



HOKKAIDO UNIVERSITY

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A PECULIAR POISON USED BY THE AINU FOR BIRD HUNTING*

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The Ainu, the aborigines of Yezo, now officially called Hokkaido since 1869, lived chiefly on natural products, particularly on game before they had contact with the civilized Japanese. On account of very poorly developed weapons, many kinds of primitive traps were specially devised by themselves for each animal according to its habits. Among them the most common type is the spring-bow with the poisoned arrow for deer and bears. The arrow poison was prepared from the roots of aconite plant, *Aconitum subcuneatum* NAKAI, containing aconitine which when it is applied attacks the animal's nervous centre of respiration.

Another kind of poison has been employed for hunting until quite recently by the Ainu who live in the northeastern part of Hokkaido near the Kurile Islands. This venom was obtained by the Ainu from the roots of Ikema as it is called in Japanese, a kind of wild milk weed, *Cynanchum Ikema* OHWI, which is native to Yezo and Japan proper. The use of this venom in hunting has not been previously reported and it has been almost lost from the memory of the present-day Ainu.

The Ainu dig up the roots of the plant in early spring before the growth of shoots or in autumn after the decaying of the vine and leaves. The roots are used either in a fresh state or stored to dry in the house for future use. The roots are known generally as Penup among the Ainu and are employed as a remedy good for any complaint, based largely upon superstition (BATCHELOR and MIYABE 1893, SEKIBA 1896). As the Ainu think the Evil Spirits and Ghosts which cause sickness will be driven away by the smell of Penup, they hang the roots at the entrance to keep the Evil Spirits out. In the presence of the sick they chew up the roots and spit and blow from the mouth all over making a spray. They do this sometimes inside of the hut, through the window

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or through whole villages when there is an epidemic disease. On the other hand a medicinal value of the roots is actually proved among them as an antidote for poisoning, food poisoning in particular, curing stomachache and healing wounds of all kinds when administrated as a sterilizer. A special effectiveness against small pox is believed in. Therefore the Ainu women carry the roots in the necklace and the men around the waist believing them to act as a charm. At the same time they are ready for the instantaneous use.

Not long ago the northeastern Ainu used the roots for the hunting of the Bering Island raven, *Corvus corax behringianus* DYB. which comes over there from Kamchatka through the Kurile chain to hibernate during the cold months. The method of hunting is quite interesting. First fresh salmon are carefully skinned and then filled again with a mixture of flesh and the roots thoroughly mingled by pounding. The poisoned fish with a normal appearance are scattered over the snow where the raven visits frequently. The poison eaten produces drunkenness and giddiness of the bird causing loss of all control over wings and legs. This enables the hunter to approach the prey without difficulty. Curiously the venom is said to have effect only upon the Bering Island raven but to be quite ineffective upon the common crows, *Corvus coronoides japonensis* BON. and *C. corone* L. which abound in the locality throughout all seasons.

The poison was also used upon the eagle. When there were plenty of eagles in Yezo the Ainu were accustomed to catch them by the legs using a wire hook when they were feeding on the prey given before a hut or snow hole in which the Ainu hid themselves. In this case they blow the chewed Penup upon the angry bird to make it quiet.

The roots taste a little sweet when eaten by man and give rise to an intoxicating effect causing faintness which is not serious. Indeed when well cooked the roots are said to be palatable as a food article. However, half cooked roots have a little strong effect on man. IWAKAWA (1912) made a series of experiments with the extract of the roots injecting it into the frog, cat etc., and observed paralysing effect on nerves of the motor system. He calls the poison cynanchotoxin but the chemical nature has not yet been determined.

Literature

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