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P.B. Dlisani & R.B. Bhat

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TRADITIONAL HEALTH PRACTICES IN TRANSKEI WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH

P.B. Dlisani and R.B. Bhat

Department of Botany, University of Transkei, Umtata, South Africa

ABSTRACT

An investigation on the indigenous uses of plants for primary health care of mothers and children was carried out in the Transkei region of Eastern Province, South Africa. Medicinal uses of 27 plants identified to species level were recorded. In spite of western influence, the people of Transkei still believe in the efficacy of herbal medicines, and use these traditional remedies currently.

INTRODUCTION

Transkei has a large number of plants which vary in their ethnobotanical value. However, in this study, emphasis is given to medicinal and wild plants which are consumed as a good source of nutrients. Medicinal plants have always played an important role in the lives of people in Transkei and there are several reports on their use (Lamla, 1981; Bolofo & Johnson, 1988; Hutchings, 1989; Simon & Lamla, 1991; Bhat & Jacobs 1995; Bhat, 1998). Nonetheless, with all the previous work done, there are still quite a number of plants that remain unrecorded. Thus, the need for this project is raised to look closely into the indigenous plants used for maternal and child health by the indigenous populations of Transkei. This study also emphasises wild vegetables consumed for the growth and development of pregnant mothers and their babies.

Keywords: Transkei, traditional health practices, maternal and child health.

* Address correspondence to: Dr. R.B. Bhat, Department of Botany, University of Transkei, Private Bag X1, Umtata 5117, South Africa. E-mail: Bhatr@getafix.utr.ac.za

For many years, the people of Transkei had no contact with the Western world, and they relied solely on the knowledge they had of medicinal plants to meet their demands. With the establishment of western medicine in Transkei, the Xhosas have not abandoned their traditional health practices. According to one women interviewed, they believe this to be part of their culture and abandoning them will mean an end to the Xhosa culture.

Among the Xhosa-speaking people of Transkei, a wide range of remedies are used to combat diseases and illnesses. In this study, a number of medicinal plants have been identified. Such medicines are known as imithi (singular umthi) and include remedies derived from trees, shrubs, herbs, leaves, bulbs and roots. The people who have much knowledge about the medicinal plants are elderly people, or the herbalists and traditional healers. Young women also have knowledge but to a lesser extent compared to their mothers and their mothers-in-law. The grandmothers collect and prepare the medicines for their daughters and grandchildren. These remedies include plants used by pregnant women like *Agapanthus* sp., *Chlorophytum comosum* (Thunb.) Jacq. and *Salvia scabra* L.f., all locally known as Isicakathi (Simon & Lamla, 1991).

Wild vegetables are edible wild plants which are considered to be highly nutritious and are an important supplement to the daily diet. They are consumed widely for making an ordinary meal taste quite delicious. “Imifino” (wild vegetables) are generally collected in wild places in many parts of Transkei, usually near villages. They are mainly prepared and eaten by women. When a woman conceives, “imifino” becomes her daily diet, is considered to be highly nutritious, and is prepared mainly by the mother-in-law.

METHODS

In order to investigate the plants used by the mother and child for health reasons, three study areas of Transkei were selected, namely, Cala, Mt. Fletcher and Umtata. Field survey was undertaken in these areas. Various villages, urban and suburban areas within the study area were visited periodically at different seasons of the same year as some plants are available at different seasons while others are available throughout the year. During each visit, plants were collected from different parts of the regions. Field notes were recorded with regard to the medicinal uses of the plant following the methodology of Croom (1983). Other information was obtained through a series of interviews with elderly people, young women, herbalists and traditional healers who have no organized hospitals (only out patients are treated by these healers). Plants collected were identified using the floristic approach and related work of southern Africa (Dyer, 1973) and elsewhere (Watt & Breyer-Brandwijk, 1962; Bryant, 1966; Arnold & De Wet 1993; Fox & Young 1983). The other plant parts were then processed in the usual manner and deposited in the herbarium of the Department of Botany, University of Transkei. Live plants, 12 of which were collected from the Silverglen medicinal plant nursery (Durban), were grown in the nursery of the University of Transkei, Umtata as most herbalists and traditional healers were not prepared to provide the identity of the plants.

RESULTS

Twenty-seven medicinal plants, reported to be presently used, were identified during this investigation. In the enumeration, the families are alphabetically arranged and the data are presented in the following sequence: family, botanical names, vernacular names in Xhosa (X), English (E), plant part collected, and information on uses with methods of utilisation.

Classification of Plants Studied with Major Pharmaceutical and Therapeutical Properties

Acacia caffra (Thunb.) Willd. Fabaceae
Cat thorn (E); umNyamanzi, umToli (X)
The boiled roots are used to treat stomach disorders. Children sometimes chew and swallow the leaves to relieve abdominal troubles.

Acalypha glabrata Thunb. Euphorbiaceae
Umthombothi (X)
The inner bark or wood is scrapped and ground into a fine paste which is applied on the baby's face or taken orally by a teaspoon to treat rashes on a baby's face. The rash is locally known as ishimnce. This rash, if it is not treated, is believed to block the nose and the ears and may make breathing difficult for the baby.

Agapanthus sp. L'Herit. Liliaceae
Isicakathi, Isihlambezo (X)
The plant is used by the expectant mother from the period she is six months pregnant until the baby is born. The plant is grown in a beaker of water and she drinks half a cup of this water every morning and evening. It is believed that the health of the unborn baby is determined by the manner in which the plant is growing. If the plant is growing vigorously, that is an indication that the baby is healthy and, if the plant dies, it is accepted that the baby will also die.

Aloe ferox Miller Liliaceae
Ikhala (X)
For weaning the baby. The leaf is cut open and the bitter juice that oozes out is smeared on the nipples of the mother.

Aloe tenuior Haw. Liliaceae
Ikhala (X)
The plant is used as a purgative. The leaves are soaked in lukewarm water and half a cup is taken at night. Even pregnant women take this medicine.

Alepidia amatymbica Eckl. & Zeyh. Apiaceae
Iqwili (X)
A piece of the bulb is chewed, or boiled and allowed to cool, and the decoction is taken in small doses to treat flu, coughs and chest complaints. Sometimes a piece of the bulb is crushed and mixed with water and a few drops are put inside the baby's ear to chase away evil spirits.

Amaranthus hybridus L. Amaranthaceae
Unomdlomboyi (X)
The leaves are boiled and mixed with maize-meal or they may be cooked as a relish. The plant is a source of nutrients such as carbohydrates, protein, iron and calcium.

Artemisia afra Jacq. ex Willd. Compositae
Umhlonyane (X)
A handful of leaves are put in boiling water, allowed to cool, and taken at regular intervals to treat fever. The same leaves are put in the nose or they are put in a vapor bath for the same purpose. Sometimes a hot infusion of the leaves is mixed with goat droppings to treat measles.

Bidens pilosa L. Asteraceae
Umhlabangubo (X)
Young shoots of the plant are eaten as a pot-herb. This is one of the most wanted weeds dried and stored for winter use. The plant provides carbohydrates and proteins.

Brunsvigia sp. Amaryllidaceae
Umayime (X)
The leaves are used to treat infertility in women. An infusion prepared from the leaves and the roots is put in hot water and taken orally, daily.

Chenopodium album L. Chenopodiaceae
Imbikicane (X)
The fresh tender leaves and tops are boiled and eaten as a relish, or they may be added to mealie-meal (corn flour) and cooked into a porridge. The plant is a source of proteins, vitamin C and iron.

Elephantorrhiza burclielli Benth. Fabaceae
Intolwane (X)
The roots are crushed using a grinding stone, hot water is added, and the preparation cooled before the juice is taken for stomach complaints.

Erythrina humeana Spreng. Fabaceae
Umsintsana (X)
The burnt bark is powdered and applied to the umbilical cord of newly born babies for fast healing of the umbilical cord.

Erythrina lysistemon Hutch. Fabaceae
Umsintsana (X)
Strips of the bark are cut from all four sides of the trunk and are bound together into a bundle of herbs from which an infusion is made to ease labor pains during childbirth.

Eucalyptus sp. Myrtaceae
Eucalyptus, Gumtree (E)
The leaves are used in a vapor bath to treat fever in adults and children. Sometimes a hot infusion from the roots is used to treat stomachache and rash in children.

Gunnera perpensa L. Hallorrhagidaceae
Iphuzi lomlambo (X)
The crushed bulb is boiled with water, cooled, and a cup of the medicine is taken daily by pregnant women to reduce swelling of the feet.

Halleria lucida L. Scrophulariaceae
Unobhibhi (X)
The leaves are soaked in water, then drops of the water are put inside the baby's ear to relieve earache.

Helichrysum cymosum (L.) D. Don. Asteraceae
Impepho (X)
The young and mature leaves are boiled and filtered, half a cup of the decoction is taken daily for colds and fever. The leaves are also put on burning coals and the baby is fumigated to chase away evil spirits.

Ilex mitis (L.) Radlk. Aquifoliaceae
Umduma (X)
Pieces of wood are crushed and mixed with water for the preparation of an enema for treating colic in children.

Maytenus heterophylla (Ecklon and Zeyher) N.K. Robson. Celastraceae
Umqaqoba (X)
The bark of this tree is used as a remedy for dysentery. The roots and thorns are crushed, cooked, and taken as treatment for colds and coughs.

Ranunculus sp. Ranunculaceae
Iyeza lamasi (X)
The roots of the plant are put in warm water and used as a douche to treat stomach problems in children associated with the milk of the mother. It is believed that the milk inside the baby has to be removed once the baby has been weaned. If not, the baby's stomach will bulge.

Rhoicissus tridentata (L.f.) Willd & Drum. Vitaceae
Isaqoni (X)
Women prepare a decoction from the decorticated root

as an enema to facilitate child birth and to induce labor if it is delayed.

Scutia myrtina (N.L.Burm) Kurz. Rhamnaceae
Isiphingo (X)
The leaf provides an ointment which is applied locally to hasten parturition of both the baby and the placenta.

Solanum nigrum L. Solanaceae
Umsobo (X)
The leaves of this plant are commonly used as a potherb. The plant may be used dry or fresh. The plant is a source of iron and calcium.

Sonchus asper L. Asteraceae
Irwabe (X)
The leaves are sometimes eaten raw or mixed with mayonnaise into a salad or boiled until soft with salt added and eaten as a relish with porridge or bread. The plant is a source of B vitamins, calcium and iron.

Tulbaghia alliacea L. Liliaceae
Isivumbampunzi (X)
A cold infusion of the leaves is used to douche children. A hot infusion of the leaves is used to treat coughs, constipation and high temperature. The leaves may also be pounded and mixed with lukewarm water and used to bathe the baby. The medicine may also be put inside the baby's ear and anus in a process called ukukhamela. This is done to chase away evil spirits from the baby.

Zanthoxylum capense (Thunb) Harv. Rutaceae
Umlungumabele (X)
An infusion of the leaves is used to treat gastric and stomach disorders as well as intestinal parasites. The bark may be taken as a tonic or chewed to relieve toothache.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

It is evident from the interviews conducted in different villages that knowledge of medicinal plants is limited to mainly traditional healers, herbalists and elderly people who live in rural areas. Those living in urban areas show less interest in medicinal plants. Also, young women have little knowledge of medicinal plants. Whenever they need medicinal plants they contact their elders who make the preparation for them. However, in some families, the knowledge of medicinal plants is a heritage which is passed on from generation to generation. In such homes, even an eight year old child may know common plants such as Umhlonyane (*Artemisia afra*). This was observed during one of the visits.

Herbalists and traditional healers were not ready to divulge information. Those ready to provide some information about uses were not willing to show the live plants. One traditional healer demanded Rand 200 (US $40), a heavy price, before he would provide a book with all the information on medicinal plants. The other traditional healers at Umtata asked for Rand 60 (US $12), some of which was to appease their ancestors. This secrecy seems to be common practice and present observations conform to those of earlier workers (Bhat et al., 1985, 1990; Bhat & Jacobs, 1995; Bolofo & Johnson 1988).

The knowledge and use of traditional medicines are also associated with supernatural powers and hence some of the preparations and treatments are followed by rituals and the chanting of incantations. Similar observations have been made by Jain and Borthakur (1980), Bhat et al. (1985, 1990), and Bhat and Jacobs (1995). The number of people using wild vegetables as a source of nutrients is diminishing as there are other sources which are readily available such as shops. Most people, especially in urban areas, claim that "imifino" (wild vegetables) is old-fashioned and does not belong to this modern world. The nutritional value of these wild vegetables has been studied extensively (Mbangata, O'Connell & Johnson – no date).

Two or more species may have a single vernacular name, though the uses and methods of utilization may be different or similar (Bolofo & Johnson, 1988). Similar observations have also been made during the present investigation in two *Aloe* species known as ikhala (X), i.e., *Aloe ferox* Miller and *Aloe tenuior* Haw. Both have a laxative effect, but *Aloe ferox* is mainly used when weaning babies. In the case of *Erythrina humeana* Spreng and *E. lysistemom* Hutch., both are known as umsintsana (X) and are associated with the birth of a newborn baby but the manner in which they are used is different. It seems that the herbalists and traditional healers try to find out the differences among the many species of the same genus to increase the efficacy of the medicine (Bhat & Jacobs, 1995).

Looking at such a number of plants collected from only three places in a very short time, one is inclined to believe that many more plants exist in Transkei which are used for health reasons by mothers and children. Thus, further research is essential to explore the uses of those unreported medicinal plants. The firsthand information we have on these reported medicinal plants

needs to be evaluated critically by scientists to establish their medicinal values. Such research may lead to the discovery of new compounds beneficial to diseases of the mother and her new born child.

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