Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends breastfeeding as the sole nutrition of infants during the first six months due to the protective effects against infections, on reduction of newborn mortality and as supply of essential micronutrients [1, 2]. The beneficial impact of breastfeeding on infant health has been also shown in a randomized trial [3]. Besides, prolongation supplementary lactation up to two years is advised to fight against malnutrition of children. Quality and quantity of breast milk are significantly affected by the mother’s nutritional status. While the portion of group 1 nutrients like thiamine, riboflavin, vitamin B6, vitamin B12, choline, retinol and vitamin A, vitamin D, selenium and iodine depend on their maternal dietary intake, nutrients of the second group (including iron, zinc, calcium, folate and copper) are constantly secreted into breast milk. A possibility to enhance lactation is the use of so-called galactagogues, that are pharmaceutical drugs or herbs increasing, promoting or maintaining milk secretion [4, 5]. In traditional medicine, the application of galactagogue plants is widespread in different cultures, especially regions with malnutrition and high infant mortality [6-8]. Application of different galactagogues of natural origin have been described in various African countries for breastfeeding mothers as well as for livestock, e.g. in Morocco, Benin, Nigeria [9-11]. A recent ethnobotanical survey collected information on traditional knowledge of breast milk affecting plants in the Angolan province Uíge [12]. According to UNICEF, the South-Western African country suffers from malnutrition and one of world’s highest under-five mortalities [13]. The respondents of the ethnobotanical study made a distinction between plants that increase milk production, plants that reduce milk production, plants that should be avoided during the breastfeeding period and plants that help to ‘clean the milk’. According to the interviewees, the breast milk needs to be cleaned when it appears to be watery because this provokes diseases like diarrhea. Hence, we have adopted this unusual term also for the present study.

The murine mammary epithelial HC11 cells derived from the parental COMMA-1D cell line has been shown to differentiate in response to the lactogenic hormones prolactin, dexamethasone and insulin [14].

Keywords: galactagogue, HC11 cells, Angola, Morinda lucida, Carica papaya, 1H-NMR
Moreover, HC11 cells have been used to investigated the impact of extracts of diverse plant species on the \textit{in vitro} mammary cells differentiation\textsuperscript{[15-17]}. Herein, we describe the preparation of aqueous extracts of twelve different Angolan plants described to affect human breast milk quantity or quality by tribes in the province Uíge, Northern Angola. The aqueous extracts were subsequently tested on their influence on the \textit{in vitro} mammary cell differentiation of murine HC11 cells. The most active extracts were characterized with HPLC-DAD and NMR analyses to explore their chemical profile and the existence of major chemical classes in extracts composition.

**Materials and Methods**

**Collection of plant material**

Fresh plant material of twelve plant species (Fig. 1), mentioned in Jendras et al.\textsuperscript{[12]} was collected by Gesine Jendras in February and March 2018 during field studies in the province Uíge, Angola. Subsequently the samples were cleaned, immediately dried in a drying cabinet (HTD 100 Bench Top, LinTek) at 30 °C, then vacuum-sealed, stored in a freezer and later sent to Athens, Greece, for extraction. At the same time, herbarium vouchers of the plant species mentioned were prepared, identified and stored in the Herbarium Dresdense (DR, voucher no. see Table 1).

![Fig 1: Plant material was collected from the wild in Uíge, Northern Angola. (a) Abrus precatorius, (b) Morinda lucida, (c) Morinda morindoides, (d) Carica papaya and (e) Spondias mombin.](image)

**Plant extraction**

Extractions were carried out for each plant material employing ultrasound assisted extraction (UAE) methodology. More specifically, 2.0 g of the dried and pulverized plant materials were mixed with 20 mL of water (H\textsubscript{2}O). Samples were set into the sonication bath for 2h, while temperature was adjusted at 30 °C. Finally, twelve extraction solutions were produced, which were then centrifuged for 20 min at 3500 rpm, for separation of the initial plant precipitates and powders (sediments) with the supernatants. After recovery of the supernatants, they were evaporated under vacuum conditions at 40 °C. Final extracts were weighted and stored in dark glassy vials at 4 °C. Table 1 illustrates in detail the initial plant materials and the final weight of the corresponding extracts.
Table 1: Representation of the used plants with their scientific name, the used part of the plant in the study and the final weight of the aqueous extracts. Local names are listed in Kikongo language. Herbarium vouchers are stored at the Herbarium Dresden (DR), Institute of Botany, TU Dresden; photo vouchers are archived with the author TL. Naming of the plants related to the effects refer to the ethnobotanical survey in Uige, + lactation: mentioned to increase lactation; - lactation: mentioned to decrease lactation; *total number of interviews.

| Plant                      | Local name            | Herbarium code | Code | Part of the plant | extract [mg] | Beneficial effects (12) | Adverse effects (12) |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|----------------|------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| Abru s precatorius L.      | Maique, Kiamiembie    | DR 051649      | Ap   | leaves and tendrils | 221.50       | 2 (3)                   | 9 (9)                |
| Carica papaya L.           | Papayi                | F 01           | Cp   | leaves             | 651.90       | 0 (1)                   | 15 (15)              |
| Costus afer Ker Gawl.      | Nsangalavua           | DR 053482      | Ca   | fleshy stems       | 131.10       | 1 (1)                   |                      |
| Crassoscephalum rubens     | Bungudia              | DR 051645      | Cr   | leaves             | 587.50       | 2 (4)                   | 0 (1)                |
| Maprounea africana Müll.   | Nsiele nsiele         | DR 051640      | Ma   | leaves             | 497.5        | 2 (2)                   | 3 (3)                |
| Morinda lucida Benth.      | Noiki, masiki         | DR 051642      | Mi   | leaves             | 378.00       | 4 (7)                   |                      |
| Morinda morindoides (Baker)| Meso-nkama, Nkongobolo| DR 051623      | Mm   | leaves             | 203.10       | 7 (10)                  | 0 (1)                |
| Salacia erecta (G.Don)Walp.| Mbonda, Kanzangu      | DR 053480      | Sp   | leaves             | 453.00       | 6 (12)                  | 2 (2)                |
| Solanum macrocarpon L.     | Couve preta           | F 02           | Som  | leaves             | 513.15       | 2 (2)                   |                      |
| Spondias mombin L.         | Mungieniere            | DR 051647      | Smp  | leaves             | 483.50       | 5 (6)                   | 46 (80)              |
| Vernonia amygdalina Delile | Malulua               | DR 051610      | Va   | leaves             | 188.4        | 3 (3)                   | 11 (24)              |

Extracts chemical profiling
After extraction, the twelve aqueous extracts were analyzed with three different methodologies for investigation of their chemical profile. Initially, HPTLC and then HPLC-DAD and 1H-NMR analyses were performed towards this purpose.

HPTLC analysis
For the High Performance Thin Layer Chromatography profiling, 20 µL of extracts were applied onto 20 × 10 cm HPTLC plates (silica gel 60 F254, 0.20 mm layer thickness; Merck) using the Automatic TLC sampler (ATS4, CAMAG) under the control of the software platform VisionCats 2.5 (CAMAG). Samples were applied using a syringe of 25 µL (Hamilton) and a nitrogen aspirator. The plates were developed with an automatic development chamber (ADC2, CAMAG). The development system used was mobile phase dichlomethane (DCM)/MeOH (95:5 v/v). Plate images were recorded at 254 nm and 366 nm on a Visualizer 2 Documentation System (CAMAG). For visualization of the spots, the HPTLC plates were sprayed with sulphuric vanillin derivatization reagent (i.e. 5% w/v vanillin in MeOH/5% v/v H2SO4 in MeOH 1:1 v/v).

HPLC-DAD analysis
For the High Performance Liquid Chromatography-Diode Array Detector analysis of extracts, a Thermo Finnigan® HPLC-PDA System (P4000 Pump, AS3000 Autosampler, PDA Detector UV8000, Chromquest™ 4.1 Software) and a Supelco® RP18 Discovery HS-C18 (250 mm, 4.6 mm, 5 µm) column were employed. The mobile phase consisted of water with 0.1% acetic acid (Solvent A) and acetonitrile (Solvent B). Elution started with 2% of B and maintained at this proportion for 5 min. In the next 40 min B reached 100% and stayed for 5 min. At the 55th min system returned to the initial conditions and stayed for 5 min for system equilibration. The total analysis time was 60 min at a flow rate of 1 mL/min. Column temperature was set at 40 °C, while the injection volume was 20 µL. Chromatograms were recorded at 254 nm, 280 nm and 366 nm.

β-Casein gene expression analysis
Cells were lysed by the addition of peqGOLD TriFast™ and total RNA was isolated according to the manufacturer’s instructions. After digestion of genomic DNA contaminations by RQ DNase, 3 µg RNA were incubated with MMLV reverse transcriptase and oligo (dT)12-18 primers for first-strand cDNA synthesis. The iCycler iQ™ Real-Time PCR Detection System (Bio-Rad Laboratories GmbH) and SybrGreen I as detection dye were used for amplification of mouse β-casein: forward 5'-AGGTTGAATCTCATGGGACACG-3', reverse 5'-CACAGGGGGTTGAGCAATAG-3', and for the mouse ribosomal protein S18 (Rps18): forward 5'-AGGATGTAAGGATGGGAAG-3', reverse

1H-NMR experiments
1H-NMR experiments were performed on a 600MHz Bruker Avance AVIII-600 spectrometer equipped with a TXI cryprobe. 5mg of each extract were diluted in 600 mL of MeOD. Chemical shifts (δ) are expressed in ppm and coupling constants in Hz.

Cell culture
HC11 cells were cultivated in RPMI-1640 with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS), 1% penicillin/streptomycin (P/S), 10 µg/mL epidermal growth factor (EGF) and 5 µg/mL insulin (all components purchased from Sigma-Aldrich) (14). HC11 cells seeded at a density of 200,000 cells per 25 cm2 flask were put on RPMI-1640 containing 10% FBS, 1% P/S and 10 µg/mL EGF for four days after reaching confluence. Thereafter, the cells were incubated for four days in differentiation medium consisting of RPMI-1640, 10% FBS, 1% P/S, 5 µg/mL insulin, 104 M dexamethasone (Sigma-Aldrich) and 0.5 µg/mL prolactin (Sigma-Aldrich) in the presence of either 1% DMSO or the aqueous extracts dissolved in DMSO. The aqueous extracts were tested in a dose-dependent manner (0.1, 1 and 10 µg/mL) in three independent cell culture experiments.
The expression was normalized to the housekeeping gene \textit{Rps18} and the \( \Delta \Delta C_T \) method was applied to evaluate the \( \beta \)-casein expression level relative to the solvent control cells treated with DMSO solely (set to 1) \({ }^{[18]}\).

### Statistical Analysis

Gene expression data are shown as arithmetic mean \( \pm \) standard deviation from three independent cell culture experiments respectively. Statistical analysis comprised one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) followed by Bonferroni’s post-hoc test. Results were considered as statistically significant at \( p \leq 0.05 \).

### Results and Discussion

Extracts isolated from twelve different Angolan plant species selected on the basis of their mention in an ethnobotanical survey on effects on breast milk production in the province Uíge (Table 1, \([12]\)) were tested for their impact on the mammary differentiation of murine HC11 cells. Amongst them, nine plants were recorded from interviewees asked about plants with beneficial impact on breast milk, that the respondents further separated in either increasing lactation or cleaning breast milk \([12]\). Four plant species have been already mentioned in a previous large-scale ethnobotanical study, that investigated general traditional medicinal plant use in Uíge \([19]\). Two of the plant species investigated herein were mentioned by the respondents when asked about a lactation-decreasing impact or about plants that should be avoided in general during breastfeeding (\textit{Salacia erecta} and \textit{Crassocephalum rubens}). Regarding \textit{Vernonia amygdalina}, the survey recorded more or less balanced mentions for beneficial and adverse effects on breastfeeding.

Treatment of the HC11 cells with differentiation medium solely, significantly increased the \( \beta \)-casein mRNA-expression proving that the HC11 mammary cell differentiation can be induced and monitored by \( \beta \)-casein mRNA-levels (4000-fold compared to the proliferating cells, data not shown). The \( \beta \)-casein mRNA expression was significantly increased by treatment with 1 \( \mu \)g/mL \textit{Carica papaya} extract (Fig. 2a, \textit{Cp}), while the one-tenth lower as well as the tenfold higher doses had no impact on the mRNA expression. The interviewees described the usage of \textit{Carica papaya} leaves to “clean breast milk”, that was defined to be necessary if the milk seems too watery provoking diseases, e.g. diarrhea \([12]\). Traditional usage of \textit{Carica papaya} is also described in Thailand, where the ripe fruit or a soup of unripe fruit is used to promote lactation \([7, 20]\). In lactating rats fed with a root extract, an increase of the mammary gland size, protein and prolactin content was shown \([21]\). A recent Indonesian study observed a significant increase of prolactin blood levels in breast-feeding mothers after a seven-day intake of a \textit{Carica papaya} leaf juice (prepared from leaves with boiled water) \([22]\). The constraint of this study is the lack of a control group. Another study investigating the impact of an aqueous \textit{C. papaya} fruit extract on dairy cows revealed a regulatory effect on immune- and antioxidant related genes and proteins in the milk, but no impact on the milk yield \([23]\). The authors conclude that \textit{C. papaya} might exert beneficial effects on mammary gland health, e.g. decreasing the mastitis risk, and thereby affecting milk quality. This might be one of the reasons for the frequently mentioned ‘clean the breast milk’ as type of application in the ethnobotanical survey in Uíge, Angola \([12]\).

**Fig 2**: Relative \( \beta \)-casein expression in murine HC11 cells. HC11 cells were treated with differentiation medium containing 0.5 \( \mu \)g/mL prolactin and 0.1, 1 or 10 \( \mu \)g/mL of the respective plant extract. As solvent control, cells were treated with the differentiation medium and 1 \% DMSO (set to 1). * Denotes statistically significant differences in comparison to DMSO-treated cells (\( p \leq 0.05 \)).
In the present study, the *Morinda lucida* extract also increased the β-casein mRNA expression in HC11 cells, though statistically not significant (Fig 2B, MI). Just like for *C. papaya*, *Morinda lucida* leaves were mentioned to be used by breast-feeding women in Angola for the so-called cleaning the breast milk. Traditional usages of *Morinda lucida* are also described for Nigeria, while there are no references for its utilization regarding lactation [24].

Among the other seven extracts referred to as beneficial for human breast milk production or quality, the β-casein mRNA expression was rather reduced compared to the DMSO-treated cells in a dose-dependent manner (Fig. 2). This down-regulation of the β-casein gene expression supposes an inhibitory effect on the induced mammary cell differentiation of HC11 cells. The highest inhibitory effects were observed for the highest concentrations of *Abrus precatorius*, *Momordica charantia*, *Morinda morindoides*, and *Solanum macrocarpon* (Ap 0.06±0.01; Mc 0.14±0.14; Mm 0.08±0.06; Som 0.09±0.04; \(p \leq 0.05\)).

Different traditional usages of *Abrus precatorius*, amongst others effect on anti-fertility and abortifacient effects supported by data from rat studies, have been described for African and Indian countries, while description of effects on breast milk production or quality to our knowledge are missing [25–27].

In contrast, one of *Momordica charantia*’s traditional applications described is as galactagogue [28, 29]. Hence, preclinical studies observed an impact of *M. charantia* leaf extract on murine mammary gland development as well as an increase of alveoli diameter and blood prolactin in lactating mice in response to fruit juice [30, 31]. *Spondias mombin* was the most frequently mentioned plant species with 36% of the respondents assigning breast milk cleaning properties (Table 1) [12]. So far, there is no other description of its traditional usage as galactagogue in humans. However, several studies investigated *S. mombin* leaves impact on milk production for improvement of breeding in the West African Dwarf sheep. These investigations from Benin and Nigeria observed lactogenic effects of fresh or dried *S. mombin* leaves fed to ewes as an increase of the milk yield, the serum prolactin levels as well as the lamb’s body weight gains [10, 11, 32, 33]. In the present study, the aqueous of *S. mombin* leaf extract inhibited the mammary differentiation of HC11 cells, as the β-casein mRNA expression was half of that induced in the DMSO-treated control cells (Fig. 2b, Spm).

With regard to the three species mentioned to have adverse effects on breastfeeding, all three extracts repressed the β-casein mRNA expression significantly in a dose-dependent manner (Fig. 2, Cr, Se, Va).

Our observations diverging from those of in vivo studies might be based on different molecular actions or on the metabolisation of the compounds. While the in vitro HC11 mammary cell differentiation is based on a prolactin receptor agonistic activity of the investigated compounds, a compound can be shown to act as a galactagogue in in vivo studies by an indirect effect, e.g. influencing prolactin blood levels. Furthermore, the often ascribed breast milk cleaning effect might be based on other indirect mechanisms, for example an impact on mammary gland health by immune regulation as described for *Carica papaya* [23]. Those mechanisms could only be addressed applying in vivo assays. In response to the biological results, the chemical profiles of the two most active extracts, *Morinda lucida* and *Carica papaya*, were further investigated. Initially, HPTLC was used as a fast screening method, however, the high abundance of sugars as expected in aqueous extracts didn’t reveal meaningful information (Fig. 3).

**Fig 3:** HPTLC analysis of the aqueous extracts developed in DCM/MeOH 95:5. Plates were recorded at vis after spraying with sulfuric vanillin, at 254 nm and at 366 nm. 1: Ca, 2: Ap, 3: Sp, 4: Spm, 5: Va, 6: Mc, 7: Cp, 8: Cr, 9: Mm, 10: Som, 11: Ma, 12: Ml.
Continuously, $^1$H-NMR experiments were performed to investigate characteristic resonances indicating certain chemical classes (Table 2). Like HPLC-DAD analysis, samples presented similar spectra, with *Morinda lucida* being richer verifying HPLC-DAD observations. The majority of peaks was detected in the area between 6-9 ppm, indicating the presence of phenolic compounds. Both spectra were also characterized by resonances (at 3-5 ppm), indicating the presence of sugars, while the characteristic double peaks of anomeric protons witness the presence of both free and conjugated sugars.

**Table 2:** NMR spectroscopic data (600 MHz, MeOD) of *Morinda lucida* and *Carica papaya* extracts. Chemical shifts (δ) are expressed in ppm and coupling constants in Hz. The respective chemical structures are also illustrated.

| δH, multiplicity (J inHz) | Chemical structures |
|--------------------------|---------------------|
| 7.59, d (15.9)           | [Caffeic acid](#)   |
| 6.34, d (15.9)           |                     |
| 6.96, dd (8.1/2.1)       |                     |
| 7.07, d (2.1)            |                     |
| 6.78, d (8.1)            |                     |
| 8.2, s                   |                     |
| 8.04, d (8.9)            |                     |
| 6.91, d (8.9)            |                     |
| 6.69, s                  |                     |
| 7.72, d (8.6)            |                     |
| 7.10, d (8.6)            |                     |
| 7.58, dd, (8.1/2.0)      |                     |
| 6.92, d (8.1)            |                     |
| 7.71, d (2.0)            |                     |
| 7.73, d (1.7)            |                     |
| 7.58, dd (8.1/1.7)       |                     |
| 6.92, d (8.1)            |                     |
| 3.41, d (2.1)            |                     |
| 7.45, d (2.1)            |                     |
| 7.41, d (2.1)            |                     |

**R**$_1$, **R**$_2$=OH →*genistein*  
**R**$_1$, **R**$_3$=H, **R**$_2$=OH →*daidzein*  
**R**=OH →*luteolin*  
**R**=H →*apigenin*  
**R**$_1$=H, **R**$_2$=OCH$_3$ →*vanillic acid*  
**R**$_1$,**R**$_2$=OH →*gallic acid*
The 1H-NMR spectrum of *Morinda lucida* was characterized by trans-hydroxycinnamic derivatives as indicated by the characteristic resonances of a trans-double bond and a substituted aromatic ring. For instance, it is evident the clear presence of caffeic acid also previously reported in *M. lucida* leaves extract [30]. Moreover, disheilded signals at approx. δH 8.20 (2H, s), characteristic of isoflavonones were detected. In combination with additional spin systems in the aromatic region, the presence of daidzein and genistein derivatives, the well-known phytoestrogens is evident [37, 38]. Concerning *Carica papaya*, only signals corresponding to flavonoids were detected and most specifically flavones e.g. luteolin and flavonols signals [39]. Additionally, phenolic acids such as vanillic and gallic acid derivatives were identified in the same extract [40, 41]. According to literature, the two plants are screened on mammary cell differentiation of murine HC11 cells. Leaf extracts of *Carica papaya* and *Morinda lucida* induced HC11 differentiation elevated the mRNA expression of the milk protein β-casein, which is used as a marker of mammary cell differentiation. The observation that the majority of the plant extracts did not induce mammary epithelial cell differentiation, assumes that the plants might rather exert their effects on prolactin levels or on other mechanism influencing the mammary gland health. Phenolic compounds and flavonoids were identified as the major chemical classes in *Morinda lucida* and *Carica papaya* aqueous extracts, demonstrating them as potentially chemical classes responsible for the observed activity.

**Acknowledgements**

We thank Gesine Jendras for collecting the plant material during her studies in Uíge. Furthermore, the article would not have been possible without the contribution of knowledge from the villagers of the Province Uíge. The University Kimpa Vita provided logistical support. The fieldwork in Angola was supported by the program “Strategic Partnerships” of the TU Dresden. These published results were obtained in collaboration with the Instituto Nacional da Biodiversidade e Áreas de Conservação (INBAC) of the Ministério do Ambiente da República de Angola. The authors would like to thank the European Union (ERDF) and Greek national funds through the Operational Program “Competitiveness, Entrepreneurship and Innovation”, under the call “STRENGTHENING RESEARCH AND INNOVATION INFRASTRUCTURES” (project code: 5002803 - PlantUP).

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