

Oral presentation

The messiahs of the virgin forest: the life and plants of the Giriama Mganga

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Introduction. The Giriama, a sub-tribe of the Midzichenda, are at least 1500 year inhabitants of the forest area “Kaya Fungo” in eastern Kenya. This region includes 35,000 people, mainly Giriama, in an agricultural, pastoral, and gathering economy. Plant medicines are still being used in Kaya Fungo but the knowledge and use of the traditional medicines are threatened by the influx of a cash economy, desertification, and lack of child-elder mentorship.

Objectives. To record the life history of the Giriama Mganga and his customs entwined with the forest. To catalogue and identify the Mganga’s medicinal flora using indigenous and scientific names. To provide a permanent record of plant parts and methods used to treat health conditions.

Methods. J.F. lived with members of the Kaya Fungo elder council called the “Kambi” and established a close relationship with Mganga Fungo, the direct descendent of Kaya Fungo’s founder. Together, medicinal plants were collected from the forest. The indigenous names, remedies, and preparations were further discussed with the rest of the “Kambi” elders. Scientific identification of plants continued at the National Museums of Kenya.

Results. Mganga Fungo used a variety of plant parts sometimes conjoined with animal parts or byproducts. There were 65 plants recorded for treating about 40 health conditions. The remedies can be applied by blowing, poultice, bathing, through incised veins or arteries, teas, and wafted smoke.

Conclusion. The pharmacopoeia of the Mganga included numerous plants, with many species having major cultural significance. Plant preparations were used in the treatment of many ailments including: heart disease, snake bites, asthma, numerous bacterial and viral infections, and tuberculosis. These medicinal remedies should be tested for efficacy using western criteria.

Keywords: Midzichenda, ethnobotany, medicine

Selected References

1. Pakia M. and Cooke J.A. (2003). The ethnobotany of the Midzichenda tribes of the coastal forest areas in Kenya: 2. Medicinal plant uses. South African Journal of Botany, 69: 382-395.

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