1973

A Sketch of Vincentian-Portuguese Folk Botany and Medicine

F. David Mulcahy

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/anthro_res_rpt12

Part of the Anthropology Commons

Retrieved from https://scholarworks.umass.edu/anthro_res_rpt12/15

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthropology Department Research Reports series at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Report 12: Winward Road: Contributions to the Anthropology of St. Vincent by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.
A SKETCH OF VINCENTIAN-PORTUGUESE FOLK BOTANY AND MEDICINE

F. David Mulcahy

Purpose

The field research for this paper was completed during an eight-week period during the summer of 1970. Although a considerable body of data concerning folk-botanical and medical knowledge was collected during this period, and several interesting hypotheses concerning the semantic and structural organization of these data were forthcoming, the limited time in the field did not permit a legitimate formal semantic and structural analysis of the subject. The following report is offered as a general and descriptive overview of an extremely fascinating and to date somewhat overlooked area of Caribbean culture.

St. Vincent, being a tropical island, is blessed with an extremely varied floral environment. The impact of this environment on the indigenous culture is extensive, most rural Vincentians being able to recognize and name many dozen plant species. Early in the course of investigation it became evident that plant life in the mind of the rural Vincentian was closely involved with and had direct impact on ideas related to health and bodily well-being. In addition to those of usual botanical and medical sophistication, Vincentians recognize the superior herbalistic knowledge of many of their compatriots. Many people, despite the availability of scientific medical services, continue to bring their "complaints" to the attention of such experts ("bush doctors") in the hope of finding remedy and relief in their travail.

Community and Language

The vast majority of the data for this report were gathered in the inland community of Villo Point, principally from informants of Portuguese descent. Cross-checking with Black informants both in Villo Point and in Kingstown seemed to indicate that, with several obvious exceptions, the data collected among the Portuguese is also representative of the medical and botanical beliefs of the Black majority. Although no work was done with East Indians, one would be led to believe that they hold similar concepts, in view of their high degree of assimilation into Vincentian life-ways in general. The families of the Portuguese informants have lived on the island for at least three generations. They are without exception completely assimilated linguistically, speaking the Island's dialectical English which they term "broken English." With the exception of several words for food, obscenities, two kinship terms and several magical formulas, no Portuguese is remembered. No correspondence is carried on with Madeira, the home of the original migrants.
Major Plant Categories

Most plant life can be argued as belonging to one of five major categories, these being tree, bush, fern, grass, and vine. The distinguishing components are quite similar to those of the popular botany of the writer's culture, i.e., the Northeastern United States. Thus trees have branches, "grow big" and "have trunks." Bushes "don't grow tall" and have "broad leaves." Ferns are "small" (i.e., not tall) and have "fine leaves" which are usually perpendicular to the stem. Vines are characterized as simply "running," either on the ground or up trees. The above distinctions are admittedly neither complete nor exclusive but are intended to give the reader some idea about the way in which the people of Villa Point express verbally the more theoretical side of their botanical knowledge. Borderline cases are, as in our culture, problematical, and in the final analysis a plant is more than likely categorized according to a set of configurationally linked criteria which are not customarily verbalized. In the total "verbal economy" of the community relatively little time is spent in theoretical polemics as to major plant categories, but rather speech concentrates on the more relevant question of practical distinctions based on plant use. Indeed, probably the most frequent mention of major categories occurs when folk species and subspecies are to be distinguished for the purposes of practical use.

Before we proceed to the more practical side of the community's botany, several additional terms must be elucidated. The term "plant" in Vincentian usage means the totality of a botanical specimen, i.e., the roots, stem, leaves, etc. It is usually not used for mature trees. It is also used to designate a specimen which is planted by man in a maturing form. "Tree," in addition to being a major plant category mentioned above, can also mean the stem or trunk-like portion of any specimen. It is usually thought of in vertical terms but may be horizontal (as in the vines) or may even extend underground (as in cassava). The term "bush" may also mean the clustering of leaves on other plant types. The term "weed" is used to designate plants of "no value" or of "no use." This rule is, however, of little predictive value in that important medical plants are at times referred to as "weeds." Several plants such as [manjeli'ni], [mami] rose and [papa] are categorized under the heading of "dangerous things" because of particularly obnoxious characteristics such as being poisonous or having caustic sap.

The Folk Species Level of Identification

The next to lowest level at which plants are treated is that of the "folk species." A listing of several dozen Vincentian plant names representing folk species follows this section. The lowest level at which plant naming occurs is that which we shall call the level of "folk subspecies" or that of "kinds" within a folk species, which does not apply for all plants but does for many of the more important. This level will be treated in a subsequent section.

Some interesting observations may be made concerning customs of plant naming from a review of the list below. Several species are suffixed by the term [ka'ji] meaning "thorn." All such plants are thought
VINCENTIAN FOLK SPECIES

- baby wood
- [begulagin]
- bird mango, edge bush
- bird suck, bird honey, Johnny cutlass
- carpenter grass, lata
- Christmas blossom tree
- cock spur [káji]
- elder
- eye bright
- fiddle wood tree
- fig tree
- ginger
- gloria cedar
- goad meat
- green heart
- ground itch bush, shine bush
- guinea pepper
- [habak káji]
- hog butter
- hunter man water
- horse nettle
- [jamanjo]
- Job's tears
- [kahjerut]
- [koraila]
- [kongolala]
- [kuliman]
- lemon grass
- lightning grass
- [mámi rose]
- [talulu]
- [tipiki thyme]
- Trinidad basil
- trumpet bush
- water grass
- water [krísal]
- man better man, man to man
- [manjeli'n]
- [mfnirut]
- mint
- mustard bush
- nut grass
- lavender grass, old man beard, hurricane grass
- [pačiž]
- pain bush
- [papa] tree
- physic nut
- [písabed káji]
- Portuguese bomba, cow heel (heal?)
- Portuguese parsley
- [pósli]
- privy fence
- rabbit vine
- running basil
- [jsadam vini]
- [jákk - ják]
- [aronét]
- seed under the leaf
- snake vine
- soldier coat, [jáko]
- sorrel
- sour grass
- sour sap
- stingy nettle
- [súsuba káji]
- sweet sap
- white bark
- wild plum
- [wiri - wiri]
- worm grass, ratitun
- [viri] vine
- [zabika], pear
to be "dangerous" in that they can "[čuk] you" causing injury and at times an illness called "stone bruise." Some species such as "lavender grass" have more than one name and bush doctors pride themselves on knowing the various names for a given species. Informants also recognize that identical plants have different names on neighboring islands. Two species, [kájarút] and "soldier coat," have different names among the community's children: "uncle [kája]" and [jakót] respectively. The re-duplicated structure of [šákšak] derives onomatopoetically from the custom of using the dried plant as a child's rattle. "Cholera bush" (not listed) is a "kind" or subspecies of [kóráila], also being called "man [kóráila]." Thus the name "cholera bush" probably derives from the magical association of "cholera" with [kóráila] during an epidemic within the memory of elder informants.

Although many names are descriptive of the major category to which the plant belongs, some names may be misleading in this connection; thus "carpenter grass" is not a grass but rather a vine; "[vāri] vine" is not a vine but a bush, and worm grass and lightning grass are not grasses but bushes. Several names are descriptive of some morphological characteristic such as "seed under the leaf" and "soldier coat" (its blossom resembles a red military tassel), "water grass" which boasts an abundance of juice and "shine bush" which exhibits a bright luster on its leaves and stem.

"Family" and "Kind"

"Family" is a very flexible category by which plant species are related to each other. The frame used in such expressions of botanical relationship is:

"folk species is family to folk species"

Thus "jumbee tannia is family to tannia" and "[saiv] is family to onion." As stated above, the criteria for inclusion of plant species within the same family are flexible and varied. For example all "ground provisions" (tannia, dasheen, eddoe, yam, sweet potato) "are family" because they all "bear underground"; "[čeni] is family to tannia" because they "have the same leaves and plant."

"Kind" is a much more specific concept. Many plants spoken of in everyday contexts are perceived as having several varieties of "kinds." The usefulness of a plant may depend on what kind of the folk species it represents. Likewise different kinds or subspecies of a folk species may have different uses. Needless to say, different kinds of a folk species are also family to each other. The following exposition of folk species and their representative kinds will illustrate the principle.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kinds or subspecies within folk species</th>
<th>Differences and/or similarities</th>
<th>Uses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>red seed under the leaf white seed under the leaf</td>
<td>red/white stem</td>
<td>remedy for bowels (rarely used) common remedy for the bowels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>green or black veri vine white veri vine</td>
<td>color of &quot;stick&quot; broadness of leaf, both have blue tassel</td>
<td>remedy for dysentery remedy for sick pigs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French [tiki] thyme [tiki] thyme</td>
<td>&quot;thick, thick bush&quot; &quot;very fine bush&quot;</td>
<td>remedy for abscess no use recorded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>man [piába] woman [piába]</td>
<td>black &quot;stick&quot; white &quot;stick&quot; neither bear fruit, both bear blossom</td>
<td>both used for &quot;pain&quot; and &quot;cold&quot; &quot;black one is best&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>man [korála] (cholera bush) woman [korála] garden [korála]</td>
<td>bush vine vinegar vine, &quot;the big one&quot;</td>
<td>remedy for cholera food, remedy for boils, (i.e., leaves) food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[yomanjo]: &quot;the black kind,&quot; clap hands, granny backbone</td>
<td>difference in color. Black one leaves powdery impression like old woman's backbone when clapped to skin.</td>
<td>remedy for colds, eye diseases in dogs, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;white kind,&quot; wild kind</td>
<td>&quot;big tree&quot;</td>
<td>no use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;one to make posts with&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td>used to make posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish needle: &quot;real white kind&quot; &quot;black kind&quot; &quot;French kind&quot;</td>
<td>color difference pink blossom</td>
<td>no use &quot;boiled for sick animals&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>castor oil bush &quot;black kind&quot; &quot;white kind&quot;</td>
<td>color of stem difference in leaves</td>
<td>both used &quot;for sickness&quot; &quot;white one is best&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plant Type</td>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>Uses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White with ka/ji</td>
<td>Whether plant bears thorns and color of stem</td>
<td>No use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White without ka/ji</td>
<td></td>
<td>Food, food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red with ka/ji</td>
<td></td>
<td>No use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red without ka/ji</td>
<td></td>
<td>No use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman stingy nettle</td>
<td>&quot;broad bush,&quot; no seeds</td>
<td>No use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man stingy nettle</td>
<td>&quot;fine bush,&quot; bears seeds</td>
<td>No use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horse nettle:</td>
<td></td>
<td>Both used as a remedy for stopping of water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White &quot;stick&quot;</td>
<td>White has broad leaves</td>
<td>Both used as a remedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red &quot;stick&quot;</td>
<td>Color of stem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snake vine:</td>
<td></td>
<td>Both used as a remedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White kind</td>
<td>Difference in color of &quot;bones&quot; and breadth of leaf</td>
<td>Both used as remedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black kind</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby wood:</td>
<td></td>
<td>Both used in tea for children's colds, &quot;white one&quot; pounded for sore throat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;White kind&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Green kind&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As the preceding chart demonstrates, the most recurrent feature used in identifying "kinds" or subspecies within a folk species is the color of the plant, usually of the stem. The colors contrasted are white vs. pink, green, and black. A component of sexual contrast is suggested by the "man" and "woman" prefixes. The ethno-rule is that "man" plants "don't bear" while "woman" plants do. The rule, however, does not hold up in some cases, exceptions being justified as to the nature of what is produced or "born" by the plant, i.e., "pods," "fruit," "blossoms," etc. Leaf shape, size and color; stem shape, tendency of growth ("flat," "straight up," "makes a tree," etc.), stem thickness and array of branches are also frequently mentioned as distinctive features. Shape and appearance of seeds, seed pods, fruit and flowers are also important, as is relative size.

When informants were asked to identify a particular plant their first reaction was visual, judging the nature of the specimen's individual parts. The folk botanist's next impulse was almost invariably to break off a leaf or several leaves, bruise them between the thumb and fingers and smell them. In addition to visual and olfactory perception, the plant was sometimes tasted. The taste of leaves, flowers, buds and stems were usually classified as being bitter or sweet.

The Medicinal Uses of Plants

As indicated above, the people of Villa Point are orientated toward plants in terms of their practical uses. The frame relevant for inquiries concerning plant use is "what is folk species/subspecies good (used) for?" At the highest level of contrast the frame elicits three major categories of plant use: "for food," "to feed animals," and "for sickness." The last category would then indicate the appropriateness of a consideration of folk medicine in any discussion of the community's botanical concepts and vice versa.

Botanical folk medicine is contrasted with scientific medicine by members of the community as "bush medicine" vs. "doctor medicine." The existence and popularity of folk medicinal concepts and usages does not in any serious way preclude faith in or limit use of scientific medicine.

Procedural Categories for the Use of Medicinal Plants

The use of medicinal plants is broken down by the people of the community into several categories of habitually linked events or choices of events. A description of each procedural chain follows.

"To boil to drink" or "to make tea"

This is the most common way of employing plants in the treatment of illnesses. One or several species or subspecies are selected, washed, and placed in a vessel of water and put to boil on a coal pot or stove. The entire plant, or only various plant parts such as leaves, bark, and root, may be used. With some plants, such as mint, the buds are removed.
Some bush doctors also observe strictures as to the number of leaves which they will boil. When such strictures apply the general rule is that either one leaf or three leaves are used. Although tea made from one species or subspecies is a common remedy, teas combining several species or subspecies are often used. When the infusion has boiled long enough so that the water has taken on a definite greenish tint, the vessel is taken off the fire and the plant matter is discarded. There are now several choices open to the bush doctor. He may prescribe the tea as is, i.e., "black"; or he may slightly sweeten it, i.e., "brackish" it; or he may sweeten it with a generous amount of sugar. His choice depends upon the type of plant, type of illness, and the tastes of the patient. Milk may be added to many tea remedies.

"To tie on" or "to put on"

This is a method of direct application of plants to affected area. It is used for external lesions such as "sores" and "boils" and internal "pain." For the latter complaint a leaf or leaves of a plant are tied on the part of the body in which the symptom occurs; often oil, vinegar, or white rum are also applied. The leaves may or may not be crushed. For an external lesion a leaf of the prescribed plant is heated over a flame until it expels its juices. It is then rolled on a table top (in the manner of crushing garlic) to further facilitate the release of its juices. The leaf is then "greased" with a variety of substances including "sweet oil" (olive oil), cooking oil, castor oil, or "candle grease" (i.e., wax). Of these castor oil is preferred because it keeps moist the longest. "Iodex," a commercial mixture of "black salve" and iodine, is sometimes used. The greased leaf is then "put on" the lesion and because of its moist state will often stay in place without further tying or binding.

"Grinding or pounding"

This procedure consists of grinding the plant or plant parts until they become pulverized and then "abstracting" the juice by squeezing the pulp through a thin cloth. The resulting liquid may be salted and used internally or externally.

"To set up"

Entire plants or parts of plants, singly or in combination, may be "set up" in either "strong rum" or water. The infusion is not heated; the plant material is merely left in the water or rum until its curative properties are thought to go into solution. The resulting liquid is used externally and internally.

"To boil for [bák]"

For the preparation of a [bák] ("bath") one plant or a combination of plants are boiled in water which is then used to bathe ("sop down") the body of the patient.
"Coolings"

Coolings are prepared identically to the "teas" mentioned above, there being, however, a tendency to allow the solution to cool before consumption. Coolings may also be "set up."

"To smoke"

This procedure is used for the treatment of only one illness -- "the evil eye" -- and will be described in detail in a subsequent section.

Diseases and their "Remedies"

The following two pages outline in tabular form several Vincentian folk diseases and their botanical remedies. The list is not complete but is presented so that the reader may gain some idea of how plants are prescribed and used in curing illness.

The following folk illnesses are best described in narrative rather than in tabular form.

The Evil Eye

The phenomenon of the evil eye is most often referred to in the Portuguese community as [mál·jo]. Other terms are the "bad eye" and [walyárd]. The latter term is recognized by informants as being Portuguese in origin. The evil eye in Villo Point, as in most other parts of the world in which the custom is practiced, is at least partially explainable on the basis of envy. Thus one may be victimized when someone "looks a lot of you" and "thinks you look too good." Such "steadfast" looks can injure both animals and human beings. Symptoms include giddiness, inability to eat, vomiting (casting up), and trembling. Children are told that if they fail to say their evening prayers for nine nights in a row that they will be susceptible to the condition. And quite significantly it is believed that if one's godparents make a mistake during the recitation of the Creed during the baptismal ceremony, the infant in later life will cause evil with his eyes.

Protection from the influence of [mál·jo] is varied, including the wearing of an object blessed by a priest, such as a "chain," cross or medal. In the past itinerant peddlers sold black [mál·jo] beads which were worn by children either around the waist or as a necklace. Counter-spells include the Portuguese phrases [bÍniz et diuz] and [krúž tamulyárd]. Such formulas are uttered at the moment the intended victim believes he is injured. For a person already exhibiting the symptoms of the malady a rather complex ritual is required.

The ritual is called "smoking" and is often entrusted to a specialist in the practice. One version of the ceremony is as follows: Rubbish is gathered at a crossroad. The individual gathering the rubbish must sight his handful of trash, close his eyes and seize upon it without looking. Only one handful may be gathered and the gatherer must not look back while
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Folk illness</th>
<th>Procedure</th>
<th>Medicinal plants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>abscess, boil</td>
<td>put on, tie on pound, squeeze (see also section on hot-cold complex)</td>
<td>[kā'yrút], French thyme, [véri] vine, snake vine running (woman) [koraïla]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bad eye (in the sense of dust or a foreign object in eye)</td>
<td>set up in water for one week</td>
<td>&quot;cabbage rose&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cold</td>
<td>boil tea</td>
<td>baby wood, granny backbone, water grass, Johnny cutlass, sweet sap (leaves), sour sap (leaves), trumpet bush, snake vine, rabbit vine, Trinidad basil, running basil, man better man, carpenter grass, old man beard, man [koraïla], [kā'yrút], [sádam vini], [véri] vine also combinations of plants such as: old man beard man better man [sádam vini], trumpet bush running basil carpenter grass Trinidad basil running basil rabbit vine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cold (marazma, malnutrition or terminal stage of cold in children)</td>
<td>boil tea</td>
<td>[kongolála]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cold in the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condition</td>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>Combination of:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>edge on teeth</td>
<td>chew</td>
<td>edge bush</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fever</td>
<td>boil bak</td>
<td>combination of: fever grass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>[kəˈʃrụt]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>fiddle wood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>sour sap (leaves)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>lemon grass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>physic nut (leaves)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>indigestion</td>
<td>boil tea</td>
<td>man to man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>headache</td>
<td>tie on</td>
<td>cow heel bush, mustard bush</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jaundice</td>
<td>boil tea</td>
<td>white seed under leaf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pain:</td>
<td>put on tie on</td>
<td>white bark bush, man pepper tree leaves, mustard bush</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>twisted muscles and joints</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lames muscular pain</td>
<td>pound, squeeze</td>
<td>man [piába], woman [piába]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pain in the neck</td>
<td>tie on</td>
<td>woman [kəˈraɪla]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>toothache</td>
<td>put on</td>
<td>mustard bush</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ringworm</td>
<td>pound, squeeze</td>
<td>French physic nut bush, man better man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>worms (intestinal)</td>
<td>boil tea</td>
<td>worm grass</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
leaving the crossroad. The rubbish is then mixed with chips struck from a post of "gloria cedar" or "Bermuda cedar," a supply of which is kept against the necessity of a smoking ritual. The patient is draped with a garment belonging to a male and is made to sit in a chair over a coal pot forming a tent-like affair. The cedar-rubbish mixture is then burned in the coal pot and its smoke fumigates the patient. The latter recites the Creed while the practitioner repeats the formula: "are kurari kudil senor santantan kurari" three times while making the sign of the cross over the person being smoked. If so much as one word of the spell is mispronounced the ritual will lose its efficacy. The ashes are thrown by the side of the road and the patient is considered cured. If symptoms persist, he will surely die.

"Stone Bruise"

Stone bruise is an abnormal condition of the foot. Many people in Villa Point go barefoot a good deal of the time and believe that either through walking on hot pitch roads or by stepping on a sharp object such as a stone or thorn that they will cause a "pride flesh" to "come out" under the toe. The condition is said to be exceedingly painful and slow in healing. One cure is as follows: A slice of a plant called "don cane" is roasted in the ashes of a fire and then "tied on" the affected area. This eventually "turns back" the condition so that "it don't come back again." Another cure is described in the following narrative.

I was living by me self... in those days. I did not married as yet, I have no children as yet -- I alone -- living by me self in a little hut of my own. And there I got [Čúkt] by something in me foot -- something stick me in me foot, and days after it start to pain -- I got a needle and I open it, but I couldn't get but the crown of it. And I weren't able to open it -- start up to pain so rapidly -- and then it gather that inflammation there and it make a stone bruise. I didn't know night, I didn't know day. I took my razor and I cut it and nothing came out of it. I put on some hot fermentation. The next day I gone back to it again, to see if I can get revive of the pain -- no revive -- I putting it in hot water as much as my heart can take it, until to the end it grows out a proud flesh and oh -- that was so painful! But I don't know -- I cry day and night -- I bawl! And that night I had the foot hung out on the doorway, and something lash it, and I started to bawl -- and after a while I fell asleep, because so many nights I lost my night's rest. I saw a woman come to me and tell me "never you do it! -- Don't you put your foot out of the doorway!" and then she show me -- says "you know this?" I says "yes" -- she say "what is it?" I say "fie's nut leaf." She says "you know this?" I says "yes, that's the young part of it." And I see she had the young part of it. And I see she had it cooking in the fire. And she throw the water in a basin, and she shake the white thing in it. I ask her the name of it -- she tell me "rock
salt" -- but it wasn't rock salt, it was alum! The next morning when I awake, the first person I tell it to was a Black woman by the name of Mistress [redacted]. And she tell me "jumbie don't come faithful -- I never knew they take rock salt and bathe lame -- I know they bathe lame with alum -- so try the alum." And I take my stick -- two stick -- and I hop on one foot until I reach where the fig's nut tree is. And I break off and I come and I boil it, and I take the water and shake the alum in it and I bathe the foot. I can't touch it at all. And the young part of the leaves that cook, I crush it with the alum and I put it on. And thanks be to God that alum eat all that proud flesh clean out and well it! And I have my foot today . . . .

Dreams and Illness

The above narrative, in addition to providing material concerning the technology of healing, provides an insight into an important ideological aspect of sickness and health. In the cosmology of Villa Point there exists a definite gulf between the temporal and spiritual worlds. There is, however, an important line of communication open between the society of the living and the dead in that the latter may come to the aid of the living in crisis situations via the phenomenon of dreams. Indeed, one of the most recurrent elements in narratives about illnesses is the appearance of a deceased relative or friend or often just a "dead man" or a "dead woman" in a dream who provides a prescription for the healing of the illness. An elderly informant cites an interesting example of dream curing which seems to have a literate source. He relates that he once read a story in a "story book" in which a woman with a severe heart condition was told in a dream to go to the swamp and to "eat grass." Remembering that she had read of "eating grass" in the Bible, she went to the swamp and ate water [krisal] "like an animal" with her hands behind her back. She did so for nine days and was cured. From that time on she ate nothing but watercress.

The Hot-Cold Complex

Ideas of heat and cold play an important role in disease etiology and in the botanical pharmacology of the community. Certain plant substances as well as certain practices are thought to "give heat" to the body. Some plants, plant products and everyday events have their cooling effects.

Practices which imply abrupt changes in body temperature (either real or imagined) are thought to be injurious and even fatal to the normally healthy individual. Two short case histories will serve to illustrate this point:

A young man wore a kind of cap which left the back of his head exposed to the sun. As a result he fell ill, the evening after his exposure, i.e., "he go crazy -- throw
up" because "the sun give him an inflammation." The boy himself feared for his life and even after scientific medical attention died due to his "inflamed brain."

An elderly informant described how she received a large quantity of fresh fish from a man whom she had fed when he was hungry. She was preparing for Mass and therefore had to cook the fish hastily. She heated up a cooking copper and cooked the portion of the fish which she could not give away. She then washed her face and went to Mass. After church she fell ill, becoming delirious, remaining so for two weeks.

The pertinent factor in both cases is that thermal phenomena were thought to be instrumental in the causation of serious illness. In the first case the injurious agent was the sun, in the second, heat from the copper grill. The second example, however, suggests that the abrupt change of the body's heated condition by washing with cold water was the immediate precipitating cause of the illness. The informant believes that if she had used warm water she would have remained healthy, while if she had bathed her entire body in cold water the subsequent condition would have proved fatal.

There are other interesting examples of thermal etiology. If one sits on a hot stone or stone wall it is thought that he will develop a burning sensation while passing urine. The condition can be cured by boiling bushes such as horse nettle or eye bright and after "cooling it out," drinking the infusion. Sickness can also occur if one eats foods such as bananas which are thought to be "cooling" immediately after rising in the morning. When one is asleep the body is believed to "have a heat" and therefore any cooling substance or event will, because of the necessary clash in the body's thermal state, cause abnormal physiological conditions. Children who get up at night and expose themselves to a draft "cause their death." Some people, upon rising, will pause a while before leaving the house to avoid any clash in temperature.

Skin rashes, abscesses and boils are thought to be caused by an excess of heat in the body. Informants often state that the blood is the body part which is particularly hot. When such conditions occur a "cooling" is taken. Coolings include young sour sap fruit, parsley, Guinea pepper, bitter rash bark, trumpet bush, man better man, [kūli] man, [mınirūt], running basil and water grass. The plant material is either set up in winter, or is boiled and the infusion is allowed to cool before drinking. On occasion the cold liquid may be slightly warmed, i.e., "chilled" before use. Since the cause of skin eruptions is heat in the body, the aforementioned "coolings" are thought to cool the "insides" and the blood, "so that all these things [skin eruptions] will come out."

Saffron, black pepper, ginger, cinnamon bark, Trinidad basil, garlic and bayleaf "give the body a lot of heat." These substances which "give heat" also have medicinal value. Saffron, for instance, is mixed
with vinegar, heated and tied on a sprain. It is also useful when boiled with ginger and fever grass for expelling a dead foetus from the womb. Ginger is also thought to be useful in treating "windgas" or abdominal gas.

Nonbotanical Medicine

The botanical medical folkways described above are augmented and complemented by a large nonbotanical pharmacopoeia, consisting of such commercial preparations as aspirin and liver salts, various oils and essences such as oil of wintergreen, shark oil, and Canadian healing oil. Lotions and salves include bay rum, alcoholado (imported from Curacao), and Iodex. All these preparations and scores more are available in the "doctor shops" of Kingstown, the capital. The nonbotanical remedies are used to treat about the same range of ailments as the medicinal plants, and are with some frequency included in botanical curing strategies. A detailed consideration of Vincentian nonbotanical medicine would require an additional paper.

Summary

There exists in the community of Villo Point an extensive and detailed knowledge of the botanical environment. Plant life is classified under several "major" plant categories. Perhaps more important is the breakdown of folk species into subspecies or "kinds" upon which decisions concerning plant use are often made. A large portion of the available plant life is used for medicinal purposes, being prescribed for a number of folk diseases through the medium of several recurrent procedural chains. Dreaming, the evil eye, notions of heat and cold and nonbotanical remedies also play an important part in the culture of the community.