

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ‘If there is trust there is no need for words’: embodying trust in a competitive environment

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## Abstract

The anthropology of sport literature, and literature on neoliberalism in Africa more broadly, has often been predicated on the notion that neoliberalism forces a conversion from seeing the self as collectively produced towards the development of an individualistic and competitive ‘entrepreneurship of self’. While global long-distance running is increasingly competitive, with the odds against success stacked ever higher, this is not a dynamic that can be traced in Ethiopia. Rather, there is a sense that the individualism and competitiveness that are acknowledged to already be at the heart of Amhara society must be tempered in order for athletes to survive within this system. Increasing competition is understood to require people to work together more closely, rather than forcing them apart. In this article, I explore the paradox that bodily acts of trust can coexist with the discursive insistence on the impossibility of trust in competitive environments. By focusing on the warm-up as a key site of trust work, I show how an awareness of the challenges inherent in enacting trusting relations in close proximity with others necessitates deliberate work over a number of years to render such behaviour as unspoken as possible.

## Résumé

L’anthropologie de la littérature sportive, et plus généralement la littérature sur le néolibéralisme en Afrique, repose souvent sur l’idée selon laquelle le néolibéralisme forcerait une conversion de la vision du soi comme produit collectivement vers le développement d’un « entrepreneuriat du soi » individualiste et concurrentiel. Alors que la course de fond mondiale est de plus en plus compétitive et que les chances de succès sont de plus en plus faibles, ce n’est pas une dynamique que l’on retrouve en Éthiopie. On a plutôt le sentiment que l’individualisme et la compétitivité, reconnus comme étant déjà au cœur de la société amhara, sont à tempérer pour que les athlètes puissent survivre au sein de ce système. On considère que la concurrence croissante exige que les gens travaillent plus étroitement ensemble, plutôt que de les éloigner. Dans cet article, l’auteur explore le paradoxe selon lequel les actes corporels de confiance peuvent coexister avec l’insistance discursive sur l’impossibilité de la confiance dans des environnements concurrentiels. En se concentrant sur l’échauffement en tant que siège-clé du travail sur la confiance, il montre comment une prise de conscience des défis inhérents à l’établissement de relations de confiance en étroite

proximité avec les autres nécessite un travail délibéré sur plusieurs années pour rendre un tel comportement aussi tacite que possible.

## Resumo

A literatura sobre antropologia do desporto, e a literatura sobre neoliberalismo em África em geral, tem sido frequentemente baseada na noção de que o neoliberalismo força uma conversão da visão do eu como produzido coletivamente para o desenvolvimento de um 'empreendedorismo do eu' individualista e competitivo. Embora a corrida de longa distância a nível mundial seja cada vez mais competitiva, com as probabilidades de sucesso cada vez mais elevadas, esta não é uma dinâmica que possa ser identificada na Etiópia. Pelo contrário, existe a sensação de que o individualismo e a competitividade, que se reconhece estarem já no cerne da sociedade Amhara, têm de ser moderados para que os atletas possam sobreviver neste sistema. Entende-se que o aumento da competição exige que as pessoas trabalhem mais em conjunto, em vez de as separar. Neste artigo, exploro o paradoxo de os actos corporais de confiança poderem coexistir com a insistência discursiva na impossibilidade de confiança em ambientes competitivos. Ao centrar-me no aquecimento como um local-chave do trabalho de confiança, mostro como a consciência dos desafios inerentes à adoção de relações de confiança em estreita proximidade com os outros exige um trabalho deliberado ao longo de vários anos para tornar esse comportamento o menos explícito possível.

## Introduction

You can't be left behind. Being left behind is a training adaptation, just like any other adaptation. (Setayehu Eshetu, coach, Bekoji)

There is no trust between Ethiopian athletes. (Hailye Teshome, sub-agent, Addis Ababa)

Long-distance running in Ethiopia is a fiercely competitive sport in which only a handful of the thousands of young men and women striving to 'change their lives' through running will succeed in their aim of going abroad and winning large sums of prize money. Runners place a huge amount of emphasis on the importance of working together, sharing their energy and 'doing their duty' to others in training. Success as a long-distance runner in Ethiopia is understood to be collectively produced, and yet, when it comes to races, athletes must compete alone. Navigating the world of professional running therefore involves a clear tension between relational and individual agency, which is understood principally in terms of the skilful deployment of energy (Crawley 2022).

Training in the Ethiopian context is not painstaking work of the self on the self in the pursuit of perfection. Rather, success is seen to emerge out of a moral economy of shared energy in which training is synchronous, visible and equitable. We are therefore confronted with a dense tapestry of relations tying together runners, coaches, managers, partners and wider family. Even if self-making for Ethiopian runners might be meant to produce autonomy and individual success, this pursuit is only ever made possible through the cultivation of relations of co-operation,

dependency and obligation. Training together, sharing the pace equitably and sacrificing their own energy on behalf of others were understood in the Ethiopian context as intensely intersubjective moral labour.

While runners trained in extremely close proximity to others, and understood others to be absolutely vital to their success, there was a consistent discourse of mistrust among athletes. Discursive accounts of mistrust like the one quoted above ('There is no trust between Ethiopian athletes') coexist with the practical reality of a training environment that demands trusting relations be enacted in close proximity to others and in situations where people are understood to be vulnerable.

Significantly, while training together in close proximity was understood to involve a level of trust that was difficult to enact and sustain, the intensity of competition in international long-distance running was understood to require increased collaboration of this kind. As Hopkinson and Zidaru (2022) argue in their overview of anthropological work on competition, tacit analyses of competition can have a tendency to fall into the 'capitalist slot' and to assume that the outcomes of competition (for instance, atomization or a lack of solidarity) are broadly predictable. In the case I describe, however, I build on more recent work on relational moralities under neoliberalism (Muehlbach 2012; Hopkinson 2023; Trnka and Trundle 2017) to argue that competition in fact involves the mutual implications of lives and subjectivities and works to pull people together, even if this is understood to create frictions that must be managed carefully. My analysis goes further by suggesting that this negotiation of trust plays out primarily through the body. Far from being predicated purely on mistrust, the relations of competition I examine confront us with an intricate interplay of trust and mistrust.

While people frequently lamented a lack of trust, it is clear that training requires coordination and socially synchronized labour as well as detachment. The plural choreography of training requires openness to others – pacemakers, mentors, housemates, massage therapists and others – and this requires enacting trusting relations even while people lament a lack of trust. I therefore focus on how trust is developed and deployed at the level of the body among Ethiopian runners, especially in their formative years, emphasizing that many of the training practices that young athletes go through are explicitly intended to encourage athletes to enact trust in an *unspoken* and embodied manner – 'without thinking', as one sub-agent put it to me.

In doing so I develop an understanding of the 'trust work' that goes into allowing runners to train in close proximity to one another. This builds on literature on embodied learning (Downey 2005; Ingold 2000; Wacquant 2006) which tends to focus on how particular *skills* are passed on through 'silent and practical communication, from body to body', as Bourdieu (1990: 166) puts it, to explore how trust itself is communicated and enacted at the bodily level. That is, I argue that it is not only practical skills that are passed on in this way, but affective dispositions. My argument is that, rather than the unspoken nature of this communication being a result of a deficiency of language, in fact the unspoken enactment of trust is the result of deliberate and painstaking 'trust work' that is understood to require years of training.

Much of the literature on trust (Gambetta 1988) and mistrust (Mühlfried 2018; Carey 2017) deals with these phenomena in a primarily intellectual way, expressing this in terms of calculations of risk and reward, in terms of 'strategies' and 'hypotheses' (Carey 2017) or of the 'cost' of investing in trusting relationships

(Gambetta 1988). In Carey's (2017) work, trust and mistrust are dealt with primarily at the level of language and in relation to Grice's (1975) conversational 'maxims'. Much of his focus is on the possibility of knowing others' minds, recalling work by Robbins (2008). The ethnographic work Carey describes in a peasant community in the Atlas Mountains, characterized by 'vocal mistrust ... obfuscation and dissembling' (2017: 16) in fact recalls classic work on the Amhara in Ethiopia (Levine 1965), and Carey notes that his interlocutors frequently told him 'there is no trust', echoing the quote with which I opened this piece exactly.

Carey's (2017) thorough work on the importance of understanding the expectations it is possible to have about other people's speech acts and the intentions behind them is important, but he does not attempt to trace how trust and mistrust might be enacted beyond speech. If you accept that language is an unstable basis for establishing trust or mistrust, then it makes sense to look for how trust is enacted in other ways, through the body. Interestingly, Carey writes about how trust has become something of a 'black box' in social theory, which is an accusation that is also often levelled at the concept of 'habitus'. In this article, I seek to trace how trust is learned and enacted as a skill in Ethiopia, and how embodying trust might shape the habitus. In doing so, it is important to make a distinction between what people say about trust and what they actually do in training.

This is a particularly important distinction to make because statements such as 'There is no trust between Ethiopian athletes' – that is, that it is very difficult to trust any other individual runner not to try to gain an advantage over you – could coincide with people emphasizing the importance of trust within the team as a whole (*buden weste*). The reason I focus on trust within the team in this article is because this is where trust was understood to be vital in allowing athletes to navigate competitive encounters in the sport beyond Ethiopia. Furthermore, I argue that the outcome that emerges from this embodied work – an unspoken notion of trust – becomes central to the way in which athletes themselves understand trust outside the context of training sessions in the way they deal with the economic side of the sport.

The word most frequently used to describe training in Amharic was *lememid*, which literally means 'adaptation'. This is important because it encapsulates the notion that anyone could succeed as an athlete given the right circumstances (a combination of training environments, relationships with other runners, and adequate food and time to rest), which is quite different from ways of thinking about athletic success that rely on genetics or 'talent'. As the first quotation above shows, togetherness is explicitly seen as a 'training adaptation' in the same way as certain physiological attributes, and crucially as one that was the responsibility of the coach to cultivate and maintain. If being 'left behind' is a training adaptation, then so is staying together.

There is an affective quality to the notion of being 'left behind' and it is clear that coach Sentayehu, who works with teenage athletes who are developing their skills, sees the capacity to move together and trust others as a key aspect of his charges' athletic development. It is therefore important to write in detail about the specific training practices developed for athletes in their formative years. First, though, I turn to a description of the competitive environment in which athletes operate, and the discourses of mistrust that circulate among athletes in the capital city, Addis Ababa, and how these relate to broader notions of increasing competition. It is important to outline the uncertainty and flux of the competitive 'field' in which runners operate,

because it is this very uncertainty that makes the unspoken and assumed enactment of trust in the moment of running so vital.

This article is based on fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork with runners competing at various levels of the sport, but primarily on time spent with a group of professional athletes represented by Moyo Sport Management, an athlete management agency based in the UK. Like many other training groups, which coalesce according to pre-existing social networks formed at training camps in rural areas, the group I trained in was relatively homogeneous in terms of ethnicity and religion. With the exception of one or two individuals, the runners described here were practising Orthodox Christians from Amhara region.

### Tracing the competitive 'field'

The competitive training dynamics I describe in this article are influenced by a neoliberal global sporting industry, and Ethiopia's place within this and the wider economy was understood to influence competitive dynamics in particular ways. There has been a tendency in the anthropology of sport to emphasize the extent to which the practice of sport has been 'reshaped by neoliberal capitalist interests' characterized by 'competition for resources and the struggle for survival' (Besnier *et al.* 2021: 8), pushing individuals to conceptualize themselves as 'neoliberal "athlete selves"' (Hann 2021: 197). As I have argued elsewhere (Crawley 2021), there is no straightforward way in which athletes are 'converted' to a 'neoliberal' disposition. Rather, the specific ways in which neoliberal values interact with and are transformed by existing notions of individualism and competition are the most interesting element. My own work, as well as other more recent work in the anthropology of sport (Hopkinson 2023; Kovač 2023), shows that, while the pressures of increasing competition are clearly present in global sport and more broadly, increasing competition often had the effect of pulling people together rather than forcing a greater individualism. Particular forms of competition were viewed with wariness in Ethiopia, yet learning to compete was also necessary. As I go on to show, 'good competition' required a high degree of control and had to be entered into selectively and within specific parameters.

The urge to give in to more individualistic competitive urges was understood to be increased by neoliberal economic policies that limited resources and opportunities and by growing inequality in Ethiopia, shifts that have also been traced by other scholars (Di Nunzio 2019; Malara 2020). Addis Ababa, as the capital city of Ethiopia, is seen in particular as a place where 'networks of mutual support are weakening, and individuals compete mercilessly against one another' (Malara 2020: 454). This trend was one that my interlocutors traced through both athletics and other means of getting on in life, such as education. On a rare and impromptu occasion with the whole training group, when we stopped the bus at a café, our driver Birhanu emphasized the importance of unity in the face of this competition. 'This time is a time of competition,' he began (*Gizyaw ya wudeder gizew naw*), before adding the following:

In my time, certificates were precious. If you completed grade twelve, you had a place. Nowadays, teacher training centre graduates, diplomas and degrees are not so useful. How about master's?

Birhanu's concerns chime here with work on the widening gap between expectations and reality in the global South that have been articulated by many scholars (Chua 2014; Jeffrey 2010; Mains 2011). Concerns about ever increasing expectations in education were accompanied by the perception that international long-distance running was characterized by constant acceleration, leading to fears about increasingly competitive relations.

The athletic industry is organized in such a way that athletes are in constant competition with one another. In fact, two systems operate in parallel, which makes navigating this particular competitive space particularly difficult. Most athletes in Ethiopia must operate between two different and largely independent competitive systems. They are reliant on a local club to pay them a salary and support their living costs, for which they are contractually obliged to run a certain number of domestic races a year. Many runners also have a foreign manager who organizes races for them abroad, often at relatively short notice. In order to run outside Ethiopia, they must get permission from their local club and a 'release letter' from the Ethiopian Athletics Federation (EAF) to leave the country to compete, a process that requires maintaining smooth interpersonal relationships with a range of people.

Rather than a closed 'field' of competition governed by a specific set of rules and regulations, then, athletes are faced with numerous interlocking spheres of competition that interact with each other and must be carefully negotiated. The global governing body of the sport, World Athletics, and the practices of the two major sportswear manufacturers that sponsor Ethiopian runners, Nike and Adidas, were understood to shape competitive dynamics in particular ways. Athletes who compete in road running are now categorized according to their 'label status' as platinum, gold, silver and bronze, while races have corresponding labels. Because each race must recruit a certain number of athletes with a particular 'label', it has become necessary for them to pay high fees to runners of gold and platinum status just to appear at races. This system also provides less incentive to races to allow athletes with no 'label' to run at all, thus solidifying the hierarchy of the sport.

Hierarchy was established and maintained within the training group as well, in a way that corresponded roughly to the 'label' status of athletes according to World Athletics. In order to ensure that the training group was balanced and that pace-making responsibility and therefore energy expenditure could be divided equally, the men's group was divided into two for the most important training sessions of the week. There was a group for those who had run a marathon in under two hours and seven minutes (which was roughly seen as corresponding to 'world class' – usually athletes with platinum or gold status) and a group for those whose running times were over two hours and seven minutes, who Hailye referred to as the 'coming-up athletes'.

It was clear that in some ways my interlocutors saw the sport itself as driving a particular kind of competitive individualism. For example, Hailye, the sub-agent of our group, said the following:

You know, the environment itself changes your behaviour. Athletics itself. They were farmers before, they helped each other with farming, harvesting, collecting grains and making a house and stuff like that, but athletics by itself is a competition. Life itself is a competition for them when they come to athletics.

In this reading, competition is a logic that is imposed from outside and transforms more collaborative norms of behaviour in a fundamental way. Hailye is speaking specifically about athletics in the Ethiopian context here, but his words echo broader analyses of competition in Africa that see it as a force of 'asocial self-interest' (Ferguson 2015: 127) that disrupts African forms of cooperative social organization and collectivist personhood (Ntarangwi 2011; Seppällä 2010). This is a narrative that situates athletics in a postcolonial context as a sweeping form of 'modernity' that replaces more 'traditional' and collective forms of social organization (Ranger 2012). As Ferguson notes, however, this dichotomous way of approaching competition and collaboration is flawed. 'Both a wholly disinterested sharing and a purely asocial calculation,' he writes, 'are fantasies; real sociality always unites sharing and self-interest in a single act' (Ferguson 2015: 126).

### **The challenge of proximity and the imbrication of trust/mistrust**

The Ethiopian runners I lived and trained with conceived of energy as transbodily, subject to give and take with the environment but also with each other (Crawley 2022). Training in an ethical way required visibility and synchronicity, and the equitable division of energetic resources. This meant that runners placed emphasis on the importance of working together and doing their 'duty' on behalf of others as they worked towards races in which, inevitably, they would have to compete alone. Group training was conceived as a way of producing performances that could never be achieved alone, harnessing the vitalizing and generative powers of 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim 2008 [1912]).

Beliefs about the transcendent potential of shared energy relied on proximity, and yet it was clear that runners were affected by, as Geschiere puts it, 'the tensions between, on the one hand, the fear of an intimacy that gives the ones who are close a dangerous hold over you and, on the other, the need to establish at least some form of trust with one's intimates in order to collaborate' (2013: 101). Recent anthropological work on trust and mistrust has emphasized both that mistrust can entail proximity and that trust and mistrust should not be understood as opposites (Mühlfried 2018).

In a sense, the importance of synchronicity of training in Ethiopia – that is, of not being seen to train alone and particularly not in darkness – can be seen as indexing mistrust. Training alone was considered deeply antisocial because it was seen to represent a squandering of energy, the maintenance of which was vital to the success of the group. Proximity in this sense indexes mistrust, the insistence on running together representing a form of surveillance. Mistrust in this sense can be seen as a productive social disposition (Carey 2017). At group training sessions I was often struck by the contrast between the bodily intimacy of training in close proximity that was then followed by athletes retrieving their bags from the team bus and retreating far apart from each other to get changed. This was usually explained in terms of fear surrounding *metat*, a form of witchcraft performed through materially mediated contact.

Fear of this kind of attack extended to the training process itself, which entailed extremely close proximity to others and competitive dynamics, such as overtaking, which were associated with witchcraft. It was, however, considered extremely important to run together as a group because this was considered, by both coaches

and athletes, to be the most important factor in allowing athletes to ‘change’ themselves and therefore to be competitive in races outside Ethiopia. Numerous coaches spoke of building the ‘trust’ required to facilitate this kind of group training as the most important part of their job, even as they lamented a general decrease in trust between runners.

In thinking about proximity and trust, it is important to note that both trust *and* mistrust were invoked at various points to describe the importance of training together as a group. It is therefore an imbrication of these two states that allows the kind of running practices that people felt were most important to continue. It is because of this discursive ambivalence that it is especially important to trace how trust is embodied, as I do in the second half of this article.

Working together was not seen as something that came naturally to Amhara runners. The tensions I highlight here have long histories, stretching back to at least the 1960s, as classic work on the Amhara shows. This work has emphasized a view of man (*sew*) as essentially selfish, humanity being raw material that, without the moral and collective constraints of religion, kinship duties, laws and punishment, will seek self-satisfaction (Levine 1965; Kebede 1999); these concerns have also been traced more recently (Malara 2017; Boylston 2018). There is a consensus in the literature that Ethiopian society is based on a certain degree of mistrust, with Levine in particular writing that the ‘basic disinclination to trust one another’ is ‘endemic in traditional Amhara culture’ (1965: 252), making trusting relations outside close kin (*zemed*) almost impossible.

There is also clearly a sense in Levine’s (1965) work that language itself is associated with secrecy, and that people are assumed to speak indirectly, which echoes Robbins’ (2008) writing on the opacity of other minds in the Melanesian context as well as Carey’s (2017) writing on mistrust. What I hope to show in this article is that competitive relations can in fact be generative of particular kinds of trust, and that this trust can be enacted beyond the kinds of *zemed* relations described by Levine. What is clear, however, is that the morality of collective training, built through a strong attention to hard work and virtuous suffering on behalf of the self but also, crucially, on behalf of others, was therefore understood to require intense intersubjective moral labour.

In many training sessions the responsibility to ‘share the pace’ was divided up carefully between athletes. Runners trained in a single-file line, or in lines two abreast, following a leader or leaders who often decided the route and who were seen as expending the most energy. Runners’ energetic capacity was thus defined in terms of their relationship with others rather than being contained within the self. This required an opening up to others that, in a context in which bodily ‘closure’ lies at the heart of Ethiopian orthodoxy (Hannig 2017; Malara 2017), was understood to bring with it a high degree of vulnerability.

Rather than seeing competition as a ‘neoliberal’ logic that is imposed from outside and which disrupts local norms of social interaction, it is important to trace how particular competitive logics come to transform and be transformed by pre-existing notions of competition. For example, while we might think of running as a particularly ‘pure’ or ‘natural’ form of competition (like boxing, it encapsulates one of the ‘fight or flight’ responses), access to races is never determined purely on an



athlete's ability. There is, rather, as outlined above, a hierarchical structure to the sport that is created through interactions between internal and external elements.

The creation of this hierarchy is not necessarily intended to cement differences within the group, however, but rather to protect people from unbridled competition, which was understood to be damaging to athletes' abilities to maintain their energy levels and continue their careers. Classic literature on the Amhara (Hoben 1970; Levine 1965; Messay 1999) has emphasized dynamic, competitive elements of hierarchy, characterizing Amhara society as atomized, individualistic and defined by authoritarian forms of control. As Hoben (1970) puts it, from an Amhara point of view it 'is natural and reasonable that the individual, left to himself, will be aggressive and self-seeking and will pursue his own narrowly conceived interests'. The main ways of avoiding conflicts arising as a result of this are two types of relationships – those between patron and client, and those between the clients of a common patron – relationships that Hoben claims are characterized by 'mistrust, suspicion and malicious rivalry'.

While the relationships I write about in this article fit with this model (the runners are all clients of the same patrons: their European manager and his Ethiopian representative) and Hoben's characterization might be reflected in the statement 'There is no trust between Ethiopian athletes', the practices of running together are oriented explicitly towards building trust and eroding suspicion between athletes. As Malara and Boylston point out, the vertical notion of power ignores the fact that a recognition of human selfishness and of realities of power coexists with a 'deep-seated ethic of mutual care and neighbourliness' (2016: 53). The crucial point is not to oppose a vertical notion of power to one of egalitarian love but that 'the forms of love and care that are emphasized in Orthodox Ethiopia are themselves largely asymmetrical, and that the local character of coercive power is therefore hard to separate from relations of love and care' (*ibid.*: 43).

Carefully controlling competition between individuals, and ensuring that directly competitive relations are entered into selectively and in a way that is not damaging to either individuals or to the group, is a key part of indexing these relations of care. While it is an important notion for Amhara Orthodox Christians that one should know one's place (*likk mawek allebeh*) or one's limits within a hierarchy (Malara and Boylston 2016), there is also a recognition that competition is an avenue to allow one's *idil* (chance, or the notion of the potential inside of someone) to be shown clearly. As one runner put it, running was a privileged way of making a living because a race allowed you to 'show what you have in front of people' without concealment or artifice.

Competition, then, was a way of navigating within the hierarchy of Ethiopian athletics, but one that had to be circumscribed and engaged in in particular ways. There were training groups, Hailye said, where it was always '*wudededer, wudededer, wudededer*' (competition, competition, competition), but the athletes in these groups were understood to be injured often and unable to compete at the highest level abroad. For this reason, in all but one training session in the week, training was carefully controlled and it was emphasized that everyone should run together. In the third session of the week, the two groups would come together, however, and this was explicitly seen as an opportunity for athletes to challenge each other.

**'Of course they are trying to kill each other': controlling competition**

It is a Wednesday morning, and we have travelled to a large grass field in Sululta (which is referred to as 'satellite' because it has a large satellite dish in one corner) for a fast interval session. As the runners group together following their warm-up, I catch Selamyhun's eye. 'Selam naw?' I ask him. Is there peace? 'There is no peace on this field,' he says with a little smile. When Meseret gives them the go-ahead, the runners take off round the edge of the field, with Teklemariam in the lead initially. Hailye, Meseret and I jog vaguely towards the middle of the field with Birhanu the driver in tow. Birhanu knew nothing about running when he was hired to drive the team bus, but he has begun to really enjoy watching training sessions and looks forward to Wednesdays especially. Rather than keeping to the edge of the field, the runners play a kind of follow-the-leader where someone surges into the lead and then picks the direction. Tsedat takes off on a diagonal across the field and the others seamlessly change direction to follow him. 'Haha!' Birhanu says, clearly delighted, as the runners come careering past us. 'They are fighting each other today!'

Already, after three repetitions, there are gaps appearing and it takes a while for the runners to regroup in the rest periods. Tsedat is back at the front again on the fourth repetition and he makes a couple of abrupt changes of direction as he surges back across the field. 'Look at this little guy, zigzagging all over the place,' Birhanu comments, shaking his head. 'When they do intervals it has to be like this,' Meseret responds. 'They need to unleash their energy like this in turn. After a couple of minutes, Tsedat will be exhausted and someone else will be the leader at the front. The key for Tsedat is to learn to respond.' As he speaks, Tsedat relinquishes the lead and falls back into the group. 'Gaba!' Meseret shouts – literally 'enter' – entreating him to enter the pace of the others rather than fall behind.

I point out that this seems very different from training on other days of the week, when Meseret emphasizes the importance of control and energy conservation. He laughs and gestures towards Tsedat, who is now desperately hanging on to the back of the group. 'Training like this is costly in terms of energy,' he says. 'But they have to do this in order to learn tactical efficiency.' This kind of training can upset some of the more senior runners, who feel that there are some who don't do their fair share at the front. 'You see there are athletes who stay most of the time behind the leaders and even drop behind the team completely,' he says, pointing out that Fasil is around 50 metres adrift. 'But then suddenly when they feel a bit more comfortable they will want to be the leader and kick beyond the capacity of the leaders, and that sometimes upsets Birhanu and Mekuant. They tell me, "You have to control those guys!" I say, "I don't want to control them. You have to respond to be efficient enough to go with them." Kenenisa [Bekele, arguably the greatest long-distance runner of all time] is efficient. Why? Because he can respond to all different kinds of challenges. And then with 400 metres left,' he opens his arms in an expansive gesture, 'Kenenisa says, "Ciao," and he is gone.'

The runners stagger over to us for a drink during their five-minute rest and Hunegnaw is violently sick. 'They are trying to kill each other,' he says. 'This is speed training,' Hailye laughs. 'Of course they are trying to kill each other.' The five minutes' recovery is over sooner than Hunegnaw would have liked and they are off again, weaving around the field with a new leader every couple of hundred metres. 'There

Mekuant goes again!' Birhanu exclaims gleefully, as he makes a move round the outside. We watch them go from the centre of the field, encouraging the stragglers to try to regain contact. Meseret is clearly enjoying watching the runners 'fight' with each other, as he puts it. As they fly through the last repetition, with Fasil suddenly charging to the front like a sprinter, he slaps his rolled-up notebook against his palm. 'Today I am totally happy!' he exclaims. 'One hundred per cent happy! While they are kicking, somebody kicks, again somebody kicks, again somebody responds, again somebody kicks, again! That is what you call a speed session. With speed you have to push beyond your capacity if you want to improve it.'

The runners shuffle off at walking pace to warm down, before returning to the bus to get changed. Meseret asks them to come together in a huddle before they get on the bus. 'Please make a circle,' he says, 'to encourage those who were sent back. On *coroconch* [the Amharic term for gravel road] you go comfortably, on asphalt you go by the pace I give you, but when we come to speed training it is natural that everyone tries to prove their talent. When the lead exchanges you have to keep going with whoever takes over.' He calls Fasil and Teklemariam, the two least experienced runners, over to him and puts his arms around them before addressing the whole team again. 'You should not be afraid of each other, because if you fear each other you cannot bring change. So if there's someone pushing, praise him and go. Fasil was a hero today. I saw him send everyone back. Teklemariam too.'

It is important to recognize this kind of training – where people try to 'prove' themselves and 'send each other back' – as exceptional, specific and unusually and problematically costly in terms of energy expenditure. The competitive disposition is one that must be learned and cultivated, but one that should be deployed at particular times and according to a shared set of assumptions that the coach is responsible for regulating. An athlete must trust their teammates to compete and compete hard in this particular training session. More importantly, though, they must trust them to share their energy and run in close proximity for the other ten or more training runs each week.

The key thing to emphasize here is that training can never completely eradicate competitiveness or mistrust but that it can curb and control the most negative manifestations. The speed sessions on Wednesday morning are an example of good competition, where competitiveness is honed as a vital skill necessary for a successful athletic career. As the team talk from Meseret demonstrates, it encompasses higher relational values of cooperation and solidarity while working to build particular skills. The runners all know that this is the purpose of the Wednesday morning sessions and that this is a time when to 'send everyone back', as Meseret puts it, should be seen as also helping the other runners in the group. This can be clearly differentiated from bad competition, which is morally corrosive and overtly individualistic, and usually associated with secrecy.

### **Trust work: the warm-up as embodying trusting relations**

So far in this article I have argued that training together in close proximity was understood by Ethiopian runners as a practice that brought together trust and mistrust, but which was ideally a site for the enactment of trust. In this section I want to focus on the warm-up as a practice that readied athletes to enter into trusting

relationships with others, a practice that was explicitly oriented towards enacting trust automatically. The process of warming up for training was much longer and more complex than any I have encountered elsewhere. While in many European and American contexts the warm-up would often be a personal thing performed individually before the start of training, in Ethiopia a major function of the warm-up is to allow athletes to attune themselves to others in order to enable them to run in synchrony.

In the professional group with whom I lived and trained for a little over a year, this process would usually take around forty-five to fifty minutes. It would begin with athletes forming two single-file lines and beginning to jog extremely slowly (at a speed of around eight or nine minutes per kilometre). The athletes at the front of the two lines would gradually increase the pace over the course of about twenty minutes, until they were running at a pace of well under four minutes per kilometre. Crucially, this was a time for athletes to get used to 'following the feet' of the runner in front, running in step with them in a way that was understood to reduce the amount of energy necessary to cover the ground.

Once this was complete, athletes would remain in line to perform a long series of dynamic exercises determined by the runners at the front, who would usually mark the transition from one exercise to the next with a clap of their hands. Many of these involved bringing the feet down exactly in time with other athletes, or swinging the arms in unison. This series of exercises was never the same each time and was rarely performed in the same order, and yet athletes were able to switch between exercises seamlessly, seeming to know intuitively which exercise would come next. This was something I found particularly difficult to mimic, and I would constantly be half a second behind in switching from one exercise to the next in spite of trying to train my attention on the athlete in front of me as keenly as possible. While the switch between exercises was marked with a clap of the hands, no verbal instruction was given about the next exercise. The communication of the new movement was wordless.

At training camps for younger athletes in rural parts of Ethiopia the emphasis on warming up together was even more pronounced, and was understood explicitly as a reaction to the perceived increasing competitiveness of the sport. Bekoji is a farming town with a population of around 17,000, but athletes who started their career there have gone on to win eight Olympic gold medals and over thirty World Championship titles. All of these athletes were coached by Sentayehu Eshetu in their formative years, a self-taught coach who was himself a footballer in his youth.

According to Sentayehu, in the 1990s and early 2000s Ethiopian athletes used to run as a team in international competitions. 'The race would be open for a while and then suddenly there would be a green flood at the front, and no one would get past,' he says, smiling. The Ethiopian team would decide in advance who was the strongest and the other runners in the team would run in support of their leader. Until the late 1990s, athletes had a very limited chance to run in foreign races for prize money, with this opportunity extended only to members of the national team following a major championship. The relaxing of these rules and the increasing prize money in the sport were seen by Sentayehu as driving a more individualistic approach to running that had to be countered through particular training practices to foster trust and togetherness.

I asked him about his own group of athletes and the behaviour he encourages in them, and he had the following to say:

I teach them to read each other, to learn each other's pace, their strengths and weaknesses. After a few years they know the stride of every other runner here intimately.

At the edge of a eucalyptus forest we observe a group of athletes performing a series of synchronized drills in two single-file lines. They draw their knees up to their chests in unison before snapping their feet back to the ground. Close your eyes and you hear a foot being planted firmly on the ground, a light scuff, a foot again, an off-beat, on-beat rhythm. It sounds like one person, when in reality it is twelve runners operating in unison. It is off-season, an opportunity for the athletes to rest and recuperate before restarting their training, and yet they still meet every day to perform this warm-up even though they do not follow this with any running.

Even when runners are in full training, these synchronized drills take longer than the actual running training they undertake. While East African running success has often been characterized as coming 'naturally' (see Bale and Sang 1996; Jarvie and Sykes 2012; Crawley 2020 for critiques), there is in fact a huge amount of emphasis placed on the development of fast and efficient running technique in Ethiopia, and these drills and exercises are primarily learned mimetically from others. As Bourdieu puts it, there are 'heaps of things that we understand only with our bodies, outside conscious awareness, without being able to put our understanding into words' (1990: 166).

Similarly, Greg Downey (2005) seeks to describe and interrogate the ways in which capoeira techniques are passed on from body to body without verbal instruction. If a novice asks too many questions – more than an instructor deems helpful – they are told to remain silent, watch closely and imitate. While Bourdieu was primarily concerned with problems of scale – of bridging between the individual and social structures – the concept of the *habitus* has often been something of a black box. Bourdieu fails, Margolis writes, to identify the 'microstructure' of *habitus*, or its 'operative substructures' (1999: 83).

In Downey's (2005) account of capoeira, he claims that the ability to master the movements and skills of capoeira should be seen as separate from the cultivation of the art's particular *habitus* or worldview – that of *malicia*, or cunning. This, he suggests, is more ephemeral, and cannot be learned merely by imitating and enacting particular techniques. When Wacquant does turn to a consideration of the ways in which the embodied practice of particular skills equates to an 'enacted ethics' (1998), this ethics is understood entirely in terms of an ethics of the *self* developed through personal sacrifice, as opposed to a way of relating to others.

I want to argue instead that as well as particular techniques and skills being passed on in an imitative and embodied way (Wacquant 2006; Ingold 2000), in Ethiopia embodied practices are explicitly understood to encode trust between athletes and ideally to do so in an unspoken way. Bourdieu writes that skill is passed on from body to body 'without being able to put our understanding into words' (1990: 166), but what is significant about the Ethiopian context is that the embodied practice of running

together and 'sharing' the pace is that the unspoken nature of this communication was understood not as an insufficiency of language but rather as an ideal form and deliberate strategy. Being able to seamlessly follow in the footsteps of another, or to take over from them if they are faltering and allow them to run in your slipstream, is cultivated as an automatic response to be reproduced without conscious thought. As the sub-agent of our group put it, 'If there is trust there is no need for words.' Taking over and maintaining the integrity of the group at moments like this was ideally done without hesitation and without speech.

Hayder Al-Mohammad has critiqued approaches that focus primarily on an 'ethics of the self or the normative codes of the social world', identifying a lack of anthropological attention towards thinking about the 'ethics of the *relationship* or the with' (2010: 437). He writes that he finds 'something compelling in the image of two persons being connected by a line in which life runs from one to the other' (*ibid.*: 426). While Csordas has explored the notion of 'intercorporeality' (2008), Al-Mohammad urges us to 'think of that cord – the line, the relationship, the with of being – as ethical itself' (2010: 427).

The image of the cord or thread joining people together and making them stronger was often the way in which the coach of the athletes in Ethiopia talked about the act of running together. 'If the cobweb strings unite, they can bind a lion' (*kajachin karocc honuw, ambessa yasralu*) was how he phrased this in one post-training discussion. Crucially, this was only possible when the rope remained unbroken – that is, when the line of athletes was able to stay together without disruption. If one runner faltered in their attempt to 'do their duty' to the group by taking their turn running at the front, the runner behind them was expected to take over unhesitatingly and without acknowledgement. In enacting morally appropriate training behaviour, this was explicitly intended to take place without comment and without a disruption to the overall pace of the group of athletes.

The intention, then, is for the act of running together as a group to become what Zigon describes as 'nonconscious embodied modes of moral life' (2014: 18) in his phenomenological approach to studying ethics. Thinking of trust as an embodied ethical practice that is ideally enacted without words brings us a long way from discussions of trust that rely primarily on interrogating the reliability of language (Carey 2017) and the possibility of reading people's intentions. Crucially, this 'trust work' in Ethiopia is explicitly oriented towards encouraging people to act in trusting ways without resorting to the kinds of cost-benefit calculations that characterize much of the literature on trust and mistrust (Gambetta 1988; Mühlfried 2018).

What I hope to have demonstrated here, however, is the conscious and painstaking trust work that goes into allowing people to enact moral behaviour in a non-conscious and unspoken manner. In the final section, I want to demonstrate how this unspoken notion of trust, developed through practices of warming up and running together, informs other practices in which trust is important, and interacts with other notions of trusting practice in unexpected ways.

### **Practices of trust and trust in practice**

The importance of silence in trusting practices is cultivated in an athlete's formative years in training camps in rural parts of Ethiopia, but it continues when they join a

management group and begin to run professionally in Addis Ababa. The group's European manager, keen to differentiate himself from some of the other managers operating in Ethiopia (many of whom were deemed untrustworthy), emphasized the importance of transparency in communicating with athletes about finances. He therefore insisted on providing a printed breakdown of the money athletes won at races as well as any bonuses provided by the sponsor or for running particular times, and with a clear indication of any deductions made for his commission or expenses related to the race.

Hailye, as sub-agent, was expected to sit down with the athletes after a race and explain this to them to ensure that trust was maintained between Malcolm and the runners. Under World Athletics rules, all contracts between athlete and manager last twelve months and cannot last longer, and it was therefore common for runners to switch manager frequently if they were dissatisfied. 'The most important thing,' Malcolm said frequently, 'is that the athletes trust us.' For him, an accurate written statement was the best way to demonstrate transparency and produce trust. In practice, though, the printed statement had little to do with whether trust existed or not. As Hailye explained, it wasn't realistic to expect an athlete to trust their manager. What mattered was whether or not they trusted him as their sub-agent, and this often depended on relationships that were forged when he was training with them himself.

At one particular race in China, Asmara, one of the athletes in the group, won US\$15,000. The race had been set up relatively recently, and unlike many of the races in Europe and America, it did not pay for the athletes' flights or accommodation, so these (quite significant) expenses had to be deducted from the prize money. After the agent's fee (of 15 per cent) and the Chinese tax on the prize money had been deducted, this left a little over US\$7,000 to be paid to Asmara. I wondered whether he would be disappointed with this and asked Hailye whether he was happy with the money he had been given. 'Oh yeah. He said, "You don't need to show me the breakdown, I trust you in everything,"' Hailye responded.

On another occasion when I was present, another athlete in the group, Zeleke, reacted similarly when presented with a printed breakdown, shoving it away and refusing to look at it. These were both runners Hailye had lived and trained with in Debre Birhan, and it was clear that trust between them was not something to be mediated by a document. In fact, the very presence of a written document was seen as introducing a barrier between athlete and sub-agent, and could even achieve the opposite effect from that intended by the manager. This demonstrates that the embodied 'trust work' described above can carry over into the economic relations between athletes and sub-agents later in their careers.

### **The embodied work of trust**

For my Ethiopian interlocutors, embodying trusting practices of proximity and sharing within the team environment was seen as vitally important for individual success. This was seen as something that could be achieved only through painstaking embodied trust work, best exemplified through extensive practices of warming up for training, which were explicitly seen as achieving synchrony and attunement at the level of the body. Crucially, trust of this kind was described as the most important determinant of an individual's success, and was seen as compatible with statements

that saw interpersonal trust between particular runners as non-existent or very difficult to maintain.

Both the capital city, Addis Ababa, and the sport of long-distance running itself were seen as drivers of problematic forms of competitive individualism. Coaches at rural training camps in Gondar and Bekoji articulated a clear desire to encode practices of trust and proximity at the level of the body before athletes made the move to competing professionally for large amounts of money. I hope, therefore, to have demonstrated how behaviour that is specifically intended to be enacted in an unspoken and non-conscious way requires painstaking and deliberate work to achieve. As such, this kind of unspoken or embodied trust emerges out of a deep sense of the difficulties of trusting others, especially in contexts requiring close proximity.

Clearly, the ways in which Ethiopian runners talked about both trust and mistrust indicate a degree of unreliability at the level of language that has been emphasized in other work on trust (Gambetta 1988; Carey 2017). Running together was described both as a practice of mistrust and as a practice of trust, even if in its ideal form running together should be an enactment of trust. Given this, I have demonstrated the importance of understanding how trust is cultivated and enacted at the level of the body as opposed to the level of language.

In fact, it is the intensity of the competitive landscape of elite long-distance running, as well as the uncertainty and flux of running as a competitive field, that requires such intricate, repetitive and time-consuming trust work. Close attention to the ‘trust work’ that is practised and enacted at the level of the body suggests that in fact it may be possible to trace these back to particular practices of attunement, and that it may be less a case that we are unable to ‘put our understanding into words’ (Bourdieu 1990: 166) and more a case that some moral practices are deliberately unspoken.

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