
Kicking across borders: A study on the lives of African migrant football labourers in Kerala”

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the lived experiences of African migrant football labourers in Kerala's Sevens football tournaments, focusing on their socio-economic conditions, cultural adaptation, and professional challenges. Through in-depth interviews with seven players from Nigeria, Liberia, and Ghana, the research explores the push-pull factors of migration, including economic opportunities in Kerala versus unemployment in their home countries. Findings reveal that while players benefit from higher earnings (₹2,000–₹4,000 per match) and community acceptance, they face systemic precarity, including age-based wage discrimination, contractual control (e.g., passport retention), and substandard living conditions. Cultural barriers, particularly language and dietary adjustments, further complicate their integration. Despite these challenges, Kerala's inclusive environment and football culture provide a sense of belonging. The study highlights the need for policy interventions to protect migrant athletes' rights, improve working conditions, and foster equitable opportunities in India's informal football economy.



Introduction

Human migration, driven by economic and professional aspirations, has brought African football players to Kerala, India, where they contribute to the vibrant *Sevens football* culture. Kerala's higher wages and better living standards attract migrants, with African players forming a distinct community in this sporting landscape.

Football's global appeal, rooted in its simplicity and cultural transcendence, has made it a vehicle for migration, particularly for African athletes seeking opportunities beyond their home countries' limited infrastructure. While Europe remains a primary destination, emerging markets like India offer alternative pathways. African players bring diverse skills and cultural exchange but face challenges like contractual exploitation and adaptation struggles.

Kerala's *Sevens football*, a fast-paced, seven-a-side variant, is deeply embedded in local culture, especially in Malappuram. Played seasonally (November–May), it features community-driven tournaments with massive fan followings. African players, primarily from Nigeria, Ghana, and Cameroon, are recruited for their athleticism, earning ₹2,000–₹10,000 per match. Their presence elevates the game's competitiveness but also highlights issues like wage disparities and precarious living conditions.

This study examines the socio-economic and cultural experiences of African migrant footballers in Kerala, exploring their motivations, adaptation challenges, and impact on local football. It situates their journeys within global labor migration trends, revealing both opportunities (financial stability, community acceptance) and struggles (contractual ambiguities, cultural barriers). The acclaimed film *Sudani from Nigeria* reflects these dynamics, humanizing migrant athletes' realities.

By analysing these intersections of sport, migration, and culture, the research underscores Kerala's role in the global football labor market while advocating for better protections for migrant players. The study contributes to broader discussions on transnational labor, identity, and sports economies in developing regions.

Literature Review

Theoretical Frameworks of Sports Labor Migration

The global movement of athletes has been extensively analysed through the lens of globalization and dependency theories. Maguire and Bale (1994) established a foundational framework, arguing that core



nations systematically exploit peripheral regions for athletic talent, mirroring broader economic inequalities. This perspective is expanded by Poli (2010), who conceptualizes football migration as part of a "new international division of labor," where intermediaries (agents, academies) facilitate talent extraction from developing nations. Carter (2013) critiques rigid migration models, advocating for place-based approaches that account for migrant agency amid structural constraints.

African Football Migration: Exploitation and Agency

African athletes' migration is often framed as neo-colonial exploitation. Darby et al. (2007) reveal how football academies in Africa operate as unregulated pipelines for European clubs, exacerbating talent drain. Andreff (2001) identifies this as "muscle drain," paralleling brain drain, where developing nations lose skilled labor with minimal developmental returns. Conversely, Engh (2013) and Ungruhe (2018) highlight migrant agency, demonstrating how African players negotiate transnational spaces through strategies like dual careers and cultural hybridization.

The Indian Context: Local-Global Dynamics

India's football evolution reflects these global patterns. Dimeo (2001) documents how the 1990s National League reforms, spurred by Goan administrators and diaspora investments, created new opportunities—yet failed to address systemic inequities. Santhosh (2022) examines Kerala's informal Sevens leagues, where African migrants operate in legal Gray zones, celebrated during matches but marginalized otherwise. This paradox is epitomized in the film *Sudani from Nigeria* (Zakariya, 2018), which Yadukrishnan (2020) analyses as a cultural text revealing Kerala's "subversive carnivalesque" acceptance of undocumented players.

Economic and Structural Barriers

Andreff's (2001) correlation between economic underdevelopment and sporting inequality is evident in African migrants' precarity. Bale (1991) and Elliott & Maguire (2008) show how wage discrimination (e.g., age-based pay cuts) and contractual control (e.g., passport retention) perpetuate exploitation. Kastner (2010) and Owusu (2000) further highlight how remittance economies compel migrants to endure poor conditions, as seen in Kerala's Sevens leagues where players earn ₹2,000–4,000/match (Santhosh, 2022).

Cultural Adaptation and Identity



Transnational athletes face profound cultural challenges. Ungruhe (2018) documents West African players in Scandinavia navigating language barriers and dietary adjustments—echoed in Kerala, where players struggle with Malayalam and local cuisine (Case Studies 2–5). Carter (2007) emphasizes how media representations (e.g., *Sudani from Nigeria*) shape host communities' perceptions, alternately fostering inclusion or exoticization.

Policy Gaps and Future Directions

Andreff (2001) proposes a "Coubertin tax" to redistribute resources to developing nations, while Poli (2010) calls for transparent intermediaries. These solutions remain unrealized in Kerala, where African migrants lack legal protections (Santhosh, 2022). Future research must address this gap through policy-oriented studies and intersectional analyses of race, class, and labor rights.

Research Methodology

Research methodology refers to the systematic approach adopted to investigate a research problem. It encompasses the theoretical framework, data collection techniques, sampling strategies, and analytical procedures that guide the study. This study, titled "*Kicking Across Borders: A Study on the Lives of African Migrant Football Labourers in Kerala*," employs a qualitative descriptive design to explore the socio-demographic, economic, cultural, and health-related aspects of African migrant footballers in Kerala's Malappuram district.

Theoretical Framework

The research is grounded in two key theoretical perspectives:

- **Bourdieu's Theory of Capital (1986):** Used to examine how participants navigate and convert different forms of capital—economic, cultural, social, and symbolic—within Kerala's football ecosystem.
- **Berry's Acculturation Theory (1997):** Provides a framework to understand the cultural adaptation strategies employed by migrant players as they integrate into a new socio-cultural environment.

Study Setting and Population

The study focuses on Kerala, India, with a specific emphasis on Malappuram district, widely recognized for its strong football culture and thriving Sevens tournaments. The study population comprises African migrant football labourers participating in these leagues.



Sampling Strategy

Given the challenges of accessing African migrant players through formal institutional channels, a **non-probability snowball sampling technique** was adopted. Initial participants were recruited via local football clubs, and subsequent respondents were identified through referrals.

- **Sample Size:** Seven (7) African migrant footballers.
- **Rationale:** Qualitative research prioritizes depth and richness of data over breadth, making a smaller, focused sample appropriate.

Data Collection Procedures

Primary data was collected through structured, in-depth interviews. An interview guide was developed based on research objectives and included the following domains:

- **Socio-demographic background:** Age, nationality, education, family status.
- **Livelihood and income:** Earnings per match, contractual arrangements, financial challenges.
- **Social and cultural adaptation:** Language barriers, community acceptance, experiences of discrimination.
- **Health and well-being:** Injuries, medical access, and mental well-being.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in English (a shared medium of communication). Each session lasted 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed consent.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols were strictly followed to protect participants' rights and well-being:

- Informed consent was obtained from all respondents.
- Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured through pseudonyms and secure data storage.
- Participants were made aware of their right to withdraw at any stage.

Data Analysis

The recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. The transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase thematic analysis approach:



1. Familiarization with data.
2. Generating initial codes.
3. Searching for themes.
4. Reviewing themes.
5. Defining and naming themes.
6. Producing the report.

This method enabled the identification of recurring patterns related to players' migration journeys, adaptation experiences, and everyday challenges.

Summary

By combining in-depth interviews with a robust thematic analysis, this methodology provides a nuanced understanding of the lives, struggles, and strategies of African migrant footballers in Kerala. The integration of Bourdieu's capital theory and Berry's acculturation framework further strengthens the interpretive depth of the findings, situating them within broader debates on sports migration and labor precarity.

Case Summaries

Table 1: *Participant Demographics and Migration Characteristics*

ID	Age	Country	Education	Marital Status	Duration in Kerala	Current Club
A	29	Liberia	10th grade	Married	2 years	AYC Ucharakkadavu
B	22	Liberia	12th grade	Single	2 years	AYC Ucharakkadavu
C	26	Liberia	10th grade	Single	1 year	Royal Travels Club
D	20	Liberia	12th grade	Single	18 months	Saban Kottakkal FC
E	18	Ghana	10th grade	Single	8 months	Saban Kottakkal FC
F	24	Liberia	12th grade	Single*	3 years	Saban Kottakkal FC
G	27	Liberia	10th grade	Married	1.5 years	FC Thrippanachi

Note: Participant F is unmarried but has two children.

Case 1 (A, 29, Liberia)

A 29-year-old married Liberian with a 10th-grade education, A plays for AYC Ucharakkadavu. Formerly a cloth businessman, he relocated to Kerala for football opportunities. He earns ₹3,000–5,000 per match,



sending ₹15,000/month home. Despite tight schedules and minor health challenges, he appreciates Kerala's cultural diversity, supportive community, and better living conditions. The team manager assists with injuries, and English aids communication. He finds Kerala welcoming, with no racial discrimination, and considers it a second home.

Case 2 (B, 22, Liberia)

A single 22-year-old Liberian with a 12th-grade education, B plays for AYC Ucharakkadavu. He moved to Kerala two years ago, leaving farming due to family struggles. Football is his sole income (₹2,000–4,000/match). The club manager arranged his visa and accommodation. He shares a room with two others and praises Kerala's lack of racial bias, English-friendly environment, and higher earnings compared to Liberia. Seasonal work allows him to return home post-tournaments.

Case 3 (C, 26, Liberia)

C, a 26-year-old single Liberian with a 10th-grade education, plays for Royal Travels Club Kozhikode. A former mechanic, he migrated last year after a friend introduced him to Kerala's sevens football culture. He highlights Kerala's acceptance of African players, absence of caste discrimination, and ease of adaptation. Administrative processes (visas, contracts) were challenging, but English helps communication. Despite minor language barriers in daily life, he is satisfied with the sport's opportunities.

Case 4 (D, 20, Liberia)

A 20-year-old unmarried Liberian with a 12th-grade education, D plays for Saban Kottakkal FC. He migrated to support his struggling family, facilitated by his manager (visa, flights, accommodation). Kerala's inclusivity contrasts with caste discrimination in Liberia. He shares a rented room with two others. Contract extensions depend on performance. Despite initial cultural adjustments, he values Kerala's community support and football's financial potential.

Case 5 (E, 18, Ghana)

An 18-year-old single Ghanaian with a 10th-grade education, E plays for Saban Kottakkal FC. He migrated with a friend but faces challenges: limited matches due to age (lower pay), crowded housing, and self-cooked meals. Language barriers persist outside football. No injuries yet, but low income frustrates him. He notes cultural differences (e.g., greetings, food) but remains hopeful for contract extensions based on performance.



Case 6 (F, 24, Liberia)

F, a 24-year-old unmarried Liberian with two children and a 12th-grade education, plays for Saban Kottakkal FC. A three-year Kerala veteran, he previously played for FC Perumbavoor and runs a business back home. He cites unemployment and poverty in Africa as push factors. While Kerala offers growth opportunities, language barriers and rare racial prejudice persist. Overall, he is satisfied with the career prospects and community support.

Case 7 (G, 27, Liberia)

A 27-year-old married Liberian with a 12th-grade education, G plays for FC Thrippanachi. Initially struggling in Liberia, he joined Kerala's leagues via social media. He earns ₹3,000/match (higher value in Africa) but misses his family. Challenges include intense match schedules, food/water adjustments, and restricted mobility (passport held by manager). No major caste discrimination noted. Performance dictates contract continuity.

Thematic Findings

1. Work and Income

African migrant footballers view Kerala as an opportunity to pursue professional football, improve skills, and earn a stable income. As **Respondent 1** states, *"I earn between 3000 to 5000 rupees per game, with higher pay for semi-finals and finals. I send around 15000 rupees back home every month."* Similarly, **Respondent 2** notes, *"I earn between 2000 and 3500 for a one-day football match, and for important matches like finals, the income can reach up to 5000."* However, income disparities exist—**Respondent 5**, an 18-year-old, struggles: *"I only get to play fewer matches, once or twice a week... the manager said he couldn't pay me more because of my age."* While football provides a primary livelihood, financial stability depends on performance, age, and club budgets.

2. Communication Challenges

Language barriers (Malayalam vs. English) hinder daily interactions and social integration. **Respondent 6** explains, *"The primary difficulty for me in Kerala is the language barrier. Malayalam is the local language spoken in Kerala, and it may be unfamiliar to me."* While English aids on-field communication (**Respondent 1**: *"We communicate in English with my teammates and manager"*), off-field challenges persist. **Respondent 5** adds, *"When I go out, especially to shops and supermarkets, it's a struggle to*



communicate." Players often rely on teammates for translation, highlighting the need for better language support.

3. Livelihood and Living Conditions

Clubs provide shared accommodations, but conditions vary. **Respondent 1** praises, *"The accommodation provided to me was comfortable, and the living conditions in Kerala were far superior to those in my home country."* In contrast, **Respondent 5** describes overcrowding: *"Cleanliness is a bit of an issue, and there are always crowded people in the room."* Players adapt to local life—**Respondent 4** shares, *"We may seek assistance from teammates... who can help with translation or provide guidance."* Despite challenges, many appreciate Kerala's inclusivity, as **Respondent 6** notes: *"The local community, teammates, and fans can provide a sense of camaraderie and support."*

4. Cultural Assimilation and Social Adaptation

Players highlight Kerala's acceptance and contrast it with discrimination in Africa. **Respondent 1** observes, *"The Kerala people accept us like their local community."* **Respondent 3** adds, *"I have not encountered any instances of caste discrimination... a unique and positive characteristic of Kerala's culture."* Cultural adjustments include adapting to local greetings (**Respondent 5**: *"In Kerala, people greet with 'Namaste'... African countries may have different customs"*) and cuisine. Football fosters integration—**Respondent 4** states, *"The warm acceptance and support received from the local community"* make the experience fulfilling.

5. Health and Well-being

The packed match schedule strains physical and mental health. **Respondent 1** explains, *"Matches often take place on consecutive days... leaving little time for rest and recovery."* **Respondent 7** adds, *"The demanding schedule... presented a significant difficulty."* While clubs provide medical care (**Respondent 1**: *"The team manager takes diligent care of injuries"*), some face health issues like boils from water (**Respondent 7**) or stress from separation from family. **Respondent 5** notes, *"Thankfully, I haven't had any injuries so far,"* but younger players struggle with limited matches affecting income and morale.

Discussions

1. Economic Motivations for Migration



The study reveals that African players primarily migrate to Kerala due to limited economic opportunities in their home countries. High unemployment rates and poverty in nations like Ghana and Liberia push young athletes to seek better prospects through football. Many respondents viewed Kerala's football leagues as a viable pathway to financial stability, with earnings from matches (typically ₹3,000 per game) holding significantly higher value when converted to African currencies. This economic incentive remains the strongest driver behind their migration decisions.

2. Cultural Adaptation Challenges

Players face substantial difficulties in adapting to Kerala's cultural environment. Language barriers prove particularly problematic, as most African players rely on English while the local population predominantly speaks Malayalam. Cultural differences in greetings (traditional "Namaste" versus African handshakes/hugs), food habits (spicy Kerala cuisine versus familiar African dishes), and social norms create initial discomfort. While some players gradually adapt, others struggle with feelings of isolation due to these cultural divides.

3. Exploitation in Working Conditions

The research uncovers several exploitative practices affecting migrant players. Younger athletes, particularly 18–20-year-olds, report receiving lower wages with managers citing their age as justification. More alarmingly, some teams retain players' passports, severely restricting their freedom of movement. Living conditions often prove inadequate, with multiple players sharing cramped, unclean accommodations where they must cook their own meals. These factors combine to create an environment where migrant players hold little bargaining power.

4. Contractual Instability and Performance Pressure

Employment terms remain precarious for African players in Kerala. Most receive short-term contracts (typically 3 months) with extensions contingent on performance metrics like goal-scoring or match fitness. This system creates intense pressure to perform while offering no job security. Some respondents reported playing fewer matches than promised (1-2 per week instead of daily games), further reducing their earning potential and career stability.

5. Health and Lifestyle Challenges

Players encounter several health-related adaptation issues. Many reports digestive problems and skin conditions (like boils) attributed to differences in water quality and unfamiliar local cuisine. Despite



Kerala's relatively advanced healthcare system compared to their home countries, players often lack proper medical support from their teams. These health challenges compound the stress of adapting to a new environment while maintaining peak athletic performance.

6. Psychological and Emotional Difficulties

The emotional toll of migration emerges as a significant finding. Married players with families back home particularly struggle with homesickness and isolation. Being separated from spouses and children for extended periods creates psychological distress. Limited social support networks in Kerala exacerbate these feelings, even among players who appreciate the generally welcoming nature of local communities. The combination of professional pressures and personal loneliness presents a serious mental health challenge.

7. Positive Aspects of Kerala Football

Despite challenges, players recognize several benefits of Kerala's football environment. The state's passionate fan base and welcoming teammates help many feel valued. The competitive league structure provides valuable experience that could lead to better opportunities in India or internationally. For most respondents, the financial rewards - though modest by global standards - still represent significant improvement over prospects in their home countries, justifying their continued participation.

Suggestions

- **Connect with local football academies:** Kerala has several football academies that aim to nurture young talent. These academies often provide opportunities for talented players, including African migrants. Reach out to these academies and inquire about any African players who may be looking for opportunities.
- **Utilize social media and online platforms:** Make use of social media platforms such as Facebook groups, Instagram, or Twitter to connect with African communities in Kerala. Engage with these communities and inquire about talented football players who might be interested in joining local teams.
- **Local African community organizations:** Connect with local African community organizations in Kerala. These organizations often have networks and connections within their communities and can help you identify talented football players who are looking for opportunities.



- **Language support:** Consider providing language support or translation services to assist players in their daily interactions. This can help them communicate with locals, navigate administrative tasks, and develop relationships within the community.
- **Safety and security:** Prioritize the safety and security of the players by choosing accommodations in safe neighbourhoods. Implement appropriate security measures to ensure their well-being.
- It is important for African migrant football players to adhere to all local laws and regulations while in India, including immigration laws, employment laws, and any specific rules related to their sport or profession.
- African players in Kerala may face limited opportunities to showcase their talent and progress in their football careers. This could be due to the dominance of local players or difficulties in accessing professional football clubs, leagues, or competitions.
- **Injury prevention programs:** Implement injury prevention programs that focus on warm-up exercises, proper techniques, and strength and conditioning training. These programs can help reduce the risk of injuries and improve player performance.
- **Mental health support:** Recognize the importance of mental health and provide resources and support for players who may be experiencing mental health challenges. This can include access to mental health professionals, awareness programs, and a supportive team environment.
- **Highlight Success Stories:** Share success stories of African football players in Kerala, showcasing their achievements, milestones, and positive contributions to the sport. Highlight their role as role models and inspirations for aspiring footballers, irrespective of their background.
- **Address Substance Abuse in Football:** Instead of focusing on specific nationalities or backgrounds, discuss the issue of substance abuse in football as a whole. Highlight the importance of maintaining a drug-free and healthy environment in the sport.

Conclusion

The study underscores the need for an inclusive and supportive environment for African football players in Kerala. Addressing challenges like discrimination through awareness campaigns and anti-discrimination policies is crucial to fostering belonging and mental well-being. Comprehensive medical



support includes injury prevention, rehabilitation, and mental health services which ensures players' physical and psychological health.

Embracing diversity enriches Kerala's football ecosystem, promoting cultural exchange, unity, and competitiveness. By ensuring inclusivity, medical care, and opportunity, Kerala can empower African players to thrive, contribute their talents, and inspire future generations. This approach benefits not only migrant athletes but the entire football community.

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