

DIVERSITY AND VARIABILITY OF PLANT KNOWLEDGE AMONG ADULT BAKA HUNTER–GATHERERS IN CAMEROONIAN RAINFORESTS

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Baka hunter–gatherers of Cameroonian rainforests have names for many forest plants and use wild plants for various purposes including food, material culture, medicine, and trade. Among the group of Baka studied, one elderly woman in particular had an extremely diverse knowledge of plants. An analysis of individual differences in plant knowledge, in terms of the vernacular names of plants and their different uses, showed that Baka adults generally knew the common vernacular names of plants and had similar knowledge of plants used for food and in material culture. However, they had widely varying knowledge of both the quality and extent of medicinal plants. While Baka adults share evaluations of the material properties of plants used for food and in material culture, evaluations of effects of medicinal plants are not commonly shared, a tendency that may account for this wide variability. The Baka acquire knowledge of medicinal plants from their parents and other family members when they or their children become sick, and this knowledge among Baka adults reflects individuals' and families' medication histories. Baka medicinal and therapeutic systems also reinforce this variability, because individuals actively seek cures for themselves and their family members rather than relying on medicinal specialists such as traditional healers, who may attempt to monopolize medicinal knowledge.

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