

**BURNING *TITE-PATHI*:
HEALING PRACTICES
OF THE INDIGENOUS
HIMALAYAN PEOPLES**

—

AQUI THAMI





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BURNING *TITE-PATI*: HEALING PRACTICES OF THE INDIGENOUS HIMALAYAN PEOPLES



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my *bojus* for trusting me to put together these drawings and directions as a form of knowledge keeping and sharing. This helps recognise an urgent need for sharing their practice and knowledge systems as indigenous liberation strategies. This is a small offering to my kin and to the allies of the indigenous peoples, with directions and suggestions for decolonising healing practices which will be impossible without the power, strength and intelligence of the *bojus*. This is a small flame which I hope will ignite many fireworks that celebrate indigenous liberation and self-determination.

AQUI THAMI



My *boju* has the power of healing. As we walk through the forest she shows me medicine plants, touching them softly like the head of a new born, taking only what is needed and leaving the rest for others. Our medicines do not come in thick sticky syrups screwed tight in amber bottles, nor do they come in vacuumed air packets of plastic and aluminium.

Our medicines come from the soil into the kitchen. They fill our stomachs and our hearts and heal every cell and our soul. Our food is not just medicine; it complements the needs of our bodies and the needs of the soil. It is not only sustainable and organic but also regenerative. This practice of non-oppressive herbalism is beyond white hippies and Brahmanical supremacy. These bodies of knowledge are stolen and silenced but still not forgotten; they have been practised and honed over thousands of years as our rituals and ceremonies are scientific.

These practices are evidence that we are knowledge makers and keepers, as much as the casteist patriarchal society would want to appropriate these knowledge systems and keep us unhealthy by calling these traditional practices pseudoscientific when we practice them but holistic medicine when they sell them.

Due to many political and geographical conditions in the Darjeeling region, I constantly see people struggling to remain healthy. This growing health crisis is amplified by health barriers created by the absence of health service providers; the services are too few to address the growing needs of the people, and to add to it there is also no acknowledgement of culturally relevant information that includes herbs, food and other healing methods.

There could not be a more appropriate time than amid a global pandemic to reflect on the medical-industrial complex and re-evaluating health systems. It is urgent to understand how health and well-being are defined and in these definitions how biases that inhibit indigenous healing practices are upheld. On the other hand, there also could not be a better time to honour indigenous healing practices by regenerating connections with water, forest, the land and our *bojus*.

From our smoking ceremonies to indigenous farming techniques that honour biodiversity, the knowledge systems of our foremothers have helped the community thrive. This knowledge of healing that our *bojus* hold is co-created with our plant and animal relatives, built through touch, connection and community of thousands of years. It is testimony of the power of nature and acknowledging it as our teacher as we forage and eat together relying on the cycle of the moon and the sun. Constantly communicating with great care and sensitivity, paying keen attention to how the plants communicate with us through their language of colour, fragrance and beauty and building a relationship that sustains the entire planet.

With their knowledge systems, our *bojus* have not only kept 'lifestyle' diseases like cancer at bay, but they also exemplify a system of kindness, care and reciprocity to all thus disrupting all the stereotypical conventions that represent indigenous people as uncivilised and effortlessly reframing vastly critical frameworks concerning women power, ownership of land, sovereignty and producing and distributing knowledge to name a few.

Our parents don't hold the same authority on traditional healing and rituals and practices as our grandparents do. Indigenous healing practices are a process of constant learning, remembering and sharing. Due to various efforts at assimilation, there has been a disconnect in not only continuing the healing practices but also between the earth and us. It is evident how a breach in practising these rituals has harmed our people and the environment.

I felt called upon to recognise the earth as a sentient being as my *boju* had taught me. I opened my self to the teachings of ten grandmothers from different Himalayan indigenous peoples of Thangmi, Chamling, Limbu, Tamu, Newa, Bhotia, Rong, Sherpa, Tamang and Thapa communities who taught me that working alongside water, soil and forests and honouring our relationship with them supports life and our relationships with our community as indigenous peoples.

Familial connections are what keep our teachings, history and our identity alive, and as I stand on this incredibly long lineage and connection to recognise it, it is a huge honour and privilege to be a keeper of these in a small way by recording rituals, practices and recipes through drawings and stories.

I acknowledge, honour and would like to thank Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong, Mirik, Duars and Sikkim as sites of knowledge sharing.

AQUI THAMI

Tite-Pati



Tite-pati is one of the most sacred medicines of the mountains. These fragrant leafy shrubs are found widely throughout the Himalayas. *Tite-pati* is not only used for ceremonies but it is also used as medicine and food by all indigenous peoples of the Himalayas.

Because of its wondrous healing properties, *tite-pati* is used as a medicine to treat a wide variety of ailments from skin problems to chronic pain. It can be used as herbal tea using fresh leaves. Juice extracted from its leaves can be applied to wounds or consumed orally; it is also used in local cuisine. It has anti-microbial and anti-fungal properties and is also known to treat anxiety and cancer.

For the smoking ceremony, harvest fresh tender leaves; make sure not to disturb the flowering stalks. Always make sure to thank the plant for the medicine. The leaves should be kept with dried leaves and dried cedar for a few hours, this will wilt the leaves and moisten the dry cedar.

On an incense burner burn the dried leaves, cedar and *tite-pati*. There will be smoke, keep it smoking in the corner of a room and let the smoke fill the house. The smoke will cleanse the air and the house of parasites and bad energies and also help in loosening muscles and hence should be used at night.

Tite-pati is smoked on full moon nights and during rituals that might induce anxiety. The smoke helps in alleviating anxiety and stress; it brings balance and serenity.

AQUI THAMI

Tama



Bamboo is used for many ceremonies by the Himalayan indigenous peoples. Apart from using it in ceremonies, bamboo is also used for building homes, baskets, fishing baskets, storing food, canoes, bows and arrows for hunting, musical instruments, ornaments and also for food.

Tama can be harvested during the rains when the new shoots start appearing at the base of mother bamboo plants. Dig around the young shoots and with a sharp knife carefully cut along the rhizome. Make sure a few shoots are left with every bamboo cluster. New growth is vital for the plant's growth. Apart from humans, our other foraging relatives like bears also enjoy *tama*. One must be cautious when harvesting so as not to disturb nesting snakes.

Once harvested, peel the sheathes and clean them off the fine hairs using a knife. The edible part of *tama* is soft and creamy yellow or sometimes soft green. *Tama* must be treated in water to make it suitable for consumption. Soak the *tama* in water and bring to boil with a little turmeric.

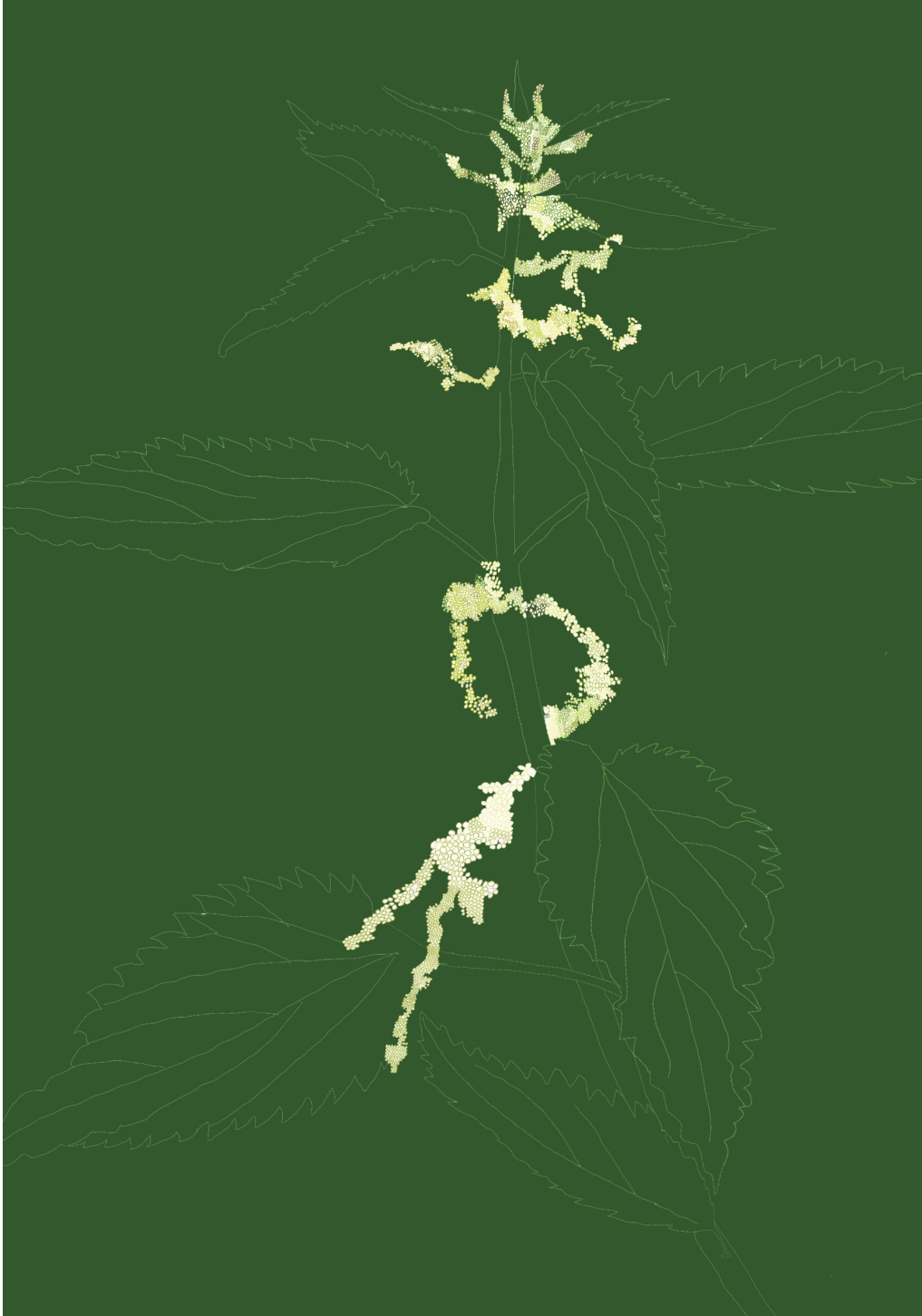
Drain the water and boil again, and *tama* is ready for consumption.

If left to ferment for five to ten days *tama* becomes sour, and is known as *mesu*. Fresh *tama* post-treatment can be cut into rings and strung together to be dried in the sun. It can also be cut into smaller slices and spread on a *nanglo* to dry. This helps preserve the *tama*. It can also be preserved through pickling. To cook *tama*, on a shallow pan heat two tablespoons of mustard oil, add two cloves of crushed garlic and a small piece of crushed ginger. Once the aroma fills the kitchen, add two cups of diced potatoes, keep stirring for ten minutes then add one diced tomato. Pour four cups of water and let the potatoes become tender. Finally, add *tama* and cook till it becomes soft.

Alu tama can be served with rice or can be had as a soup. *Tama* is nutrition-rich and makes an important food for growing children. People suffering from heart ailments, diabetes and respiratory problems also benefit from consuming *tama*.

AQUI THAMI

Sisnu



Sisnu is readily available in the forest. Its flowers and tender leaves are used as food. Stalks are beaten to extract fibre, which is spun into yarn for weaving traditional clothes. The medicinal gifts of *sisnu* are acknowledged by all Himalayan indigenous peoples.

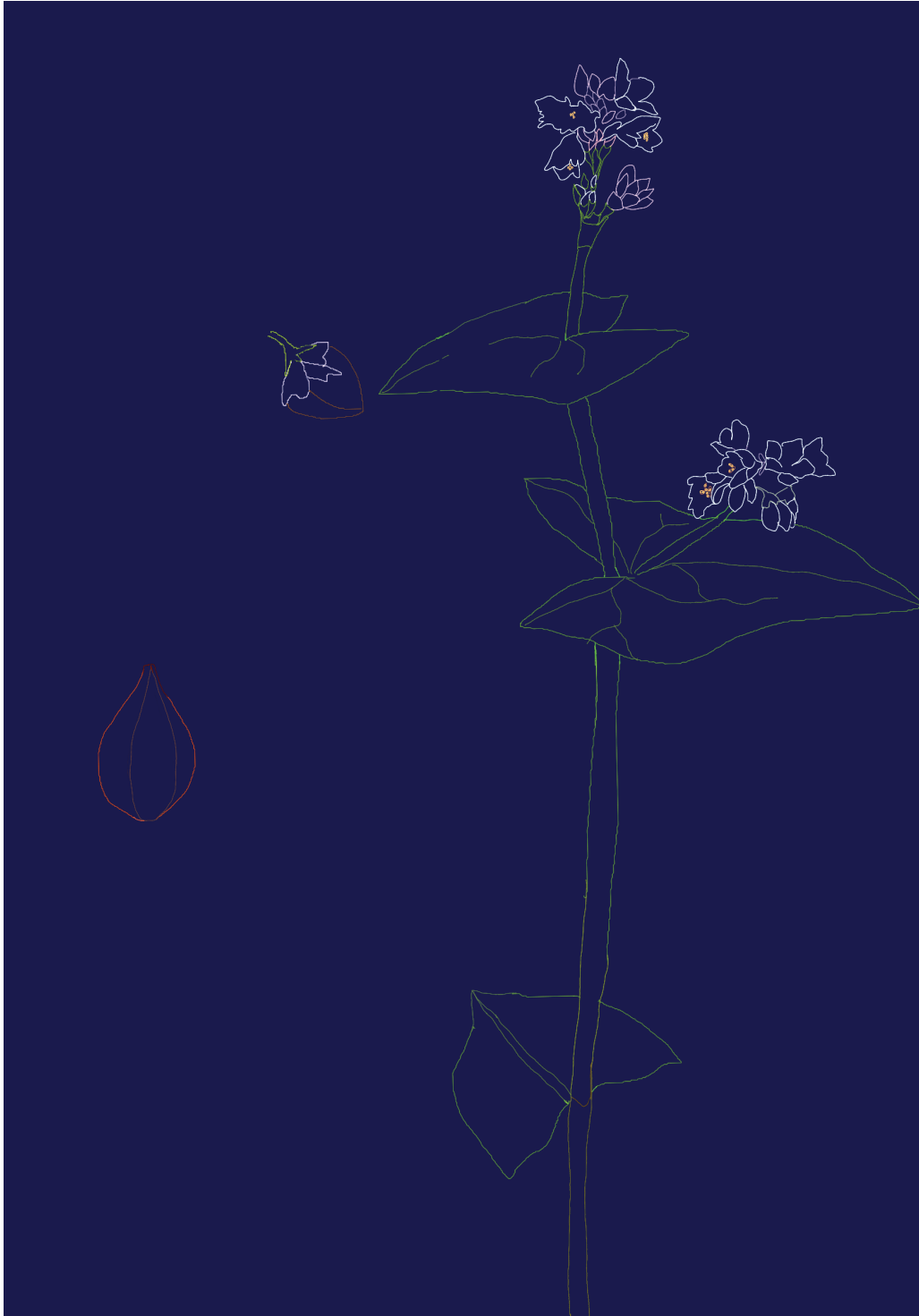
Post the rains when the plant starts flowering, tender leaves and flowers can be collected using metal or bamboo tongs. *Sisnu* leaves and stems have thorns that lead to painful stinging. One must be very careful when collecting the flowers and the leaves. If the leaves come in contact with the skin and lead to stinging, immediately apply some snot to alleviate the pain.

Always collect flowers from multiple plants making sure every plant is left with some flowers. To prepare the nettle evenly spread it on a *nanglo* and add a table spoon of flour to separate the clumps, leave in the sun for ten to 15 minutes. In a deep dish heat one and half litres of water, bring to boil, add a teaspoon of rice and a pinch of salt and let it cook for five minutes on a low or medium flame then add a cup of *sisnu*. Let it boil for ten minutes, add three crushed garlic cloves and boil for five more minutes. When the *sisnu* reaches a thick consistency that is gelatinous but not sticky, it is ready. Serve in a bowl. It can be had like soup or with rice and noodles.

Sisnu is packed with healing benefits that reduce pain in the bones and joints. It also helps cure stomach pain. People with hypertension or diabetes should take *sisnu* in the mornings for best results. *Sisnu* is delicious; it has a very specific taste that is mild and subtle.

AQUI THAMI

Fafar



This easy to grow plant is not only a medicine for the people but is also a favourite of our winged relatives. *Fafar* is not easily found in the forest but can be grown at home and does not require much attention. Bees, butterflies and birds love the small flowers that are full of nectar. The leaves of the plant are rich in vitamins and have nutritional value.

Wash the leaves thoroughly, take tender leaves and stems and break them into smaller pieces. Heat some oil (preferably mustard oil) in a pan; once the oil is hot, add crushed garlic and wait for it to turn brown. Then add *fafar* leaves and cover for two minutes. The leaves will reduce to a quarter in volume. Stir and take off the flame.

The plant starts forming seeds while it flowers. Seeds from the lower stems can be harvested and collected. Once enough seeds have been collected, they can be ground in a stone grinder to separate the hull. Sift the flour in a sieve to make sure there are no large lumps or pieces of the plant left. The flour can be used for making *dhindo*. It is rich in proteins and extremely good for pregnant women, lactating mothers and even menstruating girls and women. It is equally good for people who indulge in physically straining work, people with heart ailments and diabetic people.

Bring a litre of water to boil. Slowly add 250 grams of flour to the water stirring with a cooking spoon. Add a tablespoon of ghee and keep stirring the mixture constantly for five to seven minutes. Once the mixture reaches a consistency where a wooden spatula can be stuck and remains where it is, *dhindo* is fully cooked.

Dhindo can be had with soup, or with a curry or chutney for lunch or dinner.

AQUI THAMI

Iskush



This miraculous plant is nutrient dense and provides minerals, vitamins, fibres and anti-oxidants. Every part of this plant can be consumed as food. Its leaves, fruit and roots grow at different times of the year which ensures there is nutritious food all year round.

Extremely easy to grow and find, there are plenty of *iskush* in the forest. Monkeys and four legged relatives enjoy this wondrous plant as much as us, and we have to make sure we leave some for them when we forage it. *Iskush* vines are dense and build a canopy which is often used by animals to rest. Make sure to pay attention to nesting and resting animals when harvesting.

Munta or the tips of the vines are to be foraged from August to October. The pear shaped heavy and thorny fruits are foraged in November and December, and the fleshy roots are foraged in January and February.

The stalks and leaves of *iskush* are known to relieve uterine pain, burning and other discomfort owing to infection or other problems. It is also known to have laxative properties and helps in relieving problems related to constipation. Lactating mothers struggling to produce milk are given *iskush ko munta* to aid in easy production of breast milk. Apart from this, the entire plant is medicinal and used for balancing the heart's health and blood pressure, dissolving kidney stones and for treating skin problems.

To prepare soup with *iskush ko munta*, cut the stalks so that they are no longer than your fingers. Heat some oil in a pan with fenugreek seeds and garlic. Once the garlic turns brown, add the vines and stir. Add a pinch of salt and cover for three minutes. Add 300 ml of water and boil.

The soup can be had with rice, noodles or *dhindo*.

AQUI THAMI

Rayo



Rayo is a leafy green plant that grows easily in sunny spots. It has beautiful yellow flowers and grows as high as four feet. Its leaves are consumed as food; fresh leaves are cooked with the stalk. It is also fermented to be used in the cold months when foraging becomes difficult.

Gundruk is a popular medicinal food made using *rayo*. To make *gundruk*, *rayo* leaves are left in the sun for about three hours to wilt; once wilted, they are gently beaten to break down the fleshy primary veins. Then the beaten leaves are quickly dipped in hot water; then they are squeezed into balls to remove excess water. These balls are wrapped in banana or fig leaves and kept in an earthen vessel which is buried in the soil for 15 to 20 days. *Gundruk* is then spread on a *nanglo* and left to dry in the sun.

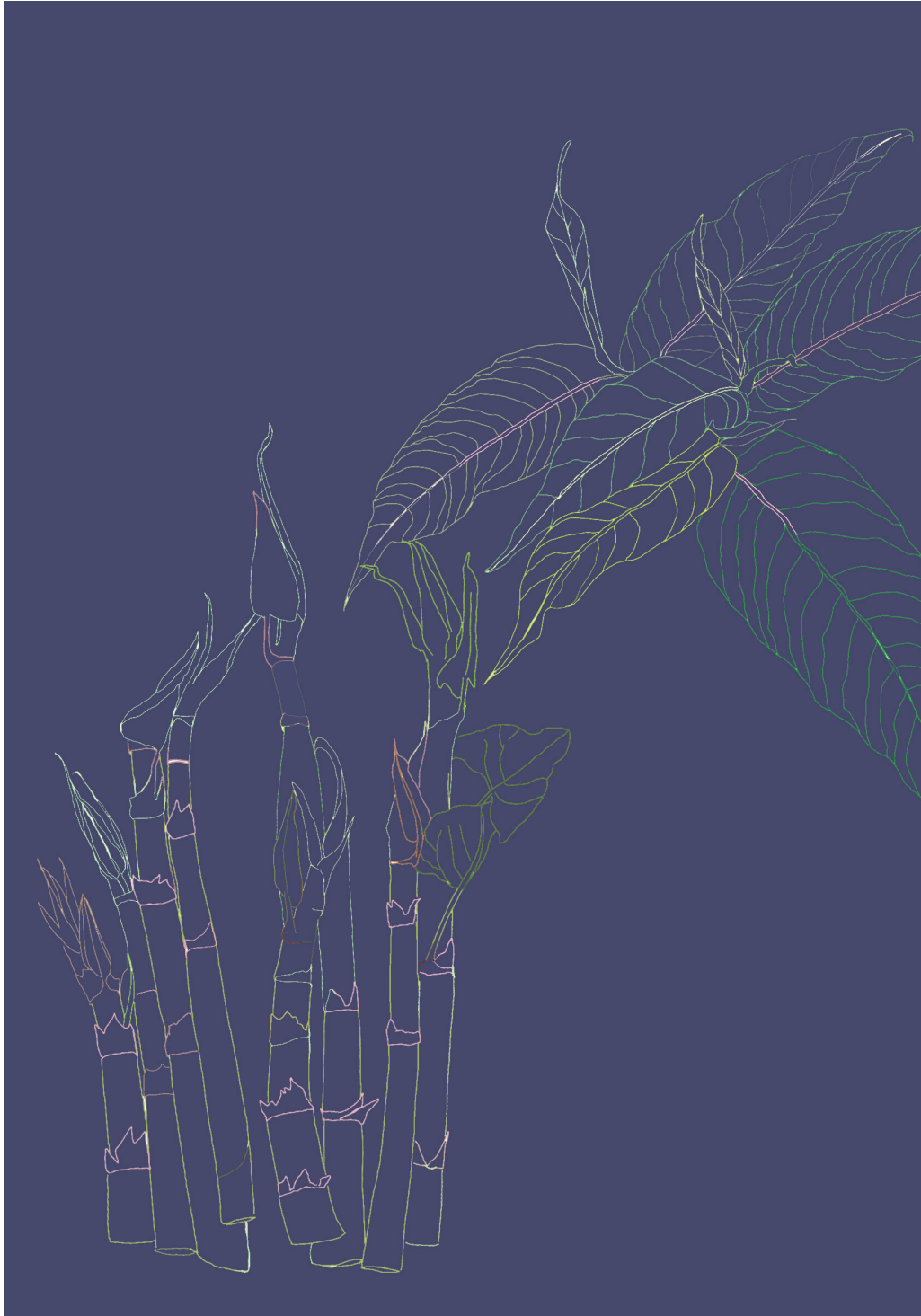
When the sun darkens and makes the fermented leaves brittle, you know it is done. Store it in an air-tight container. *Gundruk* is extremely good for stomach pains related to digestion. With its bioactive compounds, *gundruk* is also believed to cure hypertension, tuberculosis, stomach ulcers and many other ailments.

The seeds of the *rayo* plant are called *tori* and are harvested when they start turning yellow. These are ground to extract oil that has tremendous healing properties. Apart from using it for cooking, pregnant women, new mothers and infants are often given massages with this oil. It is also used for relief from body ache due to arthritis, gout and other similar ailments.

To prepare the medicine, heat oil with a few cloves of smashed garlic until the garlic turns dark brown, add a pinch of fenugreek seeds and remove from heat. Apply to the affected area while the oil is still warm.

AQUI THAMI

Thotney



Thotney can be foraged in the spring when new shoots begin to grow. It has to be foraged while the stems are still tender since within days the stems get tough and are unsuitable for consumption. *Thotney* grows abundantly in thickets on the edges of boulders, so one must be careful when foraging it.

This sour plant is used as a medicine for numerous ailments including oral health, mental health and overall well-being. A favourite of young people, *thotney* can be eaten raw with salt and chilly. The hollow stalks should be peeled and then sliced vertically and coated with a mix of salt, chilly and mustard oil. The crunchy snack is shared while having a good time. Although it is not common knowledge, *thotney* is loaded with zinc which helps in reducing stress and anxiety, which explains why it is a snack that is relished by the young and old alike.

Thotney has anti-inflammatory properties that make it a medicine for tuberculosis, arthritis and swelling. It is also known to cure eye problems and promote good skin and detoxification of the liver.

Thotney is also cooked with meat and vegetables as curry and soup to eat with *dhindo* or rice, but the most common way of eating *thotney* is by pickling it. For the pickle *thotney* it must be washed in cold water and wrung out to get rid of the large fibres. Steam and dry the clean *thotney* in the sun on a *nanglo*. Bottle the dried *thotney* with mustard oil and chillies.

Nakima



Nakima are beautiful orchids found in the forest; they grow at the bottom of the plant and are rare and hard to find. This medicine is used for expelling toxins from the body, relieving pain including pain in the eyes, menstrual pain and muscular pain. It is also believed to nourish and moisturise the skin and provide good health, vitality and longevity.

When foraging, make sure to collect *nakima* without harming the plant. Since the flowers grow closer to the roots, care and precision must be used. Use a sharp knife to cut the stalk that is attached to the plant. Leave at least one flower on every plant to ensure there is growth. Thank the plant with a gift of fresh water and a prayer.

Bring the *nakima* to boil with some water and a pinch of salt until it becomes tender. Once boiled, break it into small pieces, peel and cut a small piece of ginger and let both the ginger and *nakima* dry in the sun or firewood for one hour. Once dried, add some chilli powder and mix, add hot mustard oil and mix and finally add the juice of one lemon. Mix thoroughly and let it ferment in the sun. Make sure to cover with

a sieve when leaving it in the sun. When the *nakima* turns black it is ready to be bottled.

Fermented *nakima* can be used for many months. Fermenting adds beneficial enzymes to *nakima* making it even more nutritious. For its many benefits *nakima* is also given to pregnant women as one of its medicinal usages is relieving stress and inducing tranquillity and peace.

AQUI THAMI

Buda okathi



This medicinal shrub can be found in the forest. Its young leaves are bright red. The hairs on its stalk resemble thorns but are soft to touch. While the entire plant is valued for its medicinal properties its roots are the most sought after.

Due to high demand, the roots are getting harder to find and when foraging one must keep in mind that this old plant is for everyone who needs it including animals and birds.

It is used as a medicine to relieve all cold related ailments like muscle pain, contractions, cough and fever. It can also be used for soothing menstrual pains, for anxiety and stress and for post-partum pain and fatigue.

The roots are fleshy but fibrous, and they are pulled out of the soil giving thanks. They are then washed in cold water, and the shaft is removed revealing white flesh. This is the medicine and should be cut into small pieces and dried either in the sun or on firewood.

The dried *buda okathi* is consumed like one would eat a betel nut. It can also be ground into powder and preserved. A table spoon of this powder is mixed with a tea spoon of honey and a tea spoon of ghee and given to new mothers for reliving body ache and fatigue.

AQUI THAMI

Guras



These beautiful evergreen trees of the Himalayas are in full bloom from the end of winter to the beginning of spring. The red, pink and white flowers are pleasing to the eye. Birds, insects and small rodents celebrate *guras* as much as humans do.

The flowers are sweet smelling and bright hued. Fallen flowers can be found under the trees. Their petals are used for making a syrup for beverages. The petals should be cleaned and cut into smaller pieces and boiled in water to form a concentrate. Sugar as desired can be added when the water starts to boil.

The flowers are also used for making *rakshi*. The petals should be washed with water and crushed while still moist with yeast and millet or rice, then cooked in a big pot for fermentation. The *rakshi* is bright pink and fragrant but can be as strong as vodka.

Guras is antimicrobial and has been known to relieve pain, even that associated with cancer. Women suffering from a hormonal imbalance and people with problems with the liver and kidneys are also given *guras*.

The petals can be eaten raw as well, but many families preserve the dried petals to use through the year. The petals must be thoroughly cleaned before drying. They are spread out on a *nanglo* and covered with a thin muslin cloth to protect them from insects. Once fully dried, the petals are stored in a jar and either eaten dry or used as herbal tea.

GLOSSARY

Boju: grandmothers

Nanglo: round plates made by weaving bamboo

Gundrukh: dried fermented mustard leaves

Dhindo: soft thick porridge mush

Munta: tips of a plant

Mesu: sour fermented bamboo shoot

Rakshi: alcoholic drink

INTERVIEWS

Interviews with grandmothers who did not want to reveal their names, September-October 2019.

Personal communication (phone calls and WhatsApp messages to the grandmothers to share my illustrations of them and the plants), December 2019-January 2020.