Vincent Lebot, Mark Merlin, and Lamont Lindstrom, ***Kava: The Pacific Drug.*** New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993. Pp. 255, maps, figures, tables, photos, appendixes, bibliography, index. US$45.

Reviewed by Glenn Petersen, Graduate School and Baruch College, City University of New York

Kava has finally begun to receive some of the same respect from scholars that Pacific peoples have long paid it. Use of this mild drug was once common across a vast portion of Melanesia, Polynesia, and Micronesia; today its distribution has been somewhat circumscribed, but it retains a vital role in many island societies. And now the literature on its use (and abuse) is beginning not only to consider its traditional roles, but also to address the reasons for its dramatic survival and even efflorescence.

This volume makes up part of what we might look upon as a trilogy of comparative works on kava. Ron Brunton's ***The Abandoned Narcotic*** (1989) took up an old thesis of W. H. R. Rivers concerning the rather complementary distribution of kava and betel in Melanesia, and provided an updated account of kava organized around a set of theoretical problems. A special issue of ***Canberra Anthropology*** devoted to kava is about to appear; it comprises a number of essays originally presented at the 1991 Pacific Science Congress in a session on "Kava and Power" organized by Nancy Pollock. Along with these other volumes, then, ***Kava: The Pacific Drug*** demonstrates a resurgent interest in one of the Pacific islands' more important shared cultural traits. (In addition, recent volumes edited by L. Lindstrom [1987] and by J. Prescott and G. McCall [1988] include significant studies of kava.)

Lebot and Merlin, biologists, and Lindstrom, an anthropologist, have done an extraordinary job of weaving together research in the many realms across which a comprehensive study of kava must reach: biochemical, agronomic, ethnological, and sociological. The book is exceptionally well conceived and well executed; the illustrations, photographs, and maps are of consistently high quality, and the tables are easily interpreted. If this volume is not utterly seamless, it nevertheless manages to make chemical analyses and mythological exegeses accessible to the same readers, no mean feat. Careful examination of both the kava plant's wild precursors and the zymotypes (proteins) of modern cultivars enables the authors to arrive at one of their strongest conclusions: kava ***(Piper methysticum)*** was most likely domesticated roughly three thousand years ago from a wild precursor ***(P. wichmannii)*** in what is now northern Vanuatu, whence it diffused as far

west as New Guinea, as far northwest as the Eastern Carolines, and as far north and east as Hawai'i and the Marquesas.

Even though there is enormous local variation in the ways in which kava has traditionally been treated and used, as this work amply documents, it is, nevertheless, consistently regarded as a source of considerable spiritual power. It is diligently cultivated, ritually prepared, and respectfully consumed wherever people still rely upon it. It is consistently employed in social contexts, even as its direct effects are on the physiology of individuals. "Kava consumption evokes feelings of camaraderie--an emotional response that symbolizes within a drinker's body the strength of ongoing social relationships" (p. 119).

The book brings together a great deal of ethnographic material--some of it already considered by Brunton--on kava use. There is a slight bias, however, toward organizing this discussion around the categories that are most important in Vanuatu, where the authors' own experiences and investigations have been most immediate. This experience tends to shade their interpretations of data from other regions, particularly regarding social hierarchies and gender issues (though I hasten to add that this problem must characterize any study conducted by researchers with significant firsthand experience of kava--and who else would mount such a major undertaking?).

This observation does lead me to my one real cavil with an otherwise exemplary work. The problem is in some sense inherent in any large-scale comparative effort: data of many different types, recorded for many different purposes, have to be fit piecemeal together, and in the course of doing so a good many misinterpretations are liable to creep in. I am reminded of Will Rogers, who used to explain that he had no privileged access to information about current events: "I only know what I read in the papers." Robert Murphy, who taught me much of what I learned while I was at Columbia University, was wont to say that he didn't know why he believed anything he read in the ***New York Times.*** "Whenever they write about anything I know, they get it wrong. What makes me think they get it right the rest of the time?" My knowledge of Pohnpei, in the Eastern Carolines, inclines me to a bit of skepticism about the validity of the comparative materials brought together here. Let me cite a few examples.

1 / Drawing from an accurate report that Pohnpeians dislike noise while they are at kava, the authors conclude that on Pohnpei "drinkers normally sit silently" (p. 140). But conversation is absolutely central to Pohnpeian kava sessions; it is only after hours of talk and song that people gradually drift into shared silences.

2 / The authors touch upon Pohnpeians' customary gifts of kava made to their chiefs, speaking of "tribute" payments to "their Micronesian chiefly overlords" (p. 144). In Pohnpei's intensely competitive political economy, however, one of the primary ways to gain and keep a chiefly title is to continually provide one's neighbors with high-quality kava.

3 / Descriptions of kava ceremonies taken from the late Saul Riesenberg's works (pp. 146-149) could be easily misinterpreted as characterizing all kava use, when they in fact refer only to a few important public feasts; most Pohnpeian kava is consumed at small, semiprivate, relatively casual gatherings.

4 / We read here, moreover, that Pohnpeian kava is "feminized" as a consequence of the way in which it is pounded with hammer stones: "Kava preparation on these islands becomes a symbolic copulation." This notion in turn plays a part in generating the conclusion that "to the degree that kava poses as mythologically feminine, women's use of the drug is made to seem to be abnormal and shameful homosexual intercourse" (pp. 134-135). Pohnpeian women do not ordinarily pound kava, but it does happen and draws little if any comment. Breadfruit pounding is a common euphemism for male masturbation, but I have never encountered any signs that kava pounding has sexual connotations (which is not to say that there are none; if they exist, however, they are well disguised). And Pohnpeian women are firmly included in all the rituals of kava consumption--there is absolutely nothing shameful or abnormal about their participation in kava, whether at great feasts or at local get-togethers.

I fear that readers must take all the generalizations in the chapter on comparative ethnology with a grain of salt, although there are points where the authors do acknowledge and confront problems inherent in the data. To cite but one example, following a discussion of reports about kava drinkers becoming comatose or hallucinating, Lebot interjects that his own personal experience "suggests to us that these statements about hallucinogenic or killer kava are either erroneous or dubiously simplistic" (p. 202). There is indeed something about kava's mystique that lends itself to exaggeration. This book goes a long way toward demonstrating that the remarkable realities of contemporary kava are in no need of embroidery.

REFERENCES CITED

Brunton, Ron
1989 *The Abandoned Narcotic: Kava and Cultural Instability in Melanesia.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lindstrom, Lamont, ed.
1987 *Drugs in Western Pacific Societies: Relations of Substance.* Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania Monograph, no. 11. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America.

Prescott, J., and G. McCall, eds.
1988 *Kava Use and Abuse in Australia and the South Pacific.* Monograph, no. 5. Sydney: University of New South Wales, National Drug and Alcohol Research Center.