

‘Awa’s (kava’s) dual role as a sacred plant and commercial product – a Hawai‘i perspective

Abstract

Hawaiian kava, or ‘awa, has been grown in Hawai‘i by Hawaiians since time immemorial as suggested by cultural evidence and recordings. Because of Western colonization of Hawai‘i, and its consequence of marginalizing Hawaiian culture in the past, much knowledge about ‘awa has probably been lost.

What we do have are over 14 varieties of ‘awa collected from old groves in isolated areas, families, and areas of known historical significance. Continuing ethnobotanical research suggests there are more Hawaiian kava varieties still.

Now with worldwide interest in kava as a therapeutic, social, and recreational plant, and the continued growth of Hawaiian culture and its desire to understand and/or incorporate its heritage into practice, the demand for kava is very high. Yet, because of ‘awa’s commercial value and ignorance, theft and extirpation of old ‘awa groves are occurring.

Hawaiian kava is also grown commercially in Hawai‘i with the large productions already in harvest and re-plant cycles. Distribution is worldwide and growing. There is much corporate and university research potential to develop new strains and technologies.

With these dynamics in play, issues concerning ‘awa as a sacred plant and commercial product arise, some of which are addressed here:

- How is ‘awa being re-incorporated into Hawai‘i society?
- Who are the beneficiaries?
- What are our concerns and/or potential outrage?
- What can we do?