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Book Review

Un destin foudroyé: Un footballeur dans l'enfer du terrorisme.

By Kodjovi Obilalé. Paris:
Talent Sport, 2015.

Un destin foudroyé: Un footballeur dans l'enfer du terrorisme, written by Kodjovi Obilalé, is a 10-chapter autobiography, the story of the unique professional football journey of a West African child who became the centre of attraction in the aftermath of a terrorist attack.

The book revolves around the attack by the Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda – Military Position (FLEC-PM) aimed at the Togolese national football team bus on its way to the 2010 African Cup of Nations (AFCON) tournament in Angola. While this incident is pivotal, the book also brings to light a spectrum of societal issues and exposes the intricacies which characterise the African football scene. The book discusses childhood challenges in West Africa, with a particular focus on family crises and the resultant child protection crises. These crises often stem from infidelity, polygamy and the erosive influence of patriarchy, which pave the way for defective parenting. These conditions increase the vulnerability of children and expose them to global threats such as child trafficking. Conflicts are common between parents and teenagers who choose sport as profession. To some parents, football is antithetical to success at school, which

is considered the only laudable pathway to greatness. Disciplinary measures against stubborn children can be harsh. Under the instruction of his mother and with the conspiracy of police officers, the author was once even locked up in a police cell. However, these unpromising beginnings to a football career did not deter him. Temerity, hard work and determination led to the achievement of his dream of becoming a professional footballer.

As a footballer, the author noticed the differences between the relatively 'advanced' European football scene with its numerous challenges for aspiring Africans, and the chaotic African football scene, especially in Togo with unethical practices, rapacity and corruption, the manipulation of young footballers by unscrupulous agents, frequent misunderstanding between players and coaches and the impact of this on individual and team performances. The strike by the Togolese players in Germany before their first historical World Cup game against South Korea in 2006 is a case in point. The author also describes certain positive characteristics of African football such as the influence of the solidarity among players in terms of advice and mutual moral support over the performance of young players.

The author describes the militarised state of the border between Congo-Brazzaville and Angola, suggestive of a war situation, and the actual attack by FLEC-PM on the Togolese football team convoy. This incident brought to the fore the ills of African football and the local and global complicities behind these. In addition, this tragedy exposed the crisis of human dignity which characterises football locally and internationally and the conflict between economic rationalities and humanitarian concerns, as well as the existence of football profiteers whom the author calls 'football parasites'. The book also establishes that the Togolese Football Federation, the African Football Confederation (CAF) and Angola, the host country, to a certain degree, were all responsible for the attack. The Togolese Football Federation (FTF) violated one cardinal safety rule of AFCON, that is, travelling by air and not 'heroically' by road as they did through the Cabinda Enclave. The author sees in this choice of the FTF an aspect of the usual corrupt practices which impede the development of football in the country. Furthermore, he decries the attitude of the Angolan authorities, who were aware of the operations of the FLEC-MP in the enclave, but allowed the Togolese delegates to travel by road and provided an inefficient military convoy. The book describes the complexities characterising the relationships between CAF, African football federations and their governments, and FIFA. It also presents how, in football, economic rationalities tend to override humanitarian concerns. The Cabinda Enclave attack points to lingering management inconsistencies showcasing a dehumanising asymmetric relationship between football management bodies

and players, where players at times become simple pawns; after the attack, the author describes being pulled out of the bus like a worthless rabbit.

The book goes on to describe the author's stay in hospital in South Africa; the series of surgical operations he underwent; the nightmares, hallucinations, encounters with the world of the dead and other forms of trauma; the professionalism of the medical personnel; and the fallible role of the media who declared the author dead while he was still alive and receiving treatment. The author's sojourn in Johannesburg also exposed him to stubborn societal problems, such as racism and crime. The book describes the varied support the author received to ensure his return to France for further treatment and rehabilitation. The writing highlights the pains, the frustrations and bitterness of a wounded migrant during his rehabilitation in France, a foreign land at the same time as being his 'home' and 'promised land', despite the 'ordinary small racism' experienced. At the rehabilitation centre, unexpected conviviality helped the author regain an 'appetite for life'; the seemingly hopeless create hope in others. He was, however, not surprised that, in the aftermath of the Cabinda Enclave attack, the solidarity he experienced did not come from his country of origin (Togo), but from elsewhere, from other people.

Following rehabilitation in France, the author describes his eventual return to Togo. This return, although characterised by overwhelming hospitality to a celebrity, was also an opportunity for the author to experience the turpitudes which characterise Togolese society, and the pain endured by vulnerable people. The book further describes the author's ritualistic reconnection with his ancestral roots in his village; he believes that through these rituals, he has set a precedent to help migrant youths living in Europe to turn to cultural practices to end their misfortunes.

This book covers many issues, more than indicated in the table of contents and preface. It presents the life history of a young aspiring African footballer, whose dreams are never more than a mirage after the tragedy en route to national duty. It highlights a number of factors impeding the development of football in sub-Saharan Africa, including corruption, greed, tumultuous childhoods and negative family influences, a lack of proper sport infrastructure and poor leadership. What is slightly disappointing, however, is that the author does not convincingly accentuate the nexus between his turbulent childhood, level of education and misadventure; most of his opinions seem fragmentary, and fail to establish how key events and moments of his life coalesced to contribute to the 'shattered destiny' indicated in the title of the book. Besides, the author does not propose solutions to the thorny issues raised, for instance, local support mechanisms to help injured players.