

In recent years, the Health Protection Branch of our Canadian government decided to ban the sale of one of my favourite plants, kava kava. Traditionally drunk both ceremonially & in daily life on Polynesian islands, kava's charms eventually became known to North America. The problem as I see it is that whenever our culture sees a good thing, it tries to turn it into a marketable commodity and, in doing so, often misses the point. This idea applies to much of the manufacturing of modern drugs. Many of our pharmaceutical agents are synthetic versions of botanical chemical constituents. So the story goes: Important man from North America or Europe visits a remote Polynesian island. Man notices the natives are happy, healthy, & peaceful. Man notices the natives are drinking a beverage that helps to induce this state. Man tries beverage & feels better than he ever has before. Man decides not only to take this plant back to his people but also, in his sense of superiority, decides to “better” the plant's effects, make it “super-sized”, “new & improved”, or more potent.

Traditional kava drinkers made a beverage from the root of the plant using water & coconut milk or saliva. There was also a lot of magic & ritual involved. Like any good thing, too much long-term heavy use was not healthy. Some abusers developed a temporary condition called kava dermatopathy which involved the eruption of scaly skin. Otherwise, it usually produced a euphoric state whereby the drinker would eventually become quite drunk but in a loving & peaceful way. Unlike alcohol, it was not known to invoke violence in men. Kava drinking would often lead to sleep.

So man brings the kava into a lab & attempts to identify the plant's “active constituents” & starts isolating, extracting, standardizing. . . Eventually, kava (mainly in capsule form) is seen on the shelves of retail stores alongside such herbal standards as Echinacea & Ginkgo Biloba. The kava craze begins. Even Wal Mart starts stocking its shelves with the legendary plant. These capsules are guaranteed to have “70% kavalactones”, kavalactones being a group of alkaloids considered by modern scientists to be kava's “active ingredient”. Kava is not the only herb to be standardized to 1 or 2 plant constituents. Advertised on the label of a Ginkgo product is the claim “24% flavonglycosides, 6%

terpene lactones” or on an Echinacea product, “4% echinacosides”. What about the hundreds of either constituents of the plant? Consumers are led to believe that we should be looking for these percentages of marker components, though these marker components change like fashion.

In our quest to understand more about medicinal plants, we have actually gotten further & further away from truly knowing them. Rather than thanking, blessing, & singing to the plants & using them in their natural state, we are abusing them. The plants are striking back! There were several cases of serious liver toxicity associated for which kava was held responsible. I have found several reasons why this occurred. The first is the current trends in the manufacturing of kava products. Traditional preparations of the beverage naturally contain 3% kavalactones. Tinctures (alcohol extractions of plants that stay in liquid form) contain 15% kavalactones. Acetone & ethanol extractions (or standardized capsules) contain 100% kavalactones. This is too much. Traditional kava beverages & tinctures also contain glutathione, a powerful antioxidant that is a major protector of the liver. Glutathione is not found in standardized extracts. Secondly, researchers at the University of Hawaii have found that another possible culprit is the alkaloid pipermethystine which is found in the peelings & leaves of the plant. In Traditional preparations of kava, these parts were not used; only the root was used. As kava became more popular, man got greedier & wanted to make the batch go further. He started adding the aerial (above-ground) parts of the plant & selling this to manufacturers. Add to these factors that a large % of North American & European kava users were recovering alcoholics & drug addicts with existing liver problems & a lack of glutathione in their systems, then there was an even bigger chance of liver toxicity!

We need to get back to seeing the active components in plants as part of a whole & start using them with the utmost respect & love. By all means, drink your kava! Check with the supplier (some herb shops still carry it in bulk) to ensure that only the root is present. Create your own kava ceremony. Drink it in moderation. Learn to dance with the gods & goddesses again!

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