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# "Where Are All the Women Who Used to Be Good Athletes in Their School Days?"

## *Sports, Gender, and Leisure in English-Speaking Cameroon, 1960s–1970s*

JACQUELINE-BETHEL TCHOUTA MOUGOUÉ

At five o'clock in the morning in Buea, the capital of the Anglophone Southwest Region of Cameroon, a family friend and I headed to an exercise class in the Molyko Omnisport Stadium. On the way, she remarked, "I'm determined to cut down," meaning lose weight, recalling that adult women had avoided exercise when she was growing up in the 1970s. Although some Cameroonian subcultures still consider a robust body size evidence of good health and prosperity, being overweight increasingly stigmatizes women. Women in Cameroon are increasingly appreciating the physical and mental health benefits of exercise regimens and organized sports. On arrival, despite the early hour, we saw that exercise groups and all-male soccer teams had crowded the stadium. The women, many of them wearing colorful African-print head wraps, dominated the exercise groups.

Positioned in West-Central Africa, Cameroon neighbors Nigeria, Chad, and the Central African Republic and encompasses a minority of English-speaking towns, reflecting British administrative legacies in a predominantly French-speaking country. My research in Buea indicates that neither disinterest in fitness nor discouragement of women's athleticism drove the dominant anti-exercise culture of the 1970s. Women's participation in *formally* organized sports teams, such as soccer, was not widely accepted in the 1970s and is still not. However, unlike in the early postindependence period, *informal* exercise regimes have become more acceptable, and health campaigns addressing obesity have promoted acceptance of informal exercise, such as aerobics, for Cameroonian women. My 2011–12 research in Buea demonstrated that, then as now, economic stratification, geographic positioning, and shifting gender-norm expectations contributed to Anglophone Cameroonians expressing conflicting ideas about formally organized sports and informal exercise regimens for women.

This chapter draws from political and social history. It uses English-language archival records in Cameroon, such as official government documents and newspapers, to analyze ideas about gender, sports, and leisure in urban Anglophone Cameroon. It examines how, in the 1960s and 1970s, Anglophone Cameroonian women created, contested, and occupied their leisure time in the early period of independence. This discussion reaffirmed and challenged gender norms, social positioning, and citizenship. Sports and leisure were spaces of negotiation where formally educated urban elites transformed politics, culture, and society. While older women today contend that the culture discouraged women from exercising in the 1970s, primary sources suggest that many individuals in urban regions strived to normalize formal and informal women's sports for nationalist, social, and cultural purposes. I contend that formally educated female elites asserted that participation in sports and exercise made Anglophone female citizens happy by socially emancipating them. Through this politicized leisure, which included participation in organized sports, women represented Anglophone regions of Cameroon as a socially progressive nation compared to others around the world. Readers who wrote to newspapers responded with conflicting opinions, suggesting that women's participation in organized sports teams both fractured and advanced ideal gender norms. Examining women's participation in organized and informal sports allows us to think more complexly about gender ambivalence and its connection to crafting new African national identities in the early postindependence era.

Urban elites sought to regulate varied forms of women's leisure and expressivity as part of their efforts to communicate the emergence of Anglophone Cameroon as an autonomous nation-state. Britain and France had divided modern-day Cameroon between 1922 and 1961. In 1961, British-ruled areas became part of the Federal Republic of Cameroon, which consisted of two sociopolitically autonomous states—the West Cameroon State (Anglophone, comprising the current Southwest and Northwest Regions of Cameroon) and the East Cameroon State (Francophone). The political dominance of Francophone Cameroon contributed to growing perceptions amongst the Anglophone urban elite that the Francophone state threatened their shared traditions and political and cultural identity based on British administrative legacies. Anglophone Cameroonian political elites—politicians, government workers, and the wives of politicians—strived to delay their incorporation into the Francophone regime by emphasizing differences, real and manufactured, between the previously British- and French-administered regions. Anglophone political elites saw organized sports as one way to preserve their Anglophone identity and autonomy as a nation-state. In 1968, for example, one sports writer for the *Cameroon Telegraph* attributed his countrymen's proficiency at soccer to their British heritage: "Any football scholar understands the difference between football being played in former French [c]olonies and that played in former British territories. . . . British football is hard and swift, while the French play is cool and slow."[1]

The period under consideration brought expanded formal education and job opportunities for women, changes individuals applauded as social progress, but which also occasioned anxiety over the loss of African cultural values.[2] The notion that women played a key role in communicating the sociopolitical advancement of English-speaking regions of Cameroon led many individuals to encourage women to participate in organized sports like men.

## Gender, Time, and Leisure in Urban Anglophone Cameroon

Research on changing notions of leisure in Africa demonstrates that European rule and the existence of Christian missions influenced the order of time and space in urban Africa, particularly among the educated elite. Colonial powers, through the introduction of sports, hoped to exert "social control" and redefine Africans' perception of leisure, which they believed was unorganized. Colonial officials and Christian missionaries considered organized sports an important dimension of colonial hegemony, feeling that the rules would teach Africans obedience, bravery, and perseverance. However, colonial governments seemed more interested in developing organized sports for male members of African society, such as soccer and rugby. Conversely, women focused on "[g]oing on errands or joining friends for strolls" or "found dance at church services and participation in church activities" to be acceptable leisure activities.[3]

During British rule in Cameroon, Christian missionary groups played a significant role in establishing women's approach to leisure by imparting European gender norms in which "good" women

Figure 13.1. Female students play netball at the Teachers Training College in Kumba, an English-speaking city in the southwestern region of Cameroon, 1953. Source: The National Archives of the UK (TNA).

focused on domestic activities, endeavoring to "create 'good' Christian wives and mothers." Women's associations also demarcated elite women's suitable domestic activities, contributing to definitions of ideal femininity. For example, the Women's Corona Society organized children's parties, needlework competitions, and various educational presentations on embroidering, baking, and flower arranging in Buea and Limbe in the late 1950s.[4]

Although schools introduced girls to sports programs by the early twentieth century, women had fewer opportunities after graduation. They were hampered by a "lack of financial resources, sponsorship, and training amenities that affected all Africans," in addition to stereotypes and gender segregation in organized sports.[5] Urban women's daily activities, which contrasted with those of their rural counterparts, were confining, and they "had to be much more careful about transgressing the boundaries of respectability than rural dwellers." Regularly visiting "beer halls and other public drinking venues, for instance, often marked younger women as loose or available."[6] Various national initiatives in 1960s and 1970s Anglophone Cameroon sought to change that perception by providing opportunities for women to participate in athletics and by asserting that women's athletic activities were respectable and denoted the social progression of Anglophone Cameroon.

## Sports, Progressiveness, and Citizenship

Anglophone Cameroonian elites sought to demonstrate that they were as socially advanced as their European and African counterparts. Women's participation in sports and competitions indicated "good" citizenship and the social progressivism of the nation. Thus, women were obliged to participate in organized sports to support the Anglophone nationalist campaign. Both the West Cameroon government and its hegemonic Francophone successor developed government initiatives to improve women's sports culture. They succeeded: in 1960, 1,000 girls were members of the Athletic Federation (boys, 5,335); in 1975, girls totaled 4,000 (boys, 10,000). There were 105 women's basketball and handball teams in 1960 and 900 in 1975.[7]

Government texts encouraged women's participation in sports, asserting that, through purposeful leisure, women's athletic activities highlighted the social progress of the nation. The Women's Cameroon National Union, the women's wing of the country's national political party, released a short booklet, *Faces of the Cameroonian Woman*, in 1975. It exemplified the government's emphasis on emotional expressivity in promoting leisure activities. Asking "how many fights were fought and how much prejudice had to be overcome before public opinion admitted that a woman could take part in sports contests[?]," it connected sports to temporary liberation from the kitchen, as a way to achieve "health and physical, as well as mental balance" and "a sane and healthy body," which it termed "a major trump in a world where they [women] have to fight every day in order to conquer their place as full-fledged citizens." Women were to fulfill domestic obligations as well as nationalist endeavors that sought to emphasize progress-driven unity in the country. Further, the booklet avowed that Cameroonian women's "physical fitness was equal and sometimes even superior to that of her sisters in other countries," concluding that "[j]ust as high school and university education, participation in sports has helped with the Cameroonian girl's emancipation."[8] The booklet implied that women were responsible for emancipating themselves and for combatting societal stereotypes. Thus, political ideologies about leisure stipulated that "free" time was not just for women to pursue their own individual interests; it was also time in which women should "work" and "fight" to develop the nation-state.

The Cameroonian state connected women's participation in sports to emancipation, but it also limited the extent of that liberation. *Faces* *of the Cameroonian Woman* cautioned that the reader must "remain African and retain her own true nature which is the fruit of her ancestral and traditional heritage."[9] While political elites sought to stress women's participation in sports as a sign of social progress, they also held women responsible for upholding imagined ideas about an African "authenticity"—a "real" African cultural heritage independent of European ideals. Yet, simultaneously, they sought to indigenize, or Africanize, some of these new cultural expressions, such as women's participation in organized sports, to align them with broader nationalist rhetoric. Thus, the state endeavored to limit the boundaries of women's emancipation even as it endorsed their liberation through sports participation.

## Sports and Normative Gender Ideals

Newspaper records suggest urbanite elites similarly supported sports—even while recognizing limitations in their encouragement—in support of the progress of the nation. Female journalists argued that Cameroonian women's participation in sports was an antecedent to their being as progressive as their European and African counterparts. Journalist Clara Manga's 1963 column in the *Cameroon Champion* was typical: "The average Cameroon woman, as soon as she gets married and has one child[,] feels too old and big to take part in any form of sports." Thus, while women might subscribe to ideal gender norms and engage in domestic activities through marriage and motherhood, they nevertheless failed to embrace acceptable contemporary cultural expressions that would signal the progress of Anglophone Cameroonian societies and support nationalist endeavors.

Manga noted that "wives and mothers [took] part in sports" in European nations and other African nations, such as Ghana and Nigeria. She advanced sports participation as an ideal feminine activity and chided her readers for lagging behind, comparing the plight of Cameroonian womenfolk with *other* African females who she deemed to be more socially progressive and cosmopolitan. While scholars underline how educated African elites in the postcolonial period have compared themselves to Westerners, they pay less attention to how Africans have favorably or unfavorably compared themselves with people from other African countries. Manga's comparison of her compatriots' sports participation with those of Ghanaians and Nigerians suggests how postcolonial African women have measured themselves against both continental and international gender norms to shape standpoints on women's athletic activities and use of leisure time.

Manga also asserted that Cameroon needed "a real well-organised Women's Athletic Association" to encourage the same level of sports participation as their African counterparts, and less "class distinction amongst women."[10] She proposed that sports might break down class boundaries and foster camaraderie among women. But Manga's lamentations also illustrate that socioeconomic position informed just *who* engaged in leisure activities. Her 1963 observations and the 1975 government text, *Faces of the Cameroonian Woman*, demonstrate that, while women's participation in sports reflected larger ideas about the progressiveness of Cameroon, it also identified the *type* of woman suitable for conveying such messages. Formally educated women more easily accessed sports than did women of lower economic status; the latter lacked financial resources and faced time constraints.

In a 1962 article in the *Cameroon Champion*, an unknown journalist similarly criticized women's indifference toward sports. She (assuming the writer was a woman) reflected on her "last tour in the East Cameroon," in which she had seen "that girls can run faster than boys." The columnist lamented the "draw back spirit in women" in West Cameroon as indicative of a "great weakness in the women['s] field of sports" and exposed these female counterparts as noncompetitive with "their sisters in the East."[11] Like Manga, the journalist described women who forewent sports as lazy, thus emphasizing that indolent use of leisure reflected a larger failure to fight for West Cameroon's emancipation and social progress.

Others described women's sports as challenging normative gender ideals. In October 1964, Sarrah Agbor, a light-middleweight boxer, knocked out her male opponent, H. Nitty, in two rounds in front of a thousand-strong audience in Limbe. The *Cameroon Times* printed a review of the match: "Both boxers started very fast, but Nitty rained heavier punches. . . . Sarrah dashed out of her red corner like a wounded lioness. Spectators leapt to their feet as Sarrah cornered Nitty and rained blows in preparation for the kill. Nitty escaped to the centre of the ring for a breather, but the Amazon was on him like lightning. The end came fast. . . . Nitty's legs became rubber and wobbled. He crashed on the canvas, dazed." Following the match, Agbor, allegedly "still looking fresh," told a reporter, "what a man can do, a woman can [do]."[12] She dared any woman "who thinks she can contest my right as a boxer" to a boxing match with her. Agbor's declarations—or threats—implied that she derived pleasure in challenging the supposed biological differences between men and women. Her statements highlight how some women found pride in their athleticism when participating in sports. Such women's experiences provide a lens for understanding how they sometimes found it pleasurable to challenge dominant gender codes of behavior for women.

Clara Manga criticized men who objected to women's sports and blamed a "rude and unkind" public for opposing their involvement, rather than women's laziness, as others had. Manga lamented the lack of a female referee in a netball match and urged women to "rise to the call and come forward to improve women's sports in an Independent Cameroon."[13] The *Cameroon Times* ran a letter from a reader from Limbe who, while agreeing women should referee netball matches, ultimately argued that "women cannot officiate without the help of men for they cannot take a firm decision when officiating in any sports competition." The author pointed to women's previous officiating of netball matches, which, in the author's opinion, went poorly.[14] The letter implied that women referees in the 1960s, like those of their contemporary global counterparts, face sexism because of their leadership positions in a patriarchal sports world. Thus, female referees may be "seen as deviant in these male-defined roles."[15] Clearly, as women crossed—or challenged—cultural barriers to their participation in athletics, the role of gender and authority in sports informed perspectives about leisure, femininity, and citizenship duties in Anglophone Cameroon.

In the 1960s and 1970s, formally educated urban Anglophone Cameroonians endeavored to regulate forms of leisure and expressivity by women to show that Cameroon was a socially progressive nation. Consequently, a relationship began between state policy and women's involvement and how they might take pleasure in a leisure activity that brought individual autonomy and communicated the national and global sociopolitical advancement of Cameroon. Discussions of women's involvement in sports evidenced a societal ambivalence about changing gender norms for women. While political elites sought to regulate and monitor formally educated women's leisure activities so that they adhered to recognizably indigenous cultural forms, some women, like Sarrah Agbor, reveled in their physical prowess and used sports to break the boundaries. Today, in Cameroon, women's participation in exercise and organized sports teams continues to signal the social advancement of the nation. When Cameroon's national women's soccer team, the Indomitable Lionesses, qualified for the 2014 Women's World Cup, their coach explained to a BBC reporter its impact on women's social emancipation: "We have more girls playing soccer, we are better organized—with this qualification, many things will change."[16] Indeed, when the Indomitable Lionesses were runners-up at the 2016 Africa Women Cup of Nations, one Cameroonian fan asserted that "Women's football is popular in Cameroon. We all know the team and we know what they do," thus demonstrating how women's use of leisure time continues to be a primary site for the public (de)construction and performance of gender, and nationalism, in Cameroon.[17]

## Notes

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3. Emmanuel Akyeampong and Charles Ambler, "Leisure in African History: An Introduction," in "Leisure in African History," ed. Emmanuel Akyeampong and Charles Ambler, special issue, *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 35, no. 1 (2002): 9, 10, 11; Phyllis M. Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3.

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6. Akyeampong and Ambler, "Leisure in African History," 10.

7. Women's Cameroon National Union, *Faces of the Cameroonian Woman* (Yaoundé, Cameroon: Ateliers Graphiques du Cameroun, 1975), 109.

8. Women's Cameroon National Union, 109.

9. Women's Cameroon National Union, 89.

10. Clara Manga, "Women and Sports," *Cameroon Champion*, May 29, 1962, 3.

11. "Women Too in the World of Sports," *Cameroon Champion*, June 12, 1962.

12. "Boxing Sensation: Woman Licks Male Opponent," *Cameroon Times*, October 6, 1964, 1.

13. Manga, "Women and Sports," 3.

14. "Women Are Incapable Referees," letter to the editor, *Cameroon Times*, July 15, 1967, 2.

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16. "Nigeria Reclaim African Women's Title," BBC Sport, October 25, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/29739296.

17. "Africa Women Cup of Nations Kicks Off in Cameroon," *Guardian*, November 20, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/20/africa-women-cup-of-nations-cameroon-opening-ceremony-football.