

# Rugby in Fiji: Unifying and Dividing a Multi-Cultural Society

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*Abstract: This article discusses the socio-political meanings of rugby union football in the Pacific Island state of Fiji. It argues that Fijian rugby is best understood as a cultural construction and a vehicle of symbolic communication which has the capacity to simultaneously divide and unite the country's multi-ethnic society. Since its introduction to Fiji during the British colonial period, rugby has been almost exclusively played by indigenous Fijians and has become an integral part of the vaka i taukei ("the Fijian way of life"). Rugby enables Fijians to articulate and maintain regional and local social boundaries but, in the same time, it also promotes nation-building, by uniting members of different ethnic groups as fans and contributing to the establishment of a common "Fiji Islander" identity. Therefore, the socio-political aspects of Fijian rugby are manifold and mirror both the challenges and the potential of Fiji's multi-cultural society.*

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The 2007 Rugby World Cup in France has been considered a milestone in the history of Fiji's rugby union football<sup>1</sup> not only from the perspective of sport achievements. In their final pool game, the Fijian national side ('The Flying Fijians') managed for the first time to defeat the Welsh rugby team and entered the quarter finals where they lost in front of the South African team. Back in Fiji, where I conducted fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation (Schieder, 2010), a nation of rugby enthusiasts, consisting of indigenous Fijians, Indo-Fijians and several other population groups<sup>2</sup>, cheered for its team. In remote island areas people placed radio and television antennas on rooftops or peaks to catch a glimpse of the performance of their team, while in Fiji's capital Suva rugby became the focus of public life for citizens of various ethnic backgrounds.

Given the fact that rugby in Fiji is almost exclusively played by indigenous Fijians and that Fiji is often perceived as a deeply divided plural society, with Fijians and Indo-Fijians living next to, not with each other, this ability of rugby to foster multi-ethnic relations came as somewhat of a surprise. In this article I will reflect on Fijian rugby and its capacity to articulate and negotiate ethnic, regional and national identities. My findings are based on newspaper reports and information, which I collected through non-standardized interviews with rugby players, rugby officials, and rugby fans in Suva and on the Fijian island of Ovalau during two research field trips between 2007 and 2009. Furthermore, this article is a contribution to current anthropological research on the social meanings of modern sport. It aims to highlight the fact that modern sport has to be understood as an integral part of social life and, as a cultural expression, holds several symbolic meanings which help to understand the complexity of social relations.

## Modern sport & anthropology

Modern sport evolved in nineteenth-century Britain during a period of rapid social changes and gradually spread across the world within the framework of capitalism and colonialism. Until recently, modern sport has been perceived as a Western category and a topic traditional anthropology would hardly investigate, even though it must be emphasized that there is a broad variety of categories and definitions of sport depending on the cultural and historical context in which sport, games and competitions are socially constructed (Blanchard, 2002).

However, not only the societies anthropologists study, but also the discipline

itself has undergone massive changes during the last two to three decades. In the wake of the postmodernist and postcolonial turn, anthropology has become more accommodating of research on topics such as modern sport. While encounters of and with sport are still under-represented, the recent years have seen an increasing number of anthropological investigations. For example, today anthropologists reflect on modern sport as a marker of social divisions, an instrument of colonial and postcolonial subjugation, as well as an element of cultural maintenance or cultural change (Dyck, 2000). Moreover, anthropologists have become aware of the fact that sport is not only shaped

by existing social patterns and relations, but also re-shapes social life due to its ability to establish or strengthen new



A Fiji rugby fan at the Hong Kong Sevens

Source: Victor Bautista

social identities and social boundaries. In short, sport is a physical expression of numerous social values and acts as a means of reflecting on these values (MacClancy, 1996). Additionally, the overall meaning and importance of sport cannot be fully understood with a focus on sport alone. On the contrary, it has to be understood as part of “culture as an integrated whole” (Blanchard, 1995, 33) and is closely linked to other socio-cultural aspects such as politics, religion or economy.

In conclusion, nowadays anthropologists investigate sport in numerous ways. This article intends to examine sport in its capacity as vehicle for the formation and maintenance of socio-political identities.

### **Politics, Coups and rugby**

Fiji is one of the few countries in the world which claim rugby as an official national sport. While this alone reveals the importance of rugby in Fiji, the performance of the Flying Fijians in France has been significant for the country also

in a socio-political context.

Only a couple of months prior to the 2007 World Cup, the Republic of Fiji, a former British Crown colony which gained its independence in 1970, witnessed its fourth coup d'état in less than two decades<sup>3</sup>. On 5 December 2006, Commodore Frank Bainimarama ousted the government of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, in a self-proclaimed act of good governance against racism, corruption and nepotism. Fiji has had a military government ever since and, five years after the military takeover, Fiji's latest coup which was initially staged as a clean-up campaign has become a cause of instability itself. The takeover was initially planned for Friday, December 1, 2006. It was nevertheless postponed due to the Ratu Sukuna Bowl rugby clash between the police and army teams which is one of the biggest national sport events in Fiji and took place on the same day. This coincidence led Fred Wesley of the Fiji Times to write three days later that it is “only in Fiji that a coup could be put on hold for a rugby

match.” (4 December 2006).

Half a year later, rugby and politics were again linked in a prominent way because the good performance of the Flying Fijians in France had a positive symbolic meaning for a country torn apart by the effects of repeated coups. Being in Suva during that time I felt that, at least for a moment, the rugby excitement united and reconciled Fiji's multi-ethnic and multi-cultural community as well as the many political opponents and rivals. Similarly, the success of the Fiji Sevens rugby team occasionally serves as a vehicle for nation-building in Fiji. For example, the victory of the Fijian team at the Rugby Sevens World Cup in 1997 was symbolically linked to the introduction of a new constitution in the same year which was supposed to bridge the ethnic divide between indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians.

Observing the potential of rugby to be a vehicle of nation-building was all the more interesting since in Fiji rugby is commonly perceived as an exclusive Fijian domain, with Indo-Fijians not



The Flying Fijians performing the local Fijian war dance cibi at the 2011 IRB Rugby World Cup

being actively involved in the game itself. Rugby has, therefore, a significant potential to be a centrifugal element in Fiji's fragile multi-ethnic society. Moreover, these events made me aware of the fact that rugby not only perpetuates and fosters ethnic identities and stereotypes in Fiji, but it also serves as a tool for articulating Fijian conflicts and rivalries on a local level.

### **A short historical background of rugby in Fiji**

Rugby originates from ball-focused folk games, which were played in parts of the United Kingdom and Ireland. The first official rugby football union was founded in 1871 in London and the game was first codified in the public school of the English city of Rugby. During the nineteenth century, rugby came to play a prominent part in the educational ideology, which strongly relied on the character-forming properties of religion, athleticism and team sports (muscular Christianity) to form young men. From the United Kingdom,

where rugby gradually developed from a school boys' and gentlemen's game to a favourable team sport of the society at large, it spread all over the world to the various colonies of the British Empire and beyond (Dunning & Sheard, 2005). Today the national teams of Britain's former settler colonies, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa, dominate the international rugby scene. They are closely followed by France, England, Ireland, Wales, Scotland and Italy, Argentina, and three small South Pacific Island countries, Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji. In Fiji, rugby was introduced by British settlers and colonial administrators in the late nineteenth century. It was first played by Europeans and Fijian policemen and soldiers of the Armed Native Constabulary in the province of Ba in 1884. The game initially developed along racially-segregated lines. In 1913, a Suva-based Fiji Rugby Football Union was founded by expatriates from New Zealand. One year later a native rugby competition was established, even though rugby was already known across

the islands through Fijian chiefs who had attended school in New Zealand and learnt about rugby football there. It was only in 1945 that the two unions merged and in 1963 the organisation became the Fiji Rugby Union (RFU) as it is known today (Robinson, 1973). By then the majority of rugby players in Fiji were already male Fijians and rugby started to be understood as an indigenous Fijian game. Nevertheless, coaches, board members and representatives were still Europeans. This gradually changed from 1970 onwards when the former colony became independent.

Today, the Fiji Rugby Union (FRU) serves as a governing board for 36 affiliated unions and about 500 local rugby clubs. It coordinates and organizes several local, as well as international rugby competitions and tournaments. Nowhere else on the globe is the ratio of inhabitants of a country to registered and active rugby players higher than in Fiji. Currently, there are 36,030 registered rugby players in Fiji (4.3 per cent of the total population of 837,271),



Source: www.lintofphoto.co.nz



Vuda Blues vs. Vuda Rugby Club

although unofficial numbers state that there are approximately 80,000 players. The absolute majority of the registered players are male Fijians. According to the International Rugby Board (IRB), there are 35,700 male Fijian and 330 female Fijian registered players. 22,500 of the male players are at a pre-teen stage (International Rugby Board, 2011). This emphasizes the strong bond of rugby and secondary school education in Fiji. Starting in 1924, all-native Fijian teams occasionally played other Pacific Island sides (especially Samoa and Tonga) or teams from New Zealand, Australia and Europe at home and abroad. Four years later rugby became part of the school curriculum for male students and in 1939 the Fiji Schools Union was established. In the same year Fiji toured New Zealand under the captainship of the country's first Fijian Governor General, the paramount chief Ratu Sir George Cakobau. Also in the team was Fiji's later president Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau. Throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s the Fijians played in Australia, New Zealand and Europe. In the line-up of the 1970 Britain tour was a young Fijian named Sitiveni Rabuka, who later spearheaded the military coups of 1987 and became Fiji's prime minister in 1992. It was during Fiji's overseas tours that the international awareness of the unorthodox, but nevertheless successful Fijian way of playing rugby was established. Until today the Fijians thrill spectators and the media with their fast and furious rugby and their unpredictable running game, elements which are considered to be the cornerstones of rugby played *vaka viti*, the Fijian style.

In the next section I will describe how,

through Fijian agency, rugby evolved from an imperial game to a local Fijian game. Rugby is not only played in a *vaka viti* style and uses a local Fijian war dance (*cibi*) as pre-match ritual (Dewey, 2010), but it is also incorporated in the Fijian way of life, the *vaka i taukei*.

### Rugby and Fijian articulations of self and society

Today, rugby has become an essential part of the *vaka i taukei* because, as Robinson points out, it is "in line with their [Fijian] own beliefs of what constitutes proper physical activity for a *,cauravou'* (young man)" (Robinson, 1973, 12). Rugby as "proper activity" includes body contact, speed, personal contest, teamwork and strength of character.

In 1986, the Fijian sociologist Simone Durutalo argued that indigenous Fijian culture can be summarized in four R's: *ratuism*, *royalism*, *religion* and *rugby*. Today the *ratuism* ideology which is based on the belief that Fiji's chiefs are legitimate divine rulers is constantly threatened by the forces of modernity (Schieder, 2010, 296) and the strong bond with the British crown has significantly weakened after Fiji became a republic in the wake of the 1987 coups. The importance of rugby and Christianity on the other hand has been unaltered. For example, it is a common feature of the game that Fijian rugby players pray before or after games. In addition, teams or individual players occasionally make use of bible verses such as Philippians 4:14, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" on their gear.<sup>4</sup>

Even though a detailed account about

the way in which the reciprocal relationship between rugby and the Fijian society evolved over time is beyond the purpose of this article, a brief summary is in place here. Presterudstuen's (2010) and my own findings (Schieder, 2010, 232) suggest that the acceptance of rugby by Fijians as a traditional cultural element was initially supported through the Fijian cultural logic of *vaka vanua* (the way of the land) which allows them to simultaneously understand elements of cultural change and stasis (stability) as traditional. That is to say that, when Fijians talk and reflect about the past and the present, they emphasize the continuity of cultural elements and practices rather than the discontinuities (Jolly, 1992).

Based on these assumptions it can be argued that playing rugby became a Fijian tradition because in its early days the game was almost exclusively linked to the British, the divine leaders of the Fijians (chiefs) and Christianity, which Fijians embraced before the colonial takeover. Rugby without doubt is part of Fiji's colonial heritage. In many ways, the import of the game to Fiji followed similar patterns as in other parts of the Empire where modern sport was introduced through British school teachers and principals. In the beginning of the twentieth century rugby became an essential element of the curriculum taught at Fiji's elite schools, such as the famous Queen Victoria School which heavily relied on the concept of muscular Christianity. It has been so ever since. In colonial Fiji, this particular school curriculum, according to Presterudstuen (2010), was understood as a tool to develop leadership skills and proper values among the Fijian elites and to foster future political as well as military leaders. Moreover, teaching about rugby and Christianity aimed at securing "the ideological continuity of the Fijian administration under the concept of indirect rule." (Presterudstuen, 2010, 245). It was already during the early years of British colonial rule that the explicit link between Fijianess, militarism, Christianity and rugby was cemented. Rugby, in conclusion, became part of the *vaka i taukei* because Christian Fijian chiefs who attended British schools at home or abroad played and organised the game. Within Fiji's strictly hierarchical society this meant that it was a rightful and valuable activity to pursue. Because of this ideological framework it is no coincidence that until today

important Fijian politicians, statesmen and community leaders such as former coup perpetrator Sitiveni Rabuka, Fiji's current President Ratu Epeli Nailatikau or Fiji's interim prime minister Commodore Frank Bainimarama have close links to the Fijian military and the Fiji Rugby Union.

Furthermore, playing the game gives expression to physical and moral values which Fijians identify with warfare and martial traditions, both important elements of pre-colonial Fijian societies in which the warriors (*bati*) played a crucial role within a system of local socio-political entities (*chiefdoms*) which were caught in a permanent interplay of political fission and fusion, very often created through feuds, raids and warfare (Schieder, 2010, 58-77). The *bati* (literally meaning teeth) were the protectors of the chiefs and the *vanua* (which in this context can mean chiefdom, region, village or kin group). Rugby resembles and consolidates indigenous notions of manhood, masculinity, loyalty, warrior ethos (known as *bati ideology*), courage and selflessness. It therefore fits in well in a society which, according to Ratuva, places a lot of emphasis on physical competition and prowess and likes to romanticize its warlike pre-colonial past (Ratuva, 2000).

Finally, the importance of rugby in the Fijian perception of self and belonging can also be understood within the context of the increasing militarisation of the modern Fijian society which started in the 1970s and promotes similar physical and moral qualities as rugby football. Today, Fiji is the most militarized country in the Pacific and it is certainly no coincidence that the army and police teams dominate the local rugby scene and that many of the most promising Fijian rugby players are active or former members of the Fiji Military Forces (Teaiwa, 2005).

### Local Fijian (rugby) rivalries

Given the fact that political conflicts between indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians are often perceived as religious conflicts (Christians vs. Hindus and Muslims) in Fiji and because Fijians occasionally stereotype Indo-Fijians as lacking the physical strength as well as the moral quality to play rugby, it could well be argued that rugby is an exclusive Fijian domain and a centrifugal socio-political element in Fiji's fragile multi-ethnic society. For example, Sitiveni Rabuka's 1987 coups have been ge-



Fiji rugby fans at the Hong Kong Sevens 2009

Source: Cathay Pacific Airways & David G. McIntyre

nerally perceived as an act to protect the indigenous Fijian society with Rabuka himself, a member of a *bati* clan, being the prototypical manifestation of the link between *vanua*, religion, militarism and rugby. Nevertheless, this picture would be too simplistic because rugby not only serves as a tool of maintaining ethnic boundaries, it also serves as a vehicle to express regional intra-ethnic Fijian identities. Similarly, rugby is an eminent element of the political rhetoric and action of influential Fijian elites who compete with each other for political influence and economic resources and use rugby to achieve their very own political agendas (Schieder, 2010, 232).

Indigenous Fijians are a rather heterogeneous ethnic group. Before the British annexed the Fiji Islands in October 1874, the archipelago was home to geographically and regionally limited socio-political entities. It was because of the attempts of colonial administrators to unify the indigenous inhabitants of the archipelago for political and administrative purposes that a common ethnic Fijian identity was established (Schieder, 2010, 246-279). Until today intra-ethnic Fijian power struggles and regional affiliation play a prominent role in Fijian politics as well as social acting and thinking. This is also visible in rugby, where local social boundaries are articulated and strongly protected in inter-Fijian competitions such as the Digicel Cup and the Sullivan-Farebrother Trophy, or when teams from different villages compete against each other. I became aware of this during a research trip to the Fijian island of Ovalau in August 2007, where I witnessed several games between the local rugby franchise and

guest teams from Viti Levu (Fiji's main island). The players would occasionally fight on and off the field and it later became clear to me during conversations with some of the players that they considered the game and the brawls as a sort of acts in honour and protection of their own *vanua*.

### Conclusion

In this article I discussed the plurality of social and political meanings of rugby in Fiji. I particularly reflected on the links of rugby with social identities and boundaries. I suggested that rugby values and ideals influence as well as reflect social, political and cultural divisions in Fiji. In other words, rugby in Fiji is not only shaped by existing social patterns and relations, but also re-shapes social life in certain ways. As a cultural construction which allows symbolic communication, rugby has a potential to divide and unite social groups simultaneously within a single social framework. It is as much an element of the indigenous Fijian way of life as it is a vehicle for nation-building, if we take into consideration the context in which it is enriched with particular meaning by particular social actors.

In extension, this brings us to the conclusion that sport in general serves as a vehicle for social identities. It simultaneously provides humans with a sense of difference and belonging and shows, as MacClancy has argued, that sport-based identities are not necessarily exclusive and that humans may have multiple identities "either simultaneously, seasonally or consecutively" (1996, 3). Because of this, the socio-political aspects of rugby in Fiji are manifold and

reflect the challenges, but also the potentials of Fiji's multi-cultural society. Rugby serves as a powerful tool of Fijian ethno-nationalism, but it also has the potential to promote a common "Fiji Islander" identity, regardless of ethnic background.

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### Endnotes

[1] Unless otherwise specified, this article refers to the version of the rugby union football which is played by 15 players. A second rugby union version is played by seven players.

[2] According to the official population census of 2007, Fiji's total population of 837,271 comprises 475,739 Fijians and 313,798 Indo-Fijians, with the remaining 47,734 coming from other ethnic groups (Pacific Islanders, Europeans or Asians).

[3] Once described as a role model for a peaceful multi-ethnic community, today Fiji features prominently in discourses on ethno-nationalisms in the South Pacific region. The country's socio-political instability is commonly believed to be a result of ethno-political conflicts between Fijians and Indo-Fijians even though the political reality is more complex (Schieder, 2010).

[4] However, members of certain Pentecostal churches are not allowed to play "violent" games. I was told by a member of a small Pentecostal community in Suva that they only play touch rugby because it lacks body contact (anonymous, personal communication, 9 September 2007).

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