

DETERMINATION OF PHYTOCHEMICAL CONSTITUENTS IN *CNIDOSCOLUS ACONITIFOLIUS* LEAVES EXTRACTS BY GC-FID

Original Research Article

ABSTRACT

Cnidoscolus aconitifolius, commonly called 'Chaya' and in Southeastern Nigeria 'hospital too far', or 'catholic vegetable' is a medicinal plant from the family Euphorbiaceae that has been used since pre-Columbian times as food and in treating diseases. The aim of this study was to determine the phytochemicals present in the ethanol, methanol, and aqueous extracts of *Cnidoscolus aconitifolius* leaves, which could be accountable for the plant's acclaimed therapeutic properties, using Gas Chromatography-Flame Ionization Detector (GC-FID) technique. Cold maceration was used in the extraction process while GC-FID was employed for the qualitative and quantitative analysis. The phytochemical screening revealed the presence of lunamarine, cardiac glycoside, anthocyanin, spartien, cyanogenic glycoside, flavonones, steroids, keampferol, epicatechin, flavones, oxalate, resveratol, sapogenin, epihedrine, flavan-3-ol, proanthocyanin, naringin, ribalinidine, naringenin, catechin, tannin, rutin, and phytate. However, the extracts did not all contain the same phytochemicals nor quantity of phytochemicals. While the ethanol extract recorded phytate (18.9224 μ g/ml) as the highest yield, methanol had spartein (17.2035 μ g/ml) and the aqueous extracts had epicatechin (9.2402 μ g/g). The presence of these pharmacologically active substances, which has been researched to have antimicrobial, anti-diabetic, anti-oxidant, and anti-inflammatory properties amongst others, supports the efficacy of *Cnidoscolus aconitifolius* leaves in treatment of various pathologies and use in ethnopharmacology. It also projects *Cnidoscolus aconitifolius* leaves as a probable raw material for antibiotic formulation.

Keywords: *Cnidoscolus aconitifolius*, GC-FID, Medicinal plants, Phytochemicals, Aqueous extracts, ethanol extracts and methanol extracts

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial, medicinal plants have been used traditionally as therapeutics to various illnesses. Long before recorded history, people employed plants for medical purposes and as early as 3000 BC,

descriptions of plant medicines were found in Chinese and Egyptian papyrus literature [1]. Medicinal plants are plants that “possess therapeutic properties or exert beneficial pharmacological effects on and/or in” the body, and are used globally especially in developing countries for treatment of one ailment or the other [2] with greater efficacy and fewer or no significant adverse effects [1] [44]. The WHO estimates that 80% of developing countries populations rely on traditional medicines, mostly plant drugs, for their primary health care needs [3]. The therapeutic properties of medicinal plants can be largely attributed to the wide variety of bioactive compounds, such as saponin, phytate, flavonoids, tannins, and alkaloid, the plants contain [4] which makes them serve as core components of new drugs. For instance, phenolics aid in preventing cardiovascular diseases and cancer [5] while alkaloid is used in the manufacture of antimalarial, analgesic and antihypertensive drugs [6]. With over 500,000 kinds of medicinal plants on earth, there is tremendous hope for the discovery of new pharmacological compounds [1] but there is also the challenge of ascertaining the phytochemicals in these plants responsible for their therapeutic actions. This knowledge would not only aid in drug production but would also create a scientific reference base as a guide to the populace. Hence, this research aimed at analyzing the phytochemicals present in a widely consumed medicinal plant in Southeastern Nigeria - *Cnidoscopus aconitifolius*.

Cnidoscopus aconitifolius, with common name ‘hospital too far’, ‘catholic vegetable’, Spinach tree or Chaya, is a perennial herb from the family Euphorbiaceae and is recorded to have originated from South–East Mexico during the pre-Cambrian period [2]. The leaves of “*C. aconitifolius* has serrated edges, with a long petiole length, without pubescences, with sagittate base, with the presence of glands and with white flowers” [20]. It is a traditionally used medicinal plant in South-Eastern Nigeria with many claims from local consumers of its blood-replenishing properties. The leaf extract is employed traditionally in the treatment of anaemia, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases [7], and serve as diuretic, laxative, and an antimicrobial agent [2]. The whole plant is used in treating fever, respiratory, kidney and urinary disorders [8] while the juice, and pounded leaves are applied to wounds and refractory ulcers, scabies, eczema and ringworm [9] [7]. Nutritionally, *C. aconitifolius* is two or three times higher in nutrients than spinach, lettuce, and Chinese cabbage [43], its leaves also serve as food for animals such as chickens, ducks, goats, pigs, iguanas and cattle[45]. Furthermore, *Cnidoscopus aconitifolius* have been reported to possess essential phytochemicals such as anthraquinones, tannins, polyanxanthone c, lignins, phlobatannins, alkaloid, saponin and sesquiterpenes, which have antimicrobial, antidiabetic and anti-mutagenic properties [10]. Most times, the availability of these secondary metabolites depend on the extract and processing techniques employed; and with the paucity of literature on likely phytochemicals, which could be identified using GC-FID technique, this study was aimed at screening the phytochemical constituents of the ethanol, methanol, and aqueous extract of *Cnidoscopus aconitifolius* leaves using GC-FID technique. This research would bridge this gap in knowledge and supply adequate information on the phytochemicals present in this plant for therapeutic purposes and drug synthesis.

2.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Plant Material

Fresh plant leaves of *Cnidocolus aconitifolius* were harvested from a farm in ifite-awka, Awka South Local Government Area, Anambra state, Nigeria and identified by the Botany department of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra state. Nigeria. The herbarium number is NAUH-168^A. The leaves were then air-dried, pulverized and stored in airtight sterile containers at room temperature for further use.

2.2 Chemicals/Solvents

Ethanol (70%), absolute methanol, sterile water, potassium hydroxide(50%), hexane, anhydrous sodium sulfate, pyridine. The chemicals are all of analytical grade from Sigma Aldrich, USA.

2.3 Extracts Preparation for Phytochemical Analysis

Cold maceration method was used in the extraction process. The leaf powder was weighed using a weighing balance. Exactly 350g of it was macerated in 2L of sterile water, ethanol, and methanol separately, shaken vigorously for some minutes and left to stand for 72 hours at 37°C. These afterward, were sieved using muslin cloth and the filtrates concentrated using a rotary evaporator at 40°C except the aqueous extract [11]. The percentage yield of the crude extract was calculated using the formula:

$$\text{Percentage yield of the crude extract (\%)} = \frac{\text{Weight of crude extract (g)}}{\text{Weight of pulverized sample (g)}} \times 100$$

Extraction of phytochemicals

1g of the fraction (ethanol, methanol and aqueous extracts separately) was weighed and transferred into a test tube and “15ml ethanol and 10ml of 50% m/v potassium hydroxide was added. The test tube was allowed to react in a water bath at 60°C for 60mins. After the reaction time, the reaction product contained in the test tube was transferred to a separatory funnel. The tube was washed successfully with 20ml of ethanol, 10ml of cold water, 10ml of hot water and 3ml of hexane, which were all transferred to the funnel. This extracts were combined and washed three times with 10ml of 10%v/v ethanol aqueous solution. The solution was dried with anhydrous sodium sulfate and the solvent was evaporated. The sample was solubilized in 1000µl of pyridine of which 200µl was transferred to a vial for analysis” [12] [11].

2.4 Identification and Quantification using GC-FID

The phytochemical analysis was carried out using a BUCK M910 Gas chromatography with a Flame Ionization Detector [13]. A GC capillary column, RESTEK(make) MXT-1 (15m length x 250µm ID x 0.15µm film thickness) was used for the separation. Helium (5.0 pa.s) was used as a carrier gas, with a flow rate of 40 ml/min. The injector temperature was set to 280°C with a splitless injection volume of 2 µL sample and a linear velocity of 30cm⁻¹. The GC oven temperature was set to 200°C; and then raised to 330°C at a rate of 3°C per minute and maintained there for 5 minutes. The detector temperature was set to 320°C. The flow rate for hydrogen gas was 40psi, oxygen 350 psi and nitrogen, which was the make-up gas, was 10psi.

Phytochemicals were determined by the ratio between the area and mass of internal standard (The internal standard used is AccuStandard USA. The concentration of internal standard is 50ppm) and the area of the identified phytochemicals. The concentrations of the different phytochemicals were expressed in µg/g, µg/ml and ppm. The retention time of the standard is compared with the retention time of the sample and the concentration in ppm evaluated.

$$\text{Percentage Composition (\%)} = \frac{\text{Amount(concentration) of component (ppm)}}{\text{Total concentration of components (ppm)}} \times 100$$

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

3.1 Percentage Yield of Extracts of *Cnidoscolus aconitifolius* Leaves

This (Table 1) revealed that with the same quantity of pulverized leaves, ethanol extract had the highest percentage yield of crude plant extract followed by methanol and aqueous extract. The extraction of 350g of pulverized *Cnidoscolus aconitifolius* leaves with ethanol, methanol and aqueous as solvents (separately) resulted in an extract yield of 50g, 44g and 38g respectively. Thus, percentage yields of 14.29%, 12.57%, and 10.86% of the starting plant material were obtained.

TABLE 1: Percentage Yield of Extracts of *Cnidoscolus aconitifolius* Leaves

Solvents	Weight of the pulverized sample (g)	Weight of crude extract (g)	Percentage yield of extract (%)
Ethanol	350	50	14.29
Methanol	350	44	12.57
Aqueous	350	38	10.86

3.2 Phytochemical screening of *Cnidoscolus aconitifolius* leaves extracts

Gas chromatography-Flame Ionization Detector technique screening of *Cnidoscolus aconitifolius* leaves (Fig 1) indicates that the extracts do not contain the same phytochemicals. While Flavan-3-ol was present only in the ethanol extract, proanthocyanin was detected only in the methanol extract and no phytochemical was peculiar to the aqueous extract of *Cnidoscolus aconitifolius* leaves. Naringin, ribalinidine, and naringenin were found only in the ethanol and methanol extracts, catechin and tannin were present only in the methanol and aqueous extract while rutin and phytate were present only in the ethanol and aqueous extract of the plant leaves. However, lunamarine, cardiac glycoside, anthocyanin, spartein, cyanogenic glycoside, flavonones, steroids, keampferol, epicatechin, flavone, oxalate, resveratol, sapogenin, and epihedrine were found in all three extracts.

The chromatogram (Fig. 2, 3 and 4) shows the quantitative evaluation of the phytochemicals extracted from the plant. In the ethanol extract, phytate (18.9224 μ g/ml) and naringin (14.1273 μ g/ml) had the highest concentration while resveratol had the lowest concentration of 3.8888 ppm. For methanol extract, rich amounts of spartein (17.2035 μ g/ml) and oxalate (10.3147 μ g/ml) were present while proanthocyanin was there in minute quantity (0.2552ppm). The aqueous extract had high amounts of epicatechin (9.2402 μ g/g) and phytate (7.1889 μ g/ml) with considerable quantity of spartein (4.4838 μ g/ml), and rutin (3.6003 μ g/ml) while resveratol (2.5998 ppm) and flavones (2.7896 ppm) were present in minute concentration.

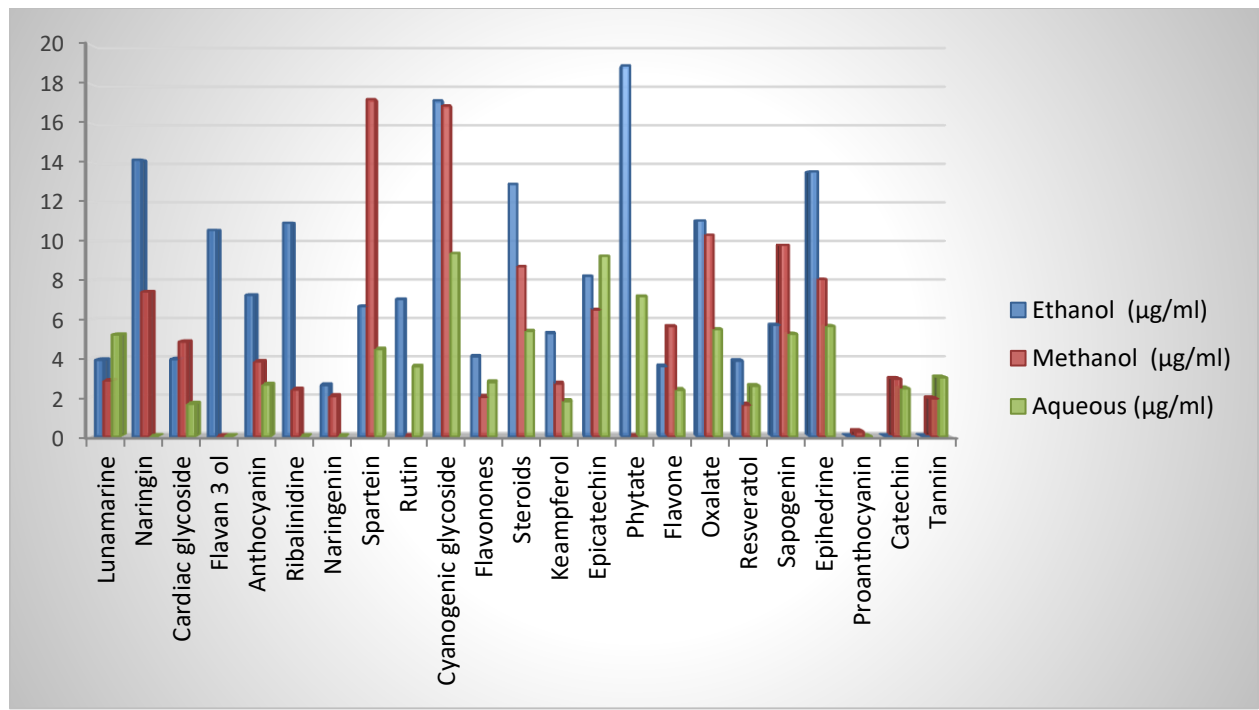


Fig. 1 Phytochemical screening of *Cnidoscopus aconitifolius* leaves

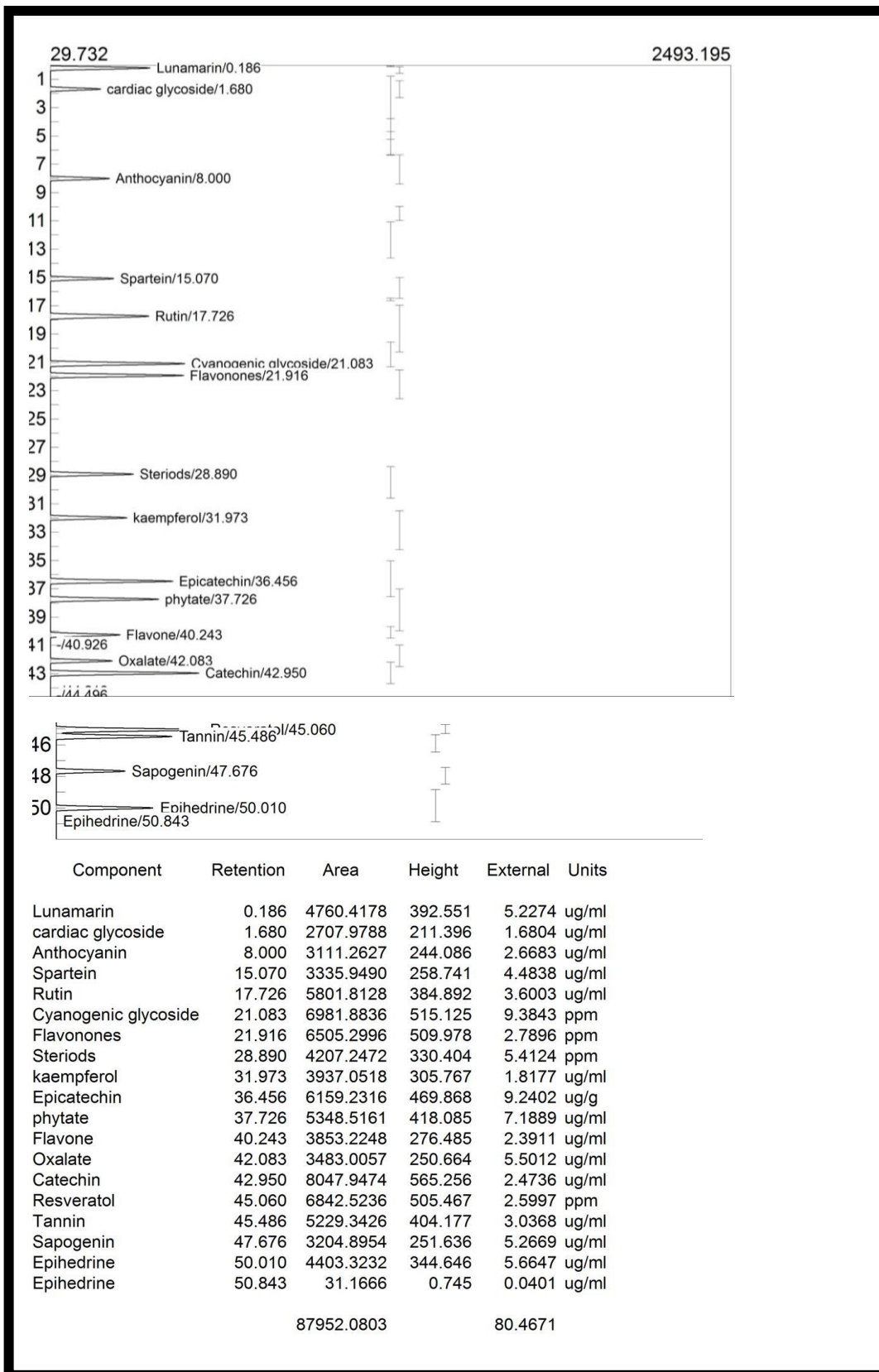


Fig. 2: Chromatogram of the aqueous extract of *Cnidoscopus aconitifolius* leaves

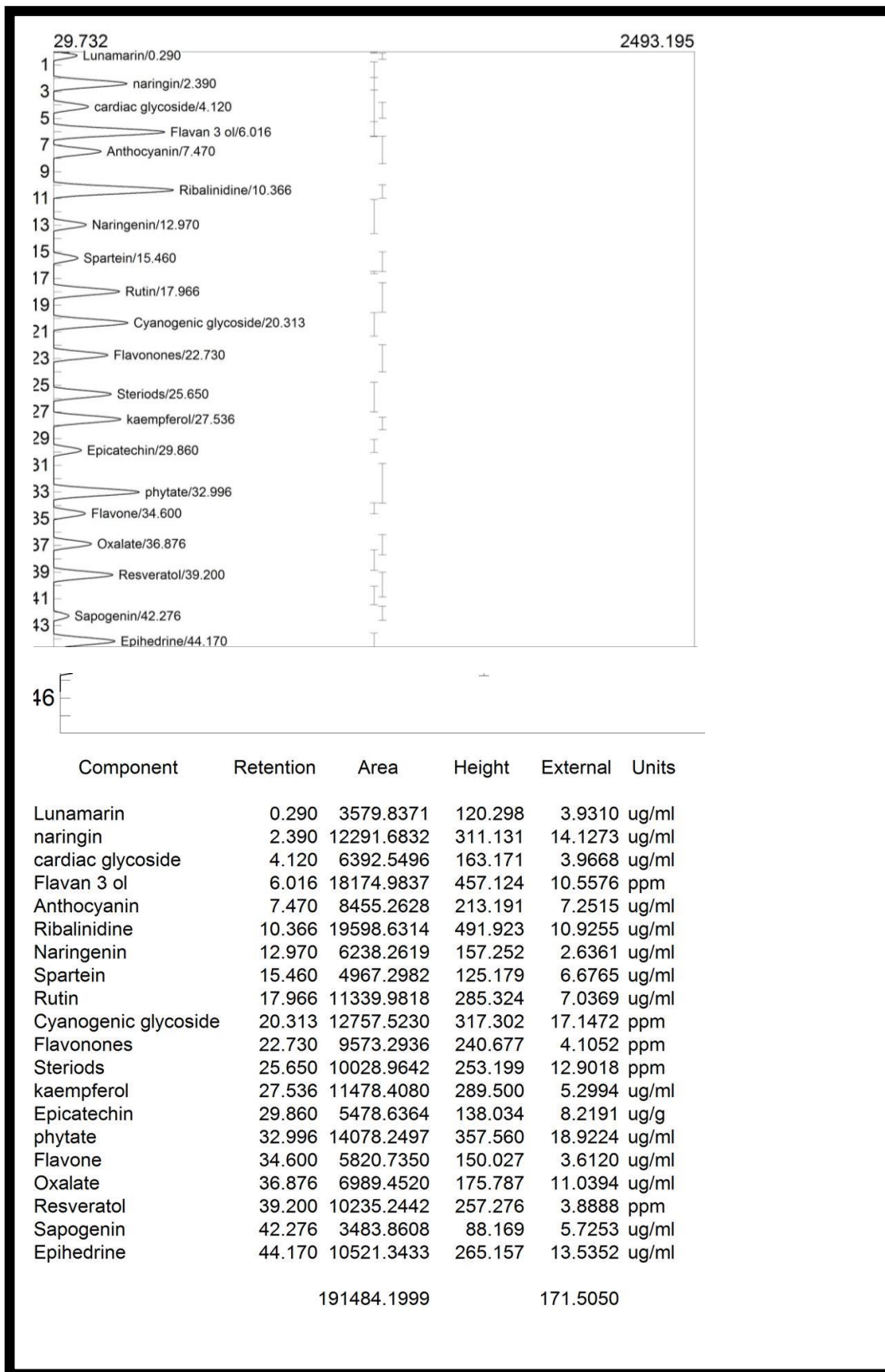


Fig. 3: Chromatogram of the ethanol extract of *Cnidoscolus aconitifolius* leaves

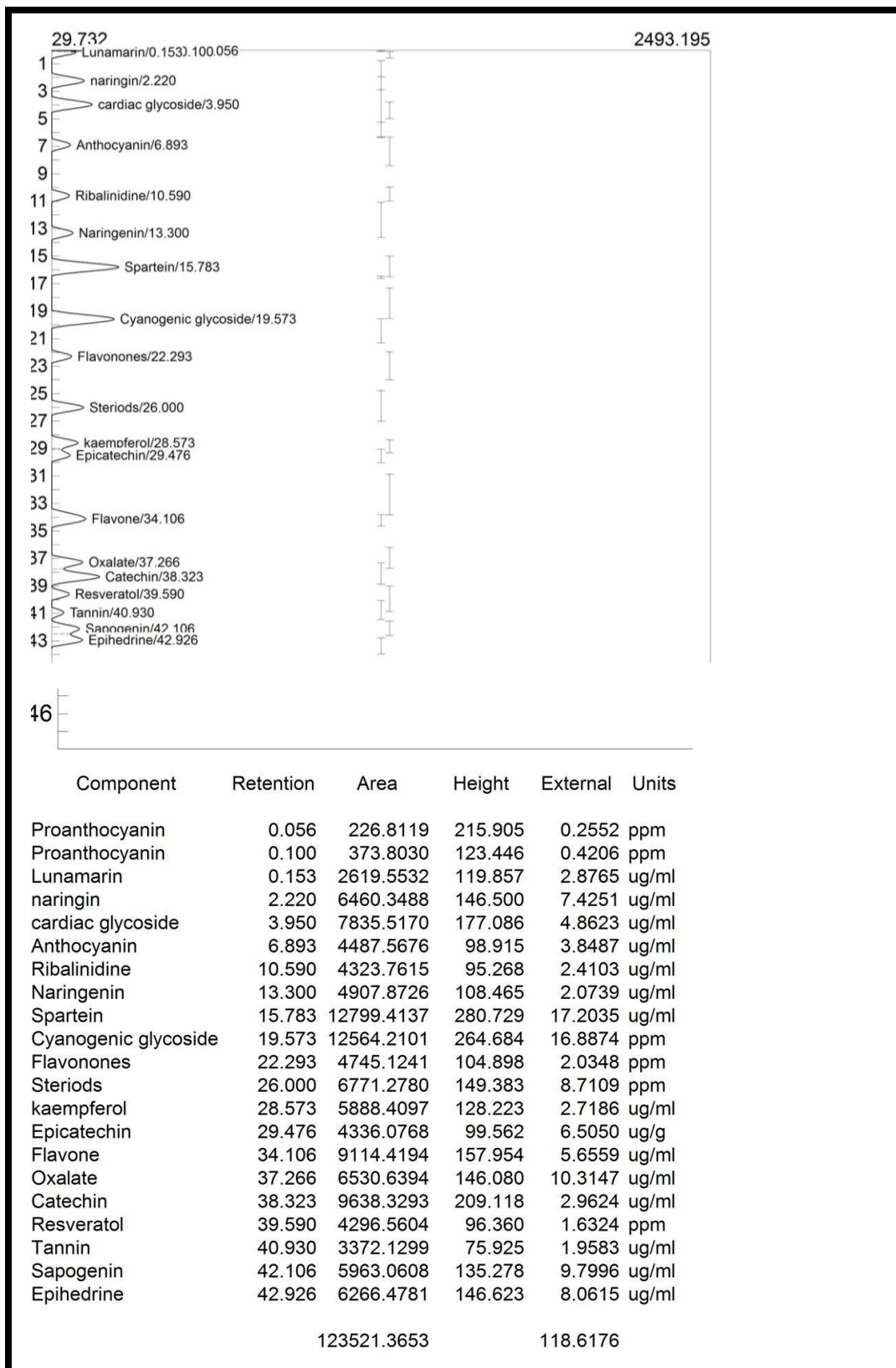


Fig. 4: Chromatogram of the methanol extract of *Cnidoscopus aconitifolius* leaves

DISCUSSION

Phytochemicals are secondary metabolites also known as bioactive constituents found in plant, which are responsible for several health advantages when consumed over time in a prescribed dosage [14]. The phytochemicals obtained in this study aligned with the findings of [2] [15] [16] [17] but anthraquinones, and phlobatannins, which they obtained, were absent in this study. The use of GC-FID revealed phytochemicals such as oxalate, specific forms of alkaloid (lunamarine, ephedrine, spartein, ribalinidine), and flavonoid (naringenin, anthocyanin, proanthocyanin, kaempferol, catechin) which before now had not been documented as bioactive constituents of *Cnidioscolus aconitifolius* leaves extract. Rich concentrations of ephedrine, ribalinidine, epicatechin, phytate, naringin, flavan-3-ol, sapogenin, spartein, and steroids were also recorded in this work. The presence of these phytochemicals justifies the ability of the plant to treat various ailments.

Alkaloids are the most abundant phytochemicals in plants; the high quantities of alkaloids (spartein, ephedrine and ribalinidine) obtained in this research infer the ability of *C. aconitifolius* leaves extracts to play anti-inflammatory and hepatoprotective roles. Alkaloids also manage hypertension and AIDS related intestinal infections, diverse degenerative diseases [18], diabetes mellitus, and cancer [19].

The presence of phenolic compounds (Flavonoid, phenol, and tannin) in *C. aconitifolius* concurred with the findings of [20] making the plant a suitable raw material in drug production. The various forms of the phenolic compounds: phytate, epicatechin, naringin and flavan-3-ol were also present in rich quantities. Phenolic compounds protect the plant from pathogens. Their presence in *C. aconitifolius* indicates the plant's antioxidants, anti-inflammatory and anticancer abilities [21].

Flavonoids and glycosides have been researched to be major antioxidants. They exhibit a broad range of biological properties, amongst which are antifungal, antibacterial, cytostatic, antidiarrhoeal, analgesic, and anti-inflammatory [23] [15]. "The antimicrobial attributes of these bioactive constituents have been associated with their abilities to inhibit cell wall formation in fungi, intercalate with DNA, and inactivate microbial adhesions and enzyme" [2]. Flavonoids can also shrink cancer cells and lessen the likelihood of developing neurodegenerative and cardiovascular diseases [24]. Flavonoids also offer "protection against allergies, free radicals, platelet aggregation, ulcers, hepatoxins, viruses and tumors, scavenging, anti-microbial, anti-leukemic, vasodilator, anticancer, and antibacterial properties, and are reported to be useful for improving blood circulation in the brain of alzheimeric patients [41].

"Plants containing tannins are used to treat non-specific diarrhea and inflammation of the mouth" [25] [26]. Tannins have also been reported to possess antioxidant properties and carry out antimicrobial abilities at low concentrations [27] via proteolytic enzymes, cell membrane lysis, microbial adhesions, and inhibition of protein synthesis pathways [28]. According to [22], "Tannins can be toxic to filamentous fungi, yeast, and bacteria" and cause physiological responses in animals when consumed [29]. In addition is their use as healing agents in piles, diarrhea, and gonorrhoea [42]. Aside the biological properties of these bioactive compounds, they also aid in wading off pathogens from the plants hence serving as part of their defense mechanism [30].

The presence of sapogenin (a form of Saponin) is in agreement with the work of [4] [31]. Sapogenin has an innate capacity to eliminate microbes [24] [2], aids in the treatment of hypertension, hyperglycaemia and hypercholesterolaemia, acts as a prophylactic against cancer [32] and possess anti-diabetic, antihemolytic and anti-inflammatory abilities [33].

Steroids were also found in this study in high concentrations. Steroid is consistently utilized in the food, cosmetics, and herbal medicine industries due to their biological attributes; they are also effective antimicrobial and insecticidal agents [36]. Fortunately, the toxic, hydrocyanic glycoside found in the plant can be easily neutralized by soaking and cooking the leaves [2] likewise oxalate, which causes a decrease in calcium and iron absorption in the body [37].

Furthermore, the antioxidant nature of phytochemicals such as flavonoids, naringenin, rutin, catechin, kaempferol, epicatechin, anthocyanin and phenol present in the plant can also be utilized in the food industry for their role in food preservation and prevention of food spoilage [24].

4.0 CONCLUSION

The numerous phytochemicals present in *Cnidoscopus aconitifolius* leaves confirms its efficacy as a medicinal plant of high therapeutic value. Phytate, for instance, have been researched to prevent kidney stone, dental decay, and calcification of blood vessels [22]. Tannins facilitate healing of wounds and is effective in treating inflamed or ulcerated tissues in the body [18]. Saponin stimulates Ca^{2+} influx, which strengthens the contraction of cardiac muscles in the body [34] [35], "Its presence in *Cnidoscopus aconitifolius* leaves makes the plant a potential antibiotic" [4].

From the three extracts- ethanol, methanol and aqueous- used, the concentrations of these important secondary metabolites were highest in the ethanol extract and least in aqueous extract. Ethanol extract was rich in alkaloids (epihedrine), phenolic compounds (ribalinidine, epicatechin, naringin, flavan-3-ol) and steroids (phytate and steroids), key phytochemicals responsible for the medicinal properties of the plant. This infers the anti-cancer, anti-inflammatory [38], anti-diabetic [39], antioxidant [40] and antimicrobial abilities [2] of the ethanol extract of *C. aconitifolius* leaves. Methanol extract had appreciable quantities of saponin and the alkaloid-spartien, hence it could be applied as an antimicrobial agent. Aqueous extract had low concentrations of these vital phytochemicals, cyanogenic glycoside and oxalate inclusive, thus it is less toxic for consumption.

With this array of phytochemicals found in *Cnidoscopus aconitifolius*, it is evident that it is an embodiment of solution to various ailments and if properly harnessed would be instrumental in ethnopharmacology. Knowledge of these bioactive substances in the various extracts used in this study would guide in the proper utilization of this medicinal plant for both consumption and drug synthesis. This data, if utilized appropriately, will undoubtedly affect the pharmaceutical and food industries positively.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no conflict of interest

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. Author AJC designed the study, wrote the protocol and the first draft of the manuscript. Author ECU supervised the work. Author CDC edited the manuscript to fit the manuscript guideline. Author OCO managed the phytochemical analysis of the study and plagiarism check of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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