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Sports diaspora and sevens football: An ethnographic study of African footballers in malabar region

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Abstract

The growth of professional Indian tournaments in cricket, football and others attracted skilled sports stars from abroad due to the absence of such competent athletes within the domestic region. But even before the advent of professional leagues, the regional football tournaments, particularly from Goa, Calcutta, Hyderabad and Malabar, had migrant African players. Even though not trained professionally, they performed better than the local players; hence, these regions' local tournaments and clubs became 'hubs' of such players from Africa. On the other side, Africa became a supplier or 'hinterland' of talent for Indian football clubs. The paper is an ethnographic description of the semi-participatory ethnographic observation exercise to explore the collective life of African football players in Kerala.

Keywords: Migration, diaspora, African players, football, and seven matches

Introduction

Since the successful organization of the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, the potential of sports as a vibrant economic activity is exposed to the world. Even though the feel of nationalism and international political atmosphere like the cold war were the primary catalyst of making sports a multi-billion industry, private interests equally contributed to the sector's exponential growth. The popularity of major tournaments like the Olympics, FIFA World cup, NBA leagues, and World Athletic Championship attracted private players to invest in and harvest out money from different sports fields. Now the sector is worth of \$1.3 trillion (Plunkett, 2015) [29]. Even though not evenly distributed globally, all countries and regions within them are somehow received from and contribute to the growing sports sector. The extensive size and exponential growth of the sector attract and facilitate the movement of talented human resources from one place to another in search of maximum returns. These movements of people realized sports migration since the middle of the last century.

Sports migration refers to the temporary or permanent movement of all those related to sports from one place to another, domestically or across borders, searching for or as part of livelihood earning or seeking pleasure. Such movements created new or added to existing diasporas wherever they reached. Even though Europe and America were attracting the best sports personnel globally, those fastly growing sports economies like India are also keeping an increasing bunch of foreign sports personnel presently. Hundreds of foreign players engaged with football in different regional clubs of Goa, Kerala and West Bengal. Among them, those unique sevens football matches held at villages and small towns of the Malabar region in Kerala during evenings and nights were the forerunners of present large scale league tournaments. This paper attempts to picturise the football Diaspora created by African players and the professionalism they created in the sports in Kerala.

Background of the study

It was the British introduced football in India. The British army and other government officers organized matches among them, which gradually attracted local players too. Nagendra Prasad Sarbadhikary, recognized as the 'father of Indian football', formed the Boys' Club in Calcutta. It is considered as the first Indian initiative in football. Later he established the Sovabazar Club at Calcutta. Other football clubs formed around the 1890s were Calcutta FC, Dalhousie Club, Traders Club, Naval Volunteers Club, Mohun Bagan A.C, Aryan Club.

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Tournaments for Durant cup (1888), IFA Shield (1893), Gladstone Cup, Traders Cup (1889) and Cooch Behar Cup (1893) was started around the same period. Clubs more or less ran Indian football in those times. Only after the formation of the All India Football Federation in 1937, a football team beyond clubs was formed here. After the victory of the Sovabazar Club over the East Surrey Regiment for Trades cup in 1892 (....., 2005), several Indian clubs achieved historic victories and contributed many football legends to the world. National football league (1996) [22], its later avatar 'i-league' (2007) and Indian Super League (2013) took club football to further levels. Considering the commercial success of club matches, the team managements were eager to bring the best players affordable to further attracts sponsorship and selling tickets. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, football got introduced in the three political divisions, namely Travancore, Kochi and Malabar, which later formed together as the present state of Kerala (Thomas, 2001) [35]. Even though the army ground at West Hill was considered as the cradle of football at Malabar (Malaparambu, 2012) [25], different army barracks and tea estates of the Malappuram region likely made their own 'beginnings' of football. The British army and Malabar Special Police popularized the game among ordinary people (Ragesh, 2014) [32]. There were several reasons for the widespread popularity of football. The fewer technicalities attached to the game helped ordinary people to enjoy the sport than anything else. The physically fit agrarian labourers of the rough terrains of Malabar were the most suited for the physically tiring football; hence those downtrodden were demanded and recognized through the sport. Compared to others, the sport demanded the people to join others irrespective of their positions in the social hierarchy. When the British and their Indian army people played with local people, it created an escalating up effect on the social space of the latter. But the ground requirement of British football was not suitable to the geographic conditions of Malappuram. In the absence of large plain lands, the ground size was supposed to reduce according to availability. When the ground size was reduced, appropriate changes were introduced in all other rules, including a reduced number of players per team. This created a unique format called 'sevens football'. Eventually, sevens became the most regular and professional football format in the region (Ragesh, 2014) [32]. The commercial success of sevens football led to the high demand of talented footballers where African players filled in.

Statement of the problem

Considering sports, the African continent is a rich source of talent, particularly for growing economies like India. African players are talented as well as cheaper. For the growing Indian sports industry, African players are affordable investments. The presence of physically powerful and quick African players is both an inspiration and challenge for the Indian counterparts. As the opportunities for recreational and professional sports are growing in India, recruiting African players is a viable solution for winning competitions. The different private football clubs, mainly from Goa, West Bengal and Kerala, continuously keep African players in their professional tournaments since the second half of the 1980s. During the non-rainy months, these players amuse the spectators of sevens football in

Malabar with their speed and kicks. The local people accepted them as part of their society and extended all possible support needed. The migrated players eventually created an African Sports Diaspora in the region. The Sports Diaspora is defined in the paper as the collective social life interaction and enrichment of people who live in another geographical region away from their homeland for associating with sports in one way or other.

Objectives and Research Questions

The present paper is an attempt to investigate the extent of the African sports Diaspora in Kerala. The research questions are,

- i. How the sports Diaspora of African footballers perform in the State of Kerala, India?
- ii. How does the local society respond to the presence of African footballers in their neighbourhoods?

Review of literature

Sports migration is a comparatively recent discipline. In the early nineties, notable writings on migrating sports stars appeared first in academic literature (Bale & Maguire, 1994; Bale, 1991) [14]. While some of them used theories of globalization in order to explain the larger structural conditions that shape sports migration (Maguire & Falcous, 2011) [23] whereas later works used network approach to address seasonal migration (Maguire, 1996) [22], safeguarding of consistent supply of talent (Maguire, Jarvie, Mansfield, & Bradley, 2002) [24], enrollment techniques (Poli, 2010; Elliott & Maguire, 2008; Darby, Akindes, & Kirwin, 2007) [30, 18, 17]. When theories of globalization address global socio-economic power relations behind migration, the network approach deal with those non-economic factors that facilitate informal routes to maintain the flow of immigrants (Engh & Agergaard, 2013) [19]. Marxian scholars argued that the ongoing recruitment of African footballers resembles the colonial exploitation of the East and South by the European powers (Lanfranchi & Taylor, 2001) [21]. Other scholars used world-systems theory to describe the player migration from the Southern hemisphere to the North and dependency theory to illustrate Africa's neo-colonial exploitation and resultant underdevelopment as a base for their unending movement from the homeland (Bale, 2004) [13]. However, later studies tried to incorporate the expectations and behaviour of people and the reflections on the experience they earned while moving through diverse spaces to explain the determinant factors of the ongoing migration of sport stars (Carter, 2011a; 2011b) [15, 16].

All those studies on sports in Kerala highlight the role of the British in popularizing football in the state (Ragesh, 2014; Abdurasak, 2008; Thomas, 2001; Aravindan, 1956;, 1954) [32, 4, 35, 11]. Similarly, there are studies on the importance of particular regions like Kozhikode and Malappuram in the growth of football (Malaparambu, 2012; Saju, 2005; Ali, 2000; Mushtaq, 1974) [25, 34, 7, 27], while other scholars tried to explain about football tournaments (Nandan, 2011; Prathap, 1951) [28, 31] and football clubs (Ramakrishnan, 1952) [33].

Data and Methodology

The paper is an ethnographic description of a semi-participatory ethnographic observation exercise. For data, the researcher used the ethnographic survey method for

collecting maximum information on the real-life experience of African football players in Kerala. Personnel meetings with such players were created to get direct information about their expectations and experiences on life here. Talks with their colleagues, team managers and neighbours were arranged to collect the perceptions of others about the migrant players. There was no structured questionnaire; hence, the researcher collected a large amount of information on the topic at hand. But there was hardly any common thread that connects the responses of different respondents even though all of them were reflecting on the presence of these foreign players in their life. In order to make maximum use of the ethnographic survey, the researcher observed these targets for a long time without any audio or video recordings. A substantial time was spent in Kerala's Malappuram district as the region has several local football teams where African players are present. The researcher gathered information from old football players and fans and present team management to understand the need for such foreign players in their local teams. In addition, the old and new issues of popular magazines and newspapers were used to gather photos, reports and controversies, if any. The collected data from respondents were analysed using the narrative analysis method, which is best suited to describe the responses.

Analysis and Findings

The presence of African players in local football clubs of Kerala was traced from the early nineties. The indigenous sevens matches were very popular at that time. Those African students in higher education institutions participated in these matches either for their friends or for additional income. They were neither keen to regularly play in these matches, nor the local clubs felt the urgency to ensure them in the teams. But the economic liberalisation of the 1990s was a turning point in sevens matches in the region. The increasing job opportunities in the Gulf reduced the availability of human resources for football in villages. Even though gulf migration created limited sports facilities in villages and provided better sports equipment, the Gulf war created an economic blow in several villages of Malabar. The financial uncertainty forced many young people to search for alternative livelihood options, which affected football too. The increasing popularity of television was another reason for falling spectatorship in tournaments. But the organisers, notably All Kerala Sevens Football Association (AKSFA), addressed them with a professional attitude and eventually brought back the glory of sevens football. Introduction of floodlight matches in the late night, extensive local advertisements using posters and banners and telecast of matches through cable television were the common strategies they used to impress local people. But among them, the most vibrant strategy was the induction of African players in the team; hence, the increasing presence of African football players in Kerala was associated with the increasing popularity of sevens football.

Over the years, hundreds of African footballers played in the rough paddy or mud grounds of Kerala. Since the mid-nineties, their number was steadily increasing. As there is no official data on the details of players based on country of origin, either with AKSFA or any other agency, it is not easy to find out their accurate number. It is calculated to have around 400 African football players in 2014 in the entire country, whereas around 120 players in Kerala itself

(..., 2014). From the field study, it is estimated to have around 150 players in Kerala at the end of 2015. When most African players were from Nigeria, Sudan, Ghana, and Mali initially, they later came from Liberia, Guinea, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Zambia, Kenya, and Burkina Faso also. All of them are from economically backward families in the outskirts of urban or semi-urban areas. Their age usually is between 22 to 27 years even though very rarely those who belong to above thirty also play in teams. As sevens match demand maximum physical stamina, it is not easy to maintain a place in teams to those who beyond an age irrespective of nationality. Most of them join the football leagues in India in later teenage but reaches Kerala later in age only. But the trend of joining Kerala teams directly is increasing for around a decade. Even though we heard about African students who play part-time footballs, the researchers hardly saw anyone during the fieldwork.

All those African nationals we spoke to migrated to India for making a living. The passion for playing football was their second motive only. Even though they wish to continue their football career, their immediate aim was to make money to support their poor family back home. Among them, several are married and have children. As the football season of Kerala depends on monsoon, there will be hardly any sevens match from June to November; hence players have an option to return home if needed. They all use mobile phones to regularly communicate with families whereas the use of letters and e-mails are absent in the present days. As they are from different races and nationalities, they use either Arabic or English to communicate within. Those playing in Kerala for several years can understand little Malayalam, the local language of communication in Northern Kerala. They usually use English to communicate with management and local people. One of the important reasons for learning spoken English in these football villages is the presence of African footballers. Even though very rare, some Islamic scholars also use Arabic to communicate with players from Sudan or Nigeria. Similarly, some of these players visit local religious centers for offering prayers. Those African players who do not belong to either Islam or Christianity usually stay home for their prayers and related things. But all of them have one or another kind of religious beliefs. Although they belong to different religions, they never had any religious tensions among them as they share apartments. They wholeheartedly join the religious function of other communities too.

One of their most significant attractive factors to the Indian sub-continent is the common climatic conditions with Africa. The experienced players who worked before in different regional clubs in India also believe that Kerala is the best geographical region to live in. Supporting climatic conditions help African players to perform better in Kerala than in other states. As different African communities have their own unique food culture, it will be difficult for the migrated players to adjust to local food initially; hence indigestion and diarrhoea affect them. But they will adjust with local cuisine as elsewhere. The players themselves cook their food using local vegetables, meat and imported curry powder. The management will try to ensure regular meat intake as it is crucial to keep their physical stamina. They will utilize local gymnasiums as team managements have contracts with such facilities. Panchayat grounds, paddy fields or any other open areas in the neighbourhoods will be used for practising. Managements usually use the

service of a regular physician in case of health issues. It is not unusual that these African players have physical injuries during the match or otherwise. But the management has to address those medical expenses too as per the contract. The underperformance may create mental pressure on several players; in that case, such players may leave the state even before the season ends.

The African players are recruited to Kerala in several ways. In the earlier times, they were contacted while playing in other clubs in West, East or North India. As the contract with players usually is for a year, it was not difficult to catch them for the coming season. Even though players from central Asia (usually Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan), Latin America (Brazil and Peru), Caribbean islands and East Asia (Thailand and Malaysia) are plenty in such clubs due to financial reasons, Kerala clubs book only those from Africa. Club management will be cautious about dealing with only those African players who are coming under the second category players as others are very expensive to afford. The contract is on a 'pay-as-you-play' basis and not for an entire season. Payment is in Indian rupees, and it covers food, accommodation, medical expenses and flight charges to the home country. On average, Rs 3000 to Rs 5000 is given to an African player. It was around Rs 750 to Rs 1250 in the late nineties. There will be around two to three African players in most of the sevens teams. Each player can play around 80-100 matches in a season. These players cannot engage in any other livelihood activity due to visa conditions. The managements are enthusiastic about keeping African players as they command a more extensive community of fans. Considering the limited time and space, only those players with maximum speed and strength can perform consistently in sevens matches; hence skilled African players attract more fans and admirers. Their presence boosts ticket sales and attracts sponsorships. It is most likely that successful players will continue in subsequent seasons too. But they can move from one club to another.

The admiration for footballers goes beyond the boundaries of grounds. The local people are very concerned about the welfare of African footballers in their neighbourhoods. The players were invited to many family functions like marriages and local festivals. They were treated with regard at marketplaces, in buses and local restaurants. The presence of such players is a matter of prestige for the host while organizing functions. Treating them during festive occasions like New Year, Eid or Vishu is never missed by the team management. Each victory will be celebrated by the team members together. The foreign players will do visit the families of local colleagues as a customary practice. Fans give farewell to players at the end of seasons along with management. Such programmes will be a 'mini-festival'. Players will be rewarded with several gifts when they return home. Several local people still keep in touch with the former African players who are present in different places or back home. Along with admiration, such practices also reflect the local culture of hospitality.

Conclusion

Even though football has a prominent position in people's individual and collective lives in the Malabar region of Kerala, very few are choosing football as a career. Similarly, only the less talented players of Africa are reaching the clubs here. But they never fail the expectations of the club

owners and spectators. The continuous presence of Africans in several places of Malappuram and Kozhikode gradually created an African football diaspora. As a small and temporary community, they never command any higher positions in the social or economic hierarchy of the region; but have an esteemed space in the social and cultural life of local people.

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