

Producing Cannabis in Africa South of the Sahara:

A review of OGD findings in the 1990s



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INTRODUCTION

Before sharing what I know – or what I think I know – on cannabis in sub-Saharan Africa, let me tell you briefly about what I do *not* know. In its [World Drug Report 2005](#), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime ([UNODC](#)) stated: “*There is very little reliable information on the extent of cannabis cultivation [worldwide]. Although cannabis is the illicit drug most widely used, there is much less precise data on the quantities produced than for other drug-producing*

^[1] *plants*”. This is but one of the many paradoxes facing the international drug control system. We may add that the African situation is probably the one with the largest and deepest information gap, at least regarding cannabis production and trade. The evidence is patchy at best, since there are very few studies on the subject of agricultural production of drug-plants in Africa, with the possible exception of *miraa*, or qat. As a result, we know nothing on the surface area dedicated to cannabis cultivation in Africa, on the quantities of consumable substance(s) produced, even less on how they have changed over time; we don’t know much about growing methods, yields per hectare, and we know very little about the African populations that make a living by growing this illicit crop. Finally, the history of cannabis production and trade in Africa remains, by and large, a pending endeavour. The only (or nearly) numbers available are those of seizures carried out by law enforcement. But these “statistics” – whose conditions of production are opaque and would deserve a study in their own right – are, at best, *indicators of the activity of law enforcement* units; and of little else. In the best of cases, these police-made numbers inform us only very indirectly on the reality of cannabis production in Africa and its evolution. The most precise and recent information currently available to me on the *production* of cannabis south of the Sahara date back to the mid-1990s and it was produced by the Observatoire géopolitique des drogues (OGD – Geopolitical Drug Watch) mostly thanks to funding by the [European Commission](#). The OGD studies were implemented in [West Africa](#) (1993 and 1995), Central Africa (1996) and [Southern Africa](#) (1997). What was then the UNDCP (now [UNODC](#)) relied largely on these studies to draft the few pages dedicated to cannabis production of its 1999

^[2] publication [The Drug Nexus in Africa](#). This presentation is based largely on the mostly qualitative data resulting from these studies, which serve as a basis for the formulation of some hypotheses.

SOME HISTORY

Cannabis has long been produced and used in Africa, at least in Eastern and Southern Africa. According to historical research, it is highly likely that the San and Khoikhoi people, who are the earliest inhabitants of Southern tip of the continent used “*dagga*” (as cannabis is now known in South Africa) before 1500, i.e. before Europeans came in contact with them ^[3]. Cannabis was probably introduced first in East Africa by Arab merchants, who established trading posts on the continent “no later than the 12th century”. The plant and its uses then spread to Southern Africa as Bantus migrated south ^[4]. Some present-day uses of the plant have probably been handed down by history, in Lesotho for instance, these include using marijuana to treat ailments like heart burn, high blood pressure, and “nerves”. It is also used to rid horses and donkeys of parasitic worms. Since the end of the nineteenth century, with the employment of black people in the mines and on large farms, utilitarian use of cannabis herb has been common among workers. Marijuana is reputed to give workers more strength, and more courage. Reportedly, many white employers encouraged use of “*dagga*” in the old days. Whether or not this is true, it is clear that cannabis has been culturally integrated by many of the ethnic groups inhabiting Southern Africa for years, as is illustrated by the existence of at least one specific word for “cannabis” in most Southern African languages. Although I have not been able to find a satisfying historical background of cannabis cultivation and use in West Africa, the sub-region seems to share common features with the rest of the continent, at least as far as utilitarian use is concerned.

CANNABIS USE IN PRESENT-DAY AFRICA

It is important to understand the structure of African cannabis consumer markets, since it seems that most of the African cannabis output is sold in Africa itself, exports outside the continent are, in my view, marginal compared to what is consumed locally. According to a study I carried out in urban Ghana in 1995 (and which was broadly confirmed by other studies elsewhere), cannabis users may be broken down in two broadly defined categories:

- Those who use the drug for work, in order to work harder, longer (this is a feature that cannabis in Africa shares with coca in the Andes), or obtain courage; these users are overwhelmingly found among the poorer segments of African societies. This category is in all likelihood the most numerous ^[5].
- Those who use the drug for pleasure or recreation; they are found primarily among the expatriate and the better-off, “westernized” segments of societies. In other words, there seems to be a strong correlation between the socio-economic background of African marijuana users and their motivation for using the plant for psychotropic purposes.

CANNABIS PRODUCTION IN PRESENT-DAY AFRICA

The testimonies of the people interviewed during the studies carried out in the 1990s by OGD all converged that cannabis cultivation was increasing in Africa. I would now like to briefly outline the factors that I believe caused this increase.

Basic agronomical data

Cannabis has an extraordinary ability to adapt to many soils and climate, it will grow in ecologically diverse settings, and it requires comparatively little care and few inputs (especially water), although yields will improve if water and fertilizers are applied. As a result, it is grown throughout the continent, from the Sahel to the equator, at different latitudes and altitudes. The techniques used for and location of cannabis fields therefore are heavily dependent on local situations. The plant's cycle lasts between 4 to 8 months, which may mean 1, 2, 3 and sometimes even 4 harvests per year, and it may be planted alone or in combination with other plants (maize for instance), which makes it easy to integrate into a variety of cultivation systems, from the cocoa plantations of the forest zone of Côte d'Ivoire to the Afram plains of Ghana or the Niayes of Senegal where vegetables are grown, or the high plateaux of Cameroon where potatoes and maize are cultivated to the sugar-cane plains of Swaziland, and the cattle and maize farms of the Drakensberg mountains of Kwazulu-Natal, etc. Of course, due to prohibition, the crop cannabis offers many comparative advantages from an agro-economic point of view. For instance, it may be grown on farms located far away from markets and still be profitable, which is not the case of

many other cash crops. According to OGD studies with African farmers ^[6], during the 1990s cannabis had become the main cash earner of the farms where it was grown, bringing at least 75% of the monetary income, regardless of the socio-economic and natural backgrounds of these farms. Therefore, once started, it is not an activity that may be easily given up. This is especially true, since in the majority of cases we found that cannabis was grown on small farms (in patches of less than one hectare) of farmer-owners or share-croppers.

Compensation crop

Starting in the 1980s, cannabis crops emerged as a compensation crop in two special contexts:

- In areas where most farms grew cash crops and international prices for their produce fell; and,
- In areas where the degradation of ecological conditions resulted in a reduction of arable lands.

Both phenomena may occur concomitantly, leading to a steep degradation of agriculture as an economic activity—a crisis of agriculture. In all the regions dedicated to cash-cropping where

studies were implemented, the same sequence of events seems to have taken place: the price of the crop on international markets fell sharply. Then, following advice from international financial institutions, the official marketing bodies of the said crops were scaled down, privatised or altogether scrapped (as Togo's OPAT in 1996) by African states. Under these new conditions, farms no longer benefited from guaranteed prices, marketing security, subsidised chemicals (fertilizers, pesticides, etc.) and credit, or any other support to agriculture previously extended by state bodies. As a result, the monetary revenue of farms dropped just when the price of inputs such as fertilizers or seeds was going up. In Senegal, for instance, the price of such inputs rose 50% where the rice sector was liberalised. Growing cannabis may be an alternative to a loss of revenue. Cannabis may grow on highly-depleted soil, and may therefore appear as a solution to the degradation of land. The long drought in the Sahel has resulted in a reduction of arable land. In Western Gambia, for instance, the drought has resulted in an increase of soil salinity (the same has occurred in the Casamance region of Senegal) and farmers have seen their arable land decrease sharply. A lady explained in 1995 that "before" she harvested enough rice to cover her family's needs for a year. Now due to a loss in soil fertility the harvest only made for three months' consumption. She started growing cannabis so as become able to buy rice in order to feed her family. Cannabis may also emerge as a compensation crop when access to land becomes too expensive, especially for young farmers. Because cannabis may bring a "good" income even when grown on a small patch, it can help younger generations launch their own farms even when they cannot obtain the large land-holdings normally needed for profitable agriculture in their area. In forest areas, as is illustrated by the case of western Côte d'Ivoire, the permanence and reproduction of cocoa and coffee plantations, and therefore of the regional economy as it has functioned for decades, is threatened by problems due to the impossibility of reproducing agricultural frontier economies due to the end of forest reserves (depleted by deforestation), the aging of plantations, and the increasing cost of land (because there is less and less virgin forest land available). These problems became more acute in the mid-1980s, and this is precisely when cannabis production developed in a big way in the region. All the more so since in addition to the problems above, the prices of traditional cash crops then dropped sharply: the farm-gate price of coffee was divided by 4 and that of cocoa by 2.7 between 1988 and 1992. To quote the researcher who implemented the field study in Côte d'Ivoire in 1995: "nearly all the marijuana producers interviewed in western Côte d'Ivoire started producing cannabis after the fall in coffee and cocoa prices in 1988/1989; two-thirds attribute their decision to grow cannabis to the economic and land crises."

[7]

But while the search for alternative revenue was the main engine behind the growth of cannabis cropping, the latter cannot be analysed fully without paying attention to the growth in local and national demand for marijuana: at the height of the crisis, illicit drug use, mainly amphetamine (known locally as "Sékou Touré") but also marijuana, was adopted by some as a way to compensate for the departure of waged workers (whom plantation owners could no longer afford to pay) by increasing the duration of an individual's work. Such resorting to drugs is frequent

among younger farmers who strive to establish a new plantation on poor-quality land and who must work double hard to maintain their plantation. Cannabis cultivation thereby meets the needs of a population that seeks to become part of a society where available land is rare, expensive and of little potential. Cannabis affects primarily those with small or very small holdings, but also farmers who cannot buy their own land: 50% of the marijuana producers interviewed grew the plant as contractual workers on the plantation of a family member or acquaintance. They did not know who the sponsor was nor how much profit was made, but benefited of good protection from law enforcement. Their payment was often postponed for various growing seasons, until their employer gave them a patch of forest land, a plantation, a small shop or a taxi. In the new socio-economic conditions marked by the agricultural crisis and structural adjustment programmes, farmers were forced to implement new strategies in order to compensate for their loss of revenue by increasing the added-value per unit of cultivated land. Such an objective may be achieved either by technical innovation (new seeds, new tools, new methods, etc.), or by an increase of the amount of work or capital applied to the land. Although it has costs, as all illicit crops have, the introduction of cannabis in agricultural production systems appears as both a technical innovation and an instrument of rapid capitalisation while permitting to rise up to the new challenges. Because it requires less care than most other crops, cannabis is less demanding in terms of work. In the conditions prevailing in many family farms growing cash crops, such an “asset” may be brought to bear to the full, since the loss of cash revenue due to the fall of prices of licit crops has impeded access to waged workforce and farmers have fallen back on the family workforce. In such a context, the more the arable surfaces diminish, the more cannabis may play its role as compensator because of the revenue it allows per land unit. Finally, cannabis allows farmers access to a certain type of savings. Indeed, if it is dried well, marijuana may keep up to a year, and even longer in some areas. It is therefore possible for some producers not to sell their whole crop at once but to keep some in reserve. Such “cannabis savings” may subsequently be sold when needs arise (wedding, funeral, school fees, health problems, etc.) or when prices are higher (after harvesting season, prices tend to rise). To summarize, cannabis cultivation appears as a compensation, sometimes a full-fledged alternative crop and always as a “crisis cushion”. But this comes at a price, which is high for those who launch into it and which is due to its illicitness—permanent insecurity, the constant threat of law enforcement or of thieves without hope for justice.

ARMED VIOLENCE AND CANNABIS PRODUCTION

As is the case on other continents for other drug-plants, cannabis production and trade may serve to fund armed movements in sub-Saharan Africa. But, except perhaps in Casamance and Liberia, it is probably of little significance compared to the other commodities that fund or trigger conflicts in Africa: oil, gold, diamonds, and other minerals.

Some governments suppress cannabis plantations in some regions while ignoring them in others. They usually call forth the need to fight the “drug scourge” and their duty to the international

community (or even mankind), which legitimises and often pays for this so-called “drug law enforcement”. For example, in 1996, the Khartoum government launched major militarised “drug enforcement” operations in the Darfur and Bedja regions, which also were sensitive areas in terms of armed rebellion. Khartoum was then claiming to implement a policy recommended by UNDCP [8]. For the most part, such operations are carried out with great brutality and generally result, at best, in the destruction of some cannabis crops. Poor peasants are their main victims. Less anecdotally, the following should be stressed regarding the links between armed conflicts and cannabis production in Sub-Saharan Africa: to the extent that marijuana is very widely consumed by African fighters, the mushrooming of conflicts on the continent is without doubt a stimulant for production—and not the opposite.

CONCLUSION

Speaking generally, cannabis production would be primarily a response to economic imperatives; the strategic dimension, which is essential in the drug production dynamics of countries like Afghanistan or Colombia, does not appear to be as significant in Africa. Not so significant, but not altogether irrelevant, since it has been mentioned that there are some connections between the armed conflicts that rage in Africa and this illicit crop. Yet, understanding the cannabis economy in Africa means above all studying problems of economic and political development. Cannabis highlights the failure of development aid and the side effects, which are never measured and rarely acknowledged of the policies that have been imposed on African countries. It also stresses the ability of African farmers to adapt to the demands of the global economy.

NOTES

[1] Translated from the French.

[2] *The Drug Nexus in Africa*, United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention *Studies on Drugs and Crime*, March 1999, Vienna.

[3] Du Toit, B.: *Cannabis in Africa*, published for the African Studies Center, [University of Florida](#), Gainesville, by A.A. Balkema, Rotterdam, 1980, states that cannabis “was almost certainly used in the southern part of [Africa] in Pre-Portuguese times, i.e. before A.D. 1500” (p.8); while Gill, S.J.: *A Short History of Lesotho*, Morija Museum & Archives, Morija, Lesotho, 1993, p. 7, maintains that marijuana was known to the San prior to 1550.

[4] Du Toit, B.: “Dagga: The History and Ethnographic Setting of *Cannabis Sativa* in Southern Africa”, in Rubin, V. (ed.): *Cannabis and Culture*, Mouton Publishers, The Hague, 1975, p. 84.

[5]

Marijuana is reputed to have several utilitarian virtues throughout Africa south of the Sahara. For instance, users frequently report that it enables them to work harder at physically demanding jobs, such as ploughing, mining (for gold, diamonds, etc.), etc.; or at jobs that require staying awake for a long time, like driving, standing guard at roadblocks or houses, etc.; or to “get courage” in order to perform tasks perceived as difficult or dangerous such as fighting with firearms (viz. The numerous armed conflicts in Africa), begging, robbing houses, selling sex, etc. See Laniel, L.: “[Violencia y marihuana: Usos del ‘tabaco del diablo’ en el Ghana contemporáneo](#)”, in Inchaurreaga, S. (comp.): *Drogas y Drogadependencias, Teoría, Clínica e Instituciones*, CEADS-SIDA, [Universidad Nacional de Rosario](#), Rosario, Argentina, 1997.

[6]

Agro-economic studies of cannabis producers were implemented in the Gambia, Senegal, Guinea-Conakry, Togo, Côte d’Ivoire, Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Additional information was gathered in South Africa, Congo-Brazzaville, Lesotho, Malawi, Zambia, etc.

[7]

Éric Léonard, “Quels sont les facteurs agricoles de l’expansion du cannabis en Afrique ?” in OGD, [Les drogues en Afrique subsaharienne](#), [Karthala/UNESCO](#), 1998.

[8]

The World Geopolitics of Drugs 1995/1996, annual report, Paris, September 1997.



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