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Godwin Siundu <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Literature, University of Nairobi, Nairobi, Kenya

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### European football worlds and youth identifications in Kenya

Godwin Siundu\*

*Department of Literature, University of Nairobi, Nairobi, Kenya*

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This article examines the various ways in which the phenomenon of English football, beamed across the world via satellite television, provides a canvas upon which many Kenyan youth can confront their lived experiences and desired aspirations. Drawing on theoretical tools fashioned by discourses on identities – pan-Africanist and global – together with dynamics of youth and popular cultural productions, I demonstrate how football as a leisure activity allows the youths a chance to imagine themselves as being more than what they are in material and socio-economic terms. This, I hold, is part of their larger aspirations of assuming global and cosmopolitan identities.

**Keywords:** English football; satellite television; Kenyan youth; aspirations; identities

#### Introduction

In *Laduma!*, Peter Alegi describes how he was shocked, in 1993, when he realised that although football was a popular entertainment activity for many South Africans, ‘there were no scholarly books on this subject’ (2004, p. viii). This observation resonates clearly with the Kenyan situation which has a similar lacuna in scholarship on sports in general and football in particular. Yet, the popularity of this sport in the region and beyond is such that it has generated a set of popular cultures that connect with other advances in the construction and consumption of leisure, competing with film, music and other engagements. Indeed football can be used in many ways to bring to the surface other issues of concern to contemporary humanities and social science scholars who grapple with questions of how such activities can be viewed as narratives about issues of identity and identifications. Sporting activities like football can therefore be used to help tease out problematic matters such as citizenship, nationalism, ethnic and racial relationships, as well as masculine and feminine transformations in the light of discourses of globalisation and cosmopolitanism. With all these possibilities, it is inconceivable that there is very thin literature on what scholarship has been undertaken on football as a social activity.

This article is written as a modest effort at filling this gap. In it, I examine the various ways in which football shapes youth cultures in Western Kenya, which, like many parts of the country and the world, has been socialised into the phenomenon that is English football. I examine the role of televisual technology in the formation of Kenyan youths’ identifications with European trends in fashion, as well as a way of expressing individual aspirations for success. I ultimately demonstrate that apart from being a healthy leisure

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\*Email: godwin.siundu@uonbi.ac.ke

activity, European football beamed to local areas via satellite television also provides a space for the youths to imagine themselves in terms of masculine, class and pan-African identities.

I have organised this article along three planes of discussion, thus: previewing the field in which I describe the research area in terms of socio-economic attributes of the youth; football cultures as expression of youth aspirations; and football and the concern with masculine anxieties among the youth.

### **Previewing the research in a glocal context**

From October 2006 to February 2007, I interacted with youthful supporters of soccer teams playing in the European leagues, mostly in the English Premier.<sup>1</sup> I aimed at establishing the motives for the positions these supporters held in regard to the performance of those teams in the league standing, the reasons that led them to support 'their' teams, and what the whole phenomenon of European soccer meant to them. In addition, I asked them how they related among themselves as supporters of different teams, what attracted them to specific teams and not others, and what they thought were the most successful teams in European soccer. My informants were urbane, though inhabiting provincial townships of Mumias, Kakamega and Kisumu, all in Western Kenya, where this research was conducted. A brief description of the socio-economic nature of these towns is necessary in order to give an idea of the realities that frame the lives of the respondents.

The three towns, excepting Kisumu to a reasonable degree, are not more than advanced shopping centres in terms of physical infrastructure that would be found in more established Kenyan urban centres like Nairobi or Mombasa. With no theatres, movie halls or even music clubs, avenues for entertainment are severely limited to bars and nightclubs – with their accompanying hazards – as the dominant social places in these towns that none the less show aspirations of socio-economic advancement. The absence of such social facilities, as mentioned above, is partly because of the generally low income status of the region's inhabitants, most of whom are perpetually worried about the basics of sustenance, school fees, unemployment and the like. Yet, despite or in spite of these realities, the desire for entertainment that is at once socially progressive and modern overrides such limitations, bringing in soccer at various levels.

As a socialising institution, soccer is acceptable because of its potential to be enjoyed and appreciated by people across religions, cultures and economic classes. It is also acceptable because of 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. Solomon Waliaula (2009) has, in this regard, traced the history of two football clubs in Western Kenya – AFC Leopards, popularly called *Ingwe*, Leopard in many Luhya dialects, and Gor Mahia, or *K'Ogalo*, to its many fans. These football clubs were formed to provide opportunities for socialisation, but also to harness ethnic Luhya and Luo identities and sensibilities, and indeed for a long time defined the ethnic pride of these communities. One can note that the late 1980s marked the period of drastic decline in the social influence of these teams, both in terms of pulling crowds in the stadia and in evoking intense ethnic emotions during their matches. But, as I signal earlier, older generations of fans still romanticise with nostalgia the days when these teams were at their peak. To that extent, these teams continue to offer

opportunities for the narrativisation of experiences that are at once social, ethnic and even nationalistic. And so the interest in football in Kenya has a long history that can be interpreted in terms that extend beyond entertainment and socialisation to include the national politics of visibility and inclusion in the public imagination of the Kenyan people generally. Put differently, football in Kenya has for long been appropriated and exploited for a number of potential returns by different groups.

Hence, the phenomenon of English football beamed into Kenya and its power to capture youthful audiences needs to be interpreted and understood within this trajectory. Historically, the popularity of English football can be explained by a number of factors. These include the decline in influence of the local teams, the spread of satellite televisual technology together with its massive advertisement campaigns, and the emergence of a youthful population that can only remotely identify with old ethnic narratives and competitions. Also, actual and virtual travel has been made easier by an increasingly wider roads network. The internet makes such interactions more possible, and equally influential. All these developments make it possible for many people to aspire to bigger and better things, even in matters of soccer, where local players aspire to play in the top-notch leagues, such as the English Premier, both for fame and for financial gain. This is partly seen in the narratives that are associated with some of the celebrity footballers who are depicted as living materially rewarding lifestyles, driving high-end sports vehicles and living in rich neighbourhoods. For the past few years, the potential for European football to enrich players has been brought to the fore, especially with emerging details of weekly pay cheques that most successful soccer players receive. This realisation has contributed to the huge support for soccer from many Kenyan youth, a few of whom harbour ambitions of succeeding materially. This is a view that emerged out of my observation of the youths' behaviour and from their responses to my questions.

In attempting to make sense of my respondents' experiences, I also keenly read the common sports pull-outs from the two leading dailies, *Daily Nation* and the *East African Standard*, in which youths generally traded views on the prevailing soccer conditions. Preliminarily, I found out that a majority of the respondents claimed to have played soccer at some point in their lives on an amateur basis – some in their schools and colleges, while others in the local village leagues. In a sense, then, their interest in soccer went beyond mere spectatorship to encompass personal reasons and experiences. This realisation at once pushed my interpretation of their liking of European soccer beyond mere admiration to the possibilities of them pursuing dreams, if yet unrealised, regarding their personal athletic propensities. Most of the youths that I spoke to would recount with a mixture of nostalgia and regret how, in their earlier school days, they had outshone their colleagues in school during soccer matches. Some had gone as far as being tried out by local league teams but only as short-term signings. Essentially then, their background in soccer, to a large extent, drew on personal experiences perceived by those involved as one of the highlights of their athletic lives, having come from well-fashioned if localised football cultures.

Carles Feixa and Jeffrey Juris (2000, p. 204) assert that:

[f]ootball can be seen as culture in the sense of a multi-fractal mirror reflecting the various cultural identities present in a given society at a particular historical moment, and in the sense of an arena for (and powerful catalyst to) the creation of new identities and the reproduction and transformation of existing ones.

I concur with the same assertion for the reason that, since the youths I interviewed had clearly come from varied football backgrounds and entered others, they had with them

some identities, which they generally transformed, due to their association with soccer, in order to create new identities. Their current support for various teams in English soccer was therefore a link between their present athletic engagement with novel football cultures and their past achievements in soccer-related activities. These achievements, both at the personal and collective levels, in a sense, reflect the fate of football in Africa generally, where earlier achievements ignite aspirations that are later arrested by post-colonial realities of degenerate political and socio-economic structures that militate against individual successes. In a way, new affiliations with English football by way of satellite television allow the youth an opportunity to express their aspirations for a better life, but also allow them to remain in touch with a past being involved in local football cultures.

### **Football cultures and youth aspirations**

There is a sense in which the emerging youth soccer cultures in Western Kenya camouflage their own deep-seated aspirations towards cosmopolitan citizenship within the wider dynamics of globalisation by invoking tropes of fashion and mimicry to negotiate identities that are consistent with current notions of youthfulness. Drawing on empirical responses that I obtained from respondents, it was quite clear that European soccer is just one way via which the youth continues to subscribe to the allure of the West as the home of sophistication, achievement and civility, and subsequently to make a statement about their disillusionment with life in contemporary Kenya. I also noted that the trope of contest that dominates (European) soccer is only a spatial-temporal variant of other games like bull-fighting that, though present in some parts of Western Kenya, have seen their popularity wane, and that are now means that the youthful males employ to retrieve and strengthen their fledgling masculinities. In both football and bull-fighting in Western Kenya, the desire to win is part of the logic of the sport, yet the reality of defeat can be interpreted as a blow to the pride and masculine identities of the participants and their supporters, thereby generating a wide spectrum of emotional responses. Indeed as Egara Kabaji (2008) notes in a study on the bull-fighting phenomenon, the tension between sport as entertainment and sport as contest in bull-fighting is such that knowledge of the former is used to deal with the anxieties of the latter: if the contests are likely to bring out emotions of anger, bitterness and defeat, the same are countered by sub-conscious reminders that the whole spectacle is just a game after all. In both bull-fighting and football, these emotions reveal a higher degree of commitment and support for the teams in question. This can be extended and viewed as the dynamics operational among the Kenyan youth who invest emotionally in the performance of *their* teams, emphasis here signalling the degree of attachment by different individuals to the teams and their achievements or failures. Their involvement in the teams' fortunes causes them to be viewed as supporters rather than mere fans. As Richard Giulianotti (2005) argues, supporters are driven by a higher and deeper sense of loyalty to teams such that even when the same teams' fortunes turn for the worse, the supporters remain committed to them without even contemplating a switch of support to the next team.

The idea that the teams that attract the youth take part in what 'is just a play' seems to be immensely unsettled by the play on pet names of some of the leading English premier league teams. For instance, the rivalry between Manchester United – or Man U for its supporters – and Arsenal – the Gunners for its diehard fanatics – is manifested in the corruption of the pet names where Man U becomes 'manure' and the Gunners become 'the goons'. Such subversive reference to perceived oppositional teams is quite rampant in common parlance, just as it is seen often in 'The Fan-atics', a page on *Feverpitch*, one of

the pull-outs of *The Sunday Standard*. The fact that these terms are imported from England, where they are also used, is partly proof of mimicry at play, and partly used to dissolve the tension of adversarial support for oppositional teams. Considering that the youth have a penchant for supporting only top-flight teams, usage of the terms to poke fun at supporters of rival teams is only done strategically and convivially because fans expect to be only jeered at ‘mercifully’ when their teams lose. It is noteworthy that there was also a clear pattern of response to the performance patterns of the English teams by the youths I interacted with and interviewed on the one hand, and the contributors to *Feverpitch* and ‘Fan-atic’ columns on the other. This similarity in response signalled that football beamed via satellite television connects various groups of youth across spatial and socio-economic categories. For both my respondents and contributors to the columns, the oppositional support for rival teams is thus not meant to be a cause for enmity, but for healthy rivalry among the youth who share in the view that football is, maybe, one of the most important things in life, but only within a healthy social and economic set-up. To that extent, football becomes a medium through which the youth socially interact and nourish dreams for bigger and better things in life.<sup>2</sup>

Here, I quote some of the views expressed in the ‘Fan-atics’ by supporters of various teams, which will form a basis for discussion of the ways in which soccer as a sport also becomes a popular medium through which youthful identifications, and aspirations for success at personal and group levels are structured and expressed. With a broad headline ‘Give the Devil his Due, United Have Bagged It’, several brief letters express support and contempt for some teams:

Victor Oluoch, Man United Strategist, writes: The ‘Dazzling Devils’ are indeed a demolition unit. United have excelled where the Goons, Chelski and the Liverfools have failed. [...] So the lucky Goons should shut up after their lucky over United.

Kelvine Wafulah, UoN (University of Nairobi) Arsenal Rep: It is pretty disgusting that some foulmouthed Manure (Man U) fanatics are roaming the streets of town, trying to criticize Arsenal’s league double triumph and describing the Gunners’ performance as ‘cheap and lucky’.<sup>3</sup>

James Otieno, Arsenholic: ‘Red Devils really enjoy dreaming no wonder you [*sic*] reside in the ‘Theatre of Day-dreamers’. You can dream all u want to at Old Trafford, but one fact remains, when u visit the Grand Emirates Stadium, we turn all your dreams into [a] nightmare. Someone say Amen!’<sup>4</sup>

As I shall demonstrate in the course of this article, the triumphant vocabulary of victory for these teams adds a layer of hope to the concerned individuals’ personal and deep-seated aspirations. The significance of the views expressed by the supporters above is in emphasising the extent of the respondents’ near-obsessed commitment to ‘their’ teams. On another plane of commitment, yet another fan, Maloba Andati, while describing the reaction of a Manchester United fan’s disappointment upon Arsenal’s victory, notes: ‘we are reminded of Francis Imbuga’s ‘Betrayal in the City’ [*sic*] . . . “when the madness of an entire nation starts to disturb a solitary mind, it’s not enough to man the man is mad”’.<sup>5</sup> From Andati’s view, one can draw a conclusion about the seeming irrationality of the youths in their support of respective teams. A closer examination however reveals that the logic lies precisely in the contests at the team levels. The contests allow the fans to vent out excess energies and at the same time keep in touch with individual aspirations of athletic and masculine achievements. Such is the concern generally with contemporary youths who are beneficiaries of, and who take advantage of, the proliferation of popular media and cultures to fashion identities that are part of the changes occasioned by the social,

economic and cultural advances of late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The spectacle of European soccer as viewed and appreciated by the youth in Kenya currently is a vehicle for fashioning and propping up youthful identities against a backdrop of shifting cultures and hegemonies. Football as a culture, like other forms of popular youth cultures that have been amplified by the increased electronic media outlets, has become hegemonic over the youth because of the extent to which it generates commitment and passion. These are manifested in the long distances covered to reach centralised sites of encounter with European, and specifically English, football, and the amounts of money paid at entry points, besides the cost incurred in buying clothing items to exhibit the youth's fashion consciousness. It also becomes hegemonic partly because of the way specific players influence the thinking of admiring spectators, to the point where they are viewed as embodying some talismanic attributes. Names like Thierry Henry, John Terry, Lionel Messi, Wayne Rooney, Didier Drogba and others have many followers who view them as single individuals who have contributed to the successes of the teams in their ventures, thus emerging as more masculine than their teammates, and therefore standing out as more deserving of fanatical support. Put differently, there is a sense in which some players have more influence on their Kenyan spectators, thereby becoming more of role models to be identified with than others. It is this question of youth identities and identifications that I seek to deal with in the next section of my article.

### **Masculine anxieties and identifications with the global**

The increasing concern with youth and identity in the academy has arisen out of the realisation that the youth play a significant role in the entire population, quite apart from the fact that, in Africa at least, the youth themselves constitute the bigger part of the population. To my mind, the recent concern in the academy with the youth and the various ways through which they exercise agency has been directed towards their increasing dominance in public spheres which the older generations have neglected, such as music and sports.<sup>6</sup> It is through music and sports that the youth can have their voices heard, and indeed they have used such media to express their views on politics, business and other areas that have been dominated by the older generation. Sport, as a social institution, provides an important canvas upon which questions of youth identity and identifications, as well as their attempts to exercise agency, can be laid bare for examination. I concur with Richard Gruneau's (1983) reflexive theory, read in Michael Messner, 'that sports must be examined within a theory that views human beings as active subjects who are operating within historically constituted structural constraints' (Messner 1995, p. 166). Some individuals do 'make choices and construct and define meaning and a sense of identity within the institutions that they find themselves' (ibid.). As Kenyan youth are framed within the political and economic realities spelt out by their elders, it is mainly through sports that they participate in various capacities, and whereby they can derive possible meanings of their political and socio-economic conditions. Their participation in such sports is further a form of allowing their masculinity to compete with other masculinities since, 'there are competing masculinities – some hegemonic, some marginalized, some stigmatized. Hegemonic masculinity (that definition of masculinity which is culturally ascendant) is constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to femininities' (Robert Connel, cited in Messner 1995, p. 177). Hence for Kenyan youths, the prospects of achieving athletic successes through soccer serve the purpose of enticing them to harbour hopes and dreams of their own achievement and at the same time give them

a second frame of affiliation beyond others like politics and business, which have been dominated by other generations.

Shortly, I discuss how youth identification with successful players perceived to share much in common with them – usually by mere fact of being Africans too – becomes a way of psychological and moral armament for dreaming their own successes. The youth's dreams are actually framed within trajectories of material wealth and other manifestations of the capital economy. This is possible because one of the most compelling characteristics of European soccer as experienced in Western Kenya by the youth is the way in which it confirms the old rags-to-riches tales that have been made quite common in print and electronic media. It is possible then to read the same interest in soccer as a subconscious manifestation of the youth's own desire to live the tales of riches that the West promises, especially in regard to forms of consumerism of leisure, fashion and trends that are part of life in contemporary times. The global economy of an electronically borderless world has made it possible for people to experience far-reaching interaction in cyber- and other forms of spaces, where ambitions are expressed and pursued. While such pursuits may be inherent in the human character, what makes them enduring is what Donna Langstone in a somewhat different context identifies as 'tokenism [that] keeps a hierarchical structure in place' (1995, p. 101). In this regard, the reality that some African youthful athletes like Kolo Toure (Ivorian), Kanu Nwankwo (Nigerian), Benni MacCarthy (South African) and others have actually succeeded means that there is some remote possibility of success for other African youths. But they also occupy a higher rung in the hierarchy of international football by having played for English teams. Hence the view among some youths that Kenyan footballers in the larger European football world have not achieved real stardom yet because they play for teams outside England. The often voiced wish is that players like McDonald Mariga of Inter Milan and Dennis Oliech of Auxierre would attain the highest peak of their footballing careers if and when they play for Manchester United or Arsenal.

One can also argue that the presence of African soccer players in the more successful European clubs re-awaken and sustain the pan-African spirit among soccer spectators. Such players are viewed as being 'our own' in a sense making the teams they play for also 'our own'. In fact one of the reasons why my respondents supported teams like Arsenal and Chelsea was because of the central and regular positions that African players – Ivorians Habib Kolo Toure and Didier Drogba respectively – play for Manchester City and Chelsea respectively. Closer to the African players in admiration are black players from other parts of the world, especially Brazil, France and other countries with diasporic African populations. Such a view extends the metaphor of contest from the earlier identified local/athletic to global/racial, thereby drawing remarkably on the history of slavery and colonialism, all of which projected an antagonistic/dialectical relationship between the African and the rest. For my respondents, hence, the successes of the Africans in English teams can be interpreted in two possible ways: first as an extension of the African teams that have been unable to perform well enough in the international soccer fiesta of the World Cup tournaments. On the arrested successes of African teams, this seems to be the same point that Giulianotti and Armstrong make when they assert that 'these early successes of African teams [in the 1990 World Cup tournament and the 1996 Olympics] have fuelled international expectation that is both excessive and unfulfilled' (Giulianotti and Armstrong 1997, p. 10). In the 2010 World Cup tournament held in South Africa, the breathtaking performance of Ghana's Black Stars further captured these 'excessive and unfulfilled' expectations. It is significant to note that the current youth still nurse memories of the outstanding performance of the likes of Roger Milla, Omam Biyik and other Cameroonian players in Italy in 1990, and the likes of Augustine Okocha, Kanu



Nwankwo, Daniel Amokachi and other Nigerian players in the 1994 World Cup, as well as in the 1996 Olympics. In these three tournaments, African teams exhibited perhaps their best ever performances, and the presence of the same players and their countrymen in English premier league teams now keeps memories of the earlier performances alive, as well as exciting further expectations among their local supporters.

The second way of interpreting the central roles accorded to African players in English teams is as a statement of contradiction among the whites – if, so goes the possible question, the earlier colonialist white men had hinged the enterprises of slavery and colonialism on the dismissive and false premise that the African was incapable of doing anything admirable, why do they now rely on the same Africans to win matches for them? Recent discourses on global identity issues have shown the different ways in which Africans particularly and non-whites generally have been hailed in the success of the entertainment industry – from games and sports to film and other talent-oriented engagements. Whether such engagements can be read as exploitative or not is beside the point that they generate a host of emotional responses that are predominantly admiration, and the more successful of the players assume near-iconic stature in the eyes of their African supporters. That such issues are either latent or remote to the majority of youthful supporters is further captured in their appropriation of the same players as ‘heroes’ worth emulating. Such are the issues that sustain an interest in the matches because a victory by these European teams is considered a victory for the Africans/blacks over their white opponents. One of my respondents in fact went as far as asserting that the might of America in sports rests on the contribution of African Americans in the same, naming the likes of Mike Tyson and George Foreman in boxing, Michael Jordan in basketball, OJ Simpson in soccer and Carl Lewis in short sprints. In the respondent’s view, these are people who would have languished in poverty had they not pushed through their talents in athletic vocations. An interesting question that occurred to me, and which I posed to this particular respondent, was why they accorded attention only to soccer and not other sports if, in Kenya especially, some renowned Kenyan athletes had struck wealth and fame on international circuits. His answer was that soccer was quite regular on TV, unlike athletics that would come around seasonally. For him, this meant that he had more to gain from watching soccer than athletics, which he described as being far behind soccer in terms of global popularity.

Soccer as a social institution therefore fulfils dual roles to its consumers in the region: while, on the one hand, it provides a very healthy avenue for recreation and leisure, on the other hand, it fits in well with and sustains the predominant capitalist ideology where talent and hard work are overly compensated. In the context of African football, Richard Giulianotti and Gary Armstrong make a convincing argument that ‘football’s development in postcolonial Africa has been strongly shaped by neocolonial and neoliberal forces. From the 1970s onwards, European coaches and agents have sought to identify and develop African football talent for export purposes’ (Giulianotti and Armstrong 1997, p. 10). This partly explains the presence of celebrated African players in European league fixtures, and their popularity among some of the youthful Kenyan spectators. What is equally significant is that the same sport in its current form and status brings to the fore other key concerns in current times, especially those tied to race and class. As Messner asserts, ‘[n]ot only is the institution of sports an ideal place to study men and masculinity, careful analysis would make it impossible to ignore the realities of race and class differences’ (Messner 1995, p. 165). As I have demonstrated, the economic class of successful soccer players is one of the most important attractions for the youth in Kenya who aspire to similar levels of achievement, and the Kenyan youth’s support for some

teams and not others is guided by some vague understanding and pursuit of 'racial' solidarity – if a team has some black players, so seems to be the argument, it is a better one to support as opposed to if it is predominantly white in composition.

In answering the question of attraction to European soccer much more than they did Kenyan national league teams, respondents pointed out European football's superiority in technical skills, higher levels of competitive spirit, general organisation of the teams, better talents and remuneration of their players, and exposure of young African talents. The respondents also noted the smart attire donned by players in European football and a wider audiovisual coverage of their sporting engagements. Committed support for the teams by European supporters, a determination to fight vices like racism in the sport, cosmopolitan teammates and good officiating of the matches were also given as reasons for the support of European teams. Asked whether these attributes were not present in Kenyan soccer, the answers were unanimously negative. There was also near-unanimity that standards of Kenyan soccer at the national level had fallen so dismally that there was nothing much worth watching. As evidence, they cited continued wrangles within the Kenya Football Federation. The significance of such a view was that the youths were partly attracted to European soccer because of the high standards, skill and professionalism exhibited there, which were totally lacking in Kenya's soccer structures. Hence, the desire to be outward looking was common across the entire population – only that for the youth, sports offered a more immediate avenue for the same.

Another perspective to the whole question emerged when I asked my respondents to name at least five of the most successful European soccer teams. Chelsea, Manchester United, Arsenal and Liverpool dominated the lists, with Barcelona, FC Porto, Real Madrid, Bayern Munich, AC Milan, and Villarreal appearing once each. Clearly, English teams dominated the youthful respondents' imagination of 'European soccer' – and by extension their understanding of success. This could be explained partly because of the wider media attention paid to English soccer, which to a remarkable degree complements existing impressions of advancement in the minds of these youthful Kenyans. These impressions are vaguely associated with those of 'Englishness' – whose connotations were of orderliness, superiority, and so on – that dominated the colonial projection of the English people, and which outlived colonialism to remain as the cynical explanation of the post-colonial state's inability to attain any remarkable levels of structural organisation. The seeming successes of English teams in continental European soccer, and the media's beaming of the same into Africa, in some ways 'confirm' the existing discourses of organisational superiority that is associated with old lores of the European, as opposed to the African.

Youth identification with European and particularly English football relates to fashion as charted out by the European teams' preference for attire that reflects specific labels, which are in turn attractive to fashion-conscious youths in Kenya. Manchester United's red, Chelsea's blue and so on are attractions partly because they are associated with the successes of these teams, and partly because of the manufacturing labels that attract the adoring youth who then use them in their jocular dismissal of opposing teams. Apart from the labels that attract Kenyan youth, the texture and colour of the same are key symbols of identification among the Kenyan youth with an interest in soccer, who view ownership and donning such attire not just as statements of loyalty to 'their' teams, but also as affirmations of their own fashion-consciousness. The fact that these attires, and their contraband versions, are quite expensive suggests the degree of sacrifice in savings that the youth make to own such items of clothing. The question is whether such sacrifices are based on rational/logical reasoning, or are as a result of youthful impulsive desire to 'own'

possibly unnecessary items of clothing. Eileen Moyer has researched the dynamics of fashion among youths in Dar es Salaam, guided by more or less the same question about the motives of such investment, and asserts that ‘the value of cloth and clothing [for the youth] clearly has as much to do with *fashion* and *global imaginaries* as with *function and quality*’ (Moyer 2003, p. 88, my emphasis). The same can be said of Kenyan youth and their propensity towards Western fashion influences, including soccer related ones. The power of electronic media – especially televisual technology – in influencing and propagating youth cultures is such that the youth in Kenya can connect and identify with the athletic youth in Europe, and thus imagine themselves as part of those in Europe – or imagine themselves as global citizens. Hence, for them, the attires have many functions ranging from the merely utilitarian, mobility in symbolic spaces of modernity, and as conveyors of deep-seated dreams. Because of their high cost, the mere ability to own and don such clothing is a marker of success for these youths, and a pointer to future successes in their quest for European-like ways. Paul Gilroy in a different context comments on the impact of uniforms: ‘[t]he use of uniforms and other symbols to effect the sameness that identity only speaks about has sometimes been symptomatic of the process in which anxious self can be shed and its concerns conjured away by the emergence of a stronger compound whole’ (Gilroy 2000, p. 101). Gilroy’s view resonates with Kenyan youth since it is possible that economic anxieties inform, to a great extent, their admiration of European soccer, which captures many aspects of their individual and group desires, especially the need to identify with the success of fellow youths playing soccer in Europe. Gilroy has further noted the intersections between postmodern global commerce and identity dynamics, asserting that:

[i]dentity has been taken into the viscera of postmodern commerce, where the goal of planetary marketing promotes not just the targeting of objects and services to the identities of particular consumers but the idea that any product whatsoever can be suffused with identity. Any commodity is open to being ‘branded’ in ways that solicit identification and try to orchestrate identity. (Gilroy 2000, p. 98)

The commoditisation of soccer as a sport has spawned commoditisation of complementary items – T-shirts, boots, and others – hence trapping the Kenyan fans in a cycle of capital exchange and transforming identities that feed into the capitalist wheel, although possibly without their conscious knowledge of the same.

## Conclusion

In a manner of speaking, the soccer successes of Europe can only be dreamed of back in Kenya, suggesting a strange relationship with some of the pet-names of the most successful stadiums, such as Manchester United’s Old Trafford, all which signify the performative aspects of European soccer at home and beyond, besides the insurmountable challenges of success at the personal or collective/team levels. The extent to which European football has captured the euphoric attention of many youths in Kenya demonstrates the power of imagination and bliss that are contained in the metaphoric dreams of material and athletic success, much more than the possibility of actual success. Such difficulties in transforming dreams into realities have been caused by the state of football structures in Kenya – run-down and neglected by successive political regimes – that offers little for the youth to look up to.<sup>7</sup> In a sense, this state of soccer in Kenya relates to other aspects of life in general – economic, political, and social – which have arrested the desires and dreams of a bigger part of the country’s population. It is not surprising that for simple matters of entertainment, the youth must be outward-looking if they hope to

attain any remarkable degree of satisfaction. Admittedly, such an observation may not be particularly helpful for those who seek to better the situation; its value lies only in the sure fact that entertainment can be, and in some cases is, a source of livelihood – so that those who look outwards do so for entertainment as well as for possible economic gains, as has been demonstrated by the role of attire vendors, soccer watching halls operators and others who directly earn profits from European soccer.

Of course, it is unnecessarily simplistic to interpret Kenyan youth's liking of European soccer solely as a result of a malfunctioning economy and a dilapidated soccer infrastructure in the country. It is also that Kenyan youths, like their counterparts elsewhere, have at once been victims and actors in the postmodern dynamics of youth popular cultures spread by satellite technology and the aggressive commercialisation of entertainment avenues like film, music and sport. Such external influences need to be considered as having played a significant role in sparking and sustaining the youth's interest in European soccer.

### Notes

1. I am grateful to my respondents in Kakamega, Mumias and Kisumu.
2. Considering the increased opportunities for transnational and trans-class mobility through sports, these dreams for self-advancement harbour genuine promises of realisation for some of the youth. But even for those who are somehow stuck in poverty and therefore unable to derive material returns, the satisfaction derived from watching such matches is also good to the extent that it offers temporary relief from the drudgery of life that is common especially in rural areas.
3. See *Feverpitch* 3, 'Fan-atics', 11 February 2007.
4. In "'Luwere ... Luwere ...'" The Gunners Rhymed on and on after Victory', 'Fan-atics', 28 January 2007.
5. Ibid. The actual line in Imbuga's play is 'When the madness of an entire nation disturbs a solitary mind, it is not enough to say the man is mad.' See Imbuga (1976, p. 31).
6. On Kenyan youth and music, see Kavulani (2006) and Nyairo *et al.* (2003).
7. It is beyond the ambit of this essay to look into reasons for the decadence of Kenyan soccer facilities, although it may be explained by referring to the template of disorder, theorised by Chabal and Daloz (1999) as a way of understanding the African post-colony in general.

### Notes on contributor

Godwin Siundu holds a PhD in African Literature from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. He has published articles in a number of academic journals and taught in several universities in Kenya. He is currently a lecturer at the Department of Literature, University of Nairobi.

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