

UNITING THE WORLD THROUGH FOOTBALL: A DANCER'S PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Unity has from time immemorial being a universal phenomenon employed by people from different works of life, its importance spans through education, economy, religion, arts and even sports. While the world has had its fair share of challenges in the area of conflicts and disagreements, unity has always been a last resort to understanding each other.

Football as a very popular sport attracts lots of attention and, over time, it has been a sport that has, and continually breeds unity. It is on this platform that the relationship which exists between football and unity, from the purview of dance was examined.

Thus through the descriptive and analytical method, some aspects of a typical football match were presented to show how football enhances unity among nations of the world.

Keywords: *Dancer's perspective*

INTRODUCTION

Unity is a word that cuts across all facets of human endeavour, it is an instrument channelled towards positivity and productivity. In conceptualizing unity, there is need to understand its usefulness and impact in the world. In the parley of local, national and international relations, unity becomes pivotal, it is a sacrosanct aspect of human relations and equally considered a powerful tool amongst men. While peace has been the bane of existence all over the world, unity is a step further because while peace can be achieved without unity, unity cannot be achieved without peace, thus, peace enhances unity.

During the earlier part of last millennium, the world experienced two fierce wars that characterized uncertainties, conflicts, disagreements and discord that were prevalent at the time. However, in 1945, the United Nations was founded by 51 countries who committed themselves to maintaining international peace and security. The four main purpose of the United Nations are:

- To keep peace throughout the world;
- To develop friendly relations among nations;
- To help nations work together to improve the lives of the poor people, to conquer hunger, disease and illiteracy, and to encourage respects for each other's rights and freedoms;

- To be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations to achieve this goals. Emphasis mine (www.un.org).

Thus, unity became a priority, a watchword constantly on the lips of all. Despite all that were initially put in place, several problems that seem to draw back this noble vision began to emerge; issues relating to inequality, racial discrimination, corruption, amongst others stared the world in the face.

As the world advanced in technology, innovations, art and other areas of life, sporting activities grew in status and importance. Football, being part of this growth became a widely accepted sport for a variety of reasons, one of which is its unique ability to ensure togetherness irrespective of age, sex and colour and an overall aura of unity it breeds. Luxbacher (2003:ix) a world acclaimed sports columnist and editor expressed that;

Soccer! The game evokes an outpouring of passion and emotion unparalleled within the realm of competitive sport. Soccer provides a common language among people of diverse backgrounds and heritages, a bridge that spans economic, political, cultural and religious barriers known as football throughout most of the world, soccer is the national sport of nearly every country in Asia, Africa, Europe and South America.

Football is characterized by the inherent meaning of its name which is foot for leg (subject) and ball for a round leather (object). It is a competitive sport of two opponents represented by eleven players each, with four or more officials who decide the outcome of the match and thousands of spectators cheering their respective teams to victory. Football is though primarily a game, the proceedings and activities it entails gives it an art form. For instance Reilly (1996:6) buttresses this view thus;

The professional soccer player is comparable with the actor (dancer in this case) in that hours of practice or rehearsal underpin the preparation for public performance. The expertise of the player or actor is judged largely on a subjective basis by a critical audience or attendance of the public event

A game is of two halves, 45 minutes each and based on a large percentage of ability to create and utilize chances through accuracy in passing, good body movements and dribbles, well timed and placed shots at goal. It is a game that is technically rooted in the united endeavours of eleven good footballers rather than the skills, and ability of an excellent player.

Having discussed unity and football as two different features, this essay, from a dance consideration, therefore examines football as a harbinger of unity; the phenomenon as a clear representation of enhancing harmony, togetherness and unison all over the world.

UNITY AND FOOTBALL: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

Since unity has been identified as the world's undoubted need especially among countries, several aspects of human endeavour has witnessed lots of delimitating factors that continually threaten the aim of unity. Also in football, which is one of the reflectors of unity, certain irregularities in behaviour and actions have contributed to some of the problems affecting the popular sport.

While today we have had countless wars, crimes and conflicts all over the world, almost equal, but far less frightening occurrences had crept into football. Although, the two bodies specifically created to ensure peace in this two respective aspects (U.N and F.I.F.A) are on course to quash such occurrences, some of such problems continually stare us in the face. As a result of this, we examine unity and football in relation to one another, looking into the problems and prospects accordingly.

PROBLEMS

One of the challenges of ensuring a united nation and world is the inability to see ourselves as one. The differences in our race, culture, background and colour constantly pose problems that affect a smooth relationship amongst people. In football, this same problem and others have always been identified as what breach the unity it aims to achieve.

First, the issues of colour always becomes a bone of contention. Football is a sport well known for racial discrimination and abuse. While it is very clear that football began long in Europe before Africa, some Africans who are good at the art of football are constantly recruited by well known football clubs whose utmost aim is winning titles. However, what seems to be the negative aspect of it is the way they are treated. Some are called black monkey, goat, bastards and all other derogatory names that hinder the union between black and white football players. Marsh and Frosdick (2005) expressed that;

The true extent of racism among football supporters is almost impossible to quantify, extensive speculation and debate on the subject is not supported by much reliable empirical data. For the media and public opinion, however, racism among football fans is a serious problem, and often blamed for outbreaks of violence, particularly at international matches.

Even till today, the problem of racism is much alive, particularly in European club competitions where a sizeable number of Africans and black Americans ply their trade. Only this year (2012), not fewer than four cases of racism between white and black footballers have been reported, with the most recent coming from Russia where a spectator threw a banana at a black footballer named Christopher Samba, invariably calling him a monkey. Also in England, some investigations are ongoing to examine such reports of racism that is prevalent in the game. However, as such investigations go on, it is important that the European/white footballers and others continually reflect on the excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr's famous speech which reads;

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today! I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification one day right there in

Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. (in Eidenmuller2008).

And that this statement which was made several years back will redirect their thinking and re-orientate them on the need to unite irrespective of race, background or color. Also, the issue of football hooliganism where footballers and supporters alike have used the sport as an avenue for perpetrating evil on and off the pitch is a crucial problem that needs immediate attention. The issue of favouritism as a result of nationality or colour which is prevalent in English football also needs to be checked to give room for oneness among footballers.

PROSPECTS

While there are current problems militating against unity in football and other aspects of life, it is pertinent to note that long before now, football had been utilized as a powerful weapon of unity amongst people within a nation and of different nations. For instance, Pele a Brazilian football legend who had severally planted joy in the hearts of many replicated same through football. Tasnim (2010) reveals further that;

... in 1967, he was able to do even more than that. During that year, Pele was flown to Lagos, Nigeria, then in the midst of the Biafran brutal civil war, to play an exhibition match. In order to allow both sides of the conflict to see the greatest ever player in the game, a 48 hour ceasefire was called and honored, making him the only footballer that single handedly stopped a war.

Such a phenomenal feat further solidifies and strengthens the position of football in fostering unity amongst people. In recent times, specifically in 2007, a similar feat was achieved when Didier Drogba, a footballer spearheaded a friendly match that ended a civil war between two countries; Ivory Coast and Madagascar. Tasnim (2010) again records that;

... These players got their boots on, got out on that field and played a match as part of their everyday job and ended civil war in the nation. Soldiers from the rebel army were responsible for the security of the players as well as on field security, while government troops were present up in the stands. Yet both groups had a reason to put their guns down and celebrate and sing together.

Even the problems experienced through racism in European countries have taken a new turn recently as football governing bodies and organizations are ready to give adequate sanctions to defaulters. A European footballer by the name Luis Suarez was recently given an 8 match ban for racially abusing a black player and equally a 1 match ban for obscene gestures to a section of football fans.

This is a good development in the fight against racism and anything that attempts to debar the unity football seeks to project. Subsequently, the football world through a deeper understanding of the importance and relevance of unity would experience the game from different angles of positivity.

A DANCER'S PERSPECTIVE OF THE CONNECTION BETWEEN FOOTBALL AND UNITY

Dance from a Layman's definition is the rhythmic movement of the body in time and space. However, an attempt to go deeper will take us to other definitions as proposed by the scholars in the art of dance. Valery (1983:60) opines that;

The art of dance is the expression and transference through the medium of bodily movements of mental and emotional experience that the individual cannot express by rational or intellectual means.

Dance is a unique aspect of art, given its non-verbal medium and its ability to communicate a wide range of feelings and emotions. Dance extensively depends on communication and expression, it reveals meanings in every movement, building the momentum of artistic expressions through accurate and appropriate rhythms such that the pace and flow of the rhythm is in concordance with the intended meaning.

Football and dance are considered the same. If we analyze both in terms of performance in its rudimentary stages, we would discover the close relationship it enjoys. www.madkingthomas.com expressed it better saying that; "replace football with dance and game with performance and you will see that football is dance." The similarities between the two cut across the whole progression in terms of performance; the coach/choreographer, the field/stage, the spectator/audience. However, in the same way there is a connection between football and dance is the same way in which football and unity connect.

Due to the specifications of the game, anything short of teamwork is tantamount to defeat, and this is why all the players in a team are subjected to the leadership of the coach who capitalizes on his experience and technical

knowhow to lead his team to victory. However, the connection referred to is more reflected on the activities on the football pitch, the stadium and even viewers at home, and this connection is brought more effectively through dance and movements. Such aspects are hereunder analysed accordingly.

Goal Celebration: One principal objective on the field of play is to score goals. No matter how skillful a player is, no matter how technically good a team is, their efforts are worthless if they cannot put the ball into the net. The essence of the game is the amount of goals that could be scored to determine the winner. While dribbles, skills and techniques are the pathways to goals, the painstaking endeavour of going through such process and the feeling of fulfillment on the part of the team culminates into variety of actions and dances to celebrate the goals scored. Reeves (1999:ix) remarks thus;

Goal! Nothing is more satisfying to a team's players and coaches, or as exciting to its supporters than a goal scored from a well-planned and well executed restart play.

It is this feeling of satisfaction that ushers the happiness and joy that brings about different dance movements from the team which could comprise footballers of different countries and continents in the same club. The dance celebration is an act of unity that accurately fits into Enekwe's submission that "dance serves a vital function in human society to achieve social cohesion or togetherness, causing them to feel a deep sense of communion with each other." (1999:11). This deep sense of communion is felt when the whole team, irrespective of their size, country, race or color, celebrate together not just a goal from a player, but a fruitful result from a collective football display. While footballers like Rojer Miller of Cameroon, Robinho of Brazil, Robbie Keane of Ireland and a few others have carved a niche for themselves in celebrative dances after their goals, their team mates have equally mastered them in a way that they sometimes engage in choreographic movements. No wonder why majority of footballers have dance as one of their strongest hobbies, and equally visit night clubs and dance halls on a regular basis.

Supporters Club: The supporters club engages in a large number of activities which ultimately seek to back their respective teams up. The supporters club is a section of the spectator where ardent supporters tenaciously energize, strengthen and

back the efforts of the players up through songs, dances and dramatic displays. It is always an active part of a football match before, during and after the match.

Just like the expression of joy through dances of various kinds that emanate from the footballers, the supporters club is even more enervated as they collectively share the bond of celebrating these goals through shouts, jumps, songs, body movements and dance. For most of them however, the impulse to celebrate the goals comes naturally from a deep sense of joy, happiness and fulfillment, and that is why there is togetherness and sense of harmony in their reaction irrespective of their background, race and color. Among the supporters of football clubs like Manchester United, Chelsea, Arsenal or Liverpool, there is bound to be people from different countries and continents coming together. It is this oneness in purpose that makes it a unique aspect of the sport, particularly when they dance together, jump at each other and celebrate at the arrival of a goal.

Also, a unique aspect of some matches is the display of what is known as the "Mexican wave". This "Mexican wave" is a wave effect formed when crowd in a stadium rise up and down from their seats in succession. When this is viewed, one would see a variety of expressions and feelings that range from dance movements, variety of colors, sense of unity and proportion, and togetherness which essentially characterize the major events that occur from the spectators.

Viewers, A Personal Experience: Apart from the thousands that weekly go into the stadia to watch football matches, million others sit in front of their television sets or at football viewing centres where they pay to watch. Consequently, it is another conglomeration of diverse people from different homes, background and ethnicity. It is worthy of note that the same feeling of togetherness and harmony that is experienced on field and among the supporters club is the same at football viewing centres across the world.

On a personal experience in 2006 far in Kebbi State, a northern part of Nigeria where I was serving, I as an ardent Arsenal supporter went into a football viewing centre filled with majority northerners and people from other cultures. Unlike on a normal day where I would apply caution in dealing with people like that, we were all free with each other, discussing the match we were about to watch. However, what struck me hard was the exhilarating manner at which we all jumped at each other singing and dancing when goals began to go into the net, suddenly we kept

inside our differences in culture, background and ethnic group, to celebrate in harmony and one accord. Even after the match, I and other Corps members were treated to chilled "Fura de nunu" which cemented the bond we had shared in the viewing centre.

This experience lingers on in my mind particularly on the backdrop of current situation in the country where a section in this country where I have enjoyed such fraternity are constantly posing a threat to the unity and oneness we once shared together through football. It is with great optimism that I hope that very soon, we shall experience such feat as I enjoyed back then and live in peace and unity ever after.

CONCLUSION

The impact sports and consequently football play on unity and peaceful co-existence can never be overemphasized. Just like dance, it is a powerful tool of communing with one another, sharing feelings and being in one accord. Oloyede (2012) expresses this when he asserts that "*sport is a silent but effective means of promoting national integration and international cooperation.*"

While we have reflected on a lot of issues regarding football and unity, and the role dance plays in fostering such union, a lot of lessons need to be learnt.

First, we must as a nation, continent and as a global entity recognize the impact unity plays in our day to day activities, at least from past negative experiences which had contributed to several setbacks around the world today. We should equally tap into the vast opportunities embedded in sports and specifically football in ensuring peace, unity and togetherness amongst nations of the world.

However, this study is an eye opener on the importance, usefulness and the numerous qualities of dance which to many cannot but be seen as mere entertainment which everybody does freely anytime. While we ponder on the solutions to the diverse problems militating against our desired growth as a nation, continent and global entity, the rich and viable influence of sports in ensuring a united world must be tapped into.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Due to the identified problems, and our quest to ensure a favourable practice of the sport, we highlight a few recommendations that would help ameliorate the conditions of football in general. They are;

1. That global football organization should produce a strong code of conduct for

footballers, indicating the cogent areas relating to human relations within the sports, racism and other contending issues against unity.

2. That an orientation programme should be packaged for all age grade footballers so as to instill the self discipline, ethics and codes of conduct in them as they grow from amateur to professional footballers
3. That there should be a laid down punishment ranging from 3 months to 6 months ban for footballers found guilty of racism or other forms of human assault in football. This will ultimately reduce or eradicate such act, as it would dent the image of any footballer and equally cut short his professional career.
4. The football clubs should create a space for a choreographer, dance expert or dance aerobics in their staff allocation. This is crucial as it helps in training the footballer in body dynamics, body movement, body alignment and other skills of maneuvering that enhances his productivity on the field.

We hope these points identified would further strengthen the bond between football, unity and consequently dance.

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EXTERNAL LINKS

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