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A TRADITIONAL PHARMACOPOEIA OF THE BAKA PYGMIES

an account of the flora of Equatorial Africa traditionally used by the Baka Pygmies of Cameroon
The Traditional Pharmacopoeia and Biodiversity

The publication of this book in English falls within the activities of the “Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi e Ricerche sull’Etnobiofarmacia” (CISTRE) – the Interdepartmental Centre for Studies and Research on Ethnobiopharmacy of the University of Pavia, Italy. One of its objectives is the study and analysis of remedies found in Traditional Pharmacopoeia and Folk Medicines, so that the active components responsible for their pharmacological and therapeutic properties can be identified and enhanced.

These studies are linked to the biodiversity of several Countries and its use by the local populations for curing various diseases and complaints, as well as in their everyday lives. To share this knowledge, the University of Pavia organized in the academic year 2007-2008 a second level Master’s degree in “Ethnobiopharmacy and Natural Products of Biodiversity”, now in its sixth edition.

Biodiversity, or variety of life, means the set of all genetically different living species together with their ecosystems. Thus biodiversity implies all the biological varieties of genes, habitats and ecosystems. Given the importance of this subject, ONU declared 2010 as “The International Year for Biodiversity” but later went as far as extending this period to 2011-2020, calling it the “Decade of Biodiversity”.

The Centre for Ethnobiopharmacy of the University of Pavia is linked to the local populations of several Countries with whom it collaborates in studying these subjects, often seeking to add a scientific value to those plants the local populations employ. From the collaboration of the Baka Pygmies of Cameroon, who accepted to let us scientifically test the value of their natural remedies, sprang our studies on the plants of the equatorial forest of Cameroon, which became the subject of several dissertations, doctorates and publications. We were often able to validate the efficacy of the traditional remedies of the Pygmy people.

Through these connections, CISTRE discovered the studies on the plants employed by the Pygmies written by Brisson and Letouzey, albeit in different contexts. This documentation was the subject of the thesis Dott. Elsa Nervo presented for her Master’s Degree in “Ethnobiopharmacy and the Sustainable use of Biodiversity” for the academic year 2008-2009.

The Interdepartmental Centre for Study and Research on Ethnobiopharmacy thought it would be interesting to present these findings to the public by publishing what to all effects may be considered the Traditional Pharmacopoeia of the Baka Pygmies. The first book was published in Italian in 2011. We decided to spread the word about the precious cultural heritage of these people, which
has been handed down by mouth over the years but now is in danger of extinction due to the all too well-known socio-economic difficulties facing the Pygmy population. The interest in the book shown by so many researchers prompted us to publish an English edition, thus giving more access to anyone interested in this subject. The text has been re-elaborated to provide more ethno-botanical as well as ethno-medical information.

With this second publication, which compared with the Italian version has been designed for a wider distribution as well as to furnish more ethno-botanical information, CISTRE of the University of Pavia intends to continue its small, but dedicated, chain of publications on the traditional remedies of little known ethnic peoples from several countries in the world. Our books also cover other aspects of the everyday life of these people, worthy of the attention of a more vast public who respect their multiplicity and cultural and social expressions.

_Giovanni Vidari_
Director of CISTRE

_Paola Vita Finzi_
Professor Emeritus of the University of Pavia
Preface

Very probably, the Pygmies are the oldest population to inhabit the equatorial and tropical forests of Africa. Inscriptions on Egyptian monuments, dating back to 2000 B.C., tell that the Pygmies are called “Dancers of the Gods”, because of their great ability to dance.

The name “Pygmy” comes from the Greek word “pygmaios” which means as tall as a cubit, i.e. small. Indeed, on average the men are 140 cm tall and the women 130 cm. Pygmies embrace all peoples who are physically small in stature and pale brown in colour, who live in the African tropical-equatorial forests, from Cameroon as far as the mountainous and volcanic heights that form the watershed between the River Congo basin and the plateau to the East of the aforesaid massifs and volcanoes.

The Pygmies, who have always been thought of as the Lords of the African Forests, risk disappearing. Deforestation is destroying their habitat and threatening to wipe out their precious cultural heritage.

Modern Africa doesn’t seem to have any room for a “primitive” people, tenaciously attached to their own independence and diversity. Everything around the Pygmies is rapidly changing. Once the undisputed Lords of the Rain Forests, they now risk finding themselves uprooted from their own land and losing their cultural identity.

But the survival of their cultural identity is not the only problem the Pygmies face. The arrival of roads has brought serious epidemics, diseases unknown to the forest, which raze whole families. This in turn has increased the use of western medicines, in spite of the fact that the surrounding environment offers an abundance of medicinal remedies with which the Pygmies are familiar and which form the basis of their unique traditional medicine, handed down by word of mouth.

This book, a true and proper “Baka Pharmacopoeia”, with the translation of the writings of Father Brisson, wishes to contribute to the conservation of this cultural heritage. It is an invitation to seriously investigate the remedies used by the inhabitants of the forest, to verify their efficacy through western protocols in order to guarantee the availability of efficient, safe drugs and at accessible costs.

And it is not meant to be merely a way of saying thank you for the friendship, help and courtesy these little Lords of the Forest showed me when fate led me to meet them. It is a way of keeping a promise made to Daniel, the Zulabot Shaman, who under the hut of parables asked me to tell the world about the dramatic situation in which the Baka Pygmies find themselves today.

Gabriele Caccialanza  
Member of CISTRE
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A Traditional Pharmacopoeia of the Baka Pygmies

Elsa Nervo

This second volume in the Acta Ethnica series of the “Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi e Ricerche sull’Etnobiofarmacia” (CISTRE) is following the first book, that was published in Italian on the same subject but with a different approach. The aim of these books is to present data on the uses of plants by the Baka Pygmies in their daily life, based on direct interviews conducted by different Authors among the Baka people living in the equatorial forest of Cameroon. This volume in English is aimed at a wider audience and its purpose is to provide more ethno-botanical information on the traditional remedies of little known Baka Pygmies. Other aspects of the everyday life of this people, worthy of attention from a socio-cultural perspective, are also reported. It is interesting to note that the Baka Pygmies agreed to have the uses that they do of the plants validated in a scientific way.

Il secondo volume della collana Acta Ethnica del “Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi e Ricerche sull’Etnobiofarmacia” (CISTRE) segue il primo libro pubblicato in italiano sullo stesso argomento ma con un taglio diverso. Lo scopo di questi libri è quello di far conoscere l’uso che i Pigmei Baka fanno delle piante nella loro vita di tutti i giorni, in base ai dati raccolti durante interviste condotte da diversi autori tra la popolazione Baka che vive nella foresta equatoriale del Camerun. Questo volume in inglese è destinato a un pubblico più vasto e ha lo scopo di fornire un maggior numero di notizie etnobotaniche sulla tradizione medicinale della popolazione dei Pigmei Baka assai poco conosciuta. Vengono anche riportati altri aspetti della vita quotidiana di questa etnia che sono degni di attenzione da un punto di vista culturale e sociale. È interessante sapere che i Pigmei Baka hanno acconsentito a far validare scientificamente il loro utilizzo delle piante.

Elsa Nervo graduated in Chemistry at the University of Pavia in 1965, she taught Chemistry and Natural Sciences at Classical and Scientific secondary schools in Italy until 2005. Elsa Nervo has participated in various initiatives to examine in depth and divulge scientific culture for students and has collaborated in teaching formation courses. She attended the University of Pavia “Masters in Ethno-biopharmacy and Sustainable use of Biodiversity” in the academic year 2008-2009.