

## **RUNNING FOR A LIFETIME**

Various societies across the world have diverse rituals and expressive cultures which they practise at different times of the year. The rituals create meaning and enact identity for the people who produce and consume it. The Kenyan society is renowned globally for its running culture, majorly due to world records and numerous accolades that running athletes have amassed over the years. However, the grand international prestige of Kenya and the stardom of its athletes is just the tip of the iceberg of what Kenya's running culture encapsulates. This paper analyses Kenyan running as an expressive culture and distinguishes how it creates meaning for the people who immerse themselves in it. It explores the resulting social cohesion and differing interpretations on some aspects of the culture. The paper predominantly utilises data from two instances of ethnographic research: my interview with Student 1, a Kenyan student; and my interview with Student 2, a Kenyan student, both in their early twenties. Of significant note is that as a researcher, my native culture is Kenyan, thus the paper will also incorporate my observations on the running culture as a Kenyan.

The first encounter of Kenyans with Kenya's running culture is in high school, which for most adolescents serves as their initiation into running. A clear depiction of the suppressing nature of this initiation is Durkheim's statement that "society subjects us to all sorts of restraints, privations and sacrifices without which social life would be impossible" (1995:209). This is because running is enforced on the students by the school authorities using varying forms of restraints. Student 1's relationship with running commenced in high school. While it later bloomed into a rosy relationship in her adulthood, her recollections of running in high school described it as a thorny aspect of life. Running was enforced by the school authorities. It was a compulsory school activity, practised every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday where students would run for an average of 3 kilometres. So important was participation and exertion of physical energy in the

ritual, that prefects lined up the cross-country trail to ensure that students were running and not walking leisurely. Student 2's recollections of her initiation into running echoed the same sentiments as Student 1's. Student 2 started running in high school since it was a compulsory activity every Monday or Friday depending on your class. All students were required to participate in the cross-country run, and missing the energetic ritual would result in punishments administered by the Games Teacher. Similar to the role of prefects in Student 1's first encounter with running, the Games Teacher was the supreme authority, a representation of restraints in the running culture in high school. The Games Teacher came up with creative punishments which were very fruitful in ensuring attendance at the running ritual. The most legendary punishment was frog jumps which had to be done backwards while going up a flight of stairs. Student 2 terms her experience as "running under duress" since, without the imposed restraints, students running voluntarily would be impossible. The "sovereignty of the policing" and "coercive forces" (Graeber and Wengrow 2021:109) operated on a strictly seasonal basis, during the specific hours when the ritual was practised in the high school society.

Running is a ritual practised in diverse rites of passage in numerous stages of life in Kenya. The leaders conducting the rites of passage are in charge of enforcing the running ritual on the participants. For instance, during recruitment for the police force or armed forces in Kenya, the primal test for the applicants is running. This begins early in the morning and is supervised by highly-ranking police officers. The hopeful applicants run in public fields such as school playgrounds and national stadiums, where citizens turn up in huge droves to witness the spectacle. Only applicants who meet the physical criteria of their mouths possessing 32 teeth qualify for the running tests. Similar to Johnson's experience in his ethnographic research (1984), liminality is evident because the running test is akin to a stopping stage, whereby police

applicants have not gained access into the police society. If an applicant's running is satisfactory to the supervising police officers, they are invited to the training stage, which is a transition stage before entry into the police force. The transition (training) stage lasts for 6 months, where the applicants are subjected to rigorous physical training which entails intense running. Due to the intense nature of the training stage, female applicants are required to not be pregnant. Completion of the police training serves as an initiation into the police force. The applicants are cognizant of the fact that their future livelihood is dependent on them running fast during recruitment. It is the run of their life.

Running is deeply etched into other rites of passage in Kenya that it is practically inevitable. It is symbolic of people's dreams and aspirations. Student 2's journey to studying abroad is a testament. After completing high school, Student 2 applied to KenSap, a college access program for high achieving, low-income students in Kenya, which facilitates students' applications to colleges and universities abroad. The interview starts with an oral interview, followed by handwritten tests and culminates in a running test. An application is deemed incomplete if a student is unable to finish the 1500 metres race. On Student 2 joining the KenSap program, running was a daily morning ritual at 6.30 am except for Sunday. The program manager did a headcount to ascertain that all students were present. Student 2 described the running as "*jeshi*" the Swahili name for the army, given that the Kenyan armed forces are renowned for their potent running drills. The program lasted for 6 months. To Student 2, running was a necessary 'evil' - given her dislike for running at the time - in the pursuit of her lifelong dream of studying abroad.

Running is of great prominence to Kenyans. The role of the running ritual as a laboratory of feasible possibilities and arrangements is eminent at individual levels among Kenyans. According to Graeber and Wengrow, rituals are "laboratories of social possibility" (2021: 117).

Kenyans visualise and explore different personal ideals and possibilities in their lives through running. According to Student 1, who runs every Saturday and Sunday morning along mesmerising nature trails, running is a mirror that reflects her soul. Running offers her clarity of mind as she uses the time to contemplate life problems she may be dealing with. She takes her running time to deliberate on the possible ways she could solve her problems and what their outcomes would be. The contrasting running environment to that of her dorm room accords her with the space she needs. She listens to instrumental music to block out distractions from the life going on around her. Student 1 equates the rhythmic stepping on the ground with only a small portion of her feet touching the ground to a trampoline, and consequently, this invokes in her a sense of freedom and safety. Through the running ritual, she reclaims her freedom which may be threatened in some other spheres of her life. An instance of this is an American play she is starring in as part of the production team. Playing the role of a Californian girl has threatened her sense of identity given that she has to pick up a new accent, very different from her British one. On extreme days, she is worried that she may be judged harshly if she does not meet expectations. Through running she can reclaim peace and balance in her life and let go of her worries. The possibility of freedom that running represents to an individual is an intimate concept to Student 2 as well. Student 2, who prefers running alone, appreciates that there are safe spaces for her to run in even as a foreigner. Running is “an outlet for personal life struggles”, where she can explore the possibility of not being stressed out over issues beyond her control. This was prominent at the onset of the Covid pandemic when international students were worried about their housing situation on campus and faced the risk of deportation to their home countries by the US government at the time. Running enabled Student 2 to imagine the possibility of her retaining her freedom and her

studies remaining uncompromised. Thus, running represents the possibility of personal freedom for Kenyan individuals.

Running, in the words of Graeber and Wengow, is a “powerful ritual of creative play out of which new social forms can come into the world and which enables people to imagine other arrangements that are feasible” (2021:116). Despite Student 2 having an asthmatic condition, she defied her parents' concerns about her active running. Student 2's parents were worried that she would be heavily dependent on an inhaler, which she has to use before rigorous physical activity. However, she quelled their worries when her physical health tremendously improved as a result of running. Having witnessed several asthmatic athletes compete and win internationally, Student 2 was keen on challenging her physical capabilities while ensuring that she used an inhaler before running to keep her bronchial muscles relaxed. Running and consequently better health became a feasible arrangement for Student 2. Most running athletes in Kenya hail from impoverished backgrounds. They aspire to represent the country internationally to alleviate their families' livelihoods. However, they lack resources that empower them to compete favourably such as proper running shoes, which beyond the skills and physical agility of the runners, make a huge difference in competitions. Moreover, the district, county, regional and national level competitions are the different filtering stages that the running athletes have to surmount to represent Kenya internationally. Added to the intense competition in the filtering stages, many runners do not get to achieve their dreams. The bold ones opt to represent other countries in international competitions. One such infamous country is Bahrain. While some regard the runners representing other countries as “*msaliti*”, meaning traitors, and “sell-out runners”, other Kenyans are of the school of thought that everyone is entitled to their free will and prioritising themselves. “Representing one's country is not purely out of the goodness of your own heart. In

the same manner that a banker shouldn't be judged for changing their employer, an athlete shouldn't be judged for choosing differently contrary to people's expectations," argued Student 1. The runners need to earn a living and if another country can provide a better environment for thriving, they should not be bound by the society. The condemnation of "sell-out runners" by some Kenyans highlights Durkheim's argument that "society requires us to make ourselves its servants, forgetful of our interests"(1995:209). The defiance of societal expectations to bear Kenya's flag internationally, which is Kenya's totem, by such runners is a powerful form of creative play which has defined a new social norm of what patriotism means in the face of individual aspirations. Student 2 concurred with this, affirming that though officially a runner may represent another country, globally everybody still recognises they are Kenyan even though the flag held after they win is non-Kenyan and thus the ultimate fame is Kenyan. The norm-defying athletes seek a new free world that enables them to earn a living, where they do not necessarily have to wear Kenya's flag and can still solidify Kenya's position on the global map.

Collectively, running plays an outstanding role in uniting the country and enhancing national cohesion. Despite the tribal divides that run deep, Kenyans are a united nation as a result of our running culture. From an outsider's perspective, Kenyans are runners and are trailblazers internationally. However, Kenyans are aware that the magical running legs predominantly hail from the *Kalenjins*, who are Highland Nilotes. Yet it is the Kenyan flag the runners bear and not the *Kalenjin* flag. Even though the runners flying the Kenyan flag high are *Kalenjins*, no one is bothered by the tribal distinction. Kenyan running athletes are a symbol of national pride and embody the prosperity of Kenya which is a key aspect in the national anthem, one of Kenya's totems. Successful athletes such as Eliud Kipchoge have given back to the community by building training academies, such as in Iten, and mentoring budding talents. Iten, popularly

known as ‘The Land of Champions’, is the home of many Kenyan running athletes. It has gained international recognition and consequently attracted foreign athletes who seek superior training grounds. The resulting athletic tourism has highly contributed to Kenya’s economy. Running therefore evolved into a status symbol for Kenya.

Running is an expressive culture deep-rooted in the lives of Kenyans. It is a ritual that graces many rites of passage in Kenya and signifies different meanings such as freedom, a source of livelihood, people’s aspirations and national pride. Athletes have used running to defy societal norms leading to the emergence of different feasible arrangements. Running is a symbol of unity and patriotism, healing tribal divides and fortifying national pride and unity. Running is the lifeline of Kenyans.

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