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Pacific Island Women, Body Image and Sport
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Occidental songs, novels, poetry, films, advertising and tourist promotions have created images of Pacific peoples¹ and their cultures that have permeated the Western cultural subconscious. A repertoire of Orientalist images such as “palm trees, Bacardi rum and inane hip-wriggling, grimacing and swaying people”², have informed Western impressions of the Pacific. Typically, “beautiful Polynesian girls and handsome youths wearing flowers and grass skirts, innocently practise free love on silver beaches beside a turquoise sea under swaying palms,”³ illustrate the occidental Pacific fantasia.

This article analyses the representation of Pacific women from an Orientalist theoretical framework.⁴ The analysis traces prominent representations of Pacific women within early colonial and Christian discourses, and dominant representations since colonisation. Included in this analysis is a discussion of the fantasy of Western men, that is, of the ‘easy’ Pacific women. One of the central arguments of this article is that the reality of the ideal Pacific female body-shape from a Pacific perspective is not only in stark contrast to the Western ideal, but is also in variance with the imagined erotic archetype of Western men. To locate this analysis within the contemporary diasporic milieu, case-studies of Pacific women in the sport of netball will be used to determine the impact of Orientalist-like representations of body-shape and erotic fantasy on Pacific women now residing in New Zealand, and to highlight the differences between the Pacific and Western body-shape ideals.

Orientalism as a discourse

Developed by Edward Said, Orientalism is a theoretical framework that asserted the Western fantasia of the Orient combined with Western power, actualised occidental imaginary in the East. That is, the Western imaginary of the Orient formed a dominant discourse, which eventually became the reality in many instances.

Pacific Orientalists

Throughout the history of Western colonisation of the Pacific, the church, the academy and colonial administrators and professional bodies of the medical fraternity shaped the Orientalist representations of Pacific women.

Moreover, historical and anthropological misconceptions shaped the way Europeans preconceived of and interacted with Pacific peoples. In the eighteenth century, they brought Christian doctrine to the Pacific, subsequently denigrating local Pacific cultures. For example, local Pacific dialects declined with the introduction and translation of the

*Bible into the major Pacific languages. Sardonicly, bare-breasted Pacific women in traditional dress while labelled heathens by missionaries, were also framed as erotica for the Western male. Seemingly, the West's expectation that bare-breasted women were a Pacific cultural norm justified the Western male gaze. Such an example demonstrates Bhabha's notion of ambivalence; Western abhorrence for Pacific barbarism is mixed with Western male fantasia surrounding the enticement of the Pacific temptress.*⁵

Orientalism and Indigenous Women

The Western imaginary, 'Othered' Indigenous women as sexual objects; she became marginalised in her creation – the Western male spoke for her, her emotions, her presence and her history. Her creator was foreign, comparatively wealthy and male.⁶

Orientalism and Pacific Women

Pacific women have been particularly targets for orientalised by scholars, including novelists, filmmakers, script makers, as well as anthropologists, political scientists and legal academics, have Orientalised Pacific women. This domain was initially at least largely controlled by Western males and later, Pacific males and finally Western women who became the self-appointed voice for Pacific women's stories, valid or otherwise.

Many Europeans misconceived Pacific women as passive and dependent. Such representations were reflective of European's own constrictive gender roles as opposed to being representative of Pacific gendering. In pre-contact Polynesia, women were significantly more autonomous, assertive and culturally valued than women in the West.⁷ In most Polynesian societies, women's social standing and personal autonomy ran counter to Western assumptions about gender roles. Chiefly women ranked as high as their brothers, and high-ranking women were seen as vessels of sacred power. Most Westerners found the equality of women in Pacific Societies unnatural, barbaric and, thus, evidence of the need for civilisation. Missionaries, for example, tried to instil Western gender roles by example and education.⁸

*Civilised women were womanly – delicate, spiritual, dedicated to home. And civilised white men were the most manly ever evolved – firm of character; self-controlled; protectors of women and children...Savage women were aggressive, carried heavy burdens, and did all sorts of masculine hard labor... Savage men were creatures of whim... who even dressed like women in dresses and jewellery.*⁹

Western women and increasingly Pacific women are evaluating themselves through a Western male gaze. Representations are constructed images that need interrogation for their ideological content and often marginalized groups such as Pacific women do not hold the power over such constructions. Community pulpits and institutions of learning and research have depicted contemporary Pacific women as, "promiscuous, morally deficient, exotic, erotic, fertile, unskilled, unemployable or overweight".¹⁰ Such Oriental representations have impacted on Pacific women's sexuality and identity and have limited their potential to be self-determining.

Margaret Mead's ethnography *Coming of Age in Samoa* initially investigated Samoan adolescence. The issues she raised in her research are insulting and offensive to Pacific peoples, in particular Samoan people.

The 'Ideal' Female Body

*The perfect women must be fat – that is most imperative: her neck must be short... She must have no waist, and if Nature has cursed her with that defect she must disguise it with draperies... her bust and hips and thighs must be colossal. The woman who possesses all these perfections will be esteemed chief like and elegant.*¹¹

Slade defines body image as an individual's conceptualisation of their body size, shape and form.¹² He argued that body image is comprised of two components: a "perceptual component" and an "attitudinal component".

Danielsson describes the idealised body-type of woman in Polynesian society, strikingly contrary to the historical and contemporary Westernised standard of the 'desired' women's body. Paintings of Western women, such as those by Renoir, depicted the ideal feminine shape as more voluptuous than the bodies of today's Western standard.¹³ Even in the last twenty years the ideal Western body image seemingly has shifted again to reflect the more athletic and strong female; reflective of the societal change caused by the Women's rights movement, which symbolised women's autonomy and strength.

Studies have been conducted comparing the body image attitudes between Western Women and Pacific women.¹⁴ Craig et al compared actual perceived and preferred attitudes toward body size in a group of Tongan adults and Australian adults; finding that Tongans had a greater body mass index (BMI)¹⁵ than Australians; and concluding that due to the heavier build of Polynesian societies, the appropriateness of the BMI for normalising the body masses of Polynesian people is questionable.

Traditional Pacific cultures did not abhor corpulence the way that the dominant body-shape discourse of the contemporary Western culture does. Pacific cultures conferred status based on larger body size along with increased age. Brewis argued that Samoans traditionally had positive cultural mores surrounding corpulence, that is, big bodies were socially valued.¹⁶ In the past and now, societal expectations of Pacific women differed greatly from the majority of women in the Western World.

Family and community in the Pacific play an important role.¹⁷ I highlight this here to accentuate how a difference in cultures affects body-shape ideals or even relevance. The community orientated Samoan women ideal, as opposed to the modernistic focus on individuality, made it rare for Samoan women to be individually Oriented and/or focused upon the trivialness of physical beauty.

As described above, Pacific societies have a different cultural view of the Self to the occidental view, which effects perceptions of the ideal body-shape. Becker (1995) argued that, in Fiji, the overall preference for body-shape is one of robustness; size is equated to strength, health, and an individual's social connections.

According to van Dijk, historical evidence suggests that Polynesian societies were deliberately obese.¹⁸ She argued that a large body size was a characteristic

deliberately selected for by Polynesians, as increased size was associated with beauty. Other girls were fattened toward that representation. Body size was also one of the main characteristics selected for in a Pacific marriage. Van Dijk suggests that larger women were chosen to be the wives, in order to improve the genetic likelihood of having corpulent offspring.¹⁹

Fijians carefully monitor changes in others' body morphology within their social network. A loss in weight is considered to signal a disruption in an individual's connection to the social structure or negligence on part of an individual's caregiver and family. This weight loss is perceived as a social loss.

In *fa`aSamoa* (Samoan culture or Samoan way of doing things), "actions speak louder than words"²⁰ According to Taule`ale`ausumai, it is extremely difficult to live as a Samoan woman in a Westernised country, such as New Zealand. Essentially, Polynesian women who live in a Western society are faced with peer pressure to conform to two cultural normatives that often oppose each other. For example, Samoan children are expected to learn and understand the protocols of *fa`aSamoa* while also being schooled in a Western education system.²¹

While the large body-shape of Polynesian women is accepted and desired in the Pacific, many women in the Western world strive to be thin.²² The large, but culturally appropriate, body-shapes of a Polynesian women living in a Western society, such as New Zealand, are deemed overweight and are reported in much of the literature as reflective of an obese culture.²³ Such designations align with many of the stereotypes of Pacific peoples like poverty and laziness. Given the above literature, it is not surprising that studies have found Polynesian women living in Western societies to be more conscious of their body-shape and size than Polynesian women living in the Pacific Islands.²⁴ As a consequence, it has also been found that Pacific women living in Western Society are beginning to move away from the traditional cultural body-shape 'ideal' toward the Westernised ideal of thinness. And such a movement means many diasporic Pacific women's notions of beauty and body-shape now clashes with the Pacific idea that "the perfect women must be fat,"²⁵ an ideal that has remained reasonably constant although not immune to the effects of global images of ideal body-shapes, as opposed to the Western body ideal size that has evolved over time.²⁶

Orientalism, Pacific Sportswomen and Netball

*"She must have fine features, be 5ft9 to 5ft 11 and have the right body-shape. Big mamas with flat noses and big lips need not apply"*²⁷

The following analysis examines the Orientalism and, particularly, the Western male fantasia surrounding Pacific women, together with the issue of Pacific women's diasporic body image constructs (as described above), through the context of case-studies of media constructions of elite Pacific women netballers playing in New Zealand.

Sport is a significant part of New Zealand society.²⁸ It "permeates all levels of contemporary society and influences...individual status, ethnic relations, business life, clothing styles, automotive design, language, cultural values and beliefs."²⁹ In New Zealand, according to Netball New Zealand, netball is the number one women's

sport, is played widely by women of all ages, and is played by a growing number of boys and men. There are over 120,000 registered players in New Zealand and a further 80,000 playing in social competitions for over 1000 clubs in 128 centres nationwide. Netball is the largest participation sport in Secondary Schools and is still growing. A growth spurred on by its increasing public profile that, in large part, is driven by the popularity of the Silver Ferns³⁰ including their recent (2002) successes in the Commonwealth Games and Netball World Cup.³¹

Despite the larger female bodies seen these days in sports like netball, many Pacific sportswomen residing in Western countries pursue slimness. While the literature surrounding Netball has not typically focused on body-shape (as compared to running for instance), the analysis below anecdotally at least demonstrates that media representations of Pacific women netballers are determined or constructed based on the individual player's body-shape as opposed to mere objective measures of athletic ability. The preferred aesthetic for Pacific sportswomen has begun to mirror the mainstream cultural norms for beauty.

The case-study analysis to follow profiles four Pacific sportswomen. That is, three ex-Silver Ferns (April Bruce, Bernice Mene and Linda Vagana) and one current Silver Fern (Vilimaina Davu). The analysis clearly demonstrates that those Pacific netballers who conform to the eroticised image of Pacific women and, thus, who hold an aesthetically pleasing body-shape within the Western imaginary (i.e., Bruce and Mene) are selected by New Zealand's media as commodifiable entities.

Ex-Silver Fern, April Bruce, is one of New Zealand's highest profile Pacific women. Apart from her netball career, she became the first Pacific female to become a sports-anchor on New Zealand's most watched television programme, *Television One News*. She has also been a netball presenter and commentator for over a decade, going on to host her own television show *'April's Angels'*. In addition, April has co-hosted coverage of two Olympic Games and two Commonwealth Games, and the breakfast show on i98Fm.³² Throughout her ten-year broadcasting career, Bruce became one of New Zealand's most recognisable public figures. The key to her recognisability initially, at least, was her physical attractiveness to the Western gaze. Like Anna Kournikova, Bruce's celebrity status did not blossom through her mediocre sporting feats, rather it flourished because her general television demeanour and aesthetic resembled the Western ideal and because she also subjugated herself to the eroticised Western fantasia. In 1997, for example, a magazine featured Bruce in a sultry, pouting and titillating pose, with one shoulder bared, and her bra strap showing.³³

Bernice Mene was a member of the Silver Ferns from 1992-2002; captaining the team in 1997 and from 2000-2001. From 1998-2001 she also captained the Southern Sting³⁴, who were Coca-Cola Cup Champions from 1999-2001 and National Bank Champions from 2002-2004. During this time, Mene has had a high profile in all media forms, appearing in numerous newspaper and magazine articles, and television features. Mene continues to have a celebrity-like profile, especially because of her romance with *Palangi* international cricketer, Dion Nash. While, admittedly Mene's netball career is far more impressive than Bruce's, much of the media attention she has received has focused on her exotic looks and body, as opposed to her sporting feats. Her slender 'Amazon' like frame holding much appeal for the fantasy of the white male gaze. For example, Mene became the face of the "e-sensuals" Bendon line

of lingerie³⁵ and, in so doing, she appeared in e-sensual television, billboard and in-store advertising campaigns. When Mene gave an exclusive interview to a Woman magazine,³⁶ although she gave an articulate, intelligent and reflexive interview, the photographs exotically portrayed her as sexually alluring, with many of the shots focused on her thighs.³⁷ In another article entitled *'Island Girl,'* the title and photograph of Mene lying beside water conjures up images of the Pacific maiden lazing in the tropical sun.³⁸

The media's treatment of the two Pacific sportswomen discussed below directly contrast the eroticisation of Mene and Bruce. The media representations of Linda Vagana and Vilimaina Davu focus solely on their athletic prowess; outside of netball there is little to no attention given to their looks or attractiveness, and little attention is paid to them in general given the durability, especially in Vagana's case, of a playing career comparable to Mene's. Vagana was a Silver Fern from 1993–2003. She also played representative netball for Waitakere and North Harbour, while studying for an education degree. She has also played for Samoa, and currently coaches the Samoa Under 21 team. In comparison to the above examples, the media's coverage of Vagana has concentrated on her size, stature, aggressive style of play and Christian beliefs. Fijian born Davu played her first game for the Silver Ferns in 2000. She has 34 test Caps for New Zealand and 55 for Fiji, and currently plays for the Canterbury Flames in the National Bank Cup (2000-2004) and Smoke free Champs (2000-2003). Since Davu's entry onto the national scene as a Silver Fern, the media has solely concentrated on Vilimaina Davu's size, stature, and aggressive style of play: '...aggression, as well as a truckload of power and a heap of enthusiasm, that makes Davu one of the game's most feared defenders'.³⁹ Davu's size and aesthetic holds little appeal to the eroticised Western gaze and is accordingly afforded little 'airtime.'

Conclusion

Images of Pacific sportswomen are selected based on White male fantasia and, in so doing, help to construct the 'selected' as cultural icons of exotic otherness. Bruce and Mene's mixed ancestry⁴⁰ reflects a fusion of Polynesian and *palagi* features and personifies the 'civilised' or tamed yet sultry Pacific Island savage. Mene and Bruce represent women who are "very like the white model... Elle MacPherson with a brown skin, with features very similar to white women."⁴¹

As discussed above Pacific women who now reside in New Zealand and other Westernised societies are increasingly aligning to negative Western perceptions surrounding the 'abnormality' of their Pacific bodies. Due to competitive pressures, New Zealand based Pacific sportswomen are susceptible to the same conformity issues that other female athletes face regarding body-shape. Many endure a constant battle with their body-shape within a competitive ideology that demands high performance; within this ideology 'abnormal' body shapes are often seen to be hindrances to performance, especially in certain sports such as synchronised swimming, gymnastics and running, which have traditionally emphasised low body weight.

Pacific sportswomen, then, are expected to strive for an athletic physique, and to look sexy and feminine, while also being expected to meet Pacific cultural expectations, which view the Western ideal body-shape as 'unhealthy'. A Pacific girl watching a sport like netball may believe that she needs to be thin and glamorous to excel at

netball; beliefs that contrast their own cultural ideologies. There are also Pacific women who may excel and enjoy a sport such as netball, who may stifle their enthusiasm for fear of their body being placed in a context where it is put under the scrutiny of the Western gaze. 'Overly' large strong dark muscular women's bodies hold little currency within the Western aesthetic.

¹ "Pacific peoples is a term used to describe peoples living in Aotearoa/new Zealand. Other terms used include Pacific Islander, Pacific Nations person and Polynesian Pacific Islander," Saisoa'a, M. "Ngā hekenga hou: Pacific peoples in Aotearoa/new Zealand", In T.M. Ka'ai, J.C. Moorfield, M.J.P. Reilly & S. Mosely. (eds.) *Ki te Whaiaio: An Introduction to Māori Culture and Society*. (Auckland: Longman/Pearson Education NZ Ltd. 2004): 227.

² FK Pulotu-Endemann and C Peteru, "Beyond the Paradise Myth: Sexuality and identity," In C Macpherson, P Spoonley & M Anae (eds.), *Tangata o Te Moana Nui The Evolving Identities of Pacific Peoples in Aotearoa/New Zealand*. (Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 2001): 122.

³ M Meleisea & P Schoeffel, "Discovering outsiders," In D Denoon with S Firth, J Linnekin, M Meleisea and K Nero (eds.), *The Cambridge History of The Pacific islanders*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997): 147.

⁴ A generic tem to describe the Western approach to the Orient.

⁵ Homi.K. Bhabha. 'The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism.' In *The Location of Culture*, pp. 66-84. London: Routledge, 1994.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ J Linnekin, "Contending Approaches" in S Firth, J Linnekin, M Meleisea and K Nero (eds.), *The Cambridge History of The Pacific Islanders*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997): 10.

⁸ J Linnekin, "New political Orders," in S Firth, J Linnekin, M Meleisea and K Nero (eds.), *The Cambridge History of The Pacific Islanders*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997): 201.

⁹ Ibid, p. 25.

¹⁰ FK Pulotu-Endemann and C Peteru, "Beyond the Paradise Myth: Sexuality and identity," In C Macpherson, P Spoonley & M Anae (eds.), *Tangata o Te Moana Nui The Evolving Identities of Pacific Peoples in Aotearoa/New Zealand*. (Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 2001): 122

¹¹ B Danielsson, *Love in the South Seas*. (London: Allen and Unwin 1956): 70.

¹² PD Slade, "Invited essay: What is body image?," *Behaviour and Research Therapy*, 32 (1994), 497-502.

¹³ PA Metcalf, RKR Scragg, P Williboughby, S Finau & D Tipene-Leach, "Ethnic differences in perceptions of body size in middle-aged European, Maori ad Pacific People living in New Zealand", *International Journal of Obesity*, 24, (2000), 593-599.

¹⁴ JY Wilkinson, DI Ben-Tovin & MK Walker, "An insight into the personal and cultural significance of weight and shape in large Samoan women", *International Journal of Obesity*, 18, (1994), 602-606., AA Brewis, ST McGarvey & BA Swinburn, "Perceptions of body size in Pacific Islanders", *International Journal of Obesity*, 22, (1998) 185-189., P Craig, V Halavatau, E Comino & I Caterson, "Perception of body size in the Tongan community: Differences from and similarities to an Australian sample", *International Journal of Obesity*, 23, 1288-1294.

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- ¹⁵ Body Mass index is described as weight in kilograms divided by height in metres squared. A BMI between 20-25 is considered to be in the normal range. A BMI of 25-30 is overweight. Anything over 30 is considered obese.
- ¹⁶ A Brewis, "The accuracy of attractive-body-size-judgement", *Current Anthropology*, 40 (1999), 548-553.
- ¹⁷ A Tupuola, "Learning sexuality: Young Samoan women," In A Jobes, P Herda & S Tamasailau (eds.) *Bitter Sweet Indigenous Women in the Pacific*. (Dunedin: University Press 2000)
- ¹⁸ N Van Dijk, "The Hansel and Gretel syndrome: A critique of Houghton's cold adaptation hypothesis and alternative model", *New Zealand Journal of Archaeology*, 13 (1991): 65-89.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 65-89
- ²⁰ F Taule'ale'ausumai, "The word made flesh: A Samoan theology of pastoral care," In P Cuthbertson (ed.) *Counselling and South Pacific Communities*. (Auckland: Accent, 1997)
- ²¹ R Michelle Saisoa'a, "Tama'ita'i mai o Moata'a". (University of Otago, Dunedin: Unpublished MA Thesis, 1999).
- ²² GC Davison and JM Neale, *Abnormal Psychology: Seventh Edition*. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 1998)
- ²³ For example, JY Wilkinson, DL Ben-Tovin & MK Walker, "An insight into the personal and cultural significance of weight and shape in large Samoan women", *International Journal of Obesity*, 18 (1994), 602-606. AA Brewis, ST McGarvey & BA Swinburn, "Perceptions of body size in Pacific Islanders", *International Journal of Obesity*, 22. (1998) 185-189.
- ²⁴ AA Brewis, ST McGarvey & BA Swinburn, "Perceptions of body size in Pacific Islanders", *International Journal of Obesity*, 22. (1998) 185-189.
- ²⁵ B Danielsson, *Love in the South Seas*. (London: Allen and Unwin 1956): 70.
- ²⁶ GC Davison and JM Neale, *Abnormal Psychology: Seventh Edition*. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 1998)
- ²⁷ Steve McBride cited in *Mana the Maori News magazine for all New Zealanders* No17 August/September 1997: 24
- ²⁸ Richard Thompson, Jock Phillips, Geoff Fougere and Keith Sinclair are writer who have written widely on the role of sport in New Zealand. *Te'evale*, Tasileta. 2001:212
- ²⁹ *Te'evale*, Tasileta. 2001:212
- ³⁰ New Zealand national netball team
- ³¹ Netball New Zealand Website <http://netballnz.co.nz>
- ³² "First baby delights for TV's newlywed April" in *New Zealand Herald* 31.08.2002
- ³³ Cited in *Mana the Maori News magazine for all New Zealanders* No17 August/September 1997: 25
- ³⁴ Southern netball franchise
- ³⁵ Julie Middleton "fronting up to new life" in *New Zealand Herald* 12.04.2003
- ³⁶ "Bernice Mene Calls it Quits" in the Australian women's Weekly NZ edition February 2002: 8-15
- ³⁷ "Bernice Mene Calls it Quits" in the Australian women's Weekly NZ edition February 2002: 10 and 13.
- ³⁸ *Air New Zealand Magazine* July 2004:76
- ³⁹ Julie Ash "Netball: Keeping the enemy at bay" in *New Zealand Herald* 20.06.2003
- ⁴⁰ Both their fathers are Samoan and their mothers are European

⁴¹ Sailau sualii-Sauni cited in *Mana the Maori News magazine for all New Zealanders*
No17 August/September : 27