

Afro-Cuban religion, Magical-Medical Plant Use and Conservation: Local Perceptions of Environmental Change. (Oral Presentation)

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Introduction

Afro-Cuban ritual activities have proliferated in post-Soviet urban Cuba, leading to an increased dependence on the rich medicinal and magical pharmacopoeia employed in the hybridised religions that include santería, ifá and palo monte. Preferred plant species relate closely to those employed in recent state-led efforts to combat the healthcare crisis of the 1990s, provoked principally by the US embargo. Environmental implications of this recent rise in ethnobotanical activity are as yet poorly understood, however.

Objectives

1. Explore local perceptions in the change of ritual and medicinal plant availability over the past fifteen years
2. Compare these species with government data on scarce medicinal plant species.
3. Determine potentially scarce species of high ritual value currently excluded from national conservation strategies.

Methods

Methods included semi-structured interviews; free-listing techniques; structured botanical surveys; participant observation, and voucher collections. In-depth local accounts of plant scarcity were generated from four groups of local botanical experts (n=80), including religious and commercial plant sellers and harvesters.

Results

66 species were reported as locally scarce. Details were recorded on type and duration of scarcity; perceived causes for decline; type of harvesting and part of plant used; together with uses of scarce plants. Only a small degree of crossover was observed with the 92 species cited as scarce (and subsequently protected) medicinal plants in government strategies. Over-harvesting (through commercialisation and taboo breakdown) and climatic fluctuations were cited as principal causes of scarcity. A high percentage of plants used in a ritual context are still wild harvested and from non-conservation priority habitats, such as disturbed forests and peri-urban wastelands.

Conclusion

Conservation efforts currently exclude the majority of locally perceived scarce species of value to Afro-Cuban religions. Many of these species are high in ritual value, but do not have state-recognised medicinal properties. These plants may nevertheless be equally if not more important for local peoples and their inclusion into conservation strategies should be encouraged.

Keywords: Cuba, ritual, plant scarcity, commercialisation, secondary forests

Selected References

None

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