

Traditional herbal medicine in Transkei

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Abstract

The indigenous people of Transkei depend on natural plant resources from the forests for the medicinal, cultural, religious and other needs. This area, predominantly occupied by the Xhosa people, has remained ethnobotanically unexplored until recently. The present survey among the traditional doctors, herbalists, herb sellers, tribal priests and local people recorded medicinal uses of 26 plants. The firsthand information points out the significance of local plants to tribal groups and people of Transkei.

Keywords: Xhosa; Traditional healing; Medicinal plants; Transkei

1. Introduction

Taxonomic work on the flora of southern Africa by Dyer (1975) is considered to be a monumental floristic work for this region. Recently, some publications have thrown more light on the flora of South Africa (Munday, 1988; Arnold and de Wet, 1993). However, only some workers have attempted to show the importance of the ethnobotany of this region (Lamla, 1981; Bolofo and Johnson, 1988; Hutchings, 1989; Simon and Lamla, 1991). This work, therefore, was undertaken to investigate the medicinal role of native plants by the Xhosa populations of Transkei.

2. Materials and methods

A survey in 15 districts of Transkei was performed 8 times during different seasons in a period

of 2 years. In each visit, plants were collected from different parts of the regions. Exhaustive field notes were taken on the medicinal uses of the plants, following methodology by Croom (1983).

Information was obtained through a series of interviews with elderly villagers, traditional doctors and herbalists at the time of each visit. It was not possible, however, to record the response to the drug therapy as patients were not readily available for interviews at the time of documentation. Moreover, herbalists have no organized hospitals and the sick who receive treatment are always out-patients.

Identification of the plants collected was carried out with the help of floristic and related works of southern Africa, especially Dyer (1975), Watt and Breyer-Brandwijk (1962) and Bryant (1966). Specimens were prepared and deposited in the herbarium of the Department of Botany, University of Transkei, and are cited in Table 1, in brackets below each species.

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3. Results

Twenty six medicinal plants reported to be presently used were identified during the present investigation. In Table 1 families are alphabetically

arranged and the data presented in the following sequence: /family/botanical names, vernacular names in Xhosa (X), and in English (E), plant part collected and information on uses, and method of use.

Table 1
Plants of the Xhosa with major pharmacological and therapeutic properties

Family/species (voucher specimen)	Vernacular names in Xhosa (X) and English (E)	Part used	Preparation and uses
AMARYLLIDACEAE			
<i>Brunsvigia grandiflora</i> Lindl. (RBB 21)	isichwe (X)	Leaves	Used externally during circumcision of boys to prevent inflammation; crushed leaves (mucilaginous) are used as a bandage on the sore part, outer bulb scales are used for dressing after the circumcision for rapid healing
<i>Brunsvigia</i> sp. (RBB 16)	umayime (X)	Leaves, roots	Used to treat infertility in women, an infusion of the roots and the leaves in hot water is taken orally
<i>Cyrtanthus obliquus</i> (L.f.) Ait. (RBB 9)	umathunga (X)	Fresh or dry roots	The ash from burned roots is used as a wound dressing for fast healing, while the infusion is taken for stomach-ache
ANACARDIACEAE			
<i>Schinus molle</i> L. (RBB 2)	Pepper tree (E)	Leaves	Young and mature leaves and fruits are collected, preferably early in the morning or in the evening, and an infusion prepared, which is taken before going to bed for cold and cough, vapour of leaf decoction is also inhaled for the same purpose, the same use has also been reported to be analgesic, anti-inflammatory, anti-hypertensive, anti-depressant and anti-arrhythmic
APOCYNACEAE			
<i>Acokanthera oppositifolia</i> (Lam.) Codd. (RBB 23)	iNxinene (X)	Roots, bark, leaves	Leaves and stem are crushed and the paste applied on the site of the snake bite, powder made from the dry roots is used as snuff for headache
ASTERACEAE			
<i>Artemisia caffra</i> Jacq. ex Wild. (RBB 8)	umHlonyane (X); wild wormwood (E)	Leaves	A handful of leaves are boiled in water and the fumes are inhaled for colds and flu, sometimes a handful of leaves are squeezed and the vapour inhaled directly, a hot infusion prepared from fresh leaves is mixed with goat droppings and applied externally to treat measles
<i>Helichrysum cymosum</i> (L.) D.Don (RBB 17)	imPepho, imPepha (X)	Leaves	The leaves are boiled and filtered, half a cup is taken daily for colds and fever, fresh leaves are boiled in water and the vapour used as vapour bath for treating headache
<i>Helichrysum pedunculatum</i> Hillard et Burt (RBB 25)	Indlebe zebokwe, uNdleni, isiCwe, siGgutsi (X)	Leaves	As an antiseptic and to induce fast healing: used after circumcision to prevent inflammation externally

Table 1 (continued)

Family/species (voucher specimen)	Vernacular names in Xhosa (X) and English (E)	Part used	Preparation and uses
CACTACEAE			
<i>Opuntia vulgaris</i> Mill. (RBB 7)	iTolofiya (X); prickly pear (E)	Stems	The required amount of fleshy stem is cut open, gently heated over open fire and applied or tied over wounds, frills, sores etc.
CELASTRACEAE			
<i>Maytenus acuminata</i> (L.f.) Loes. (RBB 22)	umZungulwa, umnama, inqayi, umnyama (X)	Roots	Roots are crushed thoroughly and boiled in water in open fire for a long time; the mixture is cooled and filtered by using a fine clean cloth, then, a small quantity of the decoction is taken orally twice a day for stomach upset
CHENOPODIACEAE			
<i>Chenopodium album</i> L. (RBB 4)	iMbicane, imbilikane (X) Leaves		Leaves are chopped and boiled with a little water; maize-meal is added until properly cooked, then enough amount taken by the mouth for stomach ailment
COMBRETACEAE			
<i>Combretum caffrum</i> (Eckl. et Zeyh.) Kuntze (RBB 19)	isidubu (X); bush willow, bushveld willow (E)	Roots	Roots are ground into fine bits and added to cold water; bring to the boil, the mixture is cooled and filtered, one cup of the mixture is poured into water that is used for taking a bath by people who suffer from body and leg pains, this is done twice a day and is considered very effective before bedtime
<i>Combretum krausii</i> Hochst. (RBB 15)	umDubu wehlathi, umDubu (X)	Roots	Used for exactly the same purpose as <i>Combretum caffrum</i>
CRASSULACEAE			
<i>Cotyledon orbiculata</i> L. (RBB 5)	imphewula, intelezi (X); pig's ear (E)	Leaves	For ear ache; leaves are boiled in hot water and then allowed to cool, the mixture is then filtered and a drop of the decoction is put in the ear of the person suffering from earache, to treat inflammation; heat the leaf till it is very hot, the hot leaf is placed on a swollen part of the body, for removing warts; the juice of heated leaves is applied on the warts every morning for a week
FABACEAE			
<i>Dalbergia armata</i> L.f. (RBB 14)	uBobo (X)	Leaves and fruits	Young fruits are taken orally as a laxative, while a leaf decoction is taken (half a cup 3 times a day) for fever and body pains
JUNCACEAE			
<i>Juncus lomatophyllus</i> L. (RBB 26)	Imfe-yesele (X)	Leaves	For dressing wounds and sores, the leaves are boiled and the decoction applied externally, this is claimed to protect wounds from becoming infected and inflamed

Table 1 (continued)

Family/species (voucher specimen)	Vernacular names in Xhosa (X) and English (E)	Part used	Preparation and uses
LILIACEAE			
<i>Aloe ferox</i> Mill. (RBB 12)	uNomaweni, iKhala, umHlaba (X); century tree (E)	Leaves, roots	The required amount of mucilaginous sap is collected from the leaf, mixed with hot water and the infusion taken orally as a laxative, leaves are boiled in water, cooled, the mixture filtered and half a cup is taken orally for stomach-ache, as a treatment for toothache, an infusion is taken orally as a gargle
LOBELIACEAE			
<i>Lobelia erinus</i> L. (RBB 18)	Ubulawu, iTyholo (X)	Leaves	Leaves are boiled in water, the decoction mixed with cold water and used as a bath
MELIACEAE			
<i>Turraea floribunda</i> Hochst. (RBB 10)	umaDlozana, umhlama, umhlatholana, umvuma (X); wild honeysuckle tree (E)	Bark	Pieces of the bark are boiled in water for a long time; a small amount of the decoction is taken orally 1–3 times a day for urinary infection
MIMOSACEAE			
<i>Acacia caffra</i> (Thunb.) Willd. (RBB 6)	umNgamanzi, umtoli, umnyamanzi (X); water thorn, kaffir thorn, cat thorn, gum tree, common hook thorn (E)	Leaves	To cure fever and cold; leaves are boiled in hot water, cooled and filtered and the decoction drunk for fever and colds, a cup-full twice daily
MORACEAE			
<i>Ficus craterostoma</i> Warb. ex Mild Br. & Burr. (RBB 1)	inTendekwane, umThombe (X)	Leaves	Fresh leaves are boiled, cooled, the decoction is taken orally in small quantities once or twice a day for stomach-ache
MYRSINACEAE			
<i>Maesa lanceolata</i> Forsk. var. <i>rufescens</i> (RBB 3)	isidhende, isiThende, inTentekiwane, iNtendekiwane, umThendekwane, umTentekwane (X)	Leaves, fruits	Leaves are chopped into small pieces, boiled in water, cooled, the mixture filtered using a clean cloth and the decoction taken orally in small quantities 2 or 3 times a day for stomach complaints; a powder made from the fruits and seeds are taken orally as a laxative and anthelmintic
RHIZOPHORACEAE			
<i>Cassipourea flanaganii</i> (Schinz.) Alston (RBB 20)	umMemezi (X)	Bark	Bark is ground or rubbed on a granite stone with a little amount of water and the paste is applied on the face daily as a cosmetic, it is claimed to protect the skin from sunburn
RUTACEAE			
<i>Citrus limon</i> (L.) Burm.f. (RBB 11)	ulamula (X); lemon (E)	Leaves	For common cold and cough; leaves are boiled in water, the mixture filtered and the decoction taken orally

Table 1 (continued)

Family/species (voucher specimen)	Vernacular names in Xhosa (X) and English (E)	Part used	Preparation and uses
SAPINDACEAE			
<i>Deinbollia oblongifolia</i> (E. Meyer ex Arn.) Radlk. (RBB 24)	uMasibele, uMaSibe, umaSibe, idololenkawu, uAasibele, umBangabanga, umAsibele (X); dune soapberry (E)	Leaves, roots, fruits	Fresh young leaves and fruits are crushed and the paste smeared on the face like a lotion to improve skin complexion, for diarrhoea; the roots, preferably fresh, are boiled, allowed to cool and filtered, a small quantity of the decoction is taken 2 or 3 times a day
THYMELAEACEAE			
<i>Dias cotinifolia</i> L. (RBB 13)	isihlungu, intozane (X)	Leaves	For treating stomach-ache; a few leaves are boiled in water and cooled for a few minutes, the filtered decoction is taken (half a cup daily), for treating cough and fever; fresh leaves are chewed and the juice swallowed, it is done twice a day

4. Discussion and conclusions

When the early settlers and missionaries encountered Xhosa diviners and their traditional healing practices, those practices were considered as 'a mainstay of the grossest darkness of the human mind' (Lamla, 1981). Nevertheless, it has been observed that some of the traditional medicines used by the Xhosa healers are very effective and it has attracted the attention of scientists, anthropologists and pharmacologists (Rose, 1972; Bolofo and Johnson, 1988; Hutchings, 1989; Simon and Lamla, 1991). In spite of civilization and modern development the practice continues.

Xhosa medical practices go beyond the limits of pure empirical scientific study. Studies by Hunter (1936), Hammond-Tooke (1962) and others have shown that appeasing the ancestral spirits, **amathongo**, is an integral part of Xhosa medicine. In the mind of the Xhosa healer, it is 'the person' who is ill, not one of his organs. Hence, a medicine given to cure a particular disease has also an esoteric aspect which comforts and strengthens the patient as well (Lamla, 1981). However, the knowledge of herbal medicines for complex diseases is still confined to mostly practising her-

balists or to certain family members of the traditional healers who inherit the knowledge from their forefathers. The curative art is kept with some sanctity and secrecy, with the belief that the herbal medicines will lose their potency if revealed to other people. The fear of losing patronage is also a probable factor for the monopoly of the curative art. Similar observations have also been made in other parts of the world (Singh et al., 1979; Bhat et al., 1985, 1990).

The knowledge and use of traditional medicines are also associated with the supernatural powers; hence, some of the preparations and treatments are followed by rituals and chanting of incantations. It conforms to the study made by Bhat et al., (1985, 1990) and Jain and Borthakur (1980). It is also believed that complex diseases are attributed to the spell of evil spirits or due to the violation of the laws of their gods. The purpose of the rituals accompanying medicinal preparations or uses, therefore, is to propitiate these gods. However, minor ailments are regarded as natural.

Helichrysum cymosum (and some other species of the genus) is known by the vernacular name imPepho, or imPepha, while *Helichrysum pedunculatum* is known as Indlebe zebhokwe, isiCwe,

uNdleni, or isiGqutsi, in the Xhosa (X) language. Though this species is known by one vernacular name, the others have a set of different vernacular names. This appears to show that the herbalists and the tribal doctors do recognize differences to a degree, among species of the same genus, based probably on the efficacy of the plants and on the knowledge about them. It is also generally believed that the plant mucilage has anti-irritant and anti-inflammatory properties.

The present investigation shows that current traditional medical practices of the Xhosa fall under four categories:

(a) Use of common remedies not followed by rituals, mostly practised by common villagers;

(b) Use of remedies considered to be family secrets handed down from one generation to the other (herbalists);

(c) Use of remedies by traditional doctors who keep in contact with their ancestors and who divine the cause of disease as misfortunes or who acquire the knowledge of medicinal plants and their application from the ancestors in their dreams. They are called diviners (known as 'amga-qirha' in Xhosa), who are generally women (Hutchings, 1989);

(d) Use of remedies by traditional doctors who physically diagnose, prescribe and sell the medicines for various ailments; they are the true traditional doctors ('amaxwhele' in Xhosa), who do not divine the causes of the illness (Hutchings, 1989).

Although elders and the herbalists claim a high percentage of efficacy for plant drugs they use, further scientific and experimental investigations must be undertaken to confirm this claim.

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