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## Introduction

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## Introduction

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Scientific studies on East-African distance runners usually follow the long tradition of research on 'Black' populations, stating in essence that '*these people* are different from us'. Generations of researchers have been basing their works on this undeclared and often unconscious premise, successively in medicine, phrenology, anatomy, physiology and more recently in genetics. And although very few of them would admit it in public, none of these research works has ever found any evidence of a more fundamental difference than the pigmentation of the skin to characterize the difference between these populations and others. Yet this paradigm is still in force, based on the deeply-rooted belief of a *biological otherness* of 'Black' populations.

Challenging this tradition of research, we suggest a paradigm shift. First, discarding the premise of the biological otherness of 'these people'. Instead, we should study them, and conduct research on them, in just the same way as we would do with 'normal' athletes. Is there any serious research team searching for the gene behind the success of Canadian ice-hockey players? Or any researchers measuring the ankle diameter of New-Zealand's rugby players? This matter is not only scientific, but also political. Only hypocrites deny it. More specifically, the issue is racial, because we never look at 'Black' athletes in the same way we look at other athletes. As a consequence, don't look into this book for revelations on any 'mystery' or 'secret' behind the success of Kenyan or Ethiopian runners. Simply because there is no 'mystery' or 'secret' in the East-African athletics, just as there is none in New Zealand rugby or in Canadian ice hockey.

East-African runners, and broadly speaking 'Black' sportsmen have to be studied just like other athletes and their performances explained in the same way, by a bundle of arguments dealing with training techniques and programs, psychological motivations, and social and economical determinants. So the second change to be introduced is to open the field to social and human sciences: psychology and economics, but also history, geography, sociology and anthropology.

'But then, what about altitude?' you might ask. 'Don't they get their athletic superiority from living at high altitudes?' Again, we have gone astray: it is not altitude in itself, but *the change* in altitude which leads to an increase in the number of red blood cells in our blood. This increase is a metabolic reaction to hypoxic stress: going up in altitude, the body encounters an environment with lower barometric pressure and, as a response to this situation, engages in the production of more red blood cells, compensating the decrease in oxygen by an increase in "oxygen carriers". This metabolic mechanism applies to individuals who go up in altitude, but not to people who don't expose their body to any change of altitude. For individuals who were born at 2 000 meters or more, who grew up there and have spent all their lives at this altitude, there is no change in altitude, thus no hypoxic stress and therefore no additional production of red blood cells. This is confirmed by a piece of research in hematology led by Professor Cynthia Bell on Ethiopian high altitude populations.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Beall Cynthia *et al.*, "An Ethiopian pattern of human adaptation to high-altitude hypoxia", *PNAS* December 24, 2002, vol. 99, no.26, pp. 17215-17218.

"What about genetics? Don't they have any specific genetic traits? Aren't all from the same tribe?" Indeed, an impressive proportion of Kenyan runners do come from the same tribe, the Kalenjin. And the Ethiopian runners who come from the village of Bekoji in the Arsi region are also overrepresented among the champions of this country. But again, we are misled by simplistic explanations. First, in both countries, several champions come from other regions and other ethnic groups. So the ethnic explanation is, at the very best, insufficient. Second, ethnic groups are neither isolated nor homogeneous genetic entities. So 'ethnicity' is not equal to 'common genetic features'. Third, the link between one gene (or even a combination of genes) and any athletic skill is far from being a scientifically attested reality. Fourth, ethnic groups are cultural and linguistic communities in which solidarity actions occur, such as sharing information that is key to the career of an athlete: the phone number of an agent, contact with a race organizer or more simply a training program for a competition. Ethnicity is, at least, equally related to social and cultural factors as to biological features.

Here we may stop and make a first observation: as scientifically unfounded as they are, the issues of altitude and of genetics - of biological otherness - are indeed widespread and unquestioned beliefs. As such, they are genuine sociological objects of study. And just like any other beliefs, they do have performative effects: motivating some groups - East African runners - and demotivating others - non-African runners - and thus establishing a line of legitimacy among the competitors of any international athletic event.

A second observation: visiting the Kalenjin area in Kenya and Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, we soon realize the existence of genuine *cultures of athletics*, taking 'culture' in its ethnographic sense. These cultures of athletics are complex and consistent sets of traits, made of complementary components: technical training methods (including warming up, stretching and relaxing exercises); specific tools and objects; peculiar knowledge and know-how; a sufficient critical mass of accumulated and transmitted professional experiences; social and professional networks with an internal hierarchy; specific values, codes and beliefs; unique routines, timetable and role-models, among other specific features. These cultures of athletics are per se objects of ethnographic monographs. To paraphrase Emile Durkheim, we could say that when a young Kalenjin / Oromo arrives into Kenyan / Ethiopian society, (s)he can find an already established athletics universe and does not need to re-invent everything by him/herself. (S)he is benefiting from the existence of this culture of athletics. Such a situation occurs in Ethiopia and Kenya, and nowhere else in the world.

Starting from these observations, a social and human sciences approach to the phenomenon should document the social, cultural, psychological and economic dimensions of the athletic performance of these runners. Following a constructivist perspective, we assume that the current situation is the result of two processes: an historical process of progressive construction of these cultures of athletics in Ethiopia and Kenya since the 1960s; and an anthropological process of individual acquisition, at the scale of a man's life, of this culture of athletics by some young Ethiopians and Kenyans. The latter process has three dimensions: first, the shaping of the body through exercises and training; second, the social integration into the local world of athletics; and third the mental conversion to the values of professional sport competition. All these dimensions -but not only these - still need to be documented.

Apart from some notable exceptions<sup>4</sup>, the study of African Athletics in the social sciences is still a relatively blank field and entire sections are yet to be explored. For instance, the history of athletics in Kenya and Ethiopia, the geography of athletics in these two countries including their internal and external migrations and the economy of these universes including the professional opportunities and their impact in terms of local development. We may add to this the demographics of local athletics, the study of social and professional institutions, the relationships between both athletics and other local sports, and also their position in the international division of athletic work with other nations specialized in athletics, etc.

The nineteen contributions gathered in this collective book aim to fill some of these gaps. They reflect the growing interest of the local and international scientific community in such an approach to the phenomenon. This book intends thus to be the first compilation of research work in the human and social sciences conducted on East-African athletics by scholars from Ethiopia, Kenya and the rest of the world. And indeed the proportion of young researchers and/or PhD students among the contributors holds promise of future publications on the subject.

This is another important and original feature of this book: local researchers are doing the lion's share of the job, in a rare example of regional scientific cooperation between Ethiopia and Kenya. Through its URMIS 'Migration and Society' research unit, the French *Institut de Recherche pour le Développement*, locally known as IRD, has been instrumental in this enterprise, as it is part of its goal to support researchers from Southern countries, to promote international scientific cooperation and to develop local research through research training and practice.

All contributions presented in this book feature original research works, rigorously based on fieldwork studies and/or first-hand data, and they all provide new and original knowledge on Ethiopian and Kenyan runners. Not all of these contributions have the same scientific status, ranging from descriptive surveys and case studies to inductive or deductive pieces of works based on theoretical frameworks imported from other fields of study. Most of these pieces of research were presented to the scientific community at the *International Symposium on East-African Athletics & Social Sciences* held in June 2015 in Addis Ababa. All have been reviewed by an international scientific committee composed of experts in East African studies, sport science and / or social sciences. Each contribution has gone through a double-blind peer-reviewed process and only those that successfully passed this review procedure are included in this book.

A couple of contributions are not specifically focused on athletics as they more broadly address some specific aspects of sport in East-Africa. It seemed to us important to include them in this book, as articles on East-African sports are rare. Also, they help contextualize East-African distance runners within their local context, describing the universe in which they live.

Yet none of the contributions of this book will provide any definitive answer to all the questions about East-African distance running. Nor will they fully explore all the dimensions of the issue. At the crossroads of politics with science, but also of life sciences with social sciences, the

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<sup>4</sup> Bale John et Sang Joe, *Kenyan running: movement culture, geography and global change*, London: F. Cass, 1996; Bale John, Kenyan running before the 1968 Mexico Olympics, pp. 11-23 and Jarvie Grant, The promise and possibilities of running in and out of east Africa, pp. 24-39 in Pitsiladis Y., Bale J., Sharp C., and Noakes T., *East African Running: Toward a Cross-Disciplinary Perspective*, Routledge, 2007.

matter is too broad and too complex to be exhausted in a single book. Still each of these articles casts, in its own way, a light on a part of the phenomenon, bringing a contribution to a deeper knowledge and a better understanding of East-African runners, their motivations and their social, cultural, economic and institutional environment. As a consequence, this book will provide evidence that East-African runners are not as 'different' as they are usually perceived to be, helping us to take them for what they are: sportsmen and women like any others.