World Cup fever in Sierra Leone reveals how the beautiful game unites and divides

LSE's Jonah Lipton looks at how football serves as a window into a wider world for marginalised youth in Freetown.

I am sitting in Victor's cinema in Freetown, Sierra Leone. A rumbling generator powers three televisions at the front of a large room built from corrugated iron and wood. A crowd has assembled to watch the World Cup game between Ivory Coast and Greece. This is the final game of the group stage for Ivory Coast's "golden generation", many of whom are celebrated members of Europe's top clubs but have yet to achieve at international level. A victory or draw would offer an historic opportunity to progress to the knock-out stages.

The atmosphere in the cinema is one of pride for fellow West Africans performing on the global stage, but also one of profound and somehow expected disappointment, crystalised by the late penalty awarded to Greece, winning them the game in literally the last minute. One audience member exclaims that "they don't want African teams to succeed". Others comment on the determination of the Greeks to score right until the very end versus the Ivorian's misjudged self-assuredness.

A crowd watching Ivory Coast-Greece at Victor's cinema in Freetown

Victor's is just one of many cinemas in Freetown where Sierra Leoneans, mostly young men, go on a weekly basis to watch club sides from the English Premier League and Spanish La Liga and, during the past month, World Cup matches from Brazil. The activity borders on the religious. As a friend told me, football matches and prayers at the mosque are the only times that he needs to be somewhere at an exact time, everything else here is negotiable. The ritual of watching is appropriate given the highly ritualistic nature of football as a spectacle.

Football projects patterns of serial repetition and progressive achievement for global audiences. It also scales up aspects of classic coming-of-age rituals, well documented in "traditional" African societies, whereby an age-set of youth take on their societies' values and expectations to become accepted as adults. In football the roles played by youth in traditional rituals are enacted by players who strive to earn the approval of supporters of their team or their country, although this aspiration may take a long time to fulfil or never at all. As well as being a collective endeavour, football is also very personal. For fans, the highs and lows become bodily experiences of joy and pain or, perhaps most common, the uneasy feeling of “almost” or “what if”. In Freetown, there is often money at stake, as well as personal reputation, pride and credibility.

It is not surprising that football resonates so much with African youth, in part due to the way that football resembles a protracted or unending “coming of age” ritual. It is widely noted that many African countries have been suffering from a “crisis of youth”, who have become a marginalised group, lacking opportunity and resources to progress and become “adult” in locally meaningful ways. In Sierra Leone a significant number of young people aspire to migrate as a means of achieving a status that is seemingly impossible to achieve otherwise. Football plays into this migration fantasy in various ways. On one level, football allows for a sense of global membership and belonging. It offers an opportunity to be part of a very international club and have a stake in their success (or failure). In Sierra Leone most young men have a nickname of a professional footballer, often from the club or country they support. Daily discussions and debates about the game on the streets reveal tremendous levels of knowledge on topics ranging from club finances and player biographies to critiques of managers’ tactical decision making.

But as much as football brings people together, it also accentuates and reveals differences beyond its inherent competitiveness. Through watching football young Sierra Leoneans see a foreign world of referees, cameras, medical teams, “goal-line technology”, and monumental architecture. These images colour the impressions of life abroad that people often convey to me as one of impersonal bureaucracy, technology, law and punctuality. But they also see a world of opportunity. They see young Africans weaving their way through opposition defences towards goal (and making a lot of money in the process). People endlessly speculate and relay information about the status of those players. Have they naturalised abroad? Where did they learn to play? Are they first generation? Where are their parents from?

So football is many things: it is a ritual, a game to be watched or played, a window into a wider world, a means of categorising and participating in that world, and a mirror to reflect on and in some ways shape one’s own life and position. The way that hope and frustration were inseparably weaved together at Victor’s cinema during the Ivory Coast-Greece game is somehow emblematic of the inseparability of those emotions in people’s own lives and plans. The possibility, route, and nature of success are never clear, but in four years time there’s going to be another World Cup.

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