

# Yaqona (kava) and the school campus: Regulation versus facilitation

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Yaqona (kava) is a culturally significant, non-alcoholic drink consumed nightly by many Fijians. Although yaqona is not consumed by primary or secondary school students, cultural protocols related to yaqona preparation and presentation are often taught in their schools, with students then presenting this indigenous drink to acknowledge visitors to the school, open events and support fundraisers. In the early 2000s, some within the Fiji Ministry of Education began questioning whether yaqona use by teachers was negatively impacting their teaching ability, suggesting it should be banned from the school campus. In this study, Fijian teachers were cognitively tested and interviewed following an evening of yaqona consumption with the results suggesting this indigenous substance can disrupt cognition and in turn negatively impact teaching quality the morning after consumption. Although development theory prescribes prohibition and situational bans in cases where indigenous substances negatively impact productivity, the author argues that prohibiting yaqona in Fijian schools would be short-sighted, as the findings show that this traditional substance is critical to the facilitation of school function, identity formation, and academic achievement, all elements necessary to development.

**Keywords:** education, delivery and facilitation, achievement, culture, identity, kava, regulation

## Introduction

Kava is a non-alcoholic drink with great cultural significance for many Pacific peoples. The use of kava by primary and secondary school teachers, particularly at school-related events and functions, and its impacts on their subsequent ability to teach is a matter of interest and concern for the Fiji Ministry of Education (“Bole advises against yaqona”, 2008; Chand, 2020; Ministry of Education, National Heritage, Culture and Arts, Youth and Sports, 2010; Nai, 2020). However, attempts to date by the Ministry to regulate kava use in school contexts have created ambiguity and uncertainty, and are of questionable benefit (Aporosa, 2014, pp. 63–4).

The research discussed in this article was conducted in Fiji between 2009 and 2013, and examined the significance of culture and the kava drinking habits of Fijian teachers together with the impacts – positive and negative – that this drinking was having on both the quality of teaching and the overall environment in Fijian schools.

The research informs the debate around what form, if any, kava regulation in Fijian schools should take by bringing together the available literature of the subject with local voices and perspectives on the

relationship between kava and education. Importantly, it also illustrates what is at stake for all Fijians if this vital icon of cultural identity is banned or restricted.

Although conducted in Fiji, the study is of interest to all kava-using Oceanic cultures, where kava and its consumption is linked to cultural identity and practice (Aporosa, 2019a). It is also important for policymakers and development practitioners, demonstrating the need to consider wider cultural and societal issues in development and developmental practice.

The full research was published as a book by Pasifika@Massey (Massey University) entitled *Yaqona (Kava) and Education in Fiji: Investigating “Cultural Complexities” from a Post-Development Perspective* (Aporosa, 2014). To aid further reading, page numbers, presented simply as (p. xx) unless included with other references, correspond with discussion in the book publication.

Since completing the research in 2013, the Fiji Ministry of Education (FMoE) has made little comment concerning kava in school environments. As will be discussed in the closing sections of the paper, kava use by teachers is now back in the spotlight.

## Kava: An ingestible manifestation of culture

The kava plant (*Piper methysticum*) is cultivated widely across the tropical islands of the Pacific for its roots, which are ground up and mixed with water to make a beverage that is then drunk within culturally informed settings over many hours (Aporosa, 2019a; see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Dry pounded kava root being mixed for drinking (photographer: Todd Henry, 2019)**



Kava and its attendant practices play a significant cultural role where it is used as medicine, to acknowledge hierarchies, bless and protect structures and ventures, and give efficacy to events (Aporosa, 2019a). Its ability to induce a relaxed, yet cogent, state in the drinker means it is commonly used to facilitate quality discussion and decision-making as part of *talanoa*, a Pacific dialogue process (Aporosa, 2019b).

For many areas of the Pacific, kava is arguably the most dominant icon of identity, providing a unique expression of cultural unity and respect (Aporosa, 2019a). These areas include Pohnpei (Federated States of Micronesia), Vanuatu, Fiji, Tonga and Samoa. In Papua New Guinea, kava use has a lengthy history in a few selected areas, including the Fly River Delta, and is also increasing in popularity in the capital Port Moresby (Aporosa, 2014). In nations such as the Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Niue, Rarotonga, Tahiti and Hawaii, that use is best described as renewed, as it follows a lengthy hiatus influenced by Christian missionaries starting in the 1800s (pp. 37–8). In Aotearoa New Zealand (ANZ)—where kava does not grow—Pacific diasporic communities have been using kava since the 1960s, with this also encouraging its use among non-Pacific peoples (Aporosa, 2015; Henry & Aporosa, 2021). There is also increased use of kava by Māori, both influenced by the ANZ Pacific diasporic community and Māori-initiated

reengagement with their pre-migration traditional substance (Aporosa & Ford, 2019). In many of these environments, kava circles and venues provide a “cultural classroom” where respect, language and traditions are taught; cultural cohesion is reinforced; and issues of importance to the community are discussed in *talanoa* (Aporosa, 2019a; Aporosa & Forde, 2019; Fehoko, 2015). This includes tertiary spaces where kava is consumed by students during teaching about the kava culture and used to facilitate peer supervision involving post-graduate research students (Aporosa & Fa'avae, 2021; Tecun, Reeves & Wolfgramm, 2020).

Kava contains kavalactones, a psychoactive ingredient that creates a relaxed yet clear-headed state in the drinker (Lebot, 1991). Unlike alcohol, kava does not cause marked euphoria, meaning it does not impair decision-making, adversely diminish mental or physical control, or lead to emotional changes, such as disinhibition (Aporosa, 2011, 2019b, 2021; Aporosa et al., 2020; Aporosa et al., 2022). It is also not addictive (Aporosa & Foley, 2020; Sarris et al., 2013). Many Pacific Island communities are now exporting kava as it is increasing in popularity as a relaxant and stress reliever and as an alternative to alcohol among non-Pacific peoples (Wolinski, 2018).

In the Fijian Islands kava is commonly known as *yaqona*, although in formal settings is referred to as *wainivanua*, literally meaning an ingestible manifestation of the people, their land and cultural systems (pp. 67–8). This encourages the presentation and consumption of *yaqona* at almost every event from birth to death, and its drinking by many Fijians in socio-cultural spaces on a nightly basis (Aporosa, 2019a; Aporosa & Gaunavou, 2021).

## Yaqona use in schools: The Ministry's dilemma

In Fiji, *yaqona* also plays an important role within, and in relation to, schools and education. Although they do not drink it themselves, students will often present *yaqona* to visitors attending school events and celebrations, for example, at the opening of sports days, fundraisers and graduation ceremonies (Aporosa, 2008, pp. 60–2; Aporosa, 2014, pp. 62–3; Tuwere, 2002, p. 172; see Figures 2 and 3). *Yaqona* is often also presented at the commencement of, and consumed during, school functions such as parent teacher evenings and board meetings. Teachers will also frequently consume *yaqona* during these events and on campus at the end of the school day (pp. 81–3; see Figures 4 and 5).

**Figure 2: Year 12 student at Richmond Methodist High School, Kadavu, Fiji, presents yaqona to dignitaries at the opening of the annual school fundraising event (photographer: Apo Aporosa, 2008)**



**Figure 3: Ratu Viliami Katonivere (author's cousin) and fellow Queen Victoria School students serve yaqona during Fiji Day Celebrations, Suva, 2013 (unknown photographer)**



**Figure 4: Teachers drinking yaqona during school hours to “support” their students sitting end-of-year exams (photographer: Apo Aporosa, 2009; image altered for confidentiality)**



**Figure 5: Teachers drinking yaqona in the school hall after hours (photographer: Apo Aporosa, 2006)**



At the start of the new millennium, the Fiji Ministry of Education (FMoE) began grappling with the issue of *yaqona*, and whether its use by teachers was negatively impacting on their teaching ability and their students' educational achievement, particularly on mornings following lengthy kava drinking sessions (Tavola, 2000, p. 169). Some players within the Ministry began to suggest that *yaqona* should be banned from the school campus (Aporosa, 2008, pp. 61–4).

This issue presented a genuine dilemma for the FMoE. On the one hand, the Ministry recognised that education plays a critical role in national development strategies (an area of particular focus for the Fijian Government), but that this role was often dominated by Eurocentric paradigms. It also knew that culture and traditionally influenced value systems, some of which countered Eurocentrism, had the potential to influence higher academic achievement (pp. 58, 62–6, 83, 85). Several commentators, for example, have noted that students who have strong cultural connectedness also have increased notions of empowerment, improved environmental adjustment (including better adjustment on campus), and better inter-personal relationships and application to learning (see literature review pp. 61–2).

The FMoE also fully understood the prominent role that *yaqona* plays in Fijian cultural identity and practice, and knew that, although students do not drink *yaqona*, *yaqona's* cultural prominence nevertheless adds to student notions of identity construction and formation and therefore plays a role in their academic achievement (Ministry of Education, National Heritage, Culture and Arts, Youth and Sports, 2010; Tavola, 2000, p. 169).

On the other hand, the FMoE was only too aware that quality education (and its attendant promise of academic achievement) requires competent, alert and highly functioning teachers who are capable of delivering quality curricula (Tavola, 2000, p. 169). The Ministry knew that *yaqona* use by teachers can occur over many hours, running into the early hours of the morning, and that this had the potential to increase tiredness and lethargy, a concern also frequently presented in local newspapers (Chambers, 2018; Delaibatiki, 2017; Rawalai, 2014). Therefore, the Ministry was concerned tiredness and lethargy had the potential to disrupt the delivery of quality education which in turn could have a negative impact on national development strategies (Aporosa, 2008, p. 87; “Bole advises against yaqona”, 2008).

This dilemma was summed up by the FMoE in its 2000 education review *Learning Together*: “*Yaqona* drinking is important in ceremonial Fijian culture and social gatherings but excessive consumption of kava is becoming a problem... [as] it substantially inhibits performance of duties in non-traditional professional environments, including... teaching” (Tavola, 2000, p. 169).

To assist with understanding this traditional/contemporary juxtaposition, alongside the wider tensions between culture and education, the Ministry called for research that would strengthen understanding of the relationship between Fijian (specifically *iTaukei*, or indigenous Fijian) culture and values and its system of education (Williams, 2000, p. 188).

Discussion over the following decade on the importance of Fijian culture, including *yaqona*, to educational attainment culminated with the Ministry of Education’s release, in 2010, of its *Policy on Drugs and Substances Abuse in Schools*. The policy made it clear that marijuana, tobacco and alcohol were prohibited on campus. However, when it came to *yaqona*, the policy was more relaxed, stating: “2.2 The MoE makes allowance for kava only to be used at ceremonial purposes in moderate amounts” and “2.5 Government employees are strictly prohibited from drinking *yaqona* during office hours including on government premises” (Ministry of Education, National Heritage, Culture and Arts, Youth and Sports, 2010, p. 2).

Not surprisingly, the policy’s introduction caused much discussion on school campuses and around the *tanoa* (the wooden bowl used for mixing and serving *yaqona*). In the eyes of some, the policy wording justified current *yaqona* use practices on campus. From this perspective, all *yaqona* use had a traditional, and therefore “ceremonial” purpose. Others questioned what was meant by “moderate amounts”, while yet others were confused why the policy “strictly prohibited” *yaqona* drinking during office hours, when this was exactly the time that its use for “ceremonial purposes” was most likely to occur.

The policy’s ambiguity was a demonstration of the dilemma faced by the FMoE in trying to apply rigid Eurocentric regulatory boundaries to an intrinsic indeterminate cultural practice and icon of identity. It is this conflict, and its implications for future development in Fiji, that are explored in the research study.

## Research methods

The study aimed to respond to the FMoE’s research call by investigating the specific theme of *yaqona* and quality education delivery, as opposed to a broad-sweeping discussion of all themes and elements presented in the *Learning Together* review.

The investigation was guided by the indigenous *vanua* research framework,<sup>1</sup> an approach that embodies the principles of post-development.<sup>2</sup> The major tenets of this development theory are the elimination of hegemony by challenging Eurocentrism, while acknowledging and endorsing local grassroots decision-making and governance systems, culture, traditional knowledge and self-determination. The use of the *vanua* research framework in the study in turn supported a primary aim of post-development, namely self-determination and empowerment by emphasising local systems, knowledge and priorities.

Although the study focused on *yaqona* and education from the Fijian context, it nevertheless has wider application. As discussed earlier, kava is used widely across the Pacific and in Pacific diasporic communities, environments that include both a large body of teaching staff and Pacific students. In addition, the study offers insights into the use of culturally embedded substances from a post-development perspective, a theme absent in academic literature. The study's combined use of psychometric measures, or cognitive tests, as part of post-development, is also believed to be a first (p. 102).

### Work with participants

The study involved surveying, cognitively assessing and interviewing participants, many of whom were teachers, from schools across Fiji. This stage of the research was conducted during 2009.

In total, 252 people participated in the study. Of these, 82 comprised senior education officers at the FMoE, church and government officials including the Minister of Education, academics, spouses of teachers, school administration staff and other stakeholders (p. 91). Most were interviewed using a pre-prepared interview guide. A further 63 were teachers from 18 schools who were surveyed and interviewed, providing information that enabled participant selection for cognitive assessment. Eight of those 18 schools were classified as rurally isolated, four as semi-rural, and six as urban (p. 92–5). Thirty-six of the 63 participants met the necessary conditions for psychometric testing and comprised one of two groups: “active” (*yaqona* consuming participants) or “control” (non-*yaqona* consuming participants) (p. 104–5). Those 36 participants were evenly split across the three school classifications: six active and six control participants from each of the rurally isolated, semi-rural and urban schools (p. 110, 128).

The psychometric testing involved processing speed index tests, namely symbol search and coding assessment measures, which assesses concentration, short-term memory and attention aspects of cognitive function (Groth-Marnat, 2003, p. 150)—all necessary functions for the delivery of quality education (McGee & Fraser, 2008, p. 120).

Two psychometric assessment tools specifically developed for this purpose were used: the Digit-Span and Digit Symbol-Coding subtests. These tools comprise two of the 14 subtests that make up the WAIS-III test battery, an instrument used to measure a wide range of cognitive functioning ability (Kaufman & Lichtenberger 1999, p. 5), and recognised as one of the “most frequently used” and authoritative worldwide (Daniel, 1997, p. 1038). The use of these Western-developed and -normed psychometric

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<sup>1</sup> *Vanua* research is a research methodology developed by Professor Unaisi Nabobo-Baba (2006) and employed when the research focus has implications for the *vanua*. *Vanua* is a concept of culture, literally meaning “the land, its people and traditions” (Ravuvu, 1983, p. 76). That application of *vanua* research, when used in this study associated with cognitive testing and post-development (as explained in Footnote 2), led to the creation of the Pacific post-development research framework (see Aporosa, 2014, p. 102, 175; Aporosa et al., 2021, p. 78).

<sup>2</sup> Post-development is an evolving anti-hegemonic, internally theorised, initiated and applied development ideology. Further, post-development acts as a resource to assist in resolving some of the theoretical aspects of “contemporary problems created by modernization and development” (Schech & Haggis, 2000, p. 124).

measures as part of a post-development *vanua* research framework is discussed and justified within the book publication (p. 102; also see Aporosa et al., 2021).

The two WAIS-III subtests were administered to the 36 teacher participants during two field research periods in May and November 2009. These, together with the surveys and interviews assisted in answering the three study research questions:

- What are the *yaqona* consumption habits of Fijian teachers, and what role does culture play in this?
- Does *yaqona* impact teacher cognition, sickness and absenteeism and, if so, what effect does this have on education delivery?
- Does *yaqona* play other positive roles in the school environment and, if so, what action should be taken regarding teacher kava use, considering that *yaqona* is central to culture?

The findings for these questions will now be discussed. They are followed by commentary on the implications of the findings for the Fijian Government's policy response and regulatory approach to *yaqona* use in educational settings and contexts.

## Results

### Research question 1: Yaqona consumption and culture

The first research question focused on gathering information regarding the *yaqona* drinking habits of Fijian teachers and then asked what role culture played in that consumption.

Participants in the study reported that, on average, they had consumed *yaqona* for six hours on nights prior to teaching in the classroom (p. 109–10). Although there was a significant difference between this average and that reported by the author's earlier study (three hours) (Aporosa, 2008, p. 24), this estimate did not seem unrealistic, especially when compared to studies into general *yaqona* consumption levels (Aporosa, 2008; Newland, 2008; Tomlinson, 2004). This six-hour consumption period meant that participants were likely to have consumed an estimated 36 *bilo* (cup made from a half coconut shell) and 9,576 milligrams of kavalactones during each session (pp. 110–12), a level that is almost 32 times greater than the daily pharmacologically recommended dose (Mediherb, 1994, p. 2).

Of interest was consumption by ethnicity, which revealed the importance of culture in promoting *yaqona* drinking. Although the rural *iTaukei* (or indigenous Fijian) participants were adamant they were the heaviest *yaqona* consumers, when their consumption was compared to their urban and semi-urban ethnic counterparts, and to Indo-Fijian<sup>3</sup> consumers in all settings, this was incorrect (p. 112). Additionally, rural Indo-Fijian teachers were shown to be the heaviest consumers (averaging 8.6 hours per session prior to

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<sup>3</sup> Indo-Fijian people are Fijian citizens who can trace their ancestry back to subcontinent India and often to the British Colonial system of indenture in which more than 60,000 were brought to Fiji over a 37-year period starting in the late 1870s to work on sugar plantations. In 2010, a Fiji Public Service Commission memo replaced "the word 'Fijian' or 'indigenous' or 'indigenous Fijian', with the word '*iTaukei*' ... when referring to the original and native settlers of Fiji" (Government of Fiji, 2010). The memo went on to say that all other citizens of the country, whether of Indian, Chinese or European ancestry, would be referred to simply as "Fijian". However, for the purpose of this paper, aimed at reducing confusion, Fijians of Indian ancestry are referred to as "Indo-Fijian".



teaching), while urban *iTaukei* drinkers (averaging 6.6 hours) were found to consume more than their rural ethnic counterparts (at 5.6 hours).

It is arguable that the creation of these misconceptions by rural *iTaukei* (that they were the heaviest *yaqona* consumers by ethnicity) is founded in notions of identity. Statements made by *iTaukei* participants to describe their *yaqona* use referred to *yaqona* as solidifying and reinforcing a sense of place, tradition and power. This supports the perception that *yaqona* is much more than just a sociable beverage, but instead represents an ingestible manifestation of *vanua* (a concept of culture, literally meaning “the land, its people and traditions”) (Aporosa, 2014, pp. 67–8; Ravuvu, 1983, p. 76; Tomlinson, 2019, p. 8).

This *iTaukei* desire for identity solidification can itself be viewed as a reaction to perceived threats to their culture from modernity, Westernisation, urbanisation, and Indo-Fijian political, business and property ownership success (p. 170). Put simply, rural *iTaukei* believe they consume more *yaqona* than their urban or Indo-Fijian counterparts as this solidifies their notions of traditionalism, which add to their “sense of self and identity” (Brison, 2007, p. 95) when that sense is under threat from external sources (pp. 113–6).

Kava consumption by Indo-Fijians was also shown to be influenced by culture, in that it could be attributed to “diaspora identity” (Hall, 1990, p. 235), essentially a melding of traditional Indian and *iTaukei* cultural expression and the culture of *yaqona* (pp. 116–20; Aporosa, 2015). So, for example, practices such as *isevusevu*, or the formal presentation of *yaqona*, were reported to be used in some Indo-Fijian schools. From these findings, a key theme to emerge from participant responses in relation to the first research question was the importance of *yaqona* to notions of identity for *iTaukei*, and to a lesser extent Indo-Fijians.

Academics have argued that identity and notions of self-worth are positive factors towards scholastic achievement (pp. 61–2). This current research also supports the view that there is a relationship between *yaqona* use, culture, identity and educational attainment (pp. 62–3, 149–50). Furthermore, the research found evidence that *yaqona* use within the school arena was likely to increase inter-ethnic socialisation, which in turn contributes to improved staff unity (pp. 124, 151–2). Research suggests that staff cohesion and collegiality is itself a valuable input into quality education delivery.

## Research question 2: Effects of *yaqona* on cognition, absenteeism and education delivery

The second research question focused on the cognitive effects, sickness and absenteeism resulting from *lomaloma ca*, or *yaqona* hangover, and how these affected quality education delivery. It should be noted that *lomaloma ca* is experienced quite differently to that of an alcohol hangover. Impacts are vastly less severe with feelings of tiredness manifesting in lethargy (Aporosa & Tomlinson, 2014). Due to *yaqona* sessions frequently running past midnight, and with some *yaqona* drinkers attending these environments on consecutive nights, *lomaloma ca* has been argued by some to be more the result of sleep deprivation as opposed to the effects of *yaqona*.

The psychometric testing carried out during the study compared differences in levels of concentration, short-term memory and attention between an active (*yaqona* consuming) group and a control (non-*yaqona* consuming) group, a total of 36 teachers, as they entered the classroom in the morning to start teaching (pp. 127–8). Results from the testing indicated that members of the active group displayed a 16.5 per cent deficit in processing speed (p. 136). Although this finding suggests clear cause and effect, a number of constraining factors prevented conclusive statements being made. For instance, many of the *yaqona* using

participants started they often attended late-night *yaqona* sessions over consecutive nights, leading to questions concerning the impacts of sleep deprivation on test results. Whether it was the effects of *yaqona* alone, limited sleep, or both, the findings are supported by the participants' own reports. In particular, high numbers of participants reported a lack of motivation and short-term memory deficits, which some cited as interfering with their ability to provide quality teaching.

These deficits were also reported to have negative impacts for the *yaqona* drinkers' non-consuming peers. The active group of participants reported increased incidences of late arrival in the classroom and sick leave, and a lack of productivity while at work (presenteeism), all of which increased workloads and stresses on non-consuming peers (pp. 137–44).

Overall, these impacts were described as negatively affecting teacher roles, competencies and professionalism, which in turn compromised quality education delivery—a finding that has obvious ramifications for the achievement of national developmental goals and economic growth. Conversely, there were also reports of heavy *yaqona* users who were extremely competent and motivated in their work following late-night drinking sessions, again negating simple cause-and-effect arguments.

When these results are considered together with the findings from the first research question, they support the notion of a traditional/contemporary tension. For example, *yaqona* has a positive impact on educational achievement through identity formation and solidification, and its strong contribution to a sense of self among students. However, the results also suggest that high *yaqona* use (by some teachers) is simultaneously interfering with quality education delivery and, therefore, Fiji's pursuit of contemporary-styled development.

An important concept to arise in relation to this research question was the comparative effects of *yaqona* and alternative substances, such as alcohol or marijuana. Several participants compared the impact of *lomaloma ca* with an alcohol hangover and argued that the impacts of alcohol were a lot worse than that of *yaqona*. In addition, alcohol use often had a variety of other negative factors associated with it that *yaqona* lacks, such as a tendency to induce euphoric disinhibition, which can lead to antisocial behaviour, self-injury and increased violence (pp. 151, 153–4, 162, 171; also see Aporosa et al., 2022).

Interestingly, however, the impacts of alcohol are often ignored within Fijian and other societies. This is arguably because alcohol use has greater acceptance among white elites (Nutt, 2020), whereas traditional substances like *yaqona* tend to be viewed as primitive and native, and therefore assumed detrimental to development (Aporosa, 2019b). In other words, Eurocentrism tends to highlight the small negatives of indigenous substances like *yaqona*, while ignoring the greater negatives of alcohol. This lends another facet to the traditional/contemporary tension that exists around *yaqona* use and education.

Adding further to this traditional/contemporary tension are several Fijian Pentecostal Christian denominations. These Euro-American influenced expressions of Christianity place “emphasis on direct individual experience of the Holy Spirit” and are quite different to the more traditional Christian denominations (such as the Wesleyan Methodist and Catholic churches) established during the early colonial period (Brison, 2017, p. 658). Although it could appear this line of discussion moves away from the focus of the paper, it is worth explaining the beliefs of some Fijian Christians concerning *yaqona* in order to give context to later discussion regarding moving forward with the issue of *yaqona* and the school campus.

Some within Pentecostal Christian denominations are highly critical of *yaqona* use, linking this with demonic spirits and arguing *yaqona* “is entirely evil in light of the Biblical truth” (Qioniwasa, 2020, p. 5; also see Aporosa, 2019a, pp. 10–11). To add traction to this form of religious dogma, some will also state (as fact) that *yaqona* is a health danger, leads to drunkenness and promotes laziness,<sup>4</sup> and disrupts family time<sup>5</sup>; these cause-and-effect statements are either false or highly subjective (Aporosa, 2019b, 2019c; Aporosa & Foley, 2020). In a 2016 sermon delivered by Pastor Atu Vulaono from the Pentecostal New Methodist Church of Fiji, he preached that it is vastly better for Fijians to drink Fiji Gold (beer) than *yaqona*, as “*yaqona* shakes your brain and takes you to the world of worshipping devils [into the demonic]” (translated from Fijian, see Aporosa, 2019c, p. 4). This comment is perplexing considering the high levels of alcohol related socio-cultural disruption and violence in Fiji (Chaudhary, 2020), whereas *yaqona* promotes “casual contentment ... with a clear-headedness that promotes conversation” (p. 39). This is the reason why *yaqona* use is encouraged over alcohol in both Fiji and wider Pacific communities (p. 162; Fox & Aporosa, 2020; Pinomi, 2008). It is also worth reiterating earlier commentary in which the severity of alcohol hangover was explained as exceedingly worse when compared with *lomaloma ca* (also see p. 78, footnotes 45–7). Fiji education commentator Sharon Bessell (2009) noted this, citing concerns about teachers “coming to school ... affected by alcohol [and hangover as] ... unprofessional behaviour” (as cited in Aporosa, 2014, p. 66).

### Research question 3: The role of *yaqona* in education delivery—past, present and future

The third question investigated in the study was whether *yaqona* played any positive role within the school setting and, if so, what action should be taken with teachers when considering the traditional/contemporary tension.

In response to questions exploring this issue, research participants strongly reported that *yaqona* is critical not only for maintaining cultural identity, but also for the survival of many schools. This is because the majority of Fijian schools are run under a state/community partnership model. Under the model, the schools are owned, maintained and managed by village communities or religious organisations, which then receive financial contributions from the state in order to deliver educational services (pp. 54–5).

In most settings, this state/community partnership is critically informed, facilitated and motivated by *yaqona*. For example:

- *Yaqona* is used as a culturally appropriate form of appreciation, used to support and encourage parental and alumni participation in schools, participation that can include the building of classrooms, dormitories, et cetera and the maintenance of facilities (p. 147).

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<sup>4</sup> In response to discussions regarding drunkenness, Pentecostal Christians will often cite the Biblical scripture: “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18). Concerning laziness, several scriptures are often cited including, “He who is slothful in his work is a brother to him who is a great destroyer” (Proverbs 18:9). When counter-arguments are put to Pentecostal Christians, including commentary that the use of *yaqona* by members of the Wesleyan Methodist and Catholic churches comprises an expression of their Christianity and connection with God, they will often respond with Biblical scripture such as, “But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Timothy 4:1), inferring those who believe their *yaqona* use can be unified in any way with the Christian God are being deceived by the devil.

<sup>5</sup> In a recent publication I explained that due to *yaqona* drinking often being time consuming, *yaqona* is frequently “blamed” for taking men away from their families. I add that “excessive television watching, gaming or involvement with sport can do the same thing – it’s about how people choose to spend their time. [However, *yaqona*,] as opposed to personal choice, or even poor choice, has become the scapegoat and the point of criticism” (Aporosa & Foley, 2020, p. 108).

- *Yaqona* is grown by some schools as a source of income and used by some parents as a means of school fee payment, with the value of the *yaqona* given often surpassing that of the fees due (p. 148).
- *Yaqona* plays a vital role in encouraging attendance at, and facilitating discussion in, board and parental meetings (particularly at many rural and semi-rural schools), with parents often opting to not attend when *yaqona* is restricted (p. 148).
- *Yaqona* plays a similarly important role at school fundraising events, including through its sale (pp. 148–9).
- *Yaqona* venues provide inclusive environments for staff to meet and mix, promoting unity and inter-racial harmony between staff (particularly between *iTaukei* and other ethnicities in Fiji), and thereby fostering greater cooperation and collaboration on campus (pp. 124, 151–2).

Essentially, *yaqona* acts as both a driver and a facilitator of the state/community partnership in many schools by encouraging community support, infrastructure, facility maintenance and, most critically, financial backing. A number of participants were very clear that removing *yaqona* from the educational arena had the potential to threaten the ongoing viability of many schools. In other words, until the Fiji Government is in a position to fully fund education in Fiji, and therefore dispense with the “community” aspect of the state/community partnership, most schools simply could not survive without *yaqona* (p. 152).

Participants also noted that banning *yaqona* from the school campus would remove an important form of cultural instruction in which students are taught the respect-based values, such as *vakaturaga*,<sup>6</sup> associated with *yaqona*. This includes being taught how to mix and culturally present *yaqona*, allowing the students to engage with and present their culture as part of welcoming guests and opening events and ceremonies.

These reports again demonstrate the complexity of this issue. On the one hand, *yaqona* (for many) is arguably a hindrance to quality education delivery, and to teacher roles, competencies, professionalism and attendance. On the other, *yaqona* is considered to be a key element, not only to identity formation and academic achievement, but also the continuance of schools and education provision.

When asked how to deal with this traditional/contemporary tension, most research participants were adamant that, due to the cultural embeddedness of *yaqona* use, any attempt at regulatory action by the government would be futile (p. 153). This belief is supported by the ineffectiveness of the FMoE’s efforts to date to do exactly this.

However, the failure of the Ministry’s *Policy on Drugs and Substances Abuse in Schools* (2010) is more complex than simply an issue with teachers ignoring demands to cease *yaqona* consumption at school. The FMoE itself recognises the dichotomy inherent in the policy by acknowledging the importance of *yaqona* as the nation’s “cultural keystone species” while simultaneously seeking its restriction (Ministry of Education, National Heritage, Culture and Arts, Youth and Sports, 2010). Some research participants suggest that this ambivalence on behalf of the Ministry has created a policy with mercurial boundaries, which can be interpreted and applied in numerous ways.

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<sup>6</sup> *Vakaturaga* is “the central [Fijian] ethos” and value system that includes, behaving in a chiefly manner irrespective of one’s status, respect, knowing one’s place in the community, fulfilling obligations, sharing and caring, and a quiet disposition (Ravuvu, 1987, pp. 18–9, 319–20). *Vakaturaga* refers to the observance and practice of this ideal by males. *Vakamarama* is the female equivalent.

Most participants were openly opposed to any group or agency that sought to prohibit their indigenous substance (Aporosa, 2019a). Again, they cited *yaqona's* cultural importance and suggested that attempts to repress its use would potentially lead to a “substance switch” (particularly towards alcohol or marijuana) and therefore increase socio-cultural disharmony (pp. 161–2). There was strong consensus among the *yaqona*-using teachers who participated in the study that they would not stop using *yaqona*. However, there was also some low-level support for locally produced and delivered awareness programs to highlight the problems associated with teachers overindulging in *yaqona* and the impact that this has on quality education delivery (p. 163).

Overall, the “culturally recognised and accepted process” of *talanoa* (Nabobo-Baba, 2005, p. 393) was suggested by participants as the most promising and effective way to untangle this culturally complex issue. *Talanoa* is a coming together of people to share and discuss information (Havea, 2010). It frequently occurs around the *tanoa* (Mishra, 2007, p. 45) and is a practice common to both *iTaukei* and Indo-Fijians (pp. 164–6). *Talanoa* aimed at finding a way forward with this culturally complex issue will be discussed shortly.

## Yaqona and education: A complex issue requiring a considered response

Participant interview responses gathered during the study show that both *yaqona* drinkers and non-*yaqona* users recognise the critical role that *yaqona* plays in cultural practice, the respect-based values system, and empowerment, cultural connectedness and identity formation in Fiji. With empowerment, cultural connectedness and identity themselves inexorably connected to academic achievement, it becomes apparent why the prohibition, or situational banning of *yaqona* from the school campus, is a far from simple matter.

Although the results of the psychometric testing—including *yaqona's* post-consumptive impacts on cognition, absenteeism, presenteeism and quality education delivery—if considered in isolation, appear damning, these effects need to be balanced against the other more positive impacts discussed through the study, including *yaqona's* contributory role to academic achievement and hence to sustainable development (Aporosa & Tomlinson, 2014).

The Eurocentric ideology that lies behind many of the calls to ban *yaqona*—an ideology that tends to view cultural practices as “acceptable provided... [they do] not interfere with economic progress” (Eade, 2002, p. ix)—fails to consider wider issues such as the importance of these same cultural systems to sustainable development.

This study makes a clear statement that such stereotypical discourse, often present within the Eurocentric development arena, is unjust, imperialistic and hegemonic. The cultural life-ways of people in developing countries must be accorded the same value as the Eurocentric model of development. This will allow the positive attributes of culture to be considered and balanced against the single-minded pursuit of entrepreneurialism, industrialisation, transformation, progression, modernity and Westernisation (Cockley, 2010, pp. 149–52).

In addition, developing countries, and those whose life-ways are deeply embedded in cultural systems and processes that comprise a sense of “otherness” from a Eurocentric perspective, must be supported and encouraged to consider what is at stake for them when they pursue development based upon that

Eurocentric model. Teasdale and Teasdale (1992, p. 1) make the risk explicit when they state that “the loss of culture is at the heart of our educational and social problems”.

The study discussed in this article focused on the theme of *yaqona*/kava and education. In considering historical Eurocentric responses to indigenous substance use, it delineates a warning—one that has the potential to create loss, disempowerment and disenfranchisement for the Fijian (and other Pacific kava-using) people should the Fijian Government simply pursue a national growth and economic development strategy that fails to fully embrace their cultural life-ways (p. 197).

The study presents data that demonstrates a simple solution such as “just stop[ping] teachers from drinking *yaqona* on nights before teaching” will not work. Most Fijian teachers, both *iTaukei* and Indo-Fijian, whether *yaqona* consumers or not, understand the importance of this indigenous substance to their identity and systems of living. Many have stated they will not cease its use regardless of FMOE directives or evidence of its negative implication.

## Talanoa as a way forward

Many participants in the study suggested using *talanoa* as a way to explore, and potentially resolve, the issues surrounding *yaqona*/kava use in educational contexts (pp. 164–6). *Talanoa* is a “culturally recognised and accepted process” of dialogue (Nabobo-Baba, 2005, p. 393) that encourages participants to wrestle with issues and consider all sides of the debate, in order to seek a locally informed response (Nabobo-Baba, 2005, pp. 396–7; Vaka’uta, 2011, p. 8). Because of *yaqona*’s cultural significance and effects that do not interfere with reasoning or decision-making (Aporosa et al., 2022), *yaqona* is frequently used to facilitate both formal and informal *talanoa* environments (Aporosa & Forde, 2019). Therefore, *yaqona* combined with *talanoa* has the potential to aid the exploration and resolution of this sensitive issue.

There is no predetermined expectation of agreement within the *talanoa* process; instead, differences of opinion and viewpoint are accepted as a part of life. Robinson and Robinson (2005) explain *talanoa* at length and capture its ideals when they state:

*Talanoa* is a traditional Pacific Island deliberation process that goes round in circles; it does not follow a straight line, aiming towards a final decision like many Western processes. It involves a lot of repetition,... *talanoa* has no time restrictions... this does provide the opportunity for “slow thinkers” to be engaged in the discussions... *talanoa* is centred on an open-style of deliberation, focusing on respect, tolerance, flexibility, openness and fairness... underpinned by unwritten rules and etiquette [of *vakaturaga*]. (p. 14)

*Talanoa* would allow all stakeholders to discuss this matter in a culturally appropriate manner aimed at encouraging a local response to a local issue while enhancing self-determination and empowerment. To aid all stakeholders in such *talanoa*, this paper will be published in the coming months in *vosa vakabau* (the standard Fijian language) in *In Our Language: Journal of Pacific Research*. That translation is currently under review.

The study noted that should the option of *talanoa* be pursued, the participant comments recorded during this research, together with the discussion around the intrinsic issues related to *yaqona* and education, had the potential to provide informed comment to assist the FMOE and other stakeholders in their discussions. Such a process, it was argued, would be empowering and appropriate, and support national- and local-level decision-making processes on this complex issue. Although it is recognised that *talanoa*

encourages participants to wrestle with issues and consider all sides of the debate, it is nevertheless argued that to address this complex issue in a rigorous and professional manner, anti-*yaqona* sentiment and Pentecostal-influenced religious dogma (as discussed earlier) must be excluded, as this detracts from the core issues concerning *yaqona*'s impacts to teaching ability, student educational achievement, identity and the functionality of the state/community partnership.

## New developments to an old tension

Over the past eight years (up to a few months prior to the start of COVID-19) there had been very little commentary from the FMoE regarding *yaqona* in schools. Moreover, during this period I have visited a variety of schools across Fiji, and communicated with a large number of teachers, and noted what appears to be “business as usual”, or the continued use of *yaqona* to show appreciation to guests, parents and alumni who were visiting or had contributed to school development or projects, as a means of school fee payment, in facilitating board and parental meetings, at the opening of school ceremonies, in support of fundraising events, and as part of teacher socialisation and unity.

A marked change occurred in January 2020 when the Fiji Minister of Education (appointed in 2018), Mrs Rosy Akbar, was quoted in the *Fiji Sun* newspaper as saying she did not want “official functions” at schools to include *yaqona* consumption. The Minister added that if such occasions did include *yaqona*, “there will be a problem [suggesting disciplinary action]. It is a code of conduct not to drink grog<sup>7</sup> [*yaqona*] during school hours”, she stated (Nai, 2020). On the same day, the FMoE's national education service delivery leader Mr Timoci Bure was quoted in the *Fiji Times* (Chand, 2020) as saying, “Throw the sulu [bag used for mixing *yaqona*] and kava and everything ... throw it away in the bin ... kava drinking is not supposed to be done in the school – not supposed to be done every day.” Mr Bure reasoned this on un-Godly practice – being against “what the scripture says” – and impacts to teacher performance – inferring laziness – the morning after “a long night's grog session”.

Both articles led to considerable debate, both positive and negative, on social media sites such as Facebook and around the *tanoa*. Of greatest concern was Mr Bure's comment about throwing *yaqona* into the rubbish bin. This was inferred by some to mean the FMoE saw little relevance in the indigenous Fijian culture, leading to comments such as “who are we if we don't have our culture?”, reiterating similar concerns raised during the study (p. 179). When linked with academic achievement, such concerns have validity, reinforced by new research (since the study) which continues to link culture and cultural engagement with academic achievement (Aporosa, 2016; Chu et al., 2013; Hemi et al., 2021; Reynolds, 2017). Conversely, others supported Minister Akbar's call to ban *yaqona* on school campuses, arguing this would eliminate teacher lethargy (associated with late-night *yaqona* consumption) and therefore lead to quality teaching which would improve student achievement. Yet others countered that while adequate sleep was necessary to alertness and quality productivity, why was *yaqona* – Fiji's icon of identity – being scapegoated, as opposed to personal choice concerning bedtime (Aporosa & Foley, 2020)? A teacher asked, “It's not just grog. What, are the Ministry also going to stop us from watching our TV till late, stop us on the computer, make us go to bed early? They can't.” Further, a large number of teachers also echoed comments similar to those I had heard 10, even 20, years ago: that nothing would stop them from

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<sup>7</sup> “Grog” is a common colloquialism for *yaqona* in Fiji. Geraghty (1996) explains that the word “grog” dates back to the mid-1700s and the daily rum ration issued to British sailors: “Since practically all of the earliest European visitors and settlers in early nineteenth-century Fiji were sailors, they then used the same term [grog], which ... came to mean something like ‘customary daily tippie’, for the Fijian equivalent, *yaqona*.”

drinking *yaqona* as this was part of their culture. What was not mentioned on Facebook posts or in debates, however, was that Fiji continues to engage education through a state/community partnership, a model – whether the FMoE likes it or not – that is both driven and facilitated by *yaqona*.

Although 20 years may have passed since the FMoE first began grappling with this dilemma, questioning whether *yaqona's* use by teachers was negatively impacting on their teaching ability and student educational achievement and how they were going to deal with this, little has changed. Moreover, this is unlikely to change until the FMoE, key stakeholders associated with the state/community partnership and teachers engage in *talanoa* with a commitment to working on a local solution to a local issue. That local solution must also be absent of Eurocentric-influenced Pentecostal religious dogma. A commitment to working through this matter has the potential to enhance self-determination and empowerment and lead to enhanced educational outcomes.

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## Conflict of interest

The author is of Fijian ancestry, considers *yaqona* cultural practice and consumption to be a critical aspect of his identity and cultural expression, has previously farmed *yaqona*, and taught in a rural Fijian high school where he consumed *yaqona* with peers on an almost daily basis.

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Dr Apo Aporosa is maternally related to the village of Naduri in Macuata, Fiji. Although based in New Zealand, he regularly visits his ancestral homeland where he has taught secondary school students, farmed kava, assisted with grassroots development projects and conducted research. He has a Doctorate in Development Studies from Massey University, New Zealand. Aporosa was the recipient of the 2016 New Zealand Health Research Council Pacific Postdoctoral Award and was the 2019 New Zealand Health Research Council Sir Thomas Davis Te Patu Kite Rangi Ariki Award recipient allowing him to investigate the impacts of traditionally influenced kava use on cognition and driver safety. Based at Te Huataki Waiora School of Health and Te Kura Whatu Oho Mauri School of Psychology at the University of Waikato, Aporosa also teaches, and supports the Pacific staff and student body as a member of the university's Pacific Strategic Group and Research Committee. Aporosa was recently awarded a 2022 Fulbright scholarship to further kava research.

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