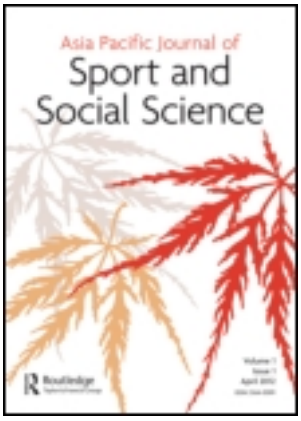

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Problematizing the dominant: the emergence of alternative cultural voices in Fiji rugby

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Today's indigenous Fijian culture is often said to be represented by *ratuism*, religion and rugby. Rugby is widely described as Fiji's 'national' sport, with a considerable degree of social significance. That rugby is listed alongside two powerful institutions (*ratuism* and religion) in the life of indigenous Fijians is a clear indication of the central cultural importance of the sport. In this paper, drawing upon the existing literature as well as our own research data, we outline the key aspects of the dominant rugby discourse in relation to *ratuism* and *religion*, along with exploring some of rugby's main alternative cultural 'functions'. Employing a cultural studies approach, our main goal is to interpret and (re)present some of the chief alternative discourses in Fiji rugby and to discuss their role in the formation of dominant and emergent cultural practices.

Keywords: Fiji; *ratuism*; religion; rugby; indigenous identity; alternative discourses

Introduction: three Rs of Fiji

Rugby is often described as Fiji's 'national' sport. Alongside widely made popular claims about Fijians' (and other Pacific islanders') 'natural flair' and physical suitability for the sport (see, for example, SuperSport, 2012; van der Berg, 2012), the uniquely indigenized nature of the game in Fiji, with its close linkages to local culture, is frequently highlighted. Comments such as 'In Fiji, rugby is not just a sport, it's very much a part of our culture' are often heard (La France aux Iles Fidji, n.d.). Renowned Fijian sociologist Simione Durutalo (1986b, p. 1) once stated: 'Indigenous Fijian Culture can be succinctly summarised in four R's: Ratuism, Royalism, Religion and Rugby'. In recent decades, royalism – the attachment to the British Crown – has been of less significance in Fiji, especially since the country became a republic following the military coups d'état of 1987. Perhaps, then, today's indigenous Fijian culture is represented only by the three Rs, *ratuism*, *religion* and *rugby*, which have retained their socio-cultural significance (E. Laqiloa, personal communication, 10 April 2012; Schieder, 2012). Religion here refers to Christianity, especially Methodism (the dominant faith amongst indigenous Fijians) and the Methodist Church, whilst *ratuism*, derived from the word *ratu* (an indigenous chiefly title), is described by Durutalo (1986b, p. 1) as 'the ideology which claims that chiefs are divinely ordained as natural rulers and hence to be obeyed unquestioningly by indigenous Fijians'. That rugby is listed alongside two such powerful institutions in the life of indigenous Fijians aptly indicates the central cultural importance of the sport as well as suggesting close linkages between the three Rs.

Whilst rugby, like Christianity, is a relatively modern arrival to Fiji, introduced only in the late nineteenth century, it has become deeply embedded in the dominant cultural discourse of Fijian society and is today widely regarded as a cultural practice inextricably

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intertwined with indigenous identity and tradition. Central to this is the game's close connection with *ratuism* and religion, which is consolidated by associated indigenous ideals of masculinity and martial tradition. The emergent literature on Fijian rugby has highlighted these linkages and the indigenized character that the game has come to assume as a result (Guinness, n.d.; Presterudstuen, 2010; Schieder, 2012). In doing so, the literature has predominantly revealed the dominant discourse that has developed around rugby in Fiji since its colonial origins.

However, in addition to the dominant rugby-related discourse, there are emergent, alternative social voices that suggest that rugby's current cultural role in Fiji might be more complex than it is often portrayed as. Although these alternative cultural voices are emergent (sometimes resistant) ones, we think they contribute significantly to the cultural tapestry of Fiji and to understandings of the social significance of rugby. Therefore, in this paper, drawing upon both the existing literature and our own research data, we outline the key aspects of the dominant rugby discourse, along with exploring some of rugby's main alternative cultural 'functions'. Employing a cultural studies approach, our main goal here is to interpret and (re)present some of the chief alternative discourses in Fiji rugby and to discuss their role in the formation of dominant and emergent cultural practices.

Our primary data was collected between March and September 2012, through 11 semi-structured interviews with key official rugby stakeholders and male Indo-Fijian rugby players and female rugby players identified mainly by snowball sampling (Patton, 1990). The interviews were recorded (with the interviewees' permission) and subsequently transcribed. The interview data underwent qualitative analysis for the purpose of identifying salient themes and meanings that allowed us to delineate the emergent voices in Fiji rugby (for further details on interview data collection, analysis and representation procedures and methods employed see Kanemasu & Molnar, in press).

Dominant voices in Fiji rugby

Ratuism and rugby

In its formative years, rugby – as an English public school sport and a medium for the education and discipline of young men – was associated with the doctrines of 'muscular Christianity', which connected athleticism, masculinity and Christian morality (Chandler, 1996; Watson, Weir & Friend, 2005). By the mid-nineteenth century the game had become an integral part of public school education as an activity considered suitable for 'English gentlemen' (Dunning & Sheard, 2005) to instil upper-class, 'manly virtues' of strength, courage and physical prowess. In the colonies too, the introduction of organized sports performed several functions: as a 'civilizing force' of cultural assimilation, as a mode of social control to divert the potentially rebellious and dangerous energies of local populations and as a moral and physical disciplinary tool for the production of desirable British colonial subjects, amongst other things (Dunning & Sheard, 2005; King, 2009). Although rugby was not explicitly or systematically introduced into Fiji with the mission of cultural assimilation, as in the other colonies, it was undeniably encouraged by the church 'as a civilized [Westernised] substitution for violent traditional practices' (Guinness, n.d., p. 61).

The socio-cultural embedding of rugby, however, was by no means a one-way process. Chiefs and local elites pursued rugby to 'prove their physical prowess in ways [that] resonated well with the colonial administration' and as 'a gentlemanly and prestigious cultural practice' that consolidated their relationship with the British colonists (Presterudstuen, 2010, p. 240). Prominent chiefs became involved in rugby both as

leading players and in official capacities. For instance, the first 'native competition' began under the leadership of high chief Ratu Epeli Ganilau in 1914 (Fiji Rugby Union [FRU], 2012a). In 1939, Ratu George Cakobau, the colony's first indigenous Governor-General, captained the first Fijian team to tour New Zealand. Ratu Edward Cakobau, father of the current President, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, captained the team that toured Tonga in 1934 and (co-)managed the overseas tours in 1948, 1958 and 1964 (McGlusky, 2005). Ratu Penaia Ganilau, the first President of Fiji, similarly represented the colony as a player in 1938 and 1939 and a manager in 1957, 1961 and 1970 (Robinson, 1973).

Over the decades, rugby grew into a mass sport played not exclusively by chiefs and the elite but by an overwhelming majority of Fijian men, producing one of the highest player-population ratios among the rugby-playing nations (FRU, 2012b). But the close links with the chiefly establishment have remained to the present day and are evident, amongst other things, in the fact that the position of patron – i.e. symbolic head – of the FRU has been reserved for the President of Fiji who is also a paramount chief – such as former Prime Minister and President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, former President Ratu Josefa Iloilo and the current President, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau.

To further explore the chiefs' involvement in the development of rugby, a review of the wider socio-historical context is essential. Rugby was introduced when the hegemonic structure of colonial rule was being formulated, with leading chiefs playing a key role in facilitating this social change. Colonial rule rested on a hegemonic alliance between the colonial state and the (eastern[1]) chiefly/elite establishment (as well as the non-indigenous elite and foreign corporate interests) in the form of 'indirect rule', mediated by the influential Methodist Church (Durutalo, 1986a, 1986b; Lal, 1992; Lawson, 1991; Norton, 1990; Sutherland, 1992). As succinctly summarized by Durutalo (1986a), the colonial order (which was in large part carried over to the post-independence era) hinged on the strategic alignment of '*Na Lotu*, *Na Vanua*, *Na Matanitu*' (the church, the land/tradition/people, the government). As the leaders who represented the continuity and the *mana* (spiritual/supernatural force) of the *vanua*, chiefs became a focal point of this hegemonic configuration. Prior to colonization, the (eastern) chiefs facilitated the Christianization of the indigenous population through the protection they provided for the early missionaries and their own conversion which, in turn, brought Western support for and endorsement of their traditional status and authority. Subsequently, the incorporation of the chiefly establishment provided the colonial regime with effective political and administrative control over the indigenous population, whilst it also entrenched chiefly power through, for example, the appointment of high chiefs to key positions in the colonial administration.

It was in this context that the cultural diffusion of rugby was 'led by highly placed, British educated representatives of the new Fijian elite under the indirect rule scheme, arguably as a potential means to groom leaders and soldiers from the native ranks'(Presterudstuen, 2010, pp. 240–241). The introduction of the game and its indigenization was part of the wider process of negotiation and forging of the colonial socio-political order, which entailed a two-way appropriation of a range of Western and indigenous institutions and practices. 'Pastiches of precontact and colonial cultures' thus engendered 'the conventional manners, customs, and practices with which succeeding generations of postcolonials define themselves' (Mageo, 2001, p. 4). Rugby was one such practice that incorporated, and was incorporated by, indigenous social structures and cultural heritage as part of the emergence of a broader hegemonic order. Chiefly leadership became instrumental in the development of rugby not merely as a foreign recreational activity that ignited Fijian enthusiasm, but also as a cultural practice that came to deeply

interlock with Fijian identity. This further served the cultural legitimation of the newly emerging hegemonic system as a mode of social control and physical and moral discipline: rugby as a hegemonic cultural practice facilitated the grooming of indigenous elites and soldiers (Presterudstuen, 2010) and, perhaps more generally, the creation and sustenance of conditions favourable for continued Western presence by appropriating existing (and potentially oppositional) practices, especially indigenous martial culture and its 'violent traditional practices'. A localized form of rugby diffused out of the dynamics of the process by which the hegemonic structure took shape in colonial Fiji and has since remained closely associated with its constitutive elements, namely the chiefly system and the church, along with martial and masculine traditions. In the following section we will consider the significance of rugby's socio-cultural links with indigenous militarism and masculine ideals.

Militarism, masculinity and rugby

Rugby's historical connection with the chiefly system and the broader *vanua* is reinforced by the socio-cultural and socio-political significance of militarism in Fiji. In examining the indigenization of rugby, previous researchers have highlighted something of an 'elective affinity' (Weber, 1958: 91–92) between the intensely physical and combative nature of the game and an indigenous martial tradition. Warfare was 'almost an everyday way of life in Fiji' until about the second half of the nineteenth century (Clunie, 1977, p. 1). Frequent wars and skirmishes took place between chiefdoms, in which warriors, called *bati*, played a crucial role in defending chiefs' territories and interests. In a seminal study of militarism in Fiji, Halapua (2003) observes that this tradition continues to underlie contemporary Fijian culture and has been repeatedly mobilized in service of chiefly/elite interests, culminating in two military coups d'état in 1987 and an attempted coup and military mutinies in 2000.[2] The '*bati* ideology' (Teaiwa, 2005, p. 212) has functioned here as a cultural rationale for the entrenchment of militarism in post-colonial Fiji.

Rugby can be seen as a modern expression of this martial tradition. Studying the spread of militarism into areas of socio-cultural life in post-colonial Fiji, Teaiwa (2005) identifies rugby as its primary example. Guinness (n.d.), Presterudstuen (2010) and Schieder (2012) provide more detailed discussions, concurring that the physical competition, aggression and prowess associated with the game resonate well with the indigenous warrior ethos. Guinness (n.d.), for instance, describes Fijian rugby players as 'modern warriors' (p. 9) and argues that 'Rugby, gradually, subsumed the important social connotations of warfare that had existed in Fijian society … Rugby allowed the *bati* (warrior) heritage to be continued in a modern form' (pp. 61–62). *Cibi*, the traditional war dance performed by the national rugby team prior to international matches (Figure 1), and the naming of the national rugby league team (the Bati) and one of the national rugby union teams (the Fiji Warriors) are often cited as explicit expressions of this synergy (Dewey, 2008; Guinness, n.d.; Presterudstuen, 2010; Schieder, 2012). There is, then, a cultural 'fit' between this key indigenous Fijian tradition and the modern, Western game of rugby: 'Militarism disarticulated from indigenous warfare rearticulates itself with modern sports; competition disentangled from armed battles is rewoven in ceremonial exchanges' (Teaiwa, 2005, p. 217).

Beyond such symbolic connections, rugby has also maintained direct links with the nation's armed forces nation. In the early years of rugby's development, Fijians were often first introduced to the game in the military and police forces (McGlusky, 2005; Robinson, 1973), and the *Ofisa* (police) was the first indigenous team to be established (Robinson,

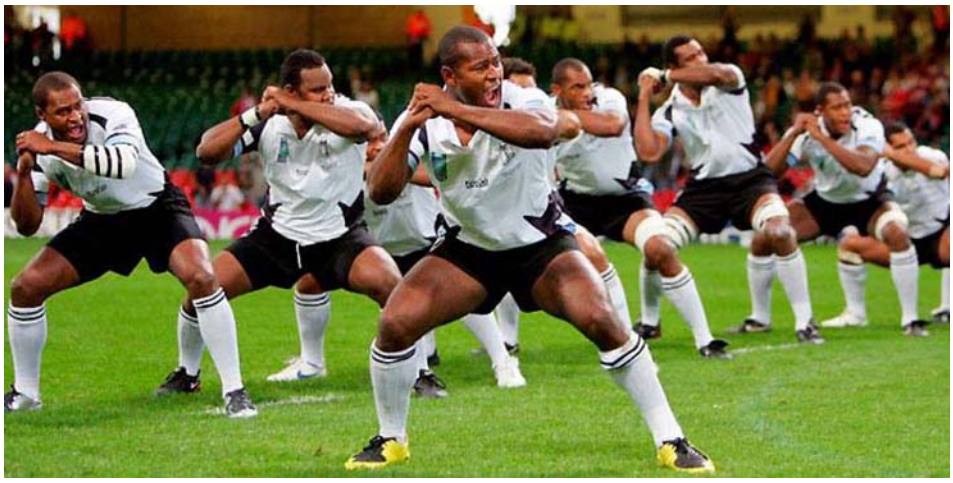

Figure 1. The national rugby union squad, the Flying Fijians, performing *cibi* (Source: Croz Walsh's Blog 2011).

1973, p. 49). Today, the army, the police and the navy remain leading rugby teams, and the Sukuna Bowl, an annual match between the army and the police, is a major national event. Elite players who gain prominence at the national/provincial level and those who have returned from overseas professional careers are often offered employment by the forces. In addition, high-ranking military officials occupied several high-profile positions on the FRU Board, including that of chairman, in 2011 and 2012.

Inseparable from this synergy are the traditional, indigenous ideals of masculinity. The implication of rugby in the social construction of masculinity has been examined by researchers in various cultural contexts (see Dunning & Sheard, 2005; Nauright & Chandler, 1996). In Fiji, the game's role as a marker of masculine identity is bound up with the martial tradition outlined above. In pre-colonial Fiji: every male born was expected to be a warrior. … [T]he rite of passage for a young male becoming a man in the tribe was demonstrated at times of tribal wars. His skill in the way he performed with his war club in killing the intruders gave him the status of a man and a defender of the tribe (Halapua, 2003, p. 25).

Indigenous constructions of manhood are today said to remain deeply rooted in this pre-colonial history and culture of warfare. It is not surprising, then, that the military has come to be regarded as 'a bastion of Fijian masculinity' (Teaiwa, 2005, p. 206), and rugby as one of its cultural expressions. Rugby offers 'a chance for indigenous men to represent themselves and their families in battle, to prove that they were brave. The traditional masculinities of warfare are present in the modern game of rugby' (Guinness, n.d., p. 62). Rugby's status as the pinnacle of indigenous Fijian masculine and warrior identity is also illustrated by our interview data. According to a participant who is involved in the training of the national teams:

> We always say [to the players], 'You are the Fiji warrior, you are the bati.' The whole Flying Fijian [the national rugby union team] image is someone who is very strong with a warrior mentality, who never gives up, puts his body on the line. This is what they believe in, and the rest of the country believes in it… It is wrapped up in masculinity.

The gendered nature of the sport, as well as the central importance it is accorded in Fijian male identity making, is illustrated by another participant, a former national squad member:

> Every afternoon, we go playing [rugby], and if we see someone in the house, [we'd say] 'What are you doing? Why aren't you playing? Are you a lady or what?' ... You just have to play rugby. If you are a man, go and play. If you don't play rugby, in Fiji, you are not a man.

There is therefore a clear, yet complex, entanglement between militarism grounded in the *bati* ideology, Fijian hegemonic constructions of masculinity and rugby as an embodiment of 'the social value placed on militarised and masculinised discipline in Fiji' (Teaiwa, 2005, p. 206). In Fiji, cultural interaction can also be observed between religion and rugby, to which we will turn our attention in the next section.

Religion and rugby

Unlike in England, where rugby initially developed with a distinctive moral code and religious purpose, the link between rugby and Christianity in Fiji appears to have been more indirect, in that the game was not introduced formally or explicitly as a medium of Christian education. Yet the cultural links between rugby and organized religion have been pervasive and continue to permeate the country's rugby culture today. Since its introduction to the country in the early nineteenth century, Christian belief has been intimately fused with indigenous spirituality, social structure and way of life and become no less 'authentic' than cultural practices more ostensibly associated with the pre-colonial past (Hereniko, 1999). Christianity is therefore an organically emerging cultural formation subtly infusing a range of indigenous cultural practices. For instance, Christian rituals and practices, especially devotions and prayers, are today incorporated into the protocols of most social and public events and occasions in Fiji, and rugby is no exception. Researchers have identified the spiritual dimensions of Fiji rugby and their manifestations, especially in the day-to-day practices of rugby players and teams:

> The rituals of the *lotu* are practised by the rugby team, and indicate the centrality of religiosity to the identities of these men. Religion forms one of the most significant aspects of a rugby training session. Most notably, before and after games and training they gather into a quiet circle and pray. At these times the prayers are led by a senior member of the team, or by the team's *talatala* (priest) .... At the end of trainings and games they sing a hymn. ... These manifestations of religiosity were understood as being a defining factor of the players' identities and culture (Guinness, n.d., pp. 87–88, parentheses and italics in original).

These practices are also part of the training sessions and camps of the national squads, encouraged and endorsed by the FRU. For instance, the FRU's coaching panel for the 2011 Rugby World Cup squad included two ordained Methodist ministers who provided spiritual guidance for the team prior to and throughout the tournament. Indeed, it has been argued that religiosity in Fiji rugby extends far beyond the adoption of rituals and protocols; athletes attach deeply spiritual meanings to the act of playing the game itself. According to Presterudstuen (2010, p. 242, parentheses and italics in original):

> In the villages I visited these links were often explicitly made. To play rugby was viewed as an important way to show commitment and sacrifice for *'Noqu Kalou, Noqu Vanua'* (lit. My God, My Country), and thus considered a constitutive practice for Fijian men.

Seen in this light, rugby did not simply incorporate elements of religious conventions and values. It became a religious practice itself, as well as a cultural conveyor of traditional, dominant values of masculinity and *ratuism*.

Problematizing the dominant discourse

Rugby has thus come to be regarded as far more than a sporting activity; it is a deep-seated cultural practice heavily invested with the heritage of the *vanua* – in particular, *ratuism*, militarism, masculinity, and *lotu*, a crystallization of 'the reconstituted Fijian notion of tradition and ethno-national identity in which the pre-modern and the colonial have merged into a Fijianness which encapsulates all these values' (Presterudstuen, 2010, pp. 241–242). This constitutes today's dominant discourse on Fijian rugby, and the emergent literature has made valuable contributions by identifying the hegemonic meanings that 'the practice took on … within the Fijian cultural logic' (Presterudstuen, 2010, p. 238).

However, whilst we agree with the above in relation to the hegemonic cultural definition and meanings of the game in Fiji, we argue that an exclusive focus on this dominant discourse could be problematic. For instance, an overwhelmingly culturalist and anthropological reading of Fiji rugby has essentializing and perhaps Orientalizing tendencies. With an overriding focus on the centrality of the indigenous cultural anchoring of the game, the culturalist thesis locks Fijian rugby and rugby players into a potentially romanticizing meta-narrative of 'Tradition', which suppresses and conceals the multiple, shifting and even conflicting meanings of and within the game that the players have cultivated as they negotiate and engage with the realities and challenges of their post-colonial, increasingly globalized society. Whilst the warrior masculinity, with its pre-colonial roots, has undeniable significance, defining rugby as an 'outlet for the expression of this urge' (Guinness, n.d., p. 61) fixes Fijians in a primordial state, possessed of an intrinsic quality that persistently resurfaces through rugby as its modern 'outlet'. Similarly, references to the appropriation of rugby by '*the* Fijian cultural logic' imply the singularity and fixity of such logic and inadvertently reproduces the binary distinction between the pre-colonial/indigenous and the (post-)colonial/modern/Western, despite the emphasis on the articulation between them.

In fact, as we will show in the following sections, there exist alternative, 'under-the-dominant-cultural-surface' discourses of Fiji rugby that challenge the totality of the dominant cultural position. For instance, our research suggests that the centrality of *lotu* in Fiji rugby is neither universal nor constant. At least a significant number of players (especially in urban areas) sacrifice many hours of their day for rugby training not necessarily because 'playing rugby is seen as a crucial part of their active devotion' (Presterudstuen, 2010, p. 243) to their Christian faith, but sometimes primarily because of their earnest and even desperate pursuit of the material benefits that a professional rugby career could bring them and their kin (Kanemasu & Molnar, in press).

Furthermore, there appears to be some degree of tension between the authoritative religious discourse and a competing one that questions the assumed primacy of religiosity in the sport. The national coach's controversial decision in 2009 to discontinue the performance of *cibi* on religious grounds (stating that its 'pagan' origins make it an un-Christian act) caused nationwide uproar, prompting *The Fiji Times* editorial to protest, 'Sports and religion do not mix' ('Let the war cry be heard', 2009).[3] In the same year, senior members of the national squad submitted a letter of complaint to the FRU, citing as one of their key concerns '[t]he coach's religion-centric approach' ('Big step back', 2009): 'While we certainly acknowledge that spiritual preparation is important, there was a strong feeling amongst many that Lotu suspended all else during the tour' ('Flying Fijians Report', 2009). Similar voices of discontent were heard again at the time of the 2011

Rugby World Cup (see, for example, Rugby365, 2011). These instances are indicative of important, if sometimes peripheral, alternative realities and voices of Fiji rugby.

Indeed, the hegemonic status of the culturalist position is at times visibly eclipsed by another competing discourse. As we have argued elsewhere (Kanemasu & Molnar, in press; see also Schieder, 2012), rugby is not only a modern embodiment of indigenous cultural heritage, but also serves as a symbolic medium of anti-colonial nationalism which, especially at times of international competitions, at least temporarily dissolves the ethnic and gender boundaries around the hegemonic constructions of the sport and national identity. The multi-cultural emphasis of this discourse can be seen in a passage from the handbook given to the 2011 Rugby World Cup national squad:

> rugby in our country … knows no religious barrier, it does not distinguish between any race, it doesn't care whether you be rich or poor and YOU, its players, are held up as heroes, to one and all, throughout the width and breadth of this proud nation (Fijivillage.com, 2011)

Whilst this nationalist discourse is often appropriated by the state for nation-building and other political purposes (Cattermole, 2008), it also commands considerable legitimacy among the local population today, coexisting and at times openly in conflict with the culturalist discourse.

Also absent in the culturalist thesis is sufficient attention to the power dynamics underlying the dominant discourse. We believe that without critical scrutiny of the challenges to the dominant discourse, the culturalist thesis unwittingly replicates (and legitimizes) the power differentials that are inherent within it. We have shown above that the coalescence of *ratuism*, religion and rugby which constitutes the core of the dominant discourse was shaped by the dynamics of the colonial/post-colonial hegemonic order. It should be noted that rugby has traditionally functioned as a manifestation of, and a legitimizing medium for, this hegemonic power, along with its social hierarchies of ethnicity, religion, class and gender (Teaiwa, 2005). For instance, in much of Fiji's modern history, the majority of Indo-Fijians constituted a significant social group systematically excluded from the hegemonic alliance, which entailed their political marginalization – codified in state policies and the national constitution (especially until its 1997 amendment) – as well as social marginalization, whereby 'Fijian' cultural traditions and virtues were officially championed over those of Indo-Fijians (and other non-indigenous Fijians). This hegemonic system is also intersected by patriarchal power. As noted by Halapua (2003, p. 182), militarism and hegemonic masculinity in Fiji are interwoven with '[t]he cultural construction of gender roles sanctioned by a particular religious interpretation, [which] conditions women to take a subservient status'.

As a hegemonic cultural practice, rugby has reproduced colonial/post-colonial relations of power by mainly excluding Indo-Fijians and women from the centre stage of the 'national' sport that commands societal prestige and pride, as well as reputedly more government funding than any other sport. It is for this reason that Teaiwa (2005, p. 213) calls the FRU 'a bastion of the modern Fijian [male] elite'. The dominant discourse around Fijian rugby normalizes this by defining the game as a distinctively and intrinsically indigenous male practice, with the central emphasis on its cultural embeddedness providing effective normative sanctions. In this respect, rugby may be seen as a 'hegemonic apparatus', in the Gramscian sense, serving to consolidate and naturalize the existing social order by embodying and sustaining a hegemonic 'conception of the world' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 328) based on particular social hierarchies.

In this context, an exclusive focus on the dominant discourse has the effect of reifying it, thereby reinforcing its normative power and silencing alternative, counter-hegemonic

discourses. It is important to acknowledge that previous researchers have noted the ethno-nationalistic elements of the game and their exclusionary implications (Guinness, n.d.; Presterudstuen, 2010). Cattermole (2008) and Schieder (2012), in particular, have highlighted rugby's both inclusive and exclusive nature as a symbolic site of ethnic politics in Fiji. We believe nevertheless that in order to construct an in-depth account of the cultural complexities of the sport, it is essential to go further by exposing that, despite its hegemonic status, this dominant discourse is also challenged by competing and emerging voices. To this end, in the following sections, we will examine segments of the multiple, emergent socio-cultural meanings of the game – namely, rugby as a cultural space for both alternative self-definition and continued marginalization of Indo-Fijian and women rugby players.

Alternative voices in Fiji rugby

Indo-Fijian rugby: 'if I get to wear the national jersey . . . '

There is a widespread belief in Fiji that specific sports have almost exclusive links to certain ethnic communities – for example, that football is practiced by Indo-Fijians and rugby is a solely indigenous Fijian sport. It is, however, important to caution against uncritical acceptance of such an assumption. As stressed by Prasad (2008), football has been played by a significant number of indigenous Fijians from the very inception of the game in Fiji,[4] and its player population remains multi-cultural today, despite a significant Indo-Fijian following among supporters. We cannot say that this applies to rugby to the same extent, but our interview data suggest that it is by no means an exclusive domain of indigenous Fijian men.

Our Indo-Fijian participants stressed that whilst it is only in recent decades that Indo-Fijian men have begun to play rugby in an organized fashion, many have always followed the game and/or played touch rugby as an informal recreational activity and, although it often goes unacknowledged, some have played rugby alongside indigenous Fijians and gained prominence.[5] That there has been active Indo-Fijian interest in the game is evident in the fact that five Indo-Fijian teams were in existence by the early 1990s.[6] Many of these early players came from villages and settlements where they interacted with their indigenous neighbours on a daily basis. The number of Indo-Fijian players gradually increased, leading to the existence of about 10 teams[7] by 2000. These teams organized competitions amongst themselves, creating their own 'Fiji Indo rugby',[8] which provided a separate but necessary entry point for Indo-Fijian youths not introduced to rugby in secondary schools (in contrast to indigenous Fijian schools with strong rugby traditions). In 2003, the Fiji Indo Rugby Union was established; it currently consists of eight to nine teams,[9] with approximately 180 registered players.[10]

Today, some domestic rugby sevens tournaments include a 'Fiji Indo' category (in addition to the 'open' i.e. mainstream, 'school', 'women's' and 'oldies' categories), indicative of the social status that Indo-Fijian rugby has gradually achieved to date. Furthermore, since 2009, Indo-Fijians have participated in open-category competitions by forming a 'national' Indo-Fijian seven-a-side team, with endorsement and support from the FRU (Figure 2). Similar plans are also being made for 15-a-side competitions. Whilst these activities and achievements are rarely documented or highlighted by the national media or academic literature, they nevertheless present a counter-hegemonic assertion that, as one of our participants noted, 'rugby is not only for [indigenous] Fijians. It's sending a message that "Yes, we can make our presence known"'.

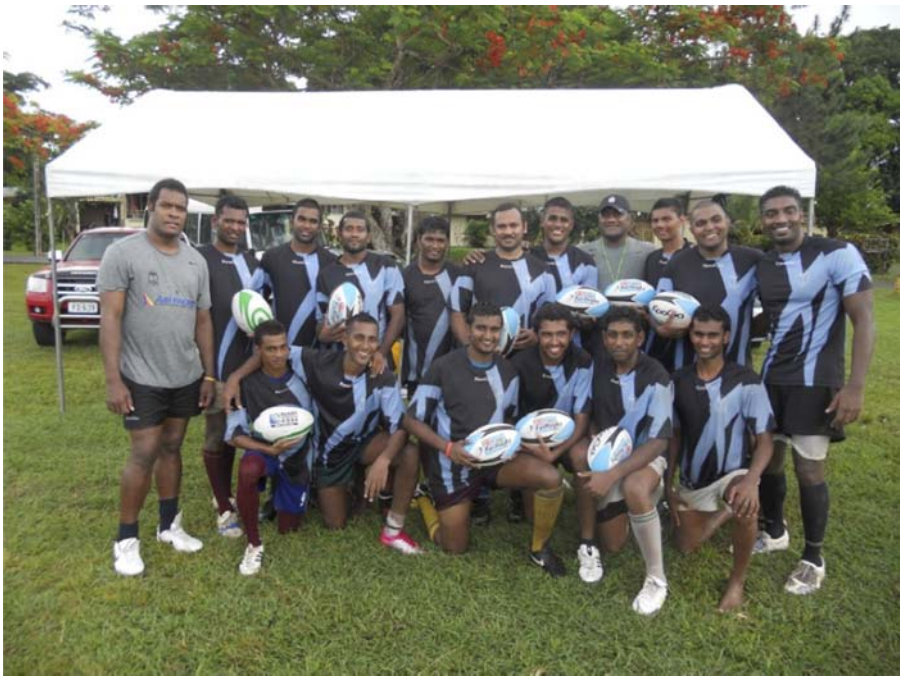

Figure 2. Participants at the first FRU-organised Fiji Indo Rugby training camp in 2011 (courtesy of the Fiji Indo Rugby Union).

One of the greatest challenges for Indo-Fijian rugby is the absence of a financial and social infrastructure. Since its emergence, Indo-Fijian rugby, especially at the club level, has received little support from external bodies, except for the short-lived transport and related assistance provided by the FRU in the early 2000s. Consequently, the players, coaches and officials have themselves covered almost the entire costs incurred by the game, often struggling to meet basic needs such as having jerseys: 'So, what we used were normal T-shirts, just something to wear. I got 12 of them and … had to spray-paint the numbers on them'. Despite its official expression of support, the resource-strapped FRU does not have a budget specifically allocated for Indo-Fijian rugby development, and its administrative officer doubles as the contact person largely out of personal interest and goodwill. The 'national' team is not provided with a national coach, health insurance, structured selection procedures or sustained training camps. Hence, beyond inclusion in the open category and some related support (such as occasional and short-term coaching clinics and training camps), Indo-Fijian rugby has not received tangible logistical, administrative or financial support from rugby bodies and, similarly, has been unable to attract any corporate sponsorship. This lack of resources has prevented Indo-Fijian rugby from expanding.

Another key obstacle is the lack of interest shown by local communities. Although the players receive active encouragement from their families, many Indo-Fijians offer only secondary support: 'Their interest is soccer'. An even greater challenge is posed by the negative sanction exercised by the wider communities. Our participants invariably spoke of their difficult experience of becoming 'a laughing stock' at tournaments:

> When they [indigenous Fijians] see an Indian playing they laugh at you because they think you are not fit, you're not [well] built … 'Oh, he's an Indian guy. He cannot play. Weak boy'.

> They make all kinds of sounds. They go back to the food things, like, 'Oh, roti [traditional Indian flat bread]!' … All these sarcastic comments. 'These people should play soccer, not rugby'. If you drop the ball, they say 'Oh, it's not a round ball, it's oval!'.

These examples illustrate the potency of the hegemonic discourse that defines rugby in terms of indigenous physical prowess and cultural tradition and invalidates Indo-Fijian claims for the sport on the basis of the (alleged) lack of such values and qualities. Hegemony operates both at the structural level, which manifests itself in the marginalization of Indo-Fijian rugby in the (lack of) distribution of institutional support and resources, and at the community level, where it is embodied in everyday acts of othering that informally, but powerfully, sanction against an alternative cultural definition of the game.

Importantly, however, the dominant discourse is never completely successful in silencing dissident voices. Indo-Fijian players' relentless pursuit of the sport in spite of the negative sanctions is an act of counter-hegemony *per se*. Moreover, the players continue to resist even the most formidable pressure:

> In Nadi [third largest conurbation in Fiji] early this year we were playing [an open category game] and we had one of the Indian guys playing in the team. The crowd was … trying to put down his morale. They were shouting from the side line, 'Oh, bhaiya' [Hindi word meaning 'brother'] … But when that fellow stood his ground and gave two or three tackles to a[n indigenous] Fijian guy, and the guy went not down but out of the field – he went flying off! – I turned around and saw all the spectators were quiet.

Such acts of counter-hegemony are not only motivated by the players' love of the sport, but are also enabled by their ability to imagine an alternative vision of the sport and ultimately an alternative social order that challenges hegemonic hierarchies and defines them as active agents of the cultural practice long associated with national pride. Indeed, our participants all spoke of their multi-cultural vision of a future Fiji rugby that would no longer necessitate separate categories based on ethnic groupings, and their earnest desire to be part of such a future:

> When I was young, soccer was only meant for Indians. But now you see it, and there are more Fijians and less Indians playing soccer. There has been a mixture. So, why can't it be the same in rugby? My perspective is, yes, it is important for me or other boys to play our national sport so when I retire I can say 'Yes, I played.' I keep on saying this; just one game, just one game will do it for me, if I get to wear the national jersey. Once. Get to go out onto the field. Once. That's enough for me. It means a lot to wear the jersey. Even just a game will do.

Whilst the attitude demonstrated in the above quotation may be described as 'transgressive' rather than directly oppositional, it nevertheless powerfully questions the totality of the seemingly undisputed dominant discourse. It is not alone in doing so.

Women's rugby: 'women have always played rugby'

Despite the powerful masculinist tradition in Fiji rugby, a closer examination of the sport reveals that this has been consistently and actively challenged by (largely indigenous Fijian) woman athletes. Whilst it is difficult to identify exactly when women's rugby began to be organized systematically, our participants explained that 'women have always played rugby' in Fiji. Even prior to the establishment of formal structures, women had organized themselves to play the game informally and casually. By the early 1990s, women were training and playing regularly, and by 1999/2000 they had established about six women's teams.[11] Although there was only one major domestic tournament (the Marist Sevens) that included a women's category, 'there was this community of women that

played games week in and week out'. In 2003, a women's squad had a first international tour to the Hong Kong Sevens, which was followed by other intermittent tours. Thus, women have been challenging the gender specificity of the game, even if officially undocumented or unacknowledged, for at least two decades, and possibly longer.

According to International Rugby Board (IRB) (2012) statistics, there are currently 270 senior female players and 100 teen players, making a total of 370 female players in Fiji. However, an elite-level women's rugby coach estimates that there are far more (500–600) senior women players, and that 'even in primary schools there are some girls playing rugby with boys'. Today there are five clubs[12] affiliated to the Fiji Women's Rugby Union that play both seven- and 15-a-side games. Recently, women's rugby has begun to receive greater media and official attention due to its notable achievements. In 2011, the national 'Fijiana' team won the Gold medal in women's rugby sevens at the Pacific Games, and in 2012 they qualified for the IRB Rugby World Cup Sevens 2013 by winning all of their matches at the Asian Women's Sevens Championship (Figure 3). In view of the inclusion of rugby sevens in the 2016 Olympics, the FRU officially supports women's rugby, provides a national coach and facilitates and finances national team training camps and tours. Women's rugby also benefits from an IRB position created in 2012 (based at the FRU), the Oceania Women's Rugby Development Officer.

Yet these achievements are the fruits of the players' early struggles over many years with limited or no external support. The newly created Oceania Women's Rugby Development Officer is the only fully paid position for women's rugby development in the entire Pacific island region (covering Samoa, Tonga and Papua New Guinea), and prior to its establishment, there was no institutional support. Women's rugby hence experiences many challenges similar to those faced by Indo-Fijian rugby. Unlike 'mainstream' men's rugby, which has a clear league structure (local clubs – provincial unions – the national union), 'for us, it's just from clubs to the national level. There is a big gap'. There is consequently a lack of a sufficiently consistent game schedule. The Fijiana team has no corporate sponsorship and receives minimal institutional support, in contrast to the Flying

Figure 3. The Fijiana winning the Asian Women's Sevens Championship in 2012 (source: Rugby World Cup Sevens 2013, 2012).

Fijians (their male counterparts), who are also without corporate sponsorship deals but receive a significant amount of FRU and central government funds (such as the F$2.3 million government grant for the 2011 Rugby World Cup) (FRU, n.d.). The Fijiana squad members currently do not sign contracts, and medical insurance policy and procedures have yet to be put in place. Consequently, the cost, burden and responsibilities of women's rugby development to date have fallen almost entirely on the players and coaches themselves.

Amongst other challenges they face, 'number one is the stigma that this is a man's game'. Whilst Indo-Fijian players receive moral support and encouragement from their families, most women players pursue the game in the face of severe negative sanctions not only from the wider communities but also from their own kin: 'Parents do not allow daughters to play rugby because it's seen as a men's game'. Notably, their challenge to the gender logic of the sport and to the broader gender norms of their society often invites critical scrutiny of their sexual orientation, meaning they are further subjected to homophobia. Community leaders and members 'point fingers at their parents and say "Your kid is playing rugby; she's a lesbian". So parents get angry and say, "Stop playing rugby because this is not what you've got to be"'. Continued non-compliance often results in societal ostracization:

> It's a sad story, the community thing. They think, 'Because your daughter is playing rugby, she's a lesbian.' And then the kid leaves her home. They roam the streets and bunk wherever they want to bunk. They go and stay at their friend's place for one night and then move again. It's like they're nomads.

Other women keep their pursuit hidden from their family: 'Some of them go to the extent of lying that they have classes on Saturdays, just to come and play'. Our participants observed that the severity of such social control has recently decreased as a result of the greater recognition attained by women's rugby. Nevertheless, many players continue to experience various forms of sanction on a daily basis.

In this regard, as with Indo-Fijian rugby, the act of pursuing the sport is in itself counter-hegemonic: 'women taking sport seriously is a feminist activity' (Griffin, 1998, p. 26). Women players do this at considerable cost. Unlike Indo-Fijian players, an overwhelming majority of these players are unemployed, and unlike indigenous male players, the sport does not (currently) present possibilities for a professional career. Yet they continue to claim their space in rugby by sacrificing much of their time, money and energy. Many players cannot afford the gym fee or the bus fare but 'they walk to the grounds. Some of them walk six, seven miles to come to town, every day, to train'. One participant spoke of the women's sacrifice in leaving home for the sport:

> Imagine, this is just club level. They leave home without any money, without any assurance that they will get to live in a place like home – no comfort, no security, no safety. They come together in one place [accommodation]. They take turns in going around asking for work.

Clearly, for these women, rugby constitutes a crucial, and even central, dimension of their life and their sense of self that is worthy of all sacrifice: 'All I do is for rugby. That's all I can think about. I eat well because I need to play well. Most of us, we do that. That's the drive for us'. As in the case of Indo-Fijian players, rugby is an arena not only for their continued subordination but also for an unrelenting assertion of their agency. In the worlds of an FRU officer who has been supporting Indo-Fijian rugby:

> Women's rugby, we get laughed at. Fiji Indo [rugby], we get laughed at. But take on the challenge. Take on the challenge. You might get laughed at now, but who's gonna laugh later on, in two, three years' time? They've got to give you the respect that you deserve.

The emergent discourses presented so far by Indo-Fijian and women players thus contest the hegemonic claim of Fiji rugby's intrinsic ethnic and gender specificity. These alternative voices may be contained within minority ('Fiji Indo', 'women's') categories that are defined by and against 'mainstream'/'malestream' rugby, but also bring into question the totality of the hegemonic discourse and hold out transformative potential.

Conclusion

We have examined the dominant discourse that has developed around rugby in Fiji since its colonial origins. Rugby is today widely regarded as much more than a sporting activity, a privileged cultural practice deeply grounded in the heritage of the *vanua*, especially the indigenous chiefly system, martial/masculine traditions and Christianity. The emergent literature on Fijian rugby has highlighted the sport's connections with these institutions and traditions as the basis of its indigenization, thereby outlining the contours of the dominant discourse. We have attempted a closer examination of these linkages by placing them in a wider socio-historical context. We have argued that the cultural anchoring of the game, as well as the unquestioned prestige that it has come to command, is profoundly implicated in the historical making of the colonial (and later post-colonial) hegemonic order in Fiji. Fiji's localized form of rugby emerged out of the dynamics of the colonial rule that rested on, amongst other things, a hegemonic alliance with the chiefly establishment and the church. Rugby thus developed as a hegemonic cultural practice – as a cultural expression and a medium of a hegemonic socio-political order embedded in particular social relations and hierarchies. That is, rugby has both reflected and reproduced the prevailing social relations in colonial and post-colonial Fiji.

However, we have also noted the importance not only of examining the dominant discourse, but also of taking account of its contested nature and the challenges presented by emerging and alternative discourses. Whilst we acknowledge the force of the hegemonic, cultural definition of Fiji rugby, we have argued that an exclusive focus on this is limiting, firstly because of its essentialist effect of fixing Fijian rugby players in a timeless 'tradition' and denoting that an immutable, primordial quality persistently prevails by appropriating rugby as its modern medium, and secondly because of its tendency to reproduce the asymmetrical relations of power inherent in the hegemonic order. That is, a preoccupation with the pre-colonial cultural origins and meanings of rugby conceals the multiplicity of meanings and realities of the game in contemporary Fiji; and the reproduction of the gendered and ethnicized nature of the game has the effect of muting the voices of women and Indo-Fijians in Fiji rugby.

In this article, we have attempted to deconstruct the dominant rugby discourse by shedding light on alternative and competing cultural meanings. Consequently we have shown that, to many players today, rugby is not only a modern expression of indigenous cultural heritage but also, and sometimes primarily, one of the few avenues open for alternative cultural self-expression. For Indo-Fijian and women players, rugby is a site of emergent, counter-hegemonic discourses that contest the binary opposition and hierarchy between the indigenous/masculine and the non-indigenous/feminine inherent in the dominant discourse. The experiences and voices of Indo-Fijian and women rugby players illustrate both the formidable power and the possible limits of hegemony. These players remain marginalized through their positioning as minority categories, defined by and against 'mainstream'/'malestream' rugby, which manifests itself as an uneven distribution of institutional support and resources and various, sometimes severe forms of negative social sanction. However, at the same time, their unrelenting pursuit of self-assertion

through the game constitutes a significant act of counter-hegemony, an expression of oppositional voices emanating from the social groups that have been excluded from the hegemonic rugby discourse as well as from the wider hegemonic social order.

The dominant discourse, with its powerful cultural legitimation, retains its hegemonic status today, warranting continued scholarly inquiry into its complexities and manifestations. Nevertheless, what the 'under-the-cultural-surface' discourses reveal is that hegemony is never total or static and, furthermore, is continuously challenged. As Raymond Williams (1977, pp. 113–4) puts it:

> The reality of any hegemony ... is that, whilst by definition it is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive. At any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in the society. ... It would be wrong to overlook the importance of works and ideas which, whilst clearly affected by hegemonic limits and pressures, are at least in part significant breaks beyond them, which may again in part be neutralized, reduced, or incorporated, but which in their most active elements nevertheless come through as independent and original.

Our discussion is intended to add to the existing literature a more holistic perspective on Fiji rugby as a social phenomenon that shapes, and is shaped by, the dynamics of wider social relations. Like other cultural practices and experiences, sport constitutes a 'sort of constant battlefield' (Hall, 1981, p. 233) or an arena of 'cultural battle' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 348), 'pitting the powerful against the less powerful in a competition to define the dominant' (Molnar & Kelly, 2013, p. 87). Our aim, therefore, has been to illuminate the interaction and contestation between a multiplicity of (dominant as well as emergent) discourses, interests and social groups in the cultural arena of Fiji rugby to gain a greater understanding of a game that is indeed much more than a recreational sport.

Notes

[1] In setting up the structure of colonial rule, the British colonists incorporated prominent chiefs of southeast Viti Levu (the main island) and the eastern islands (Durutalo, 1986a, 1986b; Norton, 1990).

[2] Fiji has since experienced another military coup in 2006, with the country under military rule to date. However, in this latest coup, the military made a decisive move away from its traditional role associated with ethno-nationalism by overthrowing a government elected with the majority support of indigenous Fijians and claiming the eradication of ethnic politics as one of its primary motives (Fraenkel & Firth, 2007).

[3] Subsequently, the FRU Board made the decision to reinstate the practice ('Cibi stays', 2009). In 2012, *cibi* was replaced with a new war dance called *i-bole* ('New War Dance', 2012).

[4] Prasad (2008) argues that football was originally introduced to and played actively by indigenous Fijians in the western region, especially, in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

[5] For instance, Joseph Sadal was selected into the national under-21 team in 2002/3 and Jack Prasad (whose father is Indo-Fijian) played for the national team between 2004 and 2007 and currently plays for the British Army team. More recently, in 2013, Rocky Khan (whose father is Indo-Fijian) became the first Fijian of Indian descent to become an All Black.

[6] These are the Lautoka, Nadi, Nadroga, Naitasiri, and Nasinu teams.

[7] These are the Lautoka, Nadi, Naitasiri, Namosi, Nasinu, University of the South Pacific, Highlanders and Sigatoka teams, as well as two teams in Suva.

[8] Formerly known as 'Indo-Fijian rugby' it was renamed "Fiji Indo rugby" some years ago due to the preference shown by the FRU.

[9] About half of these teams operate actively. These are the Nadi, Naitasiri, Lautoka, and Wainivula (formerly known as Nasinu) teams.

[10] Indo-Fijian rugby was initially developed by 'full' Indo-Fijians whose parents were both of Indian descent. The eligibility rules for this category have since been contested and changed, and the only formal requirement today is that one parent of the player should be Indo-Fijian.

[11] These are: Queen Victoria School (Bluez), Marist Sea Hawks, Nausori, Serua, Nadi and the University of the South Pacific.

[12] These clubs are Queen Victoria School Bluez, Marist Sea Hawks, Striders, Ricketts and Central Chiefs.

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