



## Once were Warriors, now are Rugby Players? Control and Agency in the Historical Trajectory of the Māori Formulations of Masculinity in Rugby

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# Once were Warriors, now are Rugby Players? Control and Agency in the Historical Trajectory of the Māori Formulations of Masculinity in Rugby<sup>†</sup>

Domenica Gisella Calabrò

*In Māori society rugby has come to be viewed as a platform to maintain an indigenous model of masculinity as well as one of the main sites for the achievement of prestige. National and international representations of the Māori man as a rugby player—a present-day version of the Māori warrior—apparently corroborate the indigenous experience of rugby. This is the result of the more than one-century-long Māori negotiation with rugby, a practice where they were allowed to occupy a space. However, this phenomenon is made of multiple nuances, ambiguities and tensions,*

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† I dedicate this article to the late Whetu Tipiwai:

E te rangatira e Whetu  
E tangi tonu ana te ngākau  
E rere tonu ana ngā roimata e te pāpa, i tōu rironga moe mai rā

I haramai au ki te kimi mātauranga whutuporo  
Me ngā hononga o te whutuporo ki te iwi Māori

Nāhau au i tautoko i ārahi kia tūtuki ai āku mahi  
Ko te wairua o ōu mahi rangatira  
Ka ora tonu i roto i aku tuhituhinga

Anei āku kupu mihi, āku tangi  
Aroha naku nā

Domenica Gisella Calabrò received her PhD in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Messina, Italy. Her thesis investigated the indigenisation of rugby and its role in the process of Māori identity definition. A postdoctoral fellow at the University of Amsterdam and member of the ERC (European Research Council) funded project 'Globalsport', directed by Professor Niko Besnier, her research focuses on the construction of Māori masculinities in rugby and the transnational mobility of Māori players. Correspondence to: Domenica Gisella Calabrò, University of Amsterdam, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Programme Group: Globalising Culture and the Quest for Belonging, Postbus 15509, 1001 NA Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Email: [D.G.Calabro@uva.nl](mailto:D.G.Calabro@uva.nl)

which reflect the constraints framing the indigenisation of rugby and major changes such as the urbanisation of Māori and the introduction of professionalism in rugby. This paper will explore the Māori formulations of masculinity in rugby, problematising the dominant axiomatic Māori warrior-rugby player and viewing the phenomenon as historical, contemporary and now taking new directions.

*Keywords:* New Zealand; Māori; Masculinity; Rugby

Whakaki ki te maungatai ki te whenua: hoki ki te rangitai, ki te pukerunga.

Piki ake piki ake ki te ara poutama, ki ngā taumatanga e wairua hinengaro tinana.

If we aim for the mountains, we're just going to hit the plains, but if we aim for the sky, we'll hit the peaks.

Climb up and thrive on the path of knowledge, to achieve excellence spiritually, mentally, physically.

*Te Timatanga* (New Zealand Māori rugby team *haka*)

This is the final part of the *haka* (Māori posture dance) performed by the national Māori rugby team.<sup>1</sup> The first verse is a *whakatauki* or Māori proverb. The second verse revolves around the concept of the *poutama*, the stepped pattern woven in the panels on the sidewalls of the Māori meeting-house. This pattern represents genealogies as well as the different levels of knowledge achievement. It evokes equally the steps that Tāne, a spiritual force, climbed in his ascension to the realm of superior knowledge, as told in Māori mythological tales (Barlow 1991).

The late *kaumātua* (elder) Whetu Tipiwai wrote this *haka* for the Māori team more than twenty years ago. As he told me upon our first meeting, he conceived it himself as a personal challenge for the players, aiming to motivate them to pursue excellence on the rugby field and, by extension, in life:

to tell a young person something like that, that's where his psyche is gonna be. If he wants to achieve [...] that's what they're aiming for, that they're able to progress. We call it *poutama*, progression, and it's the *poutama* pattern I'm talking about, it's the stairway, and the stairway is the knowledge, so it's a progression thing. You know, that's the challenge, you get to one level and you get to the highest levels you can attain to... The three ingredients within Māoridom that are the most important are the spiritual, and the mental, and the physical wellbeing of the person. So the spiritual is learning all the *tikanga* [customs] [...] and spiritual things about Māoridom. The mental thing is the mental preparation; and that can be in different ways, through different styles, and they lead to the physical part, you know, that they are physically prepared. Those are important ingredients, and wanting to progress.

Endorsing a model that ideally balances spiritual strength—conceived as cultural awareness and responsibility—mental strength and physical wellbeing, the *kaumātua* incorporated into the *haka* the ideal inherited from past generations, where balance is seen as functional to the wellbeing, survival and identity of the individual and thus the

community (Marsden 1992; Metge 1976). Through the *poutama*, the *kaumātua* also included the indigenous notion of progression. By resorting to a range of old concepts, used metaphorically (cf. Van Meijl 2011), Tipiwaiti thus validated the connection between Māori and rugby—male sport *par excellence*—in contemporary society.

As many Māori proudly point out, Māori rugby is more than a century old and its history comprises multiple accomplishments which have contributed to define New Zealand rugby (Ryan 1993; MacLean 1999; Hokowhitu 2005; Mulholland 2009). In a country where rugby has been elevated to the status of national sport and national icon, such deeds provide national recognition and prestige within the community (Hokowhitu 2004a). During this time span Māori have also integrated rugby into their social dynamics. As a result of the ‘intercultural encounter’ (Merlan 2005), rugby has evolved from colonial sport into a cultural practice of contemporary Māori society, aiming to fulfil indigenous aspirations of self-definition, recognition and sociocultural continuity in a transmuted historical landscape (cf. Appadurai 1996; Sahlins 1999; Hermann 2011).

Rugby was introduced to Māori as part of the colonial policies typical of British cultural imperialism, where ‘athleticist principles followed the flag [ ... ] and cricket and other sport accordingly accompanied the gun, trade and Christianity’ (Hargreaves 1987, 145), conforming with the Victorian view of sport encompassed in the notion of muscular Christianity (see Stoddart 1988).<sup>2</sup> When rugby in New Zealand evolved from an elitist sport into a classless practice (Phillips 1996) and it became clear that the Māori race would not die out as had been predicted, colonial authorities accepted and encouraged Māori participation in rugby—with Māori being allowed to play for the New Zealand national team, the All Blacks, and their own national team. Rugby became a key subject in Māori schools—in order to ingratiate the indigenous man to the colonial society, and concurrently marginalise him (see Hokowhitu 2004a; MacLean 1999). Dominant representations of Māori men, imprisoned in the axiomatic warrior-rugby player whose (brute) strength is the defining trait, suggest the enduring control of Māori masculinity. Similarly, statistics that emphasise such things as poverty, unemployment, low education levels, criminality, poor health and suicide point to the structural disadvantages that Māori men still experience in New Zealand society.

This paper focuses on the ambivalent impact of rugby on the Māori understanding of masculinity, viewing it as a historical process, whose trajectory reflects major political and sociocultural events from colonialism to the creation of a postcolonial bicultural society; and from the urbanisation and proletarianisation of Māori in the second half of the century to the introduction of professionalism in rugby. My aim is to highlight the dialectic generated by contradictory influences of rugby, and the tensions such ambivalence generates within the Māori communities and among Māori men.

My analysis develops from the encounters I made during my one-year doctoral fieldwork in 2008–9, and upon subsequent visits in 2010 and 2012. I formally interviewed eighteen men and four women self-identifying as Māori, who were involved in rugby, or whose lives had been directly or indirectly influenced by rugby. The

interviewees were people with whom I had become familiar, or people to whom I was introduced by other Māori who acted as intermediaries. As I situated myself in the School of Māori Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, several interviewees or intermediaries were people I met at or through the School. The scholar and former rugby champion Farah Palmer enabled me to enter the official world of Māori rugby. One of the people she introduced me to was Whetu Tipiwai, the representative of Te Tini a Maui, the Central Māori region<sup>3</sup> for the Māori Rugby Board, who invited me to the 2009 Māori rugby tournaments.<sup>4</sup> Based on several talks and the interviews, this article ultimately aims to illustrate the diverse, complex and often contradictory ways Māori (attempt to) formulate their masculinity within a space which remains limited and limiting, due to the internalisation and silent institutionalisation of colonialist representations and the persistence of structural disadvantages.

### **The Poster of the Discordance: The Ambivalence of Māori Masculinity in Rugby**

I interviewed the *kaumātua* Whetu Tipiwai on a December morning in 2008 at his office in Napier, a town in the central-eastern region of the North Island. Afterwards, I had to drive south to Wellington, but he asked me if we could catch up briefly in the afternoon at the university in Palmerston North, on the way to the capital, where he was completing a Master's degree. He wanted to give me some Māori team-related material, particularly the 2008 Māori team poster issued by the New Zealand Māori Rugby Board. Aiming to inspire the younger generation to take up the sport of rugby and to raise awareness of the historical and cultural relevance of the team (New Zealand Māori Rugby Board 2007), the poster portrays the players in the *haka* stance, wearing ornamental cloaks over their black jerseys and holding the ancient weapons of traditional warriors. In the background can be seen the green New Zealand landscape, four tattooed, long-haired warriors blowing the wind—recalling the mythological concept of '*ngā hau e whā*', the four winds that represent Aotearoa—and the faces of early players. In the middle ground are the faces of recent players and coaches. Together they represent more than one century of Māori rugby history. The back of the poster includes the team's *haka*, brief accounts of Māori rugby history and Māori mythology.

The *kaumātua* seemed particularly proud of the poster, and made sure I understood all of the concepts and meanings encompassed in it. The ideal of masculinity that he saw embodied by the Māori team and celebrated by the poster did not seem to share much with colonialist derived definitions of indigenous masculinity, except for the prestige attributed to the ancient Māori warrior and the rugby player. The life of the *kaumātua* as a man supporting the tribal and rugby communities, a loving husband and grandfather, a former teacher and Master's student of the Māori language in his old age, did not align with dominant representations of the Māori man either. Rather than endorsing the racial discourse, the *kaumātua*'s understanding of the association of Māori men and rugby seemed to reflect an awareness of the

historical compromise with rugby which has characterised the Māori struggle for empowerment.

In February 2009, another interviewee mentioned this poster, but his motivations collided with those of the *kaumātua*, for he presented it as a symbol of the corrosive nature of rugby in contemporary Māori contexts. A highly educated man in his forties, who did not want his identity disclosed, D. O. appreciated the sport *per se* and the historical value of the deeds of early Māori players for the empowerment of Māori men, but viewed the poster as an expression of self-colonisation. Similarly, he disapproved of the strong association between indigenous culture and rugby that characterised Māori rugby tournaments. From this point of view, the indigenous community becomes 'complicit with the maintenance of a Euro-American institution which naturalizes colonial rule by mapping it onto a system of gendered, raced and classed power relations' (Tengan 2002, 247).

As illustrated by Hokowhitu (2004b), the representation of the Māori man as a rugby player encompasses the ambivalence which informed the coloniser's discourse about the indigenous man of New Zealand: his noble strength and warrior-like ferocity; his physical prowess and intellectual limits (cf. Best 1934; Donne [1927] 1938; Polack 1840; Skinner 1923; Thomson 1859; Tregear 1926). Since dominant discourse in New Zealand represented the nation in masculine terms and based its masculinity on an ideal of strong virility (Phillips 1996), the indigenous war and rugby performances reverberated with the values of the *Pākehā* man. MacLean (1999, 2) emphasised that Māori were nonetheless excluded 'because they disrupt the homosociality. The problem is that Māori men proved their right to be admitted to the Pākehā masculinist elite'. Hence, the elements of violence and physicality become instruments of differentiation. Drawing on Bhabha's (2002, 114) concept of colonial mimicry, the acclaimed Māori player and warrior emerges as 'the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal'.

The notion of 'Māori flair', a term used to define the Māori performance on the rugby field, tacitly associates the Māori niche in rugby with specific *physical* characteristics—brown skin, stamina, staunchness and speed (Calabrò 2014). Thus, a form of racism which naturalises Māori physicality and violence is contemporaneously sanctioned and camouflaged, so that we see the New Zealand appreciation of Māori players and their warrior ancestors, but we miss the kinds of subtle discrimination that exclude Māori men from professional occupations and higher education and determine class and health disparities (see Hokowhitu 2008a).

As a matter of fact, becoming a rugby player still seems to be the most common aspiration among young Māori. It can also be noted that many of those young Māori alternatively opt for a military career. This trend reflects and in turn reinforces the increasing power of the Māori warrior as an image of indigenous masculinity. Māori significantly contributed to the two World Wars as members of the New Zealand Army, particularly with the 28th Māori Battalion that fought in the Second World War (see Soutar 2008, and the website of the 28th Battalion, <http://www.28maoribattalion.org.nz>), which was formed because Māori themselves—politicians

and organisations—believed that an indigenous unit serving overseas would prove their skills and sanction their integration. But today the pursuit of an army career seems void of the political and cultural values that Māori would have associated with it in the past. To many *rangatahi* (Māori youth), this is one of the few options available for a Māori man to secure an income and express his identity—and a more realistic option than a rugby career. Similar experiences can be found in other contexts where populations have experienced colonialism and are still affected by the imposition of colonial representations, such as in Fiji, where the connection of Fijian men with rugby and war is in some respects analogous (Presterudstuen 2010, and Presterudstuen and Schieder this issue).

To summarise, the *kaumātua* privileged the negotiation with rugby and did not dismiss the image of the Māori warrior, whereas D. O. questioned the validity of such negotiation in the present and problematised the image of the Māori warrior. The different ways the two men looked at the poster were emblematic of the ambivalence inherent in Māori formulations of masculinity within rugby. Yet, both responses stemmed from an awareness of the persistence of structural disadvantage in the expression and fulfilment of Māori masculinity in New Zealand society. Their distinct positions enable us to identify a historical evolution and intergenerational changes in the way indigenous masculinity—and the Māori warrior ethos—is defined through rugby. These observations provide the substance of my inquiry.

### Rugby, *Mana* and the Principle of Reciprocity

Rugby is not at odds with indigenous values. In pre-colonial indigenous society physical activities played a pivotal role in the education of youth, training them in those elements that were deemed necessary for survival—whether at battle or in daily life—such as strength, endurance and dexterity, mental strength and memorisation, cooperation and competition (Best [1925] 2005; Buck 1949; Metge 1976). Demonstrating those skills conferred spiritual prestige or *mana* (see Metge 1976, 1986; Patterson 2000). In a system characterised by the interdependence of the individual and the community, and therefore attributing a crucial role to human relationships in the definition of the individual (see Poyer & Linnekin 1999; Howard 1999), the community acknowledged the *mana* of successful individuals, who, in turn, would reflect and enhance the *mana* of the communities themselves—*iwi* (tribe), *hapū* (clan), *whānau* (Metge 1976, 1986).

Physical activities were integrated into social events—fostering tribal and inter-tribal encounters—and could be supported by rituals (Best [1925] 2005; Buck 1949). Nevertheless, most colonial observers trivialised such activities disregarding their purposefulness and their holistic dimension, and impelled Māori to discard them (Hoko-whitu 2007). The functions once held by indigenous physical activities were then ‘assumed’ by the British sports imposed on Māori. First of all, Māori converted them into a new space in which to educate their youth in their values, as elaborated in the epistolary conversation between Māori leader Āpirana Ngata and Māori

anthropologist Sir Peter Buck throughout the second quarter of the twentieth century (Sorrenson 1986, vol. I 165, 181). Rugby is today mentioned as preparing many Māori men for everyday life, instilling in them a work ethic, an ability to lead and a propensity for team work and entrepreneurship; it has also reinforced their self-awareness as Māori men (Te Rito 2007). Secondly, colonial sports evolved into a community affair (Love 1952; MacLean 1999; Sorrenson 1986, 1996; Winiata 1967; Metge 1976), acting as a site of inter-tribal competition and reinforcing tribal identity. Sport thus emerged as a new site to locate leadership (Winiata 1967).

Because of its political value, rugby has gradually outshone other sports and successful players have been regarded as men of big *mana* and looked upon as role models by younger generations—their leadership moving from the field to the stage of community life and from there onto the platform of national politics (Te Rito 2007). Obituaries contained in the Māori magazine ‘*Te Ao Hou*’, published between 1952 and 1976, and those of the magazine ‘*Mana*’, published since 1992, have celebrated many rugby players. The young Māori I interviewed or talked to usually described the older members of their *whānau* and/or *hapū* and *iwi*, who had experienced good rugby careers, as men of *mana*—exerting influence on their communities. At the long-established Māori boarding school Te Aute—which has an outstanding rugby tradition—most students aspired to be an All Black, probably influenced by the then best Māori player, Piri Weepu, a former Te Aute student. Petera (Ngāti Porou) and Jordan (Ngāti Porou), two Te Aute students I interviewed, lauded his attitude:

Piri is the man! We feel really proud 'cause he came here and he comes back now and then just to, you know, chill out [P]. And it's just like normal, you see Piri here! He just pops in [J]. He knows what it's like [P]. He just humbles himself. He makes you wanna be like him, an All Black [J].

As portrayed by the young students, Weepu displayed Māori leadership qualities. Since *mana* needs to be maintained and nourished (Metge 1976, 1986), top-level players have a range of responsibilities on and off the field, particularly, to acknowledge and reciprocate the community/ies from where their *mana* is derived. Indeed, the respect of the community confirming their authority continues to be viewed as one of the key markers of Māori leadership (Mead 2003; Nga Tuara 1992). Interviewees actually emphasised that, regardless of the level at which they play, Māori players should always bear in mind that they are not standing alone on the field, for their communities and their ancestors will be watching them and they will be an example for future generations. It was also stressed that those who make it to top levels, usually do so thanks to the encouragement and economic support—for instance, through *marae* fundraising events—of the community/ies they represent.

Māori players are thus expected by their communities to ‘put their *mana* on the line’, which means experimenting, using imagination and displaying physical talent. Players should also adopt—on and off the field—behaviour underpinned by the values that ideally define a healthy and integrated Māori individual, such as cooperation, loyalty, honesty, humility and humorousness. The players who possess



expertise, experience and knowledge should share this with others while remaining humble enough to continue to learn from others. They do so respecting the *tuakana/teina* (elder/younger; mentor/novice) model based on the Māori principles of complementarity and reciprocity (Salmond 1975; Metge 1976). I witnessed the manifestation of this model during the annual Māori rugby tournaments and through the words of people involved in the national Māori team. Similarly, Weepu's visits to his former school enact these principles. So do the initiatives of the Māori Rugby Board.

Reciprocating the community equally means participating in community life, for example playing at tribal competitions, participating in *marae* (gathering centre) activities and respecting its protocols (where, for instance, the *mana* of young players is secondary to that of the elders). As they become involved in more adult affairs, rugby men can prove their leadership promoting the community's interests in other strategic realms of society, such as business, politics and education, like the early rugby leaders or the ancient *rangatira* (chiefs).

In conversations about the merit of Māori players and their responsibilities, money *per se* was never mentioned. If anything, people considered that the economic gain introduced by professionalism in 1995 was not a source of prestige. In any case, the societal changes that Māori communities have experienced following the Second World War and the introduction of professionalism have significantly challenged or complicated the meanings and ideas associated with indigenous masculinity in rugby discussed above.

### **Rugby, Contemporary Identity and Socio-economic Wellbeing**

The migration of Māori to the city and their employment in low-income jobs, paralleled with the national government's push towards assimilation, have brought about additional transformation, and in some cases, the disruption of tribal ties and value systems. Far from Māori villages, Māori have more often encountered rugby at school rather than through involvement in their respective family's or community's activities, and so have tended to cease involvement in the game once they finished schooling (Te Pou & McIlraith 2006). Tribal rugby has also suffered a gradual decline in the number of supporters and participants and in social value.

However, in the urban context the identification of rugby as an indicator of Māori masculinity, even as its main marker, has emerged reinforced. For instance, rugby leadership has impacted on the reorganisation of leadership in the diasporic communities (Winiata 1959). In addition, disconnected from strong and/or healthy Māori-defined sociocultural environments, Māori men are more likely to validate and be influenced by the dominant image of how Māori men should be, where rugby is depicted as an essential element of indigenous masculinity. Nonetheless, it must be pointed out that the urban/rural division is much less neat than it might seem, many ancestral lands being negatively affected by isolation, economic difficulties and socio-political abandonment. The kind of influence young indigenous men receive from their

'bros' (peers), the type of support they get from their families and communities and the type of leaders they refer to play a key role in determining to which notion of masculinity—and thus rugby—they will adhere.

In 1995, New Zealand rugby adopted the professional code, which meant that Māori could transform an activity that they appreciated and where they felt self-confident into a source of income. I met elders and former players who engaged passionately in promoting the participation of Māori youth in rugby, convinced that the economic prospects of rugby might contribute to keeping them off the streets. Playing professional rugby also means having more educational opportunities, travelling and ultimately expanding one's understanding of the world. The notion of upward social mobility has often been associated with contemporary rugby. In such instances prestige might seem to consist of 'economic status' or 'Western social status'. The issue is that while many Māori—at least ideally and officially—still abide by the notion of *mana*, they also have aspirations that fall within a Western framework and long for socio-economic wellbeing and to avoid marginalisation and discrimination within the wider society.

Accordingly, ambivalences underlie the Māori views of professional rugby. People who had grown up, although to different extents, in settings where there was a strong continuity with indigenous elements and practices, often voiced concern, envisioning sociocultural alienation and identity loss. Tai, a young man from the Waikato *iwi*, lamented that professionalism was corrupting Māori leadership:

Māori leadership speaks in Māori ways ... it's not really Māori leadership to pay ... someone who's really good at rugby one hundred, two hundred, three hundred thousand dollars, that's not Māori leadership. Māori leadership is being seen and playing amongst your people, washing the dishes, helping out at the *marae*, that's Māori leadership. So this professionalism that is coming through is encouraging Māori to become sell-outs, I think.

Several Māori also complained that professionalism did not leave space for Māori to put their *mana* on the line. In terms of the game, professionalism, with its emphasis on physical performance, could ultimately render Māori rugby players indistinguishable from their non-Māori counterparts. Furthermore, various Māori had contrasting views about those players who ended up signing contracts overseas. Although they could see the advantages in the experience, some feared that players would not go back to their communities. Dale (Ngā Puhī), a man in his forties who had met several Māori who had gone overseas to play rugby, pointed out that some players might return home with psychological scars. One of the reasons offered was that playing in countries where rugby is not very popular would force the realisation that their prestige as top-level players, and ultimately as Māori men, was not recognised beyond a parochial setting.

Overall, Te Hiwi (Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngā Puhī), a young man who came from a *whānau* with a strong rugby tradition, noticed that in the Māori family 'the support is not really there for our people to actually go forth with rugby so much as what I know it's really instilled in the Polynesian family' for 'in Polynesian culture the

education in rugby is really pushing because all they see is like an economic gain for them or their family'. He argued that Māori families would surely be supportive of top-level players, if they see their passion for the sport. However, in his own *whānau* he had experienced how the Māori family could act as a 'negative enforcer', his older brother and one of his cousins having been discouraged from progressing in their rugby career to 'stay behind and help with family there, like work and just play with the *whānau* team'.

We must keep in mind that many Māori do not necessarily share the same worries because while they self-identify as indigenous, they may not feel familiar and/or comfortable with the 'Māori ways'—although they may internalise more aspects of 'traditional' culture than they are aware. Further, Māori experience different kinds of disadvantage and some may care more about the financial aspects of professional rugby and/or might place more importance on rugby as a marker of their Māori identity than others.

In any case, all contemporary top-level players, regardless of their own perception of indigeneity and their experience as indigenous males, perceive that in professional rugby their knowledge about 'traditional Māori ways' and Māori tribal and rugby history will be intensely scrutinised to the extent that most of them experience different forms of distress, particularly when they are in conventional Māori contexts such as the *marae* (Hirini & Flett 1999). The solution envisaged by Hirini and Flett was to invest in the players' cultural training, recognising the importance of cultural capital in professional rugby and the wider aspirations of the indigenous community.

Another issue is the performance of the *haka* before the game. In an era where the dance has acquired international visibility, expectations of Māori to perform it in the appropriate way are high. Furthermore, when the *haka* is performed in multi-ethnic contexts, such as by the All Blacks and in mixed schools, Māori players are expected to provide leadership as representatives of the indigenous culture. While this is a significant leadership role, it becomes highly problematic for those players who do not have a secure identity and are not steeped in indigenous traditions. At the 2009 inter-regional tournament, while watching the *haka* rehearsal of the Te Tini a Maui team, the *kaumātua* Tipiwai actually mentioned the players' stress around the *haka* performance. One episode was particularly emblematic. For the first match played in Christchurch, the captain Brendan Watt (Ngāti Ranginui, Waikato, Ngaitirangi), a semi-professional player from a strong Māori environment, composed and led on the field a *haka* representing the team. Watt was absent in the following match, but the new captain felt that he lacked the leadership skills and the cultural knowledge and confidence necessary to perform the new *haka* as Watt had done. Consequently, the regional team went back to the old *haka*—a dance belonging to the tribal repertoire of the Central Māori region.

In this regard, I was once asked if it could be inferred that 'culturally informed' Māori view those who do not incorporate indigenous values in professional rugby as 'de-cultured'. This question made me think of the notion of 'plastic Māori', a slang term which in Māori contexts has come to define Māori who are 'culturally

uninformed' and yet pretend to be 'authentic' Māori. The people steeped in indigenous culture whom I talked to did not usually blame Māori players lacking in 'traditional knowledge' because they were aware that urbanisation and national politics had not favoured the preservation of tribal links and the transmission of Māori values. Consequently, they accepted that nowadays there are many ways of being Māori. At Māori rugby tournaments, elders and adults complained about the cultural 'ignorance' of young Māori players, but they did not question their Māoriness and hoped that the context of the tournaments and their own efforts would contribute to educating the youth in Māori *tikanga*. Indeed, at the Māori rugby tournaments, it was a young player who self-identified as plastic Māori, arguing that such a label could be applied to most participants who pretended to be real Māori for the sake of rugby.

However, the Māori understanding of current cultural 'shortcomings' significantly decreases when we shift our attention to their national team. Some Māori think that the team is no longer representative of Māori society. The *kaumātua* rejected similar allegations—sometimes coming from other elders—claiming that the team's authority rested on encompassing the diversified contemporary Māori experience, where people with Māori descent have less access to the cultural aspect of their indigeneity or to customary knowledge, or conceive their identity differently. What these different indigenous identities have in common, he argued, is pride in wearing the Māori jersey. When rugby is played within Māori settings with Māori and for Māori,<sup>5</sup> discrepancies between the official representation of Māori—emphasising the centrality of traditions such as the *marae* and the language—and lived experiences are more likely to be admitted, accepted and faced. However, where the indigenous national team represents Māori men and the Māori community within the nation and to the world, many Māori are reticent to reveal their internal contradictions or conflicts, lest these be used to further marginalise them.

More generally, rugby has remained a site for the formulation and performance of a model of indigenous masculinity where recognition can be achieved. However, demarcations between agency and oppression have become more blurred. As we shall see, ambiguities are further exacerbated in the current era, where both professional rugby and increasing incidences of Māori gang violence have reinforced the representation of Māori men as warriors—and implicitly validated the representation of Māori rugby players as the modern version of those warriors.

### **The Impact of the Māori Warrior Ideal on the New Generation**

At the first match of the 2009 Māori inter-regional tournaments, an elder of the Te Tini a Maui team suggested that I interview the captain Brendan Watt. He emerged as a charismatic and humble young man, knowledgeable in conventional culture and committed to his community. Brendan was also a father who talked lovingly about his son and an indigenous man who criticised the victim culture upon which he claimed some Māori based their lives. In short, he had a secure indigenous identity

that allowed him to be critical about Māori and their issues. What intrigued me in our conversation was his constant reference to the Māori warrior ideal. For example, when he discussed his indigenous identity:

We descend from a warrior-race that has been through a war and as our ancestors passed on, like, next thing is open for our generation to fix some ... which is the reason why we are going through the battle of fighting the government for the Treaty of Waitangi claims and all that stuff, that's a war 'cause we're fighting for something that was ours and was confiscated from our people and ... little has been done about it but ... yeah the war will go on to my children, my children's children, it's just in our blood, it's how we descend.

Or, when he talked about the Māori rugby tournaments: 'We'll get through this war [the tournaments], we'll have a few drinks and celebrate. And whether you wanna win or wanna lose, hopefully win, but ... yeah for me it's about ... joining forces, joining *iwis* and going out and taking it on the battlefield'.

In accordance with his views, Brendan's thighs were adorned with a tribal *moko* (tattoo) like the Māori warriors of old. His story reconnects us to the New Zealand Māori rugby team's *haka* and the *kaumātua*'s pride in the team poster. However, unlike the *kaumātua*, the young man endorsed more consciously and placed more emphasis on the warrior ideal. This might be accounted for by his growing up in the era of professional rugby which crystallised and internationalised the image of the indigenous warrior/player. Still, some Māori would have been uncomfortable with the war metaphors used by this young player. Some women and a man who identified as homosexual expressed particular hostility towards any Māori involvement in rugby, arguing that the warrior representation it conveyed belittled and marginalised their own categories.

The dominance of the 'Māori warrior/rugby player' as an image of indigenous masculinity does generate an ideal of hyper-virility, which can exert psychological strain on Māori men. For instance, Māori students may put their own health at risk in order to conform to that model (Hokowhitu, Sullivan, & Williams 2008, 7). The informant Tai commented ironically that 'You certainly would not see a Māori, a rugby man crying. Big shame, big shame! [laughter] But then in the old times ...'. On a few occasions, I was actually reminded of how Māori men have traditionally been expected to cry at *tangi* (funeral ceremonies), believing it would be healthy to manifest one's feelings and share them with the community. With virility associated with the standardised image of the muscular and large Polynesian body, stronger pressure exists for Māori players than Pākehā men to have a big, tough body. Tai, who had European-like body proportions and was not very muscular, indicated his being skinny as one of the main reasons why he did not get involved in rugby. He maintained that Māori players who do not correspond to the stereotype have limited chances to have a rugby career and might become targets for aggression on the field.

The hyper-masculinity of rugby might also corroborate the representation of Māori society as extremely macho or patriarchal. Hokowhitu (2008b) has identified such

representation as another piece of the colonial discursive puzzle aiming to produce a masculinity that could be appreciated by the settlers while solidifying the Māori deferential status. However, Māori society defies such a discourse in multiple ways. If we look at rugby, it is increasingly played by Māori women, who have achieved impressive results, including captaincy of the national team. The result is a paradox, for one of the rugby players whom I found embodying all of the characteristics associated with Māori leadership was a woman, Farah Palmer. Besides being a sporting champion, she is a scholar investigating Māori issues, who shares her rugby knowledge by participating in the Māori rugby board as an independent member, and has qualities such as humility and courage.

If some Māori criticise rugby, the ideal of the Māori warrior/player leads many others to believe that the sporting arena—rugby playing the chief role—is the only one where they can excel. At school Māori are more likely to focus on sporting activities. Work-wise, many restrict their options to physical labour. However, several Māori also disclosed having been discouraged by non-Māori teachers when they did show interest in non-sporting subjects and in pursuing tertiary studies.

When I visited the Te Aute school and talked with a class, their teacher stressed how important rugby was to the students as a way to express themselves and as a life goal, his voice revealing a mixture of bitterness and tenderness. As for the students, they talked proudly about their school rugby tradition. I then interviewed two final year students, who confirmed how some of their ‘brothers’ could only see their future in terms of rugby, but claimed they would have liked to pursue academic studies. Jordan was thinking of ‘being maybe a physiotherapist or something... you know... sports science’, thus remaining within the sporting domain. Petera mentioned anthropology, but then laughing he confessed that he had just read it on my paper and indeed he was very uncertain about which path to take. Jordan associated their hesitation with the lack of role models amongst their ‘brothers’:

Hardly any of them [school boys] go to University. Academics pretty much are not up where they should be [...] They might just go to the Army, Air Force, Navy mainly. [...] The Navy likes to come here so they can talk to us trying to recruit us and all that ... uhm ... I don't know ... I think maybe because we have a sort of routine since we're at boarding school, just the same as the Navy, but a step up.

The two students explained that university representatives visited them to promote their courses, but not as often as the Army or Navy. This phenomenon cannot be attributed solely to the Māori war tradition. In the Army and sports alike, disadvantaged minorities are over-represented in New Zealand/Aotearoa, the same as in Australia, the US and Fiji. These same minorities are also over-represented in the unemployment statistics, revealing the limited number of jobs available to Māori men. Thus, if Māori often fail to achieve the rugby career they hope for, it is partly because too many indigenous men compete for a place in this Māori niche. Jordan actually sensed that mainstream society was not expecting too much from them as Māori men, but this feeling did not discourage his ambitions:

Personally, I don't really mind, kind of feel a bit annoyed, like kind of imagine I wanna show off, like I can do whatever you can do and I can do it better [ ... ] just personally feed off negativity and keep it going. Yeah! [smiles] Yeah quite a lot actually, being in a Māori boarding school ... Like, I don't know, they always run you down in public and stuff.

In the case of Jordan and other informants, low expectations motivated them to excel in life. What these people had in common was the support of their *whānau* and having grown up in healthy Māori sociocultural contexts. Nevertheless, a significant number react by 'playing the underdog', according to Caleb (Ngāti Toa), a player in his early twenties. Some men find themselves trapped between a grim material reality comprising cultural alienation and dysfunctional social contexts and a discursive reality that celebrates the moral nobleness, courage and physical prowess of their ancestors while having low expectations towards their descendants. Accordingly, the rugby field corresponds with the scenario of criminality and violence depicted in the novel *Once Were Warriors* (see Tengan 2002). Given this context, the men who cannot enjoy the support of *whānau* and community and feel unable to conform with the warrior model are more likely to attempt suicide (Hirini & Collings 2005).

The pervasiveness of such representations combined with disadvantaged contexts fosters the discourse on innate Māori violence. Dale, who used to referee junior rugby matches, recalled being shocked at the attitude of some parents from socio-economically deprived areas 'who might enjoy watching their kids smashing another kid on a rugby field or yell "Take their fucking heads off!"'. Like many other Māori I talked to, he approved of the expression of a degree of aggression, viewing its outlet as a healthy process (cf. Metge 1984, 28), but blamed parents for not contextualising values to their children.

The indigenous rugby player is also depicted as lazy and lacking discipline. Such stereotypes are part of ordinary conversations with both Pākehā and Māori, the latter often mentioning them ironically, and tend to translate into a prejudice towards the capacity of Māori players to behave on and off the field and to appreciate the technical aspects of the game. In this regard, the former coach of Māori teams, Ray Falcon (Ngāti Porou), also noticed that, 'for some reason, I don't know why but even in coaching we don't seem to [get to high-level], you only have a look around the provinces and you see how many Māori are coaching Super 14, how many Māori are actually coaching NPC level ... but you don't really wanna say that [because of racism]'.

Despite the issues elaborated above, very few wanted to frame what was happening in terms of racism. The young player Mat (Ngāti Kahungunu) even believed that many Māori had become 'over-sensitive', and several people admitted that some indigenous men did have discipline problems, which had repercussions on their rugby career. People usually talked of lack of cultural understanding on the part of Pākehā. However, two informants identified an element of racism in the lack of cultural understanding, including Farah Palmer, who mentioned Piri Weepu as an example of cultural misunderstanding:

I think it's never explicit racism, it's just subtle. I think it's the values they look for in players. And I think the ones that come from a strong Māori background, have Māori upbringing and Māori values... they're not the same values that coaches are looking for in a player. Like Piri Weepu is someone who grew up in a very strong Māori environment, but his values don't seem to be reflecting the values that the coaches are looking for in an All Black. Now, they wouldn't tell you that, or they would deny black and blue that's racism [...] Maybe he [Weepu] did have an attitude problem<sup>6</sup> but maybe there's some cultural reason, lack of cultural communication, misunderstandings.

All of these considerations remind us of the ambiguous character of rugby as a practice that sanctions and perpetuates a racially based prejudice towards Māori men and simultaneously conceals it, and as a site of indigenous agency. Ultimately, it is a reminder of the ambiguities of contemporary New Zealand society and its egalitarian ideals.

## Conclusions

Rugby has played a significant role as a platform to maintain, transmit and make thrive an indigenous model of masculinity as well as one of the main sites for contemporary Māori man to achieve *mana* (spiritual authority/prestige) and national acknowledgement. However, drawing on MacLean (1999) and particularly, Hokowhitu's (2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2007, 2008a, 2008b) arguments, I have further elaborated how the image conflating the Māori warrior and the rugby player has limited the options for Māori men to express, represent and adapt their masculinity in a colonial and postcolonial context.

Grounded in ethnography, and situated in the interstices between neo-colonial forms of control and forms of indigenization, where Māori masculinities are actually played out and meanings are constructed, the analysis in this article has extended the existing literature by exploring Māori tensions and concerns. In doing so it has underscored the ambivalent impact of rugby on Māori masculinity. Such ambiguity does not allow for the unreserved celebration of Māori masculinity within rugby. However, neither does it encourage the mere dismissal or condemnation of formulations of masculinity through rugby in contemporary society for some men continue to use rugby in ways that complete and enhance their indigenous identities. To merely reject meanings produced within rugby may further marginalise individuals who are struggling to find a place in New Zealand society and in their communities as Māori men. I argue that understanding this ambivalence is paramount to fully capturing the shifting meanings of Māori masculinity as well as its plurality of formulations and associated problems.

Multiple masculine trajectories are then traced in the dynamic, ambivalent and ambiguous space of rugby. To better understand the phenomenon and contrast the marginalisation of Māori men, it would be insightful to delve into the desires, hopes, difficulties, creativity and compromises that emerge in these trajectories and hide behind the male *bodies* acting on the rugby field. The use of the term 'body' is not accidental, for the discourse of the warrior/rugby player has in effect reduced Māori men into *bodies*, which can be appreciated in a rugby team or in a military force. This discourse has also deprived



them of the ability to communicate. The difficulty of communicating also occurs because many Māori have internalized the hyper-virile and essentialist interpretation of the warrior/rugby player model, to the extent that the loss of communication cannot be communicated either. In this sense, revealing and analysing masculine Māori subjectivities also means contrasting the process whereby Māori men are reduced to silent bodies. The analysis of discourses and historical facts should therefore be complemented by an analysis of emotions—those very emotions that get repressed or lost in the construction of the hyper-virile Māori player.

As I have pointed out, all interpretations of indigenous masculinity within rugby deal with the same issue—persistence of socio-economic and political disparities. Participation in rugby comprises the other face of Māori violence and criminality if we look at these phenomena as two opposite reactions to such disparities rather than as the expression of two distinct features of the Māori warrior. Future analysis should therefore also continue to tackle the ambiguities of New Zealand politics and discourses in contemporary society, and to explore the effects of the dysfunctional social structures generated by colonialism and postcolonialism. However, the increasing number of Māori criticising Māori ‘victim culture’ and unconditional adoption of rugby as well as Māori reluctance to use the term ‘racism’, despite the realities elaborated above, indicate the difficulties in identifying and dealing with colonial control. To conclude, understanding this complexity within a sport such as rugby which celebrates egalitarianism is necessary to recognise the lingering character of racism towards Māori men in New Zealand society, and to envision a future for Māori masculinities that both encompasses and extends beyond rugby.

## Notes

- [1] The All Blacks, the Māori national team as well as Māori teams, when playing important matches in Māori contexts such as Māori rugby tournaments, perform a *haka* as a prelude to the rugby match.
- [2] See, for instance, the use of football in India (Mills & Dimeo 2002), the use of cricket in the West Indies (James [1961] 2005) and India (Appadurai 1996) and the use of running in Kenya (Bale & Sang 1996).
- [3] Māori rugby is divided into three main *rohe* (geographical-tribal districts): Te Waipounamu (Southern Māori), Te Tini a Maui (Central Māori) and Te Hiku o te Ika (Northern Māori). The annual Māori Rugby tournaments comprise regional and inter-regional annual competitions.
- [4] Other figures of Māori rugby I interviewed included former Māori team coach Matt Te Pou, and former players Bill Bush, Tane Norton, Dallas Seymour and Melodie Robinson.
- [5] Māori rugby for Māori occasionally breaks out of indigenous space, such as the 1999 and 2000 NPC 3rd Div finals between East Coast and Poverty Bay, which in many ways characterised a pre-existing struggle between Ngāti Porou and Rongowhakaata.
- [6] In 2007, Piri Weepu, who had been selected for the All Blacks squad performing in France at the Rugby World Cup, was eventually dropped for disciplinary reasons, and for a while was not selected again. It can be noted that the young informant Caleb mentioned Piri Weepu as an example of Māori indiscipline, for ‘he could have been there for sure but he had problems, you know, to sort out, so he was pushed on the side [ ... ] like with alcohol and stuff. When

I happened to talk with some young women affiliated to Weepu's *whānau*, they stressed that Weepu had instead been the victim of a cultural misunderstanding. They claimed that in 2007 he had actually disrespected the curfew, but had done so to attend a very important *whānau* event, where his presence had been highly appreciated due to his *mana*.

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