

By: Joan Baxter

The solemn young Cameroonian botanist was trying hard not to smile and he seemed very interested in the shine on his black shoes, even as he tried to answer my interminable and intrusive questions. In each hand he held a piece of tree bark, taken from separate piles behind us, where tonnes of the potent stuff had been bundled up ready for export to France.

‘There are two kinds of bark,’ he said. ‘They are both used but often confused because they come from two closely related trees. One they call four o’clock. It’s the false johimbe and not as potent.’

I scribbled away, avoiding his eyes, not wanting to make the interview any more awkward than it already was for either of us.

‘And this one here is called five o’clock, or crocodile.’ He cleared his throat. ‘It’s stronger. Crocodile will keep a man going, ah, well let us say all the way through to five o’clock in the morning. Or for several days, if he has taken too much. It comes from *Pausinystalia johimbe*, a tree that grows only in the coastal rainforests of Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Congo. It used to be found in Nigeria too, but it is now nearly gone there. This is the real johimbe. Africa’s Viagra.’

I closed my notebook and thanked him profusely. Not for the first time, I was chastising myself for setting out to report on a male aphrodisiac that, in Africa, grows on trees. In the course of my interviews with researchers working on the johimbe tree, I had been reminded more than once that sex was a subject shrouded in taboo and handled with great discretion in public. Which is one of the reasons, I suspect, that johimbe—Africa’s own tried and true cure for impotence—is still such a well-kept secret.

Without any hype or headlines, johimbe has been used in Africa for centuries and around the world for decades, doing its job very nicely thank you, long before Viagra was even a glint in the eye of chemists working in Pfizer laboratories. Way back in 1915, the British pharmaceutical community recognised what the pygmies of central Africa had known for ages—that yohimbine, the extract from johimbe bark, was a ‘sexual stimulant for impotence’, which ‘dilates blood vessels’ while ‘increasing pelvic reflexes.’ No rhino horn, this.

Even as Viagra itself begins to show up in African pharmacies, the whole story of Africa’s own aphrodisiac—johimbe—remains a difficult one to penetrate. Few people I met in Cameroon, the world’s main supplier of johimbe, wanted to admit to having tried it and of course no one at all admitted to needing it.

Benoit Bibanga, a traditional healer in the pygmy community of Nkongmedzap in southern Cameroon, told me he knew johimbe well—his father had taught him that the forest was a pharmacy, the very source of life and health. He said that the pygmies sell the bark as an aphrodisiac to healers throughout Cameroon and to traders who sell it to international pharmaceutical concerns. ‘But for us here,’ he said, staring me down, ‘we use johimbe to treat headaches. Or for mystical reasons.’

‘Tell me, have you actually tried it?’ I asked impertinently of a bashful Cameroonian forester, who had what he called a merely professional interest in the tree and coming to its rescue before it was chopped into extinction. ‘Not personally, I haven’t,’ he replied. ‘But I

have a friend who did. We had come upon the tree in the forest and the local people had told us how you were supposed to grind the bark into a powder and soak it in red wine or make tea with it and drink it. Unfortunately, he pulled off a piece of bark and chewed it up raw. In its raw form, it's a powerful medicine. In Nigeria, they say that if a man can't be brought back to life with a dose of johimbe, it means he is good and dead.'

'And this, ah, friend?' I persisted. 'What exactly happened to him?'

My informant lowered his eyes. 'He spent three days in the hospital. Things, well, you know, can even rupture. But please . . . do you need *all* the details?'

Of course discretion and propriety are only one small reason that johimbe has remained such a well-kept secret in Africa, even if around the world urologists can rattle off the clinical effects of the yohimbine extract in treating male impotence and cardiovascular conditions. The bigger reason for the smoke-screen around johimbe has to do with where it comes from. Like so many other 'modern' medicines extracted from the forests of Cameroon, johimbe is a traditional remedy that has been appropriated (free of charge) from traditional healers and the people of Central Africa. Up until very recently, a pharmaceutical company in Cameroon, the subsidiary of a major French conglomerate—without a single Cameroonian shareholder and enjoying free port and duty-free status since 1995—has kept the secrets of johimbe locked up behind high walls and heavy security at their headquarters near Limbe. Their glossy PR brochures say that both johimbe and the pygeum bark from another tree, one of the major medicines for treating ailments of the prostate gland in men, are natural medicines from Cameroon, from the richest forests on the continent, which they claim they have been protecting and nurturing. Yet, for the past twenty-five years, the company has been buying undisclosed quantities of johimbe bark (they say around 100 tonnes a year) from local suppliers and apparently closing their eyes to the way it is collected—the trees are in fact chopped down.

For the past ten years, François Ekoutke in the tiny community of Lolabé Two in Cameroon's southern province, has made his living from johimbe. 'Johimbe has been a business just like any other for me,' he told me. 'I hire my men to cut the trees and strip the bark and then I sell it to Bamileke traders who have connections and can sell it to the pharmaceutical company near Limbe.' For each kilogram he gets the equivalent of about .50 US, what a few *milligrams* of the bark extract cost on the international market. Ekoutke is the only person in the province with a Ministry of Environment and Forestry permit for cutting johimbe and he alone is allowed to take up to 200 tonnes of bark each year, which he reckons would mean felling about 6000 trees—if he could find that many adult trees. He can't. He said that there are few adult trees left in the areas he has worked and there other people are felling the trees illegally, with no permit at all. Even in pristine coastal rainforest, the trees are rare, no more than three or four per hectare. And pristine forest in Cameroon is getting hard. Cameroonian foresters told me that at the current rate of logging, there will be virtually no forest left in a few years.

In the southern province of Cameroon, where johimbe grows naturally, 48 separate logging concerns from Europe and more recently Asia are now at work getting as much timber out of the country as they can before a new law comes into effect at the end of 1998 that will prohibit the export from Cameroon of uncut logs. When the forest goes, so do the johimbe trees—along with some 13,000 other species of plants, many of which are also medicinal species or simply important sources of food.

Maybe it's desperation as the trees and forests disappear, but it looks as though the pharmaceutical company may have had a change of heart. In the past year, they have opened their doors to a team of Cameroonian researchers intent—not on closing down the company or the trade in johimbe bark—but in working *with* the company to save the species and

*expanding* the market for Africa's answer to Viagra and ensuring future supplies. A future that is now in serious jeopardy.

This is where the Cameroonian research team comes in. With what looks like a belated stroke of genius, a small group of researchers are using basic and age-old horticultural techniques to 'domesticate' wild trees, the same way that aeons ago the mango tree was brought out of natural habitats and onto farms. Zacharie Tchoundjeu of the International Centre for Research in Agroforestry (ICRAF), who heads the research team in Cameroon, showed me nurseries full of johimbe seedlings collected from the wild, which he and his group are now multiplying using simple horticultural techniques to produce clones of good trees. In the past year, they have created in their nurseries a small population explosion of both johimbe and pygeum, both vanishing species of medicinal trees, and of improved varieties of indigenous fruit trees—bush mango and African plum for example—staples in the West African diet. He said that farmers, always in need of new tree crops that produce fruit or medicine—and thus money—are eager to plant such trees on their farms, especially with the falling price of cocoa. Ekoutke, who has always earned money killing johimbe trees, told me he is ready to start planting the trees around his farm. So did Mr Bibanga, the pygmy healer.

According to Tchoundjeu, the rationale is simple. 'By domesticating johimbe, we solve many problems. First, the farmers who cultivate it can make good money. Second, the pharmaceutical companies can continue to sell johimbe, but with a clear conscience. And third, this is good for men all over the world.' He said that Viagra has actually stimulated the market for johimbe. Some urologists and consumers with a green bent still prefer a 'natural' product such as johimbe to a synthetic drug that has been reported to cause some consumers 'see blue'. There are reports that in the United States, the youthful 'rave' set are adopting johimbe as a drug of choice, and often mix it with treacherous hallucinatory drugs such as Ecstasy.

But that is not the market that interests Tchoundjeu or his fellow researcher, Marie-Laure Mpeck, who in the past year has become *the* world expert on johimbe trees and how to cultivate them. Mpeck does the trekking into the forest with bark harvesters who help her find the stumps with shoots or wild seedlings, which she collects, calling them her 'children'. She said her only interest is to preserve for posterity an invaluable Cameroonian resource and to promote the tree as a new cash crop for farmers in her country.

Mpeck admitted that as a young and single woman, it's been tough working with a plant that tends to evoke smirks among her mostly male counterparts. But she said her interest is not the actual uses or effects of johimbe, which according to her is 'men's business'. That may be a misnomer. Peruse the Internet and find 3809 sites devoted to 'yohimbe' products with promises of enhanced athletic or sexual prowess—not just in men but women too. One woman who administered johimbe bark to her husband before bedtime one night said of her own experience, 'This drug is good. For men. But for me it meant no sleep at all.' She laughed. 'I think next time I will take it too. Have you tried it?'

'No,' I said. 'Not personally, but I have a lot of friends who have . . .