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Some esoteric home remedies practiced in Narayanganj district, Bangladesh

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Abstract

In the possible perpetual quest of human beings for treatment and cure of various diseases, the esoteric or a mixture of the paranormal and the supernatural has always played an important role. Since our human ancestors did not have any knowledge of microbes and other causative factors behind occurrence of diseases, their beliefs in the treatment of sickness centered on propitiating angry gods or evil spirits or demons, which they regarded as the causes for sickness. As a result some of the treatment methods, which persist even in the modern age, borders on the esoteric or are esoteric. The objective of this study was to document some esoteric home remedies used in Narayanganj city of Narayanganj district, Bangladesh. While the actual scientific values of these sorts of treatments are dubious, belief plays a large part in the cure of a patient (placebo effect), and so such treatments also need proper documentation.

Keywords: Esoteric home remedies, plants, Narayanganj, Bangladesh, cattle

Introduction

Mysticism and the supernatural have always played a part in the therapeutic practices of human beings, possibly since their very advent. For instance, even in the modern age, the traditional medicinal practitioners of the Yoruba people in Nigeria include spiritual therapists and occult practitioners^[1]. The traditional medicinal practitioners or shamans of northern Peruvian Andes are thought to communicate with the world of spiritual forces to know about plants that can heal or are psychotropic or are poisonous; in other words, an esoteric element is a part of the healing methods of the shamans^[2]. In India, various esoteric healers include the samans, ojas, tantrics, and faith healers^[3]. The Rai Kshatriya tribe of Pabna district in Bangladesh uses a mixture of incantations, medicinal plants, and formulations for treatment^[4]. Irrespective of whether esoteric medicinal practices have scientific validity or merely serve a placebo effect, it is important to document these practices for two reasons. First, it gives an idea of development of medical thoughts in a particular tribe or region. Second, a number of these practices use plants albeit in an unusual manner, but which still can be a pointer to scientists about the curative properties of a given plant. We had been collecting traditional phytotherapeutic information (including esoteric forms of treatment) for over ten years from mainstream folk medicinal practitioners (FMPs) and tribal medicinal practitioners (TMPs) as our primary informants but also collecting information on home remedies^[5-22]. The objective of the present study was to document some esoteric home remedies of Narayanganj district, Bangladesh.

Materials and Methods

Information was collected from Rasheda (female, aged around 50 years, did not want to disclose full name or house address). Informed Consent was obtained from her to publish or disseminate the obtained information. Interviews were conducted in Bengali, a language spoken both by her and the interviewers. Plant names in Bengali were obtained from her. Since these were common plants (but with some esoteric uses), the plants were easily identified by the authors on the basis of their Bengali names. However, in case of doubt, the informant took the authors to spots from where she usually collected the plants. The plants were photographed, and voucher specimens collected, dried and identified by a competent botanist. Plant specimens were deposited with the Medicinal Plant Collection Wing of the University of Development Alternative. Animal species were easily identified because they were common.

Results and Discussion

The various unusual home remedies are shown in Table 1. Altogether, six plants, one fish and one animal species were used in the various remedies. A plant-animal combination used in an unusual manner was treatment of abscess with a paste of roots of *Amaranthus spinosus*, bulbs of *Allium cepa* and teeth from a cow, dead or slaughtered at least a year ago. The use of teeth of a cow, by itself is unusual; as to why the teeth should be from a cow dead at least a year ago, makes no sense to the rational mind. The only plausible cause might be that the bones, even when grinded to a powder, may have enough abrasive power perhaps to open up the mouth of the abscess and so release the pus. On the other hand, the use of teeth, particularly one year old, may have had some ancient religious or spiritual significance, the memory of which being lost with the passage of time. The Sukuma tribe of Busega district in north-western Tanzania use animal tooth for curing ailments [23]. The indigenous people of Metema Woreda, North-western Ethiopia tie crocodile teeth to the body to cure epilepsy [24]. So the practice of using animal tooth for curing diseases is known among people of other parts of the world. Tribals of Kerala, India, use roots of *Amaranthus spinosus* to treat abscess [25]. *Allium cepa* (onion) juice can have both analgesic and anti-inflammatory effects and so can be useful

in treating abscess [26].

In Nepal, people are known to tie roots of *Mimosa pudica* to the neck to get relief from coughs and cold [27]. In the present study, it was seen that garland made from stems was worn over the head for jaundice and root tied to the body for night time fever. It is an open question as to how tying of plants or plant parts can cure a disorder. However, there is a belief in many cultures that at least certain medicinal plants can act on the “astral” body and so provide relief to the physical body [28]; it is possible that a similar notion (though unsaid) is working behind this method of treatment. Seizures can be due to a number of causes including infection, fever or epilepsy. Traditionally, frequent seizures had been thought of as being possessed by “evil wind” meaning “evil spirits”. The use of *Mimosa pudica* roots along with *Curcuma longa* rhizomes and human hair, the whole thing being put in a bag and tied to the diseased person to get rid of “evil wind” is another example of esoteric element in traditional medicinal practices. Incidentally, “evil wind” is believed in many parts of the world since ancient times. The Mayan culture believed in “evil winds” and their shamans practiced elaborate rituals to get rid of the wind [29]; which practice continues till of now. In the Mayan culture also, the “evil wind” was thought to be responsible for sicknesses and other ill effects.

Table 1: Some esoteric home remedies practiced in Narayanganj district, Bangladesh

Serial Number	Scientific Name	Family Name	Local Name	Parts used	Ailments and mode of medicinal use
A. Plants					
1	<i>Amaranthus spinosus</i> L.	Amaranthaceae	Kada huira	Root	See <i>Bos taurus indicus</i> .
2	<i>Mimosa pudica</i> L.	Fabaceae	Lojjaboti	Stem, root	Jaundice. Garland made from stems of the plant is worn over the head. Night time fever. About one inch length root of the plant is dug up on a Saturday or Tuesday and tied to the body with a thread. “Evil wind” following an operation (manifested by seizures). Roots are added to rhizome of <i>Curcuma longa</i> and human hair and put into a polythene bag, which is tied to bangles (in case of women) or any part of the body (in case of men).
3	<i>Allium cepa</i> L.	Liliaceae	Peyaj	Bulb	See <i>Bos taurus indicus</i> .
4	<i>Cynodon dactylon</i> (L.) Pers.	Poaceae	Durba ghash	Root	See <i>Zizyphus mauritiana</i> .
5	<i>Zizyphus mauritiana</i> Lam.	Rhamnaceae	Boroi	Root	Night time fever, intermittent fever. The roots from the north side of a <i>Zizyphus mauritiana</i> tree and root from the north side of <i>Cynodon dactylon</i> , which may be growing around or near the <i>Zizyphus mauritiana</i> tree is put in a polythene bag. The bag is tied to the left hand for 7 consecutive days.
6	<i>Curcuma longa</i> L.	Zingiberaceae	Holud	Rhizome	See <i>Mimosa pudica</i> .
B. Animals					
1	<i>Notopterus notopterus</i>	Notopteridae	Foli	Meat	Measles in children. Cooked fish is orally taken.
2	<i>Bos taurus indicus</i>	Bovidae	Goru	Teeth	Large abscess. Roots of <i>Amaranthus spinosus</i> and bulb of <i>Allium cepa</i> are crushed and made into a paste with a shil pata. Teeth from a cow (already slaughtered or dead at least a year ago) are dried thoroughly over a fire and powdered in a shil pata (flat slab of stone acting as the mortar and another stone acting as the pestle) and then mixed with the earlier prepared plant paste. The combined paste is topically applied around the base of the abscess, which causes it to burst and the pus comes out. Prevention from seasonal diseases. Teeth are hung outside the house on a tree or the house itself.

Another esoteric remedy was the use of roots of *Zizyphus mauritiana* and *Cynodon dactylon* to treat night time fever and intermittent fever. Not only were the roots collected from the north side of the plants, but they were put in a polythene bag and tied to the left hand. There does not seem to be any apparent reason for collecting roots from the north side. Also, it appears implausible for a plant or plant part to heal if it is put in a bag and then tied to the body.

Regarding use of the fish species, it remains to be scientifically evaluated whether consumption of *Notopterus notopterus* can actually cure measles. Also, it remains to be seen whether hanging the teeth of *Bos taurus indicus* (cow)

outside the house can really prevent seasonal diseases from occurring.

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