

BOOK REVIEW SECTION

Kenyan Running: Movement Culture, Geography and Global Change.

John Bale and Joe Sang. London: Frank. Cass, 1996.

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During the mid-1950's, the colonial government in Kenya published a broad sheet, *Pamoja*, for free distribution to Her Majesty's colonial subjects. *Pamoja* was read in Hono Intermediate School in Alego regularly, and it was from its pages that I learned that Nyadika Maiyoro, Arere Anentia and Kanuti Sum had run in, and won medals at, the British AAA Games in London's White City Stadium in 1958. This paper also introduced me to one of the enduring mythologies of Kenyan sports, for it told the story of how the Maasai herdsman Joseph Leresae, upon stumbling at an athletics meet at Narok, dropped his blanket and leapt a good six feet eight and one half inches, setting a Kenyan record in the high jump, and earning a birth in the same 1958 games in London. He finished fourth. Leresae, from the bush, was contrasted with the Alliance High School students who had been coached by E. Carey Francis and Nimrod Mbugua into competitive sports - Sila Kibet Arap Boit and Bartonjo Rotich.

His "nature" was valorized. He leapt high because he was Maasai. From the beginning of the post office system early in the 20th century the Maasai had been certified as the natural distance runners that delivered mail on a cleft stick from one District Commissioner's boma to another before the advent of the railways and the roads. This iconography has been integrated into independent Kenya's television advertising. Maasai superior running was one of the canons of colonial literature. Recognized by Ernest Hemingway as «handsome savages" in 1993, the author of *Green Hills of Africa* described them as "long-legged, brown, smooth-moving men", running alongside his car "at the pace of a fast miler". The Maasai provided a bedrock for colonial "Africanism", a form of knowledge that discussed their body in a certain way, as essentially different, savage or noble. "Other" in postmodern dispensation. Lately, virile Maasai males have exploited this fixture in lecture circuits in North America. Just as well, as Ben Kantai used to say. In *No Bride Price* (1972) David Rubadiri had called it "paying the colonial debt".

The last forty years have witnessed the flowering of long distance running in Kenya; the markers include Kipchoke Keino's triumphs in the 1500 meters in the 1960s; that magnificent 4 X 400 meters race in Mexico in 1968; that same superlative race in Munich in 1972 featuring Julius Sang, Asati, Bob Ouko and Hezekiel Nyamau at Kenya's best ever; To Henry Rono's triumph at the Stanford University Stadium in the 1980's, to the grit girl Tecla Lompe's Boston Marathon in 1996. "Ex-Africa semper novi aliquid" - Out of Africa always comes something new, the ancients said. This newness, this novelty has always challenged the west not only to describe, but to explain. So the question has been set up in the west: "Why do these Africans run so fast?" (They are not supposed to be long distance runners: according to western "knowledge" -- since the 1920's that should be the preserve of the lowland Finns). Ever since Kip's ascendancy in 1965, an explanation that has found currency with the western "experts" has been altitude.

John Bale and John Sang, the authors of this eminently readable book under review write: "A recurring theme, at least since 1968, has been that the altitude at which Kenyans live explains their running successes and their world class performances." Altitude produces superior runners, and since the majority of top-flight athletes happen to have been born at high altitude, in Nandi, Kericho, Kisii, Elgeyo-Marakwet, Baringo and Poko!, it is "obvious" to the western 'experts' that environmental determinism is at work here. Thus the *Guinness Book of Records* experts could write in 1969 that "Keino

can be said to have a genetic advantage denied to lowlanders." Bale and Sang rightly caution us against this platitude, arguing that: "Environmentalism sees the environment as the 'dominant actor', independent of social, economic and political factors, and remaining unmediated by culture". So, once again, as was the case with the Massai earlier, it is the environment, stupid! Thus American expert Kenny Moore has self-referentially written the following to explain the "success" of the Kenyans:

Africa can seem to be a sieve of afflictions through which only the hardy may pass. The largest, fastest, wildest strangest beasts are here. Every poisonous bug, screaming bird and thorned shrub has arrived at this moment through the most severe environments.... Sport is a pale shadow of the competitive life that has gone on forever across this high, fierce, first continent. Is it any wonder that frail European visitors feel threatened?

A common explanation of Kenyan success in distance running is that the Kenyan has been training solidly every day of his life since he was parked in a corners of his mud and waddle hut as a baby and encouraged to survive. His lifetime's training will have built up an incredible physical toughness, a resilience under stress and an astonishing tolerance for pain.

Joshua Okuthe's friend, John Velzian was quite comfortable with this type of explanation too. As coach to the Kenyan team he explained Kenya's success as such: "They were born, and have lived, at an altitude of 5000 feet plus. This operates to their advantage ... Since their whole physiology of respiration has become adapted to living in an atmosphere with a decreased supply of oxygen, it is of considerable benefit to them when competing at lower levels"...

Bale and Sang rightly recognize, through the words of Richard Peet, that environmentalist ideas embody a "disguised kind of natural racism". Environmental determinism, they write, "reflects the values of a western society which has consistently seen success in sport as being related to 'radical characteristics - a physical analogue of what David Livingstone has called 'moral climatology'".

But what about tribe? What explains the Kalinin phenomenon in athletics in Kenya? The Nandi produce over 40% of Kenya's top runners, followed by the Tureen, Keiyo, Market, Kissing's, and the Lou-Bantu Abacuses. These people live contiguously in what Bale and Sang call a "running region" that includes the Maasai and the Turkana. Bale and Sang tread flimsy theoretical ground in their attempts to explain the Kalenjin ascendancy. They borrow a sociological explanation from the German Afrikanistic "expert" Berg-Schlosser, who argued in his 1970's study that the Kalenjin are "traditionally" ascetic, serious and diligent people with an achievement orientation and a capacity for the postponement of gratification. They are therefore attracted to individual sports, in contrast to their hedonistic Luo cousins who are less ascetic and therefore excel in football This is tenuous theoretical territory, reminiscent only of Kenya Education Minister Joseph Kamotho's "sociological" studies in the 1990's which have led him to characterize the Abaluyia as fit for only housekeeping and herdsmanhip; and to attorney general Charles Njonjo's earlier equality authority - active assertion in the 1970's that the Kaleos were only fit to be herdsman.

What of the Nandi? They are the premiere racing family in Kenya, and home to Kiptalm Keter, Kantui Sum, Bartojo Rotich, Kip Keino, Mike Boit, Ben Kogo and Mike Rono. The authors argue that Nandi aggressiveness, a clone from their pre-colonial warrior days, was translated into a tradition of athletic prowess during the colonial period - an invention that has been sustained through generations that have looked up to Kip Keino and his successors as role models. It is hard to rein Nandi in ethnicity into role modeling. The reason being that the sportsmen have often been Kenyan-wide icons for the youth. Serafino Antao, Arere Anentia, Kiprugut Chuma and Elijah Lidonde 'belonged to me', to my twelve year consciousness in rural Hono. I did not categorize them ethnically; nor did we ever ask of

the 'tribe' of John Wayne and Elvis Presley once we discovered them at Mbotela Social Hall in Nairobi with Ndung'u Kafupi in 1962. They were just kids heroes, period. The same with our athletes. They excel because they train and compete diligently. I love the fact that they are Kalenjin. My elder brother Wole Soyinka writes: "Personally, I have never understood the phenomenon of fierce partisanship in competitive games, but I do concede that it appears that in every soccer [read sports] event, there is a nationalist out of control". That is what I always feel as Douglas Wakihuri leads the marathon pack in Houston and Tokyo; Not another Kikuyu from Kirigiti in Nyeri but a Kenyan nationalist out of control, and my emotion running along with him. As for the Kalenjin sportsman, all I can say is keep running, Thugul.

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