

## Tabernaemontana iboga - Iboga

- Apocynaceae - Tropical zones of Western Africa



An evergreen shrub, it grows to a height of 1.2m with a spread of 1.5m. The stem is erect and branching; the leaves are dark green, opposite and narrowly ovate-acuminate; the flowers are white to yellowish and widely expanding tubular. A native of Gabon (Africa), it prefers well composted, well drained soils in a protected partly shady position, and is drought and frost tender.

Propagation is by fresh seed or by cuttings.

Iboga is basic to the Bwiti cult and other secret societies in Gabon and the Congo. The drug is taken in two ways: regularly in limited doses before and in the early part of the ceremonies, followed after midnight by a smaller dose; and once or twice during the initiation to the cult in excessive doses of one to three basketfuls over an eight to twenty-four-hour period, to "break open the head," thus inducing "contact with the ancestors through collapse and hallucinations."

The drug has far-reaching social influence.

According to natives, the initiate cannot enter the cult until he has seen Bwiti; and the only way to see Bwiti is to eat Iboga. The complex ceremonies and the tribal dances associated with Iboga vary greatly from locality to locality. Iboga enters also other aspects of Bwiti's control of events. Sorcerers

take the drug to seek information from the spirit world, and leaders of the cult consume Iboga for a full day before asking advice from ancestors.

Iboga is intimately associated with death: the plant is frequently anthropomorphized as a supernatural being a "generic ancestor" which can so highly value or despise an individual that it can carry him away to the realm of the dead.

There are sometimes deaths from the excessive doses taken during initiations but the intoxication usually so interferes with motor activity that the initiates must sit gazing intently into space eventually collapsing and having to be carried to a special house or forest hideout. During this almost comatose period the 'shadow' (soul) is believed to have left the body to wander with the ancestors in the land of the dead. The banzie (angels)-the initiates-relate their hallucinations as follows: "A dead relative came to me in my sleep and told me to eat it"; "I was sick and counseled to eat Iboga to cure myself"; "I wanted to know God-to know things of the dead and the land beyond"; "I walked or flew over a long multicolored road or over many rivers which lead me to my ancestors who then took me to the great gods."