

# African Studies Quarterly

Volume 8, Issue 3

Spring 2006

**Laduma! Soccer, Politics and Society in South Africa. Peter Alegi. Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2004. 221 pp.**

Can soccer explain the world -or at least South African history?<sup>1</sup> Peter Alegi's ambitious, compelling and much anticipated *Laduma! Soccer, Politics and Society in South Africa* seeks to do the latter with great panache. Alegi brings South African popular and social history alive much as a deft mid-fielder would bring the ball alive in a soccer cup final. His analysis covers everything from aspects of African leisure time to trade unionism and from rural traditions of sport to the struggle for urban space. Alegi shows clearly the ways in which the sporting spectacle of soccer embodies not only the fault lines of race and class in South Africa, but also the ways in which Africans contested and shaped the very limited spaces available to them in their liberation struggle. In so doing, Alegi allows the reader to get caught up in his clear enthusiasm for the 'beautiful game'.

A critical question for South African history is of course where soccer fits in relation to other dominant forms of masculine leisure, identity, and white patriarchy. In this vein one can well imagine how many white colonial South Africans who became obsessed with rugby but not soccer, would have embraced Henry Blaha's oft quoted quip about the perceived differences between rugby and soccer: 'rugby is a beastly game played by gentlemen; soccer is a gentleman's game played by beasts....'<sup>2</sup> Given the historical importance of rugby to white South Africa, and the comparatively constrained place of African soccer such a false dichotomy captures some of the ways whites in South Africa emphasized and even celebrated perceived differences as they constructed their world of segregation and apartheid. Yet, as Alegi argues in *Laduma!* African soccer grew and thrived in South Africa despite these constraints.

Alegi sets out to expand on existing broader works on leisure time, sport and identity through his analysis of the history of what was primarily African soccer in South Africa, and he accomplishes much in this regard. Alegi shows how African soccer was built upon far more complex and sophisticated terrain than would first appear, even if the pitches that young African soccer players honed their skills on were of mud and dust. He situates the rise in popularity of soccer within the context of African athletic and martial traditions (chapter 1) and then explores the class and urban dimensions of the sport as it grew in the segregated cities of South Africa (chapter 3,4 and 5). Here, Alegi makes a significant contribution to African urban history by adding to our understanding of the way sports provided outlets for social, political and even economic associations in a society deeply divided by class and race. Perhaps the most compelling material comes in chapters 7 and 8 where Alegi contrasts the struggles of blacks to foster non-racial sporting in South Africa with the bald-faced racism of the dominant white sporting authorities.

There are also some fascinating team histories including detailed stories of the now famous Orlando Pirates (chapter 6) and accounts of the various African soccer leagues which struggled

to survive through the apartheid era. Alegi also gives consideration of the major playing styles; those adopted from abroad and those which originated in the African townships. Yet, there is perhaps less of interest here for die-hard soccer fans than for more serious academic historians. Indeed, Alegi has provided a vivid and captivating history based on very sound, extensive archival research and a multitude of interviews with fascinating characters from the world of South African soccer. He weaves both serious secondary scholarly sources in with references to popular media such as film and the celebrated magazine, *Drum*. He also provides a useful analysis of the relevant historiography, which is placed at the back of the book in an appendix, rather in the introductory material, and so do not help the reader frame his work at the start.

While *Laduma!* makes a significant contribution to our understanding of South African society during segregation and apartheid, I have some concern about the ways in which the book deals with gender and patriarchy. Alegi does acknowledge the very gendered ways that soccer developed (p.4 and p 55), and there is a brief discussion of women's involvement with supporters' clubs (pp. 127-28). He, moreover, argues that certain elements of the township culture surrounding gang violence, masculinity and identity are in need of further research (p. 94). Overall, however, he tends to shy away from a critical analysis of the ways in which the social dynamic of the male-dominated sport seemed to reinforce patterns of patriarchy. A more thoroughgoing look at the ways that the culture of soccer shaped not just male identities, but also male attitudes toward women and visa versa would have been helpful.

Despite these reservations, *Laduma!* is a welcome addition to the field of African history. It is a well researched, cogently argued work with crisp writing. Although some might be inclined to see the book as an attempt to overreach by ascribing so much significance to soccer in South Africa, at almost every turn, Alegi provides fresh insights which demonstrate just how significant soccer and leisure time are for understanding African history.

Aran MacKinnon  
*University of West Georgia*

## NOTES

1. For an ambitious but compelling effort at the former see Franklin Foer, *How Soccer Explains The World: An Unlikely Theory of Globalization* (New York Harper Collins, 2004).
2. There are many variations of this phrase with various attributions, but see W. Clark, *Rugby Quotes* (viewed at <http://wesclark.com/rrr/quotes.html>) For rugby see *The XVIth Man, Letters to Young Rugby Football Players* (Glasgow, Blackie and Son Ltd., 1907), p. 7 and for the South African dimension see A. Grundlingh, A. Odendaal and B. Spies, *Beyond The Tryline. Rugby and South African Society* (Johannesburg, Raven Press, 1995).