

Indigenous Entrepreneurship and Sports Development in Post-Colonial Lagos: The Israel Adebajo and Flaming Flamingo Story

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Abstract

The transformation of Lagos from a fishing economy in the pre-colonial era to a sprawling and economically vibrant mega-city in the post-colonial period owes much to the agency of indigenous political mobilisers, merchants, entrepreneurs, proponents of religions, sports patrons, arts, and educationists, among other personalities whose life histories intertwine with the ideals of the city. This essay explores the contributions of Israel Adebajo, one of the figures who transformed the social and economic skyline of Lagos after independence. Israel Adebajo was an entrepreneur, a sports enthusiast and patron, and a socialite, who was one of the drivers of the development of football in Lagos in the second half of the 20th century. This essay argues that, like many other individual change agents, whose footprints appear fleetingly in the historiography of the development of the city, the contributions of Israel Adebajo, particularly in the context of football, are waiting to be written into the history of Lagos in the 20th century, and as a testament to the significance of biographies in the construction of micro-history.

Introduction

In his book, *Capitalism in the Colonies: African Merchants in Lagos, 1851–1931*, A.G. Hopkins, (2024, 1-56) draws on the careers of over 100 African merchants and entrepreneurs, who leveraged their business acumen and adaptability to thrive in the colonial economy. Hopkins argues that indigenous entrepreneurs played a crucial role in shaping the economic landscape of colonial Lagos across significant sectors of the economy such as banking, shipping, import, and export trade, printing press, and manufacturing. Hopkins' (2024, 678) perspective

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challenges the conventional view of European writers on the role of indigenous entrepreneurship in the transformation of Lagos from a colonial outpost to a thriving metropolis in the post-colonial era. Lagos society of that era was a motley society with a lot of groups competing for dominance. The dominance of the European entrepreneur was never in doubt, however, other indigenous groups were worthy competitors in the new economy.

In his classical book, *“The Liverpool of West Africa”*, Olujoku (2004, 2-98) offers an insightful argument on the dynamics and impact of trade, particularly, maritime trade in the making of the new indigenous elite. These elite, mobilised resources and sometimes collaborated with European merchants' houses to access the new trans-atlantic market dominated by commodity trading. Prominent among them were Ogbeni Taiwo Olowo, J.B Dawodu, S.H Pearse, Charlotte Olajumoke Obasa and others. The activities of this group of indigenous elite negate the submission of Gareth Austin (2004, 23) on the “notion of poverty” of indigenous entrepreneur in Lagos. Austin's work, *African Business in Nineteenth-Century West Africa* suffered from over generalisation and narrow conceptualisation of entrepreneur within the context of Lagos colonial economy. Kristin Mann's (1991, 85-107) study of life and times of Taiwo Olowo explained the nature of competition between the indigenous entrepreneur and the European merchants' houses. *Rise of Taiwo Olowo : law, accumulation, and mobility in early colonial Lagos* illuminates the history of entrepreneurship in Lagos and offers an insightful discourse into the human agency that aided the meritorious rise of Ogbeni Taiwo Olowo. The career of Ogbeni Olowo mirrored the struggle of the indigenous business class to seize the opportunities embedded in the new socio-economic and political reality of Lagos in the 19th century and early 20th century. Taiwo was not born into any of the aristocratic families in Lagos, he however epitomised character of the city; resilience, determination and dynamism.

However, the transformation of Lagos from a slave port to a prime asset of the British on the West Coast of Africa was not limited to the entrepreneurial spirit of its indigenous merchant class. On the political front, Lagos transformed from a colonial capital to the capital of independent Nigerian. The new political reality provided the indigenous elite the platform to play a leading role in the new economy. They were not just politicians; they also constituted themselves into a powerful business elite backed-up by the new political class. While some of them were apolitical, others were discretely powerful political players serving as patrons, and their lives overlapped with the socio-political history of the city. For instance, according to Mann, (2007, 12-78) while the life histories of the trio of Oba Akitoye, Oba Dosunmu, and Oba Kosoko are inextricably linked to the nexus between slavery and the broader socio-political history of Lagos in the 19th century, the progress of traditional and modern grassroots politics in Lagos in the 20th century was considerably defined by, for instance, as argued by Cole (1978, 23-85) the political activities and careers of Herbert Macaulay, Henry Carr, Madam Alimotu Pelewura, Sir Kitoyi Ajasi, Robert Campbell, and Egerton Syngle, and traditional chiefs like Esugbayi Eleko, Adamo Akeju (the Obanikoro of Lagos), Burahimo

Igbo, Shitta Bey, and Amodu Tijani (Chief Oluwa of Lagos), Sanusi Olusi and Adeyinka Oyeekan, among others.

Arguably, many events that left lasting impacts on Lagos as a socio-polity in the 19th and 20th centuries, especially unprecedented transformation in the physical development of the city – such as expansion of rail facilities, the building of modern seaport and integration of Lagos into the international capitalist economy – had the imprints of these individuals. Indeed, accounts of their life histories (biographies and autobiographies) provide a window for a better understanding of human experience in the era. As a result, the rest of this paper adopts a biographical approach and explores Israel Adebajo's contributions to indigenous entrepreneurship and sports development in post-colonial Lagos, highlighting his legacy as a trailblazer in Nigerian sports. But, first, let us explore the significance of biography as a source of history.

Biography as a Source of History: What African Nationalist Historiography Reveals about Restoring African Identity

Biography has long been recognized as a crucial way of doing history, Cannadine, (1997, 229). As a valuable source of history, Levi (1991, 93-113) argued that biographies provide unique insights into the lives and experiences of individuals who have shaped the course of human events with an emphasis on detailed, contextual analysis. Nasaw (2009, 615-624) noted that, biographers reconstruct the past by examining the life and experiences of their subject, often using a range of sources, including personal correspondence, diaries, and oral testimony. As noted by E.H Carr (1961) In addition to the life and experiences of an individual, it provides a nuanced understanding of the broader social, cultural, and political contexts in which they lived. As the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (1960, 1-8) noted, "The biography is a prism through which the historian can refract the light of the past". Also focusing on the experiences and agency of individuals, biographers can challenge dominant narratives and offer alternative interpretations of historical events. As the historian Natalie Zemon Davis (1975) noted, "Biography can be a powerful tool for historical analysis, allowing us to see the past through the eyes of individuals who lived it." (Ibid)

Indeed, across different spaces and times, individuals have shaped historical narratives in different forms. For instance, without the biographies of history makers such as Kwame Nkrumah, Obafemi Awolowo, Herbert Macaulay, Wat Tyler, Joan of Arc, King Henry VIII, Oliver Cromwell, Napoleon Bonapart, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Joseph Stalin, Chairman Mao, J. F. Kennedy, Mikhail Gorbachev, Winston Churchill, Margret Thatcher, and Tony Blair, the history of the periods in which they lived would be incomplete. Although, biography is a valuable source of history, it is not without its challenges and limitations. Some of the primary concerns as pointed out by Novik (1988) are issues of subjectivity; incomplete or inaccurate sources; and neglect of the broader structural and systemic factors that shape historical events. As the historian Eric Hobsbawm noted, (1997) "The danger of biography is

that it can lead us to forget that history is not just about individuals, but about the social and economic contexts in which they lived”.

In the context of African historiography, African scholars, Obaro (2006), Alagoa, (2006), Bathwell Allen Ogot, (2002), Falola Toyin, (2004) have explored biography to provide the lens to understand the dynamics of socio-political and economic factors that shape African societies, regardless of the argument against biography as a history. However, because of the nationalistic approach of African historiography, certain critics have been critical about what Alagoa (1977) has rightly described as ‘the poverty of African historiography.’ Apart from decoloniality as noted by Ajayi (1980) the other is over-emphasis on and the celebration of the achievements of the so-called ‘popular icons’ (Akinyele and Olutayo, 2023) or heroes and heroines of history, namely, individuals whose lives shaped the course of history, (Falola Toyin, 1997, 157-175). Despite this seeming weakness, biographies/the life histories of key African figure, undeniably, provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities and contingencies of African history across precolonial, colonial and post-colonial eras. The biographies of nationalists, for instance, Kwame Nkrumah, Obafemi Awolowo, Nelson Mandela, Kenneth Kaunda, and Herbert Macaulay, to name a few, offer valuable insights into the lives and experiences of societies in which they lived.

As champions of anti-colonial struggles and nationalist ideologies, their lives provide both philosophical and political contexts for understanding and restoring African identity. The nexus between nationalist ideologies and African identity highlights the role of and the agency of African actors in anti-colonial struggles. Perhaps the one aspect of anti-colonial ideologies that most highlights the struggle with regard to reinforcing African identity is the role of schools/ education in shaping African identity. Studies on the complexities in colonial education and its ongoing impact on African societies, revolve around the legacies of colonial education. Research reveals that effectiveness of colonial education was limited by internal contradictions. The education offered by the colonialists was used as a tool for social control, racial segregation, and cultural assimilation, a phenomenon resulted in the ‘conquest of the African mind. Although most of the anti-colonial figures or nationalists were born, raised and educated under the White Man’s influence, their anti-colonial ideological focus advocated decolonising education, which involved reevaluating the “coloniality” of academic knowledge and disciplines.

The philosophical context for nationalist and anti-colonial advocacy rests on the effectiveness of decolonised education as a means of individual and collective emancipation and of restoration of African identity. Thus, nationalist historiography advocated, among other subjects, the promotion of indigenous knowledge, reconnecting with Africa’s pre-colonial history (in particular), and utilising African languages and research methods in transmitting African experience. At the core of the advocacy was the Africanisation of knowledge, which is a multisituated and heterogeneous historical process that culminated in academic centres such as the Ibadan School of History, the Dar es Salaam School of Political Economy, and the Dakar School of Culture. Leaning on nationalist historiography and biographical account of,

each of the centres of learning showcased African perspectives that acknowledged the historical peculiarities and realities of African societies.

Within this context, this paper argues for a decolonised history of soccer development in post-colonial Lagos, especially in the mid-20th century, by reckoning with the contributions of indigenous entrepreneurs who shaped the history of the sport and left indelible marks.

Sports Development in Post-Colonial Lagos: The ‘Missing Links’

From the colonial period, as argued by Efebeh (2020), sports - football, basketball, athletics, swimming and traditional games like wrestling and boxing - have played a significant role in Nigerian society, serving as a powerful tool for social change, unity, and development. The social significance of sport is acknowledged globally. Sports transcend mere entertainment, bringing people together regardless of their background, and also act as a medium for communication, interaction, and advocacy on important social issues such as human rights, health, and justice. In Nigeria, as pointed out by Okediji (2015, 188-196) sports are deeply ingrained in the country’s culture, promoting discipline, teamwork, and leadership skills. Sports not only foster national pride and unity, additionally, they also empower communities by raising awareness and influencing policy decisions (Odegbami, 2020)

Across cultures, sports contribute to social inclusion by challenging stereotypes and reducing prejudices (Cooley J and Pike E, 2009). For example, the sterling performances of Third World countries in international competitive sporting games such as the Commonwealth Games since 1930 have challenged racial stereotypes and popular prejudices against colonial subjects. Despite the disproportional access of indigenous population in colonial Lagos to standard sports facilities, they managed to carve out a niche for themselves as a result of the entrepreneurial spirit of indigenous patrons (philanthropists, entrepreneurs, and industrialists among traditional Lagosians and immigrants from other parts of Nigeria), who embodied sports development in the city. For instance, one of the first serious direct social investments in sports that expanded the development of popular sports, especially competitive swimming in Lagos, was made by J.K. Randle, an indigenous Lagosian. He bankrolled the construction of a private swimming pool that he opened to indigenous amateur swimmers, when the White elite community prohibited the former from sharing the only standard size swimming pool in the city.

Although, his action significantly spearheaded the development of competitive swimming in the city under colonial rule, his role is casually mentioned in overall literature on sports development. Rather, attention is given in publications to exclusive elite social clubs whose wealthy members engaged in leisure swimming and other aquatic games, including boating. The downside of such a sequestered historiography of sport is that it focuses exclusively on a select few, including merchants, corporate tycoons, and government officials, among other elites who patronised the social clubs.

Likewise, although there is a flurry of literature on clubside and competitive football development in post-colonial Nigeria, most extant sources on soccer development in the country and in Lagos in particular, see (Aderinto Saheed, 2019) foreground the role of local and expatriate conglomerates like Leventis, United Africa Company (UAC), Nigerian Railway Corporation, and Electricity Corporation of Nigeria (ECN), (Onwumechili, 2018). The role of the agency of indigenous non-corporate patrons or individuals such as Israel Adebajo, who happened to be one of a few indigenous entrepreneurs, whose ingenuity shaped competitive and public-oriented soccer promotion in Lagos in mid-20th century is strikingly absent. This omission comes across as a critical missing link in the historiography of sports development; hence the need for a more inclusive history of competitive football in Lagos in the era.

Israel Adebajo: His Ancestry, Childhood and the Enchantment of Lagos

Israel Adebajo was born into a Christian family. His family was one of the early converts to Christianity which got to Noforija, his hometown, as a result of the consequences of the Anglo-Ijebu War of 1892. His grandfather, Jeremiah Adebajo worked closely with missionaries in Ijebu and became one of the pioneer missionaries who spread Christianity to Imobi, a fishing Ijebu village north of Epe mainland (Adekeye Adebajo, 2019). Israel was born in Imobi on 21st January 1920 to Pa Adebajo and Madam Adebajo. Israel lost his father at the age of 14 years and, at 19, left Noforija to seek a better job to help his family, having imbibed the virtue of hard work and “protestant work ethic” which affirms the dignity of labour from childhood. Subsequently, Israel moved to Lagos, the only and most viable place to improve its economic status. It was the perfect place to search for the proverbial golden fleece.

According to Olakun Lawal (Lawal, 2002), the 1950s in the history of Nigeria was renowned for decolonisation as well as the conscious and increasing involvement of Nigerians in the economy. It was the centre of the new colonial economy with new manufacturing plants and a rapidly growing service industry to support the British establishment. It was the period Adebajo established his reputation as a businessman and emerging indigenous *money man*. In Lagos, as noted by Adekeye (Adekeye Adebajo, 2019), Adebajo was accommodated by his uncle, Pa Taiwo, who was an employee of the Nigerian Railway Corporation. He realised the need to better his educational standing to access the opportunities offered by the colonial economy. He enrolled on St Peter’s Church School in the Faji area of Lagos¹ and took some remedial courses in secretarial studies that were in heavy demand in the colonial economy.

Israel Adebajo: The Businessman

A record of his beginning captured Israel Adebajo thus: “A perfect picture of the self-made, started life as an office assistant in the Daily Times and later became a vendor and also worked as a typist (Daily Times, 1969). Not satisfied with the low wage being paid by the Nigerian Daily Times, coupled with the enormous responsibilities placed on his shoulders after the demise of his father, sourcing extra income through the selling of newspapers was a

reasonable decision. However, he was quick to explore the opportunities offered by the supply chain of Daily Times. He set up a business to supply the media house paper” (Adekeye Adebajo, 2019). His pioneer staff included his wife, Olabisi, and his uncle, Christopher, who was also known as “Brother Teacher” (Ibid). This initiative, it can be argued, transformed the life of Israel Adebajo and set him on the path to greatness.

Adebajo’s entrepreneurial journey began in the 1940s when he established a stationery supply business, which eventually grew into a conglomerate with interests in real estate, manufacturing, and sports. In 1944, Adebajo standardised and institutionalised the operations of his business by incorporating it. He set up a stationery supply store, which was first located at Willoughby Street in the centre of Lagos Island. The company was noted for distribution of high quality London made stationary materials which he enjoyed near-monopoly in its distribution. Adebajo injected resilience, dedication, and discipline into the management of his business. His major strength was his ability to spot opportunities before his peers. By the 1950s, he seized the opportunities provided by a shortage of duplicating papers in Lagos and sealed a lucrative deal with the British colonial government as a major supplier (Daily Times 1969, 14) This opportunity placed the firm on a sound financial footing that made it to expand its operation. As an astute businessman and a strategic thinker, he moved to secure the sources of paper supply. He sailed from Lagos to England to meet with his partner in 1956 to negotiate the sole distributorship. A move that would seal the leadership role of his company in the new emerging retail paper market in Lagos. Consequently, Adebajo became the sole agent of Rexel, a British manufacturer of paper and office equipment. He was granted the right to import items such as pen, paper and carbon paper. By 1956, it could be argued that Israel Adebajo had become a self-made man.²

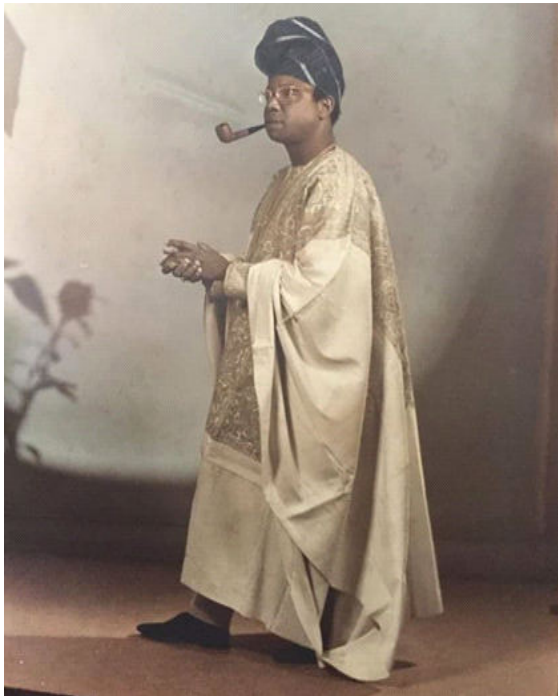
According to Adekeye:

Adebajo had the vision to build an office and factory in the Lagos district of Apapa which was then largely swamped land. His office on Warehouse Road was the first building in the area, and the factory produced toilet rolls and accounting books. Israel had also built residences in North Avenue and Kofo Abayomi Street in Apapa by 1964, further investing in property in nearby Calcutta Crescent. He owned five houses on Martins Street in Yaba, an area which had previously been inhabited by swamp dwellers (Daily Times, 1969)

The above quotation fairly depicts Adebajo’s penchant for outstanding properties in highbrow districts of Lagos and elsewhere, aside from his Noforija country home, and other properties in the Apapa district of Lagos. His affinity for luxury and nobility was also evident in his acquisition of high-end automobiles, such as Jaguar, Cadillac, and Pontiac.

He was dedicated to the progress of his business and, as a family man, he was also committed to the welfare of his family. For example, he ensured that his children were educated in the British elite schools. Adeniyi, one of his sons, was educated at Skipper’s Hill and Dover College while his other children were all educated at various schools in the United Kingdom

(Daily Times, 1969) Israel Adebajo was prominent on the social landscape of the Lagos elite of his time. He was one of the high-class business moguls who regularly patronised Victor Olaiya, the highlife maestro (Adekeye Adebajo, 2019). The presence of Olaiya at Adebajo's residence in January 1960 affirmed his status as a social celebrity. By 1960, he was 40 years old, and had established his reputation as the "Nigerian John Dickinson" (Ibid).



Israel Adebajo

Credit: Google Image

The Birth of Stationery Stores Football Club

Adebajo's foray into sports was motivated by his passion for football and his desire to promote social development in Lagos. On February 15, 1958, at the age of 38, he founded Stationery Stores Football Club, which quickly became a dominant force in Nigerian football, and a platform for social change. The emergence of Stationery Stores Football Club was a remarkable phenomenon in Nigeria's economic and sports scene. At that time, football clubs were owned by local and expatriate conglomerates like Leventis, the United Africa Company (UAC), the Nigerian Railway Corporation, and Electricity Corporation of Nigeria (ECN). Also, Lagosians yearned for a real indigenous club because then most of the teams based in Lagos were owned by federal establishments until Israel Adebajo, came to their "rescue".



Fig 1: Israel Adebajo exchanging pleasantries with Stationery Stores Players
Credit: Google Image

Stationery Stores Football Club was established by Adebajo as a social intervention package to give back to his community. The football club also represented his major business brand, the famous ‘stationery stores’. Football competitions provided the social bond that cemented the social fabric of Lagos city. Football affirms social identity in Lagos and Nigeria, just as sports have been deployed to further group, national and individual interests at different stages in history. In Spain, Jim O’Brien and others (2024), argues that Barcelona Football Club represents, not just a football club, but also group and ethnic identity. Stationery Stores Football Club represented the broad spectrum of Lagos society and it became their darling team. The club provided a Pan-African platform for social integration. Its fame and achievements loomed prominently in the socio-political space of Lagos as well as captured the imagination of the nation and the continent. The team comprised players from Togo, Ghana, Nigeria and other West African countries. The football club was influenced by Israel Adebajo’s ingenuity, particularly his visionary leadership and investment in the team’s infrastructure and talent.

Israel Adebajo’s commitment to the club was a passion that transcended his economic interests. His personality was so prominently embossed on the club that the players were named *Adebajo Babes*. He justified the honour by building a stadium for Stationery Stores and motivated the players. The performance of the club justified the investment as it won all trophies locally and conquered the continent as well. After injecting the team with players from other teams, Stores or Adebajo Babes, as the club was fondly called, won the coveted

Challenge Cup in 1967 and repeated the feat in 1968. Undoubtedly, public love for the team started when Stores won the Challenge Cup in 1967. As a result, the club became the darling of Lagosians, amassing a fanatical fan base through its exceptional exploits in matches, both within the country and elsewhere on the African continent. Before then, Lagos fans had grown tired of watching clubs from outside the state winning the Challenge Cup from under their noses at the Mecca of Nigerian football – the King George V Stadium, Onikan Lagos. The club was nicknamed “Flaming Flamingo” “for igniting pitches with their exciting play” (Daily Times, 1969)

However, beyond his passion and enthusiasm for the club, Adebajo built a major brand around the club that further enhanced the image and marketability of his businesses. At the peak of its popularity, the club not only represented the interest and aspirations of its owner, it symbolised the identity of the city. The city became the epicentre of football fandom in Nigeria.

Israel Adebajo did not just contribute to the club’s success; he also contributed to the development of football in Nigeria at large. He was the Treasurer of the Nigerian Football Association because he literally funded the Nigerian national team as most of the Stationery Stores Football Club players were in the national team. He was the first and only Nigerian to take over the responsibility of the Federal Government by funding the national team for the Olympics in Mexico in 1968, thereby leaving an indelible mark on Nigeria’s economic and sporting landscape.

Conclusion

Stationery Stores Football Club was more than just a football team; it was a symbol of Lagosian identity and pride. Adebajo’s commitment to the club went beyond his economic interests; it was an uncommon labour of love that reflected his dedication to promoting social development and community engagement in Lagos.³ Adebajo’s contributions to sports development in Lagos were not limited to his club. He was a pioneer promoter of football as a tool for social change and national development. In the 1960s, he played a key role in promoting Nigerian football internationally by facilitating friendly matches between Nigerian teams and their foreign counterparts. Israel Adebajo’s life and legacy served as a testament to the power of indigenous entrepreneurship and sports development in shaping the social and economic landscape of post-colonial Lagos. His pioneering spirit, entrepreneurial acumen, and commitment to promoting social development through sports have left an enduring impact on sports in Nigeria generally, and Lagos society in particular.

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25. Silvester Trnovec, *The Conquest of the African Mind...* The study explores the history of education in French West Africa, highlighting the role of schools in shaping African identity and transmitting colonial discourse.
26. See, for example, Oluwaseun Tella and Shireen Motala, (eds), *From Ivory Towers to Ebony Towers ... Offers perspectives on decolonizing knowledge in Africa, with a focus on South African universities and the importance of indigenous knowledge*.
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- former colonies or territories of the British Empire. See: 'Top Performing Countries at the Commonwealth Games' (Available at www.worldsatlas.com/articles)
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