

Ethnobotanical Medicines for Treating Snakebites among the Indigenous Maya Populations of Belize

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Abstract : This paper brings light to ethnobotanical medicines used by the Maya of Belize to treat snake bites. The varying ecological zones of Belize boast over fifty species of snakes, nine of which are poisonous and dangerous to humans. Two distinct Maya groups occupy neighboring regions of Belize, the Q'eqchi' and the Mopan. With Western medical care often far from their villages, what traditional methods are used to treat poisonous snake bites? Based primarily on data gathered with native consultants during the authors' fieldwork with both groups, this paper details the ethnobotanical resources used by the Q'eqchi' and Mopan traditional healers. The Q'eqchi' and Mopan most commonly rely on traditional 'bush doctors' (ilmaj in Mopan), both male and female, and specialized 'snake doctors' to heal bites from venomous snakes. First, this paper presents each plant employed by healers for bites for the nine poisonous snakes in Belize along with the specific botanical recipes and methods of application for each remedy. Individual chemical and therapeutic qualities of some of those plants are investigated in an effort to explain their possible medicinal value for different toxins or the symptoms caused by those toxins. In addition, this paper explores mythological associations with certain snakes that inform local understanding regarding which plants are considered efficacious in each case, arguing that numerous oral traditions (recorded by the authors) help to link botanical medicines to episodes within their mythic traditions. Finally, the use of plants to counteract snakebites brought about through sorcery is discussed inasmuch as some snakes are seen as 'helpers' of sorcerers. Snake bites given under these circumstances can only be cured by those who know both the proper corresponding plant(s) and ritual prayer(s). This paper provides detailed documentation of traditional ethnomedicines and practices from the dying art of traditional Maya healers and argues for multi-faceted diagnostic techniques to determine toxin severity, the presence or absence of sorcery, and the appropriate botanical remedy.

Keywords : ethnobotany, Maya, medicine, snake bites

Conference Title : ICETM 2017 : International Conference on Ethnomedicine and Traditional Medicine

Conference Location : Amsterdam, Netherlands

Conference Dates : May 14-15, 2017