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Connections Between Christianity and Sport in Nigeria's Context: A Sociological Reflection

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INTRODUCTION

Two universal social institutions are key to the discourse contained in this reflection—namely, Christianity and Sport. On one hand, Christianity is a global religion traced to a ‘small group of Jewish disciples in first century Palestine’ (Johnson & Zurlo, 2014). The religion is characterised by beliefs and rituals that centre around the virgin birth of Jesus Christ who is believed to have lived, was crucified, buried and resurrected on the third day in the present day Jewish nation of Israel; as the connector between the followers and the Supernatural (Johnson & Zurlo, 2014; Jona & Okou, 2013; Ogunade, 2000). The term *Christians* (from which Christianity was derived) has its origin in verse 26 of Chapter 11 of the Acts of the Apostles in the Bible, where the disciples were first called Christians (*...And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch*).

Christianity is the world's largest religion with roughly 2.4 billion adherents globally (Johnson & Zurlo, 2014). Over 80 million of Nigeria's growing population are Christians scattered across the six geopolitical zones, but the southern region has the largest population.

On the other hand, sport is considered in the context of this discourse as any form of activities engaged in by individuals or a group of individuals, institutionalised or not, and involving complex or simple, machine-related or non-machine related methods; It could be competitive or non-competitive in nature, and is often motivated by the desire to appropriate internal or external rewards (Jeroh, 2012; Jona & Okou, 2013; Odey, 2015). Different forms of sport exist in the modern world; it serves the purposes of entertainment, business and physical fitness in varied contexts (Jeroh, 2012; Odey, 2015). The first mention of sport in the Christian context was in the Old Testament of the Holy Book, in the Book of Judges Chapter 16, verses 25 and 27 in relation to Samson's ability to entertain the Philistine leaders and citizens through sport (*And it came to pass, when their hearts were merry, that they said, call for Samson, that he may make us sport.....* (KJV)). This historical account associated sport with entertainment. Also, in today's world, sport is a highly professionalised, commodified and politicised business with entertainment as a key purpose (Watson, 2018). In addition, in the New Testament of the Holy Book, sport was mentioned in relation to bodily exercise, indicating that it serves little benefit relative to spiritual exercises (*For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.* 1 Timothy 4: 8—KJV). Thus, the Christian Holy Book suggests entertainment and exercise of the body as some objectives of sport.

Christianity and sport have gained prominence globally but limited scientific attention has been dedicated to investigating the institutions, especially Christianity (McLeod et al., 2018). What are the connections between Christianity and sport? This question has not been well explored. Few studies have examined both social institutions as channels through which national and international unity is reinforced, and as platforms to promote peace and social justice (Jeroh, 2012; Watson, 2018). Scholars have focused on the historical trajectory of how contemporary Christian leaders initially rejected sport but eventually came to embrace it as an important platform to drive social justice in the world (for example, McLeod et al., 2018; Watson, 2018). The limited attention on the relationship between Christianity (mostly in the larger context of religion) and sport in Nigeria has been restricted largely to the similarities between the two social institutions in relation to their roles in human society (examples include Jeroh, 2012; Jona & Okou, 2013; Odey, 2015; Ogunade, 2000).

However, the implicit and explicit connections between Christianity and sport are poorly understood. To address this gap, this discourse is aimed at reflecting on the sociological connections between Christianity and sport in the context of Nigeria. The rest of the discourse addresses the Emile

Durkheim's perspective on Christianity as the theoretical guide for the discourse, sociological connections between Christianity and sport, the implications of the connections for peace and socio-economic development and the conclusion.

THEORETICAL GUIDANCE

The theory of religion posited by Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) underpins the discourse undertaken in this paper. E. Durkheim was of a Jewish background with a keen interest in explaining the origin of religion. This interest motivated his scientific writing in his *The Elementary Forms of Religion*, which was based on extensive observations among the Aborigines of Central Australia (Durkheim, 1995 [1912]). In this thesis, he argued that religion is the essence of life and rather than belief and faith, religion is predicated upon classification of aspects of social life into the sacred and profane. When an aspect of social life is classified as sacred, it attracts reverence, awe and obligations from participants (Evans-Pritchard, 1965). Durkheim posited that the non-sacred aspects of social life are the profane, mundane or common. Any objective reality could be set apart and defined as sacred and society would adore such as objects of worship (Evans-Pritchard, 1965).

I argue here that Christianity across the world consists of a system of classifications. First, the birth of Jesus Christ was classified sacred and He is the sacred figure around which Christianity is built and has survived mild and ferocious oppositions, enduring all through to today. The name attracts reverence, admiration and worship among Christians. Second, the place of worship is also classified as sacred while any other locations are profane. As soon as a building or space is so classified, it becomes a holy place of worship (even if the location is an open space). It is believed to be the attraction of angels and spiritual bodies. Also, in the sacred building, an inner section is also classified as the altar where only leaders sit or stand to provide leadership. Third, participants are classified as believers and non-believers. Believers are sacred and constitute the sacred body of Christ. The non-believers are the profane or common participants in the community and usually it is the hope of the community that ultimately such participants become believers. Furthermore, believers are further classified into spiritual leaders and ordinary members; the spiritual leaders provide leadership in anointed prayer rituals in the community while others are members. Even music is classified into spiritual and non-spiritual songs that can be sung in Church and the ones that cannot because such are profane.

Emile Durkheim further argued that religions are usually characterised by existence of an overarching community that is the rallying point for participants. Christianity, for instance, has the Church as the overarching community as practiced across the world. The Church serves as the platform where defined rituals and ceremonies are observed continually. The rituals and ceremonies tend to unite the participants of the Church, thus guaranteeing the substance and sustainability of the community and thus the religion. Some of such rituals and ceremonies in Christianity, common to virtually all denominations, include fellowships, praise and worship, dancing, prayers, deliverance, financial contributions, etc. The frequency and intensity of the rituals and ceremonies vary across Christian denominations.

The systems of classification, rituals and ceremonies are the points of connection between Christianity and sport that have not been previously well explored. This discourse is a reflection on these connections. Thus, this theoretical framework provides the basis for a clear connection between Christianity and sport in three ways. First, Christianity and sport are based on systems of classification. Second, some of the rituals and ceremonies practised in Christian denominations are integral components of sporting activities. Third, professional sporting activities involve religious rituals and ceremonies in Nigeria's context. The following section articulates describes these connections.

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND SPORT IN NIGERIA'S CONTEXT

The first point of connection between Christianity and sport in Nigeria's context is that both institutions are predicated upon classification systems, which is consistent with Emile Durkheim's theory of religion. As highlighted in the previous section, Christianity, just like all other religions, is guided by a system of classification (Durkheim, 1995 [1912]). Sport follows a similar system of classification. Clearly, the sporting activities in today's world emerged from a classification process that classified such activities as competitive, professional and institutionalised. Thus, sporting activities such as athletics, basketball, boxing, football, golf, tennis, volleyball, etc. assumed the status of an institutionalised sport and are standardised through the process of classification. Some other sporting activities are yet to be classified as professional and standardised sports because they have not been so classified. Only those classified as professional sports enjoy such status. In international sporting events such as the Olympics, only sporting activities that have been classified and standardised are staged.

Moreover, the classification system is also applied to who officiates the games. For instance, in football sporting event, some individuals are classified as referees and lines men/women, similar to the classification of participants in Christianity as clergy and believers. As a result, football games are under the supervision of such officials and every participant, either as a club member and spectator, respects and follows the ongoing game consistent with the match officials' instructions. Thus, Christianity and sport are connected through such classification systems.

The third link between Christianity and sport of interest here is the nature of the rituals and ceremonies observed in Nigeria's Churches. Praise and worship stand out prominently in nearly all denominations, be it Orthodox, Pentecostal or Evangelical. Music and dancing are critical components of praise-worship in most denominations here in Nigeria and beyond (Ogunade, 2000). Of course, dancing is identified as a sport because it is a bodily activity that effectively exercises the body which makes it a recognised sport. In fact, there are professional dancers that make a living out of dancing outside the Church because dancing has been institutionalised. The particular nature of music and dancing in Nigeria that is characterised by active and sometimes, quite forceful movement of the body to specific music during worship programmes in the Christian overarching communities stands out as a form of sport. Although the New Testament presents a soft opposition to bodily exercise as indicated in the book of First Timothy (*For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.* I Timothy 4: 8), music and dancing are key rituals in nearly all denominations in contemporary Christianity in Nigeria. Thus, Christianity and sport are integrally connected in Nigeria.

The fourth connection that may not be peculiar only to Nigeria is the involvement of Christian prayer ritual (maybe some other religious adherents observe it in their own mode) in professional sporting activities which previous writings have not documented. It is now an acceptable tradition for participants of most sporting activities to invoke the prayer ritual before commencement and end of such activities. For instance, in football games/ festivals, players observe prayers right on the field before and after (especially when they win) games. Thus, on the prayer platform, Christianity and sport are connected. It is a critical ritual in Christianity and sport in almost all denominations and sporting activities.

Furthermore, beyond integrating Christian rituals such as prayers into institutionalised sporting activities, some Christian denominations are directly involved in organising and funding such activities. A prominent example is the MFM football club and Girls' basketball in Lagos State, which is owned and funded by the Mountain of Fire Ministries. That is a Church community directly participating in professional sport and it is an active club in one of the organised divisions in Nigeria. It is not an overstatement that the Nigerian space is dotted by direct involvement in sporting activity as seen in the Mountain of Fire case, and indirect participation by active members of various denominations in pronounced sporting activities. Thus, the New Testament's indirect opposition to sport is clearly obliterated in contemporary Nigeria Christian community.

The Christian religion and sport have series of rituals and ceremonies in common. Praise rituals are observed by participants of sporting events especially by the winning side. Christianity is characterised by similar rituals. Similarly, at the beginning and end of virtually all Christian ceremonies, observation of praise rituals is nearly mandatory. Moreover, Christians observe certain ceremonies weekly, monthly and annually. Such ceremonies vary from one denomination to another. Similarly, different sporting activities also have events characterised by ceremonies that are observed at specified periods in a year and some are annual events. Thus, Christianity and sporting activities intersect in the area of prayer and praise rituals in Nigeria's context.

Finally, Christianity has the Church as the overarching community where rituals and ceremonies are operationalised in the spirit of respect, worship and reverence. Sport may not qualify as a religion but it has variety of clubs that are tantamount to the overarching communities, which accommodate and give meanings to the sporting activities, the rituals and ceremonies associated with such activities. Churches and clubs are synonymous with Durkheim prescribed overarching communities respectively for Christianity and sport.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE CONNECTIONS FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT

The connections between Christianity and sporting activities provide great potentials that relevant government agencies can explore to actualise peace and social justice. Sporting activities are certainly channels of attractions that can be utilised to draw all age groups of population. They are potent activities that government agencies (such as the National Orientation Organisation (NOO)) can leverage on to

obliterate to the barest minimum the persuasive ethnic divisions and religious hatred in Nigeria. Because sporting activities have been shown to completely unite Nigerians especially the youth.

Moreover, through the sporting activities the NOO institutions could implicitly introduce music, messages and posters which reinforce our national values that are consistent with peace and unit. Such music and messages playing at the background during sporting activities may introduce religious principles from both Christianity and Islam that point to peace and unity across our ethnic divides. Thus, this strategy will utilise the integral connections between religion and sport to promote peace.

Also, the connections platform could be seized to inculcate anti-corruption values into the upcoming generation. In the music, messages and posters at background and around the popular sporting activities, the dangers and consequences of all forms of corrupt practices in our society could be embodied. Thus, a cheap strategy of pushing into the psyche of young population values and norms that are averse to corruption from both Christianity and Islam is achieved. Hence, if the policy is well implemented, corruption can be reduced to the barest minimum in Nigeria. Effective corruption reduction stands as another critically required condition to perpetuate peace, social justice and enhance socio-economic development in short and long run in Nigeria.

Of course, peace is a scientifically proven panacea for accelerated social and economic development. If effective policy encapsulating the above strategies is aggressively implemented, peace is likely to be restored and sustained in Nigeria. Such condition is highly probable to attracting domestic and external investments in Nigeria. Promotion of investment will create the much needed employment generation platform and engender rapid social and economic development.

CONCLUSION

This discourse has presented concise reflections on the connections between Christianity and sport in Nigeria's context within the theoretical framework of Emile Durkheim's theory of religion. Apparent in the reflections is that Christianity is a religion that is built around the sacred Jesus Christ and it is characterised by a series of classification systems. Sports do not have a singular name around which they are built but they are also characterised by classification systems. In addition, Christianity has Churches while sport has clubs as the overarching communities where well-defined rituals and ceremonies are observed in both social institutions. A chief observation is that Christianity and sport are connected through predication upon respective systems of classifications, overarching communities, rituals and ceremonies. Finally, sport and Christianity are two global social institutions that are interwoven and possess potentials that can be used to drive and enhance peace, social justice, social integration and accelerate social and economic development in Nigeria.

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