

'AWA IN HAWAII

'Awa was a very important part of Hawaiian life and used in many different ways. In general, 'awa was used ceremonially by kahuna (also medicinally by kahuna la'au lapa'au), socially by the ali'i and as a relaxant by commoners. Its effect depends on the frequency and the amount taken. Taken in moderation, it relaxes the nerves, relieves strained muscles and induces restful sleep. Taken often and in large quantities, results in scaly skin, bloodshot eyes, and reduced control of the arms and legs. But, contrary to the use of alcoholic beverages, the mind remains clear and the emotions unaffected and sleep is induced. In other words, drinking of a large amount of 'awa while discussing things in a group would, besides a little numbness of the tongue, seem to have little effect until attempting to stand to go and relieve oneself and find the legs to be a little rubbery. The old saying was recalled by Tūtū Kawena Pukui, who further explained that a man drinking whiskey or rum became loud, boisterous, argumentative etc., while the 'awa drinker would remain calm and fall into a nice sleep eventually.

The farmer and fisherman would have a cup of 'awa to repair tired muscles and would awaken refreshed. There are many examples of native men working very hard and strenuous work, drinking 'awa before sleeping and waking as if the previous day's strain did not occur. It was also used effectively to lose weight when men found themselves getting heavy.

Medically, 'awa is considered a spinal, rather than a cerebral, depressant, which steadies the pulse, does not raise the temperature and acts as a diuretic and stomach tonic. Kahuna la'au lapa'au used 'awa extensively to treat sleeplessness (insomnia) and general debility, especially in children. The nene variety, for example, was used to soothe a "fretful child." It was used, in addition to what has already been mentioned, to restore strength, for chills and colds, for difficulty in urinating, for blinding headaches, for children with disorderly stomachs or diseases such as when a white coating appears on the tongue (I can't think of the western name), and lung problems. There are many uses in the old records like treating boils, and displacement of the womb. There are many more uses and treatments. Because it could also be used to induce a miscarriage, pregnant or women of child-bearing age should not drink 'awa extensively, or not at all.

Europeans, especially Germans, recognized the healing abilities of 'awa and most people don't know that prior to World War I, 'awa was a major export. Once Germans could not get 'awa from Hawaii, because of the war, they continued to get it from other pacific areas.

The use of 'awa also established social rank, was prominent in religious practices and even sorcery. I recall Tūtū Kawena saying that if one were attempting to make amends with his 'aumakua and could not put together all that was required, the one thing that must be offered was 'awa.

Aloha,
'Anakala La'akea Suganuma
'Ōlohe Āiwaiwa