Preface

Doing research with African migrant football players, past and present, and with African youth who aspire to play the professional game abroad and who pursue this goal with a dedication, diligence and focus that belies their youthful age is a thrilling, rewarding and challenging experience. We have shared aspiring players' excitement and worries about upcoming matches or trials and listened to professional players reflect on the progress of their career trajectory. We have watched from close quarters their efforts and daily toil in exacting conditions. We have been privy to their future hopes for self and family as well as their insecurities and fears of not succeeding, and the sting of shame that this brings. We have also observed the countless challenges, setbacks and victories they navigate in their quest to 'make it' as professional footballers.

The players' stories of overcoming adversity and reaching their goals, and of their career struggles and heartbreak at unfulfilled ambitions, certainly piqued our intellectual curiosities as academics and our more general interest in football and the lives of football players. Indeed, despite uncertainty and precarity and the relentless nature of the physical, psychological and emotional demands that characterise the pursuit of a career in what is an intensely competitive and often unforgiving industry, we cannot deny a little bit of vicarious identification and envy. Each of us played football in our childhoods and dreamt of playing professionally, or more specifically turning out for our respective teams, Liverpool, AC Milan and Borussia Mönchengladbach. However, unlike those who participated in our research, we did not possess the talent, dedication, willingness to make sacrifices or the appetite that we have witnessed first-hand over the years of our research with African footballers.

It is this dedication that African youth and young men show towards the game, and their commitment to securing and sustaining a career in the global football industry, that makes their football migration life projects, achieved or envisaged, deeply fascinating and admirable – and worthy of the academic inquiry that we expose them to in this book. However, this

forms only part of our motivation to write a book about African football migration. In keeping with the accelerating flow of talented footballers out of the continent since the 1990s, the academic discourse has gathered pace since the first studies appeared during that decade (see Chapter 1). We believe that this is a timely juncture to offer a comprehensive perspective on the history, structures, geographies, temporalities, networks and outcomes of African football migration and to situate these in the context of the global game.

Without wishing to draw what might appear to some to be naive parallels between the comparatively comfortable labour conditions of three middle-class academics located in universities in Northern Ireland, England and the Netherlands, and those experienced by African footballers, it could be argued that writing a book shares some analogies with their migration project. James Joyce, the famous twentieth-century Irish writer, once said that the craft of writing requires the author to ‘be an adventurer above all, willing to take every risk, and be prepared to founder in his effort if need be’ (cited in Power, 1974: 45). While Joyce was discussing writing novels, short stories and poetry, his words not only resonate with our experiences of accessing, capturing and chronicling the lifeworlds of African migrant footballers, but also encapsulate what those players must do on an almost daily basis in their efforts to enact and reproduce the transnational mobility required to enter into and sustain a career in the global football industry. Both enterprises – writing a book and chasing what is a utopian, and for most an unrealistic, dream – are unpredictable, all-consuming, arduous, exciting, engaging, promising and, not least if the envisaged outcome is eventually accomplished, intensely rewarding.

As we show in this book, African football migration is a process that connects individuals to networks of actors and institutions that can facilitate (and curtail) their ambitions. Equally, this book is a product of a collective, collaborative effort involving a sociologist, a geographer and an anthropologist. Working together certainly accentuated the positive sides of writing and enabled us to cope a bit more fleet-footedly with the challenges that we encountered along the way. We feel that our various disciplinary lenses, methodologies and writing styles provoked ‘outside-the-box’ thinking, stimulated our discussions and provided opportunities to learn from each other’s expertise and approaches. We believe that this book is stronger and more comprehensive for this collaboration and possesses relevance beyond a single discipline.

Nevertheless, producing this book was a process of unimagined uncertainties. While our research engagement in the field of African football migration stretches back to 2008, most of our writing was undertaken during what was a tumultuous 2020 and early 2021. The wider impact of the COVID-19

pandemic continues to unfold and it is likely that it will have ramifications for the way we live our lives long into the future. A policy brief by the OECD (2020) suggested that the COVID-19 crisis has posed particular challenges for immigrants around the world, pointing to its disproportionate impact on them in terms of health, jobs, education, language training and public opinion. The closing of international borders, a key element in the fight against COVID-19, has also created significant problems for millions of people across Africa whose lives and livelihoods are tied to intra-regional and international migration. According to Teye (2020), travel restrictions and the closing of legal channels for migration are being keenly felt across West Africa, the geographic focus for this book, and may force more people to become caught up in irregular migration and trafficking – practices that encompass football migrants.

In light of this, it will come as no surprise to learn that the pandemic has generated unique challenges for African migrant footballers and those with aspirations to become transnationally mobile professionals. For many, the pandemic put their migration projects on hold (see Chapter 8). Following the initial outbreak, leagues and other competitions were either suspended or cancelled, and those that resumed mostly did so without fans in attendance. This has created pressures on club revenues, leading many to take measures to reduce labour costs. As a consequence, contractual uncertainty for existing migrant players has grown and the number of international transfers has declined for the first time in a decade (Ahmed, 2020; FIFA, 2020a). This has sharpened the precarity faced by African migrant players abroad. But, in a context where clubs are less willing to speculate in the transfer market, it also creates the risk of effectively placing a moratorium on the hopes of countless talented young African players, leaving them bereft of alternative routes to productive livelihoods.

With far less serious implications, COVID-19 also challenged our book project. With offices, nurseries and schools closed during several lockdowns, writing the book became a family affair, and, at times, it seemed better for everyone if we sought peace and quiet away from our makeshift home offices and the demands of home-schooling our young children. Thus, park benches and deserted car parks, locations that we never imagined would be conducive to writing, became regular sites for progressing our manuscript. Travel restrictions made it necessary to adjust the scope of the book to some degree. While a planned fieldwork trip to further interrogate African footballers' migration to South-East Asia was cancelled at the last minute, our enforced immobility also prevented us from conducting planned research with female footballers and other actors relevant in African women's football migration. While we have been able to incorporate primary data on African football migration beyond the prominent Africa–Europe nexus, this book

is now entirely about male players – and we cannot deny a certain unease with this.

From this book project's conception, it was our intention to incorporate the aspirations, experiences and trajectories of female African players in a meaningful and sustained way. Having dealt with the challenges of researching men's football almost exclusively over our careers, we knew that the inclusion of girls and women was an ambitious endeavour. Nonetheless, we had begun to undertake research with aspiring African female players in Ghana, conducting initial interviews at a local football academy in 2015 and following up with them at a youth football tournament in Sweden two years later (Darby and Agergaard, 2018). The restrictions imposed by the pandemic meant that it was impossible to add further primary data on the full spectrum of female African players' ambitions, experiences and career trajectories. These constraints on conducting further primary research and an acknowledgement of the limits of the empirical evidence we had already gathered were important in our decision to re-orient our focus to the men's game only.

Our decision to focus on the men's game was also influenced by a recognition of the gendered particularities of African football migration. This is clearly demonstrated in the small but rich body of work that has explored African women's football-related mobilities (see Chapter 1). This scholarship made it clear to us that simply generalising female players' encounters with football migration according to those of male players would be insufficient in capturing the nuances and differences between the male and female experience. There are undoubtedly some similarities between male and female African players. Both possess the requisite talent and ambition, aspire to ply their trade at the highest level, compete with the best players, avail of professional facilities to improve their abilities and, not least, to earn a decent living by playing abroad professionally, and in doing so supporting their families at home (Botelho and Agergaard, 2011). Some of those women who have been able to secure professional careers in Europe have also been confronted with the same challenges posed by racialisation that male players have had to deal with (Engh, Settler and Agergaard, 2017). Uncertainty and precarity also manifest themselves similarly across the post-playing-career lives of male and female African football migrants (Agergaard, 2018; Agergaard and Ungruhe, 2016).

In many other ways, however, football in Africa is deeply contoured by gender, and this impacts aspirations and opportunities for football migration among female players. The infrastructure for girls' and women's football on the continent is much less developed than its male equivalent. Whereas the game has become increasingly popular among girls and women all over Africa, they generally lack access to adequate facilities, professional clubs and leagues as well as sufficient support from local, regional and national

governing bodies. Quantitatively, transnational migration for female African players is much less prominent than for their male counterparts and does not have a similar global reach (Agergaard and Tiesler, 2014). For example, in 2020 the number of international transfers of male players from Africa to leagues outside the continent stood at 1,786, generating transfer receipts of almost fifty-five million US dollars. The number of female African players making the same journey in the same period numbered fifty-eight with no discernible transfer fees being recouped (FIFA, 2020a). While there are a growing number of professional leagues and expanding media coverage in the women's game around the world, the fact that it significantly lags behind the men's game in terms of commercialisation and mediatisation, makes migration in women's football much less lucrative and speculative.

A consequence of the challenges noted above is that football migration does not fuel the hopes of female youth players to a degree comparable to male players. It also does not have the same sort of critical implications for their future life projects that it does for a whole generation of boys and young men who increasingly look to football as the one pathway to success, respectable social adulthood and acceptable masculine identities. Given these differences in scale and social meaning, we felt that it was important either to engage deeply with African women's football migration in this book or refrain from it entirely. After many discussions, and in light of the issues for fieldwork imposed by travel restrictions and other pandemic constraints, we chose the latter course. Certainly, a richer and more nuanced understanding of African football migration would have been gleaned by incorporating women's migration. We hope to pursue this further in our future research.

Of course, 2020 was not only the year of COVID-19, with all its restrictions and problematic implications for the global football industry and those who labour within it. It was also a year that appeared to open up new horizons and possibilities in terms of how issues of racialisation and racism, both overt and covert, are confronted within the game. While campaigning against racism has been on the agenda of players and coaches, clubs, supporters, and national and continental governing bodies for some time, structural racism and racialisation in football persists largely unchecked. African football migrants, and Black players more generally, live with the insidious nature of this problem throughout their careers and often beyond. However, football's embracing of the Black Lives Matter movement in the second half of 2020 may instigate more robust, committed efforts on the part of the football authorities and other stakeholders to tackle this issue. The official endorsement of a range of gestures, symbols and practices that support the Black Lives Matter message by a range of national football federations and leagues appears to represent a bigger step towards acknowledging the depth of the problem. Black players have certainly felt emboldened and

have been outspoken on the structural and direct racism they experience. Yet incidents involving the use of social media platforms to hurl racist invective at Black players and the largely ineffectual response to this has raised questions about whether the incorporation of the Black Lives Matter movement into professional football will initiate significant, lasting change. At the very least, it has increased awareness of the issue of racism and racial inequality in football and of how much work remains to be done to rid it from all levels of the game. One of our hopes for this book is that it might make a modest contribution to this fight by further raising awareness of the discrimination and hardships that migrant African players encounter over the course of their careers and migration trajectories.

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