Crafting Sport History Behind Bars: Wrestling with State Patronage and Colonial Confinement in Kenya

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Abstract: This article explores how indigenous games such as wrestling were marginalised during the colonial era and the contemporary impact of this legacy. Through the sport of wrestling’s neotraditional resurgence, I argue that the sport’s contemporary iteration which emerged behind the imposing walls of Kenya’s penitentiaries provides an important window into historic discourse and state control of sport rooted in the colonial past. Paying close attention to the methodological challenges and opportunities researchers of indigenous sport face, the article also examines the sources available for scholars interested in investigating the social history of indigenous sport in Africa.

Résumé: Cet article explore la manière dont les sports locaux comme la lutte ont été marginalisés pendant la période coloniale et l’impact contemporain de cette relative inattention. Grace à la résurgence néo-traditionaliste de la lutte, je suggère que la version contemporaine de ce sport née derrière les murs imposants des prisons kenyanes révèle les racines coloniales du discours historique et du contrôle de l’État sur ce sport. En examinant au plus près les défis méthodologiques et les opportunités offertes aux chercheurs des sports africains, cet article se penche sur les sources disponibles pour les chercheurs intéressés par l’histoire sociale des sports locaux en Afrique.
Introduction

Traveling across the fertile highlands of Kenya’s northern Rift Valley en route to the new administrative capital of Trans Nzoia County, any student of African sport history would associate this region as a global center of distance running prowess. Arriving in Kitale in May 2013, the preeminence of athletics and other European imports dominated the Friday afternoon scene at the Jomo Kenyatta stadium. A group of children dribbled a makeshift soccer ball outside the stone walls of the sports ground and around the dirt track, aspiring distance runners warmed up for a local meet. As one of Kenya’s small regional stadiums, supporters of athletics slowly filled the stands and as I surveyed the scene with my three Kenyan colleagues, a small group of about thirty athletes were visible at the corner of the stadium’s soccer pitch. Standing around a makeshift grass circle outlined with plastic advertising tape from a local bank, these athletes did not represent the population of aspiring soccer players and distance runners wandering the stadium grounds that day. Ranging from young boys to men in their thirties, they had come for another, very different sporting event; the first annual Trans Nzoia wrestling championships.

As the four of us entered the stadium that day, some of the young boys quickly rushed to my host, Eric Walucho’s side. Dressed in a crisp Kenyan flag athletic shirt with a whistle and stopwatch slung around his neck, Walucho was both the chief architect of the tournament and Kenya’s current national wrestling team coach. Accompanying Walucho to the Kitale event were two of his Nairobi based athletes, Hollis Ochieng and Abdulahi Ibn Khalid. Ochieng and Khalid, quickly changed into their official national

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1 Earlier versions of this article were presented at Sport and Place: Sport, Identity and Community, Mansfield College, Oxford, 30 August–1 September 2014 and the African Studies Association Annual Meeting in Baltimore, 21–24 November 2013. The author would like to thank fellow panelists and conference participants for their useful comments on earlier drafts of this article. Most of the data for this article was collected during ten weeks of field research in Kenya in May–June 2011 and 2013. Archival research at the Kenya National Archives in Nairobi was mixed with participant observation of wrestling practices at the Ruiru and Naivasha prisons along with interviews with athletes and staff associated with the Kenya Prisons Team, Kivuli Bulls, and Sports for Youth Development Initiative in Nairobi. Additional interviews were conducted in Trans Nzoia, Bungoma, Kisumu, and Kakamega counties. Other data draws on my previous research on the construction of ethnicity among the Luo community in western Kenya.

2 Trans Nzoia was a district in Rift Valley Province until a new constitution adopted in 2010 did away with the old colonial-based provincial system and created forty-seven counties, each with a governor and county legislature. Kitale became the new county seat of government during the implementation of the new constitution in 2013.
team singlets and were instructed by Walucho to take the competitors through a routine of drills I had first seen inside the walls of a Nairobi prison. As Walucho, Ochieng, and Khalid introduced the athletes to a hybrid set of rules for this particular tournament, an average spectator would have never known that the three were not just wrestlers, but also officers within the Kenyan prison department.³

As one of several sponsored sports, the Kenyan prisons department has been the nation’s principle patron for aspiring Freestyle and Greco-Roman wrestlers since the 1980s. With a home base at the Ruiru Prison Staff Training College (PSTC) on the outskirts of Nairobi and through other active clubs at several penitentiaries throughout the country, a small cadre

³ In an effort to blend the rules from local wrestling styles with those of Olympic Freestyle, Walucho instituted a hybrid set of rules for the tournament. In local styles, the first “takedown” usually ends the match. However Walucho employed a best two out of three takedowns or a fall to win the match, to encourage longer bouts where younger participants would have a number of chances to win. Takedowns were awarded via conventional Freestyle scoring rules with the wrestler having to demonstrate “control” in taking the opponent from a standing position to the ground. Walucho officiated all matches.
of roughly forty to sixty prison guards are given release time to train with coaches associated with the Kenya Amateur Wrestling Association (KAWA).\textsuperscript{4} Confining behind the imposing walls of the nation’s prisons, most Kenyans have little exposure to the country’s wrestling program. This relative obscurity poses some challenges to Walucho’s efforts to promote the sport across the country. The 2013 Trans Nzoia championships represents a recent grassroots effort to address this issue. Since 2011, Walucho has partnered with several local NGOs and wrestling clubs to stage a number of exhibitions of “traditional” wrestling in Nairobi, Mombasa and parts of western Kenya. Mixing the rules of Olympic Freestyle with regional styles from western Kenya and south Sudan, Walucho and others support a neotraditional resurgence of indigenous wrestling in Kenya, as a way to both preserve the past and market the sport to a new generation of athletes.\textsuperscript{5} From NGOs using wrestling to focus on youth development, to Nairobi’s Nubian community promoting the sport as a source of ethnic/national pride, indigenous styles have seen a revival in popularity over the past several years.\textsuperscript{6} These outdoor events need little more than a tuft of soft grass and willing competitors, overcoming the significant obstacle that there are only four known official wrestling mats in the country.\textsuperscript{7} From the beach in Mombasa and outdoor cafes in Nairobi, to public sports grounds in Kitale, these free public events provide Walucho and others a chance to discuss the sport with the wider community, highlighting how wrestling was a popular local sport in the past and asking the rhetorical question “why shouldn’t wrestling be popular today.”\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{4} Interviews with Eric Walucho and Anthony Karuiki (Secretary of KAWA), Nairobi, June 2011.

\textsuperscript{5} For more on the ways wrestling fits into cultural productions of identity, see: Matthew Carotenuto, “Grappling With the Past: Wrestling and Performative Identity in Kenya,” \textit{International Journal of the History of Sport} 30–16 (2013), 1889–1902. Kenya’s neotraditional adaptation of wrestling is in the early stages of development. While the scale and scope of these efforts have yet to captivate widespread public attention they do resemble similar efforts to rebrand traditional sport with a commercial and cultural appeal. See: Birgit Kravietz, “Prelude to Victory in Neo-Traditional Turkish Oil Wrestling: Sense Perceptions, Aesthetics and Performance,” \textit{The International Journal of the History of Sport} 31–4 (2014), 445–458.


\textsuperscript{7} Kenya National Team Assistant Coach Linus Masheti, Naivasha, 27 May 2013.

\textsuperscript{8} Walucho, introductory remarks at the Trans Nzoia Wrestling Championships, Kitale, 23 May 2013.
Often confined behind the walls of Kenya’s prisons, this small but vibrant wrestling program provides an interesting case study in the ways East Africans re-imagine amateur sporting traditions of the distant past and how they fit within a national sports program focused primarily on garnering medals and cash prizes abroad. Offering a contemporary window into the historic state patronage and control of sport, informant testimonies and the archival record are filtered through a long standing view of sport primarily as a means for social control, economic advancement and international prestige. Refashioning indigenous martial traditions into a national sports program dominated by soccer politics and distance running expertise also demonstrates how the Kenyan state has blurred the lines between grassroots amateurism and professional sport within the controlling arm of the nation’s security forces. Rooted in the colonial marginalization of indigenous sports like wrestling, the postcolonial control and professionalization of sport within Kenya’s prisons department reveals a number of continuities with the colonial past. From the use of sport as a pacifying moral force for the youth, to the legacy of the colonial education and criminal justice systems, the last century of Kenyan sport history can be seen broadly as an effort by the state to centralize and control sporting activities across the country, often stifling grassroots efforts to promote activities at the local level.

**Locating Indigenous Sport Histories**

The historiography of indigenous sports in Africa reflects the historic decline in popularity of wrestling in Kenya. As Africans have widely embraced colonial imports such as soccer, scholars have focused much of their attention on the local adaptations of these global games across the continent’s colonial and postcolonial past. Consequently, African sport histories are dominated by accounts of soccer, rugby, and a few other colonial imports. Due in part to the significance of the 2010 World Cup, studies of South African sport is a major focus of the historiography with sport histories of East Africa representing a small but emerging field of social history. While indigenous sport

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has not captured wide attention in scholarly literature, wrestling has long held a place in the popular imaginations of African writers with oral traditions and early ethnographic studies referencing the popularity of the sport throughout many parts of the continent.

Popular accounts and historical memories often crown wrestlers as romanticized moral guardians of patriarchal tradition, yet few scholars have adequately explored the sport’s social and political history beyond a reverence within ethnographic coverage of the preccolonial past. In Kenya, narratives of wrestling and other indigenous games from the past can be found within the local canon of the amateur “patriotic past” where leisure activities are intimately linked to the performance and preservation of identity. Often produced during a time of social upheaval and change in the colonial era, indigenous leisure traditions are employed in this literature to document, preserve and promote a partisan historical narrative with a specific audience and goal in mind. Read through this lens, indigenous sport histories represent more than a window into romanticized traditions of the “precolonial past,” and show how indigenous games both infused local adaptations of colonial imports and were employed as a discursive strategy allowing for cultural and individual expression under the controlling gaze of colonial authority. These ideas are well established in the historiography of ethnicity, but scholars have too often refracted indigenous sport


primarily through histories of colonial hegemony and the contemporary supremacy of imported games. Consequently, nuanced discussion of “indigeneity” has been confined behind work that focuses mainly on the Africanization of soccer and a colonial legacy where wrestling and other local games were frequently marginalized within the historical record.

The rules of indigenous styles of wrestling differ widely across the region. Informants from western Kenya all noted that wrestling was a competitive and typically male event. As a match began, wrestlers whose competitive careers and/or personal memories date back to the 1930s and 1940s recalled that athletes typically worked to take their opponent from a standing position to the ground using a variety of techniques associated with modern Olympic Freestyle or Greco-Roman forms of the sport. With the first “takedown” winning the match, bouts varied in length, and informants often described or even demonstrated with great enthusiasm nuanced techniques from their athletic past. From spectacular throws to leg attacks which I first encountered as a youth wrestler in upstate New York, the stories and sometimes physical encounters with wrestling’s Kenyan past captivated both my professional and personal attachment to sport history. However it was not until an octogenarian informant attempted to literally throw me to the ground while demonstrating a technique outside his rural Western Kenyan home that I realized that my own background and history with wrestling played a precarious role throughout the research process.

As a former wrestler and coach, I have had the pleasure to both grapple with my Kenyan colleagues and wrestle with the challenge of conducting research on an indigenous tradition pushed to the far periphery of the written historical record. Within the official archive, indigenous games and leisure activities were either dismissed or more often ignored by colonial authorities. After independence, officials seemed to wilfully inherit the colonial legacy of viewing indigenous sporting tradition as a primitive impediment to notions of Kenyan modernity. As a result, the official record leaves little room for direct analysis, pushing a historian interested primarily in the sport’s indigenous past far beyond the archive stacks. Where the archival record is lacking, glimpses of wrestling’s past can be found within colonial newspapers, amateur histories, and through the memory of informants who came of age during the sports decline in the late colonial era.

Approaching this research as both a cultural “outsider” but fellow wrestling “insider,” I often found myself balancing the role of a historian with that of an occasional volunteer coach and struggling athlete. By participating in wrestling practices at the Ruiru prison, or helping to coach

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at youth a clinic in Kitale, my presence was interpreted first and foremost as a that of a player/coach and a researcher as an afterthought at best. At first, this provided a methodological challenge; how can one keep a level of historical objectivity when literally engaged in physical combat with many of your informants? However, as much as historians of religion might be interpreted locally as theologians or scholars of musicology as musicians, crafting contemporary sport histories of Kenya can often blur the methodological line between athletic participant observation, sports reporting, and social history.15

The vague lines between being viewed as a scholar and practitioner initially concerned me. I came to realize later that Kenyan interpretation of my role on and off the wrestling mat reflected not just the aspirations of athletes, but were filtered through a distinct historical framework which has shaped the way both indigenous traditions and global games are interpreted in contemporary Kenya. Through the window of contemporary events, this article takes a wide historical look at the impact of colonial marginalization of community based wrestling and explores the impact of a professional version of the sport which re-emerged inside the walls of Kenya’s prison system. Placing these “prison games” within Kenya’s contemporary sports landscape reveals that the legacy of over a century of state patronage and control of sport is reflected not only in the archival record, but in the memories of four generations of wrestlers from Western Kenya who spoke about the cultural, economic and political role of sport in ways that mirrored the evolving colonial and postcolonial state view.

**Wrestling with State Confinement**

Informants from Western Kenya still remember the waning years of wrestling’s popularity during the peak of colonial occupation. Joshua Ananygu recalled attending village wrestling matches in Bungoma in the early 1940s where community teams were pitted against each other in front of large crowds during the harvest season where prizes of cattle and great social prestige were at stake.16 Others recalled less prolific but equally important encounters with the sport’s indigenous past. James Osogo spoke of long hours spent testing adolescent masculinity in the Lake Victoria hinterland of the

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15 The notion of positionality within African sports histories is an underdeveloped element in the current historiography. For recent studies that more overtly address this issue, see, for instance: Manase Chiweshe, “One of the Boys: Female Fans’ Responses to the Masculine and Phallocentric Nature of Soccer Stadiums in Zimbabwe,” *Critical African Studies* 6–2/3 (2014), 211–222; Marc Fletcher, “‘These Whites Never Come to Our Game. What Do They Know About Our Soccer?’ Soccer Fandom, Race, and the Rainbow Nation in South Africa,” PhD dissertation, University of Edinburgh (Edinburgh, 2012).

1930s and 1940s. By grappling with age mates during his colonial youth spent herding goats and cattle, he argued that “I grew into a man from those days spent wrestling (...) the older boys would teach us the rules of fighting and how to show respect to your opponent. These are rules which I carried with me long after I stopped wrestling.”

Multiple informants regaled me with vivid stories of the sport’s glorious rural past during the first half of the twentieth century, while also lamenting the rapid decline in popularity since the 1950s. Snippets from the colonial record confirm local concerns of wrestling decline in the late colonial era. However, as documents contained at the Kenya national archive do not elaborate on the rural prominence of indigenous wrestling as in oral testimonies, they do reveal a broader history of state patronage and control of sport that spans the colonial and postcolonial era. Analyzing the state discourse of sport beginning in the colonial period shows how an unofficial sports policy privileged the promotion of European games within a strictly controlled and disciplined national program.

Understanding the decline of community based wrestling and shift towards the professionalization of the sport within Kenya’s security forces lies in the contested role that sport played in the region’s colonial past. Here the well documented “disciplining” role of sport and other state or mission-sponsored leisure activities throughout colonial Africa applies directly to Kenya and offers a way to understand how local martial traditions such as wrestling did not fit into a sports policy based on social discipline, political obedience, and notions of “muscular Christianity.” Discussed at the very top of the colonial administration, the role of sport within the civilizing mission was noted as early as the 1920s to be essential in allaying “discontent and premature political agitations.”

As the Chief Native Commissioner continued to argue in his 1923 annual report: “In Africa, as elsewhere, particularly amongst semi-civilized peoples, the development of healthy games has been of first rate political importance.” The “healthy games” mentioned by the Chief Native Commissioner rarely considered

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17 James Osogo, Nairobi, 11 June 2011.
discussions of sports suitable for the African masses outside of British styles of soccer and athletics, with little reference to wrestling as one of the imported colonial traditions aimed at African audiences.

Prior to the 1920s, professional versions of wrestling were popular throughout Europe and there is some evidence in the colonial record to suggest the white settler population carried this interest to East Africa.22 In the settler dominated *East African Standard*, there are several references to professional wrestling events in Nairobi as well as reporting on popular international matches in Europe and the United States.23 In a 1912 display of European indigenous styles, the Caledonian Society of Nairobi put on a rare segregated display of Cumberland wrestling from the Scottish borderlands.24 Other references in the colonial press note the popularity of wrestling among the South Asian population in East Africa’s urban centers. Descriptions of “Indian Wrestling” in the media fell on the same page as other white settler events, noting large crowds of nearly 1,000 spectators and the intercultural appeal of wrestling among the immigrant colonial settler population.25

As important sites of intercultural exchange and performance of Caledonian or South Asian cultural identity in a growing cosmopolitan colonial capital, there is little evidence to show how African audiences may have interacted with wrestling’s imported traditions. There is also no indication to suggest any meaningful intercultural competitions or exchanges between imported and African styles of the sport in the early colonial era. Within the colonial record, local indigenous sports such as wrestling either

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23 These brief references include discussions of both professional “Catch-Wrestling” and Olympic styles.

24 “The Coming Sports,” *The East African Standard* (27 June 1912). It should be noted that wrestling (beyond the professional theatrical variety) was not a very popular game in early twentieth century Britain, as scholars have noted that the peak of interest in competitive wrestling was the early nineteenth century. Thus, it is quite plausible that the vast majority of colonial officials had little experience or interest with the competitive styles of sport from the British Isles. Some scholars have noted a regional popularity of Cumberland, Westmorland, and Cornish styles of the sport in interwar Britain. See, for instance: Christopher Johns, *Cheer Like Mad for Cornwall: The Story of Cornish Wrestling* (St. Austen: Johns, 1995); Guy Jaouen, “Transforming Cornish and Devon Wrestling (Britain) and Gouren (Brittany-France) Through Sportification,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 31–4 (2014), 474–491.

did not interest colonial officials or more importantly were not sites where foreign expertise could reinforce colonial hegemony over inexperienced African athletes. Relegated to “side shows” during official celebrations such as Empire Day, exhibitions of indigenous games were sometimes displayed as curious displays of native primitivism in ways that reinforced the rigid and often violent racial hierarchy of colonial Kenya. For example in 1911, the schedule of events for the coronation celebrations of King George V in Mombasa included an exhibition of Baganda Wrestling alongside other racially segregated competitions for African adults, which included a “fancy dress parade” and “pillow fighting.” Even by the 1930s, Empire Day celebrations still included segregated sports competitions for European, Arab/African and Indian athletes with the latter two competing in events such as “tug of war,” “sack races,” and “bow and arrow” competitions.

Outside of the subordinate events at official celebrations of colonial hegemony, indigenous sports are virtually absent from the Kenyan colonial record. However, the enthusiasm and popularity for wrestling in the region is confirmed in amateur histories penned by African authors chronicling the patriotic past of their imagined ethnic communities as early as the late 1930s. For instance, in Jomo Kenyatta’s famous 1938 political ethnography Facing Mount Kenya, he places local sport within a description of gendered

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education and initiation. In a clear effort to fashion Kikuyu as a traditionally moral yet modern political identity he defines youth sport as a generational “rehearsal prior to the performance of activities which are the serious business of all members of the Gikuyu Tribe. Running and wrestling are very common and the best performer in these activities is marked out for leadership.”

Brief ethnographic descriptions such as this can be viewed as evidence of the importance of sport within precolonial social and political systems. They also represent the ways leisure traditions were employed in African constructions of ethnicity during the colonial era.

Even as African authors like Kenyatta wrote of the prevalence of indigenous games, the official governing bodies for sport within colonial Kenya never recognized or promoted local traditions such as wrestling. Formed in the 1920s, the Arab and African Sports Association (AASA) was the principle government body charged with promoting and controlling sport for Kenya’s colonial subjects. As an association dominated by European settlers and missionaries, AASA exclusively worked to expand athletics, soccer and other European sports in ways that “promoted physical and social well-being” where actual competitions and sporting events were “only incidental to the main object.” Summarizing the discourse of decades of debate on the value of European sports for Africans, officials frequently encouraged the development of African sports mainly for the purposes of promoting social and political discipline. As one district welfare officer noted in 1948 “it must be remembered that street corner politicians are rarely (except mentally) long jumpers. These [sports] clubs band the better types of youngster together.”

Wrestling’s decline is linked in part to its exclusion within the official colonial sports program. It is also tied to the tense political climate of the struggle for independence in the 1940s and 1950s. For many within the colonial bureaucracy, African sport in the post-war era continued to be viewed somewhat naively as a pacifying force used to combat political resistance. In 1948 the Chief Native Commissioner stressed: “[I]t is necessary

to make every effort, particularly at present time, to occupy the minds and bodies of young Africans, otherwise they tend to become involved in undesirable activities which are often termed political but which really spring from lack of suitable spare-time activities.36 Discussions such as these were linked to ideas of even stricter control over African leisure time in the post-war era. Perhaps fearful of the potential danger of indigenous martial traditions such as wrestling posed, Joshua Ananygu recalled being severely scolded by his European headmaster when attempting to stage a traditional wrestling match at his Western Kenyan primary school in the early 1950s. As he argued, the headmaster did not like the “rebelliousness wrestling instilled” during the tense political climate of the post-war era.37

By the 1950s colonial sports officers were in place throughout the country promoting sport as a way to combat the political upheavals caused by the violence of Mau Mau and Kenya’s growing struggle for independence. Officials noted that soccer had emerged as the most popular sport among Africans, particularly for migrant workers who formed clubs in towns and on settler farms throughout the country. As the Provincial Commissioner for Coast Province noted during Kenya’s state of emergency in 1957, soccer has filled the “vacuum left by the abandonment of many traditional forms of entertainment (...) there is little doubt that this has helped to dispel boredom and to foster an active interest in healthy recreation.”38 While a full investigation of sport and the struggle for Kenyan independence has yet to be explored by scholars, informants confirm that the tense years of the state of emergency and the growing strategy of labor migration for young men, simply left “few wrestlers to be found” in the traditional rural sports grounds of Western Kenya.39

Wrestling and other indigenous games by the late 1950s were certainly not encouraged by the colonial state and were overtaken in popularity by the Africanization of soccer.40 Not all Africans fully embraced this change as ethnic associations such as the Luo Union saw the exclusion of wrestling in the colonial sports program as a threat to notions of cultural identity and represented a population that supported indigenous games during a period of colonial decline. However, their efforts towards the end of colonial rule reflect the intergenerational decline in wrestling’s popularity. Given that ethnic associations like the Luo Union were often encouraged

37 Joshua Ananygu, Bungoma, 26 May 2013.
38 Kenya National Archives, DC/LAMU/2/11/10, “PC Coast to DC Lamu,” 18 April 1957.
due to their efforts to control youth and curb “immoral” behavior, they provided one of the few forums in colonial discourse where indigenous sport was openly debated. For instance in 1958 the Luo Union put on a display of traditional wrestling in Kisumu with the backing of the provincial commissioner because, as they argued, “young people tend to dislike these tribal games and dances, and therefore the underlying element is to revive them.”

Colonial records and contemporary memories point to a number of factors in explaining the decline of indigenous sports like wrestling in colonial Kenya. While the fear of wrestling as a “dangerous” element may have been fostered during the Mau Mau State of Emergency, there is little definitive documentary evidence to suggest a conclusive reason for wrestling’s fade from public popularity. Efforts such as the Luo Union’s cultural festivals of the 1950s were part of community based wrestling’s waning attempts to cultivate grassroots support in the late colonial period. After 1958, wrestling virtually vanished in the official record before re-emerging through the Olympic styles of sport within the Kenyan security forces and postcolonial sports apparatus in the 1970s. By emphasising strict centralized control, the postcolonial Kenyan state prioritized the development of international Olympic and professional prowess in popular European sports, with the patriotic cultural renaissance many felt for indigenous games left out of official policy. Thus the transition from community based wrestling to state sponsored confinement within the prison department reflects a number of continuities between colonial and postcolonial sports policy in Kenya, posing a challenge for contemporary efforts to promote the sport at the local level.

**Sport History Behind Bars**

Eric Walucho’s path from his rural western Kenyan youth to become Kenya’s current head national team coach reflects the deeper history of the prison department’s focus on physical aptitude and patronage of sport rooted in the colonial past. When Walucho entered the prison department as a recruit in 1995, he was one of the few selected out of hundreds of applicants during a regional competition for the coveted government post. He remembered competing in a series of physical tests against a number of other finalists during a daylong selection processes in Busia and argues that it was his speed, strength and raw athletic ability that gave him the

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edge during the recruiting process. Upon enrolling at the PSTC in Ruiru, he was then introduced to Olympic Freestyle and Greco-Roman wrestling as part of the physical training regime within the nine month training program for new prison warders. Since Walucho had grown up in a former hotbed of wrestling in western Kenya, he was exposed to a local traditional style of wrestling by his father and uncles during his youth in the 1970s and 1980s. However, when he spoke of his early origins in the sport, he admitted that he did not initially share same reverence for the traditional competitions as recounted to him by his father and grandfather, and reiterated by informants from older generations.

Given his athletic prowess and roots in the indigenous styles, he quickly excelled in Freestyle and Greco-Roman, eventually competing for Kenya at international competitions such as the All-Africa and Commonwealth Games. Upon graduation, Walucho moved into what was by then a well-established system of patronage within the prison department and other branches of Kenya’s security forces. Elite athletes in sports such as (track and field) athletics, volleyball, soccer, boxing, and wrestling are given release time for their official duties as prison warders to train in their given sport while still collecting their salaries as prison warders, police, and/or members of the military. Promoted to be the National team coach in 2006, Walucho has risen to the rank of Sergeant in the prison department and now runs the most active Olympic style wrestling club in the country at the PSTC in Ruiru.43

Walucho’s experience with wrestling inside the prison department reflects a deeper historic connection with colonial policy and the preference to place martial arts under the patronage of the state and viewed as a form of “military sport.” For instance as early as 1905, “wrestling on horseback” was referred to in colonial discourse as a “military sport” during Gymkhana exhibitions for the settler community throughout the Eastern and Southern Africa.44 “Wrestling on horseback” became a popular part of military training for British troops during the First World War, and there is some evidence to suggest that African teams from the Kings African Rifles took part in displays of “native (Baganda) wrestling” during celebrations of the end of the war in Kampala.45 These early references suggest an intimate connection between sport and military service. However, scholars have noted that by the Second World War, British colonial armies throughout the continent

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helped to spread popular British games but did not officially incorporate indigenous traditions such as wrestling.\textsuperscript{46}

Within the Kenya Prisons Department, by the 1930s sport was noted to be part of the training regimes of both European and African staff members with inmates included in sports activities by the early 1940s.\textsuperscript{47} Initially it was argued that sport had a positive impact on the work of prison employees with the commissioner of the prisons J.L. Willcocks noting in his 1935 annual report that:

\begin{quotation}
\((\ldots)\) a desirable \textit{esprit de corps} is fostered by the European staff of the larger prisons especially in the matter of soccer. The Nairobi Prison warders’ team, at the time of writing, holds second place in the Police Shield League, \((\ldots)\) and all matches have been well attended by the warder staff. The institution of warders recreations rooms at Nairobi and Kisumu Prisons during the year has proved a great success.\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quotation}

Reports throughout the 1930s and 1940s continued to praise the expansion of sport and leisure activities for prison warders.\textsuperscript{49} And by the late 1950s participation by prison employees in soccer, golf, snooker, boxing, and tennis was often noted in annual reports and other prison publications. As Tim Stapleton demonstrates among African police officers in colonial Southern Rhodesia, prison warders in Kenya were also avid sports enthusiasts, with several pages of the \textit{Kenya Prison Staff Magazine} devoted to sports reporting, highlighting the accomplishments of prison officers across the colony.\textsuperscript{50}

Sports were initially promoted for only the prison staff, as early discussions of inmate rehabilitation through leisure activities were deemed peripheral in a system that frequently employed corporal punishment, withheld food


\textsuperscript{49} Kenya National Archives, \textit{The Kenya Prisons Annual Reports 1936–1945}.

and shackled inmates for minor offences. In a system which also sought to exploit inmate labor for commercial/strategic gain, sports were introduced first to simply help “productivity.” For instance the 1940 department annual report argued that:

Owing to the increased demands for prison labor on work of national importance, it has not yet been possible to organize any system under this heading except for those prisoners continuously employed in the tailors’ workshop. These men now enjoy half an hour’s soccer on working days and the results have been entirely satisfactory. Output has increased and discipline has improved.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, sport and leisure opportunities for inmates increased and were expanded to juvenile homes and detention camps. By 1960 the prison annual report noted: “Soccer, volleyball and other outdoor games were encouraged (…) with obvious improvement in prisoners’ morale.” And in 1961 a report even highlighted a combined prisoner/staff soccer team that managed fourth place in the Kisumu municipal league.

Sports discourse focused primarily on the accolades of prison officers which points to the origins of the professionalization of sport within the prison department. For instance by the late 1950s boxing was one of the principle sports the Kenya Prisons Department sponsored which provides a colonial link to the martial traditions of contemporary training and patronage of other martial arts such as wrestling. First mentioned as an activity promoted among juvenile remand prisoners, the 1959 annual report noted that Wamumu, a detention camp opened for juvenile Mau Mau detainees, had “specialized in boxing,” bringing home three first place and two runner up trophies in the colony wide championships.

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As a point of pride among prison officials, the Kenya Prisons Department supported a number of professional boxers employed as prison warders, including Mwangi Mugo who represented Kenya in the 1962 Commonwealth Games.\(^\text{56}\)

During the transition to independence there was a great deal of discussion about the need to reform the prison department generally, most notably after the harsh detainment and deplorable conditions of the Mau Mau camps.\(^\text{57}\) However, postcolonial control of Kenya’s penitentiaries reflect more continuity than change, with officials arguing for instance that doing away with such techniques as using corporal punishment to inflict a “sharp and salutary shock to young louts would be a most retrograde and ill-advised step.”\(^\text{58}\) While some punitive measures of corporal punishment were maintained, the postcolonial state did invest in the training of prison warders, establishing the Prison Staff Training College in 1964 to both physically train warders but also instill them with a “knowledge of the basic principles of the behavioral sciences.”\(^\text{59}\)

Courses at the PTSC included martial arts training, with judo and boxing introduced into the formal curriculum by 1970. The Kenya Prison Sports Association was also formed in 1970 to “promote the coordination and control of all amateur sports and athletics within the Kenya Prison Service and to provide recreational facilities for members of the Association.”\(^\text{60}\) Like their colonial counterparts, Kenyan officials continued to promote sport for prison staff and to a lesser extent among the inmate population. Continuing a trend towards rewarding success and focusing on creating a class of professional athletes within the prison department, officials boasted openly about sport and even devoted roughly 10-15 percent of the department’s annual reports to sports reporting throughout the 1970s.

The professionalization of sport within the prison department was also expanded and fit well with Kenya’s vision to use sport in establishing a global reputation after independence. By 1966 the National Sports Council (NSC) emerged as the postcolonial counterpart to the former AASA, inheriting much of the same focus on controlling sport through centralized


government channels. As the NCS advocated for centralized control, the newly independent government was keen to establish itself on the global stage. In a speech given at the first meeting of Kenya’s new sport governing body, a representative from the Kenyatta government argued, “The liberation of the continent of Africa has created a new dimension in world affairs. And this is as true in sport as it is in international politics or economic institutions.” For the newly independent government, this idea translated into a focus on international success in established European sporting traditions such as soccer and athletics, with large portions of government revenue reserved for just a few chosen imports from the colonial era.

With emphasis placed on international success in athletics, boxing, volleyball and soccer, the prison department continued a colonial tradition of supporting the expansion and commodification of imported games by the state. By the early 1980s other martial arts were formally adopted within the prison department during a boom in sports expansion as Kenya prepared to host the 1987 All-Africa games in Nairobi. With large investments made to expand sports infrastructure, such as Nairobi’s Kasarani Sports complex, there was a national push to ensure that Kenya performed well at the 1987 games. This translated into increased funding for more peripheral sports such as wrestling. A number of former wrestlers within the prison department noted that this was a high-point for wrestling in the country, as new mats were procured from Europe and clubs were sponsored at several army barracks and at the headquarters of the National Youth Service in Nairobi. However, unlike colonial organizations such as the Luo Union which called for a return to “traditional” sports and games during Kenya’s struggle for independence, wrestling only received official support through the global Olympic styles of Freestyle and Greco-Roman with Romanian coaches brought in to conduct clinics for wrestlers within the prison department. By 1987, the investment in wrestling’s expansion paid off with Kenya winning one silver and three bronze medals during the 1987 All-Africa games in Nairobi.

61 Carotenuto “Grappling with the Past,” 1895–1896.
62 Kenya National Archives, QB/20/15 – W.N. Munoko Assistant Minister of Housing and Social Services (7 January 1966).
63 For instance, within the records of the National Sports Council nearly ¾ of all expenditures were devoted to soccer by the early 1970s. See, for instance: Kenya National Archives, AAT/5/8, “National Sports Council 1970–1974.”
64 For instance the National Sports council began issuing a series of “special expense grants” to various sports associations in the run up to the All-Africa Games, however the dominance of athletics and soccer persisted. For instance in 1984 to wrestling received 43,165 KSh whereas Athletics received 881,584 and Soccer 725,036 out of a total of 2,925,588 KSh given to various governing bodies. See: Kenya National Archives, AAT/5/11, “Kenya National Sports Council 1983–1986.”
65 Linus Masheti, Naivasha, May 2013.
With most of the national team drawn from the Kenya prisons staff, this success solidified the place of wrestling within the Kenya prisons sports program.\(^{67}\)

Kenya’s prison department remains today as one of the principle patrons of Kenyan sport on a global stage and continues to boast of its historic role, with the chairman noting on the association’s website:

Kenya Prisons Service is a power house in sports since the times of independence having produced World and Olympic sports personalities in different fields ranging from Athletics, volleyball, boxing, Judo and Karate among others. Great names like Catherine Ndereba, Ben Jipcho, Amos Biwott, Lukas Kibet, Hellen Chepnengo and even Isaiah Kiplagat the current AK President and IAAF council member have all been members of the Kenya Prisons Service. The Kenya prisons women volleyball team is the only club in the world to feature in the world volleyball club championship in three consecutive times.\(^{68}\)

Supported in part by a two hundred shilling monthly contribution from all staff members, the prisons sports program serves to not only support elite athletes but also train warders for the physical skills needed in their day to day work behind the walls of the nation’s penitentiaries. When asked why wrestling was part of the official training program for new recruits, the commandant of the PSTC argued that wrestling and other martial arts equips warders with valuable skills in physical restraint and self-defence, often needed in a prison system known for its high levels of violence and history as a sight of both judicial confinement and political detention and torture.\(^{69}\)

Focused primarily on prison officers, sports are also part of the notion of rehabilitation for prisoners. Several of the wrestlers training at the PSTC who work at the neighboring Kamiti maximum security prison noted that opportunities for inmates to occasionally play soccer and volleyball helped calm tensions and worked to mediate personal disputes without violence. The prison department even occasionally sponsors inter-prison competitions among several of Nairobi’s penitentiaries.\(^{70}\) However, when I asked

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\(^{70}\) Abdul Ibn Khalid and John Mburu, Ruiru, May 2013.
the commandant of one of Nairobi’s prisons if wrestling was among the
activities promoted within the inmate population, he dismissed this pos-
sibility with a cautionary remark. In a prison system often criticized for
its widespread use of corporal punishment and poor living conditions
for inmates, the commandant noted that inmates were incarcerated for
punitive purposes and should not undergo martial arts training as they
might “feel empowered to try out their new skills on the warders.”71

Prison Games, Local Championships, and Neotraditional Sport

As a historian of Kenya’s colonial past, visiting prisons such as Naivasha
and Ruiru offered a rare glimpse into a part of Kenya’s government appa-
ratus few researchers venture into. Admittedly I entered with a biased
view of Kenya’s prison culture, which focused on its connection to a his-
tory of political repression dating back to the colonial era. Thus, I was
surprised to pass through the gates of the Ruiru Prison outside of Nairobi
to see children on their way to a primary school within the prison walls
and inmates in striped uniforms working independently on the manic-
cured grounds of the sprawling facility complete with sports grounds and
a large commercial farm. Getting research clearance as a historian inter-
ested in the more nefarious past of Kenya’s penal system would have been
difficult, yet through the lens of sport I was welcomed through the gates
of several of Kenya’s prisons. Interacting with Kenya’s prison warders in
2011 and 2013 was initially a chance to simply witness the wrestling pro-
gram first hand. I came to realize later, that the way I was received and
how my role was interpreted, reflected not just a healthy scepticism of the
agenda of foreign researcher but was filtered through the ways Kenyans
have been historically socialized to view sport. With a historic state empha-
sis on promoting international success in Olympic styles, Ruiru’s young
prison athletes were initially indifferent about the sport’s indigenous
past. Their focus was on representing Kenya abroad, with little connection
to the traditional styles or cultural importance remembered and imagined
far beyond the prison walls.

In a converted classroom at the PSTC, the wrestling team practices
in the same facility as other martial arts programmes such as judo and
karate. When I entered the facility, changed into my wrestling shoes,
and stepped on the mat, wrestlers were initially hesitant to interact with
me even as an official guest of their coach. However, once I began going
through the drills and practicing techniques with my Kenyan counter-
parts, the shared experience of our athletic backgrounds allowed for
discussions on a number of important issues. On the wrestling mat,
my gender and athletic background in this very male space trumped the

71 PSTC Commandant Daniel Mutua, Ruiru, 23 June 2011.
cultural difference sparked by nationality and race as the intimate experience of martial arts training helped to quickly break down cultural barriers.\textsuperscript{72}

In 2011 and 2013, none of the twenty plus athletes training full-time in Ruiru had experience with “traditional” forms of wrestling in their youth. Even Walucho noted that wrestling was rare when he was growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, and few wrestlers knew about traditional forms of the sport as young athletes, with most being introduced to wrestling for the first time during their training as recruits at the PSTC. For Kenya’s current generation of elite wrestlers the sport did not initially represent some way to resurrect a nostalgic indigenous past. Unlike informants from older generations, their thoughts and aspirations were more pragmatic and focused on how the state has historically viewed sport since the colonial era. For these prison guards, gaining a spot in the department’s elite athlete program offers a chance for professional advancement. Like other elite athlete programs in the Kenyan police and armed forces that include many of Kenya’s most successful professional athletes, the Kenya prisons wrestlers are focused on working to represent Kenya abroad at international competitions. While the cash prizes for international wrestling competitions pale in comparison to the lucrative circuit for long distance runners, simply gaining a spot on the national team often comes with lucrative allowances and cash incentives for winning performances provided by the state.\textsuperscript{73}

This historic institutional and state focus on international success and prestige in established global traditions influenced Kenya’s current generation of wrestlers to see my role first as a foreign “expert” who might be able to help them advance. Wrestlers often asked me about techniques embodied by American champion wrestlers and if their counterparts in the U.S. were as wealthy as professional basketball players. I was clear to let them know I was certainly no “expert,” and that U.S. amateur wrestling resembled nothing of the flamboyance or lucrative pay checks of the more theatrical “pro-wrestling.” I was nevertheless viewed first as a coach/athlete, perhaps second as a sports reporter, and a distant third as a historian. It is not surprising that the nuances of academic research into the social history of sport were of only marginal interest to these prison warders.

\textsuperscript{72} Even though there were a few female wrestlers at the PSTC, it was still a male dominated space and as other scholars have noted, the positionality of certain sport constituents can greatly impact the research process. See: Richard Giulianotti, “Participant Observation and Research into Football Hooliganism: Reflections on the Problems of Entree and Everyday Risks,” \textit{Sociology of Sport} 12–1 (1995), 1–20.

\textsuperscript{73} For instance, at the 2014 Commonwealth Games, each of Kenya’s 195 athletes reportedly received US$ 6,000 or 522,000 KSh for the twenty-four day competition in Glasgow, Scotland. See: Ayumba Ayodi, “Angry Athletes Threaten Commonwealth Games Boycott,” \textit{Daily Nation} (13 July 2014).
However, I realized later that the interpretation of my role helped to confirm a generational shift in thinking from the patriotic notions of wrestling’s precolonial and colonial past, to the economic and perhaps political applications of sport in contemporary Kenya.

As a minor sport compared to athletics and volleyball, the goal of the wrestling program within the Kenya Prisons Department has the same world and Olympic focus as Kenya’s new governing body, Sports Kenya, and the broader Kenyan state. Coaches within the wrestling program note that the continued national focus, almost exclusively on success abroad, hinders their efforts to promote wrestling at the local level with little funding and support for practice facilities and local competitions. For instance, next to the PSTC in Nairobi, the most successful club in Kenya is the Naivasha prisons team. Headed by Linus Masheti, a former teammate of Walucho, this club of prison guards at one of Kenya’s most notorious maximum security prisons practices on a thirty year old tattered mat in a small room behind the officer’s canteen and rarely gets a chance to compete outside the walls of the Naivasha prison.

The hierarchical nature of the prison system further hinders these efforts with coaches like Walucho and Masheti constantly needing to ask their superiors for permission to do anything outside the confines of the prison walls. Travelling around the prisons with them in 2013, we constantly stopped to salute and greet superiors in ways that reflected the hierarchical military tradition of the prison department culture. In 2011, when Walucho began partnering with local NGOs to stage exhibitions of traditional wrestling in Nairobi and then Mombasa and Kitale, he was first met with scepticism and limited financial support. Walucho saw these events as an important way to both market the sport outside the prison walls and get his athletes some much needed local competition. However, officials with the prison department and Kenya wrestling’s governing body, KAWA, were initially doubtful about the benefits of these types of events. With no cash prizes or international prestige at stake, exhibition bouts with local clubs promoting indigenous forms of the sport simply did not fit into the national goals of Kenya’s contemporary sports discourse.

Returning to where this paper began, the 2013 Trans Nzoia wrestling championships were one of the rare occasions where Walucho had permission to take a couple of his prison athletes beyond the gates and promote the sport among the wider public. Sponsoring a free public event for both

Hoping for clubs from Nairobi and Naivasha to join the event, Walucho was faced with the historic lack of institutional support for local competitions. With little more than a T-shirt and local pride at stake for the winners in Kitale, prison officials and KAWA showed little interest in providing financial support for wrestlers to make the two-day trip to Kitale. Thus Walucho had to supplement funding for the event with his own money. With a lack of elite clubs like the PSTC and Naivasha competing, the Trans Nzoia championships turned into a very local affair with Walucho and his two prison athletes running it as both an outreach clinic for the youth and

75 In exchange for help with translation and field research for this article, I contributed 8,000 KSh (just under 100 US $) to purchase the T-shirts to support the event, with Walucho providing the rest. Walucho paid an estimated additional 8,000-10,000 KSh to secure access to the Jomo Kenyatta sports ground and provide food, lodging, and transportation for his two Nairobi based athletes. He also bought lunch for ten to fifteen of the young athletes after the competition ended.

76 KAWA Secretary Anthony Kariuki has advocated for seeking private sponsorship for wrestling in Kenya. However as of 2013, the association relies entirely on funding from the NSC and the prison department. See: Anthony Kariuki, “Strategy to Enhance Financial Partnership Through Accountability of Sports Organization in Kenya,” unpublished manuscript, Université de Poitiers (2008).
competitive regional tournament. Mixing Olympic Freestyle techniques with rules from local indigenous styles from the past, Walucho promoted the tournament as an opportunity to both compete and learn about the sports historic glory among the local Luhya community. 77

Talking with athletes who participated in the first annual Trans Nzoia wrestling championships, many had never heard of the sport’s popularity in the past. To them, sport in Kenya was embodied by the soccer pitch and through distance running champions who are sometimes seen training in the highlands of Trans Nzoia County. Like their fellow wrestlers within the prison department, they did not see the event as primarily a connection to the sport’s indigenous past but more as an entrepreneurial economic endeavour. 78 When competitors found out that Walucho was a prison officer, a number of athletes saw this tournament as a potential audition for a job with the prisons department or viewed wrestling as an activity to sharpen their “street skills” to gain employment as guards in Kenya’s growing private security industry. 79 With unemployment rates for youth as high as sixty per cent in some regions, the interpretation of the Trans Nzoia championships as a chance to increase employment prospects was a logical conclusion for many. Further emphasizing the contemporary view of the value of the sport in relation to economic development, a 2013 editorial in the The Standard questioned why “(…) can we not make a penny from our wrestling by making it commercial? Certainly, we are not doing enough to promote the wrestling goldmine. As a country, we cannot survive on athletics and soccer alone yet we hope to create 500,000 jobs every year. Come on!” 80

Since the two day event coincided with a local professional soccer match and track meet, the hierarchy of wrestling in Kenya’s sports landscape became clear. On day one, when mere practices for a local track meet were underway, Walucho was able to use the soccer pitch to stage his opening clinic and initial rounds of the tournament. When the main competition commenced on Saturday, the tournament was relegated to a far corner of the stadium complex, as a local professional soccer match and regional track meet pushed wrestling to the periphery of local importance.

77 The tournament was broken down into two weight divisions (one over and one under 74 kgs) and two age categories (seniors and juniors). A winner was declared when one wrestler won the best two out of three takedowns/pushouts or one wrestler threw his opponent from his feet to his back for a fall. T-shirts were given to the finalists and champions in both weight/age divisions, with soda and a small snack provided to all competitors.


The spectators who came to watch the event first represented mainly friends of the competitors and curious onlookers perched on the stadium wall to avoid paying an entry fee to the soccer match. Even though wrestling was seen again as a curious “side show” to the day’s main events on the soccer pitch and the track, eventually a few dozen additional spectators from the main stands did venture over to see the wrestling competition. Some of the older spectators at the sports grounds were drawn from these events due to Walucho’s emphasis on promoting his hybrid style as a neotraditional resurgence of “traditional” wrestling. Seeing some of the younger boys learn techniques from current national team members sparked several older men to come and address the group informally. Resembling the views of informants remembering the colonial past, they emphasized not the economic benefits of sports but how they thought wrestling was a healthy activity and that the sport had traditionally taught young men discipline and the skills to defend their community in the past.

These intergenerational discussions and interpretations of the event reminded me of the colonial efforts of the Luo Union to promote “tribal games and dance” among the youth in the 1950s as well as state efforts to promote and control sport as primarily a venture to excel in imported games from the colonial era. Relegated to side-show status similar to “native sports” exhibitions from the colonial past, the historic confinement of wrestling within Kenya’s security forces provided a stark generational contrast in the interpretation of this 2013 event. For the older generations, their view of using sport as a way to promote both cultural pride but also youthful discipline, put them in a precarious partnership with both their colonial forebears and historic state discourse. Like their colonial counterparts these older spectators rejoiced in a chance to highlight the sport as a point of local cultural pride, while also agreeing with the colonial state view of using sport to contain and control sometimes “rebellious youth.”

Moving from generational attitudes to state views, martial arts coaches such as Walucho express concerns that the history of confinement behind Kenya’s prison walls limit their access to the wider public through events like the Trans Nzoia championships. For instance, lamenting this notion of history confined under the wing of Kenya’s security forces, Duncan Chemiryo of Kenya’s Judo governing body argued that: “Judo is mainly entrenched in the discipline forces as opposed to it being a civilian sport. But if we introduced it to young people, say, at eight years, by fourteen, they would be champions.” Even with these historic challenges, optimism was high in 2013 that the Kenyan state’s patronage and control of sport

would trickle down to the local level with the passing of the “Sports Act,” which argues that sport should “inculcate the sense of patriotism and national pride,” develop the tourist industry, and establish a sports academy to “serve as an international centre for excellence.” Given that sport was listed among the pillars of Kenya’s grand Vision 2030 development plan, the connections between the entrepreneurial spirit displayed by young wrestlers in Kitale and official government policy was more than simply about youth unemployment or cultural tradition. This discourse also points to the tendency for the Kenyan public to look primarily to government funding and initiative to promote amateur sport at the local level. For instance, Walucho hoped to use this new state emphasis on sport to lobby for more support for wrestling from government coffers, yet the expansion of sports activities since 2013 has reinforced the historic focus on European imported traditions.

Towards a Social History of Wrestling

The Trans Nzoia wrestling championships signifies how Kenya’s sporting past and present have historically clashed with grassroots efforts to change contemporary discourse, preserve indigenous tradition and challenge state practice. From behind the imposing walls of Kenya’s prisons, grappling with the contemporary challenges of the country’s wrestling program provides an interesting angle to explore the broader history of Kenya’s prison system, with similar opportunities available through the elite athlete programs in the police and military. The tensions between the past and present clearly impact informant testimonies but help to uncover how indigenous sport histories are often hidden by the archival record and state patronage of martial traditions. For scholars of African history, crafting a narrative of wrestling in Kenya shows the constraints and opportunities for using sport as a lens to study social history and the need to utilize a wide variety of sources outside of the traditional archive. While a definitive social history of sport in Kenya has yet to be written, the challenge of examining wrestling’s indigenous past offers further insight into the oral, written, and visual sources historians can use to examine local sporting traditions throughout much of the continent.

For scholars of colonial Africa, the patriotic narratives embodied by Kenyatta and other amateur historians offer rich alternative insight into local discourse in ways that both fill the gaps in the official record and show


84 For instance Deputy President William Ruto was recently quoted in the Kenyan press that funds would be used to support expansion of swimming and tennis facilities throughout the country. See: Elias Makori, “Ruto: State Pledge on Stadia on Track,” Daily Nation (26 December 2014).
how African authors fashioned indigenous sport to fit with the changing social landscape under colonial rule. For instance, seeing Jomo Kenyatta as both a rising politician and amateur ethnographer represents the variety of ways African intermediaries interpreted sport as valued “tradition” in the context of both national political resistance and local struggles over the contested moral boundaries of ethnic citizenship. Beyond the written works of famous political ethnographies such as *Facing Mount Kenya*, scholars have yet to adequately mine the wide variety of vernacular publications (from newspapers to amateur histories) for the ways sport and leisure filtered into debates about ethnicity, gender, and other forms of social identity. Offering a different perspective to the imperial descriptions of “native sport” in the settler dominated press, vernacular publications such as *Muigwithania* and *Ramogi* provided both a political voice to their respective ethnic communities but were also important forums for debating a variety of social issues from the 1920s through the 1950s.

Outside of these Kenyan examples, digital collections offer further insight into the potential sources available to investigate wrestling’s colonial past beyond East Africa. For instance, searching the new African collection in the Readex World Newspaper Archive, which offers “online access to more than sixty African newspapers published in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,” reveals over one hundred articles mentioning the sport of wrestling in Anglophone publications in East, West, and Southern Africa. From discussions of indigenous forms of the sport in Nigeria and the Gold Coast, to the Olympic and professional-theatrical versions among white settler populations in Rhodesia and South Africa, these sources provide an important arena for mapping the broader discourse on indigenous sport and imperialism during the initial years of colonial occupation. Complementing the written record with visual evidence, the Basel Mission archives, for instance, contains at least a dozen digitized photos of wrestling events in Cameroon and the Gold Coast, which speak to the broader ways indigenous sport was incorporated into state sponsored festivals and interpreted by a variety of colonial actors. These images reveal both athletes in

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local regalia and African officials refereeing events dressed in white suits complete with pith helmets. Thus as sights to both reinforce colonial hegemony and combat cultural change, photographic archives offer an important window for scholars of African sport to view the ways indigenous traditions clashed publically with imperial concerns.89

Moving from the colonial record to more contemporary sources, African newspapers provide an important link to the ways the sporting past was remembered and reimagined after independence. While Kenyan news outlets have overwhelmingly maintained the colonial preference for sports reporting on dominant imported traditions and global games, alternative media outlets and the growing availability of open access television and social media groups offer ripe terrain for scholars interested in more contemporary debates about indigenous sport and their neotraditional adaptations.90 Particularly rich data is available in the Senegambia regions of West Africa, where indigenous styles of wrestling draw stadium size crowds in Dakar and Banjul and athletes compete for lucrative cash prizes.91 Outside of the regions of West Africa where local styles of wrestling still enjoy widespread popularity, several examples of the sport’s neotraditional resurgence in East Africa draw historic comparisons to the patriotic narratives produced by Kenyatta and other amateur historians of the colonial past. As these “homespun” histories found a market in the local colonial printing presses in the early twentieth century, amateur historians and indigenous sport entrepreneurs in the twenty-first century are taking to social media and staging festival style celebrations of the sport’s indigenous past that are now packaged for television and online audiences.92


92 Peterson and Macola (eds.), Recasting the Past. For examples of how neotraditional forms of the sport are being imagined in the context of contemporary East Africa, see: Bamuturaki Musinguzi, “Reviving Traditional Wrestling in the Buganda Kingdom,” The East African (9 October 2011); Nehemiah Okwembah, “Cultural Festival Marks End of Easter,” Daily Nation (22 April 2014). Other visual representations are widely available via online video platforms such as youtube.com.
Even a brief survey of the wide variety of sources available on wrestling clearly indicates that scholars of sport and social history in Africa have ample opportunities to expand beyond the historiographical focus on the adaptations of global games and colonial imports across the continent. Indigenous sport histories do not need to be confined behind the historic rise in popularity of the soccer pitch or the global focus on corporate mega events like the World Cup. African forms of wrestling and other indigenous sports are on the periphery of this historiography, but are finding a contemporary niche in the corporate global world of sport governance and event production. For instance in 2004, United World Wrestling (UWW) – Olympic style wrestling’s global governing body – introduced “beach wrestling” to “bring together all the different traditional wrestling styles practiced on sand and to make them more popular worldwide.”93 This new style has yet to rival Freestyle and Greco-Roman on the world stage. Yet in 2013, the UWW sanctioned African Championships in N’Djamena (Chad) included a “Traditional Styles” division. Teams from North Africa dominated the Freestyle and Greco-Roman competitions on mat, but the outdoor stadium and sand filled wrestling grounds reportedly drew the largest crowds and highlighted local styles from West and Central Africa.94 At the intersection of global sport governance and indigenous “tradition,” events such as these are rarely examined by scholars but represent a significant point of contemporary convergence in the literature on sport and social history in Africa. As indigenous games are reimagined in the corporate world of global sport governance, both local examples from small regional events in Kenya to continental “African Championships” provide an important opportunity to interpret historical memories of the past.95 Both fans and athletes interpret and debate the “indigeneity” of these events, sparking discourse about the past which can uncover both continuities and change in the ways local sporting traditions have been remembered and reimagined within the hierarchical legacy of the colonial past.

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