

African Football Under the Western Gaze

Salawu Olajide

February 5, 2022



Toni Morrison once wrote about the concept of the “other” in her beautiful book titled *The Origin of Others*. In the book, she writes about how othering is subjugating another person in order to define oneself. She goes on to explain that in order to emphasize the importance of the Self, the Self creates and defines the “other”. Although Morrison wrote in the context of Blackness and Whiteness in the United States, her treatise extends to the image of Africans and the influence of the Western gaze on their existence. The Western gaze comes from the idea that Eurocentrism influences the way we (Africans) are perceived, the way we think, and how we in turn see ourselves. We aspire towards Western standards and when we make human mistakes, we shrink and become agitated because we are sure of the menacing lash of the Western world on our backs. Today, this lash comes in the form of derision and misrepresentation of our beloved Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) via Western news platforms on traditional media and on social media spaces like Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and Facebook.

On January 11, 2022, some Nigerians on Twitter tried unsuccessfully to view a video uploaded by Skysports on Twitter. The video featured Kelechi Iheanacho’s brilliant goal against Egypt. It was restricted from their locations due to copyright reasons. In their first match at AFCON 2021, the Super Eagles had scored against the Pharaohs. People were agitated that they were unable to view the video— perhaps it was the fact that this was Nigeria’s first game or that Nigeria was playing against a top contender. Many bemoaned this restriction and limited access to view a glorious moment in their country’s football history. Some responded to the copyright restriction with banter while others expressed deep irritation for Skysports. According to them, Skysports hardly covered any AFCON news, so it was pathetic to see that their only uploaded video of a Super Eagles goal was

restricted. Eventually, Skysports uploaded another video on January 12, 2022. This video was accessible. It was a video featuring the AFCON referee who had blown the whistle before full time. People were disgusted.

Many Africans on Twitter criticized Skysports (some of the replies call out Skysport's hypocrisy) for now granting them access to view a video that questioned the validity of AFCON. One Twitter user asked a pertinent question, "...How is it that obscenity is viewable, but achievements isn't?" This question invites us to theorize global images of Africa and the portrayal of Africans via Euro-American and non-African lenses. One wonders: why is it that Africa and Africans are always presented through a derogatory lens? How does this hyperfocus on mistakes and football brawls, fit into the larger narrative of African incompetence and the general pushback against the AFCON tournament holding during the English Premier League (EPL)?

The coverage of mistakes as testament to African incompetence brings to mind historical examples of Africans who navigated European and colonial spaces. It reminds one of Ajayi Crowther's experience with white missionaries in Africa. After he was consecrated as the Bishop of the Niger in 1864 (the first Black Bishop of the Anglican Church), Samuel Ajayi Crowther experienced racism and disrespect from white missionaries in Africa. They considered him incompetent and believed that African Christians would not "respect white missionaries whose leader was a black bishop" (*Colour, Class and the Victorians* by Douglas Lorimer). Apart from the clear racist intentions of the white missionaries, the statement reminds one of National Football Associations on the African continent that would rather employ an unknown white coach than an experienced local coach. What we witness in our football today is a continuation of the legacy of colonialism and the positioning of Africans as inexperienced infants who are below par.

As of January 14th, 2022, Skysport's Instagram page had two videos on the AFCON tournament. One was the referee video, and the other was the Benjamin Tetteh Punch video. The referee video has the tag "AFCON" and underneath the name of a tournament that excites millions of Africans and makes us experience momentary joy in the face of political instability and economic issues—lies a caption that defines human mistakes and quarrels as an African phenomenon. Some news outlets later reported that the referee was suffering from a heatstroke. Considering the weather in Cameroon on Wednesday January 12, 2022 (between 77- and 93-degrees Fahrenheit), it is understandable that a man from a much cooler region (Zambia) would suffer a heat stroke in a different part of Africa. Perhaps this is a learning moment for the world to understand Africa's geographical and human diversity. This is not an attempt to excuse the referee's mistake. Rather, it is a call for Africans to push back on the current narrative that the referee's mistake represents an inherent element of African mediocrity. We are familiar with how Africa's history was rewritten and conceived through Eurocentric lens in order to perpetuate the image of incompetence, lack of human civilization and perpetual backwardness. Sadly, this Western and even non-African image of Africa continues today. AFCON's coverage by Western media has merely scratched the surface of the poverty porn and incompetence mantra that defines the image of Africa through non-African eyes, lens, and pens.

Another problem that arises from this coverage of AFCON is that some Africans tend to apologize for the way they are represented or for mistakes made by referees. When will this continent that has survived slavery, colonialism, bad governments, neocolonialism, and anti-immigration laws be allowed to breathe and just live? When will Africans stop being apologetic for ONE African who made a mistake that anyone could make and have made? Why is there a laser of exceptionalism beaming on the heads of every African who find themselves on a global stage, in Euro-American classrooms, and on a football field? Why should African climate change activists worry about how they are presented or how they are obliterated from global conversations? Why have the likes of Skysports committed themselves to projecting a one-sided view of the AFCON tournament?

Unfortunately for Skysports and other Western media (YouTube commentators inclusive) who emphasize AFCON mistakes (they stress that AFCON needs to present a good image to world and get its act together in order to be taken seriously), their coverage only increases global interest in AFCON and emphasizes the entertainment factor that characterizes AFCON. Apart from good and amazing football, you're guaranteed wins that displace defending champions like Algeria and enthrone underdogs like Sierra Leone whose last AFCON participation was 26 years ago.

There is an interesting story from a beautiful day in December 1936. It is from one of the British Empire Exhibitions that pervaded the 20th Century. Jonathan Woodham, a critic of British colonial history describes a Pageant of Southern Africa which took place in the Empire Exhibition Arena. The culture of Zimbabwe was put on display and because of the myth surrounding the rich history and architecture of Zimbabwe, people of European descent played the roles of the Queen of Sheba, her Attendants, Overseers, and Clerks. According to Woodham, these "new possessors of the African colonies sought to validate themselves symbolically as contemporary bearers of the mantle of civilization".

In closing, Woodham's observations are applicable to the coverage of AFCON by Western Media platforms. Although Western media outlets do not outrightly say it, their ultimate intention is to remind AFCON and its fans that AFCON MUST adhere to European standards and dictates (suspending the tournament during the EPL for example). If AFCON officials refuse to comply, the Western media will draw attention to ANY mistake or individual flaws. Africans will then be informed that these mistakes are unique to them and such mistakes make their tournament small and inconsequential.

Mosúnmọlá Adéòjọ is a Yorùbá woman from Nigeria. She is also a PhD student at the University of Florida where she is pursuing a research in anti-imperialism in religious and political spaces in 20th-century Nigeria. Her other interests include Afro-Victorianism, Military History, Gender studies, and Digital Media studies. When she is not reading or collecting books by new writers, she is watching African football, listening to an audiobook or cooking.