

# Imbhola yesiXhosa

## Traditional Xhosa cosmetics

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Plants have been used for cosmetic purposes since time immemorial. The earliest known cosmetics come from the First Dynasty of Egypt, about 3100-2907 BC. Since the ancient Egyptians who used olive oil perfumed with aromatic plants to keep their skin supple, humans have been using plant extracts for cleansing and beautifying purposes. Although it is generally believed that cosmetics originated in the Far East, the study of non-industrial cultures indicates their use in every part of the world. One of the oldest and best-known plant oils is derived from lavender. Hair rinses and shampoos containing camomile *Chamaemelum nobile* are popular nowadays for blond hair, and there is evidence that the Vikings used the flowers to enhance their blond locks. Henna, made from the crushed, dried leaves of the henna plant *Lawsonia inermis*, is one of the oldest known hair and body dyes. The prophet Mohammed is said to have used it to redden his beard and it is still commonly used to colour hair and, in some countries, cheeks, hands, nails and feet. It is likely that the Jews adopted the use of cosmetics from the Egyptians, since references to face painting appear in the Old Testament.

By the middle of the First Century, cosmetics were already widely used by the Romans, who employed kohl for darkening eyelashes and eyelids, chalk for whitening the complexion, rouge, hair-removing preparations and pumice for cleaning teeth. In the Middle Ages the Crusaders observed the use of cosmetics in the Middle East and it was they who spread the use of cosmetics throughout Europe. The war paint of Native Americans, the tattooing and scarification practised by many peoples (the Maori of New Zealand and numerous African cultures come to mind) and the use of woad (*Isatis tinctoria*, a plant dye from the cabbage family used by ancient Britons to paint their bodies blue) are all forms of cosmetics used for adornment as well as psychological intimidation of the enemy. The almost universal use of cosmetics in modern times has grown with the scientific study of the ingredients employed. This research was begun by the French in the Nineteenth Century, and led to the development of a multi-billion dollar industry across the globe today.

Despite massive advertising campaigns in print, radio and television media for new and improved cosmetic products, Xhosa men and women still use, indeed prefer, certain traditional vegetable and mineral cosmetics (imbhola yesiXhosa) for beauty, health, well-being and as social status indicators in the Eastern Cape today. Most of the plants are collected in the wild and are also available at local herbal street markets where they are relatively inexpensive unless they are sourced



The flowers of the onionwood or ummemezi *Cassipourea flanaganii*, growing in the Pirie Forest, King William's Town. Over-exploitation of ummemezi bark as a complexion cream and skin lightener, has placed the species on the IUCN Red Data list as Critically Endangered.  
Photo: Tony Dold.

from beyond the Eastern Cape province. Some species, however, are uncommon and localized and may be threatened by continued, uncontrolled harvesting for cosmetic and other uses. We are only beginning to understand the complexities of the use and trade of wild plants in the Eastern Cape. For example a recent urban household survey shows that almost 70% of the plants traded in this province have multiple uses and names, these often being clan-specific. Furthermore we found that just over 50% of the 'medicinal' plants traded in urban markets have important spiritual and cultural functions such as those described for some of the cosmetics (in the broad sense) discussed here.

### For the complexion

*Cassipourea flanaganii* (onionwood, ummemezi) is a small uncommon tree that occurs in forest patches between King William's Town and southern KwaZulu-Natal. Bark is removed from living plants, cut into small pieces, and dried in the shade before sale. The powdered bark is mixed with a little water to make a light brown paste that is applied to the face to enhance the beauty of the young ladies who use it. It is also used to conceal skin blemishes and long-term use reportedly improves the complexion and lightens the tone of the skin. Many Xhosa women consider a lighter tone of skin to be more attractive and ummemezi helps to achieve this. Sadly, the desire for a light complexion is most likely enforced by feelings of racial inferiority as a result of the psychological legacy of apartheid (see 'Black beauty, white mask' in *Veld & Flora*, March 1996). Ummemezi bark sells

for R52 per kilogram. Small containers of powdered ummemezi have recently become available on the market, indicating an increased demand and commercialization by means of pre-processing and packaging. As a result of the over exploitation of ummemezi bark the species is now an IUCN Red Data listed species, assessed as Critically Endangered.

As we have shown in a previous article in *Veld & Flora* ('Fine fare, rare remedy' March 2003), the root parasites *Hydnora africana* (jakkalskos) and *Sarcophyte sanguinea* (wolwekos) are both called umavumbuka in Xhosa. Men and women apply a thin reddish paste, made by rubbing the dried fruiting body on a coarse stone with a little water, directly to the skin to treat and prevent acne and other skin blemishes. The effectiveness in treating these complaints can most likely be attributed to the high tannin content of the plant. The application is repeated daily until the symptoms disappear. Men and women who work outdoors also use the paste on a daily basis as an effective sunscreen. Umavumbuka costs R30

per kilogram at the informal herbal market in King William's Town.

The well-known African potato (*Hypoxis hemerocallidea*) is called inongwe. The tuber has traditionally been used to treat high blood pressure and kidney problems, and more recently as a commercial product (Moducare™) to treat immune system disorders. It is less widely known as a traditional Xhosa cosmetic. The dried rhizome is applied in the same way as umavumbuka, to treat acne and conceal pimples. The paste is dark brown in colour and is only used by women. Of the top ten most frequently sold plant species in informal herbal markets in the Eastern Cape the greatest quantity for a single species is inongwe (10 000 kg each year) although probably only a small percentage of this is bought for cosmetic use. Inongwe costs approximately R30 per kilogram.

#### Social status

Bracket fungi of the genus *Ganoderma* are generally called isibindi. The Xhosa word isibindi is the same word for liver, the association being the dull

reddish colour. According to custom, male initiates (abakhwetha) returning from initiation school indicate their new social status (amakrwala) by wearing a particular style of clothing, including a formal jacket and cap, and various facial cosmetics. Natural red ochre called imbhola is applied for an initial period of approximately two weeks after returning from seclusion followed by the daily application of isibindi for up to three months. Imbhola is harsh on the skin and isibindi not only indicates the young men's new social status but is also a natural restorative. Isibindi is also used by women to treat facial skin imperfections, is effective in the treatment of acne, and is used as a sunscreen by both men and women. The dry fruiting body is powdered and mixed with water to make a reddish coloured paste that is applied directly to the face. Isibindi costs R160 per kilogram for the best quality material, said to be found growing specifically on umthathi trees (sneezewood, *Ptaeroxylon obliquum*). *Ganoderma* is also used in an ancient Chinese medicine called Reishi. As with inongwe, a commercial immune enhancing product *Ganoderma Lucidum* is available worldwide.

#### Baby rash

*Spirostachys africana* (tamboti) is called umthombothi in Zulu and Xhosa and is best known for the beautiful woodcarvings produced from its timber. The species occurs primarily in KwaZulu-Natal and northern Pondoland and is 'imported' into the Eastern Cape as a cosmetic and a medicine. Small splinters of the scented heartwood are sold in 5 cm lengths for approximately R5 each. The fragrant wood is powdered on a coarse stone and mixed with a little water for smearing the face of infants. The brown paste prevents and treats a form of baby rash called ishimnca. Umthombothi costs up to R700 per kilogram and is therefore sold in small quantities of about 15 g per customer.

#### Well-being

For Xhosa people good health, disease, success or misfortune are seldom considered chance occurrences but are often regarded as the result of active intervention of individuals or ancestral spirits. Illness and disease are commonly attributed to either natural or supernatural causes with the idea of 'contamination' entering from both the physical and the spiritual plane. Cure requires as much a restoration in the

BELOW: Ikrwala (a young initiate recently returned from initiation school) proudly shows his new social status with isibindi, a paste made from the bracket fungus, *Ganoderma*.

BOTTOM: Isibindi is named for its liver-red colour. The dry fruiting body is powdered and mixed with water to make a paste. It is used by women to treat facial skin imperfections, acne and as a sunscreen.

Photos: Tony Dold.



**Illness and disease are commonly attributed to either natural or supernatural causes with the idea of 'contamination' entering from both the physical and the spiritual plane.**





ABOVE LEFT: Applying umaphipha. A preparation of the bark of the Cape beech *Rapanea melanophloeos* is used cosmetically against umgqwaliso or sorcery and also medicinally.

ABOVE RIGHT: Preparation of umaphipha. Bark from the Cape beech *Rapanea melanophloeos* is harvested from living trees in forests where increasing harvesting pressure threatens their long term survival.

LEFT: Umavumbuka *Hydnora africana* is a parasitic plant living on the roots of *Euphorbia triangularis*. Men and women apply a thin reddish paste, made by rubbing the dried fruiting body on a coarse stone with a little water, directly to the skin to treat and prevent acne and other skin blemishes. The effectiveness in treating these complaints can most likely be attributed to the high tannin content of the plant. Photos: Tony Dold.

balance of supernatural forces and social relationships as the use of therapeutic medicine. Treatment or prescription may call for the ritual sacrifice of a domestic animal, but will almost certainly require certain forms of symbolic ritual purification in the form of a body wash, purgative, fumigation, steaming or cosmetic application as counteractive and protective measures, often using plant material (amayeza). Dried, powdered root or bark is moistened to make a paste that is applied to the face (ukuqaba) by men and women as a protective agent against sorcery (umgqwaliso), and misfortune often attributed to the ancestral spirits. Symptoms of umgqwaliso include outbreaks of pimples and continuous bad luck. Unlike ummemezi, umavumbuka, inongwe and isibindi these cosmetics are conspicuous, immediately revealing the user's predicament.

*Bulbine latifolia* is most commonly called rooiwortel from the Afrikaans name denoting the red flesh of its root but the true Xhosa name is ibucu. The tuber is dug up and cut into small pieces before drying in a cool shady place. Powdered tuber, mixed with a little water makes a yellow cosmetic paste applied to the face by men and women to protect against umgqwaliso. Ibucu costs R30 per kilogram at herbal markets.

*Rapanea melanophloeos* (Cape beech, umaphipha) and *Ilex mitis* (Cape holly, isidumo) bark is harvested from living trees in forests where increasing harvesting pressure threatens their long term survival. Both species are used cosmetically against umgqwaliso (sorcery) and are also used medicinally. Umaphipha is light pink and isidumo is pale yellow in colour once it has dried on the skin. Umaphipha bark is also burnt as incense in preparation for rituals. Umaphipha costs R37 per kilogram and isidumo costs R41 per kilogram.

*Plumbago auriculata* (utshinitshini) is closely associated with traditional healers (amagqirha) who always carry a small wooden staff of the plant during their training. The staff is decorated with beads to indicate each stage in the progress of their apprenticeship. Both men and women also use the

dried, powdered root as a cream coloured cosmetic against umgqwaliso (sorcery). Fresh flowers are eaten to reinforce the plants protective powers. Utshinitshini is seldom sold at markets because of its association with traditional healers and the ancestral spirits.

In the last ten years we have happily seen a renewed interest and pride in traditional African cultural heritage, for example, since Dr Nosimo Balindlela began wearing umbhaco (a traditional Xhosa skirt) in public there has been a revival of traditional Xhosa fashion. We have also seen a marked increase in the mass harvest and trade of wild plants – often for cultural functions (see 'The cost of culture in *Veld & Flora*, December 2003) thus indicating that cultural practices are also threatened by the loss of biodiversity. We therefore suggest that in our efforts to protect threatened species and ecosystems, more emphasis should be given to their cultural values. Recognition of cultural and spiritual values would greatly enhance biodiversity conservation efforts, which are at present mostly focused on either cognitive arguments or emotional arguments regarding bequest values for future generations. This is especially relevant in a country such as South Africa, where most people can ill-afford the luxury of limiting the present use of certain plant species in favour of intergenerational benefits. However, the importance of cultural diversity may form an important stimulus to adopt sustainable use practices rather than extractive practices. 🌿

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#### Further reading

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