

AFCON in Transition: Structural Reforms, Marketing, and the Contestation of African Identity

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Abstract

The Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) is both a premier football competition and a cultural festival symbolizing African unity and pride. The tournament affords a platform for nations to showcase not only their footballing talent but also their cultural traditions, fan rituals, and collective identity. Ahead of the 2025 edition in Morocco, the Confederation of African Football (CAF) announced reforms shifting AFCON from a biennial to a quadrennial cycle beginning in 2028, aligning with global calendars to enhance financial sustainability. Meanwhile, the tournament's transformation is deeply tied to marketing and commercialization, with significant revenue generated from broadcasting rights, sponsorships, and merchandising. This study examined how such structural changes and marketing strategies reshape AFCON's cultural identity. Through qualitative document analysis, findings revealed that while reforms and commercialization increase global visibility and competitiveness, they risk diluting AFCON's distinct cultural symbolism, weakening its role as Africa's cultural anchor. The study concludes by indicating that, AFCON's future depends on CAF's ability to balance modernization with cultural preservation amidst structural reforms.

Keywords: AFCON, structural reforms, sports governance, cultural identity, marketing strategies

Introduction

Background: AFCON, established in 1957, is the premier continental football tournament organized by CAF. Over the decades, AFCON has evolved into more than a sporting competition – it has become a cultural festival that symbolizes African unity, diversity, and pride. The tournament affords a platform for nations to showcase not only their footballing talent but also their cultural traditions, fan rituals, and collective identity (Darby, 2013; Giulianotti, 2015). Prior to the 2025 AFCON in Morocco, CAF introduced significant structural reforms to the tournament. Notably, the tournament will shift from the biennial to a quadrennial cycle beginning in 2028, aligning with FIFA World Cup and UEFA European Championship (The Ball Business, 2024; (CAF, 2025)). This restructuring aim to reduce scheduling conflicts with European clubs, enhance player welfare, and improve financial sustainability (Cape Times, 2024). However, critics argue that such changes risk prioritizing external benefits over African traditions, potentially undermining AFCON's cultural distinctiveness (Alegi, 2024; GBC Ghana Online, 2024). Meanwhile, the tournament's transformation is deeply tied to marketing and commercialization, with significant revenue generated from broadcasting rights, sponsorships, and merchandising, historically accounting for up to 80% of CAF's income (Cape Times, 2024). Though with this shift to a four-year cycle, CAF has announced complementary competition such as the African Nations League (ANL) to maintain the continent's competitions still visible and enhance its market demand (MSN Sports, 2024). However, through these restructuring and addition, marketing strategies now play a pivotal role in shaping and maintaining AFCON's global image, balancing commercial obligations with cultural symbolism in-grained with the continent (Alegi, 2024; Cornelissen, 2010). Furthermore, AFCON is widely regarded as a symbol of African cultural identity. It posits by uniting diverse nations through shared rituals, music, food, dance, and fan traditions, while also serving as a cultural anchor for the African diaspora (Right for Education, 2023). Thus, this study examined how such structural changes and marketing strategies reshape AFCON's cultural identity.

Problem Statement: Despite AFCON's dual role as a sporting and cultural institution, limited scholarship has examined how structural reforms and marketing strategies intersect with cultural identity. Existing studies often focus on governance or economic outcomes, leaving unexplored the cultural consequences of AFCON's transition. This research seeks to fill that gap by critically analyzing how CAF's reforms and marketing approaches reshape AFCON's role as a cultural unifier and global brand.

Research Aim: This study aim to appraise the impact of AFCON's structural reforms and marketing strategies on African cultural identity.

Research Questions

Stemming from the aim this study seek to answer the following research question:

1. How have CAF's structural reforms reshaped AFCON's role as a cultural unifier across Africa?
2. In what ways do marketing strategies influence the representation of AFCON's cultural identity?
3. Do structural changes strengthen pan-African identity or risk diluting traditional cultural expressions?
4. How do reforms and marketing affect diaspora engagement and global perceptions of African football?

Significance of the Study: This study contributes to the growing literature on sports governance, marketing, and cultural identity in Africa. By integrating these dimensions, it offers insights into how AFCON's transition reflects broader tensions between modernization, commercialization, and cultural preservation. The findings are valuable for CAF policymakers, sponsors, and scholars seeking to understand the evolving role of AFCON as both a football competition and cultural institution.

Literature Review

AFCON as a Cultural Institution: AFCON has long operated as more than a football competition – it is a continental establishment that unites Africa's people, shapes cultural identity, and projects African pride globally. Scholars highlight that AFCON embodies both national and pan-African identity, serving as a symbolic arena where cultural traditions, rituals, and collective pride converge (Darby, 2013; Giulianotti, 2015). More recent work emphasizes AFCON's role in cultural diplomacy and identity formation, particularly in the context of globalization. Manzo (2021) argues that AFCON represents a symbolic politics of unity, while Njororai (2022) highlights the tournament's significance for diaspora communities, who view AFCON as a cultural anchor in transnational spaces.

Structural Reforms in AFCON: The recent reforms by CAF will undoubtedly alter the tournament's frequency and programming beginning 2028, where the shift from the biennial to a quadrennial cycle, will take effect (The Ball Business, 2024). This change is intended to reduce scheduling conflicts with European clubs and enhance financial sustainability (Cape Times, 2024). Alegi (2024) situates these reforms within broader debates on African football governance, noting that institutional pressures from FIFA and UEFA often shape CAF's decisions. While reforms may enhance legitimacy, critics argue they risk prioritizing European interests over African traditions, potentially undermining AFCON's cultural distinctiveness (GBC Ghana Online, 2024).

Marketing and Commercialization: AFCON's evolution is closely tied to marketing and commercialization strategies hinging on its past records of generating revenue through broadcasting rights, sponsorships, and merchandising, which accounts for up to 80% of CAF's income (Cape Times, 2024). With the move to a four-year cycle, CAF has introduced complementary competitions such as the ANL to maintain visibility (MSN Sports, 2024). Alegi (2024) explores how commercialization reshapes African cultural identity, arguing that marketing strategies increasingly frame AFCON as a global product rather than a uniquely African festival. Similarly, Cornelissen (2020) records that commercialization can strengthen AFCON's global brand but risks commodifying its cultural symbolism.

Cultural Identity and Global Representation: Structural reforms and marketing strategies may have an influence on how AFCON represents African cultural identity. Media narratives often frame AFCON as a continental celebration of culture, economy, and identity (Afrika Star, 2025). Yet, aligning AFCON with global football calendars may dilute its unique cultural symbolism, reducing its distinctiveness as Africa's premier cultural festival. Conversely, reforms could enhance AFCON's visibility and prestige, positioning African football more competitively on the global stage (Manzo, 2021; Njororai, 2022). Recent scholarship from Darby and Akindes (2023) emphasizes this stiffness, noting that AFCON's identity is increasingly negotiated between global institutional pressures and local cultural expectations.

Scholarly Gaps: While there is growing literature on AFCON's governance and commercialization, limited scholarship exists on the cultural identity outcomes of structural reforms. Most studies focus on economic or political dimensions, leaving unexplored how reforms reshape fan traditions, diaspora engagement, and continental unity. This study addresses that gap by integrating structural change, marketing, and cultural identity into a single analytical framework, drawing on both Social Identity Theory and Institutional Theory.

Theoretical Framework: Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), posits that individuals derive part of their identity from membership in social groups. In the context of AFCON, SIT provides a lens to understand how fans, players, and nations construct identity through continental football. AFCON is not only a sporting competition but also a cultural arena where national pride and pan-African unity are expressed. Structural reforms, such as the move to a quadrennial cycle, may impact these identity dynamics by reshaping the rituals, traditions, and opportunities for collective celebration (Darby and Akindes, 2023). Marketing strategies further mediate identity construction by framing AFCON as either a global product or a uniquely African cultural festival. Thus, SIT allows this study to examine how reforms and commercialization affect both national rivalries and continental solidarity.

Institutional Theory, on the other hand particularly neo-institutionalism explains how organizations adjust to external gravities and global norms (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). CAF's reforms can be interpreted as responses to institutional pressures from FIFA, UEFA, and European clubs, reflecting a process of isomorphism where African football governance aligns with global standards. Marketing strategies similarly reflect institutional adaptation, as CAF seeks to position AFCON competitively in the global sports marketplace. However, institutional theory also highlights the tension between conformity and distinctiveness: while reforms may enhance legitimacy and financial sustainability, they risk eroding cultural uniqueness. Integrating SIT and Institutional Theory provides a dual-level analysis – (1) At the micro-level, SIT captures how fans and communities negotiate identity through the tournament's evolving structure and marketing narratives, (2) At the macro-level, Institutional Theory explains CAF's governance decisions and commercial strategies within the global football ecosystem. Together, these frameworks illuminate how structural reforms and marketing simultaneously reshape cultural identity and institutional legitimacy. This integration is particularly valuable because it situates AFCON within broader debates on globalization, commercialization, and cultural preservation. By combining theories of identity and institutional change, the study can critically assess whether AFCON's transition strengthens pan-African unity and cultural pride or risks commodifying and diluting its symbolic role.

Methodology

Research Design: This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the intersection of structural reforms, marketing strategies, and cultural identity in AFCON. Qualitative methods are appropriate because the research questions focus on meanings, narratives, and identity construction, rather than statistical measurement (Creswell, 2018). Document analysis served as the primary method, enabling a systematic examination of texts produced by CAF, media outlets, and commercial stakeholders.

Data Sources: The study drew on multiple textual sources to ensure depth and triangulation through CAF Official Documents – Reform announcements, policy papers, and press releases (e.g., CAF's confirmation that AFCON has shifted to a four-year cycle from 2028), marketing materials on sponsorship campaigns, branding strategies, and promotional content linked to AFCON's repositioning, media coverage on African and international reporting on reforms, highlighting debates around cultural identity and commercialization, and secondary literature where scholarly works on sports governance, marketing, and cultural identity in African football were captured.

Analytical Strategy: The study adopted thematic analysis and categorized recurrent themes such as unity, commercialization, modernization, and cultural pride in line with Braun and Clarke (2006) literature on thematic analysis. The discourse analysis of the study examined how AFCON is framed in official and media texts, focusing on language that constructs cultural identity and marketing narratives (Fairclough, 2013). Similarly, the comparative analysis employed contrast in pre-reform and post-reform documents to trace shifts in CAF's messaging and branding strategies.

Validity and Reliability: Triangulation of findings were cross-checked across CAF documents, media reports, and marketing materials to ensure credibility. Again, on transparency of data, coding procedures and thematic categories were documented to enhance replicability. However, on reflexivity, the researcher acknowledged positionality and potential biases when interpreting cultural identity discourses.

Results

1. **Structural Reforms and Institutional Pressures:** Analysis of CAF policy documents and press releases revealed a consistent narrative of influential alignment with global football governance. The shift to a quadrennial cycle was framed as necessary to reduce scheduling conflicts with European clubs and enhance financial sustainability. However, discourse analysis highlighted tensions – while CAF emphasized modernization and global competitiveness, media coverage and fan narratives frequently expressed concern that reforms risked wearing away of AFCON's cultural distinctiveness.

2. **Marketing Narratives and Commercial Positioning:** Document analysis of sponsorship campaigns and promotional materials indicated a shift in AFCON's marketing discourse. Earlier campaigns emphasized African heritage, unity, and celebration, while recent materials increasingly foregrounded international competitiveness, modernization, and commercial appeal. Sponsorship agreements and branding strategies positioned AFCON as a product for international consumption, often highlighting partnerships with multinational corporations.

3. **Cultural Identity and Fan Traditions:** Media reports and fan-generated texts revealed uncertainty regarding AFCON's evolving identity. On one hand, reforms were perceived as enhancing AFCON's prestige and visibility, reinforcing pride in African football, while on the other hand, fans expressed concern that reduced frequency of the tournament and increased commercialization could dilute traditional rituals, chants, and celebrations that make AFCON a traditional festival. Diaspora communities, particularly in Europe, emphasized AFCON's role as a cultural anchor, warning that reforms risk weakening its symbolic connection to African heritage.

4. **Emerging Themes:** Thematic analysis identified four recurring themes across documents and narratives as:

- a) Unity vs. Fragmentation: Reforms framed as promoting continental unity, but perceived by some as privileging elite clubs and nations.
- b) Modernization vs. Tradition: Marketing emphasized modernization, while fans stressed preservation of cultural rituals.
- c) Commercialization vs. Identity: Sponsorship and branding strategies enhanced visibility but risked commodifying cultural identity.
- d) Global Prestige vs. Local Authenticity: Institutional reforms sought legitimacy in global football, while fans valued AFCON's authenticity as Africa's cultural festival.

Summary of Results: The findings suggest that AFCON's structural reforms and marketing strategies produce contradictory outcomes – (1) they enhance global visibility and financial sustainability but simultaneously, (2) risk diluting the tournament's cultural identity. Fan narratives

and media discourses highlight the importance of balancing modernization with cultural preservation to ensure AFCON remains both a football competition and a cultural institution.

Discussion

The results of this study highlight the complex interplay between structural reforms, marketing strategies, and cultural identity in AFCON's transition. From the perspective of Social Identity Theory (SIT), AFCON continues to serve as a powerful site for identity construction, where fans and nations express both national pride and pan-African solidarity. However, the findings suggest that reforms such as the shift to a quadrennial cycle risk weakening traditional rituals and fan practices that reinforce collective identity. Marketing campaigns that emphasize modernization and global competitiveness further complicate this dynamic, as they reframe AFCON less as a cultural festival and more as a commercial product. SIT helps explain the ambivalence observed in fan narratives: while some perceive reforms as enhancing continental prestige, others fear the dilution of cultural authenticity. At the institutional level, Institutional Theory provides insight into CAF's reform agenda. The move to align AFCON with global football calendars reflects institutional isomorphism, as CAF adapts to external pressures from FIFA, UEFA, and European clubs. Marketing strategies similarly demonstrate institutional adaptation, positioning AFCON within a globalized sports marketplace. Yet, the results reveal a tension between institutional legitimacy and cultural distinctiveness. While reforms may secure CAF's financial sustainability and global recognition, they risk undermining AFCON's symbolic role as Africa's cultural anchor. Institutional Theory thus frames CAF's decisions as balancing conformity to global norms with the preservation of local identity. Integrating SIT and Institutional Theory underscores the dual-level consequences of AFCON's transition. At the micro-level, fans negotiate identity through evolving rituals and marketing narratives, revealing both pride and concern. At the macro-level, CAF's governance reflects institutional pressures that prioritize modernization and commercialization. The convergence of these levels illustrates how structural reforms and marketing strategies simultaneously reshape cultural identity and institutional legitimacy. Ultimately, the findings suggest that AFCON's future depends on CAF's ability to balance modernization with cultural preservation. If reforms and marketing strategies are framed in ways that reinforce African heritage and unity, AFCON can continue to serve as both a football competition and a cultural festival. However, if commercial imperatives dominate, AFCON risks losing its distinctiveness as a symbol of African identity. This study therefore contributes to broader debates on globalization, commercialization, and cultural preservation in sports governance, emphasizing the need for policies that safeguard AFCON's dual role as a sporting and cultural institution.

Practical Recommendation

1. CAF (Governance and Policy)

- a. Balance modernization with cultural preservation: CAF should ensure that reforms such as the quadrennial cycle are accompanied by initiatives that safeguard AFCON's cultural distinctiveness. For example, embedding cultural rituals, music, and fan traditions into official tournament programming can reinforce identity while pursuing global legitimacy.
- b. Inclusive stakeholder engagement: CAF should involve fans, national associations, and diaspora communities in reform discussions to avoid perceptions of reforms being externally imposed. This participatory approach would strengthen legitimacy and cultural ownership.
- c. Cultural branding strategy: CAF should develop a branding framework that explicitly integrates African heritage into marketing campaigns, ensuring that modernization does not overshadow authenticity.

2. Sponsors and Commercial Partners

- a. Culturally sensitive marketing: Sponsorship campaigns should highlight African traditions, languages, and symbols, rather than adopting generic globalized imagery. This approach would enhance brand resonance with African audiences while appealing to international markets.
- b. Long-term investment in grassroots football: Sponsors should complement commercial campaigns with investments in local football development, reinforcing AFCON's role as a cultural and developmental institution.

3. Media and Broadcasters

- a. Narrative framing: Media coverage should emphasize AFCON's dual identity as both a football competition and a cultural festival. Balanced reporting can counter narratives that reforms are purely commercial.
- b. Diaspora engagement: Broadcasters should tailor coverage to diaspora communities, highlighting cultural rituals and traditions that resonate with Africans abroad.

4. Diaspora Communities and Fans

- a. Cultural advocacy: Diaspora communities can play a key role in preserving AFCON's cultural identity by promoting traditional fan practices and rituals in global contexts.
- b. Digital participation: Fans should leverage social media to amplify cultural narratives, ensuring that AFCON's identity remains visible even as reforms reshape its structure.

Summary: These recommendations emphasize the need for multi-stakeholder collaboration to balance modernization, commercialization, and cultural preservation. By embedding African heritage into governance, marketing, and media strategies, AFCON can continue to thrive as both a global football competition and a cultural institution.

Implications

1. Academic Contributions: This study advances scholarship on sports governance, marketing, and cultural identity in Africa by integrating Social Identity Theory and Institutional Theory into a single analytical framework. It demonstrates how structural reforms and commercialization reshape both institutional legitimacy and cultural symbolism. The findings contribute to broader debates on globalization and cultural preservation in sport, offering a model for analyzing similar transitions in other regional tournaments.

2. Policy Implications for CAF: The results underscore the need for CAF to balance modernization with cultural preservation. Policymakers should recognize that reforms designed to enhance financial sustainability and global competitiveness may inadvertently weaken AFCON's cultural distinctiveness. Embedding African heritage into governance and marketing strategies can mitigate this risk. CAF's decisions not only determine AFCON's institutional legitimacy but also its capacity to remain a cultural anchor for the continent and diaspora communities.

3. Commercial and Marketing Implications: For sponsors and commercial partners, the study highlights the importance of culturally sensitive marketing. Campaigns that foreground African traditions, languages, and symbols are more likely to resonate with fans and reinforce AFCON's identity. Commercial strategies that prioritize authenticity alongside profitability can strengthen brand loyalty and ensure that AFCON's commercialization does not erode its cultural symbolism.

4. Cultural and Societal Implications: The findings emphasize AFCON's role as a cultural festival and unifying institution. Reforms and marketing strategies that dilute cultural rituals risk undermining continental unity and diaspora engagement. Conversely, strategies that celebrate African heritage can strengthen identity, pride, and solidarity across nations. This study therefore highlights AFCON's broader societal significance, positioning it as a site where sport, culture, and globalization intersect.

Limitations of Study

1. Methodological Constraints: This study employed a qualitative methodology centered on document analysis, which provides rich insights into narratives, discourses, and cultural representations. However, reliance on textual sources limits the ability to capture lived experiences of fans, players, and communities. While thematic and discourse analysis reveal patterns in official and media texts, they cannot fully account for

the emotional and embodied dimensions of AFCON's cultural identity. Future research could incorporate interviews, ethnography, or participant observation to complement document-based findings.

2. **Data Availability and Source Bias:** The study's findings are constrained by the availability and accessibility of CAF documents, sponsorship materials, and media coverage. Official CAF publications may present reforms in a favorable light, while media sources may emphasize controversy or critique. Similarly, marketing campaigns are designed to project commercial appeal rather than cultural authenticity. These biases may shape the narratives analyzed, potentially limiting the representativeness of findings. Triangulation across multiple sources mitigates this risk but cannot eliminate it entirely.

3. **Temporal Scope:** The research focused on AFCON's recent and ongoing reforms, particularly the transition to a quadrennial cycle beginning in 2028. As these reforms are still unfolding, the study captures discourses and expectations rather than long-term outcomes. The cultural and commercial impacts of reforms may evolve over time, meaning that conclusions drawn in this paper are provisional and subject to change as AFCON's new structure matures.

4. **Generalizability:** Given its qualitative design, the study prioritizes depth over breadth. Findings are context-specific to AFCON and may not be generalizable to other African sporting competitions or global tournaments. Nevertheless, the insights contribute to broader debates on sports governance, commercialization, and cultural identity, offering a foundation for comparative studies in other contexts.

Conclusion

This study examined the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) as a tournament in transition, focusing on the intersection of structural reforms, marketing strategies, and cultural identity. Using qualitative document analysis, the research revealed that CAF's reforms, particularly the shift to a quadrennial cycle, were framed as necessary for modernization, financial sustainability, and alignment with global football governance. However, fan narratives and media discourses highlighted concerns that such reforms risk diluting AFCON's cultural distinctiveness, weakening the rituals and traditions that have historically defined the tournament as a continental festival. Marketing strategies emerged as a critical mediator in this transition. Sponsorship campaigns and promotional materials increasingly emphasized global competitiveness and commercial appeal, reflecting institutional adaptation to external pressures. While these strategies enhance AFCON's visibility and prestige, they also risk commodifying its cultural symbolism. The findings underscore a tension between global legitimacy and local authenticity, suggesting that AFCON's identity is being reshaped by both governance imperatives and commercial narratives. The integration of Social Identity Theory and Institutional Theory provided a dual-level lens for interpreting these dynamics. At the micro-level, SIT illuminated how fans and communities negotiate identity through evolving rituals and marketing discourses. At the macro-level, Institutional Theory explained CAF's governance decisions as responses to global institutional pressures. Together, these frameworks highlighted the contradictory outcomes of AFCON's transition: reforms and marketing strategies enhance global recognition but simultaneously challenge the preservation of cultural identity. In conclusion, AFCON's future depends on CAF's ability to balance modernization with cultural preservation. Policies and marketing strategies that foreground African heritage, unity, and authenticity are essential to ensuring that AFCON remains both a football competition and a cultural institution. This study contributes to scholarship on African sports governance and cultural identity, offering insights for policymakers, sponsors, and academics seeking to understand how AFCON's evolution reflects broader tensions between globalization, commercialization, and continental unity.

Statements and declaration

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: Frank Appiah Kusi

Methodology: Frank Appiah Kusi

Data Gathering: Frank Appiah Kusi

Analysis and interpretation: Frank Appiah Kusi

Drafting of manuscript: Frank Appiah Kusi

Critical revision: Frank Appiah Kusi

Ethical approval: This study does not contain any studies with human or animal participant.

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