



Traditional food uses of wild plants among the Gorani of South Kosovo



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ABSTRACT

A food ethnobotanical field study was conducted among the Gorani of South Kosovo, a small ethnic minority group that speaks a South-Slavic language and lives in the south of the country. We conducted forty-one semi-structured interviews in ten villages of the Kosovar Gora mountainous area and found that seventy-nine wild botanical and mycological taxa represent the complex mosaic of the food cultural heritage in this population. A large portion of the wild food plant reports refer to fermented wild fruit-based beverages and herbal teas, while the role of wild vegetables is restricted. A comparison of these data with those previously collected among the Gorani living in nearby villages within the territory of Albania, who were separated in 1925 from their relatives living in present-day Kosovo, shows that approximately one third of the wild food plant reports are the same. This finding demonstrates the complex nature of Kosovar Gorani ethnobotany, which could indicate the permanence of possible "original" Gorani wild plant uses (mainly including wild fruits-based beverages), as well as elements of cultural adaptation to Serbian and Bosniak ethnobotanies (mainly including a few herbal teas and mushrooms).

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1. Introduction

One of the most promising trajectories of current ethnobiological research concerns the cross-cultural comparison of folk food plant uses among contiguous ethnic or religious groups or among diasporas (de Madeiros et al., 2012). Data from these studies can contribute to the dialogue concerning crucial questions regarding how complex cultural and social components may influence the use and preference of plant ingredients in local cuisines, as well as the predominance of specific food processing techniques, assuming that the available plant ingredients are the same (i.e., that we refer to the same environment/foodscape). A number of studies conducted over the last decade have shown how commonalities and differences in food and medicinal plant perceptions and uses between diverse cultural groups may depend upon an interplay of socio-cultural, symbolic, and even politico-economical dynamics (Bellia & Pieroni, 2015; Dogan & Nedelcheva, 2015; Eyssartier, Ladio & Lozada,

2008; Ghorbani, Langenberger, & Sauerborn, 2012; Jiang & Quave, 2013; Menendez-Baceta et al., 2015; Mustafa et al., 2015; Pardo de Santayana et al., 2007; Pieroni et al., 2014; Pieroni, Ibraliu, Abbasi, & Papajani-Toska, 2015; Pieroni, Giusti, & Quave 2011; Pieroni, Nedelcheva, & Dogan, 2015; Pieroni & Quave, 2005; Quave & Pieroni, 2015; Rexhepi et al., 2013; Zamudio, Kujawska, & Hilgert, 2010).

In our further search for ad-hoc case studies that could represent suitable arenas for ethnobotanical cross-cultural comparative analysis, our attention has shifted in recent years to Eastern European areas, where the past implementation of geo-political borders resulted in the separation of what once might have been more or less homogenous ethnic or religious groups (Sõukand & Pieroni, 2016). In order to test the hypothesis that continuity and change in folk food plant uses also depends upon cultural isolation determined by the establishment of artificial borders, we decided to assess to what extent the wild food plant uses recorded within a small ethnic minority population (Gorani), who live in a remote mountainous area of South Kosovo and are still relatively understudied (Dérens & Geslin, 2010), resemble those of their nearby peers, who have instead lived for the past 90 years within the

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borders of the neighboring Republic of Albania.

This case study is particularly significant since the Gorani community living in the mountainous Gora area was artificially separated in 1925, when the borders between Albania and the former Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia, and nowadays the Republic of Kosovo) were re-arranged following a decision by an international commission of the League of Nations, probably under pressure from Italy (Hasani, 2002). Nine Gorani villages that serve as home to a total of approximately 15,000 inhabitants remained within Albanian borders and in this way the two resulting Gorani populations (those remaining within the borders of the former Yugoslavia and those living within the borders of Albania) underwent very different acculturation processes, living apart from each other, especially during the Albanian Communist period (1946–1991) when the state borders between Albania and Yugoslavia became practically unbreachable.

The Yugoslavian Gorani, sharing the same language as the dominant Serbo-Croatian elites, although professing a different faith (Islam), became more integrated within the urban socio-economical network of the federal state of Yugoslavia. Despite the remoteness of their highest home villages, extensive labor-related migrations to several city centers of the former Yugoslavia (notably Prizren, Belgrade, and Subotica), especially as confectionary artisans and construction workers, put them in more frequent contact with the majority population. On the other hand, the Albanian Gorani (and esp. the women of the communities), as a result of their Slavic language and the tremendous isolation of their area, remained completely isolated within the Albanian state for many decades, despite complex cultural negotiations with the dominant Albanian culture and elites. Beginning in 1991, the Albanian and Kosovar Gorani populations could interact once again, and nowadays it is not uncommon to see a few intermarriages and daily exchanges across the border.

The main question raised in this work was whether wild food plants and mushrooms still play a role in the domestic arena within the Kosovar Gorani *food scape*, and, if so, to try to explain why. We also assessed how wild food plants are processed and consumed, what are their medicinal perceptions (if any), and lastly we compared the collected data with those we previously found among Gorani communities in Albania and with pre-existing food ethnobotanical literature concerning Albanians, Serbians, and Bosniaks living in surrounding countries.

Our overall aim was to develop a better understanding of cross-cultural dynamics of plant folk knowledge systems among marginalized communities living along borders.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Ethnographic background

The Gorani are one of the ethnic minority groups living in southern Kosovo, within an area known as Gora, and now belonging to the District of Dragash (Albanian: Dragash). The Gorani represent a Muslim minority, who were “recently” islamized (approx. in the middle of the 19th century) in comparison to the other Muslim groups in the Balkan region. The Gorani live in thirty small villages/communities: nineteen located in Kosovo, nine in Albania, and two in Macedonia. They speak a unique language, which they defined as “našinski”, and which is a Torlakian transitional dialect between the Bulgarian/Macedonian language group and the Serbo-Croatian language (Browne, 1993). The Gorani people retain a strong sense of their specific cultural identity, and tend to refuse being considered part of the Serbian, Macedonian, or Bulgarian groups. In Kosovo, in the most

recent census, a few Gorani declared themselves to be Bosniaks (the Balkan ethnic group they may feel closest to, being both Slavic and Muslim), but this seems to have been due to very specific local political circumstances. The Gorani still marry only within their ethnic group. The majority of the Kosovar Gorani interviewed during this study are in favor of establishing an autonomous Gora municipality.

2.2. Study site

The ten Gorani villages in Kosovo that were considered in this study, as well as the two Albanian villages where previous fieldwork was conducted in the spring 2012 (Quave & Pieroni, 2014,2015), are presented in Fig. 1. The main part of the field research was conducted in the center of Restelica, which is the largest Gorani village and is considered the “capital” of the Gorani population in Kosovo, with approximately 4500 inhabitants and representing the most elevated municipality of the entire Balkans (1717 m). The other villages, apart from Brod (1695 m), are located at lower elevations (800–1300 m) and have an average population of a few hundred inhabitants.

Restelica, as well as the other Gorani villages in Kosovo, is nowadays well connected in terms of infrastructure to Prizren, the main (trilingual) urban center of South Kosovo. However, the fact that this area remained historically landlocked as a Slavic-speaking exclave within the territory of a prominently Albanian-speaking area, dictated that Gora built intense ties esp. to Serbian towns, while today Gorani integration within the Kosovar Albanian society remains problematic.

The Gora landscape is dominated by mountains that may reach approximately 2800 m and the climate is typically continental and characterized by very harsh winters, with heavy snowfalls. The Gora area is part of the Sharr (Šar Planina) mountain system and is very biodiverse, with approximately 2000 vascular plant species and approximately 150 endemic plant species, as well, relictual and rare plant species and plant communities (Krasniqi, 1982).

Moreover, this habitat is the home of a rich mammalian fauna, which includes lynx, bear, chamois, wolf, and roe deer.

The Gorani territory was traditionally considered to be the most economically disadvantaged area within the former Yugoslavia and today it is still the poorest territory of Kosovo. The traditional economy of the Gora villages of the last century was based on cattle pastoralism and remittances of migrants, who worked and still work as laborers in diverse Balkan city centers. Nowadays, a significant portion of the youngest and middle generations have migrated for work to Italy (Siena and surrounding area, Tuscany), Austria (Vienna), and Serbia (Belgrade), while a number of young male community members still move only seasonally as construction workers to Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia. Today, the remittances sent home from relatives living in towns, and especially from abroad, represent the main household income for most Gorani families.

2.3. Field study and data collection

In-depth, semi-structured interviews concerning food plant uses (including herbal teas), as well as *folk nutraceuticals* (i.e. plant ingredients which are consumed and at the same time considered “healthy”, see Pieroni & Quave, 2006, pp. 101–129) were conducted with forty-one informants (between 26 and 82 years of age) during the winter 2015. Informed consent was always verbally obtained prior to conducting interviews and researchers adhered to the Code of Ethics of the International Society of Ethnobiology (ISE, 2008).

The main interviewees (thirty-five) were represented by mid-aged and elderly men, mainly farmers, shepherds, or retired

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