Muthi market gets authorities' hands dirty

Government is cultivating and harvesting medicinal herbs to prevent them from becoming extinct writes SICELO DLADLA.

A third of South Africa's healthcare is medicated with indigenous plants or muthi. Indeed, 20 000 tons based on about 700 species of plants are traded annually. If it were to disappear, there would be an extra R10 billion burden on the health care system. With each unit typically trading at a minimum of R2 on the market, you can imagine the staggering amount of material being sold. There are even rumoured to be muthi syndicates that are trying to corner much of the exchange.

It is a business that extends across the whole Southern Africa region with people procuring plants from deep in the rural areas of South Africa where they grow naturally, as well as in neighbouring countries. According to Magelepula Makgoba of the Medical Research Council about 80 percent of the population use muthi. The demand for medicinal plants has also been pushed up by population growth and the increasing use of indigenous medicines to treat AIDS and associated ailments. Rising unemployment and the retrenchment of unskilled workers makes establishing a muthi stall on pavements, in shop fronts or in the muthi markets of big cities an attractive option.

Tonnes of bark, roots, bulbs and whole plants, as well as animal parts, are traded every year in South Africa in a business that is informal and untaxed. Until recently it posed the threat of depleting our indigenous plant resources to a damaging extent, but fortunately authorities are starting to see the value of regulating the trade. Government has responded to the ever-increasing demand for muthi by embarking on a natural resource management strategy that allows the needs of people today to be balanced with the needs of people tomorrow. Local communities, traditional healers and traders are encouraged to plant their own medicinal herbs or to make use of mass propagation initiatives.

Division of labour

It is seldom the healers themselves who harvest the plants. Gatherers dig and sell muthi to collectors who in turn transport them to traders in markets. "Traditional healers then mix the herbs for different purposes," says Vincent Mazibuko, chairperson of the Warwick Avenue Herbal Market in Durban.

This informal arrangement has some adverse consequences. For traditional healers, certain rituals should accompany the harvesting for the medicine to be truly effective and to ensure selective picking and prevent over-utilisation. Others point to the danger of poisoning from incorrect identification. And, in a clash between conservation efforts and traditional medicine, some gatherers and healers may have run-ins with the law.

Ambrose Dlamini, chairperson of the trader's association at Isakhisizwe Trading Herbalist market, near Umlazi, tells of a trader who was arrested and fined R10 000 or six years in jail when she was found in possession of Cycads, known as *isiDwabasomkhovu* in Zulu.

It is not only rare plants that are protected. In the tropical plant cornucopia of KwaZulu Natal, many indigenous plants have been protected. *All* muthi plants fall under this category. People need a permit from the wildlife or nature conservation authorities before they are allowed to pick the plants. Other herbs are specially protected and people are rarely granted permission to dig them or sell them without a license, which must be carried at all times.

"The objective is to ensure the survival of these plants so that traders can continue to earn an income, and so that people will continue to be able to obtain medicine in the future. This action aims to ensure that the plants and animals, which are so valuable for traditional medicine, do not become extinct," says provincial Nature Conservation Service official, Thokozani Gumede.

Even traditional healers who are concerned about the survival of our biological heritage have started seeking ways to address the problem. Like many conservationists, horticulturists, community leaders, and vegetable growers, traditional doctors have identified the commercial cultivation of these plants to save South African herbs from extinction. In the past few years, traders and healers have held a series of meetings and workshops dealing with the shortages of some herbs. Dlamini says, "We asked government to provide us with land to plant the endangered herbs because once gone, these plants will never be replaced and the health needs of the very poor will be difficult to address."

Paulos "Zihlahlazemithi" Cele, practising from his surgery in Umlazi, Durban, has been planting herbs at Nkumba Nature Reserve in Engonyameni for the past ten years. Cele, who started working with his father in the early 60s and later formed the Natal and KwaZulu Inyanga's Association, has also been granted permission by the KwaZulu Natal Provincial Administration for the building of Isehlulamanye Traditional Healers Training Institute Committee at the village outside the township, for which he is still raising money.

The formal harvesting of medicinal plants could create a new agricultural sector with opportunities for farmers, communities with access to communal land, traditional healers with small plots of land, entrepreneurs and traders to improve their livelihoods.

Government backs plant preservation

Government has initiated a muthi plant program at the Kruger National Park called the Integrated Conservation and Development Programme. The KZN Wildlife Society has opened up an indigenous plant nursery in Silver Glen, near Durban. Pretoria's Botanical Garden commissioned botanist Priscilla Swartz to design and develop an ethnobotanical garden displaying useful plants as used by the Ndebele, Sotho and Zulu people. The Gauteng Directorate of Nature Conservation has embarked on a community driven cultivation programme for key medicinal plants at the Abe Bailey Nature Reserve, including *Hypoxis*, the African Potato that is being researched for its purported ability to combat AIDS.

Community education forms part of this programme as using or taking these medicinal plants without the proper guidance of a qualified traditional healer is dangerous and can lead to poisoning and death.

If taught properly, traditional healers, muthi gatherers and sellers would benefit from growing their own medicinal plants, as they would have access to legal and unlimited supplies of fresh plants. This is something that could be grown in their own yards, in their own time.

"Growing herbs is as easy as growing vegetables," says Gauteng MEC for Agriculture, Conservation, Environment and Land Affairs, Mary Metcalfe. "They can actually be grown together with vegetables in a common garden. Being local plants, they need less water and are more resistant to disease than foreign plants."

The formal harvesting of medicinal plants could create a new agricultural sector with opportunities for farmers, communities with access to communal land, traditional healers with small plots of land, entrepreneurs and traders to improve their livelihoods. Their target market could be shops, street hawkers, healers, commercial harvesters, tourists and commercial nurseries.

The large role that muthi plays in primary health care has prompted government to give workshops with communities and clinics in the Southern Cape to learn about and use traditional plant remedies. Clinics are desperately short of money and often medicine too, and modern drugs are often over prescribed and wrongly used for simple health problems which would have been treated at home in the past. The project aims to help clinics to provide simple traditional plant remedies and to empower women or other carers to be proud of their knowledge and tradition.

Meanwhile, the University of the Western Cape has initiated an Applied Herbal Science Programme to teach inter-disciplinary knowledge and applied competence in the scientific and health aspects of indigenous herbs. From 2002, the multi-disciplinary programme offers integrated B.Sc (Honours), M.Sc. and PhD opportunities that cut across Biomedical Sciences, Biodiversity, Pharmaceutical Sciences and Society.

Faced with new variations of life-threatening diseases, the international community is looking at traditional cures to find solutions. It is commendable that government is pioneering plant preservation and research before multinational pharmaceutical companies ignore indigenous intellectual property rights and patent our indigenous plant heritage. (*See L&R Digest, issue 17*)

So what is muthi?

Recently, the former Ciskei homeland leader, Oupa Gqozo was shot three times while consulting a sangoma who died on the scene, and Winnie Mandela consulted a sangoma after being served a summons from the South African Receiver of Revenue. Both incidents illustrate how entrenched the use of traditional healing fits into South African culture.

Virtually all cultures have used a variety of plants for the prevention and treatment of disease. It is estimated that the market for commercial herbal medicine in Europe alone reached about $7 billion in 1997.

In Africa, herbal medicines, known as "muthi", have been used for generations, having survived colonialism and apartheid, the impact of Christianity on indigenous culture, the growth of the migrant labour system and gradual urbananisation.

The previous government undermined it, comparing it to witchcraft, but 80% of the population still rely on it today.

From ordinary people in the rural hinterland, to professionals and ministers, to doctors and priests in the townships and affluent suburbs, people from different racial and religious backgrounds consult healers and are given muthi to help them solve their physical, emotional and spiritual problems.

Muthi may also have magical component. It is used for a variety of reasons, from treating diseases to casting spells for love, protection, defeating enemies, attracting business, gambling, horse-racing, penis enlargement, and even court cases.

There are different kinds of traditional healers. In Zulu culture, "Izinyanga" *(healers)* consists of people who inherited the knowledge of muthi from their parents or ancestors. Izangoma *(diviners)* are those who use spiritual power and muthi to heal the sick. Abathandazi *(prophets)* use spiritual power and holy water. However, a person can be all in one.

Although often sidelined, traditional healers use muthi to treat many problems and sicknesses that Western medicine cannot.

Today, the muthi trade is complex, mail order systems supply a massive international market, especially in Germany. It is advertised in newspapers, and muthi traders have set up shops and stalls in markets frequented by the poor and by healers.

In formalising the trade and recognising traditional healers it is hoped that legislation will be passed that allow healers' fees to be deducted from medical aid schemes.