

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

A Continent's Beautiful Game

The 2024 Super Bowl featured an advertisement filmed in Ghana, encouraging African youth to aspire to American football stardom. This inclusion in the half-time show was strange, given how little interest American football enjoys on a continent where the real football (soccer in American lingo) functions as a tool of national cohesion, leisure, and work. In fact, hours before the Super Bowl commenced in Nevada that Sunday, the final match of the 2024 African Cup of Nations (AFCON), which had brought together thirty-two teams from across the continent, was underway in Abidjan. The match pitted Nigeria against the host country (and eventual winner) Côte d'Ivoire in a culminating event that radiated the preeminence of football as Africa's "beautiful game," while also offering a productive site for articulating the aspirations and disappointments of peoples across the continent.

Benedict Anderson's claim of national formation as the product of an imagined community arguably finds its ultimate expression in the patriotic disposition of football across Africa. As Peter Alegi observes, "By 1960, football was certainly deeply rooted in urban African popular culture, [providing] a rare form of 'national culture' in postcolonial Africa." New African nations "staged matches as part of their independence celebrations and asserted their full membership in the international community by joining FIFA" (2010:54). The rootedness of the sport in Africa and its standing as location of national culture were evident at this year's AFCON. Take Nigeria and South Africa, for example. Both countries have been plagued with worsening economic conditions (marked by rampant inflation, heightened insecurity, and infrastructural dilapidation) resulting in denunciations of the ruling elite and scrutiny of the idea of the nation itself. It is a testament to football's mobilizing power that the socioeconomic and political pressures confronting these two economic and cultural powerhouses (as other countries on the continent) were side-stepped as AFCON kicked off in Côte d'Ivoire. Both countries rallied behind their flags. Nigerians dribbled past their economic conditions and ethnic rivalries as they cheered the Super Eagles. The theoretical idea of "One Nigeria" was temporarily realized as the green and white jersey and flag mantled evidence of social dysfunction. South Africans would do the same, as critiques of load shedding and other aberrations of the post-apartheid state gave way to acclamations of the Bafana Bafana and the country they represent. As evidenced by the mood in the stadiums and commentary on social media, football's capacity for national suturing is not restricted to these two teams. Compatriots of winning teams celebrated their countries' successes as dejected fans mourned losses over the month-long duration of the games.

The football stadium was also the site of beautiful displays of culture—music, dance, fashion—symbolizing Africa’s richness and vitality. The tournament’s official song “Akwaba” by the Ivorian group Magic System—and featuring Mohamed Ramadan (Egypt) and Yemi Alade (Nigeria)—showcased the continent’s cultural heterogeneity: its music, food, fashion. The pan-African celebratory song left room for national and local distinctions, with country colors on display in addition to landmarks, languages, and other identificatory vectors. In its adumbration of sights and sounds from across the continent, the song elevates Africa’s infrastructural achievements as it calls upon the audience to imagine a glorious future for the continent. The exuberant movement and infectious joy as the Ivorian team and their supporters danced to compatriot Tam Sir’s hit song “Coup du Marteau” (Last Hammer Blow), following the country’s quarter-final surprise victory, offered another remarkable example of an athletic sport assuming the status of aesthetic sublime.

The beauty of the game, its national character, and pan-African inclination notwithstanding, AFCON surfaced fault lines across the continent. Following Nigeria’s semi-final victory against South Africa, Nigerians based in South Africa were warned on social media to be cautious in their celebrations. This warning must be understood within a context of xenophobic attacks against Nigerians in the Rainbow nation, even if nothing untoward would end up occurring. Social media was also the site of fascinating memes and commentaries during the tournament, some of them already analyzed by James Yékú (2024). One such post appeared following the Nigeria–South Africa match, a tweet by the Nigerian activist Aisha Yesufu: “Imagine instead of fielding Stanley Nwabali we decided to field a goalkeeper from the 80s because it is his turn.” The tweet interlaced Nigeria’s performance on the field with the off-field political space of the country, whose current president had campaigned on the mantra “emi lo kan” (it is my turn). Confirming Nwabali’s extraordinary goalkeeping performance as the outcome of a meritorious appointment, Yesufu indirectly excoriates the logic of political ascendancy in Nigeria, blaming it for the country’s dire straits. As Yesufu sees it, Nigeria’s success in the match—which enlivened a tired Nigerian population—offers a lesson for the political arena. Results are only achievable when merit underpins selection.

Observably, Yesufu’s post is also tinged with humor and wit, a characteristic of posts and banter across social media during AFCON. The analogy of “a goalkeeper from the 1980s” highlights not only the incompetence of the incumbent president but also his age and ill-health, which have been the subject of jokes and comedy skits. Also prevalent on social media were culinary jokes. The long-running Ghana–Nigeria jollof rice rivalry regained prominence during the tournament, even though the teams did not face each other. A meme that surfaced immediately following Nigeria’s loss to Côte d’Ivoire in the final deserves attention for capturing the entertaining and critical valences of AFCON:

No Grammy
No Afcon
No fuel

No light
 No president
 Somebody should check on Nigerians.

The repetitive “no” underscores Nigeria’s negative gaps, associated with the failures to attain both cultural distinction (Grammy and AFCON) and social infrastructure (fuel, electricity, and an effective president). As a sporting tournament, AFCON was a resounding success with excellent plays, pleasant surprises, quality infrastructure, positive fan behavior, and largely unbiased officiating; but football, as the festivity and discourse around AFCON shows, is more than a game in Africa; for Africans. It is also a mechanism for national cohesion, social critique, and entertainment. AFCON confirms that despite the NFL’s efforts to extend its dominance and exploitation of Black bodies to the African sphere with its Super Bowl ad, the real football remains the continent’s beautiful game.

In its beautiful renditions of the continent, AFCON maintained the typical focus on urban spaces across Africa, be it in the host country, or scenes from other participating nations highlighted in the media. But as the forum on “Rural Radicalisms” that begins this issue affirms, the rural domain remains a fascinating site for knowledge production, politics, and activism. The forum includes four articles and a foreword by guest editors Tatiana Carayannis, Michael Watts, Annalisa Bolin, and Koen Vlassenroot.

The first forum article is Zachariah Cherian Mampilly’s “Global Forces, Rural Radicalism, and the Dual Transformation of Urban and Rural Protest in Africa,” which argues for a shift in focus from the urban proletariat and middle classes to the (underrecognized) rural masses in thinking about political action and democratization in contemporary Africa. Mampilly observes that increased exploitation of rural resources (engendered by increased investments from Asian countries) has not only shifted Africa’s position within global capitalism but also given rise to new forms of contestation over land and resources, linking rural areas (and rural radicalism) more directly to the political economy of urban areas and thereby straining the distinction between the continent’s urban and rural spaces. The article draws on cases of rural mobilization in Tanzania and Sudan among other African countries to illustrate these movements and their effects.

The next two forum articles also grapple with the instability of the rural–urban divide. Tessa Laing and Sara Weschler’s “Rural Radicalism and the Tactic of Third-Party Leverage: How Acholi Peasants Drew a UN Agency into Their Struggle against Land-Grabbing by the Ugandan State” challenges the “bifurcation” of the urban and rural in its discussion of rural protest in Africa. The article examines the 2018 occupation of the compound of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN-OHCHR) in Gulu by Acholi peasants who had travelled over a hundred kilometers from the remote Apsa area to the urban center. The peasants, who sought the UN agency’s support in resisting forced evictions and land-grabbing by the Ugandan state, peacefully occupied the facility for thirty-five days, during which they were supported by urban

actors who supplied them with food and other necessities. Laing and Weschler discuss the limitations and outcomes of this protest. Despite its shortcomings, the occupation, they argue, “demonstrated the capacity of rural actors to draw on rural-urban ties and the tactic of ‘third-party leverage’ to imaginatively circumvent [the constraints presented by remote geographies].”

The next article in the forum, by Louisa Lombard and Gino Vlavonou, is titled “Radical Autochthony? Proprietary Political Discourse Among Elites and Peasants in the Anti-Balaka Armed Movement in the Central African Republic.” The authors “explore the changing contours of rural and urban, and peasant and elite life in CAR to situate and compare the preoccupations and reasons for mobilization of diverse sets of people.” Analyzing the narratives of adherents of Anti-Balaka, a movement by CAR autochthons seeking to resist perceived disrespect and dispossession by the country’s growing (foreign) Muslim population, Lombard and Vlavonou find that despite urban-rural connections, the positions of elite and peasant can be nonetheless distinct: whereas elite Anti-Balaka discourse prioritized respect on a geopolitical level, seeking institutional recognition and membership within the country’s political establishments, peasant adherents were more concerned with interpersonal civility and respect in their day-to-day lives.

The forum’s fourth and final article is Naomi Pendle and Deng Maror’s “Rural Radicalism in the Capital City: Pro-Government Militia and the Destruction of Safety in Juba, South Sudan.” Pendle and Maror examine the deployment of rurally recruited youth by the government of South Sudan as a means of defending the capital city against armed opposition forces. Despite their seeming conservative position as defenders of government interests, these rural recruits, Pendle and Maror argue, may be viewed through the lens of “rural radicalism,” which provides a means of understanding how their violence poses radical challenges to the political economy and political geographies of safety that have been dominant since the colonial era.

While not a part of the forum, Mohamed Sesay’s article “(Re)negotiating State Authority: How Hinterland Protests against Global Capital Impact the Mediating Role of Traditional Rulers in Postcolonial Sierra Leone,” like the forum articles, assesses the functioning and ramifications of mobilization on the continent. Sesay turns to Sierra Leone, where an influx of foreign capital from multinational agricultural and mining concerns has given rise to social grievances and protests in the countryside. His article examines three such protests against global capital in the hinterland, focusing on their impact on local power structures—in particular, the role of traditional chieftains, a vestige of indirect rule, as brokers between their constituents and the central government. Sesay argues that conflict-fueled mobilization enables constituents to form new coalitions or seek direct access to central powers, thereby disrupting existing political arrangements that locate traditional rulers in dominant positions as mediators and mechanisms of social control.

The issue’s next article is “The Mediation of Autocratic Regimes: How Local Officials Shaped Authoritarian Systems in Rwanda and Sudan” by Marie-Eve Desrosiers and Anne-Laure Mahé. Like Sesay’s, Desrosiers and Mahé’s article examines the place of intermediaries—in this case, the role of local functionaries

as mediators for authoritarian regimes. Noting that scholarship on local officials has tended to focus on strategies of self-enrichment as well as their part in gathering information, repressing the citizenry, or deflecting criticism in service of national authorities, the authors advocate a more comprehensive understanding of local functionaries, which sees these figures as more than mere reproducers of the system. Desrosiers and Mahé argue that in fact, the role of functionaries in translating and representing authoritarianism “entail[s] forms of local bifurcations that ultimately create alternative, if not competitive, political realities.” Thus, the authors conclude, while functionaries fulfil expectation by sustaining the reach and resilience of authoritarianism, they often complicate regime demands as they cater to local power dynamics and interests of their constituents.

In the issue’s final article, “‘These Somalis Are Not Somalis’: Cup of Art Italian Coffeehouse, Authentic Identities, and Belonging in Hargeisa, Somaliland,” Yusuf Serunkuma tackles questions of identity and authenticity in postcolonial Africa, as evinced in the contestations around a “performatively Western-inspired” coffeehouse in Hargeisa, Somaliland. Examining the “rebel life and legacy” of the titular coffeehouse, whose reference to Italy (among other aspects of its running) troubled conceptions of tradition and authenticity founded on a rejection of supposed Western sensibilities, Serunkuma discusses the problematics that underlie and emerge from the discourse of authenticity. The author ends on a note of caution: “The political-cultural project of forcefully silencing the fruits of contact through claims of protecting authenticity,” he surmises, “risks engendering extremism and internecine conflict.”

The issue’s scholarly review essay, on “Crime and Policing in Africa,” is by Elizabete Albernaz, who discusses four books that grapple with the interconnectedness of crime and policing as components of social life and statecraft. A trove of book and film reviews follows Albernaz’s essay and wraps up the issue.

References

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