

## ‘El Diego de la gente’: the most human of the football Gods<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Football and religion maintain a beneficial association and it would not be an exaggeration to say that contemporary football presents the most watched religious performances in the world (Rial, 2012). Some authors even compare football to a new religion.

In the multisite ethnographic research about football that I have conducted in more than 15 countries since 2003, I found expressions of devotion to various celebrity players who are treated as “saints” and “messiahs” – yet none with the intensity of Maradona, who has his own Church in Argentina, chapels in the streets of Naples, and there was passionate commotion at his wake.

Inquiring into the relationship between football and religion, the article explores the characteristics of the star Maradona, who is closer to the ambiguous figure of Exú than other more Apollonian football “deities”. It examines why Maradona deserves such worship and how this banal religiosity echoes among football fans. Cheering for Maradona can be seen as a weapon of the weak to beat puissant, at least imaginarily.

**Keywords:** football; religion; Maradona; banal religiosity; vengeance.

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<sup>1</sup> I thank my colleague and friend Cornélia Eckert for her comments, and Jeffrey Hoff for the proof-editing.

Just like pharaoh, Elvis too had a biological body, complete with biological needs, desires and emotions. Elvis ate and drank and slept. Yet Elvis was much more than a biological body. Like pharaoh, Elvis was a story, a myth, a brand – and the brand was far more important than the biological body. During Elvis's lifetime, the brand earned millions of dollars selling records, tickets, posters and rights, but only a small fraction of the necessary work was done by Elvis in person. Instead, most of it was done by a small army of agents, lawyers, producers and secretaries. Consequently when the biological Elvis died, for the brand it was business as usual. Even today fans still buy the King's posters and albums, radio stations go on paying royalties, and more than half a million pilgrims flock each year to Graceland, the King's necropolis in Memphis, Tennessee.

Y.N. Harari, *Homo Deus*, 2015, p. 147

## 1. Introduction: Maradona's eight pillows

The first time Maradona entered my radar as someone special was in June 1980. I was working in the sports department of a radio station in southern Brazil and his team, Argentino Junior, was in Porto Alegre for a friendly match. The reporter who covered the Argentines at the hotel where they were staying added a curiosity to routine information about squads, tactics, substitutes: according to a room maid, a young prodigy who wore number 10 for the team slept with eight pillows. He was not yet 19 years old, which at the time was considered quite young for a professional footballer. He played for a relatively small club and only in the following year would he swap its red jersey for that of Boca Juniors, the club he was truly passionate about. But he already deserved special attention, so much so, the reporter provided details about his pillows.

Six years later, in 1986, he led Argentina to victory in the World Cup bringing joy to the entire country. The campaign included his infamous goal by the “hand of God” and his famous “goal of the century”, in which he dribbled across more than half the field to beat his English opponents. He would rise to become the world’s greatest active footballer, through the force of television images. But in 1980 he was still unknown outside South America. He was considered a football star in his own country, and he already had celebrity habits and perks – in that hotel in Porto Alegre, he was accompanied by family members and a “bride”, which is not common in football travels, when players usually share rooms with teammates. Looking back, I can only justify this transgression by the fact that it was a friendly match. However, what caught my attention in the hours before the game was the idiosyncrasy of the eight pillows, and the importance given to the minor issue by a reporter. The world might not have known it, but a celebrity was being born – and Maradona and the reporter seemed to realize. But neither

probably imagined that he would be deified by a legion of admirers across the planet, and entering his name on Google today results in more than 65.2 million results.

This article is the result of a multilocated ethnography and a screen ethnography (Rial, 2005). The first term, multilocated, refers to fieldwork with footballers in a variety of places. It is inspired by Clifford (1997) who recognized that travel replaces more traditional ethnography that is localized in a specific place. It was conducted by visiting stadiums, locker rooms, players' homes, and talking to multiple actors who compose the football system in different places around the world, in more than 15 countries (Rial, 2008; 2016).

Since 2003, I have been studying the transnational circulation of Brazilian football players, many of whom are celebrities. This multilocated ethnography began in Andalusia where I lived for one month in Cádiz (in 2003) and one month in Sevilla (in 2004) – close to the training facilities for Bétis. There, I interviewed the eight Brazilian players on the Bétis and Seville clubs at their respective *Ciudades Deportivas*. Most of them were playing for or had played for the Brazilian national team. I also visited and lived in the Netherlands (Wageningen, Eindhoven and Amsterdam), where I spent from two weeks to a month at various times in the past 10 years. There I interviewed more than 10 players (and their relatives, managers, directors, secretaries, friends...), two of them twice, with a gap of years.

In Seville and Eindhoven, where I stayed longer and visited repeatedly, I learned the divisions of the sport territories (the training pitch, gyms, cafeterias, bars, locker rooms, medical centers, press rooms, stadiums, parking lots, etc.); who is allowed to circulate in each space (employees, footballers, press managers, journalists, players' entourages); and the work and domestic routine of the footballers. This experience allowed me to visit other clubs and move quickly among the different gatekeepers to gain access to the players. The spaces and agents are very similar from one place to another. Although local, national or global clubs have very different budgets and their facilities differ in comfort and luxury, the training routines and division of spaces is not very different among the clubs. This facilitated a multi-localized ethnography.

I was able to visit football clubs, stadiums, matches, sport bars, churches or cafes and restaurants (meeting places for players), talk with players, their colleagues, relatives, club employees, FIFA agents and other football related actors in Madrid, Malaga and Cádiz, in Spain; Lille, Paris and Lyon in France; Almelo, Groningen, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Alkmaar in the Netherlands; Toronto, Canada; Seoul, South Korea; New Delhi and Mumbai, India; Hong Kong, China; Tokyo and Chiba in Japan; Athens, Greece; Warsaw, Poland; Bangkok, Thailand; Marrakech, Morocco; Tunis, Tunisia; Perth, Melbourne, Adelaide and Sidney Australia; Montevideo, Uruguay; and New Jersey, United States. In Brazil, where I initially intended to carry out the research with players returning from experiences abroad, I have been in stadiums and conducted interviews in Fortaleza, Belém, Natal, Salvador, Porto Alegre and Florianópolis. These direct contacts were complemented by telephone conversations with players and intermediaries in Marseille, Metz, Rennes, and Le Mans, France; Charleroi, Belgium; and

Monaco, which proved to be much more effective than I could have imagined. For example, I “followed” a player on Brazil’s national team by talking with him on the phone when he left his house, and while he was in his car on the way to the club-training center. Protected by a “curtain” that separated us, immersed in semi-anonymity, and without having to interrupt their activities, players tended to be more vocal. Hearing domestic noises over the phone allowed me to ask questions that broadened the conversations.

The interviews with players were usually conducted individually, and recorded, but never in the pressrooms where they usually respond to journalists in buzzwords. Nevertheless, I did some group interviews at the training center of Bétis (with two athletes); at Kwakab Marrakech (also with two); at Panathinaikos (where I spoke with a group of five players) and in a hotel lobby in Montevideo (where I met three players who were “concentrated” for a match). These were also good encounters. As those who conduct interviews with focus groups know, the tension found in a dialogue between two strangers disappears through the mediation of third parties. What is lost in intimacy is gained in self-confidence and a desire for expression.

Many of the meetings were informal and on many occasions observations were made outside professional spaces. The meetings at the players’ homes - where I could speak with their friends, wives and relatives - were particularly fruitful for observing their lifestyles. I did this in Seville, Eindhoven, Alkmaar, Groningen, Toronto, Marrakech, Adelaide and Montevideo. It was also profitable to accept rides in their cars or taxis; to have meals at cafes and restaurants, observe them in train stations, and visit fan stores near stadiums or in the stadiums, and bars frequented by fans and players. I have interviewed around 100 players.

Since in recent years the Brazilian sports media has correspondents in major European cities and closely follows the Brazilian celebrity players, I have been able to keep track of their lives (at least, parts of them) especially players in Spain, France and England, and with less frequency those in new markets for Brazilian footballers - Russia, Ukraine and China. Countless television, radio and Internet programs provide useful information especially about players with whom I had contact in previous ethnographic fieldwork, which allowed me to filter the material and read between the lines. A shadow on media coverage remains over Africa, parts of Asia and Australia.

In recent years, the footballers’ large use of social media offers virtual visits to their homes and families, and has allowed me to accompany them in their daily lives. Posts by athletes and their *entourages* on social networks (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter (and previously Periscope) have become more frequent and provide precious information about everyday life. Remotely, using the Instagram chat, during a “live” in England I interviewed a footballer’s teen son who I had met in Eindhoven when he was a baby.

In Brazil, the CBF website ([www.agenciacbf.com.br](http://www.agenciacbf.com.br)) was very useful, because, unlike newspapers, it provides raw behind the scenes images of training, gyms, excerpts from speeches, meetings of the Technical Commission, meals, players’ contacts with fans and team

staff and of private moments (watching movies, playing games, praying). These videos allow viewing aspects of the ‘concentration’ routine which is often absent from journalistic coverage, although it has become increasingly extensive, especially on paid channels, and often approaches a reality-show style, verifying who talks to whom during training or in the locker room, and accompanying the construction of relationship networks, the presence of managers and the absence of others, etc.

So if I want to, I can now be ‘on the field’ 24 hours a day. My ‘normal’ day starts with sport news at several paid sport channels (*SportTV, ESPN, Fox, Band Sport*), and a glance at foreign newspaper websites - the main Spanish sports newspapers, *Marca, Mundodeportivo, Sport* or *As*, where I would also have access to their radio stations; the French *L’Équipe* and *LeParisien*; and the English *Fourfourtwo, Mirror Sport, Sun Sport, Dailymail, The Guardian*; the Argentinian *Olé*, as well as club websites and, with luck, their radios which are not on the air all day. Towards the end of the morning, I may watch live matches and videos indefinitely, because Brazilian television has sports programs 24 hours a day, on more than 10 TV channels. This is more than I have found in any other country, though with the Internet, many options have been added to the regular media throughout the world.

Fieldwork continues to establish an important disciplinary border between anthropology and cultural studies. Culture studies being “a fluid interdisciplinary formation that potentially shares everything else with socio-cultural anthropology” (Clifford, 2003, p.19). Because of its use in association with fieldwork, we can place screen ethnography within the scope of anthropology. Screen ethnography is a methodology that transports procedures proper to anthropological research to the study of media text, such as a researcher’s long immersion in the field, systematic observation, recording in field notebooks; and others proper to film criticism like analysis of shots, camera movements, editing options, in short, of film language and its meanings. It is a method that allows revealing the ‘social spaces’ of messages in television, cinema, internet or the press, and a fieldwork practice that allows researchers to achieve a high degree of understanding of the social group or text studied, maintaining a reflectivity of the researcher.

As I wrote in another article (Rial, 2022), unlike content analysis, in screen ethnography the contents of messages are not matched or compared in terms of their frequency. A news item may occur only once, yet it may be written by a reporter with a sharp sensitivity that goes beyond routine description. Even if there is no follow-up, either in subsequent television reports or in the written press, it could be quite significant. Screen ethnography requires attention to detail (tone of voice, gesture, dress - the “wink”, as Geertz (1973) would say. And in this sense, it agrees with the German art historian Aby Warburg who said “God hides in the details”.

Freely inspired by Freud’s *fluctuating attention* or *evenly hovering attention* technique, a fluctuating listening/reading/seeing was also used in my screen ethnography. Freud (1996) formulated this

technique in 1912, as follows: “We should not attach particular importance to what we hear, and it is convenient that we pay the same fluctuating attention to everything” (p. 125). With a fluctuating attention approach, the researcher is able to make use of everything that is said or presented. This is what Theodor Reik (1948) later described figuratively as ‘listening with the third ear’. More than a recommendation to avoid preconceived ideas and biases, the *evenly hovering attention* approach (as the method is also known) recognizes that the attention of the analyst (or researcher) “is regulated by conscious and unconscious selections” (p. 42-43). Data were recorded in field diaries and reading spreadsheets. Accepting Geertz’s (1973) notion of “dense description”, I am aware of the existence of multiple meanings and the possibility of different interpretations of the data.

The mediascape provides what Bakhtin (1997) calls chronotopos – the possibility to temporalize space, transporting us not only to another space but also to another time (which for me allows overcoming the 4-hour time lag between Europe and Brazil and to watch matches played in the past). The data collected during this multi-sited research (Rial 2007; 2008; 2016; 2020) gave me information about the football system that was indirectly relevant to understanding Maradona’s trajectory.

## 2. Exotic star

Maradona’s eight pillows are nothing compared with demands made by some stars today. With each contract renewal, footballers ask for productivity bonuses (based on goals, team appearances, titles), including houses, cars, flights, special insurance and others.

In recent times, there have been oddities of all kinds, such as asking to be paid for applauding the fans, for being slim or even demanding a number of parties a week they can attend. The teams, for their part, prohibit them from carrying out risky activities, such as riding a motorcycle, bullfighting, skiing, riding a bike ... and even traveling into space!

Other “crazy demands were made by ex-Madridista Adebayor, as Labarga (2021) reported. To wear the Lyon shirt, he asked for a mansion with views of Corsica, a helicopter, a private chef and the number 10. Upon learning of the forward’s intentions, the French team wasted no time in discarding his signing. Parties are a common theme in contracts. When Ronaldinho signed for Flamengo in 2011-2012, he demanded that they allow him to go out at least two nights a week. In Mexico, when he arrived in Querétaro, ‘Dinho’ asked for a house with a swimming pool, a beach soccer field, a seven-a-side soccer field, and four butlers. Regarding the houses, a former Madrid player said that he would only sign if his new house faced north, towards the sun (Labarga, 2021).

Compared to these, the young Maradona’s demands seem quite modest. And in fact, he doesn’t appear to have many demands, even though he has worked at the world’s wealthiest clubs (and

countries, the United Arab Emirates for instance), his requests involved returning to Argentina, such as tickets and planes for him and his family.

After Argentino Junior, Maradona played for Boca Juniors (1981-1982), the club which he and his entire family fanatically supported. In fact, he was about to be traded by Argentino Junior to Boca's rival River Plate when a reporter from a Buenos Aires newspaper interviewed him by phone to confirm the transaction, and Maradona, in a brilliant trick, told him that he was also studying a proposal from Boca. The next day, the newspaper headlines were about Boca's proposal— which became a reality, leading to a contract (Pomarède, 2021). But Maradona was too big for Latin America. He was soon sold to Barcelona in the biggest deal ever until that time, (\$7 million).

It was during his stay in Barcelona (1982-1984) that the image of a bohemian began to be constructed by the media and his behavior criticized, racialized - as if it was very different from other footballers. Maradona's eccentricities were linked to parties and the abusive consumption of alcohol and drugs. This was not new; South American athletes had suffered with stereotypes since their first appearance in Europe in the early twentieth century, when they were portrayed as eccentric, rude and uneducated.

In the mid-1930s newspaper articles made acid criticism of off the field behavior: "Cesarini was an extravagant character who was known to go out with a monkey on his shoulder, went to bed when his team-mates were waking up and took every opportunity to smoke, drink and seduce women." (Lanfranchi & Taylor, 2001, p. 77). The Argentines Sivori, (*Ballon d'Or* in 1961), and his compatriot Libonatti were also represented as eccentric and lazy:

"The anecdotes regarding Sivori are rich and diverse even if he is not as excessive as Libonatti who used to buy twenty-five shirts at a time, or Cesarini who arrived one day to a training session wearing only a dressing gown. In general, the *oriundi* are extravagant. (...) Sivori is lazy. He likes to sleep until lunchtime. He has missed practice more than once, and has had to be woken up to get ready for matches." (Lanfranchi & Taylor, 2001, p.93).

The lack of training, and sleeping until noon, displayed in the 1920s and 30s by Libonatti, and revived in the 1960s by Sivori, echo the embarrassed reprimands I heard from the Dutch of a legendary Brazilian, Romário, who was at PSV Eindhoven from 1988 to 1993. The club was forced to bend its rules, since it could not repeatedly punish the team's leading scorer, a player who decided matches and championships. Also, because of the night parties of the players, coach Vicente del Bosque scheduled practices for the afternoons (Martínez & Ainstein, 2021). Displaying a continuing imperial bias towards the former colonies, a half century later, stereotypes and racist statements were common in the Catalan press during Maradona's stay in Barcelona. In Barcelona, he shared a house with many Argentinian friends his own age. He lived with an extended family as is common in poor neighborhoods in Latin America, like his Villa Fiorito, a favela on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, with no electricity or running water (Pomarède, 2021). This household arrangement was not well accepted by the press.

“He did not count them, but there were times when there were 30 or 40 people,” said Joan Gaspart, the *culé* vice president between 1982 and 1999. “You went at 11 or 12 at night and there were 12 young people sitting on the floor watching movies until three in the morning” added Josep María Minguella, the player representative who was the key to Maradona’s arrival at the entity. “Those boys were very young, they loved the night, they went out a lot,” recalled Marc Bardole, a friend of the *Diez* in Spain<sup>2</sup>.

His nights out with cousins and the childhood friends he supported financially were the target of the most resounding accusations: “Famous were the expeditions of the ‘Maradona clan’ to certain streets of the city where they frequented prostitutes and transvestites, and looked for people to invite to Diego Maradona’s house, where parties and orgies lasted until the wee hours of the morning”. When Maradona reportedly had acute type-B viral hepatitis, it was said to actually be a venereal disease he contracted through his careless and busy sex life. While years later the extravagant clothing tastes of the English male, working class born star Beckham would be admired and copied as bold ; the Argentine star’s attire was often portrayed as displaying bad taste. Taste is a matter of class (Bourdieu, 1979) but also of race, ethnic identity and nationality. In Barcelona, where football was much more physical, he was called a ‘little monkey’. Or *Sudaca*, a depreciatory word for South American (Pomarède, 2021).

### 3. Sudacas in the football market

Being South American is an ethnic identity that has been positively valued at many clubs I have visited. A Dutch manager told me that if a club had pretensions to excel internationally, it needed South American players. Ethnic identity seems to function as stock in a global exchange with cyclical rises and declines. Although unofficially, class, gender and national culture of South Americans and Africans are commonly associated at European clubs with heterodox social practices and these different ethnicities carry a risk with a probable impact on their market value. Ethnic and racial stereotypes persist, have economic consequences when they involve commercial transactions and more seriously, perpetuate racist images that refer to the time of slavery (Rial, 2016; 2020).

Driven by discrediting reports and haunted by injuries, Maradona left the sophisticated city of Barcelona only two years after arriving in Spain for the more working class atmosphere of Naples. There he definitively transformed from a star into a saint. And he performed miracles, taking his club, A.S.C. Napoli, which had regularly struggled against relegation, to national and European titles.

In Naples, his lifestyle and subaltern class tastes didn’t attract as much attention and criticism.

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.americateve.com/barcelona/maradona-barcelona-sus-tumultuosos-dias-cataluna-las-fiestas-del-clan-y-el-misterio-detras-la-hepatitis-n1080777>

He felt at home. We have to remember that at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Argentina had only 1.5 million inhabitants. Mass migration in the first decades of the twentieth century brought thousands of Europeans, from different regions, including many poor Neapolitans. Maradona's grandmother, Salvador, was Neapolitan – while his father's parents were indigenous Guarani. “There [in Naples], he was not seen as a little monkey but as a great God, a semi-God...Napoli is viewed in Argentina as a motherland, more than Spain” (Pomarède, 2021).

Despite being Italy's third most important economic center (behind Milan and Rome) and third in population, Naples is still present in the European imaginary as a more traditional Italian city, with pre-modern habits and, in the extreme of prejudice, a place of mobsters, the locus of the Camorra.

Maradona was aware of Naples' subaltern position in the Italian regional hierarchy and the opposition between the industrial north and rural south, which is well identified in the work of Gramsci (1987). It was similar to the opposition that he lived with at a club on the poor south side of Buenos Aires, which was opposed to the rich northern neighborhoods of the city. “So it was the messiah who arrived. He made it possible not only to win, but also to see teams that had never come here before, like Real Madrid or Barcelona...everything changed, everything. We were under the power of the northern teams, like Juventus, Milan. It was the first time that a team from the south could win against the north” (Pomarède, 2021).

Buenos Aires and Napoli are also similar because of local beliefs:

In both cities, there is a relationship with superstition, with Christianity but Baroque Christianity. We find this Baroque Christianity in Buenos Aires. And above all, the common point between Argentina and Napoli is a sense of revenge. It is necessary to understand that a poor emigrant in the late 19th century and early 20th century could not go further than Argentina. The richest went to the United States. The madmen, the bandits, were coming to the south. Argentina wants to have its rematch with the world. Napoli, in relation to the North of Italy (Pomarède, 2021).

Maradona used Naples' underdog image when Argentina faced Italy in the World Cup of 1990. Maradona inspired a stunningly unprecedented display of loyalty by inspiring many Italians from Naples to support Argentina during a semifinal match against Italy played in the Sao Paolo stadium (which is now the Diego Armando Maradona stadium).

Napoli has a saying: “take the slap off your face”. To have a rematch, you have to ‘take the slap off your face’. And that's what Maradona proposed in this epic game between Argentines and Italians. He tried to show that Napoli was perhaps closer to Argentina than to rich northern Italy. The national identification drama reached an apex, and Maradona was the reason Argentina eliminated Italy in this semifinal, leaving the home team as the humiliated runner-up. While many Neapolitans cheered for Maradona in the semifinal, in the final, in Rome, against West Germany, the Argentinean anthem was booed by Italian fans, and the Argentine flag torn

and removed from its pole because of Dieguito.

Just as the Neapolitans returned the slap by winning championships, the Argentines did so in the 1986 World Cup, beating a colonizing rival. Argentina had been a Spanish colony, but since the 19th century was economically dominated by England. The genocide of the Indigenous was largely conducted by the English as they cleared La Pampa for their railways. More recently, Argentines saw the Cup as a chance for at least symbolic revenge for the Malvinas war. So the game was a kind of rematch. And God was with the South. Dieguito's first goal was made with "the hand of God", it was "stolen", just as the Malvinas were stolen from Argentine, thought the fans. His second goal was a miracle of a cosmic flying kite. Maradona's football also took on a divine existence in the mythical and unforgettable radio narration of Victor Hugo Morales, who did justice to his French homonym:

Maradona has the ball. Two defenders on him. Maradona steps on the ball. He tears to the right, the genius of world football. He left the third one. He's going to pass to Burrochaga. No, Maradona all the way. Genius, genius, genius, tá, tá, tá, tá,... Gooooooooal! Gooooooooal! I want to cry. Saint God. Long live football. What a goal! Dieegooooool! Maradona! I am crying. Forgive me. Maradona, In an unforgettable run, the play of all time. Cosmic kite. What planet did you come from? To leave so many English behind. To turn the country into a clenched fist screaming for Argentina. Argentina 2, England 0, Diego, Diego, Diego Armando Maradona. Thank you God, for football, for Maradona, for these tears. For this Argentina 2, England 0<sup>3</sup>.

Against FIFA's will, this is considered the best goal of all Football World Cups.

The victory over England, in the context of a deadly war for Argentinians, helps us to understand the importance of Maradona and the veneration he provokes. But I prefer to look back to Naples. A possible reason for the veneration of Maradona is found in Neapolitan sentiments. Honor and revenge are central to Mediterranean cultures, as Peristiany (1966) pointed out. A dishonor must be washed out (sometimes with blood) within this cosmology of sentiments (Pitt-Rivers, 1968). In the Neapolitan case, a dishonor must be removed from the face. Maradona became a demi-God by allowing the weaker to win (Argentines against English, Neapolitans against Northern Italy), avenging them on the football pitches of humiliations suffered in the real world. Maradona seems like the pulp fiction hero Edmundo Dantès studied by Gramsci (1968). The popularity of novels such as "The Count of Monte Cristo" was explained by the hero's ability to take revenge. Revenge of the weak against those in power, against injustice, contempt, is at the heart of the novel. Or, in Gramsci words: "what man of the people does not believe that he has already suffered an injustice from the powerful and does not fantasize about a 'punishment' that he will inflict on them?"<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wVho3I0NtU>

<sup>4</sup> Gramsci (1968) understood the love of the marginalized for Dumas' pulp fiction, although criticized it: "the most opiate of popular novels: what man of the people does not believe that he has suffered an injustice from the powerful and does not fantasize about a 'punishment' that he will inflict on them? Edmundo Dantès offers this man of the people a model, intoxicates him with exaltation, replaces the belief in a transcendent justice in which he no longer systematically believes."

Diego had supporters, the avid fans of the clubs he played for. He also had “admirers” (Malaia, 2012), who were those capable of overcoming club or national oppositions, and he had “believers”, members of the Maradona Church. In 2017, Maradona was anointed with the title of honorary citizen of Naples.

#### 4. Celebrities and the banal religiosity

Celebrities (or stars, as Morin called them in his study of the Hollywood star system (1957)) are special individuals, treated like heroes, inaccessible, who are adored by legions of fans. The use of the word star indicates the unfathomable stellar distances that only an imaginary identification can span. They inhabit an inaccessible cosmos, a bubble (Rial, 2008), isolated from common mortals, and yet seem to be as close as a dear friend. Today, they enter our everyday lives through the mediascape (Appadurai, 1990) on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook or TV - and display their everyday lives in images of family, dogs, girlfriends, cars, homes, restaurants, clothes, and in advertising, an interminable paraphernalia of personal objects for consumption.

A star, Morin tell us, has two lives: that of his public image and his real life. And in fact, the first tends to command or take over the other. It is as though in their everyday lives stars are condemned to live and be like the images seen in advertising, to have lives devoted to beauty, fun, holidays, games, and adventures. And thus, stars touch every aspect of the daily lives of ordinary people, dictating taste in fashion, lifestyle, and desire (Morin, 2005).

Like cinema stars, some athletes are also stars and thus mediators between the real and the imaginary. Their bodies and also some objects that are in contact with them (physically or imaginarily) are considered special. Thus, the cult of fame fetishizes the objects they touch. A shirt worn by an athlete (and not only a football player), depending on their fame, can be seen as a hallowed object.

His photos, his trinkets, his handkerchiefs, his house, are all infused with his presence. Inanimate objects are impregnated with his soul and force us to love them. Affective participation thus spreads from beings to things and regenerates fetishizations, venerateds, and cults (Morin, 2005).

Some authors even compare football to a new religion (Rial, 2012). If watching a game is compared to participation in religious rituals, the performance of the players on the field is similar to that of clergy (Augé, 1998): “ ... the drama is celebrated in a central place by twenty three officiants and some assistants before a multitude of fans, whose number varies, and can reach up to fifty thousand individuals and be followed with the same faith, at home, by millions

of practitioners of the liturgy who, without apparently being given an order, stand up, chant, wail or sit once again, at the same rhythm as the gathered multitude". (p.74)

And this is not new. Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert associate profane acts and religion, in this much cited passage: "Si les dieux chacun à leur heure sortent du temple et deviennent profanes, nous voyons par contre des choses humaines, mais sociales, la patrie, la propriété, le travail, la personne humaine y rentrer l'une après l'autre" (Hubert & Mauss, 1906, p. XVI)<sup>5</sup>.

In fact, the relationship between football and religion has been identified by many for quite some time, at least since Catholic festivals and games after Sunday services. While the relationship between sport and religion dates back centuries, and was initially present among Catholics, it is also found among Protestants (Putey, 2001). The expansion among Protestants was due in part to Charles Kingsley's novel and the movement that emerged in the Protestant Church is known as 'Muscular Christianity'.

Football and religion maintain a beneficial association and it would not be an exaggeration to say that contemporary football is often the scene of the most watched religious propaganda in the world (Rial, 2012). However, as Da Matta (2003) warned, we must be careful not to reduce one thing to another, as Novak (1976) did. Here, I am not particularly interested in the religiosity of football players – or of Maradona, in particular, but of his fans towards him.

Knowing the power of the stars, clubs increase their profits by selling shirts, replicas, cups, pens, and a wide range of trinkets that become central ornaments in homes or are used with pride and respect by fans. They become the site of sentiments, desires, and fears, bearers of an aura and thus become cult objects, in Benjamin's (1969) sense. Although this is true for many footballers (athletes from other sports, and movie stars as well), only a few are seen as sacred themselves. And to this day, only Maradona has deserved chapels and churches.

## 5. A chapel in Naples

On one of the busiest streets in Naples' old city I came across a small chapel in honor of Maradona, in 2010. It is on the facade of the Bar Nilo along the Piazzetta of the same name. The altar was on the outside wall of the bar until 2014, and has been inside the bar since then. I was told that the bar owner, Carmine "Bruno" Alcidi, is the third generation in his family to run Bar Nilo. He and his father erected the altar in 1991. It is the "Capello miraculoso di Diego Armando Maradona", as we read in one of the two frames, the other contains a lock of hair said to have been Maradona's. Maradona's hair exhibited as a relic under the central photo of

<sup>5</sup> "If the gods each at their own time leave the temple and become profane, we see on the other hand human, but social things, the homeland, property, work, the human person entering it one after the other".

the venerable was allegedly picked up by Bruno Alcidi from his idol's seat on a return flight from a European Cup match in 1990. Under the 'miraculous hair' we see a photograph of a young Maradona dressed in the colors of Napoli, which coincidentally correspond to the blue of Argentina. A blue glass bottle also in the chapel supposedly contains tears collected from fans in 1991, when Maradona fled Naples to return to Argentina, after having been caught in a doping test. Surrounding the central frames in the altar to Maradona are figures of the current Pope and the saint of the city of Naples, San Gennaro, expressing the cultic mixing of Christian faith with football devotion. "Saint cards" of Christian Madonnas surround the portraits. And bills of money from different countries are displayed as offerings.



**Fig. 1. Author's photo, September 2014**

Next to the small wooden chapel there is a photomontage entitled "La Creazione di calcio" ("The Creation of Football"). It paraphrases the scene of the Creation of Adam (*La Creazione di Adamo*) by Renaissance artist Michelangelo that covers part of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. In the alfresco de Naples, Maradona takes the place of Adam and thus Maradona's hand is near the finger of God who commanded him to teach football.



Fig. 2. Image from internet, 2021

The chapel resonates the fans sentiment toward this semi-God. Neapolitans have a prayer for him: “Our Maradona who descends on the pitch, your name will be sanctified, Napoli is your kingdom, remove us from the illusion and lead us to the Scudetto” (Pomarède, 2021). This is a sentiment present since the day of his first appearance in the stadium. “In many of the chronicles relating to Maradona’s first arrival in Naples, in 1984, there is a reference to the Argentine champion in the guise of a Messiah” (Pecchinenda, 2014). Maradona was already considered the most talented player in the world, and his signing by Napoli was a tremendous surprise. Most analysts thought he would go to a global club, if in Italy, to Northern Italy. However, through a deft maneuver by an agent who rooted for Napoli, he ended up there in a deal that made him the most expensive player in the world for a second time. He was received like a hero: 80,000 people bought tickets (1,000 lire) to enter the stadium and hear him say a few words in Italian and kick a ball towards the rostrum that gathered the most fanatical fans. Naples has a tradition of martyrs and small altars in private homes. The Capello di Maradona follows this tradition; yet the religious veneration here is not for a Christian but a football god. Mr. Bruno’s chapel seems to combine jest and worship, taking the adoration of relics like hair to an extreme, to the point of provoking laughs – at least from rational tourists like me who pass by. But I do not know how Napoli fans feel when they pass in front of the Capello. It may correspond to a religious sentiment. And I do not know the artist’s intention. In the same way, the Maradonian Church in Argentina – which I will present soon – was, at least at its beginnings, a mix of a joke and an adoration. However, there is no hidden intentions and no ambiguous interpretations in the many graffiti seen in Naples, and in many other cities in the world, particularly Buenos Aires. They pay tribute to the footballer and were the sites of homages that took place when Maradona died. Fans left flowers and prayed in the vicinity of these frescoes.

Indeed, Maradona’s death on 25 November 2020 was a moment of transcendental consecration. The world’s sports press precisely captured the religious sentiment in headlines:

the French *L'équipe* declared Nietzschianly: *Dieu est mort*. Which was also the headline of the Madrid newspaper *As: Dio He Muerto* and the Argentinean *El Sol* with *Morrió D10S*. The Portuguese *Record* disagreed with the headline: *D10S no Muere*. Similar to Argentina's *Olé*, where a photo of Maradona kissing the World Cup is complemented by only a date: *1960-Infinito*. And in the British *Mirror Sport*, *Diego is Eternal*.

Celestial references abound. The French *Libération* printed a photo of Maradona with the Argentine national team shirt and the word *Céleste*. The Catalan *Sport*: *D10S ya es en Cielo*. The British *Daily Express* declared: *In God's Hands*. The Italian *Corriero dello Sport* preferred to reincarnate Maradona with the headline *Diego Vive 1960-2020* while *La Gazzetta dello Sport* highlighted the miracle of having seen him: *Ho Visto Maradona, 1960-1920*.

Maradona was neither the first nor the last footballer (or athlete, if we expand our focus) to deserve divinity. Others are referred to as messiahs, saints, and gods, and miracles are associated to some of their successful actions. Messi is often referred to as a messiah, but none are treated with the same intensity as Maradona, who earned a song that described him as a saint (*Santa Maradona, Mano Negra*), a Church in Argentina, chapels on the streets of Naples, and passionate commotion at his wake.

## 6. The Maradonian Church and the statue in Santiago del Estero

A banal religiosity towards Maradona echoes among football fans, especially Argentines but not exclusively. Why does Maradona, a *Sudaca*, deserve such veneration? Why him - and not another of the dozens of great players who have circulated through global clubs in recent decades – and consequently in the mediascape?

It is difficult to respond to this question. Football is a sport essentially marked by oppositions (schismogenesis, as Bateson (1936) would say), divisions between clubs, cities, and countries. Maradona had a counterpart, Pelé, who had been considered the greatest player when Maradona was at his apex. It was interesting for the press to have a good and a bad guy to write about. Maradona himself emphasized the contrast in interviews, towards the end of his career. His critics say that he did so because this way he would be seen as at least the second best. But the rivalry did not begin this way. If we hear his declarations to the press during the 1986 World Cup, we see that he avoided comparisons with Pelé. "Let's leave Pelé out of the Cup", responded Maradona, when a reporter asked if he was better than Pelé.

FIFA helped to consolidate the opposition between an Apollonian Football God (Pelé) and a Dionysian one (Maradona). Between the Brazilian star who followed the rules and humbly accepted the power of the institutions (FIFA, club managers, etc.) and the Argentinian star who proudly, definitely, questioned them<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> With some exaggeration, the Serbian writer Vladimir Dimitrijević describes Pelé: "...Pelé sought the favor of journalists,

And thus the legends were formatted. Not that their lives were so distinct from each other: Pelé also had lovers outside his marriages, and children out of wedlock who he did not recognize. Pelé also kept silent about the bloody dictatorship in Brazil, as did the young Maradona in Argentina. And Pelé also had involvement with drugs - it is well known that he smoked marijuana in the 1970s – although Maradona was associated with stronger drugs.

On the pitch, Pelé was not a saint; he also used hands to score goals, and elbows to take down adversaries, as in a match against Uruguay, in a World Cup semifinal in 1970. While these facets and practices have not been emphasized in Pelé's biographies, they are in Maradona's.

They did live in different eras of the sportscape. Pelé was almost retired (which he did in 1977) by the time Maradona scored his first professional goals (1976). In the 1970s, football was becoming a form of global television entertainment, while Pelé's achievements were seen more often on movie screens – at least in Brazil – than on television. For instance, the FIFA World Cup was the first with a televised broadcast in 1954 – but who had a TV set at that time outside Europe and the North of America? Pelé's last World Cup, in 1970, was the first with live color broadcast in Brazil – and probably in many countries. Yet the total viewers were certainly still far from the 11 per cent of the world population who saw the final of the 2006 FIFA World Cup, and the audience has continued to grow.

Pelé was a global star since an early age, after winning the 1958 World Cup in Sweden, and his life was under scrutiny. But there is no comparison with the display of Maradona's private life. Partly because Maradona played for a global club in Europe. Pelé, on the contrary, only went abroad (to a lowly club in the football system, the New York Cosmos) at the end of his career. Maradona's greater access to the mediascape is a possible explanation but not a complete answer. Why did he, and not Pelé, or another football star, deserve such veneration? Maybe it was precisely his weakness, which was abundantly displayed in the media that constructed his legend as the most human God in the football pantheon. Perhaps this provoked such a strong identification, especially among Argentinians and Neapolitans. I would like to advance the hypothesis that this veneration is related to Maradona's ability to overcome personal suffering. His economic rise did not distance him from a majority of fans, because he had shared with them common problems. Like them, he was held in a position of subordination - real or imagined - by powerful institutions. And, fulfilling the fans' wishes, he managed to get revenge through sporting victories against big clubs and against colonizing countries. He 'got the slap off their face', as Neapolitans would say.

The veneration of such a bad boy did not please FIFA. FIFA would prefer humble and disciplined stars like Pelé to become icons and it was ironic that the online competition FIFA

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becoming the darling of the media and the amusement of politicians. He will become minister, president, and a stadium builder, like Platini. There is no Havelange business trip, no ordinary draw, and no humanitarian initiative without the presence of Pelé. I believe that in his country one cannot become president if one cannot have him next to the tribune of authorities. A kiss ass of authorities, in short!" (Dimitrijević, 2000).

organized among football fans to vote for the best player of the twentieth century was won by Maradona. Even so, the prize was given to Pelé. The reason given was that the award could not be given to a player who had been expelled from a competition for alleged doping (with Ephedrine, a weight loss drug). As the wife of a top FIFA representative said in 1986, "The Indian must go" (Pomarède, 2021).

Maradona does not need FIFA to be recognized, or the official Catholic Church to be canonized. His supporters in Rosario, Argentina materialized his special place by creating the Maradonian Church, on 30 October 1998 - his birthday. The Maradonian Church also has members in Spain and Mexico, a bible (named "Yo soy el Diego de la gente" [I am Diego of the people], which is the title of his autobiography) and ten commandments that include requirements for unconditional love as well as practical actions like giving a son the middle name Diego. Church members display tattoos like "God exists, 10 thanks for being Argentine [In Spanish, the number on Maradona's jersey, 10, "diez", is pronounced similarly to "dios", God], and celebrate Christmas on 30 October, as much as in December - just like fans in Naples (Pomarède, 2021). They have rituals in bars, which are led by "priests" wearing white robes, who light candles for Diego Maradona statutes, while chanting "Sweet Diego" to the melody of Ave Maria. They lift a ball over their heads, some wearing T-shirts reading "Diego sinned for us", with a crown of thorns around the ball.

The Maradonian Church might be seen as a parody of a Church, but even so we have to admit that it congregates people who do have an ecstatic feeling toward *el pibe d'oro*, the golden kid - *urchin* may be a more effective translation for *pibe*, as proposed by Archetti (2014, p. 147) -, as was well portrayed in the film *Esperando Maradona* de Vázquez (2005).

Born Catholic like most of his countrymen, Maradona broke with the Vatican when he saw its riches in contrast to the poverty of many, but he reconciled with it when the Argentine Francis I was consecrated as Pope. He visited Francis I to ask for a blessing and gave the Pope, a fanatic football fan, a shirt with the number 10 of the national team. Francis I probably "worships" the player more than Maradona worshiped the Pope.

If, however, we accept for the purpose of this text (and in the same half-serious half-joking spirit of the founders of the Maradona Church) that yes, Maradona is a god, I think we should look for his divine profile in pantheons other than the Christian. The characteristics of the "dios" Maradona is closer to the ambiguous figure of Exú, an orisha of Afro-Brazilian religions (or perhaps Afro-Cuban, since he often stayed on the island of Cuba, hosted by his friend Fidel), who embodies good and evil, and opens paths with his tricks, similar to the figure of Native American *tricksters* or Brazilian *malandros* (Da Matta, 1997). Maradona was a "golden kid" who because of his tumultuous lifestyle is closer to an Exú than to more Apollonian football "deities". Although the 100-foot statue in Santiago do Estero, Argentina to Maradona, inaugurated by Lionel Messi and all the players of the Argentina team weeks after his death in 2021, does have an angelic face.



**Fig. 3. Image from Internet, 2021**

“Maradona is too big to be on one side” is how one Argentine colleague responded when I asked her why, in a country so divided, he could be supported by both political factions, and by feminists - knowing he refused to recognize sons and daughters.

He had certain ties to the bloody military dictatorship when he was young, but later inscribed tattoos of leftist guerrillas on his body. He loved Cuba, but claimed to be a Peronist when in Argentina. And he lived happily in Dubai, under a dictatorship. If not a God, he is certainly a myth. And as Morin (2005) said, we need stars because it is impossible to live in a pure reality purged of myth.

## 7. Final Considerations

Many players are stars and feed the imagination of spectators. Few rise to the status of adoration that Maradona enjoyed - and still receives. Football has the ability to equalize clubs for as long as a match lasts, and bring together fans from diverse social backgrounds. Cheering for Maradona can be seen as a weapon of the weak (Scott, 1985) to beat puissant, at least imaginarily. For as long as his performance lasts, fans supporters can identify with his profile and through his dribbling feel the taste of superiority. His victories offer a transcendent justice. He was “de oro”, earning much gold through life, while never ceasing to be “el pibe”, never ceasing to be “el Diego de la gente”. That’s why the stadium in Napoli received him with a ritual chant: *Oh mama mama mama, oh mama mama mama, do you know why my heart beat so? I've seen Maradona, I've seen Maradona ...* (Pecchinenda, 2014).

Maradona incorporated the bodily aesthetics and moral principles of the periphery, and they are visible in his clothes, tattoos, and corpulent body. He bypassed wealthier regions, led the weak to victory over elite clubs, and even colonized fan's hearts in the UK, which had won a war against Argentina. This is how we can understand the permanence of his veneration, which seems like it will perpetuate. The Argentine Football Federation (AFA) celebrated its victory in the Copa America 2021 with a video clip that begins with the phrase “*Por Dios*” and an image of Maradona, with open arms stretched towards a celestial light<sup>7</sup>.

For all these reasons, he is worshiped by a popular Catholicism expressed in chapels and simple tributes, and by Afro-Latin-American cults, which accept more nocturnal figures among its deities. In one way or another, Maradona continues to perform his tricks. Even his death is cloaked in mystery. Argentine courts are investigating it; at the very moment I finish this text.

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<sup>7</sup> Maestros del sentimiento: el #Messiento para la eternidad - AS.com

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