

New Perspectives on the Therapeutics of Traditional Psychoactive Plant Medicines from Southern African and Upper Amazonia

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Abstract

The use of psychoactive plants in southern African traditional medicine has been a neglected area of ethnobotanical research. However, recent reviews have demonstrated the significance of psychoactive plant medicines in the healing practices of the southern African traditional healers, and ethnopharmacological studies indicate numerous species of southern African plants with psychotropic activity for treating mental illness. Yet, much of the cultural understandings of this psychoactive plant use remain undocumented. A cross cultural healing technology of utilising psychoactive initiation plant medicines has been identified from southern African and Upper Amazonia, that may hold keys to furthering our understanding of how psychoactive plants could be used to treat mental illness and addictions with potential application in future medicine.

Keywords: Psychoactive Plants; Healing; Traditional Medicine; Drug Discovery; Ayahuasca; Ubulawu

Introduction

Little academic attention has been paid to the subject of psychoactive plants and their role in the initiation process of southern African traditional healers. Mentions of psychoactive plant use from the southern African anthropological and ethnobotanical literature are scant and anecdotal. Yet, revitalization has occurred in the last 20 years that has demonstrated the significance of psychoactive plant use in the South African traditional medicine system, and the great potential of drug discovery from the myriad plants identified [1].

Some findings from conducting a literature review and long standing fieldwork include a preliminary inventory being published indicating over 300 species of plants being used for psychoactive purposes in southern African healing traditions [2]. A review of plants used in divination in southern Africa and their psychoactive effects was also conducted, that indicated that approximately 45% of the plants reported with uses in divination have other psychoactive uses [3]. Much of the traditional meanings and therapeutic significance of these plants remain undocumented and is in urgent need of study.

Having experienced a category of South African plant medicines called *ubulawu* and Ayurvedic *vamana* emesis therapy in Dharamsala, India, in 2011, indicates that there is a common mechanism of action of using plant medicines to cleanse the body in both the Ayurvedic and South African traditional medicine systems, that has a corresponding psychoactive healing affect on the mind [4].

Further to this, there appears to be a common sequential use of initiation plants by both traditional healers from South Africa and the *curandero* healers from East-Central Peruvian Amazon, to treat psychological challenges that occur in tandem with the initiation process, and other mental illness such as depression and anxiety. This pattern of using psychoactive initiation plants was identified through reading a paper outlining the sequential use of categories of initiation plants by the *curandero* shamans of East-Central Peruvian Amazon [5] that parallels the same sequence of categories of initiation medicines the author and other South African traditional healers have experienced through participant observation in the South African initiation process. These categories include plants that are administered as part of a particular sequence during the initiation process namely: (I) purification and cleansing (II) sensitivity and intuition; (III) strengthening; and (IV) protection and defence.

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Psychoactive Initiation Plants as Perturbatory Learning Tools

The employment of psychoactive plants in the above sequence has the purpose to take the initiate through a process of physiological and psychological cleansing, so as to prepare the initiate for new insights with using the opening *ubulawu* medicines [4], and then anchoring this new knowledge with strengthening and grounding medicines that are consumed.

I have hypothesized that this initiation medicine process is a pragmatic technology that is used to interrupt old patterns of behaviour and familiarize the initiate with enhanced states of awareness, self-enquiry and potential self-development. I suggest this is partly afforded by the psychoactive actions of the plant medicines that provide perturbatory effects on the nervous system that foster the interruption of conditioned learning, that can translate, under certain conditions, into new insights and learning with attendant personal growth for the initiate [6]. The positive effect of perturbation on behaviour resulting from the actions of psychoactive substances has further support from neuroscience studies [6].

Conclusion

These recent findings challenge the often held assumption that traditional medicine is primitive and unsophisticated, and demonstrate that the actions of traditionally used psychoactive plants, and the phytochemical synergy that traditional healers employ in their herbal protocols, is deserving of research that will further our understanding of healing the brain-mind complex.

In order to help realize this research, the Khanyisa Healing Garden Project [7] has been initiated, with the aim in to create a network of healing and research gardens between South America and southern Africa. The primary purpose of these gardens will be to act as multi-disciplinary research sites studying the traditional psychoactive plant use from these, and possibly other regions, for their applications in medicine, healing and community development.

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