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Neo-rituals under construction. How and what do the finals of the CONMEBOL Copa Libertadores tell us?

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the ritualization that has evolved around the Copa Libertadores de América finals: the most important football tournament in South America at club level. It seeks to understand its evolution from the beginning of the twenty-first century, paying attention to the confrontation between different national realities and the subcontinental institutions that govern football in the region, particularly the Confederación Sudamericana de Fútbol (CONMEBOL). Applying a methodology based on the audiovisual dimension of the event, and analysing multiple categories of ritualization, it can be seen that the institutional weakness of CONMEBOL has hindered the transmission of a clear message via the tournament. This has made it difficult for the tournament to consolidate itself as a unifying force for football in the region, and has prevented CONMEBOL, at least so far, from being able to lead a citizenship project around football in South America.

KEYWORDS

Ritual; football; globalization; broadcast; South America

Introduction

This is the logical progression of an earlier investigation into the characteristics of the rituals that revolve around the UEFA Champions League finals: the main international football competition at club level (Castilla, González-Ramallal and Mesa López 2019). In that article, we discussed the construction of a global or neo-ritual, adapting extensive anthropological literature on the concept of ritual to the characteristics of a global cultural phenomenon such as football. The conclusion we reached was that this neo-ritual is helping to configure a type of global citizenship. This forced us to ask ourselves about its counterpart on the American continent, the Copa Libertadores de América. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate whether the ritualization in this tournament, the most important at club level in South America, also generates some unifying dynamics regarding the identity and the concept of citizenship. However, we are no longer talking about global citizenship, given that the impact of this competition outside South America is limited, but about a powerful cultural element that articulates a territory which, as we will see, continues to function under the pressures from different national realities. The questions this article attempts to

answer are the following: Is there a high degree of consistency in the ritualization in the finals of the Copa Libertadores de América? Is there an identifiable and coherent narrative? What kind of messages are transmitted? How powerful is the institution that supports it? What changes have occurred over the years?

We address these questions through a detailed analysis of the 18 cup final ceremonies between 2000 and 2017. A total of 36 matches (the finals of the Copa Libertadores were played over two legs during this period). Our analysis shows that the neo-ritual associated with this tournament is in the process of being constructed. Moreover, there are multiple elements that have traditionally evolved without a fixed direction, or that have been closely linked to national specificities. These findings should be considered within the framework of an institutional regulator with evident signs of weakness and lack of legitimacy.

South American football, national culture, and the Copa Libertadores

Football is the most important sport in South America. Indeed, international football recognizes, in this subcontinent, an inexhaustible source of myths, inspiration, resources, speeches, stories, and dreams, both fulfilled and unfulfilled (García Cames 2018). In addition, South America has a desire for modernity, but this modernity has only been partially fulfilled. A certain tone of frustration mixed with pride of being Latin American coexists in an unstable way and affects different actors (international institutions, states, fans, media, etc.) (Alabarces 2018). These actors often dispute the control of something as unique and vivid as professional football. Of course, this control has to do with resources, prestige, networks of interest, but above all it has to do with a forged identity and the uncertain destiny of a subcontinent at a permanent crossroads of modernity in crisis (Archetti 1995; Llopis Goig 2009).

Being a sport imported from European colonial empires, the truth is that football has strong national overtones.¹ Unlike Roland Robertson's statement about the similarity of nation-states,² it is impossible to interpret the meanings of football in each national context if we do not know how to read the core issues in order to define 'the other' that takes place in the dialogue within civil society and between civil society and the State. As Rita Segato (2007) comments, each national construction involves a narrative of constituent stories, definition of actors, villains, heroes, and establishes a discursive framework that makes that narrative intelligible though at the same time contradictory. Football is not left out of this story, because football is one of those great scenarios in which it is defined who 'we' are and who 'others' are. Therefore, in football, what is at stake is always more than the ball.

In South America, there is a desire for permanent modernization, which so characterises the continent, but also creates semantic ambiguities, apparently contradictory, and which end up structuring a situation of perpetual transit. The love of innovation and cultural coupling coexist with the pride of the Latin, the national, and their singularities. Thus, the threat of globalization coexists with the desire to be globalised. The defence of the nation coexists with repulsion and mistrust of the institutional, which is known to be arbitrary and illegitimate. These paradoxes appear in football in curious ways such as the ambiguous role of the State in the face of crises of security and violence; ambivalence and lack of legitimacy of international institutions of professional football (fundamentally of the South

American Football Confederation, hereinafter CONMEBOL); tension between fans and national football federations; etc.

In the case of South American football, its national configuration coexists with its international dimension. In fact, CONMEBOL was the first confederation to be created, in 1916, almost 40 years before the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA). Already around that time, intra- and inter-continental matches were being played. In this sense, South American football has been no stranger to cosmopolitanism since its beginnings. South American football feels like a leading player, although, as Pablo Alabarces (2014, 48) suggests, 'it is built on an exacerbated narcissism'. Every nation needs a mirror in which to look at itself and, according to Alabarces, this mirror is Europe. A Europe that is the distant destination to which many of its most prestigious footballers flow. The dream of world-leading football resides in the perpetual aspiration of recognition that would give South American football value beyond its own geographical borders. The Europe that colonised the continent is even reflected in a football tournament that celebrates decolonization through its 'Liberators':³ another paradox of this story.

Numerous studies in social sciences attest to the creativity and originality of the elements associated with football that coexist on this continent.⁴ Studies on the social behaviour of fans, on the origins of football, on violence, on racial identities, on collective ritualisations, etc., warn of the relevance of the national and regional specificities of football projects in the southern cone (among others, Galvis 2008; Helal, Soares, and Lovisoló 2001; Guedes 1998; Alabarces 2002; Panfichi 2008; Quitián 2012; Ramírez 1998). These have tended to overrepresent the diasporic tendency, pitting differences, and particularities against the homogenising tendencies of international football. As Brown suggests:

The birth of national football cultures has come to be seen as an integral part of national cultures in each country, but this can be a trap for the historian. National historiographies have been slow to adapt to the 'Global' and 'Transnational' turns in the Anglophone world, and can sometimes, neglect transnational and imperial connections (Brown 2015, 177).

Thus, if we were to stay with the fertile analysis of the historiographic and ethnographic aspects of South America, we would get a rather idiosyncratic and plural image of the phenomenon, but not a realistic one. Thus, our study places the emphasis precisely on the opposite, on the homogenising and convergent aspects of international professional football in South America. In studying the ritual, or rather the neo-ritual⁵ of the coronation/celebration in the finals of the Copa Libertadores, we will try to account for two issues, which, in our opinion, are relevant: the increasing homogenization and complexity in the ritual of the tournament's finals and the specificities of the phenomenon in question. Trying to respect in the analysis the specificity of each final, we do not want to establish again a debate between globalization and localization or between the particularist and the universalist. At this stage of the discussion, we do not believe that such polarizations help us to analyse the phenomenon. We prefer to start from the idea of strategic hybrids from which the different local, national, multinational, and transnational forces take shape. Undoubtedly, the weight of the history of this subcontinent draws a scenography of colonisation, emancipation and neo-colonial forces that are part of highly saturated symbolic fields, such as happens in rituals. Nevertheless, we will try to be syncretic in the empirical demonstration of what we are talking about to avoid over-interpretations so typical of our discipline. To this end, we will follow Edmundo O'Gorman (2006) when he stressed, in relation to the American

continent, that the ‘discovery’ and ‘invention’ (of America) are not two interpretations of the same event, but two paradigms in which different things happen. We could say the same thing about South America and football. There, football was discovered by importation and at the same time was reinvented, and the two stories give rise to two ways of looking at it. The first can be seen as cultural colonization, the second as resignification in the first instance and re-symbolization afterwards.

Evolution of the Copa Libertadores

The Copa Libertadores was created in South America in 1960 under the institutional framework of CONMEBOL: the oldest of all the continental confederations. The innovative tendencies of South America are reflected in the fact that the continent supported and hosted the first World Championship of national teams, in Uruguay in 1930, while Europe was in a period between wars. Another example is much more recent, as since 1993, CONMEBOL has been a pioneer in inviting teams to participate in the Copa América of national teams, belonging to other international confederations such as the Confederation of North, Central America and Caribbean Football (CONCACAF) and the Asian Football Confederation (AFC). In this line, Petersen-Wagner and others point out the following: ‘In a way, as argued by Maffesoli, South America [...] can be considered as the laboratory of *European* modernization, where ideas and concepts are tried out before taking their *big* stages’ (Petersen-Wagner et al. 2019: 462).

The Copa Libertadores has also introduced innovative measures at the global level, such as the participation of Mexican teams (affiliated to CONCACAF) between 1998 and 2016, an aspiration that had been pursued by Mexico’s clubs since the 1970s. In 2009, in conjunction with the South American Cup, the use of evanescent spray (9.15 spray) to mark the distance of players’ walls following fouls became widespread. In 2017, a year before the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) was consolidated worldwide, the Copa Libertadores implemented its use in the semi-finals and finals of the tournament.

This brief summary of football in South America brings us closer to that ambiguous and contradictory framework of incomplete modernity, of love for innovation together with a desire to maintain its own unique characteristics. Wernicke (2015) points out five major moments in the development of the Copa Libertadores, not only in terms of its format, which tends to be more complex and to have more club participation, but also as a socio-historical reflection of the contradictory national and transnational construction.

The early years (1960–1969) are characterised by a chaotic period. The tournament did not yet enjoy the prestige it has today, and, in some cases, ad hoc decisions were taken (for example, where to hold a play-off match) based on purely economic rather than sporting constraints, with the prize going to the highest bidder. This period was characterised by repeated conflicts between the protagonists, sometimes tinged with an imposed nationalism (Wernicke 2015).

Between 1970 and 1979, the competition grew, not only in terms of the number of teams taking part (21), but also in terms of the prestige of the tournament itself. Indeed, among other things, this expansion allowed its clubs to become better known in Europe through the Intercontinental Cup, as well as the economic benefits for South America’s professional players. This again is an example of the mirror that South American football uses to look at itself, the one to which Alabarces (2014) alludes.

The third stage (1980–1989) began and ended in the 1980s. Until 1979, the Copa Libertadores' winners had been divided among teams from Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay. During the 1980s, the tournament was democratised in sporting terms, with teams from Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, Bolivia and Ecuador appearing in the final stages. Changes in the game were also observed, attempting to offer a sporting spectacle of greater technical quality, better refereeing that was less conditioned by the local situation and, in general, a less violent climate. Particularly as football is a televised spectacle and unsportsmanlike behaviour is increasingly prosecuted and punished.

Between 1990 and 1999, the predisposition to offer a more spectacular and higher quality game was consolidated and the definitive international projection of the tournament was also reached. The main conflicts recorded focused mainly on refereeing (threats and possible manipulation) and leadership (corruption) levels. However, despite this ambiguous scenario, what weighs most significantly during this period is the 'socio-sports peace' surrounding the tournament.

The fifth and final stage is the one from 2000 to 2017, characterised by a strong 'sense of democratization' and innovation in continental football. Thus, in the context of growth in the football industry, aided by the already unstoppable development of digital television platforms, the number of participating teams increased from 23 to 47. In fact, the competition calendar had to be modified with the objective of 'promoting the quality of local tournaments in each country and raising the standards of continental competitions to be more competitive at the global level' (CONMEBOL 2016).

These modernising processes found their counterpoint when, at the same time, in 2004, CONMEBOL had to face one of its main ghosts in the form of serious incidents between the supporters of two of the continent's most outstanding teams, resulting in the semi-finals between Argentina's River Plate and Boca Juniors being played without visiting fans. A similar circumstance occurred in 2015, when four River Plate players were attacked on the pitch of Boca Juniors with pepper gas at the exit of the tunnel to the dressing rooms, leading to CONMEBOL disqualifying Boca Juniors from the tournament. The events of 2018, which led to the second leg of the final of the competition being played in Madrid, are the culmination of an era where football has acted as a thread in the narrative of nation-building, the forging of an identity, and the appropriation of resources, power and prestige through the main competition between football clubs on the South American continent.

Methodology

The methodological approach of this study is based on previous works on the ceremonies and protocols before and after final matches of international club tournaments. Given that the main goal of this work is to extend the analysis already carried out for the Champions League to its 'mirror' competition in South America, the Copa Libertadores, we understood that the methodological approach should be the same, in order to guarantee the coherence of the approach applied and the contrast of results. For this reason, it can be verified that the type of analysis and the set of categories and subcategories observed almost coincide with those presented in the work already published on the ritualization of the Champions League finals (Castilla, González-Ramallal and Mesa López 2019). In turn, a different way of approaching the use of data matrices to analyze football information on television can be seen in Mesa López, González Ramallal and Castilla Vallejo (2016). In the case of the

Copa Libertadores, we take as a reference the finals of the tournament between 2000 and 2017 (both inclusive) and both the first and second legs. A total of 36 matches were scrutinised through systematic qualitative analysis. We have only analysed the finals of the men's tournament, since the women's tournament does not yet enjoy international media visibility.

Approaching the study and identification of the ritual elements that make up a continental football final requires previously planned qualitative scientific observation, with controlled recording of visual and acoustic data (Heinemann 2003). For this reason, we previously tested and subsequently elaborated a data matrix with 17 categories and 58 subcategories. In each section of the matrix, we included those empirical elements relevant to the pre- and post-match rituals in order to later analyse them in a global manner.

The categories and subcategories that were used for data recording are presented in the table below (Table 1):

During data collection, we proceeded to assess the status of the ritual for each of the 17 categories and 58 subcategories according to three possible contexts (which we characterized with different colours whenever there was a valid record for that category and/or subcategory):

- a. There is no ritual, it is in an incipient state, or it is an inherited ritual of long standing in the tournament (red).
- b. Although every ritual is in transformation as part of its essence, in this context, the ritual is in a process of substantial transformation (yellow).
- c. The ritual has been transformed and made more complex in a manifest way or it is a consolidated ritual. By complexity, we understand both the act of multiplying meanings and greater sophistication of its performance (green).

The basic data collection method for the subsequent analysis were the television broadcasts of the 36 matches of the finals recorded on digital media. We are aware that what we are analysing is a mediated reality, which we access through the screen, in which there are

Table 1. Categories and sub-categories analyzed in pre- and post-match events of the Copa Libertadores finals.

Categories	Subcategories
Local recreation	Hybrid between local and CONMEBOL elements.
Authorities	Entrance and location of authorities. Protagonism and hierarchy. Role of president. Equipment.
Ball	When and how it appears. Presenciality of the object. Transformation of object.
Trophy	When and how it appears. Presenciality of the object. Transformation of object. Description of trophy.
Managers	Circulation. Courtesy. Equipment.
Equipment	Shirt with players' names and CONMEBOL logo. Other equipment. Kit arrangement. Post-match equipment.
Anthems	Moments. Live or recorded. Singer. Other anthems.
Referees	Number. Circulation. Interaction with Objects (ball, trophy). Referees' companions. Equipment.
Entrance and player formation	Previous stay of the players. Players' companions. Layout of entrance and formation. Courtesy, proxemics. Team photo. Location.
Coin toss	Type, arrangement.
CONMEBOL Iconography	Central banner. Other elements (presence and arrangement). Mobile iconography.
Exchange of gifts (captains)	Timing. Objects. Courtesy.
Award of trophies	Location. Timing. Who awards it? Type of trophy.
Over-represented Icons	Gigantism, reiteration of icons.
Coronation	Climax. Location. Stage. Circulation.
Journalists	Location pre-match/post-match.
Celebration	CONMEBOL presence. Music. Photo celebration. Announcement of man of the match.

occasional unreported and, therefore, unrecorded events. However, it is also true that it is precisely the mediated events that reach millions of spectators and is, therefore, the perceived ritual that contributes to forge what we have called the global tribe of football (Castilla, González-Ramallal and Mesa López 2019). In any case, to enrich and complement the analysis, we have used some secondary information sources, especially YouTube, where in addition to the existence of a CONMEBOL channel, there is a huge amount of public and private video material about the tournament. It was also enlightening to have access to the *Manual de Clubes. CONMEBOL Libertadores 2020* (CONMEBOL 2020), which sets out in detail, among other things, the entire ceremonial protocol to be followed in the tournaments under its responsibility.

Results

In order to present the results obtained from the analysis, we have decided to show a selection of the recorded data focused exclusively on second leg matches of the finals, which are the most complete in terms of performances. We also present a subset of the years and categories worked on, as to show the data in its entirety would be ineffective for the reader. Thus, in this section, we will present the general results found for each of the 17 categories analysed (Table 2).

Local recreation: Traditionally, CONMEBOL did not arrange a spectacle before final matches, neither in the first leg nor in the second. Only in the second leg match in 2002 was there a ceremony that highlighted the tournament itself, although there was no reference to the venue where the match was held. All this has begun to change in recent years, within a general process of increasing complexity of the match ceremony. Thus, in 2017, the Brazilian singer Michel Teló performed in the ceremony prior to the first leg of the final in

Table 2. Selection of the results found in pre- and post-match analysis of the Copa Libertadores finals (second legs).

Category	Subcategory	2001	2005	2009	2013	2015	2017
Ball	When and how it appears	Red	Red	Red	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
	Presence of object	Red	Red	Red	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
	Transformation of object	Red	Red	Red	Yellow	Green	Green
Trophy	When and how it appears	Red	Red	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
	Presence of object	Red	Red	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
Equipment	Shirt with players' names and Tournament/CONMEBOL logo	Red	Red	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Green
	Kit arrangement	Red	Yellow	Red	Red	Green	Green
Anthems	Moments	Red	Red	Green	Yellow	Red	Green
	Live or recorded	Red	Red	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Green
Entrance and player formation	Players companions (gender, equipment, contact, ethnicity, age)	Red	Yellow	Green	Green	Green	Yellow
	Arrangement of entrance and formation (uniformity)	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Green
	Location	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Red	Red	Red
Award of trophies	Who awards it?	Red	Red	Red	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
	Type of trophy	Red	Green	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
Coronation	Climax	Yellow	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green
	Location	Red	Yellow	Red	Red	Green	Green
Celebration	Circulation	Red	Green	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Red
	CONMEBOL presence	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
	Music	Red	Red	Yellow	Red	Red	Yellow
	Announcement of man of the match	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red

Porto Alegre. However, in the second leg match held in Buenos Aires, the performance was by the Puerto Rican Yandel. It seems clear that the recreational part of the pre-match ritual is consolidating, but there are still not enough indications to know if the hybridization with the venue will be its 'leitmotif' or if it will be a way of vindicating the Latin, understood globally.

Authorities: The role of the authorities during the finals has not greatly altered during the period under review. In particular, the rotating president of CONMEBOL is always in charge of leading the trophy presentation during the coronation. The only significant change we can see is the disappearance of the custom of former President Nicolás Leoz to greet the players one by one, as they line up on the pitch before the start of the match.

Ball: This element has not been subject to significant ritualization. It has only been over the last few years, from 2013, that elements have begun to be incorporated that make the ball more visible. On the one hand, there is the printing of the CONMEBOL logo as part of its graphic design; and on the other, its placement on a pedestal at the exit of the dressing room tunnel to be picked up by the main referee. It was not until the 2017 final that this presentation of the ball has become more solid and achieved greater prominence in television broadcasting.

Trophy: The presence of the main trophy in the first leg has been practically nil. Only in the 2013 edition was it placed on the sidelines, without any great prominence. In 2017, it was placed on the pitch, on a pedestal, waiting for the players to come out. In the second leg, its presence has been variable, without a fixed pattern, going from no visibility to being placed on the sidelines or the pitch. Once again, the 2017 final marks an important change, with the trophy being the central element of the pre-match ceremony. There has also been an increase in the number of trophies to be awarded. In the early years, in addition to the main trophy, one was awarded by the sponsor and another to the player designated as the best player of the match. In the 2017 final, up to six trophies were awarded, including prizes for Fair Play or the best player of the tournament. It should also be noted that the design of the main trophy has not been modified in any way during the period under study.

Managers: The managers and technical bodies have not played any relevant role in the development of the ritual.

Equipment: This is another element whose ritualization was very insignificant until a few years ago. Usually, the teams came out onto the pitch wearing their regulation strip, but there were several examples of external elements such as caps or commemorative T-shirts. From 2013 onwards, the competition logo was put on the teams' shirts, and, later, signs of the final were added, making this equipment exclusive to the event. The equipment of substitute players and journalists is also regulated via the use of official competition bibs.

Anthems: This is one of the most unstable categories within the ritual's articulation of the finals, especially in the second leg matches. There has been a shift from occasions when neither national nor competition anthems were played, to others when the national anthems of the countries of both teams are played live. There have also been cases when only the national anthem of the local team is played. The competition anthem, which until 2016 was Beethoven's Ode to Joy, also appears and disappears without a clear pattern. In the latest edition, within the extensive restructuring of the ritual, a new anthem has appeared that has greater prominence both in the pre-match and in the coronation phase.

Referees: The role of referees has hardly changed over the years. They usually arrive on the pitch before or leading the teams and carrying the match ball. What has changed the

most is their uniform, especially the institutional references. The logos of CONMEBOL, of FIFA, and of the institutional campaign 'Fair Play' of FIFA itself have been fluctuating on the referees' shirts year after year, without following a recognizable pattern.

Entrance and player formation: This aspect has clearly been the most chaotic of the whole ritual, and one of the best indicators of the lack of consistency until recently. Only the line-up of the teams in front of the authorities, once they come onto the pitch, has maintained some stability with little change. The organization of this whole process has been changing virtually year after year, adapting to the venues where the matches are played and without it being possible to identify a clear set of rules to follow. Only in recent years can we see a certain stabilization of elements such as the protocol of courtesy between teams and the referees (the visiting team greeting the referees first and then the local team during the line-up), or the disappearance of children (relatives) at the start. On the other hand, the organization of the access to the pitch, with both teams doing it simultaneously and led by the refereeing team, is the most novel and firm aspect of those that have been consolidated recently.

Coin toss: This has not undergone any variation, maintaining its traditional structure.

Tournament/CONMEBOL Iconography: The important weight of the various sponsors of the tournament have meant that a large part of the iconography used has referenced the sponsors themselves, instead of the tournament or CONMEBOL. Thus, both the central canvases and the rest of the mobile iconography have functioned fundamentally as an element of commercial promotion, with the institution playing a secondary role. Other elements of a more 'fixed' nature, especially the side and back barriers, have been handled in a more stable manner and with greater emphasis on the tournament. In 2017, as part of the restructuring of the institution, a significant change took place, with the institution taking a leading role.

Exchange of gifts (captains): This has not undergone any variation, maintaining its traditional structure.

Award of trophies: This part of the ritual has been developed with the introduction of new elements and the maintenance of traditional aspects. On the one hand, the location and configuration of the stages depended for many years on the characteristics of the stadium and the traditions of the local team. Practically every year, changes were made without an identifiable pattern of evolution. The various trophies and awards to be presented have also become more complex and have extended the coronation process, especially in recent years. On the other hand, both the moment of the award or the protagonists have undergone little change, with the CONMEBOL president always given the main role. Together with the president, the representatives of the sponsors have also played a relevant role in this phase.

Over-represented icons: Up till 2014, no special emphasis had been placed on highlighting specific elements associated with the tournament or the institution. In any case, as we pointed out before, the most outstanding symbols and icons have been linked to the sponsors. The visual presence of CONMEBOL and the tournament itself was not very striking. This logic seems to be changing in recent years, in which efforts have been made to emphasise the autonomous nature of the tournament and the importance of the institution organising it.

Coronation: The coronation phase has not undergone any major procedural changes, though it has in terms of regulation and protocol control. The movement of the protagonists across the stage and the final climax have been very stable over time, but what years ago

often became chaotic and difficult to manage for the organization is now increasingly precise. Scenes like the one in 2002, when the president of the championship team went on stage with his players and tried to take the trophy by skipping protocol, are now unthinkable.

Journalists: This is another of the enormously variable aspects of the ritual, especially in the post-match period. Almost every year, changes have been made to the freedom of movement of journalists during the final, as well as their access to players. Again, it is difficult to find a defined regulatory pattern. In the last two finals, print journalists have had access to the celebration, but no interviews have been conducted.

Celebration: The official photo of the champions has been the most striking addition to this phase. Apart from this, the process has remained basically the same. The presence of CONMEBOL is practically nil and all the protagonism falls on the winning team. Obviously, the logic of the celebration is very different depending on whether the champion team is local or visiting.

Discussion

Based on the results set out so far, we are going to analyse what we consider to be the key vectors to explain the structure and functioning of the ritual associated with the finals of the Copa Libertadores. Beyond the changes that have taken place in each of the categories studied, it is possible to find a series of general lines or principles that have been guiding these transformations.

- **Tension with local venues:** One of the most interesting aspects regarding the organization of the finals is the tension between CONMEBOL and the clubs acting as venues. On the one hand, the institution is the guarantor of the tournament and is ultimately responsible for the organizational elements, and as such, it has been making an effort to give a certain internal coherence to all its operating processes. But what we see throughout the period studied is that this effort has often clashed with the logic of the venues where each match is held. Indeed, most of the protocol elements have been orchestrated by the club where the match has been held. Thus, the ritualization varies clearly and consistently depending on the country where each match is held and the local team's own culture. Evidently, the format of the tournament encourages this relationship. The fact that there is always a local team means that many of the dynamics are pre-established. Even so, in the last few years, a certain level of stabilization can be seen as we commented in the results. In the future, we will have to see how this tension evolves, bearing in mind that with the new format of the final at a neutral venue, CONMEBOL has more room to establish all the protocols of the event, which would represent a novelty at the venue.
- **Weak uniformity:** We said earlier that CONMEBOL is making an effort to bring together the organizational elements of its tournament finals. This effort is more than evident in the light of the analysis we have made, but at the same time, it is also clear that it has been weak and discontinuous. However, our analysis shows that some of the central elements of the ritual have clearly been subject to a process of increasing complexity. With these actions, CONMEBOL seems to be highlighting and reinforcing its institutional strength, presenting itself to football fans in South

America as the main administrator of the structure of continental (or subcontinental) football. However, what seems obvious for some elements, such as balls and exclusive equipments with logos of the institution, is not accompanied by similar processes in other fundamental aspects of ritualization. Thus, elements such as the presentation of trophies, the movement of journalists or the presence of the official tournament anthem have fluctuated over the years without a clear line.

- **Little hybridization with the venue:** A little developed aspect has been the staging. Traditionally, there has been no spectacle prior to matches. This moment, apart from pure entertainment, is key to vindicating the venue that hosts the final. And this can be understood as an exercise of legitimation of the institution organizing the event. The objective would be none other than to provoke a feeling of identification with the institution on the part of the fans, who would view its cultural specificity positively underlined in the framework of an international event. The best examples of this are the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games, which are organized by the host countries and represent a window to the world through which to promote their national values. All this, under the banner and protection of the International Olympic Committee, which makes the event possible and at the same time legitimates itself as a kind of global benefactor (although the scandals associated with its management have greatly weakened that role). As we see from the results, only once has CONMEBOL attempted to follow along this line. Efforts to hybridize with the venue have been practically nil, as have been its ability to present itself as a unifier and promoter of Latin American culture. To this day, it is at least questionable that the final of the Copa Libertadores represents a celebration of Latin American football culture.
- **Increased regulation and control:** This is without doubt the area in which the greatest emphasis has been placed by CONMEBOL. Having all aspects of the ritual well regulated and controlled has been probably the biggest concern for the last few decades. It is logical that this is the case if we consider that on many occasions the pre- and post-match events have been chaotic. In fact, perhaps this is the most appropriate adjective to summarize the ritualization of the Copa Libertadores for the period studied. From completely disorganized access to the pitch, ignoring the CONMEBOL agents, to breaches of the protocol in presenting trophies, to several mass fights between contending teams, there are many situations of lack of control that have questioned the capacity of the organiser to properly handle the event. In response to this, in recent years, the conditions of the different phases of the ritual have hardened, especially those that have to do with the awarding of trophies and the coronation. The protocols have become more rigid, leaving little room for improvisation, and giving the event a greater sense of professionalism. It is evident that the common association between South American football and violence/lack of control has become the main worry for its sports institutions, always in the spotlight due to their lack of effective responses in this regard.
- **Transformation of institutional policy:** The greatest problem that CONMEBOL has faced during the last century is the almost incessant trickle of corruption cases that has involved several of its main leaders. The most important was Nicolás Leoz, president from 1986 to 2013, the year in which he was forced to resign due to one of these cases. This president, during his long term, exercised great unipersonal

control over the institution. Thus, CONMEBOL understood itself as a kind of private preserve in the hands of a dominant personality. That network collapsed at the same time as Leoz was toppled by the corruption cases. The institution entered a phase of misrule that affected the next three presidents, whose terms barely exceeded a year. All this ended up provoking a sort of re-founding of the institution, with a new image, a new president (totally unrelated to the previous administration), and a clear need to regain lost legitimacy in the eyes of the general public. Our study period ends just at the beginning of this new phase, but already in the first year, we have been able to observe the change that the new CONMEBOL wants to undergo. The final match of 2017 is the first time that the institution assumed the main role in all the ritualization. A new logo and a new slogan were presented by the institution ('Cree en grande' ['believe big']), a new logo and a new name for the tournament (with the word CONMEBOL appearing for the first time), and a greater complexity and regulation of the entire protocol, always under its presence. A new iconography has been put into play that seeks to put the institution at the centre of the event, but now in an impersonal way, with its president taking a back seat.

What we have seen so far helps us understand that it is in the uncomfortable relationship between Latin American civil society (permanent socio-economic crisis), the general questioning of the power of the nation-state, and the weakness of international organizations such as CONMEBOL, that we can find the most consistent explanation for the erratic nature of the Copa Libertadores ritual. If one of the most relevant functions of the ritual is to define who is in charge, the unbalanced struggle between these three vectors impacts the fragile and fragmentary profile of the tournament ritual. The ritual is a metaphor for the territory and its actors. Once everyone swims in the global market, the ritual seeks its own owner, it seeks its own leadership, which will take it as far as possible.

Perhaps, as some authors indicate, this transnational, globalization process pushes football rituals to become mere cultural products for consumption, and they lose a good part of their communitarian aspect, as well as a part of their spiritual efficiency (Villena 2003; Han 2020). However, what our work indicates is that this passage from ritual to global neo-ritual is a key element of a transformation of the *comunitas* to which it is addressed. It is not a question of mere cultural consumption; it is global adhesion and the formation of an international tribe of contemporary football. Authors such as Alabarces suggest that these international ritual stories, although they have a significant global market, do not forge identity stories. We do not see it that way. It seems to us that the global fandom and the traditional processes of tribalization coexist today, leading to increasing hybridization. A world of global media repeatedly encourages this hybridization, insisting on the convergence of agendas. The steps of ritual transformation of CONMEBOL, as well as the increase in international audiences, are also proof of this. Although its dimension is more global, ritual convergence expresses the increasingly legitimate imposition of the principles of football, progressively moving away from local primordialism. It is not a less 'authentic' football, it is simply another football in search of its own story. Highly competitive professional football is irremediably distancing itself from the nation and its contradictions. FIFA's dream of fair play multiculturalism in football paradoxically coexists with ritual standardization and the establishment of a universal symbolic language. The accelerated evolution and systematic complexity of transnational neo-rituals indicate this.

However, this process will not make the story of national football, so typical of the twentieth century, irrelevant, as some have suggested. The nation is an actor with its own agenda and specific locus. It involves a sufficiently strong narrative to be able to continue affecting football. National football will not be irrelevant and will continue to have civic value in the territory, but it will have to learn (in fact, it is already doing so) to coexist with the dominance of the transnational story. The football tribe needs to handle staggered readings of the semantics of the game. After all, the most relevant Latin American football heroes have been performing for decades so far away from the Latin American continent that the absence of local myths and their episodic returns to the national team results in an intertwining of national and transnational narratives. The alliances, mergers and convergences of media conglomerates will facilitate the transnationalization of communication agendas and the linking and intermingling of cultural connections (Giulianotti and Robertson 2007; Jijon 2015).

Conclusions

Everything we have seen so far speaks of a neo-ritual in the process of construction. The erratic character of the ritual of the Copa Libertadores finals is evident from the lack of an identifiable evolution of many of the elements that make it up. The steps that have been taken in one direction have subsequently been altered in the opposite direction, or transformations have continued to be generated without a defined pattern. In this way, trying to identify a clear narrative is a complicated, even useless, exercise, and forces us to pay attention to specific aspects that allow us to recognise a line of ritual complexity that is shaping a new message. As we have shown, it is possible to carry out such an exercise. The institutional weakness of CONMEBOL has not yet led to much more, but there is a momentum that makes clear the path that needs to be followed. The control of procedures is increasing and the regulation of the roles of the different actors are growing. A discourse is beginning to be articulated. This is being reinforced at the present time, in which we are witnessing one of the most important transformations that the institution has undergone in its history. The new CONMEBOL, freed from the weight of its most corrupt structures, is beginning to gain legitimacy and to challenge national discourses that have so far shaped the tournament. Based on this, we believe that the next few years are going to be key to understanding the role that the institution is going to play in the future socio-political scenario of the region. We will have to be very attentive and examine whether this possible deepening of ritual complexity is going to be of a fundamentally endogenous nature, or if, on the contrary, it is going to follow the successful UEFA Champions League model as its main reference. This is the next challenge we intend to take up.

Notes

1. For a thorough review of the origins of Latin American football and its influence by the British Empire, the works of Brown (2015) and Wahl (2007) can be reviewed.
2. 'Much of the apparatus of contemporary nations, of the nation-state organization of societies, including the form of their particularities—the construction of their unique identities—is very similar across the entire world' (Robertson 2012, 199).

3. In 1965, the Copa de Campeones de América tournament adopted the more popular name of the Copa Libertadores. In this article, we will refer to this tournament as the Copa Libertadores.
4. The most classic references in South America are Eduardo Archetti (2001, 2016) and Pablo Alabarces (2000, 2018) in Argentina; and Roberto da Matta et al. (1982) and José Sergio Leite Lopes (1998) in Brazil. However, the expansion of national literature throughout the subcontinent, as well as a number of multi-ethnic studies conducted in this century, draw a much more complex picture of the football phenomenon.
5. These concepts have been dealt with in depth in a previous work. We understand a ritual as a 'performance of reiteration open to innovation that is assumed to have certain efficiency over social processes and whose symbolic consistency is mediated by a more or less contingent communicative context'. From this, we also speak of neo-ritual to refer to a 'performance ever more open to innovation, which is assumed to have less efficiency over social processes and whose symbolic consistency is more floating and mediated by a more contingent communicative context'. (Castilla, González-Ramallal and Mesa López 2019).

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