

The Encyclopedia Of Rootical Folklore. Plant Tales From Africa And The Diaspora. With Collage Illustrations By Nancey B. Price. 2024.

Samuels, Natty Mark. Scorched Earth Press, Saxtons River, Vermont. 339 pp. USD 24.95.

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Natty Mark Samuel's "The Encyclopedia of Rootical Folklore" serves as a heartfelt tribute to the plants and their cultural and spiritual roots uniting Africa and the African diaspora in the Caribbean region and beyond. Across 88 entries, encompassing 90 plant taxa, including species, genera, and broader functional plant groups like lianas, Natty Mark delves into the profound wisdom of African ancestors while honoring the oral traditions passed down through generations. Through revisiting classic tales and crafting new ones using poetry, haiku, chants, and prose, Natty Mark embodies the role of a contemporary griot, reviving the cherished African tradition of storytelling in the diaspora. By spotlighting the spirituality of plants, a subject often overlooked in scientific discourse, he fosters a connection between botany and culture not only for scientists but for the wider public. This book is a pivotal part of a broader endeavor initiated by Natty Mark, who in 2009, established the African School in Oxford, the United Kingdom, where he teaches on African folklore, history, and art.

This book serves as a poignant reminder that plants transcend mere taxonomic classifications and utilitarian purposes; they are also profound spiritual guides deeply intertwined with the lives of African, Caribbean, and Indigenous American peoples. Through the lens of lived landscapes and ecosystems, Natty Mark imbues plants with spiritual significance, emphasizing their role as vital members of natural environments, including forests. Above all, the book pays homage to the rich cultural heritage of African peoples and the diaspora. Introducing two fictional urban storytellers, Jah Folk and Mama Solace, Natty Mark amplifies the spirit of storytelling and community engagement. Jah Folk imparts wisdom about the Yoruba people and their connection with the Orishas, deities that fulfill all human needs and are linked with specific plants, fruits, vegetables, and herbs used as offerings. Meanwhile, Mama Solace shares her personal journey exploring the intricate relationships between African spirituality and plants. This work fills a significant void for those seeking deeper insights into the traditional, ecological, and spiritual wisdom of African peoples, both within and beyond Africa, highlighting their profound relationships with plants and the vibrant spirited environments these plants inhabit. Moreover, it underscores the connections between the African diaspora and the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, illuminating shared spiritual and ecological narratives across continents.

Each plant is celebrated for its ancestral significance within a couple of densely packed pages. To fully absorb the wealth of information contained within, I recommend reading this book slowly, allowing each chapter to prompt reflection before moving on. Chapter entries are arranged alphabetically by English or local plant name, plant category or functional plant group, and each short chapter focuses on different species.

Chapter subtitles list the plant's other local names which can be English, Yoruba/Lukumí, Spanish, Portuguese, and/or French, alongside its scientific (botanical) name. Occasionally, terms like "ibhulu," a Zulu word for members of the genus *Senecio*, defy these categorizations. Within the text, globally recognized plants such as *Aloe vera* (L.) Burm.f. and watermelon (*Citrullus lanatus* (Thunb.) Matsum. & Nakai), share space with region-specific species such as African lettuce (*Launaea taraxacifolia* (Willd.) Amin ex C.Jeffrey). Even familiar plants like watermelon carry untold stories, like watermelon's journey from Africa to the West during the era of slavery, where enslaved Africans cultivated improved varieties of this fruit on their provision grounds. Furthermore, the book explores these plants' spiritual properties; for instance, Natty Mark describes that residents of Saint Martin hang aloe on their doorways for good luck. The same age-old tradition is practiced in the Dominican Republic and among the Dominican diaspora in New York City— reflecting the enduring Caribbean cultural connections nurtured through plants.

Following the final plant entry, which highlights the South American yerba maté (*Ilex paraguariensis* A.St.-Hil.), a traditional caffeinated beverage cherished for its social and ritual significance across Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and southern Brazil, the book offers three distinct glossaries (of persons, terms, and Orishas, revered divinities in the Yoruba religion of West Africa), as well as a multilingual index of plant species. These are supplemented by a list of further reading, organized into folklore collections, ethnobotanical bibliography, and literature related to specific plants.

In his entry on the liana, Natty Mark showcases examples of tropical vines thriving in forests, such as *Pyrostegia venusta* (flame vine), as well as those found in temperate regions like *Toxicodendron* spp. (poison ivy) and *Vitis vinifera* L. (grape). He marvels at the intricate ecology of lianas, elucidating how they competitively ascend toward the light crucial for all plants, often at the expense of their host tree. Additionally, Natty Mark reflects on the flourishing of lianas in a warming climate, a phenomenon still shrouded in mystery. While acknowledging liana removal as a proposed climate solution, he underscores their indispensable ecological roles. This discourse culminates in a manifesto poem titled "The Liana Declaration," wherein Natty Mark elevates the spiritual significance and forest guardian role of lianas. Through vivid imagery, he portrays lianas as agents of both disruption and assistance in the natural world, causing hunters to stumble while aiding the survival of the hunted, such as the agouti, a forest rodent.

Through vivid storytelling and insightful commentary, this book unveils the interconnectedness of flora, spirituality, and African cultural heritage. From the invocation of Yoruba deities to the preservation of sacred groves, each chapter reverberates with reverence and protection for the natural world. Rootical Folklore is not just an encyclopedia; it is a testament to the enduring wisdom found in the tales of African (and Indigenous American) traditions and the timeless lessons taught by nature.

I am intrigued by the creation process behind this book. How were the plants chosen? What steps were taken to navigate their botanical identities and intricate complexities among local, global, and botanical plant names? How did Natty Mark sift through the extensive literature to review and select the information used in this book? Was the process organic? I hope to uncover some of these answers in Natty Mark's next publication. One thing I am certain of: His mind is singular, and his quest is impressive.

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