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November, 2014

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On: 26 August 2015, At: 22:22

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London, SW1P 1WG

Critical African Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcaf20>

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Published online: 30 Jun 2014.

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To cite this article: Chuka Onwumechili (2014) Nigerian football: Interests, marginalization, and struggle, *Critical African Studies*, 6:2-3, 144-156, DOI: [10.1080/21681392.2014.931200](https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2014.931200)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2014.931200>

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Nigerian football: Interests, marginalization, and struggle

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(Received 29 October 2013; accepted 17 April 2014)

Nigerian football has achieved a long line of success at both continental and global levels. A significant part of that has occurred through its local clubs and players. However, while player labour has sustained Nigerian football in many ways, the increasing capital interests of administrators have created a situation of marginalization and domination, which not only leads to player flight but also has threatened the sustainability of the league itself. Using critical theory, this paper exposes the structure of power, interests, and marginalization that define local football in Nigeria today. In so doing, it also identifies player resistance in a struggle for emancipation. Administrators have used several instruments to affirm power including withholding of wages and bonuses and denial of free agency. In the struggle for emancipation, players have chosen strikes, petitions, violence, and flight. Ultimately, the paper argues that adoption of a discursive public sphere as advanced by Habermas may place the conflict on a trajectory of fairness and repair in order to emancipate players from the current unsustainable situation.

Keywords: critical theory; football; Nigeria; labour; power

Introduction

Nigeria won the 2013 Cup of African Nations and has been regarded as one of Africa's top footballing nations for nearly a half century. In addition, its footballers are widely represented in leagues all over the world including Obi Mikel and Victor Moses in England and Onazi Ogenyi at Lazio in Italy. The country has continued to produce remarkable footballers over the years including Jay Jay Okocha and Nwankwo Kanu who played in top European leagues and at the World Cup. This leads to understandable interest in how the game is managed in the country. Unfortunately, few studies have investigated Nigeria's local football in order to understand how it is run, its management, and the working conditions of its players. Thus, the internal management of the game in Nigeria remains largely a mystery from an academic perspective.

Nevertheless, Nigerian news media have provided significant reports of conflict in the management of the game locally. These have involved wage disputes and player strikes, among other types of conflict. Of notable focus are working conditions in the nation's football leagues, which range from amateur to the professional level.¹ These leagues include both state-managed and privately managed clubs at all league levels. But these reports are non-academic, lacking deep analysis of probable causes and explanations that provide more than a cursory understanding.

Therefore, a key objective of this paper is to provide a deep understanding of disputes and conflicts existing in Nigerian football. To do this, this paper uses critical theory as a framework

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for understanding the conflict and the structure that informs that conflict. While there are several academic works on African football that use critical theory to expose conflicts and power relations in various aspects of African soccer, the author is not aware of any research that has used this method to investigate local Nigerian football.² For instance, critical theory has been used to investigate the relationship between the International Federation for Football Associations (FIFA) and the Confederation for African Football (CAF) (Darby 2002); the migration of African footballers (Bale 2004; Poli 2006), women, and football in Africa (Onwumechili 2010b); football and transnational media in Africa (Akindes 2010; Onwumechili 2009); corruption (Pannenberg 2010; Sugden and Tomlinson 2003); and the administration of local football in some African countries (Rukuni and Grenink 2010; Martin 1991), amongst several other studies. In most of the cases above, the common thread has been a struggle between Western or European hegemony and the *otherized* African. Only few, such as Onwumechili's investigation of genderized football in Nigeria, have focused on internal conflict between local administrators and player labour. Thus, the investigative focus of this paper is not only important but it is rare.

This paper begins with a background section on Nigerian football intended to provide more than a cursory understanding of the environment, which is critically evaluated in latter sections. Subsequent sections begin with a discussion of critical theory, focusing on power and emancipation. The following sections expose the actions of Nigeria's football management that create a structure of power and domination, leading to subsequent labour resistance and struggle. The latter sections focus on opportunities for emancipation and voices of change.

Nigeria's football

Football was introduced into Nigeria in the late 19th century as a result of the influence of religious evangelists and British colonialists (Boer 2004; Onwumechili 2010a) and paralleled the 'global pattern of the game's diffusion' (Alegi 2010, 5) as it did in other parts of Africa. Alegi adds, 'it precisely followed the assertion of British commercial and imperial power' (Alegi 2010, 5). However, Nigeria was not a significant power in African football until it introduced a nationwide football league in the early 1970s. Prior to the league's establishment in 1972, the only national competition was the Challenge Cup involving mostly city selections with the exception of Lagos, which was represented by clubs. There were many clubs in Lagos with most sponsored by companies such as Pan Bank, United African Company (UAC) and government agencies such as the Public Works Department (PWD), Nigerian Marine, and Nigerian Railways Corporation, whereas other cities had few or no clubs at all. Thus, Lagos could organize elimination competitions amongst its clubs. Other cities, bereft of competing clubs, organized training sessions for footballers from disparate sources, such as schools, agencies, and those individually reputed as good footballers. In essence, only Lagos had strong clubs qualifying to represent it at the national level for the Challenge Cup through competitions, whilst other cities simply formed teams with players selected from schools and government agencies, among others. The Challenge Cup was an elimination competition, which meant that many teams were out of competition very early in the football season. Worse still, because only clubs were eligible to represent countries at the African Champion Clubs' Cup competition, Nigerian Challenge Cup champions were often ineligible and this delayed Nigeria's development as a football power in Africa.

After the league was established however, Nigeria began to immediately produce better football performance. The effect of the league was clear as Nigerian players became involved in year round competition. Nigeria won its first continental championship for clubs four years after the inception of the league and in the same year advanced, for the first time, to the medal stage of the Cup for African Nations.³ However, the league was still not professional as players remained employed to do non-football work and football remained recreational and amateur in the most

part. Moreover, players were free to move to and from any club of their choice during the registration period.

However, several factors changed the football environment in the 1980s. These factors included a depressed economy, widespread corruption, and an entrenched military dictatorship. Nigeria's debt had risen sharply in the mid-1980s forcing increased emigration (Adegbola 1990; Adepou 1991; Onwumechili 2010a). Adegbola (1990) wrote that over 103,500 professionals and technicians alone emigrated from Nigeria to non-African countries between 1987 and 1989. This coincided with a period when the percentage of Nigerians living in poverty rose from 43% to 64% (Aliyu and Usman 2013). Football was not immune to the change in the economy. Teams increasingly found it difficult to pay wages or provide adequate equipment for players. Also, players began to emigrate to other African countries, as well as to Europe. Corruption also was on the increase during this period including in football administration (Diamond 1991; Fagbadebo 2007). The height of Nigerian military dictatorship occurred during this period after the overthrow of the civilian republican era, which lasted from only 1979 until 1983. Under military dictators – Ibrahim Babangida and Sanni Abacha – the country was ruled by heavy-handed military decrees, which would affect football.

In 1990, football formally became professional with the clear agreement that players were simply employed to play football without being encumbered by other services. Two years later, the military government promulgated a military Decree 101 which formalized government control over football administration in the country despite professionalization of the game. Players were required to be signed to a contract and the Nigerian Football Association (NFA) instituted rules for transfer of players from one club to the other.⁴ The league remained largely professional on paper but teams were unable to generate their own revenue or attract significant sponsors. Most teams continued to rely on government sponsorship and were indeed owned by government and its agencies (Ngobua 2013). The difference was that players were no longer civil servants, employed directly by the state, and protected by state regulations that often assured lifetime employment with a pension and similar benefits. In the new professional era, players were primarily footballers who could be fired when their skill diminished, yet their movements from one club to the other could be restricted. Importantly, with discretionary powers to dismiss players, management became increasingly emboldened.

The professional football environment in Nigeria created a new football labour condition, which included formalized and controlled movement of labour, disengaging player labour compensation from a compensation structure that was largely based on civil service rules, and labour stability was increasingly based on management discretion.

Theorization of power and emancipation

The labour conditions of football players in Nigeria are a result of a political structure which can be examined through a lens of critical theory. Critical theory assists us in explaining the social conditions of life. Its goal is to free people from their shackles. This paper employs several strands of critical theory to understand the conflict between Nigerian football management and football player labour. This is important as no one theory best describes or explains the working conditions of footballers in Nigeria. Instead, several aspects of the critical theory genre is derived from the disparate works of Marx, Horkheimer, Domhoff, Gramsci, Engels, and Habermas and are appropriated for a rich understanding of the conditions of football labour in Nigeria. Several of these theories, particularly Marx's class theory, have been used by African scholars in analysing labour conditions in Africa (cf. Mudenda 1983; Nzongola-Ntalaja 1983; Seddon 2002). Most of the scholarship on class struggle in Africa focuses on industrial conflicts, conflict between state and workers, and conflict between workers and imperialists.

These struggles and conflicts also exist in Nigerian football and justify an analysis using critical theory.

Horkheimer argues that all critical theory must satisfy three goals, which are: explaining the conditions, making it practical, and then emancipating those adversely affected (1993). He further concluded that critical theory seeks to 'liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them' (Horkheimer 1982, 244). However, liberation assumes that the oppressed are interested in becoming free from the circumstances in which they find themselves. In Nigeria, this is a critical question because cultural issues and ideology create power distance between management and labour which is accepted, and management is ascribed dictatorial power that is largely unquestioned.⁵ Horkheimer defined ideology as unquestioned assumptions adopted by the public but scripted by the elite for its own interest. Ideology invariably presents itself as knowledge but it is discretely used to oppress and repress labour (Horkheimer 1982). In any case, critical theorists propose that labour struggle for liberation, ideology, and culture largely assist in creating, maintaining, and sustaining status quo. It is this understanding that provides, for this paper, a road map for the analysis of, and recommendations for Nigerian football.

Marx (1969) points out that class conflict has focused historically on the struggle to control the means of production. In this struggle, class interests vary and are in direct conflict. Owners seek to maximize profit while labourers demand better conditions of work. Marx and Engels provide a dialectical interpretation of Hegelian proposal of thesis, anti-thesis, and synthesis in the process of understanding stages in a class struggle. The thesis refers to the status quo preferred by the elite class and the anti-thesis refers to challenges, conflicts, and contradictions that arise in a class conflict or struggle, while synthesis is emergent conditions that substantially change existing conditions of labour (Adilieje and Osoku, n.d.).

The structuring of the football player's working conditions in Nigeria creates in its simplest form two broad classes that oppose each other in a struggle to define everyday life as a football player in the Nigerian football league. At one end of the structure is the administrative or manager class that makes frequent administrative decisions which affect lives of players, who occupy a class located at the opposite end. Domhoff (2005) has argued, however, that domination by the few (e.g. administrators)⁶ does not always mean complete control, instead it reflects the ability of those few to influence how the other class must act or participate. But while Domhoff (2005) argued that the underclass has the ability to restrain actions of the elite class through elections, in Nigerian football, this option for the underclass is absent. Players are not represented in any of the groups with voting rights on Nigerian football and, thus, cannot claim the same abilities that Domhoff refers to. Though the Association of Professional Footballers of Nigeria (APFON) claims to represent the interests of Nigerian footballers, its location is at best at the margins of struggle. The APFON's presence is not formalized in any way, it is neither represented in any of the football governing boards in Nigeria nor does it have any formalized presence recognized by administrators or current Nigerian football players for it to be a key player in the current arena of struggle within the game.

Importantly, what is described above exists in an environment of prebendal practices that frame public work in Nigeria. Prebendalism is a concept first credited to Professor Richard Joseph (1987) who described the sense of entitlement that Nigerian public officials feel about revenues of the state. Pannenberg (2010) further elaborated on the phenomenon when he described football in Africa noting that 'it is quite common to see that the administrators use football funds for their own travelling, accommodation, dining, and other forms of spending ...' (11). In essence, just as top government officials in other Nigerian agencies feel entitled to the state's revenues, so do football administrators who manage state-sponsored clubs. Ngobua (2013) wrote:

Huge allocations (from government) are made to the clubs every year, yet year in, year out players of Nigerian clubs are promised bogus sign on fees and other allowances which are never paid... Consequently, while the administrators keep smiling to the banks, the players and their officials (coaches) are left to their fate.

These practices, which are obviously corrupt, not only create wealth and power for football administrators but deny access to proper welfare to football labour. While it is true that prebendalism produces patron–client relationships and neopatrimonialism where patrons use state resources to secure loyalty of clients in the general population, that loyalty relationship is not necessarily between managers and players. Administrators do not see the need to participate in this relationship since players do not have voting rights that may affect the employment status of the administrator class. Instead, managers practice patron–client relationship with those that have such voting rights, i.e. peer administrators.

The dictates of administrators

Nigerian football administrators have maintained hegemony over football labour in Nigeria through several means. Gramsci (as cited in Forgacs 1988) argued in his seminal book *Prison Notebooks* that the ruling class maintains domination of labour through manipulating beliefs and narratives in such a way that its views become the norm. In essence, those views become a dominating ideology, particularly within a culture where power distance is already welcomed. This is the case with manager–player relationships in Nigerian football. Though Gramsci refers to the existence of contradictions within the dominant class, Nzongola-Ntalaja (1983) has argued that such contradictions are not irreconcilable. For instance, while there may be contradictions that exist in competition between clubs that involve financial distributions, and game results, among others; these are resolved through collective influence over the regulatory board. Resolutions include muting or compromising the board and preventing it from making decisions that exacerbate competition. For instance, league game competition has fostered competition among clubs to win games, leading to management corrupting game officials. The board is largely ineffective in punishing clubs for match-fixing and a détente is largely maintained in the corrupt environment in which it is now frequently acceptable that home teams ‘win’ games and away teams can at best ‘draw’.

Gramsci added that class domination can be obtained either by force/imposition or consent. This was what Gramsci referred to as ideological hegemony. Though Gramsci wrote about the state in his home country Italy, his work today is applicable to differential power distributions in other nations, societies, and organizations. In Nigerian football, management is able to control football and impose hegemony through ‘capture’ of certain critical aspects of football in the country. These include domination of seats in the nation’s football association boardroom, accumulation of capital through prebendal practices, collusion with football regulators, and taking advantage of cultural practices of power distance. This paper will describe each of those elements in the following sections.

Club administrators represent a strong bloc of voters on the Nigeria Football Federation (NFF) board which regulates football in the country. Under the current statutes, all members of the board come from the ranks of club management. In fact, the 2011 election guide specifically states that

d) He/She is duly registered member of a club or other organization, which is a member of the NFF in accordance with Article 10 of the NFF Statutes, for a period of four years, prior to the date of the election ... (Aikhoje 2011)

The board is the policy-making organization for league football in Nigeria and regulates the game. With club administrators seated on the board, it is logical to conclude that they are more

susceptible to bias in favour of their colleagues at the club level. This interlocking relationship provides the opportunity for 'mind capture' of the board by the clubs and thus, strengthening the powerbase of club administrators.

The structure of league football has always been defined by rules that document relationship between management and players. The previous rules, such as Decree 101,⁷ stacked the NFA board with government representatives to ensure a government grip on the game. Out of 22 members of the board, the rules provided for government control of virtually 16 seats. Among these were two seats occupied by the military and the police, and six appointed by the Sports Minister from his/her Ministry. Among those appointed by the Ministry is the Secretary General of the board who is usually a Ministry civil servant. The Secretary General administers the daily affairs of the Federation.

However, it was not only the distribution of board seats that defined power. The absence of seats for key football publics also demonstrates power distribution. Not only were player representatives absent from the board under Decree 101, they were also absent from the NFA Act of 2004. This is a glaring and perhaps deliberate omission when one considers that Decree 101 provides for two representatives from schools on the board. In essence, schools (a bastion of amateurism) were represented on a board for the professional game, whereas professional players had no official representative, such as APFON, on the board. Because of government control of board seats, the Ministry was critical to appointment of the Board chairperson. Thomas wrote

[...] every Sports Minister always [have] their stooge as NFA chairman [...] Normally before an AGM (Annual General Meeting), all the delegates will assemble in the capital Abuja, the Minister will address them and tell them that Mr. XYZ is the government's candidate as next chairman. And like obedient servants, the delegates will vote according to the script and everybody will go home happy (2006).

While this, on the surface, portended government control, it did much more. It spread prebendal practices in the administration of the game.

Prebendal practices, particularly by those with access to funds led to further entrenchment in management power. Ugbagwu (2008) wrote, for instance, how a state appointed chairman of Benin Insurance FC converted the state-owned club to his personal asset naming three members of his immediate family on the board. Insurance FC had always belonged to the local state government from its formation as Vipers FC of Benin in 1970 to its change of name to Bendel Insurance and finally to Insurance FC. The state appointed one of the club's major supporters, Chief Ekhosuehi, as Chairman, to run the day-to-day affair of the club. While the state continued to provide funds to the club, the Chairman covertly converted legal ownership of the club to his private ownership. While many club chairmen may not convert ownership as the case of Insurance FC, they often misappropriate funds provided by the state or divert funds that may be used to offset debts to players.

In many cases, administrators not only used their position to embezzle funds meant for the club but used their position to disregard player contracts by withholding wages due to players and forcing players to become beholden to them as they assumed positions of demigods by determining when to pay, who to pay, and what to pay players. In 2013, no less than three clubs in Nigeria's 20-team Premier league placed its players and coaches on half salary for what management described as poor results.⁸ At least two other clubs, Wikki Tourists and Enyimba International, threatened players with half salary. Imposing or threatening players with half salary is certainly unethical as wages and salaries are earned without any link to particular game day results. Clubs have bonuses, though they are rarely paid, designed for match day results and are due for a win or draw but not in a loss. But it is not only the ability of club administrators

to wield this immense power that is questionable, but the fact that they have been able to use language to impose this hegemony over players as Gramsci proposed. Rarely do players oppose the logic or the validity of management decision to link wages and salaries to game day results. Instead, they accept it, as predicted in high power distance cultures. Oni (2013) quoted a case of an affected player who stated

The Management and Board were not happy that we couldn't win our home game against Wikki Tourists and it was the sole reason for this action. *We shall strive to do our best* in the next three matches at Bayelsa United and 3Sc.

In essence, the player accepts the practice in spite of logical reasons to doubt its legality. Rather than question, players accept manager narrative and hope not to be in such situations in the future.

Ugbagwu (2008) wrote that the chairman of Insurance FC allegedly transferred 'notable Super Eagles (Nigerian national team) players such as Pius Ikedia, Wilson Oruma, and Julius Aghahowa and others without giving account of the proceeds to the relevant authorities'. Udoh (2013) also wrote on how manager and club powers were used to flagrantly disregard FIFA rules on player transfers. Players were routinely held 'captive' even when they were free agents according to international rules. He noted that players whose contracts had legally expired 'still cannot leave'. Worse still, even players announced to have been released, cannot leave until the player's new club pays a fee to the player's old club. This is essentially the pre-Bosman rule prior to 1995 that had virtually disappeared elsewhere in the world.⁹ However, administrators in Nigerian clubs continue to practice these oppressive rules that have been discontinued globally by FIFA because Nigerian football regulators make it possible. This collusion has stymied the ability of Nigerian players to transfer to other local and foreign clubs. In recent times, this was central to the local transfer problems involving Sunday Mba (who is a national team player), and Emmanuel Daniel, which led to the CAF banning Enugu Rangers from the African Confederations Cup.¹⁰ As Ngabua (2013) has noted, several illegal actions by administrators continue because regulators sit back and do nothing.

Geert Hofstede, a cultural scholar, studied Nigeria among several other countries in his study group and noted that Nigerian culture ranked high on power distance (Hofstede 2001). Power distance refers to: 'the extent to which less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally ... subordinates expect to be told what to do and the ideal boss is a benevolent autocrat' (Hofstede Centre, n.d.). In Hofstede's study Nigeria scored 80, which demonstrates that people expect inequality and largely accept it. Hofstede's scale ranged from 0 to 100 with 50 at mid-level. A score over 50 means an expectation of inequality and its acceptance in this case. Class bestows extreme powers and authority on a group of men (administrators) and the power distance that they impose is largely accepted by the lower class or player labour. This allows administrators to make rules and wield extreme powers with very little opposition or voice from those at the receiving end. Pannenberg (2010) has also described power distance in African football, which he labelled 'Big Man Small Boy Syndrome' (10). He states further: 'There is a strict hierarchy ... The Big Man controls and gives orders, the Small Boy obeys and does not dare to speak his mind' (Pannenberg 2010).

The player labour response and resistance

As noted earlier, critical scholars such as Marx and Engels have often used the Hegelian concept of thesis, anti-thesis, and synthesis to describe class conflicts. In the previous section, we described the thesis or status quo in Nigerian football. The anti-thesis phase refers to a struggle

between classes that involve several lines of conflicts that may include narratives and violence, among others. In the Nigerian football case, the anti-thesis phase exists but its effectiveness in producing sustainable results over the years is doubtful. High power distance impedes immediate, sustained, and effective reaction to management oppression. Often, player labour reaction to oppression is delayed, weakly articulated, measured, and easily put down by the management. However, there is little doubt that resistance exists, albeit hardly effective or sustained, and this paper will provide evidence to support this claim. First, this paper will categorize types of player resistance over the years to demonstrate how the labour class has sought to counter actions of the manager class. These acts of resistance have included strikes, petitions, violence, and flight. Each will be described in subsequent paragraphs.

Players widely use strikes, or at least the threat of strike, as a means of last-ditch resistance to oppressive management. This often occurs when management fails to pay, for long periods, agreed remuneration that includes salaries and sign-on fees. Each season, players from several top clubs are involved in this type of resistance. Oni (2012) reported one such action by players of Enugu Rangers:

Majority of the players who spoke to Goal.com on condition of anonymity said that they may resort to strike action if the management fails to clear the *outstanding sign on fees from last season* and do something about this season's sign on fees.

Maduewesi (2013) reported a similar plan to strike by Heartland FC players noting: 'Like is the case amongst most Nigeria Premier League clubs, players of Heartland [are] threatening to embark on a strike action to protest non-payment of the salaries by the clubs.' While in some cases, management would deny the occurrence of these actions; in other cases, management confirms these player actions. An example is reported by Akinrujomu (2012) who cited a top administrator of Sunshine Stars in the following statement: 'As at when I left the office this Monday, the players' cheques were being issued to them. The cheques are not bogus ones, so they will get their money.' It is notable, as Akinrujomu points out, that management decision to settle the debts (long after they were accumulated) was to avoid a strike planned by players that may have adversely affected the club's ability to participate in a continental cup match against Al Ahly of Egypt.

The quotes above reveal important information in player labour resistance to management oppressive actions. One, management action of unilaterally delaying or not paying players the agreed remuneration is widespread not only in terms of its impact on several clubs and players but also in the length of the delays and/or non-payment. That management determines when to fulfil the agreement is in the interest of the administrators who allegedly hold up payment, keeping the funds in private accounts to generate enough financial interest before disbursing delayed principal to player. In the Sunshine Stars' case, players not appearing in the Champions League would not only have been internationally embarrassing (along with sanctions from the CAF) but would have been such a national disgrace that even the NFF board may have had no options but to sanction the club administrators. Perhaps, deeply revealing is also the fact that players are owed sign-on fees. These are fees that are agreed before a player signs to play for the club. Clearly, it means that in many cases, players register for clubs based on a promise to receive these fees but the fees end up being delayed or not paid.

In 2013, the APFON claimed that Nigerian clubs owed players and coaches N888.803 m (Ngobua 2013).¹¹ It is important to note that this amount is based on official petitions to the NFF made by players and coaches. In the report, not a single club was exempt from this situation. The reality is that the actual total debt to players is likely to be in excess of that amount as not all debts are officially reported to the NFF. Ngobua (2013) and Nnabuogor (2012) attribute a mass

exodus of players from Nigeria's local leagues to these situations. Nnabuogor (2012) wrote about Nigerian players fleeing to the Indian league:

The situation (in India) is, indeed, a sharp contrast to what obtains in the NPL (Nigeria Premier League), where players are poorly paid, owed salaries, denied bonuses and their sign-on fees are never paid in full. Most players also don't have valid contracts with (Nigerian) club sides and often end up penniless, whenever they are sacked by their clubs.

Openings and possibilities of interaction and emancipation

This paper has now discussed both the thesis and anti-thesis phases of the Hegelian concept as it applies to Nigerian football. The final phase is the synthesis and this is where Habermas' (1991) concept of communicative action is crucial. Habermas wrote compellingly on the use of a discursive public sphere to free society from inequalities and domination. In Habermas' view, elite class domination of the ideological sphere through the use of narratives is responsible for oppression, marginalization, and domination of other classes such as labour. He, therefore, envisioned an emancipated society free of oppression, marginalization, and domination that would result when 'truth' is discovered in a public sphere where varied and competent discussions take place. Such a public sphere encourages unfettered interaction of ideas among classes. It is important to note that Habermas stresses the importance of communication competence which involves the following key factors: (a) the ability to be open to other's truth claims and (b) the ability to think critically about one's own beliefs and claims. Communication competence is obstructed when ideologies are created through coercion of consensus and lack of free discourse. It is only through a free discourse that hidden forms of domination can be uncovered and emancipation can be achieved.

This paper has noted existing interactions between management and labour in Nigerian football and narratives produced and advanced by both parties. While management has used several leverages to make its narrative dominant, labour has been largely silenced and its narratives have not only focused on reacting to management initiative of action, mostly adverse, but such reactions lack leverage required to emancipate its members. The question is what possibilities exist, within Habermas' proposal, for competent communication and interaction to emancipate labour in Nigerian football? Competent communication requires the two key factors of openness to others and critical assessment of one's own belief within a context that encourages both factors.

To think about possibilities, ultimately portend a different kind of football regulation in Nigeria and radical rethinking without which emancipation is a mirage. The football board where effective football discourse takes place is currently dominated by management and would require statute changes to make it a fair public sphere for competent communication. There are organizations that represent football labour but are currently sidelined in the discourse. One of these is APFON which has neither seats on the NFF board nor is it consulted by club administrators in Nigeria. Yet, APFON is a voice for football labour in the country. However, one must note that having APFON seated around the table is one step; the most important step is the commitment of management and labour representatives to meet the definition of competent communicators. This requires commitment and openness to ideas from various sources and willingness to critically evaluate one's own beliefs, ideas, and positions. This commitment is critical to reducing conflict and creating an atmosphere where classes feel free and believe in the possibilities of reaching solutions that are acceptable and fair.

In essence, forcing management to the negotiation table where acceptable and fair solutions are possible requires a move away from current weak resistances (see the anti-thesis phase

described in the previous section) that are exemplified in isolated strikes at separate clubs. This move is an important leverage that requires football labour to strengthen APFON as a union and align strongly with the feared but respected Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC).¹² Such an alignment will vastly strengthen football labour by transforming its strikes nationwide. This, ultimately, will force management to the negotiation table where collective bargaining such as used in professional sports elsewhere (e.g. in the USA) will provide guidelines for fair agreement. In such a case, an APFON seat on the regulatory board will only be an alternative and not essential since collective bargaining provides the opportunity for the interaction of ideas among labour and management classes that Habermas proposed.

Nevertheless, it is notable that sources of oppression and marginalization are not limited to who controls seats on the board. For instance, collusion with football regulators is also a problem that increases oppression of labour because it encourages inaction by regulators. However, collusion with football regulators will be diminished with participation of APFON or other representations of football player labour on the football regulatory board or through collective bargaining. That should be the case since the current management collusion with regulators is derived from interlocking relationship between members of the regulatory board and management class where membership of the former is derived directly from the membership of the latter.

As noted in earlier parts of this paper, other major sources of oppression and marginalization have come partly from entrenched cultural practices such as prebendalism and power distance norms. The cultural situation – prebendal and power distance practices – is much harder to tackle but yet must be tackled in order to emancipate football player labour. This situation is significant at club levels where management has built extensive power, which has exacerbated class struggle at the club level and increased the level of oppression of football player labour as noted in previous sections. In any case, the termination of this deep cultural problem is more complex and difficult but yet achievable through the suggested alignment with the NLC. Ultimately, a truly public sphere with competent communications as proposed by Habermas provides a starting point for reducing the class gulf largely created by this cultural situation. In essence, clubs must be accessible to appropriate labour representation in such a way that the voice of labour or its narratives are considered important. It is only such representation that provides capability for player labour to achieve emancipation.

Conclusion

Max Horkheimer (1982) outlined important goals of critical theory noting that such theory must set and achieve three important goals: provide an explanation for the current situation, identify existing problems and inequalities, and identify how the situation can change and who can participate in achieving this change. In addition, critical theory has to be normative, i.e. the theory ought to provide clear norms and goals for transformation or emancipation. This critical essay has investigated Nigeria's football and critically examined the class struggle between management and player labour in order to illuminate points of tension and inequalities. In doing so, this paper has noted increasing power of management and increasing oppression of football labour which has been sustained by collusion between management class and football regulators. Furthermore, this paper has noted how this situation could change in order to emancipate football labour. We have also done this by noting key tools for restructuring and the participants in such restructuring. Habermas' (1991) proposal for a discursive public sphere provides a suitable guide for locating a road map to emancipation in Nigeria's football. It is that proposal that serves as a reference point for our proposed solutions for which the stated goal is player labour emancipation.

Notes

1. Nigeria's football is run through various league levels that include amateur divisions one to three, Nigerian National League (NNL), and the Nigerian Premier Football League (NPFL). Each of those leagues is regulated by a board elected from management cadre of the clubs.
2. The focus of this paper is strictly local Nigerian football and excludes discourse about conditions at the national team levels.
3. Prior to the establishment of the African Champions League for clubs, Nigeria won several editions of African continental cups for clubs including the Cup Winners Cup (Ibadan Shooting Stars, Enugu Rangers, and Gboko BCC Lions) and the CAF Cup (Ibadan Shooting Stars and Benin Bendel Insurance). The Cup for African Nations awards medals to the top three finishers in the competition.
4. NFA and NFF throughout this paper refer to the apex organization that administers football in the country. It was established as the NFA in 1933 (Though some argue that the date of 1945 is more appropriate) and later became the NFF.
5. See, particularly, Hofstede's (2001) work on organizational culture in Nigeria and issues of Prebendalism as discussed by Joseph (1987).
6. Throughout this paper, the term 'administrators' is used to refer to club officials who manage the administrative affairs of the club. This includes the Chairman, Secretary, team manager, and others with similar titles or duties. They have authority to make administrative decisions on a daily basis. Note that this term does not include football coaches or those directly involved in football technical matters. Administrators who serve on the Football Association boards are referred to as regulators in this paper.
7. See, The Complete Laws of Nigeria (n.d.)
8. These clubs included Owerri Heartland FC, ABS of Ilorin, and Nasarawa United.
9. The rule refers to three cases all involving an FC Liege player, Jean-Marc Bosman, in the Belgian league whose case was consolidated and involved the refusal of his club to release him without a transfer fee after his contract expired. The 1995 case, won by Bosman, allowed the freedom of movement for football players when their contract expires. Though the initial ruling by the European Court of Justice (ECJ) was directed to player labor movement in the European Union, FIFA has rewritten its international rules in order to ensure that one rule applies to all countries in the world.
10. Sunday Mba left Warri Wolves FC when his contract expired after the 2012/2013 season but found that he could not play for Enugu Rangers because Rangers and Wolves could not agree a fee in spite of the fact that Mba was a free agent according to FIFA rules after the Bosman case mentioned in the previous note. Mba's case was similar to that of Emmanuel Daniel who left Ibadan 3Sc to join Enugu Rangers after his contract expired. CAF disqualified Enugu Rangers, preventing the club from advancing in the African Confederations Cup because the club used Daniel in a game after 3Sc refused to issue a transfer certificate without a fee payment from Rangers.
11. N888.803 million was the equivalence of USD 5.422 million in 2013 using an exchange rate of 1 USD = N163.925 in July 2013.
12. The NLC has traditionally wielded enormous power in Nigeria using nationwide strikes and public protests to achieve historical victories on wage adjustments, issues of employment protection, and worker benefits, among others.

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