

GOYO BUL, MIEL, NA NGIMA: DHOLUO INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE SYSTEMS AS A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING SPORTS, EXERCISE, AND HOLISTIC WELLNESS IN WESTERN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

The Dholuo-speaking community of western Kenya possesses a rich indigenous knowledge system that conceptualises the human body, physical strength, and community well-being through a unique lexical and philosophical perspective. However, this system remains largely unexplored in sport science and wellness research, where biomedical approaches tend to dominate, and indigenous African knowledge is often marginalised. This paper explores how the Dholuo language encodes ideas of sport, exercise, and holistic wellness, arguing that indigenous linguistic categories provide culturally rooted resources for encouraging physical activity and community health among Luo populations in Kenya. Based on data from forty semi-structured interviews with Dholuo-speaking elders, athletes, and health practitioners across Homa Bay, Siaya, and Kisumu counties, combined with a lexicographic analysis of the Dholuo corpus created under a funded indigenous language documentation project, the study investigates three interconnected areas: the semantics of bodily movement and competitive play expressed through terms such as *goyo bul*, *miel*, and *timo tich*; the ethno-physiological vocabulary related to bodily strength, fatigue, and recovery; and the relational wellness philosophy embodied in the concept of *ngima*, a Dholuo term that encompasses physical vitality, social harmony, and spiritual balance simultaneously. The findings demonstrate that Dholuo wellness discourse is inherently communal rather than individualistic, integrating physical performance with social duties and spiritual harmony in ways that challenge the Cartesian division of body, mind, and community that underpins Western sport science. The paper concludes that sport and wellness programmes aimed at Luo communities will be much more effective when developed in dialogue with Dholuo indigenous knowledge systems, advocating for the intentional integration of indigenous linguistic frameworks into Kenyan public health and sport policy.

Keywords: *Dholuo, indigenous knowledge systems, sports, exercise, wellness, ngima, ethnolinguistics, Kenya, Luo, community health*

Introduction

Across western Kenya, the rhythmic beat of a goat-skin drum accompanying young men and women in traditional dance, the organisation of competitive boat races on Lake Victoria, and the communal engagement in agricultural labour from dawn to dusk represent a long-standing, deeply culturally embedded tradition of physical activity. Among the Dholuo-speaking Luo community of Nyanza, these practices are not experienced as "exercise" in the biomedical sense of structured physical exertion undertaken for individual health improvement. They are, rather, expressions of *ngima*, a Dholuo concept of holistic living that encompasses physical vitality, social participation, and spiritual harmony as an indivisible whole.

However, when researchers, public health practitioners, and sport development agencies arrive in Nyanza to promote physical activity and wellness, they often speak a different language, not just linguistically, but conceptually. The frameworks of Western sport science and public health, with their focus on individual metabolic efficiency, quantified exercise thresholds, and the Cartesian separation of body from mind and community, often do not resonate with Dholuo-speaking communities, whose understanding of movement, effort, rest, and vitality is based on completely different ontological premises.

This paper contends that this disconnect is not simply about translation. It reveals a deeper epistemological divide between biomedical wellness frameworks and the indigenous knowledge systems inherent in the Dholuo language itself. By exploring how Dholuo linguistic categories conceptualise bodily movement, physical competition, fatigue, recovery, and well-being, this study shows that the Dholuo language contains a coherent, sophisticated, and practically relevant philosophy of sports, exercise, and wellness that has been systematically ignored by researchers and policymakers alike.

Sport Science and the Neglect of Indigenous Knowledge

The global sport science literature has increasingly recognised the need to diversify its epistemological foundations. Edwards and Skinner (2009) noted that conventional sport science remains predominantly rooted in Western biomedical and performance-optimisation frameworks that marginalise non-Western knowledge traditions. Smith and Westerbeek (2004) extended this critique to public health, demonstrating that physical activity promotion programmes based on biomedical premises often underperform in non-Western community settings where collective rather than individual health logics dominate.

In African contexts, Amusa and Toriola (2010) conducted a significant review of physical activity research across sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting an ongoing failure to incorporate indigenous African sports traditions and wellness philosophies into research frameworks or public health strategies. They observed that indigenous games, movement practices, and health beliefs were usually regarded as background ethnographic data rather than as valid epistemological resources for sport science. More recently, Burnett (2015) documented the systematic displacement of indigenous African sport knowledge by colonial and postcolonial sport governance structures, calling for decolonial approaches that put indigenous knowledge at the centre of African sport research and policy.

The Dholuo-Speaking Community: Sport, Movement, and Physical Culture

The Luo of western Kenya have a rich tradition of physical culture that encompasses competitive sports, ceremonial dance, martial practices, and agriculturally embedded physical labour. Ocholla-Ayayo (1976) documented the role of competitive running, wrestling (*nduru*), and canoe racing in Luo initiation and community life, while Ogot (1967) noted the centrality of communal work parties (*saga*) as a context for socialised physical exertion. More recently, scholars

such as Oluoch (2018) have examined how Luo traditional games are being displaced by Western sport forms in schools and communities, with significant consequences for cultural identity and community cohesion.

The intersection of language, music, and cultural identity among the Dholuo-speaking community has been a fruitful area of research. Studies on Dholuo Ohangla music have shown how the language encodes complex cultural philosophies, including constructions of gender, community solidarity, and spiritual belonging, through its lexical and metaphorical resources (Awuor, 2025; Awuor & Awino, 2017; Awuor & Anudo, 2016). War metaphors in Dholuo music have also been demonstrated to encode political ontologies and group identity formation in ways that challenge straightforward translation into Anglophone analytical categories (Awuor Orwa, 2018). These insights from the ethnolinguistics of Dholuo cultural expression directly underpin the current study's focus on how the language encodes physical culture and well-being.

Despite this empirical documentation, no research has explored how the Dholuo language itself encodes concepts of sports, exercise, and wellness, or what implications this linguistic structure might have for public health communication and sport development programmes. This study addresses that gap.

Language, Indigenous Knowledge, and Health Communication

A substantial body of interdisciplinary literature documents the role of indigenous language systems in encoding health knowledge and shaping health-related behaviours. Kreuter and McClure (2004) demonstrated that health communication that is linguistically and culturally congruent with recipient communities achieves significantly better uptake than culturally generic messaging. In the Kenyan context, the parallel corpora project documented in Mbogho et al. (2025) has demonstrated the extent to which Dholuo, Kalenjin, and Kidawida encode detailed ethno-medical and physiological knowledge that remains largely invisible to Anglophone health research. The present study builds directly on this foundation to examine the wellness-related dimensions of Dholuo lexicology.

Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically informed by three intersecting frameworks: ethnolinguistics and the anthropology of the body, indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) theory, and decolonial sport studies.

From ethnolinguistics, the study draws on the principle that language is not merely a tool for describing a pre-existing physical reality but is itself a cognitive and cultural structure that shapes how speakers perceive, categorise, and respond to bodily experience (Mauss, 1973; Csordas, 1994). The concept of "techniques of the body", culturally specific ways of using and understanding the physical body, provides the analytical vocabulary for examining how Dholuo speakers learn, through language, to inhabit and deploy their bodies in culturally meaningful ways.

Indigenous knowledge systems theory, as explained by Dei (2000) and Semali and Kincheloe (1999), asserts that indigenous knowledge is not an inferior or pre-scientific form of Western knowledge, but a unique, internally consistent epistemological tradition with its own criteria of validity, modes of transmission, and practical uses. When applied to this study, this framework suggests that Dholuo wellness concepts should be explored on their own terms instead of being judged by biomedical standards.

Decolonial sport studies, as developed by Carrington (2010) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), offers the critical political dimension: an insistence that the marginalisation of indigenous sport knowledge is not accidental but reflects ongoing colonial power relations within global sport

governance and research. The decolonial project, for this study, involves not merely documenting Dholuo wellness knowledge but actively advocating for its integration into policy and practice.

The Study

This study employs a qualitative, ethnolinguistic approach that combines semi-structured interviews, lexicographic analysis, and participant observation. Forty semi-structured interviews were conducted with Dholuo-speaking participants across three purposefully selected sites: Homa Bay, Siaya, and Kisumu counties, chosen for their demographic diversity and differing levels of exposure to formal sport development programmes. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling from three groups: Dholuo-speaking community elders (aged 60+), recognised as custodians of traditional knowledge; active athletes and physical education teachers (aged 18–45); and community health practitioners working in the Nyanza region.

Interview protocols were designed to elicit metalinguistic commentary on physical activity, bodily experience, and wellness: participants were asked to describe in Dholuo how they would explain to a child the importance of play, physical work, and rest; to name and describe traditional physical games and activities; and to articulate what *ngima* means to them and how it differs from simply being physically healthy. All interviews were conducted in Dholuo with English code-switching as necessary, recorded with informed consent, and transcribed and translated by the researcher in collaboration with two community linguists.

Lexicographic analysis drew on the Dholuo-English dictionaries of Capen (1998) and Odaga (2005), as well as the living Dholuo corpus developed under the Lacuna Fund indigenous language documentation project (2021–2024), described in detail in Mbogho et al. (2025). This corpus contains over 200,000 lexical tokens across various semantic domains. Corpus search methods identified all lemmas and collocations related to movement, physical exertion, competition, rest, and bodily states, producing a semantic dataset of 347 relevant items for detailed analysis. Thematic analysis of interview data was carried out using the framework approach, with themes developed inductively from the data and refined deductively against the theoretical framework.

Findings

The corpus search procedures applied to the 200,000-token Dholuo dataset identified 347 lexical items directly related to physical movement, competition, bodily states, and wellness. Of these, 112 items (32.3%) belonged to the semantic domain of movement and sport, 98 items (28.2%) encoded ethno-physiological states including strength, fatigue, pain, and recuperation, and 137 items (39.5%) were associated with the relational wellness domain anchored by the concept of *ngima*. Interview data from the forty participants generated 618 distinct metalinguistic commentary segments following thematic analysis, organised across three primary thematic clusters. The findings are presented below by cluster.

Finding 1: The Dholuo Vocabulary of Movement, Competition, and Play

Goyo Bul: The Cultural Semantics of Competitive Sport

The Dholuo term *goyo bul*, literally "beating the drum", is among the most semantically rich items in the study's corpus as it relates to physical competition. In everyday Dholuo usage, *goyo bul* does not merely refer to the physical act of drumming; it evokes the entire social event organised around drumming, which encompasses dance, athletic display, competitive running, and communal gathering. The corpus analysis identified 43 distinct collocational patterns involving *goyo bul* across genres, including oral proverbs, narratives, and ceremonial speeches, each encoding the same foundational premise: that competitive physical performance is inseparable from the social and ceremonial occasion that gives it meaning and legitimacy.

This contrasts sharply with the English semantic field of "sport," which, in its predominant usage, emphasises individual performance, measurable results, and rule-based competition, detached from social context. In Dholuo, the closest equivalents to "sport" or "game" include tugo (play, game, recreational activity), width (contest, trial of strength or skill), nduru (wrestling), and kayamba (a competitive jumping game played during initiation ceremonies). Each term conveys specific connotations that shed light on a culturally unique understanding of physical competition. Corpus frequency data indicated that tugo occurred 284 times throughout the dataset, making it the most frequently used sport-related term, while nduru appeared 97 times and width 61 times, suggesting that in Dholuo usage, the play-pleasure aspect of physical activity is far more linguistically developed than the contest-outcome aspect.

Particularly notable is tugo, which interview participants consistently described as an activity undertaken for the pleasure of communal participation rather than individual victory. One elder participant from Siaya County, aged 72, described the concept in the following terms: "Tugo en gima iluwo gi chuny, ok gi del, you follow tugo with your heart, not your skin. The child who runs fastest has won nothing if he runs alone." This formulation accurately captures the communitarian ontology of Dholuo physical culture: the body in motion is always a social body, and the meaning of physical achievement is judged by its relational quality rather than its measurable outcome. A younger participant, a physical education teacher aged 34 from Homa Bay County, affirmed this perspective from a pedagogical point of view: "When I teach traditional Luo games in school, the children who grew up in the village always ask, 'Who are we playing for? The idea of playing just to win a medal makes no sense to them."

The corpus also uncovered a lexically rich realm of traditional Dholuo competitive activities that are not documented in existing sport science literature on the Luo. These include rambo (a game of competitive stone-throwing accuracy played in age-grade groups), yogo (competitive swimming races on Lake Victoria connected to fishing community identity), and lweny mag chak (a form of competitive stick-fighting practiced among young men in cattle-herding communities as both martial training and a social display). Each activity is named with a term that also holds social and ceremonial importance beyond the physical event: yogo, for instance, is semantically linked to the verb yogo (to attempt something difficult, to try one's utmost), reflecting a philosophy of physical effort as moral courage rather than merely a competitive strategy).

Miel: Dance, Movement, and Embodied Community

The term miel (dance) holds a central position in the Dholuo lexical field of physical movement and warrants special attention in any discussion of Dholuo physical culture. For Dholuo speakers, miel is not a leisure activity separate from the serious realms of work and sport. Instead, it is a disciplined form of physical practice that simultaneously trains the body in coordination, stamina, communal responsiveness, and aesthetic expression. Research on the multilingual and multimodal aspects of Dholuo gospel and Ohangla music (Awuor, 2025; Awuor & Awino, 2017) has similarly shown that the embodied, performative elements of Dholuo musical expression form a rich domain of cultural knowledge transmission, findings that directly support the present study's data on miel as a means of embodied community formation.

The semantic field of miel yielded 22 distinct related lexical items in the corpus analysis. These include the verb liel (to move rhythmically, to flow), the noun jaliel (a skilled dancer, one who moves with grace), the evaluative construction miel maber (beautiful dance), in which physical skill and aesthetic achievement are combined into a single term, and miel mar teko (the dance of strength), a specific ceremonial form performed by young men returning from agricultural

communal labour parties as a display of collective physical capacity. The corpus further revealed the term *ochako miel* (the dance has begun), which functions in oral tradition not merely as a description of a physical event but as a culturally charged signal that a community transition, a wedding, an initiation, or a communal harvest, has officially commenced. The physical act of beginning to dance is thus lexically encoded as a social and temporal threshold, not merely a bodily event.

Interview data provided particularly vivid illustrations of *Miel*'s significance as an embodied fitness practice. A female elder from Kisumu County, aged 68, described the physical demands of traditional Luo women's dance: "*Miel mar mon*, women's dance, is not for the weak. You dance from sunset to midnight. Your feet must never stop. Your arms must stay level. Your back must be straight. If you stop before the song ends, you have shamed yourself and your age-mates." This testimony encodes a sophisticated understanding of muscular endurance, postural control, and peer accountability as dimensions of physical practice, none of which are framed in terms of individual health benefit, but all of which constitute rigorous physical conditioning. A male physical education teacher from Siaya County independently noted that his students who had trained in traditional *Miel* showed measurably better rhythmic coordination, core stability, and sustained aerobic performance in formal fitness assessments than age-matched peers without this background, a finding he attributed to the sustained, full-body nature of traditional Luo dance practice.

Timotich: The Semantics of Agricultural Labour as Physical Training

A domain of Dholuo physical culture that received less attention in the original research design but emerged as a significant theme across interview data is the lexical framing of communal agricultural labour. The term *timotich* (doing work, performing labour) is, at its surface, an unremarkable expression. However, corpus analysis of its collocational environment revealed that *timotich* in the context of communal work parties, known as *saga*, consistently co-occurs with terms from the physical performance domain: *teko* (strength), *ler* (agility, lightness of movement), *pek* (heaviness, bodily effort), and *nyiewo* (to push against resistance). This co-occurrence pattern indicates that Dholuo speakers linguistically encode communal agricultural labour as a physical performance domain, continuous with sport and competitive physical display, rather than as a separate category of economic activity.

Twelve of the forty interview participants, eight elders and four community health practitioners, volunteered descriptions of *saga* as the primary context in which they had developed and maintained physical fitness throughout their lives. One elder from Homa Bay County, aged 78, stated: "*Saga* is where you learn how strong you are and how strong your neighbours are. You work side by side. You carry the same weight. If you are weak, everyone sees. If you are strong, they sing about you." This testimony illustrates how *saga* functions as a performative arena for physical display and social evaluation, analogous to competitive sport in its social logic, but embedded in productive communal labour rather than organised recreation. The lexical continuity between *timotich* and sport-domain vocabulary in the corpus reflects and reinforces this cultural continuity.

Finding 2: Dholuo Ethno-Physiological Knowledge, Strength, Fatigue, and Recuperation

Teko: Strength as Social Resource

The Dholuo term *teko* (meaning strength, physical power, or capacity) is semantically complex and resists a straightforward translation into English as just "strength." While *teko* clearly signifies physical strength—the ability to lift, carry, run, or work—its usage in interview data and within the proverb corpus shows that it consistently bears social and moral connotations that the

English equivalent lacks. The corpus identified 19 proverbs featuring teko as the main term, and in 16 of these 19 instances (84.2%), the proverb uses teko to refer to communal service or reciprocal obligation. Examples include: Teko ma ok konyo ji en teko mar loch (Strength that does not help people is the strength of a ruler, used pejoratively to imply strength without generosity) and Ja-teko oting'o ogut mar ji ducu (The strong person carries everyone's burden, representing strength as a social duty). No proverb in the corpus portrays teko as a value in itself, independent of its social application.

This finding was strongly supported by interview data. When participants were asked directly, "What does it mean to be strong, ja-teko?", none of the forty participants defined teko in terms of individual physical parameters such as speed, muscle mass, or lifting capacity. All forty described it relationally: in terms of what one can do for others, how much one can contribute to communal effort, and how reliably one fulfils community obligations. A community health practitioner from Siaya County, aged 41, explained it clearly: "If a man lifts heavy things but does not come to help when we build a neighbour's house, we do not call him ja-teko. We say aonge gi teko, he has no strength. Strength is what you give, not what you carry."

The corpus further identified a semantically related term, nyalo (capacity, ability, power to do), which broadens the teko framework into mental and social realms. Nyalo is used to describe not only physical ability but also the capacity for generosity, leadership, and endurance under social pressure. The term ja-nyalo (a person of capacity, an able person) functions as a comprehensive social honourific that covers physical fitness, social reliability, and moral character as interconnected aspects, a lexical construction with no equivalent in English sporting or wellness discourse.

Ol and Nindo: Fatigue, Sleep, and the Ethics of Rest

The study's analysis of fatigue vocabulary revealed a notably sophisticated Dholuo ethno-physiological framework. The primary term for fatigue, ol (tired, exhausted), exists on a semantic spectrum with related terms encoding five distinct gradations of physical depletion: ol (mildly tired), ol ahinya (completely exhausted, beyond ordinary fatigue), dhier (physically depleted specifically through sustained overwork or illness, with connotations of systemic weakness), olore (chronic fatigue, the state of persistent exhaustion that signals underlying health issues), and tho chuny (literally "death of spirit," a state of complete physical and psychological collapse used for conditions approaching what biomedicine would term burnout or overtraining syndrome). This five-level taxonomy of physical depletion presents a more detailed ethno-physiological framework for fatigue than the usual distinction in lay English, which generally only differentiates between "tired" and "exhausted."

Each gradation carried distinct pragmatic implications in interview data regarding appropriate community responses. Ol warranted a brief rest and hydration. Ol ahinya warranted withdrawal from communal labour and explicit social permission to rest. Dhier warranted active community support, with other members taking over the depleted person's obligations. Olore warrants consultation with a herbalist or healer (ajuoga). Tho chuny was described by two older participants as a condition requiring spiritual intervention rather than mere physical rest, reflecting the integration of physical and spiritual health in Dholuo wellness ontology.

The relationship between ol and nindo (sleep, rest) was especially revealing. In Dholuo discourse, adequate sleep and rest are not seen as personal lifestyle choices but as social and moral duties. A 65-year-old elder from Kisumu County expressed this idea clearly: "If you deny your body nindo, you are being greedy with your body. You borrow strength from tomorrow and cannot pay it back. Then you become a burden." This framing, which presents sleep deprivation as social

irresponsibility, reflects a sophisticated understanding of physiological debt. It is similar to Western concepts of recovery and overtraining in sport science, but it is understood through a social rather than a metabolic perspective. Conversely, excessive rest, *nindo mag bor* (sleeping for a long time), is strongly socially frowned upon. The collection of stories included the derogatory term *ja-nindo* (a sleeping person, a sluggard), appearing in 11 oral narrative contexts, always with negative social judgement. This suggests that Dholuo notions of rest involve a carefully balanced norm between too little and too much recovery.

Rem and Siany: Pain, Injury, and Bodily Warning

A notable secondary discovery in the ethno-physiological field involved Dholuo vocabulary relating to pain and physical injury. The primary term *rem* (pain, ache) appears in the corpus across 78 different collocational contexts, with a semantic spectrum ranging from intense physical pain to emotional grief. This overlap in meaning reflects the Dholuo view of physical and emotional suffering as part of a continuum rather than as separate categories. This finding aligns with emerging biomedical research on the neuroscience of pain, which increasingly acknowledges the inseparability of physical and psychological pain processing (Kreuter & McClure, 2004).

Of particular interest to sport and wellness promotion is the term *siany*, which specifically refers to the pain of physical exertion, the muscular discomfort of sustained effort, and the burn of physical training. The corpus analysis revealed that *siany* is semantically and evaluatively distinct from *rem*: where *rem* is uniformly negative and demands relief, *siany* carries a distinctly positive valence in sport and labour contexts. Interview participants, particularly athletes and physical education teachers, described *siany* as a desirable and morally significant physical experience: "*Siany en nyiero mar yamo, siany is the laughter of the wind. It means you have done something*" (male athlete, aged 27, Kisumu County). This lexical distinction between productive and pathological pain, encoded in the *siany/rem* opposition, represents a sophisticated indigenous framework for differentiating between adaptive training load and injury, a distinction that is foundational to sport science but rarely credited with indigenous precursors.

Finding 3: Ngima, A Dholuo Philosophy of Holistic Wellness

The most significant theoretical finding of this study relates to the Dholuo concept of *ngima*. In the simplest translation, *ngima* means "alive," "living," or "healthy." However, this translation conceals the philosophical richness of the term, which, in interview data and everyday Dholuo usage, consistently encompasses aspects of well-being that Western wellness discourse usually treats as separate: physical health, social connections, spiritual balance, and moral standing within the community. The corpus identified *ngima* as the most frequently used wellness-related term, appearing 1,204 times within the 200,000-token dataset, more than three times the frequency of the next most common wellness term, *nyalore* (resilience, the capacity to recover).

When participants were asked to describe what it means to be *ngima*, to live in a state of *ngima*, their responses consistently integrated physical and social dimensions in ways that resisted simple separation. A person who is *ngima* is not just free from illness or physically fit; they actively engage in community life, maintain proper relationships with family and neighbours, fulfil social obligations, and live in a state of spiritual balance. One elder from Homa Bay County articulated the concept clearly: "*Ngima is not just your body standing up. A tree is standing up. Ngima is your body standing up and knowing where to stand, next to your wife, next to your father's grave, next to your neighbour when he is weak.*" This testimony highlights the fundamentally positional and relational nature of Dholuo well-being: health is not a state of the individual body but a quality of one's embeddedness in a web of social relationships and obligations.

Several participants explicitly contrasted *ngima* with the English concept of "health," noting that a person can be physically well in the biomedical sense while failing to be *ngima*, for example, through social isolation, broken family relationships, spiritual disharmony, or moral failure. A community health practitioner from Siaya County with formal biomedical training offered a particularly striking account: "I have patients who come to the clinic and their blood pressure is normal, their weight is fine, everything is fine by the tests. But I can see they are not *ngima*. They have quarrelled with their family, or they have not gone to their father's funeral. Their body is there, but their *ngima* is broken. Biomedicine has no word for that." This testimony from a practitioner trained in both biomedical and indigenous frameworks illustrates the explanatory gap between the two systems and the practical inadequacy of biomedical wellness categories for Dholuo-speaking communities.

This finding aligns with contemporary global health frameworks that have moved beyond the biomedical model toward holistic definitions of well-being, notably the World Health Organisation's definition of health as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being" (World Health Organisation, 1948). The difference is that Dholuo communities did not arrive at this holistic understanding through the biomedical critique of the 1980s and 1990s; it has been encoded in their language and knowledge systems for generations.

The corpus analysis of the *Ngima* semantic cluster identified 137 directly associated lexical items, with the following being most frequently cited in interview data. *Ngimani* (living well, being in a good state) appeared in 34 interview segments, consistently in contexts related to social participation and fulfilling obligations. *Chiel ngima* (the breath of life, vitality) was used by 18 participants to describe a felt sense of physical readiness and spiritual alignment, often in the morning, indicating a daily rhythm of wellness awareness not found in Western wellness vocabulary. *Bed gi ngima* (to be with life, to live together well) was mentioned by 22 participants specifically during discussions of communal physical activity, confirming that the relational aspect of wellness is most strongly activated through shared physical practice. The compound *ok ngima* (not alive, not well), the negation of *ngima*, was notable for its range of use: participants employed it to describe individuals who were physically ill, socially isolated, morally compromised, or spiritually troubled, with no lexical distinction between these states, illustrating that the *ngima* framework considers them as different dimensions of a single underlying condition.

Another important discovery relates to the developmental lexicology of *ngima*. Interview data showed that Dholuo-speaking parents and elders explicitly use the term *ngima* to socialise children into physical activity. Phrases such as *Dhi tur mondo ibed ngima* (Go and play so that you may be well/alive) and *Timtich mondo ingim* (Do work so that you may live well) incorporate physical activity within a wellness framework from the earliest stages of children's social development. Notably, these expressions frame physical activity as a route to *ngima*, a relational, holistic sense of well-being, rather than merely as a means to individual health outcomes. The implication for physical education and health promotion is significant: motivational messages grounded in *ngima* discourse are likely to be more effective for Dholuo-speaking communities because they evoke culturally central wellness values instead of imposing external biomedical categories.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study centre on a key point: the Dholuo language embodies a rich, coherent, and practically significant philosophy of sports, exercise, and holistic wellness that has been systematically overlooked in Kenyan sport science research, public health initiatives, and sport development policies. This oversight is not just an academic mistake; it has tangible

consequences for the success of physical activity promotion and wellness programmes within Luo communities.

The communitarian philosophy of teko, the embodied social practice of miel, the ethno-physiological sophistication evident in the fatigue vocabulary, and especially the holistic wellness framework encoded in ngima collectively represent a knowledge tradition that should inform, rather than be displaced by, biomedical approaches to sport and wellness in the Nyanza region. Several practical implications follow.

First, campaigns promoting physical activity among Luo communities should shift from focusing on individual health improvement to emphasising communal vitality. The key question should not be "how can you improve your personal fitness?" but "how does your physical vitality benefit your family and community?" This shift, rooted in the meanings of teko and ngima, is likely to generate much greater engagement, especially among men whose cultural identity is strongly linked to social contribution rather than personal achievement.

Second, traditional physical practices, miel, nduru, goyo bul, saga, should be actively integrated into physical education curricula in Luo-region schools, not merely as cultural heritage activities but as legitimate sport and exercise modalities whose physical demands and health benefits are formally recognised and documented. This requires collaboration between sport scientists, physical education specialists, and Dholuo-speaking cultural practitioners.

Third, the holistic wellness concept of ngima should be integrated into community health worker training programmes in Nyanza, enabling health practitioners to engage with communities using conceptual frameworks that resonate with locally held beliefs about health and well-being. This aligns with increasing evidence that culturally congruent health communication yields better behavioural outcomes than generic biomedical messaging (Kreuter & McClure, 2004).

This paper argues, based on ethnolinguistic evidence from the Dholuo language and the knowledge traditions of the Luo community in western Kenya, that indigenous language systems contain sophisticated and practically relevant frameworks for understanding and promoting sports, exercise, and holistic wellness. The Dholuo concepts of goyo bul, miel, teko, and ngima collectively form a wellness philosophy that is both theoretically coherent, culturally rooted, and directly applicable to the practical challenges of sport development and public health in the Nyanza region.

The exclusion of these frameworks from Kenyan sport science and public health research reflects broader patterns of epistemological marginalisation that decolonial scholarship has extensively documented. Redressing this exclusion requires not merely acknowledging indigenous wellness knowledge as culturally interesting but treating it as a legitimate epistemological resource, one that should inform research design, policy development, and program implementation alongside and in dialogue with biomedical frameworks.

The Dholuo-speaking communities of Kenya have always understood what it means to be truly alive, *ngima*. The challenge for sport science, public health, and education policy is to learn that language well enough to collaborate.

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