

Games

The social tools handed down by our tūpuna

HARKO BROWN WITH RACHEL BOLSTAD

Harko Brown is an expert on traditional Māori games and play. He has written several books including *Ngā Taonga Tākaro II: The Matrix* (2016), and *Te Mara Hupara* (2017), co-authored by his teenage daughter Yves Tennessee Brown. In 2015 Harko was co-opted by the New Zealand Government to organise and lead the first Aotearoa New Zealand Māori delegation to the World Indigenous Games in Palmas, Brazil. Harko believes that if the educational and environmental propositions of ancestrally derived games were embraced by educators, social institutes and even incorporated into town planning, we would have a much more peaceful, loving and harmonious society. Harko responded to *Set's* questions about his research and why he is so committed to the revitalisation and continuity of aro-tākaro.

What are tākaro and māra hupara?

To my mind *tākaro* are a life force. People have talked to me about them, using terms such as “whenua” and “kai”. They are games and protocols, but they were and are also spiritual, social, and educational tools, and that is how they were utilised.

I think the term *hupara* (Brown, 2016) refers to places built or selected for physical play, learning, and exercise, but more than this, they are spiritual, physical and social nodes. Commonly made out of rākau that

are permanently dug, stacked, or hung in place, they are designated as hupara and thereupon take on special relationships and qualities in aid of tribal resilience. Traditionally these implements for play were numerous, but widely spread. Today, hupara can be purposefully gathered together in māra hupara (hupara gardens) giving a choice of activities and ways to interact, play, exercise, and learn.

Could you give an example of a tākaro that illustrates their multidimensional qualities?

Take for example the game of pipi, where players form a circle and throw a marker, called a pipi, into a central kete. What could be much simpler than sitting 5–10 metres from a kete and throwing an object into it? But the object thrown had to be of a type that would flutter through the air, such as a pipi shell, or a wood chip, requiring a skilful wrist-flicking throw. We played this as youngsters on the marae with flattened bottle tops and wood chips. One year an uncle visited and set up a kōhanga (nest) for a kete on an elevated central pou and told us the rules for tūperepere, his preference for the game name, which they played when he was young. He instructed us with kota (pipi shells), and taught several rules for the taking out of other players' kota from the kōhanga. He asserted that this game connected with our ngahere and our particular whakapapa bonds. This forest–sea connection was explained to me in detail when I communicated with Dr Ihirangi Heke, who shared whakapapa which linked pīpīwharaua to Tānetehokahoka—the atua of birdlife. The link continued to his whanaunga, Te Awarua, the personification of pipi. The parents entrusted Hineahuone, the sand, with the safe keeping of pipi. These links remind us of the interconnections between all life forms, and the need to treasure our environment. From the kōrero of beloved elders we were encouraged to care for our traditional games, to nurture and sustain them. We came to realise that the plants and trees which we used to make aro-tākaro needed to be kept healthy, which is only possible in healthy environments. There are so many layers of meaning and significance in this one

tākaro, and many variations from tribe to tribe—Māori thrived on diversity, and differences emerged from their environmental habitats, which were never exactly alike from tribe to tribe.

How did you become interested in Māori games, and how have you researched them?

I look back and see how lucky we were to have whānau who treasured our taonga tākaro. This is at my principal marae Whakaaratamaiti and two main sister marae Ngātira and Mangakaretu. But there were also several other marae where we would be indulged in traditional games. Those elders put that everlasting love in me to continue to awhi them into our lives. They helped our ancestors and were amazing social tools. Perhaps if we respect and nurture them we will benefit and have a more peaceful world. To me they represent the realm of Rongo. Of peace and love. Since I was very young at hui or tangi with my father or koroua, elders would come and sit by me and just talk about our tākaro. I showed an interest and a passion. My mother, who is Dutch, loved Māori culture too and thought the games were a wonderful cultural phenomenon.

What challenges have you encountered in researching traditional games?

I think because written information is quite scarce it has meant I've needed to do a lot of talking and listening, and travelling to keep up the momentum, both for researching and revitalising tākaro. I try to capture the views and opinions of so many other informed people on the kaupapa. It's all voluntary, including the researching and support of our indigenous friends overseas to promote our tākaro to keep them alive and relevant. It's more than the games, it's about all things associated with them and how their relationships are intermingled into the fabric of Māori culture. This kaupapa is very much a learning curve where quite a few of us meet up, network and discuss or share what we have researched or read about. It seems that "games" were a part of every aspect of ancient life. The music, protocols, hunting and fishing, sailing, tangi, love, sorrow, and other areas of life seem to merge into a matrix of games—very much a breathing entity all around us, melded/part of ngā atua. Probably today, I feel, they are wholly undervalued and utilised by our people and general society. I suppose it's about finding the right key to make them relevant to people. I've met some wonderful people on this journey and had humbling joyful experiences. I am always grateful and honoured when asked to present or workshop these treasures. I just want to revel in them, be immersed in their beauty and excitement and to show them off for the entities that they are.

Why do you think it is important to integrate tākaro and māra hupara in schools and kura?

To me they are mauri-laden. They support and empower thoughts of love and peace and 'health'. I think historically we were onto something very important, a vestige which for perhaps a century or two had ultimate peace as a way of life. The Moriori had it sussed, and I am currently learning more about their practices. The practice of hohou rongo had it sussed, games were peace-laden mechanisms utilised with skill and nous. It would be great to assist to make our world a better place through reintegrating tākaro and hupara in our everyday lives.

What is one thing you want New Zealand educators to know about tākaro?

That their propositions are limitless for the health and wellbeing of our society.

What are teachers and students saying about tākaro in schools and kura?

The games, activities, and aro-tākaro are varied, which sparks interest in kids and their teachers, and purposeful layering is occurring whereby the rituals, protocols, and practices are being melded together to give a more complete and beneficial "education" around them. What is probably lacking are a multitude of resources to help teachers understand and utilise all the possibilities of tākaro and hupara.

In your view how are tākaro similar or different to games and sports in Western cultures, and other cultures?

I think there are strong similarities worldwide and that is the beauty of indigenous games, you can connect and mutually understand their wairua. For example if you read up on an ancient hupara called a moari, you can appreciate how important that artefact was to our ancestors. So important that whole regions would be named after them, such as Te Moari and Te Hupara rohe in Far North. They were games equipment, but as with so many aro-tākaro, they doubled up as psychological enablers, giving a cathartic means to release pent-up anger or frustration, among other useful purposes—I've discussed this use elsewhere. For example, a hapū might spend several days using the moari to swing on whilst creating songs to lament their dead in battle and to overcome their inability to seek redress. It was a way to accomplish utu, to clean the slate and start over positively. I think the maypole and moari have had similar purposes for their communities, but our ancestors seemed to have had a bit more connection to them and spiritual reverence.

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What interesting things have you learnt about games and play from other indigenous peoples?

That universally games seem to have morphed out of the whenua and forests to fit the psyche and mauri of the indigenous people who live there—it's like a mirror image, you feel it. The smiles, laughter, and connectedness of game play is also a beautiful attribute.

What are you working on currently in your research?

I am collating into book form a few of the protocols (and their skilful practitioners' traits) which accompanied games, or were games, and which seductively transitioned people into the realm of Rongo, of peace love, fun, laughter, warmth, memory-making and learning and kept them there! It seems to have been a very clever and beneficial profession.

To my mind the realm of games has had input from birds and animals, from the moon and sun, from winds and ngā atua Māori ... a real family affair!

Glossary

Aro-tākaro: Game implements, the “face” of game play

Hohou rongo: Hohou rongo describes the practice of peacemaking, striving to make a tribe resilient and long lived.

Moari: Huge pole-swings built over land or water, used for games and competitions, as well as rites for warriors returning from battle. Moari could provide a psychological bedrock for a hapū, and even be used to find rebirth from the ashes of calamity, defeat, and hardship.

Putiki: An ancient term for two or three pou grouped together which served as supports for women while giving birth. They were extremely sacred pou when in use, and later children born by them would often play on them.

Reference

Brown, H. (2016). *Ngā taonga takaro II: The matrix*. Tauranga: Penz.



FIGURE 1. MOARI. (ANGAS, GEORGE FRENCH, ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY REF: PUBL-0014-53.)