

Antiaris toxicaria

[Synonyms : *Ambora toxicaria*, *Antiaris africana*]

UPAS TREE is an evergreen tree. Native to tropical Asia (particularly Malaysia) it has small greenish flowers.

It is also known as *Anchar* (Javanese), *Dalít* (Filipino/Tagalog), *Hmyaseik* (Burmese), *Ipoh batang* (Malay), Ipoh tree, *Jasund* (Hindi), *Karwat* (Marathi), *Kyenkyen* (Ghanaian), *Nettavil* (Tamil), *Pokok ipoh* (Malay), *Riti* (Singhalese), Sack tree, *Sui* (Vietnamese), Uppas tree, *Valkala* (Sanskrit), and *Yang nong* (Thai).

Warning – the sap is often extremely poisonous (it can vary in strength and be virtually harmless in some localities). At its worst it can cause vomiting, convulsions and heart failure (death). Animals can be killed by the poison but subsequently are not dangerous for humans to eat.

Toxicaria is derived from Greek and Latin *toxicum* (arrow poison) meaning ‘poisonous’.

For centuries it was alleged that the tree was so lethal that it poisoned surrounding vegetation and that fumes from it would kill any living creature that approached it (even birds flying overhead). It is claimed by some authorities that a Friar Odoric (c.1286-1331) who is said to have travelled in Java (now an Indonesian island) in 1321, was the first European to provide a description of the poison that perpetuated some of the tree’s fabled powers. But it was not until the early 19th Century that a realistic understanding of the tree’s toxic qualities was approached.

In the interim some of the early European explorers in the region from Portugal, the Netherlands and Britain, died painfully at the hands of the skilful south-eastern Asian tribesmen who, with the help of long wooden tubes, could blow their silent barbed, poisoned arrows accurately over long distances. These arrows carried barbs made of sharp fish bones and these were coated in sap from the upas-tree (usually mixed with other saps such as that of galangal, *Alpinia officinarum*). Some Javanese tribes also used the sap as an ordeal poison. Its local reputation above any other poison available in the region is illustrated in records of tribal conflicts in the early 20th Century in Sumatra (now an Indonesian island) which describe how one of the tribes involved travelled one hundred miles in order to get a supply of the upas poison.

Strong white fibre from the inner bark served a far more mundane purpose. After careful processing (retting or steeping in water, and beating) to ensure that no lethal sap remained among the fibres the resultant felt-like material was used for cordage and matting, and the material was also fashioned into clothing. The fibre has been used to make paper too.

Today the treated wood is used for veneering, and joinery, as well as for making light furniture and blackboards.

Medicinally, in India the seeds have been used in the treatment of dysentery and fever.