

BOOK REVIEW

MEDICINAL PLANTS OF EAST AFRICA. 3RD EDITION

John. O. Kokwaro, 2009, University of Nairobi Press (WWW.uonbi.ac.ke/press, Nairobi. xviii, 478 pp, 35 pp ill. (col.), 248 x 172, ISBN 9966846840, soft cover. Price Ksh. 1500 in East Africa and US\$ 35 in other countries.

The 3rd edition of this classic book, first published in 1976 comes at a time when there is renewed interest and policy emphasis on herbal remedies especially in Africa. The developed world may have moved on to modern medicine centuries ago but in sub-Saharan Africa it has been estimated by WHO that 60% to 80% of indigenous Africans still use herbal medicine for their primary health care. East Africa (Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania) has a rich plant diversity of about 12000 vascular plant taxa, and likewise a rich ethnic diversity of about 180 tribes. This rich cocktail has resulted in the proliferation of a wealth of traditional herbal knowledge that has been transmitted orally for thousands of years from time immemorial. The author describes the traditional herbal uses of over 1500 species as utilised by the different tribes in East Africa. Over 200 plants that are widely used for various treatments are illustrated in colour to help in identification.

The front cover photo shows foliage and fruits of *Warburgia ugandensis*, taken from a tree planted by President Barack Obama on 28 August 2006 (then a US Senator) in the grounds of the University of Nairobi main campus during a lecture visit. There are two introductory remarks; the first one being an introduction to the herbal remedies or the medicinal plants. The second introduction is on the traditional medicine as practiced primarily by indigenous East Africans. After the introductions follows parts I and II that form the bulk of the book. Part I on 'plant species and the diseases treated' is the main section of the book where each herbal remedy is identified by its botanical name followed by its vernacular name(s) and a full herbal use description. All similar plants (e.g. legumes) are grouped into their respective plant families. The new edition includes short remarks on how family members can be propagated. Part II on 'diseases and plant species used for treatment' classifies diseases into various groups and lists herbal species under each respective disease. Human diseases are listed first followed by ethno-veterinary medicine. Finally are indexes to vernacular and botanical names. The index to vernacular names lists all vernacular names covered in Part I of the book.

Each vernacular name has the tribe which uses it and its botanical equivalent. In order to find out under which plant it has been used, one has to refer to the last comprehensive index to botanical names.

Some criticisms about the book: A different layout combined with smaller font and lighter, higher quality paper would have produced a more compact and portable book. Some photographs fall short of the expected quality as it is clear that many of them were taken years ago and have lost their true original colours and sharpness over time. Spending additional resources by photographing afresh would have improved the quality of the images.

An issue that may be of concern is the protection of the intellectual property rights of the communities that preserved this knowledge" and how they can share in any future profits in the event that drugs are discovered based on their collective knowledge. Much of Africa is however in a critical stage where much of this knowledge is disappearing fast or getting distorted because it is not being faithfully and religiously passed on to the intellectually gifted and honest sons and daughters of these societies. The older people with the knowledge are dying fast without passing it on to the younger generation. If we overemphasize the protection of IPR without finding ways of documenting this knowledge and practices urgently, there may be nothing much left to document in a few years time. In addition, much of the environment has been undergoing accelerated degradation in recent years with the result that useful plants especially the medicinal plants are becoming rarer in their native habitats. Some of them could be exterminated due to a combination of factors such as overexploitation and adverse climatic changes.

Knowledge and skills that are transmitted down the generations orally require intact traditional societies. The African reality is that there has been much disruption to the traditional ways of life due to colonialism, competing new ways of life and religions, rural-urban migration and environmental degradation. In these circumstances, much of the traditional knowledge is not well passed on, or becomes distorted in the process of transmission. The proliferation of quack herbalists and the association of herbal medicine with sorcery and witchcraft as well as the current commercialisation has often tainted herbal practice. Many African countries

have no policies to incorporate herbal practice as an alternative form of medicine to be administered alongside western medicine and practice. These are some of the major factors that severely affect the development of herbal medicine in Africa.

The author has over 40 years of scientific experience in plant science with special focus on plant taxonomy. The book is therefore grounded in sound field and theoretical research and is clearly

and accurately presented in a simple manner. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in medicinal plants since it is a classic book that will be useful for many years to come.

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