[Untangling complexity: The ethnic, gender and class dimensions in Fijian sport and society]

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ABSTRACT:

The Pacific Island nation of Fiji, spanning 100s of islands, has been characterised by both geographical and ethnic divisions between, mainly, Indigenous Fijians and Fijians of Indian descent. The latter took shape in quite blatant forms in the island's historical tendency towards ethnic politics but has also been enacted across the island's sporting traditions. Today, while ethnic politics still exists to a degree, encouraged by ethnopolitical entrepreneurs, the reality is more nuanced. Divisions remain not only along the popularised lines of ethnicity but also across hierarchical, socio-economic class and gender boundaries that have received somewhat less scholarly attention. This nuance is visible in the performance and packaging of Fijian sport and through the meanings that local people attach to it. This chapter, therefore, draws upon the experience of ethnographic fieldwork within and across Fijian subcultures with a focus on rugby and soccer. Inclusive of participation and interviews with diverse Fijian sporting stakeholders from differing intersections of local sport and society, the key threads above will be untangled to reveal a more three-dimensional and collective impression of contemporary Fiji.

KEYWORDS:

(Please supply up to 6 keywords for your Chapter)

1. Fiji
2. Social class
3. Hegemony
4. Gender
5. Critical theory
6. Ethnicity

Introduction

The following chapter seeks to untangle some complexities of modern Fiji and the role of sport herein – both in shaping and reflecting the realities of Fijian sport and society.

Beginning with the historical context, I chart the journey towards modernity in Fiji wherein ethno-nationalist frames of ethnic division, masculinity and rugby remain dominant. The

chapter adds further nuance to this picture by looking at the concepts of gender and class in Fiji and the role of sport herein. This discussion draws from recent research in this area along with a re-analysis of primary research conducted in Fiji across three months and two visits in 2015 (*A note from the editor: The original manuscript had a reference here, which has been removed for the purpose of blind peer review. It will be placed back after the review*). The reason, this initial research, which focused on ethnic division in Fijian sport and primarily on male sporting cultures, in many ways, embodied the blind spots of gender and social class prevalent regarding modern Fiji.

The process of re-engagement and comparison reveals how sociological nuances can be muted and obscured through the management of popular sporting discourses. In this respect, the chapter draws from critical theoretical lenses that follow a translation of Prost who extolled (broadly) that, "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes" (cited in Allan 2001). Similar sentiments were echoed by Mills (1959) who called for the "systematic reflection" of intellectual work, especially given the new perspectives and knowledge(s) one might have been subjected to since. To adopt a fresh perspective, the chapter begins with a re-examination of Fiji's historical context before addressing some important counter-narratives around gender and social class in Fiji sport. The chapter finishes with a look to the future and those who are disrupting these discourses in an effort towards slow but necessary change.

Fijian context – ethnic politics?

With a population of approximately 920,000 living across 332 islands, 110 of which are inhabited, Fiji is the second most populous Pacific Island nation (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2017). The islands can be described as geographically disparate, but they share collective isolation in a vast ocean. For many, Fiji connotes tropical beaches, blue skies, smiling locals,

fire dancing, traditional Fijian dress etc. However, beyond these nostalgic images and rituals socially constructed by the global tourist industry (Kanemasu, 2013), Fiji has had a volatile modern history. The nation has undergone four military coups since its independence from British rule in 1970 (MacNaught, 1979; Ramesh, 2008). At the core of these conflicts was a perceived acrimony between Indigenous Fijians (Indigenous Fijians) and those who were migrants or progeny of migrants – most notably Fijians of Indian descent (hereafter Indo-Fijians). Yes some of the nuance here lies in discord around class and access to resources as will be discussed (Durutalo 1986).

Historical legacies and cultural distinctiveness have enabled ethnic-based grouping, but they do not always determine the extent of such divisions at the community level. Across Fiji, Indigenous and Indo-Fijians work and live side by side (Naidu, 2016). There are also substantial populations of both rural and urban Indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians, with most recent estimates suggesting that both groups live in comparable levels of poverty (Narsey, 2019) Nevertheless, intergroup differences persist in many aspects of the society, with Indo-Fijians dominant in the entrepreneurial sphere and Indigenous Fijians in areas of civic power such as the police and the military. This creates a 'polydominal' system of power and racial attitudes – where no group holds both economic and political hegemony. Consequently a 'privileged marginality' is enabled, wherein individuals are seemingly custodians of one area of social life but feel inferior in another and this has perhaps limited movements towards change (Larson, 2013). This is, in part, due to class inequality and impoverishment that cuts across ethnic lines. For example, Indigenous Fijians have found it hard to capitalise on land ownership – with many moving to more urban areas in search of work – while Indo-Fijians area suffering with a legacy of marginalisation from positions of governmental, military and civic power (Naidu 2009). These dynamics can be laid at the feet of Fiji's highly influential colonial past.

From 1879-1916, it is estimated that around 60,000 indentured labourers were brought over from India and other areas to work primarily in the sugar cane fields (Lal, 2013). The workers agreed to come based on the promise of freedom and access to equal rights after five years of labour to pay off their passage from the sub-continent (Gillion, 1962). Thus, the ethnic makeup of the Fijian Islands was drastically altered for good, with two large ethnically based populations, the Indigenous Fijians – sometimes known as *iTaukei* (land owners) - and those who came from South Asia - referred to as Indo-Fijians, Fijians of Indian descent, Indians or also simply as Fijians. Equal rights and representation for the latter, however, were somewhat elusive, despite further waves of wealthier Indians who arrived in the 1960s (Lal, 2012; Trnka, 2008).

The indentured labourers were meant to be a short-term solution but were imported with a lack of foresight; most stayed after indenture ended in 1916, setting up their own farms and businesses on the West of the main island Viti Levu and around Labasa in Vaua Levu (Gillion, 1962). They found a cultural foothold, increased in numbers, and rose to greater prominence in the entrepreneurial spheres while continuing to follow their own religions – Hindu, Muslim, Christian or Sikh. Between 1921 and 1960, the Indo-Fijian population quadrupled, peaking at 50.5% of Fiji's total population (Lane 2012). It was around this time that a fresh wave of migrants arrived with entrepreneurial ambitions and soon began to rival Europeans in the dominance of the economy at the top end despite the bulk remaining in relative poverty (Leuprecht, 2012). Lately, indigenous Fijians make up around 57% of the population with Indo-Fijians around 37% (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

Thus began the emergence of not only ethnic but a degree of economic separatism in Fiji. This was somewhat encouraged by a colonial narrative - to maintain and preserve the "Fijian way of life" from what Ratu Sir Lala Sukana, the chiefly leader, termed 'the great octopus of the modern world' (MacNaught, 1979, p. 1-2). But instead, once the British left,

Indigenous Fijians found they were ill-equipped to deal with a rapidly globalising, neo-liberal world unlike their Indo-Fijian countrymen now skilled in industry and who were keen to take advantage of their newfound autonomy and work their way out of indentured poverty (see: Lal, 2012; McNaught, 1979).

Economic and numerical power did not equate to political power, however. Following independence from Britain in 1970, many Indigenous islanders felt that their identity was being threatened as the sizeable Indo-Fijian population looked to capitalise on their new access to open democracy (Newland, 2013). What began as a solution to labour needs had now snowballed into a perceived threat to Indigenous national identity. Many Indigenous Fijians were wary of independence, viewing it as an opportunity for the Indo-Fijians to exploit them, a fear exacerbated by ethnopolitical entrepreneurship which entrenched these belief systems superseding attempts at class solidarity between groups (Durutalo 1986). In many ways, it was - the Indian community had been side-lined from power for some time and saw independence as an opportunity to gain representation (Trnka, 2008).

However, ethnic division in Fiji has become a less overt characteristic of the islands due to the absence of open conflict and the cultural hegemony of Indigenous Fijians (Akram-Lodhi, 2016). Yet the cannon of Fijian politics is still skewed towards ethnicity and Indigenous primacy often at the expense of more muted yet no less important issues and voices. In terms of women in Fiji, for example, the 2017 Census revealed that the labour force participation rate was 76.4% for males compared to 37.4% for females (NEC 2018, p. 27). When combined with worryingly consistent statistics (around 70%) regarding the degree to which women are subjected to some form of violence in their lifetime (see: Fiji Women's Crisis Centre 2023), it reveals a sense of the barriers faced by all groups of women who, along with a lack of political representation, experience a life on the margins.

More recently, in the run-up to the December 2022 elections, there were fears that wounds might be re-opened in a campaign that occasionally reverted to ethnic politics. Yet economic issues and a desire for change due to post-Covid recovery and skyrocketing costs won out in part due to its reliance on overseas tourism (Keen 2022). A coalition of three parties—the People's Alliance Party (PAP), the National Federation Party (NFP), and the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA)—formed a People's Coalition government, with 29 seats (O'Brien 2023). This is led by the PAP, which has claimed to bring about change and strengthen Indigenous governance and livelihoods (Keen 2022), but ultimately the focus is on economic stability.

While recent elections have shown a slight disaggregation of ethnic voting (Nakagawa 2020), yet stereotypes still play strongly in the minds of the populace. Indigenous islanders see themselves as family-orientated, collective people – Christians who believe in exchange and community hierarchy echoing earlier social structures. Indo-Fijians, in contrast, are portrayed as individualist in nature, driven by materialism, profit and wealth. In many ways, Indo-Fijians reciprocate, viewing themselves as enterprising and hard-working while seeing the Indigenous Fijians as idle, less productive, and brutish (Guinness & Besnier, 2016). However, such distinctions are becoming more blurred due to the continued urbanisation of Fiji as the younger generations flow towards built-up areas in search of employment (Phillips & Keen, 2016). That said, ethnopolitical entrepreneurs have still relied these insecurities and fears to win votes (Fraenkel 2019), and sport is complicit in maintaining this distance.

Sport in a 'divided' Fiji

Rugby's connection to the Indigenous Fijians way of life is reflected in its participation which, like the government and military, is overwhelmingly Indigenous. Rugby has become an emblematic platform for muscular Indigenous identity, autonomy, masculinity and

postcolonial resistance not just at home but internationally (Kanemasu 2022; Presterudstuen & Schieder, 2016). But predating rugby was the introduction of Christianity to the islands, which was deftly interwoven with local culture and politics. Christian belief became associated with power and political ascendency, due to its use in forging alliances and currying favour with the colonial hierarchy (see: Ryle 2016). This Christianisation of Fiji has had a sustained impact on the nation today – influencing a social order that is built on the collusion between pre-modern patriarchy and an indigenised version of muscular Christianity.

Aside from rugby, soccer is arguably the second most popular game in Fiji. However, compared to rugby there is much less discourse on Fijian soccer (James, 2015), again a reflection of rugby's dominance. Although soccer in Fiji enjoys a relatively mixed base of participation and support 'Football in Fiji takes on a racially charged outlook that it is an Indo-Fijian sport' (Prasad 2013, p. 25). This perception is due to the sport's history and the creation of 'racial myths and narratives of ethnocentrism' (ibid). These were brought about due to the separate development of the Indigenous Fijians and the Indo-Fijians and influenced heavily by the machinery of colonialism that was segregationist in nature.

The Indigenous Fijian elite were the initial agents of soccer's popularity in Fiji as their sons were enrolled in the more sought-after Christian mission schools from the late 1890s that all favoured soccer as their prescribed/main sport. Later their loyalties began to slide towards rugby as they found, and were shown, how elements of the full-contact sport meshed well with heteronormative archetypes around tribalism and traditional hierarchies (Presterudstuen & Schieder, 2016). Thus, a split in sporting cultures was manifested in tandem with the split in Fiji, with the Indigenous islanders turning/being pushed towards rugby and leaving Indo-Fijians with soccer. Class and 'hierarchy' as will be discussed, is also a factor that splits both soccer and rugby along ethnic lines as rugby was traditionally

associated with the chiefly elite, who pursued rugby to prove their physical prowess to the colonial administration. At the same time, soccer became known as a comparatively 'low' sport because of its popularity with the indentured labourers brought over from India to work the cane fields (Prasad, 2013).

The status given to rugby is in tune with an elite ethno-national project. It is well known that a 'national' sport formed around a singular ethno-national typology can be displayed and confirmed through international competition (Bairner, 2015). Fiji displays its post-colonial ethno-nationalism through its active use of rugby to display an image of Indigenous Fiji to the rest of the world, when in fact there is a demographic reality that is at odds with this impression. The *cibi* (ceremonial chanting and dancing before games), customary celebrations, and symbolism associated with the naming and branding of teams, i.e. The Fiji Bati, evokes rugby as the flag bearer for, and key in the dissemination of, Indigenous Fiji. Many elites use sports teams and competitions in a similar way, ensuring they are acted out, played, and branded to encompass a dominant projection of nationhood worldwide (Bairner, 2015).

The role of sport in categorising groups in Fiji has and continues to have, an effect on intergroup relations. Narratives about Indigenous Fijians as warrior custodians of chiefly power, and Indo-Fijians as hard-working and business-minded were formed by British rule and given permanence in contemporary discourse (Macnaught, 1979; Naidu, 2016). Indo-Fijians are also categorised in opposition to the islander identity; their progression in the education and business sectors fuels stereotypes that they are 'selfish' and 'greedy' (BLIND 2017). Again, sport plays a part, with soccer's label as 'Indian' speaking to stereotypes of Indo-Fijians as 'tactical' and 'quick-witted', as soccer is considered a more tactical and strategic game than the collision sport of rugby (ibid.).

Soccer, is given secondary treatment as an 'Indian sport', and is less part of the popular, or 'Fijian', discourse (BLIND et al., 2018). Yet the Indo-Fijian character of the FFA and soccer's position as Fiji's second largest sport means that this game allows Indo-Fijians a place at the mainstream sporting table. Yet there is Indigenous Fijian dominance of sport management in Fiji's other main sporting bodies such as netball, volleyball, athletics, and the sports commission itself. Indigenous Fijian players also make up most elite competitors, so although soccer is Indo-Fijian in character, the face of Fijian sport more broadly is largely Indigenous.

However, a consequence of the above histories and the contemporary political landscape is that a preoccupation with ethnicity means that further sociological issues receive less attention. Issues around gender and social class are conjoined in both their size, scale, and exclusion from popular discourse. This is somewhat rectified below.

Theory and Method

Earlier (BLIND, 2017) research into Fijian sport and society was concerned with ethnic separatism in Fijian sport and benefited from an ethnographic research design, chosen for its fortitude in giving a sense of life and realism to research contexts the world over (Gobo 2008). While traditional ethnographies are often measured in years, due to pressures of time and finances I devised an approach labelled 'Short-Term-Ethnography' that was contextually rich yet comparatively ephemeral (see: BLIND et al., 2019). Data were collected during two trips to the Islands, one 'ethnographic visit' over 10 days in 2014 wherein I laid the groundwork – visited sites and met key gatekeepers – before a longer, 10-week, trip in 2015. I made use of my experience of sport for development and peace work across several global lower and middle-income contexts (LMICs) and my own reasonable sporting acumen. I lived, ate, trained, and socialised with a diverse set of Fijians across geographic (around Viti Levu, Vanua Levu and Taveuni), class and gendered bounds.

Through such approaches, my mission was to devote serious time to the exploration of naturally occurring data to build a 'thick description' of Fijian sport and society through the foregrounding of local agency (Geertz, 1994). This was achieved through the employment of further data collection tools such as semi-structured interviews (n47 - 14 women, 32 men) with sporting stakeholders from decision-making to the community level. These conversations were informed by a *Talanoa* methodology - an informal and un-pressurised form of storytelling and conversation common across the Pacific Islands (Vaioleti, 2006). Counterintuitively my position as an outsider allowed many doors to be opened, as Fijians shared their stories and lives with me showing a willingness to educate me on their way of life. This position allowed a measured interplay that disrupted the monopoly of interpretation, as I discussed emergent findings with locals in a way that was both open and co-constructive.

For our discussion, critical theory is employed in re-analysing this initial data set and overlying this analysis with more contemporary research so that we may chart both the changes in Fijian sport and society and better understand its nuances. Critical theory itself emerged in opposition to state-centred (realist) analytical frameworks that privileged the role of states in shaping national and international world order (Moolakkattu, 2009). Originating in the Frankfurt school (Jay 1973), Critical Theory is a collection of thought processes that seek to surpass imperial abuse by analysing it's social and philosophical underlay with the goal of rebuilding (Horkheimer 1975). The approach taken here utilises the more contemporary theory of Linklater (2007) that considers the cultural and governance structures that have given permanence to class-based exclusion. In refocusing on civil society this theory borrows from Gramscian notions of 'hegemony' and how ruling blocs work actively to preserve dominance through the a networked imposition of dominance in many forms. This is achieved through the manipulation of sources and popular cultural domains that win consent for socioeconomic (power) structures of the populous (Gramsci, 1971). Critical theory

proposes dialectical reason that challenges reductionist instrumentalist thought which simplifies the social world to just one dimension when in reality these worlds are multi-dimensional, in flux and ultimately complex (Fuchs, 2017). It is through the revealing and understanding of (hidden) complexities that alternative truths to those predominantly purveyed come to the fore, allowing for the realisation of alternative realities or counter-hegemony (Gramsci, 1971).

If critical theory is our guiding philosophy, then critical discourse analysis (CDA) is our tool. CDA teaches us to readdress the semiotics of words and powerful discourses similarly, to better understand the role of ideology in discourse, level normative critiques and reveal disempowered narratives within (Fairclough, 2013). Discourse can be harnessed by the powerful to curtail and finesse people's values and beliefs in such a way as to bolster the current power status quo (Bloor & Bloor, 2013). Emblems and cultural artefacts, such as sport, have proven particularly potent in doing just this, protecting hegemonic gender (McGannon, 2016) and social class (Moustakas, 2023) hierarchies the world over. This approach allows for the re-analysis of this initial data set through a more critical lens and removes the emphasis on ethnic separatism that coloured the initial study. Through this, a better understanding of the contemporary realities around social class and gender can be elucidated where obscured, beginning with gender

Gender

Fiji's chiefly history, subsumed by colonial domination and a tumultuous post-independence political journey have grabbed many of the headlines and indeed the attention of scholars. To a degree, these are historical narratives penned predominantly by men and via the male gaze. Indeed, the initial research that informs this chapter fell victim to such bias, conceived as it was to charter the role of sport in Fijian intergroup relations with a focus on male sporting

domains across the islands mainly.[1] However, this is changing. In the past when one thought of Fijian sport, it would have been difficult to avoid images of the men's (sevens) rugby teams, and to a lesser extent the male soccer team. As discussed, this was partly intentional, and to a degree understandable – an LMIC leveraging what cultural capital it can to assert itself on the world stage. Yet a closer look at Fijian sport and its many strata and subcultures reveals a more nuanced reality.

Beginning with rugby, Kanemasu & Molnar (2013) have highlighted how rugby has been elevated to the central stage for a masculine ethno-national identity and has been for some time. However, Kanemasu (2022) highlights a change: In the Tokyo 2021(0) summer Olympics, the Fijian women's sevens team the 'Fijianna', took home bronze – Fiji's third-ever medal at the games. This is even more astonishing given that women's rugby was only integrated into provincial rugby structures in 2018. The latter is unsurprising given the thoughts shared by women in 2015 who (at the time) were current and ex-players women rugby players in 2015: *'we are expected to stay home'* (Kerry)

> Well I think, and this is my personal opinion, I think that FRU has never really considered women playing rugby. They have only started to take it seriously now because it is an Olympic sport. Since it's become an Olympic sport we have been taken seriously…. there is no coaches, no equipment and stuff [at games] you get comments from the spectators, they shout things like 'what are you doing here; you should be at home cooking' (Akisi)

The recognition of Rugby Sevens as an Olympic sport was an important step for Fiji and its government's mission to employ the sport as part of a broader soft power project. Indeed, from the discussion between myself and the women rugby players above in 2015 to the research conducted by Kanemasu (2022), there is a noticeable shift in how women's rugby

[1] While this bias was noted in the limitations of the research, gender and the various intersections related to it emerged in the eventual findings. Yet the bias remained across the centra narrative and, on reflection, removed some important nuances from the study.

and its participants are being treated in the popular discourse in modern Fiji. From workers and families stopping to specifically watch women's rugby to the medal win being commemorated on a $7 banknote, the victory and subsequent shift in public opinion 'is the latest and greatest victory in the women's counter-hegemonic contestation over rugby nationalism' (ibid: 9). However, despite Indigenous women's success in rugby and weightlifting (theguardian 2022), the reality is that this attention/encouragement has not spread to many other areas of women's sport and physical education (PE) or to other areas of women's rights. Despite a vibrant history of women's rights advocacy across the islands women in Fiji still experience life on the margins both in terms of political representation and in their own homes (see: Biersack et al., 2016). The most reliable recent statistics show that 64% of women across Fiji have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from their partner in their lifetimes and 24% in the past 12 months since the survey was conducted (Fiji women's crisis centre 2013)[2].

Women are subject to intersectional oppression along the lines of class and ethnicity the world over, Fiji is no different. My research in 2015 also highlighted the realities of Indo-Fijian women's absence from the 'Fijian' sporting narrative. Travelling around the islands and spending time training with local teams, observing PE lessons and attending rugby and football tournaments along with girls' multi-sport events, Indo-Fijian women were conspicuous in their absence (see BLIND et al., 2019). An extract from these findings highlights the issues faced by women labelled as part of this group:

> It's not that they are not allowed [to play] it's just that they are never interested in sport… they are the managers or the administrators of the team (Ellie, Indigenous [woman]).
>
> The majority of Indo-Fijian girls are not allowed by their parents to play sports in PE classes. Parents must sign a consent form … allowing or disallowing their daughters

[2] This was the last national survey of its kind depicting the structural problems identified herein.

> to play sports … Most parents would disallow. In addition to [physical] safety concerns, many parents have the traditional belief that girls should stay indoors. (Sangeeta, Indo-Fijian [woman])

The above quotes represent two key barriers for Indo-Fijian women, first the stereotyping around their interest/suitability to play sport and second the cultural norms that they must overcome. The dominance of Indigenous Fijian men, foremost, and then indigenous women of these spaces feed socio-cultural perceptions that weigh heavily on budding athletes before they even enter the field of play. This marginalisation has fed a cyclical stereotype loop that 'equates indigeneity with physical and political power, placing non-indigenous women in a subordinate position within postcolonial corporeal politics' (BLIND et al., 2019, p. 16).

More recent research has given Indo-Fijian women, including the obstacles they face and the benefits of overcoming them, further recognition (Balram, 2022). It was found that Indo-Fijian women who managed to participate in PE, physical activity or a sport resisted 'traditional gender constructs, racism, and Fijian masculinities' such practices were also shown to be central in disrupting Fijian gender/masculinity hierarchies that regularly placed Indo-Fijian women at the bottom (ibid, p. 11). While progress has been made concerning women's sport in Fiji, the sub-text here is that, in part because of their rugby successes, Indigenous women receive more recognition and Indo-Fijian women remain by and large absent from sporting spaces and prevailing discourses. Looking again at a long conversation I had with an Indo-Fijian women field hockey player (aged 20) in 2015, I remain struck by her comments about the potential for change:

> I would actually start with the primary school because that's where children properly learn ….[at the moment] doing PE classes 90% of the girls won't even change, they will just sit. Especially the smart ones (Victoria).

That intelligence becomes a part of this picture is notable. Due to the history of indenture in Fiji and the realities regarding the dearth of land ownership among the Indo-Fijian community, there has long been an emphasis on hard work and education through fear of

falling into poverty (see also: Balram 2022). In many ways, sporting pursuits for Indo-Fijian women (and men) have fallen victim to this emphasis. The sporting sphere is emblematic of this logic also. This is a dynamic that impacts all women in Fiji who, as discussed, are greatly afflicted with emotional, physical, and sexual violence. During a conversation with a local women's rights activist in 2015, she had this to say about women in Fijian sport more generally:

> There [is a] body image issues so that's why girls don't want to play sport because they don't want to look fat or look awkward. So, when they see other women playing sport and they feel confident and this transports into their relationships with others as well, including men, it teaches them good negotiation skills. For example, negotiating around sex like those kind of things…getting girls to understand that you have an ability to negotiate, and this negotiation should not just be about negotiating for pay (Pricilla).

Returning to the language of critical theory, dominant principles, values, and beliefs in Fijian sport reflect gender power dynamics and while this is changing in some areas (Kanemasu 2022), women from all groups are reticent to enter sporting spaces freely and, by extension, receive the bodily empowerment imbued. A situation compounded regarding Indo-Fijian women. An excerpt from Balram et al (2022) highlights that this negotiation is ongoing, revealing the intersectional oppressions heaped on Indo-Fijian women:

> I was keen to try out javelin but was told by my iTaukei sports teacher that it was dangerous for me and that I should try something else, whereas the iTaukei girls were allowed to freely throw javelin like superheroes. No one made any effort to teach me how to throw a javelin (Roshini, Indo-Fijian).

Here within the dynamic of a girls-only PE lesson, broader stereotypes around ethnicity are allowed to flourish, dissuading Indo-Fijian women from physical activity and, potentially, Indigenous women from more academic pursuits. Indo-Fijian women find themselves marginalised due to their Indian ancestry, their gender and perceptions of sporting acumen. The perpetuation of these hegemonic norms could well feed wider narratives that prevent groups of women from transcending their socio-economic status.

Social class

Class is another important aspect of modern Fiji that has been obscured by a discursive preoccupation with ethno-nationalism and division. However, it would be a mistake to consider social class in Fiji through a solely Western lens – with its macro-economic connotations along with its histories of class struggle – as 'class' dynamics in Fiji are very much a product of its unique history and make-up (see: Toren 2020). It is perhaps these complexities inherent in Fiji's social realities that have made it such an uneasy point of discussion. For example, Indigenous Fiji's rich chiefly history is characterised by internal hierarchies that vary according to region and urban/rural locations. Whereas, within the Indo-Fijian community, there are remnants of a traditional South Asian caste system that undergird socio-cultural life. Interestingly sport can be reflective of these dynamics in terms of participation and performance at the elite level, which is dominated by Indigenous Fijian men and women (BLIND 2020).

For Indo-Fijians there are very strong familial pressures on them to focus on study and to achieve success and wealth – meaning for many that sport is often seen as a waste of time. This is how Victoria (Indo-Fijian) explained a broad Indo-Fijian absence from certain sports: "*I would say that Indian parents think a lot so maybe that's the reason … Yes! It's the thinking!*" This 'thinking' deprioritises sport on a list topped by education, starting a family and earning a decent living. An Indo-Fijian soccer coach and head teacher gave his opinion:

> For the Indigenous Fijians it's more of a free life for them you know. But for the Indians at that age (adolescence), they are more concentrated on not playing sports; their concentration is based on their studies, they are looking at career paths for their lifelong process … sports might be distracting (Sanjiv).

This suggests a fundamental difference in upbringing that socialises both groups into having different aspirations, expectations, and roles, which are generally accepted as part of 'the way things are' in Fiji. Yet, despite an emphasis here on ethnicity that rears its head when one considers the makeup of elite teams (predominantly Indigenous) for example. Sport, particularly rugby 7s fandom, can be a source of unity. Indeed, ethnic binaries have dissipated over time, only to be reignited by orchestrated ethnic polarization which, like the colonial administration before them, seeks to divide and conquer in Fiji's political economy (Fraenkel 2019). As a women rugby player explained: '*Yeah you will see that the Fijians and the Indians are mixed...there is no division, only when politics get involved, when it comes to politics the division arises'* (Vika).

A 2013 report began to see the blurring of ethnic lines and the emergence of class solidarity when they concluded 'Increasingly, how an individual relates to members of their own and other ethnic groups depends more on their education and socio-economic status than their ethnic identity or gender' (Naidu et al., 2013, p. 4). That said a critical view of Fiji's popular sport infrastructures allows one to see its instrumentality in the maintenance of elite hegemony and narratives of ethno-separatism despite a somewhat shared economic existence.

While reliable statistics are hard to come by due to the difficulties in gathering such data across the 110 inhabited islands and the lack of communication networks in some places, recent reports suggest that around 75% of those living in poverty are reportedly Indigenous Fijian (ABC 2023). It is worth noting that such poverty is likely to be more widely discussed in the prevailing Indigenous ethno-nationalist populist cannon than Indo-Fijian struggles. In terms of the latter, however, most recent calculations show comparable levels of deprivation within urban areas with rural level of Indo-Fijian poverty lower (see Narsey 2019). Indeed, a recent UN impact assessment of Covid-19 in Fiji (2020) highlighted that people living in urban areas are more than twice as likely to be living in poverty than those in rural areas. As

rural dwellings tend to be Indigenous more than Indo-Fijian, a complexity emerges. Perhaps one in which both of Fiji's major groups share comparable levels of poverty in different areas. I visited a village on the island of Taveuni and, sitting on the floor of the chief's house – where people met to talk, smoke and consume kava[3] - I spoke with an Indigenous woman at length on this subject:

> Well most of the Indo-Fijians living with us here, most of them they have a good life, they earn more than what we earn us real Fijians… they earn more than what we do…they put a lot of emphasis on education? Maybe because they stay in Fiji they do their best because they are not in charge whereas the [Indigenous] Fijians just laze around because we don't care because we own the Fiji Islands (laughs). Any money or not we have land, we have a place to plant and earn money from there eh?...maybe we need another election - (Lusi)

This is an important extract which denotes again how a preoccupation with ethnicity can obscure underlying disenchantments with the overarching socio-economic reality. A concern with ethnicity and deference to traditional hierarchical structures are overarching. A conversation I had with an ex-Fiji national soccer player (Indigenous) at the time illuminates further: '*Some things need to be addressed in the village life and in sports, in the village life, some people here are very poor'* (John). Due to these realities, sport moves beyond past time and is viewed as a stepping stone out of poverty for young men (mainly) and the communities that bore them. Back in Taveuni Joe reflects: '*The purpose of sports is in my Village here. We want to develop the skills and go overseas and play so that they can earn money and support our families'*.

Rugby in Fiji, like professional sports globally, acts as a beacon for young men who wish to transcend their social status. The money available for a select few is not only for themselves but in many cases to support their communities at home. This is a situation that exacerbates the pull of rugby as a career in Fiji that the FRU along with professional teams across Japan and Europe have exploited to farm some of the best talent across Fiji and the

[3] Kava is a drink which has the look and consistence of muddy water, it is derived from the Kava root and induces mild narcotic effects. It is consumed both ceremoniously and leisurely across the South Pacific.

region more broadly. In his regard, the bodily labour of the athletes is used to feed both the national economy and the political prestige of decision-makers. Therefore, the Fijian body becomes an object/commodity of the globalised neoliberal labour market (see: Bohman et al., 2005), one which has a history of resource extraction from the region (Mackay & Guinness, 2019). The exposure to lucrative global competitions and leagues through the spread of satellite television and the internet coupled with ethno-racial stereotypes around sporting versus academic acumen discussed above, can have the effect of foregrounding the pursuit of an unlikely rugby career (ibid). This supersedes, perhaps, more integrated class solidarity as a route to status transcendence within and across Fijian communities.

Narratives of ethnic separatism in sport and Rugby's symbiosis with Fiji the nation renders it as a protected space and one that projects a sense of ownership onto wider Indigenous society. In 2015, I trained with a men's rugby team for three months that had 2 Indo-Fijian players, a rarity. An Indigenous teammate was proud of their involvement; he believed that they were one of the "*friendlier teams"*, as Indo-Fijian boys often faced difficulties: *When they play [other teams] they get it! All the other boys are like yeah let's kill them* (Jay).

Such beliefs feed widely held perceptions around the strength of Indigenous Islanders versus the weakness and aversion to the physical exertion of Indo-Fijians, which reinforces the story of rugby as Indigenous, Fiji as a rugby nation and therefore Fiji as Indigenous (see: BLIND 2020). In this vein, rugby has become a powerful tool for national branding at home and abroad, a shortcut to perceived success and prosperity, yet one that is at odds with the economic realities, and actions, at home. Speaking to another Indigenous villager in 2015 about government sports outreach he had this to say:

> The Government are not supporting all the small villages, hardly any development done here like it is far away from them. They don't see it and the Government did not… All the people in this village they feel left out, the small villages here (Jack).

While in Urban areas, speaking to an Indo-Fijian sports journalist he commented that: '*there is nothing for Indo-Fijians here…it [sport] is not something that is thought of for us*' (Deev). In this sense, sport is employed to manufacture consent for centralised power structures in both sporting and political cultures (BLIND et al 2019). The Fijian social class reality is then obscured by the careful curation of the populist rugby image, veneered with success, and characterised by ethnonationalism, masculinity and the centrality of physical power (Kanemasu 2020), all themes that are discursively associated with Indigenous (male) dominance. At times this dynamic crosses gender binaries also as the woman's rights activist reflected: '*Even when I think about women and sport it's also very classist. So when I was in high school, all the girls who came from a particular Fijian family either played netball or volleyball* (Pricilla). This has the combined effect of preserving entrenched hierarchies within and across both groups in a way which maintains the hegemony of the status quo.

The nuance here is that in the preoccupation with Fiji's ethnic politics, which is at times overly politicized, the class realities are obscured. This was partly the case when the above data was gathered in 2015, where it was identity not economic position which coloured many of the local contributions, and my own understanding. This chimes with the work of critical theorists, such as Fraser and Honneth (2003) who have criticised the overemphasis on identity politics as decoupled from class hierarchies. Citizens can find agency, injustice and ultimately solidarity based on a multitude of socioeconomic identity hooks. For Laclau and Mouffee (1998, p. 20) 'new political subjects' should be considered both beyond and within their role of production including 'women, students, young people, racial, sexual and regional minorities'.

The performative nature of sport in Fiji, and its inordinate success in the international rugby sphere, mean that the tendency towards ethnic separatism and elitism in sport is presented to all sectors of the populace who reciprocate in shared celebration in Fiji's

victories. In doing so consent for existing hierarchical structures and the dimming of the above nuances is manufactured and collective economic struggles, both rural and urban, are sacrificed at the altar of professional sport.

Disrupting Discourses

The powerful discourses that are perpetuated through Fiji's culture, and in this case sporting, landscapes are difficult to disrupt, particularly from the top where such narratives form an elite political ideology that is both congruent and self-perpetuating. The Fijian sport policy reality is indicative of these commitments. In getting to know Fijian sporting culture from decision-making to the community level, it was important to compare official sport policy documents concerning sport with research undertaken across the three different levels. Through this evaluation, I found that government policy not only favours rugby, but Indigenous Fijians more generally (BLIND 2017). The FRU receives support vastly superior to any other body to enable it to continue to achieve success on the international stage. Indeed, elite sport still receives the lion's share of government financial support at present, targeted once again to sports that are held dear to elite communities mainly (Fiji Government 2022).

Despite the above, those willing to contend with the various barriers are doing so across the islands. Indeed, elsewhere the visibility of people in sporting spaces where they were previously less/in-visible has proven disruptive to recidivist hegemonic norms around gender (Claringbould and Knoppers 2012), and ethnicity (Walseth 2006). In Fiji, through disability sport, namely deaf rugby (Kanemasu 2022), various Indo-Fijian women athletes (BLIND et al 2019; Balram 2022) and Indo-Fijian male rugby players (BLIND et al., 2020), counter-hegemonic actions are being formed in an attempt to shift popular understandings about who *should* play sport and occupy sporting spaces. However, they are doing so without much tangible support in mainstream Fijian sport and society where 'Ethnonationalism,

masculinism and ableism are paradoxically yet durably entwined' (Kanemasu 2020, p. 4). Yet such a nodal conflation of cultural power can be disrupted by counter-centres of expression that can be given a platform/ life through sporting practices and places. A shift like this might begin to take place organically at the community level, but the shift could also bleed into PE classes and the school playground.

Fijian schools could serve as a focal point for trandfermation. Sport in schools can build a sense of community cohesion among students, in the process enabling minority group's access to education (Rees et al., 2000). In terms of Fiji, this is not simply about providing Indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijian children with opportunities to choose rugby or soccer (or, preferably, have a chance to play both); it is also about disrupting the mindset that Indigenous Fijians are 'naturally' gifted at sport and Indo-Fijians 'naturally' gifted at academia, with deficits for both groups in the reverse. There is an opportunity for school spaces to act in a disruptive or liberatory fashion, spaces that challenge orthodoxies around participation in order to engage young Fijians in rethinking their socio-economic roles. A scenario may be imagined where both Indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijian students are equally encouraged into sports and academic pursuits, and in doing so challenge socially constructed limitations that have been placed around the physical and mental capabilities of each.

None of this would be easy. Studies have found that teachers typically struggle to integrate diverse cultures and abilities in school sport (Azzarito, 2009; Bailey, 2005). Given such difficulties, some teachers tend to recycle dominant norm, practices, and patterns of group inclusion/exclusion (Rich, 2004). Indeed, 'when teachers are Indo-Fijians, their confidence in teaching Rugby is lower: a similar pattern was found when Indigenous Fijians-Fijians are teaching soccer' (Dorovolomo, 2015, p. 95). Yet PE in schools is instrumental to the embodied socialisation of young people (Bailey, 2005). Social bonds can be generated through a positive experience in PE, which can have a lasting effect beyond the school

environment. Negative experiences are just as profound by way of influence. A liberalisation of PE could be useful in disrupting young people's 'normative' perception of group identities and capabilities in Fiji, thereby challenging stereotypes around gender, class, and ethnicity. This could have potential in freeing young Fijian from living out separate identities in their subversion of dominant gender/ethnicity norms to participate (see: Balram et al 2022).

Outside of schools, discourse disruption is even more difficult, and this relates more closely to the complexities around hierarchy and class. Press freedom in Fiji has been at low level historically and this remains the case (RSF 2023). With a central government keen on preserving the status quo and convincing Indigenous Islanders that, despite high levels of poverty, Fiji is progressing well as an extension to Indigenous success on the playing field - with adjunct imagery frequenting the front and back pages of the popular press. There is strain put on these messages by the activism of women rugby players and their subsequent success on the international stage that has disrupted this discourse. However, this disruption is subsumed into the wider messaging about ethnonational primacy and perceptions of success and prosperity. In many ways this sets the agenda in the popular cultural mindset and can drown out counter-narratives that pave the way for 'social transcendence' between and within boundaries of class, gender, ethnicity etc… (Fraser and Honneth, 2003).

Conclusion

Hegemony is contested in several political, economic, and social arenas, one of which is sport. In Fiji, a picture of both economic and cultural hegemony through sport has become clear. Contemporary displays of sport are sites of and vehicles for the representation and confirmation of dominant social systems. In Fiji, the national celebration and preferential state support of rugby plays a significant part in securing 'common consent' for the unbalanced relations in a number of societal spheres, one of which is sport. With rugby serving as a control mechanism for reproducing the status quo, acting as a 'hegemonic

apparatus' of cultural dominance (Gramsci 1971, p. 328), it helps distract a seemingly divided populace from their shared experiences of social and economic injustice.

Sport is employed in the conjoined movements to preserve both the patriarchal and class status quo. The successes of some Indigenous women athletes in Rugby (Kanemasu 2022) and weightlifting (theguardian, 2022), have shifted some perceptions about the potential of Indigenous women in these spaces. Yet the dominant ideology of Indigenous (male) primacy and control of these sporting spaces remains. This leaves Indo-Fijian women and other marginalised groups with a mountain to climb to receive recognition as part of the nuanced reality of the contemporary Fijian sporting (and non-sporting) landscape.

The long-established, 'polydomial' (Larsen 2014), system of ownership and control suits the elite class, regardless of ethnicity, and consent is manufactured through the realities of Indigenous dominance in the political sphere, in the army and the police, yet economically speaking many Indigenous Islanders remain left behind. Similarly, in business circles, powerful ethno-racial stereotypes build acquiescence to the status quo that foregrounds Indo-Fijian acuity in these fields and popular sporting cultures are complicit in this. It is also worth noting that the demography and political culture of Fiji were shaped by the British colonial administration, who educated the incumbent political class on the leavers of control.

The result is that the deeply emblematic sphere of sport in Fiji is operationalised by those in power to maintain ethno-racial myths in the preservation of the current/historic hegemonic order. In revisiting previous research this chapter has highlighted that even in-depth research can be blind to these discursive practices. By re-examining these narratives and the assumptions around them, along with more recent research this chapter has highlighted that while there has been some strain on socio-economic hegemonies in Fiji, it ultimately remains central to a state power project to the detriment of all disempowered groups across the islands.

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Endnotes

Notes for Chapter Authors:

Delete this section if not used

Five Key Readings:

Kanemasu, Y. (2022). Fissures in gendered nationalism: the rise of women's rugby in Fiji. *National Identities*, 1(1), 1-16.

- This paper is a good contemporary look at the way in which women rugby players in Fiji have managed to over-come the various societal barriers they have faced to achieve success. More than this however the paper discusses the way I which this success has been celebrated and acknowledged in Fiji developing the reader's understanding about how such victories are subsumed into the prevailing discourses of power.

Sugden, J. T., Schulenkorf, N., Adair, D., & Frawley, S. (2020). The role of sport in reflecting and shaping group dynamics: The “intergroup relations continuum” and its application to Fijian rugby and soccer. *Sport Management Review*, *23*(2), 271-283.

- A paper that highlights the role that sport in Fiji, namely rugby and football, have in perpetuating intergroup distance in Fiji. The paper problematises the idea of sport for the purposes of integration and indicates aspects of Fijian sport and society that promote unity and exacerbate division.

Balram, R., Pang, B., & Knijnik, J. (2022). Understanding Indo-Fijian girls’ experiences in sport, physical activity and physical education: an intersectional study. *Sport, Education and Society*, 1-15.

- This paper delves into the experience of Indo-Fijian women in the Fijian sporting landscape. Focusing on the barriers face and taking a critical feminism intersectional approach, the piece depicts the multifarious challenges faced by this group and in doing so celebrates those who make it and excel in sport despite these limitations.

Fraenkel, J. (2019). Ethnic politics and strongman loyalties in Fiji's 2018 election. *The Journal of Pacific History, 54*(4), 480-506.

- Fraenkel is a very good commentator on Fijian politics and particularly its election, this is just one of many papers of his that readers can turn to better understand the contemporary political culture. This paper in particular depicts the use of ethnic identity politics as a strategy by some seeking election that have been touched upon in this chapter.

Linklater, A. (2007). *Critical theory and world politics: citizenship, sovereignty and humanity*. London: Routledge.

- For readers looking to gain a better understanding of critical theory, in its modern form, I recommend the work of Linklater. They have written extensively on global politics and critical theory but this book is a good overview of its use as both a lens and explanatory tool through which one can better understand how we got where we are and, perhaps, improve where we are going.