

the failures of revolutionary transformation in one of the largest countries in the global South.

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Uroš Kovač, *The Precarity of Masculinity: Football, Pentecostalism, and Transnational Aspirations in Cameroon*. New York NY and Oxford: Berghahn Books (hb US\$135/£99 – 978 1 78920 927 3). 2022, 220 pp.

In *The Precarity of Masculinity*, Uroš Kovač provides us with a timely and comprehensively researched ethnography of aspiring male footballers in Cameroon. The three pillars of Kovač's analysis are precarity, masculinity and Pentecostal Christianity: Kovač argues that since young footballers have a somewhat commodified status in football and a promising but uncertain future, Pentecostal Christianity operates as an engine of hope. It encourages asceticism and an avoidance of extravagant lifestyles (of alcohol consumption, for instance) that could bring down one's fledgling career. In this sense, a key observation of Kovač's book is about the sorts of persons footballers must become under the conditions of global aspiration and economic precarity, which combine in a classic instance of 'cruel optimism'. Kovač pays particular attention to the appropriation of 'suffering' as a narrative through which these men not only articulate their marginality, but also their capacity to endure and overcome.

Kovač has conducted field research with football clubs and footballers that is both in-depth and multi-sited. He has worked with two football academies and has followed Cameroonian footballers across the globe to understand their experiences of migration through football. Chapter 1 sets out context for the book, emphasizing the introduction of satellite television in the 1990s as a critical moment that brought European football to audiences in Cameroon. At the same time, Cameroon's ailing economy encouraged young people to look abroad to secure better futures.

In Chapter 2, Kovač illustrates, with meticulous understanding, how Cameroon's football clubs and academies became incorporated into the transnational political economy of contemporary football. The incorporation of Pentecostal Christianity into the lifeworld of these academies is fascinating, and Kovač shows – using the example of one amateur club – how a transfer of ownership from an old 'big man' to his son, Junior, embodied a total break in the club's philosophy. Junior's introduction of Pentecostal prayers into the pre-match ritual symbolized the new emphasis on success, in contrast to the academy's former status as something closer to a charitable home for boys. Meanwhile, other businessmen also began investing in clubs, hoping to market Cameroonian footballers abroad.

In a world where football clubs such as Real Madrid, Manchester City, Paris Saint-Germain and Chelsea are trying to push for a global 'super league', disconnected from local fans and able to play football matches to audiences as far afield as Shanghai and Doha, these observations about the disembedding of an old 'moral economy' of

football are striking. I found it intriguing that promising footballers are discouraged from playing in local tournaments by academy bosses, who want to save their health and fitness for potential trials with (and, it is hoped, sales to) international teams. Even though local 'interquarter' tournaments are something of a rite of passage for local footballers, they are shirked and maligned for the 'rough' quality of their football and the apparent 'brainlessness' of their players by the aspiring superstars to whom Kovač has drawn close and who must be wary of career-threatening injuries (Chapter 3).

Indeed, and as I mentioned above, a critical aspect of this book relates to how young footballers are keen to capitalize on their status as potential commodities in the global game, aspiring to go abroad and win wealth and fame. The commodification of persons is shown to be appealing to some, providing that it paves the way to a better future in Europe. But as Kovač deftly shows, hanging onto this precious status becomes a fixation and an anxiety, not least because of the hopes of relatives and friends pinned to one's star. Chapter 5 illustrates how the body becomes a site of self-discipline, typically through the avoidance of sex and alcohol, as these footballers struggle to negotiate their value in potential.

In the conclusion, Kovač reflects more fully on the question of why Pentecostal Christianity appears so well suited to the demands of both football and the neoliberal economy. The range of reflections here will be key reading for anthropologists of Christianity.

But I also wondered if something was missing. In a book about football, the sport's inherent beauty ('the beautiful game', Kovač calls it) recedes into the background. One can only assume that this is because his context – two football academies – are so professionalized that players no longer see the game itself as anything but a means to an end (i.e. leaving Cameroon), which is very much how Kovač presents it. This would explain the relative lack of description of football matches and their incredible capacity to generate situations that genuinely make one stop and wonder 'What just happened?' Football has a remarkable tendency to turn ordinary people into legends of the game, like the figure of Akwe, vividly described in Chapter 3, and to create moments of pure emotional transcendence, out of body experiences. Is it that the setting is so professionalized that football is presented in such rational terms?

Kovač's book illuminates the hopes and aspirations for transnational migration through sport and will become a key touchstone in understanding the lives and subjectivities of the people who enter onto its uncertain pathways to Euro-America. The spiritual and mental challenges of being a potential commodity are richly evoked. Its core themes – recounted above – speak to critical issues with which many Africanist scholars are concerned and it will have a welcome place on reading lists across African studies and anthropology.

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