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## THROUGH THE PRISM OF SPORTS: WHY SHOULD AFRICANISTS STUDY SPORTS?<sup>1</sup>

Bea VIDACS

*Afrika Spectrum* 2006 , 41, 3, pp. 331–349. (Institut für Afrika-Kunde, Hamburg)

### ***Abstract***

Sports and especially football animate the lives of millions of people in Africa. Yet, until recently the social sciences have paid very little attention to these activities on the continent. The first part of this paper provides a brief overview of social scientific writing in English (and to a lesser degree in French) about sports and argues that the field has been understudied on the continent. It continues by delineating some of the reasons why this is so, ranging from the weaknesses of sports studies, to perceptions of academics of what is a fitting subject for scientific inquiry, to seeing sport as irrelevant for the solving of the problems of underdevelopment. The second part provides an analysis of one particular case, that of the Cameroonian government's handling of three World Cups and the Cameroonian population's varying responses to it, with the intention of showing the relevance and fruitfulness of paying attention to sport in Africa.

### ***Keywords***

*Africa, Cameroon, sport, anthropology, football, politics, society, World Cup*

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Susann Baller and the three anonymous reviewers for their constructive criticism and suggestions to improve the paper, any shortcomings naturally remain my own.

Millions of people in Africa follow sports and especially football. They invest time, energy and scarce resources in it, they hope to gain fortunes from it, rejoice and despair over it, argue and feel a commonality with others through it. Yet, until recently the social sciences have paid very little attention to sports in general and football in particular on the continent. This article will attempt to demonstrate the usefulness of considering sports in Africa as a topic for academic research. My argument is that exploring sporting practices can provide insights into social, cultural, political and historical processes which go beyond the sporting arena. However, for such an endeavor to be successful sports have to be both thoroughly contextualized in the social realities of a given society and their importance to the people studied needs to be taken seriously. The article will start with a brief general overview of the evolution of Anglophone (and to a lesser extent Francophone) academic writing on sports and then it will hone in on the Africanist literature on the subject concluding that sports have been neglected by Africanists. I will also delineate some of the reasons why this might be so and why sports nonetheless deserve our attention. I argue that the neglect can in part be explained by some of the shortcomings of the sports literature. In part, however, it is due to academic perceptions of both sports and of Africa as well as of the problems the continent faces. In the second half of the article I will analyze one particular case, that of the Cameroonian government's handling of three World Cups and the Cameroonian population's varying responses to it with the intention of showing the possible fruitfulness of studying sports in Africa. Although football is the most popular sport on the continent by far, in the first section of the paper I will refer to sport or sports rather than to football exclusively because the relevance of what I am trying to say goes beyond the confines of a single sport.

### ***Sports studies and African studies***

#### *Context vs. focus in sports studies*

Sports studies, a relatively new field of academic research, have been an interdisciplinary endeavor since its beginnings in the 1960s. Other than sociology and perhaps history no other social science discipline

has a well-defined and even mildly institutionalized sub-specialty dealing with sports. I myself am an anthropologist, however, in what follows, I wish to get away from narrow disciplinary boxes because the study of sports can offer useful insights for other social science disciplines concerned with the continent too. Sports studies in general were a rather meager field until the 1980s when they got a new impetus from British cultural studies. At least at the beginning, most of these studies concentrated on the development of modern sports and the sports ethic in England (cf. Brailsford 1991, Hargreaves [Jennifer] 1982, Hargreaves [John] 1982, 1986). Only later did they turn their attention to the diffusion of sports to other continents usually along the lines of colonial contact and conquest (Arbena 1988, Mangan 1994, Stoddart 1988).

This new focus in British sports studies was a great improvement over earlier works on sports, which had usually stopped at celebrating human achievement through sports and generally took sports propaganda at its face value without questioning its ideological underpinnings. What is more, they had kept sport apart from the larger society in which it was embedded thus making it rather thin and irrelevant for an understanding of social processes. The newer sports studies have consciously set out to overcome this shortcoming and have yielded some interesting and exciting insights. Most importantly they showed that sports cannot be divorced from larger social practices and that in more ways than one they are political. They often serve to control the time and the body of the working class as well as their use of space. Sports may at the same time serve as expressions of privilege or be used to keep people in their place as well as to teach them moral values (cf. Bourdieu 1972). Since the mid-1990s there has been a sharp increase in the number of works on sports. Unfortunately, not all such studies have been successful, often they yield predictable results which are rather thin ethnographically and show little theoretical sophistication. Part of the reason for this has to be the narrow focus on sports where the social context is invoked almost ritualistically but depth is lacking on the social, cultural, political and historical aspects of the area in question.

Paradoxically, perhaps the best studies of sport tend to be the ones that were written as a byproduct of research that was bent on elucidating something other than sport. To name some of the most famous ones, Geertz's (1973) essay on the Balinese cockfight uses the

cockfight to understand Balinese society and personality. Appadurai's (1995) article on cricket also has another agenda than the mere understanding of the sport for its own sake. Rather he is interested in how cricket has been 'vernacularized' and thus de-colonized by Indians and therefore serves different goals than those originally intended by the colonizers. Unlike the sports studies discussed above these works are using sports to throw light upon larger social phenomena of wider relevance than the sport itself.

There are, of course, some studies of sports that succeed as ethnographically informed analyses which have sport as the direct focus of their inquiry. However, they are convincing for the same reason as the works cited above, namely, that they embed the sport they examine in a wider social framework and integrate what happens in the ring, in the arena or on the pitch with social, political and cultural processes taking place in the larger society. Some examples of such work from other continents are Brownell's *Training the Body for China* (1995) on the place of sports in Chinese nationalism, Wacquant's *Body and Soul* (2005) on the practice and meaning of boxing in a Chicago ghetto, Joseph S. Alter's (1995) work on wrestling in India and of course Azoy's (1982) classic monograph on the buzkashi in Afghanistan as well as Bromberger's and his collaborators' (1995) study of football in Marseilles and Turin. What distinguishes these works from others is their ethnographic groundedness and theoretical sophistication. Thanks to the extensive fieldwork on which they are based they escape the facile generalizations and superficiality characteristic of much of sports writing.

Some of the ills of sports studies are also evident in African studies, but in general the problem here is simply that there are very few works of any depth on the subject. Until about the late 1990s there was practically no attention paid to the practice, politics, significance or meaning of sports on the continent with any kind of serious social analysis in mind. Scotch's (1961) brief note on the use of magic and sorcery in Zulu football and the work of Clignet and Stark (1974) on Cameroon in the mid-70s on football as a modernizing agent constituted exceptions. More than a decade later an edited volume appeared on the subject in which eight out of twelve chapters dealt with the history of the spread and of the practice of sports and sport-like activities on the continent (Baker/Mangan 1987). Besides these,

we encounter works which are either journalistic and impressionistic accounts of the state of sports in Africa or are satisfied with giving a purely descriptive account of the institutional framework and organization of sports in various countries without any real attempt at social analysis (see for example Melik-Chakhnazarov 1970, Mignon 1994, Versi 1988, Wagner 1990).

Although there were sport-like physical activities on the continent prior to colonial contact, their meaning and social significance as well as form differed greatly from modern Western achievement sport. Among other elements they could form part of socialization into adult activities, initiation ceremonies or the maintenance of social control and, depending on the context, the same activity may have had different meanings (cf. Blacking 1987). Modern sports were introduced into Africa with colonialism with the purpose of satisfying colonial ideas of and needs for order and discipline among the dominated populations. Colonial representatives attempted to inculcate Western ideals and attitudes in Africans, which were thought to be especially well represented in the practice of sports (cf. Bale/Sang 1996, Guttman 1994, Mangan 1987, Stoddart 1988). In most places these activities were enthusiastically adopted and adapted by Africans, especially in the case of football, within a relatively short time.

The first discipline to pay more than fleeting attention to sports in Africa was history. The historian Terence Ranger was among the first to investigate sport and popular pastimes of a sport-like nature. His pioneering *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa* (1975) was one of the first sustained efforts to subject a sport-like practice in Africa to academic scrutiny. Ranger also gives a few brief mentions to sport as part of colonial life and education in his contribution to the celebrated volume, *The Invention of Tradition* (1983: 216–219, 222, 235, 238). His chapter in the Baker and Mangan volume discussed above provided a fine-grained analysis of the appropriation by urban Rhodesians of boxing and its re-appropriation by the colonial government by imposing White colonial control over the practice (Ranger 1987).

The historians Phyllis Martin (1995) and Laura Fair (2001) followed in his footsteps, when they used football as a window on understanding urban colonial life in Brazzaville and Zanzibar, respectively. They demonstrate the contestation of and resistance to

colonialism by the local population over the issues of the control of their leisure time in the colonial urban context. Significantly both authors couple the study of football with other social practices to round out the picture of urban life for the dominated population, thus ensuring that sports are anchored in the larger context of colonial life. Martin also is interested in leisure activities to show how Africans in Brazzaville adapted to urban circumstances and made their lives livable under the harsh circumstances of colonial rule. Besides football she includes fashion, nightlife, music and dance in her discussion. Fair's study on Zanzibar is concerned with questions of identity. She devotes her attention to clothing, music, urban land tenure and football to draw a nuanced picture of how urban residents of Zanzibar tried to refashion their lives and identities after the abolition of slavery on the island and to position themselves often at odds with the colonial government.

South African apartheid occasioned another strain in the literature on sports in Africa. This is not surprising as sports became one of the prominent battlegrounds for the anti-apartheid struggle. A spate of journalistic and academic writing documented the effects of apartheid on South African sports and society and the struggle for non-racial sports in the country. Among academics, historians again dominate the field, carefully documenting the facts and effects of apartheid and the resistance it gave rise to (a far from exhaustive list would include: Alegi 2004, Archer/Bouillon 1982, Badenhorst 2003, Black/Nauright 1998, Couzens 1983, Grundlingh 1994, Odendaal 2003). Thus with the exception of South Africa and to a lesser extent the colonial era, sports have barely been touched upon by Africanists. In the next subsection I will make some suggestions as to why this is so and will follow up with outlining some of the areas where studying sports can be especially fruitful, pointing out the existence of some of the already existing works.

### *Disciplinary gatekeeping and the relevance of sports studies*

No doubt one of the reasons why the study of sports has not garnered more academic interest in either area studies or other disciplines, such as anthropology or political science, is the above outlined questionable quality of much of the work produced by sports studies. Nonetheless,

it is puzzling and paradoxical that the topic has not gained more legitimacy in and out of African studies in light of people's interest in sports. The reception of the subject in academia may provide some answers.

Here I have to rely on my familiarity with anthropology rather than the other social sciences, however, the reasons why this should be so are likely to be similar across the various fields. Several authors have reflected on why the anthropology of sports has not really taken off as a field of inquiry in its own right. Archetti (1998) put forth the argument that anthropology – as the study of the 'primitive' – was *ab ovo* cut off from the study of modern sports since sports are seen to be the product of industrial society and therefore fall outside the purview of the discipline. Although there is some truth to this view, at least since the 1960s this has become less and less the case. These days anthropologists are studying urban phenomena among peoples who were earlier considered 'primitives' and have turned their attention to societies closer to home, too (cf. Dyck 2000, King 2004).

In addition, there are problems with the general acceptance of sports as a legitimate and serious subject of study among academics. Despite the interest of people in sports, they are suspect in the eyes of academics for several reasons. One is that the subject is perceived as trivial and frivolous – 'only a game' – therefore not worthy of serious attention. Another is that by virtue of being all around us in everyday life it seems to be difficult to grasp its 'researchability'; it is not strange enough to merit study probably because it is so taken for granted. A third reason also has to do with the mindset of academics, namely, that many may consider sport to be an opiate, something that diverts the attention of the masses from their real problems, something that governments or political leaders manipulate to their advantage by working people up into a frenzy or making them forget what ails them (cf. Weber 1971). Some authors are quite ready to dismiss sports for this reason, or else they are satisfied with registering this as a fact in lieu of an in-depth analysis of sports. Perhaps these considerations weigh even more heavily in the case of Africa. The pursuit of sports may appear to be trivial, light, without consequence and not on a par with the grave problems the continent faces from poverty and corruption through ethnic strife, civil war and genocide to the abuse of power by the mighty, in short underdevelopment. From the point of view of socially committed researchers or funding agencies sports

may not seem worthy of attention in great part because they are not seen to be relevant for solving the burning problems of the continent.

Although anthropology has moved away from an exclusive focus on rural, traditional, 'primitive' societies, there is a lingering romanticism which renders the study of modern, Western practices in an African setting seem less attractive or even some kind of a cop out. Another closely related issue is that, in the eyes of many Europeans or Americans, Western practices in Africa can seem inauthentic and contaminated, a far cry from some ingrained notions of pristine, untouched societies and in the case of activities such as sports they contradict the overall dismal image of Africa the West has. These are issues with a long history, Europeans – including social scientists, colonizers, missionaries and the lay public – have often held an animus to the 'detribalized' native, seeing him or her as a vain imitator of European ways, and unlike his rural counterpart lacking in charm and attraction. Despite these – by now most likely unconscious – misgivings about the practice of modern sports, upon reflection it is clear that given their popularity sporting practices on the continent deserve our attention.

So what can the study of sports contribute to the study of Africa? Clearly, there are several avenues. On the one hand, certain aspects of sports should be studied on their own merit (for example the economics of sports have been grossly neglected in academic studies). On the other hand, studying sports can yield important insights about non-sporting aspects of African societies as well. Some new work since the mid-90s has started to deal with sports, especially football, on the continent. However, some of these are brief notes and not all of them are based on sustained fieldwork and thus can lack in nuance and in-depth understanding (Chappell 2004, Yetna 1999).

I have discussed the relationship of sports and colonialism above. This line of inquiry has already resulted in a number of important studies and no doubt there is room for more work of this kind. Another fertile field of inquiry is the question of identity formation. Given that sport can function both as a unifying and dividing factor and is rather well-suited for making abstract units become real in people's minds, the maintenance and transformation of identities can be examined beautifully through sports. In light of the importance of both ethnicity and the perceived need for more overarching units of identity in Africa, sport can be a fruitful field of inquiry for

understanding the kind of dynamics that exist between different groups or between ideas of national and ethnic belonging and how the meanings of these units change or are manipulated (Armstrong–Giulianotti 2004). Sport can throw light upon issues of inclusion and exclusion and the mechanisms of these processes, thus besides ethnicity, the understanding of gender relations, ideas of masculinity and femininity can greatly benefit from paying attention to sports (Saavedra 2000). There is also room for examining the relationship of youths and their elders through sports (Baller 2005, Sarro 1999). In addition, the role of the occult in African sporting practices presents interesting cases of the syncretism of old beliefs applied to new practices and their transformations (Leseth 1997, Schatzberg 2000).

Since the practice of sport is the local manifestation of a global phenomenon, through paying attention to sport we can capture the articulation of the local and the global through the regional and the national in ways that are not so easily done in other domains. Sport is by definition political, partly because it is intertwined with the control of the body and time as well as space of the masses and partly because it has become closely associated with identity and therefore it is open to political manipulation and challenge. In the next section I will attempt to demonstrate through a case study how studying sports on the national and international level can throw into relief political processes on the ground and their local interpretations.

### *A case study: politics and sport in Cameroon<sup>2</sup>*

In order to show that focusing on sports can yield important insights into society I will now compare Cameroon's World Cup participation between 1990 and 1998, concentrating primarily on 1994 and 1998. The two competitions unfolded very differently for Cameroonians

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<sup>2</sup> The analysis is based on more than two years of anthropological field research in Cameroon on several occasions since 1994, including the duration of the two events. The material consists of a combination of personal observation, interviews, newspaper accounts and recordings of radio programs as well as casual conversation both during these events and in the course of my fieldwork in Cameroon. I would like to thank the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research for generously funding my research.

even though the Indomitable Lions, as the national team is known, did not go beyond the first round on either occasion. In the first case Cameroonians turned against their government, while in the second the two sides united in an overarching anti-White and anti-racist discourse. I will argue that to understand what took place we need to look at changes in Cameroon's power relations but equally that looking at the differences in the government's and the population's responses to the two events helps us to better recognize and understand the transformations the country underwent. The comparison will focus on by what means the Cameroonian government attempted to control public perception of the two events and how the population reacted to these attempts. I have chosen to focus on these two World Cups because during this period Cameroon underwent significant political upheavals. Looking at these events would reveal this to the observer even if s/he were unaware of the changes in the political climate of the country.

Cameroon has participated in international football since independence in 1960 and its national team is one of the most successful sides on the continent, having qualified for the World Cup a record five times. In 1990 it was the first African country to have reached the quarterfinals of the World Cup, thus creating a world sensation and spreading pride all over Africa and the Third World. In addition, the national team has been victorious in the African Nations Cup four times, and Cameroon won Olympic gold in 2000.

In the 1990 World Cup the Lions played the opening match against Argentina, the holder of the title and – astonishing the football world – won. Paul Biya, the president of Cameroon, who had been in power since 1982, attended the opening match. Although the team lost to England in a dramatic match in the quarterfinals, the Lions returned to the country in glory and the day was made a public holiday. All participants, players as well as coaches, and, significantly, journalists, were decorated by the head of state.

In 1990, the Cameroonian government under Paul Biya was fighting for its existence. This was the year when – partly prompted by people's dissatisfaction with their lot and partly by the example of the release of Nelson Mandela as well as the democratic upheavals and the fall of communism in Eastern Europe – there was a wave of demands for democracy and multipartyism in many African countries. Cameroon was one of these countries. Although the government

claimed to have ‘brought’ democracy to the people by legalizing multipartyism, in fact, the population had fought for this right and won. Immediately, many political parties came into being. At first, they seemed to present a serious threat to the government, especially the main opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF) (cf. Konings 2004).

The 1990 World Cup took place in this climate and the stellar performance of the Indomitable Lions was welcomed by the government, not just for the usual reason of victory promoting national unity, but also because it would create a diversion in the highly charged political climate of the period. Given the team’s name, Indomitable Lions, it was not surprising that for the

1992 presidential elections Biya’s propaganda machine used the image of a lion coupled with that of the president in several instances. However, the population was not willing to grant the president the right to claim the victory as his own. In fact, the tactic was resented by the population and backfired in as much as it earned the president the nickname of Lion Man (*homme lion*) which became a term of derision. Thus, under certain circumstances people see through such attempts at co-optation and can reject them.

The opposition continued to be active throughout the early nineties and it paralyzed the country with a national strike (*villes mortes*/operation ghost towns) when its demand for a sovereign national conference was not met. Significantly, during these upheavals football continued in the country and sportsmen recalled with some nostalgia afterwards that football teams on their way to a match were able to pass unchallenged through the many roadblocks set up by the strikers (cf. Richards 1997). Ultimately, the strike proved to be unsuccessful which not only weakened the opposition but also created mayhem and economic deterioration in the country and exacerbated divisions between supporters and opponents of the regime, often along ethnic lines. In the 1992 presidential elections amidst widely suspected electoral fraud Paul Biya won against John Fru Ndi, the chairman of SDF, who ran as the representative of a coalition of opposition parties. Many Cameroonians (and foreign observers) maintained that there had been electoral fraud and a large portion of the population referred to the event as the ‘stolen elections’. The opposition, still active in 1993, called for a general strike to mark the first anniversary of the elections. It fell on the day after the

Indomitable Lions' qualification for the 1994 World Cup providing a golden opportunity for Paul Biya to declare the day a public holiday, and thus neutralize the commemoration (Ntonfo 1994: 214).

The 1994 World Cup took place in the United States. By then, people were less hopeful about the political future. The period was characterized by an increasing economic crisis accompanied by withheld salaries and decreases in the pay of civil servants. The crisis was compounded by the devaluation of the CFA franc at the beginning of the year. People continued to support the Lions, however, the general feeling was that they had been inadequately prepared for the competition. Moreover, many feared that in the case of a successful World Cup participation, the government would again try to take political advantage of the victory and – sweeping things under the carpet – pretend that there were no problems in the country. Others were deeply upset that the glory of Italy did not bring any tangible improvement in Cameroonian football infrastructures or the conditions under which local sportsmen were working.

The preparations for the competition left much to be desired, for example, Henri Michel, the French head coach, was named just a few months before the World Cup. In May (barely a month before the beginning of the competition) *Fécafoot*, the national football federation, deposed its government-selected president and elected its own candidate instead. When the Ministry of Youth and Sports refused to accept this choice FIFA intervened and under the threat of not being allowed to participate in the World Cup the popularly elected candidate was installed. This, however, led to general confusion during the competition with regard to who was in charge of the delegation (the Federation or the Minister). Further confusion and indecision was shown in the fact that after the national selection was announced there was a demonstration in Yaounde demanding that certain players be removed from the selection and others be put in their stead which resulted in the replacement of some players at the last minute. It was also in May that the government launched *Opération Coup de Cœur*, a collection drive, asking the population to support the Lions.<sup>3</sup> Despite the forced nature of the drive people paid

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<sup>3</sup> The collection drive took place while I was in the field in June 1994. There were daily reports on TV and radio about the amounts collected in various corners of the country, artificially trying to create rivalry between different

large amounts out of patriotism or one-upmanship, but in fact the players were not paid until well into the competition amid wide-spread rumors that the bulk of the money collected had disappeared 'between Paris and the United States'.

Cameroon was eliminated from the competition in the first round. After having drawn with Sweden, the Lions were beaten in their two other matches against Brazil and Russia, and the latter was a heavy loss, 6:1, which shook Cameroonians as they perceived it as a humiliation. While the World Cup was going on, the national radio (CRTV) put into place a call-in radio program. It was called *Bonjour l'Amérique* and ran every morning for three and a half hours; there was also a two hour English version in the afternoon, called *Hi America*, to give equal opportunity for self-expression to the country's sizable Anglophone minority.<sup>4</sup> The program was supposed to allow people to make suggestions and express their support for the Lions. As Cameroon's fortunes changed for the worse, however, the program became a forum for people to pour out their hearts, air their disappointment, and try to find reasons for Cameroon's poor showing. Typical responses included blaming the government, the foreign coach, tribalism, and the lack of organization.

Most of the grievances were about issues beyond soccer. People slipped quite easily from talking about the fate of football to the fate of the country symbolically identifying the former with the latter. Thus the non-payment (or delays in the payment) of the bonuses was often contextualized to draw parallels with the delays in the salary

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regions. The huge amounts collected have never been satisfactorily accounted for. Cf. *Le Messenger* 439 (12 June 1995) and 449 (24 July 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Although first colonized by Germany (1884-1916), after World War I Cameroon was divided unequally between France and Britain, first administered as League of Nations mandated territories and after World War II, as UN Trusteeship territories. French Cameroon gained its independence in 1960 while the southern part of the area under British administration voted in a plebiscite to join the French part in 1961 in a federated state. The relationship between the two parts of the country has been unequal – in favor of the Francophone part – since the beginning. This was further exacerbated by the abolition of the federated structure in 1972. Anglophones feel marginalized by the system and their aspirations for more recognition and autonomy have become much more pronounced since the incomplete democratization process that began in the early 1990s (Eko 2003, Eyoh 1998, Konings/Nyamnjoh 1997)

payments of civil servants. The collection drive *Opération Coup de Cœur* to support the Lions was seen as an occasion for certain high-ranking politicians to embezzle the funds. The engagement of the French coach was judged unpatriotic as many people saw it as an example of the neo-colonial ties that bind Cameroon to France (cf. Vidacs 1998). Blaming him for the Lions' poor performance was also an indirect way of criticizing both the government and the French who had upheld the Biya regime during the political turbulence of the early 1990s (cf. Konings 2004). Some of the most scathing remarks were openly directed at the government and some callers even demanded its resignation, claiming that it had betrayed the nation by neglecting to make sure that the participation went smoothly. In essence, the callers of the program were implying that if the government appropriated the glory of 1990, it should also take the blame for the shame of 1994.

Discussing the post-1992 period, most authors agree that the Biya government began a slow process of recovery and re-establishment of its hold over the country (Takougang 2003, Konings 2004). The 1994 devaluation of the CFA franc deepened the economic crisis, making the economic situation of a population which felt that it was already on its knees even worse (cf. Mbembe/Roitman 1995 on the totalizing nature of the crisis). In 1994, with the memory of popular dissent and the awakening of 'civil society' still fresh in people's minds the government was only able to contain the discussion. The government's weakness was shown already in the insufficient preparation for the World Cup, especially in its inability to find financing for the players. Another indication of the regime's inability to effectively control the situation was the fact that to avoid greater problems it was obliged to allow the almost totally uncensored expression of popular discontent through the creation of the radio program. Although at first *Bonjour l'Amérique* served as a veritable forum for the indictment of the government, eventually it was suppressed in a rather high-handed way – when the soon to be dismissed Minister of Sports was not allowed to speak by the simple expedient of interrupting the program (cf. Nkwi – Vidacs 1997). This was clearly a show of force, but paradoxically in its very blatancy it also showed the government's inability to forge consensus.

The government's recovery became gradually more pronounced in the period between 1994 and 1998. Local elections due in 1993 had been postponed several times and only took place in early 1996.

Despite the ruling party's<sup>5</sup> ability to control (and rig) elections, mayoral elections in urban councils showed an even split between it and the main opposition party (SDF). However, the results were revoked administratively and government appointed delegates replaced the elected ones, amid some protest but nonetheless showing the government's ability to control things (cf. Takougang – Krieger 1998: 197–198). Added to this manipulation of elections was the neutralization of the opposition parties through government co-optation, internal squabbles leading to splits within the more important parties and a further proliferation of ever smaller parties of mostly local significance. Furthermore, the Biya-regime instigated another process, that of neutralizing political parties by encouraging the politics of belonging and the 'politics of the belly' through an increasing role played by elite associations in rural areas (Nyamnjoh – Rowlands 1998, Eyoh 2004). It has become the consensus of Cameroon scholarship that by 1997 the CPDM managed to become the only party of national significance in Cameroon.

If the circumstances of the preparations for and the handling of the 1994 World Cup reflected the weakness of the government those of the 1998 World Cup clearly showed its renewed strength. By contrast to 1994, in 1998 despite some unforeseen hitches the government was fully in charge of the handling of the event, even setting the stage for the major theme of White racism emerging in the commentary. Although the French head coach, Claude LeRoy, was only named about ten weeks before the competition, he was a popular choice having successfully led the national team to its 1988 African Nations Cup title. There were no wrangles over the payment of bonuses, in fact, they were paid prior to the beginning of the competition and this fact was widely publicized. There was no forced collection drive either. This sense of the government being in charge was paradoxically reinforced when a few days prior to the beginning of the World Cup the President of the Federation, Vincent Onana, was arrested for embezzlement of the tickets FIFA had provided for Cameroon. The swiftness of the arrest reinforced the strong government image and actually this also made it inevitable that the Minister for Youth and Sports should be in charge of the delegation.

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<sup>5</sup> Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM)/Rassemblement Démocratique du Peuple Camerounais (RDPC).

There was thus a clear sense of who was in charge and it was the government.

Other than Claude LeRoy's late appointment it seemed that the government had done its utmost to make sure that everything went smoothly. It was as if they had listened to *Bonjour l'Amérique* and taken people's complaints to heart. A less benevolent interpretation would suggest that the motivation behind the changes reflects a determined will on the part of the regime to control the event and its perceptions. Thus, rather than being a mere will to satisfy the demands of the people, it was a way of extending government control while at the same time also signaling this fact. The radio coverage of the World Cup also reinforced this view of increased control. Paralleling 1994 there was a daily program called *Bonjour la France*, but it had no English language counterpart. In addition, a large number of the interviewees seem to have spoken in English which was likely to turn off the Francophone majority from listening, while the Anglophone minority would not listen because it was a Francophone program. The most significant difference, however, was that the program had no call-in component.

The most overwhelming theme of the 1998 World Cup became the question of White European racism. Throughout the competition the perception of the majority of Cameroonians was that FIFA (and Europeans in general) were bent on eliminating by partial refereeing all Third World teams in general and Africans in particular. This view was 'proven right' when the Lions were refused a crucial goal against Chile for no apparent reason. Following the match there were anti-White riots in Yaoundé and Douala and the government, while restoring order, could be seen in the forefront of setting the stage for the calls for justice and the condemnation of White racism. After all, the official head of the delegation, the Minister for Youth and Sports, was the first one to mention racism publicly following Cameroon's second match against Italy. People and government were for once in complete agreement.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The World Cup and especially the French victory were interpreted in France in a diametrically opposed way to how they were seen in Cameroon. There, the fact that many of the French players came from an immigrant background or were people of color from France's former colonies and that all of France was behind its team were greeted as a triumph for multiculturalism (Dauncey – Hare 1999). Cameroonians read the situation

Thus, the government's attempts to appropriate the Lions' 1990 victory only succeeded on the surface as the population saw through these attempts and resented them. As a result in 1994 when there were no victories the people were quick to turn the tables and blame the government both directly and indirectly. After the political upheavals of the early 1990s the government was simply not strong enough to impose its will on the population and, unable to forge consensus, had to allow unusual freedom of expression to the people. By 1998, having successfully fended off political opposition for eight years, the government had consolidated its political position. The discourse surrounding the World Cup was deflected from the government and became a totalizing anti-White discourse which brought government and the people into the same camp. The increased strength of the government was shown in the fact that it had managed to make the defeat of 1998 into a victory in some ways much more successfully than it was able to draw advantage of the real victories of 1990.

### ***Conclusion***

I have argued in this article that the practice of modern sports in Africa has been understudied despite its great importance to Africans themselves. In trying to find an explanation for this omission I suggested that it is partly due to the weaknesses of sports studies and partly to the idea of academics that sports are trivial and therefore their study cannot contribute to solving the grave problems Africa faces. Moreover, existing studies of sports on the continent often either lack ethnographic depth and therefore cannot provide a nuanced understanding of the issues sporting practices and their reception raise or they do not take sports seriously enough to be able to explain their extraordinary hold over people.

Without doubt, sport animates the lives of millions of Africans. This fact should in itself already guarantee social scientific interest in it. Despite the statements of sportsmen, fans and ideologues to the

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very differently seeing the composition of the team as discrediting France's claim to football greatness in its own right and pointing out that the French team could only triumph with the help of immigrants who are otherwise unwelcome in France (cf. Vidacs 2004).

contrary, rather than being separate from ‘real’ life sports are deeply embedded in society and reflect larger social processes. As the Cameroonian case study shows, studying sports can provide insights into these processes from a variety of vantage points, thus enabling us to better map the interrelationships of politics on both a national scale and in popular discourses and how they mutually influence each other. For such studies to yield insights worthy of attention, however, we need research that is ethnographically grounded and looks beyond obvious and facile generalizations.

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### ***Zusammenfassung***

Sport und insbesondere Fußball spielen im Leben vieler Millionen Menschen in Afrika eine wichtige Rolle. Dennoch haben die Sozialwissenschaften lange Zeit kaum Interesse am Sport in Afrika gezeigt. Dieser Artikel bietet im ersten Teil einen kurzen Überblick über englisch- und in geringerem Maß französischsprachige sozialwissenschaftliche Literatur zum Sport und stellt fest, dass das Thema in der Afrikaforschung unterrepräsentiert ist; anschließend werden einige Gründe dafür skizziert – sie reichen von Schwächen der Sportforschung, Vorstellungen von Akademikern in Bezug auf angemessene Bereiche wissenschaftlicher Forschung bis zur Ansicht, Sport sei irrelevant für die Lösung von Entwicklungs-problemen. Mit dem Ziel, die Relevanz und Fruchtbarkeit der Beschäftigung mit Sport in Afrika aufzuzeigen, wird im zweiten Teil des Artikels ein spezieller Fall analysiert: der Umgang der Regierung Kameruns mit drei Weltmeisterschaften und die jeweils unterschiedlichen Reaktionen der kamerunischen Bevölkerung darauf.

**Schlüsselwörter**

*Afrika, Kamerun, Sport, Anthropologie, Fußball, Politik, Gesellschaft, Weltmeisterschaften*

**Résumé**

Le sport, et en particulier le football, tient une place privilégiée dans la vie de millions d'Africains. Pourtant ce n'est que récemment que les sciences sociales ont commencé à s'intéresser aux activités sportives sur le continent africain. Cet article est divisé en deux parties. La première donne une courte vue d'ensemble de la littérature académique en langue anglaise (et dans une moindre mesure en français) sur le sport en Afrique et explique que ce sujet est sous-examiné. Par la suite, elle porte sur certaines des raisons de ce manque d'intérêt, raisons qui vont des perceptions des universitaires selon lesquelles le sport n'est pas un sujet digne d'investigation scientifique aux perceptions selon lesquelles le sport ne joue aucun rôle dans la recherche de solutions au sous-développement. La seconde partie contient une analyse d'un cas particulier. Il s'agit de la manière dont le gouvernement camerounais a géré trois coupes du monde de football ainsi que des différentes manières dont la population camerounaise a réagi à cela. L'objectif étant de montrer la pertinence du sport en Afrique ainsi que le caractère fructueux que présente son étude.

**Mots clés**

*Afrique, Cameroun, sport, anthropologie, football, politique, société, Coupe de monde*

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