The Bewitched Seven-Headed Date Palm, Cachiche, Ica, Peru

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Abstract

This paper describes the unusual procumbent stem morphology of a bewitched, mystical seven-headed date palm at Cachiche, Ica, Peru, and discusses its natural causes and the association with witchcraft-related actions to prevent growth of a seventh stem.

Introduction

The village of Cachiche, on Peru's south-central coast at the fringe of the Atacama Desert, is a provincial tourist destination known initially for its witchcraft and more recently a surreal, procumbent, seven-headed date palm said to resemble a huge octopus. Cachiche was founded in the mid-1560s on the outskirts of Ica and became a refuge for women fleeing the Spanish Inquisition in Lima, some 300 km (186 mi) to the north. Today in Cachiche, witchcraft continues to be openly practiced and is even commemorated by statuary in the village's Witches' Park.

In classical natural history, plants (and animals) exhibiting abnormal, unusual or even grotesque growth forms are called "monsters," the term derived from the Latin and meaning to demonstrate or to warn. The origin of such oddities in genetically normal plants can derive from severe stress brought about by, individually or in combination, extreme conditions of soil, water, or climate, and pathogens or natural disasters, inducing abnormal growth forms. In prescientific times, the unexplained spontaneous appearance of monstrous life forms sometimes led witches and sorcerers to interpret them as mythic manifestations of evil requiring countervailing measures to avert calamitous personal or natural disasters. The Cachiche date palm is a classic example of such a plant.

The objective of this study is to describe the unusual procumbent stem morphology of this date palm and to discuss its natural causes and the association with witchcraft-related actions to prevent growth of a seventh stem. For comparative purposes, an upright multi-headed date palm in a private Spanish garden is also described, which is of known origin and whose offshoots are artificially kept upright for aesthetic reasons.

The Cachiche Date Palm

The age of the Cachiche date palm is undocumented and nearly impossible to calculate because palms do not exhibit annual growth rings. Attempts to determine age by counting the quantity of leaf base scars on the stem, dividing the total by the estimated annual production of leaves, to give a numeric age, is one method that has been attempted. However, incredibly old leaf scars might have physically eroded away or scarcely visible; also, annual leaf production is variable and can be reduced during years of hygric stress. For these reasons, longevity calculations using leaf scars is unreliable in this instance.

Anecdotal estimates hold that the Cachiche date palm may be 400 to 600 years of age. Although this time frame cannot be authenticated, it is at least historically possible. As a potential new South America fruit crop, the date palm was introduced to coastal Peru by the Spanish in the early 1600s, which included the Ica area (Pavez Wellmann et al. 2007).

In 1872, Ricardo Palma, an anthropologist who collected popular histories of Peru, provided an early written record of Cachiche as a center of witchcraft. The account notes that the first witch flourished in Cachiche around 1616 but does not refer to the unusual date palm (Palma 1872). In a recent study, Lorente Fernández (2023) describes the date palm and its relationship to witchcraft and is the source of information presented below.

General Description of the Cachiche Palm

This female (pistillate or seed-bearing) date palm is described as first growing as a normal solitary upright stem with basal offshoots. Under normal conditions, if such a palm is given no care the offshoots would develop their own root systems and continue to grow upright after the death of the mother palm. In cultivation, the occurrence of a specimen like the Cachiche palm would be culled out. Because abnormal plants are of negative economic value, they have received scant research attention.

When the Cachiche mother plant had produced six offshoots, seven stems (“branches”) were emerging from the same root matrix. An unexplained event of indeterminant duration led to the collapse of the seven stems each with a crown of leaves. Purportedly, the first stem on the left enters the ground then emerges to the surface and extends away from the root matrix; the second comes out and bends into a serpentine form; of the next two, one extends downward and the other upward; the fifth is a stump; the sixth stem is creeping away; the seventh is present but the end has been cut off, killing that stem to reverse the witch’s curse.

Historically, it is unclear when the Cachiche date palm attained mystical status. Most is known about its association with the celebrated Cachiche witch Julia Nasaria Hernandéz (1881–1987). Julia was exceedingly popular and attracted a large following. At an unspecified juncture, possibly because of her

popularity or allegations of devil worship, a brouhaha erupted among the practitioners of the dark arts that led to Julia being ostracized. In retaliation, she allegedly cast a spell on the date palm, which prophesized that if the seventh head was permitted to live, the village would suffer disastrous consequences.

A little more than a decade after Julia's death, in 1998 a new seventh head emerged from the palm and was allowed to grow. That year heavy rains caused the normally dry Ica River to flood, causing massive damage to Cachiche. This event led villagers to cut off the seventh head as a hedge against future disasters. According to local lore, a new seventh head appears every eighteen or twenty years. However, date palm science supports no such phenological event. Since 1998, no specific records exist of major floods in Ica linked to Julia's curse; the status of the seventh head in the same period is not recorded.

Site and Botanical Description

Cachiche is at -14.094 and -75.736 at an elevation of 398 m (1306 ft) and lies about 48 km (30 m) east of the Pacific Ocean. It has a BWh Köppen-Geiger climate classification with virtually no rainfall, although plant surfaces are moistened by condensing winter fog (*garúa*), which drips to the ground. Notably, the rare occurrence of a rainstorm is governed by the periodic climatic El Niño effect caused by above normal water temperatures in the Pacific Ocean. The area is characterized by sandy soil and dunes underlain with ground water originating from the Andes Mountains to the east.

Despite its apparent long history, the Cachiche date palm has not been studied botanically to explain the environmental factors and growth mechanisms causing its unique habit. The palm is indeed unique; neither in the date palm literature in particular nor the palm literature in general, does a record of anything like it exist. The seven-headed date palm spontaneously growing in Ica, Peru is a true botanical curiosity.

Visual analysis of the date palm's abnormal stem morphology was carried out using **Figure 1** and **Figure 2** and supplemented with online still and video imagery providing different views of the palm. Below is a hypothetical explanation of how a normally upright palm with offshoots could have been physically altered into a procumbent, seven-headed habit.

The seven stems radiating from a common root system or matrix appear to be offshoots from an original mother palm. Possibly, the mother palm and her basally attached offshoots collapsed because of certain physical reasons such as wind and/or weak root support. The mother palm's collapse might have occurred in such a way that it and its offshoots remained attached to the shared root system. Then, the offshoots took over by growing conjointly; alternatively, the

1. Ground view of seven-headed date palm, Cachiche, Ica, Peru. © 2018 by and courtesy of WWW.TravelingMark.com, used with permission.

2. Aerial view of date palm in Figure 1. Tik Tok Video. Palmera de 7 cabezas brujas de Cachiche. Frame 7085. Video © 2026 by Enrique Llinas, used with permission.

mother palm is still present and continues to develop concomitantly with its offshoots. Subsequent procumbent stem growth could be related to the absence of an erect mother plant, chronic water deficit, and a reduced number of roots supplying the stems, which consequently can limit apical growth. The key point is that the seven stems are partially broken but still connected at the junction zone with the root system.

The hypothesis then is that in an area of sandy soils associated with elevated hygric stress, the basal portion of the mother palm weakened, incapable of mechanically supporting the weight of the mother palm and its offshoots as together they increased in weight and volume. As a result, it splintered into seven units and the stems reclined, probably gradually, reaching ground level and then elongated horizontally. The event probably originated when offshoots were short and still at a juvenal stage of development. Overwise, splits would have occurred along the stem, and all the sister palm stems would eventually have died. The practice of killing the seventh stem when it emerges may contribute to maintaining the current serpentine growth form.

Hypothetically, the purported exceptional longevity of the seven-headed palm may be directly attributable to the architecture of its fasciculated root system, which maintains effective water and mineral absorption despite partial root sectioning and complete collapse of the normal upright plant. The extensive length of some stems also suggests that the palm is very old. Moreover, chronic water deficit as well as a reduced number of roots supplying the group of stems could consequently limit apical growth.

Date palm science would benefit from a detailed *in situ* study to test the above hypotheses to prove or disprove that the operative anatomical and morphological mechanisms described allow the palm to survive in its present form in a harsh environment.

The Imperial Date Palm of Elche, Spain

Normally, date palms produce basal offshoots in the early years of growth. However, in some instances a palm will develop what are called “aerial” offshoots which emerge from the stem about one meter or more above ground level. The cause of this departure from the norm is not understood but appears to be genetically related rather than a response to environmental factors. Aerial offshoots are typically smaller in size than basal offshoots and have undeveloped or are devoid of roots.

A multi-headed date palm thrives in the private Huerto del Cura (Priest’s Garden) in Elche, on Spain’s southeastern coast. Elche is a World Heritage Site because of its extensive plantings of introduced date palms going back to the eighth century. A male (staminate or pollen-bearing) date palm, estimated to be 180 to 190 years old, bearing seven aerial offshoots is the center piece of the garden. When the solitary palm reached about 30 years of age, a spiral of seven

offshoots emerged from the stem about 2 m above the base. Around 1900, to prevent separation of the offshoots from the mother palm, a metal support system was erected to support the stems as a cluster. As the mother palm and stems grew in size, metal supports were fortified, a band installed to encircle the stems and guy wires added to firmly anchor the bouquet of palms. One of the offshoots died in 2014 but its stem remains in place (Ferry et al. 2002; Huerto del Cura 2026; Kyburz 1995).

The majestic palm group is shown in **Figure 3**. It is remarkable that the Imperial Palm survives under bonsai-level care and that a shared single root system is able to provide water and nutrients to sustain the grouping. Without extraordinary human intervention, the aerial offshoots might have separated from the mother palm and died.

Addendum

Procumbent growth of multiple stems in the Cachiche date palm specimen appears to be a unique occurrence. However, a single procumbent date stem is known, originating from a basal offshoot of a mother palm (**Fig. 4**) and extending horizontally six meters to the crown (**Fig. 5**). About 100 years old, the palm occurs in the Degache Oasis, located about 176 km (110 mi) west of Gabès, Tunisia.

In the palm family (Arecaceae), the American oil palm (*Elaeis oleifera*) exhibits a natural procumbent growth form.

Date palm offshoots, basal or aerial, if allowed to grow large can give a false appearance of branching. True dichotomous branching can occur in date palm but is abnormal and rare, triggered by damage to the single apical meristem (growing tip) in monocots. Branching appears to be the result of environmental rather than genetic factors. Physical damage can occur to the upper stem by high winds whipping the top of the palm or by a nearby tree falling onto the date palm. Another source is insect boring activity or a disease affecting the area of the apical meristem. In all such cases, the apical meristem is damaged but still viable, bifurcating in the process of recovery to produce a second stem and crown of leaves. Dichotomous stems cannot be removed from a date palm and propagated because they are an integral part of the mother plant and never develop roots.

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3. Imperial Date Palm, Huerto del Cura, Elche, Spain. Postcard, late 1900s.

4. Basal view of a procumbent date stem, developed from an offshoot, in March 2026. Degache Oasis, Tunisia. © 2026 by Ahmed Othmani.

5. Crown view of the procumbent date stem in Fig. 4 in March 2026. © 2026 by Ahmed Othmani.

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