

Madagascar's 'green gold' against COVID-19 seeks nod beyond Africa

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The plant taking Africa by storm originated in China

A drink made from a bright-green fern-like plant is being promoted in African countries as the go-to cure for COVID-19.

But detractors, with undisguised scorn, dismiss claims for the concoction as at best useless—and at worst dangerous.

Madagascar President Andry Rajoelina is the promoter-in-chief of the substance, marketed as Covid-Organics and sold in the form of a herbal infusion.

Asserting that the Madagascan brew has the potential to "change history", Rajoelina has widely distributed it in his Indian Ocean island nation and exported it to many parts of Africa.

The East African countries of Tanzania and the Comoros are among enthusiastic customers as well as Guinea-Bissau and Equatorial Guinea on the Atlantic coast.

Guinea-Bissau President Umaro Sissoco Embaló made a point of personally taking delivery of his country's Covid-Organics order at the airport.

Artemisia annua has a long history in its native China, where scientists discovered an active ingredient that made the plant a front-line weapon in the fight against malaria.

Flying off shelves

Covid-Organics seems to be selling like hotcakes in Madagascar, costing 30 euro cents (35 US) for a 33-centilitre (11-ounce) bottle.



Promoter: President Andry Rajoelina drinks from a bottle of Covid-Organics at the product's launch on April 22

In Senegal, Belgian agronomist Pierre Van Damme markets the product under the label Le Lion Vert (The Green Lion).

"Since the start of the epidemic, demand for artemisia has gone through the roof," Van Damme said. "But since the Madagascan president's declarations it's been crazy."

Sales jumped 15-fold in a few weeks, forcing Van Damme to hire eight staff to handle some 2,000 orders a day.

As demand surges for the purported coronavirus remedy, prices have

followed suit.

Ibrahima Diop, a producer in the Dakar area, says the retail price has soared by two-thirds.

"I'm swamped," grinned Haoua Wardougou, an apothecary in a working-class district of the Chad capital N'Djamena. "I have lots of customers who want to buy some, but I'm out of stock."

Western doubts

The counterpart to this enthusiasm is the cool reception that the drink has met in the West.

The substance has proven effectiveness against malaria, but no clinical trials have tested it against COVID-19, either as a cure or as a preventative.



Sociologist Marcel Razafimahatratra questioned why artemisia was not used in China where the pandemic originated, noting that the plant has been used in Chinese medicine for centuries

In recent weeks, both the World Health Organization (WHO) and Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention have underscored the need for empirical testing of local formulas to demonstrate they are safe and effective as claimed.

"We would be very proud if a solution in this war against COVID-19 comes from an African country," said John Nkengasong, head of the Gabon-based Africa CDC. "But we must be methodical before approving such a remedy."

Some African countries are exercising caution, handing over their stocks of Covid-Organics for expert analysis.

"They will be subjected to the same process as all other products before they are put on the market," said Boss Mustapha, Nigeria's point man in the fight against coronavirus. "There will be no exceptions."

Even in Madagascar, doubts persist. The dean of the medical faculty in the eastern city of Toamasina, Stephane Ralandison, warned against methods that were "not fully scientific" behind the Covid-Organics' launch.

"I am extremely cautious," said sociologist Marcel Razafimahatratra, asking why the drink was not used in China, where the pandemic originated and where artemisia has long been used in [traditional medicine](#).

Clearly thrilled by his new continental fame, Rajoelina is an unabashed defender of Covid-Organics, charging that the West scorns the concoction because of its condescending attitude toward traditional African medicine.

"If it was a European country that had actually discovered this remedy, would there be so much doubt? I don't think so," he told French media.

For evidence he cites Madagascar's [coronavirus](#) statistics: 405 cases including two deaths and 131 recoveries, according to the official count.



Bionexx researcher Rasamiharimanana Solofo says it may take four years to develop an ideal hybrid

'Green gold'

Rajoelina is touting artemisia as the new "green gold" for Madagascar, one of the world's poorest countries.

"Life will change for all Madagascans," he said, noting that rice fetches \$350 (320 euros) a tonne, while artemisia changes hands at nearly 10 times as much at \$3,000 a tonne.

A Madagascar-based company, Bionexx, has been producing artemisia since 2005 to fight malaria.

Its CEO Charles Giblain is also convinced of a lucrative future for the crop.

"This plant is a weed that can grow anywhere," he said. "The only problem is to grow it in conditions that will make it competitive with Chinese rivals."

Bionexx is working to develop a hybrid to maximise the strength and effectiveness of wild *Artemisia annua*, with researcher Solofo Rasamiharimanana estimating that the quest could take four years.

But many growers are far from convinced of its market potential.

At the village of Ambohijoky on the outskirts of Antananarivo, farmers tempted by the crop quickly abandoned the effort.



Bionexx CEO Charles Gibrain describes artemisia as a "weed that can grow anywhere". Employees are shown sowing seeds at a nursery

"We dropped it because of the prices," said one of them, Louis Jean Patrice Rakotoninaina. "We were paid 1,050 ariary (27 cents, 25 euro cents) per kilo of dried artemisia while we expected to get 3,000 ariary."

Another, Eveline Raharimalala, said anything below 15,000 ariary was not worth growers' while. She noted that artemisia takes six months to grow—three times longer than other crops.

Bionexx's Gibrain disputes the argument, saying: "If our prices weren't attractive, we wouldn't have 16,000 farmers working with us."

But one of the footsoldiers in this army of producers, Josephe Rakotondramanana, said a more important factor in growing the plant was to have a secure market.

"We don't grow artemisia for its price (but) because it's a safe product with less risk of loss and zero need to stock," said Rakotondramanana, who has worked with Bionexx for five years.

Gibrain for his part believes he is looking at Madagascar's next vanilla—the crop that accounts for 80 percent of world production.

His ambition is to make his business, which currently produces 2,500 tonnes of artemisia per year, one of the world's top three producers alongside Chinese rivals.

Razafimahatratra, the sociologist, has his doubts.

Rather than banking on a green miracle, he says, the Madagascar government should focus on ensuring food security for the former French colony's 26 million people, 90 percent of whom live in grinding poverty.

"Instead of importing 300,000 to a million tonnes of rice per year, the country should work to close this gap," he said.

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