

Na tabili kavoro

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***The place of alcohol in the lives of Fijian people living in
Aotearoa New Zealand***

***A report prepared by Sector Analysis, Ministry of Health for
the Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand***

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Explanation of Title

Na tabili kavoro refers to the pestle and mortar that is used for pounding the kava from its root form into a powder that is suitable for drinking. *Tabili* means the actual mortar and pestle together, both of which are necessary for this function to be carried out. *Kavoro* means broken, so the title means the broken pestle and mortar. Since the tabili is made of iron, the fact that it is broken implies that it is not being used for its original purpose, the pounding of the kava; or that it is not made of iron. There are further implications in that whatever is being pounded is strong enough to break the vessel. Also kava is associated with cultural tradition so the breaking down of the vessel implies a breaking down of culture and tradition. Alcohol is often seen as contributing to this breakdown of culture and traditional values.

Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank all those people who took part in this study and who shared their stories with us. We hope that this report will generate more discussion within the Fijian community.

Thanks again to Tinai Hancock for pulling together the research team in Auckland. Our thanks also to Mike Kiloni who suggested the title and to those people who read through the report and offered comment.

Vinaka vakalevu

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Fijian Border Design

Vaitoa Baker

As a freelance illustrator of mixed ethnic groups, having the opportunity to work on this project that incorporates many designs of the Pacific, I hope I have done justice to each. I also want to give thanks to my partner, Yvette, whose love keeps me going.

Disclaimer

This report was prepared by staff of Sector Analysis, Ministry of Health for the Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand. Its purpose is to inform discussion and assist future health promotion strategies. Therefore, the opinions expressed in the report do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand nor the Ministry of Health.

ALAC's Alcohol and Pacific Islands Research Project Reports

This report is one of a series of seven studies published in 1997

- The place of alcohol in the lives of people from Tokelau, Fiji, Niue, Tonga, Cook Islands and Samoa living in New Zealand: an overview
- Inu Pia: The place of alcohol in the lives of Tokelauan people living in Aotearoa New Zealand
- Na tabili kavoro: The place of alcohol in the lives of Fijian people living in Aotearoa New Zealand
- Vai Mamali: The place of alcohol in the lives of Niuean people living in Aotearoa New Zealand
- Kapau tete to ha fu'u siaine he 'ikai tete ma'u ha talo pe koha 'ufi ko e fu'u siaine pe: The place of alcohol in the lives of Tongan people living in Aotearoa New Zealand
- Kaikava me kare Inuinu: The place of alcohol in the lives of Cook Islands people living in Aotearoa New Zealand
- O le a'ano o feiloaiga: The place of alcohol in the lives of Samoan people living in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Na tabili kavoro

Aims of the study

The Pacific people's alcohol research project was set up to describe the place of alcohol in the lives of Tokelauan, Fijian, Niuean, Tongan, Cook Islands and Samoan people living in Aotearoa New Zealand. The reason for doing this was to enable the Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand (ALAC) to design alcohol health promotion strategies and materials which would be suitable for the different Pacific communities.

Pacific people came from small close-knit communities in the Pacific where everyone knew everyone else, including their genealogy, to a place where they knew few people. As migrants and the children of migrants, it is important to share and pass on the stories of the homeland. But it is equally important to share the stories of migration. The migration stories tell what it was like to be pioneers in a new land, building new communities, learning new ways from new people. For a lot of the early Pacific migrants, being introduced to alcohol was part of that new learning experience.

How the research was carried out

One important aim of the research was to have at least two members from each of the Pacific communities working in the research field team. Each community would then be able to gather its own stories and information.

Research for the Fijian report took place in both Auckland and Wellington. Tinai Hancock provided important advice at the beginning of the field work. Tevita and Litimai Rasiga, Mere Samusamuvodre and Sofaia Kamakorewa interviewed Fijian people in the Auckland area. Tina McNicholas, Mike Kilioni and Apisa Tuiqere interviewed Fijian people in the Wellington area. Ruve Tuivoavao transcribed all the interviews carried out in Fijian.

Information about the purpose of the research was given out and people were asked if they wanted to take part. Those who agreed to take part were then asked to read and sign a consent form, which showed that they understood the purpose of the research and were still willing to take part. Some people were interviewed individually and some took part in group interviews. The interviews were taped and transcribed.

Why the interview method was chosen

The research method of interviewing individuals and groups of people was chosen because the researchers wanted to gain an in-depth account of Fijian people's experiences with alcohol. The people interviewed were able to think over their personal experiences and could try and give meaning to those experiences.

The information collected does not claim to be representative of the whole Fijian community, but only of those persons interviewed. Presenting these stories, will hopefully encourage more discussion within the Fijian community about the role of alcohol in people's lives.

Direct quotes from the people interviewed are included throughout the report. This is to help the reader view life through those people's eyes. While the researchers have attempted to represent the views of the participants, they take full responsibility for the interpretation placed on the information gathered and welcome discussion from the Fijian community.

Who took part in the study – the participants

The field team attempted to find people with a wide range of experiences and beliefs about alcohol.

Fifteen women were interviewed. Five women took part in a group interview, two women were interviewed together, and the remaining women participated in individual face-to-face interviews. The women's ages ranged from 17 years to over 50 years of age. Four women were under 20 years of age, eight were in their 20s and 30s, and three were in their 40s and 50s.

Eight men were successfully interviewed. Two men were interviewed together, and the remainder took part in individual face-to-face interviews. Five of the men were in their 50s, one was in his 20s, one was in his 40s and one was in his 60s.

Two group interviews were also held with younger men in their 20s and 30s but unfortunately the sound quality of the tape recordings was too poor to be able to be understood. Due to time constraints it was not possible to rerun these interviews. Therefore most of the information on male participants has been gathered from older men and reflects attitudes and life styles (stages) that have led to reduced levels of drinking.

How the interviews were carried out

The interviews were conducted in Fijian and English. All the interviews were taped and then transcribed. Those in Fijian were then translated into English.

People were interviewed in their homes or in a place that was convenient for the participants.

What the interviews asked

The interviews asked open-ended questions around the themes of:

- social or family events where Fijian people would drink alcohol
- who Fijian people drank with, for example, whether men and women drank together
- what type of drinks Fijian people preferred
- the differences between drinking in Fiji and drinking in Aotearoa New Zealand
- whether there was a Fijian style or styles of drinking
- how the people taking part in the interview first began drinking alcohol
- issues that were brought up in the interview by the people being interviewed.

Open-ended questions are those questions which get people to describe or explain their point of view. Closed questions, on the other hand, usually require simple *yes* or *no* answers. Open-ended questions generally start with words like: *How . . .*, *Can you describe . . .*, *What . . .*, *Where . . .*, *Who . . .*

In both the group and individual interviews the interviewer was guided by the direction taken by those being interviewed.

How the research information was analysed (made sense of)

The written copies of the interviews were analysed by comparing people's experiences and views to identify their similarities and differences and see if any common themes were emerging. Those people in the research field team who were members of the community offered their experience and wisdom and clarified points about the culture and the community. Historical and anthropological accounts of Fiji were read to provide background information and set the context for the report.

Background

There was no alcohol in Fiji until the arrival of outsiders. Before this, yaqona (kava) was the traditional ceremonial drink used by men. In the early 19th century with the arrival of sandalwood and *beche-de-mer* traders, alcohol came too. Missionaries of the London Missionary Society and the Methodist Church arrived in the 1830s. Fiji became a British colony in 1874 and achieved independence in 1970.

As in the other Pacific Islands, a permit system was set up to control alcohol accessibility. In Fiji, the permit system did not apply to Europeans, but only to Fijians and Indians.

No permits were issued to women, either Indian or Fijian, or to young men (under the 25 years in the case of Indians, and under 30 years in the case of Fijians). . . . In 1958 restrictions on access to beer were removed for adult males of any race and four years later, in 1962, adult males were allowed access to any alcoholic beverage. The sexist regulation was repealed in 1969 (although women are still not allowed in public bars) (Casswell 1986:25).

Historically wherever there has been prohibition, alcohol drinking has been forced “underground” where it has flourished. In Fiji, as in the other Pacific islands, home-brew became popular. The home-brew was stronger than the commercially produced beer and because it was made in secret little was known about how much was being produced except that there was widespread drinking.

When alcohol drinking is forced “underground” people become clever at hiding their drinking and a culture then grows around secretive drinking. Binge drinking is encouraged by prohibition because the drinking has to be done at a certain place within a certain time. People, usually young men, would meet to drink as much as possible at one time.

In 1986, the National Workshop on Alcohol-related Problems in Fiji was set up to look at possible reasons for the type of problems arising from alcohol abuse and ways of effectively dealing with these problems. At the time of the workshop, alcohol-related problems in Fiji had reached such a level that both government departments and non government organisations felt something needed to be done. Sally Casswell had just completed research into alcohol-related problems in Fiji and Vanuatu. She found that problem areas included:

. . . the number of alcohol related accidents occurring on our roads and in the workplace, the role of alcohol in the upsurge of violence in our community, and the economic implications of alcohol use in homes and in industry (Kippax and Oldmeadow 1986:4).

In Kippax and Oldmeadow (1986:5) one of the workshop presenters spoke of “the increased freedom that suddenly became available to all, but especially to young Fijians, when traditional methods of control and discipline” were replaced by a European legal system. This seemed to undermine traditional authority and served to further allow the “European way” to seep in. Alcohol was seen to be part of the European way just as yaqona (kava) was seen as being part of the Fijian way.

The workshop raised three important points that needed to be considered when discussing alcohol use in Fiji:

1. the widespread consumption of “home brew” alcohol in Fiji; a beverage that may contain up to three times the alcohol content of commercially produced beer
2. the interaction of alcohol consumption with that of kava, in Fiji, and the overlapping patterns of consumption for these two beverages, possibly aggravating the alcohol problem in this country
3. the continuing European influence in Fiji, predominantly through the media, and the role this may play in influencing future consumption here (Kippax and Oldmeadow 1986:4).

Migration to Aotearoa New Zealand

Immigration to Aotearoa New Zealand from Fiji has always been tightly controlled. Temporary work schemes have allowed a limited number of rural workers into the country since before the 1960s. The Fijian community is one of the smaller Pacific populations in Aotearoa New Zealand. In the 1991 census 5097 Fijians were living in Aotearoa New Zealand. Fijians were more likely to be Pacific born rather than New Zealand born. In 1991, more than half (58 percent) of the Fijian population lived in Auckland and 13 percent lived in Wellington (Statistics New Zealand 1995).

The role of alcohol in the Fijian community in Aotearoa New Zealand

Alcohol seems to have become an accepted part of Fijian social functions but in a sense it competes with yaqona (kava) which is the traditional drink. Yaqona used to be a ceremonial drink only but as it has become an everyday drink, it too is used for socialising.

Participants drank alcohol at home, in the pub, at night clubs, after sport, at wakes, weddings, and parties. Alcohol was used to celebrate, to commiserate, as a social ice-breaker and to relax. For example, men mentioned drinking a can of beer while watching television or before dinner. A few women talked of having wine with dinner. Others had a drink with friends after work.

Alcohol was associated with sport. People who played sport and their supporters had drinks after the game. One man spoke of alcohol being drunk during the team talk after the match and how he was amazed that some people also drank before playing.

Alcohol also gave people confidence to do things that they would not have done when they were sober. One of the negative aspects was that after a few glasses of alcohol, some people would “air long-hidden grudges to those concerned”.

Introduction to alcohol

Most of the participants had started drinking alcohol between the ages of 14 and 19 years. Usually the drinking had started with school friends at a party, as this young woman said:

I just did it because I wanted to and because I didn't want to be like the only one left out, who wasn't drinking.

Alcohol and yaqona (kava)

No, alcohol cannot be a part of our way of life since it is foreign. It was brought. Whereas kava grows in Fiji and is used in many Fijian functions; ceremonial functions and tribal functions. Alcohol is not a part of our Fijian way of life. A function like a traditional wedding would not be complete without kava. The bridegroom's party would present their gifts to the bride's party and vice versa, using kava. Kava is also used to settle differences between two groups or individuals. Kava is served while disagreements are sorted out. Alcohol is not used to settle differences as such. This is why I am saying that alcohol is not a part of our Fijian way of life. I am speaking here on behalf of our ancestors and those who live in our villages who regard kava as a part of their everyday life. They treat kava with respect as it is a ceremonial drink. (Man)

Today in Fiji, yaqona has become an everyday occurrence but it has not always been that way.

In the nineteenth century and, in many areas, until the 1950s or so, women and young men did not drink; women were not admitted to the company of yaqona-drinkers and the young men were there merely to look after its preparation and serving (Toren 1994:156).

In Fiji, the consumption of alcohol and yaqona have increased together. It is difficult to know if alcohol use has encouraged or influenced kava use or vice versa. However, there seems to be an interaction between alcohol use and kava use. As mentioned earlier, when examining alcohol use in Fiji, Kippax and Oldmeadow (1986) noted this interaction with yaqona use needed to be taken into consideration. Fijians living in Aotearoa New Zealand also drink kava and alcohol, sometimes using one after the other in the same drinking session. Toren (1994) refers to young men using alcohol to "wash down" the yaqona after long yaqona drinking sessions. On the other hand, two of the male participants spoke of not being able to drink alcohol after yaqona:

When I drink kava it's difficult for me to drink alcohol afterwards. But if I drink alcohol first, I can drink kava afterwards. I can't drink alcohol after kava because it doesn't go well with me.

Several of the participants in this research project drank yaqona and alcohol and mentioned both being served at events. One man was against this happening:

In New Zealand now, I have attended some Fijian functions and I have seen that both alcohol and kava have been served. This was done at a wake I attended. This probably

happened because there were not many elders present at the wake. This was not a respectable thing to happen.

Yaqona drinking is seen as being part of the Fijian way whereas alcohol drinking is seen as being the European way:

People associate alcohol-drinking with fighting among young men, and wife beating, sexual licence, general disorder, and disrespect for village values – with, in short, ‘the European way’ (Toren 1994:157).

The effects of yaqona drinking and alcohol drinking are almost the opposite of each other. Participants, in contrast to alcohol, felt that yaqona suppressed sexual desire and quietened down behaviour. According to one man, when drinking alcohol, people “move to other places to look for more action” whereas with yaqona “people would sit around respectful and considerate of each other, usually till the early hours of the morning till they disperse”. The term “respect” was used by participants when speaking of yaqona but not when referring to alcohol drinking. Yaqona drinking sessions tended to be long because it took a much longer time to feel the effects of yaqona compared to alcohol. For some of the men in the study this was one of the disadvantages of drinking yaqona.

. . . with kava if you drink it excessively, it makes you weak, with alcohol it gives you more energy, they say it sharpens your vision when you drive, whereas kava blurs your vision and slows your reaction time; it paralyses your body. (Man)

With kava it doesn’t move you to yearn after a woman, or to want to commit a robbery or want to get into a fight. It’s probably because it’s dirty and heavy, it sort of weighs you down. It presses down any form of life in you. You get groggy and have difficulty in standing up and walking. With alcohol, the more you drink, the more alcohol gets into your bloodstream, therefore, everyone gets hyped up . . . (Man)

While it was not within the brief of this study to look at the effects of yaqona use, several of the participants were concerned about excessive yaqona drinking. However they were talking about excessive yaqona drinking in Fiji, not in Aotearoa New Zealand. Interestingly enough, several of the male participants said that they did not like the taste of yaqona and preferred alcohol, but it was socially important that they drink yaqona, especially at Fijian gatherings. The participants referred to yaqona as “grog” which was confusing to the non-Fijian members of the research team because “grog” is also another word for alcohol.

A kava drinking gathering is usually based on mutual respect for one another and its physical effect is that it tends to subdue rather than excite the mind and body. But often when alcohol is consumed the level of respect for one another slowly dissipates, and after a while as people start getting drunk they start to get loud and discourteous. Alcohol can often give people confidence and also make people quite arrogant and aggressive. I think you will also find that where alcohol gets consumed in large amounts there is likely to be violence because of its effects on the body. Whereas the effect of kava on the body is very much the opposite in that even when you've consumed a lot, you just feel numb and very subdued, almost sleepy, (Man)

Commentary

In Fiji, as in the other Pacific nations, the use of home-brew was widespread. This home-brew was often of a higher alcohol content than the commercially produced beer and was mostly drunk by younger men.

Young men saw little point in drinking alcohol unless they could get drunk (Toren 1994:161)

Although alcohol is now readily available in Fiji, the style of drinking home-brew, that is, drinking large amounts in one session, is also used when drinking commercially produced alcohol. It is possible that this style originated from yaqona drinking where the sessions are long and the session only ends when the yaqona is finished.

The yaqona-drinking sessions have changed over time and it could be that alcohol drinking has influenced some of those changes. Women and young men now drink yaqona whereas in former times they were not allowed to take part in yaqona-drinking sessions. Yaqona drinking has now become an everyday affair.

The role of the church

In the early 1900s, the Fiji Methodist Synod tried to persuade its congregation to abstain from drinking yaqona, but with little success. Instead the church asked its ministers to restrict their yaqona drinking to ceremonies “whereas ordinary church members could do as they pleased” (Toren 1994:156).

Today, while some ministers adhere to this principle and go so far as to preach against overindulgence in yaqona-drinking as detrimental to family life (*na bula vakamatavuvale*), others routinely drink yaqona at gatherings in their own house and elsewhere (Toren 1994:156).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, yaqona appears to be supported by some churches, such as the Methodist church, while alcohol drinking is frowned upon. Yaqona drinking

represents the “Fijian way” whereas alcohol represents the “European way”. By supporting yaqona drinking and rejecting alcohol, the church is supporting Fijian tradition and rejecting European influence. It is supporting the old way and rejecting what is seen as a new way.

. . . our elders . . . warned us of foreign influences, that we have to be careful about foreign ways and one of these is alcohol. (Man)

Yaqona is also supported by the churches because it encourages people to give up alcohol:

The church does not regard alcohol to be something good. For instance, salaries and wages in Fiji are poor. One week’s pay can buy a bag of potatoes, sugar, salt, tapioca or taro to feed a family for a few days, not to mention the rent money, transport costs, and school fees for the children. If the man of the house goes out drinking, he uses all the money that could be used on his family. (Man)

Some of the churches regarded alcohol drinking as evil. A person who had given up alcohol drinking for yaqona drinking and was regularly attending church was seen as having changed for the better.

Some research participants thought that the church could play a more active role in alcohol education. Participants seemed to accept that alcohol had become part of people’s lives and that rather than prohibit its use, people needed to learn how to live with it. Some participants, including those who had reduced their drinking said that young people and children needed to be shown how to drink moderately and that such education probably started in the home with parents, for example, having a glass of alcohol with the main meal.

What types of alcohol did the Fijian people in the study prefer?

Among the participants in this study the women drank mostly wine and spirits and some beer. The men drank mostly beer and some also drank rum and whiskey. None of the men mentioned drinking wine or cocktails.

Some of the women spoke of difficulty in finding drinks that they liked:

It’s just a fun thing really because I started at varsity as a student . . . It was fun but it’s only in the last year or so that I’ve actually found a drink that I like and when you think about it I’ve been drinking for well over 10 years and if I’ve never really liked the drinks that I’ve been having why have I been drinking?

I’m the same . . . I’ve finally found something after all these years of drinking . . . I’ve just found something that I like and I can sit on that all night and not be too bad on it. It’s like you put yourself through years of vomiting and whatever else and you finally find something, when you should have maybe held off [*laughter*] till your system’s been ready for it or whatever.

These comments would seem to suggest that drinking for these women was socially important in the same way that the men who did not like yaqona spoke of yaqona drinking.

I drink kava when I have to at a Fijian function. I don't enjoy drinking it. I find that I couldn't eat properly if I've had too much kava. (Man)

Who did the Fijian people in the study drink with?

Participants drank mainly with family and friends because they were the people they felt comfortable with.

People I drink with are people I know. There's nothing worse to me than going into a group of people, with people that I'm not really familiar with, and having a few drinks. That makes me really uncomfortable. It makes me drink more. (Woman)

Some women spoke of getting to a stage when they were drinking when they would talk to anyone, whether they knew them or not.

Most of the men preferred to drink with other men and most of the woman drank with women although one 18-year-old woman said that she had been drinking with male friends because few of her female friends drank. A 17-year-old woman said that she drank with women friends because if males were involved, a female could find herself in a situation she did not want to be in. One male participant said that men tended to open up more in an all male group.

When I drink with my mates, we share jokes and there's laughter and we don't take anything seriously because we are with our mates. But when I drink with a mixed group, we respect women because they become our mothers. (Man)

Gender and alcohol

According to Casswell (1986), Fijian women were not allowed in public bars until recently, but in practice, according to some of the participants, women went anyway. Some of the women participants felt that in the community, drinking was still seen as a male activity and that a woman's place was in the home looking after her children and family. They pointed out that the community set limits for women but not for men.

I think that in the Fijian community too there seems to be a double standard like if a guy drinks a lot, "Well he's a guy. That's okay", but if a woman does, then she's a tramp or she is, you know, she's looked down on.

The younger women spoke about how they needed to be careful when drinking because the eyes of the community were on them. They were aware that they were being watched to see how much they drank, who they were talking to and who they smiled at. The women felt this monitoring of their behaviour placed restrictions on them but not on the young men.

I don't find the community judgment . . . they don't bother me at all. I go to functions I don't care what people think of me. I know there will be people there who will be saying things about me because of what I'm wearing or who I'm with or what I'm drinking and

whatever, but that doesn't bother me, but I find Fijian guys once they've had a few drinks, they're pretty scary really and a lot of the time you can't win 'cause like [another participant] said, if you don't talk to them, they'll think you're a snob so they'll come and hassle you and they'll go, "What, don't you want to show you're from Fiji?" [agreement] Whereas if you go friendly and start chatting to them they'll think you're trying to pick them up [murmurs of agreement].

Both men and women thought that men drank more than women. Women were inclined to drink and talk without the emphasis being on the amount they were drinking.

Yeah that's right you're having a conversation and a few drinks and you don't really notice how much you're drinking in the course of the night because you don't ever get faster you just sort of talk on and it's flowing into the glass. (Woman)

Men, however, were often under pressure from their mates to drink up and there was a competitive edge to their drinking as they tried to outdo one another. For men the emphasis was on the amount drunk and the 'distance lasted'.

I mean I know heaps of guys who can drink for days and not stop but I think I have only heard of one of my mates who has gone the whole night till 2 o'clock the next afternoon. (Woman)

One man had a different opinion:

Yes, when we drink with our mates, we drink moderately, but when we drink with women our behaviour changes. Things that are hidden get revealed when one drinks excessively. We know that we should stop but when women are present, we'd keep drinking. But we'd know when to stop if we drank with our mates . . . Yes, we know what's going to happen when women and men drink together, some men would be successful with some women, if not, we'd go and buy some more beer.

One older man reported that now he was getting older, "I don't have to show off how much I drink".

The difference between men and women drinking would probably be that for most women being able to sustain large quantities of alcohol in one sitting is not important whereas for men it is important.

It seemed that for men and woman, drinking could cause problems because of inappropriate or misinterpreted behaviour on both sides. The women complained that if they avoided unwanted male attention, men accused them of being snobs but if they were friendly or smiled too much then they were seen as flirts trying to pick men up.

Commentary

Among the participants, what was considered acceptable behaviour for men, for example being drunk, was not acceptable for women. Alcohol was associated with the expression of sexuality. A woman who drank a lot was seen as a "tramp" or a woman of loose morals. A man who drank a lot was not labelled in this way but according to Toren (1994) the Fijian community believes that alcohol encourages a man to acts of violence such as rape or assault. Therefore the man who committed such acts was not

responsible for his behaviour, the alcohol was. So the community has different standards of morality for men and for women. Drunk women are bad because of their loose morals, drunk men are basically good because they cannot help themselves. The implication is that women are responsible for their morals and actions but men are not.

How do you know when you've had enough to drink?

Participants said that they could tell when they had had enough to drink by the physical effects on their body. For example, when their speech was affected, when they could not walk straight, or, “when I collapse and don't know what the hell I'm doing”. One woman who said she talked a lot found that she became quiet when she had reached her limit of drinking, “that's when my body's telling myself, you know, you don't want to drink anymore”.

Commentary

Participants relied on their bodies to tell them when they had reached their limit for drinking. This combined with the long drinking sessions, indicates that the idea of moderate drinking has not reached or is not acceptable to this community. However, participants felt that the longer they remained in Aotearoa New Zealand, the more their drinking behaviour changed. The older men pointed out how their own drinking habits had changed, but this could also be attributed to their age because it would seem from other studies (eg Neich and Park 1988) that as people aged their drinking levels drop.

The difference between drinking in Fiji and drinking in Aotearoa New Zealand

. . . most of our family still live in the village, so to them it's a bigger deal whether they're going to be fed as to whether they're going to go out and party, you know. They don't generate any income so drinking in our family isn't really a big issue. They don't really understand it, you know, they just don't . . . like all my first cousins they still live in the village . . . (Woman)

The participants saw alcohol as being a part of modern Fiji. Alcohol was readily available, quite cheap (from the Aotearoa New Zealand point of view), and the black market meant that it was accessible to teenagers and available at all hours.

We were involved in a black market for alcohol. When they were asleep at night, they'd come and buy one or two cartons of beer. Some men would give their watches for payment or bring their wives' belongings, just so they can get some beer. (Woman)

Some of the participants commented that the alcohol in Fiji was stronger than the alcohol in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Fiji Bitter is very popular, there is also rum, whiskey that women drink, because men buy these drinks for their women. Men drink mainly Fiji Bitter in Fiji. NZ beer is nice, but is not as strong, the alcohol content is not as high as the Fiji beer, but they still drink it and they drink a large quantity so that they can get really drunk. If it's hard to get drunk from the beer, then they would mix beer and rum to make it potent.

Two male participants spoke of “overproof” (higher than usual alcohol content) alcohol in Fiji.

The style of drinking in Fiji is very different. All the drinks are “overproof”. We don't have much money but we still want to buy drinks and we'd drink until there's none left. In NZ, we don't drink that much. In Fiji we'd drink until there's none left.

A number of participants commented on what they saw as being the Pakeha way of drinking: “They drink quietly and converse with each other”, “One can never tell that they've been drinking” and “They can hold their drink well”.

Unlike us, we were forbidden to drink alcohol when we were young, so when we grew up we suddenly had the freedom to drink alcohol and tended not to have any control over the amount that we drink. (Man)

Participants generally thought that Pakeha knew how to drink because they had grown up with alcohol and that the longer people had been in Aotearoa New Zealand the more likely it was that they would learn to adopt that style of drinking.

I can tell the young people who have just arrived from Fiji by the large amount of alcohol they consume. This is the drinking habit they bring with them from Fiji. (Man)

Commentary

The participants suggested that long hard drinking was a behaviour brought over from Fiji and that the longer people remained in Aotearoa New Zealand, the more likely it was that their drinking behaviour would change.

Kai valagi (Pakeha) were seen as the ideal drinking role models. Participants thought that Kai valagi knew how to drink because they had grown up with alcohol and it was socially acceptable for them to start drinking at home with their parents and relatives or through having alcohol with meals. The participants themselves had grown up but it was not acceptable for young people to drink alcohol so drinking had to take place in secret.

Marshall (1979) found:

When members of a society have had sufficient time to develop a widely shared set of beliefs and values pertaining to drinking and drunkenness, the consequences of alcohol consumption are not usually disruptive for most persons in that society. On the other hand, where beverage alcohol has been introduced within the past century and such a set of beliefs and values has not been developed completely, social – sometimes physiological – problems with ethanol commonly result. (Marshall 1979:453).

Is there a Fijian style of drinking?

There seemed to be general agreement amongst the participants that Fijian people tended to drink excessively. Participants spoke of the drinking behaviour at community social functions and dances where people became “noisy, rowdy, argumentative” and the events often ended in brawls.

Some participants thought there was a Fijian style which was to “drink till you drop”.

One woman commented that alcohol made people “six feet tall and bullet proof”, implying that when people were drinking they thought they could do anything.

Commentary

The participants’ comments could not be said to apply exclusively to the Fijian people since other Pacific groups have made the same comments about their own communities. The comments reflect how these community members see the community’s drinking behaviour.

Problems associated with drinking too much alcohol

Too much money spent on alcohol could lead to neglect of family responsibilities. Aggressive behaviour was often associated with alcohol abuse, and physical violence was frequently mentioned by participants. Women and children were often at the receiving end of this violence.

Few years ago, we were having some drinks one day, we had too much to drink and a woman got raped and she was locked up in a room so a friend of mine said that we should get away from there. Trouble began when they started mixing drinks with something else, could be rum, they were also taking drugs and it got to the point where they did what they did. (Woman)

Some women also drank to the point of being out of control and some of the female participants spoke of their experiences of this:

. . . we’ve been saying that a lot that our guys get really out of it and we do know that, but also our women get quite lippy [*murmurs of agreement*] and quite totally out of control, and it’s just so scary to see someone that you know, that you get along with really well and when they’re fine eh, then when they get on the alcohol they’re just like schizo, totally different, you know.

Some participants blamed alcohol rather than the individuals involved for the alcohol-related incidents:

I remember one function where we were all sober at the beginning, I woke up in the morning to find people fighting. Women were drinking too. There were different types of people, all getting drunk dancing and stripping off their clothes but when I woke up in the morning one woman had gone to sleep in one room and most of the men went to her room

and raped her. I am not blaming the men or that woman. I blame alcohol. They were so drunk that they didn't know how far they had gone (getting involved in the rape).
(Woman)

Toren (1994) refers to the attitude taken by the community towards men who commit offences when drinking saying that the men are absolved of blame for their actions and the alcohol is at fault.

It is noticeable that virtually all accounts of crime in Fijian newspapers, both English language and Fijian, say that the defendant offered in extenuation of his crime the excuse that he was drunk. This is particularly true of Fijian men accused of assaulting women or rape, and it is part of the Fijian male folklore of drunkenness that when drunk one has to have a woman and that this urge cannot be denied, that it is not under the control of the man concerned (Toren 1994:158).

A woman participant spoke of the change in her life since her husband had reduced his drinking:

It has made a big difference to our lives. I don't have puffy black eyes like I used to get from him, when he punches me, two weeks I would be recovering from a black eye, I would get another one, and it used to be like that all the time. I found that I shouldn't talk to him when he was drunk. I am so glad that he drinks a lot of kava now and less of beer.

Commentary

If alcohol is held responsible for offences committed or inappropriate behaviour then the people involved never have to take responsibility for their actions. Alcohol becomes the perfect excuse. A person is free to do whatever they please. Alcohol-related problems have little chance of being dealt with when the alcohol and not the person are held responsible.

Participants' recommendations

The participants said that some form of alcohol education was needed. Some felt it started in the home and that parents needed to model good, moderate drinking behaviour for their children, by for example, having a glass of alcohol with meals. Others wanted to see the church taking a more active role by educating its members on how to drink responsibly and to be respectful of one another when drinking.

Commentary

How successful has ALAC's alcohol education and awareness campaign been for the Fijian community? Participants thought that drinking behaviour was affected by the length of time a person had been in Aotearoa New Zealand. The longer a person stayed in Aotearoa New Zealand the more they were exposed to different types of drinking behaviour and it was more likely that their drinking behaviour would change. However it would be difficult to decide whether drinking behaviour changed because of the influence of other people or because of the length of time in Aotearoa New Zealand or

simply because the longer the person stayed, the older they became. Research showed that drinking levels reduced with age.

An alcohol education programme that was developed with input from the Fijian community for the Fijian community and delivered by Fijian people would possibly have more impact.

Summary of main points

1. The views of those taking part in the study were varied so there could not be said to be one Fijian perspective but rather a range of perspectives.
2. Drinking yaqona (kava) is seen as the traditional Fijian way, while alcohol drinking is seen as the new European way. Possibly the competition between yaqona and alcohol represents the conflict between tradition and new ways.
3. Little is known about how yaqona and alcohol have influenced one another. The interaction of yaqona and alcohol use need to be explored further, and also the effects of drinking yaqona and alcohol at the same time.
3. While the term “respect for one another” was used a lot concerning yaqona drinking, there was no mention of this with regard to alcohol drinking. In fact, quite the opposite. The attitude that alcohol was to blame for offensive behaviour meant that people need not be responsible for their actions and so disrespectful behaviour when drinking alcohol became acceptable.
4. Women were drinking alcohol but there were different rules as to what was acceptable drinking behaviour for women and what was acceptable for men.
5. The participants recommended more alcohol education in the community, encouragement of parents to show their children in the home how to drink moderately, and for the church to be more actively involved in alcohol education.
6. The concept of moderate drinking and the reasons for moderate drinking did not appear to be a concern for the participants. People relied on their bodies to tell them when they had had enough to drink. However, participants said that the longer a person remained in Aotearoa New Zealand it was more likely that their drinking behaviour would change.

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Appendix 1

Interview schedule

Drinking Beliefs and Practices:

*Do you drink alcohol on **special occasions, every week, or not at all?***

Can you tell me about some of the times when you have been drinking in the last couple of weeks?

When

How often do you drink?

(How long have you been drinking? What age did you start drinking?)

What times of the week do you put aside for drinking?

Where

Where do you go to drink?

Who

Who do you drink with?

(Are they usually male/female friends?)

(Are they usually people that you know?)

Differences between male/female

Are there any differences between drinking in an all male/female group or in a mixed group?

Do people behave differently within these drinking groups?

Do you talk about different/same things depending on which group you are in?

Buying

Who buys the drinks?

(Is there an arrangement for buying the drinks?)

Do you buy drinks for others?

Before & After

What things do you/people do before having a drink? for eg. sports, movies ...

What do you do afterwards?

(What sort of activities do you take part in that don't include alcohol?)

Drinking Practices

Type of drink

(a) What is your favourite drink?

(a) What kinds of drink do you drink?

(b) What other types of drink do you like?

(b) Which do you drink most of?

How much

How much do you drink?

Are there times when you want to drink as much as you want/can?

(Why?)

Effects

Are there any changes in your behaviour when you've been drinking?

How you feel after 2-3 drinks?

How you feel after you've had quite a lot to drink?

How do you know when you've had enough to drink?

Drinking Behaviour

Normal Behaviour

From your own experience, can you describe what [insert name of Pacific group] people see as normal drinking behaviour?

Can you describe [insert name of Pacific group] people's behaviour when they've had a lot to drink?

Differences

What differences have you noticed between those who drink and those who don't?

(Look for words that describe alcohol and alcohol related practices)

What differences have you noticed between drinking in [insert name of Pacific island] and drinking in New Zealand?

(Why do you think there is or there isn't?)

Is there a [insert name of Pacific group] style of drinking?

Demographics:

Male/Female

Age Group:

under 20

20-29

30-39

40-49

50-59

60+

When did you come to live in Aotearoa New Zealand?

For: "Non-Drinkers"

Do you mix socially or go out with people who drink alcohol?

[If yes ...] How do you fit into that situation?

Who

(Are they friends, family, work mates, etc.)

Are they male/female?

(And are they people you know?)

When

Can you describe any occasions that you go to where alcohol is drunk?

Where

Where would the occasions take place?

Differences between male/female

From your own experience, are there any differences between drinking in all male/female group or in a mixed group?

Do you see people behave differently within these drinking groups?

(Do people behave differently when they drink and when they don't drink?)

Do you/they talk about the same/different things as those who drink? (depending on which group you are in?)

Buying

Who buys/arranges the drinks?

Do you buy drinks for others?

What sort of activities do you take part in that don't include alcohol

As a non-drinker, what made you decide not to drink alcohol?

[If no ...] What social events/activities do you take part in where there is no alcohol?

Are there any occasions that you go to where alcohol is drunk?

Can you describe it?

As a non-drinker, what made you decide not to drink alcohol?

Questions for focus groups

These are the main questions but may need prompt/probe questions.

1. *Can you remember back to the first time you tasted/ tried alcohol? How long ago was that and how did it come about?*
2. *Can you tell us something about the times when you drink alcohol?*

*For example, how often do you drink?
Where do you drink? [at home, which pubs? which nightclubs?]
Who do you drink with? [mix of ages, women/men, ethnicity, friends, family, workmates]*
3. *When you're drinking with other men, do you behave differently from when you are drinking with women?*

Can you describe/talk about this?
4. *What types of drink do you drink? (which do you drink most of?)*
5. *Who buys the drinks? (What sort of arrangement is there for buying drinks?)*
6. *How much do you drink?*
7. *Are there times when you want to drink as much as you can? What times are they?*
8. *How do you know when you've had enough to drink?*
9. *What differences, if any, have you noticed between drinking in [insert name of Pacific island] and drinking here?*
10. *Do you think there is such a thing as a [insert name of Pacific group] way of drinking?*

If yes, can you explain what that is?
11. *What do you think your community sees as being acceptable drinking behaviour?*

The Research Team

Lanuola Asiasiga

Lanuola has a background in education and social science research. She is now enjoying working as a health researcher. Lanuola has three children and lives in Porirua.

Ian Hodges

Ian has research training in social anthropology and is an experienced researcher in health. He undertook a PhD in the rituals and customs associated with alcohol consumption amongst New Zealand men. Ian lives in Blockhouse Bay, Auckland.

Sofaia Kamakorewa

Sofaia has lived in New Zealand for three years. She is 20 years old and is currently in her first year studying economics at Massey University in Albany. Sofaia lives with her family in Hillsborough, Auckland. Sofaia is from the province of Rewa in Fiji.

Maikali (Mike) Kiloni

Mike has lived in New Zealand since 1988 when he came to take up a rugby contract with the Paremata-Plimmerton Club in Wellington. He was a past youth member of the Wellington Fijian Community Council of Elders and a committee member of the Wellington Fijian Community Sports Club. Mike is a qualified chef and works for The Wellington Club. Mike is from the island of Kadavu in Fiji.

Fane Malani

Fane has lived in New Zealand since 1981 when she came to attend secondary school and subsequently, Victoria University of Wellington to study Public Administration. She is an active member of the Wellington Fijian Methodist Church and has been a past Treasurer of the Wellington Fijian Community Council of Elders. Fane currently works for MRL Research Group in Wellington. Fane is from the province of Ra in Fiji.

Tina McNicholas

Tina has lived in Wellington since her parents immigrated to New Zealand in 1975. Tina was a past youth member of the Wellington Fijian Community Council of Elders and was Treasurer of the Wellington Fijian Sports Club from 1991 to 1994. Since graduating from Victoria University of Wellington, she has held various posts in the public service and now works as a Policy Analyst for the Ministry of Health in Wellington. Tina is from the province of Rewa in Fiji.

Mere Samusamuvodre

Mere, who describes herself as a home executive, immigrated to New Zealand from Fiji in 1983 with her husband and their eight children. She worked as a stenographer in Fiji and was recently employed as a health educator for the South Auckland Pacific Islands Cervical Screening programme. Mere and her family live in Manurewa, Auckland. Mere is from the island of Koro in Fiji.

Litimai Rasiga

Litimai works in a private hospital in Auckland. She is involved with the Auckland Fijian community and in particular the Fijian Women's Craft Club. Litimai has six children and she and her family live in West Auckland. Litimai is from the province of Tailevu, Fiji.

Tevita Rasiga

Tevita is the current treasurer of the Auckland Fijian Community and was also a past Chairperson. He lectures in engineering at the Auckland Institute of Technology. Tevita is from Vanuabalavu in the Lau group, Fiji.

Apisa Tuiqere

Apisa has lived in Wellington since immigrating to Aotearoa New Zealand in 1986. He is an active member of the Wellington Fijian Community and was chairman of the Wellington Fijian Sports Club from 1992 to 1994. Apisa works as a branch manager for Photo Plus Ltd in Wellington. Apisa is from the island of Matuku in the Lau group, Fiji.

Ruve Tuivoavao

Ruve has lived in Aotearoa New Zealand for nine years and is an active member of the Wellington Fijian Assembly of God Church. She has three children and lives with her family in Central Wellington. Ruve has a secretarial background, and until recently worked for the Fiji Embassy in Wellington. Ruve is from the island of Taveuni in Fiji.