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Sounding Morocco at AFCON 2025: The Politics of Representation in Morocco

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Abstract

This article examines how Morocco's diverse sonic signature is presented on the international stage through an analysis of ceremonial and public performances at the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON). As host of AFCON 2025, Morocco mobilized music and performance to position itself within African cultural networks, emphasizing continental connection. However, as the tournament went on, the expectations of international spectators, media audiences, and participants—often shaped by racialized and historical assumptions about what "Africa" looks and sounds like—revealed tensions that resonate across the continent. Morocco is, in some views, perceived as not "African" enough, while in others, it is framed as not "European" enough, highlighting how Morocco's sonic presentation operates within competing regional imaginaries structured by uneven racial hierarchies. Drawing on performance analysis and media discourse, this article asks how Moroccan performative representations reflect broader cultural narratives about belonging and regional positioning within Africa, Europe, and West Asia, developing a sonic ethnography of reception across multiple publics and contested interpretive frames. By examining these dynamics, this article argues that international mega-events function as key sites where identity is strategically articulated and contested through musical and other sonic registers, revealing how sound becomes central to the production and negotiation of racialized geographies of belonging.

Keywords: Morocco; African identity; race; sound studies; football/soccer; nationalism; Pan-Africanism

1. Introduction

The final match of the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) tournament between Morocco and Senegal created a tense soundscape throughout Morocco. The score remained deadlocked at 0-0 by the second half. Morocco's Brahim Díaz was awarded a penalty kick, a decision largely contested by Senegal's coach, Pape Thiaw. In protest, almost the entire Senegalese team walked off the pitch, delaying play for approximately sixteen minutes. During this time, a section of Senegalese fans spilled onto the pitch in anger, damaging stadium infrastructure, while whistles, chants, and jeers echoed from the stadium onto the streets of Morocco, reverberating out of café and pub doors and windows. When the Senegalese players returned and play finally resumed, Díaz shot his penalty kick in the "Panenka" style,[1] which was easily saved by Senegalese goalkeeper, Édouard Mendy. The score remained 0-0, and as such, the match went into extra time, where Senegalese midfielder Pape Gueye scored the tournament's decisive goal, securing a 1-0 victory for Senegal and the AFCON 2025 title. Under FIFA regulations, a team that abandons a match forfeits the game, but this decision was not made. Once the tournament's events came to a

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close, Morocco's football federation submitted a formal appeal in protest of Senegal's win. The tournament's once vibrant soundscape had become muted across the country.

On 17 March 2026, Morocco suddenly became audible again—a change in sonic atmosphere that could not be ignored (Feld and Brenneis 2004). While watching a movie that evening with my husband at our apartment in Casablanca, the familiar chorus of car horns, whistles, and cheers began to filter in from the street below. My first assumption was that a major European football club match had just ended. "Was there a big game today?" I asked. He shrugged; neither of us knew. Only after opening Instagram did the soundscape become intelligible: FIFA had officially awarded Morocco the AFCON 2025 title.[2]

What started as a football match had become a stage where competing narratives of Morocco and Africa were being performed. Senegal's protest transformed a disputed refereeing decision into accusations of racial injustice, while Moroccan supporters interpreted the protest as an attack on the legitimacy and integrity of the host nation. Long after the final whistle, such performances continued through FIFA appeals, social media debates, and public celebrations.

Although Morocco had filed a formal dispute after the final, enough time had passed that the possibility of the title being reassigned had largely faded into the background of everyday life. In Casablanca, the announcement did prompt cars to parade through the streets with horns blaring and supporters celebrating, but the celebrations felt restrained. By the time the decision was announced, months had passed since the final—for many people the emotional intensity of the tournament had already dissipated. The ruling was widely understood by Moroccans as a form of justice, but it did not carry the same affective force as winning the championship on the pitch would have.

The controversy surrounding the final match began days before the opening whistle. Throughout the tournament, coaches and players from several participating nations publicly praised Morocco's hospitality, training facilities, stadium infrastructure, and organization (Hespress English 2026a, 2026c). As the final approached, however, Pape Thiaw and the Senegalese Football Federation (*Fédération Sénégalaise de Football*, FSF) raised concerns that the Moroccan hosts were monitoring the team's training sessions. The FSF removed their squad from their assigned hotel and training facilities, claiming that they were unsafe due to a lack of security (Sport News Africa 2026). Although Thiaw never made direct, public accusations of racial discrimination, the FSF accused the Confederation of African Football (CAF) of institutional and structural bias, favouring Morocco (Rotbard 2026). The air felt tense leading up to the match—although racism was not directly mentioned in this power imbalance, one could feel it like an underlying ostinato driving the conversation.

Against this backdrop, when Díaz was awarded a penalty kick in the final minutes of the match (94th minute) and Senegal's players walked off the pitch in protest, the decision became framed as evidence of broader unfairness. Whether sincere or conspiratorial, one rumour began to reverberate in the streets of Morocco: Díaz was, perhaps, instructed to deliberately miss the penalty because a Moroccan victory at that moment would only reinforce Senegal's accusations of racism and institutional bias. As Clifford Geertz has written (Geertz 1972), sporting events are not sporting events, they are cultural texts we can read—the penalty itself thus became a site of political interpretation rather than simply athletic performance. However, Díaz's missed opportunity transformed him from one of Morocco's standout performers (he won the golden boot of the tournament, awarded to the player with the most goals) into a target of intense criticism across social media. What had begun as a dispute over officiating quickly expanded into much louder and broader public debates about race, discrimination, and Morocco's place within Africa.

In this article, I argue that AFCON 2025 functioned not merely as a sporting tournament but as a performative arena in which the Moroccan state, participating teams, supporters,

and online commentators each produced varying sonic narratives about Morocco's place within Africa. State-led performances of what Morocco "is", "is not", and "should be" were consistently met with public responses and critiques.[3] I draw on the concept of call-and-response, informed by ethnomusicological scholarship on participatory music-making (Chernoff 1979; Jolaosho 2019), as an analytical framework for examining the relationships between political communication, collective participation, and public expression. Jolaosho's understanding of call-and-response as a "critical organizational element of collective protest singing" (Jolaosho 2019, p. 15) is particularly useful here, as it foregrounds the practice not simply as a musical form but as a means of organizing collective expression and political participation. It highlights how individual and collective voices engage one another, articulate shared positions, and negotiate competing claims. Extending this understanding beyond protest singing, I consider how similar dynamics unfold across the musical, performative, and mediated spaces of AFCON 2025, where institutional narratives, public responses, and competing expressions of belonging continually interact.

Rather than treating call-and-response as a universal or essential feature of African cultural expression, I approach it as a relational process through which calls are recognized, transformed, amplified, or refused (Sakakeeny 2024). In this sense, the concept extends beyond its musical application to consider how political meanings circulate between institutions, publics, and mediated spaces (Tausig 2019; Eckstein 2025). Furthermore, these exchanges are not necessarily reciprocal or harmonious: calls may go unanswered, responses may exceed their intended meanings, and competing voices may struggle for recognition (Bakhtin and Holquist 1981; Kunreuther 2018). Building on this framework, my analysis proceeds through the following interrelated calls and responses: the call of Morocco's national football identity was answered by the GenZ-212 protests; the call of an internationally projected image of Moroccanness was answered by the *Maroc–Maghreb* social media critique; and the call of the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of AFCON 2025 was answered by the myriad performances of Morocco and Africa enacted by various publics throughout the tournament. Through these examples, which examine the tournament from the preparation stages to its final moments, the complexities of racialization, belonging, and nationalism in Morocco are rendered audible.

2. Call: Morocco as Football Nation; Response: GenZ-212 Protests

Morocco is undergoing a turbulent amount of change, all related to hosting a string of consecutive football mega-events. From 21 December 2025 to 18 January 2026, Morocco hosted AFCON 2025, which is organized by CAF, the African continental governing body affiliated with the *Fédération Intérnationale de Football Association* (FIFA). Alongside Spain and Portugal, Morocco is set to host the FIFA World Cup in 2030. As a "dress rehearsal" for the World Cup 2030, Morocco will host the FIFA Clubs World Cup in 2029. In total, Morocco is hosting three mega-events over the span of a five-year period. Morocco is calling for its citizens to identify with football.

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar brought Morocco's emergence as a global footballing force to international attention. I was in Morocco during the tournament, and witnessing the way people lit up, screaming through the streets in revelry was an extraordinary experience—one unlike any sporting celebration I had previously encountered. As a Canadian, my experience of major sporting celebrations had largely been limited to local teams and diaspora communities in Toronto. The atmosphere in Morocco was fundamentally different: the national team provided a shared object of identification for people across social and cultural differences, and one did not need to be a football fan to participate in the collective energy that filled the streets.[4] Since then, this affective energy has increasingly been channelled into a football-centred national identity. As Ncube et al. argue, football

in the Global South is often deeply intertwined with a politics of belonging (Ncube et al. 2024). I suggest that Morocco's footballing identity is particularly productive in this regard because it operates through a dual performance: the performance of the nation for its own citizens and the performance of the nation for the international community. Football thus becomes both a means of producing internal solidarity and a platform through which Morocco presents itself to the world.

This football-centred identity that Morocco started calling for in 2022 is both celebrated and critiqued, simultaneously. At the end of September 2025, Morocco's youth responded to the football call. They took to the streets in protest for better healthcare and education. These demonstrations were eventually named the "GenZ-212" protests (GenZ meaning Generation-Z; 212 being the country code for Morocco), and they took place both online and offline, an "affective public" gathering traction through an emotional circulation of actions and images (Papacharissi 2014). The critique was entangled with Morocco's footballing identity because approximately $5 billion USD was mobilized for renovating old stadiums, building new stadiums, and other related infrastructure (Chaffag 2025; Harley 2026); and approximately $4.2 billion USD was allocated to airport upgrades (Eljechtimi 2025). Apparently, no extra money was being channelled into healthcare and education. During the peak of the GenZ-212 protests, graffiti tags around Casablanca suggested that everyone should boycott AFCON 2025; Morocco's football infrastructure appeared increasingly European in scale and quality, but everyday life for many Moroccans remained far removed from the standards of living associated with Europe.

The GenZ-212 protests roared throughout the streets of major cities across the country for about three weeks, and unfortunately police responded brutally. Windows shattered as protestors targeted banks, shops, and municipal headquarters; police engines roared as vehicles drove into demonstrators in an attempt to "clear the way" in Oujda; and gunshots echoed in Agadir, where three young men were killed by Royal Gendarmerie officials (Amnesty International 2025; Najjar and News Agencies 2025; Savoye et al. 2025). Due to the violence, eventually, the government had to address what the people wanted. Government statements were released, broadcasting that $13–14 billion USD would be put into healthcare—a 16% increase (Africa News 2026). The Moroccan government also promised to construct new public hospitals and university hospitals, as well as renovate existing hospitals (Maroc.ma 2026). In their education promise, $10.8 billion USD would be directed towards a new education plan (Hespress English 2026b), which was stated to include 2000 new primary schools, and 500 new middle schools across the country (7News Morocco 2025). By the time AFCON 2025 began, the echoes of the protests and boycotts had slowed down.

The protests also drew on the memory of Brazil's 2014 World Cup mega-event, which was promoted as a catalyst for employment and economic growth but ultimately left many Brazilians questioning who had truly benefitted from the tournament. Maurice Roche identifies three defining characteristics of mega-events: their immense scale, their relatively brief duration, and their potentially long-lasting effects (Roche 2000). While the media often emphasizes the potential of mega-events to generate employment, stimulate infrastructure development, and produce broader social and economic benefits, a substantial body of research has also documented the uneven distribution of these benefits and the displacement that can accompany them (Roche 2000; Horne and Manzenreiter 2006; Gaffney 2008; Tzanelli 2018; Boykoff 2020). Protesting mega-events is thus not an abnormal occurrence, and countries such as Brazil and Turkey are widely known for such actions. These tensions have been evident in critiques emerging from Morocco's GenZ community, which has questioned both the substantial public expenditure required to stage AFCON 2025 at this scale and the social consequences that may follow once Morocco's string of tournaments ends in 2030.

Morocco's hosting of a sequence of mega-events over a five-year period introduces a further temporal dimension to this debate. My interlocutors are cautiously hopeful that the concentration of these events may enable the country's football identity to outlast the tournaments themselves, particularly if the infrastructure developed for them continues to support employment, sporting activity, and public use. I, too, am cautiously hopeful—my hope is shaped not only by my positionality as someone who resides in Morocco and wishes to see these developments benefit local communities, but also by the extensive social and material costs of the urban transformations already undertaken to accommodate them. However, the construction of the infrastructure required for these events has already involved forms of destruction and displacement that have profoundly affected communities and neighbourhoods. These transformations are audible in the everyday soundscape, where the persistent noise of construction machinery, the crashing of demolition, and the rhythms of neighbourhood life are increasingly interrupted by the sounds of urban redevelopment. The potential long-term benefits of mega-event development cannot erase these costs, nor can they make displacement acceptable. Nevertheless, they raise a difficult question: if such transformations have already taken place, what will remain for the people who have borne their costs once the spectacle has ended? Alongside Caldeira (2000), I ask, who gets to inhabit this refurbished *medina*? My interlocutors and I hope is that it does not continue to get worse for people who have already endured such hardships.

Beginning in 2024, I began to witness the urban transformations undertaken in preparation for Morocco's upcoming mega-events. In Casablanca, these transformations initially took the form of efforts to remove pigeons from the city as part of a broader project of urban "clean-up". The pigeons, however, have since returned—as pigeons are known to do—while the city's clean-up initiatives have expanded into more consequential forms of urban transformation: shifting toward people and their houses. Houses in the *medina*, occupied and owned by the same families for generations, have begun to be demolished to make way for tourism infrastructure, including hotels. As a result, the *medina* is already beginning to look and sound markedly different from the place that many residents have known as home.

To analyze the performance Morocco presented to its African audience during the AFCON 2025 tournament, it is necessary to attend also to the performances taking place within Morocco's urban centres. As Morocco prepares to perform for an even larger international audience in 2030, its cities are increasingly characterized by the sounds of construction and demolition. The voices of FIFA and other powerful institutional actors are amplified through the processes of mega-event development, while those whose homes are demolished and whose communities are displaced are rendered increasingly inaudible.[5] In the reorganization of urban space required to accommodate mega-event infrastructure, powerful institutions and investors secure access to land and resources, while individuals and communities with limited political power bear the costs of these transformations. The unequal distribution of voice and space is not unique to mega-events; it is characteristic of neoliberal urban development more broadly. Mega-events, however, intensify these processes, accelerating the production of infrastructure while compressing the time available for communities to contest or resist the transformations imposed upon them. The mega-event thus amplifies some voices while silencing others, producing an urban soundscape in which the sounds of construction drown out the voices of those displaced by it.

3. Call: Morocco's Diverse Roots; Response: Maroc/Maghreb Divide

The controversies surrounding the AFCON 2025 final demonstrate that urban sounds in Morocco are never simply background noise. Car horns, chants, public announcements, music, and online audio all become sites through which competing understandings of race,

racialization, belonging, and nationhood are expressed. These sonic exchanges are significant in the context of Morocco's contested position within Africa, where distinctions between North and sub-Saharan Africa are shaped by histories of colonialism, racial hierarchies, and the uneven recognition of Blackness within national and continental identities. Drawing on performance analysis and media discourse (MacAloon 1984), I examine AFCON 2025 as an arena in which competing performances of Morocco were produced, circulated, and contested. I ask how the Moroccan state's official sonic presentation (or call) of the nation interacted with (or was answered by) the performances of athletes, coaches, supporters, and online commentators, each of whom articulated their own understandings of Morocco's place within Africa and the racialized boundaries of African belonging. By examining these dynamics, I argue that international mega-events function as key sites where musical identity is both strategically articulated and negotiated, revealing how Morocco's simultaneous connections to—and disconnections from—Africa, Europe, and the Arab world are also shaped by racialized understandings of identity. Together, the Opening/Closing Ceremonies and individual performances can be read as a dialogue between the host nation (Morocco) and visiting African delegations—some of which embraced the host while others offered critiques. These official and unofficial performances reveal that AFCON 2025 was not simply a showcase for Moroccan culture, but a site where competing understandings of Africa, race, nationhood, and belonging were continuously negotiated.

Opening and Closing Ceremonies are state-run performances described by scholars as sites where both globalization and nationalism are negotiated (Wang et al. 2025; Li 2014; Arning 2013; and Thomas and Antony 2015). Most scholarship about this national–global connection is discussed in the context of the Olympics or the FIFA World Cup, which are larger-scale events than AFCON, but I argue that the framework still applies. An analysis of Morocco's AFCON 2025 performance requires attending to the intersecting frameworks of nationalism, Pan-Africanism, and globalization. Although AFCON is a continental tournament, its broadcasts circulate globally, reaching African diaspora communities as well as non-African football fans with an interest in the competition. The importance of the African diaspora was reflected in the Closing Ceremony through the inclusion of British actor of Sierra Leonean and Ghanaian descent, Idris Elba, whose presence extended the tournament's symbolic reach beyond the African continent. Having said that, the negotiation is mostly national (Morocco) and continental (Africa)—calling for a (global) African audience to witness and comprehend Morocco's nationhood and complex cultural roots.

Wang et al. (2025, p. 1142) use Buhmann and Ingenhoff's "four-dimensional model of country image" to analyze China's Olympic Opening Ceremony performances in 2008 and 2022, conceptualizing a country's image as "a subjective stakeholder attitude toward a nation and its state, comprising specific beliefs and general feelings in a functional, a normative, an esthetic and an emotional dimension" (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015, p. 187). Morocco's country image, however, is not solely produced by the Moroccan state. It is also interpreted, challenged, and reconfigured by those who encounter it.

According to Buhmann and Ingenhoff's model, a country's image has four dimensions:

1. The functional dimension (what a country does): how a country performs and contributes economically, politically, and technologically on the international stage.
2. The normative dimension (how a country governs): how a country governs and upholds values, institutions, and quality of life for its citizens and residents.
3. The esthetic dimension (how a country appears): how a country is perceived through its physical environment, culture, heritage, and visual or sensory appeal.
4. The emotional dimension (how a country makes people feel): the feelings, emotional associations, and sense of affinity that people develop toward the country.

Applying this model to China, Wang et al. (2025, p. 1142) thus articulate this model as:

1. The world's China
2. The people's China
3. Esthetic China
4. Modern China

By applying this model to Morocco, one can analyze what Morocco wants to project onto the international stage, as well as the image of Morocco that the people feel:

1. The world's Morocco
2. The people's Morocco
3. Esthetic Morocco
4. Modern Morocco

While useful, this model risks implying that a country's image is produced primarily by the state and subsequently received by audiences. AFCON 2025 demonstrates a more dynamic process. Morocco's image was not simply projected through official ceremonies and branding campaigns, rather, its image and position were a site of performative debate—a "call-and-response" type of dialogue. The four dimensions of country image provide a useful framework for understanding these negotiations, but they should be understood as sites of contestation rather than fixed categories.

Through social media, many Moroccans have begun articulating competing images of the nation. Such individuals are posting reels about a social divide that frames Morocco through the distinction between *Maroc* and *Maghreb*. In these social media posts, *Maroc*—the French name for Morocco—comes to signify an affluent, touristic, and internationally legible Morocco, while *Maghreb*—the Arabic name for Morocco—indexes a more local, working-class experience. Drawing from post-colonial critiques of inequality, images of riads, models in *haut couture*, and fine dining on the coastline are juxtaposed with scenes of popular neighbourhoods, young men in tracksuits and slide-on sandals, and meals eaten on plastic tables in the sand. At its simplest, this contrast presents a divide between wealthy and poor Morocco, circulating for both domestic and international audiences with the implicit political messages that the Morocco showcased to tourists and global media is not the reality experienced by much of the population. However, the distinction extends beyond class. *Maroc* evokes a cosmopolitan, European-facing Morocco, while *Maghreb* is constructed through imagery of small villages, manual labour, multigenerational families, and cultural traditions, positioning it as the country's more "authentically" African counterpart.

This distinction is also sonic. Posts tagged *Maroc* are frequently accompanied by a bohemian, cosmopolitan soundscape reminiscent of globally circulating "World Music" esthetics, while those tagged *Maghreb* feature *chaabi*, a popular musical genre more closely associated with everyday social life and popular cultural expression. Music thus becomes another means through which these competing imaginaries of Morocco are produced: one oriented towards a cosmopolitan, internationally legible esthetic, the other invoking a more locally grounded cultural identity.

These contemporary distinctions also have a longer history. As Llano (2026) demonstrates in his study of music, race, and colonialism in Morocco, musical practices and listening were historically implicated in the production and negotiation of racial and cultural difference. Although the social media representations discussed here emerge from a different political and historical context, they similarly demonstrate how musical forms become attached to particular ideas of cultural identity and belonging. The contrast between *Maroc* and *Maghreb* is therefore not simply visual or linguistic; it is also audible, as different musical esthetics help construct competing claims about what constitutes Moroccan culture and where Morocco belongs.

Through this interpretation, we can understand Morocco's country image as:

1. The functional dimension: *Maroc*
2. The normative dimension: *Maghreb*
3. The esthetic dimension: heritage, architecture, spectacle
4. The emotional dimension: football, pride, pan-African belonging

Focusing on the emotional dimension, Ncube et al. state that "football serves as a fetish for war, replaying past conflicts and sometimes setting off new ones" (Ncube et al. 2024, p. 673). On the football clubs team level, one can still find ongoing rivalry between a city's quarters and the fans a team has collected over time. But on the national team level, football matches are symbolic of going to the battlefield. On this larger scale, geopolitical wounds can thus be reopened in the stadium and through the emotions of fans. In the case of Morocco, this even extends to people who do not regularly engage with football, as it is such an engrained part of Moroccan identity that most locals know what is happening with all Moroccan national teams (various age groups) at any time of the year, especially since their semi-final qualification in the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Football becomes the emotional performance of the nation through which Morocco expresses its multiple identities, transforming into a shared narrative of ambition, belonging, and international recognition.

The tensions expressed through the *Maroc*/*Maghreb* distinction also emerged at the continental scale during AFCON 2025. Questions about which Morocco was being presented to the world were closely connected to questions about whether Morocco's performance of nationhood was recognizably African. The expectations of international spectators, media audiences, and participants—often shaped by assumptions about "Africa"—revealed tensions that resonate across the continent. Morocco is, in some views, perceived as not "African" enough, while in others, it is framed as not "European" enough, highlighting how Morocco operates within competing regional imaginaries.[6] In 2022, when Morocco qualified for the semi-finals of the FIFA World Cup, Ncube et al. write that, "celebrating greatness, Moroccan winger Sofiane Boufal dedicated the victory to Moroccans, Arab and Muslim people. The disavowal of sub-Saharan Africa and the negation of pan-African solidarity triggered social media debates which spilled into quotidian lives of Africans" (Ncube et al. 2024, p. 674). Following Boufal's remarks, national team coach at the time, Walid Regragui, addressed the issue during a press conference, clarifying the team's position as inclusive of Africa. However, the question of how Morocco identifies and how Africa identifies Morocco remained unclear.

The question of Morocco being "African enough" is not only a racial divide across the Sahara Desert, but it is also based on political decisions that divided Morocco from the rest of the continent. In 1984, during the reign of King Hassan II, Morocco left the Organization of African Unity (OAU, now the African Union). They did not rejoin the African Union (AU) until 2017, thus marking a 33-year absence from political Africa. The reason for their departure was because the AU granted membership of the organization to the Saharaoui Arab Democratic Republic (SADR)—the Western Sahara territory that Morocco claims ownership of (BBC News 2016). During this absence, they put forward three motions towards Europeanness, including one formal application to the European Economic Community (EEC, now the European Union) in 1987, which was rejected. King Hassan II passed away in 1999 and King Mohammed VI took the throne immediately after. By 2008, Morocco gained an "advanced status" partnership with the European Union (Jaidi 2009). Morocco was thus gaining traction with the European Union, although not necessarily "becoming European". Although King Mohammed VI made the claim that he was "coming home to Africa" when they rejoined the African Union in 2017, it still took him 18 years of his reign to get there, as he appeared to be more interested with European political connections. The question of who Western Sahara "belongs to"—the debate that

signalled Morocco's exit from political Africa—remains controversial. Therefore, as Zakia Salime (Salime 2024) cautions in her call to decolonize debates about race in North Africa, the question of Morocco's African belonging cannot be reduced to a simple racialized division between North and sub-Saharan Africa. Rather, it must be situated within the region's specific histories and political formations, including the ways in which Blackness and anti-Blackness have been constructed and contested.

These historical and political tensions help explain why Morocco's Africanness is sometimes questioned by people elsewhere on the continent. However, for many Moroccans, this makes them not European enough, not African enough, and—often—not Arab enough, leaving them positioned at the edge of the continent where they are geopolitically positioned, and revealing the instability of neat regional categories. Morocco is simultaneously African, Arab, and deeply entangled with Europe, while never being fully reducible to any one of these frameworks. AFCON 2025 brought these competing understandings of Morocco into direct conversation. The Moroccan state sought to present a particular vision of the nation through ceremonial spectacle, musical/cultural performance, and infrastructural display. Simultaneously, coaches, supporters, journalists, influencers, and players often articulated alternative interpretations, sometimes affirming the state's narrative and at other times challenging it. The Opening and Closing Ceremonies—detailed in the next section—therefore cannot be understood as isolated performances. Rather, they formed one part of a broader dialogue through which Morocco's place within Africa was continuously voiced and contested.

4. Call: The State Performs Morocco at the Opening and Closing Ceremonies

The Opening and Closing Ceremonies constituted the Moroccan state's most carefully curated performance of national identity during AFCON 2025. This can be analyzed through Joseph Nye's "soft power" (Nye 2008), a seductive form of state-branding that coerces citizens to agree with the wants and needs of the state (in this case, the 4D model). Unlike the spontaneous performances of supporters, athletes, and online commentators (examined later in this article), the ceremonies offered a highly managed representation of Morocco intended for continental and global audiences. Through music, choreography, language, symbolism, and infrastructure, the state articulated a particular vision of Morocco's place within Africa. However, this vision would not remain uncontested. As subsequent sections demonstrate, many of the tournament's participants and spectators interpreted Morocco through alternative frameworks that both reinforced and challenged the narratives presented during the ceremonies. In this section, I will describe and analyze the Opening and Closing Ceremonies performances, which both took place at Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium in Rabat. As will unfold, Morocco is trying to perform itself as simultaneously African, Arab, Muslim, modern, and global.

4.1. Opening Ceremony

The Opening Ceremony performance began with a pre-recorded, "behind-the-scenes" video, which was projected onto the megatron screen for those who were watching live at the stadium, while serving as the opening broadcast for viewers watching on television at home or at cafés and pubs. The visual performance began with a mysterious-looking man (the "central figure") wearing indigo-coloured Moroccan traditional clothing. Sonically, it began with cinematic drones and a woman's cry, and eventually an electronic *darbouka* (hand drum) to establish the rhythmic mode. This combination of sound and imagery reminded me of stereotypical Afro-futuristic or sci-fi feature films (such as Denis Villeneuve's DUNE), where the natives of another planet are often depicted using North African, Amazigh cultural

tropes. The performance thus draws upon an Orientalist visual and sonic vocabulary, and does so through a distinctly self-conscious and self-referential process: Morocco mobilizes imagery that was historically used to construct North Africa as exotic, ancient, and culturally Other in order to produce its own image of cultural distinctiveness for a global audience. This can be understood as a form of self-Orientalism, although the term should not imply a simple reproduction of Western representations; rather, the ceremony strategically reappropriates and redeploys Orientalist codes as part of Morocco's contemporary cultural and national self-presentation.

It is also important to note that none of the music heard during either the pre-recorded video sequence or the live stadium performance was performed live. All musical elements (for the entire ceremony) were delivered through a pre-produced playback track. Thus, while the dancers and performers were physically present and performing live in the stadium, the musical soundscape itself was mediated through pre-recorded audio. This distinction is important because the ceremony's sonic performance was not produced spontaneously in the stadium but, rather, it was carefully composed, edited, and reproduced through a controlled audiovisual production. Furthermore, staging a performance in an open-air stadium introduced the material conditions of weather into the event. The AFCON 2025 tournament took place during Morocco's rainy season, which extends through the winter months of December and January, and a heavy downpour continued throughout the Opening Ceremony, as well as during a number of the tournament's matches. But the rain did not disrupt the performances (nor did it disrupt the matches). The newly constructed and renovated stadiums were designed to accommodate such conditions, demonstrating the infrastructural capacity required to host mega-events at this scale—a level of preparedness that, in some respects, rivalled or even surpassed that of many established European football venues. In this sense, the rain became an inadvertent demonstration of the infrastructure itself, representing "modern Morocco" in the 4D model of country image: while the weather remained beyond the control of the organizers, the stadiums were designed to ensure that the spectacle could continue uninterrupted.

Following a sequence of movements performed to the cinematic music, the central figure raised his arms above his head, holding a glowing LED hexagon approximately one foot in diameter. He then threw the hexagon toward the camera, mimicking the gesture of throwing a football. As the hexagon appeared to strike the camera, the broadcast cut to images of Rabat. The camera subsequently appeared to throw the hexagon back to the central figure, who caught it and incorporated it into a contemporary dance sequence. This exchange continued as the performance introduced each of the cities hosting the tournament's matches: Rabat, Casablanca, Tangier, Marrakech, Agadir, and Fez. Once all six cities had been introduced, the symbolic function of the hexagons became clear: each represented a panel of a football, and the separate pieces came together to form a single golden football. The pre-recorded sequence then concluded, and the broadcast returned to the live stadium feed, where the central figure entered the stadium carrying the golden football.

As the central figure enters the stadium, he is accompanied by another man dressed in a football tracksuit. Rather than functioning as separate characters, the two figures appear to operate as complementary halves of a single symbolic figure: the modern footballer, simultaneously rooted in tradition and oriented toward contemporary sport. Together, the two dancers perform contemporary choreography with the golden football. The cinematic music continues, with an electronically produced *nay* (an Arabic reed flute) playing soaring melodies over the beat. As the routine concludes, however, the *nay* fades out and is replaced, precisely on the first beat of a new musical phrase, by the sound of a *guembri*, the traditional three-stringed, skin-covered, bass plucked lute associated with Gnawa music.[7]

This transition marks the conclusion of the ceremony's introductory section and initiates its second movement, using the sound of Gnawa music to shift the performance from a more generalized cinematic and Arab sonic vocabulary toward a specifically Moroccan (and African) musical tradition.

As the second section of the performance begins, a woman's voice narrates a descriptive, poetic passage about Morocco's landscapes in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). The choice to use MSA rather than Moroccan Darija (Moroccan Arabic), is significant: as the standardized form of Arabic used across Africa and the Arab world, MSA allows the narration to address a broader Arabic-speaking audience beyond Morocco. Moroccan Darija, by contrast, is a distinctly Moroccan vernacular shaped by a complex linguistic history, incorporating elements of Morocco's indigenous Amazigh languages Taselhit, Tamazight, and Tarifit; colonial languages French and Spanish; and other linguistic influences, such as English. Although Darija is the primary language of everyday communication for most Moroccans, the two official languages of Morocco are MSA and Standard Moroccan Amazigh, and formal and public-facing broadcasts in Morocco are conventionally delivered in MSA. The use of MSA in the ceremony therefore positions Morocco within the linguistic landscape of Arabic-speaking Africa while maintaining the performance's broader Pan-African orientation.

During the poetic narration, approximately 250 dancers enter the stadium, each holding a glowing LED hexagon above their head (CAF Online 2025). Viewed from above by a drone, the dancers appeared as a sea of illuminated hexagons. At various moments, the hexagons changed colour or displayed the faces of significant figures from Moroccan, African, and football history. The dancers organized themselves into smaller groups that advanced toward the camera to perform brief choreographic sequences before returning to the larger formation. However, the coordination between dancers in both the smaller groups and the larger ensemble appeared uneven, producing a visual effect that was at times disjointed in both the close-up broadcast images and the panoramic drone shots. This was particularly notable given Morocco's reputation for highly coordinated gymnastics and dance performances. My interlocutors expressed disappointment with what they perceived as a lack of synchronization, a reaction that was also evident in the pub where I was watching the ceremony: as the sequence continued, members of the audience began expressing visible and audible frustration with the performance. The sequence therefore demonstrates that national performances are not only produced by organizers and performers but also evaluated by audiences, whose expectations are shaped by Morocco's existing reputation for choreographic and athletic excellence.

The narrator concludes her poetic evocation of Moroccan culture as the central figures continue to move and dance among the sea of performers carrying the illuminated hexagons. The central figures carry the golden football, which is eventually suspended from a chain, at which point its resemblance to a traditional Moroccan brass lantern becomes more apparent. The object thus continues the performance's recurring fusion of Moroccan cultural forms with contemporary football imagery, transforming the football into a distinctly Moroccan symbol that illuminates the movement of the central figures. As this section of the performance comes to a close, the soundscape transitions into the song, "Allah Ya Mawlana" (God, Our Lord/Master). The song was originally performed by Nass El Ghiwane, subsequently reinterpreted for the Opening Ceremony of the tournament in a contemporary electronic arrangement by Omary, a DJ and producer from Casablanca. In an interview with Omary in 2026, he stated that the inclusion of Nass El Ghiwane was meaningful: formed in 1969, the band became renowned for using music, poetry, and elements of Moroccan folk traditions to address social and political concerns. Their work offered a means of articulating critiques of authoritarianism, surveillance, corruption, and government power within the constraints of Morocco's political context. Their music therefore exemplifies how folklore

and poetry could function as forms of political expression, enabling musicians to voice social critique without necessarily confronting censorship through direct political speech. This relationship between music, cultural memory, and political articulation also resonates with Alexander Fisher's analysis of how music can carry and reshape ideas of African identity, functioning as more than an accompaniment to visual or narrative representation (Fisher 2016). In the context of the Opening Ceremony, the reworking of Nass El Ghiwane's song similarly gives musical expression to a particular vision of Moroccan cultural identity, bringing the band's history of social critique into a contemporary national spectacle.

The band's inclusion in the Opening Ceremony thus carries multiple layers of significance. Nass El Ghiwane remain deeply popular among Moroccans, making the group an important representation of popular cultural identity rather than simply an elite or state-sanctioned cultural tradition. At the same time, their musical practice bridges traditional Moroccan instruments and rhythms with electric instrumentation and modern arrangements, drawing on diverse elements of Morocco's musical landscape, including Gnawa and other popular folk traditions. Their music thus evokes a culturally plural Morocco, one whose musical heritage cannot be reduced to a singular Arab identity. This is particularly significant given the historical marginalization of Amazigh languages and cultural expression within official narratives of Moroccan national identity (Maddy-Weitzman 2011), despite the eventual constitutional recognition of Tamazight as an official language in 2011. Amazigh expressive traditions, including music, poetry, dance, and musical culture, have themselves played important roles in articulating and negotiating cultural identity (Becker 2006). Their presence in the ceremony therefore offered a particularly resonant Moroccan and African cultural reference: one rooted in popular musical memory, traditional sound, political history, and the ongoing transformation of Moroccan music. In this sense, Nass El Ghiwane can be understood on the 4D model as the "people's Morocco"—a cultural reference capable of representing Morocco not only through official national symbolism, but through the music that has long spoken to and for ordinary Moroccans. During this part of the performance, the hexagons form a large-scale visual display of Morocco's national colours, red and green, creating the five-pointed star on the Moroccan flag. The performance thus shifts from an evocation of Moroccan cultural heritage toward an explicitly national representation of the host country, for the host country. The inclusion of a group historically associated with social critique illustrates how state performances often incorporate symbols whose meanings exceed the narratives organizers intend to communicate.

Another cinematic vocalization accompanies an Arabic rhythmic pattern performed on a djembe drum, bringing together North African Arabic influences and a West African percussive instrument. The dancers now carry footballs and continue with hip-hop choreography, blending contemporary dance with references to the tournament's sporting focus. The juxtaposition of North African sonic and visual motifs with hip-hop choreography produces an esthetic that projects a distinctly "modern" Morocco, an analysis I will return to in due course. The brass lantern/golden football introduced earlier is likewise transformed into an ordinary football, now carried and manipulated by a hip-hop dancer. This transformation symbolically shifts the object from a culturally specific Moroccan form toward an object associated with global contemporary sport. The cinematic atmosphere continues and the sequence culminates with the appearance of a giant AFCON trophy at the centre of the stage, as the hexagonal LED panels surrounding it transform into the national flags of the participating African countries.

The final section of the Opening Ceremony's musical performances took the form of a concert, also performed to a playback track, featuring French Montana, David, L'Artiste, and Jaylann. Following the concert, CAF President, Dr. Patrice Motsepe, delivered the opening address, declaring the tournament's official opening. The dancers then cleared the stadium

as the pitch was reorganized for the opening match. The ceremony concluded with Crown Prince Moulay El Hassan inaugurating the tournament with a ceremonial kick-off. And thus concludes the Opening Moroccan "call".

4.2. Closing Ceremony

While the Opening Ceremony represented Morocco to Africa and the world, the Closing Ceremony represented Africa's gratitude back to Morocco. The AFCON 2025 Closing Ceremony was structured around three acts: a farewell to Morocco as host, a celebration of African musical unity, and a symbolic handoff to the next generation (Medias24 2026). The Closing Ceremony foregrounded themes of Pan-African unity, intergenerational continuity, and collective emotion at the conclusion of the tournament. The ceremony paid tribute both to Morocco as the host nation and to the participating African countries, emphasizing values of integrity, sportsmanship, connection, and collective inspiration (Medias24 2026). Its closing gestures also looked toward the future of the tournament, invoking the next edition of AFCON in 2027 as part of a continuing continental narrative.

The Ceremony started with a 60 s countdown with the theme of "celebration, heartbreak, unity" (Medias24 2026), dedicated to the fans and supporters of the tournament. Dancers wore Morocco's colours—red and green—and visuals celebrated the football infrastructure that set the stage for future football tournaments internationally—not just in Africa. Sonically, electronic music was combined with Moroccan and African rhythms and percussive instruments. The second act featured Jaylann, L'Artiste, and Angélique Kidjo, who performed the tournament's official song, "AFRICALLEZ", in Arabic, English, and French, marking the linguistic diversity of both the tournament and the continent. This performance showcases the diversity of Pan-Africanism, constructing the image and sound of Africa as multilingual and musically plural, with Morocco's Amazigh, Arabic, and Francophone cultural affiliations positioned within a broader African soundscape.

One of the ceremony's most significant performances was the third act, which was centred around Idris Elba, who delivered a spoken-word performance addressed to Africa and Morocco before performing his song "An African". Elba has described being inspired and honoured by the opportunity to participate in the event, and he even documented aspects of the song's production and his experience of the tournament through his YouTube channel (Elba 2026). His inclusion is particularly significant in relation to the ceremony's Pan-African themes. As a British actor and musician of Sierra Leonean and Ghanaian descent, Elba embodies the African diaspora, and his presence symbolically extends AFCON's continental narrative beyond the geographical boundaries of Africa. Accompanying his performance was a young boy, symbolizing the next generation of African athletes and citizens whose futures were presented as connected to the continent's ongoing cultural and sporting development. Through this closing performance, the state's intention was to connect Pan-African belonging to global cultural circulation, intergenerational continuity and transmission, positioning the next generation inside and outside Africa as an important part of the broader African community imagined through the tournament, the future of African football and, symbolically, the future of the continent itself.

The final symbolic image of the ceremony is the AFCON trophy, assembled from two ceremonial banners extending from opposite sides of the stadium. The image offers a powerful metaphor for Pan-African unity: difference is not erased but brought together to produce a shared whole. Pan-Africanism is often misread as a project of creating "one Africa," implying cultural and political homogeneity. The AFCON 2025 Closing Ceremony instead had the intention of foregrounding the continent's diversity, suggesting that African unity is constituted through plurality rather than sameness. Morocco suggests that Africa, in this representation, is strongest not when its differences are dissolved, but when its

many cultures, languages, histories, musics, and identities are brought into relation with one another.

As the following section demonstrates, this vision of Pan-African unity remains largely aspirational. The Closing Ceremony presents a normative ideal of an Africa whose diversity can be brought together through shared cultural and sporting affiliations. However, the actions of fans and supporters, while often lively and jovial, also reveal how national differences can generate division as readily as they can produce solidarity. Rather than naturally dissolving national boundaries, football can intensify them, exposing the tensions between the ideal of Pan-African unity and the lived realities of continental competition.

Taken together, the Opening and Closing Ceremonies articulated an image of Morocco as simultaneously African, modern, culturally diverse, and globally connected. However, this was only one performance among many. Throughout the tournament, coaches, athletes, supporters, and digital commentators advanced their own interpretations of Morocco, some embracing the state's vision while others questioning its authenticity, inclusivity, or Africanness.

5. Response: Counter-Performances by Individual Actors

The Opening and Closing Ceremonies of AFCON 2025 were carefully orchestrated state-called performances, while alternative, responsive performances by individual actors continued throughout the tournament both inside stadiums and on social media. In many cases, such performances appeared to express allegiance to a particular nation-state or to position themselves in opposition to another—often Morocco, as the host nation, but also whichever opposing team was being played. Examining these moments reveals competing interpretations of the tournament and highlights how AFCON 2025 became a site where the meanings of nationhood, belonging, and African identities were actively negotiated. In what follows, I examine three case studies that illuminate the tournament's central tensions: how Pan-Africanism should or should not be expressed, and the recurring question of Morocco's place within Africa.

5.1. Lumumba Vea and Pan-Africanism

One of the most notable performances of the tournament was silent—the performance of Michel Nkuka Mboladinga, better known as Lumumba Vea. His stillness became a powerful point of reference for audiences who read the performance through the language of pan-African solidarity, generating meanings that were not necessarily articulated by the Moroccan state itself. Lumumba Vea is a football superfan from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He stands completely silent and motionless with his right arm raised in the air for entire ninety-minute matches (including extra time and penalty kicks) as a living statue. His performances invoke both the memory and political legacy of Patrice Lumumba,[8] symbolizing resilience, anti-colonial struggle, and the enduring aspirations associated with his vision for Congo. Standing silent and motionless atop a pedestal with one arm raised for the duration of a football match—often more than ninety minutes—requires considerable physical endurance. The performance therefore does not merely represent political commitment; it enacts it through the disciplined use of the body itself. The understanding of the body as a site through which meaning is produced resonates with Vlad Dima's examination of footballing bodies, race, and representation in African contexts (Dima 2020). Lumumba Vea's body becomes both the medium and the message—through its stillness, endurance, and deliberate positioning, it makes the political memory of Patrice Lumumba physically present within the spectacle of international football.

Images of Lumumba Vea went viral during AFCON 2025, transforming him into a recognizable figure across African football media. His anticipated presence—and eventual

absence at the 2026 FIFA World Cup—after he was denied a visa to enter the United States, also generated significant discussion on social media, further amplifying the symbolic power of his performances beyond the stadium. Unlike the highly choreographed state spectacles of the Opening and Closing Ceremonies, Lumumba Vea's body became a site for remembering anti-colonial struggle and asserting alternative visions of African identity and solidarity.

However, neither the significance of Patrice Lumumba nor Lumumba Vea's performance were universally recognized. During a match between Algeria and the DR Congo, Algerian striker Mohamed Amine Amoura mocked Lumumba Vea, imitating his iconic pose after scoring a goal before theatrically falling to the ground, seemingly suggesting that the statue had been knocked over. The silent gesture was met with loud criticism, prompting both Amoura and the Algerian Football Federation to issue public apologies to Lumumba Vea, the Congolese team, and supporters on social media. According to subsequent reports by The New Arab, Amoura said he was unaware of Patrice Lumumba's historical significance of the figure he was imitating (The New Arab 2026). The incident points to uneven relationships with shared African histories and political symbols across the continent. In particular, it brings into view the historical and political distance that has often been constructed between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, despite their entangled histories and shared experiences of anti-colonial struggle. Lumumba's legacy, and the pan-African ideals associated with it, thus become a point of connection and tension, exposing the limits of any assumption that a shared continental identity necessarily entails a shared historical consciousness.

Patrice Lumumba's symbolism extends well beyond the borders of the DR Congo. As one of the most influential pan-African figures of the twentieth century, he continues to represent anti-colonial struggle, African unity, and political self-determination. This broader significance was evident in the responses of other players and supporters throughout the tournament. For example, Nigerian striker Akor Adams paid tribute to Lumumba by striking the same statue-like pose after scoring a goal against Algeria in the following match. Similarly, Moroccan fans were photographed in the stands adopting the pose after the DR Congo had been eliminated from the competition. These acts suggest that Lumumba Vea's performance resonated beyond national allegiances, becoming a silent, visual symbol through which diverse African publics expressed solidarity and a shared investment in pan-African ideals. The distinct performances of Lumumba Vea, Amoura, and Adams, and the ways they were interpreted by audiences, raise questions about how North African identities and competing ideas of African belonging are embodied, performed, and recognized across the continent.

Lumumba Vea's performances created opportunities for learning, critique, and solidarity throughout the tournament. While his performances echoed some of the pan-African themes advanced by the Moroccan state during the Opening and Closing Ceremonies, they articulated these ideals through a markedly different political lens. Rather than celebrating African unity through state-led spectacle, infrastructure, and cultural diplomacy, Lumumba Vea's performance drew on the memory of anti-colonial struggle and grassroots forms of political identification. In doing so, it offered an alternative vision of Pan-Africanism—one rooted not in national branding or mega-event narratives, but in collective historical memory, resistance, and transnational solidarity. And it did so, silently, through his body.

Lumumba Vea's body has since been incorporated into FIFA's commercial ecosystem. The official care sponsor of FIFA is Unilever, which owns the deodorant company Rexona. The Rexona logo is conveniently positioned on the armpits of the referee kits, becoming visible whenever officials raise their arms. Because Lumumba Vea's now-iconic pose involved lifting his right arm, he was later featured in a Rexona advertisement in which he sprays

deodorant under his arms before taking the field. While the advertisement is framed as lighthearted and playful, the advertisement transforms a gesture associated with anti-colonial resistance and pan-African solidarity into a vehicle for selling a consumer product. The implications become particularly striking when considered alongside the colonial history of the company behind the brand. Unilever's predecessor, Lever Brothers, established *Huileries du Congo Belge* (HCB) in 1911 to extract palm oil in the Belgian Congo, operating through extensive territorial concessions and exploitative labour practices. The advertisement thus brings together two seemingly disparate histories: the colonial extraction of Congolese resources for European commercial profit and the contemporary commodification of a political figure whose legacy is inseparable from the struggle against colonial exploitation. Lumumba Vea's body becomes a site through which this contradiction is made visible: a symbol of anti-colonial resistance is repurposed to promote a multinational corporation whose own history is entangled with the colonial economy against which that resistance was directed.

5.2. Morocco Is Not African Enough

Morocco's Opening and Closing Ceremonies celebrated African arts and cultures in ways that were shaped by the practical constraints of an open-air stadium and winter weather conditions. Throughout each of Morocco's cities (not just the cities hosting events, but also smaller cities and those that bring tourism) were various Fan Zones—some paid and some free entry—where locals and tourists alike could go to enjoy the games on large screens, play games, have their makeup done, and more. Nevertheless, these efforts were not embraced by everyone. Hugo Broos, South Africa's coach, criticized the tournament, suggesting that it was not "African" enough. The comment generated debate given Broos's position as a Belgian-born, white South African coach commenting on the authenticity of African cultural expression. More broadly, his critique raises questions about who is authorized to define what counts as "African" and how competing visions of Africanness continue to shape interpretations of continental sporting events.

Broos's comments were met with frustration by some supporters. During one of the matches, an interlocutor arrived at a pub, visibly annoyed by the controversy. "What did he expect? Moroccan warriors chanting in the streets, wearing face paint, and beating their chests?" he asked, rolling his eyes, while others at the table responded with sighs and murmurs of agreement. His reaction reflected a broader critique of persistent stereotypes about Africa, whereby the continent is often imagined through images of tradition, folklore, magic, and cultural authenticity rather than as a space of modernity, urbanization, and technological development. Within this framework, performances are frequently judged according to how closely they conform to external expectations of what Africa should look and sound like.

Given this context, Broos's comments invite further scrutiny. As a South African coach, his critique emerged from within the continent, yet it nonetheless echoed familiar assumptions about African authenticity. Rather than asking whether Morocco's ceremonies were sufficiently "African", the controversy reveals how Africanness itself remains a contested category, one negotiated through competing understandings of tradition, modernity, and cultural representation.

Most commentary regarding Morocco's infrastructure and hospitality was overwhelmingly positive. FIFA and CAF officials, including Patrice Motsepe and Giannini Infantino, described the tournament as one of the best organized AFCON editions to date (Kick Off 2026). As discussed earlier, similar praise was offered by players, coaches, and national teams throughout much of the competition, particularly in relation to transportation, accommodation, stadium facilities, and overall logistics. Yet some of this praise extended

beyond assessments of the tournament itself. On social media, I observed influencers and commentators livestreaming their experiences in Morocco, presenting the country not only as a successful football host but as a model that the rest of Africa should aspire to emulate.

While such commentary was undoubtedly flattering for many Moroccans, it often lacked a broader political–economic perspective. Celebrations of Morocco's infrastructure and apparent prosperity frequently overlooked the uneven distribution of resources, the public expenditures associated with mega-event hosting, and the social consequences of rapid urban redevelopment. In this sense, these narratives risked transforming Morocco into an uncritical symbol of African success, obscuring the political and economic tensions that accompanied the tournament's preparations. The GenZ-212 protests were ultimately set aside during such commentary.

Notably, many of the social media influencers advancing these narratives were themselves Africans from elsewhere on the continent. Yet this did little to challenge the hierarchies embedded within such comparisons. By positioning Morocco as an example that other African countries should aspire to emulate, these narratives risked reinforcing a developmental divide between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, reproducing a hierarchy of success and failure rather than fostering a more nuanced understanding of the continent's diverse political and economic realities.

5.3. Morocco Is Becoming Too African for Moroccans

The accusations surrounding the AFCON 2025 final between Morocco and Senegal quickly extended beyond the boundaries of football. Online debates intensified, returning to a question that has surfaced repeatedly throughout this article: who counts as African? At its core, this question reflects the enduring divide between North and Sub-Saharan Africa, a divide that is largely shaped by histories of racialization, the trans-Saharan slave trade, and anti-Black racism. Following the disorder that accompanied the final, including the vandalism of stadium infrastructure by a section of Senegalese fans, discussions about the match spilled into broader conversations about race, belonging, and citizenship.

Morocco has become an important destination and transit country for migrants from across West Africa, and cities such as Casablanca are home to sizeable Senegalese, Ivorian, Malian, Guinean, and other West African individuals. Due to undocumented migration, exact populations are difficult to estimate, but it is thought that 200,000 Senegalese people reside in Morocco, with only 10–20% of them holding official immigration documentation (MondAfrique 2025). The presence of the Senegalese community in Casablanca is especially important to this discussion because it reiterates questions of community and belonging. Like Moroccans, Senegalese people also have histories of French colonization, and thus they find linguistic belonging through the French language in Morocco. In theory, Senegalese individuals should have an easier time in Morocco, both culturally and linguistically, than a European or North American person, such as myself. However, this is not the case—although Senegalese residents are woven into the social and economic fabric of urban Morocco, anti-Black racism persists. Especially since the chaotic final match, in Casablanca, a discriminatory soundscape became increasingly audible in both online and offline spaces. Terms such as "uncivilized", "primitive", and "animalistic" circulated in these exchanges, revealing how quickly sporting conflict could become a vehicle for racialized forms of exclusion.

Morocco's geopolitical proximity to Europe, previously explained, is frequently cited by some Sub-Saharan Africans as evidence that Morocco occupies an ambiguous position within Africa. However, the recent migration "crisis" in surrounding Ceuta on 30 July 2026 illustrates the limits of Morocco's presumed proximity to Europe. Although Ceuta is located on African soil, Moroccan nationals cannot enter the city without a visa. Together

with Melilla, the Spanish enclave has long served as a focal point for migration attempts by Africans of various nationalities, including Moroccans, who are seeking access to Europe.

This context is also relevant to football. For many Moroccan youth, figures such as Spanish footballer Lamine Yamal embody the possibility of mobility across borders and social classes. His story resonates not simply because of sporting success, but because his parents hail from Morocco and Equatorial Guinea.[9] The large number of young Moroccans who attempted to reach Ceuta on 30 July 2026 underscores the continued power of these aspirations and the enduring perception of Europe as a site of possibility, even as access to it remains highly restricted. Therefore, although many Moroccans may view themselves as culturally different (and superior) from their Senegalese counterparts, both communities continue to confront forms of exclusion, restricted mobility, and economic precarity that are deeply rooted in the African continent's unequal relationship with power and global order.

6. Conclusions

In this article, I examined AFCON 2025 as a performative arena where competing visions of Morocco were articulated and contested. The Moroccan state called for a carefully curated image of the nation through the spectacle of the Opening and Closing Ceremonies, modern infrastructure, and cultural programming throughout the country. Athletes, coaches, supporters, and social media influencers responded with counter-narratives that variously affirmed, challenged, and reworked this curated image. AFCON 2025 exposed the multiplicity of identities and social stratifications through which the country is understood—as African, Arab, modern, traditional, and global.

Read through the framework of call-and-response, these dynamics demonstrate how international mega-events generate ongoing exchanges between institutional representations and the publics who receive, reinterpret, and contest them. At AFCON 2025, Morocco's efforts to articulate a particular vision of national and continental belonging generated responses that extended well beyond the stadium, emerging through musical performances, fan practices, protests, and digital media. These exchanges were neither uniform nor necessarily reciprocal: different publics took up, transformed, or challenged the meanings attached to Morocco's position within Africa and the wider world. Understanding these dynamics through call-and-response reveals how identity is not simply represented on the international stage but continually negotiated through the interplay of performance, reception, and contestation.

These competing visions were also reflected in the material transformations accompanying Morocco's preparations for mega-events. The sounds of construction, demolition, celebration, protest, and everyday urban life reveal that Morocco's preparation for mega-events is not only transforming how the nation is represented internationally but also how it is experienced by locals. The sonic dimensions of mega-event development render audible the unequal distribution of voice, visibility, and power that accompanies processes of urban transformation. As Morocco moves toward the 2030 FIFA World Cup, the question is not whether the country can successfully perform itself on the world stage—AFCON 2025 demonstrated that it can. The more pressing question concerns whose voices will shape that performance and whose voices will remain unheard amid the continuing transformation of Morocco's urban and sonic landscapes.

Perhaps, then, the question is not whether Morocco "belongs" to Africa, Europe, or the Arab world, but what it means to live within—and govern through—the tensions produced by all three at once. As Morocco continues to prepare for future mega-events, the performances presented to international audiences will undoubtedly evolve. Whether those performances can accommodate the diverse aspirations, frustrations, and everyday realities of the people who inhabit Morocco's rapidly changing cities remains an open question.

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Notes

[1] A Panenka penalty kick is a technique where the player attempts to deceive the goalkeeper into jumping to the right or left, when all they do is chip the ball directly into the middle.

[2] Following CAF's 17 March 2026 decision to overturn Senegal's 1-0 victory over Morocco in the AFCON 2025 final and award Morocco a 3-0 victory by forfeit, the FSF appealed the ruling to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), the highest independent judicial authority in international sport. On 24 November 2026, CAS upheld Senegal's appeal, overturned CAF's decision, and reinstated the original result, confirming Senegal as the AFCON 2025 champions.

[3] Valentin-Yves Mudimbe (Mudimbe 1988) examines how Africa has become an object of knowledge that is constantly being defined and redefined through colonial lenses. He argues that it is important to unpack African histories in order to understand how it gets defined. I apply this framework to the question of how Morocco is defined, and by whom.

[4] Armstrong and Giulianotti (Armstrong and Giulianotti 2004) analyze football in Africa as a site of community (as well as a site of conflict and conciliation, themes which are both also present in the AFCON 2025 example).

[5] Ochoa-Gauthier (2014) frames listening and the voice as essential to understanding places. The silenced community is representative of who is/is not present after gentrification.

[6] Achille Mbembe (Mbembe 2001) rejects the idea that there is only one formula for Africanness.

[7] See (Kapchan 2007) and (Witulski 2018) for information about Gnawa music culture.

[8] Patrice Lumumba (1925–1961) was a Congolese independence leader and the first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo following independence from Belgium in June 1960. A prominent figure in African anti-colonial and pan-African movements, Lumumba was removed from office and assassinated in January 1961, with Belgian involvement and complicity playing a central role in his death. He remains an enduring symbol of African liberation and resistance to colonialism and neocolonialism.

[9] Lamine Yamal Nasraoui Ebana (b. 2007) is a Spanish professional footballer who plays for the La Liga club, Barcelona, and Spain's national team.

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