The Evolution of a Roots Daughter

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Until quite recently, marijuana smoking has been almost universally a male-dominated activity. Similar to the reports of cannabis use in other non-Western cultures (Hamid 1980; Carter, Coggins & Doughty 1976; Soueif 1976; Rubin 1975), anthropological studies of cannabis use conducted in Jamaica in the early 1970’s (Dreher 1982; Dreher & Rogers 1976; Rubin 1975; Rubin & Comitas 1975) described the use of marijuana as a male-dominated social activity. Indeed, although there was considerable urban-rural variation, with most of the female cannabis smokers concentrated in the island’s cities, women who smoked the drug were a rare phenomenon in comparison to male smokers. Now, 16 years later, it is obvious even to the casual observer that more and more Jamaican women—rural as well as urban—are smoking marijuana. In a more recent study of marijuana use in rural Jamaican communities (Dreher 1984), estimates (provided by informants) of the proportion of women who smoke marijuana ranged from 15 to 50 percent, with the majority hovering around the latter figure (Shapiro 1983).

This article summarizes observations of women and the use of marijuana during 15 years of anthropological research on cannabis use in Jamaica. It explores the changes in patterns of female use as a reflection of changes in the relationship between men and women, perhaps even signaling the emergence of a more liberated and independent laboring-class woman. In order to understand the dynamics of the exponential increase in female smoking it is necessary to understand the nature of the marijuana complex and its function in Jamaican society.

Marijuana was introduced to Jamaica in the nineteenth century by indentured laborers from India who came to the island to work on the sugar plantations after manumission. The consumption of cannabis, or ganja, rapidly diffused throughout the Jamaican working class where it emerged and became stabilized as a widespread social institution with medical, ritual, social and recreational functions. Within this institution there arose two predominant patterns of use: First, ganja can be inhaled in a pipe or a hand-rolled cigarette called a spliff or sciff; Second, it can be consumed as a tea or tonic for medicinal or health-rendering purposes. According to Jamaican folk theory, when ganja is inhaled it goes directly to the brain where it produces both positive and negative psychoactive effects. On the other hand, when it is consumed in the form of teas or other infusions, it goes directly to the blood and produces physiological and salutary effects.

These two forms of consumption reflect the two major social traditions that have surrounded the use of cannabis in Jamaica, which are organized around class, age and gender. The smoking of ganja is a social activity, not only restricted to members of the working class, but in fact is embedded in their daily routines of work and leisure. As in many other cultures, the routine smoking of cannabis has been reserved for those who have achieved adult status and are mature enough to deal with its psychoactive effects. Finally, ganja smoking has been primarily a male-oriented activity. This parameter has been rationalized by the widely held belief that women

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“don’t have the brains” for smoking, and either should abstain altogether or restrict smoking to no more than occasional use, preferably in the protective company of their mates.

Ganja tea drinking, in comparison, has been more widely accepted. Its alleged medicinal and preventive effects, when consumed as a tea or mixed in a tonic, are endorsed by members of the middle class as well as the working class. Furthermore, ganja infusions are household medicines used both curatively and prophylactically for Jamaicans of all ages and both sexes. Thus during infancy and childhood, both males and females are exposed to cannabis through the ingestion of ganja teas, tonics and other forms of medicine administered by their parents. Traditionally, this practice has existed even in households where the adults may oppose the smoking of ganja, but nevertheless endorse the health-rendering properties of ganja. Because of the legal penalties and social stigmas attached to ganja use, wives and mothers often prepared the ganja teas and medicines in secret and disguised the taste not only with sugar and milk but with teas and other strong flavors, such as mint, pimento and anise. Consequently, many children and some husbands often were unaware that the tea contained ganja. In fact, many Jamaican housewives, who themselves had been given tea regularly as children, reported that they first learned the value of ganja medicines and how to prepare them only when they set up their own households.

For both boys and girls in Jamaica, the initial experience with ganja smoking typically occurs in puberty and most often in the company of older friends or siblings. During the first years after initiation, smoking generally is more of a sporadic act than a regular activity for both sexes. Male users, however, steadily increase and regularize their smoking within adolescent peer groups, where the exchange of ganja becomes a symbol of mutual support and friendship. Female smoking, on the other hand, tended to remain episodic and experimental, if it continued at all beyond the first few attempts. Thus, many female adolescents in Jamaica may have shared an occasional spliff with friends or siblings. However, their smoking pattern—opposite that of their male counterparts—never became institutionalized, with a set pattern of activities, definitive groupings and a code of values related to the consumption and exchange of ganja.

Not only have female adolescents been excluded from participating in the male adolescent smoking sessions, they never formed parallel groupings of their own sex in which ganja is exchanged as an overture of group solidarity.

In their twenties, when young people in Jamaica begin to establish their own households and settle into their adult occupational patterns, peer-oriented social smoking for men not only continues, but extends to the work context. There it becomes an integral part of the daily routine of group work, lunch breaks and evening visits. In contrast, the already minimal peer group involvement of the young adult female steadily decreased as her activities and goals took a more familial focus. Her ganja activity, functionally linked with the ordinary requirements of rural life, shifted to the preparation of tea and other medicines for her family. If she smoked at all, it was either alone within the confines of her house or in a presexual context with her mate.

These two traditions of male and female ganja use prevail until the declining years, when men tended to relinquish ganja smoking. As retired farmers or laborers, they no longer have available funds to purchase ganja or the opportunity to cultivate it. Moreover, because their former smoking associates are either deceased or have relinquished ganja smoking as they moved into a higher social bracket, the context and social incentives to smoke ganja are lacking. Women, on the other hand, even as grandmothers and great-grandmothers, continue preparing, consuming and administering ganja in their role as household caretakers. Therefore, contrary to popular opinion, it is not uncommon to find communities in which there is a greater prevalence of ganja activity among women than among men, when both traditions are considered.

In addition to being consumers of marijuana, Jamaican women also have played a role in ganja commerce—both its cultivation and distribution. Because the possession and cultivation of marijuana are illegal in Jamaica and invoke severe legal penalties, it is necessarily planted in remote and practically inaccessible sites. Typically, the rural women who have access to such land through their personal holdings are encumbered with domestic and child care responsibilities, requiring that they remain at home. Therefore, except for a few women whose homes are located in remote places, independent ganja cultivation by women is not the norm. However, women—landowners or not—have played a supportive role in ganja cultivation, singly managing their households and farms, while their mates spend days and weeks deep in the bush, guarding and tending the ganja crop. It also has been very common for women to grow a few plants secretly for domestic consumption. These are placed in a well-secluded corner of a kitchen garden or in pots hung high in the branches of tree so as to escape detection. In fact, as with their preparation of teas, it is not unusual for the families of these women to be unaware of their endeavors until the ganja is presented for consumption.
Jamaican women have played an even more active role as ganja vendors. Vending is a commonplace economic activity for Jamaican women, which includes buying and selling almost everything from fish and produce to food and cigarettes. Typically, the woman involved in ganja vending does so under the auspices of her mate's enterprise. When male ganja retailers are not at home, their women assume responsibility for the business, making the transactions, monitoring the men who stay to play dominoes or have a smoke, and keeping a lookout for police.

Within this supportive role, even the most reputable women have assumed significant risks in the ganja trade. For instance, a sugar estate worker recounted that he once was given the opportunity to purchase a farmwork card that would entitle him to go to Canada as a migrant laborer—a prized economic opportunity among Jamaica's rural working class. In order to obtain the necessary funds quickly, he decided to visit the village where he was born, purchase a quantity of ganja from an old friend and sell it in his current community. In order to allay suspicion, his very respectable wife, who ordinarily would have nothing to do with ganja, accompanied him on the journey and even carried the half-pound of marijuana in her market basket, covered with plantains, bananas and other produce on the bus ride home.

In addition to their supportive role in the distribution of ganja, it has not been uncommon to find independent female vendors, the majority of whom do not smoke. In one household, a woman actually took over her husband's substantial and complicated wholesale/retail ganja trade after he was charged with possession of marijuana and was incarcerated. She ran the operation so efficiently and so profitably that when her husband was released three years later, they had accumulated enough capital to retire from ganja distribution. Retail ganja sales have provided many women, particularly those recently widowed or abandoned with several small children or those whose mates are unemployed or incapacitated, with a means of support for their families.

Thus, the socially accepted pattern of cannabis activity by Jamaican women has centered on their preparation of teas and tonics in a household/familial context and on their support of male-dominated commercial ganja activities. Though a few heavy smokers claimed that they would not trust a woman who does not "take a draw" now and then; the ideal woman was one who refrained from smoking, was tolerant of her mate's ganja smoking, and supported his enterprises in production and distribution.

The women who ignored the sex-linked injunctions on smoking were considered "brawling" (disorderly) and unrespectable by smokers and nonsmokers alike. The importance of respectability as a guiding theme in the behavior of rural Jamaican women is grounded in economic considerations. For young working-class women there are few opportunities for earning a living, much less socioeconomic advancement. Traditional female work either requires a capital outlay (e.g., to stock a shop or to purchase a sewing machine) that is beyond the reach of most young women or these positions are already occupied by older women in the community (e.g., regular domestic work or low-scale civil servant jobs). In addition, the time and energy requirements of tending to infants and small children interfere with their ability to work routinely outside the home.

For these youthful laboring-class women, a conjugal union—either legal or common law—was the primary means by which they could acquire economic security and perhaps even social status. The extent to which they conformed to standards of respectability significantly influenced their success in acquiring and keeping a mate who was a cut above the rest—literate, steadily employed, perhaps even a policeman or public health inspector. Inasmuch as the competition for such men has been intense, the woman who breached the norms pertaining to female ganja smoking risked widespread community sanction through censure and gossip. Moreover, she could be severely rebuked by her mate even though he may smoke regularly himself and actually required her to smoke with him in a presexual context.

This was exemplified by the case of a 22-year-old woman living with her two children and her common-law husband who was regularly employed as a laborer in Guantanomo, Cuba. She enjoyed not only considerable prestige through her husband's good job, but a comparative wealth of material goods, including a television, stereo, furniture and china. During his absence, which often was several months at a time, she would frequent her nearby siblings and their friends. On one of his visits home, jealous villagers informed her husband that his wife "g'wan like bad pickney" ("goes on like a naughty child"). Angry and embarrassed, he reprimanded her and cuffed her in public. A few individuals were sympathetic to the loneliness of her situation, but community support—including that of her own parents who were concerned that her privileged position would be jeopardized—remained with her husband, and she was widely condemned.

In comparison, young women exposed to more sophisticated urban settings, where they could escape the constant vigilance of their communities, were more likely to smoke ganja than their rural-bound counterparts. The young-adult daughters of a middle-class family, for example, admitted experimenting with cannabis while

boarding in Kingston to attend secondary school and continued recreational (weekend) smoking afterward. They quickly added, however, that they would never have considered smoking ganja in their home community or with any of the local youths, as it might have brought embarrassment to them and their families.

Despite the powerful tradition militating against female ganja smoking in Jamaica, research carried out in the late 1970's revealed a visible increase in the number of women who smoked marijuana (Dreher 1984). One factor in this increase appeared to be the exponential growth of Rastafarianism and the greater number of women involved in this politico-religious movement. As participating members of the religion, Rastafarian women not only are permitted to smoke ganja, but often are expected to do so in order to fulfill their religious obligations. While they do not match the quantity and frequency of male Rastafarians, Rasta women ordinarily smoke on a daily basis and would be considered chronic users by any standards in the United States.

Meanwhile, ganja use and exchange among non-Rastafarian women also had increased dramatically. For some women, the sharing and smoking of ganja had begun to acquire social value as an overture and confirmation of friendship and mutual assistance, very much like the male tradition. Female smoking still was more sporadic and attenuated than male smoking, but nonetheless had begun to approximate the peer-oriented social smoking typical of men's groups.

Interestingly, although it initially was concentrated in Kingston and other cities, the diffusion of female ganja use did not radiate evenly from urban centers, but instead flourished in some communities and not in others. Community-based comparisons of the quantity and quality of female ganja activity (Dreher 1984) permitted the tracing of the variance in entry of women into this traditionally male activity. For example, in the densely populated neighborhoods surrounding a large sugar estate, female ganja smoking was exceedingly more prevalent than in the small mountain communities where independent farming was carried out by family units.

An analysis of these comparisons revealed that female ganja smoking tended to concentrate in communities where women had access to their own income-generating activities, independent from that of their mates'. Thus, in addition to the presence of a large number of comparatively wealthy families, which provides more opportunities for domestic work, the sugar estate communities are inhabited by many single men who migrated to the area seeking work. These unrelated males probably offered the single greatest source of cash remuneration for the domestic, marketing and sexual services of local women who are unequipped or unprepared for higher level economic opportunities. Because the women in the sugar estate community have this capability of generating cash, irrespective of their mates or "baby father," they also have the option of returning to their parental homes or even maintaining their own households if a union founders.

As one young woman explained, when she and her boyfriend quarreled and separated, she took her children to eat in her father's yard one day and her mother's yard the next. A male friend visited her twice a week and gave her twenty-five dollars in addition to buying her a new dress. Added to her own money that she earned from washing and ironing for various people, she was financially better off than she was before she and her boyfriend separated. Also, because of the large numbers of unrelated males in the area, she was not disqualified from a new relationship when previous ones failed. While such women were not opposed to a stable union in which they and their children would be adequately supported by a steadily employed male—indeed, this was probably the ideal for most—they also were cognizant of their own abilities to establish new unions quickly and to generate income as well as to support their children on their own.

This economic independence permitted the sugar estate women a greater degree of personal freedom than that enjoyed by women in the mountain communities where female ganja smoking continued to be rare if not nonexistent. There, except for occasional agricultural wage labor, the working-class woman's productivity was organized around her own household unit. She took care of her own children and grandchildren. She cooked, cleaned and washed for her own family, marketed the produce of her own household, and as her children grew older and required less care, she cultivated her own household lands and tended household stock.

While many of these efforts were income generating for her family unit, very few activities provided direct cash reward for the woman herself. This is not to say that these women would not have performed any or all of these activities on a cash basis if such opportunities had been available. The fact is that such communities were composed mainly of other corporate households that were identical to her own. Without special skills, and without a market for ordinary skills, the socioeconomic viability of the mountain community woman was inextricably connected to the corporate household. Her lessened options for generating her own income and her greater reliance on local men increased her vulnerability to social censure. There was an unequivocal pressure for such women to discontinue the practices they may have enjoyed in adolescence and adhere to the traditional norms of male
spliff smoking and female tea drinking.

Thus, while it was tempting to explain community-level variation in the prevalence of female ganja smoking through reference to personality, the amount of exposure to ganja, or other individual characteristics, there was nothing to distinguish the women in one community from the women in another in terms of ethnicity, age, religion, socioeconomic status or other demographic categories. The prevalence of male smoking was the same in both kinds of communities, and mountain women actually had greater and more consistent access to ganja than the sugar estate women. Rather, the evidence clearly pointed to the nature of community life and the manner in which women and their activities were linked to the local social structure as the major determinant of ganja use by women. In fact, there was evidence that women who changed their residence from one kind of community to another also changed their pattern of ganja use.

Now, just a little over half a decade later, women who smoke ganja not only are tolerated grudgingly, but they have been given the commendatory title of “roots dawta.” In working-class Jamaica, the word “dawta” (daughter) refers not to one’s female offspring, but to any youthful unmarried woman. It generally is a term of affection or admiration and when used with a possessive pronoun it can mean, for example, “his girl friend” (him dawta). The term “roots” recently has become part of the Rastafarian and youth vernacular in Jamaica to signify something that is real, natural, original, African, or at least, non-Western. Thus, the appellation roots dawta is one of praise and esteem used to identify the woman who comes from a fine—even if humble—tradition, who as “good brains,” who can “smoke hard as a man” and with whom men can “reason” (discuss and debate) as they would with other men. The model roots dawta is not a ganja smoker; she also is a clear thinker and a woman of dignity. She “must keep a standard” and “go out properly.” If the roots dawta is involved in a stable union, her partner can expect her to be obedient, helpful and sexually faithful. As one informant explained, if your awta is roots and you see her talking to another man, there is no reason to be jealous, for she is independent and rightly principled.

Economic independence is, indeed, a main characteristic of a roots dawta, who typically describes herself as “worker,” a “fighter” and a “woman with a plan.” They compare themselves favorably to “lazy” women who do not smoke marijuana, but “sit down an’ wait for one man to help dem.” This economic independence from the opposite sex is played out in a variety of ways. Some of the unattached roots dawtas have quite realistically assessed the extent to which they can rely on any one man and have concluded that they are better off on their own, with several male friends rather than a single mate. As one popular shop owner proclaimed, when asked whether she had a boyfriend, “‘me nah bother wi’ dat ting . dem ha’nutting fe gi’ me” (“they can’t help me”). Another frequent ganja smoker, in the process of building her own house, similarly dismissed men as providers, saying that “after you reach forty dem nah won’t you again . . . then you’re in no man’s land . . . it more better to ha’ your own house when you reach ol’ age.” On the other hand, both admitted that they were not averse to occasional sexual encounters, but tended to treat them almost instrumentally as another source of revenue, useful when a lump sum of money is needed to buy fertilizer for their farms or to make a monthly installment on a shop freezer.

In the working-class and indigent communities where ganja smoking prevails, underemployment for men, adolescents and young adults is the norm. Thus, while conjugal relationships have been—in the past—the primary means by which laboring-class women could acquire the resources needed to survive, the ability of men to provide routine support for a woman and children in Jamaica’s current economy is severely diminished. Many women openly recognize the incapacity of men to provide the necessary food, shelter and clothing, and confess the need for multiple relationships. As one mother of three small children explained, when queried about having more than one boyfriend, “if me nah ha’ two men, me nah wear clothes.” In general, the ganja smokers were more sensitive to the economic marginality of men in their localities and were more aggressive about earning their own livelihood. Not surprisingly, unlike their nonsmoking counterparts, female ganja smokers in Jamaica—even when they are engaged in a stable union—do not identify themselves as housewives or homemakers. Whether by necessity or preference, they have additional sources of income. These included farming, shopkeeping, rental property and raising livestock, but most often they support themselves and their children through the regular or intermittent sale of ganja. In practically all cases, the women who smoke ganja generate more income and are more effective providers of food, clothing and shelter for themselves and their dependents than are nonsmoking community women.

While a more systematic investigation needs to be conducted, this narrative of observations of female ganja activity over the past 16 years in Jamaica suggests that Jamaican women are, indeed, ganja consumers and are knowledgeable about its properties and its effects, its preparation and administration, and the intricacies of production and distribution. Moreover, the supportive role
that women have played in their mates' ganja activity has been essential to the smooth functioning of commercial ganja enterprises. In the past, women have not participated in peer-group smoking because of the social/economic consequences that attended their entry into the male ganja tradition. However, in environments where sufficient economic options exist for women or where the capacity of men as providers is severely compromised, the disadvantages of participating in social ganja smoking are minimized. In fact, there may be considerable social and economic advantage to participating in ganja activity. For years, Jamaican women have observed men acquire group support and economic resources through the exchange of marijuana and have even assisted them in this activity. Now, for women as well, ganja commerce represents a source of income, by which they can support themselves and their families, that does not require strenuous labor or take them far from home. Female ganja activity is not new in Jamaica. It simply is coming out of the private domain of the household and into the public domain of peer-group smoking and commerce.

REFERENCES


