

*The African Roots of Marijuana*, by Chris S. Duvall  
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Paper ISBN: 978-1-4780-0394-6 / Cloth ISBN: 978-1-4780-0361-8

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The fact that Africa's omission from cannabis histories comes from an intellectual tradition that marginalises the African contribution to world culture, is a central finding of this book. African knowledge is fundamental to the now-dominant global practices of cannabis use. African vocabulary and technology are historically documented and inseparable. Words and phrases, paraphernalia and techniques, plants and knowledge variably survived the Middle Passage. Although industrial slave plantations constituted a new form of social organisation and communal life, the ancient traditions and cultural centrality of cannabis use amongst Africans persisted. Cannabis use today thus represents a thousand years of African intangible heritage and cultural continuity.

This book stands as an iconoclastic contribution to a debate that is hundreds of years old, and one dominated by arguments for and against European colonialism and African slavery. To add a new perspective to such a well-travelled topic, a book must offer something unique and this one does. The author begins with an argument for yet another essay

on cannabis and African people. A search using these terms together in our University of Arizona library documents thousands of articles and books on similar topics. However, Duvall devotes considerable space to showing that the extant literature is overwhelmingly biased either for or against a number of sub-themes that have dominated the African-cannabis debate. Perhaps this point is more important than the details of the biases and Duvall's analysis of why they have misdirected academic and public discussions for more than three hundred years. Stepping back from the details, we are told that the arguments for and against African slavery and its role in European colonialism dominated what scholars and others could and did say about both Africa and cannabis.

The social constructions of cannabis as a mind-destroying drug linked with the perceived racial inferiority of the African people worked together to serve as an ongoing excuse for African slavery and the political suppression of both the drug and the people. This is the unique focus of the book.

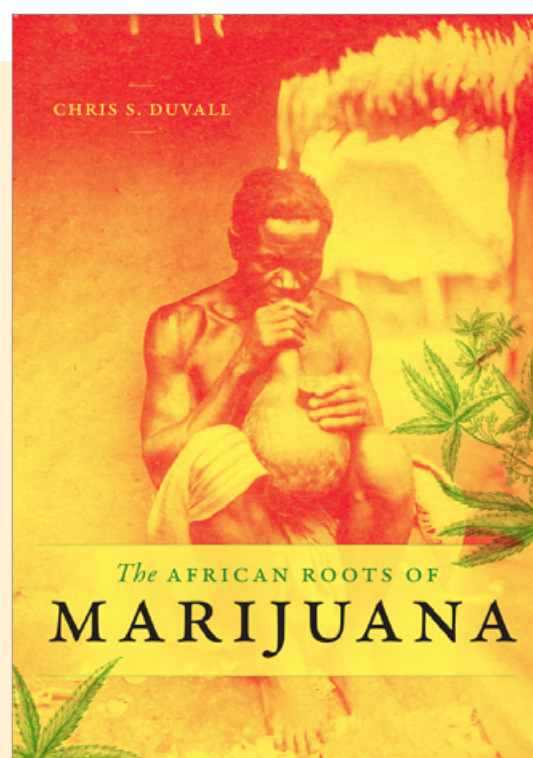


Unlike many other authors, Duvall, a professor at the University of New Mexico, USA, argues that he is an objective, data-based scholar. He defines himself as a geographer and political ecologist, but based on his publications he clearly qualifies as an ethno-historian and cultural ecologist. His scholarship on this topic has consequently developed into an argument for the ancient relationship of African peoples with cannabis. His research suggests that for more than a thousand years the plant occupied a culturally central place in pre-colonial African society. Like other mind-altering natural plant products, such as those used by traditional peoples around the world, the plant had religious and spiritual roles. It was originally perceived to be a gift from the Creator designed to expand reason and open portals to other dimensions. Thus cannabis was less of an escape from the world than a means of engaging its complex dimensions. The plant (and its associated spiritual practice) is thus part of the ancient cultural heritage of African peoples and continues to be important in the heritage of Caribbean peoples today.

The book is organised into three major sections developed over 351 pages, including a very brief 'Table of Contents', 106 pages of useful 'Notes', and 10 pages

of 'Index'. The 'End Notes' are organised by chapter where they document a reference point; a style that precludes an alphabetically-listed bibliography of references organised by types of sources. Despite being filled with maps and historic photos there is no listing of these. Most of the maps were produced by the author so they do illustrate what is being said in the text. Figures and maps contain original data and special analysis by the author thus reflecting his expertise as a geographer. All photos are referenced as being in the Author's Collection. This is clearly a unique and scholarly book.

Part One is an introduction where major components of the cannabis-African connection and both kinds of approaches, are criticised as biased. While some biases were caused by limited access to colonial records, Duvall argues that most were either apologies for colonialism and African slavery or pushbacks against these apologies. Chapters entitled 'Cannabis and Africa' and 'Race and Plant Evolution' lead to a recommendation for a plant-centred history of African peoples due to the long-term co-evolution of both African society and plant genetics and distribution.



Part Two is about how cannabis came to Africa, what happened to it there, and how it crossed the Atlantic. Basically this portion of the essay is the recommended plant-centred history called for earlier. Here the author talks of 'Cannabis Cultures' reflecting the centrality of cannabis and the resulting human/social co-evolution. He argues for cannabis movement and cultural learning occurring over more than a thousand years of regular interactions. There were specific routes of arrival (well-mapped by the author) ultimately from the Far East but with significant stops in the Middle East (Levant) and on to north and east Africa via trade routes. The movement of cannabis and subsequent cultural learning was more from person to person (traders and seamen) rather than as an explicit export crop or a religious movement. North Africa maintained the cultural use of cannabis much as it had been in the Middle East, but south of the Sahara people primarily smoked it using a wide variety of pipes, some stylistically imported from the Middle East. Innovation occurred in the plant and its uses due to the hundreds of sub-Saharan cultural groups and environmental settings.

Among the many interesting stories is that of the 'African cough' which derived from the smoking of cannabis (pages 106-107). The cough was apparently unique and ubiquitous. Europeans travellers were disturbed by the cough and made reference to it in their travel accounts. One observer suggested that the cough was in part an affectation designed to elicit a humorous response from Europeans.

By the historic period cannabis use in Africa, as observed by European travellers, was quickly socially constructed as being both a harmful drug and one of the reasons (along with assumptions of cannibalism and general moral corruption) why African people were better off (that is culturally improved) by being enslaved on 'civilized' industrial plantations in the Americas.

African people brought the cannabis plant and the culturally-associated medicinal, spiritual and religious ceremonies to the Americas. They did so alongside sailors and traders. It moved like tobacco and potatoes as part of the 'Columbian Exchange' (Crosby: 1972) having such an obvious purpose that it was only questioned by plantation owners and European

scholars who argued for its restriction. Here again the author pushes back on most theories of its origin and movement. Cannabis now developed new uses and purposes suitable to the physical and psychological environment of suppressive plantation slavery. It, like other things African (Stoffle and Baro: 2016), was often kept *sub-rosa*, away from colonial observations and restrictions. Cannabis, like other formerly-suppressed African cultural practices, emerged and was further modified after slavery. While fundamentally a part of the African heritage, cannabis and its uses were creolised to fit the oppressive lives of the people in the Americas.

Part Three contains integrated discussions and some conclusions. The issue of working under the influence is addressed as part of the colonial, and later national, efforts to suppress cannabis use. But cannabis was easily grown, whereas alcohol and tobacco required more effort and were more publicly observable. The author concludes, *Cannabis was a low-input environmental resource that laborers valued because it enhanced their capacities to endure marginalization and exploitation* (page 161). In addition it became a form of heritage resistance against the legacy of the diaspora, slavery and the organised diminishment of African people and their cultures.

The book should be purchased by every scholar and lay student with an interest in this topic. Have it on your bookshelf because it is more like an encyclopedia than a one-time read. There are many portions of the book that will set off further debates, although much of it is designed to put aside old and false 'truths'. The challenge is that the author comes to hundreds of conclusions about a wide range of topics. Tracking the ancient presence of cannabis, for example, is done by using archaeology to analyse the forms of excavated smoking pipes, linguistic analysis to uncover words and phrases about smoking in dozens of old African languages, and even using ethno-botanical analysis of pollen from dry caves. Despite the obvious scholarship on these key issues, the author still draws conclusions from the evidence that are difficult to check. This occurs because the author's sources, using the End Note referencing style and a lack of an integrated bibliography, become their own labyrinth. At some level, however, the reader must largely respect the document-based authority of the book. 📖

## REFERENCES

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