

HEALTH-SENEGAL: AN ANCIENT HERBAL MEDICINE MAKES A COMEBACK



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DAKAR, Mar. 4 (IPS) -- Long forgotten, Senegalese are slowly returning to aloe, an ancient herbal medicine, which has been used in Africa and Asia for more than 6,000 years.

For centuries, local people have called it by different names: a miracle plant, the fountain of youth and the elixir of life.

While its scientific name is aloe vera, it is commonly known as aloe. The aloe, measuring 60 to 80 centimeters tall, has shallow roots and a short stem. The stem carries a bundle of pointed fleshy green leaves with triangular cross-sections and light yellow spines along their edges. Its drooping yellow flowers are trumpet-shaped.

Aloes grow naturally in sandy, limestone soils in semi-desert regions with hot, dry climates, from where it gets one of its common names "Lily of the Desert".

"The aloe is an ancient plant whose medicinal values have been well-known," says Masra Nanasta, a nutritionist, as he explains the traditional preparation of the remedies. To consume it, its pulp must be crushed, powdered and filtered. "Since it's bitter, it's often mixed with honey," he says.

In Senegal, the plant is popular with traditional practitioners in treating certain gastric or skin diseases. Its use, according to Nanasta, requires specific techniques and precautions since its toxic sap must not contaminate the pulp when the leaves are removed. Traditionally, the pulp, which is fragile and depreciates faster, must be used immediately after it is removed from the leaf, a phenomenon that limited its use to those possessing the plant that particular time.

Those problems have now been solved by modern, natural preservation and stabilization methods. The manufactured product can now be preserved much longer and be made available in large quantities.

"The manufactured product, which has been sold in the West for more than two decades, only came to Senegal in Jan 2002," Nanasta says. "It is sold by authorized distributors in Senegal." After mixing the product, Nanasta starts prescribing it to his patients.

"The product is used as a dietary supplement with medicinal value" for patients. One might call it a "medi-food", he says.

After a three-month experiment with the product, consuming three liters, Nanasta, who was balding, saw his hair beginning to grow again and certain minor health problems disappearing. Leonard Ndeki, a 70-year-old retired technician, has suffered with diabetes for some time, and it has affected his eyesight. He is feeling much better now since he began taking aloe herb from the United States.

"After a three-month treatment by my physician, Dr. Nanasta, I feel much better. My eyesight continues to improve," Ndeki says.

"In addition, my wife, who has the same disease, is following the same treatment." Consumers, who have tried the medicine, say aloe herb cures or relieves certain ailments.

"I suffer from sickle cell trait, the less serious form of the sickle cell disease, and I regularly experience fatigue, vertigo and anemia, especially after my menstrual cycle. But all that progressively disappeared after repeated treatments with aloe juice," says Sokhna Mame Diara, 47, a pharmacist.

She also had a fibroid, a benign tumor, which she claims had disappeared after treatment. "The state of a patient's health always improves after he or she followed an aloe treatment, and improved his or she diet and received modern medical treatment," says Diara. Aloe, which is not considered a medication but a dietary supplement, should be taken as a preventive, she says. "It should be added to our daily diet to improve our bodies' equilibrium, especially in Africa where our diet is so poor," Diara advises.

"A healthy, balanced diet is the key to good health," Nanasta adds. "In case of illness or for prevention, dietary supplements provide a precious, even indispensable, addition to traditional medical treatments." The family of Rose Da Costa, 40, in Dakar, has always taken aloe. Her grandparents and parents, who came from Cape Verde, grew it in their gardens. She, too, grows it, but in a pot on her desk.

"Normally, the plant is just a decorative addition to my desk. But for a while now I've been taking the gel with honey as a detoxifier, an energizer, to help me keep weight off, and as stress-reliever," she says. "Aloe is the beauty secret of Cape Verdian women in the know," Da Costa reveals.

Practically every Cape Verdian home in Dakar, the Senegalese capital, has an aloe plant. But patients worry about the high price of imported aloe, a liter of bottle, which costs \$37. "The price is justified by the effectiveness of the product and the cost of the modern technology needed to preserve and stabilize it," Nanasta explains.

"The price would be even more expensive if the manufacturing company had not opted for direct sale from producer to consumer." There are more than 300 species of aloe plants in the world, but

so far, only a few are recognized for their medicinal values. According to certain writers, aloes originated in North Africa, before they were introduced to and cultivated in the West Indies in the 17th Century. Widespread cultivation intensified in the regions enjoying hospitable climates during the last 20 years.