

PLANTS ASSOCIATED WITH WITCRAFT AND EVIL EYE

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ABSTRACT: *The present article, continuation of a previous work, is an attempt to study the plants to which magical properties are attributed. It is based on published information as well as survey conducted by the authors.*

Not so long ago, diseases were thought to be induced by evil spirits and the remedy was exorcizing the spirit. Most of the time the magic did not work. In occult belief, plants are supposed to have their own individual and group spirits. Lower elementals are often believed to stay in plants, in a coconut grove, a lone quivering leaf is supposed to have magical powers. Nearly all people, ancient or modern, seem to have developed something of a medical herblore, frequently mixed with much magical material. Magical properties have usually been ascribed to vegetable poisons or their antidotes. Magical properties have superstitions associated with the plants among European peasants have actually been found to be fragments of medical herblore practised in these areas (Singer, 1958). A survey of medicinal plants by Karnick (1983) has also shown that the magical values are attributed to medicinal plants. Ophelia's herbals in Shakespeare's poetry (Newman, 1979) further illustrate that all these plants are toxic (abortifacient) in nature.

Results and Discussion

In some parts of Southern India, Tamarind (*Tamarindus indica*) tree if considered to be haunted by spirits. In Punjab, old people believe that large trees such as ficus growing quit away from the village are haunted by the evil spirits. Evil spirits are known as 'Jumbies' in the islands of the West Indies. Jumbie seeds are strung and used as an ornament and worn as an amulet to ward off evil and to bring good fortune. Hard seeds of Bholia (*Symplocos spicata*) strung as beads are hung round the neck of the children to avert evil spirits (Mehra et al, 1975). *Anthocephalus indicus* flowers are to ward off evil spirits by the tribes of Gauhati, inhabiting near the kamakhsya hills in Assam (Karnick et al, 1981). In Kangra, Himachal Pradesh, Nirgundi (*Vitex negundo*) and Vasaka (*Adathoda vasica*) leaves are kept in the lap while taking a young or sick boy from one place to another. It is said that these leaves protect the body from evil spirits and evil eye. Actually these plants are highly antimicrobial in nature and might be helping the young ones from

infectious organisms. Sangli (*Skimmia laureola*) incense and smoke are used against supernatural forces, namely ghosts and evil spirits, (Pathak et al, 1980). *Adeantum caudatum* is administered to a patient affected by natural forces (spirits) by tribes of Shiv Khorri forest area of Western Himalayas (Karnick et al, 1982). Parents put *putranjiva roxburghii* rosaries around the children's neck to preserve them from harm and to ward off diseases attributed to evil spirits. During journey, a pregnant woman or a lactating mother is expected to carry a bunch of neem (*Azadirachta indica*) leaves for protection against all evil elements. On the sixth day after their confinement, tribal women hang garlands made from *Ipomoea pes-caprae* on their huts to protect their pregnancy from evil spirits. *Celtis caucasia* plant was used to be made into charms in Peshawar valley to keep off the evil eye from men (Stewart, 1869). Indians living in Trinidad, water hyacinth plants in dark nights of August-September, it is believed that evil spirits linger near the plants. Swahili people of Zanzibar burn curry leaves as incense to keep devils away from their sick children. Fine finger grass and Devils shoestring plants are used to ward off bad dreams and evil spirits. In ancient Europe, it was customary to gather Saint John's wort (*Hypericum seouleri*) on Saint John's day (24th June) and hung up in the windows as a preservative against evil spirits, storms and thunder, thereby giving it an ancient name, 'devils flight'. *Peganum harmala* seeds were burnt to keep off the evil spirits at lights and to avert the evil eye (Stewart, 1869). Druids, a relic of ancient pagan times, used the Vervain herb to ward off the evil eye.

Recipe of plants and parts viz., *Boswellia sp.*, *securidaca longipedunculata*, *Biophytum crassipes* and *cannabis sativa* was also used to ward off evil eye in Tanzania (Mathias, 1982). In India, to counter the effects of evil eye, burning of dry red chilli fruit is a common practice. In Punjab, garlic bulbs (*Allium sativum*) are strung into garlands and are hung around the children's neck to ward off evil eye.

Small branches of Sal (*Shorea robusta*) are used by Indian villagers to detect witches. In idle ages Vervain herb was very popular in Witches brew. Henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*) was one of the main ingredients permitting the witches of medieval times to experience effects of intoxication and hallucination. During the middle ages in Europe, belladonna or deadly nightshade assumed importance in witchcraft and magic. Mandrake *Mandragora officinarum* became famous in magic and witchcraft due to its Mandrake *Mandragora officinarum* became famous in magic and witchcraft due to its powerful narcotic effects. The root of this plant is likened to a human body and this extraordinary resemblance led to the early belief that exercised great supernatural power over the human body and mind. Jezebel plant named after the wicked queen of biblical times, is generally prized and related to superstitious women of wicked intention. Herb Veronica is also mentioned in English charms (Singer, 1958). Rue was considered as antidote or a counter charm against the witch practices, while Tyrol people carried Rue with agrimony, maiden fern, Broom straw, and ground Ivy to sense the presence of witches.

“Trefoil, vervain, saint john’s Wort, Dill,

Hinder witches of their Will”.

Adathoda vasica stems are used in the Naga hills for divining and to foretell omens. A herb of eternal life was very popular in china. It was known as jen Shen now called ginseng (*Panax ginseng*). Its roots actually look like a human body with a head, two hands and two feet. To a common observer, the surprising results of healing practices only gave an impression that the cure has been affected by nothing but magic or witchcraft (Said, 1981). Oldest magical plant, mandrake was revered as far back as genesis for its alleged aphrodisiac powers and its use as a drug persists even today. In Greece, Circe stirred mandrake into her potion for turning men into swine. Because its forked roots resemble legs, the mandrake was often depicted in medieval Europe as a tiny human figure, as in 1498 French drawing of a “Female root”.

Conclusion

Use of plants magical practices is certainly the corruption of the use of plants in folklore or indigenous systems of medicine. It is a stage in the development of medical herblore, indicating confused situations, a partially analyzed set of scientific information mingled with many individual and social prejudices. It is a stage of exploitation of uneducated masses by semi-educated and selfish persons.

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