



Research paper

Traditional uses of wild food plants, medicinal plants, and domestic remedies in Albanian, Aromanian and Macedonian villages in South-Eastern Albania

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ABSTRACT

Ethnobiological research in SE Europe is especially important for providing concrete insights aimed at developing small-scale markets of local medicinal plants and food products.

An ethnobotanical field study was carried out during late summer 2016 among Muslim Albanians, Christian Orthodox Aromanians and Christian Orthodox Macedonians living in six isolated villages of Eastern and SE Albania, as well as in one nearby village located in SW Macedonia. The field survey was conducted via semi-structured interviews by asking 32 local, mainly elderly informants, who retain traditional ethnobotanical knowledge (TEK) regarding traditional utilizations of wild food plants, medicinal plants (both wild and cultivated), mushrooms, plants used as a dye, and other home-made remedies pertaining to both human and animal health. Fifty-two botanical and fungal folk taxa and twenty-four other domestic remedies were recorded; approx. one-fifth of the total reports have not been previously recorded in Albania and the SW Balkans. Among these findings, the uncommon medicinal uses of *Clematis*, *Verbascum*, and *Fraxinus* spp. deserve phytopharmacological investigations.

The most cited taxa were commonly used by all investigated communities, suggesting that the bulk of the Eastern and SE Albanian ethnobotanical knowledge is retained by all locals, beyond linguistic and religious affiliations.

1. Introduction

In the last decade a remarkable number of field studies have explored the ethnobotany of the South-Western Balkans (countries of the Balkan peninsula which do not yet fully belong to the European Union), with the aim of recording folk knowledge and perceptions of wild plants, mainly used in the food and medicinal domains (Jarić et al., 2007, 2015; Pieroni, 2008, 2010; Menković et al., 2011; Pieroni et al., 2011, 2013, 2014a,b, 2015, 2017; Mustafa et al., 2012a,b, 2015; Savikin et al., 2013; Pieroni and Quave, 2014a and references therein; Zlatković et al., 2014; Quave and Pieroni, 2014, 2015).

The rationale for these studies has normally stemmed from the assumption that this area in SE Europe may still possess a tremendous reservoir of Traditional Environmental Knowledge (TEK) related to wild plants. This notion was postulated upon three main facts: 1) the complex bio-cultural diversity of this region, which is a hotspot of biodiversity and hosts many different ethnic and religious groups; 2) the socio-economic environment related to the troubled vicissitudes of the last few decades, which has slowed down the economic development of the former Yugoslavia, while Albania has had to undergo a

complex transition from a strict Communist regime to a market economy, thus allowing more than in many other European countries the permanence of subsistence economies in many isolated rural and mountainous areas; and finally 3) the long “tradition” that the collection of wild plants has had in this region for several centuries, well before the end of the disintegration/occupation of the Ottoman Empire, which started at the beginning of the 19th Century (Kathe et al., 2003).

Small-scale agro-pastoral activities, therefore, still represent the pillar of subsistence economies for those local communities who live in mountainous and rural areas in the Western Balkans, and TEK-centered studies are not only important for understanding local perceptions and uses of plants, but also for providing baseline data that could be employed in projects intended to foster rural development programmes focusing on sustainable valorization of local herbal and plant food resources.

Albania in particular, given its peculiar vicissitudes during the past century and especially the fact that the country remained completely isolated from the rest of the world for nearly half of the 20th century, represents a remarkable *bio-cultural refugium*. Eastern Albania, even more particularly, served as a crucial “sanctuary” of medicinal and

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aromatic plants for many decades during the Communist regime (1945–1991) and it still represents an important reservoir for the harvesting of wild plants mainly destined for Western European herbal markets (Londoño et al., 2008). In addition, such a mountainous area may offer insights into certain new medicinal plants or medicinal plants that are still locally used today, and could enlarge the herbal portfolio of NGOs and stakeholders interested in cultivating and gathering herbal teas, which are very often simply dictated or “imposed” by Western markets.

Moreover, we are now well aware that bio-conservation initiatives aimed at preserving local medicinal, aromatic, and wild food plants need to be culturally sensitive; in other words, the “emic” perceptions that local populations have towards their natural plant environment must be taken into account in order to successfully implement measures regarding nature protection and this can only be done via in-depth, ethnography-based ethnobotanical studies.

The main goal of the present study was to assess how religious and ethnic affiliations may have played a role in shaping local plant uses of different communities living in the same natural environment in Albania. To this end, we focused on an interesting case-study, represented by an isolated mountainous area of Eastern and SE Albania, where three ethnic/religious communities have historically co-existed for many centuries: Muslim Albanians, Christian (Orthodox) Aromanians, and Christian (Orthodox) Macedonians.

Orthodox Macedonians in Albania live along the Eastern shores of Prespa Lake as well as the Macedonian and Greek borders, and they represent the remains of populations that inhabited Slavic areas which were then left within the borders of the Albanian nation, when it was formed in 1912. Aromanians (who define themselves as Rrămeni/Rrămăni, while Albanians refer to them as Çobanë or Çobenë) are a Latin population of the Orthodox Christian faith that traditionally practiced transhumant pastoralism in SE Europe, but now live scattered throughout the southern Balkans (most notably in Western Macedonia, Southern Albania, and Northern Greece). Aromanian ethnogenesis is still disputed and they may represent the descendants of ancient Latin speakers or “Latinized” autochthonous Balkan populations, including Greeks, Illyrians, and Trakians, or even Romanian populations who moved southwards (Weigand, 1894; Burileanu, 1912; Wace, 1914; Dahmen, 1985, 2005; Winniffrith, 1987; Kahl, 1999; Schwandner-Sievers, 1999; Trifon, 2013). They still speak Aromanian, a threatened language belonging to the Romanian group (Lewis et al., 2016), and all across Albania there remains only four scattered, very isolated, tiny villages which are entirely inhabited by Aromanians (Kahl, 1999). One of these tiny villages (Llengë/Lunca) was the focus of a previous field study we conducted a few years ago in Eastern Albania (Pieroni et al., 2015).

The objectives of this study were: a) to document the ethnobotanical knowledge related to wild plant-based cuisine, medicinal plants, and other natural, domestic remedies pertaining to humans and animals in Albanian, Macedonian, and Aromanian villages of Eastern and SE Albania; b) to compare the collected data between the three linguistic/religious communities; and c) to compare the same data with the findings of previous ethnobotanical surveys conducted in Albania and SW Balkans, in order to discover new plant uses of potential interest for local herbal and niche food-speciality markets.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Study areas

Fig. 1 shows the study area and the seven visited villages: one inhabited by Orthodox Aromanians: Niçë (Aromanian: Nicea; 1,084 m a.s.l.); three inhabited by Orthodox Macedonians: Vërnik (Macedonian: Врбник; 1,055 m a.s.l.), Cerjë (Macedonian: Церје; 1,116 m a.s.l.), and Tuminec (Macedonian: Туминец, 862 m a.s.l.); and three Muslim Albanian villages: Osnat (1,103 m a.s.l.),

Qarrishtë (1,009 m a.s.l.), and – in the contiguous SW Macedonian territory – Nakolets (Macedonian: Наколец, 865 m a.s.l.). Each of the seven villages has a permanent population between 100 and 600 inhabitants.

2.2. Field study

The field study was carried out in late summer 2016; the sampling was conducted by identifying study participants among elderly individuals who retained traditional knowledge concerning plants, i.e. farmers and shepherds. The sampling of these specific groups was undertaken as previous field work conducted in Albania found – even in very remote areas – TEK systems that are rapidly disappearing due to remarkable social changes, i.e. these systems of knowledge and practices are rapidly vanishing among the middle and youngest generations (Pieroni, 2010; Pieroni and Sökand, 2017).

In-depth open and semi-structured interviews were then conducted with 32 selected villagers (9 Aromanians, 13 Macedonians and 10 Albanians). The participants, including 14 men and 18 women, were between the ages of 48 and 84 years (mean age: 64.5; standard deviation: 10.1), with the large majority of the informants from all communities above 60 years of age. Study participants were asked about local uses of: (a) wild food plants; (b) medicinal plants (wild, semi-domesticated, and cultivated) in both human and veterinary medicine; (c) semi-domesticated and cultivated food plants employed in “unusual” ways (i.e. diverging from what those cultivated plants are normally used for in Europe and Western countries); (d) dyeing plants; (e) food or medicinal mushrooms, if any; and (f) other domestic remedies pertaining to the food and medicinal domains.

Specifically, local name(s) of each reported taxon, the plant part(s) used, details about their preparations and food, medicinal or other domestic uses were recorded.

Study participants were asked to report current uses considered “traditional”, i.e. considered part of the perceived cultural heritage, as well as uses they could recall from their childhood, which may no longer be exploited. Interviews were conducted in the Albanian language with the help of an interpreter, as all participants (including the Aromanians and Macedonians) were bilingual and fluent in Albanian.

Informed consent from all participants was verbally obtained prior to conducting interviews and ethical guidelines prescribed by the International Society of Ethnobiology (ISE, 2008) were followed. During the interviews, informants were always asked to show the reported plants (fresh or dried).

Voucher specimens were collected during previous fieldwork conducted in the neighboring Gollobordo area of Eastern Albania (Pieroni et al., 2014a), and taxonomic identification followed the official *Flora of Albania* (Paparisto et al., 1988; Qosia et al., 1992, 1996; Vangjeli et al., 2000). Botanical nomenclature and family assignments followed The Plant List database (2013) and the Angiosperm Phylogeny Group III (Stevens, 2012), respectively. Local plant names were transcribed following the rules of standard Albanian and Romanian languages, while Macedonian folk names were transcribed using the Latin alphabet.

2.3. Data analysis

A Quotation Index was calculated for each report as the percentage of those informants who mentioned that specific report.

Moreover, all the collected field data (plant reports, i.e. plant x used in way y) were compared with the entire ethnobotanical literature of Albania (Pieroni et al., 2005, 2011, 2014a,b, 2015a, 2017; Pieroni, 2008, 2010; Quave and Pieroni, 2014, 2015; Pieroni and Sökand, 2017) and the surrounding countries located in the southern portion of the Western Balkans, including Montenegro (Menković et al., 2011), Kosovo (Sejdju, 1984; Mustafa et al., 2012a,b, 2015), South Serbia

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