Social context of alcohol in Tonga

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Introduction

1 am honoured to have been invited to speak at this historic Conference, Pacific Spirit: Action on Alcohol in the Pacific, a subject which concerns so many of our people in the region, and a substance which has caused untold misery in so many lives, in so many Pacific homes. It is my fervent hope that this Conference, the first of its kind to be held in the region, will not merely be another international forum in which learned views are expressed, debated and documented, and then left forgotten on library shelves to be of interest only to future researchers, if at all, but that it will be the springboard from which will emerge community-based strategies and activities, that would assist communities and individuals around the Pacific region, to minimise the harmful effects of its love/hate relationship with alcohol.

Alcoholism is defined by the Collins Dictionary as "A condition in which dependence on alcohol harms a person's health, social functioning, or family life." I propose to spend the first half of this address reviewing the larger context, in which alcohol abuse and dependence occur today, in order to provide us with a better understanding of the enormity of the challenges we face, and in the second half I will take a brief look at what we could do as communities to minimise, if not eradicate, the fatal attraction of alcohol for those of our population most at risk.

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The contexts that promote alcohol abuse and dependence

Today all our Pacific countries are going through unprecedented changes, which are transforming our societies, economically, politically, socially and culturally and even our environments and physical landscapes. None of our countries have escaped, although the degree and rate of the changes vary from one country to another. All of us are making attempts to grapple with a variety of issues brought to life by a number of globalisation processes.

The most obvious, of course, are the so-called new liberal economic policies and reforms with their call for free markets and free trade, diversified export led growth, foreign investments, down-sizing of governments, lower public expenditure, sales of public property, promotion of the private sector, protection of special groups, lower wage policies, and tax regimes, which include tax free zones and no-tax packages, deregulation and removal of import tariffs, lower company taxes, lower ceilings on personal taxes and more direct (user) taxes. These dominant economic strategies are freely adopted by our Pacific countries, and sometimes imposed subtly and not so subtly by aid donors and world organisations.

Globalisation

The less obvious but no less pervasive is the globalisation of western culture, through increased improvements in travel and the increasing adoption of the new information and communication technologies, which have accelerated cultural and social changes to unprecedented degrees.

These globalisation processes are changing not just individual values but, in addition, the cultures of our societies. They have increased personal mobility to a level greater than ever, as well as urbanisation, and internal and external migrations. The globalisation processes and the changes they bring appear inevitable. Pacific countries today are

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making attempts to manage such changes and put in place strategies that could mitigate the negative aspects which are assuming nightmarish proportions in some parts of the region, such as urbanisation and its attendant problems of land and housing, squatting and social dislocation and disorder; deteriorating law and order enforcement and rising crimes, such as domestic violence, child abuse, prostitution, paedophile, incest, drug and alcohol abuse, and drug trafficking; high and permanent unemployment accepted as inevitable; fierce competition for scarce services such as education and health, alienated youth; uncontrollable population growth; brain drain, increasing uncertainty about identity; and, increasing corruption in governments and businesses.

These are just a few of the negative outcomes of development and globalisation. We have yet to see the full effects, if globalisation is fully extended, of its consequences. Those we could see today could be summarised as follows

- Poverty is growing as a consequence of the increasing social disorder and unemployment.
- Crime is becoming rampant: violent crimes are increasing as do white collar crimes and domestic violence.
- Housing for the urban masses and squatters is becoming a major issue in many countries.
- Inequalities are increasing and new forms have been created.
- Environmental degradation is increasing, such as pollution, and deforestation.

Electronic media

The increasing access and adoption of the new information and communications technologies are among the most potent forces for change today. Satellite Television, because of its ready accessibility, immediacy and relative low user costs, is certainly one of the most influential mediums for change that we have today. It is a medium that ensures that our children learn to emulate the drug and alcohol habits, hair styles, and violent crimes of American gangsters, accept as the norms the promiscuous and amoral life styles of jet setters, and submit to the worship of Gods Mammon and Materialism. The globalisation of television programmes has been almost entirely from North to South, and from the first world to the third and from Western culture to the rest. World wide satellite television guarantees that western culture and values are known, emulated and adopted in every part of the globe. Remoteness, our defence of the past, no longer protects communities from its negative influence or impact.

This is the context in which we must discuss alcohol abuse and alcohol dependence in the Pacific region. It is a context in which increasing urbanisation and increasing and faster contacts with the larger world are changing at unprecedented pace both individual and communal values. It is a context in which individual and national identities are no longer clear cut.

The socio-political environment

In today's world and global culture young people growing up face multiple complexities in societies in states of constant flux; in moving from the rural areas to the urban areas, they have no sense of self-worth. In this context youths are perceived as problems, but these young people bear the brunt of cultural change. At the threshold of the twenty-first century, they should have wide life choices, but the reality today is that those choices are increasingly narrowing. In this context new social organisations are growing up in the move to the urban areas, such as youth gangs and the new middle class which overlap with traditional but changing older forms. In this context too new forms of governance are emerging, replacing or transforming traditional political structures and leaderships.

Such are the changing social, economic, political, and cultural contexts in which alcohol abuse and dependence occur in our region today. The use of substances to alter and expand human consciousness, as Marshall stated (1993) is a world-wide phenomenon. Most Pacific Islanders traditionally used 'kava' and betel. But as is typically the case in human affairs, these long-known and highly valued substances were deeply rooted in cultural traditions and patterns of social interactions. Pacific people had developed culturally controlled ways of using betel and kava, because of the relatively benign physiological effects of these substances, and because neither by itself seems to produce serious disease states when consumed in the traditional manner. As usually taken in the region, not only do kava and betel pose few - if any - health risks, but neither drug leads to intoxicated behaviour that is socially disruptive. The plants from which these substances are derived are locally grown for commercial purposes, but neither substance is yet handled by multinational corporations. Thus, kava and betel do not have negative social and economic consequences for the Pacific societies where they are used.

Pacific Islanders, like most North American Indians, had no alcohol beverages until Europeans brought them early in the contact period. During the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century, whalers, beachcombers, missionaries and traders arrived in the islands in growing numbers. Many of them were drinkers and provided models of drunken behaviour for islanders to copy. As is true in most parts of the world, more men drink alcoholic beverages than women, and that men drink greater quantities than women, but these gender differences are particularly marked in the Pacific. In many of the islands, there are strong social pressures against women drinking, reinforced by church teachers, that effectively keep most women from even tasting alcohol beverages. With few exceptions, it is usually Westernised women in the towns who drink any sort

on a regular basis. Boys below the age of fifteen seldom, if ever, drink, but by the time they are in their late teens or early twenties, nearly all of them partake of alcohol. Weekend binge drinking by young men, especially in towns, frequently leads to social disruption and confrontation.

For many Pacific Islanders, alcoholic beverages have come to symbolise "the good life" and active participation in a modern, sophisticated lifestyle. Beer is usually the beverage of choice. The chief problems associated with alcohol use are social ones, although it is difficult to divorce these from the inter-related public health and economic costs.

Among the more prominent widespread social problems are domestic strife, particularly wife-beating; community fighting and disruption, often with attendant trauma and occasional fatalities; crime and drunk-driving accidents. Although they have received less attention, the physical and mental illnesses, linked to either prolonged heavy ethanol intake or binge drinking appear to be considerable. Among these are alcohol cirrhosis, cancers of the upper respiratory and upper digestive tracts, death from ethanol overdose, alcohol psychoses, and suicide while under the influence of alcohol.

Alcohol and Tonga

In Tonga, the pattern of consumption is very similar to what has been described as typical in the Pacific region. As Ma'ilei et al (1994) stated "with increasing urbanisation, paid employment and changes in life styles, alcohol is increasingly consumed as people especially in Nuku'alofa, can afford to purchase these at the expense of family necessities. As James has found (1986) 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

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and to a lesser extent in Neiafu, Vava'u and Pangai, Ha'apai. Most rural people in Tonga prior to 1987 never drank alcohol, they could not afford to; they lived too far from retail outlets and their church beliefs and customs forbade or, at least, strongly discouraged it. However, with the establishment of a locally brewed beer (Royal Beer) in 1987, consumption of beer increased tremendously because it was widely available and cheap. Licence for consuming alcohol was lifted in 1989, and everybody had easy access to it, thus increasing its consumption throughout the Kingdom, but to a greater extent in Nuku'alofa. It was estimated that in 1992, the average Tongan consumed 30 litres of alcohol per annum. Tongans who drink can be divided into two broadly contrasting types: men and women of the elite (includes

Government civil servants), and younger men in the towns. To add to that, there is another category of alcohol consumers that is obviously noticeable today and that is the single young woman. Each category seeks, in different ways and with very different means at its disposal, to attain a life-style containing western style elements.

Today alcohol is served at various functions such as weddings, cocktail parties, etc. with the establishment of numerous night-clubs in the late 80s and 90s, teenagers and youths of both sexes, have easy access to alcohol. Its consumption by this group is becoming increasingly acceptable especially in the Nuku'alofa area. However, despite the growing numbers of alcoholic consumers, the number of offences has fallen since 1992, which peaked at 1510, to 1055 in 1994. The Minister of Police's Report for that year commented that "despite the foregoing, liquor as a cause of deviant social behaviour, in comparison with other Pacific nations, is the lowest and certainly no cause for trepidation or anxiety in the total behaviour of criminally irresponsible behaviour in the Kingdom. Tongans by far and large are disciplined consumers of liquor, with the off incident (sic) highlighting it from time to time." As the numbers of consumers grow, however, despite the official view, so has the concern over social, cultural, economic and health issues, such as domestic violence, misuse of family income, and increase in mortality from non-communicable diseases associated with high alcoholic consumption.

The drinking of alcohol, the use of tobacco and the taking of other drugs (eg. Marijuana, glue sniffing) are seen as mainly urban phenomena associated with people's changing life-styles. Consumption tends to increase with urbanisation (Finau, 1982). What has not been sufficiently explored is the psychological trauma and stress that people, not just the youths and those freshly arrived from the rural areas, but those too who outwardly appear the most westernised, suffer as a consequence of urban living, which very often means the devaluation and erosion of traditional and personal values, confusion over identity, loss of the traditional support systems, destruction of existing social structures, and the re-learning of coping skills. The real reasons, therefore, why people use drugs - those related to self-esteem, self-worth and self-efficacy, are often ignored in the preoccupation of how to deal with the harmful physiological, social, cultural and economic effects of alcohol abuse and dependence. But the most appropriate strategies with likely long-term and permanent effects, cannot be developed or identified without fully understanding the deep-rooted causes in our societies, that drive individuals in our Pacific communities to

consume alcohol. We cannot comfort ourselves with the belief that alcoholism is a disease, such as AIDS or cancer, although it is often progressive and fatal, and is characterised by impaired control over drinking, preoccupation with the drug alcohol, and the use of alcohol despite adverse consequences and distortions in thinking, most notably denial. Drinking is profoundly affected by one's social and family environment and the choices that one makes. Alcoholism is very often a personal philosophy, a mode of thinking that allows one to slowly self-destruct while under the influence. But such thinking can be changed and individuals can recover, and by so doing, recover from 'alcoholism as well as alcohol dependence". But we, as societies and communities, must find the ways and means of assisting those suffering from excessive and pathological drinking, to make the necessary changes in their thinking and life-styles by changing those political and economic structures, cultural and social systems, and attitudes that impose intolerable stresses on individuals and promote alcohol consumption.

Some suggestions for community interventions

I have talked about the contexts in which alcohol dependence and abuse occur. I stressed mainly the fact that it is largely an urban phenomenon. The issue of identity is one of the most serious. We need to create urban environments which do not merely provide adequate housing, sufficient employment, adequate services such as health and education. We need in addition to construct new urban communities which can embody our traditional community values of sharing and caring with shared spaces and responsibilities for young and old, communities which will allow our people to retain, and maintain their roots while adapting to the demands of modern living; communities which will inspire trust and self-confidence, self-esteem and self-worth, that will allow individuals to develop skills and capabilities, communities that value human endeavours in all its splendid variations, not just in narrow economic terms.

The youths of the Pacific are our futures and we must, therefore, look for alternatives, and think about how we can build on principles of community, which we value so much in our region. We need to develop capacity building by networking, a kind of people and community movement, that is, of globalisation from below, and provide the kinds of support that would encourage community initiatives, such as sharing information and decentralising resources and services. We need to learn to seed ownership and to share power so that identifying problems, and finding

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solutions are not hierarchical, or bureaucratic activities, but communal structures. In the development of new forms of governance there is nothing to prevent us from developing institutions that create transparency, accountability, greater participation and integrity, not just in the central state and its political structure, but in traditional communities, and leadership. We need to create new forms of civil societies and seek new modes of governance, new ways of relationships, of consulting and talking to each other. We need to develop in our children our own Pacific ways of perceiving the world, and articulating our own authentic and unique experiences. As we face the beginning of a new millennium, our children must be certain as to where they came from and where they wish to go. We must help them develop a vision for themselves and their children, and the kinds of societies they wish to live in. We must give them the alternatives and the choices.

As Ransom so eloquently put it (1997) in discussing the alternative to globalisation, "We can find a vast richness of more equitable, sustainable and inviting options to be implemented. We can find these too in the creativity, and potential of millions of people around the world who are today hemmed in by poverty, frustrated aspirations and wasted talent. But the commentator Tom Athanasiou observes in his recent book: " Our tragedy lies in the richness of the available alternatives, and in the fact that so few of them are ever seriously explored." The changes and the challenges our Pacific societies face today, including alcohol abuse and dependence, are immense and complex, but the efforts we put into finding appropriate solutions, are measures of the value we put into our humanity. As Ransom puts it, "This is the missing link, the spring for the political will to challenge "market logic" and explore alternatives... We do not have to take to the hills of isolation or retreat into parochialism... The world's people are, in one way or another, impoverished. Globalisers say: Compete. Make ourselves cheap!" Internationalists say: "Unite. Make yourselves powerful." Individuals need a sense of human engagement, and influence to interact successfully with other people, to develop a sense of personal identity; success or failure measured in material terms alone has no lasting significance.

We must learn to control once again our own history, our own means of dealing with our problems and our vision for our future. We must learn once more to believe in ourselves and the power that lies within us. We must reawaken the dreams and the possibilities. This is the Pacific Spirit.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you. God bless you all.