

Kava, Its Preparation and Use

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Kava, also known as 'ava and awa, is a non-alcoholic beverage of ancient origin, which is still used to a considerable extent in many of the islands of Polynesia. It is a simple and easily prepared watery infusion of parts of *Piper methysticum*. This plant, which is also known by the native names for the drink made from it, is an attractive, slow-growing shrub which eventually may reach a height of ten or more feet. It is to be found on most of the islands in the south Pacific and probably owes its wide distribution to the fact that the aborigines carried it with them in their early migrations.

The part of the plant which is used in preparing the drink is the enlarged basal root-like structure. The beverage is claimed to have a strong narcotic effect followed by drowsiness and sleep, and when it is drunk to excess it produces results which are harmful. Moderately used, however, it is believed to have stimulating or tonic properties and small quantities of the dried root have been marketed for medicinal purposes. It is said that when the effects of the drink wear off that they may be reproduced by merely bathing or lying in water.

The preparation and use of the beverage varies somewhat in different parts of Polynesia. Ordinarily there is considerable ritualistic ceremony associated with its preparation and use, and there is usually no debauchery resulting. On certain islands, Niue, for example, the drinking of kava is frowned upon. A few plants grow there but it is probable that very little, if any, of the drink is prepared nowadays. In Samoa, on the contrary, it is served at nearly every *fono* or village gathering and it is also common for a visitor to be invited to enter a *fale* (house) and have it served as a part of the native hospitality much as Europeans might serve tea. The natives appear to enjoy it, as do some Europeans and Americans also. For the most part, however, the *papalagi* (whites) do not care for it.

As anciently prepared, pieces of the root were chewed, usually by those chiefs' daughters who possessed strong teeth. When reduced to a pulp and sufficiently mixed with saliva it was ejected into a bowl known as the *tanoa*. The bowls used for this purpose have four or more legs and are carved from a single piece of wood, commonly *ifilele* (*Afzelia bijuga*) a hard-wood species. After a sufficient amount of the juicy matter had been thus prepared, water was added to dilute the mixture which was then cleared with a strainer. Those whites who have witnessed this original, somewhat disgusting method of preparation admit that it required considerable will power to drink the concoction after seeing it prepared.

Very definite regulations dictated the procedure of preparation. The girls who chewed the material must have reached the age of puberty, but be unmarried; children were never allowed to touch the kava root

or the utensils employed in its preparation and serving; untattooed boys could not assist; nor could the person who made the kava talk or laugh during the ceremony.

The modern method of preparing the drink is much as it has always been except that the root is now macerated with a stone pestle instead of being chewed. One old samoan chief complained, however, that the modern drink was not nearly as good as that prepared in the older manner. It has been suggested that some enzymatic action, which would be lacking in the modern process, probably occurs when it is chewed.

A kava ceremony, which includes both the preparation and the drinking of the kava, commonly is the first part of any gathering of importance. The type of ceremony used depends upon the significance of the occasion. An uncommon form is known as the "Royal" or "King's"



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kava which is held for members of the ruling class. The most unusual of all is the "Sacred" kava which is held only on rare occasions of great significance such as the assuming of office by a new high chief, etc.

In the preparation of the kava for ceremonial purposes several persons take part. A large kava bowl is placed on the ground behind which the person who is to make the kava sits. This position is one of honor and is usually taken by the son or daughter of a high chief. On the right sits an assistant who has charge of the water, while on the left is the cup-bearer. The talking chief who presides also generally sits on the left. Behind and outside the circle usually are one or two others who assist with the straining. The pulverized pieces of Piper are placed in the bowl to which the proper amount of water is added. Sometimes, in order to increase its peppery taste, some fruits of *Capsicum frutescens* are ground up and added. The mixture is then kneaded for a few minutes to insure a proper extraction after which it is cleared with a strainer about two feet long, made of the inner fibrous bark of the *fau* tree

(*Hibiscus tiliaceus*). The mixer, who is called the *taupou*, draws the strainer through the liquid, collecting the coarser particles. He wrings the strainer then hands or throws it over his shoulder to one of the assistants in the rear who shakes out the fragments with a vigorous whipping motion and returns it. This is repeated several times or until the kava is sufficiently cleared. Sometimes two strainers are used in order to speed the process. When finished the kava is a slightly milky substance which somewhat resembles dishwater. It is rather peppery to the taste, and leaves the mouth and throat with a peculiar, slightly puckery sensation. However, no other reaction was experienced by the writer from the drinking of comparatively small amounts.

When the preparation of the kava is completed the officiating talking chief proclaims the fact in a loud voice, whereupon all present slowly clap their hands in unison several times, announcing to the village that the kava is made.

The beverage is served in a coconut shell cup called the *ipu*. The *taupou* fills the cup by squeezing the strainer full of liquid over it. It is then passed to the proper person whose name is announced in a loud voice by the presiding chief. The recipient takes the cup, carefully spills a small amount on the floor as a libation, says "*Manuia*" (your health), to which all respond with "*Manuia*" or "*Soi fua*" (life to you), then drains the contents of the cup. The cup is returned for refilling, and the performance is repeated until all have been served.

All of the movements of serving and receiving the cup of kava are strictly prescribed by ancient ritual which varies according to the rank of the person being served. At the conclusion the bowl and other equipment are removed and the meeting gets under way.

The sacred ceremony differs to a considerable extent from the ordinary type and is exceedingly impressive. It was my privilege, on the occasion of the American governor's visit to the outlying islands of American Samoa, to participate in the first sacred ceremony given in Manua since 1909. An important feature of the ceremony is a period of absolute silence and immobility on the part of those participating. The guests are seated within the *fale* at alternate posts, with the participating chiefs sitting between. At the proper point in the proceedings a signal is given by the presiding chief, whereupon everyone present is expected to "freeze," and to remain absolutely silent and motionless until the releasing signal is given. This may last a few minutes or much longer. It is said that in earlier times anyone who disturbed the ceremony by noise or movement was promptly impaled on a spear and that this "legal" elimination of certain persons was sometimes caused by extending the quiet period until the individual's self-control snapped.

Though excessive indulgence in kava may bring about undesirable physical effects, it is believed to produce less serious results than the drinking of alcoholic beverages which, for the most part, owe their introduction to the white man.