



Introduction

Precarity, Spirituality, and Masculinities

“It is time for me to reap the fruits of my labor!”

Ayuk was clearly frustrated. It was September 2014. I was walking with him and our friend Emil up the main road in Buea, a mountainous town in the Southwest Region of Cameroon, listening to them vent about their football agent. They were in their mid-twenties and they trained at a football academy, Buea Young Star FC. They dreamed of migrating abroad and playing football for a living with a foreign club.

Ayuk had already acquired a “football age” passport showing that he was nineteen—European football clubs could legally hire only players over eighteen, and they demanded young men no older than twenty-one. Ayuk had even managed to acquire a three-month tourist visa to enter the European Union. But his “football age” was already on the high side—soon it would be twenty, which would significantly reduce his chances of landing a position—and his visa would expire in a month and a half. Time was running out, but here he was, still in Cameroon, with his agent seemingly no longer interested in making the necessary arrangements to send him to Europe. “Why should I train every day if I am getting nothing from it?” he vented.

Emil, the captain of Buea Young Star FC, listened intently. Among aspiring footballers he was known as “MOG,” short for “man of God,” a nickname that reflected his fluency in Bible verses and dedication to Pentecostal Christianity, an increasingly influential spiritual movement. According to the visions of the future that God had revealed to Emil during his fervent prayers, Ayuk would leave Cameroon and play football abroad for a living only if he managed to resist giving in to numerous temptations of the devil and follow the path of God. “Right now, the devil is playing with you,” Emil repeated several times. “The devil is making you consider departing from the path that God intended for you, the path of football.” After a lengthy fit of rage, Ayuk calmed down and seemed less likely to lash out at the agent who held the key to his geographical and social mobility.

Ayuk's story illustrates how playing football for a living is an attractive but highly elusive opportunity for both livelihood and fame—a contemporary form of precarity that is central to this book. He was first spotted at age fourteen by coaches from the Ecole de Football Brasseries du Cameroun, the most prominent football academy in the country. He left school and Buea to begin training there, in Douala, the country's largest city and economic hub, with the goal of playing professionally. Some of his academy teammates were picked up by European youth clubs and developed international careers and superstar status, and the entire nation watched their performances on television. Ayuk, however, after four years at the academy, returned to Buea without a professional contract.

He was discouraged but refused to give up. Over the next few years he played and trained with local clubs and went “footing”—i.e., running—on Buea's hilly streets, alone, every morning at 5:00 A.M. before the sun rose. At that hour nightclubs were closing, and late-night partiers were returning from a night of drinking and dancing. One morning an expensive car stopped next to him, and out popped a young man who was most likely returning from a spending spree in Dream Lounge or some other popular nightclub or drinking joint. “I saw you on the field the other day,” he said, “and I liked how you play. I like that you train so diligently. I want to help you in your football career. I want to help you play abroad.” Ayuk accepted, and the man became his agent.

The agent seemed to keep his promise. He arranged for Ayuk to train with the junior national team—foreign clubs hired players based on their CVs, and tenure with the national team, however short, was a significant boost to Ayuk's list of accomplishments. The agent arranged for his doctored passport. He even arranged a trip to Europe, where Ayuk trained with a youth club in Germany for a few months, but then returned to Cameroon without a contract.

Meanwhile, his family obligations mounted. He needed to pay school fees and medical bills for his six-year-old daughter. He could barely pay the rent. His family elders were impatient, as they expected him to begin earning a living. Ayuk counted on playing for a wealthy European club, but now his agent appeared to be ignoring him. He did not disappear—the agent was not a *feyman*, i.e., a scammer, a dangerous type that young footballers are vigilant about—but he no longer seemed interested in financing his trips to Europe. Hence Ayuk's frustration in September 2014.

Emil was also bent on playing football and leaving Cameroon. His intervention in Ayuk's life illustrates the central role of spirituality among young men whose futures are plagued by uncertainty, a key analytical focus in this book. Emil was among the increasing number of young footballers who found Pentecostal denominations attractive, but he also stood out with his dedication to, as Pentecostals say, “filling himself with the Holy Spirit” by praying and reading the Bible. On numerous occasions he told me the details of vi-

sions he had during extensive prayer sessions when the Holy Spirit revealed to him each of his teammates' destinies. Ayuk had the "brightest star" of all, he said, the highest potential to prosper. But his success was conditional: Ayuk was surrounded by "bad men," "quarter boys" who drove him to gambling, drinking, and smoking marijuana. Ayuk needed to resist the temptations that surrounded him, Emil insisted; only then would the devil stop "blocking his star," and he would be free to migrate and prosper.

The agent eventually found an opportunity for Ayuk, who for the second time left Cameroon for Europe, in February 2015. I visited him in May 2016, over a year later, in his small rental apartment in Slovakia. His uncertain situation had not ended with his departure. He had encountered many challenges in his new setting—physical and verbal attacks by racist football fans, horrid living conditions, difficulties in obtaining documents, and an exploitative football club director who sought to profit from reselling players from Africa to other European clubs. But he was determined to continue playing in Europe for two reasons. The first had to do with his individual ambition—despite the difficulties and uncertainties, he loved playing football, and, as he said, "in life, you need to do what brings you happiness." The second was his obligations as a migrant: he was afraid to return to Cameroon without enough money to support his daughter, elder siblings, and parents. He had to stay in Europe and earn more before returning to Cameroon. "Otherwise, they will call me a useless man," incapable of providing and caring for others.

The stories of Ayuk and Emil, to which I will return several times, highlight problems that are central to this book. For many young men in Cameroon, as in many other places, the future is uncertain. This has become increasingly so since the economic crisis in the 1980s and the subsequent neoliberal structural adjustment programs that failed to reboot the economy and hampered young people's transition to adulthood. The expansion of the global market for football players beginning in the 1990s—a global market that exemplified neoliberal principles of deregulation and free enterprise—has offered young men the hope of not only achieving adulthood but also doing so in style, by playing "the beautiful game" and enjoying the superstar status that comes with it. Yet flashy football "careers" are elusive, and new forms of uncertainty have emerged. With the new opportunities of transnational sporting careers come new opportunities to fail.

Pentecostal spirituality emerges as a way for young men to both deal with the crippling uncertainty and actively engage with it. Many footballers sought the advice of Pentecostal pastors and prophets, often referred to as "men of God," and joined Pentecostal Christian denominations. Some used Pentecostal paraphernalia, such as anointed oil and holy water, to help them win matches and score goals. Others looked to churches for support in a fickle industry in which many fail. Yet others prayed with Pentecostal men of God to be granted

a visa, leave the country, and compete for positions at foreign clubs. In all instances, Pentecostalism allowed players to deal with uncertainty.

In Cameroonian football, the emergence of Pentecostal spirituality is striking for two reasons. First, Cameroonians largely associate the game of football with sorcery and occult practices commonly referred to as “witchcraft.” Cameroonians often speculate that when football coaches and managers want to prepare their teams for important matches, they seek help from traditional healers who perform rituals in order to increase the chance of winning. When football players want to stand out on the team, they may consult traditional healers who provide them with substances that can poison opponents or even teammates who are competing for the same position. The use of sorcery is highly secretive and difficult to pin down, but it is quite common in football. Recently, however, young footballers seem to be more inclined to seek advice from Pentecostal men of God, who are unapologetic in their calls that all practices that resemble “traditional” spirituality constitute the devil’s work and need to be eliminated from football and all social life. In this sense, it is not entirely surprising that Pentecostal Christian men of God would wish to intervene in the “witchcraft-ridden” space of football, but it is striking that young footballers themselves, without any real pressure from coaches or managers or Christian pastors, gravitate toward Pentecostal men of God.

The emergence of Pentecostal Christianity among footballers is also striking because many Cameroonians consider footballers prime examples of virile youthful masculinity characterized by enthusiasm for nightlife, flirtatiousness with women, a promiscuous lifestyle, and frequent enjoyment of beer and whiskey. The image of young men who gladly enjoy the visibility that comes with football is not entirely unfounded. And yet a considerable number of aspiring footballers are willing to distance themselves from the perks of masculine popularity and subscribe to Pentecostal Christian denominations that scorn hypermasculine performances that they deem sinful and seek to transform sinners into good Christians and responsible men. The convergence of football aspirations and Pentecostal spirituality produces a performance of masculinity that is very different from the reductive stereotypes of “African” and “hegemonic” masculinity.

Ayuk’s fear of being labeled a “useless man,” a morally charged trope that describes those who fail to provide financially, reflects young men’s growing fear of being seen as superfluous in the eyes of their kin. Relations with and obligations to kin figure centrally in young men’s everyday experiences of training, migration aspirations, and migration itself. Cameroonian parents have long considered football an activity that distracts young men from education and social mobility, and many still do; however, since the turn of the millennium, football has emerged as an opportunity to migrate and begin earning a living, and parents have begun supporting young footballers’ aspirations and

helping finance their migration projects. On the surface, football stardom is emblematic of spectacular individual success, an ambition driven by a need to realize one's "God-given" talent, and young aspiring athletes are prime examples of entrepreneurs of the self whose success relies on individual focus, dedication to the sport, and deploying bodily capital to achieve material ends. As will become clear, the transformation of football into a global industry has amplified the drive to fulfill individual dreams of success. Yet at the same time, young athletes' migration projects are strewn with responsibilities for others, especially moral obligations to provide for their kin. The danger of becoming "useless" in the eyes of others can drive young athletes to embark on journeys strewn with obstacles and uncertainty.

This book focuses on these young men in precarious conditions, who increasingly harbor anxieties of being seen as superfluous, anxieties that are not exclusive to Cameroon but commonplace among young men throughout the world. Instead of taking at face value common assumptions of idleness of young men in Africa whose agency is limited to domains of criminality, trickery, or playful performance of cosmopolitan style, this book shows how young men struggle to construct alternative versions of masculinity that are built on moral values of self-discipline and care for their kin. I argue that attention to globalized sport is central to understanding how young men imagine and shape their future and seek to overcome the difficulties they face in the post-structural-adjustment period. Moreover, I aim to unpack the role of Pentecostal spirituality in areas of social life that are influenced by neoliberal transformations, a spirituality that allows young men to fashion themselves as gendered and moral subjects and reconfigure notions of masculinity, and yet remains inextricable from the stifling economic uncertainty that characterizes much of structurally adjusted West Africa.

Young Men, Precarity, and Cruel Optimism

In many parts of the world young men find it increasingly difficult to provide for themselves and their families, and transnational economic processes are central to these dynamics. The turn of the millennium has arguably produced a "contemporary predicament of youth" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 306), by which young people struggle to reach adulthood in contexts of deepening social, economic, and political insecurity. More specifically, austerity measures and structural adjustment programs that have been implemented since the 1980s have increasingly excluded young men from ways of becoming and performing as men, especially through economic productivity (Cole and Durham 2007; Mains 2007; Weiss 2009). Many are forced to devise novel strategies to overcome economic uncertainty, including petty trade, informal work, and

scam artistry (Newell 2012; Ndjio 2008b). At the same time, many young men seek to overcome local socioeconomic structures, which are often gerontocratic and driven by relations of patronage, and become fascinated by cosmopolitan imagery, such as hip-hop music and style (Weiss 2009), conspicuous performances of foreign elegance and wealth (Newell 2012), and, perhaps most strikingly, transnational migration.

For young men in many places, transcontinental migration has become a key strategy for securing an income, looking for opportunities lacking at home, and meeting older generations' growing expectations. Young men are eager to migrate at all costs and participate in processes of globalization and modernization from which they feel excluded (Ferguson 2006; Piot 2010). At the same time, regular routes to the global North have become strewn with obstacles, and migration for many has become increasingly "illegal" and risky (Andersson 2014; de Genova 2002). As a result, social networks and entire industries that focus on obtaining travel and migration documents have proliferated (Gaibazzi 2014; Piot with Batema 2019).

One of the avenues for migration that has gained considerable visibility over the last two decades is the transnational market for football players, as teams and clubs have been increasingly recruiting players from West Africa (Alegi 2010; Darby, Akindes, and Kirwin 2007). Much of this recruiting takes place through academies that proliferated since the 1990s in countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Cameroon, many with the specific focus of identifying talented young men and preparing them for the transnational market (Darby 2013; Esson 2015b). Images of superstar athletes such as the Cameroonian Samuel Eto'o and the Ivorian Didier Drogba have spread all over the world in the past two decades, fueling young people's hopes of global recognition. Driven by a passion for the beautiful game, the star status of elite athletes, and economic and social anxieties, many young men dream of opportunities abroad and enroll in academies and clubs in the hope of launching a coveted career in professional sports.

In Cameroon, the idea of playing football for a living has increasingly appealed to young men since the mid-1990s, mainly (but not exclusively) those from poorer backgrounds who found themselves navigating increasing economic uncertainty that resulted from the economic crises in the 1980s and the failures of the structural adjustment programs that followed. In this context, the commercialization of football as a global sport and the expanding market for players that increasingly looked to West African countries for talented young men seemingly provided new and attractive opportunities for Cameroon's young men.

In reality, despite the perceived opportunities, it is extraordinarily difficult to stand out as an exceptional footballer in a very narrow window of time:

Cameroonian footballers need to be between eighteen and twenty-one years old—at least on paper, as Ayuk’s case shows—if they hope to launch a career and travel abroad in order to earn a living by playing. Large numbers of boys and young men train and pursue the dream of a transnational football career, but only very few sign professional contracts. Even those who manage to leave Cameroon are often forced to take “irregular” migration trajectories, leaving them susceptible to exploitation by profit-seeking football agents. The hope and dream that the life project of becoming a transnational footballer provides are not in line with the precarious realities of actually “making it.” Many projects of becoming a migrant athlete amount to “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011), by which faraway dreams appear close, achievable, meaningful, and worthy of labor yet are beyond one’s grasp and very difficult to attain. Thus young aspiring footballers in Cameroon experience precarity, i.e., the uncertainty of life in the globalized context of labor uncertainty (Allison 2013; Tsing 2015; Millar 2018), in two ways: first, through difficulties stemming from the country’s post-structural-adjustment era, and second, through the attractive but precarious life project of “making it” as a professional footballer.

As will become clear in the following chapters, major transnational processes anchored in neoliberal ideologies of deregulation and free enterprise are crucial to these dynamics. In particular, the increasing corporatization and commoditization of the global business of sport, including football, in the 1990s (Andrews and Silk 2012; Besnier, Brownell, and Carter 2018; Besnier, Calabrò, and Guinness 2021) and the consequences of neoliberal structural adjustment programs imposed the world over by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and international donors in the late 1980s shape the lives and experiences of young Cameroonian aspiring footballers.

This book will unpack the differing scales of the global and of the local—specifically that of the globalized football market and that of small football academies—and show how they are becoming critical in shaping young men in Cameroon. For instance: young Cameroonians flock to football academies that promise to sell them to clubs abroad. The academies in turn seek to inculcate young men with values of suffering and perseverance in the face of adversity and limited opportunities. The academies frame these values as cornerstones of adulthood. But in the context of commercialized global football, they are also values that allow the young men to internalize the precarity intrinsic to the competitive industry. Football in Cameroon is thus a fertile and concrete field for examining how people both deal with and actively seek to submit to neoliberal governmentality, i.e., the process of making self-reliant subjects on whose shoulders rests the responsibility for both success and failure (Foucault 2008: 229–33; Gershon 2011; McGuigan 2014).

Spirituality, Uncertainty, and the Gendered Subject

Despite the commonly held idea that modernity will reduce the role of religious and spiritual movements, people at the turn of the century are increasingly inclined to engage with the supernatural in order to deal with and actively participate in new economic and social circumstances. The global South in particular has seen the rise of what Jean and John L. Comaroff (2000) dubbed the “occult economies.” Occult economies stand for an increasing number of occult interpretations of sudden and unexpected accumulations of wealth: if one manages to accumulate wealth with seemingly few resources and despite unlikely odds, people often consider that person’s efforts as assisted by forces beyond practical explanation, such as magic and witchcraft (Geschiere 1997). The proliferation of occult economies throughout the world is an indicator that people recognize the accumulation of wealth in globalized “millennial capitalism” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000) as having less to do with practical reason, rational decision-making, and work and more to do with speculation, risk-taking, and luck.

According to this vision, contemporary forms of Pentecostal Christianity are “holy-owned subsidiaries” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 314) of occult economies. Contemporary Pentecostal denominations that promote the “prosperity gospel,” i.e., the notion that prayers and dedication to the Holy Spirit will bring material wealth to dedicated Christians, have spread all over the world (Meyer 2004; Robbins 2004). Prayer meetings and healing sessions in “prosperity gospel” denominations respond to people’s desire for miraculously quick solutions to economic hardship. As with occult economies, the prosperity gospel of Pentecostal Christianity allegedly relies on the “instant efficacy of the magical and the millennial” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 314–15). The Pentecostal prosperity gospel also embodies a contradiction: on the one hand Pentecostal Christians condemn those who enrich themselves in seemingly magical ways, and on the other they pursue instant material gains through novel spiritual means in prayer meetings and healing sessions (Meyer 1999). From this point of view, despite its different iterations across the world, Pentecostal Christianity is not much different from occult economies.

Critics of the notion of “occult economies” have argued that the global expansion of spiritual practices, whether linked to the occult or to the Holy Spirit, is not simply a response to the expansion of global markets and the increased uncertainty that characterizes twenty-first-century capitalism. Spiritual practices are not merely otherworldly reflections of deregulated markets or allegorical images of modernity’s contradictions. For example, in Ghanaian Akan shrines in Detroit, young priests use discourses of witchcraft not only to criticize excessive consumerism but also to develop an alternative “American

dream” rooted in old-style Fordist capitalism (Parish 2015). In another example, one more globally visible, an increasing number of people throughout the post-structural-adjustment global South join Pentecostal Christian denominations in order to construct new social relations at a time when neoliberal austerity programs have eroded old ones (Haynes 2012; Haynes 2013; Robbins 2009). For some followers of Pentecostal Christianity, prayers and congregations can lead to a long-term process of self-transformation that can fuel ambitions of large-scale social and political change (Marshall 2009). All of these examples are of people for whom spiritual practices are not only celestial reflections of material processes, such as market dynamics, but also a form of action, with tangible consequences in the material world.

As the following chapters will make clear, Pentecostal spirituality for young footballers is a way of dealing with the cruel optimism of competitive transnational football industries. It is also a way of imagining a future elsewhere, outside of Cameroon, and actively dealing with barriers that limit geographical and social mobility, such as the need for passports and visas. Moreover, for young aspiring footballers, involvement with Pentecostal spirituality acquires a particularly relevant material dimension. Like athletes everywhere, young footballers are focused on training and maintaining their athletic bodies. Aspiring athletes are perfect examples of people who use their bodily capital as a source of action—a way to fulfill life ambitions or find a way out of poverty. But before athletic bodies can be put to use, they need to become “docile” (Foucault 1995 [1979]), that is, subject to manipulation, training, and discipline (Brownell 1995). For young Cameroonian footballers this is most clearly articulated in their anxieties concerning sexual behavior. As will become clear in chapter 5, a “common piece of knowledge” among footballers and their coaches is that excessive sexual activity results in diminished athletic performance. Pentecostal spirituality emerges as one way of articulating and controlling fears over the loss of bodily capital.

Looking “beyond the body proper” (Farquhar and Lock 2007), i.e., beyond the material body extracted from its social context, Pentecostal spirituality is crucial for young Cameroonian footballers in their efforts to challenge and transform common notions of youthful masculinity that are grounded in performances of virility. Pentecostalism in different parts of the world often leads to the “domestication of men,” by which people measure men’s moral standing based on their attention to the household and confinement of sexual practices to marriage (Brusco 1995; Soothill 2007). It also inspires novel projects of nation building based on the idea that masculinity is in dire need of transformation (van Klinken 2016). But the attraction of Pentecostalism among young men who aspire to move abroad and who harbor dreams of transnational careers reveals a key role of Pentecostal spirituality in the making of gendered subjects in conditions of globalized uncertainty.

Football is thus a fertile and concrete field for investigating the wide-ranging issues that the Comaroffs and their critics have raised. For one, what is the role of spirituality, especially Pentecostal Christianity, for people who deal with new and old forms of uncertainty? Second, what is the role of spirituality in the making and maintenance of gendered bodies? And finally, what is the role of spirituality in the making of gendered—in this case masculine—subjects? Rather than asking whether spirituality, Pentecostal or otherwise, reflects large-scale processes of contemporary capitalism, I seek to investigate exactly why Pentecostalism is attractive to young Cameroonians and why they seem to increasingly gravitate toward Pentecostal men of God rather than traditional healers, and I endeavor to determine the consequences of their spiritual practices. This book will show that Pentecostalism is very much intertwined with the “global production of desire” (Trouillot 2001: 129) of the contemporary moment and clearly provides the “instant efficacy of the magical and the millennial” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 315) that resembles occult practices. However, it will also show that Pentecostalism offers young men a disciplinary and moral regime that converges with the demands of their coaches and helps them deal and engage with new forms of precarity.

In order to do justice to the perspectives and everyday practices of my research participants, I prefer to analyze Pentecostal Christianity in terms of “spirituality” and “spiritual practice” rather than as a “religion.” The main reason for this is grounded in my ethnographic observations. My Pentecostal Christian friends rarely speak about Pentecostalism as a religion. Quite the opposite: they refer to their way of practicing Christianity as a “way of life,” one not bounded by a religious canon or an institution but instead depending on their individual experience of the Holy Spirit that defies institutional boundaries. Rather than referring to themselves as “religious,” they consider themselves “spiritual” in the sense of investing considerable energy and time in relating to entities beyond the material world.

Another reason for a focus on “spiritual” rather than “religious” is an anthropological critique that demonstrates how defining and objectifying the religious as an isolated domain of social life is a product of a unique post-Protestant reformation history in Europe when Christian churches sought to achieve coherence in doctrines, practices, and rules (Asad 1993). More often than not, religion does not have an autonomous essence that is separate from politics, law, science, or sport but instead infuses different domains of social life. This is certainly true of Pentecostal Christianity (despite its historical origins in Evangelical Protestantism), a worldwide spiritual movement that seeks to infuse the Holy Spirit in domains commonly considered profane, such as markets and politics (Comaroff 2009; Marshall 2009).

The goal of shifting attention from “religious” to “spiritual” is not to argue that Pentecostal Christianity is not a religion. After all, its denominations rely

on literal interpretations of the Bible, Pentecostal pastors closely follow the book as the word of God, and their main activities take place in churches. The goal is rather to recognize ruptures and continuities between different kinds of spiritual practices, such as sorcery, Pentecostal Christianity, and other forms of Christianity, as well as to consider the role of spiritual practices in other forms of everyday life not necessarily linked to the church, such as football and aspirations for mobility.¹

Beyond the Crisis of Masculinity

Masculinity, the enactment and embodiment of being a man, has occasionally come to be regarded as being in crisis in the contemporary world. The notion of “crisis of masculinity” has been used by analysts to highlight how recent transformations on a global scale threaten the previously more predictable ways men used to realize their masculinity and to demonstrate men’s difficulties in dealing with neoliberal structural adjustments and socioeconomic change in general (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 307; Perry 2005; see also Silberschmidt 2001). All over the world women have been deeply affected by structural adjustment programs, at least as deeply as men, yet they seem to have been more capable in adapting to new conditions, through avenues such as entrepreneurship and the informal economy, strategic marriages, or participation in industries that are traditionally female preserves, such as caregiving and domestic work (Cole 2010; Freeman 2014; Niger-Thomas 2000). In contrast, young men faced with the consequences of austerity measures seem to have become particularly anxious of being seen as superfluous, especially by their kin, and being labeled as “useless” by women and the elderly (Cornwall 2002; Lin 2016; Perry 2005). Many have been relegated to experiences of “boredom” and “waitthood” (Honwana 2012; Jeffrey 2010; Masquelier 2013; O’Neill 2014) or have found precarious livelihoods in male-dominated fields marked by violence and illegality, such as “gangs,” drug trafficking circuits, and militias (Van Stapele 2021; Vigh 2015; Vigh 2017).

But while the notion of “crisis of masculinity” captures some of the challenges that men face in the contemporary world, it does not address the variety of ways in which men in difficult economic or political circumstances struggle to overcome hardships and attempt to make themselves into moral and gendered subjects. Taking “crisis” as an exclusive starting point of inquiry is problematic, as it has come to be a “place from which one claims access to and knowledge of history” (Roitman 2017: 24), especially about Africa and Africans. The Anglophone Southwest and Northwest Regions of Cameroon have been affected by a political crisis that started in 2016 and has since escalated into a shocking and unprecedented armed conflict (Kewir et al. 2021). And

yet, in the years before the conflict, when the bulk of the fieldwork for this book was conducted, “crisis” was nothing new in Anglophone Cameroon. Like elsewhere in West Africa (Piot 2010), the discourse and reality of crisis has shaped everyday life here since the neoliberal structural adjustments of the late 1980s (Fokwang 2008; Johnson-Hanks 2005; Konings 2011). After the initial profound shock of austerity measures, the socioeconomic life settled into a routinized state of crisis (Mbembe and Roitman 1995) or “crisis ordinariness” (Berlant 2011: 10), an experience quite different from the rupturing experience of crisis as an interception of stable life. Moreover, the notion of “crisis of masculinity” has been subjected to loaded interpretations. In some cases, the notion attributes social problems to men and masculinity and its use can result in pathologizing them (Smith 2017; Enria 2016). In other (quite different) interpretations, it is used to indicate that men’s economic and political power in relation to women has decreased; yet men still hold positions of power, continue to benefit from the patriarchal dividend, and dominate most domains of life (see Morrell 2002). Finally, the idea that masculinity is in crisis often emerges as an ideological construct that overemphasizes gendered identity while obscuring underlying structural conditions, such as the restructuring of the economy (Cornwall, Karioris, and Lindisfarne 2016: 8–9; Yang 2010). As a number of analysts have recently noted (Ammann and Staudacher 2021; Little 2016; McLean 2021; Musariri and Moyer 2021; Schultz 2021), the notion of “crisis of masculinity” obscures more than it reveals.

Another common way in which masculinity has been discussed is by focusing on how people assert some forms of masculinity as “hegemonic” by way of subordinating other, less dominant forms of masculinity. The core of the notion of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) is useful because it not only reasserts the widely accepted idea that people construct masculinities differently in various contexts and histories (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994; Gutmann 1996; Hodgson 1999) but also reveals a hierarchy of forms of masculinity, some emerging as more dominant than others. Yet the notion of “hegemonic masculinity” is less useful when it suggests that a hierarchy is so clearly defined and that a single notion of masculinity emerges as hegemonic in any particular context (Dawley and Thornton 2018: 16; Miescher 2005; Ocobock 2017; Osella and Osella 2006; Ratele 2016). Moreover, masculinities, despite being considered in specific contexts, become in this way extracted and objectified as clearly definable categories of social life. In reality, masculinities emerge at the intersections of different domains of social life, such as economic and political activities, and it is not always clear what kind of masculinity emerges as hegemonic.

When considering constructions of masculinity in situations in which different kinds of uncertainty intersect, I suggest instead to discuss the “precarity of masculinity.”² The term is useful for two reasons. First, it emphasizes that

all types of masculinity, even those that appear sovereign, are unstable and subject to contestation. For instance, many young Cameroonians defy the idea that “African masculinity” is based on performances of virility. Even though most contemporary studies of masculinities in Africa have concluded that masculinities on the continent are diverse and cannot be reduced to a singular notion of “African” (Lindsay and Miescher 2003; Ouzgane and Morell 2005), there still exists an “idea of African men” (Spronk 2014), held and reproduced by both Africans and outside observers (such as public health professionals who focus on issues of HIV/AIDS), that assumes virility as a cornerstone of African masculinity. The social invention of a virile African man has permeated different spheres of life of men on the continent, from street culture (Aterianus-Owanga 2013; Pype 2007) to state building (Ndjio 2012). It remains at the heart of the idea of African masculinity as a problem, both among outside researchers and women in Africa (Igonya and Moyer 2013; Smith 2009). “*Man pikin* [young man] likes cheating too much,” Cameroonian women often complain, and the men who brag about their sexual exploits and their ability to “keep” many women invoke traditions of polygyny as explanations and excuses. However, many young men challenge this notion of masculinity, and even though Cameroonians often mark footballers as yet another instance of youthful virile masculinity, many footballers seek to stay away from these models, seeing them as key problems that prevent young men from using their athletic talents and advancing in life. Both football training and Pentecostal Christian churches are crucial to this “emergence” (Inhorn and Wentzell 2011) of alternative forms of manhood and renegotiation of masculinity. Thus, even the most seemingly dominant modes of masculinity, and perhaps especially those, are prone to contestation.

Another good reason to refer to masculinity as precarious is that the term “precarity,” in the sense of a contemporary mode of uncertainty of labor and income characteristic of globalized neoliberal capitalism (Allison 2013; Tsing 2015; Millar 2018), suggests that performances of masculinity cannot be separated from structural conditions that limit and shape men’s possibilities for economic reproduction (see also Cornwall, Kariotis, and Lindisfarne 2016). Masculinity is a production inextricable from the political economy and is grounded in gendered aspirations and disciplining regimes specific to a given political and economic moment. In the contemporary post-structural-adjustment time in West Africa, this means that performances of masculinity are intertwined with the economic uncertainty that haunts young men as well as with the increasing perception that opportunities for a livelihood and social adulthood lie in participation in unpredictable globalized markets. The former is particularly clear when one considers that young men risk becoming labeled “useless men” by their elders, a condemnation that is closely tied to their inability to financially provide for their families. The latter is

especially clear when one considers that an increasing number of young men see their chances in a competitive and intrinsically precarious transnational football industry.

The damning label “useless man” reflects another simple fact: that men are constantly faced with moral judgments from their social surroundings and struggle to live up to others’ expectations. Like people everywhere (Robbins 2013), young Cameroonians struggle to make themselves into moral subjects. In poor urban settings, young men seek to “fight social ills” like sexual promiscuity, urban violence, and consumption of alcohol and to gain respectability and recognition as social adults in the context of what they perceive as contemporary Cameroon’s moral bankruptcy (Fokwang 2008: chapter 7; Fuh 2012). The young men respond to moralized discourses that label them “useless” and orient themselves to moral values by striving to become “humble.” These moralized gendered discourses need to be taken seriously and not conflated with issues of power, hierarchy, or politics (Khan 2018; Spall 2020).

Sport is a particularly fertile social realm to analyze the construction of moral and gendered subjects. It rarely concerns only the construction of athletic bodies. Sports are a key site for the construction of gender ideologies (Besnier, Brownell, and Carter 2018: chapter 5; Klein 1993), and athletes are frequently subjected to moral evaluations, often perceiving their athletic endeavors as development of moral subjectivity. For instance, wrestlers in India see their athletic endeavors as development of individual character as well as a public critique of what they see as the modern Indian state’s morally bankrupt practices (Alter 1992). In China people compel athletes to embody state-promoted values such as “civilization” and “discipline” (Brownell 1995). Cricket in the West Indies (James 2005 [1963]) and surfing in South Africa (Laderman 2014) serve as platforms to challenge colonial subjugation and racism on moral grounds.

I suggest that the term “moral masculinities” can account for ways in which men struggle to negotiate a variety of gendered moral evaluations and judgments and fashion themselves as moral and gendered subjects. If, according to Didier Fassin, moral economies consist of the “production, distribution, circulation, and use of moral sentiments, emotions and values, and norms and obligations in social space” (Fassin 2009: 1257), then moral masculinities are oriented toward how these aspects of the moral shape masculine subjects. Moral masculinities are ways of being a man that emerge from men’s attempts to deal with others’ moral judgments (Meiu 2009), from their attempts to orient themselves to moral values (Baral 2016; Simoni 2015; Thornton 2018; Wignall 2016), and from their struggles to do and be good (Smith 2017). Like all people, young Cameroonian footballers evaluate what is the right path to take and what is the right thing to do and reflect on their own actions and the actions of others. They act in relation to the judgments of others (e.g., their

peers and elders), institutions (e.g., religious institutions), and large-scale processes (e.g., transnational markets). As Lila Abu-Lughod writes, “For individuals . . . conformity to the code of honor and embodying the cultural ideals set by that code for the individual are not empty acts of impression management but the stuff of morality” (Abu-Lughod 1986: 238). Cameroonian footballers are not conforming to a clearly outlined moral code, but, rather, they navigate evaluations articulated on both global and local levels, from transnational markets to family relations. Still, however, their activities are not reducible to either fulfilling unavoidable social obligations or calculated pragmatic actions motivated by self-interest (see Lambek 2010). Their actions are also not reducible to simple responses to neoliberal restructuring of the economy, even when they formulate dispositions that help them participate in globalized neoliberalism (see Zigon 2011). Rather, it is the “stuff of morality” that shapes young men as gendered subjects. Focusing on morality helps with moving beyond limited approaches to masculinities that rely on representations of men as either victims of contemporary transformations and crises or powerful agents who reproduce the hegemony of certain forms of masculinity.

However, it is not enough to consider men as moral subjects. Anthropologists need to be attentive to how moralized discourses become central when people invoke masculinity as a problem and an obstacle, a reason for a lack of progress (see also Smith 2017: chapter 5). As Masquelier (2019) shows in her analysis of accusations of idleness aimed toward young men in Niger, “the discourse of idleness is often fraught with moral implications: to be idle is to be lazy. . . . Rather than seeing idleness as a by-product of structural inequality, many elders associate it with thievery and delinquency” (Masquelier 2019: 3–4). In Cameroon, the “useless man” trope is freely deployed by Cameroonians young and old when referring to young men who supposedly waste their time in urban quarters and avoid the struggle to provide for their family elders and juniors. Cameroonians discuss how social problems will be solved only after young men manage to change: if they would only stop taking part in time-wasting local football matches, spending too much time socializing with “bad friends” in their neighborhoods, having a lack of focus due to “distractions” such as drinking and gambling, or having too many sexual partners, they would manage to avoid becoming “useless.” Footballers are not excluded from these discourses: for many Cameroonians, all of these issues diminish footballers’ possibilities to not only perform well on the field but also to obtain visas and passports and sign contracts with international football clubs, despite the fact that opportunities to do so are scarce. Thus, young men are navigating a range of gendered moral judgments and evaluations that can effectively obscure the uncertainties of transnational markets and the elusiveness of adulthood in times of economic hardship. Anthropologists need to critically assess how different forms of precarity become translated into issues

of morality and masculinity and how gendered notions of morality can obscure the consequences of economic and political processes that shape and limit young men.

Athletes, Academies, and the *Wayman* Researcher: Fieldwork in the Southwest Region

My ethnographic research on masculinities and globalizing sports was based in football fields and academies in the Southwest Region of Cameroon. Very soon after my first arrival in 2014 in Buea, the regional capital home to some 130,000 inhabitants, I was immersed in the world of football. A well-known coach, who became famous for being the first to guide a team from Anglophone Cameroon to a national championship title, offered me the “lay of the land” of football in the region and the country and introduced me to key stakeholders and institutions. Two clubs struck me as the most interesting.³

One was Unisport Limbe FC, a well-established football academy and club in Limbe, a coastal town of around 90,000 inhabitants, less than one hour’s drive from Buea. The club was founded by a very prominent figure who managed a large parastatal company, was close to the region’s chiefs and traditional authorities, and built his reputation as a “big man” who spearheaded regional development. The club competed in the Cameroonian elite national division. The other was Buea Young Star FC, a small, recently founded club in Buea, almost ad hoc in appearance and practice, run by a young Cameroonian entrepreneur. The club competed in the lower rungs of Cameroonian football, but its real goal was not national promotion: the club president focused on discovering and training young talented footballers and selling them to clubs abroad. The contrast between the two clubs was striking: one was large and “local,” i.e., an established institution widely recognized in the country and firmly grounded in the region’s history and politics, while the other was small and “transnational,” i.e., a one-man show oriented toward establishing connections in Europe and selling players abroad.

I settled in Buea, moving between two quarters (Molyko and Great Soppo) during my twelve-month stay, and trained with Buea Young Star FC for the first four months. On odd days I made trips to Limbe, where I followed the footballers and coaches of Unisport Limbe FC in preparations for key matches as well as in their private lives in their homes and quarters. My home base in Limbe was the house of a well-known footballer in the region, one of four houses he had built using his salary from the club he played for in France. I stayed there with his brother and nephews, also footballers, aspiring or accomplished.

A key part of my fieldwork was focused on establishing and cultivating relationships with young footballers such as Emil and Ayuk, whose conver-

sation helped introduce this book. As will become clear, much of my ethnographic materials came from my everyday engagements with teammates and young men who became my friends. Like the opening story above, most of the materials in this book acquire depth only when placed in the appropriate social context, as stories of specific individuals. During my stay in Cameroon, I trained and spent time with them and their friends in Buea and Limbe quarters, on and around football fields (figure 0.1), in their homes, and in my rented rooms. I attended family funerals and weddings and traveled to home villages in the Northwest and Southwest Regions to visit parents and grandparents. I accompanied them to churches and prayer meetings. I was only a few years older than most of the footballers, and in most cases I was able to take part in their social lives. Establishing relationships based on trust also allowed me to inquire about details of more intimate issues, like sexuality. As in every social anthropological study, information and analysis emerged through an intersubjective exchange of knowledge between the people whose stories appear in these pages and me.

Buea, Limbe, and the Southwest Region were perfect locations to conduct research on sports and all the social dynamics that surround them. In addition to football and the expected craze for it, all kinds of sports and physical activities were an integral part of the region's social life. Buea is located at the foot of Mount Cameroon, and a major annual event in the town is the "Race of Hope," a stunning forty-kilometer competition in which athletes run up the slopes



Figure 0.1. Half-time rest during a friendly match. Buea, Cameroon, October 2014. Photo by the author.

of the highest peak in West Africa and back down it in a remarkable display of athleticism and endurance. More important for this book, the Southwest Region is home to the popular *wesua* or *pala-pala*, a form of traditional wrestling practiced by the Bakweri, an ethnic group indigenous to the coast of the Southwest Region. Wrestling tournaments are organized in villages and quarters during the dry season, between February and June. Interviews with young wrestlers, and especially with retired wrestling champions (*ngumu*), were crucial in understanding the dynamics between indigenous notions of body and sexuality and intersections with modern sports.

In 2016 my fieldwork became transnational. A few of my friends from Buea Young Star FC and Unisport Limbe FC had managed to migrate to Europe despite the odds, and I visited them in June 2016 in Poland and Slovakia. I spent one month with them in their rented rooms and football clubs. The attitudes of my friends to migration and Europe had changed, and their new perspectives were crucial to the analysis that follows.

In addition to participant observation, I conducted approximately 110 semistructured interviews with young footballers, retired footballers, their partners, siblings, parents, grandparents, coaches, managers, and football officials, as well as men of God, wrestlers, wrestling elders, and sport journalists. I recorded 60 of those interviews. I also made many audio and video recordings of events that struck me as important, such as leisure time in the quarters, prayer sessions, club meetings, warm-up singing in dressing rooms, and training sessions. Research on men and masculinities would be incomplete without attention to the perspectives of women, and since football fields were predominantly masculine social spaces, I made conscious efforts to socialize with the footballers' sisters, mothers, and girlfriends, and to give their perspectives the attention they deserve.

Linguistic competence was a primary concern in a country known for linguistic diversity and inventiveness (Pool 1994: 44–48). Cameroon is officially a bilingual country, with English and French serving as administrative languages, the result of decades of colonial rule by France and the United Kingdom, which lasted until 1960. There are an additional 250 languages spoken in Cameroon. However, the vernacular in the Anglophone Southwest and Northwest Regions, especially in towns such as Buea and Limbe that are home to migrants from the country's other regions, is Cameroonian Pidgin English. I built on my knowledge of Krio, which I learned during my previous research project in Sierra Leone, and, while there are important differences between the Sierra Leonean and Cameroonian vernaculars, it provided me a base to quickly develop fluency in the early stages of fieldwork. Most of my interactions were in Pidgin English, except when my interlocutors insisted on speaking English, such as in churches and during prayers. Some interactions demanded a basic knowledge of Mboko Tok, a dynamic mixture of English, French, and Pidgin.

Originally a slang spoken by “common men” such as taxi drivers and construction workers, and which was popularized in the 1980s by the singer and protest artist Lapiro de Mbanga, Mboko Tok has been largely appropriated by young men and women in urban quarters who continue to add new words and expressions to its dynamic lexicon.⁴

As a White man in my late twenties, some of the first words I learned after arriving in Cameroon were terms that designate White people. *Waytman* was the most common one, followed by *sará* (used mainly by the Bakweri) and *oyibó* (a term borrowed from neighboring Nigeria).⁵ When asked where I was from, I always (truthfully) answered “from Serbia” rather than “from Europe,” in a conscious effort to distance myself from European nationalities with a history of colonialism, especially France, which many in Anglophone Cameroon consider the European country most responsible for the region’s economic and political plights (Nyamnjoh and Page 2002). I was surprised that the young footballers would become keenly interested in the Serbian football scene and in opportunities to play in Serbia, demonstrating that their migration aspirations were not fixed to the global North.

Moreover, as a foreigner clearly interested in football, every time I initiated contact with young footballers or football club officials I had to insist that I was not a football manager interested in profit and that my goal was not to discover talented footballers and take them abroad to *waytman kontri*, i.e., Europe. The Southwest Region is not a regular destination for foreign talent hunters, but both of the football academies with which I closely worked at some point had partnerships with European managers or coaches who occasionally visited the area to scout for young footballers. Even after I had explained that my interest in sport was purely academic, entrepreneurial Cameroonians involved in football saw me as a resource for potential connections with European football clubs and managers. Even at the end of my twelve-month fieldwork, some encouraged me to enter the “business of football,” which I never did.

Training with Buea Young Star FC in the first months of my fieldwork was a way to gain access to masculine spaces of Cameroonian football and to suspend, at least temporarily, the power inequalities and boundaries between Whiteness and Blackness that separated the footballers and me. Just like them, I had to submit to coaches’ rigorous training regimes, at least for the first few months. On football fields, the difference in competence between myself and the footballers was obvious, as their football skills, tactical reasoning, and physical strength were far superior to mine. This led to many embarrassing jokes at my expense, but it also opened the door for friendships. In later months, my role became that of club assistant and photographer, which allowed me to focus more on asking questions and taking notes.

Some of my closest friends occasionally insisted that I was not a *waytman*, or at least not a stereotypical one. “Waytman? Usay yi dey?” (White man?

Where is he?), one of my friends would comment during social occasions, making a point to others present that I should not be viewed as a European. “You are not like other White men, you are simple. You are my brother.” I was told this a few times by friends. After I asked them to clarify, they explained that I was different from most White people they knew who socialized with Cameroonians only when they had something to gain. I was of course very touched, as these acts appeared to go beyond simple hospitality and were genuine expressions of intimacy. At other times, however, I was crudely reminded that I was indeed a *waytman*, sometimes by those same friends, and that I was after all profiting from their friendships, in ways they could not profit from mine. This at times also signaled that I was becoming too inquisitive about sensitive details, such as witchcraft accusations or “fake” documents. My fieldwork was thus a constant negotiation between my role as a *waytman* researcher and an intimate “brother.”

To my surprise, some of the more sensitive topics, such as the semilegal manipulation of travel documents, were public secrets. Even when the footballers were reluctant to discuss them directly, it was not very difficult to learn about them, but it made clear my responsibility to protect the anonymity of the people I worked with. Anonymizing was not always easy, since some of my key research participants were high-profile figures who could easily be identified by those familiar with football and politics in Southwest Cameroon. The names of key characters and football clubs in this book are pseudonyms, and some inconsequential details about them have been altered in an effort to protect their identities. The exception are well-known public figures, such as politicians and famous footballers, coaches, and club owners, whose identities could hardly be concealed.

Chapters and Arguments

In this book I argue that young men’s aspirations to migrate to play football highlight issues that are central to the analysis of masculinities in post-structural-adjustment West Africa.⁶ More generally, I argue that the athletic aspirations of young Cameroonians and their propensity to consult with Pentecostal men of God offer new insights about the nature of social mobility in the neoliberal age. To demonstrate this, throughout all the following chapters I seek answers to two simple questions: Why are so many young men in Cameroon attracted to mobility through football, despite being aware of the miniscule chances of success? And why do they gravitate toward Pentecostalism when there are ample other social and spiritual resources available to them?

In chapter 1 I outline the history of football in Cameroon and the Southwest Region from its introduction by European colonial administrators to the

present-day commercialization of the sport. More importantly, the chapter details key structural conditions that fuel the precarity of life and livelihood of Cameroonian young men in general and aspiring footballers in particular. I demonstrate that young men's disposition to migrate through football is grounded in the prolonged economic stalemate and neoliberal austerity measures since the late 1980s, the proliferation of images of superstar athletes, and the expansion of the transnational market for football players since the 1990s.

Chapter 2 compares two of the region's most prominent but very different football academies, focusing particularly on how their "presidents" managed players. It shows how new football academies that consider aspiring footballers as commodities to be sold in transnational markets play a key role in molding young men to be willing to embrace new forms of precarity and to internalize neoliberal forms of agency as markers of adult masculinity.

Chapter 3 shows how morality is central to the ways young men attempt to face, on the one hand, diminishing livelihood possibilities at home and, on the other, the unpredictable transnational football industry. I focus on two key aspects that shape young men as moral and gendered subjects: their tenuous relationships with family members, reflected in young men's fears of being labeled "useless men," and the role of Pentecostal Christianity in shaping young footballers as "humble" men, focused on the sport, with faith in success despite unlikely odds. I show how the intersection between football aspirations and Pentecostalism shapes moral masculinities.

In chapter 4 I delve deeper into the spiritual aspects of football and demonstrate that magico-religious practices and Pentecostalism are deeply intertwined. The chapter scrutinizes the Pentecostal footballers' claims of rupture with "traditional" forms of spirituality and "demonic" forces, and reveals rupture as a key notion that allows the young men to fashion themselves as moral subjects, but one that reflects a desire for transformation rather than an accomplishment.

Chapter 5 focuses on young footballers' struggles to control and maintain their athletic bodies. I show how sexuality is a main source of embodied anxiety for the footballers and how Pentecostalism is a way of dealing with it. Beyond the material body, football and Pentecostalism emerge as moral and bodily regimes that shape young men as masculine subjects.

Finally, in the conclusion, I draw on ethnographic insights from the preceding chapters to return to the key topics raised in this introduction. As the chapters will show, the global market for football players relies on the willingness of young men to embrace new forms of precarity; however, crucially, this is a quality that is not simply "there" among young men but needs to be produced and cultivated. Part of this production is solving the "problems" of youthful masculinities, and Pentecostalism emerges for the footballers as a method to do exactly that. The intersection between football aspirations and Pentecostalism suggests that the ideology of neoliberal capitalism relies on the

production of magical possibilities of extraordinary success but also on the faith that self-discipline, focus, and moral decency will bring social mobility, despite unlikely odds. Football dreams, Pentecostal faith, obligations to provide for the kin, and desires to migrate abroad fuel the precarity of masculinity in Cameroon, and beyond, in structurally adjusted West Africa.

Notes

1. I do occasionally refer to sorcery as “magico-religious practices” when I am looking to avoid morally charged terms like “witchcraft” or “black magic,” even though my interlocutors regularly used them.
2. I borrow this term from the title of the European Research Council–funded research project “Globalization, Sport and the Precarity of Masculinity,” directed by Niko Besnier, retrieved 7 September 2018 from <https://global-sport.eu/project>.
3. Throughout this book, I switch between the terms “club” and “academy.” Technically, the two are not the same—“clubs” are teams that compete in national and regional leagues, and “academies” are football schools that train boys and young men under eighteen years old. In practice, however, the two overlap: some of the most successful clubs in national competitions call themselves “academies,” and some football schools maintain teams with older players and compete in national and regional leagues.
4. The word “football” also has an equivalent in Mboko Tok—*ndamba*. However, the slang term is largely a part of a decades-old lexicon, out of fashion among young Cameroonians.
5. Another common term for White visitors is *mukala*, which otherwise refers to an albino. However, during my stay in Cameroon, the term was mostly reserved for Clinton N’Jie, a young Bakweri footballer with a light complexion who became a superstar during my stay in Cameroon, and who was nicknamed “Papi Mukala.”
6. This book builds on a number of earlier studies of football in Cameroon. Arnold Pannenburg’s doctoral thesis (2012) on “big men” who manage football clubs demonstrates how the sport is intertwined with Cameroon’s politics and elite figures. This book goes a step further and situates Cameroonian football in a global political economy. Pannenburg’s equally interesting MA thesis (2008) provides detailed descriptions of sorcery in football but very little reference to Pentecostal Christian spirituality. Jude Fokwang (2009) writes about marginalized Cameroonian men who promote self-discipline and imagine an alternative moral order through football, but he does so with no mention of Cameroonians’ aspirations to migrate by playing the sport. Finally, Bea Vidacs in her *Visions of a Better World: Football in the Cameroonian Social Imagination* (2010) effectively applies Achille Mbembe’s ideas (2001) to football. She writes: “As an ideal, at least on the level of desires and will, in Cameroon football represents an antithesis of the zombification, inertia, and impasse of the postcolonial condition, described so vividly by Mbembe and others. In practice, the general state of Cameroon constantly frustrates this desire, and one could subscribe to Mbembe’s thesis and recognize in football the zombification he talks about, mirroring the general state of affairs of the country.” Such discrepancy between desires and realities is also central to this book, which focuses more sharply on high aspirations and stifling realities of young footballers themselves.