The Uses of Plants in Healing in an Afro-Cuban Religion, Santeria

Author(s): George Brandon


Published by: Sage Publications, Inc.

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2784497


Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
THE USES OF PLANTS IN HEALING IN AN AFRO-CUBAN RELIGION, SANTERIA

GEORGE BRANDON
City University of New York Medical School

Although plants have long been known to play an important medical and ritual role in the religious traditions of Africa, little attention has been devoted to examining the use of plants in the context of the various Afro-American religions. As one scholar has written: “Medicinal species, to a large extent, have been overlooked even though in some cases these plants represent some of the social and cultural traditions of the people who use them” (McClure, 1982). This is particularly evident in the case of Afro-Cuban Santeria, for despite the important role plants play in this religion, studies of their use in Santeria have been few.

The African origins of Santeria stem largely from the Yorubas of southwestern Nigeria but also include contributions from other neighboring West African peoples sharing similar or related beliefs and practices. In Cuba the Yorubas’ orisha worship practices fused with Spanish folk Catholic traditions of hagiolotry and gave rise to an early form of Santeria. The influence of the 19th century European Spiritist movement headed by Allan Kardec completed the ingredients making up present-day Santeria.

In Cuba the numerous Yoruba subgroups became known by the ethnic group name Lucumi, which originally had only applied to Yorubas from the kingdom of Oyo. Lucumi is also the name for the dialect of Yoruba serving as Santeria’s liturgical tongue (Bascom, 1950; Olmsted, 1953). Ethnicity remained significant in the forma-

JOURNAL OF BLACK STUDIES, Vol. 22 No. 1, September 1991 55-76
tion of Santeria in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, when most adherents were Yorubas born in Africa or people who could trace Yoruba descent. They used the term Lucumi both to include and to distinguish among African-born Yorubas. The salience of Lucumi ethnicity has paled somewhat with time. With the end of Cuban slavery, no more Yorubas were being brought to Cuba. In the 20th century especially, it seems that more and more people who were neither Yoruba nor of Yoruba descent, including Whites, took up the religion. We will use the term Lucumi to distinguish Cubans of Yoruba descent from both African Yorubas and non-Yoruba-descended Cubans who are not adherents of Santeria, and also to refer to Santeria’s ritual language.

Santeria devotees came to the United States in increasing numbers after the 1959 Cuban revolution. They brought their religious practices with them and, after a period of cold storage, revived them on American soil. In the United States as well as in Cuba, there is a wide range of variation in Santeria belief and practice, but the determining influence on the form and content of Santeria’s ideology, pantheon, and rituals is still its African heritage. Yoruba traditions of divination, sacrifice, ceremonial spirit possession, and healing remain important in present-day Santeria, and the religion is practiced with great secrecy.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

William Bascom (1950) established the anthropological importance of plants for Santeria ritual in Cuba. Bascom also believed that herbs and the sacred stones by which the Santeria deities are represented were even more important as foci of religious concern among the Lucumi in Cuba than among their Yoruba contemporaries in Nigeria, among whom he had also done research. The major scholarly compendium of plant usage in Santeria is the last section of Lydia Cabrera’s (1971) El Monte. There she lists a number of plants used in both the Yoruba- and Congolese-derived religions of Cuba, give their Latin, Spanish vernacular, and Lucumi names, and
writes about their uses. Some of the most interesting material in this remarkable book appears in the herb list. I have relied upon it heavily in the present study but have had to update her nomenclature for plant species. Her research was done in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, but quite a few of the plants she lists are still being used. Roig y Mesa (1945) and Scoane (1962) cover Cuban medicinal and useful plants as well as folk remedies and superstitions, but neither focuses on Santeria specifically. Despite the provocative title of his article on Cuban Santeria, "Stones, Trees and Blood," Jorge Dauny (1982) actually devotes little attention to the use of plants.

Over the past 15 years, a number of popular, literary, and academic studies of Santeria in the United States have been published, but none focuses very sharply on plant use (Castellanos, 1976; Gleason, 1975; Gonzalez-Whippler, 1973; Murphy 1988. Sandoval (1977, 1979), however, does pay some attention to the therapeutic use of plants as an element in Santeria's healing system in Miami. In addition to these accounts, there is also literature created in the United States by santeros and santeras themselves. Some of this literature is commercially available in Hispanic religious stores, and other books authored by santeros have been privately printed and were originally intended only for use by devotees studying under a priest or priestess. Those that have proven most useful to me are Guzman (n.d.), Pastoriza (1972), and Rogers (1973). Although Santeria is usually transmitted orally and by apprenticeship, devotees, priests, and priestesses may keep notebooks as study aids; the author has had access to a number of these, as well.

The author conducted field research on Santeria mainly in New York City and in several locations in New Jersey from 1979 to 1981 and uses all the sources mentioned above to supplement field observations. Plant use was not the major focus of his fieldwork. The research was exploratory, because little was known then about Santeria in the United States, and the goal was to write a general history and ethnography of the religion (Brandon, 1983).
THE RELIGIOUS CONTEXT OF PLANT USE

The Lucumi term for plants, herbs, and weeds is egwe, derived from ewe, the Yoruba word for leaf or foliage. Egwes are thought to have the power to help human beings lead healthful and abundant lives. The divine suprasensible power that makes this possible is called ache, and a major emphasis in the utilization of plants is making use of their varied kinds of ache to heal disease and to promote happiness and well-being. It is ache that fortifies and protects health.

Not only are plants, weeds, and herbs alive with divine power, but they also have personality and temperament. Some are easily frightened and therefore withhold their powers by refusing to bloom. Others are retiring and shy. Others have brittle, explosive personalities and require the utmost in etiquette and respect before being picked. If not pampered, others will simply hide the next time you want to find them. The powers of plants fluctuate during the course of the day, and like people they rest at night but are enlivened by the morning, which is when they are at the peak of their vitality (Sandoval, 1977).

In the eyes of santeras, it is not cultivated but wild egwes that possess real powers for healing. Homegrown plants and domesticated plants grown on farms or in gardens lack ache (Sandoval, 1977). Even plants found growing in vacant lots near abandoned houses, or struggling up between pavement cracks in a city street are, ultimately, preferable to those bought in a store.

Aside from the folk medical uses of plants and herbs, to which we will turn in a moment, their major uses are in ritual. Although the two types of uses can be conceptually distinguished — there are herbs used by santera(o)s which have folk medical but not ritual use and vice versa — there is also a great amount of overlap, and the distinction between magico-religious and medical uses is not a rigid and absolute one. Virtually every aspect of this religion is multifunctional and may be mobilized in the treatment of physical and psychological ills. Those plants that do not help through some pharmacological efficacy are thought to help through the efficacy of their magical powers.
MEDICAL USES OF THE PLANTS

The kinds of medical problems treated with plants seem to fall into some fairly well-defined groups. Gastrointestinal and respiratory problems are a major focus, as are inflammations and a variety of skin eruptions. Treatment of syphilis and gonorrhea also falls within the santero’s folk medical realm, but the female reproductive system seems to be a special focus. Although medicinal plants have been used to manipulate the birth process by easing childbirth, promoting expulsion of the placenta, or inducing abortion, none of those listed in the appendix functions as a contraceptive. Nervous disorders, muscle pains, headaches, and fevers may all be treated with egwes several of which are said to be tranquilizers. At least one santero with whom I became acquainted has claimed cancer cures through Santeria, and in the plant list are a few plants claimed to affect tumors. A cluster of egwes are employed as blood purifiers and purgatives. This may well be a specific instance of a much more widely occurring phenomenon found in African, Black American, and Afro-Caribbean folk medicine, where the belief that the body has a normal tendency to accumulate an undefined filth that causes various illnesses leads to concerns about the relative “dirtiness” or purity of the blood (Dougherty, 1978; Dow, 1965; Dressler, 1982; Laguerre, 1981,1987; Snow, 1977, 1980; Weidman, 1978). Blood purifiers, laxatives, and purges are means through which the blood and the body can be cleansed and illness treated or prevented. It is also probable that, as Morton observed for Latin America, “purifying the blood” is sometimes a euphemism for treating syphilis (Morton, 1981).

RITUAL USES OF THE PLANTS

Plants play an important role in Santeria ritual, whether in communal ceremonies, the more private domain or healing rites, or individualistic practices of magic, witchcraft, and sorcery.
CEREMONIAL USES

Ozains and Omieros are the two main classes of plant concoctions used in ceremonies. The ceremonial function of ozains and omieros is to cleanse, refresh, and prepare individuals and objects for contact with the oricha or santos, the deities of Santeria (Bascom, 1972, p. 524).

The ozain is an herbal concoction that is also a spiritual being, the oricha Ozain, who is created through the process of manufacturing the plant mixture. (For a description of the deity Ozain and his iconography see Thompson, 1975.) “Making ozain” requires the presence of a number of priests including a master of ceremonies, the oriate, who knows the songs and prayers of the deities, particularly those of Ozain. It also requires and ozainista, a priest or priestess knowledgeable about the herbs, their prayers, personalities, and temperaments, and able to collect them from the wild. Just as the oricha Ozain has a number of herbs specifically associated with him, so do each of the other oricha have specific herbs associated with them, which are appropriate for making their respective ozains. The number of different herbs used for each oricha’s ozain reflects a more pervasive symbolism associating each of the oricha with a specific number.

Making the appropriate ozains takes up much of the early section of most initiation ceremonies. Each priest or priestess sits behind a pail and, after the oriate leads the group in the songs of Ozain, they proceed through the songs of the deities whose ozains will be made. As each deity is sung, the herbs for that deity are torn and crushed and the juices extracted and mixed. With these acts the santeras and santeros transfer some of their own aché to the mixture they are creating, amplifying it further. The more santeros who assist with the singing the better, the more aché is concentrated in the ozain, and the more powerful it is (Cabrera, 1971). Once the herbs have been prepared the container is filled with water and the making of that specific ozain has been completed. A part of each of the ozains may be set aside while the rest is used in washing the religious objects that will play a role in the succeeding parts of the ceremony. The used ozain is discarded and later cast out onto the ground.
Preparation of the ozain leads to the preparation of omiero. Omiero is the more powerful of the two mixtures. The ozain and omiero both cleanse, but the omiero also empowers. Unlike the ozain, which is discarded after use, omiero is a continuing power and remains so until the infusion is entirely used up. Omiero appears not only to gain power from the rite in which it is used but it also retains that power indefinitely. Preparing the omiero requires no additional ceremony. Those portions of the ozains which have been set aside are all combined in a single clean pail or basin and, altogether, they constitute the omiero.

The omiero washes and cleanses people as well as objects for contact with the santos. Santeros soak the bead necklaces that signify membership in the religion in omiero before presenting them to new devotees. A devotee’s head is prepared for ceremonial spirit possession by being washed with omiero, and the knives used in the sacrifice of four-legged animals must be washed in omiero if the sacrifice is to be properly accomplished and its goal attained (Bascom, 1972). There are omieros for each of the oricha also, but the most important omiero is the omiero de asiento, the omiero prepared for the initiation of a priest or priestess. The omiero de asiento is particularly prized because it contains the egwes of all the deities and because its aché is further amplified by being employed in a rite that is considered very powerful. Initiates into the priesthood bathe in this omiero and drink some each morning of their seclusion. It is said to fortify and rejuvenate them, making their faces and skin radiant.

After a ceremony, the omiero de asiento may be kept in bottles for months or years. Over the course of time, the santero will employ it in a variety of minor rites. Godchildren of a priest(ess) frequently request some omiero for their own use, and some omiero will be poured off for them to take home to bathe beads, jewelry, and other items. I have also seen omiero used in a quasi-medical fashion. I once was a woman use it to alleviate a pain in her leg by rubbing on omiero where it hurt. People with colds or lung congestion sometimes drink it. An object washed in omiero can be used by a santera to treat tremors or tics. The treatment consists of
placing the omiero-washed object against the troubled area. The omiero, then, appears phenomenologically as an herbal concoction; in actuality it is a continuing rite, a stored ceremony that can be put into effect at any time without additional ritual.

HEALING RITES

The most common use of plants in healing in Santeria is in ritual cleansings (*despojos*), including fumigation with cigar smoke, baths, and house cleansings, and in the *rogacion de cabeza*, a rite directed at the client's head.

1. Despojos. Common terms for cleansing ritual are *despojo* and *trabajo de limpieza* (a cleansing work). The verb form of *despojo*, which we can translate as cleansing or alleviation, *despojar*, also meant to rob or to strip. These connotations suggest the aim of the despojo (robbing malignant spirits of their power to harm) as well as its techniques (stripping away negative spiritual influences from a person by absorbing them into objects, water, or smoke.) Through despojos, priests and believers can deal, at least for a time, with the influences of the malignant spirits they see as the cause of a great deal of human suffering.

In fumigation the santera blows cigar smoke all over the body of a person, and the smoke lifts off the bad spiritual influences believed to be clinging to them. Santeros often prescribe herbal baths for the same purpose. The devotee obtains the prescribed plants and prepares the bath at home by tearing and crushing the plants, mixing their juices and leaves with scents, oils, or flower petals in a tub of cold water. Then they bath themselves, starting from the head, moving downward to the toes, while standing in the mixture. The baths must usually be repeated once a day over a number of days to achieve the desired effect.

Santeria devotees believe that houses are just as vulnerable to malign spiritual influences as human bodies are. Ill will directed at a house is even more destructive than that directed at a person, because malign magic will affect everyone who lives within. So santeros may also prescribe plant mixtures to alleviate problems
through scrubbing and cleansing the house. House cleansing mixtures often contain the same plant ingredients as baths, but these may also be supplemented with coloring agents such as bluing or white chalk and may be heated in copious amounts in a large pot. The mixture is then used to scrub the walls and floors.

Aside from these, other items santera(o)s use for cleansings include the stalks of various weeds and branches or sprigs of long-stalked flowers (such as gladiolus). The santera(o) shapes the stalks into a broom and then brushes them up and down the devotee's body, having them turn around in a circle as the santera(o) does this. In essence the santera sweeps the person's body, brushing away the bad, which is absorbed by the stalks which she breaks and throws away. This practice is particularly frequent among santeros who are more influenced by Espiritismo.

None of the cleansing techniques described here is usually applied alone. Rather they are frequently combined, piled up on top of each other, as if the repetition of a single technique could not lead to a sufficient intensity of effect. Instead the different techniques are combined and superimposed to create an accumulation of powers.

2. _Rogacion de Cabeza._ Rogacion de cabeza (rogation of the head) is at once a curing rite and a preparation for other rituals. When used on a person defined as sick, the rogation acts as part of a cure and is usually accompanied by other rites. As a preparation for a ritual, such as any of the initiation rites, the rogation strengthens the devotee's mental and spiritual faculties.

The core of the rite consists of placing the devotee before the santero's shrine, intoning a series of prayers in Lucumi, and dressing the devotee's head with one of a variety of plant or animal preparations which will have to be worn for at least 24 hours. Depression, mental confusion, witchcraft, high blood pressure, and violent temper are some of the problems treated in this way. The ingredients used correspond to the different categories of problems, in a way which I have not yet been able to determine.

The purpose of the rogation is to "cool" the head, to refresh it. For this reason, it is sometimes referred to as a refreshment ceremony, "a ceremony that refreshes the head," or as a cleansing. The
rogation is viewed as a means for balancing a head that has grown “hot” through confusion and problems and also as a means of strengthening and calming a head that is vulnerable because it will soon be undergoing changes brought about by ritual. The rogation, as both a medical and ritual treatment, aims at the promotion of health and balance rather than the cure of disease. For santero(a)s coolness and freshness of the head are optimal states of health.

MAGIC, WITCHCRAFT, AND SORCERY

Just as plants play a role in healing and communal worship, they are also important in individualistic practices of magic and witchcraft. Magic, medicine and the expulsion of witchcraft are all part of the santero’s work. Whether the intention is to bring good luck, to attain an important personal goal, or to heal or protect someone from the ravages of witchcraft, the santero’s concern usually focuses on the person’s body or on the house in which they live. A variety of plants are used to create amulets, called resguardos. Resguardos are worn on the body for protection against witchcraft in some cases and to bring good fortune in others.

Expelling witchcraft and protecting people against being victimized by it in the first place call up an elaborate array of plant uses. For example, abre camino (Trichilia havanensis) fights witchcraft by being taken into the body. It is administered as a purgative and by its action forces the witchcraft out, as if the witchcraft were a substance. Abre camino’s strong purgative action is also used as a folk therapy in problems unrelated to witchcraft. Curujey, an aboreal parasite which is dried and ground to a powder, dispels and dissects the evils sent by witches when it is sprinkled throughout the house or worn as an amulet. Petals of galan de dia (cestrum diurnum), spread throughout the house, clean it spiritually and expel witchcraft from the house by creating a happy environment in which witchcraft cannot abide. Rompe zaraguey fights witchcraft by being absorbed through the skin in a bath, and the boundaries of a house are secured against the work of witches by putting okras over a door, washing all the outside doors with guasima (guazuma...
ulmifolia), or planting bushes of *ruda* (ruta chalepensis) at the patio or near every door.

**DISCUSSION**

The differential contributions of African, Amerindian, and Spanish herbologies to this fund would be difficult indeed to determine, not only because of the long period of time and the multiple influences involved but also because, on the African end of this congeries, there has not been much research on the use of herbs in religion and folk medicine in Yoruba territories until fairly recently (Bascom, 1972; see also Ademuwagun, Ayoade, Harrison, & Warren, 1979, Ayensu, 1978; Buckley, 1985; Simpson, 1980).

McClure (1982) has suggested that some cultivated plants were brought by Africans to the New World during the slave trade. She describes the parallel use of three plants species found in Africa and the Caribbean as evidence, hypothesizing a rout from the Fulani, Hausa, and Mandingo peoples and Obeah religion in Ghana into the Caribbean, especially Jamaica. McClure mentions the use of seeds in fashioning jewelry, that is, using seeds as beads. The case she makes for *citrus aurantifolia* (limes), *abrus precatorius* (rosary pea or wild licorice), and *ricinus communis* (palma Christi or castor bean) could be extended possibly to some other flora as well. The widespread African custom of ornamenting the body with beads may have been one means of transport. As McClure observes, seeds were often used to make jewelry and body ornament, and they frequently served as beads in necklaces and bracelets for the wrists and ankles. McClure stresses the religious undertones of these bead/seed body ornaments. Sometimes these religious beads were the only protection slaves had during transport to the Americas. Thompson (1975) also demonstrates that beads, leaves, and the oricha Ozain were linked together in a tight symbolic complex which would have been important to Yorubas enslaved in Cuba and which has survived in many details among the Lucumi and among Santeria adherents into the present day.
Many, if not most of the plants, however, are native to the New World and would not have been known to enslaved Africans fresh off the ships until perhaps the later periods of the slave trade when some of the plants had been introduced into the tropics of the Old World, including Africa. The names of some plants pose interesting historical questions that need to be followed up in the future. A few species used do not seem to have Lucumi names. This is noteworthy but not nearly as noteworthy as the fact that almost all the plants, even those native to the New World, do have Lucumi names. It would be interesting to know the meaning of these names and whether or not these names were (or are) in use in Nigeria and what plants they refer to. Four sections of the shells of *cocos nucifera*, for example, are used as a divination tool in Santeria, and this simple system of divination is called *obi*, just as *cocos nucifera* is called *obi kola*. Among the Yoruba in Nigeria, however, *obi* refers to kola nuts (*cola acuminata* or *cola nitida*). There kola nuts, which had many religious and nonreligious uses, were separated also into four lobes and used as a divinatory apparatus (Bascom, 1972). At the same time as *cocos nucifera* replaced kola in divination among the Lucumi, its use became widespread throughout other aspects of the system of ritual. Interestingly enough, its Spanish vernacular name, *coquito africano* or "little African coco" refers to African-ness, thus endowing the plant with peculiar and distinctive ethnic associations.

Because so many of the plants are New World natives or were imported from non-African areas, the case cannot be made that the plants themselves are survivals of African tradition, even granting the cases suggested by McClure. However, the other extreme, expressed by some Nigerian traditional religious practitioners—that Africans enslaved in the Americas could not practice the traditional religion and lost it because they did not have the African herbs and plants—is belied by the fact that Santeria and kindred Afro-American religious systems continue to exist. Plants still play an important role in religion and healing in many of these religions, even if most of the plants are not the same ones that were used in Africa. In some cases this plant lore is not the exclusive preserve
of santeros but is part of a more general pool of folk medical knowledge shared with Hispanic curanderos and espiritistas, although the specific way in which a plant is used, within and outside of ritual, may be unique to Santeria in Cuba.

With the emigration of santeras from Cuba to the United States, the situation has become even more complex. An ongoing exchange and amalgamation of practices is taking place in the multiethnic cities where they have settled. In Miami, Puerto Ricans buy folk remedies from Cuban grocers; in New York, Cuban patients are treated by Puerto Rican curanderas and espiritistas as well as santeros; Puerto Rican patients go to Haitian folk healers; Black American folk healers may see West Indian patients; and Black Americans and Puerto Ricans become santeros (Brandon, 1983; Garrison, 1977; Harwood, 1977; Laguerre, 1984, 1987; Murphy, 1988).

Knowledge of the properties and uses of plants is as important to the santera as knowledge of rituals and songs, but use of this knowledge is hampered by the lack of many of the plants. Because of differences in ecology between Cuba and the northeastern United States, the ozainista is much more restricted in terms of what there is for him to find and pick. This situation obviously affects both religious ritual and folk medicine. For example, the traditional omiero de asiento was composed of 101 or 121 different egwes. In New York the number of plants used is much reduced. It is now said to have been cut down to only the most essential herbs of each of the deities.

In New York, both Cubans and Puerto Ricans operate botanicas, stores specializing in the sale of religious goods, such as candles, statues, and assorted herbs and plants (Borello & Mathias, 1977). The restricted number of areas within cities where herbs and plants grow wild has increased the dependence of santera(o)s on botanicas for supplies, although some herbs can still be found growing wild even in an “asphalt jungle” like Newark or New York City. Baths and preparations for house cleansing are available commercially at botanicas and at some large markets, but santeros discourage the use of these items. For them it is of the greatest importance that the
correct ingredients be used, particularly in baths, as the ingredients are related symbolically to the devotee's oricha or protector. If the wrong things are used, the intended cleansing can do more harm than good, hence the caution against commercial preparations as one is never entirely sure what they contain. Herbs and plants packaged for sale in large volume for a profit are among those least likely to have been found growing wild or to have been collected with the sympathy, knowledge, and care of the ozainista. In addition the number of true ozainistas cannot now be very large and could well decrease substantially after the current generation dies. Some santera(o)s keep a cache of herbs and leaves in their homes for ready use. Others find a botanica they think they can trust and simply provide the believer with a list of what to buy and where to buy it.

Just as the image of the wild forest of the African past has yielded to the botanica in the urban American present, so may some of the religious and botanical knowledge of the ozainista become the data of the ethnobotanist and the ethnopharmacologist, and the African and Afro-Cuban folk remedies of the past and present become part of a broader and more widely available cosmopolitan medicine of the future. Folk medical knowledge has served as a mode of screening potentially useful plants, which is certainly superior to random experimentation (Spjut & Perdue, 1976). If future scientific examination of the pharmacological, psychological, or symbolic efficacy of the plants used in Santeria should turn up something useful to the physician, the psychotherapist, or the druggist, it certainly would not be the first time something like this has occurred (Efron, 1967; Farnsworth, 1973; Schultes, 1972; Swain, 1972).

APPENDIX

Some Plants Used in Santeria in Cuba and in the United States

The following list of plants and plant uses in Santeria derives from the several sources mentioned in the body of this article. Some
of the material appeared previously in Brandon (1983). Other listings come mainly from Cabrera (1971), Rogers (1973), Pastoriza (1972), Guzman (n.d.), and Sandoval (1977); assistance with plant names in Spanish from Malaret (1965); English language identifications from Gerth van Wijik (1971), Ayensu (1981), and Lewis and Elvin-Lewis (1977); and both names and origins from Morton (1981), Plowder (1968), and Willis (1966). Not all the herbs and plants listed appear in all the sources. Cabrera’s list is the longest, the most comprehensive, and the most informative, but it is not current and I have had to bring her plant names into line with contemporary botanical nomenclature.

The structure of the individual listings is as follows: The plants are divided into three groups: medical use only, medical and ritual use, and ritual use only, according to the information known about them. Within each listing the scientific name appears first, followed by the common English name for the plant (Eng.). The Lucumi name (Luc.) appears next in bold face, followed by a description of the way in which the plant is used. Finally, enclosed in brackets is any available information concerning the origin or nativity and distribution of the plant in question.

GROUP 1: MEDICAL USE ONLY

Annona squamosa L./Annonaceae; Eng./custard apple; Luc./irabiri. Bark and roots used for acidosis, cystitus, and bladder problems (Cabrera, 1971; Guzman, n.d.). [Believed native to tropical America; also cultivated in Old World tropics.]

Antigonon leptopus Hook. & Arn./Polygonaceae; Eng./beetle nut plant; Luc./chauko. Used to neutralize the effects of alcohol intoxication (Cabrera, 1971). [Native to Mexico; introduced into cultivation in most warm regions of the world.]

Citrullus lanatus Matsum. & Nakai/Cucurbitaceae; Eng./watermelon; Luc./agebeye. To refresh tired and irritated eyes (Sandoval, 1977). [Native to Africa]

Indigofera suffruticosa L./Fabaceae; Eng./indigo plant; Luc./yiniya, ewe ni. Used to treat epilepsy and gonorrhea; said to
destroy tumors before they form (Cabrera, 1971). [Native to the West Indies; introduced into Old World tropics.]

Origanum marjorana L./Lamiaceae; Eng./marjoram; Luc./? A tea made from the leaves of this plant is said to be food for people suffering from hysteria (Sandoval, 1977). [Native to North Africa; cultivated and naturalized in Southern Europe.]

Pluchea odorata S. Moore/Asteraceae; Eng./golden rod; Luc./? A tea made from the leaves of this plant is said to be food for people suffering from hysteria (Sandoval, 1977).

Ricinus communis L./Euphorbiaceae; Eng./castor oil bean; Luc./? Used to treat headaches and diphtheria; a purgative; said to promote childbirth and to stimulate milk production (Cabrera, 1971). [Native to Africa; cultivated in most tropics worldwide.]

Tribulus cistoides L./Zygophyllaceae; Eng./turkey blossom; Luc./beri ogun. Said to encourage expulsion of the placenta (Cabrera, 1971, Pastoriza, 1972, Rogers, 1973). [Native to Cuba and the New World; occurs in West Africa.]

Waltheria indica L./Sterculiaceae; Eng./hibiscus; Luc./lanla, dede fun. The leaves are used in vaginal baths; the roots to purify the blood; cooked it is said to be refreshing (Cabrera, 1971). [Native to Old World tropics.]

GROUP 2: BOTH MEDICAL AND RITUAL USE

Adiantum tenerum L./Polypodiaceae; Eng./maidenhair fern; Luc./kotonlo, ewe ofi. Used in omieros and in rogations; the sap is used as a dentifrice and is supposed to remove tartar; a good treatment for catarrh and upsets of the intestines and liver (Cabrera, 1971). [New World native, West Indies, South America, Florida.]

Ambrosia cumanesis Hbk./Asteraceae; Eng./bitterweed; Luc./liniddi. Employed in lustral baths and despojos and as a treatment for contagious fevers, to combat rheumatism and to induce abortion (Cabrera, 1971). [West Indies, Central America, South America.]

Ficus aurea Nutt./Moraceae; Eng./fig tree; Luc./fiapabba, afoma, uendo. Devotees place offerings in this tree’s trunk because the orisha are believed to take up sanctuary there from time to time;
medicines prepared from it is used to treat hernia and reduce the size of swollen glands (Cabrera, 1971; Rogers, 1973). [Native to the New World and Cuba.]

Gossypium spp./Malvaceae; Eng./marvel of Peru; Luc./oru, oro. Contained in the omiero de asiento, used in purifying baths and healing rogations; also used to treat ear pain; the cooked seeds are said to fight bronchitis and asthma; the roots regulate menstruation; in a very concentrated form it is employed to induce abortion (Cabrera, 1971). [Native to the New World.]

Guazuma ulmifolia Lam./Sterculiaceae; Eng./bastard cedar; Luc./iggí boni. Said to be a defense against black magic which is capable of undoing any damage witches and sorcerers can create; the bark is cooked and used to refresh and purify the blood (Cabrera, 1971). [New World native; Mexico, Central America, West Indies.]

Hura crepitans L./Euphorbiaceae; Eng./sandbox tree; Luc./ewe gubba, arónica. Ritually cleanses a house from which a corpse has been removed; also employed as an emetic in conjunction with ricinus communis (Cabrera, 1971; Pastoriza, 1972, Rogers, 1973). [New World native from Costa Rica to Peru, also West Indies.]

Opuntia tuna L./Mill./Cactaceae; Eng./Indian fig; Luc./egun, weggun, ikikigun. A branch of this plant behind the door keeps your enemies away; inflammations may be treated with the leaves; a cure for asthma (Cabrera, 1971). [New World native cultivated in Cuba.]

Pouteria sapota L./Sapotaceae; Eng./sapodilla; Luc./emi. The seeds, along with guinea peppers and oil, are used for black magic, but cooked by themselves the seeds are recommended for treatment of colitis (Cabrera, 1971; Guzman, n.d.; Pastoriza, 1972; Rogers, 1973). [Tropical American native; cultivated in Old World tropics.]

Psidium guajaba L./Myrtaceae; Eng./guava; Luc./kenku. Used as an offering to the santos and frequently combined with other herbs to create lustral and medicinal baths (Cabrera, 1971; Guzman, n.d.). [Native to New World; Mexico, California, West Indies.]
Rhoeo discolor Hance./Commelinaceae; Eng./oyster plant; Luc./peregun, tupa, diela. A component in ozains and in omieros used to bathe the emblems and attributes of the oricha; used to treat asthma, catarrh, and other respiratory problems (Cabrera, 1971; Pastoriza, 1972; Rogers, 1973). [Native to New World; Mexico, Guatemala; cultivated in the West Indies.]

Rosmarinus officinalis L./Lamiaceae; Eng./rosemary; Luc./wew re, ewe pagwabima. Used in despojos; accompanied by a prayer to San Ramon, is supposed to ease the pain of childbirth; used to treat bronchitis, headaches, and rheumatism by massage (Cabrera, 1971). [Native to Mediterranean Europe and North Africa.]

Ruta chalepensis L./Rutaceae; Eng./herb of grace; Luc./atopa kun. A powerful tool in the practice of witchcraft and a shield against it; used to treat hearing problems and as a remedy for mal de madre (morning sickness) (Cabrera, 1971). [Native to Mediterranean.]

Simlax havanensis L./Smilacaceae; Eng./sarsaparilla; Luc./atewe edin, ateke din. Eases the way for ritual power to become effective; a liquid made by scalding the roots is said to purify the blood, calm the nerves, cure syphilis and rheumatism, and alleviate wheezing (Cabrera, 1971). [New World native; Florida, West Indies.]

Tillandsia curata L./Bromeliaceae; Eng./tree pine (also wild pine); Luc./? Used to make protective amulets; powdered it is said to absorb malign influences safely; the powder also is supposed to clean the blood and to purify and fortify the whole body (Cabrera, 1971). [New World native; Dutch Antilles.]

Trichilia havanensis L./Meliaceae; Spanish/abre camino or siguralla; Luc./atori. A very strong purgative; also administered to fight the effects of witchcraft on its victims through purging them (Cabrera, 1971; Guzman n.d.). [New World native, Southern Mexico.]

Zebrina pendula Schnizl./Commelinaceae; Eng./wandering Jew; Luc./ani. Used in an omiero; a tea made from the leaves is supposed to flush gravel out of the kidneys and bladder, break the crisis of colitis, and provoke menstruation (Cabrera, 1971). [New World native; from Mexico to Panama.]
GROUP 3: RITUAL USE ONLY

Abras precatorius L./Fabaceae; Eng./peony; Luc./ewereyey, cupa. The leaves are good and are used in the omiero de asiento, but the seeds are very dangerous and are only used in bad works, i.e., witchcraft or sorcery (Cabrera, 1971; Rogers, 1973). [Native to India; introduced into West Indies and Florida.]

Cocos nucifera L./Arecaaceae; Eng./coconut; Luc./obi kola. A major ingredient in materials used for the initiation rituals of the Santeria priesthood, used also in divination and in rogations (Cabrera, 1971). [Unknown origin, possibly Melanesia but ancient spread to Old World tropics; now in tropical lowlands just about everywhere.]

Coleus Blumei L./Lamiaceae; Eng./coleus; Luc./ochare. Used to wash the stones and attributes of a santo (Cabrera, 1971). [New World native; West Indies and elsewhere.]

Eleusine indica L./Gaertn./Poaceae; Eng./crabgrass; Luc./ewe eran, dede, araogu. Hung in the four corners of the house it serves to disorient the police; also used in black magic by witches and sorcerers (Cabrera, 1971; Pastoriza, 1972; Rogers, 1973). [Old World native introduced to New World.]

Eupatorium odoratum L./Asteraceae; Eng./eupatorium; Luc./tabate. Used in despojos, purifying baths, and as a defense against witchcraft; believers may protect their houses against witchcraft by erecting a cross made of this plant at their doorway and drawing another cross below it (Cabrera, 1971). [Native to New World where it is widespread; introduced into Old World tropics.]

Osmunda regalis L./Osmundaceae; Eng./bog onion; Luc./imoshun, imo, iti ibu. Washing the eyes with this herb is thought to promote clairvoyance (Cabrera, 1971; Pastoriza, 1972; Rogers, 1973). [Native to the New World.]

Spondias purpurea L./Anacardiaceae; Eng./hog plum; Luc./iggi yeye, rewo, erokyasi. Used in a sacrifice to one of the santos on behalf of someone who is sick (Cabrera, 1971; Pastoriza, 1972; Rogers, 1973). [Native to New World; Mexico and Central America.]
NOTES

1. Santeria means worship of the saints, and devotees use the Spanish term santo and the Lucumi term oricha interchangeably. Priests and priestesses are called santeros and santeras.

2. The situation is somewhat different in Florida which is closer, both geographically and in terms of its flora, to the Caribbean than to the northeastern United States. An illustration of this is an incident Julia Morton (1981, p. 657) recounts in which a resident of Coral Gables, Florida, was approached by a Cuban woman who requested leaves from his star apple tree because her mother was ill with cancer. In this case the woman was able to find the proper native remedy in her new-found homeland. Nonetheless throughout the United States today, Latino residents are ingesting decoctions of plants brought into the country by themselves, their friends, or relatives (Morton, 1981, p. xiv).

REFERENCES


Weidman, H. (1978). *Miami health ecology project report: A statement on ethnicity and health*. (Available from University of Miami School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry)


*George Brandon is the Program Director of Sociomedical Sciences at the Sophie Davis School of Biomedical Education, City College, City University of New York.*