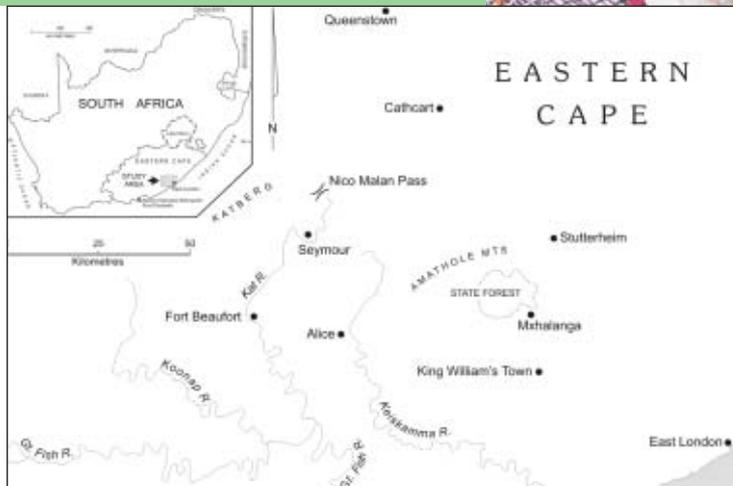


A new broom

Traditional grass brooms keep certain cultural practices alive in urban areas and provide rural people with a means to earn an income.



ABOVE: The grass bundles are tied in the middle and bent back 180° to form a rounded handle on one end and a brush on the other end. Photo: Tony Dold.

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In the last few years there has been renewed interest in the importance of wild plants for rural livelihoods, both through their household use and sale. Wild harvested plant products are most often categorized as having either a subsistence consumption value or a commercial value, however they may also have cultural uses, but the significance of these are relatively poorly documented.

Most studies that discuss the role of the environment with regard to cultural functions refer to specific areas or units of vegetation, such as sacred forests, rainmaking sites or landmarks. The cultural functions of wild harvested plants have for the most part been overlooked.

Several case studies have shown that large quantities of wild plant products are used in urban areas, notably medicinal plants. Such 'medicinal' use of wild plant products also has an important cultural dimension.

For example, a study in the Eastern Cape found that 30% of the plant species bought for 'amayeza' (medicine - in the broad sense) was used exclusively for cultural purposes, including rituals.

These findings highlight the value and significance that

wild plants have for urban communities through commercialization. The commercialization of natural resources is a growing phenomenon with recent studies now investigating the resulting rural-urban links.

Much attention has been given to the flow of cash and remittances from urban to rural areas, however far less acknowledged is the reverse flow of goods and 'culture' to urban areas and the significance of wild harvested plant material to urban cultural diversity.

Grass broom production and marketing in Mxhalanga village

Mxhalanga village is located in the former Ciskei homeland of the Eastern Cape Province. The village of just over 400 households is typical of many peri-urban villages in the former homelands being characterized by poor infrastructure, high population densities and high poverty levels.

A large proportion of the population of Mxhalanga is unemployed and relies on welfare payments or on urban earnings.

Thirty-one broom makers were interviewed in Mxhalanga village. The broom makers are all women and are mostly

between thirty and sixty years old.

Few younger women have the interest or skills for this craft. The majority are heads of their households and have only primary level education.

All the broom makers learnt their skills from their mothers and grandmothers who began the industry in the early 1970s.

Material to make the brooms is harvested on a privately owned farm on the Nico Malan Pass in the Seymour district. Two types of brooms are produced at Mxhalanga.

The producers consider the smaller brooms, 'umtshayelo wesandle', to be of traditional Xhosa origin, a sentiment supported by early historical records. The long-handled broom, 'umtshayelo wentonga', is made in the same way but a wooden handle is attached. This type of broom was originally copied from a European broom but has reportedly been in existence for more than a century.

The grass brooms are made from tamboekie grass *Cymbopogon validus*, an aromatic tufted perennial reaching 2.4 m high. It is widespread and common throughout the eastern regions of South Africa.

The Xhosa name for this species is 'irwashu'. Handles are made of 'igumtree' *Eucalyptus* saplings harvested from nearby State Forest timber plantations.

The grass brooms are seldom sold within Mxhalanga but the producers travel extensively to sell them - indicating a strong rural-urban link. Sale

localities include Alice, Cathcart, East London, King William's Town, Port Elizabeth, Queenstown and Stutterheim. Sellers may sell from door to door in residential areas, or they may set up an informal roadside stall near taxi ranks and bus stations where commuters are targeted as potential customers.

Income

Approximately 7 200 large brooms and 1 400 small brooms are produced in Mxhalanga each year. The average price for a large broom is R11 and R4.50 for a small broom. In total the thirty-one grass producers interviewed generate a gross profit of R83 000 per

year. This equates to approximately R2 700 per producer per year.

The expenses incurred by the broom producers amount to approximately R844 per year. These costs include transport to and from the harvesting site, permit fees to harvest the grass and *Eucalyptus* saplings as well as accommodation and transport costs to and from the urban areas.

This results in a net profit of R1 800 a year per producer.

Uses for grass brooms in Port Elizabeth

Port Elizabeth, now known as the Nelson Mandela Metropole, is home to about 775 000 people, of whom 56%



RIGHT TOP: A traditional hand broom talisman in a modern home. The broom is a protection against lightning and is used to apply traditional medicine for ritual cleansing and purification to ensure good health and prosperity. Photo: Tony Dold.

RIGHT: The brush-end is trimmed flush. Photo: Tony Dold.





LEFT: Traditional hand brooms 'umtshayelo wesandle' (foreground) and long-handled, modern brooms, 'umtshayelo wentonga' (background) for sale at an informal medicinal plant market in King William's Town. Photo: Tony Dold.

The three main cultural uses of grass brooms are as a traditional wedding gift, as a protective talisman against lightning and as an implement for the application of traditional protective medicine.

are Xhosa speaking Africans.

Two hundred people were interviewed while they were buying a broom in the suburban and informal settlements of KwaZakhele, New Brighton, Motherwell, KwaMagxaki, Costine and Njoli. Eighty-four percent of the grass broom buyers were women and 60% of the buyers purchased a broom for 'isisiko' (cultural purposes).

The remaining 40% indicated that they used a grass broom for cleaning purposes as it was considered to be more effective than a commercially available broom.

The three main cultural uses of grass brooms are as a traditional wedding gift, as a protective talisman against lightning, and as an implement for the application of traditional protective medicine.

Seventy percent of the broom buyers who bought a broom for cultural purposes bought them as a wedding gift for a family member.

All these buyers had also received a broom as a gift at their own weddings and were upholding the custom. The traditional wedding reception, where a set of grass brooms is presented to the bride, is called 'ukudliswa amasi' (literally 'to present a gift of sour milk').

The broom is symbolic of traditional Xhosa culture and represents respect to the ancestral faith in the newly-weds' home. These brooms are used for daily cleaning and are replaced when necessary.

The remainder of those who bought a broom for cultural purposes indicated that the presence of the small broom in the home served to protect the inhabitants from lightning, most often attributed to sorcery.

A broom purchased for this purpose is not used for cleaning, but is hung above the door as a talisman. The grass broom is also used to apply protective medicines in and around the homestead.

The ritual in which an infusion of various plant materials is splashed or sprayed on the floor, walls and roof is called 'ukutshiza'.

This ritual cleansing and purification ensures the good health and prosperity of the inhabitants.

This example of grass brooms shows that the use of wild harvested plant products is not restricted to rural utilitarian use, but is an important element in the performance and conservation of cultural practices and traditions for both rural and urban people.

Other urban examples of these are the growing of protective plants such as *Gasteria* and *Haworthia* species, called 'intelezi', around the home and the use of wild olive (*Olea europaea* subsp. *africana*) leaves as a platter for the meat of a ritually slaughtered domestic animal.

Many traditional cultural practices are still significant even in highly urbanized contemporary settings.

The extent to which urban people still adhere to such cultural practices is complex and is influenced by variables such as family origin, economic status, level of education and age.

The demand for grass brooms in urban areas provides an opportunity for people living in disadvantaged areas such as the former homelands to generate an income.

The trade value of grass brooms to producers in Mxhalanga is significant considering that almost 80% of residents are unemployed.

Our observations in the harvesting sites indicated that *Cymbopogon validus* is a sustainable resource for Mxhalanga broom producers at the current level of harvesting.

In this regard it has been shown that harvesting of tamboekie grass in

Pondoland actually promotes annual growth. These findings indicate on the one hand that cultural practices are threatened by the loss of biodiversity and, conversely, the cultural value attributed to many plant species could be used as an argument to support the conservation of biodiversity.

The importance of recognizing the traditional value of indigenous commu-

nities in biodiversity conservation is now recognized, e.g. in the Convention on Biological Diversity, but as yet has not been applied locally.

It has been argued that 'promoting conservation in the context of local culture would endow protected areas with a significance that emphasis on biological diversity, landscapes or economies does not.' This is especially relevant in

a country such as South Africa, where people can ill-afford the luxury of a species-focused conservation ethic but recognize the importance of cultural diversity.

We therefore need to reintroduce the concept of culture into our analyses of the environment and not simply portray wild harvested material as being only of economic value to users.

Acknowledgements

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Further reading

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ABOVE: Broom-sized bundles of grass are steeped in boiling water to soften the middle section and facilitate bending. Photo: Tony Dold.

RIGHT: The broom makers of Mxhalanga village are all women, mostly between thirty and sixty years old. They strip *Eucalyptus* saplings of their bark as soon after harvesting as possible as it becomes increasingly difficult to remove as it dries. Photo: Tony Dold.

