

Opinion **Gabon**

Gabon's government is tripping for a psychedelic plant

It wants to monetise the trade in iboga, which is reputed to help people kick drug addictions

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Roots of an iboga tree. Iboga, extract from a plant known for its hallucinogenic powers, used in the Gabonese traditional rite, is also used to cure addictions to drugs © Steeve Jordan/AFP/Getty

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Gabon updates

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Most sovereign wealth funds commission studies on roads and dams. Gabon's is about to commission one on a psychedelic shrub.

The shrub in question is [iboga](#), a powerful hallucinogenic used for millennia by people who dwell in Gabon's forests in vision-inducing ceremonies. More recently, the mind-altering plant has been discovered by outsiders as a [would-be cure](#) for heroin and other addictions. "The intention is to exploit ibogaine, the active ingredient of the iboga plant," says Akim Daouda, chief executive of Gabon's sovereign wealth fund.

Though illegal in many countries, including the US, ibogaine is widely employed as a last-ditch cure for addiction, with rehab centres in Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico and New Zealand.

Many patients, according to testimonies, emerge from three days of trance-like visions with no craving for the drugs they once depended on. Such claims have not been rigorously verified and iboga, taken in large quantities, can cause [side effects](#) including seizures, paralysis, cardiac arrest and death.

“It’s taken in massive doses. It’s a violent three-day process, but it resets your system,” says Daouda. He wants to commission a study from a reputable consultancy benchmarked against [marijuana](#), another substance that is illegal in some countries but that has become big business partly thanks to its medicinal effects. Daouda envisages a thorough scientific assessment of the plant’s properties and its export regulation.

Internationally, iboga fetches \$2,000-\$5,000 a kilo, according to Lee White, Gabon’s forestry minister, who says archeological digs reveal the Gabonese have been using iboga for at least 2,600 years. “There’s a flourishing international trade and Gabon gets nothing out of it,” he says.

Westerners began to discover iboga’s properties in 1899 when French explorers brought it back to Europe where it was later marketed as the stimulant Lambaréne. In the early 1960s, the American Howard Lotsof, a young heroin addict who later became a scientific researcher, discovered it stopped his cravings. Iboga can “literally turn an addict into a non-addict over a two-to-three day period”, he told a 2004 documentary, [*Ibogaine: Rite of Passage*](#).

Iboga has appeared in numerous artistic genres. Gonzo journalist Hunter S Thompson wrote a spoof story for [Rolling Stone magazine](#) about a presidential candidate taking it in the 1972 campaign. In 2006, Ira Glass’s This American Life radio show featured a US underground clinic using iboga to treat drug addicts.

In the rainforest of Pongara National Park, a boat ride from Gabon’s capital, Libreville, Karl Kombila Nze, a guide at the Pongara Lodge hotel, points out the dark green leaves of the iboga plant. Local people pound the bark into a powder that they eat to induce visions of their ancestors, he says. Forest elephants and buffalo also consume the plant, which makes them drunk.

Back in Libreville, Kay Dougherty, a social worker from Brooklyn, has recently arrived to take part in an iboga initiation ceremony. She has been taking iboga sporadically for 15 years as a means of self-discovery, something she says most of her American relatives fail to appreciate.

“A big part of iboga is creativity, so you paint your face into a mask — which always freaks out my relatives in Iowa,” she says, adding that they do the same when they go to sports events. “They’re painting their face to worship football. I’m painting my face to worship God.”

Tatayo, a French citizen and the first European to be initiated into the iboga religious tradition, will oversee Dougherty’s ceremony. Many foreigners misunderstand the spiritual nature of iboga, he says, treating it purely as a miracle cure. “I came for two weeks 50 years ago,” says Tatayo, who arrived in Gabon as Hugues Poitevin in 1971. He became fascinated with iboga when his truck broke down near a village where the plant was in use.

“Iboga is not a pleasure party,” says Tatayo, a Keith Richards-lookalike with a deeply grooved face. People who want to learn about it should come to Gabon, where they can understand the full spiritual context and contribute to the Gabonese economy, he says. “That’s my message.”

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