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The Worship of Football in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Football, from its inception in Nigeria, has occupied a pivotal position in the hearts of many people. A great multitude of fans now follows the games with great passion that life becomes almost meaningless to them without it. The contemporary followership of the sport among Nigerian youths exceeds a mere thirst for entertainment and assumes every form of what religion represents. Several Nigerian youths look forward to the weekend for football matches rather than religious attendance in Churches, while every day of the week never ends without some football-related rituals. This paper, therefore, proposes to study the spiritual dynamics of modern football and its influences on everyday life and the religious commitment of the Nigerian youths to it. It discusses the other aspects of the game and encourages the capacity for the society to respond to it to create positive impacts in the lives of the youths. The paper draws its data from interactions and observation of the practices of Nigerian professional footballers and its community of fans. It highlights the observable worship of the game as being attributable to the massive similarities that exist between football and religion which the former combines with greater entertaining passion and social candour. It therefore suggests that religions in Nigeria should embrace football as a channel of achieving religious harmony as this would combine the appeal of the game with religious guidance to curb the behavioural responses that are devoid of spiritual and religious virtues.

Keywords: *worship, football, spirituality, Nigeria*

INTRODUCTION

In multitudes, they throng into the complex, dressed in sacred and hallowed uniforms. They came to be led into the experience by the dedicated souls who have used the preceding days preparing and aspiring towards a happy and victorious gathering. The group gathered in hope of returning home with lifted spirits and renewed devotion. Many others commune with the group remotely in the gathering of home cells or a date with the media broadcast. Various forms of rituals ensued across the group's universe, and in unison of spirit, faces are lifted in supplication for triumph over challenges. All souls present witnessed and hailed the leaders making ingress into the zone of subliminal bliss; the kind of experience that transcends barriers and transmits the euphoria of conquest all through the community...

The sort of expression above resonates in two similar but distinct Nigerian environments; it could be that of a religious gathering or a sporting event, especially football. This represents a snippet of the similarities that exist between sporting events and religious worship. This parallelism is hinged on the comparability of several themes like stadia being compared to the cathedral, players to worship leaders, jerseys and club merchandise to robes and other religious objects, the game rules to liturgies and doctrines, and the fans as the religious congregation. With all these similitudes, the comparison of sport and religious experiences becomes glaring to anyone to comprehend.

At the turn of the century, there arose a new awakening into the interplay between religion and sport, especially in the Western part of the globe; this fuelled some academic curiosity into the interaction between these two phenomena. Football, as a sport, is a great aspect of the contemporary world where many fans expend massive time and monetary resources on the passion they have for the game. Its relevance transcends beyond mere entertainment to that of recreating the symbolic cosmic struggle of humans (Gordon and Rob, 2009). In Nigeria, football is the most followed sport and its influence in the everyday society of Nigeria cannot be overemphasised. This paper, therefore, examines the impact of football on the religious lives of fans in the country and how their love for the game equate them to what, in religious parlance, is regarded as idolatry. In other words, the paper discusses how the nature of contemporary football followership in the country resembles a form of religious worship. It further highlights the relevance of sport in religious circles and how it can better be used to achieve religious objectives without friction.

COMPARING FOOTBALL TO RELIGION

A deeper look into what football represents in the contemporary Nigerian environment depicts a phenomenon that is larger than a mere game or past time. It embodies feelings that surpass ordinary eccentricity to a transcendent experience that can be ranked in the realm of religion. In his speech at the 2018 annual football award ceremony in Lagos, the President of the Federation of International Football Association (FIFA), Gianni Infantino narrated that, football in Nigeria surpasses passion, love and even religion, and is only comparable to life itself (*Vanguard*, 2018). This expression seats well with the assertion that sport is an existential mechanism, only with the subtleness of individuals being able to stage the psychoanalytical thanatotic dispositions without being reprimanded with jail terms or other real-life constraining legal penalties.

An obvious confluence between sport and religion is the theme of personal challenge that breeds enhanced living (Gordon and Rob, 2009). Football uniquely provides a stage where an athlete must employ diverse tactics to dribble through several obstacles to achieve a goal. These tactics could be mastered skills or sheer aggressiveness against the opposition. This depicts both the physical and spiritual lives of humans where challenges have to be surmounted in order to attain the expected end. Sports depict the near-death experience where a person stands face to face with death, at which point no room exists for pretence but the utter truth of fear, apprehension and struggle for survival. Simply put, sports move humans beyond the superfluity of life to a much closer truth that reveals one's self-worth in terms of strength, weakness, fear and hope (Gordon and Rob, 2009). This forced realization drives the need to dig deeper, calling the innermost strength and belief to scale the immediate hurdle.

This type of narrative about football as an existential mechanism is premised on the belief that humans desire to express control over their situations, a feeling that stands in sharp contrast to reality, as humans possess no real control over the universe (Amy, 2011). However, with sports, humans have the opportunity of feigning, through a sporting victory, the illusory ego of the ability to manoeuvre one's way through any situation. With the victory, athletes feel the exhilaration of surviving a face-to-face encounter with death (loss), where the opponents embody the human nemesis of finitude and death. This propels the pursuit of the pleasure (*eros*) to conquer opponents or obstacles and the avoidance of the angst that accompanies defeats, which is a stark remembrance of one's limitations.

Consequently, more like religion, football suspends the thanatotic reality and provides a transient sense of adeptness over the fundamentally uncontrollable universe. In addition, sports generally can usher humans into a state of bliss where one exists completely in unison with an activity, a state where a player becomes unconscious of the environment or self but deliver subliminal feats unconsciously and unpremeditatedly. In the spirit of the message in 1 John 3:2, where the Bible says that when God is revealed to His children, they shall be like Him and know Him for His true personality, a football player becoming one with the game is to identify with the footballing moment, jettisoning the consciousness of any other thing. This type of moment produces super-human dribbles and goals, just as a truly transformed Christian shows forth God's awesomeness.

Concerning religious worship, Ludwig Feuerbach's projections theory explained religion's origin as being shrouded in the human quest to satisfy dreams and fantasy of an ideal universe (Harvey, 2007), a sense that creates a dependency of the adherents on their religious convictions, which ultimately elicits worship. A similar view anchors the assertion that sport is an existential mechanism, resting the explanation on sport's compelling force of *eros* that stirs many fans into its worship. This warrants the calling of sport as the new opiate of the masses that provides relief from the distress of the uncontrollable universe (David, 2017). Like the religious claim of solutions to the earthly challenges and the paradise in the afterlife, the ability of football to provide a platform where humans pursue and possibly experience subliminal feats that transcend limitations draws the followership of many fanatics to make demigods out of their team heroes.

In Nigeria, football is about the only thing that makes a civil, rational, and well-educated elite behave irrationally. Many public figures who ordinarily often avoid uncontrolled public appearances are often seen in football viewing centres "savouring" with every common person all the noises, heat and even smoke of cigarettes or hemp. With the battle of tongues ravaging the atmosphere at the viewing centres, the community of fans replicate a form of the spirit of competition that reigns on the actual playing field. In the end, all team loyalists share the ecstasy of victory or sorrow of loss in unison, notwithstanding their geographical or class dispersion.

The etymology of religion depicts a root in sharing of bond with the deity, and by implication, among humans. Sports similarly possesses the capacity to foster a bond among humans and with the

overarching entity called a team or club. It is interesting how sports can even create an instant bond between total strangers, who can smile and agonize in commonality for their shared aspiration, and in negligence of their social and economic class differences. This is an aspect where sports may be faring more advantageously than religion in the view of several millennia. The sport appeals more to the fans as a society that embraces everyone without discrimination. However, the two phenomena share the capacity for sectionalism as well. Sports have recorded some fair shares of divisional clashes more like the religious crises that often rock the nation. The rivalry between the Rangers Football Club and the Shooting Stars Football Club gave credence to this aspect of football competitions (Solomon, 2018). The rivalry represented ethnic tension and identity worship between the Igbo and Yoruba groups in the immediate post-civil war era. This underscores how football can be used to project human aspirations and group ego without necessarily running afoul of social ethical dictates.

THE WORSHIP OF FOOTBALL IN NIGERIA

Nigeria is undoubtedly one of the most religious nations on earth. According to the 2017 figures of the Yearbook of International Religious Demography, 99.4% of Nigerians are religious (Brian, 2017). Meanwhile, 84% of Nigerians sampled declared their love for sports, with 64% indicating that they love or watch football games. This is a significant growth if compared to the figures recorded by NOI Polls in 2016, where 49% of the population sampled across the country declared their love for football (NOI Polls, 2016). This rapid growth in football followership in Nigeria becomes obvious when one considers the volume of females that now follow football clubs, a thing that was the reserve of men just a few years back. However, within the same period, religious commitment shrinks under the guise of enlightenment, with several individuals opting to go and play rather than pray or evangelise on weekends.

In truth to Infantino's statement, football in Nigeria transcends mere passion; it is about the strongest force binding the nation together. The only time when Nigeria echoes with one voice and share the same aspiration is when the national football teams are competing in any major tournament. While religions have been unable to achieve this feat, football has proven repeatedly its capacity to spread joy, happiness and tranquillity across the nation called Nigeria. Many will easily recall the atmosphere that reigned over the nation during the Atlanta Olympics in 1996 when the Nigerian football team defeated two of the strongest footballing nations in the world, Brazil and Argentina, consecutively to claim the gold medal at the event. It was left for every religious leader to experience what the religious attendance would have been if any programme was scheduled at the time when the final of that tournament was to be played. Another way to weigh the relevance of football to Nigerians is to imagine that the Super Eagles are to play a world cup final match on a Sunday morning or at the time for Friday Jumaat. Situations like these depict football as a huge totem among the people.

From the religious perspective, humans are created to worship. It is either one worships God or something else; human nature is naturally void without any form of transcendent connection. A heart that is not occupied by God will be filled with lesser gods. The Bible commands Christians not to love the world and everything in it as doing so amounts to not loving God (1 John 2:15). It is within this view that God commanded in Exodus 20: 2-3, *"I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other gods before Me"*. This gives the understanding that it is possible for humans to make a god out of anything other than the Supreme God. The contemporary influence that football wields among the Nigerian youth is very massive and it is manifesting the capability of occupying their hearts to the extent of making every other thing secondary. It is dictating a new culture and luring them into behaviours that are contrary to religious teachings. Gambling is one of such key anathemas that is associated with the football culture in Nigeria.

Christianity frowns at gambling and the society also perceives gambling as an act of irresponsible individuals or those who have given up on life. Gambling relates to greed, usually for money, and the Bible says that a person's heart lies where his/her treasure is (Matthew 6:21). Gambling fosters greed and stimulates fatalistic faith in chance. This qualifies gambling as a form of idol worship since it fills the heart with the love of money as the Book of Ecclesiastes declares that whoever loves silver will not be satisfied by it (Ecclesiastes 5:10). Consequently, a gambling habit undoubtedly constitutes a biblical mammon in the hearts of many youths today. Furthermore, gambling begets hatred and grief in the heart of losers as he/she has his/her money taken away painfully, while it constitutes an unearned income to the winner who made no honourable effort towards earning the gains. Some religious views compare this to stealing (Kelvin, 2016). Nevertheless, the betting industry keeps expanding in Nigeria today; Lagos State Lotteries Board has 22 active online sports betting outfits listed on their website with 9 others having approval in principle (Lagos State Lotteries Board, 2022).

In addition, hero-worship is a common feature of football globally and in the country. Kanu Nwankwo and “Jay Jay” Austin Okocha are household names that are probably more popular than most clergy personalities in the country. An average five year old Nigerian has one or two things to tell about a football star but nothing about any popular clergy person other than those of their local groups. Also, accomplished football stars are often perceived as perfect humans who possess higher virtues than ordinary people do. This kind of feeling elicits veneration in the hearts of several fans towards these perceived superhumans or demigods. While the religious texts are not regarded as trendy literature for many millennials to talk about every day, the youths are busy arguing and discussing football like they are yielding in obedience to the scriptural commandment to daily keep the book of the law on their lips (Joshua 1:8). In addition, the kind of bond that the Nigerian fans have with their favourite football clubs, usually the European ones, can only be described as an elevated level of devotion, fidelity and loyalty, such that the thought of changing club allegiance is viewed as a sacrilegious. Many fans will even use the statement that one can only change a wife but not a football club. When these feelings about football are examined against the biblical instruction in Colossians 3:2 that our affections should be set on heavenly things and not those on earth, any devoted religious persons will cast sports as nothing short of idolatry.

The issue of idolatry in relation to football lies in the extent of the attention paid to the game, often in compromise of undivided attention to religious worship or devotion. Colossians 3:2 commanded the Christians to set all affection on things above. Christianity, as a religion, preaches total devotion to God for whose glory all humans were created (Isaiah 43:7). Jesus quoted the Scripture to the Tempter that *“you shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.”* Philippians 3:3 says, *“For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.”* Anything that stands to distract the commitment of one’s heart to the service of the Creator is deemed nothing but a potential idol. The Bible also explains in Matthew 6:24 that *“no one can serve...both God and mammon.”* The mammon, in this case, relates to what can be termed the “idol of the heart”- that which uncontrollably occupies one’s heart.

Meanwhile, football is a highly emotive sport that is consuming many Nigerian youths with so much passion. While the practice of the game may be mentally and physically beneficial to the athletes, the fanaticism and irrationality of behaviour being exhibited by the youths raise concerns around religious devotion. Gambling and idle arguments characterise football followership in the country and demand time and financial devotedness from the youths. There is no gainsaying that whatever preoccupies a person’s heart defines his/her identity and shapes his/her value system (Tim, 2018). This, therefore, relates to the biblical warning to *“put to death, therefore...passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry”* (Colossians 3:5). Equally, Jesus declared to the Pharisee that the greatest commandment is to love God with all heart, soul and mind (Matthew 22:37).

Now, there appear to be so many pointers to a probable tussle between religion and football for the hearts of the multiple football fanatics in Nigeria. Not only does the game wrestles the sacredness of religious time from the minds of many, but it has also overtaken religious attendance as the highlight of the weekends from them. Apart from nourishment, football is the constant feature of everyday life for millions of youths who collectively stake billions daily on online sports betting (PWC, 2018). Many Nigerian women now have to learn the lesson of identifying football time as sacred moments for their husbands, lest they stand the risk of incurring the fiery wrath of a fanatic husband. All of these point to an ongoing tussle that the game of football causes in the lives of many Nigerians against their commitment to religious laws and observations.

However, religions cannot be completely absorbed of the blames for promoting this situation. Save for a few religious groups like the Mountain of Fire Ministries, Rhema Chapel International, the Baptist Convention and the Redeemed Christian Church, several religious groups in Nigeria still hold the medieval antagonistic position of the Crusaders against sports (Lincoln, 2014). Some groups discourage both the play and spectatorship of sports, discarding everything relating to it as both idolatry and irresponsible waste of time (Al Jazeera, 2018). Views like this are oblivious of the physical and mental benefits of sports as well as its capability for character development and social peace maintenance. Besides, the compelling emotive force that football wields in the hearts of contemporary youth is a thing that cannot be left untamed.

CAN FOOTBALL AND RELIGION BE COMPLEMENTARY?

This should not be misconstrued to mean that Christians in the country are against football or sport. The basic principle is that the practice of sport or participation in the game should not hinder religious obser-

ventions or worship. In line with this, Apostle Paul warned the Corinthians against being consumed by things that are perceived as being permissible- He explained that not all things that are lawful are helpful and that why all things may be lawful, one should not be enslaved by anything (1 Corinthians 6:12). The games can be made more edifying to the religious minds when they are tailored to complement the religious purpose of soul winning and being physically and mentally fit for religious obligations.

The potential for clashes between these two phenomena is glaring and ever more so. The level of passion and devotion that football elicits in the mind of Nigerian youths today is unparalleled by any other aspect of life, especially in its consistency. This excessive passion positions football in the stead that it can easily override any other commitment, including religion. As a result, religious attendance has been standing the risk of a steady decline, especially whenever there is a clash of schedule with football fixtures of interest, especially the international competitions or the English Premier League. On the other hand, there are occasions when religion is perceived as a hindrance to sports participation and followership through antagonistic views or systemic discouragement.

MANAGING THE CLASH BETWEEN FOOTBALL AND RELIGION

This paper upholds the perspective that both football and religion are essential in the life of any youth and that both can co-exist harmoniously if the religious leaders and sports organizers would appreciate the other aspect of their followers' lives and manage the scheduling and location of events as well as the attitude to the other side with respect, recognizing the value in both sides, especially in the mind of the youths. Some of the ways to manage and prevent clashes are explained below:

1. Harmonious maximization of incidences: Religious leaders can leverage sports fixtures to boost religious attendance just by arranging to have the sports event that could have discouraged the youths from church attendance beamed live either at the end of an abridged service or before the service to prevent late coming and absence. The possibility here is that many youths would find it more interesting to watch sports matches in the company of so many of their church friends
2. Respect for established sacred time: It is a generally known fact that the majority of Christians attend church services on Sunday morning. It will do great good for sports organizers to make allowance for a short time for early morning church attendance or designation of specific rooms for religious worship within the sporting complexes, such that people can briefly observe some sacred time without having to choose between playing sport or worship, or even the spectators missing out on watching the games.
3. Accommodating attitude: Rather than viewing a clashing schedule as a call to compromise religious attendance and since sporting participation requires physical presence, the religious person can creatively weave religious objectives into the sporting activity. A typical example of this is the football team of the Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministry which attends match fixtures on Sundays with church members distributing tracts in the spectators stand and their supporters' club playing religious tunes. This way, the players' endeavour on the field of play is carried out with religious objectives.

In similar vein, the fasting period is a major sacred timing that often raises the issue of a clash between sports and religion. While there might be the temptation to suggest that sport games should not be scheduled during fasting period, it is essential to understand that not all religions made fasting at a giving time compulsory; most Christians are encouraged to fast at their own chosen time and Lent is but a commemorative event for many churches. In addition, it is essential to note that football or sports generally is an activity that concerns people of diverse faiths and religious denominations, as a result, it is not practical to shelve sporting activities because of fasting period. Besides Muslims having a different calendar for Ramadan, different Christian denominations also have different timing for their annual fasting. Moreover, several studies have suggested ways for athletes to cope during fasting and these include dietary adjustment and regulated training mode (Maughan, 2010). However, the suggestion here is for sports organizers to create the allowance for water breaks during matches for people that are fasting to quickly break if they desire to.

Functional adoption: Religious leaders can channel the passion that youths have for football into religious relevance either by setting up sporting facilities and schedules within the church premises and agenda or by employing the games as a means of teaching behavioural excellence. On the other hand, sporting clubs and institutions can employ religious leaders as chaplains who can help to tame and tend to the moral and social excesses of youthful age in the minds of their players. The clergy would oversee character development among the professional athletes while they also provide the much needed platform for the athletes to share their inner worries and concerns and receive religious guidance. Projecting the clergy as moulders and promoters of the game would deeply emphasise the relevance of religion in the hearts of athletes and their fans.

An appropriate adoption of these recommendations will not only curb the declining religious attendance, but will also facilitate the capacity for religion to tame the negative culture that accompanies excessive fandom, such as gambling, drug use, age falsification, violence, and other vices. A dimension to this cultural shift is that of hero-worship which underscores the idolatry tendencies of football followership, especially from a committed Christian perspective.

Meanwhile, the idea of football being worshipped in Nigeria is still largely a metaphoric depiction as no fan or group has dedicated a real and sacred temple or clergy to practical worship of the game or its athletes. Nevertheless, religious leaders in the country need to be aware that this is not the case globally as countries like Argentina and Brazil currently have groups who are wholly dedicated to the practical worship of football icons as gods. The term god of soccer is a language that is fast gaining popularity, and with Nigerians being a type of people that are quick to import perceived trendy ideas and cultures, it may not be surprising to see the vast football cults in the country instituting real temples and liturgy in the worship of god(s) of soccer.

Therefore, to forestall the ceding of grounds to possible football religion in the future, religion needs to acknowledge the relevance of the game to the millennials and embrace it as a means of promoting the religious commitment among them. A lesson or two should be learnt from the 1130 Pope Innocent's ban of the knights' tournaments with the canon 14 at the Second Lateran Council. This ban was greeted with so much disobedience that it was eventually overturned by Pope John XII in 1320. By this time, there was a much lesser number of knights who are willing to take part in the Crusades (Lincoln, 2014). It was only pragmatic enough for the Church to realize that the tournament only needed to be rehabilitated to eliminate anti-religious tendencies and possibly embrace religious focus. Therefore, instead of losing the knights' dedication to the Crusades to their passion for the art of tourney, the Church redefined the art within its principles to retain the commitment of the Crusaders.

CONCLUSION

Football shares an abundance of similarities with religion. The bond that football fans and athletes have with the game can easily be compared to that of a religious experience. The fans' devotion to the game is built on the extreme and irrational passion which can easily relegate any other thing, including religion to the background whenever there is a clash. With sporting schedules being fixed without proper acknowledgement of time for religious observations, it is imperative for religion to step up to the plate and wield its power to influence sport in its favour. This is because, with proper engagement of religion in sport, the passion that the fans diverted to sports devotion can become subservient to religious orchestration. In other words, football can be employed to the service of religion which fastens the hearts of football enthusiasts to religion.

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