



Transformation of Football in Papua within the Framework of Social Integration, Conflict, and Peace

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Abstract

Soccer in Papua is more than just a set of physical activities; it serves as a social and cultural platform that brings together various issues regarding conflict, identity, and community cohesion. This study explores the role of soccer in Papua, particularly in relation to issues of conflict, peace, and social unity. The main focus of this study is to show how this sport impacts interactions within communities and contributes to the process of local conflict resolution. Using a qualitative approach that includes document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and participatory observation in a number of communities, this study analyzes the experiences of players, community leaders, fans, and organizers involved in inter-village and inter-district competitions. The findings show that soccer acts as a tool for cultural diplomacy within communities, easing tensions between competing groups, encouraging cooperation, and strengthening collective identities that transcend ethnic and geographical boundaries. However, challenges remain regarding security management, unequal access to facilities, and a lack of regulations that support sports programs for peace. This research adds to the growing body of knowledge on sports and peacebuilding by presenting new evidence from Papua, where soccer not only strengthens community bonds but also fosters.

How to Cite

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INTRODUCTION

Football has emerged as one of the most significant socio-cultural activities in Papua, reaching well beyond the limits of merely being a recreational sport (Sokoy et al., 2023; Sokoy & Qomarrullah, 2025). In numerous communities, football serves as a common area where cultural values, group identities, and social connections are articulated and negotiated (Qomarrullah & Sokoy, 2024b). In contrast to formal sport development models that highlight performance and institutional structures, the football culture in Papua is integrated into daily life played in villages, church grounds, coastal regions, and urban communities. This establishes football as a significant means for analyzing community interactions, especially in areas that have a history of social unrest and political struggles (Cervantes-Duarte & Fernández-Cano, 2016; Naibaho, 2023).

From a sociological viewpoint, football in Papua serves as a social space where principles of teamwork, rivalry, leadership, and unity are created and maintained (Qomarrullah & Sokoy, 2024a). Games, whether casual or structured, unite young people, older adults, religious leaders, and cultural figures, creating a space for interaction that enhances community bonds. Simultaneously, football influences shared memories and local identity, serving as a symbolic indicator of affiliation with a village, area, or ethnic community. These social roles indicate that football has transformed into a means of uniting the community, assisting in overcoming divisions created by geography, historical events, and ethnic differences.

From an anthropological perspective, football in Papua can be viewed as a cultural event that includes elements of gathering, storytelling, celebration, and reconciliation. Football tournaments frequently take place alongside customary events, traditional ceremonies, or church gatherings. The match is more than just a game; it serves as a structured way to communicate, where respect, diplomacy, and emotional feelings are exchanged (Qomarrullah et al., 2025). Research regarding indigenous sports indicates that sporting activities can serve as venues for symbolic diplomacy, allowing communities to show trust and create non-violent forms of competition. Papua offers a setting that has not been thoroughly studied, where these anthropological interactions are prominently observed in routine sports activities.

Although it has the ability to strengthen

community bonds, football also demonstrates issues associated with conflict. Historical grievances, territorial disputes, and rivalries among young people can arise during football events. However, instead of increasing conflict, football frequently channels tensions and transforms them into organized, peaceful engagement. In certain areas, football games act as ways for the community to solve conflicts, particularly during celebrations after competitions, combined training sessions, or discussions between villages led by elders or church representatives. Such dynamics demonstrate a community-based peacebuilding approach that is based not on official actions, but on cultural involvement.

Current studies on sports in Papua are still scarce and primarily concentrate on talent development, local football successes, or the management aspects of sports governance. Several studies examine football as a social and cultural institution that is integrated into daily aspects of community life. Globally, research on sports and peacebuilding has increased, particularly in Africa, Latin America, and countries in the Middle East affected by conflict. In these regions, football has proven effective in promoting conversation, decreasing bias, and enhancing the resilience of young people. Nevertheless, Papua is significantly missing from the global literature on sport sociology and anthropology, resulting in a considerable gap in research.

Regarding theoretical advancement, sociological research on football frequently highlights social capital theory, collective identity, and community unity, whereas anthropological research investigates symbolism, rituals, and cultural expressions. However, these methods have not been consistently utilized in football within Papua, which displays unique patterns of cultural exchange influenced by native beliefs, religious leadership, and histories of political conflict. This indicates an important chance for academic contribution, particularly in exploring how football activities serve as local resources for fostering peaceful relationships without force and promoting social integration in daily life.

Numerous recent studies in Indonesia have investigated how sports can serve as a means for character education and youth involvement; however, few have analyzed sports as a cultural practice in settings that are sensitive to conflict. This research fills that gap by providing real proof of how football in Papua functions as an informal peace tool based on local customs, social ties, and community structure (Widyanto et al., 2025). It provides a sociological and anthropological

perspective to sports studies in Papua, showing that sports activities are not just physical or for fun, but are deeply rooted in cultural and symbolic systems.

The nature of football in Papua raises wider questions about the meaning of peace in communities, how conflicts are addressed outside official organizations, and how cultural traditions act as methods for living together harmoniously. Football can create short-term partnerships, shared feelings, and mutual acknowledgment that reduce social barriers. These small interactions build up into larger systems of trust and communication that help strengthen social unity.

Considering these viewpoints, this research intends to examine football in Papua as a social and cultural framework functioning within situations of conflict, peace, and unity. Considering these perspectives, this study offers a novel contribution by positioning football in Papua not merely as a recreational or institutionalized sport, but as a culturally embedded social system that actively mediates conflict, peace, and social integration at the community level. Unlike previous studies that focus predominantly on sport development, talent identification, or organizational governance, this research foregrounds the lived experiences of players, supporters, community leaders, and local organizers as primary sources of sociocultural meaning. By employing a sociological and anthropological lens, the study reveals how everyday football practices function as informal mechanisms of peacebuilding, collective identity formation, and social resilience in a conflict-sensitive context. This research therefore extends existing sport and peace scholarship by providing empirically grounded insights from Papua an underrepresented region in global literature and demonstrates how locally rooted football practices generate non-coercive forms of conflict transformation beyond formal political or institutional frameworks.

METHOD

This research utilized a qualitative research approach based on sociological and anthropological techniques to investigate how football influences conflict, peace, and social integration in Papua (Almalki, 2016; Lim, 2024). The study used an ethnographic method, focusing on deep involvement in local communities and active participation in football-related activities in both city and countryside environments. Through the use of various qualitative methods, the research aimed to understand local interpretations, symbo-

lic actions, and the real-life experiences of people engaged in football interactions.

Fieldwork was carried out in specific communities in Papua where football tournaments, matches between villages, and casual games for youth frequently occur. The research locations included coastal communities, fields near churches, and community sports areas that are often utilized as gathering places (Ashwini et al., 2024; Hands, 2022). Participants were intentionally selected to guarantee a variety of representation, including athletes, youth leaders, coaches, referees, community elders, church members, fans, and organizers of football events. Aiming to conduct in-depth interviews, we planned to engage between 25 and 30 participants, while also holding informal discussions during observation times.

Data were gathered using three main methods: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of documents. Participant observation entailed being present at matches, training sessions, and community events related to football activities. The observation concentrated on actions, routines, feelings displayed, interactions between groups, and how local leaders handle disputes or promote teamwork. Daily field notes were taken to record observations, discussions, and developing analytical themes (Finlay, 2022).

Semi-structured interviews were carried out to investigate views, experiences, and understandings of football as a social activity. The interview questions addressed subjects including historical rivalries, shared identity, the symbolic significance of matches, methods for conflict resolution, and community expectations concerning football. Interviews were carried out in Indonesian and local Papuan languages when suitable, with the participants' consent, and audio recordings were made whenever feasible.

Document analysis consisted of examining local reports, community announcements, church bulletins, social media updates, and unofficial rules regulating football tournaments. These documents offer background details on the organization of football, the rules that are applied, and how communities express values of peace and unity through sports.

Data analysis employed a thematic and interpretative approach. All interview transcripts, field notes, and documentary materials were manually coded using an inductive method. The first phase of coding revealed descriptive categories including "community rivalry," "religious engagement," "collaborative practices," "conflict resolution," and "symbolic rituals." Subsequently,

these categories were arranged into overarching themes connected to sociocultural integration, informal peacebuilding methods, and the cultural significance of participating in football.

The analysis of the data utilized sociological ideas related to social capital, shared identity, and daily peace, along with anthropological theories concerning rituals, symbols, and cultural expressions (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Nirwan et al., 2024). Instead of examining hypotheses, the analysis concentrated on creating contextual explanations of how football influences social relationships and community unity in Papua.

Ethical practices were upheld consistently during the entire research process. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, and consent was acquired either verbally or in writing, depending on the situation. Anonymity was maintained by employing pseudonyms or broad descriptions when displaying data. Confidential details concerning community disputes, identity, or relationships between groups were managed with caution to prevent possible damage or misunderstanding.

To guarantee that the study can be repeated and maintains a high level of methodological precision, data were gathered during several field visits and verified using various methods. The data from observations were examined alongside interview accounts and written materials to ensure that the findings were consistent. Reflexivity was applied consistently during the research process, as the researcher kept a field journal to record their position, possible biases, and changing interpretations. These methodological specifics offer a clear guideline for other researchers to carry out similar sociocultural investigations on football in various Papuan contexts or similar environments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of field observations and interviews indicate that football holds a significant position in Papua, functioning not only as a recreational activity but also as an influential social institution. Participants consistently emphasized that football creates spaces for interaction across ethnic, geographical, and generational boundaries. As one community leader explained,

"When people gather for football, they come not as separate groups, but as one community. On the field, differences are put aside."

Similarly, a youth participant noted that football matches allow young people from different villages to build relationships that rarely occur in everyday life, stating,

"We may come from different places, but when we play football, we feel equal and connected."

These narratives demonstrate that football events whether informal matches on village fields or tournaments organized by church communities are deeply integrated into social life in Papua and function as a cultural system rather than merely a competitive sport. These findings show that sport has the potential to be a basis for deepening peace, building identity, and resolving conflicts informally.

One of the most visible conclusions is that football has the ability to defuse disputes between youth groups or neighboring towns. According to interviews, many community leaders expressed a preference for resolving disputes through football activities rather than allowing disagreements to escalate into violence. As one village elder stated,

"It is better to settle problems on the football field than to let them turn into real conflicts."

Another community leader similarly emphasized,

"When young people compete in football, anger is released in a controlled way, and we can avoid fights outside the field."

The research found that traditional ceremonies preceding matches, such as prayer groups, speeches by community leaders, and meaningful handshakes, provide a culturally defined opportunity for peaceful participation. This implies that football in Papua serves as a type of ritual diplomacy, in which conflicts are transformed into controlled symbolic activities.

Another significant conclusion is that football aids in fostering and reinforcing a sense of shared identity among members of local communities. Soccer teams frequently represent pride, cultural legacy, and a shared sense of collective narrative, as expressed by many young participants who emphasized that teams stand for more than athletic success alone. As one youth player explained,

"When we wear our team jersey, it is not only about winning the game; it represents our village, our families, and our history."

Another participant similarly noted,

"Playing for the team means carrying the pride of our community, not just playing football."

The colors of team uniforms, chants, and symbols displayed on banners were consistently observed as markers of family lineage and village affiliation during field observations. Participants explained that these elements carry historical and emotional meanings rather than serving purely aesthetic functions. As one supporter noted,

“The colors and songs remind us of who we are and where we come from.”

Both victories and defeats were collectively remembered through post-match discussions, communal meals, and storytelling, transforming match outcomes into shared emotional experiences. These ethnographic observations support anthropological theories that sport functions as a performative arena in which community identity is enacted and reaffirmed through participatory rituals, even in the absence of formal ceremonial structures.

According to the findings, football encourages the creation of novel social connections and relationships that go beyond traditional family ties or ethnic divisions. For example, religious organizations hold tournaments where teams often include players from different families and faiths. These interactions result in mixed social identities and foster collaboration between groups that might otherwise be socially isolated. These networks are a crucial component of social capital, where sports promote trust, mutual support, and long-lasting relationships both inside and between communities.

In addition to how conflicts are resolved during and after matches, the role of football in fostering informal peacebuilding is also evident. Elders, church leaders, and tournament organizers were consistently observed to play an active role in resolving conflicts through dialogue, negotiation, and symbolic gestures during football events. Field observations and interview narratives indicate that mediation often involved collective discussion, public apologies, handshakes, or shared meals rather than punitive measures. As one church leader explained,

“We talk together after the match, forgive each other, and remind everyone that unity is more important than winning.”

Similarly, a tournament organizer noted, *“Punishment is not our first choice; reconciliation is.”*

These practices reflect culturally embedded methods of conflict resolution that prioritize social harmony over formal legal consequences. Rather than eliminating conflict entirely, such interventions transform tensions into manageable and socially constructive forms.

The results also point to significant challenges that prevent football-based peace initiatives from being sustainable, despite their positive aspects. One issue is the absence of official management and organizational support during games. Conflicts about officiating judgments, team eligibility, or prize distribution may increase ten-

sion in the absence of explicit regulations. These conflicts highlight the flaws in informal systems and emphasize the need for transparent procedures to ensure fairness, especially in big events with wide community participation.

The unequal allocation of resources poses another issue. Interviews revealed that access to football facilities and resources varies significantly across communities in Papua. Some participants described having well-maintained playing fields, adequate training facilities, and sponsorship support, while others relied on improvised spaces and limited equipment. As one youth player explained,

“Some villages have proper fields and uniforms, but we play on rough ground and share old shoes.”

A community organizer similarly noted, *“When resources are unequal, it creates jealousy and makes people feel their community is less valued.”*

This disparity contributes to uneven power dynamics among communities and can generate feelings of resentment or perceived injustice, which may undermine efforts toward social integration. From a sociological standpoint, unequal access to sports resources represents a form of structural inequality that has the potential to undermine social integration efforts by exacerbating divisions between communities.

An examination of available local regulations, public announcements, and community-level records indicates a limited formal integration of football competitions into structured community development or peacebuilding programs. While football is widely perceived as a unifying activity, no explicit policy frameworks or official development plans were identified that systematically position sport as an instrument for peacebuilding at the local government level. Instead, field observations and interview accounts suggest that football initiatives largely depend on volunteer efforts, moral authority of community and religious leaders, and informal community organization. This reliance reflects the absence of institutionalized recognition within local governance structures and highlights a gap between community practices and formal policy support.

When analyzing these results, it's useful to view Papua in the context of global literature on sports and peace. Previous research conducted in Africa, Latin America, and post-conflict societies demonstrates that football has significant potential to foster reconciliation, reduce social bias, and strengthen youth resilience. For example, scholars argue that sport can function as a

"neutral social space where former adversaries interact under shared rules and mutual recognition" (Giulianotti, 2011).

Similarly, Risyanto et al. (2023) emphasizes that football-based programs contribute to peacebuilding by creating opportunities for dialogue, trust-building, and collective identity formation among young people in divided societies. These studies suggest that football's social impact extends beyond physical participation, positioning sport as a meaningful tool for reconciliation and psychosocial recovery in conflict-affected contexts (Sanders, 2016). Many of these studies, however, center on programs that are supported by outside sources like non-governmental organizations or international organizations. In contrast, Papua presents a unique situation where peace plans are developed locally using community organization, spiritual values, and indigenous knowledge rather than being created by outside parties.

The findings also contribute to anthropological discussions about daily peace, a concept that emphasizes how peace originates from common behavior rather than formal treaties (Mangolo & Qomarrullah, 2025; Qomarrullah, 2015). Soccer in Papua represents a continuous state of peace since it happens often, is integrated into everyday life, and is related to contemporary cultural and spiritual practices. This integration makes football a long-lasting foundation for coexisting that does not depend heavily on official enforcement or political directives.

From a theory point of view, this research adds to current talks in sports sociology by showing how people build their identities in sports within places that often have conflicts (Siahaan et al., 2021; Sutoro et al., 2020). The improvement of a group personality, the nearness of typical competition, and the foundation of common stories approximately winning and losing empower communities to reconsider their associations through shared encounters and feelings. These forms compare with speculations related to collective personality and open ceremonies as recognized in both classical and advanced sociological hypotheses.

Other than giving sociological understanding, the inquire about gives an anthropological viewpoint by illustrating how football serves as a social action that speaks to values, sentiments, and moral measures. Field perceptions shown that football matches in Papua as often as possible join ceremonial elements shared suppers, singing, supplications, and gather discussions which hoist the diversion to a social occasion

or maybe than fair a competitive wear. This demonstrates that football holds numerous layers of typical noteworthiness that are significant to its part in advancing peace.

In conclusion, the discoveries appear that in spite of the fact that football in Papua serves as a capable implies for advancing peace and solidarity, enduring comes about depend on upgrading organizational aptitudes, making conventions for overseeing competitions, and handling incongruities in assets. Setting up nearby arrangements that coordinated football into community improvement endeavors, teaching coaches to serve as peace arbiters, and giving back for youth programs with legitimate offices and subsidizing can improve the useful impacts that have as of now been seen.

Football in Papua is demonstrative of the clash of culture, struggle, and participation. The think about concludes that football is more than a unimportant frame of amusement; or maybe, it is a shape of typical strategy, custom character, and regular peace, as prove in the ponder. The ponder upgrades the understanding of don and culture as components for struggle change and social integration, not as it were in Papua, but in other parts of the world. This is especially genuine in settings where don is an fundamentally portion of the social texture of a community.

CONCLUSION

The research indicates that football provides a means of transforming and facilitating the peaceful resolution of conflicts and the integration of diverse groups in Papua. Village festivals, church football matches, and organized community matches all became opportunities for "football and peace-building practices". Football becomes a peaceful, non-military arena for free (and controlled) competition with the construction of a unified community and peaceful resolution of conflicts through dialogue and non-violent means. While the results of the research demonstrate that football can generate social capital and integrated communities, the results also identify a number of structural barriers including differential access to community resources, a lack of peripheral organizing, and absence of formal community governance.

Above all else, combining sociology and anthropology offers a new angle on research on sport and peacebuilding. Papua's culture, spiritual authority, and traditional social systems fuel grassroots conflict transformation. These findings highlight the value of policy advocacy, communi-

ty empowerment, and the culturally responsive administration of sport programs to safeguard football's enduring role as a conduit of peace and social integration in Papua.

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