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A Home Away from Home: Football and the Street in a South African Township

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A Home Away from Home: Football and the Street in a South African Township

Grassroots football in Soweto is peculiar—played in public, but suspended in ideas of confined protection. Physically situated in the midst of treacherous streets, but understood through concepts of safety and security. In a desire to navigate life in the precarious conditions of the South African township, young footballers lean on authoritative structures, as well as being caught in them, in a search for identity, and in an effort to draw a much needed demarcation line between wholesome activity and unwanted conduct. From a ground up perspective, I pose new questions relating to how the conceptualization of local football structures activity, coordinates social control and offers a framework for a desired dependency in the urban, Global South.

Keywords: South Africa; Soweto; identity; conceptualization; football; social anthropology;

Introduction

Football in South African townships deserves the attention of social sciences. Football has the potential to be a prism that could shed light on a wide perspective of enquiries that could advance our understanding of everyday life, and this certainly rings true in the case of township South Africa. This article rests on arguments that consider social anthropology to be well-suited for treating the particularities of sport as worthy phenomena in their own right, while simultaneously seeking out the broader cultural and social connections of sports (Dyck and Hognestad 2015; Traphagan 2015).

Research on football often revolves around the bigger leagues, mega-events, or football fandom, while the smaller, more informal games are seldom the sole object of scientific analysis. Yet, as Armstrong and Giulianotti noted over a decade ago, football in Africa has its strength at the grassroots level (2004, 14). The current study helps to fill this lacuna through an appropriate treatment of everyday football and by displaying

how local, small-scale football is framed in a manner that responds to life's challenges in Soweto, South Africa. By establishing a solid empirical foundation that analyses how township football is both conceptualized and played out, this research shows that football practices relate to authoritative structures in an effort to create meaning and identity for township dwellers in facing a confusing contemporary social world and an uncertain future.

Contextualizing Township Football

In the second half of the nineteenth century, British colonialists introduced football in the Cape and Natal colonies (Alegi 2010a, 2; 2010b, 15). Records show that the first games were held in the cities of Cape Town and Port Elizabeth in 1862, where whites from South Africa played against British-born whites (Alegi 2010a, 2; 2010b, 15). The deployment of working-class British soldiers in the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, in the subsequent war with the South African Republic in 1880–81, and in the South African War in 1899–1902 popularized football and popularized the sport further (Alegi 2010b, 16-18). Football came to Johannesburg from Natal, and the sport was quickly considered a potential device for social control over workers in the Witwatersrand gold mines (Nauright 1999, 1997; Grønlund 2010). Together, colonial rulers and mining companies organized the first football matches in the Johannesburg area in an effort to keep young mine-working men away from the potential dangers of life in the urban society (Nauright 1999, 190). However, the colonial ambition with football was not only about detaining the men by organizing an activity for their leisure time; there was also a presiding idea that sports was a means of infusing the urban population with a good standard of moral values and correct ideals (Haley 1978; Messner 1992, 10). This is in accordance with the view held in the Victorian era on physical health and the body as central components of the moral being (Haley 1978, 138). Couzens (1982) explained

the colonial use of football as a means of *moralizing leisure time* as complimentary to colonial missionary practice. Religious teachings were in place to colonize and control the mind, while football was believed to colonize and control the body of young urban men (Couzens 1982; Haley 1978).

In his thorough work on football in South Africa, Alegi (2010b) emphasized similar ideas amongst the founders and organizers of one of South Africa's biggest football clubs, The Orlando Pirates FC. The football club, founded in the late 1930s in the township of Orlando—which would later become Soweto—was, from the time of its formation, organized by men who believed that the club would keep the youth out of trouble and encourage good habits and moral conduct through football (Alegi 2010b, 66-69). Alegi indicated that this view also resonated with community members outside the club: 'Many residents of Orlando supported the Pirates because they believed that football was a means to develop self-respect and civic-mindedness among the youth—a healthy alternative to joining the *tsotsis* (urban toughs, street criminals) in township streets' (2010b, 67).

Within this contextual framework lies the foundation for how thoughts and actions towards small-scale football was expressed and understood in everyday life in the township community. Even today, local football is ascribed the societal role of controlling and educating young men to become respectable community members. This idea leans on various processes that function to establish a shared understanding of football and its places as an alternative to the ills of modern township society. However, this idea of football as an activity opposing the dangerous and immoral does not necessarily coincide with football's history in South Africa. Rather, football has historically been a contested arena for the production of an African identity, expressions

against colonial rule, and resistance against the apartheid regime (Alegi 2010b; Booth 1998; Darby 2002).

From the inter-war period up to the formalization of apartheid in 1948, football gradually evolved into a site for local identity formation, where football was ascribed local meaning and significance that was beyond the reach of colonialists, missionaries, and mine employers (Alegi 2010a, 13,15; 2010b; Fletcher 2012, 46-47). The local appropriation of the game developed unique rituals of spectatorship, playing forms, as well as religious practices that further localized football and contributed to enhancing its significance in urban everyday life (Alegi 2010b, 47). The connection between football and politics was apparent from an early stage, even prior to apartheid, as many elites of the African National Congress (ANC) also held positions in football administration (Nauright 1999, 199). Subsequently, political leaders utilised the growing popularity of football in the townships as a tool for addressing an audience without formally requesting police permission (Nauright 1999, 199). By the 1970s, football and the anti-apartheid movement became entangled. For example, the Black Consciousness Movement led by Steve Biko and the United Democratic Front utilized football matches to address a mass audience. The speakers used portable amplifiers to deliver political messages while hiding in the crowds to avoid being detected by the police (Nauright 1997, 122). Further, the Soweto uprising of 1976 and its aftermath portrayed the strength of civil society in revolting against the regime, and this revolt also catalysed a process of change within the non-racial sporting movement (Booth 2003, 483; Mamdani 1996, 21). The non-racial sporting movement, fronted by the South African Council on Sport (SACOS), which initially imagined sport to be distinct from the world of politics and race, came to the realization that sport 'did not transcend politics' (Booth 2003, 483). In the townships, football had become a leading form of black culture, and was

significant for the everyday fight against racial injustice as well as an important force for the movements towards liberation and freedom (Alegi 2010a, 2-3). The epicentre of both resistance and football in South Africa was the township of Soweto (Nauright 1999, 190).

While football in South Africa has played a continuous oppositional role through the creation of an urban, African identity, contestation against colonial rule, and resistance against an oppressive regime, it remains a presiding idea that football is a tool for keeping youth safe and out of trouble. Despite historical evidence suggesting that football has been a site for contestation, struggle, and revolt, the sport it is still imagined to play an important role in protecting, disciplining and controlling the township youth and maintaining and producing a social reality that is favourable for individuals and community in Soweto. Before this issue will be expanded and addressed further, I will elaborate on this study's methodological concerns.

Methodological Approach

The empirical findings presented here are qualitative in nature and produced from ethnographic fieldwork in periods of six months in 2009, four months in 2015, and one month in 2016. While the 2010 FIFA World Cup sparked my interest in football in South Africa, the focus of the first period of fieldwork quickly shifted, as it became evident that small-scale football holds a unique position in township culture that is worthy of a thorough anthropological investigation.

To research football and township life through participant observation requires a proximity to the field and informants, which ideally rests upon a certain degree of equality between the subjects and researcher. To achieve this is a formidable task. For a white European anthropologist in a township in post-colonial and post-apartheid South Africa, it is most likely an impossible one. Imagining equality between the informant

and anthropologist in this setting would simultaneously imply ignoring the realities of the historic and socio-political processes that underpin the entire context (Flikke 2003a, 209). However, these insights do not necessarily cast participant observation in this context as a hopeless endeavour; rather, these insights function as a reminder that manoeuvring in the field rests on a skewed power relationship that potentially enables access to the field and simultaneously creates an unintended distance in positionality.

An example of this conflict in proximity and distance is illustrated through the process of how I joined a Soweto-based football team in 2009 that played in a regional league. In an effort to achieve a grounded understanding through participation, I wanted to play local football as part of the data collection strategy. Therefore, I reached out to a European contact, a high-ranking official in the South African Premier League, and explained my intentions. The chain of events this sparked is unclear to me, but it led to me being picked up by an unknown man and driven to football practice with the amateur players of Orlando Red Stars. From an outsider's perspective, I had secured a place in a decent team, not on merit like everyone else, but through a powerful network not accessible to any of the other players. I became part of a team through a granted access, but also became very distant from the team members because of the opacity and favouritism involved in me obtaining that position.

The initial suspicion towards me (the researcher) was somewhat countered when my team members realized that I actually never withdrew to one of the rich suburbs of Johannesburg, as they suspected, but rather resided in a typical Soweto backyard room. Further, my efforts to partake in township life by drinking in shebeens¹, hanging out on the street corners, walking as the preferred mode of transport, and attempting to

¹ Unlicensed township drinking establishments.

communicate with township residents in local languages² further defused the situation. The football team that I, in a sense, forced myself into actually ended up being a valuable foundation for developing the network of informants I gradually acquired. However, this route to access also generated distinct limitations. I mostly worked amongst young men who displayed a unique urban ‘performative competence’, as described by Fergusson (1999). Their communicative performances expressed a distinct street smartness involving a self-fashioning that symbolizes a masculine, partially dangerous, urban individual who knows how to manoeuvre in the township society. ‘You must walk like you know’, they told me—chest out, chin up, wide strides, and with a sauntering style. This sort of display is effective for signifying differences between social categories and portraying a certain male township identity, however, it also denied me research access into other social groups and contexts apart from men involved in football. This position enabled access to almost all arenas of township football since it effectively signaled a competence in the local ballgame, but I cannot escape the fact that it simultaneously silenced information from outside this sphere of masculinities. Yet again, the football I have studied happens in public, mostly involving males displaying a measure of this character.

The Everyday Football

To speak of football in Soweto as a singular concept is at best misleading. This is

² Township residents seldom communicate in English spontaneously, although the younger generations certainly speak it properly. However, my basic understanding of some of the local languages, my curiosity about the linguistic phenomenon of *tsotsitaal*, and my general interest in learning enabled me to communicate with informants in a rather natural manner. A detailed perspective on the urban phenomenon of *tsotsitaal* can be found in Ellen Hurst’s work (2009).

because it implies lumping professional top division football teams together with informal, loosely organized street games, as well as everything in between. Therefore, the reference to everyday football here requires clarification in terms of what exactly is being addressed. The empirical starting point for this article comes from a football club³ I followed for four months in 2015 and for one month in 2016. The club was established in 2011 on the lone initiative of Kaizer, a man in his thirties, who worked part-time as a night guard at a local Sowetan school. One of Kaizer's reasons for establishing a club was that he 'wanted to give back to the community'. He further explained that he 'wanted to give boys an activity to keep them from the streets, from cigarettes, alcohol and marijuana'. The club was started by Kaizer simply gathering youth from the neighbourhood under a club name and dividing them into three age groups. The club perpetually struggles to finance training equipment, organize transport to matches, and pay the affiliation fee with the local football league. Kaizer mostly finances the club from his own pocket, but his meagre salary of 1500 Rands a month is barely sufficient to even sustain himself. Therefore, the club does not participate in the league every season, but instead arranges friendly games with other teams located in reasonable proximity.

A gatekeeper informant of mine, Lucky, connected me to this club after I explained to him that I wanted to follow a youth team for data collection. In addition to

³ In traditional sporting terminology, it would be a stretch to call this a 'club' rather than a loosely organized team. It has no formal dimension to it, no official affiliation with a sporting organization or any board members in charge of managing the club's affairs, just to mention a few of the usual characteristic of a sporting club. Yet, I choose to call it a 'club' since this is how the informants themselves label their activity.

being a former youth football coach, Lucky, can best be described through Hansen and Verkaaik's concept of the 'urban specialist' (2009, 16). Urban specialists are understood as 'individuals who by virtue of their reputation, skills and imputed connections provide services, connectivity and knowledge to ordinary dwellers in slums and popular neighbourhoods' (Blom Hansen and Verkaaik 2009, 16). Lucky spends most of his day in the street outside his house where he, confined to a wheelchair due to a previously violent lifestyle, organizes moneymaking schemes and maintains an impressive network of different people. Lucky easily reached out to coach Kaizer on my behalf.

Below is an empirical vignette based on field notes from a training session, approximately three weeks into my involvement with Kaizer's club:

After the school day is over, the various football grounds of Soweto gradually fill up with children and teenagers. At the ground inside Thabisang Primary School, Coach Kaizer summons the players who have arrived. Someone is always late, but the majority of the under-13 and under-15 team is here. Some older boys and a few young ones are also present. I stand beside Kaizer in the capacity of being the assistant coach. The players sit down while Kaizer talks to them about tomorrow's matches at the ground in Orlando. He speaks about expectations for the upcoming games and about how we should execute our tactics and style of play. He ends his monologue with a reassurance to the players. He emphasizes that even though he might occasionally yell at the players and act slightly strict, he still cares deeply for everyone. 'We all love you very much, the coach and I', Kaizer says. I am a little bit uncomfortable with him including me in this affectionous statement, but I play it cool and nod my head when I see that the players find this to be within the ordinary boundaries of the coach-player relationship.

This is not the only time that I experienced such situations within the purview of township football, particularly within the teams comprising amateur players who identify themselves as part of a loosely organized group and meet up for training, more or less regularly, led by a volunteer coach. It is rather common that affectionous statements describe the relationships among the various actors involved in these football teams. Words of warmth and registers of family are often used to describe the relationship between players and coaches. At one point during my time with the club, I was strongly encouraged by Kaizer to declare my affection for the team. Before a training session, Kaizer gathered the players so that I could announce ‘*Ngiygnithanda honke, bantwana bami*’, a phrase he had taught me and which meant ‘I love you all, my children’. All the players smiled and laughed, and some also uttered an affectionate response. Further, when communicating with the players, Coach Kaizer often repeated that the football team was a family in addition to the biological one, and that caring, support, and protection for one another are central aspects in a team. ‘The players [by being part of a team] can now help each other beyond football’, Kaizer once explained to me; he continued, ‘[football is] teaching them values of life, protecting each other, loving each other’.

At one point, when I asked Coach Kaizer to expand on his motivation for establishing, running, and coaching his own modest football club, his response quickly revolved around themes beyond the actual playing of football itself. He explained, ‘I am teaching these boys discipline, respect, and to be a people’s person. *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*⁴, a common South African aphorism, which roughly translates to ‘a person is

⁴ McAllister argues how this phrase sums up an emic understanding of the idea of a unique African moral ideal of the social nature of personhood as opposed to Western individualism (2010, 54).

a person through other people'. He emphasized that football is a way of teaching young people the values of life and infusing them with a community spirit that will outlive the football activity. In addition, he added that football is something that keeps boys away from the streets and the dangers associated with street life.

One of my other dependable informants, who just goes by the name Tsebo, expressed similar opinions related to football and the upbringing of youth. Tsebo is an unemployed man, soon to turn sixty years of age, father of two, and the founder of a youth football club (similar to Kaizer's, but bigger and slightly more resourceful). He told me that we, as football coaches, 'are the players' fathers away from home'. He expanded on this aspect by explaining that when children do not behave themselves at home they are often told to 'go to your coach', as he put it, thereby implying that the upbringing of youth is not only expected to be executed by parents. Subsequently, I observed an example of how this responsibility of upbringing also relates to protecting the youth, when Tsebo took his team of 13 year-olds to play a game at a nearby pitch. All the players met him by his front gate to walk the 15-min distance together. Tsebo walked in the midst of the players carefully ensuring that no one strayed too far from the group. He continuously made announcements about passing traffic, and if anyone fell behind or walked too fast, he effectively reeled them in. Tsebo executed this task very responsibly and the players arrived safely at the ground under Tsebo supervision as their substitute father.

However, the role of a guardian for the young players is not only one that the coaches take upon themselves, it is also an expected responsibility. A few empirical examples serve to illuminate how the coach is legitimized as some sort of parental extension to the families of the teenage footballers.

During a school holiday, Coach Kaizer planned a friendly game against a neighbouring team; however, to assemble the team, we had to visit the team captain's house in an attempt to convince the captain's mother that her son would be safe for the day. We sat down in the mother's living room, hats in hand, and explained our intentions of playing a friendly game. The mother was standing while listening, with her arms crossed in front of her and a sceptical look on her face. Finally, she gave her permission, with the implicit understanding that we, as adults, were accountable for the boy's welfare during the period of the planned events. This example shows that transferring of responsibility from parent to coach is not necessarily a frictionless transaction but rather requires skilful social manoeuvring on the part of the coach. In this particular incident, the manoeuvring also clearly involved using the accompanying white, European researcher for legitimating purposes.

A young coach, 23-year-old Siphon—rather fresh into coaching a neighbourhood team after an accident ended his playing career—shared comparable experiences while we were casually watching a training session together. He said that he had picked up signals amongst the players' parents that they were worried about football affecting school performances. Siphon understood the parents' perspective and explained, 'The players are busy with soccer and the parents didn't even meet the coach!' Therefore, he said, he 'went house to house'. Together with another coach, he visited the players' homes to introduce himself, show respect to the parents, and explain that the players' school performance was important to him (the coach) as well. Siphon's initiative went well and the parents expressed understanding for the football activity. Siphon explained, 'They [the parents] love it [football], because if they [the children] were not on the ground, they would be outside getting into trouble'

The coach as a parental extension is a perspective supported by another related event in which a mother was passing by Kaizer's training session. She asked Coach Kaizer if he was guiding her son properly during the time he was spending with the team. Kaizer reassured the mother that he was giving the children the morally correct input and disciplining them when necessary. The two did not speak about football at all, but the mother seemed satisfied with the answers. 'At least he stays away from smoking and liquor', she remarked to me as she walked away.

The duties of the amateur football coach in Soweto go beyond the obvious footballing aspect. The role of the coach is also to take care of the children and young citizens, teach them life lessons, and potentially discipline them when they step out of line. These responsibilities contribute to establishing a hierarchical relationship between the coach and the players. As Tsebo put it, the coach is the players' father away from home. The use of family terms, such as the coach as a father, or other expressions relating to protecting and disciplining, fortifies this hierarchical relationship. A coach is expected to discipline or correct unwanted behaviour and does this legitimately. The players subordinate themselves to the coach and accept a disciplinary action if they fall out of line. The following episode illustrates this further. At one point during a training, it came to Coach Kaizer's attention that our star player had been talking down to his teammates for not performing as well as he did. Kaizer was angry and expelled the player from training for a period, even though we had important games coming up and certainly needed that player's goals-scoring abilities. Regardless of his suspension, the player continued to show up to practice, sitting silently on the sidelines. This pleased Kaizer, who proclaimed that the boy took his punishment like a man.

What must be highlighted from this incident is that it has an apparent element of upbringing to it. It resembles a situation of raising a child. Kaizer's action was intended

to discipline and correct the young boy's unwanted behaviour; much like what is done within a family, in school, by church leaders, or occasionally by community elders.

When the young boy assumed responsibility as a consequence of this action and showed that he understood his mistake, his paternal mentor complimented his gradual involvement into becoming a responsible grown-up.

I have also been on the receiving end of such disciplining when I was a football-playing researcher with the Orlando Red Stars. After losing two matches in a row, a missed opportunity of league promotion, and a general lack of concentration in training, our club president felt the need to set things straight. Before a training, he delivered a fierce monologue to us players about our lack of discipline, and then asked us rhetorically, 'What kind of fathers are you going to be?' All of us players looked shamefully into the rusty sand, silently acknowledging that we were far from behaving in a manner that would be expected of family men.

It is evident that the social mechanisms between the coach and the footballers assumes the form of a hierarchical relationship. The coaches express it through the use of father-child metaphors, and act it out as a role involving raising young footballers to becoming responsible adults. In this relationship, the players subordinate through their silent compliance with being disciplined and punished, and by communicating an acceptance of affectious statements from the coaches.

The central aspect to extrapolate from this is that in Soweto, people understand and talk about township football through concepts involving family and the raising of

youth.⁵ Within this context, a football team is a socializing arena in which adolescents are taught discipline and moral values, and the township coaches play roles resembling that of a paternalistic guardian. Thus, football is ideally an arena where potentially wild young boys evolve into respectable grown men.

The football coaches play on several registers to legitimize and assert their authority. They use metaphors of family in speech, act as extensions of parental guidance and discipline, conceptualize football as an extension of school confinement and imagine providing a service to the community. In particular, the idea of serving the community has a strong legitimizing force, as the coaches see themselves as representatives of a community that has a shared and common set of values. However, as Buur and Kyed argued (2007, 19-20), the analytical concept of community is quite problematic since it produces an idea of a homogenous social network that masks potentially problematic social realities. Yet, in an emic sense, community is regarded as a single-minded entity, which is how it can be used to assert authority. In this regard, Buur and Kyed stated, 'Community has been appropriated by South African traditional leaders as a political tool in providing themselves the authentic representatives of local communities' (2007, 19).

Although the coaches in my study are not traditional leaders, they utilize the concept in the same manner to validate their position. As I have shown, Kaizer and Tsebo lean heavily on the idea that their coaching is in the interest of the community. Further, Coach Lucky explains his own football coaching, and that of others, in a

⁵ The concepts of family in this context usually only imply that of the father-child relationship.

The metaphors of family in township football seldom expand to involve the roles of mothers, siblings and so forth.

similar manner through an altruistic statement: 'We do this with love from our hearts'. He is reassured that the community knows and values this effort: 'The community knows me', he told me, thereby implying that his motives for coaching, the sacrifices he has made for neighbourhood football, and his commitment to local children is both appreciated and highly valued by the community.

The Workings, Origin and Construction of Football and the Street

In broad terms, football is understood as a socializing arena in Soweto. The coaches speak about being the young footballers' fathers, and their actions fortify their role. The players' parents express an expectation of discipline and guidance, and the players themselves subordinate to the coaches' paternal behaviour. Language and action are both part of reinforcing the structuring of the concept of football into a hierarchical relation that plays on metaphors of fatherhood as well as on the idea that youth need authority figures outside family and school. Football as a hierarchically organized socializing arena is not only a suitable way of talking about the sporting activity, but actually a conceptualization of how football is comprehended, conceived and acted upon in the township.

In the above account, I focused on how the introduction of football in the Johannesburg area and the early years of The Orlando Pirates FC revolved around the sport's ability to protect, discipline, and control young men. These are characteristics that continue to frame the township football game, despite South African football's history of being a contested arena for expressions against colonial rule and for mobilizing potentially dangerous resistance against the apartheid establishment. Why, then, is football still conceptualized as a suitable and safe arena for the upbringing of youth?

As mentioned earlier, football in Soweto is regarded as a means to keep young men away from the potential dangers associated with the urban environment. My informants all claimed that football keeps one off the streets, and taken literally this has some truth to it. If one is on the football ground, one cannot possibly be in the streets simultaneously—physics will not allow it; however, a statement such as this implies more than its immediate association. It establishes ‘the street’ as something dangerous and unwanted and thus produces a dichotomy between street and football. In essence, the streets of Soweto are considered a morally toxic place for teens and young residents and clearly do not represent a safe, protected, and controlled environment. The general idea of ‘the street’ as an epitome of ‘bad’ is prevalent in the township, but an attempt to define the concept remains an impossible exercise. ‘The street’ is not necessarily something concrete but rather is an abstract notion of harmful, immoral, and dangerous activities. In their work with township South Africa, Buur and Jensen found similar sentiments in the local understandings of the categories of ‘crime’ and ‘criminals’ (Buur 2009; Buur and Jensen 2004). According to them, ‘crime’ is an emic concept that not only encompasses a wide range of criminal activities—such as theft, robbery, and violence—but also includes issues such as HIV/aids, teen pregnancy, and family disputes (Buur 2009, 30; Buur and Jensen 2004, 147). ‘Crime’ is described as a discursive category used by township residents to explain the ills of post-apartheid society, while the ‘criminal’ is the embodied symbolic threat to modern day societal order (Buur 2009, 30; Buur and Jensen 2004, 147). In my findings, ‘the street’ works the same way.

In opposition to the concept of ‘the street’ amongst Soweto’s inhabitants, one finds ideas of home, family, school, community, adult supervision, and correct upbringing. These ideas contrast with ‘the street’ and are used as interchangeable terms

that come to represent the same thing—an ideal situation of a confined space characterized by order, discipline, protection, safety, and good morals. In this regard, the idea of home and family are constructed categories connoting good and correct values; the categories function more as imagined models rather than representing the actual lives lived in homes and families in the township.

The idea of home is considered safe. The street is not. Unfortunately, football is something that happens outside the perceived safety of family, physically outside the gates of home and away from a confined and controlled space. Nevertheless, it cannot be understood and labeled by its actors as ‘street’. It must to be conceptualized in manner that can make everyone who is involved or affected by it rest assured knowing that football has nothing to do with ‘the street’. The empirical material above describes how football is conceptually related to a controlled and safe arena and, in many cases, to an abstract idea of family. A football club is understood as family, the coaches take on the role of fathers away from home, a transfer of parental responsibility is negotiated or football is viewed as an arena where learning to be a responsible adult takes place.

If football can be associated with family and upbringing, it brings it all closer to the idea of some kind of confined home, which makes the streets seem far away, at least mentally, because the physical boundaries of the football sphere and the street sphere are actually not very clear at all. In his work on youth gangs in Soweto, historian Clive Glaser has in fact found that football grounds functioned as central connection points for gang affiliates in the 1960s and 70s (1998, 724). Football grounds were gathering places for male youth where they could hang out, smoke dagga⁶ and gamble, as well as being focal points for the development of a territorial local identity (Glaser 1998, 724).

⁶ A slang term for cannabis

A particular football ground where I spent time, located where the neighbourhood of Orlando meets Diepkloof, reveals a more recent example of how the ideally distinct concepts of football and street blur in reality. The *Coke* ground is infamous for hosting money-betting games between amateur adult teams, which often end in aggravated disputes over rules and results. Those in the crowd smoke and drink while gathering around cars that play loud kwaito music. On one Sunday, when I visited together with three informants, I witnessed a violent fight erupt between two spectators. One of the football players then temporarily stepped out of the ongoing game to join in the fighting, before casually returning to play football.

The phenomenon of the betting games and its surroundings in general, and the violent incident in particular, obscures the imagined dichotomy between the category of street and the category of football. What are considered two distant spheres of township life, and consequently two opposites on a spectrum of morality, are in fact constructions that poorly reflect the reality of the everyday. I have participated in Sunday-league games where the opponent has had difficulties prioritizing playing since they were occupied with drinking in the crowd instead, and I have witnessed local police trying to arrest youth smoking dagga at a ground by running after them, which just ended up in the police being ridiculed for their poor physical form. Yet, the confidence in football's ability to oppose street-like activity is ever-present. My informant Tsebo represents this accurately. I lived with Tsebo for a month in a backroom in Orlando, where we would often chat in the evenings over beers bought from a neighbour a couple of houses up the street. I often sat on the bed, while Tsebo reclined in a camping chair—the only two seating options in our room. One night when sitting like this after returning from a local shebeen, one of Tsebo's grown-up sons knocked on the door, mildly intoxicated and smelling of marijuana. The reason for his visit was slightly unclear, and Tsebo was not

really interested in finding out either. He just ignored his son as best he could and turned to me to ask if I could talk some sense into the young man. Slightly baffled and confused about how I would manage this role, I took Tsebo's son outside to ask him how he was holding up. I spoke a few words of support to him, and we parted ways. Once back inside, Tsebo continued to complain about the choices made by both his sons, before humorously suggesting a solution involving me containing the boys on the football ground: 'Take them [the sons] to the ground and keep them there', Tsebo proposed to me.

There is an obvious paradox present here. In the imagined ideal state of things, football and the street are in complete opposition. However, in actual everyday life, the two phenomena partially overlap and blend. Yet, no matter how unclear the experience of the boundaries actually is, the categorization used to draw these imagined boundaries remains fixed. The play on different registers of authority between players and coaches create the important and necessary distinction. Football must be conceptualized as a confined and secure home led by an authority, because the opposite of that would equal the street. The act of understanding football through a conceptualization that involves a hierarchy is in place in order to draw a sharp line between what is considered unwanted activity and what is believed to be good conduct. Football needs to operate within a paternalistic frame to distinguish it from being connected to something harmful. It needs to be supervised by an adult to make it separate from disorderly behavior. This kind of conceptualization structures activity, serves as a form of social control, and provides the idea of a safe environment.

In Donham's (2011) work, the trace of a historic foundation that relates to how football is conceptualized deserves highlighting. Donham explains how labour relations in the developing stage of the South African gold mining industry in the late nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries were characterized by paternalistic attitudes, and that these developed to become part of managing discourse with the rise of apartheid in the 1940s and 50s (James in Donham 2011, 112). The patriarchal culture in the gold mines and in the miners' living compounds was partially a white ideology put in place for control and protection over black workers; however, it also, to a certain extent, resonated with rural black workers who came from traditions where respect for fathers were culturally rooted (Donham 2011, 18,112; Gluckman 1950; Kuper 1950; Leclerc-Madlala 2003; Memela 2005; Sathiparsad, Taylor, and Dlamini 2008). Not to say that these 'traditions' were pure and authentic preservations of the past (Buur and Kyed 2007, 22). They were also colonialist constructions cultivated and imposed as means to establish legitimacy within local authorities, which could work as tools for indirect rule during the colonial period (Mamdani 1996, 17; Moore 1994, 18; Ranger 1992). White compound managers exploited these paternalistic 'traditions' to secure production in the mines and often viewed themselves as *ubaba wetu* or 'father of all' (Donham 2011, 18). This paternal authority was also displayed when white managers referred to black African workers as 'boys', which implied that mine leaders needed to act as strong father figures in their relationship with the work force (Donham 2011, 112).

The mineworkers in the Witwatersrand area were never isolated in the compounds but engaged in social and economic relationships with the increasing number of rural black workers employed in the city outside the mines (Moroney 1982, 260-261). Hence, the social and cultural forms in the mine compounds developed in accordance with life outside the compounds, and in conjunction with the development of black townships (Coplan 1982, 359). It is therefore no surprise that a patriarchal culture, with ties to rural South Africa, deployed actively as an instrument for indirect colonial rule, taken advantage of in the mines, and used as a strategy for control, is still

observable in the township and is clearly present in the most popular leisure activity of Soweto—football.

The construction of football as a hierarchical arena facilitates a controlling mechanism in a landscape where the distinctions between ‘street’ and ‘not street’ are vague. Organizing football within a paternalistic framework eliminates it from being associated with the street. It takes the leisure activity, which goes on outside the confines of home, frames it within something that is imagined as safe and controlled, and further fixes it within the category of good morals as opposed to wrongful conduct. A virtuous world of football is constructed by adults who regard the outside of that world a dangerous alternative, and the players, through their mere participation, accept and succumb to that world, which reinforces the structure of the same hierarchy.

Providing Desired Dependency

Beyond the controlling and protecting mechanisms, there are additional aspects related to the hierarchical understanding of football that require attention. My findings suggest that the presence of a patriarchal structure in township football also fulfil a need for a social incorporation and provides young football players with an answer to a search for a desired dependent affiliation.

I build this argument on the basis of Ferguson’s (2013) groundwork. Ferguson claimed that the southern African context is a social world where people have gone from historically being a scarce and valuable resource to now being considered redundant, in surplus, and less valuable (2013, 223). Further, Ferguson claimed that this has serious ramifications for social personhood (2013, 223). My argument is that football, when framed within different registers of authority, provides a possibility of obtaining personhood and offers a desired opportunity for subordination. A subordination that ideally should have been obtained through permanent employment,

but alternatively has to be sought out through football, since the possibility of future jobs seems out of reach (Seekings 2014, 72-73).

Before I elaborate on the argument further, there is a need for additional specification, because personhood can be a tricky concept. It often collapses with concepts of the conscious self and the individual, and becomes hard to understand as well as analytically useless (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001, 279; Spiro 1993, 117).

When referring to social personhood, I refer to the cultural conception of the person and the social roles and relations actors are suspended in (Spiro 1993, 118-119; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001, 279). The definition serves an important function. When reading my claims of how young Sowetans willingly seek out a dependent relation, it is important to avoid confusing personhood with actors' inner workings or their own understanding of their self. That mistake would far too quickly resemble a classical anthropological cross-wiring—a cross-wiring that suggests that Africans are representatives of a collective identity (Flikke 2003b, 78; Vail and White 1991, 7,9; Lienhardt 1985, 143-144). I am far from suggesting that my informants have a purely collective-orientated identity; rather, I merely indicate that I treat personhood in this article as a relational matter and a cultural creation (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001, 276; Ferguson 2013, 230).

Ferguson used a case of southern African regional history to show how there is a continuity in the social systems from the precolonial to the colonial eras, the main point being that men were needed—either as clan-members or subsequently as labourers—in the mine-industry, and that these subordinate relationships constituted their social personhood (2013, 229-230; Donham 1998, 112-124). Further, Ferguson drew a line from the colonial era through the apartheid era and pointed to how, particularly in the urban environment, social membership for black men was inevitably connected to

waged employment which was available and mandatory (2013, 229; Donham 1998, 112-124).

The search for a subordination is quite provoking to the liberalist idea that people naturally seek autonomy and independence in a pursuit of emancipation, and that this is directly associated with dignity and freedom (Ferguson 2013, 224). This idea is not culturally universal (Shah 2013, 254) Instead, it is the dependent relation to some kind of authority that offers the possibility of dignity, freedom, and personhood in the South African context. Because, as Ferguson accurately points out, seeking dependence is a strategy to avoid the terrifying opposite—the absence of social relations and the absence of personhood (Ferguson 2013, 232). In the South African context, hierarchy must be understood as a key aspect of social organization and production of personhood (Haynes 2013, 251).

In contemporary South Africa, the social situation has shifted. Men have gone from being needed as workers to being surplus resources, despite the country's economic growth (Seekings & Natrass in Ferguson 2013, 230). Especially for township-dwelling men, the possibility of employment appears unachievable. A recent and thorough work on class in Soweto supports this claim (Alexander et al. 2013). According to Alexander, 69 % of adult Sowetans are either unemployed, not in the labour force at all, or merely engaged in some kind of survivalist activity (2013, 3). Further, Seekings emphasized that unemployment could delay the South African youth's transition into the adult role of working for a living, and I add, delaying the production of social personhood (2014, 73). Comaroff and Comaroff (1999, 284) made a similar argument when they highlighted that it is black underclass males that bear the brunt of difficulties with social reproduction in the contemporary South African context.

It is within this context that I propose that football provides an opportunity for social incorporation. The hierarchical structure in place offers the necessary dependent affiliation in a societal condition that fails to offer a transition into a social adult identity. Honwana's work (2012) dealt with the problematic process African youth are faced with in going through the transition from childhood to adulthood and claimed that African youth are suspended in a long phase of 'waithood' since they are struggling to achieve the social and economic autonomy that defines the role of the adult.

Adulthood—consisting of obtaining a job, moving out, and creating a home with a spouse and children that one can provide for—is not an easily obtainable next-step for township youth (Honwana 2012, 23). Rather, youth in 'waithood' seek out alternative forms of personhood and ways to incorporate themselves with society (Honwana 2012, 4). Football then, when framed as a hierarchical arena, fills a void for the young, football-playing men who are at an age where unemployed 'waithood' is approaching fast. This kind of football is seeking a dependency in a post-colonial, post-apartheid state where there are few other possible arenas for forming a social personhood, of being someone. In my opinion, football could be regarded as a contemporary response to a panic about future joblessness and as a solution to a possible troubling identity. The hierarchy in football, facilitated by the authoritative relations it is caught up in, makes football a good framework for production of personhood and identity, as well as for grounding oneself when approaching an uncertain future.

Conclusion

In contextual conditions that are at best uncertain, football provides a possibility for clarity, meaning and identity. Grounding the activity in an authoritative framework contributes to social control over the young population as well as organizing a sense of security in an urban social world that is commonly deemed as unsafe. In a society where

inhabitants are constantly worried about young men being captured by ‘the street’, the need to provide a safe social space is urgent. The conceptualization of football as a hierarchical practice produces and organizes this space. Further, understood in this manner, football offers an opportunity for the creation of social membership. In this article, part of my aim has been to show how football in Soweto generates social membership and a much-needed personal dependency.

On a larger scale, this article points to how involvement in football in Soweto is a process of willingly seeking out, engaging in and reproducing cultural practices that has clear reminiscences of patriarchal and oppressing South Africa. This, of course, is a rather provoking statement, but it does not simultaneously imply that the actors are consciously longing back to their history of oppression; rather it simply suggest that cultural phenomena in contemporary Soweto partially and unavoidably mirrors a past of colonialism and the apartheid regime—a history that cannot be shed that easily.

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