

**The Willow and the Palm:  
an exploration of the role of cricket in Fiji**

Thesis submitted by

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## **Abstract**

The starting point for this thesis is an investigation of the political role of cricket in the development of national identity among the colonies of the British Empire. The British invested the game with moral and political values and openly employed it to impose these values on their colonial populations. As the colonies established their own national identities they accepted, adopted and adapted these values for their own purposes. The game was used as a vehicle for entry into the closed society of the elite ruling class but was also utilized, both overtly and covertly, as a tool for resistance. This thesis examines this process in the Pacific state of Fiji through a study of the interaction of its political and social history with the development of cricket between 1874 and 1971.

While the role of cricket in the development of national identity in the major test playing nations has been extensively explored, very little has been done to discover whether the processes in these countries operated in those ex-colonies where the game is still played but not to test standard. There also appears to have been little consideration given to the more pragmatic question of why the game prospered in some colonies rather than others. The role of sport in the colonial experience of the people of the Pacific islands has been neglected by historians.

Utilising a broadly comparative approach, the study traces the Fijian experience with colonial sport through cricket. The importance of the sources of the game in other British colonies, the administration, missionaries and the education system, are placed in the Fijian context. The demographics of cricket in Fiji are established through a study of individual players. A contextual analysis of the game itself and the physical and geographical nature of Fiji reveal practical reasons for the game's decline after its initial enthusiastic reception.

The thesis establishes that although cricket initially flourished in Fiji, the nature of the game, Fiji's climate and geography and the competition provided by rugby union and soccer, led to its decline. The weather and terrain frustrated the most enthusiastic

attempts to promote the game. Rugby provided Fijians with a more compatible form of entertainment and excitement, dovetailing with current images of maleness and masculinity. Soccer gave Indo-Fijians a cheap leisure activity in which all could participate. Cricket remained a chiefly game and did not become popular with the general population.

Relating the role of cricket to the concept of national identity within the Fijian state posed problems. National identity is intrinsically linked to nationalism and nationalism to the nation. Fiji does not fit comfortably within accepted definitions of the nation. During the period covered by the study, indigenous Fijians acknowledged cultural differences in their own society but retained a cohesive sense of ethnic identity which consolidated their polity. Nationalism, and national identity, presupposes an 'other.' For Fijians the 'other' was the immigrant Indian community, not the British. The need to prove themselves against the coloniser, which drove other British colonies, did not motivate the Fijians. They were not establishing a 'new' national identity, only strengthening and re-working their existing identity to fit new circumstances. Hence their interaction with the game of cricket did not take on the political overtones experienced in other colonies.

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