

# SAKAU: GIFT OF GODS AND ROOT OF POHNPEI

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*Sakau is always something that all Pohnpeians understand. It has its own power, and it is highly respected by those that most people respect.*

—The Nahnken of Nett<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Nothing is as symbolic of the traditional culture of Pohnpei as *sakau*, or *kava*, as it is known in many parts of Polynesia. The coconut shell cup from which sakau is drunk appears on the state flag and on the official seal of the governor of Pohnpei. Islanders from the other three states of the Federated States of Micronesia, not to mention Pohnpeians themselves, will universally identify sakau use as the distinguishing feature and centerpiece of life in Pohnpei.

Pohnpeian sakau is prepared from the roots of the kava plant (*Piper methysticum*), a relative of the plant found in New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. The plant was once widely used throughout Polynesia—especially Tonga, Hawaii, and Fiji—as a ceremonial drink, just as it still is on Pohnpei. The drink, prepared from the crushed roots of the plant pounded and squeezed through hibiscus bark, is sipped from a coconut half-shell. The kava lactones in the roots provide a relaxing narcotic effect on the body while leaving thought processes crystal clear.

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1. Michael J. Balick and Roberta A. Lee, *The Ethnobotany of Pohnpei—Plants, People and Island Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 175.

Genetic evidence suggests that sakau may have been introduced directly from Vanuatu or indirectly via the Admiralty Islands perhaps a thousand years ago.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the case, Pohnpeian oral tradition maintains that sakau was used at first “only for the spirits.”<sup>3</sup>

“We do not know exactly how sakau was used,” says Dr. Rufino Mauricio, a trained archaeologist and scholar in the prehistory of his island, “but we know for sure, from the archaeological records, that sakau was used in Pohnpei a thousand years ago...for ritual or religious purposes in the past.” In light of Pohnpei’s oral tradition, he continues, “we can safely state that sakau was a gift from the spirits and it was initially used to symbolize humans’ relationship with their gods.”<sup>4</sup> This same oral tradition suggests that sakau was at first used only to honor Pohnpei’s high chiefs, who were believed to be the representatives of these gods.



## MYTHICAL ORIGINS

A plant that could work such wonders on the human body and play such an integral role in the cultural life of the people could only have been of divine origin, Pohnpeian folklore suggests. Sakau was clearly a gift of the gods, one to be used for much more than personal enjoyment. One version of the legend regarding the origin of sakau is recorded by Luelen Bernart in a published journal that he wrote.

On a visit to earth, Luhk, one of the most prominent sky gods, encountered an old man by the name of Wideningar and offered him the gift of sakau, as recounted in the following text from the journal:<sup>5</sup>

*In the beginning there was a man . . . named Wideningar . . . He was a master prayer. He used to pray to Luhk, the god of the Luhk Clan. This man was a very old man. He was no longer able to walk about, for he was blind. . . .*

*Now Wideningar used always to lie on his mat, for he was an old man. Now one day he was lying on the mat and he heard what seemed to be a person stepping on his taboo place [the pile of coconuts], for he used to make offerings to Luhk. He then asked his identity, saying, “Are you man or god?”*

2. “On the Sakau Trail,” College of Micronesia, <http://www.comfsm.fm/socscie/sakautrail.htm>.

3. Ibid.

4. Rufino Mauricio, personal communication with author, 6 April 2014.

5. L. Bernart, *The Book of Luelen*, trans. and ed. by J. L. Fischer, S.H. Riesenber, and M.G. Whiting, Pacific History Series No. 8 (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1977), quoted in Michael J. Balick and Roberta A. Lee, *The Ethnobotany of Pohnpei—Plants, People and Island Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 170-172.

*Luhk called out, “I am Luhk. You are to come with me.”*

*Wideningar replied, “I am an old man and can no longer see things and can no longer walk about, for I am weak.”*

*But Luhk called to him a second time, saying to him, “Stretch out your hand to me that I may get you.”*

*He then stretched out his hand to Luhk, and Luhk then took it and helped the man stand up. And when his hand touched Luhk’s hand he became strong and could see things. . . .*

*The two then went on to Kinakapw and spent the night on the shore. [They] then walked up to Enimwahn, and then the two men went on out to Na. They walked on out to the south of Na. The two men then went on until they got to a place named Pejiko. They then met a married couple there, Jau-nok and Kat-nok. The woman was preparing a likpuake. This is an ornament for a man’s breast. The woman then conceived a liking for Luhk and gave away the likpuake as a love gift, giving it to Luhk.*

*Luhk repaid her with skin from [Wideningar’s] heel, and told this woman to take it and bury it in the earth, for it would sprout and form a plant. Supposedly if people would drink its juice, they would become intoxicated with it and it would change their life.*

*The man now went back. Luhk took Wideningar back to his original home in Wenik, in the section of Mallenuht. Various people used to watch and be amazed at how the rats would go and eat at the base of the clump of the plant, and how, after they had eaten the plant, they would get weak as if they were sick from it. They were no longer able to run about, but would simply crawl about on the ground and then go to sleep, and that was that.*

*Now the people of the land tried eating some of the roots of the plant [sakau], and all those who tried it became intoxicated from it. They therefore named the plant “intoxication” because people ate it and became light-headed from it.*

*The people of heaven were looking down on the earth, and they saw how the people of that land would consume the kava [sakau] and would become*

*intoxicated from it. Accordingly, one day two of them descended to investigate what the plant was like. They descended to Pejiko to ascertain the nature of kava.*

*The two of them stole a cutting of kava. They took it up to heaven and they gave it to Nanitenlañ [Lord of the Eels of Heaven] and to Nanitenpatanlañ [Lord of the Eels of Patanlañ]. The two of them took it and planted it in Diwienleng [Garden Plot of Heaven], a garden plot which was in Pwetenleng [a place in heaven where Luhk sometimes lived]. The two planted it on that day and had a feast with it on the same day. When they were pounding it on that day, a joint of kava bounced out as they prepared the kava and fell down on Mallenuht, at Wideningar's place, and sprouted there.*

*This was the beginning of the kava plant multiplying in Pohnpei.*



Sakau may have originally been a gift of the gods, according to the legend, but the gods found the drink so delightful that they brought all of Pohnpei's sakau back to heaven with them, leaving Pohnpei with none.



A later legend states that sakau was re-introduced by a Pohnpeian who traveled to Kosrae, where she took part in a sakau ceremony. The legend says that during the ceremony she slipped a piece of the root into her vagina and smuggled it back to Pohnpei, where she replanted it. Locals say that the legend accounts for the olfactory difference between the sakau currently grown in Kosrae and the sakau grown in Pohnpei.

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③ Preparing *sakau* roots for pounding on the flat stone known as a *peitehl*. © Bill Jaynes

From its earliest origins, then, sakau was a singular expression of the exchange between the gods and the people of Pohnpei.

## PREPARATION AND PRESENTATION OF SAKAU

Pohnpeian sakau is a large shrub with heart-shaped leaves and knobby stems. The roots of the plant are lopped off, laid on a large rock, and pounded to a fine consistency. The pounded roots are then sprinkled with water, wrapped in the bark of the hibiscus plant, and squeezed into coconut cups before the drink is passed around in a tightly regulated order to those at a gathering.

The preparation of sakau, as much as the ritualized drinking from the cup, is conducted in a formal ceremonial fashion. Every step of the process, conducted only by men, is done with deliberation. The group of men will first judiciously select the plant that is to be used for the sakau ceremony, harvesting the plant with care to ensure that the roots remain intact.

Various individuals have their own specific duties in the preparation of the sakau ceremony. First, the foliage must be trimmed from the plant in a traditionally prescribed way. The roots that will later be pounded to make the bitter, potent drink are removed and cleaned. Next, the large, flat stone on which the sakau is to be pounded (*peitehl*) is cleaned, and four taro leaves (*pwoaikoar*) are placed around the stone in order to catch pieces of sakau that might fall during the preparation. Those who are to pound the sakau position themselves at the stone with their feet underneath the large taro leaves. Meanwhile, others bring branches of the hibiscus tree and strip away the bark that will be used for squeezing the sakau.

In larger formal ceremonies, several stones may be used for pounding sakau, with each *peitehl* manned by four people who pound the roots with round basalt stones (*moahl*). The pounding begins slowly and rhythmically, with the tempo of the pounding changing as the process continues. One man provides the cadence for pounding by calling out the various steps in the preparation of the sakau, in effect acting as the conductor for the musical pounding ceremony. As the

pounding comes to a conclusion, the tempo increases, the rhythm grows more complex, and the meeting house suddenly falls silent. The liquid is then strained through the hibiscus bark strips into the coconut half-shell before it is ready to be consumed.

Dr. Mauricio describes the rounds of sakau drinking and their regional difference and significance as follows:<sup>6</sup>

Madolenihmw, U, Nett, and Sokehs all have only four cups offered during the sakau ceremony. Only Kitti has five cups because it recognizes women as deserving of being part of that important ritual. The reason for the four cups follows the same significance of having to complete a cycle in the local medicine practice. The distribution of the first four cups is related to the importance of the hierarchy of social status; currently the first cup is given to the Nahnmwarki, second to Nahnken, third to Liken/Nahnalek, and fourth goes back to the Nahnmwarki. During the formal seating in a nahs, the Nahnmwarki always sits up front against a post known as Keidu. The Pohnpeians believe that when he sits at the post he represents the high spirit. Thus, the religious significance of the sakau ceremony today remains as in the past. The change is that we have a human representative of the gods.

Only after the first four ritual cups would the coconut shell cup be offered to the others in the meeting house. This would generally be done in order of rank.



6. Mauricio, personal communication, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Sakau roots on the peitehl. © Bill Jaynes



## SAKAU AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR MAINTAINING THE SOCIAL ORDER

Just as sakau was an occasion for recognizing the power of the gods in the life of the society, it was an expression of the respect due to those persons who, by virtue of their chiefly titles, represented them on earth. As a matter of fact, the use of sakau could be viewed as reinforcing the most basic foundation of the society itself.

In *The Ethnobotany of Pohnpei*, Balick and Lee put it as follows:<sup>7</sup>

On Pohnpei, *wahu* (respect or honor) is the historic and contemporary foundation that defines its culture, society, and people. *Wahu*, in large measure, is structured, maintained, and mediated by sakau, based on the people's reverence for and ritual use of this plant. Sakau is ultimate respect, higher than the highest paramount or oratory chief or any other living being in the society—and even higher than the most important of the ancestral spirits, both good and evil. Sakau towers above them all, in a way that brings peace and community to the island, holding the cultural traditions together in the face of overwhelming and destabilizing economic and geopolitical forces that emanate from 'beyond the reef'—the local term for the rest of the world.<sup>8</sup>

7. Balick and Lee, *The Ethnobotany of Pohnpei*, 165.

8. It is the practice of the quoted text's authors to give copyright to the holders of knowledge, which in this case is the Mwoalen Wahu Ileilehn Pohnpei, the organization of traditional leaders.

5 Sakau pounders keep their feet beneath taro leaves. © Bill Jaynes

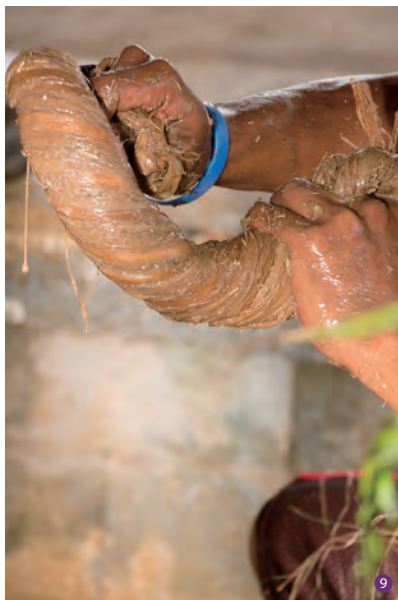
7 Sakau being pounded with *mohl* (pounding stone). © Bill Jaynes

6 Sakau pounding begins to a steady rhythm. © Bill Jaynes



To understand the importance of sakau in maintaining the “peace and community” on the island while asserting the wahu (respect) that defines the culture and holds it together, we can look at a few of the circumstances in which sakau was used and continues to be used today. The following are situations based on a list compiled by Mauricio.<sup>9</sup>

- *Sakau en Tomw* is a ceremony used for atonement and/or formal apologies for having offended a chief. The offense caused to the chief usually is brought about by the disruption of peace when one family wrongs another. Hence, peace is restored not simply by a formal apology or reconciliation between the two parties, but only when the offending family apologizes to the chief.



- *Sakau en Pahnta* is the offering of sakau made when the family of a young man goes to the family of the intended bride to request her hand in marriage. Dr. Mauricio said that this ceremony serves as a means of protection against inadvertent violation of the taboos that prohibit marriage between families too closely related.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the sakau functions as a respectful request for the blessing of the young woman’s family on the union. It is also a celebration of the tight unity that will bind the two families in the future.

9. Mauricio, personal communication, 2014.

10. Ibid.

8 The pounded *sakau* is wrapped in hibiscus bark. © Bill Jaynes      10 Traditional Pohnpeian stick dancers. © Bill Jaynes  
 9 Squeezing the *sakau* and hibiscus bark into a coconut cup. © Bill Jaynes

- *Sakau en Enihtik* is the sakau ceremony used when an individual who is sick requests local medicine from another. This is practiced widely on Pohnpei even today. In the offering of sakau, the supplicant is showing respect for the traditional practitioner even as he throws himself on the mercy of the latter.
- *Sakau en Olu* is the offering of sakau used as atonement to offended spirits. Illness, mental and physical health disabilities, and other setbacks are still believed by some to have been induced by offended deities. In the presentation of sakau, the afflicted person is acknowledging the respect due to the offended spirit.

The traditional use of sakau, then, would seem to emphasize the importance of respect in restoring the right order to the world. It also recognizes the key role that the spirit world plays in human affairs. The conventions surrounding the use of sakau also suggest that respect for the authority of chiefs is a primary consideration in its use. Finally, it binds people together in unity, even when one party has offended another. All these are essential cultural elements in Pohnpeian society.



11 Carrying harvested *sakau* to a cultural day ceremony. © Bill Jaynes      13 Children in traditional attire. © Bill Jaynes  
 12 Carrying a basalt pounding stone (*moahl*) to a *nahs* (meeting house) during a cultural day celebration. © Bill Jaynes

## SECULARIZATION OF SAKAU TODAY

At some point in the past, sakau use, which had once been reserved for the most ceremonial functions in the presence of a paramount chief, became available to Pohnpeians as a recreational drink. Common people began pounding sakau in their own meeting houses, usually dispensing with the formalities that marked its use in the old days. Steps for preparation of sakau for everyday use at the homestead might be carried out by a single individual if necessary. It was probably at that time, too, that the thickness of the *peitehl* (pounding stone) changed. The stones in use today are thin and resound like a bell when sakau is pounded on them—an open invitation to all within hearing distance to join the party.



With the opening of Pohnpei’s first sakau bar in 1970, another step in the secularization of sakau was taken. At the bars, sakau was poured out of large bottles and served in styrofoam cups to patrons who sat at picnic tables and paid a set fee per cup. There was no attempt to retain the traditional meetinghouse setting, the chime of the pounding, or any of the other features that had once been so linked with sakau on the island.

Has the recreational use of sakau weakened its traditional importance in the culture? Some argue that cultural erosion brought about by Western education combined with the commercialization of sakau has culminated in a “rootless” Pohnpei, whose people have forgotten the mystical plant’s purportedly “divine” origins. Many traditionalists say that each cup of sakau that is consumed by recreational users

14 Sakau plants lined up for a large ceremony in Madolenihmw. © Bill Jaynes

15 Four men pounding sakau during a traditional ceremony. © Bill Jaynes

undermines the memory of the cultural importance of the traditional sakau in Pohnpei.

Dr. Mauricio argues otherwise. “The democratization of sakau, I think, has not weakened the traditional importance of sakau. It has, however, added a new and universal dimension of culture to sakau.”<sup>11</sup> He might have added that the consumption of sakau—whether from a bottle or from the stone, whether at a *nahs* (meeting house) or at a sakau bar—is always a social affair. It remains a time for reconciliation and peaceful harmony. Disharmony simply does not occur and fights do not break out where sakau is consumed.

Moreover, many of the traditional manners in which sakau was used still occur today, despite the widespread use of sakau for recreational purposes. The Naniken of Nett summed up eloquently and succinctly the importance of sakau in an interview conducted ten years ago:<sup>12</sup>



Sakau is always something that all Pohnpeians understand. It has its own power, and it is highly respected by those that most people respect. It is frequently used between human beings, families, leaders, clans, in all matters: happy families, sad families, a family that needs help, a family that loses a loved one, a family that will bring in somebody from other families. You use sakau to go and ask for a girl. You use sakau when you are giving thanks to somebody who helped you, who helped you in medicine . . . you share sakau with your friends. Sometimes enemies must use sakau to create a different relationship. And you use sakau when you ask for land, the right to use land. You use sakau for funerals and for four seasons of harvesting [feasts] based on what we have on the land. You bring it for the Nahmwarki and the Nahnken, who are the most responsible for the people within their kingdoms, for anything — solving their needs, answering their questions, helping in their situations.

11. Ibid.

12. Balick and Lee, *Ethnobotany of Pohnpei*, 175.

16 Squeezing the slimy *sakau* liquid into a coconut cup. © Bill Jaynes

## REFERENCES

Balick, Michael J. and Roberta A. Lee. *The Ethnobotany of Pohnpei—Plants, People and Island Culture*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009.

Bernart, L. *The Book of Luellen*. Trans. and ed. by J. L. Fischer, S.H. Riesenberg, and M.G. Whiting. Pacific History Series No. 8. Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1977. Quoted in Michael J. Balick and Roberta A. Lee, *The Ethnobotany of Pohnpei—Plants, People and Island Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 170-172.