Alcohol: a threat to Tonga's time-honoured values?

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Introduction

Some foreign elements - styles of clothing, types of food and drink, music and dance - can be added to people's existing ways of life with harmless or happy results, while other things when they are introduced cause widespread misery and disruption. In Pacific cultures, a bad match of old and new elements occurs when alcohol is drunk in the same quantity as the traditional drink kava, or when it is drunk together with kava.

In the Kingdom of Tonga where faikava (gathering where kava is drunk) serves as a model for modern drinking. Some drink alcohol in the same fashion and quantity as kava. Custom, in this case, leads to too much alcohol drinking. When people get drunk, they are likely to shatter the very relationships and values that the cherished custom of faikava is meant to preserve and deepen.

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Faikava

In Tonga, drinking kava, made from the Piper methysticum plant, is a continuation of an ancient culture, well-grounded in myth and ceremony, that helps to make up the Tongan identity.[1] The ritual drinking of kava, most developed in the Taumafakava or royal kava ceremony, allows genealogies to be recited and the relative rank of titled participants to be observed and, if necessary, rearranged. Informal social kava-drinking, faikava, binds Tongans together in a different way since it allows social barriers to be crossed, and encourages the discussion of themes and events of local and national interest.

Despite opposition from early missionaries, the faikava have continued to structure general discussion and play an important part in celebrations.[1] This helps to maintain Tongan identity in the face of Western influences. Recently, a great number of kava clubs have been started in towns and villages. Kava is also drunk socially in homes and other meeting places.

Men might start drinking kava formally or informally before they are 20 years old. They are expected to drink kava because its traditional association with rank, title and power. Married women, as they bear children and grow older, obtain a political status in some sense, like that of men and may begin to drink kava. Women rarely attend faikava except as the maker of the kava.

The effect of kava comes from its wide and important social setting than its chemistry.[2] Generally, the drinking of kava in moderation are slightly relaxing. If it is made strong from the dried or green roots of the kava plant - heavy drinkers can develop dry and scaly skin, becomes unsteady on their feet and be said to "walk in circles" mentally and physically.

More serious problems arise when the pattern of drinking during a faikava is applied to the drink of alcohol. In a few instances the kava bowl has been "spiked" with alcohol, or spirits drunk as a "chaser" after faikava. Some young Fijian men have presented at the CWM Hospital in psychotic states, and remained so for several days, as a result of having drunk sizeable amounts of kava with alcohol (Dr De Asa, CWM Hospital, Suva). The two substances, taken closely upon one another, exaggerate the effects of each.

Secondly, an aspect of the etiquette of faikava seemingly so slight that it is rarely mentioned in published accounts - is proving to be a disastrous model for the present day consumption of alcohol namely, that every piece of kava brought as a ma'u kava (gift of kava) to the faikava should be used at that single session. This polite "rule" also tends

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to be applied to modern contexts of drinking alcohol so that if four cases of beer, or however much alcohol, is brought to a drinking party, it will all be drunk at that session in the manner of faikava. Unlike the mild peaceful effect of kava, such an amount of alcohol can be grave, destructive results. Therefore, the etiquette of kava drinking is definitely not the way to drink alcohol.

Alcohol consumption

Alcohol has become, together with European-style houses, dress, food, literacy, and "white-collar" jobs, a symbol of European life that is seen mostly in Nuku'alofa (the Kingdom's political, social and commercial capital) and to a lesser extent, in Neiafu, Vava'u and Pangi, Ha'apai. Most rural people in Tonga never drink alcohol: they cannot afford to, they live too far from retail outlets, and their church beliefs forbid or, at least, strongly discourage it.

Hopi, home brew, is drunk by a few people in rural areas and by many poor people in towns, but it has neither the traditional significance of kava nor the prestige associated with imported commercial alcohol. An urban and rural sample studied in 1973 drank relatively little hopi compared to the amount of kava or alcohol consumed.[3] This may be changing as younger men in towns and without much money still want to get drunk.

Before the mid-1880s, Wesleyan missionaries had strongly discouraged the drinking of alcohol by converts. Most Tongans obeyed their church leaders' wishes and stayed away from alcohol. Religious and widespread social disfavour of strong drinks was put into Tongan law so that, today, alcohol is obtainable from retailers only with a permit that is issued to individuals who are given a monthly allowance based on their social status and income. There is no brewery in Tonga and Tongans rarely buy wine. Most of the commercial alcohol drunk is imported beer and spirits. In Nuku'alofa, Tongans can get liquor without a permit from clubs and hotels at a slightly higher price than in the shops. The air of exclusivity, both of club membership and the system of permits, gives alcohol an unintended further prestige.

Alcohol is actively campaigned against except by a few churches, particularly the Mormon. Economic restraints, in terms of money to spend, and practical limitations, in terms of transport, are more effective supports of the early social resistance to alcohol taught to most of the Tongan population.

Accordingly, the amount of alcohol drunk overall in Tonga has remained low, although the latest figures show the amount to be increasing.[4] In 1964, Lavin was able to say that "drunkenness in Tonga is almost non-existent".[5] She saw that for most Tongans, their lack of ready money also had a lot to do with their sober state. Today, with more cash available, especially in towns, heavy drinking among some people is increasing. "Binge drinking" is presently the most visible sign of alcohol abuse in Pacific countries.[4]

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The alcohol consumers

Tongans who drink can be divided into two broadly contrasting types men and women of the elite; and younger men in towns. Each category seeks, in different ways and with very different means at its disposal, to attain a life style containing western style elements. For example, the formal kava ceremony is performed at official functions, and at national celebrations such as royal weddings, where alcohol is also served, and the imported palangi custom of cocktail parties is well established in government and business circles. Younger men in towns go to kava clubs or faikava informally but they may also attend drinking sessions where large quantities of alcohol are drunk.

The government bureaucrats and other members of the Tongan elite have relatively high incomes from salaries and other sources. They travel overseas frequently and can buy duty free alcohol. Thus buying alcohol does not absorb the same proportion of disposable household income or stop them paying for food, shelter, clothing, or education for their families as it would for poorer people.

It is hard to judge the amount of alcohol consumed by this sector of Tongan society but, should the elites drink large enough amounts of alcohol over a period of years, they will surely have the alcohol-related illnesses, accidents and domestic disarray that characterise regular, heavy "social" drinking among similar people of Westernised countries.

In addition, there are cultural considerations, as Urbanowicz remarked:

"*when the ratio between kava consumption patterns and alcoholic consumption patterns shifts towards a preponderance of alcoholic consumption, Tonga will indeed have some problems for this will be an indication that the basic fabric of their culture and society has shifted*".[1]

In hierarchical society, change usually starts from the top and gets to the rest of the population! Such a shift among the social and cultural elite, the governing sector, would

indicate that a highly imported change was taking place in Tongan life and values.

In towns, younger men who are working or have relatives who get wages may have drinking sessions, typically over a weekend. Alcohol is shared in the manner of faikava. Drinking parties can begin whenever the participants acquire some money. Pay-days and cruise-ship days, are likely times for "binges" to begin. People get very drunk at "binges" and, indeed, drunkenness appears to be goal of the drinking.

Oddly enough, although drinking is not socially approved, drunkenness is tolerated to a curious degree in Tonga. Once people have sobered up, they usually resume their accustomed place in Tongan society without grave disadvantage or stigmatization. If damage has been caused, the state of drunkenness is blamed rather than the drunken individual. Being drunk while committing a crime has seemed almost to be an excuse rather than a double fault.

As numbers of very serious crimes have increased in recent years, the Tongan judiciary has reacted with equally harsh penalties. Sentences of death which were handed down in 1984 for three men convicted of murder when all were drunk, clearly places responsibility upon the individuals concerned for wrongs done even when the men were drunk. Apart from violent crimes, the increasing demand for alcohol and drunkenness cause disruption of traditional Tongan values and cherished relationships.

Traditional values and alcohol abuse

In Tonga, positive traditional values centre about the concept of 'ofa, part of a general Polynesian theme - aloha in Hawaii, arofa in Tikopia, aroha among New Zealand and Cook Islands and Maoris, and talofa in Samoa - which covers such concepts as kindness, hospitality, sympathy, a hope for something good to happen, and many more meanings which all have a loving, caring connotation. The Tongans use the concept of 'ofa to explain anything that has positive results or shalom.[6] It is not possible to fully understand other key concepts of Tongan culture, such as faka'apa'apa (roughly translated as reverence, respect, or honour), fe'ofo'ofani (harmony in living), or fetokoni'aki (sharing or cooperation) without relating it back to the ideas bound up in the notion of 'ofa.

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Unlike faikava, drinking alcohol in a group can lead to drunken violence which turns upside down the values in the concept of 'ofa. Generosity and sharing, especially between members of a kainga (extended family) becomes burdensome when people request money from their relatives' meager wages. On pay-days, wage-earners often try to dodge relatives asking them for money on the streets. Outside the hotels, young men stand waiting to see someone from whom they can ask the entrance fee or the price of a drink. If the relatives who request money are fahu, of higher rank in the family, it becomes even more difficult to refuse their requests and it is a shameful, impolite, and without ofa (ta'e'ofa) to do so but how can people give a me'a'ofa (gift) which they know will be spent on drink and probably lead to destructive behaviour?

Measures to curb heavy drinking in other countries have included increasing alcohol prices beyond the means of most people. Such a step should be considered carefully before being recommended for Tonga, where alcohol is already beyond most people's means but where the idea of fetokoni'aki (sharing) operates to spread money around a wide circle of people. Prices would have to be raised many folds before making it impossible for people to purchase alcohol. In the process, drinkers will reduce the economic circumstances of their kainga in Tonga itself and overseas.

Tongans value fe'ofo'ofani (harmony) in interpersonal relationships, particularly within the family. Loud, individualistic, self-aggrandisement and the frequent inability to perform family duties, typical of drunkenness, effectively disrupt close and harmonious relationships and thus negates fe'ofo'ofani.

The most valued relationship of respect faka'apa'apa ideally existing between a brother and sister in Tongan society, has been violated through drunkenness. In one case, a young many attempted to drive the family vehicle when he was drunk. His sister, according to her traditional right, reprimanded him and ordered him out of the can. Her brother, filled with shame, drunken rage and frustration, a potent mixture of emotions which cannot socially be expressed towards a sister in Tongan society, committed suicide. In a similar incident involving a sister's reprimand not to drive while drunk, another young man threw himself over a cliff and is now a quadriplegic. In both cases, neither the sisters' check of their brothers' reckless behaviours nor the brothers' unreasoned reaction would have occurred if they were not drunk.

A considerable range of Tongan social values, including reputation (ongoongo), dignity (langilangi) duty (fatongia), and even life (mo'ui), are likely to be distorted or compromised, by the drinker and those who must interact socially with him. Warm-heartedness (loto mafana), obedience

(talangofua), friendship (fakakaume'a), and generosity (nima homo) may have negative results when pressed into the service of supplying alcohol for "binges" or to keep relatives drunk.

Conclusion

The Pacific way of drinking all the alcohol available at one sitting after the fashion of faikava is not the way to drink. The effects often undermine the positive values that faikava is meant to enhance.

The current trend towards preserving and strengthening Pacific cultures should take account of the potential dangers of mixing old practices, such as traditional kava drinking patterns, with new elements such as alcohol. Rather than ordering people, especially younger urban men, not to indulge their taste for alcohol and its mind-blowing effects, the elites should look at the aura of glamour their own patterns of drinking have given to alcohol. The leaders should seek to understand the fears and insecurities that beset younger urban "binge" drinkers and try to readdress inadequate present-day social rewards - in terms of the poor; the allocation of land to young men, meager employment opportunities; lack of self-esteem in the contemporary world; and onerous and devalued social responsibilities towards kins and local leaders. Only then will the problems of alcohol abuse, be tackled at the core.

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An alcoholic has been lightly defined as a man who drinks more than his own doctor.

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