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'We Are Burning Ourselves Up': Ethiopian Runners and Energetic Subjectivities

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ABSTRACT

This article describes how energy, and the '*condition*' of the runner, achieved through the successful management of energy, is understood as trans-bodily and social by Ethiopian long-distance runners. The way energy flows between people and the environment means it is deeply implicated in how people understand relational ethics. By describing both morally appropriate training sociality as well as instances of rupture, I argue that rather than seeing competitive pressure as driving atomisation, the notion of shared energy deepens athletes' reliance on others. By bringing together literature on energy with debates about ethics I argue that in conditions of scarcity energetic concerns become relational issues in ways that are particularly important to theorise in a moment characterised by the pressures of an economy constrained by ecological and energetic limits. The notion of 'energetic subjectivities' can help us make sense of these challenges from the perspectives of those caught up in them.

KEYWORDS Energy; ethics; limits; Ethiopia; running

Berhanu is asleep, his head resting on my shoulder and his Adidas-clad feet balancing precariously on the seat in front of us. We are stuck in traffic on the way back into Addis Ababa. It is now ten thirty in the morning, and it has been six hours since we walked the faintly lit streets from our compound in Kotebe to where we were picked up by the *Moyo Sports* team bus at five o'clock. Berhanu has just run thirty kilometres on rolling red-dirt roads in Akaki, an hour's drive south of the city. I ran twenty-five kilometres, before stepping onto the bus when it stopped so that Tadesse, the bus conductor, could jump out and hand water bottles to the athletes as they ran past. By the time I got back on, five of our group of around thirty runners had already done the same. Bogale sat with his head in his hands, the sweat pooling on the leather of his seat. '*Selam naw?*' I asked him. 'Is there peace?' '*Zare condition yellum*' came the reply. 'Today I have no *condition*'. The dirt, whipped up into

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clouds by passing buses, coats my teeth. My legs ache, and I will hobble off the bus with the others when we get back to Kotebe. Those who watch our slow progress up the hill will wonder at our tracksuits; it is hard to imagine that these same legs covered so many kilometres in an hour and fifty minutes earlier in the morning.

We have eaten nothing since last night. Outside the bus, hawkers jostle for position at car windows, desperately trying to sell biscuits and bottles of water. A couple of the runners push five *birr* notes out in exchange for deep fried chickpea sticks or sweetened bread rolls. Car horns blare as people try to cut in front of each other. The tumult outside the bus contrasts with the somnolence inside; most of the athletes, like Berhanu, are dozing. Coach Messeret walks down the bus, gestures to the sleeping runners and addresses the following to me.

We are burning ourselves up! Energy is not created or destroyed. This is one of the principles of chemistry, but it does not work for Ethiopians. We are burning ourselves up working to try to double the capacity that we have, but we can't conserve anything. Through this process we cannot develop the country!

Messeret explicitly links the careful marshalling and monitoring of the runners' physical energy to the broader economic development of Ethiopia. He hints at one of the main concerns he expressed to me again and again in the course of fieldwork – that runners were striving to go 'beyond their capacity', that their drive for athletic 'development' was too fast. Given the context in which this speech was delivered – of frenetic attempts to get by in the city taking place against the backdrop of rapid construction work – it seems clear that Messeret is making an explicit connection between athletes' athletic development and the broader development of the country. When I asked him to clarify these remarks later in the day, he told me that 'when we talk about development, we are talking about energy expenditure'. He went on as follows:

Life by itself is economics for me. It is a flow of energy. Energy can neither be created nor destroyed but you can shift it from one form to another form. The potential that you have inside yourself should be exploited. But nowadays they are expending so much energy from their physique, the energy which helps them for growth as well as the energy that tomorrow allows them to run faster and faster and faster and to cover a further distance

The concerns Ethiopian runners have about energy articulate economic desires and aspirations in particular ways. This is not merely a model or a metaphor that people use to make sense of the economy and the sport of running. Rather, runners inhabit a world in which energetic concerns are concrete and absolute, confronting very real physical and metabolic limits. They must operate extremely close to their limits in order to succeed. Amhara runners see energy as subject to give or take with the environment but also with other people, and therefore as deeply embedded in concerns about relational ethics.

Whilst Ethiopian runners used the English word '*condition*' whilst speaking Amharic, this term contained a range of meanings connected to the Amharic term '*huneta*'. This was most often used to denote weather 'conditions' and other environmental factors such as altitude (referred to as '*ayeru huneta*' or 'air conditions'). The two Amharic terms most commonly used to denote 'energy' are '*gulbet*' and '*hayle*',

and I often asked runners about the distinction between these terms. The key difference is that *'gulbet'* is explained as something acquired naturally due to eating well and resting adequately. *'Hayle'* on the other hand (also translated as 'power') is more likely to denote a sudden burst of energy (an athlete sprinting up a hill for instance) or a spike in energy caused by more elicited means such as performance enhancing drug use or witchcraft. On a day-to-day basis it was the maintenance and monitoring of *'gulbet'* that was the main concern, and this term was more closely associated with *'condition'*.

Runners spent a lot of time thinking about the combination of people and environmental conditions that would best enrich their *'condition'*, travelling for hours to particular training locations around the city and beyond. Different locations were imbued with value based on particular qualities of the air (related to, but not exclusively connected to the altitude), the temperature (which affected energy levels in particular ways) and the terrain (Crawley 2021b). They aimed to situate themselves as best as possible within the 'world of diverse energies and strange vitalities that whirls around us and through us' (Connolly 1993: 205, quoted Bennet 2004). Aware that their ability to 'change their lives' was dependent upon the relationships they entered into with other people as well as the environment, they were involved in a Spinozist ethical project of the kind described by Bennet, aware that 'the particular matter-energy formation that is a human is always engaged in a working relationship with other formations, some human and some not' (Bennet 2004: 354).

Relying upon a precarious state of *'condition'* developed in Ethiopia but deployed primarily in Europe, America and China in races, is to be acutely aware that economic life is, as Gudeman (2012) puts it, 'biological and ecological'. In writing about the notion of strength in South American agricultural communities he notes that 'strength is rather like force and energy in the natural science sense' in that people have 'a conservation, organisation and entropic notion of force or vital energy' (61). For Gudeman, this concept of 'strength' provides a structure for material life 'and an implicit critique of market economies that presume unlimited growth, calculated risk, and the denial of the laws of thermodynamics'. This is exactly what I am concerned with in this article. As one massage therapist put it to me, he had told many injured athletes that 'you trained harder than you *can* train'. Runners see their physical *'condition'* as a limited entity that must be carefully monitored; they are constantly aware of the limits to accumulation, and of the need to balance inputs and outputs both for themselves and for the training group as a whole.

I seek to make two main contributions here. The first is to understand of how athletes navigate the competitive world of neoliberal global sport. Here I argue that rather than seeing competitive pressure as driving atomisation and notions of bounded individualism and 'bodily capital', in practice this competitive pressure can deepen athletes' reliance on others and strengthen the moral imperative to share energetic resources as equitably as possible. The second is to bring together literature on energy and limits with debates about ethics to argue that in conditions of scarcity energetic concerns become *relational* issues in ways that are particularly important to the rise in a contemporary moment characterised by the pressures of a global economy

increasingly constrained by ecological and energetic limits. The paper shows the plural ethics of visibility and synchronicity of training, and the sharing of energy, by tracing the relations that are built, mobilised and exploited in order to succeed on the global stage. Accounts of energy are necessarily focused on how energy is produced and distributed through intersecting ties of care and reciprocity. If you follow the notion of the lone sportsman working on themselves with a coach and sports scientists, which dominates the Western sports imaginary, you cannot make sense of these complexities.

This article is based upon fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork amongst Amhara, Orthodox Christian runners, conducted primarily in Addis Ababa but also at rural training camps and further afield at races in China and Europe. A typical training week would see us covering around 150–200 kilometres, and three times a week we would be picked up at 5 am by the bus hired by *Moyo Sports*, an athlete management agency, to travel to various places around Addis Ababa in order to access particular environmental resources deemed beneficial for our ‘condition’. My argument therefore emerges from a methodological commitment to the same rhythms of training, eating and recuperation as the runners I lived with. The conclusions I arrive at are reached by running alongside people, ‘sharing the pace’, and discussing how we felt day in day out.

Energy and Neoliberal Global Sport

Professional Ethiopian runners are reliant upon opportunities which originate ‘outside’ Ethiopia as they put it. Races are organised by ‘athlete representatives’ (or ‘managers’) who are typically European or American and who organise race invitations, visas, sponsorships and travel itineraries and who receive a standard 15% commission on all athletes’ earnings. The pressure towards exponential speeding up, exemplified by the project to break the two-hour ‘barrier’ in the marathon, the *Ineos 1.59 Challenge*, supported by Nike and multinational chemical company Ineos (Ineos 2019), often originate with corporations and technologies outside of Ethiopia. This is not, then, the closed system that Messeret implies, and the influence of multinational companies and the global sports system (Besnier *et al.* 2018; 2021) clearly exert a great deal of pressure that is both ‘neoliberal’ and ‘millennial’: individualising, wrought with insecurity and personal risk, and underpinned by speculation.

The overwhelming sense is that there is not enough energy in circulation in Ethiopia to sustain sporting careers for large numbers of athletes, and concerns about limits were therefore paramount. Competitive opportunities abroad, lucrative contracts with brands, and salaried places on sponsored athletics teams are all in limited supply. Ethiopian runners operate within a hyper-competitive environment in which only a handful of the thousands of runners training twice every day will ever succeed in their stated aim of ‘changing their lives’. Competitive long-distance running on a global scale therefore generates intensified moral concerns about trust, co-operation and concealment.

Much of the ethnographic work on neoliberal sport (Besnier *et al.* 2018; Hann 2018; Esson 2013) traces a shift in sporting subjectivities from seeing the self as collectively produced towards the development of a hyper-individualistic ‘entrepreneurship of self’

(Foucault 2008) through the cultivation of individual ‘bodily capital’ (Wacquant 2004). Such interpretations rely heavily on Foucauldian analyses of the self-fashioning of ethical subjects, which often fail to account for ‘the exigencies of actual practice’ (Lambek 2010) in which articulations with and responsibility to others are of paramount importance (Crawley 2020). A notable exception is Brownell’s (1995) *Training the Body For China*, which does trace the bodily dependence of athletes on others and the state, principally through an examination of food and reproduction. In this article, I seek to build on this to also consider the more ephemeral notion of energy.

Much of the promotional material surrounding events like the Ineos 1.59 and *Breaking 2* (Nike 2017) challenges focus on the potential of sports science for producing sporting excellence. Eliud Kipchoge, the Kenyan athlete who was eventually successful in running under two hours for the marathon, is pictured in a laboratory wearing a mask to measure the efficiency with which he is able to process oxygen for instance, and commentators on the *Breaking 2* event constantly emphasised the importance of such insights for his running. The bounded individual body, understood as a system of inputs and outputs that can be judged according to their efficiency, is the focus of sport scientists’ approach to understanding how athletes harness and use energy. The kinds of experiments sports scientists use to measure attributes like VO₂ max (the measurement of the maximum amount of oxygen an athlete can utilise during exercise) still closely resemble those developed by scientists of the ‘science of work’ in the nineteenth century (see Bacon *et al.* (2013) for a meta-analysis). These deal with energetic assessments of human potential that are entirely limited to individual bodies and have no way of considering how they relate to others.

Social and cultural anthropologists have rarely engaged with attempts to measure bodily energy, although physical anthropologists (Carrier 1984; Ulijaszek 1992) have long explored ‘human energetics’ methods of measuring energy expenditure, again focusing on individuals rather than how relationships influence energy use. These methods included the ‘Max Planck respirometer’, the first device to be widely used to measure the inputs and outputs of oxygen and carbon dioxide in breath, and informed and were informed by the nineteenth century ‘science of work’ described in Rabinbach’s influential ‘The Human Motor’ (1992). As Rabinbach (1992) argues, thermodynamic discoveries like those alluded to by Messeret above encouraged a way of thinking about human society and nature in terms of the interchangeability of the productive work of the body, technology and nature. In *The Birth of Energy* (2019), Cara New Daggett notes that definitional struggles surrounding thermodynamics have – she quotes Nobel laureate Percy Bridgman – a more ‘palpably verbal’ feel to them, they ‘smell more of their human origin’ (39). The laws of thermodynamics have long lent themselves to projected anxieties. Early energy scientists in Scotland, for instance, as devoted Presbyterians, put thermodynamic discoveries ‘into conversation with the existing Protestant work ethic and its enemy, waste’ (50). For Messeret to allude to thermodynamics when articulating his anxieties about Ethiopian athletes’ abilities to maintain their energy levels in a context of limits is therefore unsurprising.

Whilst modern day sports science continues to take as its subject the self-contained ‘human motor’, as a measurable and self-contained system of inputs and outputs, for

Messeret to frame his concerns in terms of thermodynamics suggests a far broader anxiety about social relationships under the pressure of hyper-competitive capitalism as well as Ethiopia's position within a global sporting system. Barry (2015) writes that 'while social theorists have often wanted to add social relations to matter, in doing so they have ignored physical scientists' own analyses of relations, including thermodynamics' (110). An understanding of energy based on thermodynamics places emphasis on *relational* powers and identities (Stengers 2010) as well as on the politics of measurement. As Barry puts it, 'energy is not a physical object with given dimensions'. Rather, energy 'has to be understood in terms of its conversion, or the potential for its conversion in the future' (117).

It is this relational nature of energy that I seek to trace in this article. Ethiopian runners express concern that they are attempting to go 'beyond their capacity' in terms of the energy they were able to expend and that their energy levels were threatened both by forces within Ethiopia and outside the country. Energy was seen not as bounded within individual bodies but rather as transbodily, flowing between people, shared and sometimes stolen. A runner's 'condition' was constructed and maintained through relationships with others, and anxieties about energy use were not bounded within individual bodies but dispersed, vexing to measure and a source of real anxiety. For Ethiopian runners, maintaining the social relationships necessary to thrive within an economy of limited energy required intense intersubjective moral labour, which demanded that training and eating be synchronous, visible and equally distributed.

As noted above, recent anthropological literature on sport has seen the intensification of competition and the increasingly global market in which athletes operate as occasioning a shift towards greater individualisation and the understanding of the self in terms of 'bodily capital' and entrepreneurship. Whilst my interlocutors did articulate concern about individualistic behaviour, as well as the shrinking of opportunities under neoliberalism in Ethiopia (see Mains 2013a), it was also clear that becoming a successful athlete required enlisting others, and harnessing the energy of others, in particular ways. Rather than seeing the neoliberal trends of 'moral individualism, autonomy, responsibility and bodily discipline' (Throsby 2016) mirrored (and often exaggerated) in the world of sport, what I seek to argue here is that the energetic understanding of running in Ethiopia, combined with an awareness of limits, meant that an increasingly competitive environment actually *deepened* rather than weakening athletes' reliance on others. I want to emphasise, however, that I am not rehearsing a tired comparison between the individualistic 'West' and the collective other. Ethnographic work amongst the Amhara (Levine 1965; Kebede 1999) emphasises rather that individualism is firmly entrenched and that collective work alongside non-kin does not come naturally, but rather demands constant work and attention.

Energy as Relational and Ethical Concern

Distance running is a sport in which runners place a huge amount of emphasis on the importance of working together, on sharing their energy, and of doing their 'duty' on

behalf of others, and yet it is also a sport in which, at the end of the day, they must compete alone. Navigating the world of professional running therefore invokes a clear tension between relational and individual agency which was understood principally in terms of the skilful deployment of energy. Whilst many of anthropology's classical concerns with relations, exchange, circulation, value and sociality have in some sense always been 'energetic' in orientation, ideas about energy have rarely been explicitly addressed in terms of the ethics of sharing.

Why is it energy that is perceived as limited, as opposed to opportunities, money, or time, and what are the ethical consequences of this? Whilst the contemporary anthropology of energy is concerned with 'energopower' (Boyer 2014) in terms of the politics of harnessing electricity and fossil fuels, or the ethics of that use (Smith & High 2017), I hope to demonstrate the importance of tracing forms of 'energy talk' (Coleman 2019) like Messeret's in contexts where bodies come up against the limits and pressures of a neoliberal global economy increasingly constrained by ecological limits. An understanding of energy based on thermodynamic limits makes energy an acutely relational concern. But I also seek to emphasise that this is not merely 'talk'. It is important to consider energy, and the sharing of energy, in terms of 'material or bodily concretion', (Coleman 2019) recognising the very real energetic and metabolic limits runners face. I also seek to extend Solomon's (2016) concept of 'metabolic living' to consider not just how energy *absorption*, the 'possibility for bodies, substances, and environments to mingle, draw attention to each other', but also energy *expenditure* can be considered in terms of collective and collaborative work.

Whilst not always explicitly evoking 'energy', much classical anthropological work is concerned with the proper distribution or maldistribution of the material, substance or energy that binds people together, as well as how their circulation and conversion opens up the boundary between self and other (Durkheim 1912/2008; Mauss 2002 [1925]; Munn 1986; Strathern 1996). Writing specifically about mana, William Mazzarella (2017) has noted that the concept may gain contemporary relevance because we are 'facing the undoing, at a planetary level, of the energetic settlements that have constituted long-reigning assumptions about the human and the social' (34). These accounts use the concept of energy in a theoretical register, whereas I seek to trace energy primarily as an ethnographic artefact whilst retaining a focus on the importance of considering how energy affects ethical relationships between people in a context of limits.

Running in a group, as I will describe in the next section, was clearly seen as a way of collectively producing physical performances that could not be achieved alone. In this sense, the vitalising and generative power of 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim 1912/2008) was clear to all. Where Malinowski (1935) might disparage the importance of 'collective energies' as a function of a kind of mystical language that we might call 'performative' (Mazzarella 2017), for Ethiopian runners the effects of collective effervescence are clear and visible. Group training runs that were premised upon harnessing the energy of the group were seen both as vitally important for athletic success *and* as potentially volatile, and would only constitute two or three of the twelve runs they would complete in a week for this reason. The energetic demands

– and rewards – were clearly understood to be higher in instances of collective effervescence, which meant that these moments had to be carefully controlled and entered into selectively.

We might consider this in similar terms to those used by Munn (1986) in her introduction to *The Fame of Gawa*. Group training runs of the kind described here represent a ‘type of transformative action through which a community seeks to create the value it regards as essential to its communal viability’ (9). Whilst leading a run and following in somebody’s footsteps might look very similar, in fact they can be seen as connoting different bodily actions of generosity and selfishness, or of ‘releasing and incorporating’ versus ‘retaining for oneself’ (Munn, 49). Much as eating the food that should have been given to a visitor results only in ‘bodily swelling and the sleep of surfeit’ (50), running alone is both selfish and damaging to others *and* detrimental to your own performance. Generosity in training – giving the gift of energy – is understood as a form of sacrifice that is expected to bring with it a future payoff, as suggested by Mauss (2002 (1925)), although as with other sacrificial contexts there is no guarantee of this. As I hope to show, however, ideas about the energetic value of pace-making operate alongside the sharing of food and concerns about witchcraft in a way that necessitates the monitoring of a holistic idea of the flow of energy within the system of Ethiopian running.

An Economy of Limited Energy

The idea of limits is crucial to my argument because, as argued above, it is the idea of a limited system that makes concerns about energy such acutely relational ones. The anthropological literature on living within limits focuses primarily on the behaviour of subsistence farmers (the background most of the runners I knew shared). Foster (1965) referred to this as the ‘image of the limited good’ which extended not only to ideas about health, land and wealth but also to the bodily control of substances like blood and semen. Crucially to his notion of a ‘closed system’ (297) is the idea that an individual or family can improve their position only at the expense of others. Scott (1976) argues similarly that the ‘subsistence ethic’ of living within limits is notably at odds with the profit maximisation calculus of traditional economics, as the peasant family – as both unit of consumption and production – must avoid risky behaviour. Jackson comes to a somewhat similar conclusion in his *Life Within Limits: Well-being in a World of Want* (2011). ‘Awareness of the limits within which one’s life unfolds’, he writes, brings the ‘acceptance that happiness consists in knowing how to make the most of what one has rather than staking everything on the chance of something else’ (197).

Living within an economy of limited energy patterns aspects of runners’ behaviour in similar ways, and yet in spite of the runners’ awareness of limits they were absolutely not willing to give up ‘staking everything on the chance of something else’ as Jackson puts it. Pushing their limits, in a context where it is common to hear the phrase ‘*lik mawek’ allebih*’ (‘you should know your limits’) was an intricate ethical process, however, and required managing relationships with teammates extremely carefully.

Runners' anxiety that energy is limited and relational is also accompanied by an awareness that they do not operate within the closed system assumed by Foster (1965), but rather one in which international flows of bodies, commodities, substances and money alters the economy of energy in which they operate.

This work on living within limits has important parallels to classic anthropological works on the Amhara – the ethnic group of the majority of the runners with whom I lived and trained – which describe a way of looking at the world as a shifting hierarchy in which if one person is raised to a position of power, another must necessarily fall (Kebede 1999; Levine 1965). Kebede writes that according to the Ethiopian concept of 'chance' or *idil*, for one person to ascend to a higher position in life entails that 'the favour removed from one person goes to another person' (204). 'Such place being limited' he writes, 'someone else must be dislodged and degraded' (220). As Malara (2022) has noted much more recently, there is a sense that growing urban inequalities, and the competition for resources under neoliberalism have 'only augmented the need for secrecy, distrust and ambiguity'. This somewhat Hobbesian view of human nature implies a closed and rigid structure that does not acknowledge how such a system is open to creative interpretation or outside influence. Interpretations based on the concept of limits remain important in scholarship on Ethiopia. Di Nunzio (2017) writes of a 'politics of limited entitlements' which determined the relationship between the state and the poor under both the *derg* and EPRDF governments, which 'prevented poor people from living with "too little" but also refrained from giving them "too much"' (93). Di Nunzio emphasises, though, that government development narratives around empowerment through entrepreneurship fail to account for the importance and intricacies of social relationships.

Visibility, Synchronicity, and Trust

Ethnographic work on the Amhara (Levine 1965; Kebede 1999; Malara 2017) has emphasised 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. An important part of resisting these centrifugal forces is through eating and drinking together (Boylston 2018). As Boylston (2013) writes, 'food actualizes the relationship as it contributes to the physical constitution of the actors involved'. Running together can be seen in a very similar way, as constituting the kind of body required to make a living from the sport requires the group. In the collective training environment in which runners operate, self-sacrifice and the assumption of 'responsibility' towards the team is the main way of indexing this intersubjective moral labour. For Ethiopian runners a collective training morality is built through a strong attention to hard work and virtuous suffering on behalf of the self *which is also* on behalf of others. Runners must work to control themselves and their energy levels in order to protect their own careers but also the careers of their friends and teammates.

The discourse surrounding morally good training is predicated on the notion that good results can be achieved only within a moral economy of sharing energy and

duties, and a responsibility to something bigger than yourself – the group of athletes and the coach, but ultimately something more and higher, the God who has the power to reward such morally good behaviour and punish selfishness (Levine 1965). For this reason it is important that training is synchronous, that it is equitable and that it is visible.

Ethiopian athletes believe that training in a group is the only way to improve. I was told frequently that training alone was ‘just for health’, and that ‘if you want to be changed’ you have to train with others. Runners trained in a single-file line of athletes, following a ‘leader’ who decided upon the route and who was seen as expending the most energy. Their energetic capacity was thus defined in terms of their relationship with others rather than in terms of containment within the self. This required an opening up to others which, 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 degree of vulnerability.

Following was seen as much easier than leading, and runners sought to synchronise their steps by ‘following each other’s feet’ and staying extremely close together. The principal way in which concerns about relational energy played out was in the allocation and performance of obligations to ‘share the pace’ in training. As it was put in one post-training meeting by a runner concerned to time his ‘condition’ with an upcoming race, ‘a person who pushes, especially in the build-up to a race, is killing himself and he is killing others’. Pacing each other responsibly, and sharing energy in this way, was vitally important. Coach Messeret’s response to the comment above was to say, ‘let me tell you one thing: if you don’t lead, you won’t win. And if you don’t follow you can’t win either’. That is to say, you need to lead in order to invest in the group, and you need to follow because if you always run alone you will ‘burn yourself up’ by exerting too much energy. An instance of collective effervescence (Durkheim 1912/2008), when the allocation of pace-making responsibilities went according to plan, it allowed the runners to run significantly faster than they could have done alone, and they put this down to the power of the group (Figure 1).

It was very rare to see someone running on their own, even on the ‘easy’ training days in the forest, and on the three days per week when we travelled in the team bus to train in a group, pace-making responsibilities were carefully divided up before the start of training. The ideal situation was that everyone did their ‘fair’ share of setting the pace, which was understood to involve expending more energy than running in the group. Given the precision required of those in charge of setting the pace – they were expected to be no more than a couple of seconds off Messeret’s required speed per kilometre – the concentration required by the leaders was significant.

The division of pace-making duties was therefore also intended to decrease the likelihood of fluctuations in pace that were seen as unnecessarily costly in energy terms, with the overall aim being to cover the training session without ‘losing anything’, that is, without using too much energy and, importantly, *without using more than other people*. According to this division of running labour, one could gain in value only when installed within a collective, which resonates with other aesthetic, religious



Figure 1. Athletes train in a line in Sebeta, to the West of Addis Ababa.

and social celebrations of togetherness in Ethiopia (Malara 2017). There was therefore a strong moral discourse attached to pace-making responsibilities, and discussions of pace-making and whether or not certain people ‘did their duty’ often dominated post-training discussions. On one occasion when a young runner called Gojjam had to take another runner’s pace-making responsibility because they were unable to keep up, he told him ‘I did your turn at the front today and my soul almost came out’, before adding, ‘leading is hard. It is like carrying someone else’s burden’.

Clearly there is a very strong link between moral behaviour and shared pace-making here. Gojjam expresses his effort in terms not of his body – which was clearly hurting, he was sick moments before saying this – but in terms of his soul. The implication is that the pace-making here was harder because it was not his turn; because he was doing another’s ‘duty’. Things are potentially rewarding because they are hard, and they are harder when they involve ethical work performed for others. Athletes ‘sacrificed’ their energy for others knowing – as in other sacrificial contexts – that the gift of their

energy would have a return for them, but one that cannot quite be foreseen or calculated at the moment of giving. After training, the first question Messeret usually asked was, ‘how was the pace? Did everyone do their duty?’ If someone failed to ‘do their duty’ at the front, or else ‘disturbed the pace’ and ran too fast, however, this would usually elicit a lengthy and heated exchange of views. In a context of general secrecy – in one particular outburst Messeret shouted that, ‘you will remain silent now, athletes only want to talk behind each other’s backs in the forest!’ – the willingness to accuse each other directly in the situation described below implies that it is seen as too important to remain silent about.

When Pace-Making Goes Wrong

The best training sessions are those where the transitions between pacemakers all go smoothly and where the pace never deviates by more than a couple of seconds per kilometre from the pace Messeret has told the athletes to run. It is a rare day, though, when all of the athletes are feeling good, and sometimes other runners have to step in to ‘bear the burden’ of pacing on their behalf. When there is a problem with the pace-making, it is expected to be solved without discussion; if someone who is supposed to be leading drops back, it is seen as his responsibility to get back to the front without being cajoled into it by his teammates. Likewise, if a runner misjudges the pace, as in the example below, they are expected to correct it without being told. If someone else has to step in to replace a runner who cannot keep up the pace, this too is expected to be done without comment. There is a strong moral discourse attached to this, as the following quote from Hailye, who was the sub-agent of the group, demonstrates:

If you are morally good, there is no hesitation, and no doubt, between friends. If I need to lead, I will lead. If my friend is leading, I will take over from him. He is not asking me to help him, but because I am morally good I know that if I do that I will get a reward from God. There is no argument, there is no blaming others.

Through sharing responsibility, ‘good’ and ‘moral’ behaviour are mutually reinforced. An equal and fair sociality of pace-making should be spontaneous and heartfelt. It should stem from ‘love’ and respect for one’s teammates and also for something higher – the God who is responsible for dispensing punishment and reward. As Mains (2013b) has argued in the context of his work with young men in Jimma, balancing affection and reciprocity can be fraught with tension. Given the strong rhetoric of collaboration and togetherness surrounding group training, when this ideal form of pace-making breaks down it brings the tension between the individual and the collective into sharp focus.

The argument I will now go on to discuss began on the road at the end of a training session and continued after Messeret made the athletes get back into the bus to avoid making a scene in front of other training groups and the curious farmers who had gathered to observe. The two athletes, Tsedat and Atalay, were supposed to lead the third 5km segment of a 20km run together, but Tsedat became angry with Atalay for ‘going beyond the given pace’ on an uphill section. In protest, Tsedat dropped to

the back of the group rather than running side-by-side with him at the front. When he felt that people were criticising him unfairly for this, he lost the control the athletes are expected to have in training, sprinting ahead and completing the final 5km in an astonishingly fast (we were 2,700m above sea-level) 14.23, and finishing alone. The following is a short extract from the argument that followed.

Atalay: 'Ah, you're so clever, you finished the session first. What a hero! (*jegna*)'

Tsedat: 'Yeah, I'm clever for myself (*inney lerasen gorbez nann*). On the hill you were going at a pace that felt easy and comfortable for you, not at the pace we were told to go ...'

Atalay: 'Oh, well. You came first anyway, what a hero'.

Tsedat: 'Yeah, I'm a hero for myself.'

Here the narrative of teamwork, sharing and collective effort abruptly breaks down. When Tsedat says 'I am a hero for myself' he brings to the surface a reality that is scrupulously avoided in discussions of training; that the athletes *do* need to compete against each other and distinguish themselves in order to be selected to go to a race. It might seem unsurprising for one of the strongest athletes in the group to make a clear display of dominance like this, so it is important to emphasise how unusual this was – it only happened a couple of times in the course of fifteen months of fieldwork – and how significant. Tsedat did not come back to training for ten days after the incident. Outbursts of this kind confirmed the Amhara suspicion that man (*sew*) is essentially selfish, and will seek self-satisfaction if not restricted by the kind of collective moral discourse described in the previous section. It is the display of arrogance, or being 'full' (*tigab*) and self-sufficient that is especially objectionable here. *Tigab* is seen as a particularly dangerous sin in Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, negating as it does dependency on God but also your mutual duties and responsibilities to others (Levine 1965, Malara 2017). This kind of self-serving arrogance was also connected to material desire and the acquisition of material goods, which I go on to describe later in this piece.

Some of the frustration with Tsedat came from the fact that his unwillingness to share the pace with Atalay was not an 'ability problem' – he could have continued running with Atalay if he had wanted to – and therefore his behaviour was seen as deliberately deceptive. He was seen as consciously trying to gain an advantage by acting the way he did. The fact that these criticisms only come to the surface at the end of the session – that whilst they were running this all played out in silence – is also interesting. It was only because Tsedat 'kicked away' at the front, which was seen as a deliberate provocation, that this rupture of the discourse of 'sharing' came to the surface. In summing up the dispute, Messeret returned to the moral dimension of shared responsibility. 'The problem is not one of ability, it is a mentality problem, a lack of positivity. When someone is emotional, the others must be patient. When someone is angry, the others should mediate. We have to grow together'. When he says that the athletes' must 'grow together' he is referring to more than sporting performance, but rather to a kind of character development or moral self-realisation.

The ‘mentality problem’ is also something Messeret often brought up with regard to athletes missing training sessions, which is also seen as an unwillingness to equalise energy expenditure; it is assumed that people miss training in order to save energy and gain an advantage in a subsequent training session. This was sometimes a source of conflict as the runners claimed that they missed training in order to protect themselves from injury or from the unsustainable output of energy. The issue with missing training sessions was the inequitable expenditure of energy it created, whether this was because people were using the opportunity to train harder (expend more energy) on their own or easier (expending less energy and therefore allowing themselves to perform better at the next group session).

For a few days towards the end of my fieldwork, we were unable to travel in the team bus to our usual training locations because of anti-government protests. When we returned to training after a week we went to the dirt track at *Legetafo* to do ‘speed’ training. I observed the session with coach Messeret as I was suffering from a knee injury. Rather than running in the usual tight-knit, single-file formation, the runners were unusually dispersed on the track, running their repetitions in smaller groups or scattered apart. Messeret kept shaking his head as he looked at the watch, and explained the runners’ diminished ‘*condition*’ as follows.

Most of the time if you give them a few days of personal training they push the stress and intensity up, and then they feel too exhausted. They don’t recover when you call them back to the normal sessions. If you give them one or two days, they push ahead of their capacity because they think they can improve when they increase the intensity alone.

This quotation seems strange in light of the runners’ statements, described above, that change only comes from working in a group, and again draws attention to the tension between the individual and the collective. It seems clear from Messeret’s statement that part of the logic of training as a group is to avoid this kind of damaging centrifugal drive; to push ‘beyond your capacity’ in pursuit of individual advancement is seen as damaging as well as morally suspect. This extended to the general attitude towards being alone, even when ‘resting’ after training, which ensured that they also took the same amount of rest and recuperated in the same manner before the next training run.

Attempting to create equality in energy intake and expenditure was to recognise that each individual’s success was dependent upon the group. Malara (2018) has used the phrase ‘technologies of the other’ to articulate instances in which attempts to improve the self are reliant upon enlisting others. Operating within an economy of limited energy necessitated this way of thinking and behaving amongst runners (Crawley 2021a). As I will go on to demonstrate in my discussion of sharing food below, to fail to look after the self and one’s own ‘condition’ was also to fail to care for one’s teammates.

Eating Together

Energy is not seen by the athletes as ‘bounded’ and the property of one individual body. As with pace-making responsibilities, the sociality of sharing and withholding food is

extremely important amongst runners as it is in Amhara culture more generally (Boylston 2018; Howard 2018; Malara 2018). As Boylston (2018) puts it, 'eating together is the first sign of community belonging, and a regular prophylaxis against centrifugal, individualistic forces present in all humanity'. Much like with sharing the energetic 'burden' of pace-making, the sharing of food and therefore energy were seen as being most virtuous when unspoken, when somebody recognised the needs of another without being asked. In a discussion of the importance of teamwork, Messeret said that the basis of respect was a kind of unspoken empathy between runners: 'Before I say I am hungry he will know I am'.

Here it is clear not only that athletes should ideally be extremely sensitive to the monitoring of their own bodies and energy levels but also to those of others. Runners were expected to work constantly on the distribution of energy within the group. Messeret often drew the athletes' attention to the perceived difference between the 'previous generation' of athletes who worked together for success and the 'current generation', who were seen as more individualistic. Here he refers to Haile Gebrselassie, the most famous Ethiopian runner, who was often helped to victory by other Ethiopian athletes pacing him in races.

Messeret: 'There are strategies to accept teamwork! "Haile, have you eaten lunch? No? OK, come to Werku Bikila's butcher" We have to develop this first. Honestly, he [Gebrselassie's teammate] used to order and take it for him. What about now?'

Abere: 'If a friend calls when I am sleeping, I tell him I am sleeping' [everyone laughs]

Messeret: 'We have become selfish'.

Much of the joking that went on during the bus trips to and from training had to do with the sharing or withholding of food. Each Friday, when we went to training on asphalt, considered to be the most energy-intensive, all of the athletes contributed 5 *birr* each to buy around 15 kilos of bananas on the way back from training, and these were meticulously shared out to ensure that they were divided fairly. If someone did not have the money for this, another athlete would normally chip in double, but this would be done ostentatiously and often contributing more than one's fair share earned a round of applause from the other runners. For minor misdemeanours like missed training sessions, the coach often announced publicly that the offending party had to 'sponsor' bread or bananas for everyone at the upcoming session, which met with cheering from the other athletes. A particularly illuminating example of this came when Zeleke failed to 'do his duty' as a pacemaker, dropping off the pace before it was his 'turn'. This Messeret blamed on his being distracted by trying to build a house in his hometown of Debre Birhan; he had travelled there a couple of times recently, and, because of the construction work and because he was waiting to receive prize money from China, had run out of money to feed *himself* well.

After training, Messeret addressed Zeleke in the bus in front of the group. 'Because money comes and money goes', he said, 'you need to sleep and eat well in order to do your training properly'. Zeleke, slumped in his seat, replied, 'I am so tired I have no response'. As a punishment, Messeret demanded that Zeleke 'sponsor bread and

bananas' for the whole team later in the week, a way of resetting the energetic imbalance created by his failure to share pace-making. By emphasising that 'money comes and goes', Messeret seeks to draw attention to the bodily capital (which is in a sense easier to control) upon which prize money depends, whilst signalling awareness that the economy of energy within Ethiopia is affected by what happens 'outside' the country as the athletes' put it. When Zeleke finally accepts that he will provide food later in the week he stands up and says that the other athletes had 'better all come' to recognise his generosity. Here Zeleke's failure to take care of *his own* 'condition' by feeding himself adequately is seen as being detrimental *to the team as a whole*. Personal responsibility and responsibility to the team are thus made inseparable, as a failure of self-care is also a failure to care for others.

Usually the monitoring of reciprocity indicated with Zeleke's 'you'd better all come' is presented jokingly. On the same bus ride Tsedat joked that 'I can't afford to invite everyone for lunch when they are hungry, so I'll invite people when they have already eaten, then I'll make a really thin *beso* (roasted barley drink) so they all have to pee, and then when they go out to pee I'll lock the door behind them'. This was met with laughter from the other runners. As with scheming to think of ways of gaining a training advantage (by going to higher altitude, or by running in secret during the night for example), the implication here is that it is acceptable to aim to receive more than one gives in these exchanges of food.

Scheming to gain an advantage over others was often presented as an urban phenomenon connected to the competitive nature of the sport within Addis Ababa. On one occasion an athlete who had recently moved to Addis came to our compound to sign a contract with the management group. I asked him about where he was living, and he said he had moved to *Sendafa*, 15km away from where most of the athletes live in *Kotebe*, because the rent was cheaper. He told me that he lived with another runner and that whichever of them returned from training first would prepare breakfast. I was surprised by this relationship and said so to Hailye, who responded thus:

That's because they only just come, they are new to Addis, or to *Sendafa* anyway and came from a rural area. You will see after two months, they will not cook for each other. One will become selfish and come late, and one will be cooking and cooking. For instance, if we went to training together and we come back, and you sleep, and I cook and feed you, I am not getting any rest. You are resting and eating as well. You're going to be much stronger than me.

The implication here is that the individualistic behaviour of trying to seek an advantage over others by saving more energy is seen to be a characteristic of the city and the competitive nature of the sport itself. When we were all invited to one athlete's house because his wife had recently had a baby, we all chipped in and bought a sheep from a local market, which was served an hour or so later on large communal plates outside. Several of the athletes filmed everyone eating, and for an hour or so afterwards this footage was reviewed along with comments like, 'look! She is eating and never talking!' or, 'look at him! He's like a hyena'. Filming made eating a self-conscious experience, as people tried to ensure that no one thought they were taking more than their fair share and trying to take advantage of the situation. Whilst commensality

and the intake of food and energy has received much ethnographic attention, I want to emphasise here the importance not only of *taking in* or *absorbing* (Solomon 2016) energy together but also of *expending* energy in unison. It was the synchronicity and visibility of both training and eating that rendered them moral.

Illicit Energy

Before going on to discuss the more obviously illicit energetic practice of a form of witchcraft called *metat*, I want to emphasise that practices like running alone, especially at night and in darkness (*'ba chelema'*) were often spoken of in similar ways. In fact, the knee injury that prevented me from training in the description above led to speculation that I had been training in secret at night, when the only option is to run on the roads through the city (where there are streetlights), and therefore been injured by the hard surface. It is the invisibility and deception of this practice that renders it immoral. Training at night is seen as having a particular potential to lead to improvement in the short term, connected as it is to an excessive output of energy. To run like this in the night though is to deplete yourself and therefore be unable to help the group.

So far I have discussed the monitoring of energetic practices that occur primarily between runners and within the group environment. Concerns about individuals giving in to individualistic desire and seeking to 'change their lives' through taking a 'short-cut' were often expressed through explanations of *metat*. I was told that *metat* worked by allowing the perpetrator to 'steal' some of the effected runner, or runners' energy. In many cases where a runner mysteriously felt a lack of energy, or picked up an injury that they could not explain, they put it down to *metat*, which was performed through materially mediated contact – handshaking, obtaining sweaty items of clothing, or through food. Crucially to an understanding of an economy of limited energy, the improvement of the athlete performing *metat* could only happen at the expense of others.

Concerns about *menfas* (spirits) catching a runners' energy were used to explain why Ethiopian runners at the top level do not live in training camps. Hailye was keen to emphasise that the trust between runners was in decline, and that it was becoming less common for runners to eat together or even shake each others' hands. When athletes were afflicted with *metat* – for instance when one of the runners collapsed by the road, wailing 'lightning, lightning!' and 'help me!' – Messeret's response was to pour a bottle of Holy Water he kept in the bus for this purpose over their heads, and to hold a bible over them. He explained that *menfas* do not like hard work, and that was why athletes were particularly vulnerable to them during training. The idea that the spirit dislikes hard work lends a clear moral dimension to the idea of 'stealing' someone's energy that resonates with other scholars' work on witchcraft in Africa regarding the suspicious nature of 'tak[ing] without sweat' (Geschiere 2013, 82).

In Geschiere's 'Witchcraft, Intimacy and Trust', (2013) he writes that 'in modern contexts as well, everyday life is still haunted by the tensions between, on the one hand, the fear of an intimacy that can give 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' (101). This statement sums up the paradox the runners face quite neatly. Running entails a constant and careful monitoring both of one's own 'condition' and that of the other runners in your training group. They recognise that they must operate as a tight-knit group during training in order to benefit from sharing each other's energy, and yet there is always at least some underlying suspicion and wariness that accompanies this.

Energetic Subjectivities

Anthropologists have written about regulating the flow of substance from one person to another in contexts where bodies are seen as mutually constitutive (Strathern 1996; Vokes 2013; Huhn 2017), emphasising how particular anxieties arise as a result of attempts to delineate the networks of people to whom substances can appropriately flow. I have demonstrated that in the Ethiopian context it is not only tangible substances that flow between people, but also the less tangible stuff of energy. Understanding the possibility of 'changing your life' to be dependent upon flows of energy that are both seen and unseen, licit and illicit, makes navigating the world of competitive running in Ethiopia particularly challenging. Ethiopian athletes sought to 'cut the network' in ways similar to that described by Strathern (1996), training in a big group three days a week but forming smaller groups of two or three athletes on other days, who would eat, plan and run together. Their beliefs about the shared potential of energy, however, meant that to truly transform themselves relied upon the larger group. Radical transformation necessitated opening themselves up to broader relationships and therefore to increased vulnerability, and they often relied upon humour to cope with this reality.

Because energy was conceived of as trans-bodily and social, its flow between the environment and between different people meant that energy was deeply implicated in people's ethical relationships. This ethics of energy involved the constant evaluation and re-evaluation of relationships with others, and a shifting standard of moral assessment that was influenced heavily by the intensity of the competition they were involved in and the tension between shared value and personal advancement. Whilst the anthropology of energy has focused primarily on the use of fuel and ethical judgements about that use (Smith & High 2017), and the importance of measurements of energy production and consumption in political and economic life (Boyer 2014) there has been little work on the energetic subjectivities of people themselves.

Through focusing on a form of 'energy talk' (Coleman 2019) and practice rooted in a thermodynamic understanding of the nature of energy and limits, I have demonstrated the intrinsic relationship between energy and measurement and the fraught and acutely relational nature of energetic concerns at the level of the body. By emphasising that 'condition' is an emic concept that animates the way in which Ethiopian runners view and act upon the world I have demonstrated the importance of foregrounding energy as a heuristic category to make sense of human sociality. Rather

than an increasingly intense struggle over scarce resources driving atomisation, however, I have demonstrated that this actually necessitates a deepening of reliance upon others, albeit one that requires hard work and is often tinged with wariness and mistrust. Whilst this article has focused on a group of people who perceive of themselves as operating at the very edge of their energetic potential, the concept of an ‘energetic subjectivities’ is nonetheless useful in other contexts where bodies come up against the limits and pressures of a neoliberal global economy increasingly constrained by ecological limits.

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