Ron Brunton, *The Abandoned Narcotic: Kava and Cultural Instability in Melanesia.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Pp. viii, 219, illus., bibliography, index. US$39.50 cloth.

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Fifteen years ago I noted that anthropologists working in Oceania had given relatively little attention to either alcoholic beverages or kava in the post-World War II period (M. Marshall 1976). Happily, in the years since that literature review appeared this situation has changed. Much has been written on alcohol use, and more recently various other drugs --including kava--have been the focus of research (for example, Lindstrom 1987; Prescott and McCall 1989). Now, with publication of a revised version of Brunton's doctoral dissertation, contemporary kava studies have come into their own. Brunton has done for kava what anthropologists working elsewhere in the world have done for qat (Kennedy 1987), marijuana (Rubin 1975; Rubin and Comitas 1976), tradi-

tional tobacco use (Wilbert 1987), peyote (Aberle 1982; LaBarre 1959), and a variety of hallucinogens (de Rios 1972; Furst 1976).

Brunton was led to his investigation by the intrigue of an unsatisfactorily resolved puzzle originally posed in 1914 by W. H. R. Rivers in *The History of Melanesian Society* (Cambridge). Seeking to explain the scattered and discontinuous distribution of kava in Melanesia, Rivers observed that its use seemed to be mutually exclusive with the use of betel. From this he suggested that the two drugs had been brought to the islands by two separate immigrant groups (the "kava people" and the "betel people"), that the kava people arrived first, and that wherever these two peoples came into contact betel use gradually supplanted kava use. Rivers believed this happened because betel ingredients were easier to obtain, easier to carry about, and simpler to prepare than kava ingredients. (A problem with Rivers's idea, not noted by Brunton, is that studies from many parts of the world suggest that drug use is much more likely to be additive than substitutive.)

Brunton acknowledges various problems with Rivers's speculations on Oceanic culture history, but feels that "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" (p. 3). Given kava's strange geographical distribution in Oceania, and given the huge distances between the different kava-drinking regions of the Pacific, Rivers inferred that its use had once been much more widespread. As noted above, his solution to this puzzle was to suggest that in Melanesia its use was given up in favor of betel. Brunton finds this solution problematic for various reasons, and offers instead his own answer to the kava puzzle.

The book is both a reappraisal of Rivers's argument, using a wealth of data that have accumulated over the past seventy-five years, and a detailed case study of kava use on Tanna, Vanuatu, based largely on Brunton's own field research. The case study is joined to the reappraisal via an assumption that particular events that have occurred on Tanna since European contact are probably representative of similar events that occurred in many other parts of Melanesia. The disappearance and reappearance of kava-drinking on Tanna in the historical period becomes a general model for its disappearance from wide areas of Melanesia in precontact times.

To set the stage for his reconsideration, Brunton begins with a six-page chapter summarizing Rivers's ideas on kava and briefly discussing its psychoactive properties. A chapter follows whose nineteen pages provide the most thorough discussion to date of the traditional and con-

temporary geographical distribution of kava-drinking. In assembling this material Brunton draws on both the published record and on an extensive correspondence he initiated with numerous Pacific scholars during the 1980s. In the next two chapters (sixty-seven pages in all) Brunton impressively pulls together the evidence from archaeology, botany, ethnology, and linguistics to evaluate his hypothesis that kava once was used in many parts of Melanesia that abandoned its use prior to the arrival of Europeans. Here he dismisses the likelihood of the independent discovery of kava in several different regions and the probability of direct links between kava-drinking regions. Instead he concludes that the evidence provides "very strong grounds" for accepting the likelihood that "the links between at least some of the known kava-using regions were indirect," that is, that kava-drinkers who abandoned the practice sometime before European contact once existed in the intermediary areas separating the kava-using regions in Melanesia (p. 80). Also in this chapter Brunton presents the "not inconsiderable" arguments for thinking that kava-drinking may have originated in the Bismarck Archipelago. This will be of interest to a range of Pacific scholars since, as Brunton notes, "there are strong reasons for thinking that the Bismarck Archipelago [also] was the Proto-Oceanic homeland" (p. 81).

In the next three chapters, Brunton abandons general considerations about kava to focus on the specifics of kava use on Tanna. He devotes eighteen pages to traditional kava ritual and its contemporary modifications, fourteen pages to the development of secular patterns of kava consumption, and a somewhat extended (thirty-eight pages) discussion to what he calls "problems of Tannese society." This chapter is crucial to his argument since his "overall intention is to point to social processes which were shared with other Melanesian societies" (p. 129). The "problems and processes" to which he refers are discussed under the headings of traditional social organization; traditional political hierarchy; fighting and social order; and religious volatility, power, and taboo.

In his concluding chapter (ten pages), Brunton holds that "the ritual and religious significance of kava made it vulnerable to disappearance, because of the religious instability of many Melanesian societies" (pp. 168-169). This, coupled with divisiveness, distrust, and ineffective institutions of leadership and social coordination led many Melanesians --like the Tannese--to reject "their current cultural 'package' in favour of another" (p. 169). Brunton endeavors to show that the problems and processes characteristic of Tanna were endemic to much of Melanesia. These include weak institutions of authority, suspicion, individual

autonomy, and a recourse to external religious and ritual powers. In the face of adversity, Brunton believes that the mechanisms that might have protected Melanesians' "current interpretive systems" of religious powers frequently failed, and people feared the diminishment and dissipation of the particular potency of their system. "This opens the way for the enthusiastic adoption of a new package--or a return . . . to a previous one that had been prematurely rejected--that can protect them from the dangers of the one they are abandoning" (p. 166). Thus did kava disappear from wide areas where it formerly had been drunk.

What are we to make of all of this? Brunton's major contribution is that he has greatly clarified and expanded our knowledge of kava's geographical distribution, its botanical diversity and fragility, and its cultural patterns of use. He is less convincing when he tries to generalize from the Tannese case to much of the rest of Melanesia. For one thing, Melanesian societies are considerably more diverse than he seems to grant. But more importantly, I believe he gets chewed up and spat out by his own argument.

Over time various groups of Tannese abandoned kava use in favor of some other source of power--usually one or the other brand of Christianity. So far, so good. The problem is that over time various groups of Tannese also abandoned Christianity and resumed using kava (for example, members of the John Frum movement; see also p. 122). Why, if kava was both "the abandoned narcotic" and "the recovered narcotic" on Tanna, was it not also thus elsewhere in Melanesia--in the historical period as well as in precontact times? I find it hard to believe, for example, that if kava had been used throughout the Solomon Islands at some point in the past, and if Brunton's "problems and processes" apply to most Melanesian societies, that kava would not have been readopted by at least *one* Solomon Island society over the past 150 years.

Brunton documents (tables 1-7) that the names in different Pacific languages for various psychoactive plants (kava, *Piper betle, Areca* palm fruit, ginger) are often cognates. This interesting finding may reflect a general linguistic association among pharmacologically active plants that produce behavioral or physiological changes. For example, it may be relevant in this regard that *"kava"* is the Hiri Motu word for "mad, insane, stupid" (Dutton and Voorhoeve 1974:197).

The first half of the book contains fourteen maps, which, though useful, are wanting in certain respects. For instance, in map 1, Samoa--a major kava-consuming area--is conspicuous by its absence, and map 4 lacks two islands mentioned in the text: Paama is not shown and Pentecost is labeled "Raga." Use of the same dark pattern in map 4 to illus-

trate areas where kava was *not* drunk as is used in maps 2 and 3 to show areas where kava-drinking *did* occur is also confusing.

Finally, there are a few other problems. Brunton twice refers to a western Polynesian myth in which kava is said to have grown originally from the body of a leper (pp. 21, 68). It is difficult to consider this a myth of much antiquity when one learns that leprosy was a nineteenth-century introduction to the Pacific Islands from Asia (L. Marshall n.d.). In this case Brunton should have heeded Dening's caution about accepting myths and legends as reflective of a precontact world (1966: 32). Brunton states that kava's soporific effects appear to help explain its association with peaceful relations (p. 70). There are difficulties with this assumption. Beverage alcohol is a central nervous system depressant, and by the same logic it, too, should be associated with peaceful relations. Adding to the dilemma is Schwimmer's observation that the Orokaiva use betel to create equanimity in potentially tense social situations (1982:322-323), yet the arecaidine in the betel chew is primarily a central nervous system stimulant (M. Marshall 1987: 17).

On balance, this valuable book consolidates the literature on kava as none has done before, raises numerous questions for further scholarly investigation, and presents a plausible alternative hypothesis to Rivers's less-than-compelling explanation. Although it was not his stated intention, Brunton has performed a valuable service to alcohol and drug studies by making accessible material on kava that heretofore has been scattered and difficult to locate.

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