

DECOLONIAL PLANT KNOWLEDGE

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HARRIET TUBMAN. PHOTO: H. S. SCUYER, 1885

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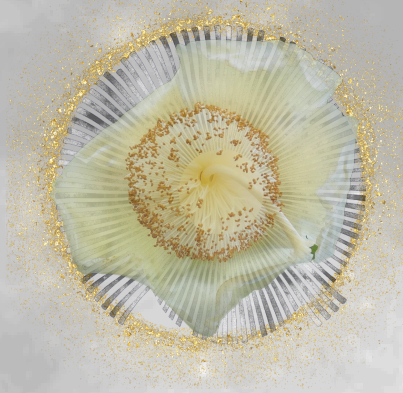
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TABLE OF CONTENT



ANCESTRAL PLANT KNOWLEDGE

KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS AND COLONIAL BOTANY

PLANTS, ABOLITION AND ANTI-COLONIAL RESISTANCE

HARRIET TUBMAN

ABOLITION FLOWER CAMELLIA

PLANT ALLIANCES IN THE DIASPORA

ST. JOHN'S WORT

CALENDULA

COMFREY

ABOUT

LITTLE SCHOOL

AUTHOR



KAKUM FOREST, ASSIN ATANDANSO. PHOTO: A. ASANTE, 2022

ANCESTRAL PLANT KNOWLEDGE

KEMET

Our ancestors on the African Continent worked and connected with plants for thousands of years. The Ebers Papyrus found in Kemet dates back more than 3.000 years from today. It is a comprehensive medical document for plant remedies, diagnoses and treatments. Amongst others **Peseshet** is known as one of the first female physicians, who specialized in midwifery and plant medicine. University temples were places of worship, healing and studying.

EXAMPLES FROM WEST AFRICA

In West Africa there is a long history of plant medicine and healing that is interwoven with traditional religion and culture. With reference to author Kofi A. Opoku, in traditional Akan culture, people who are ill go to their priests who are not only ministers of the deities but also herbalists who know the remedies of particular deities. Sometimes, it is believed, the deities reveal new cures for particularly baffling illnesses to the priests. In Yoruba and Igbo traditions, there are specific deities, Osanyin (Ossain in afro-brazilian Candomble) and Agwu respectively, who are recognized as the guardians of medicine. These deities are believed to call people to become herbalists and doctors and all healing takes place under their guardianship.

ANCESTORS

The ancestors in West African traditional beliefs are also involved in the practice of medicine. They are believed to send special cures to their relatives suffering from serious illnesses, and it is common to hear a mourner at a funeral asking the dead person to send a cure for their ailment, or asking them to convey a request to some other ancestor to send medicine. Also early ancestors who practised medicine like **Elesije** from Ile-Ife are called upon to invoke blessings and guidance in healing.

* OPOKU, KOFI A. "WEST AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION." (1978)



AGWU NSI (DIVINATION) FIGURES, IGBO CULTURE. PHOTO: G. I. JONES, 1930S
BAOBAB TREE, GREATER ACCRA. PHOTO: A. ASANTE, 2016



BOTANICAL GARDEN BERLIN. PHOTO: A. ASANTE, 2017
OSSAIN, SALVADOR, BAHIA. PHOTO: A. ASANTE, 2024

KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS AND COLONIAL BOTANY

One tool of colonialism is the destruction of Indigenous knowledge systems. This also means erasing and demonizing traditional African practices of plant medicine and relationships with the natural world. The phenomenon is part of the binary colonial approach that divides the world into Black and *white*, good and bad, nature and science, etc. In various African Indigenous knowledge systems spirituality, science/observation and plant medicine are closely interwoven.

BOTANICAL COLONIAL NAMING SYSTEM

Another way of colonizing the plant realm, was the creation of a new nomenclature that categorizes plants by greek or latin names, utilizing a two-name format to describe the species and genus of each living being. The establishment of the binomial classification system, shows the colonial agenda of supremacy and ownership and systematically disregards the richness of Indigenous linguistic heritage. On the continent a lot of the knowledge is passed on through storytelling in a variety of languages, this oral tradition is often not acknowledged as a source of knowledge.

THE COLONIAL IDEA OF BOTANICAL GARDENS

The botanical garden is a concept that evolved during colonial times, serving as a physical manifestations of the domination over nature and knowledge. These gardens not only show a curated collection of plants divorced from their Indigenous contexts, but also perpetuate the narrative that reinforces colonial control over both the environment and the information that surrounds it.

*PLANTS AND CULTURE. [HTTPS://WWW.PLANTSANDCULTURE.ORG/IMPERIALTAXONOMY](https://www.plantsandculture.org/imperialtaxonomy)

*PLANTS AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCE. KOFI ACREE, [HTTPS://GUIDES.LIBRARY.CORNELL.EDU/BLACKS_PLANTS](https://guides.library.cornell.edu/blacks_plants)

PLANTS, ABOLITION AND ANTI-COLONIAL RESISTANCE

Harriet Tubman

Harriet was born around 1820 in the south states (U.S.) on a plantation. She escaped and risked her life to lead hundreds of other enslaved people to freedom with the Underground Railroad. Harriet had a strong connection with nature. She used knowledge of the stars, local landscapes, and plants to escape. Her herbal knowledge was wide ranging, she used plants like poppy to calm babies on the journey and she soothed wounds of people with geranium.

Abolition flower Camellia

In Brazil the camellia flower became a symbol of the abolition movement, representing solidarity and the fight for freedom. In the 19th century, advocates for the end of enslavement planted these flowers to recognize and support each other. Two centuries earlier, **Dandara dos Palmares** fought as a leader in the Quilombo dos Palmares, for freedom for African people and the land.

Anti-colonial resistance

Anti-colonial resistance means liberation for people and at the same time protection for the environment and plant world from colonial destruction. The historical and current genocides in DRC show how exploitation of Black people and nature are linked. So are the resistance movements - stop all genocides! **Patrice Lumumba** fought for independence from the Belgian colonizers and against the exploitation of the Congo. Today people in the east DRC are still fighting the colonial legacies of exploitation on a daily basis together with global collectives and grassroots initiatives like **FreeCongoNow!**

*FREEDOM NETWORK HARRIET TUBMAN. [HTTPS://HARRIETTUBMANBYWAY.ORG/HARRIET-TUBMAN/](https://harrietubmanbyway.org/harriet-tubman/)

*ABOLITION GARDEN. MU SA MICHELLE MATTIUZZI. [HTTPS://WWW.KHI.FI.IT/EN/AKTUELLES/VERANSTALTUNGEN/2024/09/ABOLITION-GARDEN.PHP](https://www.khi.fi.it/en/aktuelles/veranstaltungen/2024/09/abolition-garden.php)



DANDARA DOS PALMARES

PLANT ALLIANCES IN THE DIASPORA

Forced displacement continues to be part of Black history, in the past through enslavement and today through economic injustice as a colonial legacy, genocides, wars and climate crisis. Resilience can mean making use of the local environment, also adopting plant knowledge for healing, survival and liberation. Plants like oleander were used in the Caribbean to poison plantation owners, and other plants were used for healing and rituals. On these next pages three healing plants and recipes are introduced, which can be used in the diaspora for better mental and physical wellbeing.



Colonial English/Colonial German: St. John's Wort/Johanniskraut

Colonial botanical name: *Hypericum perforatum*

Distribution area: Native in North Africa, Europe, Asia and introduced in the Americas and Oceania.

Description: Perennial herb with vibrant yellow flowers. The leaves look perforated when you hold them against light.

Internal uses (tea) St. John's Wort is associated with the sun and the key active component hypericin, is showing mood-brightening effects and making it a popular natural remedy for mild to moderate depression, winter depression and anxiety. This can be helpful for people in the diaspora during European grey winters.

Note! St. John's Wort in form of pills/ high concentrated doses can interact with other medications. It activates the liver to help the body detox and it might flush out other medications in that process. So consult with a healthcare professional before using higher amounts.

External uses (oil) The red oil extracted from the flowers, can be used in massages to relieve muscle tension and to alleviate pain. Furthermore it can be applied to minor burns, cuts, bruises, or against skin irritations.

Note! Avoid sun exposure when using St. John's Wort oil, as it may increase photosensitivity.

PLANT RECIPES

ST. JOHN'S WORT OIL

Harvesting: Harvest St. John's Wort flowers and buds during the flowering season (European summer) when the plant is in full bloom. Here a general advice for harvesting plants by the Indigenous ecologist and author Robin Wall Kimmerer:

'Ask permission before taking. Abide by the answer. Never take the first. Never take the last. Take only what you need. Take only that which is given. Never take more than half. Leave some for others. Harvest in a way that minimizes harm. Use it respectfully. Never waste what you have taken. Share. Give thanks for what you have been given. Give a gift, in reciprocity for what you have taken.'

Filling the jar: Fill a clean transparent glass jar with the flowers. Leave some space at the top.

Adding carrier oil: Pour the carrier oil over the fresh flowers until they are fully submerged. Use a chopstick to push the flowers down and eliminate any air bubbles.

Maceration: Seal the jar tightly and place it in a warm, sunny location. Allow the mixture to infuse for about 4 weeks. Shake the jar gently every few days to help the maceration process. The oil will begin to take on a reddish colour as it absorbs the properties of the St. John's Wort.

Straining: After circa 4 weeks, strain the oil through a fine mesh strainer or cloth into a clean bowl or pan. Make sure to squeeze out as much oil as possible from the plant material.

Storing: Transfer the strained oil into a dark glass bottle to protect it from light, and seal it tightly. Store it in a cool, dark place. Add a label with the date and ingredients that you used to keep track.

PLANT ALLIANCES IN THE DIASPORA



CALENDULA

Colonial English/Colonial German: Calendula/ Ringelblume

Colonial botanical name: *Calendula officinalis*

Distribution area: Native to Europe and the Mediterranean region

Description: Mostly annual herb with orange and yellow flowers.

External uses (oil/ointment) Known for anti-inflammatory, antiseptic, and healing properties, in topical applications for treating skin irritations, cuts, and burns.



COMFREY

Colonial English/Colonial German: Comfrey/ Beinwell

Colonial botanical name: *Symphytum officinale*

Distribution area: Native to Europe and parts of Asia

Description: Perennial herb, which is characterized by large, hairy leaves and bell-shaped purple or yellow flowers.

External uses (oil/ointment) Wound-healing properties, particularly due to its allantoin content, promoting tissue regeneration and therefore helps with broken bones, sprains and joint pain.

Note! Not for internal use!

PLANT RECIPES

COMFREY AND CALENDULA OINTMENT

Harvesting: Calendula can flower from early summer to late autumn, harvest the flowers without leaves. Comfrey roots should be harvested when the plant is not flowering, e.g. in spring, autumn or winter.

Infuse the oil: Start by warming about 1 cup of olive oil in a double boiler. Chop up 2/3 fresh washed and towel dried comfrey roots and 1/3 calendula flowers. Make sure that the roots and flowers are not wet, to avoid mould. (Don't harvest on rainy days for oil maceration). Ideally let the plant material soak in oil for circa 2 to 3 weeks. If that is not possible, put the herbs in oil and warm them up on low heat in a double boiler for about 2-3 hours. Stir occasionally.

Strain the oil: After infusing, strain the oil through a fine mesh sieve or cloth into a clean bowl. You can compost the rest of the plant material.

Melt the beeswax: In the clean double boiler, add the strained herbal oil and gradually incorporate beeswax. Stir continuously until the beeswax is completely melted and blended with the oil. Adjust the amount of beeswax if you prefer a thicker or thinner ointment.

Pour the ointment: Once the beeswax is fully melted and mixed in, pour the mixture into clean little jars. Allow it to cool at room temperature until it solidifies.

Store: Once cooled, your comfrey and calendula ointment is ready to use! Label it and store it in a cool, dark place.

ABOUT LITTLE SCHOOL

'Decolonial plant knowledge' is one out of five workshops and zine contributions that formed part of the Little School, a project that took place in Summer 2024 in Berlin Neukölln, at Spore Initiative.

The Little Schools' invitation was to create a space for practical learning and exchange on topics such as environmental justice, health, and food sovereignty. A focus was put on those practice-based forms of knowledges, that enable different relationships to the land, forests, water, biodiversity and the plants that feed and heal us, while often being marginalised or not recognized as "valuable knowledge".

Over the course of one week, participants took part in a variety of workshops for creative new methodologies and knowledge sharing. The zines are meant to further extend this invitation to think teaching and learning through different practices, knowledges, principles, and processes.

SPORE GARDEN, BERLIN. PHOTO: M. CLAUSEN, 2024



ABOUT AUTHOR/ARTIST

ABENI ASANTE
IS ROOTED IN MOVEMENTS OF ANTI-RACISM, GENDER
LIBERATION, AND ECOLOGY.



PHOTO: PRIVAT, 2024

'REVOLUTION IS BASED ON LAND. LAND IS THE BASIS OF ALL INDEPENDENCE.
LAND IS THE BASIS OF FREEDOM, JUSTICE, AND EQUALITY.'

MALCOLM X

LITTLE SCHOOL

2024



**FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE LITTLE SCHOOL AND
DIGITAL COPY OF THE ZINE VISIT [SPORE-INITIATIVE.ORG](https://spore-initiative.org) USING THE QR CODE.**