

Ethno-botanical survey of plants commonly used for ceremonial activities among Yoruba tribe of South West, Nigeria

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Research Paper

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Ethno-botanical survey of plants commonly used for ceremonial activities among Yoruba tribe of South West, Nigeria was carried out. Data were collected to record scientific, common and family names and parts of the plants that are used and were summarized. The results showed that 31 species of different plants were included from 22 families are used in different ceremonial activities in Yorubas. The most frequently mentioned families was *Sterculiaceae* and others were from *Fabaceae*, *Malvaceae* and *Palmae* families. The plants part used were: leaves, flower, tuber, stem, bulbs, twigs, and fruits. Compared to those of others, fruits were the most frequently used for ceremony.

Key words: Ceremonial activities, Ethno-botanical survey, Yoruba tribe, Traditional ritual, cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION

The Yoruba account for about 20% of the population of the country. They are believed historically to have migrated from Mecca in Saudi Arabia during the medieval period and settled originally at Ile ife through Odudua and occupy the South-Western part of Nigeria. They are religious group of people who are mainly Christians, Muslims or of Traditional beliefs. The Yoruba people are mainly involved in the financial, press and educational sectors of Nigeria. Yoruba culture is richly blessed in such a way that many organisms are significantly relevant to their ways of life one way or the other. Many native peoples used plant in ceremonial and spiritual ritual events from time immemorial (Agbogidi, 2011; Conrad, 2013). Plants are also important in the social, religious and cultural life hence; they are regarded as symbols of acceptance to visitor. The fruit of kola tree, a genus (*Cola*) of trees native to the tropical rainforests of Africa) not only used during ceremony but even when one is unceremoniously visited. In Nigerian, plants serve as a national icon on the

country's coat of arms (Nicole, 2004). Despite rich cultural heritage related to plants with the Yorubas, there are only few literatures on plants used for ceremonies among Yoruba ethnic group. The present study was thus to carry out a survey on plants used in different ceremonial events among Yoruba-speaking communities in the context of their cultural and ethno-botanical background.

METHODOLOGY

The informations about plants used for ceremonial events were gathered from the personal interviews from different parts of South- West Nigeria. The library collections and research publications of Federal university of Agriculture were also used as secondary sources of information. Sufficient fields and survey works were made for collection of plant materials from specific sites in specific flowering seasons. Information was collected only from

Table 1.Plants commonly used for ceremonial activities among the Yoruba tribe, South West, Nigeria.

Scientific Name	Family	Common Name	Local Name	Part used	Uses /meaning
Naming ceremonies					
<i>Aframonium</i>	Zingiberaceae	Alligator	Atare	Fruits	Goodness
<i>Castanospermum</i>	Fabaceae	Black bean	Osun	Stems	Fruitfulness of the baby, present as gift.
<i>Cola nitida.</i>	Sterculiaceae	Cola nut	Obi	Fruits	To repel death, evil and sickness
<i>Colocasia esculenta</i>	Araceae	Cocoyam	Koko	Tuber	Comfortability
<i>Spondias mombin</i>	Anacardiaceae)	hog plum	Yeye	Leaves	Long life and Financial blessing
<i>Elaeis guineensis</i>	Palmae	Oil palm	Ope	Fruits	Sound health or healing
<i>Garcinia kola</i>	Sterculiaceae	Bitter cola	Orogbo	Fruits	Longevity
<i>Harrungana madagascariensis</i>	Euphorbiaceae	African walnut	Awusa /Asala	Fruits	Oneness between the baby and his/her siblings.
<i>Manihot esculenta</i>	Euphorbiaceae	Cassava	Ege/ paki	Tuber	Processed into fufu and served during ceremonies in Egbas land.
<i>Phaseolus vulgaris</i>	Fabaceae	White beans	Ewa	Fruits	To serve invited guests
<i>Saccharum officinarum</i>	Poaceae	Sugar cane	Ireke	Stems	Joy and sweetness
Weddings					
<i>Ananas comosus</i>	Bromeliaceae	Pineapple	Opon oyinbo	Fruits	Sweetness, Acceptance and welcome.
<i>Dioscorea alata</i>	Dioscoreaceae	Yam	Isu	Tuber	Food
<i>Garcinia kola</i>	Sterculiaceae	Bitter cola	Orogbo	Fruits	Longevity and oneness
<i>Lawsonia inermis</i>	Lythraceae		Laali	Leaves	Social ceremony (Islamic marriage)
<i>Musa sapentum</i>	Musaceae	Banana	Ogedewewe	Fruits	Fruitfulness
<i>Citrus sinensis</i>	Rutaceae	Sweet Orange	Osan n la	Fruits	Fruitfulness
<i>Tectona Grandis</i>	Verbenaceae	Teak	Gedu	Leaves	Hamper material to present gift during wedding ceremony.
<i>Cola acuminata</i>	Sterculiaceae	Cola Nut	Obi	Fruits	Prayer and acceptance
Housewarming					
<i>Hibiscus rosa sinensis</i>	Malvaceae	Hibiscus flower		Flower	For decorations
Traditional festivals					
<i>Butryospermum paradoxum</i>	Sapotecae	Shea butter tree		Fruits	Wedding, naming, birth day and cultural ceremonies.
<i>Dacryodes edulis</i>	Burseraceae	African pear tree		Twig and fruits	Peace and fruitfulness.
<i>Zea-mays</i>	Poaceae	Maize	Agbado	Fruits	Fruitfulness, Abundance
Religion and other ceremonies					
<i>Newbouldia laevis</i>	Bignoniaceae	African Border Tree	Akoko	Leaves	Longevity
<i>Abrus precatorius</i>	Fabaceae	Coral bead vine		Leaves	Used as beads and decoration materials for social ceremonies.
<i>Allium sativum</i>	Liliaceae	Garlic	Ayu	Bulb	Traditional religious ceremonies.
<i>Cassia fistula</i>	Fabaceae	Golden shower tree		Leaves	Used by priests in religious ceremony
<i>Ceiba pentandra</i>	Malvaceae	Cotton-tree	Araba	Leaves	Healing ceremonies.

Table 1.Contd.

<i>Cocos nucifera</i>	Palmae	Coco nut	Agbon	Fruits	Religious ceremonies, festivals and as ritual materials.
<i>Corchorus olitorius</i>	Tiliaceae	Nalta jute	Ooyo	Leaves	Cook as soup during dedication and funeral ceremonies.
Coronation of titles					
<i>Delonix regia</i>	Fabaceae	Flame of the forest		Flower	Beautification
<i>Elaeis guineensis</i>	Palmae	Oil palm	Ope	Fruits	Divination
<i>Nicotiana tabacum</i>	Solanaceae	Tobacco	Taaba	Leaves	Hallucinogen in spiritual ceremonies and as offerings to the spirits they worship.
<i>Newbouldia laevis</i>	Bignoniaceae	African Border Tree	Akoko	Leaves	Peaceful governance and long life

Yorubas. The informants were mainly chosen according to their knowledge of common traditions and/ or religious status. In each village we made a preliminary survey to locate people who are well respected and well versed with local traditions and in religious customs. The informants were asked about the ceremonial and religious importance of the plants found in the locality and their uses. A small herbarium was maintained for the storage of some plant specimens collected. Identifications of plants were confirmed at Forest Research Institute of Nigeria (FRIN), Ibadan. The information regarding plant types, mode of application, local name, and plant part used were noted carefully in tabular form.

Limitations of this study: Generally, the respondents were not willing to share their knowledge with outsiders and that made the information gathering processes a troublesome and time taking one.

RESULTS

A total of 31 species of plants belonging to 22 families were identified as being used for different

ceremonial activities among Yorubas. Ethnobotanical data of the plants collated such as scientific, common and family names and parts used are Shown in (Table1). It was revealed that the most frequently mentioned families were *Fabaceae*, *Sterculiaceae*, *Malvaceae* and *Palmae*. *Garcinial kola*, cola nut and *Aframonium* were reported having dual purposes as they were reported being useful in naming, wedding, cultural and coronation ceremonies. Also, *Garcinial cola*, *Harrungana madagascariensis*, *Aframonium*, and *Castanospermum* were reported being useful in dry form. Tubers were reported in *D. alata*, and Cocoyam for wedding and naming ceremony respectively. Fruits, leaves, tuber and stems were the most frequent parts reported useful during ceremony. During wedding ceremony, fruits, tubers and flowers were mainly reported. Majority of the plants used for ceremony signified different connotations such as, longevity, comfortability, joy and sweetness, fruitfulness and sound health among others.

The use of leaves during coronation was suggested to be the sign of peace and good governance. Fruits were reported to connote goodness, sound health or healing and to repel death, evil and sickness during naming ceremony

(Table1). Similarly, fruits were claimed to signify sweetness, acceptance and welcome, longevity and oneness, fruitfulness, abundance during wedding, traditional festival and religious ceremonies respectively. The (Table 2) shows that fruits were the most frequently used part among all the plants collated being useful for ceremonies as it was reported in *Aframonium*, *Cola nitida*, *Elaeis guineensis*, *Ananas comosus* and *Cocos nucifera* among others. Leaves were reported in *Crinum glaucum*, *Lawsonia inermis*, African Border Tree and *Corchorus olitorius* to mention a few. Bulbs were used in *Allium sativum*, flower in *Hibiscus- rosa inensis*, stem in *Castanospermum* and *Saccharum officinarum* while twig was used in *Dacryodes edulis*. The most frequently used parts were fruits, followed by leaves while bulbs, twig and combination of twig and fruits were less used parts (Table 2).

DISCUSSION

South west is not only rich in biodiversity but also rich in its cultural heritage. In Yoruba speaking tribes, plants are use as materials and each of them connote significant importance. Names of

Table 2. Plant parts commonly employed in ceremonial activities among Yoruba- speaking communities.

Plant parts	Frequency	Percentage frequency	Mode
Fruits	13	41.94	41.94
Leaves	9	29.03	
Flowers	2	6.45	
Bulbs	1	3.22	
Twig	1	3.22	
Tuber	2	6.45	
Twig and fruits	1	3.22	
Stems	2		
Total	31		

trees such as “Iroko” and “Araba” are given to humans during naming ceremony which denote long life and popularity among his or her mates because trees are believed to live longer than humans. Plants such as, alligator pepper, cola nut, sugar among other are used as naming ceremony materials. Sometimes part of any plant is used usually leaf during naming ceremony to connote easy delivery if the baby is female when she gets to marriageable stage.

Trees are used in the construction of the talking drums not only as a ceremonial instrument but also to make money or as a means of livelihood. It is now common in Yoruba traditional setting to see groups of talking drummers of different ages at various occasions such weekly or monthly market days, wedding/marriage ceremonies, burial ceremonies, house warming ceremonies or naming ceremonies beating talking drums to praise people or to praise a particular family or town's oriki (praise poem) (Samson and Halira, 2012). In the ritual ceremony of gods (Sango) oil fibers from the pericarp of the oil palm, is used in making torches starting fires. Also, the dressing code is characterized with a well carved mortar, Sango staff, ritual container, small images of twin carved from wood or dance staff made from wood is believed to be able to better focus the followers' attention on the important attributes of the great king and to better lure the spirit to the shrine. Calabashes (dried gourds) are carved by men to serve food or drink during ceremony such as burial, wedding and naming. Divination trays used during traditional ceremony among Yorubas and many other sacred objects are carved out of wood. Sixteen palm nuts from the African palm tree (*Elaeis guineensis*) are the most important of all the objects used in divination of ifa.

Agricultural products like as maize, yams and vegetables are presented as gifts during Egungun festival in Ibadan, Egba, Ekiti, Oyo, Ogbomoso and all parts of Oke-ogun which take place annually. During the Igogo festival in Owo town, masquerade participants dance holding a fresh bunchy branch of *Dacryodes edulis* as an emblem of peace, fruitfulness and spiritual cleansing (Conrad, 2013).

The use of *Garcinia kola*, *Cola nitida*, *Saccharum officinarum* and *Aframonium* in naming ceremony as

reported in this study is in conformity with the findings of Inegbenebor *et al.*, (2009). The plants symbolize wish for longevity and fruitfulness of the new family. Among Yorubas, fruits of plants such as orange, pineapple, Banana, Coconut (*Cocos nucifera*), cola nut, bitter kola, alligator pepper and flower of many ornamental plants and tubers of food items such as *D. alata* and Cocoyam are included alongside with other materials as part of the hamper presented to the family of a woman when seeking her hand in marriage (Conrad, 2013). The softened fruit of *Dacryodes edulis* to welcome guests during wedding and religious ceremony. It is highly likely that some of the items are consumed instantly while others are shared among family members or because of significance of acceptance, blessing of fruitfulness and abundance they represent.

The frequent use of *Garcinia kola*, *Harrungana madagascariensis*, *Aframonium*, and *Castanospermum* in dry form may be because they are seasonal plants, therefore, the users harvest, store and use them whenever their needs arise. Among Yoruba- speaking ethnic group, specially the Oka people, plants play an important role hence, they are celebrated and even worshipped.

A notable example is the white *Dioscorea rotundata*, which is usually celebrated annually as Yam Festival on the first Saturday of August (Conrad, 2013). This festival has grown to become one of the most important events that bring the Oka people together annually. Other important plants that are worshipped among Yorubas include: *Adansonia digitata* and *Milicia excelsa* and *Cola acuminata* are widely used for prayers to the “gods” of the forest before plant materials are collected. It is also used to pray for blessing during wedding and naming ceremonies (Obata and Aigbokhan, 2012). Trees in many Yoruba-speaking communities are used as shrine where gods are worshipped.

These, in addition to other spiritual beliefs and practices of the Yoruba people have made plants relevant to their sustainability and have contributed greatly towards the enrichment of their unique cultural heritage. The sweet scent from burned parts of *D. edulis* (stem exudates, leaves bark and root) is believed to wards away evil spirits) particularly, around ill or ill-

disposed persons, and during spiritually “tense” periods such as deaths or annual festivals/prayers. The resin exudates from bark or roots are commonly burned as incense (Conrad, 2013; Sofowora 2008).

Conclusion

The tribal people of the area that was covered during this study appeared to have sufficient knowledge of the central role of plants in ceremonial events.

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