

# Transcript

Rob McNeil

Hello and welcome to a new series of the Migration Oxford podcast. I'm Rob McNeil.

Jackie Broadhead

And I'm Jackie Broadhead.

Rob McNeil

Now today we've got World Cup fever and so Jackie can you explain what we're talking about in this episode?

Jackie Broadhead

Yeah thanks Rob. We're talking about an absolutely fascinating subject today which is a big shift in how football players are choosing which national team they choose to represent and we're particularly focusing on Morocco.

Rob McNeil

Rather than you and I chatting about this for the next 10 minutes, should we get straight on and listen to our speakers?

Jackie Broadhead

I'm joined by Hassan Bousetta, Associate Professor at the University of Liege, and Dr Miriam Cherti, Senior Researcher at the Global Exchange on Migration here at the University of Oxford. Hassan, from your research into the Moroccan diaspora and football, can you start by giving us a timeline so we can understand a little bit about the changes that have occurred and when?

Hassan Bousetta

Right. I've been doing a lot of research on Moroccan diaspora and especially in Belgium, the Netherlands, France. And if you look at the realities of football, that goes very much in parallel to the migration history of these communities. And probably we should look, I mean, if we want to understand what's going on right now with diaspora football being blossoming in Morocco, we probably need to look at both ends, what happened in Morocco and what happens in the diaspora. And in diaspora, I would say that we need to, we could identify a period starting at the end of the 60s up until the mid 80s, where Moroccan football has been essentially community based with a lot of amateur clubs. and very limited presence of Moroccan professional footballers. There were some, like a very important figure in Moroccan football, who was Abdel Khalak Lousani, who was one of the coach of the Moroccan national team in the 90s. And he was recruited in

Belgium in 1967. He's one of probably a dozen of Moroccan footballers in that period between the end of the 60s and mid 80s who joined Belgium as professional footballers. For the rest, that was essentially community based amateur football. Then there is a second period which starts the mid 80s and up until the end of the 90s where you see the emergence of second generation Moroccan footballers born and raised in Belgium. And actually, you already see in that period, second generation Moroccans joining the national Moroccan team, not the Belgian team, but the Moroccan team. Two of them, Mohamed Lazhaf and Nordin Mukrim, second generation Moroccan, born in the end of the 60s, and who played for the qualifying games for the World Cup in the USA in 1994. And then you have another period, I would say a third period in the 90s and the beginning of the 21st century, where you see much more Moroccan footballers coming from Morocco to European championships, some of them ending up in Belgium, the Netherlands. With increasing mobility also between countries, you have a very important figure like Barak Boussoufa, who will play for the national Moroccan team, who is a Dutch second generation, but who made most of his career in Belgium. So you see a Europeanized trend with European championships attracting Moroccan footballers, but also second generation becoming much more mobile within Europe. And then there is what is probably the most important and the thing that we're witnessing right now is the diasporic moment where you now see second, third and 4th generation players going back to Morocco, which is quite paradoxical because they were born, trained, culturally, I would say assimilated in European societies, but making the choice of Morocco. And one of the reasons behind this is that there's been a shift, a very important shift, which is precisely dated in 2008, 2009, which is the creation of the Mohammed VI Football Academy, which is a game changer in the history of Moroccan football. And that has really changed the landscape of Moroccan football becoming much more competitive and attracting plenty of people from the diaspora who now sees the interest of playing for a national Moroccan team that is becoming very competitive.

Jackie Broadhead

Thanks, Hassan. That's really interesting in a way that it maps on to some of the work around migration decision making in that some of the decisions are individual, the kind of choices of who you want to play for and some of them are structural in the sense of the facilities that are available having changed. Would that be accurate in your experience of that kind of mapping between the decisions that are made in football and the decisions that are happening in kind of broader migration processes?

Hassan Bousetta

Yes, probably there are parallels to draw between how, ethnicities are constructed within the diaspora, how they reconnect to the national identity. But, this needs also, when we talk about football, I mean, you also need to take into account, the specific

realities of football itself. After the World Cup in Qatar, where Morocco played the semi-final against France, A very important commentator and former footballer who is Ruud Gulit, who is a Dutch former footballer, said that one of the arguments why people were less inclined to play for their national team and going back for was the level of the competition. So the fact that you would play for the African Cup of Nations and not for the European Championship, not for the World Cup, this argument is over. you cannot simply say that there is a question of level of competition. So there is some specificity which goes beyond the simple fact of identifying to the country of origin of your parents, et cetera, because football is a game, is a popular game, it triggers a lot of emotions, but it's also business. It's also a business where the value of players, where the visibility of the players and the two goes hand in hand because you need to be in a high profile sort of games and championships. So there are specificities which explain also why you see so many people now being attracted because they expect also their visibility, their value being raised by the kind of performance that is now being achieved by the Moroccan national team in this particular case.

Jackie Broadhead

Miriam, it's so interesting to hear from Hassan about the kind of specificities of the Moroccan case. Is this something that we're seeing, is this a Morocco specific trend or is this a kind of wider picture that we're seeing throughout global football?

Miriam Cherti

Well, the Moroccan case is definitely part of a much wider shift in football because as Hassan mentioned, national identities also becoming more fluid, more transnational and less tied to birthplace alone. And I think we can remember this quite vividly back in the late 90s with the France kind of World Cup and as well as in the 2018, when France won the World Cup, players such as Zinedine Zidane or Kylian Mbappe show that how European national teams have long benefited from colonial and post-colonial migration, but Morocco represents this reversal or reversal of the flow. So instead of Europe claiming post-colonial talent, African countries reclaiming or claiming players from the diaspora. So this kind of diaspora factor really raises broader issues around sport and citizenship, players with dual nationality or migration background are often have more than one possible national team pathway. In fact, they get in more like, for instance, Yamin Lamal, he had three options. So the country of birth of his dad, the country of birth of his mom, or his own country of birth. So he decided to play for Spain in the end. So their decision is very much shaped by personal identity, but also professional opportunities, not purely about kind of national or emotional belonging. But these players are gradually developing or inhabiting spaces of strategic belonging, where identity is very much negotiated across professional, emotional and political considerations. And we see different versions of this in other parts of the world. So for instance, in the Gulf or countries, UAE, these countries are using naturalization or

migration linked kind of recruitment in sports. And although the politics are different, of course, from this Morocco's diaspora model, in those cases, the issue is often less about country of birth of parents or ancestral kind of home, but it's more about citizenship and state strategy, as well as even labour kind of migration, sort of active recruitment for sporting competitiveness. So yes, the Moroccan case maps out a much broader transformation where football is making visible the fact that modern kind of national identity is very much layered. National teams are still powerful symbols of the nation, but the nation they represent is increasingly shaped by diaspora, by mobility and as well as migration history.

Jackie Broadhead

Miriam, that's so interesting in terms of all of the different dimensions. So I think we talked a little bit about the sort of individual and also the structural, but Hassan, I wanted to come back to you a little bit. Obviously in migration studies, there's lots of discussion about the idea of brain drain and then people kind of returning. And when we think about that in relation to football, how much do you see this as a political project for Morocco, for example, alongside being something that individuals are deciding or that's happening kind of structurally?

Hassan Bousetta

Yes, in the case of Morocco, it's worth looking at it because it's a really interesting case study in how diaspora politics has been interwoven with football projects. And you see that it's not simply accidental in the Moroccan case. There's been a decision, there's been a plan that was put on the table in 2008, the creation of the academy. And the academy was based on the idea that training is a key factor. And one of the models that Morocco looked at is the French model of having local academies training youngsters. But beyond this question of training, there was also the idea of mapping much better the talents that are developing in the diaspora. And there's been an incredible work of scouting the players in the European Championship and even beyond, even in Asia, even in other contexts. Moroccan have been very active. And you see it even up until very recently. You've just seen a sort of battle between the French National Federation and the Moroccan National Federation around the case of Bouaddi, a young player in Lille who is seen as a future talent. So this is still on. And there are many implications for in that respect, because you mentioned the idea that they could be there a sort of parallel with the idea of brain drain, where you see people trained in the South and being attracted for doing all sorts of work in the North. The fact is that there is a difference between the two, because the pool available jobs for brain drain is quite large, which is not exactly the same in football, because that the number of people who reach the first squad in any European Championship is much narrower than the number of people who would like to join. So if you look at the question of training in football, you see that there is a very high level of selectivity in who gets in the first squad. So The idea

of having a purely similar trend in brain drain and in football, there are limitations to the model because the football model is a model where you can choose. And that leads me to the question, and you see it already coming in the Netherlands, in the current Dutch national team and Belgium, you don't see any more any second generation Moroccan in it. In Russia, two of the main players of Belgium, Marwan Fellaini and Nasser Shadli, were second generation Moroccan. Now they're zero. In the Dutch national team, zero. For simple reason, many people who could qualify for these teams are now opting for Moroccan, which raises a question for the training in Dutch, Belgian, French clubs. The Dutch have now put an increasing pressure on a very young player to sign for the Dutch team very early on because they want to have the fruit of the training. And so you will see this competition between federations in order to attract dual nationals becoming much more intense in the future. There will be a fierce competition for talents. And yes, that's a model that it's tempting to do the comparison between brain drain and football and training. And there are some elements which allow the comparison, but the limitation is that in a cohort of young football players, there are only two or three who will reach the highest level every year, two or three per year, that's very narrow. And that's I think a difference, which leads to the question of the kind of policies that are put in place for these people who have the specificity of being dual national and sometimes having multiple nationalities. Miriam quoted Lamine Yamal who could play for three teams. That's not unusual right now. And even the Belgian national team very recently has attracted a player who could qualify for Spain. And Belgium has managed to sign him for the World Cup. So it's becoming something much larger than, the usual countries like Morocco.

Jackie Broadhead

It's incredibly interesting because I think that also points to a shift that might happen in migration policies or migration thinking in European countries more broadly, which is that obviously for so long the focus has been on restriction. And yet, you know, with ageing societies, for example, there's quite a likelihood that there will be a competition for talent in the future and maybe football is kind of at the leading edge of that sort of competition for talent. Miriam I don't know your thoughts about you know what this... what this shift and it does feel like a very significant shift that's happening in football might mean for migration policy more widely.

Miriam Cherti

Absolutely. I think this shift is very much symbolic and powerful because it reminds us that, you know, we're no longer in this framework where it's about retaining talent. You know, whether it's about skilled migrants or talented footballers, moving towards a model of talent circulation, while in the past it's very much kind of a lost investment from the Global South countries to European or Global North countries. But now we're in this different frame where, yes, brain drain analogy is useful, but it can be slightly

misleading as it suggests this kind of simple loss for Europe and gain from Morocco. But actually there is something bigger happening, which is about redistribution of footballing values more broadly, because at the end of the day, these football stars, they might represent the national team, but their professional careers are in Europe in these football clubs in Europe. So I think it's useful to reflect on the implications of this, of course. there's this European strategy around reinforcing talent mobility and kind of or strengthening talent mobility. But in the end, I think sports or football particularly is really drawing our attention to some new model where there is a win-win equation kind of thing. I think there's also maybe European countries might see this as kind of lost investment because of the sort of early years of footballers development. But in a way, I think countries like Morocco have also invested a lot in their diaspora engagement. So it's kind of return on investment in that sense as well. And it's also about kind of narrowing this gap of competition between countries in the global South and the global North, which is very important.

Jackie Broadhead

And Miriam, you talked about redistribution and obviously Hassan's talked about how much in this conversation we're talking about a very elite type of mobility apart from potentially winning a competition or a World Cup, which obviously would be very welcome. But is this something that's purely happening at an elite level or are there kind of wider benefits or changes that happen within the football pyramid that we talk so much about?

Miriam Cherti

Well, I mean, they're much wider benefits, of course, because as mentioned earlier, ball is really powerful kind of tool for bringing countries and people together. So it has a symbolically quite an impactful way of strengthening community cohesion. So this cohesive power often comes from making a wider we feel visible. And there's been plenty of research that has highlighted this, of course. So seeing how migration, citizenship, belonging, national identity, multiple or multi-layered and contingent is not fixed to place. So in that sense, I think the wider issues around kind of how diaspora players to some might undermine this kind of role modeling or cohesion. But it's important to look at how their participation is framed and as well as institutionalized, because that's where the main difference is seen. So whether it's represented as kind of a replacement of real nationals or prove that kind of local pathways are failing, they can also sharpen kind of divides if they're presented as part of a wider national story that includes both those who are born and in this country or abroad, then they can expand kind of younger people's kind of sense of belonging and offer a much more powerful role model for hybrid identities. The best example that would come to mind is Mozilla effect. The impact that his presence or his participation as part of the Liverpool squad has had a major impact in terms of him being a visible Muslim, but also how, yeah, He

was open about his faith, which led to him being very much accepted as a sort of positive figure, Muslim figure. There's even research that has actually showed how, him joining the Liverpool team has reduced some of some levels of Islamophobia, and yeah, which really reminds us that this kind of Mo Salah effect shows that belonging is not created only through policy or community cohesion is not only created through policy, it can be created through culture, football and other forms of belonging.

Jackie Broadhead

Thanks, Miriam. Hassan, you know, As Miriam said, there have been these symbolic moments that people have talked a lot about in ways in which football has been important for changing national identities. So I guess we would think about France 98 as being an example that was used A lot. The Migration Museum here in the UK ran a campaign during the last World Cup that was called England Without Migration, showing how few players there would be in the England national team if it weren't accounting for migration. I guess this is a balancing act between those questions of changing national identity in European countries and the kind of redistribution of talent that you've talked about. How do you see that shifting? Do you see any risks in the type of changes that you've talked about of where diaspora players are choosing to play? Do you see any threats to integration or cohesion or do you see this as a positive development?

Hassan Bousetta

Of course there are risks, but there are also opportunities. What strikes me is the impact, football has had recently on African identities much more broadly. when looking at the number of players who were on the pitches during the AFCON, the African Cup of Nations, 2025, 2026 in Morocco, well, you see you have among the best players in the world. And that leads to a sort of, feeling not only, well, of identification, of course, but also of confidence. And Also with a main challenge that is ahead of African football is modernizing its infrastructure just like Morocco did. There is a big issue there of modernizing the infrastructure. And that leads me to one of the potentialities that I see, which is a positive one. which is, and Morocco again is a good case study in that respect, because Morocco has witnessed in a very short period of time, less than 20 years, how a strategy can be impactful at the global level, because between the World Cup in Qatar and when they inaugurated the academy in Rabat, there's been less than two decades with massive results. And so the question now is raised in countries like Morocco, whether this strategy of the diaspora cannot be extended to other fields like scientific research, like economic policy, investment policy. So there are elements which comes from football which tends to lead to an increased confidence And a sense of identification, but I would say that we need to put this much more broadly on what's happening globally in football, because if I want to be... Fair, I must say that there is a forms, there are forms of globalization that do not only affect footballers and the public,

even the technical teams, etcetera. One of in this reform of Moroccan football, one of the national technical director was a Belgian, one of the coach of the Moroccan team was a Belgian at some point. The video experts of Morocco, he was at the World Cup in Russia with Belgium, and he was at the World Cup in Qatar with Morocco. And he's himself a second generation Moroccan. So there are elements which tends to point to something globalizing on the one hand, and there are things which have to do with much more emotional identification, like countries of origin, etc. But that goes in parallel. And that's why I think we will probably see in the future a very big diversity with a logic of clubs, which is a highly capitalistic logic with a lot of concentration of capital in European football, where you have player, seeking to increase their values, circulating, being mobile, and the logic of national teams, which is a bit different, much more reliant on identification, on family ties, emotional ties, etc. And probably we'll see the development of these two realities in parallel. There will probably be many other new talents choosing for France or for the Netherlands or for maybe for the UK and having this in parallel to other choosing Congo, Morocco or any other countries. So the trend maybe in the future will be probably much more pluralistic in a sense. than what we see right now. We are in a period where, it's a new period beginning. I mentioned, in the beginning of my talk that we have started the diaspora moment at the end of the year 2000. Probably now we're entering a new phase in the development of football. which will be marked by globalization, diaspora politics, but also the old classical integration and community-based development of football and identification.

Jackie Broadhead

That seems like the perfect note for us to finish on. Thanks so much Hassan and Miriam for such a fantastic conversation. Wishing Morocco all of the best at the upcoming World Cup and hopefully this discussion brings a bit of a different perspective to what you'll see on the pitch. Thanks so much.

Hassan Bousetta

Thank you very much.

Rob McNeil

Thank you. Wow, what a completely fascinating conversation. Jackie, I now want to dive in here and pick your brains about your work on integration, specifically asking you the question of, I mean, we've talked a lot about the increased confidence that we've seen in African nations that football has helped to instigate. But what does it mean for communities in countries like the UK or in France or in Belgium when they're potentially losing incredible talent? and particularly talent from communities that, wants to be represented in those countries in the 1st place. Does that have integration impacts? Does it have meaning? Is it a loss for us?

Jackie Broadhead

Yeah, thanks Rob. I mean, I found this such a fascinating conversation because it helps to broaden your perspective away from what I think can be quite an insular conversation about integration, which obviously ironic given that it has such global reach and we know that transnationalism is an absolutely hugely important part of integration work. But often our conversation, I think, because of global inequality, often focuses on it being kind of quite one way. So this idea of a sort of, it's European countries that will have the pick of the crop almost. And this idea that we spoke about in the interview that we're moving into a different period, I think is really important for integration and for migration governance, you know, this idea that things will become more circular. But at the same time, I do think there is something quite tricky within that because we've had these long standing debates around, well, how do you foster inclusion? How do you have the sense that people feel part of a nation state on the same terms as people who aren't first or second generation migrants? There's something quite challenging about the idea that people could have a choice between where they represent. And I think football actually is quite a good crucible for testing some of that. But obviously we've seen much darker and more difficult conversations. So we think back to things like the Tebbit test within UK conversation around, you know, saying that it was a real marker of integration as to which cricket team people would choose to support. I think actually the word that Hassan used was confidence and he was talking about African countries' confidence in the world growing, which obviously is very important. But I think there's something about confidence also within European nations. How confident do we feel about ourselves as pluralistic societies? Do we have the confidence to be able to think about countries where people have dual identities, have transnational identities, are able to kind of make that choice and that be something that is normalised and also be something where there are decisions that are made, again, reflecting the conversation that these are happening as personal and emotional choices, they're happening as structural choices, but then they're also part of business and geopolitical projects and reflective of much larger trends. So I think this is a conversation that actually has helped and sort of challenged me in some of the conversations we have around integration and inclusion. I think it's the direction of travel that we're moving into and actually something that we probably need to consider a lot more in terms of how we think about how integration is framed.

Rob McNeil

I've got a very simple and slightly glib response to all of this, which is, as with every single thing that I've ever dealt with on the subject of migration, the basic answer is it's really complicated.

Jackie Broadhead

Well, I think it is. I mean, obviously, you know, cliché about football is it's 22 people running around on a pitch and then the Germans win on penalties. I think things that people make very complicated can also be very simple. And I think actually this idea that people have dual identities or sometimes more, even more than that, the example of Yamin Lamar that was given, that hopefully shouldn't be that tricky an idea for people to understand, that people can take pride in a British or English identity, but also understand that they have other ancestral identities and that there might be more equality between where people choose to play football. And obviously, from a football perspective, actually in the UK, we have had that debate for a long time because we're a federal nation. So we've had lots of football players over very long time periods who have had to make the decision about whether they'll play for a historically more successful England side or whether they'll choose to play for example Wales or Scotland. So I think it's not a new question and actually the UK has a fair amount of experience of it. is, I think it can be made very complex but I think this idea of can we be confident in the idea of being a plural nation that includes people who have come from different places is more straightforward and football is a good way of illuminating that.

Rob McNeil

I think this is very true and I think at some point we're going to see African winners of the World Cup and I think that this conversation is going to get considerably more complicated when that does happen as well. I think that everybody wants to win and this is going to be something that shapes people's choices for a very long time to come.

Jackie Broadhead

Yeah, I think this idea that we're going to move into a talent battle is something that people haven't really internalized in the way that we talk about migration. we're so focused on the idea of numbers and in particular reducing numbers. But obviously with demographic change, that's not what's coming for us, I don't think. And seeing football kind of really illuminating that, to me maybe makes it a bit more accessible because it feels so far outside of the mainstream conversation on migration. Whereas maybe this is a place where it actually can become quite visible in a way that is understandable and also that people can understand the decisions that individuals are making.

Rob McNeil

And I think on that note, we should probably wrap this up. Jackie, thank you very much for a fascinating conversation and thanks again to our amazing guests. You've been listening to the Migration Oxford podcast. I'm Rob McNeil. And I'm Jackie Brodhead.