Reclaiming the ‘real’ Rarotongan culture

When CI News published a story recently about licitnic problems faced by a new Rarotonga business based on the ‘traditional’ tumu or bush beer, it grabbed the attention of University of Waitakere researcher Dr Apo Aponosa. He offered to write a feature story on the original practices and traditions of the tumu which were based not on bush beer, but on kava. Dr Aponosa is related to the village of Mosavatu in northern Rarotonga. His adopted sister is related to Aitutaki. His work at the Hamilton, New Zealand university included teaching on kava and identity.

I HATE a friend here in New Zealand. He is half Rarotongan, half Aitutakian. He is very in- volved with the Maori culture. Several months ago we were drinking kava together and I was amazed at his knowledge of Rarotonga. My ancestry in Fiji although my adopted sister is Aitutakian, and many now live in Rarotonga; so my wife and I were heading over for a few days to spend some time with my mate. ‘Every time I go home (to Rarotonga) I get very sad about the loss of culture and the excessive alcohol use and violence that goes with it. I would love to see kava replace alcohol in Rarotonga to provide us with a space like this to talk about culture. My mate’s comment was very interesting to me as my area of research at the University of Waikato includes Pasifika cultural expression, particularly the kava culture and its role as a unique source of identity for Pasifika people.

My mate added, “My interest in kava and revitalizing this traditional ritual and ceremonial practice is to facilitate the affirmation of pa- painga or genealogy connections with whakamana marae families and their collective responsibility to maintain the marae and tapu and mauri of relationships to the mystical past, present and future generations.”

“For me, kava presents opportunities for us to celebrate and affirm our indigenousity to our culture, to va vana, Rarotonga, and resonate with me as a platform for advocacy.”

I headed off to Rarotonga keen to understand first-hand my mate’s concern. I spent many hours with both locals and Pasifika migrants (some working in the tourism industry and pursuing culture and kava). Some were very thought-provoking.

For months, I was asked about the name of their island group, the Cook Islands and why they were named after an English explorer, something that tended to reflect colonial dominance, instead of the local culture and ancestry. Therefore, in honour of these, I discovered this, I will use the name Te Ao Maohi to the greater Raro- tonga island group which includes Pukapuka and its accompanying islands in the north and Mangaia etc in the south.

In addition to discussion about Te Ao Maohi’s colonially-driven name, there were also suggestions by some of the need for greater autonomy, self-determination and decolonisation. While discussion of this nature can make some uncomfortable, viewing comments of this nature as radical, what was clear from all Te Ao Maohi I spoke to, was a desire to reclaim traditional expressions of the culture as part of their identity to assert nationalism.

Since arriving back in New Zealand, I have noticed that hardly a day goes by without an article on culture appearing in the Te Ao Maohi (Cook Islands) News. This included a very interesting story two weeks ago (cultural identity and the “brown economy,” May 21) in which Thomas Tarun- Tongo-Wyer asked whether Te Ao Maohi culture is being exploited through commodification by the tourism industry. But the story that really grabbed my attention was the closure of the Atu Tumu in

Most importantly though, for most niVanuatu, Fijian, Tongan, Samoan, and increasingly indigenous Hawaiians, kava is one of their most potent icons of identity, a plant and drink that uniquely represents who we are.

Oa Tupu (Business imprinted by ‘vain’, May 26). In that artic- le, local business owner Tanji Njiru, said that the aim of the fumara was to introduce “a unique island experience that models itself on the practices and traditions of the tumu culture in Ato.”

That gets me thinking: ‘tumu’ today serve bush beer, an alcohol introduced to Te Ao Maohi in the early colonial period whereas the original prac- tices and traditions of the tumu were based on kava. If Te Ao Maohi want to re-establish traditional cultural practice as so many say, something which is also a hot topic in the Te Ao Maohi (Cook Islands) News, why not do that through the reintroduction of the kava culture?

I will discuss that shortly, but first, a little about kava:

Kava is a drink made from the roots and basal stumps of the Piper methysticum plant. Botanists believe kava originated in Vanuatu and was transported throughout the South Pacific. From Papua New Guinea in the west to Te Ao Maohi and Ha- waii in the east — with the exception of Australia and New Zealand, approximately 300 years ago by way of early navigational spread.

Kava in both its plant and drinkable form is considered to have great mystical, spiritual and cultural significance. Additionally, when made into its drinkable form, kava is believed to possess mana, or spiritual power. This mana attribute creates the understanding that kava — even as a drink, is considered to be alive.

Even today, in many parts of Polynesia, kava users treat this in- digenous substance with a great deal of respect and, one is sup- port almost every event from birth to death. This includes events like the blessing and naming a child, which is a confirmation of a child to be alive. Additionally, kava use practice is strongly associated with respect for one another and the kava envi- ronment, and this adds an additional level of meaning and mana to the many and situations where kava is used.

Kava’s value to medicine is not limited to its traditional use. The pharmaceutical industry has recognized kava’s value as an anti-stress medication with doctors prescribing kava for Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) disease. A number of studies are currently underway looking at kava’s effectiveness in cancer research.

Most importantly though, for most niVanuatu, Fijian, Tongan, Samoan and increasingly indigenous Hawaiians, kava is one of their most potent icons of identity, a plant and drink that uniquely represents who Pasifika are.

A kava-drinking ceremony at the University of Waikato, in Hamilton, New Zealand. PHOTO: Dr Apo Aponosa.
McElvain state kava "remains better ... as a platform for chiefly discussion."

So what happened to kava in Te Ao Maohi, the "greater Rarotongan island group"?

Until the arrival of the early colonists, there were no alcoholic beverages in the Pacific. Kava was the traditional drink and this included its use in Te Ao Maori. Unfortunately, nobody is known about pre-colonial kava use in Te Ao Maohi. This is because kava use was eradicated by the early missionaries who believed that its use and related practices would hold back the people of the islands from progressing toward modernity. Mangia & Ummav said, "By the end of the 19th century, Christianity had thoroughly replaced the traditional belief systems and practices. For a culture founded on oral traditions, this was a body blow akin to the burning of libraries in Western culture."

Only glimpses of pre-colonial kava use remain. For instance, Te Ariki-marae Ata'a described in 1920 remember using a traditional Rarotongan tapa-making process along with kava leaves as part of spiritual healing.

As it was removed, it was replaced by bush beer, the making of which was taught to the Te Ao Maohi by early missionaries and traders. What is interesting though, is even today in some tumuru where bush-beer is drunk, aspects of traditional kava consumption practice can be seen in bush-beer drinking.

For instance, I have seen photos and heard accounts of bush-beer drinkers sitting cross-legged in a circle drinking bush-beer from a kava-type kumu (wooden bowl) from half-coconut shell cup, practice that could be mistaken for traditional kava use. One major difference is though, I have also heard of trouble at tumuru resulting from bush-beer/alcohol intoxication, something that does not happen with kava use.

That raises an interesting point, the missionaries removed kava as they see this as being "primitive" and not modern. Alcohol was introduced and as we know, causes major socio-cultural disruption and violence. Kava does not do this. So which drink is more "primitive" considering bad behaviour is often framed as "natural"?

Kava is the "cultural keystone species" and indigenous substance of Te Ao Maohi, not bush-beer/alcohol. Kava is also a potent icon of Pasifik identity, unique to the people of the Pacific. The reintroduction of kava to Te Ao Maohi can provide not only an authentic reflection of traditional culture, but its use patterns have the ability to facilitate discussion on cultural revitalisation. This is something the

In its drinkable form, kava is believed to poses mana, or spiritual power. Both the plant and the drink are accorded much respect in many parts of Pasifik. 

Kava is made from the roots and basal stump of the Piper Methysticum plant. 

A kava ceremony precedes a staff meeting a school in Fiji. PHOTO: Dr Apo Aroposa. 

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