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Kava and cars

Kava has been used for political, medicinal and social purposes in the Pacific Islands for centuries. But in a modern mobile society, what impact does it have on driver ability? A new study aims to find out, reports Sonia Yoshioka Braid.

For someone who left school with no qualifications, Dr Apo Aporosa has certainly come a long way. In addition to gaining a master's and a PhD (in 2013) in development studies by distance at Massey, in December 2015 he was awarded a Pasifika postdoctoral fellowship worth $230,000 from the Health Research Council of New Zealand, to examine the effects of kava on driver ability and road safety.

The former policeman of Fijian descent is an expert in the area of kava, an interest that was piqued while he was working at a school in Fiji, and where kava was an everyday part of life. He spent his time there doing development projects and teaching, and when back in New Zealand would cram his studies into the short time he had available.

“Studying at Massey was great, aided by the generous prior recognition awarded for the practical development experience I had gained before enrolling. Moving into my postgraduate studies I had fantastic support from mentors such as Dr Bob Gregory, supervisors like Professor Regina Scheyvens and the Pasifika@Massey team, whose support was critical to my receiving the Health Research Council award. I look back and laugh; this kid who was a total failure at school then ends up at university!”

“It was challenging though. I remember trying to read this totally foreign language, reading journals and throwing them on the floor and ‘spitting the dummy’ – but I’m doing what I’m doing now because of people like my wife Jan [a Massey psychology PhD graduate], my mentors and supervisors and the Pasifika support systems who guided and were patient with me,” he says.

As a policeman in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Aporosa saw the aftermath of motor vehicle accidents and wondered about the impacts of drug driving. “Back then there was less attention paid to drug driving as the focus was more on alcohol,” he says.

The issue of drinking kava and driving has had little attention, limited to several small studies done using minute pharmacologically recommended doses that are vastly less than those regularly consumed in the Pasifika setting. With injuries from road traffic accidents the leading cause of hospitalisation for Pasifika men and women living in New Zealand, Aporosa says there are anecdotal reports suggesting that kava contributes to these statistics. It made sense to bring the two together and do some testing.

Now based at the University of Waikato’s Anthropology Programme as a research fellow, Aporosa will work in partnership with its School of Psychology’s Traffic and Road Safety Research Group to see what happens when people drink kava and drive, the drivers’ perceptions after drinking kava, and whether there needs to be an education programme designed at keeping people safe.

“This study is not anti kava, it’s about our culture and the practice of kava use that now exists in a highly mobile society. We have a German company – Vienna Tests Systems – that specialises in industry-standard driver assessments; it has donated the tests, which fit nicely with the normal kava drinking routine at traditionally influenced kava sessions. Once we have the test results we can work out our next steps.”

The root of a kava plant that is being prepared to be made into the light-brown beverage that is part of daily life in Fiji.

What is kava?
Kava (also known as ‘awa’, ‘awa, saka’ and ‘yapawa’) refers to the both the Piper methysticum plant and the light-brown, relaxing beverage made from its roots.

What is its cultural significance?
Kava plays a key role in linking Pasifika cultures and identities due to its function as a potent symbol of social unity. It has been used for millennia across the Pacific for political, social and medicinal purposes, producing a gentle sense of relaxation and sociability.

Is it hallucinogenic?
The drink contains a number of active compounds called kavalactones, making it mildly psychoactive, but it is neither alcoholic nor hallucinogenic. It is often referred to as the “anti-energy drink” because it brings on feelings of calmness and sleepiness, which is why kava is recognised as a viable non-addictive alternative for treating generalised anxiety disorder.