

What Does Beltane Have To Do With American Herbalism
By Shereel Washington

Well, we are about to transition from Spring into Summer over the next few weeks. I'm sure by now many people in America's herbalist and homeopathic community have been reading or hearing about the holiday many are calling "Beltane". People have been wishing each other 'Happy Beltane' and greeting each other with similar phrases for a few days now. I have to admit that, prior to recent weeks, I had never heard of this event or holiday. Well, of course since I was seeing this greeting so often, I gave it a little research to see what all this about.

So to get right to it, turns out that Beltane is a once popular Western European nature worship & fertility holiday celebration. The more secular version of Beltane has evolved in many countries and cultures into what we call "May Day". Beltane is generally started around May 1st, with celebrations lasting as long as 8 days. Beltane celebrates the start of planting and farming seasons. In almost all of its rites, practices, and activities, Beltane/BelDane is taken from the worship of the Canaanite god "Bel" AKA "Baal". Baal worship consisted of wildly exciting festivals celebrating fertility and sexual activities leading to procreation and the expansion of humanity, but that wasn't all. Baal festivals celebrated the increased planetary warmth, the increased fire and heat from the sun, and the restored freedom, renewal, and revival of the land following the cold, darkness, and desolation of the Winter solstice.

A key component of Baal celebrations also recognized the revival and regrowth of plants, flowers, and trees. It also recognized the start of mating season and procreation processes and sexual activities within nature as a whole, including procreation activities happening throughout the animal kingdom. Baal festivals were recorded in the Middle East as early as 3000 BC, and continued to spread primarily in Western Europe into the 17th Century. It has since been revived by Wiccans and nature worshipers in the Americas in the present day with the help of European global exploration, colonialism, and imperialism.

All that said, it appears that many people in the American Herbalism and the holistic health community are using "Beltane" and other Western European religious and social practices to establish "ownership rights" over American Herbalism, American Homeopathy, and American Holistic Health as a whole. The fact is that this attempted co-opting of recorded factual history is sadly typical of the deliberate and accidental misappropriation of a collection of integrated cultural and societal homeopathic practices and processes that were fully in place long before European explorers arrived in the Americas.

My goal in this share is to affirm American Herbalism and Homeopathy as separate from European practices of the same name. The fact is that American Herbalism today, as represented by many holistic health schools, herbal institutions, and homeopathic

associations in the U.S., and as being broadcast especially around seasonal celebrations generally practiced exclusively by Western Europeans, is being presented and sold as the product of Western European development and invention. Whether this culturally insulting and disrespectful representation is accidental or intentional, it is clear that the true founders and creators of American Herbalism are literally being robbed of their historical contributions and of their essential presence and originality as participants in the development and propagation of the human race. As an herbalist of African descent, I am concerned that so much of American Herbalism is aggressively portrayed and boldly represented as almost having solely resulted from the ingenuity of exploring, invading and enslaving Western Europeans.

Western European Herbalism and Homeopathy are very real and valid as a component of Global Herbalism and Homeopathy. When we talk, however, about Herbalism in the Americas, we should appropriately, respectfully, and rightfully engage and honor the Native American and indigenous practitioners and originators of this field in these lands as much as possible. In doing so we most accurately present American Herbalism, and we honestly reflect the historical practices and original homeopathic and herbal processes developed by Native and Indigenous peoples of this region of the world. A great example of that would be when we talk about herbal, medicinal and homeopathic experiences of European explorers and immigrants to the Americas. We can directly address what Native Americans did to show Europeans arriving on both continents what was food and what was not food. We can confirm how Europeans learned what was healthy and what was deadly. That includes everything from animals, to plants, to fish and crustaceans, to flowers, vegetables, fruits, trees, and yes, including restorative herbs and plants.

Other Examples:

- The first Virginia colony was a complete failure with no trace of any survivors except by rumor. Likely reasons? Poison plants and animals, bacteria, infections, viruses, and lack of basic knowledge of what was food and what was not food.
- Explorers from all parts of Europe were saved from deadly diseases, viruses, and bacterial infections by the medical efforts and cures provided by the native tribes with whom they engaged. These soldiers, sailors, priests, and invaders were not able to return the favor regarding the diseases and pathogens they brought from Europe because the plants, herbs, and compounds that resolved and eradicated the pathogens of Europe were simply not available. As a result of that minor detail, literally millions of Native Americans and indigenous societies were literally made extinct. This was first rooted in the accidental reality of nature, but later became a deliberate component of subjugation and conquest. This sad series of events led to the highly successful African slave trade.
- As Africans who were largely immune from European pathogens were brought to the Americas, many brought foods, plants, and herbs here that they shared and integrated within the diets of the native and indigenous cultures they found here. In their initial escapes from slavery and joining up with these cultures, our first

Africans became acculturated within many American societies as early as the year 1500. Today, Seminoles, Cherokee, Sioux, Iroquois, Apache, and other North American tribes along with the early South Americans societies that became Brazil, Argentina, and Bolivia represent more than 500 years of integration between African and indigenous cultures.

- From Asia and the Pacific Islands, these diverse peoples and cultures have added their plant, herb, and food components into the American Herbalism landscape. This has been the case for at least 200 years and probably longer, given that California itself is named for the African queen “Calafia” whose royal family and servants is said to have greeted even the first Pacific islanders who arrived on the shores of the Western U.S.

Knowing just these few facts, do we really continue to naively and egotistically represent the complex integrated world of American Herbalism and Homeopathy as a European creation???

To be clear, our uniquely American integrated herbal, homeopathic, and holistic health history begs for our deliberate scholarly exploration and affirmative research into the formal genre of Native American Herbalism and Homeopathy, the study of imported plants and herbs from other lands, and understanding of the agricultural technologies and cultural practices brought to the Americas by Africans, Asians, Pacific Rim and Indian Ocean cultures – and yes Europeans too, that uniformly inform and benefit all of us living in this Twenty-First Century American melting pot. In doing so, this amazing “accidental” co-mingling of cultures helps drive the expanding global holistic health and homeopathic wellness industry of our present day.

One positive result of formal classification and scholastic pursuit of uniquely American Herbalism & Homeopathy will be that we may discover & better understand other seasonal nature and fertility celebrations practiced by indigenous and integrated cultures that indigenous to the Americas. Those events then become the starting points for Spring planting celebrations. We can then add the Spring fertility and planting practices of West Africa, Hawai'i, India, Taiwan, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, and celebrations from Eastern and Central Europe as well. Do they celebrate Spring planting in South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Chile, Cambodia or SriLanka? What about Alaska? They too are Americans. Celebrations are as natural, common, and universal in human experience as are the managing and mixing of natural herbs, plants, compounds, and oil extracts to bring about healing, maintain health, strengthen bodies and minds, restore general homeostasis, and even revive from certain death. History makes clear that activity was well in place everywhere in the world long before Etruscans, Minoans, and Trojans collaborated in their founding of Rome.

In summary, the message that must go out is that American Herbalism and Homeopathy are not extensions of European Herbalism and Homeopathy, much less of European culture, especially here in the US. As an herbalist of African descent it must now be clear that I don't celebrate some European religious or cultural practices, nor should I do so to be recognized as an herbalist and homeopath. I don't begrudge anyone the joy of

celebrating Beltane and I won't be offended if anyone wishes me a "Happy Beltane". I can respect the celebration practices of every culture, especially my own, as we all celebrate in diverse ways, while honoring a collective goal of improving human life and quality of life naturally and holistically.

Please consider reviewing these quotes.

<https://theherbalacademy.com/african-american-herbalism-history/>

"...As enslaved African people crossed the Atlantic with the transatlantic slave trade, their herbal knowledge and practices were both influenced by—and appropriated by—European slavers." "...enslaved Africans were often selected for their agricultural expertise because Europeans were not used to farming in the warmer climates of the Caribbean islands "nor the marine/tropical environments of the Americas" (Penniman, 2018).

"In this way, their knowledge of plants—as well as their forced labor—made them vital to the success of the colonies. After arriving in the Americas, cohabitation and collaboration with Indigenous Americans meant that enslaved Africans were then introduced to knowledge of local plants and their medicinal ways. Therefore, African American Herbalism is a hybrid of all the knowledge that enslaved Africans came into contact with leading up to and throughout their enslavement."

As an African American Slave Descendent, I stand on the shoulders of the men and women who came before me that made it possible for me to continue in a long proud tradition. My grandmother was my first herbal teacher and homeopathy instructor. As I close this for general review, I am fondly remembering how she celebrated the herbs and medicinal plants she grew on her little farm. She would walk among them and work with them, simply thanking God for her life in being able to use the herbs she cultivated in ways God intended so they preserved and promoted the lives of people.

May we all celebrate as herbalists and homeopaths with her same approach and perspective.

God bless and Peace to all.

Other Reference Works for Review:

Michael Alan Weiner

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- Earth Medicine: Earth Food – Collier Publishing -1980
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