

## CHES IN AFRICA

My African tour at the beginning of this year had quite a different character than previous visits to other continents. The reason is obvious. To a certain extent chess is already developed in other continents, while in Africa one has to start from the bottom, from scratch.

However, before continuing, let me first state that when speaking about Africa in this article, I have in mind the central part of the continent. So, I exclude South Africa, Rhodesia and the northern part of Africa. In the Arab countries chess was already introduced in the Middle Ages, before it ever came to Europe. However, it did not assume the major proportions it has gained in Europe and it is only recently that interest in the game has gradually increased there FIDE is happy to include seven Arab countries among its affiliates.

Up to now, chess in the central part of Africa has mainly been played by non-Africans who were charged by the Government with carrying out certain development works or other tasks. In general, these chess players are united in clubs and it would not have been very difficult to found chess federations consisting of a number of these immigrant chess clubs. The purpose of my visit to Africa, however, was different — it was to introduce chess to the native population.

This task contained many problems. The first was that, although Africans are generally play-minded, they felt no particular need to adopt a new game such as chess, for they already had their own games, games such as draughts which is played in many places, usually with astonishing speed, indicating a natural talent. Senegal has an outstanding draught player, Baba Sy, who is a potential candidate for the world title in draughts. The game „ayo“ is also very popular and in many universities I saw students practising this game in their leisure hours.

Another obstacle is that a federation can only be internationally viable if it is supported by Government instances. This obstacle, at the same time, is a welcome indication of how to tackle the problem. I did not know this beforehand, but it would not have made much difference. It was obvious from the start that I would have to write to the Ministries of Education or Sports, although a letter as such cannot be very convincing. To explain the value of chess in a letter is a hopeless task. The best you can hope for is to receive a polite, non-committal answer, saying that you are welcome to come. The actual work has to be done on the spot.

I had some addresses of European chess players in Africa and I also received names from the authorities of the countries I was to visit. Some of them proved to be valuable, others worthless — altogether a good working-point for the organization of my tour. However, settling all the details of such a trip requires more time than one may imagine, because all sorts of complications have to be considered, such as weather conditions in different seasons. The first question was: **Which countries to visit?**

In 1973 I had already made a list of 10—12 African countries which I considered to be important for the development of chess in Africa. As I already mentioned, FIDE wrote informative letters to the various Departments of Sports or Education. I also sent copies of these official letters



to the individual addresses in my possession. From eight countries I received encouraging answers and so I could draw up a provisional scheme, taking into account the geographical situation, climate, possibility of communication, etc.

The trip was planned for the first quarter of 1975, from January 20 to April 10.

However, a new and unexpected obstacle arose. Of course, I knew that my tour would overlap with certain critical dates in the 1975 world championship, but having (since the Congress in Nice) three deputy presidents, I did not think that it would be necessary for me to handle this matter personally.

The Bureau meeting in Penang in December 1974, however, was of another opinion. One of the members even suggested that I postpone or cancel the entire trip. After all my preparations this was certainly out of the question. A compromise had to be found and it was agreed that I should try to shorten the trip so as to be back by about the 10th of March.

As it happened, the countries figuring on the last leg of my trip (Kenya, Uganda and Mozambique) were precisely those for which I had not yet worked out detailed plans, so I was able to skip these visits without causing too much inconvenience to the parties concerned. I also had to shorten my stay in Senegal and drastically limit my stay in Zaire. My programmes remained unchanged for Ghana, Nigeria and Zambia, where my visits proved to have the most success.

### **Government instances**

I have already emphasized the necessity of winning government support and in order to get it I first had to know how to approach the authorities. In this respect the ambassadors of my country have been of tremendous assistance and their introduction meant that half of the work was already done. The other half consisted of convincing the authorities of the value of chess. On previous occasions we had already had lectures on this subject, e.g. in seminars held together with the Bureau sessions at the beginning and end of the Jubilee year of the FIDE in Puerto Rico and Penang respectively. However, it is one thing to discuss these questions with interested functionaries of affiliated federations and entirely another to talk about the value of chess to a minister in Africa who has probably never even heard of chess. In working on this I have made the greatest use of the experiment carried out by Dr. Franck in Kisingani (Zaire). Two groups of about 50 pupils each were formed and an aptitude test was given to both indicating equal ability. After one year of the usual school courses, during which one group was given chess lessons and the other was not, the two groups were retested. The chess group proved to be considerably better.

In one country a high official was so impressed by this result that he immediately voiced the desire to become president of the new chess federation which had yet to be founded. In other countries I had similar experiences: unexpected enthusiasm and great help from the authorities.

### **The level of chess**

The level of chess in the African countries is still not very high, but it will certainly improve in the near future. I gave a number of simultaneous exhibitions during which I sometimes encountered natural talents. With one such talent the game came to an ending in which I had two Knights and six Pawns, while my opponent had two Bishops and six Pawns. There were no passed Pawns and since my Pawns were not vulnerable, I offered a draw. He declined and after some clever manoeuvres he succeeded in weakening my Pawns and won.

The contacts which new member-countries will soon be making in FIDE tournaments will not be without effect, especially if from time to time a grandmaster can go to a new country for about a one-month stay and give lessons and train promising players.

It is a pity that our committee for developing chess in these countries does not yet dispose of funds, but I hope that initiatives in this direction will be taken by the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and other countries.

### **Junior players**

I visited many schools where pupils have shown great interest in chess. However, the boys do not like to listen to talk, they want to play. During my visits I found an efficient combination of these two sides of the coin: I played an exhibition against 10—20 players and after the exhibition I demonstrated the best game of the event. During the talk I mainly let my opponent explain his moves. The new federations will have to take advantage of the extraordinary possibilities afforded by school chess in order to secure the future of chess in their countries.

### **Results**

In **Ghana, Nigeria and Zambia**, national chess federations were founded and affiliated to FIDE. In all these federations support from (and sponsorship by!) the Government has been secured. High officials have taken their places in the boards of the federations.

In **Senegal** there is the possibility of founding a chess federation in the near future. The native population will be sufficiently represented in this federation.

In **Zaire**, where I only stayed for one day (moreover a holiday), I could not do much. The Zaire Chess Federation has already been founded and affiliated, but it still lacks the support of the Government. Another drawback is that the native population is insufficiently involved.

If I had had a few more days, I could have perhaps promoted both sides.

### **By-products**

Contacts made during my trip may lead to greater interest in **Mauritania, Egypt and Ethiopia**, and possibly to the foundation of chess federations.

I plan to make a second trip to Africa and then, unhindered by FIDE problems, I will try to consolidate work in the countries I have already visited and extend chess interest to other African countries.

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