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Indigenous Peacemaking

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Comparing Indigenous Peacemaking Practices Between Ho‘oponopono, the Pokagon Band of
Potawatomi, and Mayan Communities

Background

Peacemaking practices are used globally by Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities to resolve community disputes. Despite being used by non-Indigenous people, peacemaking is a form of Indigenous conflict resolution, which ultimately is intended to address the deeper issues of conflict, thereby restoring balance in the community (Moraza-Keeswood, 6). These processes shift justice away from “getting even to getting well,” and they recognize that healthy relationships between individuals is crucial to the overall health of the community (Moraza-Keeswood, 6).

This paper will compare and contrast Indigenous peacemaking practices between Ho‘oponopono, the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi, and the Maya K’iche’. Ho‘oponopono is focused on restoring relationships between families, confessing to and forgiving one another, and providing restitution for wrongdoings. In the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians, they call their peacemaking practice the Native Justice forum, and this practice is used to resolve civil disputes among citizens while also bringing the community back to balance. The Maya K’iche’ form of peacemaking is intended to reinstate the wellbeing of the community, while coming to a peaceful resolution.

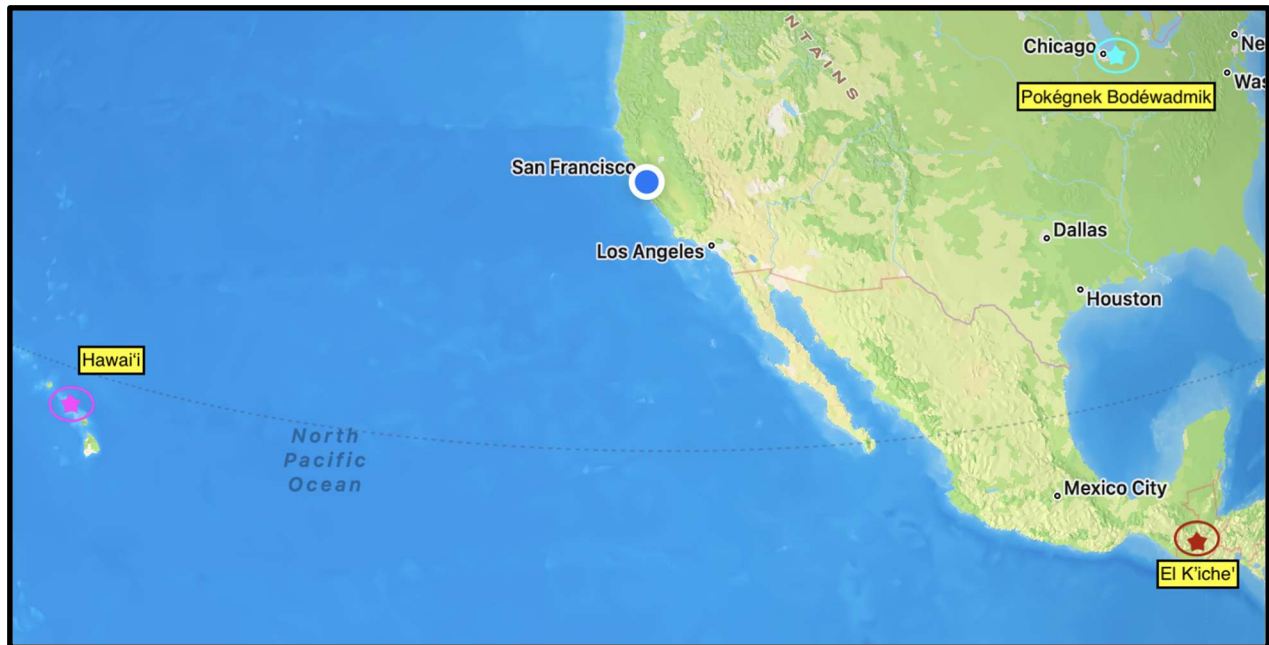


Figure 1. Map of current lands of Hawaiian, Pokagon Band of Potawatomi, and Maya K'iche' peoples

These three different communities were chosen because of their very different geographical locations, as seen in Figure 1. I wanted to represent my own culture in Ho‘oponopono from Hawai‘i, and I also wanted to represent Pasifika peoples in some capacity. I also wanted to compare two other communities, one from North America and one from Central or South America. I chose Pokagon Potawatomi peacemaking (Pokégnek Bodéwadmik/Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians) because they worked quite closely with the Native American Rights Fund, and it is one of the Northernmost tribes in the US. Lastly, I chose Maya K'iche' peacemaking (El K'iche'/Quiche) because their community is a leader in Indigenous activism and my friend was able to tell me about peacemaking from her culture. Both Latin American and Pasifika Indigenous peoples can often go unheard or unincluded from conversations about Indigeneity in the US, so I wanted to demonstrate the similarities and shared practices through this analysis.

Focus and purpose of Peacemaking

In Ho‘oponopono, the purpose is defined by the name. “Ho‘o” means to do or to make, and “pono” means correct or right, and the term “ponopono,” which is a reduplicate of pono, meaning “in order, cared for, attended to” (Pukui, 60). In Hawaiian culture, ho‘oponopono are held in order to attempt to set right the relationships between entities, often people or families. The parties are also attempting to set their relationships right between themselves and God, whether that be a Hawaiian aumākua (ancestor god) or a Christian God (Pukui, 60). The affected parties pray to the Almighty for forgiveness, both the ability to be forgiven and to forgive another.

In Pokagon Potawatomi peacemaking practices, which they call their Native Justice Forum, they strive to preserve the entire tribal communities as well as the relationships within them (Native Justice). The purpose here is to restore relationships between participants (Wesaw), and ultimately create meaningful and peaceful conversations that lead to mutually beneficial solutions.

The main focus of Mayan peacemaking is the wellbeing of the people involved as well as the community, self, and the environment (Gethsemany). They are attempting to find a solution to the problem or conflict that was brought into the circle through collaborations and fruitful conversations of the participants. The circles are meant to make both parties feel valued and understood, further emphasizing the focus of wellbeing on multiple dimensions (Gethsemany). They also are deeply connected with their environment, and they emphasize that the wellbeing of themselves is tied into the wellbeing of the environment.

Shared Values

Ho‘oponopono has very straightforward values, all of which are centered in the practice and the name. Pukui mentions that, as the goal is for there to be a “righting of wrongs”, people need to come into the circle with true intentions and honesty (Pukui, 62). On the other hand, people within in the circle also need to come to the practice with the ability to forgive, and this forgiveness must come from the heart (Pukui, 62).

The Native Justice forum requires a solid list of values that are tied into the ultimate goal, but also help the peacemaking process to run smoothly. Those who are “seeking use of the Native Justice forum are expected to be patient, responsive, respectful, open-minded, solution-oriented, engaged, equal, mentally present, actively listen, know there is support and alternate solutions” (Native Justice). These values are required for everyone who wants to participate in the forum, not just those who are at the heart of the conflict.

The values of the Maya K’iche’ requires participants to be open to conversations and willing to listen to others (Gethsemany). The participants also have to want to achieve peace and move through the peacemaking with collaboration and understanding. Ultimately those participating in peacemaking must want the process to be successful, and be willing to agree to the terms that make it successful (Gethsemany).

Types of Disputes

Ho‘oponopono is normally for families, specifically the nuclear/immediate family. The examples of dispute types that Pukui gives in her book including finding out why someone in the family is sick, or what the root cause of a family quarrel is (61). Although she does not specify this outright, her writings suggest that ho‘oponopono is not used to more serious offenses, even if they may happen within a single family.

The Native Justice Forum is open to citizens to use for civil disputes before they go to the tribal courts (Native Justice). Some stipulations for a Peace Circle session include the fact that referrals must be self-initiated by a participant, family member, or by a tribal program (Wesaw). The eligible issues listed by the tribe include: “interventions related to alcohol and substance abuse, behavioral/mental health, gambling or bullying problems, minor juvenile matters, such as underage drinking or status offenses, e.g. truancy, curfew, other general disputes or conflicts as deemed appropriate for this forum especially where relationships or community harmony is at stake, matters referred by the Tribal Court, family conflicts and disputes, neighborhood disputes, and estate disputes” (Wesaw).

Mayan peacemaking circles focus on inter-family or inter-personal disputes (Gethsemany). This can include immediate family disputes, like in Ho‘oponopono, extended family disputes, disputes between two families, or disputes between two people.

Spirituality and Culture in Peacemaking

Ho‘oponopono has multiple aspects of the peacemaking that are rooted in spirituality and culture. As stated in the focus of peacemaking, both parties start by praying for forgiveness to God. The circle also starts with an opening prayer, and prayers are done any time they are perceived as necessary (Pukui, 62). The party/parties make “honest confession to the gods (or God)” as well as to each other (Pukui, 62). There is also a closing prayer as well as a closing rituals in pre-Christian times. These closing rituals were “usually chicken or pig offerings to the gods” and this also included a ceremonial ocean bath (Pukui, 62).

The Native Justice forum utilizes ceremonial traditions in their circles, preserving the original cultural significance of this practice (Native Justice). While I was unable to find specific

practices of ceremony and prayer, it is a central part of the practice, and the peacemaking practice comes from traditional practices.

Mayan peacemaking is tied in with spirituality and connection to the Earth. C'ulel, traditional healers, are often leaders of these circles when an elder is not available (Gethsemany). C'ulels are specially in tune with the Earth, and they are also always women. This makes their role, and Mayan peacemaking in general, very unique because of their matriarchical structure. The role of c'ulels ties back to the Mayan origin story in which the creator told women where to find corn, making them especially powerful and sacred in Mayan culture (Gethsemany).

Leaders of Peacemaking

In Ho'oponopono, a "helping-healing kahuna" or an elder in the family would conduct ho'oponopono (Pukui, 61). Because of the connection between kahuna and community as a sort of "family doctor", the kahuna was very in touch with the family and knew a lot of insight into the problems of the family (Pukui, 61).

Native Justice Forums are led by peacemakers in the community, ranging from elders to youths depending on the wishes of the community (Native Justice). There are two circle keepers, one male and one female, that lead and guide the circle and the participants within it (Wesaw). These circle keepers are facilitators of the circle, and they must be "culturally informed, honest, respected, have life experience, and have knowledge of available Pokagon Band programs for the participants" (Native Justice). These circle keepers are not meant to be judges of the dispute, and they do not decide the outcome of the dispute. Rather, they are simply there to guide the conversation, hoping to "preserve community harmony and relationships within the community" (Wesaw).

Maya K'iche' peacemaking circles are normally led by elders within a family or community. If a person has a dispute with another, they will find an elder within their family or community because it is believed that elders are the most knowledgeable and they are viewed the most highly (Gethsemany). Although everyone involved in the dispute is a part of the conversation, whatever is agreed upon by the two elder representatives is what becomes the solution for both parties. If there is no elder available for one side or the other, they will refer to a c'ulel to be their representative and guide of the circle. There is no one set person that is "supposed" to be the representative, it is often just whoever the community or family holds in the highest regard or has the most life experience (Gethsemany).

Balancing Punishment vs Restoration

Ho'oponopono has a focus on confession and forgiveness as the goal, as well as an ultimate goal of making mutual restitution (Pukui, 65). There is no specific emphasis or mention of punishing anyone for their actions, rather the purpose is to restore the original relationship that was broken. The Ho'oponopono is often filled with love and an even deeper connection than before (Pukui, 66).

Pokagon Potawatomi peacemaking is focused on helping both parties and the entire community come to a resolution. There is not a goal of one side winning, rather the main goal is to avoid a legal dispute in the courts by coming to an agreement (Native Justice). Along with this, the Native Justice forum is intended to "preserve the tribal community and the relationships within" (Native Justice).

In Mayan peacemaking, the goal is never punishment, rather it is to collaborate on finding a resolution. The peacemaking is also focused on a shared understanding of both parties' perspectives (Gethsemany). They also attempt to give the other person what they need in order to

restore peace and healing within the community. Exile from the community is the worst case scenario (Gethsemany).

Circle Confidentiality

Ho'oponopono, based on my experience, is kept confidential after the circle is finished. Also, if it is multiple days long, what is brought up within the circle cannot be mentioned in between the Ho'oponopono.

In the Native Justice forum, people are not allowed to share what has been discussed within the circle to others who were not involved in the session (Wesaw). It does not specify whether the participants are allowed to speak with each other about the circle after the session is finished.

The information shared within Mayan peacemaking circles is kept within the circle. The only people allowed to disclose the information within the circle is the elder representative chosen by the family (Gethsemany). Even other people within the circle/situation are not allowed to talk about the situation after the circle to the other party.

Parties Within the Circle

Ho'oponopono are kept within the immediate family as well as those who are connected to the problem. Children are excused from partaking in the circle. Pukui specifies that this is not a community-wide therapy (Pukui, 61)).

Pokagon Potawatomi peacemaking is open to the anyone who wants to be a part of the circle, regardless of their background or belief system (Wesaw). The focus is to serve the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians community, but others can also participate in peacemaking as long as they agree to the other terms.

In Mayan peacemaking, the only people who will be in conversation in the circle are those who are directly involved in the conflict (Gethsemany). They also do not include the entire family, unless the entire family is affected, and only the directly affected person will go to the circle.

Structure of Circle

In Ho‘oponopono, once the family agreed to peacemaking, a kahuna or elder was able to facilitate the circle, and everyone agreed to the terms of Ho‘oponopono, the session would start (Pukui, 61). The session starts with an opening prayer, and prayer will be said any time it seems appropriate or necessary in the circle (Pukui, 62). The next step is the statement of the problem, and if there is other problems succeeding from the original problem, they will also be mentioned and other Ho‘oponopono’s may be necessary (Pukui, 62). Everyone is expected to control their emotions, but the leader of peacemaking will also facilitate this by having the participants speak to them rather than directly to each other (Pukui, 62). The leader will then ask questions to the participants, and participants will confess wrongdoings to the god(s) (Pukui, 62). The next step is to immediately make restitution or to make plans of restitution. They will then forgive each other, and then release any guilt or tension they may still be holding onto. The last two steps are to provide a closing prayer and then to sit in silence for a few moments, then the Ho‘oponopono is over (Pukui, 62).

The resources available on the tribe’s websites for the Native Justice forum do not specify what the exact procedure is for peacemaking, but there is some general guidelines that are to be followed. The first step is to be referred to the forum, either by yourself, someone you know, or by a tribal program (Wesaw). The sessions are also voluntary, so no one can be forced to participate if they do not want to (Wesaw). The circle keepers will lead the session, and each

person within the circle will have the chance to speak without being interrupted by other participants (Wesaw). Ultimately, the decision is made by those involved in the dispute, and once a resolution is reached and the circle is finished, no one is to mention what was discussed in the circle to others who were not present (Wesaw). It is also mentioned on their website that ceremony and other traditions are a part of the circle, but its not clear exactly what and when.

In Maya K'iche' communities, when there is a conflict that arises and both parties agree to a peacemaking talk, either side will choose an elder from their family or request a c'ulel if they do not have an elder to represent them (Gethsemany). When they start the circle, only the representatives and those who are directly involved in the conflict will participate, and the representatives will facilitate the conversation among the parties. Although all are able to participate in the conversation, what the elders or representatives decide will be the final decision (Gethsemany). The representatives will decide what needs to be done to make up for what ever act has been committed, and after that the restitution follows and the parties do not discuss the conflict anymore (Gethsemany). It was also mentioned that ceremony and prayer are a part of the peacemaking circle, but it was not specified exactly what and when.

Legal Implications

There are currently no legal implications of Ho'oponopono in Hawai'i.

Citizens of the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians can use the forum for civil disputes before going to court, but the court continues to be responsible for criminal cases (Native Justice). There are three strands of Native Justice for the tribe: "Native Justice for Court, Native Justice Community Conflict and Dispute Resolution Forum, and Native Justice Community Education and Awareness" (Native Justice). The strand that citizens and community members

can use to resolve conflicts among one another is the Native Justice Community Conflict and Dispute Resolution Forum (Native Justice).

Modern day Mayan peacemaking circles look different because the people involved are the community being targeted by the government. Now, peacemaking circles include a military representative, an elder, an environmental justice representative, and the affected family member (Gethsemany). Although the elder has influence, the government has the ultimate authority to decide the resolution. Indigenous Mayan peacemaking practices do not have much political power now in Guatemala (Gethsemany). The Quiche Mayan community has Indigenous political autonomy.

Similarities

Restoration of Relationships

The main goal in all three traditions is to restore and heal relationships rather than assign blame or enforce punishments. In Ho‘oponopono, this is done through prayer, confession, and mutual forgiveness, intending to restore the familial ties that have been broken. The Native Justice forum explicitly seeks to preserve community harmony and to help participants maintain or rebuild their connections and relationships. Similarly, Maya K’iche’ circles aim to repair interpersonal relationships while also considering the well-being of the broader community and environment, leading to cooperative solutions that benefit all parties.

General Wellbeing

Wellbeing, whether it be emotional, social, communal, or environmental, is a core value embedded in each peacemaking practice. Ho‘oponopono addresses not only interpersonal conversations but it also addresses illness and imbalance within a family, reflecting the Hawaiian holistic view of health. The Native Justice forum address a wide range of personal and social

issues, including mental health, substance use, and family conflict, with the goal of supporting all-around wellness. Maya K'iche' peacemaking explicitly incorporates environmental and spiritual wellbeing, showing a broader understanding of harmony that extends beyond human relationships and into environmental balance.

Spiritual and Cultural Roots

Each form of peacemaking is deeply rooted in the cultural and spiritual practices of its respective community. Ho'oponopono uses Christian and traditional Hawaiian spirituality through prayers, offerings, and ceremony. The Native Justice Forum preserves traditional ceremony and continues to practice tribal customs while addressing modern problems. In Mayan peacemaking, spiritual leaders such as c'ulels lead circles in a way that honors matriarchal traditions and ancestral knowledge. These spiritual foundations affirm the sacredness of the Indigenous peacemaking processes and reflect each culture's worldview.

Emphasis on Forgiveness and Healing

Forgiveness and emotional healing are central parts of each peacemaking process. In Ho'oponopono, participants begin and end the circle with prayer and must make honest confessions, seeking both godly and interpersonal forgiveness. The Native Justice forum is designed not to judge the actions or words of participants but rather to guide participants toward finding a resolution and establishing mutual understanding. Maya K'iche' circles also avoid punishment, instead working toward solutions that allow participants to feel heard and understood. This emphasis on healing reinforces the idea that peace comes not through "winning" a conflict or dispute, but through restoring personal and communal balance.

Guided by Community Members

In all three systems, the peacemaking process is led by respected members of the community rather than legal professionals or external entities. Ho‘oponopono is often conducted by elders or kahuna with deep familial knowledge, so this person has already worked to gain the trust of the family. The Native Justice forum uses trained circle keepers, who are culturally informed and community-trusted, guiding the conversation without imposing decisions. Maya K’iche’ peacemaking depends on elders or c’ulels, whose spiritual and/or experiential knowledge gives them understanding of proper outcomes. This community-guided structure ensures that the processes remain grounded in culture and lived values.

Conclusions

The three overarching themes shared among the three peacemaking practices are cultural roots, community, and healing. The first major theme that is shared among the peacemaking practices is cultural connections. This theme shapes not only the structure of the process but its purpose and outcomes. In Ho‘oponopono, prayers to either the Christian God or aumākua reflect the sacred connection Hawaiians have to those who came before, our ancestors, and the land that supports us. Ho‘oponopono is not only about resolving interpersonal disputes, it is also a traditional and cultural action that restores balance of relationships between people, land, and the universe. The Native Justice forum also preserves the Pokagon Potawatomi ancestral practices, as circle keepers are required to be culturally informed, and they incorporate the tribe’s customs and values into the peacemaking circle. Maya K’iche’ peacemaking further centers their worldview by involving spiritual healers and connecting resolution building to goals of environmental harmony and even their cosmology. All of these processes emphasize that righting wrongs or finding justice is not separate from culture and spirituality, but rather they

they are deeply intertwined and even inseparable. This contrasts the US legal system, which is rooted in “Western” and secular (though sometimes Christian) frameworks that prioritize rights, procedure, and legality over communal harmony and spiritual connection. Because the intention is to maintain a perceived neutrality, courtrooms, judges, and lawyers are intentionally detached from any culture or spirituality in their practice. This often results in a system that makes participants feel alone or alienated, especially Indigenous and/or marginalized communities. While Indigenous models seek to restore equilibrium within the community and individuals, the US system enforces their rules through punishment, with no regard for culture or spiritual wellness. This lack of cultural grounding in the US courts can make justice feel impersonal, disconnected, and ultimately ineffective at addressing the deeper roots of conflict.

The second major theme shared among the peacemaking processes is community centering. Despite the differences in the types of people eligible to be peacemakers in each community, each peacemaking process is led by a trusted member of the community. This means that even though there is a conflict that needs to be navigated, the process is done with care and respect for everyone in the circle. This also means that, because the circles are led by community members, they themselves are invested in preserving the health of the community. The exigence of Indigenous peacemaking is very different from that of the current criminal justice system of America. In courtrooms, opposing sides are represented by professionals who have likely only met their clients a few times. The judge is also someone who has likely no connection to either party, further creating distance between the two conflicting parties.

The last theme shared among the peacemaking practices researched is a focus on healing for all parties. Each practice has different specific words they use to describe this goal, like forgiveness, resolution, and collaboration, but they are all working towards a larger goal of

communal healing. This is again contrasted with the US justice system because the US system is focused on punishment, rights, and “justice”, rather than healing and restoration. After a conflict is filed and each side makes their case, the verdict is either decided by a judge or jury, and this verdict is usually a form of punishment or there are no charges. In either case, there is a winner and a loser, and someone is either punished for their actions or not. The prosecution is not comforted and there is no plan for the healing of those who were wronged. If the perpetrating party is sent to jail/prison or put on probation, the goal is not to heal this person of the trauma that caused the act to happen, rather the convicted person is punished for their sentenced time.

Despite the many specific differences between the peacemaking practices of these three communities, the similarities that connect them also provide a stark contrast to the US justice system. Community, culture, and healing are not only not at the forefront of the US justice system, but they are not implemented at all into the US legal processes. These shared values listed above show that people coming from different backgrounds can find common ground as long as they prioritize the same goals. It also requires people to feel connected to a larger community, want to heal, and make steps towards cultural competency. Although this may seem like a distant or impossible future for the US, this paper shows that there is a lot more in common among Indigenous communities than people may think. There is a possible restorative future forward, but people need to want to participate in it and agree to the terms of peacemaking.

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