

A review of plants used for magic by *Basotho* people in comparison with other cultural groups in southern Africa

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Based on comprehensive literature survey and my own observations while growing up in Lesotho, this paper presents an evaluation of plants utilized as magic charms by the *Basotho* people (residing both in Lesotho and the Free State Province of South Africa), these uses are in turn compared to other cultures in southern Africa, particularly South Africa. The *Basotho* people make use of a total of 197 plant species for magic purposes. The plants are used for a wide range of magic purposes ranging from love philtres to good luck charms, charms to turn enemy bullets into water, as well as protective charms, but can also be used to inflict harm. The highest number of species are used as protective charms (47), with divination (including initiation of diviners) second (35), and charms against lightning, thunder and hail third (33). Surprisingly, of the 197 species recorded, only seven are also used as magic charms by other cultural groups in southern Africa, especially the *Tswana*, *Xhosa* and *Zulu* people.

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Many cultures around the globe use plants in many different ways including food and beverages, medicine, recreation, household items (e.g. brooms, mats, and baskets), clothing (skirts, hats), building materials (thatch, hut poles), farm implements, and magic. The latter is an age old concept, for example numerous plants such as bay/laurel (*Laurus nobilis* L.), mistletoe (*Viscum album* L.), hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna* Jacq.), hazel (*Corylus*), and holly (*Ilex*) have been used as protection against lightning for many centuries. With regards to bay, it is reported that people have been used to carry its branches over their heads in a storm¹. This would explain the several aphorisms dating from the 17th century, for example: "He who carrieth a bay leaf shall never take harm from thunder, and Culpeper added neither a Witch nor Devil, Thunder nor Lightning, will hurt a man in the place where bay tree is"¹. With regards to mistletoe; "in its own right is an embodiment of the lightning (a Swiss name for it is Donnerbesen, thunder besom), and in Britain it was often used in the same way as rowan, not only to protect from lightning and fire, but also from witchcraft and the like". With reference to the Zulu

people, it is written that "in the native mind there exists no system or order, nor clear line between medicine (*umuti*) and charm (*intelezi*). Many a time the plant as it is used by the natives is believed to be a medicine and called so by them; but a European would say that this plant cannot have the supposed effect and therefore it is not really a medicine but a charm"². The first mentioned notion would apply to the Sotho culture as well, the *Basotho* (in South Africa simply referred to as Sotho or Southern Sotho) do not distinguish between medicine and charm (i.e., magic)³. The reason being that medicines used as charms are used for controlling natural or social phenomena and are therefore socially acceptable^{3,4}. They however distinguish between magic and sorcery, a phenomenon in which they strongly believe, such that misfortune, accident, unusual illness, or even death may be attributed to it⁴. In addition to sorcery, the *Basotho* also believe that bad luck and misfortune could also be a result of punishment by the ancestors (*balimo*), for reasons such as the non-observance or abandonment of certain customs. In my experience, the *Basotho* also make no distinction between sorcerers and witches, they are all believed to have the ability to perform malicious acts with an intention to cause harm. However, "witches are not downright

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dangerous and anti-social as are sorcerers, but are rather mischievous and immoral and, though they may sometimes harm fellow-men, on the whole they use their powers solely for their perverted amusementit is however, impossible to draw a hard and fast dividing line, and when witchcraft becomes malignant it really turns into sorcery"³. One of the most dreaded characteristics of witches and sorcerers is the possession of a familiar (or 'animal') known as a 'thokolosi' whose masters/owners can send to either cause havoc (e.g. breaking cooking utensils, strangulating children thus causing convulsions, or giving adults dreadful dreams) or serious harm by causing sickness, accidents and death, doing damage to crops, driving cattle out of their kraal at night, and setting huts on fire³. According to one author, the word 'magic' is used in three basic ways, "firstly, it is used to describe illusory tricks and acts of conjuring, often for the purposes of entertainment. Secondly, it is used to refer to manipulation of occult powers" (the definition of the *Collins English Dictionary*). "Thirdly, the word is used to refer to ritual acts which contain a meaningful and appreciable symbolic interpretation"⁵. It appears that the practice of magic by the *Basotho* would fit the latter two definitions.

The aim of this paper is to enumerate plants that are used in southern Africa for magic purposes, with an emphasis on the *Basotho*, based on a literature survey and from my own observations. The paper also discusses the different categories of magic as well as their mode of use.

Methodology

This review is based on a comprehensive literature search with the earliest reference dated 1861, as well as the author's experience and recollections while growing up in a rural area in the Qacha's Nek District and later in the Maseru District of Lesotho.

Results and discussion

The *Basotho* make use of a total of 197 plant species for magic purposes, the majority of which are indigenous species with only ten naturalized exotics. The plants are used for a wide range of magic purposes ranging from love philtres to good luck charms, charms to turn enemy bullets into water, as well as protective charms, but can also be used to inflict harm. Surprisingly, the naturalized species *Myosotis sylvatica* Hoff. has the most magic uses including good luck charm, love charm, to dispel evil spirits, as well as to bring prosperity of herds. These

medicines are used in different dosage forms: as enemas, lotions, decoctions, snuffs, powder added to bath water, or ointments (prepared from ashes of the plant mixed with animal fat). The plants are used alone, in combination with other plants, or mixed with animal parts. Interestingly, only seven species are also used by other cultures in southern Africa: four by the *Xhosa* and *Zulu* people and three similar purposes by the *Tswana* people. The different types of charms are discussed below according to popularity:

Protective charms

Forty-seven plants are used as protective charms, most of them as protection against witchcraft/ sorcery, bad omens, or any evil. Protective charms can be used by individuals and/or their whole families or by the whole village, or by specific categories of society including sick people (e.g. *Polygala gymnocladia* MacOwan), babies (e.g. *Kohautia amatymbica* Eckl. & Zeyh.), newly-weds (e.g. *Solanum supinum* Dunal), and chiefs when establishing new villages. *Zulu* people use *Hermannia depressa* N.E.Br. as a protective charm for couples, "a *Zulu* couple who suspects that the discords in their life are produced by someone desirous of separating them, use the plant as a protective charm"⁶. The protective medicine is used mostly as an ointment which is either (i) placed in incisions made on the whole body or certain parts of the body; (ii) smeared on pegs placed around the homestead or the whole village; or (iii) placed in a protective horn (pers. obs.). The pegs are made from sticks of plants such as *Celtis africana* Burm.f., *Grewia occidentalis* L., *Leucosidea sericea* Eckl. & Zeyh., and *Rhamnus prinoides* L'Her., all of which are regarded as protective charms even on their own. In southern Africa the latter species is renowned for its protective powers. The plant is used by the *Basotho* (pers. obs.) and *Zulus* as a protective charm for people and crops, the *Xhosas* burn its twigs when offering sacrifices to ancestral spirits⁶. The *Sesotho* name for *Rhamnus prinoides* (mofifi = the dark one), refers to its strong protective powers against witchcraft. As a protective charm, the burnt, ground bark is mixed with fat and inserted into incisions made on the body or placed in the protective horn. The *Basotho* use the wild peach (*Kiggelaria africana* L.) as a protective charm to protect their kraals, however the *Tembus* believe it attracts lightning and should not be touched⁶. Several plants serve as ingredients of the protective horn, the contents of which depend on its function, for example *Crassula dependens* Bolus is

part of the horn prepared to protect warriors when they go to war. Some horns are used as fertility horns, i.e., to influence the gender of the next child, only one species *Colpoon compressum*, is used for this purpose. Other horns are for protection of girl initiates (for which *Asparagus africanus* Lam. mixed with *A. microraphis* (Kunth) Baker or *Kniphofia ritualis* Codd are some of the ingredients), or boy initiates (*Asparagus cooperi* Baker). A special horn is also prepared to protect diviners (apprentices) during their initiation, *Galium mucroniferum* Sond. and *Phragmites australis* (Cav.) Steud. being some of the ingredients.

Initiation and divination charms

Thirty-five plants are used for this category (with 7 species used for the initiation of apprentices and 26 in conjunction with the divination process). It can be gathered from earlier writers of the history of the *Basotho* of Lesotho, that the divination process mainly involved throwing of the bones. Based on the way the bones fall, the diviner is able to correctly diagnose the cause of their patients' problems and prescribe the appropriate charm. In addition, certain plants are used to induced an 'altered states of consciousness' (ASC), which seem to be an integral part of the divination process, for example when referring to the use of one such a plant, it is reported that "with ingestion, this plant has been reported as producing mildly stimulating ASC that Sotho diviners use to divine"⁷. Sotho in this context is understood to refer to Northern Sotho, South Sotho and Tswana of South Africa. The plant referred to is *Myosotis afropalustris* C.H.Wright which is one of the charms (others are *Agapanthus campanulatus* F.M.Leight., *G. mucroniferum*, *M. sylvatica*, *Rhoicissus tridentata* (L.f.) Wild & R.B. Drumm., *Silene undulata* Aiton, *Sporobolus africanus* (Poir.) Robyns & Tourneay, and *Stachys aethiopica* L.) used during the initiation of apprentices to enhance their memory, however there is no suggestion that these plants are used during the divination process itself. On the other hand, three species of *Helichrysum* (*H. aureonitens* Sch.Bip., *H. herbaceum* and *H. odoratissimum* (L.) Sweet) are reportedly burnt "to invoke the good will of ancestors" with the former also being used to induce trances⁸. These, and other *Helichrysum* species are used by other South African cultures, especially Zulu diviners, for similar purposes^{9,10}, it is believed that these plants may exhibit psychotropic effects¹¹. Other species used to facilitate communication with ancestors such as *S. undulata*, are reported to be

"dream-inducing plants" and "are believed to produce 'true visions' that elicit intuitive powers that normally arises only while sleeping"⁷. Two plants (*Agrostis bergiana* Trin and *Heliophila suavissima* Burch. ex. DC.) are particularly important when working diving bones, these and fourteen others are chewed by diviners before throwing the bones. It is likely that when the plants are chewed they bring about a calming effect before consultation. Fourteen plants are used for washing the divining bones, it appears that the bones are cleaned mainly for two reasons: (i) to make them more accurate (e.g. *Alepidea cordifolia* L., *Brunsvigia radulosa* Herb., *Euclea coriacea* DC., alone or mixed with *E. crispa* (Thunb.) Gürke, *Lobelia dregeana*), or (ii) to purify them after the death of a patient (e.g. *G. mucroniferum*).

Charms against lightning, thunder storms, hail

In total, 33 plant species are used as charms against lightning (24), thunder/ thunder storms (5), and hail (7); three plants are utilized as charms against both lightning and hail. It is believed that some plants used as charms against lightning, can also cause someone to be struck by lightning if so called by a traditional healer, one such a plant is the wild olive (*Olea europaea* L.ssp. *africana*). One author reported that according to her informants "when a witch-doctor wants to kill someone by calling lightning on that person, he uses a stick of olive wood"¹¹. Generally these charms are used to divert lightning and thunderstorms, for example *Turbina oblongata* A. Meeuse is a renowned charm (pers. obs.), and it is mixed with *Hypoxis multiceps* Buchinger ex Baker and smeared on pegs placed on the ground around homesteads. It appears that there are a number of similarities in the way in which the Sotho and Zulu doctors practice their trade. For example, to protect family members against lightning, Sotho traditional healers follow the same procedure undertaken by Zulu *inyangas* where the "anti-lightning concoction is applied in four ways: 1) rubbed into incisions made on the bodies of the members of the homestead; 2) dipping a broom into the mixture and flicking it into the air around the boundaries of the homestead; 3) the standard medication of wooden pegs placed around the homestead, with one being placed into the mud cap at the top of the roof of each hut; and 4) drawing a cross on the top of the doorways of the huts, inside and out"¹². Interestingly, some Sesotho names originate from the use of the plant, for example *Dichilus strictus* is called *lesita-tlali* (from *lesita* =

one who prevents + *tlali* = lightning) and this is its sole ethnobotanical use, “this plant and *Buchenroedera viminea* are burnt and ashes mixed with water, everything and everybody in the village is sprinkled with the mixture and are then supposed to be immune to lightning”¹³. Such accordances between a plant name and its use also exist in the Zulu culture, for example *ubani* (= ‘plant effective against lightning’) for the genus *Agapanthus* and *umkhombazulu* (+ effective against weather) for *Strychnos decussata*, both used as protection against lightning⁵. Other plants such as *Phygelius capensis* E.Mey. ex Benth. are used as charm to protect plants against damage by hail. *Asclepias stellifera* is added to this category as it is reported to be an African charm, used when a person has been struck by lightning⁶. Reference should also be made to *Pentanisia prunelloides* (Klotzsch ex Eckl. & Zeyh.) Walp., a very well-known medicinal plant used in traditional medicine across southern Africa for numerous conditions such as boils, burns, cough, swellings, rheumatism, heartburn, vomiting, fever, toothache, tuberculosis, snakebite, menstrual pains, and hemorrhoids^{6,10}. The *Basotho* and the *Xhosas* use it as a charm against lightning; its vernacular names *setima-mollo* (Sesotho) and *isigcikamlilo* (*Xhoza*) which both literally mean ‘one who puts out the fire’ (or fire extinguisher) may as well emanate from this use. However, its Sesotho name emanates from its use to allviate the burning sensation of boils⁴. It is reported that the Mfengu people called it *isi-cimamlilo* for its use to treat the effects of lightning stroke⁶.

Good luck charms

Nineteen plants are used as good luck charms, be it infertile women desiring to conceive, litigants wanting to win a court case, an accused seeking favour of the court, a traveller seeking a safe and successful journey, a farmer requiring facilitation of a good sale of cattle, a person looking for favours from the chief, or procurement of things wished for. Some plants serve a purpose of bringing good luck to friends and bad luck to enemies, e.g. *Albuca virens*. *Leobordea corymbosa*, also known in Sesotho as *molomo-monate* (*molomo* = mouth + *monate* = nice), is a very well-known plant that is used for acquisition of good luck, eloquence, and reverence (pers. obs.), “to make sure you are heard wherever you go”, for example litigants use it to strengthen their case⁶. *Trifolium africanum* Ser. and *T. burchellianum* Ser. are used specifically by people who have a difficult lawsuit. One author¹⁴ has argued that plants that bring

luck act by “enabling the user to attain a positive frame of mind that comes from the feelings of well-being and clarity of thought resulting from consumption of psychoactive chemicals contained in the plants and the use and effects of emesis therapy”. For barren women, a plant part (root, stem or leaf) is shaped into a doll and such a woman must carry this doll on her back and pretend to suckle it, three plants (*Eulophia hians* Spreng., *E. ovalis* Lindl., and *Massonia jasminiflora* Burch. ex Baker) are used this way, or the whole plant (in this case *Aristaloe aristata* (Haw.) Boatwr. & J.C. Manning) is uprooted and placed on the shelf of her hut, “if it flowers under these conditions she will become pregnant but if it withers she remains barren”⁶.

Love charms

Another category of plants utilized for magic purposes is that of love philtres. Eighteen plants are used as love charms. Four different ways in which these plants are used become apparent: (i) powdered root may be added to a person’s bathing water while calling out the name of the desired person [e.g. *Cymbopogon marginatus* Stapf. and *C. nardus* (L.) Rendle], (ii) it may be secretly introduced into the food of the desired person (e.g. *Linum africanum* L.), (iii) an ointment may be applied or inserted into scarifications on the body of the one seeking affection, or (iv) the root maybe chewed (e.g. *Dianthus basuticus* Burttt Davy). It appears that certain plants are used by men, while others are used by women, for example *Myosotis sylvatica* is used by girls who are about to marry, whereas *Wahlenbergia depressa* J.M.Wood & M.S.Evans is used by young men who are courting. Other plants are used to retain affection, for example *W. denticulata* (Burch.) A.DC. is used especially by wives of polygamists. The use of love charms has been practiced in many parts of the world for centuries, for example John the Conqueror (*Trillium erectum* L.) root was used as a love charm for men¹⁵. It is reported that Native Americans used bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis* L.) as a love charm in addition to its medicinal uses¹⁶. Pearl wort (*Sagina procumbens* L.) is said to have been used in the following manner: “girls in the Scottish Highlands drank the juice or wetted their lips with it, if they had a piece in their mouth when they kissed, the man was bound forever”¹.

War charms

While several plants are used as ingredients of the protective horn to protect warriors when they go to

war, some plants are used in other interesting ways. For example, *Senecio macrospermus* DC. known in Sesotho as *lesira* (unseen) is used to make warriors invisible to enemies. Others will stop advancing enemy (*Colchicum striatum*), while others will charm away enemy bullets (*Pteris cretica* L.) or even turn them into water (*Aloe ecklonis* Salm-Dyck). The grass species *Tetrachne dregei* Nees is used as a charm to protect villages at war time and *P. capensis* is given to warriors to give them courage. It appears that plant material has been used as war charms by many other cultural groups across the world, for example, it is reported that the Melanesian warriors would rub their spears with ginger to make them go straight¹⁷. The Ameridians would mix the war charms with the red paint made from *Bixa orellana* fruits and rub on their bodies to pacify the enemy¹⁸.

Rain making

Plants are also used by rain-doctors when they perform rain making ceremonies. In this category four species are used: an unidentified species of *Chenopodium* (referred to as *C. batnji*⁶), two of *Searsia* [*S. divaricata* (Eckl. & Zeyh.) Moffett and *S. erosa* (Thunb.) Moffett], and *S. nigrum*. Another species of *Chenopodium*, i.e., *C. ambrosioides* L. together with other psychoactive plants such as *Datura* and *Avonia rhodesica* (N.E.Br) G.D.Rowley, is used in rain making rituals by the *Tswana* people⁷. The fruits of *S. nigrum* are purportedly included as part of the rain making medicine by the *Basotho* and *Tswana* rain-doctors because of their black colour when ripe, “the symbolism being the dark clouds”⁶.

Charms to get rid of pain and animals

It has been argued that the religious and spiritual use of traditional medicine is often regarded as “irrational and unscientific”¹⁴, these misconceptions are particularly true if one looks at some of the practices purely from a scientific point of view. For example, to cure certain illnesses, plants are used in a manner plants are used in a manner that would seem to have no correlation with the possible pharmacological effect of the plant, however it is possible that there is an underlying biological activity from the plant or that the technique itself provides some physiological relieve to the patient. For example, *Senecio rhyncholaenus* is used to treat sore limbs and if a person suffers from sore feet and hands: The patient is taken to some running water and

incisions are made on the limbs in which the ash, from the incinerated plant, is placed. The blood is carried away by the stream and the pain is supposed to accompany it¹³. Pain in the limbs could result from a number of causes including conditions that trigger inflammation such as rheumatism. Although the biological activity of *S. rhyncholaenus* is not yet known, several *Senecio* species have been proven to have anti-inflammatory activity, for example *Senecio flammeus*¹⁹, *Senecio scandens*²⁰, and *S. salignus*^{21,22}. *Senecio rhyncholaenus* itself is known to have terpenoids which have been proven to have anti-inflammatory effects²³. *Hypoxis hemerocallidea* is used as a charm against headaches as follows: “rootstock of the plant is hollowed into a receptacle and the blood from incisions made on the forehead collects into it, it is then buried after which the patient will be cured”¹³. Headaches can be triggered by any number of conditions, but in this case, it is conceivable that releasing some of the blood from the head could reduce the pressure and thus provide some relief. As mentioned earlier, *Basotho* people (and other cultures in southern Africa) strongly believe in witchcraft, so much that any illness is attributed to it. For example if a person continuously suffers from abdominal pain or unexplained pain in the body, it may be due to “beetles”, “insects”, or “*nohana*” (= small snake) introduced into the body by witchcraft and therefore to get rid of these, an enema is prepared—from *Canthium ciliatum*, *Cephalaria oblongifolia*, *Cussonia paniculata*, or *Kedrostis capensis* mixed with *Geum capense* to get rid of beetles or insects, and *Pimpinella caffra* or *Withania somniferum* to get rid of *nohana*. The *Basotho* do have a propensity to equate certain sensations or behaviour to the presence of animals, especially insects, for example the itching sensation of chilblains is often described as ‘insects’ in the affected area (pers. obs.). It is therefore not surprising that abdominal pain is likened to the presence of beetles or insects, as a matter of fact, snake-like roundworms such as *Ascaris lumbricoides* are often referred to as ‘*nohana*’. It is possible that the medicinal plants being used could have anti-spasmodic and/or anti-inflammatory properties, for example *Cussonia paniculata* is known to have anti-inflammatory and analgesic activities²⁴, furthermore, plants such as *Pimpinella caffra* and *Withania somnifera* are known to have anthelmintic properties^{25, 26}. A decoction of *Gazania krebsiana* is drunk to get rid of bewitched food from the body.

Miscellaneous charms

These charms do not fit in any of the identified categories. Apparently, if *Felicia muricata* is put into food of accused person, they readily confess their guilt⁶. Two plants, i.e., *Crassula alba* and *Helichrysum pallidum* are used to make a person invisible or forgotten by enemies, interestingly, the latter is known in Sesotho as *boleba* (which means to forget). There are also charms to retain youthfulness (*Pseudognaphalium undulatum*), to bring absentees back (*Polygala virgata*), or to get rid of bad dreams in children (*Senecio asperulus*). Since there is a strong believe that sorcerers have the ability to awaken dead people into ghosts and make do all manner of horrible things, to ensure that a dead person doesn't rise from the grave *Clutia natalensis* is used. Other plants, e. g. *Geigeria filifolia* are used to hasten ripening of crops.

Conclusion

A total of 197 plant species are utilized by the Basotho people for various magic activities such as good luck charms, love philtres, charms against lightning, hail, thunderstorms, and as protective charms against witchcraft, bad omens, and evil, with most plants (48) used for the latter category, followed by those used during the divination process and initiation of diviners (35). Interestingly, the naturalized exotic species *Myosotis afropalustris* has the most uses.

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