

# Chapter 1

## Ethnobotany in the Balkans: *Quo Vadis?*

Andrea Pieroni and Cassandra L. Quave

### 1.1 Beginnings

#### 1.1.1 *Andrea*

One spring day, 15 years ago, I (AP) visited the Warburg Library in London in search of some old medico-folkloric papers focusing on the Mediterranean area. While I was searching for this, I noticed a hidden, old, dusty, monograph, which captured my attention since it was located at the edge between the Mediterranean and the Eastern European sections. It was Leopold Glück's work on folkloric medicine and ethnobotany in Bosnia, probably the first modern ethnobotanical work ever written in Southeastern Europe (Glück 1894); I had never heard of it before, neither had I ever found this reference, and I still remember the trepidation with which I copied the monograph and ran home to read it.

But my (AP's) interest in the ethnobiology of the Balkans and, even well before, in that of Balkan diasporas (Pieroni et al. 2002a, b; Pieroni and Quave 2005; Quave and Pieroni 2005; Nebel et al. 2006; di Tizio et al. 2012) actually began before that morning. I believe that it all started in August 1991, when the ship *Vlora*, overcrowded with several thousand desperate Albanians who tried to escape their country after the fall of the Communist regime and the economic collapse, arrived at the port of Bari, Italy. Those unforgettable images, which were aired live on Italian television, cut my skin like a knife, and were shocking, at least for a young Italian university student, who had never been confronted with something similar before.

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A. Pieroni, C. L. Quave (eds.), *Ethnobotany and Biocultural Diversities in the Balkans*,  
DOI 10.1007/978-1-4939-1492-0\_1

**Fig. 1.1** Gorani man from NE Albania showing *Sambucus nigra*. (Photo: Cassandra L. Quave)



Without the *Vlora*, I believe that my life would have not been the same and without this shock I would have never become an ethnobotanist and surely never an ethnobotanist working in the Balkans and on Balkan diasporas. For more than 15 years, I have been travelling all over many places in the Balkans, and especially within the Albanian territories, touching several locations, from the most isolated mountainous areas to the new, super-busy, vibrant urban centers. This region remains to me still today—as it has been maybe for those “Westerners” who visited the region and described the local medical and food folklore and attached customs one century ago (Cozzi 1909; Cozzi 1914; Durham 1923; Doda and Nopcsa 2007)—an incredibly potent space: Because of its austere landscape, the warm, touching hospitality of its people, the fascinating mosaic of cultural and religious differences, the dense history and heritage, the surviving attachment of the locals to “their” customs, and, among them, plant uses (Fig. 1.1).

### **1.1.2 Cassandra**

My (CLQ) story with the Balkans began 13 years ago in the tiny Arberëshë village of Ginestra, located in Southern Italy. The Arberëshë are the descendants of Albanians who immigrated to Italy in several migration waves almost five centuries ago. Uniquely, the Arberëshë language represents an ancient form of Albanian, and is listed as an endangered language (Moseley 2010). We (CLQ and AP) spent many months conducting field research on the use of local wild plants for food (Pieroni et al. 2002a) and medicine (Pieroni et al. 2002b; Quave et al. 2008), and also studied other folkloric practices related to emic perspectives concerning health and healing (Quave and Pieroni 2002; Quave and Pieroni 2005).

It was during this time that my fascination with the Balkans began—even before I had ever actually traveled there. This experience with Arberëshë communities

**Fig. 1.2** Elderly Serbian traditional environmental knowledge (*TEK*) holder in Pešter, Buđevo, SW Serbia. (Photo: Andrea Pieroni)



opened the door to my curiosity concerning the people, languages, and cultures of the Balkans, and Albania, in particular. This fascination only deepened when I married an Arberëshë man from Ginestra, and now his history, his ancestors, and his linguistic roots have become part of my family. The research that we (AP and CLQ) undertake is deeply personal to me because it reflects not only our academic interests but also a piece of the traditional knowledge and heritage that is passed down to my children (Fig. 1.2).

## 1.2 A Path Forward

The draft idea for this edited book was conceived 2 years ago while we (AP and CLQ) were in Kukës, Albania, during a rainy and (in the mountains) even snowy May. We were there to conduct field research among the Gorani and Albanians inhabiting the isolated highlands at the borders between Albanian and Kosovo. The main conceptual linchpin of this book was that the Balkans represent for ethnobiological studies—and for ethnobotany in particular—an extraordinary, unique arena, given the incomparable biological and cultural complexity of this territory within Europe.

### 1.2.1 *The Role of Ethnobotany*

Recent field studies published in international journals have confirmed—certainly within the frame of a clear coexistence of old practices and “modern” uses—a remarkable resilience of ethnobotanical knowledge (Pieroni et al. 2003; Redžić 2006;

**Fig. 1.3** Albanian woman holding *Chenopodium bonus-henricus*, one of the most appreciated wild vegetables in the area, Rrogam, Northern Albania. (Photo: Andrea Pieroni)



**Fig. 1.4** Elderly woman from the Venetian diaspora in Romania sitting in her home garden. (Photo: Andrea Pieroni)



Jarić et al. 2007; Redzic 2007; Dogan et al. 2008; Pieroni 2008; Pieroni and Giusti 2008; Pieroni 2010; Redzic 2010a, b; Šarić-Kundalić et al. 2010; Menković et al. 2011; Mustafa et al. 2011; Nedelcheva et al. 2011; Nedelcheva and Dogan 2011; Papp et al. 2011; Šarić-Kundalić et al. 2011; Dénes et al. 2012; Molnár 2012; Mustafa et al. 2012; Pieroni et al. 2012; Babai and Molnár 2013; Łuczaj et al. 2013a; b; Papp et al. 2013; Rexhepi et al. 2013; Savikin et al. 2013; Zlatković et al. 2014). We strongly believe that exactly this complexity, which has also been one of the driving forces for the turbulent recent and less recent history of the area, could represent however the key turning point for fostering a peaceful, viable, environmentally and socially sustainable future.

Ethnobotany is, in fact, not just about recording lists of plants and plant uses, but, in a more visionary and fascinating way, it is about a deep understanding of how socio-ecological microsystems work. It is about the exploration of how, over the centuries, the complex interplay between biota and human societies have fostered

the creation of landscapes, food habits, emic strategies of health-seeking behaviors, social relations, and even concepts of beauty: in other words, the diversity of life in all its forms (Maffi and Woodley 2010; Figs. 1.3 and 1.4).

### **1.2.2 Traditional Environmental Knowledge**

Traditional environmental knowledge (TEK) has been defined as a “cumulative body of knowledge, practice and belief evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment” (Berkes 1999). The TEK of the Balkans, then, holds an enormous potential, still largely untapped. Moreover, TEK is becoming central today in many strategies aimed at shaping truly sustainable future for the region. This encompasses multiple perspectives, for example:

- Community-based strategies of in situ and ex situ (botanical gardens) biocultural conservation
- Small-scale herbal markets
- Niche food products
- Handicrafts and folkloric museums
- Ecotourism
- Reconciliation policies among different ethnic and religious groups in rural and mountainous areas

We believe that not only the scientific community (which for ethnobiology is always made up of natural, medical, and social scientists, as well as by scholars of the humanities) but also, and especially, external stakeholders (both from the public and private sectors, as well as international bodies and organizations) may be interested in learning more about the relations between plants and people in this fascinating area of the globe. Differently from one century and more ago, when medicinal plants from the Balkans were already traded into Western Europe, today, despite the dominant position that southeastern herbal raw material still has in Europe (Kathe et al. 2003; Londoño et al. 2008; Tomičević et al. 2011), the goal of medicinal and wild food plants-centered studies should be on a better understanding of the local perceptions of plants, which are crucial in turn for both serving truly community-based food sovereignty and public health policies. To reach this goal, both local and international actors (scholars, NGOs, SMEs, institutions, farmers’ associations) need to work together.

Thus, within this framework, the ethnobiological approach here offers a holistic perspective on human–environment/biota relations. This concept emerged in the 1980s (ISE 2012) with the purpose of bridging the gap between scientists and traditional societies (including local and Indigenous communities) in the common understanding that only a comprehensive view of the biocultural environment is able to foster long-term, sustainable solutions that contribute to the well-being of all biota.



**Fig. 1.5** The author (AP) with one of the last remaining families of Nistrovë, Reka Valley, Macedonian side of the Mt. Korab, Western Macedonia. (Photo: Andrea Pieroni)

### 1.3 Overview

The chapters in this book cover several different areas of the Balkan Peninsula: Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Bulgaria, as well as the contiguous territories of coastal Croatia and central Romania. This overview of Balkan ethnobotany is not intended, however, to be comprehensive, nor to show the geographical variety of ethnobotany only. Our aim for this volume is to offer instead a panoramic view of the slightly different approaches and accents occurring in the Balkan ethnobotany: from studies focusing specifically on wild food plants, to others, which focus on wild medicinal plant remedies and their potential applications, from surveys connecting plant perceptions to historical trajectories to studies that focus more on cross-cultural and anthropological perspectives. We have organized the chapters by general topic: (I) From Folk Medicine to the Medicinal Plant Trade, (II) Balkan Traditional Plant-Based Foods: Beyond the Ottoman Cuisine, and (III) Building Small-Scale, Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Economies. We believe that this broad compilation may offer a synthetic view on the current state of the art, but, much more interestingly, may also inspire new or further research into these mosaics (Figs. 1.5 and 1.6).

#### 1.3.1 *Dedication and Concluding Remarks*

Finally, we would like to make a special note of who we wish to dedicate this edited volume. On 1 January 2013, a few of us received an email from our friend and colleague Sulejman Redzic, University of Sarajevo, containing a couple of his most recent ethnobotanical works conducted in Bosnia as attachments. Just a couple of

**Fig. 1.6** An Albanian man describes how to eat local wild plants, such as this *Rumex* sp. (Photo: Cassandra L. Quave)



days later Sulejman disappeared, only to be found dead a few weeks later (in circumstances that still remain obscure) close to a river in the outskirts of Sarajevo, in the Republika Sprska of Bosnia. We will never forget that day and the pain, which is still with all of us as we write, who were also Sulejman's friends and colleagues.

Sulejman was not only a terrific plant ecologist and ethnobotanist but also a scholar happily engaged within Bosnian civil society. He was a scholar who went through the horrible days of the Siege of Sarajevo in the 1990s by helping his people to cope with the daily lack of food resources via radio programs aimed at spreading information concerning wild plants to eat during this period of famine. We would ask that the readers keep this picture in their minds while going through the book.

Ethnobotany is best described as the science of survival (Prance 2007), and indeed it was the Balkan ethnobotanical knowledge that helped to sustain local communities also during the sad days of the horrible atrocities and famine that occurred less than two decades ago in this region. We believe that ethnobotany and TEK are inextricably linked to the destiny of all of our Balkan friends; and, as an inseparable companion, it is something to be cherished and cared for.

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# Ethnobotany and Biocultural Diversities in the Balkans

Perspectives on Sustainable Rural  
Development and Reconciliation

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ISBN 978-1-4939-1491-3      ISBN 978-1-4939-1492-0 (eBook)  
DOI 10.1007/978-1-4939-1492-0  
Springer New York Heidelberg Dordrecht London

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014946597

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