DEVELOPING FOOTBALL CULTURE FOR NATIONAL UNITY AND PRODUCTIVITY IN NIGERIA

Ebohon Godfrey Oghuan

Abstract

Personalities within and outside the academia have expressed feelings of disappointment over the incessant bombings, killings and kidnapping incidents being perpetrated in Nigeria, especially the issue of Boko Haram insurgents in the North-eastern part of the country. The reasons may not be far-fetched; Nigeria is a multilingual, multicultural, and multi-religious nation. These, most times have been the reasons for the different conflicts and misunderstandings amongst and within the Nigerian society. This paper looks at football culture as a means or medium of bringing the youths to embrace peace as well as engaging them in a meaningful activity that will make them bring the best out of them for the society to be a better place. The paper concluded by recommending that football culture will help the youths, communities and the country at large to achieve the objectives of national unity by positively engaging the youths in soccer academies all over the country where ideas will be criss-crossed, for peaceful co-existence.

Football is considered a game played by two teams of eleven (11) players on each side, using a round ball, which the players kick up and down on the playing field or any playing space. A standard football game lasts for ninety (90) minutes; these ninety minutes can make a world of difference in the lives of many. The Americans call it soccer, while the rest of the world calls it football. The essence of kicking the round ball is to see that the ball is played into the goal of the other team or opponent as the case may be. This game has become so advanced that technology and politics are now the order of the day if a team is to guarantee a win in the field of play. Tactics have been employed to see that one’s opponent is defeated in the field of play.

Football has become a global sport where spectators from around the world can enjoy many different leagues. The popularity of football is unique among the countries of the world in their attachment to the game which, brings to mind the fact that football contains characteristics particularly important in the society. A football team and game is a microcosm of our sophisticated society. A football team looks very much like a small scale model of our society. Compartmentalized, highly sophisticated in the co-ordinated application of a differentiated specialized technology, turning out a winning product in a competitive market. According to Nanda (1984), when a football match is in progress and watching it:

We are watching a model of the way our world works, because the football game is a model of the most important productive unit in our society. The society cannot get better without dedication, hard work, team spirit and self-sacrifice, for the good of others. (pg 328)

These are the basic principles on which success is based and are the characteristics most praised in individual player. Through football, we can begin to understand how our society works.
Football, if well studied is the secret to get considerable results. All the actors who play in the sports field like public and sport authorities, both on central and local level, club players, media, supporters and the non-governmental organisations active at grass root level should be involved in developing a proper football culture that will in turn help to create understanding of the society better. In the field of play, co-operation among all actors is necessary because football is a huge social phenomenon, often, if there is a problem with football culture, it means that there is a problem in the society. Racism, violence, corruption, fanaticism, etc, surely can be considered as strong cancers in the body of our society, especially in this era of globalization, global change, and intercultural integration.

Football Culture

Football has a long and glorious history, with which a vast and diverse culture has emerged. The term culture as used will be examined separately, to be able to arrive at a meaningful conclusion as it relates to the topic of this discourse. According to Oni (2001):

Culture, like many other English words came from Latin vocabulary, ‘cerele’ meaning to cultivate, tend, or tillage of soil; hence, it is found in words such as agriculture, aquaculture, horticulture, and floriculture. In the religious field, the word cult means a place of worship for paying reverential homage; while in a secular sense, the word means to take active care of. (pg 5)

The essence of this definition by Oni above is to prepare, grow, try and develop. What this means is that culture is not a thing you just jump into and think you can achieve perfection. Oni’s definition can further be buttressed by Nigeria Cultural Policy (1988) which very well describes:

Culture as the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenges of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and mode of organization, thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours. (pg 1).

What one can deduce from these definitions is that attempts must be made to kick start a process that will then take time to mature into a full grown or matured entity before one can lay claim to having gotten somewhere as far as the term football culture is concerned. That is to say that football power runs deeper than just the ninety minutes played on the pitch. Football all over the world today has become a complete system called football culture. Ebohon (2011) is of the opinion that “football culture refers to the culture aspects surrounding the game of association of football. Football has ingrained itself into the national culture of many countries of the world today and in most cases the life of the people revolves around it”. Every team and country today is having their own pattern of playing the round leather game, which is unique to them. The game has become glamorized with many children practicing the game and aspiring to get to the level of the wealth shown off by the top footballers in the world all-over.

The concept of football culture is the sum total of all the activities that are involved in the organization of a football game. The popularity of football has been reflected in the arts, books and films. In the words of Nanda (1984), “surely, football is an example of the statement that ‘art’ serves to display the culture themes of a society in ways that make them emotionally compelling”
Books and articles have been written dealing with the culture surrounding football, as well as detailed history of events about the game. Talking about football culture, it should be looked at from the perspectives of how the players, fans and clubs see the sport.

The Supporters’ Club: these are group of people who are always around cheering their teams or country to victory; these groups of people generate football chants at match venues to support and encourage their team, insult the opposition or just make noise. Some clubs have their own anthems, which these supporters sing. Some songs are shared between clubs, while some chants are used to mock opposition players, such as “ewu”, an Igbo word for “goat”, “ode”, a Yoruba word for “a fool”, and “daniska”, Hausa word for “bastard”; others are more aggressive and of a personal nature against a player on the pitch of play (this act is very common in Europe). Some chanting can be more than insulting, and may even be racist or sectarian in nature. These types of chants tend to have been banned from football stadiums; FIFA, CAF, UEFA, CONCACAF, etc have sanctioned racism in the game of football with a slogan “say no to racism” and campaigns to combat offensive chants and songs. Although all the football running bodies in the continents and FIFA do not directly punish fans who partake in such discrimination, they do expect the domestic leagues and local stadiums to act upon the policies and control of what fans say. Nigeria Supporters Club (NSC) is one of the supporters clubs that FIFA has given great respect and recognition for the beautiful way they used to comport themselves all over the world in match venues and the rhythm of their drums.

It is believed in some countries that football has become a new religion, although this cannot be proved, it is just as a result of the religious aspects of sporting events which include the ritualized group responses to cues such as on-pitch events, group chanting, singing, dancing, the wide-spread use of symbols. Team colours and logos take on a special importance and insulting these symbols is a grievous insult to the whole side. Wearing them marks the wearer as an adherent of a certain group and divides the world, almost making it a cult-like thing – there is this usual divide like “us” and “them”. Today in the world over, the European Leagues are the most developed. So talking about religion in football that is where most of these things are well practiced. Idol-worship of heroes which is associated with relics such as balls, shirts, number on jersey associated with players and events are highly valued. Pilgrimages- some fans will travel to another country to see a match live or even travel in large groups to faraway places, caravanning to see football matches.

Rivalries: this is very visible in local derby and major football matches. A local derby is a match between two neighbouring club sides, which are often fiercely competitive. Sometimes, there are underlying political or sectarian tensions such as the old firm Kano Pillar of Kano and Ranchers Bees of Kaduna; Bendel Insurance and Bendel United of Benin City. The term derby often applies to matches between two teams from the same city or region, but most appropriately the term is used to refer to matches of two big clubs from the same country. Derbies are usually treated as the most important matches by the fans, players and the clubs regardless of position in the league table, etc. that is why words like clash, battle, are always used to introduce match pairing as if the club sides are at war path.

According to Foer (2007) “when it comes to derbies the culture of football thrives and shines in all its colours and what they mean to the community”. The moods of regions, cities, and countries have been seen to be connected to football. Victory in a major tournament can bring happiness to the local community or country; conversely defeat can lower spirits and, has been seen to be connected to
morality in the population. Withdrawal symptoms when the football season finished have also been observed.

Politics in Football: this has brought in corruption, bribery, and match fixing a very strong allegation that has now been part of the game and will remain there till eternity. This practise or level of corruption vary from country to country and can involve players, agents and teams. In 2010 for instance, Amos Adamu of Nigeria and Tahiti’s Raymond Temarii, the president of Oceanic Football Confederation were both suspended from being members of FIFA’s 24-man executive committee. Adamu was suspended for asking for cash before voting for a country that will host FIFA tournament in 2018 and 2022, while Temarii was alleged to have asked for payment to finance a sport academy in his country. As reported by Salami (2010),

The biggest story of the week is the suspension of Dr. Amos Adamu by FIFA following the publication of a story by the Sunday Times of London, where it was alleged that the WAFU president attempted to sell his vote as an executive of FIFA to the USA…but how Adamu fell for it remains a big surprise. It is a big blow to Africa because the man is serving in FIFA on the ticket of the continent. (Pg 61)

There are acts and activities that are common with the game of football. Teams trying to buy referees and match commissioners before tournaments start. Again it was also reported that on 20th of October 2010, Chief Davidson Owumi, the chairman of Nigeria Football League (NFL) was arrested by officials of Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) for alleged corrupt practices when he was in charge of Rangers of Enugu.

Celebrity Status: football has become so popular that most players playing for bigger leagues all over the world become automatic celebrities and as a result most press people follow them about to let us know their off-the-pitch activities. While some have good record outside the playing pitch many others have bad behaviours and all these make the football culture very thick in the world today. We have heard of past and present players of the round leather game that have been celebrated. The celebrity status is such that advertisers and good manufacturers hire them to advertise their products for them. John Fashanu was so admired as a player during his time that he went on to become UNICEF ambassador, as well as being a spokesman in advertisements for many different companies. The great Pele of Brazil. This Brazilian footballer became UNICEF ambassador and spent some time in Brazilian politics. George Weah of Liberia, a former FIFA world footballer of the year, also tried his luck in Liberian presidential election in 2005. In 2002 after the world cup the head of the South Korean Football Association decided to run for president of the country. This goes to show that even non-footballers who are connected to football have become famous through their association with the game. In Nigeria, we have had players like John Chidozie advertised Life Bouy toilet soap; late Rashidi Yekini IGI insurance, Kanu Nwankwo, Peak Milk; Austine J. J. Okocha Ariel Detergent, to mention but few of them in Nigeria.

Religious Beliefs: these are commonly used throughout football. Some players are religious and can be seen to cross themselves before a game. According to footballculture.net(2005)

In Africa traditional belief, rituals are used to help teams win important games. In 1995 final of African Champions Cup between a Sowetan Club Orlando Pirates and ASEC Mimosa of Cote D’Ivore. It was reported that in several days the South African players bathed in a special potion prepared by their muti-man or traditional healer at the stadium, they were instructed to
follow the juju man out of the dressing room, keeping strictly to the left hand side of the passage ways in order to avoid bewitchment. That game turned out to be one of the most one sided matched in the history of African football. (footballculture.net).

In national stadium, Surulere, Lagos State in 2000 Africa Nations Cup hosted by Nigeria and Ghana, Nigeria national team coached by Chief Onigbinde played a semi-final with the lions of Senegal. The game was very tough, that after playing into the dying minutes of the second half the Nigerian coach got up from his seat and walked into the goal post of the Senegalese and picked up a charm neatly kept by the goal post. It was after that singular action that the Nigerian side scored through Julius Aghahowa and went ahead to lose to Cameroon in the final match. Onigbinde was criticized by the press and officials of CAF, the organisers of the tournament. The chief said to help his team and country, he will and can carry out such actions again and again. Ewuaje (2010) also reported that Frenchman Phillipe Trouissier whose most famous television documentary showed “how he spilled the blood of a helpless chicken in a bowl for his Burkina Faso players to lick ahead of a match”. Some African players believe in the power of the spirit others go along for the sake of morale and do not quite reject the idea of ancestral guardianship, because these rituals are part of our tradition. But today these practices are changing because it is believed that football results are dictated by forces within the members of a team, their talents, their will, and so on, rather than by outside supernatural forces. And today it is a generally accepted belief that sometimes the team loses because the coach and the players don’t understand each other.

**Football Organization and Packaging:** the packaging of football, the passion, the zeal, the accuracy and dexterity with which presenters of football matches broadcast and run commentary of the premiership and other leagues in Europe increases viewers’ love and interest for the game of football. In the years past, Nigeria could boast of a robust local football league in the 70s and early 80s, which has today become a charade no thanks to corruption and poor organization.

These and many other football cultures time and space will not permit to be discussed here, are fanaticism in football, bad behaviour outside pitch on the side of the footballers; pitch invasions, alcohol, exploitation, drugs, hooliganism, and violence.

**Football as a Unifying Factor**

Nigeria is a country with a proud tradition of outstanding football history in the committee of nations. Football has been a very strong force in the country that has really integrated the people. It has served as a strong point or element in peace and community building. Today, Federation International de Football Association (FIFA) is an international organisation that controls the sport of football. The FIFA World Cup held every four years is the quintessential football event, combining the greatest in the world and the passion of the fans. Other continental bodies are UEFA, CAF, CONCACAF, etc. this game has held the power to unify nations, states, regions, communities, etc. it has played out war and it has brought people together from around the world. Football, like art, has a universal language, the seeming strength of football, to integrate a diverse people of different cultures, languages, genders and regions cannot be underplayed.

When tournaments such as the FIFA World Cup, Confederation Cup, the African Nations Cup and the UEFA Champions League bring in supporters from nations around the world, this national pride is a part of globalism. The FIFA World Cup brings the world of football together for an entire month. Through triumph and defeat, it is a modern example of nationalism fused with
globalization. Nationalism is shown in wearing football shirts, scarves, flying of colours, and flags to express pride. According to Ebohon (2010), “these unifying factors is a complete system that forms a part of the global community of football. Football brings players, fans, coaches, and clubs together from every part of the world”. Football is playing a very strong unifying role in the nation because of the passion for the game. What religion, politics, and tribe could not do, football is doing it; the game is a barrier breaker. Anytime Nigeria is having a match to play with any other nation, Nigerians are always seen together discussing as a family bounded together with love irrespective of religion, tribe and region.

As earlier discussed, football culture in the world today is very clear that it can help bring about understanding and unity. Whenever a football tournament is organised that brings people of different creed together, we see an infusion of sub cultures with various belief systems. The last FIFA World Cup for instance in South Africa, a German Octopus named Paul (but which died in October 2010) introduced another dimension into predicting what the outcome of a game will be, but Octopus Paul changed that by predicting perfectly well, winners of games in the tournament. This brings into lime light that it is not only Africans that believe in future or fortune telling. Football brings people together to understand themselves and their pattern of play. That is why coaches are also becoming sought after internationally. This extends to national coaches once being native to their country, being brought in from other countries. This practice is very common in Africa and Asia where foreign coaches are in charge of national teams.

The relationship between football and the society can be looked at from two perspectives. First, football as a great instrument to solve social problems, to overcome huge social obstacles, to give opportunities for disadvantaged people. If football as a competitive sport, especially the big events can be a great stage to send social messages because it is consider a powerful tool for the integration and the socialization among people with different background, religion, gender, ability, and race. The second aspect is the communication between people who cannot speak the same language but kicking a ball, they can have fun, share a game or a simple laugh. As they do this, playing together, they begin to understand each other, developing a set of relations and the colours of their skin, the religion etc; do not matter here. Salami (2010) observed that “football is a beautiful game and we should work towards enjoying the game and making our stadia violent free”.

Productivity through Developed Football Culture

Productivity according to Hornby (2006) is “the rate at which a worker, or a company, or a country produces goods, and the amount produced, compared with how time, work and money is needed to produce them”. Looking at the huge potentials that abound everywhere in Nigeria, it will only cost the country a little to harness the youths through football. Football all over the world today has become a big business. People of different races have sometimes not been accepted as players in European football. This has changed now, players and their services can now be offered to clubs in various countries and for whatever the price they want. Top players make millions of cash in salaries in a year, plus whatever additional endorsement they receive. Teams have also benefited from this by being able to find a wider support base outside their traditional /local areas. Honestly, football is one of the enormous sporting industry in the country if properly harnessed will be the most obvious source of revenue generation that we have in this country. This is a game that attracts millions of participants whether managers, coaches, scouts, players and spectators.
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Given the significant contribution of football to the development of the society or the role that organised sports particularly football can play in contributing to the positive development of the society (Haruna, 2012). The government should quickly see how an effective football culture should be put in place. Football culture must be seen as a crucially important economic asset to the country, considering the youth percentage of the entire population in the country.

In today’s football, most clubs have multiple foreign players, this is especially evident in European league and in the English Premier League in particular, where English players are outnumbered by their foreign counterparts. Many teams attempt to build a complete team with players with ball control, others with strength, others with speed and others with vision. Traditionally, these skill sets are associated with different regions, countries and continents; ball control is regarded as a South American trait, speed is typically associated with African Players and strength is typically seen as European way. Therefore, prominent clubs scout these regions heavily for raising talents and advise them to have a trial with clubs outside their regions.

These successful footballers in Europe pay heavy taxes on their properties, thereby generating revenue for the government. This whole concept did not just start overnight, but rather it has taken these countries a long process to develop their football culture and today, they are reaping the dividends of their investment. Nigeria as a nation can do the same by investing heavily on sports, but football in particular. Football academies can be established all over the country, where young ones can combine sports (football) with studies. Again, Haruna (2012) observed that “sport has the potential to promote a broad spectrum of life skills and values that build on these capacities, including: team-building; communication; decision making; problem solving; self-esteem; sense of community; personal responsibility; empathy; resilience; and socio-moral development”.

Football academies will help the youths to avoid many detrimental practices and develop in them teamwork and team-spirit. Football academies will bring young people from different backgrounds and walks of life to share similar interests that will enhance their sense of belonging as a team. And according to Bailey, Wellard and Dismore (2004), this will help “develop capacity, pre-readiness and provide opportunities of being involved in social activities which will enhance building social cohesion, ties and values”.

Football can be a very strong tool if properly channelled to turn the fortunes of this country around. The teeming youths will be gainfully engaged in a productive activity if Nigeria’s football culture is established well. The challenge is hard and maybe the dividend is far away. The country must try, if they are able to remove all the football culture barriers at the entrance to highlight the social and economic values of football activities and to spread the concept of “football for all”. Maybe all barriers of football culture may be difficult to avoid, but for some, the body of the society will feel better productively.

Conclusion
Looking at the significance of football culture as discussed in this paper, it has demonstrated how football can benefit the nation and the individuals involved in this laudable project. This is now a clarion call to the government of the federal Republic of Nigeria to intensify efforts into establishing a football culture in the country so as to enhance employment and self-productivity. This will in turn help to increase the country’s GDP, which will have a multiplier effect on increased income, thereby helping to maintain peace that will bring about the country’s development.
Recommendations

In view of what has been discussed in this paper, the following recommendations are made towards effective football culture in Nigeria:

1. Federal government should establish football academies all over the states in the country and like the unity schools, students should be admitted from all parts of the country into a particular academy. This will help the youths, communities and the country at large to achieve the objective of national unity by positively engaging the youths in soccer academies all over the country.

2. Federal government through the ministry of sports should formulate and implement effective policies regarding the transfer of players (footballers) from our local leagues to foreign football clubs in Europe, and other parts of the world. This will help take care of exploitation of the youngsters and the nation as well.

3. In these football academies, government should also establish technical and vocational training centres so as to train them in different areas of skill acquisition to empower them for self-reliance, self-sustenance and employment generation when they will no longer be active footballers.

References


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