

THE INTERFACE BETWEEN RELIGION AND FOOTBALL IN THE GHANAIAN EXPERIENCE

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the role religion plays in Ghanaian football. The study seeks to examine why in Ghanaian football, participants such as administrators, players and supporters spend much time and money on religious rituals and practices towards achieving success. The paper discovers that religion plays a substantial role in Ghanaian football and it is difficult to take away the religious elements from Ghanaian football, due to the benefits football participants derive from their religious activities. Nonetheless, the study indicates that success of football does not only depend on religion but also on training, discipline and commitment to the game.

KEYWORDS

Religion, Football, Sports, Ghanaian football, Interface, Religious rituals, Religious practices

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Religion is the awareness of the existence of an Ultimate, Supreme Being who is the origin and sustainer of this universe and the establishment of constant ties with this being.¹ In other words, religion involves the serious and social attitudes of individuals and societies towards

¹ Gyekye Kwame, *African Cultural Values*, Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company, 2003, 3.

the supernatural forces or powers which they conceive as having definitive control over their lives and destinies. It has to do with the belief in a superhuman controlling power and also the rituals associated with such belief.

Football is a game played by two teams of eleven players using a round ball.² In other words, football is a group competitive activity comprising physical exertion and skills, governed by rules and usually engaged in professionally. Ghanaian football refers to the game of football that is played or administered in Ghana.

Ghanaian football is normally looked at from different perspectives other than religion. It is sometimes looked at from an economic perspective as a means of getting one's livelihood. It employs several people as players, coaches and team or club officials. It is also considered by people to be a form of entertainment normally due to the pleasure they derive from it. Moreover, football is a critical space for viewing the religious, political, and cultural dimensions of most societies across the globe. Hence, football is looked at from a social perspective, as in the promotion and development of unity and social co-existence.³ The level of religiosity exhibited in football cannot be underestimated. Thus, football is more than a game in Ghana; it has a social dimension that has meanings that go far beyond scores and performance statistics.

As already indicated, football involves physical exertion or skill, and the display of one's capabilities. Monetary issues are also important in football. This is because, as said by Esson, Ghanaian society places high expectations and tremendous pressure on young males to be successful in material terms, reproducing a sense of monetary success as an inherently masculine trait. Hence, the youth usually aspire for well paid 'serious jobs', entailing respect

² Available at <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/football>. (Accessed on July 23, 2022.)

³ Ncube, Lyton. "Visualizing diverse religious performances: The "sacred" and the "profane" in Zimbabwean football." *Critical Arts* 31.4 (2017): 69-88.

and authority.⁴ Therefore, football clubs in Ghana, to be successful, spend huge sums of money to employ the services of good and competent players, expert coaches and administrators, and also ensure a formidable support base. In all these, they spend huge sums of money and time on religious rituals and practices all in the name of achieving success. Sometimes, these religious rituals and their costs are kept secret. The question one might ask then is that, if football is based on physical exertion or skills, then why should Ghanaian football clubs spend huge sums of money and time on religious rituals to seek divine or spiritual intervention in football? One might also ask if there is any correlation between football and religion and whether or not religion can influence football in any way. Moreover, one might ask, what is the role of religion in Ghanaian football? These are the questions that this work seeks to find answers to. Thus, this study will enlighten readers on the factors that motivate football participants or enthusiasts to resort to religion in Ghanaian football.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

This work is mainly a qualitative study. The work is based on the study and scrutiny of various secondary data resources that focus on religion and sports, with much emphasis on football. Data from the internet, and published and unpublished literature in the form of newspapers, books and journal articles were patronized. There were also interviews with current and former footballers, supporters and club administrators on the interface between religion and football in Ghana. The reason for choosing to do a qualitative work lies in the researchers' interest in knowing and presenting the real situation on the ground and what information the respondents gave out about the phenomena of football and religion in Ghana. Thus, the study is situated in the nation Ghana, a country where religion defines and informs

⁴Esson, James. "A body and a dream at a vital juncture: Ghanaian youth, uncertainty and the allure of football." *Geoforum* 47 (2013): 84-92.

almost all the acts, sayings and practices of its inhabitants. Football has also become part and parcel of the social life of the people.

2.0 THE RELATIONSHIP AND INTERFACE BETWEEN RELIGION AND FOOTBALL

Some people, especially football enthusiasts, see football and religion as connected in different ways. It is sometimes argued that football is actually a new form of religion or at least a quasi-religion.⁵ On the other hand, it is sometimes argued that there are essential differences between religion and football. Religion and football are seen as two distinct forms of cultural practices that sometimes overlap. The purpose of this section is to examine the relationship and interface between religion and football.

2.1 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND FOOTBALL

There exists some clear relationship between religion and football. They do cross each other. They correlate with each other coherently and interchangeably. However, there are some differences in respect of their nature and characteristics.

According to Akgul & Karafil, examining the relationship between sports (including football) and spirituality in the context of different religions, beliefs and different sports branches are recommended to reach a wider perspective. They add that religious beliefs and practices can be seen in almost every dimension of human life, and their impact covers all social areas, including football.⁶ Also, Honeybourne et al, in elucidating the similarities and relationship between religion and sports (including football) argue that sports are a form of “natural” religion because both sports and religion are shaped by a desire for freedom, reverence for

⁵ Darkwah, A., Akpabli-Honu, K. & Onina, K., ‘Football as a Quasi Religion: A Case Study of the Rituals’. Available at <http://ugspace.ug.edu.gh/handle/123456789/8318?showfull>. (Accessed on July 23, 2022.)

⁶ Akgul MH & Karafil AY, “Examining the relationship between religious perception and psychological well-being levels of university football players”, *Physical Education of Students*, 2022; 26(2): 51. Available at <https://doi.org/10.15561/20755279.2022.0201>. (Accessed on June 15, 2022.)

ritual limits, a passion for symbolic meaning, and a longing for perfection.⁷ This demonstrates that both religion and football, as forms of human expressions, are in some important respects cut from the same cloth. Both religion and football are related to godliness because they emanate from the same pursuit of perfection in body, mind and spirit that leads people to form their notions of god which are conceptions that usually express the ideals of a specific group or society.⁸ In addition, asserts that, religious figures have also taken lead roles in sports employing sport as a means of instilling discipline and character in young people. In more recent years, religion has continued to feature prominently in sports.⁹ Hence, it is worthwhile to look at the similarities or parallelisms between religion and football.

2.1.1 SIMILARITIES BETWEEN RELIGION AND FOOTBALL IN GHANA

Upon careful observation and analysis of the relationship between religion and football, it can be seen that there are some commonalities and parallelisms that both can be identified with. These similarities stem from certain characteristics that pertain to both religion and football.

2.1.1.1 Rituals

Both religion and football have rituals performed before, during and after notable events. Most football clubs and teams have some rites that they perform in the form of initiations to prepare their players and officials before they enter into matches, and they include training sessions and coaching. In the same vein, most religions have rites and ceremonies performed to prepare and initiate their followers into active religious activities, and they include baptism, laying of hands and confirmation. Usually, national anthems or club anthems are

⁷ Honeybourne John, Hill Michael & Moors Helen, *Advanced Physical Education and Sport*, Stanley Thomas, Ellenborough House, Wellington Street, Cheltenham, Glos. GL50IYW, United Kingdom, 1996, 478.

⁸ Snyder Eldon E. & Spreitzer Elmer A., *Social Aspects of Sport*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 07632, 1989, 293.

⁹ Adogame, Afe. "Religion and Sport, Past, Present and Future." *Studies in World Christianity* 21.3 (2015): 193-200.

sang at the commencement of football matches. This is, in some respects, similar to the opening hymns sang in religious gatherings to commence programmes. Also, football matches have halftimes when the team officials take time to advise and coach the players. In the same line, in some religions, this is the time where ministers give sermons or preach to the congregation. Again, in football, the supporters or fans engage in hand slapping, band parades and singing to cheer up their teams. In religion, this is identified with the joining of hands and choir processions. Moreover, in football, the end of matches is marked by the shaking of hands by players, officials and sometimes supporters. Likewise in religion, the end of religious meetings is usually marked by the greeting of the ministers, religious leaders or priests and other attendants. In both religion and football, rituals are frequently used to make participants feel as if they have some control over whatever happens to them. The certainty that prevails in highly competitive football matches is so great that many footballers use rituals. It is worthy to note that rituals are grounded in religion, juju, magic and personal habits. According to Jeremy, it is not figurative to say that fans or supporters today have a type of religious commitment to their favourite teams and players.¹⁰ Also, rituals and ceremony whether in religion or football reinforce beliefs and values. In Ghanaian football, the football clubshave rituals they perform before, during and after matches. They make some symbolic representations, for example the wearing of red and white outfits by theKumasi Asante KotokoSporting Club supporters and players, and the wearing of rainbow colours bythe Accra Hearts of Oak Football Club supporters. They do so to demonstrate their ambition, feelings and expectations in matches.¹¹

2.1.1.2 Heroes and Legends

¹⁰ Jeremy R. Treat, 'More than a Game: A Theology of Sport'. Available at <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/more-than-a-game-theology-of-sport/>. (Accessed on June 21, 2022.)

¹¹ Interview with Obed Opoku, a Sports journalist with Otec 102.9 fm. Interview date: 04/02/2022.

Religion and football in Ghana have heroes and legends based on their legacies or accomplishments. Religious heroes are raised to sainthood, and their stories are told continually by religious writers, ministers and preachers. Such heroes include Martin Luther, the Pope and other apologists in Christianity; Sheikh Usmanu Sharabutu, Rabiatu Mauwiya and other prominent heroes in Islam; and Komfo Anokye, Akhenaton and others for African traditional followers. Likewise, in football, there are heroes and their stories are told frequently by sports journalists and fans. For example, in Ghana, the Kumasi Sports Stadium is officially called the Baba Yara Sports Stadium, and it was named after Baba Yarawho was a famous player of Asante Kotoko and the Ghanaian National team (the Black Stars of Ghana). The Accra Sports Stadium is officially called the Ohene Djan Sports Stadium and it was named after Ohene Djan who was a prominent football administrator in Ghana and once a Chairman of the Ghana Football Association (GFA). They were done in commemoration of their unprecedented performance and contribution to Ghanaian football. There are also players like Abdul Razak (former African best player), Osei Kofi (former Black Stars player), Kwasi Appiah (former captain and coach of Black Stars), Sarfo Gyamfi (former player of Asante Kotoko Football Club), Opoku Afriyie (former player of Black Stars), Samuel Osei Kuffour (formerly of King Faisal Football Club, Bayern Munich football club and Black Stars), Stephen Appiah (formerly of Juventus football club and Black Stars), Michael Essien (formerly of Chelsea football club and Black Stars) and other players and officials who are held in high esteem in Ghanaian football in particular and the society in general.

2.1.1.3 Structured organization

Both football and religion are controlled through planned organizations and ordered systems of authority. As most religions have leadership made up of administrators or bishops and pastors or priests, football teams also have leadership made up of team owners, football directors or managers and coaches. As most religions have priests, pastors, monks and others

who superintend and supervise affairs, the Asante Kotoko Sporting Club, for example, has Otumfuor Osei Tutu II – the Asantehene (the Monarch of the Asante Kingdom) – as the owner and therefore the person on top of its hierarchical order. The King Faisal Football Club also has Alhaji Abdul Karim Grusah as the owner and bankroller and therefore the person on top of its hierarchical order.¹²

2.1.1.4 Festivals

Religion and football have events programmed to celebrate values in the context of festivals and festive occasions which capture considerable attention. Football and religion have habitually been used to create strong collective emotions and celebrate selected communal values through rituals and public events. Religion has festive moments like Christmas for Christians, Idr Fitr for Muslims and Akwasidae for Akan traditional followers. In 2009, the Otumfuor Tournament was organized and played in celebration of the Asantehene's (King of Asante) ten-year successful rule. The Asante Kotoko football club won the trophy which attracted highly considerable attention in Ghana. The President's Cup is also played in Ghana almost every year in the past ten years in celebration of the incumbent President's successful rule.¹³

2.1.1.5 Morality

Both religion and football emphasize morality. In Ghanaian football, participants and enthusiasts are expected to exhibit discipline, selflessness and the development of good character. In religion too, adherents are expected to emulate and exhibit good moral virtues in order to succeed in their religiosity. Thus, both religion and football have rules and

¹² Interview with Obed Opoku, a Sports journalist with Otec 102.9 fm. Interview date: 04/02/2022.

¹³ The cup is called the GHALCA President's Cup because it is organized by Ghana League Clubs Association (GHALCA) and played in honour of the sitting President of Ghana. It was founded in 1969. This football game was also known as the Republic Day Celebrations Cup and is usually played on the 1st of July each year to mark Ghana's Republic Day celebrations which falls on that day.

regulations governing the actions of participants. In most religions in Ghana, the rules and regulations are encoded in their scriptures and oral tradition. They include the Qur'an for Muslims, the Bible for Christians and oral tradition for the indigenous religions. Likewise in football, the Federation of International Football Associations (FIFA) which is the highest football governing body has rules and regulations used to govern football in the world. In Ghanaian, the Ghana Football Association (GFA) has rules and regulations encoded in their constitution. The GFA has the Disciplinary Committee which seeks to address any form of violence and uncouth behaviours in Ghanaian football.¹⁴

It is due to these aforementioned factors why some people claim that Ghanaian football cannot do without religion. Many people talk about football as quasi-religious. Participation in Ghanaian football, as players or supporters, is characterized by many of the same trappings that characterize involvement in religion.

2.1.2 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN RELIGION AND FOOTBALL

The parallels between religion and football are somewhat so apparent that it is often easy to get carried away with the similarities and ignore the differences between these two forms of human expressions. Nonetheless, some essential differences between football and religion should not go unmentioned.

Firstly, some people believe that both religion and football have unique, separate essences that are grounded in divine inspiration. They argue that religion and football reveal different parts of a basic human nature that is unchangeable regardless of history, culture or social circumstances. In other words, they assume that each system – religion or football – has an essence that transcends time and space, and that human beings live out that essence when they participate in either religion or football.

¹⁴ Interview with Obed Opoku, a Sports journalist with Otec 102.9 fm. Interview date: 04/02/2022.

Secondly, religious beliefs, rituals and events are grounded in the sacred and supernatural realm, while sports beliefs, rituals and events are grounded in the profane and material realm. Snyder and Spreitzer in discussing the differences between religion and sports states that, “At first glance it might seem that religion and sport have little in common. Religion apparently deals with the supernatural, the transcendent and the sacred, whereas sport is seemingly embedded in the physical, mundane and earthly dimensions of the human condition.”¹⁵

Thirdly, the purpose of religion is to transcend the circumstances and conditions of material towards the achievement of spiritual goals, while the purpose of sport (including football) is to focus on material issues towards the achievement of pleasure, wealth, fame or fortune here and now.

Fourthly, religion is fundamentally rooted in faith, whereas sport is fundamentally deep-seated in concrete rules and relationships. Religion is fundamentally non-competitive, whereas sport is fundamentally competitive. Religion emphasizes a spirit of service and love of others, whereas sport underscores a spirit of personal achievement, self-promotion and defeating others.

Fifthly, religious rituals are fundamentally expressive and process-oriented, whereas sport rituals are basically instrumental and goal-oriented. Religion is fundamentally mystical and pure, whereas sport is fundamentally clear-cut and crude.

Those who advocate a total dichotomy between religion and football would not say that football is not religion-like, or that the social and psychological consequences of football differ from the consequences of religion. They would recognize overlap, but they would also stick to their position that football and religion are essentially different.

¹⁵ Snyder *et al*, A., *Social Aspects of Sport*, 293.

2.2 THE INTERFACE BETWEEN RELIGION AND FOOTBALL

There is fundamentally an interface between religion and every aspect of African life of which football as a social phenomenon is not an exception. According to Mbiti, religion permeates all the departments of life such that there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and the non-religious and between the spiritual and the material areas of life.¹⁶ Mbiti establishes that, wherever the African finds himself, there is his religion and therefore to be without religion amounts to a total excommunication from the entire life of human society, and African peoples do not know how to exist without religion”.¹⁷ It can be inferred from this quotation that, religion is identified in every aspect of the lives of Africans including Ghanaians. Football is thus a serious and highly important aspect of the lives of Ghanaians such that it cannot be done away with. Therefore, if religion affects every aspect of the lives of Ghanaians, then religion affects Ghanaian football. Thus, there is a close affinity between religion and football. The African lives in a religious universe; such that all actions and thoughts have a religious point of view.¹⁸

Spiritual manipulations and control in football have existed for a very long time and there is little human beings can do to avoid their presence and control in football. These spirits seem to be involved in football even when they are not invited.¹⁹ Their activities and influences are beyond bounds. This means that spiritual activities and football interrelates and affects each other. The interface between religion and football is something that many footballers and football enthusiasts believe has been in existence for a long time. Many of these people are of the view that this interface between religion and football cannot be evaded or cease to exist, especially in Ghanaian football. It is part of our humanity to always seek spiritual

¹⁶ John, S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. 361 Hannover Street, Portsmouth: Heinemann Educational Books Inc., 1989, 2.

¹⁷ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2.

¹⁸ Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 1.

¹⁹ Peter Owusu Agyemang, *The God of Football, Who is He? Jehovah or Satan?*, Ashcan Publishers, Adum-Kumasi, 2008, 24.

intervention in all our endeavors of which football is no exception.²⁰ The correlation between religion and football seems to be a form of motivation for many footballers. Some players claim that before they go into any football game, they recite some biblical quotations such as Psalm 91. According to Eric Bekoe, before he enters into a match, he usually recites Psalm 91 from the Bible, because it contains a motivational message for him to give out his best in matches.²¹

The interface between religion and football in Ghana can be described as a common phenomenon but just that the practice is generally held in secrecy.²² For instance, in Ghana, the use of juju in matches is a common practice, but the practice is deeply steeped in secrecy. In the words of former Ghana coach, Burkhard Ziese: ‘Club officials in Ghana draw a lot of money from teams under the pretext of paying a juju man but end up pocketing it’.²³ Also, there are certain Muslim spiritualists who are called Mallams. They practise *sihir* meaning “occultism”. They make use of *asrar* meaning “secrets”. Footballers consult them to help them win matches. This is why sometimes, in Ghanaian football, when a goal is scored, people call the goal “mallam goal”.²⁴

Some religious rituals like prayer serve as antidote to some health and psychological problems in Ghanaian football. Football participants manipulate such religious rituals to get a

²⁰ Interview with Daniel Nii Adjei (former player of Kumasi Asante Kotoko Sporting Club and the Black Stars of Ghana). Interview date: 04/02/2022.

²¹ Interview with Eric Bekoe, a former player of Kumasi Asante Kotoko Sporting Club and the Black Stars of Ghana. Interview date: 06/02/2022.

²² An article titled ‘Football and Spiritualism’, available at <https://www.myjoyonline.com/football-and-spiritualism/>. (Accessed on 21/06/2022.)

²³ ‘Football and Spiritualism’, available at <https://www.myjoyonline.com/football-and-spiritualism/>. (Accessed on 21/06/2022.)

²⁴ Interview with Sheikh Dr. Zakaria Seebaway on Monday, 6th June, 2022. He is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Ghana.

relief from these health and emotional problems. Sometimes, when a player gets injured, the other teammates irrespective of religious background come together to pray for the injured.²⁵

Some religious rituals serve as the opening ceremonies in some football matches in Ghana. They mark the preparations of some teams towards matches. Football participants usually make sure they undertake those religious rituals before they begin a match. They normally do so to achieve expected results in matches. In describing Ghanaian football, Nana Agyemang, a prominent sports commentator in Ghana articulates that sometimes the administrators and the supporters produce special concoctions for the players to sprinkle on themselves and to be used on the field of play.²⁶ They produce powders that on the blast of the first whistle from the Referee are ceremoniously thrown into the air by the players or the coaches or officials of the club.²⁷ Objects are provided for the goalkeeper to place within his defending goal and, more noticeable, the players are given handkerchiefs which are normally placed around the wrist of every player. The Mallam or the spiritualist always assures the players, coaches, or the club officials that so long as they conform to the instructions, the game will be won. They even go as far as to predict the score line.”²⁸ According to Thomas Nuamah-Yeboah, in 1987 there was a match between Kumasi Asante Kotoko Football Club of Ghana and Zamalek Football Club of Egypt in an African Champion Clubs tournament. The then Chief Executive Officer of Kotoko, Ofori Nuako said God had revealed to him in a dream that Kotoko will score five goals. This made him come to the stadium with five doves and at the end, Kotoko

²⁵ For instance, on 11th March, 2008 at 23:30 on *asantekotokofc.com*, Thomas Boakye-Agyeman demonstrated an interface between religion and Ghanaian football when he wrote that, “Kumasi Asante Kotoko striker Eric Bekoe has revealed to the Kotoko Express of the horrific experience he went through as he gallantly fought for his life for almost one and half hours after Kotoko drew goalless with Hearts of Oak at the Ohene Djan Sports Stadium in Accra. The Christians in the bus led by Osei Kwame prayed as they made a ring around Bekoe who was lying prostrate on the floor of the bus after which goalkeeper Abdoulaye Soulama also led prayers in Islam.” (Source: *www.asantekotokofc.com*, Accessed on 05/02/20).

²⁶ Nana Agyemang, a prominent sports commentator, in his article “Is there football after Juju? The Ghanaian experience”. Available at <https://www.modernghana.com/amp/news/42663/is-there-football-after-juju-the-ghanaian-experience-.html>. (Accessed on 15/06/2022.)

²⁷ Nana Agyemang, “Is there football after Juju? The Ghanaian experience”.

²⁸ Nana Agyemang, “Is there football after Juju? The Ghanaian experience”.

after being down by a goal six minutes, made a comeback to win 5-1.²⁹ This is known in Ghanaian football history as the Super Miracle of Kumasi.³⁰

Again, football matches have become avenues or grounds for people to exhibit their religiosity. Football matches have also become moments of continuous struggle between spiritual forces through some religious rituals undertaken by some football enthusiasts. For example, on Monday, 25th May, 2009 at 6:35 a.m., Kweku Ahenkora, a Sports journalist, in an interview with Mr. Sarfo Gyamfi (the then Welfare Committee Chairman of Asante Kotoko Sporting Club) on a morning sports program called Boss Talk Sports on Boss 93.7 FM, it came to light that in the match between Kotoko and Eleven Wise Football Club on 24th May, 2009, some officials of Eleven Wise Football Club sprinkled some liquids at the entrance of the players' dressing room. According to him (Mr. Sarfo Gyamfi), he in turn sprinkled holy water and anointing oil at the place to counter their spiritual activities or rituals.³¹ He continued by saying that, in the game of football, there are continuous struggles between spiritual; forces. He made a comparison that, Jesus commanded the wind on the sea to stop, so human beings can also command spiritual forces to a halt. He emphasized that football should not be looked at only in the physical realm, but also in the spiritual realm. He also said, in playing matches, the ancestors of Asante Kotoko Sporting Club are called upon to bring their powers and support to bear upon the match to ensure good performance and favorable results.³² This shows the level of religiosity exhibited in Ghanaian football.

Thus, in this section, we have outlined a series of parallelisms and affinities between football and religion. The interface between religion and Ghanaian football has resulted in religion

²⁹ Interview with Thomas Nuamah-Yeboah, a sports historian in Kumasi on 10th November, 2022.

³⁰ Agyemang, "Is there football after Juju? The Ghanaian experience".

³¹ Interview between Kweku Ahenkora, a Sports journalist and Mr. Sarfo Gyamfi (the then Welfare Committee Chairman of Asante Kotoko Sporting Club) on a morning sports program called Boss Talk Sports on Boss 93.7 fm, on Monday, 25th May, 2009 at 6:35 a.m.

³² Interview between Kweku Ahenkora, a Sports journalist and Mr. Sarfo Gyamfi (the then Welfare Committee Chairman of Asante Kotoko Sporting Club) on a morning sports program called Boss Talk Sports on Boss 93.7 fm, on Monday, 25th May, 2009 at 6:35 a.m.

playing a phenomenological role in Ghanaian football. The role of religion in Ghanaian football will then be examined in the next section.

4.0 THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN GHANAIAI FOOTBALL

As indicated earlier, religion is identified in almost every aspect of Ghanaian life. To the ordinary Ghanaian, there is a religious meaning to every activity, encounter or happening; so religion has a role to play in football as a social institution. Agyemang posits that; “A dead atmosphere is the atmosphere without the activities of spirits. So, just as much as a spirit is vital for the proper functioning of a body, so also spirits are vital for the proper functioning of a charged area of football.”³³ This means that religion is a prerequisite for any charged area of football.

4.1 THE RELEVANCE OF RELIGION IN GHANAIAI FOOTBALL

Religion and sports (including football) are entities that need to be cherished. According to Jeremy, ‘When viewed through the lens of scripture,, we will see that sports is more than a game,, and when transformed by the gospel can be received as a gift.’³⁴ For Akgul & Karafil, the institution of religion has a special meaning and essence for footballers albeit in different ways.³⁵ Religion has been in Ghanaian football as it had provided spiritual and psychological support, unity and cohesion, discipline, assurance and hopes for football participants and as a form of spiritual exercise.

4.1.1 Spiritual support

After examining the relationship between the religious orientation of professional football players and their psychological well-being levels, Akgul & Karafil claims that football players

³³ Agyemang, *The God of Football, Who is He? Jehovah or Satan?*, 21.

³⁴ Jeremy R. Treat, ‘More than a Game: A Theology of Sport’.

³⁵ Akgul & Karafil, “Examining the relationship between religious perception and psychological well-being levels of university football players”, 51.

need religion to provide psychological support and increase their performance.³⁶ Religion in football provides players, coaches, team officials and supporters with spiritual support as they cope with the challenges and uncertainties of the football competition and as they try to find special meaning to their sporting lives. Due to human limitations in the face of uncertainties and anxieties, footballers, administrators and fans stick to religion to prepare themselves spiritually. They do so to complement their physical skills and exertion. Religious rituals like prayer and fasting give the players a positive mind-set when playing football. For them, religion actually acts as a spiritual booster.³⁷ According to Eric Bekoe, his recitation of Psalm 91 before a match gives him spiritual support to give out his best in matches.³⁸ Richmond Boakye Yiadom also attributes his success in his football career to the power of God that gives him spiritual support.³⁹

4.1.2 Psychological support

Religious elements in football provides players, coaches, team officials and supporters with psychological support as they cope with the challenges and uncertainties of the competition and as they try to find special meaning to their sporting lives. Due to human limitations in the face of uncertainties, footballers and other football participants stick to religion to prepare themselves psychologically aside their physical skills and exertion. Iona & Okou, in their study titled “Sports and Religion” state that sportsmen (including footballers) can use their religion as a source of psychological support as they cope with the challenges and uncertainties of competition and as they try to find special meaning for their sports

³⁶Akgul & Karafil, “Examining the relationship between religious perception and psychological well-being levels of university football players”, 51

³⁷ Interview with Emmanuel Nkrumah, a former player of Asante Kotoko Sporting Club and King Faisal Football Club. Interview date: 03/02/2022.

³⁸ Interview with Eric Bekoe, a former player of Kumasi Asante Kotoko Sporting Club and the Black Stars of Ghana. Interview date: 06/02/2022.

³⁹ Interview with Richmond Boakye Yiadom. Interview date: 04/06/2022.

lives.⁴⁰ Religious rituals help footballers to overcome anxieties and excessive environmental stimuli, such as chanting of fans, from interrupting their concentration. Religious rituals like prayer and fasting give the players a positive mind-set when playing football. Thus, for them, religion actually acts as a psychological booster.⁴¹ Akgul & Karafil claim that religious perceptions and psychological well-beings of players who pray before matches are relatively higher. They see prayer perhaps to be the most frequently employed use of religion by footballers.⁴² Slatinsky et al also found that footballers with a greater internal locus of control and higher strength of religious beliefs had a higher level of resiliency than players with a high external locus of control and lower strength of religious beliefs.⁴³ Eric Bekoe posits that his motivation, psychological and spiritual support in the success of any match he plays come from the Psalm 91. For him, just meditating on this verse helps him to give out his best in matches.⁴⁴ Richmond Boakye Yiadom also attributes his success in his football career to the power of God that gives him psychological support.⁴⁵

4.1.3 Unity and cohesion

Religion in football helps maintain unity and cohesion among the players and the team as a whole. Coaches and other team officials use various forms of religious rituals to ensure and promote unity and establish a basis of social control over the team. Religion provides a system of meanings that can provide a basis of group integration and unity, and since it is related to the sacred and supernatural. It can be used as a significant social control in both the

⁴⁰ Slatinsky CP, Farren GI, Bartlett M, Fiaud V. & Haasi R., 2022, "Relations among locus of control, Religiosity and Resiliency in Collegiate Football players", *Pastoral Psychol.* Available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-021-00988-9>. (Accessed on April 12, 2023.)

⁴¹ Interview with Emmanuel Nkrumah, a former player of Asante Kotoko Sporting Club and King Faisal Football Club. Interview date: 03/02/2022.

⁴² Akgul MH & Karafil AY, "Examining the relationship between religious perception and psychological well-being levels of university football players", 51

⁴³ Slatinsky CP, Farren GI, Bartlett M, Fiaud V. & Haasi R., "Relations among locus of control, Religiosity and Resiliency in Collegiate Football players", *Pastoral Psychol.*, 2022. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-021-00988-9>. (Accessed on April 12, 2023.)

⁴⁴ Interview with Eric Bekoe, a former player of Kumasi Asante Kotoko Sporting Club and the Black Stars of Ghana. Interview date: 06/02/2022.

⁴⁵ Interview with Richmond Boakye Yiadom. Interview date: 04/06/2022.

individual and group levels. Religion in Ghanaian football brings cooperation among individuals and people of different religious affiliations together. Religious beliefs and rituals can be powerful tools in creating strong bonds of attachment between people. When religious beliefs and rituals are combined with sport participation, they can link athletes together in ways that transcends the everyday lives of teammates.⁴⁶ This of course can build team cohesion and team morale. For instance, during Ghanaian national team matches, the national anthem which goes like: “God bless our homeland Ghana” is recited. God’s name is articulated and this brings unconscious feeling of sacredness irrespective of religious background or competition. The Muslims always join hands with the Christians, when they are on the field of play, to pray together. But on Fridays, they are allowed to go and pray alone.⁴⁷ On occasions when the entire team is to engage in any form of religious rituals, all the players are expected to be part of it whether they believe in it or not. The essence of this is to demonstrate and maintain some form of unity among the playing body which helps to promote a high level of discipline in the team.⁴⁸

4.1.4 Discipline

Religion in football ensures and promotes discipline among players, officials, supporters and other football participants. Religious beliefs separate them from the risky lifestyles common in the social worlds that develop around certain sports and keep them focused in training. Religious beliefs may also influence players and football administrators to become involved in church-related and community-based service programmes all of which keep them out of trouble.⁴⁹ The religious beliefs and reliance upon God informs the lives of footballers and make them desist from some practices like alcoholism and philandering. This makes their life

⁴⁶ Honeybourne *et al*, *Advanced Physical Education and Sport*, 492.

⁴⁷ The Christian Messenger newspaper, published on December 2019, page 22.

⁴⁸ Agyemang Prempeh, *The Role of Religion in Ghanaian Sports with reference to Football*, A dissertation presented to the Department of Religious Studies, KNUST, Kumasi, 2009, 27.

⁴⁹ Honeybourne *et al*, *Advanced Physical Education and Sport*, 490.

devoted to training and hardwork to ensure success in their career.⁵⁰ Agyemang asserts that one major difference between players who concentrate much more on spirituality as well as physical training and those whose concentration is only on physical training is that, those who are spiritually minded are more disciplined.⁵¹ The spirit will tell you to abstain from certain excesses of life which eventually destroys the same body you spend time building. Excesses such as womanizing and alcohol intake will always be opposed by a right spirit in a person.⁵²

4.1.5 Assurance and hope

Religion in football gives assurance and hope to players, officials and supporters. Through history, people have used rituals based in religion, magic and or superstitions to cope with uncertainties in their lives. Because football involves a high level of uncertainty, it is not surprising that many players use rituals, some based in religion, to make them harbour the feeling that they have some control over what happens on the playing field. Notably, religion in Ghanaian football marks the end of preparations for footballers competing and instills confidence in the competitor. Thus, they feel backed by the divine or the supernatural aside their training, skills, knowledge and strength. This helps them to cope with uncertainties in football.⁵³ Usually, ahead of a crucial encounter, team officials try to assure their supporters of victory by trying to predict the outcome of the game. They normally do this after consulting certain religious men specifically native doctors or Mallams. Entering into a game with the assurance of victory helps the players to give out their best so as to achieve the predicted results for their teams.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Interview with Eric Bekoe, former player of Kumasi Asante Kotoko Sporting Club and the Black Stars of Ghana. Interview date: 06/02/2022.

⁵¹ Agyemang, *The God of Football, Who is He? Jehovah or Satan?*, 22.

⁵² Agyemang, *The God of Football, Who is He? Jehovah or Satan?*, 22.

⁵³ Honeybourne et al, *Advanced Physical Education and Sport*, 489-490.

⁵⁴ Prempeh, *The Role of Religion in Ghanaian Sports with reference to Football*, 28.

4.1.6 Spiritual exercise

Religion in football serves as a form of spiritual exercise for some footballers. Rituals for sports provide for many an experience of at least a pagan sense of godliness. Some sportsmen or players may need the spiritual assistance and guidance that religion offers and for that matter, they participate in the religious activities involved in their religion. Because of this, many people sometimes undertake a spiritual exercise like fasting before games which to them serves as a means of communicating with God to seek for His intervention.⁵⁵ For the Muslim sportsmen, some of these exercises form part of their religious obligations. During such periods as Ramadan, they continue to observe these exercises whiles on the field of play or when they are competing in a sporting event. For instance, Yusif Alhassan Chibсах, a former player of Asante Kotoko Sporting Club, could be cited as one of those sportsmen who preferred to observe such a religious obligation even whiles on the field of play.⁵⁶

4.2 THE DISADVANTAGE OF RELIGION IN GHANAIAN FOOTBALL

Such social phenomenon as religion, as it manifests in football, cannot be overly praised as an angelic phenomenon. This is because, aside the relevance of religion in football, there are some disadvantages of religion in football that need to be highlighted.

Religion in football, sometimes, does not contribute to good sportsmanship. It brings about delays at the various sport venues or stadiums. The fear of religious beliefs and rituals may cause some players and team officials behave in a manner that makes their opponent feel it is a kind of strategy they have adopted to turn the competition in their favour. Some of these teams try to employ all forms of strategies which they believe can help them attain victory.⁵⁷

It is because of this that some teams refuse to use the dressing rooms and also report very late

⁵⁵ Prempeh, *The Role of Religion in Ghanaian Sports with reference to Football*, 28.

⁵⁶ Prempeh, *The Role of Religion in Ghanaian Sports with reference to Football*, 28.

⁵⁷ Prempeh, *The Role of Religion in Ghanaian Sports with reference to Football*, 34-35.

at the match venues. This generates so many controversies at these sports venues which in turn affect the initial time scheduled for competitions to take place because they waste much time in an attempt to argue issues out with each other.⁵⁸ According to Daniel Nii Adjei, a prominent negative effect of some religious rituals is that, they bring about complacency on the side of players, officials, or supporters. Because they are foretold that they will win a match, they refuse to work harder, but rather rely on the rituals which sometimes bring defeat to them.⁵⁹

Moreover, some religious rituals or performances turn back to harm or ruin the careers of some players, coaches, and officials. Those powers like juju demands thanksgiving and appreciation from the adherents when it works effectively. When one fails to show the required appreciation, it turns back to harm him and it can even end the player's career. The unfortunate thing is that, sometimes the player may forget that it is the power that has helped him in some way and therefore he forgets the thanksgiving or appreciative sacrifice. Meanwhile, the power does not consider that but goes ahead to harm the player.⁶⁰

Also, religious rituals sometimes result in lack of confidence in team officials and also disbelief in some spiritual powers and religious personalities who are the sources of such supernatural powers. This is normally the case when expected results in matches are unable to be achieved. Football fans do get very annoyed when their teams are not performing to the expected level, and miracles are often demanded. The end result is that, sometimes many coaches and sports administrators (especially those who are appointed by team owners) lose

⁵⁸ Prempeh, *The Role of Religion in Ghanaian Sports with reference to Football*, 28.

⁵⁹ Interview with Daniel Nii Adjei, former player of Kumasi Asante Kotoko Sporting Club and the Black Stars of Ghana. Interview date: 04/02/2022.

⁶⁰ Interview with Daniel Nii Adjei, former player of Kumasi Asante Kotoko Sporting Club and the Black Stars of Ghana. Interview date: 04/02/2022.

their jobs as these football fans or supporters call for their resignation. They even receive all kinds of insults and threats from these angry supporters.⁶¹

Again, religion discourages some people from participating in football in Ghana. People who are strongly informed by their religious traditions and beliefs might avoid participating in football because they would not want to come into contact with a person from a different religious background. Moreover, some people are discouraged from participating in football because they are beaten, harassed and made to go through all sorts of maltreatments, especially by the home teams when they discover that what their opponents are doing may have a negative effect on the religious rituals they have performed before the start of a game.⁶² The bad side of such incidence is that, most people who are unable to cope with such chaos are likely to quit football to avoid any inconvenience or unfortunate happenings.

5.0 THE FUTURE OF RELIGION IN GHANAIAN FOOTBALL

People in sports, especially footballers and coaches have used religious beliefs and rituals to cope with the uncertainties of competition, to sanctify sports involvement and achievement, to foster cohesion in teams and to reaffirm a commitment to norms in football. Nonetheless, according to Honeybourne et al, “Sociologists see the beliefs and rituals of sports and religion as subject to change, as people struggle over how to live with one another and over what their lives mean.”⁶³

⁶¹ Prempeh, *The Role of Religion in Ghanaian Sports with reference to Football*, 28.

⁶² On page 8 and 9 of the Kotoko Express newspaper published on February 23-24, 2010, which is captioned “The Madness at the Dormaa Park”, the author gives pictures of some attacks on some people in the match between Asante Kotoko and Aduana Stars at the Dormaa Park on 21st February, 2010. In these pages, it was written that, “Aduana tags invaded the pitch to attack a member of the Kotoko technical team Issah Ahmadu whose crime was giving water to Kotoko goalkeeper Isaac Amoako even before the game went underway. Kotoko players were made to walk the distance from the gate to the field because their bus was refused entry into the stadium.” It was later reported on radio that, the Aduana Stars supporters did all these to protect the rituals they had performed in order to win the game. Fortunately for them, they won the match by 1-0.

⁶³ Honeybourne *et al*, *Advanced Physical Education and Sport*, 499.

Several football participants are of the view that Ghanaian football will forever experience such religious rituals and activities.⁶⁴ They claim that, the religious elements can never be evaded or cease to exist in Ghanaian football. They are part of the participants' humanity and sometimes they do them involuntarily. However, there are players, supporters and administrators who think Ghanaian football participants should desist from juju practices and rather rely wholly on prayers and the power of God. In doing so, some people believe that, Ghanaian football will have a very bright future. Evangelist Peter Owusu Agyemang asserted in an interview that, football participants can never do away with the spiritual elements in football.⁶⁵ However, according to him, for a player to function well spiritually and physically in the whole world, wherever he goes, he needs the universal power of God to give him a flourishing future in his football career.

All these buttress the conviction or assertion that, football in Ghana can hardly do away with religious beliefs, rituals and happenings. It is however worthwhile that, going forward, players, football administrators and football enthusiasts or fans should pursue or practice healthy religious rituals that will not unsettle the game of football and the lives of the players, administrators and fans who patronize football in Ghana.

Therefore, going forward, the following should be well noted as Ghanaian football administrators, fans and players exhibit or manipulate religion in their football life.

Firstly, Ghanaians are deeply religious and therefore, football administrators could use religious beliefs and rituals to motivate themselves, players, supporters and other officials.

However, motivation and success have to do with mental orientation. So, the football administrators should first ensure that the players and other football enthusiasts are self-

⁶⁴ Almost all the footballers that the researcher interviewed were of the view that Ghanaian football cannot do away with religious beliefs and ceremonies.

⁶⁵ Evangelist Peter Owusu Agyemang is the author of the book "The God of Football. Who is He? Jehovah or Satan?". The researchers had an interview with him on 05/10/2022 at his residence in Ejisu Besease in the Ashanti Region of Ghana.

motivated and success-minded before they support that ambition with religious beliefs and rituals. The collaboration between the two will ensure victory and success in football.

Secondly, football in contemporary Ghana has become a highly lucrative business enterprise. It has witnessed enormous capital investments. Therefore football administrators, in their attempt to ensure success, should not rely solely on religious beliefs and rituals, but manage the sport enterprise on sound financial principles and good financial investments. The playing team should be financially motivated to give out their best.

Thirdly, Ghanaian football participants should portray decency and sanity in their exhibition of religious beliefs or tradition in football. Sometimes, because of some religious beliefs and rituals, people sprinkle all sorts of things like concoctions and other unhygienic substances on the playing field. These people's minds are preoccupied by some religious beliefs which make them do such things without considering the consequences of their actions.

Fourthly, those who patronize football should have it at the back of their minds that, games are supposed to be won on merit on the field and not by spirits. When situations are not brought under control, a time would come when the results of matches in Ghana's football will be determined by soothsayers or spiritualists.⁶⁶ As far as football is concerned, win, draw or lose is inevitable. Surprisingly, when foreign teams are not performing well, supporters of these teams take it as normal but when it comes to local clubs in Ghana failing to perform above their expectations, they turn around to attribute their team's abysmal performance to a spiritual problem.⁶⁷

Fifthly, contemporary Ghanaian football has experienced optimum modernization, innovation and enlightenment. Therefore, team owners should not always be kept blind by some

⁶⁶ 'Football and Spiritualism', available at <https://www.myjoyonline.com/football-and-spiritualism/>. (Accessed on 21/06/2022.).

⁶⁷ 'Football and Spiritualism', available at <https://www.myjoyonline.com/football-and-spiritualism/>. (Accessed on 21/06/2022.)

religious beliefs and ritual, but they should employ the services of competent administrators, players and coaches who can help their teams to cope with the ever-changing football environment.

Lastly, the Ghana Football Association (GFA) should collaborate with team or club administrators to adopt measures to sanitize the mode in which football participants undertake religious rituals in Ghanaian football. Some people engage in violent behaviours due to some religious rituals. They do so especially when the activities of some people seem to hinder the efficacy of their rituals or beliefs. This does not contribute to good sportsmanship.

6.0 CONCLUSION

Football and religion are great enterprises that increase human passion. The two ought to be handled with care and by professionals. When government and private sector invest in football, it will create more avenues for employment of the youth and solve youth unemployment problem in Ghana. It should be noted that religion and football have close affinity in terms of moral values of discipline, self-denial and the development of character which are very essential for nation building. If religion and football are developed and play their proper roles in our society, we will end up building a strong and healthy nation for all.

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Annex

Interview with Emmanuel Nkrumah, a former player of Asante Kotoko Sporting Club and King Faisal Football Club. Interview date: 03/02/2022.

Interview with Daniel Nii Adjei, a former player of Kumasi Asante Kotoko Sporting Club and the Black Stars of Ghana. Interview date: 04/02/2022.

Interview with Richmond Boakye Yiadom, a former player of the Ghanaian senior national team (the Black Stars of Ghana), on TV3 at 11:30 am in a programme named “Warm-up Platform”. Interview date: 04/06/2022.

Interview with Eric Bekoe, a former player of Kumasi Asante Kotoko Sporting Club and the Black Stars of Ghana. Interview date: 06/02/2022.

Interview with Obed Opoku, a Sports journalist with Otec 102.9 fm. Interview date: 04/02/2022.

Interview with Sheikh Dr. Zakaria Seebaway on Monday, 6th June, 2022. He is a Lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Ghana.

Interview with Thomas Nuamah-Yeboah, a Sports historian in Kumasi on 10th November, 2022.

Interview with Evangelist Peter Owusu Agyemang is the author of the book “The God of Football. Who is He? Jehovah or Satan?”. The researchers had an interview with him on 05/10/2022 at his residence in Ejisu Besease in the Ashanti Region of Ghana.