

# Alcohol and young Tongans: a FOBI perspective for change

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## Introduction

The use of alcohol among young Tongans has been the subject of rhetoric for some time but has been the focus of little action. It has been on the agenda of the churches, government agencies and parents but has not progressed past awareness programmes, treatment of the sick and condemnation of alcohol as an evil agent that causes sins. The rhetoric may have led to policies being developed and laws being enacted. However alcohol use continues to increase and its association with young people becoming more intimate.

This paper explores the association of alcohol and young Tongans with view to providing a perspective to addressing the growing intimacy. The deliberate focus on Tongans acknowledges several aspects of our current knowledge and my presentation. The latter is a FOBI (Fresh Off the Boat Intelligentsia) perspective. That is, an academic analysis from a new migrant to New Zealand. The analysis reflects the freshness, innocence and naivety of a concerned new comer without the political baggage borne of being in a used and discriminated minority group. Therefore the context for this presentation is based upon:

- scarcity of ethnic-specific research on alcohol among young Pacificans,

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- dependency on my subjective personal experience;
- heterogeneity of Pacific peoples; and
- avoidance of grandstanding and cultural arrogance by speaking on behalf of all Pacificans.

Many of what will be said about Tongans may be relevant to other Pacificans. The focus on Tongans avoids grandstanding of a FOBI as a Pacific person, a stance which has enhanced the rhetoric and curtailed action due to lack of specific community-based solutions. The sole purpose here is to direct what we know and what we feel to meaningful action towards rationalizing the relationship of alcohol, young people and their families. We must appreciate but question the prevailing situation and assumptions as a means of developing a perspective for change.

## Situational analysis

As alluded to earlier, there is little information on alcohol and young Pacificans and almost non-existent specifically on young Tongans. Available information suggest increasing consumption of alcohol among the Pacific youths, but still lower than Maori and Palangi. The information available are from a few cross-sectional studies in which Pacific peoples are treated as a homogenous group, without due recognition of ethnic diversity, and some poorly designed anecdotal information collections. A summary of and generalisation from the current information has been provided by ALAC and the Public Health Commission. (See Table 1) Although these are not necessarily specific to young Pacificans, it is the best information available.

In 1995 New Zealand males 18-24 years accounted for 33% - 50% of the heaviest drinkers. Fifty percent of female heavy drinkers were also in the 18-24 year age groups. In this young age group there is a linear relationship between alcohol and all-causes mortality. This age group were more likely to report alcohol having a harmful effect on their life.

A study of 24,000 secondary students throughout New Zealand in 1988 showed Pacific students to be low users of alcohol and other drugs compared to Maori and Palangi.

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Alcohol consumption	Pacificans (%)	Maori (%)	Palangi (%)
<b>1992-93 Household Survey (15-65 years old)</b>			
Never drink alcohol	53	27	21
Drank alcohol in last week	29	46	60
6 to 20 standard drinks	50	37	36
<b>Workforce Study (40-65 years old)</b>			
Male	75	NA	93
Female	42	NA	89
<b>National Plunket Study (1990 - 1991)</b>			
Female	12	44	45

(See Table 2). The Pacific students in this national study were mostly Samoans, Tongans, Tokelauan, Cook Island Maori and Niueans.

Research showed the boys 14 to 17 years respond to alcohol advertising with increased frequency and amount of alcohol consumed. In 1996, youth of 10-17 years old saw about 400 television alcohol advertisements. Men aged 18 to 24 whose drinking had increased over the past 12 months often mentioned reasons related to increased availability of alcohol, such as:

- More alcohol served at social occasions (59%)
- The availability of more places where it is enjoyable to drink (43%)
- The range of places selling takeaway alcohol, making it easier to buy (36%)
- Longer opening hours of outlets (35%)
- Availability of "sly grog" after closure (39%).

The conclusions gleaned from available information on alcohol consumption includes the following

- Pacificans are moderate drinkers (6 to 20 standard drinks)
- Beer and spirits are the preferred drinks
- Alcohol consumption is predominantly a male activity

- Alcohol consumption among young women is increasing
- A private home is the place most commonly used for drinking
- Alcohol is increasingly used as a social lubricant
- Binge drinking is the predominant pattern
- Women are concerned over the men's use of alcohol.

An epidemiological study in Tonga in 1973 on alcohol, tobacco and kava consumption showed a close association in the use and abuse of these substances. If youths are using one of these substances they are more likely to be using and abusing the other two. This pattern suggests a risk taking personality precipitated by stressors in their lives and/or weakened resilience. Some of these may be a functional response to boredom, curiosity, wanting to feel good, relieve pain, stay awake, put to sleep, relax or even to dream. Such a functional response is often seen by the users as a solution rather than a problem.

## **Associations with alcohol consumption**

Many problems and so called contributing factors have been associated with the use of alcohol consumption.

**Table 2. Substance use by Pacificans, Maori and Palangi (FADE 1988)**

	Pacifican	Maori	Palangi
Painkillers	24	30	41
Alcohol	6	48	54
Tobacco	10	29	18
Marijuana	6	28	14
Solvents	3	3	2

However the relationship between alcohol and these problems and factors remains just that, statistical associations, because there is no evidence of a casual relationship.

It has been argued the bio-psychosocial problems lead to alcohol consumption and increase the risk of youth suicide, juvenile offending, teenage pregnancy, and substance abuse. An alternative explanation is that alcohol abuse is only one of the many end points youths share as they respond to the stresses of adjustment to the challenges of living at the margin of New Zealand society with well defined cultural boundaries and clear codes of behaviour. The noted associations includes:

- family disruption and dysfunction
- violence, criminal offences and antisocial behaviour
- motor vehicle accident
- alienation and marginalisation
- social disadvantage
- development of behavioral difficulties
- association with delinquents
- poverty and unemployment.

The obvious question has to be is alcohol use the cause or the result of these situations? Do youth see alcohol as the problem or the solution?

**Risk factors**

Studies on self-esteem and body image would suggest alcohol use is the result of

biopsychosocial problems rather than the cause. Similarly so called risk factors to alcohol use have been identified. This includes:

- conflict of multiculturalism and failure to reconcile different value systems
- greater access to and affordability of alcohol especially with more discretionary income
- break down of the family and traditional support e.g. lack of parental discipline
- pressure from peers, family, church and traditional obligations especially peer pressure and fear of being labeled as different and lacking resilience to stand tall under duress
- environmental pressures from media and peers
- lack of knowledge and experience with alcohol
- kava consumption is associated with alcohol and/or tobacco abuse.

This kind of conclusions from anecdotal information have Pacificans between the rocks and a hard place. An extrapolation from this existing information and conclusions, would give the impression that young Tongans are culturally inept, gullible, and are dumb drunks who are losing their tradition and living in broken families who can afford to buy alcohol for home parties that are neither Palangi nor Pacific. This implies that they cannot help themselves and that they

should be targets for all knowing do gooders who are free of self interest and purely altruistic. This sets in motion a series of events leading away from the problem and towards dependency and the interest of the do-gooders.

As I look at the context of Tongan youth, the best predictor of consuming and experimentation with alcohol by young people is being young. Experimentation, exploration, curiosity, identity search and risk taking is part of being young and travelling to adulthood. This can be done within a sensitive controlled environment with clear culture boundaries without being over politically correct and inappropriately liberal. Many young people who drink do not continue to abuse alcohol or develop significant problems. Therefore we should perhaps aim at providing a "padded-cell approach" to youth alcohol use rather than the fire and brimstone tactics.

**Kava and alcohol**

Kava drinking is an important traditional and cultural activity for Tongans. It is predominantly for men as a medium and lubrication catering for their political role in Tongan society. The women rarely drink kava because their

traditional role as the social convenor has been catered for through other social avenues e.g. weaving groups, tapa cloth making or village workgroups. With migration the di-

chotomy of roles is becoming blurred and confusing and alcohol replaces the traditional political and social lubricants.

Many suggest that the kava drinking nuances and habits have been transferred to alcohol use. This is expressed through heavy binge drinking in a group going for as long as the alcohol supply last or people become senseless. Traditional kava parties tend to be prolonged and protracted depending on the occasion, supply of kava and the conversation or singing.

The Fijian and Tongan missionaries introduced kava to some of the Australian aboriginal communities. This was successful in decreasing alcohol consumption so much so that the alcohol lobby funded research to stop the importation of Kava. This curbed importation but boosted local production. This approach may be a useful strategy for curbing alcohol and increasing the acculturation of young Tongan men in New Zealand.

There are many kava clubs in Auckland, mostly revolving around church groupings, ex-student associations, village or district of origin and occupation groups. These are almost exclusively for men. However, concomitant use of alcohol and tobacco must be monitored through traditional

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peer and social sanction mechanisms. A few kava clubs are already smoke-free and many are alcohol free.

## Comment on available information

The most prominent feature of the available information is its inadequacy in quality and quantity. Ethnic specific information is grossly deficient. Therefore to provide evidence-based and efficient intervention on the abuse and misuse of alcohol among Tongan youth, we have to be better objectively informed.

The salient features of the available information:

- inadequate information on alcohol use and general life challenges of young Tongans. There is no multidisciplinary profile on issues important in the life of young Tongans e.g. self esteem, body image, parental and peer relationship, etc
- data available are service based and therefore reflect special groups e.g. prison, treatment facilities, courts, etc. This leads to negative stereotypes. Therefore the positive attributes and contributions of the general population are drowned in prejudices and discriminations
- as most Tongan youths are not alcohol abusers, we need to study and learn from the reasons for their resilience rather than the weaknesses of a few
- there is no research on the use of alcohol and its relationship to Tonganess and Tongan traditional cultural/social control mechanisms for substance abuse
- there are differences between Pacific ethnic groups in their attitude and use of alcohol. This necessitates the consideration of ethnic specific strategies for addressing alcohol use.
- the family members and structures are victims of and contributing factors to alcohol use. It is also a part of the solution.
- there is no objective information on the relationship of the Tongan youth behaviour and alcohol with poverty, unemployment, alienation, marginalisation, and low educational achievement.
- emphasis on individuals information rather than the collective (e.g. family). There is a need for a profile of the collective groupings that creates problems with alcohol as well providing the solutions.
- so far much of the research and analysis have been the domain and prerogative of ethnic and cultural outsiders. There is a need for insider researchers with qualitative and quantitative research on the context of alcohol.

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## Observations and discussion

There is a dire need to define the problem. It seems that alcohol use is a symptom of economic and social deprivation

(e.g. poverty, unemployment) rather than the problem. The role of important factors in life of young Tongans need to be better understood and factored into a holistic strategy to address the causes of alcohol use rather than just the damages of alcohol. Such factors include religion, tradition, family, educational level, reciprocal obligation, migrant and economic status etc. The definition of the problem must be community-based and reflects the ethnic specific world view.

The use, abuse and misuse of alcohol are parameters that need clarification. At present alcohol is used as a social lubricant, appetiser, thirst quencher, social status indicator, a medium of exchange, alleviate frustration and loneliness, and a vehicle for pleasure. When do these uses become abuse and/or misuse? The answer cannot merely be the quantity consumed.

Court appearances and service data cannot be a measure because expensive legal representation and social manipulation keep the rich and powerful from being counted. Criminality has many other extenuating factors that alcohol may just be the drop that breaks the camels back. The data systems (e.g. hospital morbidity, prisons, courts etc) are more likely to catch the economically and socially deprived. Population based research is urgently needed to address essential questions for intervention.

Is alcohol use among the poor abusive and/or misuse till proven otherwise? Is there social, physical and mental dimensions to the definitions of alcohol misuse and abuse? Unless these questions are adequately addressed, the identification, prevention and treatment of alcohol abuse and misuse will remain a fuzzy warm panacea for the staunch do-gooders with the hidden agenda.

Alcohol and mood changing agents are here to stay. Youths, as part of growing up, will use them. Whether migrant, indigenous, dominant or marginalised each

have a need for mood changing agents. These agents may be legalised (e.g. alcohol) and under prescriptive control (e.g. diazepam and methadone), illegal (e.g. marijuana), or just socially acceptable (e.g. kava and betel nut). Perhaps life may have become intolerably stressful and society no longer has sufficient mechanisms to deal with this challenge. Is life meant to be risk and stress free? If these agents are here to stay then we must accept the inevitable and develop mechanisms of how we may live within the risks of their presence. An example of this approach is our life with the dangers of motor vehicles. What are the acceptable risks for the use of mood changing agents? Why are mood changing agents necessary in our societies? Are we trying to ban or live with the inevitable? Rational answers to such

questions are necessary for a focussed approach to addressing alcohol use.

It has been said that bicultural conflicts alienate and marginalise migrants in New Zealand. Thus leading to alcohol use and social and economic problems. It is not clear when a migrant ceases to be migrant but complete assimilation by the dominant culture seems to be the expectation. The assumption being that migrants will not cease to have problems until a complete loss of cultural democracy. This however will take some time and may be never as has been aptly demonstrated by the attachment to the British monarchy by most New Zealanders after at least 200 years of migration regardless whether the migrants were slaves, sailors, soldiers or entrepreneurs. Therefore an acceptance of migrants, cultures and traditions with New Zealand being a true political and cultural democracy seems to be fundamental to any solution.

The recognition of ethnic diversity and multicultural values as a pathway to a solution, dictates that social systems and worldviews must be developed. This can be fostered through appropriate human resources development, sufficient funding, and timely evaluation of these efforts. The subtle assimilation processes must be identified and neutralised e.g. mainstreaming of health service, population control and adoption of token Pacific Islanders as a conduit by assimilationists. There must be support for the cultural democratic process as a prerequisite to "unity in diversity" rather than the present unequal partnership. This support may necessitate the importation of expertise from Pacific countries of origin - a kind of reverse imperialism.

Religion is an important dimension of Tongan life. It is surprising that religion has been a largely ignored variable in the research into problems originating in the social context. Alcohol, and other lifestyle risk factors of diseases have been modifiable through religion or religious processes. In studies of self-esteem the lack of firm systems of beliefs and direction in life have been shown to be important predisposing factors. Therefore the use of religion and spirituality for the minimisation and treatment of alcohol use have internal plausibility and cultural appropriateness.

Families have always been the unit of interaction of the Tongan society. This group can be nuclear or extended and many functions are distributed throughout the unit. Coherence depends on reciprocal obligations which have dealt with fatherlessness, discipline, safe haven for children, identity, roles and responsibilities of individuals. These are

currently undermined in New Zealand by the concepts of individual freedom and rights translating to lax discipline, ill defined social boundaries, and a inconsistent definition of normal. The primacy of economic survival of a marginalised people also relegate social obligations within the family to a lower priority. In addition pseudo-intellectuals and tokens keep inserting concepts undermining the family structures e.g. New Zealand born versus Pacific born differences, feminism, individual based services, etc. These pathetic defeatist efforts at being politically correct may win short term funding and individual brownie points but opens the way for the disintegration of a social institution for which we

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have as yet no substitute. If alcohol use is a symptom of this process then we must keep the family intact.

### **Perspectives for change**

These perspectives covers the aspects of change in the approach to resolving the problems as well as the extent of alcohol use. With the preceding discussions as a backdrop the following strategies are suggested to resolve alcohol use among young Tongans:

1. Wholistic approach to address the economic and social deprivations leading to alcohol use. In this approach alcohol is seen as a symptom rather than the problem. The latter includes better education, strengthening traditional links and cultural democracy, decrease discrimination, alienation and marginalisation, and enhancement of self-esteem. These are system problems and will involve all sections of New Zealand society not just the victims. If this is to be successful then a social revolution may need to take place.
2. Development of family and home focussed prevention and treatment services. This must address roles of family members, parenting, discipline, the links of individualism, and safety of the home for all its members. Individual based concepts and services must be discouraged.
3. Development of ethnic specific services. The ethnic groups must design and implement services. Adequate resources must be provided from within the community and by outside agencies to establish and maintain such services. Ethnic specific workforce and educational resources must be created for such services. Different levels of Pacific societies are already aligning themselves ethnically e.g. political parties, churches, gangs, other services, etc.

4. Appropriate research and information systems must be in place to support the family and ethnic based services. Research must be operational and action oriented. This must include:
- development of research capability not token cultural brokers
  - culturally appropriate definitions of alcohol abuse, misuse, and other concepts
  - intervention studies addressing the comprehensive relationship of alcohol and ecological factors
  - participatory research must be the ultimate goal
  - research should focus not only on the disadvantaged but on the rich and powerful as well, akin to studying the advantaged to enrich the poor rather than studying to poor to be taken advantaged of.
5. Government Policies, legal frameworks and sufficient resources must be developed and dedicated to these suggestions to make them a reality and resolve the problem of alcohol use as well as many of the social ills in New Zealand. These may seem expansive and expensive but a cursory look will suggest efficiency of problem resolved per unit cost outweighs the current emphasis on efficiency of the process per unit cost without necessarily resolving a problem.

## Conclusion

Alcohol use is a problem of young Tongans but the dimensions of this problem is ill-defined. The root cause of alcohol use lies in the economic and social deprivation of families. Positive steps that can and should be taken to address the symptom of alcohol use must include the resolution of deprivation through family focussed services, appropriate research and training, production of ethnic educational resources, development of supportive policies and legal frameworks, and provision of sufficient resources. The ultimate aim being a culturally democratic New Zealand society united by diversity without alcohol misuse.

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Man, being reasonable, must get drunk;  
The best of life is but intoxication  
Lord Byron (1788-1824) Don Juan II