

## Plants Used as Medicine in Rituals among | Gui Bushman

Kaoru Imamura

### Abstract

About the treatment system of the hunter-gatherers in Southern Africa, /Gui Bushmen, the field research was held. They call their treatment “*tsoo*.” The word *tsoo* is used as a verb meaning “to cure” and as a noun meaning “medicine.” Moreover, *tsoo* has another meaning “a rite.” For /Gui Bushmen, their rites are not held for the sake of formalities, but are done for practical treatment.

/Gui Bushmen use various plants of their rites and treatment. They take “medical” plants boiled down, or make them powdered and rob them into the wounds cut by knives against their daily disease such as headaches, toothaches, stomachaches, and diarrhea, and also against misfortune such as unsuccessful hunting and death of their parents.

On the other hand, they hold their rites as treatment against “calamities” such as serious disease and sudden accidents considered to happen due to some kind of conflicts in their social relationship. Medical plants are used even in the rites, and there, objects separated from human bodies, such as their blood, urine, sweat, saliva, filth and nails are regarded as having important functions. Mixing such objects has the symbolic meaning in the culture of /Gui Bushmen to make the persons as one. And the action itself that people involved in each rite get together has social significance, in which they throw everything open to public and have it in common.

### Introduction

The /Gui Bushmen are hunter-gatherer in the Kalahari Desert, the southern part of Africa. Their life and society have been studied (Silberbauer 1981, Tanaka 1980). They have their own ways for medical treatments when they are in poor health or are injured in the accident. They call such their original cures “*tsoo*.” They use medical plants as remedies for each daily disease such as headaches, toothaches, stomachaches, and diarrhea. They use the word *tsoo*, which means both of the action “to treat somebody” and the medicine itself.

They also use the word *tsoo* to express their treatments involved in rites of passage in their lives such as their coming of age and marriages. They carry out the treatments in their rites to avoid misfortune and to grow up in good *tsoo*, too. They *tsoo* even when their hunting is not successful.

Moreover, they usually try to find the causes of their misfortune like serious illness, sudden death, accidents, some detects of their infants’ growth by comparing them with their social convention. They believe that the misfortune should result from the adultery or the negligence of sharing to the relatives, and they *tsoo* according to each

cause.

As mentioned above, *tsoo* indicates all of the activities to return undesirable conditions to desirable ones, ranging from just medical treatments to kinds of rites. What conditions they think are desirable are their frugal lives with no problem. Such lives means they all in their families are in good health and they can gain enough water and gathered food, blessed with rain and nature, and they succeed in hunting. They *tsoo* in various medical treatments and ceremonies to achieve and preserve the frugal lives on their own.

Ceremonies and the medical plants which the word *tsoo* indicates definitely will be introduced. Also, the origins putting people into unfortunate conditions are considered, and so are the origins making them recover from such the conditions. Then /Gui bushmen's systems of treatment are revealed. I will discuss about the comparison between rites as a main topic.

### The treatment involved with rites of passage

In /Gui's society, they hold their rites in each process of their lives like birth, coming of age, marriage. We can see the common activity in every rite, which is to rub the medical herb into their wounds.

There are two purposes for the rite of female having their menarche. First is to hope for their growth in good health and being productive in birth. Second is to

respect nature and hope for its blessing. The rite is also an opportunity to re-recognize the ideology in the /Gui society through the aged, based on the spirit of sharing with one another such as "Share something into your relatives," "Help each other with them," and "Don't keep anything secret to them." The rite of males attaining manhood has similar functions to the one of females. But the one of males has the strong meaning to form the relationship in which the olders are superior to the youths.

On the other hand, the rite of marriages and birth take place for the married person and the born babies themselves to be in good health and grow up. Especially, it is believed that the person would have a terrible headache and lose his/her life without the rite of marriage. On such rite for menarch, marriages and birth, the used medical herbs are common to *!gari ii* and *!goō /koa*.

### The rite of cancel food avoidance

/Gui bushmen have some taboos on animal food such as "meat for old" only the aged persons can eat, and some animals young females and infant parents have to avoid eating.

The "meat for old" is pangolin, kori bustard, black korhaan, tow kinds of tortoise, the intestines of gemsbok, the marrow of hartebeest, the marrow of kudu. The "meat for old" is believed to cause diarrhea and pain in stomach to the youth

and make them terribly thin if eaten by them. Only the aged has a privilege of eating this special meat. The rite to cancel such meat avoidance, seems to have importance on the effects of medical plants but the act itself in which the aged give the meat to the youth by hand.

Girls who are expected to the beginning of the menstrual function aged around from 14 to 15 years old are prohibited from eating kudu and duiker. At their age about 16 with their menarche, the two kind of meat are not the subjects of food avoidance any more. The girls, who have their first menstruation, start eating kudu and duiker without any specific rites. However, they cannot eat five kind of animal meat, gemsbok, steenbok, hartebeest, springhare, porcupine in stead of the two this time. The meat of the five animals is considered to be “strong” or “poisonous.” And if girls, who are still of young age, eat them, they are believed to have terrible stomachaches and suffer from inappetence.

Though the order of the five to be relieved of the subjects as food avoidance are different between the girls, depending on their opportunities to obtain the five animals meat and their own tastes, gemsbok is likely to be eaten first. Gemsbok should be avoided only a short time so that some of the girls start eating it in a month after the beginning of their menarche. The other four should be avoided for a long period comparatively, at least from a half to one year. As far as the five kinds of

animals are concerned, the rites should be held to start eating them.

The meat of the five animals is also considered to obstruct infants’ growth. Parents don’t make their infants eat the five kind of meat and they themselves don’t eat them, either. Mother in particular follow the rule of the food avoidance strictly because infants may be infected with the poison through mother’s milk. Mothers continue to avoid eating the meat until babies become 2 or 3 years old. When mothers stop the food avoidance, they hold the rite in the way of “putting medicine into a wound of the infant cut with a knife.” On the other hand, fathers start eating the five in a few months, and they hold the very simple rite in the way of “letting the infant have the father’s saliva including medicine.”

Females follow the rule of food avoidance for themselves being faced with their menarche. Then, they do so for their children after being married and having them. Therefore, some of them do not eat the meat of certain animals for about 10 years all the period through their menarche, marriage, childbirth and children’s growth.

Without the rites on any case, they are supposed to have terrible stomachaches, diarrhea and to become very thin, and go to death. The treatments for such cases are done by the aged.

//*Gaa* is used as the medical plants. †*Xari* is added to it for porcupine, and /*koē* and /*nān* for springhare. The former is a

food of porcupine, and the latter of springhare.

### The rite against unsuccessful hunting

The /Gui Bushmen traditionally have some ways in hunting such are the one with traps, with bows and arrows, and with spears accompanied by dogs. While they have not gone hunting with bows and arrows any more, they have still been going hunting with traps and spears. Traditionally, they went hunting to obtain meat as their own dishes. Also, they did to obtain fur, from which they made their clothes, and which was very important exchange with Bantu people. Even at present, it is indispensable for them to go hunting to get meat and to sell the fur goods as their handicrafts.

When they are not successful in hunting, they hold the rite, which is like a charm. Wives often do something to their husbands early in the morning. They have two ways in the rite. One is to apply medicine plants to husband's wounds cut with knives. The other is to use mushrooms. Both of the ways are considered to prevent the hunters from being found by the game, and to cause their successful hunting. As medical plants, //gaa, //gore, !goḏ/koa are used, and also are mushrooms called ꞤꞤꞤ ꞤꞤꞤ, whose spores hide the figures of the persons like smoke screens.

The treatment and rite against disease, injuries, unexpected accidents

### Medical treatments

The /Gui Bushmen take suitable plants decocted, drink and apply it to the wounds, or pour the steam over their bodies according to each symptom for stomachaches, headaches, muscular pain, arthritis, and eruptions. They do another treatment to cut their parts with pain such as their stomachs, backs, and joints and let the blood out. Then they rob the medicine made of plants by pounding and eland's fat into the wounds.

### The causes of misfortune

When they are not easily recovered from something even after the cures, the /Gui people eventually guess that it should have another different cause. The family and relatives of a person who had an unexpected accident or became seriously ill find the specific cause of the "misfortune" through their talks with others. The causes of misfortune are divided into two, that is, "/qx'ori" and "qhaba."

#### (1) /Qx'ori

/Qx'ori represents "dirt" and "filth." It means the visible dirt on the bodies and hands, but also is regarded as the thing hidden in the blood and urine. They believe that /qx'ori is infected by sexual intercourse, especially by extramarital intercourse. The /qx'ori spread over whole the

body of the man and woman who commit adultery, and then it is infected to the each spouse. At last /*qx'ori* is infected to their children by food or something shared. After /*qx'ori* spreads over the people, the children become sick first, and secondly the adults get seriously ill. The symptoms by /*qx'ori* are headaches, back pain, and stomachache for adults, and diarrhea, stomachache, vomiting, small appetite, and weak constitution for children. All these illnesses go worse eventual, and in the worst cases they lead the people to death.

To prevent the illnesses by /*qx'ori* or to cure them, people hold “the rites of /*qx'ori*.” The rites of /*qx'ori* contains three kinds of rites; “the rite of mixing urine,” “the rite of sneeze,” and “the rite of sweat.”

The rite of mixing urine is similar to the rite of marriage, but it is different in the point that people use their urine which is mixed with their blood. They say that urine becomes strong medicine because it is “in the dirtiest condition.” /*Qx'ori* lurks in the blood, urine, sweat, saliva, breath, and nasal mucus of the person who is affected by the /*qx'ori* disease. In the rite of mixing urine, people urinate and cut their skin to get /*qx'ori* out of their bodies. And they mix all of their urine and blood, which are also “medicine.” So they rub the liquid mixture with medical plants into their wounds.

In the rite of sneeze, people inhale the powder medicine, which made of plants and their fingernails and toenails, and they

sneeze. In the rite of sweat, people sit by the boiled medicine, covering all of their bodies and the steam of the medicine to sweat. Both of the rite aim to get /*qx'ori* out of human bodies by sneeze or sweat. Then people who hold these rites of /*qx'ori* recover from the diseases.

The rite of /*qx'ori* has social meaning that clarifies the sexual relationship between a man and a woman to their husband and wife and children. The rites of /*qx'ori* are held not only when adultery occurs, but also when people remarry. That is, the rite of /*qx'ori* is not the one for distinguishing formal “marriages” from “out of marriages”, but the treatment to solve the social and physical problems occurring by the sexual relationship.

## (2) *Qhaba*

I will mention about “the rite of *qhaba*.” *Qhaba*'s meaning is close to “a grudge.” But it has the characteristic of going one way from the aged people to the youths in the relatives. *Qhaba* occurs when a wrong action by the lower generation (a son, daughter, nephew, or niece) bothers the upper (a father, mother, uncle or aunt), and it comes into the youth such as the son or nephew, who will become seriously ill or encounter an accident. The wrong actions are as follows: the youths (1) do not share meat and money with their parents and relatives (2) continue the relationship of “out of marriages” which are not approved of by anybody, or (3) are missing after

going far away.

*Qhaba* means the grudge only of the aged relatives, not the whole grudge in general. Damage caused by *qhaba* is as follows: (1) severe illnesses, (2) the accidents in which the people are almost killed by wild animals, (3) the ones where they injure someone with spears in hunting by mistake, (4) the situations where mothers and infants become in peril of their lives involved in their pregnancy and birth. These kinds of damage do never make people go to death, but “make them almost dead but finally stay alive.” Such damage never cause the death to the youths, which is why people believe that it is caused by the relatives.

In the process of *Qhaba* occurring, the aged people are said to “become dirty with /*qx'ori*.” Therefore, when the youths are infected by *qhaba* and in peril of their lives, the aged try to remove /*qx'ori* by washing their own hands with water. The rite for *qhaba* is called “the /*qx'ori* of hands.”

The medical herbs for “the rite of mixing urine” for /*qx'ori* are the same as the ones for “the rite of mixing blood.” In the rite of mixing urine, urine itself is believed to have powerful effects for the treatment. /*Qx'one qx'ai* are used for “the rite of sneeze,” and plants called *qhaba* for the rites against *qhaba*. These medical plants are used in only the rite for *qhaba* in particular, and never used for other rites.

## Discussion

### Comparison with other medical plants in Africa

I made a list of plants, that are used in the medical cure and rites by /Gui Bushmen. 49 species, with 48 unacular names, are used, and 25 species whose genus or species are same as my subjects were reported as medical plants by other researchers (Table 1). Some of these medical plants in Africa were revealed they contain effective medical constituents. So the /Gui hold the knowridge of medicinal plants for analgesic, purgative, and cough by their own experiments and propagation from other ethnic groups.

### Treatment effects by rites

Rites are held as “treatment” for the prevention of illnesses and misfortune happened in the process of human beings' growth, and for the accidents and illnesses actually happened. What supports such rites as materials are plants used as “medicine” and things separated from human bodies such as blood, urine, and filth. The kinds of plants used for the rites are not so many. /*Gari ii*, /*goḍ/koa*, /*gaa*, and /*gore* are used for several rites in common.

Materials with power in the rites are thought to be not the medical plants so much as things separated from human bodies such as their blood, urine, sweat, saliva, filth and nails. They have two meaning; they have innocent and positive

Table 1 Comparison with other african medicinal plants

/gui name	Scientific name* <sup>1</sup>	Family	Comparison* <sup>2</sup>	Usage	Reference* <sup>3</sup>
!gui	<i>Sansevieria aethiopica</i>	Agavaceae	G anodyne, tonic, phlogistica		1, 2
gaa	<i>Ehretia rigida</i>	Boraginaceae	G fever, skin disease, dysentery		1, 3, 4, 5
			S anodyne, luky charm		6
nuu  kǝe	<i>Heliotropium stuedneri</i>	Boraginaceae	G fever, eyewash, injury, vermifuge		1, 3
koro	<i>Commiphora mollis</i>	Burseraceae	G toothache, stomachache, oral hygiene		1, 2, 3, 5
none	<i>Boscia albitrunca</i>	Capparidaceae	G STD, aphrodisiac, disunfectant		1, 2
			S eyewash, piles		6
gaa	<i>Terminalia sericea</i>	Combretaceae	G piles, diarrhea, diuretic, vermifuge		1, 3, 4
			S diarrhea, stomachache, eyewash, heart		6
qhaba	<i>Dicoma schinzii</i>	Compositae	G swollen throat, toothache		1, 4
cobexa	<i>Ipomoea adenoides</i>	Convolvulaceae	G laxative, anodyne, fever		1, 2, 3, 4
kǝe	<i>Cyperus margaritaceus</i>	Cyperaceae	G cough, antiphlogistica, anodyne, edema		1, 2, 3
!nan	<i>Cyperus fulgens</i>	Cyperaceae	G cough, antiphlogistica, anodyne, edema		1, 2, 3
kǝe	<i>Kyllinga alba</i>	Cyperaceae	G insecticide, indigestion, flu		1, 3
gam ca  ʔii	<i>Jatropha erythropoda</i>	Euphorbiaceae	G TB, headache, diarrhea, disunfectant		1, 2, 3, 5
			G laxative, poison for fishing and hunting		6
k'aa  k'ana	<i>Monsonia angustifolia</i>	Geraniaceae	G dysentery, typhoid, piles		1, 2
qari	<i>Acacia nebrownii</i>	Leguminosae	G delivery, fever, diarrhea, cough		1, 3, 4
‡nan ‡ke	<i>Bauhinia petersiana</i>	Leguminosae	G stomachache, malaria, vermifuge		1, 2, 3, 4
			S flu		6
!gǝo  koa	<i>Cassia bienesii</i>	Leguminosae	G laxative, anodyne, aborticide		1, 2, 3, 4, 5
			G fever, anodyne, laxative, gonorrhea		6
qam	<i>Cassia italica</i>	Leguminosae	G laxative, anodyne, aborticide		1, 2, 3, 4, 5
			G fever, anodyne, laxative, gonorrhea		6
kamts'a	<i>Lonchocarpus nelsii</i>	Leguminosae	G skin disease, cramp, diarrhea,		1, 3, 4
			G flu, antidote against snake and fish		6
!gae ku	<i>Indigofera flavicans</i>	Leguminosae	G anodyne, sterilization, tonic		1, 2
kere					
qx'ori	<i>Strychnos potatorum</i>	Loganiaceae	G skin disease, sprain, poison		1, 3, 4
			S tonic, poison for fishing		6
gera ‡koba	<i>Dicerocaryum eriocarpum</i>	Pedaliaceae	G antiphlogistica		1, 2
‡kauca ‡kaba	<i>Harpagophytum procumbens</i>	Pedaliaceae	S anodyne, phlogistica, sedative		1, 5
‡qx'aro	<i>Ziziphus mucronata</i>	Rhamnaceae	S tonic, flu, fever		1, 4
			S anodyne, phlogistica, dysentery, TB		6
‡nai ‡na tsaa	<i>Solanum panduriforme</i>	Solanaceae	G fever, poison, skin disease		1, 2, 3
			G vermifuge, rheumatism, injury		6
qx'ori qx'ao	<i>Melhanian burchellii</i>	Sterculiaceae	G diarrhea, flu		1, 2

\* 1 Plant specimens were identified by the National Botanical Institute, Pretoria, Republic of South Africa.

\* 2 G : in the same genus, and S : in the same species, medicinal plants in other african areas are reported

\* 3 Numbers indicate following literature.

1 : Iwu, M. M. 1993 2 : Watt, J. M. and Breyer-Brandwijk, M. G. 1962 3 : Daziell, J. M. 1937

4 : Irvine, F. R. 1961 5 : Iwu, M. M. 1986 6 : Palgrave, K. C. 1977

elements such as blood for “the rite of mixing blood”, sweats, and saliva used to relieved from food avoidance, as well as they are dirty and negative to have power

such as blood, urine, sweat, filth, and nails for the rites of /qx'ori and qhaba.

### Calamities caused by conflicts of the social relationship

As misfortune lead by conflicts of the social relationship between people, /qx'ori and qhaba are introduced. /Qx'ori originate in mainly the sexual relationship, and qhaba in conflicts of hierarchical relationship of the relatives. The rites for them can be said to be complementary. /Qx'ori is, however, a more fundamental concept with a more broad range since the aged are said to "become dirty with /qx'ori." even qhaba occur. Also, /qx'ori, indicating the objects themselves "filth and dirt," is more close to the physical level.

On the other hand, qhaba make people reconfirm the ideology that "youths should respect the aged relatives" as forms of calamities. Compared with /qx'ori lurking in their daily lives vaguely, qhaba have more intent and cause more dramatic damage.

In the rites for /qx'ori and qhaba, blood, urine, sweat, filth, and nails have powerful effects of the treatments. The objects separated from bodies are expressed as metaphors of the bodies themselves, and mixing these objects are considered to have symbolic meaning to make the persons as one. All of the persons involved in the matters participate in the rites, recognize the conflicts have happened in the relationship

between themselves, and try to restore their reliance. Not only the ritual medicines and behaviors, but also gathering of the all people itself has treatment effects and social meanings exceedingly.

### NOTE

This paper is based on a draft presented in "The 6th International Symposium on Traditional Medicine," at Toyama Medical and Pharmaceutical University, from 10th to 11th December 1997.

### REFERENCES

- Daziell, J. M. 1937 *The useful plants of West Tropical Africa*. Crown Agents, London.
- Irvine, F. R. 1961 *Woody Plants of Ghana*. Oxford University Press, London.
- Iwu, M. M. 1986 *African Ethnomedicine*. USP Press, Enugu, Nigeria.
- Iwu, M. M. 1993 *Handbook of African Medicinal Plant*. CRC Press, U. S.
- Palgarave, K. C. 1977 *Trees of Southern Africa*. Struik Publishers, Cape Town.
- Silberbauer, G. B. 1981 *Hunter and Habitat in the Central Kalahari desert*. Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Tanaka, J. 1980 *The San, Hunter-Gatherers of the Kalahari : A Study in Ecological Anthropology*, University of Tokyo Press, Tokyo.
- Watt, J. M. and Breyer-Brandwijk, M. G. 1962 *The medicinal and Poisonous Plants of Southern and East Africa*. E. & S. Livingstone.