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The Indigenization of rugby in New Zealand: Express of Māori rugby in contemporary society**

Abstract

Da oltre un secolo il rugby, sport inglese figlio dell'epoca vittoriana, è divenuto parte del vissuto della comunità indigena maori. In Nuova Zelanda il rugby, sport elitista, si trasformò ben presto in uno sport che trascendeva i confini di classe, divenendo simbolo dell'identità nazionale. Questo aspetto favorì l'apertura del rugby neozelandese alla partecipazione degli indigeni. Lo scopo ultimo di tale atteggiamento era la loro assimilazione nonché il controllo delle loro ambizioni sociali e delle loro modalità di rappresentazione. Nondimeno, il rugby è stato altresì oggetto di un processo di indigenizzazione, sul quale intendo qui soffermarmi. La popolazione maori ha utilizzato il rugby per colmare il vuoto generato dalla scomparsa

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**This article is based on some chapters of the thesis “The Indigenization of Rugby in New Zealand and its Role in the Process of Māori Identity Definition” submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Education, University of Messina, 2011. Fieldwork in New Zealand was conducted in 2008 and early 2009 thanks to the support of the School of Maori Studies/Te Kawa a Māui at Victoria University of Wellington. On the field I observed Maori rugby events and interviewed 23 people – including four women – that self-identified as Māori and were directly or indirectly involved in rugby. The age of the interviewees ranged from 17 to over-sixty. Two of them were high-school students (Te Aute). The others were mostly full-time tertiary students. Some were involved in business, education, sport and/or politics. Most of them had tertiary education. Some played or had played at club-level; one played professional rugby; some were former top-level players; some used to coach; some were involved in the management of Māori rugby. Three of them had played rugby sporadically when they were younger, but were strongly influenced by the presence of rugby in the groups they identified with (family or friends).

delle attività fisiche e delle forme di competizione sociale autoctone. Esso è stato così integrato nel sistema socioculturale maori, contribuendo a salvaguardare e rivitalizzare le dinamiche sociali indigene –ruotanti intorno ai concetti di *whānau*, *hapū* e *iwi* – e una serie di valori e costumi. D'altronde, lo status che il rugby ha acquisito nella società neozelandese lo ha trasformato in luogo privilegiato per la partecipazione dei maori alla società nazionale e per l'affermazione dei propri interessi e della propria identità dinanzi al gruppo di discendenza coloniale. Il risultato è un rugby che assume connotazioni tipicamente maori sia nello stile di gioco sia nel modo in cui è concepito e vissuto. Parte di questi aspetti sono confluiti negli All Blacks, ma è in contesti propriamente indigeni, spesso molto discreti, che si manifestano appieno. Questo articolo illustrerà tali contesti nella loro veste contemporanea, mettendo in evidenza che i mutamenti storici e socioculturali che hanno continuato ad investire il gruppo indigeno hanno in parte mutato lo stesso volto del rugby indigeno, fino ad intaccarne la vitalità. In questo senso, le odierne manifestazioni indigene di rugby divengono un tentativo di preservare la stessa tradizione del rugby maori.

Prior to the beginning of a match, the New Zealand national rugby team, the All Blacks, performs a Māori ritual dance, known as the *haka*. The All Blacks representations emphasise the Indigenous participation to the game, which is depicted as the modern day expression of their ancient warrior tradition. These facts suggest that the sport of rugby has become an aspect of contemporary Māori sociocultural life. The relationship between Māori and rugby is more than one century old. In strictly cultural terms, Māori exposure to rugby and their following adoption of this sport is to be situated within the acculturation¹ process ensued by British colonization. This sport was initially meant to educate, in moral and physical terms, the Māori that were supposed to form the local

¹Acculturation is herein used in the anthropological definition given by Redfield, Linton and Herskovits. It refers to the two-way process of cultural change engendered by the first-hand and continuous contact between two different cultures, whether it is pacific or conflicting. See Robert Redfield, Ralph Linton, and Melville J. Herskovits, *Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation*, *American Anthropologist*, 38 (1): 149-152, 1936.

male elite and help the British settlers governing the colony up to the time when the ‘Māori race’ would extinguish. At the beginning of the twentieth century rugby had evolved into a classless sport. In addition, the New Zealand national team, the All Blacks, had acquired international fame thanks to their outstanding sporting achievements and their inclusiveness of the autochthonous group. This context and the resistance of the Indigenous population – both in demographic and cultural terms – favoured the colonial openness towards Māori participation to rugby, which was viewed as a site to assimilate them to the society arisen out of colonization. As a matter of fact, the Māori participation to rugby tends to be merely regarded as the evidence of New Zealand successful assimilation strategies. What I individuated is, instead, a multi-faceted process, whose negotiations and effects mirror a dialectic between the colonial/dominant strategy to rein Indigenous agency and the Indigenous attempt to assert such agency. On the one hand, rugby did fulfil colonial goals and still exerts control over manifestations of Māori cultural agency and self-determination. On the other hand, the Māori relationship to rugby is a phenomenon of cultural subversion. Coined by Sahlins, this term conceptualizes the process of “assimilation of the foreign in the logics of familiar”². Encouraged by their leaders³, the Indigenous communities embraced rugby and integrated it into their social dynamics in order to fulfil their aspirations to sociocultural continuity, sociopolitical acknowledgement

² Marshall Sahlins, *What is Anthropological Enlightenment? Some Lessons of the Twentieth Century*, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 28: i-xxiii, 1999, p. xvi.

³ The Ngāti Porou leader Apirana Ngata, who was the main Indigenous political leader of the first half of the twentieth century, actively encouraged the Indigenous population to embrace Pakeha sports, particularly rugby, viewing colonial sports as a means to safeguard from extinction aspects of Māori education and social life that would eventually impact on the survival of Māori as social entity and as a site to foster pride and identity. This belief fully emerges in his correspondence with another Maori leader of his time, the anthropologist Peter Buck. See M.P.K. Sorrenson, *The Correspondence between Sir Apirana Ngata and Sir Peter Buck, 1925-50, Vol.1-2-3*, University Printing Services, Auckland, 1986.

and self-realization. Rugby partly filled the gap caused by the loss of their own physical activities/social competitions⁴. As a consequence, it has allowed Māori to transmit some of their educational values and safeguard and re-invigorate Indigenous social dynamics – revolving around the notions of *whānau*, *hapū*, and *iwi*⁵ – which encompassed Indigenous definitions of personhood, social bonding, status and leadership. Moreover, due to the elevated status of rugby in New Zealand society, rugby has not only become a privileged site for Māori to participate in mainstream society, it has also served as a platform to acquire national prestige, and reaffirm and define their indigeneity. This appropriation of rugby has in turn led to a peculiar conception of the rugby team and to some minor innovations to the game, such as the introduction of the ritual dance and the elaboration of a rugby style that has come to define how Māori play rugby. Although these aspects mostly emerge in Indigenous contexts, some of them have insinuated into national rugby – or at least have tried to – contributing to define

⁴ Games played a paramount role in Māori society. They educated youth to dexterity, endurance, competitiveness and cooperation. Physical activities also marked quite a few moments of Māori social life, for sport contexts enabled different hamlets to compete and games were integrated into different sorts of *iwi* or *hapū* meetings, such as harvest festivals and political meetings. Local games were also meant to train young people for war, a strategic site of social competition. Nonetheless, colonial observers missed the holistic dimension of Indigenous physical activities and dismissed them as mere leisure. As a consequence, local games were discouraged and partly extinguished. Cf. Eldson Best, *Games and Pastimes of the Maori*, Te Papa Press, Wellington, 2005[1925]; Brendan Hokowhitu, *Māori Sport: Pre-colonisation to Today*. In C. Collins & S. Jackson (eds.) *Sport in New Zealand Society* (2nd edition), Thomson Albany (New Zealand), 2007.

⁵ Commonly translated as extended family, sub-tribe and tribe. When the British settlers arrived, the autochthonous population did not view itself as a single entity. There were, instead, many *iwi*, that is autonomous social groupings to which corresponded distinct geographical areas. The construction of a pan-tribal identity, known as Māori, is a later phenomenon, which resulted from the concomitant influence of historical events and assimilatory colonial policies. Nevertheless, the concept of Māori identity has not erased tribal identifications. The *iwi* had – and still has – a representative role. Daily life still gravitates around the notion of *whānau*. Descent is bilateral and membership and marriage can provide membership as well. For this same reason, residence and participation are equally important in defining membership.

New Zealand rugby. In addition, when players who come from strong Maori environments play in mixed teams, they tend to bring their own view of rugby along.

To emphasize the active role Māori played in the adoption of rugby and situate the process in a specific historical and political context, I defined the abovementioned process as the indigenization⁶ of rugby. This fully emerges in rugby realities which are situated in Indigenous contexts, such as community rugby, Māori school rugby, the Māori rugby tournaments and the Māori national team. These realities are hardly known and/or scarcely understood by people who do not self-identify as Māori. Compared to the first-half of the twentieth century, they have been losing sociocultural and political strength in response to a wider sociocultural, political and historical malaise. Also, many Maori are today scarcely familiar with Maori ways so that they play rugby just to play the game rather than using it as an expression of their Maoriness. Yet, in Maori society at large rugby is still viewed as part of Māori social dynamics, having raised to family tradition and privileged site of social bonding. To many young men rugby has also become instrumental to the assertion of their Indigenous masculinity. Furthermore, rugby remains an opportunity for upward social mobility and to gain national *mana* and as well as a site where Māori are seen in a positive light. In this sense, the need to safeguard and transmit the Māori rugby tradition has itself become an end of Indigenous rugby manifestations.

Can we talk in terms of Māori rugby?

We cannot argue that in Māori contexts rugby has evolved into a distinct sport, as it occurred, for instance, to cricket in the Trobri-

⁶ This is another concept I borrowed from Sahlins, who described the project informing the Indigenous approach to Western culture as “[...] the indigenization of modernity”. Cf. Marshall Sahlins, *What is Anthropological Enlightenment? Some Lessons of the Twentieth Century*, Annual Review of Anthropology, 28: i-xxiii, 1999, p. x.

and Islands⁷. However, what we have hinted to suggests that the idea of Māori rugby contains more than a tradition of strong, staunch and courageous players who contributed to New Zealand rugby. It encompasses a mixture of ends, values and practices which have slightly modified the way rugby is viewed and lived within Māori communities respect to the mainstream society.

Amongst Māori rugby is a privileged site of social bonding between friends, brothers and cousins. They might play it at school, in the backyard of the house or at the *marae*. Although we usually talk about the male component of society, Māori women are more and more involved in the game of rugby – which they firstly embraced during the WWII – challenging the alleged chauvinism of Māori society within the same area that mainstream discourse portrays as the epitome of such attitude. However, in the Māori contexts rugby is also a family affair. The influence of the *whānau* is often determinant in orienting Māori youth towards rugby. Ideally, as children Māori are exposed to rugby during social events. A young Māori woman pointed out the fact that surprisingly there always seemed to be a rugby ball at the *marae* events, regardless of the reason of the encounter. Thus, Māori often learn by observing adults playing and handling the rugby ball while having fun with their cousins and brothers during gatherings. Additionally, in some *whānau* rugby has been tacitly raised to family tradition. Members tend to play so as to uphold the tradition and emulate the rugby deeds of grandfathers, fathers or uncles who have played at representative levels. In the era of professionalism, the *whānau* can also impact on the possible career of a player, acting either as a deterrent or as an encouraging force.

The same Māori teams reproduce the Maori family model emerging as microcosms of Māori society. They are an example of what the New Zealand anthropologist Metge identified as meta-

⁷ Sally Ann Ness, *Understanding Cultural Performance: Trobriand Cricket*. In Robert R. Sands (ed.) *Anthropology, Sport, and Culture*, pp. 39-49, Bergin and Garvey, Westport (Connecticut) and London, 1999.

phorical *whānau*, that is groups based on common interests rather than descent, which, nonetheless, aspire to reproduce the *tikanga* (values and practices) that are associated to the *whānau*⁸. The camaraderie of a Māori team is, in fact, fashioned by the concept of *whakawhanaungatanga*⁹. As a result, there is a strong cooperation amongst players, who, like the members of a *whānau*, long to *kotahitanga*, being one thing. Commitment and loyalty are paramount values. Players who let down the team by being selfish or irresponsible are made to feel *whakamā*¹⁰ (embarrassed). The *kaumātua* (elder) acts as a cultural and spiritual guide. There are peculiar relationships based on the notion of complementarity. Thus, *kaumātua* establish a closer relationship with *rangatahi* (youth), based on trust, advice and support. Older players look after and guide the younger ones in compliance with the *tuakana* (older)-*teina* (younger) model. The whole group strongly identifies with the territory they represent.

The whys and hows of such integration of rugby in Māori culture have nicely been pinpointed by the New Zealand historian Michael King. Firstly, he noticed that “with room for individual flair within a framework of team cooperation, rugby was an ideal

⁸ Joan Metge, *Te Rito o te harakeke: Conceptions of the whānau*, Journal of the Polynesian Society, 99 (1): 55-92, 1990, p.74. Metge also provided a sound analysis of the values and customs of the whānau. Cf. Joan Metge, *New Growth from old: the whānau in the modern world*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 1995.

⁹ *Whaka* means “to cause something to happen, cause to be” and *nga tanga* means “the people”. This expression, thus, refers to the process of creating a social connection based on the modalities of the *whānau*. That same term is also used to translate “relating well”, confirming that in the Māori worldview the *whānau*-like relationship represents the ideal model in terms of social relations.

¹⁰ The term *whakamā* encompasses a state of mind, a range of feelings and the behaviour associated to such state, which Māori experience in a condition of social uneasiness. Wrongdoing and falling short in some respect can cause this temporary state. Isolation and frustration is the condition of a person. Such a situation is, generally, managed by the whole community. First, they isolate the individual who is *whakamā*, then they consider the situation through a mediator. Cf. Joan Metge, *In and out of touch: whakamaa in cross-cultural context*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 1986.

vehicle for the expression of Māori physical qualities of speed and strength and imagination”¹¹. Secondly, he highlighted that “the game fostered a sense of identity amongst Maoris, and on the football field Pakehas¹² could see Maoris engage in an activity that they understood and appreciated”¹³.

The aspects of rugby considered by King made this sport an ideal site for social competition. Māori played in mainstream tournaments. Parallel to that, they started to create their own trophies both at the tribal and district level. This sport soon evolved into an Indigenous event itself, where a tribal group would meet and compete with other groups, and would display its *manaaki* (hospitality). The rugby encounter got to be fashioned as a *hui* (Māori encounter). Matches were enshrouded by Māori rituals. Like in the old times, the encounter between the opponents was opened by the *pōwhiri*¹⁴ or welcome ceremony and the match was followed by a *hakari* (feast) offered by the hosting team to the

¹¹ Michael King, *Maori: a photographic and social history*, Reed, Auckland, 1983, p. 228.

¹² *Pākehā* is the Māori term to identify the New Zealanders descending from British settlers and, for extension, all New Zealander of European origin. The use of the term is contextual. At the national level New Zealanders of British ascendancy hardly self-identify or are defined as *Pākehā*. It is used by Māori or in Māori settings.

¹³ Michael King, *Between two Worlds*. In W. H. Oliver (ed.), *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, pp. 279-301, Oxford University Press, Wellington, 1981, p. 298.

¹⁴ The encounter with a different group is *tapu* (sacred). The welcoming ceremony is performed to lift the *tapu*. The main phases of the Māori ritual of encounter are the *karanga*, a cry of welcome performed by a woman standing on the side of the *tangata whenua* (host) and in front of the *whare-nui*, to which a woman of the *manuhiri* (visitors) could reply back; the *whai kōrero*, or formal speeches, usually performed in the courtyard by men of *mana*, which are concluded by a *waiata* (song); the *hongi* (Māori greeting), where *tangata whenua* and *manuhiri* press noses and shake hands, their physical contact asserting that the *tapu* has been lifted. In conformity with the occasion, the ritual can be more or less elaborated. When welcoming important visitors, the ritual can include a *haka* of welcome following the *karanga*, and in very special occasions a *wero*, a challenge, which would be performed prior to the *haka*. Furthermore, many *hui* include the *koha* (gift), the moment where the guests offer a gift to their hosts, which takes place after the speeches and prior to the *hongi*. Cf. Ann Salmond, *Hui*, Reed, Auckland, 1975.

guests. While rugby encounters reinforced ancestral ties and social cohesion, they enabled distinct tribal groupings to compete and assert their own *mana* (prestige, spiritual authority). Such phenomenon was favoured by the increasing availability of Indigenous social spaces. Those are the years wherein the construction of ancestral houses was again in vogue and *marae*, Māori gathering centres, started to proliferate and define New Zealand rural landscape. The prominence that rugby acquired within the nation and the possibility for Maori to have their own official contests and their national team further enthused Maori communities. Being conceived as social events, rugby matches involved all members of the community. In the '50's it was observed that tribal and district rugby matches had become massive events, with "supporters travelling in some instances on a round trip up to 1,000 miles to attend games"¹⁵. In a coeval period, the Māori anthropologist Winiata, who observed Māori communities in the Tauranga district, had noticed that "the tendency has been for the Maori village communities to select a team representative of the tribe or the subtribe. Though the name of the team does not reveal this fact, the sentiment prevails, especially when the team wins or is defeated by a team from a traditional rival. The best players take over leadership, while the administration is assumed by an old player of note. There is always a *kaumātua* attached to the team, and women and children as well as men follow its destinies"¹⁶. He also pointed out that "crowds attend weekly matches"¹⁷. Similarly, in the 70's the New Zealand anthropologist Metge noticed that "every Maori community of any size has its own club and ground; players retire late, only to take up management and coaching; and all but the incapacitated turn out for matches on the home ground"¹⁸. She also observed that "besides matches, sport involves many other activities:

¹⁵ Ralph Love, *Sport among the Maori People*, Te Ao Hou, No 1, Winter 1952, p.64.

¹⁶ Maharaia Winiata, *The Changing Role of the leader in Maori society*, Blackwood and Janet Paul, Auckland, 1967, p.125.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*

money-raising gatherings, feasts, dances and concerts to entertain visiting teams, ‘away trips’, and end-of-season parties”¹⁹.

As an arena of social cooperation and competition, Māori rugby is informed by the notion of *mana*. The idea of prestige it encompasses is multidimensional, flexible and connected to a spiritual dimension²⁰. *Mana* is inscribed in a worldview where man is integrated into the universe and the individual and the community – including past, present and future generations – are interrelated. Any individual has a degree of *mana* as a member of a community. This kind of *mana* is inherited from the ancestors and enables the individual to act with authority as regards the group and its members. The relationship with the land can be another source of *mana*. *Mana* can also be acquired thanks to skills that benefit the community. In that case, the *mana* of the individual will mirror and, in turn, benefit the *mana* of the community. All *mana* can be increased, thus reinforcing the spiritual power and authority of the group or the individual, or can, on the contrary, be damaged or withdrawn, affecting the physical and psychological health of a person or a group and therefore impinging on their ability to act effectively. In any case, there is an interdependence between individual *mana* and collective *mana*. For all these reasons, *mana* must be constantly preserved and nourished by adopting an appropriate behaviour.

Competition and cooperation are both ways to assert and increase *mana*, whence sport and hospitality, that are conflated in the Maori community events, are ideal sites to display and enhance *mana*.

During conversations and interviews players who self-identified as Māori, regardless of the context they played in – whether

¹⁸ Joan Metge, *The Maoris of New Zealand*, Routledge and Kegan, London, 1976[revised edition], p. 182.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*

²⁰ Cf. Joan Metge, *In and out of touch: whakamaa in cross-cultural context*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 1986.p. 62-65.

social, amateur or professional, Indigenous or mainstream – usually emphasized the fact that both on and off the field they represented a community and playing implied a commitment to that role. Thus, players represent their *iwi*, their *hapū*, their *whānau* and those communities expects them to behave in such a way as to respect and enhance their prestige. Thus, when talking about rugby Māori easily evoke the notion of *mana*. The community acknowledges the skills of the individual by encouraging him/her and supporting his/her career, for example by organizing funds-raising events at the *marae*. The central role rugby plays in the nation, other than within the Māori community, also implies that skilled rugby players are also credited high *mana*²¹. Younger generations have looked upon successful Māori players as role-models. Strongly inspired by their achievements, they have embraced rugby aiming to emulate them. The skills of the rugby players have benefited the *mana* of the communities they belong to and the prestige of the Māori community at large both within the nation and overseas. This has stirred tribal pride and enthusiasm and fostered a sense of pan-tribal identity. As a display of *mana* rugby has affected the notion of leadership. Successful players can act as leaders in the sport milieu. As they get older, the *mana* acquired on the field can entitle them to play leadership roles in their own communities or in Māori society. Skilled players can be leader provided their behaviour is up to their *mana*. *Tika* (fair) behaviours include participation to community life, respect of the *mana* of the elders, humbleness, modesty, sharing of their experience with younger generations and the community of their community. Although professionalism and urbanization have partly altered the way leadership is conceived by younger generations, Māori who

²¹ The necrologies of Māori magazines, commemorating people of *mana*, confirm this trend. The *Haere ki a Kotou Tupuna* page in the “*Te Ao Hou*” magazine, published between 1952 and 1976, commemorated many men who had been excellent rugby players, eulogising their sporting deeds. The obituaries of the magazine “*Mana*”, published since 1992, keep honouring people who excelled in the rugby field.

come from strong cultural environments tend to abide by those principles.

The influence of *mana* can be evinced from other aspects of rugby. For instance, *mana* moulds their perception of winning. A few Māori have used the term experimentation. Experimenting on the field is as important as scoring. It means proving those skills that are appreciated within Māori society – speed, strength and creativity – and therefore acquiring or defending one's *mana*. Should a team lose, its single players can still gain or maintain *mana*, which will ultimately have a positive feedback on the community he/she belongs to. Vice versa we deduce that a victory might not necessarily increase a player or a team's *mana*. For example, a victory based on cheating, unfair playing or a safe game would overshadow the *mana* of the team and specific players. As a matter of fact, I have heard a few times Māori praising the Māori tribal or family teams that often get massacred on the field but can guarantee those wonderful rugby actions that overshadow their actual loss. The actions I am referring to are often synthetically identified as Māori flair. Māori flair is used as synonymous to a Māori style of playing. When I talked with Māori players they un-animously described it as a fast and physical game, where running and passing the ball are privileged to kicking. Māori players often say 'Give it a go', 'give it a try' and view it as a way to put their *mana* on the line.

Similarly, the performance of the *haka* prior to a match is a statement of the team's *mana* and an acknowledgement of the opponent's *mana*. Although it is too often described as a war dance, the *haka* is a posture dance which has historically been performed in diverse situations. Nowadays the *haka* is still performed in various modern contexts. *Haka* can be performed at *kapa haka* (Māori performing arts) contests where various groups compete for their *mana*. Or, it can be performed in order to celebrate the achieve-

ment of an individual and thus the *mana* that ensues from it²². The performance prior to a rugby match echoes the old times when a *haka* was performed by warriors prior to a battle, and in the welcome ceremony prior to a simulated fight. In this case, the group displays its own *mana* suggesting that it has nothing to fear, but it implicitly recognizes the *mana* of the other team. The *haka* is actually performed during strategic matches only. In the rugby contexts, *haka* can be performed as well after the match by a team which aims to assert again its *mana* or by supporters which, through the *haka*, pay a tribute to their team's *mana*. The *haka* is the most clamorous sign of the indigenization of rugby in New Zealand, for it has transcended the local borders . It is now shared with the rest of the country, and has been raised to national icon. In the light of what we have thus far observed, the performance of the *haka* within the All Blacks becomes the ultimate assertion of Indigenous *mana*, for it contributes to restore the *mana* of Maori as *tangata whenua*²³ (autochthonous inhabitants) of New Zealand, that has been depleted by the colonization process.

Rugby as a community event

Māori social rugby emerges as an underground world, for there seems to be no official information as to the numbers and names of the family or *marae*-based rugby clubs and to *iwi* or *marae*-based contests. Unless one is affiliated to the groups involved, word-of-mouth is the best way to get to know about Māori rugby events/teams. The experiences of those people who are involved in some Māori club or contests are, then, the main sources to access these realities. Nowadays the reality of social rugby is not so vi-

²² For instance, *haka* are often performed at graduation ceremonies. Through the *haka*, family and friends of the graduates celebrate their achievements which will eventually affect positively the group/s they belong to. At *kapa haka* or sports contests teams' supporters can perform a *haka* to celebrate an extraordinary performance or victory.

²³ Literally, "people of the land".

brant as it used to, is very fluctuant – depending on issues such as resources, availability²⁴ and leadership – and to a certain extent is much more hidden than in the past, which makes it more marginal and marginalized²⁵. This is to be ascribed to the fact that the social and political scenario that stimulated the involvement of the Māori community in rugby – and other sports – has gradually vanished. The relocation of many Māori in the city entailed the partial emptying of villages and the fragmentation of *whānau* and *hapū*, which sometimes resulted in the loss of tribal links. As a consequence, some rugby clubs have dissolved and matches do not enjoy as much family or community support as they did, nor do competition have the same meaning as in the past. Life-style has changed so that the clubs do not have the same social force as in the past. The same youth has partly taken the distance from rugby, privileging other sports at school or *kapa haka*. However, rugby has adjusted to new circumstances. Nowadays annual tournaments have become a pretext to periodically gather the expatriates and those who still live in tribal lands as well as a way to expose the urban generations Māori traditions and get them to socialize in terms of *whanaungatanga*. From this point of view, contemporary rugby events are no less significant than in the past.

Some *marae* annually organize a *hui* to host competitions known as the *pā* wars. The name echoes the past, when Māori had their own village, the *pā*, and different groupings competed for *mana* by fighting each other or through physical contests. Today the *marae* plays the role of the *pā*. Anyone affiliated to the *marae* involved can participate. However, rugby is not the only protagon-

²⁴ Players availability to play depends on whether they manage to get time off from work and/or financial resources to travel. There are also events which are priority. For example, in 2008 the whole team of one of the *hapū* that was meant to play at the Opotiki *pā* wars withdrew because of the *tangi* (funeral) of a *hapū*'s member.

²⁵ In addition, the rugby which is today played in many meetings is not the one played by the All Blacks, also known as rugby union. Among Maori, the supremacy of rugby union has been challenged by the burgeoning of easier and faster variants of rugby, that is rugby league and touch rugby.

ist, for other sport competitions are played. An example are the Opotiki pā wars that are held in the Bay of Plenty region – an area mostly inhabited by Māori – which is held during a weekend at the beginning of spring, between the end of September and the beginning of October. It is a medium-sized *hui* which brings together two *iwi* each represented by two distinct *hapū* who have their own rugby team.

According to people who have participated to annual competitions like the *pā* wars the kind of rugby played is quite distinct by the one played in non-Māori contexts, insofar as it more physical and intense. This has been attributed to the presence of the older generations of rugby players, uncles and fathers of younger players, who embody the old school of rugby or what we would properly identify as Māori rugby. Different generations play within the same team, which reinforces intergenerational cooperation and communication. A participant stressed the fact that top-level players could as well turn up to the tournaments. The presence of top-level professional players at the social competitions is testimony to the fact that Māori players coming from strong cultural Māori contexts who manage to reach top-levels tend to maintain and preserve their relationship with the community. Keeping participating to social rugby and humbly bringing back what they have learnt can be one of the ways to uphold their *mana*. Thus, these teams put together fit and unfit persons, top-level and amateur players, older and younger generations. This aspects further suggests that the stress is placed on the social dimension of the event, inasmuch as it fosters *whanaungatanga* and the assertion of *mana*.

In the last decades, social rugby has also enacted as a site to maintain and promote a Māori identity in the Māori communities overseas, like Australia²⁶, where annual rugby tournaments are held, and London²⁷. Finally, rugby contests can also be part of *hui*

²⁶ Bergin, Paul. *Maori Sport and Cultural Identity in Australia*. The Australian Journal of Anthropology, 13 (3): 257-269, 2008.

²⁷ In the '90s some Maori expatriates in London set up their own rugby team. See Waitemata Football Club, 1990

which have other functions than the competition per se. For example, rugby competitions are included in the religious gatherings or in the Māori university students *hui* or different sorts of cultural events. The common denominator of all these games is to retain a sociality based on the notion of *whanaungatanga* and assert indigeneity, whether it is under the guise of a tribal or pan-tribal identification.

Other than one-off teams made up for the social events, many *whānau*, *hapū* or *iwi* still have their own rugby club. Though family-based Māori clubs struggle to emerge at the national level. Their rugby is not polished enough. The attendance to the games of players is not constant, and many of them often snob training. The comments of Te Hiwi, a young man, who, contrary to his many cousins and brothers and the older generation of his family, did not appreciate rugby, emphasized to which extent improvisation can be part of Māori family teams:

Usually us, the young ones might get involved in some way or other, cause my family usually... usually haven't got enough players (smiles) so if we go along to the games, we, you might have to jump on and play, even if you're not prepared, so that's why I try not to go to the games, so I don't have to play (laughs)

Another man, Dale, deemed important to point out that leadership can make the difference:

If they can kind of harness them, they can manage quite well. It was probably about six or seven years ago the East Coast took out the third division and they won the 2nd Division of NZ rugby and again it was part of the whole kind of *whānau* concept onto the coach worked around so that they would not turn up to training every now and then (smiles).

The Ngāti Porou East Coast Team, managed by the East Coast Rugby Football Union – the only provincial rugby union established by a tribe as well as the smallest one in terms of players and

population represented – enjoys a strong community support in spite of size²⁸. When the team made it to upper divisions and gained prizes thanks to a good leadership, such support caught the country's attention. This event had a socio-political relevance and benefited Māori rugby in general. We can detect the sociocultural relevance attributed to this event by the fact that the ascent of the East Coast team was the subject of one of the children booklets in *te reo* (the language) Māori which are published to promote the learning of Māori language²⁹.

What we have heretofore observed confirms that Māori social rugby can be erratic and is concealed from national visibility. However, the community is the cradle of Māori rugby and represents therefore the bridge to Māori involvement into national rugby. Accordingly, the first priority of the Māori Rugby Board 2005-2007 and 2008-2010 strategic plans has been to grow rugby at the community level, by engaging it through various projects³⁰. These includes initiatives aiming “to expose top NZ Māori players, coaches and managers, past and present, to local Māori rugby communities”³¹, such as the “Māori *Whānau* and Cultural Days” and the “*E Tu Taitama* and *Rangatahi* Role Model” programmes. In the first case, the Māori board organise days which conjugates cultural and rugby skills development and addresses to whole families. In the second case, Māori rugby personalities meet young Māori and their parents, discussing “about topics such as leadership, goal-setting, fitness and nutrition, and decision-making in life”³², and host skill development sessions. The 2008-2010 Strategic Plan also men-

²⁸ The Ngati Porou are one of the most numerous iwi as well as one of the most influent in the Maori history.

²⁹ Dewes, Pine. *Te Tima o te Rau Tau*, Te Tahuu o te Matauranga e te Pou Taki Korero Whaiti, Te Whanganui a Tara, 2001.

³⁰ New Zealand Maori Rugby Board, *2006 Annual Report*; New Zealand Maori Rugby Board, *Review of the 2008 Māori Rugby Tournament*.

³¹ New Zealand Maori Rugby Board, *Review of the 2008 Māori Rugby Tournament*, p. 6.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

tioned *Wahine* Days, that is events focused on women, amongst the initiatives. At the competition level, the first objectives have been to “inspire Māori to participate in whānau and iwi based rugby opportunities; provide inspirational pathways from Marae and Iwi-Clubs to representative levels [...]”³³.

These initiatives suggest that promoting social rugby has also educational aims, inasmuch as it aspires to provide positive life-models and thus fight the many social problems that afflict contemporary Māori society. However, the connection between rugby and wider social projects is itself a tradition within Māori rugby³⁴.

Māori school rugby and the pride of young Māori men

In accordance with its institutionalised role, rugby is the king of New Zealand schools’ sporting tradition. Most rugby school teams have a *haka* representing the institution they play for. School rugby entails the opportunity to travel and discover new realities, because the best schools participate to international competitions. It can as well be the door entrance to higher levels. I could witness the passion and energy that flow during school matches. However, the scenario is much more coloured and passionate when Māori schools are playing.

Rugby is the flagship of Māori schools. It mirrors the presence of rugby in the social dynamics of the Māori whānau and the Māori community as well as the perception that rugby is a privileged domain to achieve *mana* in mainstream society. However, this tradition also results from the historical emphasis Māori schools have placed on practical education since the 20’s when the colonial government changed the curriculum of Māori schools to orient them towards practical activities.

³³ Ibid., p. 6-7.

³⁴ See the comments of the leaders Ngata and Buck on the educational value of sport contests. M.P.K. Sorrenson, *The Correspondence between Sir Apirana Ngata and Sir Peter Buck, 1925-50, Vol.1*, University Printing Services, Auckland, 1986, p. 165; 181.

Placed in rural and relatively isolated areas they welcome students regardless of their tribal affiliation. Religion is the discriminating factor because all institutions identify with a religion. Parents usually choose to enrol their children in a Māori school because it is a family tradition. The school is informed by Māori pride, the sense of the family and the link to the territory which would ideally define a Māori community. On the other hand, Māori schools are all boarding schools, so that students view the school as their family. However, in many cases their school mates include brothers and many cousins. The feelings towards the school are fully disclosed during a rugby victory. Passions get to their climax when Māori schools play one another.

Today there are only two Māori boarding schools left due to a gradual decline of enrolments and to scandals related to cases of bullying and violence amongst the students. The famous “Te Aute”, Anglican institution located in the Hawke’s Bay region not far from the towns of Hastings and Napier, and “Hato Pāora”, a Catholic school situated in the Manawatu region, between the towns of Fielding and Palmerston North. The derby Te Aute-Hato Pāora is the only time we can get to watch Māori schools competitions. One of the Te Aute students I talked to, Jordan, thus summarized the spirit of this match:

You play for the school, you play for the boys. For the Hato Pāora game you play for the school, put your mana on the line! it’s like, yeah, probably putting your heart on the line.

It must be stressed that to many of the students rugby is key to the assertion of their identity as Indigenous male. While they might neglect other disciplines, they tend to entrust lots of their energy into rugby, where they feel self-confident and motivated. On the other hand, they all seem to share the dream to become an All Black.

In August 2008 on a sunny and cold Winter day I watched the

match between the two Māori school-teams hosted by Te Aute school. The event was structured like a *hui*. In the morning a *pōwhiri* formally welcomed the Hato Pāora school and other visitors. In that occasion the boys of each school showed off their singing abilities in the *waiata* (Māori songs) performed after the speeches.

Four matches were played throughout the day, because there are various representative teams. The main match is the one between the First XV, competing for a Māori carved trophy, and is the last to be played. Each match is preceded from the performance of the *haka*, which encompasses the spirit of the school. Each team has its own *haka*. Contrary to the All Blacks *haka*, the *haka* I observed were lengthy and elaborated. The players' ardour and force, and the expressiveness and the preciseness of gestures and facial expressions captivated the spectator's attention. On the other hand, at Māori schools students also learn and practice *kapa haka* and learn the Māori language. In addition, as a teacher told me, the school instils in the students the sense of Māori culture, so that they are aware of its value and of the respect it deserves.

The fact that each team performs a *haka* means that the rugby field becomes stage to a metaphorical confrontation. The home team started, but the players of the opponent team did not watch impassively. Their faces were tense, their teeth clenched, their breath heavy. Then, the home group started to slowly advance towards the opponent. The opponent team did not wait for the *tangata whenua* (hosts) to finish. The two *haka* began to overlap and each group was moving forward to the midfield, where the invisible border is situated. The *haka* catalyzed the energy of the players, cemented the team spirit, represented its own force and dignity, while acknowledging the other group. Prior to the start of the game, both at the first and second half, each team huddled round and recited a *karakia* (prayer), often ended by the vigorous

cry “*Hui ē! Tāiki ē*”³⁵. In the scrum or before or after important actions one could hear Māori exclamations such as the aforementioned cry and, less commonly, *Tihei Mauri ora!*”³⁶, meant to encourage one another and focus the team’s attention on its goal. Three matches out of four were sealed by a *haka*. It looked like the celebration of the encounter and the acknowledgement of one’s *mana*. The winning team asserted its victory, whereas the defeated team re-asserted its *mana* while promising to make up for the loss next time. The last two teams who performed the match took off their jerseys and delicately laid them down on the field, in front of them. A spectator believed that their care at laying down the jersey signalled the respect for the jersey, and more specifically for the team and the school the jersey was the metaphor of. When the teams performed the *haka* after the match, the teams got closer than in the pre-match *haka* to the point that in the first occasion they walked over the jerseys and teachers had to intervene to separate the groups. They had let their energies and feelings take over their spirits and that was not good because, as an elder told me, it was ‘talking fight’, and this is not what the *haka* is meant for. After the boys broke ranks, they greeted one another by pressing noses while shaking hands.

The rest of the school and family members – elders, adults,

³⁵It means “Draw together! Affirm!”. This exclamation is the ending part of the following saying “*Whano, whano! Haramai te toki! Haumi ē! Hui ē! Tāiki ē!*”, which is “often used in speeches. It is used to signal that the group is united and ready to progress the purpose of the coming together” (www.maoridictionary.com). This phrase also concludes various *karakia* and can appear in some *waiata*. “*Haumi ē! Hui ē! Tāiki ē!*” or simply “*Hui ē! Tāiki ē!*” is often heard in sport contexts.

³⁶ It means “Sneeze the life”. “*Tihei*” is to sneeze, *mauri* is the life force and *ora* is life. It is commonly used by orators to begin the formal speeches in the ritual of encounter. *Tihei* refers to the sneeze of a new-born child clearing his/her airways to take the first breath of life. Like a child who is just born, the orator clears his airways to give a *korero* (speech), so that by stating “*tihei mauri ora*” the orator claims his right to speak and thus draw the listener’s attention. This phrase appears in many *waiata* and can be used at the beginning of ritual speeches. It is meant to call one’s attention and emphasise the importance of the communication.

young people – warmly supported the teams, while many babies and children happily frolicked in the meadows around the field. On the fieldside some people had set up a tiny kiosk with drinks and a barbecue where they prepared hot dogs which were sold at a symbolic price. The income of this kind of activity is usually supposed to support some Māori social or cultural initiative.

The last match was the high point of the day. The students who were not in the team formed a human corridor and started a passionate *haka*. The first XV walked into the field working their way through this hall, for their schoolmates made resistance to their passage. During the match schools alternatively supported their team singing Māori chants or the songs “We will rock you” and “We are the champions”. For the final *haka* schoolmates joined the players. It was a show that ended a long day rich in emotions and energies that left most students voiceless. This match takes place twice per year and remains the last expression of the rugby tradition of Māori boarding schools.

Provided that school rugby is a privileged pathway to representative rugby and Māori schools have a strong tradition of Māori rugby, preserving such institutions and assisting their rugby development is viewed as imperative by those who view rugby as a strategic site to socioeconomic and political inclusion. It can be, instead, viewed as detrimental by those who focus on the restrictions rugby can today play on Maori young men’s social aspirations.

The Māori Rugby Tournaments

At the end of Summer the energies of Māori rugby are channelled into the Māori Rugby Tournaments³⁷, which uphold a tradi-

³⁷ In February and March 2009 I had the chance to attend the *Te Tini a Maui* regional tournament at Palmerston North and witness the performance of the *Te Tini a Maui* representative teams in the interregional tournaments at Christchurch and Taupo, thanks to the invitation of the *kaumātua* Whetu Tipiwai.

tion of Māori contests that dates back to the twenties³⁸. Run by the Māori Rugby Board, they are played at the regional and interregional level and involve three categories, the senior men, the colts and the female.

Māori rugby is today divided into three main geographical-tribal districts or *rohe*: *Te Waipounamu* (Southern Māori), *Te Tini a Maui* (Central Māori), *Te Hiku o te Ika* (Northern Māori). In the regional tournaments, which have been played since 1986, matches are played between teams representing different areas of the region. Each tournament takes place in a town of the district concerned during a weekend between the end of February and the beginning of March. In the interregional tournaments the competition is amongst teams representing the three regions. Teams are assembled by selecting the best players of the regional competition. These matches take place during three weekends in March and are held in different locations (each one representing one of the *rohe*). Each weekend the three categories of two regions play each other. The winner of the senior men category is awarded the Princes of Wales Cup. This prize has been reinstated in 2007 following a period of oblivion, in order to reinstate its value and “further enhancing Mana associated with Māori rugby”³⁹. The colts teams play for the “MacDonald Challenge Cup”, whereas “George Nepia Memorial Shield” is given to the region which has the most overall points. Recently, the Dr. Farah Palmer trophy has been introduced to award the winner of the female category.

³⁸ In 1928 the Prince of Wales, Edward, who had been impressed by the Māori team's performance during their 1926-27 tour in Europe offered them a trophy. Four teams representing Māori districts were formed to compete for the Cup. By enabling all iwi to interact and compete, this trophy contributed to safeguard tribal organization. Its sociocultural relevance is evident in that the then political leader Ngata deemed it to be a noteworthy event, whose institution transformed rugby into a strategic political and sociocultural area. M.P.K. Sorrenson, *The Correspondence between Sir Apirana Ngata and Sir Peter Buck, 1925-50, Vol.1*, University Printing Services, Auckland, 1986, pp. 114-115; 139.

³⁹ New Zealand Maori Rugby Board, *Review of the 2008 Māori Rugby Tournament*, p.8.

These tournaments put together different rugby experiences, such as club, top-level and school rugby. They represent the main site to promote and safeguard grass-roots Māori rugby at the national level as well as Māori rugby's national showcase. Players like Piri Weepu and Ricky Flutey, who are currently top-level players, played and emerged in these tournaments.

Both regional and inter-regional tournaments are designed like a *hui*. Teams are formally welcomed to the main *marae* of the hosting area and the tournament ends with a *hakari*, a feast where Māori *tikanga* are observed. The *marae* provides the teams with a shelter during the tournament⁴⁰. However, in the regional tournaments the number of participants might exceed the capacity of the gathering centre, so that some people might stay at the hotel. All regional groups and all the teams that are part of those groups are accompanied by a *kaumātua* involved in the rugby world, who supplies cultural and spiritual guidance.

Tournaments are a huge display of *mana* and Māori rugby flair. The people I talked to actually described the event as rich in emotion and entertaining.

The event is a profusion of *haka*. Most teams perform a *haka*, particularly in the North. Female teams are no exception, although their gestures and movements will slightly vary. Teams with no *haka* are perceived as lacking something, particularly during strategic matches. Like in the Maori school contests, the field is the

⁴⁰ Staying in a *marae* means to abide by principles such as sharing and co-operation and respect a range of rules and procedures that are often related to the concept of *tapu* and *noa*. People who stay in a *marae* sleep in the *whare nui*. Piles of mattresses are stored in each *marae* to be used every time there is a *noho marae* (stay at the marae). Mattresses are laid down one next to the other, so that people end up sleeping next to each other. Guests are only meant to provide their own blankets and/or sleeping bags. Within the house people also talk, socialize, play guitar and sing, but drinking and eating are strictly prohibited because the house is *tapu*, whereas food is *noa*. Bathrooms and toilets are shared, one for women and one for men. Meals are served in the *whare-kai*. All meals are preceded by a *karakia*. When people finish eating they are meant to bring their cutlery and dishes back to the kitchen and possibly help in the kitchen. The final meal is a special meal, preceded by *karakia* and formal speeches.

stage to a dialogue where the *haka* is the language adopted. Both teams advance towards midfield, raising tension and emotion. A Maori coach compared the *haka* performance of those teams to the peacock opening its wings. When the *haka* is performed prior to a final match, the team can be joined on the field by reserves, supporters and/or the teams of the other categories. Joining the team during the *haka* performance is meant to reinforce the *mana* of the group and be a more dramatic statement of the group's solidarity and loyalty. In the most important games, the *haka* can be as well performed at the end of the match, prior to the *hongi* between the two teams' members. Usually, *haka* are also performed at the prize awarding ceremony. When a team or a player is awarded a prize, the players stand up and perform a *haka* to celebrate the achievement and thus the *mana* of the team or the individual, whose prestige will enhance the whole group.

In an interregional tournament I had the chance to witness the composition of a new *haka* for the senior team. It was impromptu created and it was meant to properly embody the spirit of the *Te Tini a Maui* team. The *haka* normally performed by the team was, in fact, generic, being part of the tribal repertoire of the region it represented. The captain Brendan Watt played a pivotal role. Brendan was already a professional player, but he was first and foremost a charismatic and humble young man coming from a strong Māori environment and committed with his community. He had a secure identity and was knowledgeable in traditional terms. He possessed the *mana*, the knowledge and skills which were necessary to make the group willing to embark on a new adventure, to compose the *haka* and lead it on the field. This episode reminds us of the importance of leadership in Māori settings and of the ways it manifests. Because of his strategic role, his absence the following weekend corresponded to the return to the old *haka*. The new captain felt he lacked the leadership as well as the cultural knowledge and confidence which were necessary to replace Brendan's guide and thus perform the new *haka*.

At the rugby event one can witness other small Māori rituals, all aiming to create/reinforce the team cohesion and provide spiritual support. For instance, the distribution of the jerseys which will be used during the match brings the team together. Jerseys are offered by the group's *kaumātua*, who blesses them with a *karakia*. Prior to the beginning of the match, in the changing rooms or in a corner of the field, the team gets close and recites a *karakia* led by the *kaumātua*'s team. On the field or in the changing-rooms, the team often recollects its energies and concentration by exclaiming the famous Māori phrases “*Tihei Mauri ora!*” or “*Hui ē! Tāiki ē*”.

The game is fast, physical and spectacular. Spectators highly appreciate actions like the side-step or intricate passing. The finely-elaborated *moko* (Māori tattoo) that many players display on their body outshine in the action.

When they came together, many of those players do not know each other or have only met at previous tournaments. However, when I attended the tournaments they appeared to easily socialize and get into a co-operative mind-set, both within and out of the field. Differences existed, conflicts emerged, but their approach to the team and the group seemed to be fashioned by a collective frame of mind. The situation probably favoured that kind of approach. Spaces were communal. In most cases, people slept together as well. *Haka* practise favoured co-operation. There were also quite a few socializing moments, particularly after training or at the end of the matches. Finally, there was always a guitar around. Songs and good-humour were part and parcel with the tournaments' programme.

Coaches, managers, other staff and elders were part of the scenario, for they shared spaces and regularly interacted with the young participants as well. Adults and elders joked, sang and discussed with players, but also provided advice, moral support and cultural mentorship. I saw them speaking to the players both with frankness and complicity. Coaches adopted coaching and sports psychology methods which are embedded in Māori culture and are

strictly associated to the concept of *whanaungatanga*. For example, they adopted soft discipline, they led from the back. Coach and players sat up together and discussed. According to Indigenous educational models⁴¹, individuals were made to grow independent, their autonomy was respected and fostered. This model was adopted off the field as well. Thus, players were not prohibited from drinking, going out, or be creative on the field. They were expected to be able to make their choices and take the responsibilities of those choices. For instance, they expected players to have a respectful behaviour on and off the field, not to cause damages, not to disturb others' sleep when they came back to the *whare nui* or the hotel from their partying, to be up and ready when they were supposed to train or leave, help cleaning the *whare* before they left the *marae* to go back home. If that was not the case, the players would have been made *whakamā*.

Children were part of the human landscape of the rugby tournaments too. At the interregional tournament in Christchurch some of the *kaumātua* Tipiwai's grandchildren came along. They were under everyone's eye, while the *kaumātua* seemed quite loving towards them. One of the female players brought along her one year old baby. The little girl was looked after and cuddled by all her mother's team mates.

This scenario is in many instances distinct from a non-Māori space. However, in a few instances players struggle to cope with that. They can be hesitant as to the behaviour they should adopt; they can be shy; they can superficially disrespect the protocol of the *marae* and get irritated by the stress placed on tradition; they can feel upset because of their lacks; or they can simply be uncomfortable.

The players who came from a strong Māori environment felt comfortable at sleeping at the *marae*, but urban Māori or Māori who had not been brought up in a Māori-defined environments

⁴¹ Cf. Joan Metge, *Talking past each other: problems of cross-cultural communication*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 1984, p. 38.

preferred the hotel, for they were not used to lack of privacy, or they did not want around noisy people, or struggled with respecting rules. Some people felt very shy when having to perform the *haka*. A few times I saw *kaumātua*, coaches and managers admonishing the players as to their behaviour within the *whare-nui* and the *marae* in general. They particularly reminded players to walk into the ancestral house barefoot, not to drink or eat within the house and ask each *marae* whether alcohol was allowed or not within its premises. In Taupo at the *hariki* hosted by the *marae* where the *Te Tini a Maui* group was staying, the *Te Hiku o te Tika* group was sensibly late because of some young players. That behaviour engendered embarrassment, because it was considered disrespectful towards the *tangata whenua*. Prior to dinner, there were the *kaumātua*'s speeches and a *karakia*. It was then that I accidentally perceived the impatience of some young boys who wondered why on the earth the elders kept speaking Māori if hardly anyone could understand them. Right after dinner, the coach of the female team called for the attention of the team managers and proposed that from the following year the event should include a proper introduction to the *kawa marae* (marae protocol) and the Māori *tikanga*, because many girls were not aware of many aspects of Māori traditions.

The point is that many of the participants are people who have hardly been exposed to conventional aspects of Māori culture or stayed within Māori traditional setting. At the 2009 tournaments I had actually been told that at those tournaments there were some players that had never been into a *marae* before and that it regularly happened that there would be people having their first experience at the *marae* through the tournaments.

Although elders and adults complained of the disrespect of the new generations and attempted to oppose the trend, they tended not to blame it on them ascribing it to the social context. Thus, they thought the exposition to the *marae* and its *tikanga* through rugby was positive. From this point of view, in contemporary society

Māori tournaments have acquired an extra meaning, in that they are also meant to favour reconnection with the tradition. Nevertheless, what they deemed to be an opportunity for young Māori to reconcile with their cultural heritage was to many of those young individuals source of distress. Because of their limited knowledge of or lack of familiarity with conventional cultural markers, part of this youth felt fake and inadequate, to the extent that someone self-described as plastic Māori. When Māori players perform at Māori events they feel emphasis is placed on the conformation with conventional cultural markers, such as the *tikanga* of the marae and the language. Hence, confusion, frustration, inadequacy and opposition can hide behind the seeming ease of the players participating to the tournaments.

Christina, a female player, who was quite comfortable within the marae setting, believed there was no reason for them to feel so uncomfortable, because they were always told what was going happen, and the use of Māori language was circumstantial. Nor did their ignorance justified annoyance:

I think the only way you're ever gonna learn them is to experience them, so ignorance isn't really something to full back on, either you actively learn them or you don't. Yeah, but in saying that, I learnt it somewhere, like I didn't just know automatically, like I learnt the kawa, like the rules and all the staff, I learnt it at some stage while I was growing up, it didn't just happen, so.

Having said this, she also deemed that the usefulness of the tournaments was tangential because of lack of time:

If there was more time yeah, but in general no, because I mean...you get there like it's... you can experience a lot, but, if you travel to, it's an amount of hours, you have your *pōwhiri*, you have your *kai* [food] and then you're off doing your training, I mean you slowly start to bond with the people you're keen, but [...] you don't really get to know them any better that you would... somewhere else. [...] It's not the best place to... start somewhere, it's for people who have never been on a *marae* before, but... realistically it's not gonna consolidate your *tik-*

anga Māori or what you know about your whakapapa, unless it's at your *marae*, unless your *kaumātua* are there and you can talk to them about things like that.

If the schedule is too strict to enable people to dwell on cultural issues, it is also likely to depend on the individual's receptiveness, which is, at its time, affected by his/her experiences and personality and by the way he/she views and copes with her traditional 'disinformation'. Thus, some people just refuse learning, but others, usually those who have already started to inquire and reflect about their Maoriness, look at that in positive terms and bounce on that opportunity.

In sum, the exposition to conventional aspects of Māori culture is, then, something collateral. As such, what it can produce is not knowledge but the stimulus, the curiosity, the willingness, or the confidence to actually engage into the acquisition of traditional knowledge in the appropriate contexts and with the due time. It is a privileged opportunity for people who have never been to a *marae*, inasmuch as it allows them to do an initial step that, out of inhibition or for lack of resources and connection, they might never do or might do much later. The Māori tournaments can possibly act as a tiny window on a mysterious or limitedly familiar world. It is up to the individual to attempt to get out and see what that world is actually about. On the other hand, people tend to forget or not to realize that Māori rugby and *whanaungatanga* are cultural enunciations as well. In terms of Māori rugby and Maori social bonding, participants seem to fit easily in the context. Many Māori probably absorb more about Māori culture than they realize or that they are given credit for, particularly when social relationships are involved. Indeed, Māori do not generally explicit the values that generate the sense of togetherness specific to the *whānau* so that what concerns Māori social relationships seems to be taken for granted.

However, an anonymous informant was quite critical towards the association of rugby and *tikanga* that characterised the tournament. His motivation was that it reinforced deleterious stereo-

types about Māori being physical beings and war-oriented and this was much more dangerous in a space where young people were the main recipients. Yet, he believed the Māori community would not appreciate his dissent and this was one of the reasons why he preferred to conceal his identity.

Today Māori tournaments also have a new socio-political dimension. Because rugby weighs upon the identification of young Maori men and professionalism has turned this sport into a source of income, quite a few elders view rugby as an instrument to deter Māori youth from street life. Thus, they hope the tournaments will make the skills of many young Maori visible. Nevertheless, these tournaments often go unnoticed. New Zealand media do not cover the event and the same Māori TV does not seem to pay attention enough. The All Blacks selector no longer attend this event. Another issue is that spectators are scarce as well. The quality of the spectatorship is impressive. The people who are there and the group warmly support the various teams and sometimes passionately join the *haka*. However, numbers are minimal. The view is nearly upsetting if compared with the accounts of the early tournaments. The modest support of the NZRU and the same nature of Māori rugby as a social event were listed amongst the reasons.

Quite a few people involved in the tournaments complained about meagre visibility and limited support and thought it was urgent to oppose this trend. We understand this scenario because of the way rugby has historically contributed to make Māori *mana* shine at the national level and. Yet, I have also been told that there is lot of talk but no action: every year during the tournaments people involved in this event debate, come up with suggestions, proposals, but as soon as the tournaments are over people go back to their lives where they are very busy with other and, often more urgent, tasks.

The New Zealand Māori team and the political face of Māori Rugby

The New Zealand Māori team is the most visible face of Māori rugby as well as its most political expression. The elders I talked to proudly recalled and emphasized the long-standing and illustrious tradition of the Māori team. In 2010 it was actually the centenary of the team which was marked by various celebrations set up by the Māori Rugby Board, including three friendly matches against historical opponents. For that occasion they wore a special jersey created by a Māori artist, whose design reproduced the ornate imagery which distinguishes Māori carving. Acknowledging past and present heroes of Māori rugby, it was meant to auspicate the beginning of a new era. The magnificence of the celebrations temporarily masked the hardships the team has been facing during the last years. The team's golden age was in the first half of the twentieth century, coinciding with the great era of Māori rugby under the political leadership of Apirana Ngata. The Māori team impressed thanks to its achievements and its cultural distinctiveness. When touring the players also performed off-the field, entertaining their hosts with songs and dances. When rugby was turned into a professional sport, the Māori team risked to be devoured by the competitive and money-driven dynamics of professionalism. Yet, during that delicate transition the Māori team got back on the track collecting impressive results during a decade. Leadership made the difference. In 1994 Matt Te Pou, former soldier and coach, was appointed to lead the Indigenous national representative. He left ten years later after the historical victory over the British and Irish Lions and having collected 33 victories out of 38 matches. The team had managed to cope with the transition from amateur to professional rugby, had rejuvenated its spirit and distinguished itself from other teams by accentuating its cultural character. Its endeavours stirred Māori pride like in the old times. More and more Māori aspired to play for the Māori team and to become rugby

players. Since Matt Te Pou's departure the team has been struggling to maintain the visibility and the recognition it had achieved, first of all because of scarce game opportunities. At the same time, the team is by now synonymous of controversial topic and polemics have become more aggressive. Māori who keep longing to play in the team are those who do identify with the indigeneity the Māori team jersey is symbol of. In 2009 the NZRU cut the funds to the team due to financial problems. The future of the team is uncertain.

Emphasizing the centenary of the Māori team had, then, political relevance. Because the team often managed to make New Zealand indigeneity shine nationally and internationally, the Māori team has been raised to symbol of the Indigenous aspirations of *tinorangatiratanga* (self-determination). The constraints and polemics the Māori team has been the object of are viewed as a limitation to their own determination. During the centenary celebrations, a young Māori man told me not to appreciate too much the political interpretation of rugby and the emphasis placed on the Māori team by many Māori leaders. He lamented that this distracted Māori from more urgent issues like education. While I understood these contentions, which are availed by quite a few Māori, and believed that achievements in other fields had to be more or at least equally highlighted and fostered, I also comprehended the position of those who viewed rugby as a *taonga* (treasure) and fought for its development, acknowledgment and safeguard, interpreting this process as a metaphor of the realization and recognition of Māori dignity and *tinorangatiratanga*. From this point of view, rugby has a symbolic power that no other field has and the Māori team becomes a powerful icon, the reason being that rugby is highly-valued by New Zealand society and is the only valued mainstream site where Māori have historically been allowed to confront, interact and compete with the dominant group as equals. Thus, the Māori Rugby Board, former top-level players, managers and coaches live their passion for rugby as a political endeavour.

Similarly, a politician and educated person like Dr. Pita Sharples, who was once a rugby champion at Te Aute, celebrates rugby achievements and stresses the significance of Māori participation to rugby.

In 1994 the cultural dimension of the team became preponderant and its distinctive trait. Focusing on this aspect was strategic and had a twofold goal. To one extent, it was meant to provide the team with visibility and attractiveness. Because of concomitant reasons (the partial anonymity it had been experiencing, scant financial resources, the secondary role it had in New Zealand rugby and the legend of the main national team) the team had little chances to get a space in the hyper-competitive and crowded professional area. Since the Māori team represented the Indigenous community of New Zealand, the team, then, invested on the Indigenous element. To another extent, it was supposed to provide the players with a reason to play for a team where they would earn no money or learn anything special in terms of the game in an era where game schedules were intense. The cultural dimension of the team could appeal all sorts of Māori identities. It would motivate the players who were grown up in Māori contexts, because they would be placed on a familiar and comfortable environment. It would inspire the Māori who were not familiar with Māori tradition or did not know much about their Māori side because it gave them the opportunity to make an experience that in daily life they could hardly access to or were too shy to engage in.

Thus, the team was appointed a *kaumātua* who would act as the spiritual guide of the group and be responsible for the cultural aspect of the team. Whetu Tipiwai has been the *kaumātua* of the team since 1994 and even composed a *haka* for the team. The rituals of the team and the values that fashion it are those that can be observed amongst the teams that compete at the Maori tournaments.

At the national level, the intense mixture of rugby and aspects of Māori culture might have been viewed as artificial, as irrever-

ent, as intriguing or simply as an innovation, but, as we have seen, in Māori contexts that practice has a long tradition. Māori rugby rests on their union. This strategy has the credit to have catapulted the socio-cultural features of the rugby played within Māori settings from behind the scenes onto the national stage. From this point of view, the Māori team has become more representative of Māori rugby than in the past years, and Indigenous agency has gained more control over a site that being first and foremost a national institution tends to be refractory to the complete manifestation of indigeneity.

Nevertheless, because of the changes the Indigenous context has experienced the team has been coping with the same issues than the teams of the Māori tournaments. Contrary to what occurs in the Māori tournaments, elders are often unhappy with the cultural lacks of the Māori players and blame the team to be scarcely representative. I argue that the public role of the team justifies such feelings. The New Zealand Māori team represents the Māori community before the nation and overseas. It has an official and thus political role. The team is then expected to embody the official representation of Māori culture. Borrowing Herzfeld's terminology, this case seems to be an example of cultural intimacy, that is "the formal or codified tension between the official representation of oneself and what happens in the private of collective introspection"⁴². The Māori tournaments represent an intimate space. Although the ultimate aim of the tournaments is to make Māori rugby emerge at the national level, in those occasions rugby is played within Māori settings with Māori and for Māori. As a consequence, discrepancies between the official representation of Māori culture – emphasising the centrality of traditions such as the *marae* and the language – and lived experiences are more likely to be admitted, accepted and faced. For example, if we focus on eld-

⁴² Herzfeld, Michael. *Intimità culturale*. L'Ancora del Mediterraneo, Napoli, 2003, p. 31. Italian translation of *Cultural Intimacy. Social Poetics in the Nation-State*, Routledge, New York, 1997.

ers, we have hinted to the fact that at the tournaments they expect *tikanga* to be respected, but they tend to recognize and thus be sympathetic with the players' struggle, because they are aware that those players come from different experiences and are young. Therefore, they make the effort to tell the players about the *tikanga* and in some occasions they gloss over their mistakes. Above all, they never question the representative role of the teams. The New Zealand Māori team is instead the representation of Māori rugby and the Māori community within the nation. In this case, many people are not likely to appreciate the emersion of their internal contradictions or conflicts. The minority status and the marginalized position of the Māori group and their culture reinforces the human reticence to show one's cultural intimacy, least it should be used against them.

The *kaumātua* of the team did not agree with those complaints, inasmuch as he believed the team encompassed the contemporary Māori experience:

I associate myself with some of the old, old players and they talk to me about... how they see the Māori team now and how awesome it was when they were there. And when they were there they took it for granted, the Māori things, they were fluent speakers of Māori, they could *haka*, they could *waiata*, as to the Māori today, you know, I'm teaching them. The difference is when those boys hit first the *tikanga*... the guys of today they're willing and they want to be Māori, to understand Māori, they're quite proud... to be Māori it's understanding genealogy, understanding things about that and they're learning that, but they express it, they fully express it! And the older players, man! you know, they get really annoyed with themselves, 'Look at the young force man, look at what you've done to these young guys' We had them and we were naturally... we could speak fluent Māori to one other... and now these guys have to fight. And that's the difference eh, with the Māori players today, the pride in the jersey? Yes. A lot of pride. And the culture within our team? Awesome culture... [...] For myself it's the culture they get nowhere else eh [...] some of them have... picked that up and continued learning *te reo*, the language... taking evening classes, there are some that are doing that.

However, the Māori team players are aware that most elders are judging their degree of cultural information and questioning their role as representatives of Māori rugby. Both this awareness and the wide visibility they get as players of a national representative increase the unease of those who do not have a secure identity. In 1997 the Māori team was actually the object of a survey which aimed to understand how they coped with the responsibility to represent Māori identity before the nation and the rest of the world in the professional era⁴³. It emerged that “some 26% of respondents reported experiencing “some” stress associated with their role. Types of stress reported included feelings of anxiety, nervousness, embarrassment and notions of inadequacy and confusion”⁴⁴, which intensified when players were invited into traditional contexts. This stress was ascribed to limited knowledge of *tikanga* and/or *te reo* Māori; to feelings of low self-esteem and shyness (*whakamā*) in traditional contexts; or to the lack of exposition to those contexts. It, thereby, Asked about possible resolutions, the players who did not have a secure Māori identity hoped they would get a better cultural preparation and access more knowledge of Māori rugby history and their own tribal area. This desire suggested that the Māori team’s emphasis on the cultural dimension was appropriate. If anything, the team had to invest far more time and energy on such aspect.

The comments of players that have been part of the Māori team led by Matt Te Pou are testimony to the appreciation of the team’s cultural dimension⁴⁵. Some appreciated playing rugby in an environment where they could be totally at ease and fully understood, others voiced gratitude to have been given the chance to be exposed to Māori traditions. Dallas Seymour voiced both those feel-

⁴³ Hirini, Paul and Flett, Ross. *Aspect of the Māori All Black Experience: The Value of Cultural Capital in the New Professional Era*. He Pukenga Kōrero, 5 (1): 18-24, 1999.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22

⁴⁵ Te Pou, Matt and McIlraith, Matt. *Against the Odds. Matt Te Pou and Māori Rugby*. Huia. Wellington, 2006.

ings:

Whenever I've played in a team that has a Māori context to it it's... you feel at home, I guess. And I've played in heaps different teams and it's all, it's always been fun, and challenging in a way, but the ones where I've felt the most, I guess, comfortable is... within the teams that have Māori context, in some ways you don't have to... make excuses or I guess to tone it down to make other people feel at ease, like within the Māori New Zealand team for instance there are guys who are totally comfortable and fluent, but the majority of the guys, I guess we're pretty much on the same boat, we really don't know much about our culture, but when they come into it they're totally at home straight away and that makes us grow as people, and I've always felt that whenever I've been in the Māori team as well, it's always great representing your own history, you know, our culture and heritage and being surrounded by that was such a welcoming environment, you couldn't help learning in that environment... and actually, it impacted on the way you played as well, you know, you just wanted to do more because you had, I guess, your ancestors watching over you as well, so I mean you didn't have to make excuses, and the expectations that everyone had to learn all the way through *haka* it wasn't from, you know, unless you do it you'll be punished, but it was you need to know this because it's part of... a way to defend Māori, and when you know it you'll be a better person as well. [...] you're able to celebrate being who you were and able to express yourself in your own natural way, no excuses, no one is gonna judge you at all, you're gonna be judged on the field but in terms of Māori we won't judge you, you're Māori, and you can be that without making any excuses, now you're a whole person I guess. And that's how I feel like when I go home, to *kainga* [...] amongst your own people, amongst a Māori context. You're feeling a lot more relaxed because... even though you still might be learning the language like I am, and the culture, you're so relaxed, because... people are there to learn and to see a Māori context... again it's not like a typical educational system where there's a sort of recognition, reward, you're always sort of being judged, I guess, it's not like you're having to pass an exam, you're just going there and being Māori, and you don't have to make any excuse to anyone. People just allow you to be who you are, people are relaxed about whoever you may be [...] It's like going home to *kainga*, like everyone goes to their own area, to their own *marae*, and that's where you are the most comfortable, cause you're within your own family and you're gonna be nurtured and looked after and put on the pressure, but in a nice way.

To Seymour the sense of being at home transcended one's cultural fluency and the fact of having to learn various aspects of Māori culture. These considerations reminds us that Māori cultural difference is not simply located in the language or the prayers or the *haka*. Many Māori players may not be fluent Māori speakers or great *haka* performers, yet, there will be many aspects in their lives – that they are likely to give for granted and non-Māori are not aware of – that make them culturally different from non-Māori players. In a mixed-team the same fact of self-identifying as Māori creates difference, which is, furthermore, associated to a range of cultural and social negative assumptions. However, the NZRU and part of the country seem to miss the team's role in the fulfilment of Māori socio-cultural aspirations. As a matter of fact, parallel to the resurgence of the Māori team during the Matt Te Pou's era there has been the insurgence of a national debate concerning its role and its legitimacy.

According to many non-Māori, the Indigenous national team should not be assembled any longer, because it is racist and/or because it is no longer representative of Māori people and their society. These ideas strongly emerged in 2009 when the NZRU cut the Māori team's funds and some Māori former players attempted to organize a private tour to South-Africa, and in 2010 for the Māori team centenary and the NZRU apology to the Māori players who were not selected to play against South Africa during the apartheid.

Someone agreed that the team made no longer sense for the simple reason that it had become too problematic and being under the control of the NZRU, it could not properly voice Indigenous aspirations and values. Māori who had been involved with the team believed that team was still legitimate, in that it represented shared experiences and values. In addition, these cultural world had long been mortified, so that its representation within the team reverberated positively on Māori self-esteem.

At the core of why many people identify the Māori team as a ra-

cist institution, there is the very persistence of the concept of race⁴⁶. Three decades ago New Zealand politics banned the concept of race replacing with ethnicity and adopted a bicultural policy. A team representing a specific culture does not disregard the country's policies, nor is it supposed to upset common beliefs. Yet, many Pākehā opine about the Māori team referring to a Māori race as well as using race and culture as interchangeable terms. As a matter of fact, the Māori team is expected to be a brown institution. In addition, there is little awareness of the importance of this team to the Māori population. As a minority, their culture is partially or not represented in the mainstream contexts and as social subjects they often experience lack of recognition, but non-Māori citizens often fail to grasp these implications and to realize how different people who self-identify as Māori are. Thus, stressing the legitimacy of the Māori to have their own team is by many viewed as favouring a race over another in an era that portrays and promotes New Zealand as one country/one people. Accordingly, some people try to be provocative, by suggesting that there should then be a New Zealand European team. Others accuse Māori to be hypocritical when they blame New Zealand to have been racist leaving Māori players at home when competing against South Africa. Still, in that case the New Zealand team accused to be racist was supposed to represent the whole country, more specifically an egalitarian country.

The debate is so intense that at the 2009 Māori inter-regional tournaments in Christchurch a teacher of South African origin came along to watch the event and ask questions, because she was carrying out a class project concerning the issue of the Māori team, aiming to overcome racial prejudice towards Māori. The woman talked with the *kaumātua* Tipiwai. In order to highlight the *mana* and the recognition of Māori rugby and suggest that reciprocal understanding is possible, he told her about this student that appreciated their meaningfulness and had come all the way from Italy just

⁴⁶ Cf. Jeff Sissons, *First peoples. Indigenous culture and their futures*, Reaktion Books, London, 2005.

to watch the tournaments. The woman found my presence interesting and therefore ‘interviewed’ me, curious to know what someone external to New Zealand vicissitudes thought about the alleged racism and lack of legitimacy of the Māori team.

Aligning with Bastide’s analyses on the impact of the socio-economic context on racial prejudice⁴⁷, I argue that the recent debate about the Māori team can be better understood if situated in the wider national context. First of all, to New Zealand rugby shifting to the professional code was not an easy process. A lot of money was invested in the All Blacks promotion and skill development, but the team has long struggled live up to their outstanding reputation and their magnificent representation. On the contrary, the Māori team, where there was hardly any money involved, achieved high results. Quite a few Māori suspected that the team’s achievements (results, international visibility, support) in the professional era had worried the national federation, insofar as they could potentially challenge the All Blacks status. Then, the country’s social and political context has been characterized by the majority’s growing animosity, impatience and apprehension towards Māori. As the Māori political voice gains strength and visibility, Māori are increasingly represented as a privileged group. If we take into account these feelings, the Māori team would fall within the privileges Māori are supposed to have; Māori aspirations for more games and acknowledgement would be probably seen as a further example of restless demands; and their success would be a valid reason to fear Māori requests.

The team is likewise accused not to be representative of Māori society. In this case, critics come as well from the Māori community. In 2003 the Māori team selected Cullen, one of the strongest All Blacks of the first decade of the current century and an icon of New Zealand. He was as fair as a Viking, had no idea about Māori cultural values and rituals and did not even know he had Māori ancestors until the Māori team found them out. His se-

⁴⁷ Roger Bastide, *Le Prochain et le lointain*, Éditions L'Harmattan, Paris, 2001[1970].

lection was perceived as an outrage by public opinion. In accordance to what we have heretofore considered, we would agree with the Māori scholar Hokowhitu who argued that what mainly shocked the majority was to have one of their national heroes – one of the best representative of the dominant group – represented as a Māori, thus decentring the white subject⁴⁸. This makes much more sense in a society where colour prejudice is intimately connected to a prejudice towards the culture and the class associated to the ‘brown’ Māori⁴⁹. The selection of Cullen was not an isolate case. During the Matt Te Pou era the Māori team began to number quite a few players who did not fit in the standard representation of Māori.

In order to be selected for the Māori team, the fundamental criterion rugby players must meet is *whakapapa* (genealogy). According to *whakapapa* principles, one Māori ancestor automatically qualifies for full membership. As a matter of fact, the New Zealand anthropologist Metge had noticed that Māori “in practice usually accept as Māori anyone with a Māori ancestor, if he or she desires acceptance”⁵⁰. The same principle applies to the Māori team. Thus, any player who has a Māori ancestor in his genealogy is eligible to play, provided he wants to be accepted. The *kaumātua* of the team is responsible to find out or check the links. Players are never automatically selected, but are asked whether they want to represent the Māori team or not. *Whakapapa* is at odds with the paradigm of blood quantum. In addition, within the *whakapapa* frame the gene-

⁴⁸ Brendan Hokowhitu, *The Māori All Blacks and the Decentering of the White Subject: Hyperrace, Sport, and the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 25: 243-262, 2008.

⁴⁹ I borrowed the concepts of colour, cultural and class prejudice to describe racial prejudice towards Maori from the analysis on racial prejudice of the French anthropologist Bastide. Roger Bastide, *Le Prochain et le lointain*, Éditions L'Harmattan, Paris, 2001[1970]. See also Metge's analysis of racial prejudice in New Zealand. Joan Metge, *The Maoris of New Zealand*, Routledge and Kegan, London, 1976 [revised edition].

⁵⁰ Joan Metge. *The Maoris of New Zealand*. Routledge and Kegan, London, 1976 [revised edition], p. 40.

alogical link stands out for its metaphorical importance, since it entails the spiritual bond with the ancestors, and the land where those ancestors rest, which in turn informs people's identities. The term spiritual is not, hereby, used to merely and vaguely oppose the Indigenous worldview to Western society. On the contrary, it appears the most fitting word to convey the immaterial connections and influences which are emphasized in the Indigenous notion of genealogy. Non-Māori often fail to understand it, because they tend to identify Indigenous people by adopting the concept of blood quantum. On the other hand, in some cases Māori themselves are today prejudicial towards white Māori. Vice versa, if they are quite too fair, they might feel uncomfortable within Māori society. Furthermore, even when Māori conform with the original principles of whakapapa, they often tend to translate the concept in English with the term blood. This means that the Western concept of blood percentage has silently entrenched itself in the context it was originally used against.

However, what distinguishes Māori criteria to identify membership is also the fact that descent refers to membership at the potential level rather than to full belonging. The emphasis is placed on the relationship with the others and the land⁵¹. We, then, understand the doubts and scepticism of some Māori concerning the cultural legitimacy of a team where there are players who seem to be alien to Māori ways, and, possibly, did not even use to respect Māori and their culture in their daily life. While non-Māori protests as to the cultural legitimacy of the Māori team stem from a stagnant and stereotyped perception of Māori culture – which denies the several, multifaceted ways Indigenous people can express their identity, the Māori complaints tend to ensue from the

⁵¹ To better understand the Maori formulations of identity see the Oceanic theories. Cf. Jocelyn Linnekin, *The Politics of Culture in the Pacific*. In Lin Poyer and Jocelyn Linnekin (eds), *Cultural Identity and Ethnicity in the Pacific*, pp. 149-173. University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 1999; Alan Howard, *Cultural Paradigms, History and the Search for Identity in Oceania*. In Lin Poyer and Jocelyn Linnekin (eds.), *Cultural Identity and Ethnicity in the Pacific*, pp. 259-279. University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 1999.

fact that lived experiences and social relations are paramount to defining Māori membership. The reason why there are discordant opinions seems to be a matter of emphasis. Some might place emphasis on the fact that this is the result of colonization – and then view the participation of these ‘unknowledgeable’ players as an opportunity which will benefit the players and, in the long term, the whole community. By doing so, they also enact the idea of situational flexibility which seems to pertain to Oceanic Indigenous cultures. Others might focus on the players’ lack. However, there are as well Māori whose opinion is affected by the incorporation of a Western concept of authenticity. To others, the adhesion of those players was a matter of opportunism, particularly during Matt Te Pou’s era. Some Māori thought that professionalism had been corroding the spirit of the Māori team – both in terms of values and rugby style – transforming it into a space to restrain players from going to France or UK, where they tend to get more money and seem to have more chances to be selected to play in the national team, and/or in a commercial endeavour⁵².

In any case the team – like the Māori rugby tournaments – cannot act as the panacea to the cultural alienation ensued from tribal uprooting and urban migration. Nevertheless, its cultural atmosphere can stir the players curiosity and stimulate them to keep discovering Māori culture in their daily lives. We have seen, for instance, that a few players took on evening classes to learn te reo. As for the players who only have one Māori ancestor and definitely identify with Pākehā culture, their experience in the Māori team is likely to be a parenthesis in their life. Yet, getting to know firsthand what Indigenous culture can be about and learn to respect it can only be beneficial to both the individual and the society at large.

However, no-one can take advantage of or benefit from the cultural capital of the Maori team, for no games are envisaged in the

⁵² Cf. Brendan Hokowhitu, *The Māori All Blacks and the Decentering of the White Subject: Hyperrace, Sport, and the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 25: 243-262, 2008.

near future. Its new dawning is procrastinated and what is currently left are speculations over the legitimacy and the meaningfulness of the team.

Conclusions

We have seen that the Māori relationship with rugby has been informed by dynamism, creativity and agency to the extent that we can talk of Māori rugby as an indigenous form of rugby. Like the Indigenous society, Māori rugby has had experienced its up and downs and has changed accommodating new circumstances.

To a certain extent, Māori rugby is losing its cultural vitality, and its role as privileged site to express Māori identity and achieve *mana* is being questioned. The overall social and political climate and the professional rugby world do not seem to favour the expression of Māori rugby within official contexts either.

Yet, Māori rugby fights the odds, to the extent that it now tries to preserve itself. On one hand, it has evolved into a family tradition and a common site to socialize amongst Māori. On the other hand, the status and political determination of Māori people and their cultural enunciations still feels the effects of colonization so that rugby remains a strategic site to claim acknowledgement and assert their pride. Thus, Māori engage in preserving and improving Māori at the community level and the Māori rugby tournaments. Because of the symbolical power of the Māori team, many Māori will not give up asking for games and recognition. If the historical context plays an important role, I argue leadership will always make the difference. Within the rugby world Matt Te Pou had the same powers than Apirana Ngata had in the wider social context - and indirectly in the same rugby in the 20's-30's. Like the Māori community, Māori rugby needs to be guided by strong Indigenous leadership.

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