

Reading the Oyinbo Wall in Nigerian Football

Salawu Olajide

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Just before his country's encounter with France at the 2026 World Cup, Senegal's National Assembly President Ousmane Sonko stated that "regardless of the winner, it's Africa that will have beaten Africa," a sentiment that reiterated the French National Team's constitution by African sporting talent. Sonko's remarks also speak to the domination of the French side by African soccer stars. Indeed, many of their African-by-roots, French-identifying football talents are able to play for France due to their parents' migration to the country. But what happens if the tables are turned and whiteness contours the face of an African team, indeed, of the conditions of citizenship? Southern African countries offer several examples of this. In West Africa, Senegal may not have had a white player, but we have an example of the white French-born midfielder Guillaume Brenner, who elected to honor his Togolese ancestry, playing his international football for the Togo National Team in the late 2000s.

The Nigerian Super Eagles have also historically had such foreign-born, even if mostly biracial, players in their ranks, so much so that the *Oyinbo wall*, coined during the 2018 FIFA World Cup qualifiers, became the nickname for two defenders, William Troost Ekong and Leon Balogun, who were born and raised in Europe. This prompts the question: when does an oyinbo become a Nigerian, or, to reframe this in the vocabulary of Nigerian fan culture, how is an oyinbo a Nigerian? Ekong and Balogun's partnership was so solid that it became read by fans and the media as an impenetrable fortress, a wall that ensured Nigeria's flag would eventually be hoisted in Russia. The term *oyinbo*, like *gringo*, used in the Americas to describe people from the United States and other places, occasionally yields to ambiguity, as its meaning often shifts from its political suggestions to something more natural or complimentary, depending on contexts.

Growing up in Lagos in the 1990s, the years following the crises of the IMF's structural adjustment programs as well as a contested general election that engulfed the city, you had an excess of harsh

conditions, but it was also a time of much fun. As children, you rolled tyres on the streets when you could not afford to rent a bike and played football with your peers, hoping a ragged ball never ended up in a walled compound with a mean owner and their eternally angry dogs. One memory from back then is our collective response to the rare presence of a foreigner or a white person in the neighborhood. Children would abandon whatever new mischief they had and would chant *Oyinbo pepper, if you eati pepper, you go yellow more more*. Rendered in Nigerian Pidgin English, the teasing song was a playground tune that linked whiteness to how kids might react to spicy Nigerian food (like pepper soup). There was something of an implicit desire in the song, the idea that you could become white if you endured the piquant tastes of Nigeria's notoriously pepper-filled cuisine, or even a playful mockery of the sunburnt European who turns red after tasting the peppery conditions of life in Nigeria.

There is much that can be said about the colonial histories of the word and its connections to the labelling of the outsider or foreigner, but let's be clear that the usage of the word hardly engages any hostility. At the same time, whether the term *oyinbo* is a derogatory slur is never far from its meaning, although for these kids there was a warm and endearing undertone to its rendition that undercuts any offensive intent. Today, you will find Nollywood and Afrobeats references to the *oyinbo pepper*, used as an endearing term for a sweetheart – as in Yemi Alade 2014 track “Kissing,” in which she affectionately calls her lover “my *oyinbo pepper*, my darling of life.” Rather than offense, the affective meaning of the term evokes a sense of banter aimed as a friendly ritual of welcome, whether for a white person or even a light-skinned returnee, such as a member of Saro class in West Africa.

Before Ekong and Balogun, there was Uzbekistan-born Osaze Odemwingie and, further back, Reuben Agboola, the Camden-born former Southampton defender who played for Nigeria under Dutch coach Clemens Westerhof. Agboola had a white English mother and a Nigerian father, making him eligible to represent the Super Eagles, for whom he played as a left back at the 1992 Africa Cup of Nations in Senegal and earned 9 caps. In more recent years, other foreign-born and biracial players, including Udinese's 2025/2026 player of the season Maduka Okoye, have opted to play for the Super Eagles. Perhaps the most prominent *oyinbo* is, however, Ashleigh Plumtre of Nigeria's women's team, the Super Falcons. While Plumtre identifies as a mixed-heritage player with Nigerian roots, she was born and raised in England and looks entirely white. Representing the Nigerian Super Falcons ahead of the 2022 Women's AFCON, Plumtre would eventually become a favorite among Nigerian fans both for her industry, arguably, her ‘*oyinboness*.’ Being the only *oyinbo* in the women's team, though, it is hard to parse her teammates' relationship with her, but social media footage suggests her colleagues and fans fully embrace her Nigerian identity even if she doesn't look like them. Responding to Plumtre's dance steps during a presidential reception after the Falcons won the 2024 women's AFCON, a fan went as far as writing on X/Twitter: “Wait ooo she's really Nigerian Nigerian! Those legs are not for half Nigerians oo.” Here, as the *oyinbo* wall stands, first on the pitch and, later, on the dancefloor, her cultural skills and sporting talents are the consecrating symbols of her Nigerian identity and are framed in the rhetorical gestures of emphatic doubleness (“Nigerian Nigerian”) common in popular discourses.

It is probably a coincidence that, barring Odemwingie, most of these Nigerian diaspora players are defenders (including the goalkeeper Maduka Okoye), but what is more fascinating is that, for each of these stars, an *oyinbo* identity has hardly foreclosed the certainty of both fan outrage and admiration, a situation that complicates the ambiguous tenors of the *oyinbo* category. Balogun and Ekong weren't only the mainstay of Nigeria's defense for a while; they occasionally scored crucial goals for which they were celebrated. When the fact of their aging bodies began to affect their games, the *oyinbo* wall came under intense scrutiny. Some Super Eagles fans may recall Nigeria's shocking 1-0 defeat to the Central African Republic during the 2022 FIFA World Cup qualifiers in

October 2021, a loss that contributed to Nigeria's failure to qualify for that World Cup in Qatar — and, as it turned out, the first of consecutive missed qualifications, with Nigeria also failing to reach the ongoing 2026 edition.

Balogun dropped from the radar around this period, due, as some might argue, to a fallout with Nigerian football officials. Ekong, meanwhile, went on to captain the Eagles, playing a pivotal role at the 2023 AFCON, where he became the highest-scoring defender in AFCON tournament history. His three crucial goals during the competition may have earned him the Most Valuable Player (MVP), but Nigeria's failure to qualify for the World Cup meant he too had to retire from international football after 83 senior caps, five major tournaments, and three medals.

His retirement statement captures his appreciation of a conviviality that shapes the oyinbo figure: "From a boy born and raised in the Netherlands, to the Oyibo Wall and eventually Skippo [or team captain] is a privilege I will always hold close to my heart...Born in the diaspora, I am so proud to be part of a group that fully showed it is possible to come home to play and represent our nation." Ekong may not pronounce *oyinbo* correctly in his video statement, but I doubt it matters at all in the larger scheme of his becoming Nigerian again, this time, through football.

Nigerian citizenship in this sense is not only ancestral, and neither is it based solely on indigeneity, but determined by a logic of modernity in which people, oyinbo or not, who have the remotest legal connections to the nation may become Nigerian and become accepted as such. Of course, the Nigerian constitution makes allowances for descent-based return. Ancestral connections may not be new, but the social and cultural willingness to accept them is new. The language of the oyinbo which Ekong accepts and celebrates means, unlike the early 1990s with the pioneering Agboola, these players now belong at the center of the teams, never remaining at the edge as foreigners. The sense of belonging probably undergirds Ekong's charity work among local communities in Nigeria, an indication that the benefits of the Oyibo wall may, in fact, transcend the football pitch.

But being oyinbo has not meant being shielded from toxic fan outrage. Maduka Okoye had to take a break from the national team following heavy online criticism after Nigeria's 2021 Africa Cup of Nations exit. In his case, the oyinbo wall fell, and the social media abuses became vile, a response to a loss to Tunisia that shocked many Nigerian fans. The Super Eagles were the absolute standout team of the group stage and had entered the knockout round as favorites to win the entire tournament after a perfect record and a style of football in the group stages. And the Okoye let in a goal and all hell was let loose. Okoye, who later returned to the team, might have come to understand the many footballing and extra-sporting reasons to conclude being oyinbo in Nigeria is a convoluted politics of visibility, expectations, and affections.

What an oyinbo wall means for local talents is also a subject of intense debates, although this is not the lack of NPFL visibility I have written about previously, but a distinctive, racialized question about how the constitution of the national team configures the performance of citizenship. Nor is it about the broader legion of UK-born players such as Alex Iwobi and Ola Aina or the German-born Werder Bremen full-back Felix Agu, all players whose international switch to Nigeria has made the men's team more formidable — something the oyinbo wall, though distinctively racially marked rather than diasporic, epitomizes. An equally relevant question is to ask about the implications of the oyinbo wall for a social environment where infrastructural breakdown is symptomatic of the broader crises of postcolonial governance. In the academic literature, the wall has some major intimations worthy of our attention. It reanimates the ghosts of colonial cartographies and the polarizing ethnic divisions left in the wake of the colonial aftermath in Nigeria and other postcolonial countries. The theorist Mahmood Mamdani has explained how the colonial state in Africa created a wall along the lines of citizenship, explaining that colonialism created a system of "decentralized despotism" where rural populations were treated as "subjects" circumscribed by the dictates of the

customary law and traditional chiefs, while urban populations were treated as “citizens” with civic rights. What Mamdani describes doesn’t fully capture the vastly different legal tensions and laws governing the relations between diasporic footballers and their local counterparts. Increasingly, though, the kinds of walls he describes still exist in many parts of Africa and often percolate into football, especially its administration and discourses, shaping even how the oyinbo figure settles into their new identity.

Based on this reading, we may also think about the class walls and economic divisions that made home so unlivable in the 1980s that emigration became a normative practice for many Nigerians. But the oyinbo wall, at an equally metaphorical sense, also signals an infrastructural ideal often associated with distant places like South Africa, where the football league is most developed on the continent, and especially Europe, which every player aspires to play. Not only does it remind players of a hitherto Nigerian league that was built on solid broadcasting and sporting infrastructure. It also reveals why many Nigerian players seek to play their trade elsewhere. In other words, the oyinbo wall is a material metaphor of what we have lost because of complex political choices and cultural factors that make the conditions of life less pleasant and bearable than when the oyinbos – not the visiting or diasporic-footballer type, but the thieving, colonial kind – were among us. To be clear, the arrival of the first Portuguese and British explorers on the West African coasts activated an incomprehensibly tragic scale of misfortunes that, along with self-inflicted actions, constitutes the backdrop of our postcolonial realities. This makes any justification of colonialism and its enduring legacies untenable. At the same time, African subjectivities and actions are implicated in the decay and morass around us today, and while narratives and sites of pleasure such as football both complicate and mirror these, there is often an undue focus on external pressures, a focus that suggests an unending enchantment with outside influences. The oyinbo wall sometimes embodies this fascination even as it enacts, in the case of Ekong and Balogun, the conditions for its own questioning.

But, again, the oyinbo wall redefines these negative readings of infrastructure, both through the merit of footballing skill and the commitment to a new nation after retirement. The Troost-Ekong foundation, for instance, may suggest other kinds of walls—as institutions and infrastructures of empowerment are possible, but there is also an articulation of Afropolitan citizenship, as Mbembe explains it, unconstrained and fully expressed in its mobilities and planetary subjectivities. Reading the oyinbo as Afropolitan means recognizing them as a mobile subject with more than one passport, who inhabits several transnational spaces and retains a connection to Africa even after their footballing relationship with Nigeria has ended. Through the circulation of philanthropic capital, Afrobeats and other cultural productions, for example, Ekong, Plumptre, and others perform Afropolitan identities that accompany their sporting allegiance to Nigeria. Okoye, on his website, even describes himself as an ambassador of Nigeria’s Enugu State and, while based in Europe, is committed to youth, sport, and social development in the state. The class politics of Afropolitanism may be a reason to dismiss the term, but the humanitarian labors of these players in local spaces, extended by the circulations of their sporting influence in particular Nigerian communities, push the Afropolitan beyond the performative zones of its familiar elitism.

At the 2026 World Cup, about 15 football stars with Nigerian ancestry represented other countries, with most of them being Black players who remind one of the diasporic forces that are altering the faces of European teams like France. As Nigeria witnesses an explosion of diasporic and oyinbo talents returning home to represent them, the country is invited to renegotiate the terms and conditions of citizenship. Along with mechanisms such as the FIFA Change of Association Platform, citizenship becomes a category that is no longer always a matter of blood or soil alone; it is enacted as a performative and dynamic contract whose terms are negotiated on the football pitch and affirmed through the field of culture and the wired routes of social media. In the meantime, and to

return to the nostalgia of childhood memories, if the oyinbo figure created the effects of light and shade, it is on the turf of football that those tensions manifest in their fullest complexity.

James Yékú is a poet and tenured professor at the University of Kansas.

