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Sugar City Blues: A Year following Lautoka Blues in Fiji’s National Soccer League

Abstract

This paper is based on my experiences, as a foreigner on a three-year work-permit, following Lautoka Blues in Fiji’s national soccer league during my first year in Fiji which was the calendar year 2013. This paper argues that Lautoka Blues’ inconsistency and its long-term decline since 1970 have mirrored the anxieties present in the town over Indo-Fijian emigration; unemployment; and the fate of the sugar industry. The present author also presents a second thesis in this paper: Fiji soccer as a sport, forever marginalized by rugby, has a status which some might see as commensurate with the second-class status endured by Indo-Fijians politically for much of the past 100 years. However, indigenous Fijians are somewhat marginalized within the world of soccer – a minority group within a minority game but a majority within the nation.

Keywords: ethnicity, Fiji, Indo-Fijians, marginalization, soccer, sugar industry
Sugar City Blues: A Year following Lautoka Blues in Fiji’s National Soccer League

Introduction

Lautoka (population 52,220 according to the 2007 Census (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2012b, Table 1.4)), located on Viti Levu’s western coast, has been the traditional centre of the Fijian sugar industry for the past 100 years. The town, which is a “heartland” city as opposed to the more sophisticated tourist-city of Nadi (pronounced “Nandi”) some 24 kilometres away, is the second-largest in Fiji and serves as the administrative capital for the western region. Traditionally the western towns of Lautoka, Ba, and Nadi, as well as Labasa on Vanua Levu, have had Indo-Fijian majorities (Atkin, 2012a) although this has changed for Lautoka in the past 20 years due to Indo-Fijian emigration (Sherlock, 1997) and the migration of indigenous Fijians (iTaukei) from countryside to town (Donnelly et al., 1994, p. 112; Sherlock, 1997). Sherlock (1997) writes that: “Division between the eastern and western parts of the country have remained an important feature of Fiji society up to the present day”.

While there are indigenous Fijians who support soccer and Indo-Fijians who support rugby, by and large it is still fair to present soccer in Fiji as an Indo-Fijian controlled sport and rugby as an indigenous Fijian controlled sport. The current administration of rugby is totally indigenous whilst the administration of soccer is completely Indo-Fijian. As a result, the stronghold for soccer in Fiji is definitely the western Indo-Fijian-dominated towns stretching the 62 kilometres from Nadi through Lautoka to Ba (plus Labasa on Vanua Levu). Suva, being an indigenous Fijian-dominated city, is less known for its soccer support and it has only one club in the Fijian national league, Suva, while another (strongly supported) club, Rewa Tigers, is based in neighbouring Nausori (19 km away).

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1 This population includes 43,473 in the city and 8,747 in the peri-urban area. All other cited city and township populations are similarly the sum of the town/ city plus peri-urban populations.
2 Ba is 37 km from Lautoka and 62 km from Nadi.
3 Fiji has kept the ideological model of “one-team-one-city” introduced by Australia’s A-League in 2005 (Hallinan and Heenan, 2013; Tuckerman, 2013) whereas the A-League has not. In Australia “one-team-one-
This paper is based on my experiences, as a foreigner on a three-year work-permit, following Lautoka Blues in Fiji’s national soccer league during my first year in Fiji which was the calendar year 2013. Some facts and discussion points here do postdate 2013 but most of the text has not been updated since its writing in late 2013 so as to maintain the authentic flavour of the account as a diary from my first year in Fiji. Although some observations may reflect a foreigner’s innocence or freshness these have purposefully been allowed to stand unamended. However, factual errors have been corrected.

One reason for Lautoka’s disappointing performances in the past decade is that the academy of football talent has been set up in Ba which means that young players are pushed into the Ba-system. Furthermore, local administrators run the Lautoka association team four on a largely amateur basis and attracting and retaining good talent has been difficult especially given the attraction of Ba as Fiji soccer’s dominant team based in a soccer-crazy town. Furthermore, this paper argues that *Lautoka Blues’ inconsistency and its long-term decline since 1970 have mirrored the anxieties present in the town over Indo-Fijian emigration; unemployment; and the fate of the sugar industry*. The present author also presents a second thesis in this paper: Fiji soccer as a sport, forever marginalized by rugby, has a status which some might see as commensurate with the second-class status endured by Indo-Fijians politically (Sherlock, 1997) for much of the past 100 years. However, as mentioned, indigenous Fijians are somewhat marginalized within the world of soccer – a minority group

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*city* was ideological code for exclusion from the new league of the traditional clubs connected to particular European ethnic communities. Fiji’s national league adopts the concept but not as ideology. The main reason for adherence to the “one-team-one-city” model in Fiji is that Fiji soccer functions on an association basis (like rugby in New Zealand and Australia) and so the national league is actually association-versus-association and not club-versus-club. Clubs play at the tier below the national league. For example, Lautoka and Nadi both have their own club-based competitions administered by their respective soccer associations. Province names rather than town or city names are used in the national league so we have Rewa Tigers (instead of Nausori Tigers) and Nadroga (instead of Sigatoka). Some provinces have more than one soccer association. For example, Ba Province includes the Ba, Lautoka, and Nadi Soccer Associations and Rewa province includes the Rewa and Suva Soccer Associations. To make the situation even more complex national league teams are sometimes colloquially but incorrectly referred to as “clubs”.

4 See previous footnote regarding the meaning of “association team” in the context of Fiji soccer.
within a minority game but a majority within the nation. I return to discussion of this topic in the last section of this paper.

**Lautoka City, “Indianness”, and the sugar industry**

Lautoka City (population 52,220 according to the 2007 Census (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2012b, Table 1.4)), located on Viti Levu’s western coast, has been the traditional centre of the Fijian sugar industry for the past 100 years. The town, which is a “heartland” city as opposed to the more sophisticated tourist-city of Nadi some 24 kilometres away, is the second-largest in Fiji and serves as the administrative capital for the western region. Traditionally the western towns of Lautoka, Ba, and Nadi, as well as Labasa on Vanua Levu, have had Indo-Fijian majorities (Atkin, 2012a) although this has changed for Lautoka in the past 20 years due to Indo-Fijian emigration (Sherlock, 1997) and the migration of indigenous Fijians (iTaukei) from countryside to town (Donnelly et al., 1994, p. 112; Sherlock, 1997).

In Fiji as a whole the Indo-Fijian percentage has declined from a peak of 50.5% (240,960) at the 12 September 1966 census to 37.48% (313,798 / 837,271) at the 16 September 2007 census (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2012a, Table 1.1). The vast majority of the current-day Indo-Fijians are direct descendents of the 60,965 original “*girimitiyars*” who were indentured labourers sent by the British to work in the Fijian sugar industry between 1879 and 1916 (Atkin, 2012a; Sherlock, 1997). However, the Gujaratis and Punjabis came as free-settlers after 1904, and the Gujaratis still dominate retail and industry in most Fijian towns (with the Chinese being seen as their latter-day rival) (Sherlock, 1997). Paul Atkin (2012b) proclaims, as if it was obvious, that travellers “will notice the [Lautoka] population is predominantly Indo-Fijian”. Similarly, Donnelly et al. (1994, p. 112) state that “Lautoka, Nadi, Ba and Labasa have predominantly Indian populations” and this is probably still a widely-held perception. However, according to the 2007 Census, Indo-Fijians have forfeited
their statistical majority in Lautoka and Nadi but this is not the case for Ba and Labasa. However, even in Lautoka and Nadi, the Indo-Fijian percentages remain higher than for both Suva/ Nausori (38.77%) and for the country as a whole (37.48%). The relative percentages are 47.34% for Lautoka; 66.86% for Ba; 45.49% for Nadi; and 60.84% for Labasa (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2012b, Table 1.4). Despite this, Indo-Fijian culture remains strong in Lautoka and throughout the entire western region coastal strip from Nadi to Ba. For example, the religious Diwali “Festival of Lights”, which is an annual focus for the Lautoka community and marked by festivities, fire-works, and gift-buying, sees the Indo-Fijian houses lit up by coloured lights after-dark to welcome the Hindu goddess Lakshmi. These lit-up houses are visually very prominent and they, along with the accompanying fire-works, register in the psyche of all ethnic groups resident in the city. Jeanette Scott (2010, emphasis original) writes about Lautoka as follows, emphasizing the “Indianness” of the city as perceived by a foreigner: “Lautoka, Fiji’s second city is also home to a sizeable Indo-Fijian population. It sways to a Bollywood beat and saris take the place of sarongs. ... It’s an interesting detour for its Indian flavour”. Sherlock (1997) points to the migration of indigenous Fijians to the towns and some indigenous Fijians’ linking with Indo-Fijians to defend the rights of the west against the east (Suva and surrounds) during the 1980s had the effect of “paradoxically ... increasing some Fijians’ resentment against Indians while increasing other Fijians’ links with them”.

The city of Lautoka has seen a major drain of the Indo-Fijian population through emigration in the years since Colonel Rabuka’s 1987 coup. It may well now have an indigenous Fijian statistical majority although proving this hypothesis is difficult due to the problematic of defining boundaries between town and country and the issue of itinerant workers. The sugar industry is centred on Lautoka and it is struggling because of internal factors as well as global competition and the introduction of new harvesting and processing
technologies by developing countries such as Australia and the USA. PM Mr Frank Bainimarama has put in a concerted effort to promote Fiji sugar internationally and to encourage efficiencies internally. The PM personally visited the widow and children of a 44-year-old Fiji Sugar Corporation worker Samuela Sigatokacake who was killed in an industrial accident in July 2013 (ABC Radio Australia, 2013; Anonymous, 2013; Fiji Broadcasting Corporation, 2013). The Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC) presently employs around 3,000 workers. It is a government-owned monopoly (68.1% government-owned according to the FSC official website at: http://www.fsc.com.fj/history_of_sugar_in_fiji.htm [accessed 8 January 2014]) and the largest public enterprise in the country. It owns four sugar mills of which Lautoka is the largest. The locations of the four mills are Lautoka, Ba, Rakiraki, and Labasa. The capacity of the four mills is presently 500,000 tonnes (metric tons) of sugar per season (FSC official website). An estimated 200,000 people in the cane-belt of Viti Levu are financially dependent upon the company. Overall, the FSC website states that there are 22,500 independent famers of whom 76% are Indo-Fijian and 24% are indigenous Fijian (although 83% of the country’s total land is iTaukei land). The average farm size is 4.6 hectares. The seasonal nature of the work creates seasonal unemployment and poverty and the government’s efforts to provide financial welfare to sugar worker families, whilst sincere and targeted, are not sufficient. Sugar production is both a (declining) capitalist industry and a traditional lifestyle attuned to the time-honoured rhythms of the seasons and the weather. Government efforts to boost the industry will find it hard to suppress the global economic and structural factors which have contributed to the decline.

Jagannath Sami of the National Federation Party (NFP) highlighted the plight of the sugar industry since the PM’s FijiFirst party took over the country in its 2014 election pamphlets and public statements (Sauvakacolo, 2014). Mr Sami said: “It is hard to imagine Fiji without the sugar industry. In one way or the other it touches many aspects of our
society, more particularly at the grassroots level. It is estimated about 20 per cent of Fiji’s population, or about 170,000 people rely directly or indirectly on the sugar industry for their income and livelihood” (cited in Sauvakacolo, 2014). Mr Sami went on to add that cane production declined from 3.2 million tonnes in 2006 to 1.6 million tonnes in 2013 while sugar production declined from 310,000 tonnes to 176,000 tonnes over the same period (Sauvakacolo, 2014). The NFP proposed in its election campaign to re-establish an elected Sugar Cane Grower Council to improve cohesion and to allow more views to be heard (Prasad, 2014). Mr Sami himself was a member of former similar cane growers’ councils (see the NFP election pamphlet distributed to Lautoka households in August/ September 2014). Sherlock (1997) concluded as follows about the sugar industry and the comments still have some applicability: “The issue thus touches on some of the most sensitive questions facing Fiji today, involving a conflict of interests between the two main ethnic groups [mostly Indo-Fijian leaseholders versus indigenous landowners] over an industry at the heart of the Fiji economy and centring on the question of land, a matter of key symbolic importance for indigenous Fijians”.

Lautoka has been centre of the sugar industry and many of its shops are in decline. The FSC official website states that the government has encouraged tourism so that the country is not so dependent upon sugar exports. However, as mentioned, the tourist towns are Sigatoka and Nadi not Lautoka. The emigration of Indo-Fijians in large numbers (Sherlock, 1997) has been another factor which has impacted Lautoka negatively. Most of the shops in Lautoka city-centre are small Indo-Fijian tailoring and barbering establishments, bread shops, fish shops; and cheap restaurants, and there are a (smaller) number of Chinese-owned stores. The following comment about the cheap restaurants is fairly close to the mark: “There’s a handful of eating establishments in Lautoka [in fact there are many more than that] with the obligatory over-bearing red of Coca-Cola branding and plastic tablecloths” (Scott, 2010).
The departure of nearly 50% of the Indo-Fijian community in the past 40 years has created not just what Sherlock (1997) terms “a continuing exodus of skilled labour and capital” but also a great loss locally of social memory and Indo-Fijian community self-identity and cohesion. The lack of popular and academic sporting history books and websites and the dearth of book publication more generally are both causes and effects of this great loss. (Lautoka is one of the towns/cities to have been most severely affected by the emigration of Indo-Fijians.) This self-identity and social memory has not died overseas as evidenced by overseas-based Indo-Fijians still writing letters to Fiji newspapers about Fiji topics and soccer clubs forming in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and USA bearing the names and colours of the Fiji district association teams (Nadi Jetsetters, Rewa Tigers, etc.). The self-identity and social memory has been split into overseas-based and local-based with links and exchange between the two achieved through visits of relatives back home and to overseas as well as online-based communications where a “virtual Fiji” not defined or constrained by physical borders is beginning to develop. The Fiji International Veterans Football Championship 2014 held in Nadi in 2014 hosted New Zealand and USA-based teams bearing the names of Fijian districts such as NZ Levuka Masters, NZ Nadro Masters, NZ Lautoka Masters, and USA Masters. To a lesser extent the emigration of indigenous Fijians has also occurred with their social memory and self-identity also being partly split into local-based and overseas-based.

There is no modern-style integrated and enclosed shopping mall in Lautoka (all shopping areas comprise only traditional “High-Street” shops); Lautoka City is less obviously well-developed than Nadi Town where housing and retail prices are much higher and entertainment and dining options much more varied. The eastern section of Lautoka city-centre (on Vitogo Parade east of its intersection with Namoli Avenue) is especially run-down
and decrepit as the commercial heart of the town has gradually shifted westwards. There is a locked-up and abandoned cinema complex on Vitogo Parade (near where it joins up with the King’s Road) which is symptomatic of the decline of the eastern part of Lautoka city-centre as a commercial and retail area. This area has been largely eaten-up by the industrial precinct.

Throughout the Lautoka city-centre the vast majority of buildings date back to the 1950s to 1970s era as can be seen by aging names and dates stated proudly on the first-floor level above the ground-floor shops (in Naviti Street, Vitogo Parade, and Yasawa Street). In Lautoka local Fiji-owned chains, such as Courts, Jacks of Fiji, and Prouds department stores (owned by Mothibai Group); R.B. Patel Group Limited and Rajendras Foodtown Limited supermarkets; and Chicken Express fast-food, are the mainstays. Prices are high at the many supermarkets in the city, as they are all owned by R.B. Patel or Rajendras, making living costs unsustainable for the bulk of the local community. By contrast, in the Nadi-Martintar-Namaka urban corridor, and even more so in adjoining Port Denarau, the local chains are joined by global MNC brands such as McDonald’s and Hard Rock Cafe. Even the official website of Tourism Fiji is forced to admit about Lautoka that “while it doesn’t have as many dining options as Nadi or Suva, there is plenty of good quality, reasonably-priced eateries and a couple of bars” (Fiji Travel, n/d, emphasis added). The positive aspect of Lautoka is that it is far away from the tourist industry and it is not reliant upon tourism earnings. Scott (2010) remarks that at the tourist resorts “the real Fiji begins to feel very far away” but “Lautoka immerses you in the day to day ritual of just living and breathing Fijian life”. Whilst resort-money comes into Nadi, both directly via tourist spending and indirectly

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5 See Lautoka city map at: https://maps.google.com/maps?q=lautoka+map&ie=UTF-8&q=0x6e176d042e7f49d507d7b60f9a9d6f1Lautoka+Fiji&e=xy5UuXNCMcAkQWNLjoHICg&sqi=2&ved=0CCwQ8gEwAA [accessed 24 December 2013].

6 Courts (Fiji) is 100% locally owned by Vision Group Limited (since 31 May 2006) and has expanded to Tonga. It has no existing association with the former Courts PLC. Its website reads: “Vision Group is a consortium of four companies, namely Jacks of Fiji, R.C Manubhai & Co Ltd, Challenge Engineering more popularly known for its [sic] car business Automart Ltd and Candle Investment Ltd which is the investment arm of lawyers Parshotam and Company” (https://www.courts.com.fj/about-us/history-worldwide.html, accessed 8 January 2014)).
via the expenditure of tourism-industry workers, far fewer Lautoka people work in the industry and the tourism dollars mostly fail to penetrate this far east. Traditionally Lautoka’s main source of income has been from the seasonal sugar cane industry and tourism has yet to make a major mark on Lautoka unlike Nadi (Henry Dyer, personal interview, 17 April 2014). Thursday pay-days for government employees cause minor spending-spreees to take place in the city (ibid.). However, Lautoka people often spend their dollars at Nadi nightclubs, pubs, and restaurants. The Ba-based Indo-Fijian business entities R.B. Patel, Rajendras, Meenoo’s (clothing), and R.C Manubhai & Co have all at one time or another been sponsors and/or supporters of Ba’s association soccer team. The centre of manufacturing in Fiji’s west is in and around Ba town.

**The nature of Fiji soccer’s annual tournaments**

The local soccer team, Lautoka Blues, has been a perennial underperformer for many years and a constant disappointment to the local predominantly Indo-Fijian fan base. The major lightning-premiership tournament of the season, Courts IDC (Inter District Championship), has not been won by Lautoka for six years (since 2008). In Fiji soccer there are three annual lightning tournaments contested by all senior teams. Traditionally these are held in one city over either two weekends (FIJI Fact and BOG) or one weekend (IDC) from Thursday or Friday nights through to Sunday afternoons. Traditionally IDC games last 60-minutes instead of 90-minutes. In 2013 Fiji FACT was held in Nadi (won by Nadi Jetsetters); followed by BOG (Battle of the Giants) in Ba (won by Ba); and, lastly, Courts IDC in Lautoka (won by Ba). The first Fiji FACT was held in 1991; the first BOG was held in 1978; and the IDC dates back to 1938 making it one of the world’s oldest continuously held soccer competitions (Fiji Football Association, 2013, p. 9). The BOG has been won only once by Lautoka Blues, in 1985. The IDC has been won only 16
times by Lautoka (but only five times since 1970), and the Fiji FACT only twice. These
tournaments attract much more interest than the regular national-league season which is run
concurrently but drawn out over a much longer period. The tournaments, the biggest being
IDC, are rotated around the towns, and attract supporters from other towns who come for a
day or for the whole competition.

The unique (from the global standpoint) popularity of the Fiji FACT, BOG, and IDC
tournaments reflects the fact that they have much in common with traditional Fijian cultural
and religious carnivals, where visitors descend on a major town for several days. The 2013
IDC was accompanied by a Miss Charity contest with each local football association (Ba,
Lautoka, Nadi, Rewa, etc.) nominating a contestant. Nadi FA’s Ms Ajneeta Lal won the Miss
Charity with Lautoka FA’s Ms Kylie Wise being runner-up which turned out to be Lautoka’s
only victory of note for the tournament (Fiji FA Media, 2013a). These soccer tournaments are
all self-contained and points cannot be transferred over to or from each other or to or from the
concurrent national league season. However, they are no mere inconsequential friendlies or
practice games. In fact, the tournaments are taken very seriously by local soccer fans. The
significance to the local communities of these tournaments can be gauged informally by
crowd sizes and by the percentage of local taxi-drivers tuned into (and paying attention to)
the radio broadcasts of the matches! The Courts IDC tournament dates back to 1938 (Fiji
Football Association, 2013, p. 9) and is rivalled as the biggest tournament of the year only by
the Oceania Champions League. There is a complex and ambiguous interaction between a
tournament such as IDC and the others held in the same year and with the same tournament
in the previous year. Therefore, Lautoka Blues fans hoped for “revenge” over Ba at the 2013
IDC for Ba’s 3-1 win in the BOG Final held at Ba’s feared Govind Park ground rather than
over Suva for its win at the 2012 IDC (which had faded into distant memory).
Lautoka Blues recruited two Vanuatu nationals, Jean Kaltak and Niko Jack, for the 2013 BOG and they entered the country on six-month work-permits (Fiji Times, 2013). However, the Nigerians Ali Anthony and Henry Uche at the same time departed Lautoka Blues for Navua and Suva respectively (Nius, 2013). The two Vanuatu players, Kaltak and Jack, made an immediate positive impact on the team at the BOG. They both stayed on for the 2013 IDC but were gone by season’s end. A highlight of the 2013 BOG was Lautoka’s win over Nadroga on penalties (6-5 after a 1-1 game) on the concluding Saturday night game played on a very cold night in Ba when the temperature in the wind-exposed Govind Park grandstands probably dropped as low as 14 degrees Celsius (Fijifootball.com.fj, 2013). Unfortunately, some Lautoka supporters, including the present author and his family, missed the penalty shoot-out having left the ground early because they were worried they might miss the last public bus back to the Sugar City.

The 2013 Courts IDC tournament

Fiji Football Association CEO Bob Kumar announced that IDC games in 2013 would remain their traditional length of 60-minutes rather than following the pattern set by the year’s other tournaments where all games ran for the standard 90-minutes. As Mr Kumar said, the “Courts Inter District Championship over the years has been a football festival whereby many fans from Fiji and overseas head over a weekend to enjoy the matches and be part of the festive mood. We did not want to deprive the fans and we thought it would be best to maintain the culture” (cited in Fiji Football Association, 2013, p. 54). In other words, if games were 90-minutes long and played only on weekday evenings and weekends, the games could not be completed inside one Thursday night-to-Sunday afternoon cycle. Playing games over two weekends would minimize the chance that visitors would stay for the whole tournament in the host town. Playing 60-minute games does add to the festival atmosphere
but 60-minute soccer is a different sport entirely and arguably playing games of that length affects negatively the players’ ability to strategize in and play the 90-minute game.

The 2013 Courts IDC tournament was won by Ba which defeated Nadi 2-1 in the Final (after extra time of 10-minutes each way) (Fiji FA Media, 2013b). Games were also played at premier division (the national second-division); secondary school; and primary school levels as part of the bigger festival. However, the eight national league clubs played only amongst themselves in two pools of four before the top four progressed to the semi-finals (IDC 2013 Regulations, Fiji Football Association, 2013, Section 5, pp. 50-1). The Premier (second) Division final was eventually won by Taveuni FC 1-0 over Dreketi FC (Fiji FA Media, 2013c).

Churchill Park in Lautoka attracted over 10,000 spectators for the opening night of the 2013 IDC tournament, Thursday 10 October, which was Fiji National Day and a public holiday. The author attended the games on the Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights but not the Sunday finals. Many of the 10,000 spectators on the opening night were local indigenous schoolboys and young men, who do not usually attend soccer games but were starved for entertainment options on the day. As Scott (2010) points out fairly bluntly, “[t]here isn’t an awful lot to be entertained by in Lautoka”. Similarly, Atkin (2012b) writes that: “[t]here is not much as far as tourist attractions are concerned and no beaches”. Lautoka City is even worse on a public holiday than on a regular day as far as entertainment options are concerned. The present author’s experience is that usual match crowds in Lautoka are at least 90% Indo-Fijian but on the opening night of 2013 IDC the percentage was significantly lower.

By the scheduled 6pm kick-off time for the concluding 2013 IDC opening-night match, the ground’s three grandstands were sold out leaving only the two hilly grassed embankments at each end which fans had to share with the ubiquitous local frog population. Fans were standing two or three deep at the tops of the embankments with seated fans below them. The
Lautoka fans’ hopes were high after Lautoka had reached the final of the earlier 2013 BOG held in Ba. The then Lautoka coach Ravinesh Kumar was quoted as saying in the Fiji Sun of 7 October 2013 that: “[w]e are doing all the preparations to ensure that we try our best in front of our home fans” (cited in Kumar, 2013, p. 24). It was the perfect opportunity for Lautoka, in the premium closing time-slot on the Thursday public-holiday, to win over new fans and reinspire old fans but it ultimately disappointed against Rewa.

IDC tournament crowds dropped to around 2,000 on both Friday and Saturday nights and Lautoka’s poor performance on the Thursday night might well have been a factor. On both nights Lautoka played in the premium closing time-slot – on Friday versus Labasa Lions and on Saturday versus Ba. The final, which the author did not attend, on the Sunday afternoon, was witnessed by a crowd of over 10,000 people. Although winter had officially long gone, soccer brought a strange cold-spell to Lautoka City and it was jacket-weather each night of the competition. Lautoka lost its three qualifying games, and in fact it did not score a single goal all weekend. Its one Nigerian and two Vanuatu signings (Nelson Oladiji, Jean Kaltak, and Niko Jack), whilst talented and exciting to watch, were very disappointing especially in front of goal. This comment applied especially to the pony-tailed Jean Kaltak from Vanuatu who made countless impressive forward moves, including many exciting solo dribbling runs, but he had his good work marred by atrocious finishing. As mentioned, the Lautoka team played poorly in the 2013 IDC tournament, losing its three matches and scoring zero goals. The team wasted its numerous attacking chances with over-confidence, a lackadaisical attitude, and abysmal finishing. The poor finishing, which characterizes Fiji soccer in general, reminds the author of the comment by Fiji’s German national coach Rudi Gutendorf in the 1980s that too many times attackers “pass back to the goalkeeper” meaning that their final forward passes gently and politely go straight to the opposing goalkeeper.
An unfortunate trend in 2014 was for the IDC to be held in four different cities over two weekends. The opening weekend was in Nadi, there was a game in both Labasa and Lautoka, and then the finals were held in Suva the next weekend. One reason for the change was that the games were played over 90-minutes instead of 60-minutes. Because of this it was impossible to fit them into one Thursday night-Sunday afternoon cycle.

Theoretical analysis

Lautoka Blues’ inconsistency (as displayed at the 2013 IDC tournament) and its long-term decline since 1970 have mirrored the anxieties in the city over Indo-Fijian emigration; unemployment; and the fate of the sugar industry. Although Lautoka did have a great team in the mid-1980s (securing back-to-back IDC wins in 1984 and 1985 and a league title win in 1984), this was just a blip in an otherwise downward trend of on-field performance since around 1970.

The sugar industry wrestles with problems such as small farm sizes, of an average of four hectares each; insufficient and outdated harvesting equipment; insufficient trucks to take cane to the mills; and younger Indo-Fijians leaving the land for the townships and overseas. The FSC official website traces the industry’s decline since 1996 and is upfront about some of the problems:

“Sugarcane production peaked at 438 million tones [sic] in 1996 when it accounted for some 11 per cent of GDP and some 37 per cent of merchandise exports (measured net of re-exports). As of 2005 the most recent period for which published data is available, sugar accounted for 6 per cent of GDP and some 26per cent of total merchandise exports (again excluding re-exports). Production has been declining over the past decade as leases of land on which the crop has been
cultivated have been expiring. While some land owners have been induced into taking up sugarcane farming by government subsidies, many of the farms from which the tenants were displaced remain fallow”.

The FSC website goes on to add that: “[t]he decline in sugarcane production predates the announcement of price reductions by the European Union but is coincidental with the uncertainty about the loss of leases”. Those without land leases have tended to gravitate to the urban areas of Lautoka, Nadi, Ba, and Labasa thus contributing to an increased level of generalized urban poverty.

Music scholar Lucy O’Brien (2012) argues that the feminist sounds of Leeds’ student bands Gang of Four and Delta 5 in the early-1980s mirrored the depression and anxiety which were the result of the Yorkshire Ripper’s reign of terror in the area. The Ripper’s thirteenth victim, Jacqueline Hill, had been a student in the English Department (O’Brien, 2012, p. 34). As O’Brien (2012, p. 28) writes, “[i]f post-punk was about articulating the true narrative of place, these groups were the sound of collective trauma”. O’Brien (2012, p. 29) also adroitly explains how the bands’ sounds resonated with the stark and brutal modernist architecture of the Leeds University campus. Similarly, Fraser and Fuoto (2012, p. 151) refer to Joy Division’s “persistent depiction and denunciation of Manchester’s harsh post-industrial urban environment” and “invocation of the chaotic mental life created by the metropolis”. In the same way the present author does not argue simplistically for direct causation such as decline in sugar industry plus emigration caused decline in performance of Lautoka Blues. Instead the author argues that the Lautoka association team’s decline since 1970 merely “mirrors” these broader economic, social, political, and demographic factors. The direct reasons include the visionary management of Ba; Ba town’s soccer-culture; the sponsorship of Ba by the town’s Indo-Fijian business entities; and the junior talent academy being based at Govind Park, Ba. The present author also presents a second thesis in this paper: Fiji soccer
as a sport, forever marginalized by rugby, has a status which some might see as commensurate with the secondary-citizen status endured by Indo-Fijians (Sherlock, 1997) for much of the past 100 years.

Lautoka’s performance post-IDC and the highlight of the league season

Post-the 2013 IDC Lautoka Blues did not score again until the second-half of its opening post-season Late Jimmy Ram Pratap Trophy match which it drew 1-1 with Nadi in Nadi on Wednesday night 18 December 2013 (Chandar, 2013). This trophy is contested on a home-and-away basis between Lautoka and Nadi. Both teams played without foreign imports according to new Fiji FA rules (forced on to FFA by the government) barring foreigners. The first match was played at night mid-week at Nadi’s Prince Charles Park ground on a rainy night. The attendance was only around 200-300 mostly local Indo-Fijians aged in their teens and twenties. Even the local frogs were seen scampering off the pitch to escape the rain under the grandstand’s roof. The rain worsened the game as a spectacle. However, even in fine weather, Fiji soccer, with the exception of the top two or three teams, is characterized by players bashing balls upfield in a crude display of the long-ball game. The contrast between Nadi and Auckland City at a 2014 Oceania Champions League match played at Churchill Park, Lautoka was very stark. Auckland City’s skilful possession-based game, where players developed and executed strategies to bring the ball upfield, was in direct contrast to Nadi’s crude long-ball tactics. Lautoka won the second Late Jimmy Ram Pratap Trophy match 1-0 in Lautoka on Sunday 22 December 2013 to claim the trophy. This trophy ranks in significance somewhere well below Fiji FACT, BOG, IDC, and the national league. This was the last game of the 2013 season for Lautoka Blues.

For the Lautoka fans, the highlight of the 2013 season, other than the team’s second-placing in the BOG, was undoubtedly the 3-1 home national league win over Nadi on 14 July.
The reliance on foreign-talent was evident when Lautoka’s Nigerian player Nelson Odaiji scored a double in the second half of this match (Sharma, 2013). These goals were wildly celebrated by Odaiji and his team-mates in front of the small but adoring Blues hardcore fan-base located in the wooden stand closest to the main entrance gates (under which the local homeless sleep at night). One hardcore Blues fan in this stand was wildly shouting at the Nadi players that this result was a sweet revenge for Nadi’s previous win over Lautoka in the just completed Fiji FACT tournament (a victory which eliminated Lautoka from that competition (Nadi FC, 2013)).

**Indigenous Fijian alienation within and from Fiji Soccer**

As mentioned, indigenous Fijians are somewhat marginalized *within the world of soccer* – a minority group within a minority game but a majority within the nation. The indigenous Nadi players from the successful mid-1980s era meet regularly today at funerals and social events (under the banner of “Nadi Legends Club”), but they perceive that they lack power in the Indo-Fijian controlled sport. During the author’s interview with the former Nadi and Fiji player Henry Dyer (29 May 2014), Dyer quoted a local lawyer who stated that the players are treated like “tea-bags”, used and thrown away. Few of these indigenous Fijian ex-players are coaching or officiating today in the national league. The only exception appears to be Ravuama Madigi (pronounced “Man-deegie”) who scored the only goal for Fiji in its 1-0 defeat of Australia in the friendly-match played on 30 January 1988 (Prasad, 2008, p. 41 and Appendix VII, p. 94). The highly-respected Ba champion shifted to Rewa and helped the Nausori-based side win its first IDC tournament trophy for many years. Through Henry Dyer the author was introduced to Madigi who was standing at the back of the public beer-parlour on the Saturday semi-final day of the 2014 Fiji FACT tournament held at Ratu Cakobau Park, Nausori where he was quietly and humbly watching the game with a few friends of his
generation. The younger fans in the crowd had no idea who he was. Madigi is part-owner, as at the date of writing, of the Nausori Club.

Although the focus is on Lautoka Blues, this paper also considers the wider issue of the decline of Fiji soccer since the late-1980s because there is arguably a dialectical and intermeshed relationship between Lautoka Blues and Fiji soccer as a whole. Fijian soccer has declined overall since the golden-era when the Fiji national team defeated Australia 1-0 (30 January 1988); New Zealand 2-0 (16 August 1983); Solomon Islands 10-0 (31 August 1983); and, famously, English First Division club Newcastle United 3-0 (25 May 1985). According to the Fijian national team player from that era Henry Dyer (personal interview, 17 April 2014), the game is relatively unattractive to indigenous Fijian children and youth today because it is perceived to be a game controlled at both country- and club-level by Indo-Fijian administrators. Fiji has no system of identifying talented 12-year-olds and putting them on to high-school sports scholarships and/or into designated “soccer-schools” (as Henry Dyer has proposed in personal interview with the author, Nadi, 3 July 2014). No village-based clubs presently play in the Nadi or Lautoka senior club competitions although the hearts and lives of the indigenous Fijians still primarily revolve around the villages and village identification. The Nadi Rugby Association runs a village-versus-village knockout cup competition on Thursday nights which regularly attracts crowds of 3,000 to 4,000 to Prince Charles Park, and the locals support their village teams with great passion. Unlike at soccer games, the crowd is mixed-genre and all-ages. Dyer suggests a similar village-based knockout competition be implemented by Nadi Soccer Association. Furthermore, the government, media, and big business have widely promoted rugby (instead of soccer) as a passport out of poverty.

Rugby-league’s rapid emergence in the country since 1992 has also been disheartening as that sport has taken over soccer’s second-rank position in the national consciousness. This means that retired indigenous Fijian soccer-players, such as Dyer, are simultaneously in the
complex position of being minorities within a minority game and the largest numerical group within the country. Arguably Dyer is not being utilized as a manager by the Indo-Fijian based association teams of Lautoka Blues and Nadi Jetsetters (he played for both teams during his distinguished career) because he is an indigenous-Fijian figure operating now only at the fringes of an Indo-Fijian controlled sport. Other Nadi players such as Inosi Tora and the former Nadi and Fiji Goalkeeper Savenaca Waqa are also not being used officially in the sport. Both Tora and Waqa live in Namotomoto Village, Nadi and Tora has progressed in status beyond village-headman to Nadi-area delegate on a national council. On the streets and in the pubs of Nadi and Lautoka (such as Lautoka Club and Renee’s in Lautoka and Deep Sea Pub in Nadi), Henry Dyer remains a popular and jovial figure showing that, whilst certain ethnic groups may have a hegemony over certain industries in Fiji (including soccer), relationships are cordial among ex-players, ex-officials, and ex-supporters of the same era regardless of ethnicity. For the first time in 2014, Fiji Football organized a free dinner-and-drinks event at Nadi Town Council which was open to all ex-players from all districts. Although the event was very short in length and carefully stage-managed and controlled, the ex-players still enjoyed themselves tremendously. The author estimates that 80% or more of the ex-players are indigenous Fijians.

Shared-life-experiences trump ideology at the level of inter-personal relationships but in few spheres of Fijian public life beyond that. This was driven home powerfully to the author on the Saturday night of the 2014 Fiji FACT tournament finals when an Indo-Fijian Nadi fan, who had moved to the USA and had just returned to Fiji for the tournament as a “soccer-tourist”, embraced Dyer and wept unashamedly in the crowded Nausori Club as he had been overjoyed to learn that the author’s barroom companion was indeed that past Nadi and Fiji soccer hero of past championship wins and glory. That American-resident was reconnecting with a part of his own growing-up years and hence the emotional display of
tears. This inter-ethnic display of warmth and affection seemed to the author to be especially powerful and significant in a country which has been plagued by inter-communal tensions, race-based political coups, and sporadic violent episodes during its history.

**Conclusion**

This paper is based on my experiences, as a foreigner on a three-year work-permit, following Lautoka Blues in Fiji’s National Soccer League during calendar year 2013. One reason for Lautoka’s disappointing performances since 1970 is that the academy of football talent has been set up in Ba town which means that many talented young players are pushed into the Ba-system. Furthermore, local administrators run the Lautoka association team on a largely amateur basis and attracting and retaining good talent has been difficult especially given the attraction of Ba as Fiji soccer’s dominant team based in a soccer-crazy town. Furthermore, this paper argues that *Lautoka Blues’ inconsistency and its long-term decline since 1970 have mirrored the anxieties in the town over Indo-Fijian emigration; unemployment; and the fate of the sugar industry.* The present author also presents a second thesis in this paper: Fiji soccer as a sport, forever marginalized by rugby, has a status which some might see as commensurate with the secondary-citizen status endured by Indo-Fijians for much of the past 100 years. Sherlock (1997, emphasis added) concluded as follows: “The crucial weaknesses of the experiment [the 1987 coups and the 1990 Constitution] were that it was based on an idealised vision of traditional Fijian society that had never really been accepted throughout the islands of Fiji and which necessitated the political exclusion of half the country's population. The result was not only a violation of Indo-Fijians' rights but an undermining of the economic growth and prosperity to which indigenous Fijians have aspired”. However, as mentioned, indigenous Fijians are somewhat marginalized *within the world of soccer* – a minority group within a minority game but a majority within the nation.
This means that retired indigenous Fijian soccer-players, such as Henry Dyer, Inosi Tora, Emasi “Bacardi” Koroi, and Savenaca Waqa, are simultaneously in the complex position of being minorities within a minority game and the largest numerical group within the country.

Lautoka Blues lacks a strong sense of identity and culture nowadays. It needs a home in Lautoka city-centre such as a pub with team photos on the walls (like the Adelphi in Newcastle, UK) where fans can gather before and after games and even on non-match-days. The recent return of Nadi-resident Henry Dyer to Lautoka pubs on Friday nights should help ignite renewed interest in soccer in the Sugar City and will also perhaps stir up memories about the mid-1980s golden years of Fiji soccer. People may begin to ask why Fijian soccer has fallen so far and why people such as Henry Dyer, Inosi Tora, Savenaca Waqa, Peter Dean, and Emasi “Bacardi” Koroi are no longer officially involved in the sport whilst still living in Fiji where they are freely available to be utilized in any suitable capacity.

In terms of encouraging more indigenous Fijian youngsters to play soccer Dyer suggests that village-based clubs need to be resurrected, such as the former Tanoa Soccer Club and Sweat’s Soccer Club which played in the Nadi Soccer Association’s senior club competition. Presently no village-based clubs play in either the Lautoka or Nadi leagues. The grassroots enthusiasm, passion, and self-identity of many or even most indigenous Fijians remain village-based and village-oriented so having village-based senior clubs would motivate youngsters to continue playing the game up to senior level. Presently players and supporters both feel alienated from the extant club teams which are not village-based. The passion for the village-based Nadi rugby knockout competition where Thursday evening games at Prince Charles Park attract enthusiastic crowds of 3,000 people or more, including many women and children, suggest a possible pathway for soccer to explore.
References


