

# **Ritual Cleansing, Incense and the Tree of Life – Observations on Some Indigenous Plant Usage in Traditional Zulu and Xhosa Purification and Burial Rites**

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## **Introduction**

Purification procedures involving plants during rites of passage have been a widespread phenomenon in many cultures through the ages. Relics of such practises from biblical times are still to be found in present day transition-marking ceremonies such as baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals, which may be marked by the use of white flowers or the burning of incense. Although their underlying significance may often be forgotten in Western society, in rural Africa there is a great awareness of the mystical forces of pollution and danger that need to be overcome to ensure safe passage during such times of transition. The anthropologist Arnold van Gennep observed in 1908 that in rites of passage three consecutive phases could be perceived (Van Gennep 1960). These phases are separation, transition and incorporation and while not all of them are apparent to the same extent in every rite, the perception is still a useful guide to our understanding of the processes involved. The pattern may be clearly seen in African circumcision and healer graduation ceremonies where the candidates are required to live in the bush, away from their families, for a length of time before the ceremony, then to undergo various rites before incorporation into a recognised age or professional group. The celebration of incorporation or re-integration into the home often takes the form of a communal feast. Further examples may be seen in various Catholic and Anglican ordination ceremonies, which require a

retreat, with cleansing by confession and absolution before the ceremony itself, which is followed by a shared community and family celebration. Such rites underline the relationship between the individual and the community which is well expressed in the Zulu proverb '*Umntu ungumntu ngabantu*' (I am a person because of other people). In this study I observe how some traditional Zulu and Xhosa purification and burial rites involving plants relate to other practices. I use biblical and Ayurvedic examples to demonstrate that there are related levels of practice from other cultures and times, and indicate that the rites have a profound holistic significance in serving a common human need for belonging and continuity.

### *Definition of Terms*

Given the nature of this study, it is appropriate to start with some definition of the terms pure, purification and pollute from *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1993). Meanings given for the adjective pure (p. 2418) include the terms 'not mixed with anything else', 'not adulterated', 'not debased', 'not corrupt', 'morally undefiled' and 'innocent'. Purification (p. 2419) is defined variously as an action or process of making 'ceremoniously or ritually clean', 'physically pure or clean by removing blemishes and impurities' or 'morally or spiritually pure by the elimination of faults, error, or other undesirable elements'.

The meaning of the verb pollute (p. 2760) includes 'to make morally corrupt', 'to violate purity or sanctity', 'to desecrate or to defile', 'to make physically impure, foul, filthy, dirty or tainted and 'more recently, to contaminate, especially with reference to the environment'.

In this study purification has been viewed as a process by which the state of purity is retained by the removal of polluting factors. This may be a physical process, implying the removal of dirt or sources of infection, or by a symbolic moral and spiritual process, implying the elimination of faults or sin and a healing or restoration of wholeness to the victim or repentant perpetrator.

In Zulu culture, pollution is viewed as a mystical force that weakens resistance to disease and creates conditions of bad luck and misfortune which are perceived as part of the physical and social environment (see Ngubane 1977; Hutchings, 1989). Environmental factors include evil spirits and sorcerers or witches and would include items of witchcraft known as *umeqo*, which, various informants have

told me, are likely to have been left in the pathways of innocent people who have become polluted when they have failed to 'step-over' them. Subsequent purification rites may be by sprinkling, washing or the taking of an emetic (pers. comm. Simon Khumalo). The presence of the ancestors may also cause sickness and bad dreams when offended by a failure to carry out certain required rites. This is, however, done for positive purposes. Buhrmann (1984: 27-29) refers to two categories of ancestors, namely the 'living dead' – clan members who are called shades in anthropological literature, and non-clan related ancestors. Shades are regarded as 'kindly mentors, guides and protectors, especially when customs are kept and regularly performed'. Non-clan related ancestors are 'more distant, powerful and numinous'. Berglund (1989:123), points out the great difference between sickness caused by the shades and that brought about by witchcraft and sorcery. The latter, he says, is intended to kill or annihilate if at all possible. The former serves to alert not only the person involved, but also the whole family, to the needs of the shades. Appeasing rites, which may be simple or prolonged, are aimed at restoring broken contact and thus improving health and a general feeling of well-being (Buhrmann 1984:28).

### *Indigenous Plant Taxa and Customs in Study*

Plants selected for this study include four indigenous plant taxa, observed or known to me to have been used in Zulu or Xhosa traditional purification or burial rites, or as incense or regarded as a Tree of Life. These are *Lippia javanica*, *Ziziphus mucronata* and various *Helichrysum* and *Ficus* species. The first three taxa are used in burial rituals, *Ziziphus mucronata* as an African 'Tree of Life'. *Ficus* species, commonly known as fig trees, have been included because Zulu customary usage and reverence for large fig trees relate very closely to two Ayurvedic Trees of Life featured in Patnaik (1993).

### *Purpose of Study*

Basically the questions asked about the selected Zulu and Xhosa purification rituals involving plants are how they relate to customs elsewhere, what they mean to the societies involved and, briefly, how the relevant plants may work as anti-pollutants on a physical level.

## Methodology

This study is based on the relevant aspects of my research as a botanist and ethnobotanist over the past two decades at the Universities of Transkei and Zululand. Research activity involved primarily, observing, talking and reading.

## *Observing and Talking*

I was able to observe plants and usage directly in the former Transkei between 1983 and 1986 where I was employed as a research assistant and, later, herbarium curator in the Botany Department at the University of Transkei. My research involved intensive field work, collecting and identifying plants for the setting up of the herbarium, and gave me the opportunity to observe plant characteristics and also to record Xhosa names and usage from informants met in the field or from colleagues working at the university. The plants included various *Helichrysum (imphepho)* species (see Hutchings & Johnson, 1987). I was also able to record or observe plant usage and some purification customs from meetings with various Xhosa speaking traditional healers and informed lay persons, all of whom were interviewed by me on more than one occasion in their own homes or work places or at a hospital in Lusikisiki in Transkei (see Savage & Hutchings, 1987; Hutchings 1989).

I joined the University of Zululand in 1987 and was able to observe and record Zulu usage of plants, both from a literature survey conducted for the compilation of an inventory of Zulu medicinal plants (Hutchings *et al.* 1996), and directly, from various informants and plant collecting expeditions. I started an indigenous medicinal plant demonstration garden in the Botany Department, partly to confirm identity and usage from local healers of the plants I was recording. The garden is still in operation and visiting healers and botany students often volunteer further information on usage and names, and also sometimes on purification rituals, when they see the plants in the garden.

Between 1995 and 2002 I paid repeated visits to seven healers' home gardens and exchanged plants and information, and sometimes, on request, assisted in the treatment of patients. The gardens included a large one in Mpembeni, close to Hlabisa in the North, about 100 Km from the University, five local gardens, three of which were in the adjacent township of Esikhawini, and two of which were in a more rural

area within a 20Km radius of the University. I also visited the garden of the late Simon Mhlaba, in Sumdumbili 90Kms South of the University. Simon Mhlaba was a traditional healer and then secretary of the provincial *Inyangas* Association, who visited all of the above-mentioned gardens with me after he invited me to participate in the preparation of local traditional healers for qualifying examinations being conducted by the newly formed Traditional Healers Association. We made a total of 22 visits to the seven healer group gardens in 2000 as part of the Environment Liaison Centre International sponsored by the Medicinal Plants and Local Communities (MPLC) project, which sought to empower local communities in selected areas of northern KwaZulu-Natal by promoting the utilisation of indigenous medical plants and knowledge for the enhancement of health and conservation. I visited Simon Khumalo in his home in Sundumbili frequently, where he showed me how he used the incense known as *imphepho* (a *Helichrysum* species). I helped him to set up one of the MPLC garden projects in Sundumbili, where we were able to conserve and discuss the significance and usage of a large fig tree. Meetings with healers in their own established gardens took place in the shade of various large trees. Owner of one of the local healer's gardens, the late John Mthethwa, accompanied me on a collecting visit to Ngoya Forest, where I was able to observe his careful preparation before collecting bark of one of the trees. A year later, wounds from the bark removal had completely healed.

In November 2000, I was invited to collaborate in the management of informed and consenting patients in an Ngwelezana Hospital HIV/AIDS support group programme on the basis of two creams I had made in response to calls for help in treating skin complaints from healers at the homes of the late Veronica Ndlovu and John Mthethwa. *Lippia javanica* is an important ingredient in these creams. The on-going clinical work has been extended to a community outreach programme, in which home-visiting has enabled me to observe current plant usage. It has also enabled me to pay bereavement visits to the families of some deceased patients and to attend part of the long vigils held by family members and neighbours, prior to burials. These are held to ensure that the departed person is not left alone until the burial is safely concluded and the spirit of the departed set free to join the body of the ancestors. I have also witnessed hand-washing at various funerals I have attended since 1986

I conducted research in a rural area known as Ntandabantu in northern KwaZulu-Natal between 2000 and 2003. I wished to share my experience of cream-making and selected indigenous therapeutically beneficial plant species with a rural community who might be able to use this resource to address some of their own health problems. First I needed to know how much people know about the plants I wished considered might be a resource and thus initiated the survey on medicinal plant knowledge. Results are presented in the discussion on *Lippia javanica*, as are the results of a case study on the effects of water problems, AIDS and home-based care in the area, published after I was joined in some of the research by Prof. Gina Buijs (see Hutchings & Buijs 2004 and 2005).

The MPLC and Ntandabantu community visits involved many long car journeys, usually of over an hour's duration, which provided many opportunities for talking with Simon Mhlaba., Dr Lissah Mtalane and also with the botany department driver, Simon Khumalo, who was able to confirm common knowledge of much of the usage mentioned in this paper. Dr Mtalane accompanied me and also acted as interpreter at Ntandabantu and in the clinics, community outreach visits and healers' meetings between 1999 and 2005. A nurse, former hospital matron, one time deputy provincial MEC for health, and friend to the traditional healing fraternity, she is a fount of knowledge on Zulu cultural customs. She was with me at two funerals and was always able and willing to explain anything I asked.

## Reading

The extensive literature search I conducted during the compilation of an inventory of Zulu Medicinal Plants involved Zulu usage of over 1000 species, including all the taxa discussed in this paper. Details included known usage by various ethnic groups, recorded Zulu, botanical and English and Afrikaans names as well as known physiological effects, chemical compounds and biological properties found in these and closely related plant groups. I have continued to read widely around my subject matter and have also relied on a long standing habit of personal bible reading and study. Unless otherwise stated, bible quotations are from The New International Version (1978). For comparisons with Ayurveda practice I relied strongly on the beautifully illustrated book by Naveen Patnaik (1993).

For the purposes of this study, I have relied on a literature study to:

- Demonstrate how the Zulu and Xhosa purification rites I have observed, relate to other recorded African, biblical and Ayurvedic practice.
- Better understand and explore the meaning and role of such rites and ritual with reference to spiritual and community well-being
- Observe indications of possible efficacy pertaining to physical anti-pollutant or anti-microbial properties of the taxa recorded

Before detailing specific usage of the selected plant taxa used in Zulu and Xhosa rituals, I have exemplified a basic human need for purification cleansing expressed in Psalm 51, noted similar Zulu and Xhosa modes of ritual cleansing activity and given a brief overview of symbolic significance of the colour white in biblical, Ayurvedic and African concepts of purity.

### **The Human Need for Purification Cleansing**

Psalm 51, may be taken as an example of a basic human need for purification or forgiveness in order to survive and continue with ones life calling. It refers to David's need to be cleansed from the state of sin after adultery with Bathsheba, so that he would be saved, not only from death, but also to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem after the exile. The four main verbs used in verse 7 in different versions of the Bible reveal different modes of action.

The *New International Version* (1978) reads

Cleanse me with hyssop until I am clean:

Wash me until I am whiter than snow

An even stronger image is produced in *New Revised Version* (1968) of the old authorised *King James* version and reads:

Purge me with hyssop ....

In the *Jerusalem Bible* (1966), the line becomes

Purify me with hyssop ....

An older *Catholic Bible* (1914) reads

Sprinkle me with Hyssop ....

Washing, purging and sprinkling all feature strongly as modes of action in recorded Zulu and Xhosa purification rituals (see Hutchings 1989). It is also interesting to note that the *Hyssopus* reportedly known to Dioscorides was named a Holy Herb because it was used for cleaning sacred places (Grieve 1976:456) while Paffard (1995: 171) traces the derivation of the Old English name *ysope* via Greek from the Hebrew *ezob* and refers to its usage for cleaning lepers.

## **The Colour White as a Symbol of Purity**

### *Biblical Significance*

The concept of white as the colour of purity, is reflected in the call ‘to be washed whiter than snow’ in Psalm 51, quoted above, is repeated in Isaiah 1:18, with the promise:

Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.

Revelation 7:9 depicts a multitude of people, wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands, which is explained in verse 14:

These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

White lilies are frequently featured in portrayals of the biblical annunciation and were commonly used in Italian renaissance art to symbolise the purity of the Virgin Mary (see Fig. 1). Brewer (1993:755) recalls a tradition that the lily sprang from the tears of Eve as she left Paradise and notes that in Christian art the lily is an emblem of chastity, innocence and purity, with images of St Joseph with a lily in his hand indicating that his wife Mary was always a virgin. White lilies commonly called St. Joseph or Madonna lilies (*Lilium candida*) originate from the Balkans, Lebanon and Israel and have a long history of cultivation from 1500BCE and are reported to be featured in 5000 year old Cretan Frescoes (Mabberley 1987:333). They are often grown in South African gardens.



### *The Significance of White from Ayurvedic Practice*

An association of the divine with white is reflected in verses of longing from a twelfth century hymn from Mahadeviyakka to the Goddess Siva quoted by Patnaik (1993:153):

You are the forest.  
You are all the great trees.

O Lord White as Jasmine,  
Filling and filled by all.  
Why don't you show me your face?

While burial is not part of Ayurvedic tradition, cremation services are and people attending these services often wear white robes to symbolize purity and goodness (pers. comm. Mayuri Dahya).

### *The Significance of White in Zulu and Xhosa Rituals*

Examples from Zulu and Xhosa rites include the white beads which are worn during training and at healer graduations and are well illustrated in various photographs in Broster and Bourne (1982), Buhrmann (1984) and Berglund (1989). The white clay used by Xhosa trainee diviners known as *Amagqira* before their graduation is reported to serve as a warning to others that they should not be approached during this time of required isolation (Broster & Bourn 1982). This, I think is likely to be true of the white clay used by teenage boys undergoing circumcision rites. Berglund (1989) says that for the Zulu white is associated with good (p. 364) and the divinity (p. 371), while medicines classified as 'White medicines', although they may not necessarily be white, serve as purifying protectors (pp. 47, 355). Plants with large white flowers or roots are grown in many Zulu gardens as a protection against lightning. The late Mavis Mbuyise, a traditional healer from Esikhawini, had cultivated an exotic species because of its white flowers for the same purpose. One student informant told me he found it difficult to understand why white people erected lightning conductors on their roofs when they cultivated so many protective plants that would do the same thing.

## BURIAL PURIFICATION RITES

### *A Biblical Example*

Purification rites associated with burial are described at length in the chapter 19 of the Book of Numbers. In Judaic tradition any one who even touched a corpse was considered unclean and contaminating to the whole community for a period of seven days (Num. 19, 11). The proscribed purification ritual involved the sprinkling of the tent in which the deceased died, all the vessels, everyone present, with Hyssop dipped in lustral water. Anyone who touched the corpse, was also also required to bathe in the water for a number of days before he could be regarded as purified (Num. 19, 17-20). Lustral water comprised spring water poured on the ashes of a sacrificial heifer that had been burned for the deceased.

### *Zulu Burial Rituals*

In Zulu culture, death is considered a highly intensified form of pollution that emanates from the corpse itself, and perceived dangers, precautions and burial rites are comprehensively detailed by Krige (1950: 159-175). Relatives of the dead are thought to be not only in a position of danger themselves and in need of fortification, but also to a source of pollution to the society. Thus they may not take part in the normal life of the society until they have been purified after the mourning period, which is always longest for the nearest relatives. After a traditional burial an ox or a goat, known as *imbuzi yokugez' izlanda* (goat for washing of the hands) is slaughtered to 'cleansing the hands' of those who had helped with the burial and to rid them of pollution. The chyme of an animal is used intact and is only used for hand washing when the slaughtering has been done for cleansing, not sacrificial purposes. The cleansing properties of chyme are also referred to fairly extensively by Ngubane (1977) and Berglund (1989), who points out its importance in ritual handwashing (p. 129):

It must be this thing (the chyme) of the animal because it alone washes so that the hands become like the shades .... This thing is better than soap because it gives the colour of the shades, the colour inside the hand.

Quoting a diviner from eThelezi, he continues,

It gives this colour .... Then they (the shades) see that the man agrees to their brooding. So he becomes powerful.

### *A Zulu Burial Wash - Lippia javanica (umsuzwane)*

The following information on the use of a plant known as *Umsuzwane* (*Lippia javanica*) pertaining to burial rites was obtained for me in the plant usage survey I initiated in Ntandabantu. Apart from a brief mentioned by Krige (1950), citing a work by Lugg (1907), and referring to the practice of placing a branch of the strong smelling plant *Dippia asperifolia* (sic.) in the mouth of a corpse at burial, no reference was found in the literature surveyed to the usage of *Lippia javanica* in funeral rites. It is, however, fairly common knowledge in the areas of KwaZulu-Natal where I have worked that the leaves of *Umsuzwane* are used to wash hands after a funeral (pers. comm. S. Khumalo).

Ntandabantu is the name of a rural area of approximately 80 square kilometres comprising c. 400 homesteads, strung out along the ridges of hills and situated approximately 40 kilometres west of the nearest town, Mtubatuba (see Hutchings & Buijs 2004 and 2005). The area is extremely dry and poverty stricken. We were able to conduct four surveys with the help of Khangi Zwane, a worker in the University of Zululand agriculture department who has her home in Ntandabantu and was able to conduct the surveys over weekends. She went to three different areas and interviewed those she met with on a random basis, using printed questionnaires.

Preliminary results of our 2002 survey of 100 of the estimated 400 household in the area indicated that the average household consisted of eight members and that 60% of these households had less than R500 available for food per month. This was often less than R200.

The questionnaires on five medicinal plants included *Lippia javanica* and was prefaced by an assurance that personal information would be kept confidential and that the results would be shared with participants in workshops aimed at improving health knowledge and cultivation of useful medicinal plants. Fourteen community workshops were held to discuss health problems usually attended by about 40 participants, mainly elderly women. A medicinal and food plant garden

was initiated but had to be abandoned a year later due to the acerbated drought conditions. We also paid eight home visits to families with severely ill or recently deceased members.

All of the 78 participants interviewed recognised and used leaves of *Lippia javanica*, which is one of the plants that does grow abundantly in the area. Although all knew the name *umsuzwane*, it is not always used by the community members coming from Mtubatuba out of respect (*hlonipa*) for the brother of Falaza (King of Mtubatuba), who was named Msuzwane. Instead they use the name *umkhwishane*, a name used 'because it works against bad spirits'.

All reported using leaves for coughs, colds and flu or headaches, 65 reported usage before and after funerals, 54 said it was used to protect against pests in food stores and 37 used it against ticks in animals and/or to prevent Newcastle disease in poultry. Several participants referred to the plant as 'our Vicks', two mentioned use as 'mosquito coils' and one said that it could be applied instead of Jeyes fluid to 'get rid of ticks'.

The following observations, referring to funeral or other purification rites are quoted from the questionnaires.

- A mixture of leaves and roots is used to clean tools and hands before and after funerals
- The plant is used when coming from the mortuary to remove bad spirits.
- We use stems and leaves as brooms to sweep grave sites and, after weeding the grave site, to remove both the soil and the weeds.
- The corpse is washed with an infusion after death to prevent odours forming. This is necessary in cases where the death did not take place in a hospital. (One informant said his church does not allow washing of the corpse with *umsuzwane*, but that it should be used only to wash hands and tools.)
- If the corpse has an odour, women place pieces of *umsuzwane* in the nostrils of the corpse and sweep the room where the person was sleeping.
- The plant is used by the poorest of the poor who have failed to slaughter a cow or goat - instead of (the chyme of) a goat, ground leaves or leaves and roots are placed in a big basin of water in which everybody washes their hands.

Other usage relation to practical protective, anti-pollutant or anti-pest usage included:

- In the olden days there were no fridges or cool boxes and we had heads of cattle and so meat was not scarce. If the meat started to smell it was boiled with *umsuzwane* to take away, the smell.
- Leaves are sprinkled in toilets to prevent odours.
- In rural areas where there is no electricity, wood is collected from the forest, where many snakes are found. A stem with leaves should be placed on the head and even one small stem will prevent snakes from coming to you.
- Collect some *umsuzwane* to speak to the Ancestors.
- Leaves are mixed with *imphepho* (as a protective charm).
- Leaves are used in oxwagons to harvest the maize.

This last item puzzled me until my informant asked someone to photograph the 'oxwagon'. The photograph showed how the *Lippia* branches are woven to create walls around the sides of a traditional ox-drawn plough when it is needed to harvest maize.

### *Indications of Efficacy of Lippia javanica as an Anti-pollutant and Insect Repellent*

The insect-repellent properties of *Lippia javanica* are fairly well known against various insects, including beetles and mosquitoes (Van Wyk *et al.* 1997; Omolo *et al.* 2005). Known antimicrobial effects of *Lippia javanica* are reported in Viljoen *et al.* (2005). It is also interesting to note that use of the plant to disinfect anthrax infested meat in the eastern Cape was recorded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Smith 1895). In 2007 the CSIR reported the forthcoming patented production of mosquito-repellent candles made from *Lippia javanica* (CSIR – technology transfer – [http://www.csir.co.za/technology\\_transfer/successsstories](http://www.csir.co.za/technology_transfer/successsstories) revised 17/9/ 2007).

### **Air Purification and Incense**

#### *Biblical and Eastern Examples*

Frankincense, long regarded as a symbol of divinity, was one of the gifts brought by the Wise men to the infant Christ (Mat. 3:11 and glossary note, *Jerusalem Bible*). In India incenses from aromatic gums and flowers are burned before family altars during morning and evening devotions (Patnaik 1993: 150). At the same time, Ayurvedic rules of hygiene require fumigation of chambers with incense as a disinfectant and against insects. Air purification involving Holy Basil among the Hindu is reported by Patnaik (1993:24f) to be widespread. He quotes an Italian traveller's 17<sup>th</sup> century record:

Every one before his house has a little altar, in the middle of which they erect pedestal-like little Towers, and in these the shrub (Holy Basil) is grown.

Patnaik also observes on the same page that, in India, any courtyard centred around Holy Basil is considered, to be a place of peace, piety and virtue and notes that:

Modern Science has established that this modest aromatic shrub perceptibly purifies the air within a wide radius of its vicinity, proving most effective just before sunrise, the time when it is ritually circled by the devout.'

### *An African Incense – imphepho (Helychrysum spp.)*

*Imphepho* is often referred to as 'Our incense' in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. Bundles of the plants are commonly sold for the purpose in street *Muthi* (medicine) stalls in many parts of South Africa. They are commonly called 'everlastings' in English because of their long-lasting flowers. The term *imphepho* is used by Zulu, Xhosa and also by Ndebele speakers from Zimbabwe (Gelfand *et al.* 1985) for various related strong smelling *Helichrysum* species. Eight species are known to be burned to invoke the goodwill of the Zulu ancestors (Hutchings 1996), two of which may also be used for diviners to induce trances. Two species from the eastern Cape are reported to be burned to clear the air for the ancestors, to safeguard the home against evil spirits during the night and to be used in cleansing rites to purify the body before sleeping (Broster & Bourn 1982; Hutchings 1986).

Buhrmann (1984: 40-46) observed the need expressed by Xhosa healers to induce and clarify dreams when a patient is presumed to have come from a polluted and unclean environment and has to be prepared to enter a clean one. She cites Greek and Roman practice in which temple sleep was preceded by ritual purification to free the mind of the contamination of the body and thus release it for unimpeded dream experience. Berglund (1989: 113f) observes that smoking *imphepho* is common among Zulu diviners, and that some chew the stems and leaves of the plant while others place plants under their pillows 'so that dreams may be clear'. He records that one diviner compared *imphepho* to a shade (ancestor), saying 'it does not die, even as a shade does not die' and was convinced that the ancestors 'were just near the plant, in the earth'. In addition to its everlasting properties, the clarity of colour of the flower was found significant to the diviners, who reported that one reason for smoking and inhaling *imphepho* was 'to give us a clear mind'. It was also said that the plant should never be ripped out of the soil, and that before being broken off, it should be addressed with the words 'excuse me, thing of my people, it is the work of my ancestors I am doing'.

Simon Mhlaba told me in 2004 that a traditional healer would never buy *imphepho*, but always harvested it during the day, explaining to the plant exactly why it was being taken. He showed me how he burned *imphepho* in a holy area of his workplace. This activity seemed to me to be very similar to the ritual burning of Holy Basil in Hindu homesteads described in Patnaik (1993), and even the clay vessel he used showed an oriental influence. A student from the University of Zululand interviewed by Professor Gina Buijs (pers. comm.) said the smoke from the burning of *imphepho* was 'meant to rise to the ancestors, who convey it to God'. Krige (1950) describes simply how, on their way home from a burial, women sometimes pick flowers of the 'yellow everlasting' to thread into necklaces and tie them round the necks of children to enable the spirit of the deceased to bless them.

I witnessed the burning of *imphepho* before the first performance of a mixed Zulu and white dance performance at the Grahamstown festival in the early 1980s, and again, at the start of a Primary health care workshop held for *Sangoma*'s in Valley Trust in 2004. This ritual calling to the Ancestors appears now to be an important element at the inception of many transcultural events and state ceremonial functions.

In Ntandabantu five women were asked about their use of *imphepho* and all reported that the herb was placed in the bottom part of a clay pot and burnt in order to be able ‘to speak to the ancestors’.

A recent community-outreach visit to a 93 year old blind woman, who had been distraught at the recent death of her son on my previous visit, which took place after he had been buried, found her much calmer and revealed that she had just burned *imphepho* in a purification ceremony for him. She said that she could now die in peace as her grandson would be looked after and thus indicated her own acceptance of a timely death as well as that of her son.

### *Indications of Efficacy*

Proven antimicrobial activity has been shown in various aromatic *Helichrysum* species and antifungal and insect or parasite repellent effects are also known (see Hutchings 1996; Van Wyk *et al.* 1997 and 2000; Yani *et al.* 2005). These properties are also indicated by wide usage of species for suppurating sores and respiratory infections.

## **The Tree of Life**

### *Biblical and Ayurvedic Examples*

Biblical references to a tree of life occur in the first and last chapters of the Holy Bible. In the Book of Genesis 2, 8-10,

After the Lord God had formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, the man became a living being.

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the East, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the Lord God made all kinds of tree grow out of the ground, trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Verses 15-16 tell of how Adam was commissioned to take care of the garden and told that he could eat of any tree excepting for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, as this would cause him to die. After the provision of a helper, Eve, the prohibition was broken at the suggestion of a crafty serpent, and Adam, Eve and the serpent were banished from



the garden, and the tree of life protected (Gen 3,23-24). Verse 24 concludes:

He placed ... cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

One of the reasons for which Eve ate the forbidden fruit was because she thought it would bring her wisdom. Proverbs 3, 18 refers to wisdom and reads:

She is a tree of life to those who embrace her, those who lay hold of her will be blessed.

The Book of Revelation was written after the coming of Christ and prophesies the second coming of Christ and the resurrection and salvation of those who have done right. Revelation 22:1-2 records,

And he showed me a river of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street, thereof, and on both sides of the river, was the tree of life, bearing twelve fruits, yielding its fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of nations.

Verse 14 reads,

Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.

Patnaik (1993) lists two fig trees (*Ficus bengalensis* and *Ficus religiosa*) in his list of sacred plants. Of *Ficus religiosa* (Patnaik 1993:37) he writes:

India honors the sacred fig as the Tree of Life. The earliest evidence of this reverence was discovered by archaeologists excavating the five-thousand-year-old remains of the Indus Valley civilisation, when they found seals already depicting the sacred fig circled by worshippers .... As befits the tree of life, its medical properties were found to contribute to the health of the vital functions – circulation, vision, the lungs, and the kidneys.

So deeply is this tree associated with both the origin and the symbiosis of life that it is thought to induce illumination, and countless Indian legends tell of sages meditating in its shade. The greatest of them came to be known as Enlightened One or Bhuddha, and his tree, the Bodhi, or Tree of Enlightenment. Bhuddists often depict the Buddha in the shape of this tree, which has become the Bhuddist symbol of consciousness.

Of *Ficus Benghalensis*, more commonly known as Banyan, Patnaik (1993:19) writes:

Three thousand years before Pliny described it to the Roman Empire this mighty shade tree struck awe in the Aryan nomads sweeping across India. Their priests likened the banyan's outpouring of vitality to a flow of light or to liquid immortality overflowing on to the earth from the goblets of the gods themselves.

Claims for immortality are thought by Patnaik (1993:19f) to relate to the observed extreme longevity of the banyan tree, which he calls life-giving and life-preserving. He cites the various blood-clotting, antiseptic, astringent and diabetes alleviating properties known to Ayurvedic doctors and describes how the trees are still used as places of assembly in rural India by merchants, village elders, and priests celebrating religious occasions. Farmers are reported to herd animals into the shade of the trees to protect them from the searing sun, while school children may be taught under the trees during the day and adults may hold discussion meetings under the same trees in the evenings. Illustrations of the two sacred fig trees featured in Patnaik's work depict religious sages, birds, animals and flowers sheltered below the trees (see Fig. 1 ).

### *African Usage of Fig Trees*

An interesting parallel usage of the fig tree as a shelter was brought home to me when I was setting up a new community garden with Simon Mhlaba in Sundumbili. Much of the existing vegetation was cleared, most of it alien invaders, but he insisted that a large indigenous fig tree should be left so that meetings could be held in its shade. Palmer and Pitman (1972:440) refer to an recorded incident in which Dr. John Hutchison of Kew dined under a Transvaal *Ficus* that shaded 'quite half an acre of

ground'. The species are sometimes difficult to tell apart. Watt & Breyer-Brandwijk (1962:775) record:

In East Africa many of these trees (*Ficus sur*) are used from generation to generation as sacred shrines or places of sacrifice to the ancestral spirits. Sacrifices usually of rams and male goats are made to appease the ancestral spirits to invoke rain, to ensure a good crop, to relieve famine to eat the first fruits and generally to safeguard the tribal and local welfare. Sacrifice to the tree means also sacrifices to *Earth* and *Forest*, the two great divinities of productivity (F86).

(The work cited as F86 refers to a paper by Friede 1953 from *Trees in S. Afr*, 5, 4, which I have been unable to locate.)

### *An African Tree of Life*

The tree known Zulu, Xhosa and Ndebele speakers as *umphafa* (*Ziziphus Mucronata*) is much revered in many parts of Africa and is perhaps best described in the eloquent frontispiece of McCallum (2000):

The *Ziziphus mucronata* is a thorn tree which can be found through-out the entire continent of Africa, extending its boundaries into the Middle Eastern countries of Israel, Lebanon and possibly Turkey. On its branches, it has two rows of thorns, one pointing upwards and out, while the other row hooks back in an opposite direction. It is believed by the traditional Nguni people of southern Africa that these thorns remind us of something about ourselves ... they say the ones that point upward and forward tell us that we should always look ahead to the future, while the ones that look backwards say that we must never forget where we come from. For these people, it is not only the tree of the ancestors, it is the tree of life.

I knew of the ritual use of branches of *Ziziphus mucronata* to attract ancestral spirits to new dwelling sites, or to be placed on the graves of chiefs and kraal heads after burial and fed to cattle to imbibe the spirit of the departed owner from various sources in my earlier work on Zulu medicinal plants (Hutchings 1996). It was only after I learnt that

*umsuzwane* could be used as a substitute for a goat's chyme, that I learnt that *umphafa* branches or twigs could be used as a substitute for a person who had died, and were widely used locally 'carry home the spirit' of some-one who had died in hospital, or away from home. This had been recorded by Player (1997:81-84). Dr. Lissah Mtalane confirmed this practice from her experience in nursing dying patients in a Zulu hospital and lent me her doctoral thesis (Mtalane 1989) in which she carefully describes several instances similar to those related by Magqubu, in Player (1997). Both tell how an elderly relative will take a branch from home to lay on the bed where the death has recently taken place. The twig will then be treated as if it is the dead person on the journey home, even to the extent of buying a separate train ticket and food for the person and explaining how and where they are going. This is to ensure that the spirit of the dead person is accompanied until the burial is safely completed. Magqubu further describes how the twig would be put in the eaves of the huts, a beast would be killed and the dead person would then join al the *amadlozi* (ancestors) in the *muzi* (homestead), and is quoted by Player (1977:86):

You must know that this is not only a tree of the people, but all the wild animals, and cattle and goats too, eat from this tree. It is food for the spirit and the body. You must *hlonipa* (respect) the *mpafa* (sic.).

When I related this custom to a journalist, the late Chris Jenkins, he told me how he had observed a similar custom, after the tragic deaths by drowning of eight teenagers from Mpumalanga on a school outing to Richards Bay in May 2005. Relatives brought down by bus to identify the bodies, visited the spot where the children had perished and held a prayer service on the beach and a number of elderly women relatives had brought branches with them, which they dipped into the sea before taking them back home on the bus. The gesture and its significance of the gesture puzzled Chris Jenkins until, he told me, it was explained to him by a local woman.

### *Observations on Some Properties Relevant to Ziziphus mucronata as a Tree of Life*

Obviously it is difficult to assess scientifically the efficacy of a tree of life, but the observation in Palmer and Pitman (1972: 1392) that in some (unspecified) places the tree is believed to indicate underground water would give weight to the concept of a tree of life. The tree is often found growing next to water, as is a beautiful specimen growing naturally in the grounds of the University of Zululand. The fruit is apparently not very pleasant to taste, but is regarded as a source of food in times of famine and also reported to be a good thirst quencher (Fox & Young 1982). Medicinally roots, leaves or bark are used for various forms of pain in Africa, while extracts and alkaloids from related species are reported to have shown significant analgesic, anti-inflammatory or sedative properties. This is also reported in related species used in Chinese phytomedicine (see Hutchings *et al.* 1996 & Van Wyk *et al.* 1997). Such usages and properties would reinforce the image of the tree as a comforter, as would the frequently observed sheltering and sustenance of insects, birds and animals.

## FINDINGS

The passages quoted below were selected to illustrate how the literature survey helped me to understand the purposed of rites I was recording.

### *Notes on the Social Significance of Culture, Rites and Symbols from the Source Literature*

Vera Buhrmann, a clinical psychologist, was intrigued by and wished to understand the meaning of the rituals she observed in the eastern Cape and wrote:

When I was first introduced to a group of Xhosa *amagqira* (indigenous healers) and started watching and sharing their rituals and ceremonies and learning about their cosmology, I was plunged into a world which was partly familiar to me from my own analysis and training as an analyst, and subsequent practice as one, but which was unfamiliar to me in its vitality, its power to grip all participants and its ability to transform attitudes, insights and feelings .... I felt the need to experience and understand the meaning of the methods of the healers, their rituals, ceremonies and symbols, so as to satisfy myself about the reasons for

effectives of their healing procedures and the effect these had on me (Buhrmann 1984: 13).

She found her studies of Jungian philosophy highly relevant to understanding and analysing her experiences and quotes Jung (1953: par 174):

Rites and rituals are attempts to abolish the separation between the conscious mind and the unconscious, the real source of life, to bring about a reunion of the individual with the native soil of his inherited instinctive make-up (Buhrman 1984:66).

In his book on Zulu thought patterns, Berglund (1989: 18) wrote:

The relationships between men expressed in rituals and symbols make living in that society a meaningful experience.

In a similar vein, in a paper examining the role indigenous culture in a paper on herbal resources in Nigeria some three decades after Berglund, Iroegbu (2006: 42) wrote:

The richness of culture exists in our minds and the material resources with which it can blend. In short, culture is manifested in the way we live and thus establishes mores over time. Indigenous knowledge is a basis for understanding how to live in local environments in a way that makes sense for the people whose lives are sustained in them. The role of local or indigenous knowledge is to guide sustainable ways of life established with social systems containing linkages to cosmology, moral concepts and pedigrees. Indigenous knowledge is also known as local knowledge and traditional knowledge: local knowledge accounts for a society's origins and the embodied natural and socially constructed world it inhabits, and upon which it functions. It is a sensible dialogue and a shared adaptive response to environmental challenges that affect people, their families and kin-related neighbours. This suggests that a nation in quest for progress and development must not cheat itself by deliberately neglecting any sector of its culture: economic, political, religious or health.

Referring to the needs for and potential benefits of further understanding between cultural groups in South Africa, Buhrmann (1984: 16-17) wrote:

We need to work on the images we encounter in other cultural groups of our shared country: this will increase our understanding to the mutual benefit of all concerned. If this knowledge is shared it could also assist the members of other cultural groups to a greater understanding of the images and forces that motivate them from their unconscious.

On the holistic philosophy of Ayurveda, or 'Knowledge of Life', Patnaik (1993:1-2) wrote:

Its logic prescribed a whole way of life, based on knowledge and awareness that man (sic.) is interdependent with all forms of life. Spirit is described as the intelligence of life, matter as its energy. Both are manifestations of the principle of Brahm, the one-ness of life .... But as the highest form of life, man (sic.) also becomes its guardian, recognizing his[her] very survival depends on seeing that the fragile balance of nature, and living organisms is not disturbed.

More specifically on humanity's ecological responsibility, Patnaik wrote:

In Ayurvedic terms, this means that man must prevent wanton destruction. What he takes he must replace, to preserve the equilibrium of nature. If he cuts down a tree for his own uses, he must plant another. He must ensure the purity of water. He must not poison the air. He must not poison the water. Ayurveda, some four thousand years ago, was already propagating the arguments which inform the ecological debate of our own time.

The logic of Ayurvedic philosophy, with its insistence on maintaining nature's equilibrium, continues by observing that if man's spiritual health is dependent on his ability to live in harmony with the external universe, his mental health must depend on his ability to live with himself.

Of sacred plants, science and the forest, (Patnaik 1993:16) wrote:

As early as 3000B.C. the prehistoric worship of actual plants was already turning into a reverence for nature as a source of medicine .... What primitive peoples worshipped as a plant's magical powers was now analyzed by the Ayurvedic physicians for its physical powers.

The scientific approach may have dispelled superstition, but it certainly did not diminish a plant's sacredness in the eyes of the Ayurvedic physician to whom knowledge was sacred, as it was to all Indian thinkers. Indeed, the great Indian philosophers conducted their dialogues in the forest using plants again and again to illustrate concepts of spirituality and continuity to their students, because the forest represented the endless regeneration of life, or what we would today call an ecosystem, complete in itself.

## Discussion

The above quotations reflect the values of rituals and symbols as powerful and transforming and highly meaningful to the holistic societies from which they emerge, and stress the responsibility humanity has for maintaining the environment and its own integrity. These concepts have helped me to understand the function of the practices described in this study, which, for me, demonstrate the needs for both a sense of belonging and a sense of continuity which I believe are essential to both spiritual and community well being and survival. A belief in the possibility of being cleansed from pollution in purification rites involving plants and an acceptance of death as not being final are expressed in the related African, biblical and Ayurvedic examples cited. Respect and guardianship for the environment are shown in care and cultivation of trees within the healers' gardens, and the conservation practices relating to the example of bark preservation and in the collection and recognition of the sacred properties of *imphepho*.

Possible efficacy in the aromatic plants used as antipollutants are apparent, especially in the resourceful use of *Lippia javanica* by the people of Ntandabantu. The volatile oils commonly found in *Helichrysum* species used as incense have some indicated antimicrobial, antibacterial and insect repellent properties and would tend to purify the air in the same way as other insect repellent candles. They could also



help to disperse calming and sedative properties indicated by use of the plants for sleep and trance induction.

The substitution of *Lippia. javanica* for the chyme of a goat in ceremonial hand-washing at a funeral would provide a significant economic release from the pressure on poverty stricken communities to meet ritual obligations, while still allowing for the solace that fulfilling the ritual might bring. With great compassion, Mtalane (1989) calls on hospital nurses and doctors to try to understand and to facilitate, where they can, traditional washings and family burial rituals such as those involving the *umphafa* tree. This is one of the ways we can adapt to the calls for understanding of rite expressed by Buhrmann and Oroegba above. Do these rituals not fulfil a universal need of communities to respect and honour their departed loved ones, and, in doing so, remind us that we are part of a living community that includes the living dead/ancestors in a similar way to the community of saints cited in the Christian Apostles' creed, as intercessors? I believe the rites described in my text have very much to do with a holistic perception and a concept of the sacred, and that this is relevant to traditional concepts of the forest and the need for its conservation.

## Conclusion

Although some of the customs related in this paper may seem strange to a foreign eye, such rites of passage fulfil a valuable function in holding a community together. The universality of many of the underlying concepts found in diverse studies of ritual confirm the view expressed by Etkin (1993), that anthropology, as one of the core disciplines of Ethnopharmacology, offers a holistic perspective that broadens our insight. This, I believe, enables us to understand what it is as human beings we have in common, which is far more important than our differences. During the course of my study, many of the people involved have died. The last funeral I attended was that of the journalist Chris Jenkins who died suddenly very recently. As I watched the smoke rising high before the altar as the priests solemnly circled the altar with incense censers, I thought of the student who talked of the smoke from *imphepho* being taken by the ancestors straight to God, and felt comforted.

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In keeping with truth expressed in *Umuntu ungumuntu ngabantu*, I know that, as a person, I should not have been able to undertake this study without the help of other people. I should like, first, to acknowledge my late husband Geoffrey for his enthusiastic and shared love of the Psalms, and also to thank the following people for their generous sharing of knowledge:

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