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Grounding Pacific practice: Fono at the Fale and Veiqaraqaravi Vakavanua

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Grounding Pacific practice: *Fono at the Fale* and *Veiqaraqaravi Vakavanua*

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Introduction

Pacific practice is grounded in *vanua* and *fonua*, Fijian and Tongan terms encapsulating notions of land, culture and people. *Fono at the Fale* and *Veiqaraqaravi Vakavanua* are expressions of *vanua* and *fonua* cultural practice and are facilitated by, and through, the use of kava. Kava, a culturally significant drink made from the roots of the *piper methysticum* plant, is used in many areas of the Pacific (or *Moana*), grounding cultural practice in tradition, values and beliefs—with knowledge and meaning-making imparted and shared with those involved (Aporosa, 2019b). That meaning-making includes *talanoa*, an explanatory and conversational process fundamental to the ways in which Fijian and Tongan people make sense of their *veiyaloni* and *vā* inter-connections and interactions with the physical, spiritual, sacred and ancestral *vanua* and *fonua*—through land, sky, *moana* and people, including deity (Fa'avae et al., 2021). In this paper we explain and reflect on the use of *Fono at the Fale* and *Veiqaraqaravi Vakavanua*, inclusive of kava and *talanoa* at the University of Waikato (UoW) as culturally-embedded practices associated with Pacific student and staff learning and interactions, through *vanua* and *fonua* expressions of iMua linked to UoW strategic vision and goals.

With this paper focusing primarily on *Fono at the Fale* and *Veiqaraqaravi Vakavanua*, minimal explanation is given concerning iMua at the UoW, or kava as a cultural keystone species, drink and facilitator of *talanoa-vā*. For details on these themes, readers are encouraged to consult the following papers included in this special issue: *Imua: Reflections on imua and talanoa-vā in the ongoing strategic journey of a New Zealand university* and *The virtual faikava: Maintaining vā and creating online learning spaces during COVID-19*.

Fono at the Fale

Throughout the UoW, there are various ways in which the iMua initiative is outworked as part of grounding Pacific practices that encourage and align with Pacific students' worldviews and wellbeing. *Fono at the Fale* is an initiative that promotes Pacific research dialogical practice aligned with wellbeing.

In its eighth year, and initially starting in the home of a Pacific post-graduate student who later joined the University of Waikato as a research fellow, *Fono at the Fale* is a UoW iMua initiative linked



to wayfinding and *vā* (see Figure 1). This weekly event, held around the kava bowl and facilitated by staff, provides a culturally inspired space in which Pacific post-graduate students (and non-Pacific students using Pacific methodologies and/or collecting research data from Pacific participants) unpack research, discuss literature, methodologies and methods, seek advice on sourcing participants and how to negotiate challenges linked to supervision or administrative processes (see Figure 2).

Kava and the kava use environment are ideal for initiatives such as *Fono at the Fale*. Not only has kava been used for more than 2000 years in cultural practice and in the facilitation of *talanoa*—therefore firmly grounding *Fono at the Fale* in Pacific tradition and practice—but this traditionally significant drink is not an alcohol and does not cause marked euphoria, hallucinogenic effects or interfere with reasoning (Aporosa, 2019a). Additionally, there is no compulsion to drink kava and the attendees at *Fono at the Fale* are given the choice not to consume it if they choose not to. The focus is on the kava environment as a space of *talanoa-vā* linked to research wayfinding as opposed to simply being a place to drink kava.



Figure 1. The early days (2014): *Fono at the Fale* in the Student Union lounge, University of Waikato (University of Waikato: Pacific, 2021b).

Fono at the Fale has played a role in the postgraduate journey of several hundred students. For Laulaupea‘alu (paper in this Special Issue), the importance of *Fono at the Fale* for them, is a space that encourages “*faikava talanoa* ... [which] aspire[s] students to honour *vā* ethics through the enacting and maintenance of *vāofi* (close connections) through the relationships and the diverse voices and opinions shared.” In an unsolicited email, a female Māori student wrote: “I felt safe in the environment ... able to express my concerns/worries with my studies here at university. Sharing of ideas has helped me immensely [in my Master’s thesis]” (personal communication, 2017).

Fono at the Fale-type spaces of learning within tertiary environments is gaining traction. For instance, Tecun et al. (2020) make a brief comment that “university students in Aotearoa [New Zealand] are discussing their studies and community issues in co-ed and gender-inclusive kava circles” (p. 184). Fehoko et al. (2021) pick up on this and add:

The adaptation to use faikava [spaces of kava use] as a forum for exchanging ideas and debates has also been taking place in several tertiary institutions in Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland [New Zealand]). 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 ... 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. (p. 4)



Figure 2. *Fono at the Fale* in action at ‘The Conch’, the Pacific at Waikato lounge (University of Waikato: Pacific, 2021b).

It is anticipated *Fono at the Fale* will continue to provide an alternative yet safe space grounded on Pacific respect-based values that prioritise *vā* honouring, inclusivity, *talanoa* and learner wayfinding as integral parts of postgraduate students’ research experience, with kava as part, but not the focus, of the contextual experience.

While *Fono at the Fale* is an informal yet culturally guided space of lively chatter, debate and learning often accompanied by Pacific humour and a lot of laughing, *iMua* and wayfinding at UoW can also be seen in high-level ceremony inclusive of formal language and ritualised processes and structure. A recent *veiqaraqaravi vakavanua* illustrates this.

***Veiqaraqaravi vakavanua*: Ceremonial protocols and welcoming of the Chancellor**

iMua and wayfinding values *vā* and the relational space and acknowledges the authority figures and Pacific pioneers. As Fa’avae et al. (2021) point out, *vā* is “the in-between connective spaces, where our place/position in relation with [others] ... affirms the significance of comprehending one’s relationship with [that] other[s]” (p. 6). With these understandings, the UoW’s Pacific staff and student body recently welcomed the new Chancellor, Sir Anand Satyanand, GNZM, QSO, KStJ—who has relational links primarily to Fiji as well as Tonga and Samoa—with *veiqaraqaravi vakavanua*.

Veiqaraqaravi vakavanua is arguably *iTaukei*’s (indigenous Fijian’s) highest level of ceremonial practice. It has similarities with the Māori welcome protocol of *pōwhiri*, particularly the *isevusevu*—a specific formality within the *veiqaraqaravi vakavanua* ceremony. *Veiqaraqaravi vakavanua* is

underpinned by *sautu* (relational unity and harmony) aimed at creating and solidifying *veiyaloni* (*vā*) (Government of Fiji and the Asian Development Bank, 2019).

The similarity of *veiqaraqaravi vakavanua* with *pōwhiri* was mentioned in a briefing to attendees at the ceremony prior to the arrival of Sir Anand and Lady Susan Satyanand. Guests were advised that Sir Anand and Lady Susan had been officially welcomed to the UoW by Māori the previous year; therefore, the *veiqaraqaravi vakavanua* they were about to observe sat under Māori *tikanga* and *pōwhiri* processes, not seeking to usurp or undermine that earlier protocol. The UoW Pacific staff and student body acknowledge and defer to Māori as *tangata whenua* ('people of the land' as the original inhabitants of Aotearoa New Zealand), a recognition stated in the opening sections of the Pacific Plan 2021–25. Through *veiqaraqaravi vakavanua* we brought into conversation our transindigenous relational connection with Māori as *tangata moana*, people within the *moana*.

Despite many of the articles in this special issue discussing individual or micro-level interaction as part of the creation and maintenance of *vā*, in the case of *veiqaraqaravi vakavanua*, ceremony and protocol occurs at a macro-'chiefly' level, with a few selected leaders representing others to create *sautu* and *veiyaloni* (*vā*) for both themselves and those they represent. For example, researchers explain that much of what occurs in ceremony across the Pacific is symbolic with chiefly entities representing vastly more than themselves, to include also their ancestral deities, the ancestors living and deceased, and clan and political allies (Toren, 1988, 2007; Turner, 1986). Abramson (2005) states that "whilst symbols of rank, status and gender frequently predicate the ritual use of *yaqona* [kava, or in ceremonies such as *veiqaraqaravi vakavanua*], empirically there is more to the enduring rites of *yaqona* drinking [and *veiqaraqaravi vakavanua*] than the symbolic expression of hierarchy" (p. 330). Abramson (2005) qualifies his statement by explaining that when a chief drinks a bowl of *yaqona*-kava, the kava is consumed by his 'ritual body' on behalf of those he is relationally connected to together with his land and culture (p. 332; also see Abramson, 2009). In the case of the recent *veiqaraqaravi vakavanua* for the new Chancellor at the UoW, that particular culturally guided symbolic interaction occurred between Sir Anand (in his new role as the 'chief' of the UoW) on behalf of Lady Susan, their ancestors, children, wider family and support systems and the Assistant Vice-Chancellor Pacific (AVC Pacific), Dr Keaka Hemi, on behalf of (and in her role as 'chief' of) the UoW's Pacific staff and student body. Through that macro-'chiefly' level, the symbolic interaction of *veiqaraqaravi vakavanua* (between Sir Anand and the AVC Pacific) *veiyaloni* (*vā*) was negotiated and established on behalf, and by, a vastly wider body of people than simply those physically present at the event.

Veiqaraqaravi vakavanua comprises of nine symbolic interactions required to achieve *sautu* and *veiyaloni* (*vā*). It is rare for a full nine-step *veiqaraqaravi vakavanua* to be completed outside of Fiji unless it is conducted at executive level ceremonies through foreign embassies or government interactions. It is suspected that this is the first time *veiqaraqaravi vakavanua* has been presented in an educational environment outside of Fiji. *Veiqaraqaravi vakavanua* at the UoW involved the following:

1. *Veivakasalusutaki*—the acknowledgement of guests by placing *salusalu* (garlands) around their necks to signify their status.
2. *Qaloqalovi*—the presentation of *tabua* (whale tooth) to a chief guest. *Tabua* sit at the top of Fijian gift hierarchy. To reflect that significance, during the presentation of *tabua* they are referred to as *kamunaga* (literally meaning an extremely valuable offering) and *vatumivanua* (literally meaning a tangible/solid representation of the *mana* of the *vanua*—the sacredness of the land, culture and people of Fiji). Figure 3 shows Sir Anand receiving *tabua* during *qaloqalovi*.
3. *iVakamamaca*—the gifting of cultural items to the chief guest. At our event, those gifts included *ibe* (woven mats), *sasa* (traditional broom) and printed fabric.
4. *iSevusevu*—the presentation of kava to guests as part of the process of relational connection. Kava, commonly known in Fiji as *yaqona*, and also referred to as *wainivanua* (literally meaning an ingestible/drinkable manifestation of the land, culture and people of Fiji) during official

ceremonies, is believed to possess *mana* (spiritual power) which, when shared between host and guest, breaks *tabu* (separation) and creates *noa* (balance, unity, mutuality). Due to the importance of *isevusevu* (and the associated practice of *yaqona vakaturaga*, the next step in the *veiqaraqaravi vakavanua* process) to the creation of *sautu* and *veiyaloni* (*vā*), *isevusevu* as a stand-alone ceremony is an everyday occurrence in Fiji. Ceremonies with similarities to *isevusevu* are common across many parts of the Pacific/Oceania (Aporosa, 2019b). This includes Aotearoa and the Māori practice of *pōwhiri* and *whakatau*, with the key difference that kava is used instead of *kai* (food) as part of the *tapu/noa* (sacredness, separation/mutuality, balance) process (Aporosa & Forde, 2019).



Figure 3. Sir Anand Satyanand, GNZM, QSO, KStJ, receiving *tabua* during *qaloqalovi* (University of Waikato, 2021b).

5. *Yaqona vakaturaga*—literally means the serving and drinking of kava in a chiefly manner, with the consumption of kava being critical to the *tapu/noa* process and creation of *sautu* and *veiyaloni* (*vā*) between host and guest. Figure 4 shows Sir Anand receiving his cup of kava from the *Tu Yaqona* (designated server) during the *yaqona vakaturaga*.
6. *Wase ni yaqona*—is the presentation of food items cooked in the *lovo* (Fijian *hangi*) to the chief guest.
7. *Vosa vakaturaga*—is the opportunity for the chief guest to formally address those present. In our ceremony, Sir Anand explained his Pacific ancestral connections including the migration of his great grandparents to Fiji from India more than 100 years ago, and his schooling and lifelong friendships with many of Fiji’s contemporary leadership pioneers.
8. *Ulivu ni vosa vakaturaga*—is a speech of reciprocation for the *vosa vakaturaga*. This was presented by the AVC Pacific who acknowledged Sir Anand and his guests, and Senior leadership and division members across the university.
9. *Tatau*—is the seeking of permission from the chief guest to leave—the final step in *veiqaraqaravi vakavanua*. It is rare for a chief guest to leave immediately following the *tatau*. However, with this completed, it draws the formalities to a close, permitting a more relaxed

atmosphere while allowing the guest to slip away at a later time without feeling the need to make an announcement of departure which would necessitate additional formalities.



Figure 4. Sir Anand Satyanand, GNZM, QSO, KStJ, receiving his cup of kava during the *yaqona vakaturaga* (University of Waikato, 2021b).

In spite of *veiqaraqaravi vakavanua* being of *iTaukei* origin, the ceremony had multi-ethnic representation, including those born or having ancestral connection to Hawaii, Kuki Airani, Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Niue, Tuvalu, Kiribati and West Papua (see Figure 5). The notion of inclusiveness is aligned with the core values of *iMua*, wayfinding, and *veiyaloni/vā*. The *Pacific Plan 2021–25*, a university policy, actively encourages inclusiveness amongst UoW Pacific staff and student body.



Figure 5. Some of the Pacific student body involved in *veiqaraqaravi vakavanua*, representing their Pacific homelands including Hawaii, Kuki Airani, Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Niue, Tuvalu, Kiribati and West Papua (University of Waikato, 2021b).

The prioritising of inclusiveness also influenced the performances at the end of *veiqaraqaravi vakavanua* formalities, with traditional dance presented by students from the Waikato University Tertiary-Tech Tongan Student Association (WUTTSA), the Kiri Waikato University Student

Association (Kiri WUSA) (see Figure 6) and the Waikato University Samoan Student Association (WUSSA).

The final student presentation was followed by the serving of lunch. Food is an important facilitator in the creation and maintenance of *vā*. Although food has always played a major role in ceremony, it is often more than simple sustenance whereby specific food items (including meat, particularly pork and root crops) have symbolic significance. Lal and Fortune (2020) comment, “So, feasts are complex social events ... [where] the social ties between the visitors and the hosts are expressed ... being occasions of social solidarity ... [in which] people manipulate their social relationships ... Thus, feasting combines both material and symbolic aspects” (pp. 411–412). While food has a symbolic role in ceremony, these *vā* contexts have additional benefits, with Durham et al. (2019) reporting Pacific cultural celebration spaces as important to increasing notions of health and wellbeing.



Figure 6. A student from the Kiri Waikato University Student Association (Kiri WUSA) performing traditional dance following the end of *veiqaraqaravi vakavanua* formalities (University of Waikato, 2021b).

For those involved in *veiqaraqaravi vakavanua* who chose not to partake in the meal sharing, instead chose to be present to host guests wanting to drink kava. They were rewarded when Sir Anand, Lady Susan and family members joined them after their meal (see Figure 7), further solidifying *vā* and relational connection, this time within the kava circle. The highlights of *veiqaraqaravi vakavanua* can be seen in a short, professionally edited video (see University of Waikato, 2021a).

Ongoing reflections

Pacific practices enable meaningful learning and engagement. Both the noted Pacific initiatives at UoW, the *Fono at the Fale* and *Veiqaraqaravi Vakavanua*, grounded the shared interactions within—Pacific as well as between non-Pacific in culturally meaningful and inclusive ways. Through the kava processes and associated ceremonial practices, interactions with and between diverse people was mediated through Pacific-centred values, beliefs and ideas. Grounding the intra-cultural as well as inter-cultural practices validates the appropriateness of Indigenous Pacific frameworks, knowledges and languages in the successful orientation and re-orientation of Pacific students and their communities across the diaspora. It also grounds the importance of *talanoa-vā* and culturally guided relational connections by the UoW Pacific staff and student body as they continue their *iMua* wayfinding voyage. The willingness to acknowledge and embrace *talanoa-vā* is necessarily about learning to connect with others, diversity and the specificities that make us similar yet different to each other. Embracing the learning involved is

about appreciating the grounded sense-making that contextualises our intra-cultural and inter-cultural connections and relations as *tangata moana* within Aotearoa New Zealand.



Figure 7. Sir Anand Satyanand, GNZM, QSO, KStJ, and family joins some of the hosts for informal kava drinking after the conclusion of the event (University of Waikato: Pacific, 2021b).

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