

Football and politics: a fruitful relationship or a tool for social manipulation?

Victorine Ghislaine Nzino Munongo

Researcher at the Department of Political and Legal Studies, Centre of National Education Ministry of Scientific Research and Innovation, Cameroon

Email: victorineghislaine.nzinomunong@gmail.com

Christine Nadège Ada

Researcher at the Department of Political and Legal Studies, Centre of National Education Ministry of Scientific Research and Innovation, Cameroon

Email: adachristinenadege@yahoo.fr

Abstract

Football is a cultural phenomenon that has become with time a significant instrument in the political life of Cameroon. Football is now seen as a catalyst of social facts, practices related to identities, an innovative trade, a means to pass on ideologies and new philosophies in Cameroon. Football is also presented as a passion which contributes to Cameroon's influence in the world and in the long run contributes to the prestige of the nation. The aim of this study is to carry out a functionalist and historical-hermeneutic reading of the impact of football on the Cameroonian society in its pursuit of the construction of national unity and its search for a multidimensional influence on the international scene.

Key Words: Football; Prestige; instrument; Politics; Unity.

1. Introduction

Scholars have long considered culture and especially football as an unproductive entertainment sector in relation to their research in social sciences (Lincoln, 1998, p.709). The scholars started seeing sport in another perspective in the 19th century which symbolised the development of modern sport. They now considered sport as a catalyst of social facts, practice related to an identity, innovative trade and a means to pass on ideologies and new philosophies.

Antoine Mourat speaks of a *football phenomenon*. He describes sport as the final

stage of globalisation, transcending, with some few exceptions, national, racial, religious, generational and social cleavages thanks to the broadcasting worldwide of football games on television¹. Seen from this angle, the contribution of football is no longer just entertainment. This contribution is now transformed into a worldwide trade with profitability and local identity. Transhumance practices are what foster the emergence of football to a spectacular dimension in Cameroon. As a matter of fact, Roger Milla, Eto'o Fils and many others are now referred to as social models on the media. Pascal Boniface considers football as a sign of major geopolitical development with a real impact on the functioning of the planet (Pascal B., 2002). Jean-Marie Brohm talks of this evolution in these terms: the economic aspect of sport has supplanted the political aspect of sports which previously replaced the ludic aspect of sport which was reserved for a particular group of people based on their aristocratic or financial status (Brohm, 1992).

Football took off in Cameroon between 1922 and 1923. As time passed by, it

¹MOURAT Antoine, *Géopolitique du football*, <http://www.wearefootball.com>. (Consulted on 19/09/2012).

became a double functional instrument. Football could be referred to as an instrument of democratization because it had the ability to foster the education on civic responsibility and collective values and it could also be used as a diplomatic instrument in its elitist and spectacular dimension of globalized Show-biz. This study has as aim to build a socio-political analysis of the new social configuration of football in Cameroon base on previous research studies and sports events.

The hypothesis that was developed from this study is as follows: Today, football stands as a multidimensional 'platform' for actors of various social sectors such as politicians, footballers and fans. The functionalism (Kurian, 2011, pp. 641-642) of Talcott Parson and Robert Merton will be used for this study. Functionalists ascribe to the social process the merit to achieve and maintain the balance of the society². Incidentally, the use of historico-hermeneutics sciences will facilitate the collection of data and their interpretation. This study will take place in three phases:

²Thanks to the implementation of the concepts that are Adaptation, goal attainment, integration and latent pattern maintenance-tension management.

firstly, the study of football as a way of expression (Habermas, 1973) and recognition on the international scene, secondly, an instrument of democratisation and harmonisation at the national level. Prior to these two phases, a historical reminder of the evolution of football in Cameroon won't be inappropriate.

2. Birth and Rooting of Football in Cameroon

Football in Cameroon started between 1922 and 1923 in an undefined manner. Back then, football was only for entertainment purposes, it was recommended by the medical profession and it was especially destined for European colonists. The colonists who were living in the city of Douala had the habit of organizing football match with sailors when these ones were on leave³. That is how, little by little, aboriginal people began to study the rules of the game. The aboriginal people began to practice the game with "balls" they could create⁴. This is how football activity and its institutionalization were implemented.

3. Birth and First Victories

³British, French, etc.

⁴Oranges, lemon, etc.

In 1930 the initiative was taken to professionalise football in Cameroon. We could then notice the following achievements: the first championship was held in Douala, then the establishment of rules and regulations followed the organisation of the first autonomous league, the establishment of a schedule of matches and licenses for players, the distinction of football clubs. This initiative gradually became popular in major cities of Cameroon. The creation of teams was done based on quarters and tribes. The only financial resource was the membership fees paid by the football teams. The entrance in the stadiums was free and matches took place on lands of fortune (Betsi, 2011).

The *Cameroon Athletic Federation* was created in 1934 and was later renamed *Federation Camerounaise Football* (FECAFOOT) in 1959. In 2012, the Cameroonian football improved its organisation: the FECAFOOT was affiliated to the Federation of International Football Association (FIFA) since 1962, member of the African Football Confederation (AFCON) since 1963. FECAFOOT organised several matches during seasonal Championships.

This brief historical reminder presents the genesis of football which is a sport activity in Cameroon. It states out to a certain extent the propensities of this activity which is to instil or amplify some values and practices from various angles. The interest Cameroon developed in football justifies the rapid implementation of this sport in the Cameroonian landscape. The outstanding performance of Cameroonian footballers during their second participation in the African Cup of Nations (ACN) in 1972 organized in Cameroon was the beginning of its influence on the international scene which was confirmed in 1990. It was in Italy at the World Cup of Football that Cameroon became the first African country to reach the quarter-finals. In 1972 the national football team of Cameroon will be named "*indomitable Lions*".⁵ This facilitated the spread of their fame and by extension that of the nation. After sleeping for ten years, it is during the Sydney Olympics Games in 2002 that the team won a gold medal, a second victory in the row at ACN and at the same time they were qualify for the 2002 World Cup. Cameroon was the

first African country to reach the finals of the Cup of Confederations. All these successes made a great number of Cameroonian football fan.

4. Settling of football in Cameroon

In 1923, George Goethe, a photographer from Sierra Leone moved to Douala with his family. George Goethe had the habit of training every evening with his cousin Roman on a small field of Castelnau Street. Due to their curiosity the spectators got involved in the training sessions too. Their initiative was then spread within the population, which led to the creation of the first indigenous sport team called '*Mbenguemen*' in Douala; the name changed later to become the Athletic Club of Cameroon. This team was made up of Senegalese, Nigerians, Gabonese, Togolese and Dahomeans. The contemporary team still has that cosmopolitan side. Despite all the problems related to tribes, some teams do not see the diversification of the origins of the players as an obstacle to the success of the team or the club. That is why; the team is made up of Aboriginal, people from other regions, and even foreigners (Betsi, 2011). Football is therefore in the Cameroonian context, an element that brings

⁵Article 1, Decree No 72-600 of 31 October 1972 on the creation of the National Team of Football.

together people and generates in them a sense of belonging to the nation. In the same vein, Bernard Jeu, sees the pitch as an instrument of socialization, and sport, as a ritual that initiates to a collective life (Jeu, 1977, p.241).

In Cameroon, football has gradually become the most popular sport. It therefore earned the status of King Sport. This statement is based on the following events:

- In 1994, after the qualification of the national football team at the World Cup in the United States of America, a national fund raise was organised by the Government under the slogan "*Opération coup de cœur*" (charity) with the aim to finance the participation of the team to the competition. One billion Francs CFA was collected (Kana, 2008, p.4).

-In 2003, the President of the Republic appointed Marc Vivien Foé to the rank of Commander of the order of value posthumously during the reception in the honour of the indomitable lions at the Unity Palace. His name was given to the avenue joining Omnisport Stadium to Essos and Mimboman quarters in Cameroon.

-On 19th to 27th May 2012, Jubilees of Patrick Mboma and the brothers Omam Biyick, former players of the national team of Cameroon were organised. These various events were celebrated in the following Cameroonian cities: Yaounde, Douala and Pouma. These celebrations displayed the positive impact that football has on the Cameroonian society, because they were joyful communion and intimate celebration between the heroes of the football scene and their admirers. A way for these stars to say goodbye and at the same time, prepare for new action scenes (Ateba, 2010, p.12).

-Multiple receptions held in the Unity Palace in honour of the players who returned victoriously from their competitions⁶ :

○ In 1979, *Union Sportif de Douala* presents to the President of the Republic of Cameroon their two continental trophies.

○ In 1984, Theophile Abega, Captain of the '*Lions*' presents to the President of the Republic, Paul Biya the trophy of

⁶*Regard sur le football camerounais* (1928 – 2002), an exposition of Jean Pierre Kepseu, at the French Institute of Cameroon, Yaounde, 30th january – 9th february 2013.

ACN during the reception at the Unity Palace.

○ In 1988, Minister of youth and Sports, Joseph Fofé hands to the President of the Republic the trophy of the ACN on 29th March, after winning Nigeria one-nil (1-0).

○ In the year 2000, the President of the Republic receives from the captain Rigobert Song the trophy of the ACN in Lagos⁷.

-The usual presence of the Head of State or Prime Minister at every finals of Cameroon Cup⁸ :

○ Charles Assalé, Prime Minister of the Eastern Cameroon in 1960 hands to Bissoni, Captain of the '*Lions*' of Yaounde the cup of Cameroon.

○ In 1963, the President of the Federal Republic of Cameroon Amadou Ahidjo gives the kick-off of the Cup of Cameroon between *Oryx de Douala* and Buea Red Devils.

○ In 1978, the President of the Republic, Paul Biya hands the trophy to Manga Onguene, captain of Canon after

his victory against the *Union de Douala* (3-2).

5. Politics get into Cameroon's football

In addition to political developments, the growing interest of Cameroonians for the sport in general, and football especially, was an opportunity for the Cameroonian politician to bring national unity (Oumarou & Chazaud, 2010, p. 4, 59) and the democratisation of the collective consciousness. It therefore led to the creation of following football clubs: *Canon de Yaoundé, Tonnerre de Yaoundé, Union de Douala*, to finally the national football team (Kana, 2008, p.4).

6. Football, a factor of unity

During the independence era, Cameroon was headed by Ahmadou Ahidjo. In April 1963, he made of unity a priority for Cameroon in his speech on the occasion of his official tour in the Bassa land by stating the following: without unity, our young people will be living in anarchy, this anarchy is worse than dictatorship, worse than colonialism, worse than the colonization (Bouopda, 2008, p. 180). Based on its

⁷The list is not exhaustive.

⁸Regard sur le football camerounais (1928 – 2002), op. cit.

history, Cameroon was under the dominion of two foreign countries and its reunification was officially made on January 1st, 1961. One of the strategies Ahmadou Ahidjo used to consolidate the national unity was the single political party strategy. The first president of the independent Cameroon sees Cameroon National Union as an instrument that would give the Cameroonian one vision and a spirit of mutual belonging according to the African socialism which requires unity among the elders (Tazifor, 2003, pp. 229-230).

After Paul Biya took office on November 6th, 1982, a democratic wind started blowing on the African continent; Cameroon was not spared. This democratization of the political scene therefore paved the way for a multi-party system. For the new president, the preservation of spadework, most importantly, Cameroon's unity remained the priority. This would justify the name given to the presidential residence: the Unity Palace. Taking into consideration the Cameroonian context where we can find various ethnic groups, religions, languages and more, Paul Biya had decided to start a systemic research to discover those elements of the society that will bring forth in every

Cameroonian an existing solidarity. It shall therefore raise a national consciousness that would lead to a practical national unity (Biya, 1986, p.30) that will be display through football.

The Cameroonian politician therefore sees in the activity of sport seven main considerations meeting social needs (Ministry of economic affairs and planning, 1981, pp. 245-254):

The promotion of development and the preservation of the physical and moral qualities of man, especially the youths;

The contribution to the development of man and especially his skills, his will and his self-control;

The preservation and improvement of health and the guarantee of the proper use of leisure time by helping man to manage the inconveniences of modern life;

Cultivating the spirit of belonging in the national community in every Cameroonian, by satisfying their most hidden emotional needs; and serving as a means of assessing the vitality of youths;

that the person has rights and duties before the law and it requires his active participation in decision-making of the public scene (Darity, 2008, pp. 175-176). Patriotism is defined the same way. When civicism is seen from the angle of patriotism, it refers to the concept of sharing a community identity that is formed and developed, or cultivated through education. Placing football among instruments producing civic responsibilities and consciousness awakening of a Community is the same as presenting football as an activity that offers an appropriate space for the training of the mind of players from different backgrounds. According to Elias Norbert, it became a place where an outburst of emotion is tolerated, a way to control - release emotions (Norbert & Dunning, 1994). Football has the ability to control and channel aggressiveness and human drives to the building of the nation Cameroon through various virtues such as fair play, team spirit, respect of hierarchy, the sense of honour, tolerance, equality, zeal to win according to the rules of the game; precious notions of citizenship rules (Mignon , 2004, pp. 54-57).

Football is an activity based on well-established rules. The implementation of those rules creates a climate of confidence antagonism (Norbert & Dunning, 1994). At the end of a match the loser is consoled with the idea of a rematch and the winner has the liberty to celebrate his victory without remorse. This aspect of the game binds the players by a sense of mutual respect. The loser respects the athletic superiority of his opponent on the field and the winner does not offend his opponent in a situation of defeat. This illustration of the game is visible at the end of every match when the players are interviewed by journalists. The winner acknowledges the worth of his opponent when he giving himself credit for the victory of the day. After a close observation of this gesture, fans or spectators reproduce the same thing in their daily lives. Fans will therefore teach this practice to their entourage, to eventually become a social behaviour (Delzescaux & Norbert, 2002, p.161). Reference is made to *théorie des dominos* of Gregory Bateson.

Each times the national team plays, it unifies the people and preserves at the same time the people from quarrels related to tribal differences. Even the players put aside their



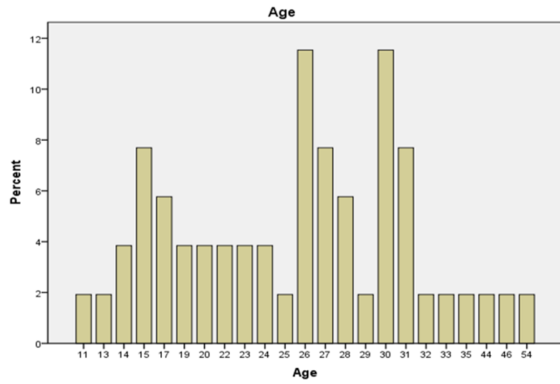
ethnic differences for the sake of the national flag. Football therefore brings all social groups of people to share the same feeling. According to H el ene Sabbah, that aspect sport and football that brings people together has its origin in the Antiquity (Sabbah, 2011, p.8). Vector of social integration, it enables everyone to succeed according to his personal talents.

The relationship existing between Cameroonians and their national football team is interesting to analyse in a sociological point of view, the emotions arising can sometimes be violent and also reflect in their own way the functioning of Cameroonian society. Its success or defeats is related to the love or lack of love Cameroonian display. They are usually supporters who have a special relationship with their team as Nicholas Dixon presents in his article *"The ethics of supporting sports teams"* (Dixon, 2001, pp. 151 – 153). He makes a clear distinction between two categories of supporters: *purists* and *Supporters*. *Purists* according to Dixon as those who identify themselves to their team based on criteria of excellence and high moral value meanwhile a *Supporter* is this loyal admirer who relates to a team just by a

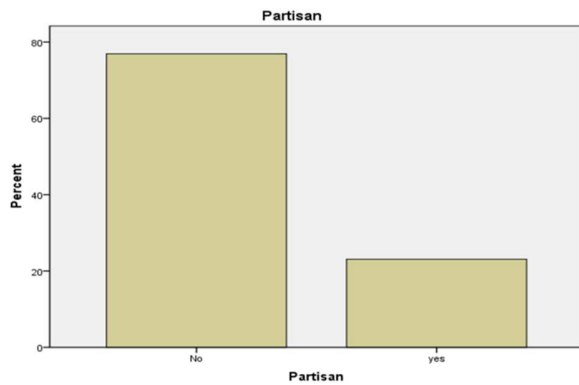
sense of belonging regardless of their victory or failure. In Cameroon, 52 persons between the age rate of 11 to 54 in different education levels were called to answer some questions, 23.1 percent⁹, identify themselves as *Supporters*, 63.5 percent say to be *Purists* and 13.4 percent said to have no interest in football. These figures spell out the narrow and didactic relationship between Cameroonians and their national football team. Nevertheless, this attachment leads to the unleashing of passions and emotions. Dominique Bodin and others confirm that hypothesis at the end of their study by stating the following: Sport has some special characteristics such as *"instability"* and *"serenity"* that have an impact on the passion of the public. From passion to irrational, there is perhaps only one step to take since this sport has unquestionable theatrical and dramatic qualities and also a complexity that makes it attractive and questionable" (Bodin et al., 2005, p. 325).

1- The age group interested in football in Cameroon

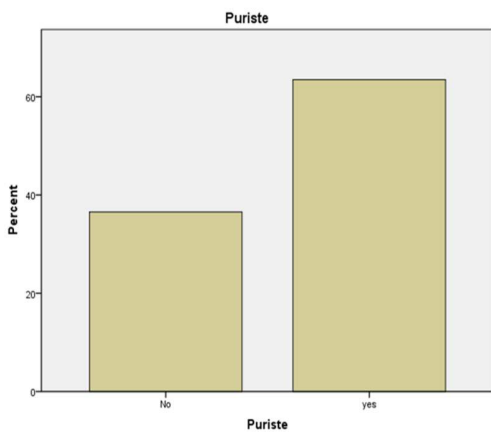
⁹From secondary school to University.



2- The percentage of Cameroonian football supporters



3- The percentage of Cameroonian football purists



7. Impact of Cameroon Football in External Relations

Since the arrival of media with its power or ability to influence human consciousness, sport in general and football in particular has become a prominent and powerful vector for a national representation and an instrument for external relations in the time of globalization (Rowe, 2009, p.543).

Showcase of Prestige

Football has undergone a gradual evolution in Cameroon that is why it has become a sport which generates moments of symbolisms, cultural resonance and socio-economic impute (Jeu, 1977, p.28). This point of view was frame after seeing the national players run around the field to greet the public who are putting on the national colours *green - red - yellow* during international competitions when their team wins a match or a competition or when the national flag is raised before every match and the national anthem sounds in the hears of an auditorium at the global level. That powerful demonstration was the reason why the status of Ambassador was given to

Cameroonian footballers¹⁰. Pierre Arnaud sees in it a showcase of vitality and of nation's greatness¹¹. That is the political motivation attach to the political commitment of the Cameroonian State to invest and to be more present on the football scene. This sport is presently one of the ways or platforms for "soft power" demonstration by the Cameroonian State (Nye, 2004) and indirectly its ability to explore any land which can be of interest to the nation in its external relations (Grix & Goodwin, 2011, p.4, 6). For each State taking part to the worldwide competitions, it is all about prestige and profit (Guttman, 2002, p.175). For the Cameroonian State, football is a game that is related to civics and it is a way to create relationships of influence on the international scene. In terms of television rights, sports apparels, architectural contracts of sports facilities or contracts of players¹². These relationships

have an impact on the economic, lucrative and tourist activities and bring a sense of familiarity and affiliation among the Cameroonian. It is common to notice the trademark clothing of football fans based on those of their teams or favourite players. It is a dynamic that Jonathan Grix has described as "feel good factor" (Grix & Goodwin, 2011, p.4, 6). It is illustrated by the decline of social barriers when it comes to sports, be it ethical, socio-economic, religious, gender and political opinions.

And this phenomenon accents more when the national team wins. According to Jonathan Grix, "Policy makers" are at work to promote through this "feel good factor" in the mind of the people, the values of unity and common consciousness. It gives a positive image of Cameroon on the international scene. For example, the victory of Cameroon in the match against Argentina in 1990 put the nation on a pedestal. Cameroonians were and are still identified as the inhabitants of Roger Milla's country¹³. Samuel Eto o Fils can also be referred too, since he was elected four times African Golden Ball. According to Jacques Dufresne, these results would (Dufresne,

¹³He scored the decisive goal of the match.

¹⁰Article 1, Decree No72-600 of 31 October 1972.

¹¹ARNAUD Pierre cité par Luca Lorenzi, Yann Bernardini, Frédéric Moser, Sport et colonialisme: impérialisme culturelle ou hybridité harmonieuse ?, www.espritsport.com, p. 10.

¹²LORENZI Luca, BERNARDINI Yann, MOSER Frédéric, Sport et colonialisme: impérialisme culturelle ou hybridité harmonieuse ?, www.espritsport.com, p. 9.

2004, p.3) indicate the quality of life and education of a nation; very attractive terms for potential tourists and investors. Football can also be seen as an investment for the development of Cameroon.

In addition, ideologies are shared through the media¹⁴ and popular consciousness are either formed or transformed. The illustration can be made by the designation of the national football team “*the indomitable lions*”. By this name, Cameroonians identify themselves as invincible warriors, who never accept a defeat but in difficult circumstances they are ready to form a bloc despite of their differences and persevere until they obtain victory. Football is perceived as a platform on which a battle of symbol is taking place. It is in this logic that Roger Milla said; I’m a stand-by officer, I am proud to have served my country for 20 years¹⁵. George Orwell, described football as a war without gun (Barbet, 2007, p.9). So, football is now one of the substitutes of former confrontations

between States with national prestige as main investment (Pascal, 2002).

Moreover, football has such a strong impact on the identity of a whole nation so much that they are carried away into a world of dreams becoming real through its global broadcast. That is what made possible new and unpredictable manifestations of the collective imagination. Therefore, it is a very subtle way to impose a way of thinking, a way to live, to represent oneself and the other. According to Luca Lorenzi and al., sport is more than a game with recreational purposes. It is a very important lever for the achievement of a cultural imperialism¹⁶. It is a culture of success, of achievement, of elitism.

8. Means of Visibility and Expression

Geopolitics is the study of the influence of geographical, economic and cultural factors on the States policy and on external relations. Is it by chance that football is found on the geopolitics scene? In other words, has this sport been introduced to serve the interests of geopolitical actors? With the tendency of realism, external relations are generally defined as relations

¹⁴ Gender, race, ethnic, etc.

¹⁵ Lecture provided in Public Law Postgraduate, “*la géopolitique du football*”, University of Yaounde II Soa, academic year 2005-2006. (Not published).

¹⁶ LORENZI Luca, BERNARDINI Yann, MOSER Frédéric, op. cit., p. 8 – 9.

between States. These interactions can be used by official intermediaries who are diplomatic representatives. Next to these official intermediaries, there are also more cordial relationships which are more relaxed and they enable States to share their cultures, to know and mutually complement each other. One of the major elements of these cultural exchanges is football; because it is a sport of mass and cohesion by excellence. Various appointments on the international scene are generally large masses, where people meet and are all driven by a single goal: victory.

For example, the *indomitable Lions* have helped Cameroon to shine internationally during the 1990 Italy World Cup. Indeed, by reaching the quarter-finals, the *indomitable lions* proved that Africa is undoubtedly one of the major nations having professional football.

On the other hand, football sometimes helps to evaluate the international relations of nations, be it in time of tensions or in time of peace. During the cold war, football was used as an instrument of propaganda. This reflected the great influence of football today in the crusade of Nations. To strengthen their agreements or

disagreements, teams will accept to play or not (Bromberger, 2002).

However, according to Pascal Boniface, even within the FIFA, there is a centralization of powers which does not challenge the place of the powerful and Africa always remains the poor parent, after the brain drain, it would be the flight of players (Pascal. 2002).

In Cameroon, FECAFOOT is at the centre of football; and if for a decade now, the team of the *indomitable lions* displayed poor results, many observers agree that it is because many problems agitate this structure. This thus led to her drop at the 60th place in the FIFA world ranking¹⁷. Local football no longer unites or excites the Cameroonian public. The national championship barely attracts the crowd. Without this internal impulse to renew players and bring an acceptable professionalism into the team, the image that the country could have built through football seems to deteriorate more and more.

9. Conclusion

Football, which was for leisure at the beginning, is now an instrument of

¹⁷FIFA worldwide ranking,, 11 April 2013.

democratisation and national prestige. The question in the introduction of this analysis was to know if the relationship existing between politics and football is productive in the sense that it facilitates the development of the sport valued by Cameroonians or it is a simple manipulation in order to stabilize social relations. Following the above mentioned arguments, the hypothesis of this analysis has been confirmed. Football has therefore been in Cameroon another rope on the arc of the Cameroonian ruler enabling him to create in the society a social cohesion and a variable geometry. Beyond the borders of Cameroon, football is considered to be an activity which has been transformed into a sort of showcase to evaluate the prestige of a nation. Through the football, Cameroon could extend its fame as a great nation of football alongside with nations such as Argentina, the Brazil, etc. It is from these two main functions given to football that it became an instrument the Cameroonian ruler could use in case of need. However, one question remains, if football is an agent containing several virtues used for the benefit of the Cameroonian society, are the current meanders of FECAFOOT a justification for currently turmoil within the Cameroonian

society? In other words, is football a reflection of our society just as H el ene Sabbah said? This is the answer Pascal Duret would give to such a question: the sporting entertainment does not offer a perfectly pure or totally fair scene; this is because it is imperfect, sometimes even unfair that it looks like our experience of an imperfect world in which we have to cope (Duret, 2012, pp. 28-51).

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