

Football as a Medium for Minority Identity Expression and Political Platform in Kenya

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Abstract

Association football was introduced by the colonialists in Kenya and has grown to become the national sport. The sport developed along regional and ethnic lines thereby growing deeper roots among the Luhya, Luo and Mijikenda. Introduction of taxes by colonial authorities forced the males to move to cities, and their vicinities, in search of employment. People, especially the Luhya and Luo, relocated to cities where they embraced football as a recreational and later as a competitive sport. The encouragement by the colonial government for communities to form welfare associations ironically opened doors for ethnic-based team formation as well as an avenue for political expression. It is also clear that the various post-independent governments have in a way utilized politicians to intervene in football matters and in the process encouraged others with political ambitions to seek leadership at club and federation levels. It is also apparent that unlike other presidents, Arap Moi, whose background was that of a primary school teacher, seemed to have recognized, embraced and weaponized the popularity of soccer to advance and promote his political ideology. It is arguable that throughout the postcolonial period, football has been used as a political tool for Kenyan political leaders to strive towards building a sense of Kenyan identity on the back of the national team and the popularity of the sport.

Keywords: association football, ethnicity, minority, national identity, political platform, Kenya

Introduction

Kenya is a country that has a good reputation earned through her sportsmen and women, especially the athletes in middle- and long-distance running (Njororai, 2004, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2016). However, it is association football (soccer) that is considered the favorite national sport (Nasong'o, 2022; Njororai 2003, 2009, 2016, 2017, 2019; Siegelman, 2018). Although the game's popularity cuts across the various ethnic and social classes, the level of development has varied according to geographical and therefore ethnic spaces. The country's ethnic composition, geographical/ regional distribution and colonization combined to influence the establishment and development of the sport. Regarding ethnicity, Kenya's estimated population of 56,435,996 (Worldometer, 2022) comprises 42 ethnic groups with the dominant ones being Kikuyu 17.1%, Luhya 14.3%, Kalenjin 13.4%, Luo 10.7%, Kamba 9.8%, Somali 5.8%, Kisii 5.7%, Mijikenda 5.2%, Meru 4.2%, Maasai 2.5%, Turkana 2.1%, other Africans 8.2%, non-African 1% (Asian, European and Arab) (Kamer, 2022). Nearly all Kenyans are black Africans,

divided into about 42 ethnic groups belonging to three linguistic families: the Bantu, the Cushitic and the Nilotic. Language is a major characteristic of ethnic identity in Kenya as it influences the socio-political environment especially in terms of political and economic power. In a country that is divided on ethnic lines and constantly politically charged in pursuit of political power, language via ethnicity can mean access to a job or an opportunity (Bloomfield, 2010). It is also through language that one's closeness to power is determined. Bantu-speaking Kenyans are divided into three different groups: the western group (Luhya, Kisii and Kuria); the central or highlands group (including the Kikuyu, the Kamba and other subgroups), and the coastal Bantu (Mijikenda). Among Kenya's Nilotic speakers, the major groups are the River-Lake or Western group (Luo), the Highlands or Southern group (Kalenjin), and the Plains or Eastern group (Maasai). The Cushitic-speaking groups include the Oromo and the Somali. The Kikuyu are Kenya's largest ethnic group and have utilized their numeric advantage to dominate the political and economic life in the country (Bloomfield, 2010; Njororai, 2009; Sobania, 2003).

The fragmentation of Kenya into different ethnic, as well as geographical blocks, was accentuated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the British moved in to colonize the country. Their strategy of divide and rule was evident as they solidified ethnic identities among Kenya's people (Njororai, 2009). Colonial administrators associated ethnic groups with specific areas of the country by designating zones where only people with a particular ethnic identity could reside. This pattern of ethnically based settlement and regionalism continued to persist in Kenya post-independence in 1963, even though economic and political development increased mobility and urbanization among the country's inhabitants. The majority of Kikuyu live in the central highlands previously called Central province as well as central parts of the Rift Valley; the majority of Luhya live in western region with others in northwestern parts of the former Rift Valley province; the Luo live in what was Nyanza province which is to the southwestern part of Kenya; the majority of Kamba live on the lower side of the former eastern province, and the majority of Kalenjin reside in what was the Rift Valley province of the country. Ethnicity was a vital instrument of divide and rule over the indigenous people by the colonial power and the same tactics were an important factor in Kenyan politics as well as the evolution of the sport of football and its management in the country. Although Kenya's official languages are English and Swahili, sport can indeed be considered as one of the languages used extensively to promote national unity and identity (Siegelman, 2018). The love of sport in Kenya, especially football, transcends the ethnic divisions and language differences. Apart from English and Kiswahili, many Kenyans also speak an ethnic language, making for considerable linguistic diversity within the country. It is therefore common for many Kenyans to show mastery of at least three languages: the language of their ethnic group, Swahili and English, and in their daily conversations, they switch from one language to the other with ease. According to Njororai (2009), the social structure that evolved in Kenya during the colonial time emphasized race and class. Colonialism entailed White people dominating Blacks given the power differential and social structure. This unequal relationship was reinforced

through segregation of the races and, within the Black African population, through various ethnic groups. Within each ethnic group, status was determined largely by wealth, gender and age. After Kenya gained independence in 1963, race ceased to be an important indicator of social status, but wealth, gender and ethnic identity remained significant (Njororai, 2009). Today, several of Kenya's problems result from disparities in wealth. These problems include pervasive urban and rural poverty, overcrowded and substandard housing in urban areas, and a relatively high rate of unemployment. In the 1990s and in the 2007 post-election violence, the country witnessed clashes between ethnic groups, particularly between Kalenjin and Kikuyu peoples in the then Rift Valley province of Kenya. These two ethnic groups are to date the only ones to have produced a president for the country including Jomo Kenyatta, Mwai Kibaki, Uhuru Kenyatta (Kikuyu); Daniel Arap Moi and William Ruto (Kalenjin). Hence the clashes between them have had a lot to do with political incitement and repossession of land (Bloomfield, 2010).

The foregoing discussion on colonialism, ethnic diversity and political leadership in Kenya provides a background to delve into football as a medium for minority identity expression as well as a platform for political rivalry and aspirations in Kenya.

Regionalization, football and identity

The development of football in Kenya reflects the minority and regional orientation versus the dominant political class who had no time for the sport in its formative years (Njororai, 2009). However, association football has an enduring mass appeal that cuts across ethnic, regional as well as class lines. This passion for the sport, which is not unique to Kenya, makes it an attractive asset not just for the players and fans, but also the aspiring as well as the established political class. Football scholars have pointed to the widespread and popular nature of football across the globe (Alegi, 2004, 2010; Ben-Porat, 2001; Bloomfield, 2010; Darby, 2000, 2002, 2005; Foer, 2006; Hawkey, 2009; Murray, 1998; Njororai, 2009, 2014, 2019). It is this mass appeal to the people especially in Africa that upon gaining independence, each state rushed to affiliate with the Federation of International Football Associations (FIFA).

According to Darby (2002), since FIFA's inception in 1904, the game of association football has taken on a universal significance and appeal. He argues that FIFA has more affiliates than the United Nations and most of the world's population takes a greater interest in the former than the latter. This demonstrates that football is a universal sport that is followed passionately by people from diverse backgrounds, nationalities and social classes. Unlike other sports like golf, rugby, cricket, polo, swimming, tennis, etc., that were also introduced by the colonialists, association football gained much popularity in Kenya because it appealed to people of all socio-economic classes and cultures (Mazrui, 1986). Kenyan fans are known to be very passionate about international football as well as their favorite local teams especially the national team, Harambee Stars. Important matches involving the national team always attract crowds of close to 60,000, with millions more watching on television (Bloomfield, 2010). In the villages and urban areas, children can be seen playing with bundles of rags (fondly referred to as 'Lifundo' in Luhya and 'Ajwala' in Dholuo). These are improvised balls made from clothing, paper and wrapped tightly in a polythene paper and reinforced by a sisal string all around to form a mesh like appearance. When nicely done, the improvised ball can bounce and can withstand different weather conditions. The improvised ball is slightly larger than a tennis ball and is useful in the initial mastery of dribbling, juggling, control and kicking skills, which are fundamental in the technical evolution of a football player. People in the villages monitor association football via radios to know the latest football news nationally and across the globe (Njororai, 2019).

Since inception, the Football Kenya Federation Premier League drew most teams from Nairobi (the capital city), Nyanza, western, central, central rift valley and coast provinces and is played all year round. The premier division consisted of 20 teams for a long time, but FIFA insisted that the country reduce the teams to 16 to enhance competitiveness, scheduling and marketability. However, the local administrators, out of political prudence, settled on 18 teams to date. Each year two teams are promoted from the Nationwide League to the Premier League while the two teams with the worst record in the premier league

are relegated. The 2021/22 Premier League teams and their geographical locations include: AFC Leopards, Nairobi; Bandari, Mombasa; Bidco United, Thika; Gor Mahia, Nairobi; Homeboyz, Kakamega; Kariobangi Sharks, Nairobi; KCB, Nairobi; Mathare United, Nairobi; Nairobi City Stars, Nairobi; Nzoia Sugar, Bungoma; Posta Rangers, Nairobi; Sofapaka, Nairobi; Tusker FC, Nairobi; Ulinzi Stars, Nakuru (based in Nairobi but play home matches in Nakuru); Vihiga United, Vihiga; Wazito FC, Nairobi; Police, Nairobi; and Talanta, Nairobi. The geographical locations for the teams show that 12 teams (13 if Ulinzi is included) are based in Nairobi, and one each in Bungoma, Kakamega, Mombasa, Nakuru, Thika, and Vihiga. This shows that 66.7 percent of Premier league football is played in Nairobi only (National Football Teams, 2022).

The League winners from the inception of the league to the present reveal the dominance by teams whose player identity is rooted in Luhya (AFC Leopards formerly Abaluhya United FC) and Luo (Gor Mahia) ethnic groups. The latter has won 19 league titles, while AFC Leopards has won 12. Other winners are Tusker (13), Ulinzi (4), Luo Union (2), Oserian (2), Nakuru All Stars (2), Sony (1), Utalii (1), Feisal (1), Sony Sugar (1), Sofapaka (1), and Mathare United (1) (Kenya League Winners, 2022; Stokkermans, 2023). Gor Mahia and AFC Leopards are traditionally Kenya's most popular club teams. Matches pitting the two regularly draw huge crowds. Supporters of both teams are among the most passionate in the world. The rivalry is so vicious that violence is a regular feature during and after their contests leading to loss of lives and property (Njororai, 2017, 2020). This passion for football and ethnic identity has its roots in colonial times when there was huge rivalry between Elgon or North Nyanza and Central Nyanza regions (Odinga, 2015). Elgon/North Nyanza comprised the Luhya, who eventually formed AFC Leopards, and Central and South Nyanza were occupied by the Luo who formed Gor Mahia. The passion for these two teams is therefore rooted in the long history of ethnic and nationalist football cultures in the country, where even old men reminisce about the days of their youth, when they were players themselves or ardent supporters of teams that may have long faded from the public imagination now,

either in terms of actual existence or, as is the case with some of the leading teams in the Kenya Premier League, remain only in name (Siundu, 2011). According to Waliaula and Okong'o (2009, 2014, 2020) and Njororai (2009, 2017), AFC Leopards, popularly called 'Ingwe' (Leopard) in many Luhya dialects, and Gor Mahia, or K'Ogalo, to its many fans, were formed to provide opportunities for socialization, and to harness ethnic Luhya and Luo identities and sensibilities, and indeed for a long time defined the ethnic pride of these communities. This trend continued into the 21st Century as local players hailing from the Luhya and Luo communities ventured into professional leagues in Europe including Dennis Oliech, Michael Olunga (Luo), McDonald Mariga and Victor Wanyama (Luhya) and became established fan favorites in the country (Otieno, 2020).

The passion for association football among the Luhya, Luo and Mijikenda is traced back to when the British settlers introduced the game at the beginning of the twentieth century (Njororai, 2009, 2017; Odinga, 2015). Kenyans naturally took to the sport due to the simplicity of its nature. The game was introduced by missionaries, administrators, teachers and farmers (Versi, 1986). The game of football, which is simple to follow and easy to play, was a vital instrument used by the British in their efforts to assert imperial hegemony and racist discrimination. The British often imposed over-arching constraints on the organization and control of the game in the country and elsewhere in the colonial territories with the aim of instilling western morals, values and discipline (Hokkanen, 2005; Njororai, 2009; Siegelman, 2018). The appropriation of football by the colonialists for political purposes seem to have continued into post-independent Kenya (Nasong'o, 2022; Siegelman, 2018). From the game's introduction, it was enthusiastically adapted by Kenyans of Luhya, Mijikenda and Luo origins (Odinga, 2015) even as the dominant Kikuyu ethnic group shunned the sport (Njororai, 2009, 2017). Competitive football, however, started in 1923 with the formation of the Arab and African Sports Association. This marked a major departure by the indigenous people to assert their authority in the management of sport. Regardless of the British motive for introducing football, the indigenous people enthusiastically appropriated the

game to promote not only their nationalistic identity but also engendered a regional and ethnic orientation by the time of independence (Njororai, 2009, 2017). One of the characteristic features of modernization which compelled the indigenous people, especially males, to move from villages to urban centers was the issue of taxation. The introduction of taxes, especially poll tax and hut tax, forced men to migrate to urban areas and plantation farms, owned by the settlers in the central highlands in search of jobs (Sobania, 2003). While away from their rural homes, the male youth found plenty of free time to engage in the exotic pastime of playing football leading to the formation of teams based on regional and ethnic origins as they had a common language. Football provided a medium that brought out the free expression of the working-class indigenous people. It was a freedom they found curtailed elsewhere including work and, in the community, where the colonial rules were strict (Straker, 2005). The difference in approach between the Whites and Blacks towards the game was captured by Straker (2005), who argued that Africans played the game for fun and were unwilling to be regimented by whites in training sessions. The Europeans, on the other hand, emphasized inculcation of values such as team spirit, perseverance and fair play. It is interesting to note that the approach to the game by Africans in the colonial period has persisted to the modern day where African players are accused of being naive tactically and playing to entertain rather than to win. To the African player, therefore, the joy of the game was, and continues to be, in the self-expression as opposed to the instrumental role of imposing discipline desired by the Europeans. Straker (2005) elaborates on this struggle over whether football constituted a vehicle for the extension of colonial power or whether it was a space where that very power would be revised, subverted or altogether suspended. According to him, the more practice of football generated distance and difference from the rhythms and clearly restrictive and more ambiguous laws of the colonial order, the more pleasure it could return to the African players and spectators. This was indeed a fascinating aspect of football in the colonial period and to some extent continues to play out in stadiums where unpopular politicians in government are jeered and opposition leaders given standing ovations. In Kenya,

Opposition leader, Raila Odinga has been a beneficiary of such recognition (Bloomfield, 2010). Thus, it is interesting that a rule, which governed sport, created and imported by Europeans became a means for Africans to create spaces in which the onerous powers of European imperialism were deflected (Straker, 2005).

Stadium as a medium for political dissent and political activism

The soccer stadium is a vital medium for expressing dissent and displeasure against the political class, administrative control and power (Bloomfield, 2010). Football is, therefore, the medium and symbol of resistance as well as freedom. The stadium remains the ideal site as there are no restrictions on self-expression. The large gatherings at the stadium are an alternative to the political rallies which are subject to intense security restrictions and vetting by agents of the state and the political class. Due to the emigration of the labor force into urban areas and the coffee plantations around Nairobi, a lot of the Luhya and Luo people found themselves playing the game in their free time. They formed teams based on their ethnic and even sub-ethnic groupings including Maragoli, Samia, Bukusu Brotherhood, among others. In the cities, football provided an avenue for freedom and identity. The balkanization of the teams on ethnic and sub-ethnic lines was tacitly supported and encouraged by the colonial government. The tacit colonial support was consistent with their imperialist strategy of divide, conquer and rule (Odinga, 2007). This meant that it was easier for the colonial government and her agents to govern when the indigenous people were divided rather than united. However, most local trade union leaders and emerging politicians identified with the teams by providing material support. For the indigenous politicians, such an association was critical in articulating not only their ethnic nationalism but also political activism against the imperialist Government and her discriminatory policies and practices.

Additionally, the colonial government, which did not encourage political parties, supported formation of ethnic-welfare associations such as Abaluhya and Luo Union of East Africa. These welfare associations eventually found space for

expression through the football clubs they sponsored. By the end of the colonial period in 1963 when the country gained independence, Kenya had already established a formal football structure at the national level. Kenya Football Association was formed in 1946 and actively promoted local competitions including the Remington Cup and participation by the national team in the Gossage Cup at the regional level (Nasong'o, 2022; Njororai, 2009). The formation of the national federation was the result of a joint initiative by the local football leaders and colonial settlers. This was in line with the goal of using football to help bridge the gaps between the English and their African subjects, and to bring Africans into line with English moral standards and social practices (Siegelman, 2018). Thus, it can be argued that the British introduced football as a medium of strategic cultural imperialism, which elicited enthusiastic acceptance by a wide majority of youth in school and urban areas and at the same time fostered newfound ethnic identity via team formations and nationalistic feeling towards the national team by the ordinary citizenry. Through the colonial policy and practice of divide and rule, and the political suppression of the day, football became an alternative avenue for ethnic identity, nationalism and resistance especially for the Luo and Luhya, who were encouraged by the colonialists. This colonial political strategy was therefore capitalized upon by prospective politicians to voice resistance and cement ethnic loyalty through football club formation (Njororai, 2009, 2017).

The minority question and football at independence

This essay approaches the definition of minority from an American dictionary's perspective. The dictionary meaning is: 'an ethnic, racial, religious or other group having a distinctive presence within a society; a group having little power or representation relative to other groups within a society'. The Penguin English Dictionary further defines 'minority' as the state of being the smaller of the two groups constituting a whole or a group of people who share common characteristics or interests, differing from those of most of a population. Related to the concept of minority is that of ethnicity. Kenya, as already pointed out, is a nation of many ethnic groupings each with a

distinct language and cultural practices. Ben-Porat (2001) has extensively explained the place of ethnicity in football. This article borrows heavily from Ben-Porat to illustrate the place of ethnicity and the perceived notion of minority in Kenyan football. Ben-Porat argues that the entire debate on ethnicity is epitomized by the demarcation of inter-ethnic borders or by an ongoing struggle between at least two ethnic groups to specify their social territory. There is thus a clear distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Ben-Porat (2001) advances a four-point clarification of the concept of ethnicity. It is quite reasonable to suggest that the struggle on ethnic boundaries may, in a certain historical context, be intertwined with elements of nationality. Ethnicity exists in a state of competition. This is an essential element in any definition of ethnicity. In practice, this competition occurs between definite ethnic categories over issues such as neighborhoods, economic resources and political hegemony. Competition can be of consensual or conflictual mode. Also, inter-ethnic relationship is made concrete by dependency relations behind which lurks a tension that is a constant potential for conflict. In this set up, there is a persistent process of consensus-construction by compliance or exploitation. There is also a situation where inter-ethnic boundaries are marked by distinctive identification of each group marked by a whole set of symbols, signs and practices. In the context of Kenyan football, the point of departure that is relevant is that of ethnicity in the face of competition and inter-ethnic boundaries marked by administrative identification of each group, which again is marked by a set of symbols, signs and practices. For a long time, the Luhya and Luo have competed as to who ranks next to the dominant Kikuyu as the most populous group. Additionally, the fact that the dominating club sides are either Luhya or Luo in ethnic affiliation brings out the obvious contest as to who is the dominant force in football. Thus, to further assert themselves, there is the added distinctive trait of belonging and identifying with either AFC Leopards for the Abaluhya or that of Gor Mahia which represents the Luo ethnic group (Njororai, 2009, 2017; Waliaula & Okong’o, 2014, 2020).

The struggle for football dominance has sociological significance. Indeed, sport is considered

by many as an arena of inter-cultural struggle. Sports competition pits ‘us’ against ‘them’ and participates in the reproduction of boundary demarcations based on factors such as ethnicity, religion, nationality and even color. Through sports competition, certain collective identities are reinforced. According to Ben-Porat (2001) soccer is the most popular spectator sport in the world and it incorporates some characteristics that can be used for purposes other than mere sport, such as, maintaining and reproducing ethnic-national identification within a society in which ethnicity, nationalism and citizenship do not fully converge. Some key assumptions include that of adaptation and assimilation on the one hand and that of protest and conflict on the other. According to the adaptation and assimilation assumption, ethnic minorities are highly willing to integrate by adopting the society’s values and certain practices which symbolize nativity. The assimilation adaptation assumption allows for both the togetherness and the loneliness. By participating and proving their excellence in football, the Luhya and Luo became assimilated and adapted to the colonial modernization strategy. However, through the formation of ethnic football clubs, they managed to sustain their autonomy. The second assumption relates to protest and conflict. Football is an instrument for protest and for maintaining a particular ethnic identity. According to Ben-Porat (2001), ethnic based soccer clubs are an effective means of maintaining a voluntary seclusion which keeps the ethnic group together. Being a worldwide phenomenon, the existence of such clubs represents something profound in the social system such as class structure or ethnic division of labor. Thus, one can argue that ethnic soccer clubs are a symptom of a cultural or political division of labor. Furthermore, this division reproduces the inter-ethnic boundaries; different social identities are formulated and reproduced on the opposite sides of these boundaries.

Given the above scenario which conceptualizes ethnic football teams as a medium of identity and integration, football in Kenya took on a different dimension by the early 1960s. The formation of the teams was rooted in ethnic identity and even when each sub-ethnic group could not bring about the desired impact, a merger of sub-ethnic groupings was instigated to form one solid team especially in the case

of Luhya and Luo ethnic groups. The Luhya, Luo and the Mijikenda share characteristics that place them in the minority class. These characteristics include the following:

- They all hail from the outlying parts of the country far removed from the capital city and the seat of political and economic power which is dominated by the Kikuyu ethnic group and foreign-owned industries.
- They are less in numbers compared to the numerically strong Kikuyu.
- They have not held the reins of power and therefore perceive themselves to be marginalized politically and economically during the colonial period as well as in the successive independent governments of Jomo Kenyatta, Daniel Arap Moi, Mwai Kibaki, Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto.
- They all had dynamic and vigorous physical activity-based recreational lifestyle before the onset of colonization and hence were best suited for the athleticism demanded by the game of soccer which explains their adoption and subsequent dominance of the game (Njororai, 2017).

Whereas the Luhya and the Mijikenda originally belonged to the Kenya African Democratic Union, which was a party for minority ethnic groups just before and immediately after independence, the Luo teamed up with the Kikuyu in Kenya African National Union which formed the first government but the Luo were soon marginalized when the Vice President, Oginga Odinga, a Luo, resigned from the government over ideological differences with President Jomo Kenyatta and formed a new political party but was subsequently put under house arrest.

Post-independent association football and politics

Thabet (2022) avers that football, the beautiful game, is for many supporters a source of joy and happiness and an escape from social and economic challenges. She asserts that football managers, players, and even workers in sports media tend to welcome the intervention of political leaders in the game for their own purposes. For most political leaders, they use the major achievements of the football teams to raise the spirit of national pride and to glorify or protest the

reigning political regime. In a country like Egypt, the football fans have used football to fuel opposition against the political system by leading popular demonstrations in the streets against corruption and bad governance and spreading violence, instability, and political unrest in the country. In the Kenyan context, politicians and political aspirants have often used football and the clubs to build and assert themselves in the national politics of the day. At the Pan-African level, Kwame Nkrumah, harnessed the power of football to push for the boycott of the 1966 world cup by African countries in order to bring about change in FIFA (Darby, 2002; Njororai, 2019, 2023). At the domestic level, Nkrumah recognized the capacity of sport to help imbue the local population with a sense of nationhood that could potentially transcend parochial ethnic loyalties and bind them to common social, economic, and political objectives (Darby, 2002; Njororai, 2019, 2023). For Nkrumah, football had a central role in mobilizing the youth of the country around a common identity, and he recognized its potential as a barometer of international standing for newly independent African nations. Taking on FIFA and by extension UEFA's hardliners therefore gave Africa an opportunity to rally together for a common cause against the former colonizers (Njororai, 2023).

The association between football and politics in Kenya was demonstrated at the celebration of independence when Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first president, used soccer as a nation-building tool, to create a pan-ethnic Kenyan national identity. On December 7, 1963, five days before Kenya was officially declared an independent state, Kenyatta organized the Kenya Independence Tournament, also known as the Uhuru (Freedom) Cup where Kenya beat Tanganyika, tied Uganda, and beat Scotland Amateurs, a team composed of Scottish expatriates, to finish first in the tournament, and set up what was supposed to be a great future for Kenyan football (Cruickshank & Morrison, 2013; Siegelman, 2018). In this tournament, Kenyan nationhood was tied directly to Kenyan soccer and the national team. The tournament celebrated political freedom, yes, but also allowed citizens to come together around a sense of 'Kenyan-ness' as the team played and beat some of their key local rivals, and even a team composed of

citizens of the very nation that had colonized them. Of significance was the naming of the national team as “Harambee” Stars. Harambee, which was Jomo Kenyatta’s favorite slogan for rallying Kenyans together is a Swahili word meaning, “pulling together”. The apt naming of the national team using the national slogan was a clear manifestation of using football, and the national team, to build national solidarity and identity. It was apparent to Kenyatta that sports play an important role in bringing together all ethnicities and races. The more people are brought together in such common pursuits, the more they would feel they are members of a single nation (Siegelman, 2018). Interestingly and reflective of the diversity of the ethnic make-up of the new nation, Kenya’s team had white players in it, as well as others from the Luo, Luhya and Mijikenda communities (Cruickshank & Morrison, 2013). The desire to form a national team that is diverse, and representative of the whole nation continues to plague the national team selection to date as merit is at times compromised to accommodate representation. In the 1970s and 1980s, when Gor Mahia and AFC Leopards’ rivalry was at its peak, the national coaches had to balance the Luo and Luhya ethnic representation carefully to avoid public disapproval. Utilization of sport to promote national unity and identity filtered down to all government units such as the army, police, prisons, financial institutions, sugar companies, firms and corporations as they were encouraged to form sports teams including sponsoring football clubs. This was a colonial legacy that had used football to bridge the gaps between European workers and the indigenous people especially in the uniformed forces such as the Kenya African Rifles. These institutions, corporations and companies were the ones that offered jobs to players who otherwise played for AFC Leopards and Gor Mahia or unless they themselves had competitive teams in the league.

The enthusiasm over Kenya’s victory during the Independence celebrations and the positive prospects of the new nation and its football, was tainted two years later when Ghana’s national team, Black Stars, the African champions at the time, hammered the hosts 13-2 in a match to mark Independence Day. The historic match was graced by the presence of President Jomo Kenyatta. By halftime,

the Black Stars were leading by six goals to one for Harambee Stars. A disappointed President Kenyatta left the stadium at halftime and is reported to never have watched another soccer game until his passing in August 1978 (Kenyapagenet, 2023; Nasong’o, 2022). The massive loss by Harambee Stars could be attributed to the relative inexperience of Kenyan players in international football, poor team selection, injuries to key players and the haphazard preparations leading to the match including a change in the coaching ranks (Nene, 2015).

Unlike Kenyatta, whose association with football was at the national team level albeit briefly, the political rivalry between Jaramogi Oginga Odinga and Tom Mboya in the mid-1960s revolved around ethnic loyalty among the Luo. The clash between two football teams, Luo Union and Luo Sports, for access to the best Luo players reflected a bigger clash between Kenyatta’s first vice president, Odinga, and a rising political rival, Tom Mboya, over representation of Luo voters (Nasong’o, 2022; Nyanjom, 2010). Odinga backed Luo Union, while Mboya backed Luo Sports Club, and while the two clubs eventually merged to form Gor Mahia in 1968, this conflict is emblematic of a broader trend in Kenyan soccer towards politicization and the translation of political rivalries into sports contests (Siegelman, 2018). This pattern of politicians dipping their hands into football continued with Daniel Arap Moi, the second president of Kenya. In order to prevent divisions within the Kenyan identity and KANU itself, and as a policy of ethnic unity, Moi forced Gor Mahia and the then Abaluhya Football Club (representing Luhya ethnic group) to change their names, becoming Gulf Olympic Rangers (GOR) and AFC Leopards, respectively. Not only were such ethnic divisions problematic, but soccer supporters provided a deep base of support that could have allowed politicians from such popular teams to resist and contest Moi’s hold on power (Siegelman, 2018). While the AFC Leopards’ name-change stuck, Gor Mahia retained its original name through the intercession of a prominent Luo minister, the late Robert Ouko (Nyanjom, 2010).

The political tussling at club level and its national political implications filtered into the leadership of the Football Association and the management of football affairs in the country.

Bloomfield (2010) quotes a veteran sports Journalist, Gishinga Njoroge, who said thus: “There is more intrigue and more politics and more problems in Kenyan soccer than there is in Kenyan politics” (p.107) and these sentiments may not be completely off the mark. The naming of the federation has changed over the years due to the political feuds between rival groups and the political support from the Government of the time. For example, Kenya Football Association (KFA), registered in 1946, remained the soccer governing body in Kenya until 1975 when it was replaced by Kenya Football Federation (KFF) formed by Kenneth Matiba. KFF lasted until 2007 when it was replaced by Football Kenya Limited (FKL), which was disbanded in 2011 when it ceased being a limited liability company. It was replaced by the current Football Kenya Federation (FKF) (Bloomfield, 2010; Nasong’o, 2022; Nyanjom, 2010). Political rivalry and competition have characterized this constant change of name and the formation of rival bodies. Having been defeated by Williams Ngaah in the KFA elections of 1973, Kenneth Matiba decided to form KFF to which many of the teams subscribed and became the governing body in 1975. In 2007, a group of soccer administrators in the country decided to form a rival body to KFF. This is how FKL was formed and was immediately recognized by FIFA as the soccer governing body in Kenya. For some time, the two organizations operated simultaneously with KFF going to court against FKL but lost the case and the courts asked FIFA to continue recognizing FKL, which was disbanded in 2011 to pave way for the current FKF (Nasong’o, 2022; Nyanjom, 2010). However, the marriage of politics and football management in Kenya happened right at the birth of the nation of Kenya and the launching of a revamped nationwide Kenya Football Association. The first national Chairman of the KFA was Isaac Lugonzo who quit in 1964 to enter politics and became Nairobi mayor. This set the stage for ensuing political rivalry for football administration to be used as a steppingstone to political office (Nyanjom, 2010). Lugonzo was replaced by Jonathan Kasyoka from 1964 to 1968. Kasyoka’s committee was disbanded in 1968 by the then Minister for Cooperatives and Social Services, Ronald Ngala, who appointed a caretaker committee led by a politician, Limuru Member of

Parliament, Jonathan Njenga, which remained in charge till 1970. In 1970, Martin Shikuku, an incumbent Member of Parliament for Butere, was elected Chairman of KFA. However, during his tenure, the politics of ethnic rivalry emerged as he was accused of favoring Abaluhya FC, from his Luhya ethnic group, and being overly punitive against Gor Mahia, dominated by the Luo. At one point, Shikuku expelled four Gor Mahia players from soccer as well as renowned referee, Ben Mwangi. With questions being raised in parliament about Shikuku’s alleged favoritism of Abaluhya FC (later renamed AFC Leopards SC), the Minister for Cooperatives and Social Services, Masinde Muliro dissolved Shikuku’s committee and appointed a caretaker committee led by Bill Martin as Chair, Joab Omino as Secretary, and H.Z. Ramogo as Treasurer. Note that Joab Omino was a retired Gor Mahia and national team player and later Chairman of KFF as well as Member of Parliament on an opposition FORD Kenya ticket when multiparty politics were restored in Kenya. Similarly, Kenneth Matiba, Chris Obure, Clement Gachanja, Peter Kenneth, and Alfred Sambu moved from FKF leadership into national competitive politics successfully as shown in Table 1 (Nasong’o, 2022; Nyanjom, 2010).

The list in Table 1 shows that most of the chairmen who have presided over the Football affairs in Kenya have either been in politics before they assumed their role or were first elected in FA before eventually contesting, be it successfully or unsuccessfully, for national political seats except for Nick Mwendwa, Mohamed Hatimy and Julius Ringera. It is also interesting that except in 2004 and 2021, whenever the Government dissolved the elected Football Federation officials, the new Caretaker office was often headed by a politician including Jonathan Njenga, Chris Obure, and Adams Karauri.

The presidency and football

Out of all the five presidents of Kenya including Jomo Kenyatta, Daniel Arap Moi, Mwai Kibaki, Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto, the one who really recognized and tried to harness the power of sport, including football, was Arap Moi. It is worth pointing out that his reign was the longest relative to other presidents and therefore his legacy was more

Table 1: Names and nature of appointment of Chairmen of Football Kenya Federation 1963 - 2022

Isaac Lugonzo Elected (founding member) 1963-1964	John Kasyoka Elected 1964-1968	Jonathan Njenga Appointed (Caretaker) 1968-1970
Martin Shikuku Elected 1970-1973	Bill Martin Appointed (Caretaker) 1973	Williams Ngaah Elected 1973-1974
Dan Owino Elected 1974-1975	Kenneth Matiba Elected (KFF not KFA) 1975-1978	Dan Owino Elected 1978-1979
Chris Obure Appointed (Caretaker) 1979-1980	Clement Gachanja Elected 1980-1984	Joab Omino Elected and dissolved, 1984-1991
Adams Karauri Appointed (Caretaker) 1992-1993	Joab Omino Elected 1993-1996	Peter Kenneth Elected 1996-2000
Maina Kariuki Elected 2001-2004	Prof. Mike Boit (Stakeholder's Transition Committee and Kipchoge Keino's Normalization Interim Committee (both appointed) 2004	Alfred Sambu Elected and dissolved, 2005-2006
Mohamed Hatimy FIFA appointed and elected (FKL) 2006-2011	Sam Nyamweya Elected (FKF) 2011-2015	Nick Mwendwa Elected 2016-2021, 2022 - Current
Justice Julius Ringera, Appointed 2021-2022		

Source: Nasong'o, 2022 and other sources by the author

solidified. During his regime (1978 – 2002), Kenya experienced both the peak and the low moments of football in the country. The major successes were in the East and Central African competitions where the national team and club sides won several titles; at the Pan-African level where Gor Mahia won the Africa Cup of Cup Winners tournament in 1989 and were runners-up in 1979; Harambee Stars were runners-up to Egypt in the 1987 4th All Africa Games football tournament, and Tusker were losing finalists in the 1994 Africa CAF competition tournament.

Other signature moments that reveal the commitment of Arap Moi to the value and power of sport including football include his directive that physical education be made a compulsory teaching subject in all teacher education programs in 1980; the directive to establish the position of Commissioner of Sport in 1989; and his single handed push for Kenya to host the 4th All Africa Games in Nairobi; and during his time, he invested in the construction of Nyayo National and the Moi International Sports Center, Kasarani Sports Complexes in Nairobi. He also hosted

national and club sides at State house, whenever they won competitions and even rewarded teams monetarily. On several occasions he allocated land to Gor Mahia and AFC Leopards to construct club headquarters and training facilities, but this initiative did not yield fruits due to inexplicable government bureaucracy and sheer corruption. To date no one knows what happened to those allocations. It appears that football in Kenya, like other African countries as well as public sectors, is riddled with corruption and none of the Kenyan Presidents found a solution to it hence the frequent dissolution of the elected football associations. Other African countries have also suffered under the weight of corruption as FIFA, the parent organization, is also not immune from it (Njororai, 2019; Nyanjom, 2010). Despite the prevalence of corruption in the football sector in Kenya, and Africa as a whole, various African leaders tend to focus more on the popularity of the sport, which they use as a medium to enhance national cohesion.

Like Kwame Nkrumah, Arap Moi recognized

that football had a central role in mobilizing the citizens of the country around a common identity, and he recognized its potential as a barometer of international standing for an African nation (Darby, 2002; Njororai, 2023; Siegelman, 2018). Arap Moi, whose Nyayo philosophy emphasized the values of peace, love and unity, found football to be a great medium to propagate his ideology. Indeed, he rarely missed international matches hosted in Nairobi. He also left a legacy by building the Nyayo National Stadium and the Moi International Sports Center whose names are directly related to him personally and to his role as the President of Kenya.

To further consolidate his commitment to football, Moi personally sponsored the historic football association knock-out tournament which was re-christened Moi Golden Cup in the 1980s and it ran all the way until he exited from political power in 2002. The tournament is now renamed the President's Cup. On the other hand, other Presidents, including Jomo Kenyatta after the 1965 humiliation by Ghana, Mwai Kibaki and Uhuru Kenyatta, were relatively lukewarm towards football, whereas William Ruto has shown glimpses of harnessing the power of sport to promote a political agenda. Collectively, their rhetoric still pointed towards promoting the game. For example, Mwai Kibaki is quoted by Nyanjom (2010) to have asserted that:

My government also plans to take sports more seriously. Not only is it an important pastime but Kenyans are good at it. Success in sports changes the lives of many Kenyans every year. It gives us something to be proud of as a nation. It promotes healthy lifestyles. My government plans to deal with corruption and mismanagement in this sector. These trends negatively affect our athletes. They have undermined the standards of key sports like soccer. (p. 6)

Structurally, during Kibaki's reign the long-awaited Sports Act was discussed and approved in 2013 and he also went ahead and created a Ministry specifically for Sports. During Uhuru Kenyatta's time, this Sports Act had problematic implementation. Apart from the erratic implementation of the Sports Act, Uhuru Kenyatta will also go down on record as having presided at a time when Kenya was suspended from FIFA and CAF in 2021 leading to the country missing out on qualifying for major tournaments including the 2022 African Woman's Cup of Nations and the 2023

African Cup of Nations for the men. Previously, suspensions, such as 2006, led to quick resolution without the teams missing out on participation in international competitions. A President who realizes the significance of football in rallying a nation together would not allow such a suspension to remain unresolved for so long at the expense of the nation's players and citizenry. This lack of appreciation for football by Uhuru, compared to Arap Moi, could be due to the vast differences in their upbringing. The former, as a son of a President, and the latter as a peasant who rose from the ranks of a primary school teacher, have contrasting attitudes towards football and its significance in society.

President Moi also to some extent weaponized football to discredit his perceived political adversaries in the 1980s and 1990s. It was not lost on Moi that the Luhya, Luo, Kisii and Mijikenda were dominant in football at club and national federation levels. Coincidentally, the push for multiparty politics was fronted by a group of leaders from the Luhya, Luo and Mijikenda communities including formation of the first opposition grouping named Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD) in 1991. This national umbrella forum was led by Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, Phillip Gachoka, Ahmed Bamahariz, Salim Ndamwe, Masinde Muliro, George Nthenge and Martin Shikuku. At the same time, the FKF leadership was in the hands of a Luo (Joab Omino), Sammy Obingo (Luhya) and Nordin Taib (Coastal ancestry) and had successfully bid to host the 1996 Africa Cup of Nations for the first time in East and Central Africa. However, with political temperatures at their peak, President Moi's Government dragged its feet in upgrading the Mombasa Municipal Stadium to host some of the games forcing CAF to move the tournament to South Africa earning the country a two-year suspension from continental activities. This was a low moment in the history of Kenyan football. To many football lovers, the loss of hosting rights for AFCON were down to political reasons and not the lack of resources.

According to Siegelman (2018), association football is a political language, but also a political tool used by politicians like Odinga who want to use it to "employ many of our young people locally and abroad," (Odinga, 2015, p. viii) and others like former

star the late Joe Kadenge see it as a way to promote “social change in order to impart key values and principles that will help us achieve prosperity in general for this nation” (Nene, 2015, p. 300). Political leaders often hold rallies in football stadiums before games and elections as the game provides an open and ready base of supporters, essentially a captive audience. It allows politicians to associate themselves with a good in their life, with something their constituents are passionate about (Siegelman, 2018). Other trends that reveal the utilization of football for political purposes is routinely witnessed at national holidays when the highlight of the day, right from sub-counties to the national level, is a football match. All around the country aspiring and incumbent politicians routinely sponsor teams with balls, uniforms and provide trophies to be contested for in tournaments named after them during school holidays. It is also apparent that major political rallies are often held in stadia where the incumbents can proclaim their policies, while the opposition would use the same platform to voice their dissent against those in power.

Conclusion

Association football was introduced by the colonialists in Kenya where the game found an enthusiastic indigenous people of mostly Luhya, Luo and Mijikenda origins who quickly turned the sport into their own. The game found easy acceptance as it demands athletic abilities and movements, which found resonance with a well-established pattern of rigorous indigenous physical activity (Njororai, 2009). Additionally, the introduction of taxes by colonial authorities instigated a new migration pattern with males moving to cities to find employment. Within the cities, the need for social cohesion found football as an appropriate medium for people from varied ethnic groups to come together and play the game. The encouragement by the colonial government for communities to form welfare associations enabled prospective politicians to use the clubs and stadiums as avenues to express political dissent and voice their political aspirations. The freedom to form welfare associations encouraged ethnic-based team formation which characterized post-independent Kenya till the 1970s when corporate sponsored teams surfaced. The football success and dominance of the politically

marginalized Luhya and Luo in terms of political authority and geographical distance from the seat of power in Nairobi can therefore be analyzed in the light of a multiplicity of colonial legacies such as regionalization and urbanization, divide and rule as well as political and demographic status as minorities. Football was therefore an imperialist tool that the indigenous people adopted and appropriated to solidify their ethnic and national orientation. The social cohesion and identity that coalesced around the ethnic-based teams also provided a fertile ground for people with political aspirations to harness the passion in pursuit of elected leadership positions at national level. It is also clear that the various post-independent governments have in a way utilized politicians to intervene in football matters and in the process encouraged others with political ambitions to seek leadership at club and federation levels. It is also apparent that unlike other presidents, Arap Moi, whose background was that of a primary school teacher, seemed to have recognized, embraced and weaponized the popularity of association football to advance and promote his political ideology. President Ruto, who rose to political prominence by sponsoring grassroots football tournaments in his rural Uasin Gishu County, seems to prioritize football development by recommending the launch of an intercounty national tournament as well as mobilizing the East African countries of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania to bid as joint hosts of the 2027 AFCON tournament.

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