

PERFORMANCE & RITUAL IN SPORT: STORIES AND HISTORIES

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Abstract

The word 'Performance' might be used in sporting terms to denote the achievement of some predetermined or widely accepted standards of physical prowess or skill in a particular area of sporting endeavour. However, sport itself might be conceived of as a 'performance' in the sense of being a spectacle which is presented before the audience. In sport, rituals can myriad forms: rituals enacted by sportspersons, fans or officials, or those that have become institutionalised and part of the structure of the game. This paper aims to view sporting rituals as "performances" within sport as performance, and examine how these rituals are created, manipulated and fostered for purposes other than the obvious, and how – against the backdrop of the commercialisation and globalisation of what were once community institutions or clubs, and community activities like a particular sport – sporting rituals, thus manipulated, serve to exploit the clannish or tribal spirit fostered by performance sport for generation of commercial revenue, or for the creation and re-creation of stories, histories and narratives that service an ideological agenda.

Key words-Performance, Ritual, Sport, Tribal, Culture, Performance Studies

The word 'Performance' might be used in sporting terms to denote the achievement of some predetermined or widely accepted standards of physical prowess or skill in a particular area of sporting endeavour. However, sport itself might be conceived of as a 'performance' in the sense of being a spectacle which is presented before the audience, where the sportsman is "enacting a ritual as part of his professional role as athlete and popular entertainer" (Schechner 2). A ritual is a repetitive performance that is characteristic of a society or a group which is passed on from generation to generation, and which has strong connections with the formation and constitution of collective and individual identity. It is "a way of defining or describing humans" (Encyclopedia Britannica Online). Considered as "a window on the cultural dynamics by which people make and remake their worlds" (Bell 3) and identities, the significance of rituals in the formation of identity and propagation of cultural values is fundamental.

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In sport, rituals can myriad forms: rituals enacted by sportspersons, fans or officials, or those that have become institutionalised and part of the structure of the game. As Jarvie says “sport can provide the technical means for creating...national cultural identities, ...often accompanied by an invention of tradition” (Jarvie 285). The tradition that Jarvie refers to often takes the form of ritual, a ceremonial performance or the enactment of specific behaviours that distinguish groups of individuals from one another and thus serve as markers of their identity, and indicate a sense of belonging to a particular community. It must be remembered that this is particularly true of community-based sporting entities: clubs or national teams.

A case in point is the Spanish football club Barcelona F.C. It is a football club based in the city of Barcelona, in the province of Catalonia. One of the most successful and widely-supported football clubs in the world, Barcelona has won numerous national and European trophies. The motto of the club is “*Més que un club*”, which roughly translates as ‘more than a club’. The club – founded in 1899 – has become a symbol for Catalan identity and the resistance to what is seen as Spanish centralist tendencies and oppression of Catalan identity and nationalism. According to Ramón Spaaij, “FC Barcelona gradually evolved into an important symbol of Catalan political, social and cultural identity and came to be regarded by its supporters as *més que un club* (“more than a club”). For many fans, participating in the club had less to do with the game itself and more to do with the club’s transformation into a potent symbol of collective identity” (Spaij 279). Evidently, for Catalans, being a fan of F.C. Barcelona is a significant way of demonstrating their loyalty to Catalan separatism and independence.

Thus, in the case of community-based sporting entities, a sense of belonging is fostered and reinforced by participation in rituals that are related to the sport and the team. This might take myriad forms: wearing team colours in shirts, crests, caps or scarves; painting body graffiti, particularly on the face; eating; using noisemakers; using team merchandise; and most significantly, participating in group activities like celebrating, or even mourning, team events. Fabien Ohl says: “sport (is) ... a dynamic, unpredictable, emotionally charged public performance facilitating spectator and fan identification, and, in turn, targeting strategic market segments” (Ohl 242). This paper aims to view sporting rituals as “performances” within sport as ‘performance’, and examine how these rituals are created, manipulated and fostered for purposes other than the obvious, and how – against the backdrop of the commercialisation and globalisation of what were once close-knit community institutions or clubs, and community activities like a particular sport – sporting rituals, thus manipulated, serve to exploit the clannish or tribal spirit fostered by performance sport for generation of commercial revenue.

Participating in sporting rituals is a significant part of being a sports fan. It heightens a sense of participation in what is essentially a community activity, enables the individual to 'fit in' culturally, and most importantly, forms a significant component of the social identity of the individual. This sense of community is revealed when – for example – fans travel to watch games wearing team colours or flags, or sing club anthems, or carry club mascots. The sale of club merchandise – team jerseys, scarves, and memorabilia – by clubs seeks to use this ritual to generate revenue for the clubs. In fact, the sale of team merchandise is one of the prime revenue sources for clubs all around the sporting world. In fact, sporting rituals and traditions are created, and thereafter used, for generation of revenue. An early example is the ritual of the "hat trick" in ice hockey, where spectators threw their hats in the air if three consecutive tries were scored. As early as the 1950s, a Baltimore hat manufacturer provided free hats to spectators to throw into the air if a hat trick was scored.

Sporting rituals can also be used to emphasise social stratification and hierarchy, disseminate an ideology or simply to attune the community to a particular viewpoint. Representation – of a populace or community, or a society – through the means of sporting ritual is common. The earliest instance of sporting ritual as performance and its use as a means to emphasise or disseminate an ideology were the Ancient Olympic Games, where men and women participated in tests of physical skill and prowess, which were formulated in a way that served to glorify, legitimise and perpetuate the social hierarchy, and emphasise the right of the elite to rule over the common populace. For instance, almost all of the participants were young men training to be warriors, belonging to the elite of the various city states, who displayed their physical prowess before the masses, turning this into a show of strength and power that established, exalted and emphasised their superiority before the common people. The women participated in races for the prize of becoming the priestess of the Hera, the goddess of marriage, and her consort.

An excellent example of how a sporting ritual can be created, adapted and used for the representation of a particular community is the Haka. It is now used by the New Zealand International Rugby team the 'All Blacks'. The Haka is an ancient posture dance of the New Zealand Māori that was traditionally used to prepare a war party for battle. It was performed either on the battle field prior to engagement with the enemy, or as the war party was leaving their own village en route to a battle. The ferocious nature of the Haka created a united frenzy among the war party preparing them mentally and physically for the reality of war and impending conflict. *Ka mate, Ka mate* - the original All Black haka - was composed in the early 19th century by famous Māori warrior chief Te Rauparaha, of the Ngāti Toa Rangatira tribe. Te Rauparaha was fleeing an enemy tribe seeking retribution for a past wrong he had

committed against them. As he was chased across the central plateau of the North Island, fellow chief Te Wharerangi helped him hide in a pit and then instructed his wife Te Rangikoahea to sit on the pit entrance. After the enemy had moved on, Te Rauparaha emerged from the pit. There, in jubilant celebration of his lucky escape and in front of Te Wharerangi and his people, he performed *Ka mate, Ka mate* which he had composed while deep in the pit. *Ka mate, Ka mate* was the only haka performed by the All Blacks until 2005 when a new haka - *Kapa o Pango* - was unveiled before a match against South Africa at Carisbrook Stadium, in Dunedin. *Kapa o Pango* - written for the All Blacks by Derek Llardelli, an expert haka composer from the Ngati Porou tribe - roughly translates as 'All Blacks', and the haka also makes reference to the silver fern, another Kiwi sporting icon.

But this adaptation of a Maori ritual serves to suppress the discrimination that the Maori population suffered – and have suffered – at the hands of the colonial settlers. In consonance with the treatment of colonised peoples by imperialist powers, “colonisation sought to assimilate Māori from their cultural roots” (Walker), supplanting their philosophical, social and economic orders in favour of a “better Britain” (Belich), oriented to settler priorities. “Many Māori have been and are at the bottom of almost all socio-economic indicia since records started, and remain some of the poorest, hungriest, least-educated and most locked-up peoples” (Charters) in New Zealand. Even though the historical injustices and oppression meted out to the Maori people have been somewhat acknowledged, and attempts at resolution made through mechanisms like the Treaty of Waitangi, and even though “the tribe as a social group no longer provides the degree of meaning and interaction that it once did to many Maori individuals” (Barcham 303), debates continue to rage regarding the nature, desirability and efficacy of such efforts at reconciliation and integration of the Maori into the ‘mainstream’. There is no doubt that tensions continue to exist between the ‘pakeha’ – a white New Zealander – and the Maori, and there continue to remain wide disparities in the field of political, social and cultural representation. For instance, as of 2007, less than 5% of the successful candidates in local council elections in New Zealand were Maori (Taonui). New Zealand has a separate, non full-international rugby team, the *Maori All Blacks*, as opposed to the *All Blacks*, which represents New Zealand in international matches. The Maori ‘whakapapa’ or genealogy of a player is verified, and their ancestry authenticated, before a player can be considered for selection into the *Maori All Blacks*. During the economic recession of 2009, the New Zealand Rugby Union announced that that the *New Zealand Maori All Blacks* would not assemble due to financial constraints (Mullholland), while of course, the *All Blacks* were spared. Evidently, the image of an accommodative, multicultural New Zealand, that is sought to be communicated by the appropriation of a Maori ritual as a prelude to a colonial sport like Rugby,

attempts to gloss over the considerable breach that continues to exist in New Zealand society, and the task of reconciliation and integration that needs to be undertaken before Maori peoples and their culture might be said to have attained equality of status with the 'pakeha'. In fact, it might be argued that the highly choreographed and unusually aggressive use of this ancient tribal ritual – the Haka – is not only based on its appeal as a spectacle on television and the stadium, but is also an inappropriate use of a sacred ritual out of its context. There is considerable debate about whether the All Black's use of the Haka tantamount to a trivialization of Maori customs and ritual and culture. As Matiu Rei, a spokesman of the Ngati Toa tribe says in an interview: "It's passed down to us by our ancestors so we need to see it done properly and with the right respect, otherwise you're attacking us. They're presenting somebody else's culture in an inappropriate context" (Rei). Isabela Borman says:

In 2009, the New Zealand Government decided, within the context of larger settlements of grievances to multiple tribes for colonial alienation of land from Māori, to give intellectual property rights to the Ngati Toa tribe in the interest of stopping commercial exploitation. Te Rauparaha was the chief of the Ngati Toa and as his descendants they gained copyrights to "Ka Mate!"

It is unfortunate that such misuse of the haka has led to the need for Māori and specifically Ngati Toa to legally protect their performing arts. This leads to the bigger issue of the Māori, and other indigenous groups, needing to protect their culture from commercialization and disrespect. Since Māori are known globally for the haka, it is extremely important for this image to be accurately portrayed. (Borman)

Therefore, this is a demonstration of how a sacred tribal ritual might be appropriated by the dominant culture and transformed into a spectacular sporting ritual that is used for commercial exploitation and furthering an ideological agenda.

Often, a sporting ritual is employed to promote consumerist behaviour and generation of revenue. Fans and spectators are invited to 'consume' a sporting ritual, which contributes to an illusion, exploited by advertisers and promoters of sport as televised or choreographed spectacle, of acceding to an authentic, genuine and valorised culture. In this way, "commodities punctuate the sport" (Ohl 242), and as I will demonstrate, create and modify its rituals for commercial purposes. The 'Gatorade Shower' is an extremely popular American sporting tradition, that involves pouring ice-cold liquid – in this case, the energy drink Gatorade – over a teammate or coach after a significant victory or achievement. Even though the tradition of drenching a participant or teammate with water is an age-old one, the 'Gatorade Shower' has a well-documented history. Darren Rovell credits the American Football player Jim Burt – of the New York Giants football team – with giving the first

'Gatorade Shower' to his coach Bill Parcells, after a win over the Washington Redskins in 1985 (Rovell 78). The ritual caught on, and Harry Carson, a teammate of Burt, even poured popcorn – from a red Gatorade cooler – on President Reagan when his team visited the White House after the Super Bowl victory in 1987.

Naturally, Gatorade did not lose this opportunity to exploit a ritual that had become associated with its brand and product. When Gatorade's head of Sports Marketing, Bill Schmidt, heard the television commentator John Madden describing the 'Gatorade Shower' to millions of television viewers during a NFL playoff game between the San Francisco 49'ers and the New York Giants, he said: "I think I have died and gone to heaven" (Trex). According to Rovell, since Gatorade didn't actually think of the ritual, they weren't quite sure how to handle the situation. To show the brand's gratitude to the coach and his linebacker, Gatorade sent both men \$1,000 Brooks Brothers gift certificates, along with a note from Schmidt saying: "We do feel somewhat responsible for your cleaning bill". After the New York Giants won the Super Bowl, though, they offered a more formal endorsement: Parcells got a \$120,000 deal for a three-year deal, and Carson got \$20,000 (Trex). The power of this ritual is evident from the fact that NBC News describes the 'Gatorade Shower' as "an enduring symbol of athletic victory" (Flicker). Thus, in this case, the consumption – to indulge in a 'Gatorade Shower', one must necessarily buy a cooler of Gatorade – of an energy drink is ritualised, and a symbolic value is imparted to it, which is linked with athletic prowess and sporting success. Numerous such instances point to the creation and use of sporting rituals as markers of identity, the commoditisation of such rituals and promoting an inevitable association with a product, and thereafter encouraging the ritualistic consumption of such a product, among fans and audiences.

Thus, it may be argued that sporting rituals are significant tools which are used for commercial and ideological purposes. Capitalist economy sees sporting rituals as opportunities for the generation of revenue, by encouraging fans to engage in and replicate these rituals, and promote behaviour which involves consumption of goods. The expansion of world trade and global markets, are contributing factors to young people using sport commodities as new markers of identity. Numerous sporting rituals involve the consumption of specific sports merchandise, which operate as identity markers, including those developed by various sport clubs and associations. These contribute, in various ways, to the maintenance of social bonds between their members. The visible display of sporting emblems and logos demonstrates loyalty and commitment, and symbolically separates out the true supporters from the casual fans. Rituals become performances that are displayed for the benefit of onlookers and the participants themselves, and the meanings which imbued these rituals is transformed into one which has revenue generation as its primary motive or

suits the dominant ideology. Sports fans thus are lulled into a sense of community and belonging that is fostered by consumption of merchandise, rather than any actual engagement or shared experiences with other members of the community.

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