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Introduction: W. H. R. Rivers and kava

In 1914 W. H. R. Rivers published *The History of Melanesian Society*, his heroic attempt to unravel the complexities of Oceanic cultures. Noting that the distribution of the two major drugs in Oceania appeared to be almost mutually exclusive, he suggested that they had been brought by two separate – though culturally related – waves of immigrants, the kava-people and the betel-people. Both these peoples brought other elements of culture with them, and the interaction of the immigrants with the original population and each other, together with processes of internal development, had produced the great cultural diversity that characterized the region.

Rivers thought that both the kava-people and the betel-people had migrated into the Pacific from south-east Asia. The kava-people came first, and as well as kava they brought shell money, the bow and arrow, the wooden gong, the pig, and the fowl. They also had secret societies, and associated with these were a cult of the dead, totemism, and the practice of taboo. The betel-people came later, and they also brought the custom of head hunting (1914, vol. 2: 226–7, 250–60, 533).

Betel chewing requires at least three ingredients: the nut of the areca palm (*Areca catechu*), the leaf, catkin or stalk of the betel pepper (*Piper betle*), and lime.¹ Rivers believed that, because it was a complex practice, combining substances with no obvious common associations, it must have developed in stages. First the betel leaf was chewed, then the other ingredients were added later, one at a time. Either the kava-people left their homeland before the other ingredients had been discovered, or these were not initially available to them in their travels. But they did find *Piper methysticum* – the kava plant – in Oceania, and Rivers supposed that they substituted this for the betel pepper, first chewing the leaves, then discovering ‘that the root furnished a more potent means whereby to procure the desired effect’ (ibid.: 256). At a later stage people learnt to make a drink from the plant, and this became the universal way of consuming kava.

¹ Some people add other substances, such as tobacco, cloves, gambier (*Uncaria gambir*) and sap from the breadfruit tree, to the betel quid (Theodoratus 1953: 31, 44–5, 51 and *passim*; Crawford 1981: 97).

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When the betel-people finally arrived in Melanesia, they brought betel chewing with them as a fully developed practice. To Rivers it seemed obvious that it had a number of advantages over kava: the constituents of betel were freely available, easy to carry about, and ready to be used immediately, whereas the supply of kava was rarely plentiful, the drink required prolonged preparation, and its use was restricted. Consequently, he believed that in the places where the betel-people came into contact with the kava-people, the use of kava was gradually abandoned in favour of the superior drug (*ibid.*: 252–5).

Rivers' work stimulated an interest in kava as an important marker of past migrations (e.g. Churchill 1916; Haddon 1916, 1920; Riesenfeld 1950; Schmitz 1960). But this was relatively short lived in British and Commonwealth anthropology. With the dominance of structural-functionalism after the 1920s, the questions Rivers raised were pushed to the margins of the discipline, appropriate for ethnologists and folklorists, but not social anthropologists. Detailed accounts of kava use continued to appear, particularly in the writings of those who had worked in Polynesia (e.g. Firth 1967; Newell 1947). Yet anthropologists who studied people who drank kava, either at the time of their fieldwork or in the past, sometimes did not even think it necessary to mention the fact in their publications. As the late Peter Lawrence, who was one of them, told me: 'When I was studying the Garia [in the late 1940s and 1950s] these things were only incidentals.'¹ It was only in the 1970s, following the development of more general interests in both psychoactive substances and the interpretation of ritual, that anthropological interest in kava revived. Nevertheless, as we will see, there is still a surprising degree of confusion in the literature, even in regard to rather straightforward matters.

While Rivers was given credit for his contributions to the development of kinship studies, his speculations on Oceanic culture history were ridiculed. Of course, from a contemporary perspective, nearly three-quarters of a century after the functionalist revolution, and as a result of the accumulation of high-quality ethnographic data and the increased anthropological sophistication that followed, it is easy to criticize his work. There was a circularity to his arguments; for instance, he identified specific institutions as belonging to the kava-people on rather tenuous grounds, and then supposed that wherever these institutions were found he had evidence for the earlier presence of the kava-people. He made unrealistic assumptions about the coherence of cultural complexes and consequently neglected

¹ Lawrence eventually referred to the Garia's use of kava in his monograph (1984: 224). Other anthropologists who have informed me that they worked among people who used kava, but who have not yet mentioned this in their publications, are Romola McSwain, Louise Morauta, and Buck Schieffelin.

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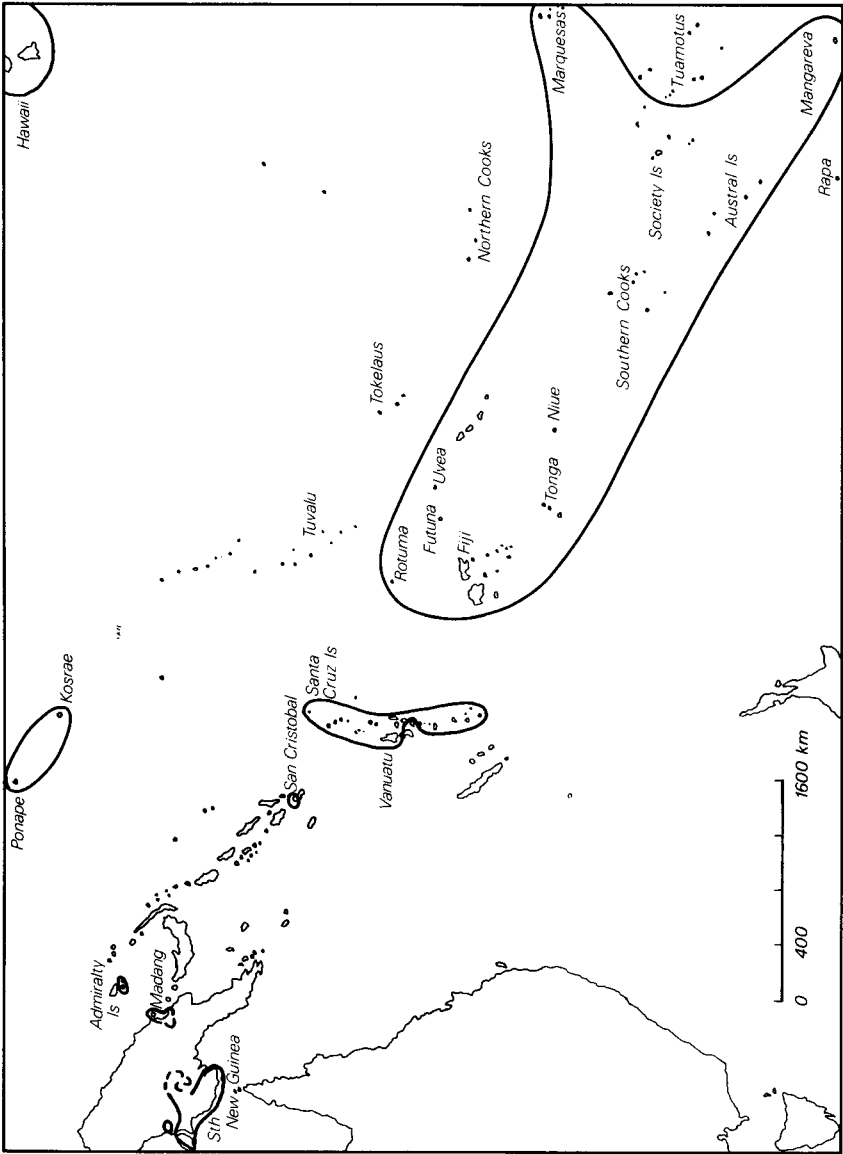
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indirect diffusion. He also made unwarranted generalizations regarding areas about which his knowledge was very limited.

These objections are well rehearsed, but they should not blind us to his insights. He raised important questions about the cultural similarity of widely separate areas of the Pacific, and he showed considerable sensitivity to the dynamics of leadership and change in Melanesian societies. Michael Allen has recently shown that Rivers' speculations about secret societies and descent systems can be a productive starting point for further inquiries (1981a, 1984). Similarly, I think that Rivers identified genuine anthropological problems relating to kava, as well as contributing possible ideas towards their resolution.

Rivers had a simple but compelling insight about kava: its geographical distribution is strange, and huge distances separate kava-drinking regions (see Map 1). From this he inferred that it had once been far more widespread (1910: 734). Of course, this is not an inescapable inference; the psychoactive properties of *Piper methysticum* could have been discovered independently in a number of different places. If this were the case, the problem would dissolve. There would be no justification for thinking that the spread of kava had ever been more extensive, and no point in speculating why a drug, so highly valued in many cultures, should have been abandoned by others. The purpose of this book is to argue that independent discovery is extremely unlikely, and that the problem of kava is but one aspect of the broader and more fundamental anthropological problem of cultural stability in stateless societies. The first part of the book presents botanical, linguistic and ethnological evidence which strongly suggests that Rivers was correct in thinking that kava was once drunk much more widely in Melanesia. In the second part, I attempt to explain why kava would have disappeared from many Melanesian societies before European contact. This explanation takes as its starting point one of Rivers' conjectures, and draws heavily on my own research, as well as that of others, on the island of Tanna, in southern Vanuatu. I describe the kava ritual – and the modifications it is known to have undergone – in the context of Tannese social organization and its structural weaknesses, and discuss the extent to which certain characteristics of Tannese society and culture are found in other Melanesian societies. I argue that there are sufficient grounds to justify using the known history of kava on Tanna as a model for what may have occurred much more widely in Melanesia.

Before I begin the actual reconsideration of Rivers' work, I intend to discuss two more general issues. Firstly, some information on kava and its properties is necessary. This occupies the remainder of the present chapter. Then, in Chapter 2, I discuss the precise geographical distribution of kava drinking in the Pacific, both to indicate the extent of the problem it raises, and to clear away some of the inaccuracies and confusion that exist in the literature.



Map 1 Traditional distribution of kava in the Pacific

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Piper methysticum, the plant from which kava is made, is a shrub that may grow to a height of between one and six metres. The drink is most commonly prepared from the roots, but in some places the stalks also are used. Methods of preparation vary according to whether the plant is used fresh or dried, and whether it is chewed, grated or pounded. Water is usually added to the pulverized root, although some people are reported to drink the undiluted juice – for example, the Kolopom Islanders of Irian Jaya (Serpenti 1969: 33–4). Kava is drunk soon after it is made, and there is no question of any fermentation taking place.

The psychoactive constituents and effects of *Piper methysticum* have been a topic of scientific investigation for well over a hundred years, at least since the French pharmacists Cuzent and Gobley independently published the results of their analyses in the late 1850s (Cuzent 1858: 644–6; Steinmetz 1960: 33). However, even relatively recent anthropological literature demonstrates uncertainty as to whether the plant contains any significant psychoactive constituents. For instance, in a widely read article Elizabeth Bott wrote that Tongans ‘treat kava as if it were strong stuff. And so it is, but the strength comes from society, not from the vegetable kingdom’ (1972: 207). Her authority for this statement was C. R. B. Joyce, a reader in Psycho-Pharmacology at the University of London, who reviewed the literature for her and concluded ‘The whole situation is a remarkable example of the placebo phenomenon in a wide and important setting’ (ibid.: 234). Yet recent pharmacological research leaves no doubt that *Piper methysticum* contains a number of active alpha-pyrone whose properties include soporific, anti-convulsant, muscle relaxant and local anaesthetic effects (Duffield and Jamieson 1988; Duve 1976, 1981; Lebot and Cabalion 1986: 53–73; Shulgin 1973; Smith 1979, 1983).

However, there is still uncertainty about some details which are of ethnographic relevance. The alpha-pyrone in kava have a low water solubility (Meyer 1967: 133) and this has led some writers to state that kava prepared by chewing has very different effects from kava prepared by grating or pounding. They suggest that saliva acts as an emulsifying agent, or in some other manner on the pyrones, enabling them to be readily absorbed by the body (e.g. Shulgin 1973: 60; Steinmetz 1960: 23–4, 29–31, 39; see also Lewis and Elvin-Lewis 1977: 439). But from my own experience I suspect that there is little, if any, difference in the effects of kava prepared by the alternative techniques. I have drunk kava prepared both by chewing and by grating on many separate occasions in Vanuatu, and with both I have experienced feelings of tranquillity, difficulty in maintaining motor co-ordination, and eventual somnolence.¹ Discussions with fieldworkers such

¹ In case it is countered that the only conclusion that can be drawn from my experiences with kava prepared by different techniques is the importance of expectations and settings in structuring the subjective experience of drugs, two points should be noted. On the basis of

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as Michael Allen and Gerard Haberkorn, who have drunk kava in those northern Vanuatu communities where it is grated, confirm my own experiences.

The research of Buckley and his associates suggests that kava may also have active constituents which are water soluble, and this could explain the similarity of effects. They isolated an amorphous solid they called F₁, which was neither an alpha-pyrone nor an alkaloid. Laboratory tests on rats showed that F₁ was a depressant, whose effects were considerably stronger on the spinal-motor system than on the cerebral-cortical system (Buckley, Furguele and O'Hara 1967). Although they stated that they were attempting to isolate the pharmacologically active components of this solid, they do not appear to have produced any further publications. Recent work by Duffield and Jamieson on the aqueous kava extract indicates that while there are some pharmacological effects, these cover a narrower range of activities and are generally weaker than the effects produced by the alpha-pyrones.¹ They conclude it is very likely 'that the action of kava, as prepared for human ingestion, is indeed due to the water insoluble components' (1988: 7). Consequently, if I am correct in thinking that the techniques of preparing kava do not really govern its effects, the obvious inference is that the body absorbs the alpha-pyrones contained in material in suspension in water or saliva. Nevertheless, the question still appears to be open, and this serves to highlight Marshall's recent comments about the need for extensive psychological and physiological research on kava, in both field and experimental settings, using a wide range of varieties (1987: 25).

what I had read, the first time I drank grated kava I fully expected that its effects would be *different* from the effects of chewed kava. Also, I drank grated kava only in bars or other westernized settings which were quite unlike those in which I drank chewed kava.

¹ Duffield and Jamieson suggest that the earlier work by Buckley and his associates may have given misleading results because their extracts were not free of pyrone contamination (1988: 3).

2

The traditional distribution of kava drinking

Most writers who are interested in comparative aspects of kava include some discussion about its distribution, although there have been no attempts to do this systematically, and to evaluate the sources on which statements have been based. Consequently, mistakes which have crept into the literature, either through carelessness or misinterpretation, tend to be confidently repeated by later writers. This is particularly true of Melanesia.

Melanesia

A search of the literature shows that kava is variously stated to have been used in the following parts of Melanesia: some of the islands in the Admiralty group; New Britain; New Ireland; parts of Madang Province; the Lower Sepik; a number of places in the Huon Gulf area; over a wide area of southern New Guinea, including south-east Irian Jaya and a large part of the Fly (formerly Western) Province of Papua New Guinea; San Cristobal and a number of places in the south-east Solomon Islands; Vanuatu; Fiji. Each of these areas will be discussed in turn.

Admiralty Islands

Kava was drunk on the south-eastern islands of Baluan and Lou (Ambrose, personal communication; Bühler 1935: 23; Mead 1934: 341, 344; Nevermann 1934: 220; Parkinson 1907: 373–4; the latter two writers refer to kava drinking only on Lou). As well, Schwartz (1962: 239) and Bühler state that kava was used on the small island of Pam, which lies between the two other islands and shares a common language with them (Wurm and Hattori 1981: Map 14). In a later article co-authored with Romanucci-Ross, Schwartz adds Rambutyo to this list (1979: 257).¹ Holly McEldowney was told by the people of Baun village on Lou that they thought that the people of

¹ Schwartz and Romanucci-Ross leave Pam out of this later list, stating that kava was drunk only in Baluan, Lou and Rambutyo (1979: 257). The omission of Pam may be due simply to its small size and population.

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Rambutyo once drank kava, as they had seen the special stones used to mash the kava root there (personal communication).

New Ireland and New Britain

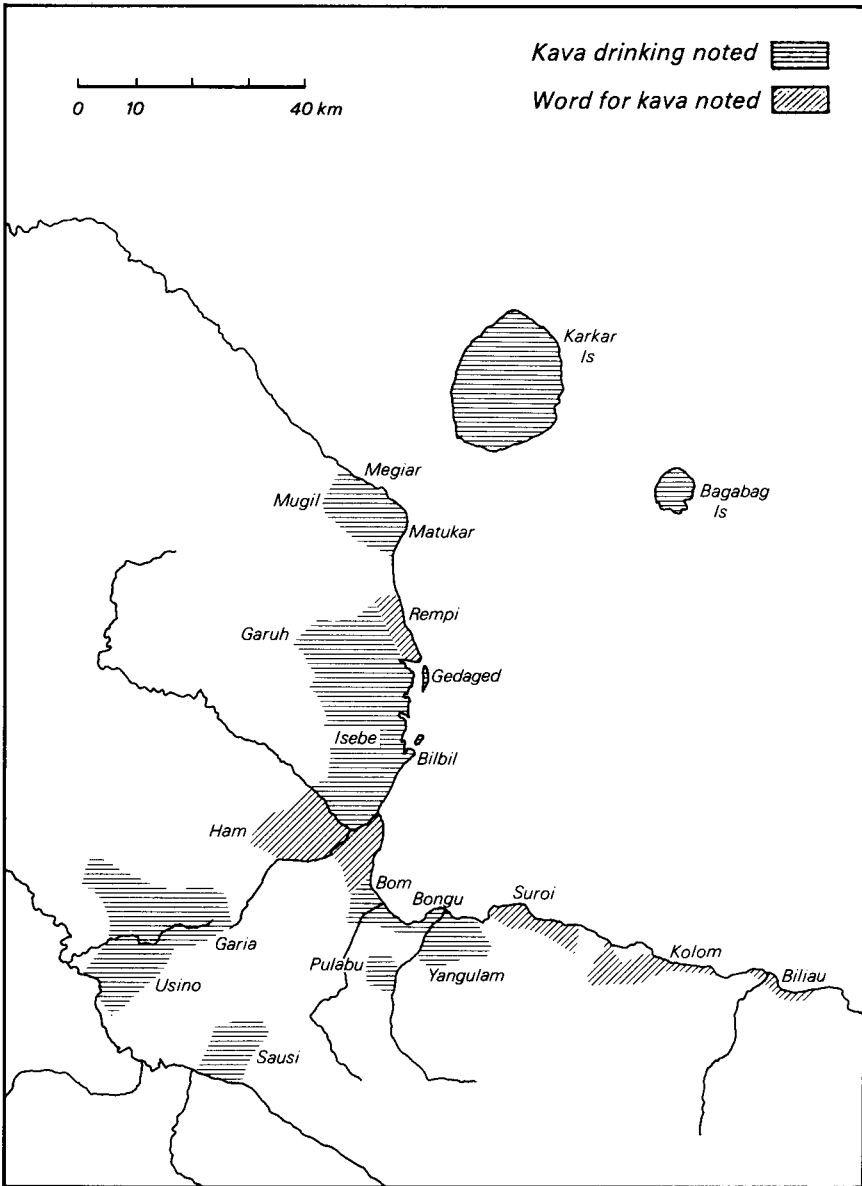
Holmes states that kava drinking is found in both New Britain and New Ireland, but neither presents his sources nor specifies the societies involved (1979: 30). A similar claim is made by Ford (1967: 162), who almost certainly obtained his information from an article by Lester (1941–2: 101), as the same paragraph includes sentences which are almost direct, though unacknowledged, quotations from this article. However, Lester's survey of kava-drinking peoples contains a number of errors,¹ and there is simply no field evidence to back up his assertion. To the best of my knowledge no ethnographer – or anyone else – has described kava drinking in either of these two islands. Perhaps the most charitable suggestion is that Lester misinterpreted reports of *Piper methysticum* found growing wild in New Britain (Schumann and Lauterbach 1976 [1901, 1905], vol. 2: 238), and being used as a constituent of betel mixture in New Ireland (Abel 1906, 1907; cited in Riesenfeld 1950: 649).

Madang

Miklouho-Maclay was the first person to record the use of kava in this region (Map 2). He stated that 'all the natives of the Maclay Coast [the area around Bongu where he was based] do not use the *keu* (kava), in some villages this stimulant and its effect are known, but the use of it has not been adopted; in some others, it is not known at all' (1886a: 351). Unfortunately, he does not seem to have attempted a precise delineation of its distribution, although it is possible to gain some information by examining his diary. Kava is mentioned as being grown or prepared in the villages of Male, Koliku Mana, Bongu, Gorendu, and Englam Mana (1975: 112, 117, 165, 175, 214). A comparison of the maps accompanying his diary with Map 7 of the *Language atlas of the Pacific area* shows that the first two villages were inhabited by speakers of the Male language, the next two by speakers of Bongu, and the last by speakers of Yangulam. Werner briefly describes kava drinking in Kadda (1911: 152) which, on the basis of his map (*ibid.*: 49), appears to be in the Pulabu language area about 10 km inland from Bongu (Wurm and Hattori 1981: Map 7). However, the people of Bai village on the Gowar River, about 25 km east of Englam Mana, did not drink kava, had no name for it, and refused it when it was offered to them at feasts in other villages (Miklouho-Maclay 1975: 271).

¹ For example, he states that kava was not drunk in Papua, nor in some islands in Vanuatu which are known beyond doubt to have used it.

Traditional distribution of kava drinking



Map 2 *Traditional distribution of kava in Madang*

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Hagen reported kava drinking among the Bom-speaking people of Bogadjim village (1899: 245–6). In the area around Madang, kava was drunk by the coastal and island people speaking the Austronesian Gedaged and Bilbil languages (Hannemann 1944: 7–8; see also Aufinger 1939: 279–80). Morauta, who studied seventeen interior villages situated between the Gum and Biges Rivers, inhabited by speakers of four non-Austronesian languages (Garuh, Kamba, Isebe, Amele), states that these people drank kava traditionally, although she did not record any contemporary use (personal communication). The people of Karkar Island and Bagabag Island also used kava traditionally, although the latter no longer drink it (Romola McSwain; Stephanie Fahey; Mait Kilil; personal communications).

In the hinterland of Madang province kava drinking has been recorded for the Garia,¹ the Usino, and for Yonopa village on the Ramu River in the Sausi language area (Lawrence 1984: 224; Conton 1977: 156–7; Eisler 1979: 82; Aufenanger and Höltker 1940: 101).

Although Miklouho-Maclay's statement that some of the people in the area knew of kava without drinking it themselves means that word lists are a less reliable form of information, he provides words for 'kava pepper' in the following languages in addition to the ones mentioned above: Biliau, Erima, Kolom, Rempi, Suroi and Songum (1951, vol. 3: 175, 182–3). Mager, who worked as a missionary in the area for a number of years, also gives words for kava in Biliau and Kolom, as well as in Ganglau and Ham (1952: 5).² Kasprus, who was a missionary in the Mugil area from 1932 until 1936, lists words for kava in the Megiar and Mugil (his Saker) languages, but not for neighbouring Matukar, Garus, Murupi and Rempi languages (he called the latter three the Em, Ate and A'e dialects of Garus), although he states that there was almost no cultural difference between the Megiar and Matukar (1942–5: 719–20, 750). As noted above, Miklouho-Maclay listed a word for kava in Rempi. Mait Kilil has confirmed that at least the Megiar, Mugil and Matukar peoples traditionally drank kava (personal communication).

Lower Sepik

Riesenfeld states, without indicating his sources, that kava was used 'perhaps on the Lower Sepik' (1950: 447). I have not been able to find any

¹ Lawrence states that it is 'a toxic drink made from wild ginger' (1984: 260). As we will see later, ginger is used as an intoxicant in parts of Papua New Guinea and may have been confused with *Piper methysticum* in at least one other account. However, from the description Lawrence has given of the drink (personal communication), and the presence of *Piper methysticum* among the Garia's neighbours, it is certain that it is *Piper methysticum*.

² These are not necessarily the language names used by these authors. I have adopted the names used by Z'graggen (1975).