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The Politics of Truth of Kenyan Distance Running

1. Introduction

Distance running as a form of movement has existed since the beginning of the human race and set homo sapiens apart from the other animals and humanoids. Today, the discourse surrounding distance running is primarily in the context of sport. Within competitive distance running, Kenyans are perceived as the best runners in the world. While this statement appears to be true in terms of records and accolades, the implicit understanding that Kenyans have always been naturally talented distance runners is not completely true. The dominance of Kenyan runners is constructed as are the narratives surrounding their dominance.

The dominance of distance running in Kenya is intertwined with political issues such as colonialism and racism which are performed, promoted, and subverted through national narratives and actions of individuals revolving around the distance running world. Through my research I will explore three questions: (1) What led to the rise of East African distance running in the sphere of international competitions? (2) How are issues of colonialism and racism articulated through East African distance running? (3) How has the dominance of East African runners in distance running competitions played a role in the politics of East African countries and nation-state building?

Due to the length constraints of this paper I will focus only on Kenyan distance running, even though Ethiopia is also located in the East African region and generally recognized as a dominant force in international distance running competitions. Further, it is important to contextualize myself as I relate to the topic of Kenyan distance running. There is a large amount of scholarship written on Kenyan distance running, especially from the perspective of white,

Anglo-American runners and scholars, and while I work to prioritize Kenyan and black voices in my research and analysis, I am also aware that I am a part of a history of white scholarship that speaks on the culture and experiences of black and African individuals.

2. History of Running

Running as a practice first arose out of necessity for the survival of the human race. Endurance running was utilized for hunting animals over long distances. As society changed, the purpose of running changed from a skill meant for hunting to a means of communication and transmitting messages. Many other transformations and iterations of the practice of running waxed and waned across years and cultures, but most important to my analysis of distance running is the eventual globalized transformation into running as a sport which can be traced from the eighteenth century to today. (Gotaas 9-22). The British were the first to define distance running as it is understood today through standardized distances and official records. The standardization of the mile and reliable time-keeping devices in the eighteenth century, allowed for the keeping of records to start during the nineteenth century (Gotaas 70-71).

The growth of global trade and travel throughout the nineteenth century laid the groundwork for the first international, modern Olympic games to be held in 1896. While the idea stemmed from the French, the British were the only country that had standardized rules for sport and thus the rules for the first Olympics were almost entirely British (Gotaas 129-131). The Olympics gave running a global platform thusly initiating the idea of a global “running culture.” With the constitution of international competition begins the mobilization of the sport of running as a political and capitalistic device to assert power and promote national narratives (Eichberg 5-9). Since the sport’s international debut in 1896, a variety of nations have dominated the space of distance running with each country’s era of success rationalized via a variety of national and

international narratives. This variation of domination over the years within distance running begs the question of whether Kenyans have always been runners, and if they have not always been runners, how did Kenya come to be known for distance running?

3. Cultural Narratives and Discourse

These questions about dominance in distance running and the position of Kenya in this long-standing debate on what country or ethnicity or race makes for the best runners is caught within the paradox of understanding. Hannah Arendt tackles this idea of understanding in the midst of totalitarian regimes in her article, “Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding).” While the case of narratives about Kenyan distance running is not one of a totalitarian regime in the context of a nation state, the construction of Kenyan distance running represents a much more hidden instance of ideological rule through sport that has its roots in colonial history and has continued through to today via post-colonial structures and the many facets of neocolonialism in sport.

As for how people should grapple with these narratives of truth surrounding colonialism and neocolonialism in Kenyan distance running, Arendt offers the advice of dealing with truth by stating, “the activity of understanding is necessary; while it can never directly inspire the fight or provide otherwise missing objectives, it alone can make it meaningful and prepare a new resourcefulness of the human mind and heart which perhaps will come into free play only after the battle is won” (Arendt 310). More than having the historical knowledge of the past, it is necessary for there to be an understanding by the global community of the power structures at play in Kenya that continue to be articulated through global politics as well as widespread media narratives that shape these politics and perspectives.

Kenya has not always been considered dominate in the sport of distance running.

Even after the introduction of Western sport to the region in the late 19th century, it would be another 70 years before anyone started discussing East African runners as prominent players in the sport (Aisch and Buchanan). This delayed dominance in distance running complicates the common narrative that Kenyans are naturally the most gifted distance runners by birth. There is a greater history and construction of distance running in Kenya that speaks to both economic and political realities of the country as well as racially biased actions, narratives, and scientific studies by hegemonic powers, specifically the United States and the United Kingdom (Scott and Pitsiladis 425).

Kenyan runners first enter the international running scene during British rule in the 1950s, during which time the prevailing stereotype was that black people could not run very far because of the ways in which their DNA and thusly physiology was different from their white counterparts (Gotaas 228). Even so, with this prevailing stereotype dominant in global culture at the time, the Colony Sports Officer in Kenya put together an athletic team for the 1954 Commonwealth Games including Lazara Chepkwony who was a premier long-distance Kenyan athlete at the time. On the way to the games he competed barefoot in a six-mile race in London the day before his three-mile race at the Commonwealth Games in Vancouver. However, while in both races he secured a strong start among the leaders of the race, his bare feet and inconsistent form setting him apart from the field of runners in both race he suffered terrible cramps in his legs which resulted in poor finishes at both events (Gotaas 227-228).

Thusly, with the first African performance in a European competition, Chepkwony became another narrative to fuel the anti-black sentiment in the sport of running through his failures in both events. However, while the barefooted, cramp-prone depiction of Chepkwony at the Commonwealth Games seemed to portray Kenyan unsuitability for long distance running, a

process of talent curation was being conducted in Kenya, only known at the time by the most well-connected members of the running community. After Kenya's independence the world would finally see the nation claim a narrative of successful long-distance running subverting the running narrative of the time of black inferiority (Gotaas 227-228).

4. Kenyan History

Before the British, the region of East Africa now known as Kenya had a tradition of games and play similar to the many other societal constructions of traditional pastimes and youth activities across the globe. Many of these traditional, Kenyan activities were geared toward youth and consisted of games and play that served socialization and the development of skills that resembled tasks and roles to be taken on in adulthood. While some of these games were bound by distinct rules, many activities were unstructured and encouraged the youth to play and engage with each other freely. Even beyond youth activities, games were seen as a vehicle for social and cultural transmission of traditions and community (Byron 20-24). The arrival of British imperialism largely erased the majority of traditional games and play in the region, marshalling in the beginning of the dominance of Western sport in the region (Mählmann 160).

The history of Great Britain is imagined with a rich history of sport which resulted in the perpetuation of sport along with politics and culture during its colonial period. The institution of British sport began with the determination of the Kenyan Colony under the East Africa Protectorate in 1895. British interest in Kenyan sport was isolated to anthropological and academic motivations. Kenyan games were largely perceived as uncivilized and unproductive whereas British sport built physical fitness and moral character (Perkin 152-153). The British used sport to colonize the daily life and culture of Kenyans. Sport was conveyed in the Kenyan colony through missionary schools which made sport a vital part of the curriculum as well as a

form of “upper social sports” for adults that “served an integrative factor for the colonists” and made the native Kenyans feel inferior when dominated by foreigners in sports that were coded in Western customs and habits as well as British tradition (Byron and Chepyator-Thomson 303).

Further, more than merely playing sports in schools, leagues, and other informal and communal settings, sport was institutionalized on a national scale through organizations such as the Kenya Amateur Athletics Association and the Kenya Olympic Association. These actions created a sense of home country for the British colonists that were craving sport from the home country, while at the same time serving the imperialistic motivations by erasing the sport and cultural traditions associated with native Kenyan culture (Byron and Chepyator-Thomson 303-304). Although, British colonialism in Kenya eventually ceased, Kenya’s continued tradition of Western sport, participation in the Commonwealth Games, and recruitment of runners by foreign powers speaks to the continued hold British sport has on Kenyan culture.

5. Nation Building and Neocolonialism

Kenya’s independence in 1964 was followed by a spike in winning performances in international competitions. Growing from the colonial ideal of development through sport, Kenya co-opted the political framework to develop a distinctly African state based around African socialism. From a structural standpoint, Kenya started to develop governmental organizations such as Ministries of Education and Culture and Social Services, with the Ministry of Education coordinating school sport programs, the Culture and Social Services department controlling out of school sports programs, and the Kenya National Sports Council coordinating general sport development and administration among a handful of other branches responsible for more specific sections and branches of sport (Byron and Chepyator-Thomson 303-305).

As acclaim for Kenya's runners grew, foreign economic interest and investment followed. While this may appear positive on the surface-level, foreign involvement is a result of a structural manipulation of the Kenyan state that offered fiscal profit through immediate capital while the foreign state would go on to receive long-term return from the athletes that they lifted from less advantaged backgrounds in Kenya. On one hand, economic poaching was occurring at the hands of neocolonial powers, thusly undercutting national economic and political power, while on the other hand, a national identity in running was being forged through the success that was made available through this international involvement that lifted the status, funding, and training of Kenyan athletes (Connor and Griffin 2-8).

As success of Kenyan athletes grew at the hands of increased media representations as well as individual narratives of the wealth and celebrity success, a national desire was born that created distance running success as an ideal to strive for to achieve maximum opportunities. This avenue for success created a new pathway that existed outside of the traditionally poor, agrarian, and stratified nature of Kenyan society, giving men and women alike the ability to accumulate wealth and achieve the individual agency that comes with that wealth. While Kenya is still trapped within the power structures of post-colonial economic and political influence, even within sport, there is a level of agency asserted through running at the individual and state level through wealth accumulation and nation building (Gotaas 332-340).

The idea that Kenya is distinct in its atemporal domination of the sport of running is not necessarily true due to similar assertions of national dominance in the past where, "presumed causes of such domination are often recycled, out of date, and based on misinformation and myth" especially as seen in the case of Finland which was formerly the most dominant power in running a mere 50 years prior to mass Kenyan success in the sport (Hamilton 393). The history

of nation building through distance running offers the argument that countries achieve dominance due to the socio-cultural drive of individuals to contribute to the notion of the nation state. The individual comes to embody the vision of the nation and bonds a country together through the performance of national identity.

Finland was similarly occupied by a foreign power (Russia) prior to the country's dominance in distance running. Following Finland's independence in 1917, the country dominated distance running, winning international competitions, driven by a compulsion to define the new country. Narratives surrounding Finnish success mirrored those of Kenyan runners, referencing geography, biology, and cultural difference as the reason behind their success. These runners were similarly veiled in a narrative of "othering" as beings that possessed inherent ability and a mythic engagement with the sport. However, while these myths and stereotypes were perpetuated by culturally dominating countries, they were also promoted within the country of Finland as a part of their national identity and self-image (Gotaas 154-165).

While Finnish dominance would elicit international attention and funding, what differs from the Finnish example of nation building and Kenya is the embedded nature of colonialism along racial lines whose history is much deeper and still very much a part of the contemporary narrative of disenfranchisement within Kenya and in a global context. This is asserted largely by the United States as a major media and political force who has been reckoning with race for much of its history. Embedded in perceptions of the black body is the history of the slave trade across the western world and especially in the United States. While the enslavement of Africans has ended, black bodies continue to be enslaved within newly constructed structures of domination. The commodification of the black body is done on a cultural level that reproduces racially-charged narratives and disseminates them across the various media publics that

subscribe to American media. With the United States as a primary producer of media, it is the decontextualized interpretations of black African bodies read through a lens of late-slavery and African American history that relates these bodies as un-human and commodities in the global economy. (Pierre 149-155).

Many colonial and imperialist powers have continued to dominate the African continent through economic and business ploys that play to the continued flow of resources and power and even people toward the economically dominate powers. In terms of distance running in Kenya, this enslavement takes place in the form of recruitment to run for a country and win medals, honors, and records for the nation state. In this way, migrants trade their bodies for the opportunity to transcend the structural disadvantages they experience in their home country. Human capital is mined by the dominating powers, thus pillaging countries that have been largely misstructured and crippled by colonial and imperial powers. Athlete migration from these less advantaged countries such as Kenya thus speaks to this disempowered history at the hands of hegemonic powers, while continuing the flow of African bodies to support the success and power of these politically and economically dominating countries (Connor and Griffin 3-9).

In addition to this physical commodification of the black, African body, there is a process of narrative crafting surrounding these individuals that builds on and promotes racist discourse surrounding black experience in general. The narrative that supports the commodification of the black, African body is science of the “other” that marks East African bodies as biologically distinct from white bodies. This perception of African, black bodies being unlike white bodies and the physiological arguments for these notions go back much further than the examination of the black body within the sport of running. Black individuals have been the point of physical experimentation and analysis since the slave trade with one of the most striking examples being

the case of Dr. Marion Sims who experimented primarily on black women because of their incredible capacity for pain (Saint-Aubin 257-261). While the magnifying lens on Kenyan running physiology appears quite different than the non-consensual experimentation on slaves, there is still a commodification and study of the body by primarily white individuals that continues to subject the black body to the economics of the white, western world.

Further, narratives that portray Kenyans in a “primitive” light add a cultural dimension to the biological racism that has been articulated. Depictions and stories of Kenyans who run barefoot or run to and from school from a young age continue to represent Kenyan runners as existing outside of the accepted Western standard of normality of life due to the so called “primitive nature” of Kenyan life. Even descriptions of a limited and primarily agricultural diet present Kenyan athletes within the stereotypical narrative of the poor and primitive African. These narratives are constructed in similar veins to past and present discourse surrounding biological difference, neglecting the consideration of athletic development and training, thusly focusing entirely on the black body as a resource and object (Hobson 114-118).

Kenyan runners have been formally trained ever since their admission to the international running competition scene, and they have been trained even more intensely with incredible levels of technology as they moved into the mid-1980s where they would begin to completely dominate the field. Heavy amounts of money, recruitment, and training have been funneled into Kenya, creating some of the most state-of-the-art training facilities in the world (Gotaas 338-340). While distance running culture has continued to be highly constructed in Kenya, the narratives still continue to be largely constructed along the lines of racial and ethnic difference and othering rather than sport development.

6. African Narratives

The story of Kenyan dominance in distance running has been a primarily Western narrative in cultural and scientific discourse. African voices have been excluded until most recently as academic discourse has just now started to gain international acceptance in the academic community. Even so, while academia has begun to unpack instance of neocolonialism and racial biases that has been exerted on former colonial and imperial states by hegemonic powers, these have gain little grounding in general culture, as the major media centers such as the United States continue to prioritize white voices when it comes to issues that involve black bodies and narratives due to the own history of racism in the United States (Fisher).

Efforts by academics and cultural theorists have re-contextualized distance running within Kenyan society. Kenyan narratives are written in direct opposition to the sensationalized habits of American culture where theories that play to narratives of Kenyan exceptionalism often gain wide-acceptance as a confirmation of the societal tradition of racial othering, especially along black-white lines. Where Western, white scholars, constructed theories of Kenyan success as a form of untouchable and other-worldly difference, African scholars tell the story of African running through a lens of the normality of cultural sport and how colonial powers re-constructed this sport along cultural and economic lines that has been increasingly used as a socio-cultural device for national and individual emancipation since the independence of Kenya in the 1960s (Wabuyabo et al.).

While commodification of African bodies has been grown on a global scale through the use of Western sport as a space of manipulation, sport is also a form of reforming society and subverts narratives of poverty by empowering individuals and communities. To combat the exportation of youth as commodities of sport, the Kenyan government has put forth efforts to empower youth by constructing formal sport organizations such as the Marthare Youth Sports

Association which bring together a community of young athletes outside of their isolated, sometimes impoverished conditions, in order to promote health and give the youth a role in governance that has been previously non-existent (Wamucii 27). Additionally, women were largely excluded from Kenyan society, sport offers them an active role in the community as well as a possible way to gain wider emancipation through success in sport either through athletic ability or even sports leadership which is a growing field for women. Female empowerment through sport is a Western ideal, but even so, in Kenya it has been championed by the country's women to construct a vision of Kenya that grants women a formal place in the community and government (Gotaas 337-338).

Further, successful and famous Kenyan runners have been vital to constructing a vision of a new Kenya by growing opportunity for youth through sport as well as reinvestment in their communities. While there is a narrative of the co-opting of Kenyan talent by international powers as a form of sport commodity, there is also a counter narrative that has begun to arise of Kenyan celebrity athletes that use their success to perform their Kenyan identity and empower their nation state and communities through direct political and economic action. This has been a growing trend since the new millennium as interest in investment in Kenya began to grow, and Kenyan athletes began to prioritize the agency of competing on their own terms within their nation state rather than subscribing to a pathway built on the dream of foreign wealth and success which often turned into tragedy for many Kenyan athletes who sought their fortunes abroad due to cultural differences and isolation in life and training (Gotaas 290-303; 337).

The diverse theories surrounding Kenyan success in sport do not allow a direct conclusion to be drawn. However, without a distinct answer to Kenyan success, the reasoning that is accepted speaks to national and cultural motivations. While it has been made clear that

Western analysis of Kenyan running is meant to define distinct difference largely along biological and racial lines, Kenyan narratives on sport empower a narrative that aims to construct a vision of not a naturally gifted people, but rather a society and cultural that allows for the growth of distance running success.

The primary socio-cultural reasons that are articulated as behind Kenyan success center around institutional infrastructure, colonial rule, and the constructed culture that empowers individual drive and an appreciate for the experience of running. The infrastructures in place from sports institutions to athletic competitions to training camps, builds the narrative of a developing and positively constructed and operational nation state. The narrative of colonial rule recognizes the past so as to empower a Kenyan future in spite of malicious involvement by hegemonic powers. The construction of cultures builds a positive vision of a hardworking people that sets examples for younger generations and promotes stability in a region that has often been cast in narratives of vast dysfunction.

7. Eliud Kipchoge: A Contemporary Case Study

Eliud Kipchoge set the new world record in the marathon this fall at the Berlin Marathon. As the most dominant athlete in distance running and a native of Kenya, he offers an interesting case study for how media narratives are constructed around Kenyan success. While Kipchoge has dominated the running world for years, he entered digital and cultural discourse through his participation in the Nike Project *Breaking2*. This project brought together three runners of the greatest runners of today, including Kipchoge, to use the latest Nike technology to break 2 hours in the marathon. The assembly of runners were entirely from East Africa, reflecting the talent of the field. However, while the most talented athletes in the field are almost entirely Kenyan with a handful of Ethiopian runners, Nike picked three runners that originated from different countries

in East Africa, purposely constructing a narrative of the East African duty to break the 2-hour barrier for all of humanity (“Breaking2”).

This arrangement of East African runners meant to represent the greatest in physiological development, coupled with Nike’s greatest products in material development, thusly positing the black body not only as a commodity of Nike completed branded in Nike gear, but also as a type of racial and biological technology in and of itself. Further, even the venue for the record-setting attempt was situated on a brand-new track nestled in the wooded Kenyan landscape, creating a visual representation of the primitive and the raw nature of East African experience, meeting the revolutionary and new of Nike technology. The event was digitally commoditized as it was streamed across social media and promoted using a narrative of a kind of manifest destiny of sport with Nike ready to claim the fall of the 2-hour barrier as its own technological achievement powered through black bodies as vehicles for this success. This bears capitalistic and imperialistic overtones that represents the form and physicality of black bodies over the narratives of their individual experiences and training.

In the midst of this attempt to break 2 hours in the marathon and Kipchoge’s subsequent record at the Berlin marathon, hegemonic sources of Western media have portrayed Kipchoge in a light of African exceptionalism. While it is not a falsehood that Kipchoge is one of the most talented and decorated distance runners of all-time, the media has manipulated his depiction by portraying him in a one-dimensional and extra-human manner which is entirely constituted by his national identity and untouchable talent (Dennehy). While it may also be true that his inherent talent is unmatched, what is left undiscussed is any potential nuances of his training or habits, or even input from him about where he thinks his success comes from.

The headlines prior to Berlin only spoke to his goal for the race, and the narrative of exceptionalism that was constructed around this goal, and after the race it similar echoed these splits, times, and goals as a matter of sporting sensation and spectacle (Dennehy; Robinson) While much of the language describing is relatively dry and factual stating splits and accolades independent of commentary on the background behind these achievements, the constructed perception of Kipchoge lives both in the lack of details surrounding his running success and the meaning of the few details offered about him and his life and character.

Coupled with his narrative of exceptional difference, it is often mentioned in American and running publications a basis in how he was raised that sets him apart (Robinson; Joyner). Emphasis is always placed on the village he grew-up and trained in, articulating the very idea of primitiveness in the semantics of “village” over other habitual distinctions. However, in discussing his upbringing few details are mentioned other than that of a deceased father, a single mother, and a handful of siblings which also fosters an unnuanced depiction that plays to traditional stereotypes and narratives of African individuals (RBR Admin).

Kipchoge is also depicted in a particularly British manner and character which speaks to both the colonial history of Kenya and the hegemonic dominance of Great Britain in the sport of running. One publication offered a description of his manner using the sub-heading of “Keep Calm and Carry On,” while *The Guardian* included the quote that he “drinks a lot of tea” in its headline of his Berlin win, even offering a fair amount of the copy to his tea drinking habit (LetsRun.com; Cleary). While both instances can be examples of publications that cater to specific cultural cues and narratives that people can connect with, it also casts Kipchoge in a particularly colonized sense by painting an image that depicts him within the gaze of the British imaginary.

Self-descriptions of his performance by Kipchoge himself as well as depictions in Kenyan publications present a view of Kipchoge that varies incredibly from the fantastic and vague portrayals of Kipchoge as an example of athletic exceptionalism. While Western publications utilized words and description that portrayed Kipchoge carrying on a simple existence and Spartan-like life that was iterative of the Kenyan experience, differing vastly from that of the digital and hypermodern West, a close analysis of Kipchoge's own quotes and descriptions of training and self-assessment within these Western articles are indistinguishable from discourse of other elite athletes as well as incredibly similar to phrasing and narratives of self employed by the average competitive runner. The actual depictions of Kipchoge's life and perspective on it, is that of an everyday runner, easily recognizable across publics as someone who runs and trains out of earnestness and enjoyment, rather than the hyper-oothered and exceptional character that is often depicted in journalistic analysis of him as an individual (Robinson; Joyner).

Narratives in Kenyan media about Kipchoge prioritize cultural perspectives over exceptional athletic ability. A sports publication in Kenyan notes that "Kipchoge credits teamwork for his success" as the headline of the story, while another news organization notes that he was named UN Person of the Year for his work in Kenyan communities specifically regarding HIV/AIDS, which was left completely undiscussed by any mainstream Western news publications (IAAF; Mutuko). These instances have a dual purpose of promoting cultural narratives of famous Kenyan athletes and decolonizing the sport while also crafting a constructed Kenyan experience of success which is meant to contrast with the completely commoditized and objectified Kenyan body that is largely detached from the character of the individual and cast within a narrative of success that is achieved through a mythic black body. Thusly, Kipchoge

represents how Kenyan athletes are still being commoditized within media narratives and by corporations to promote a narrative of racial and ethnic difference, while at the same time, within Kenya Kipchoge is a proponent of aiding his community through capital and mentorship which is prioritized in Kenyan media over the exceptional commoditization seen in Western media.

8. Conclusions

The dominance of distance running is the result of a constructed history that has been largely erased by racist narratives of hegemonic powers. However, while sport has been used as a colonial and neocolonial tool throughout Kenya's history, there is also a rising counternarrative of distance running as a device for nation building through nationally imagined narratives coupled with individual embodiment and participation. Narratives surrounding Kenyan distance running continues to be constructed through hegemonic narratives to promote racial dominance and geopolitical difference while within Kenya, narratives are constructed to serve national and individual identity.

For now, it appears that distance running will continue to be dominated by East African runners, especially those from Kenya and Ethiopia. As sport development and achievement continue within and outside of the Kenya state, it will be important to watch how narratives change over time with the shifts in cultural power and dominance of Kenyan runners. Can distance running offer a sustainable pathway to Kenya's emancipation from its colonial past, or will the hegemonic West continue to push for the commodification of the Kenyan experience and co-opt the physicality of black bodies to serve the dominant economic and political powers? The answer will most likely be found somewhere between the truth and its various constructions.

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