

## Sport, Bodily Habitus, and the Subject(s) of the Middle East

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In his classic 1934 essay, “Les techniques du corps” (Body Techniques), the French sociologist Marcel Mauss called attention to a set of embodied practices from eating and sleeping to walking and swimming. While generally taken for granted as naturalized human aptitudes, Mauss deployed myriad examples hitherto filed under “miscellany” in the ethnographic record to demonstrate that such activities are in fact cultivated techniques that constitute the particular “habitus” of a society.<sup>1</sup> Until recently, sport had been similarly relegated to the miscellany of Middle East studies, generally garnering but passing attention or, at best, making for a fun side project for those studying ostensibly more serious matters such as sectarian conflict, nationalism, or state building. But, over the last decade or so, a new generation of scholars of and in the region has embraced the Maussian revolution and come to understand the centrality of sporting practices to the very making and unmaking of communities, nations, and states—to the constitution and contestation of the modern Middle East as we know it today.

Most apparent has been the salience of sport (and particularly football/soccer) within nationalist projects, international diplomacy, and contentious identity politics. Although, in light of the awarding of Qatar of the 2022 World Cup, much attention has focused, often in journalistic fashion,<sup>2</sup> on the political interests and economic stakes of world football, scholars have begun to trace more rigorously how soccer stadia become preeminent sites where nation-states come to be united and contested in Algeria, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Turkey, Yemen, and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Carl Rommel, for instance, ethnographically traces the centrality of Cairene football clubs such as Al-Ahly and Zamalek to competing visions of the Egyptian nation; he critically unpacks how their *ultra* supporters achieved mythical status as revolutionary subjects in the 2011 Tahrir Square occupation and the 2012 Port Said massacre.<sup>4</sup> State governments have responded with attempts to regulate the unruly violence and protean affiliations called forth by such football passions, to harness sport as a means to discipline youthful populations into national subjects. Nearly every country in the region has a ministry-level agency devoted to sport, generally also conjoined with youth affairs, indexing enduring anxieties over the capacity of postcolonial states to assimilate new generations into the national project.

Yet, as scholars have long emphasized, the instrumentalization of mega-events such as the World Cup, Olympics, Asian Games, and Mediterranean Games to shore up political regimes and perform spectacles of nationhood risk ringing hollow to jaded participant-spectators and can never entirely kill vernacular expressions of political imagination mobilized within stadia or in more private consumption settings.<sup>5</sup> More and more, women and those from marginalized ethno-religious groups have demanded inclusion in sports structures that have long been the preserve of male majorities; they have formed parallel leagues, garnered

infrastructural improvements, and altered the demography of teams and the social space of stadia.<sup>6</sup> Although some countries, including Qatar, have nominally embraced such (mostly superficial) reforms in order to publicly promote their global standing,<sup>7</sup> these openings have sometimes faced racist or misogynist backlashes. During the “black decade” of the 1990s, Algerian female runners faced death threats from Islamist militants, and Betar Jerusalem supporters continue to attack their opponents’ Palestinian players with anti-Arab invective.<sup>8</sup>

Sports, however, are more than simply a site for the spectacular enactment of contentious identity politics. Sporting practices play a central role in the constitution of gendered, classed, and ethno-religious subjects in the first place. Compelling new historical research by Wilson Chacko Jacob and Murat Yıldız has demonstrated how categories of “modern” personhood were elaborated in and through institutions of physical culture that developed transnationally across the late Ottoman Empire and the emergent independent states of Egypt, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. Egyptian effendi and Armenian and Jewish Istanbul residents cultivated modern affects and tastes through gymnastics training—identities that were simultaneously cosmopolitan and sectarian.<sup>9</sup> My own research shows how young Amazigh men in Algeria, Morocco, and the diaspora not only make explicit cultural, linguistic, and political claims on football pitches and pétanque courts but implicitly learn how to act as Amazigh through coordinated play. In the southeastern Moroccan town of Goulmima, the local football squad has modeled itself on the powerhouse Algerian professional club, the Jeunesse Sportive de Kabylie (JSK), a team that has been at the center of transnational Amazigh politics since the 1960s. Calling themselves the Jeunesse Sportive du Ksar, young men in Goulmima sport similar canary yellow jerseys emblazoned with the Tifinagh zed symbolizing freedom, and adopt the names of Kabyle cultural heroes; in any given Goulmima JSK match, there will be several Jugurthas, a couple of Masinissas, and an Idir or two on the pitch.<sup>10</sup> In donning the names and attributes of such figures of resistance and taking on local “Arab” teams, they come to embody the stance and disposition of masculine defiance central to politicized Amazigh subjectivity.

Such corporealization of gendered, classed, and ethno-religious habitus occurs in more banal forms as well, via quotidian, repetitive fitness training. Too often media pundits and secular states oppose athletic exercise to religious indoctrination, viewing in the former an antidote to so-called “radicalization” or a means to “liberate” women from cultural tradition and Islamic seclusion.<sup>11</sup> Such assumptions misrecognize the historical genealogy of global football, basketball, and cricket in colonial missionary and muscular Christian projects, as well as the ongoing intimacy between sport and evangelical movements more broadly, which likewise prioritize bodily purity, self-discipline, modesty, and moral rectitude along a strict gender binary. Physical exercise, and even competitive sports, have long been integrated into the daily practices of committed Muslims, including women, who perceive no inherent conflict between bodily exertion and piety.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as Saba Mahmood has shown, Egyptian women in the mosque movement cultivate pious agency precisely through iterative, disciplined bodily performances.<sup>13</sup> D.S. Farrer has similarly explored the consonances between Sufi mysticism and martial arts in Malaysia.<sup>14</sup> Young men in Egypt and Morocco take advantage of the exceptionality of Ramadan to play football, jog, and do physical exercise, conjoining entertainment with ascetic self-discipline and a heightened sense of moral-*cum*-bodily purity.<sup>15</sup> More religiously

committed Moroccan men build their Islamic ethical selves in homosocial settings of dojos and bodybuilding gyms, much as other upper-class Moroccans develop secular aesthetics alongside their visible bodily form in mixed-sex urban fitness centers. In both of the latter cases, athletic facilities are not just body factories but advanced technologies for self-making.

Sport thus converges pleasure and politics, ethics and aesthetics, discipline and agency. Although this may be true in any setting, the contemporary Middle East, as Tamir Sorek and Danyel Reiche have recently insisted, makes for a particularly “contested terrain where struggles over resources, meanings, and identities” shape the field of sporting practices.<sup>16</sup> More and more, scholars have turned their focus to such seemingly marginal activities, placing what had been but a miscellaneous subject of Middle Eastern studies at the center of our understanding of the region. Sporting habitus, it turns out, never only engage individual bodies and identities; they intimately entangle categories of subjectivity with national destinies and even transnational politics. They are, as Mauss would put it, “total social phenomena.”<sup>17</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Marcel Mauss, “Body Techniques,” in *Sociology and Psychology: Essays* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979 [1934]), 95–123.

<sup>2</sup>See James M. Dorsey, *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer* (London: Hurst, 2016).

<sup>3</sup>Mahfoud Amara, “Football Sub-Culture and Youth Politics in Algeria,” *Mediterranean Politics* 17 (2012): 41–58; Babak Fozzoni, “Religion, Politics, and Class: Conflict and Contestation in the Development of Football in Iran,” *Soccer and Society* 5 (2004): 356–70; John McManus, “Been There, Done That, Bought the T-Shirt: Beşiktaş Fans and the Commodification of Football in Turkey,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45 (2013): 3–24; Paul A. Silverstein, “Stadium Politics: Sport, Islam, and Amazigh Consciousness in France and North Africa,” in *With God on their Side: Sport in the Service of Religion*, ed. Tara Magdalinski and Timothy Chandler (London: Routledge, 2002), 37–70; Tamir Sorek, *Arab Soccer in a Jewish State: The Integrative Enclave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Thomas Stevenson and Abdul-Karim Alaug, “Football in Yemen: Rituals of Resistance, Integration, and Identity,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 32 (1997): 251–65; Dag Tuastad, “The Political Role of Football for Palestinians in Jordan,” in *Entering the Field: New Perspectives on World Football*, ed. Gary Armstrong and Richard Giulianotti (Oxford: Berg, 1997).

<sup>4</sup>Carl Rommel, “Troublesome Thugs or Respectable Rebels? Class, Martyrdom and Cairo’s Revolutionary Ultras,” *Middle East – Topics and Arguments* 6 (2016): 33–42.

<sup>5</sup>Andrea L. Stanton, “Syria and the Olympics: National Identity on an International Stage,” *International Journal of the History of Sport* 31: 290–305; Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 18–24.

<sup>6</sup>Awista Ayub, *Kabul Girls Soccer Club: A Dream, Eight Girls, and a Journey Home* (New York: Hachette, 2009); Nicole Matuska, “The Development of Women’s Football in Morocco,” in “Sport in the Middle East,” special issue, *Middle East Institute Viewpoints* (2010): 35–37; Sertaç Sehlükoglu, “Contestation and Dichotomies Concerning Women’s Bodies and Sports in Turkey: From Aysun Özbek to Nslihan Darnel,” in *Sport in Islam and Muslim Communities*, ed. Alberto Testa and Mahfoud Amara (London: Taylor and Francis, 2015).

<sup>7</sup>Geoff Harkness, Esther Quinoz and Kimberly Gomez, “Sports and Qatar’s Empowered Woman Narrative,” *Sociology Compass* 12 (2018): e12631.

<sup>8</sup>Jennifer Hargreaves, *Heroines of Sport: The Politics of Difference and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2001), 61–64; Tamir Sorek, “Hapoel Tel Aviv Fans and the Crisis of Liberalism,” in *Sport, Politics and Society in the Middle East*, ed. Tamir Sorek and Danyel Reiche (London: Hurst, forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup>Wilson Chacko Jacob, *Working Out Egypt: Effendi Masculinity and Subject Formation in Colonial Modernity, 1870–1940* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012); Murat Yıldız, “What is a Beautiful

Body?': Late Ottoman 'Sportsmen' Photographs and New Notions of Male Corporeal Beauty," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 8 (2015): 192–214; Murat Yıldız, "Mapping the 'Sports Awakening': Toward a Regional History of Sports in the Middle East," in *Sport, Politics and Society in the Middle East*.

<sup>10</sup>Paul A. Silverstein, "The Pitfalls of Transnational Consciousness: Amazigh Activism as a Scalar Dilemma," *Journal of North African Studies* 18 (2013): 768–78. Masinissa (238–148 BCE) founded the Kingdom of Numidia in what is currently Algeria. His grandson Jugurtha (160–104 BCE) famously fought a protracted battle with Rome over his succession to the throne. Idir (Hamid Cheriet, b. 1949) is a Kabyle political folksinger whose 1976 ballad, "A Vava Inouva" (O Father, My Father), has become the de facto Amazigh national anthem.

<sup>11</sup>Hana Askren, "Tradition Trumps Sport: A Female Wrestler Retreats," in "Sport in the Middle East," special issue, *Middle East Institute Viewpoints* (2010): 31–34; Nadia Fadil, Francesco Ragazzi, and Martijn de Koning, *Radicalization in Belgium and the Netherlands: Critical Perspectives on Violence and Security* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2019); Paul A. Silverstein, "Sporting Faith: Islam, Soccer, and the French Nation-State," *Social Text* 18 (2000): 25–53.

<sup>12</sup>Tansin Benn, Gertrud Pfister, and Haifaa Jawad, *Muslim Women and Sport* (London: Routledge, 2011); Kristin Walseth and Kari Fasting, "Islam's View on Physical Activity and Sport: Egyptian Women Interpreting Islam," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 38 (2003): 45–60.

<sup>13</sup>Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>14</sup>D.S. Farrer, *Shadows of the Prophet: Martial Arts and Sufi Mysticism* (New York: Springer, 2009).

<sup>15</sup>Samuli Schielke, "Being Good in Ramadan: Ambivalence, Fragmentation, and Moral Self in the Lives of Young Egyptians," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (2009): S21–S40.

<sup>16</sup>Tamir Sorek and Danyel Reiche, "Introduction: From Sports in the Middle East to Middle Eastern Sports," in *Sport, Politics and Society in the Middle East*.

<sup>17</sup>Mauss, "Body Techniques."