Chondrodendron tomentosum

[Synonyms : *Chondrodendron scabrum*, *Chondrodendron tamoides*, *Cissampelos caapeba*, *Cissampelos microcarpa*, *Cissampelos pareira*, *Cissampelos pareira* var. *caapeba*]

PAREIRA is a deciduous climbing vine. Native to Brazil and Peru it has small, greenish flowers.

It is also known as Abuta root, *Adivi bankatige* (Telugu), *Akanadi* (Bengali, Hindi), *Alcotán* (Spanish), *Ambashtha* (Sanskrit), *Appatta* (Tamil), Curare, Ice vine, *Gasing-gasing* (Malay), *Kalaad* (Filipino/Tagalog), *Kattuwalli* (Malayalam), *Mubarabaria* (Kikuyu), *Paharvel* (Marathi), Pareira root, *Pataveli* (Gujarati), and Velvet leaf.

Tomentosum means 'densely woolly, hairy or matted hairy'.

For some the plant was a good luck charm, and as such women in Sudan wore the plant like a necklace.

In parts of Brazil and Venezuela the South American Indians have long used the plant to prepare a poison, now known as 'curare', for their blowpipe darts and arrow tips. According to some authorities a skilled hunter could blow a dart as far as 120 feet., and these arrows were used for getting food, whether bird or animal, as well as for warfare. The poison was (and still is) prepared by tribal priests. Knowledge of it has been passed down from generation to generation, either through the medicine man in each tribe or a specialist whose role was confined to preparing that drug. The trainee would have had much to learn including the identification of the seven or eight species apart from this one which would yield the narcotic, the time and method of harvesting the bark, the fasting requirements demanded by some tribes when the drug was being prepared, let alone the preparation of the poison itself and the differing accompanying rituals. (His learning also extended to knowledge of many other plants that could also be used with pareira.) Some records have suggested that its potency may have been tested on monkeys. For instance if a monkey hit by a poisoned dart was then able to jump to three trees before dying, it was too weak – two tree, or better still one tree, was considered potent. There seems to be little doubt that these poisonous and silent weapons, referred to by the early European invaders as 'flying death', must have been most effective – and it is known today that they have been used for hundreds of years. Application of the poison was not limited to the arrow tips as in close combat an Indian could be just as lethal if he scratched his opponent's skin because they put the *urari* under their fingernails.

Apparently the 16th Century Spanish conquistadores are said to have contemplated use of the poison as a hunting weapon in Europe. However records indicate that the exact make-up of it was to remain a secret for nearly 200 years.

Some authorities suggest that investigations of the drug's properties began in 1743. It is claimed by others that the celebrated German naturalist and traveller, Baron Alexander von Humboldt (1769- 1859) wrote the first clear description of the witnessed preparation of curare by one of the South American Indian tribes living near the Orinoco. Specialists also note that fourteen years later a Charles Waterton experimented with the drug on animals of various sizes and eventually was able to revive a donkey successfully after it had been injected with it. This showed that curare was not lethal and that it could provide a muscle relaxant for the medical profession if artificial breathing aids were available.

Experiments with the drug continued over the following years. In 1850 for instance the French physiologist, Claude Bernard (1813-1878), is remembered not least for identifying curare's effect on the nervous system more precisely after carrying out experiments on frogs. Then according to some records in the early 20th Century a gentleman named Richard Gill was able to gain the confidence of one of the tribes familiar with pareira by living with them for a period. As a result in 1938 he was able to prove that the drug (which affects the nervous system when it enters the blood stream) was to be found in the vine's leaves. In 1939 it was isolated for the first time.

Medicinally, the root has been used locally for treating urinary disorders, gonorrhoea, rheumatism, jaundice and fluid retention. In Brazil the bruised leaves are applied externally to poisonous snake bites while at the same time an infusion of the root os taken internally. In India the root has also been used in the treatment of dysentery, diarrhoea, urinary ailments and coughs. In Africa the vine's root has been valued for treating intestinal worms. Today in Western medicine root and stem are used to obtain a drug that can be called upon to relax the muscles during surgical operations. It can also form part of treatment for multiple sclerosis, tetanus convulsions and shock therapy.