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The virtual faikava: Maintaining vā and creating online learning spaces during COVID-19

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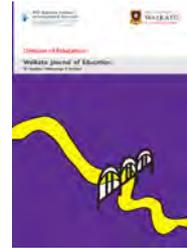
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## The virtual *faikava*: Maintaining *vā* and creating online learning spaces during COVID-19

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*COVID-19 has had a major impact on collectivist cultures and their means of social interaction and maintaining contact with those in their wider community. This has particularly been the case for Pacific peoples living in diaspora, with COVID-19 preventing travel home and social distancing and forced lockdowns restricting the ability to gather. This has also impacted *vā*, the Pacific concept of 'relational space' critical to connectivity and maintaining relationships. This paper explains the creation of virtual *faikava*; online meeting environments in which Pacific kava users meet, maintain *vā*, connect with those at home and in the wider diasporic community and learn, while consuming their traditional beverage kava.*

### Keywords

*Kava*; Pacific peoples; collectivist culture; *vā*; online learning; COVID-19; Zoom; Whatsapp; Viber; Facebook.

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic commencing in 2020 and the resulting global upheaval is a topic that needs little introduction, having captured the world's attention by causing major health and economic impacts on a global scale. However, a theme that has often been overlooked amidst the concern and confusion wrought by the pandemic are the impacts that COVID-19 has had on interpersonal and intercultural relationships which have certainly been felt by Pacific people living in diaspora.

Most Pacific Island nations have large numbers of citizens living permanently or temporarily abroad, particularly in Aotearoa New Zealand (Aotearoa), Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada. For many of those citizens, a lack of 'permanent residency' (immigration status) restricts travel between their diasporic place of residence and their home islands. For others, even if they were free to travel home, the prospect of paying for quarantine on their return to their diasporic home is prohibitive. This is particularly the case when the role of many Pacific diasporic people is to support



family members in the Islands through remittance, with COVID-19 having a major impact on this role (Fuatai, 2020; Reserve Bank NZ, 2020). Factors such as these effectively lock out many Pacific people from returning home.

Adding to this enhanced sense of alienation that COVID-19 has created for many Pacific diasporic people is the need to isolate and social distance in order to reduce the virus's spread. Cultural collectivism<sup>1</sup> and group gatherings, along with Pacific values, traditions and cultural practices, are defining characteristics for Pacific people and play an important role in facilitating connections between individuals and groups (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2018; Podsiadlowski & Fox, 2011). Those connections are also critical to maintaining *vā*, a Moana concept<sup>2</sup> of spatial relations that pays special attention to the “space between people and things” (Ka’ili, 2005, p. 89). The concept of *vā* is discussed in depth in several articles within this special journal edition, and is fundamentally different from western concepts of space, which are often interpreted as an “expanse or open area” (Ka’ili, 2005, p. 89).

When discussing the concept of *vā* it is also necessary to acknowledge *tā*, which can be described as a “beat or rhythm” (Tecun et al., 2020, p. 172) that also has the ability to showcase the state of a relationship (Ka’ili & Māhina, 2017). Tecun et al. (2020) explain that when the two concepts of *tā* and *vā* are merged, it can be described as “a lens through which to view intersections of contextual arrangements of time–space” (p. 172). This time-focused Tongan perspective deliberately organises the concepts of time and space with the past at the forefront (Hernandez, 2019). Through this view, it is noted that favourable sentiments between individuals can result when time and space intersect in a functional way through a series of “transcendent and communally participatory performances” (Tecun et al., 2020, p.173). When time and space are in sync with one another through successful mediation, a resulting state of equilibrium known as *ngofua* or *noa* is reached.

Due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, and the ongoing need to maintain social distancing, the maintenance of *vā* has been particularly challenging for Pacific peoples. Focusing on the situation in Aotearoa, this paper discusses the creation of virtual *faikava*, as a means of addressing these challenges.

*Faikava* literally means ‘doing kava’ in the Tongan language, with virtual *faikava* evolving as spaces where the traditional Pacific substance *kava* is consumed in combination with internet communication technologies. This paper examines virtual *faikava* by first considering the recent evolution of internet-based communication for Pacific peoples. This is followed by an explanation of *kava*'s cultural significance and role in facilitating social spaces, COVID-19's impact on those social environments, and the shift to online—or virtual *faikava*—in response to Government calls to isolate aimed at limiting the pandemic's spread. The paper then explains the evolution of new learning spaces that have developed out of virtual *faikava*.

## **Vā, vahaope and bridging the separation gap**

The first use of the internet as a communication tool to connect Moana Oceanians with their diasporic communities is believed to have been a 1995 chatroom named the *Kava Bowl Online*, associated with the Pacific Forum Online platform ([www.pacificforum.com](http://www.pacificforum.com)). According to *Kava Bowl Online*'s creator, Taholo Kami, the chatroom served as an online space connecting Tongan diasporic peoples and their island communities by serving as a directory for Tongan businesses, a place where members could discuss topics of interest from home, and a medium through which *vā* could be maintained (Pacific Island Report, 2000).

The concept of the *Kava Bowl Online* is also believed to have led to the creation of the Tongan word for the ‘internet’: *vahaope*. *Vahaope* is a compound term, incorporating the words ‘*vaha*’ (the space between islands) and ‘*ope*’ (to extend outside the range of a boundary). In analysing the definitions of those two words, Ka’ili (2005) defined ‘*vahaope*’ as “space beyond the boundaries of a physical

locale” (p. 108). The appropriateness of Ka‘ili’s observations is demonstrated through the internet’s use as a key tool for connecting, creating and maintaining *vā* between Moana Oceanians and diasporic family and friends around the world.

This use of the internet to aid *vā* does have limitations though, with some Pacific Island communities—particularly those in isolated areas—having limited access to the internet, as well as affordability and internet speed issues. A World Bank International Development Association programme is currently aiming to mitigate these issues, as part of its Pacific Regional Connectivity Programme. The goal of the programme is to improve internet access for citizens in some of the Pacific’s poorest and most remote localities (Henry, 2019).

Tuvalu is a small island nation that, as a result of the programme, has recently benefited from a major upgrade to its internet system, resulting in cheaper and faster internet. Before the upgrade, locals reported that they felt their voices were often absent in online platforms, that their ability to convey news from home to Tuvaluan diasporic communities was stifled, as was their ability to communicate with family members, and that they had difficulty accessing stories and news about their own country, particularly news on the topic of climate change (Henry, 2019).

As internet improvements continue throughout the Pacific, the ability to develop and sustain connections between families and friends will increase, as will the capacity to maintain *vā*. Better internet connectivity will also provide greater access to news and alternative learning settings.

## The social functions of traditional *kava* spaces

*Kava* (*Piper methysticum*) is both a Pacific tropical shrub and a beverage made from the roots and basal stump of that plant. *Kava* beverage plays a key role in the ceremonial practices of many Pacific island nations (Aporosa, 2019b). For example, the Fijian Government (Government of Fiji and the Asian Development Bank, 2019) explains that the traditional welcoming ceremony, which uses *kava*, is

accorded to high dignitaries, chiefs and tribal leaders, [in which] the presentation of *yaqona* [*kava*] signifies the highest respect and deepest reverence for the honoured guest, their people and the *vanua* [land and people] from where they are from. Once the rites have been performed and the *yaqona* drunk, it signifies that the guests and the home people have become as one. (p. 9; also see Aporosa, 2014b; Aporosa & Gaunavou, 2021)

In Tonga, *kava* has been used for centuries, not only for social gatherings, but also for weddings, funerals, and the coronation of kings, with Finau et al. (2002) stating that it is through their use of *kava* that, “Tongans have maintained their cultural identity” (p. 59).

According to Holmes (1967), in Samoa, “formal or informal meetings of chiefs wouldn’t be complete without the distribution of ... *kava*” (p. 107). *Kava* currently serves similar ceremonial functions in many other Pacific Island societies, including “much of Melanesia ... and on Pohnpei Island in Micronesia” (Lebot et al., 1992, p. 1). Aporosa and Forde (2019) have reported that, “*kava* is arguably the Pacific’s/Pasifika’s most dominant icon of identity, a cultural marker that remains just as relevant today as it has done for over a thousand years” (p. 77).

*Kava* is not only found in traditional or ceremonial settings, it has also made its way into mainstream social spaces, often influenced by Oceanic peoples living in diaspora (Aporosa, 2019a; Tecun, 2021). This has encouraged an entire industry to grow out of *kava*, including the opening of a number of ‘*kava* bars’, particularly in the United States. According to Tecun et al. (2020), “*kava* is also currently facing enclosure through global commodification interests by the hipster market, homeopathy and big pharma” (p. 185).

A driver to these new *kava* spaces is *kava's* effect, which promotes sociocultural benefits. Unlike alcohol, *kava* induces relaxation, without loss of mental clarity (Aporosa, 2019a). Lemert (1967) adds that, in contrast to alcohol, *kava* “release[s] aggressive impulses; if anything, *kava* inhibits or disassociates them. You cannot hate with *kava* in you” (p. 333). These relaxing and mellowing effects facilitate fellowship and the formation of new relationships (Lebot et al., 1992).

In addition to being social spaces, environments where *kava* is used also serve an important role as places of learning and for sharing information through *talanoa*. *Talanoa* is a Pacific-wide discussion process that “promotes dialogue and encourages wrestling with issues, in order to expand on them together with continual regurgitation at later times in changed environments, thus building on previous progress or seeking alternative pathways where there appears to be impasse” (Aporosa, 2014a, p. 164). Halapua (2010) makes an interesting comment about *talanoa* that suggests a link between this Pacific form of discourse, *vā* and the internet:

Talanoa may be seen in the allowing of freedom of movement and freedom of interaction. The moana constitutes the vastness of the interconnectedness of the five oceans in this planet earth—it is immense space and openness. Talanoa involves an open space for people to tell stories. The environment provides a profound contribution to offer to conversation. It is about a sacred space and room for interaction.

The moana has depths and shallows. The moana may be peaceful or unpredictable. Talanoa embraces different aspects of meetings among people. Talanoa potentially allows space for a variety of voices coming from different places emotionally and spiritually. The emphasis is on ... encounter with deep and engaged listening. This builds trust and reduces misunderstandings ... Talanoa moves toward the achieving of consensus in decision-making ... Talanoa is open-ended as the moana is alive, dynamic and provides space for all because all the oceans flow into one another and together flow, flow, and flow. (pp. 28–29)

In this quote, Halapua explains the dynamics of *talanoa*, or communicating at an emotional and spiritual level that in turn, creates and maintains *vā*. He also interprets *talanoa* as being similar to the flow of ‘the space between islands’, essentially using metaphoric language to illustrate the movement of the ocean between land. In an earlier section it was explained that the Tongan word for ‘internet’ is *vahaope*, with ‘*vaha*’ literally meaning ‘the space between islands’. With *faikava* environments being spaces in which *talanoa* dominates, and where that *talanoa* often ‘ebbs and flows’ (in a similar manner to movement of the ocean between islands) to underpin interpersonal connection and learning, we are suggesting Halapua’s definition also metaphorically presents a link between *talanoa*, *vā*, *faikava* and the internet, or ‘virtual *faikava*’.

Concerning *faikava* as spaces of learning, Fehoko (2015) explained their function as ‘cultural classrooms’. In his study of young New Zealand-born Tongan males in Auckland, he states, “Faikava plays a significant role in teaching, reinforcing and maintaining the Tongan culture and language for this group ... the *faikava* is valued as an identity marker for New Zealand-born Tongan males in Auckland, New Zealand” (p. 131), because “it is a common place where Tongan values, beliefs, traditions, customs and practices are reinforced, nurtured, rejuvenated and maintained” (p. 138). Similarly, in his study investigating the use of *kava* in Fiji, Aporosa (2014a) reports on both the teaching of *kava* presentation protocols to Fijian high school students as part of in-school cultural studies and the use of *kava* consumption spaces after school hours by teachers as part of their own learning. Aporosa quotes a research participant: “See, *yaqona* [*kava*] is the cornerstone of our culture ... It’s a way we can openly sit and discuss things” (p. 151). He also cites a school principal who commented, “The teachers mix [*kava*] every afternoon. I always go to them. When I go, I become a staff member, not the principal. Staff relax and we can discuss the problems. It makes us strong like a team” (p. 151).

Also increasing in number are women-only *kava kalapu* (clubs), particularly in the Pacific communities in New Zealand and the United States. These spaces challenge notions that *kava* spaces are for men only. Mele Vea, founder of the *Silent Whistle Kalapu* (formed in 2019 and based in Auckland, New Zealand), explained their purpose in a recent *Tangata Pasifika* news item: “Women can get together, empower each other through conversations and *kava*. That’s why we started Silent Whistle” (Lolohea, 2021). The group currently comprises 20–30 women who come from a range of professional backgrounds including police officers, teachers, civil servants and entrepreneurs who come together over *kava* to share experiences and connect in a positive way. “A lot of us were heavy drinkers [of alcohol]”, says Vea, ‘but we don’t drink anymore, we just drink *kava*’.” (Lolohea, 2021). *Silent Whistle* meets monthly at the *Four Shells Kava Lounge* in Central Auckland, a space that is dedicated to *kava*. *Four Shells* is owned by Anau Mesui-Henry (see Figure 4), a Tongan woman whose family has a long history in the *kava* business (Blackwood, 2019). In a discussion with Mesui-Henry (2021, Feb. 14), she promoted *Four Shells* as an inclusive space where people of all backgrounds can come to “meet, engage in meaningful conversations and share experiences over *kava*” (also see Brown & O’Leary, 2020).

*Faikava* as ‘cultural classroom’ has also moved beyond Pacific specific spaces. Te Karere (2014) reported on a rugby team in Southland, Aotearoa, whose members (who include Māori and non-Pacific peoples) used *kava* when they came together after each game to debrief and learn from their most recent encounter. Aporosa (2015) also explains the use of *kava* as part of learning in other non-Pacific contexts in Aotearoa. Additionally, *kava*, *talanoa* and *vā* have for some time been used to facilitate teaching at various tertiary institutions across Aotearoa, including in formal lecture spaces, where *kava* is consumed with students as part of teaching about *kava*’s significance as a Pacific cultural keystone species (Tecun et al., 2020; Fehoko et al., 2021; also see paper this Special Issue, *Grounding Pacific Practice: Fono at the Fale and Veiqaraqaravi Vakavanua* by Aporosa & Fa’avae).

Finally, Aporosa et al. (2021) also explain *faikava* venues as sites for research data collection. These spaces gather together *kava* users who make themselves available as research participants while also engaging in *kava* consumption, *talanoa* and the creation of *vā*. (For further information on this approach, known as the *Faikava Methodology*, see Aporosa et al., 2021) This becomes a two-way learning environment which includes both the research participants who learn about academic research processes, and the research team who gather data to generate new understandings about *kava*, *kava* users and the *faikava* environment.

## Representation of *kava* spaces in the media (during COVID-19)

Despite its relational, cultural and communication benefits, *kava* has a lengthy history of misrepresentation, not only in the media, but also through some peer-reviewed publications (Aporosa, 2019a). Media reports have misrepresented *kava* as being a danger to health, ‘dirty’, promoting laziness, negatively impacting productivity, and encouraging husband and father absenteeism (Aporosa, 2019a; Aporosa & Foley, 2020). These narratives are part of a wider misrepresentation of Pacific people generally, including suggestions that island-dwelling Moana Oceania people are the “helpless victims of climate change” (Henry, 2019) and stereotyping that portrays them as lazy (independent of *kava* use), dependant, and in poor health (Loto et al., 2006).

Pacific people residing in South Auckland have disproportionately borne the brunt of mainstream media misrepresentation. Allen and Bruce (2017) argue, “South Aucklanders are subjected to stereotypes and negative labelling that reinforce their marginalisation and exclusion from mainstream New Zealand culture” (p. 225). The stereotyping of Moana Oceania people by the media, whether in general or specifically linked to *kava*, has caused some speculation on the degree to which elements of racism are projected onto this people group and some of their cultural practices (Pollock, 2009). As will

be discussed in the following section, the arrival of COVID-19 in Aotearoa has served to further fuel this kind of rhetoric.

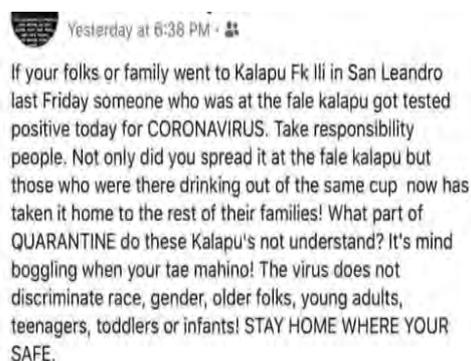
### **Kava and COVID-19**

COVID-19's arrival in Aotearoa was announced on 28 February 2020, with the country shifting into alert level 2 of its four-tier system on 21 March. By 25 March 2020, the country had shifted to alert level 4, essentially a full lockdown, with residents only allowed to leave their homes for food shopping or to work in specified vocational roles categorised as essential workers. During this time, there were widely spread and voiced fears that some people would ignore the rules and meet for social gatherings, despite the alert level 4 restrictions. The government reacted by enacting strict penalties for those who broke the rules.

The Pasifika Leadership Forum<sup>3</sup> considers Pacific communities to be a vulnerable section of society, in terms of COVID-19 risk, due to the inherently communal nature of Pacific cultures, household living situations and their disproportionate levels of health inequities when compare with European-New Zealanders. The forum advocated for a concerted effort to be made by health authorities to deliver information to Pacific communities through traditional communication methods, including the involvement of community and church leaders (Perich, 2020).

On 2 April 2020, eight days after alert level 4 measures had been put in place, TVNZ's 1 News published an online story entitled '*Auckland kava drinking groups continue to meet despite lockdown*' (Dreaver, 2020). The article featured a video showing *kava* drinking and was narrated by TVNZ Pacific correspondent Barbara Dreaver. In the video, Dreaver states, "Kava-group get together in South Auckland, blatantly broadcast live on Facebook over the past week, the latest in the early hours of this morning." The remaining video and the associated print article inferred that this practice was rife, suggesting mass disregard of the level 4 requirements by not only South Auckland Pacific *kava* users, but the Pacific *kava* community Aotearoa-wide. Dreaver, who already had a reputation among some Pacific groups for exaggerating and misreporting, particularly in reports related to *kava* use<sup>4</sup>, drew criticism for her 2 April article and video. That criticism also included a response in which *kava* researchers felt obliged to explain how new *kava* use practices had been adopted by many Pacific people in order to comply with the COVID-19 lockdown requirements (Marrett et al., 2020).

Fears that COVID-19 could spread through *kava* groups and into the wider Pacific community was not limited to Aotearoa. *The Coconet*, a website that serves the interests of the global Pacific community, reported in April 2020 that a member of a *kava* club in San Leandro, California, had tested positive for COVID-19 (Lua, 2020). In a similar manner to media misreporting in Aotearoa, the San Leandro *kava* COVID-19 claim appears to have been based on a screenshot of a social media post (see Figure 1) and has not, to date, been verified by an authoritative source.

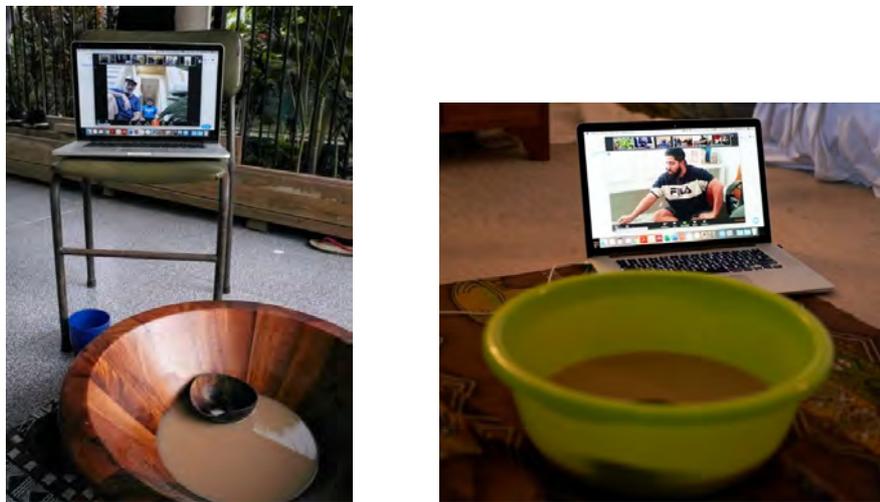


**Figure 1. Social media post warning about the spread of COVID-19 at a *faikava* venue in California, United States. (Source: Lua, 2020)**

Yet despite their misrepresentative nature, what these Aotearoa- and United States-based claims of level 4 *kava* gatherings did do was provide a first glimpse into the evolving world of virtual *faikava* (Lua, 2020; Marrett et al., 2020).

### The evolution of virtual *faikava*

In response to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and the associated social distancing measures enacted around the world, several online *kava* groups and virtual *kava* spaces were created and promoted widely across both the Pacific Island and diasporic *kava* communities. Unlike communal *faikava* gatherings, virtual *faikava* consists of individual users setting up their *kava* mixing equipment and *kava* bowl at home, then connecting—via internet communication technologies such as Zoom, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp and Viber—to one of a variety of online groups. Through these groups, users continue to engage in *kava* consumption and *faikava talanoa* aimed at maintaining cultural connectedness and *vā*, while complying with COVID-19 isolation requirements (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** *Kava* bowl containing *kava*, with ipu (cup made from half coconut shell) and laptop. (Photographs taken by Todd M. Henry—left: in Nuku‘alofa, Tonga; right: from quarantine isolation hotel in Auckland, New Zealand)

Although some have suggested that virtual *faikava* have sprung up in response to media criticism of *kava* users breaching isolation regulations, a number of these spaces existed before Dreaver’s report on 2 April 2020. One of the first to form was the Facebook Messenger group, *COVID-19 Isolation Mix*. This group, with its distinctively international presence, met for the first time on 27 March 2020, two days after New Zealand moved into alert level 4. According to the group’s creator (Aporosa), the first *COVID-19 Isolation (kava) Mix* was hosted from Hamilton, New Zealand, with over 15 participants joining at various times over a period of nine hours.

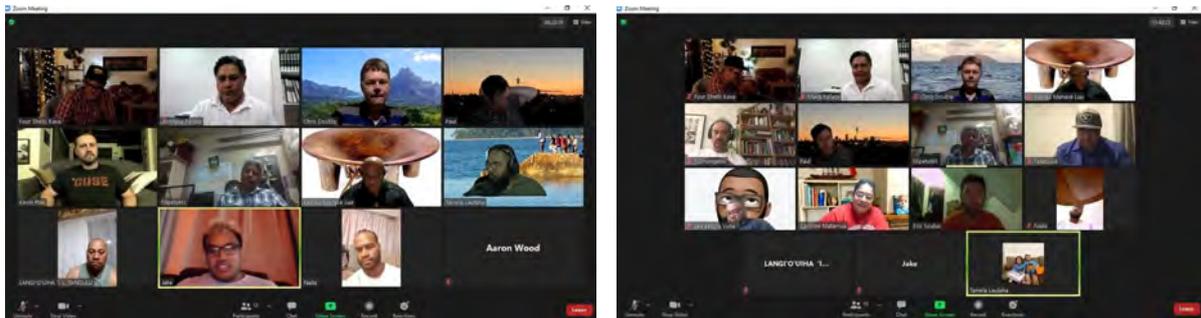
The group’s second online virtual *faikava* occurred the following Saturday, on 3 April 2020, and was much larger, lasting from 11am on Saturday to 4am on Sunday (New Zealand time). Attendees signed in over the duration of the virtual *faikava* from numerous international locations, including Taiwan, Hawaii, the continental United States, Fiji, Tonga, Australia and Thailand.

The *COVID-19 Isolation Mix* group’s online *kava* sessions took place for another four Saturdays. The group included several academics whose work focuses on researching *kava* use in traditional Pacific settings, and as a result much of the *talanoa* focused on study findings, with discussion often simplifying those findings for the non-academic audience.

Six weeks after it started, the *COVID-19 Isolation Mix* group's numbers decreased significantly, as attendees shifted to other groups that better reflected their own ethnicities or languages. The group's creator advises that the *COVID-19 Isolation Mix* group subsequently gave rise to several other popular online virtual *faikava* groups.

One of these groups was the *Inasi Worldwide Online Kava Klub*, which has a strong Tongan presence and a *talanoa* focus on Pacific political issues and the *kava* production industry. Encouraged by *kava* production *talanoa* and the growth in *kava* interest in the United States, a *Inasi Kava Klub* member arranged for a virtual tour through a US-based *kava* business, where local regulations, *kava* processing hygiene practices and distribution administration were explained. This is believed to be the first time that such information has been shared outside of the United States.

*Inasi Worldwide Online Kava Klub* gained greater prominence (and more members) when *The Coconet* ran an interview with Tongan political activist Pakilau Manase Lua about the group and its activities (Lua, 2020). Lua explained in the interview that a highlight of the club's virtual meetings to date had been a visit from invited guest Taholo Kami, founder of the now defunct *Kava Bowl Online* (explained above). The article provided links for readers to join *Inasi Kava Klub's* virtual *faikava* sessions via Zoom. *Inasi Kava Klub's* virtual *faikava* has remained popular, with a spike in online attendance during the seven-day alert level 3 COVID-19 isolation period enforced in the Auckland region in early March 2021. Figure 3 shows some of the *Inasi Kava Klub* participants at a virtual *faikava* during that alert level 3 period.



**Figure 3.** *Inasi Kava Klub* participants engaging in virtual *faikava* during the alert level 3 COVID-19 isolation period in Auckland, New Zealand, in early March 2021. (Images captured by Todd M. Henry)

Another virtual *faikava* group to grow out of the *COVID-19 Isolation Mix* was *Talanoa Tuesday*. This Zoom-based group comprised mostly Pacific women and will be discussed further in a later section.

The *COVID-19 Isolation Mix* virtual *faikava* group has been largely quiet since mid-May 2020, with members preferring to meet face-to-face when possible. Despite this, the group still has 60 members. Another reason for the group's gradually reducing participation has been to do with some members running out of *kava* and experiencing difficulty accessing more due to lockdown restrictions. This is a particular concern for Australian based *kava* users, a country that has strict *kava* importation regulations, and with COVID-19 currently preventing *kava* from entering the country (Radio New Zealand, 2020). As a result, some members have appeared in the online sessions with alcoholic beverages, confirming the statement made by Pakilau Manase Lua (2020) in his *Coconet* interview that if *kava* becomes unavailable, people will fill the void with alcohol: "You'll see more harm at home, the abuse, all of those things will manifest in our communities."

## Attitudes and preferences: Virtual versus physical faikava

While many have flocked to and embraced the new trend of online *kava* spaces as a way to connect with others during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are some who consider that virtual *kava* sessions are not acceptable replacements for physical ones. Samuela<sup>5</sup>, a long-time *kava* drinker and member of a large Tongan *kava* club in Aotearoa's central North Island, indicated that most of the older members of his *kava* club showed little interest in participating in online *kava* spaces and would be unlikely to drink *kava* at all over the lockdown periods out of a preference for meeting to drink *kava* in person.

Australia's Special Broadcasting Service also produced a story featuring Buka Sokovagone, a Fijian residing in Queensland, Australia, who stated that he had tried an online *kava* space during Australia's lockdown and felt that the exchange was too impersonal: "Like 'a long-distance relationship'. Chatting with strangers across the world didn't resonate with him, as he typically shares *kava* with his closest friends." (Seow, 2020). Sokovagone decided to stop drinking *kava* until restrictions eased, after which time he would host smaller physical *kava* sessions, where social distancing and frequent hand washing would be employed.

However, these more restrictive physical practices can also undermine what participants consider a physical *kava* session to be about. As one commentator, Ratu Maseinawa, has said in relation to hygiene concerns arising out of the sharing of *kava* utensils and cups during COVID-19, "restricting fully sharing *kava* bowls [cups] in a common place makes me feel like we're not really practising the *kava* ceremony in its pure form" (Seow, 2020).

## Virtual faikava as productive learning spaces

Despite the preference that some have for physical *kava* environments and sessions, many have embraced online *kava* as spaces for the meaningful and productive discussion of contemporary topics. An example of this is the variety of topics discussed in *COVID-19 Isolation Mix* virtual *faikava* sessions. As explained earlier, discussions tended to focus on *kava* research, and covered topics such as *kava* history and tradition, *kava* and health (Aporosa, 2019a), *kava* and cognition—particularly *kava* use and driver safety (Aporosa et al., 2020), the evolution of *kava* use by non-Pacific peoples and even debating the merits of virtual *faikava* sessions. The role of *Inasi Worldwide Online Kava Klub* as a platform to discuss political issues was mentioned earlier. Those discussions played a critical role in the delivery of a 10,000-signature petition to the Aotearoa Parliament seeking Governmental support towards Pacific overstayers and those stranded in Aotearoa due to COVID-19 (Hopgood, 2020a). *Inasi Worldwide Online Kava Klub* continues to have a strong online following, hosting virtual *faikava* as often as twice per week.

*Wakanavu*, a Fijian brand of *kava* currently selling out of Wellington, Aotearoa, uses Zoom to host virtual *faikava* sessions, with *talanoa* focused on the *kava* industry and business-related topics. A topic that created a lot of debate in the *Wakanavu* virtual *faikava* was the recent publication of the *Tonga Kava Quality Standard*, released in June 2020 (Government of Tonga, 2020). Some were critical of the publication's claims, criticism that led to lengthy debate. This also prompted several submissions to the Tongan Ministry of Agriculture. In another virtual *faikava*, members were walked through a California *kava* distribution facility and learned about import regulations, quality control and state *kava* regulation (Lomaloma, 2020a). *Wakanavu*'s virtual *faikava* also hosts a weekly class for those wanting to learn the Fijian language (Johnson, 2020). *Wakanavu*'s virtual *faikava* sessions are continuing, despite relaxations in lock-down restrictions, and often have a distinctively international presence. Some past sessions, including seven Fiji language lessons, have also been recorded and uploaded to the *Wakanavu*'s website as blog posts, where they are available to the public (Lomaloma, 2020b).

The evolution of online *kava* sessions to facilitate focused discussions for research dissemination and understanding, political activism, business, professional development or language acquisition purposes have seen them transformed into valuable learning spaces.

This format of focused, guided discussion is embodied by *Talanoa Tuesday*. Set up by *Four Shells Kava Lounge* founder and co-owner ‘Anau Mesui-Henry (Figure 4). *Talanoa Tuesday* provides a ‘safe space’ for Pacific entrepreneurs and professionals to network. The group’s name—*Talanoa Tuesday*—incorporates a reference to the reason it was established, namely to facilitate *talanoa*, and conforms with Vaiioleti’s (2006) description of “a personal encounter where people story their issues, their realities and aspirations” (pp. 21–23). As well as a format for community and group discussion, *talanoa* is used as an informal approach for collecting qualitative academic research data when working with Moana Oceanic people, as it allows for a more authentic exchange of information between researcher and participant (Aporosa et al., 2021; Henry, 2019).



**Figure 4.** Anau Mesui-Henry, Founder of *Talanoa Tuesday*. (Photographer: Todd M. Henry)

Although *Talanoa Tuesday*’s sessions have been held exclusively online since the advent of COVID-19, they were originally physical meetings, with the first session held in October 2019 at the *Four Shells Kava* premises in Auckland city. Those physical sessions incorporated *kava* use among participants, with Mesui-Henry explaining that incorporating *kava* helped maximise the time available and created more open discussion among participants, as opposed to a European-style of meeting where a presenter speaks to an audience.

Speaking on the founding principles of *Talanoa Tuesday*, Mesui-Henry also references the *faa’i kaveikoula*, or “the four golden pillars” that strengthen social connections in Tonga’s cultural context, with these linked to love, respect, humility and the maintenance of socio-spatial relationships—*tā* and *vā*. Mesui-Henry (2020) explains that these principles help “guide and strengthen the ways we want to interact with each other at first as strangers. It leads to creating meaningful and supportive relationships online and offline” (personal communication).

When alert level 4 lockdown measures were announced in Aotearoa, Mesui-Henry reacted by immediately moving *Talanoa Tuesday* sessions online. Had internet communication tools not been available, Mesui-Henry (2020) believes that *Talanoa Tuesday* would probably have been suspended indefinitely: “Taking *Talanoa Tuesday* online has opened up a digital communal space where Pacific Islanders from around the world can meet and connect in a way that is familiar to us. The fact that we are not physically present hasn’t been a problem” (personal communication).

The move to an online platform also fostered development of *Talanoa Tuesday* as an online learning space for collaboration and communication, as it immediately became available to a wider

group of participants than had attended the physical sessions. People from all backgrounds have attended virtual *Talanoa Tuesday* sessions, with the greatest interest in the sessions coming from Pacific women, many of whom operate their own businesses or have aspirations to start businesses.

The group is promoted via social media (see Figures 5 and 6), and to date, over 20 virtual *Talanoa Tuesday* sessions have been held via Zoom and Facebook Live, with over 2,000 people tuning in from around Aotearoa, as well as Tonga, Samoa, Fiji, Australia, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia and Canada. Many participants drink *kava* during the sessions, although in smaller numbers than at past physical sessions, since the group has moved online. Despite this reduction in *kava* consumption, Mesui-Henry says the principles embodied in the *kava* space are still what informs the approach *Talanoa Tuesday* takes as an online platform.

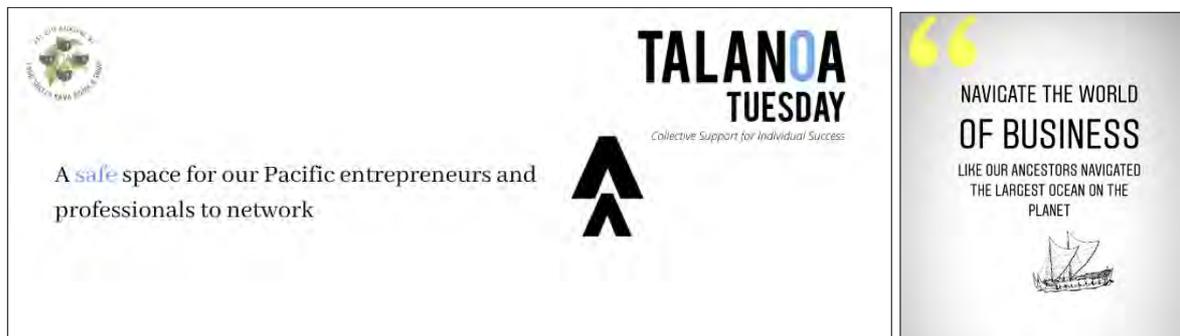


Figure 5. *Talanoa Tuesday* social media promotional. (Source: Anau Mesui-Henry)

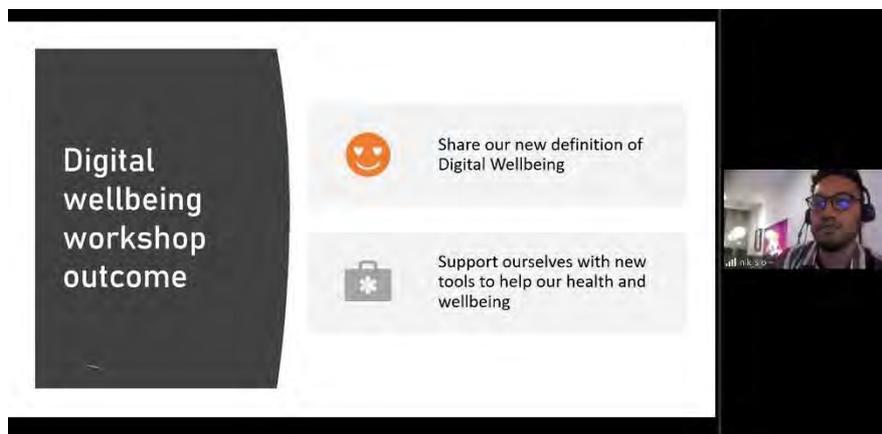


Figure 6. *Talanoa Tuesday* social media promotional material. (Source: Anau Mesui-Henry)

Finally, it is important to recognise the work of Fehoko et al (2021). In their paper, which was only published a few days ago, they draw on the concept of “‘fonua’ and its complex meaning that includes ‘land, placenta, customs, people’” (p. 2), “‘fonua’s link to kava’” (p. 5), and “‘vahaope (digital online space)’” (p. 7) to discuss their experience of virtual faikava during the COVID-19 lockdown period in Aotearoa. That discussion also highlights the role of virtual faikava in the retention and maintenance of vā and as a learning environment. For instance, they comment that kava’s shift from the physical to the online virtual faikava space:

... 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

... the practice of meeting to share and work through ideas prior to this circumstance [COVID-19] nonetheless continued in an adapted form ... *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.

### Virtual *faikava* and Moana Oceania wayfinding: A continuation of cultural adaptability

Ancient Moana Oceanians could acutely recognise environmental changes and conditions on the islands they inhabited and would either make appropriate adaptations or move on from a particular island if necessary for survival. Norfolk Island, Henderson Island and Pitcairn Island provide examples of this, being abandoned after long periods of occupation by early Moana Oceanic people (McEvoy et al., 2010; Preece, 1998). While the reasons for this abandonment are up for debate, what is known is that the ancestors of today's Moana Oceania people were expert wayfinders, highly adaptable to a vast range of environmental conditions at sea and on land.

*Kava* has a strong history of accompanying Moana Oceanic peoples as they navigated back and forth across the vast Pacific Ocean, trailblazing their way to ever more bountiful and remote islands (Kirch & Green, 2001). Grayzel (2019) has described the vast scope and enduring nature of these journeys: "Over thousands of years and miles, across open ocean, a core population expanded to settle on hundreds of scattered islands, while maintaining shared identity, continued awareness and repetitive contact with each other" (p. 7). Grayzel's reference to "shared identity, continued awareness and repetitive contact" encapsulates the essence of the *kava* space, in both its physical and virtual form. *Vā* can be representative of the space between islands that are connected by water, but it can also refer to the socio-spatial relationships between individuals and groups, effectively connected through *kava*, and the act of sharing *kava* within a common space where learning also takes place.

Today's descendants of the ancient Moana Oceania possess the inherent abilities of their ancestors whose traditional ecological knowledge enabled them to skilfully adapt to changing physical and social environments (Lefale, 2010). According to Lefale (2010), the traditional knowledge and coping mechanisms of indigenous societies can offer many valuable lessons to modern society during times of change. The COVID-19 pandemic has posed many dilemmas for Moana Oceanic people whose cultures place such high value on maintaining constant and close contact with others, and the transition to observing social distancing measures has not been easy (Lauer, 2020). In addition, COVID-19 has seen borders to many Pacific Island nations closed on a seemingly indefinite basis, causing families to be separated from one another, job losses, uncertainty, sickness, and even death in some unfortunate cases.

For Moana Oceania people living in parts of the world where COVID-19 is active, culturally appropriate adaptations are being painstakingly made and remade in order to reduce the risk that the virus will spread in the community. Among these are the innovative adaptations that are being made for the continuation of *faikava* and other cultural or social events through the use of internet communication technology. These adaptations are encouraging and, in many ways, represent a modern form of

wayfinding; finding ways to problem solve and advance cultural values, learning and fellowship, while consciously extending the concept of vā to a range of virtual spaces.

## Conclusion

The forced social distancing measures that have been imposed around the world due to COVID-19 has had a marked impact on the traditional functions and relational connection of people from collectivist cultures. However, Moana Oceanic peoples have reacted with resilience and adaptability, acting swiftly to bring a critical aspect of their culture—traditional *kava* use—online, enabling the continuance of this practice and the critical role it plays in creating community, while also adhering to lockdown rules and helping prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the community. This new use of internet-based communication and social-media technologies combined with *kava*—and termed virtual *faikava*—has allowed for the maintenance of vā and led to increased levels of learning and interpersonal support. That process has been suggested to comprise a new form of Pacific ‘wayfinding’, demonstrating the ongoing creativity and adaptability of Pacific peoples to new and challenging environments.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Peoples from collectivist cultures typically prioritise their wider group, group identity, and goals and tribalism over individualism and self (Podsiadlowski & Fox, 2011).
- <sup>2</sup> Although the concept of *vā* is understood across Moana Oceania, the word is most familiar to Pacific peoples in the islands to the east of Fiji. The concept of *vā* in Fiji is more commonly captured in the word *veiyaloni*.
- <sup>3</sup> “The Pacific Leadership Forum are a group of Pacific communities who look after the interests of Pasifika and communicate their concerns to the government” (Hopgood, 2020b).
- <sup>4</sup> An additional example of criticism concerning TVNZ’s Pacific reporter Barbara Dreaver can be found on page 8–9 of Aporosa, 2019a.
- <sup>5</sup> Name changed to aid anonymity (personal communication, 9 May 2020).