

Tākaro as Resistance

Place-Based Play as Decolonisation Practice

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Abstract

This article advocates for the reclamation of place-based tākaro as an expression of resistance, whakapapa, collective memory, and the politics of belonging. It explores how play anchored by whenua reconnects us to pūrākau, hītori, tūpuna, and atua that shape our world. Tākaro Māori is a living practice of whanaungatanga that nourishes hauora, revitalises mātauranga, and disrupts colonial narratives. This article weaves a vision of tākaro as a path to our Hawaiki Hou, situating tākaro within both Māori epistemologies and global Indigenous practice to highlight the interconnectedness of Indigenous resurgence through play. It argues that intentional, whenua-centred play is a powerful act of decolonisation and resistance against divisive ideologies and legislation, offering connection and compassion over competition. In a time when communities seek different ways to resolve conflict, heal, and thrive, place-based tākaro emerges as an old yet enduring solution; one that calls us home to ourselves, our landscapes, and each other. This contribution invites further conversation about the role of tākaro in sustaining Māori futures, grounded firmly in mātauranga ki te whenua.

Keywords

tākaro Māori, play theory, ethical pedagogy, Indigenous praxis, community building, inclusive learning

Introduction: The Play Problem

It's useful to understand from the outset that this article attempts to cover themes that could be inexhaustibly discussed in wānanga and therefore should serve as a conduit and contribution for a much wider discussion. It's also important to clearly delineate what is widely accepted as “play” from what we refer to as “tākaro” or “tākaro Māori” in this context. This article will refer to both play and tākaro as two distinct concepts, with many overlapping layers.

If we consider the concept of play, scenes of brightly coloured metal structures in softly surfaced areas come to mind. Perhaps objects of novelty (a cardboard rocket ship, a favourite toy, a competitive sport, or video game), tactile and immersive, come to the forefront. These natural associations are repeated intergenerationally and widely celebrated in society as children's pastimes. Western academics have considered play an essential element for healthy development and behaviour since as early as the 1890s, establishing play as a significant aspect of childhood learning and social growth (Hall, 1904). Throughout the early-mid 20th century, several developmental theorists cemented the idea that play is fundamental to learning and socialisation, asserting that children construct knowledge through active engagement, and that play is a key mechanism for learning (Piaget, 1945/1962); some researchers demonstrated that imaginative play helps children develop self-regulation, language, and social reasoning (Vygotsky, 1978); while others linked play to emotional wellbeing and the development of the “true self,” framing play as essential for psychological health and creativity (Winnicott, 1971). By the mid-20th century, developmental psychology widely accepted play as a critical driver of cognitive, social, and emotional development. In 1989, recognition moved beyond theory into international policy as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) declared play as a fundamental right.

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Modern neuroscience and child-development research now confirm that play contributes to brain development, emotional regulation, creativity, and social skills, reinforcing earlier theories from psychology and education. Meanwhile, the everyday discourse around play remains less scrutinised. Socially, play is framed as fun but non-essential, whereas policy and child developmental fields assert that play is both fundamental and formative. Integration of these two perspectives is conceptualised through “place-based play,” where sites of recreation also serve as sources of education about the area and communities in which such sites are situated.

Tākaro is a te reo Māori kupu that is widely translated into English as play, and operationally this translation can function well in day-to-day communications. On a deeper level, this translation could be viewed as a disservice for the layered meaning and function of tākaro as a conduit for reconnecting communities to pūrākau, tūpuna, and atua that shape our world and inform how we move in it and with it. Unlike place-based-play, “place-based tākaro,” is a pleonasm of sorts; a redundant phrase like free gift, where the same idea is repeated in different words. In te ao Māori and te reo Māori, context is key, and the Māori worldview contextualises in relation to whenua and whakapapa. Traditional games function as vehicles for transmitting knowledge, physical skill, and social values, and are embedded in tikanga and whakapapa (Brown, 2008, 2012). This demonstrates how play connects participants to landscape and collective identity and reinforces the role of tākaro as both pedagogy and cultural resurgence (Waiti & MacLean, 2013).

Non-Māori Indigenous research similarly recognises play as an integral component of relational learning systems grounded in land, culture, and community (Cajete, 1994; Howard, 2010). These perspectives challenge Western developmental frameworks by positioning play not merely as a stage of childhood development, but as a lifelong cultural practice through which knowledge, identity, and ecological relationships are sustained. Therefore tākaro, and other forms of Indigenous play, can be defined as a living ethical practice that pushes beyond neurological and social development and into the realm of collective conscientisation.

The underpinning assertion is that tākaro constitutes an intentional act of decolonisation. By examining the levers that uphold nationalism and colonial erasure, this article attempts to demonstrate how tākaro can disrupt entrenched inequities and inspire a resilient and informed society. Ultimately, it positions tākaro as both praxis and philosophy: a decolonial technology that teaches communities how to live together in balance, resilience, and care.

And so, “the play problem” exists in the convergence of Western and Indigenous ideologies: tākaro is not inherently interchangeable with play yet is often linguistically and socially positioned as such. Without delineation, we limit the healing capabilities of tākaro for whānau, communities, and society as a whole.

Whakapapa of Play: Memory, Knowledge, and Belonging

Tākaro is deeply entwined with whakapapa, acting as a medium through which intergenerational knowledge is transmitted. Play anchored by whenua allows people of all ages to embody history and ethical frameworks by encoding complex relational logics: reciprocity, collective responsibility, and respect for the environment, which offer a living curriculum for ethical and social development (Tawhai, 2010). Far from abstract, these are embodied teachings that are learned through movement, laughter, healthy competition, and cooperation.

For example, kēmu like kī-o-rahi are structured around landscapes and embody teachings of conflict, alliance, and guardianship (Brown, 2008, 2012; Mutu, 2011) that remain invaluable to communities today. Engaging with these games is an enactment of cultural memory that asserts belonging and resists colonial definitions of play as mere entertainment. These practices not only preserve ancestral knowledge but reinforce intergenerational responsibility and relational decision making. Through such play, ancestral logics are reactivated in the present, reminding the collective that every action is part of a wider genealogy of learning.

Tākaro challenges the individualistic competitive paradigm dominant in Western sport and ideology, offering instead a model centred on connection, care, and environmental stewardship. It resists the colonial framing of play as a site of discipline and productivity, insisting instead that play is a site of relational ethics and collective healing. In doing so, tākaro exemplifies how Indigenous practices can inform modern educational and social interventions and provide measurable benefits.

Indigenous scholars globally have long emphasised that learning occurs through participation in culturally grounded practices that are embedded in land, story, and community. For many Indigenous societies, knowledge is not transmitted solely through formal instruction, but again through relational engagement with place, movement, and shared experience. Cajete (1994) described Indigenous education from a Tewa perspective as an ecological process in which children learn through observation, participation, and play within the landscapes that sustain their communities.

These practices cultivate an awareness of reciprocity between people and environment, reinforcing social responsibility alongside personal development. When viewed through this lens, tākaro Māori can be understood as a part of a wider Indigenous pedagogical movement where games and playful practices act as transmitters of knowledge, values, and collective identity across generations.

Hauora ki te Tangata: Play as Holistic Wellbeing and Connection

Cultural practices function as protective, preventative, and restorative health measures, fostering social cohesion and emotional intelligence in ways that Western health interventions chronically overlook (Jackson, 2011).

By positioning tākaro as a health practice, we connect Māori knowledge systems to contemporary public health discourse, demonstrating practical applications beyond cultural preservation. In this sense, tākaro is medicine: a communal act of care that restores equilibrium between people and place, mind and body, self and collective.

Play/tākaro, translated directly and applied in a New Zealand policy context, refers to spontaneous, intrinsically motivated activity that is freely chosen, personally directed, and not driven by any predetermined outcomes; it is characterised by enjoyment, creativity, imagination, and social interaction, with limited external control or imposed rules. It is universally recognised as central to children's wellbeing and life-skill development in research and policy circles. Play/tākaro is described by the Ministry of Health (2017) as a vital part of children's growth that is instinctive, creative, and adaptable, performed for no external goal or reward, and integrated with cultural concepts of movement and learning. The Ministry of Education (2017) describes learning as occurring through a broad range of play-based experiences that empower children to explore, communicate, and develop dispositions for lifelong learning.

Within Aotearoa, Māori education research similarly emphasises the transformative potential of culturally grounded learning frameworks. Indigenous education initiatives succeed when they centre Māori knowledge systems, values, and community aspirations rather than attempting to adapt Māori learners to existing colonial institutions (G. H. Smith, 2003). This perspective reframes education as another site of political and cultural transformation rather than simply a mechanism for skill acquisition; tākaro Māori can therefore be understood as an educational practice that aligns with kaupapa Māori principles, providing experiential learning environments where knowledge, identity, and wellbeing develop simultaneously.

This is a promising direction that reflects a bicultural understanding of play. For many Indigenous communities, the reclamation or reinterpretation of play becomes a way to assert identity and rebuild social cohesion in the face of disruption.

The Machinery of Erasure: Colonialism and Nationalism

Colonialism has systematically sought to redefine land, bodies, and knowledge across the globe, and by framing these processes as ongoing instead of historical, we emphasise its persistent nature.

The intersection of nationalism and colonialism has profound impacts for all “New Zealanders”: Māori, Pākehā, and Tangata Tiriti alike. The colonial project is not only about seizing land, but also about shaping the imagination through manufactured social hierarchies, dictating who can belong, who can play, and whose knowledge counts as truth.

Socioeconomic structures built through land confiscations and class stratification have limited access to spaces where play and cultural transmission can flourish (Jackson, 2011). By inspecting these mechanisms, we begin to connect structural oppression directly to the marginalisation of tākaro as a cultural practice.

Colonialism is not solely a Māori issue. The British Empire taught societies to vilify their own populations by portraying people in poor communities as criminals and morally questionable. Historically, the Crown offered redemption through military service deployed against Indigenous populations (Belich, 2009; Canny, 2001), while modern levers are more covert and entrenched. These strategies weaponise poverty, transforming desperation into complicity, and manipulating people who are themselves colonised yet willingly rewarded for enacting colonisation elsewhere. Distilled through generations, a broader global logic of identity through access and privilege evolves and, in turn, secures participation in divisive ideologies. History continues to warn us of the colonised-to-coloniser pipeline, and the devastating impacts of ignorance.

Studies further illuminate the structural dynamics underlying these processes, with Veracini (2010) arguing that settler colonial societies are not merely historical events but ongoing political formations that seek to reproduce themselves, securing land while simultaneously displacing or assimilating others. Within this framework, cultural practices that reinforce Indigenous identity, governance, and belonging are a challenge to the stability of settler states. Activities such as language revitalisation, storytelling, and traditional play therefore become politically significant because they sustain relationships to land and collective memory that contradict settler narratives of legitimacy. The suppression of Indigenous play practices can thus be interpreted as part of a wider attempt to weaken relational knowledge systems that affirm Indigenous sovereignty.

An Empire’s Playground: Sport and the Control of Bodies

Similarly to education, religion, and social policy, sport can also be a vehicle of assimilation by privileging commercialised games while discouraging tākaro Māori (Palmer, 1987). Colonial sport policy, under the guise of “civilising leisure” sought to produce disciplined bodies aligned with imperial values.

Hokowhitu (2004) demonstrated how colonial narratives constructed Māori masculinity through racialised notions of physicality and savagery, which were then channelled into state-sanctioned sporting practices. These systems simultaneously celebrated Māori athletic ability while suppressing Indigenous forms of physical culture that did not conform to Western sporting values. In this context, the privileging of commercialised and codified sport functioned as a mechanism of assimilation, replacing relational and culturally embedded forms of movement with competitive structures aligned with imperial ideals. The marginalisation of tākaro Māori can therefore be understood not as incidental cultural loss but as part of a broader colonial project to reshape Indigenous bodies and identities.

This pattern is not unique to Aotearoa: in Hawai’i, surfing was banned by missionaries alongside hula and hula-based games, only to be commodified for tourists (Kanahele, 1986). In North America, Lacrosse (a medicine game) was criminalised and stripped of spirit before being absorbed into elite White universities and social circles. In Canada, residential schools removed Indigenous children from their families, suppressing traditional games that encoded cultural knowledge and

governance principles (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015). In Australia, the doctrine of terra nullius provided the moral and juridical foundation for violent suppression of Indigenous culture, languages, play, and systems of governance (Attwood & Markus, 2007; Reynolds, 1996). Everyday expressions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life were and continue to be criminalised and punished as mechanisms of control (Broome, 2019; Haebich, 2000).

Within this worldview, language, story, and play are recast as primitive, and their suppression justified through the civilising mission of the empire (Pascoe, 2007). These acts of erasure sought to sever people globally from ancestral lands and each other, transforming the freedom of play into a site of surveillance and obedience: a strategy consistent with the genocidal logic of assimilation (L. T. Smith, 2021; Tatz, 1999).

Manufactured Identities: Settler Complicity and Collective Amnesia

These processes were not limited to the direct regulation of Indigenous populations, as the architects of settler colonial societies simultaneously produced new identities for the settlers themselves.

National myths framed colonial expansion as progress, while obscuring the violence that made it possible, and, over time, these narratives have encouraged settlers to forget their own historical experiences of dispossession, class exploitation, and migration. These histories are replaced with a curated national identity that promises belonging and social currency. Research argues that such identity formation is essential to the stability of settler states: by normalising the occupation of Indigenous land and reframing it as national destiny and ultimate progress, colonial societies further obscure the ongoing nature of dispossession (Veracini, 2010; Wolfe, 2006). Historians reaffirm that such processes are central to imperial expansion: Indigenous knowledge systems are delegitimised so that colonial institutions can replace them as the sole legitimate authority over land, law, and social order (Pascoe, 2007). Yet again, this underscores how the suppression of play was not incidental; the freedom of play has gradually transformed into a domain of surveillance and control, aligning with assimilation policies (L. T. Smith, 2021; Tatz, 1999).

Collective amnesia describes forming a national identity that is detached from the histories that produced it. In Aotearoa, the construction of a homogenised “Kiwi” identity encourages people to prioritise individual achievement and patriotism, a concept often presented as “equality,” “unity,” or “oneness.” These narratives of equal opportunity obscure the structural inequalities that continue to shape relationships between the Crown, Māori communities and wider society (Mutu, 2022). It is essential to understand that colonialism is not solely a “Māori vs Crown” issue; it also seeks to erase Pākehā and Tangata Tiriti history and identity. Within this framework, cultural practices such as tākaro become politically significant. Their revitalisation disrupts the amnesiac effects through reconnection and true inclusion. In doing so, we can expose the fragility of the myths upon which settler nationalism depends.

Recent events across multiple settler states underscore the ongoing consequences of these systems beyond Aotearoa. In Australia, the Northern Territory Coroner’s Office reported a record number of Indigenous deaths in custody, with 12 recorded in 2025 alone, highlighting systemic failures in the justice system (Schmidt, 2025). Similarly, in Canada, the discovery of unmarked graves at former residential schools has brought to light the systematic genocide of Indigenous children, and prompted national reckoning (Government of Canada, 2024). Parallel logics are evident in Palestine, where Indigenous people continue to resist a settler-colonial state built on the dispossession of land and the erasure of memory. The United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2025) and Amnesty International (2024) determined Israeli state forces, under the banner of nationalist security and divine entitlement, have carried out acts of genocide against Palestinians through international war crimes such as mass killing, collective punishment, and the deliberate destruction of civilian infrastructure (Pappé, 2006; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2023; Wolfe, 2006).

While these contexts differ historically and politically, they reveal a shared logic: nationalist states frequently mobilise narratives of security, destiny, or divine entitlement to justify the ongoing dispossession and the consolidation of territorial control. So, these acts are not aberrations, but expressions of a global order in which nationalist states weaponise belonging, land, and fear to secure dominance; reminding us that colonialism is not a historical anomaly but an enduring system of extraction, control, and erasure.

Colonial administrations recognise the power of practices like tākaro and frequently target them precisely because they foster forms of belonging that exist outside the authority of the state. When communities gather to play, tell stories, and move together within ancestral landscapes, we reaffirm systems of knowledge and responsibility that colonial governance actively seeks to dismantle. In this light, tākaro is not only resistance, but essential to repair, restoration, and societal resilience.

Reclaiming the Field: Tākaro Against Nationalism and the Far Right

Tākaro not only serves as restorative praxis but can be positioned as a preventative measure against further disconnection and political extremism.

Modern nations are not ancient or natural formations but socially constructed political communities built through shared narratives, rituals, and symbols that define who belongs and who does not (Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1983). Tākaro offers an alternative framework of belonging that resists these exclusionary logics. Rather than grounding identity in rigid territorial or racial hierarchies, tākaro is embedded within whakapapa, collective responsibility, and relationships to land and community. These relational frameworks align with broader knowledge systems that prioritise reciprocity and collectivism over individual competition or nationalist ideology. By reinforcing social bonds through shared practice, tākaro cultivates forms of belonging that are inclusive, dynamic, and resistant to appropriation. Such recognition of collective rights, cultural continuity, and community governance counters ideologies that seek to monopolise national narratives and marginalise minority populations (Palmer, 1987).

Challenges to dominant national narratives are destabilising because they expose the historical foundations of colonial power (Veracini, 2010; Wolfe, 2006). In Aotearoa, where far-right rhetoric increasingly seeks to distort history and portray Māori assertions of sovereignty as threats to national unity, such cultural practices carry renewed political significance.

Tākaro therefore operates as subtle intervention by foregrounding cooperation, relational accountability, and shared joy; it disrupts the competitive and hierarchical frameworks often mobilised within nationalist discourse. In doing so, it destabilises the binaries of “insider” and “outsider” identity politics upon which exclusionary nationalism depends. The field of play becomes a site where community relationships are reaffirmed, and new solidarities can emerge across generations and cultures. Through these processes, tākaro functions simultaneously as shield and strategy: protecting cultural memory while generating possibilities for more inclusive and relational futures.

Tākaro as Decolonising Praxis

Simpson (2014) argued that Indigenous knowledge is produced and sustained through everyday interactions with land, relationships, and community practices. In this sense, cultural activities such as storytelling, ceremony, and tākaro function as forms of “land as pedagogy,” where knowledge emerges through lived participation rather than institutional instruction. Tākaro Māori aligns closely with this framework. By engaging bodies, landscapes, and ancestral knowledge simultaneously, tākaro becomes more than recreation; it is an enactment of resurgence that reaffirms relational governance systems and collective memory. Tākaro does not exclude but instead seeks to form bonds and understandings across people and culture. This positions tākaro as civic engagement, cultivating agency and encouraging communities to assert sovereignty through cultural expression and spatial occupation (Tawhai, 2010). In this way, tākaro becomes protest in the deliberate act of existing, learning, and thriving as a diverse and inclusive society.

Internationally, Indigenous movements echo this principle. In Native American communities, revival of traditional games has been linked to improved mental health outcomes, stronger intergenerational relationships, and the reinforcement of cultural identity (Lomawaima, 2000). Similarly, Australian Aboriginal communities have leveraged traditional play to strengthen community cohesion and cultural transmission, particularly in urban contexts where colonial disruption has fragmented kinship networks (Atkinson, 2002). In Canada, the resurgence of Indigenous play functions as a reclamation of identity, teaching histories suppressed by colonial schooling and residential systems (TRC, 2015). In Hawai‘i, play revitalisation enables reconnection to genealogy and place, asserting Indigenous knowledge against ongoing cultural erasure (Kanahele, 1986). This affirms that the intentional use of play as a decolonising practice transcends geographic boundaries. By connecting these examples explicitly to Māori practice, we underscore the universality of Indigenous resilience while again situating tākaro as context-specific praxis and pedagogy, a method of remembering who we are and what we value when systems of domination try to make us forget.

Mapping a Hawaiki Hou: Tākaro as Renewal

When we position tākaro as a generative pathway toward Hawaiki Hou, a renewed space of cultural, communal, and ecological flourishing becomes palpable. By engaging children, families, and communities in play rooted in whenua and whakapapa, tākaro provides practical frameworks for education, urban planning, and health promotion that are culturally grounded, relational, and ecologically sensitive. In essence, it is an architecture of hope that rebuilds futures from ancestral blueprints.

Lorde (1988) reminded us that expressions of joy, creativity, and connection can themselves be acts of resistance within systems structured by domination and exclusion. Practices that cultivate collective wellbeing challenge colonial narratives that frame Indigenous existence primarily through deficit, struggle, and redundancy. In this sense, the laughter, movement, and shared experience generated through tākaro are not merely recreational; they represent an affirmation of life, community, and cultural continuity that resists the forces that seek to suppress.

Through tākaro, communities reclaim agency over space itself tākaro then becomes an enactment of sovereignty, asserting the rhythms, rules, and relationships of the land as a map for us to follow. As such, the practice embodies both cultural preservation and innovation, sustaining futures that are firmly grounded in mātauranga ki te whenua while remaining responsive to contemporary realities. Tākaro becomes a vehicle where the stories of all people who have arrived on the shores of Aotearoa can be brought to light, shared, and honoured. And, in doing so, tākaro opens a relational space where healing, belonging, and creativity coexist.

Conclusion: Returning Home Though Play

This article contributes to a wider conversation about tākaro Māori and other forms of Indigenous play as a multifaceted act of resistance, cultural transmission, and decolonisation that benefits all. By reclaiming tākaro, communities reconnect to whakapapa, reinforce whanaungatanga, and nurture hauora, all while challenging colonial, nationalist, and far-right frameworks that seek to divide and erase. International comparisons underscore the universality of these principles, showing that Indigenous resurgence through play is both a local and global strategy for healing, education, and empowerment.

In an era marked by social fragmentation, ecological and economic crisis, and renewed colonial pressures, tākaro offers a timeless yet dynamic solution: a practice that calls us home to ourselves, our landscapes, and each other. It is a living testament to the resilience of Māori knowledge and a roadmap for creative, sustainable and interconnected futures in Aotearoa and abroad. It invites us to remember that resistance can be joyful, and tākaro in itself is a declaration of freedom.

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GLOSSARY

Hauora	Holistic wellbeing.
Hawaiki Hou	A renewed space for cultural, social, and ecological flourishing.
Kēmu	Māori games or playful activities.
Kī-o-rahi	Traditional Māori game.
Mātauranga	Māori knowledge systems, including values, practices, and ways of knowing.
Pākehā	New Zealander of European descent.
Pūrākau	Stories that convey moral, historical, and cultural teachings.
Tākaro Māori	Māori play practices embedded with relational ethics, and ancestral knowledge.
Tangata Tiriti	Non-Māori people living in Aotearoa under the framework of Te Tiriti o Waitangi.
Tūpuna	Ancestors whose knowledge, values, and actions inform contemporary life.
Whakapapa	Genealogy or relational frameworks connecting people, land, and ancestors.
Whanaungatanga	The cultivation of relationships, kinship, and collective responsibility.
Whenua	Land or place with spiritual, ancestral, and ecological connections.

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