

# JOURNAL

of

## THE NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN

VOL. 41

APRIL 1940

No. 484

### *Achiote, The Blood Tree*

*By Victor Wolfgang von Hagen*

OF all the useful contributions of the American Indian—such as potato, pumpkin, cocaine, ipecac, and quinine—none has had such a curious and mystical application in the lives of the natives as the seeds of the achiote. While the scarlet pulp surrounding them is used as a coloring for food, it is of even greater importance as a symbol of blood—emblem of life and of power—and as such is used in daily practice and in special ceremonies.

Almost everywhere in the American tropics, from the lush hot regions to the cold Sierras, the achiote may be found. It is a small tree or shrub seldom more than 16 feet high, blooming three times a year, the flowers followed by clusters of soft-spined burrs at the ends of the branches. Upon drying the burrs split open to reveal their vermilion-coated seeds, each about the size of the seeds of a large grape. When held in the hand the aril, or soft coating, instantly exudes a scarlet dye. This is the blood symbol.

It did not take the Spanish explorers long to find a use for this powerful coloring matter, and soon it was being employed throughout all Europe as a dye. In the United States today tons of it are imported annually for the unromantic but practical purpose of coloring cheese and oleomargarine. As it is one of the few harmless vegetable coloring media that will meet the requirements of the stringent pure food laws, its use may be widely extended in the future.

When we add it to our food we are imitating a custom of the primitive Indian many centuries old. Although seemingly tasteless to our palate, it is used quite often in a condiment made with hot chile peppers and is generally mixed with the food of the South American mountain Indians. Potatoes, soup, rice and meats served at the Andean fairs in Peru, Ecuador or Bolivia are always colored with it. An Indian would hesitate to eat



*Flowers of the achiote (Bixa Orellana) with young fruits at the tips of the branches.*

his food unless it were colored, and the cook never fails to stir a handful of the seeds into the stew. Montezuma, the Mexican emperor, used it regularly. It was his habit to quaff many jars of chocolate daily, and the recipe given by the Spanish conquerors mentioned chocolate flavored with vanilla and tinted with achiote, the mixture beaten into a red froth by means of a whirling MOLINILLO.

But the chief use of the achiote is not the flavoring of food. In the past (as now) it has been used for painting the body by the uncivilized and semi-civilized Indians all the way from Mexico to Patagonia. The Negro-Suma Indian hybrids of the Mosquito coast of Honduras, for one example, paint themselves with it when they go hunting or fishing.

To prepare the dye the capsules of the tree are gathered and the seeds are split and placed in a pot of boiling water to remove the testa or waxy substance surrounding the aril of the seeds. Then the red wax is passed through a sieve and made to coagulate into a thick maroon paste by the

addition of leaves of the tiswat tree. The thick substance is then poured into small gourds and placed on the rafters for use during hunting festivals. Formerly the Miskito women would paint their menfolk before they embarked on a fishing expedition to hunt the great manatee, or before they left to enter the jungle for the search of wild pig. The achiote paste would first be thinned and tempered with high-smelling vegetable oils; then decorative designs would be drawn upon the faces and bodies of the hunters with small sticks called AULALA-DUSA. This was done in an intricate series of dots, dashes, and geometrical figures.

The hereditary enemies of the Miskito people, the Sumus, who live in the interior of the Mosquito coast, adopt a different manner of painting but always use the achiote as a base. When going to war with the Miskito UPLA (people), the men would paint themselves black on one side, red on the other, and in this ferocious aspect they would war upon their enemies.

Among the Headhunters of the Upper Amazon, with whom I lived for some months in 1933-34, the achiote is considered a magical tree and like all the plants they cultivate is attributed with a WAKANI or soul. Since this magical achiote bush, which they call IPIAKU, has a female soul, it is the custom to entrust its care to the women, who harvest the seeds and press them into small bamboo vessels which are given to both men and women to carry. A Headhunter, like a "civilized" woman, would never be caught without an achiote rouge tube—for who knows where and when it might be needed? To an Indian, and especially to the Headhunter, danger lurks everywhere; the air, the rivers, are filled with evil genii who are constantly seeking to inflict harm, and using achiote dye is one means of combating this evil influence. Primarily, the painting of the face with achiote, which is done by making large round circles about the cheeks, is of combined religious and magical significance. Often the dye is mixed with the oil taken from the mysterious cave-dwelling nocturnal oil-bird, and then the color is said to possess much power against the evil-eye, and is a good augury for hunting. Some Headhunters even regard it as a love charm and in this use of achiote the Headhunters are not unique, as all the Indians of the great Amazonian watershed use it for the same purpose.

The name by which it is known to the European market, URUNU, comes from the Tupu languages of a lower Amazonic tribe. In France the dye is known as URUKU; in Italy and in the United States, it is called ANNATTO;\* while it becomes FAROH in the British colonies and ORLEAN to the Dutch in their South American colony of Surinam. In Central and South America the material is best known under the ancient Mexican name of ACHIOTE, adopted from the Aztec word ACHIOTL. It was first described botanically by Linnaeus under the name of *Bixa Orellana*, the specific name being the common name in use by certain Amazonian tribes.

\* Other spellings of this word are ANATTA, ANATTO, ANOTTO, and ANNOTTO.



At left, a young Colorado Indian preparing achiote to dye his body red for a special ceremony. Below, a native with reddened body and characteristic hair-cut. Beside him, Mrs. Christine von Hagen, who aroused curiosity because she painted only her lips red.



While all Indians in these regions paint themselves with the achiote, none have reached such a stage of decoration as have the Colorado Indians of western Ecuador. If some are wont to complain about modern women being over-rouged, what are we to think of a whole tribe of people who color themselves red from the top of their hair to the bottoms of their feet?

With such a custom the Colorado Indians remain unique, for they are never seen without this brilliant scarlet paint derived from the seeds of the achiote.

They are a curious, little known tribe of Indians living at the base of the western Andes in the province of Esmeraldas. There are now only 125 left, but they numbered thousands before the conquest of the Inca by the Spaniard. During one of the sorties by the conquerors these inoffensive red men were discovered and named the Colorados or "Red Ones." These Indians, who are related to the ancient Chibchas of Colombia, have accentuated many of their ancient customs to the point where they believe it always necessary to dye their bodies red. The process is complicated and the dye takes some time to apply. The capsules of the achiote are emptied on a banana leaf and quantities are taken into the hand, expectorated upon, and rubbed for a while until the hand is thoroughly coated; then the red dye is systematically rubbed into the hair, down to the roots. The Colorados do not remove the natural wax testa of the achiote, therefore the hair becomes stiff. It is later combed and then cut with scissors so that this coiffure looks something like the old-time "bowl-trim," with the exception that the hair hangs down in front of the eyes, necessitating the Indian's leaning backward in order to see forward.

Over the brilliant red they sometimes paint geometrical black lines from the juice of the fruit of the genip (*Genipa americana*), a large fruit that yields a harmless black dye (another commodity for which modern commerce is searching).

Curiously enough, the woman of the tribe does not color herself completely red, but only dyes her face. She uses the achiote for other purposes, however, such as the dyeing of cloth. Whenever the Colorado moves away from the house to work in his plantations, or to fish or to attend a festival, red coloring is applied. He is thus never without it and in this custom one sees the entire compass of superstitions of the American Indian exemplified.

Why do they color themselves and why do they use achiote seeds for this purpose? In primitive reasoning, to be full of blood means to be alive; to be without it means to be dead; to them blood possesses a vital being apart from the body and is thus magical and mystical. To the Indian to be of the same blood is to possess the same vital spirit that makes them all of the same single living unit. To them this is what blood relationships really consist of.

In far-away Australia, tribes of natives who are at enmity with one another may meet to end their bad relations; the peace conference always contains a blood-drinking ceremony wherein each tribe drinks the fresh blood of another. In Australia, where the achiote bush does not exist, the



natives smear their bodies with another symbol for blood—that of red ochre—which has the same effect on them as the *achiote* has on the Colorado Indian. It is not only a decoration (although to the Colorados it may now mean only this), but is a means of protection against unseen forces, malignant principles, death and evil, and is the only agent that can overcome witchcraft and the countless evil forces that animate the whole organic and inorganic world. By smearing on blood or the symbol of blood the Indian becomes possessed of tribal blood-power and inherits all its collective strength; thus he can do battle with the *genii* of evil, not as an individual, but as the whole tribe. Since *achiote* is the special symbol of blood, and the symbols of Indians are realistic in their eyes, *achiote* is not only the symbol of blood—it is blood; and thus the Colorados go through their lives day and night clad in a fiery mantle of red to ward off the principles of evil.

It became highly ludicrous to my wife to see the men decorating themselves with the same pomposity as modern women, and to the men of the Colorados she became in turn the same object of wonder and amazement when she, like themselves, decorated her face. On one occasion, she applied rouge to her lips and cheeks in front of them. While the men gaped in wonder, a little Colorado boy, scarlet-red like the men, came forward and asked, "Why don't you put the red all over your body as we do, why do you only put it on your lips?"

## *Ground-Covers For Difficult Places*

*By Mabel Choate*

SOME years ago, when I took over "Naumkeag" in Berkshire County, Mass., there were just two kinds of ground-cover on the place, *pachysandra* and *vinca*. The *pachysandra* was planted where the growing and mowing of grass had proved impossible, and the *vinca* under tall shrubs in places inaccessible to anything but weeds. The idea of having ground-covers in order to gain effects of space, distance, design, or contrast of color had never occurred to anyone; nor had the idea penetrated that their use might do away with the expense of having two men mowing lawns for two days a week, as had been customary in the good old Victorian days.

Now, after ten years, almost all the difficult places are filled with something other than grass, and the variety of plants used is a constant source of delight to myself and of surprise and interest to visitors.



von Hagen, Victor Wolfgang. 1940. "Achiote, The Blood Tree." *Journal of the New York Botanical Garden* 41(484), 81–86.

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