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(Citation)

Anthropology Today, 39(5):23-27

(Issue Date)

2023-10

(Resource Type)

journal article

(Version)

Version of Record

(Rights)

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<https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14094/0100485156>



Navigating uncertainty

The interplay of ‘magical football’ and ‘football magic’ in Cameroonian football

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Cameroonian's Indomitable Lions (a nickname for the Cameroon national football team) have long captured the world's attention with their extraordinary performances on the football pitch; performances often described as ‘magical’. This magic, however, is two-fold – it encompasses both the incredible skills and tricks displayed by the players (‘magical football’) and the suspected use of supernatural means to enhance performance and influence game outcomes (‘football magic’).

While these concepts are intertwined, they each shed unique light on the strategies employed by the Lions and the broader cultural context in which they operate. This article aims to dissect and explore the interplay between ‘magical football’ and ‘football magic’, investigating how these two contribute to the Lions' success. Our central question is: how do ‘magical football’ and ‘football magic’ intersect, and in what ways do they shape the trajectory and outcomes of Cameroon's football matches?

While ‘magical football’ is relatively straightforward, the ‘football magic’ concept warrants further exploration. Drawing from literature and examples across sports, we see that magic has a longstanding association with athletic competition. Leach and Kildea's film, *Trobriand cricket* (1976), for instance, illustrates how magic can influence the trajectory of a cricket ball or even the weather conditions during a match. This intertwining of magic and sports is not limited to cricket. Pannenberg (2008) and Kovač (2022) have confirmed that witchcraft and magic are central strategies in Cameroon's football culture, often considered vital to securing victories (see also Vidacs 2010: 94-95).

Magic's influence in sports extends across Africa and beyond; Niehaus (2015) highlights the role of magic potions in South African sports, Stroeken (2002) recognizes the importance of magic in African football post-World War II and Herd (2017) generalizes the concept of magic in sports, examining Swedish supporters of Malmö FF as practitioners of magic. However, like witchcraft

accusations, few admit to employing ‘football magic’, making it a covert yet potent element of the sports world (Eto'o 2022).

This article proposes that ‘magical football’ and ‘football magic’ are not separate entities but intertwined phenomena that shape the narrative of football matches. The Indomitable Lions' extraordinary performances, often called ‘magical football’, and the speculated use of ‘football magic’ to bolster these performances, compound supporters' belief in football as a game that transcends technical skill. In this view, the unpredictability inherent in football is not merely a product of physical prowess and tactical strategy but is also influenced by ‘football magic’. This perspective diverges from the common interpretation of sports as ritual (Birrell 1981), offering instead a nuanced understanding of the interplay between natural skill and supernatural influence in football.

Magical football

In prominent competitions such as the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) and the FIFA (Federation Internationale de Football Association) World Cup, Cameroon's Indomitable Lions consistently demonstrate a style synonymous with ‘magical football’. This term captures their exceptional skills and surprising strategies on the pitch. Moreover, their performances often give rise to speculations about their use of ‘football magic’. A prime example occurred during the Lions' game against the Brazilian national team, the Seleção, in the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. Positioned as the underdog, the Lions managed a stunning upset when Vincent Aboubakar scored a goal against World Cup favourite Brazil. This unexpected event, vividly narrated by British football commentator Peter Drury, exemplifies ‘magical football’. It underscores the unpredictable nature of football and lends credibility to the concept of ‘football magic’.

Reflecting on the Lions' underdog position against the Seleção, Peter Drury captured the magic of Vincent

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Fig. 1. Vincent Aboubakar in the Cameroon vs Chile (0-2) game, FIFA Confederations Cup 2017.

1. See Peter Drury's hilarious commentary on Aboubakar's goal against Brazil: <https://youtu.be/GjMd-WicUrc>.

- Africanews* 2022. The 2022 World Cup: Samuel Eto'o fires back at French broadcasters over 'Juju' allegation. <https://www.africanews.com/2022/10/10/2022-world-cup-samuel-eto-o-fires-back-at-french-broadcasters-over-juju-allegation/>.
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Aboubakar's goal: 'Mbekeli! Aboubakar! Ooh Cameroon! From Douala on the Gulf of Guinea to Maroua at its northernmost tip, all points between and beyond rise to celebrate a moment'. This vivid description encapsulates the thrill and excitement of 'magical football', depicting a nation united to celebrate its team's extraordinary feat.

One of Drury's colleagues underscored the remarkable nature of this event, noting that Brazil, which had 'hardly [done] any defending in [the] second half', seemed to have 'gone to sleep when [Mbekeli's cross] came in the box'. This observation suggested an almost hypnotic effect, as if the Lions' play had momentarily spellbound the Brazilian team. Another commentator added a final touch to this memorable scene, remarking: 'He [Aboubakar] is going to be sent off for a second yellow. He leaves with a smile! And he leaves with a memory!'.¹ These comments vividly illustrate the dramatic, unexpected twists that 'magical football' can bring to the game.

Drury's commentary captures the essence of Aboubakar's journey, from his geographical roots in the coastal city of Douala to the savannahs of Maroua. Meanwhile, his colleague underscored the mesmerizing effect of the Cameroonian players' performance, suggesting that they metaphorically put their Brazilian rivals to 'sleep'. The third commentator acknowledged the exceptional skill and memorable performances of Aboubakar and his teammates. Together, these insights paint a picture of a nation pulsating with the excitement of football during significant tournaments and a team capable of spellbinding its opponents with 'magical football'.

The eloquent descriptions provided by the commentators serve as reminders of the unique and enchanting journey of Cameroonian football. Since its inception, it has transcended traditional boundaries in a captivating manner. Embodied by the national Indomitable Lions, Cameroonian football brings together participants, knowledge and strategies from diverse realms: the natural and supernatural, rational and irrational, scientific and superstitious, visible and invisible. Supporters of the Lions and football pundits argue that these realms intersect and synergize during significant moments, such as the match against Brazil. They assert that victory over formidable opponents requires more than talent – blending skill, strategy and elements beyond our typical understanding.

Magical conquerors

Often positioned as underdogs, particularly when facing off against top-tier teams from Europe, Latin America and even Africa, the Indomitable Lions have consistently defied expectations on the football pitch. Their surprising successes have elevated them to the ranks of football wizards, drawing comparisons to legendary players like Pelé and Maradona. The 1990 World Cup in Italy was a grand stage for Cameroon's 'magical football'. The tournament began with a stunning victory over the reigning champions, Argentina, and triumphs against Romania and the Soviet Union. Despite narrowly losing to England in the quarter-finals, the Lions' performance was memorable, mainly due to the magical goals scored by Roger Milla. At 38 years old, Milla had come out of international retirement to join the squad at the personal request of Cameroonian president, Paul Biya. This spectacular performance, the most significant achievement by an African team in World Cup history, led FIFA to increase the Confederation of African Football (CAF) qualifying zone's representation to three teams in the subsequent World Cup.

Fast forward a decade to the Sydney Olympics in 2000, where another chapter of Cameroon's 'magical football' unfolded. A record-breaking crowd of 104,098 spectators at the Olympic Stadium watched as the underdog Lions tri-

umphed over Spain, a team favoured to win. The thrilling match ended in a 2-2 draw after extra time, with Cameroon clinching victory in a penalty shootout. In the semi-final against Chile, Cameroon found themselves a goal down with just six minutes remaining. However, in a magical turn of events, they scored two goals within 300 seconds, securing their place in the final.

The tournament was replete with future football 'magicians', from Spain's Xavi and Puyol to Brazil's Ronaldinho and Adriano, and Italy's Pirlo and Nesta. Yet, the true enchantment came from the Lions themselves. Sixteen-year-old goalkeeper Kameni stunned the football world with his goalkeeping heroics against Brazil. At the same time, players like Eto'o, Etame Mayer, M'boma and Njitap played pivotal roles in securing the gold medal for Cameroon. Their collective performance exemplified the spirit of 'magical football' that has become synonymous with the Indomitable Lions.

The Lions continued to weave their magic during the 2002 AFCON in Mali. Propelled by the goals of Olembé and Foé, they triumphed over Mali, setting the stage for a showdown with Senegal's Teranga Lions. After a two-hour battle at the Stade du 26 Mars Bamako in Mali, the Indomitable Lions emerged victorious, retaining the African Nations Cup trophy. Their victory shattered the home-field advantage of the Stade du 26 Mars Bamako and Nigeria's renowned Surulere stadium two years before. By the tournament's end, Cameroon had joined the ranks of Ghana and Egypt as four-time winners, becoming the first team to retain the cup since Ghana's success in 1965.

Yet, the Lions' 'magical football' performances elicit various reactions. For supporters, these moments inspire joy and pride. For detractors, they may spark controversy or even instigate outright animosity. Such divergence in perceptions underscores football's complex and captivating nature, a sport where magic and reality intertwine.

Football magic

In contrast to 'magical football', 'football magic' refers to invoking supernatural forces to influence match outcomes favourably. Take, for instance, legendary players like Pele, Maradona, Messi and Ronaldo. Their physical prowess has been honed to such a degree that they themselves become magical entities (Mauss 1973), lending an air of invincibility to their respective teams and challenging the norms of football's retirement age. However, even with such magical fitness, victory in every match is not guaranteed.

This is where 'football magic' comes into play. Teams often resort to supernatural aids like charms and amulets or seek counsel with marabouts, to tip the scales in their favour. These practices have recently become particularly associated with the Indomitable Lions, adding another layer to their 'ultra-human' magical reputation on the football field (Lienhart 1961: 28).

The high standards set by the Lions through their 'magical' performances raise expectations. However, questions about their 'football magic' effectiveness inevitably arise when the team falls short of these standards. Geschiere (1997, 2018) argues that witchcraft and sorcery are not antiquated. Instead, they are central to many Africans' sense of 'modernity', serving as a dynamic response to their uncertainties.

For instance, when the Lions failed to qualify for the 2012 AFCON, co-hosted by Gabon and Equatorial Guinea, debates on the efficacy of 'football magic' resurfaced. Randy Joe Sa'ah, a correspondent for the BBC's *Focus on Africa Magazine*, reported on Cameroonian players and officials' enduring belief in and use of purported magical charms. Sa'ah concluded that these charms failed to assist the team in their qualification bid for that year's tournament, even if they had been employed (*BBC News* 2012).



NHK TV 2002



NHK TV 2002



NHK TV 2002

Fig. 2. Carrying and parading a cardboard coffin.
 Fig. 3. Lighting a candle and performing a ritual.
 Fig. 4. Casting a spell to curse the opposing team.

However, drawing on Nyamnjoh (2019) we argue that Sa'ah's analysis overlooked a critical aspect: the intermittent nature of such charms, which 'tend to work only partly and for some of the time' (Nyamnjoh 2019: 281). We also note that Sa'ah failed to acknowledge that, much like football charms, even purportedly more scientific and technical tools like computers and mobile devices offer no guarantees – they too can freeze or malfunction 'just when one needs them the most' (ibid.: 284).

For Cameroonians, who have a rich tradition of intertwining football and magic, Sa'ah's comments were seen as dismissive, reflecting a Western bias that undermined non-Western beliefs and knowledge systems. Critics argued that Sa'ah missed a crucial understanding: in the high-stakes world of qualifiers for a prestigious event like the AFCON, one country's magic might outshine another's.

Furthermore, as a Western media reporter relying on information and communications technology to enhance his reporting, Sa'ah was accused of overlooking his dependence on digital technology. Critics pointed out that his reliance on such technology – to be 'present even in [his] absence and absent even in [his] presence' – was not dissimilar to the beliefs he dismissed as 'witchcraft and magic' (Nyamnjoh 2019: 279). This critique underscores the complexities and nuances inherent in the intersection of culture, belief and sport.

Similarly, just before the 2022 World Cup, Radio France Internationale (RFI) published a controversial article. On 6 October, RFI accused the Cameroonian Football Federation of collaborating with black magicians, or 'juju' men, to enhance their performance in Qatar. According to the report, a Cameroonian spiritualist named Oussen confirmed the allegations:

As the World Cup approaches, several Indomitable Lions players resort to witchcraft, magic, and marabouts, intending to destabilize their opponents. Everyone wants to be selected or be a starter. Thus, players often call on my services for important competitions such as the World Cup or the AFCON to invoke the gods to disturb the opponent. (*Africanews* 2022)

This revelation brought the intersection of 'football magic' and 'magical football' into the global spotlight, sparking a fresh wave of debate and scrutiny.

The role of the RFI journalist in this scenario also bears examination. By utilizing 'the internet, the cell phone, and the smartphone, along with their "magic" and "witchcraft" of instant availability and reachability', the journalist could broadcast Cameroon's 'football magic' to an international audience without any physical travel (Nyamnjoh 2019: 282). This ability to transcend physical boundaries and instantly communicate globally is a form of 'magic' in itself, leading some to label the journalist a 'magician'. This perspective further blurs the line between the mundane and the magical, casting a new light on our understanding of 'football magic'.

Ngando: The magical football mascot

Despite facing criticism from African and Western conspiracy theorists, the Lions' enchanting exploits are made even more vibrant by the lively cheering, chanting and dancing accompanying their matches. Ngando Pickett, a self-taught dancer and the Lions' mascot, is at the heart of this spectacle; he has become a national symbol of the team's good fortune, inspiration and 'magic'. Recognized by the Lions and their fans, Pickett has followed the national team to 18 AFCON tournaments and cheered them on globally since the 1998 AFCON in Burkina Faso.

Cameroon Voice (2011) reported that in 2011 Pickett and his group followed the Lions for over 10 days through various cities during their AFCON qualifier against

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- Senegal. Despite the lack of flights, Pickett was determined to accompany the team, stating, 'I would like to take this road, not because there is no plane, but to restore calm in the Indomitable Lions. The Indomitable Lions should believe that in playing in Dakar, it is like they are playing in Cameroon. That's why I want to do my utmost for us to win this game'. This dedicated spirit exemplifies the passion and belief that infuse 'magical football'.
- In the interview, Ngando shared some of the Lions' victories he had contributed to. He recalled supporting the team during their 2000 African Cup triumph in Ghana and Nigeria. He also remembered his journey to Abidjan in 2005, where he helped the Lions secure a 3-2 victory over Ivory Coast at the Stade Felix Houphouet-Boigny, during the penultimate round of qualifiers for the 2006 World Cup. 'The stadium was full of Ivorians, but I gathered all Cameroonians, harangued, and we won this game' (*Cameroon Voice* 2011), he reminisced.
- Ngando's assertion of the effectiveness of his harangue lends credence to the idea that magic can serve as a tool for self-empowerment and self-expansion. As Nyamnjoh (2019: 283) notes, this 'technology' of magic allows Cameroonian footballers to transcend their ordinary state and compensate for their shortcomings rather than solely relying on their natural abilities. In the end, Ngando's supernaturally charged optimism and the underdog victories he has supported underscore the correlation between Cameroon's remarkable performances and the magic that surrounds them.
- 'Coffin' rituals and other magic**
- Whether magic can enhance the Lions' performance, found an affirmative answer during AFCON 2002 in Mali. This was particularly evident in the victories associated with what has become known as the 'coffin' and 'orange rind' rituals.
- Cameroonian supporters gathered near the stadium on the eve of Cameroon's quarter-final match against Egypt. They paraded through the streets with a cardboard coffin decorated with the Egyptian flag (Fig. 2). This procession culminated at an impromptu funeral chamber in a vacant plot. There, supporters slowly lit candles around the coffin, chanting incantations that predicted the downfall of the Egyptian national team (Figs 3 & 4).
- Attempts to bring the coffin into the stadium were halted by security guards, marking the birth of 'the coffin ritual'. The ritual seemed to bear fruit when the Lions, who had won only four of their 18 major clashes against Egypt between 1983-1997, celebrated a fifth victory against their most formidable African rival. This event further validated the belief among Lions enthusiasts in the potency of their 'football magic' rituals (Gabilondo 2022).
- In the semi-final match against the host nation, Mali, an unusual event unfolded that further underscored the intertwining of magic and football. Thomas N'kono, the Cameroonian goalkeepers' coach, was detained and removed from the field by Malian police due to suspicions of curse-making (Figs 5 & 6). The discovery of a small piece of orange rind was cited as evidence, leading to what we now call 'the orange rind ritual' (Fig. 7).
- CAF responded by imposing a one-year suspension on N'kono for instigating disruption. However, a subsequent press conference featuring AFCON 2002 local organization chairman Sofy Makaguila was cut short when Nigerian journalists protested CAF's decision.
- For Lions supporters and proponents of 'football magic', the 'orange rind ritual' seemed to pay off. The Lions defeated Mali, positioning themselves as favourites to retain the trophy they had won in Nigeria in 2000. This outcome further bolstered the belief in the effectiveness of their 'football magic' rituals (Gabilondo 2022).
- The Lions fans interpreted the reactions of the Malian police and CAF to N'kono's actions as condescending responses to his audacious reappearance and activities, reminiscent of those seen in Senegal and Nigeria during the 2000 African Cup of Nations quarter-final in Lagos, as well as Ghana's and South Africa's prudent actions (*Camillions* 2002).
- These responses align with Geschiere's (2018: 74, 77) suggestion that the danger of witchcraft lies in ignoring its potential to emerge in any context. Its fluidity is the secret of its resilience, promising insight into something that resists understanding and deriving its unique power precisely from its chaos. This concept resonates with the ongoing narrative of 'football magic' as a powerful – albeit misunderstood – force shaping the game.
- Magic beyond borders**
- As noted earlier, the phenomenon of football magic extends beyond Cameroon. An incident during the 2015 AFCON final between Ghana and Ivory Coast at the Bata Stadium in Equatorial Guinea illustrates this. Ghanaian striker André Ayew was spotted sprinkling a substance on the field before the game, an act widely interpreted by football fans as invoking magic or witchcraft. However, the magic seemed to fail on this occasion as Ivory Coast's 'wizards' – Drogba, Touré and Yao Kouassi – led their team to victory over Ghana.
- In Latin America, football magic has also had a significant presence. The 2022 World Cup victory by Argentina, their first in 36 years, was surrounded by rumours of supernatural assistance (Nemer 2022). A group of Argentinian witches joined a WhatsApp group initiated by Antonella Spadafora. They aimed to explore ways to support their national team by harmonizing Argentinian football's natural and supernatural spheres (Nicas & Lankes 2022). This modern twist on 'football magic' shows how it continues to adapt and evolve in the digital age.
- When France faced defeat in the final in Qatar, many fans interpreted it as an unintentional jinx resulting from French footballer Kylian Mbappe's disparaging pre-tournament remarks about Latin American football. He stated: 'South American teams are at a disadvantage because they don't have the same level of competition as European teams. Argentina and Brazil don't participate in high-level matches leading up to the World Cup' (Gabilondo 2022).
- These words, seen as dismissive of Latin American teams' capabilities, were thought by some to have brought about France's unexpected defeat. This incident illustrates how beliefs about the power of words, intention and respect can intertwine with the concept of 'football magic'.
- In August 2022, an intriguing claim came to light when Guinean footballer Mathias Pogba, the older brother of footballer Paul Pogba, made a sensational statement (Gabilondo 2022). He alleged that his younger brother had been employing football magic and witchcraft against Kylian Mbappe. Mathias stated, 'Kylian, I hold nothing against you; my words are for your own good; everything is true and proven. [Pogba's] marabout is well-known! [He is] steeped in witchcraft!' (Sandra 2022). This accusation brings to the fore the complex dynamics and rivalries that can permeate the football world, further highlighting the perceived influence of 'football magic' on the game.
- In football, magic is seen as a powerful tool for transformation and barrier-breaking, fostering self-empowerment and self-expansion. Cameroonians believe this empowerment allows their football champions to surmount formidable opposition. For many Lions supporters, the powers of magic are as reliable as advanced technology, such as activity tracker watches, smartphones, GPS-equipped high-range four-wheel drive vehicles and automatic weapons (Nyamnjoh 2019: 284).



NHK TV 2002



NHK TV 2002



NHK TV 2002

Consequently, the more a football team harnesses magic, the greater its chances of success. As Nyamnjoh (ibid.) suggests, rituals ‘work best in combination’, although they can disappoint when most needed. This perspective underscores the intricate balance and unpredictability inherent in ‘football magic’ usage.

In his analysis of the role of magic in South African rugby, Rubin (2014) posits that science and magic aim to reduce uncertainty. Might this theory hold for the African concepts underpinning 21st-century ‘magical’ football, much like modern devices aim to reduce uncertainty?

Both CAF and FIFA recognize video assistant referee officials, sequestered in a room before a TV screen, as ‘football magicians’. From their remote location, they direct the course of a football match using video clips, calibrated lines and goal-line technology.

Similarly, many Cameroonians and Africans believe that an Argentinian witch or Pogba’s marabout can influence the outcome of a game from their own sanctuaries, also earning the title of ‘football magician’. The difference between these two approaches to influencing football outcomes may not be as significant as one might initially think. This points to an interesting confluence of science and magic in the quest to reduce uncertainty in football.

Conclusion

In this exploration, we have delved into the intertwined concepts of ‘magical football’ and ‘football magic’, providing a glimpse into the rich tapestry that forms Cameroon’s football culture. ‘Magical football’ encapsulates the awe-inspiring grandeur of seemingly impossible technical mastery on the pitch. In contrast, ‘football magic’ is a culturally informed strategy for managing uncertainty through magical interventions, particularly when skills alone might not guarantee a win.

By illuminating these two concepts, we hope to contribute to a broader understanding of how cultures around the world engage with and shape the beautiful game of football. In understanding Cameroon’s position in international football, we can draw upon Malinowski’s (1948) observations of the Trobrianders. This community relied more heavily on magic when embarking on perilous deep-sea journeys – an apt metaphor for Cameroon’s journey in international football.

With fewer resources to secure top international players or access advanced sports science and technology, Cameroon is often cast as the underdog. This position may amplify the team’s informal reliance on ‘football magic’. Like the Trobrianders navigating the tumultuous seas, the Indomitable Lions use ‘football magic’ to reduce uncertainty and navigate the ‘wild seas’ of international competition.

Our study suggests that the unpredictable nature of football outcomes prompts a complex interplay between physical skill, strategic planning and elements that extend beyond our conventional understanding. This interplay raises intriguing questions for future research. For instance, how prevalent is the reliance on ‘football magic’ among other under-resourced teams? Can the application of ‘football magic’ be statistically correlated with success in international football?

As we delve into the mesmerizing world of Cameroon’s ‘football magic’, we invite further enquiry into the fascinating intersection of skill, strategy and the supernatural in sports. By doing so, we hope to expand the discourse on how cultural practices shape and are shaped by the global game of football. ●

Fig. 5. Goal keepers’ coach and police struggle.

Fig. 6. Goal keepers’ coach was arrested.

Fig. 7. The orange rind is found and highlighted.