

UNIVERSITY SPORT, SPIRITUALITY AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

It is near impossibility to discuss humanity without adequate recourse to sport. In the same vein, it is becoming difficult to separate spirituality from sport. Several research efforts have shown that sport has become a kind of religion to some people because of its rallying power and the ability to unite people from different cultural and religious backgrounds. Thereby fostering societal peace and cohesion, especially in the face of pluralistic characterization of several societies, sport has severally succeeded even where religion could not. We have also seen the ugly sides of sport, particularly among rival fans. This work, therefore, set out to examine the place of sport and spirituality in selected Nigerian universities and how that can impact humanity. The methodology adopted in this work is historical, comparative, survey, and analytical approaches. It was observed that sport is an anticipated channel of climbing social ladders among several students which serves as a source of hope for many of them, especially those from a rather humble and poor background. It was also discovered that, sport holds the answer to the much needed unity and friendliness among students on campuses. This prima place of sport in human existence makes it very necessary to accord adequate priority to the study of sport and spirituality in curriculum, as it promotes humanity and develops the society.

Keywords: University Sports, humanity, spirituality, social development, empowerment, hope.

Introduction

Ostensibly, sport refers to any activity that involves physical skills which is often competitive and tasking. On the other hand, spirituality implies the unseen and intangible as opposed to the physical or mundane. Placing these two side by side suggests an interesting oxymoron, giving vent to a reasonable reflection of this type. It is not intellectually askew to portend that Sport involves an iota of spirituality, which has necessitated this discourse. Sport has maintained a universal status quo encompassing all localities since time immemorial. It is regarded as a common language every human understands and which has a centripetal force of promoting unity in diversity.

Apparently, the spirit of sportsmanship is a spirit of love, brotherliness and acceptance of defeat irrespective of faith, cultural and tribal affiliations of the opponent. Sport is spiritually inclined in the sense that it enmeshes a rhapsodic efflorescence which permeates the human soul at all times. The spirituality of sport is also demonstrated by the unprecedented belief in the Supreme Being to embed victory to a sporting team and loss to another, in accordance with His divine prerogative while also rewarding hard work.

God in His infinite wisdom allowed sport to be part of His creative plan. God can be described as a Sporting Personality, taking cognizance of the creation exercise. According to Christianity, God exercised the creation task for six days, and rested on the seventh day. God created the heaven and earth with His divine ability, however in no competitive manner. He designed the Cosmos in an active form that suggests a sense of sportsmanship. The birds are seen racing in the sky; the fishes perform gymnastics in the water, monkeys jump from one tree to another etc. All these lend credence to the idea of a Sporting God. Furthermore, God placed man as a coach and referee (as the case may be) to direct the activities of other creatures, making man the apex of His creation. In return, man designed the various sports we have today as a reflection of the sporting image of God in man. Suffice it to say that man has only corroborated God's spirituality about sport.

Be that as it may, it will be a harebrained assertion to say that sport can be separated with spiritual convictions. This is unarguable, considering the recitations, prayers, liturgical symbols and gestures which are often conducted on the pitch by athletes and spectators. Taking a swipe at football which is a leading sporting event today, it is evident that players are accustomed to gather and pray before and after matches, some bow and touch the football pitch with their forehead, to thank God when they score a goal. Sport has a proclivity to reduce all forms of melancholy, enabling a fraternal bond beyond individual differences. Observing the lowest ebb of sports on the streets, there is a profound elevation of the human spirit, striking a chord of friendliness among youths and children.

In view of the above, University sport is galvanized towards youths developments, exhibition of skills, enabling students to exercise the innate sporting abilities in them. It is imperative to cite a popular maxim which states that "all work and no play, makes Jack a dull boy". This is to say that tertiary education is rightly meant to be channeled alongside sporting activities for a coherent progress. University Sport promotes mental development and it avails students the opportunity to direct their youthful exuberance in a good way. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to draw attention to the potentials of University sports and its spirituality with regard to youthful strength, energy and exuberance in fostering friendliness and nation building.

University Sport in Nigeria

In order to relate this to the University environments, the academic settings in Nigeria have not done much to take advantage of what sport has to offer. With the existence of

several vices and moral decadence on the campuses, sport provides a very potential alternative of diverting youthful zeal and exuberance more meaningfully.¹ The contrary is the case however, the academics give little or no prominence to sport's involvements for the students.

The Nigerian Universities' Games Association (NUGA) has not recorded appreciable successes when compared with successes of College/University sporting competitions in countries that are doing well in international professional competitions.² In 2011, a research was conducted about NUGA by some scholars from the University of Benin, Nigeria, to determine the level of public awareness and support of University Sport, NUGA management effectiveness, availability of funds, and athletes' motivation. The response to all these came out negative.³ From the local reality, it is extremely difficult to identify any active Nigerian athlete that was discovered from the varsity level. Looking at the United States as a global model, College Games are serious money spinners and major competitions commanding dozens of thousands followership.⁴ United States has produced several Olympic medalists through their College Sports, some examples which include Ryan Lochte and many of the US Female Football team at the 2012 Olympics who won gold medals.⁵ Collectively, US Colleges and Universities produced athletes that grace the colour of their national teams at various events.

The US example may be too far from Nigeria, but when compared to any other nation in Africa, Nigeria is expected to be considered in the rank of South Africa. However, the distance between the developments of varsity games in Nigeria can no way be compared to that of South Africa as the latter has teams that are well known at international competitions such as University of Pretoria Football team.⁶ Since joining the International University Sport Federation in 1961, Nigeria has hosted the World University Championship just once in 2006 (Athletics and Chess) compared to Algeria's twice of 2006 (Soccer and Indoor Games) and 2008 (Soccer and Racket Games), and South Africa's twice of 1998 and 2008 (Athletics and Indoor Games) with also a global forum hosted in 2002.⁷ Whereas, South Africa has only two Representatives at FISU compared to Nigeria's six which apparently means Nigeria is only interested in the politics and not the games or its developments. Again, the South African Varsity sports board has a good functioning website profiling its activities with events lined up almost year-round⁸ while NUGA's website is almost moribund.

In terms of facilities, South Africa has not less than 5 Stadia of international standard belonging to Universities. One of it, the University of Johannesburg Stadium was a major venue for the 2010 FIFA World Cup while the University of the Western Cape Stadium hosted the 2012 International Rugby Board Junior Championship.⁹ The only Nigerian University, which has something close to such well rated Stadia to host international professional competitions, is University of Ilorin.¹⁰ Also, a publication on University Athletics profiled the University Games across different regions of the World, only South Africa was profiled in Africa with Nigerian University Games not found good enough in a list that includes countries like Philippine, Indonesia and New Zealand.¹¹

Very importantly, the University Games in the United States and Europe have produced many national athletes for Nigeria while none has been home grown from any of our Universities. The reigning fastest Nigerian, Adeseye Ogunlewe is a product of University of Essex in Ireland where he won the School Championships in 2009/2010.¹² Similarly, Michael Gbinije is a member of the Nigerian National Basketball team and a member of the Syracuse Orange, the Intercollegiate Competition team of the Syracuse University. Unfortunately, most of the athletes who made it to national level locally have been those who shun University education to pursue informal self-committed training because most Universities in the country have no means to aid the attainment of their sporting aspirations. Little wonder then why many of our athletes are not doing well in professional contract dealings and media interactions.

Sport and Spirituality

The spirituality in sport is manifesting glaringly before our very eyes; crowd assembles for a display of spiritual zest and devotedness in the 'sanctuaries' of sport. While successes are immediately followed with religious gestures and symbolism, a lot of people, even some scholars, have not really seen the link between sport and spirituality. It is ironical that not many scholars in Nigeria appreciate the role of spirituality in sport, as we have very limited literature from the Nigerian perspective when compared with the West. In like manner, some things like the religious gusto of supporters' club and the power of sports to rally fans in spite of their individual differences are becoming more obvious.¹³ For instance, sport fans sing religious songs, dance to the rhythm of drumbeat, to cheer their team and boost their morale in order to win. Players, particularly footballers most times make the sign of the cross when entering the field of play and when a goal is scored (in the case of a Christian) and touching the ground with the forehead (in the case of a Muslim). The emotions, positive or negative that are displayed after a match is lost or won reverberate from the players to the fans and vice-versa. Religions of the world, may want to borrow a leaf from the spirituality sometimes demonstrated by footballers particularly when they come together to pray before the commencement of and after a match. One wonders in whose name they offer their prayers, knowing full well that the team comprise of Christian, Muslims and Afrelists (adherents of African Religion).

Sport has the potential of improving physical wellbeing, instilling discipline and keeping youths out of troubles, and can also foster peace and institute friendliness. But if all these are true, we then need to consider the level of priority accorded to sport since all these potentials are means of developing the individual and by extension, the society. In view of the pertinent role of University system to the development of any society, this study is located within the University environment in Nigeria.

An ordinary look at sport may paint it as mere entertainment exercise and equating it with religion may appear odd. Sport however, goes far beyond that; it engages spirituality, and not only that, it is spiritual.¹⁴ Some scholars argue that sport has a long history of religious and spiritual connections, and that today, many experiences of athletes are not easily explained by natural science.¹⁵ Also, considering the vocabulary associated with

both sport and spirituality: faith, devotion, worship, ritual, dedication, sacrifice, commitment, spirit, prayer, suffering, festival, and celebration, the similarities and intersection between them become difficult to miss.¹⁶

The underlining spirituality of sport can be explained through the Ubuntu philosophy among the Nguni Bantu which "strikes an affirmation of one's humanity through recognition of an 'other' in his or her uniqueness and difference."¹⁷ This is portrayed in the spirit of playing sport, where all the members of the same Team and Supporters' Club put aside individual differences for the common goal of winning. It is also important that athletes appreciate team work and that no individual person can achieve success in sporting competition without the efforts and support of team mates, coaches, and fans, as the case may be. It is also crucial to note that, there is no competition without the opponent. Hence, the Ubuntu philosophy is all encompassing when applied to the spirit of sportsmanship. Failure to do so by either underrating or disregarding opponents has often shown the way out of competitions to many players or teams. The University environment is a place of learning not just academics, but also character. The University planners must have realized the importance of sport in human development and that it is a veritable means of inculcating discipline and self-control in students. Among students, sport facilitates group understanding and harmonious co-existence even when they are from varying backgrounds or affiliations. These are some of the virtues of sport spirituality.¹⁸

On the other hand, it is equally essential that we point out that sport also holds a large potential for destructive tendencies with calamitous impacts on human lives and properties. Drug abuse, sexual harassment, tribalism and other social vices are common issues in the sporting arena, the impacts of which are detrimental to social development. These vices show that sport is also capable of causing division and unrest in our society if they are not checked on time.

Sometimes, some of the religiously inclined athletes manifests levels of spirituality like fairness, self-control, friendliness, discipline, obedience to coaches' authority, compliance to rules and regulations and all of these have a way of rubbing on their supporters.¹⁹ These virtues also have a way of keeping them away and safe from malicious, reckless, harmful, and dangerous activities. For example, some sports men and women, who because of their religious beliefs abstain from alcohol, immoral sex, and the use of hard drugs and these characteristics, are commendable and highly profitable for them. Spirituality in sport through character formation and deliberate orientation of athletes about spirituality of sport, especially in Universities, while athletes are being developed is a very important way of checking the dark sides of sport and athletes. This, obviously, underscores a major role of spirituality in sport and a reason why spirituality should be recognized and accommodated, particularly in academic departments where sporting skills are taught and imparted. Transforming the sport potentials to engender social development can only be imagined within the context of spirituality which recognizes the following:

- i. awareness and appreciation of the other (including the self, the other person, the group, the environment and, where applicable, deity);
- ii. the capacity to respond to the other. This involves putting spirituality into practice, embodying spirituality, and thus the continued relationship with the other;
- iii. developing significant life meaning based upon all aspects of awareness and appreciation of and response to the other.²⁰

To this extent, Pope John Paul referred to sport as “paradigm of mass psychology” in the sense that sport “contributes constructively to the harmonious and complete development of man, body and soul”.²¹ In this regard, the Vatican has established an office for Church and Sport within the Pontifical Council for the Laity. The vision is to foster “a culture of sport” that is “an instrument of peace and brotherhood among peoples”.²² The spirituality of Sports goes beyond differences in religious affiliation. It is only in Sport that Christians, Muslims, and Afrelists unify to form a common interest without any form of crises.

Another aspect of the spirituality of sport is the involvement of some Churches in sporting activities in Nigeria. For example, Mountain of Fire Ministries (MFM) and the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and some others have Football Clubs, where apart from the physical well-being; the spiritual lives of the players are given serious attention by the Church Management, as they are considered witnesses for Christ²³ through their life-styles on and outside the football field. These categories of athletes are encouraged to be prayerful, morally upright, and good ambassadors of the Church and State.²⁴ MFM Football Club is very active in the Nigerian Professional Football League (NPFL), to the point that it topped the chart for a while.

University Sport and Social Development

Sport occupies a pride of place in society and the interdependence of human beings. Hence, the Universities are expected to provide the avenue for obvious expression of sport's potential where individuals (students, staff and even the community) deepen their understanding of an increasingly interdependent world. While sport can help social developments in numerous ways like recruitment, retention and enhancement of lives, encouraging the spirit of volunteerism, improving national recognition globally, it can also help with “more active necessity of harnessing the power of sport and education to address the problems of the day or equip students and staff with necessary analytical tools to better exercise command of their lives.”²⁵

The Nigerian society is not adequately intellectual about the important place that sport occupies in humanity. Unfortunately, the University system has no much to help either. Universities are expected to use their privileged position to develop and promote sport to the public, rather than just the intellectual engagements of sport, as it is done in most

Universities in Nigeria. The Universities in Nigeria should dominate the Sport Industry in theory and practice, in form of Clinics, Seminars, and Public Enlightenment. There is the need for the development of special curricula for gifted and talented youths in the public domain (who may not be academically inclined to gain admission into the University via the Joint Admission and Matriculations Board), that will attract, polish, and deliver such individuals back to the society, as refined and marketable Sports Men and Women. Apart from Soccer, which has gained popularity, there are a lot more sporting activities with potentials to empower the youths when they are adequately publicized. The Universities have the potentials and the capacities to do this. "Sport and its impacts within cultures and societies has the potential...to be that missing ingredient that many... presidents/principals and politicians are looking for but do not fully understand other than its celebrity or community potential."²⁶

It has always been observed that sporting facilities in most Nigerian Universities are inadequate and substandard than what can produce the expected results of international competitiveness or tangible benefits to the lives of students.²⁷ It is expected of a University or an institution to provide "enabling programs (policies and methods of implementation) and opportunities (facilities, personnel, incentives) to successfully nurture athletes from school level to elite levels of sport competition"²⁸.

In order for our Universities to actively encourage sport participation their resultant athletes' physical and character development, it is important that, adequate infrastructures are in place. This however cannot be said of most Universities in Nigeria today, especially when measured on the scale of basic facilities that are available in virtually all Colleges/Universities in the developed countries. We set out to substantiate this by asking how many renowned Nigerian athletes are products of, or were discovered in any University in Nigeria and also carry out a survey, using two major Universities in each geo-political zones of Nigeria as samples. The list of Schools includes:

University of Ilorin

University of Jos

University of Maiduguri

Federal University of Technology, Yola

Ado Bayero University, Kano

Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

Federal University of Technology, Owerri

University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife

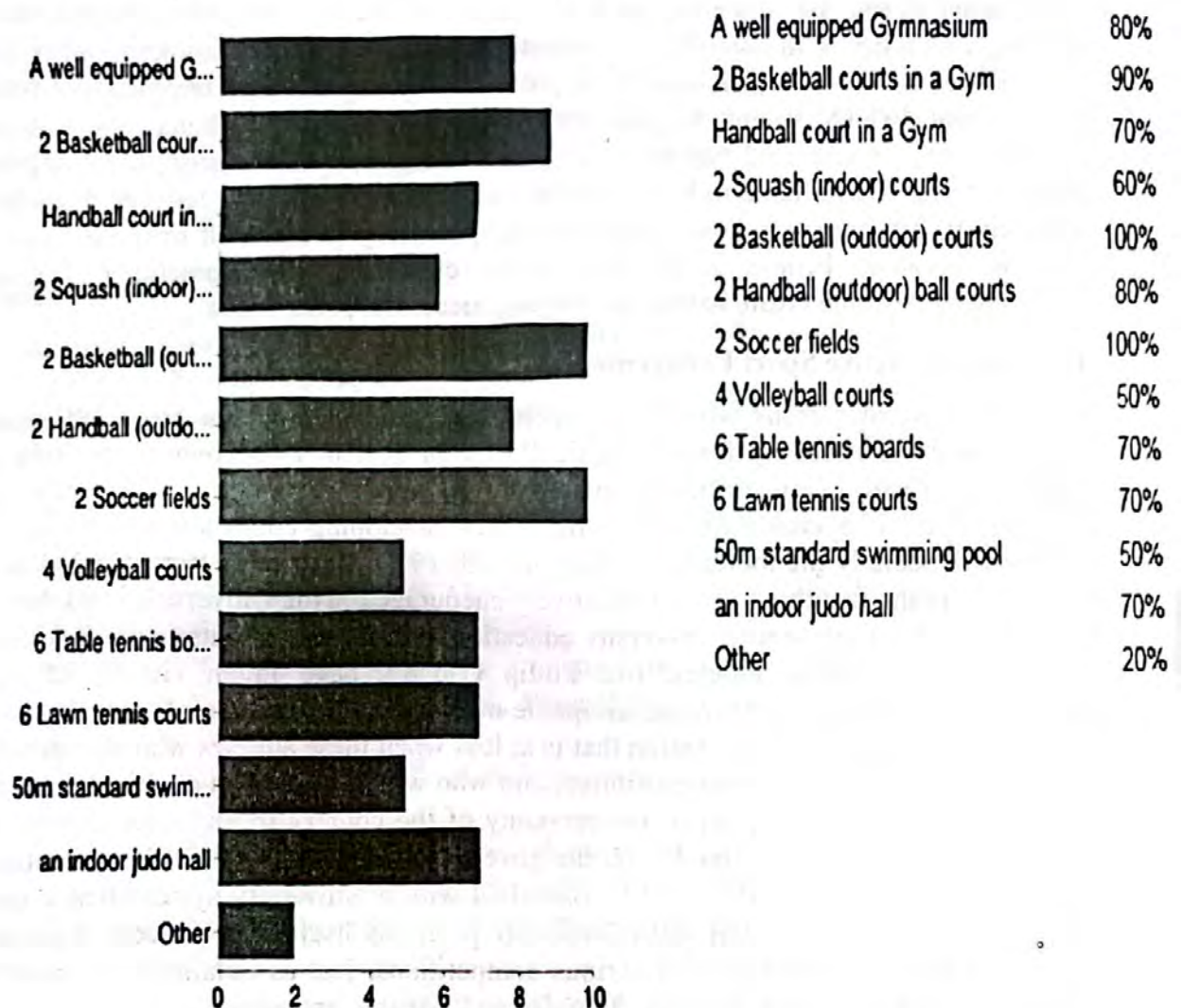
University of Ibadan

University of Port Harcourt

University of Benin

And below is the result:

Are these facilities available in the university you know?



Survey conducted with Google Form, 2015

While all the schools are said to have Soccer fields and outdoor Basketball courts, facilities required to perform the remaining basic sports are available in only about average of 60% of the Universities.

Historically, however, Nigeria recorded 5 gold medal successes in the World University Games in 1983, but through the grace of five US based Nigerian athletes²⁹. The country virtually has no record of any internationally renowned athletes or sport icon that was discovered in or through University system. This gives little room for wonder why the

nation has not really been competitive in the sporting world compared to the potentials in the country, going by the population and the resilient nature of our youths. When athletes are built and developed with adequate knowledge and discipline to respect the essence of sporting which lies in the dignity of humanity and formation of friendliness, rather than war and destructive means of settling dispute, the capacity of sport brings about social development, which would become glaring for all to see. Talking about social development, if it is agreed that sport can help to boost economy, foster peace, improve livelihood and sustain hope to keep forging on in life, it takes some level of discipline, self-control, determination, and some form of spirituality to make all of these realistic. This is because, believe it or not, some challenges and sometimes negative forces/energies would create barriers to forging successful paths in life.

The Need for Active Sport Engagement

There are several reasons why active sport engagement should be promoted among students and the necessity for Academic Policy or system to accommodate it in the Curriculum. Firstly, Universities are places for academic learning as well as character building. Sport is a vital means of learning and developing character. Some Nigerian athletes (particularly the footballers) today are either half-educated or not educated at all. This is due to the fact that sport is not actively encouraged in the Universities and this has created an idea of jettisoning University education in order to concentrate on developing career in sport. Many athletes, like Philip Osondu, have fallen victims of slave contracts³⁰, while several others are incapable of making any meaning of their lives after their sporting careers. It is the nation that is at loss when these athletes who are supposed to be role models to many young children, and who would have even positively invested from their accumulated wealth in the economy of the country to engender growth, but rather turned out to become burden on the government one way or the other, because of neglect. However, this situation can be remedied with a University system that actively encourages sport participation and consciously positions itself as the breeding place of athletes to represent the nation in various competitions, just as obtainable in countries like the USA, Britain, Asia, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and so on.

Nigerian Universities should have a system that recognizes skills and admit students to pursue the development of such skills rather than leaving them on the street where bad character is learnt with sport. Through University Sport Development Programs, the country can develop World Class athletes that are sound in academics, rules of playing sports, sound character, the fear of God and respect for opponents. Athletes that are products of this kind of a system would be good ambassadors of the nation and assets to the country that are capable of replicating themselves in lives of many other youths.

Conclusion

Having considered the roles of spirituality in sport and the important place of sport in our University and the current sorry state of facilities in our schools, this paper emphasized the need to develop sporting facilities in our schools to such level that could breed

athletes of international standard. Also, rather than viewing it as mere fun and satisfaction of egoistic contest, sports are expected to be practiced with the consciousness of its essence in promoting spirituality, humanity, friendliness, and social order in mind. It is, therefore, expected that all Universities develop Curriculum that permit and promote sport and spirituality. Such Curriculum should give room for, peaceful co-existence, skills identification and development and deliberately fashion in a way to make students be conscious of the essence of sporting and the roles expected of them when they become accomplished athletes in the development of the society.

Endnotes

- ¹ Raymond Ogunade, "The Role of Spirituality on Health, Fitness and Sports", Health and Fitness Journal 1/1
- ² C.J Ifedili, and S. Omiunu, "Management of Nigerian Universities' Games' Association for Better Results" Ozean Journal of Social Sciences 4/2 (2011), 21
- ³ *ibid*, 23.
- ⁴ Williams A. Coron, "The Parallel of Modern-Day Sport to Religion: An Analysis of How Society has Transformed Sport into a Spiritual Practice", an M.A. Thesis at the Wake Forest University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (May, 2014), 23.
- ⁵ Beau Dure, "US College Sports Are a Factory for Olympic Medalists – But for How Much Longer?" The Guardian, December 1, 2015, accessed January 14, 2017.
- ⁶ University of Pretoria FC Official website is <http://www.amatuks.co.za/> accessed on January 14, 2017.
- ⁷ International University Sport Association "Member Associations NUSF/Africa", FISU, <http://www.fisu.net/en/Africa-3421>. Also note that Sports are divided into regions all over the World. For instance, Athletics may hold in one region, while soccer and indoor games could hold in another part of the Continent simultaneously. It depends on what facilities are available to host the games in chosen location according to FISU standard. Nigeria hosted some Sports in 2006, in Bauchi and then Chess in Lagos, while soccer and indoor sports held in Algeria.
- ⁸ <http://www.ussa.org.za/events.php> accessed on January 14, 2017.
- ⁹ "The IRB Junior World Championship- Cape Town – 4-22 June 2012," DHL Western Province, 2013, <http://wprugby.com/the-irb-junior-world-championship-cape-town-4-22-june-2012/> accessed on January 14, 2017.
- ¹⁰ This was the major reason why University of Ilorin was selected to host the West African University Games in 2012.
- ¹¹ Coron, 26.
- ¹² *ibid*

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