

Chapter 5: Domains of plant knowledge

“ Plant utilization in Africa includes a vast array of foods, drugs, building and other raw materials, fuels, fibres, and even a much more recent utilization of ornamental plants.”
(Kokwaro, 1995: 224)

The concept of domains is pragmatic, and I will aim at establishing domains of plant knowledge in an emic way. However, as it facilitates talking about these domains in the framework of this dissertation, I will label them in English, using common consensus terminology, such as ‘medicine’, ‘food’, ‘firewood’ etc. I acknowledge that separating medicine and ritual as categories is problematic and might tend toward an etic view, but I aim to highlight the fact that knowledge of the different areas and applications of Mambila traditional medicine is subject to specialisation and domain-specific interest and, therefore, affects the variation of ethnobotanical knowledge. From the free lists and trailwalk data, I collected use categorisations for a total of 47 trees and 37 other plant species, of which 16 were mentioned to have no use or were considered weeds. The main plant domains were food (F), medicine (M), ritual (R), firewood (FW), construction (CO), craft (CR), weeds, and plants that were said to have ‘no use’ (both NU). Some plants were mentioned in ways that did not fit in any of these categories (O), including uses from the past (traditional ‘torch’) plants used in erosion control, as seasonal markers, or ecological markers (all categorized as ‘other’).

5.1. Knowledge of medicinal plants

The existence of a domain of ‘medicinal’ plants is well established although I found no specific Mambila word to label plants as ‘medicinal’, and plants in this category were generally referred to as “it helps with...” “it heals.....”, or “it is used in tradition”. Based on this form of reference, and based on the Mambila concept of disease and healing which I describe below, I chose to refer to these domains with a distinction into ‘medicine’ (M), as in herbal remedies and applications, and ‘ritualistic’ medicine or simply ‘ritual’ (R), emphasising, however, the inextricable link between these domains.

From the free lists and identification trail walks, I found a total of 21 trees and 19 other plants that are being used in both medicine (herbal remedies, baths, incenses) and ritual (i.e. divination, oath swearing, repelling thieves, protection, plants used in **sua** ceremonies, public addresses).

5.1.1. The concept of disease and medicine in Mambila culture

The Mambila concept of disease and healing is based on “personalistic” and “naturalistic” etiologies (Etkin 2002, Moerman 1988, Foster 1976) and has many similarities with other healing traditions in Africa (Kokwaro 1995, Murdock 1980; Jackson 1975:389, in Zeitlyn 1994: 70; Lamar 1995), that differentiate two categories of naturally caused and unnatural or supernatural diseases. Lexically, however, the Mambila word for medicine (**lɔ**) does not make this differentiation, and spans a wide range of treatments for minor physical afflictions and chronic diseases, as well as bewitchment, poisoning, potions and magical charms (i.e. for luck, love or protection against thieves). Illnesses of the first type are considered to be caused by **Chàŋ** (the remote creator and supreme god), which renders investigation of its cause unnecessary (Zeitlyn, 1994:70). These diseases are treated in physical terms with plants (and since the opening of the village dispensary in the early 1960s, increasingly also with synthetic drugs which are considered to be a powerful **lɔ**). Common fevers and flus, coughs and other bacterial infections, common and recurring illnesses such as diarrhoea, malaria, yellow fever and hepatitis, as well as the most common ailments pertaining to the female reproductive system, including childbirth, belong in this category. Older women who are specialists in fields such as midwifery, child illnesses and other female reproductive health are often consulted as first option for herbal treatment of such ailments, but male specialists and professional healers also provide numerous remedies.

In the case of prolonged, wasting illnesses that have not reacted to previous treatments of the kind mentioned above, “divination will be consulted in order to determine the cause and thus the proper course of action” (Zeitlyn 1994:70). Such unnatural illnesses are believed to be caused by ‘bad people’ (‘witches’) and can enter the body in many ways, including through dreams. As has been pointed out in the healing practices of other cultures (e.g. Moerman 1988), disease is not perceived to be the consequence of a body/mind dichotomy, but is rather attributed to human emotions that have profound effects on the body and health. Illnesses in this category are always treated by older men specialising in various disease contexts (such as illnesses related to lungs, heart, ‘poisoning’, physical deformations, etc.). Treatments include the slaughter of a chicken accompanied by an address, herbal admixtures administered orally or via scarification, as well as public hearings and oath- takings (Zeitlyn 1994:71).

The belief in witchcraft is deeply ingrained into the Mambila culture, regardless of level of education or religious denomination. Therefore, it is not surprising that much of traditional

Mambila healing is a form of symbolic healing in which “the metaphorical structure, the system of a healing discipline is decisive in its effectiveness” (Moerman, 1979:60). As the most basic preventative measure of protection against sorcery, life is kept “in the open”, in front of the house, so as to “not hide your affairs behind closed doors”, and food is always consumed in company of others.



Figure 12. Mama Simón, a renowned 'tradi-practitioner' in his "office"

Traditional practitioners (known as ‘tradi-practitioners’) are nation - wide recognized professionals who make their own plant based remedies, and work, to a large extent, with trees, their barks, roots and resins, from which they produce powders, incenses, fresh concoctions and poultices.

Older men use preparations made from both tree and other plant ingredients according to their area of specialisation, generally using a synergy of plants and ritualistic applications (divination, sacrifice of a chicken), and often administer their herbal remedies via scarification. Of special importance are certain bulbs, which have a notion of secrecy attached to them and are used only by men. Women specialists tend to use various other herbaceous plants for home remedies and herbal preparations administered in conjunction with incantations and ritual (as far as I know, women never sacrifice chicken).

5.2. Knowledge of food plants and their preparation

Based on data from free list interviews, trail walk identification exercises and participant observation, food plants can be categorized as cultivated crops, ‘semi-wild’ (Etkin, 1994), and wild foods (some grasses and several tree species). Some participants mentioned a type of wild yam, **tiéé** (*Dioscorea* spp.) and the legume **kweri** (*Cajanus cajan*) that are cultivated in the savanna as foods that are eaten “when there is not much other food”, qualifying them to be categorized as ‘famine foods’. As in other parts of Africa (Etkin, 1994) local pharmacopoeia inform food selection and food plants often also fit into the category of ‘medicine’ and are recognized and utilized as such (more so by older women and men).

Free lists and trail walk data yielded names for 36 plants in the following food use categories: 11 cultivated, 10 semi-wild, and 15 wild food plants. In the category of cultivated and semi wild foods, predominantly grasses and herbaceous plants were mentioned, whereas trees outnumbered other plants as wild food.²⁹

5.2.2. Semi wild and wild foods

Etkin (1994) defines wild food plants as those that are neither managed nor cultivated. There are several plants used in Mambila diet such as **tindar** (*Solanum* spp.) or **san** (*Ocimum* ssp.) which fit Etkin's definition of 'semi wild' as plants that are 'neither explicitly cultivated nor actively tended but nevertheless affected by human activity' (Etkin et al, 1994), and might best be described as 'managed'.

5.3. Famine foods

The traditional staple crop of the Mambila used to be a *Sorghum* species until transhumant herds of cattle and shifts in social structure related to education³⁰ made it impossible to have three crop harvests a year. Today, by June most peoples' maize stores are used up and subsistence switches to cassava. This used to be the time for the sorghum harvest.

In an interview, the chief acknowledged climate that change and the consequences of agro-pastoralist conflict put stress on the local subsistence system in famine times. However, he saw increasing commercialisation to be significant in the context of famine and was concerned about the fact that villagers are selling their surplus corn often below a fair price. The mention of **kweri** (*Cajanus cajan*) as "something you can eat when there is not much food around" is evidence that famine food is recognised as a category, but I found no term for it.

²⁹ See Appendix II, table 12.

³⁰ Children have less time to help with work in the field due to time spent in school. This is of particular relevance for the traditional sorghum staple as it is very susceptible to bird predation and children used to be employed to chase away the birds.

5.4. Firewood

Firewood was generally referred to as “it is for cooking” (pour la cuisine), and knowledge of trees in this category showed great variation among all groups.

Firewood is generally cut in the dry season.

Ring-barking trees in the wet season is often applied as a convenient method to kill a tree so it dries out by the dry season (figure 13). Women and men both collect firewood in the dry season in the savannah, the forest and on individual fields, and store it under cover, next to their huts. Anyone can ask the owner of a field for permission to collect firewood on his land, especially when stores are dwindling by June. Numerous evidence from participant observation showed that knowledge of firewoods is widely shared and highly varied³¹, and that trees that are generally mentioned



Figure 13. Ring barking trees in the savanna for firewood (photo R. K.)

in the use

context of food, can easily cross

categories and become firewood (i.e. Avocado, *Persea americana*).³²

5.5. Cash crops

The major cash crops in the subsistence base of Somié are coffee (*Coffea robusta*), oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*), corn (*Zea Mays*) and the medicinal seeds of **métok** (*Voacanga* spp.). Trucks come regularly to the market to buy coffee beans and take them to the nearby decorticising factories. Both women and men work on coffee plantations, and corn has been increasingly planted and managed also by women in "own account enterprises" (Roberts 1988). Women trade many plant related products and foods on the market (such as groundnuts, fruits, foods and snacks made from maize, manioc, plantain, leafy greens, vegetables, palm oil), and often young girls and boys as young as 12 are sent with baskets of

³¹ See Appendix II. Table 13.

³² On one occasion I witnessed a woman in her late thirties cutting down about one third of a large avocado tree that had just finished bearing fruit. As a reason she mentioned that she needs wood for cooking and that she has no time and no help to go far to look for firewood that has become scarce by then.

fruits and other crops to markets that are in close proximity. In this sense, the category of cash crops is wide and includes any plant that is traded for money. This might explain why their uses as commodities were hardly mentioned. Only three younger women mentioned specific plants as being “for the market”, validating this as a recognised but unnamed category.

5.6. Plants for construction and crafts

Free lists identified 11 plant species- trees, palms and grasses that are used predominantly by men as providing materials for construction and craftwork (i.e. e. house construction, enclosures of bath houses, basketry, slingshots, pestle and mortars, mattresses, rope-making). Imported goods from the market have, largely replaced plants that were traditionally used in the production of cloth.

5.7. New and introduced species

In informal discussions on walks through the village, I asked various community members irrespective of age and sex the names of several plant species that are mainly grown for ornamental purposes (i.e. *Poinciana pulcherrima*, *Vinca* spp.) or are widely dispersed as weeds (i.e. *Mimosa pudica*). All villagers agreed on their name as **fleur** or **nyuri fé** (‘new grass’), considered them as introduced species, speculating on transhumant cows as the importers, and had no uses for them except for the aesthetic value of their flowers.

5.8. Multi purpose species

According to Etkin, plants that overlap in several use contexts are engrained more deeply in the communal consciousness of a people (Etkin 2002). This seems to be true for the Mambila in Somié, as illustrated by the fact that 41% of the plants that were mentioned most frequently have multi-contextual uses (Table 1).

Name	Species name	M	F	FW	CO/CR	R
kékéma	<i>Pilostigma thoningii</i>	x	x		x	
líí	<i>Erythrophlaeum guineense</i>			x	x	x
tùbù	<i>Anogeissus leiocarpus</i>	x		x	x	
teér	<i>Elaeis guineensis</i>		x		x	
tulu	<i>Terminalia macroptera</i>	x		x		
njieè	<i>Cyperus procerus</i>	x	x		x	
yoó	<i>Vernonia amygdalena</i>	x	x			
guíí	<i>Pennisetum purpureum</i>		x		x	
càgàmbor	<i>Paspalum paniculatum</i>	x			x	x

Table 1. Plants on the "top 22" list that were mentioned in multi-contextual uses (codes on page 31).