

A bleating World Cup soundtrack

The 94,700-seat Soccer City Stadium is shaped like a calabash, a gourd used as a cooking pot. When the World Cup opens here Friday, though, the stadium will sound like a giant, throbbing beehive with the incessant blowing of plastic trumpets that are the cause of much celebration and consternation.

The trumpet, called a vuvuzela (pronounced voo-voo-ZAY-luh) and reaching as long as three feet, has over the last 15 years become to soccer in South Africa what the samba drum is in Brazil — albeit at a much higher volume.

From the beginning of Friday's match against Mexico until the end, Bafana Bafana, or the Boys, as South Africa's team is known, will be serenaded by a deafening, inspirational chorus. For some, the vuvuzelas herald the country's piercing emergence from the forced racial hush of apartheid.

"This is our culture," said Lucas Radebe, the captain of South Africa's World Cup team in 1998 and 2002. "This is how we create our national rhythm and dance."

For some opposing players and coaches, as well as television broadcasters, however, the vuvuzela is viewed as a major annoyance that should be toned down or banned from the 10 stadiums used at this World Cup.

Some officials are also concerned that the trumpet noise may make it difficult to hear emergency announcements on the stadium public-address systems. Still others think the vuvuzela can be a health risk.

On Monday, Hear the World, a Swiss-based initiative to raise awareness of hearing loss, cautioned in a study that the trumpet blasts could lead to permanent hearing damage and urged fans to wear earplugs or earmuffs during World Cup matches.

Not all South Africans are enamored of the trumpet. Mondli Makhanya, a former editor in chief of The Sunday Times of Johannesburg, wrote a column in the paper on May 30 that was headlined, "Nothing Kills the Joy of Soccer Like a Bunch of Wailing Vuvuzelas."

The trumpets have smothered the spontaneous singing that traditionally accompanied soccer matches in South Africa, Makhanya wrote. And while some compare the sound of an individual vuvuzela to that of an elephant or an air horn, he compared the noise "to that of a goat on the way to slaughter."

But the trumpets will not be silenced any time soon.

Sepp Blatter, the president of FIFA, soccer's Swiss-based world governing body, has said repeatedly that African traditions should be embraced, not restricted by European aesthetics.

"When you are in Africa, there is another noise, another ambience," Blatter said last June at the Confederations Cup, a pre-World Cup tournament played in South Africa, dismissing complaints by some that the vuvuzelas were a distraction. "We have to adapt a little."

At the Confederations Cup, Xabi Alonso, a midfielder for Spain, then ranked No. 1 in the world, said the vuvuzelas should be banned. Some European broadcasters also complained about the continual drone that could be heard on television during matches. DaMarcus Beasley, an American midfielder, said his inability to hear contributed to a mistake on a corner kick that led to a Brazilian goal in the first round.

Last month, after his Thailand team was defeated, 4-0, by South Africa in the city of Nelspruit, Coach Bryan Robson said the Thai players were unable to hear or give instructions over the sound of the trumpets. Teams will have to rethink their communication strategies during the World Cup, he said.

"With that noise, they could have an advantage," Robson said of the South Africans.

Bafana Bafana will need as many advantages as they can get.

South Africa is ranked 83rd in the world and risks becoming the first host nation not to reach the second round of the tournament. Without automatic qualification as host, it might not have reached this World Cup. To advance, it must finish among the top two in a group that includes France, the 1998 World Cup champion; Uruguay, the winner in 1930 and 1950; and Mexico, which regularly advances to the second round.

So it is no surprise that Carlos Alberto Parreira, the Brazilian who coaches South Africa, has said the louder, the better.

"We need the vuvuzela," he said. "It is our 12th player."

When the United States arrived May 31 at its team headquarters north of Johannesburg, a vuvuzela was waiting in each player's room. Several Americans said they welcomed the trumpets during the World Cup after hearing them at the Confederations Cup.

"I think it's cool; it's their culture, man," midfielder Clint Dempsey said. "That's the point of World Cups, to go to other countries and experience their culture."

The provenance of the vuvuzela is not certain.

Folklore has it that the horn of a kudu, a type of antelope, was once used to summon community meetings. Boogieblast, a South African distributor, says that the plastic horn first arrived here from the United States as a children's toy and that the use of a sports trumpet can be traced to a Chinese women's basketball team. A well-known South African soccer fan named Saddam Maake claims to have invented the vuvuzela in 1965 from a bicycle horn.

Whatever its beginning, the vuvuzela can now be found on cellphone ring tones and heard everywhere from Johannesburg and its surrounding townships to remote villages six hours to the east.

Last Thursday, a trumpet was blown in the South African Parliament in anticipation of the World Cup. On Tuesday, an army of schoolchildren paraded to Soccer City while blowing their vuvuzelas. And at noon Wednesday, the entire country has been asked to trumpet its support of Bafana Bafana.

"When they play, they are supposed to have some noise," Innocent Khoza, 14, said Sunday as he blew a vuvuzela in the village of Kamhlushwa, near the border with Swaziland and Mozambique. "It's not a good thing when people complain. They must try to come up with a way to support their own teams."

Fonte: New York Times, New York, June 8th 2010, Sports, online.