

advice. Although this law was not well enforced, it signaled a decline of the traditional drug in this archipelago and its replacement by alcohol and, in the twentieth century, marijuana and other substances.

In Vanuatu, hostility toward kava was particularly marked in the early Presbyterian and more recent Pentecostal and Adventist missions (Gutari 1956a; Gadusek 1967; Brunton 1979; Gregory, Gregory, and Peck 1981). Members of several other denominations, including the Holiness Fellowship Church, are also obliged to give up not only kava but also tobacco and alcohol. The Catholic missions, on the other hand, generally have tolerated kava. Some Marist and Columban fathers continue to use it with their village neighbors. Anglicans, too, have taken a friendlier stance toward the drug.

Ironically, the decline of kava drinking on some Pacific islands coincided with a rapid increase in consumption of alcohol. Restrictions imposed on kava drinking have had the unintended consequence of swelling sales of alcoholic spirits. Over a hundred years ago on Ani island in the southern Cook Islands, for example, the London Missionary Society stamped out the traditional use of kava. The precontact kava ceremony of the *tanu nu* has persisted, however, with the replacement of kava by an alcoholic home brew made from fermented orange juice and sugar (Lerner 1976). Today *tanu nu* has four meanings: the coconut trunk, the container made from it, the place where the beverage is drunk, and the social institution where men gather to sit and exchange ideas and of course to drink home brew—in the same way that people in other countries do at pubs (Mokoroa 1984).

Even after a century or more of this sort of Christian and colonial interference, ethnobotanical knowledge and consumption of kava have been preserved in some societies, while in others impinging forces and influences have led Islanders to new, alien drugs like alcohol, nicotine, and marijuana. Although some Islanders now possess only fading recollections of the customs governing their traditional drink and the ethnobotanical knowledge necessary for kava cultivation, others who traditionally never consumed kava or who abandoned its use are turning or returning to the drug. In Vanuatu, particularly, local traditions of kava preparation and consumption are tending to change toward a modern national norm. In more than one contemporary Pacific community the ethnobotany of kava and its consumption are being reshaped by vibrant and creative innovation.

5. Anthropology The Cultural Significance and Social Uses of Kava

Georg Forster, a young naturalist on James Cook's second Pacific voyage, gave us an early account of kava drinking. It was September 1773, and Cook was moored off the island of Raiatea, 250 kilometers or so west of Tahiti. A Tahitian youth named Porca, whom Cook had picked up earlier, brought a new Raiatean acquaintance on board. In Cook's own cabin the two Polynesians together prepared and drank kava while Forster watched.

[Kava] is made in the most disgusting manner that can be imagined, from the juice contained in the roots of a species of pepper-tree. This root is cut small, and the pieces chewed by several people, who spit the macerated mass into a bowl, where some water (milk) of coconuts is poured upon it. They then strain it through a quantity of the fibres of coconuts, squeezing the chips, till all their juices mix with the coconut-milk; and the whole liquor is decanted into another bowl. They swallow this nauseous stuff as fast as possible; and some old topers value themselves on being able to empty a great number of bowls. . . . The pepper-plant is in high esteem with all the natives of these islands as a sign of peace; perhaps, because getting drunk together, naturally implies good fellowship. (Forster 1777)

Although clearly no kava enthusiast himself, Forster does tell us something about the significance of kava in Pacific Island societies. Two new friends meet to cement their acquaintanceship over a bowl of kava. They do so, moreover, in the most prestigious, perhaps even sacred, space they can find—inside Captain James Cook's cabin on the *Resolution*.

Over the past two centuries, kava has maintained its central place within many Pacific Island societies. Kava drinking still signals good fellowship (figure 5.1). This fellowship may be that between leaders and followers, chiefs and commoners, or prime ministers and voters, or it may be a fellowship of friends and equals. By sharing kava, Islanders create new relations with strangers and repair these relations when they falter. Kava consumption evokes feelings of camaraderie—an emotional response that symbolizes within a drinker's body the strength of ongoing social relations.

Kava is a valuable exchange item within political, religious, and economic structures—the main spheres of everyday island social life. First, bowls of kava



Figure 5.1. Informal kava circle celebrating the end of a day's work, Vanua Levu, Fiji (courtesy of J. O. Juvik).

lubricate island political systems, as men and women assume chiefly rank by acquiring traditional titles, enemies make peace, law-breakers seek forgiveness, and leaders attract supporters. The everyday details of drinking kava signal the state of important social relationships and mark the identities and roles of the people involved in those relationships. Regulations on kava usage—who drinks and who does not, where one drinks and with whom—separate important categories of people in island cultures. Typically, men's access to and use of kava differs from that of women, chiefs' from that of commoners, religious traditionalists' from that of Christians, that of the old from that of the young, and so on.

Rules of kava use not only define social status and create and nurture relationships but also regulate access to the drug. As with most psychoactive drugs, overuse of kava could undermine social order and public health. The traditional prescriptions and proscriptions that surround kava usage, maintaining its value as an exchange token, also serve to moderate the times and places of its use and the range of people who may consume it.

Second, kava is an important traditional exchange item that also links people with their gods and ancestral spirits. It is an object of sacrifice. Perhaps more significantly, it is an important means of inspiration. People inebriated on kava

receive new knowledge from their ancestors. Altered states of consciousness are valued as openings to the supernatural realm in the great majority of traditional societies (La Barre 1980). Kava drunkenness traditionally provides priests and laymen alike with an opportunity to listen to spiritual sources of wisdom and to seek ancestral favor.

Third, the drug plays a significant role in island economies. Kava production and exchange are important aspects of both the traditional subsistence and the contemporary cash-crop agricultural economies of several island nations (see chapter 6).

This chapter focuses on three aspects of the anthropology of kava: the symbolic meanings and cultural understandings of kava that sustain its central place within Pacific Island social life; the uses of kava as a valuable exchange item within social relationships; and the religious significance of kava consumption. Although this anthropological overview generalizes kava meanings and practices from the range of societies where kava is (or was) consumed, important commonalities in the ways people understand and use the drug exist throughout the Pacific.

The Meanings of Kava

Origin Myths

The bush of the kava sprouted in *Suasani'ava'ava*.

The rat passed by,

chewed the stalk,

took a snack of sugar-cane,

men saw it.

—SAMOAN SONG (Churchill 1916a)

Origin myths, as the pioneer anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski once noted (1948), can be interpreted as social charters. In societies that lack writing, myths often serve as a kind of narrative deed or claim to land and other important resources; they also function as sacred constitutions for existing social groups. Furthermore, in their underlying narrative structures and core symbols, myths encapsulate particular worldviews. Although people in any one society may entertain a range of understandings of the world, mythic versions of reality tend to be particularly powerful, given myth's utility to legitimate social order and its sacred nature.

Origin myths are therefore an instructive place to begin a reading of the cultural meanings of kava. Popular tales of the origins of kava shape people's appreciation and consumption of the drug. Conversely, changes in everyday kava use may reflect back to transform how Islanders tell their kava myths (or which

versions they choose to tell). The myths cited below come from a variety of nineteenth and twentieth century sources. Most island societies possess an elaborate archive of myth versions and alternatives that are narrated by different people at different times in different places and to different audiences. Kava origin myths, like most sacred Pacific narratives, exist in multiple versions that may be contradictory and ambiguous.

Although remarkable commonalities within peoples' tales of how they acquired kava can be traced across the region, interesting differences in accounts of the origins of kava occur from one island society to the next. Both similarities and differences in the oral archive of kava origin myths are useful to consider. What do these mythic narratives tell kava drinkers, and what might they tell us?

Almost all kava origin myths sort into one of two types. The first recounts local origins of kava—its indigenous generation. Typically, kava first grows from a buried human corpse, most often out of the vagina of a woman (Leach 1972; Brunton 1989). An ancillary mythic element associated with many germinant-corpse tales is the drunken rat—the Pacific version of the laboratory guinea pig. (Siegel 1989 reviews myths of animal discoveries of drug substances worldwide.) Humans observe an intoxicated rat (or sometimes a mouse or pig) that has chewed kava root, and they thereby learn how to use kava (see, e.g., Churchill 1916a for Samoa; Williamson 1939 for Polynesia in general; Ticombe 1948 for Hawaii; Gallot 1962 for Futuna; and Schütz 1967 for Nguna in Vanuatu).

The second type of origin tale recounts kava's external provenience. Some god, ancestor, or hero descends from the heavens or sails from across the horizon and bestows kava upon a society. Like the myths of local kava origin, many of these tales give animals or women creative roles in the introduction of the drug plant. All these elements appear in the examples presented below. The meanings of kava and kava drunkenness that these myths relate influence the ways that Islanders think about and use kava in their social relationships and in their transactions with their ancestors or gods.

Myths Citing Internal Origins.

1. Pentecost Island, Vanuatu (recorded by Lebot at Lolong Village, February 1984; see Lebot and Cabalion 1986 and Weighman 1989)

A very long time ago, orphan twins, a brother and sister, lived happily on Maewo [an island just north of Pentecost]. One night the boy, who loved his sister very much, had to protect her from a stranger who had asked to marry her but whom she had refused. In the struggle the frustrated suitor loosed an arrow that struck the girl and killed her. In despair, the boy brought his sister's body home, dug a grave, and buried her. After a week, before any weeds had grown over her tomb, there appeared a plant of unusual appearance which he had

never seen. . . . [A] risen alone on the grave. He decided not to pull it up. A year passed and the sorrowful boy still had not been able to quell the suffering he felt at his sister's death. Often he went to mourn by her grave. One day he saw a rat gnaw at the plant's roots and die. His immediate impulse was to end his own life by eating large amounts of these roots, but when he tried, instead of dying, he forgot all his unhappiness. So he came back often to eat the magic root and taught its use to others.

2. Tonga (narrated by former Queen Salote; Bott 1972)

One day the King of Tonga went fishing with a friend. They did not catch anything, and as they were tired and hungry they called in at the little island of 'Fueki to get something to eat. At that time there was only one couple living on the island and they had one child, a daughter, whose name was Kava'ouau. (In some versions the name is abbreviated to "Kava"). She had leprosy. It was a time of famine and the only food the couple had left was a large *kape* plant (*Melastoma macrorrhiza*) which stood near the beach. When the King landed he sat down to rest against this plant. When the couple realized who their guest was they set about making an earthen oven, but when they came to get their sole remaining food plant they could not use it because the King was leaning on it. The King's friend saw the couple hit something in their house and bring it out to be baked in the earthen oven. He saw that they had killed their daughter because they had nothing else to give their King. The King's friend told the King what the couple had done. The King was deeply moved by their sacrifice. He rose up immediately and returned to the main island, telling the couple to bury their child properly. Two plants grew from the grave, one from the head and one from the foot. One day the couple saw a rat bite the first plant, stagger a bit, and then bite the second plant, after which he recovered his balance. One day Lo'au la Tongan hero] came to the island and the couple told him all that had happened. When Lo'au heard the couple's story he sat in silence for a time, deeply moved, and then he spoke in poetry telling them what they should do. They must take the two plants to the King and give him Lo'au's instructions about how the plants should be used. The one from the head was to be used to make a drink, and that was the kava, and the other was to be eaten with the drink, and that was the sugarcane. The couple did as Lo'au had told them. At first the King thought their plant might be poisonous. He had one of his matapule [ceremonial attendants] taste it first. But on finding it was all right he directed the people to carry out Lo'au's instructions. And so kava was made for the first time, and the rules and procedures for making it were established.

3. Kiwai, southwest Papua New Guinea—three myth versions (Landman 1927)

(a) Long ago there lived at Masingle a woman named Ua-ogrete, who was the first person in the world. One day she shot [with bow and arrow] a kangaroo and put it on the fire to singe off the hair, but the kangaroo was not yet quite dead and floundered about with a cry, "*Enga-enga!*" The woman took fright and

thinking that it was a man, threw the animal aside. The worm which formed in the dead kangaroo developed into people, and that was the beginning of the Masingle tribe. The *gamoda* [kava] plant grew up from the navel of the dead kangaroo, and *Ua-ogere* showed the people how to use it. . . . Men, who drink *gamoda*, were forbidden to eat kangaroo, but the women may eat it, as they do not take *gamoda*.

(b) Once when a male kangaroo was playing in the grass at Kuru, its semen dropped on to the ground, where it was dried up by the sun. From the semen a boy grew up, and *gamoda* plant stuck root there too. . . . One night, when the boy was dreaming, the kangaroo came to him and taught him the use of *gamoda*.

(c) The first *gamoda* sprang up at Sareve from the dung of a kangaroo and was found by a Masingle man named Bege. During the night the plant came to him in a dream and taught him how to grow and drink it. He showed the people the use of it. . . . From that time onward everybody planted *gamoda* in his garden. Bege said, "That *gamoda* belong man; no good woman he drink milk belong *gamoda*. Man he want *kobort* (have connection with) woman, he no drink him *gamoda* first, he no want *gamoda* go along woman."

4. Tikopia (Firth 1970)

Kava originated in the Female Deity, *Pulafine*; it grew from her body. Then came the fleet from Tonga (to Tikopia), a hundred canoes, a great fleet, they came and plucked its leaves and its stem. They carried it off for Ti Tonga (the Tongan ruler) to drink. When the kava was mixed Ti Tonga drank of it and found its taste was good; he threw away the kava which his land used to prepare—the kava in Tonga was a wild kava [*kava alua*, "Kava of the gods," *Macropiper latifolium*]. . . . Ti Tonga drank and drank of it and said one day that the Tongans should go again (to Tikopia). They came and plucked one plant, but also dug out its roots. The man who first seized the kava had been treated as married by the Female Deity. *Pulafine* had conceived a desire for the man who was digging some way off. He and the Female Deity did not copulate, but when he went to sleep the Female Deity went to him and had intercourse [spiritually] with him; he was overcome.

Myths Citing External Origins.

5. Samoa (Mackenzie 1933)

Tangaloa-le-Mana [Tagaloa], the miracle-working god of the Eighth Heaven, chanced to pay a visit to the earth. He had been accustomed to drink kava in the sky-world, where it was the "nectar" of the gods, and he sent his attendants to obtain some. They brought down not only the bowl, strainer and cup, but the whole of a kava plant which they had, in their hurry, torn up by the roots. Of this Tangaloa threw away the most part, as it is only the "rhizome" or root stem, that is chewed. Pava, a mortal, who saw all that was done, watching an opportunity,

gathered up the portions which the god had rejected, and planted them; they grew luxuriantly, and thenceforward men enjoyed the god-like drink.

6. Samoa, Fāgaloa Bay, Upolu Island (recorded by Lebot, May 1989). This version combines elements of external godly with internal germinant origins. Kava first came to Samoans through Tagaloa, the first matai, or chief. Tagaloa had two sons, Ava'ali'i and Sa'a'sa'ali'i. As Ava lay dying, he murmured to Sa'a that from his grave would come a plant of great value to the Samoan people. Ava died and was buried. Sa'a and his children watched the grave, and on the third day after Ava's burial, two plants were seen growing from the head of his grave. As Sa'a and the children watched, a rat came and ate the first plant. It then moved to the second one and began to eat, but quickly became intoxicated. The rat went staggering home as the people watched in astonishment. They named the first plant *tofo*, or sugarcane, and the second *ava*, in honor of the man from whom it sprang.

7. Hawaii (Handy 1940)

It is said that this plant was brought from Kahiki [Tahiti] by Oikukakacana. He brought it for laj fishing plant [*la'au*, medicine (to stun fish)]. When he came and landed at Kauai, he saw a beautiful woman, Kamaike; she became his wife, and the plants were cared for by her. Afterwards she threw them away and they grew at Waiakale. Some were pulled up by Moikeha and brought by him from Kauai, and without his knowing the kinds of plants they were, he planted them at Halawa, on O'ahu. . . . Moikeha waited until the plants grew large, and because he had forgotten the name, he went to Ewa. . . . Ewa said, "Let me first eat of this plant, and should I die, do not plant it, for it would be valueless; but should I not die, then we will be rich." When Ewa ate it she became drunk and was intoxicated all day. When she woke she called the plant "*ava*."

8. East Futuna (Burrows 1936)

A man of Nganiu, Alofi, went into a trance and was transported aboard a spirit boat. The spirits gave him a root of kava, which he still had in his hand when he came out of the trance. That was the first kava in Alofi.

9. Marquesas (Christian 1895)

Atea, the god of husbandry, . . . took to wife Uene, and she bore Te Kava, the *ava* [kava] plant, in the land of Ahu-Take, whence the plant was brought over seas to the Marquesan group.

10. Pohonpei (Bernart 1977; see also Riesenberg 1968)

In the beginning there was a man in Upwind Uanik in the section of Mallanui who was named Ufannar. . . . He used to pray to Luk, the god of the Luk Clan. . . . Now one day he was lying on his mat and he heard what seemed to be a person stepping on his taboo place, for he used to make offerings to Luk. He then asked his identity, saying, "Are you man or god?" Luk replied, "I am Luk. You are to come with me." . . . The two then went on until they got to a

place named *Pijiko* [in the supernatural realm]. They then met a married couple there, *Jan-nok* and *Kat-nok*. The woman was preparing a *likpuake*. This is an ornament for a man's breast. The woman then conceived a liking for *Luk* and gave away the *likpuake* as a love gift, giving it to *Luk*. *Luk* repaid her with skin from the man's [Uliamar's] heel, and told the woman to take it and bury it in the earth for it would sprout and form a plant. Supposedly if people would drink its juice, they would become intoxicated with it and it would change their life. The two then walked on further to another place and found a dead person whom they were going to bury. *Luk* said to them, "You people bury this person carefully for it will sprout and make a plant, and you shall give it the name of sugarcane." Various people used to watch and be amazed at how the rats would go and eat at the base of the clump of that plant [*kaval*], and how, after they had eaten the plant they would get weak as if they were sick from it. They were no longer able to run about, but would simply crawl about on the ground and go over to the place where the clump of sugarcane was, and also eat some of it, and then go to sleep, and that was that.

11. Marind-amin, southeastern Irian Jaya (Van Baal 1966)

Wonatai [a hero], who had apparently changed again into a stork, had flown to the *Maro* [River], alighting on the site of present-day *Merauke*. People from *Baiti* came paddling up to the spot in a canoe and *Wonatai* changed into a young man who was engaged in chewing *muti* [*kaval*], a drug unknown at the time. He taught the *Baiti* people how to use it and the next day *Wonatai*, changing back into a stork, flew off to *Birok* near *Wendu*. Having changed again into a young man, he got married. The first thing he did was to make a *muti* garden and instruct his father-in-law in the art of *muti* planting. For [*kaval*] cuttings he used hairs from his armpits.

As noted, multiple myth versions and interpretations typically circulate within any one Pacific community. The symbolism in one myth may reinforce that of other local variants or it may evoke alternative images. On some islands, for example, narratives combine elements of both internal and external mythic kava origins. The buried germinant corpse is, in fact, the external kava-giving hero (see myths 3, 4, and 6). Or a culture may have several alternative myths that assert either indigenous or exogenous kava origins. Vanuatu possesses a rich archive of sometimes contradictory kava origin myths. Several variants exist on the southern island *Tanna*, which has obvious cultural affinities with both northern Vanuatu and Polynesia. Some of these myths suggest local, if godly, kava origins.

12. *Tanna*, Vanuatu (Gairart 1956b, our translation)

The hero *Kalpapen* regularly makes kava on top of Mount *Tukosmere*. He cannot be seen, but he can be heard shouting after drinking. For a kava bowl he uses a long trough dug in the earth on the mountaintop. It is because of him that the southern part of the island has so many ravines. They are cut by the

water running through his kava. . . . When he went through *Lounakiyampen* Village he gave people some real kava to replace the wild kava they had been drinking up until then.

Other Tannese myths recount kava's external origins but incorporate elements of women's role in its acquisition.

13. *Tanna*, Vanuatu (recorded by Lebot, Iammanu Village, southeast *Tanna*, May 1982)

Long ago people drank only one sort of kava—wild kava. One day a Futunese woman [from neighboring West Futuna Island] was peeling yams alone by the seaside. As she crouched in the water, a spirit took advantage of her posture to slip a magic stone into her vagina. When she realized it was there she pulled it out and looked at it. She was intrigued to find that it was slender and covered in knots and buds, and she decided to take it back to the village. The chief there claimed it and took it that evening to the kava-drinking ground, where all the village men assembled. They were gathered around the chief to look at the stone when the spirit appeared. He showed them a kava plant the size of a banyan tree [*Picras* sp.] and told them this was the true kava. He also said the stone was sacred and should be handled respectfully. They immediately put the stone into a canoe-shaped bowl carved from sacred wood and sprinkled it with water. The next day, the canoe was overflowing with thousands of identical stones. People came from villages all over the island to take the stones home, and, because of the stones' magical powers, men are able to grow kava today. Women are not allowed to drink kava or even watch it being prepared, because it once touched the unclean part of their body.

Another myth version with similar elements exists a few miles down *Tanna*'s southeastern coast.

14. *Tanna*, Vanuatu (recorded by Lindstrom, Iakwarakwara Village, southeast *Tanna*, June 1983; see Lindstrom 1987)

Long ago when the ancestors were alive, two women gathered wild yams and went to scrape their peels off in a tide pool at the sea. *Mwaitikiki* [a hero associated with West Futuna] had brought to *Tanna* a kava plant and had hidden it in a hole in rocks on shore. The two women squatted down and began to scrape their yams. A kava shoot rose up and out, stuck into the vagina of one of the women, and began to do it. She said to herself, "I feel something good, something sweet!" The kava continued to do it. She turned to her sister and asked, "What is poking me?" They saw that it was kava. They pulled out the kava shoot and carried it back to their garden at *Isouragi*, where they planted it. At that time, men drank only wild kava. They had yet no knowledge of the real thing. The women weeded the kava plant in secret. They then dug it up, prepared food, and brought it to the kava-drinking ground and told men there that if they drank this kava they would feel something different. Men quit

drinking wild kava and began using real kava. From that dried ground, kava reached every area of the island.

Common elements that show up again and again in kava origin myths provide clues to some of the important cultural understandings of the drug. These include its supernatural, womanly, or animal origins—particularly its association with the vagina; its connections with death, corpses, and poison, on the one hand, and fertility and sexuality on the other; its twinning with sugarcane (the bitter with the sweet); and its evocation of both an inebriated consciousness and a tranquil male sociability.

Before exploring further these symbolic elements and themes, we might ask whether kava origin myths and their geographic distribution can tell us anything about the real origins and dispersal of kava. Presuming that kava was domesticated in the northern islands of Vanuatu, one might expect that myths there would stress indigenous generation (the germinant corpse motif), while myths elsewhere would recount kava's external origins (the gift-giving gods motif). Kava origin myths from northern Vanuatu do in fact build on the germinant corpse motif (see myth 1), but this motif is also found in myths from nuclear Polynesia (myths 2 and 6) and Tikopia (myth 4; this may be owing to Tikopia's location just 200 nautical miles or so north of Maewo, Vanuatu).

Mythic elements probably diffuse even more easily than kava stem cuttings; folks who acquired kava secondarily may have adopted the germinant corpse motif along with the drug itself. People also tend to indigenize borrowed elements or practices and after a time forget, or pretend that a borrowed element is their own invention. Firth, for example, records two kava origin myths from Tikopia. The one cited above (myth 4) proposes an indigenous generative origin for kava. Another myth, however, admits that kava first came from Tonga (Firth 1970).

We might speculate on myth content as well as myth distribution. Does this content provide information about where and how kava was domesticated? There is an ongoing debate within oral historical studies about the informational value of myth and oral narratives. Although historians recognize that people tell myths for contemporary purposes and that present concerns can rapidly be incorporated into myth and reshape the story, some nonetheless argue that history can be found in myth (see Lacey 1985; Waiko 1986). For example, we might derive from kava origin myths the speculation that the people who domesticated kava also buried their dead; this is not, however, the case in some Melanesian societies. Furthermore, Vanuatu kava origin myths specifically refer to real kava replacing an earlier sort of wild kava, which could be *Piper michmannii*. This might suggest domestication of kava in that archipelago. Tikopian myth (myth 4) also includes this element, but it shifts to Tonga the replacement of wild kava with domesticated kava.

And what about the drunken rat? *Rattus exulans* Peale was introduced in the Pacific from Southeast Asia during early human migrations, and rats play an important role in Pacific mythology. (Of course, the number of land mammals one can plot one's narratives around on most Pacific islands is not large.) Rats and pigs do occasionally nibble kava roots in island plantations (Lebot, field observations, 1984). However, because *P. methysticum* exists only as a cultivar, discovery of kava's powers by an animal is nonsensical. One might push this motif further into the past to speculate that once upon a time, people observed the reactions of rats that chewed on a wild *Piper* species (i.e., *P. michmannii*). If there is any factuality to this discovery of wild kava by rats it must have occurred in island Melanesia where *P. michmannii* grows.

Widespread similarities in narrative elements and motifs suggest a common origin for both kava myth and the plant itself (see Brunton 1989). Moreover, kava origin myths can be read to support the premise that psychoactively potent kava was first domesticated in northern Vanuatu and then diffused, along with certain mythic motifs, to central Micronesia, coastal New Guinea and nuclear Polynesia and then spread farther to eastern Polynesia where, in fact, local kava myths typically recount external origins.

Drunkenness and Death

The springing up of the kava

Which stands there from Tonga

On the grave of Tuipania

Tuipania was cooked in the oven.

—TIKOPIAN DANCE SONG (Firth 1970)

Reading kava origin myths for what they say about people's current understandings of the drug, rather than for clues about its domestication, takes us back onto more solid ground. Perhaps the most obvious theme that runs through kava mythology is the association of the plant and its effects with death. This is, however, a death that ensures growth and fertility: the germinant corpse. The cycle of burial and fertility—death and birth—is especially striking in myth 1. The rejected suitor shoots an arrow into (inseminates) a girl, and kills (impregnates) her. Her corpse is buried and from her vagina or womb (we may presume from similar myths) grows a kava plant (child). This plant appears to be deadly poison, but in fact brings a kind of new life—the brother's relief and overcoming of sorrow. In this section we discuss the darker side of the cycle of fertility: kava as poison, and drunkenness as death.

Kava is a psychoactive drug, albeit usually a mild one. It is not atypical for humans to conceive of altered mental states and bodily intoxication as a kind of

death (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1972; Turner 1986). In myth, kava death comes from and causes death. It grows out of a human or supernatural core (myths 1, 2, 4, and 6); a dead kangaroo, its spilled semen, or its dung (myth 3); the head of a dead girl (myth 2); or the dead skin of a man's heel (myth 10). This last mythic element from Pohnpei recalls widespread Pacific stories that explain how humans were once immortal. People avoided death by sloughing off their old skins and growing new, somewhat like snakes, lizards, crabs, and lobsters (Riesenberg 1968). Thus kava, in this myth, grows from dead skin—symbolic of a corpse.

The germinant-corpse motif is echoed in an odd footnote to Lemert's study of informal kava use in Tonga. He claims that Tongans occasionally find *mongea*, concretions or lumps of kava, among the disinterred bones of heavy kava drinkers. "Discerning drinkers claim that kava made from *mongea* is top quality" (Lemert 1967). This macabre anecdote probably has no factual substance, but it makes good sense given Islanders' common necrological kava symbolism.

Kava plants spring from corpses, and kava drinking induces a kind of small death. Metaphorically, drunkenness is death. Actually, in most Austronesian languages, the same verb is used for both "to die" and "to be unconscious." Ethnographically, the unconsciousness that can follow an overdose of kava is the same thing as death. The rat in myth 1 dies after gnawing the root. The grieving brother attempts to kill himself by doing the same.

Mythic interpretations of drunkenness as death make sense of the common symbolic equation of kava with poison (Sahlins 1981; Brunton 1989). The Tongan king in myth 2 fears that the kava that grows from the body of the leprous girl is poisonous (see also Biersack 1991). Kava is brought from Tahiti to Hawaii (myth 7) as a kind of fish poison. The poisonous fruits of *Barringtonia asiatica* and other plants are used to stun fish in many Pacific cultures. In Tonga, two creeping vines (Fabaceae) used as fish poison are called *katyisi* and *kavalaha* (*Derris* spp.) (Bot 1972; see also Knauff 1987). In myth 7, Ewa, the first ancestor to try kava in Hawaii, does so after warning that she might die.

Tannese kava drinkers joke about poisoning themselves with the drug, using the verb *akona* ("poison"): *In rakona ia nikava*, "he's poisoned [drunk] with kava." Parallel metaphors exist in other regions, such as the Lau islands of eastern Fiji: "The intoxication caused by kava is called *mateni*, meaning death from or illness from. The expression *mate ni yanggona* [die from kaval] is also used" (Hocart 1929).

Death and kava were sometimes linked by more than metaphor. Thomson (1908) narrates the execution of a seditious cousin organized by Fijian chief Tui Thakau [Cakau] as a part of a kava preparation ceremony in the late nineteenth century:

Four hulking fellows, seated on either side of [the accused], held the ends of the cord that passed about his neck. The brewing and mixing [of kaval] pro-

ceeded with usual decorous deliberation, and none knew better than the condemned himself that the hand-clapping of the person officiating at the bowl, notifying that the drink was brewed, would be the signal for his death. . . . At last the brew was made: the brewer gathered the strainer into a tidy parcel, swept it once round the lip of the bowl, and struck it smartly with the other hand. It was the signal. The executioners threw their whole weight upon the rope, and the body fell writhing upon the floor with the head almost wrung from the shoulders, and the tongue hideously extruded from the open mouth. They stayed so until the tortured limbs ceased to writhe, and then, at a signal from the chief, the body was dragged by the shoulders to the doorway, and flung, rope and all, out of the house. It fell with a heavy thud upon the hard ground below.

In that kava induces a kind of death, this conjuncture of execution and kava preparation is no symbolic accident.

The equation of kava and poison is evident at the lexical level in a number of island societies (Turner 1986; Brunton 1989). The word kava (or *ava* or *ava*) commonly also means "bitter" or "bad-tasting" in Polynesian languages (Churchill 1916a, 1916b) and sometimes, by semantic extension, connotes "poisonous." Lester (1941) suggests that the standard Fijian word *yagoma* derives from the Viti Levu term *goma* that also means both "kava" and "bitter" (Yarawa 1989). This may be cognate with Tannese *akona*, "to poison." *Kona* on Tonga means "drunk" (Cowling 1988); Tikopians use the same word to refer to the taste of kava, signifying "bitter" or "pungent" (Firth 1970).

Kava origin myths are commonly also sugarcane origin myths, with both growing from the germinant corpse (myths 2, 6, and 10). Sugarcane is twinned with kava as its antidote. Rats and Tongan chiefs, poisoned with kava, recover by eating sugarcane. There are a number of similarities between the two plants that no doubt underlie this mythic linkage. Kava and sugarcane are both chewed and the used fibers spat out and discarded. Island farmers propagate both species vegetatively, often planting them in small mounds. Both kava stems and sugarcane stalks are segmented. Both species include a number of "black" and "white" varieties. Both are used medicinally. Kava, however, is earthy-tasting and sometimes bitter, while sugarcane is sweet. Traditionally, many kava drinkers sucked on lengths of sugarcane to eliminate kava's taste from their mouths. Sugarcane is the archetypal revivifying antidote to the stupors of poisonous or bitter kava (see myth 10; Emerson 1903; Rivers 1914; Bot 1972).

Given kava's symbolic equation with poison, it is no surprise that it turns up in magical spells and sorcery techniques (Landman 1927; Turner 1986; Brunton 1989). Magicians from Ambae, Vanuatu, spit kava to stun and quiet particularly quarrelsome women. There is a suspicion, echoed in several kava myths, that

bowls of kava might sometimes actually contain deadly drafts of, *poison*. A tale from Anuta tells of the death of the god Tuna, who was clandestinely *poisoned* with fish poison, not true kava, to drink (Firth 1970; see also Jones 1861; Anderson 1928; Buck 1934; Ticombe 1948; Riesenfeld 1950; Van Baal 1966). In one myth from the Cook Islands, the underworld demon Miru immobilizes her human victims with poisonous kava:

15. Cook Islands (Gill 1876)

The three sorts of "kava" known in the upper world [human realm] were originally branches of this enormous root ever-growing in Awaki. Miru's four lovely daughters are directed to prepare bowls of this strong kava for her unwilling visitors. Utterly stupefied with the draught, the unsuspecting victims are borne off to the oven and cooked. Miru, with her son and peerless daughters, subsist on these human spirits.

Furthermore, a person's kava paraphernalia (bowls, cups, strainers), along with his used kava fibers themselves, can be used magically against him. For example, Hawaiians fearful of sorcery discarded their used kava chewings in running water or in the ocean to keep them from the hands of sorcerers (Ticombe 1948).

Mythic constructions of kava inebriation as a symbolic death are also grounded in the religious functions of kava drinking in most Pacific cultures (see the section below on "Altered States"). Kava root is a common object of sacrifice; it is a vehicle for communicative links with the supernatural world (Turner 1986). Ancestors, in particular, speak to people in altered states of consciousness—in dreams and during kava intoxication. In order to converse with the dead, it helps to be somewhat "dead" oneself.

Pharmacologically, kava is a soporific, an analgesic, a muscle relaxant, and a leveler of emotions (see chapter 3). There is an obvious marriage between kava's mythic deadliness and its real physiological effects upon human bodies. Mythical kava, the poison sprout from a dead woman's vagina, possesses the gift of death; and kava drunkenness lifts drinkers—symbolically at least—out of ordinary realms into the powerful other world of the gods and ancestors.

Kava and Sexuality

The "children" [younger men] must be getting tired lading out all that "kava" [ejaculating]!
I'll ladle mine out with a thrust!
Will you give it [kava/semen] to me?
—GENUJOKING SESSION (Knaut 1985)

Kava is more than poison, and kava drunkenness richer than death. Symbolic messages about sexuality, fertility, and regeneration can be read in kava origin

myths, as in the *busi* (southwestern Papua New Guinea) conversation excerpted above. *Kava* sprouts from a vagina or a symbolic equivalent—such as a navel (myth 3), the skin of a foot (myth 10), or the hair of an armpit (myth 11). Its fertilizing, generative functions are evoked in myths 13 and 14, in which a phallic kava shoot (or a magical kava stone) appears and copulates with a woman eventually to propagate itself throughout a community. Mythically, kava is sometimes feminine (Biersack 1991), sometimes masculine (Serpent 1965), and often, bisexually, both male and female at once.

A dose of infused kava root can be vivifying—"the water of life" (Turner 1986). A variation of myth 5 from Samoa recounts kava's life-giving rather than its fatal powers.

16. Samoa (Holmes 1961)

[Tagaloa U'i] walked through a grove of kava plants and discovered the house of the mortal Pava. Pava invited the chief to enter his house and there the first kava ceremony involving mortal men was held. . . . While Pava was wringing the kava, his son, P'a'alafi, laughed and played near the bowl. Tagaloa U'i instructed Pava to make the boy sit down and be quiet, but nothing was done about the irreverent boy. After several unheeded warnings, Tagaloa U'i picked up a coconut frond, formed it into a knife and cut Pava's son into two pieces. Then Tagaloa U'i said to Pava, "This is the food for the kava. This is your part and this is mine." Pava mourned and could not drink the kava. . . . [After preparing a second batch of kava from a special kava plant brought down from Tagaloa's mountain home,] Tagaloa said, "Bring me my cup first." Tagaloa U'i did not drink the kava but poured it onto his piece of the dead son of Pava and then onto Pava's piece. Then he said, "Soifua" (life). The two parts came together and the boy lived.

Kava's life-giving properties are also apparent in its medical uses in many Pacific cultures (see chapter 4; see also Ticombe 1948; Holmes 1961; Likwatu and Meyer 1977) and in its association with garden fertility magic and first-fruits ceremonies (see section below on "Altered States"). On Malakula, for example, gardeners once poured libations of kava onto ancestral skulls to ensure the fertility of their yam gardens (Deacon 1934); the Marind-anim empowered newly launched canoes by pouring kava on them (Van Baal 1966).

Life-giving fluids are typically symbolized as semen or breast milk. Kava, too, as a kind of fertile water, poses symbolically as both semen and milk (Sahlins 1981; Knaut 1987). Young (1991), for example, recounts an origin myth from Epi, Vanuatu, that elaborates equations of kava and milk, and drunkenness and (in this case) oedipal sexuality: "There is a kava myth of origin about a man who grieved piteously for his dead wife until he learned to drink kava and 'forget' her in peaceful sleep. The irony of the tale is that the kava grew from the dead woman's

breast. The widower, in effect, lulled himself into childlike sleep, drinking his dead wife's breast milk."

In many island societies, the square baskets that women plait are seen as metaphors for their wombs. In Vanuatu Pidgin English, for example, a woman's womb is her "basket" (*basket blong pikinin*). People furthermore refer to a basket's corners as its "breasts" (Keller 1988). This body imagery carries over to a different sort of container—Fijian kava bowls (*vanua*). These carved wooden bowls usually stand on four or more supports that Islanders call breasts rather than, as would Westerners, legs (Hocart 1929; Roth 1953a). Tongans likewise sometimes refer to kava bowls as female and the supports as breasts (Biersack 1991). Kava becomes feminized in northern Vanuatu as well, where men process the root by grinding it with phallic shafts of coral (figure 5.2), and in Micronesia and elsewhere, where men pound kava with hammer stones or pestles. Kava preparation on these islands becomes a symbolic copulation.

There is a profusion of fertile sexual imagery here that combines and confuses masculine and feminine images: kava grows from a vagina; kava is a penis; kava is semen; kava is breast milk; kava is fertilizing; kava is poison. On Tanna, Islanders' kava imagery conflates phallic kava shoots (myths 13 and 14) with feminine kava roots. Men sometimes call the fringe of tertiary roots that surrounds the rootstock a skirt (Lindstrom 1987). Like a woman's traditional bark skirt, these fringe roots cover over the hidden object of male joking lust: the stump (vagina). A story from Pohnpei attributes the peculiar odor of the island's kava compared with that of neighboring Kosrae to the facts of kava's arrival on Pohnpei. Two women acquired small kava stem cuttings on Kosrae and smuggled these to Pohnpei by hiding them in their vaginas. This heritage has indelibly perfumed Pohnpei kava.

This hermaphroditic mélange of sexual imagery around kava relates in part to gender asymmetry in drug use (Marshall 1987). Adult men of high status generally have best rights and access to kava. Women throughout the Pacific Islands have fewer rights and opportunities to use the drug. Kava origin myths work to charter men's access to the drug, and to illegitimate kava drinking by women.

Kava myths parallel a series of other myths, especially those from Melanesia, that legitimate contemporary male domination of powerful objects and practices, including sacred flutes, masked dances, and men's houses. The common underlying text of these myths is that women first discovered sacred and powerful items, but through incompetence, ignorance, stupidity, or licentiousness forfeited their control to men. Every time people recount these chartering myths, present-day male domination and control is legitimized on the grounds of past female transgressions.

Many kava myths communicate something of this invidious message. Kava originated in women but, for various reasons, passed into the hands of men (myths

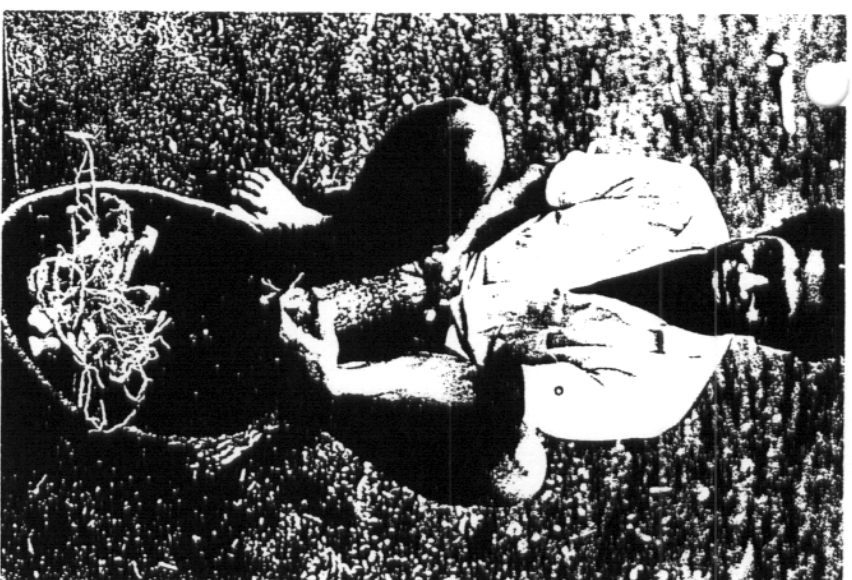


Figure 5.2. Kava preparation, Ambae, Vanuatu: pieces of root are grated along coral abrasives, or *qasisi* (courtesy of P. Crowe).

1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, 13, and 14). To the degree that kava poses as mythologically feminine, women's use of the drug is made to seem to be abnormal and shameful homosexual intercourse. Alternatively, women's original mythic sexual connection with a phallic kava precludes their further association with the drug, as myth 13 proclaims: "Women are not allowed to drink kava or even watch it being prepared as it once touched the unclean part of their body."

Although kava is life-giving for men, folk theory often suggests that its use endangers the fertility of women. People justify sexual inequalities in its use by supposing that kava drinking makes women sterile (Brunton 1989; Humphreys 1926; Lester 1941; Van Baal 1966). Some Islanders, such as southeast coastal Frian Jayans, in fact use the drug as an abortifacient (Serpenti 1965). In old Hawaii,

kava leaves "stuffed into the vagina [were] said to induce mis-
"savage" (Handy, Pukui, and Livermore 1934). Interest in these ethnomedical cla-
"Med to labora-
tory tests of kava's effects on the fertility of male rats; the tests indicated no effect
on rat fertility (Dam-Bakker, de Groot, and Layken 1958).

Insofar as kava is mythically feminized, men's use of the drug becomes a kind of
sexual intercourse—one that is properly heterosexual. Here is a second metaphor
for kava intoxication—drunkenness conceived of not as death but as sexual ecstasy
(myth 4). The sexualization of drug-induced states of consciousness is common in
many cultures (see, e.g., Reichel-Dolmatoff 1972). Widespread parallels between
kava drinking and sex exist. In Melanesia, for example, dry, scaly skin is a recog-
nized symptom of overindulgence both in sex and in kava (see Lester 1941).

Kava intoxication, however, is a rapture that is inimical to sex in many Pacific
cultures. The mythic paradox is that drunkenness, as a kind of symbolic sexual
intercourse, is endangered by actual sexual contact with women. A recent sexual
experience with a woman can spoil a man's kava intoxication; conversely, overin-
dulgence in kava causes a man to lose interest in and capacity for sex. Lemert
(1967) reports that Tongans recognize kava's aphrodisiac effects, quoting one of
his informants: "Boys never want girls after kava" (see also Churchhill 1916a;
Landman 1927; Gadjusek 1967; Lindstrom 1987). The Pidgin English commen-
tary that ends myth 3 also makes this point: "Kava belongs to men; it's not good for
women to drink kava liquid. If a man wants to have sex with a woman, he must not
drink kava first, he doesn't want to mix kava together with a woman" (Landman
1927, our translation).

Kava can supposedly be polluted by real sexuality and rendered ineffective
or even dangerous. Sex transforms vivifying kava into poison, sliding back around
to the darker side of the fertility cycle. The virgin boy or girl is the preeminent kava
preparer in many Pacific societies. The clean touch of these sexually uninitiated
youngsters does not endanger men's kava. On Tanna, once a youth has sex he can
no longer mix his elders' kava with his hands. Mead describes the similar kava-
making role of Samoan ceremonial village virgins (*taupou*), remarking that "a
desire to escape from this fatiguing duty is a traditional explanation of the old time
elopement of chief's daughters" (Mead 1930; see also Ticomcomb 1948). The sexual
connotations of elopement render these girls ineligible to prepare the most pres-
tigious kava. Menstruating girls in Samoa are also ineligible to prepare kava (Mead
1930).

The desire to separate sex from kava drunkenness also may account for other
taboos and prescriptions that typically surround and regulate kava consumption
(Lindstrom 1981). In southern Vanuatu and in Fiji, for example, drinkers who
sneeze during kava preparation must undergo ritual decontamination before they
become drunk. On Tanna, when a kava drinker sneezes, fellow drinkers strike

his head with a k... ranch. In Fiji, "it is customary for... one of the company, not
the individual wh... sneezed, to get up and go outside the house and call out...
"The *janggona* has been sneezed for"; he then gives vent to an ear-piercing yell and
resumes his seat" (Roth 1953a; see also Lindstrom 1987). One might interpret a
sneeze as a symbolic ejaculation that must be negated for kava to work properly and
safely.

The cultural understanding that sex spoils kava intoxication appears in a re-
ported Marquesan antidote to kava overindulgence: "To stop the trembling the
[drinker's] stomach would be struck a blow or his wife would sit, nude, on his chest.
It was believed that the contact of her body would frighten away the god" (Handy
1923). Here again, sexual contact with a woman negates kava drunkenness.

Gender inequalities in the right to use kava reproduce more serious gender
inequalities throughout the realms of politics, economics, and religion. Kava is an
important political exchange token and an avenue to supernatural inspiration.
Regular kava sharing is a unifying social practice among users. Women's participa-
tion in the wider public spheres is lessened and deflected insofar as they have fewer
rights and opportunities to drink kava.

Brunton (1989) lists only two types of women who had traditional rights to
drink kava: higher ranking women of Polynesian and Micronesian chiefdoms such
as Tonga, Samoa, Tahiti (Olliver 1974), Hawaii (Ticomcomb 1948), and Polinpei
(Riesenberg 1968); and women elsewhere past menopause, whose gender status
typically becomes masculinized as they age. After European contact, women in
other Pacific societies, such as Fiji and the Marquesas (Cuzent 1858), achieved
easier access to the drug. Today, women in such places as Polinpei (Ashby 1984),
urban Port Vila in Vanuatu, Tonga (Beaglehole and Beaglehole 1941; Lemert
1967), and Fiji (Thompson 1908; Thompson 1940; Lester 1941) sometimes drink
kava, as do women of Fiji's Indian community (Brenneis 1984).

Brunton (1989) also refers to several reports in the traditional literature of
Pacific women drinking on the sly (see Rivers 1914; Haddon 1916; Landman
1927). Systems of domination and inequality (including inequality in access to kava
between men and women) are continually in contention and occasionally break
down. Absolutist claims that women never drank kava traditionally must in some
cases be taken as ideological talk that shores up assertions of male supremacy.
These claims may or may not accurately reflect how much kava men and women
actually consume.

For example, Meriana, a Tannese woman who works in a Port Vila hotel,
confessed her kava drinking to a visiting female journalist:

In Tanna, women aren't allowed to see men drinking kava. "The men go to the
nukamal to make decisions and drink kava," Meriana explains. "So by keeping

women from the kava they can't take part in making decisions . . . [but] when I'm really exhausted I have a shell of kava and next day I'm o. . . . So when the hotel's got an important function looming, Meriana takes a shell "for good luck," although her boss doesn't know it. "Some men said I shouldn't do it because it's against custom," says Meriana. But she also suspects they don't like it because "I drink more shells than most men." Perhaps it's the benefits of being "strong headed," but Meriana can drink the kava bucket dry. More than once she's helped carry home male drinking companions. "I like strong kava," she admits. . . . Meriana is one of a small but growing group of women, especially younger women, beginning to frequent some of Port Vila's 140-odd kava *nakamals* (Mangnall 1990; there are in fact 70 or so nakamals in Port Vila).

For the most part, however, the sexual asymmetry of kava consumption in the Pacific continues into the present. Prohibitions on drug use by women render kava sharing, exchange, and enjoyment predominantly male endeavors.

Kava and Sociability

Question: My broad leaf that extinguishes chiefs.

Answer: *Yavu* [kava].

—HAWAIIAN RIDDLE (Judd 1930)

Another important Pacific understanding of kava drunkenness is that it promotes tranquility and sociability. This view makes good sense given the particular psychoactive and physiological properties of kavalactones (see chapter 3), although, as MacAndrew and Figerton (1969) have argued cogently in the case of alcohol, a user's reactions to a drug have as much to do with his or her cultural expectations of the experience as they do with the mental and physical effects of the drug itself. Some kava drinkers, for example, expect drunkenness to render them silent and hostile to conversation, while others expect that they will want to talk long and hard with fellow drinkers (Smith 1984; Lindstrom 1981; Shaw 1990).

The most general presumptions about the effects of kava throughout the Pacific are those of peace, sociability, and camaraderie. The alternative cultural understandings of kava drunkenness as a kind of death or as a symbolic sexual rupture contribute to passive expectations about kava comportment. Along with this psychological set, the social drinking context, or setting, also shapes a kava user's experience. Islanders almost never drink kava by themselves; most drink in groups to create and share emotions of sociability and relaxed contentment.

Some users, of course, intoxicate themselves to experience the drug's more stuporous effects. Drinkers in Vanuatu may mix special lichens (*Ussua* sp.; see chapter 4) with their kava to boost its potency. Singh (1981) reports a technique of

infusing kava in water that renders it particularly potent. Hot water helps render resinous kavalactones in dried and powdered kava rootstock less viscid and facilitates their transit through the stomach membrane. Consuming warm food or liquid up to several hours after kava drinking can sometimes sustain drunkenness. On Pohnpei, some users "prefer a bowl of warm soup or broth which they claim increases their high" (Ashby 1984; see Emerson 1903 for a similar report from traditional Hawaii).

The tranquil camaraderie that kava evokes is not always one between political equals. In Polynesian, Fijian, and Micronesian kava circles, where drinkers commonly mark important status differentials in the ritual details of the drug's preparation and consumption, sharing kava symbolizes drinkers' acceptance of the local political hierarchy. If a Samoan elder is seriously ill, for example, family members may join in a kava ceremony to declare that they profess no anger or ill will toward the patient (Mead 1930). Kava, here, functions as a social antidote to anger and hostility, and also as a test to insure that people continue to support prevailing social relations. Similarly, in Pohnpei, stories are told of violent chiefs calmed down with judicious doses of kava (Ashby 1984). And in Fiji, if a son upsets his father, he can repair relations with a gift of kava rootstock (Arno 1992).

In much of Melanesia, the sharing of kava signals a time-out, when everyday disputes and prestige competitions are set aside for a period of collective drunkenness (Brunton 1979, 1989; Lindstrom 1981). Among the Gebusi of southwestern Papua New Guinea who practice a ritualized male homosexuality, for example, "heavy drug consumption at ritual feasts is directly related—both in Gebusi belief and in fact—to cessation of hostility between antagonists and, subsequently, to marked social and sexual camaraderie between them" (Knauff 1987). Kava's peaceful effects are such that, in more dangerous times, drinkers sometimes posted guards lest they be attacked by enemies while under the influence of the drug (Laddon 1916; Brunton 1989).

Variation in expectations about kava comportment from region to region correlates with certain features of kava preparation and consumption. In much of Polynesia, in Fiji, and in parts of northern Vanuatu and southern New Guinea, kava sociability includes lively conversation and sometimes joking and singing. At informal kava parties in Tonga, "participants talk and sing, play guitars, the radio, or card games" (Feldman 1980; see also Mead 1930; Beaglehole and Beaglehole 1941; Arno 1992). Noisemaking is a ritualized part of kava preparation in Polynesia, Fiji, and parts of northern Vanuatu (Deacon 1934; Harrisson 1937; Ticom 1948; Holmes 1961; Gaillet 1962; Firth 1970). Participants in formal kava circles clap their hands during preparation and distribution. Clapping, a common technique to awaken the awareness and interest of the supernatural, is here incorporated into formally elaborated kava preparation protocol.

In other kava-using societies, noise and sociability cease to increase. Although loud, rhythmic stone-pounding is characteristic of *sakau* preparation in Pohnpei, after the beverage is served, "any noise, even loud conversation, is intolerably magnified and very unpleasant to any *sakau* drinker" (Ashby 1984; see also Guzent 1858; Titcomb 1948; Van Baal 1966; Condon 1977). Drinkers normally sit silently. Noise and bright light can spoil kava's effects. In much of Vanuatu, kava drinkers quietly "listen" to the effects of the drug and to the voices of their ancestors.

Some kava drinking practices have carried over to shape the ways Islanders use alcohol (a more recently introduced drug): consumption is typically social rather than solitary; people drink quickly; men drink more than women; drinkers empty entire bottles at once, just as they drink to the bottom of the kava bowl; and so on. In early-twentieth-century Hawaii, Emerson (1903) noted that "this idea which so prevails among the Hawaiians that [kava] drunkenness is the goal of the drinker, has its tendency, when they give themselves to the use of alcoholic stimulants, to make them hard drinkers."

People's expectations of sociable and peaceful kava drunkenness contrast with what they expect from alcohol (Lindstrom 1982). Drinkers emphasize the contrasting physiological effects of the two substances. Pacific Islanders' common understanding of alcohol is that this makes drinkers unruly and violent (Lindman 1927; Schwartz and Romanucci-Ross 1979; Marshall 1979; Marshall and Marshall 1990; Arno 1992). A Hawaiian proverb warns, "The man who drinks *'ama* is still a man, but the man who drinks liquors becomes a beast" (Titcomb 1948). The current coexistence of two psychoactive drugs in many Pacific societies perhaps strengthens the opposed expectations of their effects: Peaceful kava informs disorderly alcohol, and vice versa.

Although the contrasting effects of kava and alcohol are widely recognized across the Pacific, drinkers nowadays occasionally mix the two drugs (Beaglehole and Beaglehole 1941; Lemert 1967; Philibert 1986). In Vanuatu, kava drinkers who consume an alcohol chaser call this a *kale*—a Bislama (Vanuatu Pidgin English) word derived from the French *caler* ("to wedge, to put a chock under"). The alcohol presumably boosts the strength of kava intoxication. Often, however, the differing expectations for comportment following use of each drug work to keep them separate. People consume kava one time and alcohol another (see Beaglehole and Beaglehole 1941 for Tonga; see Ashby 1984 for Pohnpei). A kava-alcohol cocktail can leave a drinker confused as to whether to relax or to go wild (Lemert 1967; Lindstrom 1982). Early Polynesian Society member F. W. Christian (1899) commented on combining kava with alcohol on Pohnpei: "If a white trader insists on mixing good kava with bad gin, he has simply to face the consequences. Beer, whiskey and wine are strictly to be avoided . . . as incompatible with the true kava

frame of mind. Over the years, Pacific public health authorities, drawing on prevailing island perceptions of "the true kava frame of mind," have proposed that governments encourage kava drinking in order to discourage alcohol consumption and its attendant social disruptions (Speiser 1922; Finau, Stanhope, and Prior 1982; Philibert 1986).

Whereas betels about the incompatibility of kava and alcohol often serve to reduce simultaneous consumption of the two, Islanders commonly use kava and tobacco together (Finau, Stanhope, and Prior 1982). Tobacco did not spread into much of the Pacific until the nineteenth century, but it soon became an important component of kava drinking. Guzent (1858) described tobacco-smoking kava drinkers in Tahiti in the 1850s, and the explorer D'Albertis noted use of tobacco with kava in southern New Guinea in 1880 (Haddon 1916). On Tubuai, in the Austral Islands, people extended their word for kava, *'awa 'awa*, to refer to tobacco as well (Aitken 1930). For many drinkers, an imported or homemade cigarette is an essential ingredient of the kava experience. After downing a cup or two, they settle back to smoke and, on some islands, converse. On Tanna, people claim that both kava and tobacco are symbolically hot substances and that tobacco thereby facilitates kava drunkenness (see also Serpent 1965; Sorum 1982; Knauff 1987).

Kava drinkers in parts of New Guinea and Pohnpei, and in Tikopia several generations ago, occasionally mix kava with the Pacific's other traditional drug, betel (itself a mixture of *Arca catechu* palm nuts, lime, and the leaves, stems, or inflorescence of the *Piper betle* vine). Early diffusionist historians attempted to reconstruct Pacific migrations and settlement by plotting the geographic distribution of the two drugs (see chapter 2; Rivers 1914; Brunton 1989), arguing that the substances have mutually exclusive ranges of distribution. There are Pacific locales, however, where both drugs are known and are used simultaneously (Serpenti 1965; Shaw 1990).

Islanders have imbued kava and its use with meanings rich and diverse. Kava drunkenness is like death; it is sexual capture; it is tranquil sociability. Kava origin myths and stories speak to wider cultural notions of proper relations between men and women, between leaders and followers, and between the living and the dead. These overlapping cultural understandings of kava inform the ways that Islanders consume the drug, giving it political, economic, and religious value.

Relating with Kava

Kava is our treasure.

—NAINKEN [CHIEF] OF NET, POINPEI (Riesenberg 1968)

Island societies are held together by both utilitarian and ceremonial exchange. Islanders create and sustain important social relations among family members,

among residents of a village, between leaders and followers, and between allied groups through a continual exchange of goods. The most valuable exchange tokens, of course, are people themselves. Parents arrange the marriages of their children to promote good relations among neighbors.

Islanders exchange (or once exchanged) a range of socially valued material goods, including shell and stone money, pigs and game animals, whale teeth, bird feathers, plaited baskets and mats, and garden produce. The two traditional Pacific drugs—kava and betel—are also valued exchange tokens. Because of the common assumption that kava drinking promotes sociability, kava is a particularly appropriate gift. A gift of kava fosters good relations; and its shared consumption further strengthens these relations by physically inducing emotions of camaraderie and sociability in those who drink to celebrate their relationship. Islanders almost always use kava within groups. As Torren (1988) has noted of Fiji, “‘Drinking kava alone’ is an idiom for witchcraft. It implies the pouring of libations to the ancestors for some evil purpose. . . . [Social] kava-drinking is virtually obligatory; a refusal to drink effectively constitutes a denial of society and a rejection of the status quo.”

Kava exchanges hands within all sorts of social relationships. Kin and neighbors share roots from each other’s plantations, with a different person contributing kava to the kava circle or informal drinking club each time the group meets. Women who grow kava may give plants to husbands and brothers. Hosts present kava to guests, and vice versa. In Fiji, “a person who comes to drink *yagona* with others brings some *yagona* as his *sevusevu*, a mark of respect for the group. Even a very small amount constitutes the *sevusevu*, although as a practical matter a certain amount will be needed to keep the supply going during the evening. Consistent failure to contribute leaves a person open to joking criticism as a ‘mosquito,’ and it may be said ironically that ‘his smiling face is his *sevusevu*.’” (Arno 1992). In Tonga, courting boys arrange for favored girls to preside over the making of bowls of kava that they share with informal circles of friends (Feldman 1980; Olson 1990). On Kolopom Island, Irian Jaya, shared kava lubricates relations among participants in informal working groups (Serpenti 1965, 1969).

Kava exchange is ritually formalized for important social occasions. Gifts of kava draw attention to ceremonially important events that affect social relationships. These include the creation of significant new relationships, such as the marriage of a Tongan boy and his kava-making girlfriend (figure 5.3), a revived political alliance, or a person’s acquisition of a new chiefly title or status. Kava exchange also celebrates the successful repair of disrupted relations—a declaration of peace or a request for forgiveness.

Gifts of kava are a prominent part of many rites of passage in Pacific societies. These are rituals, such as weddings, male or female initiation ceremonies, and

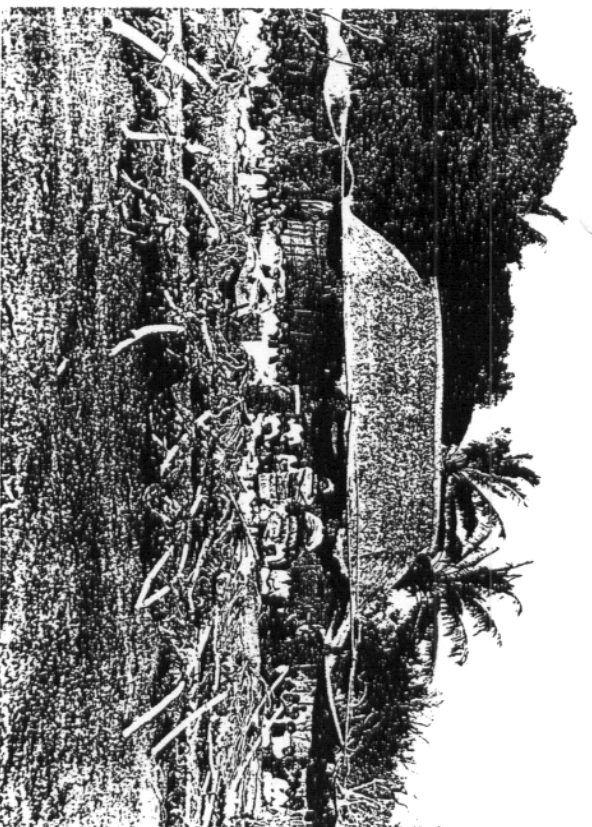


Figure 5.3. Marriage ceremony on Tongatapu Island, circa 1915. The bride and groom, dressed in *tapa* cloth, are surrounded by gifts of food and kava (courtesy of Bishop Museum, Honolulu; photo W. S. Sherwill).

funerals, that mark acquisition of new social status or the creation of new relationships. On Tonga and in some New Guinean communities, for example, both nuptial negotiation and the traditional marriage ceremony itself are marked by kava sharing. Bride, groom, and their families all drink kava to celebrate their new affinal bonds (Newell 1947; Aoyagi 1966; see also Serpenti 1969). On Rotuma, homecomings to the island are celebrated as a sort of rebirth and are marked by kava drinking (Marscu 1986). Funerals—rites of passage that transform the dead person into an ancestor and make survivors into widows, widowers, and orphans—involve kava exchange on Tonga and elsewhere (figure 5.4; Beaglehole and Beaglehole 1941; Aoyagi 1966; Conton 1977; Sorum 1982).

In nuclear Polynesia, Fiji, and Pohnpei, gifts of kava symbolize a person’s acquisition of a chiefly title. For example, when a Pohnpei high chief bestows a title on a subordinate, “he takes a cup of kava in both hands and raises it high before him, and says loudly, ‘This is the coconut shell vessel of [such and such title].’” Either the newly entitled man, or a sponsor, then drinks down the kava (Riesenberg 1968; see also Smith 1892; Collocott 1927; Newell 1947; and Valeri 1989 for descriptions of kava and title-taking ceremonies elsewhere).



Figure 5.4. Kava plants measuring over four meters are carried to a funeral in Pohnpei (photo V. Lebot).

Kava exchange serves to celebrate new or continuing political alliances (figure 5.5). Pohnpeian commoners traditionally gave kava in tribute to their chiefs. German colonial administrators in Micronesia wrote this customary tribute into their land code—landowners had to present one kava root and one yam annually to their Micronesians chiefly overlords (Fischer 1957). Fijians today bring along kava when visiting local chiefs (Sahlins 1962).

Gifts of kava also aid in conflict resolution. Arno (1992) has analyzed the composition of informal Fijian kava drinking parties and their function in circulating gossip and information and argues that a village's kava drinking networks serve as conflict-management systems. Petersen (1991) describes kava's similar functions on Pohnpei. In Vanuatu, disputing parties who have successfully resolved their affairs almost always exchange roots of kava, and often pigs and garden produce as well, to mark the settlement (Lindstrom field observations, 1978; see also Collocott 1927 on kava in dispute settlements on Tonga). A cultivar called *pinia* (or *pinia*) is especially used in conflict-resolving exchange on Tanna.

In less egalitarian Polynesia and Micronesia, commoners can appease an angry chief and seek his forgiveness with gifts of kava. An outraged Pohnpei chief might turn down several offerings of kava, but he must eventually accept the gift and restore normal relations with his public (McCrath 1973; Riessenberg



Figure 5.5. Plants carried to a feast in Pohnpei (courtesy of Trust Territory Archives, Pacific Collection, University of Hawaii Library; photo C. Viti).

1968; see also Gifford 1929; Gaillot 1962; Sahlins 1962). Ticombe (1948), in similar vein, quotes a Hawaiian on kava's peacemaking functions: "If one has sworn not to talk to another, and later they wish to make up, they must use some 'ama root."

The same pattern of forgiveness through exchange sometimes operates at the supernatural level, as a Hawaiian writer observed: "If you have sinned against your guardian spirit, with the root of the 'ama you could be forgiven, then the anger of the guardian spirit would be appeased" (Ticombe 1948). The use of kava in curing rituals is similarly thought to arouse supernatural assistance and concern (see below on "Altered States").

Gifts of kava also signify forgiveness and peace in larger political arenas—an exchange function that reflects cultural expectations of tranquil kava drunkenness. Haddon (1916) quotes the missionary G. Landman's comment that kava "plays a prominent part in several [Mavata, Papua New Guinea] ceremonies. Part of the ceremony of making peace with another tribe consists in the men drinking *gamoda* [kava] together, during the drinking-feast one man of each side will sprinkle a little *gamoda* over the assembled people and say, 'No more fight now, no good you me [we] fight'" (see also Knauff 1987).

Kava's peaceable connotations perhaps induced the Tannese to present a kava

branch to the Russian explorer V. M. Golovnin in 1809. Golovnin's ship, *Diana*, was one of the first to call into Port Resolution after Cook's visit in 1774. Golovnin wrote in his log: "One individual among [the Islanders] presented me with a branch of the plant known as kava. . . . This was obviously done as a gesture of friendship and peace. I ordered that the branch should be tied to our main sail shrouds, an action that gave the natives much satisfaction" (Barratt 1990).

Pacific Islanders emphasize the value of kava as a gift by elaborating the ways they prepare and consume the drug. They typically drink kava at special times and places and according to special manners. In areas of the Pacific where people use kava daily, they usually do so during designated times. In Vanuatu, for example, people drink at dusk, a time when ancestral presence is strongly felt. Twilight consumption of kava also correlates with drinkers' expectation that bright light would interrupt the drug's physiological effects.

People often retire to special places to consume kava, such as men's houses, chiefs' houses, kava-drinking grounds, or even James Cook's cabin. All these sites are marked socially as non-ordinary spaces. The desire to ritualize kava consumption by drinking in special places is evidenced by the popularity of kava bars in such towns as Port Vila or Kolonia. The kava bar partly reconstitutes within an urban environment the more traditional extraordinary places where people meet to consume the drug.

Islanders also signal the special exchange value of kava by dressing up their plants before giving them away (figures 5.6 and 5.7). The anthropologist L. M. Serpent (1969) attended an exchange on Kolopom Island off southeastern Irian Jaya and observed a scaffolding 10 meters high "completely hung about with *maiti* [kaval]." In Pohnpei, kava plants "are carried to the community house in a procession of men singing a type of song called *ngis* and blowing conch trumpets. . . . The kava bushes are frequently decorated with ornamental plants. Large bushes carried on a litter may have a stalk of croton or breadfruit inserted in them" (Riesenberg 1968).

Islanders may further glorify kava as a gift by manipulating the ordinary shape of the stump. In the Lau islands, for example, gardeners plant kava "over a flat stone so that the mass of the root grows upwards; the plant then holds on to the ground only by rootlets, which spread over and round the stone" (Locart 1929). As noted in chapter four, the Tannese also manipulate the shape of their kava stump and roots. They sometimes plant kava over a flat piece of wood that horizontally shapes the growing rootstock, somewhat like flat stones do in Lau. They also plant cuttings within hollow tree fern stumps; this form of kava, called *nikaia tapuga* (*tapunga*), is exchanged at feasts marking the reentry into society of circumcised boys (figure 5.8; Brunton 1989). Parents also decorate gifts of *nikaia tapuga* by stripping the leaves off the branches and tying on in their place leaves of more



Figure 5.6. Pigs and kava plants carried onto a *nakamal* (kava drinking ground and dancing ground) for exchange during the *nakwari* festival on Tanna. Each man from the hosting group who has danced during the festival presents a pig and a kava root for exchange. One of his sons sits upon the pig as it is carried onto the *nakamal* to be displayed and exchanged (photo L. Lindstrom).

colorful croton, *Cordyline fruticosa*, and *Excoecaria* sp. On occasion, Vanuatu's Plant Quarantine Department has cleared for export decorated kava of this sort, wrapped up in *Pandanus* leaves for family or friends in New Caledonia or Australia.

In addition to decorating the rootstock itself, Islanders ritualize the act of giving kava in other ways. For example, they may lay the plant out on the ground so that its roots (in some places) or its stems (in others) point toward the recipient (Collocott 1927; Beaglehole and Beaglehole 1941; Newell 1947; Firth 1970). In a number of societies, givers leave one leafy stem on the kava gift. (The other stems, of course, have already been broken or cut off and replanted.) In traditional Hawaii, "one exceedingly powerful offering was a 'complete' *ama* (*ama lau*)—that is, a plant with one root, one stem and one leaf" (Ticcomb 1948). On Tanna, a kava recipient breaks off one remaining, upstanding stem—an act that symbolizes his acceptance of both the gift itself and the sociability that it entails. In Fiji, too, "the representative of the recipients [ears] off a rootlet or two while acknowledging the gift" (Thomson 1908; see also Roth 1953a; Burrows 1936).

The ceremonialized preparation of kava for drinking further indicates its im-

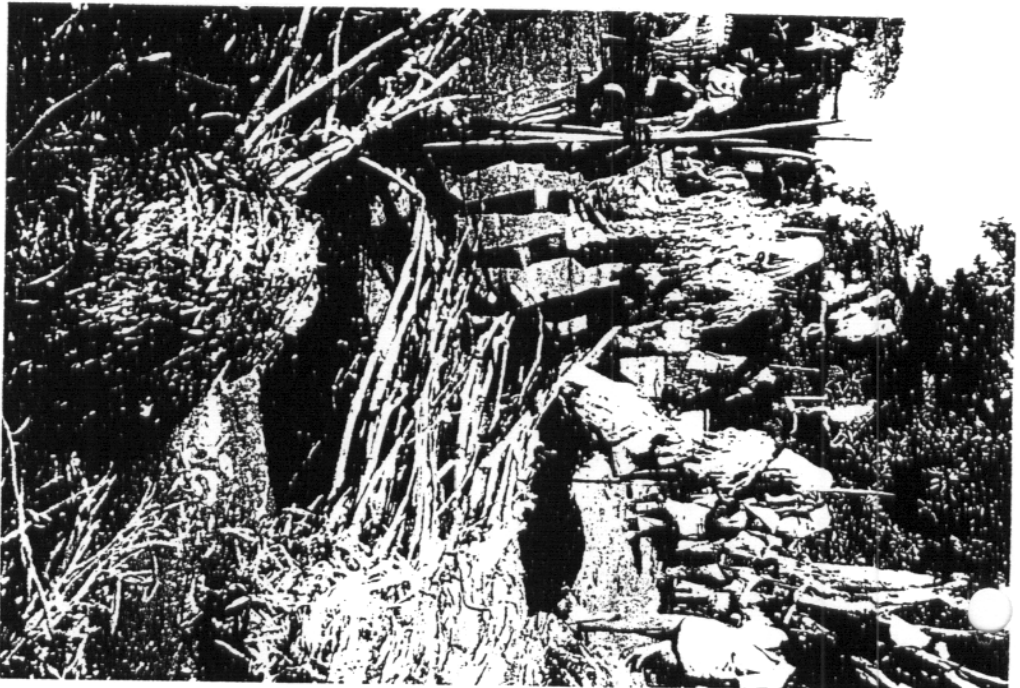


Figure 5.7. Large kava plants and pigs being readied for exchange between groups of dancers during the *nakwari* festival on Tanna (photo L. Lindstrom).

portance as a gift. Pohnpei's kava pounding stones are one vivid example of this. These stones are large, flat, carefully selected, water-worn slabs of basalt, on which people crush kava root. The most important stones are named. Up to four men together use cobbles to pound kava on these stones, their pounding organized according to one of a number of traditional rhythmic patterns. The stones ring with echoing bell-like tones that celebrate and publicize kava preparation through-



Figure 5.8. The men of a village lead recently circumcised boys onto a southeast Tanna kava drinking ground at the end of the boys' period of social seclusion. Carrying lengths of sugarcane and decorated kava (*tapuga*), men and boys circle around the heap of exchange goods (food, baskets, mats, bark skirts, lengths of cloth, pigs, and kava) that the boys' parents are giving to the boys' mothers' brothers (photo L. Lindstrom).

out an entire region (Riesenberg 1968). On Tanna, people advertise kava in a different manner. Some men yodel after drinking, a cry that announces kava consumption as it echoes across the island's landscape of ravine and forest. Another kind of elaborated kava preparation, seen in northern Vanuatu and parts of Samoa, consists of a theatrical pouring of infused kava between two containers, or from strainer to bowl, so that the liquid froths like a head of beer (Holmes 1961; Rivers 1914; Durrad 1940).

The ritualization of kava's exchange, preparation, and consumption, in addition to signaling the gift value of the plant itself, serves to demarcate social identities among the collected drinkers. Differential access to the drug and various duties in its ceremonial preparation separate men from women, virgins from sexually active people, and the old from the young in many kava-using societies.

On Tanna, for example, men converge at kava-drinking grounds while women remain behind in the villages (busy, in part, cooking the food that the men will eat after drinking). On the kava-drinking ground itself, small, uncircumcised boys toddle after their fathers to participate as observers only. Youths who are circum-

cised but still virgins chew kava and infuse the chewed root in water, mixing and squeezing the pulp with their hands. Teenaged, sexually active boys chew kava but no longer mix it by hand. Older men who have sons to prepare their kava mostly sit around socializing, gossiping, and politicking until the kava is ready. And the leading men of the village generally drink their kava first. Kava consumption on Tanna thus not only presents a daily tableau of gender, age, and political identities but also tracks a person's life passage through important social stages (Jindstrom 1982; Brunton 1989).

Elsewhere in the Pacific, patterns of kava consumption reflect other status distinctions. One such distinction is a man's relative rank within traditional grade societies (which recognize a ladder of titles, somewhat like Masonic organizations in the United States). Within these hierarchical associations, men move up through the ranks by purchasing rights to titles from those above them. In northern Vanuatu, for example, only initiated society members traditionally drank kava, with men of the same grade preparing and drinking their kava together (Rivers 1914; Deacon 1934; Durraid 1940; see also Haddon 1916).

The most elaborate marking of political status during kava preparation and consumption ceremony occurs in the formal kava circles of Polynesia and Fiji (see, e.g., Collocott 1927; Mead 1930; Williamson 1939; Newell 1947; Roth 1953b; Bott 1972; Rogers 1975; Tora 1986). Here kava drinking order serves as a model for the hierarchy of local chiefly titles. These kava circles are tableaus that represent and maintain the system of titles in general, as well as the particulars of existing political relations among titleholders (Bott 1972; also Toren 1988 for Fiji) or between participants in more general relationships of inequality, such as Tongan fathers and sons (Perminov 1991).

The demonstrative political functions of giving and sharing kava in Polynesia have encouraged an efflorescence in kava preparation and consumption protocol. Kava drinking that indicates and honors the status of chiefs becomes dignified and extremely mannered. Biersack (1991) and others, noting this ceremonial formalization of kava circles, have likened it to a dance. In addition to regulating who drinks first, rules govern the seating arrangements, the placement of the kava bowl, the pounding and preparation of the root, the serving of participants, and so on. Different Tongan or Samoan chiefs, when they host a kava circle, often insist on slight variations in how their kava is prepared and served. These variations mark the ceremony as their own, further honoring their particular claims and titles.

The antiquity of these elaborations in Polynesian kava preparation and consumption is unclear. The inherent inequality within Polynesian political systems no doubt affected kava consumption patterns from the beginning. Political elites appropriated kava as a valued social good, and chiefs in both Polynesia and Micronesia had better rights to use psychoactive substances to communicate with ances-

tors and the spirit world than did commoners. In many of these societies the increase in political competition and conflict that followed European contact may also have sparked an inflation in kava consumption ritual (figure 5.9). In Fiji, for example, kava circles date back only to the eighteenth century (Clunie 1986). Rival chiefs may have concentrated attention on formalizing their kava consumption as a symbolic aspect of the increasing political competition among chiefs within newly forming states, such as Tonga, Hawaii, and Fiji.

In some areas, the political functions of kava ritual have continued into the present. For example, in part to legitimate their rule, the present ruling Tongan family has absorbed the kava ritual of its vanquished rival—the former high chief, or Tui Tonga—into its own kava protocol. Queen Salote amalgamated the two variations during the great Tongan kava ceremony of 1959 (Rogers 1977; Valeri 1989). Other current Pacific governments continue to use kava consumption ceremony to legitimate themselves and to evoke sentiments of national unity.

The political importance of kava ritual in Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, and Pohnpei may have muted some of kava's more religious meanings and uses. This may explain why kava consumption continues in these islands, having in some cases survived a



Figure 5.9. Colonial British administrator drinks kava, Fiji, circa 1880 (copyright © the British Museum).

century of hostile attempts by Christians to eradicate it. The *if*s converted to Christianity but kept their kava circles as political rather than religious ceremonies. In Hawaii'i, Tahiti, the Marquesas, and other islands where kava ceremony did not play as vital a role in displaying and legitimating elite titles and powers, use of the plant declined and was essentially abandoned. In Hawaii, for example, nineteenth-century chiefs demonstrated their status by pointedly abandoning kava for alcohol, "the water from America" (Keanutana and Whitney 1990).

Kava maintains its more obvious religious functions throughout much of Melanesia (where missionization efforts began later and, in fact, in some areas are still underway). Although many Polynesians today drink kava for political display and for sociable reasons, there, too, religious uses are still in evidence (Williamson 1939; Holmes 1961; Brunton 1989).

Altered States

That is your kava, Sakura

Turn to your kava

You excrete upon the head of the land

You excrete hither that I may eat

Raise up above your waters

For the revivifying of your land.

Sprinkle upon your land which has become parched

And sprinkle upon your land which has become dry

And slip down below the crown of your land

And produce for us excrement for your land which has stood orphaned.

This is your kava, Male Ancestor

You give life hither to me

This is your kava, Father

You give life hither to me

That the man who is about to fall may live

That the food may live

Finished is my invocation of the kava.

Evil things for the kava shall be left aside to the sun which is about to set.

—TIKOPIAN PRAYER (Firth 1970)

Kava inebriation brings one into a communion with the gods and ancestors. In so doing, it also provides access to potentially valuable and powerful knowledge. Leach (1972) and others have suggested that ritualized kava drinking might be interpreted as a form of sacrifice to the gods—the body (rootstock) of kava chewed or pounded (killed) before being communally consumed as a sort of religious offering. Viewed in that way, kava consumption rituals often do appear to entail sacrifices of kava to the gods (Collocott 1927; Harrison 1937; Thompson 1940;

Ticom 1948; Sorenberg 1968; Oliver 1974; Brunton 1989). Tikopian priests, for example, poured libations of kava onto the ground. Firth (1970) summarizes the ceremony:

First was an announcement to the god or ancestor invoked that the kava being performed was his, coupled with the citation of his personal name or title. This was to be construed as a personal association of the god with the rite, to secure his involvement. Then came a request for him to turn to the kava—so backing up involvement by orientation. Then followed a declaration of abasement by the officiant. This was followed by a series of requests, according to circumstances, for growth for the crops, good harvest, a plentiful supply of fish at sea, calm weather, health for the people.

People also did or do make libations of kava in Fiji (Roth 1953a; Toren 1989), Tonga (Gifford 1929; Newell 1947), East Futuna (Burrows 1936), West Futuna (Capell 1960), Samoa (Churchill 1916a; Mead 1930; Williamson 1939; Holmes 1961), northern Vanuatu (Rivers 1914), and New Guinea (Landman 1927).

In a number of other Pacific cultures, drinkers spit out mouthfuls or splash around droplets of kava (Jensen 1903; Haddon 1916)—actions that might also be a sort of religious offering or libation, as perhaps might be the ceremonial pouring of kava between strainer and bowl cited above. On Tanna, drinkers spit out final mouthfuls of kava in impressive sprays and then murmur short prayers or instructions to the ancestors (Lindstrom 1980). Likewise in Fiji, "a chief or a distinguished guest, after he has drunk his cup of *yauqona*, blows a small quantity of it through the lips against the wall of the house or away from his neighbors and then utters the name of some desired object or a sentiment" (Roth 1953a; see Thompson 1940). And on Vanua Iava, in Vanuatu, "after drinking the breath is blown out strongly (*puksag*) in such a way that some of the kava is blown out too" (Rivers 1914).

Kava spitting on Tanna is called *tanuqa* (*tinatua* or *tanahua* in other languages of the island). Cognates of this word in Polynesian languages of Tahiti and New Zealand mean "firstfruits offering"—an offering typically made each year to the ancestors and gods (Firth 1970). The meaningful connections between kava libations and firstfruits offerings, which celebrate natural fertility, perhaps stem from the attribution of mythic regenerative powers to the drug. Life-giving kava symbolizes and contributes to the productivity of gardens. In Tonga, the chiefly kava consumption ceremony is called *tanuqa* kava. A different term in Fiji, *i seu*, also combines the meanings of "firstfruits offering" and "kava libation" (Roth 1953a). On Tikopia, small offerings of food for the gods, and any sort of distributive share of food or drink, are likewise called *tanuqa* (Firth 1970). In this semantic context,

libations and *tamafa* spittings of kava, like firstfruits offerings, might be understood to be gifts to the supernatural.

A second interpretation is that kava serves to open channels of communication with the supernatural realm, rather than being a simple offering to the gods and ancestors. Here kava sacrifice is not a pure gift but an enticement. Kava spittings and libations work like keys, or knocks on a door, or the clapping of hands to awaken ancestral interest and solicit ancestral concern (see Turner 1986; Lindstrom 1980). Islanders also ritually spit substances other than kava, including medical concoctions as part of curing rituals and, on Samoa, coconut water to remove curses (Mead 1930). Spitting of all sorts is a mediating, magical practice that works symbolically to connect the natural and supernatural worlds.

From a religious point of view, the consumption of kava can be seen to place a person into direct communion with the supernatural realm. Ritual kava spittings and libations merely evoke and celebrate that fact. As Turner (1986) writes for Fiji, "like the initiate in a rite of passage, the sacramental kava drinker 'dies' to find his life." Traditional priests and mediums, especially, drank kava to induce trance states—or more likely, given the often mild properties of the drug, to mark symbolically their induction. These trances were sometimes possessive states in which a god or ancestor actually inhabited the body of the medium (for Hawaii see Handy 1923; for Pohopoi see Riesenbergh 1968; for New Guinea see Van Baal 1966); other times they were simply altered states in which priests enjoyed the opportunity to communicate with spiritual figures. In the Motu language of the south central coast of Papua New Guinea, the word *kaukava* refers to states of possession or madness (although the plant itself is known only to the west of this region). Supporters of the Vailala Madness (one of Melanesia's earliest cargo cults—millenarian movements in part focused on the acquisition of European goods), dancing themselves into trance states, were described as *kaukava* (Williams 1923).

Through kava intoxication ordinary people, too, can send messages to helpful supernatural beings. Drinkers in Vanuatu and elsewhere utter prayers, commentary about the day's events, or instructions for their ancestors to hear (see Gill 1892 for the Cook Islands; Firth 1970 for Tikopia). In Hawaii, kava drinkers offered a "prayer of praise . . . to the gods for evil and good received from them, for their life-giving care of their offspring in this world and in the bright world beyond" (Titcomb 1948).

Kava not only helps to transmit ancestral messages but also facilitates their reception. Kava drunkenness is a particularly valued altered state of consciousness in the Pacific Islands, given dominant assumptions regarding epistemology. Unlike in contemporary Western theories of knowledge production, in Islanders' explanations for the origins and growth of an idea the importance of inspiration far

outweighs that of activity. Clever people are those who control powerful means of inspiration, rather than those who are personally creative or talented (Lindstrom 1990). Kava drunkenness thus serves to account for and legitimate new ideas; kava is "universally recognized in the Pacific as a channel for divine (ancestral) inspiration" (Layard 1942). Sleep is a second altered state during which people may contact their ancestors for information. Dreaming parallels drunkenness as an important means of inspiration that can yield new knowledge from ancestors or other spiritual authorities.

Song writers in Vanuatu, for example, when commissioned to come up with a new song, do not attempt some sort of creative cogitation. Instead they often retire to a place in the forest that they know ancestors frequent and there cook a fowl, drink kava, and settle back to await inspiration. They hope to overhear, while drunk on kava, some ancestor singing fragments of a song they can learn and subsequently share with others.

Kava imbibers in many Pacific societies thus sit silently, enjoying their altered state of consciousness, listening for valuable ancestral messages of all sorts. In Vanuatu, important men are often buried in kava-drinking clearings so that drinkers literally are surrounded by the bodies of their ancestors. Kava encourages these dead to talk. The importance of kava in many curing rituals and in magical practice of all sorts can be understood as a technique that infuses these healing rituals and practices with a powerful ancestral presence.

Because Pacific people believe that knowledge can be inspired by kava inebriation, the drug is a typical ingredient of divination techniques. In Vanuatu, seers and mediums, called "clevers" (*klewa*) in local Pidgin English, often drink kava before divining the cause of someone's illness or the location of a lost pig. On Manus, in the Admiralty Islands, people divine by spitting betel juice into a *Piper* leaf (Firth 1935). And in traditional Hawaii, *kahuna* (priests) discovered causes of disease, the sex of unborn babies, and so on by inspecting the movements of bubbles in cups of kava (Titcomb 1948; see Emerson 1903; Handy 1927; Williamson 1939; Capell 1960; and Van Baal 1966 for additional accounts of kava use within divination practices).

The traditional religious and political significances of kava continue to shape its use today. Kava retains its power to create a symbolic and often real emotional camaraderie among groups of drinkers and in some places also retains its parallel power to evoke a kind of communion with the dead. Elsewhere, however, kava's meanings now have shifted to signal more modern sorts of communion, such as sentiments of emerging national unity and identity. We conclude our review of the anthropology of kava with a set of vignettes (which, given the plant species, we prefer to call "kavettes") that describe kava consumption in various island communities today:

Isina kava-drinking ground, Tanna Island, Vanuatu (Lindstrom, field observations, 1983)

In the late afternoon the shadow of a banyan tree creeps across this small clearing in secondary forest. The Isina kava-drinking ground is located at the edge of a narrow ridge, with land sloping down on three sides. Men from nearby Samaria village filter onto the clearing. The sky threatens rain, and Rapi, a village leader, complains once again that the community has yet to repair the small shelter on the edge of the clearing, and the thatched roof has almost rotted away. Some men have picked up fallen branches along the path on their way to Isina, and they use these to light several fires. Small taro roots are tossed onto these fires to bake. Other men

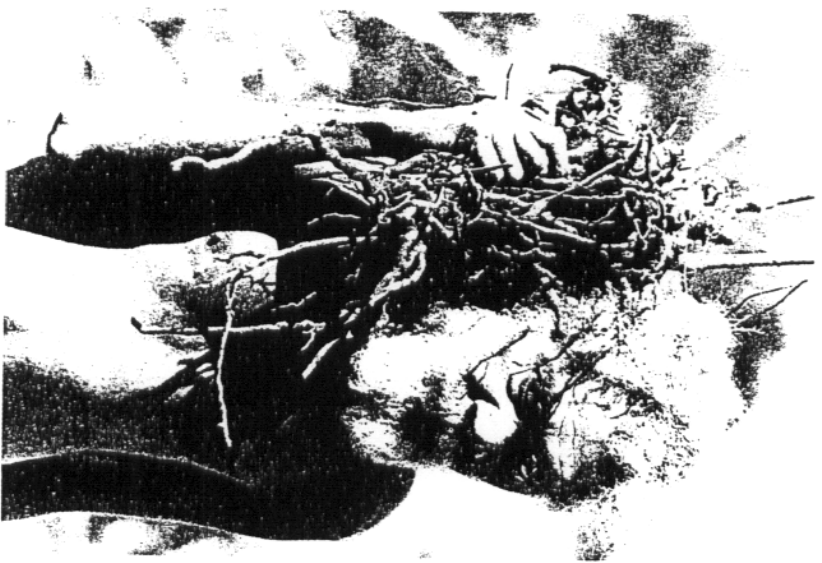


Figure 5.10. Old man on Tanna, Vanuatu, carrying a young rootstock for an informal kava drinking session (photo E. Moyen)



Figure 5.11. Preparing the roots and rootstock, Tanna, Vanuatu: the stump is cut into smaller pieces and cleaned (photo E. Moyen).

carry in water in round orange plastic Taiwanese fishing net floats that have washed up on Tanna's beaches.

Nakutan arrives from his garden up the mountain. He carries over his shoulder a large kava root he has just dug up. The rootstock is wrapped in long grass and tied with vines. On this occasion Nakutan wants to finalize plans for the upcoming circumcision of his son. His brothers are present at Isina, as are his wife's brothers from neighboring Isarkei Village. Nakutan provides kava for the company because group discussion will attend to his concerns. Kahi, his brother-in-law, who will be a major player in the circumcision ceremony, also brings a large kava rootstock. Other men search about the edges of the clearing for kava pieces, left over from the night before, that they might chew.

Nakutan unwraps his kava and bangs it on the ground to shake off loose soil. He expertly chops the thick stump into pieces with a long bush knife. Several teenage boys appear and are given pieces of rootstock. They clean the kava with their knives and polish it with handfuls of coconut fiber. After giving it a final inspection, they bite off large pieces of the yellowish stump and begin to chew. Each is careful to mix in his mouth pieces of the stump itself with one or two elongated kava roots.

Rapi and other older men complain that many of their younger sons are living at boarding school and are not around to chew their fathers' kava. Rapi yells for one son, Timo, who he knows is loitering somewhere nearby. Timo wanders in from

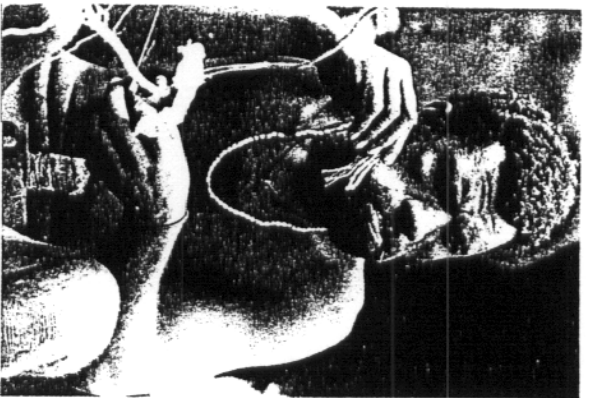


Figure 5.12. Chewing kava, Tanna, Vanuatu (photo E. Moyon).

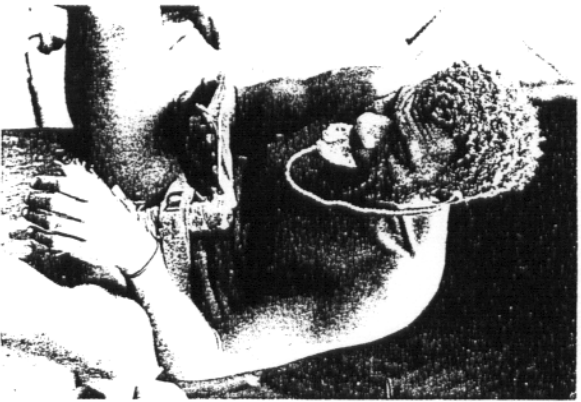


Figure 5.13. Masticated kava is spat onto a kava leaf, Tanna, Vanuatu (photo E. Moyon).



Figure 5.14. Drinking kava prepared by mastication, Tanna, Vanuatu (photo E. Moyon).

the bush with several small birds he has just killed with a blunt arrow. He lays the birds on the edge of a fire to singe, and reluctantly takes a piece of kava from his father and bites off a chunk. Most of the men are busy chewing by this time. Some make a point of chewing kava for a friend or brother-in-law; some are just chewing their own. Only Rapi and another old man, both of whom have lost most of their teeth, refrain from kava mastication.

As the men's and boys' jaws work, Nakutan mentions plans for the circumcision. His brothers-in-law also make a few comments. The details of the ceremony have all been worked out before in private. The shared kava at Isina serves to mark and publicize this fact and to set a rough date for the event in people's minds. Conversation drifts to other topics. Joel, a younger man, switches on his shortwave radio to catch the news, in the Bislama language, from the capital, Port Vila. The headlines today are about the prime minister's visit to Papua New Guinea, a warning to people who refuse to pay local council taxes, and a report about possible fighting far away in Kuwait.

Chewers masticate each mouthful of kava for ten minutes or so—until root fibers are well broken up and mixed with saliva. They then spit the mouthful onto a pad of leaves. Young boys hurry to pick additional leaves as needed from the trees that ring the clearing. Chewers are soon surrounded by pads of green leaves on

which sit growing mounds of masticated yellow kava. Most men drink the kava from three chewed mouthfuls. Rapi, properly for an elder, restricts himself to one. Joel, stating that he plans to get really drunk, jokingly demands five.

A hollow knock on a section of bamboo that hangs along the path to the clearing signals that women have sent food to their husbands and brothers. Timo and other young boys rush up the path to where their sisters give them imported enameled plates full of boiled manioc, taro, and *abiika* leaves to carry back to their fathers. To celebrate the circumcision discussion, Nakutan's wife also sends along a kettle of boiled rice and tinned Japanese mackerel, both luxury foods.

Rapi calls to twelve-year-old Timo that it is time to start making kava. Timo, still a virgin, can knead chewed kava with his hands without endangering drinkers with sexual pollution. He gathers half-coconut-shell drinking cups, and a well-used burlap-like piece of coconut frond stipule for a strainer. This kava paraphernalia is usually stored off the ground on a makeshift table.

Because Nakutan's concerns are highlighted today, his brother-in-law Kahi will drink first, and Nakutan second. Kahi picks up a leaf full of kava, careful not to touch the chewed root. He dumps the kava onto the strainer and holds up one side while Timo takes the other. Timo kneads the chewed kava with his fingers, pushing down hard against the strainer, as Kahi pours cold water on top of Timo's hand. The infused kava filters through the coconut stipule and falls into a large coconut shell resting on the ground below. When the cup is nearly full, Timo takes the strainer in both hands and twists it to squeeze all remaining liquid into the cup. He removes the compressed kava fiber from the strainer and returns it carefully to the leaf, ready to be used a second time.

Guests from Isarkei, gathered on the other side of the clearing, begin to infuse their own kava. No other virgin boy is available, so the men knead their chewed kava in the strainer with a length of kava branch.

Kahi takes the first cup. He walks to the side of the clearing and, facing away from the company, drains the large shell in a single draft. Noisily he spits out his last mouthful which contains a sludge of kava particles and fibers that were not filtered by the strainer. He murmurs something that others cannot overhear, and then yodels. People understand that Kahi has uttered a prayerful demand to his ancestors that the upcoming circumcision ceremony encounter no problems. After Nakutan drinks, the rest of the men then infuse and drink their own kava in no set order, although older men tend to drink before younger, and guests before hosts. Each spits out his last mouthful and murmurs something to the surrounding ancestors.

After drinking, men return to the side of the fires, where plates of food are shared. Some eat a lot at first and some only a little, saving their food to consume after additional shells of kava. The children and teenagers also eat and then return

home. As the night deepens, men light pipes and roll cigarettes of locally grown tobacco. Taking along a glowing ember, they move a little farther apart or turn away from each other and from the light of the larger fires.

The Tannese say that noise and light spoil the psychoactive effects of the drug. If children playing in the village are making too much noise, a youth who has not drunk runs back to hush them. People riding home in the beds of pickup trucks become quiet when passing by roadside kava-drinking grounds, and women passengers cover their heads or look away in order not to observe male drinkers.

At Isina, all talk ceases as twilight fades. Instead, the booming of thousands of cicadas singing in unison rises from the surrounding bush. Men "listen" silently to their kava and listen for the inspiring voices of ancestors, who are approachable under the influence of the drug. After half an hour or so, drinkers who want to prolong the experience re-strain their kava for a second cup. Kahi and others from Isarkei rise and pick up pieces of wood whose ends they have lit in their fires. Without disturbing the meditations of those who will remain in the clearing, they slowly leave, shaking their fire-sticks rapidly back and forth so that the glowing embers shed a little light on the darkened trail.

By 7:30 or 8:00 at night, most drinkers have left Isina and returned to their families. Only a few younger enthusiasts remain behind. Some of these can be heard in the tropical darkness searching for remnant pieces of kava they can chew for a second round. Most everyone will be back at Isina the next evening. Whether or not there is a special event such as Nakutan's circumcision discussion Tannese kava-drinkers recreate male sociability and a ritual communion in the twilight of each day—a period they call the time of the ancestors.

A Gebusi longhouse, Western Province, Papua New Guinea
(adapted from Knauff 1987)

A Gebusi longhouse community has invited people from neighboring settlements to feast on sago starch and to dance. Events of the day begin with ceremonial displays of antagonism between the different longhouse groups. Lines of men dressed as warriors march grimly into the host village. The feast-givers hurry to diffuse their guests' apparent anger by snapping fingers with each visitor and pressing each to smoke large pipes of tobacco. In this manner, they eventually persuade their armed guests, now in a nicotine stupor, to relinquish their bows and arrows. The hosting community then opens its sago ovens and begins food exchange, speeches, and feasting.

As evening falls, the men move indoors and begin to prepare kava. The hosts harvested the kava plants earlier that day and empowered the roots by yelling "y-kay" as, whooping and stomping, they carried them into their longhouse (the single

building, about 23 meters long, in which all members of the community reside). At this point hosts and guests set aside ceremonial or real antagonism and sit in a circle to prepare the drink. Some men burn the leaves of a forest palm to make ash to sweeten the kava. Others chew kava, spitting mouthfuls of pulp into a bowl made from the spathe of a palm inflorescence. Both hosts and guests contribute mouthfuls to the growing communal pile of chewed kava. Finally the leaf ash is mixed into the masticated kava, which is then divided into servings, each in a coconut spathe bowl. Water is added and the kava is squeezed by hand to infuse the drug.

Hosts ladle kava into coconut-shell cups and present it to their visitors. A guest often receives several cups of kava in succession and, although he might protest, he cannot refuse to swallow these. Only when a drinker appears close to vomiting do some hosts cease to force on him additional shells of kava. After all guests have drunk, the hosts serve themselves. Both guests and hosts continue to drink kava in less formal fashion as the night proceeds.

Men socialize and joke as they prepare and drink additional cups of kava. Women and children, who may not consume the drug, sit nearby in another section of the longhouse to watch.

A striking aspect of Gebusi kava consumption is the degree to which kava itself becomes a subject of sexual joking during the evening. . . . Thus, a man may say he will “serve his kava to the women,” even though (a) women never drink kava; (b) it is not in fact the speaker’s kava (or serving); and (c) he may not even be a member of the host community. The intended message is that he wants to give his semen to the women, i.e., to force them to have sex with him. Alter-

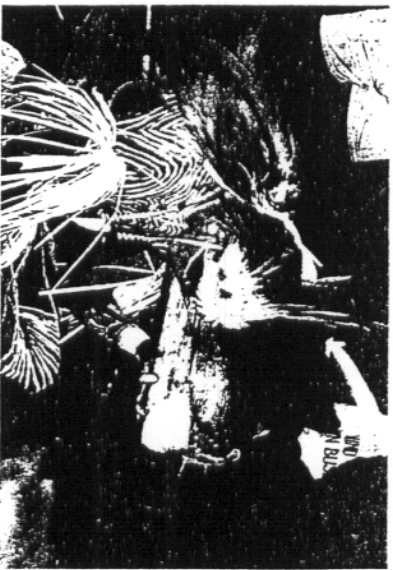


Figure 5.15. A Gebusi dancer drinks kava from a palm spathe before his performance. His body is painted red, his eyes are painted black, “dogs” teeth and cuscus fur adorn his forehead, and red Bird of Paradise feathers rise from his headband (courtesy of E. Cantrell).



Figure 5.16. Gebusi men chewing kava roots (courtesy of E. Cantrell).

natively, a man may jokingly entreat another man to “drink his kava,” i.e., be a homosexual recipient through fellatio. The targeted individual may jokingly say he has enough “kava” already, or he may reply that he doesn’t want to accept, because the joker’s “server (genitals) is dirty.” The first man may spontaneously offer to “clean off his server,” or say, “It’s already served! Drink!” Such exchanges induce uproarious male laughter, including that from both jokers. In general, much sexually charged and good-natured joking surrounds the “serving” or “drinking” of “kava.” (Knauff 1987)



Figure 5.17. Gebusi men drinking kava in a circle; one holds the palm spathe drinking cup (courtesy of E. Cantrell).

The Gebusi believe, as do a number of Melanesian peoples, “boys grow and develop by means of ingesting their elders’ semen.” “Kava drinking and the joking camaraderie that surrounds it are highly charged symbols of semen exchange between males. The general effect of kava drinking is to accentuate good natured camaraderie between visitors and hosts” (Knauff 1987).

Dancing begins in early morning hours. A few ornately costumed male dancers perform in the center of the longhouse as the women, seated on sleeping platforms along the sides of the house, sing plaintive songs. The aesthetic of a seductive male dancer and his admiring female accompaniment “greatly accentuates sexual joking among the assembled male audience” (Knauff 1987). Men who have drunk too much kava stagger to their feet and rush to vomit over the sides of the longhouse porch, to the cheers of fellow drinkers. Although many are too far under the influence of the drug to participate, “homosexual liaisons between unrelated men may in fact take place in the bush outside the longhouse during the course of ritual feasts” (Knauff 1987).

At dawn some men remain in a kava stupor and others are asleep. The hardy, however, have stayed awake all night drinking, socializing, seeking lovers, dancing, and joking. They rouse the sleeping and the stuporous, and the visiting party as a whole stumbles off to their own longhouse. Eventually they will prepare a feast to repay, to entertain, and to exchange sago, semen, and kava with their erstwhile hosts.

Pitiuta Village, Ta'u Island, American Samoa
(adapted from Holmes 1967, 1974; Malaudu 1974; Ta'ofinu'u 1974;
Amituana'i 1986)

It is early afternoon as the chiefs of the village—both the *mutai* (“chiefs”) and the *tulafale* (“orators” or “talking chiefs”)—gather at their council house. The *fono*, or council of chiefs, is meeting today to discuss hurricane damage to the village guest house and ways to finance repairs. With the chiefs come the *aumaga*, the younger untitled men of the village. Many carry dried kava roots, which they set on a mat before seating themselves in rows outside the meeting house. Before the deliberations of the day can begin, this kava must be ritually prepared, served, and consumed.

The presiding talking chief selects a kava root and hands it to one of the younger members of the *aumaga*. This man cuts the kava into pieces and uses a hammer stone to pound them into pulp on the concave surface of a stone mortar. As he works, other *aumaga* members are washing the large, multilegged wooden kava bowl and fetching water in plastic buckets. No one speaks loudly or smokes as the work of preparation proceeds.



Figure 5.18. Early twentieth-century posed photograph of Samoan *taupou* (ceremonial virgin) preparing kava (courtesy of Bishop Museum, Honolulu).

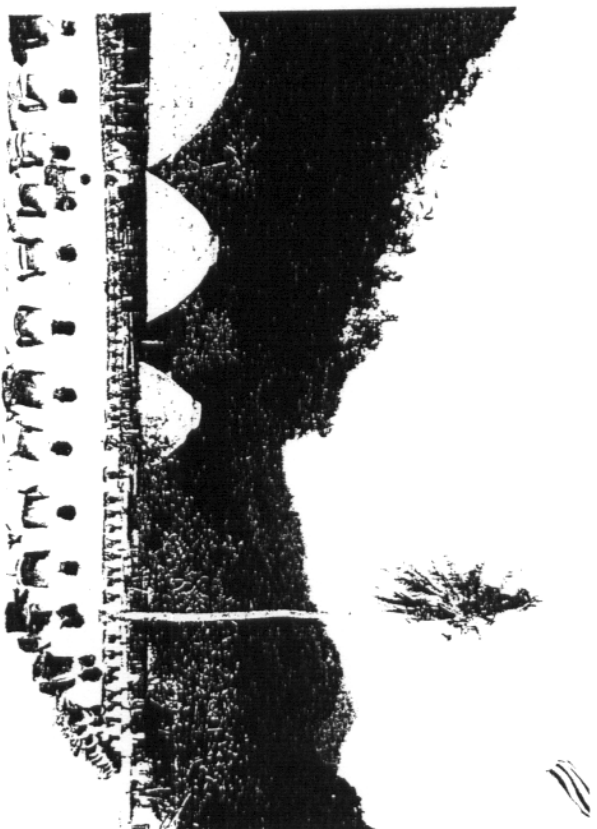


Figure 5.19. Kava ceremony commemorating the visit of American commissioners, American Samoa, 1930 (courtesy of Bishop Museum, Honolulu; photo M. Lavoy).

When the kava is pounded and the water readied, three members of the aumaga carry the massive bowl to the back of the house and sit behind it. Kava preparation and consumption at formal occasions are strictly patterned. The village *manaia*, the leader of the aumaga, who today will prepare the kava, sits directly behind the bowl. (In other contexts this place is taken by the *tanponi*, the ceremonial village virgin.) The manaia has taken off his shirt and turned up his *lauwau* (waistcloth) so it does not extend below his knees. He turns to his right to wash his hands before beginning to prepare the kava infusion.

The man sitting to the right of the manaia now empties a leaf full of kava pulp into the bowl and half fills this with water. The manaia picks up a fibrous strainer (*fau*) made from the inner bark of *Hibiscus tiliaceus*, and uses this to work the pounded kava, pressing down with the heels of both hands. He pulls the kava pulp into the strainer and lifts this above the bowl. Holding his arms out, he twists the *fau* so that strained kava pours back into the bowl. After gathering pulp and wringing out the hibiscus bast two more times, he passes the strainer under his right knee and lobs it to an aumaga member stationed at the door of the meeting house. Catching the *fau* in his right hand, this man removes the kava dregs and cleans the strainer by snapping it smartly. With an underhand throw, he returns the *fau* to the manaia for further strainings.

Inspecting the kava as it cascades from strainer to bowl, the manaia at last judges from its color, cleanliness, and the sound of its splashing that it is ready. He snaps the strainer once himself, then uses it to lift infused kava ostentatiously into the air to stream back into the bowl. The presiding tulafale, seated behind and to the right of the bowl, watches carefully to judge whether the kava needs to be further watered down. Seeing that preparation is nearly complete, he begins a poetic recitation about the mythic origins of kava. He finishes his oration and signals the end of kava preparation ritual by announcing, "The kava is already cleansed." In response, the collected chiefs clap their hands together several times. At this point the manaia wipes the rim of the bowl with the *fau* and lays his hands upon the sides of the container.

The tulafale begins kava service by conducting a roll-call of drinkers. He sometimes calls out a man's cup title and sometimes his family title. Only important chiefs possess cup titles, which are typically flowery and allusive of local legend and myth. One of the first to drink today is summoned by his cup title: "The pigeon who flies, receive your cup." Presenting kava to lower ranking chiefs, the tulafale calls out their family titles with the invitation, "your kava," or, more simply, *taumaga* ("drink"). The man whose title has been called responds by clapping his hands or slapping his thighs.

In Samoa, as elsewhere in Polynesia and Fiji, drinking order is politically charged. Although details of the roll-call differ from place to place, the most

prestigious positions are usually at the beginning and the end of the drinking order. (The last person to drink no doubt receives a higher dose of kavalactones, which sink to the bottom of the bowl.) Typically the highest ranking matai drinks first, followed by the highest ranking tulafale; the second highest ranking matai and tulafale drink next; and so on until the potent final cup, which is drunk by a high-ranking chief or guest.

The ranking title holder, who drinks first, takes the cup in both hands and tips a few drops of kava onto the floor mat, murmuring the invocation, "May God be our leader for today." (A pre-Christian libation would instead have requested, "Let the god drink kava that this gathering may be pleasant.") He then raises his cup to his fellow drinkers and says, "*ia soifua*" ("life"); the assembly responds "*ia manaia*" ("blessings"). The chief then downs the cup of kava. Serving proceeds according to the village's status hierarchy until everyone has drunk.

The aumaga member seated at the manaia's left hand is the ceremonial kava server. He holds up a coconut shell that the manaia fills by soaking the strainer and allowing the liquid to cascade into the cup. The server stands and carries this to the drinker whose title has been announced. He pauses in the center of the house and raises the shell of kava to his forehead. Approaching the chiefly drinker, he lowers the cup and places it in the palm of his right hand, puts his left hand behind his back, and presents the kava. For talking chiefs and for lower-ranking matai, the server will use a slightly different configuration of ceremonial kava presentation. He offers the cup to a matai while showing the palm of his hand; to a tulafale he shows the back of the hand. The server then stands back three paces as the drinker empties the cup.

When the bowl is empty, the presiding talking chief announces, "The kava is finished; the strainer is dry; the chiefs from afar have emptied the bowl." The assembled chiefs respond with an expression of thanks, "*malo fa'asoaia*." Aumaga members bring in taro, rice, and tinned beef for the kava drinkers to eat. The assembly at last settles back to listen to opening speeches and chiefly deliberation about how to repair their guest house.

Wilson's Sakau Bar, Kolonia, Pohnpei
(Merlin, field observations, 1989)

It is the end of the work day in Kolonia, the urbanized center of Pohnpei, a high volcanic island in the Federated States of Micronesia. A number of the local people walk, pedal bicycles, or drive cars or trucks to Wilson's Sakau Bar. At Wilson's and several other establishments, the patrons purchase and consume *sakau* (kava). Some smoke, eat small snacks, and drink other beverages while they sip on cups of sakau with eyes closed and teeth held together. Most sit silently or



Figure 5.20. Pounding kava, Wilson's Sakau Bar, Kolonia, Pohnpei (photo M. Merlin).

converse in quiet tones. Several foreigners, including the American anthropologist Tom Keene and myself (Mark Merlin), are present, consuming the muscle-relaxing, mind-altering beverage.

At Wilson's, we can all hear the ringing sounds of water-worn hammer stones being pounded against large, flat, specially chosen lava rocks. Three or four men sit around the pounding rock, rhythmically crashing their hand-held stones upon cut pieces of kava rootstock. This traditional method of releasing kavalactones is a familiar activity on the island. For years, the one radio station on Pohnpei began its daily broadcast with the easily identifiable ping-pong sound of stone hitting stone, a

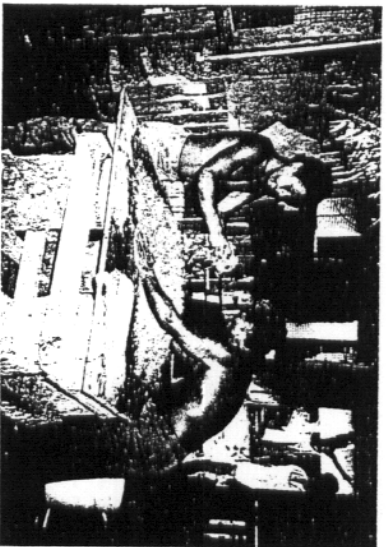


Figure 5.21. Preparing pounded kava rootstock for straining, Wilson's Sakau Bar, Kolonia, Pohnpei (photo M. Merlin).

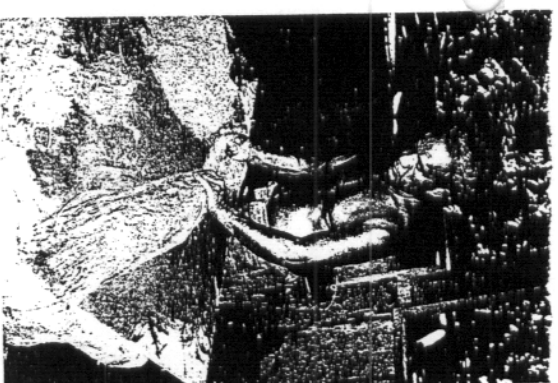


Figure 5.22. Spreading pounded kava in *Hibiscus tiliaceus* bark for straining, Kolonia, Pohnpei (photo M. Merlin).

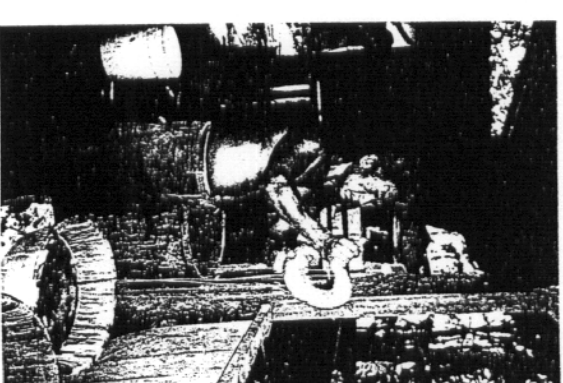


Figure 5.23. Straining kava through *Hibiscus tiliaceus* bark, Wilson's Sakau Bar, Kolonia, Pohnpei (photo M. Merlin).

distinctive symbol of Pohnpei's cultural heritage. Although so- Christian mis- sions have tried for years to suppress the use of kava, consumption. The beverage has persisted and even, in recent years, increased.

After the pieces of rootstock have been crushed by the pounders, the mashed material is moistened with water and laid out on fresh fibrous bark of *Hibiscus tiliaceus*. The slimy bark is rolled around the mashed kava rootstock and this is strained into large plastic buckets, from which the bartenders will serve sakau drinks.

In some sakau bars and less formal drinking areas, mechanical grinders are used to process kava rootstock. Machine grinding does not break down the pieces of rootstock as finely as hand pounding, however, and drinkers often complain that machine-ground sakau tastes terrible and has a smoky flavor.

At Wilson's Sakau Bar, customers purchase large plastic containers of dark, viscous sakau (U.S. \$1.20 each in 1989). Water is often added to the sakau at the bars after it has been strained, rendering the drink less potent and more muddy-looking. Nevertheless, some customers consume the contents of several of these large containers, pouring kava into smaller Styrofoam cups from which they drink. Those who drink large quantities usually depart with a wobbly gait, manifesting the characteristic muscle-relaxing effects of the drug.

Little or no beer or other alcohol is consumed at Kolonia's sakau bars; instead, soft drinks and coconut juice are available. Although connoisseurs of sakau generally are not fond of its taste and often quaff another, better-tasting beverage after sips of sakau (a modern version of the traditional use of sugarcane), alcohol consumption is discouraged because it often results in aggressive behavior. Sakau, in contrast, numbs the body but leaves the mind clear.

While sipping sakau from my cup at the bar, I remember a vivid nineteenth-century description of a Pohnpeian sakau ceremony. It reminds me of the different, yet in some ways similar, aspects of kava preparation and use in the past on Pohnpei:

The *Nach* or Council-Lodge is the scene of operations. On the raised platform above, the king or principal district-chief used to sit with the *Chaanaro* or high priests on his left hand, their long hair all ashine with uchor or scented oil, dressed in their mol or kilts of split coconut-flamets dyed orange with the juice of the Morinda, ceremonially styled the *Kiri-kei*. The lesser chiefs and commons sat around at a respectful distance. On the ground below were ranged several roundish pieces of broad shallow plates. Around these squatted the kava makers, their stone pestles swaying and ringing in sonorous rhythm as they pounded up the pieces of tough root into mere masses of trash. The root, be it observed, is neither dried in the sun as in southwestern Polynesia, nor carefully washed with water. The latter ceremony, they say, spoils the flavour and weakens the strength.

By and *ce-Mi* or ancestral spirits are supposed to be present, with Ichol- Lumpoi the *A-ul-lap*, the demon lords of the festive hall. Water is poured in, and the first cupful is squeezed out from the strainer of *Kalan* (*Hibiscus tiliaceus*) fibres. Taking the cup in his hand, the chief of the *Chaanaro*, not without blinking and shivering and other signs of demonic possession, mutters a charm for the spirits to take their place, sips a little from the cup, and pours out a drink-offering to the invisible guest. Then the bowl is offered to the king. (Christian 1899)

My thoughts returned to Wilson's Sakau Bar and my own participation in a modern sharing of sakau's physical and psychoactive experience. My associate then described a legend of the origin of sakau that recently had been told to him by a Pohnpeian man named Osaia Santos. According to legend, the sacred plant was originally smuggled off Kosrae Island in the vagina of a woman. This, he said, explains the distinctive smell of the drink, which is redolent of female genitalia. Until quite recently, only men were allowed to drink sakau on Pohnpei. On Kosrae, in Micronesia, the London Missionary Society encouraged the abandonment of sakau, although it is reportedly still grown, prepared, and consumed surreptitiously.

After finishing several cupfuls, my colleague and I bade farewell to our Pohnpeian friends and carefully walked to our hotel. Relaxed and content, we cautiously adjusted our rubber-legged stride to the effects of sakau.

Binihi Nakamal, Namburu, Port Vila, Vanuatu
(Iindstrom, field observations, 1988)

A colorful painted sign with the words "Kava Binihi Nakamal" hangs over the entrance to one of 80 or so urban *nakamals*, or kava bars, that have sprung up in Port Vila since the late 1970s. Like most of these bars, Binihi is built of local timber with coconut leaf thatch walls, and roofed with sheet aluminum. It is located in Namburu, a residential district, and is squeezed alongside a compound of shacks and modest houses, in which live people from Pentecost Island who have migrated to the capital.

Binihi's proprietor imports kava roots from Pentecost and hires five or six young Pentecost men to prepare and serve kava. The bartenders arrive at the nakamal in the afternoon to begin grinding the night's kava. They run pieces of kava root through a heavy-duty meat grinder and, using various strainers including a woman's nylon slip, infuse the ground kava with water in a metal basin. They then pour the prepared kava into gallon teakettles and wait to serve customers. In a good night 30 of these kettles will be emptied, bringing in 60,000–70,000 *vatu* (approximately U.S. \$600–\$700). Customers buy kava in small coconut shell cups costing 50 *vatu* (50 cents) or in larger shells costing 100 *vatu* (U.S. \$1).

home. More men arrive and order kava. Some leave after one or two others settle back along the benches to relax and watch others drink. A few neighborhood men, having eaten dinner, come into the nakamal. They sit down, although are short of money and do not intend to drink. Talk continues quietly among the clientele.

Prepared kava is running low, and the bartenders begin to grind more. Each will take his turn at the hard work of rotating the handle of the industrial-sized grinder. The first removes and carefully folds his shirt before bending down to the task. A Kiribati woman who lives in Vanuatu pokes her head over the halfwall and hands a bartender a plastic bottle and some money. He fills the bottle and hands it back. She leaves to drink her kava at home.

Another taxi arrives with four Australian tourists from the cruise ship docked at the wharf. They give the driver money to buy large shells, which they jokingly drink standing too close to the bar. Three down their kava quickly, in the manner of drinking a pint of beer, then make faces; one only sips and does not get very far before tipping it out onto the earthen floor. Local drinkers watch them politely. The Australians sit down with their taxi driver, light cigarettes, and talk and laugh too loudly among themselves. They soon leave for a hotel bar in town.

A group of men arrive in search of strong kava. They have tried drinking at two nakamals down the road without feeling any effects. They complain bitterly about the sale of overly watered kava, impotent kava, or stale kava from the day before. They drink a couple of shells at Binihiti but leave for another nakamal, in a continuing quest for kava with a kick.

Binihiti stays open until it runs out of kava or runs out of customers. On weekends and bimonthly paydays, it may not close until well after midnight. Tonight the bar is empty around 11:00 p.m. The bartenders clean up. One carefully closes the cash box, preparing to take it home with him. A second extinguishes the torch near the main door. Binihiti will reopen the next evening, as it does seven nights a week.

6. Economics

Kava as a Cash Crop

Sir, Mi wan man we i dring kava olaem long Vila bat mi sori tumas blong lukim se wan long yufala we i stap mekem bisnis long kava mo pem kava blong Tanna mo salern long Vila, hemi no lukluk gud long ol kava blong hem we i salem long ol stoa long plastik mo skrin. Mi bin pem mo mi wantem talemaot blong hemi save se olgeta we i livim long wan stoa long 2 dei i go, hemia i stat sting olsem i nogud finis. Hemi gud tumas sapos hemi tekemaot olgeta ia mo jensim wetem fres wan sapos no, katem daon praes. I nogud sam long yumi i krangka wetem bisnis blong kava! Pliis no mekem rabis stael long nara kaontri wetem bisnis long kava front we, kava hemi prodius blong Vanuatu mo i gat spiriti blong hem. Yufala ol bisnis man blong kava i mas respektiem!
Yours faithfully, Tufala Man Tanna, Nambatu Eria

[Sir, I'm a man who drinks kava frequently in Vila but I'm upset to see that one man who purchases kava on Tanna to sell in Vila doesn't think about the kava he sells in stores in plastic or net bags. I've purchased one and I want to say to him that kava left in a store more than two days begins to rot so that it's no good. It would be better if he replaces that kava with a fresh supply or, if not, cut down the price. It's wrong for some of us to be irresponsible in the kava business! Please don't follow the bad practices of other countries in kava business, because kava is the produce of Vanuatu and there is a spirit in it. All you kava businessmen must respect it!

Yours faithfully, two men from Tanna, Nambatu aeral

—LETTER TO THE EDITOR, *Vanuatu Weekly*, 2 November 1985

Kava is a significant cash crop in several Pacific regions, providing higher returns than other crops. This is particularly true of Fiji, Tonga, and especially Vanuatu, where recent economic surveys document the increasing commercial value of kava. Unlike copra, kava is a high-value, low-volume crop, similar to spices. As the above letter makes clear, however, the commercialization of kava can sometimes conflict with its traditional social meanings and functions.

Economic Importance of Kava in Vanuatu

Since 1980, when Vanuatu gained its independence from England and France, kava consumption there has increased, even in areas where it was not traditionally

consumed or where use of the drug was restricted to ritual or medicinal purposes. This upward trend has been reinforced by the government's policy of promoting kava as a traditional and socially acceptable alternative to alcohol. With increasing recreational use of kava and the growth of urban kava bars, imports of beer and wine in Vanuatu have fallen to about 60 percent of 1979 figures (Crowley 1991).

As a cash crop, kava has a number of advantages. Because kava growing has long been important to local farmers, the national agricultural extension service does not have to struggle to increase production (figure 6.1). In addition, the technology of kava production is familiar, ample supplies of planting material are available, small-scale production is feasible, and market prices are relatively stable. Furthermore, the return per work day is high. Although the return per hectare is lower than that of some spice crops (table 6.1), in most island regions land availability is not a constraint. A significant amount of kava is grown as a monocrop, but the plant is also suited for intercropping. Kava can be grown in conjunction with food gardens, during the establishment phase of cocoa and coffee plantations, or under coconut palms. Another advantage of the kava plant is its relative resistance to hurricane damage, an ever-present danger to Pacific farms. From an economic



Figure 6.1. In the village of Fanafo, Santo Island, Vanuatu, growing kava for sale to the French pharmaceutical industry is a community activity. This young boy is carrying on his shoulders a bag containing approximately 15 kilograms of sun-dried roots, while his friends stand in front of their kava plants (photo V. Lebot).

perspective, kava grown even in subsistence garden conditions competes impressively with other commercial crops. Assuming a planting density of 1,000 plants per hectare, a yield of 10 kilograms of fresh rootstock per plant, and a farm gate price of U.S. \$1 per kilogram, the net income per hectare is more than U.S. \$7,000 (tables 6.2 and 6.3).

Although the main economic attraction of kava is its high cash return per work day, it has other advantages over coconuts, cocoa, coffee, and, to some extent, black pepper. It matures earlier than the major tree crops. As population pressure on land resources increases in such areas as north Pentecost and Tongoa, this shorter time from planting to harvest will make kava an even more attractive crop for smallholders. Commercial processing of kava is relatively simple, especially processing for the local drinking market, which demands only that the rootstock be cleaned and dried. The international pharmaceutical market requires some additional processing, but this too can be arranged at local centers.

In spite of these advantages, some problems may slow the further commercial development of kava as an export crop, at least in the short term. A major export

Table 6.1. Comparative cash crop income in Vanuatu in 1985
(in U.S. dollars)

Crop	Income per workday ^a	Income per hectare per year	Price per ton
Kava (<i>Piper methysticum</i>)	25.15	1,786	5,870
Vanilla (<i>Vanilla fragrans</i>)	17.71	2,830	29,420
Cardamom (<i>Elettaria cardamomum</i>)	11.37	2,030	9,720
Garlic (<i>Allium sativum</i>)	10.83	2,900	1,380
Pepper (<i>Piper nigrum</i>)	9.03	1,610	2,790
Cocoa (<i>Theobroma cacao</i>)	8.96	630	1,470
Coffee (<i>Coffea arabica</i>)	8.00	750	2,670
Ginger (<i>Zingiber officinale</i>)	6.88	3,150	1,600
Copra (<i>Coos nucifera</i>)	5.00	300	450

Source: Lebot and Cabalion 1986.

^aCalculated by dividing net income per hectare by the number of work days required over the full crop cycle.

Table 6.2. Income per hectare for kava cultivate
1985 (in U.S. dollars)

Gross income (1000 plants × 10 kg/plant × \$1/kg)	\$10,000
Material and equipment costs	
Barbed wire for fencing	960
Tools	50
Purchase of cuttings	710
Labor costs (\$4/day × 284 workdays)	1,136
Total costs ^a	2,856
Income per workday	25
Net annual income per hectare	1,786
Net income per hectare ^b	7,144

Source: Lebot and Cabalion 1986.

^aIf the plantation is large, harvest drying costs should also be taken into account.

^bFor 4 years—kava takes 4 years to mature.

Table 6.3. Labor inputs for kava cultivation in
Vanuatu (workdays per hectare)

Task	Year			
	1	2	3	4
Bush clearance	50	0	0	0
Fencing upkeep	25	0	0	0
Hilling up and shading	28	0	0	0
Nursery work	10	0	0	0
Cutting and planting	28	0	0	0
Weeding	25	25	25	0
Mulching and pruning	10	15	15	0
Harvesting ^a	0	0	0	28
Total for each year	176	40	40	28
Total for four years: 284				

Source: Lebot and Cabalion 1986.

^aAt a rate of 40 plants per day.

promotion could¹ have several negative consequences. Exports might divert local supplies of roots. From Vanuatu itself. Shortages in the local market could force domestic prices to rise, and under such circumstances alcoholic beverages might be substituted for higher-priced kava. Second, without government supervision it is likely that immature kava would be harvested for the export market, jeopardizing the quality of the drug product. Third, any unfulfilled export demand or fluctuations in supply would undermine the reliability of Vanuatu as a source of kava.

Another problem involves some traditionalist communities, particularly on the islands of Tanna and Pentecost, which insist that the spheres of modern cash and traditional subsistence economies are antithetical and should be kept separate (Lindstrom 1982; Jolly 1982). These growers have serious misgivings about the commercialization of something as intimately connected with tradition as is kava. Although their needs for cash may induce traditionalist growers to commercialize kava, many people in these communities argue that it is wrong. Even with these obstacles, however, kava's importance as a market commodity is rapidly increasing throughout Vanuatu (figure 6.2).

Plantations

In 1983 and 1984, statistical surveys were carried out for the Vanuatu Ministry of Agriculture in order to guide kava development. The data collected were also used by the Vanuatu Commodities Marketing Board to devise a national purchasing system for the kava crop. The initial survey, in mid-1983, covered virtually the entire country and was conducted as part of an agricultural census. Households were randomly surveyed to determine the number of kava plants per household and per island and the distribution of the plant from island to island. According to an extrapolation of survey findings (see Lebot and Brunton 1985), 6 of the 21 kava-growing islands of Vanuatu supply 95 percent of the total crop yield. The main kava-growing islands are Tanna, Pentecost, Ambae (Aoba), Tonga, Epi, and Maewo. Pentecost and Tanna together contribute over 70 percent of the total (table 6.4).

A second survey was conducted in September 1984 to assess the plantations of individual kava growers. A questionnaire covered kava crop size, cultivar types, and relative importance of customary uses and commercial marketing. Customary requirements for kava were estimated based on the number of plants uprooted for ritual display and exchange purposes per household. This figure represents the total number of kava plants given away by a household at customary ceremonies (e.g., marriages, burials, or promotions to higher rank) during the preceding twelve months (table 6.5).

Whereas the first survey sampled random households, the second was structured primarily by geographic regions within Vanuatu. Sample units selected from

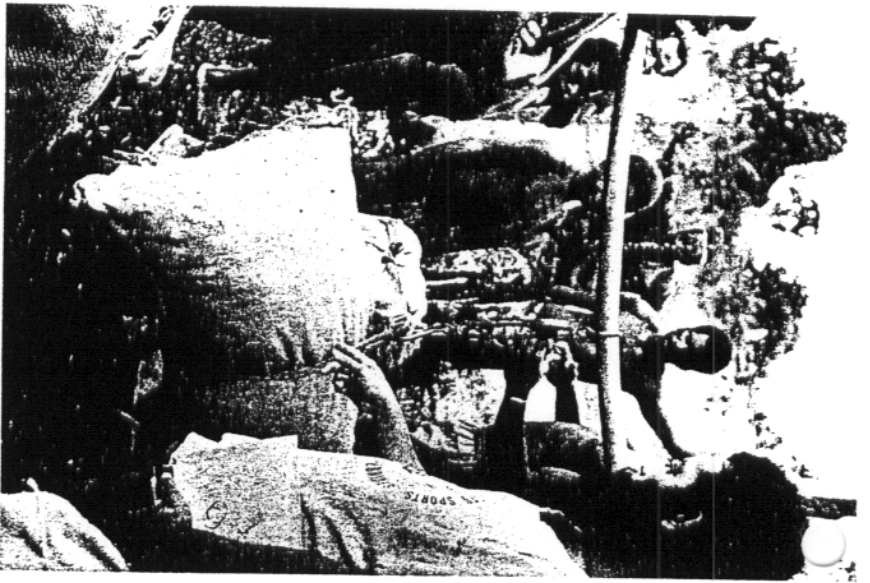


Figure 6.2. Farmers from the village of Fanalo, Santo, Vanuatu, are paid U.S. \$3 per kilogram of dried roots. The quality of the product is controlled by the Vanuatu Commodities Marketing Board in order to satisfy the pharmaceutical industry's demand for constant kavalactone content and composition. Bags of kava are transported from the village of Fanalo to the port of Luganville and loaded into a container (photo V. Lebot).

these regions were subdivided into smaller areas consisting of villages chosen at random. The survey covered 12 areas, on Ambae, Maewo, Pentecost, Paama, Epi, Tongoa, and Tanna (Lebot and Brunton 1985).

A total of 1762 households was sampled, representing about 22 percent of the households in the 12 selected regions. In only a few cases were field samplers' reports based on estimates—most data came from actual plant counts, field measurements, and other information provided by growers. In East Ambae, no Seventh-Day Adventist village was surveyed even though there are many such villages

Table 6.4. Estimated number of kava plants in Vanuatu by island, 1984

Island	Households	Plants	Plants per household	Percentage of total plants in Vanuatu
Ambae	1,821	249,846	137	10
Maewo	439	71,339	163	3
Pentecost	2,234	823,724	369	32
Paama	569	43,813	77	2
Epi	609	112,056	184	4
Tongoa	671	169,092	252	7
Tanna	3,487	1,001,629	287	38
Other islands	— ^a	134,136	— ^a	4
Total	22,054	2,605,635	118	100

Source: Lebot and Calhoun 1986.

^aData not available.

in the area, because this church strictly forbids its members to grow or drink kava. For Tanna, the two areas surveyed (Middle Bush and Southeast) made it possible to estimate kava production in the other two areas (Southwest and East Tanna). According to farmers' counts, 26 percent of the total supply of kava plants are ready for harvest at any given time. This indicates that full-field rotation of the whole kava crop takes place over an average of four years in Vanuatu. Significant

Table 6.5. Plants harvested in Vanuatu for customary purposes during one year

Region	Households surveyed	Plants harvested for customary purposes	Plants harvested per household
West Ambae	2	7	4
East Ambae	72	3946	55
North Maewo	78	575	7
South Maewo	24	2613	109
North Pentecost	128	4547	36
Central Pentecost	110	1240	11
South Pentecost	26	65	3
Paama	52	402	8
Epi	54	296	5
Tongoa	104	1264	12
Central Tanna	171	2878	17
South Tanna	53	682	13
Total	872	16,488	21

Source: Lebot and Brunton 1985.

variation was observed, however, in the age of kava that growers considered ready for harvest. Although ecological or genetic factors may influence ... age at which plants reach maturity, assessment of a kava plant's maturity is subjective and is related to individual taste and community needs.

During the sampling period, for example, only 1 percent of the plants surveyed were considered ready for harvest in West Ambae, whereas 25 percent were recognized as mature in the eastern part of that island. The very low figures in West Ambae reflect social pressures exerted by the churches rather than soil or climatic limitations. The Church of Christ is the dominant religion in this region, and the Seventh-Day Adventist church has some influence. Until the 1970s both churches were strongly opposed to kava use and cultivation. More recently, however, some members of the Church of Christ have started using kava again—explaining the healthy level of kava consumption recorded in the Church of Christ NdauNdau area. Members in good standing of the Seventh-Day Adventist church still do not drink kava, but they cultivate plants to satisfy customary ceremonial obligations. This kava is left in the ground longer than kava for domestic consumption, to produce the large, mature plants appropriate for ceremonial exchange.

The number of cultivated plants recorded in October 1984 was well over 3 million (averaging 1000 plants on each of the more than 3000 hectares where kava was cultivated). According to field samplers' observations, many farmers deliberately underestimated the number of plants they grew or marketed, fearful of future taxes on their crops. Some may even have hidden whole gardens. Figures on crop size should therefore be considered low—the survey probably underestimated the scope of cultivation by about 20 percent.

We might assume that Vanuatu's kava crop varies only slightly from year to year because new plants are established in proportion to those harvested, and every uprooted plant yields stem cuttings. In recent years, however, many farmers have increased their plantations by as much as 15 percent per year. In 1984, field estimates indicated that 157,000 plants were less than one year old and 137,000 were older than one year. Kava production has recently increased because kava consumption in the country has expanded (supply is developing with demand) and because producers have responded to media reports of export opportunities and hope to sell surplus kava outside their villages.

Overproduction risks remain low, however, inasmuch as unsold kava may be left in the ground to continue to grow. Most farmers with too many plants also voluntarily slow their planting rate. Because the labor input needed to establish a kava garden is minimal, a farmer who does not sell his crop in the market is perhaps less disappointed than the farmer of a more labor-intensive crop. Furthermore, a kava garden traditionally is a source of pride and is always a social, if not an economic, asset.

Trade Networks

Fresh kava is a perishable good that deteriorates quickly; it needs to be transported directly from plantations on the outer islands to urban markets. The commercial ships working in Vanuatu, which also carry outer-island cocoa or copra (dried coconut meat) to the entrepôts of Port Vila and Luganville, call erratically at a large number of ports, often only on demand. Only a small number of these vessels carry significant amounts of kava on a regular basis. Most charge U.S. \$5 freight per bag, which weigh approximately 60 kilograms (Lamboll 1988). Calculation of freight charges by the bag creates a strong incentive to pack as much kava as possible into one bag; this often results in higher spoilage losses. In spite of the irregular shipping schedules, the transport of kava from outer islands to urban areas is mainly by sea because of the savings in freight costs over air transport. Nevertheless, significant quantities are now also moved by air, largely from Tongoa to Port Vila. The cost of air freight generally prohibits the carriage of kava over longer distances—e.g., from Penecost, Maewo, or Tanna to Port Vila (table 6.6).

Like other traditional agricultural produce in Vanuatu, kava often passes through many transactions involving numerous middlemen before reaching the market. Ninety percent of farmers sell their kava to traders or friends. Only 1 percent of those households that sell kava deal directly with the inter-island cargo ships. More often the farmer supplies a middleman on his home island, a middleman in town, or a kava bar (*nukamal*) directly (figure 6.3; table 6.7).

The distribution of revenue from kava sales varies considerably depending on where a sale takes place. Prices differ at the farm gate, on the beach where kava is sold to trading vessels, and in town. In some cases farmers pay a proportion of the shipping and taxi costs to transport their kava to specific markets. Middlemen in town typically pay middleman back on the island where the kava was grown, after

Table 6.6. Estimated tonnage of kava transported by sea and air from main islands of production to Port Vila and Santo, June 1987–May 1988

Island of production	Transported to		Total
	Port Vila	Santo	
Penecost	220	80	300
Tanna	92	0	92
Lipi	32	0	32
Tongoa	40	0	40
Total	384	80	464

Source: Lamboll 1988.

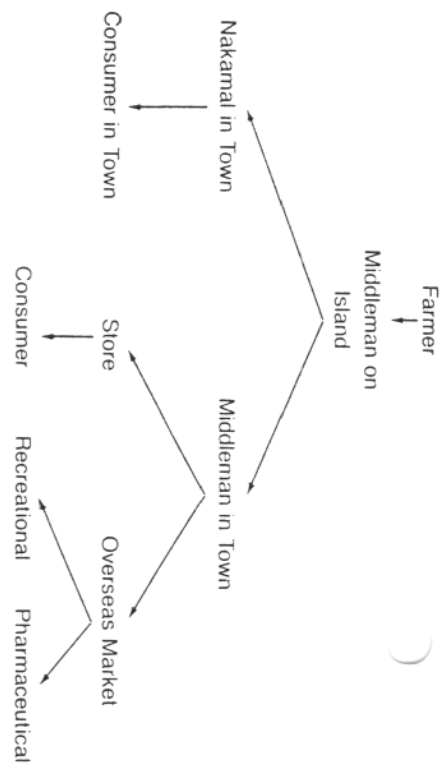


Figure 6.3. Marketing channels for kava in Vanuatu.

they have sold the rootstock product. Island middlemen pay farmers once they themselves are paid. Losses in transit are usually incurred by the farmer, unless there are mitigating circumstances.

Much of the commercial kava from Pentecost Island is marketed by one particularly large kava store in Port Vila and by Pentecost-owned kava bars, the owners of which in some cases also act as middlemen, selling rootstock to other town nakamals and stores or by the piece directly to the consumer. Pentecost kava is still essentially a garden crop, although some farmers are now planting relatively large areas. In general, farmers sell their kava to middlemen on the island. Northern and especially central Pentecost growers have well-developed systems of brokers who

Table 6.7. Sources of kava sold to Port Vila and Santo (in kilograms)

Source	Sold to		Total
	Port Vila	Santo	
Commercial farmers	40,139	33,122	73,261 (32%)
Family farmers	30,325	6,080	36,405 (16%)
Middlemen on islands	80,861	7,880	88,741 (39%)
Middlemen in towns	27,322	2,506	29,828 (13%)
Other	846	0	846 ^a
Total	179,493	49,588	229,081

Source: Lamboll 1988.

^aOther sources account for only 0.36 percent of the total.

buy and sell kava, trying as profit the margin between their price paid and their price received. Some middlemen also act as agents, buying and selling on behalf of other parties and receiving a commission, although this function is usually performed by a family member of the grower (table 6.8; Lamboll 1988).

On Tanna, in the south of the archipelago, kava is an important traditional crop, but because of population pressure on land resources and the effects of volcanic activity and hurricanes on cultivation, it is not evenly distributed throughout the island. The main area of commercial production is an area known as Middle Bush. Internal trade is much more prevalent here than elsewhere in Vanuatu. Tannese production of kava is still very much a garden activity, and many farmers fly or sail to Port Vila to market their own kava without going through a middleman.

The vagaries of weather play a crucial role in the harvesting and marketing of the kava crop. On Tongoa, a small, densely populated island with a high concentration of kava plants per household, a hurricane in 1987 damaged much of the kava crop, and many of the injured plants had to be quickly harvested. Although this temporarily reduced the number of plants in the ground, it increased the volume of kava that reached the market in Port Vila. Eight nakamals owned by people from Tongoa opened in Port Vila during the early part of 1988 to sell off hurricane-damaged kava.

Table 6.8. Distribution of gross revenue from kava sales, June 1987–May 1988

	Kava sold (kg)	Price (U.S. \$/kg)	Gross revenue (U.S. \$)
Farmers	229,081	0.67 ^a	153,859
Pentecost	151,714	0.60	91,028
Tanna	25,567	0.70	17,896
Epi	16,022	0.90	14,419
Shepherds	20,662	0.90	18,595
Santo	9,603	0.90	8,647
Other	5,513	0.60	3,307
Middlemen	229,081	1.16 ^b	264,979
Nakamals	229,081	4.00 ^c	916,324 ^d

Source: Lamboll 1988.

^aFarm gate price

^bLanded price in Port Vila or Santo

^cAverage revenue from sale of kava drink per kg of rootstock

^dNo allowance made for wastage

Nakamals

Urban nakamals (commercial establishments selling prepared kava in Port Vila and Santo) are a modern development in Vanuatu and have increased in number dramatically in recent years. Although their purpose is to make a profit, urban nakamals have retained some of the character and functions of traditional island nakamals—the houses or forest clearings in which men gather to drink kava. Sixty-eight urban nakamals were counted in June 1988, 59 in Port Vila and 9 in Santo. The oldest of these nakamals claimed to have opened in 1977, and only 10 percent were established before 1984 (Lamboll 1988). These commercial urban enterprises have short lives; half of nakamals surveyed in 1988 had been open for only six months. The cost of establishing a nakamal is relatively low. Capital inputs are local in origin and labor is inexpensive. The cost of operating a nakamal is also low, with potentially high returns. According to a recent report, only a third of nakamal owners have other businesses (Lamboll 1988), an indication that mostly new entrepreneurs are entering the market.

Although a nakamal is potentially a profitable business, owners face a number of economic challenges. For example, some customers do not pay after buying kava on credit, and a regular supply of good quality kava is often difficult to sustain. Furthermore, the number of customers is sometimes unpredictable, leading to deficiencies in supply or the need to throw away infused kava drink at the end of the night.

Having found a suitable site and constructed an appropriate shelter for the nakamal, the owner must obtain a regular supply of good quality kava. This supply may come through a middleman in town, although this increases costs, or from the owner's home island. Staff may be employed to prepare the kava by hand, or kava grinding may be done by machine. One of the larger nakamals offers a grinding service where any amount of kava can be processed for a set fee (U.S. \$3.50, according to Lamboll 1988). Since 1986, nakamals have been required to have a government business license, which costs U.S. \$20 per year. Most nakamals are open every night of the week (figure 6.4). Those that close usually do so on Sunday for religious reasons.

Nakamal kava is normally served in half coconut shells of roughly standard volume (approximately 100–150 milliliters). In 1990 a small shellful in Port Vila cost U.S. \$50 and a larger shellful U.S. \$1.00 (Lebot, field observations, 1990; figure 6.5). Prices for these two sizes in Santo are lower—about U.S. \$30 and U.S. \$50, respectively. There has been no apparent price competition among nakamals, even in Port Vila. However, given the growing number of kava bars, the market is becoming increasingly tight. Competition takes place in the size of the shell drinking vessel, the quality of the kava offered, and the availability of food and

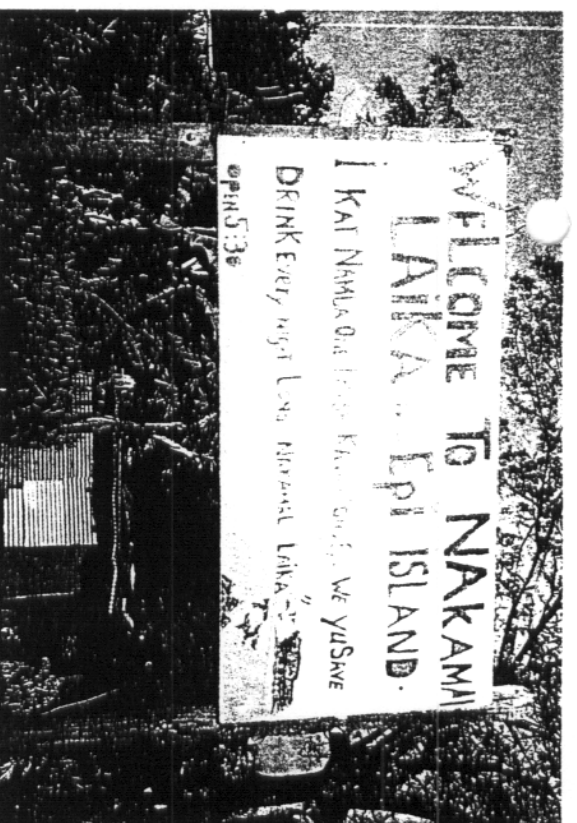


Figure 6.4. This nakamal sign declares that "fresh kava from the island of Epi is the best! You can drink it every night in the Laika nakamal!" (photo L. Lindstrom).

credit at the nakamal. Recently, one owner has attempted to entertain customers, especially European tourists, by offering a floor show of traditional dances and also occasional free shells of kava (Mangnall 1990).

Middlemen from outer islands are the source of much of the kava that reaches urban nakamals (39 percent of the total); direct purchase of kava rootstock from commercial farmers accounts for 32 percent; and owners' friends and relatives provide a further 16 percent. Urban middlemen are relatively less important, supplying an estimated 13 percent of the kava consumed in Vila and Santo nakamals (Lamboll 1988). Kava rootstock is also sold in town from ships coming from the outer islands.

Many factors determine the number of shells of kava that can be obtained from one kilogram of rootstock. According to nakamal owners, these factors include the size of the shell, the cultivar source, the age of the plant when harvested, and the desired strength of the beverage. The range is 2 to more than 20 shells (200 milliliters to 2 liters) per kilogram of fresh rootstock, with an average of 8 shells (Lamboll 1988). Based on this average and the estimate of 229,081 kilograms of kava consumed in urban nakamals between June 1987 and May 1988, 1,832,648 shells of kava were sold during this period. This amounts to 321 shells per year for



Figure 6.5. This *nakamal* sign written in Bislama indicates that cups of kava cost U.S. \$.50 and U.S. \$1.00. The notice says, "Welcome! Fresh kava already prepared and strong [potent]. You are welcomed to come and drink with your friends, to discuss kava and business!" (photo L. Lindstrom).

each male aged twenty and over living in Vila and Santo, or about 6 shells per male per week (equivalent to 600 milliliters or 6 grams of kava resin; Lebot 1988).

The gross annual revenue to country farmers from the sale of kava to *nakamals* is approximately U.S. \$150,000. Each kilogram of kava processed and sold earns the *nakamal* approximately U.S. \$4; with an estimated 229,081 kilograms processed per year, the potential gross revenue of Vila and Santo *nakamals* is about U.S. \$916,000. Taking an average landed price of U.S. \$1.20 per kilogram in Vila and U.S. \$1.00 per kilogram in Santo, middlemen and transporters collectively receive estimated gross annual kava revenues of U.S. \$260,000.

Sales of kava from rural to urban areas of Vanuatu are estimated at 400 tons per year, with an additional 50 tons of fresh rootstock being exported after drying. Compared to nationwide revenues from copra and cocoa, the value of kava production in Vanuatu is still small, representing in 1987 just 3 percent of the total for these crops combined (table 6.9). However, kava is for many farmers an increasingly important source of income. In some areas like Tongoa, it is the primary cash crop. Because Tongoa is densely populated and most arable land must be devoted to subsistence agriculture, only cultivation of crops with high unit value is econom-

Table 6.9. Annual yields of copra, cocoa, and kava in Vanuatu, 1987

Crop	Sales (tons)	Price (U.S. \$/ton)	Revenue (U.S. \$)	Percentage of revenue
Copra	36,369	204	7,419,276	82
Cocoa	1,185	1,159	1,373,415	15
Kava	400	670	268,000	3

Source: Data from the Statistics Office and the Department of Agriculture, Vanuatu, 1988.

ical. Kava does not require the capital, labor, or land inputs of large-scale plantation crops like copra, cocoa, and coffee, and therefore serves as a major cash crop on heavily populated islands where the production unit is the family subsistence garden.

Kava as a Cash Crop in Fiji and Tonga

In Fiji, because of a large internal market, the importance of kava as a cash crop is greater than in Vanuatu (tables 6.10 and 6.11). Most commercial Fijian kava is consumed locally, although some enters the export market. Kava is grown throughout the country, usually in small plots, although stands are more prolific in the Eastern and Northern divisions (figures 6.6, 6.7, and 6.8). The two largest growers in 1985 were Carpenters Company on Taveuni island, with 10.5 hectares, and Charlie Yet in Savu Savu, Viti Levu, with 12.5 hectares (Sofler 1985).

The proportion of the total kava crop that enters the retail market is uncertain; this is estimated to be about 50 percent, suggesting that about 8800 tons were actually harvested in 1984 rather than the 4400 tons counted in a government report. Based on the value of kava at the time (about U.S. \$4.50 per kilogram), this

Table 6.10. Yields and values of cash crops in Fiji

Crop	Area (ha)	Total yield (thousands of tons)	Crop value (U.S. \$/ha)	Market price (U.S. \$/kg)	Total value (millions of U.S. \$)
Sugar	69,000	373.0	1,093	0.20	75.39
Kava	2,200	4.4	8,400	4.20	18.48
Cassava	4,100	49.2	1,610	0.14	6.86
Taro	2,400	15.0	1,890	0.30	4.55
Rice	10,442	22.2	417	0.21	4.34
Ginger	130	3.3	16,692	0.64	2.17

Source: Fiji Ministry of Primary Industries Annual Report for 1984; Sofler 1985.

Table 6.11. Stand composition and size, number of farms, distribution of kava in Fiji, 1981

Political Division	Pure Stands (ha)	Mixed Stands (ha)	Average size of pure stand		Number of farms	Production (tons)
			croplands	per farm (ha)		
Western	220	51	0.18	1076	400	
Central	116	192	0.12	1943	600	
Northern	293	415	0.21	2280	1400	
Eastern	314	821	0.12	3981	2000	
Total	943	1479	0.15	9280	4400	

Source: Fiji Ministry of Primary Industries Annual Report for 1984.

represents a gross return to growers of U.S. \$39.6 million. If the production costs given by Soler (1985) are correct (U.S. \$1200 per hectare), then the cost of producing the crop was about U.S. \$2.64 million (2200 hectares at \$1200 per hectare), yielding a net return to growers of about U.S. \$37 million. This is a substantial amount of income for a small Third World country.

In neighboring Tonga, an agricultural census of 1985 estimated that 1489 households (15 percent of the total) planted about 141 hectares of kava. Of these households, 341 reported harvesting 34 hectares in 1985, producing 279 tons of kava stumps and roots (Mulk 1988). This suggests a Tongan kava production of 231,215 plants in 1985, up from the 1982 crop yield. Rathey (1984) estimated that



Figure 6.6. Traditional kava growing on Tavenui, Fiji. This farmer cultivates his kava plants under the natural shade provided by the forest canopy (photo V. Lebot).

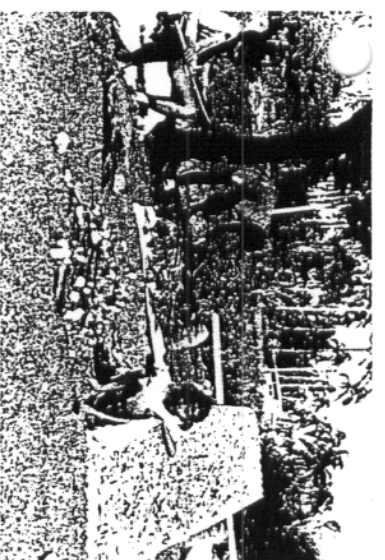


Figure 6.7. A Fijian-Indian family cleans, cuts, and grades its kava harvest. The roots (waka), the pieces of the stump (lewena), and the basal stems (kasa) are sun-dried separately (photo V. Lebot).

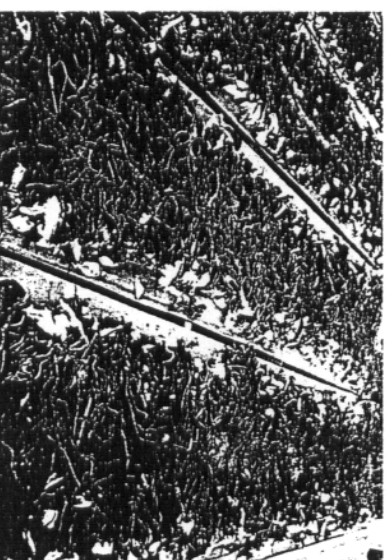


Figure 6.8. Roots being sun-dried, Tavenui, Fiji (photo V. Lebot).

1982 kava production was 104 tons from 44 hectares, with a mean yield of 2.36 tons per hectare.

The Export Market

Processing

Kava has considerable export potential in the regional and world markets, both as a drink and as a medicinal plant. In recent years, although Fiji has exported kava to

Pacific Rim markets, where it is purchased by island emigrants. It has also imported approximately 50 tons of dry kava rootstock annually for . . . A consumption, mostly from Samoa and Tonga. Communities of Pacific Islanders in New Zealand, Australia, and the United States consume about 10 tons per year according to a recent market survey (Vanuatu Commodities Marketing Board, personal communication, 1990). The market with perhaps the greatest potential is Southeast Asia, although import and marketing firms have stated that Pacific kava producers are not yet sufficiently organized to satisfy on a regular basis a potential Asian demand. Further investment in and development of commercial kava products could yield high export profits. Regional Pacific markets are the most promising, particularly the Melanesian countries (New Caledonia, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea), where alcoholism is rife and governments may be interested in importing an alcohol substitute. Hawaii is also a possible market, if Hawaiian nationalists or the tourist industry revive moribund traditions of *ʻāina* drinking. Some health food and herbalist stores in the U.S. currently market kava powder, and demand there may also increase (figure 6.9).

For the export market, freshly harvested kava rootstock must be protected from deterioration. This requires careful washing of the rootstock in water to remove soil particles. The stump must be separated from the lateral roots, which form a higher-grade commercial product. The stumps may also be peeled, in which case these peelings become a third grade of commercial product. Depending on the intended use, purchasers may prefer stumps, roots, or peelings. The kavalactone content of these grades differs, with the roots having the highest level of these active principles (see chapter 4). Stumps and roots are sliced and laid out in the sun in pieces small enough to dry quickly. Sun-drying yields a high-quality product, but is not always possible in humid and rainy climates. Use of a hot-air dryer of the kind used to make copra is an alternative process. The moisture content of dried kava must be reduced to less than 12 percent of mass in order to avoid risk of mold. After drying, pieces of stump can be packed in 40-kilogram jute sacks that allow the contents to breathe.

Current practice in the South Pacific is for kava stumps and roots to be further processed locally by grinding. Dried material is ground into a fine powder, from which the drink can easily be prepared by infusion in fresh water followed by filtration. This product is popular throughout the region, although the process makes adulteration easy, as Dove (1981) has noted of Fiji. In Vanuatu, such recent developments as the proliferation of urban nakamals, an increase in the number of kava drinkers, and the importation of more powerful grinders may also lead to adulteration problems in that country. Standardization and quality control of kava powder being sold for internal consumption eventually may be necessary.

Pieces of dry stump and roots are also exported in bulk from Vanuatu to French

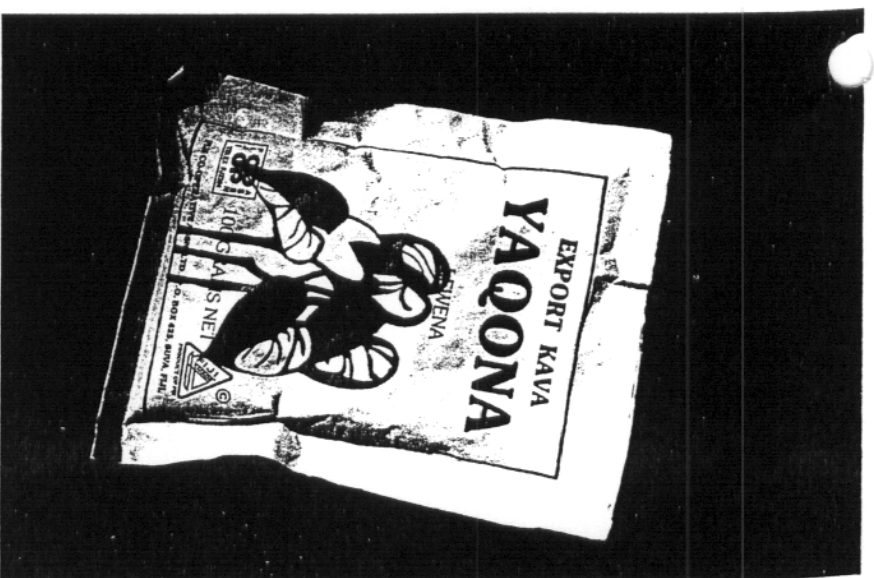


Figure 6.9. Bag of powdered basal stems (*lewena*) of Fijian kava (*yaqona*) for sale on the export market (photo M. Merlin).

pharmaceutical companies. This kava product is processed into a brown hydroalcoholic extract that is highly hygroscopic and partially soluble in water and alcohol. The French pharmaceutical industry purchases an average of 30 tons of dried kava rootstock annually from Vanuatu. The market has remained stable, showing little fluctuation during the past 10 years (Lebot, personal observation, 1980–90).

If export market demand increased, more refined extraction processes could be developed. Extraction processes vary according to the required end product and the raw material used (e.g., dry or fresh leaves or roots). Industrial extraction methods can create the following kava products: a freeze-dried extract from a

filtered macerate; an essential oil obtained by distilling leucogenone with water (a drawing-off process utilizing steam); and an extract of active kavalactones isolated using volatile solvents. Dihydrokavain, for example, can be extracted quite easily with hexane and crystallized when cooled, producing an inexpensive active ingredient (Lebot, personal observation, 1988). However, technical and economic issues regarding this last method of kavalactone extraction need to be explored further. Of particular concern is the selectivity and suitability of the solvent with regard to boiling point and thermal stability, availability (an important factor in the South Pacific), cost, and recycling possibilities (because the kava extract would be produced for the pharmaceutical market, no solvent should remain in the extraction).

Jössang and Molho (1970), for example, found Hänsel's method of extraction of dihydromethysticin and dihydrokavain (which produced 4.0 and 3.3 grams, respectively, from a kilogram of rootstock) to be inefficient. They evolved a method of isolating dihydromethysticin through simple cold crystallization of solutions obtained from extracts of ground and dried kava leaves using hexane or petroleum ether. Jössang and Molho noted that kava leaves represent a "particularly convenient" source for obtaining active substances at low cost because harvesting leaves does not destroy a plant as does use of its stump and roots. In addition, they suggested that "from a pharmacodynamic point of view, leaves should be studied for their properties because of their high dihydrokavain and dihydromethysticin contents, these compounds being by far the most effective of the various constituents in terms of their mood-elevating and anticonvulsive activity" (Jössang and Molho 1970).

Spray-dried hydrosoluble powder is another kava product that could be locally produced. Manufacture of an instant, ready-to-use kava is probably the most promising use for such powder. A process for the manufacture of a value-added, spray-dried powder has been developed, and the transfer of this technology to the Pacific is currently under study. A pilot processing plant may soon be set up in Port Vila, Vanuatu (Vanuatu Commodities Marketing Board, personal communication, 1990).

Kava and Western Medicine

When Hänsel concluded his studies of *Piper methysticum* in 1968, he wondered why kava, with its obvious therapeutic potential, was so little used in the modern pharmacopoeia. Although Western pharmacologists have not totally ignored the use of natural extracts of kava, they have yet to realize kava's full potential, no doubt in part because the availability of raw material has always been inadequate. The history of medical applications of kava clearly illustrates problems of modern use of

traditional products. First, one must decide which products of the plant to use: powder or extracts, natural or synthetic products, natural compounds or the most suitable by-products. Second, a new medicine must be more efficient or cheaper than the one it is replacing, or offer a hitherto unavailable therapeutic effect. Third, along with magistral preparations, traditional remedies are disappearing from modern pharmacists' shops. These medications often must be prepared upon request and sometimes are highly perishable.

Curzent (1860) was one of the earliest, if not the first, to make various durable galenical forms from kava stumps and roots, perhaps out of curiosity. Without stating their exact usages, he listed some possible applications of these preparations, including a crystalline substance he called kavahine, alcoholate (an alcoholic tincture containing kavahine), oenolate, alcohol extract, pills, oleoresin, essential oil, and kavahine syrup. Toward the end of the 1800s, a kava extract (or methysticum, as the Germans referred to it) was available over the counter in herbalist shops (Sterly 1970). Kava first appeared as a drug in the European pharmaceutical market in 1920, where it was described as "an efficacious sedative and hypotensive agent" (Schübel 1924).

In the twentieth century, kava-based remedies appeared for a number of years in the official English pharmacopoeia and in the British pharmaceutical codex, from which they disappeared only in 1949 (Barrau 1956b). Under the name of "kavae rhizoma," kava also was listed in the *British Pharmacopoeia* of 1914; but this reference is absent from the 1932 edition of the same publication. Kava likewise appeared in the American pharmacopoeia, the *U.S. Dispensary*, and was prescribed to treat chronic irritations of the urogenital tract resulting from blennorrhoea (a bacterial infection of the urogenital organs similar to gonorrhoea). The effectiveness of this treatment was said to have been discovered during the nineteenth century by kava-drinking European castaways in Polynesia. The second part of the *U.S. Dispensary* of 1950 prescribed liquid kava extract in doses of one to three cubic centimeters. The names of the preparations were gonosan and neurocardin (Raymond 1951; Keller and Klohs 1963). Kava-based remedies were also once listed in the Finnish and Venezuelan pharmacopoeia, until 1975 in Finland and until 1942 in Venezuela (Barrau 1957).

Before World War II, the Japanese used *P. methysticum* from the island of Pohnpei to prepare a pharmaceutical product. Riesenberg (1968) reports that Japanese settlers on Pohnpei "are said to have manufactured pills from kava as a specific against gonorrhoea. The Japanese are supposed to have bought several thousand yen worth of kava annually for shipment to Osaka to be reduced to pills; one native chief states that he sold 540 yens worth in one sale. Some of the pills found their way back to Pohnpei [Pohnpei] for sale to the Japanese there." In 1985, Japanese newspapers reported the virtues of Fijian kava as a remedy against colds

and coughing. While making an official visit to the Pacific in 1971, Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone boasted that a bowl of kava cured his cold within 24 hours.

The National Health Scheme in France now recognizes Kavase, a medicine containing kava extract (figure 6.10). In 1975, L. Bezanger-Beauguesne, M. Pinkas, and M. Torck identified five allopathic and one homeopathic medicines containing kava that are distributed in France. However, *Le Dictionnaire Vidal*, a commercial pharmaceutical directory, listed only three kava-based medicines in 1972 and two in 1980. These are indicated for decongestive action in the pelvic area, with associated antiseptic and sedative effects. In Switzerland, Kavaform, a therapeutic containing synthetic kavain, is also on the market.

Standardization

For commercial purposes, it may be necessary to standardize products sold as genuine kava. The adulteration of powdered kava available in Fijian markets was revealed by Duve and Prasad (1981). The adulterants were not stated, but it would seem that the fibrous residue from kava extractions (called *makas* in the Bislama language of Vanuatu) is the most probable candidate. After preparation of the

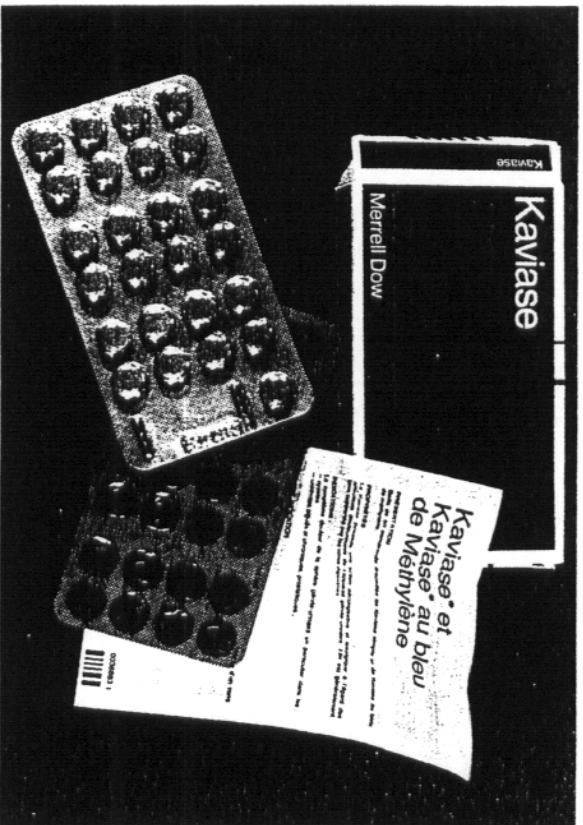


Figure 6.10. Kavase is manufactured in France using natural kava extract from select Vanuatu cultivars (photo V. Lebot).

drink, infused with a residues are relatively rich in fiber, but their total kavalactone concentration is diminished. Adulteration apparently involves products containing lactones, rather than material from other plant species—for example, drugs from the extraction of sugarcane, which are abundant in Fiji during the cane harvesting period but which do not contain kavalactones (Duve and Prasad 1981). Adulteration with kava residue could explain variations in the strength of kava powders found on the Fijian market, although this variation also reflects use of cultivars with diverse chemotypes.

Problems of product adulteration might be aggravated by increases in sales and exports of powdered kava for both drinking and pharmacological purposes, especially if related species of *Piper* or *Macropiper* are sold as kava. It is now technically possible, however, to establish quality control based on chemotypic analysis. Because the chemical characteristics of kava's various forms are known, product standards could be established and enforced on a firmer basis.

The two most important groups of commercial kava buyers today are the European pharmaceutical industry, which is mainly interested in raw product with a high kavalactone content, and recreational drinkers, who want kava that satisfies their aesthetic requirements for flavor, odor, and psychoactive and physiological effects. The supply of kava must be well managed to meet pharmacological export demands for kavalactone products without creating a shortage of more drinkable kava for the internal market. In Vanuatu, for example, the lactone content of cultivars varies considerably, from 4 to 22 percent of dry weight (see chapter 3). Only some of these cultivars are consumed regularly. If necessary, the less palatable and less commonly drunk cultivars could be used to meet demands from the pharmaceutical industry. In this context one can draw parallels between kava and wine. Similar ranges of quality can be observed in both drugs. The pharmaceutical industry wants kava rootstock with high kavalactone content—this is “table” kava. The individual drinker, on the other hand, is typically more interested in taste and quality—in “good” or “vintage” kava. Both the pharmaceutical and the recreational markets for kava products hold the promise of valuable export opportunities for kava-producing Pacific Island nations.