



A Brief Look at Globalization through Kava

by Christopher Frazier

This paper will address various aspects of the psychotropic and culturally significant medicinal plant, *Piper methysticum*, also known as kava, or 'awa in Hawai'i. Kava is a plant that has gone through many different relationships with humanity - as human history with the plant has unfolded. Here, we will look at (1) its traditional use throughout Oceania, (2) its commercial introduction into international markets for medicinal uses by profit-driven, pharmaceutical companies, and attempts to patent the plant by such companies, (3) its decline in international popularity due to health related issues that resulted from the improper use of the plant, (4) the future of kava, and, finally, (5) my first-hand experiences with kava.

Kava is traditionally consumed as an elixir made from soaking the ground roots of the *Piper methysticum* plant. According to Mac Marshall (2004), kava contains several potent alkaloids that, when consumed in a traditional manner, induce "a range of physical effects, notably analgesia and muscle relaxation, and it leads to a sense of sociability and tranquility [; ...while] the mental faculties are left clear (201).

History of Kava

In the Pacific, there are over 100 varieties of kava (ETC Group 1997). Serious cultivation of kava most likely began in Vanuatu about three thousand years ago; this is the conclusion of most scientists, which is based upon studies that indicate Vanuatu as being the location with the greatest genetic variety (Kava History). From Vanuatu it spread and could be found "in most major Polynesian islands, in Fiji, [...] in scattered coastal and island locations of PNG and west Papua [otherwise known as Irian-Jaya of Indonesia], and on the island of Pohnpei" (Marshall 2004:201).

Kava was traditionally associated with elaborate ceremonial customs, and was extremely significant

culturally. It was a drink that held "sacred overtones" (Marshall 2004:201). Kava's consumption was generally restricted to adult men (Marshall 2004:201; Brunton 1989:64). Only a few exceptions existed to whom this restriction did not apply conventionally (i.e. before European influence). Brunton points them out as being "women of high rank in stratified societies, [...elderly] women, [and...] women who used it illicitly" (1989:64).

One of the traditions that revolved around kava consumption in many places included the idea that it was forbidden to wash the cup from which kava had been consumed (Brunton 1989:62). Furthermore, these cups should never come in contact with the ground; instead, they would either be suspended by cord or placed on posts (Brunton 1989:65). Also, in some places, "there were tight restrictions on the kinds of movements allowed with the hands and the strainer when preparing the kava" (Brunton 1989:71).

In places such as Pohnpei, kava--locally known as sakau--is given, along with other traditional gifts, as an offering at funerals (Hezel 2001:105-106).

International Popularity and Patenting

In recent times, kava has undergone a tremendous growth in international popularity as an over-the-counter herbal supplement used to treat anxiety. According to ETC Group, "[i]n Europe alone, 14 kava extracts [were] being sold by at least 14 drug companies" (ETC Group 1997). Contributing to kava's popularity outside of Oceania was its reputation as an effective and safe alternative to alcohol and other drugs associated with relieving anxiety. "Kava bars" have sprung up all over the place that serve it as if it were an alcohol drink - but often out of a coconut shell to maintain the "Pacific island feel."

According to the supervising pharmacist at Manhattan Plaza Pharmacy, Steve Kaufman, kava has been shown to be as effective in treating anxiety as the benzodiazine class of drugs; and, furthermore, shown to be effective in reducing several menopausal symptoms (Kaufman 1999).

Kava has decidedly become an appealing plant globally due to its medicinal applicability. Needless to say, pharmaceutical companies have been keen to market the plant. The development, or patenting of naturally occurring biological materials, like plants and other forms of life, including human genes, is an act referred to as biopiracy, a term originally

coined by ETC Group. Yet, this is exactly what large pharmaceutical corporations have been aspiring to do. In fact, the French company L'Oreal has already patented or is seeking to patent kava as a means of treating hair loss in the US, Canada, Japan, China, Germany, France, Italy, the UK, Spain, Hungary, and Poland (ETC Group 1997). There is a long list of other examples of multinational companies--including Willmar Schwabe GmbH, American Home Products, Merck, Pfizer, Rhone Poulenc, SmithKline Beecham, Boehringer Ingelheim, and Monsanto--endeavoring to identify unique aspects and uses of kava to which they can claim exclusive ownership. These qualities range from how the powder is prepared from the root to a whole variety of specific applications.

Kava is perceived as a prospective money-maker, a plant especially well suited for marketing in the herbal remedies niche. The idea of patenting kava is that a company can obtain exclusive rights to the plant, thereby demanding full profits associated with usage and ultimately creating a monopoly of ownership.

According to a 1997 Biopiracy Update from ETC Group, this could eventually lead to reducing farmers to mere "cheap labor" for the ETC Group which is an organization involved in protecting indigenous rights and knowledge; (previously known as the Rural Advancement Foundation International) companies making Western, kava-based pharmaceuticals." It also explains that there is concern that kava could be monocropped elsewhere in places outside of the Pacific all together (e.g. Mexico or Australia), which would hurt the market value for the indigenous populations of the plant's origin.

The indigenous groups should fight back. However, in the first chapter of IPR for Indigenous Peoples, Tom Greaves (1999) points out three reasons why it is difficult for indigenous groups to patent their own cultural property. First of all, "copyrights and patents are for new knowledge, not knowledge that already exists" (8). Secondly, patents and copyrights can only be awarded to individuals, or legal entities that act as individuals (i.e. corporations). The last problem is that copyrights and patents are temporary; they expire after a duration of time (8)

Additionally, intellectual property rights is an alien concept to many indigenous populations around the world; they do not have the knowledge or the resources to pursue such options (10).

Health Scare and Decline in Popularity

All of these developments and fears of exploitation took a back seat when, in 2002, Germany banned the plant citing health reasons - that kava use can cause liver toxicity. Soon, other countries followed by banning or restricting sales of kava, including Australia, the UK, Switzerland, Singapore, France and Canada. This ban has had a serious impact on the production of kava. The American FDA has also issued an advisory on the potential risk of kava consumption (http://_w_.cfsan_da.gov/%7Edms/addskava.html).

This of course has damaged the market for kava production. According to Hawaii Agricultural Statistics, kava manufacture in Hawaii has declined since use of the plant has been associated with liver damage. However, HAS also indicates that despite the drop in production of Kava, the revenues have increased - a result, they note, of marginal farmers ceasing operations (National Agricultural Statistics Service).

Pacific Business News (2005) explains that kava remains an important Hawaiian crop both economically and culturally, despite its decline in peak production since 2001 (Noni Revenue Up; Kava Still Sells). In Fiji and Vanuatu, the other major producers of kava, the decline in production has been similar.

A Brighter Future for Kava

An encouraging study was conducted in 2003 which shook the kava world with its fascinating results. The University of Hawaii at Manoa discovered that quite likely the real liver damaging culprits are the leaves, stems and bark of the kava plant. Traditionally, only the root was used in the making of the elixir. It was not until the boom in production that companies would start manufacturing kava products containing what otherwise would have been considered waste. This seemed like a good hypothesis in "explain [ing] how a plant used in island cultures for 2,000 years, could suddenly be so toxic" (Dayton 2003).

With this and other encouraging news, the market seems as if it will be headed for more changes once again. In other news, it is suggested that Germany, formerly the largest importer of Pacific island kava, is in the process of lifting its ban on the plant, and kava farmers are anxious that other European countries will likely follow (Fiji takes 2005). Also, as the Kava Council of Fiji notes, the kava industry has the support of the World Health Organization on the safety of kava (Fiji takes 2005).

First-Hand Experience

I first partook in kava consumption a couple of years ago. I tried several times, never really knowing what to expect or how to react. Actually, I never really consumed it in quantity enough to experience any more effect than simply a numb feeling in my mouth.

The first time I actually partook in kava was not until about two months ago. I had begun work on data gathering for the topic of kava and realized the importance of getting first-hand experience. A friend of mine from Kiribati came over with the kava that he procured from a friend of his. He explained to me that he picked up kava drinking while working in Pohnpei over the last several years. Also, he noted that it was Tongan kava that we would begin drinking.

He prepared the kava and he and I, along with my roommate and another friend, proceeded to consume the beverage. We drank it out of coconut shells and clapped in the Fijian style, twice before and three times after someone or yourself takes a drink. In all, we drank about four medium, gallon-sized bowls. As the night progressed, the conversation became slower and eventually nearly extinguished completely. When another friend entered the apartment to visit, he noted how quiet we were.

Physically, I felt relaxed and tranquil. I did not feel confused mentally, but my body felt drunk. I particularly enjoyed the kava and, especially after having minimal side effects the next day-- contrasted with an alcohol related hangover--I was very satisfied. I have become a fan of kava and have since consumed it on several more occasions and promoted its use to my friends as an alternative to illicit drugs and alcohol. Unfortunately, it is a controlled substance in Korea, where I plan to live for the next year, so I will not be able to enjoy it over there.

Conclusion

Kava has a long, turbulent history and has been approached differently through time. Originally, it was a plant revered as sacred and instrumental in ceremonial situations. It was highly regulated by the societies which used it traditionally; restrictions were placed on who could consume it, when it could be consumed, and how it was prepared and consumed.

These restrictions have changed rapidly in recent times, first with colonization of the Pacific, and then with economic globalization and the spread of kava in popularity in places outside of Oceania. This large-scale growth in consumption and disregard for traditional knowledge has coincided with the growth of kava's noted health threats. If, in fact, there is something to be learned from this, it is that rapid change without time for adjustment can lead to negative consequences and that traditional knowledge should be respected and understood in full, not just in part in hopes of making a profit.

Kava is a plant that should be carefully harvested so that only the root is consumed. Stricter regulations and control measures could be applied in order to ensure its quality. This author has high expectations for the future of this Oceanic plant and believes that its popularity will continue to increase, especially once the bad image of liver toxicity passes. It is a safer alternative to alcohol and in my opinion, can lead to more interpersonal communication and less violence among recreational users.

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