

RUGBY, RACE AND THE REPUBLIC: THE SPORTING STARDOM OF ABDELATIF BENAZZI

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Le présent article porte sur la conjonction de facteurs institutionnels, représentationnels et sociétaux mobilisés dans la construction médiatique comme vedette sportive du rugbyman franco-marocain Abdelatif Benazzi. La carrière internationale de ce joueur (1988-2003) illustre l'évolution globale du rugby dans un paysage sportif en pleine mondialisation du fait de la professionnalisation officielle de ce sport en 1995. Son itinéraire fournit un modèle pour l'ouverture croissante du rugby français au talent importé ainsi qu'à des structures de recrutement davantage fondées sur l'inclusion sociale. La visibilité extraordinaire de Benazzi, dans ce sport d'équipe des plus traditionnels, comme maghrébin et musulman, notamment en tant que capitaine du XV de France, constitue un élément déterminant de sa représentation à la fois sur le terrain et en dehors. Ce processus peut être observé par le biais d'une lecture attentive des trois biographies / autobiographies présentées ici, qui ensemble attirent l'attention sur la personnification, chez Benazzi, de l'hybridité transnationale, principal héritage de cette vie sportive et de sa multiple narration.

This article explores the conjunction of institutional, representational and societal factors mobilized in the media

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construction as a sports star of rugby player Abdelatif Benazzi. Born in Morocco in 1968, Benazzi excelled as a teenager in his native Oujda before being recruited by the Cahors club for the 1988-1989 season. Located deep in French rugby's traditional heartland in the south-west, this second-division side proved to be the perfect setting for the young forward, who became the club's top try-scorer on the way to a runners-up finish in that year's national championship. Such was their Moroccan recruit's competitive and media impact that several top-flight clubs looked to sign him for the following season. This competition was won by reigning champions Agen, not coincidentally the powerbase of Albert Ferrasse, the long-standing president of the *Fédération Française de Rugby* (FFR).

After an uncertain start, Benazzi became a fixture in the Agen side, and its captain from 1996, before a final move took him to the Saracens club in London between 2001 and 2003. Playing initially in the second-row and then increasingly as a number 8, the sportsman also came to the attention of the national electors. With his naturalization fast-tracked by Ferrasse's political connections (Gardère, 1995, p. 105), Benazzi won 78 international caps with the *XV de France* between 1990 and 2001, most notably as captain of the 1997 side that won *Les Bleus'* first Grand Slam in a decade, while he also made important contributions to the French cause in three World Cups (1991, 1995 and 1999). This illustrious playing career was all the more impressive in that it spanned the seismic reconfiguration of rugby union from old-school amateurism to full-blown professionalism as of 1995: 'a profound mutation not only at a national level but also on the international stage'; and one which not all talented players from the amateur era were able successfully to negotiate (Fleuriel & Vincent, 2007, p. 35). In fact, Benazzi's personal itinerary mirrored rugby's broader evolution in a globalized sporting landscape, providing a doubly valuable template for the French game's developing openness both to imported talent and to more socially inclusive structures of player recruitment.

Above all, it was Benazzi's extraordinary visibility as a North African and a Muslim in this most traditional of team

games that was most remarked upon by media commentators in France and abroad, and which was ultimately to shape the player's portrayal both on and off the pitch. Commenting in the British press on Benazzi's appointment as captain of the national side, Ian Borthwick of *L'Équipe* observed: 'At a time when the French nation is struggling to come to terms with Le Pen xenophobia [...], the presence of a Moroccan as captain of France is heavy with symbolism' (Borthwick, 1997; cf. McRae, 1998, pp. 346-8). Thus, this multiply exceptional player's ethnicity and religious affiliation would prove to be central to his public persona, media representation and, ultimately, political appropriation. Appointed by President Jacques Chirac in 1997 to the *Haut Conseil à l'Intégration*, Benazzi would go on to receive the Légion d'Honneur in 2000. These indicators of esteem signalled Benazzi's status as an icon of successful integration, at a time when France's population of migrant heritage was threatened by a resurgent far-right that sought to mobilize popular fears about the country's evident multiculturalism. In what follows, the imbrication of elite sporting credentials, authentic Maghrebi origins and, crucially, liberal religious beliefs will be seen to underpin the three full-length depictions published to date of the life and times of this most self-aware of professional sporting migrants.

1. Sports biographies and the construction of stardom

Gary Whannel (2002) has drawn attention to the complementary discourses of masculinity and morality that typically inform the media's narration of the playing careers of sports stars. As the primary purveyors of what is still typically a male-dominated morality tale, press outlets and broadcast media have in recent years been challenged by the rise of the internet, bringing with it a myriad of non-traditional alternatives to conventional sports reporting. However, even within this radically reconfigured landscape, the book-length player biography continues to constitute a privileged format for the narration of sporting stardom, thereby retaining its marketing appeal. Depending on an individual practitioner's ability and longevity,

the chronicle of a sporting life may justify multiple iterations, although still typically conforming to the genre's conventions of linear chronology and formulaic characterization. This applies irrespective of the publisher's description of the text in question as a biography or an autobiography, the latter often produced by a ghost writer destined to remain more or less anonymous. Whatever the specifics of nomenclature and attribution, the celebrity profile will be inserted into the sporting metanarrative, understood as the overarching structure of cultural signification of modern games:

Through the media, sports stars are turned into familiar figures, household names, but also into heroes, mythologised icons, producing an immense public desire to know the 'real' person. Yet, of course, they are radically unknowable – all we have is layers of discourse – and stars can only be 'known' through media representation. Two rather contrary processes can be detected in these processes of narrativisation: mythologisation and reinscription. [...] By reinscription, I mean the process whereby star biographies are constantly rewritten in the 'continuous present' – their lives are interpreted according to dominant concerns at the time of writing. Iconic status is always conferred in retrospect, and constantly reinscribed in accordance with dominant discursive patterns of specific moments. (Whannel, 2010, p. 56).

This time-honoured combination of heroic myth-making and discursive re-inscription may be observed in the three works highlighted here, and which are as follows:

- ◆ Michel Gardère, *Abdelatif Benazzi: L'homme aux trois patries: la France, le Maroc, le Rugby* (Paris, La Table Ronde, 1995; 198 p.; 20.5 x 14 x 1.7 cm);
- ◆ Abdelatif Benazzi, avec Jean-Charles Delesalle, *La Foi du rugby* (Paris, Solar, 2000 ; 228 pp. ; 22.4 x 14 x 1.8 cm);
- ◆ Abdel Benazzi, avec la collaboration de Richard Escot, *Une vie à l'essai: Autobiographie* (Paris, Flammarion, 2005; 292 pp.; 24 x 15.2 x 2 cm).

A number of features are immediately striking as regards these three volumes. To begin with, the regular chronology

of their appearance, marked by a five-year gap between the successive publications, suggests the continued marketability of their respective accounts of the player's early career, of his mature flowering as a professional sportsman, and of his post-career reflection on a memorable sporting life. Their physical characteristics are similarly revealing, in that the steadily increasing length and expanded format of the three treatments – and thus, by implication, their respective production costs – are indicative of the enhanced public profile of the star over the length of his playing career. Next, an increasing emphasis is placed on the respective contribution made by foregrounded subject of each volume, Abdelatif Benazzi himself, to its composition. We may thus note that the clearly stated authorship of Michel Gardère in 1995 gives way in 2000 to a more discretely acknowledged association with Jean-Charles Delesalle, whose name is retained, nevertheless, and albeit in smaller print, on the book's front cover. By 2005, the star's 'collaboration' (this is the term used in French) with Richard Escot, a respected rugby journalist and author, although acknowledged on the title page, is omitted from the front cover, and also from the jacket notes. In contrast, the preface provided by Nelson Mandela is highlighted, as a marker of the high international regard in which the star is held: 'ce qui en dit long sur l'estime dont jouit Abdelatif Benazzi et permet d'appréhender toute la dimension de ce sportif profondément humaniste' (Escot, 2005, back cover).

Also worthy of note is the fact that Gardère's and Delesalle's books both feature conventional action shots of Benazzi playing for France on their front covers. The player is captured in splendid isolation on each occasion, whether on a charging run or scoring a try, with teammates and opponents similarly obscured by the close-up image of the star. In contrast, the Escot volume features a medium-length studio shot of a retired Benazzi wearing a fashionable dress shirt, looking thoughtfully at the camera, and holding a rugby ball where the title of the publisher, Flammarion, has replaced the more familiar Gilbert or Mitre logo. This front cover is also distinctive in that it refers to Benazzi as Abdel (rather than Abdelatif), an affectionate diminutive that may be regarded

as evidence of the broad familiarity of the book's subject to its targeted readership.

2. Publishers and Politics

Further attention to the specific publishing houses responsible for these volumes leads us to note a corresponding evolution in terms of the cultural credentials and social location of the three texts. The series begins with *La Table Ronde*, a traditionalist press with both a historically right-wing ethos and a strong commitment to rugby writing, two strands which were brought together most visibly under the editorship of Denis Tillinac (1990-2007), whose own exercise in sporting nostalgia, *Rugby Blues* (1993), was awarded that year's *Grand Prix de la Littérature Sportive*. Although the 1995 volume does not include a preface, both its spirit of sporting inclusivity and its high-cultural credentials are flagged by the inclusion of quotations on the value of rugby as a vehicle for self-realization from Michel Rocard, a former Socialist Prime Minister (1988-1991), and the acclaimed novelist Françoise Sagan Gardère, 1995, p. 11). Another veteran Socialist politician, Martine Aubry, the serving *Ministre de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité* (1997-2000), supplies the preface for the 2000 volume published by Solar, a mass-market publisher of quality non-fiction with a notably strong sports catalogue (Delesalle, 2000, pp. 5-6). As regards the publisher of the 2005 volume, Flammarion is a long-standing generalist press with a respected literary catalogue, and as such is arguably the most prestigious imprint featured here. These high-cultural credentials are significantly enhanced by this final volume's prefatory association with Nelson Mandela's worldwide political and humanitarian prominence (Escot, 2005, pp. 7-8).

In addition, the regular chronology of these works' publication, one every five years over a fifteen-year elite playing career, also encourages reflection on the evolving socio-political environment in which this sporting narrative was successively inserted and inflected. This editorial timeline thereby permits a productive contextualization of these discrete iterations of a particularly dynamic sporting life. For Benazzi's migration to

France coincided with the end of the Mitterrand years (1981-1995), at the time the only Socialist presidency of the Fifth Republic. The regime's founder, General de Gaulle, had pragmatically associated his administration with the 'champagne rugby' of the French national side of the late 1950s and early 1960s. François Mitterrand's successor, Jacques Chirac (1995-2007) would not only co-opt Benazzi at the height of his sporting visibility in 1997, but also extract the maximum political capital from the exploits of the multiracial national team that made history by winning the 1998 football World Cup, an event which marked French society well beyond the sporting sphere.

However, Chirac had also shown himself by this time to be susceptible to the anti-immigrant rhetoric that characterized the discourse of the Front National and was steadily gaining approval within his own centre-right party. His infamous Orleans speech of 19 June 1991, in which he castigated the Socialists for tolerating an immigration 'overdose' in the country, epitomized by 'le bruit et l'odeur' generated by the ethnic minority populations of the *banlieues*, revealed his own complicity with such attitudes. This intervention also pointed the way forward to the even more socially divisive tenure of Nicolas Sarkozy as Minister of the Interior (2002-2004, 2005-2007) and then as President of the Republic (2007-2012). Another revealing aspect of this period was the Islamic headscarf affair which began in 1989 and culminated in the Chirac administration's 2003 legislation outlawing 'conspicuous' religious symbols, which, although theoretically even-handed, was typically perceived both by its proponents and its opponents as targeting female dress codes within the Muslim community. Similar integral to the back-story of Abdelatif Benazzi's playing career were the periodic, and intensively mediatized, outbursts of youth-driven violence in the *banlieues*, from the Lyon district of Vaulx-en-Velin in 1990 to the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois, and then other major cities, in 2005.

In response, sport would be appealed to by politicians and journalists alike as a panacea for these problems of social inclusion, with stars of migrant heritage being targeted to serve as *grands frères* or models for emulation by disaffected youth (Abdallah,

2000a & 2000b). Unsurprisingly, such thinking is reflected in the successive iterations of the life story of Abdelatif Benazzi, which together offer both a sports-inflected pilgrim's progress and an exemplary narrative of the French model of integration. Our reading of these complementary versions of his sporting life will consequently prioritize the depiction of three touchstones of this ideologically charged representation of the sports star: i) Benazzi's reflections on the nature of the rugby union game itself, notably its widely claimed power to transform the individual; ii) the player's first encounter with French elite sport in Agen, including particularly the racism that he encountered there; and iii) his broader consideration of the place of Islam in today's multicultural France. In other words, how do the highlighted volumes address the key themes of rugby, race and the Republic in tracing the itinerary of a star whom they, like the popular press, routinely refer to as *le géant d'Oujda*?

3. Rugby: from Oujda via Agen and Sydney to Auckland

Michel Gardère opens his narrative with a prologue asserting the historic rootedness of the French game in an ethnically imagined south-west, to which Benazzi may have come as an outsider, but where he is now manifestly an adopted son. The star's exceptionality is underlined, not as a foreigner, but rather as the sole Agen player to emerge with his reputation intact from an especially torrid encounter with the Toulon club, with his popular approval confirmed by both autograph-hunting youngsters and 'les mémoires des papés gascons et rugbymaniaques':

Ce dimanche-là, le 24 avril 1994, le Sport Union Agenais prit une déculottée à la maison. [...]

Or, ce jour-là, dans le camp retranché d'Agen, il n'y eut qu'un gros, devant. Un seul. Il fut à la mine, au four, au moulin et même au magasin. Rien n'y fit, pourtant. Que peut-on faire quand on est seul ? Il n'y a pas que les coureurs de fond ou les gardiens de but qui connaissent la solitude.

Et ce gros – on l'aurait deviné – s'appelle Abdelatif Benazzi. (Gardère, 1995, pp. 13-14).

Hence, the reader's introduction to the player comes through a knowing representation of exemplary commitment, which deftly and humorously manipulates cultural codes including the *pré carré* (13), military service and traditionally conceived manual labour, while also self-reflexively alluding to canonical sporting literature.

This passage also serves to inform the biography's first chapter, which begins with a quotation from Antoine Blondin, the unofficial poet laureate of French sport: 'Seuls ceux qui ont vraiment souffert peuvent rentrer dans la légende du sport' (17). Suffering will feature prominently throughout Gardère's narrative, starting with his account of Benazzi's sending-off in his very first international match, during France's 1990 tour of Australia. While the author follows the French press of that time in deeming the player's expulsion unjustified, his primary focus is on its psychological impact, which, in common with the bulk of this biography, is recounted in an apparently authoritative third-person narration:

Mais il faut traverser un terrain de rugby seul, sous les sifflets et les quolibets d'une foule ennemie qui se gausse, pour comprendre ce que souffrance, chagrin et honte veulent dire. Et Abdel, à vingt et un ans, découvrait soudain, en quittant cette pelouse du stade de Sydney, ce que solitude et tristesse signifiaient. Il regagna les vestiaires et pleura.

[...]

Du fond de son infinie détresse, Abdelatif songea à sa mère. Les mamans sont toujours les bouées morales des enfants tristes et éperdus de souffrance intérieure. (22-23)

This reduction of 'le géant africain' (17) to the status of a lost child is followed by a flashback to his actual childhood, where in addition to his stereotypically depicted mother, we are introduced to the rest of his family. Both Benazzi's paternal grandfather ('ce géant de 2 mètres, mort à quatre-vingt-dix-huit ans', 25) and his father ('homme à part au caractère fort et indépendant', 26) clearly contributed to his physical and psychological inheritance. However, it was a providential encounter with a former Foreign Legionnaire, Reinhart Janik, which introduced Benazzi to the

sport in which he would rapidly excel. The father of well-known Stade Toulousain player Karl, Janik senior had settled in Oujda, where ‘Il fut le promoteur du rugby dans la ville [...] Si Oujda possède aujourd’hui la meilleure équipe de rugby du Maroc, c’est grâce à Reinhart Janik’ (32). This sporting epiphany sets Benazzi on a path that will see him selected for the Moroccan national side, then lead him to a professional career in France.

As he traces this itinerary, Gardère underlines the ordeals that punctuate Benazzi’s sporting exploits. For stardom, it would seem, must always be paid for in blood, sweat and tears: ‘le parcours d’un rugbyman équivaut largement à celui du combattant’ (71). Alongside homesickness and loneliness, aggravated by periodic injury problems, these trials include the reluctance of the established Agen first team to admit him to the squad when he joined the reigning national champions in 1989. In this connection, Gardère acknowledges the overt racism of a single, unnamed, member of the Agen side (72). However, his explanation of the group’s broader hostility to the outsider is couched in terms of its legitimate solidarity: ‘Il n’est pas facile de pénétrer un tel groupe qui a connu, solidairement, tous les exploits, tous les bonheurs. [...] Et cet ostracisme, somme toute logique, rend Abdel malheureux’ (70). In keeping with the light-hearted traditionalism of Gardère’s narrative, a fittingly ‘meridional’ solution is arrived at when Benazzi, in a rare appearance as an Agen replacement, demonstrates his commitment to the common cause against Hagetmau, a club from the Landes widely feared for its brutal approach to the game, as epitomized by the redoubtable Lansaman brothers. In response to their targeting of his teammates, the young Moroccan erupts:

Abdel est un garçon qui ne compte pas ses affections. Voyant ce pugilat, il fonça dans le tas, porta secours, seul, à ses « compagnons » agenais et d’une seule rafale, il étendit pour le compte l’un des redoutables frangins landais. Abdel le vengeur pas masqué venait sans le savoir d’intégrer le clan dont il était interdit de séjour depuis plusieurs semaines. (74)

This comically evoked display of violence allows Benazzi not only to become a regular member of the Agen side, but also in time its captain, as well as a regular international player alongside such fixtures of the *XV de France* as his Agen clubmate, Philippe Sella. Indeed, Gardère's narrative culminates with the two historic matches in New Zealand in 1994 that gave Sella his 100th and 101st caps, with Benazzi also a member of the victorious side on both occasions. France's back-to-back wins resulted in a first ever series victory over the All Blacks, which was sealed at Eden Park in Auckland with the celebrated 'try from the end of the world', a sweeping counterattack in which Benazzi, at blind-side flanker, beat the fearsome All Blacks winger Jonah Lomu to maintain the scintillating move. The Moroccan forward thus played a pivotal role in what is still hailed as an archetypal demonstration of *le French flair*. Five years later, Benazzi would also be an integral part of the most remarkable come-back in rugby history, as French adventure once again overcame mighty New Zealand, this time at Twickenham, in the semi-final of the 1999 World Cup. As the player himself commented: 'Trois essais en une demi-heure et le public anglais qui se met à chanter *La Marseillaise*... Il faut le vivre pour le croire !' (Escot, 2005, p. 259). The symbolism of this national style, and of the national anthem itself, will be returned to in the next part of this discussion.

4. Race, Religion and the Republic

In his 1995 biography, Michel Gardère had highlighted Benazzi's complementary commitment to his native Morocco and his adopted France, as well as to rugby conceived as both a family and a homeland: *L'Ovalie*, as other commentators have characterized it. In contrast, Jean-Charles Delesalle's *La Foi du rugby* (2000) foregrounds the player's staunch commitment simultaneously to the sport in which he excels and to his religious beliefs. This linkage between sport and ethnicity is in turn predicated on the centrality of Islam in Maghrebi lives and identities. Significantly, Delesalle eschews the third-person narration of Gardère's volume in favour of a conversational exchange in which questions and

comments are addressed using the informal ‘tu’ form, as are the star’s responses. The player’s voice consequently gains in audibility, even if much of the biographical material overlaps with that presented more conventionally by Gardère. Nevertheless, this discursive format does allow for some valuable precision in key areas, including particularly the depiction of race and religion in French rugby’s south-western heartland, and in contemporary France more broadly.

A case in point is the description offered by Delesalle of the banal racism encountered by Benazzi on his arrival in Agen: ‘Effectivement, il y avait des mecs – mais est-ce que ça vaut la peine d’en parler ? – qui ne se privaient pas de dire que je ferais mieux de retourner chez moi bouffer mon couscous plutôt que d’essayer de piquer la place des autres joueurs, bien français eux’ (Delesalle, 2000, p. 65). Despite the star’s magnanimous and socially exculpatory aside, he notes that such attitudes were displayed by both players and supporters, as well as the usual bar-room commentators. Significantly, the fact that Benazzi was able to survive and even thrive in this parochial environment is presented as owing as much to his conception of the French nation as to his personal resilience, which itself emerges reinforced from this ordeal:

Même si je faisais semblant d’ignorer ces conneries, ça me déprimait de voir et d’entendre ce genre de choses. J’avais encore certaines illusions et puis je me disais surtout que j’étais en France, le pays de la tolérance.

A contrario, tout cela a sans doute forgé mon caractère et m’a endurci. Et m’a aidé à relever mon challenge. (65)

As Benazzi goes on to underline in his discussion with Delesalle, traditional ethics founded on religious faith were, and still are, at the heart of his response to such challenges: ‘Mes valeurs, celles que mes parents m’ont inculquées, que le Coran m’a apprises, je ne les ai jamais oubliées, et encore moins trahies. [...] Quand je suis arrivé en France, ça a été un combat de tous les jours. Il continue.’ (120)

Where Gardère had devoted a characteristically light-hearted chapter to ‘Religion et intégration’ (1995, pp. 145-162), Delesalle offers a rather more sustained engagement with ‘La religion: moteur d’une vie’ (2000, pp. 123-128). This discussion opens with a forceful assertion of Benazzi’s faith: ‘J’ai vraiment besoin de Dieu. Je sais que ça peut déranger du monde mais j’aimerais surtout qu’il n’y ait pas de malentendu là-dessus. Au nom du respect de l’être humain.’ (123) Subsequent exchanges will underline the player’s fidelity to his beliefs, all the while stressing the liberal and progressive nature of his own Islamic faith, as exemplified by his respectful attitude to the beliefs of others, including the lack of them in a predominantly secular society. The need for mutual respect is thus emphasized, together with the danger of extremisms on all sides (124). Benazzi develops this point when the discussion turns to his work with the *Haut Conseil à l’Intégration*, specifically with regard to the habitual conflation of Islam with Islamism:

Là-dessus, il y a énormément de malentendus. Il ne faut pas tout mélanger... La différence n’implique pas forcément la violence. On peut ressembler à n’importe qui tout en marquant sa différence. Et du coup être totalement citoyen français. (134)

The linkage established here between *le droit à la différence* and French citizenship is something that underpins Benazzi’s engagement ‘Pour un islam des lumières’, as outlined in his collaborative text with Richard Escot (Escot, 2005, pp. 207-215). It is also central to the version of republican citizenship that he both personally exemplifies and publicly advocates. Before exploring that further, we need briefly to mention an event far from the rugby field that is presented by all three volumes not only as evidence of Benazzi’s authentically Maghrebi identity, but also, paradoxically, as a critical juncture in his ascent to sporting stardom: namely, his encounter with ‘L’homme du désert’.

Once again, the basic elements of the narrative are essentially reproduced in the three accounts. They focus on the 1991-1992 season, undoubtedly Benazzi’s *annus horribilis*, which would see him break his arm on two occasions, then, following a lengthy

recuperation, be sent off in a cup match against Toulon, which resulted in a four-match ban for both Agen and the national side, leading in turn to his dropping from the French party for the summer tour of Argentina. Benazzi's expulsion was prompted by racist insults from his former international teammate *Éric Champ*, who was also sent off for his part in the ensuing brawl. At a particularly low ebb, Benazzi returned to Morocco, where, accompanied by one of his brothers and two cousins, he embarked for the first time on an expedition deep into the mountain and desert landscapes of the south. It was as the guest of a Berber shepherd that the future star was invited to reflect on the insignificance of rugby's vagaries in the face of more fundamental questions of being and belief (Gardère, 1995, pp. 136-141; Delesalle, 2000, pp. 99-102; Escot, 2005, pp. 157-162). The final iteration of this story occurs at the mid-point of Escot's mature appraisal of Benazzi's playing career, a culminating evaluation that also stands out by its complexity and its comprehensiveness. This thematic richness is mirrored on the level of form by the use throughout of an autobiographical voice, which picks up and expands upon the testimony first presented in the third-person by Gardère and then revisited as a dialogue by Delesalle.

While it is unclear precisely what roles were played in the composition of this closing volume by the star player and the professional writer – in their joint acknowledgements, Benazzi and Escot simply present themselves as 'les auteurs' (Escot, 2005, p. 287) – there can be little doubt that their 'collaboration' was of the 'close, intense and prolonged' variety that only rarely, but most productively, informs the writing of a sporting life (Whannel, 2002, p. 58). Benazzi speaks here in his own voice, or something close to it, and it is this first-person narration that most tellingly evokes his reaction to the desert nomad's response to his own sporting mobility:

Nous étions assis entre l'Orient et l'Occident, ce qui m'a ramené à ce que je vivais au carrefour de sociétés différentes. Il m'a donné la force de croire que le brassage des civilisations est inéluctable, au prix de beaucoup de sacrifices et de douleur, certes, mais

qu'il ne peut en être autrement. [...] À un moment ou un autre, l'universel l'emportera. Quand on aura compris qu'il n'y a plus dangereux que de regarder le monde avec les yeux d'une seule culture. (Escot, 2005, p. 162)

We are far removed here from both the themes and the tonality of the average player biography. Clearly, the trope of the desert encounter may well contribute to the narrative's mythologization of its subject. However, this re-inscription of Benazzi's self-reflection not only within his professional itinerary – he returns to his career in France reinvigorated by 'une formidable bouffée d'oxygène' (159) – but also within the societal configuration of 1990s France serves to ensure its broader relevance and resonance.

This leads us finally to consider the star's attitude to his French citizenship, and with it his conception of the Republic. In reply to Jean-Claude Delesalle's question regarding his response to the familiar invocation 'Vive la France', Benazzi replies:

Vive la France ! Pourquoi veux-tu que je ne crie pas ma fierté d'être aussi français ? C'est ce que les gens doivent comprendre. Je le dis, je le répète: il n'y a là aucun reniement de tes convictions, de tes origines, de ta religion. (Delesalle, 2000, p. 138)

This message will be reiterated and elucidated in Richard Escot's volume, where Benazzi accurately observes that rugby has historically had an unusually accommodating attitude to nationality in the constitution of international teams: 'On était rugby, quel que soit le pays d'où on venait' (Escot, 2005, p. 201). This flexibility explains why he was able to become the first North African to place rugby for France in 1990. In turn, Benazzi's expression of pride in his adopted national anthem illuminates a broader faith in the Republic of which he had become a citizen:

Au fil des matchs, j'ai compris le véritable sens de cet hymne. Chanter *La Marseillaise* en portant le maillot bleu et représenter la France n'est pas un acte ordinaire. Chaque mot, chaque phrase de cet hymne ramène à l'histoire de la France, à la défense des idéaux de la Révolution française, à l'idée de la souveraineté

nationale face à l'envahisseur. Je pensais toujours à mes parents au moment de la chanter, mais elle pesait désormais d'un autre poids. À travers elle, j'ai ressenti le privilège qui était le mien de représenter un pays aussi emblématique que la France. (203-204)

Conclusion

Reflecting after his retirement on such experiences, and through them on the broader significance of rugby, Benazzi drew attention to the symbolism of the various jerseys that he had worn in the course of his career:

Un maillot de rugby, qu'il s'agisse de celui de son club ou de l'équipe nationale, représente beaucoup plus qu'un bout de tissu. C'est le passé et l'avenir, un héritage et un projet, des efforts accomplis et à accomplir.

Ce sont des valeurs, des hommes qui l'ont passé mille fois sur leurs épaules, des couleurs pour lesquelles des générations de joueurs se sont battus. Des victoires et des défaites, des rires et des larmes, des rêves et des cauchemars. C'est un patrimoine. (Benazzi, 2007, pp. 105-6)

This conflation of masculinity and morality, suffering and self-sacrifice, solidarity and heritage encapsulates the representational paradigm that informs all three iterations of Abdelatif Benazzi's sporting life, which together serve to contextualize and, indeed, to legitimize the star's competitive success and iconic status. In the process, the highlighted texts collectively endorse the humanist universalism underpinning the French republican value-system, specifically in the face of the societal challenges experienced by the star himself, together with the broader society of which he had become the honoured sporting representative. Through this composite narrative, we may observe a process of narrative self-assertion that accompanies not only the subject's social progression, itself a commonplace of player biographies, but also his evolving engagement with the complex realities of societal contestation. This altogether more unusual quality suggests that Abdelatif

Benazzi's variety of sporting stardom is of a genuinely exceptional kind. Indeed, a full year before France's *black-blanc-beur* world champions achieved their competitive consecration in 1998, Benazzi had ensured his abiding multicultural symbolism as 'le premier capitaine musulman du XV de France' (Espitalier, 2018). While it may often be true, as Jean Giraudoux (1928) famously remarked, that 'Une vie sportive est une vie héroïque à vide', such itineraries suggest that a minority of sports stars may be able to mobilize their media representation so as to engage authentically and productively with underlying socio-cultural questions. It is thus Abdelatif Benazzi's embodiment of transnational hybridity, his 'in-between' status as both Moroccan and Frenchman, man of faith and citizen of the Republic, sportsman and social reformer, that emerges as the abiding legacy of his multiply narrated sporting life.

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