

WAS HAWAIIAN 'AWA SERVED?

by La'akea Sukanuma, 'Olohe Lua Aiwaiwa

I sent the following e-mail to Jonathan Yee, President, 'Awa Development Council on 9-4-08:

'Ano'ai e Jonathan,

I hope all is going well. I thought I should check and see if you need me at your meeting for particular reason.

On a side note, I think you're familiar with the paper by Kawika Winter, Hawaiian 'Awa. It is very well done with the exception that there is an error on page 121 of "Evolving Traditions" where he states there is no evidence of 'awa being served. That is not true and I would correct him, but I don't know him or how to contact him. However, I think the ADC should know that.

Aloha, La'akea

The entire text of the section in question, "The use of servers in formal ceremonies, page 131 of Winters' paper, reads as follows :

There is no evidence of such a role in ancient Hawai'i. Both Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian authors alike make no mention of this role in the many descriptions of ceremonial 'Awa consumption. In fact, the 'Awa bowls are often described as being passed hand to hand. This practice may have developed out of necessity due a loss of understanding of 'Awa traditions amongst many Hawaiians who participate in such ceremonies. If the traditional practice was to pass the cup in order of rank, first and understanding of this practice would need to exist amongst all participants. This is a practice that ceased generations ago. Second, contemporary ceremonies would require all participants to understand the social rank of all other participants – which is no longer a standard practice of the Hawaiian people either. Thus, if the understanding of 'Awa traditions are only known to those conducting ceremonies, servers are a necessity to help regulate the ceremony and reduce confusion.

The following are from "Kava in Hawai'i" written in the late 1940's by Margaret Titcomb, in response to Jonathan Yee's request for further information. One of the key informants was my great grandmother, Pa'ahana Kanaka'ole Wiggin. Her daughter (my grandmother) Mary Kawena Puku'i, according to Titcomb, searched Hawaiian sources and "selected, translated and elucidated the material and has contributed from her own wide knowledge of early Hawaiian life as well as searching for information from other Hawaiians."

Rather than type out all of the text, I will cite some sections which refer to serving, and the reader can look them up. Sometimes 'awa was poured into cups, and then served to the individuals, sometimes it was poured into each individual's cup.

Nevertheless, I am also sending a drawing which, indeed, speaks a thousand words. It is from a book, "More Incredible Hawai'i" (copyright 1985) by Terence Barrow, who was an anthropologist with the Bishop Museum and who authored a number of books. Terence was meticulously thorough in his work. This drawing, entitled, "The Awa Ceremony," shows 'awa being poured into 'apu (cups), held by the individuals involved. This is something that Winters obviously never found during his research. Although I only pinpointed the question of serving, I must also note here that in going through Winters' paper, I did notice that he drew some unfounded conclusions, which anyone reading his paper should be wary of, and which I won't go into for this current purpose. I also should mention that Barrow's book was given to me well after conducting the Kapu 'Awa for the ADC, and other groups, and served to confirm what I already knew and had been doing.

Page 113, Par. 2: "A large quantity was prepared by a number of people, the work divided, some entrusted with cutting, or pounding, others with chewing, others with mixing and serving."

Page 116, SubPar. 1: "The 'awa was put into one mass, the juice....."

Page 130, Par. 2: "In serving, the highest in rank was"

Page 131, Par. 1: "In the tale of Kihapiilani (48g), the hero"

Although moving away from the purpose of this communication, what is most interesting is a comment toward the end of Titcomb's paper which, although could very well be deemed true at the time this was written, has proved to be the opposite, thanks to the work of the 'Awa Development Council and others dedicated to the perpetuation of the use of 'awa. She states:

"In 1903 no Hawaiian went home from the Saturday market without an 'awa root tied to his saddle. In 1930 'awa was still to be purchased in the market; today it is not. Today the plant is scarce on Oahu except in a few areas deep in the forest. On the other islands there are more numerous wild patches, but outside of botanists, only the older Hawaiians know or care what it is, and only a few still have a taste for the old Polynesian drink once so important and so popular. When these pass away there will be no more of their kind to take their place and probably all use of 'awa in Hawaii will end."

