

The Kambo ritual

Ebtisam Elghblawi

Correspondence:

Dr Elghblawi Ebtisam*
(MBBCH, MScRes, ADD-Dip. Derm, DRH, PGDip dermatoscope)
Dermatology OPClinic, Private practice
Tripoli- Libya
P.O.BO 3232
Tripoli-(+21) 91 320 1315
Email: ebtisamya@yahoo.com

Received January 2020. Accepted February 2020. Published March 1, 2020.

Please cite this article as: Ebtisam Elghblawi. The Kambo Ritual. Middle East J Intern Med 2020; 12(1): 25-27

DOI: 10.5742MEJIM.2020.93792.

ABSTRACT

I am writing about an experience I came across accidentally and thought to shed light on for the purpose of education and a snippet of knowledge, about this practice, in the field of dermatology. A mature white lady was noticed to have some aligned, carefully rounded skin dot marks, extensively laid out on different parts of her extremities, including the right shoulder. I asked myself what might they be? On asking about the nature of the wound, a Kambo was mentioned. I was astonished what that might be. So I decided to do my own research, in the scientific journals by using the major data bases; to find answers to its conceptual understanding, nature, applicability and what benefits it could provide to those people who might seek it.

Key words: toad toxins, phyllomedusa bicolor, kambô, giant leaf frog toxin, shaman ritual.

Introduction

Kambo is a traditional medicine that is practiced in the Amazonian territory of South America and was long ago used in Chinese medicine. They believed it conferred luck and health to hunters. Also recently, it has been used for pain relief, to clear negative energies, and detox and body cleansing and depression in the UK. Having said that, many people revert to it for various reasons and some are looking for biologically friendly medicines when medicine has failed to sort their agony and misery.

It is basically about the application of frogs' secretions at specific times as a cleansing ritual.



The lady I came across stated it was a cleanser and a detox agent for her body and that she feels wonderful. She is a strong believer in this habit.

Kambo concept

In my search, I found multiple terms that are used for Kambo descriptions, namely Sapo, shaman healer, toad vaccine, frog medicine and ritual of Kambô. It is a traditional medicine in South America.

Kambo is basically a white-colored substance extracted from the skin secretions of a frog, *Phyllomedusa bicolor* (giant leaf frog, monkey frog or kambô), which is popular in the Amazon region. It is applied through a freshly created skin wound by a superficial burn, for the purification of chronic body and mind ailments(1, 4, 5). This practice has expanded its application now to include substance misuse, sexual stamina and depression (6). This secretion is naturally used by the frog as a defense mechanism in dangerous situations.

The collected toxins have specific chemicals with extreme pharmaceutical potentials. There are approximately 100 including peptides, steroids, indole alkaloids, bufogargarizanes, organic acids, and others, located in the parotoid gland and skins of toads(1). The excreted peptides are; phyllokinin, phyllocaerulein, phyllomedusin, sauvagine, deltorphins, dermorphins, and adrenoregulin(5).

The mucus secretions of toads contain potent opioids which are far more potent than morphine and endorphin substances used for relief pain; however, it is well known to trigger the central nervous system, provoking respiratory inhibition and evoking heavy dependency(4). Not only that, it can exert profound effects on blood vessels, adrenal cortex and many other body organs failing which is its actual functionality (4).



Figure 1: Different styles of Kambo applications

The proposal of its application is to induce effects to purge, detox and cleanse the body as its peptides have a vasodilative action and analgesic effect, for a complete 15 minutes, after fasting overnight from food but not water.

There have been a few reported cases in the existing literature about emergency presentation of severe gastroenteritis, facial swelling, urine and stool incontinence, muscle weakness, spasms, seizure, confusion, lethargy, dizziness, memory loss, mental confusion state, heart toxicity along with failure and psychosis. All of which were linked to a preceding Kambo administration, by discovering skin marks of superficial burns on various parts of the body(2, 4).

The actual practice

The practice is said to consist of collecting early morning bright green giant leaf frogs after a rain fall with great delicate care to the captured frog. The frog is said to be tapped on the head for the poison, to be released on its back, tied to a cross stick in front of an open fire, to scrape the secretion then wrapped dry in front of the fire, in small sticks for storage, then applied on the fresh burnt skin by a stick.

There are nearly four to five regularly spaced and aligned dots on the exposed skin of right shoulder or ankle, applied by a heated stick or vine, spreading the dried kambo excreta, on the freshly inflicted burn in the skin. It is usually on the extremities and can be found on other covered body parts. It can range from one application per month to as many as the patient wants. The frog is never harmed and is released to the forest again to preserve its wellbeing (4, 5).

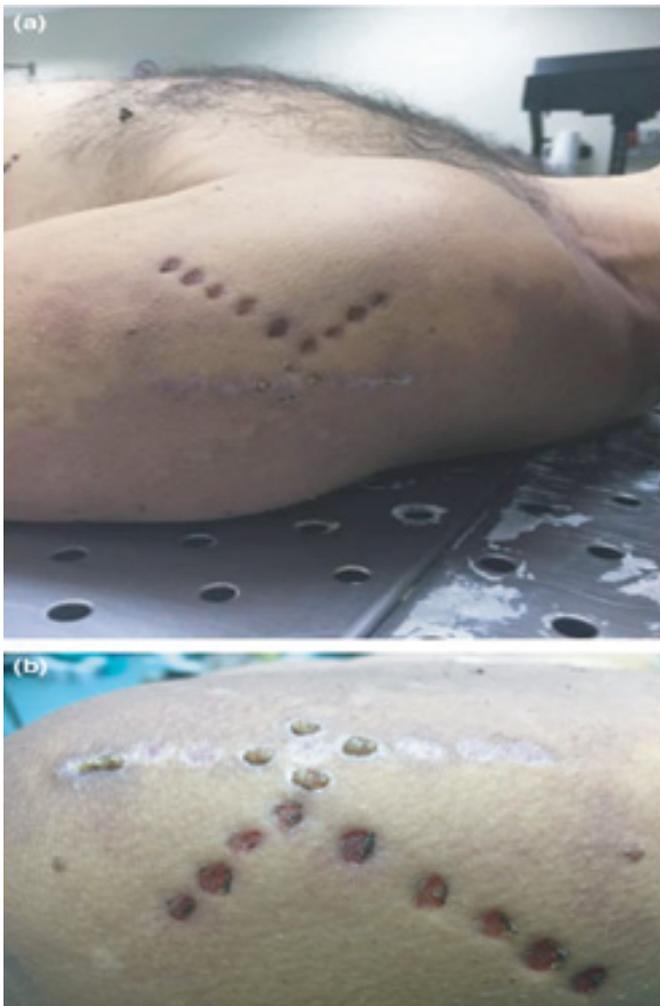


Figure 2: Aligned skin marks

The observed lady had multiple rounded aligned skin marks on multiple rows of three, on her shoulder and the ankle. They were approximately 0.5 cm in diameter with a dried brownish black scab with surrounding skin erythema. After a few days she mentioned she was off work sick and had vitamin deficiency. It is not quite clear how this could link to the Kambo practice. She did not comment much about it on questioning as she strongly believed on the practice and it is alleviating effects. She is however very happy and content. The cost of each session ranges between £UK 60-150.

Those sticks are commercially marketed and sold on the internet as Kambo sticks. They are promoted as voluntary envenomation.

The prevailing belief is that Kambo brings and provides a strong sensation of elevated stamina and strength. Kambo, although controversial, is a growing trend among Britain lately. The process of this cleanse is becoming a common practice in the west including Europe, Australia and USA (3). The question is why someone would like to have a poison in their body when we are already created and programmed to have our own defense and detox mechanism. It is clear the practice is not safe and scientifically not proven from the observed symptoms and clinical trials. There has been so far five reported deaths post

Kambo introduction in the literature. It obviously possesses neurochemical effects and it could incur and entail unexpected multiple organ damage and could be fatal and life threatening due to the toxicological effects of the bioactive peptides(5). There should be legislation on its application and patients should be warned about the possible health impacts and risks.

To conclude, the Kambo is believed in certain tribes of South America to be a purification ceremony. It was first described by Daly et al. Nowadays the practice has expanded extensively and is used by urban people as well. It is said that this practice brings luck to hunters and enhances physical stamina as well as sexual strength. There is no proven scientific evidence in randomized controlled trials, for its effectiveness however those stated healing effects would just reflect the experiences of users and remains merely placebo(7). It seems that some people are turning away from the pharmaceutical industry which is more interested in customers and profitability gained rather than cures, and looking to nature for their ailments and answers.

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