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The precarity of masculinity

Football, Pentecostalism, and transnational aspirations in Cameroon

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“This is a Business, not a Charity”: Political and Moral Economy of Football

During my fieldwork in the Southwest Region of Cameroon, a reputable and successful football club and academy in Limbe was losing its most valuable players. Unisport Limbe FC had an enviable infrastructure for training and lodging footballers, and the team participated in Elite One, Cameroon’s top division. Yet young footballers were flocking to Buea Young Star FC, a small, ad hoc, and lower-level football academy in Buea. I was puzzled as to why footballers would leave the ranks of a well-established club that provided them with the experience of top-level football matches, high-level training, and a salary (albeit an unstable one), only to seek a position in a small club that barely had an organizational structure in place, was only competing in small regional competitions, and provided no income. They gave me a straight-forward reason: Buea Young Star FC focused on selling players to clubs in Europe and offered them an opportunity to migrate. This opportunity, however elusive, attracted young footballers who dreamt of migrating and playing abroad for a living.

The contrast between the goals and leaderships of Unisport Limbe FC and Buea Young Star FC, which I will unpack in this chapter, illustrates the changing political and moral economy of football in the Southwest Region. While the previous chapter documented the globalization and commercialization of football, this chapter shows the consequences of these large-scale processes on entrepreneurship and governance in football in Cameroon. In short, rather than developing competitive football clubs that represented towns and regions in national competitions, football clubs and academies in Limbe and Buea sought to partake in the transnational market for football players. To that end, successful clubs and academies, i.e. those that attracted young men who aspired to play for a living, were increasingly focusing on commodifying young footballers by creating and estimating their market value, and preparing promising individual footballers for export to clubs abroad. The consequence of this commodification, which was novel in Cameroonian football, was the production and cultivation of young men as subjects willing to forego their present needs and obligations to make way for new modes of “suffering” oriented towards achieving future dreams and aspirations, however uncertain they were.

By taking political economy as a starting point, I seek to understand how the changing constellations of global markets and the local socio-political context shape the economic and political activities in football in Cameroon. In a West African setting, economic and political activities are constitutive of a political economy that has been shaped by “negotiability, flexibility, resilience, innovation, and entrepreneurship [...] alongside the dangers of extraction and marginality in the global economy” (Guyer 2004: 6). By focusing on the political economy of football, I seek to capture how “global and local economic policies, institutions, activities, and processes of valuation produce cultural meanings with which people engage” (Adebanwi 2017: 4). Particularly for West Africa of the neoliberal post-structural-adjustment period, the future, however uncertain, takes precedence over the present and the past, and people are willing to submit to new forms of disciplinary power that promise inclusion in transnational circuits (Piot 2010). This development is especially pertinent in football clubs and academies, given the sport’s global commercialization and the expansion of a transnational market for football players grounded in neoliberal ideas of free enterprise. Here I seek to document the exact role of new football academies in selecting and cultivating young men willing to embrace new forms of precarity.

The moral economy of football in Cameroon needs to be understood as part of the moral economy of elites. Moral economy designates economic practices that do not necessarily lead to maximizing financial profit but rather to establishing and maintaining social relations. The agents traditionally considered to be part of moral economies are the disadvantaged, “the poor” (Thompson 1971) or “the peasants” (Scott 1976). However, the moral economy of football in Cameroon is inseparable from the moral economy of elites, i.e. the way that elites in Cameroon are created and legitimized (Orock 2015). Cameroonians expect elite figures to contribute to the development of their regions of origin, and then morally judge them and (at least partially) hold them accountable to their communities, towns, and regions. In contrast to the agents of traditional forms of moral economy, the football presidents who are the focus of this chapter are anything but poor or disadvantaged. Rather, they are what Cameroonians call “big men,” influential and wealthy individuals, either established or in the making. They manage or fail to convert their financial investment into other forms of capital, such as reputation and political capital, and this conversion depends on how Cameroonian football players, coaches, and football fans judge their investments and participation in football.

DEATH OF A BIG MAN

The demise of one of the most prominent football academies in the Southwest Region illustrates the changes in the moral economy of football.

Unisport Limbe FC was founded in 2000 in Limbe by the general manager of one of the most prominent parastatal companies in Anglophone Cameroon. According to an account by a former coach, the founder had experience running and financing a small but locally very popular football club in the 1990s, and in 2000 he assembled a formidable team of physical education teachers and football coaches. He established Unisport Limbe FC as an academy dedicated to boys aged 12 to 18, and in a few years added an adult football team with the goal of participating in Elite One.

In an interview in 2004, at a time when the transnational business of football was expanding (see chapter 2), the founder said that he was “determined to put top quality athletes into the market (and) shape the underprivileged children into people who can help their families tomorrow” (Pannenberg 2012: 163). In another interview in 2009, he identified his goals much more in line with ideals such as youth development, local sport development, and contribution to the national team:

First, we want to give young people something to do in this part of the country where there are few leisure activities. Second, we are grooming young players so that they will be ready to play for the big clubs or even the national team. Third, we want to improve the level of our local football (Pannenberg 2012: 163).

The founder was a member of the southwestern elite. He was well-known in the Southwest as the “general manager”, as he managed a parastatal that despite the trend of privatization remained economically highly relevant in the region. He was a prominent member of the ruling CPDM party and a former highly positioned civil servant. Finally, he was a native Bakweri, closely related to the Limbe Bakweri chieftaincy. He was respected in Limbe and former Unisport Limbe FC footballers praised his management of the club:

When the old man was there, everything was going well. If you play well and he likes you, you will never lack anything. When I played there he would not pay players too much, he would give salary of [CFA] 30,000, but if you came to him and told him that your mommy was sick, he would remove [CFA] 100,000 from his pocket and give you. A very good man.

Despite his originally stated goal of putting footballers in the market, the general manager became known among the footballers as suspicious of foreign scouts and reluctant to sell footballers to clubs abroad. This mattered little, because he was known for taking “good care” of the academy staff and

footballers, especially those from the Southwest Region, by providing financial assistance to them and their families.

In 2013 the general manager passed away. He was succeeded at the academy by one of his four children, Junior, who was studying business administration at a university in South Africa. In 2014, Junior, who was in his thirties, told me that when his father was alive the aim of the academy was mostly “social development” and “helping disadvantaged children through sports.” At the time, he continued, this was possible despite the fact that the club made no profit, because his father as an influential general manager had “good connections” with wealthy men who invested significant amounts of money in the club. Junior did not inherit those valuable contacts and lacked his own. He stated his mission to transform the academy into a self-sustaining business: he wanted to sell football players in order to make a profit and invest in the academy. He had ambitious plans for a sports center, tennis courts, and a swimming pool, which he planned to finance by grooming and then selling talented players to more prominent (and more wealthy) football clubs.

In 2014 and 2015, Unisport Limbe FC had an enviable infrastructure, one of the most developed in the entire region. Four kilometers from Limbe, away from the bustling town and surrounded by farmland, the academy was on a campus that included two full-sized football fields, one grass and one sand; three dormitory blocks with bunk beds that could host approximately 60 children or adults; a large restaurant/dining room with a bar and television sets; a large conference room with tables, chairs, and a blackboard for meetings; a small leisure room with a television set and a ping-pong table; a large administration office decorated with trophies and photos of the late general manager; and a sumptuously furnished office for Junior. The dormitories had a regular supply of water in barrels and electricity was working most of the time. The academy owned two buses, one that could transport a football team of 25 and one to transport children between the campus and the schools they attended in Limbe. The academy employed a technical director, four coaches, an administration assistant, a secretary, a doctor, two cooks, several drivers, and a grounds man. This infrastructure was developed in 2008, when the late general manager decided to expand the academy premises that he first started developing in his native village, 3 kilometers away. There was only a handful of football academies in the region with a comparatively developed infrastructure.

Unisport Limbe FC consisted of the abovementioned academy for boys aged 12 to 18, and a men’s team, which in 2015 competed in Elite One first division league. The academy resembled a boarding school. In July, boys were selected through football trials, and in September approximately

35 moved to the campus. The boys' parents paid yearly fees between CFA 800,000 and CFA 1.3 million, which covered food, housing, football training, and tuition fees for schools in Limbe (which range between CFA 50,000 for government schools and around CFA 150,000 for some private schools). A few boys had partial scholarships and paid around CFA 300,000. By way of comparison, the yearly tuition fees at a girls' boarding school in Buea amounted to CFA 300,000. The academy also had about 30 day students, who lived with their families in Limbe. These students only paid "symbolic" fees to the academy.

In the 2014-15 academic year, almost all the students housed at the campus were from Francophone families. Anglophone and Francophone Cameroonians arguably have different views of football as a career and future. Junior explained to me that Francophone Cameroonians were much more inclined to "invest in their kids' careers," since they believe that playing football can lead to a lucrative career. Indeed, most successful Cameroonian football teams, including the most prominent national football academy, the *Ecole de Football Brasseries du Cameroun*, were based in the large Francophone cities of Douala and Yaoundé.²³ One of the common refrains I heard from Anglophone footballers was that their parents insisted that education was the only way to progress in life and that football was a distraction. This complaint was especially common among footballers with families from the Grassfields (the Northwest Region), but also present among young men from the Southwest. Footballers would contrast this with the more developed football infrastructure and "football culture" in Douala and Yaoundé, where pursuing a football career was an acceptable option for families. In Unisport Limbe FC, only well-off families could afford the academy's steep fees, and almost all were from Francophone regions. In contrast, academy day students who did not lodge at the campus and only paid symbolic fees were mostly Anglophone, and more likely to be from poorer backgrounds.

Unisport Limbe FC was the only football academy in the region that strongly insisted on their students' school performance. All boarding students were registered in different schools in Limbe. The bus would deliver the boys to their schools every morning and collect them at the end of the day. They were ordered to keep their school uniforms neat and clean. Academy staff often complained that some boys were only interested in playing football and neglected their studies. Junior insisted that the boys needed to pass with acceptable grades, and planned to develop a policy for the men's team to recruit only footballers with secondary school diplomas. The strong empha-

23 One exception was Coton Sport FC de Garoua, the most successful Cameroonian football club in the past decade, that was based in the North Region, though is in Francophone Cameroon.

sis on education, unique among academies in the region, was grounded in Junior's understanding of the attractive but highly fickle nature of a career in sports. Consider this excerpt from the academy's pamphlet:

While football has grown to become arguably the most popular and most played sports on the planet, with its top professionals being amongst the best paid athletes in the world, there is however no guarantee that being hyper-talented and undergoing a rigorous and efficient training program will lead to becoming a successful professional football player. [...] Ensuring the basic and secondary education of our trainees serves not only as a backup in case of a failed football career but also serves as a fundamental tool which will be beneficial to them during their football careers and even after their playing days.

Junior was also critical of changes in football governing in the region under the influence of the expanding transnational market for football players. Despite the club's financial issues and Junior's proclaimed solution of selling footballers to wealthier clubs, in 2015 he became reluctant to enter the business of selling players. He was clearly shaken by the emergence of new small academies, clubs, and entrepreneurs in the region that focused almost exclusively on selling players to clubs abroad, and by young footballers' attraction to them. In January 2015 he was visibly irritated when I asked him whether he had plans to sell players. The context of our informal conversation at the tribunes of a stadium in Buea was relevant: Unisport Limbe FC was playing a friendly match against Buea Young Star FC, a regional division team that was slowly becoming known for arranging trials for footballers in Europe and was becoming a magnet for young footballers. Junior used the opportunity to rail against the club:

We are a professional team, not some amateur team that is only after selling players! If the players want to travel, they can go with their own traveling program, if their contract with us is over. We are here to build a team and play. [...] Also the kids at the academy, we have to first build up quality players, we cannot just sell them like that.

His reaction could be seen as a protest against the "new scramble for Africa" (Darby 2000; Darby, Akindes, and Kirwin 2007), i.e. the search for talented young African footballers for the sole purpose of "exporting" them to wealthier countries, at the expense of development of football in Africa.

Despite the enviable infrastructure, the high profile of the founder, and the noble proclamations of goals of holistic development of young men,

Unisport Limbe FC and its president, Junior, were losing their reputation in Limbe in 2014. Junior, whom people often referred to as a “small man” (in contrast to his father, who was a “big man”), developed the reputation of being unapproachable, arrogant, and brash, lacking a clear vision, and, most of all, being financially incompetent. These rumors concerned mostly the men’s team, which was losing matches and was stuck at the bottom of the table, with relegation to the far less competitive second division looming.

Junior did not inherit his father’s connections and influence. In 2015, he complained that the wealthy businessmen, influential political figures, and companies who had supported the club no longer did so. Financing the men’s team became difficult. According to FECAFOOT officials, professional football clubs in Cameroon are obliged to pay their players at least CFA 100,000 monthly. In the wealthiest Cameroonian clubs in 2015, such as Coton Sport FC de Garoua, footballers could receive up to CFA 400,000 a month.²⁴ In addition, most Elite One clubs would pay their footballers occasional training bonuses after trainings for their meals, and additional bonuses when they won. In 2015, almost all Unisport Limbe FC men’s team players complained that they had not received their salaries for four months. Normally, they received training bonuses of CFA 5,000 a week and bonuses of CFA 25,000 when they won, which in 2015 rarely happened. The club also occasionally fed players and paid for their trips to away matches. Players frequently complained that they were “hungry” and could not meet their families’ financial demands, and that this affected their performance. Many looked for opportunities to leave the club and especially considered opportunities abroad, quoting their ambitions to “achieve higher heights.” Coaches complained that the club was in a horrendous financial state. They blamed Junior, accusing him of being deaf to the needs of his subordinates and disengaged from the southwestern elite.

The literal death of the big man and the subsequent demise of his powerless successor stood for another death: the breakdown of the moral economy on which the club had formerly relied. The moral economy of “development” (Orock 2015) grounded in large parastatals and regional elites, according to which elite figures create and maintain their positions by “developing” the town and the region, was failing in football. This break-

24 For the sake of comparison, school teachers in government schools earn around CFA 100,000; however, in some private schools teachers’ wages could be as low as CFA 25,000. A secretary at Unisport Limbe FC earned CFA 60,000. Some civil servants, such as, e.g. programmers employed by the General Certificate of Education (GCE) board, would earn up to CFA 500,000. The official national minimum wage in 2014 was CFA 36,270, well below the workers union representatives’ demands of a CFA 62,000 minimum wage. See: <http://www.businessincameroon.com/public-management/2207-4959-cameroon-to-increase-minimum-wage-from-de-28-000-to-36-270-fca> (accessed December 6, 2017).

down was symptomatic of a wider transition in football management in the Southwest Region that was becoming increasingly disconnected from the established regional elites who dominated the game in previous decades. Instead, as will become clear below, successful football management in the Southwest Region increasingly relied on appealing to young footballers who were not interested in playing for Cameroonian teams but bent on migrating abroad.

OCCULT INTERPRETATIONS

Cameroonians often assess, criticize, or praise figures in power by speculating that they are members of powerful secret societies (Geschiere 1997). The staff and players of the Unisport Limbe FC academy, as well as people in Limbe in general, speculated about the club's two presidents and their membership in secret societies. Rumors around different kinds of spiritual practices, either Christian or what Cameroonians called "occult," reflected people's perceptions of changes in political and moral economy of football.

In 2014 and 2015, Junior on several occasions hired Mission for Christ Pentecostal pastors to perform what he called "psychological preparation" for the team before key matches. He occasionally hired pastors from the Presbyterian Church, but believed that Pentecostal pastors engaged the players more effectively, with their passionate exaltations and prayers. The pastors visited the team, preached from the Bible, and led footballers in long prayers. As Cameroonians often assume that football clubs and players are steeped in "sorcery," Pentecostal prayers were supposed to help distance the team from accusations of dabbling in such occult practices. In Junior's words:

Psychological preparation is a part of the game. We are in Africa. Africans believe in black magic. There are probably other teams that instead of inviting a pastor, they...maybe...invite some traditional healer, or something, to perform some traditional rites. I am sure in Europe they have their own means of preparing games psychologically. I have not had the opportunity, I don't know what happens in Europe. Maybe there are some teams that invite pastors, maybe there are teams that invite Rosicrucians, or, what do they call them, people from Illuminati, I don't know. But we have our own way. We believe that Jesus is the ultimate, and we try to make all our players believe in the principles of Jesus Christ.

Junior's hiring of Pentecostal pastors was a significant departure from his father's rumored use of societies like *Nganya*, a prominent Bakweri secret

society, to spiritually cleanse the football field on nights before crucial matches. One Pentecostal coach, who had worked in Unisport Limbe FC since the 2000s, described to me that the old general manager was particularly opposed to Pentecostal prayers in the club. In 2007, the coach said, the team lost an important match that could have qualified it for Elite One. The general manager blamed the coaches for the loss: he claimed that the night before they had led the players to “pray violently the whole night,” and the players did not get enough sleep. He was clearly referring to Pentecostal prayers that encourage believers to dance vigorously and spend many hours on their feet. Fervent Pentecostal prayers occasionally continue deep into the night, and Pentecostals claim that long prayers, even when they invigorate their spiritual well-being, can be exhausting. The Pentecostal coach denied the charges: the prayers lasted no longer than 25 minutes, he claimed, after which all the players went to sleep. The coach believed that there were other reasons why the general manager disdained Pentecostal prayers, as he was allegedly a member of a secret occult society, most likely AMORC, a Rosicrucian order. All “big people,” influential political figures in the country, were allegedly members, he said. “The people that hold the country are there, inside. [...] They have their own principles [of] how they pray.” Hence the general manager’s disdain for Pentecostalism, the coach insisted.²⁵

However, the Pentecostal coach was reluctant to condemn the general manager’s alleged membership in occult societies. This was striking, because Pentecostal Christians were usually quick to morally castigate such influential societies and their spiritual practices, real or imagined, and the Pentecostal coach considered occult societies antithetical to Christianity. He claimed that general manager’s membership was crucial to his procurement of funds, which he then cleverly used to run a successful club. The club therefore prospered thanks to the general manager’s secretive membership. While the coach welcomed Junior’s shift to Pentecostal prayers and frequently preached the Bible to the footballers, he also lamented the loss of the well-connected general manager (whom he characterized as a “good man”) and his ungodly but beneficial networks. Several times I pressed him to give me his opinion on whether the club would do better if the young president was also a member of the masonry. His replies remained ambiguous: “He would receive favors from them, because they would give money to their member. But it is his own choice. It depends on whether he wants to do like his father, or he wants to live a different life.”

25 Note that the coach did not directly refer to a Bakweri secret society, such as *Nganya*, but to one that he perceived as European, originating from Vatican and the Catholic Church. Many Pentecostals see their faith as a moral challenge not only to traditional African ancestor cults but also longstanding Christian institutions, such as the Catholic Church.

This episode demonstrates Cameroonians' ambivalent attitude towards the demise of the moral economy on which football clubs relied. People were excited about possibilities and opportunities that came with the new generation's governing of football, but also frustrated about the breakdown of the moral economy grounded in regional elites. Pentecostal Christians, but also other Cameroonians, mobilized the imagery of occult spiritual practices and membership in secret societies to criticize the moral economy of the elites, but also expressed anxiety about the changes and the inevitable uncertainties of new forms of governing in football. People did not draw mechanical links along the lines of "old/stable/demonic" and "new/uncertain/enlightened." Yet it was clear that they felt a broader transition was taking place as the transnational football market expanded and offered new possibilities, but also new uncertainties.

"THIS IS A BUSINESS, NOT A CHARITY"

The promises of the transnational market for football players were central to the appeal of a newly founded academy in Buea. Buea Young Star FC was founded in 2010, and it quickly gained popularity among many aspiring footballers in the Southwest Region. Its founder and president was Kelvin, an aspiring entrepreneur in his late twenties, who, in contrast to Junior, did not belong to a well-known family. He was born in Buea to a father from the Grassfields and a mother from the West Region (most likely Bamileke). A former footballer and a football fan, he was keen to develop young talented footballers from poor backgrounds and help them sign contracts with clubs abroad, and to develop a profitable business based on selling football players. He founded the club with the help of two German partners, a football agent in his late thirties and a youth football coach. Kelvin also maintained a relationship with a Nigerian football agent who was based in Eastern Europe. In the club's 2011 promotional video, the German agent described the club's mission in a message aimed at young aspiring Cameroonian footballers:

Always think of where you are coming from and where you want to go. You have to do all that you are able to do to realize your dream. With, probably, our support, we can realize for some of you the dream to go to Europe.

"Dream" and "Europe," terms that frequently go together in an industry that flourishes on hope despite miniscule chances of success, were in line with the aspirations of young footballers, many of whom had seen some of their friends travel abroad to play football and earn money, living out many young Cameroonian men's fantasy. Buea Young Star FC promised to cater to

this aspiration, and many young men who played in several regional clubs joined it.

In 2015 Buea Young Star FC had none of the infrastructure of Unisport Limbe FC. Their first team had daily morning trainings at the Buea stadium, often sharing the field with another team, and the young team (boys aged roughly 12 to 16) trained a few times a week, in the afternoon, after school. The academy had no academic program and did not require school attendance or membership fees.

The academy was officially registered but had no office. In contrast to the Unisport Limbe FC president, who ran club business either from his lavishly furnished office or from his luxurious house, Kelvin ran his business from his simple rental in Molyko, Buea's economic hub, only a few minutes' walk from the stadium, where the only sign of conspicuous consumption was an enormous plasma TV set. He was not poor but his financial background and status was difficult to assess: much of his starting capital seemed to have come from his father, who used to work in a gas trading company. Kelvin seemed to have a substantial amount of capital at his disposal: in 2015 he married the daughter of a high-ranking civil servant and spent CFA 3.5 million (around €6,000) for a lavish wedding reception at Buea's most expensive hotel. In contrast to the Unisport Limbe FC president, who was somewhat corpulent and well-dressed in public (both signs of prosperity), Kelvin was slim, appeared young, and wore casual pants and a football t-shirt. His "office" in his living room was equipped with only one computer and an internet connection. Footballers would frequently visit him in his rental. He was often in the company of friends who assisted him in running the academy, some of whom had positions such as "team manager." These were not official positions, but ad hoc titles that suggested an affinity to the club and a status of a friend. On one occasion, I was temporarily given a title of an "assistant coach" so I could sit on their bench during a tournament – a gesture of good will. I was never certain if or how much Kelvin's assistants were paid, but I assumed they received some financial compensation. The head coach received a fairly decent monthly salary of CFA 120,000. In contrast to Unisport Limbe FC, Kelvin ran his club in a more informal manner.

Kelvin maintained good relationships with his foreign partners. Every year, the youth coach from Germany spent two weeks with the team, trained with them, selected 25 players who were to train with the team for the upcoming year, and, most important, made a selection of the most talented candidates for trials abroad. The young president paid for his visits and his stay in an upscale hotel in Buea. A key purpose of this expensive exercise was a performance of meritocracy: a demonstration that an external "unbiased" person objectively observed the footballers and selected the most

promising. In practice, this was not entirely the case, but to an extent the performance worked to circumvent the common Cameroonian accusation that club presidents chose footballers not based on merit but personal connections, kinship ties, and ethnic affiliations.²⁶

For Kelvin, football was “a business, not a charity.” Alongside his proclaimed desire to help young poor Cameroonians reach their dreams of playing in Europe, profit (financial or otherwise) was his main goal. Selling footballers to international clubs was important. It was difficult to find exact information about sales and profits, however a sketch of what went into selling a player, and some assessments of financial profits and the general economy of the process, can provide a rough picture.

After identifying a player with potential, Kelvin and the player would sign an official contract. If the player was under 18, Kelvin would consult the player’s parents and ask for their permission. These were usually long-term contracts, from five to ten years, and could be extended. The contract stated that each time the player was sold to a club during this period, Kelvin would receive a percentage of the transfer fee, i.e. a fee paid by the receiving club to the source club, as well as a percentage of his salary. This was a common way of managing footballers. Occasionally, Kelvin would record a video of the player in action to present to clubs and managers abroad and write up a basic CV that listed the player’s age, weight, height, position, and transfer history.²⁷

He would then arrange and partially pay for the player’s passports, visas, and airline tickets. Occasionally, he acted less as the head of a football club and more as a “doki-man,” a migration broker (Alpes 2012; 2017). He would often arrange invitation letters from his European partners, a key requirement for visa applications; organize visa appointments at European embassies; and produce passports that falsified (reduced) the player’s age.

The issue of reducing age is important to note. Even though international sporting bodies (such as FIFA) and national sporting bodies (such as FECAFOOT) consider this cheating, no footballers and very few football managers in Cameroon considered age reduction fraudulent or immoral. Footballers and managers such as Kelvin argued that while children in Europe trained football from a very young age on good pitches and with expert coaches, Cameroonian kids had fewer training facilities available and needed more time to develop. Cameroonian footballers could not possibly

26 During football matches on all levels (from small regional leagues to national team matches), when a certain footballer clearly underperformed, Cameroonian spectators often labeled him a “coach’s player” or “president’s player,” indicating that his position in the team was not a result of merit but of a close personal relationship with team decision-makers. There was much talk of club presidents and coaches taking bribes for fielding certain footballers.

27 Footballers would often make these videos themselves, as something to show to potential managers.

compete with their European peers who had been training professionally for many years longer. The market for football players had become transnational, and in order to make the competition fairer, Cameroonian footballers had to resort to age reduction. Age reduction was thus for footballers far from a morally dubious practice but rather a necessary corrective, albeit a temporary one, to large-scale structural inequalities between the Global North and the Global South.

After having arranged the documents, Kelvin would send the player to his business partner, the Nigerian football manager based in Eastern Europe, who would find a club for him to train in, usually in a lower (third or fourth) division. In the first year, Kelvin would not expect the foreign club to pay the player. This would be a period for the player to develop his skills in a European setting and try to obtain a residence permit. The expectation was that the player would be bought by another club, and Kelvin would profit from the sale.

During my 12-month fieldwork, Kelvin arranged trials and documents for ten players. For five of them, the document procedures failed, were deemed too expensive and protracted, or the players left the club for a separate reason. The other five traveled to various destinations in Europe, including Portugal, Germany, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Poland, Latvia, Estonia, and Slovakia. Most visited at least two countries, following Kelvin's instructions. Some returned to Cameroon, either briefly or indefinitely. Three players found salaried positions in clubs in Eastern Europe.

Even when a player was sold, it was not clear whether the sale would be financially profitable for Kelvin. For instance, he sold one player to a small club in Eastern Europe where the player earned €350 a month. Kelvin took 20 percent (€70), which he then shared with the other participants in the "production chain": his two partners in Germany and his partner in Eastern Europe. Considering what he invested in the player, it is difficult to see how this sale could be financially profitable. However, Kelvin sold one player to a first division club in Eastern Europe, and the player even went on to perform for the Cameroonian national team, which won the 2017 Africa Cup of Nations. In 2017, a widely used website that archives information about transfers in football estimated the player's market value at €250,000.²⁸ It is difficult to know what Kelvin collected (or is still collecting years after the sale), but the case shows that sending outstanding individual players abroad can be lucrative, both for the manager and the player.

Selling football players in transnational markets evokes uneasy connotations in an African context. Estimating a market value and selling football

28 <http://www.transfermarkt.de>.

players commodifies people. The “commodity situation in the social life of any ‘thing’” is a “situation in which exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature” (Appadurai 1986: 13). Commodification is then a process through which a thing (any “thing”) becomes a commodity for exchange. Selling football players is commodification of persons: football players emerge from a web of social relations that make them exchangeable commodities. This is a particularly sensitive issue in the context of West Africa, where there are still ample memories of the slave trade, for example expressed in masked dance performances in the Northwest Region of Cameroon (Argenti 2007), in ritual performances in Sierra Leone (Shaw 2002), and in long traditions of intellectual critique (Mbembe 2017). Cameroonians have a rich cultural and linguistic vocabulary to talk about the immorality of selling people. One example is *nyongo*, a form of witchcraft that emerged in colonial times, and relates to greed, accumulation of wealth, and slave-like labor. In *nyongo*, or as it is known in different parts of the country, *ekong*, *famla*, or *kupe*, witches transform their victims into zombies and put them to work on invisible plantations. *Nyongo* can refer to people capable of using victims as slaves and getting rich from their labor; to a mysterious place where victims of greed are said to be slaving away; or to the greed itself. Discourses of *nyongo* suggest that new practices of witchcraft are not remnants of tradition but contemporary responses to modernity and globalization (Geschiere 1997, chapter 5). But despite the widespread imagery of the immorality of selling persons, footballers did not see themselves as being exploited by the transnational industry or club presidents such as Kelvin. From their point of view, as with young athletes from poor backgrounds elsewhere (Klein 2008), commodification was an opportunity to migrate abroad and earn a living by playing the beautiful game. Migrating abroad, even for a short period of time, could bring much more financial and social capital to the young men than playing in Cameroonian clubs (see chapters 2 and 4), most of which were dependent on the financial whims of Cameroonian investors and notorious for not paying regular salaries. Footballers were aware that opportunities for signing contracts with clubs abroad were also notoriously fickle, yet for most of them commodification that led to migration meant progress and a better chance for a livelihood.

To return to the idea of a moral economy that is driven by social relations: profit alone does not sufficiently explain why entrepreneurs like Kelvin would invest in football. While the reputation of Unisport Limbe FC was in a free-fall, Kelvin increasingly enjoyed the respect of footballers, coaches, and football officials and administrators, who lauded his efforts to support young Cameroonians to fulfill their talents abroad. While some experienced

football administrators and older coaches lamented the sorry state of the Cameroonian national league and the occasionally shady business practices that accompanied selling footballers to foreign clubs, they praised the Buea Young Star FC president for supporting young players' migration. In 2016, Kelvin was awarded for his efforts and appointed to a high position in a FECAFOOT regional bureau for the Southwest Region.

Building a reputation in a town or region through football entrepreneurship used to be intertwined with parastatal companies, political parties, and ethnic and regional elites, and deeply imbedded in the region's political and economic life. In 21st-century Cameroon, this reputation depended more on how successful one was in engaging a growing transnational market and maintaining transnational relationships. Football in Cameroon, since its introduction by colonial administrators, has always been implicated in transnational dynamics, but only recently has it developed into a possibility for transnational business. Crucially, the result is the commodification of young footballers. It is quite clear that this contemporary development is an effect of the global commercialization of football, the expansion of the transnational football market, and the increased transnational mobility of football players since the early 2000s.

PRODUCING SUFFERING SUBJECTS

As an entrepreneur and a gatekeeper of young footballers' access to the global market, Kelvin was less focused on managing Buea Young Star FC as a football team than on identifying talented individual players and managing their entry into transnational markets. Kelvin sought to develop close relationships and methods of supervision of individual promising players. He claimed that psychology classes he had attended at university allowed him to carefully assess not only football skills but more crucially the character of each individual player. On many occasions he discussed with me a player's individual characteristics: who was "stubborn" and who was "focused," who had a "zeal," and who was "disciplined." He was particularly critical of *strong-hed* (stubborn) footballers not willing to follow instructions, especially concerning migration. He complained about the two most common transgressions of footballers who manage to leave Cameroon. These were "running away," i.e. hiding from the manager and the authorities, looking for other employment opportunities abroad, and staying in Europe illegally; and being defeated by the often deplorable living conditions in the destination country and flying back to Cameroon on their own accord.

The consequences of Kelvin's priority to train individual footballers, rather than the team as a whole, became clear to me during a meeting between the coach, the team captain, and the club president. In 2015 Buea

Young Star FC competed in the regional (third) division against teams of the Southwest Region. The players sometimes referred to it as the “devil league,” because club presidents were not obliged by FECAFOOT to pay their players or provide them with daily or weekly training bonuses. At the time of the meeting, the club was not performing well. We all sat around the table, opposite the television set which was broadcasting a rerun of an English Premier League match between Arsenal F.C. and West Bromwich Albion F.C. The coach argued that the main reason for the club’s low performance was that the footballers had not received any kind of compensation for more than three months:

Most of these players that are in the club now, they are not small children. They are big people, and all of them have some [financial] responsibilities. Now, players did not receive training bonuses for two or three months, and this affects the results. That is the main problem. [...] For this [low] level of football, or let me say for these players in Buea, if you want to see the results you must give them training bonuses.

Kelvin disagreed, arguing that most players were not eligible for training bonuses and that giving bonuses to everyone was not an effective business model. Moreover, it clashed with his key objectives for the academy:

The objective for the club is not to win the league. The objective is to train people who have potential, and then select the best and send them out of the country. For this season, for me, I only don’t want the team to be last. So this does not bother me too much. I only worry about the performance of individual people that we need to select and prepare to travel abroad.

The focus on preparing individual players for the transnational market is clear. Note that not winning a league competition did not indicate a lack of ambition. An important incentive for Kelvin to remain in the regional “devil league” was the fact that the administrative rules were much looser. While Unisport Limbe FC had to carefully follow the administrative instructions of FECAFOOT in order to play in Elite One, in the “devil league” there was more space to manipulate players’ documents and tamper with their reported age. Engagement with global markets seemed to work better from the gray areas of unregulated spaces in Cameroonian football.

Furthermore, Kelvin’s focus on developing individual players led him to a model of allocating club finances that was strikingly different to clubs such as Unisport Limbe FC. Kelvin continued:

I will not invest in every man equally. I can only put down money for something that is marketable, for something that has a prospect for future. I will put down money for something that will give me profit later. So I must concentrate on people that have some prospect.

Again, the commodification of players is clear, and is grounded in assessment of future value: which players are likely to bring profit in the future. Moreover, in Buea Young Star FC, commodification led to the nurturing of footballers who were equally oriented to the future and focused on success in football. Kelvin continued:

[The players] need to suffer today so they will see the results tomorrow. Not ask [for money] now, but understand that you need to put your best into your training, so you can have the results later. [...] Also, there are match bonuses, if you win the match, you get [CFA] 3,000. In my own ideology, that is better. If I come to the training and do not receive a training bonus, but I know that I will get 3,000 if I win a match, I will do what? I will fight to win, I will give my best!

The evocation of “suffering” demands attention. “We are suffering” is a common refrain among Cameroonians. Just like Nigerians (Larkin 2017: 48-49), Cameroonians speak of “suffering” during times of economic hardship, and when their hard work fails to bring them financial returns. Cameroonian footballers in the “devil league” often “suffer” – when they are forced to train on badly maintained pitches that are conducive to injuries, when they are asked to play demanding matches on empty stomachs, and when their efforts result in meager (if any) financial returns. And yet a prominent football academy president insisted that young men needed to be taught the value of “suffering,” a value that they were lacking.

It is clear that Kelvin sought from footballers a specific kind of “suffering,” one that was oriented towards success that was elsewhere and in the future. While previously the footballers would “suffer” on bad training pitches for the sake of representing a club, achieving local glory, and earning a small income, 21st-century club presidents like Kelvin trained young men to “suffer” in order to qualify for moving abroad and competing in transnational markets. As will become clearer in the next chapter, the capacity for this kind of “suffering” would become important once footballers migrated abroad and were confronted with the arduous (and sometimes exploitative) conditions in foreign clubs.

It turns out, then, that the subject with the capacity to suffer for the sake of an uncertain future is not a given among young Africans who aspire to

migrate for economic reasons. Instead, it needs to be produced, and is produced in academies such as Buea Young Star FC that are grounded in ideas of business and commodification. In other words, the suffering subject, i.e. the subject in economic distress prepared to suffer for a better future, is not simply “there” for the global markets to use, but needs to be produced and nurtured, and it emerges from spaces and relations that rely on ideas of free global enterprise.

Moreover, Kelvin framed suffering for the sake of the future as a sign of maturity and adulthood:

Not every man in Buea can play this professional football! [points to the Premier League match on the television set] Only *one-one* [i.e. “very few”] [...] And they are not children, they are growing a beard! They know what they want to do in life, so they need to do it.

Note that Kelvin’s way of addressing the uncertainty of success in professional football was strikingly different to that of Unisport Limbe FC’s president. While Junior in Limbe emphasized education as an alternative and addition to a future in football, Kelvin argued for single-minded determination and focus on the sport as a solution to the vagaries of an athletic career.

Importantly, Kelvin framed focus and determination as signs of adulthood. The allusions to adulthood are strikingly different from those brought up by the coach whom Kelvin was arguing with. The coach, who represents a person knowledgeable of local football and the needs of young men, worried about the footballers’ obligations to provide for their families. Meanwhile, for Kelvin, the gatekeeper to transnational markets, the markers of adulthood were grounded in qualities that allowed young men to compete in transnational markets, namely the capacity to suffer for the sake of future success. Needless to say, it was highly uncertain whether that future would bring success in the form of lucrative contracts.

POLITICAL AND MORAL ECONOMY OF FOOTBALL: EMBRACING PRECARITY

Focusing on entrepreneurship and governance in football reveals that the political and moral economy in 21st-century Cameroon increasingly relies on engagement with transnational markets. While in postcolonial Cameroon managing football used to be grounded in influential regional organizations, such as parastatal companies, ethno-regional elite networks, or political parties, nowadays successful football management depends more on creating and maintaining transnational networks. Moreover, when the analysis of moral economy is expanded beyond the exclusive focus on the disadvan-

taged and considers the making of elite figures, it is revealed that the elites' legitimacy depends on the people but is also increasingly intertwined with transnational large-scale processes and transnational markets.

This is not necessarily new: politics and economy in Africa has a long history of "extraversion," i.e. "mobilizing resources derived from their (possibly unequal) relationship with the external environment" (Bayart 2000: 218). But the establishment of football academies such as Buea Young Star FC is quite new in the Southwest Region of Cameroon, a trend that began in the 2000s, and clearly a response to the expansion of the transnational market for football players. Recent changes in the Southwest Region's political economy of football, which transitioned from social and political entrepreneurship to economic entrepreneurship, led to the creation of football academies that focus on commodifying young men. Crucially, young men are taught to prioritize suffering for the sake of the future, however uncertain, over present needs and obligations – a value that they seem to have previously lacked. Academies formulate this value as a sign of adulthood and maturity that needs to be inculcated. Young men thus need to be taught to embrace a new form of precarity, one that comes with the expansion of the global market for football players. Global markets thus rely on the willingness of young men to suffer for the sake of an uncertain future, but, crucially, this is a quality that is not simply "there" among young men but needs to be produced.

This begs the question: How are young men themselves dealing with these new opportunities and demands? In the following chapters I explore their perspectives and practices in detail.