

Holding Tightly onto Land and People During a Pandemic: Kava Pedagogies and Tertiary Learning Relationships in Vahaope

Edmond Fehoko, 'Inoke Hafoka and Arcia Tecun

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected the livelihoods of Pacific peoples, including partaking of the ancestral elixir of kava and the associated social gatherings and ritual ceremonies. The cultural practice of kava-drinking has adapted over the years and is very diverse, yet it remains a major form of social engagement in the lives of most Pacific communities. These challenging and unprecedented times connected communities have become physically isolated in various ways according to the responses by different nations. We draw from Tongan philosophy in order to explore '*fonua*,' and its complex meaning that includes 'land, placenta, customs, people.' We suggest that in the context of Aotearoa during strict isolation measures, the meaning of *fonua* as 'the people' increased as kava gatherings ceased in their usual fashion, shifting into only those in the home or in cyberspace. The online version of kava is far from ideal, but nonetheless became a crucial form of nurturing *fonua* (one's people) during the Covid-19 era. In addition, as access to kava also became limited, the pedagogical methods of kava gatherings and relational values used to learn customary and community-based knowledge became the most practical and adaptable part of kava culture to maintain through online tools. In this paper, we reflect on this shift and the Indigenous lessons it offers for higher education and cultural identity.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the livelihoods of Moana peoples, which is an Indigenous Tongan/ 'Polynesian' word that refers to the deep ocean. We use Moana as an evolving term of convenience to refer to Oceanic or 'Pacific' peoples that moves away from European colonial classification and naming (Gordon-Smith, 2015; Māhina, 2010). This pandemic impacted Moana peoples in a variety of ways, including partaking the ancestral elixir of kava and its associated social gatherings and ceremonies. The cultural practice of kava-drinking has adapted over the years and is very diverse, yet it remains a major form of social engagement in the lives of many Moana communities. These challenging and unprecedented times led connected communities to become physically isolated in various ways according to the responses by different nation-states. We draw from Tongan philosophy in order to explore 'fonua' and its complex meaning that includes 'land, placenta, customs, people.' We propose that in the context of Aotearoa (New Zealand) during strict isolation measures, the meaning of fonua as 'the people' increased as kava gatherings ceased in their usual fashion, shifting into only those in the home or in vahaope (ocean-space beyond borders or cyberspace) (Burroughs & Ka'ili, 2015).

The online version of kava is far from ideal, yet it became a crucial form of nurturing fonua (one's people) during the COVID-19 crisis. The pedagogical methods of kava gatherings and relational values used to learn customary and community-based knowledge became the most practical and adaptable part of kava culture through online tools. In this paper, we reflect on this shift, our experiences, and the Indigenous lessons it offers education. We begin this essay

with an introduction to kava, an exploration of fonua, give examples of COVID-19 responses to these practices, and conclude with a discussion of the pedagogical tools that extend from kava practices into relationships with students and staff within tertiary education.

Kava

Kava is a mild soporific and anaesthetic plant with some anti-fungal and antibiotic properties (Piscopo, 2009; Singh & Blumenthal, 1997). Kava is a 'sacred' plant with great potency and medicinal properties that is regarded in some societies as the most important 'cultural keystone' plant across the Moana (Beyer, 2009; Piscopo, 2009; Aporosa, 2019). Kava has been broadly used as a remedy for its curative properties for illnesses such as menstrual problems, headaches, insomnia, anxiety, and more (Aalbersberg & Sotheeswaran, 1991; Singh & Blumenthal, 1997; Lebot, Merlin & Lindstrom; 1997; Piscopo, 2009; Aporosa, 2012). Tongan kava practices specifically are also diverse and include social and educational practices as well as contemporary adaptations to current circumstances (Tecun, 2017). For example, Tongan kava rituals can have distinct protocols and purposes that share functions of mediating power relations and transmitting knowledge that are encapsulated in imbibing kava (piper methysticum plant roots infused with water) (Tecun, Reeves & Wolfgramm, 2020). Fehoko (2014) found that Tongan elders encouraged their sons to participate in faikava (Tongan for *a regular and common kava gathering*), in order for them to be able to talk and socialise in their Indigenous languages and culture.

Ethnographic observations also support this claim noting that the egalitarian way of communicating usually practiced in the faikava breaks social and cultural barriers, settles interpersonal and intergenerational conflicts and enhances social ties among Tongans (see Lebot et.al, 1997; Davis & Brown, 1999). Tongan kava events can facilitate escapism to

modern anxieties, be a source of community fundraising, a site to practice protocol, and a place where the transmission of genealogical and historical knowledge as well as debate occurs. This is supported through social ‘anaesthetics’ that soften hard truths or difficult topics such as comedy, music, or gifting that accompany the physical anaesthetic of kava’s anti-anxiety properties.

The adaptation to use faikava as a forum for exchanging ideas and debates has also been taking place in several tertiary institutions in Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland). Moana students of Māori, Sāmoan, Tongan, Papuan, and Fijian descent, gather to share their stories and even vent frustrations based on their experiences at university. The practice of faikava in tertiary institutions signifies the importance of epistemological particularity and Indigenous divergence, despite being in western colonial institutions. For these groups, the faikava is an alternative to the University bar, with an ancestral drink that is not alcohol, which does not negatively inhibit mental cognition or cause the acute emotional fluctuations that alcohol does. The use of kava on university campuses and among university students demonstrates an intersection of dominant educational institutions in Aotearoa with what Fehoko (2014; 2015) has established of common social kava practices as ‘cultural classrooms,’ based in community-based learning and well-being. The introduction of kava cultural space in educational institutions supports Moana culture, knowledge, values and beliefs (Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2013). This essay on Moana social and cultural spaces in tertiary education¹ contributes to ensuring not only a record but a support of Moana culture in New Zealand’s Eurocentric institutions.¹

¹ Tertiary education is used rather than higher education. This distinction places value to other forms of education while not considering these other forms/spaces as less than.

Fonua

Pukepuke Fonua is a common saying and concept connected to kava, which means “to hold on tightly to the land.” The Tongan concept of fonua encapsulates the importance of metaphysical and communal relationships, balance, and harmony (Tu‘itahi, 2007; 2009). Fonua can be defined as land, country, territory, heritage, tradition, and people of the land (Churchward, 1959). Fonua can also be defined as faitoka or grave, as well as placenta or the afterbirth of a new-born.

Kava is also a reference of fonua, and in Tongan it is named after Kava‘onau, a young woman who is a metaphorical sacrifice in its origin story, and thus also symbolizes the body of a person, where the body is also fonua. Furthermore, fonua is origin and fate, symbolised in icons of birth, life, and death. Tu‘itahi (2005) defines fonua as the land and its people and their ongoing relationships. Taufe‘ulungaki (2004) suggested that the judgements, experiences and perceptions of Tongans are based on five significant dimensions which include; the sino (*body*), ‘atamai (*mind*), laumalie (*spirit*), kāinga (*collective/communal village family*) and ‘ataakai (*built and natural environment*). This is summed up by Tu‘itahi (2009) when he postulates that:

Maintaining a sustainable, harmonious and balanced relationships with nature and one’s fellow human beings, both at the individual and collective levels, illustrates the spiritual dimension of fonua. Since the introduction of monotheistic religion, Tongans re-conceptualised the spiritual dimension of fonua to include God, the creator of the universe (p.14).

Fonua is also kava, in both its actual form as roots of the plant that grow inside the land and symbolically as a cultural practice constructed on that land. When people are gathered to drink kava it is a form of holding on tightly to the land, which is to say the site of life and death, of

cultural creation and perpetuation. Because kava is a form of fonua it outranks all participants and assists in facilitating a space where tapu (*protections*) is neutralized, becoming noa (*balanced, safe*), giving rise to vulnerable openness and sharing that is conducive to meaningful social relationships and transformative learning (Hernandez, 2019; Tecun et. al., 2020). The regular and common kava drinking gatherings of faikava are significant sites of positive mental health and well-being for men, knowledge production and transmission, and a refuge for youth of various genders connecting them to fonua (Aporosa & Tomlinson, 2014; Fehoko, 2014; 2015; Tecun & Siu‘ulua, 2020; Vaka, 2014).

For example, Young (1995) found that kava in Vanuatu is described as important to outworking kastom, being a “symbol of national identity” (p. 61). Finau et al. (2002) also highlight kava use in Tonga through which “Tongan’s have maintained their cultural identity” (p. 59). For New Zealand-born Tongans, Fehoko (2014) concurs that kava consumption venues act as sites of Tongan cultural cultivation where Indigenous values, language, traditions, and beliefs are “reinforced... thus reaffirming their Tongan identity”. Minahan (2012) noted a Samoan insight that kava is considered “an important cultural symbol and a traditional sign of hospitality” (p. 279). From a Hawaiian perspective, Tengan (2008) put forward that kava is now being consumed and socialised as part of re-establishing traditional knowledge and enhancing identity.

Thus, when the Sars-Cov-2/COVID 19 pandemic crisis took hold globally and governments like New Zealand took strict responsive measures, practices connected to the fonua like the faikava had to adapt from the usual reliance on in person meetings and sharing of kava, food, music, story and cultural identity on to digital platforms.

Vahaope

During the strict governmental measures taken in New Zealand in the early onset of the pandemic, communities out of necessity increasingly took to vahaope (*digital online space*), or increased their already present engagement (Lopesi, 2018) including churches, community groups and faikava groups. Kava participants, and events likewise had to adapt in order to continue to nurture their relationships and hold onto their fonua. While fonua has a spectrum of meaning, the digital meetings caused a significant shift in focus of these meetings. Usually kava events facilitate sharing space, cups, food, and of course kava. However, when physical isolation requirements went into effect, this proved difficult for the many who rely on common space and materials. Some online kava participants prepared their own kava at home in whatever materials they already had, while many also joined in, despite not having kava (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Kalapu Lalo Vaine Mo’onia faikava Zoom session every Friday night during alert Level 4 Lockdown in New Zealand. Photograph: Author

This key shift in behaviour demonstrated to us a greater emphasis on the meaning of ‘a people’ in fonua. Thus, holding onto land became more intensely holding onto people, and to each other through regular online digital ‘gatherings’ where participants could process through the pandemic and communicate needs as well as produce and transmit relevant knowledge. Prior to the pandemic faikava practices had already begun to expand into tertiary education spaces as we have already mentioned, and they continued during physical isolation mandates (Tecun et al., 2020).

One example of the intersection of kava and tertiary education during physical distancing requirements in New Zealand is student mentorship and support. Pre COVID-19, this took place through unofficial channels of the university where Moana students would regularly meet on their respective campus to faikava and talanoa (talk story) with each other, which continued during the lockdown in online settings like Zoom (Tecun, Hafoka, ‘Ulu‘ave & ‘Ulu‘ave-Hafoka, 2018). Students that we mentor as well as community scholars that mentor us continued to do so through digital platforms (see Figure 2). We did not all have kava in our own home settings during these live online group video calls, but the practice of meeting to share and work through ideas prior to this circumstance nonetheless continued in an adapted form. Another example is of meetings we had with each other as authors as well as with other colleagues, who took on the similar format of kava gatherings during online video calls, and those who could not faikava in their home at the same time still joined to continue our forms of knowledge production through talanoa.

There were several groups throughout Aotearoa facilitating digital kava sessions with their usual groups as well as in new groups that included community members, workers of various professions, students, and scholars alike. Also, vahaope allowed a nuance of extending the

talanoa and digital kava session to those beyond Aotearoa. There were sessions that included kāinga (people) from Australia, Tonga, United Kingdom, Japan and the United States of America. This is a common phenomenon of public intellectualism in kava communities in our experience, which continued through digital means. In each of these examples and settings what became most important was to keep in contact with friends, relatives, and colleagues that one is in community with. Whether participants could partake of kava or not while joining the online faikava, they all engaged in talanoa similar to an in-person setting. Furthermore, assistance and guidance with studies as well as scholarly project coordination also took place, but only after prioritizing relationships first by checking in on each other's well-being.



Figure 2. Digital faikava with university students and researchers during Lockdown in New Zealand, Tonga, and the United States. Photograph: Author

Conclusion: Kava Pedagogies and Learning Relationships

The requirements of being physically distant resulted in Indigenous scholars striving to remain socially close. We suggest that the pedagogy of talanoa and the epistemology of primarily upholding meaningful relationships among mentors, colleagues, and community was a kava pedagogy that survived the limitations to learning brought on by the pandemic. This allowed for sustainable learning to continue to happen with an increased focus on fonua metaphors of the body, and people. Holding on tightly to one another and to community is an ongoing lesson from Indigenous epistemology based in an Indigenous relational ontology of ancestral and familial like connection with interlocutors in knowledge production. Talanoa was often possible because these were often not new relationships, which are challenging online, and instead were based on already established learning relationships that used digital platforms to maintain the source and relevance of knowledge, one's people (Tecun et al., 2018). While Moana cultures are diverse, there are common cultural values shared that drive and influence an individual, a family, or community's practices, behaviours, decisions, experiences, and learning.

Kava is symbolic across different Moana peoples that is often associated with bringing the past into the future or being bound together throughout time and space. Kava is a ceremonial drink that marks friendship, achievement of milestones in life, and unity. In many contexts today the kumete or kava bowl symbolizes a gathering where there is a matter of importance to be discussed that affects the interests of the whole family/community. However, in the context of education, the kumete or tāno'a (*ceremonial name for kava bowl*) is also a symbol of collective responsibility for each other and our collective knowledge through Indigenous pedagogy premised on meaningful learning relationships. The pedagogical tools such as privileging good relationships with one another, softening difficult circumstances and topics with the

anaesthetics of kava or laughter, extended from in person kava practices into online space. In this way learning relationships between students and staff within tertiary education continued to assert their ancestral systems of knowing, being, and doing, even in a pandemic.

About the Authors:

Edmond Fehoko grew up in Auckland in Aotearoa and is an active leader in the Tongan community. Edmond is from the Ha‘apai islands of Kotu, Nomuka, Mo‘unga‘one and Ma‘ufanga in Tongatapu. He completed a master’s thesis on kava and Tongan males and has recently completed his doctorate at the Auckland University of Technology on problem gambling in the Tongan community in New Zealand.

‘Inoke Hafoka grew up in Utah and has been an active member in the Tongan community. ‘Inoke descends from Taa’a and Ha‘akio in Vava‘u and Faleloa and ‘Uiha in the Ha‘apai islands. He is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of California, Los Angeles doing research on education and Tongan mobility in the diaspora.

Dr. Daniel Hernandez publishes under the name **Arcia Tecun**. He grew up in Utah where he was introduced to kava in the Moana communities. He is of Mayan descent (K’iche’, Tz’utujil, Mam, Kaqchikel) with European, Afro, and Judeo-Arabic roots as well. He has completed a doctorate at the University of Auckland in anthropology/ethnomusicology. His research is on kava songs, stories, and urban Indigenous identities.

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