



The year 2010 saw South Africa staging the first football World Cup ever hosted by an African country at an estimated cost of \$6 billion. As former South African president Thabo Mbeki – under whose leadership the World Cup bid was won – said: ‘We want to ensure that one day, historians will reflect upon the 2010 World Cup as a moment when Africa stood tall and resolutely turned the tide on centuries of poverty and conflict. We want to show that Africa’s time has come.’ Ivorian striker, Didier Yves Drogba, the reigning African footballer of the year, had similarly expressed his optimism in a 2008 autobiography, saying ‘I’d love to be the one lifting the Cup to the blue Johannesburg sky, proving I am an African at heart.’ The Ivorian pearl was keen to prove on the largest stage on the globe that the world was his oyster. Though Africa’s first World Cup was well organised and well attended, with the exception of Ghana, none of the other five African teams (Côte d’Ivoire, South Africa, Nigeria, Cameroon and Algeria) went past the first round of the competition. Didier Drogba’s ‘Elephants’ failed to make it out of ‘the Group of Death’ after losing to Brazil, drawing with Portugal, and beating North Korea. Drogba had bravely played with an injured elbow during the World Cup, as he had courageously played for his country through the pain of injury at the African Cup of Nations in Ghana in 2008.

Côte d’Ivoire’s disappointing World Cup results in South Africa had been repeated four years earlier in Germany. Amidst bickering rancour and envy towards Drogba and the disproportionate media attention the superstar was garnering, the team failed to break out of yet another ‘Group of Death’ that had included the Netherlands, Argentina, and Serbia. Drogba confessed, in his 2008 autobiography, that he had nearly walked out on the team in Germany due to the tense situation. The African Nations Cup in January 2010 had also seen a strangely out-of-sorts Drogba playing like a shadow of one of the world’s deadliest strikers. He scored just one goal in the competition as the

team lost to Algeria in the quarter-final; he was later forced to apologise to his compatriots for the poor showing. Though he was voted African Footballer of the Year in 2006 and 2009 and has netted 45 goals in 71 international matches, the 32-year old Didier sadly never enjoyed success at the World Cup or the African Cup of Nations. This disappointment contrasts greatly with the glittering success that Drogba has enjoyed at club level, ranking him as one of the continent’s biggest superstars of all time.

Playing for Chelsea, with half an hour to go in England’s Football Association (FA) cup final against Portsmouth at Wembley stadium in May 2010, Drogba was fouled at the edge of the box on a mazy, dribbling run. He dusted himself off and stepped up to drill a spectacular free-kick with the inside of his foot into the corner of the net. Always the man for the big occasion, Didier had also scored in the 2008 FA cup final against Everton, as well as scoring the only goal in the defeat of Manchester United in the FA cup final in 2007. In 2010, the Ivorian scored three goals in an 8-0 win against Wigan to help Chelsea clinch the premiership title. In the process, Drogba scored 29 league goals to win the ‘golden boot’ as the league’s top scorer. In 2006, the Ivorian had also scored the highest number of goals in England: 33 in 60 matches in all competitions.

## **The Ivorian Pearl: The Life and Times of Didier Drogba**

Adekeye Adebajo

### **Didier Drogba: The Autobiography**

by Didier Drogba

Aurum Press, 2008, 261 pgs, ISBN: 978-1-84513388-7  
18.99 British pounds

### **Didier Drogba: Portrait of A Hero**

by John McShane

John Blake, 2007, 309 pgs, ISBN: 978-1-84454-415-8  
17.99 British pounds

Along with Cameroon’s Samuel Eto’o, Drogba is undoubtedly the greatest African footballer of his generation and one of the best strikers in the world. He is as strong as a bull, fast as a cheetah, and stealthy as a panther. He scores goals with both feet, is a great header of the ball, and has dazzling close control and a magnificent first touch, whether chesting or bringing the ball down with his feet. Not only does he score goals, but he unselfishly sets up countless opportunities for teammates. He leads the forward line with guile, aplomb, and fearlessness.

As described in his refreshingly frank 2008 autobiography, Drogba left Côte d’Ivoire as a five-year old boy, having played football on the dusty streets of Abidjan in an over-sized Argentinian jersey. Spending a year as an eight-year old in the Ivorian town of Yamoussoukro, Didier later criticised its grandiloquent, infamous cathedral – the ‘basilica in the bush’ – as the ‘folly’ of francophile founding president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, who had ruled the country like a Gallic monarch from 1960 until his death in 1993. Drogba had been sent to France to live with his uncle, Michel Goba, a professional footballer. Drogba’s father was a bank manager in Côte d’Ivoire, while his mother was still a student when the young boy left for France, before later

becoming a banker. It was felt that sending the oldest of six children to Europe would increase his chances for success in life.

As his itinerant uncle moved around France playing for different clubs, the young boy experienced racism which left him an outspoken advocate against the scourge. He would later criticise the apartheid system in which top African players in Europe earn less than their European and South American counterparts. Drogba described the pain of exile as a ‘stab in the heart,’ complaining: ‘I can’t live without the Côte d’Ivoire, without breathing the air of my own continent.’ In describing the loneliness of exile and nostalgia for his ancestral home, the Ivorian waxed lyrical, evoking the Guinean author Camara Laye’s 1954 novel *The Dark Child*: the recollections of an African student similarly suffering the loneliness of French exile. Didier’s teenage years in France were cold, lonely, and largely friendless, and the sense of socio-cultural dislocation is strong, with football providing some solace.

As the Ivorian economy faced increasing austerity, Drogba’s entire family – with both his parents having lost their jobs – would follow him to live in France in the early 1990s, easing the pain of exile and keeping him firmly rooted to his African culture. After turning professional, Didier continues to donate part of his salary to his family. His father, a former bank manager, often had to take menial jobs in France to keep the family going. The family of eight lived in a crammed flat in a poor *banlieu* (suburb) of hopelessness with other African immigrants. This was the sort of suburb in which disaffected, rioting youths live, some of whom current French president and then populist right-wing interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, insultingly described in 2005 as ‘scum’ who needed to be washed down with a hose-pipe.

After clashes with his father who, reflecting the prejudice of Africa’s middle classes, preferred that Didier focus on his studies than on football,

Drogba had to give up football for a year to re-sit his failed exams. He did eventually complete a diploma in accounting before signing a professional contract with French second division club Le Mans at the age of 21. He later moved to lowly French first division team Guingamp, before his stellar performances led to his transfer at the age of 25 to the glamorous Olympique Marseille – a city of immigrants overlooking the Mediterranean. His footballing heroes included Algeria-born Frenchman Zinedine Zidane, Ghanaian Abedi Pelé, Dutchman Marco Van Basten, Brazilians Ronaldo and Roberto Carlos, French strikers Jean-Pierre Papin and Thierry Henry, and Englishman Chris Waddle. Drogba was determined to succeed at his chosen vocation and worked hard to keep improving. He was named Player of the Year by his fellow professionals in France in 2004, though some critics regarded him as arrogant and difficult. At the beginning of his career, Drogba had difficulty adjusting to the life of a professional footballer. He was forced to curtail his insatiable lust for junk food, designer clothes, and night-clubbing that had earned him the nickname ‘Tupac,’ after the late American gangster-rapper. The injuries that have followed Didier throughout his professional career are described in excruciating detail in his autobiography.

Drogba was fortunate to have strong African professional mentors in France: his Senegalese agents Pape Diouf and Thierno Seydi, both regarded as older brothers. Having left home at such a young age, Didier seems to have sought father figures in agents and coaches. His sense of Pan-African solidarity was developed in France in reaction to the racism of a society in which the right-wing Jean-Marie Le Pen won nearly a fifth of national votes in elections in 2002. Even in Europe, Drogba ate African food, listened to African music, danced the Ivorian *coupé-décalé*, and praised the resilience and sense of communalism of Africans. His marriage to a publicity-shy Malian wife, Lalla, with whom he is bringing up three children, was another act of Pan-

Africanism; his partner and confidant helped him to overcome his loneliness and kept him grounded during his meteoric rise to global superstardom. African team-mates also sustained Drogba in France and England. However, the Ivorian is a secular humanist – who has attended both church and mosque – and a proud cosmopolitan citizen of the world.

Personal loyalty was always important to Drogba, and, throughout his career, he has needed to get on well with coaches to play well. He sometimes appeared to forget that football was a business and not just a game. His tearful reluctance to leave his beloved French club Olympique Marseille – the team he idolised as a child – to join Chelsea in a \$30 million transfer (a record for an African player at the time) in 2004 revealed a certain naiveté, almost treating his club as family rather than employer. The relationship between Drogba and José Mourinho, his Portuguese manager at Chelsea, also underlined this point. Mourinho wrote the foreword to Drogba’s autobiography, describing a special embrace and pledge of loyalty as the player was about to join Chelsea. As Mourinho noted after signing Drogba: ‘I see the qualities of power and speed. Also his control on the first touch and the way he fights – he’s a player who can achieve great success.’ The Portuguese coach regarded Didier as one of the best strikers in Europe along with Frenchman Thierry Henry and Brazilian Ronaldo. The Ivorian in turn considered the ‘Special One’ to be one of the best managers in the world, a clairvoyant soothsayer who kept faith in him after a difficult first season adjusting to life in England. Mourinho often defended Drogba against the rabid British media pack. After the victorious FA cup final in 2007, player and manager hugged each other and cried together. When Mourinho was sacked by the club’s erratic Russian billionaire-oligarch owner, Roman Abramovich, only months after this triumph, Didier was one of the few players to speak out publicly against the dismissal and was visibly angry enough to want to leave the club.

Drogba’s anger has, however, sometimes got the better of him and hurt his team: he was sent off against Barcelona in a crucial Champions’ league game in 2005, and suspended for throwing a tantrum after losing a European semi-final game to Barcelona in 2009. He has also sometimes been too thin-skinned, overreacting to criticism from the media and fans. After Mourinho left, he indiscreetly revealed tensions in the Chelsea camp to the media.

Didier holds dual Ivorian and French citizenship and the schizophrenic love-hate relationship towards the Gallic ‘Mother Country’ comes through strongly in his autobiography. Though he often feels an attachment to his adopted country and notes that he could have played for France instead of Côte d’Ivoire, he criticised the simplistic and biased coverage of the Ivorian civil war in the Gallic media, condemning the distorted official reporting of the killing of 50 Ivorian protesters in Abidjan by French soldiers in 2004. He also expressed anger at France’s continuing ‘patronising, neo-colonial policy’ towards its former colony, demanding that Côte d’Ivoire be left alone to make its own decisions free of pernicious French meddling. Drogba observed how America was becoming an alternative to France for many Ivorians as a result of discredited Gallic policies in Africa. He also vented his spleen on irresponsible Ivorian politicians who ferment ethnic divisions in Côte d’Ivoire and expressed sadness at the departure of 8,000 French citizens, many of whom he viewed as fellow Ivorians, from his country in 2004.

Much as Liberia’s George Weah – a former African, European, and World Footballer of the Year – used football as a symbol of national unity during his country’s civil war of 1989-1997 (and unsuccessfully ran for president of the country in 2005) – Drogba has sought to use his country’s national team – the ‘Elephants’ – to promote national reconciliation following Côte d’Ivoire’s own civil war that erupted in 2002, ten days after Didier made his international

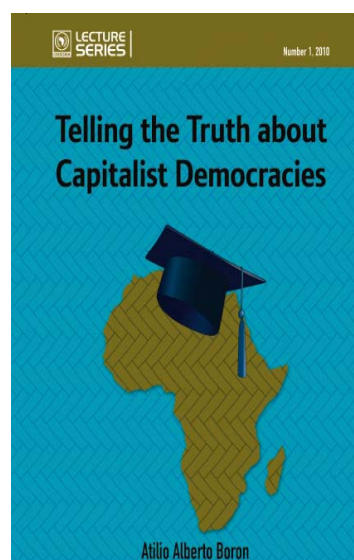
debut. As Drogba noted: ‘...when you score, nobody is asking which ethnic group the goalscorer comes from.’ After winning the African Footballer of the Year award in 2006, he insisted that the national team visit the rebel-held capital of Bouaké and play a game there as a way of forging national unity and reconciliation. As Didier noted: ‘While the Elephants are fighting, Côte d’Ivoire can bandage its wounds.’ Qualifying for the World Cup in 2006 and 2010, Drogba and his team-mates sought to provide succour and comfort to a nation that had endured years of civil conflict.

Drogba’s biographer, John McShane, described his subject as ‘a genuine superstar revered with a deference almost befitting a god by his fellow countrymen and women.’ Didier is treated as royalty in his country, with the presidential plane being put at his disposal to visit parts of Côte d’Ivoire. He is fully aware of his cult status in a country that reveres its greatest ever footballer, and has sought to use this awe to speak out for national unity, calling on fighters to bid farewell to arms. He has also met President Laurent Gbagbo several times as an ambassador of peace. As Drogba rather immodestly put it: ‘I am no longer a football player, I am an apostle of peace, a bond between the north and the south’. Didier was named a United Nations goodwill ambassador in 2007: only the third footballer to earn this honour. He has a keen sense of history, and is determined to leave a legacy, almost as an obligation to his iconic status. He has preached the importance of education to the country’s youth, built a school in his father’s village, and set up a foundation to fight disease, with plans to build a hospital in Abidjan. Drogba, one of Africa’s greatest ever footballers, earned global recognition when he appeared on the cover of and was named one of the 100 most influential people in the world by *Time* magazine in May 2010.



### Telling the Truth about Capitalist Democracies

Atilio Alberto Boron  
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After decades of dictatorship involving enormous spilling of blood, the social struggles of the popular masses brought Latin America back to the first and most elementary level of democratic development. But even this very modest achievement has been constantly besieged by opposing forces that are not ready to relinquish their privileged access to power and wealth. The struggle for democracy in Latin America, that is to say, the conquest of equality, justice, liberty and citizen participation, is inseparable from a resolute struggle against global capital’s despotism.