ME'EN RITUAL, MEDICINAL AND OTHER PLANTS: A CONTRIBUTION TO SOUTH-WEST ETHIOPIAN ETHNO-BOTANY

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1. Introduction

The present article offers a descriptive survey of the most important plants used by the Me'en people, a South-East-Surmic-speaking group in Southwestern Kafa, Ethiopia. While the inventarization of vernacular names of plants in the main Ethiopian languages such as Amharic, Tigrinya and Oromo (and various other languages of the High-lands) has been advancing rapidly over the past decades (through the works of Strelcyn 1973, Lemordant 1971, Cufodontis 1953-73, Wolde Michael 1987[1] and Hedberg & Edwards 1989[2], the study of the nomenclature and use of plants among the many smaller ethnic formations of the region shows many lacunae. As in traditional Amhara and Oromo culture, many plant species have medicinal and frequently also ritual value among these groups. Obviously, many plants will be known and shared in the Ethiopian culture area in general, although they are partly put to different use in theses spheres of ritual and/or traditional medicine.

The study of this subject is important for the following reasons: a) it can clarify the extent of the spread of certain species in various climatic and topographical zones; b) it can tell us more about 'acculturation': what plants were considered effective and/or exchanged among different groups? c) it can help us to understand more about ritual and culture of the various ethnographically little known populations of Ethiopia.

2 Methods

Information about the plants and their names was gathered over a period of 14 months of field-research (1988-91)[3] among the Me'en, with the above three questions in mind. The role of plants in Me'en life was very obvious, either in the material culture, in the ritual sphere, in that of preventive or curative, medicine or simply as feature in the landscape to which some meaning was attached. While the information was received over a substantial period of time, in the last months of my stay I also conducted special plant-gathering expeditions with Me'en friends. Due to serious transport problems (days of walking), and the plagues of rain, rats, and insects, a number of the 241 observed and collected specimens were spoilt or damaged, making later identification difficult or impossible.[4] The identification of the plants was done by the National Herbarium of Addis Ababa University and by myself, if the Amharic name of the plants was known and given to me by 3 to 5 independent local informants and showed consistency.[5]

For all plants, gathered in the field, the local name in Me'en was asked on the spot, and later also checked with people in the hamlet where I lived. Then bi-

lingual local Amharic-speakers were asked for the equivalent in Amharic. This procedure nevertheless left out a significant number of plants for which there is no Amharic name. Usually, these plants were not known or used by the non-Me'en in the area.

These data are offered as a checklist in order to stimulate further field-investigations and gathering of specimens (on the basis of the known Me'en plant names, see note 2), to enhance the comparative study of Ethiopian plant-names and plant-use, and finally to enable us to understand more of the cultural role of plants in general.

3 The Me'en and their environment

The Me'en form the largest group of the Surmic-speaking (Nilo-Saharan) populations in Southwest Ethiopia. They live in the southern Käfa Region and count at least 51,000 people, distributed over a lowland and an intermediate highland area covering some 5,500 sq. kilometers. The area is mostly above 1,000 meters altitude and has an average rainfall in the range of about 900-1400 mm per year, although highly irregular. The area along the valley of the Shorum river (which flows into the Omo) is from 600 to 1000 meters altitude, but only few groups of Me'en live there (ca. 2000 people), because livestock-keeping is difficult due to (the expansion of) the tsetse fly. In the higher areas, the Me'en practice shifting cultivation of maize and sorghum (and some t'eff and wheat) as well as horticulture of beans, peas, and amaranth (a fine grain species). In the gardens near their homesteads, they grow cabbage, peppers, pumpkin, rootcrops like taro, and various spice plants. The Me'en also keep cattle, goats and sheep, but in very limited numbers as compared to the Bodi-Me'en, who live south-east across the Omo River. The average male household head has two to four cattle and some goats. In addition to subsistence agriculture, the Me'en (males) exploit beehives and practice some hunting. Women and children are usually engaged in gathering. Especially the gathered wild vegetables, berries and fruits (Mostly in the lowlands) form a vital source of additional food in the dry season.

The Me'en in Käfa (also known as 'Tishana') have been liveing in this highland area only for about 120 to 140 years (gradually migrating from the Omo valley, see Abbink 1990), but they of course have acquired an intimate knowledge of the animal and plant world of the area. An important number of the plants (especially the ones used in various curing ceremonies and in rituals) still come from the lowland region and are also found in the Bodi-Me'en area. A large number of other plants is specific to the highland zone, where the vegetation more resembles that of the central highlands. Use of these plants has often been adopted through neighboring peoples, like Dizi and Bencho-Gimira, as reflected in the Me'en names given to them (loanwords).

In what follows, I enumerate and comment upon the most important plants used by the Me'en. The vernacular name is given, followed by the scientific name, (when it could be identified) and by a brief description of the plant's use in Me'en

culture. As I am not a botanist or chemist, I will not say anything about the chemical composition and the possible active elements of these plants.

The most interesting use of plants from an ethnological point of view is perhaps in the domains of traditional medicine and ritual. Locally (among the northern settlers in the area), the Me'en have long been famous for having expert healers and effective medicines (Already mentioned in Hodson 1929: 114). At the same time, they are reputed never to reveal this knowledge in detail (the names of the plants, the right mixture of plant ingredients, the best way of treatment, etc.) to non-Me'en. The local medicinal botanic knowledge is transmitted primarily within the own group (usually along 'clan' or family lines). One may note that this image of having secret, effective medical or magical knowledge is also a general characteristic in a relation between a culturally 'dominant' and a 'dominated' population group in a non-literate society, especially if the dominant group is formed by relative newcomers to the area. The assertion by northerners that the Me'en 'keep their knowledge to themselves' can partly be explained from the fact that the latter have often brought plants and healing procedures which are new to the northerners and of which they don't know the Amharic name: thus the knowledge remains 'secret'. My observations suggest that Amhara and other Northerners in the area frequently went to Me'en experts when they were in real need of some medicine. At such occasions they were never refused it (when they paid enough, or when they were bond-friends). For instance, the Me'en have plants used to produce a contraceptive as well as to induce abortion, and these were regularly used by their non Me'en neighbors.

4. The role of plants

To understand the social and cultural significance of the plants to be discussed it is important to recall that a shifting-cultivator people like the Me'en, living in the southern outliers of the Ethiopian highlands and the adjacent valleys of the Omo and Shorum rivers, are very much dependent upon their natural environment in everything. They live in a remote and very inaccessible area of Ethiopia and have hardly any direct economic or social contacts with the wider society. They have no access to good health services, credit facilities, agricultural extension programmes, or even fertilizer. There are no car roads, very few 'shops' and no government or internationally funded development projects in their area.[6]

For their sustenance, the Me'en are obviously dependent on rainfall, which is very variable, unpredictable and often insufficient in their region. Every season, they observe the appearance and sequence of certain wild plants and grasses, from which they predict the chances of rain, the best time to start clearing and planting a new field, and later the chances of a bountiful harvest. If the signs are bad, for instance, they move their residence, often going to the lowland area. Plants thus function - as in most African rural societies - as ecological monitors, assisting people to enhance their crop output and thus their survival.[7] In this context, some plants have also gained ritual value, for reasons which are - to outsiders at any rate - not always obvious. A *ritual* might be considered as a kind of cultural scenario through which a group of people, through dramatic means, express an ideal situation or a wish that

their future (work-) activities may be crowned with success. The creative use of certain plants in such a ritual is very important. Plants or other items used in it may, so to speak, help in creating a 'social drama' - fictitious but intended as a 'model' of reality, or of the future.[8] The plants thus may receive a variety of meanings: they may have been selected because of their being perennial green (and thus a sign of everlasting life), they may be relatively pest-resistant (and thus be an 'example' for food crops), or they may impress because of their sheer size, age and quality (and thus be associated with achievements, e.g, of chiefs or big men). In the tables below, I will furnish examples of these three kinds. It is also notable that - even though most Me'en now live in the highland zone - a majority of the crucial plants of the Me'en are only found in the lowland areas along the two rivers (the purported region of origin of the group). Especially the ritual and medicinal plants are still procured from there.

5. Results: the categories of plants in use among the Me'en

Although the emphasis in this report is on medicinal and ritual plants, some attention will also be paid to plants used for other purposes. The categories to be distinguished are therefore:

5.1. plants used for housebuilding and household utensils
5.2. plants used for clothing
5.3. magical plants
5.4. famine plants
5.5 medicinal plants
5.6. ritual plants

In the following tables, I give the Me'en name, followed by the scientific name if known, and/or the Amharic equivalent.

5.1. Me'en houses are entirely made of wood and plant material. No stone foundations or stone walls are known. In the category of hosuebuilding and household objects (like stools, spears, hoes, sticks, etc.), the materials used by the Me'en comprise the following:

Table 1. Plants used in house-building, production of household items, etc.

Amh. n. =Amharic name VS = voucher specimen[9]

Vernacular name	VS	Scientific name	Use/remarks
1. t'et'ut	61	Premna schimperi	Strong, bendable wood, used
Engl.		in hut-building.	
2. *ts'amach*	114	Unidentified (in Amh.: *Mejej)*	A lowland tree, the bark of which is used for ropes.

3. *Shi'it-te-giringaju*	6 Clematis hirsuta pree & Gill.	A creeper, used as tying material in hut-building.
4. *imbwaté*	164 Unidentified (no Amh. n.)	Used as rope in tying walls and roofs of huts. The resin of this shrub is used by Me'en children to make a kind of elastic balls.
5. *anturuk*	82 Unidentified (no Amh. n.)	A creeper, used for tying hut-walls.
6. *unach*	37 Grewia velutina Forsk	A tough lowland tree, the wood of which is used for hut-walls and also for spear-shafts.
7. *jamphach*	59 Vernonia amygdalina Del.	The bark of this tree is used for tying walls and beehives.
8. *dargach*	109 Cussonia arborea Hochst. ex A. Rich.	Hardwood tree, used for hut-walls and fences.
9. *nqarsga*	169 Aningeria adolfi-friederici Rob. & Gilb., or Aningeria altissima (A.Chev.) Aubr. & Pellégr.	A tall tough tree, predominantly in lowland areas, the wood of which is used for hut-walls.
10.*ch'anch'at*	222 physalis peruvian	A creeper, used for tying wood (beehives, walls).
11.*oshoch*	223 Cordia africana Lam.	Its tough wood is used in hut-building. A very common, multipurpose tree found and used all over Ethiopia.
12.*tulut*	49 Maesa lanseolata Forsk.	The leaves of this plant are used as a 'mattress' for sleeping-places in the huts.
13.*antorogit*	231 Unidentified (no Amh. n.)	A tough creeper, used for tying beehives.
14.*bolut*	186 Ricinus communis/ sanguineus L.	The crushed fruits of the castor bean are used to oil spear-shafts and other wooden utensils. It makes them smooth and tough and gives them a reddish-brown colour.
15.*k'araich*	152 Lippia grandifolia Hochst. ex Walp.	Like the castor bean, also used for rubbing and oiling woodwork.
16.*gormach*	28 Rubus sp., steudnerii Schweinf., aethiopicus R.A.Grah., or innatus	The branches of this plant are used for tying walls of huts.
17.*Kaya-kaya*	53 Triumfetta aff. rhomboidea	Its wood is used for house-walls and roof-beams.

18.*bants'alach*	249 periploca linearifolie A. Rich. & Quart. -Dill.	The bark is used for tying walls and for making plate-like baskets.

5.2. In the past, the Me'en were using some plants for clothing. Again, these are mostly from the lowlands and are few in number.

Table. 2 Plants used for clothing

Vernacular name	VS Scientific name	Use
1. *belshit*	113 Protea gaguedi Gmel.	Bark-Strips of this plant were made into women's frocks and rain-capes. They are very rare nowadays.
2. *dobit*	243 Terminalia sp. (no. Amh. n.)	The inner white bark. The bark of these lowland trees is moistened, hammered into shape and made into blankets, capes, or bags for transporting grain, corn, or coffee beans. The *dobit*-material is fairly common in the Omo valley (also in use among the Mursi, Bodi and Suri peoples).

5.3. Before discussing the two main categories of plant use, mention has to be made of the use of the use of various plants for other purposes, e.g. *magic*. Their identification is most difficult, because these plants are really kept secret. Of course, part of their alleged effect results precisely from the buyer *not* knowing what he/she is actually using. Some Me'en lowland-groups have a reputation for being experts in this field. For instance, the Boshu group (also the most prestigious 'rain-maker'-clan of the Me'en) is said to have: a) love charms (a root called *t'om)*, b) protective medicine (again a root, called *bullu*) against snakes (chasing away snakes by casting a spell over the paths which people use, and for healing the snake-bite wounds), c) medicne against being hit by bullets, and d) against making personal enemies. These 'medicines' are all roots and are worn as talismans. Although I visited these

lowland groups and actually acquired some of these roots, I could not identify the plants.

Other plants are used in a 'magical' sense, e.g., the *shorach* (Asparagus flagellaris (Kunth.) Bak.). Its branches are hung in a hut, to 'keep out' a contagious disease.

5.4. Another interesting category is that of the plants gathered by Me'en in times of food shortage (often in the dry season) or impending famine. Most of them are found in the lowlands, which is one reason why people move there when they feel they are going to be short of food or when rainfall appears to be insufficient.

Table 3. Plants used in times of food-shortage and famine

Vernacular name	VS Scientific name	Parts used / remarks
1. *oshoch*	223 Cordia africana	Roots, leaves, fruits are eaten.
2. *phoso*	121 Bersama abyssinica Fres.	The leaves are used - only in extreme hunger periods - as a substitute for the cultivated Brassica (cabbage) species.
3. *katila*	220 Amaranthus hybridus L., subsp. cruentus L. (Thell.)	This fine-grained cereal grows in many places, needs little care and can do with little water. It is often intercropped with maize, and is also planted in the gardens near the houses. Its consumption notably increases in hunger-time.
4. *b'odit*	42 Gardenia ternifolia, subsp. jovis-tonantis	Fruits are eaten.
5. *sese*	213 Tragia pungens Forsk.	Leaves are eaten.
6. *hantidi*	71 Leucas calostachys 79 Oliv.	Leaves are eaten.

7. *phadut*	214 Ficus dahro Del.	Fruits eaten. Also of other Ficus species, like sur, vasta or sycomorus (called *barach)* the fruits are edible.
8. *abalti*	172 Bidens prestinaria (Sch. Bip.) Cuf.[10]	Small fresh leaves eaten.
9. muchakarech	122 Carissa edulis (Forsk.) Vahl	Fruits are eaten.
10. *bararit*	136 Momordica foetida Schum.	Root is eaten.
11. *ent'ut*	38 Unidentified wild rootcrop (sometimes called in Amharic *yäch'akka k'achi,* i.e. 'forest root').	Its small roots are roasted and eaten (This plant is probably an Ipomoea species).
12. *gagut*	195 Unidentified (no Amh. n.)	A lowland tree, the fruit of which can be eaten.
13. *shumajiec*	241 Unidentified (no Amh. n.)	A lowland shrub, with edible fruits.
14. *barut*	181 Sometimes called in local Amharic, *yäsäyt'an k'och'o* i.e. Kigelia africana/ aethiopum Fenzl.)	Fruits can be eaten.
15. *sholfit*	64 Unidentified (no Amh. n.)	Root is eaten.
16. *cohoboch*	192 Manilkara butugi Chiov.	The sweet and soft whitish fruits of this lowland tree are edible.
17. *b'ilech*	190 Unidentified (no Amh. n.)	Lowland tree, fruits eaten.
18. *ch'odut*	238 Unidentified (no Amh. n.)	Lowland tree, fruits eaten.
19. *junqqu*	70 Bidens pilosa L.	Leaves eaten.

20. *chorut*	117 Syzygium guineense Willd. DC	Fruits eaten.
21. *lakut*	250 (unidentified)	The thick roots of this lowland bush are eaten

55. When the Me'en were asked about the plants they use for healing purposes they usually answered that almost any plant had some use, although not all Me'en knew about it. There are various select groups, like old women or men of certain 'clans', which are said to have specialized knowledge of certain classes of plants and certain diseases, e.g., stomach-pains, head-aches, snake-bites, poisonings, wounds, etc. However, the application of this knowledge is tied to the persons using it on a patient, and it seems that few of these plants have a really powerful curative value. For example, people of the Gisibo clan as well as of the Majana/Kuta lineage (of the Mo'ach clan) were said to be experts of snake-bites and used the ground root of a lowland shurb, called *selejut,* to effect a cure. It is assumed that, should other Me'en, not of this lineage, apply it to someone it would not work. Nevertheless, several plants used by the Me'en may have active components and should be investigated in more detail. Again, although I have gathered the *names* of most of these plants, the determination could not in all cases be made (see 2., *Methods).*

Table 4. Medicinal plants

1-7: for treating wounds; 8 10: for treating poisonous snake-bites; 11-20: for treating stomach-problems; 21-22: given to young mothers at time of child-birth; 23-25; for treating skin-infections; 26: for treating swollen legs or elephantiasis; 27; for treating 'psychological disorder'; 28-29 for treating tooth-ache; 30-32 for treating malaria; 33-34: to induce abortion; 35-39: for treating heachaches and body pains; 40: for treating gonnorhea; 41: to bring about pregnancy.

Vernacular name	**VS Scientific name**	**Remarks on part(s) used**
1. *wolì*	55 Gnaphalium sp.	Its powdered dried leaves are put on fresh flesh wounds
2. *girshu*	21 A Rumex sp. (no. amh. n.)	Important lowland plant; crushed fresh leaves applied to festering wounds.

3. *kolshoch*	201 Unidentified (no Amh. n.)	Lowland plant, ground root is applied to open wounds. It can also be taken orally, mixed with water.
4. *urasech*	165 Unidentified (no Amh. n.)	Rare lowland plant, the powerful root of which is used in treating open wounds.
5. *masech*	40 Unidentified (no Amh. n.)	Its crushed root is applied to wounds.
6. *ket-te-ngodere*	-- Unidentified (no Amh. n.)	Literal meaning: 'wound-wood', applied to various wounds.
7. *gudumoch*	90 Unidentified 105 (no Amh. n.)	Fresh leaves applied to bullet wounds, especially by wxports from the Afala-clan.
8. *qombelit*	103 Croton macrostachyus Fresen.	Root is ground and mixed with water, then drunk.
9. *zibut-te-kono*	188 Campuanulae sp.	Literally: 'snake medicine'. (Plant with trumpet-like flowers). This bush is planted near homesteads to prevent snakes from entering. Also, its fruits are crushed and applied to the place of the snake-bite.
10. *burru*	199 Unidentified (no Amh. n.)	Root applied to the bite wound. Prevalent among the lowland Me'en
11. *girshu*	21 Rumex sp. (no Amh. n.)	Root ground and rubbed on the stomach of especially babies. Adults also use it but drink it.
12. *jamphach*	59 Vernonia amygdalina Del.	The crushed root-mixture is applied to the stomach of babies, as with the previous plant. It is also used for cows because it is said to facilitate delivery (especially of the placenta).[11]
13. *k'amjach*	115 Embelia schimperi Hochst.	The crushed fruit of this plant, mixed with water, is a powerful emetic medicine, used to get rid of hookworm.

14. *bolut*	186 Ricinus communis/ sanguineus	Used for babies with stomach problems. The mixture of water and crushed fruits is rubbed on the stomach.
15. *shamtit*	26 Unidentified (no Amh. n.)	A big tree, mostly in the lowlands; the root is used as a stomach medicine by people of the Jogac-clan, one of the ancient Me'en clans.
16. *woloshu*	187 Unidentified (no Amh. n.)	The leaves of this lowland plant are used to cure a swollen stomach.
17. *gormach*	28 Rubus spp., steudnerii or aethiopicus or innatus.	Leaves are ground and drunk, for use against hookworm.
18. *ribi-de-guroñ*	235 Unidentified (no Amh. n.)	Litt. 'crocodile's back', (due to the square shape of its stem). Its root is ground and drunk with water.
19. *gimay*	96 Unidentified (no Amh. name)	The root of this lowland plant is used.
20. *ket-te-koroy*	-- Unidentified (no Amh. n.)	Litt. 'black wood'. Leeves used for wound treatment.
21. *dosut*	110 Bothriocline schimperi Oliv. & Hieron. (no Amh. n.)	The moist, soft leaves of this bush were used, mixed with butter and rubbed on the stomach of the pregnant mother, to stimulate a smooth delivery.
22. *dimdumach*	72 Clerodendrum myricoides (Hochst.) R.B. ex Vatke	Taken by pregnant women a few days before labour starts.
23. *zibut-te-k'ojun*	186 Unidentified 74 (no Amh. n.)	Litt.: 'itching medicine'. It is a mixture of ground *bolut* fruits (Ricinus communis/sanguineus) and roots of the *qe'u-qe'u* (unidentified) plant and water, applied to the skin.

24. *gonut*	153 Unidentified 154 (No Amh.n)	A soft-wood lowland tree, the ground bark of which is applied to the skin.
25. *ngo'e*	60 Rubiaceae sp.	The crushed leaf is mixed with butter and applied to the skin.
26. *k'ardi*	* 1 Kalanchoe species, macrantha or lanceolata Forsk.)	The leafs are mixed with coffee or *wo'ech* powder (white clay). It is often applied by 'ritual assistants' (see below (5.6) on ritual plants). There is one other (unidentified) plant used for this purpose, called by the same name.

27. For victims of a psychological disturbance, a 'fit', or a *k'ollo* (a malevolent local spirit): leaves of the *isingit*-plant (unidentified, VS no. 101, no Amh. n.) are ground and given to smell (i.e. fumigation). This is said to clean the person, to release her/him from the spell. (Stronger remedies for this affliction are given by a diviner-magician, involving offerings of a goat or of cattle during a healing ceremony. But here plants are not used).

28. *bolut-te-rosun*	10 Datura stramonium L.[12]	When bitten and kept in the mouth, the root of this plant alleviates molar tooth-aches.
29 *p'erp'erech*	9 Unidentified (no Amh. n.)	Its root has a similar use as the previous item.
30. *k'amjach*	* 115 Embelia schimperi Vatke	The crushed fruits are eaten, mixed with some water.
31. *k'erach*	31 Olea africana Mill.	The ground bark is consumed, with water.

32. *b'odit*	42 Gardenia ternifolia, jovis-tonantis	Like with the previous item, the crushed bark is used. All these three medicines (30 -32) have a notable emetic effect. They are said to 'clean the body', but can only be used by otherwise strong persons.
33. *loch'init*	* 185 Phytolacca dodecandra L'Hérit.	Leaves of this plant are used together with the crushed root of 34.
34. *girshu*	21 Rumex sp. (no Amh. n.)	Roots of the *girshu* are ground, mixed in water and drunk.
35. *bot'a*	* 129 Unidentified (no Amh. n.)	A lowland plant, the root of which is eaten to combat chest pain/pressure; it also helps against general ill-feeling in the body.
36. *orsut*	206 Aframomum agnus-tifolium (Sonn.) K.Schum.)	To combat headaches or migraine, the root is ground, mixed with coffee and drunk.
37. *sha'och*	36 Unidentified (no Amh. n.)	Leaves are taken against chest/heart pains.
38. *sholsholo*	116 Rumex abyssiniucs Jacq.	The root is ground and boiled in water or tea, then drunk. It helps reduce high blood pressure, general pain/pressure in the body, and what is locally called'head-burn'.

39. *lumut*	225 Unidentified (in local Amh.: *tontona).*	Its leaves are sniffed, against common cold.

40. One plant was mentioned as a medicine for gonnorhea: the *olbetto* (unidentified; no equivalent in Amharic, VS no. 8). Its root was ground and drunk.

41. The leaves of another plant called *tenti* (an Euphorbia species, VS no. 57) were said to be taken by young girls/women to increase the chance of getting pregnant, especially at the time of their first sexual contacts with their husband. The use of this and of several plants mentioned in category 5.6 (below) obviously shades into the sphere of magic.

5.6 *Ritual plants* are perhaps the most interesting, because they challenge the investigator to find out why certain of these plants - and not others - have been accorded a place in ritual procedures. It seems obvious that plants are often 'chosen' on account of certain properties which are emphasized in cultural behaviour as expressed in ritual, often on the basis of analogy. Just to give one example from another area of southern Ethiopia: the Hamar people use the *segele* grass (Aristida adscensionis) in the 'ritual for raiders': at the time that their raiders go out, leaves of this sharp-bladed grass are inserted in the muzzle of a gun (Strecker 1979: 56). The informant is clear about what this gesture should mean: "Being sharp, may it hit" [the enemy] (ibid.). Similar analogies may be found expressed in (the choice and use of) certain Me'en ritual plants.

Table 5. Ritual plants

Vernacular name	VS Scientific name	Remarks
1. *ch'ima*	219 Catha edulis Forsk.	This plant (*ch'at)* was used in certain ceremonies of blessing (see below).
2. *phadut*	214 Ficus dahro (and other ficus spp.)	Planted as a grave marker
3. *parchanggach*	15 Unidentified (no Amh. name)	Casting out evil or illness.
4. *chalkut*	86 Dodonea viscosa L.	Ceremonial sticks of elders.

5. *Habay-de-kanggaji*	Unidentified 218 (no Amh. n.)	A thin-leafed, soft grass, used in the *mosit* ritual (See below).
6. *shoro'ach*	32 Sida alba L.	Branches used in a disease protection ritual.
7. *shorach*	19 Asparagus flagellaris (Kunth.) Bak	Branches used to ward off contagious disease.
8. *tulmit*	51 Trichilia emetica	Its sticks are used for fire-making in the *mosit* ritual
9. *latech*	14 Combretum sp. (Terminalia orbicularis)	Used in the *mosit* ritual.
10. *chubulukuni*	22 Osiris lanceolata Hochst. ex Steudel	Used in the *mosit* ritual.
11. *jakach*	12 Maytenus senegalensis (Lam.) Exell.	Used in the *mosit* ritual.

According to my Me'en informants, *ch'ima* or ch'at was imported to the Me'en country in the first half of this century (before the Italians) by Oromo men, who often came to the (northern) Me'en area to hunt buffaloe and other big game animals. The Me'en elders say it was not indigenous in their area, i.e. they did not just find it and start using it without the example of these northern visitors. Some informants said the name *Ch'ima* was dervied from *'Jimma'* (a town generally identified with the area where the nrothern immigrants came from). It is interesting to note that the Me'en for a time adopted it in their own culture for magical and ritual purposes (e.g., it was used in the funeral ceremony, cf. Abbink 1990b). It also figured in certain origin stories as a plant which was given to the Me'en by the ancestors (cf. Abbink 1992a). Nowadays, however, the use of this plant has disappeared. Contemporary informants said that it was a plant of the Me'en 'big men' of the past, but that young people did not know its significance. Neither do Me'en ever chew it in ch'at sessions like is done in many areas of Ethiopia.[13]

The *phadut* was often being planted on grave-sites of lineage elders and other important Me'en persons, male or female. This tree spreads out wide and can reach vast proportions. Its wood is tough and is used for many purposes. It symbolizes durability and greatness. The Me'en area has been largely denuded of its forests, but the *phadut* trees can still be seen everywhere across the landscape.

The leaves of the *parchanggach,* a small plant, are crushed, mixed with water and rubbed on the body in order to prevent the 'evil eye' spell *(ye'achka)* from having its effect (It is thought that someone's envy has placed something, i.e., a material substance, in the victim's body). The plant is also used in the *leden*-ceremony: this is a kind of ritual purification treatment for people who have constant body pains, headaches, or feel affected by an evil eye. The treatment consists of the 'removal' of small pebble-stones from the body, by (healer)s generically healer called Idinit (although they are *not* ethnic Idinit, i.e., Kwegu). The pebbles are thrown in a gourd container with water mixed with the *parchanggach,* and are cast in the bush after they all have been released by the healer.[14]

The hard wood of the *chalkut* tree provides a ritual stick or staff carried by elders at homicide-reconciliation ceremonies. It is a wood used only by 'big men', as the Me'en say, and is associated with the notion of authority, with neutrality and desire for reconciliation which such (in principle, disinterested, honest) mediators should emanate. Such *chalkut*-sticks underline their primacy as people whose words have to be heard and respected, and who try to cool the anger between the two groups (of victim and killer).

The branches of the *shoro'ach* plant are used in an important ritual called *Gishashak Tumay* or Deshi Tumay (='God will protect/correct' or 'God will perform [it]). It refers to a kind of collective ritual whereby people of one or more compounds try to prevent a contagious disease from spreading among them. They ask members of another lineage or clan (who are, in this context, known as *kokó*, or 'ritual assistants'[15]) to perform it for them. During the ritual, first a mixture of white clay and water is applied to the face and breast of the members. Subsequently, an imaginary protective line is drawn around their body with the branches of the *shoro'ach* plant. As a substitute, the *sha'och* and *woloshu* plants (not identified yet) can be used.

The most interesting and important Me'en ritual in which a number of plants are used is perhaps the *mosit* (or *hakmosit*). This refers to any ritual where fire is made from fire-rubbing sticks and where the protective, life-giving power of the God Tuma is appealed to by a collectivity of people from different lineages. In the past, the *mosit* could be held for a variety of purposes, having in common that they refer to the 'economic' basis of the society: e.g., it can be done for the cattle, for the harvest of corn or sorghum, or even for the honey-'harvest' in the beehives (A lowland clan called Shua occasionally performed a *'mosit* against malaria'). The ritual always has this undertone of protection and of promoting fertility and growth. The *mosits* which are still performed every year are those for the two staple crops of the Me'en: corn (*weyda*) and sorghum (*liba).* If the harvest of these crops falls short of the mark, famine will ensue. The Me'en therefore give prime attention, in labour-efforts and in ritual performance, to the well-being of these crops.

Some further remarks on the ritual use of the five *moist* plants should be made.[16]

The fire is made by first rubbing the sticks of the *tulmit*. The smouldering substance is caught in the bundle of dry soft *habay de Kanggaji* - grass (litt.: 'baboon-grass') which is then blown into a fire. (Sometimes the small-leafed grass called *dunkuni* (unidentified, no Amh. n.) could be used as a substitute for this baboon-grass). The *latech, chubulukuni* and *jakach* are later ceremonially eaten by the elders conducting the ceremony and then thrown on the fire, where later the first corn cobs or sorgum ears will be roasted. These three plants are said to be 'hot',i.e. to have power. The *jakach*-plant has several other uses. For instance, in the old days, women's lip-plugs were made of its wood. Also, when Me'en are travelling in the lowlands, they never touch the *jakach*-plant, because otherwise, they say, "the journey will be long and arduous".

The anthropologically interesting problem is to explain *why* these five plants have been 'selected', assuming that they are not arbitrarily chosen (They indeed cannot be simply substituted by any other species, only by what the Me'en see as 'similar' ones). The following points could be made for each of them:

1. they are lowland plants, growing in the area along the Omo and Shorum Rivers where the Me'en as an ethnic group were mainly constituted (see Abbink 1991. In ritual contexts, Me'en elders always refer back to this 'country of origin').
2. they are tough, evergreen plants
3. they resist attacks of pests like flies and worms better than most other plants.
4. they can survive water-shortages.

In addition, the *tulmit* bush has nice straight branches which, when dried, make excellent sticks for fire-making. Of the five plants, only *tulmit* is used as such (It can, however, be substituted by several other plants, like *irkut* (Ficus ovata), *dimdumach* (Clerodendrum myricoides), *kaya-kaya* (Triumfetta aff. rhomboidea) or *belshit* (Protea gaguedi), all of which also yield good sticks with which to make a fire.

The above characteristics of the plants may be said to create - in the context of the *mosit*-ritual - the 'model' of how the sorghum and maize plants 'should behave' so that a good harvest will ensue.

6. Conclusion

This brief survey has presented, for the first time, information on the vernacular names and the use of plants of the relatively unknown area and ethnic group of the Me'en in Southwestern Ethiopia. The data presented so far can be used as a checklist of further research not only for purposes of completing the record of names and distribution of Me'en plants, but also to asses the spread of species in the borderland between lowland and highland zones, and to study the changes in the *cultural use* of plants among a population which has been moving from a lowland habitat to a highland one.

The data indicate something of the integrated role of plants in Me'en culture, either for utilitarian or symbolic purposes. Obviously, there are more plants in use among the Me'en: next to some additional ritual and medicinal plants, they have many more for especially housebuilding, household artefacts, soaps, tools, the characteristic small stools, toys, musical instruments, fences, and of course food (gathered wild vegetables or mushrooms), but a full description of their socio-cultural role must await another study.

Notes

1. See also: H.F. Mooney, 1963, *A Glossary of Ethiopian Plant Names.* Dublin: Dublin University Press.

2. The first major work resulting from the ongoing Ethiopian flora Project.

3. with additional brief trips in June-July 1991 and June 1993.

4. A list with all the 241 known *names* of Me'en plants (even though not all scientifically identified yet) is available at the National Herbarium Arat Kilo Compus, Addis Ababa University.

5. I want to express my deep gratitude to Dr. Mesfin Tadesse and his collaborators, Dr. Getachew Aweke and Dr. Sebsibbe Demisew, of the National Herbarium, Addis Ababa University, for help with the determination of the scientific names of a large number of plants.

6. Except for a clinic and mission station, built in 1991 by S.I. and the Lutheran World Federation at the northern fring of the Me'en area, intended to serve the general population of the area (Me'en Bench northerners, Kaficho).

7. The traditional knowledge and use of plants and crops have often been underestimated by western agricultural and other development specialists (see Richards 1985).

8. Compare the argument in R.M. keesing 1991.

9. The number refers to the number in my collection, a large part of which is deposited at the National Herbarium, AAU.

10. Identified from the description and photograph (p. 127) in: Mesfin Tadesse, 1984, *The Genus Bidens (Compositae) in NE Tropical Africa.* Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell.

11. It may also be applied by Me'en mothers for the same purpose. CF.Chiovenda (1931: 19) who already noted that this plant was used "... per sedare i dolori uterini."

12. The strong hallucinatory properties of this plant (i.e., its fruit) are not known to the Me'en. The Me'en name means: 'dog's castorbean' cf. the English word: 'false castorbean', a synonym for Jimson weed.

13. Despite the above information from my informants, I hold open the possibility that the Me'en who were relatively recent (mid century) immigrants to this area, took over the use of ch'at from their southern neighbors the Dizi, a long-established agricultural people in the area. Firstly, during additional fieldwork in the Maji area in May-June 1992, I found that there is a local indigenous species of ch'at (It is a redish variety, shorter, and with round leaves). It is sometimes cultivated by

Dizi people for sale in the local market in Maji town, but also gathered in the wild, in forests around Maji and Gobi, at ca. 2300 meters altitude. Secondly, ch'at figured prominently in the traditional ritual life of the former Dizi chiefs. It was a plant through which symbolic messages were exchanged (as told to me by chief Adiburji Adikiaz, June 22, 1992). Thirdly, it so happened that the group which told me the origin story in which ch'at was mentioned as a plant given to them by their first ancestors was a Me'en group of *Dizi* origin. Fourthly, while the Me'en word for ch'at (*ch'ima*) resembles the word 'Jimma', it also strongly resembles the indigenous Dizi word for it: *ch'eemu*.

14. Although I witnessed several *leden*-treatments, I could never see that the healer was 'cheating', i.e. putting the pebbles first in her mouth and than quickly placing them in the gourd. The performance is very skilful. Me'en patients do not doubt the effectiveness of the cure.

15. Every clan of lineage group has its own traditional *kokó* groups.

16. For a fuller description of this ritual, see Abbink 1992.

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