


Mental Health of Indigenous Fijian Ex-Soccer Stars and Relation to Race and Class

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Abstract

Fiji sports history is rich, with soccer thriving since the 1950s, especially among Fiji Indians in the sugarcane belts of Western Fiji and around Labasa on Vanua Levu, where many descendants of indentured labourers settled after 1920. Rugby, however, gained prominence with Fiji's triple win at the Hong Kong Sevens from 1990 to 1992, marking the country's rise on the world rugby stage. Today, soccer faces a stark decline as talented players shift their focus to rugby and rugby league, impacting the sport's quality. This article spotlights seven former soccer stars from the 1970s and 1980s, exploring how poverty, income inequality, social exclusion from decision-making, and historical marginalization related to race and ethnicity have affected their mental health. These challenges highlight the personal and societal struggles that have emerged as the focus in Fiji sports shifts, leaving soccer and its ex-stars in a difficult position.

Keywords

Alienation, Fiji Indians, Fiji Soccer, Indigenous Fijians, Poverty and Mental Health, Race and Class, Race/Ethnicity and Mental Health

1. Introduction

Fiji sport has an interesting and varied history. Since the 1950s, it has had a soccer competition that has seen plentiful individual stars and dedicated fan passion, especially in the sugarcane belts of Western Fiji and in the second island Vanua Levu around Labasa. It was in these areas where most Fiji Indians settled as a result of the end of the indentured labour era in 1920. The national teams of the 1970s and 1980s were outstanding, by Oceania standards, with highlights being the friendly 3-0 win over Newcastle United (England) in 1985 and victories over Australia and New Zealand (twice) in 1988. However, in recent years, the country has been

known worldwide as a rugby country, with the sport of rugby 7s being the field where the national-team has had most success. The beginning of this fame can be traced to the three-in-a-row wins in the Hong Kong 7s from 1990-1992 (James & Nadan, 2021). Despite this, a dark cloud hangs over soccer as talented players have tended to focus on rugby and rugby-league and the soccer standard has fallen considerably. In this article, we follow a sample of seven ex-soccer stars from the 1970s and 1980s and look at the impacts on mental health of poverty, income-inequality, alienation and exclusion from centres of power within the sport, and a history of marginalization associated with race/ethnicity. An important dynamic is that a local social equilibrium exists where the Fiji Indians “control” soccer (James & Nadan, 2019, 2020; Sugden, 2017; Sugden, Adair, Schulenkorf, & Frawley, 2019) and the Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) sector, as well having significant influence in the media, education, academia, and the trade unions, while the Indigenous Fijians “control” rugby, the churches, the police (Teaiwa, 2005), and the military. This equilibrium arguably works relatively well, as each community has spheres where they can excel and exert cultural hegemony and control. This has created a kind of exploitation and alienation within soccer where 75% of players are Indigenous Fijians, but the administrators and coaches are mostly Fiji Indians. Although there is no intention here to attribute ill-will to any individual or group (Garcia, 2001), cultural hegemony and systemic issues limit the Indigenous Fijians’ chances of serving as administrators or coaches in the sport post-retirement compared to many of their Fiji Indian counterparts. However, we will see that class issues are not reducible to race issues, as Fiji Indian men not connected to the circle of powerbrokers within soccer, such as our interviewee Sami, also find accessing such employment opportunities difficult after retirement. The poverty of our Indigenous ex-stars is mirrored in and arguably exacerbated by the depression hanging over the sport due to declining attendances and poor performances, by historic standards, in the Oceania Champions League and international team matches involving the national-team. In this article, we explore the links between mental health, race/ethnicity, and poverty among our sample of ex-soccer stars using ethnographic methods of semi-structured personal and group interviews, and extensive participant-observation. I (first author) was able to access Nakavu Village as my interviewee Henry Dyer was then assistant village headman.

The attitude of the administrators in the era of the 1970s and 1980s, if not now, could be termed benevolent paternalism with the method of control being cultural hegemony—the backdrop was and is a relatively poor and remote island nation that was a British colony until 1970. On the one hand, clubs and district associations were formed and financed usually by Fiji Indian small businesspersons and their input was due to philanthropic reasons as well as love of the sport. Fiji Indian ‘control’ was not some kind of conspiracy or plan, but emerged out of individual businesspersons forming and financing clubs. Naturally, they would hire coaches from the same ethnic and cultural background, some of whom were schoolteachers. The schools were another area of cultural hegemony where both sports and

mainstream subject teachers could mentor and guide young sportspersons, of any ethnicity, and plot their road to success. So, the Fiji Indian cultural hegemony extended through the senior soccer landscape through to school sport and mentoring. The process has led to many outcomes, but one outcome has undoubtedly been the perception among some Indigenous ex-stars that they have been cast aside by the sport post-retirement and that, despite their past successes on-the-field, in a golden era for the game, their chances of making it into coaching and administration are slim. The feeling of a blocked pathway, in the midst of ongoing poverty, can be seen as a contributor to mental health issues as was a presumption argued for at length by the Algerian Frantz Fanon (1961/1965) in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Even in their playing careers, a Lautoka lawyer once told the players how Fiji Football Association (FFA) treated the players as tea-bags, meaning that they were used up and discarded once their usefulness had passed (Dyer & James, 2023, p. 68). Another point of frustration is the huge money being made now by Indigenous rugby players in Australia and elsewhere, as compared to the Fiji soccer of the 1980s that was effectively an amateur game. Resentful and bitter would be the wrong words here as no one wants to stop people from earning a living from sport, but no doubt the wealth differential can be grating. Consistent with Atkinson (2017), sports ethnographers should not only focus on negative stories of pain and disappointment, but we need to focus on finding positive stories as well. A positive story that we refer to later is the Nadi Legends Football Club aka Nadi Legends Club (formed 2004) that is a self-help and support group formed by the ex-Nadi players and administrators; the group arranges visits to ex-players who may be sick or otherwise needing a visit from old mates. This group had and has no connections to any regulatory body, and the model has been taken up by ex-players from other national-league teams who have begun similar ventures.

2. Background

In this Background section, we look at the histories and identities of the two main and largest ethnic groups resident in modern Fiji, the Indigenous Fijians (56.8%) and the Fiji Indians, also sometimes referred to as Indo-Fijians, or, in the language of the vernacular, “the Indians” (37.5%). Lastly, we provide a brief history of Fiji soccer from its beginnings during the colonial times up until the end of the twentieth century.

The Indigenous Fijians trace their history back to a nation-defining myth, the landing of the first Fijians at Vuda Point in Western Viti Levu. In their worldview, this landing is the basis for the oneness and unity of the Fijians in the face of a history of colonialism and the domination by other ethnic groups, notably the Fiji Indians and Chinese, in the market economy. This event is also inextricably bound up with notions of Fijianness and moral landownership. The Indigenous Fijians revere the village or chiefly system whereby the villages each have a village headman and assistant village headman, and the villages in each *vanua* are under the leadership of the Paramount Chief. A *vanua* is defined as an area having only one

Paramount Chief (Dyer & James, 2023, p. 102). As all Paramount Chiefs are of equal status, the villagers of the Nadi area dispute the legitimacy of the ceding of Fiji to the British in 1874 by the then Paramount Chief of Bau. Hence, a sense of grievance and rebellion exists among the Indigenous Fijians of the Nadi area that continues to exist until today. An element of democracy exists in the villages as indicated by the facts that the village headman position is elected and that village proposals require the assent of 70% of villagers before they can be passed. The process involves the village headman or assistant handing over the physical signatures of villagers to the Paramount Chief.

The villagers exist in a lifestyle of continual and continued village fundraising activities because, under the previous Fiji First government (2006-2022), the villagers had to raise one-third of funds themselves for a village project such as a new village hall and then the government would contribute the remaining two-thirds. Under the new government, the People's Alliance (PA)-National Federation Party (NFP)-Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPHA) coalition, these rules have been relaxed so the villagers now only need to raise one-quarter of the money. The PA is a party that 1987 coup-leader Sitiveni Rabuka split off from SODELPHA. An important aspect of Indigenous culture is the moral and sacred nature of village-space (James, Tuidraki, Tuidraki, & Tabaiwalu, 2022), with its opposite, town-space being seen as secular and almost second-rate, it is seen as the province of secular government, secular criminal law, the business community, and non-Indigenous persons. With a handful of permitted exceptions, only indigenous persons are permitted to live in Indigenous villages.

The history and mythology of the Fiji Indians exists largely separately and independently from the history and mythology of the Indigenous Fijians, a division that began in the colonial era (1874-1970) when the British put the two communities on paths of separate development. The British decided to import Indians from India to work as indentured labourers (the *Girmitiyas*) and 60,000 arrived in the colony between 1879 and 1916 (Ali, 1980, p. 14; Gillion, 1977, p. 1; Gravelle, 1979/2000, p. 150; Lal, 1993, p. 189; Luker, 2005, pp. 360, 367; Singh, n.d., p. 23). One motivation behind this decision was the probably well-intentioned idea that the Indigenous Fijians should be able to go on living their customary lifestyles to the greatest extent possible. Having such different histories and mythologies can be a barrier to reconciliation and understanding since to achieve these things there must be a knowledge of and empathy with a different tradition. Arguably, these things still today contribute to tensions in society that only manifest at certain times when events rise the anxiety and nervousness in the atmosphere. None of these things suggest or imply ill-will on the part of any individual or group (Garcia, 2001) and, on balance, ethnic and other relations, such as those between Hindus and Muslims, have been free of the violence seen elsewhere. Furthermore, the wealth differential between and within groups can be attributed to the paths of separate development since very early on, at least from the 1950s, the Fiji Indians have "controlled" the Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) sector. In particular,

as in England (Chandan, 1986, p. 35), the Gujaratis or the “Gujies”, as they are sometimes known, have created for themselves the position and identity as the dominant small shopkeeper class. The myth of the *Girmitiyas* and the sufferings that they endured from plantation owners, due to overwork and direct abuse, inspires and motivates the community today, including those émigrés from Fiji that have settled in Western countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the USA. People in the community respect deeply the sacrifices that the early generations made to build up the economy and the religious and educational institutions of modern Fiji. Soccer plays a role among the émigrés in keeping their unique identity as “Fiji Indians”, and not simply as “Indians”, intact as they frequently visit Fiji to see relatives and attend soccer matches (James & Nadan, 2021). They name teams and tournaments in the Western countries where they reside after the equivalents back in Fiji (James & Nadan, 2021).

Another important concept in Fiji history is the presence of military coups. The first two took place in 1987, led by Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, and the third in 2000 led by George Speight. These three coups were designed to restore the primacy of Indigenous identity and rights. The 1987 coups led to the banning of Sunday football games for a few years, which set the game back and took away the 3:00 p.m. Sunday timeslot, which was previously popular. The 2006 coup, led by Frank Bainimarama, was instead designed to foster multiracialism and meritocracy similar to the neoliberal Singapore-style version of the state. The violence towards Fiji Indian homes and businesses after the 1987 and 2000 coups (Trnka, 2008) clearly revealed tensions in society that were connected to both race/ethnicity and social class. The result has been some trepidation among all communities that these things could happen again, as well as large-scale emigration of Fiji Indians (James & Nadan, 2021). There is some residual triumphalism among certain Indigenous people that the coups amounted to justice for their moral cause in their own land albeit the Indigenous community used the ballot box rather than a coup in 2022.

Fiji soccer was a sport brought in by the British colonialists. For a long time, the Europeans, Indians, and Indigenous Fijians played in their own separate tournaments without mixing. The first club games were organized by the Fiji Indians in the Suva area in the 1920s (James, Tuidraki, & Ali Tanzil, 2022, p. 3). The first Inter-district Championship (IDC) was organized between the districts and took place in 1938. This was conducted on a national basis, but there was no national-league of home-and-away fixtures until 1977, which, coincidentally or not, was also the year that regional powerhouse, in both economic and sporting terms, Australia, set up its National Soccer League (NSL) (James, 2023). Important developments include the star Namoli Native SC (Lautoka) team, which played in an Indigenous league and won nine league titles in a row from 1941-1949 (Anonymous, n.d.)¹. Finally, in August 1961, it was decided to admit Indigenous players

¹ It should be noted that the only reference we can find for this information is the cited Wikipedia article.

into the Indian league for the 1962 season and the word “Indian” was dropped from the name of the Association (James, Tuidraki, & Ali Tanzil, 2022, p. 3; Prasad, 2008, p. 27). The history of the Indian Association then got revamped as the history of the national association and of the sport in Fiji. Esala Masi was one of the star Indigenous players to move to an Indian district team (Prasad, 2013, p. 28). Although effectively amateur, the 1950s through to the 1980s were golden years for Fiji soccer with the national-team twice beating Australia. Numerous champions graced the fields and were enjoyed by a mostly Fiji Indian crowd except for in the Western Fiji town of Ba where soccer was the number one sport. The Ba district team up until today attracts passionate support from all ages, races and genders. The domestic successes mostly belonged to the Western Fiji teams of Lautoka, Ba, and, to a lesser extent, Nadi. One-off games and mini-tournaments progressively gave way to the current situation with the Fiji FACT tournament (established 1991), Battle of the Giants (BOG) (established 1978), and IDC tournaments being separate, self-contained tournaments featuring the national-league teams. In addition to these, the national-league proper of home-and-away fixtures continues on every year as well. In the first decade-and-a-half of the national-league, from 1977-1990, titles were mostly shared by Nadi and Ba, with Lautoka having some success in the mid-1980s and the minnows, Nadroga Stallions, based in Sigatoka, on the Coral Coast, having a fine run of success in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Southern teams Rewa and Suva and Vanua Levu (second island) team Labasa had occasional title and cup victories which broke Western dominance but failed to establish anything like golden eras or dynasties. Partly this was due to soccer being strongest in the sugarcane belts of Western Fiji and Vanua Levu and the tourist money flowing into Nadi. Supporters of both teams of a certain generation continue to debate which was the greater achievement in the sport: Nadi’s four-in-a-row national-league wins from 1980-83 (Prasad, 2008, p. 90) or Ba’s six-in-a-row IDC cup wins from 1975-80 (Prasad, 2008, p. 91) that saw its players become local legends and household names? Despite descriptions of cultural hegemony in this article, it is impossible not to agree with Mohit Prasad’s (2013, p. 28) assertion that soccer has been a contributor to the breakdown of language and cultural barriers in Fiji.

3. Methodology

The first author moved from Australia to Western Fiji to take up a lecturer appointment in May 2013. This was my first time to visit Fiji and I had no knowledge of Fiji soccer. I began to watch Lautoka Blues home games at Churchill Park in the Fiji Premier League and read the soccer pages of the *Fiji Times* and the *Fiji Sun*. In December 2013, I met by chance the former Lautoka, Nadi and Fiji national-team soccer icon Henry Dyer in the (now closed) Deep Sea Pub on the Nadi main street. We began conversing as I decided to take the afternoon off and not return that day to the university campus at Saweni. Henry explained to me his soccer past and during this and later meetings, I began to believe in the truth of

his stories. As he was then the assistant village headman at nearby Nakavu Village, Nadi, he was also able to introduce me into Indigenous Fijian village life and culture. Early on we made a verbal agreement that I could help him to write his memoir book (later published as [Dyer & James, 2023](#)) and publish any academic journal articles that might emerge from the primary data.

Between May 2014 and April 2015, I met Henry 20 times on Thursday afternoons for the purpose of doing interviews for the memoir book. As these sessions lasted around 3 hours each, we can say that about 60 hours of interview data were accumulated. Henry chose the topic for each session, and we worked in rough chronological order. At the first session or two, we covered Henry's childhood from age zero until his debut matches for the now defunct Airport Soccer Club in the Nadi club competition and the Nadi Soccer Association team in 1981. The Nadi Soccer Association team, also known as the Nadi Jetsetters, plays at the highest level of domestic competition, the Fiji Premier League. There are two divisions of national-league teams, the Fiji Premier League and the Fiji Super League, with promotion and relegation operating between them on an annual basis. Each district administers a club competition for clubs located within its own boundaries. Two villages located adjacent to the Nadi River bridge and Nadi Town Centre, Namotomoto and Nakavu, have a rich history of providing Indigenous stars to Airport SC, the Nadi Jetsetters and the Fiji national-team setup. In later interviews we discussed important international and domestic matches in Fiji soccer history; Henry's senior playing career (he played for Lautoka Blues for several years in between his stints with Nadi); his time of imprisonment during the military coup year of 1987; and postretirement. We could call these interviews unstructured as my early knowledge of Fiji soccer history was very limited and I needed Henry to talk and fill in the gaps. I only asked questions to get more detail or to clarify content. Occasionally, I would give relevant examples from Australian or European sport so as to make it into a conversation rather than using the interviewee in instrumental fashion.

Our way of working developed organically as we continued the sessions. I would usually read a sentence or two back to Henry from my shorthand notes and ask him to either accept it or modify it. Sometimes I might suggest an idea, a sentence or a turn of phrase. We wanted to be brave enough to tackle controversial issues within and outside the game, such as race/ethnicity, social class and the standard of the administrators. We also considered the poverty of ex-players, which was a function of income-inequality between administrators and players and the overall lack of money within the sport in what was effectively an amateur game. We never had the intention of criticizing named individuals as sport sociologists are concerned with systemic issues. For the more sensitive and controversial topics, we would carefully discuss and then agree upon wordings and we would not let the matter rest until we both reached agreement. Henry and the other ex-players, due to their successful careers in an era of Fiji soccer that was relatively strong by historic standards and their present poverty and standings

within Indigenous communities, give them the right and ability to reflect on social and economic problems in the country. While these might have their bases outside of soccer they impact on soccer deeply. Entrenched poverty and being largely forgotten by fans today brings in mental health issues. This is, ironically perhaps, compounded by being lauded and greeted by supporters of a certain age bracket. Although they may be respected, no money is forthcoming and so their situation stays largely the same. Although the various administrators have improved in the last ten years in terms of how they treat the ex-players, race/ethnicity of fans and administrators is different from most of the ex-players and this correlates with both social class and lifestyle opportunities.

The second stage of the research fieldwork took place in Western Fiji between June and November 2015. During this period Henry and I co-interviewed five ex-Ba players and two ex-Nadi players (excluding Henry himself in that number). Interviews mostly lasted 3 hours each and took place at the player's home, the Ba River foreshore, the Ba Central Club or the Ba rugby ground. We aimed initially to interview as many ex-players as possible who had played in the iconic 1982 IDC Final between Nadi and Ba where bad light had stopped play in the middle of the penalty shootout. We also wanted to interview at least one Fiji Indian ex-player to ensure that the views of every ethnic group were heard. Overall, we interviewed 6 out of the 22 ex-players who had played in that game (Henry included), which corresponds to 27% of the ex-players. We interviewed 2 Fiji Indian ex-players and the remaining 5 self-identified as Indigenous Fijians. It is a limitation of the study that we interviewed nobody based in Southern Fiji or the second island of Fiji, Vanua Levu. As those locations require either a five-hour bus journey or a plane trip, we were not able to visit due to time and money constraints.

The third stage of data collection involved me visiting Suva to access the physical back copies of the *Fiji Times* at the Fiji Times headquarters. As a result of the interviewing phase of the data collection, I was able to restrict my attentions to news articles around four key events: (a) the iconic 1982 IDC Final; (b) the motor-vehicle accident that killed Ba and Fiji champion Joe Tubuna in August 1984; (c) the Fiji national-team's 3-0 1985 friendly win over Newcastle United (England); and (d) the Fiji national-team's 1-0 win over Australia in 1988. While the last two matches take on the status of enduring myth in Fiji, they are unlikely to be either remembered or retold by the Newcastle United club or by the Australian soccer authorities.

4. Findings

4.1. Childhood Years

Henry Dyer's childhood in Western Fiji was marked by a rich blend of experiences shaped by both European and Indigenous influences. Early on, he spent considerable time with Fiji Indian children in Lautoka's Simla district, a middle-class area characterized by a largely non-Indigenous environment. At age 12, he joined the inaugural cohort, after the end of the Europeans-only policy, at Drasa Avenue

School (Dyer & James, 2023, p. 14). Here he studied alongside peers who would go on to become influential Fiji Indian entrepreneurs, lawyers and politicians, including future leaders of Punjas and Sons Limited. At about this time, his family moved to Namoli Village in Lautoka, where he became deeply engaged in traditional Indigenous village life (Dyer & James, 2023, pp. 14-18). In his late teens, Henry's family's financial situation improved after his mother married John Pettit, a white Australian and director of South Sea Cruises (Dyer & James, 2023, pp. 21-22). Henry grew close to his stepfather, especially through their shared interest in soccer, as Pettit recorded his games for later discussion (Dyer & James, 2023, pp. 29-30). Central to Henry's understanding of Indigenous identity and unity is the legendary arrival of the first Fijians at Vuda Point in Western Viti Levu, which deeply informs his sense of connection to his heritage:

1) When the Indigenous Fijians get together, that creates its own new and different reality. Even the people who lived with us every day would not know what was happening. When the day is over the damage is done. This is to show that Fijians (Indigenous Fijians) are always intact. If there is a big game, such as Farebrother's Rugby Challenge from two *vanuas* (from different provinces, say Nadi and Naitasiri) (a *vanua* means that there is only one Paramount Chief in that area) the emotion gets intensified and they could kill each other in the nightclub after the game. However, after this has happened, because of the links of our ancestors (the first Fijians), we both declare that we were wrong and that the violence should not have happened. We accept our oneness and unity. This is what the Fiji military force is all about. All in all, the Fijians are very particular and sensitive and aware [Henry Dyer, personal interview, 9 April 2015, Nadi Town, Ba Province, notes in possession of author].

Henry's deep and perceptive understanding of Indigenous identity stems not only from his education and innate abilities but also from his unique perspective of experiencing it both as an insider and an outsider. As an insider, he draws from his formative years in Namoli Village and his present role as village headman in Nakavu Village, Nadi. Yet he also has an outsider's view, shaped by his childhood connections with Fiji Indians in Simla and interactions with white foreigners, including his stepfather and figures like the late Rudi Gutendorf (1926-2019), the national-team soccer coach.

The quote below illustrates the flexibility and fluidity of the concept of Fijianess, particularly in cases where a sister marries a non-Indigenous person. In such instances, a sense of Indigenous unity and compassion toward the sister and child tends to guide actions. Henry, drawing from his own experiences with discrimination (refer to quote #3), aspired to uphold a higher ethical standard.

2) When I was growing up I knew the family history of the Dyer family. My grandfather told me it when I was small. The Fijians are one race in the world which looks after the children of their sisters whether they are born out of wedlock or not. The Fijian race has a lot of love for its *vasu* (meaning "the sister's

children”) be they Hindu, Chinese, Indian or South African. They always have this love for the sister. If my sister gave birth to an Indian boy we would not think any better or any worse about that. We only think of the sister and the child. We don’t want to bring any unnecessary harm into her or his life.

Despite his efforts to fully integrate into village life, Henry’s fair skin and British heritage—his family, the Dyers, originally sandalwood traders from Yorkshire who had married into an Indigenous lineage—made him a target for racist and discriminatory attitudes. Determined to stay resilient, Henry worked to not let these biases affect his self-esteem. His mixed ethnicity placed him in a unique position, both inside and outside of various ethnic groups, which brought particular challenges. With the colonial-era social hierarchy placing whites at the top, followed by part-Europeans and then Fiji Indians, people often struggled to categorize him. This ambiguity led to suspicion and resentment, with some viewing him as a social climber who leveraged his mixed heritage for advantage. When he became involved in criminal activities like jewelry store robberies, he was swiftly labeled a criminal, a rebranding that seemed intended to undermine his social standing. Henry recounts experiencing discrimination in childhood from darker-skinned villagers, and though he refers to some interactions as joking, they often carried a sharp edge that clearly caused him anxiety.

3) My self-identity then was that I was part-European because I had the Dyer name and because of my complexion. I was always known as Henry Dyer in school. There were quite a number of people in my age group in school who would joke to me about my being half-caste and part-European but they knew who I was. As we grew up into youth things changed for all of us. When you are young it is quite difficult to soak the teasing in and to accept it. You are still young and your brain is not ready for all these things. There is no one to comfort you or to advise you. I learnt the hard way but I’m glad that I came out of it. I think I became more Fijian in my self-identity as I grew older mainly because I live in the centre of the village and because my wife is native *iTaukei* (i.e. Indigenous Fijian) from the border of Tailevu and Naitasiri (Vatukarasa). So everything around me nowadays is Fijian. It is breakfast, lunch, and dinner Fijian. However, I did enjoy my upbringing.

A crucial aspect here is the anxiety and mental distress Henry experienced due to the teasing about his part-European heritage and lighter complexion. He reflects on being young and unprepared for these challenges, noting that during such formative years, one’s identity and self-image are still developing and vulnerable. It’s unclear whether he intentionally sought a “more Indigenous” wife from the interior, but he perceived her as being “native *iTaukei* (i.e., Indigenous Fijian),” because there was historically less intermarriage in that area.

4.2. The Run-Up to the Australian Games, November 1988

Late in his senior career, Henry was chosen to be captain of the Fiji national team

for the home international versus Australia at Prince Charles Park, Nadi. This was a qualifying game for the 1990 World Cup, with a return leg in Australia scheduled for the following week. Henry took it as an honour to be chosen as captain. It was a strong Fiji team with youngsters from the Fiji youth team, Ravuama Madigi, Lote Delai, and Pita Dau, stepping up a level to join the veteran stars. However, a series of events unfolded and the captaincy was removed from Henry and he was dismissed from the team. It turned out that his “criminal” label had been used against him. His Lautoka team manager, Shah Anwaz Khan, had teamed up with a Lautoka solicitor Haroon Shah. A rental car owned by Haroon Shah had gone missing in Suva and Dyer was sent to Suva to get the car back since it was known that he had “friends on the streets in all walks of life”. He found the car but delayed returning it for a week and an alleged robbery occurred in Suva during that time. As Henry recounts the story:

4) This [the dismissal] was because our Lautoka team manager, Shah Nawaz Khan, (as I was playing for Lautoka then), was working for a solicitor. The solicitor asked him (the manager) to locate a vehicle which he had hired out for rental to a [Indigenous] Fijian guy who was now living in Suva. The rental car was in Suva too while we were preparing for the Australia match. I had a lot of friends on the streets in all walks of life. They helped me to locate the vehicle in a very short time. The manager asked me to fetch the car back for him as he knew that I would be able to complete the task. He was a very good friend of mine and I played for his club (Leeds United in Lautoka). The name of the lawyer was Haroon Shah. What I did wrong was I was driving the vehicle around in Suva and did not let the lawyer or the manager know that I had located it. I kept it for about one week.

The issue with this story, albeit we are judging it by the social mores of 2024 not 1988, is that the task was a poisoned chalice. If Henry had failed to return the car then he would have failed in his mission. If, on the other hand, he had returned the car, it would prove his associations with known criminal types. Why was it that he and not somebody else was given the task? We see relations of a “patriarchal” and “feudal” type, in the words of [Marx and Engels \(1948/1972, p. 86\)](#), where a master requires a subordinate to perform a range of tasks. Unlike in capitalist employment relations, some of these tasks are neither part of the worker’s job description nor paid for specifically. Henry concludes as follows about the event, noting that he had a ‘big red mark on his back’ because of his extracurricular activities:

5) I believe that what led to my being dropped for the Australia game was that there was speculation (but no evidence) that the rental car had been involved in some nefarious activities after the time that it was discovered by me. Until today neither the lawyer Haroon Shah nor my friend Shah Nawaz Khan has told me directly the reasons for my being stripped of the captaincy and dropped from the team. However, like any other sportsperson, I take it

with a smile. I learned a lesson but it was too late and I never got the chance to be the captain again. I had a big red mark on my back, not for performances on the field but for my alleged extra-curricular activities.

Overall, Henry states his belief that he was not treated with a “professional and responsible attitude”. What we have called a “poisoned chalice” he labels a “hard job”:

6) My teammate from Lautoka replaced me to become captain (Pita Dau). I can say that they used me to do a hard job but did not treat me with a professional and responsible attitude. However, nonetheless, Fiji won against Australia. I was happy to be there at Prince Charles Park to witness the game. I was also happy that Pita Dau, who was my teammate, was able to captain the team in my place.

The only positive outcomes from this chain of events was that Henry’s Lautoka teammate, the late Pita Dau, was appointed captain and that Fiji, in a remarkable result, defeated Australia 1-0, with the goal coming from a Ravuama Madigi strike in the 67th minute (James & Nadan, 2019, 2020, 2021, Dyer & James, pp. 42-44, 128; Prasad, 2008, pp. 48, 94, 2013, p. 116; Singh, 1988). The game remains legendary in Fiji until today, but disappointment followed on quickly afterwards when Australia won 5-1 in the return match (Prasad, 2008, pp. 48, 94, 2013, p. 116).

Solomon (1996, p. 215) writes that “[i]t is not altogether implausible to suggest that Nietzsche’s works were neither substitutions nor projections of himself, but rather a kind of rage against his solitude and suffering—and against those who sought to conceal or deny their own suffering”. If mental health problems tend to be defined as a lapse from socially-accepted rationality (the mainstream view, according to Nietzsche), then the unsolvable nature of the problems that the ex-players face, clearly a product of colonialism and the modern neoliberal Fiji state, might well drive them towards the double-sided reality of their own situation. This means the “discovery”, through suffering, of the situation that dare not speak its name (landownership mixed with poverty). The Indigenous ex-players’ customary moral land ownership, reified in the modern state, so as to appease both the Indigenous Fijians and overseas liberals, stands up to mock them (Marx, 1932/1994) in their other states of economic poverty and exclusion from power and resources. They are in a bind since traditional land ownership means so much to them and they do not want to give it up. The Indian presence, that speaks of their economic lack and exclusion, is a product of colonialism, the system set up by the Europeans, because they intervened in Fiji life in yet another massive way by bringing in the Indians. And the British maintained that the Indians were brought in to help the (Indigenous) Fijians maintain their customary lifestyles, an ironic declaration from today’s perspective, since the arrival and prosperity of the Indians reveals their own utter powerlessness. This reminds us of Gordon’s (1980, pp. 249-250, 257) assertions, drawing upon the philosophy of Michel Foucault (see, e.g., Foucault, 1978), that programmes and strategies can often produce

vastly different consequences than originally intended such as prisons ending up as factories to produce crime and criminals (Gordon, 1980, p. 250). Mental ‘ill-health’ may well, on occasion, be a *different type of rationality* since it acknowledges honestly a really existing situation.

4.3. The Sweats Soccer Club and Marginalization by the Administrators

In the mid-1980s, Henry was recruited by Nadi’s rivals, the Lautoka Blues. However, the disruptions and game cancellations caused by the 1987 military coup, along with Henry’s imprisonment that same year, hindered both his and the team’s progress. Later, he returned to Nadi to conclude his senior career but sensed a cooler reception from the administrators, likely due to his prior time with Lautoka. After retiring from playing, neither Henry nor his former Nadi teammates were approached by the Nadi Soccer Association, and they faded back into village life. This led to poverty and a feeling of being overlooked and cast aside. In Henry’s words:

7) Most of us soccer players who had played together for Nadi in the same era just completely dropped out of soccer commitment. It was like a guillotine or an axe on our shoulder or on our back. I can’t remember any of us being active with the Nadi Soccer Association after that. We just completely dropped out and lost contact with each other. We did not go to watch Nadi games unless there was a tournament here in Nadi and there was an invitation. We had the feeling that we had done our part and that was it. It might be mentioned by the Nadi Soccer Association that there were coaching training clinics but there were no personal follow-ups. We all just forgot about soccer until we formed the Nadi Legends Football Club in 2004. This brought us together again.

Nadi Legends Football Club² is a self-help and support organization run by the ex-players and ex-officials—it is designed to assist and support ex-players during sickness and other ongoing problems and just be a source of connection.

Over time, relationships may disappear, a phenomenon described as the “aggregating effect of grief” or “cumulative grief” (Rogers & Pilgrim, 2005, p. 115). In Fiji, residents often experience loss due to the deaths of family members and friends at relatively young ages and the emigration of friends and former classmates. For members of the Nadi Legends Football Club, an essential social role is fulfilled when ex-players visit, support and reminisce with former teammates who are ill. Yet, for people like Henry, this can also intensify feelings of grief as he frequently encounters the loss or illness of friends. Henry’s grief deepened when his wife, Liku, passed away between 2017 and 2019. The Nadi Legends Football Club works to combat depression among ex-players and former officials by

²This club, also known as Nadi Legends Club, has never fielded senior, junior or women’s teams in competitive matches unlike the earlier Sweats Soccer Club.

maintaining a continued presence in each other's lives through past and present soccer connections. The shared experiences of the ex-players enhance the value and significance of these networks.

To avoid getting ahead of ourselves, let's return to the 1990s and the story of the Sweats Soccer Club (Dyer & James, 2023, pp. 88-92). Sweats SC was a village-based Indigenous club led by the late village headman as president, with three former Nadi Soccer Association players, including Henry, as coaches (Dyer & James, 2023, p. 89). The club rose through the ranks to compete in the top league of the Nadi area club competition (Dyer & James, 2023, p. 88). However, it folded for financial reasons when the main sponsor withdrew, a situation that still upsets Henry, as the Association did not offer financial or moral support, such as waiving fees. These events were understandably discouraging, and Henry perceives that the administrators were resistant to the idea of an Indigenous club becoming too dominant on the field.

8) In the sense of sporting fair play Nadi Soccer Association also did not do much to help. If they were really happy about the Fijian guys forming a club they would have come to see us and worked out ways to help. They waited for us to drown. They did not offer us a hand to escape the deep water. They possibly thought that we were too good for the other clubs and so they began to work for the other clubs. The other village-based club Tanoa had nose-dived too. There are many soccer clubs in Nadi which died for financial reasons including Airport, Union, Young Ones, and a few others. Nadi Soccer Association did not have the insight to give them amnesty periods of two years of no fee payments to keep these clubs alive nor did they give the clubs advice about what they should do. It's a pity that there have been no village-based teams in the competition from that time up until today. We are trying our best to resurrect a Fijian-based soccer club.

This quote highlights that there are currently no village-based Indigenous clubs in the Nadi club competition, diminishing the power and influence of former Indigenous stars within the sport.

Professionals, including those in the health sector, often assess the circumstances of working-class individuals through their own perspectives. This "cultural gap" (Rogers & Pilgrim, 2005, p. 55) stems from both their professional training (secondary socialization) and their own class background (primary socialization). This gap may have influenced how Fiji Indian administrators treated the village-based club, Sweats SC, in this specific case. It could also help explain why, on average, Fiji Indian ex-players seem to find it easier to transition into coaching and administrative roles after retirement compared to their Indigenous Fijian peers.

Henry may have faced dual discrimination—one due to his Indigenous heritage and another due to the potential resentment or envy linked to his part-European background (with a lighter skin tone and an English surname). His ambiguous

identity might have even caused irritation among others. For some, the ability to quickly categorize people and behaviors is seen as beneficial, as it saves time and reduces stress.

4.4. Semi Tabaiwalu and His Stint as Ba Soccer Association Head Coach

Semi Tabaiwalu was a committed and talented midfielder for the Ba Soccer Association team and the Fiji national team in the 1970s and 1980s. When we interviewed him for this project at Ba River foreshore (first half) and Ba Central Club (second half) on 20 June 2015, he outlined his experience when serving as head coach of the Ba team in the Fiji Premier League. He was in charge for four years, from 2007-2010 and won each of the four annual trophies at least once. Despite being a success, according to most people's definitions, his contract was not renewed. He puts this down to being too outspoken, and he also explains why he thinks Fiji Indians are able to "control" the sport. In our view, they work through cultural hegemony and control and, while these ways are usually effective when dealing with people from the same ethnic community, Indians' lifestyles and customs conflict with those of Indigenous Fijians. This can lead to Indigenous Fijians being excluded from discourses and practices of control and reward and hence they may be marginalized. The idea that Tabaiwalu was 'too outspoken' may mean that he failed to conform to Fiji Indian understandings about restraint and respect for authority figures. In later years, the New Zealand émigrés used to pay his fare to go there to coach the Ba team in the replica competitions held over there. This gave him some meaning in life postretirement, although he did not want to emigrate as he would miss the communal nature of Fiji life. The researcher questioned Tabaiwalu about the role of race/ethnicity in the sport:

9) Researcher: What is your comment about the fact that Indigenous Fijian players seem to find it harder to become coaches and officials than Fiji Indian players do?

Semi Tabaiwalu: Because us [Indigenous] Fijian boys we are very good at heart. We work straight, we talk straight; we don't know all these things about the economic and monetary side of playing dirty. This always enabled the Indians to run the show and we let them run the show. A good example is about our former friend and player George Koi. He was the first Fijian (apart from the Indians) to become a Vice-President of Fiji Football. This may have been in the late-1990s to the 2000s, I cannot remember exactly. In his first year, he started to find about how Fiji Football was working. He found out certain detailed facts about the Association and they were worried about this guy. He was removed after three months in office [Semi Tabaiwalu, personal interview, 20 June 2015, Ba Town, Ba Province, notes in possession of author].

This quote highlights the difficulties that the Indigenous administrator George

Koi faced at Fiji Football Association and the situation is likely to be similar at district (Fiji Premier League) level. He suggests that Fiji Indians' knowledge of the money economy and cunning management tactics have allowed them to retain cultural hegemony and control over the sport. He fails to mention the power and durability of Fiji Indian cultural networks and cultural ways of life that operate within community associations such as mosque, temple, school and township.

4.5. Social Class Issues

Our interviewee, Julie Sami, a working-class Fiji Indian man from Ba and Fiji, shared that he was also not informed about opportunities to obtain a coaching certificate. He agrees with some of his Indigenous ex-teammates that there is a "racial feeling in the game". This perception and dynamic stem from the fact that most ex-players are Indigenous Fijians, while most administrators and coaches are Fiji Indians. While race and class are interconnected, the case of Julie Sami illustrates that there is a social class element that cannot be reduced solely to race or ethnicity. As Julie Sami says:

10) Researcher: Why do you think [Indigenous] Fijian players are not coaching the districts today?

Julie: The [Indigenous] Fijian boys don't get to go the coaching clinics because it is not advertised on the TV or in the papers; they [the administrators] only tell their friends; only a handful of people know about it. There is a racial feeling in the game now; it is not good for the sport. I want to go coaching too but they never tell us; it is not in the papers or on the radio [Julie Sami, personal interview, 1 October 2015, Ba Town, Ba Province, notes in possession of author].

Tensions and some mistrust arise because power within the sport is predominantly held by one ethnic group, particularly after the players and their former teammates have retired. The poverty experienced by many of these ex-players adds to their challenges, potentially leading to mental health issues.

5. Conclusion

Fiji sports history is rich, with soccer thriving since the 1950s, especially among Fiji Indians in the sugarcane belts of Western Fiji and around Labasa on Vanua Levu, where many descendants of indentured labourers settled after 1920. Rugby, however, gained prominence with Fiji's triple win at the Hong Kong Sevens from 1990 to 1992, marking the country's rise on the world rugby stage. Today, soccer faces a decline as talented players shift their focus to rugby and rugby league, impacting the sport's quality. This article spotlights seven former soccer stars from the 1970s and 1980s, exploring how poverty, income inequality, social exclusion from decision-making, and historical marginalization related to race and ethnicity have affected their mental health. These challenges highlight the personal and

societal struggles that have emerged as the focus in Fiji sports shifts, leaving soccer and its ex-stars in a difficult position.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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