DIASPORA AND DRUG TRAFFICKING IN WEST AFRICA: A CASE STUDY OF GHANA

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ABSTRACT

This article interrogates the emergence of drug trafficking in contemporary Ghana and West Africa within the context of a global political economy, situated within a deeper historical perspective. It examines the earlier trafficking of cannabis along the coast of West Africa in the colonial period, and the later transnational networks that have emerged to promote international drug trafficking (cocaine and heroin). The article probes how the African diaspora and international travel service these emerging drug networks in Ghana, West Africa, Europe and the Americas. It suggests that the concept of an ‘ideological diaspora’ could shed light on a shared global popular culture, which constitutes a counter culture and rationalizes criminal activities.

IN A RECENT, IMPORTANT ARTICLE ON WEST AFRICAN CRIMINAL NETWORKS in southern Africa, Mark Shaw highlighted the need for academic research — despite the difficulty in researching crime — to provide a fuller understanding of African criminal networks, ‘not least to provide an independent and strategic overview of developments and the identification of trends’. ¹ Much of the existing literature on the trafficking of illicit narcotic drugs (cannabis, heroin, and cocaine) has been from a policy perspective, funded by agencies in consumer countries in the West. This article is a preliminary reflection on drug trafficking from a West African perspective, situating this development within the larger global political economy, as well as providing a deeper historical framework. The article examines how drug

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trafficking taps into the overlap between diaspora and travel in a globalized world.\(^2\)

I endorse James Clifford’s distinction between ‘diaspora’ and ‘travel’, in that travel does not necessarily imply dwelling and maintaining communities away from home while acknowledging that ‘travel’ infuses ‘diaspora’.\(^3\) I argue that diaspora and travel represent both asset and liability for West African drug traffickers. The international slave trade created an African diaspora in the Americas and the Indian Ocean world, and the presence of blacks in South America has meant that present-day West African travelers to South America are not racially out of place. But colonialism directed travel from Africa to the European metropoles, creating different patterns of movement. Consequently, contemporary West African economies are extraverted towards the West, in part a legacy of colonial rule. Thus, while there is a sizeable African American community in Brazil, for example, a return trip from Brazil by a Ghanaian or Nigerian in the present day arouses suspicion among airport security and customs officials in Accra, while a return from Europe may not. Yet there is no doubt that the long African presence in Latin America has facilitated entry for contemporary West Africans interested in Latin America has facilitated entry for contemporary West Africans interested in sourcing cocaine for onward transmission to Europe and North America. A visit to Bangkok or Karachi is read very differently. Neither was a major receiving area in the old African diaspora nor have they become central in Ghanaian mercantile circuits. As David Courtwright has observed in his important study of drugs and the making of the modern world, ‘[t]ravel and transportation are crucial variables in drug history...’\(^4\)

The article also examines the transnational networks that have emerged to promote drug trafficking, exploring whether parallel trends in Third World economies (i.e. economic decline) underpin these transnational alliances. This would affirm the continuing relevance of political economy as the context for dispersions from the African continent, as well as the context of drug production and distribution, hence the possible basis of new criminal networks in the diaspora.\(^5\) Shaw’s interviews with Nigerians involved in drug trafficking in South Africa emphasized an apparent contradiction: his interviewees viewed themselves as working to mitigate the

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unequal distribution of wealth in the global economy, not necessarily as criminals.\textsuperscript{6} Does some diffuse ‘Third-World mentalité’ underpin these transnational alliances supporting international drug trafficking from the Third World to the First? This is an important question, as Shaw noted that West African criminal networks are usually not large and hierarchically structured, but are small groups revolving around loose and fluid networks based on personal contacts. Kim Butler’s concept of an ‘ideological diaspora’ which, though rooted in the dispersal of people, is characterized by the ability of individuals to ‘join’, is very suggestive.\textsuperscript{7} I will return to this notion in the later discussion of popular culture and ideology in Africa and the diaspora.

Henry Bernstein, in an article on Ghana’s drug economy, describes trafficking in marijuana, cocaine and heroin as among the most dynamic of Africa’s ‘non-traditional’ exports and re-exports.\textsuperscript{8} What is striking is how drug trafficking has joined sojourn abroad as a strategy of capital formation in Ghana and West Africa in general. In this there are historic precedents, the most famous, perhaps, being Britain’s export of opium grown in India after 1757 to China to redress its balance-of-payment deficits in trade with China. European businesses, notably German and Dutch, American ones, and the Japanese made huge fortunes from processing cocaine between the 1890s and World War II.\textsuperscript{9} In West Africa itself, drug trafficking is not a recent phenomenon and cannabis trafficking was documented in the 1920s and 1930s. Mobility — migration and travel — were again central in drug trafficking in the colonial period. This article will examine contemporary cross-ethnic and transnational networks forged within Ghana, in West Africa and in the global African diaspora to promote drug trafficking to the West. It uses the specific case study of Raymond Amankwaah, Ghanaian drug baron \textit{extraordinaire}, to highlight some of the implications of these transnational criminal networks for our understanding of popular culture and ideology in Africa and the African diaspora. My sources are drawn from the records of the Narcotics Control Board of Ghana, an extensive reading of newspapers from 1992, case histories of drug addicts (particularly ‘been-tos’) in the Accra Psychiatric Hospital, and the growing secondary literature on the subject. My understanding of drug trafficking in Ghana and West Africa has been greatly enhanced by discussions with officers in the Narcotics Control Board and the Police Narcotics Unit in Accra.\textsuperscript{10} These are not cited for obvious security reasons.

\textsuperscript{6} Shaw, ‘West African criminal networks’.
\textsuperscript{7} Butler, ‘Defining diaspora’, p. 198.
\textsuperscript{9} Courtwright, \textit{Forces of Habit}, chapter 2.
\textsuperscript{10} Ghana is a signatory to the 1988 UN Convention on Narcotic and Psychotropic Substances. PNDC Law 236 of 1990 — Narcotic Drugs (Control, Enforcement and Sanctions) Law — implemented this convention and established the Narcotics Control Board.
Cannabis in colonial and independent West Africa

Cannabis (marijuana) appears to have grown wild in Ethiopia and southern Africa for centuries. It was incorporated into ritual, aiding monastic contemplation in Ethiopia, and healing therapy in Zimbabwe. In West Africa ex-servicemen returning from action in Asia during World War II are credited with introducing or popularizing cannabis.\(^1^\) A historical perspective sheds better light on these different patterns. Cannabis originated in central Asia and was widely grown in China around 4000 BCE. The plant has multiple purposes: as hemp for rope, textile for the poor, animal fodder, cooking oil, edible seeds, as well as a potent drug. It became a prized plant in India, being processed in three forms for human consumption: *bhang* (dried cannabis seeds, leaves and stems), *ganja* (from dried flowers of cultivated female plants), and *charas* (pure resin).\(^2^\) Arab traders and Muslim Sufis would serve as the pathway for the introduction of cannabis to the Nile delta and the East African coast by the fourteenth century. From these points of entry, cannabis spread to central and southern Africa. Somehow cannabis failed to make a transition to West Africa; thus slaves from West Africa in the British American colonies did not introduce a cannabis culture like that developed by Angolan slaves relocated to Brazil from the mid-sixteenth century.\(^3^\)

Sierra Leone appears to have cultivated cannabis (locally known as *diamba*) before other West African countries. It is even possible that by the colonial period traditional midwives were using cannabis for therapeutic purposes during childbirth.\(^4^\) Its non-medicinal use seems to have been confined to the labouring class such as fishermen, who saw it as an aid to hard physical labour.\(^5^\) In 1920 cannabis was added to the list of narcotic drugs prohibited under the 1913 Opium Ordinance, making its production, possession and consumption a punishable offence. Subsequent international conventions on narcotic drugs, the 1925 International Opium Convention and the 1931 Limitation Convention, created a regulatory system that would end decades of a prosperous trade in narcotics pioneered by Western powers, and allow only a restricted trade in small quantities of narcotics manufactured for medicinal use. Signatories to these international conventions sent annual reports to the League of Nations, and later the United Nations, on imports of restricted narcotic drugs and arrests

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1. This claim has been made for Ghana and Nigeria. For Nigeria, see A. Borrofica, ‘Mental illness and Indian hemp in Lagos, Nigeria’, *East African Medical Journal* 43 (1966), pp. 377–84.
3. Ibid, p. 41.
5. See, for example, ‘Report by the Government of Sierra Leone for the calendar year 1929 on the traffic in opium and dangerous drugs’, National Archives of Sierra Leone (NASL), Fourah Bay College, CSO 2/13/39.
made for possessing opium and other ‘dangerous’ drugs. Statistics for cannabis arrests and convictions are available for Sierra Leone from the 1920s. The pattern is one of gradual increase, and this becomes very notable with the economic depression of the 1930s. Thus there were 9 prosecutions with 7 convictions in 1926, 19 prosecutions with 16 convictions in 1927, 24 prosecutions with 21 convictions in 1928, and 43 prosecutions with 41 convictions in 1931. In 1935 there were 60 prosecutions with 60 convictions.\(^\text{16}\) Initial colonial reports saw fishermen as the exclusive users of cannabis, but the growing number of prosecutions and convictions indicates a growing circle of consumers. A network had come into existence by the 1930s, with farmers cultivating the plant in villages within a fifteen-mile radius of Freetown, such as Kissy, Wellington, Hastings, and Waterloo. The farmers sold their produce to particular traders, male and female, who retailed the commodity to smoker-consumers.

In the 1930s, some Sierra Leoneans began to explore a market for cannabis within British West Africa, capitalizing on Freetown’s importance as a major port, the presence of Sierra Leonean sailors on steamships, and a Sierra Leonean diaspora in port towns along the West African coast, where many worked as stevedores. This was within the context of a larger Krio diaspora in West Africa, as Sierra Leonean traders settled along the coast, and educated Sierra Leoneans served in the colonial administration in British West Africa. Diaspora and travel were coming together in significant ways during a period of economic depression to facilitate trafficking in cannabis by Sierra Leoneans. Complaints came from the governments of other British colonies that Sierra Leoneans were setting up trade in cannabis. In February 1933, the governor of the Gambia formally informed the governor of Sierra Leone that: ‘the Commissioner of Police reports that he has reason to believe that Diamba (cannabis sativa, also known as ‘opium’ locally) is being exported from Sierra Leone to the Gambia’.\(^\text{17}\) He sought the government of Sierra Leone’s assistance in putting a halt to this traffic, as cannabis was prohibited under the Dangerous Drugs Ordinance No. 6 of 1928 in the Gambia. Further seizures were made later that year in the Gambia involving Sierra Leoneans.

Complaints from the Gold Coast followed. In May 1937 the colonial secretary of the Gold Coast apprised his counterpart in Sierra Leone of this new Sierra Leonean enterprise in the Gold Coast and the need for the Sierra Leone government to halt these exports.\(^\text{18}\) Detailed customs reports

\(^\text{16}\) Ibid. Annual Reports for 1928, 1931 and 1935.
\(^\text{17}\) NASL, Fourah Bay College, CSO 1/25/13: ‘Export of Diamba (cannabis sativa) from Sierra Leone – Prohibition of’. Governor of the Gambia to the governor of Sierra Leone, 13 February 1933.
\(^\text{18}\) Ibid. Colonial secretary of the Gold Coast to colonial secretary of Sierra Leone, 3 May 1937. Possession of cannabis was prohibited in the Gold Coast by the 1935 Dangerous Drugs Ordinance.
from the port town of Takoradi in the Gold Coast reveal the mode of operations of Sierra Leonean drug traffickers. In December 1937 a marine police constable stopped a labourer employed by the African Manganese Company at the foot of the gangway of the *M. V. Adda* because of his bulging pockets. A search revealed seven packets of cannabis, and under questioning the labourer admitted obtaining the cannabis from the assistant cook on board the ship, a Sierra Leonean called Thomas Kofie. Kofie was apprehended and investigations unearthed a further 38 packets in his possession. Kofie confessed that he bought the drug from various persons in and around Freetown for threepence per packet.\(^{19}\) In subsequent months, more arrests followed of deckhands within the harbour area.

Sierra Leonean cannabis crossed the Atlantic to the New World in 1938, and the League of Nations on 19 July 1938 drew the attention of the government of Sierra Leone to the fact that cannabis from Freetown had made its way to Brooklyn, New York, aboard the ship *West Kebar*, an American ship owned by Barber Line. The package of 131 grams of cannabis was destined for Thomas Harris, an African American who obtained the drug from a Sierra Leonean, who came to work in the mess room while the ship was in the port of Freetown.\(^{20}\) With the outbreak of World War II, Sierra Leonean trafficking in cannabis disappeared from the official record, and the return of ex-servicemen from Asia after the war transformed the social map of cannabis use within West Africa. The common use of the terms ‘Indian hemp’ and *ganja* (of Hindi derivation) in Ghana and Nigeria have been cited as evidence of the Asian provenance of the drug in these countries. But the preceding section highlights an earlier use that spread from Sierra Leone before the later popularization by ex-servicemen.

In Ghana the use of cannabis — known also as *wee* and *obonsam tawa* (‘the devil’s tobacco’) — was associated with ex-servicemen and certain occupations noted for arduous and dangerous work — stevedores, night-soil men, prostitutes, criminals, fishermen, and farmers. Cannabis use had much in common with *akpeteshie* (locally-distilled gin), feeding into a class- and counter-culture that rationalized what were criminal activities.\(^{21}\) Further continuities are suggested in the ties between cocoa farmers and *akpeteshie* distillation in the colonial period, and cocoa farmers and cannabis cultivation in the independent era. The intercropping of cocoa and oil palm made the distillation of *akpeteshie* from oil palm an important provider of cash in the period before the cocoa trees began to bear fruit. Since

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20. NASL, Fourah Bay College, CSO 1/25/17: ‘Control of traffic in dangerous drugs’.

cocoa grows in forest areas, it was easy to conceal illicit distillation from the authorities. Likewise, high-quality cannabis (with high delta-nine-tetrahydrocannabinol or THC levels) grows in deep forests, again providing cash for cocoa farmers in the period between harvests. With the decline in the world market price for cocoa from 1958, cocoa farmers may have been encouraged to diversify into cannabis cultivation, especially as the market expanded to include students, musicians, and others engaged in the elaboration of youth culture. In the Brong Ahafo region, the heartland of cocoa cultivation, farmers switched to maize cultivation to feed the expanding urban centres when cocoa prices fell. A 2001 police report indicates that many farmers in the region now find the cultivation of cannabis more lucrative than maize.\textsuperscript{22} A 1995 report by the Observatoire géopolitique des drogues (OGD) makes a similar observation for the cocoa growing areas of Cameroon.\textsuperscript{23}

General economic decline in Africa in the 1970s may have reinforced the cultivation of cannabis as a cash crop in West Africa in the face of increasing demand. OGD reports in the 1990s indicate that, as an income earner, cannabis was rated 50:1 against groundnut cultivation in Senegal, and 300:1 against cocoa cultivation in the Ivory Coast.\textsuperscript{24} According to the 1996 report by the United Nations Drugs Control Program, African countries were responsible for a quarter of herbal cannabis and a tenth of cannabis resin seized worldwide. Southern and western Africa now account for the bulk of Africa’s supply of cannabis, with South Africa, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Ghana as the major sites of production.\textsuperscript{25} The Narcotics Control Board of Ghana estimates that from the 1980s about 50 percent of the domestic production of cannabis in Ghana was destined for the export market.

Cocaine and heroin in contemporary West Africa

Cannabis production, distribution, and consumption provided pathways for the incorporation of cocaine and heroin from the 1980s. The tightening of security controls at European and North American airports encouraged heroin traffickers from Thailand and cocaine traffickers from Brazil and other Latin American countries to use Africa as a staging point in their activities, and Africans as couriers or ‘mules’. Nigeria became the hub for this traffic in the 1980s, and as it earned notoriety internationally

\textsuperscript{22} Daily Graphic, 20 November 2001.
\textsuperscript{24} Allen, ‘Africa and the drugs trade’, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{25} UN Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, The Drug Nexus in Africa.
for drug trafficking, Nigerian dealers extended their operations to Ghana from the late 1980s. As was pointed out earlier in this article, the structure of drug-trafficking gangs in West Africa is far from hierarchical. Thus, Colombian cartels do not direct the business in West Africa, though personal contacts with Latin American drug networks are sought and coveted by West Africans.

The cultivation of coca, from which cocaine is manufactured, has a long history and is considered one of the first crops to be domesticated in the western hemisphere. Hunters and gatherers in the eastern Andes sampled the plant as famine food, thereby also discovering its narcotic and medicinal properties. Coca production and consumption remained a local feature in colonial Spanish America, used particularly by labourers in the silver mines, but the leaves did not fare well in transoceanic journeys. In 1860 a scientific study in Germany pioneered the isolation of cocaine, and from 1862 Merck, the German pharmaceutical company, began to produce small quantities of cocaine for the scientific community. Peru was the major producer of coca; however, the growing profitability of the industry led to the expansion of coca cultivation and the emergence of Dutch Java as the major rival to Peru by the early twentieth century. The expansion in world production transformed cocaine from an expensive drug to a very cheap one by the early twentieth century, providing the basis of a global cocaine epidemic from about 1905 through the 1920s in Europe and North America. It was the spread of cocaine to the underworld, like opium before it, and the evidence of widespread addiction that galvanized prohibitionist forces in the West to agitate for its restriction. These efforts met with success and by World War II there was little evidence of cocaine in Europe or in the United States. Prohibitionist forces in Europe and North America had taken a page from the lessons learnt about widespread opium addiction in China in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Both drugs were restricted to medicinal use and produced in small quantities, opium in the form of morphine, cocaine in the form of derivatives such as novocaine.26

The 1970s witnessed a revival in cocaine and heroin use in Europe and North America. Courtwright believes that this was because the earlier generation of Europeans and Americans that had witnessed the devastating impact of these drugs had passed away. The younger generation in the hippy movement of the 1960s experimented with cannabis, and, having no experience or memory of cocaine and heroin, incorporated these into their realm of social experience. Colombia, which had specialized in exporting cannabis to the United States in the 1960s, quickly branched into cocaine

in the 1970s and 1980s, and added heroin in the 1990s. Courtwright sums up the outcome:

By 1995 Colombia, already providing an estimated 70 to 80 percent of the world’s refined cocaine, was also one of the world’s major opium producers, with 20,000 hectares reportedly under cultivation. With the help of Chinese chemists, most of the crop was refined into an unusually pure heroin destined for the United States.27

Mexico was another important producer of opium, though most of the world’s production still came from Asia. Heroin today is produced in two main areas: the Golden Triangle (Thailand, Burma, and Laos), and the Golden Crescent (Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan). The timing in the expansion of coca, the opium poppy, and cannabis fields from the 1970s coincided with the decline in world prices for primary products from developing countries, compelling indigent farmers in several countries to turn to the cultivation of coca in Latin America, the opium poppy in Asia, and cannabis in sub-Saharan Africa. This shift was in response to a huge demand in Europe and North America for these drugs, and the emergence of drug cartels in Thailand, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico to meet this need. As European and North American airports tightened their security in the early 1980s, drug traffickers in Thailand and Latin America, who lacked the Mexican advantage of a land border with the United States, turned to Africa as a transit zone.28 West Africa served as an entrepôt with most of the cocaine and heroin coming through being destined for Europe and North America. There have been spillover effects and small domestic markets in cocaine and heroin have emerged in several African countries.

Dealing in, moving through: the Ghanaian connection

The Ghanaian newspaper, the People’s Daily Graphic, in 1992 asserted quite rightly that at the beginning of the 1980s ‘a negligible percentage of Ghanaians knew anything about heroin, cocaine or other complex synthetic drugs’. The situation had changed entirely by 1990 and between 1984 and 1990 as many as 1,744 illegal deals in narcotics had been reported in Ghana.29 The extension of Nigerian drug smuggling networks to Ghana in the 1980s sheds light on this transformation. Nigerians moved into drug trafficking early in the 1980s as Asian and Latin American drug traffickers sought alternative travel routes for their products to Europe and North America. Since Africa was not a known production site for either

27. Ibid., p. 38.
heroin or cocaine, supplies routed through Africa by African couriers did not arouse suspicion at airports in Europe and North America in the early 1980s. Even in the mid-1990s, most of the heroin and cocaine that arrived in Nigeria was smuggled onwards to the United States, Western Europe and elsewhere.

The first arrest of heroin traffickers in Nigeria occurred in 1982 at the Murtala Muhammad International Airport in Lagos. In 1984 the ruling Nigerian government under Muhammadu Buhari introduced the death penalty for drug smugglers. The execution of three young men for drug trafficking may have sent the first wave of Nigerian drug traffickers to Ghana. Subsequent intensive measures in Nigeria would send further waves of traffickers to Ghana, especially under the regime of Sani Abacha (1993–98), when General Musa Bamiyi was appointed head of the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), established in 1989. The image of NDLEA had been severely tarnished between 1989 and 1993 through corruption and the complicity of its officers in drug trafficking, and Bamiyi’s mandate was to change that. Nigeria was also responding to the international pressure to clamp down on drug traffickers. In 1991, for example, 60 percent of the heroin picked up at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York was carried by Nigerians or through Nigerian organizations.

Bernstein in his study of the drug economy in Ghana reported the general impression that initial Ghanaian involvement in the trafficking of cocaine and heroin was in the capacity as couriers and intermediaries for Nigerian drug syndicates. As Nigerians gained notoriety as drug traffickers, travelling from Nigerian airports and on Nigerian passports attracted strict security checks in Europe and North America. This is where Ghanaian intermediaries and couriers became crucial. Ghanaians began to frequent Thailand, Pakistan, and India to purchase heroin. By 1992, 42 Ghanaians had been convicted and sentenced to various terms of imprisonment in Thailand for drug trafficking, and a further 60 were awaiting trial. Other West Africans, such as Togolese and Sierra Leoneans, were also indicted at Asian airports like Bangkok for possessing heroin. Ghanaians also frequented Brazil to buy cocaine. Nigerians themselves remain very

active in drug trafficking in Ghana up to the present, and some have acquired Ghanaian passports. When the Ghanaian government in 1997 investigated reports that over a hundred Ghanaians were languishing in southern African jails, it discovered that over 80 percent were Nigerians possessing Ghanaian passports. 37

In the 1990s ‘cocaine-money’ and ‘cocaine-houses’ were very much in evidence in Ghana as the nouveaux riches displayed their wealth. So the Ghanaian Chronicle in 1997 conducted a thirteen-week undercover investigation of drug trafficking and drug dealing in Accra and at the Nsawam Medium Security Prison and published an illuminating account.

[Most] of the barons are the forex bureau operators, importers of building materials at Kantamanto, black market dealers at Zongo and Cow Lane, some spare parts dealers at Abossey Okai, and lately, hotel proprietors. Others are boutique shop owners, fabric sellers and car dealers. Aware of the harm the drug can cause its users, most of the dealers do not sniff the cocaine, inject themselves with the heroin or smoke the marijuana. 38

The Ghanaian economy was in recession in the 1990s, after being touted by the World Bank as a model for structural adjustment programmes in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Often the value of the Ghanaian cedi changed weekly on the currency market. Even boutiques priced shoes in US dollars and government contracts were quoted in dollars. The economy had become ‘dollarized’. Free trade had opened the economy to cheap imports from Asia, and Taiwan and Dubai had become supply sources for Ghanaian traders. Manufacturing had collapsed as Ghanaian goods had become uncompetitive, and few people could take the short-term bank loans at 45 percent interest and make good use of the money. Businesses had problems with liquidity, and people who had achieved the ‘Ghanaian dream’ of owning their own business were in danger of going down. Several small business owners — and some big ones — turned their attention to drug trafficking.

The timing of this shift underscores how global economic trends and policies impact on local economies and shape local responses. 39 That Ghanaians turned to drug trafficking does not make them innately criminal. Indeed, their response is not uniquely a Third World one. An investigative report by Forbes Magazine in November 2003 sheds light on how Vancouver in British Columbia (Canada) is emerging as one of the leading exporters of high grade cannabis to the United States. With the annual trade from Canada valued at between US $4 billion and US $7 billion,

39. For a vivid depiction of the adverse impact of World Bank and International Monetary Fund policies on Jamaica’s economy and society, see the documentary Life and Debt (New Yorker Films Artwork, 2001).
cannabis ‘has emerged as Canada’s most valuable agricultural product — bigger than wheat, cattle or timber’. This illicit industry in British Columbia emerged during the decline in tourism, and when mad cow disease had led to the United States banning imports of Canadian beef. So an ‘army of ordinary folks’ decided to exploit the 5,000-mile, thinly-guarded border with the United States by growing high-tech cannabis on indoor farms and exporting the product to the United States. The contraband dealers then laundered the money through previously unprofitable businesses, which can then afford to charge artificially low prices for legitimate goods.\footnote{Quentin Hardy, ‘Inside dope’, \textit{Forbes Magazine}, 10 November 2003, pp. 146–54.} The parallels with the Ghanaian example obscure the First World - Third World divide.

The \textit{Ghanaian Chronicle}’s investigative report revealed that, with about $20,000, an individual interested in heroin trafficking could organize what is referred to as a ‘triangle trip’: a trip to India or Pakistan to buy high-quality heroin called ‘brown’ or ‘off-white’ (purchased at about $4,500 a kilogram), return to Ghana for the repackaging of the product, then onward transmission to the United States. Another route was from Accra to Addis Ababa and then Bangkok on Ethiopian Airlines to acquire the heroin. Depending on the quantity of heroin, the individual could make as much as $100,000 - $150,000 in the United States. Expenses were minimal and couriers were paid between $5,000 and $10,000. The money is then laundered through various means. The boutique owners and dealers in fabrics bought clothes and materials for their shops, the car-dealers imported cars, and forex bureau operators wired the money through \textit{bureaux de change}. Cocaine was sourced in Brazil, where a kilogram could be obtained for $5,000. This trip began with a road journey from Accra to Abidjan, then a flight to South Africa with an onward connection to Rio de Janeiro. The financiers seldom went on these trips personally, but sent couriers. When they embarked on these trips personally, they carried two passports, as they knew a trip to Pakistan, Bangkok or Brazil aroused suspicion. The passport with the visa stamp for these Asian or Latin American countries was not shown on re-entry into Ghana.\footnote{\textit{Ghanaian Chronicle}, 25–27 July 1997.} They usually shipped or mailed the drugs back to Ghana.

Diaspora, globalization, and travel overlap in important ways, but there are also significant disjunctures when it comes to drug trafficking. Though diaspora had dispersed peoples of African origins to Brazil, India and Pakistan, these were not common travel destinations for Africans in the twentieth century. Globalization had opened new avenues of trade, and Ghanaians went to novel destinations like Dubai and Taiwan. Ghanaian security officers know the difference between these different types of travel and the
implications. Drug traffickers quickly became wise to this and tried to circumvent the disjunctures through the use of multiple passports.

The networks that were forged to undertake drug smuggling reveal the coming together of groups in ways that cut across ethnicity and nationality. In 1993 Emmanuel Boateng Addo, recently returned from serving time in a French jail and highly aggrieved as the only person to serve time in a drug-trafficking gang of three, spilled the beans. In the mid-1980s, when Ghanaians were yet to become players in international drug trafficking, Addo, together with Said Sinare, the managing director of Global Medical Supply and in 1993 a member of parliament, and the Burkina Faso ambassador to Ghana, Madam Mamouna Ouattara, were working the heroin route from Accra through Abidjan to Bombay. Addo and Sinare did the travelling on diplomatic passports issued by Ouattara. On returning to Abidjan from Bombay, Ambassador Ouattara would meet the two on the tarmac in her diplomatic car. The heroin would be packed into innocuous objects such as loudspeakers, and Addo and Sinare would emplane for Paris to deliver the heroin. Addo was arrested on a trip to Paris on 9 June 1986 with 7.5 kilograms of cocaine, travelling on a Ghanaian passport in his own name. It is not clear whether this was a freelance trip. Ouattara and Sinare did retain a lawyer for him, somehow managed an early release from jail on ‘medical grounds’, and gave Addo monetary compensation on his return to Ghana.42

Other networks were far less elaborate and concentrated on drug dealing in Ghana, where the spillover effect of drugs in transit, ‘been-tos’, and expatriates supported a burgeoning market in drugs. Thus, a Ghanaian sailor, Ahingwah Saeed Narh, informed two Malian traders operating in Ghana, Sulemana Dao and Batiemako Touré, of how cocaine could be easily obtained in Brazil, and that there was a ready market back in Ghana for the stuff. The three met in Rio de Janeiro in January 1995, bought an amount of cocaine and mailed it in the name of Dao to a Malian address. They knew it would be easier to smuggle it into Ghana from Mali than from Brazil. They did get the cocaine into Ghana, but were caught dealing in Kokomlemle, a suburb of Accra.43

Some networks were based in the diaspora with members from several countries. One major heroin ring involving Ghanaians, Nigerians, Turks and Vietnamese based in the United States was busted in November 1993. One of its leaders, Papa Arko, a former Ghanaian soccer star, was arrested in Curaçao by local anti-drug authorities working in conjunction with the US Drug Enforcement Administration. Other members of the gang, most of them with New Jersey addresses, were arrested in the United States.

42. The Statesman, 16 September 1993.
The group had specialized in moving heroin worth millions of dollars into the United States from Thailand, Korea, Ghana and South America.44 Another Ghanaian ring was rounded up in Amsterdam in 1992 and 15 Ghanaian men and women resident in Holland were sent to jail. Over a short period they had moved 50 kilograms of cocaine and heroin from Ghana and Thailand to central Europe, the United States, and Canada, using Amsterdam as their base. Perhaps what irritated the prosecution most was the fact that all 15 were recipients of social services allowances through fraudulent means, though the ring leader, 37-year old Yaw Bentum, allegedly owned a $250,000 apartment in the United States.45

But the drug trafficker who caught the attention of Interpol, several foreign governments, and lastly the government of Ghana, was Raymond Kwame Amankwaah, alias Chanda Keita.

Raymond Kwame Amankwaah: drug baron extraordinaire

Raymond Amankwaah can be described as a ‘drug baron’ in the scale of his operations and his international connections. A handsome Asante man born into a middle-class family and with a good education, Amankwaah could have been a lawyer or a politician. He turned his attention to business: drug business. He lived abroad mostly and on trips to Ghana kept a very low profile. He seemed like a genuine, wealthy businessman, and in the mid-1990s he was building an ice cream factory, Flamingo Food Limited, on Spintex Road in an industrial part of Accra. He had built a beautiful residential home in the exclusive Airport Residential Area. He had a registered company, Himpex Limited, under his real name with offices on Kwame Nkrumah Avenue, but no one knew its line of business.

Then in April 1995 the British police, after an eighteen-month operation, busted what was described as possibly the biggest single crack cocaine ring in the world. At the centre was crack cocaine worth £1 million, found at a luxury apartment in Park Lane in central London. The ring was led by a Ghanaian called Chanda Keita, certainly not a Ghanaian name, described as ‘highly intelligent, charming and very obviously well-heeled’. According to the London daily, *The Times*, three others, Mariame Keita, the wife of Chanda Keita, André N’Guessan, described as his number two man, and Charles Oppong had been remanded by the Southwark Crown Court. The British police suspected these were not their real names. The police believed that, during the 18 months of their operation, this family-run West African gang had supplied crack cocaine worth over £5.3 million. Chanda Keita, described as the world’s most prolific crack dealer,

could not be found. A heavily pregnant Mariame Keita was sentenced to 16 years’ imprisonment, André N’Guessan to 20 years, and Charles Oppong, an illegal immigrant, to five years. His role was described by the judge as ‘peripheral’.46

By June 1995 Chanda Keita had been identified as Raymond Kwame Amankwaah.47 Further investigation in subsequent months revealed that Interpol had issued an arrest warrant for Raymond Amankwaah on 17 September 1990 on behalf of France for drug trafficking. Two women arrested with 3.3 kilograms of cocaine mentioned Amankwaah as the brain behind the operation. Amankwaah was sentenced in absentia to 20 years’ imprisonment by a French court. Amankwaah apparently owned several passports under different nationalities, including an Ivorian one with the name Kouame Amangouah issued on 15 November 1985.48 In 1996 Amankwaah was arrested in Quito, Ecuador, for drug trafficking. French attempts to extradite him proved unsuccessful.49 He was also prosecuted in absentia in Ghana with the aid of Interpol. Since a law had been introduced in Ghana authorizing the confiscation of the assets of drug traffickers by the state, the Police Narcotics Unit in June 1997 filed notices for the seizure of Amankwaah’s ice cream factory and his house in the Airport Residential Area. The Greater Accra Regional Tribunal ordered the confiscation in July 1999.50 Amankwaah had disappeared, but his hand was still at work. In November 1998, two women arrested with several kilograms of cocaine in New York claimed they were couriers for Amankwaah.51

In the 1990s in Accra it was public knowledge which houses were built by cocaine money, and which flashy cars were cocaine cars. Taxi drivers supplied this information without solicitation. In the Ghanaian video film Okukuseku (Parts I and II), even Agya Budu, a palm wine tapper living in peri-urban Accra, easily made the acquaintance of a cocaine dealer in the big city when he needed one for his devious schemes.52 Is this acceptable wealth in Ghanaian society? Do people draw some spurious distinction between smuggling drugs to the West and dealing in drugs in Ghana? What brings Ghanaians, Nigerians, Malians, Turks, and Vietnamese into a single smuggling ring? Is the diaspora reshaping identity in ways that permit the forging of such networks? In the next section I shall provide some

46. This composite picture is reconstructed from newspaper reports in Daily Graphic, 18 April 1995, The Independent, 10 May 1995, and Daily Graphic, 13 August 1996.
47. Daily Graphic, 1 June 1995.
52. This plot unfolds in Okukuseku Part 1 (Timatape Productions, n.d.).
tentative suggestions in an endeavour to make sense of this widespread phenomenon of international drug trafficking among Ghanaians.

**Popular culture and ideology in Africa and the diaspora**

Klein cited how Nigerian officials assign greed as the reason why Nigerians responded enthusiastically to the opportunity to traffic in drugs. He quotes the inspector-general of police’s remark about the ‘societal values placed on the acquisition of wealth irrespective of the source’. The truth is that corrupt government begets a corrupt society and vice versa. Nigerian official corruption is legendary. When Abacha died in dramatic fashion, members of his family held huge amounts of money. His son reportedly had $800 million in $100 bills packed in suitcases. This was not legitimate wealth. Ordinary Nigerians who do not have access to the resources of the state, and who are struggling to get by in a declining economy, try desperate measures in desperate times. Such measures have included internet fraud and prostitution in Europe.

With the rot starting at the top and spreading across the whole social fabric, many Nigerians feel fully entitled to ‘try their luck’ when the opportunity arises. The agencies of state are seen as exercising the most outrageous hypocrisy when preaching respect for international law. The possibility of capture is taken into account as the price to be paid for the chance of success. Punishment only goes to reinforce the idea of the unjust world in which the poor have to bear the full brunt of the law, while the rich ‘get away scot free’.

Indeed, the very people in power or those around them were sometimes rumoured to be involved in drug trafficking, and Ibrahim Babangida and his wife could not shake off these rumours during the entire tenure of his government. Ghanaians were astounded in 1998 to see an international newspaper, the *African Observer*, label allegations of complicity in drug trafficking against the Rawlings government and the first family in particular, when a Ghanaian diplomat, Frank Benneh, was arrested in Switzerland for drug trafficking. Two Ghanaian newspapers, *Free Press* and the *Ghanaian Chronicle*, had the audacity to reprint the *African Observer* article and were taken to court by the government for seditious libel. Though the government stated categorically that the allegation was untrue, it was difficult for the government to dispel the rumours even when they were unfounded.

The ‘criminalization of the state’ in Africa has led to the loss of legitimacy by many governments. ‘Pirates’ seize the state, and gangsters

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reconstitute themselves as legitimate governments. The Charles Taylor government in Liberia was a good case in point.\textsuperscript{57} This leads to the perversion of morality in society as a whole. Globalization has transformed public understanding of politics and economics in West Africa in striking ways. Even market women and street peddlars in Accra know about the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Ghanaians have become aware that their economy is not controlled by their government: this is made abundantly clear daily in the newspapers, and on radio and television. The decade-long civil war in Sierra Leone that ended in 2002 was ignited by stark social inequities, and youths who lived on the street and had given up any hope of social mobility came to play a prominent role in the mad violence that characterized this conflict. Conducting research in Sierra Leone in July 2002, I asked several Sierra Leoneans if they believed the causes of the civil war had now been resolved. The answer was in the negative: the civil war ended because Sierra Leoneans got tired of fighting. Some doubted that any Sierra Leonean government had the ability to effect a radical transformation of the economy, since the control of the economy lay with external forces.

My point is this. Over the past decade or so, I have seen West Africans in Africa and the diaspora become very critical of the West. I have seen the discourse on reparations converge where slavery and colonialism are concerned. Both causes have in common the denigration of Africans and people of African descent. I have viewed with a mixture of amusement and dismay striking contradictions in the moral economy of Ghanaians living in Britain. Born-again Christians see nothing contradictory about working under a false name. Born-again Christians arrange false marriages to secure resident status. London has become a huge melting pot. The English are overwhelmed by this deluge of nationalities. Ghanaian acquaintances in London rationalize this state of affairs in an interesting way: ‘we are here because you were there’, referring to the fact of British colonialism and the empire coming home to roost.

West Africans are beginning to talk of racism and racial stereotyping in ways that echo racial discourses in the West, including West Africans who have never left the countries of their birth. Attend a ‘hipline’ concert in Ghana — the Ghanaian equivalent of hiphop — and you will see male artistes in work boots, sagging baggy pants, tank tops, pierced ears with rings, and scarves on their heads. This is American popular culture writ large. Many have never visited the West. Indeed, feigned American accents in Ghana have led to the coining of the term LAFA (‘locally acquired foreign accent’). This is where Butler’s distinction between ‘cultural diaspora’ and ‘ancestral diaspora’ is instructive. A cultural diaspora is an ideological diaspora, and globalization has facilitated the spread of African American popular culture.

Peoples of different ancestries have the liberty to join ideological diasporas. American ‘gangsta’ rap thus enters the protest discourse of Muslim youth in France. Hollywood gangster movies have inspired many Nigerian and Ghanaian video films.\textsuperscript{58} Whether shared diasporic culture provides the meeting point for transnational criminal networks involved in drug trafficking is an angle worth exploring, though in itself a completely separate research topic.

Sojourning abroad is seen by Ghanaians as a ‘struggle’. The very name given to Britain by Ghanaians, ‘Babylon’, is suggestive of the struggle. Very few Ghanaians who grew up in Ghana state that they do not intend to return home to Ghana to settle. But many are stuck in foreign countries because the wealth they are expected to return home with has not materialized. And they will rather die in shame abroad than return home and be ridiculed. Graduates from the University of Ghana work as cleaners in office buildings and as pressers in small clothing factories in London. The goal of returning home a ‘big man’ or a ‘big woman’ has become so elusive for many. This is not just a Ghanaian phenomenon. The shared experience of Third World people in the West creates a sense of community. Racial ideologies in the diaspora, and an acute sense of an unequal North-South divide among former colonies, have interfaced to create unique understandings in Africa and the diaspora. So cocaine cars screech in Accra and cocaine houses adorn often untarred roads. It is public knowledge. It is one up on the West. So long as the drugs move on and do not stay in Ghana. That is an illusion.

\textit{Conclusion}

I have sought to make sense of a worrying phenomenon in contemporary Ghana from a Ghanaian perspective. As a Ghanaian, and knowing the background of some individuals imprisoned for drug trafficking in Europe and North America, it is difficult for me to accept that these are just people with criminal tendencies. Geographically, West Africa has come to assume this middleman position between Asia and South America in the trafficking of heroin and cocaine to Europe and North America. In an important recent work on the Ghana-Togo border, Paul Nugent underscored how for border peoples smuggling was not a crime; it was a rational response to an economic situation based on having comparative information on the prices of goods on both sides of the border.\textsuperscript{59} Ghanaians, wedged strategically between

\textsuperscript{58} For examples, see \textit{Dogo Yaro} (Ideal Concept Productions, 2001), which details the exploits of a cocaine trafficker in Accra; and \textit{The GSM Connection} (Kas-Vid International Limited, n.d.), a film about a bank heist in Nigeria. The sophistication of the criminal gangs in both films — computer hackers and all — reveals the influences of a cultural diaspora. In both films the criminals are interdicted, showing that the Mercedes Benzes and flashy cars driven by the criminals are only short-term benefits and a life of crime is just not viable in the long term.

Continents, have discovered how to transform $20,000 into $100,000 in a couple of months. It is illegal. It is immoral. But in focusing on drug trafficking as a criminal activity, we lose sight of why a big demand persists in the West for cocaine and heroin and why West Africans would risk life and lengthy imprisonment for money. The answer is more complex than just plain greed. An interrogation of political economy is an important beginning.

Bibliography

References to other sources, including interviews, archives, newspaper articles, websites and grey publications, are contained in relevant footnotes.

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