

# Pioneering Ethnobotanists in Italy

## Early studies on folk plant uses in Piedmont (1880–1960)

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It has always been a tricky exercise to clearly trace the starting point of ethnobiology in Southern Europe given the fact that written annotations on plant uses by humans have existed since ancient times (Svanberg et al., 2011). The works of the great early authors of botanical and pharmacological texts, such as the Greek physician Pedanius Dioscorides' (40–90 AD) *De Materia Medica* and the Persian polymath Avicenna's (980–1037 AD) *Kitab Al Qanûn fi Al-Tibb* ('Canon of Medicine') unarguably played a significant role in the content of the many European herbals that later emerged especially during medieval times.

The crucial point in our opinion, however, is the empathic attitude through which the first ethnobiological scholars attended to folk practices. Here, we use the lens of ethnobiology to examine the development of the first folkloric studies recorded during the second half of the nineteenth century in Italy. The first of these studies which used plants as a focal point were conducted in the Piedmont region of northwest Italy. Thus, in this chapter we illustrate a few exemplary case studies carried out in this region and then expand our focus to studies conducted in other regions of Italy during the period ranging from 1880 to 1960.

### Giuseppe Ferraro Who Studied His Homeland's Plant Folklore

Giuseppe Ferraro (1845–1907) is arguably one of the most important Italian folklorists, or, as we used to say in the history of the study in Italy, *demologi*. Ferraro was born in Carpeneto, in the Province of Alessandria, Piedmont. He studied at the prestigious School of Letters and Philosophy of the Scuola Normale of Pisa, where he specialized in philology. In 1871, Ferraro began a long-career as a middle and high school teacher, and then later, a dean of studies.

Although he also visited different parts of Italy (Ferrara, Parma, Sassari, Reggio Emilia, Cuneo and Massa) throughout his years of work in education, Fer-

raro kept his home-area Monferrato as the focus and ideal centre of gravity for his research. While his activities broadly spanned general folkloric studies, his real focus was on folk songs, which he began to record in his home-area in July 1868. However, in 1884 Ferraro also began to write a series of articles in the Italian folkloric journal *Archivio per lo Studio delle Tradizioni Popolari* ('Archive for the Study of Folk Traditions') dealing with the ethnobotany of his hometown of Carpeneto d'Acqui (Alessandria Province, Piedmont).

In his introduction to this pioneering survey, he clarified the importance of studying folk botany: »Not only the songs, tales, fables, riddles, proverbs passed from people to people; also passed the first and elementary notions, certain or uncertain, good or false, of medicine, surgery, and botany«. He also added: »The books can be found and can be multiplied; but the same cannot be said for traditions, if we do not collect them [...]. Certainly this is not an easy, happy and profitable work« (Ferraro 1884).

This second statement should resonate especially with modern-day ethnobiologists, as the loss of both traditions and traditional knowledge in the ethnobiological domain is something that we deal with around the globe. Moreover, the challenges of such studies, which range from access to funding and other logistical hurdles are still an often encountered problem even today.

In his survey, Ferraro reported the local names, uses and beliefs with regards to plants – both cultivated and wild – that he recorded in his hometown of Capeneto. At times, these accounts were enriched with news on historical uses or mythologies related to the species of interest. Latin names of the described plants were not given, however, but only local and Italian common names.

Among his most interesting findings (unusual plant uses) in Carpeneto, he recorded the following plant uses:

Cornockle (*Agrostemma githago* L., Caryophyllaceae). Local name: *giutun*: »when the women gather it in large amount, they use it in their illnesses and also for taking out the spots from the face, and to clean the hands, together with fava bean meal«.

Danewort (*Sambucus ebulus* L., Adoxaceae). Local name: *u lebu*; »the farmers fabricate a kind of tent with the green branches of this plant and they put it in front of the windows of the stables, and they believe that when eating the berries of this plant they cannot become drunk«.

Caper spurge (*Euphorbia lathyris* L., Euphorbiaceae). Local name: *rugna*: »the young men say that the milk of this plant, and not others, produces the iris or rainbow on a blade of grass, bent in a circle, not larger than a coin, wet with saliva, as it in fact happens«.

## Giovanni Pons and His Work in a Waldensian Valley

The botanist Giovanni Pons (?–1900) from Florence obtained his degree at the Regio Istituto di Studi Superiori. As a secondary school teacher, he then moved to the little town of Colonia Valdense (mainly inhabited by Waldensian Italian immigrants) in Uruguay in 1899, where he unexpectedly died one year later of a contagious disease.

In his early years spent in Italy, Pons investigated the folk botany of the Waldensian Valley of St. Martin (Western Alps, nowadays known as Vallone di Massello, a lateral valley of the Germanasca Valley), where the local language is Franco-Provencal/Occitan. In his contribution, published in the *Bollettino della Società Botanica Italiana* ('Bulletin of the Italian Botanical Society') in 1900, he introduced the importance of these studies with these words: »A local folk flora, in its humble and modest dress, can serve not only to popularize the science, but also to linguistic studies, not to talk about all the prejudices, which are always deeply rooted in the consciousness of the commons, which can be successfully defeated«. He also wrote about the difficulties of ethnobotanical work: »However, a similar task requires a great dose of patience and abnegation, in order to collect here and there data, indications from the mouth of the elderly men or woman, where better the ancient cognitions are preserved« (Pons 1900).

Among his most interesting findings in St. Martin Valley, the following plant uses were recorded:

Fumitory (*Fumaria officinalis* L., Papaveraceae). Local names: *fimëntero* or *simëntero*: »It has a terrible reputation; it is believed to be a lethal poison for the pigs«.

St. John's Wort (*Hypericum perforatum* L., Hypericaceae). Local name: *tra-furelo*: »This little plant with leaves that seem to be perforated, because of the transparent drops they contain, has the reputation of not letting penetrating witches and sorcerers in the house, if it is put behind the door!! And I know old ladies, who believe in this!«.

Long-spurred Pansy (*Viola calcarata* L., Violaceae) and Heartsease (*Viola tricolor* L., Violaceae). Local name: *viul'etto blancio* (*Viola tricolor*): »The flowers of these species, which are carefully gathered, serve both to prepare a soup (*V. calcarata*) and as a medicine in a few diseases, especially affecting nurses (*V. tricolor*). The former aforementioned use is very old in these mountains«.

## Oreste Mattiolo on Wild Food Plants in Piedmont

The physician, naturalist and mycologist Oreste Mattiolo (1856–1947) from Turin obtained his two university degrees in Natural Sciences and Medicine and Surgery at the University of Turin in 1876 and 1879, respectively. He was a full Professor of Botany at the University of Bologna (from 1894) and, later, at the

University of Turin (from 1900). He also served as the President of the Italian Botanical Society and of the Agricultural Academy of Turin.

His research focus was on the anatomy of lichens and mushrooms (especially truffles). His most memorable contribution was a comprehensive review of the wild edible plants of Piedmont, *Phytoalimurgia Pedemontana. Censimento delle specie vegetali alimentari della flora spontanea del Piemonte*, published in 1918. In the introduction to this pioneering work, Mattiolo describes the need for researching neglected food plant resources and famine plants, given the problematic circumstances of the post-1st World War times, when food security was again becoming a problem for the population. In this reflection, Mattiolo's ethos for a science and knowledge, which should serve societal needs, is clearly expressed and we believe that in a sense this may still represent an important approach in the future of ethnobiology as a field.

Following Galen's classification in his *Trattato degli alimenti*, Mattiolo described plants and their local names and food uses in the following groups: plants providing food rhizomes, tubers, and bulbs; plants providing food roots; plants providing edible shoots; plants, of which leaves are consumed in salads; plants, of which leaves are consumed in soups; plants, which are used in omelettes and pies; flowers as food; oleaginous plants; plants, which can substitute coffee and tea; mushrooms, seaweeds, and lichens.

In the introduction, the author explains why he decided to exclude from the review plants to be used in alcoholic beverages or for substituting wine and beer: »Even in this time, I have not found it convenient to treat these topics, since here in Piedmont, classical home of the wine, these would have not found proselytes« (Mattiolo 1918:11).

For each described species, Mattiolo reports the local vernacular names, the food uses quoted in the European literature, and its local uses and availability in Piedmont. It is, however, not clear where the information on local food uses came from, although it is possible to imagine that the author collected this information during his field studies as a botanist and mycologist in Piedmont. Despite this likely scenario, since no clear indication of a field study occurs in his book, we believe that it would be more correct to label his work as an example of economic botany, rather than ethnobotany. Among his most interesting reports:

Rampion (*Phyteuma orbiculare* L., *P. michelii* All. and *P. spicatum* L., Campanulaceae). Local names: *rampoun*, *garell*: »These Campanulaceae, which are pretty common in the Pre-Alps and Alps, are consumed cooked, as spinach. The edible parts are the spring shoots and the young inflorescences. They are also eaten, chopped, in soups. In the Biella area (Oropa) the plant is because of this much sought; I have eaten it many times and I found it very tasty. The leaves and big roots of these Campanulaceae (as the ones of the true Campanulae) are eaten in salads«.

Salomon's seal (*Polygonatum multiflorum* (L.) All., Asparagaceae). Local name: *Sigil d' Salumoun*: »The young shoots of this Smilacaceae, which is common in Piedmont in the hilly and mountains regions, are consumed cooked as asparagus. This use was still common in Piedmont and Savoy until a few decades ago. As the shoots of the spears of *Asparagus* and *Ruscus* were eaten, so it was natural to use also the shoots of this species and of the close *Polygonatum verticillatum* All., also common in Piedmont«.

Goatsbeard (*Tragopogon pratensis* L., Asteraceae). Local names: *barbabouch*, *barba d' bouch*; *erba bouch*, *cournabech*, *scanabech*: »Who does not know in Piedmont the use of this species? Among all substitutes of the spinach, it is the most valuable and delicious. The young shoots are gathered at the beginning of the spring in the fields and a great trade is done with them« (Mattirolo 1918:88).

### The Beginning of Modern Field Studies in Italy

Caterina Chiovena-Bensi (1927–2010) was born in Premosello, a small town in Northern Piedmont. In her early years as a pharmacist and local historian, Chiovena-Bensi conducted studies focused on the folk medicinal plant knowledge of Northern Piedmont and Eastern Liguria, while she later dedicated her time mostly to local historical and folkloric (especially costumes) studies.

In her early years, she was affiliated with the former Hanbury Botanical Institute in Genoa, and the outcomes of her field research in the Ossola and Sesia valleys (and their related lateral smaller valleys) in Northern Piedmont were published in 1955 and 1957 in the *Atti dell'Accademia Ligure di Scienze e Lettere* ('Proceedings of the Ligurian Academy of Sciences and Letters'). Indeed, they represent two pioneering works, since for the first time in Italy a field study was conceived and conducted following certain principles, which we believe are still crucial in current day ethnobiology:

- Research design: the researcher selected diverse locations inhabited by diverse populations (Italian – Lombard and Piedmontese - communities vs. German-speaking/Walser communities).
- Interviews were conducted primarily with elderly people (mostly living in isolated Alpine summer settlements);
- Precise botanical identification of the quoted taxa (the researcher was trained in botany);
- Sound data analysis was conducted via: 1) a comparison of the collected data with those arising from »official« treatise of medical botany, pharmacognosy, or phytotherapy, in order to point out unknown medicinal plant uses; 2) Comparison of the recorded uses among the diverse considered locations; and

- Detailed description in the introduction of the disseminating writings (articles) of the geographical, environmental, historical, and ethnographic background of the study site.

However, even in Chiovena-Bensi's studies, a clear indication of the collection of voucher specimens and herbaria deposits was missing, and sometimes her description of local uses was very concise. Among her most interesting reports were the following plant applications:

Alpine yarrows (*Achillea moschata* Wulf. and *A. atrata* L., Asteraceae). Local names in the middle and upper Formazza valley (German-speaking): *Wildli*, *Epfelebliemii*; »The whole plant: in tea against head-ache and neuralgias«. Local names in Val Grande (both German- and Lombard-Piedmontese speaking): *Ewulebi*: »Flowers: in decoction [to be used] for every winter disease«.

Edelweiss (*Leontopodium alpinum* Cass., Asteraceae). Local name in the middle and upper Formazza valley (German-speaking): *Edelweiss*: »The flowers: in grappa, against bad colds«.

Velevetbells (*Bartsia alpina*, L. Orobanchaceae). Local names in Val Grande (both German- and Lombard-Piedmontese speaking): *Germandia*: »Flowering plants: decoction against fever«.

*Moehringia muscosa* L., Caryophyllaceae. Local name in Strona Valley not given. »The whole plant: diuretic decoction«.

Agarikon (*Fomes officinalis*). Local name in Rimella Valley: *stambu*. »Powdered in hot water or coffee. Drunk on empty stomach. Ecibolic« (Chiovena-Bensi 1955 and 1957).

## Ethnobiological Studies in Italy beyond Piedmont

Of course, near the end of the nineteenth century, the beginning of folkloric studies and the associated interest in recording medicinal plant knowledge and uses was not restricted to Piedmont and/or the Italian North-West. Here, we will discuss a few important studies focused on the medical folklore of other regions of Italy that were published between 1890 and 1920 in Italy.

Caterina Pigorini-Beri (1845–1924) was daughter to a physician and sister to the well-known palaeontologist Luigi Pigorini. Exposure to the research and work of her father and brother likely had an impact on her own research path. After teaching in a girls' school in Parma, Pignorini-Beri later became one of the most prominent protagonists of the beginning of the folkloric studies in Italy. She described the local folk religious and medical practices within a specific chapter in her 1889 publication *Costumi and Superstizioni dell'Appennino Marchigiano* ('Costumes and Superstitions of the Apennines in the Marche region'). However no plants uses were mentioned in this work.

In an analogous way, the anthropologist Paolo Riccardi's article *Pregiudizi e superstizioni del popolo modenese* ('Prejudices and superstitions of the people in Modena'), published in 1890, described in a specific paragraph a few illnesses and the local curing rituals. However, no plants are quoted in this work.

Zeno Zanetti's *La Medicina delle Nostre Donne* ('The medicine of our women'), published in 1892, is a remarkable work, which focuses on folk healing in the Umbria region (Central Italy). In this work, folk remedies and healing practices for many different pathologies are listed in a very detailed manner. Zanetti was a physician who had attended the anthropological classes of Paolo Mantegazza (1831–1910). Mantegazza was a very well known Darwinist physiologist, criminologist, anthropologist and traveller of the time, who in 1869 established the first Italian Chair of Anthropology and the National Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in Florence. This might represent the first time that a number of medicinal plants (reported in local and Latin names) are quoted and for which folk medical uses are described in detail.

One of the first very complete ethnobotanical surveys on medicinal plant uses is the linguist Gaspare Ungarelli's work (1921) on folk medicinal plants uses in the Bologna area. The work was intended for those stakeholders, which were at the time involved in the growing herbal industry. Although a description of his methodology was absent, Ungarelli reported local names and uses of more approximately 400 taxa.

### Giuseppe Pitre on Sicilian Folk Medicine

Giuseppe Pitre (1841–1916) is renowned as the largest scholar and collector of folklore in Sicily. In collaboration with Salvatore Salomone Marino, in 1880 he founded one of the most important folkloric journals of that time: *Archivio per lo Studio delle Tradizioni Popolari* ('Archive for the Study of Popular Traditions'), which he also directed until 1906. His landmark work, *Medicina Popolare Siciliana* ('Sicilian Folk Medicine'), whose first edition dates to 1896, is an impressive treatise on the aetiology and healing strategies of folk-illnesses adopted by a number of diverse actors in Sicily. In the second part of his work, this Sicilian physician and father of the Italian folkloric studies lists different pathologies and defines hundreds of healing practices, ritual, manual, and also herbalistic in nature (Pitre 1896).

Pitre's book still represents a foundational reference work in the Italian panorama, which cannot be ignored by those who analyzing ethnobiological data in Sicily (Napoli 2008). We would argue that studies of modern day ethnobiological data should also better incorporate a substantive cross-analysis with the works of the early Italian ethnobiologists like Pitre and others mentioned here.

### Lessons Learned for the Future

These briefly illustrated case studies are exemplary of the variety of approaches and background that the field of ethnobotany has enjoyed in Italy in the past. Today, all too often we insist in this field, especially in Italy, in continuous attempts to bring ethnobiology into a mono-disciplinary domain, which could result in jeopardizing decades of previous efforts and substantive studies.

The pioneers of ethnobotany in Italy came from very diverse trajectories: folkloric studies/anthropology, botany, medicine, and pharmacy. Moreover, only two of them fostered a traditional academic career. More often than not, these early ethnobotanical studies were conducted in the researchers' spare time, and not as a component of their primary employment.

It is our hope that future generations of European ethnobiologists will be able to maintain this unique diversity and inclusiveness, which would also help the academic milieu in fostering continuous dialogue with the world outside of traditional academia. As the pioneers in Italian ethnobiology have demonstrated, there is great value to be gained in taking cross- and multi-disciplinary approaches to research in this field.



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