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Research Article – Traditional Practice

Identification of Medicinal Plants in Homam: a religious practice

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Abstract

In India, Homam is an important religious practice. The consecrated fire is the central element of the ritual homa. It is offered in many hindu temples in early morning before dawn. Apart from the temples, many hindus offer this practice during their home ceremonies also. The most beneficial factor of these homas, is that smoke not only purifies the atmosphere but also helps us to get rid of many diseases. In this paper, the local and scientific name, plant parts used in the Homam were identified and presented. Different plant parts like leaf, aerial root, fruit, seed, bark, root, flower, wood, tuber, rhizome and pericarp of fruits have been used in the practice. Some highly useful medicinal plants listed are *Justicia adhatoda*, *Withania somnifera*, *Phyllanthus emblica*, *Tinospora cordifolia*, *Andrographis paniculata*, *Strychnos nux-vomica*, *Pongamia pinnata*, *Ficus benghalensis*, *Chrysopogon zizanioides* and *Curcuma aromatica*.

Key words: Homam, medicinal plants, *Tinospora cordifolia*, festivals, religious.

Introduction

Hindus constitute over 80% population in India. A precise definition of Hinduism is hard to formulate since the beliefs and practices of Hindus vary widely both regionally and within a given region from class to class. During earlier times Hindus worshipped nature. They worshipped fire, snakes and trees. Even though these practices are still in India, anyone can see people worshipping different gods like Siva (The destroyer), Vishnu (The preserver), Ganesh (Son of Siva), Durga (The fiercer) and Lakshmi (Goddess of wealth) predominantly throughout the country**.**

The people of India have connected their god with nature. Even in Puranas (the Sacred legend of Hinduism), Lord Siva is visualized as sitting under a banyan tree (Alamaram in Tamil) and expounding eternal truths to four disciples. Lord Vishnu or Tirumal is pictured as an innocent baby, nestling on the leaf of a banyan tree, floating on water. These gods are also called Alamar Kadavul (Subramania Pillai, 1948)**.** Traditional knowledge of people of Tamilnadu explores their scientific approach in many practices. For example, people in many villages play pouring turmeric powder mixed in water each other. The turmeric is scientifically known as *Curcuma longa* and the plant has a range of medicinal uses including its disinfectant nature. In Vishnu temples, a holy water presoaked with the leaves of Holy Basil, *Ocimum basilicum* called Thulasi Theertham in Tamil is distributed to devotees. In villages, a thread wet with turmeric slurry is tied around people's wrist on the start of their temple festival ("Kovil Kodai" or "Kovil Pongal" in Tamil) which is celebrated for about ten days. During the festival, the people are restricted to go out of the village/town and they should not stay in any other village/town. This is probably due to minimize the chance of spreading any communicable diseases. The traditional knowledge of using medicinal plants for different ailments explored the botanical identity, biological activity and the separation and characterization of principal or bioactive compounds (Ljubuncic et al. 2005; Ayyanar and Ignacimuthu, 2005; Koduru *et al.*, 2007).

Homam is a Sanskrit word that means any ritual, offering things into a consecrated fire in the primary action. In India, homam is an important religious practice. The consecrated fire is the central element of the ritual homa. It is offered in every Hindu temple and many houses during ceremonies, mostly between 4.30 and 6.00 a.m. The time is believed to be Brahma Muhoortham by the Hindus and seems to be ideal for doing good things. Scientifically, the temperature is very low at the time, atmosphere is less polluted and especially due to the relative humidity, the smoke arising from the Homam can stay for more

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time in the atmosphere. There are different types of Homam offered by Hindu people such as, Ayushya Homam (for longevity), Lakshmi Homam (for wealth), Navagraha Homam (to relieve from the ill impacts of planets) and Ganesh Homam (for happy and prosperous life). There are many different things offered in Homam by the people. Many people are aware of using the dried stems of *Mangifera indica* (Mango tree) known as Samikthu in Sanskrit or Mankuchi in Tamil, but unaware of other plant parts used by the priests. The common scene in many festivals is the large gathering of people. So the present study was carried out to identify and document the plant parts that are used in Homam.

Materials and Methods

Identification of medicinal plants and collection of traditional uses

The priests or Burohidhars known as the persons who perform the homam and chanting were interviewed in Tuticorin, Tamilnadu during June 2006 to December 2006 by frequent trips. The knowledge of priests in offering plant parts and the reason for performing homam were also collected. However, our aim was predominantly to find out the plants parts used during the practice. We also made informal interviews with the devotees participating during the ceremonies for their knowledge about the plant parts used in the practice.

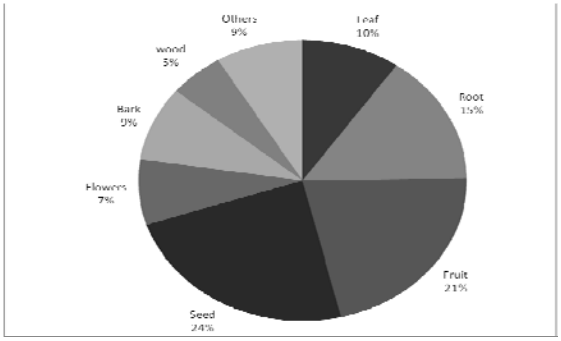
Results

From the study, the religious reasons for performing the practice, the descriptions and explanations about the practice on religious side are omitted and only the scientific outcome are presented here.

In homam, there are 108 plant parts representing 103 species used in dried form. However, due to the availability of specimen (not entire plant) in the form of root, leaf, aerial root, seed etc., we could identify only 92 species. These plants come under a total number of 55 families. There are 7 genus that belongs to Graminae, followed by Zingiberaceae and Caesalpiniaceae each representing 4 genus. The plant parts like leaf, aerial root, roots, fruit, seed, bark, root, flower, wood, tuber, rhizome, mucilage gum and epicarp of fruit were used. *Parmelia* sp., locally called as 'Kalpasi' was the only lower plant (Lichen) used in the practice. The botanical name of plants followed by local name, family and used parts are documented in Table 1. In the case of different plant parts identified in the Homam, the seed (24 %) and

fruits (24 %) of differentplants are used mostly followed by root (15 %), leaf (10 %) and bark (9%) and others (Figure 1). Since many of the plants are aromatic the volatile compounds may spread in the atmosphere and help the people to relieve their health problems.

Figure 1. Percentage of different plant parts used in Homam



In the practice, some well known and highly medicinal valued plants like *Justicia adhatoda, Withania somnifera, Phyllanthus emblica, Tinospora cordifolia, Andrographis paniculata, Strychnos nux-vomica, Pongamia pinnata, Ficus benghalensis, Chrysopogon zizanioides* and *Curcuma aromatica* are used. The seeds of wild and cultivated *Lawsonia inermis* are used. *T. cordifolia* is used in large amount in Ayushya Homam.

Discussion

The people gathering at a large mass of thousands in temple festivals are a common scene throughout India. The study conducted by us is the first type of this and we could notice that people almost not aware of the plants used in the practice.

The priests explained that smoke of *T. cordifolia* keeps any poisonous insects away from the home even for many days after the homam practice. The plant was reported to have many medicinal uses, especially for the bites of poisonous insects and venomous snakes (Kirtikar and Basu, 1991)**.** The chemopreventive potential of the plant has been reported (Singh et al., 2006)**.** Most of the plants identified in the practice are holding the property of treating many diseases and their medicinal properties are reported elsewhere (Kirtikar and Basu, 1991; Rastogi and Mehrotra, 1991).

The botanical identification of medicinal plants used in the practice can make the people aware of the plants used in the practice. The priests should always use only the pure plant parts for the perfect completion of the practice as the people participating in the ceremonies are mostly unaware of the things used in the religious practice.

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Table 1. List of medicinal plants and their parts used in Homam practice

Scientific Name	Local Name	Family	Part Used
Abutilon indicum	Thuthi	Malvaceae	Seed
Achyranthes aspera	Nayurivi	Amaranthaceae	Seed
Acorus calamus	Vasambu	Araceae	Root
Alangium salviifolium	Alinchi	Alangiaceae	Seed
Alpinia galanga	Sitharathai	Zingiberaceae	Rhizome
Anamirta cocculus	Kakkavalikai	Menispermaceae	Fruit
Andrographis paniculata	Nilavembu	Acanthaceae	Leaf
Aquilaria agallocha	Akil	Thymeliaceae	Wood
Artemisia pallens	Marikolunthu	Asteraceae	Leaf
Berberis aristata	Maramanchal	Berberidaceae	Wood
Bixa orellana	Sappira	Bixoceae	Seed
Caesalpinia bonduc	Kalarchikai	Caesalpiniaceae	Fruit
Calophyllum inophyllum	Pinnaikai	Guttiferae	Fruit
Calotropis gigantea	Erukku	Asclepiadaceae	Flower
Capparis spinosa	Maratti Mokku	Capparaceae	Fruit
Cassia auriculata	Aavarai	Caesalpiniaceae	Flower
Cassia tora	Thagarai	Caesalpiniaceae	Seed
Cedrus deodara	Thevadharu	Coniferae	Wood
Chrysopogon zizanioides	Vettiveru	Graminae	Root
Cinnamomum tamala	Thalisapathri	Lauraceae	Leaf
Cinnamomum verum	Lavangam	Lauraceae	Bark
Cissampelos pareira	Malaithangi	Menispermaceae	Root
Clerodendrum serratum	Sirutheku	Verbenaceae	Root
Costus speciosus	Koshtam	Scitaminaceae	Root
Curculigo orchioides	Nilapanai	Amaryllidaceae	Tuber
Curcuma aromatica	Kasthuri Manjal	Zingiberaceae	Wood
Curcuma zedoaria	Poolankilangu	Scitaminaceae	Tuber
Cyperus scariosus	Koraikilangu	Cyperaceae	Tuber
Dioscorea pentaphylla	Kodivalli	Dioscoreaceae	Root
Diospyros ebenum	Karungali	Ebenaceae	Bark
Dodonaea viscosa	Virali	Sapindaceae	Leaf
Elettaria cardamomum	Ealakkai	Zingiberaceae	Fruit
Eleusine coracana	Keppai	Graminae	Seed
Embelia ribes	Vai vilangam	Myrsinaceae	Seed
Enicostema axillare	Vellarugu	Gentianaceae	Root
Evolvulus alsinoides	Vishnugranthi	Convolvulaceae	Root
Ficus benghalensis	Aal	Urticaceae	Bark
Garcinia mangostana	Mangusthan	Guttiferae	Pericarp
Gymnema sylvestre	Siru Kurinja	Asclepiadaceae	Leaf
Hedyotis puberula	Siruveru	Rubiaceae	Whole plant
Helicteres isora	Valampurikai	Sterculiaceae	Fruit
Hemidesmus indicus	Nannari	Asclepiadaceae	Root
Hibiscus rosa-sinensis	Semparathai	Malvaceae	Flower
Hordeum vulgare	Barley	Graminae	Seed
Indigofera colutea	Naikadugu	Papilionoidae	Seed
Indigofera tinctoria	Avuri	Papilionoidae	Seed
Justicia adhatoda	Adathodai	Acanthaceae	Leaf
Lawsonia inermis	Maruthani	Lythraceae	Seed
Madhuca longifolia	Iluppai	Sapotaceae	Fruit
Mimusops elengi	Magilam	Sapotaceae	Flower
Mucuna pruriens	Poonaikali	Papilionoidae	Seed
Nelumbo nucifera	Senthamarai	Nymphaceae	Flower
Nigella sativa	Karunjeeraham	Ranunculaceae	Seed
Ocimum sanctum	Thulasi	Labiatae	Leaf
Orthosiphon sp.	Pulukapattai	Labiatae	Bark
Panicum sumatrense	Saamai	Graminae	Seed
Parmelia sp.	Kalpasi	Parmeliaceae	Whole plant
Paspalum scrobiculatum	Varagu	Graminae	Seed
Pennisetum americanum	Kambu	Graminae	Seed
Phoenix sylvestris	Perichai	Juncaceae	Fruit

Phyllanthus emblica	Nelli	Euphorbiaceae	Fruit/Bark/Wood
Plectranthus vetiveroids	Vialmichai	Lamiaceae	Root
Pongamia pinnata	Pungam	Fabaceae	Seed/Fruit
Punica granatum	Mathulai	Lythraceae	Pericarp
Quercus infectoria	Masikai	Fagaceae	Gall
Ricinus communis	Amanakku	Euphorbiaceae	Seed
Rosa cymosa	Rosa	Rosaceae	Flower
Sapindus emarginatus	Poonthikottai	Sapindaceae	Fruit
Saraca indica	Asoham	Caesalpiniaceae	Bark
Schrebera swietenioides	Mahalingam	Oleaceae	Bark
Semecarpus anacardium	Sengottai	Anacardiaceae	Fruit
Sinapis alba ssp. alba	Venkadugu	Cruciferae	Seed
Solanum surattense	Kandangathiri	Solanaceae	Fruit
Spermacoce hispida	Nathai Choori	Rubiaceae	Seed
Strychnos nux-vomica	Ettikai	Loganiaceae	Fruit
Strychnos potatorum	Thethangottai	Loganiaceae	Fruit
Syzygium aromaticum	Lavangapathri	Lauraceae	Leaf
Syzygium cumini	Naval	Lauraceae	Fruit
Telosma minor	Sammangi	Asclepiadaceae	Seed
Terminalia bellirica	Thandrikai	Combretaceae	Fruit
Terminalia chebula	Kadukkai	Combretaceae	Fruit/Flower
Tinospora cordifolia	Seenthil	Menispermaceae	Aerial root
Trachyspermum ammi	Omam	Umbelliferae	Seed
Trianthema portulacastrum	Saranai	Ficoidaceae	Root
Trichosanthes cucumerina	Peipudal	Cucurbitaceae	Root
Triticum vulgare	Gothumai	Graminae	Fruit
Valeriana jatamansi	Jadamanji	Valerianaceae	Root
Ventilago madraspatana	Vempadam	Rhamnaceae	Bark
Vitex negundo	Nochi	Verbenaceae	Leaf
Withania somnifera	Amukkura	Solanaceae	Root
Zingiber officinale	Sukku	Zingiberaceae	Rhizome
Ziziphus mauritiana	Elanthai	Rhamnaceae	Fruit

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