

**'META-SOCIETIES' AND 'PLAY COMMUNITIES'.  
THE FUNCTION OF PLAY  
TO LIBERIAN YOUTH FOOTBALL PLAYERS**

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### **'Meta-societies' and 'play communities'. The function of play to Liberian youth football players**

*This inquiry considers three distinct areas, firstly the Liberian definition of 'youth' and their post-conflict identity, secondly the tradition of community and the post conflict living arrangements, and thirdly the theme of this investigation, the use and participation of football and play amongst the 'youth' male population; its structure, rules, function, role, frequency, meaning and relationship to the wider society and status.*

Keywords: community, youth, football, play, culture, status

### **"Meta-sociedades" e "comunidades de jogos". A função do jogo para jovens futebolistas liberianos**

*Esta investigação centra-se em três aspetos distintos, em primeiro lugar, a definição liberiana de "juventude" e a identidade liberiana pós-conflito, em segundo lugar a tradição da comunidade e as condições de vida pós-conflito e, em terceiro lugar, e tema central desta pesquisa, o uso do futebol e a participação da "juventude" masculina em jogos de futebol. A análise foca as estruturas, as regras, as funções, os papéis, a frequência e o significado do futebol em termos das relações estabelecidas com a sociedade em geral e ao nível do status.*

Palavras-chave: comunidade, juventude, futebol, jogo, cultura, status

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Liberia has a unique history; it was founded in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century by freed American and Caribbean slaves originally taken from Central and West Africa<sup>1</sup>. This West African country became fittingly known as Liberia or “Land of the Free” and was initially imagined as a haven for “free people of colour” (Moran, 2006, p. 2). The returning Americo-Liberians also referred to as ‘Congos’ or ‘Settlers’ became the Liberian elite. Co-existing with the settlers was a population of between two and three million indigenous peoples that comprised sixteen ethno-linguistic groups. In 1838 a constitution based on the American model was drawn up by a Harvard Professor and Professors from Cornell codified its laws in the 1950’s (Dalton, 1965, p. 572). Despite the vision of freedom and security that Liberia was conceived upon, its early history was based on inequality, one party rule and the centralisation of power. Liberia’s recent history is perhaps a consequence of its unique and turbulent conception.

Liberia is now in a post-conflict state after suffering from a fourteen year civil war (1989-2003). Approximately 250,000 people lost their lives, leaving a legacy of a country in turmoil that was over-armed, without infrastructure and harbouring an entire generation of children and young people that had experienced war or actively participated with or without any education, skills training or guidance. Many were orphaned or shunned from community living due to their participation in the conflict. It is important for one to understand the complexities of a situation like Liberia’s and the position of the young and older people without power and status in a society and all its intricate elements. First it has to be determined what is meant by the term ‘youth’ and secondly what are the fundamental principles of belonging to such a group. Ultimately the question must be what is it that can bring meaning, empowerment and belonging to Liberian male youth? The data presented predominantly refer to male youths not only because of its meaning in the local context but because this group have been identified as particularly problematic in Liberian society. An attempt at gaining such an understanding and answers has been sought during extensive ethnographic research.

What was made very clear from the beginning of such an investigation was the overwhelming participation of young males and the mass population’s passion for football. Makeshift playing fields and goals epitomize the ‘jumpers for goals concept’. Football in Liberia is without question the principle activity for male participation and is observed by the masses. Football fields represent the heart of every community; makeshift wooden goals fill any available open spaces. Games throughout the day between community members, schools or against

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<sup>1</sup> The American Colonization Society (ACS), founded in 1816, was the predominant force striving to resettle ex-slaves. Between 1821 and 1867 the ACS resettled some 10,000 African-Americans from interdicted slave ships.

other community teams occupy the space until the sun goes down. Children of all ages play on the sand pitches with homemade footballs, usually mango stones or bundled plastic bags. As many children do not go to school, they play in between doing chores. Older males (from the age of 15) form community teams and enter local competitions and practice together on community pitches; 'old timers' will form their own groups and practice on Saturday and Sunday mornings as part of their weekly exercise and predominately use this time as a social activity. Girls also form teams and practice when the male footballers do not use the space; however, some girls spend their free time watching the boys and using football as an opportunity to meet potential love interests. Football is the ultimate passion of the Liberian masses, easily accessible, affordable and inherently part of their culture.

## Matadi and the Don Bosco Youth Centre

Matadi is situated in the suburbs of Monrovia and has emerged as a large residential community due to migration from the interior during the war. The Sean Devereux Don Bosco Youth Centre (SDDBYC) is the largest communal facility in Matadi, centrally located and multifaceted. Within the high walled grounds stands the Catholic Parish of Holy Innocents Church, Mary Hope of Christians School, a housing block for the priests, a stage and performance area, a basketball court, a volleyball court, a playground with swings and a slide, a music room, a large sand football pitch and a smaller football pitch for the smaller children. The Youth Centre is open for play between 4-6pm every week day and Saturday mornings until noon; an estimated 350 children and youths access the facilities every day. The youth centre was founded in 1991. Its purpose was to help children and youth recover and rehabilitate from the effects of war. The youth centre was active during the war and witnessed many stages of conflict and peace-keeping. Rebel forces resided in Matadi as an ideal location to occupy before travelling to the central Monrovia to fight. Soldiers would steal from the youth centre and use their water pump, militia leaders even tried to recruit child soldiers from the community. At this time many children and young people went into hiding in the swamp areas and returned to their homes in the evening for food. ECOMOG<sup>2</sup> peace-keepers came to protect the site in 1997 and the children and youth were able to play once more although this was regularly interrupted during heavy

<sup>2</sup> The Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) was established in 1990 for the purpose of peace-keeping and peace enforcement in Liberia.

periods of fighting. Many of the young people who used the youth centre during times of conflict now form the youth centre football team called 'Zatti'.

Matadi is very fortunate to have such a site; no other community observed has such facilities or organisation residing in their home. Although football pitches do act as focal points for most communities, houses usually surround football pitches with the play area acting not only as an area for football, but social, religious and political gatherings, parties, wakes and community meetings. Football is the activity that tends to engage the majority of that community's population, male youths, female youth for kickball, adult male coaches, referees, and spectators. When lost or trying to describe a community the name or location of the football pitch is the first point of reference.

In 2010, I began spending time at the youth centre, and was attracted to the activities on the main football field. It was the focus point of the site and attracted the majority of participants and spectators. Players were always noisy, making jokes; play fighting and their favourite pastime seemed to be arguing or '*palava*' as is the local term. Generally the disputes were directed towards the referee's decisions but there was no lack of '*palava*' between players of the same team, opposing teams or with the coach. It was like watching a pantomime; quickly I was able to identify the main antagonists, the peace makers and the jokers. Children and adults of all ages came to watch the spectacle as the youth centre team Zatti would play against other community teams or the 'outsiders'<sup>3</sup>. The gathered crowd played their role well as a participating audience, celebrations of goals, heckles for mistakes, the most common being "that player is dam *fisci*" – meaning terrible.

This seemed a perfect platform to identify 'youth' as well as their culture, characters and idiosyncrasies. As I established myself within the community I adopted the role of coach for the Zatti team. I became part of their play world and had my own function. The youth footballers practiced every day except Sundays and from observations and talking to the players it seemed their daily routines were scheduled around their training and preparing for matches inside and outside of the youth centre. Immediately it became obvious that football was their passion and the youth centre facilitated such play by providing a pitch, spectator seating area, footballs and a coach. Ultimately the priests of the youth centre see sport as a way of character building, escapism from the realities of being young in Liberia and an opportunity to give moral, ethical and spiritual guidance. Encouraging sport and especially football for them is encouraging participation

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<sup>3</sup> A combination of players who competed for different teams but lived in Matadi and wanted to play. These included players from premiership teams to 3rd division and some retired players.

and contact with the young people in their community. Without football within their walls the youth centre would be much quieter and virtually unused.

Playing football is an important part of people's lives in Matadi not only for the players but for the Don Bosco organisation and the wider community that observe their play and as later discussed facilitate young people's participation. What is being considered here centres around two themes, firstly the term 'youth' as a local category and an analytical construct, and secondly football as a practice of 'youth' in Matadi.

## The identity of Liberian 'youth'

The term 'youth' is freely used by governments, aid agencies, and society and in the case of Matadi by communities and its population. Officially the United Nations defines youth as anyone between the ages of 15-24. The Liberian government consider youth as those between the ages of 15-35: "The governments rationale behind such a broad definition of youth is that 14 years of warfare have left 'over-age youth' ill equipped to cope in a post-conflict society" (USAID, 2009, p. 5). When observing the ways in which the term is applied a pattern begins to emerge, for example the European Youth Forum provides information regarding youth NGOs and key words are used throughout "disadvantaged, marginalised, challenged, deprived, exclusion, disengaged, homeless, poverty, unemployed" to name but a few (n.d., pp. 3-15). The term 'youth' is not unproblematic and provides assumptions about the population it is describing. The 'youth' label is neither scientific nor bound by direct criteria, it is not naming someone but describing their affiliation to a group. There is a clear stereotype of 'youth' which carries many expectations or in most cases lacks expectation. In such a population not being a child nor an adult can pose an awkward position in any society.

Some have attributed such labelling to Africa's history with European colonisation: "The means by which local elites and national governments alike portray and interact with those they term their 'children' or 'youths' today are strongly influenced by the social history of people classified as 'young' in precolonial societies" (Argenti, 2007, p. 7). Europe's presence in Western Africa and their use of its people gave precedence to a misconception regarding the roles, functions and status of its populations. Although colonised by America, Liberia did not escape such practices and influence. Additionally ruling elites and chiefdoms have always led their community structures and this has not been reformed in an official nor at a traditional or practical level since Liberia's conception. As Argenti states: "The term 'youth' has thus gained its notorious connotations not only because it

was a negatively defined category but because of the failure of colonial and post-colonial governments to offer any alternative to the traditional eldership" (*ibid.*, p. 10). Here is an example of a Matadi 'youth' football player.

Richard, known by his team mates as 'Nation'<sup>4</sup>, is the captain of the Zatti football team. At the age of ten he and his mother migrated to Matadi in the suburbs of Monrovia from Bong County to escape the war that was escalating in the interior. He was faced with many challenges; for the first time he witnessed life outside of a remote village. The car that transported him to Matadi was the first he had ever seen; he could only speak his indigenous language Kpelle. He had to adapt to a new form of wartime community. This way of living included residing amongst people of varying indigenous groups, languages, religions and traditional beliefs whilst having access to hand pumps, buying food rather than living off the land, listening to imported American music and seeing different forms of housing. He was to learn English quickly with the aid of young boys in the community and adapted to his new situation. During the war, he regularly had to hide in the swamp areas to prevent recruitment from rebels who would occupy Matadi from time to time. He reminisces happily of the times when the war would 'relax' in stages and the boys in Matadi would play and go to the youth centre. Schools were mainly closed during the war so his education suffered. During wartime he was regularly at the youth centre playing football especially during the times that ECOMOG came to protect the site and in 2004 the then named 'Don Bosco Dream' team entered the National League fourth division and became a competitive outfit. 2004 would also be the year that Richard returned to school and entered into the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade at the age of 19. Richard describes his routines with great pride:

In the morning hour I wake up very early get water from the pump and bathe, eat and go to school, no one pays my way so I have to walk to school. By 1 or 2 in the afternoon hour I come home and do work for my ma, then by 3.30 I go to the youth centre and play. Practice finishes by 6 then I go home eat and study.

This was to be his routine throughout his school career. There were interruptions of schooling due to financial problems within his family and Richard had to find 'small' work in the community to get 'small' money usually fetching water for people, doing washing and cleaning.

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<sup>4</sup> The majority of football players in Matadi are known by nicknames. Most are given names of famous footballers, for example, Pele, Ronaldo, Tevez, Gerrard. Other names are given due to physical features, i.e. a player in Matadi was known as 'eyeball' due to his large eyes. Richard was called 'Nation' as this is what was chanted during a penalty shoot when he was a teenager just as he saved a penalty and led his team to victory.

In 2011 at the age of 26 Richard passed his final exams and was awarded his high school diploma. But what to do now? He was unable to find formal employment and couldn't afford university fees so he enrolled on a carpentry course in a vocational training centre within Matadi. He will not finish the course until he is 28 years of age. He is still living with his mother and father in a small house made from wood and corrugated aluminium next to Matadi's swamp area. He has no form of employment and uses his free-time after school to play football with his peers at the youth centre. His plan is to finish this course and either re-register to do a plumbing course or enrol at university to study social work, either way he will continue to live with his parents without employment for the potentially lengthy future.

For large numbers of people, prolonged adolescence – and more recently 'youth' – now takes up much, if not all, of what in earlier society would have been 'adulthood' ... it appears that an increasing number of people are not 'growing up' in the traditional sense of the word (Cote, 2000, p. 1).

Cruise O'Brien claims: "Becoming somebody can no longer be taken for granted" for young Africans, "the common denominator for these different youth situations is that young people are without employment in the formal sector, and are not in a position to set up an independent household" (1996, pp. 57-58). In the eyes of his parents, neighbours, community elders, wider society and the Government, Richard is a 'youth' and will be until he obtains the necessary wealth and social worth to be considered otherwise. Elders or people not considered youth with a higher social status will call him 'Pikeen' or 'boy' and he is expected to be highly respectful of such people and obey any requests they may make. As he is unable to support himself he is unable to obtain housing and support a wife so he remains a bachelor until the day that employment, independence and adulthood arrive. O'Brien would describe this process as "indefinitely prolonged" and one would agree due to Liberia's lack of socio-economic development, opportunity and hierarchical society (O'Brien, 1996, p. 58).

The majority of young and older males in Matadi are labelled 'youth' and yet from analysis of academic literature and from extensive fieldwork one can conclude that this is not an innocent term to describe young people. This is a label for those who find themselves unable to climb the ladder and acquire status and who, one might argue, are victims of living in a hierarchical society that elders, the Government, and in the case of Liberia aid agencies fail. From within, age has no significant relationship to perception and status and therefore labelling and identity, any male and to some extent females can be 'classified as children' if they do not possess the necessary finery associated with adulthood (Argenti,

2007, p. 7). Henrik Vigh believes that “The predicament of not being able to gain the status and responsibility of adulthood is a social position that people seek to escape as it is characterised by marginality, stagnation and a truncation of social being” (2006, p. 37). Matts Utas considered the Liberian situation extensively and claimed: “As the category of youth is constructed upon notions of social age, social markers such as marriage, or at least a stable relationship with a woman, are requirements for moving out of the youth category and into adulthood” (Utas, 2005, p. 141). He further explains that older men during the war were classified as ‘youth’ in social terms, “they were mature men lacking the wealth and power required to cross the border between youth and adulthood” (*ibid.*). Although in Utas’s view the war was seen as a means of social mobility in the quest for respect and status, this was only short-lived: “once war is over marginal souls are once again deported to the margins” (*ibid.*). In the local context, it must also be established that the term ‘youth’ has specific masculine connotations and is predominantly used to describe males and not females.

## Football and play everyday

The day the priests at the Don Bosco Youth Centre in Matadi and senior players on the team asked me to help coach Zatti, I knew I had found my role within the community. I was already familiar with most of players as they all lived in the community, but I didn’t want to rush into my position. I asked if I could have a few days to further observe and prepare, and they happily agreed. The next day, I positioned myself under a tree next to the football field; I was early but was enjoying the cool breeze. Richard was one of the first to arrive; he dressed into his practice clothes away from my eye line and went to the main building to collect the ball, bibs and cones. He was the only one allowed to collect these things as the priests trusted him and it was part of his responsibility as captain. The players arrived in a very casual manner usually one by one or in pairs; they were allowed into the compound from 3.30pm, thirty minutes before anyone else. They are the most senior team in terms of the ages of participants, competition and duration of being active at the youth centre. Dressing and talking or ‘lecturing’ as they call it amongst themselves took at least 20 minutes before Richard would call all the players into the centre of the pitch for devotion; this consisted of a religious song followed by the holding of hands and praying. The younger players especially enjoyed singing and took the lead dancing, clapping and singing loudly.

There would be a mixed reaction within the group thereafter. Some would begin playing with the ball and performing elaborate skills, others and gener-

ally more senior players would turn to the coach for the next instruction. Coach Juday, an assertive character, was in charge. He had been a commander for one of Charles Taylor's rebel factions during the war. He would never talk softly, always shouting in a husky deep voice. He was the ultimate authority figure over these boys during their practice. He stood and told them their orders; sitting down near him were suspended players that still chose to come to the youth centre to watch their friends and join in with the performance with banter, advice and support. Approximately fifty supporters had turned up during the practice to observe training and the games. Many were players from other teams or unrelated adults who had returned from work.

Practice was quite limited as in excess of thirty players had to share one ball so the ability to perform ball drills, technique and strategy was virtually impossible; instead they would do a little physical training, for example running laps, press ups, sit ups and sprints. Complaining was the main focus during these periods of physical training as well as finding ways to cheat and make exercises easier. For example, a player known as 'Pele' would perform press ups from his knees instead of full body ones like the others were attempting. All the players had an eye on the coach to see if he was looking; if ever he was distracted or engaged in conversation, the players would rest. On this particular day, I noticed that a young player by the name of Morrison was absent and this was unusual, so I asked after him; a player who lived near-by him replied "he's washing for his Ma".

Zatti trained every week day and played against either 'outsiders' who were community members that played competitively for different teams or another third division team who were based nearby. On this particular day, the Zatti players were to practice against the 'outsiders'. Coach Juday selected a team of eight players (the pitch was not full sized) whilst the youngest players filled a gallon tub with water from the hand pump for the squad to drink. A referee was selected from the crowd of spectators and the game eventually began after much joking around, physical playing between them, water drinking and emptying their boots of sand and re-tying them. The game was competitive and at some points overly competitive, with the sand encouraging rash slide tackles, and arms and upper body strength being used to over-power one's opponent. This, at times, caused arguments between players on opposing teams, which in turn led to Coach Juday scolding his player involved which resulted in '*palava*' between coach and player. Players usually touched hands after such altercations as a sign that there's no bad feeling between them.

A lot of pride was at stake in these games; even though they occurred daily, discussions of the game, player's performances and incidents would continue

well into the night. Bernardo was a key figure for the Zatti team. Tall, muscular and outspoken, he was the unofficial leader, joker, antagonist, protector and spokesperson for the team. On this day he was unhappy that they were losing 1-0 by a mistake made in the midfield. He cursed the players at fault, but took offense to an opposing player who was heckling the Zatti team. He called to him 'You' with a clenched right fist with the index finger pointing towards the air<sup>5</sup>; the player turned and at the sight of Bernardo's gesture withdrew. That would usually be enough to satisfy a player's dominance and distaste for certain behaviour but not Bernardo; when the opposing player in question made a run with the ball towards goal, he jumped into a tackle leaving stud marks on the player's ankle. Players ran from all sides to remove Bernardo from the field. Some were aggressively having *palava* between themselves. Others were trying to calm the situation down. The referee was helplessly blowing his whistle in the middle of the field whilst Coach Juday was scolding Bernardo and told him to sit alongside the suspended players. Calm was eventually restored, and the game continued without the participation of Bernardo.

At 6pm, the referee blew the final whistle and the Zatti players walked towards the concrete seating area at the far corner of the youth centre compound next to the football field; this was an unofficial home bench for the team. Players were discussing the game, mostly Bernardo's sending off. Some were defending his behaviour as they thought that the opposing player was being rude. Others believed that Bernardo was rude and that 'he was not correct'. Either way, it was accepted that such behaviour was possible from him as he was known to be troublesome and seemed to enjoy the reputation it brought. He would not face suspension, but the senior players 'lectured' him at length. The younger players collected the bibs, ball, cones and whistle and walked it over to the main building to be put away whilst the others continued 'lecturing', wiping the sand from their sweating bodies and changing. Until Coach Juday arrived and they became silent he began shouting at them in his usual aggressive manner, claiming that their discipline was not correct and that they will bring embarrassment to the youth centre when they begin their league games if their behaviour does not improve. It was evident that most players were not fond of Coach Juday; they didn't like being talked to in such ways and believed that in many cases he provoked *palava* by shouting at them, yet they respected him and, other than Bernardo, they never challenged him. The 'lecturing' finished at 6.30pm with a selected player saying a

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<sup>5</sup> This gesture is known to be a challenge in a scolding manner, a person who accepts this challenge will approach the person and force the finger down indicating 'you are not bigger than me' and this will usually initiate a physical fight. If the person does not want to enter into such a challenge they can walk away in defeat of the threat.

prayer for the group. The relationship between coach and player highlighted the typical interactions between adult and youth.

## All play means something

The work of Huizinga will be used to analyse the concept and relevance of play in culture. Although his work may have been completed some sixty years ago, he is still considered a pioneer in his field and continues to be referred to extensively with regards to the theme of play. Huizinga claimed: "In play there is something 'at play' which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something" (1950, p. 1). Whether considered instinctive, ritualistic, the need to satisfy the need for relaxation or an activity used to prepare one for future life, one assumes that play has a higher more significant purpose than simply playing. Huizinga's extensive consideration of the concept of play has formed the basis for most analysis into the play element. His concern of other theories is the lack of consideration towards the "profoundly aesthetic and primordial quality" of play (*ibid.*, p. 2). Whilst many have turned to science and quantitative research methods, this has arguably ostracised the fun element that characterises play, the beauty of its spontaneity and the freedom it can provide. Thus, this particular investigation has used ethnography as the principle research method as non-invasive technique to gain rich qualitative results. One must remember that all play is a voluntary act; if regimented or forced it no longer constitutes play. The instinct to play as a child and the enjoyment it produces lays the foundation for its quality of freedom. The endless characteristics of play encourage a multi-dimensional outlook. Play can be serious or non-serious, can evoke a number of different emotions, and each act of play is different from the other, therefore an exact definition would be misleading and ultimately inaccurate.

The social context of play and its natural quality to remove one from 'ordinary life' is what places play within a social context and this social construction is what makes play significant to cultural environments.

It adorns life, amplifies it and is to that extent a necessity both for the individual – as a life function – and for society by reason of the meaning it contains, its significance, its expressive value, its spiritual and social associations, in short, as a cultural function (Huizinga, 1950, p. 9).

Huizinga states that "play and culture are interwoven" and that genuine, pure play is one of the main bases of civilisation (*ibid.*, p. 5). Caillois would argue

that play is a reflection of society and mirrors its nature, environment and culture. Caillois here provides support for Huizinga's theory of play but developed the analysis with a further analysis of the classification and diversified forms of play (Caillois, 1961, p. ix). In the case of youth and adult play, the act becomes something which is optional, it is not a necessity, "play is superfluous" (Huizinga, 1950, p. 8). It would be performed at leisure when free time allows and is free from obligation and duty. Caillois formulated his own definition of play and placed types of play into categories: "one plays football (*agon*), roulette (*alea*), pirates (*mimicry*), dizziness and disorder (*ilinx*). Each form of play takes into consideration the role of competition, chance, simulation or vertigo" (Caillois, 1961, p. 12). Within this categorisation, *agon* will be under consideration although some crossovers will occur. *Agon* is defined as "competitive like a combat in which equality of chances is artificially created... is a cultural phenomena among *homo sapiens* as the spirit of the game is centred on equality of rules and environment" (*ibid.*, pp. 14-15). For the Zatti players in Matadi, playing football is a voluntary activity they chose to do in their free time. For these young men, this is a significant amount of time due to their lack of working or other scheduled tasks. Obligation or duty are not elements in their decision to play. Most take it seriously, playing to win and compete, but the fun element is always there to see with their wit and humour. Huizinga believes that the act of play and stepping out of 'ordinary life' and entering a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition of its own is important when characterising play and culture. This is a key element to the overall argument. Many Zatti players like Richard as previously described are unemployed still being schooled at an older age and living with parents. Their playing provides a platform to take the lead in their lives and step away from their lack of social worth within the community. In the youth centre, they become the most important, respected and seen demographic all the while displaying their inherent characters, having fun, and playing by the rules that they set.

The theme of tension is an important aspect in both Huizinga's and Erving Goffman's work. Actual physiological tension is part of the appeal of all games; play it creates drama, performance and atmosphere among all involved. Yet for Goffman, the tension experienced during games identified a player's perception of discrepancy between the world that one embraces spontaneously and the "world one is obliged to dwell in" (Goffman, as cited in Henricks, 2006, p. 154); quite simply, the tension reflects social alienation. The fact that the Zatti players have to create a world away from their community to feel free, equal and important further highlights their position and role in Matadi. Although football

for them is an escape, it is also the activity in their lives that further re-enforces their position as youth and the stigma that brings. As already examined in the case of Richard, opportunities are limited to achieve status and social worth, so the options are thus, play in the community team and be further associated with the label of 'youth' or leave and face the realities of being a 'youth' alone trying to achieve the impossible.

The question posed here is by no means rhetorical; I propose that football has become the answer for many of these young Liberians. If you are marginalised in one community and have no opportunities to escape, then create your own society. Football then has taken on a whole new meaning, function and purpose at the community and grassroots level. No longer is it just a game but it has become an outlet that provides social worth and status within a specific milieu. Along with recognition from adults who come to spectate, it creates a society from which they are not alienated but manage themselves, which forms stronger cohesion amongst its members. Players take on roles to organise, support, perform and encapsulate all whilst gaining acknowledgement from outsiders and community members. Football then provides the stage for young males to be heard and seen; even their use of nicknaming players creates characters. Erving Goffman's sociological perspectives on human expression considered not the act of play in itself but the social situation that surrounds the game and "that interpersonal life is always, inevitably, a form of play" (Henricks, 2006, p. 148). Believing games as a fundamentally relevant form of human encounter and an apt metaphor for social life, he describes the act of play and games as:

A matrix of possible events and a cast of roles through whose enactment the events occur constitute together a field for fateful dramatic action, a plane of being, an engine of meaning, a world in itself, different from all other worlds except the ones generated when the same game is played at other times (Goffman, as cited in Henricks, 2006, p. 151).

Within his theory, rules were devised, for example the 'Rules of Irrelevance'. This states that the social status of players is of no pertinence once the game has begun. As previously examined, status is a major barrier to gaining adult recognition and respect. If this aspect of human interaction is eradicated through play, then surely this can be identified as a significant aspect towards its participation and attraction for the players. As Goffman advocated, "Gaming encounters provide us with fine examples of how mutual activity can utterly engross its participants, transforming them into worthy antagonists in spite of the triviality of the game, great differences in social status, and the patent claims of their reali-

ties" (*ibid.*, p. 153). Goffman agreed with Huizinga and the correlation between established groups, in this case teams, forming their own cultures and this generally concurs with established cultural patterns. So, therefore, the Zatti team have found an activity that, most importantly, they enjoy and are skilled at, but also breaks down the barriers associated with status in their community. In their Zatti football community, they are the most important members and therefore provide themselves with status and importance. It is my belief, however, that their football community is more reflective than that and more extensively organised. Find here an example of a youth event in Nigeria that sees youth playing roles of elders and different community members as an example of this theory.

### Create a new community?

Harold Olofson's interpretation of a Hausa youth festival in Zaria, Nigeria provides alternative and supporting explanations on the social role of play. This particular youth festival takes place at night during the dry season and is named '*wasan misisi*' or 'the play of the misses'. Young people play the leading roles imitating elite hierarchical social structures. Olofson describes the complex role play that illustrates the Hausa elite roles that have been replaced by post-colonial political roles. Positions include the governor and his orderly, the queen, the prison warden, policemen, a treasurer, judge, secretary and medical staff (Olofson, 1977, p. 169). The tale of the story is not to educate the audience about the colonial government or the original emirate but to set the stage for flirtation and interaction for young boys and girls. Olofson states, "The possibility arises that the play-kingdom is a meta-society, 'a society about society' and the elements in it so combined as to provide subtle teaching on the wider context" (*ibid.*, p. 172). Within the festival, a 'play frame' is created in which rivalry and competition manifests, yet this is no different to that witnessed in 'ordinary life' in the frame created by the nation-state, but the festival provides a stage. Mimicking the roles of elites gives these young actors a chance to play the part of important or 'big men', something which for many will remain a part in a play far from reality, "at the crux is a meta-society which leads people to awareness at some level of ascribed status which prefigures life chances" (*ibid.*, p. 173).

Within the Zatti football team they create their own play frame in which competition and at times rivalry and tension is displayed. I would strongly argue they have created their own meta-society playing leading roles on the community football field every day in front of an audience. Even their organisation mimics that of 'real life'; their coach has ultimate power, but due to his involvement in

the war as a rebel commander, is he playing a character in a position of authority to recreate his status during the war or to show the audience he has a responsible position leading the community youth? The captain and vice-captain, although still classed as 'youth', are over the age of 25, so in their play society they act as elders leading the players, giving advice and policing them when needed. They organise themselves internally by unwritten rules, aware of who has been in the team longest and who is older and younger. This dictates how much respect each player receives by the team, i.e. the youngest players will be sent to fill the water bottles at the hand pump whilst the older boys will sit and rest during play breaks. The older boys will instruct the younger ones on and off the field imparting knowledge of how to become a better player. As Caillois claims,

Games reflect forms which, while doubtless remaining in the domain of play, evolve a bureaucracy, a complex apparatus and a specialized hierarchical personality... They sustain permanent and refined structures, institutions of an official, private, marginal, and sometimes clandestine character whose status seems nonetheless remarkably assured and durable (1961, pp. 40-41).

This system is almost a mirror image of the ordinary life society in which they live, but in their own play society they can act the leading roles and progress with time, unlike their journey and quest for adulthood which at times seems unachievable and stagnant. The meta-society created protects and provides opportunities to be seen by adults. Football provides a rare opportunity for inter-generational contact, but this is only seen within a specific time and space. This has little impact once the game is finished. Acquiring formal employment is the most significant barrier to gaining status and being a football player only establishes the status of youth. Youths typically pursue informal employment known as 'hustling'<sup>6</sup> and tread the fine line between legal and illegal money making.

## Playing by the rules

Although deep rooted in spontaneity and removal of one's self from 'ordinary life', play requires participants playing by the rules. Any deviation from the unwritten or written rules of play spoils the game and de-values its worth to the other players; the following of such rules is paramount to the game's sustainability and are the fundamental principles holding this temporary state together. The notion of play and tension is important and apt in the case of youth football

<sup>6</sup> Hustling can range from selling mobile phone scratch cards, gambling or seeking manual labour. Hustling can involve petty crime and stealing. It is an exclusively youth pursuit to gain money. Its chaotic nature adds to the youth identity of being immature, irresponsible and impulsive.

in Matadi. The uncertainty of play and the reliance of co-operating players build tension amongst these unpredictable youths. As Huizinga states,

Though play as such is outside the range of good and bad, the element of tension imparts to it a certain ethical value in so far as it means a testing of the player's prowess: his courage, tenacity, resources and, last but not least, his spiritual powers – his 'fairness'; because, despite his ardent desire to win, he must stick to the rules of the game (1950, p. 11).

The indiscipline observed by many of the Zatti players constantly led to the game being disrupted or ending early. At times, outside authority figures would have to intervene, 'lecture' and punish, thus propelling the players from a state of escapism in the world of play back into ordinary life. Their indiscipline, freedom to express and the empowerment of asserting authority within tested the rules and the manner in which they were expected to play. The players' behaviour dictated how long they could engage in their 'play community'; deviation from rules caused the game to break down or adults to once more assert their authority. The level of freedom given during these times often led to other forms of mirroring social norms outside of play. For example, authority figures would often 'flog' youths when they displayed inappropriate behaviour and this was performed during training times if any players began misbehaving.

Different players make up a 'play community' which many would identify as the formation of a team. Spoil-sports, cheats and fake players all contribute to the dysfunctional players who threaten the play act and highlight the fragile nature of play and the illusion of a world away from normality (*ibid*, p. 12). The Zatti team openly label 'bad boys' or troublesome individuals as part of their 'play community'. Huizinga believes that such individuals are usually ejected, more so than cheats or deviants to codified rules. However, in the case of Matadi youths, such players are expected to be punished or warned by authority figures, but remain part of their 'play community' in and outside of the act of play. Very few are permanently dismissed or ousted by the group. Similarly suspended players will often continue to attend training even if it's in a non-practical sense they still want to belong to their 'play community'. Their bond and awareness of the importance of the play act allows for misbehaviour and deviance. This may further highlight post-conflict cultural norms displayed by adults<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> In 2005 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Liberia was formed. This was a parliamentary organisation designed to promote peace, identify key players during the war and bring some form of truth and justice to their victims. Frankly speaking, many former rebel faction leaders and infamous fighters were brought before this commission; they were able to describe their crimes against humanity, apologise and be pardoned. This has created a culture whereby saying 'sorry' relieves one of many an indiscretion.

Goffman applied another set of norms to that of Huizinga's analysis of play called 'transformation rules'. In his view, games are not clearly separated from other portions of life. Although play and specifically football in Matadi is away from the marginalisation and the harshness of 'ordinary life', certain impediments may disrupt the course of play, i.e. injuries, arguments, phone calls or weather. In many cases in Liberia players were called for by family members to help with chores, as previously described with the player Morrison who missed training due to washing his mother's clothes. During rainy season, play was abandoned altogether. Importantly, for the youth of Matadi, play is something that sheds them of their low social status and for the first time puts them on an even playing field. However, their escape from ordinary life is fragile; the demands placed by hierarchical structures outside the youth centre are a constant threat to their play experience (Henricks, 2006, p. 151). However much football acts as an activity away from ordinary life, it must be acknowledged that without the support of the priests of Don Bosco and the acceptance of parents or guardians allowing them to take the time to participate, the community's youth would not be able to establish a strong play ethic and facilitate a regular outlet for these young boys and men. The elders still dictate the success and running of their play world whilst posing as the most significant potential barriers to participation.

Huizinga claims that the 'play community' tends to maintain, even after play has finished, the bond of 'togetherness'. "In an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game" (p. 12). The players unite when playing football, strength in numbers gives their youth status more significance and bonds them as their own community or meta-society, with their own rules, order and fun. Within their group, they have their own way of performing and organising, and this provides the element of secrecy and prestige. They are able to represent themselves and display their play world to an audience, performing something 'out of the ordinary' which at times creates status and admiration. Play to Matadi footballers is a very powerful element that they incorporate into their lives on a daily basis.

The spectators of such daily performances in Liberia also play a role in this act away from ordinary life. Their participation and gesturing enters its own phase of play, laughing, mocking, having fun and observing an act in the world of play. Observers are voluntarily placed at the edge of the performance and have their own rules to follow in order to continue their role. This act away from home forms another 'play community'; their reaction to the performance can influence

the stages of play and its course over a period of time. Play without willing spectators creates a whole new, less dramatic environment.

Playing football acts as a 'cosmic' state for Zatti players, a means of escapism from marginalisation, lack of opportunity and ultimately being dominated by elders. Football removes them from the realities of their environment and unites them. Their role in a 'play community' provides another world and an importance within. They are able to display their performances in front of the wider community and for once have the leading role. The importance of rules and order to sustain this world of play is of paramount importance, players who deviate are punished and the game can quickly end. In the case of Liberia, it can be argued that deviating from the rules, causing tension or breaking the spirit of play is part of the performance and conflict within is all part of the act. Uniquely, such players are never fully removed from this 'play community', highlighting the importance of play, the acceptance of deviants and tension as part of their play performance and the realisation that even the most rule abiding players don't want to see members of their youth group banished from such an important part of their culture. On and off the football field, the group's togetherness is evident and youth continue to enjoy the dynamics of being part of their own community. Yet is the participation of playing football a factor in keeping them in the youth category? Is it preventing them from aging in the eyes of the wider community and society?

I would argue that, in the case of Liberia, it does, as Caillois states: "What is expressed in play is no different from what is expressed in culture" (1961, p. 64), the act of play "affects their preferences, prolong their customs, and reflects their beliefs" (*ibid.*, p. 82). Belonging to the Zatti football meta-society and forming a play community allows them to play a part in their world away from ordinary life of marginalisation, being powerless and dominated by those who are seen as elders and adults. Their acceptance in this act is reflective of the society around them but more forgiving and ultimately more fun. Giving them the opportunity to progress to higher roles, show their skills and perform in front of an audience who would ordinarily shun them as being just boys. Yet whilst they belong to this meta-society, they are still known as 'football players' and youths; they are not working in a responsible job, owning their own home or providing for a family. More importantly, they cannot be part of play community and have a respected role in the wider hierarchical traditional community structure. The social effect for players is therefore observed in its own cultural context rather than looking at the act of football as part of a trajectory towards adulthood.

## **Reinforcement or freedom: the consequences of being a youth footballer in Liberia**

During fieldwork, a priest based at the youth centre claimed, "this is the only place I know where a thirty-five year old man can still be a fifteen year old boy". Discovering the meaning of the 'youth' label and its ramifications for young people has been a primary focus for this work. What has been considered fundamentally relevant is Liberia's community structures and its traditions. The interruption of formal rites of passage, access to education and the reduced opportunities to gain employment has increased due to the conflict but also due to Liberia's cultural and historical make-up. The interaction between West Africa and its colonisers over centuries has specifically encouraged colonial and post-colonial hierarchy structures, roles and functions of its populations which have survived generations. This has led to on-going and more recently (given Liberia's social and economic decline in the last 20 years) over- and mis-use of the term 'youth', leading to the largest segment of Liberia's population being misrepresented and being forced into misconceptions which, it should be added, are heavily endorsed by international governments and NGOs. It should be proposed that 'youth' represent culture and society, and therefore their lack of opportunity and ability to gain employment, independence, housing, sustained and committed relationships is simply a reflection of the failings by those who label and judge.

There is a realistic fear for Liberian young people, Government, NGOs and development organisations, such as the Don Bosco Youth Centre, who target 'youth' and draw people into this category. They provide platforms for engaging young people, training, informal education and recreational activity, which provide feelings of importance, meaning and opportunity mostly for their future social mobility. Yet just like the ending of the war saw 'youth' removed from positions of status, to what end will such interventions provide? The opportunity may be there for engagement, yet the cultural environment does not facilitate young people to age until they can provide tangible evidence to support a rise in social status. One can argue that such organisations label young people, empower from within and then young people are left mostly without any meaningful change in their lives and remain at the margins of society. As with the case of Matadi footballers, they are empowered and recognised for two hours a day but return to an outside community where their voice is not heard and their social worth is immediately eradicated. Additionally, the use of football grants access and engagement to this group, but it doesn't produce any sustainable impact for employment or livelihoods.

The need to be accepted, acknowledged and respected is an on-going aspiration for many young footballers whilst all the while understanding its lengthy and almost impossible process. The Matadi youth footballers have thus created their own society to provide all the above stated elements. They each have roles, duties and expectations placed on them from within, which mirror those of the outside community, but this time they have the status through football and are able to progress within hierarchy over time. It is organised so the younger players fetch water and collect the equipment after training, senior players are looked upon for policing and guiding the squad, but all the while they are able to show their characters and skill without prejudice. The bond between members of this football society is stronger than stated to date in previous academic literature; even the most deviant of players will not be permanently excluded from the group and they are encouraged to continue to attend sessions. Thus one can conclude that in this case playing football provides many opportunities for social cohesion, mobility within and acknowledgement from the outside. The scenes on the football field highlight their personalities and natural will to perform and revel in the sporting arena where they are the main players on the centre stage. Yet it must not be forgotten that although football is what provides status and belonging, it is the association with this group that can enforce wider social prejudices against youth. Ultimately the elders and adults of the wider community still pose as the largest threat to the game and the most significant barrier to accessing it.

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