

We carry home with us: Pacific athlete migration

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Abstract

Globalisation is not a recent phenomenon, nor does it occur evenly or in a vacuum. Western Scholars have traced the origins of sport-related globalisation back to the 1870s. Interestingly, Pacific migration had long occurred before the arrival of missionaries to the islands. As a result, Pacific diaspora communities can be seen around the world as they establish their families globally. Now, Pacific migration is more complex than one-way migration from the islands to countries like New Zealand and Australia, where many people migrate back and forth to the islands and other countries. This article explores Pacific notions of migration and how this informs Pacific athlete behaviour. Through understanding this phenomenon from a Pacific standpoint, we can identify how sport organisations can be more inclusive. This article aims to inform policies, rules, and regulations in the fields of sports and migration by highlighting how Pacific athletes carry their cultural identity and traditions in a contemporary, globalised sporting era.

Key words

Pacific athlete; Indigenous athlete; Diaspora studies; Pacific studies; Sport Sociology; Sport migration; Indigenous studies

Introduction

“Without question one of the greatest passions of the twentieth century has been sport. It has mattered to thousands of players and fans across the globe, with different sports playing a particular role in the cultural life of countries and people.” (Boyle, 2009, p. 1)

It has been over thirty years since Joseph Maguire and Jonathan Bale introduced the notion of the ‘new global cultural economy’, positioning elite athletes as commercially valuable commodities, frequently being bought, sold and transported all over the world to supply an ever-increasing demand for elite sporting entertainment (Maguire & Bale, 1994). Increased mobility of these ‘products’ has inevitably resulted in problems occurring within both the places of migrant production and consumption, many of which can be linked to the blurring of pre-established boundaries between them (the other) and us (the host). Robins (1997) discusses the growth of migrants within the context of increased international mobility and cross-border cultural encounters, noting that “with mobility comes encounter” (p.18). Borges (2000, p. 207) agreed, adding that “migration does not occur in a vacuum, nor is it a spontaneous phenomenon. People build migration paths on previous traditions, using past experiences and the useful information gained from them”.

The links between sport and globalisation have been traced back to the 1870s (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2006). Our opening quote highlights the intersections between cultural exchange, international competition and the potency of global exposure on national identities through sports.

For Pacific people, highly sought-after commercialised sports on a global scale have seen a rise in migration and an increase in ethno-nationalism as more Pacific people take on opportunities across the world (Ka’ili, 2017; Mackay & Guinness, 2019; Schieder, 2024; Stewart-Withers, Sewabu, & Richardson, 2017; Uperesa, 2023). Economic growth, as well as social advancement, are key drivers of international competition, with the Global Sports Market Opportunities and Strategies to 2030 Report estimating that the global sporting industry was valued at over \$388 billion in 2020. In another report, the global rise in Pacific athletes is said to be providing a platform for economic growth in their home islands, with the current projections in global sports expected to rise to \$599.9 billion by 2025 and \$826 billion by 2030 (Oceania National Olympic Committees (ONOC), 2023). Pacific people have become popular in sports across the world, ranging from American football in the United States to sumo wrestling in Japan (Hafoka et al, 2023; Uperesa, 2022). Pacific Islanders also have a strong presence in Australian, French and British rugby competitions (Mackay & Guinness, 2019; Stewart-Withers, Sewabu & Richardson, 2017; Uperesa & Mountjoy, 2014). With this increase in participation on the global stage, asserting cultural knowledge and identity is critical for achieving success and prominence in both professional and semi-professional sport.

This conceptual piece explores Pacific notions of migration, including how this informs Pacific athlete behaviour. Through understanding this global phenomenon from a Pacific standpoint, we can identify how sports organisations located in both hemispheres can become more inclusive. We seek to inform policymakers and regulators in the field of sports leadership and management by highlighting how Pacific athletes carry their cultural identity and traditions in the contemporary globalised sporting era.

Sport globalisation: Mobility & migration

Sport and globalisation have become accomplices in a process whereby the importance of national identity has been ensured despite, or arguably because of, supranationalist tendencies (Bairner, 2001). Globalisation refers to the way in which societies are impacted both positively and negatively by the growing network of political, economic, cultural and social interdependencies (Maguire & Tuck, 2005). It should be noted that globalisation is not a recent phenomenon, and it does not occur evenly, which points to Bairner's (2001) argument that various societies have become increasingly similar. Gilchrist (2004) also claimed that globalisation influences the performance and representation of communities and individualism. In contemporary society, as time seemingly speeds up, and space appears to shrink through the processes of globalisation, modern media technology allows people to go anywhere in the world from the comfort of their living rooms or pubs and clubs (Maguire & Possamai, 2007, p. 42). Although these benefits are widespread among many people, the movement of Pacific athletes into the broader spheres of sport also occurs in the context of transnational capital investment (Uperesa & Mountjoy, 2014).

Globalisation theories have offered different perspectives into the spread of sport across the globe in terms of economic, cultural and political contexts (Jarvie, 2006, p. 33). Sports were typically considered peripheral to issues regarded as more central to the discipline of anthropology, such as kinship, ritual and the evolution of the state. Many theorists and sports scientists have had to look to interdisciplinary networks for the intellectual exchange of new perspectives on the spread of sport worldwide (Hardy et al., 2018). The striking instrumentality with which sport can be mobilised to promote recognition of similarity and/or difference, to foster unity or to spark conflict may be manifestly apparent. However, anthropologists are also peering beneath these surfaces to discover more nuanced and flexible purposes for which sport may be enlisted (Hardy et al., 2018).

Developments in the world of sport, such as increases in transnational player migration and 'global' sports events, indicate a more interconnected world with nation-states situated in a closer and more intense network of interdependencies (Maguire & Tuck, 2005, p. 109). This means that the boundaries established in sports and other areas of social life must pertain to the processes by which differences and similarities are declared and made culturally significant for athletes from Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, and other islands of the South Pacific Ocean.

Giulianotti and Robertson (2006) called for academics to examine the links between sporting cultures and the identities of migrant communities, having identified migration as "a central component of contemporary studies of globalization" (p.179). Interestingly, two tourism scholars from Aotearoa and Canada positioned global mobility as being "a fertile realm for the development of personal narratives that help individuals and collectives to (re)negotiate identity" (Higham & Hinch, 2009, p. 69). Higham and Hinch (2009) refer to contemporary mobility as both "a cause and a consequence of globalisation" (p. 35) that "lies at the heart of place attachment" (p. 263). Within today's increasingly 'mobile' society, the accessibility, availability, and affordability of a new national identity have arguably never been more commercially attractive or culturally accepted (Wright, 2013).

While the links between professional athlete mobility, personal identity and popular culture (i.e. the commercially driven commodification of competitive sport) have been acknowledged, these interdependent connections remain overshadowed mainly by all-consuming processes of globalisation (Wright, 2013). At the turn of the century, Maguire and Pearton (2000, 175) noted, "a complex and shifting set of interdependencies" responsible for shaping sports-related labour migrations. The overlapping elements they identify are not only "multi-faceted", but

also incorporate a broad range of geographical, historical, political, economic, social and cultural factors. As such, globalisation and contemporary mobility have “brought enormous change to the values and reference points that once framed people’s lives” and “challenged many aspects of personal and collective identity” (Higham & Hinch, 2009, p.11).

Using Maguire’s notion of an identity ‘crisis’ (Maguire, 1999), based around the loss of traditional collective identities and a noticeable impact upon long-established national representations, these sociologists examined the role of both sport and tourism in maintaining and sustaining existing notions of spatial and temporal identities at both a local and national level (Higham & Hinch, 2009; Wright, 2013). Similarly, the concept of ‘The brawn drain’, introduced in the 1990s (Bale, 1993), highlights the unsustainable displacement of sporting ability from one locality (typically poorer, smaller or more remote) to another location (typically richer, larger or more accessible to the target consumer). Furthermore, the emergence of so-called ‘donor’ regions and the establishment of specific nurseries, both dependent upon feeding the developed world’s never-ending desire for new sporting celebrities to worship and adore, also reveal academic concerns regarding the increased mobility of sporting identities (Maguire, 1994).

Therefore, sports globalisation and its interrelationships among Pacific athletes highlight the impact of individual advancement for the wider Pacific community and adopted countries, not only as a means of financial security (Horton, 2014) but also as a display of cultural worldview and perspectives intrinsically linked to the experience of migration and mobility among sporting identities (Enari & Keung 2023, Hafoka et al, 2023; Schieder, 2024).

Pacific perspectives on migration

We acknowledge the vast reach of the Pacific stretching across Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. We also acknowledge the specific cultural nuances of each island. As two of the authors come from different Pacific lands, we acknowledge, more importantly, the similarities that inform this article. As two Pacific scholars and one sport sociologist, we acknowledge our familial ties to each other and our shared history as tagata moana (people of the sea) (Enari & Haua, 2021; Haua & Enari, 2023). It is these interconnected relationships that form the basis of our shared identity and the similarities we share in our culture, language, and worldview beliefs.

Being a Pacific athlete means upholding the worldview, traditions, and cultural protocols of ancestors in any place, context, and time (Borell & Enari, 2024; Keung & Enari, 2022). The title of this paper, ‘We carry home with us: Pacific athlete migration’, reflects this statement, because identity is entrenched in island collectiveness and grounds Pacific peoples in family values and village knowledges (Keung & Enari, 2022; Teariki & Leau, 2024). Pacific distinctiveness, in which island cultural identities are formed, is further highlighted by Keung and Enari (2022), who note that athletes with Pacific ancestry are first and foremost Pacific or Samoan people – they just happen to be athletes. Inherent ways of thinking, being and doing for athletes are, by very nature, influenced by the cultures from which athletes descend (Mackay & Guinness, 2019). It does not matter if a Pacific person is playing American football in another part of the world; what matters is their Fijian/Samoan/Tongan/Tahitian identity, which is fundamental to their existence and more important to them than being an athlete (Enari & Keung, 2023; Keung & Enari, 2022; Uperesa, 2022). This aligns with a Samoan saying, ‘E maota tau’ave Samoa’, which refers to this concept of a person carrying Samoa with them regardless of their geographical location (Tunufa’I, 2005). When Pacific people migrate, they remain deeply rooted in their sense of belonging and existential connections to their village,

family, community, and nation. That means one could be physically absent from their island homelands but still have these inherent ties, which are a vital component in maintaining a sense of belonging (Tunufa'i, 2005).

Horton (2014) notes that as the interdependencies and lives of global players become more complex, so too does our analysis of sports migration in its entirety. Hence, it is essential to examine some of the misconceptions surrounding Pacific migration. Pacific people move away from their home islands not because they are poor but because it is in their blood to be mobile, to navigate the oceans and to be curious about other lands (Hau'ofa, 1998). This curiosity about other lands is evident, with many islands, such as the Cook Islands, Niue, and Samoa, having more of their people residing in the diaspora than in their homeland (Uperesa, 2023).

Pacific migration is better understood when acknowledging that migration away from their islands is not a method to cut ties with village, spirituality, and kinship, because the island homeland remains an authentic point of reference when viewing transnational Pacific people (Mila-Schaaf, 2010). For instance, Macpherson (1999) highlighted how many New Zealand-born Samoans replicate the social dimensions enculturated from their parents' places of origin, which in this case is that of Samoa. However, the enculturation happens as they mix social identities with their birth country (New Zealand) simultaneously. Other studies also emphasise how Pacific Islanders from Fiji and Tonga have been known to create networks that replicate those of their island homeland (Hafoka et al., 2023; Hau'ofa, 1998; Mackay & Guinness, 2019; Va'a, 2001). In addition, Lilomaiva-Doktor's (2009) study on Samoans in the village of Salelologa highlighted that migration abroad was not to disconnect their ties with their village, but to advance their homeland.

Pacific migration represents an extension of Pacific cultures, where Pacific cultural values and practices can be expressed beyond international borders, and village activity can take place in a host country (Enari & Taula, 2022; Haa & Enari, 2023). As Koletty (2000) argued, for transnational Pacific peoples, their new host country is an extension of the island community, while Scull (2004) emphasised how traditions are kept alive by those who perpetuate the culture abroad. At the same time, Pacific athletes who migrate around the world continue to speak their languages among their families and perform their cultural dances (Enari & Keung, 2022; Hafoka et al., 2023). This shows that being Pacific is not just a capital resource, but also a representation of Pacific ancestry, destinies, and history (Lilomaiva-Doktor, 2009). Thus, it is unreasonable to assume that Pacific people migrate to assimilate, but rather to further extend their village to foreign shores through the sense of being (Tunufa'i, 2005).

As Samoan athletes continue to migrate, they in effect extend geographical locations where our Pacific cultures can be taught and learnt (Uperesa, 2023). For example, Samoan rugby players who now reside in Romania have now taken their language and cultural practices to Romanian shores, where they may not have been previously present. While Hau'ofa's (1998) argument served to challenge Western views of the Pacific, it also had implications for models of transnationalism that focus on why Pacific people migrate and, more importantly, how being a Pacific athlete can uphold the worldview, traditions and cultural protocols of ancestors in any place, context and time.

Relevance to fields of sports and migration

Pacific identities are shaped and supported by the concept of their nations, as their worldviews and ways of thinking, being, and doing are carried with them everywhere they go. Through this conversation, sports organisations can gain a better understanding of the perspectives and migratory decisions of Pacific athletes. Western ideologies of the 'self' are quite normalised,

but Pacific people experience life through a collective identity. As Pacific academic Schmidt (2003, p. 418) describes, “identities are predominantly sociocentric and relational in contrast to the more internal, egocentric and individualistic self of the west”. What is yours is mine, and what is mine yours seems to be a phrase which many can relate to, as often the accumulation of one’s wealth is shared among the other members of the family, village and church (Carson et al., 2007). This suggests that the individual's achievements are also shared among others. If one wins, we all win, and therefore, what is most important is the happiness of the community.

Sports organisations can develop a nuanced understanding of the ontological positioning of their athletes by considering the role of Pacific values, such as *faka’apa’apa* (respect), and the relationships within the sport itself (Teariki & Leau, 2024). When organisations realise that Pacific athletes identify with their culture first and foremost, they will understand that the culture is vital to sports excellence. In Australia, the PacificAus Sports organisation is a government initiative that supports Pacific athletes in competing in professional sports and accessing high-performance coaching. This program supports basketball, rugby league, rugby union, netball, cricket and Olympic/Paralympic sports, and others. It is a collaboration between Pacific people and Australia to aid in capacity-building and the development of players (Australian Government, 2025). The presence of Pacific peoples in the Australian context highlights the importance of facilitating the continuation of Pacific athletes’ cultures as they resettle abroad and contribute their sporting prowess to their host countries. In many ways, this can be seen as Pacific transnationalism because it influences the everyday lives of individuals, institutions and governments (Lee, 2009). As host countries, it is just as important for governments and sports organisations to allow Pacific athletes to recreate their culture upon arrival as a sign of familiarity and as a form of solidifying who they are in their new environment.

Bryant-Tokalau (2018) affirms that Pacific Islanders are adaptable to new environments and change, and migration is no different, provided there is support within complex mainstream systems. As such, the UQ Pacific Pathway to Brisbane 2032 report outlined the basis of a community-centred approach to help provide meaningful support to Pacific athletes, founded on cultural imperatives (Australian Government, 2025). Cherishing relationships with family and maintaining strong connections are foundational for Pacific peoples. The more effective sporting organisations are in supporting Pacific athletes’ cultures, the better the settlement process will be. Experiences of relocation and migration should be positive, allowing athletes to feel safe and valued.

Moving forward

Arguably, the most noteworthy and noticeable result of the globalisation process has been the reduction, if not total removal, of contextualised cultural boundaries separating the private from the public, the personal and the professional, the local (home) and the global (away), and the everyday from the other (i.e. the work from the play). While most sporting switches occur between regions or nations sharing socially constructed traditions, cultural connections, historical ties and/or close political relationships – as opposed to geographical boundaries – the number of borders that athletes are now able (and willing) to cross in order to improve their professional creditability and strengthen their personal curriculum vitae has grown considerably over the past couple of decades (Wright, 2013).

While the multifaceted subject of sport-inspired globalisation cannot claim to be in its infancy, surprisingly little is known about the motivations of elite sport migrants, specifically how their professional movements impact themselves, their families, their homelands, and their adopted

societies (Wright, 2013). Moreover, what has been written on this subject has – like many other areas of sport sociology – a North American or Western European perspective flavour. Recurring conceptual themes found in the seminal western-centred mobility literature typically point the reader towards the potential socio-economic benefits to be gained from being mobile and motivated to migrate. Perceptions surrounding one’s ability to increase their market value and increase their weekly wage dominate the discourse presented early in our piece, especially those focusing on the migration of athletes into Europe and/or North America. Inclusion of lifestyle mobility and personal identity-based elements into the simultaneous construction and consumption of identities, however, represents a route far less travelled (Higham & Hinch, 2009; Wright, 2013). There has also been little written on the motivations and movements of athletes around/within the Asian Pacific Rim (e.g., between the South Pacific islands and Southeast Asia or East Asia). As such, we seek to foster these conversations.

Based on research in the realms of Pacific sports and migration, this paper recommends five practical implications to inform policies, rules and regulations for sports organisations, institutions and groups. In the first instance, sport governance representation is particularly important when there are large numbers of Pacific athletes in a sport. This ensures Pacific people either have a role within the governance structure or are present at board meetings to ensure their voices are included in policy formulation (Enari & Keung, 2024). It is crucial that, where there are large numbers of Pacific athletes, their voices are present in all levels of sports advancement. Interestingly, Hong and Minikin (2024) found that athlete voice in different levels of sporting structures can help increase athletes’ self-esteem and awareness. There is also an opportunity for leadership development, performance improvement, and enhanced sport outcomes when Pacific athletes are included in the decision-making processes that affect them and their careers.

Second, allowing Pacific cultural exchange and ensuring broader management attendance in these events is paramount. Pacific athletes should be able to host their sports teams, organisations, and communities in a shared space that symbolises the epitome of Pacific culture (ONOC, 2023). Interweaving culture into the institutions in which they are involved can help bridge cross-cultural understandings and strengthen bonds between Pacific peoples and organisations. The focus should be on social development and capacity building across all levels of society, as Pacific athletes settle into their host countries and navigate the complex world they are entering.

Our third recommendation is that Pacific cultures should be a significant part of the club culture. What that means is that the ancestral knowledge of Pacific athletes should help inform mainstream club culture in the clubs they play for. This can be achieved through shared lunches and the pre-game singing of Pacific songs and dances, promoting traditional Pacific cultures to the wider club. This stems from the notion of connecting rather than separating (Teariki & Leau, 2024). By sharing in song and cultural dances, we are weaving two worlds of understanding together and therefore, the concept of collectivism is harnessed and actualised in the sporting institute.

Our fourth recommendation is for the inclusion of Pacific dignitaries at major sporting events hosted by organisations. This could include Pacific statesmen, Chiefs, Pacific academics and community leaders to share their knowledge and speak about what sports excellence looks like, from a Pacific standpoint. In doing so, sports institutes are strengthening reciprocity and ties to people who Pacific athletes are influenced by socially, politically and culturally (Sherry et al., 2017).

Our final recommendation is for sports groups to do their part in community development. Translating the goodwill of the community to sports institutions can influence positive change and is very much in line with the Pacific value of reciprocity. This gives Pacific athletes a chance to actualise not only their talents but also to strengthen communities through their sports organisations. Being a Pacific athlete in the context of migration means holding fast to all the traditions and worldviews which give meaning to their identity (Uperesa, 2023). We believe they will continue to do this, for no matter what, ‘E maota tau’ave Pasifika’ – Pacific people carry their houses.

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