

Datura fastuosa: Its Use in Tsonga Girls' Initiation

THOMAS F. JOHNSTON¹

This paper is a description and sociocultural analysis of *Datura fastuosa* ingestion in the girls' puberty school of the Tsonga (Shangano-Tsonga) of Mozambique and the northern Transvaal. The rite involves music/color synaesthesia and the hearing of a supernatural voice and is associated by the Tsonga with fertility. The origin and function of the rite is discussed and, in connection with certain of its aspects, cross-cultural comparisons are made.

The author did extensive fieldwork in southern Africa during the two-year period 1968-70 under grants from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (#2504) and the University of the Witwatersrand. He is a graduate of the California State University at Hayward (M.A. in Music, 1968) and the California State University at Fullerton (M.A. in Anthropology, 1972). Some of the present material formed part of a Ph.D. dissertation submitted in 1972 to the University of the Witwatersrand, and at present under examination.

Very little information is available on the use of hallucinogens throughout sub-Saharan Africa; where mention occurs it is limited usually to a description of their use within healing or divining rites (see Junod, 1927, 2: 530), rarely within initiation. The present study concerns the use (for ensuring fertility) of *Datura fastuosa* by girls of the Tsonga puberty school *khomba* in Mozambique and the northern Transvaal; the fieldwork occupied a period of two years (1968-70), under grant #2504 from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, New York, and a Senior Bursary from the University of the Witwatersrand.

Datura fastuosa (called *mondzo*) is a subsynchronous plant of the Solanaceae, with purple flowers, ovate-oblong leaves, and blackish brown seeds; its ingestion by novices of the Tsonga girls' puberty school is the culmination of three months of ritual activity following the May harvest, involving immersion in water and the performance of secret mimes, dances, and songs.

The river-rites are particularly well guarded, and it was only after two years

of endeavor and of cultivating the friendship of influential chiefs and old women supervisors that I was able to gain admission with a camera and tape-recorder. Some 40 initiation songs and secret formulae recorded by means of the latter form part of a Ph.D. dissertation recently completed (see Johnston, 1972a, 113-191); both these and some 100 color photographs may represent the first obtained of Tsonga rites of this type.

Nights at the school are spent in the special girls' hut where novices sit in pairs facing each other and lengthening the *labia minora*, and performing tasks symbolizing women's horticultural duties, such as picking up beans repeatedly thrown down by the "schoolmothers." Later, toward September, the girls are deflowered with the musical kudu horn used and blown by the supervisor as her symbol of authority, and receive cuts on the thigh signifying maturity.

On the penultimate day the *Datura fastuosa* ingestion rite commences, proceeding in six stages.

The *Datura fastuosa* Ingestion Rite

First Stage

The motivations, attitudes, and expectancies of novices approaching the

¹ Assistant Professor of Anthropology, Western Washington State College, Bellingham, Washington.

Submitted for publication June 19, 1972.



PLATE 1. The 'childbirth' mime on the mat which "separates the maturing ones from the dust they knew as children."

final rite (*rendzo ra mianakanyo*, journey of fantasy) involving *Datura fastuosa* ingestion are conditioned by a series of mimes, to the accompaniment of mime-specific drumming and special songs. The first takes place on a palm leaf mat which "separates the maturing ones from the dust they knew as children"; a red-ochred novice lies curled in quasi-foetal position, while the others dance round her in single file, hunched over, each with hands on the hips of the one before her. This is the "childbirth" mime, in which association of the color red with the menstrual blood is a significant element. The assumed pos-

ture teaches that an infant must be born head first. (Plate I)

The following song is sung at this time:

To Conceive Twins!

Call: Mother, what misfortune befalls me

Response: What misfortune!

Call: To conceive twins!

Response: What misfortune!

Solo shout: 'Tis the decree of the gods

Second Stage

While the sequence of the mimes varies from region to region, it is common to follow the "childbirth" mime and



PLATE 2. A tree-mounted novice is beaten with a stick as a third novice assumes the quasi-fœtal position at its roots.



PLATE 3. The 'breaking of the water' mime: novices symbolically stretch a skin over water while old women poke poles through it and stir.



PLATE 4. A screaming medium with yellow "dog's teeth" and bandoliers of dried hallucinogenic agents appears out of the bush and inserts clay squares (into which straws have been stuck) between the legs of novices.

certain associated dances and songs with tree- and/or water-rites. A tree-mounted novice is beaten with a stick as a third novice assumes the quasi-foetal position at the roots; here the phallic symbolism of the tree and the fertility symbolism of its sap as semen, mothers' milk, etc., is a possibility to be considered (see Turner, 1967). (Plate II)

The following song is sung at this time:

To Squeeze The *Nhlonhlo* Tree

Call: Child, to carry on one's back,
Ndaheni

Response: They will kill Ndaheni

Call: To squeeze the *nhlonhlo* tree

Response: They will kill Ndaheni

The *nhlonhlo* tree is the naboom or Candelabra euphorbia (*Euphorbia Cooperi* N.E.Br.), but a novice may climb any tree for the purpose, referring to it as the *xipingwana*, hammered-in drum-peg.

Third Stage

Next follows a water-rite; water has special significance in all Tsonga rites of passage as a cleansing and purifying agent; it is, for instance, symbolically

name, clothing, and social role of one's childhood and to adopt the name, clothing, and social responsibilities of one's adulthood.

Prior to *Datura fastuosa* ingestion novices are required to stretch a skin over a container of water while old women poke poles through it and stir; this mime teaches about the breaking of the water at childbirth. (Plate III)

The following song is sung at this time:

Tomorrow She Will Go Home

Solo chant: Today they are dancing
Tomorrow she will go home
You mature one
The child has danced
They used to say
She would not go home

Fourth Stage

Soon a screaming medium (a disguised "schoolmother") appears suddenly out of the bush, garbed in bandoliers of dried hallucinogenic agents (*Datura fastuosa*, toads' skins, etc.) and an elaborate head dress to which are attached yellow "dog's teeth" (strands of sisal), which she shakes vigorously.

The novices, who have meanwhile been cocooned in colored blankets and are lying on the palm leaf mat in readiness, prepare themselves to receive the potion to the accompaniment of specific drum-rhythms, keeping their eyes closed for fear of viewing the medium and the supernatural powers which she and the *Datura fastuosa* represent.

Approaching the palm leaf mat, the medium expectorates, spraying saliva (*ku pela marhe*, to cross over water) over the blanketed novices, and repeatedly suggesting to them that they will soon hear the voice of the fertility-god. She then takes clay models, consisting of cubes of grey clay into which have been stuck straws and inserts them between the legs of the novices. (Plate IV)

hair which, in accordance with the principles of divestiture of the old which pervade Tsonga initiation and all rites of passage, has been previously shaved off. Re-growth of pubic hair is a prerequisite for the resumption of sexual intercourse, which, ideally, should occur without intromission.

Note, in the bottom left of Plate IV, the fresh clothing and the bangle which await the novice; the latter item is a protection against witchcraft.

The following song is sung at this time:

Wash Your Eyes Clean

Call: Hey, you witches
Response: I really shall not live
Call: Wash your eyes clean
Response: I really shall not live
Call: We told them, we shall not be spared
Response: I really shall not live

Fifth Stage

When the novices are deemed sufficiently "prepared," the medium calls authoritatively to her "schoolmother" assistants for the *Datura fastuosa* potion, whereupon the boiled essence of the hallucinogenic plant, which has been mixed with a little human fat or powdered human bone, is ceremoniously brought forward in a large shell (itself a symbolic receptacle in many societies).

Taking the shell in her two hands and returning to the palm leaf mat, the medium loudly incants the following (Plate V):

Solo chant: One digs up the medicine-plants known to all
Take the medicine of which you have heard so much!

Sixth Stage

As the cocooned novices lie moaning and "hearing" the voice of the fertility-god, the puberty school supervisor strikes them through the blankets with

Fotografir de pagina interia:

- ~~revizor sub unu cabinet~~
- "potion shell"

a switch made from the *Datura fastuosa* plant, repeatedly suggesting to them that they are experiencing the *mavala-vala* vision. This was later explained to the writer as consisting of bluish-green color patterns. Note, in Plate VI, the inverted phallus shape of the drum used for the fertility rite.

At the close of the rite, each novice is unblanketed, dressed in fresh clothing, adorned with a bangle, and required to dance and sing vigorously the following song:

The Ship Lies On The Far Bank Of The
River

Call: She is mature my child
The ship lies on the far bank
of the river
At Mulamula

Response: *Iye, iye*, go home

Call: Go home, go home, Mthavine

Response: *Iye, iye*, go home

The traditional nature of the puberty rites and the finality of "crossing over" is made apparent in the reference to "the far bank of the river" in this coming-out song; the initiate is now eligible for marriage and will bring wealth (in the form of cattle) to her father.

The economic character of the *Datura fastuosa* ingestion rite of the Tsonga girls' puberty school should not be overlooked: it ensures fertility and (we shall see) protection from barrenness by witchcraft. Failure to bear children results in return of the cattle and rupture of the relations established between two groups who are economically interdependent in many ways, from the exchange of goods to the raising of work-parties for collective horticultural activities.

Analysis

Barber lists the following (among others) antecedent variables of a hallucinogenic drug-use situation:

I. where the drug is administered . . .
the emotional atmosphere;

II. S's attitudes, expectancies, and motivations.

He lists the following (among others) dependent variables or consequent effects:

- i. dreamy-detached feelings;
- ii. changes in audition . . . synesthesia;
- iii. heightened responsiveness to primary suggestions.

(Barber 1970:9)

In the *Datura fastuosa* ingestion rite of the Tsonga girls' puberty school, we are presented with culture-specific examples of antecedent variables (I) and (II) above, such as the following:

- A. the didactic, processual nature of the Tsonga final puberty rite;
- B. the synesthesia-inducing music which accompanies, controls, and distinguishes various phases of the rite;
- C. the suggestions and symbolic authority of the garbed officiant administering the drug;
- D. the symbolism of such key ritual accessories as the ceremonial mat, the clay models, and the switch made from sticks of the *Datura fastuosa* plant;
- E. the receptive, submissive, and cooperative attitude of novices — their psychological need for protection from barrenness by witchcraft, and for communication with the ancestor-god who grants fertility.

We are also presented with culture-specific examples of dependent variables or consequent effects (i), (ii), and (iii) above, such as the following:

a. the dream or vision involving the ancestor-god;

b. the perception of bluish green colored patterns, originally stimulated by the chemical constituency of the drug but directed by the drumming;

c. the hearing of ancestral voices, probably as a result of the combination

- noivas sob um cobertor

(foto de pagina inteira)

of the drug's effects and the suggestions of the officiant concerning these voices.

A Theory

Our theory is, first, that Tsonga puberty school hallucinogenic drug-use is culturally patterned in the direction of fertility and that it represents an attempt to ensure as far as possible attainment of this primary goal; second, that present-day Tsonga puberty school use of *Datura fastuosa* derives from the Tsonga *mondjo* trial by ordeal.

Complimentary Among The Dependent Variables Or Consequent Effects

In the literature which has been concerned with the psychological effects of the use of hallucinogens, attention has been paid to both the religious vision-inducing and the dream-inducing qualities of plant-derived drugs. Certain American Indians "ingest peyote at specified times in religious settings with the avowed purpose of attaining spiritual goals" (Blum, 1964: 6, quoted in Barber, 1970: 17); Unger, in a discussion of the effects of mescaline upon personality change, reports "dreamy-detached" feelings (Unger, 1963: 111). It is, therefore, imperative to note that, among the Tsonga, "the ancestor-gods communicate with the living in their dreams" (Junod, 1927, 2: 384 — Junod's italics) and that the culturally-patterned complementarity of spirit-communication and dreaming increases the probability of goal-attainment in the Tsonga girls' puberty school *Datura fastuosa* ingestion rite.

Synesthesia

We have noted that, as a result of the combination of the drug's effect and the organized drumming, novices experience *mavalavala*, which they identify as "bluish green color-patterns" (informants). We propose here that these *mavalavala*

are in fact symbolic representations of the northern Transvaal snake *Dendrophis subcarinatus*, and that this snake might represent the Tsonga fertility-god. Junod has reported that "the gods reveal themselves to their descendants . . . as little bluish green snakes called *shihundje* (Junod 1927, 2: 384), and the present writer was given a Tsonga proverb which runs thus:

U nga dlayi nyoka u ndzuluta, ta mincele ta ku vona. Swikwembu swa ku vona, swi ta tirihiwela.

Do not whirl a snake on high when you have killed it. The ancestor-gods will see you and exact vengeance.

In many cultures, snakes are commonly perceived by subjects under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs: "dragons and snakes, especially, are at home here and are not fighting . . ." (a subject in an experiment, in Masters and Houston, 1966: 286).

The association of music and color is probably universal but, at the same time, culturally patterned, so that societies respond differently, for instance, to similar sounds. Among the Lau of the Solomon Islands "a low note is called *bulu* (black), and a high note *kwao* (white). These names are taken from charcoal marks made on a plank to indicate the tune: heavy down-strokes being 'black,' and light up-strokes 'white'" (Ivens n.d.: 98, quoted by Merriam, 1964). In Mauritania, ". . . within the different styles there are two manners of performance — the 'white' and the 'black.' The latter, called *Lekhal*, is preferred by the Griot people, since it allows more spectacular effects — the voice spanning a wide range and the notes being held longer, etc. . . . the 'white' manner — or *Lebiadh* is favored by educated people. It is closer to the Arab tradition, and produces a smoother performance and more subtle singing" (Nikiprowetzky, 1961: n.p., quoted by Merriam, 1964).

To return to the subject of synesthesia

under the effects of drug ingestion, it should be noted that sound-color associations are commonly produced in experiments involving the use of hallucinogenic drugs:

. . . in one study, (Klee 1963) the experimenter clapped his hands in the air while the subjects, who had received a high dose of LSD, were observing visual patterns with their eyes closed; the subjects typically reported that they saw flashes of color in time with the clapping. In another study (Guttman 1936) mescaline subjects were exposed to music while they were perceiving lines and patterns with their eyes closed; the subjects typically reported that the lines moved and changed colors in harmony with the music. Similarly, a third study (Hartman and Hollister 1963) showed that, as compared to nondrug controls, drugged subjects exposed to pure tones reported significantly more colors and patterns elicited by the tones.

(Barber 1970: 35)

Hypersuggestibility and the Hearing of Voices

With regard to the novices' *hearing of voices* as a result of the combination of the drug's effect and the suggestions of the officiant, Sjoberg has described hallucinations involving *the hearing of a voice* (Sjoberg, 1965, mentioned in Barber 1970: 36); Slotkin has reported that American Indian peyote-users "hear the voice of the Great Spirit" (Slotkin, 1956, quoted in Masters and Houston, 1966: 257); and Tart states of *hypersuggestibility* that "the person comes to rely more on the *suggestions* of the hypnotist, shaman, demagogue, interrogator, religious healer, preacher, or doctor, all representing omnipotent authoritative figures — the *suggestions* of the person endowed with authority tend to be accepted as concrete reality . . . during alterations in consciousness" (Tart, 1969: 17 — italics by T.F.J.).

The Symbolism of Saliva

In numerous Tsonga rites of propitiation (for instance, the first fruit cere-

mony), the officiant expectorates either saliva or beer. In both the *Datura fastuosa* rite of the girls' puberty school and the dagga rite of the old mens' beer-drink, expectoration is referred to as *ku pela marhe*, a phrase which connotes one's passage across or over a body of water. Possibly, the puberty school officiant's expectoration of saliva is thought of as the source of the hallucinogenic potency of the drug being administered, for, among the Koryak, "Big Raven, a mythological character, applied to a deity for help . . . out of the saliva of the Supreme Being appeared the agaric (*Amanita muscaria*)" (Dobkin de Ríos, 1972).

Datura fastuosa and Protection From Barrenness By Witchcraft

In addition to the use of *Datura fastuosa*, there are a number of striking parallels between the Tsonga *mondjo* trial by ordeal noted by Junod at the turn of the century and the Tsonga final initiation rite observed by myself in 1970. In both instances, the *Datura fastuosa* potion was explained as containing either human fat or powdered human bone; the ceremony occurred by a river and involved a nearby tree; the patients formed a line along the ground; the officiant waved a head dress by vigorous shaking of the head (details of the trial by ordeal are to be found in Junod, 1927, 2: 532-3). The endocannibalistic practice would in each case seem to be for the same reason — protection from witchcraft by *doing that which witches do* (the flesh-eating of hyenas who dig up fresh Tsonga graves at night is attributed to the flesh-seeking of witches), and this assumption is supported by the subject-matter (witchcraft) of the puberty school song performed by "schoolmothers" prior to the administering of *Datura fastuosa*.

Within the song-text in question, "we shall not be spared" refers to the dan-

gers of barrenness by witchcraft, and "wash your eyes clean" refers to both the fact that women must watch out for witchcraft in their husband's village, and to the fact that *Datura fastuosa* 'washes' one's eyes so as to facilitate perception of the fertility-granting ancestor-god.

While there is apparently no strong relationship between Tsonga use of *Datura fastuosa* and witchcraft (it is, as we have emphasized, the human fat or bone ingredient which carries this particular connotation), Masters and Houston report such a relationship in connection with European witchcraft during the Renaissance period:

. . . the witches drank and rubbed on their bodies concoctions the principal ingredients of which were the *Solanaceae* drugs contained in such plants as the thornapple, mandragora, deadly nightshade, the henbane, and others. The drug concoctions were employed at the Sabbats to produce hallucinations and disorientation.

(Masters and Houston 1966: 252)

The American Indian shaman, don Juan, considered the jimson weed (*Datura*) and the mushrooms to be ". . . capable of being manipulated; a sorcerer, in fact, drew his strength from manipulating an ally" (Castaneda, 1971: 15).

Peter Furst, quoting Ramón, relates how

. . . in ancient times there was a dangerous sorcerer, Kiéri Tewiyari, *Datura* Person, who tried to mislead the people with his hallucinogenic powers. Kiéri was finally defeated by the sacred Deer, Elder Brother Kanyamarie who used peyote to fortify and immunize himself against the dangerous poisons of the sorcerer Kiéri. Here Kiéri is shown (pictorially). . . above him appears his other manifestation, the *Datura* (Jimson Weed) plant, into which he changes, for he does not truly die but only transforms himself to bewitch the people with his juices.

(1968: 16-25)

Among the Tsonga, and indeed among most southern African peoples, witchcraft is conceptualized as acts of black

magic perpetrated or caused to be perpetrated psychically by known or unknown human enemies, usually operating nocturnally in disguise. Its power is associated with abstract concepts such as the *rhuma* (the sending of curses), and the question of the use of potions arises only insofar as they may protect one from witchcraft.

So far as is known, Tsonga use of *Datura fastuosa* is restricted to trial by ordeal (a suspect must survive a given dose in order to prove his innocence), and the described final rite of the girls' puberty school.

Summary

Music-color synesthesia and the religious experience of the final rite of the Tsonga girls puberty school (*khomba*) is heightened by the ingestion of a northern Transvaal subsynchronous hallucinogenic plant called *mondzo* (*Datura fastuosa*), the effectiveness of which is dependent upon the replication of an optimal setting and the existence of culturally patterned attitudes, expectancies, and motivations among participants.

Specific reinforcers include the complementarity of spirit-communication and dreaming among the Tsonga, indigenous beliefs concerning bluish green snakes, the unabated performance of particularly significant (to participants) drumming patterns, and the authoritative suggestions of the garbed officiant who administers the drug.

Some evidence points to the probability that *Datura fastuosa* ingestion within the context of the Tsonga girls' puberty school is linked to a fertility goal (an added ingredient provides protection against barrenness by witchcraft), and other evidence points to the probability that Tsonga puberty school use of *Datura fastuosa* is a trans-institutional phenomenon, i.e., that it has been

diffused from the Tsonga *mondjo* trial by ordeal.

Tsonga puberty school novices are led firmly and authoritatively through a series of preparatory stages into the drug-rite; they are psychologically attuned to the rite by exegetes who coach them to achieve specific end-goals; they are neither sickened nor poisoned by *Datura fastuosa* but see and hear that which is culturally expected of them at that time and place.

Tsonga puberty school novices emerge without exception from the *Datura fastuosa* ingestion rite as mature women of their group, tempered to fulfill the social role demanded of them in an exacting traditional society.

Socio-situational study of hallucinogenic drug-use within the Tsonga girls' puberty school suggests that perhaps the overriding factor in establishing the validity of the findings of American scientific drug experimentation is: how efficient is the control of interfering variables originating in the S's culturally patterned motivations, attitudes, and expectations?

Acknowledgments

Expressions of gratitude are due to Marlene Dobkin de Ríos for suggestions concerning this article, and to the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the University

of the Witwatersrand for making the fieldwork possible.

Literature Cited

- Barber, T. X. 1970. *LSD; Marihuana, Yoga, and Hypnosis*, Chicago: Aldine.
- Blacking, John 1969. *Venda Girls' Initiation Schools: Part 1*, *In: African Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1.
- Castaneda, Carlos 1971. *A Separate Reality*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Dobkin de Ríos, Marlene 1972. *Psychedelic Anthropology* (book in preparation).
- Furst, Peter T. 1968. *Myth in Art: A Huichol depicts his reality*. *Los Angeles, L.A. Co. Mus. of Nat. Hist. Quarterly* 7(3): 16-25.
- Ivens, W. G. *The Island Builders of the Pacific*. Phil: Lippincott.
- Johnston, T. F. 1972. *The Music of the Shangana-Tsonga*. Unpub. Ph.D. dissertation, Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand.
- Junod, Henri 1927. *The Life of A South African Tribe*. London: Macmillan (2 vols.).
- Kaplan, John 1970. *Marijuana—The New Prohibition*. New York: The World Pub. Co.
- Masters, R. E. L. and Jean Houston 1966. *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience*. New York: Dell.
- Merriam Alan P. 1964. *The Anthropology of Music*. Northwestern University Press.
- Nikiprowetzsky, T. 1961. *La musique de la Mauritanie*. Paris, SORAFOM.
- Tart, C. T. 1969. *Altered States of Consciousness*. New York: Wiley.
- Turner, V. W. 1967. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. New York: Cornell.
- Unger, S. M. 1963. *Mescaline, LSD, Psilocybin, and Personality Change*, in *Psychiatry*, 26.