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### Psychoactive Ubulawu Spiritual Medicines and Healing Dynamics in the Initiation Process of Southern Bantu Diviners

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# Psychoactive *Ubulawu* Spiritual Medicines and Healing Dynamics in the Initiation Process of Southern Bantu Diviners

Jean-Francois Sobiecki, B.Sc. Hons., EthnoBot<sup>a</sup>

**Abstract**—The use of psychoactive plants by traditional healers in southern Africa appears to be a neglected area of ethnobotanical research. This article explores the healing dynamics involved in the use of popular psychoactive plant preparations known as *ubulawu* in the initiation rituals of Southern Bantu diviners. Research methods include a review of the literature, fieldwork interviews with Southern Bantu diviners, and an analysis of experiential accounts from diverse informants on their use of *ubulawu*. Findings reveal that there is widespread reliance on *ubulawu* as psychoactive spiritual medicines by the indigenous people of southern Africa to communicate with their ancestral spirits—so as to bring luck, and to treat mental disturbances. In the case of the Southern Bantu diviners, *ubulawu* used in a ritual initiation process acts as a mnemonic aid and medicine to familiarize the initiates with enhanced states of awareness and related psychospiritual phenomena such as enhanced intuition and dreams of the ancestral spirits, who teach the initiates how to find and use medicinal plants. The progression of the latter phenomena indicates the steady success of the initiates' own healing integration. Various factors such as psychological attitude and familiarization, correct plant combinations/synergy and a compatible healer-initiate relationship influence *ubulawu* responsiveness.

**Keywords**—medicinal plants, psychotropic plants, psychospiritual healing, South African traditional medicine, traditional healers, *ubulawu*

Anyone can use the plants [*ubulawu*] to connect with their ancestors. The plants give you what you are.

Mama Maponya – Northern Sotho Diviner

Psychoactive plant use is a neglected field of ethnobotany in southern Africa. However, some researchers

have embarked on revitalising the research field of psychoactive plant use in southern Africa (Mitchell & Hudson 2004; Sobiecki 2002). Sobiecki (2002) has documented over 300 species of plants that are reported as having psychoactive uses in traditional southern African

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I would like to thank Mrs. Maponya and the other healers I have worked with for guiding and teaching me and sharing their healing knowledge, Professor Thea de Wet for her encouragement and support throughout the research, Jaco Crous and Jane Burt for editing the paper, Andrzej Sobiecki for proof-reading the abstract and Dominique Florczak for his electronic support. I would like to acknowledge the healing power of the plants and gratitude to my ancestral family for the gift of being able to do this exciting research that I hope will

promote healing for all people. The author declares he has no competing interests.

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healing practices. These uses are varied, from treating conditions such as insomnia to convulsive conditions such as epilepsy (Sobiecki 2002).

A recent review has indicated the significant role that psychoactive plants called *ubulawu* have in traditional spiritual practices in Southern Africa, particularly in divination (Sobiecki 2008). *Ubulawu* preparations are a popular means of administering psychoactive plants in the traditional healing practices in southern Africa, yet many of the details of their use including their mechanisms of psychoactive action, psychological affects, cultural importance and their healing role in the initiation process of Southern Bantu diviners have been poorly researched.

In southern Africa there are two main types of traditional practitioners: the herbalist (Zulu *inyanga*; Xhosa *ixhwele*; Tsonga *nyanga*; Sotho *ngaka*) and the diviner (Zulu *isangoma*; Xhosa *igqirha lokuvumisa*; Tsonga *mungome*; Sotho *selaodi*). The diviners are considered to be the spiritual specialists, and use divination to communicate with their ancestral spirits to diagnose their patient's misfortunes or medical conditions.

Southern Bantu diviners (e.g. plurals Xhosa: *amagqirha lokuvumisa*, Zulu: *izangoma*) are called to their profession by their ancestral spirits. "The verb *ukuthwasa* refers to this process of becoming a diviner, and the noun *intwaso* to the state or condition of the person undergoing the process" (Hirst 1990). The *intwaso* condition is characterised by a "trouble" (*inkathazo*) that involves various illnesses, copious dreams and psychiatric disturbances (Callaway 1868). To become a diviner the initiate must first be cured of the *intwaso* condition. The treatment includes the use of special plant-based "medicines of the home," training in techniques of divination and curing (Hammond-Tooke 1998), as well as dieting with psychoactive plants called *ubulawu*. The novice is apprenticed to a practising healer who teaches him or her the ways of indigenous healing.

Both the herbalists and diviners prescribe and utilize psychoactive species; however the diviner has specialized knowledge regarding particular species of *ubulawu* that are used in the healing initiation of diviners.

From observing Southern Bantu diviners I befriended as part of my anthropological fieldwork, and my own experiences with traditional southern African healing, it became apparent that there is a complex psychospiritual healing process that gradually unfolds for the Southern Bantu initiate diviner. This process is marked by a progression in dreaming, divining and developing psychic and healing sensitivity. The use of psychoactive *ubulawu* plants is instrumental in these processes, by opening the initiate to the teachings of the ancestral spirits, so as to learn the healing arts and achieve personal psychospiritual healing integration.

This article aims to gain insight from the literature and accounts from Southern Bantu diviners on how these

*ubulawu* plant medicines assist healing: that is, the potential physical, psychological and spiritual healing dynamics involved with their use, which influences the healing process diviners undergo.

## SOUTHERN BANTU SPEAKING PEOPLE OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

Bantu refers to the 300 to 600 ethnic groups in Africa who speak Bantu languages, distributed from Cameroon east across Central Africa and Eastern Africa to Southern Africa. (Lewis 2009). In terms of ethnic grouping the term "Southern Bantu" refers to the Bantu languages spoken in the Southern African region (Nguni, Sotho-Tswana, Venda), which also includes languages of Mozambique (Tsonga) (Van Warmelo 1935).

The traditional Southern Bantu social organization was varied and included three major types: independent chiefdoms, federations of chiefdoms, and kingdoms (Hammond-Tooke 1937: 246). The chief held power and regulated the economy through public access to the means of production: e.g., areas for pasture and land for fields (Hammond-Tooke 1937: 137). However, traditionally there was no ownership of land; the land belonged to the tribe as a whole (Hammond-Tooke 1937: 91). Settlements were arranged according to homesteads, villages or towns (Hammond-Tooke 1937: 248), depending on the group in question and various social and ecological constraints.

Before the arrival of Westerners, the Southern Bantu were hoe-cultivators and pastoralists who supplemented the products of cattle herds and fields (the most important crop being sorghum) by hunting and gathering wild foods (Hammond-Tooke 1937: 136). The women were predominantly the agriculturalists, while the men tended to the cattle activities and hunting, though they helped clear the land for cultivation (Hammond-Tooke 1937: 91).

The most important of the traditional beliefs of the Southern Bantu people is the belief in the immortal ancestors who influence and direct the affairs of the living and to whom propitiatory practices such as offering food and drink were directed (Hammond-Tooke 1937: 104). Traditionally, the belief in miscellaneous "nature" spirits and a supreme creator existed though the creator was not seen as being interested in the affairs of his creation (Hammond-Tooke 1937: 319).

Before the expansion of farming and herding peoples, including those speaking Bantu languages, Africa south of the equator was populated by Neolithic hunting and foraging peoples such as the San. Over a period of many centuries, most hunting-foraging peoples were displaced and absorbed by incoming Bantu-speaking communities. Cultural exchange is believed to have occurred between the two groupings, including spiritual and healing knowledge and beliefs: e.g., the Southern Bantu learned and integrated

the San's shamanic healing knowledge (Hammond-Tooke 1998).

In the early eighteenth century first contact was made between European Whites and the Southern Bantu peoples (Hammond-Tooke 1937: 367). Thereafter some 200 years of confrontational relations ensued that involved competition for land, disruption of traditional life through trader and missionary activities, subordination through European military superiority, and the creation of territories to provide an attempted representation of detribalized Southern Bantu people (Hammond-Tooke 1937: 367).

The influence of Christianity resulted in the broad distinction between European orthodox churches and the more syncretic church movements (such as the Zionists) that incorporated the traditional Southern Bantu beliefs and performance of ancestor rituals: e.g., praying for the ancestors guidance and interpreting dreams from them (Hammond-Tooke 1937: 437). Thus, the modern day Southern Bantu diviners have carried through a syncretic and diverse culture based on elements of traditional Southern Bantu beliefs of the ancestral spirits and a creator, shamanic practices and Christian influences—all of which are evident in their healing tradition.

## METHODS

As a background I am an ethnobotanist with university training in botany and medical anthropology. I have had a life-long calling to healing including the use of medicinal plants, the knowledge of which I gained through self study of nature, books, making and using my own herbal medicines as well as participant observation with local healers throughout my life. I am currently apprenticing with a Northern Sotho healer in Johannesburg to learn southern African healing and traditional medicine.

The research was periodically conducted between 1998 and 2011. Data collection methods included: a review and analysis of the literature on psychoactive plant use in southern African traditional healing systems, fieldwork interviews conducted with Southern Bantu diviners on their use of psychoactive plants including *ubulawu* (with a focus in 2011 on the healing dynamics involving the use of *ubulawu*), and an analysis of experiential accounts from diverse informants on their use of *ubulawu*. Most of the fieldwork was conducted on the Witwatersrand, in Gauteng Province, South Africa, but also in the Free State, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo Provinces.

The fieldwork comprised semi-structured interviews with 19 practising indigenous healers (ten female and nine male) at their *umuthi* (plant medicine) shops or homes. Fourteen of the healers are Southern Bantu diviners while five are herbalists who do not divine. The healers were traced through word of mouth or through telephone directories.

I established a close relationship with four of the healers and have maintained a close friendship and working relationship with one of these key informants, a Northern Sotho diviner named Mrs Maponya whose knowledge of *ubulawu* made an important contribution to this study. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all the traditional healers I interviewed.

A number of *ubulawu* plants were identified by collecting voucher specimens (Sobiecki 2008), through showing color photographs or pictures of plants to the healers, and by using colloquial names and plant name lists (Williams 2007; Williams, Balkwill & Witkowski 2001). These include: *Dianthus mooiensis* F.N.Williams., *Maesa lanceolata* Forssk., *Rhoicissus tridentata* (L.f.) Wild & R.B.Drumm. subsp. *cuneifolia* (Eckl. & Zeyh.) Urton., *Silene bellidioides* Sond., and *Silene pilosellifolia* Cham. & Schldl.

My fieldwork in the Limpopo Province (in 2000) and initiation ceremonies into traditional southern African healing in rural KwaZulu-Natal (in September 2009), as well as other periodic ritual ingestion of psychoactive plants contributed valuable participant observation experience and insight into the healing dynamics involving *ubulawu*.

Informal interviews were held with a number of other informants on their experiences with southern African psychoactive plants, including medicinal plant traders, medicinal plant customers, academics, freelance researchers and more recently with psychonauts (individuals who purposefully experiment with such plants and experiences for personal development) on a South African Internet-based psychoactive plant use forum, thus providing insight on the healing dynamics of psychoactive plants as used by diviners as part of their own healing process.

## METHODS OF PREPARING AND ADMINISTERING *UBULAWU* PLANT MEDICINES IN SOUTHERN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL HEALING PRACTICES

The term *ubulawu* refers mostly to the roots of a variety of herbs and creepers, and sometimes the stems or bark of certain plants (Hirst 1990) that are ground and made into a cold water infusion that is churned with a forked stick to produce foam. This foam production is typical of *ubulawu* preparations. *Ubulawu* species are classified by Xhosa diviners according to the locality in which they grow, that is, *ubulawu* of the river, *ubulawu* of the forest etc (Hirst 1990).

*Ubulawu* preparations, used in the initiation of Southern Bantu diviners, are typically drunk as an infusion until the initiate's stomach is full and he or she is ready to vomit. Vomiting is then induced. The vomiting of this compound is referred to as *ukugabha* (Xhosa) (Lamla

1975). The foam from the preparation is used to wash the body, normally late in the evening (Lamla 1975). Both vomiting and washing with the foam are used “to remove ritual impurity” (Hirst 2005). Though vomiting is reported as removing ritual impurity, the mechanism of vomiting has a physiological affect on the dreaming process that is elaborated on later in this article.

The *ubulawu* foam is also eaten by initiates on an empty stomach to enhance dreaming. The eating of the foam and the drinking of the infusion prior to vomiting are the means by which psychoactive chemicals in the plants enter the body system, thereby having psychoactive effects, including changes in mood and enhanced dreaming. Thus, both the eating of the foam and drinking and vomiting with the *ubulawu* infusion aid the dreaming process through different yet complementary mechanisms.

Vomiting is usually performed in the mornings, with the foam being eaten in the evening before sleeping (Mrs. Maponya, personal communication). Yet eating the foam can also be performed both in the morning and evening as occurs with the Xhosa in the Eastern Cape (Broster 1981). The differences in administration of *ubulawu* depend on the cultural group in question, with “the Zulu liking to vomit while the Sotho likes to eat the foam instead” (Mrs. Maponya, personal communication).

#### USES AND INDIGENOUS CULTURAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF *UBULAWU*

There are numerous uses of the *ubulawa* preparations. The type of use often depends on the species of plants used in the preparations. Despite varying and seemingly unrelated uses, this article demonstrates that *ubulawu* preparations have psychoactive affects as a common basis of action.

The most common use of *ubulawu* is cleaning the body through vomiting with the preparation (Hirst 1990), by removing impurities, including “dirt from the chest and healing stomach disorders” (Lamla 1975). This use of *ubulawu* is believed to bring luck, and is a common practice among indigenous southern African lay people. “Luck” means that “the plants will connect you with your ancestral spirits, to give you what you need, they open your way, and in this way all the plants can give you spiritual help” (Mrs. Maponya, personal communication). From a physiological perspective this concept of luck could be interpreted in the context of the effect of vomiting on dreaming, together with *ubulawu*'s psychoactive effects, to facilitate a connection with enhanced states of awareness with the possibility of experiencing clearer thinking and insight, revelatory dreams, or good feelings—i.e., being lucky. Mutually inclusive of these physiological mechanisms is the spiritual indigenous understanding that the use of *ubulawu* connects one with your ancestral spirits who teach and guide, and

this is considered lucky. The term *ubulawu* comes from the Xhosa verb *ukulawula* (to control) and refers to “that spirit that controls one” (Hirst 2005). This origin of the word is a clear indication of the primary use of *ubulawu* as spiritual medicines.

Whereas lay people can obtain insight or spiritual guidance into their lives with *ubulawu*, the diviner healer learns to use dreams as a path to heal. Why is there this difference then? Mama Maponya shed light on this question when she said, “Anyone can use the plants to connect with their ancestors. The plants give you what you are . . . Those people with a strong spirit, only they can have this connection with special spiritual powers [becoming a healer]. If anyone just uses them it can't work in the same way.” In the Southern Bantu worldview, dreams belong to the domain of the ancestors and serve as the medium through which the diviner establishes contact with, and receives healing knowledge from their ancestors (Sobiecki 2008).

Hirst (2005, 2000, 1990) describes the interconnection between the use of *ubulawu* and dreaming related to the ancestral spirits in the initiation of Xhosa diviners, and its cultural significance. Other researchers have also noted this use of *ubulawu* in the initiation of southern African diviners (Sobiecki 2008; Broster 1981; Schweitzer 1977; Ashton 1943; Kohler 1941).

Psychoactive plants that induce or assist in recalling dreams (oneirogenic) have obvious value for diviners, and are seen as helpers or spiritual aids. Whether this is similar to the concept of “plant teachers” that occurs in Amazonian shamanism (Luna 1984) is currently being investigated by the author. A hypothesis would be that the purpose and results of the South American and South African plant use—to learn healing knowledge—is the same. However, the more intense affects of hallucinogens such as ayahuasca has resulted in their categorization as plant teachers, while the more subtle affects of *ubulawu* plants through dreams could be seen as bringing luck or as connective agents to the ancestral spirits, rather than direct facilitators of knowledge.

Some of the *ubulawu* species that are reported from the literature and diviners as having significant use for dreaming and ancestral spirit communication in the initiation of Southern Bantu diviners and may well have subtle psychoactive effects include: *Agapanthus campanulatus* F.M. Leight., *Boscia albitrunca* (Burch.) Gilg & Gilg-Ben., *Helinus integrifolius* (Lam.) Kuntze., *Hippobromus pauciflorus* (L.f.) Radlk., *Psoralea pinnata* L., *Rhoicissus tridentata* (L.f.) Wild & R.B.Drumm. subsp. *cuneifolia* (Eckl. & Zeyh.) Urton., *Rubia petiolaris* DC., *Silene bellidoides* Sond., *Silene pilosellifolia* Cham. & Schtdl., *Silene undulata* Aiton and *Synaptolepis kirkii* Oliv. (Sobiecki 2008).

*Ubulawu* preparations have also been reported to have medicinal uses, including the treatment of mental

disturbances in patients and improvement of the memory of diviner initiates (see Sobiecki 2008).

Of particular interest is how the *ubulawu* plant used by diviners and their effects contribute to psychospiritual healing.

### THE PSYCHOSPIRITUAL HEALING PROCESS INVOLVING *UBULAWU* USE

Broster (1981) gives an excellent account of the use of various *ubulawu* preparations for psychospiritual healing in a Xhosa initiate diviner named Nombuso. Initially the mixture preparation prescribed did not gain the right effect, but upon modification, resulted in the initiate opening to the teachings of the ancestors, with subsequent feelings of wellness and psychological integration.

Some of the plants used in the initial preparation included a combination of *Rubia petiolaris* DC., *Silene*, *Hippobromus* and *Dianthus* species, all of which are reported to have psychoactive properties (Sobiecki 2008; Hirst 2000).

What appears to have happened is that the original mixture of plants used had psychoactive properties that affected dreaming, but these dreams were disturbing or confusing and the initiate's ailments (that included palpitations, fear, mental confusion, and severe agitation) did not improve after four months of use. At this stage, the initiate was directed by her ancestral spirits in her dreams to stop the medicine and go to another particular tutor healer. The new tutor healer accepted that it was "the dictate of the ancestral spirits" and agreed to apprentice Nombuso. This healer modified the *ubulawu* medicine combination, which resulted in her improvement and successful healing (no longer experiencing the ailments she had). With this improvement came the ability to divine and diagnose illness in her clients.

The disturbing nature of Nombuso's dreams indicated necessary changes in the tutor healer and plant combinations being used. From this and other reported cases, the content and emotional aspect of the initiate's dreams can be viewed as a psychospiritual barometer, indicating progress on the healing path. From other Southern Bantu diviners I have spoken to, the progression of the diviners own healing process while using the *ubulawu* plants is paralleled with clearer dreams of their ancestral spirits instructing them in terms of traditional rituals observances, the location of medicinal plants and how to use them, as well as the nature of their clients ailments even before they arrive for consultations (i.e., divination).

This indicates the complex and interweaving healing processes and mechanisms involved in the use of *ubulawu* use for the initiation of diviners and their healing practices. I had a similar experience undergoing a

South African traditional healing initiation process in rural KwaZulu-Natal in 2009. At the start of the initiation I performed vomiting with an *ubulawu* preparation (red *ubulawu*) in the morning and ate the foam in the evening for a number of days without any marked changes in consciousness, e.g., "big dreams." However, after commencing with a new and different plant preparation (white *ubulawu*), psychoactive effects of mild euphoria, clarity, centeredness and calmness were felt. Being in town one day after using the white *ubulawu*, I was described as "shining" by observers. Despite the mild psychoactive effects from the plant preparations being consumed, no dreams resulted after two weeks of use.

### FACTORS INFLUENCING *UBULAWU* RESPONSIVENESS

Why the preparations do not, on occasion, elicit the desired affects of dreaming and ancestral spirit contact in the diviner initiate is an interesting and perplexing dynamic of *ubulawu* use. There are a number of factors that could influence responsiveness to the medicines.

#### The Spiritual Connection Between Tutor Healer and Initiate

After my initiation experiences, and upon consultation with another diviner, I was told there was no spiritual connection between my tutor healer and my ancestors. This is the spiritual explanation given by some diviners to explain to initiates their unresponsiveness to *ubulawu* preparations. The right healer and right plants must be found to match the initiate and their ancestors.

Another example of this explanation comes from another southern African indigenous group, the Griquas. Pienaar (2009), in her book *The Griqua's Apprentice* says; "Earlier, other wonderful teachers had crossed my path but, in each instance, either the student or the teacher was not quite ready for the specific transfer of energy that was necessary for the learning process." In retrospect, I relate to this statement as I believe my previous tutor healer was not the right person to facilitate the training process for me, for many varied reasons of incompatibility.

Furthermore, in the book she describes how her future tutor healer-diviner, Oom Johannes, had dreamt of her for 37 years prior to him meeting her. This indicates a sense of spiritual destiny that some diviners are aware of and parallels the spiritual match phenomenon that Southern Bantu diviners report. Oom Johannes is said not to have used any plants to help him dream (Pienaar, personal communication), which shows that not all diviner-healers use psychoactive plants for accessing dreams related to healing or prophetic second sight. However many healers do use the plants to assist these abilities.

### Difficulties in the Process of Psychological Familiarization

Many insecurities and fears can negatively impact a person's attitude and inhibit the initiate from opening to the enhanced states of awareness and the ancestral spirit connection necessary in the diviners healing process, be it the relationship to the tutor healer or other factors. Thus, the relationship of trust between initiate and tutor healer during the healing process is essential if learning is to take place.

The aspect of mental attitude falls into a larger domain of what can be called the process of psychological familiarization. Psychological familiarization is an important aspect in both shamanic practices (Noll 1985) and Buddhist mind training (Gyatso 2005). As these traditions demonstrate, time is needed for the practitioner to become familiar with the spiritual practices and related enhanced states of awareness that, once accessed, can lead to healing insights and wisdom.

Psychonauts who have experimented with *ubulawu* species, including *Silene undulata* Aiton., and *Synaptolepis kirkii* Oliv., in nontraditional dosage forms (using capsules of ground material), in larger amounts than traditionally prescribed, and in nontraditional, nonritualized contexts have reported experiences of disturbing and confusing dreams that have led to cessation of use. What this may suggest is that the ritual context, psychological familiarization and an appropriate guide or tutor is vital if the experience is to be of benefit.

Like that of the initiate Nombuso described by Broster (1981), my initial experience of a lack of dreaming and ancestral spirit contact with using *ubulawu* indicated problems with the initiation process. In my experience, the integrity of the training was compromised with many disruptive events preventing the process of familiarization with the effects of the plants and related enhanced states of awareness. A number of other initiates reported similar training problems in this lineage into which I had been initiated.

In summary, the process of psychological familiarization requires trust, time and practice for the initiate to learn to access healing knowledge in a dynamic ritual/therapeutic context.

### The Correct Combination of *Ubulawu* Plants Used and Their Psychoactive Effects

A significant factor influencing the healing and learning process of the Southern Bantu diviner's initiation are the psychoactive chemical actions of the *ubulawu* plants, which include among others relaxing and oneirogenic actions.

The role of synergistic or complementary psychoactive actions due to combining different species of plants is a crucial yet poorly understood aspect of psychoactive plant use by traditional healers in southern Africa.

Mrs. Maponya explained that "using one plant on its own can have too much power, pulling everything to you and that can be harmful. Different plants balance each other's actions. Too much power is not good for a *twasa* (initiate), they must also relax. Like cooking a curry, using too much of one ingredient will spoil the recipe, you need different herbs in different amounts to get the right results." (Mrs. Maponya, personal communication). This use of synergistic or complementary phytochemical actions is characteristic of traditional medicine systems such as traditional Chinese medicine. The relationship between individual neurophysiological differences and the plants psychoactive chemical actions may be another contributing factor influencing responsiveness to *ubulawu* and healing results.

## OTHER THERAPEUTIC MECHANISMS INVOLVED IN THE *UBULAWU* INITIATION OF SOUTHERN BANTU DIVINERS

### Use as a Ritual Mnemonic Aid to Reinforce Prayer, Cultural Meanings and Healing Process

The action of repeatedly churning up and using *ubulawu* serves as a ritual mnemonic aid to anchor the practice of prayer, as well as to reinforce cultural mythology and meanings that are integral to the traditional psychospiritual healing process.

Thus, the ritual process of administering *ubulawu* by the prolonged eating of the foam and its attendant effects on the psyche is an appropriate technology conducive to facilitating the gradual unfolding of a psychospiritual healing transformation that is typical of the diviner's initiation. From my observations of and experiences in southern African traditional healing ceremonies, it appears that it is not only the use of *ubulawu* that heals but that it is the relationship and process between the person, plants, the cultural practices of song, dance, story—and indispensably, the support of community—that assists the initiates in the process of transforming and healing themselves.

### Vomiting/Emesis Therapy

A further healing mechanism involved in the administration of *ubulawu* plants is vomiting. According to Mrs Maponya, "It is important to clear the lungs," which if she does not do, "clouds her inner vision." In this way, vomiting is believed to improve dream recall. Vomiting, or what can be called emesis therapy, is an important treatment method used in African and Ayurvedic (Indian) traditional medicine. In Ayurvedic medicine it is known as *vamana* therapy, and is used to rid the body of excess mucus and water (that is known as *kapha*) that collects on the lungs and "disturbs the mind and clouds the senses" (Frawley 2000). *Vamana* therapy thus increases clarity of perception and relaxation by removing excess *kapha*. This medical

theory reinforces and coincides with the above-mentioned explanation of using *ubulawu* emesis to improve dreaming.

### The Chemistry of *Ubulawu* Plants

Saponins are known to occur in the genus Carophyllaceae (Hutchings et al. 1996), which represents a number of *ubulawu* species used in the initiation of Southern Bantu diviners including: *Dianthus mooiensis* F.N. Williams., *Silene bellidioides* Sond., *Silene pilosellifolia* Cham. & Schldl. and *Silene undulata* Aiton. Saponins are known to be responsible for the production of froth/foam (Van Wyk, Van Oudtshoorn & Gericke 1997) in *ubulawu* preparations that are ingested by the Southern Bantu diviners for their dream inducing actions.

The triterpenoid saponins occurring in *Panax Ginseng* are known to have psychoactive properties and therefore there is a possibility that other triterpenoid saponins found in the Carophyllaceae family may also have psychoactive properties that requires further research. Triterpenoid saponins are confirmed to be in other popular *ubulawu* species used such as in *Agapanthus campanulatus* F.M. Leight. and *Maesa lanceolata* Forssk. (Hutchings et al. 1996). In one study extracts of *Agapanthus campanulatus* F.M. Leight. showed high affinity to the serotonin reuptake transport protein, indicating potential psychoactive (antidepressant) actions (Nielsen et al. 2004), though the chemicals and possible synergistic interactions responsible remain to be elucidated. It is possible that the triterpenoid saponins found in *Agapanthus campanulatus* F.M. Leight. and other *ubulawu* species and their interactions may be responsible for these antidepressant actions, as well as the other reported psychoactive effects outlined in this article.

### FURTHER RESEARCH ON *UBULAWU* AND POTENTIAL APPLICATION IN MEDICINE

A lesson that can be learned from these traditional ethnobotanical practices is that research on the use of psychoactive plants should not be focusing exclusively on the actions of chemical isolates on human functioning, (e.g., assays for screening plants with anticonvulsant/tranquilizing activities), that is a prolific research agenda for potential allopathic/psychiatric medicine application. Traditional whole-plant formulas, (as is typical of *ubulawu* medicines) are known for their synergistic therapeutic effects (Wagner 2011) that are lacking in single constituent-based psychiatric medicine. Therefore, a suggested research direction is to investigate standardized whole plant traditional medicine forms or formulas on indices of psychological wellness/anxiety and not specifically on pharmacological action.

Furthermore, psychoactive plant effects need to be ritually contextualized in order to make sense of their healing potential. This context of ritual that provides psychospiritual

support, safety and a sense of the sacred is something Western scientific research, allopathic medicine and psychotherapy would benefit from understanding and taking into account. Though many of the species used in the initiation of Southern Bantu diviners have been documented in this article, the knowledge of how these species are mixed together into formulas in the initiation of Southern Bantu diviners is usually kept undisclosed to outsiders and initiates who have not successfully completed further stages of training (as such the author). Therefore, information on the *ubulawu* formula recipes being used is limited in this article and is to be investigated as I commence further training to learn southern African traditional medicine.

### THE VALUE OF EXPERIENTIAL ACCOUNTS WITH PSYCHOACTIVE PLANTS

During the research, I came across numerous people, including other researchers, traditional healers and psychonauts who have shared their experiences of southern African psychoactive plants. These experiential accounts have value in indicating potential psychoactive actions and furthering our understanding of healing consciousness. The experiential insight gained from psychoactive plant use and related enhanced states of awareness should be promoted among researchers, instead of being stigmatized. There is a call for this type of expanded experiential insight-based methodology in the field of ethnography (Schroll 2010), and this could extend to fields such as psychology, ethnobotany and pharmacology.

Furthermore, mutual understanding and multidisciplinary collaboration on psychoactive substance research should be fostered so as to build on our knowledge of consciousness and to stimulate the advancement and convergence of the sciences and self-evolution.

### CONCLUSIONS

*Ubulawu* preparations are a popular means of administering psychoactive plants in the traditional healing practices in southern Africa, especially in the initiation and divination practices of Southern Bantu diviners. Yet their influence on the psychospiritual healing process that diviners undergo has been poorly researched.

*Ubulawu* plant use is located in a ritualized context in the diviners' initiation that underpins complex and interlinked healing processes and mechanisms. These include among other processes: the physical mechanisms of the exposure of the initiate to the psychoactive chemicals in the plants and the effects on consciousness of vomiting with the medicines; and the psychological process of familiarization with the psychoactive effects of the plants and related changes in states of consciousness and the resultant

psychospiritual phenomena such as enhanced intuition and healing knowledge received from the ancestral spirits through dreams and psychic sensitivity. The progression of the latter phenomena indicates the steady success of the diviner's own healing integration. Thus, the process of learning to heal with the use of psychoactive plants is fundamental in the Southern Bantu diviner's healing transformation, from the wounded initiate to the diviner-healer.

Knowledge of the therapeutic aspects of the diviner's initiation process and how *ubulawu* plants affect human consciousness can offer valuable insight into the nature of psychospiritual healing and can further greater appreciation of the spiritual relationship that exists between plants and humans.

The individuals who have helped make this research possible ask that the *ubulawu* plants be used respectfully

as spiritual medicines by all those who research them, and under the guidance of an authentic, well-trained healer for all the reasons mentioned in the article, so as to avoid psychospiritual harm. Therefore, the psychoactive *ubulawu* plants are meant to be used as medicines in a healing context and not for recreational exploration/curiosity.

Finally, plants are not only important to humans because they support all life on our planet as food, but because they serve as connectors to different and expanded parts of ourselves, our ancestral family, and the greater universe. This psychospiritual relationship between plants and humans often falls by the wayside of scientific enquiry, yet a synergy can be found between their actions and spiritual dynamics which will further our understanding of the integral nature of matter and energy that is human consciousness.

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