The social and historical background of the running success of the Kalenjin

By Robert Hartmann

Everywhere old people tell their transfigured tales. This you find in all cultures. You hear the message, expressed in a conspiratorial tone, that in the “old days” everything was better. So, it is of no surprise that in some areas of the Kenyan countryside you will hear old men tell very true stories of how, fifty or more years ago, having reached a marriageable age, they set off in well-organised raids against neighbouring tribes. The aim was to take cows. Let us avoid mentioning the word “steal”; this was a tradition.

You should know that cattle were and still are at the centre of life for these peoples; the eyes of the most beautiful girl can only be compared with the eyes of a cow. Only success on a cattle raid qualified a young man to marry his beloved and made it possible to pay the bride price demanded by her father, which might be as much as four, six or even ten cows. This tradition lives on, although nowadays the value of a prospective bride might be calculated in different currency and a young lady with an education, perhaps a university degree, can be quite expensive.

On the raids, the young men would cover up to 100km at a time, mainly at night, and then have to prove themselves in a land that was perhaps unknown to them. The risk of these adventures was existential, as you easily can imagine. In cases of misfortune, the raiders could be badly injured or even killed. Here we find the deeper sense of this test of courage: danger beyond the horizon. This was not a game in a fun-society, it was not about laughter; this was serious.

Cattle raiding was a special characteristic of the Kalenjin peoples. The athletics world has known them since the sixties: the Kenyan running tribe. They, as well as the Kisii, Kikuyu and Kamba, have made a name in our sport. In contrast, most of Kenya’s other forty tribes have not given us even one runner above international average. For example, the millions of Luo, who live near Lake Victoria, have produced the highest number professors of any tribe in the country. One might think that this society of 32 million had a planned division of labour. We joke a bit. Anyway, the...
athletics world already moans about the high number of East African, especially Kenyan, stars. They say the present number is already more than enough. And in the near future, I dare to announce, there will be more coming from the likes of Eritrea, the Sudan, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda. The people of these countries have, like their Kenyan cousins, perfect slim bodies with long legs. Moreover, they all are united by their unbelievably strong wish to become famous and escape the misery of their daily lives. To start out as a runner, you only need short trousers and a t-shirt. You don’t even need shoes.

Back to the Kalenjin. There are surely no more than three million of them all together. Their most important sub-groups are the Nandi, Kipsigis, Marakwet, Keiyo, Tugen, Elgon Masai, Uasin Gish. Words we read in the newspapers every now and then. When I travel in the runner’s blessed countryside I like to offer friends and guests a bet. “Show me one fat child and I’ll buy you a drink tonight. At a school in the town of Eldoret, the centre of the Kalenjin’s territory, I recently noticed two overweight children on the schoolyard and when I told the Scottish administrator about my bet and my surprise. What did he answer? “I know that the two are sick.”

The Kalenjin live in the northeast of Kenya, near the equator at an altitude of more or less 2000m above sea level. Here the air is thin, which is why the number of red blood cells, which transport the oxygen to the muscles, is high. The experts know what I want to say: because of this fact runners from here are offered natural advantages compared to opponents living on sea-level.

The Kalenjin belong to the Nilohamids. Today they are mainly farmers but in the past they were semi-nomads. Some centuries ago, they set off from the area of the river Nile to find greener pastures in the south. Some small, scattered groups found new homes in Ethiopia, Uganda and even deep in the south, in Tanzania. It would be no big surprise to find that the former world record holder in the 1500m, Filbert Bayi, was a Kalenjin.

More and more, scientists have been trying to find our why just the Kalenjin own this special talent: to run fast with stamina and great will and power and in great numbers. They approached the truth as near as all the curious coaches. Obviously there is not only one big secret. Indeed, it seems that only a colourful bunch of flowers gives us the many reasons for the running successes of such a small population. They are long and thin, but have strong leg muscles, strong lungs and strong hearts. And they move on a ground where you have the feeling of bouncing up and down with each step. It’s like getting a kind of massage, which is useful and necessary because they cannot afford masseurs.

To run barefoot throughout childhood, 14 years and more, on warm soil: helpful. Their feet get strong and stronger. When moved to the capital Nairobi, adults still walk barefoot in their flats. I like to say that in Kenya a foot fits all shoes. The Swiss long-distance runner Markus Ryffel said he that had to do six years of special foot-gymnastics to get the same strength as his Kenyan colleagues. In the 1984 Olympic Games, he won the silver medal at 5000m, which, by the way, justifies his courageous belief in himself and his knowledgeable preparation for the main target of the year. To the point: a wonderful and necessary weapon.

When I travelled as a journalist in Kenya for the first time, I heard complaints from my hosts. “In ten years the children will no longer walk and run to the schools, they will go by bus. Thirty-four years later, I see that not much has changed. About every third child runs to school and back. Sorry, but this cliché, which you all know, is still true. Brother Colm O’Connell of St. Patrick’s Secondary School in the little town of Iten told me of one pupil who covered a distance of 11km from home to Iten, and if taking part in the afternoon-lessons, did the round-trip two times. This meant he walked
and ran up to 44km a day. Dr Mike Boit, who in the 1970s and 1980s was one of the best middle-distance runners in the world, wrote in his PhD thesis about coeducation. In his data, he had a category about the distance pupils had to cover to get to school. There was a column: 25km and more. I could not believe it. But Mike swore blind that here some made their mark. Today there are more schools in Kenya and these distances belong to the past.

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With the buses, the comfort would move into the children’s daily routine. This is what my friends wanted to tell me. Comfort is the most dangerous enemy to the ambition of a young runner. But the expansion of comfort in Kenya moves at a snail’s pace. While traveling, the legs still carry the main-burden. Mike Boit’s 96 year-old father told me recently of a deal in his best days. The client lived 60km away, “so I had to go, walking and running.” Time is money.

When the talking comes to the reasons for the impressive international success of Kenyan runners, we know the advantages the Kenyan runners have. Some I have already mentioned. And there are others. Small, scattered villages mark the landscape. All year-round it gets dark at seven o’clock in the evening: the kids have time enough to dream of a bright future. But the pioneer, Kipchoge Keino, IOC Member and Olympic gold-medallist in 1968 and 1972, says very strictly: “There is no secret but hard work.” Nothing is truer. You never find a witch doctor or a special herbalist in the bush.

The triumphal march of the transistor radio has reached even the remote places in the province, but a television set still is very rare. I remember Kipkirui Misoi running a junior world record in the 3000m steeplechase. As a prize, the German meeting director offered him the choice of a bicycle or a television set. He took the TV, although there was no electricity in his village. It would have been more practical to take the bicycle. But what counted most to him was the personal prestige.

The guest from Europe, who travels to Kenya for the first time immediately falls in love with the bright high altitude of the Rift Valley north of Nairobi. You are not allowed to forget the brightness and generous design of the landscape. In the 1970s, scientists at the university of Basel found the wonderful value of bright sunlight: men lost their melancholy, they became more attentive, they concentrated better, their reactions improved and their rate of errors sank. The British colonists realised that this part of Kenya might be the best climate of the world. At night, the temperatures drop down to about 10 degrees Celsius; in the daytime they rarely climb to more than 25 degrees. During the dry-season, you cannot ask for more. You find only a few, if any mosquitoes. There are no more wild beasts and you find large tea-fields, savannas for the cattle and maize farms covering the Nandi hills.

And don’t forget the ground. When I start jogging on my well-known paths on Kieno’s Kazi-Mingi Farm near Eldoret, I no longer feel pain in my knees and I stop using the cream I rely on at home. Stephan Freigang, the 1992 Olympic bronze medallist in the marathon, once had to drop out of the Frankfurt marathon due to a pain in his Achilles tendon. He asked himself if it would still be useful to go to Kenya for his annual training camp or if it would be better to stay home and undergo a surgery. In the end, he went and after month, he came back without any pain.

My old friend Keino is sure that the air in Nyahururu, on the equator about 200km away from his farm, is the best in all of Kenya, “especially in the morning at six o’clock.” He says he feels it, and we know feeling and believing are the same. So, he made sure that he and the Kenyan team had their training camp there at the high altitude of 2300m as they prepared for the 1968 Olympics in Mexico, the first of the country’s many spectacular successes.
The Mzees, the honourable old men, very soon inform you about the importance of the word “discipline”. Local teachers tell you that during the classes the pupils can sit quietly for five hours. “Out of this silence,” Colm O’Connell says, “the runners can produce unique results when it counts”.

They are able to train very hard, every morning at 6 o’clock and then at 4 in the afternoon. Already the pupils follow this rhythm. Nobody in the country thinks of introducing a sport-oriented school system. There are no social or financial extras for good runners. Not for the eventual 800m world record holder Wilson Kipketer or for the 2006 world junior country champion Mangata Ndiwa. Both attended St. Patrick’s in Iten, where O’Connell was the headmaster for eight years. Their common ground was the poverty of their families, who could not afford to pay the school-fees for the children. Both were taken in by O’Connell. Kipketer even told me that in his childhood he suffered hunger and knew what it is like to go whole days without food. Here you find the reason why today he looks so satisfied, it seems as if he smiles all day long. Such a thankful man!

Moses Kiptanui, who broke the eight minutes barrier in steeplechase, estimates that 95% of the Kenya’s world-class runners come from very poor families. Here I see a rewarding investment for the Kenya Amateur Athletic Association.

In Kenyan schools, there is a system of points to recognise performance by pupils. The number of points you accumulate tells you whether you will be able to move on to a university. The more points, the better the education. If you dawdle or take it too easy, you will lose out in life. The unemployment rate is very high and even graduates can be found in the streets of Nairobi trying to sell magazines and newspapers for little money. Yes, running can help! And each race won on the Grand Prix circuit is like a win in the lottery.

The European and American managers learn about the best talents at the Kenyan high school championships, which is not always good for the future of the pupils. It often happens that they leave school before their final examinations. Some managers don’t care. Their risk is low. If things don’t work out, they will find new runners next year. Last December I was told about a 20-year-old world-class runner who could not keep up with the obligations imposed by school work and competitions in Europe. In the end, he had a nervous crisis. He had to stop school and now his only option for making a living is to win enough money in races.

The already mentioned junior champion Mangata Ndiwa has decided to finish his last 18 months of secondary school. He only wants to take part in the World Junior Championships in Beijing and two other races, money-races, in Europe. “Education”, he told me earnestly, “is something you should never miss in your young life”.

O’Connell says: “These boys can easily handle poverty but they don’t know what to do with wealth.” They need advice and don’t always get it. There is a lot of pressure when the money earned in races starts to flow into the pockets. After finishing 5th in the junior race at the 2005 IAAF World Cross Country Championships, Mangata was instantly famous at home on the slopes of Mount Elgon. When he came back home, he found neighbours, friends and people he did not know waiting for him at his parent’s small shamba. Some had travelled long distances to get there. Everybody wanted something from him, they asked for money. But he had not yet earned a single Euro. Even now, his people don’t believe him and he says that nowadays he only goes home when it is dark.

It is time now to describe a dialogue with Moses Kiptanui about the very special role of the Kalenjin in Kenyan running. He had estab-
lished a training-camp in Nyahururu. But after some time he realised that young men never came to the sports-field to see and observe the famous runners in order to join them. He remembered that most of the inhabitants of Nyahururu are Masai or from other tribes. Later he took his camp back to Eldoret, where his family lives. And very soon the young men came in numbers. Kalenjin.

During my last stay at Keino’s farm I asked him how many camps of runners are based in and around Eldoret. After a while the answer was: “More that twenty.” They are not expensive. The food is okay: ugali (the maize paste, which is eaten by the president and the beggar), vegetables and fruits. Shoe companies and former athletes are the sponsors. They say that Moses Kiptanui is the richest inhabitant of Eldoret and he gives the boys a helping hand as do former stars Patrick Sang and Yobes Ondieki.

The idea, to use running ability as a way out of poverty, begins in the head. It is obvious that the Kalenjin are ambitious by nature. I like to mention that a Kenyan flies to the end of the world with the hope of making a hundred Euros. Exactly the same view people in Germany had after the Second World War, says Horst Floßbach, eighth in the 5000m final at the 1960 Olympic Games and now 69 years old. He did not see any difference between himself in his young days and Mangata. Thus, as far as running is concerned, we both realised the similarity between Europe in the Fifties and Kenya at the beginning of the 21st century.

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Finally, let me refer to the circumcision rites of the Kalejin tribes. They symbolise the direct transition from childhood to adulthood, as Africa does not know the concept of youth. Normally they are held for teenagers of about 15 and take place in December. The youngsters live with an old man in the bush and are taught useful habits for the future. They learn to suffer and act as a group until the end of their lives. And of course, they are cut. After that they are given privacy. They no longer live under the same roof as their mothers but live in their own huts. They even avoid going into the kitchen. It is said that the toughest rites are those of the Nandis. Ismael Kirui, World Champion at 5000m in 1993 and 1995 told me: “If you went through them you would not be nervous on any starting-line.”

Mangata though says he is against the rites. He thinks they are too expensive for the parents and he would like to see money spent in school fees.

Observing the Kalenjin in elite sport you realise that they never excuse defeats or failures. They prefer to keep quiet. By making excuses they would fall back into childhood and with this behaviour they would lose their pride as well as the respect of the others. They must show discipline. My friend, a teacher named Saina, told me one day: “You have to accept defeat like a man. You are not allowed to show your disappointment. This makes you hard. I was sick and that’s why I lost? If you put your foot on the starting-line you show you are a hundred percent fit.”

They like to speak softly. No loud words. “With silence,” Maina declares, “you beat everybody”. After a win they do not turn a somersault. They just raise the forefinger into the air. They do not spread tears. The discipline of adult Kalenjins.

Over the years, we have learned about the running schools of the British, Finns, Hungarians, Italians, Germans, Americans, New Zealanders and Australians. They have all come and gone, each one leaving something special. The Kenyans, Ethiopians and other East Africans don’t offer a “school”. What they do is inject their big, somehow unique talent into all these schools. That is why they survive. For the Kalejin, the test beyond the horizon today is really the same as in the old days. The only difference is that it happens on another continent. No problem.