

CULTURAL PRIDE

Exploring Indigenous athlete culture and wellbeing

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Abstract

Indigenous people are over-represented as professional players in many sporting codes, and recently a trend has developed whereby Indigenous athletes are choosing to play internationally for their heritage nations as opposed to the top-tier countries they reside in. With regard to rugby league and rugby union, many of these athletes are Pasifika who have had minimal exposure to their heritage nations, being born and raised in, for example, Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia or the United States. Nevertheless, this cohort is increasingly choosing to play for their heritage nations, despite the substantial cut in pay and available resources this decision entails. Throughout this commentary, these athletes are not viewed as mere individuals. Instead, we acknowledge their relationality—that is, the fact that they are intertwined in collective networks of family and nationhood. As researchers from the Pasifika community, we explore the factors which contribute to Pasifika athletes choosing to play for their heritage nations. By analysing the rise of Mate Ma'a Tonga, Tonga's national rugby league team, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural pride—the connection to family and heritage nation—that drives these athletes to play for this team, and the subsequent implications for wellbeing and performance.

Keywords

athlete wellbeing, collective wellbeing, cultural identity, heritage athlete

Introduction

This commentary explores the importance professional Pasifika athletes place on representing their heritage nation, as opposed to the nations they were born or reside in. It advocates for the application of a Pasifika lens to better understand the interconnectedness of culture and identity as it relates to athlete wellbeing and performance.

We acknowledge this commentary draws only upon Tongan and Samoan experiences, as they are the main Pasifika groups within Aotearoa New Zealand and the Australian National Rugby League (NRL) competition. We look forward to future research on Pasifika athletes from other islands and their experiences.

Pasifika people continue to be disproportionately

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represented in professional high-collision team sports such as rugby league and rugby union. This cohort accounts for 52% of the NRL (Walter, 2021). There is also a large player base of Pasifika players in the Super Rugby competition. These figures are significant, given that Pasifika only account for 0.88% of the Australian population and 8.1% of the New Zealand population according to each country's most recent census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021; Stats NZ, 2018).

The high visibility of Pasifika athletes succeeding in the sporting arena continues to foster the hopes and aspirations of many Pasifika males, who view sport as an opportunity to acquire social mobility and advancement (Zakus & Horton, 2009). In rugby union, Pasifika role models include Fa'alogo Tana Umaga, the first All Black captain of Pasifika heritage, and Sir La'auli Michael Jones, an All Black legend. In rugby league, Pasifika players such as Sonny Bill Williams, Jason Taumalolo and Will Hopoate offer inspiration for those in their community, as they have prioritised their family, faith and country throughout their careers. Examples include Williams choosing to cover a sponsor on his playing jersey due to his religious beliefs as a Muslim ("Sonny Bill Williams", 2020) and Hopoate declining a significant contract to serve a two-year lay mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Beniuk, 2011). Pasifika are driven by their desire to represent their family, culture, people and God with honour in all they do (Lakisa et al., 2014).

Methodology/approach

Athletes of different cultures have different perspectives of wellbeing. Pasifika people are relational beings and therefore see themselves through others within their community. The dominance of professional Pasifika rugby league and rugby union athletes means that many young Pasifika males view professional sports as a viable career pathway to fulfil their familial obligations.

The relational concept of *vā* is shared across Oceania (Muliaumaseali'i, 2017). Through *vā*, engagement can occur between people, environment and time (Ka'ili, 2012). Through respect for the *vā*, all entities which engage in it are bound by respect and humility (Enari & Matapo, 2020). Through the *vā*, conditions for appropriate exchange and communication can occur (Enari & Matapo, 2021).

Even outside of their island homelands, those who identify as Pasifika still maintain the concept of *vā* in all aspects of their lives (Enari & Fa'aea, 2020; Fa'aea & Enari, 2021). As Pasifika people,

we are aware of our duty to *tauahi vā* or *tausi le vā* when maintaining reciprocal relationships with others (Ka'ili, 2008, 2017; Lilomaiva-Doktor, 2009). As relational beings, the concept of the *vā* has been utilised in education and health spaces to promote the achievement and wellbeing of Pacific peoples (Airini et al., 2010; Anae, 2010; Reynolds, 2016; Samu et al., 2011). It has also been applied in the sporting discipline to inform organisations and practitioners on how to better support Pacific athletes (Keung, 2018). Therefore, through understanding the *vā*, we are better able to explore Pasifika athletes' culture and wellbeing, as this methodology aligns directly with their ways of being and lived realities.

The rise of Mate Ma'a Tonga

The rise of Mate Ma'a Tonga, Tonga's national rugby league team, is a useful case study for exploring why players are increasingly choosing to play for their island nations, and the subsequent impact that experience has on their overall wellbeing and performance.

A translation of Mate Ma'a Tonga is Die for Tonga. The team's name underscores the deep love, passion and pride Tongans have for their people, culture and island nation. The historical significance and symbolism of the name dates back to King George Tupou I, Tonga's first ruler, who was instrumental in unifying Tonga upon the conclusion of the 17th century civil war (Mafi, 2018). In 1873, King Tupou I established Tonga's national motto, "Ko e 'Otua mo Tonga ko hoku tofi'a", which means "God and Tonga are my inheritance" (Fotu, 2012, p. 34). The God-fearing nature of Tongan people is evident in their crimson red flag that bears a cross, symbolic of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the blood he spilt.

The opening line of Tonga's national anthem also makes reference to God. Hence, "Mate Ma'a Tonga" means that all that Tongans do they do for their people, their nation and for God. The historical and cultural significance of the rugby league team's names provides context for the transcendent power players draw upon when they wear the red jersey to honour their family, their heritage, their people and their proud island nation.

Players such as Jason Taumalolo and Andrew Fifita are seen as pioneers because they moved away from playing for their birth nation of New Zealand and Australia respectively to play for their heritage nation. The *controversial* decision, according to mainstream media outlets, led to the rise of Mate Ma'a Tonga during the 2017 Rugby League World Cup. The team progressed to the

semi-finals, where they were narrowly beaten by England. Mate Ma'a Tonga received international attention, as their World Cup achievements came with minimal funding, resources and time together as a cohort. Two years later, in 2019, Tonga defied all odds and beat the number-one-ranked rugby league team in the world at the time, Australia. This win was a momentous occasion for a small island nation, elevating their world ranking from 11th to 4th. The win also validated the decisions of former New Zealand (Kiwis) and Australian (Kangaroos) players with Tongan ancestry to play for their motherland instead.

Many Mate Ma'a Tonga players have benefited from engaging in high-performance rugby league competitions such as the NRL. They have been afforded the opportunity to develop technical and tactical skills in high-performance environments with world-class facilities. Unfortunately, these same facilities and expertise are not as readily available in small island nations like Tonga. Nevertheless, despite the limited resources, Mate Ma'a Tonga players have inspired Tongans worldwide to be proud of their heritage, and to seek ways to elevate their people and island nation. In this way, they are reinforcing the fundamental role of cultural identity, as it relates to one's overall wellbeing, which then supports performance (Enari & Faleolo, 2020; Enari & Viliamu Jameson, 2021). A strong cultural identity or connection to culture can ground an athlete as they navigate the physical, mental and emotional demands of the professional sport system as Pasifika athletes.

Although island nation teams are generally under-resourced and underpaid and face governance issues, many Pasifika players still choose to represent their heritage countries. The loyalty of many of these players reaffirms their pride and connection to their heritage, culture and homeland, and far exceeds monetary wages (Fa'avae, 2020). Sadly, not all in rugby league are supportive of these players representing their island nations, with some believing their allegiance should lie with their country of residence or birth. Nevertheless, the players have an opportunity to (re)write and control their own narrative, using discourse and practices that reflect their cultural heritage (Enari & Matapo, 2021; Faleolo, 2020; Marsters & Tiatia-Seath, 2019). Their example has empowered more Pasifika athletes to return to their heritage nations. Up-and-coming rugby league players such as Jerome Luai and Brian To'o, who were both born in Australia, both play for Samoa internationally.

Why Pasifika play for their heritage nation

Samoan academic and Vice-Chancellor of Auckland University of Technology Damon Salesa believes a double standard is exposed when Pasifika choose to play for their island nations and are then called traitors by their host country (TheCoconetTV, 2018). Yet, if they choose to play for their host country, they are not called traitors. Salesa further suggests that playing for one's island nation confirms what Pasifika people have always known, that lucrative contracts and status do not define Pasifika athletes (TheCoconetTV, 2018). International Rugby League, the sport's global governing body, changed their eligibility rules in early 2017 to allow athletes to play for more than one country. As a result, many Pasifika athletes who had previously played for countries like New Zealand and Australia are now able to play for their heritage nations. The move drew attention to the difficulty that Pasifika players had been grappling with, given what was at stake for them and their families, and that they risked being called traitors for *turning their back* on a country they were born and raised in—the country that *made them*. The backlash players face from mainstream society for choosing to play for their island nations is unwarranted. Many of these players made the decision to change allegiance during the peak of their careers and had sacrificed substantial monetary contracts by not playing for Australia or New Zealand. New Zealand-born Tongan, Sio Taukeiaho shared that, for Australian and New Zealand born Tongan players, it was *really tough* to give up representing the countries of their birth, but their hearts were *with Tonga*, so they followed their hearts (Rugby League World Cup 2017, 2017).

Many fans and spectators may find these players' choice to take a cut in pay and play for a country they were not born in, or do not live in, to be absurd. However, as Pasifika researchers who are active in our communities, we are able to articulate why this trend is occurring. The sacrifices of the athletes' parents and grandparents and their foresight to migrate to countries such as New Zealand and Australia to create opportunities for their children and grandchildren provide the impetus for players to return to their heritage nation and pay homage to their ancestral roots and cultural heritage.

As we have seen throughout our communities, being selected to represent one's Pacific Island nation evokes intergenerational connection, igniting a deeper connection to one's ancestral and familial legacy. These same feelings and emotions

would not necessarily be felt by Pasifika players when playing for their host country of Australia or New Zealand, particularly if the player does not have blood ties to these lands. In this instance, no financial reward can compensate for the emotion and mana that comes with the honour of representing the nation of one's intergenerational familial legacy. As Australian-born Tongan international Michael Jennings (2017) has stated:

it's a very different feeling playing for Tonga. There's more emotion in the Tonga jersey. You know what your family has been through and you think about them every time you put it on. We're not representing ourselves. We're representing our families and our heritage. (paras. 4-5)

Another Australian-born Tongan international, Andrew Fifita, said that his dad was happy when he made the Australian team but started crying when he learned of his son's decision to play for Tonga (as cited in Jennings, 2017). Fifita's circumstances, like many other Pasifika players, are interesting as many of them have never lived in their island nations; some have never even visited their motherland. Many of these players were born and raised in their current countries of residence, New Zealand and Australia, and educated in a Western system. Yet, they have a desire to play for a country that cannot offer much by way of financial assistance, either personally or for team and competition resources. However, when these athletes choose to play for their island nation, it is an extension of their Pasifika tautua to the collective (Fa'aea & Enari, 2021; Filisi, 2018). Additionally, this experience (re)connects these players to their island nation languages and cultures. Participating in pre-game traditional war dances such as the Sipi Tau or Siva Tau, instead of facing them as members of a host nation team, confers the mana for players to understand who they are as Pasifika, and their ancestral connection. This curiosity could have positive implications for the player, as research suggests that a strong cultural identity is fundamental to wellbeing (Manuela & Sibley, 2013; Ministry of Social Development, 2016).

Nurturing the vā of the professional sporting space

Internationally, rugby league administrators have been proactive in implementing Pasifika initiatives such as the Oceania Cup, Pacific tests and the Indigenous All-Stars match. These are opportunities to celebrate Pacific and Indigenous cultures within the professional rugby league space. New

Zealand Rugby, meanwhile, included fixtures between the Māori All Blacks and Moana Pasifika in 2020. Additionally, two Pacific-specific teams were included in the 2022 Super Rugby season. One was based in Fiji and the other in South Auckland. As researchers from Pasifika communities, we advocate for the need to understand and embrace diasporic communities and different cultures, such as Pasifika, as it will assist in maximising sporting potential in general and benefit society overall (Stanley & Kearney, 2017; Zakus & Horton, 2009).

High-profile Pasifika players who return to play for their island nation increase awareness of and exposure to their heritage nation and the Pacific region at large, which in turn helps grow the game internationally. The pride that evolves from seeing rugby players speaking their mother tongue (i.e., Samoan, Tongan) on mainstream television, especially New Zealand-born Pasifika who are not fluent in their native languages, gives hope to young Pasifika that they do not need to leave their culture off the rugby field. Seeing and hearing Pasifika languages on mainstream television evokes their familial and ancestral ties, and their connection to their ancestral fanua (Enari & Matapo, 2021; Enari & Taula, 2022). These players are inserting Pasifika identities into the Western-centric order of sporting formalities. Therefore, Pasifika players and support staff should be encouraged to speak their ancestral languages as a way to nurture the vā and celebrate all that Pasifika contributes to the sport.

We have *Pasifikafied* the sporting field by adding our drums, our war dances and our prayers. Our people have demonstrated Pasifika cultures from the stands by singing traditional hymns and performing cultural dance displays. It is through these actions that we make the space more Pasifika. The war dances are our Pasifika invasion of the sporting arena, which is predominantly Western-centric. Our languages, chants, tattoos and hair on display on primetime television further solidify our Pasifika being among mainstream society. Consequently, these sporting events are a gateway for non-Pasifika to learn about the cultures of Pasifika athletes.

The vā that exists between the players and their fans is constantly nurtured through song, dance and cheers of adoration and support before, during and after the matches. During the 2017 Rugby League World Cup, the streets of South Auckland, New Zealand, resembled Nuku'alofa, Tonga, with numerous homes, cars and communities decorated in support of Mate Ma'a Tonga. Fans

utilised social media and other online platforms to further develop mass support for their Tongan heroes. The collective strength of the fanbase, both physically and online, generated an energy and atmosphere which has very rarely been seen in South Auckland, which motivated the players to give their all before, during and after the game, as their team name insinuates. Tongan international Daniel Tupou (2017) wrote at the time:

We're getting heaps of messages of support on social media. . . . It has definitely been a factor in how well we've played so far, knowing so many good people are behind us. You should have seen them when we were in camp in Nuku'alofa. There were literally thousands of them lining up to see us in the streets. They were waving flags and had painted the players' names on their cars. People were dancing and smiling and playing music. One of the local teams even performed the Sipi Tau for us. It was incredibly inspiring. ("Die for Tonga" section, paras. 8-11)

The experience of playing for their heritage nation invigorates a relational and spiritual journey that sees players (re)connect with their parents, family village and ancestors (Enari & Matapo, 2021; Matapo, 2018). For some, it reinforces their Pasifika identity that they embrace in church and among family, while for others it may be their only connection to their island nation. For the latter, Mate Ma'a Tonga may have supplied a sense of belonging they were missing.

As touched on above, the *vā* considers the social and spiritual connections between people (Ioane, 2017). Further, the concept of *vā* is vital to being aware of the ways in which people relate to each other and their surroundings (Tuagalu, 2008). Pasifika athletes are commonly heard referring to their values, faith and connection to culture and ways of being as what helped them succeed (Keung, 2018; Lakisa et al., 2014; Marsters & Tiatia-Seath, 2019). An understanding of the concept of the *vā* and knowledge on how to *tausi le vā* of the professional sports space would help optimise the preparation and performance of our Pasifika athletes.

In a high-pressure environment such as professional sport, where feelings of isolation can occur and one's mental health can be adversely impacted, it is the quality of human relationships that can counterbalance such emotions and negative experiences (Lakisa et al., 2014). For Pasifika in particular, positive social relations are critical to sustain an athlete's wellbeing (Marsters &

Tiatia-Seath, 2019). Specific to the NRL context, researchers have highlighted that Pasifika are the ethnic group least likely to utilise the support services offered by the organisation (Ng Shiu & Vagana, 2016). Despite Pasifika NRL players having access to resources and staff whose roles are to support the personal wellbeing of athletes, the absence of fundamental Pasifika cultural values essentially diminished the positive impact that these resources and support persons could have on Pasifika players (Keung, 2018). Therefore, when players are not training or playing for their island nation, cultural competency is a critical capability that needs to be supported to continually *tausi le vā* when players return to their respective NRL rugby league clubs. With that said, we acknowledge the pockets of practitioners who have been instrumental in affecting their colleagues and organisations to *tausi le vā* by including a Pasifika player's family or community in milestone jersey presentations and collaborations (Melbourne Rebels, 2022; Penrith Panthers, 2022) and cultural advisory panels (Gold Coast Titans, 2021; NRL, 2022). Such practices support what Keung (2019) suggests, that success "is dependent on how well you take care of your athlete, inclusive of their family, community and culture" (para. 14).

Conclusion

The professional sports space is a Western-centric, cut-throat system where professional players are cognisant that they will experience wins and losses both on and off the field. Therefore, players must learn to navigate the system (Keung, 2018). Though the sporting arena provides a platform whereby Pasifika can compete and succeed, Pasifika are constantly battling to balance their cultural obligations with their contractual obligations. This balancing act can have implications for a player's overall wellbeing and performance, which can then impact family wellbeing and social mobility. After unpacking the rise of Mate Ma'a Tonga in this commentary, we offer the following questions for consideration by sport organisations, administrations and practitioners who engage with Pasifika players:

- What resources are available for your Pasifika players to do things as Pasifika?
- What level of support do your players explicitly receive to engage in important cultural practices?
- How can cultural processes and knowledge be utilised to drive performance?
- What do organisations need to do to ensure they *tausi le vā*?

- Ultimately, will administrators and coaches be open to *try on* a Pasifika lens?

Answers to the above questions will determine whether coaches and administrators will nurture or stifle the *vā* and therefore nurture or stifle performance. In the case of Mate Ma'a Tonga, we should no longer be surprised when Pasifika athletes, both male and female, choose to pledge allegiance to their island nations. (Re)connecting to their cultural roots deepens players' pride and responsibility to represent their culture, family and island nation. Understanding and appreciating the elite sporting space as a relational space has the power to transcend sociocultural differences and therefore better support Pasifika athletes both on and off the field. May we move forward with their cultural pride and all its glory. Malo 'aupito.

Glossary

Māori language

Aotearoa	Māori name for New Zealand
Māori	Indigenous peoples of New Zealand

Samoa language

fanua	land
Siva Tau	Samoa war dance, performed by sporting teams before each match
tausi le vā	maintaining social spaces
tautua	service

Tongan language

malo 'aupito	thank you very much
mana	power
Mate Ma'a Tonga	Tonga's national rugby league team; Die for Tonga; all that Tongans do they do for their people, their nation and for God
Sipi Tau	Tongan war dance, performed by sporting teams before each match
tauhi vā	maintaining social spaces

Pan-Pacific languages

mana	power
Moana Pasifika	a Super Rugby team made up Pasifika players from Pacific Island nations as well as New Zealand and Australia
Pasifika	people of Pacific Island decent
vā	relational space

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