

Robert Wolfgramm ‘Kava as Symbol and Ritual of Melanesian Identity’

Kava Notes for Melanesian Culture Day
ACU Art Gallery, 4 December 2016

Adapted from a paper originally presented by Robert Wolfgramm to the inaugural International Kava Conference held in Suva, Fiji, 30 November–2 December 2004

Melanesia is the spread of indigenous Pacific peoples from Fiji to New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Torres Strait Islands of Australia, Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, West Papua, and Maluku. Our distinctive identities in these settings merge into a common name and ethno-cultural solidarity we have come to know as ‘Melanesia’. Through concessions given to and taken from empire and colonization, then through struggles for liberation and independence, over the past five decades, most (but significantly, not all) of Melanesia, is now free. Our concern today is to focus on the plight and pleas from our Melanesian brothers and sisters in West Papua. They are far from free.

To help us focus our concern and prayers, our friends from Fiji are here to enact a small kava ceremony. Kava or *yaqona* as it is called in Fiji, is the root of the pepper tree, dried and pounded into powder form, mixed with water to create a pacifying, soothing, relaxing drink which is served from a bowl in coconut cups. Though spread throughout Polynesia as well, kava (hence its name), originated in West Papua millennia ago and came with the great migrations into the Pacific that first brought Melanesia into existence, and Polynesia thereafter.

Aldous Huxley once observed that

“All the vegetable sedatives and narcotics, all the euphorics that grow on trees, the hallucinogens that can be squeezed from roots - all ... have been known and systematically used by human beings from time immemorial”.

Kava certainly fits that understanding. Andrew Weil is also right when he similarly notes that the universal “ubiquity of drug use is so striking that it must represent a basic human appetite”. No archaeological record exists, and anthropological and sociological evidences are fragmentary, but there is good reason to believe that the religious use of kava was an ancient Pacific-wide phenomenon (cf. Brunton). ‘Kava myths’ provide little unanimity about its original symbolic meaning. In some parts of Melanesia, kava is said to have originated from the body of a corpse. In Vanuatu, kava’s origenesis is alleged to be in the body of a dead woman usually her vagina or breasts. According to a Fijian source, kava/*yaqona* derives from ‘*yago*’ (meaning body) and from the body of a chief in a burial ground. This accords with traditions where it is said to have come from a body, and in Tonga and Taveuni specifically, from the body of a Tongan - some say Rotuman - leper buried in Vuna (Taveuni). In parts of Fiji, kava/*yaqona* is described as having been set aside by ancestral twins for the snake-deity, Degei. In Tikopia, PNG, one kava myth has it originating from a Tongan rat that ate the kava root and fell unconscious; yet another myth describes it growing out of the body of a female deity, *Pufafine*.

Regardless of where it is found and what its origin as a sacred plant, the ritual use of

kava/*yaqona* is sacralised (Brunton). Raymond Firth has accounted for kava's religious use among the people of Tikopia; Gajdusek and Brunton have provided some insights into its ritual use among the Vanuatu people; and Bott and Gifford have variously described its ritual use among Tongans. As Firth put, in respect to the Tikopia: 'The essential religious significance of the kava performance ... was its role of communication with that part of the spirit world which represented to them, manipulative power. It was their route of appeal to the gods, summoning them to attend and listen to the pleas of men'. As one Fijian source recently put it: as with 'wine being the symbol of the blood of Jesus, kava, some believe, symbolizes the milk of the *vanua*'. Some further examples of kava's sacralised ritual use are:

- In Samoan folklore, kava rituals are considered sacred. The great *Tagaloa* commanded Samoan *atua* - gods who reigned in the heavenly *Pulotu*. During the primogenital kava ceremony, he cut a boy in half because he mocked it. Samoan chiefly kava rituals are served by *taupou* - a virgin who represents the idealized sister of the chief and symbolising purity requisite to the dignity and honour of the ceremony itself.
- In Tonga, talk of the role of gods and the activities of spirits was common during pre-Christian times especially on occasions of kava consumption. According to William Mariner (a captive European from 1806-20), Tongans of his day held to a belief in the mythical *Pulotu* (paradise) and to the *otua* - gods who inhabit that realm. Mediating the will of the *otua* to the living was a priesthood given to *avanga* - possession episodes that occurred only in kava rituals. The formation of a kava circle by chiefs and commoners became sacred the moment a traditional priest joined the circle. Under the influence of kava, the priest would begin an oracle speaking 'in a low and very altered tone of voice ... in the first person as though he were the god'. Mariner notes further that 'on some occasions' the priest's 'countenance becomes fierce' and his body characterized by paroxysmic trembling, perspiration, blackening convulsing lips, heavy breathing, and tears. In contemporary Tonga, as elsewhere, the *avanga* phenomenon has jumped the pen of priestly exclusivity and *avanga* is now reported as a phenomenon that can strike at those beyond the traditional priestly functionary.
- In the Solomons, kava was also part of pre-Christian chiefly rituals. *Tearakura* a great chief among the Anuta people of eastern Solomons was seen as a potent holder of manuu (i.e. *mana*) and was the object of kava rituals after his death in primordial times. He was said to hold the key to the tribal subsistence; he controlled 'the land's productivity and the community's prosperity'. Curiously, kava is not grown on Anuta today yet the chiefly '*pai kava*' ceremony (as it is known) still commemorates the ancient veneration of *Tearakura*, and on other occasions of his older sister, *Nau Ariki*. In times past the kava ceremony was elaborate part of a cocktail of rituals that included fishing, dancing and feasting.
- Rotumans referred to the spirits of their dead as *atua* who were to be propitiated by means of kava rituals and food gifts. But the *atua* could also refer to a god who would punish those petitioners who did not provide sufficient food and kava for possessed mediums known as *tu'ura*. As Macgregor notes, 'when he [the *tu'ura*] has eaten and had kava which are for the god (not the *tu'ura*) he [the *tu'ura*] becomes the mouthpiece of the god' [i.e. the *atua*]. Historical accounts of kava/*yaqona*'s ritual preparation in Fiji in both mundane and religious

settings vary. Thomson notes that young men with good teeth were called on to chew it to a pulp and that this was a borrowed Tongan tradition. Brewster admits it was also a Tongan tradition, but declares that in Tonga 'pretty young girls' chewed the kava. Brewster argues that Fijians originally ground their kava with stones. Williams reports that chewing the plant enhanced its effects. Thomson reports that chewers of the root simply spat lumps 'the size of hen's eggs' into a *tanoa*. Williams notes that an indigenous prayer was offered during the mixing. Thomson reports that a song was sung during the mixing ritual. Historical accounts also record tribal variations of service depending on the occasion. Wilkes and Thomson both observed that the kava strainer was made of 'vau' - 'hibiscus bark'. Wilkes notes that when water was poured into the *tanoa*, a *bati* would call out '*ai sevu*' - the water is splashed!. Wilkes reports both halves were used with the eyed (holey) *bilo* serving as the measuring coconut cup for filling the un-eyed *bilo*.

Despite the apparent mundane character of the occasion of its consumption today, kava/*yaqona* nevertheless sacralises our time together, and the space we use for drinking it, collectively. Kava always renders a special quality to (i) the participants who use it; (ii) the time-duration of their use, and (iii) the space in which it is being used. In the first place, participants are sacralised in consciousness and by their conformity to the ritual rules of preparation and imbibition relative to time and space. Relative to time, in very real sense, kava/*yaqona* effects a slowing of one's activity, a time-out from one's other ritual commitments and obligations, and a sense of timelessness - of concentrated controlled thought (as noted by Miller). In terms of space, strict rules apply to the immediate area of consumption with imbuing it with dignity, and attached conceptions of trespass and violation. Hence kava/*yaqona* use is never profane in the religious sense; indeed, social punishments - usually exclusion - are meted out to guarantee its sacrality.

While kava/*yaqona* implements are sometimes regarded as ancient artifacts handed down by tradition, they have evolved over time. Pre-Christian forms of the modern *tanoa* (mixing, serving bowl) were known in Fiji, for example, as *daveniyaqona* or *ibuburau* and specifically *ibuburaunibete* (priest's dishes). These were very shallow and allowed only a small imbibition of the kava/*yaqona* sipped by lying in a prostrate position. Through modernizing and Christianising influences, the *ibuburau* was displaced by the (Tongan) *tanoa*. Drinking rites came to be associated with political rather than purely religious functions; priestly rites were desacralised from its association with non-Christian indigenous meaning-systems. But despite these changes, the associated symbolic meanings of the plant and its ritual use have not been lost - and not today. We can summarise with a Fijian observer who notes: 'The *tanoa* is seen as a feminine entity, the bearer of water and plant from the earth mother, while the *sau* is symbolic of the umbilical cord and is stretched out towards the son of the land, the paramount chief'. The *tanoa* may be understood as a womb, the *bilo* as breasts, the *yaqona* as the life-giving 'nectar' of the gods, the *watabu* as the umbilical cord stretched to the (chiefly or priestly) recipient of the *yaqona* and the white *buli* as 'symbols of divine fertility'.

Taken at face-value then, the symbolism of kava/*yaqona* imbibition is a worshipful acknowledgement of the union of 'mother' earth with 'father' sky. Kava/*yaqona* thus facilitates entry into a state of holistic and timeless transcendence that 'banishes from consideration the basic questions raised by the made-upness of culture' (Victor Turner). Whether in groups or alone, the effect is a sense of timelessness when one may see oneself in time and space among one's

others, and when one may also lose oneself in the midst of one's others. In this regard, Csikszentmihalyi's concept of 'flow experience' is apt. As Victor Turner summed it: 'there is no dualism ... past and future must be given up - only now matters ... intensification is the name of the game [and] the 'self' which is normally the 'broker' between one person's actions and another's, simply becomes irrelevant - the actor is immersed in the 'flow'. All men, even all things are felt to be one'. In this sacred state of kava-induced timelessness, self is constructed through an imagination of that which is physically absent or unreal, and through an imagination which sees it as present in others. As Bernice Martin observed, 'ritual is always a paradoxical combination: a taste of transcendence and an experience of belonging at the same time'. The effect of this kava-induced consciousness is a 'flow experience', where the subject achieves, in Ganga Sahai's words, 'the realisation that the only real moment is the moment of the Now, the eternal present' where 'it is the timeless mind that really exists'. This is effortlessly accomplished through kava/*yaqona* use.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that kava rituals are a multilayered complex of meanings and significance, and for our purposes today, it is important to know and celebrate the fact that the plant originated in Papua. It is the Papuan root-gift to the Pacific that ties our Melanesian and Polynesian peoples to our common ancestral-root. Let us honour that tie by doing justice for the people who have bequeathed it. Let us make kava a blessing, a flow-experience of one-ness with and for the people who gave it to us. God bless the people of West Papua!