

## BOOK REVIEWS: Two Roads to Magical Herbalism

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### *A Compendium of Herbal Magick*

Paul Beyerl

Custer, WA: Phoenix Publishing, 1998

Paperback, 528 pp, index, B&W illustrations. US \$24.50

### *Psychedelic Shamanism*

Jim DeKorne

Port Townsend, WA: Loompanics, 1994

Paperback, 155 pp, index, color photographs, B&W illustrations. US \$19.95

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Writers of nonfiction often say that their books are made up of other books. That statement acknowledges the necessity of research. When it comes to herbalism, however, an unfortunate tendency at least three centuries old leads writers to take the saying too literally. Too many Pagan writers just recycle older published material without ever getting their hands dirty in the herb garden — or at least they convey that impression.

Of course, one of the joys of ‘magical herbalism’ Wicca style is apparently that nothing needs to be tested. A writer can compile all the older material that he or she can lay hands on and produce a work full of “Legend has it ...” and “It is said that ...”

Consider part of Paul Beyerl’s entry for basil in his new *Compendium of Herbal Magic*: “It is believed that Solomon chose sweet basil when making his ritual asperger to use in his temple.” The writer’s use of the passive voice (“It is believed”) is a tipoff that he takes no responsibility for the accuracy of his material nor even feels obligated to tell his reader where it came from. Beyerl also refers to his plants as “herbes.” Evidently the silent final ‘e’ is there to make his reader feel Olde English or some such thing. In North America at the close of the twentieth century, who needs this?

In Beyerl’s case, he mainly recycles his own *Master Book of Herbalism* (Phoenix 1984) and an even older work, Mary Grieve’s *A Modern Herbal*, first published in 1931. Grieve combined plant descriptions, culinary and medical



uses and a bit of folklore for each herb she described in her two-volume work, but her research was state-of-the-art in the 1920s. Herbal knowledge has progressed since then, and older is not necessarily better.

Perhaps we have two adjacent issues here, medicine and magic. If you want to learn the herbal medicine of your region, then start by finding recent, informed books, seminars, and so forth particular to it. For instance, Michael Moore's books and workshops are unsurpassed for the American Southwest and Southern Rocky Mountains. (Visit his Southwest School of Botanical Medicine on the Web at <http://chili.rt66.com/hrbmoore/HOMEPAGE/HomePage.html>) Another good western North American starting point is Gregory L. Tilford's *The EcoHerbalist's Fieldbook: Wildcrafting in the Mountain West* (Mountain Weed Publishing, 1993).

To keep up with current research, consider a subscription to *HerbalGram*, magazine of the American Botanical Council, whose motto is "Educating the public on the use of herbs and phytomedicines." This quarterly magazine costs \$25/year from the American Botanical Council, P.O. Box 201660, Austin, Texas 78720 ([www.herbalgram.org](http://www.herbalgram.org)).

A good history of herbal medicine is Barbara Griggs' *Green Pharmacy* (1981, 1997) which includes material on the differing legal status of herbal medicine in the United States, Britain, Canada, and Australia.

When it comes to magic, however, recycling reigns. Here Beyerl barely improves on Scott Cunningham's sketchy and derivative *Magical Herbalism* (1982) and *Encyclopedia of Magical Herbs* (1985). *Magical Herbalism*, for instance, lists basil as having the basic powers of "protection, intellectual, manifestations" and suggests: "Carry the buds to mend a broken heart. Burn to set up a material basis in which spirits may manifest during ceremonies of this kind. Add to love and protection sachets." Cunningham's larger encyclopedia adds instructions for using basil in love divinations and claims that whether a sprig of basil withers in someone's hand tells whether that person is "chaste or promiscuous." It also "is used to keep goats away from your property, to attract scorpions, and to prevent inebriation." (The passive voice again.) Did the late Cunningham ever compare basil's power to a four-foot wire-mesh fence as a goat-stopper? Did he ever desire scorpions in his home? We will never know.

Sadly, Beyerl's and Cunningham's common style is the norm in Pagan writing on magical herbalism. As a reader, I miss one thing: the voice of experience. I would never want to trust any physical ill to a herbal practitioner who had never tried his or her own preparations; likewise, I miss the "I did it and this is what happened" component in books such as *A Compendium of Herbal Magick*. Other writers on herbalism can and do take that step. For an example, read Matthew Woods's *Seven Herbs: Plants as Teachers* (North

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Atlantic Books, 1986). Woods does not merely copy the words of bygone experts such as Paracelsus and Nicholas Culpeper, but he also tests them against his experience (Is Artemisia really an herb of Venus?) and provides case histories of healings. For another approach to learning directly from plants rather than from someone else's books, read Stephen Buhner's *Sacred Plant Medicine* (Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1996).

Good writing on magical herbalism can be found, but it seems to be coming from outside the capital-P Pagan community. Jim DeKorne's *Psychedelic Shamanism* serves as an example. Subtitled "The cultivation, preparation, and shamanic use of psychotropic plants," it was published by Loompanics Unlimited, "sellers of unusual books," (P.O. Box 1197, Port Townsend, Washington 98363).

The way that DeKorne treats the tricky psychotropic Solanaceae (belladonna, datura, and so forth) indicates the depth of his research. Cunningham, after giving an unattributed legend in his *Encyclopedia* about "the priests of Bellona" drinking a belladonna infusion in ancient Rome, goes on to write: "In the past [belladonna] was used to encourage astral projection and to produce visions, but safer alternatives are available today and belladonna is best avoided." He suggests using datura "to break spells by sprinkling it around the home. It also protects against evil spirits. ... A few datura leaves placed on the crown of a hat protects [sic] the wearer from apoplexy as well as sunstroke." His shamanic advice: "Do not eat."

Beyerl skips belladonna altogether. He lists datura (as "jimsonweed") in two long lists of 'Magickal Herbes' and 'Visionary Herbes' but says only this in its individual entry: "In some of the shamanic cultures of northern Mexico and in some of the religious which pay homage to the Universe with peyote, jimsonweed is held in poor esteem, believed to be an herbe which is used by negative practitioners. Established lore does not recommend this herbe for use."

And what is a 'magickal herbe'? To Beyerl, "A Magickal Herbe is one which, well, has magick! ... primarily, a Magickal Herbe is used to bring about change."



Someone wishing to practice shamanic witchcraft might be looking for a little more information than that. They may, like Jim DeKorne, “be interested in the Mystery of consciousness, and ... use shamanic substances and techniques to help [them] access states of awareness that are not easily available by other means.”

*Psychedelic Shamanism* offers such a reader an entire chapter on the belladonna alkaloids, on top of six preceding chapters discussing shamanic models of reality and the hypothesized existence of plant-based “allies” or teachers, “entities of the imaginal realm.” This, not list-making, is writing about magical herbalism.

DeKorne goes on to suggest the Solanaceae’s association with “aggressive female sexuality, a mystique which, in common with the *femme fatale* and witch archetypes in general, is almost the defining characteristic of the ancient goddess religions,” including, he adds, some of the more violent manifestations of the worship of Kali. “The consistency of these themes suggests that the entities associated with the belladonna alkaloids are primordial earth-forces (always symbolically female) which have been brutally and systematically repressed in human consciousness for literally thousands of years.” Perhaps, he suggests, this explains why most accounts of datura trips by Western male writers are so negative, yet “both female witches and New World shamans maintain a respectful affinity for the plant.” DeKorne goes on to provide cultivation instructions for several *Datura* species and includes descriptions of his own and others’ experience with it — even though he admits that it is a plant agent he normally avoids.

His other chapters discuss in similar detail ayahuasca and similar plant combinations, psilocybin, and various lesser-known “minor psychedelics” obtainable from plants. His references range from famous ethnobotanists such as Richard Schultes to Kabbalists, Gnostics, shamans of various cultures and their anthropological interlocutors, as well as modern advocates of entheogen-based exploration such as Terence McKenna and Alexander Shulgin. I am still waiting for the Wiccan magical herbalists to reach out as far, instead of recycling a narrow Renaissance tradition of plant correspondences. But meanwhile, it’s time to go water the *Datura*.

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