Oral presentation

The importance of odor in Aguaruna tree classification and identification

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Introduction. The structure of folk taxonomies has been a major focus of the cognitive ethnobotanical literature for the last several decades. Despite extensive progress in this area, the literature still contains surprisingly few detailed descriptions of the actual sensory criteria people use for judging membership in taxonomic categories. Olfactory criteria in particular have been explored very little.

Objectives. This paper will describe the importance of odor for woody plant taxonomy and identification among the Aguaruna Jívaro of the northern Peruvian Amazon. It will focus on the Aguaruna category numi (trees excluding palms).

Methods. Work was carried out in several Aguaruna communities in the upper Marañón region of the Peruvian Amazon, in 2004. Structured interview data were collected regarding informants' criteria for membership in various folk taxa of trees. Data from 25 Gentry style test plots (Gentry 1982) containing 156 trees demonstrate the relative importance of bark smelling and other actions involved in trees identification.

Results. Aguaruna informants almost always place trees that they consider to have a similar odor together as kumpají – "companions," a metaphor they use to describe trees that they consider to be related. Some of these groups of companions with similar odors correspond to botanical families, including Annonaceae, Burseraceae, Lauraceae, Myristicaceae and Piperaceae.

Conclusion. The data from interviews and Gentry test plots suggest that odor can play an important role for the Aguaruna in distinguishing which trees are related. Gentry plot data show that, in actual identifications, odor appears to be important for confirming an initial guess or for determining the identity of difficult trees.

Keywords: cognitive ethnobotany, Peru, Amazon, Jivaroan, covert taxa

Selected References

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