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## **Kasi Football: an Ethnography of South African Rural Working-Class Football Traditions**

### *Zusammenfassung*

*Kasi* Fußball ist eine Form informellen Fussballs, die in urbanen Vierteln der Schwarzen, einkommensschwachen Arbeiter\*innenklasse in Südafrika gespielt wird. Die Tradition des *Kasi* Fußball entwickelte sich im frühen 20. Jahrhundert im Kontext der durch die Industrialisierung forcierten Arbeitsmigration. Die autonom organisierten Fußballspiele, bei denen es um Geld oder andere Einsätze ging, dienten nicht nur der Bewältigung von Herausforderungen der Urbanisierung und der erzwungenen Migration, sie erlaubten es auch, Freizeit und Freiräume ein- bzw. zurückzufordern. Der Beitrag untersucht, wie diese spezifische Tradition des *Kasi* Fußballs, Spiele, die nahezu wöchentlich gespielt werden, aktuell in ländlichen Kontexten der Arbeiterklasse neu erfunden und imaginiert wird. Die vorliegende Ethnographie zeigt die kulturelle Widerstandsfähigkeit, die Fähigkeit zur Anpassung an Bedingungen der Entmündigung sowie den hohen Grad an sozialer Ungleichheit, die den Praktiken des *Kasi* Fußball unterliegen.

### *Schlüsselwörter*

Fußball, Soziale Ungleichheiten, Klasse, Südafrika

### *Summary*

*Kasi* football is the most popular form of informal urban football that emerged in the low-income black working-class neighbourhoods of South Africa. This football tradition took shape in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the context of forced labour migration in the industrialising South Africa. Autonomously organised, free-flowing, football games played for a sum of money or other stakes not only served as a way to cope with pressures of rapid urbanisation and displacement, but also as a way to reclaim ownership over their leisure space and time. In this paper, I examine how these urban football traditions are reimagined and performed among the rural working-class in contemporary South Africa. This ethnography of *kasi* football, games played almost every weekend, exposes the cultural robustness, adaptability to the conditions of disenfranchisement, as well as rawness of extreme inequality, which sustain these practices.

### *Keywords*

Football, Social Inequalities, Class, South Africa

## Introduction

On 9 July 2020, *New Frame*, a South African media publication, covered a story entitled “Ignoring the coronavirus to play football” (Mndebele 2020). It richly illustrates how football continues ‘in new ways’ during the nation-wide lockdown and prohibition on contact sports to curb the spread of coronavirus. Mndebele is not writing about national, regional or local leagues organised by the national governing body of football, the South African Football Association (SAFA) or its local administrative affiliates, the Local Football Association (LFA). He is attending to *kasi* football, the most popular form of unofficial and unaffiliated football that operates outside the bounds of the SAFA or LFAs. Mndebele paints a scene only too familiar to me. For the past 5 of the 8 years of conducting research on working-class sports, I have spent most of my fieldwork attending such unofficial football games. Thus, I feel qualified to argue that the only thing ‘new’ about the ‘ways’ of *kasi* football during the lockdown is an effort to avoid rebukes “from law enforcement officials and prying eyes” (Mndebele 2020). Grounded in the ethos of pre-colonial African agrarian movement cultures and shaped by the history of forced labour migration, displacement, urbanization, and industrialisation, *kasi* football is the ultimate South Africanization of the global game (Alegi 2010: 7–20). Whether it is played hidden behind “the mountains, bushes and forests” of rural Mpumalanga (Mndebele 2020) or on the dusty township fields of Johannesburg (Webster 2019), whether it takes place on the uneven grounds in the rural villages of Eastern Cape (where I conducted fieldwork in 2019) or on the lush greens of Cape Winelands (Kaur 2017), *kasi* football continues to be the most popular form of sport practiced in South Africa.

The term *kasi* itself is a South Africanism, derived from Afrikaans word, *lo-kasi*, or location (or township) in English, referring to the low-income neighbourhoods engineered for segregating South Africa’s black populations from whites.<sup>1</sup> The term *Kasi* is imbued with meanings and associations that reflect on how people make life happen in conditions of economic and political adversities. Yet, it is more than mere survival. It conveys a sense of ingenuity, vibrancy, localism, practicality, and informality. Geertz’s “a paradigmatic human event” could as well be referring to *kasi* life-making: “one that tells us less what happens than the kind of thing that would happen if, as is not the case, life were art and could be as freely shaped by styles of feeling as Macbeth and David Copperfield are” (1972: 450). Arguably, *Kasi* football is an art form, embedded in real-life human drama. In practice, it refers to

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<sup>1</sup> In South Africa, the reference ‘black’ is inclusive of african, coloured and indian, a political position taken in response to the racial categories or group divides consolidated under apartheid. Although the *kasi* football traditions are largely associated with those categorised as ‘africans’, ‘black’ better expresses the blurriness of these racial boundaries.

both, a style of play and the terms on which these games are organized. It is a free-flowing style of play, in which showboating, ‘outrageous skill’, physical prowess, and clever tricks, often to humiliate opponents, are valued over winning (Webster 2019). Yet, winning is important. These games are almost always played for a stake, “sum of money, brandy, or sheep” (Kaur 2020: 158–63). Not constrained by the regulations of SAFA, this is a kind of football “where anyone can come and organise a competition for money and any team can come and play” (Kaur 2020: 163–4).

Building on my previous work on unofficial football (Kaur 2020; 2017), this essay presents a flavour of *kasi* football among the rural working class of Cape Wine-lands. Most of the regional working-class earns their living as agrarian labour, which includes: permanently employed farmworkers who live on or close to the farms and/or the wine cellars of their employment; contractual labour who either lives in the local townships and informal settlements or are drawn from circular labour migration between rural Eastern Cape and Cape Winelands; and under- or unemployed youth, who sell their labour during the harvest season. In addition to agriculture, wine production, and tourism, industries that command the rural economy of Cape Winelands, working-class jobs include, shop attendants, construction, security, and domestic workers, among others. Thus, football, like other aspects of life, is influenced, to a large extent, by the regional agrarian economy, politics, and socio-cultural norms that are reimagined with changing migratory flows and patterns.

In my previous work on autonomously organised unofficial football, I described and analysed these practices as *the gambling games* – a colloquialism I learned during my doctoral fieldwork in the rural town of Rawsonville in Cape Wine-lands, Western Cape. In this paper, I situate *gambling games* as a permutation of *kasi* football, reflecting on how these very localised and non-centralised practices travel across southern Africa and are transformed. In other words, I reinterpret ethnographic data I collected on the *gambling games* in Rawsonville by drawing on my more recent research in Sterkspruit, Eastern Cape and the phenomenon of *kasi* football. Sterkspruit, previously in the *Bantustan*<sup>2</sup> of Transkei, a border town to Lesotho and about 900 km from Rawsonville, has been a source of labour to South Africa’s industrialising economy since early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Beinart and Bundy 1987). Western Cape’s agriculture and wine industry has also been a beneficiary of racist labour control policies of the apartheid era. It was no surprise, then, to find many of my research participants from Rawsonville with ties to Sterkspruit, a legacy of circular labour migration between the two places. With the labour, football traditions also

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<sup>2</sup> *Bantustans* were “independent” ethnic homelands, created under apartheid’s separate development policies, for black African people, which essentially served as cheap labour reserves (Beinart and Bundy 1987).

circulated. While football in Sterkspruit is not the main focus of my analysis in this paper, I refer to data from Sterkspruit to add layers to understandings of rural football and the phenomenon I called the *gambling games* in my previous work. My analysis engages with racial history of sports, agrarian political economy of Rawsonville, and the changing political role of football among the black working-class South Africans. By way of conclusion, I argue that the most enduring feature of *kasi* football is as much the autonomy and control it offers to the disenfranchised sports enthusiasts as its adaptability to the conditions of disenfranchisement.

## Rawsonville: Football in a Rugby Town

About 90 Kilometres northeast of Cape Town, Rawsonville is on one of Cape Wine-land's popular touristic wine routes. And despite being blessed with natural beauty, mountains and streams, host to hiking and mountain biking trails, fly fishing, hot springs, in addition to staple wine-tasting and dinning venues, Rawsonville is not among the better-known wine tourism destinations, such as, Stellenbosch, Paarl or Franschhoek. In the past, Rawsonville was known for production of mediocre quality bulk wine, an image the local wine and tourism board has been trying hard to shake off. Founded on slavery, South African wine industry is also known for its history of exploitative labour practices. Legacies of coercion, racialised paternalism<sup>3</sup> and *dop system*<sup>4</sup> are evident in the labour relations even today (Du Toit 1994; Williams 2010; Human Rights Watch 2011). In the relatively less-wealthy wine regions like Rawsonville that receive less tourist attention, labour conditions are often considered to be worse. Although programmes and legislation have been introduced to protect and strengthen farm labour relations and rights, particularly since the end of apartheid, these measures have also had unintended consequences in the form of large scale job-losses, evictions of farm workers and their families from on-farm housing, externalisation and casualisation of labour, and emergence and expansion of informal settlements in the nearby rural towns (du Toit and Ally 2003; Ewert and du Toit 2005). A striking and enduring feature of rural towns surrounded by commercial agriculture is extreme inequality, in which poorly paid black working class lives in the shadows of largely white-owned agricultural businesses, farms, estates and mansions.

<sup>3</sup> The farming business and everyone who lived and worked on the farm were considered the property of the white man (the farmer). There is a lot written about the racial character of social relations on the farms of the Western Cape. (See for example, Andries Du Toit (1994) seminal article on the topic).

<sup>4</sup> It was a brutal system of labour control, with lasting impact on generations of farm workers, in which workers were paid in cheap fortified wine in return of their labour (see Williams 2010).

These inequalities translate to all spheres of life, including sports. Cubizolles (2010) writes about inequalities and conflicts in the way sports are organised in Stellenbosch, a town in also Cape Winelands, about 65 kilometres south of Rawsonville, in his article entitled, “soccer in rugby town”. He shows, despite the popularity and much larger number of football clubs, games, and followers, it is rugby, not football, that the region is better known for. The dominance of the sport of rugby over football in the public imagination is a South Africa-wide phenomenon, but it is accentuated in the Cape Winelands for the reasons I shall discuss in the next paragraph. But first, consider the *kasi* makings of football traditions versus the historic role of rugby in the construction of Afrikaner nationalism. In the years leading to the augment of apartheid policies, rugby was one of the avenues that ruling elites of mostly white Afrikaner backgrounds propagated their cultural superiority and ideological domination (Grundlingh 1994; 2014). In the early days of his presidency over democratic South Africa, Nelson Mandela’s endorsement of Springboks, the national rugby team, followed by Springboks’ victory at the 1995 Rugby World Cup, and the symbolic significance of this victory in projecting the racially unified and reconciled image of post-apartheid South Africa, further elevated and consolidated the image of rugby as the sport of new South Africa.

Writing about a preseason derby between South Africa’s two professional football clubs, Kaizer Chiefs and Orlando Pirates, Catsam (2019) argues that while the clash has “virtually no implications in world football”, not even in the local Professional Soccer League (PSL), yet it holds enormous significance, drawing more South African fans than any other sporting fixture. Explaining the localisms and peculiarities of South African sporting culture, Catsam argues:

“One connects to the disproportionate role that rugby plays in the public dialogue in South Africa, which itself speaks to the predominant whiteness that still dominates the sporting and cultural landscape in South Africa. Another connects to some frankly byzantine politics and history within South African soccer. And a third connects these two points: South Africans take an inordinate pride in the best of South African-ness, whether it be the Springboks, the success of the national netball team, or, the ultimate example of sporting South-African-ness, the Pirates-Chiefs derby.”

The popularity of the two professional football clubs, Pirates and Chiefs, both from the township of Soweto in Johannesburg, this preseason derby, and their enduring rivalry, owes to their *kasi* origins.

Rawsonville also has its own township space, called De Nova, originally developed to house the coloured professionals and working-class people. No longer

restricted to a racially classified group, the residents of De Nova and its adjoining informal settlements are predominantly black working-class people. The economic, social, and political, life of the rural town of Rawsonville, including De Nova, is shaped by the surrounding (almost exclusively white-owned) fruit farming and wine production businesses. While there are rugby clubs that may include farm workers and people from other working-class backgrounds, rugby clubs and fields are mostly administered by wealthy white and/or coloured professionals. Football, on the other hand, is the sport of Rawsonville's working class. This is consistent across the Cape Winelands. For example, Cubizolles (2010) points out that rugby fields, often protected away in private institutions, occupy much larger physical surface area of Stellenbosch, and are used by district's mostly white minority population. This creates a dynamic where very large number of aspiring football clubs not only compete against each other on the field, but also compete to secure access to football fields, recognition, and resources, in Stellenbosch (Cubizolles 2010). This lopsided situation reflects the racialised class inequalities, in which sporting practices of minority white population takes up more land and oxygen, while the sporting lives of the large majority of black, African and coloured, working class are rendered invisible. The situation with access to sports fields in Rawsonville is also contested but is also different from that in Stellenbosch (which I have discussed elsewhere, see Kaur (2019)). The point of note here is: the "inequality that separates all aspects of life of the wealthy farm owners and the poorly paid farmworkers is one reason that workers' leisure practices linger in the shadows of the centrally located and well-kept rugby fields and associated clubs" (Kaur 2020: 162). The contestations over access to football venues that Cubizolles (2010) discusses are also limited to the official football games administered by the LFA. The unofficial football that I present here, also popular in Stellenbosch, however, adds another layer to understanding the conflicts over and invisibility of football in rugby towns.

## Encountering and Studying unofficial Football

In a political landscape where racial transformation, class and gendered inequality, land reform, working and living conditions of farm labour, unemployment, and access to labour rights and justice, continue to be pressing concerns, sport is seen, at best, as trivial. Farm worker development discourses, constructed mostly in response to poverty conditions and excessive alcoholism, also portray workers' circumstances as lacking in opportunities and access to sports and positive recreation. Suggestive in many conversations I had, sports were considered useful in diverting farm youth from idling, substance and alcohol abuse (Kaur 2018). In other words, sports were valued, not for its own sake, but for the 'development' it may cause. Conversely, the

lack of ‘development’ was taken to imply absence of sports. However, none of these assumptions explained the presence of “seemingly abandoned, at times overgrown, sports-field-like spaces with soccer goal posts throughout the vast farmlands” of Rawsonville (Kaur 2020:162). Built “with little care for official parameters, most of these soccer fields were on private land, usually situated close to workers’ on-farm housing, and sometimes shared with grazing livestock. Only a few fields of these sorts were visible or accessible from the tarred roads, and thus locating them required “localised knowledge of those who organised, followed and played football in and around Rawsonville”. Unless these spaces were totally unfit for farming, there was always a chance that these might end up being ploughed.<sup>5</sup> On Saturday and/or Sunday, anywhere from two to eight football teams (often outfitted in uniform jerseys), a few cars and pickup trucks parked along the boundaries, young children in a kick-about at a corner, and from twenty to two hundred spectators”, men and women, old and young, in small groups, would set the scene for football gambling games (Kaur 2020:162).

Simultaneously serious in manner and informal in condition, I had almost accidentally stumbled upon one such football game in May 2012. This discovery changed the scope of my research. The initial direction of my inquiry was shaped by the assumptions of lack as well as usefulness of sports in the development of farm workers. These weekend football games turned me to ethnographic methods and to recording the different ways sports were organised among, as well as by, farm workers and the broader working class of Rawsonville. Indeed, had I only attended the official or (some narrow understandings of) organised sports in the region, I was also likely to reproduce the popular tropes of lack of sports. I started spending more time with local footballers, joining them during training and just hung out during their leisure times, learning about their understandings of, and relationship to, sports. Emmanuel Yolo Thoba, a keen footballer, who became an important interlocuter and eventually a good friend, agreed to help me map out all the football fields in and around Rawsonville. On one such expedition, he directed me to an enclosed farm property. The football field was deep inside the estate, surrounded by the vineyards where workers were pruning the vines. I was nervous about entering for the fear of trespassing private property. As we were checking out the field and enquiring about the next game with those present, the farm-owner arrived, and with subtle hint of irritation in his tone, questioned us what we were doing on his property. Suppressing my nervousness, I introduced myself and explained that I study sports among the

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<sup>5</sup> I was informed of spaces that were used by farm workers to play football but were later ploughed for farming purposes. Sometimes farmers made another piece of land available, other times they did not — a dynamic that depended on the relationship between the farmer and farm workers in a given situation.

farm workers and was there because of the sports field *he* provides for the workers. This did defuse the tension I felt, but soon after the farmer left, Emmanuel mocked me by saying that I should have told him I was from the *Women on Farms* (an activist organisation that has been fighting for agrarian women labourers' rights for the longest time) and then hear how he responds. This exchange not only highlights how politically contentious agrarian landscape continues to be, but also how aware young footballers, who may not even have much history with a farm-owner, were of such tensions. Moreover, it shows how connotations of sports as trivial, apolitical, or even absent, lay bare the tensions that can otherwise be stage-managed. Generally welcomed enthusiasm that sports invites, as I observed over time, opened up many unique possibilities to access textures to the socio-political life of the working class.

Over the course of my yearlong fieldwork (2012–13), I regularly attended weekend football games, at times, driving between different football fields on the same day. As I developed a rapport with a select group of footballers, coaches, and managers, I recorded in-person interviews exploring their personal sports histories and how it fitted into their working lives. Observations of everyday unfolding of life on and beyond the football fields, reflections on my positionality in the research field, and many random and informal conversations with spectators at the football games, filled up my daily fieldnotes. Out of about twenty football clubs that I recorded, only five were affiliated with the LFA, but all were regularly organising and playing the unofficial weekend football games, colloquially called the *gambling games*. As mentioned in the introduction, I have written and analysed these autonomously organised games, before, where I explored the relationship between sports and gambling, more broadly (Kaur 2020). My goal in this paper is make sense of the popularity of unofficial football among the rural working-class by engaging with transregional history of what is known as *kasi* football in South Africa.

## History and Structures of South African Football

Arguably, South Africa hosts the most lucrative and well-organised professional football league (PSL) on the African continent, today. This is less a reflection of the quality of top-level football and more the full professionalism that black football achieved by early 1980s (Alegi 2010; Couzens 1983). Already in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, football clubs, tours, associations, and leagues, had started to emerge across the country, organised along racial and class divides. The formal football structures of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were organised and sponsored by missionaries, municipalities, industries and mining companies, with a goal “to curb militancy, increase discipline and production, and improve health” (Alegi 2010: 39). Without acknowledging any



sense of history of football's use in colonial social welfare activities, contemporary practices of sports-for-development continue to do the political work of maintaining the *status quo* by, if not outrightly suppressing, ignoring the working-class dissatisfaction and dissent over poor wages and working conditions. Notwithstanding, it is the autonomous and spontaneously organised unofficial and informal football games that complicate the logics of sports-for-development, therefore, deserves more attention and analysis than these have been accorded to by media and academic research. As Alegi argues the "fiercely competitive, scrappy matches [that] took place" in the streets and other open wastelands, played for money and occasionally led to violence, rearticulated the meanings of football among the exploited black working classes (2010: 39). Writing 'an introduction to the history of football in South Africa', Couzens (1983: 204) also describes:

"[...] another kind of football. This was a much more informal activity played in the streets of suburbs like Doornfontein and locations such as Sophiatown, Eastern Native Township, Western Native Township and Pimville. [...] Each team would collect a small amount of money (a pound or two) and hand this to the referee. The winning team would take the jackpot. Other forms of gambling no doubt sprang from this form."

This 'another kind of football' became popularly known as *kasi* football. The apartheid's racial labour policies that kept Africans in temporary contractual employment meant that many people were on constant move in perpetual search for better prospects. Several of my research participants, especially middle-aged men and women in both, Rawsonville and Sterkspruit, shared their rather rough journeys in search of work, in which places like Johannesburg and Kimberly, cities built on mining exploits, featured most regularly. Men spoke about their experiences of football in Johannesburg, suggesting blurred lines between informal and professional football, as well as a more personable proximity to professional clubs, like the Orlando Pirates FC and Kaizer Chiefs FC. This sense of intimacy with professional football also speaks to Catsam's (2019) diagnose of why the seemingly inconsequential Pirates-Chiefs derby continues to hold such enormous significance for ordinary black South Africans.

The professional football clubs have grown much bigger and richer now and the sense of their proximity to the ordinary working-class people seems more imagined than real. Even the very popular Pirates-Chiefs derby is largely stage-managed maintaining the illusion of it being people's game (Catsam 2019). There are anecdotes and events that provide evidence of weakening connections between *kasi* and professional football. Although most forms of *kasi* football takes place under-the

radar of mainstream media attention among very localised groups of football enthusiasts and sporadic individual altruistic-entrepreneurial efforts, the advent of social media, particularly the YouTube, has brought *kasi* flavour of football to modest lime-light. For example, every year since 2001, one weekend in July, the Maimane Alfred Phiri (MAP) Games are staged as the ultimate *kasi* football show, bringing ‘tens of thousands of fans’ to a gravel football field in the township of Alexandra, Johannesburg (Webster 2019).<sup>6</sup> The YouTube clips from the event receives millions of viewers. It was a YouTube clip that Nceba ‘Jackson’ Mcoyiya, a keen footballer and research participant, showed me on his phone that I first learned about the MAP games and *kasi* football. The fascination with the ‘outrageous skills’ that *kasi* football offers does not end with watching and sharing them via social media. Young footballers cheer on each other to imitate, invent, and perform, skills during their own practices and games (something I became more aware of during my research in Sterkspruit in 2019). Elaborating on the success of MAP games, Phiri, the founder of the MAP games, shares:

“South African football fans ... “are missing *kasi* football in the NFD [National First Division] and PSL [Premier Soccer League]. We don’t get to see a player that is skilful doing his thing. It’s more financial, people don’t want to get relegated so it’s conservative football. But here [at MAP] it is free-flowing.” (Webster 2019)

Although fans are central to the continued popularity of *kasi* football in post-apartheid South Africa, Phiri also argues that “[...] the fans’ almost religious devotion to flair is about more than players humiliating their opposite numbers. More even than the appreciation of unique ability. It’s about history.” (Webster 2019)

Indeed, it is about history, localised and mobile histories, embodied in the desires of young footballers to create relevance and garner admiration for their football prowess. However, most forms of *kasi* football looks nothing like the MAP games. Also, because these are organised by an ex-professional footballer himself, Phiri is able to stage young talent to be identified and picked by the professional football clubs:

“The tournament’s history has borne this out. Bafana [nickname of the national football team] legend Siphiwe Tshabalala played at the MAP Games. So did Chiefs midfielder Lebogang Manyama, who, like Phiri, hails from Alex. Zakhele Siwela, South Africa’s assistant referee who officiated at the recent Africa Cup of Nations in Egypt, cut his teeth at MAP games.” (Webster 2019f)

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<sup>6</sup> Also see, MAP’s official website: <https://www.mapgames.co.za/about/>.

Therefore, it is not a stretch to imagine that autonomous efforts of individuals to organise and participate in *kasi* football are, at least partially, motivated by creating a platform for football talent to be identified for professional football.

On the other hand, in Cape Town's urban low-income neighbourhoods, *kasi* football took the form of "gangster soccer leagues, ... funded and run by drug lords and gang leaders, ... [that bring] in hordes of youngsters with the lure of big money" (Tromp 2001). Tromp, reporting for *IOL News*, explains the professional manner in which these gangster leagues were run for prize money, which could be as high as R30,000 to R50,000. The article portrays the fluidity and interconnectedness of unofficial and official in South African football:

"Household names like Bafana striker Benni McCarthy, his brother and Santos winger Jerome, Bafana striker Bradley August, Sundowns striker Alton Meiring and Ajax defender Jeremy Jansen are still well remembered for their exploits in these 'Sunday league' games which easily attract 5000 supporters."

Evidently, the presence of high-profile professional footballers in *kasi* football shows how the history of racial segregation and rejection of football as a black sport in white South Africa continues to shape the various localised, regional and classed versions football takes in the country. The unofficial football that I observed in Rawsonville and Sterkspruit were certainly neither as professional nor as popular among the local fans as the MAP games and gangster soccer leagues. The popularity of these autonomously organised without affiliation with any official sports governing bodies varies according to time of the year, available resources and money, competitiveness of the game or participating footballers, among other things. *Kasi* football, thus, takes on a very localised and temporal flavours, shaping and shaped by the context in which these are played.

### ***Kasi* flavour of Football among the rural working-class**

Although Rawsonville and Sterkspruit are very different in terms of their local economy, demography, topography, climate, land and soil conditions, one physical characteristic that the two places share is the remoteness of residential clusters. In the case of Rawsonville, apart from the two football clubs based in the township of De Nova, most of the twenty plus football clubs that I recorded in my study area were spread across the distant farmlands. Similarly, apart from a few football clubs in and around the town of Sterkspruit, hundreds of football clubs were based at small villages dotted across the mountain terrain. Resources and transport for the football,

official or unofficial, was a concern shared by the football clubs in both parts of the country. Unlike the “street matches [that] could go on for a couple of weeks” in the township of Sharpeville, Johannesburg, that Ian Jeffery (1992: 71) describes, the games between the farm and village teams had to be contained to the day. At times, tournaments went on over one or two weekends, the knockout format meant a fewer number of teams had to travel. Therefore, it was more practical for football clubs in the rural areas to either challenge another club or organise a small tournament (no more than eight teams at a time) that could be completed over the weekend. Almost all the games that I attended were played for money, but brandy or sheep as stakes also featured in the stories local football enthusiasts told. In a one-on-one contest, in which two football teams would put forward anything from R50 to R700 each, the winner would take the lot. In a tournament, however, there was no fixed rule as to how the prize money was to be distributed among the winners and/or runners up, but the split was agreed upon at the venue. Tournaments were organised by a host, either a football club or an individual, who would invite other (often only selected) teams, informing them about the money each required to pay as entry fees. The word might go around a week in advance, but it was only on the day of the event that one would know the exact number of participating teams, and it was not unusual to announce or adjust the distribution of the prize money while the games were already under way. Late arrivals were neither unusual nor unwelcomed; they were accommodated into the tournament with neat swiftness. For example, Mndebele (2020) describes this dynamic at a six-team tournament in rural Mpumalanga, where each team pays R500 to participate:

“All six teams fought hard. Phola, Man City and Manchester all won their matches. However, Manchester was on standby as they had no opponent to play in the semifinals. Juventus appealed and added more money, taking the prize purse from R3 000 to R3 500, to play the semifinal despite their elimination.”

It was the possibility to renegotiate the terms of play and adapt to the whims and flows of life that separates *kasi* football from the official LFA leagues.

The founding principle shared by all forms of *kasi* football was, indeed, less rules and regulations and more flexibility. Not having to commit to games well in advance also saved football clubs possible embarrassment when they were unable to raise enough money or bring together enough players for the match on the day. With irregular and little disposable income and competing priorities for how to spend limited money and resources, *kasi* football worked, if not by desire, then by design. For the vast majority of footballers, the official leagues organised by SAFA were more

desirable and prestigious option. With the exception of occasional MAP styled games at the urban centres, it was the local SAFA structures, the LFA, that promised promotion to professional football. However, affiliation costs, weekly travel to the games, and maintaining professional standards were often much higher than what most rural football clubs could consistently afford. In urban and peri-urban townships, where informal economy has greater potential to thrive, small business owners, including minibus taxi, *shabeen* (tavern), *spaza* (grocery) shop owners, and other actors (with relative economic or political power), regularly sponsored and/or managed their own football clubs, teams, games, and tournaments. However, in the rural contexts, such possibilities were limited. From time to time, farm workers in Rawsonville were able to secure sponsorships from their employers, but these were limited to transport, team jerseys, boots, and balls (Kaur 2017). However, in the villages of Sterkspruit, it was the returning migrant workers (often from economic centres like the Cape Winelands or Johannesburg) who prided themselves in supporting their rural clubs with balls and team jerseys. For the actual games, betting money is usually pooled together between the players and coach-managers.

Take for example the story of Motsau Joseph ‘Banks’ Setlhodi, a goalkeeper for the Kaiser Chiefs FC during the early 1970s. Published in *Soccer Laduma*, a popular South African football magazine, Banks (as he is popularly known) recounts:

“I saw the guys coming to fetch me to play in one of the ‘pick up’ games. Eventually they convinced me to come and play and I even had to put five bob (that’s the money we used in those days before Rands and cents) into the soccer money for the game. As you know, the pick-up games between street teams were played for ‘winner takes all’” (Joni 2014).

Banks’s story has resonance with how many of my research participants explained their own initiation into the sport. Emmanuel, who played for one of the stronger clubs at the time, Rawsonville Gunners FC, recalls:

“[in] those days we were playing for R5 with coloured boys and that went on until the old teams decided to help us with money and jerseys. That did not last longer than 2 years because we got promoted to the first team and so did the other teams.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Extract from a series of interviews conducted via email between 23 to 26 February 2016, with Emmanuel Yolo Thoba. Also, note that although football teams or clubs in Rawsonville were not strictly or intentionally organised along ethnic or racial lines, predominance of one identity in a team over the other became that team’s colloquial identifier, as Emmanuel’s reference to ‘coloured boys’.

Children and young people not yet ready to compete in the “first team”, that is in the senior or open football games (without any age restrictions), managed, organized, challenged, and monitored their own games (as well as all forms of possible cheating). There were adults (performing as coaches) who would encourage and support them with kit and balls, the money for football games was usually drawn from their own pocket money. Managing junior football usually competed with the senior, stronger, and higher stake, football. Sometimes junior teams may be set up to play a match just before the senior game, but these were shorter and were attended by fewer spectators. And despite a very small number of keen women footballers that I met over the course of my research, I did not come across any *kasi* style women’s football games. The MAP games in Johannesburg hosts a women’s event, however, this event is more organised, enjoy sponsors, as well as a pre-announced prize-money for each event (Webster 2019). I was made aware of the junior teams some of the more established football clubs in Rawsonville supported, but I did not observe any junior games during my fieldwork (2012–13) in Rawsonville. However, my later research (2019) in Sterkspruit drew me into plenty of Under-15 *challenge games* (as these were colloquially called). Children as young as 9 years old could be selected for the team put together by stronger footballers of ages 13 to 15 years, who themselves would practice with their older counterparts. Selection to the senior teams was a matter of ability rather than age, and availability of players to play on the day of the match. So, it was not unusual for 14 or 15 years-olds to play in the senior games. Moreover, it was not uncommon to find younger looking 16-, 17- or 18-years olds playing in the Under-15 challenge games, often facilitated by adult presence. The opposing teams only protested to such age cheating either in the absence of a commanding adult figure or if they believed the older footballer to be strong enough to disturb the balance of competitiveness. If the younger players collectively felt that the older player was no real threat to winning the game, they took great pleasure in beating the team with the older player. The style and structure of junior games imitates the senior to the extent that player-coach-organisers negotiate the money and self-regulate fairness and balance of competition.

Similar to Whyte’s study of *Street Corner Society*, a working-class neighbourhood in 1940s Boston, young footballers in Sterkspruit would also refuse to play if they felt the competition was not well-matched. Whyte also notes that in self-regulated gambling games: ‘Whatever game the corner boys play, they nearly always bet on the outcome. When there is nothing at stake, the game is not considered a real contest’ (1993 [1943]: 140). Still, the sites of unofficial football gambling games were often criticized for their ‘lawlessness’ and for inviting brawls. The disagreements over fouls, bad tackles, or cheating were obvious enough to identify, and depending on the assigned referee, often selected with the agreement of the two teams,

and spectators present, these were easier to resolve in smaller, one-on-one, games. Moreover, the referees could be changed mid-game, at times, a number of times. In an under-15 challenge game I attended in Sterkspruit, after two changes of referee, a blatantly poor call to award the home team a penalty in the last few minutes of the game, and refusal of the visiting team to continue to play, the two teams agreed on a draw and moved on. Another game I attended at a farm-based field in Rawsonville abruptly ended after 15 minutes of play. The coach of the Mighty Strikers FC, one of the two clubs, explained that the other team was being violent and did not play fair, so they agreed to call the game off. In both cases, each club took their money back and left the field without further contestation. These kinds of ‘draws’ were more common in self-regulated football games than those centrally organised. Disputes and brawls were very much part of the official league games, regulated mostly by the absent executive members of the LFA. However, these conflicts were not always resolved so amicably. The presence of an official referee shifted the responsibility for finding resolutions onto the professional. And if the dispute escalated enough to be taken to the LFA’s executive committee, rural-farm football clubs had even less a chance to represent their case. Despite the higher prestige attached to the official leagues, the bureaucratic opaqueness also took away the little bit of control working-class enjoyed over their leisure time and spaces in organising *kasi* football.

## Conclusion: working-class makings of *kasi* football

*Kasi* football, no matter how trivial and unprofitable it may seem, just as Geertz’s analysis of Balinese cockfights, its “access of significance more than compensates for the economic costs involved” (1972: 438). The self-regulating fairness of the unofficial football, shaped by the very localised social pressures in a relatively non-hierarchical setting of people with more or less similar material challenges, the net profit-loss equation for individuals probably evens out over a long run. Indeed, the football teams that establish their dominance over time do struggle to arrange gambling or challenge games. In my previous analysis of the football gambling games (Kaur 2020), I focused on showing the historical centrality of gambling in shaping modern sports, pondering on the lines between universal and particular, organised and unorganised. Re-examining the particularities of formal and informal in gambling and football in the history and experiences of Rawsonville’s farm workers and Sterkspruit’s junior footballers brings out the creativity and adaptability of play in less formalised and more autonomous realms. Forms of play, sports and gambling traditions in working-class struggles have the potential to expose more complex understandings of rationality and how people create meaning in their lives (also see Desai 2019). To this end, I find Grundlingh’s (2003: 181) analysis of betting on

British Greyhound Racing among the struggling working-class Afrikaner people in Johannesburg, particularly revealing. As he so eloquently puts it:

“Gambling made more sense than saving; a small and often irregular income did not encourage prudence or the anticipation of a better future. Saving at best implied delayed gratification, if at all, and vague promises of a better future which many could hardly begin to imagine. Gambling at least had the immediate potential and the promise, however illusory, of enhancing their financial circumstances. Given this context it can even appear a rational act. For many it was ‘the only possibility of actually making a decision, of a choice between two alternatives, in a life otherwise proscribed in every detail by poverty and necessity’. Betting generated its own patterns of serious reflection, as one spent ‘one’s time in discussion, analysis and decision making with a seeming sense of purpose’ and possible achievement. Regardless of one’s losses, betting on the dogs provided a fleeting sense of control and importance.”

The *kasi* football also makes more sense than the official LFA leagues for the vast majority of football enthusiasts from working-class. It allows footballers and football fans to create a world of meaning and importance for themselves. It is true that most aspiring footballers and football enthusiasts did place greater importance to the centrally administered SAFA competitions. And yet, the logic of gambling, that is competing for a sum of money or other stakes and the competitiveness of the *kasi* football itself, was what sustained, both official and unofficial football (Kaur 2020). The *kasi* football was, at times, seen as a training ground for aspiring football clubs and footballers to test their prowess while raising money to eventually play in the LFA games, and plan, however unrealistically, their path to professional football. The exceptional stories of successful professional footballers who made it from their *kasi* origins, as well as discourses and projects of “development” through sports, all stir in the desires of footballers with some recognisable talent. In practice, such desires demand more sacrifices than returns. They were imbued with more drama, more conflict, than hopes and dreams.

Unlike the official games that demand a degree of conformity and standards of professionalism, *kasi* football exposes the rawness of life that stretches beyond the fields of play (Ross 2009). In organising and playing football, there is always a lingering desire to overcome this rawness. For example, a club named River Stars FC arrived at a farm field via a hired taxi for R200, and they staked another R200 on the challenge game. If they were to win their match, the travel costs would be covered, but if they lost, they would lose R400; win or lose, other than getting to play a game, there was no net financial gain for this club. When asked about how the River Stars



managed their finances, Andreas, the coach-manager, shared his frustration with the fact that local farmers were more likely to sponsor a rugby club over a football club and how even this support varied from time to time and farmer to farmer. Pointing at his team, he argued, “you see some of my guys have full kit, with boots, socks, jerseys and shorts, their *baas* [boss] is good. But the other guys don’t even have proper soccer boots or shorts; those guys’ *baas* is not good!”<sup>8</sup>

My goal in this essay was not to romanticise *kasi* football in the various forms it takes in the lives of black working class. The style, the terms, and the drama, of *kasi* football, were the very product of disenfranchisement that urbanising working-class experienced and continues to experience in an extremely unequal society. The fleeting sense of control and ownership over ones’ money, time and space that *kasi* football may, time to time, offer, co-exists with the ordinariness, mundaneness, rawness and an unattainable desire for something that is more prestigious and rewarding. And this reality was never quite lost on the participating actors. This feeling was detectable in all its forms, be that MAP games in Johannesburg, gambling games in Rawsonville or challenge tournaments in Sterkspruit. There was, indeed, a robustness to *kasi* football that no SAFA event, no LFA league, no matter how well-designed a “sports-for-development” programme, not even the MAP games, can replicate. In this reinterpretation of ethnography of unofficial football, I demonstrate and argue that the most enduring features of *kasi* football were the control and autonomy it offers to the disenfranchised and its adaptability to the conditions of disenfranchisement.

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<sup>8</sup> Field notes: 4<sup>th</sup> August 2012.

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