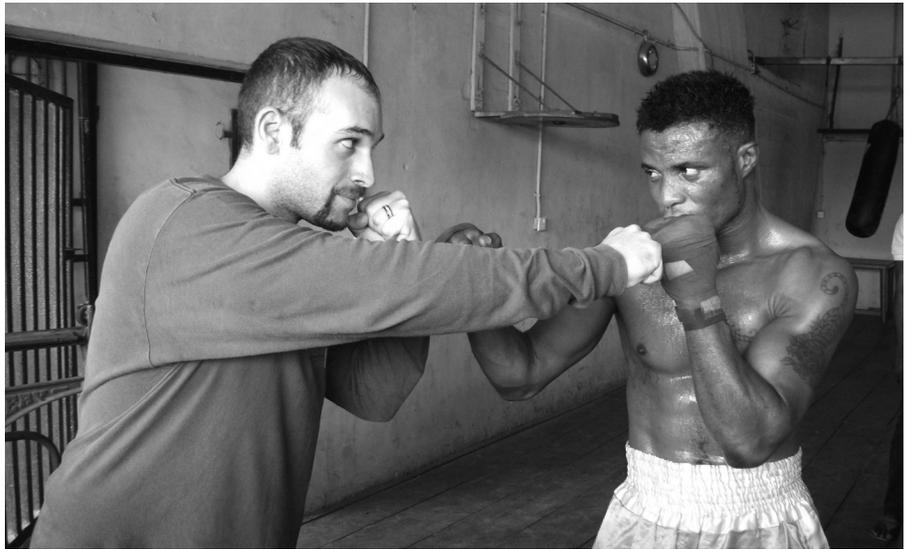


Boxing in Colonial and Post-Colonial Nigeria, 1920-1970

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In summer 2012, thanks to a pre-dissertation travel grant from the Center for African Studies, I was able to travel to Lagos and Ibadan for two weeks to begin researching the social history of boxing as it developed in Nigeria from the 1920s to the end of the Biafran War in 1970. As Nigeria's largest city and economic capital, Lagos attracted intense male labor migration after World War I: in 1931 Lagos' population was 126,000, and by 1963, it was over 675,000 people. Dick Tiger, later to become world middleweight champion, was part of this movement, as he migrated, like many Igbos, from Aba to Lagos in his late teens. At first Dick Tiger was a trader, but he later took up boxing in search of upward social mobility and fame in a city rampant with unemployment and poverty.

Boxing also provided an avenue for many boxers of considerable skill to branch onto the Atlantic circuit. These boxers travelled, lived, and fought in matches from Liverpool to Paris to New York from the late 1940s through the early years of independence. My doctoral thesis explores how boxing shaped and gave rise to new ideas of masculinity and of ethnic and national consciousness. During interviews with me last summer in Lagos, several former boxers claimed that it was through boxing, and the lessons learned both during training and competing inside the ring that prepared them for manhood. For example, "Keep Right," a boxer from Edo state, saw boxing as an extension of the Edo wrestling tradition and initiation where boys challenged one another, on the beach known as "no man's land," to prove their toughness and manliness: a setting "where great men are born." My research will examine how colonial sporting regimes transformed masculine ideals and gender relations in a dynamic urban context in which many Igbos, Hausas and Yorubas mixed in



expanding cities like Lagos. Thus, my research will use boxing as a critical entry point into understanding key historical developments in colonial and early post-colonial Nigeria: the development of new forms of ethnic and nationalist consciousness; the effects of urban and Atlantic migration; and constructions of masculinity.

Many boxers who travelled abroad to fight for money, championships, and prestige also were able to learn trades or earn enough money to start businesses once they returned to Nigeria. One thing that surprised me when interviewing many of the current Nigerian National Boxing coaches was that, although several had learned a trade, they were forced to be coaches by various governments. For example, one informant lamented that although he learned how to be an engineer while fighting in England in the 1950s, he was forced to coach boxing on his return from England and to be one ever since. The government would not allow him to use his engineering skills and forced him into a meager salary as a national coach, which he feels has kept him in abject poverty. Why and how they were coerced into coaching is something I plan to look into

further on my next visit to Nigeria.

In all, I was able to conduct ten interviews in Lagos and Ibadan this past summer and made vital connections and contacts with current and former boxers. In Ibadan, I was able to begin preliminary archival research at the National Archives. This solid study base will allow for fruitful further research on my return to Nigeria next summer and beyond.



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