Plant Use in Spiritual Communication With Souls by An Animistic Community in Siberut, Indonesia

Herwig ZAHORKA German Forestry Director Ret., Researcher Independent, Bogor, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This article presents plant use in spiritual communication with souls by an animistic community in Siberut. Based on that animistic belief the Mentawaians consider ills and diseases being created by the malicious bajou of an animated being or object which has frightened or startled the human’s simagere or, because the human has dis obeyed social taboos. Curing rituals are performed by the kerey (shamans) and by special healers using the helpful bajou of selected « medicinal » plants.

Key words: Plant use, spiritual communication, animistic, Siberut, Mentawai Island

INTRODUCTION

Based on their animistic belief the Mentawai people consider not only beings are endowed with a soul but all animals, plants, natural phenomena and ritually used objects as well. It is essential for the Mentawai people to live in harmony with all these many souls or spirits in their environment. The shamans are entitled to keep that harmony in balance by use of the souls of distinguished plants (Scefold, 1973, 1980).

KEREY, SIMAGERE, GAUT AND BAJAU

These souls or spirits are called simagere or simagere. Due to their knowledge and mental power the kerey (shamans) are capable to establish a communication link with the simagere of other beings. This is executed by help of a specific mediator which can be a sacrificed domestic animal like a pig or a chicken, or a distinguished plant. This mediator animal or plant is called a gaut. Many gaut plant species are used. Each species is considered to have a specific effective function. To make the gaut effective, the kerey is ritually charming the gaut’s simagere with incantations in the kerey’s euphemistic manguage. However, the charmed simagere does not directly act, it is its bajou, something like a spiritual power or radiation which the kerey will activate. All animated beings and objects are permanently emanating bajou. Some bajou can become helpful, some can become dangerous to human beings.

Based on that animistic belief the Mentawaians have an animistic approach to diseases. If a human is severely sick they believe the simagere did not feel well in that body for various reason and has temporarily left the body. If it is accepted by the simagere of the ancestors it would not come back again. The the human being concerned deceased. Therefore all efforts of the kerey is directed to hold back the simagere in the body, or to call it back from its journey, respectively. Because of that, the use of gaut plants within animistic faith has a mere spiritual
background. This is in contrast to the implementation of the chemistry of medicinal plants to «pharmaceutically» curing a diagnosed disease of a body’s part.

PREPARATION

Before starting an important ritual the kerey collect their gaut plants in the forest. Returned to the uma (tradition house), they select the most appropriate, or most powerfull looking ones. This is executed in Figure 1. Nearly all gaut plants are medicinal plants (Ave, 1990). Most plants are given names according to their use in the ritual. Other plants have got their names according to their shape, or their colour, or their smell. The names of plants are often different in each region of Siberut. The vernacular names cited here are those of Rereiket watershed area.

SOME SELECTED EXAMPLES OF IMPORTANT GAUT PLANTS USED WITH ANIMISTIC RITUALS

One of the most important gaut plants in the Mentawai used with nearly all rituals is the leaf of Grepopyllum pictum (L.) Griffith, Acanthaceae. The vernacular name is aileppet, derived from «maleppet» with means «to cool». Its bajou is considered to eliminate all evil circumstances. In figure 2, a kerey is «blessing» an infant boy with an aileppet leaf meaning «may you always be healthy». Applied to adults means it «may you lead a honourable and healthy life». The kerey attach the leaves generally at their necklace «tudda» and they feel it mutually when welcoming one another in pasinbula ritual.

Grepopyllum pictum is a well known alkaloids containing medicinal plant. «The leaves are considered to be vulnerary, styptic, resolvent for sores, chronic ulcers, and whitlow, ...juice from heated leaves is mentioned to cleanse thrush in an infant’s mouth, ... cure ills caused by tubercle bacillus, and many diseases of the eye. ... The plants contain the glycoside aucubin and plantagin» (Perry, 1980 : 317).

On the head and at the back the enfant’s grand mother has attached specimens of mandoraigan (other names are simainge and stilmun). It is the plant Ocimum tenuiflorum L. (Syn. Ocimum sanctum L.), Labiatae, an extensive fragrant plant. This fragrance is called beu and is believed to delight and honour the simagere that it likes to stay with the body.

Figure 3 shows a healing ritual pabete performed by four kerey wearing magic aprons called sabo. With the sweet sound of small «jejeneng» bells in their hand the try to attract the simagere and to avoid its leaving the body of a seriously sick enfant. This part of the ritual is called pasioga simagere, what means «calling the soul». At the back of their loin cloths the kerey have attached leaves of Eltingera punctata (Roxburgh) R.M. Smith, Zingiberaceae. The vernacular name is pelekak, but during that ritual it is called baiis-roro. Baiis means «turn into» because when crushed the green leaves turn into red. Correspondingly, the bajou of the plant is considered to be able to turning the evil situation into the opposite.
Figure 4 also shows that *Dieramptopteris linearis* (Burm.f.) Underw. var. *linearis* (syn. *Gleichenia linears* Clarke), *Gleicheniaceae*, vernacular name *osap* and *osam*, its applied by the *kerey* by pointing it against the body to avoid the sick enfant’s *simagere* leaving the body. *Osap* is also used as a medicinal plant. Here the pointed and forked shape of the fern is related to its special application (Unfortunately, that very young enfant deceased during the same night with dysentery and lethal dehydration).

**GAUT PLANTS IN HUNTING RITUALS**

Out of some hundred *gaut* plant species many are used with traditional hunting rituals. Ritual hunting with bow and poison arrows in the dense jungle the mountains up is important to men, however, also a daring enterprise because of strange and dangerous *bajou* probably lurking there. Therefore on an early hunting trip already before daylight raises offerings are made. Some tabacco for instance is left back for the spirits of the forest *taikaleleu* and, a *kerey* performs incantations to the *simagere* of at least three special *gaut* plants.

Figure 5 shows such a ritual. In the front of his bouquet the *kerey* presents a specimen of *Costus speciosus* (Koenig) Smith, *Zingiberaceae*, vernacular name is *pilok* or *baggilibaggili*. *Baggilibaggili* means « to avoid », and *pilok* means « twisting grow ». This plant has a spiral growing « fending-off » stem. Its *bajou* can fend off and keep at bay evil spirits, diseases and accidents caused by dangerous *bajou*. This is a plant of magic as well as medicine.

The *bajou* of the following plants could eventually also chase away evil spirits and diseases and disaster:

*Kekkele*, it is the medicinal plant *Globidion rubrum* Blume, *Euphorbiaceae*. *Kekkele* means « to chase away » (evil spirits and diseases). Another is *teiteitoi* is the plant *Rhaphidophora korthalii* Schoott, *Araceae*. *Teitei* means « back », misfortune and evil spirits will stay behind. Most species of the genus *Rhaphidophora* are medicinal plants. Also *pangaule*, the medicinal plant *Justitia gendarussa* Burm.f., *Acanthaceae*, is used for the same purpose. *Sele* means « to get lost », misfortune be averted. The wish to be clear of obstacles during a hunting trip in the forest will also fulfill the *bajou* of *tepa*, *Lasianthus sterculiacus*, *Rubiacaeae*. This plant is also known for its styptic properties.

In the hand of the *kerey* in figure 5 just behind the *baggilibaggili* some leaves of *Amomum* cf. aromaticum Roxburgh, *Zingiberaceae*, are visible. The Mentawaians call it *laiga*’ *leleu*. *Laiga*’ *leleu* has the symbolic meaning of « diligent ». Its *bajou* has the properties to arrange diligence in hunting monkeys. At the ground of bouquet is a specimen of the important plant *soga*. It is the fern *Microsorum nigrescens*, *Polypodiaceae*. *Soga* means « to call ». The *bajou* of this fern can call together the *simagere* of humans, of deceased ancestors or of game to be hunted. Here the *simagere* of monkeys are called that they are willing to show up and easily be shot and bagged by the hunters.

The *kerey* know still some more helpful *gaut* plants in hunting monkeys. The medicinal plant *Mussetonius frondosa* L., *Rubiacaeae*, here known under the name *katu-tuca* is one of them. *Muitca* means « to see, visible ». The *bajou* of this plant can make the monkeys well visible to the hunters—provided the hunters have started early in the morning. A branch of the tree
Kararabha is also used in hunting. *Raiba* means «be busy, in large number». In hunting it would cause the monkeys to flock together in large numbers close to the hunters. *Kararabha* is the Actinidiaceae tree *Saurauia reinwardtiana* (AVE, 1990). Also *Devestium heterocarpum* (L.) DC., Leguminosae, is used in hunting. The plant is called *lare*, which means «accompany, bring along». The *bajou* would be helpful in leading monkeys to the hunters. In Java the roots and leaves have been used to treat female trouble.

Figure 6 showed that a bagged game’s *simagere* is offered to stay in the *uma* with its head trophy. For that purpose the *simagere* must be calmed down and reconciled with the new environment and the *uma* members. Here two *kerey* perform that ritual. The senior *kerey* pronounces incantations calling up the *simagere* of the *simakobu* monkey (*Simias concolor*), an endemic genus and species in the Mentawai. The *kerey’s* three *gaut* plants are: At the top a specimen of the fragrant Mandaraga, *Ocimum tenuiflorum* L. (*Ocimum sanctum* L.), Labiatae. Its *bajou* will please and honour the monkey’s *simagere* so that it likes to stay there in the *uma* (with its head trophy). Well visible are also the leaves of *laija lelu*, *Amomum* cf. *aromaticum* Roxburgh, Zingiberaceae. Its *bajou* is expected to induce the monkey’s *simagere* being diligently helpful in gaining additional *simagere* of other monkeys for the *uma*. The third plant hardly visible in the *kerey’s* hand were leaves of *kinrip*, *Diospyros buasia* Hiern., Ebenaceae. After an animal is killed that plant is requested to induce the *simagere* of the dead animal to lead living animals to the hunters.

There is also a large branch attached at the back of the senior kerey’s loincloth. It is the *kelabaga*, the prize decoration of the shooter who will proudly wear the whole day until he goes sleeping. That branch is from the timber tree *Antidesma neurocarpum* Miquel, Euphorbiaceae. The *bajou* gives persistence and tirelessness to the hunter.

Figure 7 shown the skull is the trophy of the game. The *simagere* of the animal is supposed to stay there. It gets an honorary place at the central fire place where without exception only ritual meals are prepared. The *simagere* is honoured and praised in order to become a helpful spiritual member of the *uma* in hunting and shooting its still living brothers and sisters and other relatives in the forest. Then all their *simagere* are reunited again and honourfully treated in the *uma*. For that purpose the following three *gaut* plants are applied and stuck into the small gap between the skull’s zygomatic arch and the lower jaw: Closets to the skull is a leaf of *Musasaenda erythropylia* Schimm. & Thomm., Rubiaceae. The vernacular name is *munumun*. *Umun* means to praise. The *bajou* of *munumun* mediates the praise and the adoration of the *uma*. The next plant visible but already flabby is a *Begonia* sp., here to be called *deret toulu* (other local names are *sikatsila*, *tapiptipena* and *pagulut-langguk*). Begoniaceae are growing in cool places. Accordingly, their *bajou* have a cooling and calming-down effect on the *simagere* of the killed animals, like other plants with thick, fleshy leaves do. The third *gaut* plant is the fern *soge* (something unsharp, an older specimen is sharper), *Microsorium nigresens*, Polygodiaeae. As already explained the *bajou* of that can call *simagere* together. Here the *simagere* of the *simakobu* monkey is induced to call the *simagere* of its family members still living in the forest to the *uma*. Then these monkeys will be willing to be shot and bagged by the hunters in order to get such an honourable and safe place in the *uma* too.
CONCLUSION

According to their animistic belief the Mentawaians consider ills and diseases being created by the malicious bajou of an animated being or object which has frightened or startled the human's simagere or, because the human has disobeyed social taboos. Curing rituals are performed by the kerey (shamans) and by special healers using the helpful bajou of selected “medicinal” plants.

Though, the knowledge of curative plants is great among the Mentawaians, and a great number of concoctions of different plants are composed and are also applied externally and internally for all ills and diseases which happen in Siberut, however, the curing effect is always believed to emit from the plant's bajou.

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REFERENCES


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Figure 1. Selecting “gaut” plants

Figure 2. Blessing baby with leaves: *Grapophyllum pictum*, *Oxsmum sanctum*, and *Oxsmum tenax florum*

Figure 3. “Sabo” dance as performed in healing ritual, *pahetei* with bells “pasisega simagere”, calling the soul

Figure 4. Shaman with *Ghesena lineana*

Figure 5. Shaman with bouquet of plants

Figure 6. Monkey with shaman

Figure 7. Monkey skull