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The importance of a border: Medical, veterinary, and wild food ethnobotany of the Hutsuls living on the Romanian and Ukrainian sides of Bukovina

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ABSTRACT

Ethnopharmacological relevance: Recent studies have shown that groups sharing the same or very similar environments, but with diverse cultural backgrounds (e.g. different ethnos and/or religion) have considerably different knowledge of folk (medicinal) plant uses. Yet, it is not clear to what extent various factors (such as culture, economy, isolation, and especially social and political situations) contribute to such differences in the utilization of the same natural resources.

Aim of the study: This paper addresses the effect of border created in 1940 and subsequent separation of a single ethnic group on changes in their folk use of medicinal and wild food plants. The Hutsuls of Bukovina had been homogenous for centuries, but were separated in 1940 as a result of the formation of state borders between Romania and the former Soviet Union (now Ukraine). The aim of the study is to analyse if the belonging to this different states for 75 years have induced different changes in local plant use within communities that share a common historical legacy and environment.

Materials and methods: In depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 42 people in May 2015. Collected data were analysed, and comparisons were made between the data gathered on the two sides of the border for different use categories: medicinal, wild food and veterinary plants, as well as other remedies. Recently collected data were also compared with historical data obtained for the region, medicinal plant folk uses in Romania and medicinal plant uses of The State Pharmacopeia of the Soviet Union.

Results: Divergences in current medicinal plant use are much greater than in the use of wild food plants. The majority of the wild food taxa, including those used for making recreational teas, are also used for medicinal purposes and hence contribute to the food-medicine continuum, representing emergency foods in the past and serving as memory markers for possible future food shortages. Compared with the historical data, considerable changes have occurred within specific medicinal applications and less in the taxa used. The influence of the Soviet State Pharmacopeia on present ethnomedicine on the Ukrainian side is minimal.

Conclusions: Hutsul herbal ethnomedicine on the Ukrainian side of the border has continued to evolve (the abandonment of some uses and the adoption of others), whereas on the Romanian side it has undergone significant erosion with a proportionally smaller adoption of new uses and the leaving behind of possibly more "traditional" uses than on the Ukrainian side. In sum, current ethnomedicinal practices of Hutsuls living on both sides of the border are more extensive than those reported in historical sources. Yet the unknown sampling method employed to collect the historical data and possible skipping of "ordinary" uses by folklorists and ethnographers does not allow for definitive conclusions to be drawn. Cross-cultural and cross-border ethnobotany represents one of the most powerful means for addressing the issue of change and variability of medicinal plant uses and heritage, and further studies in other areas of Eastern Europe and beyond need to address the trajectory proposed by the present study.

1. Introduction

Recent studies have shown that groups sharing the same or very similar environments, but with diverse cultural backgrounds

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(e.g. different ethnos and/or religion) have considerably different knowledge of folk medicinal plant uses (for the most recent examples concerning Europe see Pieroni et al. (2015), Bellia and Pieroni (2015), Quave and Pieroni (2015), Menendez-Baceta et al. (2015), Mustafa et al. (2015)). Studies conducted on the Asian side of former Soviet territories suggest that centralization of the medical system and official prohibition to practice folk medicine have caused the erosion of traditional knowledge (Mamedov et al., 2005). Kassam (2009) demonstrated significant difference in the loss of traditional ecological knowledge on the post-Soviet (Tajik) side of the Badakhshan region of the Pamir compared to the Afghan side; the region is populated by several ethnic groups that have been politically divided since the end of 19th century. Yet, it is not clear to what extent various factors (such as culture, economy, isolation, social and political situations, etc.) contribute to such differences in the utilization of the same existing natural resources.

This paper will address the effect of border creation and subsequent separation of a single ethnic group, the Hutsuls of Bukovina, on changes in the use of plants. The selected group, which had been a homogenous ethnic group for centuries, was separated in 1940 as the result of the formation of state borders. This group, therefore, provides the opportunity to establish if disparate sociocultural, economic and political conditions have induced remarkably different changes in local plant use in communities that share a historical legacy and environment, but have experienced different conditions for more than two generations.

The medical ethnobotany of Romania has been relatively well studied during the past five decades (for a review see Dragulescu (2006)) and recently the results of a number of ethnobotanical fieldwork studies among minorities in Romania have been published (Kołodziejska-Degórska, 2012; Papp et al., 2013; Pieroni et al 2012, 2014), including a very recent investigation on the use of wild edible plants and mushrooms among ethnic Ukrainians living in the Maramureş region, also inhabited by Hutsuls (Łuczaj et al., 2015).

Conversely, Ukraine is a considerably under-studied region, especially from the perspective of recent field research. Medicinal ethnography of Bukovina, however, is relatively well covered through historical sources, as there are some regional reports originating from the 19th century and later ethnomedicinal and ethnoveterinary research and analyses of archival data published in national languages, mainly Polish and Ukrainian.

However, thus far there have been only two articles published in English concerning plant use in the territory of present-day Ukraine, bordering Bukovina. One of them is a recent documentation of the current use of mushrooms, wild food and medicinal plants in Roztochya (Western Ukraine) (Stryamets et al., 2015) and the other (Kujawska et al., 2015) concerns remotely collected historical ethnographic data from the pre-WWII period covering the part of present-day Ukraine that belonged to the Polish Republic from 1818 to 1939.

Although scarce, the existing ethnographic literature concerning Bukovina allows for some diachronic comparisons regarding the use of medicinal plants. On the other hand, the well-researched legacy of Romanian ethnomedicine allows for a comparison with a neighbouring region and the possibility of identifying Romanian influences (if any) on the use of plants by Hutsuls presently living in Romania.

Within the framework of the autocratic and formalized Soviet medical system, one of the most important means of influence might have been The State Pharmacopeia of the Soviet Union/USSR (11th edition, 1990), which contains separate chapters on selected, officially accepted plants (Shikov et al., 2014). Besides the Pharmacopeia there were several other official lists (Shikov et al., 2014), and also state-wide recommendation books (for example see Hammerman et al. (1970)). During the Soviet period, the use of plants other than the officially sanctioned taxa was negatively addressed. Research on the medicinal properties of plants in Ukraine was rather intense and widespread, as was the popularization of the medicinal use of plants, especially since the end of the 1960s (Skybitska, 2014). Official popular books (meant for a wider public, but written mainly by doctors or pharmacists following strict guidelines provided by authorities) on national medicinal plants in almost every national republic and often in national languages (Kook and Vilbaste, 1962; Podymov and Suslov, 1966, to name a couple), were published during different short periods of relative freedom within the last three decades of the Soviet State. In Ukraine, the work of Nosal and Nosal (1965) was very popular and was widely sold throughout the country. Such regional books, like the one covering the Hutsuls (Boltaroviš, 1980) in which descriptions of folk uses as well as popular explanations of the context of these uses are provided, could be published only at the very end of the Soviet period. Although within the present work it is not possible to cover all possible early sources of influence, the possible effect of the Soviet Pharmacopeia should be relatively easy to track. If such an influence is present, it must be well reflected in the current use of plants on the Ukrainian side (but not on the Romanian side) of the border.

This research addresses the question as to whether there are differences between the use of plants among Hutsuls presently living in Romania and in Ukraine. If in fact there are disparities in plant use between the two groups, then what may explain these differences? Our working hypothesis is that these two groups still share a remarkable legacy in plant use, yet some differences may exist due to diverse influences of the Soviet and Romanian states, as well as to the current socio-economic situation. The results of the present study will be compared with the historical data from ethnographic sources concerning Bukovina and documented Romanian plant-use traditions. The possible influence of the Soviet Pharmacopeia on the Ukrainian side of the border will be discussed as well.

2. Methods

2.1. Ecological, geopolitical and ethnographic background

The Carpathian area is highly biodiverse with over 7500 species (including introduced species) occurring in the Carpathian Mountains and in the large lowlands extending towards the south, north and east; the vegetation of the Ukrainian Carpathians belongs to the Central European Province, being the richest in the region, and includes a number of Transylvanian and Balkan species as well as several endemic forms (Bojnanský and Fargašová, 2007). The Carpathian region occupies only about 5% of the overall territory of Ukraine, but almost 50% of all species of vascular plants are concentrated there (Kricsfalusy and Budnikov, 2007). The altitudinal zone of the studied villages (Fig. 1) is characterized by beech and spruce/pine forests. The region is also rich in mammals, including wolf, several deer species, bear and lynx.

Bukovina is a historical region in Central Europe, located in the Northern part of the Central Eastern Carpathians. From the mid-14th century the territory of Bukovina belonged to the Moldavian state, and then later, in 1774, it was occupied by the Austrian Empire, which in the mid-19th century gave it the status of a separate Austrian “crown land”. The north of this multinational province was densely inhabited by Ukrainians/Ruthenians, which were the largest (38.4%) although not the dominant ethnic group in 1910, followed by Romanians, (34.4%), Jews (12%) and Germans (9.3%); the rural populations of the first two groups were highly illiterate in 1910 (Livezeanu, 2000). After WWI control of the