



AFRICA AND THE WORLD CUP: A Beautiful Tragedy

By Martin Maitha



2nd July 2010. Soccer City, Johannesburg. The score is 1-1 at the 2010 FIFA World Cup quarter-final between Ghana and Uruguay. In the 120th minute, Ghana have a promising free kick at the edge of the box. Some panicked Uruguayan defending, a proper goalmouth melee. Hang on, what's this? It's a penalty. Luis Suarez just saved a certain Ghanaian goal. The only problem is he's not a goalkeeper, but a forward. He is shown a red card for his troubles.

Asamoah Gyan steps up. Could this be the moment an African nation goes to the semi-final, in Africa's World Cup? Gyan is Ghana's top scorer at this World Cup, with three goals - two of which were penalties against Serbia and Australia in the group stages. If there was someone you could bet on to have the sangfroid and the cojones to do it, Gyan was that guy.

The weight of a continent's expectation is on his shoulders. He fires a shot, which cannons off the crossbar. Instead of winning it, he condemns Ghana to a needless penalty shootout which they later go on to lose - John Mensah and Dominic Adiyiah miss for Ghana and Sebastian Abreu hits a cheeky Panenka to send Ghana out of the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

This memory is so vivid because I watched every heart-rending minute of that match, cursing at Suarez- the ready-made pantomime villain who dashed a continent's hopes; but more so at Asamoah

Gyan? How could he miss? Why was he such a choker?

This is the story of Africa and the World Cup as we have always known it. A tale of the valiant underdogs who, like Icarus, flew too near to the sun and paid the price with their naivete. It is also a tale of self-sabotage, incompetence, gulfs in class and institutional racism.

The story of African football is about politics.

In 1934, Egypt became the first African country to participate in the World Cup, which was hosted by Italy. They qualified for the sixteen-team tournament by beating Palestine (then under a British mandate) and Turkey (who withdrew from the qualification round). In the World Cup, Egypt lost 4-2 in the first round against Hungary. This was to be the last time an African team participated in the World Cup, until Morocco did so in 1970.

In the 1950s and 1960s, many African nations became independent and naturally, as independent nations, they joined global bodies, like the United Nations, and of course, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), which at the time was dominated by northern European and South American nations. This posed an existential threat- the FIFA Congress operated on the basis of one nation, one vote, irrespective of footballing ability. The Kenyas and Zambias, in the eyes of FIFA, had an equal say in world football, the same as two-time world champions Brazil, Uruguay and Italy.

Paul Darby, in [Africa and the 'World' Cup: FIFA Politics, Eurocentrism and Resistance](#) published in the International Journal of the History of Sport (Vol. 22, No. 5, September 2005, 883 - 905) observed that the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) "made several attempts during the late 1950s and early 1960s to introduce a pluralist voting system that would more adequately reflect their self-perceived standing in world football". When these efforts failed, they chose to assert their dominance in the FIFA World Cup. FIFA's Executive Committee decreed that to qualify for the 1962 World Cup, Morocco, the winners of the African preliminary round would have to play a further qualifying match against Spain - a match they duly lost. In 1964, they made it worse by marginalising the Asians and Africans by pitting them against each other: the winners of the African zone would play the winners of the Asia/Oceania zone to qualify for future World Cup Finals.

Kwame Nkrumah, the-then Ghanaian president and pan-Africanist, persuaded CAF (Confédération Africaine de Football) to have its members boycott the 1966 World Cup. CAF's Secretary General, Mourad Fahmy, argued that "the allocation of one World Cup slot to three continents (with more than 65 members) was absurd and did not adequately reflect the prevailing situation in world football."

In 1974, João Havelange, a Brazilian, ran for the FIFA presidency on a pledge to improve the situation of Asian and African football - by increasing the World Cup final places from sixteen to twenty-four, and by increasing funding to improve infrastructure in African and Asian countries. He won handily, beating the incumbent, Sir Stanley Rous, who was widely resented by African nations for, among other things, supporting the inclusion of South Africa in the FIFA family despite their apartheid policy.

Under Havelange, Africa got two World Cup spots, which later became five under the expanded 32 team format that began in 1998. But it was under his protégé, Joseph 'Sepp' Blatter, that the African continent came to the fore. For all his faults, Blatter ensured that the dream of an African country hosting the World Cup became a reality. He backed South Africa over Germany in 2006. He backed

it again in 2010. It later emerged that the win was not entirely legitimate; the 2015 indictments of FIFA officials by the United States' Department of Justice showed that Jack Warner, a FIFA Vice President had accepted \$10m from South Africa in 2008. Danny Jordaan, the chairman of the 2010 Local Organising Committee clarified it was not a bribe but a contribution towards the CONCACAF (Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Association Football- of which Warner was President at the time) "development fund."

The story of African football is about incompetence.

Zaire's team, the Leopards, were Africa's representatives at the 1974 World Cup in West Germany. The reigning African champions had been funded lavishly by the kleptocratic dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu wa Zabanga; he had given each member of the team a house and a green Volkswagen. Things had looked promising when they lost 2-0 to a Scottish team with the talents of Kenny Dalglish, Billy Bremner and Dennis Law. But it was the next match against Yugoslavia that will live on in infamy.

Before the match, Mobutu, or one of his minions, had assumed that the team's coach, Blagoje Vidinić, a Yugoslav, of planning to deliberately throw away the game so as to favour his home team, so he was "secluded" from the team for that match. It later transpired that the players had not been paid their allowances - a story that will become all-too familiar - and they were in fact planning to strike before the match. The team lost 9-0 in the second-worst World Cup performance of all time (el Salvador holds the dubious record, losing 10-1 to Hungary in the 1982 World Cup, held in Spain).

Mobutu, predictably, was not amused. He gave the team an ultimatum: don't bother coming home if you lose by more than four goals to Brazil. That was *the* Brazil - the defending champions who had thrilled the world with their canary yellow shirts and an exuberant display of swashbuckling football. Zaire creditably lost 3-0, not without its mishaps and led to arguably [the most bizarre moment in World Cup history](#) - Mwepu Ilunga rushed out of the wall and hammered the ball away before Rivellino could take the free kick. BBC match commentator, John Motson, termed it, "a bizarre moment of African ignorance." But that was not the truth; Ilunga later claimed he was wasting time because Mobutu's threat was all too real. In fact, on the team's return to Kinshasa, they were briefly detained at the presidential palace for four days while Mobutu decided what to do with them, before he eventually released them. Minus their allowances, of course.

The singularly African spectre of disorganisation always seems to strike at the World Cup. In 2014, the Ghanaian team refused to train and were actually contemplating going on strike before their match against Portugal unless they received their bonuses. It took the personal intervention of President John Mahama Dramani, who ensured that the players received their money - in cash. The players did not trust their officials to bank it for them, so the cash (all \$3 million of it) was put on a chartered flight to Brazil and delivered to the players in a police convoy. Later, Ghana's star midfielders, Kevin-Prince Boateng and Sulley Muntari, who had shone so brightly in 2010, were kicked out of the squad for "vulgar verbal insults." Cameroon also threatened to go on strike at the same World Cup and duly delivered another bizarre World Cup moment - [Alex Song's bizarre elbow on Croatia's Mario Mandžukić](#). Nigeria went on strike and boycotted training too, and despite their woes, they made it to the last 16.

Which begs the question: why always Africa?

Endemic corruption is a way of life in Africa, and this extends to football. The sums of money in football make it a particularly lucrative feeding trough: during the 2011-2014 financial cycle, FIFA

gave each member association an extraordinary Financial Assistance Programme (FAP) payment of US \$ 1,050,000. Such sums in the hands of local football officials find more convenient uses. A week before the start of the 2018 World Cup, Ghana's FA President, Kwesi Nyantakyi, was implicated in a corruption expose by Ghanaian journalist Anas. He has since resigned. Aden Range Marwa, a Kenyan assistant referee who was due to officiate at the 2018 World Cup, was also netted in the sting for allegedly taking a bribe of \$600.

Poor youth development also plays a key role in Africa's underperformance at World Cup. This is a direct result of poor investment in coaching and infrastructure. African teams are usually powerhouses at under-17 and under-20 level - Nigeria and Ghana have won FIFA tournaments several times. Football at the Olympic games are considered an under-23 event. Nigeria won the gold in the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, Cameroon followed suit in Sydney 2000. However, there doesn't seem to be a clear transition for most of the youngsters into the main national team. Take the 2005 U-20 final between Nigeria and Argentina: only John Obi Mikel can be said to have had a successful career. The Argentine side, on the other hand, had Lionel Messi, Sergio Aguero, Pablo Zabaleta, Ezequiel Garay and Lucas Biglia, who are bona fide global superstars today. Here's another interesting statistic, Nigeria won the U-17 World Cup, beating Spain in the final. None of the Nigerian players have been capped to date. That Spain side had David de Gea in goal. Only Ghana's U-20 side of 2009 seems to buck the trend - some of the youngsters formed part of the successful 2010 squad.

Another reason could be the perception that sport should not be taken seriously in Africa; it is usually a means to pass time or a political tool. This is why you can have a whole Sports Principal Secretary claiming that Kenya was ready to host the African Nations Championship (CHAN) because "we had the best hotels and roads, the only thing we lacked were the stadiums." This attitude is hard to eradicate and shows up at the most inopportune moments. Sven-Goran Eriksson, a former England manager, was appointed as Cote d'Ivoire manager for the 2010 World Cup. Eriksson was [appalled by the general disorganisation surrounding the preparations](#). An hour before a warm-up game in Switzerland, the players had no kit. One of the players couldn't play because the kitman forgot his boots at the hotel. His captain, Didier Drogba, fresh from winning the Double with Chelsea that season, was not surprised. "Sven, it's Africa. It's like this."

Which brings us to another question: why do African teams always prefer foreign coaches? Most African teams that make it seem to have foreign coaches. Of the African teams participating in the 2018 World Cup - only Tunisia (Nabil Maâloul) and Senegal (Aliou Cisse - captain of the 2002 Senegal side) are local. The perception by our football administrators, is that African coaches do not seem to know what they are doing. Yet, there are instances which prove that, with the right support, local coaches can hold their own. Egypt's Pharaohs were led to three consecutive African Cup of Nations (AFCON) titles in 2006, 2008 and 2010. Stephen Keshi, the legendary Nigerian defender, won the 2013 AFCON and reached the last 16 of the 2014 World Cup with the Super Eagles. Kenya qualified for the 2004 AFCON under a local coach, Jacob "Ghost" Mulee. Kenya achieved its highest ever FIFA ranking, 68th, under a local coach, Francis Kimanzi. This is another interesting fact for you - to date, no foreign coach has ever won a World Cup.

The story of African football is about triumph in the face of adversity.

Some of the most memorable moments in World Cup history have been by African teams. Can you forget Ghana in 2010, who carried Africa's torch brightly in 2010 in Africa's World Cup? But before Ghana, there was a Cameroon at Italia '90 with the iconic Roger Milla celebratory jigs at the corner flag during Italia '90. Those were *the* lasting moments of Italia '90 - neither Paul Gascoigne's tears

nor Toto Schillaci's prolific form for the home side came anywhere close. François Omam-Biyik's header at the San Siro against the world champions, Argentina, led by the captain, leader, legend and once-in-a-lifetime genius of Diego Maradona, was the biggest upset in World Cup history. This was bigger than the United States beating England 1-0 in 1950. Much bigger than West Germany beating the Magical Magyars of Hungary in the miracle of Berne. This was an African team, from you know, Africa. Beating Maradona's Argentina with nine men - two deserved red cards for playing typical "African" football). Roger Milla, all 38 years of him, was summoned by Paul Biya (he's still President to date) and in true African dictator fashion, ordered to play at that World Cup. Their preparations were shambolic- Cameroon's training camp was rocked with the usual complaints of allowances not being paid. Their goalkeeper, Joseph-Antoine Bell, was an egomaniacal divisive force.

And yet, they hung on, match by match and were merely a Gary Lineker penalty in extra time from doing the impossible - reaching the semi-final. The Indomitable Lions inspired a whole new generation of footballers, both in Africa and elsewhere - Bell was dropped for the relatively low-maintenance, Thomas N'kono, who had a superb tournament and inspired the legendary Gianluigi Buffon to become a goalkeeper. In fact, Buffon named his son, Thomas, after N'kono.

Do you remember Senegal following an eerily similar script in 2002? The Lions of Teranga, making their first appearance in the World Cup, humbled France - defending World and European champions in Seoul with Pape Bouba Diop scored the scrappiest of goals to cause yet another upset. A Henri Camara golden goal in extra time against Sweden took Senegal to the quarter-final against Turkey, where the Lions too, succumbed to a golden goal. Fate, it seems, had a touch of cruel irony.

The story of African football is about hope.

Despite all the challenges that football in Africa faces, never have I been more optimistic about its future. A lot of good things are happening: Nigeria's 2018 World Cup kit, manufactured by Nike, was sold out within three days of its launch; which goes to show that there is money to be made in the African game if things are done properly. Mohammed Salah, Liverpool's Egyptian King running down the wing, is one of those you-have-to-see-it-to-believe-it talents. He could potentially be the first African Ballon d'Or winner since George Weah, now President of Liberia.

Gianni Infantino has pledged to expand the World Cup further. The 2026 World Cup, to be held in the United States, Mexico and Canada, will have 48 teams, with Africa having 9 teams and Asia 6 - not a bad start to his presidency. He has also promised to end the culture of corruption at FIFA, but this is to be taken with a pinch of salt - after all, Blatter is still attending the 2018 World Cup as President Vladimir Putin's guest.

For youth development and a solid technical foundation, we can look to Germany and Belgium for assistance. These two nations rebooted their whole approach to youth development, investing in coaching and better facilities. Germany's squad which won the 2014 World Cup, demolishing home favourites Brazil 7-1 along the way, was the fruit of careful planning. England have caught the bug a bit too late, but they are catching up. All African countries should follow suit. Maybe we should do one of those benchmarking trips, with actual results.

Finally, we should get more organised and drop the "this is Africa" mentality. Oh, and stop the looting.

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