

Ethnobotany of a traditional ablution in Pará, Brazil

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RESUMO — O tradicional "banho de São João" de Belém, Pará, Brasil, é pouco conhecido e divulgado a nível etnobotânico. São apresentados a identificação botânica e os nomes populares das espécies vegetais que entram na sua composição, além de informações adicionais.

The twenty-fourth of June is the festive commemoration of St. John in Belém, Brazil. On the eve of this event, homage is paid to the saint by both rural and urban folks who light bonfires and savor the taste of the typical dishes reserved for this month of festivals.

There is also a tradition, well-entrenched among the devotees of St. John in Belém, of anointing the body with a preparation of aromatic herbs from the region. This is the famous "Banho de São João" which is taken preferentially at midnight on the 23rd or in the morning of the 24th of June. It is believed by practitioners that this special bath serves to clean both the body and the spirit of any malediction and to ward against the evil-eye while also fostering happiness, prosperity, good business, riches, and good luck of all sorts.

The bath is prepared on the previous day, made from a large and variable quantity of herbs in a basin of water left in the sunlight. Belief in the efficiency of the ablution is such that the devotee often insists that his whole family take part in

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the ritual, in order that the blessing be spread to these people. Without doubt, in Belém, this is a widespread and cherished custom, in which all levels of society participate.

In order to prepare the infusion, bark and roots are pulverized and herbs are grated before being added to the water which is left to stand. The perfume which is released fills the surroundings with a penetrating and strong scent. After the bath is taken, the perfume lingers for some hours, until it fades away, signifying that the body and spirit have been cleansed by St. John.

The literature on this subject is more related to an anthropological point of view and directed towards Afro-Brazilian ritual baths, as in Figueiredo (1983). Thus, it is difficult to find commentaries and the botanical identity of the component species of this traditional bath which is representative of the many folkloric baths used in the Amazon. Below, we have listed virtually all of the species used in the bath. There have long been variations in the number and quality of plants used in the bath, according to the tradition of each family and the available species, most of which are transported from remote areas of Amazonia especially for this celebration. The herbs are sold in the open markets, especially the famous Ver-o-Peso market (Berg, 1984) and by travelling vendors in the streets. A high percentage of species (ca. 95%) are very aromatic, but some species with unattractive odors are used because people attribute to them beneficial effects, such as enhanced wealth, love, and health, for the rest of the year.

SPECIES EMPLOYED IN THE ST. JOHN'S BATH :

- Alecrim — *Rosmarinus officinalis* L. (Labiatae). The very aromatic leaves are used.
- Alecrim-de-Angola — *Vitex agnus-castus* L. (Verbenaceae).
Aromatic leaves.
- Arataciú — *Sagotia racemosa* (Baill.) M. Arg. (Euphorbiaceae).
The bark is used.

- Arruda — *Ruta graveolens* L. (Rutaceae). The leaves have a distinct smell, and are believed to protect people from the evil-eye and unlucky astral influences.
- Beliscão — *Bacopa* cf. *axillaris* (Benth.) Standl. (Scrophulariaceae).
- Breu — *Protium heptaphyllum* (Aubl.) March. (Burseraceae). The bark has a very distinct sour-sweet smell.
- Caá-xió — *Criptomaria guianensis* Meiss (Lauraceae). Pieces of aromatic wood are used.
- Canela-da-Índia — *Cinnamomum zeylanicum* Breyn. (Lauraceae). The sweet smelling leaves and bark are essential components of the bath.
- Capelinha-de-São João — *Lycopodium cernuum* L. (Lycopodiaceae).
- Capim-de-cheiro — *Cymbopogon nardus* (L.) Rendle (Gramineae). This is the famous "nard grass", mostly known among older people. Current use is much reduced.
- Capim-de-cheiro — *Kyllinga odorata* Vahl (Cyperaceae). The smell resembles a mixture of vetiver and lemon. Current use is much reduced.
- Capim-santo — *Cymbopogon citratus* (DC.) Stapf. (Gramineae). Also called "lemon grass", this has a delicious-smelling essential oil.
- Capitiú — *Siparuna guianensis* Aubl. (Monimiaceae). A "magical" plant supposed to protect against evil influences.
- Carrapatinho — *Peperomia circinnata* Link. (Piperaceae). Not odorous. It is used for its attractiveness.
- Casca-preciosa — *Aniba canelilla* (H.B.K.) Mez (Lauraceae). Scented bark resembles cinnamon.
- Catinga-de-mulata — (Labiatae). Much used, but very difficult to identify. (There are other species

identified as *Leucas* and *Tanacetum* with this Portuguese name. We are trying to elucidate the question now.)

- Cedro — *Cedrella odorata* L. (Meliaceae). Wood with a very fine smell.
- Chama — *Mentha rotundifolia* (L.) Huds. (Labiatae). Very odorous and highly appreciated as an "attractant".
- Chama-cabeluda — *Wedelia paludosa* DC. (Compositae).
- Cipó-catinga — *Mikania amara* Willd. (Compositae).
- Cipó-curimbó — *Tanaecium nocturnum* (B. Rodrig.) B. et K. Schum. (Bignoniaceae). The strong smell of this vine is like bitter almonds.
- Cipó-pucá — *Cissus sicyoides* L. (Ampelidaceae). Not very commonly used in the bath.
- Cipó-uíra — *Guatteria scandens* Ducke (Annonaceae).
- Coré-mirá or Coré-mirim — *Croton matourensis* Aubl. (Euphorbiaceae).
- Cumarú — *Dipterix odorata* (Aubl.) Willd. (Leguminosae-Papilionoideae). One to three seeds used in the bath.
- Estoraque — *Pluchea quitoc* DC. (Compositae).
- Japana-branca e Japana-roxa — *Eupatorium triplinerve* Vahl. (Compositae). One of the indispensable components of the bath. (Obs.: the number of species that compose the bath is variable, according the supply and prices, but there are determined species which can not be omitted).
- Laço-de-amor — *Episcia cupreata* (Hook.) Hanst. (Gesneriaceae). Only mentioned by old people.
- Macacaporanga — *Aniba fragrans* Ducke (Lauraceae). The aromatic bark is used.

- Malvarosa — *Pelargonium graveolens* L'Herit (Geraniaceae).
- Manjeriçã — *Ocimum minimum* L. (Labiatae). Another essential ingredient of the bath.
- Manjerona-de-Angola — *Majorana hortensis* L. (Labiatae). Small leaves with a fragrance like that of mint, rose and lemon.
- Mão-de-onça — *Maranta noctiflora* Reg. et Koern. (Marantaceae). The roots are employed.
- Pataqueira — *Conoclea scoparioides* Benth. (Scrophulariaceae). Essential.
- Patichulim — *Vetiveria zizanioides* Nash. (Gramineae). In Pará, this common name of *Pogostemon* applies also to this species (see van den Berg, 1984).
- Pau-de-Angola — *Spirostachis africanus* Sond. (Euphorbiaceae). The powder of this fine smelling wood was used in the past.
- Pau-de-Angola — *Piper latifolium* (C.DC.) Yuncker (Piperaceae). The aerial parts of plant are used.
- Pau-rosa — *Aniba rosaeodora* Ducke (Lauraceae). The wood possesses a delicious odour of roses.
- Pega-rapaz — *Pilea nummularifolia* Wedd. (Urticaceae). Only women use this species.
- Pluma — *Tanacetum suaveolens* H.B.K. (Compositae).
- Pripioca — *Cyperus odoratus* Rott. (Cyperaceae). Root containing an essential oil.
- Trevo-cumari — *Stethoma pectoralis* (Jacq.) Raf. (Acanthaceae).
- Trevo-de-S. João — *Melampodium camphoratum* L. (Compositae).
- Umiribuiuçu — *Humiria balsamifera* Aubl. (Humiriaceae). From the bark is distilled a balsamic liquor with the smell of benzoin.
- Uriza — *Pogostemon heyneanus* Benth. (Labiatae). The true "patchouli".

Vergamota or Bergamota — *Mentha aquatica* L. (Labiatae).
Vindicá — *Alpinia nutans* Rosc. (Zingiberaceae). One of the
essential species that make up the bath.

OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

From year to year, the number of plant species included in the folkloric baths has been decreasing. Presumably, the most important reasons for this are: 1) the loss of purchasing power of the populace due to inflationary increases in the price of these herbs, 2) the loss of knowledge about these herbs, and 3) the lack of the proper herbs in the market. A complete bath used to contain from 25 to 30 species, but in the last two years vendors offer baths with only ten to fifteen ingredients (plant species). For a discussion of this problem, the reader is referred to van den Berg (1985).

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ABSTRACT

The plant species are listed that are used in a perfumed bath, a tradition in the State of Pará, Brazil, on the Eve of St. John.

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