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CHILDREN'S SPORTING LIFE IN CONTEMPORARY MAASAI SOCIETY

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Academic Paradox in Childhood Sport Participation and Physical Activity

When discussing sports and children in indigenous or small-scale societies, current academic debates often present a dominant image of marginalized childhoods. Despite indigenous children demonstrating higher levels of physical activity compared to their peers in urbanized settings (Guthold et al. 2018; Marques et al. 2020), they are frequently portrayed as lacking adequate sport facilities, equipment, access to organized sport activities, and professional physical education instruction (Hardman 2008). Studies examining the broader consequences of these conditions—particularly those adopting macro-level analyses—raise concerns about the balance between play and work in children's lives. For instance, they criticize children walking to school as being due to underdeveloped infrastructure, or frame high levels of physical activity as a subsistence necessity rather than a choice (Lambert et al. 2020; Varela et al. 2021). While these studies rightly call for a reevaluation of the relationship between childhood physical activity, play, work, and well-being, they rarely address whose perspectives should guide such investigations.

The cautionary narrative surrounding the lack of sporting environment reflects this underlying issue of perspective. It stems largely from the value systems of Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies, which tend to associate healthy childhoods with playful sport activities rather than subsistence tasks. This perspective overlooks anthropological insights into the sociocultural and educational significance of children's chore participation, the rich and varied landscape of childhood play, and other place-based empirical experiences in small-scale societies worldwide (Chick 2010; Lancy 2015, 2018). Indeed, these aspects together construct the sporting lives of children in these societies.

This study explores the sporting lives of children in a Maasai community, a pastoralist indigenous group in East Africa, by considering local perspectives on childhood work and play, as well as their daily empirical experiences. My research began with an investigation into children's acquisition of ethnobiological knowledge in everyday routines and expanded to examine their participation in play and chores, local parental norms, and, more recently, children's physical activity and sport participation in school settings. Although these topics are often discussed independently in distinct academic fields, they are, as we will see in the following review, inseparable elements that together construct children's everyday routines, development, and sporting world.

A closer look at anthropological investigations into children's acquisition of ethnobiological knowledge offers a useful lens for understanding the connections between childhood play, work, learning, and sport. Ethnobiological knowledge, also referred to as indigenous knowledge or traditional/local ecological knowledge, encompasses the systems of understanding and social

values that indigenous groups have historically and empirically developed concerning plants, animals, and broader ecosystems (Hunn 2007). Anthropological research has long explored how children learn about their biophysical environments through social participation, and how this experience-based cultural knowledge is embodied and applied in everyday practices that blend work and play (Gallois and Reyes-García 2018; Quinlan et al. 2016). In pastoralist communities, for instance, children acquire ethnobiological knowledge of livestock through routine tasks such as boys' herding and girls' firewood collection. While engaging in these activities, children take initiative, make decisions, and often weave playful elements into their chores (Tian 2017, 2019). This feature of childhood development is similarly observed in many other small-scale societies (Crittenden 2016; Dyson 2014). In these contexts, childhood work and play are not distinct or opposing categories, contrasting sharply with the Western conceptions that separate play and leisure from wage-earning activity and distinguish physical activity and sports from productive work (Alpenfels 1948; Chick 2010). This work-play complex in small-scale societies highlights children's agency and the embodied learning directed by children themselves in daily routines (e.g. Tian 2024b), which surely encompasses many sport-like and physically demanding activities. Understanding this integrated nature of children's everyday physical activities provides a crucial foundation for rethinking childhood sport beyond conventional, Western-centric models.

Building on this academic paradox surrounding childhood play, work, and sport, this paper argues for the importance of reframing unique childhood sporting experiences, moving beyond the narrowly confined concepts of school-centered and/or play-oriented sport. This aligns with the recent redefinition of physical activity as a term that "involves people moving, acting and performing within culturally specific spaces and contexts, and influenced by a unique array of interests, emotion, ideas, instructions and relationships" (Piggin 2020, 5). To better understand this phenomenon in childhood, inquiries should be made taking an emic approach and moving beyond the boundaries of disciplines (Gibson and Atkinson 2018), reflecting both global concerns and local perceptions and norms.

Drawing on the aforementioned theoretical considerations, this study focuses on two main questions to explore the sporting lives of Maasai children. First, how do Maasai children's work and play practices embody local understandings of physical activity? Second, in what ways are these embodied practices related to broader concepts of sport within their community life and schooling contexts? In the sections below, I examine these questions by attending to local perceptions on sport and childhood fitness, parental norms that shape children's engagement in work, play, and organized sport activities, and the potential correlations between sport and childhood learning in this community.

Local Perceptions of Sport and Childhood Fitness

Maasai people are generally known as pastoralists or agro-pastoralists who live in the arid and semi-arid lands across the boundaries of Tanzania and Kenya. Since the late nineteenth century, Western explorers and colonial officers have produced abundant writings describing the supposedly natural athletic abilities of Maasai male youth, a stereotype that continues to exist today (Bale 1998; Bale and Sang 1996). The ongoing tourist reproduction of Maasai warriors' high jumping performances, framed within the discourse of imperialist nostalgia (Bruner and

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994), for instance, vividly reflects this point.

This paper focuses on Maasai village children, based on intermittent fieldwork conducted over the past decade. This consisted of a series of field visits across different seasons and years, primarily following the same group of children, while involving other child and adult participants depending on the research focus (Tian 2024b). I employed participant observation and mixed methods, including focal behavior observations, ethnobotanical surveys, geographic mapping of children's living environments and mobility, and, more recently, accelerometer-based assessments of physical activity levels. Revisiting the same community over time allowed me to observe changes in children's daily routines, and to capture the variability of their work, play, and sporting experiences across different environmental and socio-economic contexts. During the fieldwork, I used both English and the local Maa language for communication and data collection. As I am not fluent in Maa, I worked with local youths and children who are fluent in both English and Maa to assist with data collection and interpretation during each research period.

The targeted Maasai community is located in the Kuku Group Ranch in southern Kenya. Local people primarily engage in livestock grazing while also adapting to other forms of subsistence such as farming, tourism, wage labors, and small business ownership. Most children attend school and, at the same time, actively participate in pastoral chores and housework as part of their daily lives.

In this community, there is no single Maa word that perfectly matches the English term sport. Instead, local people often use the term *enkiguran* (meaning play) to refer to modern sport competitions and other playful activities, such as hide-and-seek or the chasing and running games of children. In schools, physical education is translated as *enchatata osesen*, which literally means "body construction," a term that also applies to purposive exercises of people associated with different life stages. Being physically and mentally fit is highly valued in Maasai communities. The local term *agol* well reflects this integrated concept of body-and-mind fitness, describing a person who is strong, capable of enduring difficulties, and courageous.

For Maasai, age is not counted numerically but is recognized in a local age system and an androcentric age group concept. Both men and women pass through three life stages: childhood, gender-specific adulthood, and elderhood. For women, adulthood is marked by adult womanhood after marriage, and for men, by institutionalized stages of male youthhood (*murrano*). Purposive exercises are well mentioned in the life stage of adulthood and differ by gender. The young men (*ilmurran*) engage in various physical activities, such as spear or stick throwing, singing and jumping, running, and wrestling both for fun and to maintain fitness. They also engage in informal competitions when gathering, such as carrying calves or lifting up spears. Women likewise maintain an active lifestyle, even during pregnancy. Tasks like collecting firewood and walking are believed to help build physical strength in preparation for childbirth. In addition, many energy-demanding daily tasks are also considered essential for building physical and psychosocial fitness. Activities such as lifting sick cattle to stand, branding livestock, fencing, herding young livestock, fetching water, house construction, and associated long-distance walking are regarded as physically formative for women. Activities such as lifting sick cattle to stand, branding livestock, fencing, and herding are regarded as physically formative for boys and young men, while for girls

and women, tasks contributing similarly to physical conditioning and endurance include fetching water, house construction, and associated long-distance walking.

In children's daily lives, physical activities blur the lines between work, play, and exercise, collectively forming the essence of childhood sporting experiences. Adults assess children's fitness through their gradual mastery of various subsistence tasks. As one elder explained, a strong boy is someone who can travel long distances and graze livestock effectively, while a strong girl is one who can energetically assist her mother with household chores. In his time, when girls also participated in herding, strong girls were recognized for their skills in that activity as well. He further noted that, for them, there are no formal exams (like those in Western schools) to assess children's fitness. Instead, parents gauge their children's development by observing their performance in daily chores. For boys, this includes their ability to catch and control sheep or goats, or to cooperate with others in managing livestock; for girls, it involves the efficient and skillful completion of household tasks.

Although adults emphasize children's chore participation, Maasai children have ample opportunities to play. In previous observations, I collected 295 instances of play among Maasai children, with variations across gender and age (Tian 2024a). Play is regarded as the children's own domain, largely free from adult intervention. In daily life, adults not only refrain from participating in children's play, but sometimes deliberately avoid observing it. Children maintain significant autonomy, deciding what to play, how, and when, and they also take the initiative to balance play with chore responsibilities.

This independence in childhood reflects a set of core values that are central to Maasai life: *naboisho* (unity), *enkanyit* (respect), *empijan* (courage), and *enkitoria* (autonomy), all of which also closely tied to the concept of *agol*, or childhood fitness. Sport-like activities, both in daily play and work, provide children with opportunities to practice these values while constructing local knowledge and subsistence skills, not only independently but also playfully and sensuously. For example, boys make herding sticks for both work and play, through which they empirically learn ethnoknowledge of plants. During herding, they whip and direct the livestock toward grazing areas. While moving with the herds, they also throw sticks for fun, either enjoying solitary play or competing to see who can throw higher and farther. Elders recalled a targeting game they used to play in childhood: a boy would throw a stick while murmuring the name of a girl he liked, aiming for a predetermined target such as a knot in a tree or a forking branch. It was believed that successfully hitting the target would bring him the love of the girl. Among boys, competition in play is less about winning or losing and more about exchanging knowledge—about the plants used to make sticks, the craftsmanship involved in making them, and the techniques for using them in different ways. Boys store their favorite sticks at home and exchange them with peers to foster friendship and social ties. Through this playful and empirical process, children construct detailed ethnoknowledge, including the geolocations of specific plant species and their seasonal changes; the flexibility, hardness, and weight of twigs and branches; the shapes and patterns of leaves and bark; and even the plants' smells and tastes.

Above all, ethnobiological knowledge is essential for the embodied childhood learning, including the development of various physical skills situated in this environment. In the following section,

I present a detailed vignette, combining observations collected across multiple field visits, to illustrate how this form of empirical childhood learning plays a crucial role in helping children adapt to new sporting experiences introduced through local schooling.

Vz's Sport Experiences in Primary School

Vz, an 8-year-old boy, attended second grade at a primary school in 2022. Situated on communal lands, his school is comprised of two buildings with four classrooms each, an office, and a kitchen, but it has no fence or gates. The schoolyard, blending seamlessly into the surrounding environment, spans approximately fifty thousand square meters. It features a flat, sandy area in front of the classrooms and extends into unmodified grasslands reaching nearby homesteads. Scattered with acacia shrubs and trees, the landscape is frequented by cattle, goats, and sheep wandering toward grazing fields. The sandy areas and grassy bush serve as playgrounds for children during class breaks, physical education sessions, and after-school recreational and club activities. The school possesses one volleyball and a net, and despite limited sports equipment, its volleyball team has qualified for the subcounty-level competitions.

Vz was a core member of the school volleyball team. He described how children engage in various organized sports at school, including volleyball, handball, football, running, and relay races. A lack of equipment does not dampen their enthusiasm; children craft footballs and handballs from dried grass or discarded cloth. The sandy ground served as the main area for playing volleyball and handball. For volleyball, they prepare the court themselves by measuring distances, drawing boundary lines, and setting up the net between two long wooden trunks. During club time, teachers generally allowed children to organize their own volleyball or handball competitions, occasionally joining in for fun and exercise. Children acted as both players and referees, deciding roles among themselves. Beyond the sandy grounds, in areas where teachers typically did not intervene or organize formal activities, children continued to manage their own sports and play. Boys played football on the grasslands, using thorny shrubs as goalposts and maneuvering skillfully around them. Girls engaged in make-believe, constructing homes under acacia trees and gathering plants and seeds for play-cooking. Some children also climbed trees or participated in singing and dancing.

During a visit to Vz's family, I observed Vz and his older brother making their own batons for an upcoming school relay race. In the evening, after herding the family's goats and sheep back home, Vz and his brother climbed a small hill near their home. There, they each selected a fresh branch from the *olporokuai* tree (*Dombeya kirkii*). After cutting the branches to about thirty centimeters, they peeled off the bark and smoothed both ends using stones and sandpaper. They meticulously polished the batons, heating them over a fire to straighten any curves, and further smoothed them before packing them into their school bags. The boys intentionally chose branches from the *olporokuai* tree because it has no thorns, is easy to shape, and resists deformation—knowledge they had gained through herding experiences, where the same tree is used to make herding sticks.

Making batons was a task assigned by their schoolteachers, an assignment not commonly found in urban Kenyan schools. Local teachers encourage such tasks, recognizing that village children are adept at tool-making and self-organizing their play and sports activities as part of their daily

routines. The ethnobiological knowledge that children acquire outside of school thus enables them to participate in, enjoy, and adapt to sporting activities within the school setting.

Above all, the episode highlights how everyday embodied practices, rooted in ethnobiological knowledge, shape children's ability to engage with organized sport. Such practices reveal the broader interplay between work, play, learning, and sporting life among Maasai children, themes to which I now turn in the concluding discussion.

Conclusion

Maasai children's physical activity and sport-like experiences are unique and inherently playful, defying simplistic interpretations that frame them as mere necessities devoid of choice. An ethnographic approach reveals the complex sociocultural contexts of childhood physical activity in small-scale societies, uncovering local logics and rationalities often overlooked in academic discussions. In concluding this paper, I highlight several elements that warrant careful consideration for understanding childhood physical activity and sport participation in such contexts: local parenting norms, children's agency, children's daily routines, and their place-based knowledge and bodily experiences. Returning to the case of Maasai children, respecting the nuanced ways in which they engage with play and work in their daily lives is a crucial first step toward developing a culturally sensitive understanding of local sporting lives.

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