

4 Theatrics of the Soccer Fan

ANTONY KAMINJU

Antony Kaminju first became interested in the antics of soccer fans in 2009 while attending the Soweto derby at Orlando Stadium. The images gathered together here are of just a few of the fans he has been following, documenting their zeal, spirit and devotion for their clubs. Focusing on Kaizer Chiefs and Orlando Pirates supporters, Antony records their eccentric and wonderful performances, from cross-dressing to body-painting, exploring their meaning for fans and our understanding of soccer's role in South African society.

'My name is Long John Silver,' the man says as he firmly shakes my hand. Finding him was not easy, as I had to manoeuvre my way through the narrow, dusty streets of Soweto. He is in his mid-sixties and is bare-chested – probably to keep the heat off as it is scorching on this particular afternoon. 'I'm the king of the Pirates,' he continues proudly. He invites me to his bedroom, which is adorned with black and white paraphernalia of a pirate's world. I spot an unusually long samurai sword next to his bed and a white face mask. There is also a toy gun on the table.

Long John Silver, whose real name is Kenneth Metiba, has been an Orlando Pirates fan since 1947 and has never supported another club. Like many soccer fans, his lifestyle revolves around the sport. He collects any and all memorabilia associated with his club. He is such a

devout supporter that when his club loses a match he does not eat for the day. His weekly plans are determined by the Professional Soccer League schedule. When his team plays he cannot miss the game, and he frequently travels with them to distant places where they are to play.

The late Johannes Mzion Mofokeng, famously known as Mzion, was another hard-core supporter of the Orlando Pirates club. He lived in Sebokeng township on the outskirts of Johannesburg. I had the privilege of visiting him at his home. Everything in his house reflected his devout support of his favourite club. In his sitting room there was a shrine where he would worship before going out to a match. Most of the objects in his house – including the bed sheets, the cups and the floor mats – were black and white, the Pirates club colours. Unfortunately, Mzion passed on in 2011. His burial resembled a ritual; most of the attendees were Pirates fans who sang Pirates songs known to be Mzion's favourites. One of the songs reminded me of a journey I made with him and his friends from Sebokeng to Wits stadium; they had hired a minibus, and they danced all the way to the stadium while enjoying drinks. At the burial I saw his young son, who always accompanied him to the matches, clinging onto his mother; I could not help but break down in tears. As the coffin was being lowered into the grave, I noticed someone had put his favourite *lekarapa* (a hand-cut and hand-painted hard hat worn by soccer fans) on top of it, perhaps as a sign of his lasting love for his team.

I have been following South African soccer fans and documenting their lifestyles for the last two years. I am fascinated by the way they construct identities for themselves, which for me provokes more questions than answers. I had previously seen brief shots of the fans on television, blowing their *vuvuzelas* and wearing *makarapas* (plural of *lekarapa*). My attention was later drawn to a newspaper article reporting on a Kaizer Chiefs fan who had killed himself after his team lost to Orlando Pirates. I could not understand how a fan could commit suicide because his team had lost a soccer match. I also wondered about the various paraphernalia fans brought with them to the stadium. Armed with my camera and a notebook, I embarked on a journey of finding

out who these fans are and what drives them to put on such elaborate performances. I am curious about the motivation and meaning behind their performances, both in the terraces and beyond the stadium. I am interested specifically in the fans of Kaizer Chiefs and Orlando Pirates, the two clubs said to have the biggest following in South Africa.

Attending a match between the two clubs in Soweto in 2009 was an unforgettable experience that brought me closer to the real world of soccer fans. On the day of the derby, I could hear *vuvuzelas* blowing from different corners of the city. As kick-off time drew near, crowds of fans – men and women, some accompanied by their young ones – snaked their way into the stadium. One of the fans told me that attending the Soweto derby was like attending a religious event. This brought to mind how some scholars have observed similarities in the kind of rituals and performances displayed in soccer and in religious ceremonies. Just as the church, mosque and temple are seen as sacred areas of worship, the stadium or field is viewed by the fans as a special space, and it is within the grounds of the stadium that the fans display their celebratory rituals. They seem to find an individual voice or identity the moment they enter the stadium.¹ I noticed quite a number of the fans carrying an assortment of paraphernalia to the stadium: watermelons, loaves of bread, telephone sets, cabbages, giant dolls. Many fans wore masks. In the midst of the frenzy and ecstatic cacophony after a team scores, a fan of the winning team will eat the cabbage or the watermelon or take a big bite from the giant loaf. This act sends a message to the competing team that ‘we shall eat you up’. (In one recent match, there was a group of young men who brought along the boiled head of a sheep, or *skopo*.) At another corner of the stadium, a Pirates fan had an old cordless phone which he dialled every time his team looked like they might lose. When asked about this, he said that he was calling his God to ask him to intervene and help, and at other times he was dialling the coach to urge him to make changes in strategy. Although the gadget was not in working condition, he seemed to believe that his prayers and summons to the coach were being heard, especially if the results were in favour of his team.

What was striking about other fans, and especially those of the

Orlando Pirates, was the trend of cross-dressing. I noticed a few male fans who proudly wore skirts and bras. One of these fans is Molife, famously known as 'Sox', who normally is shirtless, exposing his huge belly and black bra, and sporting an unusually long goatee and a black and white skirt. He has dreadlocks beaded at the tail, similar to the style of traditional healers, or *inyangas*. His huge frame makes him stand out from among hundreds of other fans. He seems to have a special place in the stadium, as he normally stands behind the terrace near the Pirates goalposts. He burns incense from time to time, while the fans next to him chant songs in praise of the Pirates.

I made a trip to call on Sox at his home in Witbank, 140 kilometres from Johannesburg. It was a journey I won't forget, as I got lost numerous times. When I finally got to his house, he loudly asked what safety measures I have in place when I travel to far-off places in search of people I don't know and when I'm not even conversant in the local language. He cautioned me against venturing into areas I was not familiar with. But he was proud to introduce me to his wife and his three kids. My first question to him was why he wore a bra and a skirt during the games. After hearty laughter he said, 'Pirates is the mother of all clubs, so when I dress as a woman I'm sending the message to Chiefs fans that we shall overcome them as we are the mother of all the clubs.' I was amused as to how, knowing or unknowingly, he figuratively used the idea of maternalism to subdue the fans of an opposing team.

A closer look at his wardrobe revealed all manner of different colours of brassiere, but they were predominantly in red and black, the colours of the Orlando Pirates. What surprised me is how supportive Sox's wife seemed to be. She said she did not mind the ways in which he performed this female identity, as he was already a fan when they got married. Sox confessed that he preferred to wear the black bras. One of the houses in his compound was painted in black and white and depicted a drawing of a human skeleton, a symbol of the Orlando Pirates. He also has what looks like a skull of a sheep's head hanging somewhere in the house. When I asked if I could take pictures of him, he insisted on posing with the skull.

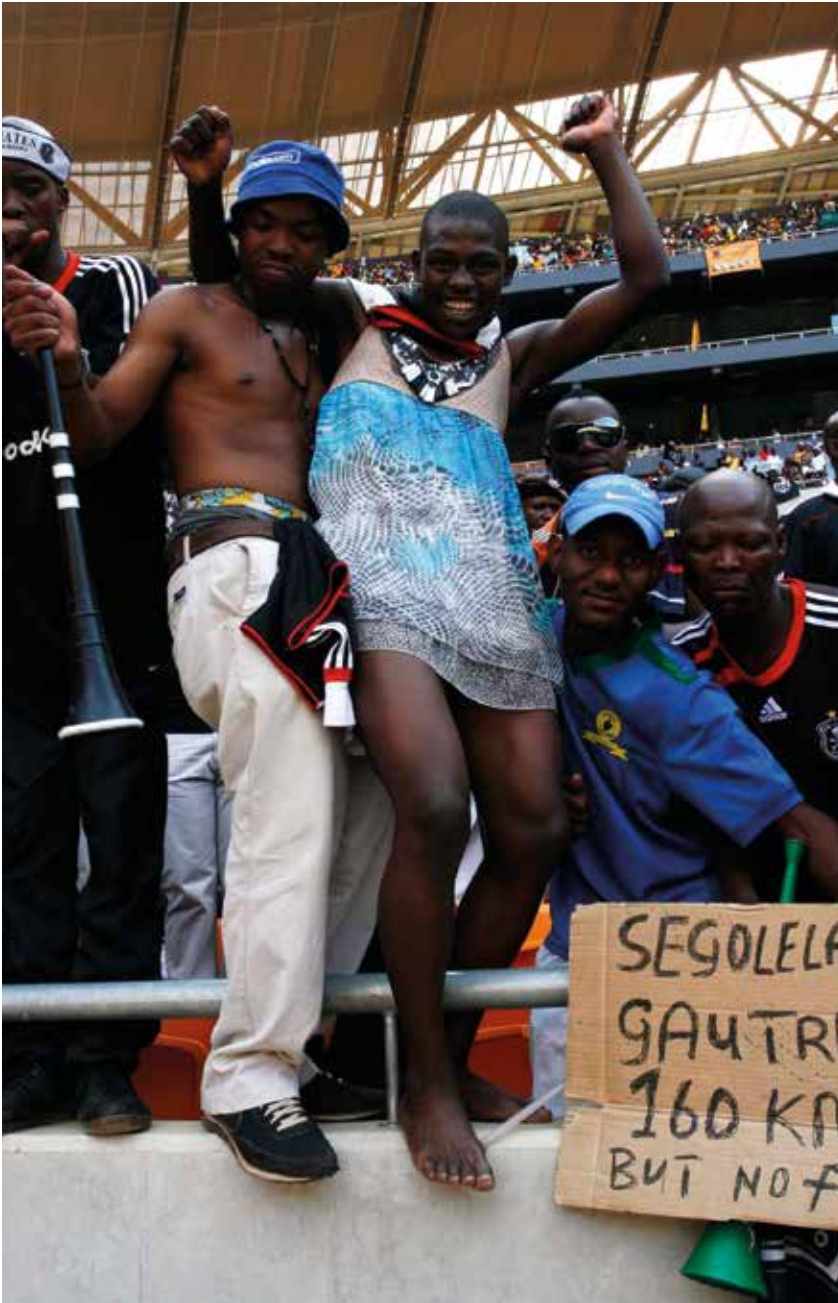
We were soon joined by one of his friends, Zweli, and his wife. It was not easy to pick him out as a man as he wore a wig, a black T-shirt and a flowered skirt, again favouring the Pirates colours. His wife wore a white blouse and skirt. Zweli is an animated character who does not shy away from walking around the township in his weave and high stilettos, which are also black. He argues that Pirates is the 'mother of all clubs in Africa', and thus he has to honour the club by dressing as a woman. But he adds that it is also a reminder to the Chiefs that when the two clubs meet, 'Pirates is bound to f**k up Chiefs'. South African communities are known to be deeply rooted in their traditions and are sometimes quite intolerant of anything they consider to be against the grain of what is culturally accepted. Cross-dressing is commonly associated with men who are transvestites, a marginalised community within and beyond the township. Sox and Zweli could hardly be described as LGBT² activists, but their modes of dressing do unsettle the kinds of masculinist discourses we associate with soccer and the spaces in which it is played, watched and celebrated. The use of maternal, feminine imagery is a potent conduit through which to locate an identity as well as communicate disdain to the fans of opposing clubs.

Antony Kaminju uses photography to bring issues that are of concern to the fore. He enjoys talking to people before he photographs them, to understand their background so as to capture their true essence. He uses photography not only as a personal voice but also to question, to inform and to incite change. He is a part-time researcher at the Human Sciences Research Council and has lectured in photojournalism at Wits University. He is currently completing an MA, also at Wits, in visual anthropology. Previously he worked as a news photographer in Nairobi with Nation Media Group, of which he was the photo editor from 2000 to 2005. Antony has published widely in local and international media, and has participated in exhibits in Europe, Africa and Asia. His work is also part of the collections of the Agence Française de Développement (AFD) in France and the Wedge Gallery in Toronto, Canada.

Theatrics of the Soccer Fan: Antony Kaminju

NOTES

- 1 In his book *Laduma!* Peter Alegi quotes a Pirates fan whose affinity to the sport was so strong that he chose to have his wedding performed at Natalspruit Indian Sports Ground. When he recalled that day, he did so with pride, calling the venue the ‘Mecca of Soccer! Oh my God, I got married there! You know it was the “in thing”. Man, it was my life.’ Peter Alegi, *Laduma! Soccer, Politics and Society in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2010), 130.
- 2 LGBT is an acronym associated with the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.



An Orlando Pirates fan wearing a woman's dress and his topless colleague taunt Kaizer Chiefs fans in a derby pitting Chiefs against Pirates.



Orlando Pirates fan Kenneth Metiba, better known as Long John Silver, in full regalia outside his house in Soweto.



Zweli (right) and his wife outside their house in Witbank. Zweli says he dresses as a woman for fun and to send a message to opposing teams that the Pirates will overcome any competition.



Walking skeleton: The late Johannes Mzion Mofokeng, arguably South Africa's top soccer fan, strolling his neighbourhood in Sebokeng township outside Johannesburg. To many South Africans, Mzion was the face of the 2010 Soccer World Cup hosted by South Africa. He died the following year.





Orlando Pirates fans from KwaZulu-Natal at a soccer stadium during a derby. They inscribe the names of their favourite players on their faces or stomachs. The fan in the middle is holding a *spati*, a kind of syringe used by traditional healers to infuse liquid through the anus to cleanse a sick person or to cure constipation.



Molife, known as Sox, with his wife outside his house in Sebokeng.



Sox dressing in his house before attending a match between the Orlando Pirates and the Kaizer Chiefs.