

| PLANTS MO PIPOL **BLONG VANUATU** |

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PLANTS USED IN KASTOM:

The *First* SHAVING Ceremony and the Cycle of *Life* on *Tanna*



Most societies have various “rites of passage” through which individuals undertake or participate in a series of rituals to mark that person’s passage from one group or status to another. In Western culture, this might involve a religious ritual, such as a baptism or circumcision, or a secular coming-of-age ceremony, such as a debutante ball. In Tanna, there are a whole series of centuries-old kastom ceremonies that represent rites of passage or “grades” in the life of a young boy. Most of these involve the boy’s *angel* or uncle (which in Vanuatu refers specifically to the mother’s brother). The first of these grade ceremonies takes place just after birth, and is summarized by the Bislama phrase “*oli kilim banana*”, which refers to the privilege specific to the boy’s uncle to enter the parents’ garden, without their permission, and harvest any food, remove the biggest stump of kava, and kill any chickens or pigs that he likes. Later that day, the uncle will gather together with the family in the *nakamal* (the most important area for communal gatherings) to offer a *tamafa*, which involves making a special wish or prayer during the ritualized spitting of kava after drinking the first shell.

During the first month of a child’s life, he and his mother must remain in seclusion inside their house. When this time has been completed, the mother brings her son to the sea for the second grade-

making ceremony, which involves touching his feet to the water of the ocean. They then return to the village while family members throw the leaves of the *nangaria* plant (*Cordyline fruticosa*) over the boy. That evening, a great feast and another *tamafa* are offered, associated with conferring the boy’s *kastom* name. Later that year, another ceremony occurs as the boy cuts his first tooth, referred to as the “first axe”. This anticipates the ability of the boy to chew kava for his father later in life. Then, as the boy reaches two or three years of age, there is a specific grade associated with his first haircut.

The most important ceremony in a young boy’s life is certainly his circumcision, which generally takes place sometime between his fifth and tenth birthday. The *kastom* ceremonies associated with circumcision are elaborate and lengthy, lasting over one month, and upon their completion, the boy is considered to have achieved manhood. And yet, he is still quite young, and remains living in his mother and father’s house. Thus, to mark his full maturity as a man, a “first shaving” ceremony is held as the boy completes his adolescence, often around the age of seventeen. With completion of this final grade, the young man may now claim the right to build his own house, to plant his own garden, to drink kava, and to raise pigs, signifying that he is ready to take on the responsibilities of a wife and family.

As with many of the other grades, the boy’s uncle has the duty to organize and conduct the first-shaving ceremony. In ancient times, this was a simple rite that involved the uncle plucking the boy’s whiskers with the bark (or “skin”) of a vine called *nekavai* in the Nafe language (*Epipremnum pinnatum*, or “*lif blong pig*” in Bislama), or even burning the whiskers using the roots of the same vine. This took place in the *nakamal*, and was also associated with the offering of a stump of kava and the head of a pig. In recent years, the first shaving ritual has developed into a more elaborate ceremony. In December 2017, the senior author (Jean-Pascal Wahe) fulfilled his *kastom* duty to usher his *smol-angel* (nephew) *Mila* into manhood through the shaving ceremony. According to *kastom*, the uncle must arrive in the morning of the ceremony to present gifts to his nephew, which in the modern interpretation includes a new razor and other shaving equipment, as well as *kaliko* (rolls of cloth), a stump of kava roots, and a chicken. An important elder from the extended family represents the “doorway” to the *Kastom Road* (an important concept related to the maintenance of *kastom* relationships within and between family groups) by preparing a concoction made from grated coconut and the strong-smelling leaves from two plants, stinkwood (*Dysoxylum* sp.) and *nisei* (*Euodia hortensis*), which are roasted in a



ground oven (much the way laplap is prepared). In this ceremony, Sam Nauka served that role. The “doorway” then uses this fragrant mixture of the coconut and leaves to swim (bathe) both the nephew and his uncle. The ground coconut, rich in oil, serves as a carrier for the essences from the two plants, allowing their fragrances to adhere to and perfume the body for many more hours than if the leaves were used alone. This technique has been developed many times independently, stretching back at least as far as the ancient Egyptians. Following the application of the fragrant mixture, the uncle then clothes the nephew in new kaliko. These acts represent the washing away of the young man’s childhood, followed by dressing him for adulthood. After this, the uncle uses the new razor to shave the whiskers from the face of his nephew, and to replace the lost whiskers of manhood, he then paints a moustache on the young man’s face using a mixture of charcoal and coconut oil.

When the formalities of the ceremony are completed in the nakamal, the uncle, his nephew, and other members of the uncle’s group make a procession to another area of the village, where a great feast has been prepared. The freshly-shaven and richly decorated young man is then presented back to his mother and grandmother, now as an adult. The festal lunch is then eaten, followed by music and dancing. Later that afternoon, men representing many family groups from throughout the whole area gather in one of the larger nakamals to prepare kava. During this time, the elders take turns offering toktok directed at the young man, providing him with encouragement and the advice of their wisdom. Following the toktok, the young man typically takes his first shell of kava, and is ready to marry and start a family, but if he is still a student, like Mila, he will refrain from drinking until his studies are completed.

