In October 2016 teachers and lawyers from Cameroon’s Anglophone North-west and Southwest Regions protested against government officials, demanding them to stop appointing Francophone magistrates to preside over Anglophone courts and Francophone teachers to teach subjects other than French. The protest was one dramatic moment in a long history of Cameroon’s “Anglophone problem,” i.e., Anglophone Cameroonians’ claim of being marginalized by an authoritarian state apparatus located in the French-speaking capital Yaoundé. Government security forces violently shut down the 2016 protest, arrested some of the organizers and trade union members, charged them with terrorism, and kept them imprisoned for months. Further protests soon followed. Some demanded a return to a federal state, but as the government continued to refuse to meaningfully negotiate with the protesters, a separatist movement formed, and in October 2017 unilaterally declared the region’s independence from the Republic of Cameroon and established the independent state of “Ambazonia.” The government responded by sending military forces, who used tear gas and shot and killed approximately forty people. In December 2017 the octogenarian president Paul Biya declared war on the separatists. Since then, the crisis has devolved into a full-blown armed conflict, with separatist militias killing security force members and kidnapping officials and government security forces terrorizing the region. Civilians have been caught in the crossfire. By 2021 anywhere between 3,000 and 12,000 civilians have been killed, at least 750,000 have been displaced, more than 200 villages have been burnt, schools have been closed, and numerous instances of rape, kidnappings, torture, and unlawful imprisonment have been reported. Atrocities have been committed by both sides, but evidence indicates that most of the indiscriminate violence has been committed by the government security forces. In 2021 the armed conflict continues, with no clear prospect for resolution (Kewir et al. 2021).

In the face of such immense suffering, a book about Cameroon that focuses on football, spirituality, and migration may sound trivial. Most ethnographic materials for this book have been collected in 2014 and 2015, more than a year before the violence escalated, at a time when, despite the long-standing tensions, an armed conflict of such magnitude seemed unlikely. And yet, the topics and arguments of this book are still relevant.
Firstly, this book provides a perspective on youth and masculinity beyond accounts of “problematic” young men who take part in violence, illicit activities, or armed conflicts. As Cameroonian scholars (for instance, Jude Fokwang and Divine Fuh) have been arguing for more than a decade, there is a need for detailed accounts of young men that move beyond simplistic narratives of poverty, abjection, and violence, but also emphasize the structural conditions that limit their prospects for a stable future. A focus on football, migratory disposition, and the spiritual life of young Cameroonians shows how young men seek to fashion themselves as moral subjects, primarily by seeking to fulfill their desires and obligations to provide for their kin, in the midst of socioeconomic conditions that make their futures profoundly uncertain.

Moreover, this book follows a perspective that critically approaches the discourse of crisis as a starting point for studying the African continent and its people. As many African and Africanist scholars have long argued (for instance, Achille Mbembe, Janet Roitman, and Francis Nyamnjoh), crisis as an exclusive starting point to think about the continent is inevitably limited. Even though the Southwest and Northwest Regions are suffering tremendously from the recent shocking and exceptional political crisis, a prolonged and routinized “crisis” in Cameroon, as both a discourse and reality, has shaped the region and the entire country ever since the 1980s and the imposed neoliberal structural adjustment programs. Both young Cameroonians’ disposition to migrate overseas (nowadays also through football) as well as their protests against the Cameroonian government are a result of a long-term socioeconomic stalemate and young people’s dwindling opportunities for a stable future in their own country. These issues have been prevalent long before the armed conflict and plague the entire country, not only its Anglophone regions.

The book therefore highlights the structural conditions that continue to shape and limit lives of young Cameroonians beyond the current conflict. Just like the roots of the conflict can be traced back to European colonial powers’ demarcation of boundaries in West and Central Africa, to controversial interventions by an outgoing colonial British acting commissioner and the United Nations who denied the region the option of secession in the dawn of independence (Willis et al. 2019), or to an aging authoritarian president who emanates power from his residence in the Francophone capital (or a luxurious hotel suite in Switzerland), so are the future prospects of the region's young people shaped and limited by economic and political decisions taken elsewhere and by others, often by powers beyond their reach.

In general, I hope that this book provides a perspective on the region that moves beyond the inevitable future academic and expert accounts of “wartorn,” “conflict-ridden,” or “postconflict” Anglophone Cameroon, accounts that will likely tie people's lives and perspectives to a single tragedy or crisis.