

2025

Building legacy: sports, Kasarani Stadium, and Moi's transnational populist politics, 1978–87

Tirop C. Building Legacy: Sports, Kasarani Stadium, and Moi's Transnational Populist Politics, 1978–87. *The Journal of African History*. 2025;66:e26. doi:10.1017/S0021853725100698

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/52854>

"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Building Legacy: Sports, Kasarani Stadium, and Moi's Transnational Populist Politics, 1978–87

Chepchirchir Tirop 

Department of History, Boston University, Boston, USA
Email: ctirop25@bu.edu

(Received 15 August 2024; revised 16 August 2025; accepted 18 October 2025)

Abstract

This article is a case study of the Kasarani Stadium in Kenya as a heuristic through which to understand President Daniel Arap Moi's political style and priorities during the first decade of his regime. Drawing primarily from national and international newspapers, the archives of national and international sporting organizations and associations, records of the Kenyan government and biographies of Moi, I explore how Moi gave political meaning to sport to advance his populist politics at home and project Kenya on(to) the international stage. At home, he used sports to define himself as a leader of the ordinary *mwananchi* (citizen), in touch with the experiences, challenges, and visions of the common Kenyan. Internationally, he used sports to chart Kenya's foreign policy and fashion himself as an international political personality. The article concludes that the study of sports and sporting infrastructure offers a productive way to write social, political, and cultural histories of postcolonial Africa.

Keywords: East Africa; Kenya; China; sports; politics; postcolonial; pan-Africanism; infrastructure

On 1 March 2023, Kenya's president William Ruto inaugurated the construction of Talanta Stadium, a new international stadium in Nairobi. According to Ruto, the stadium was the first step in turning the country into a "global sporting powerhouse" by facilitating Kenya's co-hosting of the 2027 African Cup of Nations (AFCON) alongside neighboring Uganda and Tanzania. "Evidently, Afcon 2027 is just the beginning of our nation's endeavor to become a regional, continental and global center for sports development and competition," explained the president.¹ A state-owned Chinese company, China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) was granted the commission to construct the sporting complex. Ruto's comments emphasized the novelty of the stadium to the development of the Kenyan sporting landscape. Media and scholarly analyses of the project, and of similar Sino-African partnerships, skewed the analysis towards China's interests and goals.²

These narratives of novelty and the disproportionate focus on China's interests obscure a longer history of Sino-African partnerships in the development of sporting infrastructure and the agenda and experiences of African actors. Through a case study of the Kasarani Stadium in Nairobi, Kenya,

¹Cecil Odongo and Hilary Kimuyu, "Kenya's AFCON 2027 Dream Alive as Talanta Sports City Works Begin," *Daily Nation*, 1 Mar. 2024, accessed 15 Aug. 2025, <https://nation.africa/kenya/sports/other-sports/kenya-s-afcon-2027-dream-alive-as-talanta-sports-city-works-begin-4542168>

²See for example, Istvan Tarrosy and Zoltan Voros, "China's Stadium Diplomacy in Africa, Pt. 1: The Talanta Sports Stadium in Kenya," *The Diplomat*, 24 Jan. 2025.

this article offers a historical perspective of contemporary Sino-African partnerships. Built with technical and financial aid from the Chinese government, the magnificent 60,000-seat stadium housed in a larger sports complex (eventually named Moi International Sports Center)—consisting of athletes' hostels, an Olympic size swimming pool, and an indoor arena—signaled a strengthening of Sino-Kenyan relations in the 1980s.³

However, the story of Kasarani Stadium tells more than a diplomatic history between Kenya and China. It also narrates a transnational story of President Daniel Moi's use of sport to define his political style, commitments, and legacy at home. After ascending to power in 1978 following the death of Jomo Kenyatta, Moi enthusiastically supported Kenya's bid to host the All Africa Games. His government built the Kasarani Stadium in Nairobi towards this goal. When Moi stood on the podium to officially close the fourth edition of the All Africa Games, he chronicled the meaning of the stadium thus:

nearly ten years ago the continent of Africa decided to hold the Fourth All Africa Games. At that time several hurdles stood in the way of games, especially lack of the required facilities. Despite these difficulties, and once our objective was in sight, the entire free Africa embarked on preparing their individual teams, while we in Nairobi ensured that the required facilities were ready for the event. I am convinced that the spirit which made us succeed in holding the Games, is the same spirit which will provide the driving force for the continent of Africa to overcome the challenges we face.⁴

For Moi, Kasarani symbolized his accomplishments not only as the president of Kenya but also as an African statesman having facilitated a crucial Pan-African event.

To date, both of Kenya's international stadiums, the Kasarani Stadium and its smaller counterpart, the Nyayo Stadium, were constructed during the first decade of Moi's presidency. Importantly, they were products of Moi's direct involvement as he used his presidential prerogative to commission and fund them. The development of sporting infrastructure formed a crucial aspect of Moi's legacy. In 1991, a Central Bank of Kenya publication encouraging foreign investment wrote, "President Moi took the initiative and Kenya now has two stadia of world international standard—the magnificent ultra-modern Moi International Sports Center, built with aid from China, and the Nyayo National Stadium."⁵ Upon Moi's death in 2020 Kenyan media ran specials on the president including one episode dedicated to his "enduring legacy in Kenyan sports" especially in "the development of major sports infrastructure."⁶

Taking Moi's interest and investment in sporting infrastructure as a point of departure, this article uses the Kasarani Stadium, in particular, as a heuristic through which to understand Moi's political style and priorities during the first decade of his regime. I explore how Moi gave political meaning to sport to advance his populist politics at home and project Kenya on(to) the international stage. At home, he used sports to define himself as a leader of the ordinary *mwananchi* (citizen), in touch with the experiences, challenges, and visions of the common Kenyan. The construction of sporting infrastructure offered a shorthand through which to demonstrate this commitment. On the international front, sports provided an interface between Kenya and international entities, including foreign countries like China and sporting bodies like the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa (SCSA). A study of the stadium reveals Moi's approach to foreign policy and shows how he fashioned himself as an international political personality.

³In this article I use the term stadium and complex interchangeably while referring to the infrastructure in Kasarani.

⁴Olympic Studies Center, Lausanne (OSC) H-FCO2-AFRIC/012, Daniel Arap Moi, "Speech on the Occasion of the Official Closing of the 4th All Africa Games," 12 Aug. 1987.

⁵The Central Bank of Kenya, *Kenya: Land of Opportunity* (Nairobi: The Central Bank of Kenya, 1991), 287.

⁶"Moi Sports Legacy: Meeting Muhammad Ali, Kasarani and Nyayo Stadiums," *NTV Kenya*, 4 Feb. 2020, accessed 15 Mar. 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RYujo8nAGw>.

The story of when, why, and how the Kasarani Stadium was built is therefore a gateway to a textured portrait of how Moi used sports to perform transnational politics after assuming power in 1978. That is, the portrait of the infrastructure mirrors the portrait of the president. However, as the article will show, during his first decade as president, Moi increasingly became an authoritarian so that by the time Kenya hosted the All Africa Games in 1987, the meaning of the stadium and Moi's political persona had taken on new meanings. Even as the memorialization cited above positively narrated the stadiums as Moi's contribution to Kenyan sports development, in the context of the 1980s, they were material manifestations of a troubled democracy and authoritarian populism. I contend that the history of the Kasarani Stadium offers a tangible way to show this transformation of Moi's presidency. This perspective emphasizes that Sino-African partnerships are not driven solely by China's geopolitical agenda but also reflect the visions and goals of African leaders.

Scholars of Kenya have studied the rise of authoritarianism during Moi's regime through different lenses. For example, Angelique Haugerud uses *Barazas* (public assemblies often held outside and addressed by political and/or administrative leaders) to trace the changing culture of Kenyan politics in the 1980s and early 1990s.⁷ Joyce Nyairo draws our attention to how trends in music, literary genres, and idiomatic expressions narrate the changes in political styles and priorities of different regimes in Kenya.⁸ I contribute to these insights by showing how sport can help us study Kenyan political culture—especially during the Moi era—in a way that pays attention to the international as well as the domestic sphere.

This article draws primarily from national and international newspapers, biographies of Moi, an interview with Kenyan journalist Roy Gachuhi, records of the Kenyan government and national sporting bodies held at the Kenya National Archives (KNA) in Nairobi, and the documents of international sporting organizations and associations held at the Olympic Studies Center (OSC) in Lausanne. The documents in Lausanne are mainly logistical details concerning the planning of the All Africa Games and correspondences between the IOC on the one hand, and Kenyan sporting officials and officers of the SCSA on the other hand. In some instances, the documents in Lausanne reveal issues that Kenya's national archives do not. The oppressive and increasingly corrupt national political climate of the 1980s, discussed in more detail later, might have led some Kenyan officials to see the IOC as a safer avenue through which to highlight their concerns. Together, these sources highlight the intersection between national and international spheres in the construction of the Kasarani Stadium.

Of particular significance in my analysis of Moi's investment in sports infrastructure is Brian Larkin's framework, "the politics and poetics of infrastructure," which encourages analyses attuned to the kinds of political actions infrastructure reveal as well as the "semiotic and aesthetic" values they encode.⁹ By focusing on the infrastructure and not only the practice and spectatorship of sport, this article contributes to the study of major infrastructure projects as insights into the political and social histories of colonial and postcolonial Africa. Anthropological and historical studies of dams, roads, and railways in Africa have explored stately visions of modernity and the impact of such projects on the lives of ordinary citizens.¹⁰ The literature on sporting infrastructure in Africa, while small, has

⁷ Angelique Haugerud, *The Culture of Politics in Modern Kenya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), especially ch. 3.

⁸ Joyce Nyairo, *Kenya@50: Trends, Identities and the Politics of Belonging* (Nairobi: Contact Zones, 2015).

⁹ Brian Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure," *Annual Reviews of Anthropology* 42 (2013): 329.

¹⁰ In the vast historiography of African infrastructure projects, infrastructure like roads, railways and telegraphs, and dams have received much attention. For some examples see, Jamie Monson, *Africa's Freedom Railway: How A Chinese Development Project Changed Lives and Livelihoods in Tanzania* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Allen Isaacman and Barbara Isaacman, *Dams, Displacement, and the Delusion of Development: Cahora Bassa and its Legacies in Mozambique, 1965–2007* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2013); Kenda Mutongi, *Matatu: A History of Popular Transportation in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Stephan Miescher, *A Dam for Africa: Akosombo Stories from Ghana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022); James Daughton, *In the Forest of No Joy: The Congo-Océan Railroad and the Tragedy of French Colonialism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021).

similarly offered key insights into: the role of leisure and leisure spaces in shaping colonial societies and decolonization processes; the history of postcolonial diplomacy in Africa, especially between China and African countries; and the role of Africa and Africans in the development of different architectural styles.¹¹

Scholarship on stadiums specifically exploded after 2010 when South Africa built five stadiums to facilitate its hosting of the 2010 FIFA World Cup. Questions of economic viability, the negotiation of national identity, heritage, and culture in postapartheid society, and the performance of Pan-Africanism during the World Cup animated that scholarship.¹² Through a case study of the Kasarani Stadium, I contribute to this scholarship by showing how sports infrastructure can give insight into the role of sports in shaping globally oriented postcolonial African politics. In this way, sports offer a promising avenue through which to write postcolonial histories of Africa that are attuned to and indeed connect African history to global historical processes.

The Origins of a National Stadium for Kenya

In 1979, the then-president of the Supreme Council of Sport in Africa (SCSA), Abraham Ordia, wrote to President Moi requesting that Kenya host the next edition of the All Africa Games. As the games had already been held in Brazzaville (1965), Lagos (1973), and Algiers (1978), it was the turn of an East African nation to have hosting privileges.¹³ Over the years, the SCSA found it more difficult to find willing host nations because of the high cost involved in staging the games. Despite Kenya not being in a viable economic position to do so, Moi enthusiastically agreed to the request. Moi's acceptance of this invitation and his commitment to seeing through Kenya's successful hosting of the games signaled two key characteristics of his regime. The first was his political personality as a populist and how he used his genuine love for sports towards crafting that persona. The second was his active participation in Kenya's foreign policy, where he made useful links with multiple countries including China, the USA, the UK, and Japan. Such diplomatic links buttressed Kenya financially during the global economic crises of the 1980s by supporting different projects, including the building of sporting infrastructure. I discuss these characteristics in greater detail later in the article.

While Kenya's agreeing to host the games was the immediate trigger for the construction of the Kasarani Stadium, the question of a national stadium dated back to the 1950s. After the Second World War, colonial officials in Kenya were increasingly interested in providing more recreational spaces for Africans. As Caleb Owen argues, the investment in recreational spaces reflected "a postwar outlook in which the British administration sought to redefine its role as a colonial power through uplift, multiracial cooperation, and development."¹⁴ To engineer the social and political lives of Africans, especially in urban settings, colonial governments across British colonies created administrative structures and built physical amenities to facilitate African leisure, including dance halls, boxing

¹¹ Olusegun Obasa, "Sports and the Modernity of Leisure in Nigeria: Stadium Space and the Symbolism of Expressions, 1930–1980" (PhD Dissertation, University of Texas, Austin, 2015); Charlie Q. L. Xue, Guanghui Ding, Wei Chang, and Yan Wan, "Architecture of 'Stadium Diplomacy' - China-aid Sport Buildings In Africa," *Habitat International* 90 (2019); Manase Kudzai Chiweshe, "Football Stadiums as Patriarchal Spaces," in *Patriarchy and Gender in Africa*, ed. Veronica Fynn Bruey (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021); Cole Roskam, *Designing Reform: Architecture in the People's Republic of China, 1970–1992* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

¹² Peter Alegi, "A Nation To Be Reckoned With: The Politics of World Cup Stadium Construction in Cape Town And Durban, South Africa," *African Studies* 67, no. 3 (2008); Federico Freschi, "Dancing in Chains: The Imaginary of Global South Africanism in World Cup Stadium Architecture," *African Arts* 44, no. 2 (2011); Shaheed Tayob, "The 2010 World Cup in South Africa: A Millennial Capitalist Moment," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38, no. 3 (2012).

¹³ OSC E-REO2-CSSA/002, Abraham Ordia, President of the SCSA, to Daniel Arap Moi, 5 Feb. 1979.

¹⁴ Caleb Edwin Owen, "Recreating Citizens: Leisure, Mobility, and Urban Status in Late Colonial Kenya," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 51, no.1 (2018): 108.

clubs, and stadiums.¹⁵ In addition to everyday forms of leisure, colonial officials also organized sports for the purpose of sending African athletes to international competitions, specifically the Olympics. They used the participation of a multiracial Kenyan team to project a positive image of the late colonial British state internationally.¹⁶ The promising performance of Kenyan African athletes in international meets including the 1952 Indian Ocean Games and the 1954 and 1958 British Empire and Commonwealth Games inspired the then-White leadership of the Kenya Amateur Athletics Association (KAAA) to start a campaign for a national stadium to capitalize on this talent.¹⁷

Other global trends also influenced this interest in a national stadium. During the mid to late twentieth century, there was a global explosion of stadiums. This interest in stadiums reflected the modernization of sport spectatorship on the one hand and the growing importance of stadiums in political symbolism and urban planning on the other hand.¹⁸ That is, the televising of sporting events inspired the building of modern stadiums which integrated lighting and accommodated television cameras as well as glass compartments to host television commentators; furthermore, as part of postwar urban renewal, urban planners in Europe and the USA conceived of sports stadiums as monumental pieces of architecture that would act as urban physical landmarks and as “motors for urban redevelopment.”¹⁹ Closer to home, newly independent countries across the African continent and in South East Asia renamed old stadiums or built entirely new structures to commemorate independence in the 1960s.²⁰ These sporting and political trends catalyzed the desire for a Kenyan national stadium.

From independence until the late 1970s, Kenyan sporting officials, athletes, and fans unsuccessfully tried to make the dream for a national stadium a reality. Several false starts, whose details are beyond the scope of this article, characterized these failed attempts. What those false starts demonstrated, however, was the low priority Jomo Kenyatta’s regime assigned to sports. Despite the occasional celebration of athletics success as a symbol of a developing and united Kenya, the Kenyatta government did not prioritize the development of sports. In 1971 for example, it subsidized sports by £7,500 only, which compared dismally to Tanzania’s £75,000 and Uganda’s £50,000.²¹ From the 1960s, sports remained a low priority in the government’s budgetary allocation despite continuous advice by the Kenyan National Sports Council (KNSC), the official government advisory body for sports matters, to increase financial investment.²²

¹⁵For examples of the roles these clubs played in different British colonies see: Dawson McCall, “‘A Hero Who Made this Country Proud’: Boxing, Nation, and the Politics of Sport in Kenya, ca 1950–1980,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 42, no. 1 (2023): 1–23; Michael Genarro, “‘I Was Really Disgusted at Seeing Healthy Young Boys Playing Ping Pong’: Ping-Pong and Masculinity in Post World War II Nigeria,” in *Sports in African History, Politics and Identity Formation*, eds. Michael Genarro and Saheed Aderinto (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 14–27; Maria Suriano, “Popular Music, Identity and Politics in A Colonial Urban Space: The Case of Mwanza, Tanzania (1945–1961),” in *African Cities: Competing Claims on Urban Spaces*, eds. Francesca Locatelli and Paul Nugent (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 261–89; Peter Otiato Ojiambo, *Kenyan Youth Education in Colonial and Post-Colonial Times: Joseph Kamiru Gikubu’s Impact* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

¹⁶Kara Moskowitz, “From Multiracialism to Africanization: Race, Politics and Sport in Decolonizing Kenya,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 58, no. 1 (2022): 115–35.

¹⁷For a more detailed account on these early international excursions by Kenyan athletes see John Bale and Joe Sang, *Kenyan Running: Movement Culture, Geography, and Global Change* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), 1–16.

¹⁸Robert Lewis, *The Stadium Century: Sport, Spectatorship and Mass Society in Modern France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 172; Frank Andre Guridy, “Counterhistories of the Sport Stadium,” *Public Books*, 6 Apr. 2020, accessed 15 Aug. 2025, <https://www.publicbooks.org/staff-picks-2020-counterhistories-of-the-sport-stadium/>.

¹⁹Lewis, *The Stadium Century*, 172.

²⁰Michelle Sikes, *Kenya’s Running Women: A History* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2023), xvi.

²¹Center for Research Libraries (CRL), “Lugonzo Asks for More Cash,” *Daily Nation* (Kenya), 21 July 1971.

²²The KNSC was formed to nationalize and centralize the administration of sport. For more on the body and its impact in shaping the sporting scene, see Moskowitz, “From Multiracialism to Africanization”; and Matthew Carotenuto, “Grappling with the Past: Wrestling and Performative Identity in Kenya,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 30, no. 16 (2013): 1889–902.

The government's low investment in sports did not, however, reflect public disinterest. On the contrary, soccer and boxing remained immensely popular across the country and Kenyans excitedly followed the continued international success of their runners throughout the mid-1960s into the 1970s. During the 1970 Commonwealth Games for example, a Kenyan inquired if the ministry in charge of sports planned to “produce a magazine showing how the Commonwealth Games [were] taking place in Scotland” so that he could follow the performance of Kenyan stars.²³ By the end of the 1970s however, Kenya had a new president, Moi, who not only loved sport, but used it more intentionally to accomplish political goals at home and internationally. This change in the political landscape finally led to the construction of the much-anticipated national stadium.

Sports and Moi's Populist Politics

From the onset, Moi defined himself as a president of ordinary marginalized Kenyans and not the political elite. Immediately after assuming office, he “issued a series of popular directives, from a declaration of war on smuggling and corruption...to free milk for primary schools.”²⁴ He spent most of his time traveling across the country making his agenda visible to Kenyans. Cultural analyst Joyce Nyairo described Moi as a “man... constantly on the move. When he was not opening agricultural shows in every conceivable hamlet, he was off ‘building gabions’ to control... soil erosion.”²⁵ A fan of Kenya's most successful sport, athletics, and Kenya's most popular sport, football, Moi found sports and sporting spaces invaluable to his style of politics. He attended football matches frequently where he would show off his skills (from when he played the sport as a young man), enjoy watching the game, and bask in the adulation of his people. Describing how Moi used these occasions, a Kenyan sports journalist wrote, “His arrival was often met with wild cheers and riotous jubilation by excitable football fanatics, who often chanted political slogans to welcome him and also excite his fragile, if palpable, man of the people mien.”²⁶ Moi therefore saw stadiums as sites for politics in a different way from his predecessor. They were not simply sites for holding political rallies. Rather, they were essential platforms for him to perform ordinariness, availability, and simplicity, key elements which constituted his populist politics.²⁷

This style contrasted the new energetic Kenyan leadership against the previous leadership with which Kenyans interacted mostly via the state-run broadcaster, *Voice of Kenya*.²⁸ Such performances allowed Moi to shake off the ghost of Kenyatta whose image as “father of the nation” limited his ability to chart an independent course and identity for himself.²⁹ They also showed Moi's greater engagement with sports relative to Kenyatta. While Kenyatta occasionally leveraged the political power of sport to promote nation building by, for example, waving off Kenya's Olympic team at state-house or giving national honors and gifts to individual athletes, he neither enjoyed sport personally nor supported it financially and structurally.³⁰ Moi on the contrary, was a genuine fan of sports, as

²³Kenya National Archives, Nairobi (KNA) TR/35/4, C. N Kuria, sports fan, to Minister, Cooperatives and Social Services, 24 July 1970.

²⁴Gabrielle Lynch, *I Say To You: Ethnic Politics and the Kalenjin in Kenya* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 112–13.

²⁵Nyairo, *Kenya@50*, 34.

²⁶“In Sports, Moi was Game Any Time,” *The Nation* (Nairobi), 4 Feb. 2020, accessed 15 Mar. 2024, https://nation.africa/kenya/sports/other-sports/in-sports-moi-was-game-any-time-247774#google_vignette.

²⁷For a discussion of the history of populism and performance in Kenya see Peter Simatei, “Populism and its Performance in Kenya,” in *A New Age of Extremes? Anti-political Politics and Identity Remaking in the Early 21st Century*, eds. Jamile Borges da Silva Fábio Baqueiro Figueiredo and Patricia Godinho Gomes (Bayreuth: University of Bayreuth, 2023), 77–85; Haugerud, *The Culture of Politics in Modern Kenya*.

²⁸Andrew Morton, *Moi: The Making of an African Statesman* (London: Michael O'Mara Books Limited, 1998), 148.

²⁹Nyairo, *Kenya@50*, 87.

³⁰In contrast, a significant number of Kenyatta's cabinet members, political leaders, and government officials—like Tom Mboya, Oginga Odinga, Kenneth Matiba, Martin Shikuku and Isaac Lugonzo—were involved in the sporting scene, especially football, as officials of associations and occasional players.

evidenced by numerous archival photos and popular anecdotes capturing his love for football, especially.³¹ This personal interest resulted in tangible results as evidenced by the development of sporting infrastructure discussed in this article.

Moi's focus on sports was more than just a statement of personal interest. It also reflected his greater interest in promoting the cultural heritage of Kenya, which he deemed under threat of extinction. Consequently, after assuming office, his administration made attempts to "reconceptualize 'modernization' and 'development' to emphasize development policies, strategies and programmes which took into account the cultural dimension and objectives of any process of economic and social change."³² Concretely, "he created a Department of Culture in May 1980 and a Ministry of Culture and Social Services, reactivated the Kenyan National Cultural Council in 1980, and appointed a National Music Commission in 1982."³³ Up until Moi's tenure, Kenya's cultural policy was largely incoherent and fragmented.³⁴

Sports came under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture and Social Services which marked the first time sport was explicitly coded as part of the cultural fabric of Kenya. According to sports journalist Roy Gachuhi, Moi appointed dynamic leaders like Kenneth Matiba, himself a sportsman (mountaineer), to head this department. Furthermore, the president's love for attending sports events encouraged a vibrant local sporting scene. "At Moi's time you were following sports in Malindi, Mombasa, Nakuru, Limuru, Eldoret, you know, everywhere around the country," narrated Gachuhi. He also noted that unlike today where Kenyans look to the European football leagues for heroes, during Moi's time, a period he labeled "the golden era of Kenyan sports," Kenyans had local sporting heroes.³⁵

In addition to sports, Moi also used architectural projects as physical manifestations of his political priorities and style of governance. As Andrew Morton notes, Moi built a range of buildings including a national university, schools, and hospital wards, with the mid-1980s representing the most prolific construction period.³⁶ Sometimes, Moi or people wanting to curry political favor with the president, renamed already existing buildings *Nyayo*, to inscribe his political presence in the Kenyan landscape.³⁷ "Nyayo was development in motion: Nyayo Bus Services, Nyayo Pioneer Car, Nyayo Tea Zones and Nyayo (hospital) Wards. All over the republic, every other girl's school was (re)named Moi Girls (High) school," describes Nyairo.³⁸ These projects were not only physical embodiments of Moi's populist politics and style of governance which infused every aspect of Kenyan life with the symbolic presence of the president, but were also his visions of progress and development characterized by endless projects, spontaneity, and generosity.

That Moi carried out these projects during a period of economic precarity reflected Kenya's position as a favorite of, especially, Western donors. These projects were funded by the USA, Britain, Germany, and Norway, among others. As a relatively stable, capitalist, and "democratic" East African nation surrounded by countries in political turmoil (Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, and a peaceful but socialist country (Tanzania), Western countries and institutions saw Kenya as their stronghold in the region. Kenya attracted this kind of aid due to Moi's active courting of foreign aid. Veteran Kenyan diplomat, Kipyego Cheluget writes that under Moi, foreign policy

³¹ A quick google search of Moi and Sports reveals numerous photos and stories about Moi's love for sports.

³² Bethwell Allan Ogot, "The Construction of a National Culture," in *Decolonization and Independence in Kenya, 1940–93*, eds. B. A. Ogot & W. R. Ochieng' (London: James Currey, 1995), 216.

³³ Charles Hornsby, *Kenya: A History Since Independence* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 348.

³⁴ Benjamin E. Kipkorir, "Towards a Cultural Policy for Kenya: Some Views," Paper no. 131, Institute of African Studies, University of Nairobi, 1980.

³⁵ Interview with Roy Gachuhi, on Zoom, 24 June 2024.

³⁶ Morton, *Moi*, 146.

³⁷ Moi chose the mantra "Nyayo" immediately after succeeding Kenyatta. Meaning footsteps in Swahili, Moi chose this term to reassure Kenyans, and especially the nervous political elites, that he would follow in the footsteps of Kenyatta.

³⁸ Nyairo, *Kenya@50*, 34.

“became more of a presidential prerogative, more aggressive and, consequently, more controversial.”³⁹ Unlike Kenyatta who “disliked air travel” and delegated diplomatic trips to his ministers and vice president, Moi traveled widely internationally.⁴⁰ He also adopted a more pragmatic approach to diplomacy and courted non-Western countries for aid, notably China. After accepting the invitation to host the All Africa Games, it was to China that Moi turned for help in constructing a stadium to host the games.

Sports and Changing Sino-Kenyan Relations in the Early 1980s

The end of the 1970s, a decade after Kenya cut diplomatic ties with China, ushered in a period of normalization of Kenya-China relations. Historian Jodie Sun attributes this change to “the normalization of China-US relations in the 1970s” and “simultaneous leadership transitions in Kenya and China” with Moi and Deng Xiaoping ascending to power, respectively.⁴¹ The Kenyan government used this opportunity to court China’s help in building the desired yet elusive sports complex. In late 1977, the Chinese ambassador to Kenya, Wang Yueh-yi, announced that China had agreed to partner with Kenya to build the sports complex to mark this renewed partnership.

Moi’s inauguration as president in 1978 set the project in motion. Writing to formally request Chinese aid, the ministry in charge of sport underlined Kenya’s economic hardships that made such a necessary undertaking a second priority. “The biggest bulk of local resources [would] be channeled toward the alleviation of poverty and meeting the basic needs of the people, particularly rural people,” it argued, and therefore, “very little [could] be channeled to an otherwise commendable project like the Sports Complex.”⁴² In fact, when penning the formal request for aid in 1979, Kenya was facing a severe drought which occurred in a larger context of economic precarity in the early 1980s. Charles Hornsby captures the challenges of this period thus, “With the coffee boom over, public spending rising, the land frontier closed, the oil crisis and the EAC gone, the early 1980s saw food shortages, price rises, foreign exchange crisis, budget shortfalls and growing debt.”⁴³ Kenya could not construct an expensive stadium without foreign aid.

Considering the economic situation, one possible interpretation might hold that the most reasonable decision for Kenya was for Moi to decline hosting privileges. But the insistence on holding the expensive games in the face of economic hardship can be read as evidence of Moi’s populist impulses. He was not only after likeability at home, but also abroad. Gachuhi suggested that Moi supported Kenya’s hosting of the games as a way to establish his legacy as an African statesman.⁴⁴ Immediately after taking office Moi played crucial roles in promoting Pan-Africanism: he allowed Kenyan soldiers to participate in peacekeeping missions in Zimbabwe (1979) and Chad (1981–82), and served as the chair of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) for two consecutive terms (1981–83), during which he led peace efforts in Somalia and Sudan, and condemned the apartheid government’s invasion of Lesotho in 1982. Hosting the All Africa Games was another crowning moment for him as a continental leader.⁴⁵

Using the All Africa Games to boost his image on the continent aligned with Moi’s record of leveraging sports towards political ends throughout the first decade of his tenure. The first big event hosted by Kenya under Moi was the 1978–79 Federation of African University Students (FASU) Games.

³⁹ Kipyego Cheluget, “Kenya’s Foreign Policy Under President Jomo Kenyatta and President Daniel Moi: Following and Changing the *Nyayos*” in *Kenya’s 50 Years of Diplomatic Engagement: From Kenyatta to Kenyatta*, ed. Kipyego Cheluget (Nairobi: Moran [E.A.] Publishers Limited 2018), 68–86.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Jodie Sun, *Kenya’s and Zambia’s Relations with China 1949–2019* (London: James Currey, 2023), 111.

⁴² KNA AMP/10/3, “The Kenya National Sports Complex: Proposal and Request for Technical Assistance from the Republic of China,” 23 Apr. 1979.

⁴³ Hornsby, *Kenya*, 356.

⁴⁴ Gachuhi interview.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Kenya stepped in to organize the games after Uganda pulled out. During this occasion, Moi encouraged the African continent to “use sports as one of the instruments for uniting the continent and bringing its peoples together.”⁴⁶ In 1980 he enthusiastically joined a US-led boycott of the Moscow Olympics in protest of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. To garner support for this boycott, the then US president, Jimmy Carter sent legendary boxer, Muhammad Ali, on a diplomatic tour. Kenya joined the boycott even before Ali landed in the country. Historian James Ivey writes that Ali “joked with Moi for camera-men, met with the Kenyan Olympic Association, spent time at the US Cultural Center with local Muslim leaders, and, while on safari, ‘stopped twice and charged out onto the African plain to chase eland and Zebra.’”⁴⁷ The early withdrawal of Kenya from the Moscow Games made Ali’s visit more of a confirmation of strong Kenya-US relations than a difficult diplomatic trip, as witnessed in countries such as Tanzania.

To assuage athletes’ disappointment at missing the Olympic Games, the Kenyan and American governments organized the “Kenya Golden Cup,” a boxing competition for the boycotting countries. Not only did Kenya succeed athletically in this tournament, but also diplomatically as Moi emphasized Kenya’s commitment to fighting apartheid, racism, and “any form of oppression.”⁴⁸ For Kenyan athletes, Moi directed that the money earmarked for the Moscow Olympics be redirected to the construction of a national stadium. This catalyzed the construction of the Nyayo Stadium in Nairobi, constructed in 1983, and technically, Kenya’s first national stadium, albeit smaller than Kasarani. This stadium did not receive as much media attention or government publicity as the Kasarani Stadium because its story painted a truer picture of Kenya’s financial situation. The government and the Kenya Amateur Athletics Association (KAAA) struggled to find funding for the stadium. Therefore, it would have been harder to sell an image of progress, development, and thriving international relations using the Nyayo Stadium. In 1986, Kenya boycotted the Commonwealth Games in protest of Thatcher’s fraternization with apartheid South Africa. Despite Kenya’s close ties with London and Thatcher’s friendship with Moi, the strength and popularity of the anti-apartheid sporting boycott made it risky for Moi to ignore the call for a boycott.

These examples highlight not only Moi’s willingness to use sports to gain favor at home and explicitly shape Kenya’s politics internationally, but also his policy of “positive non-alignment” which allowed Kenya to pursue beneficial relationships with countries beyond the East-West bifurcation of the late Cold War. “We cannot eat political ideologies,” Moi argued in defense of this approach.⁴⁹ It was this foreign relations policy that created a permissive environment for the renewal of Sino-Kenyan relations and eventual partnership in constructing the Kasarani Stadium. Therefore, in 1980 Moi visited China, the first Kenyan president to do so. With a “delegation consisting mainly of technocrats [he] sign[ed] five development agreements and gave approval of a sports complex by China.”⁵⁰ Of this package, the sports complex was the “single largest and most expensive aid project from China.”⁵¹ The Chinese granted Kenya “an interest free loan of RMB 70 million [~ USD 180 million today] over a period of six years from 1st Oct 1980 to 30th Sept 1986” which would be “repaid by Kenya in installments over a period of 15 years from 1st Oct 1996 to 30th Sept 2011.”⁵²

Beyond seeking financial and technical assistance from China, Moi used the trip to gain political legitimacy in his early years as president. Sun contends that in courting Beijing in political

⁴⁶Stanford University Library (SUL), Palo Alto, California, Joseph Ndung’u, “2nd All Africa University Games Sail Through Nairobi,” *Inside Kenya Today* (Nairobi), June 1979.

⁴⁷James Ivey, “Welcome, Ali, Please go Home’: Muhammad Ali as Diplomat and African Debates on the 1980 Moscow Olympic Boycott,” *African Studies Review* 66, no. 2 (2023): 493.

⁴⁸SUL, Edmund N. Kwena, “The Kenya Golden Cup 1980,” *Inside Kenya Today*, Dec. 1980.

⁴⁹Daniel Arap Moi, *Kenya African Nationalism: Nyayo Philosophy and Principles* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1986), 33.

⁵⁰Sun, *Kenya’s and Zambia’s Relations*, 133.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 137.

⁵²KNA AMP/10/4, Ministers for Culture and Social Service, Works and Housing, Finance and Economic Planning and Development, Memorandum: Kenya National Sports Complex, n.d.

transition, Moi sought to endorse his own new and fragile presidency.⁵³ China's transition mirrored Kenya's and Moi found inspiration in the new regime. Government publications and members of parliament lauded the president's trip as heroic. "Making a journey of fifteen thousand miles and another fifteen [thousand] miles back in five days is a spectacular feat and not a leisurely pastime," praised one publication.⁵⁴ Such descriptions, in addition to Moi's "on the move" disposition described earlier, further emphasized the virility of his younger more energetic leadership. Upon returning to Kenya, Moi highlighted lessons Kenyans could emulate from the Chinese, specifically hard work, and the benefits of positive non-alignment. In addition to technocrats, Moi also invited twelve university students on the diplomatic trip to check student activism which had gained momentum in the early years of his presidency.⁵⁵ For Moi, therefore, seeking Chinese friendship was more than just pursuing technical and financial aid. The economic and technical protocols signed in Beijing were concrete manifestations of Moi looking to China for political and cultural inspiration.

China's decision to take up this project aligned with its diplomatic policies regarding Africa. Beijing had already built other stadiums in Africa, namely in Senegal, Sierra Leone, and the Sudan engendering what John Franklin Copper termed "friendship stadiums."⁵⁶ "Stadium Diplomacy" was and remains a major pillar of Chinese foreign aid, especially on the African continent.⁵⁷ As different foreign countries tried to win over African countries during the Cold War, China carved out a niche for itself in the realm of sporting infrastructure. Charlie Xue, Guanghui Ding, Wei Chang, and Yan Wan argue that China focused on building stadiums in Africa because they "explicitly showcased China's advantages in a number of aspects: relatively lower cost in labor, appropriate technologies and materials, discipline and concentration, state intervention, and long-term commitment."⁵⁸ In fact, there were no other foreign countries willing to engage in this kind of diplomatic project. Stadiums were efficient ways for China to win the hearts and minds of Africans as the prominence of stadiums situated in major cities memorialized China's generosity and efficiency.⁵⁹ Cole Roskam argues that China also used these stadiums, especially those they built in West Africa, to improve Chinese architectural know-how.⁶⁰

While the theory of "stadium diplomacy" applies to the Kenyan context, it does not adequately describe the extent of Sino-Kenyan relations. The Chinese were interested in more than intergovernmental cooperation: they promoted cultural diplomatic programs that facilitated encounters between Chinese and Kenyan citizens. Corporeal practices like athletics, table tennis, and particularly acrobatics provided interfaces for Sino-Kenyan connections. In 1980, the Shaanxi Acrobatic Troupe from China toured Kenya, and in 1983, Kenya sent a contingent of twenty-four children under sixteen-years old for a three-year acrobatic training program in China. The latter program was a direct request by Moi during his 1980 tour of China. Kenya's ambassador to China emphasized the importance of the successful execution of this program "as it attracted personal interest of heads of government in both Kenya and China."⁶¹ When the Kenyan children returned from China, Moi launched them as

⁵³Sun, *Kenya's and Zambia's Relations*, 134

⁵⁴SUL, W. L. Ndege, "President Moi's Tour of China: A Living Testimony of Kenya's Policy of Positive Nonalignment," *Inside Kenya Today*, Dec. 1980, 15.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶John Franklin Copper, "China's Foreign Aid in 1978," *Maryland Series in Contemporary Asian Studies* 29, no. 8 (1979), accessed 15 Jul. 2024, <http://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1028&context=mscas>.

⁵⁷Xue, Ding, Chang, and Wan, "Architecture of 'Stadium Diplomacy.'"

⁵⁸Ibid., 2.

⁵⁹Valeria Guzmán Verri, "Gifting Architecture: China and The National Stadium in Costa Rica, 2007–11," *Architectural History* 63 (2020): 14.

⁶⁰Roskam, *Designing Reform*, 236.

⁶¹KNA AAT/7/15, Ndarari Kirangi to The Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Culture and Social Services, "Arrival of Kenyan Children in Canton to Train as Acrobats," 25 May 1983.

the national acrobatic troupe on 19 March 1985; they toured the country, performed in governmental functions, and were nicknamed the “president’s kids.”⁶² Chinese technical and financial aid for the stadium was couched in this larger cultural framework. This culturally centered diplomacy appealed to Moi’s views of culture as the “environmental ambience within which development processes take place.”⁶³

The Kasarani Stadium therefore “narrate[d] the story of international relations of [Kenya].”⁶⁴ It represented a new era of diplomatic relationship between Kenya and China and created a new positive image of China in Kenya. Media houses, government and sports officials, and fans lauded China as Kenya’s friend. But on the national front, this diplomatic win was more complicated for Moi. The dire economic situation in the country coupled with persistent student activism responding to these hardships and the transformation of Moi’s political ethos from “populism to... a calculated use of authoritarianism and criminality,” overshadowed what should have been a significant win for Moi.⁶⁵ Indeed, this duality characterized the construction of this sports complex throughout the 1980s. Even though it represented diplomatic progress between Kenya and China and Moi’s commitment to the development of sports, the construction of the complex occurred during a period when Moi centralized power, curtailed the rights of Kenyans, and created a conducive environment for rampant corruption.

Kasarani Stadium as a Site for National and International Politics

Throughout the construction of the stadium from its beginning in 1983 to its completion in 1987, Moi and his government used it in different ways to address national and international political issues. The choice of the location of the stadium illustrated the government’s use of sporting infrastructure towards urban planning. Located about eleven kilometers from the city center, the 632-acre site in Kasarani was on the periphery of the capital city, Nairobi.⁶⁶ The site development plan generated by Kenya’s first African architectural firm, Waweru & Associates, gives us insight into the benefits the government gained from choosing this site and the considerations they had to make.⁶⁷

When the government purchased the site in Kasarani, it was a vast uninhabited pastureland full of napier grass. The site was therefore large enough to accommodate the sports complex and future expansion. Furthermore, the fact that it was an uninhabited location eliminated the possibility of displacing people and the conflicts that might have resulted from such an action. Even though it was on the periphery of Nairobi-proper, the site’s immediate vicinity had “several large population agglomerations” which, the planners argued, would make use of the sporting infrastructure once constructed. Therefore, the planners envisioned that “urban development [would] gradually envelop the proposed sports complex, integrating it in the fabric of the metropolitan area.”⁶⁸

By choosing this piece of land, the government prefigured the expansion of the fast-growing Nairobi towards Kasarani. After all, debates about the location of the stadium since the 1960s were always intertwined with concerns about urban planning. Indeed, situating the stadium in Kasarani increased the value of surrounding areas; international research institutions such as the Center for

⁶²“Kenyan Acrobat Revolutionizes Local-Scene with Chinese-Inspired Moves,” *NTV*, 26 Nov. 2023, accessed 15 Jul. 2024, <https://ntvkenya.co.ke/news/kenyan-acrobat-revolutionizes-local-scene-with-chinese-inspired-moves/>.

⁶³Moi, *Kenya African Nationalism*, 38.

⁶⁴Manuel Herz et al., *African Modernism: The Architecture of Independence, Ghana, Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire, Kenya, Zambia* (Chicago: Park Books, 2022), 9.

⁶⁵Daniel Branch, *Kenya: Between Hope and Despair* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 148–54.

⁶⁶The Kenyan Government, “Gazette Notice no. 1550 and no. 1551,” *Kenya Gazette*, 30 May 1980, accessed 15 Aug. 2025, <https://books.google.co.ke/books?id=pmfU1QQnHsC&q=kasarani#v=snippet&q=kasarani&f=false>.

⁶⁷KNA AMP/10/5, Waweru & Associates, “Kenya National Sports Complex: Site Development Plan Phase 1-A,” n.d.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

Insect Physiology and Ecology (ICIPE) and Regional Center for Remote Sensing and Mapping also took advantage of the prominence of the site to establish their institutions in the vicinity.⁶⁹ The sports complex also changed the future infrastructural planning for the adjoining areas. Anticipating increased human and vehicle traffic, the government-built roads that connected the complex to other parts of Nairobi in a more efficient manner.⁷⁰

In pursuing this kind of urban expansion, the Kenyan government ignored other important urban needs connected to sports and recreation. From the early debates about the construction of a national stadium in the 1960s, urban planners, city and sporting officials, and residents of Nairobi demanded that the government provide infrastructure for everyday leisure and recreational activities. To address the question of the stadium from the local level, especially in Nairobi, required the government to consider questions of housing, funding for local governments, urban belonging, and land rights. Not only were these questions complicated, but they were also more politically sensitive than the issue of a single, state-of-the-art stadium. As Owen has shown, struggles over urban parks and spaces in the 1980s threatened Moi's regime by creating an avenue for mobilizing dissent in Mombasa and Nairobi.⁷¹ Furthermore, the high political returns the government could earn from completing the Kasarani scheme, relative to the risk in dealing with politics at the local level, I suggest, motivated the government to focus on this project as opposed to the overall development of local sporting facilities in Nairobi.

In addition to urban planning, the government also used the stadium to demonstrate its commitment to re-energizing Kenyan sports. In the 1980s, the Kenyan sporting scene was in the doldrums, especially in athletics, which had previously catapulted Kenya to global fame. Two consecutive boycotts in 1976 and 1980, the migration of top Kenyan running talent to US universities, low funding of sports due to Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPS), and general mismanagement made the 1980s Kenya's lowest point in its sporting history.

A popular theory among contemporaneous observers suggested that Kenyan athletes in the past had relied on "talent alone" and they needed more support in the form of modern training facilities and coaching for continued success.⁷² Moi capitalized on this theory in highlighting the benefits and uniqueness of the stadium; he emphasized the construction of the Kasarani Stadium as marking "a *new era* in the development of sports in Kenya" and a challenge for Kenyan athletes as "they re-group[ed] to launch their search for *new glory*."⁷³ The language of "newness" functioned to further distinguish Kenyatta's and Moi's regimes, and imprinted Moi's contribution to a well-established aspect of Kenyan sociocultural fabric, that is, success in athletics.

Indeed, the built environment became an important way for Moi to write himself into the story of Kenya's development. On 8 December 1983, he laid the cornerstone for the foundation, officially marking the commencement of construction of the stadium. This ceremony was part of a week-long celebration commemorating twenty years of Kenyan independence which included the official opening of important buildings including Nyayo House (the provincial headquarters of the then-Nairobi province), Magereza House (headquarters of the prisons department), National Youth Service House, and Utalii House (headquarters of the tourism department), all in Nairobi.⁷⁴ While these projects originated in the Kenyatta regime, Moi took ownership and used the city's built infrastructure to

⁶⁹CRL, Patrick Ngugi, "A Booming Industrial Area: The Right Place for Investors Looking for More Space and Better Communication," *Daily Nation*, 12 Mar. 1987.

⁷⁰CRL, Tom Mshindi, "A New Road that Will Greatly Alter the Landscape of a City Slum Area," *Daily Nation*, 27 Apr. 1987.

⁷¹For a more extensive discussion on these themes and politics of everyday urban leisure see, Caleb Edwin Owen, "Lands of Leisure: Recreation, Space and the Struggle for Urban Kenya" (PhD Dissertation, Michigan State University, 2015).

⁷²CRL, "A Sports Complex Fit for Champs," *Daily Nation*, 9 Dec. 1983.

⁷³Ibid. My italicization.

⁷⁴Africa Commons, "Kenyan Celebrate with Pomp and Glory," *Weekly Review* (Nairobi), 16 Dec. 1983.

frame his leadership as one of progress and modernity.⁷⁵ By lining up these events to coincide with the twentieth anniversary of Kenya's independence, Moi drew a direct line between his leadership and the legacies of Kenya's independence leaders, especially Kenyatta. Yet, the addition of projects like the Chinese-funded stadium allowed him to chart a path that was different from Kenyatta while benefiting from Kenyatta's regime.

The most important role played by the stadium, however, was on the international stage. The sports complex became an amalgam of diplomatic relationships and cooperation between Kenya and other countries and international sporting federations. Because the stadium was to host the All Africa Games, other parties besides China played a role in its construction. For example, a meeting in early 1986 brought together the IOC advisor, Artur Takac, members of the organizing committee for the All Africa Games, representatives from the Ministry of Culture and Social Services, and the Ministry of Works, Housing and Physical Planning, the Treasury, the Chinese technical team, and a Hungarian team responsible for electronic scoreboards.⁷⁶ Chinese aid made possible the construction of the main structure of the stadium, with a running track and a swimming pool. Other necessities like astroturf, scoreboards, and machines for timing events were donated by other entities including the IOC, the USA government, South Korea, and the SCSA.⁷⁷ The participation of these parties in the construction illustrated a positive response from these countries and organizations to Kenya's open and pragmatic foreign relations policy.

Ultimately though, the Sino-Kenyan partnership was the most prominent of these diplomatic relationships. After the Kenyan party provided the land for the stadium and generated a site development plan, the Chinese oversaw the remainder of the project. The Southeast University Institute of Architectural Design, under the leadership of architect Zhou Fangzhong, won the Chinese government's commission to construct the complex.⁷⁸ From 1983 to 1987, when the Chinese officially handed over the stadium to the Kenyan government, the project became a stage for displaying positive China-Kenya relations. This was particularly beneficial to the Chinese who received praise from Kenyan media on different themes, from their commercial enterprises to their work ethic. In July 1984, M. V. Pinggu, a Chinese vessel carrying 14,000 tons of Chinese building materials for the stadium docked at the Kenyan port of Mombasa.⁷⁹ This event was especially noticeable as Chinese vessels were rare sightings at the Kenyan docks, making only three to four calls a year. The reduced volume of trade at Kilindini, Kenya's main harbor from 8 million metric tons in 1981 to 6.4 million metric tons in 1983 made the Chinese vessel more prominent.⁸⁰

The Chinese experts working on the project used the opportunity to boost the image of China in the Kenyan imagination. Even though a team of 200-plus Chinese and several hundred Kenyans worked on the project, the construction site was a Chinese work site under Chinese leadership. The work was led by technical team leader Wang Jingzhi and facilitated by two interpreters Ting Bang Ying (Swahili) and Lan Lin Jane (English).⁸¹ The construction site was also guided by a Chinese work ethic that was open to incorporating elements of Kenyan linguistic culture. In an interview with a Kenyan newspaper, Jingzhi reported a harmonious relationship between Chinese and Kenyan workers, noting "the working atmosphere has become so cordial that the local people are speaking some Chinese.

⁷⁵The Nyayo House was originally named "Nairobi House" but Moi, wanting to affiliate himself directly with the project, renamed it after his mantra, "Nyayo."

⁷⁶OSC H-FCO2-AFRIC/008, IOC Technical Advisor, Artur Takac to IOC President, Juan Antonio Samaranch, "Report on the Visit to Nairobi, Kenya- 23rd-29th January 1987"

⁷⁷OSCD-RMO1 - Kenya 004, Minutes of Meeting between the IOC President, Juan Samaranch and Minister, Sports, Kenya, Lausanne, 11 July 1986.

⁷⁸Roskam's *Designing Reform* discusses the architectural elements of Chinese design in greater detail and the history of the Chinese architectural scene in more detail.

⁷⁹CRL, Nation Reporter, "Chinese Vessel Expected," *Daily Nation*, 19 July 1984.

⁸⁰Africa Commons, "Reduced Business at Kilindini Harbour," *Weekly Review*, 5 Oct. 1984.

⁸¹CRL, Roy Gachuhi, "Kasarani Sports Complex Takes Shape," *Daily Nation*, 14 Sep. 1984.

At work, we mix Chinese and Swahili and use signs when we get bogged down.”⁸² People walking by the project were met with a signboard reading, “Angalia Usalaama! (Mind your Safety!) ‘Angalia Uboru wa Kazi!’ (Mind the perfection of the job!),” written in Chinese and Swahili.⁸³ Ying, the Swahili translator elaborated on these signs, “In any kind of job, these are very strong Chinese tenets. First and foremost is the safety of the worker. Second and also very important, is the quality of the job; it must be perfect.”⁸⁴ Ying offered an example where they visited an injured colleague at their home who remarked on the singularity of the Chinese disposition: “You Chinese people are different. At other sites, they just abandon you when you get injured. You are great.”⁸⁵ At the end of the press visit, the construction team treated the editor and his team to a lunch made mostly from ingredients grown by the Chinese. “The Chinese know how to be self-reliant,” said Ting, “All the vegetables we grow here. And we even rear pigs.”⁸⁶

By emphasizing their ability to work harmoniously with Kenyans, and respecting and valuing African laborers, these experts projected an image of China as a good partner to Kenya. This on-the-ground framing of the relationship between China and Kenya buttressed China’s official definition of their role in the project. That is, the Chinese positioned themselves as partners with Kenya and not as donors or saviors. As Roskam notes, this approach helped imbue China’s “architectural ambitions with a certain humility that appealed to the leaders of developing nations eager to limit their dependence upon U.S. and Soviet aid, technology, and expertise.”⁸⁷ In sum, the project provided a tangible representation of China and the kind of partnership they offered Kenya and Kenyans.

Despite Kenyan manual laborers participating in the construction, there is little written evidence as to their experiences. When I asked Gachuhi, who covered the construction in the 1980s, what Kenyan workers thought of the project, he said they were mainly grateful for an opportunity to work and be paid on time.⁸⁸ This was not an inconsequential statement considering the tough economic conditions of the 1980s. In 1986 for example, the *Christian Science Monitor* noted that in a Kenyan “labor pool of 7 million, only 1 million drew wages” with “300,000 workers joining the workforce each year.”⁸⁹ Some Nairobians visited the work in progress and encouraged fellow citizens to visit the complex to apprise themselves with events happening in their own country.⁹⁰ Overall, evidence concerning the reactions and roles of Kenyans in this project are slim. The location of the construction site, far away from the city and not easily accessible by public transport, might have contributed to obscuring the project from engagement by the public.

Kenyan authorities, whose activities received more coverage, used the project in Kasarani to perform diplomatic politics. As the stadium took shape starting in 1986, Kenyan officials made it a popular stop for international visitors, displaying it to foreign dignitaries as evidence of Kenya’s progress. The quick progress of the stadium also assured national and international observers of Kenya’s ability to host the All Africa Games, scheduled for August 1987. Kenya initially agreed to host the games in 1983 but postponed it to 1987, a more realistic deadline for the completion of the stadium.

In April of 1987, the Chinese government handed over the completed complex to the Kenyan government, on schedule for the All Africa Games. During the handing over ceremony, a visibly upset Moi lamented the absence of the international press: “They seem to be interested only in the

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ CRL, Gachuhi, “A Day with the Chinese Bees,” *Daily Nation*, 14 Sept. 1984.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Philip Otieno Onyango as quoted in Gachuhi, “A Day with the Chinese Bees.”

⁸⁶ Ting Ying as quoted in Gachuhi, “A Day with the Chinese Bees.”

⁸⁷ Roskam, *Designing Reform*, 237.

⁸⁸ Gachuhi interview.

⁸⁹ ProQuest Historical Newspapers (PQHN), Mary Anne Fitzgerald, “Kenya’s Leadership Grows Increasingly Vulnerable to Unrest,” *Christian Science Monitor* (Boston), 17 June 1986.

⁹⁰ CRL, George Nandi, “Visit our New Stadium,” *Daily Nation*, 12 Mar. 1986.

negative aspects to the extent that a quarrel between a man and his wife is described as human rights violation. Why can't they go to countries where people, including small children, are killed every day?"⁹¹ Even though Moi used the stadium to narrate his role as an African statesman and a pragmatic diplomat, and demonstrate his commitment to modernizing and developing Kenya, the situation at home challenged this image.

The allure of this modernist project failed to occlude the fractures in Kenya's fragile political space caused by Moi's increasingly authoritarian approach to governance. As early as 1983, international press like the *Christian Science Monitor* reported the detention of political dissidents, the suppression of the Kenyan press, and the rampant corruption in Moi's government.⁹² By the late 1980s, criticisms against the oppressive regime increased. Moi needed positive international press, like the stadium project, as a foil to the barrage of negative international press. But, as shown by the handing-over ceremony, this was not forthcoming. The All Africa Games were no different.

From 1–12 August 1987, Kenya hosted a generally successful fourth All Africa Games, placing fourth on the overall table. While the much-lauded stadium hosted the opening and closing ceremonies, football finals, track and field, basketball, volleyball, and swimming, the locus of the action was the Nyayo Stadium which hosted the popular football group matches. This hurt local business-people who had rented food kiosks and market spaces near the complex in anticipation of large crowds of fans and participants.⁹³ Rather than being the center of sporting action, the stadium essentially became the center of ceremonial and political performance centered around the president's opening and closing speeches.

Although he desired an overwhelming positive response from Kenya's hosting of the Games, Moi's win was a checkered one as criticisms against his oppressive regime shrouded his "victory." Throughout 1987, Kenya's civil society, exiled politicians and intellectuals, and international human rights groups called attention to the deteriorating situation in Kenya. This was in response to a particularly repressive 1986, when "hundreds of Kenyans from all walks of life were subjected to disappearances, arbitrary arrests, torture, imprisonment following questionable court proceedings, detention without trial, and general police harassment."⁹⁴ By the time the Chinese handed over the stadium in April 1987, Moi was already feeling internal and external pressure to reform: in March, he cut short his trip to Washington after Reagan questioned him about human and democratic rights violations in Kenya.⁹⁵ In June, as Kenya prepared to host the games, the US Congress discussed a bill to "condition foreign aid on improvement in [Kenya's] human rights record."⁹⁶ In July, Kenyan opposition leader Oginga Odinga returned to the public platform and gave a rousing speech agitating for multiparty democracy.⁹⁷ This was the context surrounding Moi's opening remarks on 1 August 1987.

Despite this threat to his political legitimacy, Moi took a celebratory and grateful tone during the opening ceremony; he generally thanked all the partners who had helped Kenya prepare and host the games, called for African unity, and defended Kenya's decision to boycott the 1986 Commonwealth Games.⁹⁸ This was the persona he wanted the world to see— a pragmatic, developmentalist, Pan-African Kenyan leader. Noticeably, as observed by Roskam, in the months leading up to the All-Africa

⁹¹ President Daniel Moi as cited in CRL, "Kenya Takes over Sports Complex," *Daily Nation*, 24 Apr. 1987.

⁹² PQHN, Jack Hiller, David Cownie, and Jill McGowan, "Readers Write: On Detention and Amnesty in Kenya," *Christian Science Monitor*, 11 May 1983.

⁹³ CRL, Samuel Nduati, "Games Venue Shift Hurts Kiosk Trade," *Daily Nation*, 4 Aug. 1987.

⁹⁴ Hoover Archives (HA) Kenyan Subject Collection, Box 2, No. XX798, Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners in Kenya, "Focus on Human Rights in Kenya," n. d. [1988].

⁹⁵ Special Correspondent, "Daniel Finds the Lions Won't Lie Down," *The Guardian* (London), 20 March 1987.

⁹⁶ Blaine Harden, "Kenya's President Moi Denies charges of Rights Abuses: Moi Says U.S. Should Boost Military Aid," *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), 12 June 1987.

⁹⁷ Hornsby, *Kenya*, 405.

⁹⁸ OSC H-FCO2-AFRIC/012, Daniel Arap Moi, "Speech on the Occasion of the Official Opening of the 4th All Africa Games," 1 Aug 1987.

Games, “China’s role in the complex’s realization was understated,” as the conversation shifted to the planning and execution of the games.⁹⁹ During the opening speech, Moi did not explicitly mention the huge role China played. This intentional omission could be explained by the fact that the Chinese government was similarly facing criticism for suppressing student protests from late 1986 and early 1987. Such acknowledgement would have further isolated Moi from Western governments.

At the closing ceremony, Moi’s remarks were less diplomatic as he called out the Western press who he accused of consistently dampening the mood. “However, while we organized, competed and enjoyed watching the games in the spirit of brotherhood, here in Nairobi, some pessimists abroad were busy painting a grim picture of the event,” he lamented.¹⁰⁰ He was referring to articles in the international press that highlighted shortcomings of the event.¹⁰¹ One such article in *Le Monde* highlighted the economic and political challenges faced by Kenya in hosting the games—from the delay in completion of the stadium and huge cost incurred—to accusations of corruption in staging the pre-games celebrations, and demonstrations of political discontent by Kenyan opposition leaders and dissidents.¹⁰² As the games progressed, the protestant National Council of Churches in Kenya (NCCCK) published Odinga’s July speech, cited above, in the August issue of *Beyond*, NCCCK’s magazine.¹⁰³

If Moi intended for the complex to be “a monument to un-memory, a space where Kenyan sports accomplishments might erase the bitterness of everyday unmaking,” he found that the spectacle of the games and architecture was simply not enough to mask the political and economic turmoil in Kenya.¹⁰⁴ In fact, the opening of the stadium revealed the postcolonial disenchantment in Kenya. By the time Kenyans received the promised national stadium, the meaning of the structure had changed since it was first conceived in the 1960s. Instead of an architectural artifact that would promote national unity and signal the emergence of Kenya as a progressive and developing independent nation, the complex represented a pet project of a populist authoritarian. It joined a long list of infrastructure projects commissioned by or named after Moi, imbued with the authoritarian and oppressive ethos of the Nyayo regime.

Conclusion

This article has shown that Sino-African partnerships in stadium construction are about more than just a Chinese geopolitical agenda. Situated within broader historical contexts of individual African countries, they offer productive ways to write political and cultural histories of postcolonial Africa. The case study of Kasarani offers a framework to analyze similar contemporary projects such as that in the introductory anecdote, Talanta Stadium.

Much like Kasarani, the meaning of Talanta is not fixed but is rather shaped by the sociopolitical context in Kenya. The previous government, in which William Ruto served as the deputy president, sank billions of shillings in dazzling stadiums that never fully materialized. For many Kenyans, Talanta represents a continuation of that regime’s corruption and incompetence. Moreover, Ruto’s current regime faces “unrelenting criticism” from Kenyans for his authoritarian impulses and failure

⁹⁹Roskam, *Designing Reform*, 239.

¹⁰⁰OSC H-FCO2-AFRIC/012, Daniel Arap Moi, “Speech on the Occasion of the Official Closing of the 4th All Africa Games,” 12 Aug 1987.

¹⁰¹The All Africa Games had been shrouded in accusations of fraud and corruption as the main events organizer, an American by the name Berg, failed to deliver most of the entertainment shows despite being paid in advance. The scandal of the games led to a commission of inquiry into the case. Access to the findings of that inquiry is however restricted by the Kenya National Archives as they seem to have incriminated top government officials

¹⁰²PQHN, Jacques de Barrin, “Les Quatrièmes Jeux Panafricains: Nairobi Joue de Malchance,” *Le Monde* (Paris), 10 August 1987.

¹⁰³Hornsby, *Kenya*, 405.

¹⁰⁴Keguro Macharia, “Change of Place: Kasarani-Gaza-Ferguson,” *The New Inquiry*, 2 Oct. 2014, accessed 15 Aug. 2025, <https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/change-of-place-kasarani-gaza-ferguson/>.

to fulfill campaign promises.¹⁰⁵ Ruto's appeal to the novelty of Talanta, despite evidence of historical precedence, can be seen as a way of dealing with the crisis of legitimacy facing his regime. Certainly, Talanta, like Kasarani, holds insights beyond the "China-in-Africa" trope. To get at them, it is necessary to reorient popular, political, and scholarly analyses to center Africa and Africans.

Acknowledgements. Heartfelt thanks to Joel Cabrita, Richard Roberts, and Gabrielle Hecht for their helpful comments in earlier versions of this draft. I am also grateful for comments and suggestions from two anonymous reviewers and editors at *The Journal of African History*. Funding from the Olympic Studies Center (OSC) made research in Lausanne possible.

¹⁰⁵Basilioh Rukanga, "Is William Ruto the Most Disliked President in Kenya's History," *BBC*, 11 July 2025, accessed 15 Aug. 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c93kv37qdeno>.

Cite this article: Chepchirchir Tirop, "Building Legacy: Sports, Kasarani Stadium, and Moi's Transnational Populist Politics, 1978–87," *The Journal of African History* 66, e26 (2025): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853725100698>.