

Psychoactive Plants: A Neglected Area of Ethnobotanical Research in Southern Africa (Review)

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ABSTRACT Psychoactive plant research has been actively pursued over the last century around the world, particularly in the Americas. Yet, southern Africa has often been regarded to have relatively few psychoactive plant species of cultural importance with little research conducted on the region's potential psychoactive flora. However, in the last decade, renewed interest has occurred in the study of psychoactive plants from southern Africa. Recent anthropological studies have demonstrated the significance of psychoactive plant medicines in the initiation process of southern African traditional healers and in treating mental illness, while numerous ethnopharmacological studies have screened southern African plants for psychotropic activity, with promising new findings and research directions resulting. Yet, despite this great progress, the indigenous cultural (ritual) uses of psychoactive plants by the indigenous people of southern Africa remains a neglected area of ethnobotanical research. Aspects identified as requiring further study include: the indigenous cultural understandings of mental illness and psychoactive plants, the role of psychoactive plants in the spiritual practices of southern African traditional healers, the influence of various psychoactive plant species used in traditional formulas and the folklore and mythology relating to indigenous psychoactive plants. Thus, much is still to be learnt and documented from the southern African traditional healers regarding their worldview and their botanical, diagnostic, methodological and healing knowledge that can provide insights into the treatment of mental illness and the actions of psychoactive plants.