

# Book Review

- Chris S. Duvall, *The African Roots of Marijuana*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019. Pp 351. Notes and Index. \$28.95 (paper).

“To understand cannabis in the modern world, the pathway leads to Africa” (6). With this ambitious statement, Chris Duvall sets out to establish the significance of the African continent in the development of global trade during the past five hundred years. While the subject may perhaps be controversial or contentious for some historians or history teachers, Duvall’s aim is to establish the role that marijuana played as another commodity that linked Africa to major historical developments. Although the plant did not originate in Africa, Duvall, a professor of Geography and Environmental Studies, argues persuasively for the supremacy of Africa’s position in the eventual spread of its use and the importance of the crop in global relations of labor. Beginning with the botanical taxonomy, Duvall offers South Asia as the place of geographic origin and cultural foundation for the beginning of his global narrative. While the trade crop in question may be novel, the movement of peoples and cross-cultural exchanges provide a familiar outline. Starting with the original term *bhang* in Hindi, the author traces the movement of the various words for marijuana and paraphernalia related to its use from Asia to Africa to explore the history of increased trade between them. The crop entered the African continent through the island of Madagascar, reminding readers of the primacy of Indian Ocean trade long before Pacific or Atlantic routes dominated intercontinental exchanges. Along the way, Duvall highlights African technical contributions as smoking marijuana became more common in Africa with the use of various pipes, including a calabash-based water pipe. At times, it is easy for a reader to forget the unique the subject matter and merely fall back on the customary contour of historical events. This is perhaps the most important aspect of the book. As with so many other areas of world history, Africans have been depicted as the recipients of technology, but not the innovators. Yet, Duvall suggests that water pipes first developed in eastern and southern Africa and that Africans incorporated marijuana into their established smoking culture. As African history remains on the fringe of some studies, Chris Duvall’s book provides a solid foundation for the agency of African people and the central function that the continent plays in the expansion of global transactions.

Although Duvall acknowledges the sometimes limited sources of information, he successfully traces the movement of cannabis across the African continent. He also shows various ways in which traditions traveled alongside the movement of the crop. In North Africa, for example, the Egyptian Mamluk sultans forbade its sale and use as *harem* (prohibited); however, Sufi mystics regularly integrated the smoking of marijuana into their religious practices. Cannabis culture south of the Sahara desert has even a more fragmentary historical record. However, by the time the Europeans arrived in 1500, the technical aspects of smoking consumption and cultural elements of diverse societies had been firmly established. After 1500 Duvall's work focuses on the role marijuana exchange and use played in the Atlantic slave trade. To draw direct connections to the African diaspora and the power of West African peoples to maintain their cultural roots, Duvall emphasizes the various ways in which Brazilian language is built upon Angolan words. For example, in several West Angolan languages, *cangonha* is the word for cannabis. The Angolan word appears in mid-nineteenth century Brazilian texts which state that enslaved peoples were served congonha tea to start the day. Along with linguistic connections, Africans who made the horrible Middle Passage also took with them their knowledge of smoking marijuana. Here the author emphasizes complexity. Portuguese slavers allowed marijuana use to "support the strength and condition of slaves" (147). Africans were able to maintain cultural practices through the miserable journey to the Caribbean and Brazil, including the use of cannabis. The author cautions the reader against the familiar trope of lazy blacks and the 20th century stereotype of drug activity among people of color.

After exploring how marijuana arrived in the Americas, the author purposefully returns to Africa. In the introduction, Duval specifically mentions that he is not interested in 20th century movements such as Rastafarianism or debates about legalization in Western countries. Rather, given his desire to increase the reader's understanding of Africa, he spends the final portion of the book on the role of marijuana in the age of imperialism. Although its use in many European colonies on the African continent continued to be recreational and religious at times, the book explores links between oppressive colonial labor regimes and the drug's powerful sedative effects. Duvall could have spent time here developing a parallel to the British promotion of opium in the 19th century in China. In a similar fashion, many countries attempted to ban the product (Morocco in 1888, Angola in 1913), while others taxed its use. Across the continent, however, European agents promoted its consumption, especially among porters whose difficult labor could be eased by the smoking of cannabis. Much as he did in discussing the slave trade, Duvall focuses on the agency of African peoples.

*The African Roots of Marijuana* is recommended for anyone who would like to discover the long history of a plant that is increasingly part of American popular culture. More significantly, the author's audience may be students of world history who would like another

argument for the central role that the continent of Africa played in global trade. While I may soon forget some of the early botany and cultural terminology, Chris Duvall's book reinforced the numerous ways in which world history texts frequently overlook Africa and Africans. A reader is left with only one conclusion upon the completion of this book. The meanings and uses of marijuana in our world today developed in and spread from Africa.

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