

Piper methysticum

KAVA KAVA (English, Finnish, German) is a shrub. It is native to Fiji and the western Pacific.

It is also known as Ava, 'Ava (Samoan), Ava pepper, *Awa* (Hawaiian), Intoxicating pepper, Kava (English, Tongan), *Kava biberi* (Turkish), Kava kava root, *Kavao* (Esperanto), Kava pepper, *Kawa* (French), Kawa pepper, *Kawa Pfeffer* (German), *Pepe kava* (Italian), *Pipero ebriiga* (Esperanto), *Poivrier kawa* (French), *Rauschpfeffer* (German), and *Yangona* (Fijian).

Warning – the plant should not be taken internally over a long period or in large doses. It can cause symptoms of intoxication, hallucination, body and eye inflammation leading to leprosy sores, and respiratory paralysis.

Methysticum is derived from Greek *methusis* (drunkenness) with reference to the species' narcotic qualities.

For centuries during religious rites on some of the Polynesian islands kava kava was used in an alcoholic drink to induce a hallucinogenic trance. [It should be mentioned that today authorities appear to place kava kava in a hypnotic not hallucinogenic classification.] The drink used to be made on some of the Islands by the women and children (the chief usually chose those who were most attractive). They sat around a calabash and chewed the roots (which had been harvested in accordance with strict religious ritual) and mixed them with saliva to give a hot, intoxicating juice. The mixture was then spat out and diluted with fresh water or coconut-water (*Cocos nucifera*) and left to ferment. The use of the liquor varied from island to island. On Niue it was viewed with disdain whereas Samoans held it in great respect. For those peoples who used it acceptance of the drink would be accompanied by ritualistic ceremonies the content of which would be dependent upon the rank of the recipient. Today it is still a national drink in some Pacific Countries and is accompanied by ritual. However it is now forbidden by law to produce it by the traditional chewing process because of the possibility of spreading disease. It is understood that those who have tasted this beverage describe it as being extremely refreshing.

Until 1982 the drink was unknown in Australia but that year Australian Aborigines introduced it to their kinfolk in the Northern Territory from Fiji. Sadly according to authorities in some of the communities in that area it is being drunk in large quantities (even by the children) sufficient to encourage an undermining lethargy that is beginning to raise some concern.

In Hawaii where the plant is said to have grown for thousands of years after its introduction there by intrepid Polynesian explorers the root provided a malevolent drug often used by the Hawaiian hierarchy. It was also an ingredient in a mixture used by the Islanders in the treatment of tuberculosis and other lung ailments, It was also included in a potion taken to ease colds and chills, as well as in a remedy for treating some female problems, and various urinary disorders. The roots were chewed to ease severe headaches, and the plant was also prescribed as both a stimulant and a sedative.

About 200 years ago the root was used as a local anaesthetic but this practice was gradually superseded because of its demand as a possible cure for cystitis, gonorrhoea and other

genito-urinary tract disorders. It has been an ingredient in the treatment of bronchitis, rheumatism and gout too. Before World War II in the 1940s the Germans imported kava which until superseded by synthetic alternatives was used to promote sleep. Today however it is primarily viewed as a medicine for treating fluid retention and fatigue conditions.