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Pelé and the World

Clément Astruc

From the late 1950s to the late 1970s, Pelé was the leading figure in football, a sport that historically developed in Europe and Latin America. He aroused enthusiasm, elicited self-identification in Africa and promoted soccer in the United States.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Clément Astruc

Doctorant · Institut des Hautes Études de l'Amérique Latine / Centre de Recherche et de Documentation sur les Amériques · Université Sorbonne Nouvelle · France

Clément Astruc is a PhD student. In his research, he studies how football shaped Brazil's exposure and representations abroad (especially in Europe) between 1945 and 1974.

"Pelé has become a towering figure, perhaps the fourth or fifth most famous person in the world behind the Pope, Nixon, Mao and de Gaulle," Robert Vergne wrote in an article for the French sports daily *L'Équipe* dated March 31, 1971 about his popularity after the 1970 World Cup in Mexico. His claim may seem overstated, but it suggests at least one thing: the man the press dubbed "the King" for over ten years was a worldwide celebrity and a symbol that transcended sports.

Born Edson Arantes de Nascimento in 1940 to a poor family in Tres Corações, a small town in the south of the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais, the Black football player became a national icon and "athlete of the century." [1] The media's fascination with his social trajectory and career spawned many articles, books and movies. Pelé's autobiographies have been translated into several languages but academic output about him remains small given his importance in the history of Brazil and football in the second half of the 20th century.

In this context, rather than an exhaustive chronological analysis of Pelé's life, this article proposes to consider his career on the scale of the Atlantic space and what it reveals about sports relations and the movements that characterize it. Pelé's reputation and national hero status were largely built outside Brazil. His story illustrates both his country's preponderant place in international football since the 1950s and the sport's globalization, in other words its growth beyond Europe and Latin America, where it spread and became popular early on. Pelé drew crowds worldwide and has been the focus of collective self-identification and various discourses in Brazil and abroad, from one continent to another, but his personal path did not have the same symbolic or political resonance everywhere. His fame made him one of Brazil's leading ambassadors and the face of brands and international institutions during and after his career.

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s26VcTTp0eY

Pelé in Paris in 1971

Source: YouTube

Football's first global star

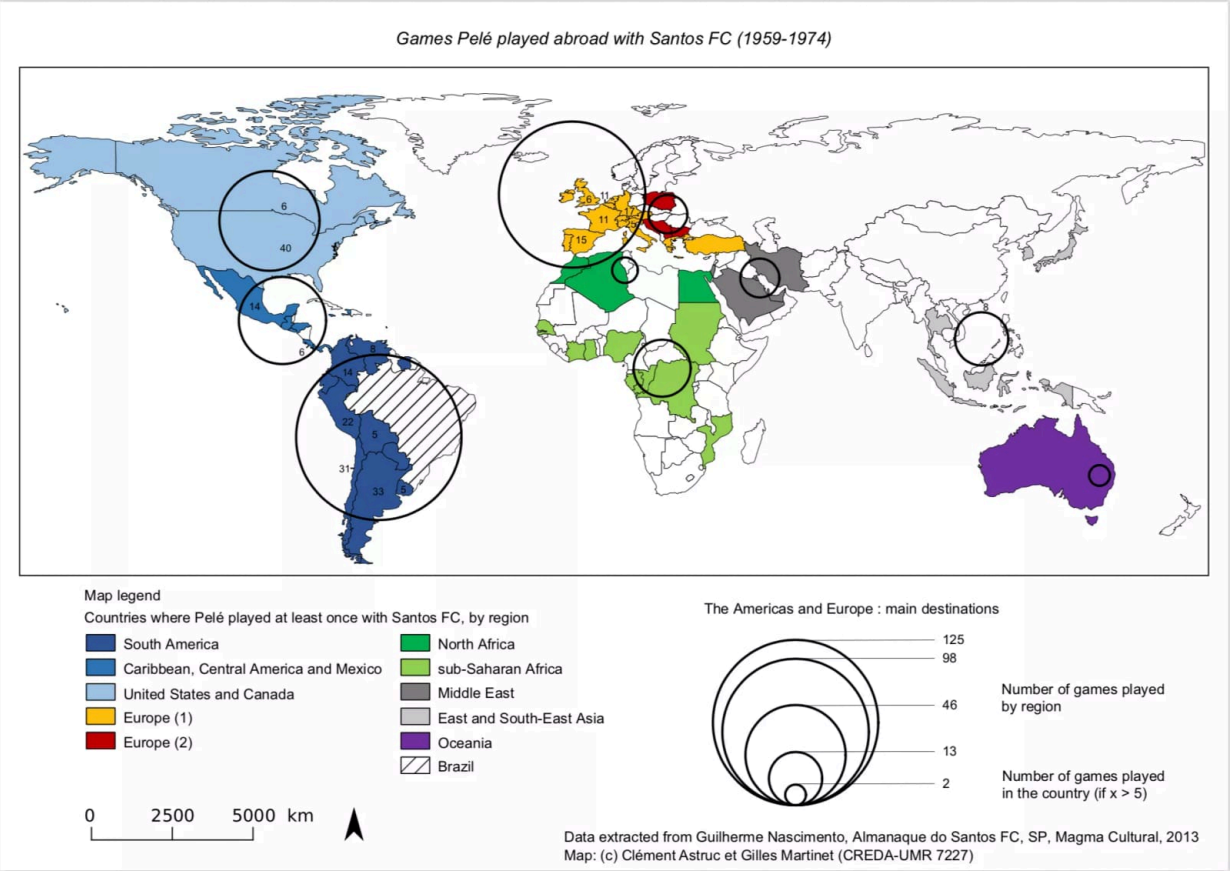
The World Cup played a key role in Pelé's career with Brazil's national team, *Seleção*, which won the competition in 1958, 1962 and 1970. His achievements made him a national hero and football's first global star. At the age of seventeen, Pelé made his mark at the sixth World Cup in Sweden in 1958. He sustained an injury early on but reappeared in the third match and covered himself in glory in the final. That year, only European (including the USSR) and Latin American nations competed, which changed young Pelé's status on both sides of the Atlantic. Until then, he had been unknown in Europe, but journalists quickly dubbed him "the King of football," arousing fans' curiosity. His achievements in Sweden found a wider echo in Europe, where some matches were broadcast live in several countries. Many French fans discovered Pelé on television during the semi-final, when he scored three goals. In Brazil, *Seleção's distant victory* sparked celebrations in the streets and, along with praise in the European press, helped raise Pelé to the rank of national icon. "The 1958 world championship gave us eyes to see Pelé and Garrincha," journalist Mario Filho wrote several years later. "In truth we did not choose them as idols. They were already chosen when they returned." [2]

Brazil won the 1962 World Cup in Chile, but Pelé, injured early in the game, only played a small part. It was quite a different story eight years later in Mexico, when *Seleção* won its third World Cup. As the only player left from the generation that won the first two championships, Pelé was still the national team's figurehead. The 1970 win in Mexico was the crowning achievement of an international career that had begun over ten years earlier. It boosted Pelé's prestige and made him the world's first global football star. The event was seen by more people and on a wider scale than in 1958. During the decade, the proportion

of households owning a television and the number of countries where the medium grew rose sharply. The 1970 final, broadcast in Mondovision, was seen by hundreds of millions of people. What's more, Africa and Asia, represented by Morocco and Israel, respectively, had a guaranteed place in the competition.

Pelé achieved global celebrity for two reasons: he distinguished himself in the most prestigious international competition, and his achievements were seen on television. He was more famous than Hungary's Puskás or Hispano-Argentine Di Stefano, considered the previous generation's best players. His fame was also buoyed, as much as it was put to good use, during the many tours he made with his club around the world.

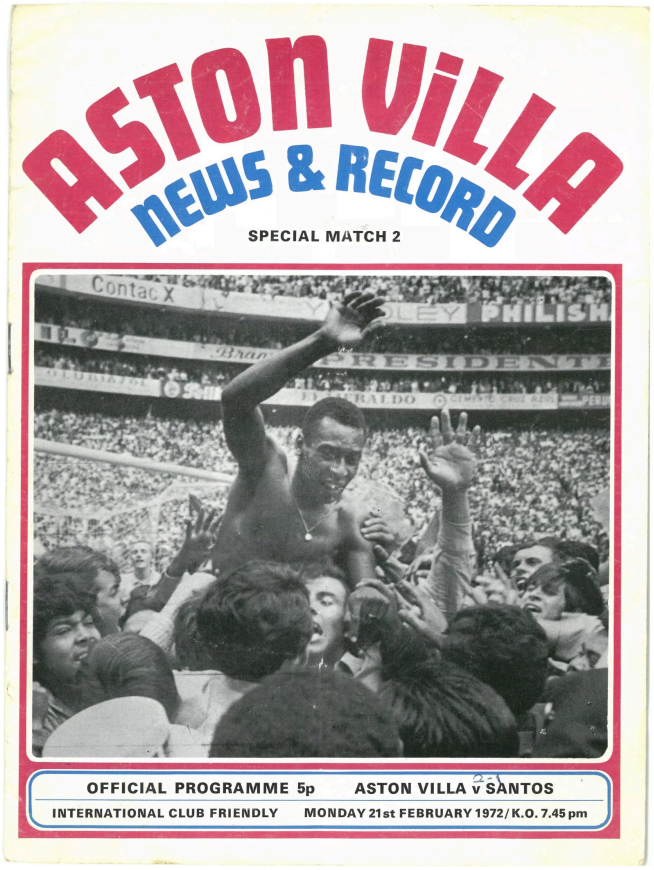
In 1959, as people on both sides of the Atlantic became very interested in Brazilian football in general and Pelé in particular, Santos FC began going abroad every year to play in competitions and friendly games. The tours could recall those of musicians, dancers and circus troupes and earned comparisons with the Harlem Globetrotters. They lasted several weeks and were big moneymakers; Pelé and his *Seleção* teammates commanded high fees. Several things confirm that Pelé was the main attraction: fees depended on whether he played, the foreign press sometimes nicknamed Santos "Pelé FC" [3] and the star appeared on many match programs. The tours show how Santos capitalized on his fame and helped maintain if not increase it. Pelé's performances in matches with the best South American and European clubs at the Copa Libertadores, the Intercontinental Cup, which Santos won in 1962 and 1963, and tournaments from Paris to Mexico City spawned media stories about the star.



Games played abroad by Pelé and Santos FC (1959 - 1974). Data extracted from Guilherme Nascimento, *Almanaque do Santos FC*, SP, Magma Cultural, 2013

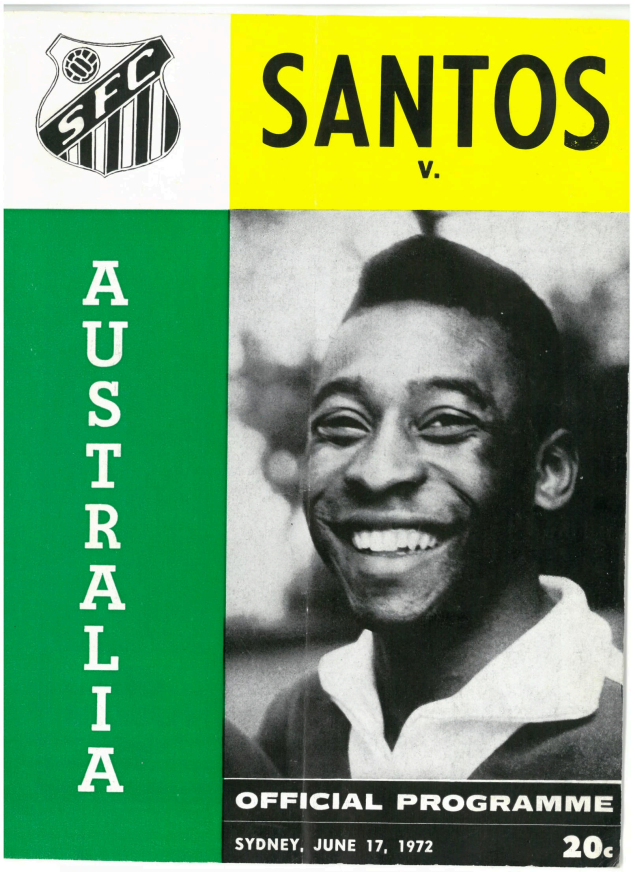
Source: © Clément Astruc and Gilles Martinet (CREDA-UMR7227)

From 1959 to 1974, the year he left Santos FC, Pelé participated in over 350 matches abroad with his club. As the map shows, he played on the five continents, primarily in the Americas and Western Europe. A little over 45% of the matches took place in South America, Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean, where the club went every year during this time. Slightly more than 25% were held in Western Europe, where Pelé played every year (except 1970) from 1959 to 1963 and 1967 to 1974. In the late 1960s, the Brazilian club began traveling outside Latin America and Europe. Football was becoming a global phenomenon: for example, in the context of decolonization Africa and Asia played a growing institutional role in the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (Fifa). In 1966, Pelé began traveling to the United States on a regular basis. The same year, the star went to sub-Saharan Africa, where he played fifteen times until 1973. In the early 1970s, his fame spread well beyond the Atlantic space as Santos toured South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East—it had already played in Israel in 1961—and even Australia.



Aston Villa vs Santos (February 21, 1972)

Source: Courtesy of David Duncan and National Football Museum

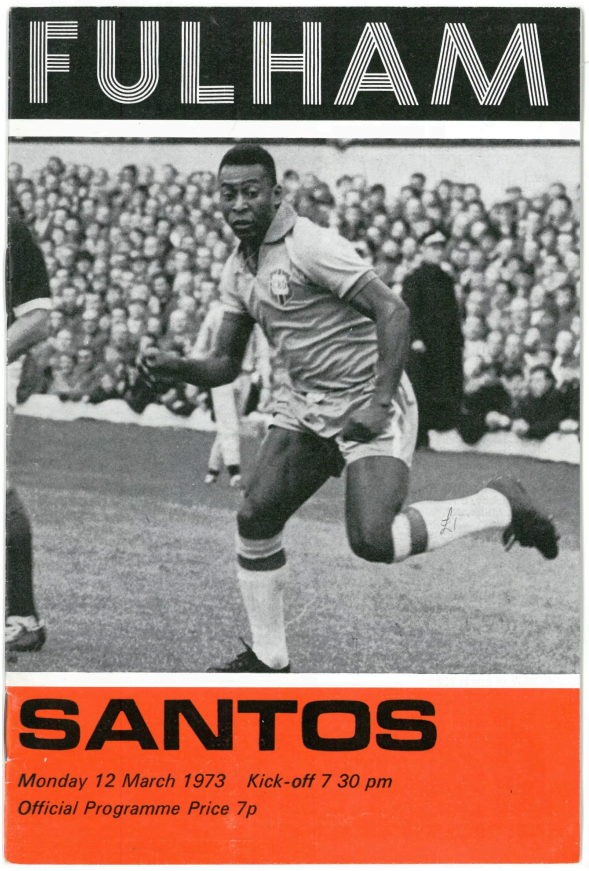


Australia vs Santos (June 17, 1972)

Source: Courtesy of David Duncan and National Football Museum

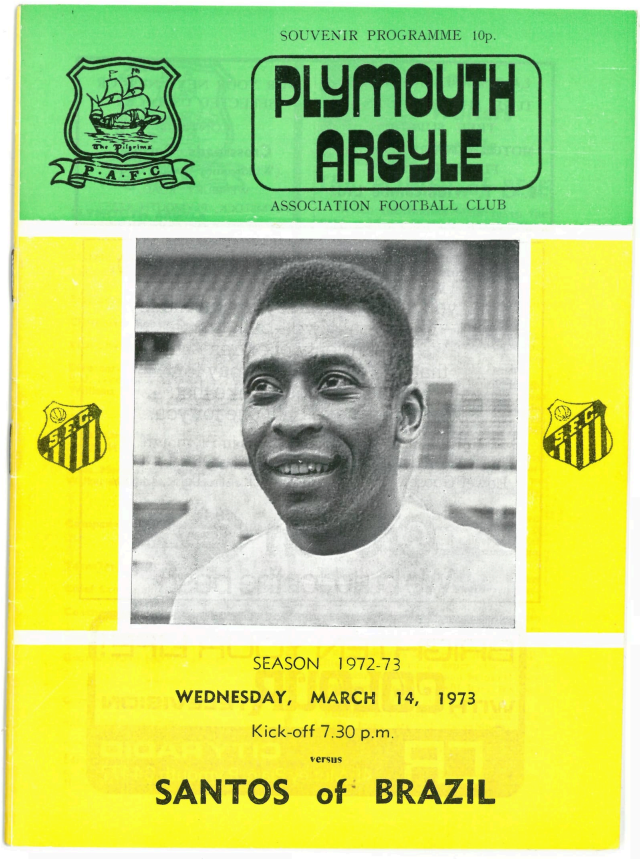
This continuous movement attests to Brazil's status in world football at the time and how it met demand from abroad. Since the late 20th century, Brazil had supplied massive manpower—players—to foreign leagues. In Pelé's time, it temporarily exported the show—the team—in the form of tours. Meanwhile, there were few transatlantic transfers. The fact that Pelé went over to a foreign club for the first time only after retiring in Brazil at the age of almost thirty-five is telling in this respect.

In 1975, Pelé left Brazil to play in the United States, but throughout his career with Santos, he received many recruitment bids, especially from Europe. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, wealthy Spanish and Italian clubs offered him record sums to join them. A year before the 1962 World Cup, the stakes even became political. Brazil's president, Jânio Quadros, told the National Sports Council (CND) that he was "worried" about the risk of an "exodus of Brazilian players," explicitly mentioning Pelé's potential departure, according to some reports, and asked the Council to take steps to "protect Brazil's sports heritage." [4] But Santos FC's rejection of its European counterparts' offers also had to do with its business model. Rather than cash in on a large sum of money that would permanently weaken the team and its international fame, its leaders probably preferred to keep an annuity, guaranteeing the success of their future tours.



Fulham vs Santos (March 12, 1973)

Source: Courtesy of David Duncan and National Football Museum



Plymouth Argyle vs Santos (March 14, 1973)

Source: Courtesy of David Duncan and National Football Museum

Pelé's expatriation late in his career is emblematic of sports relations between Brazil and Europe and attests to one of the attempts to make men's soccer a permanent fixture in North America, dominated by spectator sports perceived as genuinely national. Envisioned in the early 1970s, the recruitment of the world's most famous player for a staggering sum was a boon for the senior executives of Warner Communications, owner of the Cosmos since 1971, and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, to popularize soccer in the United States. In other words, Pelé agreed to do "missionary work" in the heartland of baseball and American football. [5] The double-duty deal—sports and advertising—was sealed for a considerable amount of money. Pelé agreed not only to play for Warner's New York club but also gave the media giant the right to use his brand image. Underscoring US exceptionalism, Pelé wrote that almost nobody knew his name there at the time. However, two years of playing for the Cosmos and the recruitment of other European and South American stars were not enough for the sport to make a lasting impact on in the United States. In the following decade, the North American Soccer League teetered on the brink of bankruptcy while the United States lost its bid to host the 1986 World Cup.

Pelé was king of a sport that had entered the television age. His achievements in a string of World Cup victories and his ceaseless traveling with Santos FC made him world famous. In Brazil, Europe, the Americas and Africa, people collectively identified with his trajectory, which spawned various narratives.

A Black sports hero

Pelé propelled Brazil to its first, long-awaited World Cup victory and became central in discourses combining football, nation and race in his country. In the late 1950s, the emergence of a young Black player who stood out for his professionalism and healthy, strict lifestyle was consistent with the idea promoted by the country's sports and political leaders, which spread throughout society, that "discipline and professionalism [are] necessary to lead Brazil to success." Pelé personified qualities that, according to a discourse then in vogue, allowed Seleção in Sweden to overcome the "atavism," the "mongrel complex," deemed responsible for its previous defeats in the competition. [6] He also stood out, wrote Mário Filho, for his refusal to hide or dissimulate the color of his skin. In his book *O negro no futebol brasileiro*, influenced by theories on race-mixing by sociologist Gilberto Freyre, Filho analyzed the history of Brazilian soccer football through the prism of Black and mixed-race players, who in a few decades had moved from a marginal to a central position. In the second edition, Filho put Pelé's rise to the rank of "national icon" in the context of other Black players from previous generations, but asserted it was a breakthrough because, unlike his forerunners, "the King" did not run away from his color but embraced it. Filho went on to write that "no Black person in the world has contributed more to sweep away racial barriers than Pelé. He has become the biggest idol in the world's most popular sport. Whoever cheers him cheers a Black man." [7]

Some journalists described Pelé's story as embodying the success of a team, if not of a multiracial nation. It resonated with wide swaths of Brazil's working classes, although the phenomenon is much harder to document. According to historian Denaldo Alchorne de Souza, Pelé became, in the early 1960s, a "people's myth…because the common man identifies with him, because Pelé gives meaning to the world in which they live." He is "an exemplary Brazilian role model, a model of behavior for those who hope to see Brazil as a true racial democracy, for those who want to see Brazil as a country of opportunities for upward social mobility, regardless of poverty or race." [8]

Many young football fans well beyond Brazil identified with Pelé. In some cases, his career had a considerable symbolic meaning, especially in Africa. Pelé's performances had strong repercussions in the context of decolonization and the emergence of the Third World on the world stage. Attesting to this are the particularly enthusiastic welcome he received in Africa during his tours with Santos and commentaries about his playing. In 1969, *Jeune Afrique* magazine devoted an article to Pelé in honor of his 1,000th goal. Mahjoub Faouzi traced his career and recalled what the star represents for "for those who have suffered due to the color of their skin… But a black-skinned Pelé is still and above all the embodiment of the advancement of millions of long-despised human beings. Like Malcolm X, Muhammed Ali and Miriam Makeba, Pelé is a symbol and a standard bearer." [9] The day after *Seleção's* third World Cup victory a year later, *Africasia* magazine published a poem by one of its Senegalese correspondents, Madike Wade. Called *Pelé, tous les nègres te saluent…* (*Pelé, All Negroes Salute You…*), it made him a hero of the Black cause:

> *NASCIMIENTO, you have proven, with your football, that no race is superior to the BLACK race, that there is not even any such thing as superior and inferior races.*
>
> *In any case, you are the KING of the world and you are a NEGRO. [...]*
>
> *You stand tall, proud and you are especially aware of being a symbol of the BLACK race.*
>
> *That is why all NEGROES salute you!* [26]

Although Pelé was looked up to as a symbol, he never took a militant, critical stand on racism, especially in Brazil. Although he experienced it on several occasions, the star claimed that his wealth and early fame shielded him from racism in his country. More generally, Pelé often spoke his mind on race relations and racism in Brazilian society before and after his career at home and abroad in response to journalists or in his autobiographies. In the 1970s, during the dictatorship (1964-1985), he made several statements downplaying the burden of racism and insisting that in Brazil discrimination is mainly of a social nature. In a 1971 *Africasia* interview, Pelé dismissed the idea that there was a "Black problem" in Brazil. "In my country," he said, "the Black race is almost, if not completely, equal, to the White race." [10] In an interview with Brazilian journalist Lucas Mendes five years later, he said racism is not "racial racism" but "social", a "social prejudice." [11] Pelé repeated this opinion in his autobiography published the following year, where he acknowledged that racism exists in Brazil, but "to a much lesser degree than in most other countries." [12] The implicit comparison with the United States and South Africa in some of his statements is explicit in his 2006 autobiography, where his views on race shifted. As Brazil returned to democracy, the more visible the African part of Brazilian culture became, the more political recognition it received, and the more he stressed his African roots.



Equatorial Guinea postage stamp (1977)

Source: Courtesy of David Duncan and National Football Museum

Pelé believes his achievements on the football pitch helped improve the condition and image of Blacks, but he never used his fame as a soapbox. When he mentioned his commitments in his autobiography, it was to point out the poverty afflicting some Brazilian children. [13] Pelé's detractors in Brazil said his position showed a lack of political awareness (see above). Certain progressive sectors, especially Black organizations, criticized some of his controversial statements. Abroad, however, Pelé was a more consensual figure.

Ambassador of Brazil, brands and international institutions

As a famous product of mass culture, Pelé embodied Brazil for decades after the late 1950s in countries where football is popular. The day after the 1970 World Cup, Mario Gibson Barbosa, then foreign affairs minister, even wrote: "Pelé is undoubtedly the best ambassador Brazil has ever had. Nobody has done more for Brazil's image abroad than this boy." [14]

This, and his media exposure, is why Pelé received particular attention from the government, including during the dictatorship (1968-1974). From 1965, secret agents kept tabs on him during his trips abroad. As his fame appreciably raised Brazil's international profile, the junta feared that leftists would try to get him to take a public stand against the regime. Diplomatic archives attest to the tension between the potential benefits of his trips outside Brazil and the fear that they would provide political opponents with grist for the mill at a time when the dictatorship's crackdowns and human rights violations came under increasing criticism abroad. Learning that Pelé would probably be invited to Caracas, in late June 1970 the embassy in Venezuela warned the General Secretariat that a "left-leaning" magazine could politicize the trip, "take

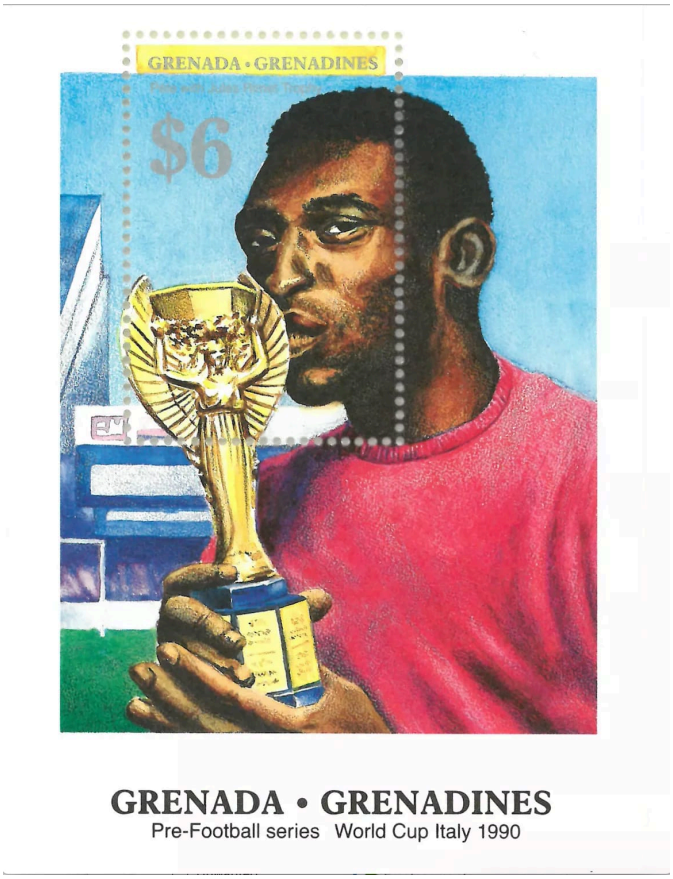
advantage of the situation" and "force [him] to come out against the Brazilian government." [15] In October, Pelé told the police that when he was in Mexico and Colombia for previous matches, he was approached by "communists to sign manifestos." [16] In the early 1970s, Pelé's trips to Paris and New York with his Santos teammates led to several acts of denunciation. [17] In the very repressive context of those dark years, Pelé's "apolitical", in his words, position reassured the authorities. In the aforementioned 1971 interview with *Africasia*, he dismissed the idea that Brazil was under a dictatorship.

Pelé gave his country a positive image abroad at timely moment. In late 1970, he was even asked to represent his homeland at the opening of Brazil Square in Guadalajara. This appearance, which took place a few months after the *Mundial* in Mexico, had no overt political purpose, but the choice of the celebrity sent to represent his country did. For a few days, he was President Medici's "special envoy." [18] He even directly reported to the president on his "mission" after returning to Brazil. [19] Journalist Amalia Barran took him to task for "acting as the dictatorship's *public relations man*". The experience, it seems, was a one-off. [?] In the autobiography published after the restoration of democracy, Pelé mentioned the pressure put on him to play in the 1974 World Cup. At a time when, according to his account, he was already aware of some of the regime's abuses, he refused to reconsider his retirement from Seleção.

Lastly, as a symbol of his country, Pelé was chosen to promote Brazilian products, activities, and companies abroad. In the early 1960s, when he frequently toured abroad with Santos, he signed a contract with the Brazilian Coffee Institute (IBC) to promote one of the country's signature exports. [21] At the end of the following decade, Interbrás, a subsidiary of the public company Petrobrás, traded on his fame to sell household appliances in Nigeria. [22] In 1987, he became Brazil's "Ambassador of Tourism" during an international campaign by the Empresa Brasileira de Turismo (EMBRATUR). A sign of his enduring fame, he was chosen following a Standard, Ogilvy and Mather study showed he was the most famous Brazilian abroad and among the ten most famous people in the world.

The figure of Pelé, "King" of a sport played in a large part of the world, also had a universal dimension that drew interest from international institutions and multinational corporations. His career marked a turning point in the advertising industry as his image was leveraged to sell products. In the 1960s, he began promoting a wide range of goods in Brazil and abroad, including some having nothing to do with sports. During the 1970 World Cup, Pelé was at the heart of the rivalry between Adidas and Puma, the two German companies that dominated the football kit market at the time. At first, Adidas and Puma, believing that competing to sponsor Pelé would lead them to formulate risky proposals, decided to make a "pact" not to hire him. But Puma broke the agreement and achieved "unprecedented exposure" after Brazil's victory. [23] Soon afterwards, Pelé became one of the first Blacks to sign a contract with Pepsi-Cola. It was to host children's football workshops around the around the world and promote a book and a film in which he explained his "method." [24] Above all, Pelé continued capitalizing on his brand image well after his career was over. For example, in the 1990s, slightly less than twenty years after retiring, he touted a bankcard and campaigned for the 1994 World Cup to be held in the United States, where he lived a long time starting when he played for the Cosmos, in return for high fees. [25] In the early 21st century, he was still a sensation, hawking a famous erectile dysfunction drug.

Pelé's role representing international institutions—he has been associated with the UN, Unesco, Unicef, WHO and Fifa—also reflects the longevity of his fame. In 1978, he received the International Peace Prize. Lastly, after the restoration of democracy, from 1995 to 1998 Pelé was the Minister of Sports in Fernando Henrique Cardoso's government, the fitting climax of an astonishing social ascension that began in the 1950s.



Grenadines postage stamp (1990 World Cup)

Source: Courtesy of David Duncan and National Football Museum

Pelé and the globalization of football

Edson Arantes do Nascimento's singular career is emblematic of a key moment in football history. As the figurehead of *Seleção* and Santos FC, Pelé embodied Brazil's rising prominence in football starting in the 1950s. His fame is intertwined with the World Cup's gradual transformation into a televised spectacle. His travel abroad and expatriation late in his career illustrate the sport's growing globalization.

All of this throws Pelé's transatlantic dimension into high relief. In many ways, it seems that the transatlantic space is the main stage on which his career unfolded. As the leading figure of a sport that historically developed in Europe and Latin America, he also aroused enthusiasm and self-identification in Africa and promoted *soccer* in the United States. Even though they were occasional, Pelé's trips to distant horizons, from Southeast Asia to Oceania and the Middle East, underscore that, at least late in his career, his fame spread well beyond the transatlantic space, even in the widest sense of the term, and may demonstrate the waning influence of the Atlantic world in late 20th-century globalization.

Pelé—sports hero, Brazilian, Black—became a focus of collective self-identification in his country and abroad, a symbol often invested with a political dimension—sometimes instrumentalized by the government—as well as a "brand" used to sell products. Despite the fact that they lived in different societies and contexts, Pelé has often been contrasted with his contemporary Muhammed Ali for his refusal to take a militant stand. He is also compared to Diego Armando Maradona, the star footballer of

the generation that came after him. Maradona's positions and statements were more divisive and transgressive, but, like Pelé, his legend was forged by his performances in the World Cup. But, unlike him, he spent much of his career playing in European clubs during the last quarter of the 20th century.

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NOTES

1. Michel Raspaud, *Histoire du football au Brésil* (Paris: Chandeigne, 2010), 124.
2. Mário Filho, *O negro no futebol brasileiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Murad, 2003 [1963]), 331.
3. For example, see Jean Cornu, "Reims, avec Kopa et Paul Sauvage engage son prestige contre le Pelé F.C.," *L'Équipe*, June 7, 1960, 8.
4. Deliberation 2/61 of the CND, April 11, 1961.
5. The metaphor was coined by Larry Adler, *Man with a Mission: Pelé* (Milwaukee: Raintree Publishers, 1976), 6.
6. Ana Paula da Silva, *Pelé e o complexo de vira-latas. Discursos sobre raça e modernidade no Brasil* (Niterói: Editora da UFF, 2014), 90-91, 99, 107.
7. Filho, *O negro,* 16-17.
8. Denaldo Alchorne de Souza, *Pra frente Brasil! Do Maracanazo aos Mitos de Pelé e Garrincha, a Dialética da Ordem e da Desordem (1950-1983)* (São Paulo: Intermeios, 2018), 130.
9. Mahjoub Faouzi, "Mais qu'est-ce qui fait gagner Pelé ? 29 ans, 1000 matches, 1000 buts," *Jeune Afrique*, no. 466, December 3-9, 1969, 28.
10. Amalia Barran, "Le roi Pelé après les buts," *Africasia*, no. 47-48, August 16, 1971, 63.
11. Interview with Lucas Mendes (New York, 1976), quoted by Silva, *Pelé*, 143, 162.

12 Pelé, *My Life and the Beautiful Game: the Autobiography of Pelé* (New York: Doubleday, 1977).

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21 "Interbrás contrata Pelé para promover aparelho elétricos na Nigeria," *Jornal do Brasil*, November 19, 1977.

22 Barbara Smit, *Invasão de campo: Adidas, Puma e os bastidores do esporte moderno* (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2007), 153-56.

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24 João Carlos Assumpção, "A criação de Pelé. As jogadas extracampo do atleta do século," *Folha esporte especial*, November 7, 1999, 4-5.

25 Madike Wade, "Pelé tous les nègres te saluent...," *Africasia*, no. 20, July 20-August 2, 1970, 49.