

Ethnomedicine of the Cherokee: historical and current applications

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Abstract

Indigenous Americans have utilized their environment effectively throughout history in supplying their communities with what was needed. The use of very rich and diverse ethnomedicines by the Cherokee (*Tsa-la-gi*) Peoples, which include both the Eastern Cherokee (Qualla Boundary Reservation, Cherokee, North Carolina) and the Western Cherokee (Tahlequah, Oklahoma), has been historically documented. These ethnomedical practises are still used in today's Cherokee medicine. The Cherokee tribe was one of the only Native American indigenous cultures to create a written language or syllabary for their native tongue. This syllabry was created by a Sequoyah (whose name is George Guess) in the 1800s, despite the fact that their culture had already been exposed to European influences for over 200+ years. Therefore, you will find that some of the documented herbs used as medicines by the Cherokee are not actually native species but are naturalized species. In the Cherokee use of ethnomedicine, it is not just the plants that instilled the healing but rather the combination of plants, prayer, ritual, diet and mindset that all contributed to the methods of application of the medicines on each person. Despite the vastness of this subject, we will restrict our discussion to some commonly used herbal medicines used historically and currently by the Cherokee. We will also discuss harvesting and preservation practises used through the millennia by the Cherokee and how they are still working today to preserve the green pharmacy utilized by each Cherokee medicine person.

Keywords: *ethnomedicine, indigenous, language, culture, traditional medicine*

I. Cherokee past

The Cherokee (*Tsa-la-gi*) people are indigenous to the North American continent, with their nation once spanning over most of the mountainous southeast. Their nation stretched from the current day states of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky and West Virginia.¹⁻⁵ They were a farming and hunting community with a matrilineal clan system. By the time Hernando de Soto first entered their country in the mountains of Carolina and Georgia in 1540, they had a well-established eastern agricultural woodland culture. He called them Chalaques in his writings and never penetrated their interior communities.² During the continual European infiltration, the Cherokee became prosperous traders, merchants, farmers, teachers, writers and diplomats. The Cherokee trade route was well established

also preserved many of their ancient rites and still practise them, as they have for thousands of years. The Seven Clans of the Cherokee remain, and even though some of the names are different between the East and West, the matrilineal society remains intact. The Cherokee consider themselves the *Ani-Yun-wi-ya*, the Principal People or Real People. *Tsa-la-gi* is the familiar name used amongst the people of the nation and where the English word Cherokee originated. Pronunciation of the Cherokee language differs in dialect amongst the East and West Bands of the Nation, just like the clan names. Currently, the seven-clan system consists of the following: *Ani-wa-yah*, the Wolf clan who were traditional hunters and the group that raised wolves in captivity; *Ani-ka-wi*, the Deer clan, traditional hunters and runners; *Ani-djisk-wa*, Bird clan members who were renown blowgun hunters; *Ani-wo-di*, the Paint clan (East), Red paint clan (West) known as great conjurers; *Ani-sa-honi*, the Blue clan known as the herb and root doctors; *Ani-go-ti-ge-wi*, the Wild Potato clan (East), Savannah clan (West) best known as farmers; *Ani-gi-lo-hi*, the Long Hair clan (East), and the Twister clan (West) known as dancers with elaborate hair styles.

The *Ki-tu-wa*, or *Keetoowah*, as noted above, were known as the traditionalists. The secret Keetoowah society is noted to have been formed by the full-blooded Cherokee to keep not only the cultural traditions but also the full blood line. This name, Keetoowah, is the oldest name by which the Cherokee are known. There are many reported stories about the Keetoowah, and the secret society still exists to this day in both Oklahoma and North Carolina nations. These traditionalists are those that have preserved several of the sacred objects, traditions, ceremonies and rites of the nation. The sacred ceremonial pipe that has been written about by historians, the sacred belts that tell the stories of the Cherokee, the Stomp dance, the Turtle shell dancers, the sacred rituals of healing with water, plants and prayer, have all been witnessed by the author as active Cherokee ethnomedicine practised today. A Keetoowah story told to the author by the grandson of Redbird Smith, Crosslin F. Smith, is that the father of Redbird had a vision, and the Keetoowah moved to Oklahoma before the removal. Here, they brought with them the sacred objects and rites to help in the preservation of the nation. My teacher, Crosslin F. Smith, is the high medicine priest of the Keetoowah in Oklahoma who keep the Stomp Dance. In Mr. Smith's recount of the story, the family and other Keetoowah made the trip earlier than the removal to establish a place for the people when they had to walk the Trail of Tears. Mr Smith to this day continues to practise traditional Cherokee medicine amongst the people not only of his tribe but also of neighboring tribes, and non-Native American people.

III. Ethnomedicine

The practice of traditional Cherokee medicine among the Eastern and Western Bands is still a viable, functioning alternative to allopathic medicine. There are established 'Indian Hospitals' that are placed in both the East and West by the Federal government. These allopathic establishments also honor the cultural

IV.A. Urtica dioica, URTICACEAE

Nettles are traditionally used as a medicine tea for upset stomachs and for ague, and the twisted stems were used for bow strings.⁷ Current clinical applications place the constituents of histamine, formic acid, chlorophyll, assorted minerals including iron and vitamin C as active. The plant acts as an astringent, potassium sparing diuretic and tonic in supporting the whole body and decreasing histaminic reactions. It is especially good to use it as a tea for eczema associated with anxiety as well as childhood eczema.

IV.B. Arisaema triphyllum, ARACEAE

Jack in the Pulpit or Indian turnip is named so by the tuberous root system. Traditionally, the Cherokee use was eclectic from a liniment of the beaten boiled roots that were also used as a poultice for boils and headaches. The ointment is also used topically for ringworm and tetterworm, and other topical fungal infections. In addition, the root can be used as a food and tea for stimulating expectorant properties, diaphoresis and as a carminative.⁷ Current clinical applications are sparse, as this plant is very under-utilized by modern medical herbalism.

IV.C. Trillium erectum, LILIACEAE

Beth root or Red robin is traditionally used as a tea for profuse menstruation, hemorrhages and as a constitutional warm tea for the menopausal years. It is also used for coughs, asthma, bowel complaints as a tea and as a poultice for ulcers, tumors, and inflamed areas (personal communication, Mary Chiltoskey). Current clinical applications site the active constituents as steroidal saponins, steroidal glycosides and tannins. It acts as a uterine tonic, astringent and expectorant internally. It is indicated as a phyto-precursor for female sex hormones, acting as a uterine tonic. I use it successfully with post-partum hemorrhages, or in any styptic formula to stop any hemorrhaging. It is also a good plant to use in menorrhagia, or excessive bleeding associated with menses and menopause.

IV.D. Verbascum thapsus, SCROPHULARIACEAE

Mullein, Mule tail, or Kidney medicine is traditionally used as a root and flower tea for kidney dysfunction. The root and leaves are also made into a tea to help with female menstrual cycles. The flowers are used in an oil infusion as a topical vulnerary, while the leaves are wrapped around the neck for mumps and rubbed under the arms for prickly heat. The leaves are also used as bandages to hold in poultices applied to the site (personal communication, Mary Chiltoskey and G.B. Chiltoskey). Current clinical applications in modern herbalism use Mullein effectively as a demulcent for the mucous membranes of the lungs, to treat coughs, colds, bronchitis, and hoarseness while helping to stimulate the cough to be productive and expectorate.

tea for purifying the blood. The Eastern Cherokee use the tea today for the same reason, but it is indicated especially for skin diseases, venereal diseases, ague or rheumatism. The root bark is steeped and used for diarrhea, colds and as an appetite suppressant. It is used topically as a vulnerary wash and poultice.⁷ The Western Cherokee use it in a tea form as an enhancer in any herbal formula and as a blood-purifier. The most important ethnological practise is in the collection of the sassafras. Only the young plants that have red stems are harvested (personal communication).

When in the field, it can be observed that the stems of the sassafras are differently colored, some with white stems and some with red. It is said by the traditional people that the red-stemmed plants are medicine, and the white-stemmed plants are poison. Current clinical applications have subsided in the later part of the 20th century due to the research that indicated that sassafras could possibly be carcinogenic. Could it be that the ancient knowledge of the Cherokee circumvented this problem by their traditional collection methods?

IV.I. Passiflora incarnata, PASSIFLORACEAE

Passion flower, Old field apricot, or May pops is another traditional eclectic medicinal plant. The ripe fruits are used as a kidney and bladder tonic tea or eaten as a fruit (personal communication with Gee George). The root tea is used as a beverage or taken as a tonic for the liver; it is also used internally to help with skin boils. Topically, the root is pounded and used as an anti-inflammatory. Current clinical applications are that the plant is an excellent nervine, antispasmodic and vitalistic spiritual awakener. I use the plant successfully in my clinical practise as a gentle nervine that is good for anxiety, stress as well as nervousness especially associated with menses in women.

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