A Postcolonial Reading of Representations of Non-Western Leadership in Sport Management Studies

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According to postcolonial theory, although formal colonial rule ceased to exist, newly independent non-Western nation states continue to be economically dependent on their “ex-colonial masters” (Dirlik, 1997; Nkrumah, 1965; Prasad, 2003). Moreover, knowledge and practice from the West have had a deeply-entrenched influence on “ways of knowing and doing” in the non-Western part of the world (Fanon, 1967; Frenkel & Shenhav, 2006; Gilroy, 1993; Memmi, 1967; Nandy, 1983; Said, 1978; Sholat, 1992; Srinivas, 2013; Thiong’o, 1986). Modern sport, developed in Western industrial capitalist societies in 19th Century, has been accepted as an integral part of colonialism (Bale, 2003; Bale & Cronin, 2003; Eichberg, 1984; Gems, 2006; Mills & Dimeo, 2003; Rigney, 2003; Stoddart, 1998; Williams, 2003). Thus, it is of importance for sport management scholars to take colonial history into consideration when examining sport and physical culture in non-Western settings (Darnell, 2012; Farred, 2003; Featherstone, 2005; Giulianotti, 2016; Hwang & Jarvie, 2003; McKay, 1990).

Even though there is an agreement that sport was used along with many other cultural tools by colonizers to impose Western ideals to the colonized, postcolonial scholars have rejected the simplified assumption that colonial encounters only resulted in absolute, unidirectional domination (Bhabha, 1994; Nandy, 1983). Rather, as highlighted in the studies of Anderson (2006), Antolihao (2015), Farred (2003), Guttmann (1994), James (1993), Mills and Dimeo (2003), and Williams (2003), the colonized, in various locations and temporalities, have appropriated sport imported from the West as a means of anti-colonial struggle, whether it be asserting national/ethnic prestige or enhancing inter-group cohesion. Modern sport, therefore, could be considered as a “third space” or “contact zone” where a hybrid culture is constructed as a result of the ongoing (post)colonial encounter, which exhibits the disproportionate influence of the colonizer but also provides the opportunities for native leadership to empower the colonized (Bhabha, 1994; Frenkel, 2006; Pratt, 1992; Yousfi, 2013).

Leadership can generally be understood as the process of influencing individuals or groups toward certain goals (Barrow, 1977). To date, non-Western leaders have fought a long way to establish their nations and territories on the global sporting map, culminating in those moments when the athletes from non-Western states “beat the West at their own game” (Gems, 2006; Guttmann, 1994). A question arises, however: what types of leadership could best utilize sport to empower the Non-West, as 6.2 billion of the world’s 7.4 billion population currently resides in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean? (United Nations, 2015). Although leadership theory developed primarily from research on American leaders, it has nevertheless been presented as universal (House & Aditya, 1997; Minnich, 1990). Scholars in management and organization studies have expressed their concern that American-based leadership theory may not be as helpful for solving issues in non-Western societies where the socio-historical contexts are drastically different from the West (Nkomo, 2011; Westwood, 2014). Sport management scholars should therefore be aware of the potential limitations of mainstream leadership theory and take postcolonial realities into consideration when examining non-Western settings. Although previous studies do emphasize contextual factors in the construction of leadership (Ferkins et al., 2009; Kihl et al., 2010), there has not been a review in the field that reflects on how non-Western sport contexts are incorporated in our investigations.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore to what extent leadership in non-Western settings has been a focus of mainstream sport management research so far and how has it been represented. It will adopt a postcolonial approach. Emphasizing the on-going challenge for former colonized to struggle against colonialism and its after-effects, one of postcolonial theory’s main tasks is to reveal the close complicity of Western knowledge and representation with colonial domination (Said, 1978; Mir et al., 2003; Prasad, 2003). Thus, the study will focus on the following question: How is leadership in non-Western contexts portrayed in sport management literature? Although
adopting terms like “Western” and “Non-Western” risks essentializing a binary, I nevertheless believe a cautious use of “strategic essentialism” is valuable in this study (Spivak, 1988). Here I refer to Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as indigenous territories in Western countries as “non-Western”.

In this research, I will review two types of text in sport management literature: journal articles and books. I will manually collect articles from major sport management journals, i.e., Journal of Sport Management, European Sport Management Quarterly, Sport Management Review through 2016 that have the content of non-Western sport leadership. A number of mainstream sport management textbooks and handbooks will also be collected and analyzed. After filtering all the data, I will perform a critical discourse analysis, following Fairclough’s three-process (1995; 2003). I will first categorize the text according to basic descriptive features (e.g., geographic context of study, type of presentation etc.) before I set out to “interpret” the processes in which the text is produced/perceived by asking “Who is the ‘author’ of the representation?” At last, I will illustrate the ideologies underlying each representation by relating the text to postcolonial power relations (Janks, 1997).

Because this study is still ongoing, results cannot be presented here. This study will review leadership of non-Western context, if any, in the mainstream sport management literature. Not only aiming at drawing more attention to the use of postcolonial theory in sport management research, the study will also shed light on the (in)adequacy of mainstream leadership theory in explaining phenomena in non-Western sport contexts, thus providing an alternative source for Western sport managers to better understand the tension, contradiction and conflict in their interaction with their non-Western counterparts. For scholars working in non-western settings, the finding of this study will set a foundation for future inquiries that attempts to re-write “non-Western” leadership in sport management literature.