

Piotr Klepacki *

The evolution of the ethnobotany as the field of science in 19th and 20th century

ETHNOBOTANY HAS GAINED its scientific status in the second half of the 19th century. At first its main aim was to gather information about useful plants which have high economical potential. Accidentally collected facts were spread among many sources. As the 19th century was ending systematizing works appeared as well as case studies (how different tribes use plants). In the 20th century ethnobotany has extended into several sub-disciplines: ethnoecology, traditional agriculture, cognitive ethnobotany, material culture, traditional phytochemistry and palaeoethnobotany. Now it is interdisciplinary approach joining not only botanists but also representatives of other disciplines.

The methods as well as the range of questions it has to answer have changed through years. Among new challenges there are: the identification of patterns in system of knowledge, development of the knowledge of human cultural perception, providing new plant-originated medicines. The last sphere mentioned is realized with more and more social responsibility. It means that the laws of intellectual property of tribes whose indigenous knowledge is used in research are respected. The considerable practical and social value of traditional knowledge has been noticed and the 'applied ethnobotany' is a good example of involving ethnobotany's possibilities in the biodiversity prospecting and conservation biology.

In Poland the path that ethnobotany has gone through was different as well as its objects. Polish low social spheres were explored rather than tribes living in colonial countries. At first, in the 19th century, there were just facts noted. Later the reflection on gathered material came and the syntheses in the second half of the 20th century appeared. Initially the ethnobotanical research was based on a 'scientific belief' that revival of pre-Christian culture is possible. In the 20th century the main aim was to save people's knowledge about plants and deepen this field. Most of Polish works on ethnobotany are rather connected with cultural studies than dealing with plants themselves.

* Botanic Garden, Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland; email: klepacki@ib.uj.edu.pl.