

Sports players : the heroes of the mediated sacred sphere

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Abstract : Broadcasted sport is one of the elements of the mediated culture which mobilizes extremely passionate masses. Thus, it can be considered as a mythical expression within current society, since contemporary era is witness to the revival of the sacred which manifests through rituals, myths and the divinization of certain products and celebrities. This article analyzes how media depictions exalt players as objects of worship and devotion. It will specifically focus on the most successful Spanish sportsmen such as the tennis player Rafael Nadal and the players of the national soccer team and how they are promoted as national heroes in advertising.

Keywords : sports players, the sacred, deification, national heroes, mediated sport

Les sportifs : les héros de la sphère médiatique sacrée

Résumé: Les sports diffusés dans les médias sont un des éléments de la culture qui mobilise le plus des masses passionnées. Ils peuvent donc être considérés comme une expression mythique dans la société actuelle qui, depuis l'époque

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contemporaine, est témoin de la renaissance du sacré qui se manifeste à travers des rituels, des mythes et la divinisation de certains produits et célébrités. Cet article analyse la façon dont les médias représentent l'exaltation des joueurs comme des objets de culte et de dévotion. Il se concentrera spécialement sur les sportifs espagnols les plus accomplis, comme le joueur de tennis Rafael Nadal et les joueurs de l'équipe nationale de football et la façon dont ils sont promus comme des héros nationaux dans la publicité.

Mots-clés: sportifs, le sacré, déification, héros national, sport médiatique

1. The sacred dimension of individuals

The sacred is said to be one of the main components of human nature. In fact, Cassirer (1980), one of the most popular experts who study the sacred, defines man as *homo symbolicus*, referring to his/her mythic dimension as a constituent aspect of the human condition. Not only is the sacred present within the individual's psyche as a cognitive structure, but it is also present as a social dimension. Since sacred element plays a relevant role within society, from primitive ones to the most developed ones, its significance has been highlighted by several scholars (i.e. Joseph Campbell, Emile Durkheim, Mircea Eliade, Karl Jung, etc.); some of them point out the social functions fulfilled by myths or rites. For instance, Heinrich, who is quoted by Duch, notes that one of the basic functions of myth is to connect men and women with their origins. In much the same way, Duch highlights this feature, defining it as a "saving answer" for individuals when questioning about their origins (1998: 229). Other experts, such as Eliade, point out their role as behavioral and exemplary models for human activities (1975: 8). Thus it can be said that myths play an important role in the configuration of a group or a community, since they perform as powerful unifying strategies, as it will be explained later. Moreover, the need for myths, which is said to be present in every culture and historical period, even in current times when men "keep feeling the need of mythicizing certain events and persons" (Cencillo, 1998: 23), can be understood as an ultimate sign of its universal aspect.

Taking into account that said sacred component constitutes men and women's character from ancient times, it could be inferred that it manifests in every civilization, in every epoch of humankind's history, even in those periods especially dominated by a rationalist perspective. As a matter of fact, current times can be defined by the importance of technology and science as main discourses;

nevertheless the presence of the sacred remains observable. According to Eliade's words, "some forms of 'mythical behaviour' still survive in our day. This does not mean that they represent the 'surviving' of an archaic mentality, but rather that certain aspects and functions of mythical thought are constituents of the human being" (1975: 181). Thus, it's possible to talk about myth as a constituent feature of contemporary men and women. In spite of the fact that today's time is dominated by reason, science and technology, some tendencies, movements and behaviors which prove that mythical thinking does not just belong to a primitive period on human's history emerge in the present-day context.

In much the same way, Duch points out that myths are still operating in modern world, even though they were conceived as characteristic elements from the childhood of humankind (1998: 159). As a matter of fact, it is surprising that the sacred reappeared in an era which is supposed to be the culmination of the Enlightened rationalism. The reason to explain its return lies, according to Juan Rey, in the dissatisfactory feeling that consumption provokes in individuals (2006: 70). Thus, the turning to the sacred can be understood as an answer to the emptiness that contemporary men feel in such superficial society. Most of the authors who study the presence of the sacred within current times point out the incongruence about the presence of myths, of emotional nature, in a hyper-rationalist culture as today's world, which avoids anything that is not empirically demonstrable. As a matter of fact, the dominant discourse today is inherited from the Enlightenment era, which aspired to the progressive rationalization of every sphere of human's thinking and activity, as a sign of humankind's ascendant improvement, and this determines the way in which the sacred is rejected in some spheres nowadays.

Therefore, society nowadays can be defined as dualist ; on one hand, it is dominated by an extreme rationalism ; on the other hand, the sacred survives in current time through different expressions, since it materializes in discourses such as literature, art, cinema, and/or advertising. Some of these manifestations are especially significant since they present a powerful mobilizing potential, as it is shown in the feelings expressed by the passionate followers in music spectacles or sport events. Therefore, certain elements from the media culture seem to favor the recovery of mythical thinking and some behaviors which belong to the sacred realm, as it will be explained below.

2. The media as a contemporary expression of the sacred

Mass media presents some features which are connected to the mythical way of thinking. One of these features is the massive nature of mass communication; so to speak, the instant and global character of messages which are transmitted worldwide implies that they are seen by an immense audience, reaching unprecedented coverage rates.

Furthermore the mass media, conceived as a validator discourse in contemporary world, fulfills roles which were traditionally performed by the church or religion, as noted by Juan Wolfgang who claims that the authority represented by monarchs, priests, doctors, and teachers as autocrat figures in the past is represented by journalists and the star system in modern times (1999: 151). The mass media also perform as mobilizing means which unite and integrate individuals, promoting a sense of identification and belonging to a common group or nation. For this reason, it could be claimed the media are used by governments as a tool to maintain the *status quo*, since “mass communication suggests that life is good in a capitalist society until the very end” (Hardt, 2004: 105). Hardt also suggests that the media can be understood as elements that guarantee the order and the continuance of the dominating system: “Mass communication must offer assurances of a socially or politically satisfactory response and dispense instant gratification” (2004: 101).

As pointed out by Carretero Pasín, myths still fulfill a fundamental function since they found and support the communal; therefore, myth can be conceived as a factor of social aggregation, comparable to a receptacle that supports a common sense of belonging, favoring the community identification (2006: 123). Thus, it can be said that the mass media and the sacred present a collective and communal aspect which define both discourses. Dorfles makes emphasis in this feature when talking about the contemporary celebrations, big events or massive festivities in which the individual dilutes within the mass and he/she is absorbed by a collective sense of belonging. According to the scholar, “it seems obvious that some symbolic-mythical elements which were present in sacred and recreational festivities of ancient times are brought to live in great celebrations, fairs and big sport events” (1969: 160).

The recreational component found in the myth seems to be present within mass culture as well, and it manifests through new rites and modern rituals which, despite the differences regarding primitive ceremonials, still fulfill the same functions within society by creating an enthusiastic atmosphere. This recreational component performs in both mythical thinking and the media; thus, in much the same way as the Roman “Bread and Circuses” (from Latin [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latin panem et circenses](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latin_panem_et_circenses)), the media industry can be understood as a constant entertainment resource for the audience. In this sense, the Frankfurt school’s theorists criticized the entertainment and amusement aspects of mass media as a way of reproducing the dominant system by the consumption of cultural products; “the culture industry remains the entertainment business” (2002: 108). According to Hardt, this recreational element is one of the main messages promoted by the mass media; thus, diseases, suffering and social maladies are depicted as isolated cases which affect ‘the other’: “a concrete approach, with the help of real faces, clearly defines social problems as individual issues with individualized solutions – for the other – which will not significantly distract from the playful diversions of a media reality that is designed to encourage identification with the dominant system” (2004:

101).

In addition, since “images are the new vocabulary of a postmodern capitalist society, in which the individual is dazzled by the spectacle” (Hardt, 2004: 10-11) it can be stated that the power of the image is another feature that connects the sacred and the media. Therefore, taking into account that “the magical-mythical emotion is visible within the audiovisual sphere” (Reig, 2004: 31), the audiovisual nature of mediated discourses, as well as its mythical implications, must be pointed out. It seems that those codes are especially effective when talking about the transmission of mythical tales, since they establish a strong connection with the addressee ; in Huici’s words: “myth is based in the emotional and intuitive apprehension of the world and that’s the reason why it manifests in seductive and impact images” (Huici, 2002: 9).

It follows then that the mediated discourses can be considered to be extremely connected to mythical thinking as a manifestation of the sacred in contemporary world. Among those elements of mediated culture which provoke an extreme passion in the audience, such cinema or music, sport can be conceived as the phenomenon of masses per excellence, given its importance in terms of audience, scale and intensity. As it has been already mentioned above, sport events are one of the most popular and followed ceremonies today, even more when they are broadcasted by bringing many fervent spectators together.

3. Sport as an embodiment of humans’ recreational needs

Huici points out the sacred nature of sports: “it is known that games present a religious and ritual origin, therefore they must be ascribed within the mythical thinking sphere. Most of the current games and sports are degradation or desecration of rites and religious ceremonies” (1993: 78-79). Experts who study the origins of sport remark the religious character of first recreational expressions. Although said character can be found in documents which prove the existence of primitive games in other ancient civilizations (e.g. the ball game in Mayan civilization, as studied by Morse, 1992), Greece remains the birthplace for western culture, above all since the first Olympic Games were founded by the ancient inhabitants of the H elade. The first Olympic Games were said to be a reproduction of primordial fights between gods and heroes (i.e. Zeus and Chronos), as narrated by poets like Homer (Rodr iguez Adrados, 1996: 7). Therefore, “the ancient Olympic Games and other athletic festivals were primarily a religious activity. Any cheating or other irregularity such as bribery was almost unthinkable; the Greeks regarded such misconduct as sacrilegious” (Sweet & Segal, 1987: 3). In fact, all the games were celebrated in sacred precincts where worship used to take place and the victorious players offered sacrifices in honor of gods. Moreover, contests used to take just two

days and a half of the 5-day program of Olympic events (in 5th century b. C.) while the rest was devoted to religious rituals (Baker, 2007: 10).

This mythical component still operates today, since it is a constituent of sport idiosyncrasy, even more when sports play such a central role nowadays. Dorfles is one of the many scholars who highlight the importance of play and games in current societies, since they constitute an expression of the sacred at the present time. The academic claims that the presence of mythical elements is observable within the games sector in contemporary world, in both individual games such as personal hobbies, and big sport events which are spectacles for the masses. Therefore, according to Dorfles, the fact that a mythical-ritual element is present in games is an indisputable idea (1969: 67).

As mentioned above, the media and the sacred are tightly related ; so are sport and the sacred. Martínez García highlights some aspects that the sacred and sport share ; one of these features is that both myths and sport play a social role when establishing behavioral models, such as the values promoted by the Olympic Charter for citizens around the world¹. This way, the principles of sport, so to speak, constant effort, spirit of self-improvement, sacrifice, team work, etc. are brought to every social sphere in order to build a civilized, ethical, respectful society where solidarity and a healthy way of life are mainstays. The first Fundamental Principle of Olympism reads as follows:

1. “ Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles ” (2011: 10) ².

Sport is also a discourse which provides sense to individuals, as noted by Smart when talking about the significant role it played in the post-war decades for Americans, who turned to it as an escape from the disillusion in their lives: “heroic figures, seemingly representing simple virtues, provided solace for a people whose faith had been shaken by the passage of events and whose lives had been disturbed by rapid economic and technological changes” (2005: 3). Something which is also remarked by Martínez García (2009), who understands the glorification of players as

¹ “The Olympic Charter (OC) is the codification of the Fundamental Principles of Olympism, Rules and Bye-Laws adopted by the International Olympic Committee (IOC)”, (2011: 9), Olympic Charter, retrieved October 9, 2011, from http://www.olympic.org/Documents/olympic_charter_en.pdf.

² The rest principles, up to seven, can be read at: <http://www.olympic.org/ioc>, (retrieved October 9, 2011).

new heroes in contemporary world as a response to fill the emptiness provoked by the crisis of moral values in today's society. Furthermore, sport can be conceived as a tool to organize the calendar, providing "ways of orienting ourselves in time. Where religious cultures define the passage of time in terms of sacred seasons, sport can fulfill this function in a secular culture" (Grant, 1998: 61).

Moreover, Berrio understands sport as one of the most mobilizing potential phenomenon among contemporary manifestations of the sacred. This way, the academic compares sport structure with the symbolic elements within a religious rite in which every character fulfills a specific function ; there is actually a set of norms, perfectly known by the players, leaders and followers, which are implicit within the symbolic world that takes place in any sport competition (2000: 101). Colin Grant also points out the similarities between the two spheres ;

"A whole array of parallels can be drawn between sport and religion. The training of the athlete and the faithfulness of the sports fan emulate the devotion of the religious believer. The dedication of the fitness fanatic rivals any discipline undertaken by medieval monks. People sweating regularly in fitness classes, health clubs, and gyms are a secular equivalent of the monk's faithful saying of the offices, with the incentive of achieving the body beautiful rather than eternal salvation. In professional sports, it might not be too far-fetched to suggest that, for some, the players are seen as priests who celebrate a sacred tradition for them. The celebrations have their rituals, sacred places, and special days" (1998: 61).

In much the same way, some authors establish the parallelism between religion and sport by analyzing the mythic nature of certain sport events, which surprisingly reproduce the scheme of a sacred rite. This way, the importance of elements such as the national anthem and flag of the winner's country, the presence of the awarded players in the podium, the significance of the medallions, etc. suggests the association of modern sport events as the contemporary equivalent of ancient adoration of gods. Therefore, "modern sport should be seen not simply as an expression of the secular outlook of the modern world, but as a substitute for the religious veneration that is officially relinquished" (Grant, 1998: 60). The ritualistic display is observable in international sport events such as the Olympic Games, World championship competitions and national events, such as the popular Super Bowl, which is understood by Baker as "a spectacle so orchestrated with cherished beliefs and rituals that it approximates a religious festival" (Baker, 2007: 4).

The dynamic character of sport activity is another decisive element which plays an important role in the depiction of sport as a spectacle, since its expressive component connects with the visual language nowadays. Some scholars (i.e. Domenach, 1986 or Huici, 1993) highlight the power of images and their connection to the mythical dimension; since they are addressed to feelings, images turn out to

be more effective tools than reason when transmitting ideas and emotions, plus they are immediately perceived without effort. Therefore, the audiovisual language favors dramatization and the expression of sensations over concepts ; that is where its potentiality lays. This way, the media visually narrates the game or contest as an exciting story where the images have a powerful meaning connecting with audience's mythical component : "the emotional experiences of sport spectating are sometimes compared to the sacred emotions of religious rituals that give meaning to personal and cultural life" (Mary E. Duquin, 2000 : 477).

Another aspect stands among the similarities that sport and mythical thinking present, such as the manichean perspective which interprets reality from two antagonist positions. Acquiring concepts from a political viewpoint, it can be said that players and local/national teams represent the good while their rivals symbolize the evil, an enemy who must be beaten within the sporting sphere. The media plays a decisive role in said phenomenon by intensifying its influence over the supportive audience, since it depicts a formulaic image of the heroes, who personifies all the virtues, versus the evil opponent. This construction leads to a mechanism by which people tribally identify with their team and they glorify some figures who symbolize the triumph of 'us' over 'the others'. As a matter of fact, humans present a mythical tendency to identify with other individuals, such as movie stars, fiction characters of media culture or politicians, in order to project their aspirations and wishes over them. Domenach makes emphasis on this idea when comparing sport and politics; "politics can perform the same rejoicing role as sport and the masses project their wish for adventures and heroism either over a president, a politician or a great cycling champion" (1986: 94).

Given this, it is not surprising that the potentiality of sport as a propaganda tool is exploited with political purposes. Rowe et al. suggests that, since the definition of what a nation is in contemporary world is diluted due to phenomena such as globalization and localization, new formulations are drawn from moments where a unity emerges ; this is what happens in international sport events, in what the scholars define as the "symbolic nation-making through sport" (1998: 120). Rowe et al. refer to the powerful feelings of nationhood that are born in sportive festivals, and how effective they are in terms of cohesion within the group ; in fact, Allison states that "certainly sport sometimes channels, sometimes releases, sometimes even create complex and powerful nationalist sentiments" (2000: 354). When attending a contest or watching a game a sense of shared national identity materializes in a passionate enthusiasm, since "the experience of viewing is often ritualized and communal, as compared to the more solitary and casualized manner in which much television is consumed" (Whannel , 2000: 295). This phenomenon is effectively utilized by the governments through the media, which promotes certain values, "mobilized to advocate, shape and generate new habits as citizenry, encouraging active participation at both a physical and ideological level" (Rowe et al., 1998:

121); furthermore, it reinforces nationalism, since the media present certain sports as embodying the character of a nation. As it will be explained below, the media discourse depicts a glorified representation of competitions, since they are narrated as epic deeds by deifying the players as national heroes. Moreover, players are sometimes conceived as warriors who fight for the nation, as proved by the use of a specific vocabulary which takes words from other spheres, such as the war or religion ; said phenomenon emphasizes the presence of the sacred within sport (e.g. the Spanish national soccer team is commonly known as “la furia roja”, “the red fury”, as a reference to a historic episode about the sacking of Ambers by the Spanish Army back in 1576).

4. Mediated sports : an effective synergy

The conclusion that can be drawn from all of this is that the sacred is especially present in contemporary world through the media and sport ; thus, it is not surprising that the three aspects are synergistically connected in a powerful triad with meaningful implications.

As mentioned before, current society creates its own myths glorifying figures such as movie music, or TV stars, so to speak, products of the media industry system. Said phenomenon triggers several mechanisms such as the identification of individuals with celebrities, since subjects yearn for the media heaven in order to escape from their daily routine, as pointed out by Lasch; “the media give substance to and thus intensify narcissistic dreams of fame and glory, encourage the common man to identify himself with the stars” (1991: 21). Among the contemporary idols that are object of veneration, sports players stand out for their role within society and their astonishing popularity, sometimes beyond their professional activity, so that they are well known, even by those who care little about sporting competitions. This way, sportsmen and sportswomen “appear regularly on television, in magazines and in the press, not solely because of their sporting prowess, but in addition because of their acquired fame, achieved ‘star’ quality and/or attributed ‘celebrity’ status” (Smart, 2005: 1). Consequently, the media raise certain exceptional sportsmen as semi gods, covered by a divine halo, by proposing them as models for the whole society.

Several authors highlight the interdependence between the media and sport, since the contemplation of sport spectacle events is a key element of massive entertainment, of great impact within society, which does not mean that it is exempt from the economic interests involved in such business; in fact, sport has moved from their original values to commercialization. Sport then turns in an extremely profitable and successful product which generates multimillionaire revenues worldwide by creating a sense of strong loyalty and passion among their followers.

As a consequence, it is suggested that sports and players themselves are consumed by individuals as a type of goods; thus, “celebrities are commodities to which consumers are drawn as they engage in the process of commodity consumption. Consumers are encouraged in various ways to identify with celebrities and the images and life-styles with which they are associated in press, magazine and television reports and advertising” (Smart, 2005: 9).

Given all this, it is not hazardous to state that the sacred component within sport is amplified by the effect of the media by providing a faithful audience with a repertoire of venerated fetishes and symbolic icons to which they are drawn to. In other words; “when the inherent attraction of sport is combined with the expertise of modern commercial packaging, sport can be seen to take on a new version of its ancient role as a vehicle for religious veneration” (Grant, 1998: 58-59).

5. Spanish sport players : heroes who embody the national identity and exemplary values

Sport players have been venerated since ancient times, as pointed out by Kyle who states that “some were glorified with the status of ‘hero’ after their death, they were honored with a cult and regarded as having magical powers. With the elemental, life-or-death quality of their contests, several combat athletes became revered as larger than life” (Kyle, 2007: 200). As it has been explained above, the effects of the deifying mechanism are intensified by the media and its influence over the audience. This phenomenon can be said to happen worldwide, above all in those countries that have the privilege of excelling in international sport contests.

Spain, if compared to other countries, has never been particularly successful in global championships, except for its traditional excellence in certain sports such as tennis, golf or cycling. Nevertheless, it seems that the situation is changing in the last years, at least in those sports which attract more attention worldwide. Thus, it can be said that Spanish sport is excelling in the international scene thanks to renowned figures such as Pau Gasol (basketball player for the Los Angeles Lakers and the Spanish national team), Fernando Alonso (the two-time World Champion of Formula One race driver), Dani Pedrosa (the awarded motorcycle rider), and the national teams of several disciplines like basketball, handball or synchronized swimming, that have been awarded in international competitions like the Olympic games during the last years. Nevertheless, there are certain sports which are extremely popular among the population and whose influence over the audience presents a devotional character. The sport players who better embody this phenomenon in Spain are the former World Number 1 tennis player Rafael Nadal and the players of the National soccer team, who are the current World and European champions.

Along with their constant appearance in the media due to their sporting activity, these sport stars also become the face for several companies which take advantage of their popularity and use them as spokesmen. This way, the athletes advertise different products by representing the values of the brand with a special influence on the audience ; at the same time, they are depicted in positive ways which is to the benefit of their social reputation. In order to understand how these players' image is transmitted in the media, an analysis of different advertisements has been realized. The sample is constituted by more than one hundred pieces, most of them being commercials and just a small percentage of printed advertisements, starred by Rafael Nadal and some players of the national soccer team.

The results of said analysis concerning the depiction of sport stars have been grouped in four different categories, depending on the dominant aspect in each advertisement. This way, players can be said to be represented as:

- national heroes;
- models of behavior;
- icons of championship values;
- attractive gods.

5.1. *National heroes*

It might be paradoxical to find so many advertisements starring elite sport players which appeal to a national feeling in a country where nationalism is not a unified ideology, but it is conceived as a controversial issue instead. However, it is not surprising that a patriotic feeling is expressed by an enthusiastic audience and promoted by the media, since sport is one of the spheres where Spanish nationalism is welcome without barriers.

Given this, it is easy to find many brands, from a wide range of product categories which evoke national feelings through their advertisements and, consequently, connect with a devoted audience. Nike campaign “Brilla. Ilumina tu país” (“Bright. Light your country”)³ especially stands out for its patriotic and encouraging message. The commercial stars the popular players Andrés Iniesta, Pau Gasol and Rafa Nadal, who perform as proud spokesmen by listing the international titles and accomplishments achieved by Spanish players while a flamenco guitar song plays in the background. The final claim, which states: “Trabaja y esfuérate. Con humildad y con respeto. Lucha contra la oscuridad. Sé la luz que dicen que

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vcpeGHo6rs>, retrieved October 9, 2011.

hemos perdido” (“Work hard and make an effort. With humility and respect. Fight against darkness. Be the light which is said to be lost”) is especially powerful since it refers to a traditional lack of national pride among Spaniards for not excelling in the international sport scene. Now that the situation has changed, players don’t hesitate to vindicate the glory and they encourage their compatriots to share said feeling. In much the same way, the Spanish Company of Petroleum CEPSA launched a campaign which stated: “El mundo puede volver a ser nuestro” (“The world can be ours again”) which represents a version of Velazquez’s painting “La rendición de Breda” (“The surrender of Breda”) yet changing the Spanish army’s look by characterizing them as modern supporters with the national soccer team’s apparel, the flag and the scarf. The advertisement takes an extra significance since the original painting commemorates the victory of the Spanish Empire over the city of Breda (Holand) in 1625, while in 2010 Spain defeated the same enemy, the Netherland team, in the last match of the World Cup, which gave them the victory. The image, which recalls the empire glorious past, constitutes an emblem of Spanish nationalism and its victory 400 years later.



Figure 1. The surrender of Breda, by Velázquez.

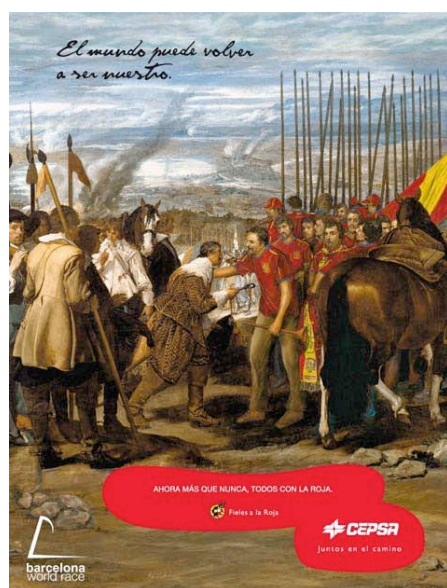


Figure 2. “The World can be ours again”

This is not the only evidence of a historical passage ascribed to the national team though ; the group is also compared to the “Armada invencible” (“Spanish Armada”), the fleet that defeated England in 1588 to stop English involvement in the Spanish Netherlands. A Cruzcampo commercial during the 2008 UEFA European

Football Championship, states in an ironic tone: “Ingleses, ¿recordáis a la Armada invencible? Pues este miércoles, once valientes guerreros os conquistarán” (“English people, do you remember the Spanish Armada? This Wednesday eleven brave warriors will conquer you!”)⁴. Moreover, as explained above, the nickname “la furia roja” (“the red fury”) is exploited by the media when exalting the collective enthusiasm: (e.g. “Babyliss for men con la Roja”, “Babyliss for men with the Red one”; “Cruzcampo, orgulloso patrocinador de la Roja”, “Cruzcampo, proud sponsor of the Red one”).

It is not difficult to find more advertisements that convey the same national feeling, even more after the victory in the 2010 FIFA World Cup. Thus, the Spanish brewery company Mahou which usually sponsors the national soccer team and counts on their players for some of its advertisements (i.e. Iker Casillas stars an emotional commercial where the daily work of common citizens, instead of celebrities, is applauded⁵), suggests proclaiming July the 11th, the date when Spain won the world championship, as the new national day in their campaign “11 de Julio día de fiesta nacional”. Another brewery brand, Cruzcampo, which is popular for being the biggest beer producer in Spain, stands out for the epic and heroic tone of its campaigns, where the players are depicted as brave warriors who fight for the nation’s glory. The firm created specific commercials for the last games of Spain in the 2008 UEFA European Football Championship; the one against Germany especially stands out for translating the ode created by the campaign (“Oda a la Selección”, “Ode to the national team”) into German, as a direct claim to Germans⁶:

<p>“¡Oh selección! ¡mi selección!, roja como mi sangre, escucha el grito de tu afición. Se acabó la rabia en tu memoria, adiós a la maldición de cuartos, por fin vislumbra la gloria. ¡Oh Roja, Armada Invencible! fija tu mirada al frente, lo sabes, lo sientes, eres indestructible”</p>	<p>“Oh national team!, my national team!, red as my blood, listen to your supporters’ call. The anger in your memory is gone, goodbye to the curse of quarterfinals, you finally see the glory. Oh Red, Spanish Armada! Fix your gaze up front, you know it, you feel it, you are indestructible!”</p>
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Moreover, the brand also initiated a campaign for the 2010 FIFA World Cup, aimed to support the national team in its endeavor in South Africa. As seen in the commercials, which continue the epic character as the ones analyzed above, the team is felt as a national identity icon for supporters: “Por vosotros, afición. Porque

⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=08GaoJS1EHI>, retrieved October 9, 2011.

⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvZqQWVh1ek>, retrieved October 9, 2011.

⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KsWaQoX5xsE>, retrieved October 9, 2011.

más que un equipo somos un país” (“For you, supporters. Because more than a team, we are a country”). To summarize, it can be said that the idea of soccer representing the Spanish identity is present in the media and it expresses the general feeling among the population.

Furthermore, it should be noted that some players promote their regions or cities, or even some local companies which turn to them as an effective resource. Rafael Nadal, for instance, is the image for both the national and international tourism campaign of the Balears Islands (“Come and enjoy my islands”), where the tennis player hails. Besides, he also sponsors Quelly, a company from his native city Mallorca which manufactures biscuits and bakery.

5.2. *Models of behavior*

On the other hand, sportsmen and women are proposed as exemplary models for society, since they are depicted as responsible citizens who follow an ideal conduct, as it is shown in their lifestyle, gestures of solidarity for those in need and their respect for the environment.

This way, it is usual to find them collaborating with non-profit organizations, which are sponsored by certain players ; this is the case of the campaign “Un juguete, una ilusión”⁷ (“One toy, one illusion”), organized by the Spanish institution “Crecer jugando” and Radio Nacional de España, on behalf of children in developing countries. This campaign, sponsored by several national institutions and famous TV and music personalities, is also supported by popular soccer players, such as Andrés Iniesta, Sergio Ramos or Fernando Torres, and it is currently presented by the national team manager, Vicente del Bosque. Many other Spanish players agree to support non-profit organizations which help children in deprived areas or those who suffer different illnesses; this way, the basketball player Pau Gasol develops different activities as an active ambassador of UNICEF⁸ in Spain by fighting against the malnutrition of kids in Africa and promoting their education, the soccer player Andrés Iniesta collaborates with the Spanish Federation of rare diseases, “Federación Española de Enfermedades Raras” (FEDER)⁹, and Iker Casillas is the image of the campaign “Paremos la pobreza infantil” (“Stop children’s poverty”) by the NGO Plan¹⁰, both by making population sensitive to the

⁷ <http://www.unjugueteunailusion.com/index.html>, retrieved October 9, 2011.

⁸ <http://www.unicef.es/conoce/colaboradores/embajadores/pau-gasol>, retrieved October 9, 2011.

⁹ http://www.enfermedades-raras.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=123:andres-iniesta-colabora-un-ano-mas-con-el-dia-mundial-de-las-er&catid=1:latest-news, retrieved October 9, 2011.

¹⁰ <http://www.paremoslapobrezainfantil.org/iker-casillas-y-plan/>, retrieved October 9, 2011.

needs of disfavored people. The goalkeeper of the national soccer team also founded the non-profit institution in his name, “Iker Casillas Foundation”¹¹, which brings support and humanitarian help to those much in need. In much the same way, Rafael Nadal develops different gestures of solidarity by cooperating with several institutions, such as the inauguration of a school in India, a calendar with more sport figures such as Gassol or Piqué, on behalf of children with chronic diseases and socially excluded organized by the Fundación Anima, or a charity match with Roger Federer. Furthermore, the tennis player created “Rafa Nadal Foundation” with the aim of giving “an opportunity for young people most in help” in 2007; since then, it has been developing projects by bringing aid to socially disadvantaged children and by encouraging people to get involved by donations and the purchase of products¹².

Given this, it can be said that sport loses its most competitive dimension to be seen as a helpful tool for children integration and education, by improving their development and providing those in need with equal opportunities. It is not surprising that sportsmen and women, especially those who are conceived as idols by children, get involved in activities related to childhood by promoting an exemplary conduct among their youngest followers, as well as advertising products targeted for specific young consumers. A clear example of this is the collaboration of Rafa Nadal with Cola-Cao, a Spanish brand of chocolate powdered flavoring mix; in several commercials the tennis player is proposed as a model of success, hard work and discipline for kids, who are encouraged to give their best in order to reach their dreams. His mother appears in one of them as a clear reference to moms by giving them advice which claims “alimenta su futuro” (“feed their future”)¹³.

On the other hand, sport players also star campaigns to raise public awareness concerning different issues; an example of this is the campaign created by the Spanish Government to promote responsible energy consumption among citizens. This way, several soccer players from the national team such as Villa, Casillas, Fábregas or their coach give some advice to reduce the spending on air conditioning, electrical appliances and encourage the use of public transport in commercials¹⁴ and printed advertisements.



Figure 3. “I save energy. Are you on my team?”

Moreover, the national team is sponsored by Iberdrola, the largest renewable energy operator worldwide. The company turns to the national soccer players to promote wind power in a commercial named “I want to be like the wind”; Iberdrola also identifies with the world champions when defines itself as the “world champion of wind energy”, taking advantage of the synergy effect.

Another communication strategy focused on the promotion of a modeling behavior is the global campaign by Bacardi “Champions drink responsibly”, starred by Rafael Nadal. The alcoholic beverage brand encourages a mature consumption among their customers through different actions such as public relation events, digital platforms and advertising by proposing the tennis player as a champion whose lifestyle and values should be followed as an example of success. By sentences as “I’d always tell my friends where the line is” and “I try to beat everyone at tennis, not at drinking”, Nadal becomes a healthy and respected spokesman for adolescents.

Therefore, to summarize, it can be said that players perform an important role in society by promoting a healthy lifestyle and charity actions; moreover, they encourage people to be respectful, protect natural resources and be focused on their goals.

2.1. Icons of championship values

Many companies also turn to sport stars by connecting the values of their brand with the concepts of hard work, sacrifice and victory. Therefore, sport players embody ideas such as strength, energy, competitiveness, determination, success, and triumph, and companies profit from that association since they identify said ideas with their brand value.

Given this, it is easy to find many sport companies campaigns which depict successful players as their emblem, such as Nike or Adidas. Nike commercials, which are usually visual ones, stress the importance of daily effort as an infallible tool to get personal goals, as it is symbolized by figures such as Rafa Nadal, Sergio Ramos, Fernando Torres, or Pau Gassol. It encourages people to work hard and “Just do it”. In much the same way, Adidas makes emphasis on its claim “Impossible is nothing” by

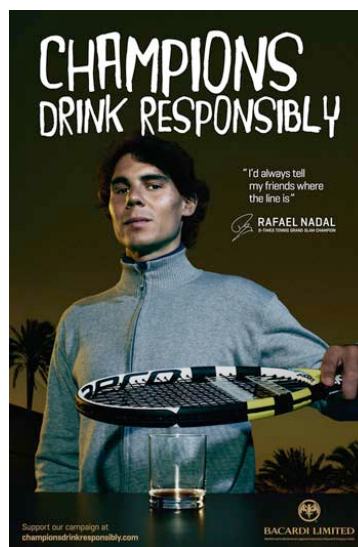


Figure 4. “I’d always tell my friends where the lines is

proposing Spanish players' accomplishments as examples of dreams come true through effort and constancy. Adidas encourages to never giving up, as seen in one of the commercials celebrating the World Cup Championship: "Through your life you will learn the importance of never giving up. Keep trying what has become impossible. Impossible is nothing". Furthermore, the brand also creates meaningful campaigns as the official apparel of the national soccer team, by stressing their connection for 30 years.

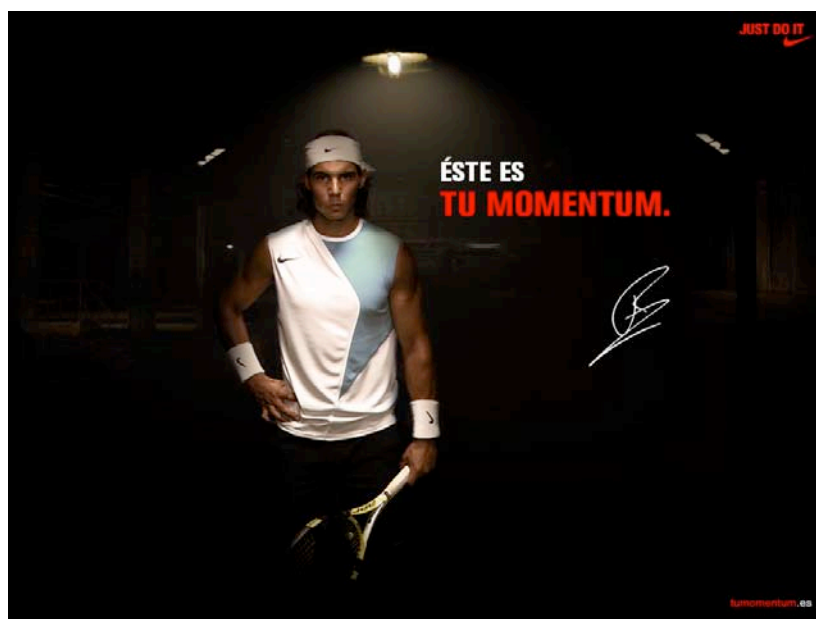


Figure 5. "This is your moment"

A Spanish company which utilizes both Rafa Nadal and the national soccer team as main stars is Banesto, one of the largest banking groups in the country. The company emphasizes the importance of trying to be the best and to excel in sport, banking or life; both the players and the bank share the same "espíritu ganador" ("winning spirit"). Other companies that follow the same communication strategies are MAPFRE and KIA. The first one, the leading insurance company in the country, identifies the brand with Rafa Nadal's qualities such as his competitiveness, his exemplary behavior and the philosophy of well done work as the key for success. On the other hand, KIA Motors, the automobile manufacturer which chose the tennis player as its global brand ambassador, makes emphasis on Nadal's physical skills such as strength, youth, energy and use them to define the cars which are advertised. As it is stated in one of the commercials which focuses on the power and precision of both the player and the car: "the quest for perfection continues". The intended

identification between the player and the brand reaches its highest when the player himself transforms into one of the Kia cars in a viral animation commercial¹⁵.

5.4. Attractive gods

Finally, sport players are depicted as semi-gods in the media, which exalt their physical skills and attractiveness ; which is why they also stand out for being fashion references and for promoting products such as perfumes, accessories or underwear. In some cases, the fact of using players as spokesman should be understood as a mere technique to attract people's attention and convince them about the advantages of acquiring the product; as pointed out by Smart, "sport stars are increasingly being employed to endorse, help promote and market consumer commodities" (2005: 10). Thus, it is easy to find popular sport players advertising any kind of products, and that's usually the result of economic contracts; the players of the national soccer team, for instance, advertise brands such as Samsung, Sunny Delight, Agua Sierra Cazorla, Chevrolet, Pelayo insurance company, or General Óptica, which are their official sponsors.

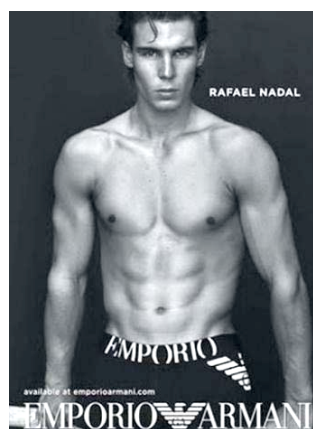


Figure 6. Rafael Nadal for Emporio Armani underwear

Nonetheless, sport stars are also depicted as sexual icons in campaigns which stress their physical conditions and present them as attractive gods. Rafa Nadal, for instance, is the image of several cosmetic brands such as Elvive L'Oreal, Sport Man Pro, Lanvin L'homme Sport, accessories like Time Force watch (with Pau Gasol), and the fashion firm Emporio Armani. The fashion house, whose suggestive campaigns depicting international sport players are popular worldwide, shows a new image of the tennis as, making emphasis on his anatomy and his sex appeal.

¹⁵http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_B5u6g3PupI&feature=related, retrieved October 9, 2011.

6. Conclusions

Sport, which is one of the contemporary realms where the sacred operates nowadays, seems to have replaced religion as an object of veneration due to its prominence in popular culture. As a result, athletes are glorified as the new gods, followed and deified by a loyal audience who is in need of references. Nevertheless, the influence of the media, which is also a sphere where the sacred manifests nowadays, plays a decisive role, assuring the enthusiastic support of sport consumers. Besides, by providing the population with cohesion and release in a difficult era, the narratives of the media favor the creation of heroes since players are transformed into social myths. The study of the Spanish cases, which has been focused on in the analysis of two examples in the present article, seems to corroborate said hypothesis. It would be interesting to study the construction of sport heroes from different nations worldwide in order to understand how the character and history of each country affects the phenomenon and in which ways they are depicted in the media.

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