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Socio-Cultural Determinants of Athletics Abilities Among Kenyan Elite & Sub-Elite Middle and Long Distance Runners

Issah Kweyu Wabuyabo,¹ Dr. Peter W. Bukhala and Dr. Benoit Gaudin.

Abstract

Kenya has participated in the Commonwealth games since 1954, the Olympics since 1964, the All African Games since 1965 and the World championship since 1983. The tradition of dominance in middle and long distance running began in the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. The total medal tallies in men track events (800m - 10,000m) in Olympic Games (excluding boycotted Games of 1976 & 1980) stands at 86 medals, of which 56 are from long distance events (<http://www.iaaf.org>). This athletic performance of Kenyan middle and long distance runners has led to a series of studies. Many researchers have sought to explain the runners' success at international level. Many of these studies were based on biological characteristics and ethnic traits of middle and long distance athletes. The social sciences have been under represented in the search to explain this phenomenon. Many studies have not considered Kenyan middle and long running abilities as a socially constructed reality. Data for this paper was sought from secondary sources including written and audio-visual support materials. Articles on Kenyan middle and long distance running were reviewed. This included internet browsing of information materials on historical and socio-cultural determinants of athletic abilities among Kenyan middle and long distance runners. This paper therefore sought to document the historical and socio-cultural environment responsible for promoting middle and long distance running abilities.

Introduction

Kenya has participated in the Commonwealth games since 1954, the Olympics since 1964, the All African Games since 1965 and the World championship since 1983. They have won a total of 86 medals at Olympics out of which 56 are in middle and long distance track event and 100 medals (38 Gold, 33 Silver and 29 Bronze) at World Championships.²The running tradition began with Kenya winning their first Olympic bronze medal in the 800m at the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games. A comparison of performance between Kenyan athletes and their counterparts from other nations in the Top 25 all time lists of track events (800m, 1500m, 3000m flat, 3000m steeplechase, 5000m and 10,000m) is shown in table 1 below.

Table1: Showing medals tallies in Top 25 all time list in Olympic Games, Commonwealth Games, All African Games track events

Country	Gender	800m	1500m	3000m	3000m St. Chase	5000m	10,000m	Total	Overall Total
KENYA	M	9	11	8	17	12	13	70	85
	W	1	0	4	7	0	3	15	

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² <http://www.iaaf.org>

ETHIOP IA	M	1	0	7	0	6	6	20	52
	W	0	1	6	4	11	10	32	
Morocco	M	0	3	1	2	4	1	11	13
	W	0	1	0	0	1	0	2	
USA	M	2	1	1	9	0	1	14	17
	W	0	0	0	2	0	1	3	
UK	M	1	3	0	0	0	1	5	7
	W	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	

Source: compiled from <http://www.iaaf.org>.

The majority of Kenyan middle and long distance runners come from the Kalenjin tribe, which has seven sub-tribes namely Kipsigis, Nandi, Tugen, Marakwet, Keiyo, Pokot, Sabaot and Terik. For instance, both Kipchoge Keino and Mike Boit are from Nandi sub-tribe, Wilson Kipketer and Moses Tanui and Tegla Loroupe are from the Pokot tribe, five-time world cross-country champion and world 10,000m record holder Paul Tergat is from the Tugen tribe while three-time world steeplechase champion Moses Kiptanui is from Marakwet.³The table below shows a distribution of medals tallies from various Kenyan communities at the Olympics, world championships and in the marathon.

Table 2: Distribution of medals amongst various Kenyan communities

Runner origin	Kenyan tribes Medal tallies compared		
	Olympics	World Championships	Marathon -Top 25 list
Kalenjin	54	77	206
Kikuyu	6	3	22
Kisii	3	2	16
Kamba	1	0	10
Maasai	1	7	2
Turkana	0	1	0
Runner origin	Kalenjin sub tribes medal tallies compared		
Nandi	33	39	86
Keiyo	5	10	38
Kipsigis	7	6	45
Marakwet	5	15	5
Pokot	1	3	2
Tugen	3	3	22
Sabaot	0	1	8

Source: Tucker et al 2015.

Because of this level of performance, myths have been used to explain this dominance of Kenyan middle and long distance runners. Most of the scientific studies conducted to explain the same phenomenon focused on the biological characteristics and ethnic traits of the athletes. However

³ Chesaina C., *Oral Literature of the Kalenjin*, Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1991.

none of the studies has been able to conclusively explain what underlies the excellent performance of Kenyan middle and long distance athletes. This has prompted a social science approach in the search for answers to this phenomenon. This paper seeks to highlight the socio-cultural determinants of athletic abilities among elite and sub elite Kenya middle and long distance runners.

Theoretical framework

This study will be guided by the theory of social constructionism as developed by Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus*. The concept of habitus refers to the durable and generalized disposition that defines a person's actions throughout an entire domain of life or mould of the personality.⁴ Habits are substantially formed during early life of an individual and remain open to development as the interdependent networks of people get involved making it more complex. This is a useful framework for understanding culture according to Bourdieu.⁵

Habitus can be understood as those aspects of culture that are anchored in the body or daily practices of individuals, groups, societies, and nations. It includes the totality of learned habits, bodily skills, styles, tastes, and other non-discursive knowledge that might go without being noticed. This relates to Smith's⁶ view of an ethnic group whose members will share a common set of understandings, values and attitudes that reflect their common culture.

A socially structured system of traits and dispositions determine people's attitudes towards the way they use their body in everyday life as well as in sport. These ideals mirror and generate gender differences. Bourdieu's⁷ considerations regarding cultural capital, habitus, taste and processes of social distinction can contribute to our understanding of the challenges and difficulties of participating in sport for people of different ethnic origins. One is socialized into running early in life, which includes learning habits, bodily skills, styles, tastes, and knowledge passed on from earlier generations. As junior athletes they join the hierarchies by learning from their senior counterparts (mentors) at school or camps.

As one joins this athletics family he or she learns the skills, techniques and tactics in specific events while sharing common values and attitudes that reflect their common athletics culture and identity. This includes the myths and cultural belief about the community and the athletics culture. During training in camps one learns from the seniors as well as tapping into their social networks to enable them to access competitions locally and abroad.

During competition the runners (individually and collectively) feel under obligation to defend the identity of winning that is historical. After winning during any event the athlete returns at home

4 Van Krieken Robert, *Norbert Elias*, Routledge, 1998.

5 Bourdieu P., *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, London, Routledge, 1984; Bourdieu P., The Forms of Capital, in Richardson J. (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, New York, Greenwood Press, 1986.

6 Smith Anthony D., *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1986.

7 Bourdieu, *op. cit.*, 1986.

to a welcome and recognition as a cultural capital for the community. Consistent outcomes in athletic events especially if it reflects ethnic or gender patterns, it creates a stereotype that later influences how people perceive and use their bodies in the same community. This may explain the performance discrepancies between different ethnicities and gender. Alternatively the stereotype could also influence gender and ethnic specializations in some sports.

Myths about Kenyan Middle and Long Distance Running Superiority

There are many myths that have been used to explain Kenyan middle and long distance running superiority. Long distance running athletic ability has been attributed to biological and ethnic traits. For instance, the myth of racial superiority as fronted by Entine⁸ has used genetic, racial, and environmental determinism to illustrate a genetic basis for the predominance of black athletes in sports.

Saltin et al⁹ describe Kenyan elite athletes as having run or walked an average of 8–12 km a day, five days a week from age 7–8 years, increasing to 90 km a week as adolescents, contrary to Bale and Sang's report¹⁰ that 14 of 20 elite Kenyan athletes interviewed had never been required to run to school. Malik¹¹ argued that populations with roots in equatorial Africa are more likely to have lower natural fat levels, which is likely to be a key factor in running. Bale and Sang¹² argue that if altitude was the only factor involved in athletic performance, then all countries with high altitude populations such as Nepal, Peru, and Mexico would be producing many world class athletes in middle and long distance running like Kenya.

Onywera *et al*¹³ studied the traditional Kenyan diet for Kenyan distant runners. They reported that the diet was composed of 10% protein, 13% fat and 77% carbohydrate which come from a traditional Kenyan maize meal (Ugali) and tea (Chai). He concluded that while the diets seem favorable for middle and long distance training and performance, the Kenyans' diets do not appear uniquely different from the training diets of most other international competitors.

These myths have not explained why foreign athletes who come to train with Kenyan athletes at the same altitude and possibly eat the same foods never perform equally well during international events. High altitude is not only found in Kenya to the extent that it can be a determinant of Kenyan athletic prowess. Likewise, all runners have genes and eat food with nutrients. What the studies based on biological characteristics and ethnic traits have been unable to do is to specify

8Entine Jon, *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We Are Afraid to Talk About It*, New York: Times Company, 2000.

9Saltin B, Terrados N, Larsen H. *et al.*, Morphology, enzyme activities and buffer capacity in leg muscles of Kenyan and Scandinavian runners, *Scand J Med Sci Sports*, 5, 1995, pp. 222–30.

10 Bale J. and Sang J., *op. cit.*, 1996.

11Malik K., Why Black Will Beat White in the Olympics: The role of race in athletic success, *New Statesman*, 4504:129, 2000.

12 Bale J. and Sang J., *op. cit.*, 1996.

13Onywera V.O., Kiplamai F.K., Tuitoek P.J., Boit M. and Pitsiladis Y., [Food and macronutrient intake of elite Kenyan distance runners](#), *International Journal of Sport Nutrition and Exercise Metabolism*, 14 (6), 2004.

which gene or food nutrient (if any) makes Kenyans good runners in middle and long distance events.

Socio-cultural factors

Traditional culture

Before 1895 cattle raiding was common among the pastoral communities like the Kalenjin tribe in Kenya. This was an activity exclusively for young men. The most fierce and dreaded of all the Kalenjin cattle raiders were the Nandi, which is the second largest of the Kalenjin sub-groups. Unlike other cattle raiders, they would often cover long distances such as 50 to 60 kilometers before striking at dawn. Apparently running abilities were a prerequisite for being a successful cattle raider.¹⁴ Coincidentally they produce the highest number of middle and long distance runners in Kenya. Skills of running acquired from this cultural practice were very compatible with modern athletics introduced during colonial period. This quickly translated into good performances in the initial competitions and as an established culture it has been able to sustain production of elite runners from the 1920s onwards.

Colonial influence

Cattle raiding as a cultural practice posed a challenge to British colonizers in the early 19th century. They deemed the tradition uncivilized “stock-theft”. They introduced running as a safe alternative to such tribal traditions and as a means of social control. In the 1920s, the colonial administration organized local track meets. The winners were offered blankets and cooking pots as prizes.¹⁵ These activities later improved and were performed on precisely measured 440 yard tracks in the 1940s and 1950s.

Colonial British settlers and Asian contractors formed many professional teams and clubs. This happened as early as 1922 before the establishment of formal schools.¹⁶ The colonial government institutionalized sports in schools; Fraser¹⁷ and the Phelps-Stokes Commission of 1924 emphasized that drills and Physical Training were some of the mandatory subjects at the elementary school level. Sports were introduced in schools in 1925. The syllabus for teaching sports in schools as an extracurricular activity was introduced in 1935. Football (soccer) and athletics (track and field) respectively were the first sports to be professionally organized in schools.¹⁸ In 1924 the Arab, Africa Sports Association (AASA) was formed and organized the first AASA athletics meet at the racecourse in Nairobi, where teams from various districts would compete.

14 Chesaina, *op. cit.*, 1991.

15 Bale J. and Sang J., *op. cit.*, 1996.

16 Wamukoya E., & Hardman K., Physical education in Kenyan secondary schools, *British Journal of Physical Education*, 23(4), 1992.

17 Fraser J. Nelson, *Report of the Commission to Recommend Structure of Education for the East-African Protectorate*, 1909.

18 Wamukoya & Hardman, *op. cit.*, 1992.

Athletic competitions

Kenyan athletes had early exposure to many standard competitions as early as the 1920s. The colonial police commissioner (RGB Spicer) in 1925 organized running competitions for police recruits¹⁹ in Murang'a. In 1933 Keino's father won a 6 mile race and was awarded 4 gallons of oil²⁰ while in 1934 the first inter-territorial athletics competition was organized between Kenya and Uganda. The championship was hosted in Kampala, Uganda.²¹ 1936 witnessed a new record set by Kamunya in a 1 mile race, while Luka Njeru set a record in the half mile race in the school championships.²²

Kenya participated in Malayan athletic championships of 1952 where Kipsang from the King African rifles won the 3 mile race. The following year (1953), the Kenya team also participated in an athletic championship in Zambia (Northern Rhodesia) and dominated the event setting a record of 61metres in the javelin. In 1954 just before the Vancouver games, the Kenyan athletics team participated in the Indian Ocean Games in Madagascar where Nyandika Maiyoro emerged victorious in the 3000m.²³

These activities accelerated Kenya's affiliation to the IAAF in 1954 and the creation of the Kenya Olympic Association in 1955. Kenya was able to participate in the 5th edition of the British Empire Commonwealth Games in 1954. This prepared the country for the 1956 Melbourne Olympics where Kenya participated in athletics, hockey, sailing and shooting. Similarly in the 1960 Olympics Kenyan competitors participated in athletics, hockey sailing and shooting. During this Olympics Nyandika Mayoro competed in the men's 5000m and finished in 6th place.²⁴The Kenyan athletics team also participated in the 1962 Commonwealth Games in Perth where Antao won in 110 yard and 220 yard sprints while Kimaru Songok won the 440 yards hurdles.²⁵

Sports institutions

To build on earlier activities of the Arab, African Sports Association (AASA), the Kenya Amateur Athletics Association (KAAA) was founded in 1951 to govern athletics (track &field) in Kenya. Arthur Evans is credited for starting organized athletics and forming the Kenya Amateur Athletics Association (KAAA) in 1951.Track and field activities were intensified from local village sports activities to serious competition around the Provinces. This transformation paved the way for the Kalenjin runners who also turned out to be exceptionally gifted athletes.²⁶

19 Spicer R.G.B., *Annual reports*, Nairobi: Police Department, 1925.

20 Noronha F., *Kipchoge of Kenya*, Nakuru: Elimu publishers, 1970.

21 Abmayr W. & PinaudY. (eds), *L'Athletisme Africain '94*, Paris: Editions Polymédias, 1994.

22 Greaves L.B., *Carey Francis of Kenya*, London: Rex Collings, 1969.

23 Bale J. and Sang J., *op. cit.*, 1996.

24 www.kenyapage.net

25 Watman M., Keino 'the world's most exciting athlete', *Athletics Weekly*, 19.16, 1965.

26 <http://www.athleticskenya.or.ke>

In 1952 KAAA organized an event between Uganda Protectorate and Tanganyika Territory, the East African Territorial Athletics Championships. The Kenyan men performed well compared with the women and dominated the championships. The championships became annual forming the cornerstone of the East Africa Athletics programme. Later other nations like Somalia, Malawi, Ethiopia, and Zambia joined the “East African Amateur Athletic Board”.²⁷

The National Olympic Committee of Kenya (NOCK) was established in 1955 to facilitate Kenya's participation in the 1956 Olympic Games and in preparation for the 1960 Olympics, 1964 Olympics in Melbourne and the All African Games of 1965. The Kenya National Sports Council (KNSC) was established in 1966 to coordinate the activities of the National Sports Federations and also assist in the preparation of national teams for the 1968 Olympic Games.

The Presidential Decree of 1980 made Physical Education (PE) a mandatory subject in all schools and Teachers Training Colleges was a landmark decision that saw improved athletics training.²⁸ Physical Education classes constitute the foundation of teaching sports skills in schools. Learners who are good in a particular sport will practice during games time in specific school teams to be presented during school competitions. During competitions regional dominance in differences sports will always indicate preferences. Schools from the Rift valley dominate running events to date.

Education and learning institutions

Athletics alongside other sports is organized from grass roots institutions (primary schools) up to university level. For instance, Kenya Universities Sports Association (KUSA) is the governing body for Universities Sports in Kenya. Each university has a department in charge of running sports in the university. This is mainly to prepare university teams for the inter-university championships among other open championships in the country. Out of the KUSA championships the best teams (which meet the qualifying times) represent the country in other championships.

The Kenya Teacher Colleges Sports Association (KTCSA) has brought together teacher trainees from all colleges around the country to compete in different Sports and Games for the last 27 years. The association documents the best times recorded in each event, which guides training as a target in subsequent competitions. Kenya Secondary Schools Sports Association (KSSSA) is an association that deals exclusively with secondary school sports in Kenya. KSSSA's main tasks include, nurturing and developing sports talent when it is young, encouraging sports in schools as a co-curricular activity and developing an all rounded student both in academics and sports. Likewise Kenya Primary Schools Sports Association (KPSSA) is the governing body for sports in primary schools.

Role models

27 <http://www.athleticskenya.or.ke>

28 Rintaugu E, G., Mwisukha A. & Munayi S., Sports: On the right track, in Njonjo S.K, Kitonga A. & Awour P. (eds), *Youth research compendium*, Institute of Economic Affairs, Nairobi, 2011.

Many youth in primary and secondary schools with upcoming athletic careers especially in the rift valley (where many athletes come from) are motivated with the presence of world-class athletes in their own villages and in several training camps in villages nearby. The champions are close relatives; they are fathers, brothers, cousins, and neighbors.²⁹ Children bear witness to the fortunes their heroes make out of winning an athletics event. This includes the homes and cars those fortunes can buy. For instance, Tegat's one-year deal of US\$300,000, with the Flora London Marathon is the most lucrative in the history of road running.³⁰ Kenyan athletes see running as a means of escaping poverty and providing money for their families given that statistics show 40% of Kenyans are unemployed.³¹ Pitsiladis et al. observe that 31% of Kenyan world-class athletes became runners for economic empowerment.³²

Achievement orientation

According to Ames³³ goal orientation with achievement motivation results to increased physical activity participation and success. Members from the Kalenjin community displayed the highest achievement orientation of all the Kenyan tribes according to Berg-Schlosser (cited by Bale and Sang³⁴). Achievement orientation refers to an internalized tendency to strive for excellence. High levels of achievement orientation can contribute to success by impacting on behaviour whose indicators include performance, effort and persistence.³⁵ This is more applicable in individual sport like running where the athletes are competing against time or set record.

Ascetic experience

Entine found out that Kalenjin students perceive the ascetic experience of sport as more significant than others.³⁶ The ascetic experience refers to the postponement of gratification where the middle and long distance runners train hard on a daily basis for success in the distant future. Both factors (achievement orientation and ascetic experience) develop over time and are important for successful performance in individual sports like distance running. According to Festinger cognitive dissonance theory suggests that we have an inner drive to hold all our attitudes and beliefs in harmony and avoid disharmony.³⁷ Gill further argues that attitudes may predispose the individual to certain behaviour which tend to be directed towards specific objects,

29 Bale J. and Sang J., *op. cit.*, 1996.

30 <http://www.iaaf.org>

31 Pitsiladis *et al.*, *op. cit.*, 2007.

32 Ibid.

33 Ames C., Achievement goals, motivational climate and motivational processes, in Roberts G. (ed), *Motivation in sport and exercise*, Champaign, I.L: Human Kinetics, 1992.

34 Bale J. and Sang J., *op. cit.*, 1996.

35 Nicholls J.G., *The competitive ethos and democratic education*, Cambridge, M.A: Harvard University Press, 1989.

36 Entine, *op. cit.*, 2008.

37 Festinger L., *A Theory of cognitive dissonance*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957.

people, or ideas.³⁸ This athletics culture has developed over time from the utilitarian from before 1895 to current modern elite athletics.³⁹

Establishment of training camps

The establishment of athletic training Camps in Eldoret, Ngong and Kapsabet among others also increased Kenya's fortunes. These camps provide basic services like accommodation, meals and coaching for the runners. Establishing training camps closer to the homes of runners has helped to increase the numbers who can access training. This also increases the chances of training under a coach unlike training privately. International funding and endorsement of some of these athletic camps has created an avenue for the recruitment and training more athletes.

Conclusion

The development of Kenyan athletics culture has taken many years. The cumulative effect of what started in 1895 when Kenya became a British protectorate is the foundation of the current athletic prowess being witnessed today. Different generations have been able to consolidate gains made by their predecessors to improve Kenyan performance internationally. This dominance in athletics is not unique to Kenya; different parts of the world dominate indifferent sports. For instance, martial arts in Japan, rugby in New Zealand and boxing in Cuba are cumulative products of their cultures and do not necessarily mean that participants have genes for dancing or boxing. Even in running, Scandinavian countries once dominated the world of athletics and specifically distance running in the 1920s. Therefore looking at this phenomenon as an outcome of human choices would pay attention to social and cultural factors that have specificity to known cultures in the regional dominance of various sports. For Kenya's case in particular they are Kenya's traditional culture, colonial influence, the existence of role models, sports institutions, the availability of training camps, the achievement orientation of the runners and their ascetic experience, and early exposure to standard facilities and competitions.

38 Gill DL. & Williams L., *Psychological dynamics of sport*, Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Publishers, Inc., 1986.

39 Mazrui Ali, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*, Little Brown & Co, 1987.