

Toothache Relief Using *Toob*: An Investigation of Folk Medicine in Siquijor Island, Philippines

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Toob is practiced by a folk healer or herbolario in Siquijor Island in Central Philippines as means of curing toothache, utilizing the smoke from the heated seeds of the herb *Datura metel* (locally katyubong) and fine roots of unidentified herbs and shrubs.

KEYWORDS: folk-healing, herbs, *Datura*, Siquijor, analgesic.

Siquijor Island has been known by its mysticism and traditional practices including sorcery of various forms and treatments such as *bolo-bolo* (detecting diseases and healing by blowing bubbles in a glass of water) and *palina* (casting away evil spirits and spells by burning a mixture of herbs, vines, incense, etc.), among others (see Pontenila & Reynolds 1971; Seki 1994; Mascuñana, Pioquinto, & Schales, 1999). More recently, I (a native Siquijorian), observed a folk healing practice which, to the best of my knowledge and using the above references as baseline, is an unreported practice. The aim of these notes is not to elaborate its anthropological origin but to describe this practice with as much detail as possible, given that it involves a potentially toxic (though the herbolario is unaware that *D. metel* is toxic) herb *D. metel* or *katyubong* and is gaining popularity within the locality as “cure” or relief to toothache.

I conducted several intermittent interviews (in all cases informal) with a *toob* practitioner in Siquijor Island in barangay Tambisan, San Juan from August through December 2008. Aside from Mr. Julie Tomaroy and his wife Vilma, both natives of Tambisan, San Juan, Siquijor, I know of no other practitioner on the Island. Claims of toothache healing resulting from removal of “worms” are probably due to the locals’ lack of basic medical knowledge. Toothache as defined by medicinenet.com refers to “pain around the teeth or jaws...[most are] caused by tooth or jaw problems, such as a dental cavity, a cracked tooth, an exposed tooth root, gum disease, disease of the jaw joint (temporo-mandibular joint), or spasms of the muscles used for

chewing” (<http://www.medicinenet.com/toothache/article.htm>). I investigated *Toob* for the purpose of providing details.

The basic components of *toob* include the following:

- a. Homemade funnel or *imbudo* ~ made of coconut shell and the pipe is made of nodes from a native variety of bamboo measuring 5 inches in length and half an inch in diameter similar to those used in the rural areas in the Philippines in fetching water from artesian well;
- b. Metal plate/bar ~ measuring 3x1x2 inches but could be replaced by any metal.
- c. Basin ~ with water enough to submerge about 3 cm of the rim of the funnel when inverted
- d. *Katyubong* seeds ~ usually dried
- e. Fine roots, stems and twigs of common herbs () ~ these could be replaced by any plant parts of *katyubong*, mixed in coconut oil. It should be noted that the practitioner used ordinary oil (homemade) locally known as *lana* (not as those used in *pangalap* (a ritual by which folkhealers gather and mix herbs with oil during Holy Week), see Mascuñana, Pioquinto & Schales, 1999). On one occasion, he used cooking oil in the absence of *lana*.

As I observed and as detailed by the practitioner, the following steps were undertaken during *toob*:

- a. Heating of metal plate, by placing the metal in burning wood/fuel;
- b. Placing *katyubong* seeds (not quantified) together with herb-oil mixture on top of the heated metal (but bar or tin can may be used)—placed only when the metal is still hot;
- c. Trapping of smoke through the funnel—the smoke is then held within the mouth cavity (supposedly to kill the “worms” in tooth cavity).

According to Mr. Julie, who preferred to be called “Mimig” (the locals’ contraction of the Spanish word *amigo*, meaning “a friend”), almost all of the local inhabitants from Tambisan, San Juan and a few numbering at least five from the municipalities of Lazi and highland barrios of Siquijor municipality who suffered toothache, have undergone *toob*. Most of them are fisherfolk and farmers ranging in

age from 20-40 years. After the treatment, they subsequently handed donations in cash ranging from PhP 20.00 (for neighbors and friends) to about PhP 100.00 (for patients from other towns) to the family. Such amounts, though modest, greatly helped the practitioner's family needs such as salt and a kilo of rice for the day, which was reflected in his happy, simplistic yet timid personality.

It should be noted that in the absence of Mr. Julie Tomaroy, his wife Vilma and his step-son performed the *Toob*. After the *toob*, the practitioner and those treated showed me several "worm-like" particles floating in the basin of water. According to the Tomaroy family and their patients who tried to explain the scenario, the so-called worms escaped from teeth cavities as they are killed by the smoke and heat. I was fortunate to have them examined very closely.

I found out that what they called "worms" (supposedly killed by the smoke of *Datura* were not organisms but were mere fragments of the fine roots of some herbs used and are mostly parts of developing embryos of *D. metel* that probably escaped out of the seeds when heated. I noted the absence of segments and other characters of parasitic worms. In addition, the supposed worms (actually roots combined with seed embryos) have cylindrical bodies but appeared yellowish and smooth, probably due to exposure to the intense heat of about 200-300°C (<http://wikianswers.com>).

To clarify further, I submitted myself to the *toob*. I have never experienced having toothache or even a tooth cavity, so I think it was a fortunate time to confirm my test. After the treatment there were also "worms" floating in the water-filled basin.

One time, my wife Lilibeth, who heard stories from neighbors that because of *toob*, "worms have been obtained from my decaying gums," decided to treat her toothache that had lasted three days at that time. She tried the treatment but had to cough once in a while due to the irritating property of the smoke. After a few seconds, when the smoke diminished, she told me that the pain gradually subsided but she noticed numbness on her gum.

The same "healing effect" was also revealed to me by another patient and my brother-in-law Robert Malicay. However, he reluctantly explained, "I believe those were just parts of *katyubong* seeds, not worms."

The healing effect of *toob* is not yet known; it may be due to the presence of alkaloids on the dried seeds (Wannang, Ndukwe, & Nnabuife, 2009). Recently, the authors evaluated the analgesic effect of *D. metel* on rats. Although they found no significant effect based on

two models (acetic acid and heat-induced pains), they found behavioral pattern of sedation among test animals, which could be explained on the basis of the action of some receptors like δ -receptors in the central nervous system (CNS), which when stimulated have the intrinsic potential to reduce the distress or the effective component of pains without having any significant change in the intensity of the actual sensation, probably due to the presence of a phytochemical called scopolamine (an alkaloid). This chemical content of the plant *D. metel* is higher than that of other *Datura* species. The analgesic and CNS depression of the plant is often attributed to the presence of this alkaloid (Tyler, Brady & Robbers 1990).

It should be noted that the local folks have used *Datura metel* also as relief for asthma by smoking the dried flowers as in tobacco or cigarette (personal observation). I myself being asthmatic have tried this traditional remedy several times and found it satisfactory especially during my bouts with asthma. The adverse effect, however, is hallucination, a sensation of having dried throat and in certain cases burning sensation of the skin as well as impaired vision. These effects could last 3-5 days depending on the amount of dried flowers used in the treatment.

Nonetheless, the lack of sufficient knowledge among the locals regarding dental health coupled with poverty may have contributed to their confusion on the toothache-healing device that they used and its possible effect on human physiology. *D. metel* is potentially toxic and hence should be treated with caution.

I cannot determine the origin of *toob* like a practitioner would. The only trace of its possible origin is that it was simply given to the practitioner by his wife's uncle (Andique Pactol, an old bachelor) as "*kabilin*" (unlike other folk healing, this *kabilin* was passed on to him without spiritual ceremony). In his small hut, Andique, who always refused medical treatment of his *asthma*, died in 2005.

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