

Sceletium tortuosum - Kougued

- Aizoaceae - South Africa



Empathogenic effects of *Sceletium tortuosum*
by Groot van der Gros

The family Mesembryanthemaceae contains many pharmacologically active species. One of the most utilized by native peoples in South Africa was the genus *Sceletium*, for which whole tribes would travel hundreds of miles to pick a years supply. The plants of the *Sceletium* genus were utilized as an intoxicant; however much of the information available has been spotty and contradictory.

In an effort to clarify the role and usage of *Sceletium* in it's historical context a search was done on Medline which yielded the following information, derived from a report in the Journal of Ethnopharmacology (#50 1996 pgs 119-30)

As early as 1662 it is reported that a man named van Riebeeck bartered with the local inhabitants for sheep and *Sceletium*, which was very plentiful and considered the "greatest clearer of spirits, and the noblest Restorative in the world". In 1685 it was recorded by the second colonial governor of the Dutch Cape Colony, van der Stel, of the natives; "They chew mostly a certain plant which they call "Canna". They use it as the Indians use betel or

areca, and are of a very cheerful nature it is held by them in great esteem as the betel or areca with the Indians."

"They chew its stem as well as the roots, mostly all day, and become intoxicated with it, so that on account of this effect one can expect some profit from its cultivation."

Thunberg, during his 1773 expedition reported: "The Hottentots come far and near to fetch this shrub with the root, leaves and all, which they beat together, and afterwards twist them up like pig-tail tobacco; after which they let the mass ferment and keep it by them for chewing, especially when they are thirsty. If chewed immediately after fermentation, it intoxicates."

Laidler in 1928 noted that it was "chewed and retained in the mouth for a while, when their spirits would rise, eyes brighten and faces take on a jovial air, and they would commence to dance. But if indulged in to excess, it robbed them of their senses and they became intoxicated."

Although primarily chewed, there are reports of it being taken as a tea (Jacobsen 1960) and also as a snuff (Jacobson 1960). Thunberg wrote in his journal in 1794, in reference to the San peoples; "These people chew 'Canna' (*Mesembryanthemum*) and afterwards smoke it."

Paterson, one who traveled in the same region wrote in 1789; "this is called the Channa land; and derives it's name from a species of

mezembryanteimum (sic) which is called Channa by the natives, and is exceedingly esteemed among them. They make use of it both in chewing and in smoaking (sic); when mixed with Dacka (sic) is very intoxicating, and which appeared to be of that species of hemp which is used in the East Indies by the name of Bang."

There have been many additional reports from self-experimenters who used the traditionally prepared material orally and most of these found a marked anxiolytic effect. "One informant used approximately 5ml of powdered 'kougoed' (sceletium) orally before giving a lecture that he was anxious about. He reported feeling relaxed throughout the lecture, with no cognitive impairment one user claimed she felt that 'kougoed' was a truth drug some felt that there was a synergistic effect with alcohol, and with smoked 'dagga' (cannabis sativa) the chewing of 'kougoed' was reported to greatly enhance the psychoactivity of an inferior grade of cannabis smoked shortly thereafter some reported euphoria as well as a feeling of meditative tranquility.

Several users felt that the relaxation induced by 'kougoed' enabled one to focus on inner thoughts and feelings, if one wished, or to concentrate on the beauty of nature. Some informants reported heightened sensation of skin to fine touch, as well as sexual arousal.." (M.T. Smith, N. Gericke, et al).

In light of the above, some Sceletium tortuosum herb, prepared in the manner of the Hottentots was procured from South Africa and the following experiments conducted:

Sceletium is here understood to mean the dried herb, powdered herb or the tincture of Sceletium tortuosum.

The first experiment consisted of combining approx. 50mg. Of dried Sceletium tortuosum with another smoking herb, the one most preferred by the Hottentots. After smoking the herbs, it was immediately apparent that there was a strong effect similar to Cannabis at first but without the dulling of Cannabis. Empathic feelings beyond normal were noted. There were no hallucinations per se, but there was a definite visual "softening" in the appearance of objects and a subtle glow to everything. Feelings of euphoria were noted and a strong desire to dance and sing. This was offset somewhat by a slight, easily correctable effect on one's balance. The balance deficit was slight and temporary. After two hours the effects were still quite noticeable but had waned somewhat. At this time I went to bed and had a good, restful nights sleep.

The next experiment was the following morning when I ingested approx. 50mg of the powdered Sceletium tortuosum as snuff. The effects were unlike those of the previous evening; in fact, there did not seem to be much of an effect at all, just a slight uneasiness. After 1 ½ hours, I again tried some of the Hottentot herb and was amazed at the difference it made. The full effects of the previous night returned, along with a stronger empathy than before. Joy and euphoria were the keywords of this session, and the effects lasted for over two hours when I became tired as it changed effects to sedation. This is an effect that has been noted throughout the history of this plant and led to the contradictory descriptions of its effects among the early explorers. I took a long nap and awoke feeling almost normal, just a little of the Sceletium in the background.

Later that afternoon I smoked some more with a friend, this time around 100

mg. The friend only smoked a small part of it, but stated that he felt calmer and had noticed that he was talking less loudly and in a more calm tone before he left. I finished the remainder, and became concerned over having used too much. Visual distortions were noted, similar to looking through a pane of wet glass; some things seemed in focus and others not. This was somewhat unpleasant, but did not last long enough to be of serious concern. The euphoria and well being/empathy was stronger than before. There was also a slight feeling of minor discomfort, possibly balance related and tending towards a slight dizziness. At times there seemed to be a slight headache, but it never developed into one, and was soon gone.

Early in the same evening, I tried another round of the snuff, this time more than the first time. It was harder to get to the euphoria and joy this time, possibly because I was tired and trying to keep up with the friends I was visiting. The friends did not try any. After a short while, the pleasant effects wore off and I found myself unhappy with the situation and short tempered with the people. I left and came home, noticing on the way that my perceptions were altered enough that I had to pay special attention to driving, even though it was late at night and there were no cars on the freeway.

The next day: After trying to sleep for hours, I got up at around 1 am and combusted some cannabis pollen. This was a big mistake; I became more awake than ever and felt flu-like physical symptoms all night. I finally managed to fall asleep around 5 am but was up again by 6:30 am. After being up a while, the flu-like symptoms dissipated leaving me just tired. Now, and all day so far, I have felt the "call" of this substance. It is as cloying in its seduction as cocaine, and keeps wafting in and out of my consciousness.

The message is "It felt so good, and this doesn't". This just feels ordinary; what's wrong with feeling good? Try some more". The problem, as I discovered yesterday, is that a little bit is nice; too much makes you feel nauseous for a short while and kind of doopey and out-of-it. That and the visual distortions.

The joy that a small dose brings is very much worth it. After the initial joy, in about 45 minutes to an hour or more, a kind of calm contentedness sets in. One is emotionally detached and can put up with all kinds of bothersome people without any stress. After a while, that wears off, though, and they become more bothersome than originally. Unless you take more. This reminds one of cocaine, again. And, again, with another dose, the slight unpleasant effects become more accented as well as the good ones until they can overshadow the good ones, and it is time to stop.

The visuals remind one somewhat of mushrooms, but things do not melt (at least for me, at low doses) they just get "soft" looking, like being slightly out of focus. The colors and textures are accented.

As far as being a potentiator of cannabis, there is no doubt that scelletium has this effect. Much more was gotten from much less when scelletium was added. Overall, it is my opinion that the pleasant effects of this substance, when used in moderation far outweigh the negative ones. Furthermore, the effects on cannabis potentiation are marked.