Duboisia hopwoodii - Pituri Bush

- Solanaceae - Central America

The pituri plant had enormous economic value to the Aborigines. Pituri roads existed with extensive trade networks that extended from northern to southern desert areas, which permitted Aborigines to trade the plant. Most of the Aboriginal weaving and written communications systems including nets, dilly bags and marker sticks, were used to carry the pituri plant or identify the trader in hostile territory. The pituri roads crossed rivers and high mountain ranges where natives would trade the plant over hundreds of miles. They were used as a token of friendship toward strangers, as a stimulant and social comforter to foster feelings of amity. The plant was used to trap emus, parrots and kangaroos in water holes. Elders who acted as seers to obtain power and riches would ingest the plant. Interestingly, it was used not only as payment to elders who circumcised and subincised1 youth, but Johnston and McClelland (1933) document that the plant was taken by youths in native operations (such as circumcision and subincision.) By the 1950s, pituri use had disappeared, pushed out by Lutheran usurpation of the plant harvest (Hart, interview, November, 1983). This had the effect of bringing tribal members to mission settlements. Commercial tobacco was also introduced into Australia at the time of European contact and became popular among Aborigines, despite the availability of different species of native tobacco that grew wild and was chewed as a wad.

Eliade (1958) described Bora rites in eastern Aboriginal society where young men were removed from the women's area, isolated in the bush, given religious teaching and floggings, and were circumcised and subincised. The boys remained in the bush for one year and were subjected to hypervigilant austerities -including sleep deprivation and fasting. They were kept in silence and darkness. The symbology of death and rebirth - the death of childhood and the rebirth of the individual into a new adult status - was prominently figured here. The initiates did not report negative experiences such as fear and anxiety, but rather revelations which allowed them to view the world and themselves as sacred. No doubt, the use of pituri in these genital operations in highly septic environments provided an amnesic experience, much as the alkaloid, scopolamine, played a popular role in obstetrics in the 1940s and 1950s, when "twilight sleep" was the predominant childbirth anaesthesia.

Male blood was seen as a symbol of strength and fertility. In order to separate men from their mothers, male blood was used through the initiation rites. Van Gennep's (1984) stages of transition in initiation rituals separation, liminality and reintegration - can be used to describe the rites among aborigines in which the hallucinogenic plant, pituri, traditionally played an important role, particularly in the third and fourth stages listed below

Segregation of novices into special isolated camps.
Education about sacred matters received from elders.

Bodily operations such as circumcision and subincision.
Disclosure of meanings of ritual objects presented to novices in secret ceremonies.
Final cleaning of all traces of the sacred world and the ceremonial return to life.

The symbolic concept of death and rebirth, as the outcome of hallucinogenic plant drug use is widely found among traditional societies of the world (see Dobkin de Rios 1984a). It is so profound in Aboriginal societies that mothers behaved as if their sons were dead and mourned them accordingly. The Aboriginal elder who performed the circumcision was believed to be a designate of a supernatural being. Five or six weeks after the circumcision, subincision was performed and this custom of cutting the male urethra was believed to be done to rid the body of the mother's female blood. After a series of hazing and ordeals, the young man was thought to be a changed person, ready to fully participate in adult society.

"Adolescent Drug Use in Cross-Cultural Perspective"
By Charles Grob and Marlene Dobkin de Rios. Journal of Drug Issues 22(1), Winter 1992:121-138.

TRADITIONAL USE: Leaves, flowers and flowering stalks are highly valued by the Aborigines as chewing tobacco with nicotine and nor-nicotine content being up to 25% of the dry weight of plant material. Pituri is the term used by the Aborigines for the ball of chewing tobacco. Pituri is prepared by drying and powdering the leaves of the nicotine plant and mixing with ash from a variety of different specially selected species. It is rolled up into quids (balls) that are 6cm long and 1.5cm in diameter and then chewed. The mixing of the alkaloid ash with the plant material renders the alkaloids more available when chewed and ingested. When it is not chewed it is put behind the ear like bubblegum. The chewed tobacco is used as a token of friendship, of which it has taken on the significance of a social event.

Pituri is mixed with ash as the nicotine is liberated from the acids through the action of the alkaloids present in the ash. The ash promotes the rapid absorption of the nicotine into the bloodstream through the thin tissues of the lips and mouth and probably through the skin behind the ear (Latz, 1995). There are certain species that are used to manufacture the ash within the pituri. These include: Acacia aneura, A.calcicola, A.coriacea, A.eutrophiolata, A.ligulata, A.pruinocarpa, A.beauverdiana (refer to acacias), [Acacia salicina],Casuarina decaisneana, Eucalyptus coolabah, Grevillea stenobotrya, G.striata, Senna artemisioides helmsii, Ventilago viminalis, Hakea sp..

The initial effect of pituri is as a stimulant, later however the user begins to fell a bit heavy and finally sleepy. In small quantities the pituri can assuage hunger and enable long journeys to be undertaken without fatigue and with little food. It can also be used to excite the participants before fighting (Maiden, 1889).

The quids are sometimes mixed with threads of native flax (Psoralea spp.) to make the pituri stick together. If preferred plants are unavailable then small amounts of I.petrae are added to less popular Nicotiana leaves to give the

quid extra strength. Aborigines also used the smoking of the burning leaves of D.hopwoodii as an anaesthetic, where the usage of the plant in the circumcision of boys during their initiation ceremonies was frequently practiced.