

6

Thierry Henry as *Igwe*: Soccer Fandom, Christening and Cultural Passage in Nollywood

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Historicizing Sports and Fandom in Africa

Prior to the advent of colonialism and western sport, Africa was alive with traditional games and other forms of physical activities. Various types of games were enacted for recreation, celebrations, community mobilization and other functions. Even where these games privileged a particular gender, there was no exclusion of the other gender, as every game had the capacity to mobilize fandom. And it is through fandom that celebrity status was conferred on contestants. Perhaps one of the earliest attempts to inscribe the phenomenon of fandom in traditional Africa is found in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. It is on account of fandom that Amalinze, for instance, gets the sobriquet 'the Cat' during his wrestling competition with Okonkwo (Achebe 1958:3). In the sixth chapter, there is a restaging of another wrestling match many years after Okonkwo's historic win (Achebe 1958:33-36). In this particular case, an elaborate attention is given to fandom in the way the novelist describes the participation of the whole community of Umofia as spectators, a scene that brings together not only men and women but children as well. Their cheers, excitement and reactions to the performance of the various wrestling teams testify not only to the presence of an active fandom but also speak to the place of fandom in the making of celebrities. Civic pride is evident in the 'honour' Okonkwo brought to his village 'by throwing Amalinze the Cat' (Achebe 1958:3). A similar representation is made in Nollywood's *Naked Wrestlers* in which holding the wrestling championship is a source of pride to the Umokene community.

Just as fandom is crucial to the popularity of wrestling in the Umofia village, it is equally central to the development of soccer across space and time. In his

autobiographical reflections, Farred (2002) uses the concept of Long Distance Love (LDL) to represent the passion exhibited by a Liverpool FC fan in a far away apartheid South Africa in the 1970s and the extent to which this speaks at the same time to the contradictions inherent in the articulations of postcolonialism, knowing that Liverpool FC is based in imperial Britain. Farred recounts how in a country where television was not part of the patronized communication inventions on account of the repressive system of apartheid, he could still exhibit so much attachment to a football club based in Britain, and identify with players, strikers and midfielders in the main, that would be his idols and celebrities. His reliance then was on soccer commentaries on radio and the dailies. But his development as a die-hard fan of Liverpool FC along the line of the geographical transcendence could perhaps best be explained in terms of the crucial enlisting of the imagination in compensating for the images and performances he could not see: 'Because I could not 'see'- I had to re-create in my head, to substitute for an absence that my circumstances could not overcome' (Farred (2002:9). This then is the logic of LDL.

Soccer fandom in Africa has since been enhanced by the development of communication media, especially the television. Television as a media form has developed from a local/national reach stage to that of digitalization and paid subscription that makes it possible to experience a far better instantiation of geographical transcendence of viewership and fandom. As Whannel (2009:625) puts it:

In the last two decades, deregulation and digitalization have expanded the number of channels but this fragmentation, combined with the growth of the internet has meant that the era in which shared domestic leisure was dominated by viewing of the major channels was closing. Yet, sport provides an exception, an instance when around the world millions share a live and unpredictable viewing experience.

Nevertheless, the study of culture remains crucial to the study of the new media and sports fandom. Yet, paradoxically, culture among scholars has become a particularly fraught and contested terrain especially in the last two decades on account of the media (Poster 2006:134). Yet, it is impossible to dwell on the intersection between new media and culture without examining the extent to which globalization impacts them. In other words, the constituent time-space compression reputation of globalization possesses the capacity to foster and destroy cultural affiliations at the same time. This again, returns us to the notion of geographical transcendence with respect to the question of fandom which at this junction is better located within the broad-based matrix of consumerism and the borderlessness that it conjures. The discussion also impacts the question of identity formation which naturally is built on the understanding of culture. Identity

formation, just like cultural affiliation, has become complex and this formation, inscription and re-inscription can no longer be determined only by spaces of birth and location. This much can be affirmed once a critical reflection on patterns of consumerism is taken into account in the unfolding of the 21st century, as from inception there was an encouragement of 'various forms of consumption in which commodified pleasure of the body provided a proliferation of identities defined by consumption, lifestyle and, or fandom' (Langman 2003:223).

With respect to the experience of soccer fandom in Nigeria, as far as the British Premier League clubs and players are concerned, what is at display is not just the arbitrariness of fandom; it is also what we have termed the 'audacity of fandom'. Beyond the passion – that is sometimes pathological – with which fans celebrate their clubs and players, a whole lot of other forms of affinity and identity formations are springing up daily. For instance, there is the story of a prominent chief in Ibadan who did not only travel to Rome, Italy to watch his club Manchester United FC play their final match against Real Madrid in 2009, but also employed marabouts at home to pray for many days and slaughter bulls and rams so that Manchester could win the cup.

Idolizing Thierry Henry in Nigeria and the Place of Nollywood

This chapter is about the celebration and idolization of Thierry Henry as *Igwe* in South West of Nigeria. As a predominantly Yoruba-speaking region, and home to one of the three dominant cultural and ethnic groups in the country, one would think that ordinarily, especially in the face of the increasing wave of subnationalism, the jealous guarding of individual cultural terrain would not permit such a cultural diffusion, knowing that the title of *Igwe* is ordinarily exclusive to the Igbo.

In examining the place of Nollywood in mediating this trans-regional cultural passage, perhaps a convenient starting point should be a reflection on the peculiarity of the evolution of Nollywood. With the economic downturn that started in the late 1970s in Nigeria, it became increasingly difficult to produce the usually capital intensive cinema for the patronage of the people. Worse still, the previously safe theatre halls, town and village squares for live performances were no longer considered safe. The situation was further complicated by the dwindling enthusiasm for live performances. The few cinema outfits that could still weather the socio-economic storm presented people with foreign films especially Hollywood and Bollywood productions. Fortunately, by the early 1990s, electronic technology consumption of video machines had begun to approach a popular level. Starting with the recording of proceedings of ceremonies for the purpose of watching them all over again, to sending copies to relations who had contributed financially to the success of these ceremonies (Ukata 2009:5), economically adventurous and creative producers from the Eastern/Igbo part of the country

began the launch of what is today known as Nollywood. Creatively detouring the huge and overwhelming financial demands of celluloid productions, the producers were able to make videos that could be afforded by ordinary people and be watched from the convenience of their sitting rooms and other similar spaces, using the video machines.

Domesticating the video machine and inventing for it another value other than the one for which it was originally designed speaks to the revolutionary dimension of new media, especially with respect to the involvement of new entrants and their capacity to gain popularity through mass cultural production and circulation. Going by its take-off time, Nollywood producers could be said to fit into the categorization of the 'heretical newcomers' (Hesmondhalgh 2006: 216) who, in spite of Bourdieu's clearly defined fields, redraw the boundaries of artistic and cultural production. This assertion is appropriate in view of the way Nollywood has caused a re-definition of Nigerian and African viewership of Hollywood and Bollywood films. It is in fact apt to also add that the geographical transcendence that Nollywood has engendered ramifies African Diasporas in Europe and the Americas (Ukata 2009:18). Needless to say, since the video machines of the early 1990s, Nollywood films have been through different stages of production in a way that is consistent with the times and advancement in information and communication technology central to which is digitalization. Besides the DVDs, satellite television can be said to have also played a major role in the prosecution of this revolution. For instance, through the Multichoice Africa Magic and Africa Magic Plus channels, Nollywood productions are transmitted on a daily basis to viewers in most parts of Africa. While the internet sales can still be said to be negligible, there is a huge export business that is thriving in the country today against the background of Nollywood productions.

It is thus not surprising that as Nollywood centralizes Igbo nationalism, the centrality of this nationalism rubs off on other cultures within and outside the country. One area of this production that has been freighted undeniably into other cultures is the representation of Igbo monarchy, which usually revolves around the figure of the *Igwe*, the traditional ruler. In this chapter, it is important to state that much as we are aware of the debates around monarchy as a contested terrain in Igbo land, as the society is essentially and primordially republican, this debate will be reserved for other research. Therefore our concern is with the representation of the *Igwe*. The *Igwe* in these productions epitomizes many values and provokes multiple interpretations, as his roles are crucial and diverse. However, in this chapter, we view the *Igwe* from the perspective of the superior citizen and performer among his subjects and fellow citizens. It is this working understanding that is in tandem with the christening of Thierry Henry as *Igwe*.

The superiority of the *Igwe* is best considered from the angle of his relationship with his subjects. Usually in many of the Nollywood films/videos, the mon-

arch whose majesty is foregrounded through the response of ‘*Igwee!!!!!!!*’ by his subjects and or council of elders is at the top of the communal hierarchy. This we know when nobody dare contradict his instructions and commands. This for instance is demonstrated in *Strange Wind* (2007) when the king summons the elders and chiefs to deliberate on the abnormal and mysterious happenings in Amaku community. Before the council can finally decide on a mission for the consultation of an oracle to determine the cause or causes of their predicament, they have to wait patiently for the *Igwe* to be seated. Of course, upon deliberation and the unanimous decision reached, no action is taken until the *Igwe* instructs that those who have volunteered to go on the mission are approved for the journey. It is only at this point that they feel empowered to go on this mission. Again, when it becomes clear that *Amuku* community may need to seek a greater power than that of the oracle in a fashion that signals a radical social change, the fears and hesitation of the people are allayed when the *Igwe* throws his weight behind this seemingly untraditional prospect of radicalism. It is no surprise then that the whole of the community gathers at *Amuku* Square for the inauguration of this social change only because the *Igwe* is at the centre of its prosecution. After all, his concern is the protection of his people from the plagues. A similar response to social emergencies is represented in *The Gods Are Wise* (2007) when *Amafor* community finds itself embroiled in the recurrence of strange plagues on account of the abominable love act of Odinaka and Adugo. The process of communal cleaning for the restoration of social normalcy is one in which the *Igwe* is centrally located, even when the priest must be consulted. It is the *Igwe* who initiates the various stages of response to these emergencies until *Amafor* is purged of the plagues.

The *Igwe*’s superiority is also foregrounded when he wades into matters of dispute and controversy. On many occasions, his council and the people trust his judgment and his intervention results in the resolution of crises. Again, much panic and disaster can be recorded when a community loses its *Igwe* and circumstances and intrigues are preventing a new one from being installed. Even during moments of confrontation with external aggression, the presence of the *Igwe* is a boost to the morale of the soldiers, as they go to the warfront, confident that it is at the instruction of their monarch. The subtext of the foregoing is that while the *Igwe* is also a citizen of the land, he is a special and superior one on account of the powers invested with him. His performance of power and the majesty of his reign are however a function of the confidence his subjects repose in him. What is more, under normal circumstances, it is the people through the endorsement and or guidance of the oracle that pronounce an individual *Igwe*. Once installed, the *Igwe* is adored and feted by his people. He is not only their monarch but also their celebrity whom they discuss from time to time. At yet another level, the choice of an *Igwe* is also informed by an individual’s track record, particularly in

the area of his contribution to the development of his land. This for us is very crucial, as it keys in centrally with the coronation of Henry by Nigerian soccer fans as the *Igwe* of soccer. Even where the *Igwe* is young without much personal achievement, his people endorse his ascension to the throne on account of his ancestry which must have recorded much in the aspect of commitment to the protection and prosperity of the land. Therefore, whichever way the *Igwe* is considered in these videos, his ascension to the throne and the attendant honour are a function of outstanding precedent and credentials. Standing out among his peers earns him this title, and his subjects subsequently stand by him all the way for as long as he maintains and consolidates his achievements.

Henry in the Estimation of Nigerian Fans

The above leads us to the credentials of Thierry Henry. Known to have hit stardom at Arsenal FC, the black Frenchman actually started his professional career in 1994, and earned international status upon improvement and good form in 1998 when he signed up for Serie A Juventus. His reputation as an outstanding soccer star with fans all over the world was due primarily to his exploits at Arsenal. For instance, it is often said that while in Arsenal from 1999 to 2007, Henry did not only win two league titles and three FA Cups, analysts and fans in particular contend that Arsenal's victory in most of these championships was on account of Henry as a superlative striker. For instance, he remains to date Arsenal's all-time leading scorer with 226 goals in all competitions (Wikipedia). Henry's record while in Arsenal was also impressive: 'he was twice nominated for the FIFA World Player of the Year, was named the PFA Players' Player of the Year twice, and the Football Writers' Association Footballer of the Year three times' (Wikipedia). Having distinguished himself among his peers and to that extent qualified to be called a rallying point, his fans in Nigeria see him as a player whose values are comparable to those of the *Igwe* among his subjects. Of course, the christening of Henry as *Igwe* was done in the South East among the Igbo. According to Uche, one of our respondents in the city of Ibadan in Oyo State:

Arsenal FC has the largest number of fans among the Igbo. The reason is not far-fetched: this was the first Premier League team in which Kanu reached the zenith of his career. By an act of coincidence, this was also the team in which Henry at the time had become a phenomenon, towering above all his team mates and players in other teams (personal communication, July 30, 2009).

The Igbo, following the fandom that Arsenal had during the period of Kanu's superlative performance in the club, must be seen as speaking to the cultural understanding about the formation of sports fandom. According to Hughson and Free (2006:72) even in the context of resistance, we must not forget 'the nature of sport as a cultural commodity in which fandom and following are

invested'. The first attraction for the Igbo was the participation of their kinsman Kanu in the English professional team. To that extent, the motivation was the need to identify with Kanu and muster an impressive fandom for the team for as long as this continued to serve as a psychological boost to the Igbo nationalism. Nevertheless, Igbo's identification with Arsenal because of Kanu needs to be qualified. This is why it is significant that the Igbo did not coronate Kanu, their kinsman, as *Igwe* but chose Henry. This in a way foregrounds the non-sentimentality of fans when it comes to pitching their tent with soccer clubs and stars. There was no doubt that Kanu was great in his days at Arsenal but it was clear to everybody that even at his very best, his credentials at Arsenal pale behind those of Henry. For the Igbo fans, this then should explain why Henry got the sobriquet of *Igwe*. As a cultural signification they could identify with, the reception of the conferment of the title of *Igwe* on Henry among the Igbo should not come as a surprise.

If the above explains the christening of Henry in Igbo land as *Igwe*, the question that comes naturally to mind is how and why this christening was endorsed in the South West, especially among another major ethnic group whose cultural consciousness is well known? The question is the more pertinent because unlike the Igbo whose appropriation of monarchy into their cultural repertoire is a relatively recent development, the Yoruba have always had monarchy as an integral part of their socio-cultural and political life. Being a tradition that is so well entrenched, going by the sophisticated expression of panegyrics inscribed in the ceremonial rituals of court and popular praise of kings among the Yoruba, one would have expected Yoruba Arsenal fans and indeed fans of Henry in particular to find a Yoruba title appropriate to his superior performance on the pitch. What then could be responsible for this overwhelming reception?

The respondents in various ways agree that Henry deserves to be king within the context of soccer, especially going by his exceptional exploits during his days in Arsenal, and the idea of *Igwe* is for them in the South West not exceptionable at all. According to Abel:

A lot of things (qualified Henry for this title)...actually when he was in Arsenal he made some marks with the club...there was a certain level which the club got to during his time in Arsenal...the 49 unbeaten record matches. He was part of the team; he captained the team; he scored goals that brought the team to the level they are now...Yes, *Igwe* means a monarchical head, a supreme head... yes he (Henry) was a supreme head in England then because he topped the chart when it came to goal scoring...he was the king; he headed them all... beautiful goals, fantastic goals and highest goal records (personal communication, July 17, 2009).

For this fan at the Osun State University, it was on account of Henry's instrumentality in the overall success of Arsenal while his contract lasted that qualified him for this title. It is also interesting to know that the metaphor of the king is so strong in the justification of Abel. Not only did he paint Henry as the king within the context of soccer, we also see that this fan practically appropriated the whole of England for Henry when he said 'he was a supreme head in England'. This respondent's impression is significant in the way it validates what Surin (2006:429-433) says are three possible levels at which we may conceptualize fandom. Going by his model, rarely does a player catalyze all the three levels in fans. There is however a sense in which these levels of fandom which are idealization, ethics and involuntary memory are instantiated in Abel's response to Henry as soccer super star.

Therefore, in feting this king from a distant location in Nigeria, an appropriation of a proportionate title was needful; when the Igbo did the crowning in the East, the endorsement in the West was just as well. According to a female respondent, Afolakemi, at Osun State University, 'an *Igwe* means the master in one aspect...and one way or the other in football, I think he is a guru' (personal communication July 17, 2009). The seemingly uncritical endorsement of the Igbo title by Yoruba fans as conferred on Henry in the East should also be seen as speaking to sports', especially global sports' capacity to de/reconstruct structures of the national (Cho 2009:320).

To another fan from Ibadan, Oyo State, however, the process of coronation and christening of Henry as *Igwe* should relate to specific deeds of the player at Arsenal: 'The guy (Henry) had an injury...and he was not around, and when he just came around, he just had three hat tricks...three goals, three goals, three goals!!!' (personal communication, July 30, 2009). Indeed, three consecutive hat tricks are uncommon and for people like Kolapo, this must be factored in each time we look back at how Henry came to be crowned as *Igwe*. Still on the process of his emergence as *Igwe* among Nigerian fans, an Ibadan female respondent like Mosunmayo believed it was also about his leadership role as captain and the way he stood out in the field of play in his days in Arsenal. Interestingly, Henry also spent his last two seasons in Arsenal as captain of the club.

The mediatory role of new media in the transfer and passage of culture then deserves further careful examination in order to ascertain the way it is foregrounded in this particular case of soccer fandom and the christening of Henry as *Igwe* in the South East Igbo land and the endorsement of this christening in South West. The first explanation for this ramifies globalization and its reputation for time-space compression. The digitalization of communication devices also means their liberalization as a result of which millions of people all over the world can in the case of satellite television, for instance, watch a particular programme simultane-

ously. On account of this, it is possible to watch premier league matches played in Europe in any part of Nigeria. In Oyo and Osun States, like other states in Nigeria, even where fans cannot afford subscription to DSTV, they have developed various ways of getting around this challenge. One common way of tackling this challenge is to go to commercial viewing centres where they pay per match to watch their clubs and stars play. This response to the challenge of spectatorship and fandom via pay-television by Nigerians is significant in at least two ways. First we construe this as being the fans' way of responding to what Brown (2007:415) terms the shrinking of geographical and financial worlds as a global phenomenon, and which provokes in sports fandom a strategy or strategies of 'persistence' in the face of this capital-spawn 'adversity', seeing that in Nigeria only a negligible percentage of fandom can afford pay-television services. On a second level, the patronage of commercial viewing centres draws a parallel between the responses that are expressed in the patronage of the pub by fans in England. In this instance, the commercial viewing centres must be seen in the light of the pub in England, which, according to Weed (2009:399), serves as a 'virtual football fandom venue' and an alternative to 'being there'. Interestingly, most of these viewing centres are also Nollywood video club houses where people come to rent particular films, recent, latest and old, for relaxation. What is implied here is that there is a sense in which we can talk about the coincidence of soccer and Nollywood viewing. This is possible at one level of patronizing video clubs which also double as premier league matches viewing centres. At another level, the coincidence is evident where the matches and the videos are watched from the comfort zone of family sitting rooms and other similar spaces at home, as DSTV subscription provides Africa Magic channels as well as other channels like Super Sport to subscribers.

In this coincidence thus lies the simultaneous viewing of both the superior performance of the *Igwe* in Nollywood films and the superlative performance of Henry in the field of play. For those living outside the Igbo cultural and geographic milieu, like those interviewed in Oyo and Osun States, there is both a conscious and unconscious internalization of the representation and performance of the *Igwe* as seen in Nollywood films. This for us is very vital in this study as respondents in the two different sites of research betrayed both forms of internalization. Specifically, those in Osun State, Ikire Campus of Osun State University, who were undergraduates and young men and women, betrayed their conscious internalization of the representation of *Igwe* in Nollywood productions. For this reason, it was possible for more than 90 per cent of them to see the link between their endorsement of the *Igwe* title as sobriquet for Henry and the mediatory role of Nollywood in this endorsement. According to Adeniran:

Through Nollywood Igbo people have projected their cultural heritage beyond their immediate environment and to that extent the designation of Henry as *Igwe* can be said to have been influenced by Nollywood (personal communication, July 17, 2009).

In view of the foregoing, the consumption trait which Wenner argues is central to sports spectatorship and fandon (Bairner 2009:307), is not only in terms of the meaning that emanate directly from the performance of sporting, but should also be seen as ramifying the new meanings and understanding which obtains from the cultural inflections and consciousness of spectators and fans. It is in this assumption that the passage of Igbo cultural heritage via new media makes sense and highlights the merits of Nollywood in this direction.

If Adeniran's admittance of the place of Nollywood is clear, there is a sense in which one finds a particularly radical response in Akeem's, as he enthusiastically said 'calling him Oba (a Yoruba word for king) or any other name doesn't really flow...but *Igwe* is more like it...just like it is represented in Nollywood' (personal communication, July 17, 2009). As said earlier, other respondents on this campus admitted that their identification with that title was essentially informed by the representation and performance of power and superiority which they had encountered in Nollywood productions.

However, the question of identification with and endorsement of the title of *Igwe* by soccer fans and enthusiasts in a predominantly Yoruba-speaking Ibadan has a complex dimension to it. According to Gboyega, it is about the mobility of Igbo people and the uniqueness of their cultural assertion in Diaspora and a better sense of humour which made Yoruba people in Ibadan at the initial stage to buy into the idea of calling Henry *Igwe*:

The Igbo people are more outspoken when they are in the public and want to speak their language... 'Oh *Igwe*!!!' Where we watch football there, you know there are some Igbo guys there...just two, three, four, five of them...the way they will be talking this and that ...I think they have a sense of humour much more than we do...those Igbo people; when they are watching matches they will say '*Igwe*!!!' And every other person will pick it up...Yes, the *Igwe* thing came from the Igbo people and we all accepted it (personal communication, July 30, 2009).

If in the past popular geopolitics was dominated by themed discussions on geopolitical representation and discourse which include the domain of sports fandom, there is however a way this pattern is changing fast to reflect 'audience interpretation, consumption and attachment' (Dittmer and Dodds (2008:437). It is in this audience reflection that we find the transgression of cultural and ethnic lines. In this case, what is important to Henry's fans in the South West is not the origination of the *Igwe* title, but their interpretation, consumption and attachment which coa-

lesce with the cultural articulation of fans in Eastern Nigeria. As well, the endorsement of the *Igwe* title by fans in the South West is of significance when viewed from another angle. The import of another angle to the way we may interpret the unity of fandom across geographical and cultural lines makes a lot of sense when we admit that considered in isolation, the Igbo-inflected title is ordinarily exclusive and space-bound and should attract abjection or indifference from the cultural space of the South West. But it is with respect to its reinvention within the context of soccer fandom that the immanently exclusionary understanding of the title is defused, creating instead a new mode of understating which does not only upend the original meaning, but extends the frontiers of inter-ethnic unity. A level of social capital is thus built around this formation and performance of fandom across spaces. In other words, the way soccer has informed the formation of fandom across spaces justifies the assertion that social capital possesses the capacity to create a connectivity which in turn may 'translate into different acts such as reciprocity, the building of relationships, the development of social and emotional skills and social participation' (Burnett 2006:283).

Yet, in discussing the formation and passage of Igbo nationalism among other ethnic groups in Nigeria and other parts of Africa since the late 1950s, it is perhaps important to note the vital role that Igbo literature and media have played over the decades. To return to Achebe, we must admit that much of what other people first knew about Igbo culture in modern times came through interaction with Achebe's trilogy: *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God*. According to Anyidoho, there is a sense in which Achebe launched the globalization of Igbo nationalism through his trilogy, so much so that even when the setting of *No Longer at Ease* is Lagos, the characters are exclusively Igbo, and we begin to wonder whether other ethnic groups do not live in Lagos. But as Anyidoho argues further, this is where lies the artistic finesse of Achebe through which he engages a postcolonial challenge that touches us all in Africa and yet able to make a statement on the primacy of Igbo nationalism in his art.

Once we begin to consider the foregoing from the angle of cultural assertion and Igbo nationalism and the role of literature and the arts generally, then we may begin to understand the nuances that are at play in the unconscious internalization by other ethnic groups of the representation of Igwe in Nollywood productions. In our interaction and interview with the soccer fans in Ibadan, this was what we found out: the fact that beyond the reputation of Igbo people to be assertive about their cultural heritage in the diaspora, a number of other artistic media contribute to the reception of Igbo cultural indices by other ethnic groups. Just as Igbo literature as led by Achebe does this, so also has Nollywood advanced this reception going by the sheer volume of Igbo productions that people buy on a daily basis in South West Nigeria, to say nothing of the almost 24 hour transmission of these productions on Africa Magic. To that extent, and as

we found out, the respondents' identification with the title did not exclusively emanate from the interaction with Igbo people at video clubs and match viewing centres, but evolved also through their unconscious internalization of the Nollywood productions which through new media have become a phenomenon that other ethnic groups cannot ignore. In the specific case of the reception of Henry in Ibadan and the South West in general, it was also about the coincidence of Nollywood cultural films and the superlative performance of Henry at Arsenal at the point in time. As another respondent, Tayosi, put it:

The period of Henry's outstanding performance as striker and unequalled goal scorer also interestingly coincided with Nollywood's consistent production of cultural films in which the representation of the *Igwe*, his splendour and superiority were in vogue. As a result of this popularity of the *Igwe* in the movies at the time, it was so easy for all of us in the West to accept the coronation of Henry in the East as *Igwe*. Indeed, the coincidence played a major role for us (personal communication, July 30, 2009).

Truly, Nollywood has undergone different thematic stages in its evolution, and it is particularly significant to note that in this evolution, the period of decisive concentration on cultural movies yielded its own dividends of development through the mediation of cultural passage beyond the eastern region of the country. The centrality of monarchy in these productions was obvious, and it was easy for other non-Igbo viewers to identify with it. Thus, the identification with Henry as *Igwe* by other ethnic groups underscores how the sustenance of national unity through the formation of soccer fandom is enhanced by Nollywood's representation of Igbo monarchy. In this case, soccer's capacity for fostering national unity and patriotism is evident not only during the moments of superlative performance by a people's national team (Liubov' Borusiak 2010:72), but also through the conceptual developments predicated upon the agency of new media in the formation of new modes of the popular in the context of a national space.

Another respondent, Godwin, was more direct in his affirmation of the influence of Nollywood on the christening and the reception:

The same viewers of premier league matches are also mostly the viewers and audience of Nollywood videos. It is therefore just natural to link the christening of Henry as *Igwe* to the popular representation of the *Igwe* in Nollywood productions (personal communication, July 30, 2009).

Yet, another respondent, Folorunsho, was more unequivocal in Ibadan in his affirmation of the place of Nollywood productions: 'Where else in this part of the country did we come in stark contact with *Igwe* but in Nollywood home videos? To that extent, the influence of the videos on the christening of Henry as *Igwe* is clearly beyond contention' (personal communication, July 30, 2009). Yet, in spite of this direct link between Nollywood viewership and soccer spectatorship

and fandom, the forms of relationships the coincidence of both viewership and fandom produces cannot be said to be simple. Indeed, there is a complexity to the socio-cultural relationships that result, as they speak to what Falcous and Maguire observe to be ‘the complexity of the local consumption of global sports contoured by local identities and affiliations, yet operating within wider political, economic and cultural dynamics’ (Williams 2007:128).

It then stands to reason that some other respondents like Tochie would interrogate the ethos of ‘crowning’ Henry as *Igwe*. We observed however that in his interrogation and abjection of the christening, Tochie ironically underscored the place of Nollywood in the making of Henry as *Igwe*. To question the appropriateness of the sobriquet for a player like Henry, Tochie invoked the memory of classical soccer:

When fellow soccer fans call Henry *Igwe*, I disagree with them. But from another angle I discover that these are people with a limited and recent sense of soccer history. I mean if they call Henry *Igwe*, what then do they think of legends like Pele of Brazil and Maradona of Argentina? (personal communication July 30, 2009).

The ironic affirmation of the place of Nollywood in the christening lies in the very fact of soccer history which Tochie invoked in his contention. Both Pele and Maradona reigned as soccer maestros long before Nollywood came into existence. Ordinarily, one would have expected that the Igbo cultural title would have made the rounds in popularity among other Nigerians during their time. But this was not to be because of the limited knowledge of the performance of the *Igwe* among other Nigerians. Even among the Igbo, the consciousness of this performance was very low until Nollywood became popularized through the various new media revolution. Therefore, we argue that even when Henry may not be comparable to Pele or Maradona, his christening as *Igwe* by Nigerian soccer fans was substantially a function of the influence of Nollywood on the popularity of the *Igwe* title. It is also significant to note that by another act of coincidence, Henry began his soccer career in the 1994, the mostly cited year of the beginning of Nollywood.

In the end, the discussion returns us to the question of cultural diversity in the face of increasing waves of subnationalism. The formation and redefinition of identity and solidarity will continue to be a complex issue, as they can no longer be exclusively construed along ethnic and regional lines. On account of new media and soccer, new forms of identity and solidarity are being formed in Nigeria. There are various dimensions to this experience of identity formation. One of such has been the cosmopolitanism of Igbo cultural ideas and the enthusiastic reception they enjoy in the Diaspora. In the particular instance of our research, the place of Nollywood in fostering unity among Nigerians cannot be denied.

This is specifically in the enthusiastic reception of the idea of the christening of Thierry Henry as *Igwe* among the Igbo, and the reception of this idea by soccer fans in the predominantly Yoruba-speaking South West, precisely because there is a sense in which Yoruba people can identify with the representation of *Igwe* in Nollywood productions. This is why they can easily relate it to the performance of Henry as the king of soccer, especially in his days at Arsenal FC. As Henry, another respondent from Osun State said, 'the Nollywood industry has really gone so far... they are doing much in bringing Nigerians together'. If this is true of Nollywood, it is no less true of soccer, especially the English Premier League matches, on account of which new trans-ethnic solidarities are being formed precisely in the mobilization and performance of fandom. The social capital appropriated in this instance no doubt enhances unity in a nation that once trod the path of civil war, essentially because of sentiments of ethnicity. In view of all this, the angle of development to our discussion in this chapter rests essentially on the trans-ethnic social capital that is mustered through soccer fandom among Nigerians and its implications for fostering national unity. Nevertheless, the role of Nollywood as a direct consequence of new media is crucial to this development in trans-ethnic social capital formation. To that extent, our findings corroborate Levermore's (2008:183) contention that though experts in mainstream development studies are reluctant to admit the place of sports in matters of development; it has become unthinkable to deny the impact of sports in political, social and economic development.

Poor Female Fandom and Its Challenges

However, much as soccer enthusiasm and fandom are on the rise in Nigeria, our findings revealed that there is still a huge gap between the number of men and women who patronize soccer viewing as sport. For instance, out of the 24 students that were interviewed at the Osun State University, only 4 were ladies; and out of the 51 in Ibadan only 4 were women. In our reflection on this, what came to mind was the initial conception of soccer as a masculine game. After all, it was only recently that African women began to play professional soccer. The history of soccer in the other parts of the world reveals a similar pattern. What is more, in most communities and cultures, status hierarchy, Borer (2009:1) observes, is employed based, among other things, on gender, as a result of which women tend to be excluded from the class of serious fandom. With respect to soccer fandom in Nigeria, we also observe that the situation also produces the irony that Borer remarks upon, which is the overt involvement of women in the interactions of fan communities and how they play a significant role in the negotiation of status symbols. Therefore for Nigerian women, one thing that may be helpful is a necessary replacement of their timid sense of fan involvement with a confident, if not audacious fan participation, knowing that, among other things, 'team

identification and social psychological health ... produce social connections, which, in turn, facilitate well-being' (Daniel Wann Stephen Weaver 2009:219). Nevertheless, considering that soccer viewership also implies relaxation, it is important to still encourage women to have more time for pleasure, although this is not to discount other choices of relaxation which women engage in, and which serve them functionally.

Conclusion

Lastly on Henry and his *Igwe*ship, we may wonder why he is still addressed as *Igwe* by Nigerian fans when in actual fact not only has he transferred from Arsenal to Barcelona FC, but at the moment can no longer be said to be in his elements of excellence as in those days? In Ibadan, as Deji informed us, Henry earned his title of *Igwe* from Nigerian soccer fans in his days in Arsenal and it did not matter where one's affiliation lay, as he was addressed as *Igwe* by all Chelsea, Manchester United, Liverpool and other clubs' fans, and till now he continues to be known and addressed as *Igwe* by them all. If Deji's explanation on the continuity of the *Igwe*ship of Henry is from the angle of fandom, ours draws expectedly on Nollywood. As an Amaeke community chief puts it in *The Gods Are Wise*, 'An *Igwe* is an *Igwe*, even when he is gone, he is still an *Igwe*'. And if in a sense the revolution of new media as discussed in this chapter can be said to have given cogency to Bolter's and Grusin's view about 'the rapid development of new digital media and the nearly as rapid response by traditional media' (Terry Flew 2005:4), by the same token, there is a sense in which it can be argued that there has been an equally rapid response from Nigerian audience at the level of viewership of Nollywood videos and premier league matches. The result is the mobilization of a unique form of fandom, which is foregrounded in the christening of Henry as *Igwe*.

Filmography

Strange Wind, 2007.
The Gods Are Wise, 2007.
Naked Wresters, 2008.

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