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The Covid-19 Pandemic and the social life of English Premier League Football Fandom in Eldoret, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

English Premier League Football Fandom (hereafter referred to EPLFF) has infiltrated the everyday life of the ordinary people in Eldoret, working its way into the communal and commercial aspects of life here. Studies have shown that this trend is popular in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa as well. In this study we argue that this essentially global cultural form has been affected by the Covid-19 Virus Pandemic in ways that resonate with its social function and that this varies from one locality to another. Using data from a long-term ethnographic study of EPLFF and sociological introspection on lived experience here in Eldoret, the authors revisit the normally active sites of EPLFF-dominant social sites to capture and reflect on the social function of this popular cultural practice that is now changed because of the social impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Introduction

The Corona Virus Epidemic stopped all football activities the world over. The impact on the global financial and cultural economy has been felt and described, particularly at the level of professional football. The European leagues were all paused, and some have since been concluded, the outcome having been mathematically configured. Global sport television has undoubtedly incurred heavy losses and this has impacted on financial aspect of the game. Actual stadium revenues forfeited probably run into millions of dollars and the psycho-social hangover is huge among the loyal fans whose lives revolved around attending live-the-stadium football across the various football stadiums of this world. But we have one very real yet completely invisible outcome of the global stoppage of football. It may be unseen and unaccounted for because it involves unconventional fans of football; overseas fans of European football in such places as Eldoret, a town in the Rift Valley region of Kenya, whose main claim to fandom – in the practical sense – consists in televisual spectatorship and extended social activities provoked by their spectatorship experience. In this article, we argue that such activities flow with and also enhance the actual rhythm of life here in its social and material dimensions. In this sense, what begins as a leisure activity is elevated to a more serious level, which is how the cessation of EPL football was for some people in these parts a serious matter beyond leisure.

We make this argument against the background of a well-defined cultural imperialism thesis, which perceives European football fandom as a mere extension of the production of culture in the West and its consumption in the developing world, which is seen as disconnected with and interfering with the local processes of cultural production and consumption, which among others include Unwana Samuel Akpam,¹ James Tsaioor,² Gerard Akindes³ and Olomuyiwa Omobowale.⁴

These studies significantly position European football in the light of a locally irrelevant extension of transnational broadcasting and, in Akpam's view, improved broadcast and marketing of local African football could change this tide.⁵ This is an argument made from the assumption that the consumption of televisual European football is an easy and dispensable leisure experience. It feeds off the assumption that individuals seek out and enjoy EPL football in manner that is detached from the real business of their life and one in many other leisure options, including 'local football fandom, given that the fans have no rootedness to the geographies and cultural histories of European football. In this sense, EPL Football Fandom (EPLFF) should have the status of a hobby, and easily distinguishable from those individuals to whom football fandom is a way of life, a central facet of their identity, without which they will feel a form of dislocation on their sense of themselves and place in their social world.⁶

Yet, there are communities of EPLFF in Eldoret that locate EPL football at the heart of the everyday rhythm of life. We are concerned with a particular segment of society, the ordinary people that walk the streets to hustle for their daily existence. Globally, these communities have been understood as the most vulnerable in the Covid-19 times; the general assumption being that their most immediate problem is how to secure basic needs for their survival. In this light, one could imagine that such a 'superfluous' cultural form as EPL football is not among their worries. Nevertheless, in our observation of life in these corona times, we have observed that indeed the tension and anxiety about the pressing 'closure of normal life' in Eldoret seems to also include the anxiety over the re-start of, in particular, the English Premier League, which has become part of the normal life in these parts, as has been observed in earlier research by Waliaula,⁷ William Sidnam,⁸ Godwin Siundu,⁹ and Richard Vokes.¹⁰ The studies highlight the experience of EPLFF in Eastern African region, a practice that is perhaps best summed up in Sidnam's rather ironic remark that, 'since the end of European imperialism, the English football club has been quietly colonising the minds of spectators everywhere, introducing them to cultural forms that had once been unique to England.'¹¹ Sidnam's remark is important to the main problem we explore in this study in which we use data from a long-term ethnographic study of the first author to give an account of how English Premier League football became part of the quotidian experience of life and more importantly, how the experience was gradually appropriated to address local socio-economic needs. Like Sidnam, we see EPLFF as serious leisure in Eldoret, but unlike him, we do not see the practice as mere evidence of the impact of global media on impressionable individuals that are then whipped into imagined communities.¹² This is because, his argument logically leads to a kind of homogeneously mediated community, which our long-term research in Eldoret consistently negated, and this is outlined in the social and theoretical contexts of this study.

Social and theoretical contexts

It is arguable that EPLFF in Eldoret is a testimony of the infiltration of global sport television into the web and flow of geographically and culturally distant societies from the UK. Granted, in our fieldwork we have established that there were a few enthusiasts of EPL football in Eldoret before the entry of live televisual broadcast of this football; but it was only after Digital Satellite Television made its entry to Kenya that EPL became part of the social reality here. Nevertheless, we argue that the social encounter has not been a mere mediation of a foreign cultural form that is subsequently absorbed in the local context. It has been processed in and reflected on local social and media technology conditions. We could understand this in the light of Nick Coudry's concept of media as social practice. He has proposed a shift towards the broader set of interactive practices related to media and how it operates in real life societies and under the influence of human agency.¹³ This has been a continuous process and in effect, the contexts, processes and meanings that are attached to EPLFF have also shifted over time. We argue that the unexpected stoppage of the EPL is one way to gauge the place of EPLFF in Eldoret's social life.

We pick one aspect of our cultural world that seems to have seeped into, defined and also been redefined in the social experience of English Premier League football fandom; conviviality of social life and its utilitarian and aesthetic extensions. We argue that this substantively and artistically gregarious pattern of social life is in part sustained in the largely informal and/or informalized economy that is characteristic of this part of the world, particularly for the low-income bracket. It is also known as the *Jua Kali* economy, an open-air and team-oriented set of blue-collar tasks that are executed by young and youthful locals to guarantee their survival. It ranges from semi-permanent motor-vehicle garages, park stations to market place and so on. The main manifestation of this conviviality is talking; endless talking that frequently includes their experience of the English Premier League.¹⁴ In this sense, we could argue that the EPL has offered a set of symbolic equipments to its fans in Eldoret with which to re-engineer and operate their everyday life. This problematizes assumptions that have been made on the nature of globalized football and which link it to global capitalism. Akpam, for instance, has observed that it is the growing global interest and massive global media commercial interest that have obviously made the European league football the most popular in the world and that this mediated football has created a body of huge fans across the globe, particularly in Africa.¹⁵

Studies have shown that local technological and socio-cultural contexts repurpose EPL football fandom and that in such instances there develop new social patterns and cultural forms. This is an argument that has been well explored in the study of Olaoluwa and Adejayan, in which it is established that the pre-existent leisure culture of Nollywood films shaped the nature of emergent EPLFF consumption spaces and style.¹⁶

The two cultural forms are located in informal viewing centres and the audience reception experience consists in an inter-textual flow of imagery from one form to another. In the Eldoret scenario, we have considered the EPL as a symbol that the fandom experience appropriates to enhance pre-existent social groupings into formidable communities only nominally identified by their EPLFF but essentially working like kinship relations that live by certain values and always supportive of each other in navigating the everyday experience of life. This could be read differently from the mainstream perception of football fandom as a direct symbolic embodiment and articulation of aspect(s) of social categories or relations, such as nationalism, ethnicities and socio-class that as has been observed by Ben Porat in his works on the logic of boundedness.¹⁷ It could be seen as the face of concrete and existent identities, and does not heavily rely on football identity to thrive; the latter only helps to enhance and entrench the former by providing regular opportunities for performance and it is what we explore in this study.

Methods and analytical approach

This study is part of long-term ethnography that dates back to 2010, but also complemented by sociological introspection. We reflect on personal lived experiences as committed fans of EPL football since 1999. Therefore, we have an over 10 years formal ethnographic experience and about 20 years lived experience – in the case of the first author. The ethnographic methods employed in this study are accompanied by and made to rub against personal experience methods. The typical conversational and contingent methods of ethnography are blended with reflexive and autobiographical insights on the part of the authors. In this light, the data of the study largely pans out as an intersecting set of narratives of our lived experience, informal and formal engagement with the EPLFF community in Eldoret and a critical reflection on the experience.

For the purposes of the current study, we are focussed on the experience of six consummate fans and two fandom communities. Significantly, these fans' everyday lives, for as long as I have known them, revolve around what I have termed as hotspots of the social experience of life in these parts, namely the bus park, the motor garage, the barber shop, the butchery, and the shoe-makers yard. They earn their daily bread in these places but at the same time also transact their social experience of life here. The changes in social protocols occasioned by the corona virus epidemic have had

a direct impact on EPLFF in the sense that we no longer watch football matches in the various viewing centres, where the real pleasure of EPLFF is made for the ordinary folks here. But our analytical thrust is in the gaps that are felt in the social places where EPLFF works as the glue that holds together the different pieces, and the mortar that runs the social engine. Our primary data are thus oral testimonies that revolve around EPLFF before Covid-19 set in.

We mainly do in-depth unstructured interviews that are complemented by our everyday living experience; the public health imperatives put in place to contain the spread of the epidemic have not necessarily switched off all engines of social life here. Therefore, our daily life affords us unlimited opportunities to observe and reflect on our new rhythm of life devoid of the televisual spectacles that plug us into the European football worlds. But the social places in which most of the EPLFF lore has been constructed and performed, where this football has been translated and adapted to serve new and contextually relevant functions, are still there and they still serve us, albeit with noticeable gaps. Our research questions are consequently geared towards an exploration of that void that has been occasioned by the cessation of EPL football, a description of which is not possible without recollection and celebration of the typical EPLFF inundated social life of the fans that operate their everyday lives in which they are barbers, drivers and turnboys, jua kali mechanics, retail-store attendants, cobblers, and tailors. This is in no way a conclusive list of the socially wired everyday life sustaining activities in these parts. We focus on them because they tend to be the areas where EPLFF has seamlessly enmeshed itself and produced the most committed fans as well. We engage with these places through purposively sampled individual fans. Their narratively constructed experiences are recorded and then analysed through the prism of relevant theories of media ethnography, with a particular slant on how media reception is adapted to and also made to improve on the rhythm of everyday life, stretching from the performance of social identities to the informal economy that sustains livelihoods in these parts, where EPLFF has been one of the new sources of social capital.

Social capital accumulation in EPLFF

Geri is a household name at West Indies Estate. He runs the oldest and most popular butchery here, which is nestled at the Eastern edge of this centre. He is a fan of Manchester United. His store is a little room of about 8 by 14 feet, typical of butcheries in these parts. The interior is partitioned in two parts, about 60% of it is the space where he stores chunks of meat hanging from the roof. The remaining part is narrow and it is where an oblong counter has been positioned, upon which a weighing machine and a sheaf of old newspapers rest. The remaining narrow corridor reserved for the customers can only accommodate 3 to 4 people at a time. When he has many customers, they line up outside and he tries to serve them as quickly and as efficiently as possible. But most of the time, there are small groups of people standing outside on the verandah trapped in small talk, which more often than not, is about EPL. He is one of those considered as connoisseurs of EPL football and in a personal conversation with him much earlier, on 2 November 2017, he had this to say about his orientation to EPL football:

I started following the EPL accidentally. Initially, back in the village in Western Kenya, I was a fan of radio. I did not have access to television and of course no electricity. I particularly liked listening to BBC news at 6 p.m. I was about 12 years then. This is when I heard about teams like Arsenal and Manchester. Later I moved to this town, that was in 1997. I made a friend at the mosque, who happened to have grown up in Mombasa and knew a lot about the EPL. They had a TV at their home and we followed the EPL highlights on TV Africa. He was an ardent Liverpool fan. When DSTV was introduced in Eldoret, around 1998, we used to walk a long distance to the Clique Hotel that was out of town, the only place where we could access live EPL. Gradually, EPL was available in a number of places in town. I became a committed fan and when I started my business here, it became one of the centres where we the early fans of EPL shared our experience. This has remained a 'hot spot' for the EPLFF community in the neighbourhood.

The Corona times have both directly and indirectly affected this 'hot spot' of EPLFF. In the first place, there being no live football going on, for such a long while, there is no focalizing experience

that would bring together the fan community. Secondly, the stay at home and social distancing conditions have kept people away from public places. But it is perhaps more instructive that Geri also talks about the losses he has incurred in his business that he directly attributes to the halting of active EPL football alongside other social restrictions from the public health department:

I have made many good and loyal friends in my long-term experience as an EPL football fan. They come here frequently and we engage in hours of talk about football, but also about other issues. My store is small, and poorly ventilated, so we always stand out here, next to the road and spend hours talking. There are times when we even spend over 5 hours just talking, especially after crucial games involving Arsenal and Manchester United. In such moments, my main business of selling meat becomes a distraction, I keep getting in to serve my customers and then resume my place in the football talk outside. I had to adopt shrewd tactics to balance it out. I take my time to measure out half-kilogram and one-kilogram portions, which is what is the popular quantity of meat on demand here. When many customers come in at ago, I easily and quickly serve them to rejoin the talk outside, and eventually most of these guys will also buy meat from me. They come from far off places, as far as Langas and Maili Inne neighbourhoods, to be part of the football talk and, perhaps sanitize it, by also becoming my customers. But currently, things are different. The football is on hold. People are advised to stay at home, and even when they come out you are expected to wear a face mask and keep social distance, (Personal conversation, 25 April 2020).

Listening to him we understood his predicament. The everyday experience of life here in Eldoret is over-determined by a strong sense of an informal public sphere; people will always congregate to talk. EPL football fandom has become a 'natural fit' in this ever-present social encounters. It has provided fuel for a fire that was already in existence. Furthermore, there is a tendency for such social encounters to be convivial but also carnivalesque spaces defined by verbal duelling, jousting and wrestling, which is arguably one of the genres of popular culture in these parts as well. It is a very popular trend at market centres and also involves lots of bluffing, elaborate performances in which individuals step out of their usual identities and project themselves to desired identities in other worlds.¹⁸ But this is made to dovetail with the meaningful and practical side of life; some friendships are made and cemented in such contexts. In Eldoret, as in many other parts of Kenya, a strong rivalry has been developed between the Arsenal and Manchester United fans, a rivalry that feeds into the verbal duelling and bluff that we have mentioned. Geri observed:

I have two friends, both Arsenal fans, that will always look for me to taunt me, to put me on the defensive, after every Manchester United loss. One of them trades in hides and skins, and lives at Jua Kali, which is over 15 kilometers from here. Yet he will jump on his bicycle and ride up to this place to fraternize with, particularly when we – Manchester United – has lost. He stays for hours, and eventually buys meat and a skin or hide, if I have any in stock. I also have a matatu driver friend, another Arsenal fan, that plies the Maili Inne Route. But in those days when Arsenal has won big, or Manchester United has lost, he will pass by here, pull up right next to the butchery, for a talk. He will also pay for some beef that his wife then picks up later, (Personal conversation, 25 April 2020).

Geri's experience is just an example of many other similar experiences involving the cultivation and performance of friendship and camaraderie around EPLFF, which then help to nurture social capital. A significant example is Jeff, the matatu driver friend of Gero mentioned above. He claims to be a former professional player that plied his trade in Mombasa and that trained with such famous Kenyan players like Mike Okoth. He is always talking about football and has been christened as Wenger. He spends his time either at the motor park in town or on the road, which means he is always in the company of other people. Both the exterior and interior of his matatu is decorated by stickers of Arsenal players, and he is almost always clad in an Arsenal replica jersey, and this is popular with many other matatus as well. Like Geri, his status as the local connoisseur has been of immense help in his career as a matatu driver. He observed:

I do not own a matatu, I have not owned one since 2013, when I sold the one I had then to buy a piece of land. But because I have made many friends in EPLFF I have always had a matatu to drive, which is not a mean feat considering that we have so many unemployed drivers in this town. My matatu always fills up quickly; it is especially preferred by young people who enjoy our football talk. Even at the park station I always have a crowd of people around me. They ask me many questions about the EPL that I happily

answer. You know I am not just a fan; I have played this game and I know it inside out, (Personal conversation, 22 April 2020).

Over the years, we have observed this claim to superior knowledge by some members of the EPLFF community. They seem to operate on some form of cultural capital that, critically speaking, is just a mix of charisma, verbal art and, indeed, oral performance acumen. These are people that you will always find in any social gathering, holding the attention of everyone else because of how they present themselves in the company of others. The EPLFF experience here, miles away from the actual spectacle and world in which it happens, is largely 'orally reconfigured and re-presented' in places such as Eldoret. In this process, there are lead fans whose positions are earned in performance, in a variety of ways but with the net effect that these fans become focal points of the fandom experience. It is a privilege that some of them profit from in real terms. Consider the example of Mako, an Arsenal fan in his mid-50s:

I came to Eldoret in 1994 to try my luck with the casual jobs in the construction industry. I had already been exposed to EPL football through BBC radio, back at my rural home in Western Kenya. But it is here that I first experienced live EPL football, in the 1997/98 season that was won by Arsenal, I think. We used to watch at Club Makuti near Rai Plywood Factory. To be honest, it was also the first time I encountered colour television. I do not know how it came to be that my very innocent reaction to the game became attractive to others. They laughed at my comments and made fun of me in return. Gradually, without meaning to do it, I had become that clownish figure that spiced up the experience. I made many good friends that way. I was not doing very well financially but would always patronize Spice Makuti during the match days because friends sponsored me, bought drinks for me and those that had cars offered to drop me off. Over time, they could pick me and take me to other fancy places to watch football with them; Arsenal fans were in particular very fond of me. I got connections to odd jobs through these friends. Up to date I have lots of patronage from the well to do fans, both Arsenal and Manchester United. My life in this town has been possible because of my being part of the EPLFF community, (Personal conversation, 23 April 2020).

Mako's testimony directly ties in with our own personal experience. Having been attracted to his antics at a local viewing centre, I tracked him down and later had him as one of my research assistants. I later stepped in to help him when he was rendered homeless after a long illness that put him out of manual jobs, which was always his lifeline. He has no family; so I figured that it was easy to engage him as my caretaker in my small plot of land on the outskirts of town and pay him a small monthly stipend. In my interview with him for this work, he expressed a lot of disappointment at the lull in the EPL, because he did not just miss the football. His everyday life depends so much on a clientelism whose main point of reference is EPLFF. I for instance frequently pick him up to watch the late kick-off matches with him and I drop him off later. We always try to support him in any way we can. It is significant that it all started because of EPLFF. Mako's experience is also important because it is, in one sense, evidence of the development of new patterns of popular culture the EPLFF. In this case, he played the role of the joker or clown that spiced up the experience, and perhaps helped to diffuse the tension that sometimes accompanies the live football spectatorship experience.

EPLFF and the aestheticization of social space

In Eldoret, EPLFF is most vibrant in what we could term the melting pots of the largely informal economy that sustains the everyday existence of most people in this part of the world, which include the already mentioned bus park and public transport, but also many other local sites where commerce and community intersect in ways that are not necessarily fungible with standard social experiences of life in other places. In this study we focus on the car-wash/motor-garage, the tailor-shop, the barber-shop and shoe maker's yard. This is part of the local circuit of the service industry where we buy services but also use as sites of performing a sense of community and social identity. For some reason, these have become the hot spots of EPLFF and this has panned out in social processes that have produced a genre of popular culture that feeds on but also helps enhance the

pre-existent commercial/communal enterprise here, which has been affected in the new social arrangements of the Corona times. We engaged with some fans from each of the sites to explore their experience and all we had were narratives of what has always been but that is currently frozen.

The barbershop has always brought male youth together in this part of the world; way before the entry of EPL football in Eldoret, barbershops worked as a connecting point for masculine identification, and as has been observed by Brad Weisse (in another context), barbershops are a social space that trades in the imagination, which when grounded in real life social activities breaches gap between the actual and the possible.¹⁹ It is one of the spaces where global trends of modernity are spectacularized both in visual and oral media. In the case of EPLFF, barbershops were among the foremost 'recruitment centres'. In an interview with Julius, a barber that has been in the business for over 20 years, 15 of those in the same barbershop in the heart of town, he observed:

We were some of the earliest fans of EPL, and in my case, it was because of my business. In 1999, or thereabouts, I moved my business from Eldoret West to the main bus park. Here I started getting new clients, most of them drivers and travellers. One of my regular clients was a bus driver, a Swahili youthful man from Mombasa. He introduced me to the EPL. He always talked about it, and later even introduced some of his friends to my barber shop, they became my regular clients and whenever they were around town, they dropped by to shave and also engage in football talk. I started following the matches live on TV; then, the only place was Midnight Café. Later there was The Clique but way out of town. I supported Arsenal. I still do. Later I moved my business to this location here, which as you can see is bigger than those tiny barbershops at the mainstage. Most of my clients followed me as well. I realized our EPLFF identity was strong, we had moved our relationship from business to a sort of brotherhood. Over time I have attracted many clients, and retain most of them. I believe one of the reasons they stay on is because my barbershop is always buzzing with EPL talk. But now, in these Corona times, business has gone down. Among other factors, I think the lull in the EPL has also contributed, (Personal conversation, 24 April 2020)

We have been his long-term clients as well, and noted that this barber shop, like many others, is much more than a hair-clinic in the standard sense. As has been observed by David Shabazz (in another context) it is a discursive space where masculine identities are socialized and performed.²⁰ EPLFF has been a useful tool in this process.

The car wash and motor garage are also centres of gregarious existence where informal business and verbal art blend into a unique cultural form. These are work stations where a lot of waiting takes place; the workers do not have a regular schedule organized around official appointments from clients. Furthermore, most of these business entrepreneurs work in poorly furnished and even rough spaces. They only have their verbal art and sense of humour to fall back on, and they have developed this into an elaborate culture of tall tales, verbal duelling and myth making. Some of the most riveting stories about EPL are told in these places, and not necessarily by people that watch the matches regularly. Most of them have just taken sides, mainly between the big EPL sides such as Arsenal and Manchester United, Chelsea, and most recently Manchester City and Liverpool. They project their identities into these clubs and spend hours trading barbs and jibes in their bluff identities. It is a practice that is comparable to what Sasha Newell (in another context) has termed as masks of projected imagery, and he considers this as a positive element in the reconstruction of modern identities in postcolonial societies.²¹ By posing as stake-holder fans of EPL clubs, they perform fandom identities comparable to what Richard Giulianotti (in another study) has termed as traditional-hot fans; fans that demonstrate a long-term personal investment with a specific club and sue the club as an extension of a geographically specific community.²² But in this sense, our Eldoret fans bear counterfeit traditional/hot identities that they are conscious of as well. But they put up a performance of this identity nonetheless, a sort of mask. Consider the case of Wama, an attendant at a car-wash in Bondeni. I knew him a polite and laconic – even shy – employee in the establishment. But this was until I found him in the heat of football talk:

We are big, we have already won this league and will also determine who takes the second and third spot. We will make sure Chelsea does not qualify for the Champions League. And Manchester United, are our wives, so you better shut up when we speak. The beat you so bad you had to sack Mourinho and next season we will beat you equally hard, so that the trainee you call a manager is sacked, (Personal conversation, 20 April 2020).

This was just days before Liverpool was soundly beaten by Watford, and I longed to hear him defend the team, because I knew that this matter would be brought up in their talk. I never got the chance but we later interviewed him for this study and he did not exude that confidence he had in the verbal performance. He came through in his usual polite demeanour, lamenting about the drop in business in the Corona times and the dull work environment due to the social distancing and face masks they had to wear. A few metres away there was Sam, the shoe-maker that operates in a make-shift yard right off the Kenya-Uganda Highway. He shifts from one side of the road to the other, depending on weather conditions. When he works on the upper side, it is always next to a thrift store, which is another social space. On the lower side he is always next to the road drainage and a few metres behind a petrol station, hardly a convenient meeting point. But it has always hosted small groups of people that engage in what, from the outside, would seem as serious issues; but when you move nearer you realize it is just social bonding and more often than not, EPL football talk.

And back at the West Indies Centre, one hundred metres away is Wata, a tailor that has set up his workshop on the verandah of another retail store. He has been working from here since 2009, and considers himself an expert on EPL football. I asked him how he came to acquire this expertise and he told me he was 'trained by the best'. He observed, 'I do not even have the time to watch the matches, but I get to hear everything right here. This is one of the centres of EPLFF. I do not support any specific team but I know a lot of information about the top teams and am always up to date.' We have been acquaintances for a long while and he has been one of the main features of the social stream of life there, his tailoring business dovetailing with everyday life here. Like the shoemaker, barber and carwash/motor garage workers, the shoemaker operates within the cauldron of the informal economy and more often than not, his financial profit and security of business are set in an unpredictable context and the most useful factor of production are other people, with whom he has to keep a convivial and even jovial relationship. These are social relationships that are enhanced by what we could term as an aesthetization of the ordinary social experience, which could also be seen as a temporary aesthetic experience against some of the harsh realities of everyday life here. In the long term, such trends as EPLFF-induced fraternization become part of what Sasha Newell has termed as the accumulation of people.²³

Conclusion

This study set out to describe the impact of the Covid-19 virus on EPLFF in Eldoret. We proceeded from the recognition that this is a global cultural practice and that, to that extent, the social impact of the cessation of the EPL should be globally the same as well. We have argued that this is the case because the EPLFF has escaped from the boundaries of global sport media and its perceived 'unification' of the experience; it has been subjected to local social adaptations and appropriations. It is in this sense that we have made our main argument; that social contexts have framed and played out EPLFF in Eldoret in a distinct manner, and subsequently, the absence of this football has an impact that is contingent to the social world of Eldoret. The study was largely fed by an ongoing and long-term ethnographic study on European football fandom in Eldoret. It is thus only in part focussed on the present, but mainly a reflection on what has been and is no longer there because of Covid-19. Indeed, the study is a celebration of the social function of EPLFF in Eldoret.

In particular, it describes the apparent importance of the role of EPLFF in blending the commercial logic and the communal social trend that helps in the simultaneous accumulation of financial and social capital and, significantly, shows how the latter has been a useful instrument in promoting the former. Secondly, we have explored the role of EPLFF in what could be termed as the 'sanitization' and garnishing of the marginalized informal income generating activities in this part of the world. The blue-colour workers in these spaces use EPLFF to create a sort of fantasy world of bluff that helps to momentarily mask their immediate social circumstances, but which paradoxically also makes their working environment tolerable and even enjoyable. But we believe we have also raised one critical issue in relation to the reality of Covid-19 epidemic, one that comes through

when we perceive the social impact of Covid-19 on EPLFF as an allegory of social life in Eldoret. Our study has shown that the rhythm of everyday life in Eldoret is highly dependent on close social interaction in the physical sense. Our commercial activities that sustain our lives here are inevitably enmeshed in and facilitated by the accumulation of people in real space and time. This is the kind of reality that the new public health policies of social distancing have to come to terms with. Needless to say, stay at home and work from home imperatives are also incompatible with this reality. These are issues that need further critical reflection.

Notes

1. Akpam, 'Elite local leagues and transnational broadcast of European football'.
2. Tsaioor, 'Football as Social Consciousness or the Cultural Logic of Late Imperialism'.
3. Akindes, 'Football bars'.
4. Omobowale, 'Sports and European Soccer Fans in Nigeria'.
5. Akpam, 'Elite local leagues and transnational broadcast of European football', 34.
6. Bosse and Gray, 'Fan Cultures and Fan Communities'.
7. The first author has explored this experience in a number of studies, the most important of which are Waliaula, 'Ritualised Talk of English Premier League Football'; 'Oral narrative extension of sportmedia'; 'Performing Identity in the English Premier League Football Fandom'; and 'Envisioning and Visualizing English Football in East Africa'.
8. Sidnam, 'The Arsenalization of Space'.
9. Siundu, 'European Football Worlds and Youth Identification in Kenya'.
10. Vokes, 'Arsenal in Bugamba'.
11. Sidnam, 'The Arsenalization of Space', 135.
12. Ibid., 139.
13. Couldry, *Media, Society, World*.
14. Cf. Waliaula, 'Ritualised Talk of English Premier League Football'.
15. Akpam, 'Elite local leagues and transnational broadcast of European football', 35.
16. Olaoluwa and Adejayan, 'Thierry Henry as Igwe'.
17. Ben-Porat, 'Football fandom'.
18. Newell, *The Modernity Bluff*.
19. Weisse, 'Thug Realism', 101.
20. Shabazz, 'Barbershops as Cultural Forums for African American Males', 1.
21. Newell, *The Modernity Bluff*, 3.
22. Giulianotti, 'Supporters, Followers, Fans and Flaneurs', 33.
23. Newell, *The Modernity Bluff*, 3.

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