

Towards a Pacific Island Sociology of Sport

Seeking New
Horizons

Edited by
Yoko Kanemasu

Research in the
Sociology of Sport

VOL
22



**TOWARDS A PACIFIC ISLAND
SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT**

RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT

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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT VOLUME 22

**TOWARDS A PACIFIC
ISLAND SOCIOLOGY OF
SPORT: SEEKING NEW
HORIZONS**

EDITED BY

YOKO KANEMASU

The University of the South Pacific, Fiji



United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2024

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Individual chapters © 2024 The authors.
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83753-087-8 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-83753-086-1 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-83753-088-5 (Epub)

ISSN: 1476-2854 (Series)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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INTRODUCTION: PACIFIC SPORT RESEARCH: SEEKING NEW HORIZONS

Yoko Kanemasu

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PACIFIC SPORT RESEARCH: SCOPE AND TRAJECTORY TO DATE

Pacific peoples' engagement with sport is increasingly attracting the attention of social scientists and sport scholars. What may be broadly described as Pacific sport research literature has developed over the past decade or so in parallel with some key regional developments. Foremost among these is the high profile that men of Pacific Island descent have come to claim in global sports, especially rugby and American football. Historically, these sports, since their colonial inception, have been adopted, adapted and played widely in Pacific Island countries and territories, in some cases attaining the status of national sport. More recent decades have seen Pacific Island athletes' meteoric rise to prominence in the professional codes of these sports. According to a website dedicated to rugby league, while Pacific Islanders made up a mere 0.1% of players in Australia's first grade competition in 1976, this rose to 0.7% in 1986, 10% in 1996, 20.1% in 2006 and a remarkable 48% in 2016 (Whitlock, 2018). Today, over 45% of National Rugby League players in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand are of Pacific Island descent (Anderson, 2020). A similar trend is observed in rugby union, notably since the professionalisation of the game in the 1990s. In 2013/2014, Pacific Islanders, combined with Māori, accounted for over half of New Zealand's provincial rugby players (Palenski, 2016). Today, Fiji, Samoa and Tonga, with a combined population of just 1.5 million, are reported to supply almost a quarter of all professional rugby union players worldwide (McMorran, 2020). As a sports commentator puts it: 'If you can think of a professional rugby team that hasn't benefited from a Pacific Islands player, then you'll be in a minority' (Williams, 2021). In the United States, the number of Polynesians,¹ particularly Samoans, entering the National Football League (NFL) has been

Towards a Pacific Island Sociology of Sport

Research in the Sociology of Sport, Volume 22, 1–20

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ISSN: 1476-2854/doi:10.1108/S1476-285420240000022001

rising since the 1970s, with a markedly sharp increase in the 2000s and 2010s (Saluga, 2018; see also Uperesa, 2014). By 2013, Samoan men were reported to be 56 times more likely than men of other ethnic groups to make it to the NFL (Field, 2013).

The competitive success and transnational mobility of male athletes of Pacific Island heritage have thus become conspicuous features of these global sports in the 21st century.² For Pacific peoples, the pursuit of successful careers in professional sports in the global North assumes many meanings ‘as a counter-representation to persistent stereotypes, as a proud representation of a nation, as an alternative pathway toward a promised future, and as a site of cultural resurgence’ (Uperesa & Mountjoy, 2014, p. 265), even if it is indelibly conditioned by geopolitical disparity and neoliberal precarity (Besnier, 2014a, 2014b; Guinness, 2018; Kanemasu & Molnar, 2014; Mackay & Guinness, 2019). At the most immediate level, professional sport migration has offered elite athletes a ‘means not just of individual advancement but as a potential source of financial security for players’ families and their wider communities in the Pacific Islands and in their adopted countries’ (Horton, 2012, p. 2388).

Correspondingly, sport has become a public policy matter in the region. The socio-economic potential of sport demonstrated by rugby (and American football), combined with the widely-recognised health, well-being and social benefits of sport and physical activity, has heightened policymakers’ interest in ‘sport for development’ as the island nations tackle youth unemployment, endemic non-communicable diseases and other challenges on their development agenda. In 2014, the Small Island Developing Nations Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway recognised ‘the strong capacity of small island developing States in sport’, promoting ‘the use of sport as a vehicle to foster development, social inclusion and peace, strengthen education, promote health and build life skills, particularly among youth’ (United Nations, 2014). At the regional level, similar interest has been expressed in official forums such as the 2011 Pacific Islands Leaders Forum (Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2015), the 2018 Pacific Islands Forum Economic Ministers Meeting (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2018) and the 2019 Pacific Islands Sports Ministers Meeting (Government of Samoa, 2019), while technical and funding support has been extended by regional and international organisations (e.g. Pacific Community, 2023; United Nations Development Programme, 2022; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2018; United Nations Population Fund, 2014). Among donor countries, Australia has been especially active in seeking soft power in the region through ‘sports diplomacy’ entailing considerable investment in sport-for-development programmes (Australia Government, 2019; Henne & Pape, 2018).

The recent growth of research inquiry into Pacific sport is at least in part a response to these regional developments. It is not surprising, in this context, that Fijian, Samoan and other Pacific Island men’s relationship with rugby (union and league) has attracted the greatest research interest. Anthropologists and sport scholars have studied, through rugby, sporting expressions and dynamics of labour mobility and global neoliberalism (Besnier, 2014a, 2014b; Dewey, 2014;

Guinness & Hecht, 2021; Horton, 2012, 2014a, 2014b; Kanemasu & Molnar, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Lakisa et al., 2014, 2019; Mackay & Guinness, 2019; Schieder, 2014; Schieder & Presterudstuen, 2014; Stewart-Withers et al., 2017); masculinity and masculinism (Besnier & Brownell, 2016; Hawkes, 2018; Kanemasu & Molnar, 2013c; Presterudstuen, 2010; Presterudstuen & Schieder, 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2015; Shiu et al., 2023); indigeneity (Clément, 2014; Guinness, 2018; Presterudstuen, 2010; Presterudstuen & Schieder, 2016) and ethnicity, identity and nation (Grainger, 2006; Grainger et al., 2012; Guinness, 2018; Guinness & Besnier, 2016; Horton, 2014b; Kanemasu & Molnar, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Schieder, 2012; Sugden, 2021; Sugden et al., 2020). This literature is today further expanded with increasing attention to elite rugby player wellbeing (Finekaso & Treharne, 2019; Horton, 2012; Lakisa et al., 2020; Marsters, 2020; Marsters & Tiatia-Seath, 2019a,b; Marsters et al., 2020; Rodriguez & McDonald, 2013). Overlapping themes are found in emergent research around Polynesian men in American football (Beissel, 2020; Diaz, 2011; Franks, 2009, 2017; Saluga, 2018; Tengan & Markham, 2009; Uperesa, 2014, 2018, 2022). In addition, researchers have begun to investigate aspects of association football (more commonly referred to as soccer in the region) in Fiji (James & Nadan, 2021; McGowan et al., 2023; Prasad, 2008; Sugden, 2021), Solomon Islands (Mountjoy, 2014), Vanuatu (Kobayashi et al., 2011) and elsewhere (Falcous, 2016), reflecting the game's great popularity and social significance in the Melanesian nations. A regional body of sport-for-development literature is also rapidly developing. Researchers have variously examined the outcomes and challenges of, and power relations underlying, sport-for-development programmes funded/implemented by donor agencies (e.g., Devine et al., 2017, 2018; Henne, 2017; Henne & Pape, 2018; Khoo et al., 2016; Lucas & Jeanes, 2019; Misener & Schulenkorf, 2016; Rikis et al., 2019; Schulenkorf & Siefken, 2018; Sherry et al., 2017; Sherry & Schulenkorf, 2016; Stewart-Withers & Brook, 2009).

The immense value of these studies must be stressed, especially in light of the geopolitics of knowledge production, whereby Pacific sports, athletes and researchers occupied minimal space in mainstream sport literature until the 2010s. The Northern orientation of the mainstream literature has persistently and considerably limited 'who speaks, whose voices are heard, which perspectives are validated, and on whose terms' (Toffoletti et al., 2018, p. 193). The growing regional scholarship challenges the epistemic marginalisation of Pacific peoples in significant ways. The rising profile of Pacific sport as a research subject area is signified by, for instance, the publication of the special issue 'Global Sport in the Pacific' of *The Contemporary Pacific* journal (Uperesa & Mountjoy, 2014) and the edited volume *Sport in the Pacific* (King, 2014), both of which effectively outline, among other things, the key contours of the existing scholarship briefly described above.

At the same time, much of the research to date reflects, understandably, the most salient characteristics, processes and dynamics of the region's most salient sports: Fijian and Polynesian men's involvement in professional sports, situated primarily in the global North. Consequently, this literature has had much to say – with a wide array of critical insights – about rugby/American football and its

masculinities, indigeneities, transnational mobilities, politics of representation and global inequities but relatively little about: women's sports; broader questions of gender (beyond masculinity) and sexuality; non-indigenous and minority ethnic groups' experience of sport; less prominent, non-professional and recreational sports; disability sports; indigenous sports and games (other than a large body of existing scholarship around surfing in Hawai'iian, North American and other cultural contexts) and sports as practiced in Pacific Island countries rather than in metropolitan/diasporic locations. Whilst the sport-for-development literature offers valuable knowledge of the complexities of sports programmes in Pacific contexts, it tends to be centred on the dynamics and impacts of Northern interventions and pay limited attention to local discourses and practices of sport as a development tool (see [Khoo et al., 2016](#); [Kwauk, 2014, 2016](#), for notable exceptions).

Importantly, there are indications that some of these knowledge gaps are beginning to be addressed. In particular, research literature is developing around women's sporting practices. Fijian women's claim on rugby union and its interface with postcolonial heteropatriarchy has received substantial attention in recent years ([Kanemasu, 2022, 2023](#); [Kanemasu et al., 2019](#); [Kanemasu & Johnson, 2019](#); [Kanemasu & Molnar, 2013c, 2017, 2019](#); [Senibua, 2017](#); [Vuli, 2022](#)). There is also exploratory research that sheds light on Indo-Fijian women's engagement with sport and physical activity ([Balram, 2022](#); [Balram et al., 2022](#); [Kanemasu, 2019, 2023](#); [Sugden et al., 2019](#)). An edited volume ([Molnar et al., 2019](#)) and two recent monographs ([Kanemasu, 2023](#); [McGowan et al., 2023](#)) partly or solely focus on Pacific Island women's sporting pursuits (including soccer, rugby union, beach volleyball and exercise).

Although indigenous sports other than surfing remain severely under-examined, there are significant exceptions. [Sacks \(2017a, 2017b, 2019\)](#) illuminates the rich history of *kirikiti* and the complex play of power that intersected the indigenisation of English cricket in colonial Samoa. Uperesa, who has extensively studied Samoan men's prominence and mobility in/through American football ([Uperesa, 2014, 2018, 2022](#)), also offers observations on the revival of customary sporting activities in the Pacific as a symbolic expression of indigenous sovereignty ([Uperesa, 2021](#)). In addition, despite the ongoing dearth of research attention to sporting practices of Pacific Islanders outside of Fiji and Polynesia, key exceptions can be found in [Osmond's \(2015\)](#) and [Osmond and Phillips's \(2004, 2006\)](#) critical studies of historical constructions of Solomon Islands swimmer Alick Wickham's contributions to the development of the crawl stroke in Australia. Finally, there is an urgent need for greater empirical research into all aspects of disability sports; but some groundwork has been laid by several studies – on the history of and challenges to the Paralympic movement in Oceania ([Maharaj, 2011](#)), sport-for-development programmes with a disability focus ([Beckman et al., 2018](#); [Devine et al., 2017, 2018](#)), Deaf table tennis ([Dorovolomo, 2015](#)) and Deaf rugby ([Kanemasu, 2020](#)).

Collectively, the existing studies outline a consequential journey of Pacific sport research, which has brought about, in a relatively short period of time, an uneven yet significant advancement of our knowledge of Pacific peoples' sporting

practices, cultures, histories and experiences. From a sociological viewpoint, it must be noted that this scholarship is largely the work of researchers aligned with the disciplines of anthropology, Pacific studies, sport studies, health and exercise studies, history and education. It is therefore not accurate to speak of the existence of a 'Pacific sociology of sport', and furthermore, any sociology of sport to be developed in the region must build upon this multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary foundation. The present volume is intended to contribute to such a project. The multi-disciplinary collection reveals how some of the hitherto-overlooked aspects of Pacific sport are being fruitfully and variously investigated to open up scope for new understandings and knowledges. The studies in the following chapters, presented by both established and emerging scholars, as well as by Pacific Islander and non-Pacific Islander scholars, showcase a range of analytical, thematic and methodological approaches, each contributing to, firstly, filling the gaps in the Pacific sport research literature, and secondly, offering key resources out of which a Pacific sociology of sport may possibly emerge. By shifting our attention to indigenous sports, women, non-indigenous Pacific Islanders, diasporic communities, sport in a post-conflict Pacific Island nation, athlete-centred understandings of well-being and sport for climate action and seldom-studied sports like swimming and outrigger canoe racing, this anthology contributes further dimensions, critical nuances and new horizons to our knowledge of Pacific sport.

SEEKING NEW HORIZONS: THE CHAPTERS

The chapters in this volume are organised into three parts according to the themes of (1) indigeneity and sport; (2) gender, ethnicity and sport and (3) sport in global contexts, although most chapters offer insights relevant to more than one of these themes. Part 1: foregrounds emerging research on indigenous sporting practices. Pacific peoples, governments and scholars have often described the region with reference to the Pacific Ocean that constitutes their home (see, e.g. [Diver, 2018](#); [Hau'ofa, 1993, 1998](#); [Perez, 2020](#); [Pratt & Govan, 2010](#); [Quirk & Hanich, 2016](#)). The histories, cultures, livelihoods and movements of Pacific peoples have been, and continue to be, profoundly connected with their vast ocean. Yet, oceanic sports in the region have received surprisingly little empirical research attention, a major lacuna that Chapters 1 and 4 grapple with. In Chapter 1, Gary Osmond presents his latest work on Solomon Islands swimmer Alick Wickham's positioning in Australian swimming history. Drawing on archival research and fieldwork, Osmond unearths aquatic practices of the Roviana Lagoon of New Georgia in western Solomon Islands as the cultural origins of the crawl stroke and other swimming and diving techniques/styles associated with Wickham, who moved to Sydney and became a champion swimmer and diver in the early 20th century. Osmond goes on to interrogate, using a theoretical lens of whiteness, the 'forgetting' of these indigenous cultural influences on the crawl stroke and its appropriation as 'the Australian crawl' in the dominant Australian swimming history (p. 35). Underlying the prevailing

narrative of the crawl is ‘a metaphoric duel between remembering and forgetting’ (p. 25), whereby Wickham’s contribution to the stroke is mythologised while its cultural antecedents are rendered marginal and inconsequential. In the context of ongoing erasure of Pacific swimming cultures in dominant sport histories and representations, Osmond’s work aptly demonstrates the power of ‘telling an untold story’ (p. 36).

The indigeneity of sport manifests itself not only in sports of customary origins; it is also embodied in the indigenisation of sports introduced from without, as the regional rugby research amply shows. Benjamin Sacks’s historical study in Chapter 2 brings to light another significant intersection of indigeneity and modern sport. The chapter presents the regional histories of English cricket as ‘Oceania’s earliest successful ludic import’ (p. 45) and, drawing on a variety of examples from Samoa, the Trobriand Islands and New Caledonia, reveals how indigenous peoples have claimed and redefined the game’s method and meaning, developing in the process the indigenised games of *kirikiti*, Trobriand cricket and *cricket traditionnelle*. The historical evidence presented here speaks to the creative and historically-contingent nature of the game’s indigenisation, which has entailed expanded participation, altered equipment and attire and the integration of matches into community life, customary exchange and politics. Of further significance is women’s and girls’ prominence in indigenised cricket as participants and organisers, including instances where women have used the game as a medium of political agency – an instructive contrast to the gendered hierarchies and inequities observed in many organised sports of the Pacific today. Sacks hence calls for ‘looking back to historicise sport’s significance’ and ‘beyond the “usual sporting suspects”’ (p. 45, emphasis original) for a fuller understanding of what sport, in its many forms and contexts, has meant to Pacific peoples.

Chapter 3 by Aue Te Ava draws attention to the social and educational benefits of traditional sports and games (TSGs) in the Pacific and especially his home country, the Cook Islands. Te Ava outlines the features of Pacific TSGs such as coconut climbing and husking, stilt walking and canoe racing, as well as their physical, recreational, social and spiritual value in both historical and contemporary contexts, which provides the basis for his argument for their revitalisation and integration into formal education curricula. Noting the absence of TSGs in physical education (PE) programmes in many Pacific Island countries, Te Ava explains how TSGs can play a critical role, alongside Pacific languages, music, literature and architecture, as a vehicle of Pacific peoples’ cultural expression. His key contention is that TSGs, on account of their organic links with indigenous ways of knowing, can effectively complement culturally responsive pedagogy in Pacific schools. This must however be facilitated with care; the chapter explores the relevance of a Cook Islands cultural model, derived from *tivaevae*, indigenous artistic quilting of various designs and patterns that tells a story. The collective process of *tivaevae* creation, Te Ava argues, serves as a useful metaphor for culturally-infused collaborative learning in sports education. In addition, the flowers depicted in the *tivaevae* model represent Cook Islands values that are essential to culturally meaningful learning and can be harnessed through TSGs. Te Ava’s educational perspective on TSGs in the contemporary

Pacific may provide a springboard for social scientific inquiry into indigenous sporting practices, an important corrective to the literature that has dealt almost exclusively with modern sports (notwithstanding their profoundly localised, indigenised and adapted nature).

In Chapter 4, Yoko Kanemasu presents a sociological study of outrigger canoe racing, or *va'a*, in Fiji, a sport deeply embedded in regional seafaring heritage. The study outlines the development of the sport in Fiji since its inception as a postcolonial 'revival' of indigenous cultural practices and explores the paddling community's pursuit of inclusivity (in terms of gender, ethnicity, age and body size), effort to mitigate long-standing exclusivity (in terms of class and geographical location) and dynamic engagement with (as against 'preservation' of) the sport's cultural anchoring. In the shadow of the nation's conspicuous (and heavily gendered/racialised) sports of rugby, soccer and netball, *va'a* has been claimed and cultivated by Fijians of different ages, ethnicities, genders, shapes and sizes. In its ongoing social construction, *va'a* has been embraced as a highly competitive game pursued within global sport structures, a hip and cool recreational activity whose affinity with the sea and cultural symbolism appeal to youths and urbanites and an inclusive community that coalesces around the relational value of the ocean reminiscent of Epeli Hau'ofa's Oceanic vision (1993, 1998) – even as it remains constrained by multiple power differentials. The study thus situates *va'a* as a sporting practice integral to living, evolving culture, rather than timeless indigeneity, with its fluidity, multiplicity and inequality.

Part 2 of the volume is intended to help accelerate research into questions around gender, ethnicity and other power dynamics of Pacific sports. Constructions of and contestations over masculinity in/through rugby (and American football) have been a key focus of the regional sport scholarship. Recently, Fijian women's experience of and resistance to rugby's heteropatriarchal order have also begun to be studied in considerable depth. This nevertheless leaves unexplored a great many questions concerning gender, ethnicity and other axes of power intersecting Pacific sports, and the chapters here point to several directions that may be usefully pursued. Chapter 5 by Rohini Balram and Jorge Knijnik examine Indo-Fijian women's relationship with sport and PE by illuminating four women's voices with an arts-based method. Qualitative insights presented in a play narrative format and guided by Critical Race Theory delineate a convergence of gender norms, familial opposition, racism, ageism and class inequality at the heart of Indo-Fijian women's (lack of) sport/PE experience, further complicated in some cases by barriers arising from rural-urban migration. The chapter argues, among other things, that PE in Fiji revolves around dominant sports of rugby, soccer and netball, with an emphasis on competition, and thus replicates the nation's gendered and racialised sporting order that marginalises Indo-Fijian women. Methodologically, the chapter may be noted for its use of a one-act play, which allows for effective evocation of the nuances, complexities and realities of (constraints to) the research participants' sporting experiences. Indo-Fijian women's sporting absence is typically explained by Fijian sports stakeholders as a matter of 'choice' or lack of interest (Kanemasu, 2023). By inviting the reader into the lifeworld of Indo-Fijian women variously

located in terms of age, marital status, religion, migration and PE experience, the chapter reveals their absence to be integral to ‘entangled sporting oppressions’ (p. 112) that require careful unpacking. One of the women in the play brings this to life when she remarks: ‘We are the forgotten lot; first our sporting interests and welfare are neglected, and then we are accused of not being interested in sports’ (p. 110). Ironically, their status as ‘the forgotten lot’ has been mirrored, and inadvertently normalised, by existing Fijian sport research centred round indigenous men. The chapter signals the need for further probing non-indigenous women’s engagement with sport and exercise in a society where these have become deeply interwoven with social constructions and politics of gender, ethnicity and indigeneity.

Jack Sugden’s Chapter 6 is another call for moving Fijian sport research beyond its current focus. In particular, Sugden calls attention to the ‘blind spots’ (p. 124) of gender and social class as consequential relations of power played out in sports in modern Fiji. Drawing on ethnographic data and the Gramscian concept of ‘hegemony’, Sugden interrogates ‘how sociological nuances can be muted and obscured through the management of popular sporting discourses’ (p. 124). It is notable that he does this by revisiting his own earlier study, which focused primarily on ethnic division in men’s sports in Fiji. Revealed in Sugden’s re-examination of his data are the multiple barriers Indo-Fijian girls and women face in accessing sports and PE, which reflect and reproduce Fiji’s existing social hierarchies, even at a time when women’s presence in sports like rugby may be beginning to attain greater public recognition. A complex mix of colonial/postcolonial histories of ethnic politics, a resultant sense of socio-political exclusion and persisting ethnic stereotypes about sporting prowess, Sugden argues, underpins Indo-Fijian emphasis on academic pursuits and Indo-Fijian girls’ marginalisation in PE and sporting spaces. The chapter furthermore considers social class – conceptualised here as socio-economic stratification encompassing multiple power differentials such as chiefly oligarchy – and argues that the privileging of rugby as a cultural emblem of Indigenous Fiji in popular sporting narratives and institutional resource allocation is instrumental in the sustenance of the nation’s ‘elite hegemony’; that ‘a preoccupation with ethnicity can obscure underlying disenchantments with the overarching socio-economic reality’ (p. 134). Finally, Sugden highlights attempts to forge counter-narratives in Fijian sport and especially the potential of PE as a counter-hegemonic space for engaging young Fijians in rethinking and disrupting the entrenched sporting relations of gender, class and ethnicity. This chapter hence forms a complementary pair with Chapter 5 in accentuating the nuances of Fiji’s sporting landscape as well as identifying PE as a space of both reproduction and possible subversion of the sporting status quo.

Chapter 7 by multi-disciplinary Solomon Islands authorial team Gordon Leua Nanau, Jeremy Dorovolomo, Billy Fitoó and Patrick Miniti turns to the significance of sport in relation to a pressing challenge confronting their country: nation- and peace-building in the aftermath of the 1998–2003 inter-*wantok* conflict. Solomon Islands sport has received scarce research attention to date, and its role in the post-conflict context has never been studied in any depth. The authors