

# Big Men Drink Beer; Drunk Big Men Do Not Hit Women



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Alcohol-related violence among security-sector forces in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea (PNG), highlights ongoing concerns regarding security and violence. This *In Brief* explores the question: what can studies of material culture, commodities or substances offer to policymakers addressing the social, political and economic implications of alcohol?

Numerous studies show obvious links between alcohol abuse and violence in Melanesia (Dinnen and Ley 2000; Jolly et al. 2012). Alcohol is a key factor in arguments over the distribution of household resources and a trigger of violence during domestic disputes (Jolly 2000). Sociality around alcohol can indicate poverty and marginalisation from development and how it ‘contributes to security-sector clashes is a critical question for policy actors’ (Munro 2014). There is recognition that alcohol abuse also drives development challenges like the HIV epidemic (Kelly 2009) and it is critical to understand how contemporary notions of masculinity shape the intersection between violence and HIV (Eves 2010).

These insights resonate with recent events in Port Moresby in which alcohol emerged as a central contested concern for a myriad of actors and interests. They also underscore the need to update Marshall’s (1982) collection on alcohol which noted that beer symbolised power and modernity, while marginalising women. A pertinent thread in this volume highlights how alcohol is incorporated into PNG forms of sociality involving gift exchange and distribution practices associated with the ‘big man’ culture (*ibid.*). The processes involved in the production, advertising, distribution and consumption of PNG’s iconic SP (South Pacific) beer provide a lens to unpack the question raised in this *In Brief*.

In the aftermath of the alcohol-related clash between the security forces in Port Moresby in November 2014 (Cochrane 2014), the National Capital District Commission liquor licensing board announced a ban on alcohol. Leaders claimed they were responding to calls from residents to ban liquor. The ban was initiated because of peace and safety and it was noted that ‘alcohol played a major part in this very sad and shameful event’ (*The National* 2014b).

The managing director of SP brewery responded by calling for ‘dialogue by stakeholders’. He argued that alcohol contributes significant tax revenue, and that liquor bans are not successful and would ‘force the issue underground and [have] devastating outcomes on the longer term’ (*The National* 2014a). Commentaries on liquor bans delineate between the legitimate alcohol industry and black markets and highlight that police are neither effective at enforcing nor willing to enforce bans and are major customers for black markets. We thus see interplay between the legitimate and illegitimate alcohol trade and the blurred position of police as both enforcers of regulation and as customers. Complicating these issues are contemporary narratives of masculinity (Eves 2010). Earlier, in a marketing strategy that seems to appeal to the archetypal PNG man, SP brewery launched its new product ‘the big man’s can’ while its website, mirroring marketing campaigns targeting modern PNG masculinities, espouses its corporate social responsibility which states that ‘[you’re no big man if you hit women](#)’.

Studies of substances, material things and commodities offer important insights into the role that they play in social dynamics between local, national and global actors and processes. Sharp’s (2012) mapping of the betel nut trade reveals dynamics of forces of exclusion and power in the networks and social relations created through trade and in marketplaces that could be applied to understand the alcohol trade. West’s (2012) approach to tracking the processes of the global certified-coffee trade could be used to analyse the relationships between SP brewery and its new corporate owner, Heineken.

SP beer may be analysed through a material lens because it facilitates relationships and connects a myriad of actors. The Tok Pisin term *sotpla braunpla meri* (‘short brown lady’) used by some consumers to describe the cheaper SP brown stubby illuminates SP’s gendered and sensualised relationship with its consumers. SP beer is a prominent feature of the city’s landscape. SP’s discernibility and ‘aura’ is steady and its impacts oscillate with the city’s rhythms, peaking in the joyous clinking of glass and music in the tides

of weekly pay cycles and flinching in cantankerous, shattered, too often bloody, recoil in the aftermath of the payday high.

The dynamics of SP beer production, marketing, distribution, retailing and consumption also show how the regulated alcohol industry converges with black markets in observable and veiled ways. SP advertising, reflecting its corporate social responsibility, is seen on public amenities, sporting venues, uniforms, shops and black market outlets. But the link between the formal beer industry and the black market is also evident in the fact that many black market outlets no longer occupy marginal, dark and 'after hours' spaces in the city. They have attained 'normalcy', located in public places and open 24 hours a day. The large quantities of stocks of SP visible in black market outlets elucidate an important link to the legitimate alcohol industry. Black market clientele include security personnel, public servants, professionals, sports people and school students. Social relationships between vendors and clients foster credit arrangements that make alcohol more accessible. PNG sociality in which exchange and distribution are markers for a prestigious and virtuous masculinity (Marshall et al. 1982) mean that men with more money are obliged to distribute their wealth by 'shouting' their associates who include unemployed and low-income friends, colleagues and family members. Black markets are sometimes the preferred place to purchase beer for such social interactions because of the absence of dress rules, codes of conduct and their proximity.

Alcohol intersects with regulated and illicit sociospatial systems in which dynamics of power, exclusion, unequal relationships and violence flourish. These have negative impacts on daily lives. For example, women divert their routes in order to avoid a black market outlet even if it means taking a longer and less safe route.

An ethnographic analysis of alcohol that draws on approaches to studying substances and products could yield much-needed insights into the social processes that influence contemporary intersections between masculinity, violence and alcohol. Such insights would contribute to the formulation of appropriate violence-prevention interventions.

#### Author Notes

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