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Plants in traditional medicine

Medical concepts of the Abelam people in Papua New Guinea

Short communication

W. H. STÖCKLIN

In the books of European history of medicine we find the notice that Hippocrates, more than 2000 years ago, knew only about 60 plants worth to be mentioned. Some 400 years later Plinius enumerated 1000 plants considered to be helpful for medical treatments. In the 19th century not less than 15,000 plants have been reported as being of healing value. After this enormous boom, however, authors became more and more critical – and nowadays we find the number of useful medical plants reduced to 101 (“Schweizerisches Arzneibuch”).

Even with modern methods of research it is most time- and money-consuming to trace the healing capacities of a plant or drug or to describe and analyse the chemical structure thought to be responsible for certain effects (e.g., valerian, vermouth, digoxin, etc.). As we meet these difficulties even within our well established western medicine, it is certainly not less questionable to make correct statements facing an exotic medical system. Therefore Drobec’s idea (1954) of grouping plants according to their healing power (from the European point of view) seems to be a delicate approach to this problem.

In order to keep away from judgements like “effective”, “ineffective”, “unnecessary” or “of merely psychologic value” (following Drobec’s terminology) I have tried to list up the plants used in Abelam medicine with a glance towards traditional belief and cultural background.

The Abelam people (East Sepik Province, P.N.G.) still manage, after several decades of contact with western civilization, to preserve many essential parts of their neolithic way of life. Even their knowledge of traditional medicine appears to be untouched by modern influence – in spite of Government Hospitals and Aid Posts set up within their territory (Koch, 1968, Stöcklin, 1977).

Accidents and severe diseases are usually considered to be sanctions for disobedience against tribal laws. The actors behind the scene are sorcerers, witches, and a number of spiritual beings.

For the medical treatment in a traditional way the Abelam will call for different “specialists” who are known to be experts for certain healing proce-

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dures. And for nearly all the healers and treatments plants seem to be of considerable importance.

The various ways of dealing with plants in the medical concept of the Abelam can be mentioned here in a few words only:

1. *Plants used as mechanical instruments.* In this group we find plants or rather parts of plants suitable for puncturing, scratching, splinting and strapping.

2. *Plants with primary (genuine) healing power.* The majority of plants designated for medical purposes by the Abelam could be listed up in this category – but it would in fact be very questionable to evaluate their effectiveness in terms of western medicine. There is a number of plants being used against earache, stuffy nose, abscess, fungus, cough or abdominal pain giving relief in one way or the other. The usefulness of *Cassia alata* against tinea rubra (dermatomycosis) and the positive statements about the treatment of tropical ulcers with heated mushrooms can hardly be explained by magical or merely psychological influence.

3. *Plants with secondary (induced) healing power.* This is the group of plants needed by healers like the “kumbundu” (the blowing doctor), the “njugrandu” (the stonedoctor) and the “babmondu” (the steamdoctor or “moon-man”). They all try to “impregnate” certain plants with their personal healing power, which then can be transmitted to the patient.

4. *Plants capable to attract souls and spirits.* Plants of this category are mainly being used in black magic (for capturing a particle of a future victim’s soul) and for detecting the murderer or culprit after a person’s death (by trapping the deceased’s soul in a bamboo stick with special herbs spreading a lemon-or perfume-like smell. The stick will then be able to trace the “murderer” within a limited range thus helping to prevent similar future events).

5. *Plants with a banishing effect in the world of spirits.* Plants capable to banish spirits (and so neutralizing the effect of the spirit-attracting plants) have an extremely nasty smell resembling sulfur or garlic. Kaamen-leaves are the best-known in this group. They are used to keep evil spirits away from a sick child (trying to steal the soul out of the weakened body). The same leaves are used to neutralize a magic bundle containing a small part of a patient’s soul – or even inactivate the whole “archive” of a sorcerer, allowing the captured soul-particles to escape and return to their owners. – In this context, Croton-leaves should also be mentioned as a powerful tool against witches, who may cause disease and disaster. Similar to other ethnic groups the Abelam believe that witches, pretending to sleep peacefully in their houses, allow their souls to leave the body and to damage other people’s health or property (often by using a wild pig or a poisonous snake etc. as a vehicle). At daybreak the witch’s soul will reenter the sleeping body. By putting a Croton-leave across the path in front of her cottage the reunion of the soul and the body can easily be sabotaged, and the witch will die within a few hours.

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 Koch G.: Kultur der Abelam. Die Berliner Maprik-Sammlung. Berlin 1968.
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Rezensionen – Analyses – Reviews

André Carayon et al.: Les névrites lépreuses. Masson, Paris 1985. 240 pages, 180 F

L'institut de léprologie appliquée à Dakar, fondation de l'Ordre de Malte, avec la collaboration de plusieurs organisations européennes et américaines a conçu et rendu possible la publication de cet ouvrage. Il est le fruit d'un travail de plus de 30 ans, mené par les médecins de cet institut et leurs collaborateurs. Son sujet, les névrites lépreuses, est un chapitre de la léprologie souvent négligé et dont l'importance pratique est quelquefois méconnue. Après une brève note sur l'activité de l'Ordre de Malte, l'auteur senior (A. C.) donne une introduction dans la thématique de ce livre. Neurochirurgien original, qualifié par ses confrères Anglo-Saxons de «*medically minded surgeon*», il est devenu neurologue, tropicaliste et finalement professeur de léprologie à Dakar. L'introduction reflète le vaste spectre de ses connaissances sur la lèpre. Ecrite très personnellement, elle donne une vue d'ensemble des problèmes actuels de la léprologie, soient-ils pathologiques, biologiques ou simplement ceux de terminologie. L'étude générale s'étend sur plusieurs chapitres. Les recherches sur les névrites ont débuté en 1952 et ont été poursuivies parallèlement à l'évolution des connaissances sur la pathogénie de la lèpre en plusieurs séries. La dernière série se rapporte à 380 malades. Dans les chapitres théoriques on trouve un aperçu sur les conditions de l'invasion des nerfs par *M. leprae*, sur le rôle de l'immunologie, sur des facteurs déclenchants, sur la pathophysiologie du nerf lésé, sur le rôle de la température, des traumatismes, de la hémodynamique, de l'inflammation. Dans les chapitres cliniques on trouve d'abord un résumé des troubles neurologiques chez les patients examinés, puis les importantes indications thérapeutiques dans les différentes formes. Les névrites ENL et les névrites reverses réagissent d'une manière différente aux traitements purement médicaux ou combinés avec décompression chirurgicale.

Dans la deuxième partie du livre les problèmes spécifiques du traitement chirurgical des différentes localisations des névrites sont décrits et illustrés par des photos et par des schémas. Le dernier chapitre traite de l'évolution actuelle de la chirurgie palliative des paralysies irrémédiables. Une bibliographie de presque 500 numéros conclut ce livre qui marque une véritable pierre milliaire en léprologie.

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