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KAVA : A CHALLENGE TO ALCOHOL?*

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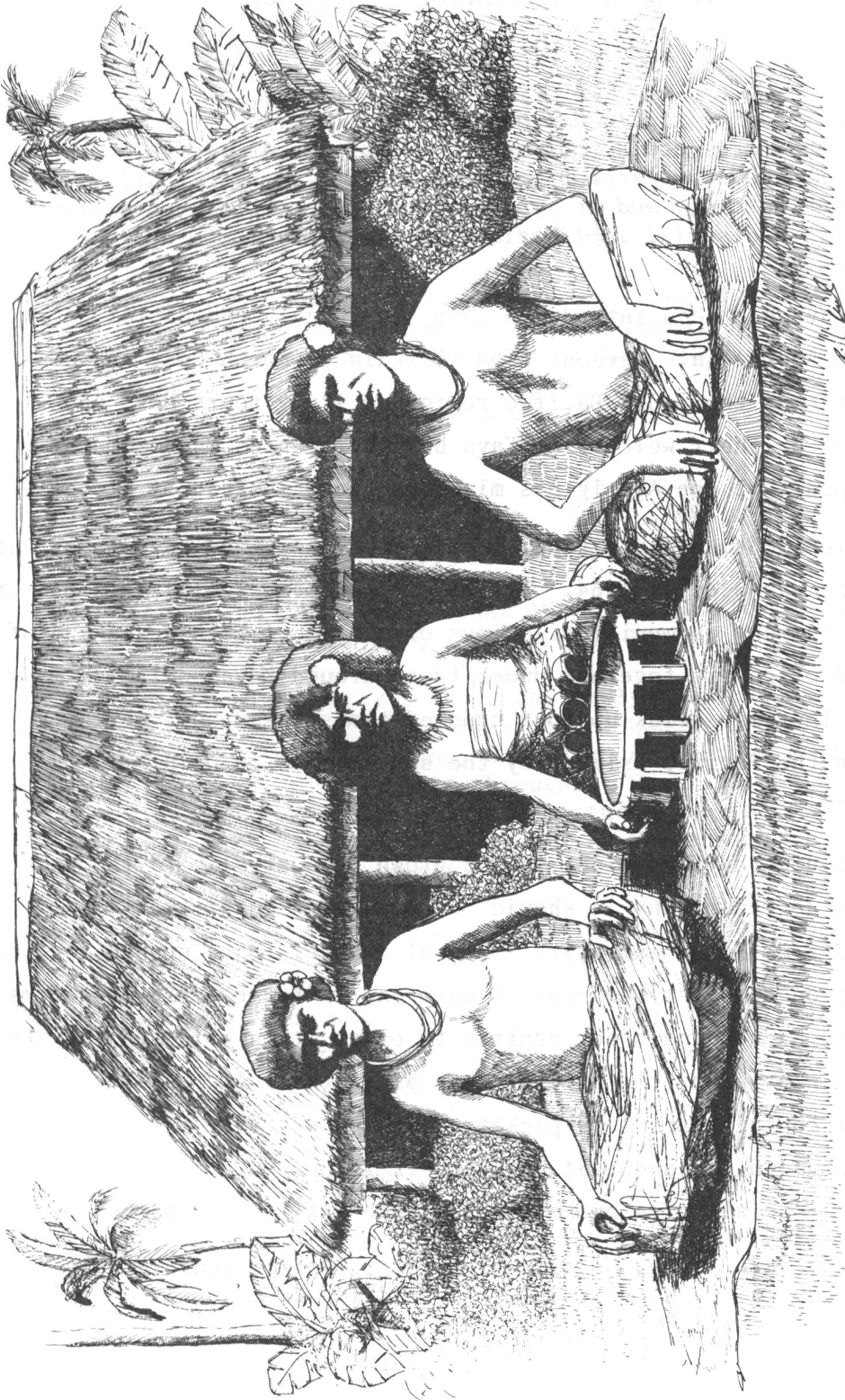
(Concern is being widely expressed about the effects of the introduction and large-scale consumption of Kava in Aboriginal communities. The sedative effect produced by Kava must seriously impede effective learning, and it is important that teachers understand the health and social implications of frequent, large-scale Kava ingestion.)

Kava has been introduced into Aboriginal communities in Northern Australia. Persons from Yirrkala in North East Arnhem Land visiting the South Pacific region on study tours have been impressed by their welcome in Kava bowl ceremonies, and some of them hoped that the Aborigines might use Kava instead of alcohol.

In 1983 many Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land used Kava, and much more was used in 1984. By 1985 it became a social epidemic or 'craze' in many communities. Rings of people of both sexes and of all ages often sit together under trees around Kava bowls for many hours. They may drink up to a hundred times the amount normally drunk in the Pacific Islands by the same number of people in the same time.

Since the Kava plant is not grown in Australia (although there is no reason why it should not be) large quantities are imported from Tonga and Fiji. Several channels have opened for its importation and distribution. A main one is for Pacific Islanders living in Sydney and other centres to order it in bulk and then to mail it in boxes to communities such as Yirrkala and Galiwinku. Each box contains about 50 packets of the powdered Kava root. A packet is sold for about \$15.00, and it is not unusual for a person to use all of a packet in a single session. A packet of

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Kava consumption in the Pacific Islands is traditionally controlled by ritual and ceremony.

Tongan Kava root bought by the writer for \$15.00 weighed 300 grams and had a volume of about 60 ml.

Dr Helen Fitzgerald, who conducts a general medical practice in Newtown in Sydney reports that Kava is widely drunk there, followed by a beer 'chaser'. We shall not concern ourselves with its use in the city in this brief article.

Nobody seems to have studied how Kava affects humans, especially those who take large amounts.

Despite the traditional use of the large aluminium mixing bowl in the centre of the ring, and the coconut shell cup passing from hand to hand, the Yolngu have developed their own customs for Kava drinking.

Throughout the Pacific Islands Kava consumption is traditionally controlled by ritual and ceremony, although there are reports that some of these societies are now ignoring the traditional ways (Brown, 1984; Cawte, 1985). A Kava session in Arnhem Land may last for up to 24 hours, and may be repeated several times a week. The atmosphere is informal. People move from ring to ring, wherever they find enough Kava, or wherever they are welcomed. The rings are not arranged along the traditional clan or moiety lines, as in the religious ceremonials or bungguls. They are distinctly secular.

My observations suggest that lower dosages have a relaxing effect on muscles, but that higher dosages have sedative and even narcotic effects. The early effects are like those of a minor tranquilizer. Yolngu relax, talk together in a friendly manner, often joining in singing of both traditional and non-traditional songs, until such time as the sedative effect takes hold, when they drop off to sleep where they sit, or go quietly home. It is possible that at least a part of the drowsy behaviour arises from lack of sleep. Unlike alcohol in the same groups, users do not

seem to revive old grievances and are not prone to act upon aggressive or sexual impulses.

The first effect noticed by a Kava drinker is the numbing of the mouth. This may spoil the appetite. Loss of weight is common after steady use. However, this may be due to not eating properly and the detached feelings, as much as to the numbing of the mouth. Heavy Kava users show a strong desire to have another Kava session within a day or two, after the long sleep has refreshed them.

Psychological and physical symptoms are recognised by nurses and health workers at the sick bay. Mental and physical tiredness are common, often put down to loss of sleep. There is a higher than usual absenteeism from work. A teacher said that children fall asleep in her morning class and explain the reason as "Kava". She likens its effect in these children to that of smoking "pot". Alternatively, she suggests that the drowsiness and indifference - "the head on the desk" - come from loss of sleep the night before.

A Kava effect that is readily noticed is a darkening of the skin, sometimes with a scaliness which makes the patient look old. It may proceed to dermatitis, with loss of hair. Eyebrows may fall out. The signs are suggestive of pellagra - possibly from associated poor diet, or from nicotinic acid (niacin) interference by Kava. Occasionally allergic reactions occur, with running eyes and noses and puffy eyelids. One nurse has observed that heavy users have higher blood pressure and chest pains and, rarely, confused states with hallucinations (McPhail, 1985). This nurse described visions and nightmares in an Aboriginal lad who came to the clinic for help with his strange feelings. In this case, gastric irritation put a stop to further intake. This nurse suspects that most people with gastric irritation do not report to the clinic but prefer to sleep off the effects at home.

There are several psychotic people in this community who are said to be moderate consumers of Kava who have shown a distinct improvement. I shall come to this interesting observation later. First, we should note the comments of the Yolngu residents living in this community and explain the terms being applied to Kava. One hears the expressions "Church Drink", "Health Drink", and "Pacific Yolngu Drink". All are misleading. While it is true that missionary workers from Fiji and elsewhere have been associated with the introduction of the drink and that some Church members support its use as an alternative to alcohol, it would be unfair to say that its use is 'supported' by the Church. It is not.

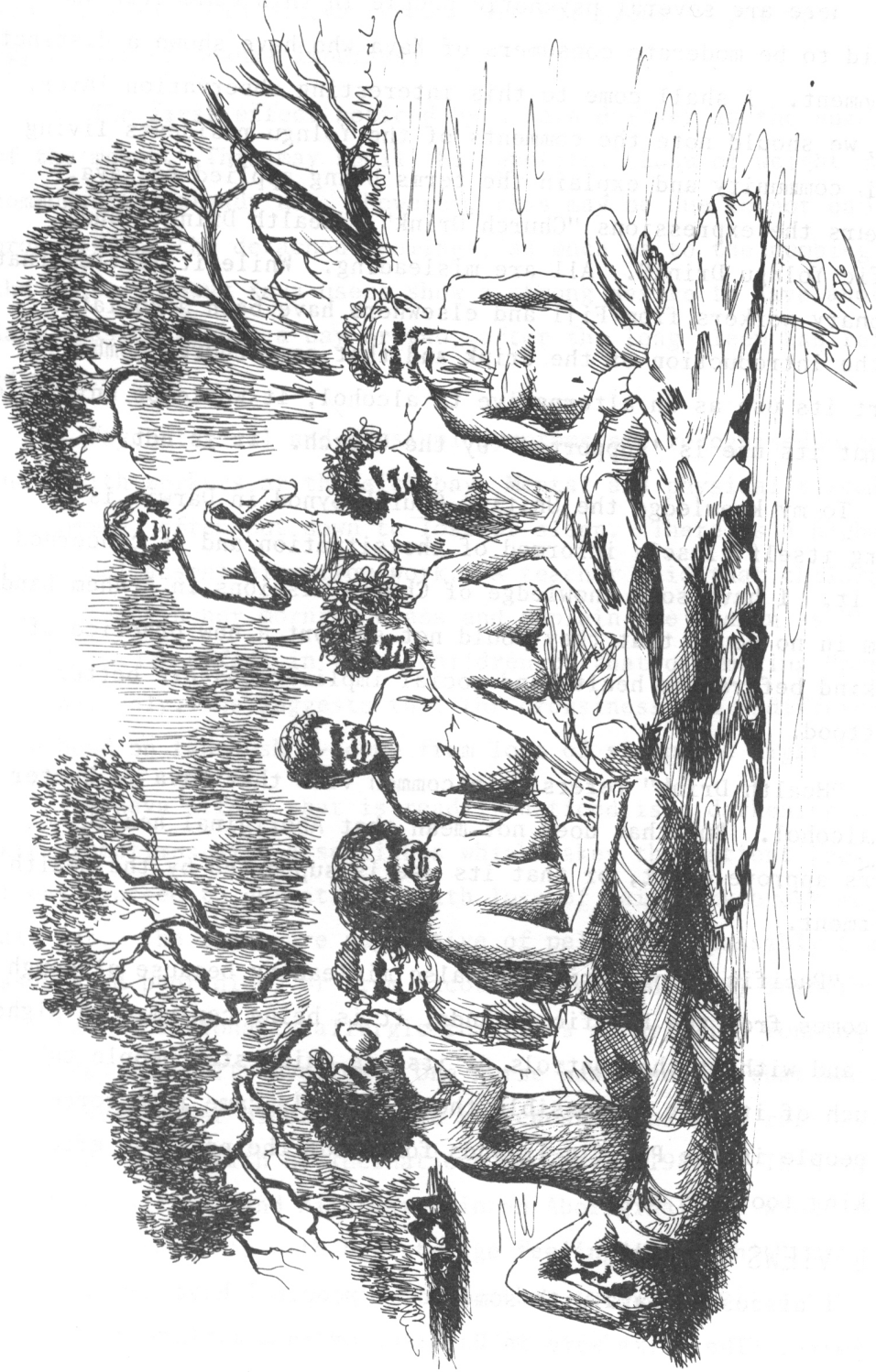
To my knowledge the Uniting Church Synod in Darwin is keeping itself closely informed of the situation and is concerned about it. I have some knowledge of Church missions in Arnhem Land and am in no doubt that they would not support a new practice of this kind before its health and social implications are better understood.

"Health Drink" refers to a common view that Kava is better than alcohol. But that does not mean that Aboriginal health workers approve of it, or that its use is supported by the Health Department.

"Pacific Yolngu Drink" is also misleading because although Kava comes from the Pacific Islands, it is being consumed in higher doses and without the controls of its use which stop people taking too much of it. It is possible these controls came into force when people in the Pacific Islands found out the negative effects of taking too much Kava.

LOCAL VIEWS OF KAVA

I discussed Kava with some local people I have known for many years. The talks were in English, or in a mixture of English



Yolngu have made their own customs for Kava. They may drink up to 100 times the amount normally drunk in the Pacific Islands by the same number of people.

and Yolngu language. These views are very important. They shape the behaviour of the people. They also determine the level of compliance with any health recommendations. Inside responses, however, are difficult to get. They need a lot of patience and understanding with the participants. Here are some views. (*Codes are used to preserve privacy.*)

T.R. A capable and responsible man in early middle age, is the main importer and supplier of Kava for the community. He said that the Tongan variety is more popular than the Fijian. The Tonga Kava is whiter and stronger in action than the darker Fijian powder. Perhaps it is dried better before it is powdered. He sells it at \$15.00 a packet and says he is not interested in making a profit. His motive is to challenge alcohol. If there were no Kava here people would be constantly flying out of this dry community "on business" to get alcohol, and smuggling it home again. He expressed some surprise at how widespread Kava is becoming, and how it pushes the craving for alcohol out of many people's minds. He describes it as an experiment and he is waiting to see how it will turn out. Yolngu often become enthusiastic about something new, only to let it lapse later. Perhaps Kava is only a craze and will die away? His own ambition in life is to start a fishery so that the people's diet will be better. He is buying nets and will start a business after his term as Chairman of Council. Perhaps in time they might rebuild the fish packing and freezing works which the missionaries had started. He then sold me a packet of Kava.

I.T. a former Chairman of the Council is widely respected for his experience and judgment. He had been to Fiji many years ago and approved of Kava there, because only one drink is taken, he said, and that in a ceremony. But here it is the same as drinking beer in a pub, except that sessions last 24 hours or

more, and there is no doubt that drinkers become drunk. He has come to the view that Kava is most unfortunate for his community. He said that the family is no good any more. Parents are away for too long and the children are not looked after. Steady drinkers become tired and give no thought to food or preparing meals for themselves or the family. Kava drinkers are not violent, but they are selfish. He does not feel Kava is a fad. He predicts that it will grow and have even more serious effects. He explained the distribution more clearly. The Tongan Kava which makes you more drunk is shipped to a Tongan agent in Sydney who places it into plastic bags which he packs into small boxes. He then mails it direct to Yirrkala and Elcho Island, from where it is flown to the Homeland centres. The Fijian Kava is handled by a dealer in Darwin. He is convinced that the handlers are making a good profit and he named a sum of money. He worries about the solution of the problem. If he had the power he would ration it. Each person would then only get a limited quantity of Kava a day. (It is worth noting that this man has himself given up smoking because of chest disease and he seems to have cured his own son of petrol sniffing.)

L.F. is one of the leading health workers, a man of good judgment. He said that lots of Balanda (*derived from Hollander, the Macassan word for white man*) criticise Kava but he sees its good side. People drinking Kava talk quietly, sing and tell stories all night, but they are *good* stories, and they talk about jobs and make plans for the future. That is quite different from drinking alcohol, which makes people remember old grudges and clan feuds. People who are lonely, or ashamed, come into the circle and share in the talk. His understanding is that in Samoa and Fiji Kava is used to welcome strangers and to make friendships. He pointed out that in Australia it is perfectly legal. It goes through Australian Customs and Quarantine, who approve of it. He

himself uses it when he is tired. Three or four cups relax him. He stopped drinking it for a while because of Balanda criticisms but has taken it up again. Sometimes Yolngu use it for special ceremonies, as when the new Minister was ordained. He encourages people to drink it with milk beside them, and he stresses hygiene. Those who mix it in the aluminium bowl should have clean hands, with no sores on their skin. He feels that petrol sniffing is less keenly pursued by children because of Kava. And it keeps the Homeland centre people happy so that they go away less to get alcohol. In brief, he said it is very good for Yolngu because it brings the people together in peace. The Tongan and Fijian missionaries at Yirrkala are teaching the people to use Kava ceremonially.

J.Z. is in my opinion a notable bark painter who teaches the art in school. He is also an active member of the Church. He calls Kava the "Church drink" and he feels that the Church says nothing against it - nor does Health. He thinks it has the same energy as "pot". It can turn the mind anywhere, but it can bring on a fiery stage - and he has learned to stop before that! Once he was seeing visions from it and could not make out what they were. He does not want visions coming from outside - they will not be true ones. He can often see visions of the sacred designs (rangga) in his mind, in his meditation rather than his dream. Truly sacred designs come into his mind to settle an argument about Rangga. He does not want any help from Kava: he wants his visions to come in pure messages from the Yolngu ancestors. So he never mixes up Kava with his Yolngu life.

F.D. is a distinguished elder. He regards himself, and is regarded by others as an authority on Yolngu law. He said that Kava is not as dangerous as alcohol but it seems to make the people who drink a lot of it grow older and blacker. "They look like old,

black men!" He thinks harm comes to them because Kava makes them lazy and they don't eat enough animal and vegetable food. And it costs a lot - but there is plenty of money about to pay for it so cost does not matter much. It is all right in Fiji because they have a strong law governing it, to use it only for special meetings controlled by the chief and as a welcome drink for important visitors. The law in Fiji is that the people who are invited to the Kava meetings must take a shower and clean up, like going to church. But here we have no law at all. People drink it to get drunk. The Fiji Methodists sent it to the Methodists in Australia. He considered that the Church are the people behind it - or they were behind it in the beginning.

U.Y. is my clan brother and he called on me to share a cup of coffee. After we parted he came back to ask for \$30.00. "Lend me \$30.00 for two packets of Kava for tonight." He said that five cups made him feel happy, rather like being drunk. After ten cups he could no longer talk and then fell asleep. I 'lent' him \$15.00 because he is my "brother" and I asked him to make me a certain carving of one of the clan ancestors and to take the loan off the price. He agreed. I formed the impression while talking to him that he is psychologically dependent upon Kava and wants it most nights. Without it nights are dull.

R.E. was formerly the gardener but is now in a job encouraging people at Homeland centres to grow bananas and paw-paws. He too reported that the Tongan form of Kava is preferred over the Fijian because it makes people drunker quicker. He does not think the plant can be grown locally because the soil is wrong. He emphasized the advantages of Kava over alcohol. When people get drunk on Kava they feel happy, like to talk and sing the manikay, or traditional songs. They do not fight or chase after women.

They just sit down and when drunk enough they go off to sleep. The gambling craze has also died down because of Kava, although when people run out of money for Kava they play cards for it.

The drawbacks of Kava have to do with health - the falling off in energy makes it easy to spot those who take too much Kava. And the fatigue often stops them coming to work. But all the northern Yolngu towns are using it and in most places it is displacing alcohol. His wife confirmed what he said.

THE RESPONSE OF PSYCHOTIC INDIVIDUALS TO KAVA

In this community there is a small number of psychotic people. They are not easy to treat, being considerably socially isolated, often teased by children, and do not take their medicines reliably. A Yolngu health worker told me of one psychotic person who, he said, has "come close" to the people since Kava was introduced. This patient is now a moderate though fairly regular Kava consumer. In response to my question my informant could not decide whether the Kava has improved this patient's disposition, or whether the community is more accepting of him.

I was able to see three other patients. One suffers from a schizo-affective disorder which makes him erratic and unpredictable, sometimes with a foolish and rather affected manner. He has heard voices whispering to him for about ten years and he becomes suspicious, lurking much of the time inside his house. Since his speech is hard to follow he is ridiculed a good deal by children, who mimic him. When I saw him on this occasion I found him more relaxed, rational and conversational. He said his mind is "free" and the voices are not bothering him. He can now mix with strangers, something he would never do before. He has been taking Kava several nights a week for about a year, especially when he feels 'uptight'. He is welcomed at the rings of Kava drinkers,

including young men with whom he did not previously keep company. He has found a new social life with them. He said he mostly talked about the Gospel and joined in the singing.

I saw a severely schizophrenic older man whose conversation is so garbled that most who meet him cannot understand it. He is almost completely socially alienated, lives alone and wanders the town by himself. For years I have seen him tramping the roads as if he were going somewhere, muttering angrily to himself. On this occasion he was more friendly and I had the longest talk ever with him, although it still sounded like a word salad. I heard from the health worker that this poor man was now accepted at the Kava rings.

A third patient has a prolonged social withdrawal for which he refused antidepressant medication or other help from the health centre. He was inactive, slow of speech and for much of the time shut himself up in his house. His wife cared for him and he would not allow her out of his sight. I was unsure of his diagnosis, especially as his elder sister has a 20-year history of severe schizophrenia. (I failed to see her on this visit.) His illness is described by Watson (1984) as a "case of sorcery". On this visit I learned that he now joins in the Kava rings and is generally considered to be much improved.

In summary, the advent of the Pacific Island substance, Kava, to Aboriginal communities is an important development. Many observers claim Kava to be a solution to the alcohol problem in such communities. But Kava brings a different set of problems in its train. It is being used by children, for instance, and it seems to affect their attentiveness at school.

All this calls for close observation and continuing study.

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