

Peeping into the Sacralisation of Marijuana in Urban Slums: A Study of Muslim Youth in Maamobi, Ghana

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Abstract

The smoking of marijuana is considered a criminal act in many parts of the world. In Ghana, marijuana is a criminalized substance. However, the disclosure by the Narcotic Drugs Control Board (NACOB) that Ghana places first and third in the consumption of marijuana in Africa and the world respectively has sustained the debate about the criminalization of the substance. The arrest and prosecution of a popular hip-hop musician, Emmanuel Botchwey, for publicly smoking marijuana has further deepened the debate. This essay seeks to contribute to the debate on the use of marijuana in urban slums, focusing on the sacralisation of marijuana by Muslim youth in Maamobi. The paper argues that, while the consumption of marijuana pre-dates colonialism, the criminalization of the substance in Ghana is a recent phenomenon, largely influenced by the colonialists' conceptualization of marijuana as a substance that is only smoked for recreational purposes.

KEY WORDS: Marijuana, Sacralisation, Criminalisation, Ghana, Muslim Youth, Colonialism

Introduction

This essay contributes to popular discourse on the use of marijuana, focusing on the re-evaluation of marijuana as a consumable substance in the Maamobi slums of Accra. Marijuana is one particular herb, whose multiple usages go deep into human history, being used in religious rites of different religions. Tracing its origin from Asia, cannabis was a very important ritual element in most Eastern religions. Herer (1998) has documented that religions, including Shintoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism used marijuana for multiple purposes. Arab traders and Muslim Sufis served as the pathway for the introduction of cannabis to the Nile Delta and the East African coast by the

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fourteenth century (Herer, 1998). From these points of entry, cannabis spread to Central and Southern Africa. Cannabis appears to have grown wild in Ethiopia and Southern Africa for centuries. It was incorporated into rituals, aiding monastic contemplating in Ethiopia, and healing therapy in Zimbabwe (Courtwright, 2001, cited in Akyeamong, 2005:432). In Cameroon, the religious value of marijuana is tied with regulatory societies.² Known commonly as dagga, cannabis is a sacrament and medicine to the Pygmies, Zulu, and Hottentots (Herer, 1998).

Discourses on marijuana continue to excite controversy. Proponents of its use, such as Grinspoon, et al (1993) and Zimmer et al (1997) contend that it is a natural, relatively harmless drug with many beneficial properties, its image tarnished by lies and myth. On the other hand, anti-marijuana campaigners including Nahas et al (1992) and Walters (1993) contend that the potential harm of cannabis has been understated, and that it is a toxic drug that causes widespread harm. The lack of clarity over the harmfulness or otherwise of marijuana has resulted in a near universal criminalization of the substance. In Ghana, the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) Law 236 and the Narcotic Drug Law, enacted in 1990 render marijuana a criminal substance. Since the cultivation of marijuana is considered a crime, it also means legally, the term ‘marijuana’ refers to all parts of marijuana, the seeds of the plant, the resin extracted from the plant, and every compound, manufacture, salt, derivative, mixture, or preparation of the plant, its seeds or its resin (Miller, 1997: 412).

Statement of Problem

The near universal criminalization of marijuana, notwithstanding, it is one of the few substances that is widely consumed, and in consequence, in the discourse on illicit drug use, the substance has become a subject of scholarly, popular, and legal debate (Barrett, 1988: 128). Woody et al (1995) asserts that globally, an estimated 200-300 million people are regular users of marijuana. This disclosure is corroborated by the UNDP report (2002) that indicates that globally an estimated number of 147 million people are regular users of marijuana. The World Drug Report of 2009 also brings to the fore that cannabis plant remains the most widely cultivated crop in the world, and its products are the most widely used, although estimates about use are less precise than those about cultivation. In UNODC (2010) Report, the Executive Director, Antonio Maria Costa, noted that cannabis remains the world’s most widely produced and used illicit substance grown in almost all countries, and smoked by 130 to 190 million people at least once a year.³ According to the World Drug Report (2014), in 2012, between 125 million and 227 million people were estimated to have used cannabis, corresponding to between 2.7 and 4.9 per cent of the population aged 15-64 years. West and Central Africa, North America, Oceania and, to a lesser extent, Western and Central Europe remain the regions with prevalence rates considerably higher than the global average. Over the past five years in North America, the largest cannabis herb market, prevalence rates have followed an upward trend in the United States but declined in Canada between 2008 and 2011, increasing again between 2011 and 2012. Although recent epidemiological data from Asia are not available, experts from nearly half of the countries in Asia consider cannabis use

² Interview with Professor Nicodemus Awasom of Swaziland University on September 26-27, 2010.

³ Source UNODC (2010). Promoting Health, Security and Justice. Source: www.unodc.org/documents/frontpage/unodc. Accessed December 19, 2010.

to be increasing in the region.⁴

Possibly because of the new researches that have shed new light on marijuana, the substance, after centuries of criminalization, is beginning to gain acceptance in some so-called developed countries. In countries like Netherland, Bangladesh, North Korea and Uruguay, marijuana laws have been relaxed. But in many African societies, including Ghana, marijuana continues to be a criminalized substance. In Ghana, marijuana is widely used by people of all social backgrounds, and it is illegally used even in penal or reformation institutions. Statistics from the four psychiatric hospitals – Accra, Pantang, Ankaful, and Valley View – show a significant rise in the consumption of cannabis. With a total of 1,945 patients admitted in 2009, cannabis was the most abused drug beside alcohol, cocaine, and heroine. Out of this figure 1,072 representing 55.11% admitted using cannabis and 583, representing 30.23% admitted abusing alcohol. Only 61 patients, representing 3.14% admitted using cocaine.⁵

In October 2014, Mr. Daniel Akwasi Amankwah, an official of NACOB, revealed that Ghana places first in Africa and third in the world as a consumer of marijuana.⁶ Based on this disclosure, marijuana became public discourse in the country for several weeks. Initially, the debate over the substance had been brought forward by the Executive Secretary of NACOB, Akrasi Sarpong, who suggested in March 2014 that Ghana should open up a new debate on the criminalization of marijuana. The debate on the substance came to a head following the arrest of Emmanuel Botchwey, a popular Ghanaian hip-hop artiste, for illegal use of marijuana. Maamobi, is a Muslim-dominated migrant community that bears the full imprint of a slum. The features of a slum includes a community that is densely populated, with inadequate services such as poor sanitation, poor supply of electricity, irregular water supply, high poverty rate, and high rate of illiteracy (Hutchinson 1997; Turkstra et al 2004). What is the history of marijuana use in Maamobi in particular and Ghana in general? What are the religious values of marijuana in Maamobi?

Research Methodology

As suggested by Siziba (2009), intimate studies, such as those on culture, ideology, young people, identity and other aspects of human behaviour evoke a pertinent need for methodologies that afford the researcher close proximity to the research problem. Following Sizibi's suggestion, the study is qualitative in design and helps to grasp better the lived realities of marijuana users in Maamobi. The data was collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with key leaders of the two sites. This research design ensured that respondents were not only objects of the study, but also active participants, who were given ample opportunity to tell their own stories, outlook, experiences and philosophy about the use of marijuana. It also helped the researcher to collect data on the socio-demography of marijuana users; explore the values marijuana users assign to the substance. The qualitative study design also enabled the researcher to apply the ethnographical technique of exploring the social realities of marijuana users

⁴ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *World Drug Report 2014*. (United Nations Publication, Sales No. E.14.XI.7).

⁵ Regina Aidoo-Rockson, 'What you should know about cannabis', published in *The Ghanaian Times* on Monday, December 6, 2010, pg. 9 No. 1,561,223 ISSN: 0855-1502.

⁶ GNA, Ghana is first highest marijuana consumption in Africa. Source: www.graphic.comgh/.../33112 Accessed: 21 January, 2015.

through participant observation and participation in some social activities, such as football gala and ceremonial organization of entertainment, by marijuana users.

The purposive sampling was used to select the two oldest existing sites, Barracks and Four Junction in Accra, for the study. The researcher's choice of these sites, apart from their long period of existence in the past three decades, was informed by the fact that users from all the other smaller or satellites sites, as well as non-residents of the community, prefer these sites. Additionally, these sites are socially and politically well-structured to capture the marijuana culture in the community. The targeted population for the study included all Muslim youth who use marijuana in Maamobi community, but for time and financial constraints, 50 respondents were selected for the study. The snowball sampling technique was used to obtain the defined population for the study. This technique was desirable because even though Maamobi is a communal community, the stigma and fear for people who use marijuana creates a latent hostility between marijuana users and most residents. This situation, as well as the legal implications and the likelihood of imprisonment for possessing, selling, or using marijuana, makes it difficult for smokers to readily avail themselves. The sites are also generally closed to non-users. Nevertheless, since the researcher has some Muslim acquaintances who are users and residents of these sites, they helped to generate the sample size. The purposive and convenience sampling techniques were used to obtain the views of informants.

This study relied on primary and secondary sources for generating data. The study explored existing literature including published books, articles from journals, newspapers, the Hadith, and the Qur'an. The primary source of data collection required regular visits to the sites, where marijuana is consumed and sold. Key informants including association leaders of the sites were interviewed. Different data collection techniques were utilized, including structured and unstructured in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation and case studies of carefully selected marijuana users. The structured interviews enabled the researcher to elicit responses on specific questions from respondents. On the other hand, the unstructured method proved to be a very suitable instrument for engaging marijuana users in a conversational style of interview. Interview guide, which contained the major themes of the study, was used to engage interviewees and the interviewer in a discussion.

A focused group discussion guide was also used to collect information from marijuana users. Individuals selected for the focus group discussion were leaders and deputy leaders of the two main field sites. The selection criteria ensured that the views reflect what the two sites consider to be central to the marijuana culture. Two focus group discussion sessions, each comprising four participants, two representatives from each site, were conducted at Four Junction on Saturday, September 4, 2010 and at Barracks on Saturday, October 9, 2010 respectively.

Participant observation proved useful with frequent visits to the sites for interviews, informal conversations and observation of behaviour of marijuana users, and participation in social activities of marijuana users including football tournaments, parties and marriage ceremonies. My participation in a football match strengthened the relationship with marijuana users, and deepened the confidence of respondents. The participant observation enabled me to get firsthand information on activities of marijuana users.

Though the Hausa language is commonly spoken in the community, questionnaires were written in English and translated into Hausa during the interviews with respondents. In few cases, Pidgin English and Twi languages were also used. The researcher familiarized himself with common jargons used by marijuana users, thus helping to have unimpeded conversation with marijuana users. My 30 years residence in the community enabled me to establish cordial relationship with marijuana users and facilitated relatively easy entrance to the sites.

In addition, a field notebook was used to document important observations and served as a source of reference. The initial intention to use tape recorders was dropped as virtually all the marijuana users objected to tape-recording the interviews, obviously for security reasons. However, they had no objection to writing, verbatim, their views and experiences. They exercised a great deal of patience as I consistently asked them to repeat what they had said in order for their views to be accurately represented. This was time consuming, but it helped the researcher to capture, as much as possible, the exact words and expressions of interviewees. The data collected was grouped thematically and interpreted descriptively to mostly reflect the views and opinions of marijuana users.

Theories on Marijuana Use

Scholars have used reference group or peer pressure theory, commitment theory and the stress theory to explain marijuana use. Sociologically, 'reference group' refers to groups which individuals use as a standard for evaluating themselves and their own behaviour (Rawat, 2007:114). Many researchers have suggested that marijuana use occur, at least, as a result of the influence of peers, whether in the guise of conformity to peer group pressure and escape from unpleasant circumstances (Ginsberg et al, 1978, Conger, 1979, cited in Santrock, 2005, Mussen et al 1984:538-539, Johnson, 1973, Miller, 1997:426). The theory postulates that a person's exposure to marijuana using sub-culture may lead to increased identification with marijuana users as reference group.

This theory resonates with the interactionist theory's approach to understanding the marijuana culture. The interactionist theory, as noted by Zastrow et al (2004:420), asserts that drug use is learned from interaction with others in a cultural environment. This theory states that social behaviour is formed as one communicates with other people in the society. Thus, both the reference group and the interactionist theories convey the understanding that prevailing conditions, such as coming into contact with a sub-culture that provides social networks and moral support for marijuana use could influence a person to use marijuana. These theories served as a framework for exploring how the presence of marijuana sites, which provide the support and social network, induce some Muslim youth to take to using marijuana.

The commitment theory asserts that when people are committed to doing conventional activities, they tend to have less time and energy to engage in any form of social deviant behaviour, which in our context is marijuana use (Johnson, 1973; Hirschi, 1971, cited in Ginsberg, et al. 1978:24). This theory is relevant to this study because, the use of marijuana is legally and socially treated as a deviant behaviour in the general Ghanaian society. The stress theory on the other hand maintains that some people use marijuana in order to escape from personal or psychological problems (Ginsberg et al, 1978:24). The theory is also related to the pressure-seeking or behavioural theory that

stipulates that people use drugs because they find them pleasurable and continue to use them because doing so prevents withdrawal distress (Zastrow et al, 2004:420).

The Marijuana Culture in Ghana

In Ghana, apart from the name ganja, marijuana has lots of names including *tampe*, *sundu*, *obonsam tawa*, *apopo*, *taba*, and *wee bitters*. Its use goes as far back as the pre-colonial era and it was abused as psychotropic substance, depressant or stimulant due to its chemical properties. Akyeampong (2005) has provided the historicity of marijuana consumption in pre-colonial Ghana. Besides, there is paucity of literature on the use of the substance in pre-colonial Ghana. Thus, much of the information gleaned for marijuana consumption in pre-colonial Ghana is also based on oral accounts. Asiana supports the idea that the knowledge of marijuana and other hallucinatory substances were known to most West African societies long before the advent of colonialism.⁷ He posits that virtually all the priests and priestesses of the popular shrines in Ghana, namely, Akonodi, Yeve, Tigari use some hallucinatory substances during initiation rites and incantations.⁸

Historically, traditional warriors used potent hallucinatory substances during wartime. This was expressed as *Ye ko noa asa*, to wit, ‘we are going to cook war.’ This was to adequately prepare the warriors, making them fearless and psychologically strong to face war and trauma. This was usually done in the forest, hence making the knowledge of it relatively unknown to the non-participants.⁹

Nevertheless, during the colonial era, marijuana was classified as a plant whose cultivation, use and possession were rendered a crime that was punishable by law. The criminalization of marijuana was economically motivated as it fed into the colonial political economy. This was because marijuana competed with tobacco introduced by the colonialists. To promote the sale of tobacco, the colonialists had to criminalise marijuana. Even so, the widespread in the use of marijuana among the youth in post-colonial Ghana is traced to the ex-service men, who returned to the country after World War II.¹⁰

Apart from the ex-servicemen, it is possible that the Krio from Sierra Leone who worked as stevedores along the Coast of West Africa popularized marijuana use in Ghana during the colonial era. In the 1930s, some Sierra Leoneans, therefore, began to explore a market for cannabis within British West Africa (Akyeampong, 2005: 433). As Akyeampong asserts, “with the decline in world market price for cocoa from 1958, cocoa farmers may have been encouraged to diversify into cannabis cultivation” (2005:435). Since then, marijuana has received wider use and it is the leading abused drug in Secondary Schools and University campuses (Kudadjie et al, 2004: 159). Presently in Ghana, some of the principal growing areas for cannabis include, the Volta, Brong Ahafo, Western, and Ashanti regions.

⁷ Interview with Rev. Dr. Asiana, a lecturer at the School of Performing Arts, and as he refers to himself ‘practitioner of herbal medicine’, Accra, 4 October 2010.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Mallam Yussif Iddris Konate, 10 October 2010.

Marijuana in Maamobi community

The use of marijuana has been an established culture in Maamobi community since the 1950s. During this period, America House,¹¹ a unit in the community, gained popularity as a vibrant site for the sale and use of marijuana. Marijuana was also sold at Avenor. The early dealers such as Mahma Issaka, Awolah, Medicine, and Mamare, traveled within and outside Ghana to purchase marijuana.¹²

Similar to the history of marijuana in Ghana in general, there has been no consensus on how marijuana became introduced to Maamobi. In spite of the controversy over the source of introduction, some residents linked the use of marijuana by some youth to armed robbery, criminal activities and other social vices in the community.¹³ A section of the community, known as *Kawo kudi*¹⁴ reflects the activities of some disgruntled ex-service men, who robbed people at the point of guns, knives and other deadly weapons. With this backdrop, the community became a major target for ridding of criminal activities in the country during the 1979 political uprising.¹⁵

When America House lost its popularity in 1979, Barracks¹⁶ and later Four Junction¹⁷ emerged as major alternative sites for the marijuana business. These two sites till date remain important centers for the sale and consumption of marijuana.

The Sociogenic Nature of Marijuana Use in Maamobi

In Maamobi community, the site represents the marijuana culture. Since the use of marijuana is a group activity, or as expressed by Goode (1970) to be ‘sociogenic’ or ‘cultogenic’, the site serves as the meeting point for marijuana users. For site members, the sociogenic nature of smoking marijuana is derived from one of the names of the substance, ‘wee’. ‘Wee’ to site members means ‘all of us’, an interpretation that binds site members together as a people who share some characteristics that define them as unique. Marijuana users hardly take non-participants, including those who use other narcotic drugs, such as cocaine and heroin, as friends. This has created a form of fictive family in the site where members are provided with social networks and support. There is, therefore, a strong sense of solidarity among members. This sense of ‘I am because we are and since I am therefore we are’ as formulated by Mbiti (1989) is symbolically expressed in the passing round of joints. The sharing of joints is also a way of asserting that, ‘one man does not share meditation.’ The sociogenic nature of smoking is also a latent way of ‘training’ a neophyte on the dynamics of smoking, including learning the expected behaviour in the site when the neophyte is ‘on high’. After a neophyte has learnt how to use marijuana, he joins the fraternity as a full member. Site members see

¹¹ The name America House reflects the activities of African Americans who contributed to development in the community in 1960s.

¹² Prempeh, Fieldnote, 2010.

¹³ Interviewed with Anthony Prempeh, 12/08/08.

¹⁴ A Hausa expression which means, ‘Bring money’.

¹⁵ The 1979 uprising was led by Jerry John Rawlings, the leader of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), and its main objective of undertaking a house cleaning exercise was popularly supported by many of the youths.

¹⁶ The name ‘Barracks’ represents the fact that it is only males who are allowed to sit there and use marijuana.

¹⁷ Four Junction is also another popular site for the marijuana business.

each other as 'brothers', and it is the duty of skilled members to pass on any known skills to other members. Membership of the site is open to males only.

The marijuana site has unwritten rules and regulations to govern the conduct of members. As part of the code of conduct, members are not allowed to use any illicit drugs in the site; members are not allowed to make unnecessary noise, or fight in the site; members are forbidden to steal in and outside the site, or admit criminals or thieves to life in the marijuana site. Though most site members smoke cigarette in addition to marijuana in the site, the sale of cigarette is not allowed in there; members are not proscribed from drinking alcohol, but members cannot live in the site under the influence of alcohol; no marital unfaithfulness, and finally 'elders' are supposed to be respected.¹⁸ *Hukumchi*¹⁹ is the punishment for those who break the rules in the site. It requires the guilty person to be tied to the ground and flogged by any member of the site. The climax of 'Hukumchi' is excommunication.

Since leadership is necessary for the sustenance of life in the site, there is a form of gerontocratic leadership. Leadership is reposed in older members of the site. They are expected to live exemplary life; and enjoin group solidarity among members. It is also their duty to initiate and organize social activities such as football matches, and clean-up exercise. They also assist members in the organization of marriage, funerals, and naming ceremonies. The reason for the strict commitment to the rules in the site was explained by an elder from Four Junction as follows:

To prevent the site from becoming a den of robbers, and not tarnish the image of the site and those of us who smoke here. The founder of our site, Lover [in the case of Four Junction] was a disciplinarian, who never tolerated nonsense, cheating, fighting, quarreling, and noise making. In his time, he made site life in such a way that one only enters here to smoke, not talk, quarrel, or even do business. This was because, the site was located right at the back of his house, and so, if he allowed noise and quarreling, he may be blamed by those in the house. He also resisted the temptation of selling *taba* to young boys. Those of us, who took over from him, must ensure that his idea of life in the site, free from troubles and criminals, is achieved. We do not shield criminals, hard drug pushers, or even allow the selling of nicotine [tobacco], because robbery is a cheat on someone, and selling hard drugs and nicotine is life threatening.²⁰

Another elder from Barracks complemented the above by saying:

Here is not a jungle of animals. And even in the jungle, animals have their own rules. Here in the site, we want to live a life to tell those who are against us that there is nothing bad about smoking, and that, we are law-abiding citizens. We don't shield criminals, or fighters in the site. We have been misunderstood for a long time, and so, we owe it as a duty to make sure that life in the site speaks for itself. We can't therefore allow a few individuals to make people think that the site harbors thieves and criminals.²¹

¹⁸ Prempeh Field Note, 2010.

¹⁹ *Hukumchi* is a Hausa word for punishment.

²⁰ Focus group discussion at Four Junction on 04/08/10.

²¹ Focus group discussion at Four Junction on 04/08/10.

Thus the use of marijuana in Maamobi constitutes a unique sub-culture within the larger community. The site is usually noted for introducing new words that are incorporated into mainstream Hausa dialect spoken in the community. These terms include words such as *dama* (money), ‘speed off’ (I’m distressed), *kana Magana iskoiki* (You speak nonsense) and *jon* (fool), to mention but a few. Life in the site, hence, serves as a sort of reference group to a number of up-coming youth in the community. The structural organization of marijuana culture in the site also helps members to cope with the harsh economic conditions in Accra.

The Supply and Sale of Marijuana in Maamobi

The study discovered that supply of marijuana is cloaked in a closely knitted connection among some police officers at the borders, cargo vehicle drivers, and marijuana farmers in Hoehoe, Sandama and Bolgatanga. Dealers have established strong ties with this network. They are respected and revered in the sites; they are believed to have some spiritual powers to outwit the police and escape all forms of arrest. They are also believed to have the ability to hypnotize their detractors. They control the distribution of marijuana in the sites. They liaise between the cultivators and the marijuana users in the sites, and they ensure the regular supply of the substance. A dealer does not necessarily have to be an elder. The farmers are responsible for the cultivation of the substance; the cargo drivers, who hide the substance under loads of charcoal, maize, or yam, transport the substance to Accra, while some senior police officers at the borders ensure the safety transport of the substance to Accra. There is, thus, a kind of division of labour that takes place in transporting the substance to dealers in Accra.

In the marijuana sites, apart from common names, marijuana is known by different terms such as ‘Ethiopian cancer’, *Apopo*,²² ‘Killing me softly’, ‘Sinsiminia’²³ ‘Congolapito’.²⁴ To buy marijuana the following terms are used: ‘Flow me taba’ ‘I me ludu’, ‘I me row’, ‘Blow me one’ ‘Let the wee flow’, ‘Let me have a puff’, ‘Flow me some Charley,’ and ‘Throw me one stone’.

To escape and preempt arrest, marijuana dealers sell to only members and friends of members of the site. Even though most members of the marijuana site are multiple drug users, marijuana and cigarette, with a few of them quaffing alcohol, the sale of all other drugs, apart from marijuana and cigarette, is strictly prohibited in the sites. Members are not allowed to use narcotic drugs. A member found using narcotic drugs is subjected to ‘Hukumchi’ and later excommunicated from the marijuana culture. Leaders of the marijuana sites have ways of identifying narcotic drug users. These include idiotic living; wearing of dirty clothes, and avoiding communal living. Members can also drink alcohol, but, here too, the culture of drinking is not allowed in the sites.

²² Apopo is a Chamba word for herbs.

²³ This is a corruption of the word, ‘Sinsemilla’, which means without seed. It is a variety of marijuana that is cultivated to eliminate seeds from the final product. For further detail, see, Miller, J. G. (1997). *Drugs and the Law: Detection, Recognition & Investigation* (2nd Edition). Florida: Gould Publications, Inc.

²⁴ Conglapito confirms Imam Yussif Iddris Konate’s assertion that marijuana on earlier on gotten from Krio stevedores from Congo.

Marijuana and Aggressive Behaviour: The Perspective of Marijuana Users in Maamobi

An aspect of the discussion on marijuana is the assumption that the use of marijuana is a threat to social order, since marijuana users may easily resort to aggressive behaviour on the least provocation. Findings reveal that 78% of respondents vehemently denied the above assertion, while 22% thought that the use of marijuana is a threat to social order and induces aggressive behaviour in the user. In a focus group discussion with marijuana users on this issue, Musbau was of the view that:

The use of marijuana has nothing to do with the peace of society. I admit that some marijuana users are sometimes hired to cause commotion in our community. But I can assure you that if you get closer to the person, who supposedly is causing commotion under the influence of marijuana, you will notice that the person has taken alcohol or other hard drug instead of marijuana. Marijuana, naturally, causes one to be calm. How do you find us in the ghettos? Do you see us fighting or beating each other?²⁵

Majid complemented Musbau's assertion:

Marijuana is a peacemaker. If you want to fight with somebody, or have the intention of doing any evil, all you need to do is to take marijuana. My brother, once you do that you will notice that you will tend to feel shy of the person whom you have nurtured evil against or intend to fight. In any case, if you smoke marijuana with evil intention, it will expose you. You will be arrested and imprisoned.²⁶

Uztaz thought otherwise. He was of the view that:

The question of aggressive behaviour and smoking is not a straightforward one for one to easily deny or confirm it. First, whatever you do is backed by intention. If it is your intention to smoke and become quiet, you will be quiet. But if you smoke with the intention of causing confusion, you would cause confusion. So, I'm against the idea of my other friends trying to find a narrow view of people's intention. If people smoke and they are peaceful, why do we have to make laws in the ghettos to govern our lives? If the smoking of marijuana will naturally stimulate in us to be peaceful, then it is irrelevant for some of us to be appointed as elders. Please, Mr. Researcher, the truth of the matter is that people's intentions determine their behaviour and not necessarily the smoking of marijuana.²⁷

In relations to addiction, most marijuana users are of the view that the substance is not addictive. In fact, one of them said that, "I learnt how to use it, so I can unlearn it." one of them also said, "Taba (marijuana) is not adhini (religion), and so one can stop." A few of them, however, think that the substance is addictive. For example, one of them, who is a mason, said that, "If I don't use marijuana, I am not able to work." The narrative in the sites about the addictiveness of the substance is not clear, as members have different views about it.

²⁵ Focused group discussion at Barracks on 09/10/10.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

The Power of Marijuana: Protection Against Witchcraft

As Ghanaian Muslims, the respondents' belief in witchcraft is largely influenced by their indigenous worldview and Islam. In addition to the prescribed method of dealing with the challenge of witchcraft in Islam, such as offering a special prayer (*dua*) in the middle of the night, marijuana users assume that the smoke of marijuana is another panacea to dealing with the paranoia of witchcraft. The belief in the existence of witchcraft is common in the indigenous religions and Abrahamic religions.

In Islam, both the Qur'an²⁸ and the Sunna attest to the existence of witchcraft, so much emphasis is placed on the existence of witchcraft that whoever denies the existence of such a malevolent and capricious spirit is considered an infidel. From the Sunna, we learn that the Prophet of Islam, Mohammed, was bewitched. This is narrated by Aisha, who relays that: 'The messenger of Allah was bewitched by a man from Banu Zurayq who was called Labeed ibn Al-A'sam, until the messenger of Allah imagined that he had done something when he had not done it' (Fath Al-Baari, 10/222, cited in Khaleel ibn Ibraaheem Ameen, 2005:182). Aside from the Qur'an and the Sunna, leading Islamic scholars attest to the existence of witchcraft. For example, that witchcraft is an existential reality is expressed by Al-Qurtubi as follows:

The Qur'aan, in more than one Verse, and the Sunnah, in more than one Hadeeth, indicate that witchcraft exists and that it has effect on the one who is bewitched. Whoever denies that is a kaafir who rejects what Allaah and His Messenger say, and denies something that is well known. Moreover, if he denies witchcraft in secret, he is a heretic and if he denies it openly he is an apostate (Sharh Al-Qurtubi 'Ala Saheeh Muslim, 6/6, cited in Khaleel ibn Ibraaheem Ameen, 2005:183).

A majority of Muslims, including marijuana users in Maamobi believe that witchcraft is a reality. In Islam, witches are ontologically noted for causing havocs and harm on society.

The belief in witchcraft is deeply ingrained in the psyche of marijuana users in Maamobi that it provides the framework to make meaning of their lives. Marijuana users project witchcraft as a nocturnal malevolent spirit that is capable of jeopardizing one's life. Marijuana users resort to all forms of spiritual means to protect themselves from witchcraft activities. Some wear specially prepared charms, rings, and amulets prepared by Mallams, Muslim ritual experts, for protection against malevolent spirits, particularly witchcraft. Some have their bodies injected with anti-witchcraft substances. Most respondents claim to protect themselves from witches through the use of marijuana. They argue that since witches are believed to attack the soul of a person, and marijuana establishes contact with the soul, the substance is able to protect the user from the malevolent activities of the witch.²⁹ The smoke of marijuana is believed to carry the spiritual potency to neutralize the powers of witchcraft. The belief in witchcraft provides an outlet for marijuana users to explain the existential challenges of life. In view of the strong belief in the malevolent activities of witchcraft, a ritual accompanies the consumption of marijuana in Maamobi. Some respondents recite the Fathia, the first

²⁸ Qur'an 2:102; 10:81-82; 113:1-5.

²⁹ Prempeh Field Note, 2010.

chapter of the Qur'an, to invoke the spiritual potency of marijuana. MacDanji³⁰ articulated this as follows:

I always recite the Fathia before I smoke taba. I do this because taba has its own power and to activate that power, one must first plead with Allah, the creator of all things, including taba, to enjoy the spiritual benefits of taba. It is the activation of the inherent spirit in marijuana that drives away the spirit of witchcraft. Witches do not like the smoke of taba, because the smoke of taba is charged with the spirit of Allah. As researchers, you might have heard that every plant has a spirit inhabiting it. That explains why herbalists perform special rituals before they make use of any herb. Over here, we also believe that taba, as a herb, has its own powers, and its powers are best invoked to counter evil spirits.

MacDanji's observation is similar to the use of herbs by indigenous healers in Ghana who perform rituals before they go into the forest to cut any root, leaves, or bark of a tree for medicinal purposes. Rituals are also performed to invoke the therapeutic powers inherent in the herb. It is commonly held belief among most indigenous healers that every herbal plant possesses some spirits, and the permission of these spirits must be sought before such herbs are used for any purposes. This seeming pantheistic belief is very dominant in the sites. Marijuana users believe that benevolent spirits inhabit marijuana, and that gives the substance the ability to ward off witchcraft. Other spirits believed to inhabit marijuana are the jinns, a belief widely held among Muslims in Ghana. Muslim clerics make reference to the Qur'an to justify the existence of these spirits. (Qur'an 51:56; Qur'an 46:29-30; and Qur'an 34:13). Basically, two types of jinns are recognised in Islam: believer jinns (*al-muslimun*) and infidel jinns (*al-qasitun*). Marijuana users follow this categorization of jinns, but hold onto another belief about jinns, which is not universally shared by Muslims. Marijuana smokers believe that there are good jinns inhabiting marijuana, and these jinns are capable of warding off evil spirit, particularly witchcraft. However, the question of whether or not jinns reside in marijuana is contestable even among marijuana users. But the general understanding among marijuana users is that there is some kind of symbiotic relationship between marijuana and the jinns, a relationship that can be exploited to drive away evil forces, particularly witchcraft.

Some Muslim ritual experts in Maamobi share the belief that the smoke of marijuana could invoke the jinns. In an interview with a Mallam, who also uses marijuana, he avers that:

There are spirits in virtually everything. These spirits are called the jinns. The jinns can be ordered to work to the advantage of human beings. There are those who use the jinns for negative things, while there are those who use these jinns for constructive purposes. Those of us who use marijuana are able to implore the jinns to protect us from witches. And this we believe works for us. Because, we are very certain that these jinns are more powerful than witches.

Hamarneh (1972) has argued that some Muslim Sufis used marijuana to enable them withstand the rigorous demands of ascetic living. Marijuana, a sedative substance, is able to calm the nerves and as a result make it possible for the consumer to 'stay cool' and

³⁰ For security reasons, we do not use the real names of our respondents. So, while the statement attributed to the names are right, the names are fictive creation. All the names are pseudonyms.

attain a high level of concentration. Some marijuana users in Maamobi indicate that marijuana keeps them in deep thinking as they meditate on the word of Allah; makes one calm and also keeps one in intense relaxing mood. They refute the assumption that marijuana makes one aggressive and violent, arguing that anyone who behaves aggressively after consuming marijuana is a multiple drug user. In his rather apologetic position, Masud contends that:

Taba alone cannot let anyone go wild. Taba alone cannot cause one to be violent. Anyone who smokes taba and misbehaves should be checked properly. Such a person uses other substances. Such a person is likely to quaff alcohol in addition to taba. Or in some instances, such a person uses heroine and cocaine in addition to taba. I have been smoking taba for so many years and I have lots of experience to share with you concerning this precious herb. But let me just tell you that marijuana rather helps one to concentrate on Allah and meditate upon His word. Whenever I smoke taba in the company of my friends, I am able to think deeply about Allah and also think about my life.

Conclusion

Researchers have mostly depended on etic view to form opinion on the utility of marijuana, thus partly confusing the discourse on the substance. This is against the backdrop that marijuana represents food, medicine, and industrial substance in many societies. Marijuana is still widely consumed by people from all walks of life in spite of the popular criminalization of the substance. Further research has resulted in the increasing acceptance in some countries. Hamilton (2013) has written that some states in the United States, namely Colorado and Washington, have passed laws legalizing the recreational use of marijuana while in Britain cannabis has been reclassified from class A drug to class C drug. In Ghana, the substance continues to be illegal, even though Ghana is reported to be the leading consumer of marijuana in Africa and rank third in the world. This paper has attempted to explore the meaning, utility and sacralisation of marijuana in Maamobi community, Accra. Findings show that users consume marijuana for its recreational and therapeutic values, but, more importantly, for its ability to ward off evil spirits, including witchcraft. The substance is also believed by Maamobi Muslims to help them focus on the worship of Allah. A good understanding of the beliefs of marijuana users could guide policy makers in devising an effective way of dealing with the social challenge.

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