

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A leap of faith: football and religion among aspiring migrants in Cameroon

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Abstract

For young men in Cameroon, football has long been a paradigm of sociality through competitive spirit. In recent decades, however, the stakes of competitive football have been raised: the sport has also emerged as a strategy for young men to migrate abroad and earn a living. On and off the football fields, young men seek to grab limited opportunities to sign contracts with clubs abroad, but few succeed. However, the aspiring athletes rarely see themselves as autonomous individuals competing for a limited number of spots in football clubs. Rather, they attribute failure or success to questions of trust and mistrust: in competitive peers, in neighbours and kin, in Pentecostal Christianity, and in football as a source of livelihood. Competing for a place in a global football industry has led the footballers to mistrust potentially envious others, but also increasingly to put their faith in a Christian God and develop a confident orientation towards a future of success despite the odds. The nexus of football, religion and migration aspirations in Anglophone Cameroon reveals how trust retains a central, albeit ambiguous, place in high-stakes competitive environments, namely as a leap of faith and a confidence in engaging uncertainty. It complicates the idea of competition as a singular and neutral principle that obviates the need for trust, and refines anthropological theory that tacitly confines trust to interpersonal relationships.

Résumé

Pour les jeunes Camerounais, le football est depuis longtemps un paradigme de socialité à travers l'esprit de compétition. Au cours des dernières décennies, cependant, les enjeux du football de compétition ont augmenté: le sport est également apparu comme une stratégie permettant aux jeunes d'émigrer à l'étranger et de gagner leur vie. Sur les terrains de football comme en dehors, les jeunes cherchent à saisir les opportunités limitées de signer des contrats avec des clubs étrangers, mais seuls quelques-uns y parviennent. Cependant, les aspirants athlètes se voient rarement comme des individus autonomes en concurrence pour un nombre limité de places dans les clubs de football. Ils attribuent plutôt l'échec ou le succès à des questions de confiance et de méfiance: vis-à-vis des pairs concurrents, des voisins et des parents, du christianisme pentecôtiste et du football comme source de subsistance. La

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concurrence pour une place dans l'industrie mondiale du football a conduit les footballeurs à se méfier des envieux potentiels, mais aussi de plus en plus à avoir confiance dans un dieu chrétien et à développer une orientation confiante vers un avenir promis au succès malgré les obstacles. Le lien entre football, religion et aspirations migratoires au Cameroun anglophone révèle à quel point la confiance conserve une place centrale, bien qu'ambiguë, dans des environnements compétitifs à enjeux élevés, en tant qu'acte de foi et de confiance face à l'incertitude. Ceci nuance l'idée de la concurrence comme principe singulier et neutre qui éliminerait le besoin de confiance, et affine la théorie anthropologique qui confine tacitement la confiance aux relations interpersonnelles.

Resumo

Para os jovens dos Camarões, o futebol é, desde há muito, um paradigma de socialidade através do espírito competitivo. No entanto, nas últimas décadas, os desafios do futebol competitivo aumentaram: o desporto surgiu também como uma estratégia para os jovens migrarem para o estrangeiro e ganharem a vida. Dentro e fora dos campos de futebol, os jovens procuram agarrar as oportunidades limitadas de assinar contratos com clubes no estrangeiro, mas só alguns o conseguem. No entanto, os aspirantes a atletas raramente se vêem como indivíduos autónomos que competem por um número limitado de lugares nos clubes de futebol. Pelo contrário, atribuem o fracasso ou o sucesso a questões de confiança e desconfiança: nos colegas competitivos, nos vizinhos e parentes, no cristianismo pentecostal e no futebol como fonte de subsistência. A competição por um lugar numa indústria de futebol global levou os futebolistas a desconfiarem de outros potencialmente invejosos, mas também a confiarem cada vez mais num Deus cristão e a desenvolverem uma orientação confiante para um futuro de sucesso, apesar das adversidades. O nexa entre futebol, religião e aspirações migratórias nos Camarões anglófonos revela como a confiança mantém um lugar central, embora ambíguo, em ambientes competitivos de alto risco, nomeadamente como um salto de fé e uma confiança para enfrentar a incerteza. Matiza a ideia de competição como um princípio singular e neutro que elimina a necessidade de confiança, e refina a teoria antropológica que tacitamente confina a confiança às relações interpessoais.

Introduction

In hindsight, meeting Tabe during my fieldwork in the Southwest Region of Cameroon in September 2014 was inevitable.¹ On the main football field of Buea, the region's capital, he stood out, with both his football skills and his outward appearance. In his mid-twenties, he was not an official player of any football club; however, he trained every day, simultaneously with several regional clubs, in order to 'keep fit' and be prepared to seize an opportunity to be spotted by a football agent and sign a contract with a club abroad. His skills as a midfielder reflected his experience of playing abroad professionally for several years, in the Gulf States and Eastern Europe. Tabe also stood out with his outstanding sense for *nyanga*, a Cameroonian Pidgin English term that loosely translates to stylishness (see also Mougoué 2019), with his nose and ears adorned with piercings and his arms sporting large tattoos (both a rarity among youth in Buea).² One of his most prominent tattoos read 'In God I trust', reflecting his

¹ All the names of individuals and clubs are pseudonyms.

² Terms in italics are in Cameroonian Pidgin English, a lingua franca in Anglophone Cameroon.

recent association with the Christ Embassy Church, a Pentecostal Christian denomination from Nigeria that gathered some of Buea's Christian youth around its gospel of prosperity and 'name-it-and-claim-it' ideology of positive thinking. Tabe was a recent, but dedicated, convert.

After knowing Tabe for many months, I understood that trust was a central preoccupation for him – in particular, the lack of it. While it was clear that he had trust in God and the church community, he insisted that he had lost all trust in most of his closest family members. His father's side of the family purportedly squandered all the money he earned and sent as remittances from abroad, especially from his professional football tenure in the Gulf States a few years earlier. All of it was invested in failed and fleeting business ventures, Tabe insisted, and he would never send money to his father and uncles again, he claimed. Feelings of duty or necessity might have forced Tabe to remit to his family, but he clearly did not trust them with his hard-earned money.

It was not until much later (I left Cameroon in August 2015) that I realized Tabe relied on family relations more than he liked to admit. When he finally acquired a visa and collected enough money to travel (once again) to the United Arab Emirates, he bragged to me and his fellow church peers that he was (once again) travelling abroad to play competitive football. However, soon after his departure, I would learn from his sister that his temporary migration had been sponsored by his aunt, a businesswoman based in the Emirates, who agreed to host him there and help him settle. Tabe's new migration project had less to do with playing competitive football and winning a coveted position in a professional club (indeed, he did not seem to have one) and more to do with his aunt's generosity and support.

Tabé's story is a useful starting point to examine how people negotiate trust while striving to participate in the sports industry, a paradigmatic example of fierce competition (Hopkinson 2024; Kovač 2023) and neoliberal governmentality (Andrews and Silk 2012; Besnier *et al.* 2021; Hann 2018) on a global scale. If Tabe travelled without a football contract, did that mean he had given up on playing professionally? Or had he found an alternative way to participate, namely by relying on his kin, despite his professed mistrust of them? What to make of his trust in a Christian God, and more generally in the role of religion and spirituality in competition? It seems that participating in transnational sporting industries is not only about performing and winning but more so about knowing who to trust, and (mis)trusting gods and spirits is just as important as (mis)trusting people. It seems that relations between ideologies of competition and dispositions of trust need to be ethnographically investigated rather than assumed (Zidarú and Hopkinson 2024).

According to ethnographies from the last three decades, trust appears to be in short supply in contemporary Cameroon. The structural adjustment programmes – themselves grounded in a neoliberal ideology of competition – that were imposed on the country by international financial organizations and Western donors in the early 1990s have perpetuated a heightened state and sense of crisis in Cameroon (Konings 2011). In the Anglophone Southwest and Northwest Regions, where this ethnography takes place, the experience of a never-ending crisis has been further compounded by claims of long-term political and economic marginalization at the hands of Cameroon's authoritarian state apparatus located in the French-speaking capital; since 2016, this problem has escalated into an armed conflict involving many

secessionist movements and a brutally repressive police force (Beseng *et al.* 2023; Kewir *et al.* 2021; Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003). Cameroonians have experienced all this as an economic and political crisis, but also as a sense of dramatic instability and a ‘routinized state of uncertainty’ that imbues everyday life with experiences of randomness and the impossibility of planning (Johnson-Hanks 2005: 376). This observation has been most productively theorized in the notion of the double, an expectation of duplicity in which everyday interactions are imbued with hidden motives and unseen machinations: ‘[H]ere, things no longer exist without their parallel . . . There is hardly a reality here without its double’ (Mbembe and Roitman 1995: 340). Elsewhere in West Africa this has been recognized as the ‘underneath of things’ (Ferme 2001), and as modernity grounded in performativity, appearance and bluff (Newell 2012). Such contexts have produced ethnographies of fraud and scam artistry (Ndjio 2008; Newell 2021; Smith 2007) and of the dangers of being revealed as transgressive – sexually, for example (Ndjio 2012). Finally, studies of proliferation of witchcraft accusations in Cameroon suggest that even those assumed to be closest to us, such as family members, are ultimately capable of atrocious (spiritual) violence (Geschiere 1997). In such contexts of everyday life imbued with expectations of duplicity, with genuine (often malicious) motives hidden behind overt expressions, it is tempting to conclude that trust – which, at least on the surface, implies some form of stability and assurance – is lacking in contemporary Cameroon.

At the same time, however, a few recent ethnographies have explicitly discussed relations of trust as central to Cameroonians’ lives and aspirations. In Anglophone Cameroon, where young people are highly driven to migrate abroad due to compounding economic and political crises (Atekhangoh 2017; Fokwang 2023; Nyamnjoh 2011), people continue to trust migration brokers, despite their past failures to arrange trips abroad and experiences of deportation (Alpes 2017). This trust seems to be contingent on brokers’ successful performance of transnationality and access to the *Waytman Kɔntri*, the prosperous West. Even among Cameroonian migrants in extremely precarious conditions in North Africa, who keep attempting to cross the border to Europe, there is some recognition of precarious but still necessary trust in others: the migrants have to balance between individual aspirations of crossing borders and the need of mutual support to do exactly that (Bachelet 2019). Finally, there is also a recognition that trust and mistrust are not necessarily opposites, and that the apparent absence of trust in Cameroon does not mean its disappearance: even with witchcraft accusations, the most menacing expressions of mistrust of kinship and family, people recognize that one needs to learn to ‘live with a witch’ – that is, to establish some form of trust with those who might have malicious intentions in mind (Geschiere 2013). The key question then becomes not so much whether trust is there or not, but rather how people continue to put their trust in relationships, even though they are aware of the dangers. These ethnographies also show that both trust and mistrust are ‘active modes of relational engagement’ and ‘mutually implicated dispositions’ – glossed in this collection as *mis/trust* (Zidarū and Hopkinson 2024: 341) – which explains how Tabe can claim mistrust of his kin while simultaneously seeking reliance on them.

To investigate *mis/trust* more thoroughly, however, it is useful to expand the scope of the term. Much anthropological theorizing about trust (or its lack) has tacitly assumed that it is located in interpersonal relationships between people: friends,

neighbours, merchants, family members, strangers and others (and Others) (Bellagamba 2004; Carey 2017; Gambetta 1988; Geschiere 2013; cf. Weichselbraun *et al.* 2023). Trust, however, does not need to be confined to interpersonal relations: it is also a more general disposition, especially towards the future, a confidence that something, usually desirable, will happen (Broch-Due and Ystanes 2016). Formulation of trust along these lines approaches recent anthropological discussions of prospective or futural momentum (Bryant and Knight 2019: 132–57; Guinness 2018; Miyazaki 2004), making trust more akin to terms like hope and expectation, and departing from more common companions like cooperation and sociality.³ One of its main characteristics is confidence in engaging uncertainty (Luhmann 1979; Mühlfried 2018), a leap of faith and a suspension of doubt that make trust acquire an almost religious connotation (Möllering 2001; Simmel 1950). Such a conception of trust is useful for understanding Cameroonians' football aspirations, for two reasons. First, engaging uncertainty is part and parcel of footballers' aspirations for the future, as they come across an unpredictable global sports industry and restrictive migration regimes that make migrating through football resemble a lottery (Kovač 2021). Here, the ideology of competition – in particular, the idea that organized and impartial competition enables merited success, an idea central to both (neoliberal) capitalism and professional sports – clashes against the reality of apparently haphazard rejections of visa applications and fleeting opportunities for trials in clubs abroad. Second, as in Tabe's example, the footballers increasingly express trust in God and the Holy Spirit, inspired by Pentecostal Christianity, making religious belief and trust especially interesting notions to unpack. Seen as an orientation and acting towards the future, we can investigate how mis/trust between individuals is inextricable from mis/trust in ideas and processes, such as education or individual effort, or non-human entities, like spirits or God.⁴

Football is especially pertinent for an investigation into the relationship between mis/trust and competition. In Cameroon, football has long been a form of competitive spirit that brings together generations of men (Fokwang 2009; Fuh 2012; Vidacs 2010). It has also been a display of the sinister side of competition, especially through accusations and reports of witchcraft – Cameroonian football has long been saturated with them (Pannenberg 2008; 2012). Since the 1990s, when neoliberal policies transformed global sports into businesses, industries and commodities (Andrews and Silk 2012; Besnier *et al.* 2021; Giulianotti and Robertson 2009), football in Cameroon has also become associated with opportunities, albeit small, for young men to sign contracts and play for clubs abroad, thus also becoming a way to migrate and earn a living (Kovač 2022). This has raised the stakes and scale of competition in football among Cameroonian young men, since success in competitions on football fields might lead not only to local recognition but also to opportunities for livelihoods abroad. One might assume that this competition would erode trust among

³ It also approaches discussions of youth in Africa as precarious but hopeful agents: 'To be young in Africa is to be precarious. It is to be concurrently the object of hope and pain' (Fuh 2020: 317; see also Honwana and De Boeck 2005).

⁴ Anthony Giddens (1990) famously discussed trust in 'abstract systems' such as science or money as a hallmark of (globalized, capitalist) modernity, contrasting it to 'pre-modern' trust based on kinship relations, face-to-face familiarity, and religious cosmologies and practice. The binary distinction is, however, untenable, given the centrality of kinship (Carsten 2004) and the enormous impact of religion (Meyer and Moors 2006) in the contemporary world.

competitors, and this is true to an extent, albeit not specific to the contemporary moment: mistrust of competitors on the football field, expressed through fears and accusations of witchcraft, is not particular to current times. However, if we consider trust not only as a relationship between people, but also as a leap of faith that propels individuals to engage an uncertain future, we see that it is not simply eroded, but continues to play a key part, only transformed. This is especially visible in young footballers' engagement with Pentecostal Christianity and the Holy Spirit, by which young men increasingly rely on performative confidence in a Christian God in order to bring about desired outcomes, either in the short term (to score goals and win matches) or in the long term (to migrate and earn a living).

In the following sections, I unpack aspiring Cameroonian footballers' relationships of mis/trust with peers, kin and neighbours; their belief in Pentecostal Christianity and the Holy Spirit; and their orientation to an uncertain future. As I will show, competing for higher stakes has led the footballers to mistrust potentially envious others, but also to increasingly put their faith in a Christian God and develop a confident orientation towards a future of success despite the odds. The nexus of football, migration and spirituality (Pentecostal and otherwise) therefore complicates both the notion of competition as a neutral organizing principle that allows for meritocratic success, and contemporary theorizing about trust that predominantly focuses on trust among people. The article is based on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork in Anglophone Cameroon in 2014 and 2015 and follow-up fieldwork with Cameroonian football migrants in Eastern Europe in 2016.

Competing to migrate or navigating mis/trust?

Football competitions have been immensely popular in Africa since the introduction of the sport by colonial administrators in the early twentieth century (Alegi 2010; Cleveland 2017). But it was not until the 1990s and the commercialization of global football that the sport became a migration and livelihood option for young men, especially in West Africa (e.g. Ghana, Cameroon and Senegal) (Besnier *et al.* 2021). Official and unofficial football academies sprung up in West African urban centres, attracting young men keen to sign contracts with clubs abroad (Darby *et al.* 2007; 2022; Poli 2006; cf. Dubinsky 2022). The stakes of competition in football were thereby raised, as young men increasingly competed for limited spots in clubs and academies that would allow them to play and earn.

However, the aspiring footballers in Cameroon rarely experienced themselves and their peers as being in direct competition over a scarce resource. One reason was that football clubs and academies were not the only avenues for them to migrate. The footballers drew on family connections to leave the country. Migrating through kin who were already settled abroad was not considered an abandonment of football. The footballers reasoned that they needed to seize any opportunity to cross the borders in order to start training and attend trials – that is, to expose themselves and their skills to the eyes of agents and coaches abroad. One of my interlocutors reflected on his opportunities and possible trajectories:

I can go through my club president, but I don't have to go through him. I need some way, any way, just to get an invitation letter and go to Europe. And then

I have people who will wait for me in Spain and Italy, I would go there. I have my cousins there. Then when I get there I can look for a club.

Moreover, the opportunities to migrate were not limited to Western Europe. While the *Waytman Kɔntri* (i.e. the West) was a preferred destination for most, footballers would travel to different destinations to play. In 2014 and 2015, I encountered footballers who either had travelled or were planning to travel to a range of countries: Vietnam, Indonesia, Bosnia, Lithuania, China, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates. The opportunities were not limited to professional teams either: many of my interlocutors sought positions in lower third and fourth divisions, which they saw as potential springboards for their trajectories. Young Cameroonians therefore did not experience the ‘scaling up’ of football competition to an international stage as a ‘dog eat dog’ contest that pitted them against each other, nor did they experience the positions in clubs abroad as a finite resource.

Most notably, the aspiring footballers were aware that winning matches and playing well were not sufficient for success. They also had to navigate relationships of mis/trust with key figures who could enable their migration projects. The footballers often debated which football migration brokers – agents, managers, club presidents, and those presenting themselves as such – were trustworthy. They occasionally received offers (via phone calls or text messages) to be represented by individuals claiming to be football agents, asking them to pay significant amounts of money (anywhere between US\$300 and US\$3,000) while promising to arrange for them travel documents, accommodation abroad and trials in clubs. My interlocutors were often excited about these offers, but also wary of potential fraudsters, well-known globally in the world of football migration (Esson 2020), and known in Cameroon as *feymen* (Ndjio 2008). However, the line between *feymen* and legitimate intermediaries was far from clear, in part because of the thriving economy of manipulated (and sometimes forged) migration documents (Fokwang 2023: 165–78), but even more so because of the wavering nature of the global market of football players, in which the intermediaries sought to seize fleeting opportunities to place ‘their’ footballers. Differentiating between good and bad brokers was a constant work of mis/trust.⁵

Relations with family members were precarious as well. As seen in the example of Tabe, trust in family members was not a given; however, family relations often offered the footballers crucial chances to migrate. Inversely, the footballers’ family members and elders, who were implored to invest money in the young men’s migration projects, were often sceptical about football as a source of livelihood, and their assistance was contingent on their trust in the young men’s ‘seriousness’ in training and pursuing football.

Mis/trust was therefore a disposition towards others (peers, agents, kin) that was unavoidable and needed to be renegotiated constantly. It was also particularly precarious, because it was contingent on a confident disposition towards a future in

⁵ FIFPRO, a global footballers’ union, conducted a survey on predatory agents among 263 footballers in seven African countries, including Cameroon. They found that 70 per cent of players had been contacted by someone offering a move to another club, and 56 per cent of those did not get a trial that was promised to them. The union’s campaign report from 2023 entitled ‘Fake agents: a warning to players’, ends with a telling message: ‘Be very careful who you trust.’

football that was profoundly uncertain. Emil, a captain of Buea Young Star FC (a club where I trained during my fieldwork) and a highly driven defender bent on migrating abroad, argued that footballers in Cameroon desperately needed ‘sponsors’ – agents, brokers and relatives with means – who believed in their dream, put trust in their talent and provided financial support. Emil’s family background is relevant: he was from Fundong, a village in Kom, a *fondom* (chiefdom) in the Grassfields of the Northwest Region of Cameroon. Kom families were well known for investing considerable amounts in their children’s education, expecting a return in the future. Emil’s family was an example of trust in education: despite being from a relatively poor background, both his elder sisters were well educated, one of them studying medicine abroad and the other practising as a medical doctor in Cameroon, and his younger brother was studying to become a nurse. With his dream to play football for a living, Emil was the odd one out, and he felt misunderstood.

From their side, Emil’s family had very reasonable doubts about his obsession with football. His mother recounted her concerns to me: ‘Emil is the only son that is giving me worries. And he is the first son. He should be in charge of the house.’ Succession of property was an important and complicated issue in Kom (Nkwi 1976; Vubo 2005), and, as a first-born son, Emil was in a position to inherit property from his mother’s brothers. This, however, entailed taking financial care of the women and juniors of the household: paying for food, hospital bills, school fees and household maintenance. Emil could decline the privileges and responsibilities of succession (and he intended to); however, being the first-born son clearly entailed expectations of responsibility for others. Football aspirations were an uneasy fit in this configuration of expectations. Emil’s mother said:

Since he was very small, I was never happy with his football. I was always asking: how will you earn money from football in this Cameroon? Here, you do not choose what you want to do, you have to do something that will bring you finances. I lean on him a lot, because he is the one who should be the responsible one.

Trust in education as a viable and reliable future clashed with trust in football as a dream and a livelihood. Emil, much like other young Cameroonians aspiring to careers in sport, was forced to navigate relationships of mis/trust, of others in him as well as of others in his confident disposition that he would succeed despite the odds. While winning competitions on the football field and in trial matches was important, succeeding in migrating through football was much more contingent on mis/trust as a relationship and an orientation towards the future.

Competition as a multiple and sociality without trust: local football, witchcraft and dealing with envy

Football has long been a preferred way of socializing for young Cameroonians, especially for young men. Inter-quarters – i.e. yearly local football competitions – are a classic example of sociality through the sport (see also Baller 2014 on similar competitions in Senegal). The competitions take place every year during the rainy season, in July and August, during school holidays. Formally, inter-quarters are

competitions between clearly outlined 'quarters' (i.e. neighbourhoods) and are organized by a variety of figures: local entrepreneurs, large companies, civil servants, Christian pastors or quarter chiefs. Professional-looking football kits are bought and distributed, experienced coaches and referees are hired, official schedules are carefully planned, and young men (and sometimes women) from all walks of life are encouraged to participate. The competitions range in size and importance: they can take place on any available patch of grass or school playground, but also in official town stadiums, where local football talent often attracts more spectators than the elite national division matches.

While in theory inter-quarters are competitions between either urban neighbourhoods or villages, strictly designated by rules and regulations produced by the organizers, coaches routinely hire talented (and sometimes professional) footballers from the region to increase their chances of winning, sometimes offering considerable compensation. Footballers could be offered anything between CFA 5,000 and CFA 50,000 (US\$9–90) for single matches, depending on their performance and neighbourhood coaches' budgets. This underlines the point that a great deal is invested in winning inter-quarter competitions: these matches are much more serious than casual pickup games of football. Every year, with the approach of rainy season and school holidays, the entire Southwest Region (and other regions in Cameroon) is buzzing with excitement. For a majority of young men, inter-quarters are an opportunity for socializing and fun. For many of my interlocutors – aspiring professional footballers, locally well known for their skills – inter-quarters are also an attractive opportunity to earn money. Here, competition is a genre of socializing that fosters fun, excitement and male intimacy.⁶

However, the footballers had ambiguous dispositions towards inter-quarters. On the one hand, they celebrated the competitions as fun and potentially lucrative events, and as formative for their football skills and competitive spirit. Many emphasized that being brought up on tough and physically demanding football prepared them for challenges they would encounter in their clubs and in matches at a 'higher' level (e.g. in the national league or in trials for international clubs). Local football was renowned for physicality and for the laxity of rules: what would count as an unacceptable foul in an official match could be a common tackle in local football, especially if one was playing among young men in villages who supposedly compensated for their lack of training and technique by physical tackling.

On the other hand, once the players started aspiring to positions in clubs, the competitive physicality of inter-quarter football also became a source of danger. One of my interlocutors, a goalkeeper in a national division club, recounted to me a story of his friend's downfall. The friend was preparing to travel abroad for a trial, where he would have an opportunity to sign a contract. Everything was already arranged – visa, plane tickets, accommodation – but July was approaching, and the friend could not resist playing in inter-quarters and making some quick money. He played a match in Muea, a small town close to the regional capital Buea, and disaster struck: he was viciously tackled by an opponent, who was likely envious of the player's opportunity to migrate and sign a contract, and targeted him specifically for a ferocious tackle.

⁶ Football is not the only form of competition that fosters male sociality in Cameroon. Young men in urban settings also join youth associations where they compete for attention and prestige (Fuh 2012).

The footballer sustained a serious injury, could no longer play, and had to cancel his trip abroad, wasting his opportunity.

Stories similar to this were not uncommon, and aspiring footballers had a number of strategies to avoid altercations in inter-quarters: at times, they would play with less intensity; at other times, they would avoid the competitions entirely, citing excuses that they were injured or did not have adequate footwear. Football managers and coaches strictly forbade their most promising players from participating in inter-quarters, sometimes even paying them bonuses to discourage them from risking an injury. This sometimes worked, but sometimes not – the inter-quarters were often lucrative for the footballers, and they would take calculated risks. They kept in mind the potential danger – participating in inter-quarters was an act of friendly socializing, but the danger of envious others was always lurking.

Two points are relevant to draw out from this brief account. One is that competition is rarely a single and clearly outlined organizing principle and a point of reference for people, even for those for whom competition is part and parcel of everyday life (and potentially a livelihood) (see also Kovač 2023). One might consider competition as an ideology that structures people's relationships with each other, a principle of social organization under which individuals relate to one another as competitors (rather than, for instance, as neighbours or friends) (Colloredo-Mansfeld 2002). However, as footballers are encouraged to participate in competitions at different levels, competition emerges as a multiple (Hopkinson and Zidaru 2022) – that is, as several different forms of sociality, all driven by logics of competition, but with potentially contradictory results. At times, competitions at different levels overlap and feed into one another; at other times, they clash. Cameroonian footballers rarely simply build their athletic trajectories by participating in football competitions; rather, they have to negotiate competing at different levels and in different social settings.

The second point is that trust is not a necessary prerequisite for sociality. As Carey (2017) has argued, pleasures of sociality are different from relations of trust. For his interlocutors in rural Morocco, deep friendships and kin relations are not contingent on relations of trust, empathy or mutual identification, but rather on the pleasure of each other's company. Betrayal is accepted, and even expected, and mistrust – rather than trust – is the basis for sociality (*ibid.*). This point is useful for understanding inter-quarter football competitions, although it is not mistrust that characterizes them, but rather the absence of absolute trust. For the footballers who take part in the matches, the intimacy and fun that characterize local football always coexist alongside a possibility of encountering an envious and potentially harmful other.

In Cameroon's football more generally, mistrust of others, either opponents or even members of the same team, is often expressed through fears and accusations of witchcraft. Cameroonian football has long been saturated with the use of *medicine, jars*,⁷ sorcery and witchcraft, a variety of overlapping and loosely related

⁷ Pronounced as /dʒɑ:(r)s/, with a long 'a' and a silent 'r', this term is possibly a creolization of 'charms'. It refers to objects allegedly charged with potent magical powers, usually by a powerful healer (*nganga*), but also to their derivatives, such as magical potions (otherwise known as *medicine*), as well as more generally to a range of magical or occult practices. My interlocutors often used terms such as *medicine, jars* and witchcraft as synonyms, even when they were not. The spelling *jars* is not ideal – *jas* or *jaz* would be more phonetically accurate; however, it is the one suggested by my interlocutors. In Cameroonian Pidgin English the term is used as a singular form.

magico-religious practices that can range from fairly harmless (though considered illegitimate) performance-enhancing practices to serious attacks aimed at sabotaging and intimidating opponents. The entire game of football is occasionally imagined (by footballers, spectators, coaches and spiritual advisers) as a space of spiritual warfare, a potentially violent altercation between teams and individual players that takes place beyond the football field, in the 'spiritual' realm, which profoundly determines outcomes on the field, in the 'physical' realm. This prompts practices of spiritual protection, with football teams, for instance, spreading salt on football pitches, or anointed olive oil on their bodies, in attempts to guard themselves from potential 'spiritual attacks' concocted in secret by the opposing side.

Two stories of witchcraft, quite different, reproduced here in brief (Kovač 2022: 99–105) are useful to understand the interplay between competition, sociality and mis/trust in Cameroon's football. The first concerns a goalkeeper in a regional club, talented but restricted by height. Once, when he was removed from a starting lineup, he used a concoction of *medicine*, prepared by his *medicine man*, on the goalposts, in an attempt to sabotage his replacement in the team. Little did he know that his phone conversation with the *medicine man* was overheard. The coach decided to punish him and put him back in the starting lineup, to defend the very goalposts he had previously sabotaged with witchcraft. Unfortunately for the scheming goalkeeper, his own *medicine* was effective, and he conceded no fewer than five goals!

The obvious point here would be that a lack of trust is part and parcel of competitive football. Here, not even one's own teammates could be trusted, as they could be plotting one's downfall, let alone the opponent, who could be attempting to conjure powerful witchcraft to sabotage and win. The dynamics of spiritual attacks and protection were common even among members of the same team competing for a starting position, and rumours of teams collectively employing powerful *medicine men* proliferated (Pannenberg 2008; 2012). Competition for a limited desired resource (a position on a team) or outcome (a victory) is assumed to breed mistrust of others. Underlying this is also a common understanding that practising witchcraft often backfires: one can never fully trust *medicine men* or witchcraft itself, as dabbling in it also means paying a high price.

Less obvious, and perhaps more interesting, is the tone of this story. It is playful and amusing, and was recounted to me during an informal meeting (later I asked for details in an interview), peppered with laughter. Witchcraft accusations have often been taken very seriously by anthropologists, for good reasons (Ashforth 2000; Geschiere 1997; Smith 2008). However, stories of witchcraft in football are often told with special gusto and a whimsical tone, and add a layer of speculation and intrigue to already charged conversations about the sport. The use of witchcraft in football is considered illicit, as well as widespread, and is subject to much gossip. In Cameroon, like elsewhere (Besnier 2009), everyday gossip has social and political consequences and blurs the line between playful and serious discourse. Therefore, even accusations of witchcraft – seemingly obvious markers of mistrust and duplicity – can breed certain forms of sociality and intimacy (see also Carey 2017).

The second story is much more serious. A friend recounted to me that he was a promising goalkeeper at the age of sixteen, playing with a locally well-known football

academy and planning for a future in the sport, when tragedy struck.⁸ He broke his leg during a friendly match, seemingly out of nowhere, while there was nobody nearby to tackle him. The pain was excruciating and lasted for months, and his parents feared he would never walk again. They took him to a traditional healer, who diagnosed a spiritual attack and treated him with herbs. The healer also revealed the source of the attack: on the day before the match, he had left his football boots out to dry outside the family's compound, and a jealous neighbour applied spiritual poison to them. The poison was effective, and my friend was completely incapacitated. After months of nightmares, hallucinations and excruciating pain, he finally recovered, looking forward to a return to football. However, his mother would never let him near the sport in which such powerful witchcraft was the norm. His dream of playing professionally was over.

Anxiety over spiritual attacks and poisons proliferated among my interlocutors, especially the footballers who aspired to play professionally and travel abroad. The attacks were often assumed to originate from the countryside, the quarter (i.e. the neighbourhood) or the family, all discursively constructed as hotbeds of apathy and potential sources of envy.⁹ For instance, for Emil, introduced in the previous section, visiting family in the Northwest Region was a particularly stressful event. As we walked through his home village of Fundong and interacted with acquaintances who seemed happy to see him, he nervously insisted that he was in danger. 'Right now, Uroš, as we are sitting here, someone somewhere might be trying to poison me.' A spiritual attack could come from an envious neighbour, or even kin. 'Here, when you start to progress, people start asking: "Why is his son reaching a new level, and mine is still just sitting in the house all day?"' While a spiritual attack could come from afar, face-to-face interactions with his former neighbours brought additional dangers, because they would be reminded of his potential success. 'I know so many people here, you see that everyone knows me. With some of them I used to play football. But since then, I went away and started playing on a different level, while they just sit at home [*shid:n fɔ haus*], they are just there [*jɔs dé*].' The last two points especially underline the supposed apathy and laziness ascribed to youth in villages and quarters, in contrast to aspiring footballers, who consider themselves exceptionally proactive, hard-working and ambitious. Emil's disposition suggested a profound mistrust of others, although it should be noted that this is not unique to football, nor grounded in direct competition over a scarce resource, but rather in the possibility of social mobility that is considered unlikely and distributed unevenly.

In practice, however, mistrust as an absolute state was untenable, and social life was more complicated. For instance, Nelson, one of my key interlocutors, was extremely wary of speaking about his upcoming migration project with relatives, friends and neighbours in his Buea Town quarter. The assumption was that they would be envious of his opportunity to play and migrate abroad, and could spoil his plans with a spiritual attack. 'Many people have a black heart, not everyone will be

⁸ Examples of goalkeepers in this section are coincidental. The issues discussed apply to footballers in general.

⁹ My interlocutors usually spoke of 'jealousy' when discussing supposed motivations behind witchcraft attacks; however, the stories pointed rather to feelings of envy. For a useful discussion about the distinction between the two, see Zidaru (2019: 25–7).

happy that I am travelling!' And yet, on the day of his departure, the list of people he had informed was substantial, if not surprising. He told several of his teammates and other footballers, some of whom were in direct competition with him to be considered for trials abroad by the club manager. His mother was not informed – supposedly she would have been 'overemotional'; however, his aunt was, and she helped him with a small amount of money to prepare for the trip. I was especially surprised when he opened up to a young man, a neighbour who worked in a local clothing shop, in order to get a small discount on a tracksuit he intended to buy for his trip. Why did he tell them, even though he was well aware that spiritual attacks can have deadly consequences and can even cross borders and reach their victims in foreign countries (Nyamnjoh 2005)? There is no straightforward answer; however, it is clear that dispositions of profound mistrust are accompanied by casual leaps of faith in others that make everyday social life possible, underlying the point that mis/trust is a dynamic orientation subject to constant renegotiation, even in situations where resources are limited and competition is fierce.

Leap of faith and performative confidence: Pentecostalism, spiritual warfare and belief

While it was common in the Southwest Region to associate all levels of football with witchcraft, it was also common to hear that Pentecostal Christianity was rapidly taking its place. Take this example of Njoh, a devout follower of the Full Gospel Church, one of the most prominent Pentecostal churches in the region. I talked to Njoh about his faith, and he recounted an instance when he was playing a football match that his team was losing, when his strength was failing him. He explained how he spoke the 'word of God' in order to retain a competitive edge:

The power of God is the highest power, it is supreme, superior to any other . . . God gives me dominion to trample upon snakes and upon scorpions. So when you come with your demonic power, I have no fear, because I know where I am standing, I know where my power comes from . . . And right inside the field of play I can declare those words while I am marking you, those words that I have been saying in my closet: 'I have dominion over you, you cannot stop me.' So I cannot lack strength when I am playing, I always have supernatural abilities, because I know that my abilities are from God. When you come with your ability from any other power that is not of the same Holy Ghost, you can never prevail over me.

Pentecostal Christianity in general has become more prominent in the region since the 1990s, with charismatic elements of worship being incorporated in so-called mainline churches (Catholic, Baptist and Presbyterian), and with a number of independent denominations and charismatic 'men of God' peppered throughout the region attracting men and women of all spiritual orientations (Akoko 2007). Pentecostalism in the region, not too different from elsewhere in Africa and the world (Meyer 2004; Robbins 2004), includes a very diverse range of denominations that emphasize individual believers' experience of the Holy Spirit; practices such as prophecy, healing, miraculous breakthroughs, deliverance from evil spirits and

speaking in tongues; and a ‘prosperity gospel’ that claims that faith in Christianity and becoming a born-again Christian can bring material prosperity. These diverse, and yet similar, denominations could be placed on what Marshall (2009) referred to as a continuum of denominations, between, at one end, those emphasizing miracles and prosperity, and at the opposite end, those emphasizing piety, personal ethics and bodily discipline, with none of the denominations embodying these ideal types, and all of them incorporating elements of both. It was unlikely that Pentecostal Christianity would completely replace witchcraft as a source of strength in Cameroon’s football – in fact, Pentecostal Christians’ claim to provide a remedy to witchcraft tends to reproduce the idea of witchcraft as a real and omnipresent danger (Marshall 2009; Meyer 1999; Newell 2007) – but it was clear that Pentecostalism was carving out a formidable presence in Cameroon’s spiritual landscape, and football was no exception.

Pentecostalism as a participant in spiritual warfare, imagined as competing with other forms of spirituality, has been explored in much detail in Africanist scholarship (Marshall 2009; Newell 2007; Obadare 2018; van de Kamp 2011) and in anthropology more generally (Rio *et al.* 2017). In football, as becomes clear in Njoh’s narrative above, the Holy Spirit can provide a tangible competitive edge in matches. This is not surprising for a competitive sport, but it is also grounded in an idea of football as a form of spiritual warfare that takes place on, and beyond, the football field. The Holy Spirit is here a source of power that is in direct competition with other powers, powers that in Christian narratives are simultaneously demonized as illegitimate while also accepted as potentially powerful and effective. Competition in sports provides a concrete and embodied expression of a more general idea (beyond football) that the Pentecostal Holy Spirit takes part in spiritual warfare between ‘demonic’ and ‘righteous’ powers.

Two things are also notable in Njoh’s recollection. First, note that Njoh, by exclaiming ‘I have dominion over you, you cannot stop me’, is not simply describing a situation, but rather making a claim designed to bring about a desired outcome. For charismatic Pentecostalism in particular, this is a version of the ‘name-it-and-claim-it’ ideology, by which believers gain access to Christian blessings (material and otherwise) by naming their desires and claiming them, in the name of Jesus. By speaking, believers seek to bring a world into existence, to turn a future potentiality into a present reality.

Second, note the exceptionally confident tone that emanates from Njoh’s recollection. During my fieldwork, I was often struck by the confidence, fervour and certainty with which my Pentecostal interlocutors described their actions and ambitions. With confident claims during prayers, matches and everyday conversations, the aspiring footballers sought to bring about results that were uncertain, even unlikely. ‘I will travel, by God’s grace!’ they would claim about their migration aspirations. ‘I will play on this professional level!’ they would claim, pointing to posters of professional footballers on their walls. All these were expressions of trust, conceptualized as a leap of faith and suspension of doubt, through a performative confidence designed to bring a desire into reality. Confident exclamations of faith in prayer and the Holy Spirit, performative and embodied, are common in charismatic narratives of Pentecostal believers (see, e.g., Dulin and Dzokoto 2023). Footballers in particular react to the confrontational and uncertain nature of competition – either in

competitive matches in football specifically, or in spiritual warfare between different sources of power generally – by performing confidence in their desired outcomes. Pace Luhmann (1988: 97–9), who contrasts confidence (which he considers a ‘normal’ state of being, a taken-for-granted-ness necessary for everyday social life) with trust (which he frames as a disposition when alternatives present themselves, involving risk and active choice), Pentecostal believers perform confidence in order to make a leap of faith feasible. Note also in Njoh’s recollection that trust through performative confidence in the Holy Spirit is a valuable tool in footballers’ arsenal for dealing with fears of witchcraft, prime examples of mistrust, as described in the previous section.

Notably, Pentecostals in Cameroon, like Christians everywhere, evoke their relationship with God and the Holy Spirit, but also with other non-human entities, through the notion of belief. ‘If you believe in it, it will work for you,’ goes a common saying among footballers, referring to the potential power of the Holy Spirit, as well as to witchcraft (or *jars*, *medicine*) – what Njoh above referred to in typical Pentecostal fashion as ‘snakes and scorpions’.¹⁰ Here, ‘belief in’ stands for trust: it does not describe an absolute certainty, but a confident disposition through which the footballers attempt to bring about a desired outcome. Some analysts of spirituality in Africa, Pentecostal or otherwise, have suggested that trust might be a more relevant vector than belief. Building on critiques that argue that the notion of belief, as conceptualized in Christianity, has overdetermined analyses of spirituality and religion in non-Western settings (Asad 1993; Ruel 1997), Englund (2007) has argued (in the case of Christian converts in Malawi) that trust in other Christians and in church authorities is a more relevant factor for potential conversion to Pentecostalism, rather than belief in a Christian God. Geschiere (2013) also emphasizes the importance of trust in Cameroonians’ debates about witchcraft, because people need to constantly assess which healers are ‘real’ and can be trusted, and which ones are ‘fake’ and charlatans. In these analyses, trust mainly stands for interpersonal relationships, such as between churchgoers, or trust in certain individuals, such as healers and pastors. Cameroonians were indeed concerned about these relationships, especially with healers and pastors, figures who mediated and enabled their engagement with the spiritual world. However, despite anthropologists’ misgivings, Pentecostal Christians’ ‘belief in’ – or rather trust in – the Holy Spirit itself needs to be taken seriously (see Eves 2022). This is only possible if we expand the meaning of trust beyond relationships between individual humans, to encompass relationships to non-human entities and an orientation towards a future.¹¹

Having in mind that ‘belief in’ stands for trust, we can return to Emil, an outspoken Pentecostal Christian, known to his teammates by the nickname ‘Man of God’, and consider his reflections on football, perseverance and the divine plan:

¹⁰ Note, however, that belief in God or non-human entities is not a recent development in Cameroon, nor is it exclusive to Pentecostalism. Christianity has been present in the region since the 1840s, and ‘traditional’ magico-religious practices have long involved engagement with spirits and the spiritual world.

¹¹ Recall, however, the general insight that *jars* might be powerful but will likely backfire. This suggests that Cameroonians can believe in *jars* while simultaneously mistrusting it. I am not arguing that belief is the same as trust, but rather that mis/trust in non-human entities is at stake for the footballers, even when they speak about belief.

You have to do your best in what you believe in, even when people don't see it. It is not easy to be successful. You must prove yourself against obstacles. Also, you need to believe in God – just like others believe in *jars!* – so that God can work with you. You need to understand and discover what is God's divine plan for you, and then you will have patience to be successful. *Jars* works for you if you believe in it, but *jars* can only take you so far. If you want more, you need God.

For Emil, success in football clearly demands a leap of faith and a suspension of doubt, a perseverance despite others' scepticism. The mention of 'obstacles' suggests an expectation of hardship and uncertainty, both of which abound in Cameroonians' migratory and athletic aspirations. For Emil (as for many Christians everywhere), trusting a Christian God, juxtaposed here as superior and more effective than trusting *jars*, is a prerequisite for bringing about a desired outcome. This is especially the case in the long term: trusting God also presupposes a long-term commitment to Christianity that involves consistent prayer and reflection, hence Emil's emphasis on 'patience'. Finally, discovering a 'divine plan' and following it diligently allows Pentecostal Christians like Emil to cultivate and act on trust in a desired outcome through faith in God. As the stakes of competitive football have become higher, and as competitive football has become increasingly linked to livelihoods, trust as a belief in a Christian God and a confident prospective disposition has become crucial for aspiring Cameroonian footballers, who increasingly gravitate towards Pentecostal Christianity in their precarious journeys.

Conclusion: mis/trust and competition multiple

It is tempting to assume that competition promotes mistrust and social disintegration, especially in crisis-ridden post-structural-adjustment Anglophone Cameroon, and especially in a field like football, where the logic of competition dominates on several levels, from local matches through which young men socialize to the commercialized and globalized sports industry paradigmatic of late capitalism. Narratives of duplicity and mistrust of others proliferate, and football fields, clubs and matches are no exception, as the footballers point to their peers' envy of potential success as a main source of danger. However, a striving towards trusting others remains, and the footballers cannot avoid negotiating their relationships with kin, peers and migration brokers, individuals who can make or break their migration projects. Narratives about the lack of trust are accompanied by casual everyday leaps of faith, and mis/trust emerges as a dynamic orientation subject to constant renegotiation, often more important for success than winning fierce competitions for limited resources.

Notably, Cameroonians' football migration aspirations show that competition is not a single and clearly outlined structural relationship, but instead a multiple, as the footballers have to compete in a range of social spaces, on different scales, all driven by a logic of competition but often with contradictory demands. Especially relevant has become the global scale: as competitive football has become increasingly linked to livelihoods in the global sports industry and to migration abroad, the stakes of competitive football have become higher. Despite prominent narratives of envy and

duplicity, competing for higher stakes did not simply mean the erosion of trust, but rather its transformation: trust as a belief in a Christian God and a confident prospective disposition towards an uncertain future has become crucial, if not necessary, for participating in globalized competition and hoping for a livelihood. As footballers strive to speak their desired results into existence, trust as a leap of faith becomes feasible through performative confidence, an embodied disposition of confidence towards an uncertain future that propels individuals to act despite the obstacles of a competitive global industry and restrictive migration regimes.

The ethnography of aspiring football migrants in Anglophone Cameroon therefore complicates the notion of competition as a neutral organizing principle that leads to meritocratic success and obviates the need for trust, and it provides nuance to contemporary anthropological theory that tacitly locates trust in interpersonal relationships. It shows that trust retains a central role in high-stakes competitive environments driven by (neoliberal) capitalist logic, in particular as a leap of faith and a confidence in engaging a precarious future.

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