The Pacific Islander in Irish rugby: From exotic ‘other’ to global professional colleague

Liam O’Callaghan

Liverpool Hope University

Abstract: This paper explores historical and contemporary connections between Irish rugby and the Pacific Islands. Tracing these connections from the first tours to the British Isles by Fijian rugby teams in the 1960s through to the contemporary professional era, this paper seeks to elucidate the evolving perception of the Pasifika within Irish rugby. Ultimately, it is argued that key contextual shifts in global rugby and Irish society from the mid-1990s gave rise to a clear shift in the function and perception of the Pacific Islander rugby player in Europe, and specifically Ireland. A figure who was once seen as the exotic ‘other’ became a sought after commodity in the global rugby transfer market.

Keywords: Irish rugby; Pacific Islander; athletic migration; globalisation

In November 2008, the Irish provincial rugby team Munster hosted the All Blacks at Thomond Park in Limerick. The occasion came thirty years after Munster had defeated the All Blacks on the same ground, an occasion immortalised in books and a play, and a key moment in the collective memory of the Irish side’s supporters. The 2008 game was a thriller, with a late try from the Fijian Joe Rockocoko giving the All-Blacks an 18-16 victory.

The highlight of the event for many was a rendition of the haka performed by the four Kiwi players in the Munster team that night. This particular side show was given legitimacy by being led by the Munster centre and former New Zealand Maori captain, Rua Tipoki. It was a ritual whose impact was also enhanced by the two teams’ heavily mythologised self-conceptions, mainly centred on the game’s apparent social cachet and cultural role. Munster and New Zealand are two locations where rugby union has a strong egalitarian image in contradistinction to their rivals, with Munster countering the middle-class, urbane Leinster and New Zealand rugby with its rustic, rural character standing apart from the solid bourgeois credentials of, say, Australian rugby. The Haka, symbolising a ‘unity of passion, commitment and assertiveness’ embraces qualities readily associated with Munster rugby. As the Irish Independent again asserted: ‘There is deep tradition, too: the shirt is treasured, kept warm for the next player, with no sense of entitlement or ownership, just as the All Blacks treasure their tradition and their shirts. Munster and All Black rugby is forged from the same steel and it was fitting that the defining moment on Tuesday night was the Munster haka,’ which drew together and embellished both traditions.”

Beyond this mesh of invented traditions and historical anachronisms,
arguably the most significant aspect of this event was how it symbolised contemporary transnational trends and globalising processes and their impact on rugby union.

Another intriguing subplot, and of particular relevance to this paper, was the contribution of Pacific Islander migration, both sporting and historical, to the composition of both teams. Of the four ‘Kiwis’ who performed the ‘Munster haka’, Doug Howlett and Liefemi Mafi were of Tongan descent, Rua Tipoki was Maori while Jeremy Manning was Pakeha. In fact Mafi was born in Tonga but rendered himself ineligible to represent his home country by playing Sevens rugby for New Zealand. On the New Zealand side, several members of the squad had either been born in, or had ancestral links with the Pacific Islands. On the Munster side, Mafi and Howlett had glittering careers with the province and were firmly assimilated to the Munster rugby tradition. Of his move to Munster in 2007, Howlett said: ‘I’ve always liked to look of Munster. I just like the likeness to the All Blacks in that they’re a smaller union or area competing on a big scale.’ In Mafi’s case, recognition of his commitment to the Munster cause and difficulty in pronouncing his Tongan name led to his being given the affectionate sobriquet ‘Larry Murphy.’ Howlett and the Mafi were two of the highest achievers among a flow (if not a torrent) of Pacific Islanders that came to ply their trade as professional rugby players in Ireland after the game abandoned amateurism in 1995. The 2008 fixture owed much of its character, therefore, to Pacific Islander rugby and migration as historical processes and phenomena.

Rugby first took root in the Pacific Islands in the early decades of the twentieth century when unions were set up in Fiji (1913), Tonga (1923) and Samoa (1924). These initiatives owed much the islands’ varying colonial histories and agents of imperialism such as missionary orders, colonial governing staff and school teachers did much to initiate and sustain the game in these remote locations. From the perspective of the native peoples, rugby gave sporting expression to qualities of manliness, loyalty and honour much-cherished within indigene culture. Post-Second World War migration, notably to meet labour shortages in New Zealand, gave rise to Islander diaspora communities, members of which would later have a significant impact on rugby in their host communities, including a certain level of disquiet among white commentators at the apparent ‘browning’ of rugby teams. The professionalisation of rugby, in turn, led to a new, distinct wave of Islander migration, this time of highly skilled sportsmen to the professional rugby leagues of the SANZAR rugby region and to Europe. Moreover, these imperial and indigenous cultural patterns have come together in the migration to Europe of New Zealand-born Polynesian rugby players and coaches.

Tracing the interaction of the Pacific Islander with Irish rugby back to the reception of the first touring teams from the islands and the eventual inward migration of players post-1995, this paper will analyse the evolving role and perception of the Pasifika in Irish rugby. Among the key contexts to
be considered will be the reception of ‘exotic’ peoples and cultures in a once homogenous society and the evolving political economy of sport in which the processes of globalisation are heavily influential in contemporary rugby union.

**Historical connections between Ireland and the Pacific Islands**

It is scarcely an exaggeration to assert that rugby provides the most powerful connection between Ireland and the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Islands. By contrast with her links with New Zealand and Australia, Ireland’s demographic, cultural, political and economic relationships with the smaller rugby-playing Pacific Island nations are marginal to the point of being insignificant. This is despite the fact that there are some vague historical commonalities between Ireland and the Pacific archipelagos. Ireland, in common with Fiji, was part of the British Empire while Samoa, Tonga, Niue and the Cook Islands were subject to various degrees of British protection in the colonial era. These Islands, like Ireland, were influenced by more powerful neighbours and, as already mentioned, at various times in their histories, native peoples migrated in large numbers to more developed economies. More direct links exist again with Fiji, where Irish missionaries in the form of the Columban Fathers, tended to the islands’ Catholic minority, though in absolute numbers these missionaries were sparse. Apart from what interactions have occurred between them as emigrant communities in Australia and New Zealand, historical connections and commonalities between Ireland and the Pacific Islands are quite academic and the extent to which the peoples of the two places have entered each other’s consciences (beyond the rugby field) in the last three hundred years must be said to have been limited. This is a point that can be stretched to the present day.

According to the 2006 Irish census of population, Tonga, Samoa, Fiji and Niue accounted for less than ten each of the 420,000 non-Irish nationals living in Ireland that year. While not a single respondent claimed Cook Islander nationality. By 2011, the numbers of Fijians and Tongans had risen slightly into the ‘11-50’ bracket of the census abstract. Though additional Pasifika were no doubt among the 2,000 New Zealanders resident in Ireland in 2011, these people cannot be said to have formed a coherent migrant community in Ireland. Moreover, many of those who have migrated to Ireland appear to have done so in order to play rugby. In 2008, for instance, all four work permits issued in Ireland to Fijians were to professional sportspeople; seven out of eight work permits for individuals claiming American Samoan citizenship were, again, for the professional sport sector, and all eight work permits issued to Tongan and Samoan citizens were for the same purpose. Only three individuals from these islands, two Fijians and a Samoan, applied for Irish citizenship between 2005 and 2009. Economically, trade between Ireland and these islands accounts for a minute proportion of aggregate Irish foreign trade. In 2012, Irish bilateral trade with Fiji amounted to around €3,000,000. The equivalent figures for Samoa and Tonga were a mere €615,000 and €230,000 respectively, while
trade with the Cook Islands in 2012 amounted to a miniscule €4,000. It is likely that an international rugby match between Ireland and any of these nations held in Dublin would generate economic activity of a value that would easily supersede the figures outlined for foreign trade above. Politically, Ireland does not have formal direct diplomatic relationships with any of these nations. Diplomatic relations with Fiji are handled by the Irish embassy in Canberra, while Ireland has no formal representation of any kind with Samoa and Tonga.

By no measure, therefore, could Irish relations with the Pacific Islands be considered extensive and the key point is that rugby-related activity is, arguably, the most important means by which the two locations are aware of each other’s existence.

**Irish and Pacific Islander rugby: early encounters**

Though touring teams from New Zealand and Australia had been visiting Ireland since the late nineteenth century, it was only in the latter decades of the twentieth that sustained interactions with teams from the Pacific Islands began. In 1964, a Fijian side impressed on a tour of the Britain and though Ireland was not included on the itinerary, rugby journalists on the island covered the tour (seen as something of a novelty) quite extensively. This commentary was symptomatic of how Irish journalists and, it must be assumed, a fair proportion of the Irish rugby public, would come to perceive rugby teams from the Pacific Islands. Up until at least the dawn of professionalism, for Irish rugby commentators, the Pacific Islander traditionally fell into the category of the exotic ‘other,’ both in terms of their ethnic background and the supposed uniqueness of their playing styles. This has been common in rugby. The stereotyping of rugby-playing nations along the lines of supposed national characteristics aligned with technical (and psychological) approaches to the game have been well-established in the research especially in terms of the four ‘home’ countries. While the Celtic nations combined different combinations of fieriness, violence, erraticism and genius, England was sober and in-control. Pacific Island nations, while seemingly oblivious to rules and technically naïve, were charmingly instinctive and entertaining.

This racialist discourse took root from the 1960s when teams from the Pacific Islands first began touring the northern hemisphere. The pioneers, in this regard, were Fiji. As the island most closely linked to the British Empire, this was scarcely surprising. With generations of British-born colonial administrators and missionaries from the British Isles having served there, cultural ties existed between the two locations. Indeed a direct link in this context that existed between Irish rugby and Fiji came in the person of Harry Jack. A Corkman who played for Munster and Ireland in the second decade of the twentieth century, Jack eventually entered colonial service and was posted to Fiji as director of agriculture. While there, he established a rugby club and was (rather overstatedly) described as the ‘father’ of Fijian rugby. When interviewed about Fijian rugby in the 1950s, Jack’s
description was an early example of the language that would come to dominate Irish commentary on the subject. According to the *Irish Times*, Jack was of the opinion that:

…the Fijians are among the finest footballers in the world. The average man stands at six feet two or three and weighs around the sixteen stone mark. They are very fit and fast and scorn any footwear – but they can kick the ball as hard and as far as anyone else. They get the most intense joy out of the vigour of the game and shouts of laughter – instead of rage – can be heard on grounds on the Fiji Islands.18

Jack had intended to bring the Fijians to Britain in 1941 but the venture had to be scrapped due to the war.

Fijian rugby first came to the attention of the Irish rugby public in the 1950s when occasional newspaper references appeared describing to how the game was played in a manner consonant to the Fijian temperament, which seemingly comprised ample jollity and little inhibition. An *Irish Times* columnist, using a mix of sporting and pseudo-anthropological language and describing the Fijian rugby team as ‘towering, dark-skinned, fuzzy-haired giants,’ observed that the Fijians:

…still regard rugby as tremendous fun, something which must always be played with a broad smile and frequently even with continuous gales of happy laughter. Their game is nearly always one of continuous attack and constant instinctive improvisation. They have speed, unquenchable stamina, and fast follow-up. And when they play the game on the islands, I believe, the completely disregard the use of football boots a something rather effete.19

It was not until 1964 that Fiji first toured Britain. As already outlined this tour gave rise to considerable interest among Irish writers who tended to marvel at the ‘strangeness’ of the visitors. For example, Paul McWeeney of the *Irish Times* covered events in detail and marvelled at the physique, skills and tactical foolhardiness of the tourists: ‘The Fijians are superb athletes and it is in their nature to seek for tries no matter what the cost but against first class opposition the lack of cover in depth can be too expensive.’20

In 1973 a Fijian touring side first played on Irish soil in a match against provincial side Leinster. In advance of the game, the celebrated Irish rugby writer, Edmund Van Esbeck, marvelled at the islanders’ approach to the game:

The Fijians play with a flair and elan that borders on the reckless and is certainly not in accordance with prescribed text of the coaching manuals. If they could temper wisdom with their undoubted talents, doubtless they would win many of the games that they have lost by narrow margins.21

After giving a potted history of rugby in Fiji, Van Esbeck further commented that ‘It was a game totally compatible with the Fijians’ happy and gay temperament.’22
This sentiment was echoed in the *Irish Press* in which it was noted by one scribe that ‘To me, Fiji was a land of permanent sunshine and bliss and golden beaches. The inhabitants were lazy, and of all sports, rugby was the one they were least likely to play. Their way of life and habits didn’t identify themselves with such a rugged, physical sport as rugby.’ In the event, much of the anticipation turned to disappointment when the tourists were well-beaten by Leinster. ‘So, what happened to these legendary coloured rugby heroes…?’ mused the *Irish Press*. The answer was provided by the then Fijian Rugby Union chairman Barry Sweetman who ‘suggested that they were distinctly temperamental’ when they failed to secure an early score.

Ireland played against Fiji for the first time three years later after having firstly touring New Zealand. The game in Suva, for which Irish players were not awarded caps, was won by the visitors but was remembered for the number of injuries sustained by tired Irish players. This was attributed by the Irish media to various deficiencies of the opposition. According to all reporters the referee and the Fijian team did not know the laws of the game, the hosts resorted to dangerous tactics, and the Irish coach, Roly Meates, was forced to intervene when the referee allowed Fiji a substitute too many. Bob Messenger, writing in the *Irish Press* exclaimed: ‘These people have their own brand of rugby and they are better off practising it among themselves.’

Edmund Van Esbeck, writing in the *Irish Times* was bewildered at what he witnessed: ‘Perhaps some might say it was rugby with a difference, others a crude variation on the Eton Wall game; certainly any similarity between the game as conceived by Ellis and perfected by the evolutionary process and what took place in…Suva yesterday was just a mere coincidence.’ This shambles, which was partially down to the referee apparently not knowing the rules of the game was mostly attributable to the fact, as a Van Esbeck saw matters, that ‘The Fijians may well have a reputation for uninhibited, spectacular rugby, but the basic elements of forward play are as yet, I am afraid well beyond their compass.’

Similar sentiments were expressed by the same writer when the two sides met in Dublin in 1985. The Fijians, according to Van Esbeck, ‘have not been able to master the essential elements of forward play, notably scrummaging and rucking, nor have they allied the necessary level of discipline to their play throughout the field.’

The rugby teams of Samoa and Tonga were also subject to stereotyping by press commentators on the rare occasions in which they encountered Irish sides. Ireland played Tonga for the first time in the Pool stages of the 1987 Rugby World Cup in Australia. In the build-up to the game, one commentator, attempting to educate an Irish public unfamiliar with Tongan rugby, spoke of how Tonga had ‘some limitations of a disciplinary nature,’ and that their temperament…hampered their progress.’ He continued, in almost anthropological terms: ‘They love the physical challenge involved in the game…many believe that their indiscipline has more to do with historic traditions which have promoted the game of Rugby Union as the modern version of tribal warfare, rather than lack of coaching…despite their temperamental outbursts, the Tongans have the ability and the
personnel to upset sophisticated outfits like Ireland and Wales. The *Irish Press* summarised aspects of Tongan rugby culture with a barely concealed sense of bewilderment:

...they had looked very inept against the methodical Canadians. One reason put forward for this sub-standard display is the reluctance of the Tongans to play on Sunday. They are an intensely religious people, and the Sabbath, apparently, is set aside for churchgoing and family...Before the kick-off, their version of the Maori *Haka* – a sort of war chant directed at your opponents – seemed to do as little for the dour Welsh as it did for modern ballet. It’s not a particularly graceful or even invigorating display – a bit more akin to late night imbibers staggering out of an Irish pub, in truth.

Ireland’s first outing against Samoa came in Dublin in 1988. The game occasioned a debate as to whether full international caps should be awarded against smaller rugby nations. Having awarded caps to Irish players who took part in the Tonga match in 1987, the IRFU decided to do likewise for the Western Samoa game following the example of their Welsh counterparts. That bestowing full international recognition on such an occasion could potentially have been seen as undervaluing the honour was in itself significant. Concerns regarding Samoa related to their apparently robust style of play. Wales had been on tour in Samoa in 1986 and when the visitors had been subject to what they considered a ‘violent approach’, their captain, Richard Moriarty, ‘primly lectured’ the islanders warning them that if they did not alter their approach, they would not be welcomed ‘among the comity of established rugby nations.’ Irish journalists welcomed the idea of awarding caps, not because they believed this signalled equality among rugby playing nations but because they did not want to see a player selected for Ireland not receiving due recognition. The stereotypical discourse surrounding Pacific Island teams remained the same. Sean Diffley summed up the islanders’ approach to rugby as follows:

Like the Fijians and Tongans, the Western Samoans love to run the ball. They play the exuberant, joyous type of rugby that the spectators delight in, but they tend to throw everything into attack at the total expense of adequate defence. And their exuberance has, in the past, got them into trouble with overly physical style.

When the match ended in a heavy defeat for the tourists, Van Esbeek commented that their ‘technical deficiency in the basics of forward play was a major burden they could not carry.’ In the build-up to the1996 international between the Ireland and Samoa, which the latter won, Van Esbeek described the visitors as follows: ‘the Samoans have a natural exuberance, are quick, physically big and strong and competitive. Unorthodox and unpredictable they may be, they don’t always add control and perception to those attributes. However, they are always dangerous and inventive.’

In all of this, interesting contextual observations can be made on the contemporary constellation of power and decision-making in global rugby union. Up until 1987, when the demands of television audiences and commercialisation began to influence those who made the rules of rugby
union, the game remained, to a large extent (especially in the British Isles), staid and boring as a spectacle. The rugby game, deemed by Van Esbeck in 1976 as ‘perfected by evolution’, was one that favoured the substance of forwards over the style of running. That the Fijians would favour an expansive game over the monotony of technical forward play provided occasion for as much weary criticism of their naïveté as praise for their ambition. This was again evident in one Irish Times reporter’s comments on the Fijian’s match against Bridgend in 1964: ‘They can all run fast and they are mostly big men. They throw the ball about in a way which players of the older unions attempt only on formal, celebratory occasions. They are bursting with energy and with enjoyment of what they are doing – the parallel with the West Indian cricketers occurred to many.’

The IRFU, moreover, along with their Scottish and English counterparts were among the most conservative of all Unions and conformed diligently to the game’s amateur, anti-commercial dogma.

A broader point about cultural stereotypes of Pacific Islanders nurtured in Europe from the eighteenth century also needs to be acknowledged. Andrew Grainger has argued that a discourse surrounding Pasifika athletic ability suffused with such terms as ‘natural’, ‘instinctive’ and ‘free’ stems from a long held belief among European writers that saw Pacific Islanders as ‘Europe’s primitive, exotic alter egos’ and that athletes have embodied a ‘kind of “soft primitivism” connoting such attributes as childlike, libidinous, free, and, of course, natural.’ That the Irish press should characterise touring rugby players from the Pacific as uninhibited, naturally talented yet lacking aptitude for such technologies as rules and forward play fits neatly with a much older juxtaposition of innate physical and mental capacities present in European writing on these peoples.

One further important context to at least mention was the contemporary homogeneity of Irish society. It was only in the mid-1990s that centuries of outward migration was replaced with immigration in Ireland. Up until that point, and having become more pronounced since independence, the Irish Republic was a largely mono-cultural country, overwhelmingly white and Catholic and heavily swayed by conservative forces that eschewed foreign influences. In this context the ‘otherness’ of Pasifika rugby was perhaps more explicitly highlighted than might otherwise have been the case. This was evidenced by parallels between rugby writing and travel writing. In a 1988 travel column in the Irish Times, John Murray spoke of how the Fijians were ‘an easygoing people,’ with it being said that ‘hard work in Fiji is waiting for coconuts to fall out of trees.’ He went on to comment that ‘Sport is hugely popular, particularly rugby. They fling the ball around with little discipline but great skill.’

**Pacific Islanders, Irish rugby and the professional era**
Decisive contextual shifts in Irish society and the world of rugby from the mid-1990s altered completely the relationship between Irish and Pacific Island rugby. In the first instance, the abandonment of amateurism had a profound effect on the game in Ireland. In the first instance, unprecedented economic expansion from the early 1990s saw Ireland undergo a transformation from an emigrant society to one who now became host, annually, to tens of thousands of migrants from all over the world. Moreover, a previously incipient secularisation gained pace and with these Ireland lost much of her white, Catholic and homogenous character. As a society Ireland became more open to new ideas and cultures and shed much of its conservatism and obsession with issues of public morality. This transformation was dovetailed by similarly dramatic change in global rugby with the onset, from 1995, of professionalism.

In Ireland, the traditional domestic game, based around clubs, was not suited to the commercial exigencies of professional rugby. The IRFU, as an alternative, decided to take complete control of the professional game with the traditional four provincial representative teams, Connacht, Leinster, Munster and Ulster becoming professional ‘clubs’. These professional sides, to all intents and purposes, were owned by the IRFU and would compete in European and Pan-Celtic competitions. Though it took some years for these teams to disentangle themselves from the old club game and to become established as commercial entitles, the success of the enterprise cannot be doubted. Ulster won the European Rugby Cup in 1999 and Munster and Leinster subsequently won two and three titles each respectively. While the concentration of resources on just four teams gave the IRFU sufficient resources to keep the best indigenous talent in Ireland, it was the nurturing of unique identities for the provinces that was decisive in getting fans through the turnstiles. Nowhere was this more evident than in the case of the Munster team around which an entire tradition of classlessness, toughness and humility was created in contradistinction to their ‘traditional’ rivals Leinster. These were identities that became heavily commercialised and, on occasion, meshed with other ‘commodified cultures’ as evidenced by the curious display of the haka outlined in the introduction to the this paper.

One of the most obvious trappings of professional sport, and of particular relevance to this paper, is athletic migration. The developing scholarship on this subject has identified, among many other issues, migration patterns and their broader relationship with flows of capital and culture as a key issue. Different sports have different migration patterns whether these are within nations, between nations or between continents. Moreover, more recent scholarship has sought to broaden the conceptual categories within which athletic migration is considered. Maguire and Elliott, for example, have called for a closer synthesis between research on sporting migration and the literature on migration within the highly skilled professions. Such a synthesis would see a broader focus in the sporting literature which would include more emphasis on such issues as: the transient, temporary
nature of some migrations; the role of supply, demand and the size of talent pools in regulating the flow of migrants; and the mechanisms through which migrants are recruited.\textsuperscript{42}

The migration of elite level rugby players to Ireland began around five years before the game turned professional. In 1991 the IRFU introduced a nationwide club rugby competition, the All Ireland League, and teams across Ireland swiftly adopted a more ‘professional’ approach to matters on the field. One widespread means of achieving this was the importation of talent and expertise from abroad. The perceived sophistication of approach and technical nous of the foreign player (particularly those from the southern hemisphere) made them an essential addition to all senior, and some junior club sides. By early 1992, there were fifty-five southern hemisphere players playing club rugby in Ireland of whom thirty-four were kiwis. The eagerness of clubs to recruit these players was caustically captured by Gerry Thornley in the \textit{Irish Times} who compared the clubs to ‘a bunch of neighbourhood kids enviously eyeing up Johnny-next-door’s latest Christmas toy, suddenly all the brats feel they should have one.’\textsuperscript{43} These players, in turn, were paid for coaching underage teams and feeder schools, as was then permitted by IRB laws. Future international coaches John Mitchell and Warren Gatland, both Kiwis, had their formative experiences in this capacity in Irish club rugby at Garryowen and Galwegians respectively. Among this early wave of immigrant sportsmen was Steven Bachop, who played with Blackrock College in the period between his test careers with Samoa and New Zealand and was probably the first Pasifika to play in Irish rugby.

When professional rugby became consolidated around the four provinces from 1997 the signing of overseas players lost its whiff of ‘shamateurism’ and migrants satisfied skills gaps that could not be filled by local talent. In the two decades following the legalisation of professional rugby players from the Pacific Islands or with Pacific Island roots began arriving in Ireland in not insignificant numbers. Significantly, professional rugby had facilitated a decisive shift in how rugby players from that part of the world were perceived in Ireland. The Pacific Islander moved from being an exotic oddity that occasionally visited Ireland as a rugby tourist to a professional sportsman whose national or ethnic identity was subordinated in the supporter’s mind to his ability as a player for his new province/club. This was all firmly situated within the context of the migration of southern hemisphere players to European rugby.

Professional Pasifika rugby players form a diverse group in Ireland can be categorised along different lines. Though a common Pasifika heritage bonds them all, significant variances have existed in nationality, country of birth, ability and successful adaptation to Irish rugby and its associated identities and cultures. Examining the (albeit small) sample of seven players and one head coach involved in the 2013-14 season offers some insights into all of these issues. Three players had played international rugby for ‘first tier nations.’ Ulster’s John Afoa, born in New Zealand but of Samoan heritage, had played thirty-six tests for New Zealand at prop when he came to Northern Ireland in
2011. Casey Laulala of Munster had a reasonably successful career with the Crusaders, having been involved in four Super Rugby finals and played two tests for the All Blacks before migrating to Europe. He was born in Samoa. Lote Tuqiri, the Fijian three-quarter, had a glittering career in League and Union in Australia before again migrating to Europe when his best days were behind him, ending up at Leinster in 2013. Connacht, meanwhile, had three Pacific Islanders on their books, all of much less repute than those playing with the other three provinces. George Naopu, a New Zealand-born Samoan, joined Connacht in 2008 having played Super Rugby with the Highlanders. He joined the Irish province for a second term in 2011. Miah Nikora, a Kiwi of Samoan extraction, joined Connacht as a fly-half. Having played NPC Nikora failed to make the grade at Super Rugby level. Finally James So’ailo was a seven time capped Samoan when he joined Connacht in 2013 and is the brother of Rodney So’ailo, a former All Black back-rower. In addition Connacht’s head coach in 2013 was the former Samoa international Pat Lam.

In terms of nationality and country of birth a sizeable proportion of the Pasifikas in Irish rugby were either born in New Zealand or, having been born in the Pacific Islands, played in New Zealand. The first Pacific Islander to be contracted in Irish rugby was Connacht’s New Zealand-born Samoan flanker Junior Charlie who was among the first cohort of four full-time professionals employed by the province in 1997. He was the first of over a dozen Pacific Islanders who would join the western province over the next fifteen years, some of whom, in turn were full internationals for either Samoa or Tonga. How Connacht should come to have more Pasifika players than the other provinces is attributable to a number of factors, primarily related to resources. In the first instance, Connacht has a much smaller talent pool than the other three provinces and produces, therefore, far fewer players of professional standard than the rest of the Irish teams. Of the roughly 153,000 school and club rugby players in Ireland in 2011, just 16,000 were from Connacht. The comparative paucity of Connacht’s local resources was obvious, for instance in the opening weekend of Heineken Cup fixtures in 2013 when the province fielded just three players that came from its own club and school system. By contrast, each of Munster, Leinster and Ulster were able to field ten players from their own schools and clubs. Connacht’s comparatively small playing pool and commercial base is compounded by being awarded the smallest budget of the four provinces by the IRFU.

In this context, Connacht, in order to compete in European and Celtic competitions, has been forced to import players cheaply from the southern hemisphere. And it is this tendency that has led to the comparatively high number of Pacific Islander imports. Some of these players, in turn, have been relatively successful. Samoan flanker Ray Ofisa, for instance, stayed in Galway for six seasons and was regarded by commentators as one of the finest southern hemisphere imports to play the game professionally in Ireland. In Connacht’s Heineken Cup maiden season in 2012, three of their key players were Pacific Islanders: Ofisa, Samoan number eight George Naopu, Samoan international centre and rugby league convert Henry Fa’afuli while a fourth, Miah Nikora was of Tongan descent.
The imminent arrival of these players often gave rise to furtive excitement. On the impending arrival of Samoan centre and former Junior All Black Niva Ta’Auso in 2008, the Connacht Tribune was moved to comment (with some ruefulness):

The Messiah is coming and Connacht folk are waiting with baited breath. After months of waiting, the impending debut of Pacific Islander Niva Ta’Auso must be one of the most eagerly anticipated in the history of Connacht rugby. His story conjures up Monty Python type images of the life of Brian with the huddled, despondent and desperate masses rumbling around in his trail waving their shoes and hailing him as the Messiah…and now one man – with a better C.V. than all of current management team’s overseas acquisitions put together (i.e. he has actually played Super 14 rugby) – is shouldered with the task of resurrecting an entire season.  

While these players have helped a small professional team on the periphery of European rugby compete at the highest level of the game in the continent, other Pasifika imports have been part of what the journalist Hugh Farrelly has termed ‘the flotsam and jetsam of the southern hemisphere.’ Moreover, many of these players had little more than a fleeting transient relationship with the Irish club. Thomas Timani, a Samoan winger, was signed from Auckland in 2009. He appears to have played no first team match of any consequence for Connacht and quickly faded into the obscurity of local club rugby in Galway. The previously mentioned James So’ailo lasted just two months with the province before being released from his contract due to homesickness. Indeed, players remaining beyond two or three seasons have been rare. These players perhaps form part of an oversupply of professional players of a certain level in New Zealand who can readily satisfy are perceived skills gap at a European club. There are other factors beyond a simple supply and demand paradigm that can explain this migration pattern. These players are also part of cross-continent talent pipelines and interdependent friendship or acquaintance networks. Niva Ta’auso illustrated as much when interviewed about how he came to be a Connacht player: ‘When I was rung up by Connacht, I hadn't heard of them to be honest. But I knew Ray [Ofisa] from back in St Joseph's school in Samoa and Troy Nathan who used to play for Counties.’

In a cultural sense, the modern Pasifika migrant rugby player is perceived much differently from his pre 1990s touring predecessor, seen, as we have already noted, as being an ‘exotic other.’ They have undergone a process of assimilation. They are, essentially, players from the New Zealand representative rugby structures as much as they are Samoan, Tongan or Fijian. There is evidence that players who have been integrated with the broader culture of Irish rugby with its attendant identities and rivalries have adapted best and remained in Ireland the longest. Lifeimi Mafi, a Tongan centre, for example, played six seasons at Munster. Having failed to make the grade at Super 14 level despite
being an age-level All Black, Mafi was a success at Munster, amassing over 140 caps for the province and being a key member of the Heineken Cup winning side in 2008. Mafi, given the Gaelicised moniker ‘Larry Murphy’ by the local fans shortly after this arrival, quickly settled and became assimilated to the local rugby culture. ‘Munster are a proud team,’ Mafi would later say. ‘There is a lot of pride in the jersey and a lot of pride of the fans in us…There’s more pride playing in the jersey in Munster than playing with the Hurricanes back home. That was one of the reasons I came here.’

Some of these migrants are even moved to make some rather twee comparisons between Ireland and their native islands. On arriving at Connacht as head coach, Pat Lam drew the following parallel between Ireland and Samoa:

Samoans and Irish are similar – “there’s good craic from both,” he says. There are other similarities – timekeeping. “In Samoa we call it ‘Island Time’, which is late. I’ve found here that ‘Irish Time’ or ‘Ireland Time’ is the same as ‘Island Time’, if not worse.”

Sam Tuitupou, Munster’s Tongan former All Black centre, engaged in similar comparisons when he spoke of his efforts to join Cork club Cobh Pirates (Munster players are still obliged to go through the motions of joining a club to maintain the pretence that it is still a representative side): ‘I actually tried to register for the Pirates when I joined Munster but I wasn't able to. It's a pity because I would have loved to play for them. The rugby reminded me of when I was with Auckland and sneaking off to play village games back on the islands. It was full-on stuff, guys would be trying to take your head off and the referee might as well not have been there. I loved it.

Two brief case studies encapsulate many of the contemporary connections between Irish and Pacific Islander rugby and the broader context of globalisation in which this relationship is currently played out. The career of the Connacht coach Pat Lam, illustrates the multi-dimensionality of contemporary rugby union and its relationship with globalisation. In the first instance, Lam’s career has been shaped by multiple migrations. Born in New Zealand to Samoan parents, Lam played rugby internationally for both nations. Never able to make an impact at Super 12 level, Lam spent much of his career playing in England where he won a European Cup title with Northampton as captain in 2000. He also coached on both continents before arriving at Connacht in 2013. In all of this, Lam’s islander heritage is of little consequence. As a player and coach he is a product of the professional rugby system in New Zealand and part of well-established flow of athletic talent and technical expertise from the southern to the northern hemispheres.

Many of these issues are also encapsulated in the person of Stan Wright. A Cook Islander living in New Zealand, Wright was signed by Leinster as an emergency front-row stopgap in advance of a Heineken Cup tie in 2006. Wright, who had played with moderate success in New Zealand, was the product of a furtive attempt by Leinster to plug a gap in their resources: ‘Leinster, in desperate
need of a tight-head, all but went out and bought a raffle ticket. Mike Brewer [then Leinster coach] had been on the phone, checking out every bargain bin in the southern hemisphere...And somehow he found Stan.\textsuperscript{56} Wright proved an astute acquisition and played five seasons at Leinster during which time he was a two-time Heineken Cup winner and firm favourite with the province’s supporters.

This ostensibly random encounter gave rise to curious clashes of culture between the Cook Islander and his host community. This should scarcely be surprising. As already pointed out, it seems likely that Wright and his family were among the only Cook Islanders in Ireland during this period. Wright himself later admitted that he had never heard of the Leinster rugby team when an agent had called him about a potential move. The \textit{Irish Independent}, in a feature article before Wright’s departure to Stade Francais in 2011, marvelled at the odd rugby culture of the Cook Islands:

\begin{quote}
His childhood was spent, as he puts it, “on the plantation, cleaning the church, mowing lawns, sweeping the yard.” And it was there he learnt a rough hybrid of the game that now pays his wages. “Rugby was good and hard on the island,” he says. “Bush rugby. Village against village. You could bite the other players, anything went.”\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

Yet again, however, Wright’s story is predominantly one of assimilation. His anecdote of playing bush rugby is a largely irrelevant throwback that somewhat obfuscates the economic and cultural processes that saw him arrive at Leinster in the first instance. In common with the Connacht Pacific Islanders, Wright became a Leinster player because the Irish province, lacking sufficient skills in his position needed a cheap import from a location where there was an oversupply of such talent.

\textbf{Conclusion}

That Munster could appropriate the \textit{haka} in 2008 with any degree of perceived legitimacy was a powerful commentary on the contemporary cultural and financial context in which global rugby operated. It signified a curious convergence of cultures: the southern Irish province and the native peoples of islands thousands of miles away. It was a spectacle that would have been unimaginable twenty years previous. Then the Munster team would have been exclusively white, Irish and amateur. Despite a long familiarity with the \textit{haka}, aspects of Polynesian culture would still have been alien and ‘other’. It is within this timeframe of contextual changes that we can observe the evolving perception of the Pacific Islander in Irish rugby. From a figure subject to racialist, pseudo-anthropological discourse from the mid-1960s, the Pacific Islander and his ‘unique’ skills became a sought-after commodity from the mid-1990s. Though census figures confirm that the migration of Pacific Islanders to Ireland has been a pattern forged almost exclusively on the rugby field, the ease at which some have settled has no doubt been facilitated by decisive societal shifts in the host nation. Ireland’s transition from a mono- to a multi-cultural country gathered pace at the same time as rugby underwent
its transition to professionalism. Within this context Pacific Islanders’ cultural identity was of little consequence compared to their ability to provide a relatively cheap but highly-skilled source of labour to the country’s professional rugby teams.

Notes

1 See English, Stand Up and Fight
2 For critiques of each myth, see, for Munster, O’Callaghan, Rugby in Munster, 228-237, and for New Zealand see Ryan, ‘Rural Myth and Urban Actuality,’ 33-54.
3 Jackson and Hokowhitu, “Sport, Tribes and Technology,” 127
4 Irish Independent, 23 November 2008 [online]
5 Irish Times, 16 February 2008
6 Dewey, “Pacific Islands Rugby: navigating the global professional era,” 86
7 Grainger at al., “Postcolonial Anxieties and the Browning of New Zealand Rugby”, 270-271
8 By the mid-1980s the number of priests amounted to a bare handful. See Irish Times, 2 August 1982
12 Parliamentary Debates Dáil Éireann, Written Answers, Vol.680, No.3 (22 April 2009)
13 Parliamentary Debates, Dáil Éireann, Written Answers, (unrevised), (12 June 2013)
15 See, for example, Collins, A Social History of English Rugby Union, 160-161
16 Tuck and Maguire, “Making sense of global patriot games,” 26-54
17 This has been touched upon elsewhere. See Dewey, “Pacific Islands Rugby: navigating the global professional era,” 98
18 Irish Times, 20 November 1956, 2
19 Irish Times, 15 January 1958, 6
20 Irish Times, 28 September 1964, 3
21 Irish Times, 4 September 1973, 4
22 Ibid., 4
23 Irish Press, 13 September 1973, 18
24 Irish Press, 18 September 1973, 19
25 Irish Press, 10 June 1976, 3
26 Irish Times, 10 June 1976, 14
27 Irish Times, 15 October 1985, 3
28 Irish Times, 13 May 1987, 6
29 Irish Press, 30 May 1987, 18
30 Irish Independent, 7 October 1988, 14
31 Irish Times, 31 October 1988, 2
32 Irish Times, 12 November 1996, 13
33 Irish Times, 28 September 1964, 3
34 Grainger, “Rugby Island Style,” 49, 52.
35 Irish Times, 21 May 1988, 4
36 For a full account see O’Callaghan, Rugby in Munster
37 Bartlett, 537-545
38 O’Callaghan, “The Red Thread of History,”175-184
39 I borrow the term ‘commodified cultures’ from J Maguire, “Real Politic’ or ethically based,” 444
40 See for example Maguire and Falcous, Sport and migration
41 Maguire, “Real Politic’ or ethically based,” 445
42 Elliott and Maguire, “Thinking Outside of the Box,” 482-487
References


http://www.dfa.ie/home/index.aspx?id=5571


Kerryman

Maguire, J., “Real Politic’ or ethically based’: Sport, globalisation, migration and nation-state policies.” *Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics*, 11, 4 (July 2008)


Parliamentary Debates, Dáil Éireann

