

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM OF BUSH TEA FROM THE LOCAL PEOPLE IN VENDA

Z.J. Rakuambo, E.S. du Toit, P. Soundy
University of Pretoria, South Africa

J. Olivier
University of South Africa

ABSTRACT

The article provides a report on a survey conducted in selected villages of Thohoyandou and Nzhelele in Venda, Limpopo Province of South Africa by means of personal interviews. The aim of the survey was to gather indigenous knowledge and to validate the uses of bush tea as claimed by the local people. The interviews were conducted with three types of respondents: a traditional healer, street sellers and bearers of indigenous knowledge (people who have knowledge about the plant). One important finding of the study was that the people from the area possess a remarkable knowledge of the plant identity and its uses to treat a wide range of physical ailments.

Keywords: Bush tea, medicinal plant, indigenous knowledge system, Venda.

INTRODUCTION

Bush tea is a member of the Asteraceae family and is commonly known as bush tea and sometimes called Bushman's tea or Kaffer tea (Gericke, 2002). According to Swanepoel (1997), many species of southern Africa's Asteraceae are also used extensively as traditional medicine. Some Asteraceae species from other parts of Africa have long been used in folk medicine. For example, most of the plants used for medicine by indigenous communities in the Western Cape belong to the Asteraceae family (Salie, Eagles and Leng, 1996). Bush tea has been used before by different ethnic groups, for example in Venda, bush tea is believed to have aphrodisiac properties (van Wyk, 2000). The Vha-Venda people use the extract from the soaked roots and leaves as a medicine. The dried or fresh leaves are boiled and the extract is drunk with sugar as a tea beverage (Mabogo, 1990; Swanepoel, 1997).

According to different authors (Watt and Breyer-Brandwijk, 1962; Roberts, 1990; Hutching, Scott, Lewis and Cunningham, 1996; Swanepoel, 1997), the tea from this plant is also excellent in the treatment of coughs and as a gargle for throat infections and loss of voice. The Zulu and Lobedu people use an infusion of the plant as a tea. However, the Lobedu people chew the leaf and swallow the juice as a cough remedy, while the Zulu people use a decoction of the roots as a cough remedy and a purgative. An infusion of all the plant parts is also used as a blood purifier and boiled by the people of South Africa for the relief of sore feet. However, the Southern Sotho bathe themselves – after scarifying themselves – with a decoction of the leaves of *A. phyllicoides* or the root of *A. elata* for the

relief of sore feet (Watt and Breyer-Brandwijk, 1962; Roberts, 1990; Hutching, Scott, Lewis, and Cunningham, 1996; Swanepoel, 1997). Roberts (1990) confirms in his book that bush tea has been used for many decades as a medicinal tea for, for example, purifying blood, treating boils, headaches, infected wounds and cuts.

Materials and methods

A field survey was conducted from 31 March to 19 April 2003. The survey was conducted in twenty-five different villages in Venda, Limpopo Province of South Africa. It was conducted by means of verbal interviews. One hundred respondents were interviewed. Interviews were performed with the following respondents: traditional healers, street sellers and bearers of indigenous knowledge. For the interviews, a questionnaire was developed and used, which contained questions concerning uses of the plant, domestication and propagation, marketing, harvesting, post-harvest handling and methods for tea and medicine preparation (Appendix A).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Women had a greater knowledge about the plant. This could be because women are more associated with the forest than men, or the fact that there were more women in the area than men. It was found that people from the area of study know of bush tea and its uses. Bush tea is locally known by different names such as mutsheke, muthathalilwo, mutshutshungwa and thanzwamuvhili. It was revealed from the survey that most of the people obtain bush tea from the bush, while a few obtain it from the open cultivated field. The plant is known for its medicinal properties as a healthy tea and to make traditional brooms. Due to the fact that the respondents have no obligation to propagate this plant and that the plant is readily available, the majority felt they would neither buy nor grow it for themselves. Leaves, together with the shoots of the bush are the most frequent used for tea and medicine. In other cases roots are also used for medicinal purposes. For making brooms, dried stems and shoots are used. Ways of harvesting include cutting the plant either from the stem or the branches, as well as uprooting the whole plant. The distance travelled to obtain bush tea determined how much respondents paid per trip. The cost varied from as little as R2.00 per trip to as much as R14.00 per trip.

During the field survey the respondents showed knowledge of other medicinal plants. Thus bush tea could be used in combination with other medicinal plants. However, they also indicated that there are other medicinal plants that they preferred to bush tea. The respondents indicated that the plant was effective to treat heart diseases, diabetes and high blood pressure. While other respondents indicated that the plant was ineffective to treat heart diseases, diabetes and high blood pressure. The results also indicated the physical ailments respondents believed could be treated with the infusion of bush tea such as headaches, stomach aches, and influenza and legs wounds.

They also indicated that dried or fresh leaves (including the twigs) are boiled and the extract is drunk with sugar as a tea. The bush tea plant could be used right after harvest and also after it had been stored or dried for both medicine and tea.

The infusion of the plant is known to have aphrodisiac properties and it can also be used to cleanse the womb, kidneys, and veins and also used to purify blood (Roberts, 1990; Hutching, Scott, Lewis, and Cunningham, 1996; Swanepoel, 1997). Through the ways in which these people harvest bush tea plants it is clear that the plant is in danger of being over-harvested and exploited. The results from the survey showed that people from those villages rely on traditional medicine. Therefore, efforts should be made to document useful plants species such as bush tea and other medicinal plants in order to conserve ethnobotanical knowledge and practices available. The ethnobotanical knowledge is in danger of being lost in the country due to urbanization. Many plant habitats are being destroyed and the older traditional healers pass away without handing down their knowledge.

APPENDIX A

Questionnaire survey on bush tea (*Athrixia phylicoides*)

1. What is the title of your job position?
2. In which village do you live?
3. What is your age?
4. What is your gender?
5. What is your highest academic qualification?
6. Do you use or sell the plant?
7. What is the traditional name of this plant?
8. Where do you get the plant materials?
9. What are the uses of the plant?
10. Which plant parts do you use? Leaves, roots, stem?
11. Do you grow the plant for yourself?
12. If you grow the plant, which plant parts do you use to grow the plant?
Seeds cuttings and roots?
13. Would you be interested to buy the plant if somebody else grows it for you?
14. Would you be interested to grow the plant for yourself if one shows you how to grow it?
15. How is the plant harvested?
16. From which areas do you harvest bush/Zulu tea?
17. What is the distance from where you get the plant to your home in kilometers?
18. How much is the travelling cost from where you get the plant?

19. When do you harvest the plant for broom making?
20. How often do you sell the bush/Zulu tea medicine to the people?
21. Which kind of ethnic group of people do you sell the medicine to?
22. Which other plants do you sell for medicine?
23. How effective is bush tea to cure the following diseases: Heart problem, Diabetes and Blood pressure?
24. What other diseases can be cured by bush /Zulu tea?
25. Are there any other plants that work the same as bush/Zulu tea plant for medicine?
26. Do you store the plant materials for medicinal purpose?
27. When preparing the medicine, do you add anything else?
28. How do you prepare the tea?
29. If you boil the leaves, for how long do you boil the tea? (In minutes).
30. Do you add anything else when preparing the tea?
31. Are there any other tea plants that you use as medicine?

REFERENCES

- Gericke, N. (2002). *Plants, Products and People: Southern Africa Perspectives*. Advances in Phytomed. Vol. 1: Elsevier. Elsevier Science B.V. Amsterdam - London. 155-162.
- Hutching, A., Scott, A.H., Lewis, G. and Cunningham, A.B. (1996). *Zulu Medicinal Plants: Inventory*. U.S.
- Roberts, M. (1990). *Indigenous Healing Plants*. Cape Town: Southern Book Publishers (Pty) Ltd.
- Salie F., Eagles P.F. and, Leng H.M. (1996). Preliminary Antimicrobial Screening of Four South African Asteraceae Species. *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, 52(1): 27.
- Swanepoel, D.P. (1997). *The Medicinal Value of the Southern African Asteraceae*. M.Sc. dissertation. Pretoria: University of Pretoria. South Africa: 90-91.
- Van Wyk, B.E. and Gericke, N. (2000). *People's Plants: A Guide to Useful Plants of Southern Africa*. Pretoria: Briza Publications.
- Watt, J.W. and Breyer-Brandwijk, M.G. (1962). *The Medicinal and Poisonous Plants of Southern and Eastern Africa*. Edinburgh: E. & S. Livingstone Ltd.