

The Significance of Religious Practices in Sport: The Case of Religion and Football in Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Sporting is an important activity in the lives of many youths in Zambia. It is common that people rarely think of religion when talking about sports. Without contradiction, Zambia is also a Christian nation, with the majority of the citizens practising Christianity. The religiosity of youths involved in sports is visible off and on the field as some of them may be seen engaging in religious acts or devotions. Worship, prayer, fellowship, ceremonies and rituals are practised during sporting events; all are expressions of religion. At the same time, some pundits may argue that sports and religion are contradictory. Ordinarily, sports as fun, competitive, intense, and in some instances violent in nature, cannot be thought to have anything close to religion, which in contrast is often viewed as sombre, reverent, and sacred in nature. This study, therefore, sought to take a paradigm shift from studying sport as a discipline in its own right to relating it to religion. Using phenomenology design, the study adopted qualitative methods to establish the reasons for youth involvement in sport. It also analysed the views of stakeholders, among them youths, on whether religion had any effect on the performance and behaviour of participants, especially in Zambia a country declared a Christian nation. Finally, the study sought to examine how sport could be used as a mitigation measure to curb the vices, including religious intolerance, faced by the youths in Zambia and other countries in Africa and beyond.

Keywords: Sports, religion, practice, beliefs, rituals, tolerance, Christian nation, worship

BACKGROUND

It is now common knowledge that society does not exist without religion; the two entities have always co-existed and influenced each other. It is from religion where every society derives its identity, meaning, norms, values and wellbeing. This means that everything that happens in society has to some extent a religious orientation. In Zambia, the religious influence is visible in sports for both adults and youths. Religious practices such as prayer, mantras and hymns always precede the matches. For instance, during the 2017 Under Twenty Africa Cup of Nations Tournament, the Zambian team was identified by its religious slogan, “*Bola na Lesa*” meaning football with God. Additionally, at the Under 20 World Cup in South Korea, the junior Chipolopolo team made headlines for their rituals which included praying together with the mantra being christened football with God. Religious practices such as prayers and mantras used in football should not be questioned. A football tournament is a form of competition so God can take sides

in a football match as He has done in Biblical times. For example, in the Exodus story, God took sides with the Israelites and destroyed the Egyptians by drowning them in the Red Sea. God always favours a team that He views to be doing the right thing. Society maintains that you can only win the game through hard work although luck does sometimes creep in. It is this discrepancy, which made this study worth and timely so as to answer unanswered questions regarding the phenomenon by gathering views from stakeholders on how religion related with sports. We recognise that there were many sports activities in Zambia. However, the focus of this study was men's football because this was seen to be the most popular sport.

Historically, sport appears to have its background in religion. In the Mediaeval period, sporting activities tended to remain part of the religious feasts and festivals until the Middle Ages in about AD 1000 to AD 1450 when the sporting competitions began to be pursued on a regular basis outside the control of religious leaders. For many centuries, sport and games were under church

control because of their concern for the body and soul. For example, Obare (2000) reports that in early cultures, sport competitions were permitted only on holidays associated with celebrations of religious rites or festivals such as births, baptisms, confirmations, and weddings. Obare's report gives an impression that sports competitions in archaic cultures had always formed part of the sacred festivals and were indispensable as health and happiness-actuating events (Huzinga, 1976).

Additionally, according to Brasch (1972), the rainmaking priests of the ancient ethnic groups tribes were the first team of professional players whose sole task was to join in games of chance which they believed would force nature to precipitate rain. Sports, therefore, assumed a cosmic significance. Definite rules in traditional ball games were religiously observed to direct the winds, the bringers of life. The two teams represented earth and sky; and as not one would dare to cheat the gods, an umpire was unnecessary. In short, sport was perceived as divine and the gift of the gods. As such, in ancient times, for a man to play a game it meant accelerating the revival of nature and the victory of negotiation (Brasch, 1972).

It is also reported that among the Zuris of Mexico, sports began as fertility magic, to ensure birth, growth and the return of spring (Obare, 2000). Sport was therefore a magical ritual. It tried to attain human survival by supernatural means. During drought, the Zuris played particular games convinced that this would magically bring rain to enable their crops to grow. This association of prehistoric games with worship permeated with the classical period. The Indian games of North America, for example, were essentially religious rites; they were more religion than play in today's meaning of the term. As such, non-Indians were not usually allowed to view these activities in their traditional form (Coakley, 1994). Additionally, sporting pictures adorned the walls of Egyptian temples. The pharaohs and their nobles enjoyed sport, not merely as spectators but as participants. The Pythian games were closely linked with the oracle of Apollo and his shrine at Delphi (Brasch, 1972). The Olympic games centred on the magnificent temple of Zeus at Olympia and when the ancient Olympics began in 776 B.C, the Greeks offered

sacrifices and took oaths in honour of Zeus to emphasize the games' religious significance.

In traditional African society, sports and religion were one functional unit. For example, the wrestling contests of the Ibo of West Africa could not take place before the oracles of the hills gave their consent through the priests and priestesses of the clan. According to Achebe (1980), the elders of the two communities involved in a wrestling contest visited the shrines and consulted their gods. Led by their priests and priestesses they offered sacrifices for blessings to ensure that they won the contest. During the contest, the drummers beat their drums like those possessed and this, it was believed, signified the presence of the spirits who were the determinants in the results of the contest. Among the Lozi of western Zambia, a man could not beat the drums the most unless he offered rituals to the ancestral spirits.

This brief background gives a clue why religious practices have become a common feature of modern sports. In the case of Zambia, it is not surprising to see rituals on and off the field since the country subscribes to Christian values. Political, social, and cultural activities are often flavoured with religious expressions and practices. The influence of Christian religious practices is commonly seen in most football competitions in Zambia. Mantras become the source of vigour for the Zambian football players. During these tournaments any non-Christian rituals by the opponents are perceived as ungodly if not altogether evil against the "Zambia Christian national football team". Though common in Zambia, the act of introducing religious practices during a football match might not be understood by the Zambian society as acts meant to appease God to help the players win the match. This study therefore presented a platform to enable youth players explain how religion influenced their behaviour on and off the football pitch.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Using different perspectives, different scholars have forwarded varying thoughts explaining the influence of religion on human behaviour. Basing on human's inability to control the outcomes of any activity, Max Weber (2002) formulated his concept called protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. Weber forwarded that belief in predestination as interpreted by everyday English Puritans, brought about a different view of capitalism in Europe. According to Weber (2002), the Puritan theology was based on the Calvinist notion that not everyone would be saved and that there was only a specific number of the elect who would avoid damnation. This was based on God's predetermined will and not on any action one could perform in his/her life. This meant that one could not really know whether one was among the elect or not.

In Weber's view, this was difficult psychologically. Understandably, humans were anxious to know whether they would be eternally damned or saved. Thus Puritan leaders began assuring members that if they began doing well financially in their businesses, this would be one official sign that they had God's approval

and were among the saved. This brought about increased pursuit of wealth by the Protestant Christians in order to develop a feeling of being among the saved by God. In modern Zambia, this spirit is observed on trading buildings and minibuses. Labels such as Holy Spirit Power, God Gives, and Forgive Them Father among many other protestant refrains are labelled on buses and shops. All these trickle down to the human's quest to gain God's approval and commit the outcome of the activity in the hands of the Supreme power (Coser, 1977).

Weber's protestant ethic theory was extended to the current study to explain the players' behavior before, during and after the field of play. Basically, football is a competition whose outcomes are practically hard to predict and control. In a way only God knows the outcomes. As such, the unceasing curiosity to predict and control the outcomes of the game by the players finds rest in dedicating the whole match to God by introducing different rituals on and off the field. This gives strength to the players to work harder. The more the soccer players dedicated their game to God the more the reward which might include winning a game, receiving monetary allowances and bringing honor to the team and sometimes the country at large. For example, Malinowski (1948) noted that as the level of uncertainty of success in an endeavor increases, the more individuals turn to magical and superstitious behaviour in an effort to control the outcome. Using weber's thesis, Hoffman (1992) challenges those with doubts on the co-existence of sports and religion by emphasizing dimensions of training and sport participation that fit well with certain aspects of the Protestant Ethic theory. This strategy as mentioned in the role of sport involves focusing on sacrifice and pain as indicators of moral worth, striving to achieve "total release performance", and abandoning the notion that the human body is sacred.

Weber's theory was used in this study as an assumption whose conclusion depended on the data collected from the participants.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The practice of introducing religious rituals on and off the playfield is a common phenomenon across different cultures globally and is as old as sport itself. Literature (William, 2014; Hoffman, 1992) contains numerous of players who have publicly portrayed their faith in sports.

William (2014) gives an example of Timothy Richard Tebow commonly known as 'Tim Tebow' as one of the players who have mixed religion and sports. Tim Tebow, a former quarterback in the National Football League (NFL) in the United States of America (USA) was a proclaimed Christian who gained notoriety with his symbolic allegiance to his faith by the customary Christian act of kneeling on the field following any score made by his team to exhibit praise, thanks, and reverence to his given belief. Ray Lewis, a former NFL linebacker, was another athlete to openly express his devotion of faith on the field as a testimony for using God-given talents. Lewis went so far as to run across the field after winning the Super Bowl in 2013 with a shirt that displayed the Bible verse 'Psalm 93', which reads in part: "The Lord reigns he is robbed in majesty.....".

Furthermore, in the run-up to France's World Cup win on home soil in 1998, before every game, their captain Laurent Blanc kissed the bald head of the goalkeeper, Fabian Barthez, even in the final game in which he was suspended. Ivory Coast defender, Kolo Toure, insisted on being the last player to enter the pitch before the start of play. During warm-up, one of England's leading goal scorers, Gary Lineker, would never shoot towards goal in fear of hitting the back of the net and wasting one of his goals. There is also the case of former Argentina goalkeeper, Sergio Goycochea, who believed he brought good luck before every penalty shoot his team faced by emptying his bladder. The ritual worked well on the pitch. It is a ritual that worked at the 1990 World Cup, held in Italy, in both the quarter and semi-finals but not in the final against West Germany in which Argentina lost. In Zambia, youth sports have seen the introduction of *Bola na Lesa* slogan as part of the game (Kachingwe, 2017).

Though common, some people rarely think of religion when talking about sports. Others are aware of it but feel the topic is too controversial to be given a platform for discussion. To the contrary, other scholars (Prebish, 1984; Eitzen and Sage, 1989; Hoffman, 1992; Bailey, 1997; Lord, 2006 and Aicinena, 2013) have taken keen interest in not only criticizing the act but also finding out how religion influences the players' behaviour during sports activities.

As justified by Bailey (1997), players and coaches use their religion as a source of psychological support as they cope with various challenges and uncertainties related to competitions, and as they try to find special meaning for their sports lives. Coaches use different forms of religion and religious beliefs to enhance team unity and establish a basis for social control over their players. Lord (2006) adds that this habit is very common in schools and college sports where special religious services are conducted prior to any crucial match. Players converge and pray or perform some rituals before a kick-off of the sporting competition. Womack, quoted in Hoffman (1992) made a similar observation. He forwarded that players frequently used rituals to make them feel as if they had control over what happened to them. Womack's argument contained some elements of Weber's theory, "the Protestant Ethic Thesis" in which he considered increased capitalism as the product of uncertainty. The two scholars Bailey (1997) and Womack, in Hoffman (1992) suggest that if football, and indeed any other sport activity, was not an activity based on probability, rituals would not be an important feature of the sport. However, uncertainty is part of the game and where uncertainty exists, rituals follow.

Admittedly, it is not all players who use their beliefs in this manner, but there is a tendency for some to call on their religion to help them successfully face the challenges and uncertainties related to sports. Different scholars (Eitzen and Sage, 1989 and Aicinena, 2013) have tried to analyse players' ritualistic behaviour from different approaches but always meet on one reasoning. The reason is that magical and superstitious activities surrounding football competitions (and any other sporting competition) abound because luck has a huge impact upon the outcome of contests. For many team players, rituals are used to cope with the uncertainty existent in sport. This may lead to the practice of a player carrying a lucky object

or engaging in a routine ritual before attempting a free throw. Kreider (2003) observed that prayers offered in sports are often equated to asking God for the provision of a miracle. Kreider further gives examples of requests for miraculous intervention such as: “God, please give me the strength to do this; God, if it be your will, please let us win this game; and God, please help me make this shot” (Kreider 2003:61).

Furthermore, prayers, mantras and other rituals are regarded as a source of strength and hope by participants involved in sporting competitions. As asserted by Prebish (1984), rituals and ceremonies, whether in religion or sport, reinforce adherents’ values and beliefs. In terms of ceremonies, Prebish cites the spectacles of the modern Olympic Games with the ritualistic and lavish opening and closing ceremonies complete with torch, oath, flags, and symbolism. Croakley (1994) supported this argument in his assertion that religious beliefs and rituals could provide players with physical and spiritual reinforcement, relieve anxiety and help them concentrate and face competitions with confidence. Religious rituals also give reasons for practicing and developing physical skills. Croakley (1994) further asserted that religious rituals are considered as a driving force behind the players’ active participation during the match as they are convinced that they have the backing from God. This hypothesis is in harmony with what one medalist testified. As reported by Obare (2002), Willy White, a former gold medalist in the women’s long jump, explained her success in the Olympic Games this way: “I was nervous, so I read the New Testament. I read the verse about having no fear and I felt relaxed. Then I jumped further than I had ever jumped before in my life” (Obare 2000: 6). White’s echoing implies that religious rituals provide calmness and security to sports participants as they forget the fear of losing the game.

Sports participants involve themselves in religious rituals in order to put their sporting lives into perspective. Hoffman (1992) stated that one way athletes could justify the self-focused, self-indulgent way of thinking that was so pervasive in competitive sports, was to define sports participation as an act of worship and an avenue of giving a witness to spectators. This is supported by the study of Czech et al. (2004) who established that Christian athletes often used prayer in sport to “give glory to God” (p. 10). For example, one participant used the Biblical verse Colossians 3:23 as his motivation for sports participation: “whatever you do, work at it with all your heart for the Lord, not for man”. So it is apparent that when working with religious sports participants, coaches and sport psychology consultants need to consider a number of important factors that may influence their counseling interventions with the players.

Several other investigations have shown that the use of religious rituals by players before, during and after competitions is a common practice for enhancing the performance and overall well-being of the players (Czech, Wrisberg, Fisher, Thompson and Hayes, 2004; Park, 2000; Vernacchia, McGuire, Reardon and Templin, 2000). For example, Czech et al. (2004) investigated the use of Christian prayer in sport, adopting an existential phenomenological method to collect and analyse data. Nine former Division One Christian athletes were interviewed using

an interview guide comprising a series of open-ended questions. The findings showed that ritualistic activity had a powerful influence on the athletes and that they used prayer as a coping mechanism to alleviate stress. These findings were supported by the results of two other studies, which investigated coping strategies used by national Korean athletes (Park, 2000) and the determinants of professional and personal development in Olympic track and field athletes (Vernacchia et al., 2000).

The results of all the investigations considered above identified prayer and other rituals as important factors in coping with stress and anxiety, attaining peak performance and providing meaning to sports participation. On the contrary, Krieder (2003) questioned the sincerity of prayers offered by players. For him prayers in sports are uttered with extrinsic goals of performance in mind. They have nothing to do with wanting to live life as God wishes sports participants to live. In his other study, Hoffman (1982) supported this argument as he declared that the pressure of soccer contests created foxhole converts. In simple yet clear terms, sports players offer prayers in response to expected fears and anxieties, but once the contest ends, they often engage in behaviour contrary to the teachings of religious scriptures.

METHODOLOGY

The study was qualitative and used interview method to gather information from 8 participants: 2 administrators selected from Football House, 2 religious leaders who participated in male soccer activities, 2 senior Chipolopolo players and 2 junior Chipolopolo players. Since the participants were busy, information was gathered using recordings on phone. Data was also collected document review of different literature and resources posted on the internet. With regard to analysis of data, raw data was thematically categorized and later analysed.

FINDINGS

The data is presented according to the themes derived from the objectives of the study as shown below:

Religious Practices

Participants gave varying views of their understanding of the term religious practices. One of the religious leaders indicated that religious practices were any sacred activities that were earned based on one's beliefs or denomination. The other religious leader took religious practices to be spiritual or moral standards of living or moral cultural practices with spiritual attachments. In addition, two participants from Football House of Zambia each explained that religious practices were all activities meant to serve God through prayer, charity works, serving on religious bodies and spreading the Gospel by good actions. Religious practices were also described as any practices that were related to religion.

One of the youth football players said, “I take religious practices to be any activity which helps me to have faith in God. It is also the fear of God expressed in different positive ways.”

Furthermore, religious norms and beliefs were regarded as some of the religious practices. An under twenty football player explained that religious practice was any activity related to walking on the side of God or doing everything, including playing football, with God in mind.

Apart from giving their views on what religious practices were, participants gave examples of religious activities often performed before, during and after the match. These included short prayers, singing religious songs, saying poetry and slogans such as ‘Bola na Lesa’, making Favour gestures and fasting. Others mentioned activities such as kissing and touching the ground, making the sign of the Cross on the ground, making gestures to the sky in prayer and Biblical teachings by pastors.

Meaning and Significance of Rituals in sports

Participants were also given a platform to explain the significance of religious rituals. To begin with, one of the participants indicated that *Bola na Lesa* was a Bemba (one of Zambia’s commonly spoken local languages) saying which translated as “Football with God”. When asked its meaning, the participant from the Senior Team indicated the following:

You cannot succeed in football if you do not acknowledge God’s role. This means that all players should put God first in everything they do on the pitch; even if they lose they should thank God for the life, endurance, commitment and the unity that prevailed between the two teams.

One Football House official explained that the slogan arose as a result of the players’ belief that God knew every outcome of every activity; even the existence of youths as football players was known before they were born.

“So we take God to be part of everything we do because without Him you cannot do anything; hence, Bola na Lesa,” he concluded.

Furthermore, while prayers often spiced the Favour gesture, the football players understood it as a direct communication with God who was to intervene in the crucial task one was about to undertake. According to the junior Chipolopolo player, the Favour gesture implied that any ability displayed on the pitch was a gift from God. With regard to the significance of religious practices performed in football as a sport, participants generally indicated that the practices were forms of rituals. As such, they signaled an outward appreciation to God. The practices further sent messages to the opponents as well as supporters that all talents were given by God and only Him should be given praise.

One participant said, “Such rituals give us strength to play the game very well and we tend not to fear the outcomes”.

One religious leader interviewed on the same subject stated that religious rituals provided footballers with physical and spiritual reinforcement; they relieved anxiety among the players and helped them concentrate and face competition with

confidence as they knew God was with them. The other religious leader indicated that when players engaged themselves in religious rituals especially before the match, their confidence grew, fear diminished and discipline was maintained. This eventually enhanced performance.

Effect of Religion on Sports

When asked whether one's level of faith had an effect on the effort put in during a football match, one of the religious leaders indicated that faith without works was nothing. The more faith a player had, the more work he would put in and the higher the performance. The religious leader concluded, "A player can incomprehensibly play beyond his ability if he believes God hears him and is with him in that battle". The under twenty player had this to say:

Faith in God is the driving force in playing football. Whenever I am playing, I remember the words I have memorized of Mathews 7: 24, "Therefore, everyone who hears these sayings of mine and does them will be like a discreet man who builds his house on the rock". So if you have faith, nothing will be impossible for you."

He further explained that these verses motivated him to dedicate his desire to win the match into God's hands, for it was as good as a discreet man who built his house on a rock. He added that he always used this approach and had been playing very well without offending other players. A Chipolopolo participant attached faith to prayer. He indicated that prayer helped him to endure all trials he faced in sports. As he prayed, he was reminded of men and women in the Bible who remained faithful to God despite the trials they faced. Hannah and Rachel were good examples.

DISCUSSION

The study gathered information on the religious practices used in football competitions, their meaning and significance, and the effect of such rituals on the general behaviour of the players on and off the pitch.

Types of Religious Practices in Sports

The findings showed that youth footballers used different types of religious practices which included prayer (both individual and communal), religious mantras, for example Bola na Lesa, religious gestures, such as Favour and the Cross, reading the scriptures and listening to gospel music. These rituals were introduced at specific levels. Prayer was used before and after the kick-off at the first and second half of a match. Prayer could also be used as a means of giving thanks to God for a goal scored. It was not only associated with good deeds but it was also used when one had been tackled to such an extent that severe pain is experienced by the offended. Prayer with intensity was what mattered to the youth in the midst of pain. This kind of prayer enhanced the endurance of the youth. It

gave him hope that the pain would quickly diminish, making him recover and continue playing and possibly score a goal. Even if one did not score any goal, there was hope that the future held good results. This is what happened to the Zambia senior team, Chipolopolo. It took eighty three years (from the time the team was constituted in 1929) for the team to win the Africa Cup in the year 2012.

Bola na Lesa mantras was often used before the match began, especially when the match seemed so crucial that it had to be won. With regards to the Favour gesture, it was used when one of the players scored a goal or when the team won a match; it was rarely used when the team lost. If the players trusted in God and left football to God, they should show favour to Him at all times. This was similar to what William (2014) observed about Tim Tebow, who gained notoriety with his symbolic allegiance to his faith by exhibiting the customary Christian act of kneeling, praise, thanks giving and reverence to his religion while on the field following any score made by his team. The presence of religious acts in football competitions among youths in Zambia suggests that religion was an important factor both in the field of play and away from the field. The findings from the religious leaders showed that religious practices enhanced the friendship among different competitors who remained calm even after a tackle caused by a careless kick or an insult from an angry opponent. The practices also helped to strengthen the behaviour of the youths. Using these religious practices, the youths became role models to their supporters and spectators, who in turn, might imitate them. As such, the findings gathered from the youth under twenty participant showed that successful training and strategic planning undertaken before the game needed to take into account religion as a key factor; otherwise all attempts would be in vain.

Significance of Religious Practices in Sports

Furthermore, the results of the study showed that religious practices were used in sports competitions by players mainly to ask God's intervention in their quest for victory. Players looked to God for strength, miraculous outcomes and for relieving fear before and after the game. The religious practices equipped and set the players ready for the battle. This is true in the sense that before the football match kicks off, competitors usually have fear of reaping negative results at the end of the game. This might negatively affect their potential to win the match. This state of vulnerability compelled the players to faithfully pour out their hearts to God by means of prayer so as to receive miraculous vigor meant to regenerate their strength and energy beyond human understanding.

This is in harmony with Kreider (2003) who asserted that prayers addressed to God by competitors in sports were meant to ask God for the provision of strength and miracle to win the game. Craokley (1994) added that religious beliefs and rituals had particular elements which directly boost the physical and spiritual wellbeing of those who faithfully used them. What Craokley tried to document is that prayer is a remedy which replaces anxiety with confidence. For example, Willy White cited in Obare (2000) reported to have fought against nervousness by praying and reading scriptures in the New Testament which implore mankind not

to have fear over anything. It is no wonder the under twenty participant who took part in the study resorted to fasting, prayer and reading the scriptures before taking part in a football competition he regarded to be important.

To a large extent, the above observations are in line with the works of Karl Marx (1975) on the functions of religion to society. Marx declared that religion was the sigh of the oppressed creatures, the heart of a heartless world, just as it was the spirit of a spiritless condition. Religion is the opium of the vulnerable. Footballers tend to be vulnerable especially before the match as witnessed by their fear and limitation to predetermine the outcome of the game; as such, they turn to religion for comfort.

Apart from relieving anxiety, prayer was identified as a means by which participants had a sense of control on the outcome of the match. When participants pray to God, they believe that He is on their side throughout the game. This sense of feeling is evidenced by their behaviour. To be specific, the mantras used showed that God took sides with the subscribers of the ritual. As such, they feel strengthened because they believe they are guaranteed God's abundant Favour. This coincides with what Bailey (1997) forwarded. He asserted that footballers and coaches did not only use their religion as a source of psychological support when faced with challenges and uncertainties of competitions but also as a source of meaning in their lives. Malinowski (1948) validated this argument by adding that the level of religious rituals used by sports participants before the match provided the level of confidence players had towards the outcome. The more the level of uncertainty increases, the more common individuals turn to magical and superstitious behaviour in an effort to control the outcome. In the current study, the behaviour exhibited was not regarded as superstition but faith in God.

Using Weber's thesis to reflect on the above analysis, one would agree that the reasoning ties well with the Protestant Ethic Thesis. The thesis has it that increased pursuit of wealth is a direct result of uncertainty by humans on their Godly predetermined fate, whether damnation or salvation (Weber, 2002). In a similar manner, increased use of religious practices in sports amounts from the players' desire to have a sense of control on predetermined outcomes. This means that the more youth footballers engage in religious practices, the more their minds remain calm. This practice is often accompanied by play which is free from panic.

Additionally, religious rituals like mantras, gospel songs and gestures are used by footballers as a way of paying homage to God who is believed to be behind any ability displayed on the field. So at the end of every match thanks giving rituals are given to God regardless of the outcome of the results. Everything happens according to God's plan. This understanding helps the players to accept the results. This is in agreement with what William (2002) asserted that Ray Lewis as an example of sports competitors, highly valued the need to praise God for the talents he gave to believers. Lewis went so far as to run across the field after winning the Super Bowl in 2013 with a shirt that displayed his favorite Bible verse: "Psalm 93".

From what has been discussed so far, we note that though religion is a key feature in sports both religion and sports complement each other.

Relationship between Religion and Sports

Religion and sports have both direct and indirect effect on each other in a variety of ways. As presented in the previous section, the footballers' faith in God, regardless of its level, compels them to work hard with full confidence because they strongly believe that they are doing something which is right and according to God's plan. One's level of faith could be measured by the efforts put in when playing since faith without work is useless as recorded in the Bible book of James 2:1. As such, more faith translates into more works which later results in high performance. This observation is in agreement with what Czech et al. (2004) asserted that religious practices had a powerful influence on those involved in sports in that they were not only used as stress coping mechanisms but also as performance enhancement elements. Besides, empirical studies in non-sports settings support these findings. For example, studies in health psychology (Duckro & Magaletta, 1994; Koenig, 1988), medical science (Bernardi et al., 2001; Leibovici, 2001) and psychology of religion (Finney & Malony, 1985; La Torre, 2004; McCullough, 1995), have demonstrated the significance and positive physiological effects prayer has on participants such as coping with stress and anxiety.

Based on the reviewed literature and the findings, we argue that religion has a multi-dimensional influence on the players. In circumstances where the match is practically crucial to win, in the mind of a footballer who has faith in God, his belief is that with God nothing is impossible. Such a mindset helps the footballers not to relent in their efforts and continue applying their energy beyond mere human comprehension. This is so because the scriptures admonishes them to do everything they do with all their hearts and for God not for humans (Colossians 3:23). In other words, the footballers' religiosity supplied reasons why it was necessary to participate and win the match. This argument is well supported by the study of Storch et al. (2001) who explored the religiosity of 248 elite college athletes. Participants were administered the Duke Religion Index to assess organizational, non-organizational, and intrinsic dimensions of religion. One finding was that the athletes' attendance at Church provided an opportunity to reflect on earlier accomplishments and future plans and thus to attach religious meaning to their sports participation. Additionally, Vernacchia et al. (2000) further found that the athletes' spiritual and religious beliefs supplied a deeper meaning to their athletic successes, failures, struggles, and disappointments.

Though religion has an influence on football players, it remains debatable whether the outcomes of sports competitions (especially when negative) have power to convert or indeed revitalize participants' faith. In the current study, participants had already Christian faith backgrounds and this made it rather difficult to ascertain if sports outcomes had an effect on their faith. However, available literature (Hoffman, 1982; Krieder, 2003) suggested that the religious behaviour portrayed by footballers often ended as soon as anxiety was contended. For example, Krieder (2003) observed that prayers in sports have less, if not nothing, to do with wanting to live life as God wishes sports participants to live. Some players' behaviour might be often at odds with the principles set by the scriptures.

It is also true to state that other sports participants play without the influence of religion. However, the findings of this study showed that youth sports participants in Zambia relied much on religion to strengthen their performance and this helped to shape their behaviour in the field of play and society at large. Generally, in times of adversity and uncertainty, believers have always used prayer for strength and as a means of coping with anxiety.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study showed that religion was used as a catalyst for good performance by male football players in both junior and senior soccer (and indeed other sports) competitions in Zambia and beyond. Through its common features such as prayer and mantras, religion worked as a source of strength and anxiety absorber in the lives of the footballers. From our study, soccer players reported that the mantras they used set the stage for good performance and behaviour both in the field of play and society at large. This appears to affirm Max Weber's insights from his theory of the protestant ethic and capitalism which stressed the role of religious belief in having positive practical outcomes. These mantras were also reported to have enhanced the footballers' desire to continue to have a good relationship with God. However, the reports of the players might conflict with actual behaviour of the players on the football pitch as behaviour such as time-wasting, faking a foul to have an opponent sanctioned, harassing of referees, taunting opposing fans and other disrespectful behaviour appear to be common among all teams including those who profess to pray or practice some religious mantras both on and off the football pitch. Finally, the religious practices examined in the current study were Christian-oriented. These religious interventions may not be applicable for youths who belong to other religions. There might be need for further research on this.

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