

Medicinal, Cultural, and Spiritual Relationships between British Columbia First Nations and *Oplopanax horridus*

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Robert Bandringa's FNST 332 course *Ethnobotany of British Columbia First Nations*. The assignment asked students to research a native British Columbian plant specimen and its relation to specific First Nations. The paper uses APA citation style.

Introduction

In the past decade, scientists increasingly began conducting pharmacological and phytochemical research on *Oplopanax horridus* (Sm.) Miq, more commonly known as Devil's club, with international attention seeming to reach a peak after 2010 (Calway et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2013). Research has focused on anticarcinogenic effects, with many initially drawing interest due to the plant's long history as a tonic and all-purpose healer. Others display interest due to the plant's close relation to ginseng, which is widely renowned for its healing capabilities.

This cross between western research and application often misses the more minute details of Devil's club's important cultural role, and many seek to separate it from its culture. In doing so, marketing of the plant and colonialist use of it blatantly ignore its history. Tinctures available online orient themselves toward the ginseng market with many products deriving medicine from *O. horridus*' roots – contrasting traditional harvesting methods which focus on the inner bark (Calway et al., 2011; Figure 1).

Devil's club is also inseparable from spiritual uses. For many coastal First Peoples, *O. horridus* holds great spiritual and ceremonial power. Considering Canada's history of colonization and censoring of Indigenous culture and spirituality, the use of the plant, which stems from traditional Indigenous knowledge, should strive to be more respectful and aware of the holism from which this plant derives its medicine. While I do not suggest anyone using Devil's

club to adhere to Indigenous spiritual ceremony, I understand that to be more harmful than good, I do believe understanding the wider spiritual relationship with Devil's club to be important in its pharmacological potential. Even beyond spiritual and medicinal applications, the plant is multifaceted, being used in a variety of ways including aesthetic decoration and technology. Essentially, ignoring the cultural roles of *O. horridus* among First Peoples while propagating economic-medicinal products derived from it will serve to drown out traditional knowledge.

As Devil's club begins to capture the attention of the world, I strive to learn more about the plant through the voices of tradition. I will examine this plant's usage through the lens of three nations, comparing them to find commonalities, and then proceed to examine settler understandings as a way to observe gaps in their knowledge. To categorize uses, I will be applying Nancy Turner's (2014) categories of food, materials & technology, and medicine & healing (pp. 361-370), but with the addition of ceremony & spirituality as well. Turner herself incorporates ceremony & spirituality within the category of medicine & healing, but I separate these to show the sheer complexity of the traditional relationships. Finally, as this is an Indigenous topic, I believe including my own relationship as a Métis researcher is important; while Metis communities have been documented to use *O. horridus* traditionally, I have no knowledge of it from my own Elders or family, and thus in writing this essay, I myself am learning about this topic for the first time.

Oplopanax horridus

Before proceeding, a brief description of *O. horridus* is necessary. This shrub is tall, up to 3m high, with maple-like leaves. The stems are armed heavily with spines reflecting the specific name *horridus* – the plant is monstrous and dangerous if not handled correctly. The berries are approximately 5-8mm wide and coloured a bright red, greatly contrasting the bold green danger surrounding them. *O. horridus* is found across nearly the entirety of BC, though rarely in the northeast, and it is also seen in Alaska, Alberta, Washington, Oregon, and Montana. Some shrubs are also found around the Great Lakes of eastern North America. This plant tends to like moist, rainy climates, moist to wet soil and shaded forest areas (Klinkenberg, 2017).

Traditional relationships

In preparation for this paper, I have primarily researched the ethnobotany of three particular nations: the Tlingit, Haida, and Nlaka'pamux. To some degree, any selection of Nations for the ethnobotany of Devil's club is arbitrary; the plant is widely used among all those who have it growing in their traditional territories. Due to the wealth and breadth of knowledge on *O. horridus*, a full examination across British Columbia is beyond the scope of this research. I chose to focus on the Tlingit and Haida due to their well-documented associations with the plant, along with the Nlaka'pamux due to the difference in their environment and my own knowledge of the Nation. For the sake of organization, I will discuss the ethnobotany of Devil's Club in sections according to each culture I have researched, finishing with an analysis of settler research and use.

Tlingit - *s'áxt'*

As *O. horridus* is occasionally referred to as “Alaskan ginseng” in settler marketing, the Tlingit people in modern-day Alaska are often observed for their ethnobotanical knowledge. Historic and contemporary Tlingit communities rely heavily on *O. horridus* for its medicinal and spiritual benefits alongside its material use. Of course, these three categories overlap heavily.

As a traditional medicine, the inner bark is mixed in a decoction with seal oil to induce vomiting. The inner bark can also be chewed on and applied to wounds as a topical pain reliever, as well as a blood purifier (Turner, 1982). Nancy Turner (1982) also notes that the Tlingit may use inner bark to treat cancer when drunk as a tea, ingested for pain relief or used on teeth for toothaches. In a documentary by Sarah Miiyuk Bletcher (2016), Tlingit Elder Helen Watkins describes her own success with using *O. horridus* to treat her breast cancer. Watkins does stress that she does not recommend it as a sole treatment, and she advises anyone watching the video to seek aid from a physician first.

Watkins also proceeds to describe other uses for the plant. She discusses ways contemporary Tlingit make a salve with oil and inner bark, walking sticks out of stems, and beads out of the stem as well. Her stories also tell of success with hanging stalks above doors to repel unwanted negative energy; this practice is also likely one of the reasons *O. horridus* is valued in beading and jewellery for the Tlingit peoples. (Bletcher, 2016).

Her harvesting practices focus entirely on finding large stalks, and she repeats that small stalks are less valuable, as they are just as much work for less

product. The outer bark and thorns are to be discarded, only the inner bark and stem are of value. Watkins does make use of as much of the plant as she can, always beading the inside or using it as a tool of some sort. It is important to make use of as much of the plant as possible.

Haida - *ts'ihlinjaaw*

Haida usage of *O. horridus* is perhaps the most widely documented. They use the berries on their hair to treat lice and dandruff, as well as to support general hair strength (“Plants of Haida Gwaii”, 2018; Turner, 1982; Turner, 2004). The Haida also use the inner bark for pain relief, much like the Tlingit, as a skin topical, a tooth application, and an ingested pain reliever (Turner, 1982). *O. horridus* is greatly revered by the Haida as a spiritual plant, particularly as a talisman. Stalks will be placed either above doors, under mattresses, or in the corners of rooms to ward off evil energy. Haida People also value the plant as a good-luck charm in gambling, with stories documented for over a hundred years associating *O. horridus* with financial luck (Turner, 2004, pp. 153-154).

Overall, Haida culture reveres *O. horridus* as a symbol of strength and power. The dangerous presence of the plant reflects the stories and uses. Medicinally, it is essentially a tonic covering many illnesses, topically it strengthens wounds and eases pain, and the berries strengthen the hair. Spiritually, it grants financial success, which is a capitalist form of power, alongside supernatural strength (Turner, 2004).

Nlaka’pamux - *k’étye’*

Nancy Turner, Laurence Thompson, M. Terry Thompson, and Annie York (1990) examined the use of *O. horridus* in the Nlaka’pamux territory, then referred to as the Thompson Nation, and found that multiple interviewees either were unaware of the plants’ uses or were aware but avoided it due to allergies. I find this research interesting, as it demonstrates *O. horridus* may not have been as central to Nlaka’pamux culture as it was to the Haida or Tlingit, or the cultural importance is not as widely understood. With that said, Turner (1982) has compiled a number of documented uses for the inner bark in their culture, such as an ash and grease mixture for sores and teas as a tonic, flu medicine, or weight loss aid.

While some Nlaka’pamux people drink tea from the inner bark or entire plant to lose weight, some warn that prolonged use can recursively cause weight gain. The inner bark is often dried so it can be used in small amounts for teas

throughout the winter. Then, it may be drunk in small amounts, replacing water, for periods of time as medicine (Turner, L. Thompson, M. Thompson, York, 1990). Similarly, Watkins discussed giving up most drinks in favour of *O. horridus* tea during her cancer treatment (Bletcher, 2016).



Figure 1. Typical example of a Devil's Club tincture label. From <https://www.eso.org/public/images/potw1322a/>. Copyright 2019 by HerbalTerra.

Settlers – Devil's club or Alaskan ginseng

Most current research appears to centre on *O. horridus*' anticancer compounds and antidiabetic effects as a natural, alternative treatment (Calway et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2013). While research on the plant as a natural alternative medicine begins from observations of Indigenous communities, the works are almost entirely focused on chemical compounds and botanical classifications. Tyler Calway et al. (2011) even reference the lack of attention paid to the culture around *O. horridus*, noting that most research and marketing attention is paid to the root bark while most Indigenous applications were associated with the inner stem bark. This is reflected in the marketing of Devil's Club tinctures I found online (see Figure 1).

Another note I would like to make about the tinctures I found, is that the source of the Devil's Club root is not transparent. One of the listed tinctures says it sources *O. horridus* from Namibia (see Figure 1) where the plant does not grow, and the country is known for its desert climate which is inhospitable to the shrub. More likely, these supplements use some other compound and market themselves

toward an uneducated audience. Unfortunately, this is quite dangerous, and it is the precise reason Turner (2004) does not share specifics on medicinal or spiritual use – it could lead to misuse by the uneducated user and overexploitation by corporations. The knowledge shared related to spirituality here is the specific information the Haida nation advised to include on the subject. Perhaps the ecological overexploitation is another reason First Peoples use the stalks instead of the roots. Both seem to have the same compounds (Calway et al., 2011) but harvesting the roots is more likely to kill the plant.

Conclusion

Medicinal and healing uses of *O. horridus* are widespread, appearing across all three First Nations researched here in both historical and contemporary times. The medicinal and healing effects are the primary, if not sole focus of settler research and marketing on the subject. Haida Nation and Tlingit Nation both appear to share significant overlap in uses and beliefs, across medicinal, spiritual, and technological uses, and the primary difference may just be in what data is available to me. Interestingly, Haida associations of Devil's club with gambling luck appears to be mostly unique – even the word “ts’iihlinjaaw” allegedly derives from the word ts’iihl, meaning “gambling sticks” (Turner, 2014, p. 495).

One of the most importantly stressed features of Indigenous knowledge with *O. horridus* lies in the aspect of respect. Watkins made use of as much of the plant as she could (Bletcher, 2016), and almost all the harvesting focus on either stems or berries which is sustainable in the long term. Haida beliefs state that power and strength can only be derived from *O. horridus* if one respects and understands the plant (Turner, 2004, p. 62).

Settler use appears to forget about many of the potential uses. Perhaps that is not a negative at all – overexploitation and misuse is a genuine concern. Given the plant's dangerous harvesting protocols, the potential for allergic reactions, and the use as a purgative, harvesting and ingesting without knowledgeable guidance is unwise. Current research on anticancer compounds and diabetic health reflects traditional usage, but corporate and capitalist exploitation of the plant will not likely follow Indigenous harvesting protocols. For now, anyone curious about use should only do so under the eye of someone experienced with *O. horridus*, and they should receive it from Indigenous sources to ensure respectful, sustainable harvesting.

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