

# Izaci namaqhalo esiXhosa

## Xhosa idioms and proverbs referring to plants

African culture and language diversity remain closely linked to biodiversity

“Converging with the ecological extinction crisis, the planet has been experiencing a severe erosion of the diversity of human cultures and languages, reducing the pool of knowledge, behaviors and values from which individual communities and humanity at large can draw to respond to social and environmental stresses”\*

by **Tony Dold**, Selmar Schonland Herbarium, Rhodes University and **Michelle Cocks**, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Rhodes University

With a land surface area of 1.1 million km<sup>2</sup>, representing just 1% of the earth’s total land surface, South Africa is home to almost 10% of the world’s known bird, fish and plant species, and over 6% of the world’s mammal and reptile species. Not only do we claim to have the third-highest level of biodiversity in the world, we call ourselves the ‘Rainbow Nation’, a title that reflects the country’s rich cultural diversity.

Recent research suggests a strong correlation between the geographical distribution of biological ‘megadiversity’ and that of cultural and linguistic diversity with a trend towards increasing linguistic diversity in areas of increasing plant diversity and vice versa. It is possible that biological and cultural-linguistic diversity may be related through co-evolution and that the causes and consequences of declining biodiversity may be linked to those threatening the diversity of human cultures and languages. It is estimated that half the people in the world now use one of eight global languages. Experts say 234 African languages have already disappeared and that 32% of the endangered languages on earth are African. Yet, by and large, the destruction of both natural and cultural habitats continues unabated. The loss of languages, cultural practices and indigenous ecological knowledge all reflect the breakdown in the relationship between humans and their environment. It has been suggested that solutions for the sustainability of both cultural heritage and the environment require recognition of the inextricable link between cultural diversity and biological diversity.

### Xhosa idioms and proverbs

While documenting folk-ecology over almost ten years we have collected a number of Xhosa proverbs (amaqhalo) and idioms (izaci) referring to plants. The wording and interpretation of these differ widely but nevertheless illustrate the complex relationship between culture/society and nature/environment. It is said that cultures and languages are defined by the natural environment in which they evolve, expressed here by the use of plant names in nuances of the Xhosa language.

We hope that by presenting them in written form they may be kept alive for future generations of the ‘Rainbow Nation.’



ABOVE: Inkanga or ragwort *Senecio pterophorus*. The saying goes, ‘Akukho ‘nkanga idubula ingethi’ (there is no inkanga that comes into flower and does not wither), which means, ‘Pride goes before a fall.’ Photo: Tony Dold.



### Lukhozo lomya

*Translation: He/she/it is the seed of the umya.*

Umya is a species of wild hemp and this saying is applied to any person or thing considered very beautiful. The seed referred to is like a small jet-black bead.

### Udle ingcolo

*Translation: He has drunk the juice of the flower of the wild aloe.*

This is said of a dull, sleepy person; the nectar being slightly narcotic.

### Isanama ndokunamathela

*Translation: The isanama will stick fast to you.*

The isanama is a herb, *Achyranthes aspera* (klitsbossie), that has seeds that stick to one's clothing when it is touched, and are difficult to brush off afterwards. This proverb is used as a warning to avoid a bad habit or an unworthy companion that won't be easy to drop.

### Akukho 'nkanga idubula ingethi

*Translation: There is no inkanga that comes into flower and does not wither.*

Pride goes before a fall. The inkanga plant referred to is ragwort *Senecio pterophorus*.

### Ubopheleleinja enkangeni

*Translation: He has fastened a dog to a shrub.*

This saying is used to denote a very greedy person, one who is so greedy as to fasten his dog to a shrub that the animal may not beg for food while he is eating. The shrub referred to is inkanga or ragwort *Senecio pterophorus*.

### Udla ngendebe endala

*Translation: You drink out of an old cup.*

The indebe is a drinking vessel made of rushes - isithebe. The saying is used for a wealthy man, and means, 'You use a vessel handed down from your ancestors.' (You prosper as your forefathers did.)

### Uzicandele umgalagala

*Translation: You have split boxwood for yourself.*

You will have to bear the consequences. Umgalagala is the Xhosa name for boxwood *Buxus macowanii*.

### Ndizithathele umgalagala

*Translation: I have collected umgalagala.*

I have brought trouble upon myself and must bear the consequences. Umgalagala is the Xhosa name for *Buxus macowanii*, the boxwood tree.

### Uzixhonxele isikhuni somhlakothi

*Translation: You have poked a firebrand of umhlakothi.*

You have run the risk of being blinded. When umhlakothi *Rhus laevigata* wood is burnt it throws out many sparks.

### Uthixo ulihlathi lam

*Translation: God is my forest (God is my refuge).*

Ihlathi (forest) is a refuge, hiding-place and stronghold and in time of war women and children took refuge in a forest.

### Amahlathi aphelele

*Translation: The forests are gone, or the forests are exhausted.*  
The truth is out.

### Injikwe

*Translation: The name of the wooden bow of the single-stringed musical instrument called inkinge.*

Injikwe refers to one who speaks promiscuously. Injikwe (the bow) is made from a branch of *Brachylaena elliptica* (isagqheba).

### Undibeka inkanga emehlweni

*Translation: He is putting an inkanga bush in front of my eyes.*

He is deceiving me. Inkanga is the common ragwort *Senecio pterophorus*.

BELOW: The wild olive or umnquma *Olea europaea* subsp. *africana*.  
Photo: Tony Dold.



### Ukunquma

*Translation: To apply the wild olive.*

To kill a bird or snake with one blow - referring to the hard wood of *Olea europaea* subsp. *africana*.

### Sinomnquma

*Translation: We are the wild olive.*

We have no appetite. The proverb implies the food is rough or coarse and therefore distasteful like the bark of the olive tree *Olea europaea* subsp. *africana*.

### Ukunquma

*Translation: To apply the wild olive.*

To kill a bird or snake with one blow - referring to the hard wood of *Olea europaea* subsp. *africana*.



## Umthathi uyawuzala umlotha

*Sneezewood generates much smoke means*

'Take the rough with the smooth.' Umthathi refers to *Ptaeroxylon obliquum*, which has a strong, long-lasting wood but produces an acrid smoke when burnt.



ABOVE: Umthathi or sneezewood *Ptaeroxylon obliquum*. Photo: Tony Dold.

BELOW: Ikhiwane or wild fig *Ficus sur*. 'Ubuhle bekhwane zimpethwana' which literally means 'the beauty of the wild fig' implies that the wild fig is attractive to look at but is often rotten inside. An equivalent English saying would be 'Beauty is only skin deep.' Photo: Tony Dold.

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*Translation: Sneezewood generates much smoke.*

Take the rough with the smooth. Umthathi refers to *Ptaeroxylon obliquum*, which has a strong, long lasting wood but produces an acrid smoke when burnt.

## Umthi wozala isilima

*Translation: The tree will bear a cripple.*

Take care – you will get into difficulties.

## Unomthi

*Translation: He has a tree.*

He has powerful medicine. Umthi refers to a tree and hence also medicine.

## Ngumthi nexolo

*Translation: The tree and the bark.*

The equivalent English proverb would be, 'As thick as thieves.'

## Ndingema nasemthini nokuba kusesibondeni

*Translation: I would climb a tree even if it had no branches.*

To achieve something difficult.

## Sisithole esigrunywe zibhokhwe

*Translation: He is a young plant mutilated by goats.*

Xhosa men are taunted by Pondo men. (Pondo men do not practice circumcision).

## Ubuhle bekhwane zimpethwana

*Translation: The beauty of the wild fig.*

Beauty is only skin deep. The wild fig, *Ficus sur*, is attractive to look at but is often rotten inside. 🍌



## Acknowledgments

1 990 Xhosa names for 1 065 plant taxa have been identified in the Selmar Schonland Herbarium as a further addition to the knowledge of vernacular names of plants for the Eastern Cape and have had the names confirmed by more than one source. For a reprint of the list and a comprehensive list of sources, please contact the editor at [voget@kingsley.co.za](mailto:voget@kingsley.co.za).

\*Maffi, L. 2004. Conservation and the 'two cultures:' bridging the gap. *Policy Matters* 13: 256. ([www.iucn.org/themes/ceesp/Publications/Publications.htm#pm13](http://www.iucn.org/themes/ceesp/Publications/Publications.htm#pm13)). Luisa Maffi has pioneered bio-cultural diversity conservation in her book *Human values of biodiversity*.