

The Social, cultural and medicinal use of Kava for twelve Tongan born men living in Auckland, New Zealand

Vili Nosa

Malakai Ofanoa

Author information

Dr Vili Nosa PhD, Lecturer, Pacific Health Section, School of Population Health, University of Auckland.

Malakai Ofanoa, Senior Lecturer, Pacific Health Section, School of Population Health, University of Auckland University.

Correspondence

Dr Vili Nosa PhD, Lecturer, Pacific Health Section, School of Population Health, University of Auckland, Building 730, North entrance Tamaki Campus, Cnr Morrin & Merton Roads, Glen Innes, Phone 09 3737 599 Ext 86906, email v.nosa@auckland.ac.nz

Abstract

Kava consumption is a very popular practise amongst Pacific people especially amongst the Tongan communities. The purpose of this paper is to identify some of the key cultural, social and medicinal elements of kava use amongst Tongan men. Twelve face to face interviews in this study were undertaken. The paper argues that kava drinking is strongly linked to many of the ceremonial, social and cultural obligations that are deeply embedded within the Tongan culture. The positive uses of kava include medicinal purposes, male bonding, alternative to alcohol consumption, reaffirming and establishing relationships amongst other Tongan men, The men also stated negative uses of kava such as it made them lazy, tired so they were not able to go to work, a lack of sexual activities by being too tired have sex with their partners and very expensive to buy in New Zealand.

Aim: The aim of this paper is to discuss and examine the social, cultural and medicinal kava use amongst twelve Tongan born men living in Auckland, New Zealand.

Methods: The study used qualitative methods, specifically individual interviews were conducted in Tongan or English. Participants were recruited through community networks in Auckland. A number of Tongan churches, Tongan medical clinics such as Langimailie, and kava clubs were approached to recruit participants.

The open ended interview schedule covered themes such as access, quantity, frequency, and problems associated with kava use. The interviews were conducted by a Tongan researcher either in English or Tongan.

All interviews were translated and transcribed into English. A thematic analysis based on multiple readings of the transcripts was used. The analysis identified commonalities and differences.

The study was granted ethical approval by the University of Auckland Human Subjects Ethics Committee in December 2004. Interviews were conducted at the beginning of 2005. Interviews were undertaken in a place where the participants felt comfortable. Interview times were arranged at a time convenient for the participants. All participants were given information sheets prior to interviews, and participants were asked to sign consent forms before the interviews commenced. These forms were provided in Tongan and English versions. Most of the interviews ranged between one to three hours. Interviews were audiotaped, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research.

Participants: Twelve men were interviewed. All participants were Tongan men born and raised in Tonga. The ages of men ranged between 30 and 75 years. Most of the men had been residing in New Zealand for over 30 years, although some men had only been in New Zealand between 2-18 years. Most of the men were employed and a few had retired from work. Most of these men also belonged to a church. All of the men who participated were married.

Introduction

There are a number of studies about the effects of consuming kava among Pacific people.¹ There is little documented evidence about kava consumption amongst Tongan men living in Auckland, New Zealand. This paper aims to explore kava use by Tongan men living in Auckland.

The Tongan population is the third largest Pacific Islands group in New Zealand. There are over 50,478 Tongans settled in New Zealand. The Tongan population is also youthful with a median age of 19 years. Fifty six percent of the Tongan population were born in New Zealand. Twenty six percent of Tongans who were born overseas have lived in New Zealand for over twenty years. Most Tongans live in urban areas. For instance, over 80% of Tongans live in Auckland.²

There is evidence that kava originated from Melanesia, then moved into some of the Polynesian countries.³ Kava has been consumed in countries such as the Solomon Islands, Ponape in the Carolines, Marind District of West New Guinea, New Hebrides, Wallis and Futuna Islands, Vanuatu, Hawaii, Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga.¹ Literature suggests that Pacific men are the main consumers of kava.^{4,5}

Kava is a non-alcoholic beverage. The kava plant grows best at altitudes of 150-300 meters above sea level. It is grown and cultivated for its roots. The plant is also known as *Piper methysticum*. The plant is used not only in social activities but in many ceremonial activities throughout Oceania. It is also used to treat many medicinal ailments. The roots of the kava plant are dried pounded into powder and then soaked in water where cloudy water is produced and then it is consumed. When kava is consumed it leaves a temporary numb feeling in your mouth.¹

Rogers thesis,⁶ which examines kava use in a rural Tongan community found that kava use during the nineteenth century was used for a number of purposes such as sacred, religious ceremonies and for persons of high rank. Kava drinking is also linked to three separate kava categories. The royal kava ceremony is structured around the royal family protocols. Chiefly kava ceremonies are associated with status of the title holder and the chiefly title holder. Common kava involves church kava, work kava, social kava, courting kava and club kava. Rogers concludes that kava symbolizes the "ethos of hierarchy, status, latent competition, rivalry and exclusion" (Rogers 1975:416).

Finau, Stanhope & Prior⁴ suggest that kava is an important part of Tongan culture, and that Tongans have maintained their cultural identity through kava ceremonies. Today kava is still an important part of Tongan culture, and kava is used by Tongan men in New Zealand, especially during traditional ceremonial and social occasions. For ceremonial purposes kava drinking allows rank and genealogies to be recited, whereas social kava drinking allows social, political, religious and current events to be discussed.⁴

James (1999)⁵ suggests that Tongan men usually begin drinking kava before they turn 20. They are expected to drink kava because of "its traditional association with rank, title power".⁵ Finau (1996)⁷ reports that there are many kava clubs in Auckland such as church groups, ex-student associations, village groups and occupation groups. These kava clubs are exclusively for Tongan men.

The Pacific Drugs and Alcohol Consumption Survey (2003) survey looked at identifying drug use amongst the four main Pacific ethnic groups in New Zealand:

Samoans, Tongans, Cook Islands Maori and Niueans. Thirty eight percent of Tongans reported that they consumed kava. 63% of Tongan men and 16% of Tongan women said they had tried kava at some stage. Older Tongans were more likely to try kava compared to people less than 30 years.

22% of people who had drunk kava in the past 12 months said that it had affected their home life negatively while 3% said it was beneficial.

Tongan men were identified as the main consumers of kava. In the past 12 months, 21% of Tongan men had consumed kava. Forty one percent of Tongan men and four percent of Tongan women had drunk kava. From the older age group 30% drank more than the younger age group of 13%. In the last 12 months Tongan men had a higher level of kava consumption compared to the overall average Pacific kava consumption rates. Tongan participants also mentioned that the frequency of kava consumption was 126 times per annum or at least once per week. Kava was mainly drunk at kava clubs, at home, parties and ceremonial festivities.

When Tongan participants were asked whether other people's kava consumption had any effect on them 6% said that it affected their home life negatively and 7% said that it was beneficial to their home life. Four percent said it harmed their friendships and social life and 2% said it was beneficial. Four percent said was harmful to their health and 3% said it was beneficial. When it came to asking questions about financial position, 7% mentioned that it was harmful and 3% said it was beneficial. 22% of people who had drunk kava in the past 12 months said that it had affected their home life negatively while 3% said it was beneficial.

Kava (2001)⁸ suggested that kava use by Fijian men had an adverse effect on their marital relationships. The wives of kava users in the study reported that their sexual desires were not being fulfilled by their husbands due to excessive kava drinking by these men. A number of problems were reported by the wives, such as a husband's loss of sexual drive, other sexual difficulties, and extramarital affairs.

Results

Initial experience of kava

The men said that they started drinking kava when they were growing up in Tonga. The median age for beginning kava drinking was between 17-20 years of age.

There were mixed views when the men were asked about their initial reactions when they consumed kava for the first time. However, many said that they did not initially like the taste, but grew accustomed to it after a while.

"I felt nauseated and vomit at the beginning but after some kava sessions I was used to the taste."

"I hated it at the beginning but when you get used to it, there is no problem".

Reasons for drinking kava

There were four main reasons that men said they drank kava, as a social lubricant, to help reaffirm relationships and status, as an alternative to alcohol and medicinal purposes.

Social substance

Most of the participants said that they began drinking kava because there was a lack of social and leisure activities in Tonga.

"I grew up in a small Island in Tonga (Vava'u Group). There were no social functions (dancing halls or night clubs) it was only the kava drinking and clubs that was available at the time."

"I started kava drinking in Tonga because we did nothing else at the time aside from drinking kava."

"I started very young and the reason why is that, it was like a leisure time for me to attend the social kava clubs"

Establishing and reaffirming relationships

Today these ceremonial uses of kava continue to be a major part of many Tongan communities in New Zealand and in Tonga. All of the men commented on

how kava drinking was a way of forming and building relationships with other Tongan men.

"I drank kava because it helps me to improve my social relationship with my other friends and mates. For example when we plan with my friends to work in the garden the next day, or we plan to do other things during our youth, it was done through the kava bowl. Second, the kava meeting and drinking's provides opportunities for us to learn from each other."

"I tend to know people, make and met new friends and I learn a lot in how to socialize with other friends and people."

One individual commented on how the kava ceremony was used as a means of communication for important issues such as the wellbeing of the family.

For any important issues discussed in the family, homes and other places, the kava ceremony helps to bring everybody together.

A few of the men also mentioned how kava drinking helped them to communicate with other people.

"My main reason for drinking kava was that I was able to mix and relate with people. I learned how to interact and talk; I met with people of different age groups, and know new people. I was in my own little world but now I learn from many people."

The men stated that consuming kava also avoided conflicts but encouraged communication amongst Tongan men.

"Kava drinking is and was also viewed or signified a "peaceful society", togetherness, "close bonding" of a society. That is another reason why I loved drinking kava and many others in Tonga."

"Social relationship to me is the most positive impacts of kava consumption. History reveals that in Tonga during the older days, non of the youths were able to visit other's villages or suburbs due to the kinds of hatred and conflicts that happens during those days. However, with the impacts of "kava clubs", youths in Tonga are able to move around freely both in Tonga and here in New Zealand because of this "warm bonding" or relationship that was established in the kava parties by different people and men."

Status plant

Some of the men described how the kava plant was identified as a plant which only individuals who had status had access to.

“There were other reasons why Tongans including us during our times drank kava was because kava was regarded as noble plants.”

*“The most important thing for me is the **nobility** of the plant. For example if you are to attend a wedding, a funeral, visit a noble or the King, it is traditionally a must for you to take the kava. The reason why is because the Kava signifies the **Land** and the Land signifies the soil, the sea, the people and everything.”*

Alcohol alternative

Some of the older men also mentioned that alcohol was used as a replacement or alternative for alcohol since alcohol consumption was limited because of the prohibition laws imposed by the colonial administrators.

*“Since my father did not want me to drink alcohol, I used kava as an alternative. Moreover, in my Island in Tonga the only alcohol available was the **home-brew**, but it was quite risky to drink these because our Island community did not accept us to drink.”*

“When one compares alcohol and kava consumption kava to me is better because some parents fight a lot when the husband drink alcohol but for kava you feel lazy and you are very lazy to fight back to your wife if you slept a lot.”

*“I think drinking kava is still far better than alcohol. My advice for youths is **to go for the kava and not alcohol. Kava leads you to just laziness but alcohol will lead you to death**”.*

Medicinal purpose

A number of the men mentioned that drinking kava often helped them with illnesses such as stomach pains, flu, and cancer.

“I viewed kava as a medication for the treatment of stomach pains etc. That was why I drank a lot of kava.”

*“If you wear warm clothes and drink kava during the winter season, you will never get **flu** or **sick**”.*

“I am 75 years now and don't feel any effects. I am still healthy; I don't get cancer because of the kava. I will continue to drink until I die.”

Consumption patterns

Cultural uses

Some of the participants commented that the cultural

use of kava was only available for certain individuals such as the nobles of Tonga.

*“No Tongan can deny the significance of kava and its positive contributions to the Tongan culture. I just want to add on its significance and why it is treated as a **royal plant** and a **royal drink**. It is said that kava was originally identified by Tagaloa the King of Tonga. Hence anything that belongs to Tagaloa was a noble or royal thing. There is a saying that Tongans came from the sky and kava also came from the sky. The missionaries stated that when they visited Tonga it was only the nobles that were regarded to have the so called **spirits**. The commoners had none. However, when the national drink (kava) was found, this national drink sealed the covenants between everybody (commoners and nobles) with God. This is why it is regarded as a royal drink.”*

In this study a number of participants stated the cultural significance of kava use for social activities such as funerals, weddings, family functions, village functions and welcoming ceremonies.

“Kava leads you to just laziness but alcohol will lead you to death.”

“They were use in funerals, wedding and in family and village functions. Kava was regarded as a noble and highly respected thing by all Tongans. When kava is presented, that function looks loyal and respected. Kava signifies the significance, the status and values of that event. When you approach a community you are presented with a kava. When one deals with conflicts or seeking some mercies on social issues kava is presented. When a family awaits or welcomes a new or best friend, Kava is presented. Kava is significant.”

One of the participants stated that kava was a drink for Tongans and alcohol was a drink for Palangi's (European).

*“It is also a **cultural drink** for Tongans. To me **beer** is for Palangi's but **Kava** is for Tongans.”*

The kava ceremony also highlights issues such as barriers within the culture. For instance

*“To me the significant of kava to me is based on its natural usages. It brings about peace and harmony. It brings equality and oneness. For example it is a **royal drink**. The serving of the kava is significant because it allows each person to **serve for one another**. In a kava ceremony you can serve others with a kava cup and the other person can serve you. This shows there is no need for any boundary between people, races, countries, churches, and nations.”*

Binge drinking sessions

A common theme amongst the Tongan men was that kava drinking sessions often took place for long periods during the night until the early hours of the morning.

"I am 75 years now, but when I was young (twenties), I consumed a lot. I mentioned earlier, I started at 9.00 pm and I left the place at about 4.00 am. The weekends, we even drank kava from 9.00 pm till 10.00 am the following day."

"They drink kava every night from 10 pm till day break the next day."

Relaxation

A number of men commented that kava was used as a form of relaxation in preparation for plantation work in Tonga.

"It was like a routine for us. We drank a lot. Some evenings we slept late but start early and as stated earlier kava gave us some form of relaxation for the next day's work at the plantation."

Kava use amongst young men

Older Tongan men suggested that younger men are increasingly drinking kava.

"There are more Tongan youths drinking kava today than before. The main reason why is because youths can socialize with other youths both here and in Tonga. Some years ago, there were some feelings of hatred among them. Today they live and interact peacefully."

Social effects

A number of participants commented on the social effects of kava consumption amongst family, church and community relationships. They thought that drinking kava made them more 'lazy' and tired. They talked about sleeping the whole day to recover from kava consumption.

"Kava does affect my relationships with my family, church, community involvement and my work as well. For example when I drink a lot of kava and being intoxicated, I am sleepy, lazy, does not want to do any other work but to sleep until you recover. In many cases you sleep the whole day, and you missed work, missed your plantation work and your other involvements. This is not good as it affects your relationships"

A number of men talked about how kava influenced their relationships.

"There are also negative effects such as family conflicts between the husband and wife fighting. As a result divorce, fights, and court cases always happened as it affects many families."

Some perceived positive effects from kava. For instance, participants mentioned how kava strengthened relationships.

"There are positive effects of kava such as it helps to establish good relationship within and between individual's families, communities and nations. It also helps to establish equality, love and harmony in societies. It helps to bridge indifferences between ethnic groups and nations."

Economic effects

We asked about the economic impact of consuming kava. A number of participants emphasized that kava is cheaper than alcohol.

"Kava is cheaper than alcohol. That was the main reason why I liked drinking kava."

Most of the participants mentioned how kava was cheaper to purchase in Tonga because people would grow their own kava plants for personal use. Some participants talked about how purchasing kava in New Zealand was expensive because they had to purchase the products from the supermarket.

"I don't think it does in Tonga because the kava is locally available and depending on the kinds of kava ceremony you attend, it is quite cheap. It costs only \$10 per kilo if you buy from the market out here in New Zealand it costs \$40-\$45 per kilo. In most cases we share the cost for a kilo both in Tonga and here but as mentioned earlier most people have their own kava in Tonga and your still can get them free."

Another person commented on how kava costs money because it is often associated with fundraising events.

"Kava affects your income only when Tongans participate in a fund raising kava club but it is not that expensive."

One person commented on how kava affected his family income because he was not able to go to work and therefore his income was affected.

"Kava affects your life if you sleep too much and you never work because your family earnings will be too small."

One man suggested that some young men were stealing money in order to contribute towards kava parties.

“Today many Tongan youths are in jail because they steal money so that they can contribute in a kava party and in fund raising activities.”

Health effects

A number of men acknowledged that kava affected their health status.

“Yes kava consumption is a health issue because when you wake up in the following morning you feel unfit, fatigue, tired, nauseated and you feel lazy. Other facts include sudden death although nobody knew the causes. One of my friend told me that, “one of our mate die suddenly due to stroke but he told me that the guy drank kava almost all week before he died” The other problem is that many men have haemorrhoids because they sit too long. This led to rectal cancer of Tongan men.”

Intimate relationships

The majority of participants mentioned that kava affected their sexual experiences with their partners, but they were often reluctant to discuss these issues openly.

*“I still think that there are some wives who are complaining about their husband drinking kava especially on sex. If we ask some of the wives, they will tell us the truth but they are either **shy** or **scared** of their husbands or don't want to put down their husbands or friends.”*

A number of the men mentioned how kava consumption made them 'lazy' or uninterested in sex.

*“Yes, I think it is true, because when one is too drunk of kava, he tends to be **too lazy** and he has no energy or drives to think of sex.”*

Discussion

The results have identified a number of key areas and that kava drinking still remains a popular activity for many Tongan born men. There are a number of cultural uses of kava such as social and cultural ceremonies for funerals, weddings, welcoming ceremonies and village functions. Today the ceremonial use of kava continues to be a major part of many Tongan communities in New Zealand and in Tonga. Some men stated that kava was seen as a status plant and a highly respected substance. It can also be seen as the equivalent to a pig, which is a high status food. The work of Singh (1992)³ discusses how kava has been strongly associated with a number of social and

ceremonial activities such as welcoming an important visitor.

The consumption of kava was also linked to a sense of bonding, reaffirming and establishing relationships amongst Tongan men. Many highlighted that kava drinking was important for communicating with other Tongan men. Kava drinking remains an important way for Tongan men to bond with one another. Furthermore, there is still a strong sense of hierarchical and social structures amongst the Tongan men. Rogers (1975)⁶ found in his work that kava ceremonies are used as a forum for communicating and open discussions on a number of social, cultural, and political issues.

The interviews suggest that long kava drinking sessions are common, whereby a group of men drink for a 12 or 13 hour period. When these sessions take place some men do not attend their paid work because they need to recover from the effects of kava. Most of the men stated that they tended to be 'lazy' and often missed going to work after consuming kava. Rogers (1975)⁶ also confirmed that kava drinking involved long drinking sessions.

Drinking kava is now a popular practice for young Tongan men. A number of the older men said that young Tongan men have recently become actively involved in kava drinking sessions. Most of the men mentioned that when they first tasted kava they did not like the taste of it but gradually over time they became used to drinking kava. Many of the older Tongan men who were born and raised in Tonga suggested that they began to consume kava because there was a lack of social activities in Tonga.

There have been a number of studies into the health related illnesses of kava consumption such as Frater (1952), Ruze (1990), Kava (2001).^{8,9,10} All the authors identify a number of health related illnesses such as poor health, feeling unwell, headaches, sleeplessness, tiredness & feeling lethargic. Participants said that kava did affect their health whereby they reported feeling tired and lazy after consuming it.

A few of the men mentioned that kava drinking was also used as a medicinal substitute for their medical ailments such as stomach pains, flu, and cancer. Ruze (1990),¹⁰ Steiner (2000),¹¹ Bone (2002),¹² highlights in their papers that there was a strong correlation between the high use of kava and reduced health related ailments such as cancer, anxiety and niacin deficiency. Some of the men also mentioned that kava drinking was an alternative to alcohol consumption. Older men who were born and raised in Tonga said that alcohol was not readily available so they looked at other alternatives such as kava and homebrew.

In many Pacific cultures, sexuality is often a very

sacred and tapu subject and is not openly discussed. This is true in the Tongan community. Tongan men are reluctant to discuss some of their sexual difficulties since the topic of sexual intimacy is sensitive. Most of the men stated how they were too shy to talk about sex. Some acknowledged that there was a problem with kava drinking but did not elaborate what these difficulties were. The men did acknowledge that kava consumption made them 'lazy' when it came to sexual activities. The men said they felt too tired to have sex with their partners. This was also a key finding with Kava's (2001)⁸ paper on the sexual difficulties for Fijian men. Many of the men also mentioned that when they drank kava in Tonga it was very cheap and very cost effective because they were able to grow kava in the plantations. In New Zealand kava was more expensive. This was due to not being able to grow kava in New Zealand.

Summary

The findings of this research suggest several key implications. There is a need to increase awareness of the health impact of kava consumption. Very little is known about the health impact of kava drinking, including among health professionals and among kava drinkers. Kava was strongly linked to friendships and status. These positive aspects need to be considered when undertaking further research. It may be useful to further investigate some of the traditional cultural features in the kava drinking environment and to see how these traditional practices could be maintained in other ways. One area that can have a greater impact is the role of policy implications of identifying key areas of developing educational awareness of the health effects and medicinal uses of kava. Public health programmes could explore the health related impacts of heavy kava use. Further research is needed to explore these topics among New Zealand Tongan born men and the views of Tongan women.

Study limitations

This study does not represent all Tongan born men living in Auckland but it is an exploratory study so further research is still needed. We acknowledge that the sample size of twelve men is very small. A number of issues were also not fully explored such as the political issues back home in Tonga and the biological effects of kava. Although a small part of the paper highlights some of the medicinal impacts of kava further work is still required in this area.

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