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Medisyne van die Vader
Medicine from the Father: People, Plants, and Landscape in Kannaland
Towards an ecology of medicine
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Abstract

The majority of academic work on plant medicine in South Africa has been based on a reductionist logic: disconnecting medicines from their environmental-socio-cultural contexts, treating them as objects, and putting them into lists. At an historical moment in which South Africa is struggling to incorporate its previously overlooked but rich base of indigenous knowledge (IK), there is a great need for work which moves toward an ecological understanding of medicine. This thesis is an attempt to situate plant medicines (known and used primarily by the rural coloured proletariat) in their relational contexts in the rural Kannaland municipality, in the Western Cape province of South Africa. Based on approximately three months of fieldwork consisting of extending recorded interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation, the thesis explores the human and non-human spheres of relations which are integral to peoples' understandings and experiences of bossiesmedisyne (lit. bushes medicine).

The argument is advanced that in a context of great inequality and difficult conditions of life, peoples’ knowledge of bossies (lit. bushes) is one practical means by which they can control how they respond to these conditions and maintain themselves in strong bodily health. The association of bossies with previous generations which are considered to have been healthier than people today, with nature, and with a conscious creator God, means that they stand outside of many of the physical and moral pollutions people experience in their day-to-day life. The cleansing, healthful potency people experience in medicines also relates to wider phenomenological experiences involved in walking in the storied Kannaland landscape and collecting and ingesting the medicines which grow there. Peoples’ appreciation for the natural landscape and the plant medicines that can be found within it derives from the dialectic which exists between the difficult conditions of contemporary life and direct sensual experiences of the landscape and its medicines.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In February 2006, I left my home in England and arrived in Cape Town to take up my place on a Masters in Social Anthropology course at the University of Cape Town. This course is both by course-work and dissertation and in my first semester I opted to do a course by the name of Tradition, Science and Environment, run by Dr. Lesley Green. The aim of the course was to explore the myriad ways in which the world's people - scientists and those sometimes labelled 'indigenous' - have related to and understood the world in which they live, and to explore ways in which the different approaches might usefully speak to one another. In connection with this course, in April 2006, I took part in a fieldtrip looking at human-environment relations in the Klein Karoo (lit. Little Karoo) which is roughly the geographical area encompassing Barrydale in the west, Uniondale in the east, Swartberge in the north, and Outeniquaberge in the south.

For the first time in my life I would see the landscape of the South African interior. Peering from the window of the coach, I saw the landscape slowly change from the green fynbos¹ (lit. fine bush) and pine-covered hills of the south western coast of the Western Cape to the greeny-brown hues of the drier and sparser vegetation covering the orange soil and rocks of the hills and plains of the Klein Karoo, itself a part of the Succulent Karoo biome². With my senses reduced to sight, to a distant gaze through the glass in front of me, the landscape was certainly aesthetically pleasing - the blue sky against the oranges and reds of the earth, not a wisp of cloud, grape, apricot and ostrich farms in the valleys - but it also seemed somehow empty and hard; not lifeless, but lonely.

¹ This term has both lay and scientific applications and according to Cowling, derives from ‘Dutch settlers [who] referred to the predominant vegetation of the south-western Cape as ‘fijn-bosch’ – either because of the fine leaved nature of many of the plants, or because their trunks/stems were too slender for harvesting (1992:vii).
² The Succulent Karoo biome possesses the highest plant species biodiversity of any semi-arid region in the world, and is home to over 6356 species of plant, mostly succulents and bulbs (Cowling et al 1998; Driver et al 2003). This exceptionally high diversity is related to it's climatic regime of reliable, gentle winter rainfall, relatively mild summers (ameliorated by its proximity to the ocean), occasional droughts, high endemism (species limited to a 50km² area), and high climatic and topological diversity with many species being adapted to survive within very limited ranges (Cowling et al; Driver et al 2003).
Some kilometres west of our destination in Oudtshoorn, we made a stop at an eco-tourism farm, to speak to the farm's extremely knowledgeable owner. As soon as I stepped off of the bus, my perception of the environment was immediately and permanently changed. I felt the quiet hanging in the air, absorbed the warmth and light which seemed to be radiating from the earth itself, and smelt the rich, fresh scent of the plants in the early evening (we arrived an hour and a half before sun-set). The smell of the Klein Karoo landscape is one of its most memorable and powerful qualities, and one which was very often mentioned in my later discussions with people with *kennis* (knowledge) of the *velde* (lit. field), and its plants. The Karoo landscape in general has inspired many over the years and here Afrikaans poet I.D. du Plessis here does better than I could hope to in evoking the unmistakable olfactory quality of the Karoo:

Gee my die krag van die Karoo – die forse lyn  
*Give me the power of the Karoo – the strong line*  
van ysterklip en kaal kareedoringstam,  
*of ironstone and karee thorn trunk.*  
die wynlug wat oor wye vlaktes waai  
*the aromas of wine that waft over the plains*  
met allerhande kruie-geur belaai…  
*loaded with all kinds of herb-scents…*  
...Gee my die aandblom met sy heuning-geur  
...*Give me the evening flower with its honey-scent*  
en gousblomplate wat die heuwels dek.  
*and the low-growing marigolds that clothe the hills*  
Neem alles van my weg, maar o,  
*Take everything away from me, but oh,*  
Gee my die grootste gees van die Karoo!  
*Give me the greatest spirit of the Karoo!* (1970: 41)

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3 From this point on I follow the practice of those I spoke to in Kannaland of using the term 'velde' (literal translation: field) as a generic term meaning those areas of the environment – including plains, mountains, valleys, and ravines - not given over to farming or urbanization; though each of these environments are also referred to by specific words.

4 Encompassing both the *Groot* (great) Karoo and Klein Karoo.
Evoked by the poet, the *krag* (power) of the Karoo and of nature\(^5\) was also emphasised by people I spoke to in discussions around the landscape of the Klein Karoo and will be discussed more fully below. Returning to my own initial experience of the landscape, my emotional response to the land changed from one of emptiness and isolation to one of appreciation and connection. This response was then reinforced and articulated in my mind as the farm's owner told us about the animals that live there, and the complex relations between the large, small and tiny plants all around us. The more he explained and pointed out, the more I looked, the more I saw, the more I appreciated the living worlds around me, and the happier I was to be there.

I had been searching for a research topic for a thesis, and had considered something around medicinal plants. It seemed to be the ideal topic to explore human-environment interactions, and when the farm owner told me that local people – and in particular local ‘coloured’\(^6\) people - did make use of the healing properties of the medicinal plants (in local terms *bossiesmedisyne* [lit. bushes medicine], *bossies* [lit. bushes] or *kruie* [herbs]) which grow in the surrounding landscape, I knew I had found my subject and place of research. Thus, motivated partly by my own emotional response to the landscape, I wanted to understand how people who had lived in close proximity to it for many years, who knew of, and made use of its healing properties, related to this place and to the medicines that grow there.

**Filling the ‘gap’ in the Literature**

Various anthropologists (e.g. Farquhar 1994; Geest *et al* 1996; Green 2007; Helman 2007), studying the relations between human beings and their medicines have

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\(^5\) The problematic concept of ‘nature’ is discussed below.

\(^6\) As an invented, socially constructed concept, all references to ‘race’ are problematic. The uses of the term in the South African context have been extensively discussed in the literature (e.g. Boonzaier 1988; Frankental and Sichone 2005). In the local context, the word ‘coloured’ was in use by Missionaries at Zoar-Amalienstein by the late 1850s to refer to the population of people claiming mixed Khoisan, Germanic and East and West African (slave) ancestry (Heese 1997). In my conversations with people, they regularly referred to themselves as ‘kleurlinge’ (coloured) or sometimes ‘bruin-mense’ (brown people). Many years of unofficial and official racial segregation have led people to make very clear differentiation between people along perceived racial lines. Thus, whilst I do use the term coloured with a recognition of its highly problematic nature, I also believe that it is more ethical to use the labels people give themselves than to deny they exist or to try to invent ones which may better suit my own sensibilities than they do the people I aim to understand.
convincingly argued that though the pharmacological action upon the body is important, it is only one element in the on-going set of relationships involving people and medicines, and the healing which is derived from them. I understand medicines to be substances which have the capacity to change the condition of an organism for better or for worse. Usually these are associated with improving health (van der Geest et al. 1996). Following the work of Claridge (1970), Cecil G. Helman, medical doctor, and one of the foremost authorities on the relationship between culture, health, and illness, argues that in order to understand the effect of medicines on the body, it is necessary to consider the ‘total drug effect’ (Helman 2007:196). Among other things, this is influenced by the personality and social identity of both the giver and receiver of the medicine; the setting in which it is given; moral and cultural values assigned to it; and wider social and economic contexts. Arguing along similar lines in specific relation to plant medicines, Green makes the salient point that ‘it is not just the pharmacologically active ingredient in the plant that is healing but the combination of social and environmental experiences that are invested in seeking a cure from that plant...’ (2007:4).

It is important to note that recognising the importance of social-environmental factors in the reality of medicine should not be read in any way as a denial of biology. Rather, it is a denial of the false distinctions which are sometimes drawn between culture and biology. It is a recognition that mind and body are an indissoluble whole, and that ‘human life, healing and suffering, belong to the world of mental process’ (Bateson 1984:65). In everyday life, we do not think about culture, we live it and it is only through taking a metaphorical step back from the experience of human life that culture can be constituted as an object; something which is thought and not lived. Following Thomas J. Csordas I hold that if the body can be understood to be the existential ground of culture, then it is equally both biological and

... religious, linguistic, historic, cognitive, emotional, and artistic [and thus] ... if even language can be shown to be a surging forth of embodiment and not just the representative function of a Cartesian cogito,

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7 It is important that I make clear that I do recognise that without doubt, the chemical composition of plant medicines plays a large part in the healing they provide - and it is important that these properties are known. Indeed, for the doctors and nurses in Ladismith, not knowing how the pharmacological medicine they administer will react chemically with the bossies many of their patients use, can lead to anxiety over prescription, and misunderstandings between patients and medical professionals.
the way would be clear for defining culture not only in terms of symbols, schemas, traits, rules, customs, texts, or communication, but equally in terms of sense movement, intersubjectivity, spatiality, passion, desire, habit, evocation, and intuition (2002:4).

The implication of these insights is that in order to understand medicine, it is not sufficient to only focus on what people ‘think’ about medicines, it is also necessary to consider the ways by which they engage them through their embodied presence in the world. I consider peoples’ sensual experience of medicine and techniques of the body involved in finding and using medicines to be as integral to the ‘tradition’ of bossiesmedisyne as are peoples’ thoughts as to the metaphysical origins of those medicines. In fact, the two are simply different aspects of the same thing (Mauss 1979).

Unfortunately, it is still true that a majority of the contemporary academic work on medicinal plants in South Africa proceeds in much the same way as the 17th century ‘botanizing’ European visitors (Augusto 2006). In sum: the compilation of the list – normally organised according to ‘rational European’ botanical categorization which has little to do with local understandings of plants and of medicine; a focus on substance over process; on Science8 verifying the pharmacological benefits of medicines; and medicines as objects, disconnected from their socio-cultural-environmental contexts. A brief review of historical and contemporary literature on Southern and South African medicinal plants will serve as an illustration.

From very early on in the European settlement of southern and western South Africa there has been an interest in and recognition of the environmental knowledge (including the medicinal plant knowledge) of those people who already inhabited the sub-continent (Deacon 2004). European frontier settlers depended for their survival

8 Bruno Latour has criticized what he views as the dominant ‘western’ episteme in which only institutional laboratory-based Science (the capital ‘S’ being intentional), is accepted as having access to nature as it really is, whilst the mass of humanity – encompassing everyone from the European ‘lay’ person to the indigenous person living in ‘remote’ places – locked in the dark Platonic cave of culture, have ‘become uncultivated, hate-filled, paralysed and gorged with fiction’. With only culturally distorted and limited views of nature, those masses must rely on Science to reveal the truth about the world (Latour (2004: 16). This situation, he argues, grants Science (and those who wield it) huge power, being possessors of the one true knowledge; it has been and continues to be the cause of conflict and injustice done to those whose knowledge has been deemed invalid.
on learning this kind of knowledge from Khoisan\(^9\) people and according to Deacon (2004) made use of their herbs, charms, and other remedies to cure sickness and ward off spiritual attack.

Though there were exceptions - including the late 17\(^{th}\) century work carried out by Hendrick Van Reede, who was keenly interested in 'the ways and ideas of the Cape Khoikhoi people' (Cook 2007: 323) - Augusto (2006) describes how the academics and scholars who produced studies of the medicinal plants of Southern Africa in the 18\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) centuries created impressive catalogues of the many uses the 'natives' found for South Africa's cornucopia of plant species (see, for example Burchell 1822–1824; Sparrman 1777). She argues that these works typify the representative epistemology of university-trained travelling natural historians... representations of knowledge (specimens, samples, descriptive notes) [which] went back to wealth patrons, metropolitan physick and botanical gardens, academies, societies and 'armchair botanists'... in Europe for 'true' analysis and classification' (2006: 19-20).

In 1932 Watt and Breyer-Brandwijk published *The Medicinal and Poisonous Plants of Southern Africa: being an account of their medicinal uses, chemical composition, pharmacological effects and toxicology in man and animal*, with a second, updated edition appearing in 1962. These list thousands of medicinally used plant species from across the sub-continent and are the classic works cited by many writers (e.g. van Wyk 2000; Light et al. 2005; Thring and Weitz 2006) on medicinal plants in southern Africa. For the authors of these vast works, documenting (what they understood to be) the real active chemical principles and commercial potential of the plants was key, and vital both for the furtherance of the Scientific project and the future economic prosperity of South Africa. Other more contemporary compendia of the medicinal plants used in South Africa include Palmer (1985), Roberts (1990), Smith (1966), van Wyk et al (1997), and van Wyk and Gericke (2000). Whilst these works do include descriptions of some of the ‘beliefs’ of the people who make use of the medicines in question, these are essentially included as interesting and colourful pieces of extra information.

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\(^9\) A generalised term, commonly utilized by contemporary authors (e.g. Boonzaier et al. 1996; Deacon et al. 2004) referring in one word, to both the herding, pastoralist Khoi-khoi, and hunting and gathering Sonqua or San peoples who inhabited the Western Cape at the time of first European contact in the 17\(^{th}\) century.
Over the past decade or so, *The Journal of Ethnopharmacology* has published a number of articles relating specifically to the use of plant medicines in South Africa. Here the focus has generally been on the gaze (le regard) of power of western Science giving a perceived validation to the efficacy and safety of indigenous plant medicines (Light *et al* 2005, Foucault 1980).

Studies done on medicinal plant use in south-western and western South Africa - the general geographical area of study for this work - include Fiona Archer's UCT Masters thesis *Ethnobotany of Namaqualand: The Richtersveld* (1994), which includes a wealth of information on how medicines are selected, prepared and used by the pastoralist Nama-speaking Khoi descendents of that area. Thring and Weitz (2006) identify 36 species of plant medicines used in the treatment of a wide variety of ailments amongst elderly ‘coloureds’ in the Bredasdorp/Elim region of the Southern Overberg in the Western Cape. Though there are notable exceptions, including Ngubane (1977 and 1992), I am in agreement with Ben-Erik van Wyk (one of South Africa’s foremost authorities on South Africa’s ethnobotany) when he argues that ‘the interaction between plants and people, [and] plant-related mythology’ in Southern Africa, is ‘poorly recorded’ (2002:7). Indeed, no such study has been made in the Klein Karoo.

At this juncture, I should like to emphasise that this is not an attack on any of the meticulously researched studies mentioned above. The issue is less about what they *do* include, than as about what they *don’t*. Indeed, the list is a useful and powerful tool in that it allows a large amount of data to be amassed and quickly and easily comprehended. Certainly, most of the plant medicines I came across in the course of my fieldwork are found in the works cited above. Because certain locally applied names were often different in the specific local context, and in order to provide the reader with a visual representation of some of the locally used medicines, I have compiled my own species-use list, included as an appendix. In the interests of knowledge protection, I have withheld botanical names and/or photographs of species not mentioned in the available literature for their medicinal properties.

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10 Of 46 species-identified plant medicines, more than 30 are mentioned for their medicinal properties in Smith (1966), van Wyk *et al* (1997), van Wyk and Gericke (2000), and Watt and Breyer-Brandwijk (1932 & 1962).
However, people do not live in lists, they live in the world in all its social, cultural, economic, spiritual, and environmental messiness. And it is in this world that they seek their cures, and live in health or illness. There is therefore much scope and need for work in South Africa, and the Western Cape specifically, which situates plant medicines in that world.

More than a matter of scholarly tunnel-vision, though, this issue speaks to the treatment of indigenous knowledge (IK) and medicinal plants in the wider South African context. Since the ending of apartheid in 1994 there has been increasing interest in reclaiming the validity of IK (Boonzaier and Sharp 1988, Thompson 2001). The term ‘indigenous’ is highly problematic but it is fair to argue that this interest in IK centres around the notion that recognising the value and worth of previously marginalized South Africans’ knowledge, know-how and ways of understanding the world, will also be a re-assertion of those peoples’ value and worth as persons and citizens. Among other things, IK includes myths, songs, dances, and stories; handicrafts such as basket-making, pottery, and weaving; agricultural knowledge and technique; and approaches to human and animal healing, including the use and knowledge of medicinal plants.

IK is often held to be a well-spring of ‘cultural diversity’ in the face of the homogenising forces of globalisation and is commonly presented as indissoluble from the aims of the African Renaissance. A number of the articles published in the 2002 inaugural edition of Indilinga - African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems hold this position (see, for example, Higgs 2002, Koka 2002, Vilakazi 2002). Certainly, these positions are supported and put forward by the government’s Indigenous Knowledge Systems policy (IKS) of 2004, in which ‘The Government of the Republic of South Africa registers its commitment to the recognition, promotion, development, protection and affirmation of IKS’ (IKS 2004: 6). As recognised in that document, ‘traditional’ medicine and healing are some of the most commonly discussed, and contentious issues associated with IKS.

In addition to its discussion of African ‘cultural redress’, the IKS policy makes it clear that it is of central importance to the government’s strategy that South Africa’s
IK be made to contribute towards the nation’s economy (Dept. of Science and Technology, 2004:14). One of its three main ‘policy drivers’ is stated as being:

Underpinning the contribution of IK to the economy – the role of IK in employment and wealth creation; and interfaces with other knowledge systems, for example IK is used together with modern biotechnology in the pharmaceutical and other sectors to increase the rate of innovation (ibid 11).

This project is exemplified in the government’s soon-to-be-open flagship Medical Research Council’s laboratory facility in Delft, Cape Town. In this modern scientific laboratory-cum-pill-factory, plant medicines – some of them learnt from ‘traditional healers’ – have their active ingredients extracted and tested for efficacy. Those that ‘work’ are patented, shredded, freeze-dried, put in gel capsules and (it is hoped) sold on the global market.

The facility is unashamedly directed toward turning plants into Rands and with this reductionist approach entails a logic similar to that of the list. In either case, a plant medicine’s universe encompassing the place where it grows; the person who picks it and gives it; and metaphysical questions of who put plant medicines there in the first place; are reduced to the unit - the unit of monetary value, or the unit of data. I am in agreement with Green when she argues that this approach to plant medicine signals the domination of an episteme based on causality and reductionism over those based on interrelationships and process; and that it ‘authorizes the admission of knowledge to the national episteme via only one matrix…’ (2007:4-5).

In order to avoid doing inordinate violence to the experiences and knowledge of those who gave of so much of their time to teach me about bossiesmedisyne, it will be necessary to move away from a focus on plants’ physical substances towards a processual, many dimensional picture, placing them firmly in their environmental ‘domain of entanglement’ (Ingold 2006:14), and in this way work towards an ecology of medicine. The hope is that this work will be a contribution toward addressing the gap in the literature whilst also touching upon what threatens to be overlooked should IK become just another commodity offered by SA Inc. to a world on the market.
Outline of chapters 3-4

To this end, I have taken recurring everyday themes identified in the course of interviews, informal discussions, and participant observation to construct chapters 3 and 4. In line with arguments put forward by Tim Ingold (2000), I hold that for the human subject, the world becomes meaningful through engagement with his or her environmental field of relations. Thus, I have drawn together some of the most important relational strands in the local context to distinguish two interconnected relational sets which are particularly salient to understandings and experiences of *bossies*. The two chapters should not be read as mutually exclusive, since there is significant cross-over in the themes discussed in each. The two chapters simply differ in their emphasis on different aspects of the same issue. In the fifth, concluding chapter I bring these various strands together.

In chapter 3, my focus is on some of the human relations which are integral to peoples’ experiences and understandings of *kruie*. The research area is one which is characterised by deeply entrenched inequality, exploitative working conditions and difficult living conditions for the majority of the population. Because of the racialised nature of South Africa’s history, those who supply the productive labour – and especially the lowest paid positions - for the various industries of Kannaland are overwhelmingly coloured people. For various reasons, the knowledge of *kruie* is most strongly associated with these people: 1) the previously existing knowledge base amongst their ancestors; 2) limitations on access to western medicines, especially before the early 1990s and the advent of free medication; 3) being engaged in occupations – including farm work and shepherding – which have maintained a connection to knowledge of the natural world.

For those members of the coloured rural proletariat who know about, value, and make use of them, *bossies* constitutes a body of healing knowledge and practice which people feel be ‘close’ and trustworthy. Medicines contain the healing power of God, and represent older times when people were physically and morally stronger. In relation to these understandings, and as a practical means of maintaining a strong and healthy body, *kruie* are commonly spoken of as a kind of antidote to some of
what is often viewed as the polluting, weakening aspects of the contemporary world, including western ‘pill’ medicine.

In chapter 4 I focus on the environmental, ecological relations which are integral to peoples’ experiences and understandings of bossiesmedisyne, and the embodied phenomenology of the process of walking in the veld, searching for, identifying, and collecting medicines. This is a pleasurable, satisfying experience and a skill which requires the negotiation of the landscape, the application of ecological knowledge, and the detailed recall of past experiences. For many people, previous experiences in the veld and its medicines, engagements with its various animal and ‘spirit’ personalities, and stories heard about these and the landscape in general, have augmented their direct sensorial perception and aesthetic appreciation of being in and moving through the landscape. In conjunction with Christian ideas concerning the divine origins of nature in general and of bossiesmedisyne in particular, people experience the landscape as powerfully emotionally evocative. I suggest that this experience of die krag van die natuur (‘the power of nature’), accessed through being in the veld, is understood to be the same divinely given power which allows kruiie to do their healing work on the body.
Chapter 2: Research methodology

As part of the afore-mentioned field-trip, we also visited a Permaculture\(^1\) farm a few kilometres outside Ladismith, situated in the north of the Kannaland municipality (Kannaland Municipality 2002). On the farm they had the facilities for visitors to stay and pay or else stay and work off their accommodation costs. It became apparent that it would be economically possible for me to stay on the farm for an extended period of time and I returned in July 2006 for a two-week long pre-research visit to judge the suitability of the farm as a base for research, whether or not people knew and used \textit{bossies} and if they would be willing to discuss this with me.

Once all these requirements were seen to be met, I arranged to come back at the beginning of December 2006 for a two month period of research. I later returned to the area in May 2007 for a ten day return visit in which I aimed to evaluate some of the conclusions I had been drawing from my initial round of research. I also returned for a week long visit in November 2007. By the time of this visit the current thesis was almost complete and this gave me an opportunity to discuss the main ideas set out in the thesis with my main participants. I was happy that my ideas were met with positive and affirming responses and that people considered them to be \textit{‘dood reg’} (dead right).

Interviews and language

Upon arriving at the farm in December 2006, I set about asking people in Ladismith whether they themselves knew about \textit{bossies}, and if not could they direct me to those that did. This lead me to speak to a few key individuals in Ladismith, whom in turn directed me to particular farms where they knew people who had much knowledge,

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\(^1\) Combining the terms ‘permanent’ and ‘agriculture’, this term was first coined in the 1970s by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren. Taking the position that modern industrial production is fundamentally unsustainable and destructive to the earth’s ecosystems, the authors developed ‘Permaculture’ as a means by which human settlements could be designed which mimicked natural ecologies and which would enable people to become more and more self-sufficiently sustainable. Today ‘permaculture design courses’ are offered across the world, including at the farm at which I stayed (Mollison and Holmgren 1978; Mollison, 1979, 1990).
whom they had known in their time working and living on the farms and in the surrounding areas. They also directed me to individuals living in Zoar-Amalienstein (pop. 6000) – a Mission station set up in the early 19th century by the South African Missionary Society, around 20km east of Ladismith, along the R62 (Heese 1998). I also spoke with several people in the rural Hoeko valley (pop. 700), just north of Ladismith.

My main research methodology was the use of extended recorded interviews – using either an audio-tape recorder or my digital camera which also supports moving images. The Klein Karoo is overwhelmingly an Afrikaans-speaking area and being an Englishman my ability to speak ‘die taal’ (the language) was virtually non-existent. In order to remedy this situation, I organised lessons with an Afrikaans-speaking friend, spoke Afrikaans as much as possible in day-to-day life, became a regular watcher of Afrikaans television soaps such as ‘Sevende Laan’, and used the June/July visit as an opportunity to practice my language skills. Thus, by the time I arrived at the farm in December 2006, I had a very basic conversational understanding of the language. Language was the biggest challenge for me but I believe people were appreciative of my efforts to speak and comprehend Afrikaans. All of the main participants made great efforts to speak slowly for me and to make sure I had understood what they considered to be important points – repeating their words if needs be, and enjoining me to ‘mooi luister’ (listen nicely/closely).

It was also essential that I record my interviews in order that I could listen over and again to things I may have missed. Most people seemed very comfortable being recorded or filmed, and as far as I could tell this was a genuine comfort, not feigned out of politeness or obligation. However, it is never possible to fully know another’s thoughts and it should be accepted that the presence of those electronic devices may have had some influence on what people did or didn’t say to me. Those living and working on the Permaculture farm I stayed on spoke both fluent Afrikaans and English and they helped me a great deal in formulating questions for return visits, and in translating those aspects of recorded interviews that I did not understand. Unfortunately they were too busy working to accompany me on interviews to act as translators, and my budget was such that I could not afford to pay for someone to act as translator. As I got to know people better, one particular young man (whom I have
named Johan) who spoke good English, and who himself was very interested in learning more (for he already had a substantial knowledge) about medicinal plants, would come with me on my weekend visits, though he worked long hours on a farm on weekdays.

Also, for the majority of my May 2007 visit I was accompanied by a fluent Afrikaans-speaking friend who helped enormously in my conversations with people. Having conducted her own research into bossiesmedisyne in the Northern Cape town of Paulshoek, she was sensitive to many of the issues which emerged in discussions, as well as having an ear well-tuned to the patterns and tones of rural Afrikaans. Fortunately, these discussions served, in the great majority of cases, to confirm and validate the ideas which had been developing in my mind in my time away from 'the field'.

My approach to interviews was to make them as informal as possible, and to let the interviewee lead the discussion topic. I returned to each of my main participants on many occasions, which gave me the chance to probe more deeply into subjects only briefly touched upon in earlier interviews. Usually interviews began with an account of what plants the person used, how, and for what. However, new plant medicines and their uses would also frequently pop up in later interviews. Where possible I would collect a small sample of these plants, to allow them to be pressed and dried and subsequently taxonomically identified with the kind help of botanists at the University of Cape Town’s Bolus Herbarium (see appendix). In most cases people were very happy to give me a small amount of their own medicines. Only where people had bought medicines that only grow in other parts of South Africa, or it was very difficult for them to get hold of more (e.g. Langblaarbuchu - Empleurum unicapsulare, which grows high in the mountains and is protected by law), were people reluctant to part with their medicines.

I also tried to elucidate how the knowledge had been learnt, and from whom. It was usually only once a good rapport had been established that people would talk to me of their relationship to the bossies and how they about felt them. From there I began to understand the cosmology, or more accurately cosmologies within which these attitudes and ideas were rooted.
Scope and limitations of research

Despite the measures I took to overcome communication barriers, language certainly was a challenge for me. It did put a limit on how much I could get done and accurately comprehend. Nevertheless, I conducted 32 in-depth interviews, ranging from 45 mins to 2 hours in length. These were primarily divided between 7 individuals. Their pseudonyms and approximate ages are; Rose (early 60s), Doris (mid 70s), David (mid 60s), Simon (early 50s), Johannes (mid 80s), Piet (late 30s), and Johan (late 20s). I also interviewed several other people in group interviews at their homes or places of work, including two of the head nurses at the Ladismith clinic and two of the local western-trained doctors. I spoke to many other people on the street or outside their homes in brief informal chats around the subject of bossies, the information from which filled a number of A4 sized notebooks.

I was fortunate enough to go walking in veld on 14 different occasions with a number of different men who knew much about plant medicines, where they grew, and whom also had a great love and respect for the whole natural landscape. It was during these experiences that I picked up some of the most useful and subtle clues as to those peoples’ understanding of, and relationship to, the living landscape we were moving through and discussing. Several of the 32 interviews mentioned above were conducted on these walks. Though I made an effort to speak to both men and women, my own gender influenced who I ended up speaking to. Certainly I never went walking with any of my female participants. In part this is because women are generally more tied to the house, and the chores which are carried out there. This meant that whilst I got first-hand direct data from men and their knowledge of and relationship to the Kannaland landscape, I only ever got second hand accounts from women talking about it. I recognise that this may have given my data a male bias, though I do think the arguments advanced are generally relevant across the gender line.

For myself as an anthropologist on ‘field-work’, I feel that the best way to come to understand people and their lives is to get to know those people well and personally as one would get to know anyone else, and not treat them simply as informants or
sources of data. Consequently I concentrated my study on a relatively small number of people whom I felt I could get to know well in the time that I had.

Budgetary constraints meant that for the majority of my time in the field my only means of transport was a bicycle. Ladismith was a twenty minute ride away whilst Zoar-Amalienstein was around one hour away. Considering the bulk of my research was conducted in the height of summer, where temperatures regularly approach 40 degrees Celsius, physical fatigue played a part in limiting how much research was possible, though I certainly did push my mental and physical abilities to their limits. However, travelling by bike did afford my research benefits it two ways. Firstly, through being constantly immersed in the environment, through working my way up and down the topography of the Kannaland landscape, I obtained a good feel for its ways, its smells, sounds, climate and wealth of insect life! Secondly, riding a bike as opposed to driving a car lessened the ‘distance’ between myself and my participants, both in terms of wealth and in a physical sense. On a bike you are outside, in the world, as opposed to a car where you are closed off and separate. People got to know me by my bike, sometimes calling for me to stop to talk.

In ‘following my nose’ in searching for people that know in the general area, my attentions were spread over quite a wide geographical area. This limited my deep immersion in the daily round of peoples’ lives, and in part meant that only on a small number of occasions did I actually witness medicine being taken or given. This meant that to a large degree I had to rely on peoples’ words that medicines were actually in use rather than perhaps being something that was used in the past. However, several strands of circumstantial evidence convinced me that in the majority of cases peoples’ actions were in accord with their words;

1. Many people had stores of medicines – dried plant material, and growing plants in their homes and gardens. Often I would see these in the process of being prepared e.g. being steeped in water.

2. Head nurses at the Ladismith clinic told me that at the end of each month they collect a large amount of unused western medicines from people who would rather use bossies.
3. People often spoke of the taste of different medicines, suggesting that they had experience of using them.

4. Rather than speaking in general terms about different medicines, I recorded and heard many accounts of specific instances when bossies had been especially effective in a treatment, often where western medicine had not been. Further, these treatments were on-going, not just made use of sometime in the past, but used contingently in the time I was in ‘the field’ - though not whilst I was in the immediate vicinity and able to witness the cure.

In some cases it is likely that in fact action did not accord with words. For example, some of those people who told me they use aalwyn (Aloe ferox) to treat a bad stomach, would actually use a store-bought remedy when they had a bad stomach. However I would still contend that how people felt and thought about the different kinds of medicine is significant and entirely relevant for the arguments advanced below. I also believe that my ‘spread-out’ ethnography did give me a good ‘feel’ for a wider attitude to plants in the area under consideration. Nevertheless, I do recognise that given the limitations of time and the use of interviews, this thesis does derive most of its information from ‘second hand’ sources, in the form of verbal accounts and narratives. Anthropologists have long recognised that people don’t necessarily do what they say they do and as such this work is offered as an introductory study – it is far from definitive. In addition to these issues, even within my small sample, there were sometimes pronounced differences of opinion about, for example, the names of different plants and their uses, or about the existence or non-existence of ‘ghosts’, and other kinds of ‘nature spirits’.

A cautionary note concerning ‘indigenous knowledge’

It is my concern throughout this thesis that an understanding of ideas around bossies can only come out of an understanding of the contemporary social reality of Kannaland. That means avoiding fixing knowledge in a mythical, imagined past and placing it firmly in the now. The ‘culture’ of Kannaland is a mix of many influences, and whilst many people will no doubt have many ancestors who have pre-colonialist
origins, the entrenchment of European ways of life, language, of everything that might be termed ‘culture’, go back a number of generations (Heese 1998; Green, 1955).

Along with a European mode of work and living came a European system of belief and education. Christianity has deep roots in the area with Missionary activity at Zoar beginning in 1817 through the work of the South African Missionary Society, and from 1837-8 by the Lutheran Berlin Missionary Society (Du Plessis 1965, p97). A Dutch Reformed Church was founded in Ladismith in 1851 and the first church at Amalienstein (around which the present town developed), was founded in 1853 (Steyl 2000, Potgieter 1972). Today there is no physical space between where houses of Zoar end and those of Amalienstein begin, though people locally often refer to each as separate towns.

There are presently Anglican, Uniting Reform Church (formerly Calvinist) and Lutheran churches, all of which act as socially important focal points for many people - Sunday morning sees many people out in their best clothes on their way to church. Unfortunately I was never invited to go to a service and not wanting to intrude on peoples’ lives beyond what was acceptable to them, I remain in the dark as to the specific social dynamics and teachings which obtain in this important space.

The church also plays an important role in education in general, with all the primary schools in the area having or having had strong links to the church. In Zoar there are two church primary schools – one of the United Reform Church, the other of the Anglican church; in Amalienstein there is one Lutheran primary school. There is one primary school in Ladismith, which was previously run by the Lutheran church. There are also several smaller schools in outlying areas, all of which are church schools, either Lutheran or United Reform Church.

It is of little surprise, then, that a belief in, and a relationship to, a Christian God were important to all those I spoke to about medicines and was certainly one of the most consistent elements in peoples’ ideas around bossies. However, how people negotiated this relationship to God, in relation to the use and giving of bossies, did change from individual to individual. This is discussed further discussed below.
Thus it is important to remember that knowledge, ideas, and concepts – all of which are relevant to peoples’ understanding of *bossiesmedisyne*, come from many sources, and have a history as complex as the people who hold that knowledge. 76.8% of people in Ladismith, and 82.5% in Zoar have had at least a primary school education with a nationally recognised curriculum (Kannaland Municipality 2002). Literacy is therefore relatively high in the area and the reading of books, newspapers, and magazines also plays an important part in shaping peoples’ understanding of the world. Most of the people I spoke to owned televisions and radios and were regular consumers of these popular media. A small ethnographic example will serve to illustrate the importance of not overlooking these kinds of influences on even the most seemingly so-called ‘traditional’ person, and his or her ‘traditional’ knowledge.

**Television and the bushman**

At the time of this conversation I had got to know aunty Doris quite well and I knew she was very knowledgeable about plants, and had resided in her house, outside of Zoar, for all of her seventy-plus years (though she had been employed as a domestic worker in Cape Town for some years). We got to talking about a particular fern (*Nephrolepis exaltata*) that she kept in her garden, and its use as a medicine; something she said was learnt from the *bushmen* – a fact which, if I’m honest, piqued this anthropologist’s interest:

Doris: now this is a fern and you break the leaves and you break it apart and you make medicine from it.

…

Doris: ja we use this for rheumatism and arthritis

Josh: where did you hear that the bushmen use that?

Doris: I saw it on the TV. On TV they show you everything, if you watch it. It shows you they were the first people.

Thus my naïve wish to trace a chain of plant knowledge into a hunter-gatherer past was put into sharp question. As it turned out, a person that the aunty classified as a bushman, had, in reality, lived nearby when she was a young girl, and he had, in fact,
taught her about other medicines. In both cases (the TV and the person of the bushman), Doris considered the knowledge valuable because it had come from the bushmen, whom she knew to be baie slim (very clever), and indeed the fern was, in her experience, an effective remedy for rheumatism and arthritis. The route by which the knowledge came to her, was, however, very different in each case.

One of the characteristic features of many peoples’ lives is of shifting labour – of moving from farm to farm or town to town in the Western Cape, and further afield, searching for work. Further, many people have regular contact with the closest metropolis, Cape Town, through relatives that live and work there, or through having spent time there themselves. Thus knowledge and ideas around medicinal plants which currently have a home in the area under discussion, often have had origins elsewhere, and have been in turn shaped through the unique set of relations which obtain in Kannaland.

All of the above serves, in this context at least, to expose the fallacy of speaking about ‘Local Knowledge Systems’. There was no one local knowledge system to identify and detail, but rather a panoply of different knowledge sources which each person made use of and interpreted in their own way, according to their own preferences and background of life experience.

On the other hand, this is not to suggest that the use of plant medicines, and even the use of the exact same plant species for the exact same illnesses, does not have a very old heritage. In 1731, Peter Kolb wrote of the Cape Khoisan people that among other things, they used aloe\textsuperscript{2} juice, and fennel as medicines; both of which people use in Kannaland in 2006-7 (Deacon \textit{et al} 2004, p 57). In both the early 18\textsuperscript{th} century and early 21\textsuperscript{st} century contexts, a few drops of aloe\textsuperscript{3} (likely to be \textit{Aloe ferox}) juice are used to treat a ‘foul stomach’ (Kolb 1731). From before the time of white settlement, people would have relied on their natural surroundings to heal themselves and incoming Europeans would have been obliged to learn from those who had lived in that environment for many generations (Deacon \textit{et al} 2004). The reasons for the

\textsuperscript{2} It should be noted, however, that Kolb does not mention to which \textit{specific} species of aloe he is referring.

\textsuperscript{3} In the contemporary context at least.
continuation of this knowledge are many, including; the undoubted efficacy of
bossiesmedisyne; the fact that the knowledge is primarily based on locally growing
plants; the scarce availability of western medicine for much of the modern period;
power relations between rich and poor, and the spiritual potency of natural medicines.

People often spoke of illness being caused by ‘vuilwinde’ (dirty winds). These are
connected to the ghosts of dead people and of the machinations of malevolent persons
– often referred to as toordoktors (‘witchdoctors’) - with knowledge of the ‘bad’ side
of bossiemedisyne. Recently, Chris Low (2007a) has identified the connections
between winds, ghosts, and illness as a pan-Khoisan phenomena stretching in space
and time from contemporary !Kung people on the northern reaches of the
Namibia/Botswana border to 19th century /Xam people from central Northern Cape,
South Africa (Low 2007a).

Aunty Doris’ speciality is in treating babies, and pregnant or recently post partum
women. Connecting her with a widespread Khoisan tradition, she uses oils to massage
foetuses into the proper position in the womb. After birth she uses a similar method to
work the internal organs back into their proper place, and to work out the sickness
inducing wind that can enter a woman after childbirth. Since wind can enter the baby
through the mother’s milk, Doris is also able to work on the child to work this out of
the body. Exhibiting a similar understanding, Simon said that illness was caused by
having one’s internal organs out of place. For this reason, he said, women need to rest
after childbirth, and drink infusions of Kooigoed (in this instance Helichrysum
pandurifolium) both to ‘clean them out’ and help the organs get back into the right
place. According to Low the use of massage to reorient the internal organs has long
been a central (though ethnographically overlooked) aspect of Khoisan healing
traditions (Low 2007b).

For many in contemporary Kannaland, the healing potential in bossies is self-evident
in their ‘lekker ruik’ (great smell). Similarly, a medicine’s taste is held to be indicative
of its healing power. For example, the intensely bitter taste of bitterpatat (Kestrostis
nana) indicates its ability to clean illness out of the body. Low argues that the idea of
a plant’s healing efficacy being connected to its smell is likewise a widely held
Khoisan understanding (Low 2007).
Whilst I would hesitate to give anyone a label they themselves do not adhere to, I think Low’s work does suggest that at least some ideas around *bossies* do have roots which predate any currently living person – and possibly European settlement. Some caution is needed on the point about smell, however, since according to Mills (1991), the connection between smell and taste and healing effect is actually a widespread understanding in herbal medicine world wide.

**Ethical concerns**

Local and indigenous intellectual property rights, and especially those pertaining to plant medicines have become an extremely contentious issue in recent years (Posey *et al* 1999). In the past the interaction between researchers and local knowledge of plant medicines has often been one-sided and exploitative. In some cases researchers and companies have made a handsome profit from 'new' plant remedies learnt from elders, with little or no compensation or acknowledgement for indigenous people. The controversial case of the appetite-suppressing *hoodia* plant would be good a case in point (Mingle 2003). Partly as a result of this, various resolutions and laws have been passed to protect indigenous intellectual property rights. The South African IKS policy stresses peoples' rights to their own knowledge and one of my principle concerns is that this thesis does not disseminate information which may be used by others for their personal gain. To this end, I have refrained from publishing the common names, species names, and photographs of plants which are not already found in the existing literature on South African plant medicines.

More generally, I maintain that it is important for the academic researcher to maintain a good perspective on the importance of his or her investigatory efforts. Academic work, and in particular anthropological work, should always put the interests of the ‘researched’ first. Ultimately this work is presented in the form that it is in order to satisfy an academic standard, to prove that I am able to produce work which meets certain requirements of critical and analytical research, thought and writing. However, for the present author, what is paramount is that in achieving this (essentially selfish) end, I do not in any way harm those who have made this work possible. Most of the people I spoke had no need of a university-educated foreign researcher to tell them the validity and worth of their own knowledge. However, I was told on several occasions
that it was good that I was taking an interest and writing down this knowledge because it was perceived that the young generation would let it die with their grandparents and parents.

In all my work I was bound by the University of Cape Town's codes of conduct and ethics for researchers involving human subjects, and the ethical guidelines set out by the professional association Anthropology Southern Africa (ASA, 2005). In relation to these, I recognise that the rights (including the right to remain anonymous) of research subjects are paramount. As mentioned, I endeavoured to come to know my participants as people in the same way I get to know any human being, and as such it is necessary that my responsibilities to research participants have extended in time and space beyond the research period. I informed research participants of the research being undertaken, ensured that they gave their consent before any research took place, and informed them of what would happen to the information they provided me with. I have undertaken to fully recognise the vulnerability of research participants and have not printed any information which may impinge on their rights, or endanger them in any way. I have also employed the use of pseudonyms to protect the identity of those I worked with in order that nothing printed here can be used against them.

In focusing my research on a few key individuals, I believe I did alienate some of the people I did not speak to, which in turn lead to feelings of jealousy. Toward the end of my initial stay, local gossip in Ladismith decided that I was selling marijuana to people in Nissenville (the name for the township side of Ladismith), which lead to me being heavy-handedly, without warning nor prior explanation, apprehended by local police officers outside of the local Spa supermarket. After thoroughly searching me, they allowed me to go, without raising charges against me. However, peoples’ perception of me certainly was affected through my association with the police – with some people then assuming that I was a drug dealer. I feel that had I had a better command of Afrikaans, been able to speak to many more people, and made the aim of my presence better understood by more people, I could have avoided this incident, and the ill-will that I feel went along with it.

The question of sharing work with participants is a complex one. For one thing, this dissertation is written in English and as mentioned this was a language not fully
understood by the majority of people I worked with. Secondly, whilst most people could read and write, the style of writing required by the academic institutions renders our work largely unintelligible to all but the most specialised reader. Even then, full comprehension is sometimes not a given, as many a reader of Levi-Straussian or Foucauldian analysis will be aware. That said, the mere act of sharing the physical end product of my research means something to people – it is a sense that what has been shared is not simply taken away and locked in an ivory tower somewhere in Kaapstad (Cape Town).

Finally, any amount of time spent in the field will only ever enable the anthropologist to present and understand a very small part of the human reality he or she engages with, and this is even more true in the short-term research period possible and required by the present academic work and hoped-for qualification.

Also, I recognise something quite precocious in a 26 year old English-speaking student believing that he can come to really understand something in a couple of months that which some people had been learning for many years; in some cases for a much longer time than I have been alive. In response to my over-eagerness to know everything concerning bossies, oom Piet once told me that ‘you are still young, don’t try to know everything all at once or you’ll overload your brain and give yourself a headache. Have patience.’ In recognition of those words of wisdom and in line with my intention to produce something which is worthy of the time, effort, and openness afforded me by those I spoke to, I believe it would be ethically questionable for me to pretend that what is presented here is anything more than a very small glimpse at the daily experience of people, plants and landscape in Kannaland.
Chapter 3: *Bossiesmedisyne* as antidote to the conditions of contemporary life

As is discussed widely in the literature, the legal and physical segregation and control of the South African population along perceived racial lines, and the exploitation of non-white labour has been a long standing and central feature of South Africa’s colonial history and capitalist economic development (e.g. Thompson 2001; Simons 1969; Feinstein 2005). The research area is no exception to this.

Archaeological remains in the area - including ‘bushman’ rock paintings with images (such as men carrying bows and arrows and spears) suggesting a hunting lifestyle - attest to the existence of Khoisan prior to white settlement. According to Steyl (2001) settlement at Zoar began early in the 19th century when four or five Khoi families set up a kraal near to Jacobus River. Soon more families arrived; and a religious farmer, Petrus Johannes Joubert with a mind to Christianize the Khoi, set up the first mission at Zoar in 1817.

Jean Comorroff (1993) writes on how the early missionaries in South Africa – often inadvertently - created ‘native’ subjects well suited to work and trade in the cash-based capitalist economies of the colonial forces. Whilst English-language historical sources concerning the specific local context are thin, the attitude of Reinhold Gregowski, the first Berlin Missionary Society (BMS) missionary to work at Zoar, suggests that Zoar was no different. Heese writes that;

> [In 1838] Gregowski described the inhabitants [of Zoar] as a mixture of KhoiKhoi and Basters (ein gemisch von hottentotten und bastarden) who all understood Dutch perfectly well. They have already progressed culturally and the majority of them are employed at the neighbouring farms (umwohnende Bauern) [sic]. A few were artisans while others owned ox wagons and plows...The missionary further commented that the inhabitants lived in neat clay huts which resembled the little houses found in east Prussia between the villages of Willenberg and Stuhm (1998:207).

It is clear that Gregorowski considered it important that the ‘KhoiKhoi’ and ‘Basters’, live in the proper European way, in ‘neat clay huts’. Comaroff and
Comaroff (1997) have argued that, unlike French and English missionaries, who believed in a universalized civilization, the German missionaries believed that social cohesion lay in people living according to their own *kultur*, as a distinct *volk*. This meant that they were more accepting of local belief and practice. Nevertheless, Heese also writes that the German missionaries believed in the value of hard work and prided themselves on the fact that ‘their flock was sought as labourers by farmers and other business people because they were outstanding workers; they worked hard, were reliable, did not drink and did not steal’ (1998:207). Further, Gregorowski’s successor, Theodor Radloff, considered the Khoisan to be ‘like weak or small children... that... always needed guidance or supervision’ (Heese 1998:207).

Likely forced off of their lands by the incursions of white settlers in the 18th century, the majority of those pastoralists/hunters at Zoar were induced to change their life processes; to accept European norms of language, work, spiritual practice, and organisation of inhabited space (Penn, 1986).

Today, those of mixed Khoisan, African and South-East Asian slave and European settler descent make up around 80% of the overall population of Kannaland (Kannaland Municipality 2002, Heese 1998); and the exploitation of their labour is ongoing – the primary employment for coloured people in the area being centred around agricultural production of some kind. As is mentioned above, it is with this rural proletariat that the knowledge of *bossiesmedisyne* is primarily associated.

The Ladismith area produces about half of South Africa’s apricots, though grapes and plums are also common. The other main employers in the area are two large dairies in Ladismith, and the Ladismith Co-operative Winery and Distillery. Long, hard days in the fields or on the factory floor are rewarded with low pay (WESGRO 2000). As well as being physically demanding, often done under a hot Karoo sun, farm work carries with it various health risks including the spray insecticides used by many local farmers (London 2003). According to a 2002 Integrated Development Plan\(^1\) (report),

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\(^1\) These percentages should be taken as approximate figures since they are not based on evidence from each and every individual, but on a sample of population. They are also based on data which is five or six years old.
of those who are employed in Ladismith, 60.6% earn less than R1500 a month, whilst the figure for Zoar-Amalienstein is 58.3%.

WESGRO, which describes itself as ‘an independent agency by Provincial Law to promote investment in and trade with the Western Cape and to identify, analyse, publicise and market investment and trade opportunities in the Western Cape economy’, advertises Ladismith and surrounds partly on the basis that: ‘the labour force is stable and reliable’ - reminiscent of the feelings of 19th century missionaries concerning the suitability of their ‘flock’ for work in the developing cash-based capitalist economy.

Even with this industry, unemployment is high. Only 56.9% of those aged between 15-60 years in Ladismith are economically active, whilst the figure for Zoar-Amalienstein is even lower at 48.5% (Kannaland Municipality 2002). Given that farm work is very often seasonal in nature, unemployment rates for much of the year are probably significantly higher, an argument made on their website by local development agency LANOK (LANOK, no date). People do have their own sources of income and nourishment; some people in Ladismith keep their own pigs for sale and eating, whilst many people grow some of their fruit and vegetables in their gardens; in Zoar-Amalienstein, where everyone has access to some land, many people grow their own fruit and vegetables, and keep animals including donkeys, cows, and goats.

Of course, each and every individual and family has differing access to wealth and resources depending on their social and economic network, and some people have better-paid occupations than others. There is also a significant population who might be characterised as a coloured middle-class. However, I would still contend that for the majority of the population, who comprise the rural proletariat, getting by day-to-day is difficult. Most people do have access to a solid roof over their heads, either in older labourer cottages, in Zoar, and the Hoeko valley, or in government-sponsored housing in Ladismith and Amalienstein. However, many people complained that these modern houses offer very little insulation, being extremely hot in the summer and freezing cold in the winter. Further, the roofs were liable to leak in a downpour. Conditions are also cramped, with a number of friends and relatives often living in the
same room. Also, some people have friends and relatives living in home-made shelters in their gardens.

Despite the official ending of Apartheid in 1994, the organisation of the population according to the colour of their skin is still very apparent in Kannaland. Walking around the area today the distinctions between where white and non-white people live, and the jobs they do, are clear. In Ladismith, the divide between the white side and the coloured side of town is definitively marked by a cross-cutting road; the quality and size of homes on the white side in the vast majority of cases being clearly bigger and of a higher quality than those on the coloured side. In the rural areas and on farms, the homes of labourers are clearly much smaller and in worse condition than those of farm owners. Very rarely do you see a white person in the coloured part of town, and interaction between the ‘races’, outside of work, is rare.

This division and inequality was powerfully brought home every time a man twice my age would refer to me as ‘meneer’ (sir), simply because of the colour of my skin. Different individuals would employ these terms in different ways. Some were speaking with the weight of a subservient history, others used the term sarcastically as a kind of insult and/or to endear themselves to me, in order that I might give them money or cigarettes. It is interesting to note that not one of those people who were knowledgeable about plants once referred to me in these terms – I was always just Josh or ‘Joss’. I suggest that at least in part this was because they knew something that I was interested in, they had pride in themselves because of this knowledge, and consequently it was I who approached them from the weaker position.

**Alcohol**

Up until recent living memory, the notorious ‘dop’ system was in operation in the area. This was a method of oppression whereby payment in alcohol was used by farmers to control and keep their labour-force, as well as to get rid of their surplus product. The bodies of labourers were literally physically dependent on the alcohol their bosses provided. Partly because of this system alcohol abuse is a serious problem in the area, as it is in the lives of many poor rural South Africans (London 2003). My efforts at research in the Hoeko Valley were made very difficult by the effects of
alcohol, with many people remaining drunk for entire weekends, which meant disinterest in discussing *bossies* and the missing of arranged meetings. Alcoholism is so much a part of life there that sections of the valley are often referred to by locals as ‘Spirit Hoeko’.

According the Hans Heese, alcohol abuse has deep roots in the area; Reihold Gregowski reported alcohol as being a serious social problem as early as 1838 (Heese 1998). As well as the direct effect of (especially cheap, low-quality) alcohol on the internal organs and the body in general, alcohol brings with it a whole range of related health issues. Injuries through fighting and drunk-driving are common, as are unwanted teenage pregnancies and the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Nurses at the Ladismith clinic told me that the high rate of STIs is also related to prostitution in the area. According to one local allopathic doctor who had been working in the area for 28 years, HIV infection rates could be as high as 20%, though there are no definitive statistics for this. He also believed that living conditions, diet and alcohol are directly linked to some of the area’s most widespread health issues – including hypertension, TB, and diabetes.

**Bossiesmedisyne as antidote**

For those I spoke to in the area, the poverty, exploitative employment, unemployment, alcoholism, and illness which they see in their own lives and in those of their friends, neighbours, and relatives, are issues over which they have very little to no power to control or influence. However, by knowing how to use *bossiesmedisyne*, people are afforded some control over how they respond to and live with these circumstances; they are a means for people to maintain themselves in strong bodily health through their own techniques and knowledge.

One Sunday morning I had organised to go walking and looking for medicines in a local *kloof* with oom David. David had been working until three o’clock in the morning as a volunteer policeman – dealing mostly with the alcohol-fuelled petty violence and squabbling of a typical Saturday night. At eight o’clock in the morning he was completely exhausted and had a sore throat, indicating to him that he had a cold coming on. He still wanted to go for a walk with me, however, and we made a
successful trip to find *dassiepis*, during which David displayed his considerable abilities in reading the landscape. He was proud of his ability to remember ecological details given to him by an old man more than 15 years ago concerning the various places he could find the medicine, as well as his physical capability at the age of 65 to outpace a 26 year old anthropologist up and down the side of a hill (giving his wife a vivid account of this episode when we returned to his house!).

The day became one long conversation in which David told me of the difficulty of making ends meet, fixing the holes in his leaking roof, and of supporting his various children and grandchildren with his meagre pension. ‘Life is very hard’, he said, telling me that the one thing which keeps him going, keeps him happy and healthy is the love and the works of God – the natural beauty of the world, the mountains and ravines, and the medicines to be found there. Once we had returned to his house, David brought out some of his stores of dried medicines (including *klipdagga* [*Leonotis leonitis*]) and combined them with some of the *dassiepis* collected that day. He said that before falling into his bed, he would ask his wife to cook up this medicinal brew. He said that if he waited for this to ‘draw’ and cool down, and then drank it immediately before his rest, he would wake up fit and healthy, cured of his sore throat and impending illness. A very similar sentiment - clearly articulating the embodied feeling of getting sick from overwork - was expressed by Simon:

> It's a natural thing that's built into us - you're not a machine, and when you work, your muscles work and your brain works and they get tired, everything works together. At the end of the day you can't just keep pushing your body that way - someway, somewhere something must give in. If you keep pushing yourself, you're putting great compression behind yourself you're forcing yourself to carry on; eventually something snaps and then you start feeling 'oh I've got a pain there, and pain there, my head hurts', because your busy thinking this way and thinking that way and especially if you have a job where you have to take in a lot into your eyes - if your looking this way and that way and your eyes are busy all day you can feel them start to burn your head's not too good, and the pain starts. You start feeling down, and tired and listless and this side is sore and this side is sore and then you have to take some medicine and relax.

Similarly, though David’s financial worries and the stresses of the previous night had left him exhausted and falling sick, he was able to rely on his ability to find and prepare medicines to vitalize his body and return to his usual state of good health.
Like many others I spoke to, David felt that the *bossies* he knew and used were *his* – his own knowledge which enabled him to negotiate his circumstances. This feeling of belief in, trust of, and ownership of *kruie* I believe can be related to two key, interconnected, regularly evoked tropes concerning the healing efficacy of *bossiesmedisyne*: (1) the fundamentally social nature of the knowledge and the medicines themselves, and (2) the physical substance and origins of plants which are of and from ‘nature’, and ultimately from God.

**The concept of ‘nature’**

Before continuing the chapter, it will be necessary to briefly discuss the problematic term ‘nature’. Questions of the relationship between nature and culture run to the core of the anthropological project. For many years, the traditional anthropological approach was to treat culture as a subjective, socially constructed reality of meaning quite separate to the objective reality of nature as it really is, accessible directly only through the analytical lens of western natural science. The problems inherent in this perspective are myriad, and have been critiqued by many authors. In particular, Ingold (2000) argues that it renders fundamentally untrue all accounts of the world not based in the techniques of the natural sciences. Latour (2004) argues that it grants institutional, laboratory Science (the capital ‘S’ being intentional) and those that wield it great power, whilst rendering everyone else powerless.

These complex issues are unresolved and it is certainly not my intention to attempt to resolve them here. However, I believe it is important to recognise that in referring to ‘nature’ I do not mean to imply a singular, universalised, unified, objective nature separated from the human sphere of social relations, which can be understood purely through the laws of the natural sciences. Whilst the scientific ideal of the objective observation of objective nature is undoubtedly a hugely powerful tool, it is not the only access to truth. As various authors, including Ingold (e.g. 2000: 13-60) and Viveiros de Castro (1998) have shown, and Latour (2004) has argued, many of the world’s so-called traditional peoples do not in fact make a rigid distinction between the human socio-cultural world and the natural world. From this perspective, persons are not necessarily human beings and the realm of social relations and a concomitant morality can include include animals, plants, spirits, and even stones.
In the specific local context, people understood nature to be that which is given by God – mountains, rivers, and things that grow, as opposed to the man-made world of houses, farms, and roads. As the creation of a conscious being, people took care in their actions with and intentions towards certain aspects of the natural world. In particular, many people felt that using medicines for what they were intended and giving them with a ‘free heart’ would draw God’s favour and increase the healing power held in them.

Nevertheless, some of those same people who spoke of the importance of using medicines in the proper way would in other situations down-play the divine consciousness behind nature and speak of it more as a ‘thing’ and act towards other aspects of it with less consideration for questions of morality. For example, oupa Johannes is a deeply religious man, very concerned that people use medicines for what they were intended, and that one should maintain a close and positive relationship to die Here (the Lord). Nevertheless, he had spent many years hunting various animals – including Leopard and Rooikat – both as a predator control service for farmers and in order to sell those animals’ pelts, for what the oupa told me was a good amount of money. According to him, he had killed ‘many many’ of these animals. In this instance, for financial reasons, Johannes had approached those animals primarily as objects to be sold. However, it is also true that in recounting these actions to me, the oupa raised the question of whether this killing constituted a sin or not, suggesting that his own understanding is more nuanced and negotiable than a rigid distinction between subject and object might suggest.

**Sociality of Bossies**

As discussed more fully in chapter 4, all those I spoke to on the subject began learning about bossiesmedisyne from a young age, through being shown plants in the veld by knowledgeable relatives and friends and through observing those people preparing and using their own medicines. The medicines themselves, and the use and knowledge of them are, for many people, a part of everyday social living. To at least some extent, bossies form some kind of a part of almost everyone’s life in the Ladismith-Zoar/Amalienstein area. No one I asked did not know what I meant by ‘bossiesmedisyne’.
A majority of gardens had at least one kind of medicinal plant growing in them – often *groenemara* (*Artimisia absinthum*) (for stomach complaints), or *wynruit* (*Ruta graveolens*) (for many different ailments including high blood pressure) (see appendix). When asked about these plants, people nearly always knew their names and what they could be used for, and in most cases acknowledged that they used them to medicate themselves. These plants are in many cases gifts - cuttings from a (often senior) relative.

Further, most people knew a few specific plants and had used them at some point in their lives. Even those who said they didn’t know any medicines at all would nod in recognition when I mentioned *bakbos* (*Conyza ivaefolia*), *wilde als* (*Artimisia afra*), *dassiepis* (see appendix), or some of the other widely known and used medicines.

One particularly hot day, I stopped cycling for a rest on a bridge over a small river and got chatting to some young boys who were playing there - taking a break from bringing one of their father’s cows from the field. I asked them if they knew anything of plant medicines. They laughed and said ‘no, nothing, that’s old peoples’ things’. As I looked to the river I noticed that there was a large stand of *bakbos* on the bank.

‘Do you know those?’ I asked.
‘Of course I know that, that’s *bakbos!*’ the older one (13 years old) replied.

On another occasion, I was out walking in Sevenweekspoort (a large ravine near to Zoar) with two very knowledgeable men, who decided that I should be introduced to the plant medicine *kooigoed* (on this occasion *Chrysanthemoides monilifera subsp. Subcanescens* see appendix). It was proving very difficult to find, so as we passed a group of men working on the road, my guides asked them whether they had seen any of the medicine nearby. One of them had, and ‘Spring-hare’ enthusiastically showed us where he had found some the other day.

Often, as I hung out in public spaces such as outside Spar, or one of the local cafés, I would regularly hear people recommending different plants to one another for various kinds of illness. What is important to note at this point is that *bossies* are part of an ongoing (if possibly diminishing, and certainly changing) oral tradition – a kind of
‘continual conversation’, in which many people take part. For the most part, then, it is knowledge learnt from and shared amongst friends and relatives. Nevertheless, for some people, there are certain areas of knowledge – especially the more esoteric aspects - concerning bossies which they were unwilling to share with others. For example, Johannes felt that if he shared all his knowledge with me, his own ability to heal would be diminished.

Whilst a general knowledge of bossies and this or that remedy is something held by the wider population, there are those who are known to be especially knowledgeable. Often older men or women, it is also common for these people to have had a relative – perhaps their mother or father – who were similarly knowledgeable and who taught them about and also ‘grew them up’ with bossies. Though not exactly the formalised and professionalised bossiesdokters (plant medicine doctors) as found in other parts of the country (e.g. as described by Kruger 2006), people will go and see them if they are sick, as a supplement or alternative to medical treatment obtained from local western doctors and nurses. It was on these types of people that my research focused.

For all of those I spoke to who knew about kruie, being a person who is ‘strong’ and healthy because of using bossies is something of which they are proud, and is a part of their identity – part of the way by which they know themselves and others know them – as is their socially recognised position as people with knowledge. I would argue that this pride and feeling of strength is part of the wellness people experience as deriving from bossiesmedisyne.

Medicines from the Father.

Whilst most of the land around Ladismith and surrounds is owned by farmers, many people do make journeys into the veld around their homes to collect medicines. Further, there is a substantial amount of uncultivated veld around Zoar-Amalienstein to which residents of that town have rights of access. People often spoke of the ease of walking into the veld to pick medicines in comparison with having to wait in queues for pills at the clinic. At least one local allopathic doctor confirmed that many of his older patients gave this as one reason why they prefer bossies over pills. Viewed as freely accessible gifts from God, people consider medicines to be ‘theirs’ –
they do not have to give over any of their money in order to access their healing power. *Oom* Simon told me that:

If a person looks back, and if you look back at what the Creator did, the Creator is the Father, for me that is the one reason why there is medicine in the *veld*, so people can be made well. That's actually the purpose, that's why medicine *is*. So you can doctor yourself, and that's what the Father thought well to plant that medicine there so that you can use it, and not abuse it - so that you can use it for a certain purpose. The purpose for which it's needed, that's actually the thing that I've thought about.

Note how the uncle emphasises using plant medicines, for the specific purposes for which they were created. A sentient creator put *bossiesmedisyne* in the world to fulfil a particular human need i.e. so that people could ‘medicine’ themselves and others - to heal or remedy particular maladies, and to maintain a positive state of well-ness. Doris, Johannes and Simon all believed that their abilities to heal were themselves also gifts from God; given in order that that they could heal themselves and others. For many people, receiving cash payment for that which is given by God for free was not a morally neutral question.

Aunty Doris said she never asked money for plants she had picked for free. She did charge a small fee for massaging – though only enough, she said, to cover the cost of buying the oils necessary for her work. Johannes told me that his mother had told him never to ask payment for healing people. He wasn’t quite sure why, though he was sure that medicines given with a ‘free heart’ would align the giver of medicine with the will of the Father. This, he felt, would bring giver and receiver ‘luck’ and increase the likelihood of a cure being effected. Piet said he never asked money for *bossies* and explained that even if he was engaged in watching his favourite team playing rugby on the TV, he would not hesitate to run far into the *veld* should someone be in need of medicine – in this way ‘putting his weight’ into the medicine, increasing its healing potential.

Piet considered *bossies* to be one way in which people without much can help each other in times of difficulty, and it could be said that *bossies* form part of the daily round of gift and counter-gift which Bourdieu discusses as ‘the little gifts that keep
friendship going’ (1977:12). The work of Chris Low again suggests connections between Kannaland and wider ‘Khoisan’ practice. He writes that:

Within many Khoisan communities there are people who have the [God given] gift to treat perhaps one or two well-known illnesses by massage. Most of these people only massage those within their family or local social network, and do so with no expectation of payment. If people come to them from beyond their immediate family and friends, it is deemed ‘traditional’ for the recipient to provide a small gift in return for the treatment, although this is not necessarily stipulated nor always received (2007b:796).

In the local context, it is likely that receiving medicines would bestow certain obligations of action on the receiver i.e. the medicine would be repaid in other means beside cash payment. For example, oupa Johannes said that for him, giving medicines to those who treated him without respect, to those ‘without manners’ took his mind ‘away from medicine’, and he did not like to do this. Because of my limited immersion in the daily round of activities and the length of research, however, my insight into this question remains partial. In sum, for the majority of people I spoke with, their experience of bossies has been of gifts, as manifestations of goodwill from friends, relatives and God. The healing people experience through using bossies relates to their relationship to these people, to God, and the intention behind each act of giving. This is especially significant in an often tense social living environment in which many people regularly expressed mistrust of their neighbours.

Of course, it is important to remember that this should not be seen as a generalised reciprocity amongst a unified mass of ‘the poor’. Most people would only be giving medicines to friends and relatives. In fact, Johannes explicitly told me that he only gave medicines to people he knew. Also for some, mistrust influences who they will help as much as the spirit of selfless giving. For example, oom Simon told me that he did not grow medicines in his garden because people would simply come by and steal all of them, leaving him with none. Further, I heard many stories about people who charge what were considered to be extortionate amounts of money for medicines. Whether these accusations were accurate or more a way of expressing prejudice against ‘Rastas’ or ‘Xhosas’ is unclear.
Since the knowledge of *bossies* is experienced as that which comes from the older generations, because it is a creation of God and grows and is found in nature, it is also held to be representative of something old, and to predate many of the pollutions (both social and physical) experienced in contemporary life - including the inconsiderate behaviour and stealing objected to by Johannes and Simon, above.

**Of nature and chemicals**

Discussions centring around the healing power of *bossies* very often turned to issues concerning the pollution by artificial processes and chemicals of a wide variety of ingested substances including eggs, meat, honey, water, and medicines. People said that mountain water is nice-tasting, clean, and healthy. Piet told me that in the time of winter rainfall he would go especially to the full-flowing *klowe* (pl. *kloof*) just to drink the healthy water. Aunty Doris told me that washing and drinking in mountain water would make you clean ‘throughout your body’. By contrast, water from the tap, which came from dams, was said to taste ‘brackish’, to be less healthy, and to be filled with *chemikalieé* (chemicals) put in there by ‘officials’. David felt that whilst the doctors tell you these chemicals are harmless, they most certainly are not. In Johannes’ words, running mountain water carries the ‘spirit of God’, whilst water from the tap does not. Here Piet compares honey from the *veld* with the store-bought kind:

> I can stay in the *veld* for three or four days. I will learn, I know exactly where is a honey nest that I can go to. It has all the *beewerk* from the *bossies* so it has all that energy [from the *bossies’* flowers]...it’s pure, there’s no chemicals, and those types of things...In the old days we always got honey from the *veld*, but no more. Say for example I give Josh some honey, it must be labelled and be processed - *but us, our forefathers, would come here for pure honey, clean honey...and they say to people that is pure honey - that’s not pure honey, pure honey comes from the *veld*. It goes through machines and things, it’s no longer pure honey (my emphasis).

Similar ideas were commonly expressed when comparing western medicine with *bossies*. Whilst many people recognised that a lot of the doctors’ medicines actually had their origins in plants, they also felt that the artificial processes involved in turning them into powder or tablet form had made them necessarily less healing than
plants directly from the veld or garden (which in turn were seen to be less powerful than medicines collected directly from the veld). *Pille* have a dead *thingness* to their substance which is opposed by the living vitality of *bossies*, whose healing power came from nature, and ultimately from God. I suggest that this understanding of the effect of pills on the body is related to wider perceptions of the pollution of chemicals and artificial processes in food and water, and that in both cases these are linked to the ill-health people witness around them on a day-to-day basis.

Johan furnished me with a particularly powerful analogy to express this feeling. In discussions around drug use in the area, he felt that *bossies* could be compared with *dagga* (*Cannabis sativa*) – an older, natural, more benign drug which some people, including the *rastas* could use to feel closer to God; whilst doctors pills could be compared with *tik* (methamphetamine); a newer, unnatural, chemical drug which was poison to the mind and body.

Whilst this comparison is generally relevant with all *bossiesmedisyne*, it is especially relevant between swallowed pills and those *bossies* that are taken internally, usually in the form of tea, and are seen to cleanse the body – to *werk die siekte uit* (work the sickness out) of the body – such as *bitterpatat* (*Kedrostis nana*), *aalwyn* (*Aloe jerox*), and *kooigoed* (*Helichrysum pandurifolium* and c.f. *Chrysanthemoides* species name withheld for intellectual property reasons). Thus, *oom* David told me that at the age of 65 he is still able to go walking in the hills because he had used *bossies* all his life, whilst his younger brothers who had taken too many *pille* could barely walk down the street. *Bossies* had cleansed David’s body and made him strong, whilst the *pille* had settled in his brothers’ bodies and made them weak.

Another common theme, concerning the substance of pills is that they work in such a way that you must keep on taking them for extended periods of time, requiring that you go back time and again to the doctor, making him rich. This was opposed to the function of *bossies*, which worked quickly and efficiently – suggesting the *independence* afforded by ‘knowing your’ *bossies*, and the *dependence* on ‘hospital’

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2 Upon a short visit in November 2007 I was sad to hear that David’s brother had in fact passed away within the last couple of months.
technology and medicine which is enforced if you do not. Here Aunty Doris and I discuss the origins of hospital medicine:

Doris: Because you take that which the bushmen dig up... And they take it, and they crush it, into a powder. And the brown man sits there, the white man also sits there - and he [the whiteman] says ‘oh this helps for....’ then they drink it, and then the hospital makes it.

Josh: Oh and so the clinic medicine comes from the knowledge of the people?

Doris: Ja, its people’s knowledge. But now, they don’t make it as strong as it was. But the good stuff, that they make those pills from, that is only for the people with money. High society people, they got the money... but those other ones, that are a bit worse. They make the same pills but they are not as good as others – hospital pills. But its one sort – there is one kind but one is worse than the other.

Josh: What has the worse one got?

Doris: The worse ones help for the pain, and tomorrow you must take another pill. And I’m not a fan of pills. I go and get herbs on the hillside – I get ysterbos [Dodonaea angustifolia], and all sorts of herbs, and I gather them together. Even rooiblomsalie [Stachys species, unidentified], I just take out of the garden, and put water on and let it draw and then drink it. (my emphasis).

As opposed to the ‘peoples’ knowledge of bossies, the medical professional has since the beginning of South Africa’s colonial history, been the preserve of a highly educated, wealthy, and almost exclusively white minority (Deacon et al 2004, Digby 2006, van Rensburg 1992). It is likely that this is linked to the mistrust people have for doctors’ medicine and their keenness to stick to their own knowledge - evidenced by the large stock of unused pills returned to Ladismith clinic nurses every month. In contrast, people feel they can be sure of bossies because both the knowledge of how to use them, and often the medicines themselves, come from friends and relatives. Further, herbs enabled previous generations of friends and relatives to be strong and healthy. A similar mistrust of biomedicine amongst older coloured people in the Western Cape is reported by Impey et al (1996).

Many of those who know and use bossies felt that the ill-health and bad behaviour people perceive around them today is linked to a loss of the knowledge and ways of
what Piet, above, calls the ‘forefathers’. Here Piet and Michael discuss the loss of the knowledge of bosses and young peoples’ present state of health:

Piet: Ja, you see, before they doesn't go to the doctor. They just go to the field if they feel sick and they get medicine from the bushes and then they drink it. You can see people live longer before. I know about an old lady, she was 122 years. She stays here in Zoar... in the past people, there wasn't a doctor that you can go and talk to, then people had to use the bosses. But now there are doctors to go and see, they still use it all the time. I know lots of people that have money, they know that I know the medicines and they come and ask me get for me that type of medicine, or this type.

...Michael: look, you know I see that many of the kids that are born now are very sickly. Sick and dead, just like that. And you see the old people, when they die, they aren't sick, they stay healthy because they know [about bosses].

Michael and Piet make reference to a time before, when people were healthy, when people knew and were stronger than the young people of today. This ‘strength’ is a physical one, but also relates to a way of being. In the past, it was felt, people were more patient, and more willing to put time and effort into something to get a good result. As Piet put it, the young people of today are not interested in grinding their coffee, and filtering it, all they want is instant coffee, they want everything now. In relation to medicine, it was felt that young people would not put in the effort to learn about bosses, and how to collect and prepare them properly; they just want to pop a pill dished out to them at the clinic. This related to wider discussions about the moral corruption of people today in general. For David, bosses come from a time when people would help you out, just because it was the right thing to do. Nowadays, he said, people would ask for money even for the tiniest little favour.

Using and knowing about bosses is held to be a connection to times and people who were less corrupted, and stronger than those of today. They represent a time when people could maintain their own health, with their own knowledge, without needing to go to the doctor. Indeed it recalls a time when western medicine was less available and people had to learn about bosses in order to heal themselves. Whether this time is ‘real’ or ‘imagined’, or both, is not of concern here. What is of concern is the
connection between *bossies* and *something better*. Through learning how to identify, find and use *bossies* people are literally embodying a potency associated with that time and with the strong and healthy people (perhaps older relatives) who inhabited it. *Oupa* Johannes expressed his feelings this way:

He [Johannes’ uncle] said ‘*ja nee, you are following in your mothers footsteps*, that’s why I know all this stuff. I am satisfied to God for the understanding he gave me, and I can also help other people. I can help my own people. Sometimes it happens like this – something suddenly happens - and you must go to hospital, but the ambulance takes so long to get there you’re almost dead, when you could have helped yourself. I tell people to use their brains. So many people die of stupidity ... I didn’t grow up on doctors’ medicine – my mother raised me only on bush medicine, and I got to 82 years of age before I went to a doctor.

**Conclusion**

Various scholars have convincingly critiqued earlier anthropologists who assumed a strict dichotomy between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ worlds. In reality, they insist, this dualism is a construct of our own imagined modernity. All medical practice and knowledge is embedded in contemporary politico-social reality and changes with it. There has never have been a point when ‘traditional’ knowledge and practice was hermetically sealed off from ‘modern’ knowledge and practice. Rather, the different technologies which have arisen in the course of history have mutually influenced and borrowed from one another. It has been the dynamics of human social and political interaction and competition which have led to the branding and essentialising of certain technologies as ‘modern’ and others as ‘traditional’(Latour, 1993; Nichter and Lock 2002).

In light of this it is important to recognise that the division people identify between western medicine and *bossies*, and between that which grows and that which is made, is to a large extent a socially constructed concept. In practice many people make use of both *bossies* and *pille*, and both medicines from the *veld* and powders and tinctures bought from the local pharmacy. Johan, for example, was using pills from the doctor to treat T.B at the same time that he was going around asking older neighbours and relatives for a plant remedy for the same illness. For him, it would be preferential to
use a plant but until he found one which worked, he would keep on taking the doctor’s medicine - which he recognised did work. Likewise, the idea that bossies is something from the past, something old, is also socially constructed since the form of knowledge and practice of herbs is of course integrally bound up with the contemporary social reality, and is continually shaped and influenced by it.

Nevertheless, as Marsland has recently argued, it is precisely these dualisms which people make use of when relating to themselves and others the healing power of their medicine (2007). In conjunction with the undeniable ability of the physical substance of the medicines to effect cures and maintain wellness these conceptions play into peoples’ experience and understanding of the Medisyne van die Vader. In brief, peoples’ trust in kruie is intimately related to: 1) people feeling involved in the ‘continual conversation’ concerning bossies; 2) the trust of those relatives and friends from whom medicines are received and learnt about; 3) their belief in the power and goodwill of the conscious creator who planted the medicines out in nature in the first place.

I would suggest that in the latter two cases, the healing to be derived from medicines is related to the quality of peoples’ relationship with these persons. In extreme cases, where there is a very bad relationship with someone, the medicine given can turn out to be a potentially deadly poison. Further, misusing bossies – e.g. using them to harm rather than heal - and generally ‘sinful’ behaviour would tend to anger God and lessen his willingness to help a medicine do its work. However, for those I spoke to, bossies were normally associated with caring, knowledgeable relatives and friends, and a loving Father. This is perhaps inevitable considering those people I spoke to were various kinds of healers who had maintained their own and others’ health through their knowledge of kruie; as well as the fact that people were very hesitant to speak of the harming side of bossies for fear of being branded as ‘dirty’.

Linking into to general notions associating sickness with dirt and pollution, and health and vitality with cleanliness and purity, kruie are cleansing on various different levels. Through their connections to older generations and to the ancientness of nature and God, herbs are felt to stand outside and predate many of the corruptions, pollutions and difficulties associated with contemporary life, and to be a connection
with better times and stronger, healthier people; people who knew how to maintain	heir own health without recourse to doctors’ medicine. Thus, in learning how to find,
collect, prepare and use medicines, people are physically cleansed whilst also
embracing both the potency of those times and people, and the healing power of God.
I believe that these understandings are integral to *bossiesmedisyne* as a very practical
means of maintaining health, and as antidote to some of the ‘symptoms’ of the
difficult circumstances of contemporary life.

This is not the whole story, however, and healing itself, as well as a reverence for the
healing, cleansing, power of *bossies* and of nature in general, also originates in
peoples’ ongoing relationship with the Kannaland landscape, and in the
phenomenological experience of walking in the *veld*, finding, collecting, and tasting
medicines. This is the subject of chapter 4.
Chapter 4: Medicine in the landscape, and the landscape in medicine

Amongst all those I spoke to who were knowledgeable about bossiesmedisyne, was a deep appreciation of ‘die natuur’ (nature) and of the plains, hills, valleys, mountains, and klowe of the Kannaland landscape. Bossies are simultaneously from and an integral part of the that landscape. I was told time again that wild growing medicines are more powerful than medicines which are grown in peoples’ gardens. The explanation for this was that medicines which grow in the veld have in them ‘all the power of nature’. In this chapter I aim to show that in addition to the experience of actually using medicines from the veld, people know this power through the embodied phenomenological experience of being in an aesthetically pleasing landscape suffused with medicines, memory, animal and spirit presences, and the divine subjectivity of the creator God. The power in medicines and the power in the landscape are experienced as one and the same thing, and are mutually affirming.

Aesthetic appreciation of the landscape

On one level, a positive regard for the Kannaland landscape derives from a more or less aesthetic appreciation for a quiet, calm space outside of the strains of daily life; for its sights, smells, and sounds; and for the health benefits derived from the fresh air and the exercise of walking in it. In using the word ‘aesthetic’ I don’t mean to limit the experience of being in the veld to one of ‘looking at’, as one might regard a postcard – though of course this may be one aspect of one’s experience. I simply mean an appreciation that derives not from what can be done with, or made use of in nature, but from its qualities as immediately available to the senses.

‘To “capture the spirit” of a sacred space’, writes Terence Hay-Edie, ‘a complete phenomenological description using all the senses must be invoked to achieve a complete picture of the “essential elemental envelope”’ (1999:247). This comment is problematic since what ‘all the senses’ actually means varies from place to place, and
is dependent on peoples’ life-ways, needs and preoccupations (Geurts 2002). These problems aside, Hay-Edie’s point is generally valid and useful.

Rather than an exercise in detached observation, to be in the veld is to be surrounded and enveloped by its space, textures, sounds, sights and smells. In accordance with the arguments put forward by Bateson (1972, 1979), Merleau-Ponty (1962), and Tim Ingold (2000), I begin from the premise that there is no division between mind and environment, and that the process of mind is ‘the unfolding of the whole system of relations constituted by the multi-sensory involvement of the perceiver in his or her environment’ (Ingold 2000: 18). You could say, then, that at the level of aesthetics, our embodied consciousness – our being – takes its ‘shape’ (both temporally and spatially) from our immediate sensorial experience of the world. With this in mind and in order to capture some of the power and spirit associated with nature and kruie, this chapter begins with an attempt to evoke some sense of the ‘essential elemental envelope’ of the embodied phenomenological experience of being in the veld.

Of course, in practice, the senses are, from the beginning, shaped by one’s previous experiences and ‘cultural’ background. I will therefore also discuss some of the ways in which previous experiences in and stories heard about the Kannaland landscape feed into peoples’ experience of it.

Partly from my experiences of walking in the veld, berge (mountains) and klowe with those that know bossies, I would suggest that the senses of smell, taste, sight, sound, and kinaesthesia (the sense of bodily movement) are all centrally involved in both searching for medicines and simply walking through the veld (Berthoz 2000). Whilst in reality the senses function and are experienced together in the negotiation of the environment, for the purposes of argument I discuss them individually (Berthoz 2000, Gibson 1966, Ingold 2000, Merleau-Ponty 1962). Inevitably, this will only able to convey an impression of the real experience.

Smells

Many of the medicinally used plants found in Kannaland give off various pungent, sweet, bitter, and aromatic smells. Indeed, this is one key way in which medicines are
located and identified (as discussed further below). It could be argued that for this reason, smell forms one of the most important aspects of the ‘essential elemental envelope’ which I am striving to convey. In this regard, however, my efforts are hampered by the intangible and elusive nature of smell which makes the experience of it so hard to describe. Indeed, the task of capturing an approximation of it in visual and/or written form, has posed unique problems to writers, scientists, anthropologists and phenomenologists alike (Rodaway, 1994). Essentially, I think, the difficulty in describing the experience of smell resides in the nature of its difficult-to-define dimensionality. In the visual plain, writers can draw on concepts of physical size, depth, and colour - e.g. that ‘limitless blue’ - to evoke the experience of sight. As we perceive it, sound has a strongly temporal/directional dimension, and for this reason it is possible to play on metaphors of movement, to say that our consciousness moves along with sound, with its falls and its rises. Smells, on the other hand, being the ‘experience of intensities...like pain and joy’ (Rodaway 1994: 65), cannot so easily be ascribed either spatial or temporal dimensions.

With these limitations in mind, I think it is possible to usefully write about two particular aspects of smells, and the experience of them, which are especially relevant to what it means to be in the Kannaland ‘smellscape’ (Porteous 1985). First of all, smells arrive in our olfactory systems through a direct interaction of particles of the substance of the smell producer (perhaps the strong-smelling medicinal plant *Skaapkaroo* - *Pentzia incana*), with membranes in the nose. Second of all, the action of ‘smelling’ cannot be distinguished from the action of breathing. In combination, these two factors mean that the air you breathe is fairly alive with the essence of the *bossies*. As you conduct the necessary processes of inspiration and expiration of the ‘fresh air’ of the *veld*, then these essences, experienced as rich fragrances, permeate the body in a very direct, physical manner. This experience is moreover part and parcel of being in the open, and feeling air currents touching the skin. Ingold (2007) argues that sky, wind, and weather can only be understood as an integral aspect of the process of the ongoing creation of the environment. Essential to the life process itself, Ingold writes that:

To feel the wind and breathe the air is ... to ride on the wave of the world's ongoing formation - to be forever present at the 'continued birth,' as Merleau-Ponty called it, of both persons and things (1964:168) ...
Wherever there is life and habitation, the interfacial separation of substance and medium is disrupted to give way to mutual permeability and binding. For it is in the nature of living beings themselves that, by way of their own processes of respiration, of breathing in and out, that they bind the medium with substances in forging their own growth and movement through the world (2007:32-33).

From this perspective, it is not surprising that many people I spoke to felt that going to the veld and breathing air rich in the smells of bossiesmedisyne is a health-bringing and life-affirming activity.

**Tastes**

Closely anatomically related to the sense of smell, the sense of taste is a particularly direct way of perceiving the plants of the veld by which a part of the plant itself physically enters the body. It is also another key way in which people identify plant medicine. As is discussed further below, developing a taste for the veld is centrally important in the process of learning what kinds of tastes might be useful for what kinds of ailment. Often, as we were walking in the veld, those I was with would pull off small pieces of certain medicinal plants (e.g. *kooigoed* - *Helichrysum pandurifolium*, or *ysterbos* - *Dondonaea augustifolia*), and chew them as we walked. This was usually done for one of two reasons. Firstly, as a direct remedy for a stomach complaint. Secondly, having the strong – often very bitter - taste of the medicine in the mouth acted as a general tonic, playing into the overall ‘cleansing’ experience of being in die natuur.

**Sights**

Making one’s way up and down the hills of the Kannaland landscape, often under a hot sun and heading directly through unforgiving and scratching bush (as opposed to walking along demarcated paths) can be arduous work. Thus on long walks, those I walked with would normally suggest we rest now and then. More often than not the place they chose for us to stop would be either under a shade-giving tree and/or in a position which afforded us sweeping views of the landscape, which we would sit and ‘take in’ for the duration of our rest. Sitting in one such place I asked Johan what most moved him about this experience. In addition to the beauty of the sight, he felt that it
was the sense of 'release' it afforded him. I believe that the thoughts of Merleau-Ponty offer a clue as to why being in and 'looking at' an expansive vista also brings a sense of an 'opening up' of the self:

Since things and my body are made of the same stuff, vision must somehow take place in them: their manifest visibility must be repeated in the body by a secret visibility. "Nature is on the inside", says Cezanne. Quality, light, colour, depth, which are there before us, are there only because they awaken an *echo* in our body and because the body welcomes them...’ (1964:164).

In other words, the light-waves carrying the landscapes' visual beauty of form and colour resonate with our being, and become a part of us. The reader is referred to Fig.1, taken in the mountains a few kilometres north of Ladismith, and the words of Merleau-Ponty, superimposed onto the photograph.

As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not set over against it as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought, or spread out towards it some idea of blue such as might reveal the secret of it...I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself: my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue (1962: 214, original emphasis).

Since consciousness is 'saturated with...limitless blue', it can be seen to be extended, and to an extent freed from the defined limits of the body. Thus vision 'is the means given me for being absent from myself, for being present at the fission of Being from the inside' (ibid, 186). For this reason, Merleau-Ponty argues that we '... must take literally what vision teaches us: namely, that through it we come in contact with the sun and the stars, that we are everywhere all at once...' (ibid, 187).
Sounds

To be anywhere is to be surrounded by an omni-directional sphere of sound (Ingold 2000, Ihde 1976). In the case of the Kannaland landscape, the ‘contents’ of this sphere will of course depend on place. In general, my own sound-experience of being in the mountains and plains, was neither of silence nor of a cacophony of sound. In brief, it could be characterized by the gentle, intermittent but regular calls and answers of birdsong, the whisper of the wind, the buzzing of insects, and the occasional rustling of mammals and reptiles in the bushes. Piet felt that one of the best things about the experience of spending the night in the veld was waking up to the morning song of birds.

Many medicines can only be found by places of permanent water – such as in the various klowe to be found in the area. These places possess their own ‘soundscapes’ of a very different sort (Schafer, 1977). Here, sonic experience is usually dominated by the continual babbling sound of water flowing over small stones and large rocks, and splashing into natural pools (see fig. 2). For Johan, this sound has a calming effect, in his words, ‘on your system’. With his eyes closed, sitting on a rock deep in one such kloof, he described this experience by moving his hands about his stomach, indicating a bubbling motion. Clearly, for Johan, the sound of the water was, in the process of being heard, also felt in his body.

The immersive, penetrating space of sound is articulated superbly by the music philosopher Zuckerkandl, who writes that ‘...the ear knows space only as that which comes from without, as that which is directed toward me, streams toward me and into me, as that which is given in no other way than as a boundless indivisible oneness, in which nothing can be divided and nothing measured – as placeless flowing space.’ (1956:336). In addition, it should be remembered that auditory perception is felt throughout the body because it involves the whole body which in one way or the other registers vibrations of the air and other mediums by which one is surrounded (Rodaway 1994:50).
Kinaesthesis

Though often overlooked in discussions of ‘the senses’, the human being’s ability to sense and so regulate and control the movement and position of it’s own body in space and in relation to its environment, is vitally important in almost any activity in which he or she is engaged (Berthoz 2000, Geurts 2002). According to Berthoz, kinaesthesis is a sense which, in addition to the visual system, involves ‘receptors for stretch and force in our muscles, for rotation in our joints, for pressure and friction in our skin…and…in each inner ear…five receptors…that specifically detect movements of the head.’ (2000:27). Understood as an element of the phenomenological experience of being in the veld, kinaesthesis could be described as the feeling the body has of itself moving through the landscape. It involves making direct bodily contact (e.g. through the feet and hands) with the slopes, protuberances, and textures of the rocks, earth, water and plants of which the landscape consists. In addition, I was often told of the health benefits of physical exertion and the benefits of sweating illness out of the body.
However, as mentioned above, the senses can not in the reality of perception be so neatly separated one from another (Berthoz 2000, Gibson 1979, Ingold 2000, Merleau-Ponty 1962). Rather, the senses exist 'as aspects of the functioning of the whole body in movement, brought together in the very action of its involvement in the environment.' (Ingold 2000:262). Thus, in negotiating and moving through the veld, the experience is of one whole, undivided, phenomenology of the senses of smell, vision, hearing, taste, and kinaesthesia. In short, this is the experience of the body feeling the landscape. As Ingold notes:

Feeling ... infuses our entire being. It is not so much a way of making bodily contact with specific persons or things as a kind of interpenetration of the self and its surroundings: a certain way the world has, as Merleau-Ponty put it, 'of invading us' and our way of 'meeting this invasion' (1962:317). Feeling, then, lies not just in what we do but in what we are: in that commingling of the perceiver with the world he or she inhabits ... (2007:s29).

Thus, the affective power of the aesthetic appeal of the Kannaland landscape lies not so much in the fact that it is beautiful, or that it sounds and smells ‘nice’, though these adjectives are certainly applicable. The power lies in the fact that rather than observing it as an ‘acosmic subject’, you are immersed in it, and your being is given over to it. Thus, for Piet, walking in the veld ‘cleans my whole body’.

Why should ‘giving your being’ over to the sights, sounds, smells, and touch of nature be affirming, so ‘good’? Here is not the place to begin to answer such a question, but I would suggest that it has something to do with a responsiveness to what Gregory Bateson terms ‘the pattern that connects’, that ‘unity of biosphere and humanity which would bind and reassure us all with an affirmation of beauty...that whatever the ups and downs of detail within our limited experience, the larger whole is primarily beautiful’ (1979: 18).

For Bateson, this unity is sacred and is something which has found expression in many, if not all, of the world’s spiritual traditions. Or rather, it is the world’s spiritual traditions which have allowed human beings to comprehend and engage with the immense complexities of nature, and humankind’s place within this (Bateson 1979, 1987). Mircea Eliade, one of the twentieth century’s leading authorities on the
world’s religions, expressed a similar sentiment, also arguing that a sense of the sacred originates in the direct perception of the natural world. Discussing why it is that many of the world’s religions situate their most powerful Gods in the sky, he writes:

The transcendental category of height, of the superterrestrial, of the infinite, is revealed to the whole man, to his intelligence and his soul. It is a total awareness on man’s part; beholding the sky, he simultaneously discovers the divine incommensurability and his own situation in the cosmos. For the sky *by its own mode of being*, reveals transcendence, force, eternity. It *exists absolutely* because it is *high, infinite, eternal, powerful* (1959: 119 original emphasis).

For Bateson, an experience of the *sacred* is a conscious or unconscious recognition by the human subject that he or she and environment are made of the same stuff, and are fundamentally related to one another. Eliade argued that for religious people (he wrote ‘men’), the *whole world* is sacred because it is the work of the gods, whilst experiences of the majesty of the natural world serve to reinforce this notion.

In the case of contemporary Kannaland, I would suggest that the direct experience of the landscape and peoples’ understanding of the divine origins of that landscape feed into one another; each affirming the other. Being in nature is such a good and cleansing experience precisely because mountains, animals, plants and people are all the work of *Die Vader*. They are, in the words of aunty Doris, ‘all the same’. Piet felt that being in the ‘pure’ space of the *veld* brought him closer to God, and away from the pollutions of town. Whether or not *bossiesmedisyne* are *sacred* as such is a moot point; though they certainly are closely associated with the will of God. Further, it is likely that this direct experience of the ‘cleanliness’ and ‘purity’ of the natural world is linked to peoples’ trust of *bossies* as opposed to their mistrust of the chemical nature of doctors medicine which were conceptually linked to other chemicals and pollutions in the wider landscape, as discussed in chapter 3.

Past experiences in and stories heard about a landscape will have a strong determining effect on how it is experienced. The on-going process of learning about *bossiesmedisyne* constitutes a key constellation of experiences involving the *veld*.
which necessarily involves a direct engagement with the landscape and a honing and cultivation of the senses discussed above.

**An education of attention**

To show something to somebody is to cause it to be seen or otherwise experienced – whether by touch, taste, smell or hearing – by that other person. It is, as it were, to lift a veil off some aspect or component of the environment so that it can be apprehended directly. In that way, truths that are inherent in the world are, bit by bit, revealed or disclosed to the novice. What each generation contributes to the next, in this process, is an education of attention (Gibson 1979:254)...Through this fine-tuning of perceptual skills, meanings immanent in the environment – that is in the relational contexts of the perceiver’s involvement in the world – are not so much constructed as discovered. (Ingold 2000: 21, original emphasis).

For all those I spoke to on the subject, learning about *bossies*, especially in times before the availability of pills, is/was a general part of growing up and in this way varies from family to family, and person to person. There is therefore no one specific mode of formalised education. However, it is true that for all my main participants, and for various others I chatted with, their ongoing process of learning about medicines; began while they considered themselves to still be children; is primarily associated with knowledgeable older relatives and friends, and involves physically going to the veld to encounter medicines in their ecological context. It is a process which requires a ‘fine-tuning of [the] perceptual skills’ of smell, taste, vision, and kinaesthesia in conjunction with the accurate recall of ecological details (Ingold 2000:21). A few ethnographic examples will serve to put flesh on to these skeletal generalities.

*Oupa* Johannes’ mother was born in Basutoland (present-day Lesotho), and had moved to the area before Johannes was born more than eighty years ago. He said she was a ‘real bush doctor’ who had learned the medicines to be found in the Klein Karoo from the old, knowledgeable people of the local area. She would make visits to sick peoples’ homes, and from about the age of 12 Johannes began to take an interest in the medicines she prepared and would go with her to collect medicines and watch how she prepared and administered them. He would also accompany his older
brothers when they collected medicines for their mother. Recognising the interest of her son, his mother told him that whenever he was in the veld and found a plant which he thought might be a medicine he should bring it to her. She then would tell him what it was and what it could be used for. Key to identifying potential medicines was learning plant’s smells, tastes, and visual appearance (especially leaf shape).

As an effective way to learn the medicines, Johannes told me to do the same. Since his painful legs prevented him from going to the veld himself, he said to me that I should bring him those plants which had a strong smell and a bitter taste. In the event, the oupa claimed to recognise as a medicine almost every plant I brought him which matched this description. He said that any plant which burnt my tongue was a poison. Though some poisonous plants can be used as medicines (e.g. *Gifbol* – *Boophane disticha*), he felt it better if I left them alone.

For Johannes, this mode of education had enabled him to develop an intuitive feel for what he termed the ‘manners’ (including smells, tastes, growing places, and leaf shape) of medicine and had proven an effective means for him to find medicines when he would spend days or even weeks at a time in the mountains, hunting various kinds of animals. In my own experience, even in such a short time, this inquiring, experiential mode of education meant that I quickly became more attuned to noticing the smells of medicinal plants whilst I was out exploring the veld, berge and klowe of the research area. However, my own small achievements were put in perspective by the olfactory abilities displayed by those I walked with.

Piet’s father had been very knowledgeable about medicines and was someone to whom people turned when they were ill. When he was still a young boy Piet would accompany his father on his medicine-finding trips into the veld and watch him as he prepared his medicines. Later on, his father would send him on his own to go and collect plants himself. Having spent much time working (tending goats, rounding-up donkeys, and hunting), walking, and looking for medicine in the veld, Piet’s sense of smell had become extremely sensitive and refined.

One morning Piet took me to see a *ghwarrieson* bush (c.f. *Osteospermum*, sp. unidentified) – a powerful medicine which cleans out the bodily system and is
especially good for the kidneys. Partly because some people over-harvest it, no one else had been able to show me this medicine growing and so I asked him how he had found it. He said he had smelled it whilst he was walking on the road, which was easily 200 metres away from the bush! He explained that a bok (deer, goat) or a breath of wind had probably moved its leaves, releasing its pungent aroma, which had been picked up by his skilled nose.

In comparison with a novice, such as myself, Piet’s experience of the ‘smell-scape’ is deeper since not only can he distinguish many more smells arriving at his nose from a wider physical area, but he also apprehends meaning in them (Rodaway 1994). As discussed above the smells that wash through you as walk in the veld are healing, since you are breathing what you know and intuitively feel to be the smells of medicine. The ability of smell to re-kind, to manifest past experiences is well known and I would suggest that where these are medicines which have been used to medicate oneself in the past, then that past experience of healing is, in a sense ‘relived’, and felt in the body (Rodaway 1994).

However, some medicines don’t have a particularly strong smell and it is sometimes necessary to rely on vision to read the landscape for signs as to where different medicines might be. As an example, David was able to combine memories of medicine sites with an ability to ‘read’ rocky outcrops in order to identify the most likely places to find dassiepis. Obviously, having been to the site of a medicine before, one will have a good idea of how to find the same medicine the next time it is needed. Memory serves a centrally important role in the preservation and exchange of knowledge.

One morning, Johan and I had decided to walk far into a local kloof (ravine) in order to look for medicines as well as see the impressive waterfalls to be found there. In particular, Johan had a need to find langblaarbuchu (Empleurum unicapsulare). However, not really knowing what it looked like, nor where he could find it, we went to seek oom David’s advice. David was happy to display his knowledge and furnished us with an in-depth description of exactly where we would be able to find bushes of the medicine. In addition he gave us a succinct, clear and accurate description of the plant itself. The advice proved to be just right. As soon as he saw the plant, Johan told
me that ‘the old man’s words came into my head’ and he knew that he had found the right plant. For those who have had a long experience of seeking and collecting medicines from the veld, the landscape is dotted with these kinds of memories. Memories both of individual plants or stands of plants and the healing they have provided, as well as of the people from whom the knowledge was learned.

Like any sense, kinaesthesia can also be honed through practice, as I discovered through walking with David (in his mid ‘60s), Piet (in his late ‘30s) or Simon (in his late 40s). Having spent many years walking in the veld for work, pleasure, and in search of medicines, the men had learnt how to negotiate the landscape with the minimum of effort. Even though I am physically fit, I would sometimes struggle to keep up simply because I was not as attuned as they at moving through scrub, over rocks and up and down hills.

In particular, Piet was exceptionally difficult to keep up with. As a boy, he had spent days at a time in the veld around Zoar rounding up donkeys with his father; an activity which required him to run long distances in the heat of the day with very little food and drink. Piet took pride in his physical prowess and it was clear that he enjoyed swiftly and nimbly running up and down steep rocky slopes, and along overgrown ‘donkey paths’, whilst I forced myself along behind, often tripping and scratching myself in the process.

However, making one’s way through the landscape often involves the ability to negotiate more than just rocks and scrub. There is also the wealth of mammal, reptile, insect and bird life; as well as the variety of ‘supernatural’ beings including certain kinds of supernatural snakes and watermeide (mermaids) which comprise some of the environment’s most essential aspects. Through spending time in the veld, having things pointed out, hearing stories, and careful observation of sights and sounds, the character of these presences becomes known - engaging people with the landscape, in various emotional ways. Ethnographic examples will serve to illustrate this.
Animals, supernatural snakes, and mermaids.

The accommodation where I spent most of my research period was an old farm-labourer’s cottage, removed by several hundred metres from the rest of the farm. Over Christmas I spent two days away from my cottage, and a local band of baboons took advantage of this, breaking and generally causing havoc in my kitchen, and decimating my food supplies and recently collected plant samples. The baboons left all but one (agdageneersbossie [species unidentified]) of my plants samples uneaten. Months later I related this story to Simon explaining to him why I needed another sample of the plant (which, incidentally, we could not locate). The oom couldn’t contain himself and broke out in hysterical laughter. I asked him what he found so funny. Baboons are ‘veld kinders’ (veld children), he explained, they know the plants and probably ate the agdageneersbossie (lit. eight day healing bush) on purpose, to ‘medicine’ themselves in some way. Moreover, it was funny because having personally seen and heard about baboons’ behaviour, he knew their scurrilous nature well. Thus, Simon’s past knowledge and experience of baboons gave meaning to the story I related to him. In turn, my own story would inform his own on-going relationship with one of the veld’s most well known animal characters.

In this way, i.e. through direct experience, and stories related, each of the veld’s animal species takes on its own nature, and in turn each will evoke different emotions in different people. These are not always pleasant emotions. In particular, the various snakes – and specifically the poisonous snakes such as the cape cobra (Naja nivea), and puff adder (Bitis arietans arietans) - commonly evoke fear and hatred. These reptiles pose a real and potentially fatal threat to those walking through the veld, especially in summer and especially to those whose eyes are not trained to spot them. Had I not been walking with Piet and his trained eyes, I would almost certainly have stepped on a sleeping Cape Cobra on at least one occasion. Snakes’ ability to kill gives them a fearsome aspect, and they were regularly referred to by people in their evocative stories of their experiences in the veld.

Accounts and experiences of animals are also often linked to specific places – places where people saw a leopard, had a close encounter with a snake, or heard the call of a jackal. In this way, a rocky outcrop, a cave, or a koppie (hill) become associated with
the exploits of certain animals and one’s experiences of them there. In sum, through a combination of story, observation and experience, people come to know the meaningful and emotive presences of the animals of the Kannaland environment, and the various kinds of tracks they leave. These include the physical tracks of footprints and droppings, as well as the mental tracks of story and memory. Certain places have particularly strong connections to particular presences, all evoking different memories, and different emotions. Though not everyone is sure of their existence, and only some people had seen them, certain places have also become associated with the presence of beings of what you might call a supernatural nature – specifically ‘magical’ snakes and watermeide (mermaids).

Normally associated with water places – klowe and rivers – the snakes are more or less snake-like in form but with various tell-tale physical attributes and abilities which mark them as magical. The manslang (man-snake) has the body of a snake, and the head of a man. Some snakes are of gigantic proportions with bodies as thick as the circle formed by clasping your hands together and raising your elbows. Other snakes have diamonds on their heads, whilst others fly in the clouds or mist, from one water place to the other. Some people remembered a time when certain people – men or women – known as waterlopers (waterwalkers) would ‘go behind the water’ at certain water places and visit the snake in his domain, to be taught certain ‘secrets’, including about bossiesmedisyne. No one knew of any living person who had successfully been to see the snake in this way, though Johan’s aunt Mavis had attempted to do this. It had been her wish to follow in her father’s footsteps; to become a waterloper, or what she referred to as a ‘coloured sangoma’. Here she recounts the trauma of going to see the manslang:

[If you are not as strong as the snake] you will die, you will die, because the snake is like water, he stays in the water. If you go to that man...then you go into a palace. On top is water, and underneath is [the snake’s] 'home'. I took a chance because my heart is good but when I got there, it didn't go lekker [well] with me... I was almost fainting because the man's voice was so big, it was like thunder. You understand what I'm saying about the thunder and I was so scared, that's why you have to have someone who is as strong as that man, otherwise you won't make it. The person that took me to him had to come and get me, because I was gonna faint. The man that took me there because I was fainting, and you know what he did, he took me to a big piece of green, beautiful grass. I was sitting on the grass and the wind took me and the wind hit me and hit me...
and hit me. And that's what happens when you play with death, I was sick for two weeks after that. I'll never go again. If someone was to give me three million rand I would never go again, and that's what I can explain to you.

Every person who had encountered a manslang, or other kind of supernatural snake, had their own account of the snake’s behaviour and appearance. In part, this is probably connected to the turbulent history of South Africa and also the various ‘cultural traditions’ – including Xhosa, Khoisan, Zulu and Christian – which have played into the complex contemporary landscape of story that exists in Kannaland today. According to Schmidt, snakes feature prominently in the myths and stories told by Nama-speaking people in contemporary Namibia. These include snakes of gigantic proportions, snakes with shining lights on their head, and snakes which fly in the sky. These descriptions match almost exactly the accounts given to me by my participants in Kannaland (1998: 269-280).

The snake that tempted Eve is of course a well known character of Christian mythology. Based on research conducted in the early 1930s, Hunter reports that snakes held an important position in Xhosa lore. Certain snakes were the manifestation of ancestral spirits and could be associated with bringing luck and health, misfortune, sickness and death. Reminiscent of stories I heard in Kannaland in 2006-7 these snakes could even appear with a snake body and human face (1979: 260-1). Exhibiting several similarities to Hunter’s account, Krige writes of Zulu belief that a snake indicated the presence of the ancestral spirits. Medicine men with evil intent to could enchant snakes with their medicines and use them to send illness to others. In addition to this, Zulu folklore includes stories of snakes which turn out to be human beings (1936: 53, 324, 357).

What was generally common in the accounts was the powerful emotions – often fear, but also astonishment - stirred up in the encounter. Similarly, the same kinds of emotions are evoked in encounters with one of the other supernatural beings commonly encountered at water places – the eponymous mermaids. Whilst different people had differing accounts of how the watermeide appeared to them, descriptions generally resemble the mermaids of European lore: the size of a human being, they
possess the head, flowing hair and torso of a beautiful human woman, whilst their ‘bottom-half’, from the waist down, is that of a fish tail.

Like the snake, mermaids also often have an air of menace associated with them. In general, their intention is to take a person away with them, to another world, under the water, where he or she will stay for a long time, or forever. In some versions of the stories, she holds a beautiful flower in her hand, just below the surface of the water, enticing people to try to grab it and follow her in. There may have been a time when this experience would have been an intentional (though very dangerous) one since some people said that – in the past – people could go ‘behind the water’ to see the watermeid and work with her in order to become slim (clever) in esoteric knowledge, in much the same way as a waterloper would work with the snake. Incidentally, I heard several accounts from people who had been there, that gaining knowledge from the snake or the watermeide is an ongoing practice in the Baviaanskloof (Eastern Cape, north of Stormsrivier).

In addition to these two main kinds of spiritual beings, people also told me stories of the ghosts of dead people who roam the veld at night, and others who would enter peoples’ homes. Sometimes referred to as a vuilwind, oom David explained that these were the ghosts of people with whom one had quarrelled in life and could bring misfortune and sickness.

Encountering any of these spiritual beings is a potentially dangerous event, and people are (or at least until very recently were) taught how to avoid becoming victims of them. This can involve throwing money into pools associated with mermaids, avoiding places where the beings lurk, or being made aware of the tricks employed by the watermeide to trap unsuspecting people. It may also involve an affirmation of faith in a Christian Lord who will protect you from such dangers. Importantly, being powerfully emotive means that this is a potency which is felt in the body.

In sum, through the development of perceptual skill, ‘a veil’ is lifted such that the phenomenological experience of the landscape is augmented by the meanings which are perceived and experienced in it (Ingold 2000:21). In the local context, the phenomenological experience of the aesthetic beauty of the veld is influenced by the
an awareness of healing potentials in the sights and smells by which one is surrounded and enveloped; as well as the presence of emotionally evocative animals and spirit beings which inhabit the space. I suggest that this emotive force is experienced as an aspect of the general power which inheres in the natural world, and in *bossiesmedisyne* in particular. Though the argument advanced here is for a general experience of potency in the natural world (of which *bossies* is a part), people would on occasion provide me with more direct connections between environmental phenomena and the healing action of *bossies*. For example, Johan’s mum Rose explained that the reason why the nest of a swallow can be used to cure wind in children is because the swallow can fly directly *into* the wind, can *overcome* the wind.

I also believe that mastering the skills and techniques of the body necessary to locate, and identify medicine; to read the Kannaland landscape; to move through the veld; to avoid and overcome the dangers which lurk there; is a source of pride and strength (Mauss, 1979). The pleasure Piet took in moving swiftly through the veld, in breathing the fresh air and *bossies*, and sweating out sickness; or the pride on David’s face when he successfully located *dassiepis*, can be understood as part and parcel of the sense of well-being and health people derive from the total ‘tradition’ of *bossiesmedisyne*.

**Relationship to God**

As is evidenced by the presence of malignant animals, spirits, and the potential for plants to be used to harm, the power experienced in the landscape is sometimes ambiguous and is not necessarily always ‘good’. However, the potential of many plants to heal human sickness is understood as a manifestation of a positive numinous power in the world. In fact, knowing one’s medicines can be very useful in countering the poison of both snakes and of human beings who have evil intent. Further, burning certain powerful medicines around the home (e.g. swartzstorm - *Cadaba aphylla*; or kooigoed - *Helichrysum pandurifolium*) cleans out the malignant spirits of the dead. These evil forces were often associated with Satan, and the protection afforded by *kruie*, with God.
Being the creation of a conscious God, the landscape is not a morally neutral place, and people said that it is important to use medicines for what they were intended, to *use and not abuse* the natural world. Piet felt that stripping the *veld* bare of medicines simply for financial gain would almost constitute stealing from God, who in turn would be displeased and would withhold his favour from the offender. For Johannes, his proper use of medicines and his good relationship with God granted him protection whilst facing the dangers of the mountains:

Johannes: Ja, I went in the mountains on my own, I went along myself, you know certain things that you can encounter there, I have encountered some funny things in the mountain. One day, I was lying under a *doringboom* [acacia karoo]. At that time I was hunting all sorts of things in the mountain...leopard, *rooikat*, all sorts of things, and I was lying under a tree. I looked at the top of the tree, when I woke up and man, it was a roll, this high, there was a coiled up snake, up in the top of the tree, a roll like this [indicating about 1m wide], poisonous, and he looked straight at me - and I stood up to move away, and then my head was level with his head, and he looked at me. But I walked away...and when I got back to the farm I asked my boss 'What kind of snake is this?' And he said 'No, I have never seen it, but I have heard about him...’

Josh: And it was a thick snake? How thick?

Johannes: Oooooo, he was very broad, as broad as my body. If he walks, slithers, where he moves in the mountain you can see almost a path that he made in the stones. That day I saw him, and never again...You young man, ask me 'Am I scared to go into the *veld*?' No, I'm not scared, *if I help people, then the Lord helps me, and I make certain that I don't say anything about him [the Lord]. You can't help without the Lord...If you go into a certain place, you must first ask [the Lord] then you can go on. You must first ask, and then you can go on (my emphasis).

It is worth remembering that just as each person has their own relationship to God, each person has their own relationship to nature, and interprets and negotiates these in their own ways, according to their own opinions and understandings, shaped through their own individual experiences of life. This means that what one person considered to be wrongful behaviour towards the natural world, another might consider perfectly acceptable.
For example, David’s father had made his living by tapping *Aalwyn (Aloe Ferox)* and selling the juice to processing factories. David learnt this skill from his father and made money in this way himself. Thus, he found it perfectly acceptable to sell *bossies*, and to generally make money from plants. However, after a walk during which we collected a number of different plant medicines, he threw 10 cents into the veld. He told me that in ‘paying’ nature, he was making the plants his property – in a sense buying them from God - to do with what he will; negotiating his relationship to God in his own way. It is difficult to know whether this was a one-off event performed for my benefit or a regular practice, though the *oom* did tell me this was his normal behaviour. Some of those I asked about this practice told me they did something similar, whilst others dismissed the practice as nonsense.

In any case the point is that, at least in relation to *bossies*, the human subject does not confront a nature of objective ‘things’ but instead engages a divine subjectivity through his or her actions with and intentions toward His creations. With the possibility of both pleasing and displeasing a God who is omnipotent and omnipresent, people often feel a sense of responsibility and obligation in their use of *bossies*.

**Conclusion**

I began this chapter with the simple statement that ‘*bossies* are simultaneously from and an integral part of’ the Kannaland landscape. In this chapter I have striven to understand some of the implications of this. Understood as an aspect of an ecological context, and not simply as disconnected objects, medicines, and the healing potential they possess, are bound up with peoples’ knowledge of and experiences in the landscape, and their on going relationship to God.

I have shown that medicines’ positive, healing power is the same power of the positive, healing experience of being in a beautiful landscape, the air of which is alive with the smells of medicine. As an embodied experience of being which surrounds and envelopes the subject, this beauty is not observed by an ‘acosmic subject’ but is felt in the body (Merleau-Ponty 1962:214). Being immersed in the landscape, in ‘the pattern that connects’, could be understood as an experience of the sacred (Bateson...
It is likely that this direct experience of the ‘cleanliness’ and purity of the landscape plays into people’s trust of bossies as opposed to the chemicals they perceive in doctors’ pills. I would also suggest that directness of experience involved in the process of learning about and using medicines (in smelling and tasting them) contributes to people’s sense of closeness to bossies; to a sense that they know and so trust the substance from which the medicines are formed.

Just as medicines are often said to clean sickness out of the body, walking in the veld is a cleaning, health-bringing experience. The power of nature people spoke of is also related to an engagement with the landscape by which animal and spirit presences are revealed and encountered. As an aspect of the living landscape, the physical and mental tracks of these beings are integral to the affective power of being in the veld. Being able to find medicines and successfully negotiate the landscape gives people a feeling of strength and can be understood as part of the healing involved in the process of making use of bossiesmedisyne.

Ultimately, kruie and their power to heal are a gift from God. Thus, medicines which are found in the landscape are closely connected to the will of the creator and for this reason many expressed people’s responsibility to ‘use and not abuse’ them. Lastly, using and not abusing has important implications for the healing potential of medicines and well as for people’s luck and protection in life in general.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

The majority of work on plant medicine in South Africa has been based on a reductionist logic: disconnecting medicines from their environmental-socio-cultural contexts, treating them as objects, and putting them into lists. This thesis is founded on four interconnected basic premises which distinguish it from these works. Firstly, that mind and body form an indissoluble whole; secondly that meaning inheres not only in what people say and think but in what they do and experience as embodied presences; thirdly that the world takes on meaning through peoples’ ongoing engagement with their environmental field of relations; and lastly that medicine can only be understood if in addition to the vitally important pharmacologically active substance, one also considers the wider context in which human beings encounter and make use of their medicines. In the same way that a plant cannot exist without the environment of which it is a part, plant medicines cannot be understood as objects, disconnected from their contextual field of relations. This thesis is an attempt to situate plant medicines in this wider ecological context.

In venturing into this field I allowed primary data collected through extended interviews, informal conversations and participant observation to guide me towards what some of the most salient aspects of this context were – to ‘set the goal posts’, so to speak. Time, language, money, and the physical conditions of research put a limitation on the size of the research group, and this thesis should be read as only a glimpse into the every day reality of plants, people, and landscape in Kannaland. There are many, many stories which I have not told. Nevertheless, I was able to identify where those metaphorical posts might stand. In chapter 3 I outlined some of the human relations which are integral to peoples’ understanding and experience of bossies, whilst in chapter 4 I considered relations with the natural landscape of Kannaland.

The reality of Kannaland today is a mix of many different ‘cultural traditions’ from Africa, Europe, and Asia. It is a place which is firmly a part of the 21st century global capitalist economy, though many of its inhabitants don’t necessarily enjoy the material benefits which this is supposed to bring. Modern forms of media including television, newspaper and radio are ubiquitous and many people have direct contacts
with the modern metropolis of Cape Town. Ideas and understandings around plant medicines must be located in this complex contemporary reality, and consequently there cannot be seen to be one local knowledge system as such.

The research area is characterised by historically deep and clear inequalities of socio-economic power, with those who know about bossiesmedisyne – the rural proletariat who supply most of the labour for agricultural production – tending to be in a disadvantaged position in those terms. People experience and are surrounded by exploitative work, unemployment, poverty, illness and alcoholism. In very direct ways – through being overworked and underpaid, living in cramped, leaky and badly insulated homes, struggling to put food on the table – people experience the reality of their situation in their bodies which get tired and fall ill. The knowledge and practices surrounding bossies constitute a practical means by which people can take some control over how they respond to these circumstances and maintain a sense of strong bodily health. Furthermore, it is a means which people feel to be their own.

Those who value and use the medicines expressed great trust in them and whilst this must derive from previous experiences of successful healings, it also relates to the origins of the knowledge and of the medicines themselves. Medicines are given by and learnt about from friends and relatives – it is a knowledge base to which people feel ‘close’. To the extent that people trust those from whom knowledge is learnt and medicines received, they trust the medicines themselves. This can be contrasted with the mistrust many (especially older) people expressed concerning doctors’ medicines and is likely linked to the history of the medical profession in the Western Cape and South Africa in general.

The knowledge of plants is associated with older generations and is seen to be a connection to a time when people were stronger and healthier, both physically and morally; when people were more independent and knew how to make use of what the natural world provided, including medicines. This nostalgia for something better – for times past and for nature – can be seen as an expression of dissatisfaction with the contemporary conditions of life.

Though there is evidence of hunter-gatherer and pastoralist life-ways before the
arrival of Europeans, a process of urbanization, proletarianisation and industrialization has meant that these ways of life have to all intents and purposes been forgotten. However, the tending of animals in Zoar, and knowledge of the medicines which grow in the immediate environment, can be seen to have origins which at least in part predate European settlement.

A lack of free healthcare up until very recently, and the predominantly rural nature of occupations within the local capitalist economy, have helped to ensure that a knowledge of the natural world and of kruie have been maintained. There are many species of plant which have been in use for hundreds of years. In addition, some of the local understandings surrounding illness, including the illness-inducing vuilwunde, are mirrored in Khoisan practice and belief from a wide swathe of south western Africa. Further, offering one’s God-given gifts in healing and God-given medicines for free is likewise linked to wider Khoisan practice.

As Marx recognised long ago, proletarianisation and urbanisation is also a process of individuation, as previously existing economic and social bonds are broken down in order to create the ideal creator of labour value – the individuated worker. In his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, he writes that:

An immediate consequence of man’s estrangement from the product of his labour, his life activity, his species being, is the estrangement of man from man. When man confronts himself, he also confronts other men. What is true of man’s relationship to his labour, to the product of his labour and to himself, is also true of his relationship to other men, and to the labour and the object of the labour of other men (1977:330-1).

Each person and each nuclear family is separated from every other and each must fend for itself. Just as people are alienated from the surplus value they create for the capitalist, they are alienated from each other. This has been a process which began with the first European settlers some two centuries ago. However, for some of those I spoke to, who had quite recently moved off of farms into the relatively more urbanised environment of Zoar or Ladismith, urbanisation was a vivid living memory. For them, this was an experience of moving further away from the veld, and into a
context where one neither knew nor could trust one’s neighbours.

For example, David told me that since he had moved from residence on a farm into Ladismith, he had had less chance to walk deep into the *veld* and so had forgotten many types of medicine. He also told me that on the farm ‘ons leer mekaar’ (we learn together) about medicines, whereas he felt that in Ladismith there were very few people who were interested in talking with him about medicines, though he did know one old man whom he went to for advice. In this context, that which can be found growing in the *veld* or can be grown in gardens constitutes a system of value which draws people together. Gifts of medicine given between friends, relatives and neighbours, maintain bonds of friendship between those people. Furthermore, as I have shown, medicines understood to be gifts from the Father, create bonds of responsibility to a conscious creator and to the world.

Amongst those I spoke to, there was a feeling that because of the ease of acquiring western medicines, the selfish lives people lead, and a general disinterest and laziness in people today, knowledge and practice around *bossiesmedisyne* has largely been lost and forgotten. People linked this loss with peoples’ current state of physical and moral *disease*. Thus, through both learning the practices involved in finding and identifying *bossiesmedisyne*, and ingesting the medicines themselves, people are simultaneously cleaning illness and pollution out of their system, and embodying the potency and strength of previous times and the people whom Johan called ‘the ancients’, and Piet referred to as the ‘forefathers’.

Nancy-Scheper Hughes has drawn attention to the ‘psycho-social-bio-physiological therapeutic nature of … rituals of redress and complaint for … poor and marginalized individuals’ (1992:8). *Bossies* and the tropes surrounding them that essentially critique the present order of society and which draw on powers which are seen to stand outside that order – God, nature and the past - can be seen as one such kind of therapy.

Because they are gifts from God, and (especially on the land around Zoar) are freely available, people feel that medicines are *theirs*. A sense of being close to, of ‘knowing’ the medicines and nature, derives from the directness of sensual
experience involved in the process of learning about and using medicines. Through
tasting, smelling, touching and visually identifying medicines people get an intuitive
feel for what Johannes referred to as medicine’s ‘manners’. This sense of knowing the
physical substance of *bossies* can be contrasted with the unknown mysterious,
alienated, substance of pills, associated with chemicals and ‘processes’ in far off
places, in hospitals and factories. Since people in the area in many cases obtain their
medicines directly from the *veld*, a feeling of the purity of and ‘power’ in the natural
world is connected to peoples’ wider ecological experiences in the Kannaland
landscape. Spending time in this landscape means being immersed in its forms,
smells, sights, tastes, and sounds and experiencing an interpenetration of the self with
the environment.

As the many animal and spirit presences in the landscape become known through
direct engagement and story, the experience of the landscape becomes further
emotionally charged. Further, the landscape is dotted with memories of previously
visited medicine sites and the people from whom they were learnt. People experience
all this as part and parcel of the potency inherent in nature, and in medicines. The
cultivation of the skills necessary to negotiate and read the landscape, to overcome its
dangers, and to find and use medicine is a satisfying experience. The sense of pride
and strength people derive through this can be seen as one element of the health
benefits people experience through their knowledge of *bossies*.

Not least because of experiencing gentle, calming sounds; breathing in the essences of
medicines which fill the air; and exercising and sweating (which is seen to work
illness out of the bodily system), being in the *veld* is experienced as a kind of
cleansing, healthful experience. For some, this stands in contrast to the pollutions
they experience in town such as the physical pollution of food and water, and the
social pollutions of alcoholism and arguing. The richness of these experiences can be
contrasted with the impoverishment people experience in their day-to-day lives.
Again, these experiences play into peoples’ sense of nostalgia for nature and the past.

People connect the healing, cleansing experience of both being in the *veld* and
ingesting medicines with a nurturing God, the conscious creator who put medicines in
the world in the first place, and whose power allows them to heal. People exist in a
kind of reciprocal relationship with this God such that actions with *bossies* bring implications both for themselves and for those they give medicines to. The connection between a cleansing spiritual force and *bossies* relates to their ability to protect from and cure people of *vuilwinde*, an everyday reality for many people and an illness-inducing force for which ‘hospital medicine’ can offer no remedy.

As Myers has convincingly argued (contra Ingold’s Heiderggerian *dwelling* perspective), the meaning of a place does not derive only from phenomenological experiences people have in that place, nor only from the pure social construction of place, laid on top of an objective nature. Rather, he argues for a ‘dialectical model of construction...a construction that emphasizes operations and practices that mediate between a subject and the world’ (2002:104). Following this argument, I suggest that peoples’ appreciation for the natural landscape and the medicines that can be found there derives from the dialectic which exists between the difficult conditions of contemporary life (and a concomitant nostalgia for the past and nature), and direct sensual experiences of the landscape and medicine.

As South Africa competes in an increasingly saturated, tense and volatile capitalist world market, it will inevitably tap every possible source of profit and this includes its previously ignored IK base - the IKS document is quite explicit on this issue. I hope I have demonstrated some of the kinds of things that would be overlooked and lost should medicinal plants become just another commodity offered by South Africa to a world on the market (Dept. of Science and Technology 2004: 15).

*Bossies* in Kannaland are immersed in webs of meaning which encompasses both the human and the non-human aspects of the environment (Latour 2004). These meanings are integral to what the medicines *are* for those who know and make use of them. Plant medicines which have had their active compounds extracted, freeze-dried, put into capsules and sold for a market price also exist in webs of meaning. However, these are very different to the meanings experienced by those people who learn about them from grandparents, parents, relatives and friends; who gather medicines in the *veld*; and who know them as healing gifts from God. Drawing on the work of Roy Rappaport and Gregory Bateson, Alf Hornborg writes that:
In a complex sense, money is a transmutation - and an inversion - of the Sacred. We can think of the biblical Mammon, or of Marx's concept of money *fetishism*. The same capacity for abstraction which gave us the Sacred, the ultimate, the irreducible, also gave us money, for which nothing is sacred and everything reducible. *The Sacred is abstraction rooted or embedded in local resonance; money - and science - are disembodied abstraction* (1994:5, my emphasis).

The focus on substance over process in plant medicine in the South African context is closely related to the commodification of medicines and the techniques of medical science. The substance of a medicine is what can easily be extracted and reproduced in a laboratory or factory – its social-cultural-environmental context is not. Scheper-Hughes has argued that for biomedicine, every human body is the same as any other, irrespective of the social-cultural-environmental contexts he or she has developed within (1992). This perspective assumes a division between mind and body, culture and nature, and treats the body of the patient as a passive, individuated physical substrate – an understanding which Turner links directly to the individuating nature of capitalist society (Turner, 2002). As a counter to this, anthropologists have stressed the importance of the active role of the *socially constituted* mind-body in healing practice (Scheper-Hughes 1992; Csordas 2002). The present thesis is a contribution to that body of work.
Appendix

Some of the medicines used in the area

The following list should not be seen as in any way exhaustive – it is a selection of the medicines used in the area, with some detail on how and for what they are used, and in some cases, the kinds of environment in which they can be found. Some plants are regularly grown in peoples' gardens and where this is the case I have flagged the text with a G. Many plants are known by different names, and where possible I have included two or more of these names. However, it will inevitably be true that many idiosyncratic local names will not have been documented. In the interests of Intellectual Property (IP) protection I have withheld the species names, common names, and photographs of plants I could not find documented for their medicinal uses in the available literature. These plants are detailed in the codicil which follows the appendix.

Aalwyn, Aloe ferox

This is a very well known and widely used medicine. The sap-gel from a cut or broken leaf is very effective in the treatment of cuts and insect bites, and is simply rubbed on the effected area. In the treatment of an upset stomach, the dried part of the leaf (the ends of leaves often become dry and brittle on the plant), is ground up into a powder, made into a tea and drunk. Some people spoke of this technique acting as a kind of internal antiseptic. A blood cleanser is made by allowing the yellow-orange sap to drip on to flour which is then formed into a small pill-type shape and administered to a person who needs to clean themselves out. Aalwyn grows very widely in the veld and is not found in peoples’ gardens.

Aambeibossie, Teucrium capense

As suggested by the name ‘haemorrhoid-bush’, this is used as a remedy for curing haemorrhoids. A tea is made from small handful of the leaves, flowers and stem. After it is drunk, the pain from the haemorrhoids is apparently very quickly alleviated. It can also be drunk as a tea to help with chronic back pain.

Bakbous, Oombossie, Conyza ivaefolia G

This is a very common medicine, known by many people, even those who claim to know nothing of bosseismedisyme. It is grown in peoples' gardens, but also grows in the veld, generally next to permanent water, and in cooler, shadier spots. The most common
use for bakhos is to cure a fever, though especially in children. The whole plant or just the leaves are taken and pounded up, wrapped in cloth and placed on the child's stomach. The raw plant can be placed on the head to cure a headache, and can be drunk as a tea in conjunction with wilde-als (Artemisia afra) to treat a cold. It can also be used to relieve pain – by making the leaves wet with vinegar, and placing them on the affected area until the leaves have dried out.

**Bergtee, Cyclopa intermedia**

Not so much a 'medicine' (i.e. something used for the treatment of a particular ailment) as a regularly drunk tonic which is believed to keep a person healthy. The leaves and flowers are collected from the veld and roasted in the oven, kept in the kitchen, and brewed into a tea and drunk on a regular basis. It is commercially grown and sold across South Africa as Honey Bush Tea (van Wyk and Gericke, 2000).

**Bitterpatat – Kedrostis nana**

This is a very important, powerful and spiritually potent medicine whose power and efficacy is linked to its intensely bitter taste. Though it is always the large tuber at the base of the plant which is used, there are various different ways in which this medicine can be administered, including simply eating segments of the fresh tuber. Most commonly it is cut up and allowed to dry, before being ground up very fine and then drunk as a tea. It is used for a wide variety of ailments – including high blood pressure, high blood sugar and chronic stomach pains. The brew can be allowed to cool and then applied directly to the skin to wash and cure diabetic sores. When drunk it makes a person's insides both physically and spiritually clean, and will remedy and protect the body against evil spirits and a *vaalvind* sent by another person. The acid smell given off by the tuber is held to ward of spirits and segments of the tuber are hung up around the house to keep these malign forces out.

**Dawidjiewortel, Antizoma capensis**

This creeping plant is easy to find due to its abundance in the veld and is often found growing in amongst *ghwarrie* (*Euclea undulata*) bushes. The root is dug up
and brewed into a tea, drunk as a 'multi-medicine', for any illness in the body. It can be drunk in conjunction with svartzstorm (Cadaba aphylia) to cleanse and protect the body physically and from spiritual attack (e.g. a vuilwind or a malignant spirit). It can also be used by those who know how, to send a vuilwind.

**Dassiepis**

*Procavia capensis*, commonly known as a 'dassie' is a guinea-pig looking mammal common throughout most of Africa which inhabits the veld and herge of Kinnalnd. They live in groups, often in crevices and holes in rocks and cliffs. They defecate and urinate in the same communal place and in time this accumulates and forms a dark, hard, and sticky mass, which is in turn collected by those who make use of its many medicinal properties. Often, it is made into a tea and drunk for back pain and kidney conditions. A small amount can be mixed with a baby’s milk to calm him or her down. The healing power of dassiepis is seen to originate in the plants and bosses upon which dassies subsist.

**Doringboom - Acacia karoo**

One of the most common plants species in many parts of the Klein Karoo landscape, the eponymous doringboom is used for a variety of medicinal purposes. In one common usage, the leaves are boiled in water, and the resultant infusion drunk to cure a fever.

**Geelbos - Galenia Africatta.**

An infusion of the root of this widely growing plant is mixed with warm milk and drunk as a remedy for TB.
Ghwarrie, Ghwarriебos, Ghwarriebaar. *Euclea undulata*

Ghwarrie is one of the most widely known medicines and is used for a wide variety of ailments. The leaves and stem can be boiled with *ysterbos* (*Dondonaea angustifolia*) leaves and stem and drunk to remedy a cold. It is said that it can also be used to help a woman who cannot fall pregnant. For this, the leaves are pounded and steeped in cold water and the resultant liquid drunk every morning, on an empty stomach, until she conceives.

**Ghwarrieson. e.f. Osteospermum, sp. unidentified.**

Deriving its name from its light yellow sun-like flowers, this is a very commonly known and used medicine. When fresh the leaves exude a thick, sticky yellowy, pungently bitter sap. A sprig of the leaves and stem of this potent plant is cooked in boiling water and then drunk hot – I was told that it must be drunk hot. This tea cleans out the system, is very good for the kidneys, and can help bring down high blood pressure. In relation to cleaning out the system, this is a medicine that is often associated with maintaining the health of a woman’s reproductive organs.

**Gifbol. Boophane disticha.**

The outer leaves covering the bulb are applied directly to a wound or burn and held in place with a bandage or other wrap until the injury is healed. I was told that it could do the work of stitching up a wide gash without the need for a ‘needle and thread’. As the name ‘poison bulb’ suggests, it is not administered internally.

**Groenemara *Artemisia absinthum***

A plant of European origin, this is grown in many peoples’ gardens and a small bunch of the leaves are chewed fresh or brewed into a tea and drunk as a remedy for stomach problems. According to some people, the mixture must be allowed to cool before it is drunk, or else its healing powers will be ‘blown away’. As with many of the plants found growing in gardens, the plant is often a cutting from the mother plant growing in a relative’s garden – perhaps an older aunty or uncle who knows about *kruid*. 
Kalmoes, *Acorus calamus*  G

A water plant that some people have growing in their gardens, or else found in rivers and streams. *Kalmoes* is a remedy for wind, which can be used on babies. Boiling water is poured over a small piece of the root and the resultant infusion drunk for an immediate and effective relief from painful wind.

Kamille, *Chrysanthemum parthenium*  G

This is a well-known and commonly used herb, which many people have growing in their gardens. A sprig of this can be brewed into a tea as a remedy for an upset stomach and nausea, as well as in bringing down a fever.

Karmedik, Kanjerbos, *Cnisus benedictus* and *Berkheya sp.* unidentified

At least two species are known by the names *Karmedik* and *Kanjerbos - Cnisus benedictus and a Berkheya*, the species of which I could not identify. All parts of the plant can be boiled in water to make a tea that is drunk to treat a stomach ache, stomach cancer and sore back muscles.

Kattekruiie, Katbos, *Ballota Africana*  G

This can be brewed into a tea a drunk as a remedy for measles, and also as a treatment for rashes on the body. I was told that the reason it is called *Katbos* is that when its dry seed pots are rubbed on the skin, it feels a cat’s tongue. This is found both in gardens and in wetter, cooler places in the veld and mountain.
Kenna, Kennablaar. *Canna indica*  

This medicine is only used externally and is simply applied to painful parts of the body in order to relieve pain. Sometimes, the leaf is used without any preparation, straight from the plant, sometimes it is scored down the length of the leaf with a sharp knife, and sometimes the leaf is pounded up and then applied. This pulverized matter can then be mixed with Vaseline or olive oil before it is applied. In whatever form, the leaf is fixed on the painful body part with a piece of material or bandage, and left on until the pain is relieved, until the leaf has dried out, or until the leaf has turned brown. In this latter case, the colour change indicates that the leaf’s power is spent and/or that the pain has been ‘taken up’ by the leaf, and so changed its colour. *Kenna* is native to South East Asia and is grown in many people’s gardens, though not necessarily as a medicine as it is also a very visually attractive plant (Cooke 2001).

Kissieblaar. *Plantago lanceolata*

This alien plant (probably of European origin) is used in healing small cuts and bruises (Goldblatt and Manning 2000). The leaf is simply applied and held to the affected area for however long the injured feels is necessary.

Klipdaggga, wildedaggga. *Leonotis leonitis*  

This is seen as a general medicine – the leaves and stems being brewed as a tea and drunk as a kind of cure-all. I was told that it could specifically be used in this way to help with bladder pain. It can also be infused with wynruit (*Ruta graveolens*) and drunk for a person that has diabetes (to bring their blood sugar levels down). This drink ‘cuts up the sugar in you.’ Many people have this plant growing in their gardens though it also grows in relative abundance in the wetter, cooler places of the veld.

At least two species are referred to as *kooigoed* or *kooigoedbossie*. This is not due to a similarity in appearance but to a similarity in smell, taste, and medicinal function. Both are used especially for women’s reproductive health, and are made into a tea and drunk to clean out women’s reproductive organs – to ‘work out unclean things’. In the ‘old days’ before people went to the hospital to give birth, *kooigoed* was apparently given to women by ‘vrouwvroue’ – informal midwives – in order to make them clean after having given birth. *Kooigoed* (in this case most likely a species of *Helichrysum*) can be dried out and burnt around the house to keep out bad smells and spirits.

**Kruidjie-roer-my-nie. Melianthus comosus**

This is a poisonous plant only ever used as an externally applied ‘wash-medicine’ (wash-medicine). The leaves are drawn in boiling water, and once cooled used to wash a burn or wound that will not heal; which will hopefully then quickly become dry and healed.

**Kruistemeth. Mentha spicata**

This grows in many peoples’ gardens and can also be found in the veld, next to sources of permanent water. Some people told me it can be rubbed on the body as a natural de-odorant, or the scent from the fresh plant simply breathed in to clear a blocked nose. It can be put in boiling water and drunk as a tea to cure a cold (especially in children), and/or to settle an upset stomach.
Langblaarboegoe. *Empleurum unicapsulare*

This medicine can be used for various kinds of ailments – including being drunk in a tea as a remedy for colds and ‘flu. Various other kinds of boegoe – such as *rondblaarboegoe* – are known and used by people. Unfortunately I was not able to acquire a sample of these for identification.

**Malva. G**

Many people grow one type or another of *malva* in their gardens. These represent different species of *Pelargonium*, and are used for a variety of medicinal uses. The most common way is to make a ‘plug’ of the leaves and put it in one’s ear as a remedy for toothache, or carache, or both.

**Nasgal, Swartbessies. *Solanum nigrum* G**

Used as a remedy for TB – the leaves, stalk and black berries are boiled in water and the liquid drunk. I was warned not to eat the berries before they turn black, or I would be poisoned. This is a native European plant introduced to South Africa around 1652 (Smith 1966), and is grown in people’s gardens.

**Plakkie. *Cotyledon orbiculata* G**

This medicine is known to be poisonous and is only ever used externally in the treatment of warts. The leaf is broken off, cut open, and the open side of the leaf applied directly onto the skin. *Plakkie* is often grown in peoples’ gardens but can be found growing in the *veld* also.
Rambossie, Chenopodiaceae ambrosioides

Rambossie is a very widely known medicine that grows in many peoples' gardens but can also be found next to sources of permanent water - in kloof and next to streams and rivers. Most commonly it is used as a baby's medicine and is mixed with an infant's milk to take away the pain of teething.

Sispieterella, Chironia haeifera

This is a widely known and used plant which is found growing in wetter, cooler parts of the veld and mountain. A sprig of it is brewed as a tea and drunk to clean out the bladder.

Skaapkaroo, Karoobossie, Pentzia hucana and Eriophalus ericooides

At least two species are known by the same names and are both used in the same way. They are known for having, and indeed do have, a particular smell and very bitter taste. Most commonly a small amount (in klein klompe) of the leaves and fine stalk are pulled off the plant and chewed as an on-the-go remedy for a stomach ache. They can also be made into a tea, but this does not seem to be the preferred method. These grow primarily in hot, dry areas of the veld and are not found in peoples' gardens.

Stinkolieblaar, Datura stramonium

A strong but dangerous medicine, this plant is widely known but does not seem to be so widely used, which may be down to its highly toxic nature (Smith, 1966). However, I was told that a small part of a dried leaf could be ground up fine and smoked with a little tobacco in a pipe as a cure for asthma. This is not indigenous to South Africa, and is said to have been brought over by European settlers in amongst their agricultural seed (Smith 1966: 438). Nevertheless I saw it growing wild in various kloofe around the study area.
Swartstorm. *Cadaba aphylla*

This is a very important plant and medicine that is often found growing at the base of *ghwarrie* (*Euclea undulata*) bushes. As a medicine, the root can be brewed into a tea and drunk to cure back pain as well as to be a general healing and cleansing tonic, effective against all kinds of impurities including those of a spiritual nature: *vuilwinde* and other ‘poisons’. It can also be used to send a *vuilwind*. The stem can be brewed and drunk as a remedy for an overly acidic stomach. The root can also be burned in the house in order that the smoke will protect you from those that have passed away – what some people referred to as ‘ghosts’, and will generally protect you from misfortune, sickness, and stress. The smoke can also be inhaled to cure a headache. The power and significance of *swartstorm* is reflected in the particular way in which it must be harvested. As one approaches the plant, one’s shadow must not fall on the plant, as this would diminish the plant’s power.

Suurvy. *Carpobrotus edulis*  G

The leaves of *suurvy* are chewed to soothe a sore throat and/or mouth, whilst the ‘sour fig’ fruit is also eaten as a very healthy food. This is a plant that people commonly grow in their gardens but is also found in the veld, in wetter areas, normally near permanent water.

Vaalsale. *Buddleja sabifolia*

A few leaves of it this type of sage are brewed into a tea and drunk to maintain a healthy heart. It is only found next to sources of permanent water.

Vinkel. *Foeniculum vulgare*

Used as a remedy for wind in babies. A handful of the leaves and stem are pounded up, boiling water poured over it, and let to stand for a ‘long while.’ Two tablespoons of the liquid are given to the infant, and then two more two hours later. Alternatively, the pounded leaves can be put straight into a tablespoon of
milk and administered that way. *Vinkel* only grows very close to sources of permanent water.

**Waboom. Protea nitida**

Slivers of bark are sliced off of the stem of the *waboom*, and cooked in boiling water. The resultant tea can be drunk as a remedy for asthma, and high blood pressure. In relation to asthma, I was told that this tea would enable a person to breathe properly.

**Wildeals. Artemisia afra**  

This is widely known medicine grown in many peoples’ gardens but which also grows in the veld. Primarily used as a remedy for colds, and *flu* drunk in the form of a tea made from a few of the leaves boiled in water. A clump of the leaves can be placed on the head, perhaps under a hat, to cure a headache. The pungent fumes are thought to pass directly into the nasal passages and mouth, working on whatever is causing the headache, and curing it.

**Wynruit. Ruta graveolens**

This is a very widely used plant, which grows in many peoples’ gardens. It is a kind of cure-all but has special application for bringing down high blood pressure and sugar levels. The usual method for administering the plant is to brew a tea of it or steep it in cold water. A small amount is sometimes added to other plants to increase a medicine’s healing power. For example, it can be boiled with *klipkoppie* (*Leonotis asp会议folia*) to make a drink that is also used in bringing down blood sugar levels. This species has an extremely pungent smell which relates to its importance as a medicine and the potency it holds.

**Ysterbos, ysterbok, ysterboek, Doudonaea angustifolia**

This can be boiled in equal parts with either *ghwarrie* (*Euclea undulata*) or *ghwarrieson* (c.f. *Osteospermum*, sp. unidentified) to make a tea drunk as a remedy for colds. It can also be used in a very similar way to *skaapkaroo* or *karoobossie*, whereby a few of the leaves are plucked off and chewed as an on-the-go remedy for stomach-ache.
Codicil

Medicines whose common names, species names and photographs have been withheld for IP reasons.

1. This *wasmedisyne* (wash medicine) is used for the relief of bodily pain. Leaves of the plant are left to steep in cold water or cooked in boiling water. The resulting infusion is used (when cool) to wash affected areas of the body.

2. This medicine is used in much the same way as *Kedrostis nana*. It is known to be a favourite food of porcupines (*Ystervark* - *Hystrix africaeaustralis*) and the stomach of a porcupine is held to be a powerful remedy in cases of *vuilwind* poisoning.

3. This plant is used as a remedy to alleviate the symptoms of cancer. A *klein klomp* - along with a sprig of *katbos* (*Ballota Africana*) - is drawn in boiling water and drunk three times a day. This is a small plant that is generally found in hot, dry places of the *veld*.

4. This poisonous *wasmedisyne* is used exclusively externally to wash the skin and hair, and is said to make the hair very nice and soft. It can also be used in the same way to relieve burning pain in the limbs. The leaves and stem are boiled in a pot until the water changes colour and then allowed to cool, before being rubbed on whichever body part you wish to clean or heal. It is only found in the *veld*, near to permanent water.

5. This is a treatment for the round-shaped sores caused by ringworm. The flower is broken off of the plant and applied directly on to the affected area of skin.

6. This is a remedy for ‘*mond sproei*’ - a viral infection of the mouth, most commonly occurring in babies. A leaf is broken off and the lips and gum wiped with the moist centre.

7. This is a remedy for athlete’s foot. A handful of leaves and branches is set alight and the effected foot held in the pungent smoke. Apparently also, a sprig of the leaves and stems can be brewed into a tea and drunk for the treatment of fever and inflammation.

8. This medicine is ground up and mixed with cool or cold water and then washed around the mouth to cure the pain of tooth-ache.

9. This is a common plant that grows in many peoples’ gardens – in fact I never found it growing anywhere in the wild. Most commonly it is put in boiled water and allowed to draw like a tea and drunk to clean the kidneys. It is also used in the same way to cure a cold.

10. When I witnessed this medicine being prepared, a handful of the leaves were taken and put into a coffee mug full of recently boiled water, and let to steep for several hours. A small piece (6-7cm with a dozen or so leaves) of *wynruit* (*Ruta graveolens*) was also included in the mixture and allowed to steep with the *rhus*. The
cool concoction was drunk as a remedy for intense pain – in this case in the legs. Apparently the bark of the same plant can be used in a similar way, again to help with pain. One knows that the decoction is ready to use when the liquid turns blood red.
References


Scheper-Hughes, N. (1992) Thinking with the Body in Critical Medical Anthropology. Background paper prepared for the faculty seminar in the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cape Town, Friday March 13 1992, on the topic: *What does it mean to be nervous in Brazil?*


