

## Turbina corymbosa - Ololiuqui

- Convolvulaceae - tropical zones of the Americas



Ololiuqui is the Aztec name for the seeds of certain convolvulaceous plants which have been used since prehispanic times by the Aztecs and related tribes, just as the sacred mushrooms and the cactus peyotl have been used in their religious ceremonies for magic and religious purposes. Ololiuqui is still used in our day by certain tribes, such as the Zapotecs, Chinantecs, Mazatecs, and Mixtecs, who live in the remote mountains of southern Mexico in comparative isolation, little or not at all influenced by Christianity.

An excellent review of the historical, botanical, and ethnological aspects of ololiuqui was given in 1941 by Schultes in his monograph "A Contribution to Our Knowledge of Rivea corymbosa: The Narcotic Ololiuqui of the Aztecs" ([38]). The following information on the history of ololiuqui, its botanical identification and its past and present use have been taken mainly from Schultes' monograph.

One of the first descriptions and the first illustration of ololiuqui were given by Francisco Hernandez, a Spanish physician who between 1570 and 1575 carried out extensive research on the flora and fauna of Mexico for Philip II. In his famous "Rerum medicarum Novae Hispaniae thesaurus, seu plantarum, animalium, mineralium mexicanorum historia", which appeared in 1651 in Rome, Hernandez described and classified ololiuqui under the heading "De Oliliuhqui, seu planta orbicularium foliorum".

An extract of a free translation of the 1651 Latin version reads as follows: "Oliliuhqui, which some call coaxihuitl, or snake-plant, is a twinning herb with thin, green, cordate leaves, slender, green terete stems, and long white flowers. The seed is round and very like coriander."

In this work Hernandez claims that priests ate ololiuqui which induced a delirious state during which they were able to receive messages from the supernatural and communicate with their gods. He reported that priests saw visions and went into a state of terrifying hallucinations under the influence of the drug.

If we are to judge from the many ancient writers quoted in Schultes' monograph, ololiuqui must have been very extensively used in the valleys of Mexico in prehispanic times. It seems to have been more important in divinity than peyotl or teonanácatl. However, the medicinal use was also very extensive. Ololiuqui served to cure flatulence, to remedy venereal troubles, to deaden pain, and to remove tumours. Ololiuqui was believed to possess a deity of its own, which worked miracles if properly propitiated.

In spite of the above relatively good description and characteristic illustration by Hernandez, the botanical identification of ololiuqui caused a great number of discussions in professional circles. Finally, in 1897, M. Urbina identified ololiuqui as *Rivea corymbosa* Hall. f. (syn . *Ipomoea sidaefolia* (HBK)). This identification was confirmed by Schultes.

In Mexico, *Rivea corymbosa* is known and has been known by a number of different vernacular names, the more important of which are: Aztec: oliliuhqui, ololiuqui, coaxihuitl, cuexpalli; Chinantec: a-mu-kia, huan-mei, huan-men-ha-sei; Maya: xtabentum; Mazatec: no-so-le-na; Mixtec: yucuyaha; Zapotec: bador, badoh, bitoo, kwan-la-si, kwan-do-a; Spanish: flor de la Virgen, la señorita, manto, pascua, piule, semilla de la Virgen, yerba de las serpientes, yerba de la Virgen.

Ololiuqui was used by the ancient Aztecs not only as a potion but also as an ingredient of magical ointments. At the present time the crushed seeds are taken in water or in alcoholic beverages such as pulque, mescal, or aguardiente. Reko described in detail the present use of ololiuqui in his monograph "Magische Gifte" ([39] ). Usually the professional soothsayers, "piuleros", give their clients advice under the influence of the piule drink, another name for ololiuqui. Sometimes they also give the ololiuqui drunk to their client or patient, who then replies to the piulero's leading questions in a narcotic-hypnotic state produced by the drug and thus reveals facts or discovers his illness, for which the piulero then finds the medicines.

038

R. E. Schultes, "A Contribution to our Knowledge of *Rivea Corymbosa*: The Narcotic Ololiuqui of the Aztecs ", Botanical Museum, Harvard Univ., Cambridge, Mass., 1941.

039

V. A. Reko, "Magische Gifte, Rausch- und Betäubungsmittel der Neuen Welt ", Ferdinand Enke, Stuttgart 1936.