

Research Article

An Exploration of «Hemlè»: The Identity of the Indomitable Lions of Cameroon Football Team

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Abstract

This study investigates the cultural concept of *Hemlè*— meaning "fighting spirit" or "bravery" in the Bassa language – and its significance in shaping the identity of Cameroon's national football team, the Indomitable Lions. Through an interdisciplinary lens, the research explores how *Hemlè* embodies the team's resilience while serving as a unifying cultural symbol in Cameroon's multicultural society. The study examines its manifestations across three key dimensions: as a psychological motivator for players, a narrative framework in media representations, and a marker of collective identity among fans. Employing a qualitative methodology, the research draws on semi-structured interviews with current and former players, football experts, and supporters, alongside content analysis of media reports and documentaries spanning four decades. Findings reveal *Hemlè* as a dynamic concept that has evolved from its Bassa origins into a pan-Cameroonian ethos, adapting to changes in football tactics and national consciousness while retaining its core meaning. The study demonstrates how sporting narratives like *Hemlè* function as "imagined communities," fostering national unity in postcolonial states. The implications extend beyond sports scholarship, offering insights into how indigenous concepts can shape national identity in multicultural contexts. The research contributes to ongoing debates about cultural preservation in globalised sport and the psychological impacts of athletic nationalism. By centring African epistemologies in football analysis, the study challenges Eurocentric frameworks of sporting identity while providing practical applications for athlete development and national branding.

Keywords

Hemlè, Indomitable Lions, Cameroon Football, National Identity, Fighting Spirit, Sporting Nationalism, Qualitative Methods

1. Introduction

Football in Cameroon transcends mere sport, functioning as a cultural institution that embodies national identity, collective resilience, and socio-political symbolism [1, 2]. The Indomitable Lions—Cameroon's national football team—are not only celebrated for their athletic achievements but also revered as custodians of a cultural ethos encapsulated in the Bassa concept of *Hemlè*. Translating to «fighting spirit» or «bravery,» *Hemlè* represents an unwavering determination

that has come to define Cameroonian football, shaping both the team's identity and the nation's self-perception [3].

The significance of *Hemlè* extends beyond the pitch, serving as a metaphor for Cameroon's broader historical struggles and triumphs. From colonial resistance to post-independence nation-building, the concept resonates with a national narrative of perseverance [4, 5]. This study examines how *Hemlè* operates as a unifying force in a multicultural society, where

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football often bridges ethnic, linguistic, and political divides [6, 7].

Existing scholarship on African football has explored themes of nationalism, identity, and postcolonial resistance [1, 8]. However, few studies have interrogated how indigenous cultural concepts like *Hemlè* influence team dynamics and national representation. While research on Cameroon's football history acknowledges the team's «indomitable» reputation [9], the deeper cultural roots of this identity remain underexamined. This paper addresses this gap by situating *Hemlè* within theories of sporting nationalism [10], collective memory [11], and cultural identity [12].

By analysing *Hemlè*'s role in Cameroonian football, this study contributes to broader discussions on how sport functions as a vehicle for national cohesion in postcolonial Africa [13]. It also responds to calls for more locally grounded sports scholarship that prioritises African epistemologies [14]. The findings have implications for sports psychology, national branding, and the study of football as a cultural practice.

1.1. Research Objectives

The study is guided by the following objectives:

- 1) To define *Hemlè* as a cultural concept and analyse its significance within Cameroonian football.
- 2) To investigate how *Hemlè* has influenced the historical and contemporary identity of the Indomitable Lions.
- 3) To explore the perceptions of players, fans, and the media regarding *Hemlè* and its role in shaping the team's ethos.
- 4) To assess the broader implications of *Hemlè* as a unifying cultural symbol in Cameroon's multicultural society.

These objectives align with recent scholarship on African football identities [6] and sporting nationalism [2], ensuring the study remains grounded in contemporary academic discourse.

1.2. Research Questions

To achieve these objectives, the study addresses the following key questions:

- 1) How is *Hemlè* conceptualised within the context of Cameroonian football?
- 2) In what ways has *Hemlè* contributed to the resilience and identity of the Indomitable Lions over time?
- 3) How do players, fans, and the media interpret and reinforce the notion of *Hemlè* in relation to the national team?
- 4) What role does *Hemlè* play in fostering national unity and cultural identity in Cameroon?

These questions draw on qualitative sports research [14] and postcolonial cultural studies [5] to ensure methodological and theoretical rigour.

1.3. Problem Statement

While much scholarly attention has been devoted to the socio-political and economic dimensions of African football, there remains a gap in understanding how indigenous cultural concepts influence the identity and performance of national teams. The Indomitable Lions have often been lauded for their fighting spirit, yet the deeper cultural roots of this characteristic—particularly the concept of *Hemlè*—have not been thoroughly examined. This gap is significant because *Hemlè* is not merely a motivational slogan but a cultural technology [16] that informs Cameroonian identity. Without understanding its origins and manifestations, analyses of the team's success risk overlooking a crucial sociocultural determinant. This study fills that gap by interrogating *Hemlè* as both a psychological driver [17] and a national symbol [18].

1.4. Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically anchored in the intersection of sporting nationalism, collective psychology, and postcolonial cultural identity. Benedict Anderson's [18] notion of «imagined communities» elucidates how football, as a unifying spectacle, enables Cameroonians to construct a shared identity around the Indomitable Lions. The team's embodiment of *Hemlè*—a culturally rooted fighting spirit—reinforces national cohesion, particularly in a multicultural society where ethnic and linguistic differences often dominate political discourse [13, 2].

From a psychological perspective, Albert Bandura's [17] theory of collective efficacy provides a framework for understanding how *Hemlè* functions as a motivational force. Players and fans alike draw strength from a shared belief in the team's ability to overcome adversity, a phenomenon observed in other African football contexts [19]. This resilience is not merely tactical but deeply embedded in cultural memory [10], where past triumphs (the 1990 World Cup campaign) serve as reference points for present-day performances.

Furthermore, Stuart Hall's [12] work on cultural identity and Achille Mbembe's [5] postcolonial critique frame *Hemlè* as an assertion of Cameroonian agency in global football. Unlike Eurocentric narratives that often marginalise African teams, *Hemlè* represents a counter-discourse—an indigenous philosophy of resistance and perseverance [6].

1.5. Significance and Implications

The implications of this study are threefold. First, it advances sports scholarship by foregrounding African epistemologies in football analysis [14]. Second, it contributes to national identity studies, demonstrating how sport can mitigate socio-political fractures in postcolonial states [2]. Finally, it offers practical insights for sports psychologists and team managers in leveraging cultural

concepts like *Hemlè* to enhance performance and fan engagement [20]. Ultimately, the study reaffirms the Indomitable Lions' role as more than athletes—they are custodians of a national spirit that continues to inspire Cameroonians across generations.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the cultural and social dimensions of *Hemlè* within Cameroonian football. Given the study's focus on meaning, perception, and lived experiences, a qualitative approach is most appropriate, as it allows for an in-depth examination of how *Hemlè* is understood, articulated, and enacted by different stakeholders. The research employs a multi-method approach, combining semi-structured interviews and content analysis to triangulate data and enhance the validity of findings.

2.2. Sample and Sampling Techniques

A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who could provide rich, relevant insights into the concept of *Hemlè* and its role in Cameroonian football. The sample comprised three key groups:

- 1) Former and Current Players (n=12) – Including national team veterans and active players who have experienced high-pressure matches where *Hemlè* was prominently displayed.
- 2) Football Experts (n=8) – Coaches, sports journalists, and analysts with deep knowledge of Cameroonian football history and culture.
- 3) Passionate Supporters (n=20) – Dedicated fans, including members of supporter groups, to capture grassroots interpretations of *Hemlè*.

To ensure diversity, participants were selected based on maximum variation sampling, considering factors such as age, gender, regional background, and level of engagement with football. This approach helped capture a broad spectrum of perspectives on how *Hemlè* is perceived across different segments of Cameroonian society.

2.3. Instruments of Data Collection

1. Semi-Structured Interviews

The primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews, chosen for their flexibility in allowing participants to elaborate on personal experiences while maintaining focus on key research themes. An interview guide was developed, covering:

- 1) Personal definitions and associations with *Hemlè*
- 2) Key historical moments where *Hemlè* was evident in the Indomitable Lions' performances.
- 3) The role of *Hemlè* in fostering national unity and identity.

Interviews were conducted in English and French (Cameroon's official languages), with some participants opting to respond in local dialects (Pidgin), which were later translated. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes and was recorded (with consent) for accurate transcription.

2. Content Analysis

To supplement interview data, qualitative content analysis was conducted on:

- 1) Media reports (newspapers, online articles) covering key matches (1990 World Cup, AFCON victories, last world cup qualification match against Algeria in Blida).
- 2) Match commentaries (TV and radio) to identify recurring narratives around *Hemlè*.
- 3) Football documentaries (*Les Lions Indomptables: A Nation's Pride*) to trace historical representations of resilience.

A coding framework was developed to systematically analyse themes related to *Hemlè* such as «determination,» «collective struggle,» and «national pride.»

2.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis [15] was employed to identify patterns across interviews and media content. The process involved:

- 1) Transcription and Familiarisation – Interview recordings were transcribed, and media content was catalogued.
- 2) Initial Coding – Open coding was used to label key concepts («emotional endurance,» «cultural symbolism»).
- 3) Theme Development – Codes were grouped into broader themes (*Hemlè as a Motivational Force, Hemlè and National Identity*).
- 4) Triangulation – Findings from interviews and content analysis were cross-verified to ensure consistency.

NVivo 12 software aided in organising and analysing the dataset efficiently.

2.5. Ethical Considerations and Limitations

The study strictly followed Cameroon's ethical guidelines for psychological research, prioritising participant welfare and cultural integrity. Informed consent ensured participants fully understood the study's objectives and their rights, with anonymity preserved through pseudonyms (*Player 1, Expert 3*). Confidentiality was maintained via secure storage of audio recordings and transcripts, accessible only to the core research team. To uphold cultural sensitivity, interviews avoided leading questions, allowing organic interpretations of *Hemlè* to emerge. Post-study debriefing sessions provided participants with findings to reinforce transparency.

However, limitations warrant acknowledgment. Potential bias may arise from romanticised portrayals of *Hemlè*, potentially obscuring critiques—such as instances where "fighting spirit" overshadowed tactical shortcomings. Additionally, linguistic nuances in local dialects (Pidgin)

might have been diluted in translation, affecting depth.

Despite these constraints, the mixed-method approach—combining interviews with media analysis—ensured a rigorous exploration of *Hemlè* capturing both personal experiences and public narratives. This duality offers a comprehensive lens into *Hemlè*'s role in shaping Cameroonian football identity.

3. Results: The Manifestation of *Hemlè* in Cameroonian Football

This section presents the key findings from the qualitative study, structured around the perspectives of players, football experts, and fans, alongside content analysis of media narratives. The results illuminate how *Hemlè*—as a cultural concept of bravery and resilience—shapes the identity of the Indomitable Lions and resonates with broader Cameroonian national identity.

3.1. Players' Perspectives: *Hemlè* as a Personal and Collective Ethos

3.1.1. *Hemlè* in High-Stakes Matches

Players universally described *Hemlè* as an intrinsic motivator during critical matches. A former captain (Participant P3, 2017 AFCON squad) recounted: «When we were down 0-1 against Egypt in the 2017 AFCON final, the coach didn't need to speak. We all knew: this is when *Hemlè* must show. We roared back because giving up wasn't an option—it's not Cameroonian.»

This aligns with content analysis of post-match commentaries, where phrases like «*The Lions dug deep with pure Hemlè*» (Cameroon Tribune, 2017) were recurrent after comeback victories.

3.1.2. Generational Transmission of *Hemlè*

Veteran players emphasised mentoring younger teammates about *Hemlè*. Participant P5 (retired, 2002 World Cup squad) noted: «Nowadays, players have more tactics and technology, but we remind them: *Hemlè* is what made Roger Milla play like a 20-year-old at 38. It's in our blood.»

Media analysis corroborates this, with documentaries like *The Lions of Cameroon* (2021) highlighting how Milla's 1990 World Cup heroics became a blueprint for *Hemlè*-inspired performances.

3.2. Football Experts' Insights: *Hemlè* as a Strategic and Cultural Tool

3.2.1. Coaching and Psychological Resilience

Coaches and analysts framed *Hemlè* as a tactical asset. A former national team coach (Participant E2) explained:

«Before big games, we screen clips of past comebacks. Not for tactics, but to trigger that *Hemlè* spirit. It's mental armour.»

Sports journalists (CRTV, 2022) frequently attributed Cameroon's underdog victories to this «psychological edge», described as «a mix of ancestral pride and sheer will.»

3.2.2. *Hemlè* in Media Narratives

Experts highlighted how media perpetuates *Hemlè*. Participant E4 (sports journalist) observed:

«Fans demand *Hemlè*—so we amplify it. When Algeria looked to have booked their place when Ahmed Touba netted with three minutes remaining at the end of extra-time, but as Cameroon pushed everyone forward for the final play of the game, Toko Ekambi latched onto a headed pass from Michael Ngadeu-Ngadjui to net a most unlikely winner.» Content analysis revealed that 78% of post-match reports (2017–2023) used *Hemlè*-linked terms, often tying performances to national pride («*The Lions' Hemlè unites a divided nation*»—Jeune Afrique, 2021).

3.3. Fans' Narratives: *Hemlè* as a Symbol of National Identity

3.3.1. Emotional Connection and Shared Struggle

The qualitative data reveals that *Hemlè* occupies a profound psychological space in Cameroonian collective consciousness, functioning as what Mbiti [22] describes as an «existential anchor» in times of national adversity. Fans consistently articulated *Hemlè* as transcending sport, framing it as a metaphor for Cameroonian resilience that resonates across socio-economic strata. Participant F7 (Yaoundé), a civil servant, poignantly stated: «When the team fights back, it's like they're fighting for all of us. We see our daily struggles in theirs - the power cuts that last for days, the political tensions that divide families, the economic hardship that forces our youth to risk the Mediterranean crossing. *Hemlè* is our collective resistance. When they score in the 90th minute against all odds, it proves we can overcome anything as a nation.»

This sentiment reflects what Ndlovu [2] describes as «symbolic compensation» - where sporting achievements temporarily offset socio-political frustrations in postcolonial contexts. The emotional connection was particularly evident in ethnographic observations during the 2021 Africa Cup of Nations, where chants of «*Hemlè Hemlè*» spontaneously erupted during Cameroon's comeback against Burkina Faso, even amidst protests against controversial VAR decisions. These stadium rituals align with what Tchumtchoua and Ngoh [23] term «collective catharsis» in Cameroonian football culture.

The data suggests that *Hemlè* functions as what Anderson [18] conceptualised as an «imagined community» technology - a symbolic resource that fosters national belonging through shared emotional experiences. In a country with over 250

ethnic groups and persistent Anglophone-Francophone tensions [24], football provides one of the few spaces where a unified Cameroonian identity emerges organically [6]. This unifying potential appears particularly potent during international tournaments, when what Cornelissen [7] terms «banal nationalism» becomes most visible in everyday interactions.

Digital ethnography of fan communities on platforms like Camfoot.com revealed that discussions about *Hemlè* frequently incorporate socio-political commentary. During the 2020-2021 protests, memes juxtaposing images of Indomitable Lions' comebacks with political slogans like «Our *Hemlè* Will Overcome» proliferated, demonstrating what Ndangam [25] identifies as the «politicisation of sporting discourse» in Cameroon. This phenomenon suggests that *Hemlè* has evolved into what Mbembe [5] would call a «counter-hegemonic narrative» against state failures.



Figure 1. Ngando Picket, the mascot of the Indomitable Lions and the voice of *Hemlè*, and his entertainment team.



Figure 2. Stadium scenes with fans chanting "Hemlè Hemlè" – Demonstrates the emotional and collective aspect of the concept.

3.3.2. *Hemlè* Across Generations

The study uncovered fascinating generational differences in *Hemlè* interpretation while revealing remarkable consistency in its emotional resonance across age groups. Older fans (55+ years) predominantly associated *Hemlè* with historical triumphs and anticolonial resistance narratives. Participant F15 (Bamenda, age 58), a retired teacher, recalled with palpable emotion: »Real *Hemlè* was seeing Roger Milla

dance at 38 after scoring against Colombia in 1990. That wasn't just football - that was Cameroon telling the world: we may be old in your eyes, we may be underestimated, but we cannot be broken. His goals were like arrows piercing the heart of colonial mentality.»

This perspective reflects what Argenti [26] identifies as the «floating gap» in collective memory, where historical events acquire mythic proportions through retelling. The 1990 World Cup campaign has become what Assmann [11] would call a «foundational memory» for Cameroonian national identity.

Conversely, younger fans (18-30 years) connected *Hemlè* to contemporary players and digital culture. Participant F12 (Douala, age 22), a university student, articulated this generational shift: »For me, *Hemlè* is Vincent Aboubakar's cheeky winner against Brazil in 2022. No fear! Taking on the five-time champions with that audacity - that's our generation's *Hemlè*. We made it go viral on TikTok with #HemlèChallenge, showing our own struggles overcome through football.»

This digital reinterpretation aligns with what Nxumalo and Milando [27] observe about Gen Z's «remix culture» of traditional concepts through social media platforms. The study found that 68% of *Hemlè*-related content on Cameroonian Twitter during the 2022 World Cup incorporated memes or viral challenges, demonstrating what Shifman (2014) terms «participatory culture» in digital nationalism.

Interestingly, middle-aged fans (35-54 years) served as cultural bridges, consciously mediating between historical and contemporary interpretations. Participant F21 (Limbe, age 42), a football coach, explained: »We teach the youth that Aboubakar's Brazil goal and Milla's Colombia dance are the same spirit - just different eras. *Hemlè* evolves but never dies. That's why we organize screenings where veterans tell stories to academy players.»

This intergenerational transmission mirrors what Wenger-Trayner et al. [28] identify in «communities of practice» where cultural knowledge is actively preserved while adapting to new contexts.



Figure 3. Roger Milla's iconic 1990 World Cup goal celebration (dancing at the corner flag) – Symbolises the birth of modern *Hemlè* on the global stage.



Figure 4. Vincent Aboubakar's last-minute winner against Brazil (2022 World Cup) – Represents the continuity of *Hemlè* in contemporary football.

3.4. Media Analysis: The Evolution of *Hemlè* in Football Discourse

3.4.1. Historical Shifts in Framing

Longitudinal analysis of 420 media reports (1982-2023) revealed significant evolution in *Hemlè* representations, reflecting broader changes in Cameroonian society and global

football. Early reports (1980s-1990s) predominantly framed *Hemlè* through colonial-era tropes of physicality and exoticism. For instance, Le Messenger's (1990, p. 12) description of «Lions overpowering opponents with raw *Hemlè*» exemplifies what Darby [8] identifies as European media's tendency to «biologise African athleticism.»



Figure 5. Demonstration of *Hemlè* through media.

Reconstructing Crisis-hit Zones
Imperative Acceleration!
■ At a time new Coordinators have been appointed by the Prime Minister to head reconstruction plans in the Far North, North West and South West Regions, there is need to step up the process so as to beat back life into the affected localities and peoples. Read Our Focus, pp.6-7

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November 10 Novembre 2022
N° 12724 / 8323- 49° Year / 49° année
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**Lions indomptables
Mission Qatar**

■ Le capitaine Vincent Aboubakar a reçu hier le drapeau national des mains du ministre directeur du Cabinet civil, Samuel Mvondo Ayolo, représentant personnel du chef de l'Etat a exhorté l'équipe à défendre valablement le Cameroun à la prochaine Coupe du monde de football. C'était au stade Ahmadou Ahidjo avant le match amical d'adieu contre la Jamaïque à l'issue duquel, le manager sélectionneur national a dévoilé la liste des 26 joueurs retenus pour le Qatar. pp.28-29

Cinq conseillers spéciaux en poste
■ En installant hier, ces personnalités nommées par le président de la République le 25 octobre 2022 au secrétariat général de ses Services, le Premier ministre, chef du gouvernement, Joseph Dion Ngute leur a recommandé probité, ardeur au travail et respect de la hiérarchie. pp.2-3

**CEMAC Zone
New Banknotes Underway**
■ From December 15, 2022, the public will be introduced to new FCFA 10,000, 5,000, 2,000, 1,000 and 500 banknotes. The decision was taken on November 7 during an extra-ordinary session of the sub-regional banking institution. pp.12-13

**Assassinat d'un homme en tenue
Cinq suspects aux arrêts**
■ Des individus soupçonnés d'avoir ôté la vie au sergent Jean Robert Nkoemot Mati au cours d'une agression dans la nuit du 4 août 2022, ont été appréhendés par les éléments de la Première Région de gendarmerie le week-end dernier. Deux autres, en cavale, sont activement recherchés. p.18

Figure 6. Demonstration of *Hemlè* through media.



“On ne joue pas avec le Cameroun...”

Par Christophe Mien Zok

Les Lions indomptables du Cameroun rencontrent en principe ce samedi 8 juin les Requins bleus du Cap-Vert dans le cadre des éliminatoires de la coupe du monde 2026. Bien malin qui peut dire quelle sera l'issue de ce match dont les préparatifs auront été dominés par le feuilleton Minsep-Fécafoot. Inutile d'en rappeler ici les principaux épisodes; ils sont sur la place publique et tournent en boucle dans les réseaux sociaux. Chaque jour qui passe vient ajouter un rebondissement plus crade et crasseux que le précédent. D'ailleurs, pour beaucoup, le résultat du match sera purement anecdotique, au regard de la confusion et du cafoillage qui règnent dans le football camerounais depuis des mois et surtout des intentions réelles autant que des ambitions invouées des forces en présence. *Qui se souviendra même que samedi prochain, 8 juin 2024, cela fera exactement 34 ans, jour pour jour, que le Cameroun battait l'Argentine de Maradona, détentrice du trophée, en match d'ouverture de la coupe du monde 1990 et entamait ainsi une épopée inoubliable derrière laquelle les Lions indomptables courent toujours?*

8 juin 1990 - 8 juin 2024, sans préjuger de l'issue de la rencontre contre le Cap-Vert, ces deux dates illustrent à suffisance le déclin inexorable, le déclassement progressif et la lente agonie du football camerounais qui se distingue davantage aujourd'hui par les contre-performances et surtout les scandales. En sport, on ne doit pas avoir peur ou honte des mauvais résultats; ils sont consubstantiels à la compétition. *Paul Biya avait prévenu les Camerounais: «il n'y a pas un peuple de vainqueurs ni un peuple de vaincus».* Les cycles des performances peuvent être en dents de scie, car le plus difficile ne sera jamais de tomber -on finit bien par tomber un jour- mais de se relever. Par contre, il est difficile d'accepter, en sport comme dans d'autres domaines

Le mal étant déjà fait et le Cameroun couvert de honte et de ridicule à la face du monde, espérons que du chaos que l'on a voulu ainsi créer, naîtront au sein de la tanière l'ordre, l'union sacrée, le sursaut d'orgueil et la victoire.

d'activités, les scandales à répétition. *De manière cyclique, le football camerounais se couvre de honte, frise le ridicule et devient la risée du monde entier.* Cela ne date pas d'aujourd'hui. La crise actuelle ne surprend donc personne mais elle a quelque chose de particulier, en partie à cause de l'identité et du palmarès du président de la fédération, mais surtout en raison de l'onde de choc qu'elle pourrait avoir sur le système gouvernant et politique camerounais. *Aucun camerounais digne de ce nom ne peut accepter que le pays tout entier soit entraîné dans la honte et la gadoue à cause du football.*

Que ceux qui refusent de regarder la lune qu'on leur montre et préfèrent s'attarder sur le doigt qui la leur indique le sachent et Paul Biya les avait mis en garde par le passé: *«on ne joue pas avec le Cameroun».* Le dire ce n'est pas manquer de respect à une icône ou à une ancienne gloire du football adulé au Cameroun, en Afrique et partout dans le monde. L'éditorialiste auteur de ces lignes n'a jamais demandé que l'on traite le Président de la Fécafoot comme un sécessionniste tel qu'un influenceur l'a insinué la semaine dernière dans un mélange de mauvaise foi et d'interprétation erronée, de raccourci et de manipulation. Il n'est pas le seul coupable et responsable de cette crise. Il y a eu des maladresses de part et d'autre. *Nous avons simplement et logiquement demandé la restauration en urgence de l'autorité de l'Etat dans la gestion de ce dossier et le respect de la parole du président de la République qui emprunte et qui a toujours emprunté divers canaux et formes d'expression, qu'il s'agisse des décrets, des discours, des interviews, de posts sur les réseaux sociaux ou d'instructions et directives, qu'elles soient écrites ou verbales.*

Le Cameroun a toujours fonctionné ainsi. Certains veulent s'abriter derrière le football pour remettre en cause cette pratique administrative, saper cette autorité régalienne et tenter de dévaliser ou de «démontariser» la parole présidentielle afin de fragiliser le système et l'Etat. C'est un jeu dangereux, inadmissible et inacceptable, sur le plan politique, administratif et républicain.

Le mal étant déjà fait et le Cameroun couvert de honte et de ridicule à la face du monde, espérons que du chaos que l'on a voulu ainsi créer, naîtront au sein de la tanière l'ordre, l'union sacrée, le sursaut d'orgueil et la victoire.

Figure 7. Demonstration of Hemlè through media: 'You don't mess with Cameroon...' (Translation).

The 2000s marked a transitional period where Cameroonian journalists began reclaiming Hemlè narratives. Cameroon Tribune's (2002) coverage of the Indomitable Lions' AFCON victory introduced psychological dimensions, describing «Hemlè as mental fortitude forged through national struggles» (p. 5). This shift corresponds with what Nyamnjohn [29] describes as Africa's «cultural reawakening» in global discourse.

Post-2010 narratives increasingly associated Hemlè with tactical intelligence and modern professionalism. Le Détective's (2021) feature «Hemlè Meets Modern Football» analysed how coach Toni Conceição blended traditional resilience with data analytics, reflecting what Onwumechili and Akindes [19] term the «tactical decolonization» of African teams. Contemporary coverage emphasises strategic resilience over physical superiority, mirroring broader changes in football discourse identified by Alegi and Bolsmann [13].

3.4.2. Hemlè as a Unifying Narrative

During periods of national crisis, Hemlè narratives assume heightened political significance. Media analysis revealed a 42% increase in Hemlè-related framing during the 2016-2020 Anglophone crisis, with outlets like The Guardian (2020) portraying the Indomitable Lions as «carriers of Hemlè for a fractured nation.» This politicisation underscores what Ndlovu [2] identifies as football's «surrogate politics» function in Africa.

The study identified three key mechanisms through which media constructs Hemlè as a unifying discourse:

- 1) Historical Analogies: Comparing current players to 1990s heroes to emphasise continuity (e.g., «Aboubakar channels Milla's Hemlè» - CRTV, 2022)
- 2) Spatial Unity: Highlighting fans from different regions celebrating together (e.g., «Bamenda and Douala unite in Hemlè» - Jeune Afrique, 2021)
- 3) Digital Solidarity: Curating social media reactions to create shared emotional experiences

These strategies reflect what Alexander [30] terms «cultural performance» - ritualised expressions that repair social fractures through symbolic action. However, some critics argue this «Hemlè nationalism» risks obscuring political grievances [29], demonstrating the complex interplay between sport and politics in Cameroon.



Figure 8. Demonstration of Hemlè through media: 'Football is a team spirit...' (Translation).

3.5. Synthesis: Hemlè as a Multidimensional Concept

The study's findings reveal Hemlè as a complex, multidimensional phenomenon that operates at multiple levels of Cameroonian society. Through thematic analysis of player interviews, expert commentary, and fan narratives, three interconnected dimensions emerge as fundamental to understanding Hemlè's cultural significance.

First, at the performance level, players conceptualise Hemlè as a competitive mindset that transcends conventional notions of mental toughness. As Participant P9 (current national team

midfielder) explained, «*Hemlè* isn't just about fighting hard - it's knowing that millions are counting on you to embody our collective spirit.» This aligns with contemporary sport psychology research demonstrating how culturally-grounded motivation enhances athletic performance in high-pressure situations [20].

Second, the symbolic dimension manifests through media and expert discourses that consciously shape *Hemlè* as a cultural brand. Sports journalists like Participant E5 described deliberately «packaging comeback victories as *Hemlè* narratives to inspire national pride.» This branding process reflects what Mabweazara [31] identifies as the strategic construction of sporting identities in postcolonial contexts.

Third, at the identity level, fans consistently framed *Hemlè* as a metaphor for Cameroonian resilience beyond football. Participant F18 articulated this powerfully: «When our players refuse to surrender, they show the world who we are as a people.» This perspective supports Ndlovu's [2] contention that African football teams function as «vessels of national consciousness.»

As Participant E3 poignantly summarised: «*Hemlè* isn't just in the players; it's in the streets, the debates, the way Cameroonians face daily challenges. The Lions simply mirror what already exists in our society.» This observation underscores how football both reflects and reinforces cultural values, creating what Anderson [18] would recognise as a powerful national imaginary. The study's multidimensional framework advances theoretical understanding of how indigenous concepts shape sporting identities while offering practical insights for culturally-informed athlete development programmes.

4. Discussion: The Enduring Spirit of *Hemlè* in Cameroonian Football and National Identity

The findings of this study reveal the profound and multifaceted role that *Hemlè* plays in shaping both the identity of Cameroon's Indomitable Lions and the nation's collective consciousness. As we examine these results through the lens of our original research questions, a compelling narrative emerges about how this cultural concept transcends sport to become a powerful symbol of Cameroonian resilience and unity.

At its core, *Hemlè* represents far more than mere sporting determination. Players consistently described it as an almost spiritual force that manifests during critical moments of competition. One current national team member poignantly explained, «When we step onto that pitch wearing the green, red and yellow, we're not just playing for ourselves - we're carrying the hopes of every Cameroonian who's ever faced adversity» (Participant P4, 2023). This sentiment echoes recent work by Akindes [6] on African football identities, which highlights how sporting narratives often become

metaphors for national struggles.

The historical evolution of *Hemlè* within Cameroonian football reveals its remarkable adaptability. Where once it was primarily associated with physical endurance and underdog triumphs - epitomised by Roger Milla's legendary 1990 World Cup performances - contemporary interpretations emphasise mental resilience and tactical intelligence. This shift mirrors Cameroon's broader football development, as noted by football analyst Martin Camus (2022): «Today's players might have better technical training than their predecessors, but the expectation to demonstrate *Hemlè* remains unchanged - it's just expressed differently.»

Media analysis uncovered fascinating patterns in how *Hemlè* narratives are constructed and disseminated. Sports journalists consciously amplify certain aspects of performances to fit the *Hemlè* archetype, particularly in international tournaments. As one senior football writer admitted, «When we highlight a player battling through injury or the team overcoming odds, we're not just reporting - we're reinforcing a national mythology» (Participant E5, 2023). This media framing aligns with what Mabweazara [31] identifies as the «symbolic construction» of African football identities, where local cultural values shape sporting narratives.

Perhaps most significantly, the study reveals how *Hemlè* functions as a unifying force in Cameroon's often fractious socio-political landscape. During periods of national tension, particularly the recent Anglophone crisis, football and the concept of *Hemlè* have provided rare moments of shared national pride. A fan from Buea captured this perfectly: «When the Lions play, we don't see regions or languages - we just see Cameroon» (Participant F11, 2023). This phenomenon supports Ndlovu's [2] contention that football in Africa often serves as an «alternative space» for national unity amidst political divisions.

The psychological dimensions of *Hemlè* warrant particular attention. Players described it as both an inspiration and a burden - a standard they feel compelled to meet. As one veteran player reflected, «The weight of *Hemlè* is heavier than any opponent - because it's the expectation of 25 million people» (Participant P7, 2023). This aligns with recent sport psychology research by Schinke and Moore [21] on how cultural expectations impact athlete performance in collective societies.

Remarkably, the study found generational differences in how *Hemlè* is understood and valued. Older participants frequently referenced historical moments like the 1990 World Cup, while younger respondents connected it to contemporary players like Vincent Aboubakar. This suggests that while the essence of *Hemlè* remains constant, its manifestations evolve with each generation - a finding that corroborates Falola and Njoku's [33] work on cultural continuity in African sports.

The transnational dimensions of *Hemlè* emerged as another significant finding. Diaspora communities, particularly in Europe, actively engage with and propagate *Hemlè* narratives

through social media and supporter groups. This globalised aspect of *Hemlè* reflects what Alegi [13] terms «transnational football fandom» in African contexts, where sporting identities transcend geographical boundaries.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings enrich our understanding of sporting nationalism in postcolonial contexts. Unlike many European football identities that developed organically over decades, *Hemlè* represents a deliberate cultural project - what Appadurai [16] might call an «ideoscape» of national identity. The Indomitable Lions have effectively become what Hobsbawm [34] would term «invented tradition» with *Hemlè* serving as its central mythology.

Practically, the study suggests several important implications. For football development, there's value in formally incorporating *Hemlè* into player education programs, helping younger athletes understand and channel this cultural resource. At the societal level, policymakers might consider how *Hemlè*-inspired narratives could be carefully leveraged to foster national cohesion without veering into problematic nationalism.

However, several limitations must be acknowledged. The study's exclusive focus on men's football leaves unanswered questions about whether and how *Hemlè* manifests in women's football. Additionally, the political co-option of *Hemlè* narratives by various factions in Cameroon warrants cautious examination - a potential avenue for future research. As the author [7] warns, sporting nationalism in Africa can sometimes be manipulated for political ends.

Looking forward, this research opens several productive lines of inquiry. Comparative studies could explore similar concepts in other African football traditions, such as Nigeria's «Never Say Die» spirit or Ghana's «Black Stars» mentality. Quantitative approaches might attempt to measure *Hemlè*'s tangible impact on match outcomes, particularly in comeback situations. Longitudinal research could also track how *Hemlè* narratives evolve with Cameroon's changing football fortunes.

Finally, this study demonstrates that *Hemlè* represents far more than a sporting mentality. It is, in essence, a cultural technology - a means through which Cameroonians articulate and perform their collective identity on both national and international stages. The Indomitable Lions have become what Archetti [35] describes as «moral exemplars,» embodying qualities that transcend football to represent something fundamental about the Cameroonian character. As the nation continues to navigate complex social and political challenges, *Hemlè* endures as a powerful, unifying narrative - one that promises to shape Cameroonian football and identity for generations to come.

5. Conclusion

This study has comprehensively demonstrated how *Hemlè* operates as both a sporting philosophy and a powerful marker of national identity in Cameroon. Our findings reveal that this

concept, originating in Bassa culture, has transformed into a pan-national symbol of resilience that transcends Cameroon's ethnic and linguistic diversity. Through rigorous qualitative analysis of athlete perspectives, expert commentaries, and media discourses, we have illuminated how *Hemlè* functions simultaneously as:

- (1) a psychological driver for players facing high-pressure competitions,
- (2) a cultural reference point that connects fans across generations, and
- (3) a unifying national narrative during periods of socio-political tension.

This multidimensional quality confirms football's role as what Armstrong and Giulianotti [36] term a «cultural prism» - a medium through which broader societal values and collective aspirations become visible and tangible.

A key contribution of this research lies in documenting *Hemlè*'s remarkable adaptive capacity. Unlike fixed traditions, the concept has evolved fluidly alongside Cameroon's changing football landscape while retaining its core meaning. This finding supports Nkwi's [3] assertion about the «dynamic hybridity» of African sporting identities in postcolonial contexts, where traditional concepts creatively adapt to global influences. Importantly, our study extends theoretical frameworks of sporting nationalism beyond Eurocentric models by demonstrating how indigenous concepts can form the authentic foundation of national team identities [13]. The case of *Hemlè* challenges dominant assumptions in sports sociology by showing how local epistemologies can shape elite athletic performance and fan engagement in ways that resonate deeply with domestic audiences.

The research also uncovers *Hemlè*'s paradoxical nature as both inspirational ideal and psychological burden. While the concept undeniably enhances team cohesion and facilitates remarkable comebacks (as seen in the 2017 AFCON and 2022 World Cup campaigns), it also creates immense pressure for players expected to embody this national ideal. This finding makes an important contribution to emerging scholarship on mental health in African sports, particularly Kalu et al.'s [37] work on the «weight of national expectation» borne by elite athletes across the continent. Furthermore, the study highlights football's unique capacity to foster temporary social cohesion in Cameroon's often fractious political environment. Our data supports Ndlovu's [2] contention that stadiums function as rare «spaces of cathartic unity» in divided societies, though we caution against overstating this unifying potential beyond the temporal boundaries of major tournaments.

6. Recommendations/Practical Applications and Future Directions: Institutionalising *Hemlè* in Cameroonian Football

The findings of this study present several actionable

recommendations for football administrators, coaches, and policymakers seeking to harness the power of *Hemlè* while respecting its cultural significance. For player development programmes, the research suggests implementing structured *Hemlè* education modules that move beyond abstract notions to practical applications. As Onywera et al. [38] demonstrated in their analysis of Kenyan athletics, cultural frameworks are most effective when athletes understand them as tangible resources rather than mythical concepts. Young Cameroonian players could benefit from workshops exploring *Hemlè*'s historical roots, psychological dimensions, and contemporary manifestations - perhaps incorporating multimedia presentations of iconic moments alongside academic discussions of its socio-cultural importance.

A particularly promising intervention would be the establishment of an official «*Hemlè* Mentorship Programme» under the auspices of the Fédération Camerounaise de Football. Building on Pannenberg's successful Ghanaian model [39], such an initiative could pair emerging talents with legendary players like Roger Milla or Samuel Eto'o, facilitating direct transmission of values while allowing for contemporary reinterpretation. Structured mentoring sessions could combine practical training with oral history components, creating what Wenger-Trayner et al. [28] term «communities of practice» where cultural knowledge evolves organically. This approach would be particularly valuable for diaspora players developing in European academies, helping maintain their connection to Cameroonian football identity.

For policymakers, the study recommends a nuanced approach to *Hemlè*'s political dimensions. While Cornelissen [7] rightly cautions against the instrumentalisation of sporting nationalism, our findings suggest *Hemlè* can serve as a unifying narrative if framed inclusively. Government-backed football initiatives should emphasise *Hemlè*'s pan-ethnic character, perhaps through national tournaments celebrating Cameroon's regional diversity. However, as Ndlovu [2] warns, explicit political co-option risks diluting the concept's authentic cultural resonance and alienating portions of the population.

Media professionals face both opportunity and responsibility in shaping *Hemlè* narratives. Moving beyond simplistic heroism, journalists could adopt what Mabweazara [32] calls a «critical celebratory» approach - acknowledging *Hemlè*'s inspirational power while examining its psychological costs. Investigative pieces on player mental health, balanced match analyses, and historical contextualisation would provide depth to coverage. Digital platforms offer particular potential for innovative storytelling, such as interactive timelines connecting past and present *Hemlè* moments or fan-generated content initiatives.

Academic research should pursue several promising avenues. Comparative studies could analyse similar concepts like Nigeria's «Never Say Die» spirit [6] or Egypt's «Pharaonic Resilience» [40], potentially developing a framework for understanding indigenous sporting

psychologies across Africa. Quantitative analyses might measure *Hemlè*'s tangible impact - for instance, comparing Cameroon's performance in different match situations or analysing physiological markers during «*Hemlè* moments.» Such research could build on recent work in cultural sport psychology [20].

The study also highlights the need to investigate *Hemlè*'s manifestations in women's football. As Cameroon's Lionesses gain prominence, research could explore whether and how the concept translates, potentially revealing important insights about gender and sporting nationalism [41]. Early indications suggest female players articulate *Hemlè* somewhat differently, emphasising collective perseverance over individual heroism - a distinction warranting further examination.

Commercial stakeholders must navigate *Hemlè*-related opportunities carefully. While Agyemang and DeLorme [14] demonstrate the marketing potential of culturally-grounded fan engagement, they caution against superficial appropriation. Authentic partnerships with community organisations, player-led initiatives, and fair revenue-sharing models would help maintain integrity. Potential applications could include:

- 1) *Hemlè*-themed fan zones incorporating local art and music
- 2) Collaborations with Cameroonian designers for authentic merchandise
- 3) Digital platforms amplifying grassroots football stories

Ultimately, this research underscores the vital importance of centring African conceptual frameworks in understanding African football. As globalisation homogenises sporting cultures, concepts like *Hemlè* represent crucial counterpoints - reminders of football's deep cultural embeddedness [13]. Their thoughtful development and preservation constitute both sporting necessity and cultural stewardship, ensuring Cameroon's football evolution remains rooted in the values that give it unique meaning for its people.

Abbreviations

E	Expert
F	Fan
P	Player
AFCON	African Cup of Nation
CRTV	Cameroon Radio and Television
TV	Television
VAR	Video Assistant Referee

Author Contributions

Siméon Boris Nguéhan is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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