

## *Sustainability of the Kava Trade*

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The ban on the sale of kava pills, imposed in 2002 by some European countries, severely compromised the sustainability of the trade in kava roots from the Pacific. However, the lifting of restrictions in October 2008 has allowed trade to resume, with “a 2 year road map” drawn up to pursue legal and alternative options for the registration of kava in Europe (IKEC 2008, 1). The pill form in which kava has been sold in Europe as an herbal remedy for anxiety and insomnia was manufactured by German and other European pharmaceutical companies using kava root material imported from the Pacific. Claims that toxic elements in the kavalactones (the main chemical components) damaged the health of individuals taking the pills were met with counterclaims by researchers and those who have grown and drunk kava beverages in the Pacific for many years with very few side effects. The only problematic physical symptoms reported by frequent consumers of the beverage were scaly skin and bloodshot eyes (Lebot 2006; Ernst 2007). Kava farmers in Vanuatu, Fiji, Pohnpei, and elsewhere in the Pacific sought assistance to have the ban lifted so that they could resume export production (see, eg, Gruenwald and Mueller 2003; IKEC 2008).

Sustainability of the kava trade is at risk. According to the World Commission on Environment and Development, sustainability refers to the development needs of current generations that must be met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Suzuki and Dressel 2002). In their 2002 book, David T Suzuki and Holly Dressel stressed the need to protect natural resources from outsiders who have no attachment to an area and are primarily interested in ever-higher profits, as well as to protect local communities from being overwhelmed and impoverished by financial and cultural forces working on the global

level. They tried “not only to analyze what is happening to our physical support systems but also to suggest some areas of our culture that are ripe for change” (Suzuki and Dressel 2002, 4–5).

Vociferous opposition to world trade policies that limit the trading potential of developing countries has necessitated a rethinking of World Bank and International Monetary Fund policies on assistance to those nations. Joseph E Stiglitz has argued that trade liberalization policies must be concerned with sustainability, not only in a narrow economic sense of increased gross domestic product, but also socially, politically, and environmentally (2006, 17). Stiglitz underlined the importance of reducing the poverty gap between rich and poor nations by setting in place fairer trade regimes. Many small nations already encounter difficulties selling their products, thus demonstrating that some aspects of globalization have proved detrimental. Restrictions (such as the European kava ban) work against development options. Development policies that encourage new income sources fall prey to counterclaims for consumer protection, in this case, health concerns.

The biodiversity of a plant such as kava is also compromised by pharmaceutical companies’ demands for a “standardized” product. Some one hundred and twenty species or clonal varieties of the plant have been identified across the islands of Melanesia, Polynesia, and Micronesia. Indeed, kava has been grown and selectively developed locally by Pacific communities over a period of three thousand years (Lebot 1995, 2006). Different qualities of these cultivars have been selected to meet local cultural and environmental needs. Vincent Lebot claimed that the diversity of root varieties in Melanesia, in particular, is unequaled anywhere else on earth (Walter and Lebot 2007, 4:16). However, when it comes to the commercialization of the plant, German pharmaceutical companies require a “standard” product to meet their particular interests. A replicable supply of kavalactones for the manufacturing process to ensure a healthy, nontoxic product is required in order to satisfy quality assessments (Ernst 2007). These contrasting demands on the kava plant relate to the underlying question of whether sustainability of the kava trade is better focused on expanding exports for cultural continuity, or for commercial gain. Restoring kava output will contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage, while also assisting island economies. Restoring the positive image of kava worldwide is also an important goal.

The current status of the kava trade is examined here on three fronts: customary exchanges of kava roots according to adaptive cultural proto-

cols; exports of kava for customary usage by migrant communities around the Pacific rim; and exports of kava to pharmaceutical companies for further development as a herbal medicine. The impact of these concerns on four Pacific communities—Vanuatu, Fiji, Tonga, and Pohnpei—demonstrates the diversity of scenarios of kava use into the future. I also briefly consider the introduction of kava to Australian Aboriginals as an alternative to alcohol and the subsequent ban on the plant by the Australian government in 2007.

Sustainability of the kava trade, it is argued, is balanced between several alternative outcomes: continuing the access to resources over both the short and long term; maintaining the availability of resources for both social and economic benefits; and insuring that those benefits can accrue locally, as well as globally.

## BACKGROUND

The term kava is used for both the plant *Piper methysticum* and the beverage made from the plant. The terms *kava* and *'ava* (or *yaqona* in Fiji) refer to the bitter taste of the beverage. Over many generations, households in the Pacific have selectively planted in their gardens the kava plants that best suit their tastes and environment. The root of the plant is pounded (or chewed, in traditional practice) and water added to produce a beverage that was traditionally drunk, usually by senior men, in ritual circumstances (for botanical and ethnographic detail, see Lebot, Merlin, and Lindstrom 1992; Pollock 1995a). The close association between kava consumption and rituals honoring the ancestral gods is maintained in Vanuatu, Fiji, and several Polynesian societies, while more recent secular use represents a “democratization of kava” with its usage in kava bars in Vanuatu, Tonga, and Pohnpei (see Pollock 2008a for discussion of diversity across the Pacific over time; see McDonald and Jowitt 2000 for Vanuatu). But regardless of context, respect for the kava remains paramount among Pacific Islands users.

Kava is regarded as a pleasurable social drink, and individuals rarely drink it alone. Indeed, it is the soothing, relaxing qualities of the kava beverage that attracted the attention of pharmaceutical manufacturers who saw its potential in the 1980s in the rapidly expanding market for herbal alternatives to prescription medicines (Singh 2004). The sudden interest in the kava plant for medical uses altered perspectives on the plant. Considered alongside St John's Wort, ginkgo, and other herbs being devel-

oped as herbal remedies, kava products have been classified variously as pharmaceuticals (medicinal drugs), nutraceuticals (over-the-counter nutritional supplements), herbal products (see HerbalGram Web site, [www.herbalgram.org](http://www.herbalgram.org)), and anxiolytics (drugs prescribed to treat symptoms of anxiety) (Pittler and Ernst 2003). Experts from a range of fields—including toxicologists, clinical pharmacologists, pharmacognosists (who study medicines from natural sources), as well as cytobotanists and social scientists—have been drawn to research the plant's safety with regard to human health. All have contributed their assessments regarding the medical safety of kava, and how the product (in pill form) should be regulated (Richardson and Henderson 2007, 418; for further details of the health issues associated with kava use, see Pollock forthcoming).

The variety of modes of kava production and usage in the Pacific further attest to the biodiversity of kava. Environmental conditions, choice of planting stock, length of time before harvesting, use of root material (and stem in some cases) are all matters of cultural selection (for details, see Lebot, Merlin, and Lindstrom 1992; Lebot 1995). Here I consider Vanuatu, Fiji, Tonga, and Pohnpei as examples of those variations in terms of the sustainability of the kava trade, whether for customary usage, for supplying island communities living away from home, or for exporting to pharmaceutical companies.

Because it restricted trade development, the 2002 European ban on kava root imports elicited expressions of concern from the Pacific Islands Forum and other agencies on behalf of emerging business ventures in the Pacific as well as local farmers. The face-off between trade and biodiversity arguments represents a struggle between the interests of farmers from developing nations on the one hand and large multinational pharmaceutical companies on the other; the drug companies see financial incentives for themselves while dismissing the need for incentives for others (Stiglitz 2006, 125).

The knowledge base that local kava producers have built in the area of conservation, breeding, domestication, and development of plant and animal genetic resources is being appropriated for short-term economic exploitation. Profiteering through the selection of commercially desirable products from the genetically diverse storehouses has led to a devaluation of life forms (Shiva 1995, 64). Vandana Shiva urged developing nations to take stock of their genetic resources in order to conserve them for future generations and the long-term benefit of indigenous peoples. She argued that “a schizophrenic approach to diversity”—which adopts a policy of

destruction of diversity while supporting a policy of preservation of “set-asides,” or conservation—not only overrides many years of intellectual contribution to environmental development, but also restricts the long-term future of that environment. The issue regarding the sustainability of kava represents in a salient way the conflict between sustainable development and conservation.

## DIVERSITY OF KAVA IN THE PACIFIC

Kava is an iconic crop in the Pacific (Pollock 2000). Nowhere else has it been cultivated so extensively (Lebot 2002). According to archaeologists and historical linguists (Bellwood 2004; Blench 2005), kava has been traded across the Pacific for more than 3,000 years. Rootstock carried by early Pacific voyagers was regenerated by vegetative propagation across islands in the central and eastern Pacific, eastward from Fiji to Tahiti (it reached the Society Islands perhaps six hundred years ago [Brunton 1989, 28]), then northwest to Pohnpei and Kosrae. It proliferated in Vanuatu, though in New Guinea it has a relatively limited distribution and is rarely found today (Lebot and Cabalion 1986). In the modern era of gastronomic exploration and molecular biology, we have a fairly full picture of the kava plant and its uses (Walter and Lebot 2007). Many publications have covered its phytochemistry, production, and processing techniques, as well as its ritual uses and the rich world of associated myths (see bibliography in Singh 2004). The “power of kava” as a social beverage, with a long tradition in ritual and secular contexts, is the basis for its strong identification as a Pacific icon (Pollock 1995a).

Significant variations can be noted for four island communities: Vanuatu, Fiji, Tonga, and Pohnpei.

### *Vanuatu*

Northern Vanuatu—considered the “homeland” of the domesticated kava plant—has the greatest range of variants (Lebot and Cabalion 1986; Walter and Lebot 2007). Its wild precursor, *Piper wichmanii*, ranged from New Guinea to northern Vanuatu. Lebot has claimed that the antiquity of the use of kava in Vanuatu is further indicated by the complexity of folk taxonomies for the plant throughout those islands. He recorded the names and characteristics of 247 kava cultivars across Vanuatu (Lebot 1997, 97) and listed the names of 16 cultivars for Pentecost, and 16 different names for Tanna, which refer either to morphological characteristics, a legend,

or to the name of the person who developed that cultivar (Lebot 1997, 99–103).

Kava bushes were planted on most islands of Vanuatu except for Ambrym and South Malekula (Brunton 1989, 19). Farmers selected different varieties for vegetative propagation on their household plots. Sites for planting kava today are carefully chosen so that newly planted stems are protected from direct sunlight and wind. The plant requires fairly high average temperatures (20–35 degrees Celsius), high humidity, and deep, well-drained soils; hillsides are particularly well suited. The plant can be harvested after three or four years by cutting above the first node. Specialized local knowledge has been applied to develop kava plants that produce a beverage that suits local tastes while also improving the yield (Lebot and Brunton 1985, 82–85). Commercial plantations have been developed over the past fifteen to twenty years.

The brew from some Vanuatu kava rootstock is reputed to yield the strongest physiological effect of any Pacific varieties (Lebot 2002; Lebot and others 1999). Ni-Vanuatu process the drink from the fresh green roots, which diverges from practices in other parts of the Pacific. They also add less water than do people in other Pacific societies, thereby producing a high concentration of kavalactones. On Tanna, sixteen named cultivars indicate locally discriminated features. For example, the right to consume one special form, *nikawa tipuga*, is restricted to certain families (Lebot, Merlin, and Lindstrom 1992, 102, 87). Lebot has suggested that both variation in soils and cultivar types may contribute to the strength of the beverage (2002). Chewing the rootstock (an old practice) releases kavalactones in water more readily than pounding or grating, but this is rarely done today.

Drinking kava was abandoned by ni-Vanuatu communities for almost a hundred years, mainly due to Christian missionaries' attempts to eliminate competition with other gods (Brunton 1989, 124). However, since Vanuatu's independence in 1980, kava has been revived as a symbol of ni-Vanuatu identity (Crowley 1995). Not only was planting encouraged as export potential loomed, but the government of the day also promoted it as an alternative to alcohol.

Kava has become a major cash crop for ni-Vanuatu. Three thousand hectares have been developed, much of that land in newly extended plantations. In 2000 (two years before the European ban), kava was yielding 1.25 million vatu per year for the national economy, the largest earnings

of the seven major crops Vanuatu produces (Lebot 2002, 6). (The vatu is Vanuatu's currency; in 2002, US\$1.00 was the equivalent of 143.50 vatu; today US\$1.00 is 110.00 vatu.) For farmers today, kava yields 100 vatu per kilogram (kg), or 1 billion vatu per annum, and is thus a major source of income. In Vanuatu, 5,000 tonnes of kava are sent to Port Vila and 2,500 tonnes to other centers for use in the kava bars, while 2,500 tonnes of fresh root are dried annually for the export market (to yield 500 tonnes dry weight) (Lebot 2002, 5).

Kava is strongly promoted on the Vanuatu Tourism Office Web site to appeal to visitors and tourists (VTO nd). Drinking kava is emphasized as an integral part of the Island experience. The cash return from hotel performances, or from subsequent sales to tourists leaving for home, is not distinguished from other kava income in Vanuatu. The root is sold in its green form for the local market, while the dried product from crushed roots is exported from Vanuatu to both Fiji and Europe, according to Roxanne Naylor, chief executive officer of the Kava Kompani in Port Vila (pers comm, 2002). Stems and shavings are also exported, giving rise to some criticism of quality control. Several independent producers have developed their own product, but the Kava Kompani is the major agent for exports from Vanuatu to European pharmaceutical companies, and to Fiji. The Kava Kompani, together with Kava Trading Company, have been actively engaged in compiling background materials to lobby against the ban on behalf of ni-Vanuatu farmers (Naylor, pers comm, 2003; Charles Long Wah, pers comm, Oct 2008).

A survey of local usage by Jenny Binihi and Anita Jowitt in 1999 in Port Vila (reported in McDonald and Jowitt 2000) found that customary usage was less than 10 percent of total usage; others drank mainly at kava bars. Of the sample surveyed, 44 percent noted that kava was "socially addictive." The report concludes that "relatively few acute problems linked to kava use are reported in the Pacific," but recommends several steps toward "harm reduction." The authors observed that changes in the social controls over kava use are taking place (McDonald and Jowitt 2000, 226).

The Vanuatu economy has much to gain from establishing a stable market for this kava. Lebot has suggested that several steps are necessary to ensure the sustainability of Vanuatu export sales to international markets; these include reducing variability between cultivars and cultivation sites, using only root material to produce a standardized product, and

establishing quality controls. Modes of drying, processing, packaging, and transporting kava also contribute to a highly diverse product arriving at pharmaceutical companies in Europe (Lebot 2006). Quality control steps are vital if a reliable export market is to be reinstated, though they would not necessarily eliminate the diversity of kava produced in Vanuatu for the local market.

Research scientists such as Lebot lobbied against the European ban by contributing to discussions between European pharmaceutical manufacturers and the International Kava Executive Council (IKEC) deliberations. Responding to the United Kingdom's determination to continue the European Union ban in 2006, Lebot, in liaison with European officials, contributed data on the growing conditions from which the dried product is produced—data that was vital in the efforts to lift the kava ban in 2008. The concern now is to ensure that the kavalactones exported are safe and that local producers are willing to work to produce a more marketable product (Lebot 2006). Lebot, as well as Port Vila businessman and kava exporter Charles Long Wah (pers comm 2008), are marginally optimistic for the sustainability of the international trade, after a slow recovery phase.

The kava trade in Vanuatu is highly likely to continue for local use in clan settings and in *nakamal*/kava bars. Overseas communities of ni-Vanuatu, especially those living in New Caledonia, are ready recipients of kava grown in their home islands, for drinking in their *nakamal*; they prefer it to kava from Fiji or elsewhere. But exports to European pharmaceutical companies remain at risk until the issues of quality control are resolved (IKEC 2008).

### *Fiji*

Fiji has become a central player in many aspects of the kava trade. Fijian kava, known as *yaqona*, features prominently at many social occasions today, both secular and ritual, though in the past its uses were mainly ritual (Ravuvu 1983).

Just how long the plant has been used in Fiji is still the subject of debate. It is likely that cultivars, originating from northern Vanuatu, were transferred during the spread of Lapita peoples eastward some three thousand years ago (Kirch 2000), and later featured in exchanges between Tonga, Fiji, and Wallis during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Along with the rootstock, ceremonial uses of the kava root spread widely throughout this early Tongan empire (Pollock 1996).



The plant grows well throughout the two main high islands of Fiji: Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. The eastern islands of the Lau group had not been surveyed by Lebot by 1992, but historical Tongan connections are likely to provide interesting data regarding the cultivation of kava in that area. Family (*mataqali*) kava plots have been noted in early botanical and ethnographic literature, along with descriptions of exchanges, usage, and myths (see, eg, Seemann 1862; Quain 1948; Ravuvu 1983). Planting methods are similar to those in Vanuatu and Tonga. Lebot recorded the names and characteristics of eleven cultivars in the 1980s, but in addition he noted many named cultivars that farmers distinguish by the color and shape of the plant's internodes (Lebot, Merlin, and Lindstrom 1992, 92).

Fijians distinguish several forms of the root. Small lateral roots, termed *waka*, are the most common part of the plant used and sold in urban markets. Alternatively the dried rootstock, known as *lewena*, can be used, as can the basal portion of the plant's stems, known as *kasa*. Each type of *yaqona* has a different price.

Plantations of *yaqona* bush that began on a small scale in the 1950s have been expanding over the last fifteen years. Lebot recently estimated that some six thousand hectares were devoted to growing the crop, twice the area in Vanuatu (2002). Total tonnage increased from 145 tonnes in 1990 to 1192 tonnes in 1998. The export market that accelerated in the 1990s encouraged farmers, with government support, to devote more of their land to growing the plant in expectation of high returns per hectare for a crop that requires minimal care. *Yaqona* rose from sixth to fourth place on the list of viable exports (Murray 2000). "Cultivation of kava for sale is a clear example of market influenced indigenous development based on local technical knowledge and skills, and derived from customary practices" (Maiava and King 2007, 89).

Internal marketing also suffered. Warwick Murray's case study of Taveuni growers revealed that they lost much of the final market value of their kava crop to a chain of intermediaries (2000). In Vanua Levu where kava was replacing coconut plantations, *waka* roots were selling for more than the *lewena* and *kasa*. The grower sold *waka* roots for F\$18 per kg, which then sold in Suva for F\$28–30. (In 2000, F\$1.00 was the equivalent of US\$.50.) Roots may be exported unprocessed to the large pharmaceutical manufacturers, or dried, pounded, and sealed in 500-gram plastic packets. The price paid by the European purchaser is highly variable, but in 1998 there were reports of kava roots selling for US\$80 per kg. Mur-

ray was pessimistic about the long-term future of *yaqona* sales from Fiji (2000, 367).

Formerly, though women had a role in the preparation and formal presentation of kava, it was consumed mainly by Fijian men; however, that is changing. Research in western Fiji in the late 1990s found that “grog” users drank *yaqona* to relieve tension and anxiety, relieve insomnia, promote sociability, and improve urination. The negative effects of scaly skin, watery eyes, headache, and so on, occurred only in heavy users, that is, those drinking 300 grams or spending F\$12 per week or more (Kava 2001, 117). Shane Aporosa is currently conducting PhD research on the effects of kava drinking on work habits in Fiji (pers comm, 2008).

Recent research by Tarisi Vunidilo indicates the importance of women’s contributions to kava practice in precolonial times, as well as their involvement in kava circles today (2006). She reported that her mother on Kadavu, used kava selectively and in moderation for medicinal purposes, such as for stomach ailments or during pregnancy. Vunidilo’s paper highlights the need for further in depth research into not only the role of Pacific women in preparing the beverage, but also their own selective uses of it.

Fijian *yaqona* is more readily available in New Zealand than other types of kava. Plastic bags containing 500 grams of powdered roots can be purchased for NZ\$6–10 by Pacific Islander communities and by tourists to take home as souvenirs. (In November 2008, NZ\$1.00 was the equivalent of approximately US\$.58.)

Ratu Josaleka Nawalowalo has been an active contributor to the international discussions leading to the lifting of the European ban. In 2002, the Fiji Kava Council was formed under his chairmanship to coordinate the concerns of farmers regarding the loss of revenue due to the ban. Today, the Fiji Council provides a channel for farmers to articulate their viewpoints in the wider debate about the future viability of trading kava.

### *Tonga*

Tonga is the Polynesian homeland of kava and, along with Sāmoa, has the strongest tradition in terms of the maintenance of kava use for ceremonies and the recognition of status. The plant was a central feature of the associations between Tonga and its early empire in the seventeenth century (Pollock 1995b). During the early Tongan maritime empire in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, cultivars of kava and many important food crops, along with their associated customs, were shared by Tongans voyaging far and wide in the central Pacific. Fiji, Wallis, Futuna, Rotuma, and Niue

all participated in the empire, in which members of the highest strata in society were honored by kava rituals (Pollock 1995b, 1996).

Ceremonial usage and myths associated with kava have been extensively recorded and analyzed (see, eg, Bott 1987; Perminow 1995). Bott has suggested that “the kava ceremony is one of a series of ceremonies that clarify social principles and social roles” and thus has contributed to the maintenance of those principles (1987, 191–201). In the ritual context, kava is a male beverage. The highest-ranking person being honored sits at the center of the “kava circle” with his dignitaries on either side. With regard to “royal kava,” the beverage is served during major events associated with the Tongan royalty, as witnessed at the 1976 celebrations of the twenty-fifth anniversary of King Tāufa‘āhau Tupou IV’s accession to the throne. The celebration drew together Tongans who brought contributions from all reaches of the kingdom (author’s field notes, 1976). The royal kava ceremony for the induction of the new king, George Tupou V, in August 2008, underscored kava’s continued prominence in Tongan ritual in the contemporary period.

As well as functioning as a ritual beverage, kava is used informally. Traditionally, both men and women used it medicinally, to relieve urinary problems, colds, and headaches; it has also been used to treat impotency (Halavatau and Hoponoa 2002). Informal use of kava has increased in recent times, as men gather to discuss matters of concern around the kava bowl in villages (Perminow 1993), in town, or in overseas communities like Wellington (Tongan resident Tevita Finau, pers comm, 1988), or Melbourne, Australia (researcher Helen Morton Lee, pers comm, 2008). Arne Aleksej Perminow found in the course of his extensive fieldwork in rural Tonga (which necessitated drinking kava), that the physiological effects from drinking kava among Tongans are not pronounced. Nevertheless, Tongans, he contended, have learned to treat kava as if it were strong stuff (Perminow 1993). Perminow recorded his informants as saying that kava makes people feel wonderfully relaxed, and well disposed toward their surroundings, forgetting all their troubles, and becoming “beautifully hungry” (1993, 49). Overseas Tongans try to obtain kava from home, but may use Fijian kava if it is not available. The Australian ban on kava (discussed later in this article) has reduced the availability of kava for use at informal sessions (Filihia 1998; Meredith Filihia, pers comm, April 2008). Although it is no longer available online (Filihia, pers comm, 2008), the “Kava Bowl” took on new symbolic meaning in the form of an Internet discussion forum for Tongans around the world (Lee 2003, 1).

Eight cultivars were named when Lebot collected samples in 1987. The names refer to the morphological characteristics, particularly the color of the stems, and the space between nodes, that is, the internodes (Lebot, Merlin, and Lindstrom 1992). Presentations of the whole root, together with stems and leaves (*kava toho*), are considered the most honorific, and thus are used for royal kava occasions (as discussed earlier) and the installation of priests. Presentation of a debarked rhizome and branch (*kava teletele*) honors a person of high status. *Taumafa kava* and *'ilo kava* are formal drinking sessions for the king and nobles, respectively. A *faikava* is a social event held in a house where individuals bring their own kava roots. A kava club is for everyday social drinking (Halavatau and Hoponoa 2002).

A whole kava plant is an important family presentation, along with pigs, at any major celebration. Community representatives display their best kava plant at the ceremony, where it can be admired alongside other such gifts. At the constitutional celebrations in 1976, some one hundred and seventy kava plants were presented to the king, and placed alongside and at the ends of the long rows of pigs that stretched half way across the local rugby field (author's field notes, 1976). The kava plant was considered the guardian of the gifts.

The kava circle, as it is often labeled, is in fact a U-shaped formation in which all participants have their place at one side or the other of the highest-ranking participant. He sits at the head of the U, facing the open space where the kava bowl and the kava maker (usually female) are located. The kava maker is assisted by a number of young men and women, as well as the master of ceremonies. After the kava root is pounded and water added, the liquid is sieved to remove any fibrous material before being served in a half coconut shell by the attendants. It is crucial that the kava is presented in the correct order to honor the status of everyone seated in the kava circle. Women sit outside the formal circle, observing closely to ensure that protocol is carefully followed. Their task is to prepare and serve the bounteous food that accompanies any kava ceremony.

The "power of kava" lies in its symbolism, which is most keenly observed during rituals and ceremonies where the beverage is shared. Respect for kava is paramount, evident in the solemnity surrounding a kava circle. But it denotes Tongans coming together, where the bonds of solidarity may be enhanced around a shared cultural ethic (see papers in Pollock 1995). Nightly *faikava* draw men around the kava bowl to drink several "shells" and discuss matters of importance. A 2001 New Zealand

court case involving a Tongan pulled over by the police for “drunk” driving at 3 AM raised questions of the status of kava as a substance. After a long working day, and having eaten only an apple, the man had drunk two shells of kava in the company of his former classmates from Tupou College, to celebrate the beginning of the new millennium. The judge eventually dismissed the case on the basis that kava was not considered an illegal substance in New Zealand (author’s expert witness notes, 2001).

In the last ten years the kava plant has become a lucrative cash crop for Tongan farmers. In the 1980s an agricultural census estimated that 15 percent of households had planted kava (Lebot, Merlin, and Lindstrom 1992, 190). In 2000, the total area of kava plantations in Tonga was estimated at of 800 hectares. Since that time, the number of hectares has been increasing by about 20 percent per year (Lebot 2002, 4). By 2001, 2,500 hectares were planted in kava yielding an average of 2.36 ton/ha. Selling at T\$18 per kg, the yielded netted some T\$12 million for the Tongan economy, according to the Tongan agricultural census (Halavatau and Hoponoa 2002). (In 2001, T\$1.00 was the equivalent of US\$.50.) Commenting on the effect of the 2002 ban on Tongan kava growers, Siosuia Halavatau and Taniela Hoponoa estimated that some two hundred households had lost income due to the European ban, and wondered whether they could make up the shortfall selling locally (2002).

Overseas Tongans use dried kava that they purchase or obtain from relatives who carry it from the islands in plastic packets of 500 grams or more. In 2007, an Australian ban placed a limit of 2 kg per person on any imports, whether carried in personal baggage or sent by mail (Mercer 2006; TGA 2008). This ban brought strong reaction from Tongans as well as Fijians (Filihia, pers comm, 2008).

For Tonga’s strongly agricultural-based economy, kava has thus added another crop that has vital export potential. This traditional crop can be contrasted with introduced crops, such as pumpkin, which have been adopted for their export potential, mainly to the Japanese market. Kava, along with taro and other Pacific crops that have persisted in island agriculture for more than 3,000 years, are more sustainable than the newer crops introduced for Western usage (Pollock 2008b).

Tonga’s ties with the European Union enabled pharmaceutical companies to tap Tonga as an additional source of kava. German pharmaceutical companies had initially shown interest in the efficacy of Tongan kava in the late nineteenth century, and again in the late twentieth century,

although they found its chemical compounds to be less potent than kava from Vanuatu (Halavatau and Hoponoa 2002). In 2002 a ready market for the plant developed in both Europe and the United States, while a lesser market for dried pounded kava root has developed among overseas Tongans. Kava is readily sought by overseas communities of Tongans in New Zealand, Sydney, Honolulu, and California. Tongans prefer their “own” kava to the kind processed in Fiji or Vanuatu.

Production of kava is thus likely to continue along traditional lines to meet the high demand for the plant as a symbol of Tongan identity, whether in Tonga itself, or among overseas communities. The success of exports to the pharmaceutical industry is less assured. Tonga has better shipping access than Vanuatu, but quality control will be a major concern. The level of kavalactones in Tongan kava may well be the crucial unknown.

### *Pohnpei*

Pohnpei is a high island in the eastern Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). The Pohnpeian term for kava, *sakau*, is said to be a linguistic indicator of its introduction from a Polynesian source to the south, Te kava (Petersen 1995, 36; Keating 1998); alternatively, the term may suggest a direct link with Vanuatu’s kava (Lebot, Merlin, and Lindstrom 1992). In Pohnpei, *sakau* has been used as an honorific beverage for the complex chiefly system. Elizabeth Keating assessed ethnographic practices in detail, demonstrating that kava is an integral part of power sharing and the marking of social space (1998). Recently it has been democratized with the opening of many kava bars throughout the island (Balick and Lee 2002). Yet as Glenn Petersen has noted, “Kava is always treated with the respect due its superior mana” (1995, 49).

Some 660,000 kg of kava is harvested annually for local use in Pohnpei (Merlin 2004, 288). *Sakau* is increasingly consumed by groups of men who gather at any one of the some fifty kava bars—known as *marked*—that are scattered around the island, or at unlicensed kava bars; *sakau* is also available at retail stores (Merlin 2004, 288; see also market reviews on the Sakau en Pohnpei Web page). The cost of *sakau* is usually around 35 or 40 cents per Styrofoam cup or US\$2.00 for a bottle. Men meet in the evenings between 6 and 11 PM at one or another of these establishments (a list of “places to consume” around the island, with photos, can be found on the Web page). The author of the Sakau en Pohnpei Web page warns

about the dangers of the water used to make *sakau*, particularly the kind sold in bottles: “Bottle sakau is for local stomachs only.” The quality of the *sakau* drink also varies from bar to bar: “The strongest sakau [on Nett Point] was Sekeren variant grown near the tip end [of the point],” as sold at Palipoa village; elsewhere three cups gives a *mataitai* (satisfied) feeling. *Sakau* is prepared from the root itself, or from purchased packets of kava, known locally as “take out.”

Drinking *sakau* is still surrounded by cultural protocols in traditional settings (Keating 1998). Drinking is considered a quiet time for participants, with no singing or spitting; it is deemed impolite to attend *sakau* gatherings and not drink. No alcohol accompanies it, although in the 1990s beer was offered at bars as a “chaser” (Merlin, pers comm, 2008). Kava, Petersen argued, binds together the chiefly side of island political relations with the populist side (1995, 55). The honorific role of the plant, held over from the past, promotes tranquil social relations.

Pohnpei exports both frozen pounded roots of kava and liquid extracts, which are sent mainly to Guam, Saipan, and Hawai‘i for use by FSM expatriates and others. Some 300–500 hectares were under production in the mid-1990s, producing 477,000 kg per year, generating US\$3 million per annum (Merlin 2004, 288). By 2002, exports were valued at US\$241,000, almost double the return in 2000 (Hezel and Lightfoot 2005; Lebot 2002, 5), making *sakau* the Federated States’ third highest value export crop.

However, a major environmental concern is emerging with the expansion of kava production. Because both individual farmers and the State of Pohnpei need the revenue (Merlin and Raynor 2004), Pohnpeians have been growing kava in the foothills on land that is unstable due to high rainfall (Merlin and Raynor 2005). Land that was formerly used for coconut plantations is also being converted to accommodate this lucrative cash crop. Ecologists are closely monitoring the erosion effects of this increasingly intensive agricultural activity, and attempts have been made to encourage farmers to grow their *sakau* plantations on lowland areas, which are more stable.

On neighboring Kosrae, kava, known as *sukha* (or *sekal*) was introduced, probably from northern Vanuatu via Tonga. “In former times, among the nobility, at any rate, kava was no longer a luxury item, but rather an everyday beverage” (Sarfert 1908–1910, quoted in Merlin 1993, 64). However, its close association with honoring the traditional gods of the islands led to its condemnation by the American Board of Commis-

sioners for Foreign Missions (ABC FM), who viewed it as evil. Attempts to substitute coconut as the drink of everyday people were only marginally successful. Efforts may yet be made to revive the cultivation of *sukha*, if it has sufficient cash-generating potential. Until then, Kosraeans visiting Pohnpei will have to settle for drinking *sakau* at the bars there.

Pohnpei is thus developing its potential as a production site for *sakau* to supply the northern Pacific, from Guam to Hawai'i. The presence of Pohnpeians living outside their home island provides a market for the dried material as well as the bottled product (Merlin and Raynor 2004). Pohnpeian *sakau* has also been exported to US pharmaceutical companies for processing into health remedies. Thus, during the European ban Pohnpeian farmers were not as drastically affected by the European kava ban as their southern neighbors.

## KAVA USAGE IN OTHER PARTS OF THE PACIFIC

### *New Caledonia*

Ni-Vanuatu and Wallis and Futuna immigrants to New Caledonia drink kava, as well as some New Caledonians living in Noumea (author's field notes, Nov 2008; see Chanteraud 2001 for further discussion). Migrants carrying their cultural traditions from their homelands, prepare kava for both ritual and secular occasions. Men even celebrate church festivities and family gatherings around the kava bowl (author's field notes, 1992, 1998). These communities have had a significant influence on the establishment of *nakamal* around Noumea, as well as the importation of roots for sale in the markets in Noumea and beyond, and the sale of 1 and 2 kg packets of dried kava root. Demand for the plant grows with the expansion of these immigrant communities.

### *Kiribati*

Kava usage is spreading to nonproducing islands, such as the atolls of Kiribati. A recent return field visit by Kazuhiro Kazama to Tabiteuea, one of Kiribati's southern atolls, revealed newly introduced kava drinking (Kazama 2006). Known there as *nanogona* (a term clearly derived from Fijian *yaqona*), the beverage began being consumed by male villagers in 2002/2003. The men stressed that the kava-drinking sessions were communal, and that the practice transformed interpersonal relations (Kazama 2006, 87). The Catholic Church offers space for these kava gatherings,



and missionaries support the activity as an alternative to consuming alcohol, as men usually drink kava before a meal or feast, while single women may take one cup. Kazama argued that Kiribati *katei* (custom) is flexible, thus enabling the easy and rapid acceptance of kava.

The kava, purchased in plastic packets of dried powder, is imported from Fiji and Vanuatu through relatives returning from education, training, or meetings in Fiji, or through Banaban relatives. A major increase in imports occurred between 1996, when a total of 3,500 kg was imported, and in 2000, when 8,700 kg was imported (Kazama 2006, 91). Importers may sell it privately in half-kilogram bags for A\$30.00. (In 2006, one Australian dollar was the equivalent of approximately US\$0.73.) The government's response to requests to regulate the price has led to a rise in import duties to prevent excessive consumption. Thus, the price continues to rise (Kazama 2006, 92).

### *Australian Aborigines*

Kava was introduced to Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory in the 1980s as an alternative to alcohol. Imported from Fiji and Vanuatu, it has had a checkered history, leading to a ban on imports by the Australian government in June 2007 (RNZI, July 2007). The concern is that kava poses health problems in Aboriginal communities. Since Peter d'Abbs documented details of the developments in kava policy (1995), such concerns have been debated by the churches, Northern Territory authorities, and the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, as well as Aboriginal communities themselves. Kava has become a political issue for both Northern Territory and national government parties. Further, the churches, which first advocated its use, have since changed their stance, thus adding to the general confusion regarding the issue (see Altman and Hinkson 2007; Mathews and others 2002).

The importation of kava from Fiji and Vanuatu by Australian middlemen has led to increased prices (d'Abbs 1995). Since 1997, imports have been permitted into Australia in accordance with the National Code of Kava management. The quantity of kava imported has increased ten fold since 2002, leading to the present move by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) of the Australian government to reinforce existing regulations on kava imports (TGA 2005). The ban as activated in 2007 placed a limit of 2 kg for any one person, whether traveling or receiving imports of kava by mail. The Australian government is being asked to rethink the ban

because kava has been proven harmless. Furthermore, Lebot has argued that government officials should take into account the impact of the ban on Vanuatu farmers who have few other sources of income (Lebot 2006; RNZI, Aug 2007; see also Altman and Hinkson 2007).

#### SUMMARY

The four ethnographic sketches presented here illustrate that sustainability of the kava trade is dependent on a variety of practices in kava usage and sales, as well as cultivation of selected cultivars. Customary local usage is still strongly maintained in all four communities, both for ritual and secular occasions, with considerable “democratization” through the inclusion of non-noble men and some women. Supply for this usage is likely to continue.

Local usage in kava bars has provided an income source for farmers, but is dependent on purchasers’ access to cash to buy a shell (or cup) of the beverage at a *nakamal* or grog shop. As the data for Pohnpei indicate, the number of kava bars and outlets is increasing rapidly, so farmers can expect and, indeed, encourage the continued expansion of kava use in the local context. Nevertheless, local government policies appear to be ambivalent about this kind of development.

Communities based in metropolitan countries, as well as in other Pacific Islands, also continue to use kava for ritual and customary ceremonies. Small amounts remitted by relatives at home must be supplemented by purchasing supplies locally from metropolitan stores. This section of the trade is likely to grow as those communities continue to expand and wish to use kava as a strong medium of cultural identity. But trade is also impeded by national policies that categorize kava as a drug—for example, Australia’s recent ban on imports of more than 2 kg, which still holds despite the lifting of the European ban. Such a restriction does not yet apply to Australia’s neighbor, New Zealand, which is home to a large population of Pacific Islanders, many of whom come from islands where kava is consumed.

Pharmaceutical company interests, European and American, appeared to offer lucrative outlets for Pacific kava farmers during the 1990s. Commercial possibilities explored by German pharmaceutical companies at the beginning of the twentieth century were reawakened with the growth in the market for natural herbal remedies (Brunton 1989). Trade from Vanu-

atu and Fiji, which had expanded dramatically in the late 1980s (Lebot 2006), was cut short by a ban on imports to Europe in 2002, when “kava pills” were deemed a health risk. As with many products, the sudden cessation of sales had left kava farmers with plantations that no longer offered a cash return. The European ban pressured kava traders to unite, both to fight the ban and to strengthen other outlets for sales of their rootstock. Support from a wide community of concerned supporters such as the Pacific Islands Forum, academics, and kava users, led to exploration of various avenues to seek the lifting of the kava ban. The formation of the International Kava Executive Council provided a significant communication link between Pacific interest and European pharmaceutical traders (see IKEC 2004). Quality controls and standardization of the product shipped from the Pacific were key factors necessary for the resumption of trading (Lebot 2006; IKEC 2008).

The insecurity of market access was a major incentive to get the ban lifted. Now that has been achieved, Pacific farmers will have to work together to grow the particular cultivar that produces the most desirable kavalactones, a determination that remains to be made by the European pharmaceutical companies. Already farmers on Pentecost Island, Vanuatu, are being encouraged to plant one particular cultivar, Borugu, as a variety likely to meet the new criteria (Charles Long Wah, pers comm, Oct 2008). However, whether other Pacific community farmers agree to grow a single type of cultivar remains to be seen. In Europe, research chemists and others continue to work toward consensus regarding the type of kavalactone signature to be encapsulated in kava pills in the future.

Other outlets remain to be explored. Several Web sites aimed at visitors to Tonga, Hawai‘i, and Vanuatu, promote “the kava experience” to tourists (see, for example, <http://www.vanuatutourism.com/vanuatu/cms/en/activities/kava.html>). Bottling kava as a drink has not yet been successful. The possibilities of marketing to Asia and Africa remain open. Emphasis on kava as an herbal remedy rather than a drug is necessary to avoid the stringent drug laws of metropolitan countries.

Not only did the European ban prove to be a major setback for kava farmers’ export trade, but internal wrangling between the major island producers must also be resolved. Producers and their trading agents in Vanuatu and Fiji must iron out inconsistencies in sales prices (Narsey 2004, 52). Charges that Vanuatu dealers were “dumping” Vanuatu kava in Fiji for F\$11–12 per kg, below Fiji’s price of F\$21–22 per kg, led Fijian

farmers to fear that their crops would not sell. In response, they asked the Fiji Kava Council to impose a ban on imports of kava from Vanuatu. In addition, the Fiji Kava Council raised fears that “Tu Dei” kava from Vanuatu was too strong by Fijian standards, such that Fiji’s “working class” was at risk of getting sick (see Aporosa 2006 for further details). But as Wadan Narsey observed (2004, 52), “Fijian kava drinkers tend not to differentiate kava as long as it is kava,” so they buy at the “best” price. Narsey argued that the kava case raises issues of fair trade between large and small nations within the Pacific based on criteria such as health, employment, and other factors that discourage competition. These have come to the fore as many aspects of the European ban were being debated, and will be exacerbated as “the road map” seeks to establish a standardized cultivar.

The Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) has also contributed to the debate about the health risks of kava drinking, as asserted by the European pharmaceutical companies (PIN 2005). The secretariat advised its readership that since evidence regarding possible side effects of kava consumption within the Pacific is limited, Pacific communities should consume kava with moderation and that those few women who drink it should avoid kava during pregnancy and lactation. They suggested more research was necessary, and were awaiting the findings of the World Health Organization (WHO) report (PIN 2005). It is too early to assess effects of the lifting of the ban, or how the WHO recommendations will impact on the kava trade, production of kava products, and consumption patterns around the world.

Categorization of kava as a drug has long been debated (see, eg, Lebot, Merlin, and Lindstrom 1992; see Pollock 2001 and Pollock forthcoming for a summary of arguments). Western partakers refer to the plant’s mind-altering effects, particularly in relation to Vanuatu kava. However, local analyses stress its social strengths and its quiescent pacifying qualities in contrast to alcohol. Its local uses as a medicine have been underreported, and thus are poorly understood.

Inclusion of kava within Western “drug” protocols is having serious repercussions for the sustainability of the kava trade. Bans such as the one in Australia will reduce the amount of kava exported from Vanuatu and Fiji. Availability for customary practices such as Tongan *faikava* may be restricted, although packets of kava can still be obtained through personal contacts (Filihia, pers comm, Dec 2008). Further, the reputation of kava

is damaged by association with illegal drugs; concerns about the use and trading of cannabis by kava users resulted in a major police raid of *nakamal* around Noumea in October 2008 (*Les Nouvelles New Caledonia*, 1 Nov 2008).

#### BANS IMPOSED BY THE GERMAN PHARMACEUTICAL INDUSTRY

The lifting of the ban on imports of kava material to Europe in October 2008 has been strongly welcomed in the Pacific. In 2002 the German Federal Institute of Drugs and Medical Devices (BfArM) had imposed a ban on the sale of kava pills as herbal medicines, a measure that was followed by a number of other European countries. Rescinding the ban was due in large part to a World Health Organization report that examined extensive reports on the cases of liver damage, which indicated that the hepatotoxicity issues were not as serious as was first claimed (WHO 2007). The BfArM claim, based on 39 initial case reports (TMEC 2002), led other producers to voluntarily recall their products. Switzerland, France, and later the United Kingdom and Brazil also instituted a ban on the sale of kava pills (for details, see Pollock forthcoming). Sales of kava roots from the Pacific ceased. According to the International Kava Executive Council, “a traditional drink from the Pacific spontaneously mutated from a safe and effective drug into a highly dangerous substance” (IKEC 2004).

Specialists in herbal medicine, pharmacology, toxicology, as well as other health researchers examined in detail the cases of hepatotoxicity cited by the BfArM (see Schmidt 2007 for an overview). Reports that the BfArM had omitted many facts, such as patients’ existing liver damage and alcohol use, and the small number (less than a hundred) of adverse health events in proportion to millions of pills consumed suggests that many of the cases could not be directly related to the intake of kava pills. The Traditional Medicines Evaluation Committee (TMEC), a subcommittee of the European Herbal Practitioners Association, argued that from their reexamination of BfArM’s thirty cases these toxicity claims needed reconsideration, since the synthetic kavains (type of kavalactone) extracted by pharmaceutical companies were “manufactured into concentrated products made from acetone extracts and high alcohol concentrates” (TMEC 2002). These latter processing elements, rather than the kavains themselves, may be triggers of liver damage in some cases. The authors of the TMEC report recommended that those with existing liver damage not use kava pills.

On behalf of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) and some kava-producing countries, the Center for Development Enterprise, a European Union institution, together with the European Scientific Cooperative on Phytotherapy, commissioned Phytopharm Consulting to critically evaluate the justification for restrictions placed on kava by some European health authorities. Their report in March 2003 underlined the safety and efficacy of kava and confirmed scientists' views that the kava ban was unjustified. Scientific data had been ignored or misinterpreted, they claimed (Gruenwald and Mueller 2003; IKEC 2004).

In the Pacific, a conference convened in 2002 in Suva under the auspices of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat led to the formation of the International Kava Executive Council in 2004 under the chairmanship of Dr Joerg Gruenwald (Finau and others 2002; IKEC 2004). Representatives of Pacific Islands Forum nations, kava trading stakeholders, and researchers met with European pharmaceutical representatives to discuss ways in which the ban could be overcome. They concluded that the risks associated with kava pills were overstated, but recognized the need to establish quality controls and standards for the export of kava roots and continued dialogue if the ban was to be lifted. The World Health Organization was asked to provide an independent overview of the health risks of kava; that report was made public in August 2007 (WHO 2007).

In 2006, the United Kingdom upheld the ban imposed by Germany, France, and Switzerland (see Richardson and Henderson 2007 for a summary of the safety issues associated with kava from a regulatory perspective). Meanwhile, France agreed to commission research into ways the kava product exported from Pacific countries could be standardized to meet pharmaceutical manufacturers' specifications (Lebot 2006).

Mathias Schmidt's summary of "Quality Criteria for Kava," from the perspective of a pharmacist, uses "kavalactone signatures" to underline the differences between kava cultivars for defining kava quality (2007, 45). While Schmidt noted that despite numerous pharmacological and toxicological studies, "no convincing proof of an inherent toxicity of kava exists" (2007, 44), he advised that quality specifications should encompass several factors: no use of peelings or chips from the aerial parts of kava stumps; the need for a system to trace the origin of the roots exported; the use of "noble" cultivars with high kavain content; and use of healthy and fully matured plants of a minimum of three years old (2007, 46-47).

The 2007 WHO report, titled "Assessment of the Risk of Hepatotoxic-

ity with Kava Products,” distinguishes between water extracts of kava (ie, traditional kava preparations, or “teas”) and the organic extracts (ethanolic and acetic) and synthetic products as used in European and North American preparations of pills or capsules (WHO Executive Summary 2007, 2). The authors found no hepatotoxicity in clinical trials, nor did experimental studies show kava to have a toxic effect on the liver; no epidemiological studies have been conducted. Their examination of 93 case reports found 53 cases of possible association, but insufficient data to confirm, and 8 cases of probable association with liver problems from which patients recovered on withdrawal of kava; 14 patients had liver transplants, and 8 had died. They concluded that kava products have a strong propensity for kava/drug interactions when patients use organic extracts, or have heavy alcohol intake, preexisting liver damage, some genetic polymorphisms, or excessive dosage and co-medication with drugs that may affect the liver. Kava alone does not cause liver damage but in a very few cases may exacerbate toxic symptoms (Executive Summary, WHO 2007).

The way forward is thus to establish measures of quality control that are agreed between European pill manufacturers and Pacific traders. Standardizing the kava material exported so that levels of kavalactones can be predicted, eliminating the stem and other by-products of the kava roots themselves, and clearly indicating the provenance of root material are vital to quality assurance (Ernst 2007). These are the baseline steps in a “2 year road map” for moving forward to pursue the necessary legal, scientific, and “institutional strengthening and organisational establishment to manage and drive these processes and strategies” (IKEC 2008, 2). When this process is accomplished, sales of kava root material will recommence, and kava pills will become available again in European health stores.

#### BAN ON KAVA IMPOSED BY AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT

As mentioned earlier, in June 2007 the Australian government banned the importation of kava powder in bulk, and placed a limit on personal imports to one 2 kg packet per person (RNZI, June 2007). This move was designed to limit the access by Aborigines, particularly those living in the Northern Territory, to the kava introduced twenty years earlier as an alternative to beer and alcohol (d’Abbs 1995; Alexander, Watson, and Fleming 1987).

The effect of this ban on kava imports to Australia has yet to be assessed. Some commentators include it as another example of “racism,” while others draw attention to its effects on those Pacific Island communities that use kava (often purchased) for their national rituals. It is too early to gather any assessment of the effects of this ban, either on Australian communities, or the island exporters.

### IS KAVA A DRUG?

The categorization of kava is raising concerns that could lead to further bans. In the Pacific the term *kava* is used for both the plant and the rituals during which it is drunk, diluted with water; the World Health Organization refers to this water extract as a “tea” (WHO 2007). Casual users from outside the Pacific, as well as analysts of the effects (eg, Lebot, Merlin, and Lindstrom 1992), have used the “drug” label to refer to the pharmacological properties and its effects. Others have provided various labels such as herbal remedy, natural medicine, dietary supplement, nutraceutical, or anxiolytic (see, eg, Cupp 1999; Schmidt 2007; Ernst 2007). Their concerns have focused on the mind-altering properties of the kava beverage, as headlined in *Kava: The Pacific Drug* (Lebot, Merlin, and Lindstrom 1992; republished under the title *Kava: The Pacific Elixir* in 1997). In contrast, the Binihi and Jowitt survey found that among ni-Vanuatu, kava drunk in the company of other men was “socially addictive,” rather than psychologically addictive (McDonald and Jowitt 2000).

The kava beverage in its diluted form produces a soporific effect, in contrast to alcohol’s intoxicating effect. The addictive qualities of kava are similar, I suggest, to those associated with drinking tea, coffee, cocoa, and other beverages. Consistent with this, the WHO label “tea” appears to locate kava outside the strong drug category.

A second question arises whether kava should appear on lists of prohibited drugs, for example, on New Zealand’s Land Transport Act 1998. Kava is not included in the US Food and Drug Administration rules (Reeder and Cupp 2000), but an arrest in California in 2001, and three arrests in New Zealand have raised the issue of this classification. In the first New Zealand case, mentioned earlier, the Tongan arrested for a drunk-driving offense after he had drunk two shells of kava had his case dismissed because, we argued, kava was not a prohibited substance in New Zealand (author’s case notes, 2001). Two other arrests for drunk-driving offenses after drinking kava, one in Palmerston North and one in Nelson (both



in July 2007), resulted in those men being banned from driving for nine months (Aporosa, pers comm, 2007). The “drug” charge seems to be related to how each judge assesses kava. “Kava is not currently classified under the New Zealand Misuse of Drugs Act and there are no plans to reconsider its status at this time” according to an e-mail message sent to me from the New Zealand National Drug Policy Team (25 March 2008).

The contrast between kava used as a beverage and the pills sold as herbal remedies to reduce anxiety and promote sleep is very marked (Pollock 2001). Many generations of Pacific Islands peoples have developed their own cultural tastes for kava drinks, while Europeans have discovered kava pills as natural medicines only very recently. It remains unclear whether these “over the counter psychotropics” (as Helligenstein and Guenther refer to them [1999]) should be included under the drug label.

The question of the drug classification is likely to restrict sustainability of the kava trade, whether for use as a beverage or as a pill. Governments have the power to ban substances they deem to be harmful to health, and the power of pharmaceutical companies to influence the use of substances such as kava as “health remedies” is legendary, as Shiva (1995) and Stiglitz (2006) have argued. Growth in the demand for alternative medicines has appeared to offer lucrative returns to Pacific farmers as well as to the pharmaceutical manufacturers. But categorization of kava as a “drug” is also likely to raise prohibitions against its sale on worldwide markets.

## CONCLUSIONS

The lifting of the kava ban as announced by the International Kava Executive Council in October 2008 is welcome news for Pacific farmers. The kava trade can be sustained for both current and future generations of farmers and drinkers, depending on how the alternatives discussed above pan out. Customary usage and trade continue to draw on farmers’ productions in Vanuatu, Fiji, Tonga, and Pohnpei, thereby upholding important cultural practices and also yielding a cash return. Opportunities exist for expansion in alternative markets but obstacles still exist such as the drug label ascribed to kava, as well as environmental concerns in Pohnpei. Kava falls within the call for the World Trade Organization’s “free market trade rules [to] be replaced by a General Agreement for Sustainable Trade, making protection and diversification of national economies the rationale for world trade” (Shiva and Hines 2006, 56). Regional cooperation between Pacific and European interests by means of the International

Kava Executive Council has already established valuable dialogue and recommendations for standardizing the kava product. These links are vital to meet both internal directions and external demands on the kava trade.

The ban on exports of kava to European pharmaceutical companies created major setbacks for farmers and national economies in the Pacific, and thus weakened trust in this export link. Now that the ban has been lifted, further research is needed as to the steps necessary to market a more standardized product with a known kavalactone signature, or to find alternatives to the ethanol and acetone used in pharmaceutical production of the pills, as the 2007 WHO report recommends. Standardization is a major step necessary to establish the quality of kava exported, but will run counter to the biodiversity of Pacific knowledge and practices developed over the past 3,000 years (Pollock 2008a). Alternative export avenues using different extractive techniques, and targeting other markets such as Asia, also await development. Kava-producing nations have the choice of several options, each with cultural significance and varying returns.

The future of the kava trade depends on keeping open as many options as possible. Kava as a Pacific icon is already widely recognized beyond its Pacific cultural setting. Variation in tastes for the kava brew sustain its biodiversity by way of a number of alternative modes of consumption, from fresh root, to dried root, kava powder or pill. Such variation is essential to the sustainability of kava production and the kava trade in and beyond the Pacific.

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### *Abstract*

Sustainability of trade in kava, which was severely compromised by a 2002 ban on exports from Pacific Islands to European pharmaceutical companies, has reached a new phase. Exporters vigorously fought the ban, imposed as a result of claims that kava pills, sold as herbal remedies for reducing anxiety, sleeplessness,



and depression, were toxic to the liver of individuals who took them. Concerted reaction by Pacific interests such as the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat led to the formation of the International Kava Executive Committee, which sought ways to get the ban lifted. A 2007 World Health Organization report found that the process of manufacturing the pills was more likely to be toxic to some pill takers than the kavalactones drunk in traditional beverages; quality control and changing the manufacturing process could allow exports of kava to Europe to resume.

Meanwhile, alternative outlets for sales of kava have been growing, which may help to sustain the kava trade and provide an income for farmers. Expanding Pacific Islander communities in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States are using kava to maintain identity ties to their homelands, such as Vanuatu, Fiji, Tonga, and Pohnpei. In parallel, sales of kava within local communities are increasing through markets, *nakamal*, and kava cafes, and Web sites promote the product. These tracks for sustaining kava trade will need further development throughout the Pacific region, and beyond.

KEYWORDS: kava trade, Pacific, Vanuatu, European kava ban