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# Performing Identity in the English Premier League Football Fandom in Eldoret, Kenya

*Solomon Waliaula*

## **Abstract**

Ruth Finnegan<sup>1</sup> and Ropo Sekoni<sup>2</sup> have observed that studies of African oral forms interact with those of contemporary popular culture. This study extends this discourse, arguing that electronic football fandom is one of these emerging patterns of popular culture,<sup>3</sup> a cultural trend that has been observed by other scholars such as Mark Fletcher<sup>4</sup>, Olaoluwa & Adejayan<sup>5</sup>, Siundu<sup>6</sup>, Vokes<sup>7</sup> and Komakoma<sup>8</sup>. The practice cuts across the urban and rural spaces and the main trend of scholarship has been on its social impact and cultural processes. In this study we focus on what could be described as the Kenyan mid level urban space, and examine the character and influence of electronic football fandom on the wider processes of micro-sociology. The study develops the argument that the dynamics of social life in the mid-level urban spaces of Africa are such that the performance of the self and community involve a play between the *Gessellschaft* of urban society and echoes of *Gemeinschaft* from the experience of - village - community. Data for the study is obtained from fieldwork techniques of semi-structured interviews and Focused Group Discussion with informants identified through the purposive sampling technique. The findings of the study establish a connection between wider process of negotiating between on the one hand performing of the self and community in the mid-level urban space and on the other hand the modes of electronic fandom practices adopted.

**Key Words:** Aspirational Identity, oral narrative performance, auto-biography, *Jua Kali*, *Gemeinschaft*, *Gessellschaft*.

## 1. Introduction

The ideas developed in this chapter owe their motivation from the proceedings of the 2nd Global Conference, Sport: Probing the Boundaries, Athens, 2013. At this conference I presented a paper on the general theme of fandom communities, with particular focus on the reception of the English Premier League football in a slum community in Eldoret. What interested me specifically was what seemed to me as an appropriation of the electronic football fandom space to mount oral performances whose structure, theme and aesthetic characteristics are hinged on, but not necessarily limited by, the situation(s) of the performers as audiences of ‘independent’ visual texts. I argued that this was evidence of the developments in the East African oral performance genre in response to changes in the wider socio-cultural patterns of life. I also argued that the texture of these performances reflected on the tensions, anxieties, aspirations and fears of this community of fans, and by extension, the general concerns of the youth in slum communities.

Nevertheless, one significant question was raised; why should Kenyan slum dwellers follow the English Premier League and, when they do, what motivates them to choose to support one club and not another. Reflecting on this question, in the context of the conference proceedings also meant revising my methodological apparatus. I noticed that my focus on the oral performance art rendered in the context of audience reception needed to be predicated on an exploration of the patterns of identity formation and performance. I needed to supplement my data on the live electronic fandom performance with background information on what I could describe as the ‘prefixes’ and ‘suffixes’ of the performance. I needed a closer and personal engagement with these fans-cum-oral performers to learn from them why and how they found themselves in this situation. I needed to know how this connected to their real lives as individuals and as members of communities.

In following this approach, I noticed that my study was closely related to two other studies presented at the conference: Wells, M.S and S.G Arthur-Banning’s “Sport is Good? Looking at

Sport Involvement through the Lens of Positive Psychology” and Ori Katz’ “Nostalgic Revolution”: Negotiating Symbolic Boundaries in the First Fan-Owned Football Club in Israel”. The former study, located in the American context, argued that sport has many practically and socially positive effects, which are nevertheless never reported in the media. The latter study examined the dynamic processes of performing identities in the context of football fandom in Israel. The current study straddles and conflates the two abovementioned studies both in scope and focus. It merges Wells and Arthur- Banning’s pragmatic perspective to sport with Katz’s social symbolic relevance of fandom identity. This perspective also echoes Flecher<sup>9</sup> and Fumanti<sup>10</sup> studies that engage with dynamism in the formation and performance of identities in the context of football fandom, a process that Fletcher refers to as creolization and Fumanti refers to as the emergence of competing and overlapping discourses. The point at the core of these two studies, which I consider to be similarly crucial in my study, is that whereas football fandom can be perceived as a leisure activity outside the real business of life of the participants involved, it is one of the central cogs in the wheel of the lived experience of the participants. As it has been observed by Fletcher<sup>11</sup> in the context of post-apartheid South Africa, football fandom acts as that performance that faithfully reflects on the real tensions and anxieties defining social life in a space that has a problematic history of race relations, what he terms as the ‘non-reductionism of and the subsequent recognition of the non-homogeneity of groups . . . ’ It is the same argument that Fumanti<sup>12</sup> terms as the visualization of the Ghanaian post-colonial discourses on nationalism, religion and popular culture in the context of football fandom. Whereas the contexts and scope of fandom in Fletcher and Fumanti studies are, in some fundamental ways, different from the current study, in their focus on the confluence between the wider social realities of the fans and their performance of fandom they are directly related to the objectives of the current study.

## **2. Methodological Approach**

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At one level the study largely depends on my rather personal lived experiences as a resident of the modest district town of Eldoret. In this light, my recollections of and recollections on what I could call the flow of the stream of life in the town provides a base upon which the identification of sources and collection of data is based. At another level, the study also benefits from an ethnographic perspective to the sources and contexts of data. In this light, I engage with my informants in unstructured interviews and focused group discussions. However, with the exception of one fandom group with whom I had casual acquaintance, the rest of my informants are people that we already had close social ties, constructed and performed not necessarily because of football fandom, but in my lived experience. As a result, of my nine informants I had known and closely interacted with four for a relatively long time. As a frequent user of the Kenya National Library, Eldoret Branch I got to know Lucas, one of the librarians. I have known him for over 6 years. Julius is my barber, whom I have known and interacted with since around 2008, and Jeff lives in my neighbourhood and I have known since around 2009. I later came to know that he is an out of work taxi driver. Mungoso is a petty trader-cum hawker that I have known since 2011. I knew the remaining 5 fans through Mungoso, one of the aforementioned ‘primary four’.

It is important to note the nature of my bonding with the primary informants started, and has been sustained to the present, because they all publicly and passionately talk about English Premier League football in ways that are very captivating, especially if one cares to take time and follow its flow. This needs time, because it appears deceptively simple, especially when one picks a few lines from the performance, and out of context, which is perhaps what Anna Tranfaglia<sup>13</sup> in describing an experience with Kenyan EPL football fans observes:

I try my best to lighten the mood by asking who is better, Manchester United or Chelsea? In Kenya, many individuals will passionately argue about this for hours, citing hard sort evidence by shouting ‘Drogba’ or ‘Rooney’.

Whereas the context of these remarks is different, one can notice a certain level of presumption and even exaggeration. If Tranfaglia had time to explore the contexts of these arguments, the narrative capacities of the different participants involved, the scope, depth and allusions of these arguments, she would notice that these are not necessarily limited to ascertaining the better team between Chelsea and Manchester United, and that the heroes constructed, compared and celebrated are not limited to the Rooneys and Drogbas of this world. She would notice that these arguments on the English Premier League are a sort of frame narrative that facilitates the performance of aspired individual and communal identities, memory and, to this extent, provide an opportunity for the individual fans re-imagine themselves and their position in their world. To establish this one does not stop at asking them who is better between Rooney and Drogba; we need to trace, the origin, contexts and characteristics of debates on Rooney and Drogba, among other EPL related debates.

But most important, we need to identify and focus on a select few visible fans that hail their identity as EPL fans through orality. In this sense, the study adopted the purposive and snowball sampling techniques. This is because the highly visible fans also attract other fans around them, not only in the places where they watch the matches but also in other spaces in where they transact the business of their life, which in this study range from the rather official spaces such as the library through the commercial points such as barber shops and *Jua Kali* kiosks to the local public spheres that form around neighbourhood abattoirs and tailor shops.

### **The Oral Construction of the EPL Fandom Community in Kenya**

In my conversations with my respondents I noticed some interesting pattern linking such factors as the EPL team of choice to the time of joining the fandom and the personality and lifestyle of the fan in question. This is represented in the table below:

*Table 1:* Ethnography of the Fans

	<b>Name of</b>	<b>Span</b>	<b>Personality &amp;</b>	<b>Current</b>	<b>Previous</b>
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	<b>Fan</b>		<b>Lifestyle</b>	<b>Team Supported</b>	<b>Team(s) Supported</b>
1	Gikonyo	17 Years	Player and Coach	Arsenal	Liverpool
2	Jeff	16 Years	Player and Coach	Arsenal	Arsenal
3	Julius	16 Years	Player and Fan	Arsenal	Liverpool
4	Lucas	16 Years	Player and Manager	Arsenal	Arsenal
5	Irungu	16 Years	Fan	Chelsea	Liverpool
6	Robert	13 Years	Fan	Arsenal	Arsenal
7	Gitau	9 Years	Fan	Chelsea	Chelsea
8	Mungoso	7 Years	Player	Manchester United	Manchester United
9	Njogu	3 Years	Fan	Manchester United	Manchester United

As shown in the table, five of the nine respondents support Arsenal while Manchester United and Chelsea are supported by two apiece; of the five fans that have followed the EPL for over sixteen years, four of them happen to currently support Arsenal; of all the three cases of defections from supporting one club to another, the club left was Liverpool F.C; of the three defections, two were to Arsenal and one to Chelsea; of the three fan that have supported the EPL for the shortest time span, two support Manchester United and one supports Chelsea. The apparent popularity of Arsenal F.C is not just an Eldoret phenomenon but a feature that had been observed in existing scholarship on the EPL Fandom of the Sub-Saharan African region as it has been.<sup>14</sup> In each of these studies the established reason behind the apparent popularity of Arsenal F.C is a historical coincidence; from the late 90s to the early 2000s Arsenal club signed players from the Sub-Saharan Africa region, most famous of whom

were Nigerian Nwanko Kanu, Ivorians Kolo Toure and Emmanuel Eboue, Cameroonian Lauren Etame Mayer and Alex Song, and Togolese Emmanuel Adebayor. However, in this study the apparent two reasons why Arsenal FC gained popularity were the perceived technically superior playing style characteristic associated with the team and the club's famous 2003/2004 "Class of Invincibles" that went 49 matches unbeaten in the EPL. However, what is important to this study is the process by which these pro-Arsenal factors were worked into a sort of urban folklore that then became the subject of orality. In the context of this study, the only way the fans "directly" connect with the EPL football is in the electronic media. As has been observed by Fletcher<sup>15</sup> majority of the ordinary (South) African residents of Johannesburg are interested in EPL football but lack of disposable income to allow them access to sports bars or subscription to cable television restricts them to the margins of the sport. In my conversation with Lucas he said:

You know, in our neighbourhood, (in the village) no one knew much about the EPL, so you could not hear any talk on the streets about these teams ... my close friends were not exposed to the EPL ... and during my time of playing football in Primary School and High School, I did not know that football could be played at such high levels.<sup>16</sup>

This is a limitation that local entrepreneurs both in the villages and the poorer sections of urban areas have addressed by introducing cheaper and locally affordable spaces for access to the otherwise exclusively cable TV mediated football. Nevertheless, most these spaces are found in the urban areas, which excludes those fans from the rural areas adequate access to EPL football. Even in the urban areas, only a handful of the fans have access to many of the EPL matches. In my conversation with Jeff, he recalls this unequal access in the urban space and how he supported his less privileged friends:

that time when I was watching EPL in Kabathayo I had a squad, that time I was working, and most of the



members of my squad were students, so I paid for them ... you know I was such a deep and committed fan that every Saturday my parents ‘understood’, and wouldn’t assign me work to do, I preferred to work on Sundays. My parent (dad) used to give me Kshs. 1000, because he knew for me watching football meant carrying with me a group of other fans ... they were eleven members of my squad.<sup>17</sup>

This situation of unequal access to cable television culminates in the emergence of patrons, the fairly well-to-do fans that sponsor what Jeff termed a ‘squad’ of other fans to the viewing spaces. What strikes one in this context is that fans with a history of having played the game seem to have more interest and passion in the Eldoret EPL fandom, and the ones that are willing to form patronages. They not only ‘convert’ new fans into the fandom but also influence some of them to support the teams that they, the patrons, support. This I noted in my conversation with Gikonyo, a fan that has followed the EPL and supported Arsenal for over 17 years. I asked him if he had ever influenced new fans to join the EPL fandom, and perhaps to “his team”, Arsenal FC, he responded:

Yes. A good number. There are newcomers, like last year I converted 5 people. I used to tell them, come and watch the Arsenal game, and they like it. Although from 2005, when they sold players such as Lauren, Sol Campbell, Henry, Arsenal went down. But what kept the fans happy was the coach. He could get players from academies in other clubs and mould them into stars. Theo Walcott, Jack Wilshere from West Ham when he was 8 years, then he was loaned to Bolton ... Gibbs was introduced after Ashley Cole had left, Clichy took that number, and Gibbs was his understudy, and he was the youngest, around 16 yrs ... and the formation, the touches, the ball does not go up, it is ground ball. It made me happy. Up to now am just proud to be an Arsenal fan.<sup>18</sup>

Gikonyo's testimony makes further revelations that incidentally characterized a certain category of EPL fans: former football player, an Arsenal fan, and a long term EPL fan. This fan is also most likely to be well informed about the EPL. This fan adopts various rhetoric techniques in narrating his experience. He is also capable of attracting attention to himself and influencing other fans to his narrative. It is significant though that this patronage is only smooth, fraternal and acceptable in contexts where the fandom comprises 'squads' that are well known to each other, that frequently watch matches together, in the same locations, and that have developed a certain degree of trust with each other. In some cases, this purely circumstantial bonding develops closely knit communities of fans with deep friendships between them. This is for instance the case with the fandom community that Lucas belongs to. When asked him whether or not his fandom community had developed close interpersonal bonds, he responded:

True. And we have a lot to share during the experience of watching the matches ... We mainly give and take personal opinion about the past matches, players etc .... I think that is how one gets exposed ... but in the beginning, when I used to watch the matches in the video-shops, you know the video-place, you go there and pay some fee to watch the match – there you do not know anyone ... you keep to yourself ... you hear people talking in some corner but you cannot join them ... maybe you fear you are not well exposed ... you do not want to appear a fool before people.<sup>19</sup>

I argue in this paper that this building of communal bonds in the context of the urban space is an important element of the wider *Gemeinschaft*<sup>20</sup> that characterized the performance of identities in many parts of the post-colonial urban space. However, I also note that there are cases when the pure *Gessellschaft*<sup>21</sup> of the urban space is reproduced in the context of EPL electronic football fandom. The very same fans-cum-oral artists that would have been welcome in

‘well established communities’ suddenly appear as unwelcome distractions. Commenting about this kind of fans, Julius observed:

Yes, there are people ... you know you could find someone at these places ... he doesn't even focus on the TV, he is talking about an injured player that is not in the game, when he is expected to return, a certain player is at risk of missing the next game if he gets yellow carded in this match ... he does not concentrate on the game ... he will talk of a player that will be signed by the club the following week, or a certain player is leaving the club ... we have such people, it is as if they, somehow, watched this game earlier, that is, the game is live and ongoing but he is done with it, it is in his past, he is focused on what for him are the real issues, ‘such and such a player will be back from injury in two months time’ ... we have such people, and significantly, when he lacks audience for his stories, he gets bored and switches of from the game, maybe starts to doze, but will not leave.<sup>22</sup>

It is apparent that these ‘impostor oral artists’ distinguish themselves by constructing parallel narratives so that they can achieve visibility in contexts that already has other centres of attention; either the tele-visual unfolding of the EPL football matches or the wider public space an argument that echoes what Fumanti has termed as the overlapping discourses of fandom<sup>23</sup>. Whereas his argument is made in the context of live-in-the- stadium football fandom, he emphasizes the role of some fans contribute to the visualization of football. Visualization, in his case, is not limited to the physical but also other national, religious and popular discourses that are performed in the context of fandom. In the current study I argue that this ‘opening up’ of discourses in the context of fandom depends on the relationship between the performer and his immediate context, and because it is an inevitable element of the fandom

performance, most EPL electronic fans choose to watch the matches in specific spaces.

It is evident that these oral artists are well informed about the current affairs in the EPL, and also have awareness about the technical and tactical aspects of football. Apparently, they use this knowledge as a way of signifying their position of authority within the fandom. This could be perceived as an aggressive strategy in the performance of identity. Nevertheless, there is a category of other oral-artists in the context of football fandom whose authority does not necessarily derive from this factual and technical knowledge. They simply utilize this space to perform a wide scope of narratives that are somehow, connected to, but which also deviate from football. However, it is significant to note that the actual electronic fandom space is rather congested in terms of narrative time, because these oral narrators share the audience's attention with the tele-visual real-time narrative of the match. Ultimately, what emerges is a blend of the two. Nevertheless, this paper argues that an engagement with these EPL fandom oral artists in the "prefixes and suffixes" of the matches is an open window through which these narrators lives can be reconstructed and performed.

### **Auto bio-graphing in the EPL Football Fandom**

In my exploration of the dynamics of joining the EPL football fandom and choice of specific club to follow, I noticed that the recollection and reflection on fandom experiences is in a sense autobiographical. The informants retrieved selected parts of their memory in ways that echoed significant aspects of their socialization, ranging from their childhood experiences, through High School to adult life of career, social life and overall lifestyle. It is significant that, typical of the autobiography genre, the narratives performed demonstrated Bartlet's concept of memory as a product of deliberate shaping and arrangement of memory to fit in certain ideas, experiences and thoughts<sup>24</sup>. It struck me that a narrative of fandom experience is comparable to re-drawing maps of the past and plotting one's location at certain points in time. To this extent, this paper

argues that the EPL football fandom acts as a structural principle of this process of retrieval and performance of memory.

One pattern observed in this perspective is the role dad in the orientation of young boys to EPL football fandom, which in a sense we could define as part of the wider family bonding process, in this case facilitated by football fandom. I noted that two of the oldest members of the EPL football fandom, Gikonyo for 17 years and Jeff for 16 years, had both been introduced to the fandom in this manner. In Gikonyo's case, he observed:

I was first a fan of Liverpool, from 1989 up to 1994, in 1995, I supported Manchester United briefly and went back to Liverpool, my dad was a Manchester United fan ... we had some changes in Liverpool, I thus left Liverpool and joined Arsenal ... and it is my dad that introduced me to the EPL, we used to watch with him the repeats on TV.<sup>25</sup>

Gikonyo apparently had a fleeting memory of the clubs he supported as a young boy, shifting between Liverpool and Manchester United before he chooses Arsenal. We can understand this as a reconstruction and arrangement of past experiences, not necessarily accurately but in terms of how they connect to the bigger and more intimate experience of the bonding between dad and son that in this context was structured around the sessions of watching EPL football on television. This is a positive outcome of sport in general that has also been echoed by Wells & Skye-Banning. As Wells and Skye have argued, the moments of engaging in sport also become important moments for performing and family, reinforcing the ties that bind them together and also providing a relaxed context in which the tensions and anxieties that sometimes define family relationships are dissolved. Indeed, it is in this context that we could understand Jeff's recollection of the role of his dad in his early days as a member of the EPL fandom:

You know I was so deep and committed a fan that every Saturday, my parents understood, and would not assign me work on Saturdays. I preferred to work on

Sundays. My dad used to give me Kenya Shillings 1000, because he knew for me watching football meant carrying with me a group of other fans ... they were eleven members of my squad. Those were my friends, some were supporting the same team with me and others were 'opposition'. On the way back we could quarrel, tease and laugh at each other.<sup>26</sup>

It is worth to note that the actual figures of Kshs. 1000 (an average of 8€ at the time of research for this paper) and eleven members of 'the squad' are not necessarily an accurate account of how it was; it is an exaggeration, an imaginative reconstruction of the past from the point of view of the present circumstances, and part of what renders this as an oral narrative performance. Nevertheless, the role of football fandom in the performance of family relations is significant.

In this research I also noted that, for some fans, the orientation to and performance of EPL football fandom and the orientation to and performance in the *Jua Kali* economy,<sup>27</sup> which is largely dependent on social intelligence. It is an economy in which all transactions are informal; deals are struck based on interpersonal friendship, trust and camaraderie. Buyers and sellers do not necessarily meet in formal offices, warehouses and stores. These activities also involve lots of waiting; waiting for customers. They are also indefinite; no one can tell how long it will take for the next customer to come and/or even whether or not a deal will be struck. Traders have to hang together as they wait. This process of waiting is livened up by informal debates on many issues of public concern, which converts these spaces into public spheres. In the Kenyan context, the EPL football is one of the most popular topics in the public sphere, especially in the urban space. Irungu, Mitumba<sup>28</sup> petty trader narrated his experience to me:

One day I accompanied a friend called Maina to Makutano in Mwea, there was an entrepreneur that had three screens, showing three different matches at the same time. On that particular day, it was Arsenal,

Liverpool and Chelsea all playing different teams ... Then, I just liked the game of Chelsea. I saw the way Chelsea played, I admired it. So it went on this way, up to 1999, I told myself, I will stop supporting Liverpool. One day, I went to Majengo, in Nairobi ... here there were many fans that had formed a (fandom) club.<sup>29</sup>

As a business person Irungu's lifestyle involves lots of travel, waiting and social interaction with fellow mitumba traders and clients. His business exploits expose him to different social spaces, thrusting him in varied public spheres. He is able to watch many EPL football matches and compare the playing styles of different teams. He does not admit it to me that he may have also been influenced not only to join the EPL fandom but also to switch his club loyalty by the oral performances of other EPL fans that he encounters. His fandom narrative also tells us the story of his mitumba business experiences. Indeed, a more vivid example of the influence of the 'Jua Kali lifestyle' on individuals, roping them into the EPL football fandom is that of Njogu, who shares a market stall with Njogu, trading in mitumba shoes. In my research for this paper I noted that he was the newest member of the EPL football fandom. When I asked how he came to join the EPL football fandom, he said:

It hasn't been long, really. It is perhaps about three years now ... when people meet in social life, like now here where we work, you find people that talk about their teams, some supporting Chelsea, Man U, Arsenal ... they talk about how their teams are faring on, so 'that thing' starts getting into you' you start following too. You start seeking out for more information, going out to watch the matches, and indeed you get thrilled at how the game is played. That way you start knowing more and more about the teams, the players transfers, etc. and sometimes it is very exciting, like here, when the fans ask each other questions, you see one of them respond very

informatively, and he strikes you as a very well informed person; you here such things as, “such and such a player playing for this team now started off in this or that team, moved somewhere else, before coming here”. You start to gain interest, so that you too can be informed and participate in these conversations.<sup>30</sup>

Njogu’s entry into the fandom is a sort of socialization into a sub-culture that develops around an economic activity. The mitumba sellers fill their time by talking about EPL football. Those that are not exposed to this football are initiated into the sub-culture because at that point in their life they are part of the mitumba business community. Thus when Njogu talks about how and why he joined the EPL football fandom, it is also a moment of reflection on his life as a mitumba trader. But one other significant point Njogu makes is the apparent desire to know as much as possible about the EPL football, so that he is not look ignorant among his colleagues.

### **Aspirational Identity in the EPL football Fandom**

Thornborrow and Brown have defined aspirational identity as a story-type or template in which an individual construes him- or herself as one who is earnestly desirous of being a particular kind of person and self-consciously and consistently in pursuit of this objective.<sup>31</sup> In a sense, the EPL football fandom identity is largely a fictional process of narrating oneself into another self that is perceived to be more exciting because it is socially approved and comes with a sense of individual pride and social status. Njogu, quoted above, admitted that he admired the apparent wealth of knowledge on EPL football. To him they had acquired a status of privilege. He made efforts to expose himself to the EPL so that he rises to that level of ‘social privilege’ enjoyed by his colleagues. I also noted that in seeking for this position of privilege, the members of the fandom do not only project themselves into a fictional world but also make efforts to gather information about the EPL and keep



themselves informed. Commenting on this aspect of performing the EPL football fandom Lucas observed:

There are those of us who benefit when we go there, it is like we listen to a radio, or it is like we are attending a meeting, or like you have gone to church ... you know at least something will touch you ... and you know, during these sessions there are people that enlighten others, even me, sometimes I go there thinking that I know so much about certain things, but end up gathering more new information.<sup>32</sup>

It is important to note that in both cases, there are specific oral strategies that are employed to gain that privileged social status. The dominant strategy is the remediation of information obtained from mainstream media outlets of electronic, media print media and the internet to the oral narrative. Most of the fans that do this make effort to go out and dig for this information, the same way journalists would do, and then relay it to those that may not have accessed this information, or that may be incapable of doing so. In the process, these remediating journalists are able to see themselves in that useful role of providing information and enlightening the “ignorant”, never mind the fact that such information is not immediate and practical use to the audience. It nevertheless helps to establish a structured and vertical relationship in which those that are enlightened are perceived to be more powerful and valuable to the group than the rest, who in turn use a variety of ways to reward them. One of the most significant of these rewards is their anointment into roles and positions of power in the fandom community that is sometimes complete with pseudo-naming and role assignment. Other than the actual sessions when the matches are televised live to the audience community these anointed ‘super fans’ of EPL football have many other occasions when they perform this identity in public spheres. Jeff, one of the “anointed” fans said this about the experience:

Yes, that one we do, even at the West Indies shopping centre, even now if I go to Gerald’s place (a butchery) you will see people hail me, ‘Wenger, Wenger,

Wenger' ... when you get there, no game has been played, or maybe it was played the previous day, we start such discussions as 'the transfer window was opened and closed, you did not buy anyone, look now how you are suffering' ... then I respond, "No, you now we got to calculate, the Arsenal squad is big, we even have good ones in the academy, the problem is Wenger's bias, you know if so and so played in this position, not so and so, maybe the outcome would have been different ... and you know I have a vision of one day founding a club, and I will be the coach, or even if am not the coach, I will take the role of technical adviser."<sup>33</sup>

This is a significant case of a fan projecting himself into someone else that he admires. His fellow fans, realizing this, support him all the way. What develops here then is a dramatic experience, with the 'anointed fan' playing the role of someone else, and the fellow fans taking on the role of his spec-actors; the whole experience is defined by a suspension of disbelief, as is the case with conventional drama. But what is even more significant is the sense in which Jeff, playing the role of Wenger, is still conscious of his identity and, in the Brechtian sense of drama, delinks himself from his role by observing that he – as Jeff – has a vision of founding a football club, where he will be the coach, or at least the technical director. Here we note the case of the play between real and aspired identity. It is an experience that another fan, Mungoso, also recounted to me thus:

Here we have someone we call chairman, and then this guy (Irungu) is his deputy ... so like if it was Chelsea that was beaten yesterday, people would face Irungu ... people will keep asking him, even those that do not know much about the EPL football, you will hear them remarking, "aaah, Chelsea was beaten!"<sup>34</sup>

This dramatization is thus a characteristic feature of the EPL football fandom talk, and in this sense echoes Ori Katz's study of the perspective that links football fans with ownership of football clubs. Whereas Katz' focus is on 'real' fandom communities with a direct link to the clubs, this paper argues that even virtual fans such as those supporting EPL football clubs from their distant geographical location in Kenya can and do overcome the physical limitations through the process of performing aspired identity. Indeed, the boundlessness of aspired identity in some cases empowers these anointed fans to perform tall tales about themselves that justify their positions as 'authorities', and therefore heroes, in the fandom space. They adopt the oral technique of self-praise, which may in some cases bear some grain of truth but in most cases purely fictional representation of themselves. Lucas describes one of these fans thus:

We have an Arab that we watch (EPL football) with ...he lives near Caltex ... he knows so much about football, and he says that he has been following football for a long time, and that at one point travelled with the Kenyan national team to international matches out of the country, when he was still in Mombasa. So this guy, I consider him exposed...<sup>35</sup>

Jeff also describes himself as not just a fan but a former footballer that played the game at very high levels. He claims:

You know I started football a long time ago, and you know I have even trained with Mike Okoth! I have trained with Nicky Ouma, Musa Otieno, he was our captain ... I have been with this people, I was training in Gusii Stadium.<sup>36</sup>

In the two examples quoted above, there is no way of proving that the 'Arab fan' used to accompany the Kenya national football team on its international assignments. But he uses narrative technique to justify his claim; first he takes advantage of his racial difference from his spec-actors (he is Arab) to create a cocoon of mystery around himself and thus earns their trust. Secondly, he

locates his epic achievements in another distant place (Mombasa) and in the past. Jeff also claims to have played football with some of the most notable names in the history of Kenyan football, but he locates it in the past, and in Kisii, which, like Mombasa a distant from Eldoret. Nevertheless, this self praise through fantasy not only helps to solidify their position as authorities in the fandom but also facilitates the performance of aspired identity.

## **Conclusion**

This paper explores why and how the Eldoret based EPL football fan joins the EPL football fandom and the process that informs the choice of specific teams to support. Underlying this quest is the question of whether or not this fan's identity with the EPL football fandom is useful to him as an individual and as member of a specific community within the urban space and by extension, a member of the society. In doing this the paper 'communicates' with Sara Wells & Arthur-Banning's "Sport is Good? Looking at Sport Involvement through the Lens of Positive Psychology" and Ori Katz's "Nostalgic Revolution": Negotiating Symbolic Boundaries in the First Fan-Owned Football Club in Israel. This is in the sense that in the process of locating the fan in his wider psycho-social, economic and historical contexts, we get to establish personal and social capital that accrues from and conflates with his identity as member of the EPL football fandom.

To accomplish this research objective, I draw on my lived experience with the EPL football fandom in Eldoret, identifying and zeroing in on the most visible of the EPL fans, responding to their call as it were, because they hail their EPL fandom identity within the daily rhythm of their lives as neighbours, librarians, barbers, taxi drivers, *Jua Kali* traders and so on. In a sense, my semi-structured interviews and focused group discussions with them is both part of our normal rhythm of life and also an oral performance event, in which I act the audience role.

This study has established that the Eldoret based EPL football fandom is largely shaped in and sustained by orality. Fans get

attracted to the fandom because of the narrativisation of the experience by significant others in their social environment. They are persuaded into the EPL fandom because of the way it is orally, and informally, marketed. In tracing the processes, mechanisms and contexts of this oral marketing the paper establishes that becoming an EPL football fan is part and parcel of the narrative of one's life, and thus relieving it is similar to narrating one's life. Because this is a sort of autobiography, the narrators reconstruct their lives in ways that signify their aspired identities, which in a sense provides a chance for the fans to re-imagine and reconstruct their identities in ways that correspond to their desired view of themselves and their place in their world.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond: Doing things with Words in Africa*. (The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 4-8

<sup>2</sup> Ropo Sekoni, 'Little Genres of Everyday Life', ed. Karin Barber, *Readings in African Popular Culture* (The International African Institute in Association with Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1997), 142-143.

<sup>3</sup> Gerard Akindes, 'Football bars: urban sub-Saharan Africa's trans-local stadiums,' *The International Journal of the History of Sport*. Vol. 28, Issue 15, Special Issue: Regional Issue: Africa, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Marc Fletcher, 'Renforcing Divisions and Blurring Boundaries in Johannesburg Football Fandom', Eds. Chuka Onwumechili and Gerard Akindes *Identity and Nation in African Football. Fans, Communities and Clubs*. (New York, Palgrave Macmillan. 2014),134.

<sup>5</sup> Senayon Olaoluwa & Adewole Adejayan, 'Thierry Henry as Igwe: Soccer Fandom, Christening and Cultural Passage in Nollywood', ed. Jimo Shehu *Gender, Sport and Development in Africa. Dakar* (Dakar, Codesria Publications, 2010) 79-94.

<sup>6</sup> Godwin Siundu, 'European Football Worlds and Youth Identification in Kenya', *African Identities*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (London, Routledge, August, 2011) 337-348

<sup>7</sup> Richard Vokes, 'Arsenal in Bugamba. The Rise of English League Football in Uganda,' *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 26, No. 3. (2010): 10-15.

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- <sup>8</sup> Leah Komakoma ‘An Investigation into Fan Identity among Supporters of English Soccer Premier League in Lusaka, Zambia,’ (Masters’ Thesis, School of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University, 2005)
- <sup>9</sup> Fletcher, ‘Reinforcing Divisions,’ 133-151.
- <sup>10</sup> Mattia Fumanti “Black Chicken, White Chicken: Patriotism, Morality and the Aesthetics of Fandom in the 2008 African Cup of Nations in Ghana”, *Soccer and Society: Visualizing the Game: Global Perspectives on Football in Africa. Vol.13, Number 2.* (2012) 264-276
- <sup>11</sup> Fletcher, ‘Reinforcing Divisions,’ 133-135
- <sup>12</sup> Fumanti, ‘Black Chicken,’ 266
- <sup>13</sup> Ann Tranfaglia, ‘Fields of Dreams and Champions: A Case Study in Kenyan Girls’ Football,’ Eds. Chuka Onwumechili and Gerard Akindes, *Identity and Nation in African Football. Fans, Communities and Clubs.* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 165-182
- <sup>14</sup> See also Fletcher 2014: 143, Olaoluwa and Adejayan 2012:84, and Vokes 2010:10.
- <sup>15</sup> Fletcher, ‘Reinforcing Divisions’ 142-143
- <sup>16</sup> Personal Communication with Lucas Ombati on March 15<sup>th</sup> of 2014.
- <sup>17</sup> Personal Communication with Jeff Kamau on March 22<sup>nd</sup> of 2014.
- <sup>18</sup> Personal Communication with Gikonyo on March 27<sup>th</sup> of 2014.
- <sup>19</sup> Personal Communication with Lucas Ombati on March 15<sup>th</sup> of 2014.
- <sup>20</sup> Rooney Spark, *Sociology: Tenth Edition* (Thomson, Wardsworth, 2000) 559
- <sup>21</sup> Spark, ‘Sociology’, 560
- <sup>22</sup> Personal Communication with Julius Mudaki on March 30<sup>th</sup> of 2014.
- <sup>23</sup> Fumanti, ‘Black Chicken,’ 264-276
- <sup>24</sup> Nick Hayes *Foundations of Psychology. 3<sup>RD</sup> Edition.* (London, Pat Bond, Centage Learning EMEA, 2000) 64-65
- <sup>25</sup> Personal Communication with Gikonyo on March 27<sup>th</sup> of 2014.
- <sup>26</sup> Personal Communication with Jeff Kamau on March 22<sup>nd</sup> of 2014.
- <sup>27</sup> The term Jua Kali is Kiswahili for ‘hot sun’, and is a metonymous representation of the informality of the small and medium size entrepreneurial activities, most of

which are conducted in informal contexts, in most cases in the open air, therefore exposed to the hot sun.

<sup>28</sup> Mitumba is a term that refers to used clothes, shoes and any other second hand commodities which are normally far much cheaper in comparison with new clothes. Most ordinary Kenyans prefer to use mitumba clothes. The chain of entrepreneurial activities around mitumba clothes involves lots of travel to buy in bulk from the bigger cities and towns and sell them at the retail level in smaller urban and peri-urban spaces.

<sup>29</sup> Personal Communication with Irungu on March 27<sup>th</sup> of 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Personal Communication with Njogu on March 27<sup>th</sup> of 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Thornborrow and Andrew Brown, 'Being Regimented': Aspiration, Discipline and Identity, work in the British Parachute Regiment,' *Organization Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (2009):355

<sup>32</sup> Personal Communication with Lucas Ombati on March 15<sup>th</sup> of 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Personal Communication with Jeff Kamau on March 22<sup>nd</sup> of 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Personal Communication with David Mungoso on March 27<sup>th</sup> of 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Personal Communication with Lucas Ombati on March 15<sup>th</sup> of 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Personal Communication with Jeff Kamau on March 22<sup>nd</sup> of 2014.

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