

## Original article

# Utilization of plant medicine for the treatment of health problems: The case of the Oromo of Chora District, Illubabor Zone, Western Ethiopia

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**Abstract:** A four-months exploratory study was conducted among the Oromo of Chora district, Illubabor Zone, Western Ethiopia, with the aim of identifying prevalent health problems, dispositions about causes and treatments with specific emphasis paid to the use of plants as sources of medicine. Data were collected from both elder members of the community and local healers by using anthropological methods such as systematic observation, case studies and responses from key informants to obtain pertinent information. Descriptive analysis was the basic mode of data analysis employed. From the study, it was found that the community attributed causes of health problems to a supernatural force (Waqqa or Rabby) who is believed to control the day-to-day human life processes. Consequent to such beliefs, recourse is made to local healers who are believed to have been given knowledge and skill for the treatment of health problems by using, among other

things, plants as medicine. Some health problems including afuura lafaa (problem related to vapor from the earth), sabata waaqayyo (problem encountered from urinating by facing belt of waaqaa), shimbo (jaundice), dhukuba dhiira (gonorrhoea in men) were found to prevail in the community. These problems are often treated by employing locally available resources. It was pointed out that many people claim to know the use of plant medicines for the treatment of specific health problems. However, the processes of collecting, preparing and administering plant medicines follow certain procedures that are mesttised to few people. In general, plants were found to serve important function in the health care of communities of Chora district. The scientific validity of these remedies, however, needs further investigation. [Ethiop. J. Health Dev. 1996;10(3):161-i66]

## Introduction

Studies conducted thus far have shown plant medicine to play vital role in health care of large sections of the population in developing countries (1). It was also argued that plant medicine helps to bridge the gap between the demand for, and supply of, 'modern' medical services (2). It is widely known that "Modern" medicine has benefited from plants in discovering cures for various health problems (3). In developed countries, plant-derived solutions still serve important purposes (4). Developing countries like China, Pakistan, India and Vietnam have identified potential usage of plant medicines and incorporated them into their overall health care system (3). Among African countries, Ethiopia is often quoted as one of the six countries of the world where about 60 % of the plants are said to be indigenous with their healing potential (5). These plants vary in their distribution over the country due to the varied geographic and climatic conditions of the country (6). The effort to standardize and scientifically ascertain these important health resource however, remained to be minimum (7, 5). Only few studies were geared towards indigenous medicine with an objective to improve their usage. Consequently, the over-all use of these plants remained within the domain of local healers as they often resort to them for the treatment of different health problems.

## **Methods**

The study was conducted in Chora district of Illubabor Zone from November 1992 to February 1993. The specific district under consideration hosts a total of 59,140 people, more than 95% of whom were estimated to be Oromo and followers of Islam (8).

The physiography of the region in general, and the district in particular, is characterized by substantial rainfall through-out the year and a relatively humid climate.

Economically, there are both food crops such as teff, sorghum, maize and pulses; and cash crops including coffee and khat (*katha edulis*) that grow in the district. Nevertheless, due to failure to properly manage what is produced, local farmers often complain about shortage of food, especially during the summer season.

Although the health status of the community in the district is not well documented, the local health institutions report the prevalence of infectious and communicable diseases. Information concerning reliance on plants as sources of medicine, locally prevalent health problems, dispositions about causes and plants used in the treatment of health problems were collected.

A total of 10 peasant associations that hosted either a notable local healer or a health station were selected so as to compare the differences in the use of plant medicine. Thirteen local elders from the respective peasant associations were chosen on the basis of their reported knowledge about their respective community. Unstructured questionnaire was used to generate pertinent information. Besides, five notable healers were consulted as informants. In the process of data collection the local language (Oromifaa) was employed. The collected information was carefully analyzed and described.

## **Results**

*Beliefs about causes of health problems*. According to local wisdom, health among the Oromo of Chora is understood within the framework of religion. The Oromo of Chora believe in Rabby -an omnipresent, creator and savior of life. Harmony among people and between people and the physical environment is believed to produce a healthy life. Misfortunes that are manifested in experiencing illness, death and disturbance of well-being are signs of Rabby's exasperation consequent to violations of shared agreements. These shared agreements which Rabby wants people to comply with are identified to include: 1) speaking truth (*dhugaa*), 2) spiritual and physical purity (*qulqulumaa*), 3) respect for one another (*ulfina*) and 4) recognition of rights and merits of human beings as well as physical environment. Violations of these standards are believed

to annoy Rabby as a result of which He withdraws His blessings and timely assistance. This leads to failure of vigor as Rabby exposes those who violate shared agreements to encounter problems.

*Role of plants in the treatment of health problems.* There are always alternative health care services to counteract/withstand the challenges of health problems in absence of or limited availability of 'modern' health care options. Of these alternatives, local healers the majority of whom make use of plants make a good share.

Treatment by using plant materials among healers in Chora is an experience that is shared and taught. Although it is to a limited degree, those elders with whom long hours of discussions were made claim to know the use of some plants for treatment of health problems. However, they have also indicated that special usages are exclusive to few local healers who are said to have been given the knowledge by Rabby which is eventually developed further through apprenticeship. Local healers, in general, are believed to have been empowered by Rabby to provide treatment for different health problems by the way of which the victim is reconciled with Rabby. Furthermore the five healers closely studied have pointed out that the wisdom they are given can pass over to the next generation through continuous apprenticeship. As the elders indicated and the healers also agree, all healers do not know how every plant is used for treatment of a specific health problem. The majority lack detailed knowledge about the procedure of collecting, preparing, and administering plant medicines. This has an important implication on the efficacy of the medicinal plant. Despite this fact, many healers dishonestly claim to have been given the wisdom so as to enjoy the social esteem attached to it.

*Local use of plants as medicine.* As already pointed out Rabby is believed to have granted the knowledge of treating health problems among others with the use of plants to few people. This implies that every one who claims to have the skill of treating health problems by employing plants does not necessarily possess it.

As revealed from discussions with the elders, there are many local healers in Chora claiming to be healers. However, it was noted that these healers are not equally knowledgeable in providing health care by using medicinal plants. According to the shared belief, a genuine healer is chosen by Rabby so as to mediate between those individuals or groups of people who violate shared agreements and Himself, thereby securing their well being. Such healers are referred to as woliyi. These healers often use different plants and spiritual prayer (duai) for the management of different problems.

The collection of medicinal Plants is based upon knowledge about the plant, the part of the plant that possesses the therapeutic value, the time when the concentration of medicinally valuable substance is optimum and the procedures of collection. A plant was pointed out by the five healers consulted, to have medicinal value only at specific times of a year. Many healers, however, claim to know the medicinal value of a plant without knowing which part of it is medicinal and when exactly it should be harvested.

Thus, collection of medicinal plants depends on the astronomical characteristics of days. Among the Oromo of Chora there are a total of seven such days called cegino days in a month that are related to the position of the moon and the stars. Cegino days are said to be the last five days before the moon sets for a days absence and the first two days after the moon reappears. Plants collected during cegino days are said to be more effective.

Furthermore, some healers believe that collection of medicinal plants follows some ritual. The argument goes that medicinal plants are guarded by sheytana (devil) that a collector should make himself ready to face this malevolent spirit. To this effect, making oneself spiritual by intensive prayer and by abstaining from sexual contact on the eve of the campaign for collection are common rituals performed for success.

Once the plant material is collected, it can be prepared in the form of powder, decoction, infusion or juice which can be taken orally, or applied topically or both. The composition of the number of species of plant used as medicine for a specific health problem varies in proportion.

In the preparation of indigenous medicines, local healers are often criticized for lack of proper measurement of ingredients. However, the five healers similarly indicated that they have developed their own rationale and logic over the years to determine ingredients and its amount.

The method of administering locally prepared medicine to the sick varies. Among the healers consulted, two have indicated to administer medicine along with rituals, while three give it without any pre or post requisites. However, public khat chewing ceremony is the basis for any treatment undenakings. Otherwise, it was found out that there is no standard ritual prescription commonly followed by all the healers who were closely studied.

*Locally prevalent health problems and their treatment.* The prevailing health problems in Chora are related to the common and widely known health problems as in the case of Ethiopia and the developing countries. These are communicable and infectious diseases, and malnutrition (9). Similar health problems have also been noted from observation of the health stations in the district. However, members of the community at grass root level claim the prevalent health problems to be different from what has been reported by the modern health institutions. Such health problems the member;" of the community claim to be common arc often treated by local healers using plant medicines.

These health problems were identified along with their immediate causes, symptoms and treatments as follows:

1. *Afuura lataa*. It is an ill-health feeling believed to be inflicted by sheytana. It refers to all kinds of feelings that are reflected in the head, back and joint aches, swelling of the body, paralysis, and madness. The last two

symptoms are serious symptoms of *Afuura lataa* and are rarely complained about. In addition to *duai*, there are plant materials commonly employed for the: treatment of this health problem.

Types, preparation and administration of plants for *afuura lata* include the following:

a) *Anccabby* (*Onimum savue*). The leaf of *Anccabby* is collected, dried, pulverized and its juice is drunk either with coffee or alone. Besides, its juice is applied topically as an ointment for the same health problem. This is often done immediately after the symptom is revealed.

b) *Altet*. It is prepared from the mixtures of different plant materials. It is given in small amount measured in pinich of two fingers either to be inhaled or drunk with water .

c) *Udasalib*. It is a plant that is believed to have therapeutic effect against different health problems. For the problem under discussion, however, the victim is smoked with the dried trunk of *udasalib*.

2. *Dhukuba Dhiira*. This illness specifically refers to gonorrhoea. It is believed to be caused due to sexual encounter with women suffering from the problem. The symptoms of this problem are invariably said to include mucoid discharges from the urethral openings and irritation while urinating. Although *Dhukuba dhiira* is prevalent in the community, it is rarely reported to modern health institutions.

Local treatment of *Dhukuba Dhiira* includes the use of *Hidii* (*Girardinia heterophylla*) and *Zararech*. The creeper of the plant is dried, pounded and a small amount of it is added to a glass of local beer and drunk. It is believed to discharge the disease through urination. *Zerarech*, on the other hand is an insect that is commonly used for the treatment of *dhukuba dhiira*. The thorax of the insect which is believed to be poisonous is discarded. The rest of the insect is dried, and pounded. A pinch of this is mixed with a glass of local beer and drunk. In addition, this formula is noted to be employed for the treatment of *shimbirro* (jaundice) and *dhukuba saree fnarattu* (rabies). Modern medicine showed that the latter health problem i.e, rabies is difficult to be treated once symptoms are revealed. Yet, both healers and local people in Chora pointed out that it is effectively treated with an employment of the insect. This calls for further research.

3. *Sabata waaqayyoo*. It literally means 'belt of the waaqa'. The disease is believed to be encountered when an unwary person urinates facing the rainbow. This is taken to show the actors' impoliteness to Rabby. This problem is said to be common among the majority of the community as some times it is not easy to locate the direction of the rainbow. The symptoms include swelling and cramp of the stomach (when alcohol is drunk and wheat bread is eaten), loss of appetite and difficulty in urination. All the healers claim to have treated this problem better than 'modern' health care institutions. Usually *ulmay* (*Clausena anisata*) and *ebicha* (*Vernonia amygdallina*) are claimed to be used. The leaf of *ulmay* is used to wash the body of the sick person in the sun. After so doing, the leaf of *ebicha* is squeezed and its juice is drunk.

4. *Dhukuba garaa keesaa*. This refers to a problem of the stomach. Although there are different types of stomach-related illnesses, the Oromo of Chora define it commonly as illness of the stomach. Nevertheless, on the basis of information on specific symptoms and feelings, healers have established specific cures. If parasites are reported to be seen in the faeces they have different plant materials for treatment, and if the problem is related to *sabata waaqayyoo* treatment follows as indicated in the foregoing discussion. Otherwise, *saari*; *nabii tuultii* (*Rheum* sp.), *duucho* (*Hagenia abyssinica*), *biftii*, *qobbo* (*Ricinus communis*) and *ebicha* are used independently. All the plants are used in a similar way i.e. , crushed, pounded and mixed with about a liter of water and drunk. While it is the root of *soori*; *nabii*; which is employed, it is the flower and leaf which are used for the treatment of the felt health problem.

5. *Tenecha*. This health problem is related to swelling and eventual wound on the neck. If it is not treated immediately, it is said to become a chronic wound. Although it was difficult to find an immediate causative agent, cold and unusual wind are blamed for its onset. Local healers treat the problem employing plants referred to as *sanamak* (*Cassia acutifolia*) and *haramandawa*. Both of these plants are said to be used for the treatment of *Tenecha*. One full cup of *sanamak*'s leaf boiled with one liter of milk is drunk every day in a cup. Similarly, the trunk of *haramandawa* is dried, pounded and an amount measured in pinch of fingers is mixed with a liter of milk and is drunk every day for about a week.

6. *Marachuu*. This refers to mental sickness. The infliction is often attributed to sheytana. Although one of the healers consulted claims to treat this problem without the use of any medicine, others have identified specific plants that have been used for the same purpose. These plants include anchaby, aqarqara, and ashangira (*Datura stramonium*). The leaf of anchaby and the seed of ashangira are used in the same way. They are dried and smoked by the patient like cigarettes. Aqarqara on the other hand is prepared differently. The leaf of the plant is dried under the roof, pounded and inhaled for the treatment of mental problems. Besides, its leaf, boiled with edible oil, is claimed to have been used for the treatment of ear problems as an ointment.

## **Discussion**

Beliefs about causes of health problems are determinants of treatment-seeking decisions (10). In Chora, local wisdom related to health has shown that causes of problems are attributed to Rabby, the creator and savior of life. He is believed to guard human-beings from harm in every day life processes. Violations of socially agreed norms would annoy Rabby who would eventually withdraw His usual attention and protection for His creatures. Such an understanding about causes of health problems influence treatment seeking decisions. Quite often people consult local healers who are believed to have been given the power to arbitrate between Rabby and human-beings. Such a role is performed by employing duai (prayer) and medicinal plants in combination for the treatment of health problems. Often healers refrain from telling that they are healers as reflected by two of the healers. The justification is the fact that the skill and power of healing belongs to Rabby (beekini kan Rabbyyti) .

Healers who claim to have healing competence definitely differ in their knowledge of providing treatment by employing plants. Thus, it needs a closer and sustained scrutiny to verify the actual knowledge of healers with respect to the practice of healing. The five healers have shown differences in the rituals accompanying the collection and administration of plant medicine. Yet, they all were found to use plant medicines intensively.

Perhaps due to the physiographic reality of the district, healers have shown that they can readily get plant medicines. Despite this and the fact that plants constitute a dominant part of indigenous medicine, and are the sources of modern drugs, only little attention has been paid to it. Hence, it needs coordinated efforts to promote the status of indigenous medicine in general and medicinal plants in particular in order to meet the health needs of the majority.

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