



Africa United: The Cup of Nations Returns and Kenya Made It to the Party

By Carey Baraka



In January 2008, I was seated in a police station in Kisumu watching a rerun of a Cameroon game at the 2008 African Cup of Nations. Kisumu was engulfed in the flames of the post-election violence, and I was an eleven-year-old sheltered in a police station, but I was not thinking about that. Instead, I was thinking about Cameroon and Ghana, my AFCON teams. Alex Song was playing in midfield for Cameroon that year, and his talents, together with those of legendary striker Samuel Eto'o, buttressed the Indomitable Lions' charge to the final of the competition, where they lost to Hosni Abd Rabou's Egypt.

Before Eto'o was the legendary Cameroonian hitman, Roger Milla. Milla came out of retirement to lead Cameroon into the quarterfinals of the 1990 FIFA World Cup in Italy. Thirty-eight years-old at the time, he netted four goals in the competition. The highlight of his tally was his double against the Colombian goalkeeper Rene Higuita in the second round. In that game, Milla received the ball from François Omam-Biyik and, in one fluid movement, flicked the ball towards and away from his body, and slalomed through two Colombian defenders with ease. Later in the match, he dispossessed the maverick keeper sometimes known as *El Loco*, and a madcap race to the goal-line ensued. Four years later, Milla would reappear at the World Cup again, and score a goal against Russia to become the oldest goal scorer in the history of the World Cup. He was forty-two years old.

In the four years between his World Cup heroics, Roger Milla's football had taken a more salacious turn. In the cellars of Yaounde's national stadium, Milla had locked over a hundred pygmies who he had originally assembled to be part of charity football tournament to raise money to promote the wellbeing of Cameroonian pygmies. In his book, *Football Against the Enemy*, Simon Kuper writes that, "Milla had invited pygmies to play a few games, to raise money for their health and education, but he imprisoned them there, issued them with guards and seldom fed them." The lack of food was fuelled by the belief that "they play better if they don't eat too much."

On FIFA's official website, Roger Milla is [described](#) as, "Modest and committed to a fault, this giant of world football devotes whatever spare time he has to helping others less fortunate than himself."

Roger Milla. Football legend. FIFA's symbol of altruism.

Let the games begin

The 2019 African Cup of Nations kicks off on Friday, 21st June in Egypt. The competition is officially known as *The Total 2019 African Cup of Nations*. The competition was initially supposed to be hosted by Cameroon, but the Confederation of African Football (CAF) stripped them of hosting rights citing, among other things, the Anglophone crisis, delays in the delivery of infrastructure, and the threat of the Boko Haram. This is the second time in recent years that the venue of the competition is being changed at, relatively, the last-minute. In 2015, Equatorial Guinea was awarded the hosting rights after Morocco, which had been slated to host the competition, pulled out, citing the looming threat of Ebola. CAF moved to sanction Morocco, throwing it out of the 2015 AFCON, banning it from the 2017 and 2019 editions, and ordering it to pay one million dollars in fines to CAF, and eight million dollars as compensation for losses sustained by CAF and stakeholders after the pull-out. The Moroccans argued that Ebola was a risk they could not afford to take, given the swathe of fans expected to attend the tournament, despite the fact that home fans predominantly attend AFCON competitions. The Ebola strain had at that point only appeared in three countries, none of which were likely to be at the competition, and the curious coincidence that Morocco would play host to the World Club Cup barely a month before AFCON, a competition that would draw in significantly more spectators from outside the country.

Writing for *The Guardian*, Sean Jacobs [argued](#) that the pullout was a microcosm of North African countries' difficult relationship with countries South of the Sahara. To make the hosting roulette more interesting, CAF would award Cote d'Ivoire the hosting rights of the 2021 competition, but after stripping Cameroon of 2019 hosting rights, they would renege on Cote d'Ivoire's 2021 hosting rights and award them to Cameroon. The latest CAF report stated that Cote d'Ivoire had accepted an offer to host the 2023 AFCON edition in place of the 2021 finals. Five years ago the 2019, 2021 and 2023 editions were awarded to Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea respectively and now Guinea has to wait until 2025.

Morocco is one of the favourites of the *The Total 2019 African Cup of Nations*, the same competition that they were banned from before the success of their appeal against it. In mercurial Ajax Amsterdam playmaker, Hakim Ziyech, the Moroccans possess one of the flair players of the continent, and are packed with quality across the board: Mehdi Benatia, previously of Juventus, Bayern Munich and AS Roma, patrols the backline, flanked by Achraf Hakimi and Noussair Mazraou, who are the finest fullback pairing at the tournament. Morocco, alongside Egypt and Senegal, start as heavy favourites, Egypt because they are hosts and because Mo' [Salah la la la la la la](#), and Senegal because *jogo oyierore*. Growing up in Kisumu, when we played football as kids, we would split into two teams randomly, and when it happened that the random selection had led to the skilled players all being on one team, we would complain that *jogo oyierore*. They have chosen each other.

This is what a friend messages when Senegal announces their final squad for the tournament. They have chosen each other. The Senegalese squad is a ridiculous exercise in name-dropping. Kalibou Koulibaly is one of the three finest central defenders in world football. His centre back partner, Salif Sane, who despite a difficult season with Schalke 04 in Germany's Bundesliga, shone at last year's World Cup, as did Moussa Wague at right back. Idrissa Gana Gueye in midfield is the best tackler in the English Premier League. Ismaïlla Sarr and Keita Balde are threatening to become world class forwards, while Sadio Mane, the figurehead of the attack, is a genuine world class forward, one of the premier players in his position in world football. *Jogo oyierore*.

Then there are the other bigwigs, the shadow favourites: Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, Tunisia, Algeria. Cameroon, by virtue of being defending champions. Kenya has the unfortunate luck of being drawn in the same group with Senegal and Algeria who in Yacine Brahimi, Islam Slimani and Riyad Mahrez have an attack not to be sneered upon. One would expect Senegal to top the group, and Algeria to finish runners-up, but the Kenyans could surprise, having qualified for the group stage on the back of rugged rearguard displays. The Tanzanians complete this group.

Kenya is back after 15 years

Naturally (or as naturally as the politics of geopolitics can be), Kenya interests me. Harambee Stars has not qualified for Africa's premier footballing competition since 2004, when a Jacob 'Ghost' Mulee coached side was drawn in a tough group with Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso, where the side lost to both Senegal and Mali, but salvaged some pride when teenage striker Dennis Oliech inspired them to a 3-0 win against Burkina Faso. Now, fifteen years later, Mulee, for one, is optimistic about Kenya's chances of making the knockout stages of the 2019 African Cup of Nations. Mulee says, "I think we will beat Algeria and draw with Tanzania and qualify for the round of sixteen (as best losers) even before our final match against Senegal."

Harambee Stars coach Sebastien Migne, however, is keeping himself grounded. Kenya, he argues, has only one player (Victor Wanyama) playing in a top league in the world, and so expectations have to be lowered. He adds, "For this reason, we must be realistic about our expectations and I believe what we achieved was something to be celebrated instead of the negative criticism."

Migne is right to keep the expectations low. Senegal is the highest ranked team in the continent, after all, while the Algerians have appeared in two World Cups on the trot. Furthermore, questions have been asked about Migne's own squad selection for the continental showcase. Sports reporter Celestine Olilo writing in *The Daily Nation*, [raises](#) doubts about the depth of the Harambee Stars squad. Masoud Juma, she notes, has spent the last six months without a football club, yet he has been picked as back-up to the main striker Michael Olunga at the expense of Allan Wanga who netted eighteen goals in the just-concluded KPL season. There is also Jesse Were who has scored freely for the last three seasons in the Zambian Super league with Zesco United leaving some to [feel](#) that he is being punished for leading the line for struggling Harambee Stars teams in the past. Furthermore, as Olilo notes, the goalkeeper situation is not the best. First-choice keeper Patrick Matasi has made several high-profile blunders while playing for the national team, most recently in the friendly against the Democratic Republic of Congo, while back-up keepers Farouk Shikhalo and John Oyiemba have zero international caps for Kenya.

While Kenya's defensive displays gained the plaudits during qualification, conceding only one goal, the attack has flattered to deceive. A trio of Michael Olunga, Ayub Timbe and Francis Kahata will be the main men in the final third of the pitch, but beyond them there are concerns about the rest of the attack. Ovella Ochieng who is expected to push Kahata for a place in the team was gravely disappointing in the buildup friendlies in Paris, and should he continue his dour displays at the tournament, then fingers will be wagged at Migne's decision to leave Cliff Nyakeya out of the squad,

despite the Mathare United dynamo having scored thirty-two goals in the last two seasons.

Still, hope never dies. The main men for the team are captain Victor Wanyama, Japan-based centre forward Michael Olunga, and wing wizard Ayub Timbe. The latter two were responsible for Kenya's goal against the DRC, Olunga curling the ball into the net after a jinxing run from the left wing by Timbe. Timbe, who one hopes will not succumb to the myriad of injuries he tends to pick up when playing for Kenya, is bullish about the team's chances of progressing in Egypt. He says, "Our team is good when it comes to defending and even attacking. I will try to score as many goals as I can, but the most important thing here is teamwork."

Then there are the other teams too, the other groups. Egypt are in a tricky looking Group A with the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda and Zimbabwe. Devotees of the Kenyan Premier League would be interested in Uganda, not least because of vague regional loyalties, but specifically because Khalid Aucho, who is maybe the best midfielder to play in the KPL in recent years, is in the squad. However, this is not the group of death. For the group of death, we jump to Group D, where Morocco, Cote d'Ivoire and South Africa will eyeball each other, and take turns at eyeballing Namibia.

Dirty Football

The African Cup of Nations kicks off while African, and world, football is caught in the eye of a storm. On June 6th, Ahmad Ahmad, the Confederation of African football president, was arrested in Paris. Ahmad is accused of corruption and harassment by Amr Fahmy who was fired as CAF general secretary in April. Fahmy accuses Ahmad of, among other things, paying \$20,000 in bribes into the accounts of African football association presidents such as those of Tanzania and Cape Verde, and harassing four female CAF employees. The arrest of Ahmad is only part of the chain of arrests of current and former world football leaders for corruption. Issa Hayatou, who Ahmad replaced as president of CAF in 2017, was accused of accepting a \$1.5 million bribe from Qatar to secure his support for their bid for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, and in 2018 was fined \$27.9 million by the Egyptian Economic Court for flouting the Monopolistic Practices Act when signing a billion-dollar deal between CAF and French company Lagardère in 2015.

However, we think not of these things. Instead, we think about Ghana. Ghana is in Group F, alongside Cameroon, Benin and Guinea-Bissau. The fifteen-year absence of Kenya from continental and world football meant that I supported Ghana resolutely. In the 2006 World Cup, I cheered on Sammy Kuffuor, Richard Kingston, Asamoah Gyan & co. as they reached the second round, while in AFCON 2008, Junior Agogo charmed me with his goals and his celebrations (and the news of his inability to write as a result of his stroke broke my heart). Then in World Cup 2010 in South Africa, Gyan, and [that](#) penalty against Uruguay that I will never get over. The Ghanaians have floundered since then, not getting past the group stage of the World Cup four years later (despite John Boye and Jonathan Mensah's heroic defending) and not qualifying for Russia 2018. Their preparations were mired in drama when Gyan was stripped of the captaincy, subsequently declared his retirement from international football, but twenty-four hours later rescinded his decision to retire following a call from his country's president, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo. He is now stressing Ghana's readiness for the tournament despite a goalless draw with South Africa, and a loss to Namibia in the buildup to AFCON.

What's In A Name?

Here is an interesting twist to the power of naming in African football. Roger Milla was *The Old Man*, and he made a mockery of those who had dismissed him because of his age. A joke made is that the national team's nickname has a direct effect on their ability to win the tournament. Thus,

Cameroon's *Indomitable Lions* were victorious in 2017. *Les Éléphants* (Cote d'Ivoire) in 2015. The *Super Eagles* (Nigeria) won it in 2013. Chris Katongo's goals fired Zambia's *Chipolopolo* (The Copper Bullets) to the title in 2012, while Egypt's *The Pharaohs* claimed the throne for three editions straight from 2006-2010. The *Atlas Lions* (Morocco) should consider themselves de facto contenders, as should *The Lions of Teranga* (Senegal). Ethiopia (*the Walias*) won the first edition of the tournament in 1962, but as the Walias ibex has become endangered, so too has the country's football.

South Africa's *Bafana Bafana* (The Boys, The Boys) won it in 1996, but since then lions, elephants, eagles, pharaohs and copper bullets have won it. Watch out for DRC's *The Leopards*, Mali's *The Eagles*, and Guinea's *National Elephants* while *The Warriors* (Zimbabwe) and *The Brave Warriors* (Namibia) could just do it. Kenya (*Harambee Stars*) will gather hope from Ghana's *Black Stars* having won in the 80s, but Uganda's *The Cranes*, Burundi's *The Swallows*, Angola's *Palancas Negras* (Giant sable antelopes), Benin's *The Squirrels* and Madagascar's *Barea* (named after a species of Zebu) should, perhaps, temper their expectations.

Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).

The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.

Follow us on [Twitter](#).

