Is Kava Alcohol?: The Myths and the Facts

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Abstract:
This paper addresses the misconception that kava is an alcoholic substance. After a brief introduction as to what prompted the writing of this, I follow by discussing kava's cultural importance to Pacific peoples, and then compare kava 'intoxication' with alcohol intoxication. The paper concludes with a discussion of the historical influences that have promoted some of the misconceptions surrounding kava. Ultimately the paper demonstrates that kava and alcohol are entirely different kinds of beverages with different effects, and that lingering misconceptions can be seen as a 'colonial hangover'.

The Phone Call

My phone rang. *Tovata* 1, bula vinaka. It was Kelera, an indigenous Fijian woman currently living in Hamilton, New Zealand, and an active member in the Fijian division of our local Methodist Church. *Did they tell you about the meeting tomorrow night? Some of the kaivalagi* (European ethnicity) *are not happy about us and the Tongans and Samoans - us drinking kava after Church, in the hall. They want to meet.* At the time I received this call, the local Methodist Church complex was being shared on Sundays by four separate congregations (the *kaivalagi/palangi:* comprising predominantly *pakeha* New Zealanders, the Samoans, Tongans and 'us', the Fijians). One of the Pacific Island divisions will often meet in the hall following their service in order to fellowship, eat, and consume their traditional beverage kava. Overall it is a well functioning amicable union, although this one particular issue had raised it head on several occasions. *They* [indicating some of the *kaivalagi* members] *want us to stop drinking kava because the rule is 'no alcohol in the Church'. We tried to explain but they don't understand. They want some proof. Tovata, kerekere [request/please], you know this is important to us and you are studying this; can you write a letter?*

I am of Fijian decent and married to a *kaivalagi.* Therefore I spend most of my life with a foot in two vastly different ethnic camps. When attending European functions that involve the drinking of alcohol, I frequently take with me kava. This is my preference to that of the social lubricant imbibed by most New Zealand kaivalagi. It is in these settings that I routinely encounter misunderstandings regarding kava as alcohol, a belief that is not confined to our local Church structure. The following is a reconstructed presentation of *'the letter'.*

Members of the Hamilton Fijian Methodist Church drinking yaqona in the Church hall. (Source: Author)

Kava and the Cultural Context

Kava is a beverage produced from the dried and pounded root and basal stem portion of the tropical plant *Piper methysticum Forst. f.* This species, which looks similar to the native New Zealand kawakawa (Piper excelsum), has been used reciprocally, ceremonially and medicinally for hundreds of years throughout the Pacific and continues to play a central role in Pacific identity and unity (Lebot *et al.,* 1997:198). Durrant and Thakker (2003:128-9) describe kava's unique contemporary role as being primarily an implement of social exchange critical to Pacific Island reciprocity, including the welcoming of visitors, the marking of special occasions, demarcating social boundaries and maintaining political hierarchies. As Christianity is a dominant social force throughout Oceania, it is no surprise that many churches have incorporated kava into their ritual and symbolism. The Catholic Churches of Tonga and Samoa have acknowledged the importance of kava and embraced its use as part of Church function. For instance, in 1995 the Catholic Church of Samoa published a booklet with a foreword by the Archbishop of Samoa describing kava's importance to the Eucharist and identifying "Jesus Christ as Heavenly Kava Root at Bethlehem" (Taofinu'u 1995:1-2). In St. Mary's Cathedral in Tonga's capital, a large *kumete* (wooden bowl from which kava is served) comprises part of the altar decoration (Davis and Brown 1999:12). Samoan and Tongan Catholics are not along in linking kava with the divinity of God's Son. Samoan Methodists believe that liquid kava has redemptive significance in the same manner as the Blood of Christ (Fa'asi'i 1993:61-3). Further, the Latter Day Saints (Mormons), who have strict regulations on the use of alcohol and drugs, including caffeine, recently produced a memorandum to clarify the use of kava among its members. The memo acknowledges the cultural importance of the traditional beverage to Pacific Island users and stated that "kava use is permitted for medicinal and cultural purposes" (pers. comm. 2009).

Intoxication

Academic literature which includes discussion on kava 'intoxication' abounds, with Singh's (1996) bibliography - now a quarter of a century old - listing over 800 articles. Contrary to a belief held by many, kava is not an alcoholic beverage. Alcohol is produced through fermentation, whereas kava is not (Leung,

2004:94); kava is made by steeping the dried and pounded plant extracts in water in a similar manner to making a cup of tea with a tea bag. It is consumed immediately and is never left for any period. Additionally, kava is an antimycotic; it kills fungal growths (Morgan 2007:6) and therefore cannot ferment as alcohol does. The anti-fungal properties of kava contribute to its medicinal value (Aalbersberg and Sotheeswaran 1991:559).

Confusion is often created, and myth perpetuated, by the use of the term 'intoxication' in regard to kava. Alcohol and kava 'intoxication' are vastly different. Whereas alcohol intoxication is often experienced as a euphoric state which includes increased activity (especially in the initial stages) and emotional change, kava 'intoxication' is the antithesis of this (Kepler 1998:9). Kava's effect is primarily soporific: these come on slowly and subtly, and are experienced as a relaxing of the muscles and a feeling of casual contentment combined, in the initial stages, with clear-headedness that promotes conversation (Lewin 1964:223-4). It is for this reason that the drink is often referred to as a "social lubricant" (Keltner and Folkes 2005:522) with "a high socio-psychological value" (Spate 1959:51). As consumption levels rise, the active properties within kava increase in the mind and body, and consumers feel a sense "of sociability, peace, harmony, brotherhood, reduced anxiety and stress, [and] sedation" (Singh 2004:5). Unlike alcohol, there is very little euphoria during intoxication, although slight dizziness and double vision can be experienced when vast quantities have been consumed (MediHerb 1994b:1-2). Moreover, where alcohol tends to "release aggressive impulses; if anything kava inhibits or disassociates them. You cannot hate with kava in you", argues Lemert (1967:333).

Kava intoxication is so subtle that many first-time uses, especially if they have had experience with alcohol, find the sensation a disappointment. They often question the beverage's 'intoxicant' properties (Pollock 1995:13). Thomson (1999:72-3) rightly comments "that most people who drink kava for the first time… expend too much effort analysing its effects on them and can be heard muttering that they don't feel a thing."

Scientific Data

Research based on kava's pharmacological activity in the brain and body is plentiful although the full extent of that activity is not yet fully understood (Singh *et al.,* 2004:150). What scientists have established is that kava's active ingredient, kavalactones (also known as kavapyrons), works on the Central Nervous System (CNS), causing a muscle-relaxant, anticonvulsant, local anaesthetic and analgesic action (MediHerb 1994a:1-2;b:1-2). The CNS is a complex highway of neurons that carries electrical impulses throughout the brain and body. These electrical impulses instruct the body in its various functions. When one considers the CNS, it is easy to imagine a highway of nerves running the length of the body; however, this highway must be viewed more like a dashed line (-------) than a continuous one (———) (Kalat 2004:30). The space between each dash, or between each neuron, is known as the Synaptic Cleft. As the neuron ends open and close, the electrical impulses pass through the Synaptic Cleft en-route to the adjacent neuron (p.33,61).

The action of the Synaptic Cleft can be inhibited, or slowed, by a chemical critical to sleep found in the CNS called Gamma Amino Butyric Acid (GABA) (p.382). Kava is believed to increase GABA, therefore slowing electrical impulses in the brain and body, promoting relaxation and mild anaesthesia (Bilia et al., 2001:2583). In larger doses, GABA increase also interrupts ocular balance, causing double vision, vertigo and feelings of imbalance (Garner and Klinger 1985:310).

In summary, as the consumption of kava increases, the firing speed of the consumer's neuronal electrical impulses decreases, causing the response time in the muscles, limbs and brain to slow. It is this type of effect that is termed kava 'intoxication.' It is extremely different from alcohol intoxication.

However, this is only part of the body's response to kava. Scientists have also found that kavalactones have a major impact upon an area of the central brain called the Limbic Structure (Cairney *et al.,* 2002:660, Thompson et al., 2004:248). Among its various functions, the Limbic Structure is involved in the determination of emotional and motivational levels, and controls such things as memory, the desire to drink, eat, engage sexually, physical activity, and the ability to experience aggression and anxiety (Sadock and Sadock 2003:83-4, Kalat 2004:88,598). Pharmacologists liken kava's effect upon the Limbic Structure to the anti-anxiety and sleep inducing properties of benzodiazepine drugs commonly marketed under names such as Valium and Halcion (Sadock and Sadock 2003:1022-29, Kalat 2004:88,598). Although a similarity in efficacy exists between kava and benzodiazepines, kava is much subtler, lacking benzodiazepines' rapid sedatory effects, long term memory loss implications, and "addiction, tolerance and withdrawal symptoms" (Cairney et al., 2002:660, Thompson *et al.,* 2004:248). This is the reason why kava is increasingly being prescribed by doctors as a safe and viable alternative to benzodiazepine based drugs (Chanwai 2000:960, Hodges and Kam 2002:893, Singh *et al.,* 2004:140-7, Lee *et al.,* 2007:88).

To summarise the discussion so far: the scientific data is straightforward. Kava is not alcohol. It has a different chemical structure and its effects are different. The term 'intoxication' is highly misleading when applied to kava consumption. So how have these misunderstandings regarding kava arisen?

Leaders of the Hamilton Fijian Methodist Church drinking yaqona in the Church hall. (Source: Author)

Myth Promotion and "Contemporary Colonial Mentalities"

Misunderstandings regarding kava have often been linked to what some scholars term "contemporary colonial mentalities" - a set of belief processes that first emerged during the heyday of colonialism in the early and mid-nineteenth century. Colonial perceptions were strongly informed by a collection of ideologies

rooted in capitalist processes which developed in tandem with the industrialisation of Europe, ideas later drawn together as the Theory of Modernisation (McMichael 2000:296). Modernisation theorists postulated that if colonised nations, including the island states of the South Pacific, were to linearly apply the same industrialisation processes as Europe, they too could reach a state of development that reflected Western systems, standards and ideals (Webster 1990:42-3). Therefore, these 'undeveloped' nations; often referred to as "lower [and] primitive" (Durkheim and Pickering 1975:107), "child like" (Nederveen Pieterse 1992:153), "tribal" (Hall 1992:10), "inferior" (Firth 1997:262) and "traditional" (Webster 1990:44,49-50), need only follow a predetermined path to capitalist modernity (Hall 1992:10). Colonial commentators argued that it was critical for these "primitive [and] lower societies" to move away from collectivist mentalities and spirituality based on "crude myths" (Rostow 1956:27, Durkheim and Pickering 1975:107-8) to gain developed values - "namely those held by the white minority or… the cultivated European" (Escobar 1995:43). Colonial administrators, believing it was their "moral duty to 'civilize the natives' by introducing development to them" (Said 1993:225), developed a raft of measures influenced by modernisation theories in order to encourage a cultural shift to "right values" (Gegeo 1998:298). One such measure was the introduction of *The Tohunga Suppression Ac*t (1907) in Aotearoa New Zealand. This regulation encouraged *Māori* to forsake their religious practices and healing systems.

It was argued that the prohibition of those practices and systems, which included the use of indigenous substances, would eliminate superstitious gullibility (Lange 1999: 242,247,249-250,281-2) and therefore lead the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa toward modern enlightenment. A similar approach was undertaken by colonial administrators in most of the Pacific Islands who regarded the use of kava as little more than *jungle juice,* 'a native pass-time misguidedly linked with medicinal and social systems' (Wolfers 1975: 45-6,125, Bastin 1981:341, Gregory *et al.,* 1981:302-3, Marshall 1987:45, Hanlon 1988:144, Brown 2003:95). Norton and Ruse (1994:93) note that during the colonial period kava was often mistakenly associated with opium and alcohol, earning the traditional beverage an undeservedly negative reputation.

Contemporary scholars argue that stereotypical beliefs regarding "primitive" practices and "crude myths" which developed during the colonial era are often based in ethnocentric ideologies (or a 'white is right' mentality) that continue to influence many today and manifest in what is termed "contemporary colonial mentalities" (Nederveen Pieterse 1992:90,91,153,199, Said 1981:151,245-6, Group discussion 2008:n/a). One example of this is the belief that one should always wear shoes and that the wearing of shoes is 'proper'. Scholars such as Firth (1997:262) and Alatas (1977:52-3) argue that ethnocentrism during the colonial period propagated the notion that natives were less intelligent and that this was exhibited in behaviours such as the non-wearing of shoes. Put simply, 'civilised people must always wear shoes or they will appear native and this is not proper'. This type of belief regarding shoes continues today, and is an example of "contemporary colonial mentalities".

When this type of thinking is applied to kava use, misunderstanding and myths such as "kava is [little more than] a native alcohol used by islanders to get drunk" are perpetuated.1 Academics (Escobar 1995:98,222, Storey 2000:42, Gibson-Graham 2005:4, Jakimow 2008:312, McEwan 2009:104, Peet and Hartwick 2009:227) argue that it is the responsibility of influential First World organizations and scholars to expose the facts regarding cultural practices and observances in order to abolish negative stereotypes and myths that feed "contemporary colonial mentalities" which do little more than marginalize indigenous cultures. This in turn gives greater understanding of cultural difference, which potentially leads to increased cross-cultural harmony.

Summary

This discussion has addressed the myth that kava is an intoxicant similar to alcohol, demonstrating that kava and alcohol are not the same. It began by describing a recent situation in which a community organisation had sought clarification on this issue followed by an examination of kava's importance to the cultural practices of many contemporary Pacific peoples, a significance which is also reflected in the rituals and symbols of the Church. Kava 'intoxication' was then investigated, showing that this is vastly dissimilar to alcohol drunkenness. The use of the term 'intoxication' was cited as one of several elements that feed this myth. A lack of understanding, colonial era beliefs and "contemporary colonial mentalities" also add confusion to traditional practices such as the use of kava. Hopefully, this will change as people sift facts, gain new understandings, and embrace cultural difference in order to increase cross cultural harmony.

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Notes

1. Tovata is a relational name used between those whose immediate (paternal) ancestral ties lye within the political area of the Tovata Confederacy; Vanua Levu and the Lau Group.
2. This comment "kava is a native alcohol used by islanders to get drunk" was stated to me as fact during an interview. March, 4, 2006.

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