

HW 03

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MEDICINE AND MAGIC IN CENTRAL TIGRE: A CONTRIBUTION TO THE ETHNOBOTANY OF THE ETHIOPIAN PLATEAU

HW03

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The inhabitants of the Ethiopian highlands were long isolated from contact with other societies and over a period probably in excess of three thousand years, a distinctive life-style evolved. The isolation had its effects not only on the people but also, over a very much longer period of time, on the flora. The combination of endemism in the plant life and the maintenance of primitive beliefs and superstitions in the people, in spite of an early conversion to Christianity, resulted in an extensive and unique indigenous pharmacopoeia.

Even though Ethiopia has had a written language for two thousand years, native medicines and treatments are an oral tradition—except possibly in church documents to which no layman is allowed access. This tradition has certainly played a part in the mystery attached to the cures by native practitioners. The plants used and the method of preparation are often closely guarded secrets, usually only passed from father to eldest son as the death of the former approaches. With each succeeding generation the chances of distortion or misrepresentation of the original plant or cure are greatly increased, and many mistakes are bound to occur. The impression of magic is also enhanced by the methods used in gathering and preparing the plants. Astrological influences are often invoked and, indeed, have become an integral part of the treatment.

Many of the treatments are effective, many more are harmless and have no effect except psychosomatically, while a small number are certainly dangerous. Nevertheless, more than 85 percent of Ethiopians have no chance of access to a modern physician and, usually at a late stage in their illness, have to resort to traditional medicine. While many of the supposed medicinal properties have no basis in modern science, it would be facile to dispose of all treatments in this way.

This paper is based on the personal knowledge of one of the authors, who has lived throughout his life in the Ethiopian highlands, and on observations and interviews carried out during the period June 1974 to February 1976. Plants and plant parts, where not known to either of us, have been identified in the Ethiopian National Herbarium in Addis Ababa. In addition, vernacular names have been used where appropriate, with due regard being paid to the anomalies inherent in this method of identification. The vernacular names included in Table I have been written down as phonetically as possible, there being no standard transliteration into English from the Tigrinya language current in northern Ethiopia. In this contribution we have not attempted to be exhaustive, but rather to add a little to the existing body of knowledge. For further information readers should consult, among other sources, Bally (1937), Cacciapuoti (1941), Chiovenda (1931), Getahun (1976), Innamorati (1973), Kokwaro (1976), Lemordant (1971), Siegenthaler (1960), UNESCO (1960) and Verdcourt and Trump (1969). To avoid undue repetition and for ease of reference the data are presented in tabular form in alphabetical order by genus.

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TABLE I
PHARMACOPOEIA OF THE ETHIOPIAN HIGHLANDS INHABITANTS

Latin name	Vernacular	Use	Method of use and plant part
X <i>Achyranthes aspera</i> (Amaranthaceae)	Muchello	Treatment of dysentery	The roots are crushed, mixed with water and the mixture drunk.
<i>Athiota schimperiana</i> (Acanthaceae)	Simayza	Control of lice	A decoction of leaves and stems is used for washing the body.
X <i>Argemone mexicana</i> (Papaveraceae)		Lubricant	The seeds are used for oiling the tray on which the local unleavened bread is baked. In other contexts the oil of the Mexican Poppy is considered to be highly poisonous.
<i>Boswellia papyrifera</i> (Burseraceae)	Itan	Control of evil spirits and fever and as a tranquilizer	The bark and the olibanum resin extracted by a primitive form of tapping are smoked on a fire. Said to be more effective if carried out at night.
X <i>Calpurnia aurea</i> (Leguminosae)	Hisawis	Control of lice	The leaves are crushed in water and the resulting liquid used as a body wash.
X <i>Capparis tomentosa</i> (Capparidaceae)	Andal	Control of evil spirits	The crushed roots are burnt in the supposedly haunted place.
<i>Cissus jatrophoides</i> (Vitidaceae)	Kosli-ahuhi	Cure for snake bite	The crushed roots are mixed with honey and the resultant mixture drunk.
X <i>Chrodendrum myricoides</i> (Verbenaceae)	Surubati	Poison antidote	A decoction of roots is drunk.
X <i>Croton macrostachyus</i> (Euphorbiaceae)	Tambuk	Treatment of tapeworm	Crushed leaves and seeds are mixed with water and drunk. Croton oil is, of course, one of the world's most powerful purgatives (Purseglove, 1968).
			Fruits eaten and root decoction drunk.
			Seeds eaten.
X <i>Datura stramonium</i> (Solaniaceae)	Mezberae	Control of venereal disease Inducement of abortion	The sap of the crushed leaves is applied to the burnt area.
		Treatment of burns	
		Relief of toothache	The vapor of the boiled seeds is inhaled.

TABLE I
CONTINUED

Latin name	Vernacular	Use	Method of use and plant part
		Fungicide	Dried ground leaves are mixed with butter and applied to the infected part.
	Poison		A few seeds in tea or coffee are said to cause almost instantaneous death due to heart paralysis. Local drinks—beer and mead—are often adulterated to a small extent with powdered seeds to give them more ‘kick’; temporary insanity, if not worse, usually results.
✗ <i>Embelia schimperi</i> (Myrsinaceae)	Enkoko	Treatment of tapeworm	Crushed seeds are mixed with water and drunk. The leaves are also eaten as a vegetable.
✗ <i>Erythrina abyssinica</i> (Leguminosae)	Sono	Laxative	A decoction of leaves and young branches is drunk.
✗ <i>Foeniculum vulgare</i> (Umbelliferae)	Insillai	(see <i>Lycopersicon</i> sp.)	
✗ <i>Hagenia abyssinica</i> (Rosaceae)	Habbi	Tapeworm expellent	The young leaves as well as dried flowers are ground and mixed with water or local beer. This is probably the most widely used worm medicine, but excess dosage may cause blindness or death. It can also be used to induce abortion.
	Hafafello	Relief of stomach ache	Roots are chewed and swallowed.
<i>Ipomoea sinensis</i> (Convolvulaceae)	Dikala		A variety of parasitic plants are used as medicines, e.g. a parasite of <i>Acocanthera schimperi</i> is used as a compress to reduce muscular tension or rheumatism: <i>Loranthus</i> ‘acaciae’ is used in the treatment of anthrax by applying the ash to the sites of sores; and the leaves of a number of species worm in a sachet round the neck are said to ward off evil spirits.
Loranthaceae			

TABLE I
CONTINUED

Latin name	Vernacular	Use	Method of use and plant part
<i>Lycopersicon</i> sp. (Solanaceae) and X <i>Foeniculum vulgare</i> (Umbelliferae)	Tomatim Insillal	Treatment of gonorrhoea	The leaves of the two plants are combined, boiled in water and the resulting mixture is drunk.
X <i>Maesa lanceolata</i> (Myrsinaceae)	Suwaria	Expulsion of tapeworms	Crushed seeds are mixed with water and drunk. An oil extracted from the fruits is also used for the same purpose.
		Cure of skin infections	The crushed seeds are fried in butter and applied to affected areas.
		Fish poison and molluscide	An extraction of the leaves is said to be effective for these purposes.
X <i>Maytenus senegalensis</i> (Celastraceae)	Kebkeb	Treatment of cancer	Crushed bark is mixed with water and drunk. Another species, <i>M. ovatus</i> , is known to be an important source of anti-cancer drugs.
+ <i>Milletia ferruginea</i> (Leguminosae)	Biribira	Cure of skin infections	Treatment as for <i>Maesa lanceolata</i> .
		Fish poison	The bark and mature fruits are crushed to a powder and applied to the surface of the water.
<i>Nicotiana glauca</i> (Solanaceae)	Tumbaku	Control of leeches	The leaves are crushed and an aqueous decoction is then used to wash the area where the suckers are attached.
+ <i>Nigella sativa</i> (Ranunculaceae)	Awassida	Relief of stomach ache	The crushed seeds of the plant are mixed in water and the suspension is drunk.
X <i>Opuntia ficus-indica</i> (Cactaceae)	Beless	Treatment of leprosy	The flowers are crushed, mixed with honey and applied to the infected area. The fruits of this imported but naturalized plant are well liked as a sweet.
<i>Otosiega integrifolia</i> (Labiatae)	Tchiendog	Insecticide and disinfectant	The smoke of burning branches and leaves is effective for these purposes.
		Ritual cleansing	As an extension of the disinfectant principle, post-parturient mothers are smoked ten days after giving birth, when they can be released from their confinement.

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(CONTINUED)

Latin name	Vernacular name	Use	Method of use and plant part
✗ <i>Oxalis anthedonina</i> (Oxalidaceae)	Habatchego	Tapeworm expellent	The roots are either chewed and swallowed or crushed, mixed with water and then drunk.
✗ <i>Phytolacca dodeandra</i> (Phytolaccaceae)	Shibli	Treatment of malaria and gonorrhoea	The roots are crushed, mixed with water and the mixture drunk.
		Abortifacient	The root is used as above. The dosage has to be regulated to avoid causing death. The roots are also used to induce abortion in animals. It is believed that the male plant cut in mid-October is most effective. A widespread use of the dried ground fruit is as a soap substitute.
✗ <i>Pithecellobium thonningii</i> (Leguminosae)	Aman gemel	To cure uneasiness or sweating	A solution of the leaves is applied to the body or the body is fumigated with smoke of the leaves.
<i>Punica granatum</i> (Punicaceae)	Roman	Tapeworm expellent	The crushed leaves in water are drunk.
✗ <i>Rumex hastatilis</i> (Polygonaceae)	Shumbubata	Anti-rheumatic	The aqueous root extract is drunk.
✗ <i>Sesbania indicum</i> (Pedaliaceae)	Selit	Relief of earache and hearing problems	The oil extracted from the seed is applied to the ears.
✗ <i>Terminalia brownii</i> (Combretaceae)	Weba	Treatment of hepatitis	The crushed bark, mixed with water, is drunk.
✗ <i>Solanum incanum</i> (Solanaceae)	Engule	Relief of stomach pains	The root is chewed and swallowed.
<i>Verbascum sinuatum</i> (Scrophulariaceae)	Ternaka	Treatment of gonorrhoea	The fruits are used (manner not specified).
		Control of post parturient bleeding	Crushed leaves are inserted into the vagina.
		Cure of anthrax	Roots and leaves are crushed, mixed with honey and eaten.
✗ <i>Veronica amygdalina</i> (Compositae)	Grawa	Control of excessive bleeding at menstruation	The leaves are crushed in water and the mixture is drunk.
✗ <i>Withania somnifera</i> (Solanaceae)	Agol	Control of joint infections (arthrititis)	The crushed leaves are applied as a poultice to the affected areas.
✗ <i>Zingiber officinale</i> (Zingiberaceae)	Zingibil	Relief of stomach ache	The rhizome is chewed and swallowed.

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