


# ***Garçons Manqués* and *Femmes Fortes*: Two Ambivalent Figures of Butch Lesbianism in Women’s Football in Cameroon**

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**Abstract:** With the enactment of anti-homosexuality laws in the 1960s, Cameroon’s government officially endorsed heterosexualist ideologies which legitimize the alienation and criminalization of minority and nonconforming sexual and gender identities. One group, the so-called *garçons manqués*, embodies the stigmatized masculine or “butch” lesbian identity. The political management of lesbianism in Cameroon is ambivalent, however, with respect to sport, and particularly regarding the national pastime, football. Whereas masculine lesbians are routinely branded as “butches” or “sexual predators” who threaten African hetero-patriarchy, “strong women” (*femmes fortes*) are celebrated as pivotal to the national ambition. Cameroon’s government strategically amalgamates both heteronationalism and homonationalism in the interest of national pride.

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**Résumé:** Avec la promulgation de lois anti-homosexualité dans les années 1960, le gouvernement camerounais a officiellement souscrit aux idéologies hétérosexualistes qui légitiment l'aliénation et la criminalisation des identités sexuelles et de genre minoritaires. Un groupe, les soi-disant garçons manqués, incarne l'identité lesbienne masculine ou « butch » stigmatisée. La gestion politique du lesbianisme au Cameroun est cependant ambivalente vis-à-vis du sport, en particulier le football qui est un passe-temps national. Alors que les lesbiennes masculines sont systématiquement qualifiées de « garçons manqués » ou de « prédateurs sexuels » menaçant l'hétéro-patriarcat africain, les « femmes fortes » sont plutôt célébrées comme le pivot de l'ambition nationale. Le gouvernement camerounais fusionne stratégiquement à la fois l'hétéronationalisme et l'homonationalisme dans l'intérêt de la fierté nationale.

**Resumo:** Na década de 1960, ao aprovar um conjunto de leis penalizadoras da homossexualidade, o Governo dos Camarões caucionou oficialmente as ideologias heterossexuais que legitimam a alienação e a criminalização das identidades sexuais e de género minoritárias e contrárias à norma. Um destes grupos marginalizados, as chamadas *garçons manqués*, personifica a identidade estigmatizada das lésbicas masculinas ou “machonas”. O modo de gerir politicamente a questão do lesbianismo é, porém, ambivalente no que toca ao desporto, e em especial no que toca ao passatempo nacional: o futebol. Ao passo que as lésbicas masculinas são quotidianamente apelidadas de “machonas” ou de “predadoras sexuais”, acusadas de serem em causa o patriarcado heterossexual africano, as “mulheres fortes” (*femmes fortes*) são enaltecidas como elemento central para as ambições desportivas do país. Para defender o interesse do orgulho nacional, o Governo dos Camarões adota estrategicamente uma mistura de heteronacionalismo e de homonacionalismo.

**Key Words:** women's football; *garçons manqués*; *femmes fortes*; butch lesbianism; female masculinity; heteronationalism; homonationalism; Cameroon

**Mots clés:** football féminin; garçons manqués; femmes fortes; lesbianisme masculin; masculinité féminine; hétéronationalisme; homonationalisme; Cameroun

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## Introduction

Over the past decade, the idea of what the urban popular language in Cameroon generally refers to as *garçon manqué* has fueled nativist discourses on unconventional sexual and gender identities, notably female masculinity and butch lesbianism. This concept makes for interesting discussion, because it embodies the figure of an equivocal tomboyism that can be either rejected or tolerated, integrated or excluded. Initially, the term “garçon manqué” or “tomboy”<sup>1</sup> was commonly used to describe a woman who displays a masculine manner and physical appearance. But with the growing stigmatization of unconventional sexual and gender identities in this country (Human Rights Watch 2010; Ladö 2011:921–44; Ndjio 2016, 2012), this notion has been

substantially redefined to the point that it is now associated with a lustful and predatory butch lesbian.<sup>2</sup>

Breaking with this nativist representation of gender and sexuality, this article uses the term “*garçon manqué*” in reference to those young masculine women who play football on Cameroon’s national women’s team. These women not only challenge the local men in a moral economy of virility, but also act to destabilize their government’s heterosexualist ideologies, which generally associate football with a hegemonic heterosexual masculinity.

This article analyzes the Cameroonian state’s ambivalent relationship with butch lesbianism, which is considered to be prevalent in the women’s football milieu in a number of African countries (Adjepong 2019; Owusua Dankwa 2009:192–205; Pelak 2010). This ambivalence is compounded by both official and popular discourses that often depict masculine female players as butch lesbians or associate tomboyism with lesbianism. This suggests that, contrary to some queer theorists who conceptualize gender and sexuality as two distinctive analytical categories, both Cameroonian officials and the general public instead tend to conflate them, even though many may be aware of the fact that the performativity or expression of a certain type of gender does not necessarily imply an inclination toward a particular kind of sexuality.

Some critics of the prevalent discourse on “African homophobia” have emphasized the tactical and calculated deployment of anti-homosexual rhetoric by many African regimes, which often use sexual minority groups as scapegoats for their bad governance (Hoad 2007). In line with this theoretical approach, this article challenges the often-polarized interpretation of current African sexual politics (Essien & Aderinto 2009; Mendos 2019). Such a biased reading has led to an ideological and arbitrary differentiation between the so-called “gay-friendly” or “homo-tolerant” African regimes and those generally labeled as “homo-intolerant” or “homophobic” (Aken’ova 2010; M’baye 2013; Nyeck & Epprecht 2013; Bosia & Weiss 2013; Gunkel 2013; Morgan & Wieringa 2005).

This article also challenges the pervasive idea about the assumed inflexible sexual bigotry of many contemporary African regimes (HRW 2010; Thoreson 2014). Such a line of reasoning tends to obscure the fact that the sexual governmentality enacted by these governments opportunistically and tactically alternates between heteronationalism and homonationalism, and homo-negativity and homo-tolerance, or between rejection and acceptance, repression and laxity toward subjects with nonconforming sexual and gender identities. This study uses the example of young butch lesbian football players from Cameroon to show that the official promotion of heteronationalist ideologies does not preclude a tactical adoption of homonationalist stances, and especially a strategic normalization of a certain form of non-normative sexual and gender identity. In the same line, the forging of a heterosexual citizenship as well as an imagined heterosexual national community by the postcolonial Cameroonian state has paradoxically engendered two distinctive forms of butch lesbian subjectivity: on the one hand, a so-called “*garçon manqué*” who is often an object of both administrative and juridical

persecutions because she represents the figure of an assertive and a non-compliant lesbian woman whose alleged unbridled sexuality threatens the dominant hetero-patriarchal sexual order promoted by the state; and on the other hand, a more acceptable “femme forte” or “superwoman,” whose lesbianism is often excused and even incorporated within the heterosexual national community. She is politically tolerated and even officially celebrated because she represents a “civic” and “patriotic” homosexual woman whose masculine character is seen as an important asset in the government’s ambition to achieve success in international sports arenas.

As far as data collection methods are concerned, the research for this article used ethnographic methods along with secondary sources, including scholarly literature, newspaper and official reports, and public statements, to illuminate the ambivalent treatment of masculine lesbian football players by Cameroonian officials. Secondary data obtained from the archives of the Ministry of Sport and Physical Education and the Cameroon Football Federation (FECAFOOT), the country’s football governing body, were also consulted for the review. During field investigation conducted in 2015 and again in 2018 in the country’s major cities (Douala and Yaoundé), I followed a number of cases in the different state courts for homosexual offenses which highlighted how the juridical power in Cameroon often dealt harshly with masculine lesbian women. As far as women’s football is concerned, I conducted a series of in-depth interviews with some key stakeholders. This included four senior officials of the FECAFOOT and the ministry in charge of sport, and three former staff members of the national women’s football squad. I also had informal discussions with both former and active players of the women’s national team who were based in Europe and North America. Unfortunately, I failed to interview the female football star Gaëlle Enganamouit, who did not respond to my requests for an interview, despite multiple attempts.

Though I undertook some face-to-face interviews and held two group discussions with members of some local LGBTIQ associations, much of my data collection was based on online ethnography, which offered me opportunities to chat online with a number of informants, sometimes on webcam or skip. I often used a different username or hid my personal heterosexual identity behind the open profile of some of my gay or lesbian “friends” when it was necessary.

### **Butch Women Football Players: Discipline and Punish the “Sexual Others”**

Historically, football has always been fraught with ambivalence throughout the formerly colonized societies of West and Central Africa. As Patrick Hutchison has argued about the politicization of football under British colonial rule, this once male-dominated sport was used by the British colonizers as a means of fostering a “sense of discipline and hard work,” and especially of reinforcing control over the dominated male populations (Hutchison 2009). At the same time, football played a crucial role in the

nationalist project to forge a collective national identity (Bancel & Combeau-Mari 2014; Darby 2002).

Cameroon provides an interesting example. Though football was introduced into the country by western colonial settlers in the early 1920s, the creation in the late 1940s of the first local football teams by some native Duala elites was inspired by the nationalist movement led by the *Union des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC), a nationalist party which was fiercely opposed to the French colonial administration (Deville-Danthu 1997; Ebanga-Mballa 2009). This means that in Cameroon, football was initially represented both as a symbol of colonial domination and as an expression of nationalist resistance against the French colonial power (Clignet & Stark 1974).

It is against this historical backdrop that one can understand why the engagement of masculine women in football is generally contentious. In Cameroon, as in a number of other African countries, women's football is often promoted because it falls within the framework of the "empowerment of women" and "gender equity" policies endorsed since the late 1980s by the governments of Cameroon and other African states. At the same time, women's football often elicits disquiet from football officials as well as the general public because it intensifies the precariousness of masculinity (Adjepong 2019; Saavedra 2004:225–53). This anxiety is compounded by the fact that some women players are purported or self-identified butch lesbians, who are often suspected of using their participation in football to compete with men, not only within a moral economy of lusty machismo but also by seducing other players, including (assumed) heterosexuals.

It is because of the disturbing presence of open or perceived lesbian players within the women's football milieu that football officials in Cameroon have always been concerned with disciplining the sexual behavior of the young women who play football. As a matter of fact, women's football is one of the few, if not the only, sports where the sexual conduct of the players is constantly monitored or controlled by the governing body or is regularly entangled into a general policy of surveillance and discipline. This challenges the phallographic and masculinist vision of football as an arena for tough, audacious, and aggressive men. Women's football may not be the only sport in Cameroon where female players often spend much of their time together, share a certain intimacy, or are even involved in *amitiés érotiques* or erotic friendships (Blackwood & Wieringa 1999; Rupp 2009; Faderman 1998 [1981]). Yet it is certainly one of the few sports activities which displays all sorts of prejudices about players, notably those who embody ascribed masculine characters.

Indeed, a nativist imagination of women's football as a game that is mainly practiced by masculine women with homosexual proclivities has increased the negative perception of women football players, who are often labelled as *deux doigts* or *tantouses* (slang for masculine lesbians in the local popular language). It is alleged that their unbridled sexuality might get out of control if it is not tamed or otherwise squelched. One can understand why the non-normative gender and sexual identities of masculine women football

players have always been an object of great concern to a number of government or football officials from Central and West Africa. This also explains why these governments are constantly engaged in stringent policies of control and policing of the sexual behavior of these masculine women players, as they are seen to embody the image of a sexually perverse butch lesbian who might spread immorality and sexual perversion within the women's national football squad (Adjepong 2019).

There have been sustained efforts by Cameroon's football officials to eliminate from women's football the so-called "homosexual peril" which allegedly hampers the development of this sports activity within the country (Nyck 2010:85–89). For example, in the wake of the government's aggressive actions to halt the propagation of homosexual behavior within women's football, ministerial instructions have been given to the managers of various national women's football squads to constantly keep an eye on their "girls," and especially to discipline and punish any player who transgresses the government-mandated ethical code of sexual conduct that has been enacted to guide the players' behaviors and attitudes.

For example, on November 17, 2015, *Mutations*, one of the most widely read Cameroonian newspapers, published an article that voiced the concern of Cameroon's football management with the so-called immoral sexual behavior of some players on the national women's football team, known as the Lionesses. In that article, Enow Gatchou, at that time the head coach of the team, was quoted as saying that "there is no place for lesbianism in the national women's football squad." He reportedly added that "lesbian players should do their things *ailleurs* (elsewhere) and not in the national squad," which he described as "a respectable team that promotes moral values and civic behavior among players." He also reminded his "girls" that any player who joins the national football team should bear in mind that Cameroon's government strongly opposes homosexuality and that the staff management has received strict instructions to expel from the national team any player found guilty of lesbian behavior.

Mr. Gatchou's *mise en garde* followed a series of sexual scandals that rocked the national team to the point of upsetting the training program of the Lionesses, who were busy preparing for the AFCOM women's football match which Cameroon was planning to host in June 2016. Reports from several local tabloids suggested that there were recurrent tensions among former lesbian partners who were regularly involved in brawls. It was also reported that some young players were complaining of being sexually harassed by their senior teammates, who threatened them with violence if they dared to reveal their locker room's secrets. Less than a week after these incidents, three players were officially dismissed from the national team. Although the press release read on the main state-controlled radio and television (CRTV) used the metaphorical expression of *conduites inappropriées et indécentes* (inappropriate and indecent conduct) to justify the expulsion of these players from the women's national team, many people assumed their eviction was related to homosexual behavior.

One former women's football staff member, who is now a top-ranking official at the Ministry of Youth and Sports, once justified the tight monitoring of sexual behavior of the masculine-presenting female players by invoking their alleged unbridled sexuality. During an interview he granted in his office in Yaoundé, he made these comments:

With these girls who often do “dirty things” with each other, anything can happen if you are not vigilant enough. You have to constantly watch them so as to avoid any scandal. We all know that some of our female players are lesbians who do not even hide their homosexuality and are sometimes open about it. We are also aware of the fact that many players who are *garçons manqués* often “disturb” (*pertuber*) other players who are not lesbians like them. If you are not strict with such players with unbridled sexual behavior, they might sow disorder within the team. That is why the first thing we do when we welcome these young girls in our team for the first time is to remind them that they have to behave appropriately and decently, otherwise they will be dismissed from the group. (NK, interview with the author, Yaoundé, May 24, 2018)

In other respects, Cameroon's football officials have tried to “normalize” the sexual behavior of masculine players on the national women's football team. This policy has often involved the imposition of compulsory heterosexual norms on those women who present a nonconventional gender appearance; they are often coerced into adopting more conventional heterosexual behaviors, attitudes, and mode of dress. The “normalization” of the sexual and gender identity of these so-called cross-gender players often means encouraging them to conform to a normative women's dress code during official ceremonies or to engage in more conventional heterosexual relationships. For example, one former player of the Lionesses, a thirty-six-year-old woman with a masculine appearance, recalled the obsession of some football managers with feminizing the behavior of some of the more masculine players through conventional women's dress: “We were required to dress like a woman. The manager did not like it when some of us dressed like men. He kept reminding us that we were above all women and not men” (JT, interview with the author, Paris, March 12, 2018).

According to the same informant, to prevent the appearance of homosexual (mis)conduct among purported lesbian players, and especially to protect the so-called innocent heterosexual players from their allegedly dangerous butch lesbian teammates, the Lionesses' management did not hesitate to separate players with non-normative sexual and gender identities from their “normal” fellow players. Football officials also managed the sleeping arrangements in order to enforce a separation between players considered heterosexuals and those perceived as lesbians. This generally happened when the team traveled abroad or was sequestered in a training camp. For example, each time the team was housed in a hotel or a guest house, the allegedly “oversexed” masculine players were generally put in separate

rooms, so as to avoid any intimate contact with their heterosexual and “normal” fellow players. On some occasions, these purportedly lesbian athletes were lodged in single rooms by themselves, while the other players shared double rooms. The football management often justified their discriminatory policy by stating that if these women with unconventional sexual and gender identities were allowed to share a room together, they might participate in homosexual acts.

The above comments suggest that women’s football clubs at large and particularly national women’s football squads have become places where a dominant political and administrative order attempts not only to enact a certain heterosexualist ideology but also strives to squelch women’s homosexuality, which is generally seen as a threat to both the development and social “normalization” of women’s football in Cameroon. Moreover, because of a general tendency to (homo)sexualize the bodies of masculine women football players, both the local women’s football clubs and the national women’s football squads have become spaces where football managers and trainers endeavor to suppress the open expression of homosexual activity among players or to marginalize players who display a so-called “butch lesbian identity.”

In other respects, the attempts by state officials to heterosexualize the sexual conduct of the Lionesses is justified by the fact that international women football players at large (like their male counterparts) generally are expected to embody the image of good and moral heterosexual citizens as projected by the Cameroonian government. This heterosexualization of international women players is a result of the politicization of football in Cameroon since its independence in 1960 (Ntonfo 1994). As Anima Adjepong has also argued in the case of Ghanaian sportswomen, the politicization of football as both the embodiment of an anti-colonial nationalist project and the reinforcement of a postcolonial hetero-patriarchal society has led to the official projection of the national women’s football team members as “national representatives.” These so-called “civic” and “responsible” sportswomen are expected to comply with the government-promoted ideals of appropriate, respectable, and exclusively heterosexual femininity (Adjepong 2019).

### **Postcolonial Representation of Female Masculinity and Butch Lesbianism**

To have a better understanding of both the hypersexualization of the unconventional physical appearance of young masculine women football players as well as the inscription of their bodies in a metaphysics of difference, it is important to recall the biological conception of gender and the heterosexualist vision of sexuality by Cameroon’s government (Abega 2007), which incorporates ideas from both the African patriarchal societies and the western colonial powers. As a number of studies have pointed out, most of these institutions developed and sustained a biological and genital



conception of gender that established a dichotomy between women and men, female and male, on the basis of their assumed physical differences (Amadiume 1987; Epprecht 2005; Hoad 2007; Tamale 2011). While men were attributed masculine and virile characteristics, women were conversely associated with femininity, which was generally conceived of as weak and passive, the opposite of masculine. In this line of thought, nonbinary (such as gender queer or gender fluid) or ungendered (agender or genderless) categories were dismissed as abnormal or contrary to nature. This anatomical understanding of gender has inspired a heterosexualist vision of sexuality, resulting in a political construction of two distinct sexual and gendered subjectivities: a libidinal and virile African straight man, to whom one analyst has referred as the Muntu (Ndjio 2012:609–31), and a sexually passive and submissive heterosexual African woman.

More importantly, this biased representation of sexual and gender roles has contributed either to the subordination of women or the alienation and marginalization of people with unconventional or nonbinary sexual and gender identities in many African societies. This is the case with the masculine-appearing lesbian, who is often perceived as the antithesis of the passive and docile African woman, who has even been elevated by a certain nativist and Africanist literature to the rank of a muse (Senghor 1945).

In Cameroon, as in a number of other African countries where nonbinary gender and sexual expressions are generally condemned as un-African or as representing sexual and gender aberrations imported from the West (Aarmo 1999:255–80; Epprecht 2004, 2008), queer people are often branded as traitors to the nation. The alienation of these sexual minorities as well as the violent problematization of their transgressive sexual and gender roles has been exacerbated by the state's nationalist project to forge a heterosexual (imagined) national community (Ndjio 2012:609–31, 2016:115–36).

Since the mid-1960s, the government's dismissal and denial of nonconforming sexual and gender identities has led to the enactment of a number of legislations that outlaw both male and female same-sex sexuality by making such behavior a criminal offense liable to severe penalties. For example, article 347(bis) of Cameroon's penal code, which was first adopted in September 1967 and revised in September 1972, imposes a punishment of imprisonment from six months to five years and a fine ranging from 20,000 FCFA (USD40) to 200,000 FCFA (USD400) for any person who is convicted of consensual same-sex sexual acts.

Moreover, in the wake of the collective homophobic paranoia triggered by the emergence in the early 2000s of an assertive and militant homosexual identity in the national public sphere (Awondo 2010:315–28; Nyeck 2013), in December 2010, Cameroon's government passed new anti-homosexual legislation to deal with what the official rhetoric considered a homosexual threat to the "heterosexual Cameroonian nation"<sup>3</sup>. The implementation of this new sexual policy was accompanied by the political

invention of a “homosexual subject” who is now judicially harassed not only for sexual misconduct but also for actual or perceived “homosexual” look or identity, and sometimes solely on the basis of physical appearance and dress style.

In many respects, the current sexual policies of Cameroon’s government increasingly target a certain “type” of individuals, notably people with a distinctive non-normative sexual and gender identity (Gueboguo & Epprecht 2010; HWR 2010). This is the case of the so-called *garçons manqués* who, like the *filles garçons* (effeminate or female-looking men), seem to be the main victims of Cameroon’s aggressive management of same-sex sexuality and unconventional gender identity.

The recent emergence of an unprecedented form of polymorphous sexual identity that oversteps the boundaries of normative sexual and gender roles has increased the suspicion of the *garçons manqués* as potential butch lesbians, regardless of their actual sexual orientation or identity. This distrust has sometimes led to police harassment and juridical persecution of these women who present a nonforming gender appearance. For example, in an unpublished report, SIDA’DO, a human rights association that provides both healthcare and legal support to LGBTIQ persons in Cameroon, relates several cases of persons who were arbitrarily arrested and detained because they allegedly displayed a homosexual look or because they were suspected of being homosexual. This was the case of Diane Essamba, a twenty-three-year-old masculine-appearing woman who was arrested in the August 2012 by the Yaoundé Juridical Police before being transferred to the Yaoundé Tribunal of 1<sup>st</sup> Instance, where she was finally sentenced to five years in prison for her purported “lesbian appearance”.<sup>4</sup>

The twenty-seven-page report not only provides a wealth of information on how Cameroon’s government deals with people with unconventional gender and sexual identities or treats women who display a *physique d’homme* (male physical appearance); it also indicates how the country’s juridical and administrative system often fabricates its “homosexual criminals” or “butch lesbians” by conflating the sexual orientation and identity of an individual with his or her physical appearance. Indeed, according to the report, much of the accusation of lesbianism leveled against the young woman was based on her alleged masculine look, or *apparence d’homme* (male appearance). In other words, the defender was profiled as a butch lesbian because she exhibited a physical appearance that was administratively and judicially construed as an indicator of her assumed lesbian identity and orientation. Moreover, in the eyes of the *ministère public* (prosecution), the accused embodied the despised image of a woman who is allegedly devoid of the sweetness, fragility, and delicacy which supposedly characterizes a typical African woman (Abega 2007; Senghor 1945).

In other respects, by inferring the accused’s alleged (butch) lesbianism from her masculine manner and look, the prosecution was following the dominant nativist conception of a lesbian woman as a kind of species that is

physically and mentally distinctive from the so-called conventional feminine (heterosexual) woman. In contemporary Cameroonian society, where women with a masculine appearance play a central role in the local representation of lesbianism, only the *garçons manqués* who overtly display masculine manners and physical appearances are generally perceived as lesbians. Conversely, women who do their best to present a feminine appearance are rarely profiled as lesbians. Even though they may be themselves engaged in same-sex relations or are receptive to butch lesbians, these “femmes” are however perceived as ordinary and normal (heterosexual) women.

However, a *garçon manqué* arouses more juridical or police suspicion about her alleged lesbianism when she is involved in football, which has always been considered a “flagship masculine sport, and serving to support and maintain male domination,” as Mari Haugaa Engh (2010:12) has argued in the case of South Africa (see also Hargreaves & Anderson 2014; Pelak 2005, 2010). The data collected in several courts of Douala and Yaoundé indicate that a number of Cameroonian judges often use the participation of some masculine women in the sport of football as evidence of their purported homosexuality. In some cases, being a female football player or expressing a passion for football suffices to be labelled a “lesbian” and even to be condemned for lesbianism.

In 2008, I attended a trial at the Douala Tribunal of 1<sup>st</sup> Instance of two young women who were being prosecuted for lesbianism after the vice squad police broke into their room in the middle of night and arrested them. Though they were both charged with homosexual offenses, the two unfortunate girls were treated differently by the juridical order, which seemed to adopt a double standard policy when it dealt either with a so-called “femme” or a butch lesbian. Indeed, while the more feminine accused was sentenced to one year in prison, her more masculine-appearing sexual partner was condemned to three years’ imprisonment. This discrepancy in the penalties inflicted on the two young women was partly justified by the fact that the defender who presented a masculine appearance was judicially profiled as an active lesbian or a *meneuse* (leader, motivator, or initiator), whereas her more feminine partner was excused as a passive lesbian or simple *suiveuse* (follower or subordinate), as the public prosecutor put it. In other words, the court was less severe with the “girly” *suiveuse*, who was considered a victim of the alleged dangerous “boyish” *meneuse*, who might have dragged her into lesbianism contrary to her will.

The masculine woman’s participation in football might have also prompted her profiling as a butch lesbian. Indeed, when questioned about her occupation, the accused stated that she was a football player. This caused the *procureur général* (public prosecutor) to interpret the young woman’s involvement in football as a *preuve intangible* (intangible evidence)

of her deviant gender and sexual identity. He emphatically put it in these terms:

Well. We are dealing here with a lesbian girl who plays football. Mr President, the prosecution does not even need to produce any evidence about the homosexuality of the accused; she has just confirmed her own homosexuality by stating that she is a football player. We can even see it on her physical appearance which is different from that of the other defender who looks like a *normal* (my emphasis) woman. A woman who is a footballer already has natural inclinations (*tendances naturelles*) for homosexuality. We all know that football is primarily a game for men and that those women who play football are generally lesbians who act like men. I have no doubt that it is this woman with a male appearance (*femme à l'apparence masculine*) who has brought the other girl into homosexuality. She is a real initiator (*vraie meneuse*), while other girl is just a follower (*suiveuse*) who has probably been manipulated by her dangerous and perverse friend. Mr President, the prosecution requests heavy penalties against the meneuse and less severe sanctions against the suiveuse."

This arbitrary and biased construction of a butch lesbian identity on the basis of the woman's participation in football has also been noted by other African queer scholars. In one article about the paradoxes that exist in women's football in Ghana, the anthropologist Anima Adjepong reveals how she was stopped in December 2016 at Accra's Kotoka International Airport by two border patrol agents, who asked if she was a football player. This sexist question was prompted by the fact that she displayed a masculine appearance. In the local imagination of non-normative sexual and gender identity, this indicates a natural inclination for football. Yet the question, "Are you a footballer?" that was asked to her sought comprehensive information not about her profession or hobby, but rather about her assumed (unconventional) sexual and gender identity that might have disturbed the two police officers. As she argues, this question reveals above all a "slippage between sportswomen's masculinity and the specter of the mannish lesbianism" (Adjepong 2019) that has always haunted postcolonial African society at large. No wonder that the unfortunate woman was subsequently questioned about her gender and sexual orientation before being allowed to check into her flight.

The two cases referenced above not only highlight the stereotyped representations of masculine women football players whose non-normative sexual and gender identities induce what Judith Butler calls a "gender trouble" (Butler 1990), which blurs a traditionally fixed gender line between the world of masculinity and that of femininity. They also illustrate the connection that some representatives of state power in Africa often make between non-conforming gender, dissident sexuality, and women's participation in football<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, both cases demonstrate how in some Central and West African countries both the juridical and administrative orders sometimes endorse the popular conception of manliness in women's football as an expression of a certain form of butch lesbianism.

## International Lesbian Football Players: The Good “Femmes Fortes” and Patriotic Homosexuals

Despite the fact that in most African countries, football officials are generally prone to stigmatizing so-called lesbian players, who are construed as a danger to heterosexual players as well as an affront to the social order, the Cameroon women’s football team includes more homosexual players than any other national women’s team. The tradition of recruiting openly or self-identified homosexual players or players who display a masculine lesbian look by Cameroon’s team has created the popular belief that the Lionesses has become a squad for garçons manqués and tantouses. After watching the muscular and athletic players of the Lionesses singing the national anthem on television during an international football match, a friend of mine made these troubling comments: “Why does the management of the national women’s football team only select lesbian players in our national team? Didn’t they see any feminized player who could give a more feminine image to our national team? Honestly, our country deserves to be better represented with more conventional and feminine football players than with these players who are neither women nor men.” He further blamed Cameroon’s football authorities for saturating the national women’s football team with players with a highly masculinized physical appearance.

Reflecting on the masculine character of most of these Lionesses and their un-feminine physical appearance, it does seem as if the management of the national women’s football team tends to recruit women who display characteristics or attributes that digress from femininity and femaleness. In addition, acknowledging the fact that a great number of Lioness players are either masculine women or often self-identified lesbians, it is tempting to conclude that both female masculinity and butch lesbianism seem to be the main criteria that determine or influence the selection of players for the national women’s football team. As a matter of fact, while most European and North American coaches and managers primarily look for more technical, talented, and tactical players, in Africa at large the emphasis is conversely on the physical, sporty, and athletic qualities of players. One Cameroonian women’s football trainer once rationalized why football management tends to select female players with masculine appearance in these terms:

Football is such a physical game that requires a particular type of players. If you play only with *women* (my emphasis) you will lose the game. You will not be successful because every team will beat you. You need tough players who are robust, strong like men. You need athletic player who can take up the physical challenges. That is why we *muscle* (to make the player gain more muscles) our players so as to make them become stronger and more powerful. (SK, personal communication, Yaoundé, May 17, 2018)

These comments remind me of the comments made by one young aspiring female football player from Douala, who failed to realize her football

dreams because she was not tough enough to become a professional player. At the time, she was a twenty-one-year-old undergraduate student from the University of Douala; she blamed football's management for privileging more physical players at the expenses of weaker and less robust players such as herself. Although she was praised for her quickness and technical skill, she was never accepted on the national team. She was told that she was *trop légère* (too light) and *faible* (weak) to be selected for the Lionesses, whose players are often physically the antithesis of the culturally idealized image of a weak and soft African woman. She explained her failure to be selected in these terms:

Apparently when you are not a mannish lesbian or when you don't look like a man, you stand a little chance to be selected for the national team. I personally was barred from the selection because I was too fragile and feminized to be a good player. The coach told me that women like me could not find a place within the Lionesses where they need players who are more athletic and robust. (MC, personal communication, Douala, February 14, 2019)

As a matter of fact, with her 1, 59 meter (5.22 feet) height and her 52 kg (115 lb.) of weight, it would have been a real challenge for this delicate twenty-one-year-old girl to compete against the other female players who are generally tall and muscular and who embody what some Cameroonians often call *sac de muscles* (bag of muscles).

The disgruntled young female player might be excessively biased in her explanation of her failure to achieve her dreams of joining the Lionesses. However, anyone who has had the opportunity to watch African women's football players might agree with her that African women's football managers generally select a certain type of female athlete for their national teams, choosing women who embody characters and qualities such as athleticism, muscularity, and power.

In a highly competitive game such as football, which often dramatizes a symbolic war between nations, football managers need strong, vigorous, and robust players who are able to compensate for a lack of talent and technical skills with their exceptional physical strength, or who could offer a physical resistance to more technical, skillful, and gifted players from the northern world-class football nations. Moreover, to outplay some of the big western teams, the national women's football teams of these African countries need to rely not on soft and highly feminized players who are most likely to be outpowered by more professional players from the northern hemisphere, but rather on powerful, masculine players. Female players who are tough, strong, and athletic are the much-sought-after type of athletes who are needed to take the national women's football teams to the international level, and who might be able to deliver some stunning wins over world-class teams such as The Netherlands, Germany, France, Japan, and the US. That is why in their search for players who are able to withstand the competition with tough

adversaries and challenges, African football's officials generally idealize hyper-masculine female players. Moreover, in the battle for supremacy in women's football in Africa, many team managers use masculine players not only to assert their team's superiority against their rivals but also to intimidate their opponents. They are also aware that players who reject normative heterosexual practices eliminate the potential problem of unwanted pregnancies, which could dissolve or break the team's cohesion or interrupt a player's ability to finish the season.

Some of the more masculine or self-identified lesbian players who make up Cameroon's national women's football squad have even risen to the level of stardom and become national icons. This is the case of the Cameroonian women's football superstar Gaëlle Enganamouit. Following the outstanding performance of the Lionesses at the 2015 FIFA women's World Cup, where she emerged as one of the tournament's best players and top scorers, the very athletic female football player became one of the country's most sought-after athlete in any sport. Beverage and mobile telephone companies and other local corporations have been competing with each other to secure an exclusive contract with the now thirty-two-year-old athlete, who has come to symbolize the renaissance of Cameroon's football and sport at large. Over the past four or five years, she has appeared in several commercials which celebrate the image of a strong, powerful, athletic female football player who embodies an idealized masculinity rather than the expected femininity.

During the time when Gaëlle Enganamouit was attaining the status of a national hero and was celebrated as an inspiring role model for national female youth, her homosexuality was an open secret for many Cameroonians, many of whom refer to her as the *mec des filles* (the boyfriend of young girls) or derisively call her "Monsieur Gaëlle." All of these contemptuous terms make reference to her alleged butch lesbianism or unconventional sexual and gender identity. Prior to her rise to fame and stardom, some local tabloids featured a series of sexual scandals, which involved several top players of the national female football team. Recently, there have been a number of leaks disclosing intimate pictures and videos in which the football star seemed to be romantically engaged with another young girl she presented in one video as her *cherie* (mistress or lover), with whom it was stated that she formed a "very romantic couple."

Yet Gaëlle Enganamouit is not the only (butch) lesbian player on the national women's football team. On social media, I have also come across some salacious pictures showing two well-known Lionesses kissing or cuddling each other in either a hotel or a dressing room. While some international players might be more discreet with regard to their sexual relationships, others are not reluctant to publish pictures of themselves enjoying the intimate company of their girlfriends or female lovers on their Facebook or Instagram pages.

Moreover, during the official reception for the Lionesses at the presidential palace by the head of the state in July 2016, I witnessed a scene that is representative of how Cameroon's government often excuses, tolerates, or

ignores certain type of lesbianism. The event pointed particularly to a more tolerant and permissive attitude by Cameroon's officials toward prominent masculine female football players. While some players tried, through their feminine clothes, to present a more feminine image, many of their self-identified lesbian teammates instead chose to dress like men and did not hesitate to exhibit through their cross-dressing their unconventional sexual identity and orientation. This sexual and gender transgression was expressed before the very eyes of the Cameroonian head of state and a hundred special guests who came to congratulate these new national heroes who, according to Cameroon's president, represented the "pride of the whole nation" and embodied the image of a "Cameroon *qui gagne*" (a Cameroon that is successful).

Yet neither the government officials nor the football authorities made any comments on the masculine attire of these female players, who seemed to take pride in exhibiting in public both their sexual and gender difference. Even the local sensationalist tabloids did not make any reference to the fact that most of the key players of the Lionesses were dressed in men's attire, which seemed to confirm their unconventional sexual orientation. Instead, most of the official comments and statements recorded by the reporters of the state-controlled television CRTV commented only on the women's exceptional football talent, particularly the athletic and mental qualities of these masculinized women players, who were now referred to by such names as "Amazons," *femmes lions* (lion women), *femmes fortes* (strong women), *femmes combattantes* (women with a fighting spirit), *filles vaillantes* (brave and courageous girls), *joueuses talentueuses* (talented female players), and *lions au féminine* (feminine lions). Both the unconventional cross-dressing and extravagant hairstyles of these masculine women players were metaphorically framed as a *look singulier* (singular look) or *style particulier* (particular style) of players *aux physiques hors-normes* (exceptional physical aptitudes), as two cabinet ministers who attended to the reception ceremony phrased it when they were interviewed by a local TV channel.

In many respects, unlike the traditionally despised and ostracized *garçons manqués*, the officially acclaimed *femmes fortes* who were honored as football heroes and heroic patriots by Cameroon's state officials symbolized a figure of the heroic, combative, and brave butch lesbian players.

### **Butch Lesbian Football Players: Between Heteronationalism and Homonationalism**

It is necessary here to clarify the two key concepts that guide my analysis: heteronationalism and homonationalism. I use the term "heteronationalism" to refer to a kind of sexual ideology that represents the national community as fundamentally heterosexual, and therefore condones a political practice that allows for the political exclusion and the juridical persecution of citizens with noncompliant or divergent gender and sexual identities. This term also accounts for the way heterosexual norms



and values are mobilized by the state power to define the nation-state or to serve its nationalist goals. As far as homonationalism is concerned, although I borrow this notion from Jasbir Puar, my reading is quite different from hers. Contrary to what she argues about the US neoliberal policy in regard to gay rights (Puar 2007), by homonationalism I mean in this essay a political practice by which the state power grants respectability to some homosexual subjects who have been successful in the defense of the nation's pride, and rewards them with visibility and social recognition.

As already alluded to in the introduction of this essay, in a number of countries of West and Central Africa, the management of lesbianism in women's football is generally marred by contradiction and ambiguity. This ambivalence is manifest in a policy that oscillates between rejection and acceptance of women lesbian players, between denigration and celebration of the very same women. Cameroonian officials sometimes deliberately turn a blind eye to the unconventional sexual and gender identities of some of the top players of the Lionesses, despite their unambiguous homosexual identity. This clearly indicates that their (butch) lesbianism is overlooked and even excused when these key players contribute through their outstanding performances to the success of the national women's football team in international competitions. Indeed, in the state officials' consideration of football performance, butch lesbianism ceases to be considered a sin, depravity, or evil, or to be condemned in the name of both traditional African and Christian moral values. Instead, it is viewed as a key asset and perhaps even necessary for achieving good results in women's football. Likewise, a female masculinity which is generally dismissed as a threat to traditional femininity or perceived as a sign of degradation toward a hyper-masculinity, is now praised as a beneficial quality or positive attribute. Ironically, the very same (heterosexual) femininity that is promoted by Cameroon's government is sometimes viewed in women's football as a hindrance to realizing their athletic goals. As a result, players who do not display this overtly masculine version of femininity are often sidelined by national women's football teams.

In other respects, it is the complex and multifaceted sexual politics of Cameroon's government which rationalizes the state officials' appraisal of masculine members of the Lionesses as "Amazons" or "superwomen." Indeed, Cameroon's politics of sex is fraught with ambivalence because it celebrates heteronormativity as an expression and a marker of national belonging and civic citizenship, but at the same time, it allows for the profiling of some unaccommodating masculinized women players as *deux doigts* or *tantouses*, who are sometimes ostracized or prosecuted when their sexual and gender dissidence is perceived as a threat to the heteronormativity which the government promotes. Conversely, to bolster its (hetero)nationalist project, the state has had to adopt a homonationalist stance which favors the perception of some forms of lesbianism in women's football as tolerable or acceptable, especially when this deviant sexual identity is tied to the *intérêts supérieurs de la nation* (nation's higher interests), the defense of the fatherland, and the nation's pride. Moreover, it is the same nationalist project of

Cameroon's government to build one of the most competitive and successful national women's football teams in Africa that sometimes causes Cameroon's football officials to consider the butch lesbianism of the Lionesses' top players as irrelevant in the players' performance or as something of little importance.

In the previous section, this study related the friendly treatment of some masculine players of the national women's football squad by the Cameroonian authorities. The state's tolerant and permissive attitude toward some cross-gender Lionesses suggests that it is thanks to their success and outstanding achievements in international women's football that the often socially stigmatized and politically excluded homosexual bodies can be homonationalized, as Jasbir Puar (2007) would put it, or can be reintegrated within the imagined heterosexual national community. This points to the ambivalent instrumentalization of football by the Cameroonian authorities to address the burning issue of female masculinity or butch lesbianism. On the one hand, the government officials use women's football not only to implement their heteronationalist project or ambition in sports at large, but also to reinforce their disciplinary regulations of the non-conforming sexuality of self-identified or suspected butch lesbian players. On the other hand, it is thanks to a successful participation of these sexually non-conforming women in international women's football that Cameroon's government manages to normalize their initially disturbing and potentially embarrassing unconventional sexual and gender identities through a political invention of "good," "civic," "patriotic" lesbian football players, who are projected as a reversal figure of the despised and pathologized *garçons manqués*. In other words, it is women's football which enables a variation between heteronationalism and homonationalism with respect to butch lesbianism, or a fluctuating representation of masculine lesbians either as *garçons manqués* or as *femmes fortes*. In addition, women's football is the chief domain where Cameroon's state power not only condones or promotes the expression and performativity of a certain form of "useful" and "patriotic" (female) homosexuality, but also tolerates, excuses, and even approves the presence of unconventional sexual subjects, who are under other circumstances stigmatized, ostracized, and even criminalized. Contrary to the US case discussed by Jasbir Puar (2007), the homonationalist politics and practice of Cameroon's government are incomprehensible without the heteronationalist ideologies which legitimize its anti-gay policies, its tactical and opportunistic acceptance of some forms of deviant sexual and gender identities, and especially its ideological construction of a binary opposition between two distinctive categories of female masculinity, *garçons manqués* and *femmes fortes*.

## Conclusion

An often-ignored paradox at the heart of the sexual politics of a great number of African governments sometimes allows a kind of "useful," "civic" and "patriotic" homosexuality to thrive even in a general context marked by an aggressive anti-homosexual policy. As the Cameroonian case demonstrates,

the official promotion of heterosexualist ideologies that celebrate heterosexual subjects as real civic citizens does not necessarily exclude some forms of tolerance and indulgence toward some non-compliant sexual subjects, and even at times their integration within the national heterosexual community. Using the example of the ambivalent approach to butch lesbianism in the context of women's football by Cameroon's government, this article shows that the very same officials who generally develop a negative attitude toward alleged or self-identified butch lesbian players are, at the same time, willing to condone masculine lesbianism and homoerotic bonds among female players as keys to success and achievement in international women's football. When it comes to the defense of the nation's pride or the state's higher interests, Cameroon's conservative heterosexist government does not hesitate to embrace a homonationalist attitude. This encourages the officials to find ways to minimize or excuse the deviant gender and sexual identity of some lesbian national heroes, as the example of Cameroonian women's football star Gaëlle Enganamouit clearly indicates.

The implication of these findings is that the framing or profiling of some African regimes exclusively in terms of "gay friendly" or "gay foes," "homo-tolerant" or "homo-intolerant" is factually inaccurate and analytically problematic, because it does not take into account the complexity of their sexual governmentality. Moreover, this biased reading of the politics of sex in Africa tends to obscure the fact that even the most radical anti-gay policies are already structured or mediated by both ideological and political differences between one type of homosexuality which is framed as tolerable or supportable by the dominant political order and another which is generally construed as unbearable or intolerable. This study points out the same arbitrary distinction between the so-called "bad," "threatening," and "dangerous" butch lesbians, who are most likely to be chastised, excluded, or alienated from the national heterosexual community, and the purported "good," "civic," and "patriotic" homosexual subjects who can easily be homonationalized, and whose dissident sexual and gender identities can be normalized or accommodated to the point of being integrated within the national heterosexual community.

As the contradictory representation of masculine lesbian football players from Cameroon demonstrates, in its ambition to construct a heterosexual citizenship or to forge a hetero-patriarchal sexual order, the alleged sexually intolerant regime of Biya has created two distinctive categories of butch lesbianism, as symbolized by two major figures: on the one hand, the dreaded, pathologized, criminalized, or demonized *garçons manqués*, who are the object of all kinds of suspicion and prejudices because of their alleged unrestrained sexual behavior, and on the other hand, the familiar and accommodating "*femmes fortes*," who can help the postcolonial Cameroonian state assert its strength and importance on the international stage through the women's football scene. While the former are generally profiled as dangerous nymphomaniac butch lesbians and are often persecuted by the state's repressive apparatuses, the latter are redefined as *femmes fortes* or

superwomen and praised as patriotic citizens who can enjoy legal and political protection by the very same state power. Moreover, both the abnormalization and criminalization of the deviant sexual and gender identity of the masculine women players go along with the normalization and socialization of that of the alleged femmes fortes. This means that the widely debated homo-negativity or homo-intolerance of Cameroon's government (Geschiere 2017; Nyeck 2013) is less ideological than situational or contingent. The variations inherent in the Cameroon state's response to non-conforming gender identities call for a more dynamic approach to studying the sexual politics of many African governments, which are often uncritically branded homophobic or homo-negative regimes, whereas the truth is generally not so clearly defined .

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## Notes

1. On tomboyism or female masculinity, see Halberstam (1998).
2. On the association of tomboyism with lesbianism, see Brown (1999); Halberstam (1998).
3. See for example the Law No. 2010/012 of December 21, 2010, on cyber-crime and cyber security. This legislation criminalizes with imprisonment and/or a fine a person who makes “sexual propositions to another person of the same sex” by electronic communications, and the penalties double if those propositions are followed by sexual acts.
4. SIDA'DO Final report, 22 June 2013, pp. 7–8.
5. Several empirical research studies and theoretical reflections have highlighted the interconnection of gender, sexuality, and sport, notably women's football (Caudwell 1999:390–402; Hargreaves & Anderson 2014).