Nigeria’s Romance with Marijuana

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Marijuana is outlawed by many governments. In this report, Joe Agbro Jr. examines the state of the war on cannabis in Nigeria.

For Nurudeen (not his real name), 34, a day is never complete without smoking marijuana. For the past 20 years, that has been a routine for this seller of used clothes. Members of his family and close friends know that he is addicted to the drug.

“My people know I smoke,” he said, gently puffing away at his spliff at one of the side-stalls located on Ipaja Road, Agege, in Lagos. Just adjacent is Akerele Street, notorious for drug peddling. While the street offers cocaine and heroin, marijuana is the most traded drug there.

“Marijuana is like pure water here,” says Nurudeen in between puffs of smoke, while sitting under the stairway of a building. Two other men sit in a nearby corner, also smoking marijuana. Less than a minute later, another customer arrives, and the dealer in charge reaches into his bag to bring out marijuana and rolling paper packaged in dispensing packs that are usually used in hospital for dispensing legal drugs. At other times, the marijuana is simply wrapped in paper. Such a “wrap” costs 50 naira in many places across the country. Larger quantities are sold in “parcels” which can roll about six average-sized spliffs, while the more serious buyers buy it in bags.

About 200 metres away from the scene is Isokoko Police Station, yet the drug users on Akerele Street act without fear. “I’m not afraid of police,” says Nurudeen. “I know at the end of the day, I will just settle them with money.”

ANOTHER WAY OF LIFE

Marijuana is a burning topic, especially among young people today. In different parts of the world, while law enforcement officers are busy trying to stop the tide of cultivation and consumption of the plant, many users continue to have a field day. At many clubs, street corners, markets, schools, beaches and other exclusive areas, smoking marijuana is no longer considered novel, maybe just obnoxious.

At Oshodi, a commercial hub in Lagos, large sections of the railway lines have been colonised by marijuana smokers. All day long, smokers freely smoke the drug in public view. Those who do the selling, usually boys as young as 12 years old, are often scruffy-looking and hang around in clusters. They clutch black nylon bags containing the drugs and make catcalls – a peculiar form of advertisement – to potential buyers. At night, they come closer to the regular traffic. The acrid smell wafts constantly in the air. For the boys, there is little attempt to shield their nefarious activities from the eyes of the security officers permanently stationed there. Successive administrations in the state have cleared Oshodi of marijuana smokers and sellers, but time and again they come back.

“What can the police do?” asked Tunde Salako, who operates a lotto kiosk at Oshodi bus stop. “I think because they [the sellers] stay on their own, the police just leave them alone. Once in a while some of them even collect ‘igbo’ [marijuana] from [sellers].”

Nigeria’s romance with marijuana is not a recent one. Often referred to as ‘Indian hemp’ in the country, cannabis sativa, which has enjoyed use as fibre, seed and seed oils, medicinal purposes, and as a recreational drug, traces its origin to central and south Asia. The drug also has many other aliases: igbo, dope, ganja, sensi, kuma, morocco, eja, kpoli, weed, trees, etc. Though usually smoked, the plant can be soaked in alcoholic drinks dubbed ‘monkey-tail’, consumed mostly in the southern parts of the country. Some people cook food with it, some boil it to drink as tea, while others just chew the plant and seeds. Physiologically, cannabis causes euphoria, relaxes the muscles and increases appetite. On the downside, the drug can impair motor skills, cause anxiety and paranoia and reduce short-term memory.

Deemed an illicit drug by law, it has always been an offence in Nigeria to smoke marijuana, and it has largely been frowned upon by society. Paradoxically, however, despite the increased hounding of growers, sellers, and users, marijuana appears to be consumed in ever greater quantities.

Some sections of society feel that using marijuana should not be illegal. And they have made their voices heard through music. Apart from the older generation of Nigerian musicians, including such as the late Fela Anikulapo-Kuti and Orlando Owoh, who used marijuana and whose songs sometimes glamorised it, and in recent years music stars like Nice, Terry G, Timaya, Oritsefemi, and Wizkid have also saluted the scraggly green plant in their lyrics, to the delight of many fans. Seun Kuti, Fela’s son, also praised marijuana in one of his songs entitled “The Good Leaf”.

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Perhaps as an unwritten legacy of Fela Anikulapo Kuti, the radical Afrobeat musician and unrepentant hemp smoker, the New Afrika Shrine built by his son Femi has mutated to become a sort of “free parking” for marijuana smokers. Forget the sign on the wall that reads “Drugs are not allowed in the Shrine”. Patrons of different societal classes gather to enjoy good music, and with no sign of the buying or selling of marijuana there, it is an invisible trade, with only buyers and sellers able to identify each other.

ARRESTING THE HEMP TRADE

During a recent raid, Nurudeen was rounded up with 11 others by a team of policemen at the Lagos State Abattoir at Agege. According to Nurudeen, seven were released from police detention, but only after they had paid amounts ranging from 30,000 to 40,000 naira. Nurudeen and the four others who could not afford to pay were charged and later remanded at Kirikiri Prison. Though Nurudeen had been arrested at a shed where marijuana was sold and smoked, he was charged only with disturbing the peace, as he said “they [police] didn’t find any marijuana on me”.

Created in 1990, the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) has the job of curtailing consumption of drugs in Nigeria. The police also join in apprehending and prosecuting offenders. However, it seems that the security agencies are inefficient, as marijuana use still persists across the country.

Had Nurudeen been charged under the NDLEA Act, the matter would have been graver. Under this act, which came about by the promulgation of Decree Number 48 of 1989, the possession or smoking of cannabis, or even allowing one’s premises to be used for dealing in cannabis, can result in a prison sentence from 15 years to life. Its precursor, the Indian Hemp Act, was even harsher, carrying a maximum sentence of death.

At the court, Nurudeen was released on bail of 50,000 naira and a surety with a tax clearance certificate. However, it was because the bail conditions were not fulfilled on the spot that he was remanded. After spending 14 days at Kirikiri, he was set free after his friends satisfied the bail conditions. He said he was one of those lucky to regain their freedom quickly. “I left some people who didn’t have people to come for them,” he said.

The official position of Lagos State police is that it raids venues where marijuana is sold or consumed. “What we do is that we raid black spots because that is where criminals converge to carry out their illegal activities,” said Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) Kenneth Nwosu, the Lagos State Police public relations officer.

There are allegations, however, that Nigerian security operatives smoke marijuana, and that they even connive with dealers to escape prosecution. When asked to comment on these allegations, Nwosu denied that it was possible. “How can we who are arresting smokers now be the ones who are smoking?”

An Abuja-based lawyer, Segun Momoh, stresses that the law in Nigeria is not properly enforced by law enforcement agencies, so that they profit from it. “Some policemen are aware of what is going on,” he said. “It is a racket.”

Statistics for arrests and prosecutions relating to marijuana are not easily obtained. Three visits and repeated telephone calls to the Lagos State Police public relations officer to get this data had been unsuccessful at the time of writing.

Through the chain that leads from cultivation to transportation and to sales, the marijuana industry connects different cities throughout Nigeria. At many outdoor markets and public motor garages, it is not strange to see marijuana smokers puffing away. In this regard, Kano State residents take the lead. According to NDLEA figures, 37 per cent of Kano State population abuse drugs, the highest percentage in the country. It is not uncommon to see youths gathering in public spaces and puffing on marijuana cigarettes in this bustling city. At Kwanar Sabo Street, Hotoro, youths gather most evenings to smoke. Ironcally, this area is close to Mobile Police barracks. A resident, Thomas Adelaja said people don’t even see anything wrong in the boys smoking there. “These boys are committing an offence,” he said. “But it now seems as if they are just smoking ordinary cigars.” That is his way of saying it is so usual that no one notices any longer.

In Tudun Wada Quarters, youths flock to the dilapidated cemetery most mornings and evenings to smoke marijuana. The situation is also the same at Danmarke near the NNPC depot where Motor Park touts freely consume it. And at Tinshama, it is almost as if marijuana is already legal, as young people walk about holding their marijuana joints and going about life. “Even the [security officials] that come to raid us smoke,” said Shehu, one of the boys there.

In a report from a 2013 NOI Poll, the key causes for the rise in drug and substance abuse are listed as poverty and unemployment.

These twin problems can be seen at the university campus town of Abraka, Delta State. Here, smoking of marijuana amongst the student population is hardly seen as an offence. A section along the River Ethiope
close to the Abraka River Resort Motel serves as a joint where students and indigenes converge to smoke marijuana.

“Many people misunderstand smokers,” said Marho (not his real name), a former student who now sells marijuana there. “We just smoke here to relax and forget our sorrows. It helps you to reason and it is even medicinal.”

Marho’s boss Tony (not his real name) sells “skunk”, marijuana grown with fluorescent light that is trending among young people. While Marho uses his motorbike to get his supply from neighbouring Obiaruku, Tony gets his from Lagos, most times, using women as his couriers.

“Police or NDLEA won’t suspect any woman,” Tony, 43, said. “They [security officials] don’t search their load and it is easy for them to bring ‘stuff’.”

Current figures from the Nigeria Bureau of Statistics (NBS) put the youth unemployment rate at about 24 per cent. In April, Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the Coordinating Minister for the Economy, quoting NBS figures, said no fewer than 5.3 million Nigerian youths are jobless, with 1.8 million graduates entering the labour market annually. Also, earlier in the year, the World Bank estimated the number of poor Nigerians to be about 58 million.

With a surging youth population and high unemployment, some youths are lured by the easy money which drug peddling offers. According to Tony, who did not complete his secondary education, poverty drove him to dealing in marijuana.

“If someone like me had something doing, I wouldn’t be selling dope. But as it is now, I am ready for the risk since I am not stealing or killing anybody.”

Concerning arresting hemp dealers and users, Delta State’s police public relations officer DSP Celestina Amadi Kalu hinted that the police in the state only “focused on the big-time producers.” But data on arrests of everyday users in the state were not provided.

HOME-GROWN

The 2011 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime World Drug Report stated that cannabis use was prevalent among 14.3 per cent of 15 to 64 year olds in Nigeria. The same report for 2014 revealed that Nigeria had made the highest number of cannabis seizures of any African country. Following this report, the NDLEA launched a programme dubbed “Operation Weed Eaters” that aimed to rid the country of cannabis.

While marijuana can be grown in all parts of the country, according to the NDLEA, the states notorious for cultivating the plant are Ondo, Ogun, Osun, Oyo, Ekiti, Edo and Delta. In September, the NDLEA destroyed cannabis farms in Ute and Ose local government areas in Ondo State and arrested 30 suspects, seizing 31 kilograms of dried weed suspected to be marijuana in the Suleja area.

“Taking the battle to the farms has yielded significant success,” said NDLEA chairman Ahmadu Giade. “We are determined to destroy all cannabis farms and cut off supply to users. This is one of our strategies of reducing crime and violence in our country. More barons shall be arrested and cannabis plantations destroyed.”

It takes an average of six months for the marijuana to be smoke-ready from seeds. NDLEA admits that even locating marijuana farms, which are usually sited in the middle of thick foliage, presents a significant challenge. Once located, such farms are burnt to the ground. However, the sheer demand for cannabis in Nigeria means that new farms subsequently emerge in different locations.

Mitchell Ofoyeju, Head, Public Affairs of the NDLEA, says cannabis has dominated the list of illegal drug seizures ever since the agency was founded in 1990. “Cannabis farm destruction is one of the most challenging operations in the agency,” he said. “This is so because cannabis cultivators go very far into the heart of the forests to cultivate cannabis. Locating these farms is not easy. There are no roads, so officers have to walk for several hours to get to the farms. Apart from locating the farms, we are also faced with the challenge of how to destroy the farms. Manual destruction is painful and time wasting.”

In October, NDLEA discovered a 57-hectare cannabis plantation at Gbongan Forest Reserve in Osun State. And one Godspower Chibogu, 51, was arrested. The street value of the 676, 800 kilograms of marijuana on the plantation was estimated at N6.8 billion. According to Ofoyeju, it took the NDLEA team three days to destroy the farm using a tractor. And that was only one farm.

Between January and June 2014, NDLEA arrested 4,511 suspected drug traffickers and seized 47,423 kilograms of drugs. Of that number, cannabis accounted for 45,875 kilograms. Though these seizure figures are high, large quantities of marijuana still find their way to the market baffling the law enforcement system.

Orianne Akere, a lawyer and chairman of the Benin branch of the Nigerian Bar Association, believes that
laws. Law enforcement officials are not helping in the fight against marijuana. “You hardly ever hear that anybody has been convicted for marijuana usage,” he said. “They are not taking it upon themselves to interrogate users because I think some of them are also users, so they condone all this.”

Dr. Ajayi says that while taking marijuana may be helpful for some people, it could trigger mental dependence in around nine to ten per cent of its adult users. While investigating, I realised something else quite important. Medical marijuana is not new, and the medical community has been writing about it for a long time. There were in fact hundreds of journal articles, mostly documenting the benefits. Most of those papers, however, were written between the years 1840 and 1930. The papers described the use of cannabis following a majority vote. According to the state governor, John Hickenlooper, “this industry will create jobs”. The state of Washington has since followed Colorado’s lead, and in November, Alaska, Oregon and the capital Washington DC also voted to legalise marijuana.

Although marijuana is still illegal in New York, New York Mayor Bill de Blasio said in November that instead of the state arresting anyone carrying less than 25 grams of marijuana, it is likely that such persons will simply be fined up to 100 US dollars in future. De Blasio said the relaxation in policy was particularly aimed at young people, who would no longer have a criminal record for the rest of their lives as a result of carrying a small amount of marijuana. “This is part of a long-term effort to make us safer,” he added.

The NDLEA disagrees with these approaches. “Nigeria is not considering decriminalizing cannabis,” says Ofoyeju. “The active ingredient in cannabis is tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). It is one of over 400 different cannabinoids. Cannabis has psychological and physiological effects on the human body. In large enough doses, THC can induce auditory and visual hallucinations. It is a very dangerous drug.”

Yet recent medical studies have also indicated that marijuana can also be beneficial to health. In a CNN report titled “Why I changed my mind about weed”, Dr Sanjay Gupta, a neurosurgeon and the channel’s chief medical correspondent, said he had been misled into viewing marijuana as very dangerous.

“There is clear evidence that in some people marijuana use can lead to withdrawal symptoms, including insomnia, anxiety and nausea,” Gupta said. “We now know that while estimates vary, marijuana leads to dependence in around nine to ten per cent of its adult users. While investigating, I realised something else quite important. Medical marijuana is not new, and the medical community has been writing about it for a long time. There were in fact hundreds of journal articles, mostly documenting the benefits. Most of those papers, however, were written between the years 1840 and 1930. The papers described the use of medical marijuana to treat ‘neuralgia, convulsive disorders, emaciation’, among other things.”

Dr Dami Ajayi, who works at the Federal Neuropsychiatric Hospital in Yaba in Lagos, takes a more balanced view. Dr Ajayi says that while taking marijuana may be helpful for some people, it could trigger mental
A recent Facebook poll conducted by The Nation newspaper asked respondents to comment on whether marijuana should be legalised or not in Nigeria – 44.7 per cent voted in favour of legalisation while 55.3 per cent voted against, showing a greater alignment with marijuana’s status quo as an illicit drug. Some Facebook respondents also aired reasons for their answers. “The dangers inherent in the usage of marijuana would be catastrophic,” Henry Akisikpo wrote. “I am absolutely sure there is going to be so much insanity and atrocities arising from its usage, which will in turn give birth to crime of various forms.”

Abdulrazak Abdulhamid also said he would not support the legalisation of marijuana, although he knows it is consumed heavily in the country. “At the university, I could not get the image of a stark mad fellow out of my mind as some friends experimented and others perfected their weed-smoking skills,” Abdulhamid wrote. “There was this guy who used to transport it from Lagos to Ado-Ekiti in a 25-litre jerry can until NDLEA caught him one day, seized his stash and made him pay heavily for it.”

But not everyone is against legalisation. Tosin Adewale wrote, “We deceive ourselves a lot. Now, in motor parks and streets in Lagos, men smoke [marijuana] as if it was legalised and nothing follows. [It is the] same thing at carnivals and beaches. So if it’s banned, let the enforcement agents act without exclusion.”

Commenting, Ogbonna Valentine wrote that marijuana should be legalised but accompanied by strict regulations to discourage abuse. “Legalising it will create more jobs and employments and as well help in improving the economy,” he wrote. “Companies should be licensed to engage in producing medical marijuana. Arresting and detaining offenders will only worsen the case as more individuals will develop a means of taking it without the law getting at them. The most annoying part is that our politicians, armed forces personnel and individuals in law enforcement agencies are also marijuana addicts.”

Economics teaches that placing restrictions on a product with high demand, especially when supply cannot be controlled, creates black market situations. That seems to be happening with marijuana in Nigeria – it is unregulated, profitable to traders, and easily accessible to consumers.

Despite being incarcerated for two weeks, Nurudeen, who began smoking weed at the age of 14, has not been convinced to quit the habit. A month after his release, he is seated with friends at his regular haunt with a marijuana cigarette in his hand. “This is the only way I know how to relax,” he says.

There are many Nurudeens in cities across Nigeria who have not been deterred from continuing to smoke cannabis. As the security agencies continue to wage war against the marijuana industry with arrests and prosecutions, the growers, traders, and users simply continue to do their thing. It remains a fierce battle.

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