

**It's All About the Ball:  
How Football Tells a Story of Africa**  
by Nisha Ligon

16 May, 2007, Prof. John Middleton  
AFST 376: African Society

I can only write of what I know. Learning comes from books, but knowledge comes from experience. Luckily for me that experience includes a little bit about Africa: summers spent in rural Namibian farm country and an Ewe village in the mountains of Togo, plus a few brief forays into urban centers like Nairobi and Accra have shown me a couple of the many extremes of “African” life (if there is such a thing). But thinking back on my experiences it seems that the hip, cell phone toting Nairobi teenager, the tough, rifle carrying White Namibian rancher, and the poor, machete swinging Ewe subsistence farmer have little more in common than the fact that they live on the same continent. But hold on a second... when I think about it a bit more, there *is* one thing that comes back, one feeling, one experience that links all these people and places, not only to each other, but also to me. It is the feeling of striking a round object with the foot and seeing it soar, or watching others do the same. It is the beautiful game, the world sport, football, soccer, or whatever you please. There’s no denying that this sport (which, if you know me, you know rules my heart) also rules the heart of Africa, where it has grown from colonial recreation to universal pastime and passion. Historians trace Africa through its past of kingdoms, colonization and democratization. Anthropologists trace the continent through its people, and the societies and systems they set up. Call me a “footballologist” but I trace the continent’s life through the lens of the sport that it loves. Now please bear with me as I attempt to show you how football tells the story of Africa.

It would only be appropriate to start with *how* the so-called “world sport” reached the African continent. To imagine an Africa without its most beloved sport is difficult, yet evidence suggests that most of the continent was without football (or any ball for that matter) until the Europeans came along. According to David Goldblatt’s *The Ball is Round: A History of the Global Game*, there is no indigenous word for ball in Bantu languages, and save for a few ball-games involving the hands played in North Africa and a couple played by the San people in the Cape of Good Hope, the rest of Africa either never had (or has now lost) any indigenous ball play. Instead Goldblatt points to dance as a possible foundation upon which football was to build: “It is irresistible, if unprovable, not to imagine that the precocity of football’s growth in Africa was triggered by the simple magic of adding a ball to the dance and watching the universe of playful possibilities that opens up” (Goldblatt, 2006). Playful speculation aside—and though I hate to address Africa from the influence of Europe—we unfortunately must mark the advent of African football with that of European arrival and colonization. Giulianotti and Armstrong place its first introduction to the 1860’s, by the British in South Africa (Giulianotti and Armstrong, 2004). Though this surely wasn’t Africa’s first brush with the game, it makes sense as an approximation for the first prolonged presentation, as the date coincides with the discovery of South African diamonds at Kimberly in 1867, and subsequent British investment and immigration to the area (Iliffe, 1995). The other colonies were not far behind, as settlers, soldiers, teachers and missionaries in pockets across Africa began to teach football, a simple sport with minimal rules that requires little more than feet and a makeshift ball—much more practical than cricket or polo (Giulianotti and Armstrong, 2004).

According to Phyllis Martin, Europeans used sport as a “means of constructing their vision of a ‘disciplined’ colonial society and workforce” (Martin, 1997). French colonists taught football as a part of a policy Paul Darby calls “Gallicization,” with the goal of incorporating foreign colonies into “Greater France,” while in the Belgian Congo football became part of compulsory training for indigenous soldiers. Yet for some time the game (at least at an organized level) remained a rather elitist recreation for indigenous Africans, as it required “privileged contact” with Europeans (Darby, 2002).

Nevertheless, where the sport was not taught, it was simple enough to be learned by watching, so even in segregated areas native Africans began to pick up on the game. Crowds of locals would gather to watch British soldiers play football during the Boer war (Martin, 1997) and young schoolboys in Nigeria kicked around mango seeds emulating the British expatriates who played in their leisure time (Goldblatt, 2006).

Presenting an African perspective on the arrival of the game, Ehizojie and Odogun’s 1987 establishment methodology for professional football in Nigeria explains:

“The British citizens were busy spreading the game of football wherever they went, whether in quest of colonies or adventurism. They introduced the game in various parts of the globe... even Nigeria was not left out, the British brought the game to our soil earlier than 1914” (Ehizojie and Odogun, 1987).

The tone here, and throughout the rest of the piece, seems to be one of pride in Nigerian soccer as well as a desire to mimic and match Europe’s establishment of the game. And indeed, the hierarchical structure of organized football across Africa has been modeled closely upon that in Europe. Once African schoolboys grew enamored with kicking the ball, structured leagues sprang up in urban centers, some—like the British organized Bulawayo African Football Association in Zimbabwe—designed by colonialists to hold

sway over local recreation (Giulianotti, 2004), and others—like Eritrea’s Director’s Cup competition developed for indigenous teams not allowed in the Italian Eritrean league (Last, 2004)—created by Africans desiring the same opportunities for competition as their colonial oppressors. In 1923 Egypt became the first African nation accepted into FIFA, the world’s governing body in football, and in 1957 the Confederation Africaine de Football (CAF) was founded to organize international level competition, namely the African Nation’s Cup, in which all of Africa now competes and teams from all areas of the continent have won (Giulianotti and Armstrong, 2004). Africa has quickly risen to notice on the world football stage, with current players such as Didier Drogba of Chelsea and the Ivory Coast, and Samuel Eto’o of Barcelona and Cameroon considered some of the top athletes in the world. Though African leagues struggle to gain the audience and economic success of those in Europe and South America, and an African country has yet to be world champions, the next World Cup competition in 2010 will be held in South Africa, and many fans and experts alike predict African champions.

But in all this talk of top-class competition, let us not forget the millions of schoolboys and villagers across Africa who now play and love the game. There is no doubt that football has reached every corner of the continent. In the cities football provides what Giulianotti and Armstrong describe as “a personally pleasing leisure experience and a healthy social pastime, an albeit temporary escape from the personal hazards of African city-life” (Giulianotti and Armstrong, 2004). It has also permeated throughout rural areas. Put simply, as Ghanaian friend once told me, an African village must have three things: houses, a church and a football pitch. And despite receiving the gift of the game and guidance for its organization from Europe, football has become a

truly African sport. Let us now examine how football uniquely reflects society and politics across the continent.

In describing the spatial and social division of Swahili towns, Middleton says that every town is divided into two sectors call *mitaa*, each with its own football team. These teams compete intensely against each other as cross town rivals, but then join together when playing against other towns (Middleton, 2004). A similar philosophy can be seen throughout African football as teams often reflect social and geographical groups on the smallest level (school and village teams or small local clubs), religious and ethnic divisions on a broader level (professional teams often associated with divided fan bases) and political groupings at the highest level (with national teams and support for other teams from the continent).

Let us start at the most local level, where games of football are generally spontaneous kick-arounds between neighbors or colleagues—a chance to let out steam and energy in a competitive environment. In his demographic history of Africa, John Iliffe points out, “If elders gained power from control of wives and property, the young gained it from violence in a world where every man had to be ready to defend himself and his family” and that violence would either be expressed through feuding and warfare or metaphorically dramatized in festivals (Iliffe, 1995). Today (save in those countries still embroiled in violence and civil war) tribal warfare and violent feuding are no longer a part of acceptable social conduct, and a different outlet for competitive aggression must be found. No doubt one means for that can be a quick game of football. Also, as I’ve stated before, football requires little equipment and provides a form of recreation for

those without radio, television and other modern forms of entertainment. After visiting Yaoundé, Dutch author Simon Kuper stated:

“I discovered why Cameroonians are good at football; they play a lot. Forget all that nonsense about African suppleness... all you need to know is that at lunchtime, in the evening and all weekend Yaoundé turns into a football pitch. Some kickarounds draw dozens of spectators and the quality of the play is rare” (quoted in Goldblatt, 2006).

More organized than these spontaneous pick-up games, local clubs in cities and village teams in rural areas provide a social group and support system for young men (and nowadays also women). Iliffe states that with colonization the young “lost the power of violence,” but that with urbanization, “football clubs became surrogates for violent rural youth groups” (Iliffe, 1995). On more passive terms, in the Tanganyika colony administrators of football clubs also served as mentors and wardens for their players, helping them find jobs, pay debts and deal with all aspects of life both off the pitch and on (Martin, 1997). In Africa, playing football often allows individuals from poor backgrounds to succeed and achieve status when given no opportunities in broader society (Fair, 2004). It is a game embraced by the continent and available to all.

They often don't have stadium lights, and they may not be screened on satellite television, but don't let that fool you: city and national football leagues in Africa are a competitive and vibrant affair, taken extremely seriously by clubs, players and fans alike. Teams have strong identities, and though the history of football in Africa may be short, they have already built up their own cultures and traditions. Giulianotti and Armstrong liken the team-fan relationship to indigenous kinship structure:

“The oldest teams have generated support among local Africans that is expressed in familial terms, as a bond between the current generation and their ancestors who founded these cultural institutions. Making football

clubs 'family' serves to further the cultural Africanization of the game”  
(Giulianotti and Armstrong, 2004).

Beyond representing family, teams in many areas represent ethnic and tribal groups, often highlighting and sometimes exacerbating tensions that sit right below the surface. Often leagues in urban centers will have a team (or multiple teams) representing each of the different tribes or traditional kingdoms from the surrounding country. Though in the city these groups mix and live similar lives, playing for or supporting a team that represents their ancestral group can have a very strong significance for social identity. This extends beyond indigenous ethnic groups, as is extremely apparent in multi-cultural island of Mauritius, where teams and their fan bases were originally divided by the country's many ethnic groups: Creole, Franco-Mauritian, “Gens de Couleur,” Chinese, Hindi, Tamil and Muslim. In the football stadium fans would use ethnic insults and racial slurs considered absolutely inappropriate in normal social settings. With football rivalry drawn along ethnic lines, an additional reason and outlet for aggression between groups was created and tensions intensified. In 1984, under the nationalist strategy of “Maruitianism,” the military government changed the names of the football clubs hoping to stem ethnic tensions. Nevertheless, fan-bases have remained largely the same, and Edensor and Koodoruth argue that in Mauritius, “Football has helped to reconstitute a regressive expression of ethnicity which threatens any nation-building project” (Edensor and Koodoruth, 2004). South African football remained officially segregated under apartheid all the way until the founding of the nonracial South African Football Association in 1991, combining the separate leagues and integrating the national team, which until then had been banned from FIFA due to its racial policies (Alegi, 2004). Though South African football is no longer split along racial lines, sport fandom in the country remains

split, with Blacks as the main football fans, and the majority of Whites following rugby instead (Goldblatt, 2006).

In addition to being split along geographical and ethnic lines, teams may also represent religions. A prime example is that of Eritrea, a nation with strong historical divides between Christian and Muslim populations. For some time the two most successful teams were the Muslim supported Mar Rosso and the Christian supported Hamasien. The rivalry between them was fierce, straining the fragile peace between Muslim and Christian. Yet to add a third dimension, the Ethiopian army in Eritrea supported Walia, so Eritreans of all religions would support any team in opposition to Walia, whether Christian or Muslim. By 1974 the social and religious tensions being expressed in the football stands became so great that the organized football leagues were officially stopped in an attempt ease regional conflict (Last, 2004).

This example eases nicely into the next mode through which football reflects African society: political expression. Throughout the world, football stadiums, with their explosive atmospheres, have long been venues for the expression of political views or discontent towards the state. The sense of power in the mass of supporters is particularly strong, and as Fates argues, “Football provokes visual decoration and a particular behaviour among supporters that is the equal of religion and outdoes politics” (Fates, 2004). In the safety of the raucous crowd, people feel the power and confidence to express themselves, even against totalitarian regimes. In Africa, this took the form of protest against foreign colonizers during the colonial era followed by protests against inefficient or oppressive post-colonial governments that continue to this day (Giulianotti and Armstrong, 2004). In the Belgian Congo, the football stadium was one of the few

arenas for free expression by Africans under the repressive Belgian regime, and ironically Zimbabwean football (which had originally been organized by the British as a way of controlling indigenous locals) became the focus for anti-colonial protest and political campaigning, which Darby claims precipitated the end of British rule (Darby, 2002). Fates describes how in colonial-era Algeria this expression went to the extreme of football violence directed at the state. “The stadium was the space and the match the time for the dramatization of the struggle between colonized and colonizer,” and indeed, in the build-up to civil war and independence, football violence hit its peak (Fates, 2004).

While football may be a means of presenting popular dissent, and a catalyst for political violence, in some instances it has also been instrumental in promoting peace. As the story goes, a ceasefire was called in the Nigerian war when Santos (Pele’s club) traveled to play in Nigeria in 1969. The Nigerian government has also held “peace matches” between civil servants to resolve tension among different governmental branches (Boer, 2004), not dissimilar to the way in which pre-colonial Nigerian groups resolved inter-clan conflicts by man to man feuds in hopes of avoiding larger scale conflict. During Angola’s civil war in the late 1980’s football pitches were marked as “demilitarized zones” (Mankell, 2006). And five years into the Sierra Leone war, amid ceasefires, peace-talks and the shaky beginnings of reconciliation, Paul Richards wrote that one of the keys to helping child soldiers reenter normal society could be football, stating that the spirit and bonding involved in the game had the potential to “contribute to healing some of the most glaring social wounds of war,” (Richards, 1997). Following suite at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Josiah Johnson, once one of the stars of African football, called out to the child-soldiers, “Put down your guns and go to the stadium and

enjoy the game; you don't become a millionaire shooting someone, [but] you might if you play good football" (quoted in Goldblatt, 2006).

In countries with borderlines drawn arbitrarily by men in Europe and without any regard to human demography or ethnic distribution, football can be one of the few things to unite the people under their flag. Darby writes that football has played a crucial role in "the process through which people construct their identity and affiliate with the communities and nations in which they live... the world game represents one of the most potent and visible vehicles for the expression of national pride and identity" (Darby, 2002). This is evidenced in the days of countrywide celebration and the declaration of a national holiday when Togo qualified for the 2006 World Cup, as well as in the way that Mobutu's power in Zaire was firmly cemented after the national team won the 1974 African Nation's Cup (Darby, 2002). There is no doubt that Africans take an enormous sense of pride in the successes of their national football teams, and that this plays a major role in their ability to identify as Rwandan in addition to Hutu or Ghanaian in addition to Ashanti. It even carries over to the continental level, when Africans from all different countries support whichever African teams succeed on the world stage. Nigeria's gold medal in the 1996 Olympics was labeled a victory for all of Africa (Boer, 2004).

And in speaking of football as Africa's sport, it would be shameful to neglect to mention the different sparks and flares that Africans have added to the game, the ultimate of which is the unique noise of the African stadium. Goldblatt describe this vividly:

"Percussion is ubiquitous in African football: drums, rattles and shakers of every kind and size provide the essential beat of the stands. Customs vary but unlike European crowds whose music rises and falls with the fortunes of their side, African crowds maintain their rhythm throughout a game" (Goldblatt, 2006).

It is tempting to attribute this steady, percussive support to the fact that so many Africans have had to “flow” through a life of endless hardship, taking ups and downs unimaginable to Europeans, all with a steadfast disposition.

Yet despite the vibrancy of Africa’s football, it lacks the money or prestige to keep its best players. Since the colonial era Europe has taken Africa’s football talent to bolster its own. Early Moroccan football star Just Fontaine scored thirteen goals for France in the 1958 World Cup. Mozambican-born striker, Eusebio, played for the Portuguese national team and became the 1965 European Footballer of the Year while at Portuguese club Benfica. Pascale Boniface, an expert in the geopolitics of football once said, “Le soleil ne se couche jamais sur l’empire du football”—the sun never sets upon the empire of football (Boniface, 2002), and this indeed is an empire on multiple levels, with attempted imperialism at times still apparent. Darby states:

“The expropriation of African players by wealthy European clubs at the expense of domestic leagues and competitions, in particular, can clearly be interpreted as an extension of the economic imperialism of the colonial period and beyond, during which first world development has been sustained by exploitation and impoverishment of other parts of the world... locating cheap resources, in this case the athlete, for manufacture and consumption elsewhere” (Darby, 2002).

Attempts like that of Ehizojie and Odogun to promote professional African football system to rival that in Europe surely cannot take off until Africa catches up to Europe economically, and sadly, like many of the continent’s brightest minds, it’s shining stars on the pitch will continue to leave for the fame and fortune promised by big-name clubs abroad. Yet though this reflects the state and fate of Africa as seen through the eyes of broad-minded economists and political scientists, I think the spirit and the hope of the continent is better embodied in the pulsating rhythm of the stadium and the barefoot

lunchtime pickup games that bring smiles to the slums. The dark continent is not at all dark, and the way it has embraced and added to the game of football reflects the potential for modern Africa's part to be played in the ever more connected world, done gradually but with passion, as with a flick of the foot, a beat in the background, and most importantly a smile on the face.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

- Alegi, Peter. *Laduma! Soccer, Politics and Society in South Africa*. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2004.
- Boer, Wiebe. "A Story of Heroes, of Epics: The Rise of Football in Nigeria." In *Football in Africa*, ed. Gary Armstrong and Richard Giulianotti. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 59-79.
- Boniface, Pascal. *La Terre est Ronde Comme un Ballon: Géopolitique du Football*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002.
- Darby, Paul. *Africa, Football and FIFA: Politics, Colonialism, and Resistance*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Edensor, Tim and Ibrahim Koodoruth. "Football and Ethnicity in Mauritius: (Re)Producing Communal Allegiances." In *Football in Africa*, ed. Gary Armstrong and Richard Giulianotti. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 135-149.
- Ehizojie, Patrick and Lucky Odogun. *Professional Football in Nigeria: An Establishment Methodology*. Surulere: CSA Productions Ltd., 1987.
- Fair, Laura. "Ngoma Reverberations: Swahili Music Culture and the Making of Football Aesthetics in Early Twentieth-Century Zanzibar." In *Football in Africa*, ed. Gary Armstrong and Richard Giulianotti. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 103-113.
- Fates, Youssef. "Football in Algeria: Between Violence and Politics." In *Football in Africa*, ed. Gary Armstrong and Richard Giulianotti. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 41-57.

- Giulianotti, Richard. "Between Colonialism, Independence and Globalization: Football in Zimbabwe." In *Football in Africa*, ed. Gary Armstrong and Richard Giulianotti. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 80-99.
- Giulianotti, Richard and Gary Armstrong. "Drama, Fields and Metaphors: An Introduction to Football in Africa." In *Football in Africa*, ed. Gary Armstrong and Richard Giulianotti. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 1-23.
- Goldblatt, David. *The Ball is Round: A Global History of Football*. London: Penguin, 2006.
- Iiffe, John. *Africans: The History of a Continent*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Last, Alex. "Containment and Counter-Attach: A History of Eritrean Football." In *Football in Africa*, ed. Gary Armstrong and Richard Giulianotti. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 27-40.
- Leseth, Anne. "The Use of *Juju* in Football: Sport and Witchcraft in Tanzania." In *Entering the Field: New Perspectives on World Football*, ed. Gary Armstrong and Richard Biulianotti, Oxford: Berg, 1997: 159-174.
- Mankell, Henry. "Greater Goal: Healing a War-Torn Land." *National Geographic Online*. Available on the web: <<[www7.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0606/feature1/#angola](http://www7.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0606/feature1/#angola)>>, accessed 07 May, 2007. Copyright 2006.
- Martin, Phyllis. "Sport." In *The Encyclopedia of Africa South of the Sahara, Vol. 4*, ed. John Middleton. New York: Macmillan, 1997: 160-163.
- Middleton, John. *African Merchants of the Indian Ocean: Swahili of the East African Coast*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2004.
- Richards, Paul. "Soccer and Violence in War-Torn Africa: Soccer and Social Rehabilitation in Sierra Leone." In *Entering the Field: New Perspectives on World Football*, ed. Gary Armstrong and Richard Biulianotti, Oxford: Berg, 1997: 141-158.