

The African Precariat: The Representation of the Undocumented Football Players in Malabar

Pashiya. M

Phd Scholar, Jain University

Dr. Sreedevi Santhosh

27 January 2019

The negotiations of the precariat in the globalised world necessitates the understandings of invisibility and inaccessibility. The precarity experienced by the African undocumented football players is unconventional. The popularity of the game in the region precedes its official acknowledgement by Kerala State Football Federation. The football clubs find known and defaced players from African countries. The reception of the Malayalam movie ***Sudani from Nigeria*** validates the popular acknowledgement of the illegal presence of these foreigners. The popularity of the game normalises their illegal presence in the public space and makes them temporarily elusive of interpellation. Their presence in the ground is often with the unofficial sanction of the police force who are employed for ensuring propriety amongst the onlookers during the match. The unfamiliarity and distance that the local people exhibit towards them changes when the game season begins. The undocumented African sevens' players in Malabar transforms into a privileged precariat during the match. The adoration of the fans, the opportunity and the exposure of the game transform the match into a subversive carnivalesque. The exotic presence of an African player in a team ensures marketability to the game and thereby foreign players receive better remuneration. Yet they are homogenised as African players and thereby lack specificity. Their presence after the season is tantamount to the "othered" migrant labourers as they merge with the manual labour force. Being under the surveillance of people and authorities, camouflaging their identity becomes impossible. The paper explores the African precariat and their negotiations with the host environment. It examines their recurrent vacillation from privilege to insignificance through representations of African football players in films and journalistic media along with testimonials.

Key Words : African players, Precarity, Privilege, Football

“Tens of thousands of people mourned the premature ‘death’ of the team, hundreds openly wept and dozens of men paid for the Argentinean defeat with their hair and moustache. Argentinean flags which had been fluttering in towns and village squares from well before the start of the World Cup vanished overnight. “(Basheer 12)

The given description is not about a Latin American or European small town where Club footballs and the World Cup itself becomes an ambition for budding soccer players and a proximate reality to the fans. It is the reaction to Argentina’s exit from 2002 World Cup by their religious fans from Malappuram, a district in the northern part of Kerala. The soccer mania of Malappuram is often eccentric and irrational. People’s enthusiasm for the game transforms into unusual haircuts, flex boards and even seasonal customised vehicles which are painted with foreign flags. The minds of most Football fans in Malappuram flutters not only at the sight of the tricolour flag of the nation but also at the sight of their favourite European or Latin American flags. Most of them are alien to the culture or history of those countries but their devotion to their favourite team in World cup is almost jingoistic.

Malabar’s exposure to Football owes it to the region’s colonial history. The British caution against the regional mutinies culminated in the foundation of Malabar Special Police and their camp in Malappuram. Football being one of the pastimes of white Police officers who were less in number demanded native enthusiasts to play with them. As the game required twenty-two people, the white officers had to selectively forget their hierarchies and give room for comradeship with the colonised on the ground. The native people played barefoot with the colonial masters who had boots and uniforms (Sandip 9). The game has always been an equaliser or a subversive instance for the existing social hierarchies. The African Football players in the contemporary regional clubs in Malabar continue the tradition of challenging the existing order in the twenty-first century too.

Malappuram’s exposure to club football is through televised matches of the football premier leagues in England, Spain and other European countries. Jerseys of participant clubs in these leagues are a fundamental possession of most teenage boys in the district. The obsession to the game has led to the invention of a new form of the classic football called “Sevens football.” The new form requires seven players in a team including the goal keeper and the duration of the game is reduced to by three quarters of an hour. Kerala tourism credits

the soccer maniacs of Malappuram for inventing and contributing such a unique form of football. The form became popular across the state and beyond. The club football culture gradually became a part of the unique form too. Sevens football clubs are currently a part and parcel of popular sports culture across the state with heavy emphasis to the region of Malabar.

Football clubs are countless in number in Malabar. Some of them are established and famous with cherry picked players whereas the others are bricolages with players who are available at the time of the match. There is a sense of regional stardom that prominent feet in the field would enjoy in every season of games. Dexterity is not only appreciated but expected from teams and hence team managers leave no stone unturned to bring in quality football to the field. Hence, there are football players from African countries in most prominent teams in the region. African football players are crowd pullers in most soccer seasons. They outshine the local players in terms of their skills and hence become the popular as well as managerial choice (Madhavan 30).

Football clubs bring in foreign players through legal as well as illegal means. Big clubs could afford to bring established players through legal channels but small clubs often wring in people from African countries through other measures as well. Football clubs like *Fifa Manjeri* are often preferred by the foreign players as they are selective of good players and are reputable in terms of their payment too. Such teams can claim impunity as they never cross paths with legality in their selection process. But small football teams hardly could afford famous players but they require black players for marketability. Hence they bring in players often without proper documentation. Though the details of transportation of such players are kept in secrecy, their illegal status in the country barely holds confidentiality. When official matches authenticated by All Kerala Sevens Football Association have limited the number of African players on a team to two, the unsanctioned matches of local teams have given relaxation to one more player too. (Madhavan 28). The organisers vouch for the enhanced quality of the game in terms of its skill and entertainment value with the participation of African players.

Most African players look for better opportunities in Kerala where they are paid better than local players. Though football remains a popular game in their homeland, it is never manifested into anything profitable. The game becomes more than a pastime when they

temporarily migrate to India. It becomes a monetarily beneficial vocation. The deprivation of basic amenities at home often compels them to move to Kerala and look for opportunities in sports. The African football players become an unusual precariat in the state.

Migrant labourers are a significant part of Kerala's labour force. With the State Government introducing welfare plans including migrant workers, their presence in the state is authenticated and recorded. The migrant labourers are othered from the main stream interactions. Though they share the same public space with Keralites, they always are deemed to be the "others." But, the African football players negotiate in their host land very differently. They are less in number in comparison with other migrant labourers and are also concentrated in the northern part of the state. So their visibility to the state has not garnered them enough attention to get any welfare from the government.

The preference of the audience to watch black players on the field could be understood not only in terms of their favouritism towards better football, but their expectation betrays the racial exoticisation of black bodies. The stereotyping of black bodies as athletic and strong is not a recent phenomenon. The sports persons from African countries are racially deemed to bring better prospects to their country or team than their non-African counterparts. The superiority ascribed by the race ironically becomes ineffective in reversing any other racial bias against the black body. This universal tendency is often observed by postcolonial thinkers:

"The forms of bio-political governance of the (black) population during the eras preceding de-colonisation, that sought to supervise, regulate and discipline black bodies through various repressive mechanisms, are now increasingly based in social projects that produce new knowledge about the 'natural' propensities of athletic black bodies" (Carrington 31).

Most onlookers expect the black players to be stronger and assume that they have more stamina. The exotic black bodies often require no individuality. In small leagues, many football fans testify that they would like the presence of an African football player as opposed to the leagues where they have only native players. So the black body gets commodified in the soccer season as there is a new version of negrophelia accompanies the enthusiasm for the game.

Love for the game often turns into soccer hooliganism too. Sevens football matches between teams of different regions in the same locality often ends in belligerent arguments of bellicose participants. The players as well as the fans ardently feel for the game and their teams. Football matches often become exclusively masculine spaces where men rejoice or bicker over the game. Foreign players are not excluded from such hullabalos. They are commonly known for their short – tempered nature on the field and become involved in many brawls. They become offenders as well as the defenders in the off field fights as well. The onlookers deem the physical strength of the African players’ superior to that of the natives and hence they are expected to feel less threatened with physical aggression on or off the field. The influence of dominant Hollywood perception of the black body is seen among the viewers in the gallery too as “in America, black men have historically been depicted as aggressive, hypersexual and violent (Hackman n.p.).”

A sense of caution is usually accompanied in the native people’s interactions with the African players. Their physical strength is always acknowledged and overrated. The brawls evidence the peculiarity of this negotiation. African football players are not hesitant to take part in the bickering or physical fight that happens during the match. Their anger is intimidating to the natives. Most witness accounts glorify African players for their valour and natives daring them is often considered as a sign of bravado. The zest and gusto of the game often accentuates the intensity of the fights. However, the local players are cautious when they argue with their foreign counterparts. Onlookers often appreciate the courage of African players to pick a fight in an alien land as most local players would get involved in fights depending on the ground support they have from the gallery. The image created of the African players’ guard them from aggravated situations. When African players restrainful from exhibiting leniency, the precariousness of their presence get defined differently.

The attributed physical superiority creates exotic African bodies which are desirable to the onlookers as they promise more entertainment and rigour on the field. The act, though dehumanising often benefit African football players. It aids them to find more opportunities every season. The financial advantages are also remarkable too. African are paid far more than the local players. The trust that organisers show towards this peculiar precariat is different too. Most organisers bank on their African players more than their local players. One of the organiser’s testimony states that: “If the match is far away, some of the Malayali

players might not show up, citing flimsy reasons. The Africans always make it” (Madhavan 34). The trust gained by the African players and their advantageous position in terms of payment function as a subversive force to the stereotype of rough black men who are often seen as aggressive characters on the ground. The inferior living conditions of their accommodation and their class would not relegate them to ill-paid category. Other migrant labourers who seek livelihood in civil construction other menial jobs are always paid lesser than their local counterparts irrespective of additional work hours. The skill required for the game as well as the emotional significance of Football in the region could be the reasons for the unorthodox status of African precariat in relation to remuneration for the game.

The glorified African dexterity in the game becomes a stereotype which often deprives African players of their individual identity. One black body becomes substitutable with another. There are good football players who may not return for another season after gaining popularity in a specific season. The curiosity of the fans is marred about such unannounced absences as soon as a new black player proves his mettle. A new name becomes the new crowd puller. Homogeneity associated with the native perception of African soccer players subtly “other” them and make their identities redundant and thereby reiterate their position as precarious.

The one-hour duration of the match, but, becomes a temporary suspension of the existing social hierarchy. The proximity that the onlookers experience with the players on the ground are dependent on the progress of the game. Often African players are more appreciated than other players in the game. They have a heroic aura and the interaction that the fans would have with them does not succumb to any social order. The game becomes a carnivalesque where the conventional norms and hierarchy in the society gets subverted. “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom (Bakhtin 7).” During the game, the love for game dominate everything and thereby it becomes an insulated space in time. The otherness of the precariat is not always replaced by glory but at times marvellously with equality. They share ownership of the game with the fans of their club. But misfortunes or inefficiency in the game, if it takes place would not let the African players to enjoy the benefit of the game hour. They are often censured harshly by

the audience as excellence is expected of them. They cannot enjoy the freedom that the carnival of the game provides with reversed fortunes.

The carnival situation in the game becomes more emphatically evident with the reception that the players often get after the game. Once the victory is secured and celebrations are over, the role of every individual on the ground resumes to its former condition. Their identities are once again marked in terms of the social hierarchy and status. One of the fans shared :“I found Eric sitting next to me in the bus after a good match in which I just watched him play and win. I felt strange and different then because I was cheering for him minutes ago.” The moment the game ends, the African player becomes an immigrant job seeker who are less authentic in their presence in the state than the native fans or players. He wants his aura of a hero. The same happens when an African player plays poorly too. The comments made against them have racial undertones which originate from the absolute conviction about one’s superiority over the other.

A similar kind of role reversal takes place when the season gets over and some of the players stay back. Some of them find means of survival in merging themselves with the existing labour force in the region. Many become construction workers and then become another category of migrant workers. Though they are treated with better respect in comparison with other state migrant workers in the state, they are no longer loved as they would be during the match season. They still are objects of curiosity than contempt. But they become a part of the invisible migrant work force socially.

The illegality of the presence of undocumented African football players is hardly noticed by the authorities :

The match starts off slowly, with the Africans giving away possession easily. Eager to impress, they go for goal at every chance. The audience cheer and jeer periodically, and a few vuvuzelas keep the tempo alive. The crowd's passion surpasses the quality of football and, as the last goal is netted, a handful of fans raid the pitch. The police, hovering on the sidelines, intervene, with lathis in hand, to keep the match going.

(Madhavan 27)

The African precariat, though physically intimidating to the native fans and players on the field, are never deemed as potential threat for the upkeep of peace. When migrant labourers

from Bengal and other northern states from the country are subject to constant scrutiny and suspicion of the authorities as well as the people, African football players are not to undergo such thorough vigilance even if they are undocumented. The police officers who are present in the football ground to maintain order are seldom bothered about the legality of the presence of the foreign players. They are immune to the interpellation of the state because of the invisibility that they ascribe. Hence, the invisibility of the margin becomes advantageous to them as they are not bound by the laws of the land until they cross paths with it.

The uncertainty of the profession of football retains the African precariat in oblivion. Some of them stay in Kerala for years and play for seasons while many others leave after their good performance in a single season itself. As there is nothing to authenticate their presence in the host region, they remain invisible and expendable. The love and affection shown by fans and club officials are not towards an individual but to the idea of a good black player in the team. Hence, the disappearance of good players after a single season is not enquired after the season in comparison with the inquisitive attitude of the people towards the absence of an active local player in a match. One African player can be replaced by another African player. Their names are forgotten immediately after their bodies become inaccessible to the spectators. The privilege owned by the African precariat in terms of fandom does not outmanoeuvre their social positioning in the hierarchy.

With the release of the movie *Sudani from Nigeria*, African football players became a part of the mainstream discussion. The assembling of African bodies in front of the camera becomes akin to the marching invisibles on the streets in America. The real African football players who acted in the movie assert their presence in their host land through the silver screen. The presence of those few players could be deemed as a declaration of how they exist beyond the boundaries of the ground and how there is a life that they live in parallel with their fans need to be seen too. Their precarity can be understood in connection with “political and social agency (Butler 168).” The acknowledgement of the presence of African precariat is further emphasised through the box office success of the movie. The relatability of the situation is highlighted as the critics lauds the movie for its realistic depiction of the life in Malabar and the significance of football in the region.

The popular reception of the movie indicates how the portrayal of the protagonist in the movie becomes a representation of an African football player which is desirable to the

Malayali audience. Though African football players mark their presence through movies, it could hardly be considered in terms of agency as the movie becomes a product created and consumed by the mainstream Malayalam culture. The chances for the periphery to be presented the way which is acceptable to the centre problematize the presence of African precariat in the movie. The ideal sweet, innocent Nigerian player becomes a creation of Malayali's imagination as he would want to see the innocent other in the African football players who are thankful for the opportunities that his host land would provide for him and in turn would rejuvenate the value system of the host land culture with his personal anecdotes. The inspiration that the Malayali protagonist get from his Nigerian counterpart in the movie vouches for that.

The cultural negotiation of the African precariat is remarkable too. When they find affinity to their landscape in the geography and weather of Kerala, their taste becomes a significant variation from the region. They negotiate with the alien elements in the culinary traditions of Kerala by finding cultural parallels. They try bringing forth their regional dishes by substituting their original ingredients with available equivalents (Elias 12). They are resistant to the assimilation of the new culture in its complete sense. They boldly make their choices in terms of what would they embrace and reject from their host culture. African precariat quietly occupy the position assigned to them by the mainstream Kerala society without completely complying or defying to their host culture's demands.

So African precariat in the region becomes a significant marginal group which has unique negotiations with the land and its culture. They become passively present in the everyday life of the region. During the football season their absence and presence become equally prominent. It puts them in an unusually precarious situation. Their existence is marked invisible yet visible to the mainstream lives which help them survive in the land with dignity.

Works Cited

A.C. Jaitson "India's African Football Revolution." *BBC News*. BBC, 2016.

Aman, Shahabas. "The field was our namaz mat, going after the ball meditation." *The Indian Express*. 20 Jan. 2019. Accessed on 20-01-2019

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rebels and his World*. Penguin, 2000.

Basheer, KPM. "World Cup: A Mass Hysteria in Malappuram." *The Hindu*. 18 June 2002. www.thehindu.com/thehindu/2002/06/18/stories/2002061806370400.htm

Butler, Judith. "Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics." *AIBR*. Vol.4.No.3. U of California P. Dec. 2009. P. I –xiii.

Carrington, Ben. "Race, Representation and the sporting Body." *New Formation*. Vol. 45. U of Chelsea. Winter 2001- 2002. p. 1-38.

Elias, Esther. "Appams and Some Football." *The Hindu*. 16 March 2014. www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/appams-and-some-football/article5788599.ece

Hackman, Rose. "It's Like We are Seen as Animals: Black Men on their Vulnerability and Resilience." *The Guardian*. July 2016. www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/12/black-men-america-violence-vulnerable-detroit

Kumar, P K Ajith. "Sevens: The Passion of Malappuram." *Sportstar*. 14 June 2017. Accessed on 20-01-2019

Madhavan, Anirudh. "Bringing Their A Game." *The Week*. 07 Feb 2016. www.theweek.in/theweek/sports/african-players-light-up-football-grounds-in-keralas-small-towns.html.

Puar, Jsbir, Ed. "PrecarityTalk : A Virtual Roundtable with Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, BojanaCjevic, JasbirPuar and Anna Vujanovic." *The Drama Review*.vol.56.No.4. Winter 2012.

Sadip, G.P. "Why Kerala's Love for Football Does not Result in Mass Production of Quality Players." *The Indian Express*. 6 Nov 2017. P. 12

Sudani from Nigeria. Dir. Zakariya Muhammed.Happy House Entertainment, 2018.