

SUSTAINABILITY OF KAVA TRADE

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Kava is a unique contribution by Pacific societies to international trade. It has become a major source of external revenue for at least four Pacific Island nations. It is sold mainly to European pharmaceutical companies who manufacture its main component into pills to sell to the growing market of people wanting herbal remedies in place of synthetic medicines. This use of kava product stands in direct contrast with its customary usage as a ritual invocant to the gods and honorific of status (Pollock 1995, Lebot et al. 1998; Brunton 1985). Thus kava today simultaneously appeals to two markets, one traditional and one modern. The question is whether both are sustainable.

These two positions were highlighted at a recent court case in Wellington in which a Tongan was accused of driving under the influence of kava, but was acquitted. The judge found that kava was not registered as a drug in New Zealand under NZ traffic laws, nor could kava be cited beyond reasonable doubt as the main cause of the traffic detention. The evidence pitted the social uses of kava for a social celebration, as cited by the accused, against the medical concerns of a drug taken by individuals for personal reasons, either as a medicament, or as a relaxant, or dietary supplement. The case has thus raised the issue whether or not kava can be labelled a drug.

Celebrations using kava root are not new. They have been part of expanding Pacific society for over 1000 years, and were one of the main products of vegiculture that were taken to new lands as early settlers moved east (Lebot 1995). New varieties were developed and carried by visitors on their journeys as a gift of honour and friendship. Thus the *Piper methysticum* cultivars today are the products of selective cultivation out of the wild form *P. wichmanii* (Lebot 1995). We can only surmise the reasons for the selective breeding of the plant. One would have been its suitability to new ecological surroundings, another would have been its endurance on long voyages. A third reason often suggested by western commentators may be its relaxant qualities, sometimes labelled as a narcotic drug, as in Brunton's title *Kava, The Abandoned Narcotic* (1985). This issue will be further discussed below.

The active compound isolated by western chemists is the kavalactones. These are found mainly in the roots, and in some cases in the lower stem. It is the kavalactones which are considered highly desirable in western herbal medicine as they induce relaxation and assist sleep. They are also prescribed by some doctors for stress, and to reduce anxiety (Greenwood-Robinson 1999). These are the desirable qualities by western standards.

In Polynesian societies, kava was prepared as part of a ritual presentation. A special person, such as a Taupou in Samoa mixed the crushed or pounded root of the kava plant with large amounts of water, sieved out the fibrous material, and half filled a coconut shell cup to be carried by specially designated servers to the appropriate people. A senior participant had the task of calling the order of servings. All participants were seated cross legged on the ground in a semi-circle with the kava bowl, the mixer and servers assembled at the open end, opposite the most high ranking person present. Thus kava servings were a recognition of the relative social status of those assembled. Such ritual may be preceded or followed by food, served in abundance, and dancing presented by the community hosting the ritual.

We argue here that this plant contributes to the world's biodiversity by offering a range of options to different populations. Its labelling as a drink, as in kava tea, or a drug is an open question. But its development is determined by demand for various properties that people consider desirable. These may be for its social importance, or for its usage in medical situations. I consider both those demands to be culturally constructed. In order to highlight the cultural importance I cite five cultural variations in usage from different parts of the Pacific.

Vanuatu

Northern Vanuatu is considered to be the ‘homeland’ of the kava plant, where its wild form *P. wichmanii* is found alongside modern forms and the greatest range of variants is found (Lebot et al. 1996). From there it spread possibly directly to Tonga (Luders 1996) and thence to other parts of Polynesia, including Hawai’i, and to Pohnpei in Micronesia.

While people of Epi, Northern Vanuatu, still use it today in their rituals (Young 1995), the people of Tanna, Southern Vanuatu, are among the most active users today, (Lindstrom 1990). As Brunton (1989) has shown, kava was banned by missionaries in the early 20th century, but made a very vigorous come-back after independence in 1978. Today it is recognised as the national drink of Vanuatu (Crowley 1995), with kava bars, or nakamel, selling shells (half coconut shells) of kava for fifty cents. It is most usually men’s drink.

This Vanuatu kava is among the strongest forms of kava, in part because it is made from the green root, before it is dried, and in part because of the smaller amount of water added than in other Pacific societies. Both Pacific drinkers and outsiders confirm its strength in contrast to other forms of kava (Pers. Comm).

Tonga

Tonga is the Polynesian homeland of kava. It has the strongest tradition of maintenance of kava use for ceremonials and to recognize status. Luders (1996) argues that kava plant was introduced directly from northern Vanuatu to Tonga, though others have suggested that it came to Tonga via Fiji. The early Tongan maritime empire in the 15th and 16th centuries was certainly a time when kava customs became shared by those under Tongan rule. Fiji, Wallis, Futuna, Rotuma and Niue all shared in this development of the kava plant and its associated ritual. Sharing has been maintained as the main symbol of kava.

The kava circle is very formalized with the King, or highest ranking person present sitting in the centre and the ranked dignitaries to his left or right. At the open end opposite the highest ranked guest is the kava bowl, with the kava maker seated behind, supported by a number of young men and women, as well as the Master of Ceremonies. The kava root is pounded and water added, with the liquid being sieved of any fibrous material before it is served.

So the status of everyone seated in the kava circle is clear to all observers. The King’s assistant or matapule is served first – said to be precautionary against any pollutant in the kava that could affect the King’s life. Each person is served according to the order called by the designated person in charge of distribution. The person’s name is called, the coconut shell containing the kava is presented to that person with a sweeping gesture, he claps three times before receiving the shell. A recipient may pour out a little of the kava in order to recognize its role in honouring the ancestral gods. Women sit outside the formal circle, observing closely that protocol is carefully followed. Their task is to prepare the bounteous food that accompanies any kava ceremonial.

Kava is served to honour any visitor to a village. Similar protocols are observed as in the very formal ceremony, with the root being crushed and water added as part of the ceremony, and the elaborate gestures and protocols observed in order to maintain the mana of the kava. An aura of quietness surrounds any kava occasion, which is marked by peacefulness and friendliness. Kava is inherently about sharing, with marked social relationships acting as a symbol of the unity of the aristocracy with the tou’a or populus (Perminow 1995).

Behind kava rituals lie a number of legends which account for the arrival of the plant, and how it has been used over time.

Kava clubs are a further mark of the maintenance of the symbol of kava while acknowledging changing social relationships. Nuku'alofa, the capital of Tonga has many such places where a shell of kava is served in return for a cash payment.

Furthermore the kava plant is becoming a lucrative cash crop. German pharmaceutical companies showed interest in Tonga's kava in the late 19th century, and again late in 20th century, though they found it less strong in kavalactones than Vanuatu kava. Today there is a ready market for the plant, both in sales to Europe, and also as a packaged product of the dried pounded kava root, that is readily sought by overseas communities of Tongans in New Zealand, Sydney or California.

Fiji

Fijian kava is known as *yaqona*. It is likely that the plant which had been transferred to Tonga gained its ritual importance when Fiji was part of the Early Tonga Empire (Pollock 1997). The plant grows well throughout the two main islands of Fiji as well as on its eastern islands, where Ma'afu made landfall from Tonga.

The ritual uses of kava in Fiji "represent the most important medium through which Fijian society represents itself to itself" (Turner 1995:112). Again its main use has been to honour high status persons in the community and special visitors; the kava circle, the tanoa and coconut shell cups and adding of water to the pounded kava are all part of the ritual. The form of the ritual is adapted to many different contexts, but always the kava is treated with respect, and symbolizes a form of 'power' that is diffused and reconstructed in many different situations. *Yaqona* has become a major symbol of Fijian identity. (Speight held nightly kava sessions during his two months sit-in in Parliament in Suva).

Every visitor to a Fiji village is expected to carry a bundle of *yaqona* roots as a presentation to the Roko or chief of the area. The roots symbolise good will as well as sociability. In return the visitor will be welcomed with both *yaqona* and food in abundance

Plantations of *yaqona* bush are replacing coconut plantations, particularly on the northern island of Vanua Levu as the roots are becoming a lucrative export crop. The roots may be exported unprocessed, or the dried pounded root may be sealed in 500 gram plastic packets. *Yaqona* is fourth on Fiji's list of exports today.

Pohnpei

Kava is known as *sakau* in Pohnpei, eastern Micronesia. The term is said to be a linguistic indicator of its introduction from a Polynesian source to the south, Te kawa (Peterson 1995:36). Here too it has been used as an honorific for the complex chiefly system. "Kava is always treated with the respect due its superior mana" (Peterson 1995:49). Today in addition to the ritual uses, informal sessions are held by the men in the villages, but always paying respect to the kava. Kava bars, known as *marked* have sprung up in and around Kolonia, the main town. Here kava is prepared both from the root itself, or from purchased packets of kava, known as 'take out'. It thus has a strong honorific role as well as promoting tranquil social relations. Kava, Petersen argues binds together the chiefly side of island political relations with the populist side (1995:55).

Pohnpei is exporting kava, mainly to the United States for processing there. Pohnpeians are converting land that was formerly used for coconut plantations in order to grow this lucrative cash crop. But they are going beyond those lands to grow kava in the foothills of the steep mountains in the centre of the island. Ecologists are concerned about the erosion effects such agricultural practices are inducing. With its very high rainfall, Pohnpei environment is fragile, and not suited to such very intensive agricultural activity. On the other hand the state of Pohnpei needs the revenue.

Samoa

Samoaan *'ava* has all the traits of ritual usage of kava in Polynesian societies. It is the centrepiece, along with the kava bowl and the whisk, and the institutionalised role of the *taupou*, or chiefly maiden who prepares the beverage for the circle of matai and high dignitaries of the land. A kava ceremony is the main occasion on which the beverage is prepared, and it includes a large preparation of food, as well as entertainment. It is a requisite ritual as a mark of distinction.

Informal kava sessions in Samoa have been almost unknown until the last couple of years. In the new market place a bowl of kava sits awaiting any market people who wish to partake (Finau pers. Comm.). This does not mean any lessening of respect for kava, but we could call it a democratization of kava.

Samoa exports only a small amount of *'ava*, when compared to Vanuatu and Tonga. Whole roots are treasured by matai in New Zealand if they can get them through the New Zealand quarantine system.

'Ava remains a very symbolic ritual in Samoa representing ties with the past, as remembered and recited in legends and poems and songs. It honours the ancestors and Samoan identity. I am told Samoan *'ava* has a distinct taste that marks it out from other kavas.

Western Uses of Kava

Kava is being consumed by Western customers as one of many “alternative therapies”. It is purchased in its concentrated form, as a pill or capsule and thus resembles a medicine, or at least a health additive to food and drink. It is thus very different from the kava beverage as consumed, mainly in ritual circumstances and in diluted form in the Pacific.

Kavalactones are the active ingredient found by processing the root of the kava plant. These have become of commercial interest today for their appeal to those interested in such ‘natural remedies’, i.e. those wishing to improve their health by using alternative products to recognized medicines. Kava is purchased in pill and capsule form across the counter of Health Food Stores, and other such outlets. Recently some of the pop drinks, known as Power drinks, are being marketed under the ICON label. At least one of these contains ‘kava kava’ along with chamomile and St. John’s wort. These are readily available in supermarkets and service stations.

Kava shares the billing with Ginkgo biloba, St. John’s Wort, chamomile and guerana under a number of different labels. Schulz (1997) includes kava kava alongside Ginkgo and Hypericum as psychopharmacological agents, while Heinze includes it in his analysis of different forms of herboreal medicines. Other authors refer to kava as a ‘dietary supplement’ or healthcare product.

The main properties of kavalactones are their action as relaxants. They are thus used to induce sleep, and as anti-stress agents, or to reduce anxiety (Scherer 1998; Pittler, Ernst 2000), and may be prescribed by a doctor as such, or

selected for self-medication. They have little or no effect on cognitive performance and visuomotor tests (Foo, Lemon 1997). They do not linger on the breath, but may be detected by a blood or urine test.

Clinical trials of kava and other herbals have experimented with the efficacy in reducing anxiety (Pittler et al. , 2000; Scherer 1998). Helligstein includes kava in his list of healthcare products “to treat emotional problems” (1998). Suss Lehmann (1996) consider kava as a herbal drug, with the extract being useful for relaxation, enhanced sociability, and promotes sleep. Kava is also included alongside Ginkgo and St. John’s wort as “alternative therapies” (Fugh Berman 1999).

The major attribute of kava is thus as a relaxant. It acts on the neurological system rather than on the brain, and when used as a herbal drug extract has little effect on cognitive and visomotor skills (Foo, Lemon 1996). Other analysts go so far as to claim that it enhances perceptions, and “improves alertness, memory and reaction time” (Greenwood – Robinson 1999:7)

Of particular interest is the low incidence of side effects of kava (Schulz 1997). Apart from relaxing the body, and if taken in strong enough dose, inducing sleep, no toxicities or other effects remain. When drunk in diluted form as in Pacific rituals, the relaxing effects wear off within a couple of hours after drinking ceases (Finau pers. Com.) In the case of the concentrate the effects are designed to be longer lasting. Cupp (1999) has noted that as herbal products are not required to undergo proof of safety and efficacy to the U.S. Food and Drug administration, any side effects and drug interactions are largely unknown.

Is Kava a drug?

This issue has currently been under examination in a District Court in Wellington, where the prosecution is claiming that an offender’s kava drinking affected his driving (NJP fieldnotes 2000).

Kava is being analysed alongside Ginkgo biloba, St. John’s Wort, Valerian and the many other substances now on offer as herbal remedies. Most of the trials have been on rats, with few trials on human subjects.

Depending on the definition of a drug, and there are many, kava fails to qualify either as an intoxicant, or as addictive, or as having lasting side effects. It is not included under US FDA rules (Reeder, Cupp (2000)). Several authors concerned with the pharmacological properties (Suss, Lehmann, 1996; Cupp, 1999; Heinze 1997; Yates et al. , 2000) class kava as a Herbal drug, or herbal remedy. Others such as Lebot et al. (1992) entitled their monograph Kava – the Pacific Drug, while Brunton 1989 referred to it as The Abandoned Narcotic. These lay uses of the label drug are under revision as demonstrated by Lebot’s latest monograph entitled Kava, the Pacific Elixir.

It is by no means clear that kava and its chemical properties are well enough understood to be accurately labelled as a drug. Nevertheless we must acknowledge that that label has appeal to some consumers in today’s world. With all the recent concern about ‘banned substances’ as taken by athletes at the recent Sydney Olympic games, we are all too aware of substances that might be performance enhancing. The market for a product labelled a drug thus has its appeal and its disincentives. It will not stop pharmaceutical companies cashing in on a growing market.

Conclusions

Kava has reached a new market as a herbal medicine, promoted by pharmaceutical companies. This globalisation of what is a uniquely Pacific product is proving lucrative at all stages of production and processing. The consumer who purchases a box of Kavacalm to reduce anxiety and stress may have to weigh up the affordability of this

new range of herbal medicines. The demands for natural products in today's world of synthetics has promoted not only the search for such 'traditional medicines' as natural remedies by pharmaceutical manufacturers, but also the demand by customers interested in alternatives to prescription medicines. Kava thus has a particular and potent place in today's world of consumerism.

But that world is vastly different to the Pacific peoples' usages of kava, where its usage verges on the religious rather than medicinal. Kava is a drink based on sharing and sociability, rather than as a pill to be popped by an individual. While the rituals persist for honorific occasions, a lesser ritual has developed to include untitled men, and sometimes women. As Pacific communities have spread to metropolitan countries, so kava has accompanied them, albeit with some changes. Their needs have promoted the demand for the processed and packaged kava that can be mixed for an evening's sharing, even in those lands where the kava plant does not grow.

The labelling of kava as a drug is misleading. But it does serve to heighten the appeal of kava and other products to a certain sector of the consuming public. The bulk of evidence suggests its main properties are as a relaxant that can aid sleep. And its lack of side effects when taken in moderation also help to promote its wide usage.

Trade in kava has thus increased dramatically over the last ten years. It is driven on two fronts, one by overseas Pacific island populations concerned to maintain customary practices in their new setting, the other by western consumers looking for suitable alternative remedies. Both populations will benefit from kava's relaxing properties, though that may not be the main reason for use by Pacific communities.

Both these markets depend on continued production of the kava plant. Since it will only grow in the unique environment of the Pacific islands, there must be concern about its long term viability. Already the market is inducing land owners to plant more and more kava bushes, even in areas that were not in productive use before. Questions of sustainability loom as to whether kava is a western fad that may be short-lived. If so will it be yet another case of a product that Pacific farmers miss the peak of the trade (i.e. pumpkin in Tonga). Another question is whether the western pharmaceutical trade will outbid the price for packets of kava powder (some label it NesKava).

As a product peculiar to the Pacific islands we will watch with interest the impact of consumer demand by both Pacific island consumer and western consumers on such a limited resource base. Globalisation of kava will test these limitations.

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