

BOOK REVIEW

The Abandoned Narcotic: Kava and Cultural Instability in Melanesia. Ron Brunton. Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology, 9. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Pp. viii, 216. \$39.50. ISBN 0-521-37375-1.

Prior to the entry of Europeans into the Pacific, relatively few plants were used by islanders as stimulants or drugs. One of these, *Piper methysticum*, was used in the preparation of kava, a drink that everywhere was prepared by chewing, grating, or pounding the roots of *P. methysticum* and mixing the results with water; no fermentation was involved. The plants' pharmacological properties clearly indicate its potential as a soporific, anticonvulsant, muscle relaxant, and local anesthetic—precisely the effects sought by kava drinkers, especially as they are seen to facilitate ritualized interaction with the supernatural world.

Brunton is concerned primarily with accounting for the geographical distribution of traditional kava drinking, which is indeed curious. At the time of European contact, kava was a ritually important drink throughout Polynesia, but only on two islands in Micronesia and in a few, widely separated parts of Melanesia. W. H. R. Rivers, one of the major proponents of diffusionist approaches to Oceanic culture history, argued in 1914 that such a distribution reflected the historical movements of two waves of immigrants to Melanesia from Southeast Asia, "kava people" and, later, "betel people," i.e., those who chewed betel nut (*Areca catechu*) with the leaves of *Piper betle* and slaked lime. Rivers proposed that kava, which was rarely plentiful and involved prolonged preparation, was abandoned by most Melanesians in favor of the simpler process of chewing betel, which allegedly induces comparable effects. Marshalling the available archaeological, botanical, ethnological, and linguistic evidence, Brunton explores Rivers's general notion that kava drinking was formerly more widespread in Melanesia and subsequently abandoned in most locations, as well as a competing hypothesis of multiple independent inventions.

The diverse and complementary evidence Brunton assembles is persuasive, and it would indeed seem that "there can be little doubt that kava drinking had a single point of origin" (p. 75). It also appears that precontact direct links between the kava-drinking areas of Melanesia are "totally implausible" (p. 78), leading to Brunton's conclusion that the distribution of kava drinking in Melanesia at the time of European contact is to be explained by postulating that "there were people in intermediary areas . . . who once drank kava as well, but they abandoned it some time before European contact" (p. 80). The intriguing remaining issue, then, has to do with why this abandonment took place.

Brunton rejects Rivers's argument that kava drinking was abandoned in favor of betel chewing and I think he is correct to do so, if for no other reason than that the two drugs are not necessarily competitors, and indeed they do not have mutually exclusive distributions. For any given location, *Piper methysticum*'s requirements of high rainfall, well-drained soil, and shelter from sun and wind, combined with its apparent dependence on vegetative propagation made it

likely that a climatic catastrophe could make abandonment an irreversible process (pp. 90-92), and perhaps no reasons other than ecological ones need be sought. But Brunton is a social anthropologist, and for him "the most important, as well as the most anthropologically interesting, explanation" for kava's abandonment is related to "the high degree of religious instability in Melanesia" (pp. 92, 93).

Brunton devotes almost half of his book (pp. 95-167) to a case study, that of the island of Tanna in Vanuatu, to exemplify processes that he believes were and continue to be widespread in Melanesia. He supplements his Tannese material with citations of the ethnographic literature to make two general points: (1) that "the major significance of kava in virtually all the societies in which it was drunk was ritual or religious" (p. 170); and (2) that Melanesia, and particularly New Guinea, is rife with examples of major ritual complexes or practices being modified or abandoned in precontact times or following European contact and, according to Brunton, for reasons similar to those behind kava's varying fate in Tanna, that the drug (or cult, or ritual) was perceived to be either "too strong" to be safe, or the opposite, that is was no longer efficacious in the light of social changes.

Why, then, was kava drinking retained in some parts of Melanesia, either as a secular or ritual practice, rather than abandoned? Brunton proposes that "variation will depend on the strength of institutions of social co-ordination and authority, the degree of trust within local communities, and the extent to which the requisite ritual knowledge is dispersed" (p. 176). Melanesian specialists will recognize these as social factors that are indeed highly variable (and much more so than in Polynesia, where kava drinking has, apparently, been as stable as the social orders there), but a systematic mapping of this variation against the distribution of kava drinking is the obvious next step needed.

Brunton stops short of such a project, but his innovative work will doubtless stimulate others to attempt it. And that will surely be a breath of fresh air in today's "postmodern" anthropology, which seems to have little interest in "distribution studies." *The Abandoned Narcotic* is especially welcome in drawing our attention to the importance of attending to nonfood plants as we continue to explore the boundless relevance of ethnobiology to our broader understanding of human beings.

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