# ‘A disease like any other’
# Traditional, complementary & alternative medicine use in the context of COVID-19 among the Congolese community in Belgium

Emiel De Meyer[1], Patrick Van Damme[1,2], Eduardo de la Peña[1,3], Melissa Ceuterick[4]

[1]*Ghent University, Faculty of Bioscience Engineering, Dep. Plant Production*
[2]*Faculty of Tropical AgriSciences, Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Czech Republic*
[3] *Institute for Subtropical and Mediterranean Horticulture, IHSM-UMA-CSIC, Finca Experimental La Mayora, 29750, Algarrobo-Costa, Malaga, Spain*
[4]*Ghent University, Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, Dep. Sociology, Health and Demographic Research*

## Background

Belgium has been hard hit during the first COVID-19 infection wave, with the highest mortality rate among men and women from Sub-Saharan African communities. After a long and troubled colonial history, the country’s largest Sub-Saharan African community orginates from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Migrant communities often maintain traditional perceptions & habits regarding health and healthcare, resulting in high use of traditional, complementary and alternative medicine (TCAM). However, TCAM use is highly under-investigated among migrant groups, certainly in a new context, like the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Goals

- document current medicinal plant knowledge and use among the Congolese community in Belgium in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and
- get insight in their overall perception of feasible health choices in light of the pandemic within the community.

## Methodology

We conducted 16 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with people from Congolese descent in Belgium (in real-life and online). Ethnobotanical data was collected through freelisting. Our qualitative dataset was analyzed through thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) .

## Results & Discussion

*Four overaching themes:*

### 1. Reinterpretation of TCAM in the light of COVID-19

- Participants retreated to, reshaped and adapted traditional and culturally bound knowledge in order to deal with all aspects of the crisis.
- Fifteen plant species were used to treat, prevent and treat symptoms of COVID-19 (T*able 1*). *Artemisia annua* L. was the most frequently used herbal medicine.
- Plants used against COVID-19 were selected on the basis of their use against malaria (curative) and COVID-19 symptoms.

### 2. ‘A disease like any other’: COVID-19 in a Congolese perspective

- COVID-19 was compared to other common diseases in DR Congo, and the reaction in Belgium perceived as exaggerated.

### 3. Information seeking through transnational and digital networks

- Information was mainly sought through informal (digital) (transnational) digital networks.

### 4. Vaccination hesitancy

- All participants showed vaccination hesitancy
- (Intergenerationally transmitted) biomedical and governmental mistrust caused by e.g. racism, discrimination, (post)colonialism and corruption may lay at the basis of vaccination hesitancy.

*Table 1:* List of TCAM used against COVID-19 mentioned by the Congolese community in Belgium.

| n° | Plant family | *Scientific name* | Recorded vernacular name | Frequency of quotation | Used in Belgium ? | Curative/ preventive/ against symptoms | Link with malaria? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Alliaceae | *Allium cepa* L. | Oignon | X | Yes | Preventive | No |
| 2 | | *Allium sativum* L. | Ail | X | Yes | Preventive | No |
| 3 | | *Allium schoenoprasum L.* | Ciboulette/ Bieslook | X | Yes | Preventive | No |
| 4 | Apocynaceae | *Picralima nitida (Stapf) T.Durand & H.Durand* | Bonobo | X | Yes | curative | Yes |
| 5 | Asteraceae | *Artemisia annua* L. | Artemisia (fr.) | XXXX | Yes | curative/ preventive | Yes |
| 6 | | *Vernonia amygdalina* Delile | Kongo bololo | X | Yes | curative | Yes |
| 7 | Lamiaceae | *Ocimum* spp. | Lumba lumba | X | No | curative/ against symptoms | No |
| 8 | | *Tetradenia riparia* (Hochst.) Codd | Mutuzo | X | No | curative | Yes |
| 9 | Moringaceae | *Moringa oleifera* Lam. | Moringa | X | Yes | preventive | No |
| 10 | Myrtaceae | *Eucalyptus* spp. | Eucalyptus | X | Yes | curative/ against symptoms | No |
| 11 | | *Psidium guajava* L. | Feuilles de goyave | X | No | curative | Yes |
| 12 | Rutaceae | *Citrus* spp. | Citron | XXX | Yes | Curative/ preventive | No |
| 13 | Zingiberaceae | *Zingiber officinale* Roscoe | Gember/gingembre/tangawisi | XXX | Yes | preventive/ against syptoms | No |
| 14 | N.A. | N.A. | Confo® (essential oils) | XX | Yes | Curative/ preventive/ against symptoms | No |
| 15 | N.A. | N.A. | Vicks® | X | Yes | Curative/ preventive | No |

X= use quoted by less than 15% of the informants; XX= use quoted by more than 15% and less than 30% of the informants; XXX: use quoted by more than 30% and less than 45% of the informants; XXXX: use quoted by more than 45% of the informants.

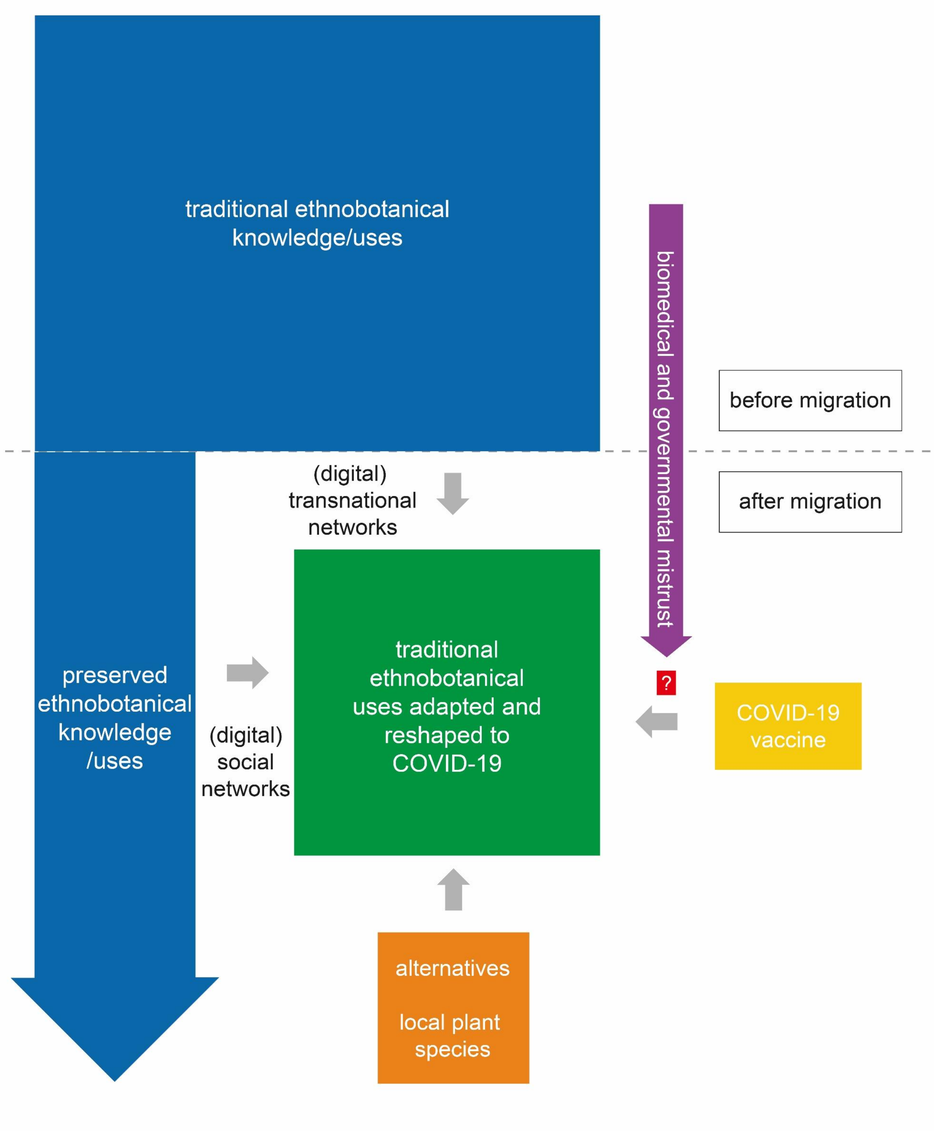


*Figure 1*: schematic presentation of mechanisms behind medicinal plant use against COVID-19 among the Congolese community in Belgium

## Conclusion

- In the context of COVID-19, people of Congolese descent folded back to their own identity: through the use of (mainly Congolese) TCAM, reshaped and adapted to the new situation, and through intensive communication within the community through digital, transnational networks.
- We suggest that different levels of distrust in societal institutions resulting from both historical and current interactions between migrants and other social/ethnic groups, might lead to an increased vulnerability of communities with a migratory background to health-threatening situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Full article: