



Taxonomic value of leaf epidermal markers in discriminating medicinal tree species of Apocynaceae Juss in Nigeria

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Abstract

Apocynaceae is a useful family comprising of trees notable for different medicinal remedies. Consequent to their importance vis-à-vis scarcity in the forest, they are being sold in various Nigerian markets by herb sellers mostly in sterile and fragmentary forms. Hence, the medicinal plants are subjected to adulteration and substitution. Identification of the plants by users is done via floristic markers, which are not readily available for such purpose. It becomes pertinent to carry out the taxonomic revision of these trees to provide additional markers that will contribute to their effective identification for correct use. Various documentations have been made on members of apocynaceae and are properly placed on their respective taxa using epidermal traits. However, such information is scarce for *Alstonia boonei*, *Holarrhena floribunda*, *Rauvolfia vomitoria*, *Thevetia nerifolia* and *Vocanga africana*. This study therefore aimed at providing epidermal taxonomic markers that could be employed in delimiting the species as an alternative when the fruit or floral parts are wanting. Leaf epidermises of five species of apocynaceae representing 5 genera were studied under a biological microscope with a camera attachment. Data obtained were statistically analyzed. The epidermal cell was penta or hexagonal in *A. boonei* and *V. africana*. The stomatal length varied from 20.88 μm (*R. vomitoria*) to 25.92 μm (*T. nerifolia*) and 18.96 μm (*R. vomitoria*) to 29.28 μm (*V. africana*) on the abaxial and adaxial layers respectively. All the epidermal characters on the adaxial layer were significantly different ($p < 0.05$) among the species. Anticlinal walls were sinuated in *H. floribunda* and *T. nerifolia* while in *R. vomitoria*, it was straight to wavy. *V. africana* and *A. boonei* anticlinal walls were straight. This study represents the first account of epidermal characterization of the members of apocynaceae in Nigeria and is of taxonomic importance in setting boundaries among the species.

Keywords: Medicinal trees; taxonomy; leaf epidermis; apocynaceae; stomatal crypt

Introduction, scope and main objectives

Apocynaceae Juss. is one of the important families in angiosperm founded in 1789. About 1900 species representing 215 genera have been identified worldwide (El-Fiki et al. 2019). According to Endress and Bruyns (2000), the family was delimited into five subfamilies, comprising of Secamonoideae, Apocynoideae, Rauvolfioideae, Periplocoideae and Asclepiadoideae. Plants of this family are greatly diversified in lifeform to trees, shrubs, climbers and rarely herbs (Venkateshwar et al. 2013; Koyuncu 2012; Bhattacharya 2004). Notable diagnostic morphological feature of the family is the production of pod-like fruits. The leaves are usually sessile or petiolate having variable shapes of lanceolate, ovate, linear, obovate, elliptic or oblong (El-Fiki et al. 2019; Bibi et al. 2015; Kidyoo, 2014).

Various works have been published on the epidermal characterization of many taxa in the family apocynaceae. *Wriohitia tinctoria*, *Ervatamia divaricata* and *Catharanthus* spp. were delimited based on their amphistomatic leaves from six other apocynaceous species after studying the foliar epidermis of ten Indian species comprising of nine genera by Kannabiran and Ramassamy (1988). Seven species representing seven genera were investigated by El-Fiki et al. (2019) and recommended the merging of Apocynaceae and Asclepiadaceae to one big family. *Nerium indicum* was distinguished from *Thevetia peruviana*, *Catharanthus roseus*, and *Tabernaemontana divaricata* by having stomatal crypt (Sharma et al. 2012). Despite these wonderful documentations, the taxonomic relationship among the members of apocynaceae remains unsettled and incomplete. This can be deduced from the fact that some of the species from Africa, most especially Nigeria in

the family such as *Astonia boonei*, *Holarrhena floribunda*, *Rauvolfia vomitoria*, *Thevetia neriifolia* and *Vocanga africana* are still being left out. These species are among the trees commonly used for traditional medicine in Nigeria. The bark of *Alstonia boonei* in a tincture with the bark of *Enantia chlorantha* for the treatment of malaria and yellow fever (Odugbemi and Akinsulire 2006). According to Fabeku (2006), the decoction of root and bark of *Rauvolfia vomitoria* in tandem with some species of meliaceae is efficacious in the treatment of coated tongue disease.

Often time, identification of these medicinal trees is achieved using the floral and fruiting components. However, the existence of flowers is seasonal and is therefore useless for taxonomic discrimination purpose during off-flowering and fruiting seasons. Due to their wide application in ailment treatment, they are usually sold in the market either fragmentary or sterile conditions (Olowokudejo and Nyananyo 1990). Hence, they are highly prone to substitution and adulteration, which is very inimical to effective application. Given the various medicinal uses of these species, there is a need for thorough taxonomic revision to provide additional markers for proper discrimination of the taxa. This study therefore aimed at providing important epidermal taxonomic markers that could be employed in delimiting the species as an alternative when the fruit or floral parts are wanting. This study is focused on the tree species of apocynaceae family that are commonly used for medicinal purposes in Nigeria. These include *Astonia boonei*, *Holarrhena floribunda*, *Rauvolfia vomitoria*, *Thevetia neriifolia* and *Vocanga Africana*.

Methodology

1-Sources of plant samples and Epidermal peels preparation

Fresh leaf samples of each of *Astonia boonei*, *Holarrhena floribunda*, *Rauvolfia vomitoria*, *Thevetia neriifolia* and *Vocanga Africana* were collected from Onigambari Forest reserve and University of Ibadan, Nigeria based on availability. Identification and authentication of the samples were carried out at the Forest Herbarium, Ibadan. According to Oyedapo et al. (2018), leaf samples were first preserved in 50% ethanol before subjection to epidermal characterization. Mature leaves were randomly selected, cut into sizeable sections and soaked in concentrated nitric acid ranging from 8 to 24 hours depending on the leaf texture (Ibrahim and Ayodele, 2013).

Swollen of the leaf surfaces with the appearance of air bubbles was an indication of the readiness of the epidermal layers for separation. Samples with swollen surfaces and air bubbles were then transferred into clean glass Petri-dishes containing water while the adaxial and abaxial layers were separated using dissecting needle and forceps. The epidermal peels were cleaned using a camel-air-brush in water and preserved in storage bottles containing 50% ethanol (Oyedapo et al. 2018; Ibrahim and Ayodele 2013).

2-Preparation of Slides and assessment of epidermal characters

Epidermal peels were first washed in water before staining them with appreciable drops of safranin (Oyedapo et al. 2018). For clear visibility, peels were counterstained using toluidine blue and the excess stains were removed by washing them with water twice. The peels were subjected to a series of ethanol concentrations of 50%, 70%, 80%, 90% and 100% for approximately 3 minutes to dehydrate them. To completely remove all traces of stains, water and ethanol, the peels were treated using absolute xylene. Each epidermal peel was then mounted on a slide using 25% glycerol for the feasibility of the internal structure. The slides were studied under a CIWA XSP-35TV biological microscope. Qualitative characters such as presence of stomata, stomatal type, stomatal abundance, epidermal cell shape, etc. were noted and recorded. Photomicrographs were taken using with 200W Electronic Eyepiece. Quantitative variables such as length and breadth of the epidermal cell, stomata were measured using an ocular micrometre.

Results

1-Qualitative epidermal characteristics of apocynaceae species

Qualitative epidermal markers of the Nigerian species of apocynaceae are shown in Table 1. Stomata were present on both the abaxial and adaxial surfaces of all the species except for *Alstonia boonei*, which lacked stomata on the adaxial layer (hypostomatic). Paracytic stomata were identified in all the species except in *A. boonei*, where stomatal crypts were found (Fig. 1). Generally, stomata were more distributed in the abaxial surface compared to the adaxial layer of all the species. Stomata were abundant in an abaxial layer of *R. vomitoria*, *H. floribunda* and *T. nerifolia* but were scanty in *V. africana* and *A. boonei*.

Epidermal cells were generally polygonal (Table 1). The epidermal cell was penta or hexagonal in *A. boonei* and *V. africana* (Figure 1). Anticlinal walls were sinuated in *H. floribunda* and *T. nerifolia* while in *R. vomitoria*; it was straight to wavy (Table 1). *V. africana* and *A. boonei* anticlinal walls were straight. Crystal was present in the epidermal cell of all the species on both leaf surfaces. However, crystal druses were discovered in *R. vomitoria*, *H. floribunda* and *T. nerifolia*, whereas, crystal raphides were found in *V. africana* and *A. boonei*

Table 1: Qualitative epidermal markers of the Nigerian species of apocynaceae

Epidermal Markers	Leaf surfaces	<i>Rauvofia vomitoria</i>	<i>Holarhena floribunda</i>	<i>Vocanga africana</i>	<i>Thevetia nerifolia</i>	<i>Alstonia boonei</i>
Stomata (P/A)	Abaxial	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present
Stomatal type	Abaxial	Paracytic	Paracytic	Paracytic	Paracytic	Stomatal crypts
Stomata abundance	Abaxial	Many	Many	Few	Many	Few
Cell shape	Abaxial	Polygonal	Polygonal	Polygonal	Polygonal	Polygonal
Anticlinal wall	Abaxial	Straight-wavy	Sinuated	Straight	Sinuated	Straight
Crystal type	Abaxial	Druses	Druses	Raphides	Druses	Raphides
Stomata (P/A)	Adaxial	Present	Present	Present	Present	Absent
Stomatal type	Adaxial	Paracytic	Paracytic	Paracytic	Paracytic	Nil
Stomata abundance	Adaxial	Few	Few	Few	Few	None
Cell shape	Adaxial	Polygonal	Polygonal	Polygonal	Polygonal	Polygonal
Anticlinal wall	Adaxial	Straight-wavy	Sinuated	Straight	Sinuated	Straight
Crystal type	Adaxial	Druses	Druses	Raphides	Druses	Raphides

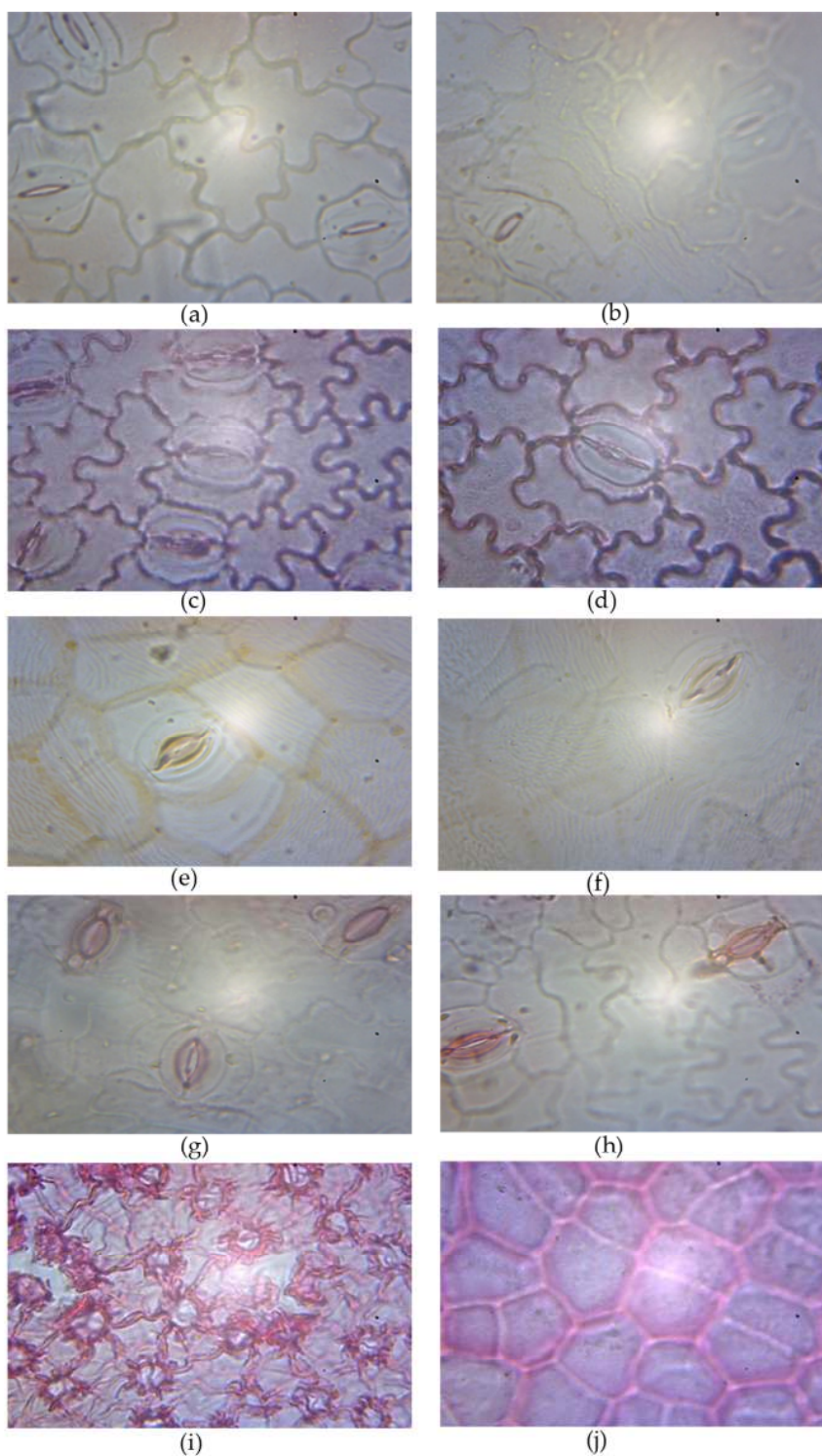


Fig. 1: Photomicrograph of the species: (a) *Rauvolfia vomitoria* (abaxial); (b) *Rauvolfia vomitoria* (adaxial); (c) *Holarhena floribunda* (abaxial); (d) *Holarhena floribunda* (adaxial); (e) *Vocanga africana* (abaxial); (f) *Vocanga africana* (adaxial); (g) *Thevetia nerifolia* (abaxial); (h) *Thevetia nerifolia* (adaxial); (i) *Alstonia boonei* (abaxial); (j) *Alstonia boonei* (adaxial)

2-Qualitative epidermal characteristics of apocynaceae species

Quantitative epidermal markers of the species on the epidermal are presented in Table 2. Length of stomata varied from 20.88 μm (*R. vomitoria*) to 25.92 μm (*T. nerifolia*). Highest length of the epidermal cell (34.32 μm), breadth of the epidermal cell (20.64 μm), breadth of stomata (21.6 μm), the width of guard cell (9.12 μm) and guard cell area (144.66 μm^2) were found in *Holarhena floribunda* while the least was (19.44 μm), (10.08 μm), (9.60 μm), (4.08 μm), (65.73 μm^2) respectively discovered in *Alstonia boonei*. Stomatal density ranged from 85.95 mm^2 (*A. boonei*) to 137.32 mm^2 (*R. vomitoria*) while stomatal index varied from 28.57 % (*Vocanga africana*) to 46.34 % (*T. nerifolia*). *A. boonei* (19.87 μm) and *R. vomitoria* (20.88 μm) had the least length of guard cell and length of the epidermal cell respectively while *T. nerifolia* had the highest values.

All the epidermal markers were significantly different ($p < 0.05$) among the species except for the length of the guard cell and length of stomata on the abaxial leaf surface (Table 2).

Table 2: Quantitative epidermal markers (abaxial layer) of the Nigerian species of apocynaceae

Tree species	LE (μm)	BE (μm)	LS (μm)	BS (μm)	LGC (μm)	WGC (μm)	GCA (μm^2)	SD (mm^2)	SI (%)
<i>Rauvolfia vomitoria</i>	24.00	11.04	20.88	11.76	20.4	4.32	68.98	137.32	36.84
<i>Hollarhena floribunda</i>	34.32	20.64	22.08	21.6	20.35	9.12	146.66	88.41	30.00
<i>Vocanga africana</i>	31.44	20.63	21.93	12.72	21.84	4.44	80.75	122.79	28.57
<i>Thevetia nerifolia</i>	29.52	18.00	25.92	12.00	24.48	4.80	93.19	110.51	46.34
<i>Alstonia boonei</i>	19.44	10.08	22.80	9.60	19.87	4.08	65.73	85.95	35.35
p-value	0.000*	0.000*	0.182ns	0.000*	0.217ns	0.000*	0.008*	0.000*	0.041*

LE = length of epidermal cell, BE = breadth of epidermal cell, LS = Length of stomata, BS = breadth of stomata, LGC = length of guard cell, WGC = width of guard cell, GCA = guard cell area, SD = Stomatal density, SI = Stomatal index; * = significant at 5% probability level; ns = not significant at 5% probability level.

On the adaxial leaf surface, highest length of the epidermal cell (30.48 μm), breadth of stomata (19.68 μm) and guard cell area (249.04 μm^2) were discovered in *Holarhena floribunda* while the least values; 24.00 μm , 10.46 μm and 95.77 μm^2 were respectively obtained in *Rauvolfia vomitoria* (Table 3). Length of stomata and guard cell ranged from 18.97 μm and 18.96 μm in *Rauvolfia vomitoria* to 29.28 μm and 28.32 μm respectively in *Vocanga africana* (Table 3). The least stomatal density (29.47 mm^2) and stomatal index (23.07 %) were recorded in *H. floribunda* while the highest; 186.64 mm^2 and 44.44 % were found in *T. nerifolia* respectively. The breadth of the epidermal cell increased from *V. africana* (12.48 μm) to *H. floribunda* (21.12 μm), whereas, the width of guard cell varied from *T. nerifolia* (5.66 μm) to *H. floribunda* (14.64 μm). Quantitative epidermal markers of the adaxial layer are significantly different ($p < 0.05$) among the species.

Table 3: Quantitative epidermal markers (adaxial layer) of the Nigerian species of apocynaceae

Tree species	LE (µm)	BE (µm)	LS (µm)	BS (µm)	LGC (µm)	WGC (µm)	GCA (µm ²)	SD (mm ²)	SI (%)
<i>Rauvolfia vomitoria</i>	24.00	13.68	18.97	10.46	18.96	6.38	95.77	98.23	38.83
<i>Hollarhena floribunda</i>	30.48	21.12	24.00	19.68	21.36	14.64	249.04	29.47	23.07
<i>Vocanga africana</i>	26.16	12.48	29.28	12.96	28.32	6.48	142.95	39.29	29.00
<i>Thevetia nerifolia</i>	30.00	18.24	26.64	16.56	26.16	5.66	116.26	186.64	44.44
<i>Alstonia boonei</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
p-value	0.030*	0.001*	0.001*	0.000*	0.002*	0.012*	0.049*	0.000*	0.000*

LE= length of epidermal cell, BE=breadth of epidermal cell, LS= Length of stomata, BS=breadth of stomata, LGC=length of guard cell, WGC=width of guard cell, GCA=guard cell area, SD= Stomatal density, SI= Stomatal index; *=significant at 5% probability level.

Discussion

There has been some documentation in which epidermal markers were used to discriminate plant taxa (Shokefun et al. 2017; Haruna and Ashir 2017; Fayose and Freke 2016; Ogunkunle 2013; Ibrahim and Ayodele 2013). Results obtained from this study clearly demonstrated that epidermal markers could provide a reasonable value for discriminating the selected medicinal tree species of apocynaceae. For instance, only *Alstonia boonei* of all the medicinal species considered was hypostomatic. This marker could be used as a veritable means of discriminating it from other taxa. The result agrees with Omino (1996), in which hypostomatic distribution of stomata was used as a marker to set the boundary between the species of East African apocynaceae.

Another important and unique epidermal marker peculiar to *A. boonei* is the stomatal crypt. Stomatal crypts are also known as sunken stomata that are located in depressed portions of the epidermis, which forms a narrow-mouthed or deep longitudinal groove (Hassiotou et al. 2009). The stomatal crypt can contain one or more stomata and at times with trichomes or wax accumulations. The presence of sunken stomata in *A. boonei* can be linked to its wide range of ecological distribution, which occurs both in the savannah and wet regions (Abu et al. 2016). The effectiveness of stomatal crypt for apocynaceae taxa delimitation has been reported. *Nerium indicum* was said to be taxonomically distinct from *Catharanthus roseus* and *Tabernaemontana divaricata* by having stomatal crypts (Sharma et al. 2012). *N. indicum* was the first species of apocynaceae to be reported with stomatal crypts characteristics while *A. boonei* observed in the present study happened to be the second species with such important taxonomic trait.

Other useful qualitative markers with taxonomic value based on the result include stomatal abundance, anticlinal wall and crystal types, which varied among the species. Such markers could be employed at both specific and generic level of the medicinal species as previously reported in some plant's families (Oyedapo et al. 2018; Shokefun et al. 2017). The overlap in the epidermal cell shape of these species makes it unsuitable as a marker for taxonomic purpose in the taxa.

Hollarhena floribunda was separated from other species by having the largest value for some of the stomata and epidermal quantitative markers, especially on the abaxial leaf surface. Also, *Thevetia nerifolia* was singled out with the highest value of the stomata index on both the abaxial and adaxial layers. Therefore, the epidermal and stomatal markers which are similar among the species could be translated as the affinity that exists within the

family while those that were variable could be termed as diagnostic features among the species. This corresponds to the literature (Ibrahim et al. 2009; Ibrahim et al. 2006; Ayodele and Olowokudejo 2006; Olowokudejo and Nyananyo 1990) in which stomatal and epidermal markers were used to solve taxonomic problems among the medicinal plants. According to a report by Olowokudejo and Nyananyo (1990), the stomatal index is very reliable and useful in delimiting some medicinal tree species.

Conclusions

Aside from the fact that this study is the first account of epidermal characterization of the members of apocynaceae in Nigeria, various epidermal markers have been identified to be useful for the discrimination of the medicinal tree species in the taxa. Of worthy of note is the stomatal crypt, which is being reported for the first time in Nigerian *Alstonia boonei*. Information obtained from leaf epidermal markers of this study may be useful in resolving some taxonomic problem, especially identification encountered by the indigenous medicinal plant sellers and users. Findings from this study could also be useful for sustainable management and conservation of the medicinal plant at both ex-situ and in-situ conservation areas.

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