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## The Royal Kava Ceremony, Tonga

D. Attenborough

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## The Royal Kava Ceremony, Tonga

BY D. ATTENBOROUGH

[Plates 27 and 28]

Tongan society is a highly stratified one, governed largely by an aristocracy of noblemen at whose head is the Queen\* and the Royal family. Most ceremonials are centred around the preparation and drinking of kava, an infusion in water of the root of the wild pepper, *Piper methysticum*. The *taumafa kava*, in which the Queen herself takes part, is the most important of these ceremonies and is now only rarely held. On the occasion that was filmed, it was convened to mark the appointment of a senior nobleman, named Vaea, to a high official post.

The ceremony took place on the ceremonial ground close to the Palace at Nuku'alofa, the capital of Tonga. Noblemen from all the islands in the kingdom accompanied by their *mata'pule*, or squires, had assembled to take part. They seated themselves in a ring, nearly 100 yards in diameter. At one end stood a small pavilion, in which the Queen would be seated. On the opposite side lay a wooden bowl in which the kava would be mixed. The position of each nobleman in the ring was of the greatest importance and had been the subject of great discussion for weeks past, for the kava ring summarizes and reaffirms the social structure of the kingdom, establishing clearly for all to see the relative seniority of those taking part.

In essence, the proceedings consisted of an act of homage to the Queen by Vaea. First gifts were brought in by Vaea's people. Bark, cloth, mandioca, fish, chicken, roasted pigs and kava roots were all placed in the centre of the circle and counted so that all present could witness the munificence of the tribute. The Queen then took her place. The ceremony now became sacred, *tapu*.

One of the roast pigs was presented to the Queen and swiftly dismembered with a knife. Special parts were taken and given to specific noblemen. Some ate their share immediately whilst others were not permitted to do so, for reasons deriving from legendary history.

The largest kava root was then broken, pounded and mixed with water in the bowl. The men performing the task of mixing moved with slow hieratic movements of great deliberation. At a call from the organizing official, a girl took a coconut shell cup full of kava across the ring and presented it to the Queen. The Queen drank, then each nobleman was served in turn. Once more, the order of serving was of the greatest importance, for it underlined again the relative rank of all present. The serving of kava continued for an hour and a half. When all the noblemen had drunk, the Queen returned to the Palace.

In time to come, when questions of protocol and seniority arise, they may well be settled by reference to the seating order and the sequence in which the kava was served at the *taumafa kava*.

\* Queen Salote has since been succeeded by her son.



FIGURE 1. Mixing kava during the Royal Kava Ceremony, Tonga.



FIGURE 2. Straining the kava.

(Facing p. 502)



FIGURE 3. Serving the kava at the *taumafa kava* ceremony.



FIGURE 1. Mixing kava during the Royal Kava Ceremony, Tonga.

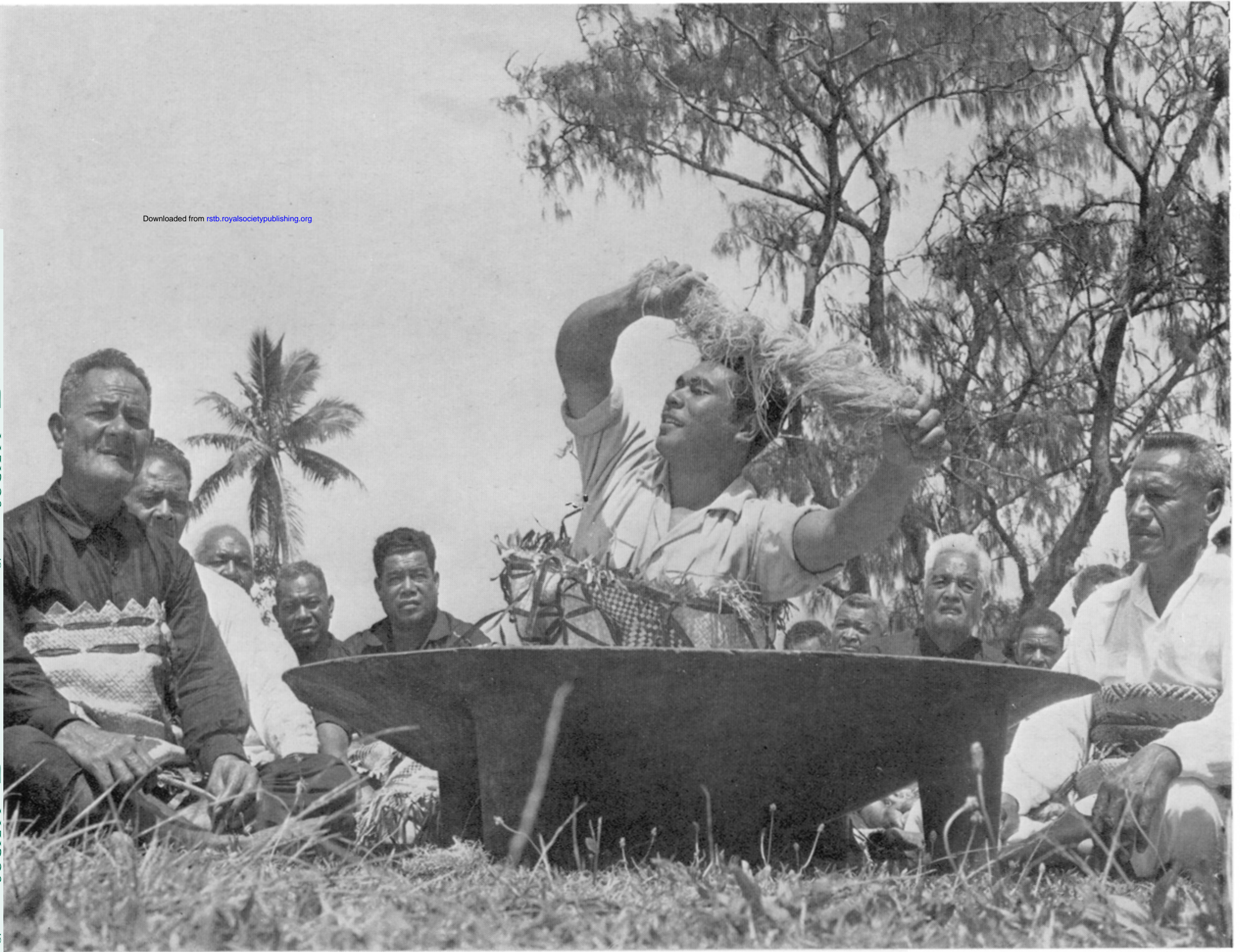


FIGURE 2. Straining the kava.



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FIGURE 3. Serving the kava at the *taumafa kava* ceremony.