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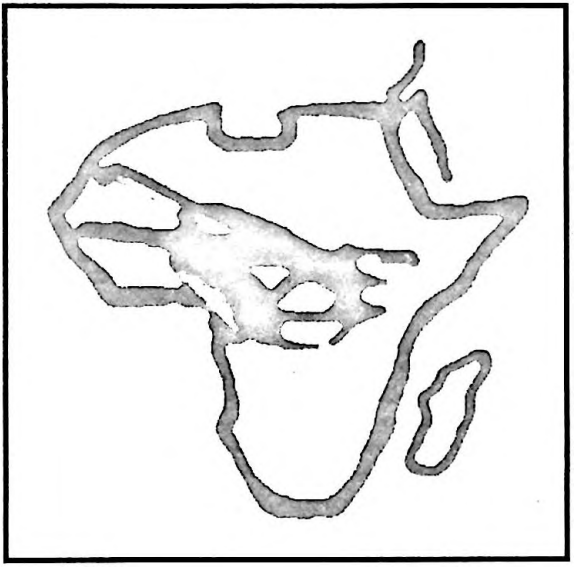

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"Before Allah Created Human Beings, There Was A Marijuana Tree": Marijuana Myths and Culture in the "Ghettoes" of Maamobi Zongo Community, Accra

Charles PREMPEH

Abstract

The objective of my paper is to deploy marijuana etiological myths in the "ghettoes" of Maamobi, Accra, to explain the persistence of the marijuana culture in Ghana. The fact that marijuana is a criminalized herb and yet remains a widely consumed herb by some of the youth leads to what I refer to as the 'marijuana paradox'. Consequently, rather than constructing myths as irrational, self-indulgent and relics of a pre-scientific past or antiquated, concocted fairytales, I use marijuana myths to explain how it informs the marijuana culture in Maamobi and also betrays the construction of the marijuana culture as a fad and a craze that could be controlled with laws. Using ethnographic research techniques such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussion, informal conversation, and participant observation, I argue that the over-reliance on external reasons, without digging into how marijuana myths inform the cultogenic and sociogenic of marijuana culture in the "ghettoes" of Maamobi, will continue to frustrate the efforts of stakeholders to stem the tide against the consumption of the herb in Ghana.

Keywords: Marijuana, Myth, Ghetto, Islam

Introduction

My paper analyzes the extent to which myths about marijuana inform marijuana culture in two of the oldest "ghettoes" – Barracks and Four Junction – in Maamobi Zongo community. Marijuana remains a highly contentious herb in Ghana and most parts of the world. Conversations about the herb have divided Ghanaians who think differently about it. Currently, Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) Law 236 criminalizes the cultivation, consumption or trade in it. But the criminalization of the herb notwithstanding, the Ghanaian public is often fed with news about marijuana cultivation, consumption, and export by some Ghanaians.[1] This contradiction in the legal status of the herb and its widespread consumption by some Ghanaians has polarized the front of Ghanaians over what should be done with the herb. While some prominent Ghanaians, including the late Kofi Annan, former General Secretary of the United Nations, have called for the herb to be legalized,[2] others like Dr. Akwasi Osei, the National Chief Psychiatrist of Ghana, has called on Ghana to keep the status of marijuana as a criminalized herb.

The debates over marijuana in Ghana have been framed around its abuse. Those in support of decriminalization have argued that the liberalization of Ghana's laws on marijuana would help the nation to curtail the abuses of the herb. This argument is informed by the assumption that while marijuana remains a criminalized herb, it is widely consumed by many people in the country. The consumption of marijuana is a transnational social phenomenon that transcends social barriers. This implies that it is one herb that is consumed by the young and old, rich and poor,

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[1] On Thursday March 14, 2019, the National Narcotic Control Board (NACOB) made what it says to be the biggest narcotic bust in the country's history with the interception of 5,851 compressed slabs of what is suspected to be cannabis at the Tema Habour "Tema Port NACOB busts £29.2m UK-bound cannabis" (March 14, 2019) https://www.classfmonline.com/1.12268668, Date accessed: March 16, 2019.

[2] Richmond Neequaye, "Ex-UN Chief Kofi Annan Calls for Cannabis Legalization" (October 3, 2017) https://denzelonline.com/ex-un-chief-kofi-annan-calls-for-cannabis-legalization/, Date accessed: March 16, 2019.

religious and irreligious. But because the consumption of the herb is done in the 'dark', it is difficult for the state to regulate it. This argument is predicated on the fact that since marijuana consumption remains a sub-culture in Ghana, the perception of the culture as a fad and a craze that could be controlled through criminalization has rather pushed the herb undercover. This development has frustrated every effort by the law enforcement agents to deal with it. Consequently, the argument for legalizing the herb has been advanced on the basis that it will help the nation to deal with the abuse. It will also make it easy for the state to regulate its production, consumption, and export. In support of this argument is the assertion that decriminalizing the herb will help the nation to benefit from other uses to which the herb could be put such as the production of hair cream.

On the other hand, those who argue for the continued criminalization of marijuana argue that decriminalizing the herb will frustrate the effort of the government to regulate the control of the herb. Others have also invoked the perceived health challenges associated with the herb as an argument for decriminalization.[3] Indeed, while scholars are divided over the perceived health risks associated with marijuana, the argument has been hyped that marijuana predisposes consumers to cancer and other forms of chronic bronchitis.[4] It is also assumed that there is a direct nexus between marijuana consumption and crime.[5]

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[3] Fred Leavitt, *Drugs & Behavior* (Third Edition) (California: Sage Publications, Inc., 1995), 143.

[4] Nancy J. Cobb, *Adolescence: Continuity, Change, and Diversity* (Second Edition) (California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1995), 565.

[5] Klaus A. Miczek, Joseph F. DeBold, Margaret Haney, Jennifer Tidey, Jeffrey Vivan, and Elise M. Weerts, "Alcohol, Drugs of Abuse, Aggression, and Violence. Understanding and Preventing Violence," in *Understanding and Preventing Violence* Vol. 3, eds. Albert J. Reiss, Jr., & Jeffrey A. Roth (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1994), 377–570; Helen R. White, and Gorman, D.M. *Dynamics of the Drug-Crime Relationship in The Nature of Crime: Continuity and Change*, ed. Gary LaFree (Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, 2000), 151–218.

While the debate over marijuana continues to be problematic, many reasons have been adduced to explain why people consume marijuana and other illicit drugs. Historically, it is argued that human beings have always had the inclination to search for and use substances that would sustain and protect them and also act on their nervous system to produce pleasurable sensations.[6] Aside from marijuana, kola, maté, khat or kat, etc., have all been used for this purpose. Others have also maintained that some people consume marijuana and other 'illicit' drugs because it is available, due to peer pressure, as a way of rebelling against parents, escaping from the realities of life, and dealing with emotional disturbances and social alienation or societal rejection.[7] Others also use drugs to partly prove their boldness and sense of adventure and partly because they do not really believe, at least initially, that anything disastrous can really happen to them. Some youth also use drugs due to peer pressure, and as a way of rebelling against parents, escaping from the realities of life, from emotional disturbances and social alienation or societal rejection.[8] This factor implies that it is possible that many marijuana users take the herb to escape some unfavorable or unpleasant circumstances.[9] In sum, many researchers have suggested that marijuana consumption occurs, at least in part, as a result of the influence of peers, whether in the guise of conformity to peer pressure or not, learning to smoke properly, perceiving the effects and defining them as pleasurable, or simply due to social modeling and imitation.

Lack of commitment to major societal values and institutions has also been identified as one of the factors that

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[6] John W. Santrock, *Adolescent* (10th Ed) (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 2005), 509.

[7] Paul H. Mussen, John J. Conger, Jerome Kagan, & Huston, C. A. *Child Development and Personality* (Sixth Edition) (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1984), 538–539.

[8] Ibid, p. 538–539.

[9] Gary J. Miller, *Drugs and the Law: Detection, Recognition & Investigation* (2nd Edition). (Florida: Gould Publications, Inc., 1997), 426.

could predispose one to associate with peer groups likely to be using drugs.[1] There is yet another group of people who abuse drugs because they think drugs will help them learn well. This is usually associated with students who consume marijuana and other drugs to enhance learning. There are also those who use drugs because they think they will get the needed energy they require to work. For instance, there are some farmers, fishermen, musicians and artists who use marijuana and other drugs to help them to be more energetic and improve their performance. Some long-distance drivers who drive through the night also use marijuana, on the assumption that it will keep them high and, thus, free from sleeping on the job.[2]

These reasons for smoking marijuana espoused above are context-based since what takes place in a community or on a school campus may not necessarily be the same as what happens in the "ghettoes." Again, these reasons, at best, explain why and how the youth may be initiated into the smoking of marijuana, but they do not provide us with the reasons why most of these youth continue to use drugs after their initial introduction to the drug culture. What we need to find out is why people continue to smoke marijuana after their initial introduction, since the herb is said to be less addictive.[3]

It must also be mentioned that the over-dependence on extrinsic factors to account for why some people use drugs has been criticized by Goode as a fundamental error that blurs society's appreciation of the complexity of the drug culture.[4] It has been argued that by concentrating on externalities to explain the rapidity in drug use, society mistakenly assumes that

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[1] See, Bruce D. Johnson, *Marijuana Users and Drug Subcultures* (New York: Wiley, 1973).

[2] Joseph B. Asare, *The Problems of Drug Abuse in Ghana* (Accra: Sedco Publishing Ltd., 2008), 23.

[3] Fred Leavitt, *Drugs & Behavior* (Third Edition). (California: Sage Publications, Inc, 1995), 137.

[4] See, Erich Goode, *The Marijuana Smokers* (New York: Basic Books, 1970).

the culture of smoking marijuana is a fad and a craze; and that marijuana smokers are irrational human beings who have been entrapped in smoking by some wise tricksters who want to dupe them.[1] In effect, the consumption of marijuana should be treated as a sub-culture that would require systematic objective study to understand.

Consequently, my paper maintains that marijuana myths provide a rationalization for what I term as the 'marijuana paradox' – marijuana is the criminalized and, yet, most consumed herb in Ghana. I argue that it is the myths about marijuana that have routinized the marijuana culture in the "ghettoes" of Maamobi. Moving away from the popular assumption that myths are a relic of a pre-scientific and pre-logical society that needs to be confined to the backwaters of history, they help us to appreciate the complexities and persistence of the marijuana culture in Maamobi. I engage the persistence of marijuana consumption from the point of view of myth because human beings who are meaning-seeking creatures invent myths to explain what is ordinarily explicable.[2] In sum, there is no natural phenomenon and no phenomenon in human life that is not capable of mythical interpretation and which does not call for such an interpretation.[3] As I argue in the paper, it is the marijuana myth that has ensured the tenacity of the consumption of the herb, expressed in the social structuring of "ghettoes" in Maamobi, Accra. The remaining segment of my paper is divided into five sections: methodology, a brief background of the "ghettoes" in Maamobi, marijuana myths, marijuana culture and conclusion.

Methodology

The data for the paper was collected between 2009–2011 when I conducted fieldwork for my Master of Philosophy dissertation,

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd, 2008), 1.

[3] Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1944), 98.

which was about the consumption of marijuana among Muslim youth in the Maamobi community. It was an ethnographic study that utilized techniques like in-depth interviews, informal conversations and focus group discussion to engage marijuana consumption in a conversation about the marijuana culture. The informal conversation involved the researcher visiting the "ghettoes" continually for about a year to engage in casual conversation about marijuana consumption. On such visits, I did not carry any recording device or field-note to record any of the conversations. But much information was elicited in those informal conversations. This was primarily because marijuana consumers felt at ease discussing a wide range of issues that I carefully directed, finally, towards marijuana consumption. Such conversations also helped me to understand the complex web embedded in the marijuana culture. Immediately, I left the "ghettoes," I wrote down as much of the information as I could remember. But before I used any of those informal conversations, I 'anonymized' the respondents. And since the research was highly sensitive as any lack of due diligence on my part could land any of my respondents in trouble with the law, I did not use any information that could even remotely be leveraged by the police or any of the security agencies to indict any of my respondents. In the case of formal interviews, I carefully wrote down the responses of marijuana consumers. While they objected to the recording of their voices for security reasons, they were patient enough for me to painstakingly write down their words verbatim. But whether in formal or informal conversations, marijuana consumers were informed about the intent of my research.

Two main factors facilitated the rapport I established with them. The first was the fact that most of the consumers were my childhood friends. Having lived in Maamobi since 1984, many of the youth who consume marijuana were persons I knew from childhood. The second was that, while I did not conceal my religious identity as a non-Muslim, my fluency in Hausa – the lingua franca of the community – (also used by most of the

marijuana consumers) consolidated my linguistic affinity with them. In the same vein, I swore on the English version of the Qur'an to assure them of confidentiality. In the end, the fears and suspicions of marijuana consumers were significantly allayed.

As part of my use of the ethnographic technique, I participated in social events of marijuana smokers in the community. I played soccer with them, participated in the naming ceremonies of some of their relatives, and also joined in their occasional social gatherings. There were times I attended open-air preaching (*waazi*) and Friday *Jama'h* sermon (*ututba*) with some of them. In all of these, I observed how the marijuana culture shapes the behaviors of marijuana consumption.

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 a few cases, Pidgin English and the Twi language were also used. Also, since language is the vehicle through which culture – ideology and philosophy – travels, and for that matter necessary for ethnographic study, the researcher familiarized himself with common jargons used by marijuana smokers. This helped the researcher to have unimpeded conversation with marijuana smokers. The researcher's long period of residence in the community also enabled him to establish a cordial relationship with marijuana smokers and facilitated easy entrance to the "ghettoes." Data was properly processed for easy analysis. The processed data was interpreted descriptively in order to see how they fulfill the objectives of the study. The data collected was grouped thematically to reflect the objectives of the study.

The Background of the Consumption of Marijuana in Maamobi Community

In Ghana, apart from the name ganja, marijuana has lots of names. Some of these names include "tampe," "sundu," "obonsam tawa,", "apopo," "taba," and "wee" and "wee bitters". While there is obscurity about the history of marijuana in Ghana, the consumption of the herb has been an established

culture in Maamobi community since the 1950s. During this period, *America House*, a constituency in the community, gained popularity as a vibrant "ghetto" for the sale and consumption of marijuana to the extent that apart from *America House*, it was only in Avenor that one could get marijuana to buy in Maamobi, Nima, Pig Farm and Accra New Town (formerly Lagos Town). The early pushers then included Mahama Issaka, Awolah, Medicine, and Mamare. These people traveled within and outside Ghana to purchase marijuana.[4]

Some residents in the community link the introduction of the smoking of marijuana in the community to ex-servicemen who were, incidentally, part of the earliest settlers of the community, shortly after World War II.[5] But this connection is refuted by the Chief Imam of the Maamobi Islamic community, Yussif Iddris Konate, who claims that it was rather the stevedores from the Congo whose dealings with some of the youth in Maamobi community and who worked as laborers at the Light House Port resulted in the introduction of marijuana into the community. He said that because the source of marijuana, as known to the people was from Congo, they called it "Congo tobacco." In the case of the ex-servicemen, he contends that instead of marijuana, they were rather well known for smoking tobacco, which was regularly supplied to them on a monthly basis in large quantities by the colonial government.[6]

The controversy over the source of the introduction of the smoking of marijuana into Maamobi community notwithstanding, some residents, rightly or wrongly, linked the smoking of marijuana by some youth to armed robbery, criminal

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[4] Yusuf Iddris Konate, the second Chief Imam of Maamobi who has served for five decades. Personal communication, July 6, 2010.

[5] Emmanuel Akyeampong, "Diaspora and Drug Trafficking in West Africa: A Case Study of Ghana," *African Affairs* 104/416 (2005), 429–447.

[6] The position of the Chief Imam is supported by other elders of the community, including Baba Moro Issa, Chief of the Wangara Community, and Alhaji Haruna Bukari Dabre, Assemblyman for Maamobi East Electoral Area.

activities and other social vices that were ripe in the community. The situation was so serious, they argue, that it was not possible for residents to stay outside deep into the night without risking being robbed or harmed in the 1950s.[7] It was a common practice at the end of the month, they claim, for armed robbers and some disgruntled ex-servicemen in the community to waylay and steal from workers of the Survey Department who were residents of the community. They did so with guns and knives and other deadly weapons, accompanied by the expression, "Kawokudi", (a Hausa expression which means, "Bring money") if one wanted to escape from being harmed. It was this scenario that gave a suburb of the community the name "Kawokudi". It is alleged that the robbers were also responsible for popularizing the consumption and sale of marijuana among the youth in the community. With this backdrop, the community became a major target for ridding off criminal activities in the country during the 1979 political uprising.

Indisputably, 1979 was a major event that contributed to the collapse of *America House*. But around that same time or even earlier, while America House lost its popularity, *Barracks* and, later, *Four Junction* emerged as major alternative "ghettoes" for the marijuana business. These two "ghettoes" to date remain important centers for the sale and consumption of marijuana. They are politically and socially well-structured in terms of the hierarchy of leadership and laid down rules that they play a major role in the politics of the community.

Marijuana "Ghettoes" in Maamobi

Maamobi[8] – East and West – is a suburb within the Ayawaso sub-

[7] Personal communication with late Mr. Anthony Prempeh on 12/08/08.

[8] Maamobi, named after one of the early ex-settlers of the community, Modibo Alhamdu, originally known as Alhamdu, is a migrant community that grew out of the early settlement of Fulani and Hausa traders who were the first settlers there in the 1940s. Later after World War II, the community was opened to ex-servicemen from British West Africa, who were largely from either Northern Ghana or Hausa Soldiers from Northern Nigeria. It was, however, after the mid-960s that the community became fully established. As a migrant community, therefore,

metro of the Accra Metropolitan Assembly. It covers an area that lies south-east of the Odaw water body, which separates Avenor – South-West and North-West Industrial Areas from Tesano Police Depot and Achimota on the West. Maamobi also shares boundaries with Accra New Town, formerly called Lagos Town, Kpehe, Alajo, Kokomlemle, Flagstaff House, Broadcasting House, Kanda-Ruga and 37 Military Hospital in the East. The community further shares boundaries with Roman Ridge in the North and with Kotobabi in the South-West of La.

Maamobi reflects much of Hausa and Islamic cultural influences. Even so, when the community became established, the Ga people of Osu-Asante descent, the traditional custodians of the land, contested the land being named after an 'alien' Muslim. Following this protest, a delegation was sent by Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, then in charge of Government Business, in 1954, to mediate the issue. In the course of dealing with the issue, a Muslim man, who could not speak Ga fluently, wanted to explain to the Ga people that the name 'Alhamdu' was not in actual fact the name of a person, but a contraction of an Arabic expression, Alhamdu lil-laahi (lit. All praises to Allah Ref. Qur'an 1:2). Thus, in attempting to give a Ga rendition of this expression, he inaccurately said: "The name 'Alhmadu' which is a contraction of Alhmadu lil – laahi, means, "Mmo Nyomo". As the Ga people realised that the name was theophoric, they became convinced about the explanation, and decided to call the community "Ma mmo Nyomo bii," to wit, Town of people of thankfulness. Over time, the expression Ma mmo Nyomo bii was contracted to Maamobi. It must, however, be stated that this change of name notwithstanding, official documents still refer to the community as Alhamdu. Another version of the origin of the name Maamobi is that the name is a contraction of the Ga expression "Ma momo mli bii," to wit, Town of Old People. This version conveys the impression that after the Muslim settlers in Ruga moved, they first settled in Maamobi before they moved to Nima. Thus, historically, Maamobi is older than Nima. The popularity of Nima today over Maamobi is, thus, explained by the fact that in the 1960s, Maamobi, especially, from Kawokudi to the eastern side of where present day Accra Girls' Senior High School is located, was reserved as a cemetery, and so, most of the early settlers, upon realising that the community was too close to the cemetery moved to Nima. Only a few people remained in the community. Following this development, Nima grew and developed faster than Maamobi. Be as it may, when the community became established, Nii Saka Adokwei was appointed as the first Ga Chief in the community, who represented the interest of the custodians of the land, Osu Asante Ga people. Apart from this historical background, the transfer of the Survey Department, following the transfer of the Capital of the Gold Coast from Cape Coast to Accra in 1877, as well as the resettlement of the ex-service men, greatly contributed in the growth and development of the community. This is because the community was used as a residential area to accommodate labourers of the Survey Department.

The term "ghetto" is used by American writers to refer to a section of a large city that is a rundown, dilapidated, rat-infested slum inhabited by a minority group that has been compelled to live there because of discrimination or institutional racism.[9] In European history, however, the term is used to refer to a walled city where Jews in the Diaspora were forced, according to the laws of the city, to live separately from the mainstream community.[10] "Ghettoes" were over-crowded, isolated that eventually turned into slums. Thus, from the point of view of the geographical description of "ghettoes" in America literature, the whole of the Maamobi community, apart from the issue of racism, could be likened to a "ghetto." This is because the Maamobi community shares some of the social description with American "ghettoes," such as poor sanitation, squalid living conditions, and erratic supply of piped water. The community also continues to experience rapid population growth that exacerbate the congestion and pressure on its limited infrastructure and services.

For the purposes of this study, the term "ghetto" is used contextually to refer to constituencies in the Maamobi community where marijuana is sold and consumed. This is because the term is consistent with the fact that both residents and marijuana consumers refer to the places for the sale and consumption of marijuana as "ghettoes." It must, however, be noted that from the perspective of history, the term "ghetto" cannot be directly used to designate "ghettoes" in Maamobi community without some difficulties. This is because "ghettoes" in Maamobi community simply refer to places where marijuana is sold and consumed. Also, even though "ghettoes" in the community constitute a subculture, they are not settlements, as it was historically known of "ghettoes." Thus, marijuana consumers do not sleep,

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[9] Peter Marcuse, 'Enclaves Yes, Ghettos No: Segregation and the State,' in David P. Varady (ed.) *Desegregating the City: Ghettos, Enclaves, and Inequality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 15–30.

[10] Dan Michman and Lenn J. Schramm, *The Emergence of the Jewish Ghettos During the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

cook, and/or do other domestic activities that take place in a mainstream settlement in the "ghettoes." Finally, "ghettoes" in the community do not have any national socio-economic and political identity.

All the same, there are some geographical features of historical "ghettoes" that reflect in the "ghettoes" in Maamobi community. First, the "ghettoes" in Maamobi are isolated from the mainstream community. Apart from *Barracks* that shares a boundary with a public toilet popularly called NDC Toilet, which is located in the community, Four Junction and all the other "ghettoes" are far removed from the community. Four Junction, for example, is located at a point that forms four-joined alleys of four compound houses, thus, making entrance completely inaccessible to non-smokers. The location of Four Junction is such that until one enters the place, one can hardly see marijuana smokers. Policemen who occasionally organize swoops get lost in the attempt to locate the place. The "ghettoes" are also isolated in the sense that membership is limited to marijuana smokers and pushers.

The Background of *Barracks*

The background of *Barracks* is closely linked to the social development of the Maamobi community in the early 1980s. The "ghetto" started as an informal "base" (a term for designated places where young men sit to while away time) in the early part of the 1970s but became very established shortly after the 1979 military uprising. The place began as a rubbish dump and, until the construction of Maamobi road by Kasadjan Construction Company in 1987, some of the male youth of the community visited the place only to smoke, but not to chat and live an organized life. But after the construction of the road, the early founders of the "ghetto," Alhassan, Yussif, Tanko, Zakari, and Lari, who were also leading pushers of marijuana at the time, asked for a public toilet to be built to replace the rubbish dump. Their request was granted and in the early part of the 1980s, a five-hole public toilet was built for them.[11]

[11] Personal communication with Seidu (name anonymised as requested by

The management of the public toilet was initially under the control of the Maamobi Town Council. But since the smokers were not only the initiators of the idea of building a public toilet for the community but had also contributed immensely to its construction through the provision of labor, the leadership of the "ghetto" wrote a letter to Baba Moro Isa and Mr. Ayabeng, then leaders of Maamobi Town Council, to be given a percentage of the money accrued from the running of the public toilet. Fortunately, their request was granted, and they co-ran the toilet, through the shift system, with Accra City Council until sometime in 1986.[12] The founders of Barracks operate the toilet and rendered monthly accounts to the Maamobi Town Council and were given a monthly salary of Six (6) Cedis each.[13] They did this until 1989 when Baba Ali, noted for bringing in 'white people' to organize adult literacy for residents in the community, had his candidature supported by the marijuana smokers to become the first Assemblyman for Maamobi community. From that time, the smokers re-organized themselves well to contribute to the politics of the community. Membership of the "ghetto" was open to all males, both residents and non-residents from all walks of life who smoked marijuana, thus giving the "ghetto" the name "Barracks."

Though the "ghetto" is strictly opened to only males, members could go there with their conjugal girlfriends or wives to consume the herb together, and females are allowed short visits to buy marijuana sticks and seeds for medicine and use in hair cream. Not allowing females into the "ghetto" was inspired by socio-religious factors and the supposed weakness of females to keep a secret, which is needed for the marijuana culture. Socio-religiously, Islam does not encourage the free mingling of females and males and, as the early founders of the "ghetto" were

interviewee), a senior member of the "ghetto" on October 10, 2010.

[12] Personal communication with Alhaji Haruna Bukari Dabre, the second person to be elected as Assemblyman for Maamobi community, on October 10, 2010.

[13] Personal interview with Yahya (name anonymised as requested by interviewee), a senior member of Barracks on October 10, 2010.

largely Muslims, they decided to apply this Islamic injunction to the "ghetto."

It is also believed that since the sale and smoking of marijuana is illegal, according to the constitution of Ghana, much of the activities of the "ghetto," especially, in relation to the sale and smoking of marijuana, are by rule supposed to be kept secret – a rule females are perceived not to be capable of observing because they are considered to be "talkatives." The consumption of marijuana is also believed to be a male activity and is considered unacceptable for females to engage in such activity. It is said to be an action-oriented behavior – working hard, escaping undue arrest, surviving the agony of prison experience and standing the stigma of the community. Females are said to lack these attributes. Leadership in the "ghetto" is gerontocratic and members are not allowed to sell any substance other than marijuana.

The Background of *Four Junction*

Four Junction[14] also known as the University of Four Junction, emerged as an extension of Hangingderg.[15] It was started by Lover in the early part of the 1980s. Lover discovered the place as an alternative to Hangingderg, a disorganized base for the smoking of marijuana. He was later joined by some male residents of the community, including Fighter, Santo, Zion, and Babylon to properly organize the place for the sale and smoking of marijuana.[16] Like Barracks, the place later became well organized with a well-structured political leadership and

[14] The name "Four Junction" is a reflection of the location of the "ghetto," located in the alleys of four compound houses; also, there are four ways of escape when there is a 'scatter' (or police raid).

[15] The 'Hangingderg' is a corruption of 'Hanging there', a name that was given by an African-American friend of Lover who patronized life in the Four Junction. The name depicted the nature of the "ghetto," as members did not have any bench, and so only stood to smoke and left the community afterwards.

[16] Personal communication with Saani (anonymised name as requested by the interviewee), an elder of Barracks on November 9, 2010.

a well-defined "ghetto" membership. *Four Junction* shares the same socio-political structure with Barracks, except that while membership in Barracks was partially restricted to adults, membership in Four Junction is made up of old and young people alike.

The Myths About the Origin and Prohibition of Marijuana: The Basis of the Sociogenic Structure of the "Ghettoes" of Maamobi

The criminalization of marijuana stems from socio-economic, medicinal, religious and political reasons. However, marijuana smokers have myths that seek to give yet other reasons for the prohibition of marijuana in the world. But more importantly, they explain why one will put one's freedom at risk to consume the herb. It is asserted that "the word myth, in popular usage, refers to something that is widely believed to be true, but probably is not."[17] Thus, myth, in actual fact, may not pass the test of historical scrutiny but its functional role of informing peoples' ideas, beliefs, and actions cannot be overemphasized. This is precisely because it has been argued that myths provide the charter for how and what people should believe, act, and feel.[18] Thus, mythology appears to some people not only as outdated but also as an antiquarian pastime when it is approached as a field of study.[19] Even so, myth does not lend itself to any universally accepted definition. But for the purposes of my paper, I adopt the definition of myths as simply stories about something significant.[20] More broadly, I conceptualize myth as stories of unknown origin that are told to rationalize a belief

[17] William A. Haviland, *Anthropology* (Tenth Edition) (California: Wadsworth/ Thomson Learning, 2003), 688.

[18] See, Bronislaw Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (New York: Norton, 1926).

[19] Joseph H. Kwabena Nketia, "Mythology in the World Today," in *Perspectives on Mythology*, ed. Esi Sutherland-Addy, (Accra: Goethe-Institut, 1999), 7.

[20] Robert A. Segal, Myth: *A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 5.

system, shape behaviors, and underscore the importance of an institution in society.

From the above, we may conceptualize myth in relation to its function as sacred stories of unknown origin that are told to justify religious beliefs, practices, and institutions. While we appreciate the above function of myths, the aspect of it that is apt for my paper is the idea that a myth provides the impetus for society to harmonize contradictory behaviors that are present in a culture.[21] This functionality of myth is appropriate for my paper because it explains how Muslim youth utilize myth to justify and rationalize the consumption of marijuana, a behavior that is perceived by the larger Maamobi community to be anathema to Islam and Christianity.

In the "ghettoes," marijuana consumers have myths that explain the origin of marijuana and explain why despite some beneficial values of the herb, it is almost prohibited universally. Consumers cannot actually tell the origin of these myths, except to say that "I was told by so and so." But the myths are treated as sacred and they constitute the category of make-believe stories in the lore of marijuana culture. These myths predate the origin of human beings, as they date back to the origin of creation to reflect the antiquity of marijuana. They are held to be true in both *Barracks* and *Four Junction*. Consumers felt a sense of awe and enthusiasm and listened attentively, as the leaders of the "ghettoes" narrated the following myths:

> Once upon a time, before Allah created human beings and put them in a beautiful garden, He planted a ganja tree that man was asked to use to cure his diseases and to aid in His communion with him. All the Prophets benefited from the plant until the time of Prophet Mohammed. During the

[21] See, Abraham Rosman & Paula G. Rubel, *The Tapestry of Culture: An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* (Third Edition) (New York: NewberryAward Records, Inc., 1989).

time of the Prophet, he expressed interest in using ganja, but *Sheitani* (Satan) got wind of it, and quickly went and urinated on it. The urine of *Sheitani* completely changed the flagrant smell of marijuana from pleasant to an abominable scent. Since then Allah ordered all human beings not to use ganja. For a very long time, no one used the ganja tree, until one man used it. When he used it, he immediately got intoxicated and slept for the rest of the day. When he regained consciousness, his friends asked him of the reason for his intoxication the previous day. He refused to tell them. This was because he was not prepared to share the benefits of the tree with his friends since he knew they would hate him and ignore his company. But he could not hide this for long. His friends prevailed over him and, eventually, he told them about the ganja tree. As his friends got to know about his story, some criticized him for breaking Allah's law to take what is prohibited. They disassociated themselves from him. Others also felt they could try it. They went ahead and used it, and had a similar experience as their friend. The common experience knitted them together and strengthened the intimate relationship between them. They were happy but did not know how Allah was going to react. But after waiting for years, as they continued to take it without Allah punishing them or suffering from any misfortune from smoking, they went ahead and spread the good news about ganja. They revived its medicinal and recreational use and passed on the knowledge to their children, who also

passed the knowledge on. Those who refused to take the ganja criticized those who used it and spread falsehood about it. When they realized that Allah had not punished those who used it, and instead they were growing healthy, they instigated hatred against those who smoke, by winning the support of the political and some religious leaders to their side. But the more they suppressed the truth about ganja, the more the tree gained its popularity. However, because of deviance, which resulted in the abuse of ganja, Allah intervened, and allowed two groups of smokers to exist side by side: those who rationally used it and benefited from it, as it assisted them to meditate and think deeply about Allah, in order to avoid sin, and those whose abuse of the tree were led by it to commit crimes and also developed mental problems. The abusers were responsible for giving ganja a very bad name. Later, Allah allowed the existence of some people too, who by the nature of their creation cannot use ganja at all.[22]

Another myth also has it that:

> Once upon a time, before the creation of man, God created the ganja tree that was meant for man to use for medicinal and recreational purposes. But man never had knowledge about it until one man, who lived with his two sons, had to find a cure for one of his sons who fell terribly ill. The man went on a search of the herb to cure his son. It was through this search that the man came into contact with the ganja tree. He plucked

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discussion at Barracks on 9/10/10.

it and sent it home. When he administered it to his son, his son got well. He told his neighbors about the plant and, with time, ganja became a universal plant, used to cure all manner of diseases. This continued until one day, *Sheitani*, the archenemy of man, out of envy and jealousy, went and urinated on the ganja tree. By this act, *Sheitani* polluted the potency of ganja. Since then, God asked that no one should use the ganja leaves. But some people did not listen to God's command. They went ahead and used it. Among those who used it, some were not lucky; they lost the protection of God and eventually got entrapped by *Sheitani*. *Sheitani* made some of them mad, criminals and miserable. Others too were fortunate. God had mercy on them, gave them a long time, and blessed them with good health. But since God had cursed the use of it, all the Prophets condemned it, and from that time, ganja has always been a bad herb in the eyes of the world.[23]

"Once upon a time ..." inaugurates a suspension of time, a break with space and a non-participation in the present. This is an incantory verbal formula that includes a dramatic, rapid regression into the dim past for the actualization of archetypical realities, the here and now having been assimilated into that "once upon a time" that transcends factors of human reckoning.[24] Also, the invocation of the incantory formula is meant to legitimize the validity and absolutism of the truth claims embedded in the myth, particularly, its invocation to support the social structure

[23] Ibid.

[24] Noah A. Imeyen, "The Mythological Tree: A History of Myths, Legends and Folktales," In *Perspectives on Mythology*, ed. Esi Sutherland-Addy (Accra: Goethe-Institut, 1999), 12.

of the "ghettoes." Myths are, therefore, not to be contested or subject to any kind of 'logical' truth test: they are make-believe.[25] The orality of marijuana culture in the "ghettoes" also implies that these myths have not remained the same ever since their narration began. Any attempt to assume that these myths have remained frozen in time is to deny marijuana consumers the intellectual creativity to embellish or reconstruct aspects of these myths to reflect the changing patterns of marijuana culture. This also helps to distill normative practices constructed out of the myths to shape behaviors in the "ghettoes." It also helps us to see the similarity in the two marijuana myths I collected. The two myths constitute part of the imaginative creativity of marijuana consumers to make sense of the tensions that have shaped discourses on marijuana. By assigning the origin of marijuana as part of God's creation, marijuana consumers dislocate the herb from the innate evil that some residents of the community associate with it. Thus, the invocation of God as the creator of marijuana gives the herb a legitimacy to be used by human beings.

Consequently, taking a cue from Malinowski's work on the functionality of myth, I argue that marijuana myth informs normative behavior practices in the "ghettoes" of Maamobi. Malinowski asserted that:

> Myth fulfills in [primitive] culture an indispensable function; it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imaginary, but a pragmatic charter of [primitive] faith and moral wisdom.[26]

[25] Karen Armstrong *A Short History of Myth* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd, 2008), 7.

[26] Bronislaw Malinowski Magic, *Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Garden

In the "ghettoes," the myth of marijuana informs the sociogenic and cultogenic-bent of the consumption of the herb. Since the myths ascribe divine origin/creativity to marijuana, it enjoins a sense of we-feeling among consumers. The sense of solidarity is invoked in the sharing of 'joints.' The slang for marijuana, 'wee', is reconstructed among marijuana consumers as 'we', which implies 'all of us'. The solidarity in the "ghettoes" is embodied in the persona in the myths sharing knowledge about the use of the herb with his neighbor.

Marijuana consumers hardly admit non-participants of "ghetto" life, including those who trade in other narcotic drugs such as cocaine and heroin, as friends. This has created a form of fictive family in the "ghetto" where members are provided with social networks and support. There is, therefore, a strong sense of solidarity among members. Yet another avenue that binds "ghetto" members together is the criminal nature of consuming marijuana. Since one stands the risk of incarceration, "ghetto" members consume the herb with intimates or intimates of intimates. They avoid consuming it with non-intimates. Thus, for them, "it is better to smoke with intimates in chains than strangers in paradise."

The sociogenic nature of consuming marijuana is also a latent way of "training" a neophyte in the dynamics of consuming marijuana, including the neophyte learning the expected behavior in the "ghetto" when the neophyte is 'on high'. The neophyte marijuana consumer, at first exposure to the drug, is subject to group definitions of the desirability of the experience as well as the nature of its reality. After a neophyte has learned the dynamics in consuming the herb, he joins the fraternity as a full member. "Ghetto" members see each other as brothers, and it is the duty of skilled members to pass on any known skills to other members. In view of this, the "ghetto" has people who have learned how to mold blocks, work in parks and gardens; others possess hunting skills as a result of taking part in

City: NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954), 101.

"ghetto" life. An attack on a "ghetto" member by a non-member is defined as an attack on all "ghetto" members. This sometimes leads to open confrontation in the community. This sense of solidarity in the "ghettoes" is important in providing members with job information or finding jobs and accommodation, as well as visiting members in prison. This social network and support help "ghetto" members to find an emotional adjustment to the challenges of life. This also entices other youth to join "ghetto" life in the community.

In a gender sense, the "ghetto" is a man's world and so membership is limited to only males. Females are not allowed in the "ghetto." They can only go there in the company of their conjugal boyfriends or husbands. A few of them also go there to buy marijuana sticks and seeds that they use for medication and in hair cream. It is a taboo for a female to go to the "ghetto" alone to buy marijuana and consume it there. Apart from females, "ghetto" life is opened to all categories of people. There is no professional, religious, ethnic, or political segregation in the "ghetto."

The "ghetto" has unwritten rules and regulations to govern the conduct of members. As part of the code of conduct in the "ghetto," members are not allowed to use any hard drugs in the "ghetto;" members are not allowed to make unnecessary noise or fight in the "ghetto;" members are forbidden to steal in and outside the "ghetto" or admit criminals or thieves into "ghetto" life. Though most "ghetto" members smoke cigarette, in addition to marijuana in the "ghetto," the sale of cigarette is not allowed in the "ghetto;" members are not proscribed from drinking alcohol, but members cannot live in the "ghetto" under the influence of alcohol. No marital unfaithfulness is permissible, and finally "elders" are not supposed to be disrespected.

There are also punitive measures to 'discipline' members who fall short of "ghetto" rules. The administration of punishment depends on the degree of the offense. The highest

form of punishment known as "Hukumchi"[27] is administered to members who are reported and confirmed to have stolen or committed a crime.

"Hukumchi" requires the guilty person to be tied to the ground and given an undetermined number of lashes by any member of the "ghetto" from which the offending member hails. If a person is caught at night, punishment is deferred until the following day, and the offending party is kept in the room of an elder. The climax of "Hukumchi" is excommunication. The guilty person is "dismembered" from "ghetto" life. During the fieldwork, the researcher discovered that excommunication is highly dreaded by members. A council of elders enforces the laws and regulations as well as dispenses punishment in the "ghettoes."

Since leadership is necessary for the sustenance of "ghetto" life, there is a form of gerontocratic leadership in the "ghettoes." Leadership is reposed in older members of the "ghetto." They are expected to live an exemplary life and promote group solidarity among members. It is also their duty to initiate and organize social activities such as football matches and cleanup exercises. They also assist members in the organization of marriage, funerals, and naming ceremonies.

Though these two marijuana myths which have been discussed have no basis in Islam, they are held to be true, and they help "ghetto" members to rationalize the consumption of marijuana. The myths also give them some eschatological hope that someday Ghana will decriminalize the consumption of marijuana in the country. This hope enjoins older members to pass the myths on to new members as part of the new members' initiation into "ghetto" life.

Conclusion

The fact that the consumption of marijuana among some of the youth in Maamobi in particular and Ghana in general continues

[27] Hukumchi is a Hausa term for punishment.

to escalate, in spite of the criminalization of the herb, makes it necessary for one to find out the reasons that continue to sustain the consumption of the herb. I have argued that marijuana myths in the "ghettoes" of Maamobi provide enough reason for marijuana consumers to defy the threat of imprisonment to consume the herb. The appropriation of marijuana myths to form a fictive family in the "ghettoes" becomes a vector for marijuana consumers to cope with the problematic predicaments associated with marijuana culture: arrest, prosecution, imprisonment, stigmatization, and reprisals from the community. In sum, while we may logically and historically discount the factual information that the myths postulate, we must appreciate how the effectiveness of these myths helps in keeping one in the practice of consumption of marijuana once one gets introduced to the herb.

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