

THE BUSH TEAS OF BARBADOS

IRIS BAYLEY*

It is customary for many of the inhabitants of Barbados when they are ill to use as remedies watery infusions of various plants, known as "bush teas". If the disease has definite characteristics, such as skin rashes, swelling or pain, the infusion is applied locally, or pieces of the plant are bandaged upon the affected part of the body. Medical consultation is considered as a last resort or to avoid post-mortem examination, the latter being the subject of much superstitious dread.

The practice of drinking bush teas is still common, although in recent years, owing to improved educational standards, the majority of the people no longer have such complete faith in these concoctions, and experts in the use and administration of herbs are gradually becoming extinct. One of my interests in this subject was to collect the still remaining data concerning the use of these domestic remedies before they were entirely lost. Once the enquiries had begun it was surprising to note the wealth of material available for study. Over one hundred and fifty different species of plants in use at the present time have already been carefully investigated for this piece of research, and from time to time a new plant with alleged medicinal properties is brought to my notice.

The flora of Barbados has changed greatly during the three hundred years following the arrival of the first settlers, and E.G.B. Gooding, who has made a comprehensive study of the subject, states that we now have about six to seven hundred species of flowering plants, both indigenous and imported, instead of thousands which were originally found here. The island is extensively cultivated, chiefly with sugar cane, and a minimum of land is allotted to pasturage and woodland. Certainly only very small patches of the original virgin forest remain, and even in those areas will be found many plants alien to the island, due to the dispersal of the seeds of introduced species. Plants were brought here from other lands soon after the island was colonised, and those that found suitable ecological conditions increased and spread. They were

• Now Iris Bannochie

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brought from Europe, West Africa, India, the East Indies, North and South America and the other Caribbean islands. Most of the plants were imported for agricultural purposes, like the breadfruit from Tahiti, romantically associated with the voyage of Captain Bligh of the "Bounty"; but some plants were imported for ornamental purposes and a great many because they were medicinally useful.

One shrub, the "Duppy Basil" or "Mosquito Bush", *Ocimum micranthrum*, is of particular historical interest. The plant is now used as a cooling drink for colds in the chest and other pulmonary complaints, but it has received its local names from the fact that it has a pleasant aromatic odour, due to the essential oil, methyl cinnamate, which is contained in the leaves and stems, and this oil, like that of citronella, seems to be repulsive to mosquitoes. When yellow fever was prevalent here nothing was known of its etiology, and certainly the mosquito, *Aedes aegypti* (or *Stegomyia fasciata*) was not suspected as being the means of spreading this dreadful disease. Yellow fever was thought to be caused by malignant vapours or duppies which came up from the low swampy ground; it was noticed, however, that when the Duppy Basil bush was broken and hung in a house the inmates were less likely to contract this "putred bilious fever". The Duppies (i.e. the mosquitoes) were kept away.

The real art of "boiling" bush teas is also nearly extinct but there are still members of the population who have preserved recipes handed on by their parents and these people are the remaining experts on the subject. The recipes vary considerably in different parts of the island and they may be altered at will by the person dispensing the draught. Many plants are used for more than one complaint and generally there is no consensus of opinion on the exact specific use of many of the herbs, some of the plants being used as panaceas for all ills. However, through the maze of confusion a few traditional facts emerge and certain bushes are found to be taken throughout most of the island for specified diseases.

The plants are collected from the ditches and hedgerows, but especially from the gullies where the flora is more varied and luxuriant owing to the better water supply and freedom from cultivation. These plants are brought from the country and sold at vegetable stalls in street markets in Bridgetown or hawked by vendors from house to house. An assortment of plants is usually tied together in a bundle which is sold for a few cents.

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Bushes may also be purchased wholesale from a "bush doctor"; he is a collector rather than a retailer of these plants and he will gladly prepare remedies for those who seek his advice; it would be beneath his dignity to sell his bushes in the streets.

A striking example of the popularity of bush teas was afforded in September, 1938, when a severe influenza epidemic spread throughout the island and the leaves of the vine *Momordica charantia* or "miraculous bush" were used by many who contracted the disease. The demand for this bush tea was so great that those who lived near to the plant's habitat did a thriving business, gathering large quantities and marketing them in Bridgetown. The pharmacists were their best customers and bottles of the ready prepared infusion were sold in some city drug-stores. As a combined purgative, diuretic and diaphoretic, this evil-tasting medicine certainly seemed to be very effective in simple cases, and the bush has many ardent users among the more sophisticated members of the community. *Cardiospermum halicaccabum*, which, to a casual observer is not unlike *Momordica charantia*, was also gathered in mistake for the "miraculous bush" often producing grave symptoms of vomiting, diarrhoea and other toxic symptoms.

The use of bush teas on this island probably dates from the very first inhabitants, and the earliest dwellers, the uncivilised Arawaks, like all primitive peoples, must certainly have made use of the various plants which they found growing around them. We have very little evidence of the medical knowledge of the Arawaks who lived in Barbados, but the more aggressive Caribs, who later came and attacked them, acquired great skill in the use of our flora and it is known that they used extracts prepared from the bulb of the Barbadian lily, *Hippeastrum equestre*, as an arrow poison.

In the neighbouring islands, notably those of St. Lucia, St. Vincent and Dominica, where small numbers of full-blooded Caribs are still to be found, the medicinal properties of the plants growing near their settlements are well exploited. Taylor cites two plants, *Anona muricata* and *Renealmia elaxtata*, the extracts of which are used to increase lactation. In Dominica, even at the present time, a medical practitioner's certificate of death is not required in the case of the Caribs, who rarely resort to any medical treatment save that furnished by taking native remedies.

There is ample evidence from the writings of the early

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European settlers that many plants found here were used medicinally. Richard Ligon describes in detail the useful properties of the physic nut, a plant which enjoys great popularity. When eaten, the kernels of this plant caused violent vomiting and purging, results in those days considered to be of benefit in most ailments.

In *A History of the Caribby-Islands*, a translation from the French by J. Davies (1666), several references are made to the useful plants found in Barbados; and the author mentions that the acajou (*Guarea swartzii*) is "very good for the stomach and also in swooning and faintings, being qualified with a little sugar".

Hughes, who describes the plants growing here, makes many comments on their usefulness as medicines and in some instances gives details of their use.

Hilary, an English doctor who practised in Barbados for some years, was greatly impressed by the shrub known as the impetigo tree, *Cassia alata*, which was reported to cure almost any type of dermatitis.

When slave labour was imported to these islands, the African negroes brought with them seeds and plants and their knowledge of the properties of West African herbs was adapted to the indigenous species of the New World. Gooding has shown that many Barbadian plants, or closely related ones, also occur in West Africa, but many beliefs in Barbados regarding the use of the flora differ widely from those at present held in West Africa about the same plants, so that it seems that a local Barbadian tradition has arisen, as it no doubt has in other places as well.

Among the slaves were witch doctors and obeah men, practitioners of strange rites, in whose magical store figured many bushes, which they cultivated in their allotments. The obeah man's clients sought his advice either from motives of revenge or to counteract the machinations of duppies and evil spirits. Some rites were just plain sorcery and included the use of blood and feathers or similar objects employed in voodoo, but the highest form of magic art included the use of poisonous plants to destroy their victims. So superstitious were these people that fear took complete possession of them and the mere glimpse of blood-stained cock's feathers could produce extreme mental anguish. The poisons of many plants, such as the lucky bean bush, (*Thevetia neriifolia*), oleander (*Nerum oleander*), crab-eye (*Abrus precatorius*) and manchineel

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(*Hippomane mancinella*), (Earl, 1938), are exceedingly potent and doubtless have been the cause of many mysterious deaths. Hughes reports the attempted homicide of a planter by his cook who put manchineel juice in his chocolate.

However, in addition to criminal intent, obeah men also possessed a certain knowledge of the medicinal values of many plants, and their advice often must have been sought in the early days of slavery when the West was yet alien and the exiles from Africa were still accustomed to the practice of their own African medicine men, using herbs whose potency was enhanced by incantations and witchcraft. Obeah men and women were still found in Barbados until quite recently, and even to-day occasional cases of prosecution for witchcraft occur. However, these modern exponents undergo no "training" as their predecessors did, who were apprenticed to an older practising obeah man for several years. Nevertheless, with bright colours, lights, blood-stained clothes, etc., these modern practitioners can still excite the lively imaginations of simple-minded, uneducated folk in trouble and from them extort exorbitant fees.

In the hocus-pocus attached to the present-day use of bush teas one may still detect the influence of obeah. Some plants are considered worthless unless first treated magically; they must be cut at certain periods of the moon; vermifuges must always be taken at full moon. Some brews must be left overnight in the dew to acquire maximum efficacy; the flowers of the creeping jasmine *Jasminum officinale* are steeped in water overnight prior to being used to wash sore eyes.

The Barbadian applies the term "cold" to a large variety of unrelated diseases. Diarrhoea and dysenteric disorders are a "cold in the bowel"; cystitis, a "cold in the bladder"; headache, a "cold in the head" lumbago and back pain a "cold in the back". Almost any disease can thus be classified as a cold, whilst the common or garden cold, or coryza, is dignified by the term "fresh cold". All these "colds" are accompanied by the familiar syndrome of "bad feels" which is elastic enough to include such divergent complaints as high blood-pressure, diabetes, pulmonary tuberculosis or peptic ulcer - any disease in fact where general malaise is a prominent feature.

Naturally, with such a loose terminology, there is no general agreement regarding the specific plants for such conditions as "colds" or "bad feels". Instead, in a sort of hit-or-miss

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therapy, a blunderbuss mixture, containing a great many herbs, given, possibly in the hope that one at least of the plants may exert the desired pharmacological effect.

There is also a large group of plants used for "cooling drinks". Rashes, urticaria, impetigo, ringworm, eczema, etc., are believed to be caused by overheated or "bad" blood and cooling drinks are necessary to combat this condition. Mauby or "Mabee" is a drink which is sold in the streets, carried on a vendor's head in a can to which a basal spigot is attached. Mauby is made from bark, boiled in water for about an hour, and concentrated to a basic extract which can be kept for some time. When making the drink, some of the stock is diluted with water, sugar and vanilla essence are added to taste, and a block of ice is put into the can, along with the prepared mixture. The result is a bitter-sweet drink, with a frothy head, popular for quenching the thirst occasioned by the tropical sun, and for "cooling" the blood.

In trying to discover the type of bark used, a great many different plants were quoted from one source or another. Professor C. Y. Shepherd, in a personal communication to Mr. E. M. Shilstone states that the Acting Curator, Forestry Department, British Guiana, says that "mauby bark" is a product of the tree, *Gouiania domingensis*, this chaw stick, a native of the West Indies. This plant is also mentioned by Schomburgk, along with two others, *Zizyphus jujuba* and *Ceanothus colubrinus*. The U.S. Dispensatory (1947) states that abee bark is yielded by *Ceanothus reclinatus* (L'Herit) or *Colubrina reclinata* (Brongn) and it contains a glycoside. All these plants belong to the order Rhamnaceae and it is probable that they are all used, one being substituted for the other when not available.

As with all peoples, purges figure the most prominently in the native pharmacopoeia: no matter what the disease or pain, a strong purge may do good - or at least no harm. However, in these days Epsom Salts constitute a convenient and cheap purgative, obviating the special preparation of a bush tea, except under exceptional circumstances. The physic nut is still used and its kernels produce violent diarrhoea. Ligon graphically describes how, after five were eaten, twelve vomits and twenty stools resulted, and he opines that this is "too great an evacuation in a hot country, where the body is weak and the spirits exhausted by continual sweating". Other purges include the locally-prepared castor oil, a foul-smelling concoction known as "cold drawn oil"; the bellyache bush

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(*Jatropha gossypifolia*), aloes (*Aloe barbadensis*), green bananas (*Musa sapientum*) and the miraculous bush (*Momordica charantia*).

An impressive number of bush teas are also hopefully used as abortifacients. The most popular of these plants are lignum vitae (*Guaiacum officinale*), seed under leaf (*Phyllanthus niruri*), gully root (*Petiveria alliacea*). An excessive dose of tea prepared from lignum vitae may produce an acute toxic nephritis. Most of these plants are violent purges, causing excessive peristalsis and vomiting, and some, notably the oleander (*Nerium Oleander*) and mudra (*Calotropis procera*) are deadly poisons.

The "wonder of the world" (*Bryophyllum pinnatum*) is held to be a sure cure for urethritis. The fleshy leaves of this plant are beaten up with common salt and the fluid thus produced is allowed to drip into a glass of water. Large quantities of liquid have to be taken in conjunction with this medicine, owing to the excessive thirst produced by the salt, and the large amount of urine passed as a result of this may naturally give considerable relief to this condition.

There is also a local "cure" for diabetes - the trumpet tree (*Cerocopia peltata*). In Barbados, as in all countries where the diet is mainly carbohydrate, transient glycosuria often occurs. Unless a confirmatory blood sugar test is performed, a patient may be erroneously declared diabetic on the sole evidence of finding sugar in the urine. Such a patient, on taking an infusion of trumpet tree, together with a restrict diet of greens, promptly "recovers". Sometimes, unfortunately, severe genuine diabetics are persuaded by these "cured" ones to abandon their insulin treatment; this leads to alarming symptoms, ending in diabetic coma. However, so great is the reputation of the trumpet tree that a doctor, having already once brought one of these people out of coma, may have to do the same thing again several months later, the patient having gone back to his trumpet tree in preference to orthodox, scientific treatment.

Worthy of mention is the horse-nicker (*Caesalpinia bonducella*). The seeds of this tree, which are hard and grey and about the size of a hazel nut, are roasted, ground and then prepared like coffee. The resulting extract is given to patients with oedema, both cardiac and renal. In removing excess fluid, its action is somewhat similar to that of the mercurial diuretics. The active principles of these seeds - bonducin, a fatty oil and gullandinin and other alkaloids - seem to stimulate renal

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glomerular action, but if the seeds are used unparched or not thoroughly roasted they have severe toxic properties. It is possible that knowledge of this plant has been handed down since Carib times, since the plant was known by them and the seeds were used as counters in the ancient game of warri, still played to-day in some of the back streets of Bridgetown. Research on this plant might yield information of value to modern medicine, but its uncontrolled use in unstandardized doses is to be deprecated.

The worst victims of bush tea poisoning are children already debilitated from malnutrition and treatments for intestinal worms. They are given large doses of the infusions which, although tolerated by adults, are a poisonous overdose for a sick undernourished child. When a mother cannot adequately breast-feed her child, she is usually unwilling to give the necessary additional feeds with cows' milk: in consequence, the child progressively loses weight and appetite. On the advice of older members of the family she next resorts to bush teas and may even discontinue the use of milk altogether. It is no uncommon experience to encounter children, suffering from severe nutritional oedema, who have been existing for weeks on practically nothing except bush teas. How they manage to keep alive so long is puzzling.

Bush teas are also much used as antipyretics, diuretics and for menstrual disorders. Rheumatism, tuberculosis, stomach troubles and nearly all the ills and disorders that the flesh is heir to are treated by some tea or another. Usually a syndrome or even an isolated symptom is taken as a criterion for the administration of a specific tea. For instance, headache, whatever its underlying cause, will be treated by one or more of the plants thought to be effective in its cure. Some plants are used as flavouring agents, although it is generally believed that the more evil-tasting the bush tea the more potent its therapeutic effect.

The roots and leaves of many plants are used for external application. Various succulent leaves are applied under a bandage to relieve headaches or "colds of the head" (neuralgia); and when one feels ill the first thing that he usually does is to tie up his head with a cloth in which leaves are wrapped. Sprains, lumps and swellings are similarly treated, and there is a great variety of plants used for this purpose. Other leaves smeared with soap or soft grease, are applied to "draw" boils or infected wounds.

The leaves usually employed for this purpose are those of the pepper (*Capsicum*

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spp.), mustard (*Brassica juncea*) and English plantain (*Plantago major*). Quite often these unsterile plasters produce such serious complications that, in the pre-penicillin era at any rate, only amputation could save the patient's life. There are also some leaves possessing highly irritant properties which are used to "burn out" chronic, long-standing ulcers or to relieve injuries caused by Lion Fish. The burning out causes the patient much discomfort and may make him worse. Leaves of the manchineel (*Hippomane mancinella*), scratch withe (*Cissus sicyoides*) and cowage (*Mucuna pruriens*), called "cow itch" in Barbados, are examples.

In the preparation of bush tea various parts of the plant are utilized, but sometimes the whole plant, together with the soil attached to its roots, is put into the mixture. A varying number of leaves, seeds, stems or roots are boiled for longer or shorter period, thus producing an extract of uncertain potency. When the foliage is resinous, the old leaves may contain more of the active principle than the young, succulent ones. Sometimes one plant is mistakenly used in place of another. Weather conditions, soil composition and the method of preparation all combine to make bush tea extracts extremely variable in strength.

Bush teas are often boiled in one part of sea water with three parts of tap water, with the addition of an unspecified amount of leaf, flower, stem or root. Dried bushes are supposed to be more efficacious than freshly-picked ones. Since alcohol-soluble oils constitute the active principle of many of the aromatic plants, it is fortunate that alcohol is so rarely used in the local methods of extraction.

Like so many other originally empiric remedies, some of the Barbadian bush teas may be useful and, with further research and standardization, might possibly become valuable botanical additions to the official pharmacopoeia. Such plants include *Phyllanthus niruri*, an antispasmodic; *Caesalpinia bonducella*, for dropsy; *Dianthera pectoralis*, from which a pleasant linctus may be prepared. Other plants are irritant and produce a great deal of discomfort, but they have no permanent after-effects. This group includes the greater number of present-day bush teas and their administration is probably more beneficial psychologically than physically. A great many of the plants used are definitely very poisonous; this fact is gradually being recognised so that their use as remedies is being abandoned. They are sometimes still employed in poisoning livestock from motives of revenge.

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Among poorer folk especially, it sometimes happens that they have consumed large quantities of bush tea before consulting a physician. This self-medication can make diagnosis very difficult for the doctor who has to discriminate between the original disease and the gastro-intestinal or other symptoms resulting from the home-brewed remedies. Children especially suffer greatly in this respect and fatal cases are sometimes seen of poisoning with white clary (*Heliophytum indicum*, *H. parviflorum*) and sour sop (*Anona muricata*).

Plants have been used medicinally by man from pre-historic times; some were of doubtful value, but others have gradually emerged to become standard remedies for the treatment and alleviation of suffering. Drugs such as belladonna, digitalis, opium, to mention only a few, have withstood the test of time and need no further recommendation. The ancient Chinese were familiar with ephedrine many centuries before its synthesis and recognition by Western medicine. However, only in modern times has the chemist analysed these preparations and thus given to the medical practitioner a standard product. After preparing the active principles of plants in pure form, it has often been possible to synthesize related substances having greater potency and fewer toxic effects; such products will eventually administer the death-blow to bush teas and other native remedies.

It is only natural that so widespread a habit as the taking of bush tea should be commemorated in local ballad. The following is a calypso that I heard sung outside one of the hotels. At my request, the singer wrote it as it is now printed.

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WEST INDIAN WEED SONG

Taylor's Version

One day I meet a old woman selling, and I wanted something to eat
I thought I could put a little bite in she way, but I take back when
I did meet.

I thought she had bananas, orange or pear, nothing that I need,
I asked the old woman what she was selling, she said she was selling
weed.

She had she coat tie up over she waist, and was stepping along with
grace,

She had a pair of old clogs on her feet, and was waddling down the
street,

Just then she start to name the different weed, and I was really more
than glad,

I can't remember all she call, but these were a few she had.

She had the Manpeabber, Womanpeabber, Tan-tan, Fall-back and
Lemon-grass,

Minnie-root, Gully-root, Granny-back-bone, Bitter-tally, Lime-
leaf and Caroon,

Coolie-bitters, Cariella-bush, Flat-earth and de Iron-weed,
Sweet- bloom, Foul-tongue and the Wild-daizzie
Sweet-sage and even to you.

She had de Cat-mint, de Pepper-mint, Soldier-rod, Pastee-lena
and de Cow-foot bush,

Milk-weed, Fit-weed, Bird-vine, de Bishop-cap-bush and de Rock-
balsam,

Surinam bitters, de Wild-green-tree, Three-fingers and the Wurum-
bush,

A worm-grass, Z-grass, Man-grass, Carron-crow, Snake-bitters and
also Tezzan.

She had de Cassava-mama, Okra-babba, Jacob-ladder, mixed with
Finegona,

Job-tea, Peter-parslee, John-Belly-parslee and the White Clary,
Bill-bush, Wild-cane, Duck-weed, Aniseed, War-bitters and Wild-
grey-root,

She even had down to a certain bush Barbados call Puss-in-Boots.

When I hear the names she call, I went down, can't even talk,
She start to call from Camp Street corner, never stop till she reach
Orange walk,

The woman had me so surprise, I didn't know what to do
Till a girl come along, one cuff in me eyes, and I didn't know who

was who.

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Sweet-broom, Sweet-sage and the Lemon-grass, I hear them good
making tea,
When I hear Dutch-grass, and the Wild-daisy am good to cool the body.
Yes the Woman-tongue was even listed, calling out all the time,
She only had a little Congo-eye, but the other one now left blind.

She had Tansa-bitters, Pumgranate-bark, Congo-cane, de Pear-leaf,
de young Bizzie-bizzie,
Young Grape-vine, Back-pain, Stinging-nettle, Do-ra-me bush and de
Broad-leaf thyme,
De Mimosa-leaf with the Evergreen-seed, Bitter-fence, bitter just like
gall,
Doctor Doodles squashy bitters, and the Anamus grass, Snake-
bitters and dat didn't even all.

She had de Bitter-gumma, Potta-demma, Congo-lalla and the Creva-
cot broom,
Stavilla, Wild-samattoo, Sour-sop leaf, and the Half-of-it weed,
Cool-de-body, Sweet-mint, Porter-bush, White Clary and de Xmas
bush,
Cat-tongue, and even the Monkey-ladder, and this the rest you may
need.

She had de Pap-bush, Elder-bush, de Black-pepper bush, French-to-
you and de Cure-for-all,
Sapodilla, Tamarind-leaf, Money-bush, and de Soldier-parsley,
Pumpkin-blossom, with the Double-do-me, and Congo-pumps in
galore,
Physic-nut, and even the Lily-root is the list of her every day soup.