

Oral presentation

Traditions in transition: African diaspora pharmacopoeias in South America

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Introduction. Ethnobotanical narratives often imply that mature medicinal plant profiles are the outcome of long-term residence and gradual cognitive familiarity with the local flora. In the moist tropical realm, where biological diversity is extreme and species frequency is low, plant knowledge acquisition is portrayed as a glacially slow process. Accordingly, whereas indigenous groups in the New World tropics are characterized romantically as living repositories of ancient medicinal plant wisdom, the descendents of African slaves and freedmen are afforded often only marginal credibility as herbalists and healers.

Objectives. This paper explores the relationship between forced African immigration to tropical South America and the process of ethnobotanical retention and acquisition. I examine in particular the role of introduced cultivars and weeds as “culturally facilitating” factors in the process of ethnomedical diffusion.

Methods. Research results are derived from field work carried out among African diaspora groups in northeastern Brazil, especially healers in the Candomblé religious community. I also review the ethnobotanical literature for Black diaspora communities in other regions of tropical South America.

Results. Results underscore the richness of African diaspora pharmacopoeias, the degree to which they have assimilated indigenous and Iberian ethnobotanical traditions, and especially the facilitating influence of the “Columbian exchange” of biota between the Old and New Worlds. Human modification and floristic homogenization of these distant biomes by means of weeds, invasives, and kitchen garden cultivars enhanced dramatically the ability of South America’s Black pioneers to reconstitute the healing tradition of their ancestors in the Americas. On the other hand, whereas indigenous communities in America’s lowland tropical forests employ the full range of life forms, including the bark and roots of trees, African diaspora healing floras are notable for their absence of native tree species.

Conclusion. This review of African diaspora medicinal ethnobotany suggests that knowledge of nature is fluid and reasonably adaptable. In spite of formidable barriers, African pioneers forged novel ethnobotanical relations with South America’s lowland forests. This was facilitated in part by the accidental and intentional floristic homogenisation of Africa and South America. Finally, given the wealth of Iberian kitchen garden species and slave foods used medicinally by Black communities, acculturation clearly contributed significantly to this evolving ethnoflora.

Keywords: medicinal plants; South America; African-American; cultural diffusion; weeds

Selected References

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