

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

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ABSTRACT

This article present 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 disobeyed 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, Mentawaiian Island

INTRODUCTION

Based on their animistic belief the Mentawai people consider not only beings are endowed with a soul but all animals, plants, natural phenomenons and ritually used objects as well. It is essential for the Mentawaiian 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 spiritis are called *simagere* or *simagre*. 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 powerful 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 Rericiket 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 *Graptophyllum 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 *pasibului* ritual.

Graptophyllum 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 *mandaraigan* (other names are *simaingo* and *silimun*). 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 *pabetei* performed by four *kerey* wearing magic aprons called *sabo*. With the sweet sound of small « *jejeneng* » bells in their hand they try to attract the *simagere* and to avoid its leaving the body of a seriously sick enfant. This part of the ritual is called *pasisoga simagere*, what means « calling the soul ». At the back of their loin cloths the *kerey* have attached leaves of *Etilingera punicae* (Roxburgh) R.M. Smith, Zingiberaceae. The vernacular name is *pelekak*, but during that ritual it is called *bailiu-roro*. *Bailiu* 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 *Dicranopteris linearis* (Burm.f.) Underw. var. *linearis* (syn. *Gleichenia linearis* 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 offerings are made. Some tobacco for instance is left back for the spirits of the forest *taikalelu* 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 *Glochidion rubrum* Blume, Euphorbiaceae. *Kekkele* means « to chase away » (evil spirits and diseases). Another is *teiteiloina*, it is the plant *Rhaphidophora kortalsii* Schoot, Araceae. *Teitei* means « back », misfortune and evil spirits will stay behind. Most species of the genus *Rhaphidophora* are medicinal plants. Also *pangasele*, 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 stercoriaceus*, Rubiaceae. 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 Mentawaiian call it *laiga' lelu*. *Laiga' lelu* 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 *Microsorium 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 *Mussaenda frondosa* L., Rubiaceae, here known under the name *katu-itca* 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

kararaiba 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. *Kararaiba* is the Actinidaceae tree *Saurauia reinwardtiana* (AVE, 1990). Also *Desmodium heterocarpon* (L.) DC., Leguminosae, is used in hunting. The plant is called *taro*, 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 Mentawais. The *kerey*'s three *gaut* plants are : At the top a specimen of the fragrant Mandarigan, *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 *laiga leleu*, *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 *kirip*, *Diospyros buxifolia* 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 which he will proudly wear the whole day until he goes sleeping. That brach 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 honourably 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 : Closset to the skull is a leaf of *Mussaenda erythrophylla* Schumm. & Thonn., Rubiaceae. The vernacular name is *mumunen*. *Umun* means to praise. The *bajou* of *mumunen* 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*, *taipitpitena* 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 *soga* (something unsharp, an older specimen is sharper), *Microsorium nigrescens*, Polypodiaceae. 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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Figure 1. Selecting "gaut" plants



Figure 2. Blessing baby with leaves : *Gaptophyllum pictum*, *Ocimum sanctum*, and *Ocimum tenuiflorum*



Figure 3. "Sabo" dance as performed in healing ritual", pabetei with bells "pasisoga simagere", calling the soul



Figure 4. Shaman with *Gleichenia linearis*



Figure 5. Shaman with bouquet of plants



Figure 6. Monkey with shaman



Figure 7. Monkey skull