Seh-haw: The Mystical Herb from West Africa

by Frederick R. Dannaway

***Combretum micranthum*, French: Kinkeliba, Wolof: Seh-haw**

Combretum micranthum, a few of hundreds of vernacular names: (Wolof) *Seh-haw, Kesu, seheou, segweyu, sexew, sexeo, duteh.* (French) *Kinkeliba, Tisane de longue Vie* (Fula) *bulusor, butek, bute kabo, talli, tallika.* (Jola) *butek* (Mandinka) *baro, kinkelliba, kou lomkalan*. (Maninka). lake . Various: quinquelibas drink, bush tea, Antidote à l'Opium

Seh-haw in Mouride Ethnobotany

From the entire flora of Senegal, West Africa, Cheikh Amadou Bamba spoke with attention to but a few plants for their physical as well as spiritual benefit. The Cheikh's recommendations for a specially spiced blend of coffee, known as Café Touba (that is mixed with the African pepper *djar, Xylopia aethiopica* also called grains of selim) and for tea (*attaya*) will be the subject of future monographs. Here we focus on an undomesticated shrub/tree of West Africa that has bee exploited by the French and modern scientists for its medicinal properties. Cheikh Amadou Bamba (and the ancestors of West Africa) instructed to call *Combretum micranthum* or kinkeliba by its mystical name: *Seh-haw* (transliterated Wolof), in distinction to the countless other names used for the plant, to receive maximum benefit from the plant. Serigne Touba said of this plant, as the Prophet (saws) of black seed *kalonji, Nigella sativa*, "Seh-haw can cure any disease except death." It is used as a daily preventive medicine and "bush tea" by large portions of the population, but many of the native Senegalese do not even know of its mystical properties and use as a spiritual remedy, increasing an inner peace and giving good dreams.

We honor the ancestors of West Africa and the Sufi Master Cheikh Amadou Bamba by reasserting the name seh-haw for this most holy plant. It is our sincere hope that this article will introduce this West African medicinal herb, and the teachings and poetry of Cheikh Amadou Bamba to all those whose bodies and souls ache for healing. If Serigne Touba had not spiritually and medicinally recommended this herb, it is likely to have drifted into obscurity, as the colonial pressures steadily eroded much of the ancestral wisdom. As our dear friend and brother Ismael Diagne tells us, if it was not for Cheikh Amadou Bamba's strong urging of the people to partake of this mystical plant it would not have been so prevalent and widespread, and people all over Africa and the world esteem the plant because the Cheikh recommend its use. Cheikh Amadou Bamba's way is the perfect synthesis of the old wisdom and the revelation of Islam, of the balance between body and spirit and the distilling of the essence of the previous Sufi *tariqa*s' *wirds* into the Mouride path.

Mourides in Senegal report that many seeking a dramatic cure will show respect before cutting seh-haw/kinkeliba by reciting the *Al Fatiha* and the *Sallatou Ala Nabi*. Then, before cutting the plant they request aid to health or ask for a health or spiritual issue to be resolved. Cheikh Amadou Bamba is known to have said to whisper one's health concerns over the tea before drinking to address one's ailments. This may seem superstitious but the wide variety of ailments the plant seems to single out and remedy works in sympathy with this spirit. Seh-haw is undoubtedly a mystical plant, with a definite, subtle but profound effect on the drinker. It is not psychoactive in any western sense, but it produces a change in

mood, dreams, quality of sleep and general well-being. It is a tonic and an elixir in the purest sense, like the truly spiritually potent wild tea trees and high mountain oolongs that saturate the Daoist and Buddhist mystics of Asia.

Seh-haw has wide use by Muslims, Mourides and Sufi throughout Africa, especially for fasting. Our Cheikh taught us that it is used in the morning to start the fast, taken with milk and sugar, and also to break the fast at night. This tonic herb can stimulate and reduce appetite, but a deeper understanding of this would be in its ability to regulate digestion, blood and the endocrine system. By gently detoxifying the liver, kidneys and gall bladder, the whole system is revitalized; an appetite is stimulated or decreased based on the overall condition of the drinker. West African herbal medicine includes many miraculous plants, and delicious, healthy, caffeine-free teas from rooibos to honeybush, but the herbal infusions of West Africa are largely unknown or overlooked.

In Sierra Leone, as in many parts of Africa the leaves of seh-haw are made into an infusion taken by Muslims especially during Ramadan. This is a predominant use in Senegal (though Café Touba predominates in Senegal with many Mourides) and Mali from various Sufi brotherhoods we have investigated. The use of such a liver-detoxifying herb is interesting for use during Ramadan and its use as such is reported in many diverse areas of Africa. A digression into the esoteric function of the liver in Islamic prayer and ritual validates Serigne Touba's recommendation to use this powerful liver-cleansing herb. The liver is the "seat of dreams" (and/or "anger and emotions") and this could very well be a practical and esoteric reason behind the Islamic prohibition against alcohol. Press on the liver. It is almost as if the Prophet's practice was to hold himself in this position to sooth the liver after each imbibing of the "clear wine" of God's Word."

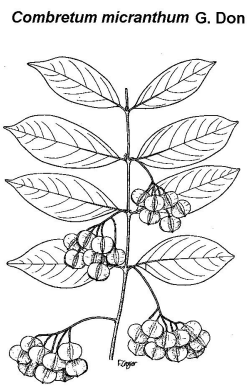
Blackhirst (2008) writes, "the devotions of the sacred month (Ramadan) are designed this way…the month is traditionally divided into three sets of ten days, leading the Laylat al-Qadr… in the third set. These three sets correspond exactly to the process: purgation, illumination, unity. The first ten days is purging. The sharpening of the body/soul duality is preparatory in all systems of gnostic attainment. Its organic correlative is the purging of the liver. The second set of ten days is illuminating—many people report vivid dreams beginning in the middle part of the fast. Then, the third part of the fast there is the greatest potential for unitive experience, the Night of Power." Therefore the supreme wisdom of the obligatory prayers as a type of yoga for the joints and bones and ligaments, as well as in a gentle, constant daily detox of the liver. The yearly fast of Ramadan takes this liver cleansing to a higher level. The addition of a mystical, gentle but powerful liver detoxifying herb like seh-haw takes this even deeper into the body by aiding the flushing of spiritual and physical toxins that cloud the liver.

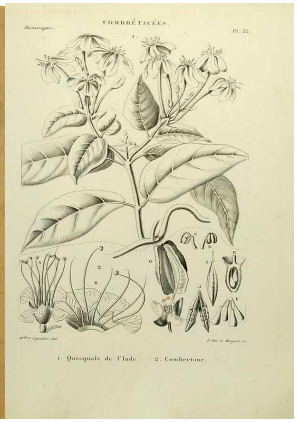
Kinkeliba: the Tisane de Longue Vie

The French colonialists in Senegal came to recognize the power of the herb (a 1928 advertisement says a company imported 70,000 kilos that year), known most commonly by the French given name "Kinkeliba." Recognizing its great medical potential, they referred to it as the "tisane de longue vie," or the infusion of long life. The plant is in the French Pharmacopeia of 1937 (and likewise the Spanish

Pharmacopeia) in their research for indigenous medicines and local plants for the unique health problems of the region, especially malaria and dysentery. As Burkill (1985) writes, “The plant is the source of general panacea kinkeliba. The leaves are ubiquitously so well-known for their diuretic, febrifugal and digestive properties that medicine-men make no mystery of their use …and to be of such diverse application that the name kinkeliba has become synonymous with the word medicine.” In West Africa, prodigious quantities of the leaf are boiled down into a thick drink, and given for many complaints.

The primary medical actions in the literature and pharmacopeia of the Europeans are as cholagogues (promotes the flow of bile from the gall bladder into the duodenum) and antipyretics (fever-reducing) but also as "diuretics… coughs, bronchitis, malaria, bilious haematuric fevers, ailments of liver and gall bladder, colic, nausea, vomiting, fever and lumbago, diarrhea, hemorrhages, leprosy, enuresis…kidney stones…" and as a preventative medicine (Burkill 1985). Some of the key medicinal uses are highlighted in the early literature and Burkill (1985) as: antemetics (drug used against vomiting and nausea); diarrhea, dysentery; kidneys, diuretics; liver, etc.; malnutrition, debility; naso-pharyngeal affections; pain-killers; pulmonary troubles; stomach troubles” to name just a few. Another primary use is as an anthelemic (dispelling worms) (Wu 1976). Kenner and Requena (2001) categorize the herb in terms of Chinese medicine as “Wood Yang” and list its uses from the perspective of professional European herbalists: “Cholagogue, choleretic, diuretic, kinkeliba is used for constipation, to clear gallstones, and in treatment of cirrhosis of the liver…used in the gastrointestinal and respiratory infections and complications of mumps, such as orchitis or pancreatitis.” It is a very widespread drink amongst West Africa. (note for some inexplicable reason, Iwu’s Handbook says the plant is used as antidiuretic and anticholagogue which contradicts everything I have ever read in the literature and ethnobotanical notes, some dating back to the mid 19th century. In general it’s a very limited entry).





"For every disease there is cure" hadith of Prophet Mohammad (saws) Kitaab al Tibb, al Bukhari

Panacea: Validation of Traditional Uses

		Leaf	Drink the decoction (sometimes adding cloves)	Cold Flue Lung infections Sore throat Antihypertensive	+++
Combretum micranthum G. Don (Combretaceae) UNISGSEN10	Quinkeliba (f) Sekhaw (w)	Flower	Drink the decoction with milk every morning	Enhancing the "well-being"	
			Make a decoction with *Xylopia aethiopica* seeds and cloves (*Eugenia caryophillata* flower buds)	Vision problems	

The following is by no means an exhaustive attempt to categorize some of the primary indigenous and scientific discussions and literature on *Combretum micranthum*. Only the most primary studies have been cited, as there are literally hundreds more and in diverse languages. In addition, we have focused on the uses of the leaf and stems much more than the bark and roots, which could furnish enough uses and literature for an entire separate monograph. The uses and powers attributed to Seh-haw/kinkeliba in the oral traditions, recorded uses and herbals are almost mind-boggling in scope. The list of cures and preventive, tonic properties gave it a truly magical status amongst the ancestors. List after list of recorded ethnobotanical data mention so many afflictions (to continue the list from above), a typical one reads, "Leaves, roots and barks have many medicinal usages (antipyretic, tonic, diuretic, antidiarrheal and choleretic.) It is used for the treatment of wounds,

fever, stiffness, syphilis, sterility, bruises, sprains, jaundice, hepatitis, haematuria, anorexia, colic, blennorrhoea (Pathol an excessive discharge of watery mucus, esp from the urethra or the vagina), colds and bronchitis…and malaria" (Steentoft, 1998, Abronnier 2004). We have come to know many who have kept their diabetes and high blood pressure in check for decades by simply using this tea, without the cost and side-effects of pharmaceuticals. One friend recorded his father's words when asked of seh-haw, "it's cured many diseases such as colds, tension, constipation, but without sugar it washes the blood to make it pure and clean."

In Mali, a common name for the tea as a medicine is *hepatisane,* or an infusion good for the liver (Willcox et al. 2011). Willcox (2011) and colleagues, while studying seven traditional medicines of Mali, write of the liver detoxification properties of seh-haw/kinkeliba in traditional sources and validates them through research on clinical trials:

> "In 1891, a French doctor in Gambia observed its efficacious use in the treatment of fièvres bilieuses hématuriques (bilious fevers with hematuria). The leaves are often used to prepare a refreshing tea, but this is also used for jaundice and hepatitis.It was added to the French pharmacopoeia in 1937, and to the African Pharmacopoeia in 1985. o and their bilirubin and transaminases have returned to normal within 2–3 weeks of starting the treatment. About 50 asymptomatic patients with chronic viral hepatitis B have been treated with Hépatisane in a clinical trial, but there was no clearance of the hepatitis B surface. However, the herbal treatment was well tolerated, there were no adverse effects, and compliance was good. Further clinical trials are needed to determine whether this treatment helps patients with symptomatic hepatitis, or whether it helps to prevent long-term consequences of chronic viral hepatitis… However, the herbal treatment was well-tolerated, there were no adverse effects, and compliance was good."

The chart below is from Willcox (2011) from left to right, the name of the drug in Mali, the Latin plant name, the material of the plant used, the method, the amount, a few traditional uses and the contraindications:

Hépatisane	*Combretum micranthum*	Leaves (dried)	Decoction	10 g boiled in 500 mL water, bd	Indigestion (especially of fats), nausea, poor appetite, constipation	Obstructive jaundice, severe liver or renal failure.

Liver tonics such as *Hepa-Vital Tea*, which is a blend of *Gotu kola* and *Combretum micranthum*, are marketed as a cure for hangovers, liver ailments and the like (Iwu & Wootton 2002). The regular, extended use of seh-haw by most drinkers is recognized in the scientific literature as being useful as a preventive medicine to the various diseases that would be exacerbated by poorly functioning liver and gall bladder as well as "washing the blood" in detoxifications as well as for antimicrobial/antibacterial effects and the high level of antioxidants in preventing disease. Yet another traditional use is validated in a study on the ethanol extraction of seh-haw/kinkeliba in use of convulsion and epilepsy (Danmalam *et al.* 2011). Research on the known traditional use for treating various infections and sexual diseases is validated in numerous studies as well. In Senegal, *Salvadora perscia* or salt brush or toothbrush tree is mixed with Seh-haw/kinkeliba for various sexual

transmitted diseases. The antiviral properties against diseases like the herpes virus (Ferrea *et al* 1993) and research documenting the antimicrobial properties of Seh-haw/kinkeliba and related species of *Combretum* have been published as well (Kola and Benjamin 2002). These are used in novel malaria, dysentery, immune system diseases and infections as well as viruses and even pest control on plants. There is even a use of seh-haw/kinkeliba for detoxifying opium addicts, where it is used (especially in Asia) as "Antidote à l'Opium, Antidote d'Opium, Antídoto de Opio, Combretum, Combretum micranthum, Jungle Weed." Seh-haw/kinkeliba has more antioxidants than green tea and journals highlight water and ethanol extractions of the antioxidants and radical scavenging (Toure et al. 2011) in fighting various cancers, also a traditional use.

The role of Seh-haw in fasting for Ramadan or health reasons, has been reported as commonplace in West Africa down to South Africa. The likely mechanism of making it such an ideal "fasting herb" is its effect on glucose levels in the blood. This also likely contributes to its traditional suggested use as a weight control herb, by preventing spikes in blood sugar and therefore keeping the body in a state of homeostasis and curbing sugar cravings and binge eating. Many herbal healers of West Africa have reported in the literature and to this author that Seh-haw/kinkeliba *Combretum micranthum* is used for diabetes and studies have documented this in other areas of West Africa. But turning to a dark side of ethnobotany, biopiracy, finds a group of usual suspects in bioimperialism from Rutgers University up to their old thieving ways.

Traditional Use and Biopiracy of Kinkeliba

Researchers at Rutgers University have been doing research of *Combretum micranthum* using various methods to extract the healing properties of the plant and isolate them for different diseases. Scientists claim success in "extracting and purifying a novel type of piperidine flavan alkaloids from the leaves of *Combretum micranthum* (kinkeliba) and a procedure for the preparation of total piperidine flavan alkaloids (TPFA) that possess anti-diabetic properties. Animal studies have shown that the isolated compounds: decrease fasting plasma glucose levels; increase glucose tolerance; lower plasma insulin levels, and decrease liver expression of the PEPCK gene, which indicates anti-diabetic activity." This accords with a widely reported traditional use for diabetes-type diseases and afflictions as well. Biopirate patents have been filed for this novel extraction method for the alkaloids (Simon, Wu and Welch 2013; see also Chika and Bello 2010). The Rutgers Office of Technology Commercialization (Simons 2009) summarizes some of the findings of isolated extracts in animal testing for their patents. Studies have shown that the isolated compounds:

- "decrease fasting plasma glucose levels
- increase glucose tolerance
- lower plasma insulin levels, and
- decrease liver expression of the PEPCK gene, which indicates antidiabetic activity."

The patent states of the traditional use: "The medicinal beverage is brewed by steeping the dried kinkeliba leaves and traditionally used for weight loss, digestion, as a diuretic and mild antibiotic, to relieve pain and, in the case of fresh leaves, the treatment of malarial fever. The herbal infusion of kinkeliba has a pleasant flavor and light brown color." They write in the application that the research into the extraction of Seh-haw/kinkeliba was born from the "**discovery** that kinkeliba tea possesses an interesting anti-diabetic effect, which could be a combination of glucose-lowering and weight loss effects when the tea is used in a traditional manner" (Simon, Wu and Welch 2013). "The positive glucose-lowering activities led to an animal study that tested the activity of the crude extract and ethyl acetate and n-butanol fractions in mice fed a high-fat diet, resulting in the development of a diabetic model. After six weeks of daily treatments, the treated groups showed lowered baseline blood glucose levels as well as decreased PEPCK levels in the liver, strongly suggesting that kinkéliba constituents may be beneficial in the treatment of Type 2 diabetes" (Welch 2010). The use of kinkeliba for weight loss and diabetes is widespread and we emphasize that the team at Rutgers did not just land in Africa and pick a plant to study for diabetes. They used indigenous traditional knowledge, then try and patent and control the plant without even the minimum of observance of the international protocols to stop biopiracy. Their flimsy, non-binding, un-signed interdepartmental "policy" is but a four-page absurdity when it comes to benefit-sharing, which they defer to companies licensing the patent anyway. As Edward Hammond notes, it's an "embarrassment to the institution."

The problem with the patent is that there is a widespread traditional use of Seh-haw/kinkeliba for diabetes. A study in Guinea (Balde 2006), documents that it is the third most popular herbal drug in Guinea for diabetes. Many herbal healers in Senegal know this as well, and my good friend's father is a famous traditional healer in Thies, Senegal, and he responds to my question about Kinkeliba's use for treating diabetes by saying, "Everybody here knows this." Even in Rutgers' own literature they admit a traditional use for kinkeliba as reported by Dr. Bassene in Senegal, and they attempt to muddy the waters by dismissively say this is purported. Purported or not, this is a clear case of biopiracy, discussed by Edwared Hammond and is another case of Rutger's University's breach of international protocol on benefit-sharing and transparency. We urge everyone concerned with herbal medicines to take a stand for this biopiracy and neoimperialism perpetrated by Dr. Simon and his pirate crew, who have been exposed before in the document Out of Africa: Mysteries of access and benefit sharing.

Conclusion

We present this monograph with much trepidation and hesitancy in attempting to present an accurate, qualified and beautiful account on the attributes of Cheikh Amadou Bamba and the Mourides of Senegal. The burden weighed so deeply that we despaired of our inability to articulate the mystery of God that is Serigne Touba. The Cheikh is a true enigma, who hid his station until his first true disciple pulled back the veil of earthly forms and let the spiritual light of the Master shine. Meditating deep in the forest, the Cheikh perfected his submission to the Lord and was the vehicle for the path of these last times to escape the hell fire and the fiery abyss of the coming modern nihilism. The deeply spiritual people of Senegal had to wait in lines to swear allegiance to Cheikh Amadou Bamba, whom the French tried in vain to kill, disappear, slander and hide. We humbly pray that our inarticulate words will nevertheless inspire the sick of heart and body to learn the way of Serigne Touba, the Servant of the Prophet. We pray that you find good health, clear thinking, and good dreams in the drinking of seh-haw. We pray that we all may detoxify our lives from within as without from the negative, the toxic and the sick and have the strength to cling to the good, the loving and the healthy. Ameen Fall.

Making the Tea

The traditional manner of making the tea, which can be bought in Senegal very inexpensively, is to wash, then boil the leaves and the water together and steep for 20 minutes. The quantity used for medical crisis is immense and, when mixed with sugar and allowed to steep for hours, results in a thick, almost syrup-like drink. Drinking it to this degree can lower blood pressure over time dramatically so caution must be used in using regularly at this strength. A good, beneficial light dosage as a twice-daily tea in the morning and night is achieved with the tea sachets from Saafara Herbal Teas. One tea sachet is boiled directly in the water (although adding boiling water works well, but must be steeped longer) and then sweetened with honey, making a delightful drink. Preparing with milk in the morning is a common practice as well. Adding lemongrass for a bedtime relaxing cuppa is popular in parts of Africa, as well as adding other herbs for specific medicinal issues. The addition of herbs such as basil and lemongrass, using honey as a sweetener, can enhance healing effects and combine to exciting tastes and delicious flavor combinations. Combined with fresh mint, gotu kola, or the other teas from Saafara can make very flavorful health tonics for specific conditions. Adding milk and pouring back and forth makes a frothy, luscious coffee-like drink that is perfect for breakfast to even out the blood levels and keep the appetite in check all day.

C. micranthum community

Combretum micranthum – wild

Combretum micranthum – 1, flowering branch; 2, fruit.
Redrawn and adapted by J.M. de Vries

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