

## Oral presentation

### “Wasi ondrosei”: the ethnobotany of genital steam baths in Suriname

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**Introduction.** In many African cultures, plants that tighten and dry out the vagina to 'improve' sexual intercourse are very popular, even though this increases the transmission of venereal diseases. In Suriname, where Maroon tribes have largely maintained their African culture, vaginal steam baths with tightening herbs are popular aphrodisiacs. This paper examines which species are harvested for this practice and quantifies their trade. This information can be helpful in the design of health care programs.

**Objectives.** 1. To find out which plant species are used in genital baths and why they are considered important by users. 2. To obtain quantitative data on the trade in these species.

**Methods.** We collected vouchers of all plants used in genital steam baths, vernacular names, recipes and information on perceived effects. Interviews were held with health care workers and women who regularly use these steam baths. A market survey was held to quantify the trade in these plants.

**Results.** Over 40 different plant species are used in genital steam baths, not only to tighten the vagina, but also to clean out the uterus after child birth, miscarriage, menstruation and intercourse with presumed 'unclean' partners. Steam bath ingredients account for 16% of the species traded. Medical experts are concerned that these practices contribute to the rapid spread of HIV and cervix cancer among the Surinamese population.

**Conclusion.** Being clean is considered essential by Afro-Surinamese, and this is reflected in their ethnobotany. Genital baths are also thought to minimize the occurrence and consequences of adultery. Women choose plants as steam bath

ingredients on the basis of their efficacy, but also on their morphology. More research on the effects on those plants is needed to find out which species are harmless and which uses should be discouraged.

Keywords: Suriname, Maroons, vaginal steam bath, HIV, plant trade

#### Selected References

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