

Datura Rituals in the Vajramahabhairava-Tantra¹

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Summary

The occurrence of a plant known as *da dhu ra* is investigated in the pre-11th century Vajramahabhairava-tantra, an Indian Buddhist tantric text existant in Tibetan translation. Internal evidence from the texts, and linguistic evidence, identifying *da dhu ra* as *Datura metel* is given despite current certainty of the New World origin of the genus *Datura*.

Zusammenfassung

Die als *da dhu ra* bekannte Pflanze taucht in einem Vajramahabhairava-Tantra aus der Zeit vor dem 11. Jahrhundert (ein indisch-buddhistischer Tantratext) in einer tibetischen Übersetzung auf. Die Untersuchung des Textes sowie die linguistische Evidenz weist auf, daß *da dhu ra* als *Datura metel* identifiziert werden muß, obwohl die landläufige Gewißheit den Ursprung der Gattung *Datura* in die Neue Welt verlegt.

Schlagwörter: Indien, Tibet, Datura, Buddhismus, Ethnobotanik

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To demonstrate the endemicity to the Indian Subcontinent of *Datura metel*, any native Indian text containing convincing references to *D. metel* and datable to pre-columbian times would be sufficient. This paper attempts to provide formal evidence for the endemicity of *D. metel* to the Old World firstly by presenting the *Datura* rituals of the Vajramahabhairava-tantra having dated and localized this text, and secondly by glancing at the history of the Sanskrit word *dhattūra* '*D. metel*' and its descendants in modern Indian languages.

The presentation of such evidence is only necessary because current botanical research insists that all *Datura* species in the Old World are post-columbian imports from the New. SYMON states: "There is no convincing evidence of their (*Datura*'s) establishment in the Old World prior to the (European) discovery of America ... *Datura* should be removed from any list of cosmopolitan genera" (1991: 142). Or again, SYMON and HAEGI are almost as definite: "In Asia, as in Europe, the total absence of *Datura* among the numerous recognizable de-

scriptions and illustrations of a wide range of plants in many and varied works argues strongly against its origin in the Old World" (1991: 202). And, concerning *Datura* in India, they say: "Original Hindu and Sanskrit literature has not been available to us. LANCASTER (1965) records *D. metel* amongst the sacred flowers used by the Hindus. As many other flowers of undoubted American origin e.g. *Tagetes*, *Polianthes*, *Magnolia grandiflora* L. and *Mirabilis* are so honoured of the rapid adoption of attractive exotic plants" (1991: 201).

Such attitudes contrast with those of earlier European scholars who were convinced – as far as *Datura stramonium* in Europe was concerned – of *Datura*'s Old World origin. The Afro-Asian origin of *Datura* is mentioned in LINNAEUS (1753), with the plant having apparently already been introduced by the Romani into North Germany in the 16th century (VAN DIEKEN 1971:73). 19th and early 20th century works retain and reinforce this view. The Pallas Lexicon of 1896 (XII: 396) is certain of the plant's importation into the Kingdom of Hungary

by the Romani – all the way from India. In 1929 P. GRAEBNER thought the plants originated in Central Asia or Southern Russia (1929: 133), which view harmonizes well with the idea of its importation into India by the Aryans.

These views may well be mistaken in the case of *D. stramonium* which does seem to be genuinely American, while the status of *D. metel* in the South-east Europe is open to question. In defence of HAEGI and SYMONI it has to be conceded that a non-native genus naturalized in Europe shortly after Columbus' discovery of the New World would seem to be a prime candidate for American import status, but perhaps the coincidence of simultaneous importation of a *Datura* species from India by the Romani can be of the same exotic genus entering Europe at the same time from opposite points of the compass².

Datura in the Vajramahabhairava-tantra

Datura metel, under the name *dhattūra*, has been known in India for centuries. There are references to it in the Amarakośa (100.78), Vātsyāyana's Kāmāsutra (VII. 1.24 and 2.42) and the Matsyapurāṇa (95.24; cf. BANERJI 1980: 38), and doubtless also in many more texts. The Vajramahabhairava-tantra rituals given in this paper are particularly useful as they comprise connected rituals (rather than just brief references) involving *dhattūra* in typical magical uses.

The Śrī-vajramahabhairava-tantra (= Vbt.) is an Indian Buddhist tantric ritual text of which we possess versions descended from a pre-13th century Tibetan translation of a lost Sanskrit (or Sanskritized Prakrit) original. The Sanskrit version was known to the compiler of the Tibetan collection in which the Tibetan translation of the Vbt. is included, hence a latest possible date of c.1300 can be

suggested for this text based on the known dates of the compiler Buston (1290–1364), though doubtless the text is much earlier. The dates of the revealer of the text, the pandit Lalitavajra, are much less certain, though the Tibetan historian Taranatha writing in 1608 (CHATTOPADYAYA 1970: 242) considered him a contemporary of the dialectician Dharmakīrti (fl.c. 650–700). A date of c. 600 is accepted for the beginnings of Tantric written literature in India, so the emergence of the Vbt. can be dated to sometime between the widely separated pair of dates 650–1200.

The area of origin of the Vbt. according to its own colophon (148r³; translated in SIKLÓS 1990:123) and according to the history of Taranatha (CHATTOPADYAYA 1970: 244) is the land of Urgyan, the Tibetan equivalent of the Sanskrit toponym Oḍḍiyāna which is usually identified with the present-day Swat district of northern Pakistan. A South Indian location for Oḍḍiyāna has also been suggested⁴, but either way the Vbt. remains an essentially typical Indian tantric work.

The Vbt. deals with the rituals of the wrathful Buffalo-headed deity Vajrabhairava (a manifestation of the Buddhist Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī). Notable amongst these many and varied rituals are a set of five, three from the 2nd chapter and two from the 4th. These all contain references to a plant known in the Tibetan text as *da dhu ra*. These references follow:

A. Vbt. ii. 136 r.

Tibetan text:

ji ltar gsad par 'dod pa'i sngags pas dur khrod kyi ras la / dug dang / khrag dang / lan tshwa dang / ske tshe dang / nim ba dang / dha du ra'i khu ba yis rdo rje 'jigs byed chen po'i 'khor lo le tshe bcu drug pa bya rog chen po'i sgro rtse'i smyu gu

'am / mi'i rus pa'i smyu gus gcer bu skra
bshig pas kha lhor bltas te / ma he'i
gdong gi sbyor bas bri bar bya'o // me
gnyis kyi dbus su bsgrub bya'i ming dang
bcas par gzhag la de yi ge bcu pas bskor
zhing hum brgyad bri // zur rnams su phat
kyi yi ge rnams bri // bdag nyid tsha ba'i
mar gyis lus byugs la / thod pa gnyis kyi
dbus su 'khrul 'khor rab tu bcug la sgyed
bu gsum gyi steng du bzhag nas dur
khrod kyi mgal pas me rab tu spar te /
rkang pa g.yon pas mnan la yi ge bcu pa'i
sngags bzlas so // de yis skad cig gis the
tshom med par 'chi'o //

Translation:

The mantrin who desires to kill should, in union with the Buffalo-headed One (= the deity Vajrabhairava), naked, with dishevelled hair and facing south, draw the sixteen-section wheel of Vajramahabhairava (= Vajrabhairava) on a shroud in venom, blood, salt, black mustard, *nimba* (*Azadirachta indica*) and *Datura* juice using a pen made from a raven feather or from human bone. When he has placed it in between two fires along with the name of the victim of the rite, he surrounds it with the ten syllables and writes eight HŪMs. In the corners the syllable PHAT is to be written. Anointing himself with warm butter he places this magical device within two crania. When he has placed it above three hearths, he should kindle a fire with cremation wood. Then he tramples it with his left foot and recites the ten syllable mantra. By this means the victim will doubtless die instantly.

B. Vbt. ii. 137 v.

Tibetan text:

//gzhan yang dbye ba'i rab tu sbyor ba ni
bya rog dang 'ug pa'i gshog pa dang /
bram ze dang gtum po rnams kyi skra
gcig ty byas la / dha du ra'i shing la me
rab tu sbar te / du ba med pa'i mes bsregs

la / de'i thal ba blangs la yi ge bcu pa'i
sngags bzlas nas bud med dang skyas pa
gnyis kyi bar du thal ba bzhag na / de
skad cig gis 'byed par byed do//

Translation: Also, for the rite of separation, he puts together the wings of a crow and an owl and the hair of a brahmin and an outcaste and kindles a fire of *Datura* wood. Burning these items in this smokeless fire he takes the ashes and, if he puts the ashes in between a woman and a man after reciting the ten-syllable mantra, they will instantly be separated.

C. Vbt. ii. 138 v.

Tibetan text: // de nas sngags pas smyo
bar bya bar 'dod na dha du ra'i 'bras bu
blangs la / sha chen dang lhan cig tu
shing srin gyis zos pa'i phye ma dang
bsres nas bza' ba dang btung ba la ni
sbyin no // sngags kyang bzlas pa bya ste
/ de skad cig gis smyo bar 'gyur zhing
zhag bdun gyis 'chi'o //

Translation: Then, if the mantrin wants to drive someone insane, he takes *Datura* fruit and, mixing it with human flesh and worm-eaten sawdust, offers it in food or drink. He recites the mantra and that person will instantly go insane and then die within seven days.

D. Vbt. iv. 144 r

Tibetan text:

de nas nor nor ma yin par bya bar 'dod na
// ras bal gyi me la dha du ra'i 'bras bu
dang bcas par mtshan mo yi ge bcu pa' i
sngags brgya rtsa brgyad sbyin sreg byas
na shin tu chud zos par 'gyor ro //

Translation: Then if, wanting to turn wealth into poverty, he performs a hundred and eight burnt offerings at night in a fire of cotton using *Datura* fruit, (that

wealth) will indeed become trifling.

E. Vbt. iv. 144 v.

Tibetan text: de nas bya rog gi tshang
dang 'bras kyi phub ma dang lhan cig tu
dha du ra' i shing gis me rab tu sbar nas /
yi ge bcu pa'i sngags gang gi ming dang
bcas par nam phyed na sbyin sreg byas na
/ nyi ma bdun gyis skrod par 'gyor ro //

Translation:

Then, if he performs burnt offerings at
midnight with a crow' nest and rice husks
using the ten syllable mantra along with
the victim's name after kindling the fire
in *Datura* wood, (the victim), will be dri-
ven away within seven days.

The identification of *da dhu ra*

The plant *da dhu ra* occurs only in these
passages in the Vbt. Whilst passage A
might be the most interesting for students
of magic, passage C is more significant
for those wishing to identify *da dhu ra*
on the basis of its described effects after
ingestion. A member of the Solanaceae
certainly suggests itself as a suitable can-
didate, but through lack of any physical
description of the plant the quoted passa-
ges can at best only suggest the identifi-
cation of *da dhu ra* as *Datura metel* on
the basis of toxic effects common to
other indian Solanaceae. Nonetheless the
Vbt. occurrences at least provide a rough-
ly datable (and definitely pre-Columbian)
record of the word *da dhu ra* on the basis
of which the linguistic evidence can be
investigated. This evidence leads in-
escapably to the conclusion that it is in-
deed *Datura metel* which is referred to in
Vbt.

The written Tibetan word *da dhu ra*
(met with in aspirated versions *dha du ra*
and *da dhu ra*) is a transliteration of the
Sanskrit *dhattūra*. White thorn-apple,

Datura metel, is given as the usual equi-
valent in the dictionaries (MONIER-
WILLIAMS 1899; APTE 1959), and
while other solanaceous plants are
possible confusion species, the identifica-
tion is well-established in the standard
sources (with other distinct Sanskrit na-
mes serving for other common Solana-
ceae).

The basic Sanskrit term *dhattūra*- has
descendants in many Indian languages, in
all of which it means primarily *D. metel*.
These words have been placed in six
phonetic categories by TURNER (1966:
6714):

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| 1. Prakrit | <i>dhattūra</i> ⁻⁴ |
| Ṣiṇā-dard | <i>dātūro</i> - m. |
| Kashmiri | <i>datur</i> - m. |
| Sindhī | <i>dhātūro</i> - m. |
| Panjabī | <i>dhatūrā</i> |
| Kumaunī | <i>dhaturo</i> |
| Gaṅgoī | <i>dhatūr</i> |
| Nepālī | <i>dhaturo</i> |
| Assamese | <i>dhātūrā</i> |
| Ōriya | <i>dhātūrā</i> |
| Hindī | <i>dhatūr</i> , -a m.
(hence also
<i>dhatūriya</i> m.
'poisoner') |
| Mārwāṇī | <i>dhaturo</i> |
| Gujarātī | <i>dhatūr</i> ,
<i>dhāt</i> - m. |
| 2. Maithilī | <i>dhathūr</i> |
| 3. Assamese | <i>dhūtūrā</i> |
| Bengalī/Ōriya | <i>dhutūrā</i> |
| Hindī | <i>dhutūrā</i> m. |
| Marāṭhī | <i>dhutrā</i> ,
<i>dhotrā</i> m. |
| 4. Bengali | <i>dhuthura</i> |
| Maithilī | <i>dhuthur</i> |
| 5. Ōriya | <i>dudurā</i> |
| 6. Prakrit | <i>dhutta</i> - |

It is immediately apparent that the consistency with which the word is preserved in the meaning of *D. metel* in all major Prakrit-based (and thus Sanskrit-based) Indian languages makes a transfer in meaning from an indigenous Solanaceous (or any other) plant to a supposed post-Columbian import very unlikely indeed. Sanskrit *dhattūra* simply must mean the same as its many descendants listed above. The distance in space and time which separates languages such as Gujarati and Assamese also positions the word *dhattūra* clearly in the vocabulary of ancestral Prakrit dialects which precede any seaborne contacts mediated by Europeans with the New World. The word also seems to be original Aryan and not a loan from Dravidian, this having been observed in 1891 by DYMOCK, WARDEN and HOOPER (II: 585) who consequently also thought that *D. metel* might be an import from Centra Asia⁵.

Conclusion

There may be other evidence which could be adduced in support of Old World *Datura*⁶ but any position arguing for the endemicity to the Americas of the *Datura* genus in general, and the species *D. metel* in particular, must be insecure purely on the basis of the above rituals. The Indian lexical evidence also means that any botanist wishing to argue against the endemicity of *Datura* in India needs to:

1. disprove the well-established equation of Skt. *dhattūra* to *Datura* (and thereby contradict all lexical sources).
2. explain the improbable switch in meaning from a Skt. word *dhattūra* not meaning *Datura* to words based on the Sanskrit *dhattūra* in modern Indian vernaculars meaning *Datura*.

3. identify the original Sanskrit *dhattūra* bearing in mind that distinct names for other common solanaceous species exist in Sanskrit.

All three tasks are probably impossible, an impossibility which can lead only to one conclusion – *D. metel* was present in India prior to European contact with the New World. Any such conclusion necessitates the revision of current botanical opinion regarding the origins of the genus *Datura* in general and the species *D. metel*, *D. ferox* and *D. leschenhaultii* in particular.

Notes

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² Extra research, both botanical and linguistic, is needed to shed light upon the complex situation in Europe, and especially upon the *stramonium/metel* duo in Eastern Europe and West Asia.

³ References are to the Peking Blockprint of the Tibetan Bka,gyur (catalogue: Ui 1934) and to SIKLÓS 1990.

⁴ Lokesh CHANDRA has argued for a South Indian location for Oḍḍiyāna (1980).

⁵ It might be worth checking (earlier) Central Asian etymologies for *D. metel*, though precisely locating the home of *D. metel* is not necessary for arguing against its American origin. In later eras theoretical knowledge of the ritual and toxic uses of *Datura* spread to the Lamaist lands of Central Asia since Tibetan, Mongolian and Manchu translations of the Vbt. all exist, and it is possible – though not proven – that *Datura* seeds could have been traded throughout the Lamaist world just as many other Indian ritual plants were.

⁶ *Datura metel*, regarded as native to the Americas, has never been found in a 'native' wild state there. The issue of the lack of a wild type for *D.*

metel in the Americas is avoided by calling the plant "essentially a collection of cultivars", these cultivars supposedly originating in pre-Columbian America rather than in Europe (SYMOM and HAEGI 1991: 205).

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