

## PHOTOESSAY

# Visual peregrinations in the realm of kava

**Abstract:** The author has been documenting the use of kava in different parts of the Pacific for several years, particularly in Tonga and in Auckland where its use is popular among members of communities that consume kava as part of their cultural tradition, and more recently a growing non-traditional user group. In this article, he reflects on his project to document the use of kava through photographs, the evolution of its use in traditional and non-traditional settings and discusses the most recent scientific studies of the drink.

**Keywords:** culture, documentary, drugs, Fiji, kava, New Zealand, photography, Tonga, traditions, Tuvalu, tradition

TODD M. HENRY

*Documentary photographer and visual story teller, Tāmaki Makaurau*

I HAVE been photographing and documenting kava sessions in the contemporary and traditional context around the Pacific for the better part of a decade. My connection to kava started casually nearly 20 years ago, but now it runs deep through connections with my wife, children and Tongan in-laws. My experiences drinking kava in a variety of contexts and my weekly engagements with kava itself add to and maintain this connection. I have a deep respect for kava and the cultures that have given this plant to the world.

Kava today is at a crossroads between tradition and contemporality. The drink is entering new spaces and new cultural contexts and non-traditional kava drinkers are increasingly using kava as an alternative to alcohol. I aim to accurately document kava culture through photography as it evolves in traditional and non-traditional communities and adapts to changing and challenging times.

I first became aware of kava as a 19-year-old university student in Scranton, Pennsylvania, when a friend of a friend's girlfriend (who was a known on-and-off heroin user) visited our flat with a small bottle of gel capsules labelled 'kavakava extract'. The label was accompanied with a byline claiming that this supposedly natural product would help the user relax in the 'Polynesian style'. She asked me if I wanted to try some and even though they seemed harmless enough, I declined as my knowledge of her relationship with illicit drugs bred a degree of distrust. While I didn't investigate kava further, the name and concept of what

kava is somehow left a lasting impression..

In 2004, I was travelling around the Pacific for the first time and I again came across a mention of kava while doing some preliminary research before a trip to Fiji. The source of tourist information (which I do not remember) described kava as something along the lines of a ‘sleep-inducing hallucinogen’ to which many Fijians were addicted. The guide also said that depending on where you went in Fiji, you might be obliged to drink it with locals. The description of kava made me feel somewhat uneasy at the prospect of having to drink it, but I would later learn that the information I received was mostly false and that the spreading of misinformation around kava was all too common.

My first experience with kava took place during a visit to Lawai village, just north of Sigatoka on the island of Viti Levu, Fiji. When the group I was with arrived in the village, we were ushered into a small, one-roomed house where some local men and women welcomed us with a kava ceremony. I could sense the deep significance of this drink to the Fijian people, but I harboured some reluctance as I was served the first shell of the bitter brown liquid. My tongue immediately turned numb and I eventually felt quite relaxed, but I did not feel as if my mental capacity was diminished. I certainly was not hallucinating. I had a few more shells with my hosts and I left feeling content and thankful to be welcomed into this community in such a special way. I probably would have kept exploring kava on my own after leaving the Pacific, but I did not know where to get it back in the United States. Even if I could get it I didn’t know how to make it, so it stayed in the back of my mind once again.

In 2008, I was back in Aotearoa New Zealand where I met my wife, ‘Anau. She was born in Tonga, raised mostly in Māngere, South Auckland, and comes from a long line of kava growers and businesspeople. Her father Sione paid for the whole family to migrate from Tonga in the 1980s with money he made growing, pounding and selling kava within the Tongan community. A weathered old sign reading ‘*Kava Tonga fakatau ‘i heni*’ (‘*Tongan kava for sale here*’) still stood in their front yard the first time I visited the family home in Māngere, and kava drinkers would often come in the early hours of the morning to buy kava powder from Sione.

‘Anau and I married in Tonga in 2010, and we shared our first shell of kava, as per tradition, on our *Sāpate ‘Uluaki* (first Sunday) as a married couple. While in Tonga we became accustomed to Sione firing up the overwhelmingly loud kava pounding machines just after sunrise most mornings at the family house in Longolongo, Nuku’alofa. The machines made sleep impossible, but I came to appreciate the mesmerising rhythm of electric motors lifting and dropping the solid steel poles which pulverised the dried kava roots into powder. Today, the sound of those machines and the smell of kava in the humid tropical air fill me with nostalgia.

## A social and ceremonial drink

EVERY culture around the world seems to have a distinctive beverage, alcoholic or otherwise, that represents its collective essence and values. Kava, a beverage made from the *Piper methysticum* plant that is unique to the Pacific, serves as both a social and ceremonial drink while also serving as a definitive icon of identity throughout the Pacific.

Dr Vincent Lebot, one of the world's most prolific kava scientists, describes kava as 'a handsome shrub that is propagated vegetatively, as are most of the Pacific's major traditional crops. Its active principles, a series of kavalactones, are concentrated in the rootstock and roots. Islanders ingest these psychoactive chemicals by drinking cold-water infusions of chewed, ground, pounded, or otherwise macerated kava stumps and roots' (Lebot et al., 1992, p. 1). The effects of kava are best described as soporific, relaxing and calming, while not clouding the drinker's mental faculties. Kava is often wrongly assumed to be alcoholic, but kavalactones (the active ingredient in the prepared kava beverage) lack 'the excitability, euphoria and loss of inhibition experienced with alcohol intoxication' (Aporosa, 2015, p. 60).

From a traditionalist perspective, the communal characteristic of kava is the key element of the kava experience, as is the bitter taste that results from mixing only kava and water. Lebot says: 'We want to promote kava for what it is, a very healthy traditional beverage.'

Products such as capsules, extracts, kava candies etc aid in the removal of the community aspect of kava drinking and, even though they contain kava, are therefore not conducive to the full experience (Aporosa, 2019, p. 5). It is because of this that some commentators have argued that these 'designer kava preparations' are not technically 'kava' (Bian et al., 2020, p. 23; also see Aporosa et al., 2022, p. 5).

Having grown up in a rural town in Pennsylvania, the Tongan language and way of life was completely foreign to me. I knew that I would benefit from gaining a better understanding of the culture into which I had married, so I asked my wife and in-laws for advice on where to start. The obvious answer from their perspective was for me to attend *faikava*, or informal kava sessions with members of the Tongan community. At first I was reserved at the prospect of entering a sacred cultural space as an outsider, but I was humbled to be welcomed in as a brother. In addition to learning some Tongan words and songs, I learned that kava itself is about community, respect, civility and inclusivity. Kava to me was, at first, just part of a cultural exchange, but I inadvertently deepened my interest in kava as a plant and a drink. This interest manifested itself in the form of photography and I took my camera to most kava sessions that I attended.

As my travels took me to other parts of the Pacific I noticed many intricate differences in kava drinking practices which I felt were important to docu-

ment. Before long, I had created a substantial body of photographic works that documented kava culture across a number of islands, cultures and communities. I observed that some Pacific Island nations have very strong kava cultures that have remained seemingly unchanged for thousands of years, while others seem to have little or no connection to kava left. In my readings I learned that kava traditions in some places were all but erased by early Christian missionaries who saw kava as a threat to their efforts of separating indigenous people from their ancestral ways in order to ‘eliminate competition with other gods’ (Pollock, 2009). In some cases kava cultivation was banned (Biodiversity for Sale. Dismantling the Hype about Benefit Sharing, 2000) and the drinking of kava was replaced with alcohol, with often devastating social effects .

Several societies have made concerted efforts to reclaim and reinstate their kava cultures, such as Vanuatu, for example, where kava drinking was abandoned in some places for almost a century. Vanuatu gained independence from Britain and France in 1980 and kava has since become a national symbol of the country that has been promoted by the government as an alternative to alcohol (Pollock, 2009). Kava is a major export crop in Vanuatu where it is often referred to locally as ‘a diamond’ and a ‘gift from the ancestors’ for its ability to vastly improve the country’s economic prosperity (Heaton, 2021). According to Pacific Trade Invest Australia (2021), Vanuatu exported A\$48.4 million of kava in 2021, with projections that predict exponential growth in years to come (Industry Focus: Kava, the Green Gold of the Pacific, 2021). Other Pacific Island nations are reporting upward trends in kava exports to markets in Aotearoa New Zealand where there are many communities of traditional kava drinkers as well as the United States where non-traditional kava bars have become trendy. As of 1 December 2021, Australia began the second half of a two-year kava pilot programme which will allow commercial importation and sale of kava as a food product. Many Pacific Island kava growers and exporters hope that this programme will further expand and create additional export markets in the region (Kava Pilot Program, 2021).

Regardless of the proliferation of kava bars in the United States and elsewhere, people outside the Pacific (and some within it) are largely unaware of kava’s existence. To those who are familiar with kava, there is no simple or easy way describe it accurately to those who are new to it. From its genetic history, botanical properties, cultural significance and use in contemporary society, there are many intricate details to discuss and expand upon. Here in Aotearoa New Zealand, the supposed ‘Capital of Polynesia’, the public perception of kava generally takes an overall simplistic form that is often riddled with common misconceptions. The two commonest are that kava tastes like mud and does nothing and that kava is an addictive drug like alcohol and opioids that causes irreversible and devastating damage to the user’s health.

Deeper public discussions reveal that there exists a plethora of other common

misconceptions and misunderstandings about kava. Waikato University's Dr Apo Aporosa has been combating the spread of kava misinformation for many years through articles in academic journals and mainstream media. A chance meeting between Dr Aporosa and myself at the 2016 Kava Research Symposium at Waikato University led to a friendship and an evolving collaborative relationship on research-based visual documentation of kava culture and practice. I have contributed many photographs to Dr Aporosa's research publications, media articles and public health awareness campaigns on kava. Dr Aporosa and I also co-authored a research article for the *Waikato Journal of Education* titled 'The Virtual Faikava: Maintaining Vā and Creating Online Learning Spaces During COVID-19' (Henry & Aporosa, 2021) which expands on the phenomenon of kava spaces as 'cultural classrooms' (Fehoko, 2015) that moved into the online space in response to the COVID-19 lockdowns that started in 2020.

My goal through this long-term photographic project is to document the human elements and community aspects of kava that make it unique, along with the changes that contemporary kava use is undergoing. It is important to document and understand the ways in which new groups of kava users are incorporating kava into their own identities and lifestyles. I also aim to simply document kava as it exists now, while also dispelling common misconceptions about kava culture and consumption through visual documentation of kava drinking practices from around the Pacific. This includes Aotearoa New Zealand where an estimated 20,000 people drink kava on any given Friday or Saturday night (Aporosa, 2015).

Most of these kava drinkers are members of traditional communities where kava drinking is a long-established cultural practice, but there are growing numbers of Pākehā and Māori who have adopted kava drinking into their weekly routines as an alternative to alcohol. A number of Pasifika women-only kava clubs, such as the Silent Whistle Kalapu (Tongan word for club) in Auckland have also established themselves, squarely challenging the notion in some circles that kava spaces are exclusively for men (Henry & Aporosa, 2021). The occurrence of women participating in kava consumption is not a new phenomenon, according to Tecun & Siu'ulua (2020, p. 450), who argue that women traditionally took part in kava ceremonies in many parts of the Pacific, such as Fiji, Tonga, and Sāmoa. In some cases they still do or are re-claiming their place in kava circles.

Aporosa and Forde provide compelling evidence for a deep historical connection between Aotearoa New Zealand and kava, stating that

Māori probably voyaged to Aotearoa via Te Au Maohi [the wider Rarotongan island group] where kava was also central to the culture; kava was easily transported during voyaging; and kava is uniquely linked to mana, safe travel, acknowledgement, hosting, trade, apology, medicine, and a journey that was likely to put early Māori voyagers in contact with other Pacific peoples en route to Aotearoa. (2019, p.78)

## Kava drinking and driving safety

APOROSA has conducted research on the effects that kava has on driving safety. During his most recent study, 20 kava drinking participants consumed 100ml of kava six times an hour for six hours to simulate the typical amounts of consumption during a Fijian kava session (see Figure 3). A somatosensory tool that ‘measures strategic, tactical and operational aspects of brain function’ was conducted at the beginning, middle and end of the kava drinking session. The results showed that ‘the kava consumed [by active participants] had no statistically significant negative impact on their focus, accuracy, timing perception, plasticity or fatigue, when compared with the control [non-kava drinking]group’ (Aporosa et al., 2022, p. 5). However, in the sixth hour of the study, a negative impact on the brain’s ability to keep track of events, known as ‘Temporal Order Judgement’ was noted. More importantly, the study demonstrated that even at high use volumes, kava’s impacts on cognition is vastly less impactful and very different to the effects of alcohol, cannabis, hallucinogens and narcotics’ (p. 11).

They argued that it was ‘difficult to believe that Māori abandoned kava in Hawaiki, leaving behind this cultural keystone species when heading south to Aotearoa approximately 900 years ago’ (p. 78).

It is important to unpack the concept of kava’s classification as a keystone species and what this classification entails. Tecun (2019, pp. 205-206) regards kava as having been central to Maori social, political and spiritual life, describing it as a symbol of cultural identity that featured heavily in language, ritual, ceremony and stories. He went on to argue that

Kava is a cultural keystone plant species across much of Oceania, and not only does it correlate with the expansion of *mana* (potency, honour), it is *mana*, and thus can have the effect of rendering the *tapu* (protective restrictions, set apart) of individuals *noa* (‘neutralisation of protective restrictions’) as they ingest it, while simultaneously making them *tapu* because they have imbibed *mana*. The antidepressant and soporific effects of kava are evidence of *mana*, as the anxiety levels go down and mental clarity remains, and the state of *noa* reveals truths otherwise restricted. (2020, pp. 174-175)

In my travels around Aotearoa and the Pacific Islands, I have photographed kava drinking practices in order to showcase the importance of kava to those who partake of it, as well as the diversity of contexts, kava drinking spaces and drinking protocol and practices. Despite the differences that exist, the element that consistently underpins all kava spaces, whether you are sitting on the floor with crossed legs like the Tongans, or standing with a shell full of kava behind one of Port Vila’s many *nakamals* (kava bars) is that of respect (Aporosa et al., 2021). I have been fortunate to drink kava and take photographs in many different places with different communities and as long as alcohol is not present alongside kava



(which it rarely is), the principle of respect is universally upheld. Kava drinkers often engage in deep or intense discussions on controversial topics, but verbal abuse and physical confrontations are exceedingly rare. Lemert (1967) observed that ‘disorderliness almost never accompanies kava drinking’ (p. 56), and it has been said that kava takes away the user’s ability to harbour hatred (Aporosa, 2019). Given kava’s 3000-year track record and its demonstrated ability to impart civility, level-headedness and a sense of community, this unassuming and bitter beverage from the Pacific could be the remedy our divided world needs.

Regarding the future of this long-term kava documentary project, Dr Aporosa and I are currently working on publishing a *kava table* (rather than coffee table) book that will showcase photographs and accounts of contemporary kava culture from across the Pacific. I still have to visit a few important locations for shooting photos yet, namely Pohnpei, Kosrae, Hawai’i, and Papua New Guinea. However, we will work on this goal over the next couple of years to make the book a reality.

## References

- Aporosa, S. A. (2015). The new kava user: Diasporic identity formation in reverse. *New Zealand Sociology*, 30(4), 58–77.
- Aporosa, S.A. (2021). Improving road safety and health: Understanding kava’s impact on driver fitness. In *Health Research Council of New Zealand* (Issue July 31).
- Aporosa, S A. (2019). De-mythologizing and re-branding of kava as the new ‘world drug’ of choice. *Drug Science, Policy and Law*, 5, 205032451987613. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050324519876131>
- Aporosa, S. A., Atkins, M., & Leov, J. N. (2021). Decolonising quantitative methods within a Pacific research space to explore cognitive effects following kava use. *Pacific Dynamics*, 5(1). <http://pacificdynamics.nz>
- Aporosa, S. A., Ballard, H., Pandey, R., & McCarthy, M. J. (2022). The impact of traditional kava (*Piper methysticum*) use on cognition: Implications for driver fitness. *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, 291. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jep.2022.115080>
- Aporosa, S. A., & Forde, J. (2019). Māori and kava : New drug fashion or re-engagement with ‘kawa’? *Pacific Dynamics*, 3(1). <http://pacificdynamics.nz>
- Bian, Tengfei, et al. (2020). Kava as a clinical nutrient: promises and challenges. *Nutrients*, 12(10), 3044.
- Biodiversity for sale. Dismantling the hype about benefit sharing. (2000). *Global Trade and Biodiversity in Conflict*, 4 (April).
- Fehoko, E. (2015). Social space and cultural identity: The faikava as a supplementary site for maintaining Tongan identity in New Zealand. *New Zealand Sociology*, 30(1), 131–139.
- Heaton, T. (2021, August 29). Kava: The Pacific’s economic ‘diamond’ is being coveted by competitors. *Honolulu Civil Beat*. <https://www.civilbeat.org/2021/08/kava-the-pacifics-economic-diamond-is-being-coveted-by-competitors/>
- Henry, T., & Aporosa, A. (2021). The virtual faikava: Maintaining vā and creating online learning spaces during COVID-19. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 26.
- Industry Focus: Kava, the green gold of the Pacific. (2021). In *Pacific Trade Invest Australia*. [https://pacifictradeinvest.com/explore-our-work/insights/industry-focus-kava-the-green-gold-of-the-pacific?fbclid=IwAR2G3wECu\\_TM1VT8-IVcz-Vea6cJc8KLCxZ5zYC6KTRJxSx6ii9Ua1QICE8](https://pacifictradeinvest.com/explore-our-work/insights/industry-focus-kava-the-green-gold-of-the-pacific?fbclid=IwAR2G3wECu_TM1VT8-IVcz-Vea6cJc8KLCxZ5zYC6KTRJxSx6ii9Ua1QICE8)

Kava pilot program. (2021). In *Pacific Trade Invest Australia*.

Lebot, V., Merlin, M., & Lindstrom, L. (1992). *Kava: The Pacific drug*. Newhaven, CT: Yale University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt211qwx.1>

Lemert, E. M. (1967). Secular use of kava in Tonga. *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 28(2), 55–57.

Pollock, N. (2009). Sustainability of the kava trade. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 21(2), 267–299.

Tecun, A. (2019). *Rootz vaka transits: Traversing seas of urban diasporic indigeneity by collapsing time and space with songs and stories of the kava canoe* (Vol. 2019). Auckland, NZ: The University of Auckland.

Tecun, A., Reeves, R., & Wolfgram, M. (2020). The past before us: A brief history of Tongan Kava. *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 129(2).

Tecun, A., & Siu'ulua, A. (2020). Mormon masculinity, family, and kava in the Pacific. *The Routledge Handbook of Mormonism and Gender*, 449–463. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351181600-35>

Todd Henry is a documentary photographer, photojournalist and visual storyteller. He is interested in capturing visual content that examines various aspects of society often taken for granted. He aims to convey his perspective of the world and appreciation of culture through the lens of his camera and on to those who view his photographs.  
[www.toddenryphoto.com](http://www.toddenryphoto.com)

# Why study journalism at USP?



**Radio  
Pasifik  
89.4FM**

**Multimedia  
training**



**USP**  
THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC

**50 YEARS**  
EDUCATION EXCELLENCE

**Confidence  
and  
communication**

**Award-winning  
newspaper  
Wansolwara**



**Visit: [slam.usp.ac.fj/](http://slam.usp.ac.fj/)**

**Contact:**  
USP Journalism Programme  
Co-ordinator  
**Dr Shalindra Singh**  
Email: [shalindra.singh@usp.ac.fj](mailto:shalindra.singh@usp.ac.fj)





**Figure 1: A virtual kava session during New Zealand's first Level Four COVID-19 lockdown in April 2020. The photo was taken in Nuku'alofa, Tonga, while those shown on the computer screen are in Auckland.**



**Figure 2: Professor Hūfanga Dr 'Okusitino Māhina pauses to drink a shell of kava while on an academic writing retreat with Dr Sione Vaka. Waiheke Island, Auckland.**



**Figure 3: Aporosa has conducted research on the effects that kava has on cognition which he applied to driver safety (Aporosa et al, 2022). Twenty kava drinking participants consumed 100ml of kava six times an hour for six hours (See Kava drinking sidebar, page 211).**





**Figure 4: Women mix kava before participating in a talanoa on the Pacific pay gap with representatives from the New Zealand Human Rights Commission, Auckland, New Zealand.**



**Figure 5: Three men drinking kava in Funāfuti, Tuvalu. Kava is a popular drink in Tuvalu with most kava powder being imported on weekly flights from Fiji.**



© TODD HENRY

**Figure 6:** A group of kava drinkers congregate to drink kava on a summer evening outside of the Fale Pasifika building at the University of Auckland. The kava session was held to commemorate the completion of the 2019 Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania conference where the world's leading kava researchers presented their findings.





Figure 7: A film crew wraps up a day of shooting with a kava at contemporary urban kava lounge in downtown Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand.



© TODD HENRY

**Figure 8: Jake Punimata (left) and Nid Satjipanon drink kava while at a gathering to show solidarity for West Papuan Independence in Auckland, New Zealand.**