

## East-African Runners: Socially-Constructed Sport Abilities and Migration Networks

For many decades, middle- and long-distance top-level running competitions have been dominated by East-African athletes, especially by Ethiopians and Kenyans. Various explanations have been provided to try and explain the reasons of such a sporting superiority. They serve as the background for this current research project, whose final purpose is to suggest an alternative way of explanation, based on a social sciences approach.

### **Details of the objectives**

The scientific objective of this research is to try to rebalance the legitimacy between the sciences in charge of the explanation of human physical activities. My intention is to induce a sort of budge, a shift, among the scientific disciplines involved in the studying of sports, in order to strengthen the legitimacy of the human and social sciences in a field of study where their contribution is usually under-evaluated.

This proposal thus posits that the social and human sciences may, as much as other sciences, provide strong elements of understanding on a phenomenon -the sport ability of the East-African runners- widely conceived as falling under the scope of the biological sciences. Furthermore, by choosing to adopt an interpretative and qualitative approach specific to the social sciences instead of following the genetic-evolutionist paradigm, this project aims to evidence that some somatic variations among human populations (here the athletics skills of the East-African runners) can be gained through phenotypic plasticity (Cynthia Beall) over the ontogenetic scale of a person life time, namely by a precocious body specialization, rather than over the much longer phylogenetic scale of time of the evolution of species.

Until today, the issue of the domination of the East-African distance runners in the athletics competitions has been overwhelmingly addressed on a determinist point of view, invariably considering the African runners as predestinated by either their culture, their ecological environment or by a hypothetical specific genotype. This current study will review in details the results of this tradition of determinist research, but it can be argued from now that their results are very modest, so modest that a change of paradigm seems to be unavoidable.

Whatever its form, determinism is an explanatory paradigm that is ascribed to others. Oppositely, when it comes to analyzing and explaining the behavior of those who are not in the 'others' group but belong to 'us', the arguments and explanations are much more subtle and attentive to the contexts, the motivations and the voices of the people involved. In order to get the East-African athletes out of the position of 'otherness' usually assigned to them, this project of research aims to mobilize the techniques of research of the social and human sciences and to reveal the various dimensions of the

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sociological, historical, cultural, political, economic and psychological contexts that, articulated together, provide the frame of the construction of their sport abilities.

The basic hypothesis of this project is that some populations of Kenya and Ethiopia have recently -i.e. since the 1960's- and gradually appropriated and consolidated a peculiar culture of the modern form of distance running. This piece of research aims here to bring to light two interwoven processes: the first is the historical process of social construction of this culture; and the second is the process of appropriation and adaptation of this culture by the concerned populations. The main feature of this double process is the increasing trend to 'biologize' and 'ethnicize' the sport abilities, i.e. to make as if the skills were not acquired by training, but inherited as biological or ethnical traits. This tendency to biologize and ethnicize the competences results from the actions and the voices of both exogenous actors (mainly western coaches and scientists) and the local population who, objectively if not wittingly, has been benefiting from this situation.

### **Literature review**

When it comes to explaining the East-African running phenomenon, common sense usually appeals to arguments inspired by either geography or climate. As in the first times of anthropology, Man is explained by his natural environment, here the high altitude of the Rift valley area, characterized by its scarce oxygen. And consistently with an evolution-based rationale, the domination of East-African athletes is interpreted as the result of a genetic adaptation of their organism to this specific ecological configuration.

To date, despite decades of scientific research, no such genetic adaptation has been evidenced among East-African populations, whereas Andean and Himalayan native inhabitants have been proved to bare a genetic form of adaptation to hypobaric hypoxia.<sup>1</sup> Yet no Andean or Himalayan athlete ever won a marathon or a gold medal in an international sport event. When it comes to winning a running competition, adaptation to hypoxia is not the point –unless the competition occurs in a high altitude location. The argument of a supposed biological adaptation to altitude loses all its validity when the races take place in London, Boston or Paris. Following a quite illogical rationale, the fact that sea-level athletes suffer from hypoxia in location like Mexico City, Eldoret or Addis Ababa has been wrongly interpreted as an inverted asset for the high altitude athletes running in low altitude locations. No scientific evidence has ever proved such a flawed statement. Yet, as poor as it can be, the argument of a supposed adaptation to altitude remains very popular, perhaps because of the great attractiveness of such a simplistic rationale like ecological determinism.

Another form of determinism, namely the cultural determinism, is also often sought to complement the explanation of the great performances of the East-African distance runners: in substance it states that 'if they get so many good results in sport, it must be because running is part of their culture'. Thus John Manners (in Pitsiladis et al., 2007) explains that the Kenyan runners belong to a pastoral tribe characterized by an

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<sup>1</sup>Beall, C. M.. Andean, Tibet, and Ethiopian Patterns of Adaptation to High-Altitude Hypoxia, *Journal of Integrative and Comparative Biology*, Advance Access, January 6, 2006, pp. 1-7.

ancestral activity consisting in raiding cattle, sometimes over huge distances. John Manners suggests that this activity could have, over time, induced some somatic –and supposedly genetic- modifications leading to some distinctive physical abilities among this tribe. At least two objections hinder this hypothesis: first, the duration of time necessary for a genetic evolution of a specific population is much longer than the recent history of the settlement of the highlands of Kenya by the tribes who live there currently. And second, such hypothesis ignores the observations of scholars as Fabrice Delsahut<sup>2</sup> that almost none of the traditional physical skills documented by anthropologists have succeeded in converting into sport medals. For instance, the legendary long-distance runners of New Mexico only yielded mediocre results in sport competitions. And the champions of various traditional forms of wrestling rarely gained the highest honors in any Olympic Games. The great Masai runners, who impressed so much the first European explorers in the early XX<sup>th</sup> century, only supplied Kenya with very few top level athletes. In fact, as demonstrated by Gérard Bruand (1992), the modern running competitions are very specific exercises, utterly independent from any other purpose -like hunting or cattle raiding. Modern sport only validates skills that have been built for its own sake.

There is an additional objection to the culturalist hypothesis of an ethnic competence: even if we suppose that all the East-African populations living in high altitude were running every day and since their youngest age, this mass sport practice would not necessarily produce champions or medalists. In fact, sport practice on a mass scale does not automatically results on sport elite, and even less to world champions or medalists. A whole population may practice a sport without any medalist ever emerging from their ranks. Producing medalist requires a minimal scheme of training, spotting, coaching and selecting, through a chain of adequately structured social networks and institutions.

An alternative way to explain the East-African distance runner phenomenon is to appeal to 'Science'. But unfortunately, not all the sciences are equally concerned: the most often consulted are exercise physiology, biomechanics, biochemistry, epidemiology, sport medicine, genetics and even a mysterious and self-acclaimed 'athletogenomics' (Pitsiladis et al., 2007). Unless very rare exceptions, the genetic-evolutionary paradigm is the first and only to be called up to address the question, while a deep skepticism surrounds any mention to the human or social sciences. So obvious seems to be the ability of 'the sciences' –i.e. the life sciences- to solve the enigma of the Kenyan and Ethiopian athletes that the University of Glasgow launched in 2004 a rather strange laboratory called ICEARS, for International Centre for East-African Running Science.<sup>3</sup>The name of this research centre raises questions, as it explicitly establishes a link between a physical ability (running) and a specific population (East-African inhabitants) within a very unlikely single science. Does a science of the East-African running exist? How would be considered a research centre whose focus would be 'the science of the Chinese table tennis' or 'the science of the Romanian gymnastics'? When the population studied is black and African, the issue seems to be less preposterous, less obscene.

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<sup>2</sup> DELSAHUT Fabrice, *Les hommes-libres et l'Olympe. Les sportifs oubliés de l'histoire des Jeux Olympiques*. Paris :L'harmattan Collection Espaces et Temps du sport. 2004.

<sup>3</sup><http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/integrativesystemsbiology/exerciseandsportscience/>

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The pieces of research conducted at ICEARS overwhelmingly focused on the quest of a biological difference between East-African populations and the rest of the world population. Yet, at this date and despite intense efforts of research, the results are very modest: whether their object is the number of red blood cells, the consumption of oxygen or the proportion of slow twitch muscles (efficient in long-lasting efforts), the East-African runners display characteristics similar to those of other athletes. For a while, much was expected from the ACE (Angiotensin Converting Enzyme) gene, which was supposed to be the 'stamina gene' because of its role in the mechanism of control of blood flow. But no evidence could be found that this gene was present on a specific manner among the East-African runner population.<sup>4</sup>

However, far from discrediting the orientations that underlie these research works (emphasis on life sciences, evolutionist paradigm), the lack of results produces the opposite effect and nurtures hopes in hypothetical later scientific progresses. These hopes are consolidated by the stubborn belief in a biological otherness of the Africans, on the simple rationale that their characteristic epidermis pigmentation is linked to some more fundamental biological difference. At the fringes of the racial and racist way of thinking, this rationale is clearly a form of biological determinism: in substance, it states that 'if these African athletes run so fast, it is because they are biologically different'. And if 'Science' cannot evidence this biological otherness, it is simply because it has *not yet* been able to.<sup>5</sup>

This kind of argumentation sounds like an echo of North-American debates on sport and 'races', where neoconservative circles intend to legitimate the theory of a fundamental biological difference between the human 'races' by taking the example of the sports in which Afro-Americans excel.<sup>6</sup> In his book, *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sport and Why We're Afraid to Talk About It*, John Entine<sup>7</sup> ratiocinates that Afro-Americans come from West-African populations who used to live in the savannah, where they had to compete with the animals they were hunting (hence their skills in sprinting), while East-Africans, because they live in high altitude, evolved into distance runners.

These kinds of rationale are everything but science. When it comes to providing evidence, the fact is that decades of research, overwhelmingly conducted in Life Science disciplines, have yielded very little, if any, explanation of the success of East-African runners. The reason of this lack of evidence, which bears all the traits of a scientific paradigm failure, is that these research initiatives were all founded on the presupposition of **biological otherness** of the concerned populations. This is the common point of all these attempts to discover the "mystery" of the runner: they all built up their rationale on the starting point that "these people are *biologically* different" be it on a genetic, physiological, biomechanical or anatomical point of view. This founding assumption misled them all in a scientific cul-de-sac.

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<sup>4</sup>In January 2009, ICEARS stopped operating from the University of Glasgow and was allegedly transferred to Moi University, in Eldoret, Kenya.

<sup>5</sup> Let us remind that scientists have been researching the issue of a difference between 'black' and 'white' populations since, at least, the French Revolution.

<sup>6</sup>Nicolas Martin-Breteau ; « Un laboratoire parfait »? Sport, race et génétique : le discours sur la différence athlétique aux États-Unis, *Sciences Sociales et Sport*, n°3, june 2010.

<sup>7</sup> New York : Public Affairs ed., 2000.

Over the years, these various narratives on Ethiopian and Kenya runners has been influencing, inside and outside these countries, a highly determinist conception of the competences of the East-African runners. Along with a whole set of technical sport knowledge, this determinist conception is part of the local culture of athletics. Not only the mentalities and the body abilities of the involved populations have been framed by this culture of athletics: even the geography received the influence of this culture which gradually shaped specific networks. These social and economic networks are now centered on areas that have progressively been perceived as the ecological and ethnical 'foci of origin' of the local athletics: the Kalenjin area in Kenya and the Arsi area in Ethiopia. At the same time, these networks has extended abroad far beyond the border of the two countries, opening a very prestigious channel of migration towards developed countries.

The Kalenjin and Arsi areas have become key destinations for a form of sport tourism that attracts foreign runners, who endorsed the principle of their athletic inferiority and wish to train in these places in order to 'drink from the source' of the runners origin. Here again, like in the processes of biologization and ethnicization of the abilities, the movement that structures the geography of the running sector and define the circulation of runners, inside and outside the two countries, is a social construction built by both local populations and exogenous social actors, mainly westerners: tourist-athletes, trainers and reporters.

### **Hypothesis**

The focal point of this current research proposal are the creeds and beliefs that surround, fuel and structure the world of East-African running, in the mind of both local and foreign actors. Alongside with a certain amount of technical skills and empirical knowledge, added to some socio-professional networks, they form the bulk of two original and relatively strong local 'cultures of athletics', in Kenya and Ethiopia.

My first hypothesis is in history and relates to the social construction of these cultures since the beginning of the decade 1960. The creeds and beliefs structuring these cultures are historically constructed, i.e. they result from a process that can be documented and described, from their genesis to their current situation. This historical hypothesis involves not only the above mentioned belief of biological otherness, but also the myths that derive from it, namely the myth of the "natural athlete" and the myth of the "running tribe". These myths and creeds have undoubtedly produced effects on the concerned population, activating dynamics of motivation and self-fulfilling prophecies, which gradually led to the concentration in some specific areas of a critical mass of technical competencies and to the creation of networks linked to the international circuit of professional athletics competitions.

My second hypothesis deals with the efficiency of the creeds, and intends to document the influence of the mental background that surrounds and motivates the two concerned populations. If the athletics ability of these populations doesn't come from their genetics, neither from any other form of biological otherness, it is the result of a process which

takes place in the span of a man's life. How does athletics come to the young Kalenjin or Arsi? I hypothesize that this process, starting from the early age of a child up to his/her late teenage, is composed of three intermingled dimensions:

- a) the shaping of the body (their bodies seem to be 'shaped *for* running', while they are 'shaped *by* running');
- b) the social integration into the world of local athletics
- c) the inculcation of the vocation through the conversion to the values of competition

I also hypothesize that these cultures of athletics are closely related to, and inspired by the local Ethiopian and Kenyan cultures. An interesting point will be to see where and how the world of the runners overlaps with the sociocultural reality in which it is embedded: how and to which extent the values and the symbols conveyed by the sport feats (self-denial, surpassing oneself, will power) are matching with traditional local values? And how the body dispositions induced by this type of physical exercises are conform to other local somatic dispositions: 'dry' complexion, resistance to pain and deprivation.

In Kenya and Ethiopia, the populations involved in the running sector have been not only appropriating the racist discourse on their 'innate' sport abilities, but also gradually gained more and more knowledge on the coaching and training techniques. These new forms of knowledge and new conceptions of how the body operates and performs have been crossing with some more traditional conceptions, similar to the humoral body, less segmented into medical and scientific disciplines, and more characterized by a monist rather than an dualistic perception of the human being. Topics like the variations in the body functioning accordingly to the intensity of sport practice (when warming-up, training, racing or resting), the place and role of alimentation and sexual activity, the link between motivation and spirituality are some of the entries into the perceived dimension of this culture of athletics of the runner population.

### **Preliminary results**

This project of research luckily does not start from scratch. Some strong scientific arguments already exist, mainly in physical anthropology. In other disciplines, the lack of conclusive results is paradoxically the main contribution: it is typically the case of the huge majority of the works presented by ICEARS in 'athletogenomics', but also in physiology, exercise biology, genetics and hematology. This absence of result should not be neglected, as it strengthens the need for an alternative way of addressing the issue.

In physical anthropology, some questions have been so thoroughly documented that they are not discussed anymore within the scientific community. First, the 'color of the skin', i.e. the distribution of the melanin in the epidermis, is unanimously recognized as a continuous and not a discrete variable, invalidating the use of binary words like 'black' or 'white' as scientific concepts. Secondly, no physiological feature involved in the sport exercise has been proved to be linked to a certain level of pigmentation of the epidermis; the only physiological function in which the skin is involved is the respiration and, to date, no evidence has been found of any respiratory advantage linked to the 'color of the skin'. Finally, the question of the 'races' inside the human species has also been settled

by the latest findings in genetics which invalidated this concept because of its lack of scientific support.

In human ecology, the relation between altitude and human performance benefits from several decades of continuous research. But, although this issue has been more than thoroughly addressed by scores of scientists, the question is yet far to be settled. If somebody living at the sea may suffer of hypoxia when going to a high altitude area, the most serious and evidence-based scientific reviews of the question in exercise physiology remain very careful about any hypothetical advantage brought by high altitude to a sea level runner. And they hardly state any conclusive result on high altitude native runners. This absence of results is per se a result, indicating that altitude is very unlikely to be the key explanative element of the phenomenon.

On a more positive perspective, this project of research also relies on the previous contribution of the author, who already conducted a fieldwork mission<sup>8</sup> in Addis Ababa in 2007 and collected on this occasion enough data and material to publish three papers in scientific reviews, one of them co-written with Dr Bezabih Wolde, assistant professor in the department of Sport Studies of the University of Addis Ababa. The topics documented by these papers are: the institutional organization of Ethiopian athletics<sup>9</sup> and the conditions of the emergence of modern athletics in Ethiopia.<sup>10</sup> In May and June 2013, during another mission<sup>11</sup> in Ethiopia, more historical documents were collected and several key scholars of the Addis Ababa University were met, as well as officials of the Ethiopian Athletics Federation. The second part of this 2013 mission was a first contact with Kenya, and an opportunity to meet fellow social scientists and sport scientists of the Kenyatta University, Maseno University and Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology.

## Research plan and method

### a) Historical part of the research

Regarding the historical part of the research, the first task will be to deconstruct the tangle of the crossed historical influences by bringing to light the various historical elements that shaped the local culture of athletics in both countries. At this stage of my understanding of the situation, I estimate that the following dynamics must be investigated:

- the patriotic motivation, from the early 1960', a time when all the medalists were serving under an uniform (prison administration, Imperial Body Guard, Police, Army, etc.);

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<sup>8</sup> Thanks to the financial support of the *Centre Français des Etudes Ethiopiennes*.

<sup>9</sup> BEZABIH W. and GAUDIN B., The Institutional Organization of Ethiopian Athletics, *Les Annales d'Ethiopie - Revue du Centre Français des Etudes Ethiopiennes*, vol 23, 2008 dated 2007, pp.471-494.

<sup>10</sup> GAUDIN B., L'Ethiopie sportive pré-marathonienne 1924-1960, *Aethiopica – International Journal of Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies*, Universität Hamburg, vol.12, pp. 83-110.

GAUDIN B., Athlétisme et nationalisme dans l'Ethiopie sportive des années 1920-1960, *Sciences sociales et sport*, n°1, pp. 45-72.

<sup>11</sup> Thanks to the financial support of the Dept of Sport Sciences, Université de Versailles, and IFRA (Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique).

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- the often omitted or misjudged Kenya / Ethiopia rivalry, since the first medals in the 1960's
- the myth of the 'natural athlete', imported from the North-American context after 1968, stating that 'black' athletes are gifted for sport *by nature*;
- the first historical economical motivation, since the 1970's, in form of scholarships from American universities and prize money of the 'old time' professional circuit;
- the myth of the 'running tribe', from the early 1990's, stating that some specific tribes in Kenya and Ethiopia have a specific genotype that qualify them for endurance;
- the 'Bounty Hunter' motivation, after 1992 and the development of a lucrative athletics sector;
- the migrating motivation, since the 1990's.

Other topics to be investigated include:

- the conditions of the emergence and consolidation of modern athletics in both countries (before the 1960's),
- influence of foreign experts on the local technical knowledge of athletics,
- influence of the numerous medical and scientific field missions on the perception by the runners of their physical specificities,
- conditions of the historical distribution of athletics competences between Ethiopia (marathon) and Kenya (steeple chase),
- conditions and incidences of the emergence of women participation in local athletics,
- influence of the commercial circuits on the shaping of the local athletic sectors and consequences of the internationalization of the sector (including transfer of allegiance) on the national sector of athletics in both countries.

On the methodological point of view, the historical part of the work will to be based on the exploration of local Kenyan and Ethiopian archives and libraries, as well as on interviews of historical witnesses (be they key actors or simple runners).

Data will be sought from written, oral and visual supports. Processing data operations include: locating, browsing, borrowing/buying/copying, translating (if applies) and analyzing. Specific actions to be carried out for interviewing historical actors are: conception of interview, conduction, record transcription, translation (if applies), analyze.

b) General description of the current situation of athletics in Kenya and Ethiopia

A global picture of athletics in both countries requires documenting and describing the following items:

- The geography of athletics inside the country: location of the facilities, training camps and institutions, networks of school-, district- and national-level competitions;

- The geography of athletics outside the country: location of competitions attended by athletes, location of athletes who 'transferred allegiance', location of managers headquarters;
- The economy of athletics: type of professions involved (massager, coach, camp manager, agent, etc.); other kind of professions available to local young men (farmer, shop keeper, etc.); amount of income generated by the athletics sector, distribution of revenues and local benefits;
- The demography of athletics: quantifying the number of runners, trainers, managers, related professionals; age and sex distribution of runners by category; professional and sport reconversion of past generations of runners;
- The institutions: the Federation, the clubs or training camps, the private event organizers and other locally implanted stakeholders;
- The integration of athletics within the local sport sector: relations with other sports in the country;
- The integration of Kenyan and Ethiopian athletics within the international world of athletics

c) Socio-cultural part the research

- The local culture(s) of athletics

Two introductory fieldwork missions in Ethiopia and Kenya gave me the opportunity to note that the runner population represents a group rather distinct from the rest of the population. The specificity of their culture can be depicted by the following traits, quite distinctive from the rest of the local community culture:

- a specific calendar (with seasonal meetings, annual competitions, international circuits),
- a set of specific places: routes and itineraries, spots in the hills, stadiums, etc.
- a very specific and quite daring kind of dress: sport short for women, flashy colors for all,
- specific rituals (the Ethiopians warming-up exercises are very codified),
- a peculiar diet (conflicting with the traditional fasting dates),
- specific role models (boards with photos of medalists of the past),
- a homogamous matrimonial behavior (inducing them to choose their life partner inside the athletics sector),
- their extreme concern for their body (their sole professional tool and asset)

All these traits compose a very peculiar culture, that I suppose to be common to the two countries, although some undeniable particularities in each of the contexts.

Yet, as specific as it can be, this culture of athletics is not completely alien to the local culture in which it is embedded. In order to explore the links and overlapping areas between this culture of athletics and the local traditional cultural environment in the Kenyan and Ethiopian concerned regions, the following topics will be tackled during interviews with runners:

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- Body sensations such as tiredness, pain, injury, surpassing oneself, euphoria;
- Social interactions while running such as hierarchy, rivalry, mutual support, teamwork, ... ;
- Personal and collective management of the main somatic functions: alimentation, respiration, sleep, sexuality, and understanding of body functioning
- Religious and superstitious beliefs associated with running.

From the tradition of sociology of sport, we know that the way people use their body is correlated with the sociological properties of their groups of belonging. Boltanski (1970) called it 'somatic cultures' and Bourdieu labeled it 'habitus' (1979). The key point in these concepts is that gestures convey values, which are themselves highly dependent on variables such as: gender, age (and in East-African context: age groups), ethnicity, profession and religion, as well as on a less extent on medical, sanitary and food-related conditions.

This part of the research requires a comprehensive understanding of the local culture that could only be achieved through an in-depth on-the-ground immersion, as well as observations and interviews with local informants, runners and key actors of the sector.

- Sociological and sporting profile of the runners at each step of the career

This part of the research will focus on the description of the sociological proprieties of the runners at each of the steps of the career. Indeed, we know since Chambliss (1989) that the sport career is not tube-shaped. On the contrary, it is divided in relatively hermetic separated 'sub-worlds', with thresholds commanding the entry to each following step. Some runners succeed in stepping over and integrate a new social and sporting world; others fail and drop out of the career. The difference between them is not necessarily a question of sport competence and all the best runners in a given step of the career will not get access to the following step. Indeed, other competences are necessary to get ahead in the career: these competences are related to the social, cultural, economical and psychological background of the runners.

The steps of the sport career can be defined as social worlds because they mainly differ in terms of social characteristics. Who is the runner training with? Who is coaching him/her? I take as a working basis a scenario built on four distinct contexts, keeping in mind the possibility to increase or reduce their number accordingly to the situation. These four sub-worlds of the local athletics are:

- Running with peers: in the community
- Running with a prestigious peer: in a regional club (Ethiopia) or in a training camp in or near Iten (Kenya)
- Training with a coach: in a sponsored training camp (Kenya) or in a first division training camp (Ethiopia)
- Training with a personal coach and a manager

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A sociological questionnaire will be distributed in a large scale among male and female runners in each of the four sub-worlds above listed, both in Kenya and in Ethiopia. The data will provide an accurate profile of these populations and potentially point out differences between them. A specific questionnaire will be conceived for each population on the basis of a common set of sporting and sociological topics, including:

- sex, ethnicity, place and date of birth, religion,
- current housing situation, current revenues
- mother tongue, other language skills,
- highest class attended at school,
- number of brothers and sisters, rank among the siblings,
- father's and mother's profession,
- presence of other runners in the family,
- number of friends inside and outside athletics,
- experience of running and competing at school-, district- and national levels,
- personal best performance,
- people they are training with,
- frequency of training,
- type of distance they are training for,
- medical and massage cares,
- affiliation to the Federation,
- contract with a club, a sponsor, a manager.

Each questionnaire requests the following tasks: conception, testing, filling up, compiling, editing and analyzing.

- The necessary social competences to step up in the career

Not all the runners with satisfactory sport results gain access to the following step of the career. In order to spot out the other competences necessary to a professional success, the research will focus, in this third moment of the socio-cultural part, on some very specific runners presenting two key characteristics:

- They had the athletics competence to integrate the upper sub-world of the career because their athletics results qualify them for the next step;
- They dropped out and did not integrate the following step of the athletics career.

Interviews with these paradoxical leavers are likely to reveal and describe all the non-athletic competencies that are requested to go ahead in the career. What are the non-athletics criteria governing the successive turning points, discriminating two promising young runners with similar athletics results and competences, leading one to the following step of the career, and leaving the other backwards? Beyond the personal life histories, I assume that some common proprieties will emerge, be they sociological, psychological, cultural or economical (or else). I hypothesize that social attributes, such as community networks, language skills, family support or parental role models are as much instrumental as the often over-estimated psychological traits in the process of inculcation of the vocation and conversion to the values of modern competitive sport.

Focusing on the leavers will help determine how the athletics competences come to the young Oromo and Kalenjin. How the successive decisions to race, train, compete and eventually dedicate one's life to athletics appear like natural choices to some of them, and impossible to others. How their whole life progressively moves in this direction and focuses on this activity, or fails to do so. How do they learn and integrate the idea that the whole world considers they are bearing – or not- some exceptional physical specificities. And in a parallel process, if their immersion –or not- from their youngest sporting age into the sphere of competitive distance running leads to a precocious body specialization, while they are still children or teenager and the maturation of their body is not yet fully completed.

Following Michel Agier in his recommendation to approach a research object by its edges, I will focus on the study of non-emblematic representatives of the two populations, in Kenya and Ethiopia. For instance, meeting the left-behind of the competitions will bring to light the drop-out thresholds of a sport career. Studying the female runners will help understand the moral and religious obligations, which weigh more heavily on their shoulders than on the men's. In the same line, studying the 'illegitimate ones', be they non-Oromo, non-Kalenjin, or better 'almost-Oromo' and 'almost-Kalenjin' will help to perceive the strength of the prejudices and creeds linked to the biologization and the ethnicization of the competences. At each of the 'turning points' of the career, several leavers will be interviewed, as well as their coaches, mentors, of persons in charge.

Empirical data will be collected by questionnaires, interviews and observation for description of the steps; and by interviews and observation for the turning points. Identification of the career's steps is performed through interviews and documentation. Each interview requests the following tasks: conception, conduction, record transcription, translation (if applies), analyze. While each observation requests the following tasks: spotting, performing, note-taking and editing, analyzing. Fieldwork tasks are to be conducted both in Ethiopia and in Kenya, through missions and/or with research assistants.

### **Operational feasibility**

Based for one year (renewable) at the Dept of Sports Science of the Addis Ababa University, I will personally conduct the part of the research related to Ethiopia. As far as Kenya is concerned, I intend to incentivize and support local academic partners through actions, like launching a scholarship program, funding research assistants, and organizing capacity building seminars, so that they find their own interest in helping me conducting the Kenyan part of the research.

For the purpose of questionnaire conception and distribution, a capacity building seminar was conducted in collaboration with the *Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology*, in June 2014. The seminar focused on Social Sciences Methodology and was completed by a hands-on workshop on questionnaire writing, testing and

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distributing. Attendants to the seminar and workshop thus acquired a practical and technical experience of Questionnaire methodology.

### **Envisaged applications of the research results**

To rebalance the distribution of functions between Life Sciences and Social Sciences for the explanation of sport performance;

To advance knowledge on:

- History of Ethiopian and Kenyan athletics
- Structure and organization of athletics in Kenya and Ethiopia in relation with the market of international competitions (migration channels)
- Social construction and performative efficiency of myths in high performance sport
- Somatic cultures of social groups in both countries
- Sociological proprieties of African runners at different skill levels
- Links between athletics and other activities of local life
  - o economic development
  - o migration
  - o gender relations
  - o ethnicity and politics
  - o etc.

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