



Bea Vidacs. *Visions of a Better World: Football in the Cameroonian Social Imagination.* Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2010. 232 S. (paper), ISBN 978-3-643-10431-1.



Bea Vidacs
Visions of a Better World
Football in the Cameroonian Social Imagination

LIT

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B. Vidacs: Visions of a Better World

The 1990 World Cup hosted by Italy is often remembered for the exploits of Cameroon's Indomitable Lions. Led by 38-year-old striker Roger Milla, Cameroon legitimized African football on the global stage with their 1-0 victory over Maradona's Argentina in the opening game and becoming the first African team to reach the World Cup quarterfinals. In 1994, Bea Vidacs, a Hungarian anthropologist based in the United States, landed in Yaoundé to begin her research on football and identity in Cameroon. *Visions of a Better World* is a revised version of a doctoral thesis completed in 2002, a study that over the years midwifed several very good journal articles and chapters in scholarly collections.

The book is structured around an introduction, six narrative chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction features the obligatory literature review, outlines the theoretical framework, and reflects on the author's positionality and her experience conducting fieldwork in Yaoundé. Vidacs's starting point is that football is not only a symbolic reflection of the world, but that *football is also a way for people to envision how the world should be* (p. 10). The chapter that follows lays out a synthesis

of Cameroonian history, culture, and politics, and establishes the dominant role of the government in the local game.

The book gets into high gear with a chapter entitled the *Daily Life of Football*. It situates the Cameroonian passion for football in people's everyday struggles to make ends meet. As an *honorary member* of the Old Boys Club, a Third division side in Yaoundé, the author describes how material poverty forces teams to rent basic equipment, including jerseys, and to play on terrible pitches (dusty in the dry season and muddy in the wet season). Players' earnings are modest and unreliable, when they exist; mismanagement and corruption are commonplace. In spite of such daunting challenges, it is remarkable that football's rituals and routines, rules and regulations, its structure and reality continue to offer Cameroonians a sense of hope, order, *normalcy* and *predictability* which is lacking everywhere else (p. 81).

Having established the ethos, world-view, and political economy of local football, the next three chapters in the book delve into detail about the ways in which the game influences Cameroonians' visions of nationhood,

government, and Europe (specifically France). *Visions of a Nation* presents a fascinating discussion about the dialectical relationship between nationalism and ethnicity in African football. By analyzing popular discourse at stadiums and in the media, Vidacs argues convincingly that Cameroonian fans can easily be ethnic chauvinists, nationalists, and Pan-Africanists depending on the situation: "This is no different from any European fan who will support his own team" and the national team, the author points out (p. 109).

The chapter entitled *Visions of a Better Government* focuses on people's commentary about the 1994 World Cup as a metaphor through which to criticize the increasingly corrupt and authoritarian government of President Paul Biya (in power since 1982). The analysis reveals the failure of the government's attempt to exploit the national team for its political benefit and highlights Cameroonians' use of football as a call for sought-after order, justice, and equity. Finally, the chapter *Visions of France/Visions of Whites* considers people's self-image and place in the world as both Cameroonians and Africans through their views of the French (and white Europeans) during the 1994 and 1998 World Cup tournaments. Cameroon's poor results and suffering of perceived injustices on the pitch, in a context of enduring inequality between Europe and Africa, produced intensely negative feelings toward whites in the streets of Yaoundé, but only for a short time.

The last narrative chapter, *Disillusionment and Irony: Are the Visions Gone?*, shows how football in Cameroon became largely depoliticized by the time Ger-

many hosted the 2006 World Cup. In part, this shift is attributed to Cameroon's absence from the final tournament, which came as a result of Pierre Womé missing a decisive penalty against Egypt in the 94th minute at the Omnisports stadium in Yaoundé. But another important reason for the changes in people's attitudes, according to Vidacs, is the dissipation of the "highly charged and politicized atmosphere of the 1990s." As disillusionment set in politics and football, Cameroonians showed less interest in the World Cup and self-mockery became commonplace: an apt commentary on both the underachievement of the national football team and "the long-standing political stalemate and on the outrageousness of nothing ever changing" (p. 191).

Visions of a Better World is at its best when it describes Cameroonian radio and television programs about football and politics, and when it highlights the author's interactions with local coaches, players, officials, and fans. Vidacs deserves special praise for providing a "view from below" that explains clearly and concisely how and why "[f]ootball in Cameroon is a local manifestation of a global phenomenon" (p. 54). On a more critical note, the book lacks an index and some of the chapters are weighed down by the inclusion of too many disparate and loosely connected analytical themes. Also, as a historian, I was eager to learn much more about the changes of the 1970s and 1980s when Tonnerre and Canon Yaoundé won continental trophies and the Indomitable Lions rose to international prominence. These minor shortcomings aside, this well-researched and lucidly written book greatly enriches our knowledge of sport and society in contemporary Cameroon.

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