



The Precarity of Masculinity: Football, Pentecostalism, and Transnational Aspirations in Cameroon

U. Kovač

Summary

For young men in Cameroon, the future is uncertain. This has become increasingly so since the economic crisis in the 1980s and the subsequent neoliberal structural adjustment programs that failed to reboot the economy and hampered young people's transition to adulthood. At the same time, the commercialization of global football and the expansion of the global market for football players in the 1990s have offered young men the hope of not only achieving adulthood, but doing so in style – by migrating abroad, playing “the beautiful game,” and enjoying the superstar status that comes with it. Yet flashy football “careers” are elusive, even unlikely, and new forms of uncertainty have emerged. Many footballers turn to Pentecostal Christian churches and Men of God for advice on dealing with the “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011) that transnational professional football produces and feeds on.

This thesis focuses on these young Cameroonian men in precarious conditions who increasingly harbor anxieties of becoming “useless” and superfluous in the eyes of their kin, anxieties that are not exclusive to Cameroon but are commonplace throughout the Global South. I argue that young men's aspirations to migrate abroad and play football for a living are central to the analysis of masculinities in post-structural-adjustment West Africa. More generally, I argue that the athletic aspirations of young Cameroonians and their propensity to consult with Pentecostal Men of God offer new insights about the nature of social mobility in the neoliberal age. As this thesis shows, the global market for football players relies on the willingness of young men to embrace new forms of precarity, but, crucially, this is a quality that is not simply “there” among young men but needs to be produced. Part of this production is solving the “problems” of youthful masculinities, and Pentecostalism emerges for the footballers as a method to do exactly that. The intersection between football aspirations and Pentecostalism suggests that the areas of life grounded in neoliberalism rely on the production of magical possibilities of extraordinary success, but also on the faith that self-discipline, focus, and moral decency will bring social mobility, despite unlikely odds. The trouble is that this might be a leap of faith few are able to survive.

This thesis reveals how new football academies that focus on training young footballers and selling them to clubs abroad seek to mold young men to embrace new form of precarity. As such, my ethnography offers a new

perspective on transnational migrants, and complicates common preconceptions – which saturate European media – of African migrants as people willing to endure an enormous amount of suffering for the sake of a better future. The young men I worked with in the Southwest Region of Cameroon are indeed driven to undertake migration projects strewn with obstacles and uncertainty, mostly due to economic hardships and lack of jobs – a situation characteristic of the post-structural-adjustment period. But new football academies, places grounded in transnational processes that consider athletes as sellable commodities, do not simply find and “harvest” desperate young men willing to suffer abroad. Instead, they seek to produce migrants willing to engage globalized precarity. This process is a concrete example of how transnational migrants are produced at the intersection of transformations grounded in neoliberalism.

Moreover, I aim to unpack the role of Pentecostal spirituality in areas of social life that are influenced by neoliberal transformations. I seek to investigate exactly why Pentecostalism is attractive to young Cameroonians and why they seem to increasingly gravitate towards Pentecostal Men of God rather than traditional healers, and to determine the consequences of their spiritual practices. This thesis shows that Pentecostalism is very much intertwined with the “imaginaries of exile” (Piot 2010: 4) of the contemporary moment and clearly provides the “instant efficacy of the magical and the millennial” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 315). However, Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on faith, focus, humility, and dedication despite unlikely odds, also offers young men a disciplinary and moral regime that converges with the demands of their coaches and helps them deal and engage with new forms of precarity. Pentecostalism is attractive to footballers precisely because it articulates both the attraction of magical efficacy and the ideology of long-term self-discipline and self-transformation.

Why is football so attractive to so many young Cameroonians? More precisely, why do so many young Cameroonians put an enormous amount of time and work into an activity that they realize is not likely to pay them back? One answer to this question is masculinity. Football captures the minds and animates the bodies of young Cameroonian men because it caters to their key masculine aspirations. Football offers young men a possibility to travel abroad and play the beautiful game that they have played and watched on television since childhood. Thus it allows them to participate in the transnational imagery of masculine success, as exemplified by elite athletes and their international stardom. At the same time, football, at least on the surface, offers young men an opportunity to avoid becoming “useless” and begin earning money and providing for their families. Despite the cultivation of dreams of individual glory abroad, strong emphasis on the morality of social

responsibilities, especially towards kin, remains. Football appears to allow young men to live up to their elders' demand to financially contribute to their households, a key marker of their transition to adulthood, one that has become increasingly unattainable since the neoliberal austerity measures. Thus the promise of football speaks to masculine aspirations grounded both in individual ambitions and collective demands, and promises participation in both local and global regimes of valuation.

When considering constructions of masculinity in situations in which different kinds of uncertainty intersect, I suggest to discuss the "precarity of masculinity." The term is useful for two reasons. First, it emphasizes that all types of masculinity, even those that appear sovereign or "hegemonic" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), are unstable and subject to contestation. Second, the term "precarity," in the sense of a contemporary mode of uncertainty of labor and income, suggests that performances of masculinity cannot be separated from issues of economic reproduction. In the contemporary post-structural-adjustment moment in the Global South, this means that performances of masculinity are intertwined with the economic uncertainty that haunts young men, as well as with the proliferation of attractive but elusive opportunities of enrichment that come with the globalization of images and markets. This is particularly prominent when one considers that young men risk becoming labeled "useless men" by their elders, a condemnation that is closely tied to their inability to financially provide for the household.

The damning label "useless man" reflects another simple fact: that men are constantly faced with moral judgments from their social surroundings, and need to struggle to live up to others' expectations. I propose the concept "moral masculinities" to account for ways in which men struggle to negotiate a variety of gendered moral evaluations and judgements and fashion themselves as moral and gendered subjects. Moral masculinities are ways of being a man that emerge from men's struggles to do and be good, to deal with others' moral judgements and evaluations, and to orient themselves to moral values. Their efforts cannot be reduced to fulfillment of unavoidable social obligations, nor to calculated pragmatic actions driven by self-interest. Instead, they act in relation to the judgements of others (e.g. their peers and elders), institutions (e.g. religious institutions), and large-scale processes (e.g. transnational markets). With "moral masculinities" I seek to open up new theoretical space to think about gender and morality in the face of uncertainty, and to move beyond limited approaches to masculinities that rely on representations of men as either victims of contemporary transformations and crises, or powerful agents who reproduce the hegemony of men.

As this thesis shows, moral evaluations are central to the ways young people attempt to face, on the one hand, diminishing livelihood possibilities

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at home, and, on the other, global inequalities and the fickleness inherent to transnational industries like football. Like many young people elsewhere, especially in the Global South, young Cameroonian footballers are acutely aware of their position on the margins of global processes and the uncertainties inherent to transnational markets. At the same time, they interpret their failures and successes in terms of moral shortcomings and moral decency. Morality is, for better or worse, a powerful and compelling way of coming to terms with a future that is profoundly uncertain.

Pentecostal Men of God who advise footballers are central in making the connections between gendered morality and success. Pentecostalism claims to offer a solution to the precarity of masculinity and to the difficulties of achieving masculine aspirations. It emerges as a site of production of an alternative form of masculinity that should have a better chance of overcoming local challenges and becoming transnationally mobile. Yet even this form of "Pentecostal masculinity" cannot be considered clearly hegemonic: it cannot guarantee success in the fickle football industry and in reaching a meaningful adulthood by providing for the family. Rather, Pentecostalism becomes a space to express and negotiate masculine aspirations, discipline problematic masculine subjects, and prepare young men for new forms of precarity. Thus the convergence of football dreams and Pentecostal faith shows how transnational aspirations and precarity profoundly shape young men in Cameroon, but also far beyond, wherever the "global production of desire" (Trouillot 2001: 129) meets young men's fears of becoming superfluous in the eyes of those closest to them.