Cannabis

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Although the cannabis plant is now ubiquitous, unlike other wide-spread types of hallucinogen (such as Psilocybe 'magic mushrooms' or 'Datura'), it is not native to more than one continent. Cannabis is a plant native to Central Asia that has spread all over the world and is probably the most widely used recreational and usually illegal drug in the world, being smoked from the inner cities of America and Europe to the outlying atolls of Micronesia. The plant's natural homeland is most likely in the regions north of Afghanistan and the Altai mountains of southern Siberia. Its cultural and cosmopolitan distribution is no doubt due to a combination of cultural and natural factors. As Brian Du Toit, following Darwin, puts it: 'plant distribution can be brought about by winds, currents, and similar natural forces. It can also follow animal activity and migration by becoming attached to their feet or hooves, or by being eaten by birds.' In the case of cannabis, much still remains to be discovered about both these natural forces and the cultural contacts that were equally important.

Cannabis is a dioecious plant (i.e. an individual cannabis plant is either male or female). Whilst both produce good quality fibre it is the females that are the best producers of the cannabinoids, the psychoactive compounds present in the plant, the most significant of which is delta-l-tetrahydrocannabinol, most commonly referred to in its abbreviated form, THC. Of the three cannabis species, C. sativa has a number of strains sought out by smokers, such as Acapulco Gold and Durban Poison. C. indica is said to be the most potent psychoactive species whilst C. ruderalis comes in a poor third.

It is not yet clear where cannabis was first cultivated. Perhaps the people of Central Asia did so themselves – we must not be led to too readily assume that it must have been the more 'advanced' Chinese who would necessarily have preceded their more 'backward' Central Asian neighbours of the great steppes in using and subsequently cultivating hemp as either a fibre plant or a drug. Central Asia, a vast land of deserts, steppes and oases is, despite its name, usually seen as of marginal historical influence, a kind of cultural vacuum between the great civilisations of China to the east, India to the south and the Middle East to its west. Yet, very early on, thriving trade routes passed through the region and these became known as the Silk Roads, on account of the importance of Chinese silk for both Muslim and Western merchants. It is known to archaeologists that Central Asia was an important center for the transmission of new discoveries and religious ideas from prehistoric times onwards. The hemp plant, being of major technological importance as a fibre and being one of the most influential psychoactive plants in human culture, was most likely a key trade item from a very early date. The anthropologist

Weston La Barre was of the opinion that cannabis use goes as far back as the Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age) period as part of a religio-shamanic complex. Certainly the use of the plant had already spread across an area stretching from Romania to China, secondly south to India and on to south-east Asia, and last, and certainly not least, to western Asia, from where it diffused to Africa, Europe and eventually the Americas.

It seems most likely that the cultivation of hemp may have originated in north-east Asia (north and north-east China and south-eastern Siberia). It is the only fibre plant of any great importance in the region and, as such, must have been eagerly sought out for its numerous technological uses. The earliest indirect evidence of hemp use is from decorated Chinese Neolithic pottery having cord impressions on it (see below for similar pottery from prehistoric Europe). Painted pottery from Honan province belonging to the Neolithic Yang-shao culture (c. 4200-3200 BC) also indicates the probably presence of cultivated hemp. Pieces of what are thought to be hemp cloth have been found on the inside of a jar belonging to a Neolithic culture at a site in the western province of Gansu (2150-1780 BC). Other probably finds of hemp fragments dated to the Chinese Neolithic period have been discovered at a site in Chekiang province. The earliest uncontroversial find of fibre cloth is from the Western Chou era. The indications are that in early China hemp seeds were also a significant foodstuff. North-east Asia is still associated with shamanism today and it was surely important throughout the North, Central and East Asia during prehistoric times. If the cannabis plant was practically important as a fibre plant to these early societies then it was probably equally important in their spiritual life. Direct and incontrovertible evidence for this comes from a later prehistoric period of southern Siberia (see below). In Chinese hemp is known as ta-ma, meaning 'great fibre' (ma being 'fibre'). In the ancient Chinese script 'ma' is supposed to represent fibres placed on a rack inside a roofed shelter. Yet this technological use for hemp does not appear to have been the only one, as Hui-Lin Li says:

that the stupefying effect of the hemp plant was commonly known from extremely early times is also indicated linguistically. The character ma very early assumed two connotations. One meaning was, 'numerous or chaotic', derived from the nature of the plant's fibers. The second connotation was one of numbness or senselessness, apparently derived from the properties of the fruits and leaves which were used as infusions for medicinal purposes … as a character it [ma] combines with other characters to form such bisyllabic words as ma-tsui, narcotic (ma and 'drunkenness'); ma-mu, numb (ma and 'wood'); and ma-p'i, paralysis (ma and 'rheumatism').

The earliest of the Chinese pharmacopoeias, the Pên Ching, dating from the first century BC but containing much material undoubtedly of older date, makes it clear that the Chinese knew the psychoactive properties of cannabis: 'To take too much makes people see demons and throw themselves about like maniacs. But if one takes it over a long period of time one can communicate with the spirits and one's own body becomes light.' The Taoists used cannabis as a hallucinogen by adding it to other ingredients in incense burners (something also done by the Assyrians). In the sixth-century AD work Wu Tsang Ching, or 'Manual of the Five Viscera', there is the following instruction for magicians: 'If you wish to command demonic apparitions to present themselves you should constantly eat the inflorescences of the hemp plant.' It was also believed that using cannabis and ginseng together gave one visionary powers to see into the future.

Despite the numerous Chinese references to cannabis it has never played a comparable role in Chinese social life to that it achieved in the Middle East and India. Hui-lin Li has suggested that the austere and somewhat puritanical system of ethics and social behaviour founded by Confucius put a stop to the widespread use of cannabis as a psychoactive substance. The often unpredictable effects of cannabis could easily result in a very un-Confucian way of behaving. Opium, says Li, with its narcotic effects, was far more socially acceptable. Whilst a superficially persuasive explanation for the marginal role of cannabis use in China, it fails to explain why alcohol – surely the most un-Confucian of all inebriants! – should have played such an important role in Chinese history. The real explanation may lie elsewhere. That cannabis may have been one of the main psychoactive substances used by the shamans of archaic China may have resulted in the decline of the habit along with the shamanism that gave its use its meaning. The other reason for its marginal place is that traditionally China has seen itself as the unmoving center and the surrounding barbarians of its northern and western borders as a volatile threat. Cannabis, as the chosen drug of many of these neighbouring peoples, would have been an unsavoury choice for many Han Chinese, who didn't wish to indulge in 'barbarian habits'. This still holds true today. In Chinese Turkestan (Xinjiang) the local Muslim peoples, mainly Uighurs, are still associated with cannabis by the Han Chinese. According to Owen Lattimore, a great traveller and expert on Central Asia, in 1937-38, 42 per cent of exports from Chinese Turkestan to India down one of the old silk routes were in the form of cannabis resin. That cannabis may have been one of the main psychoactive substances used by the shamans of archaic China may have resulted in the decline of its use as the cult of shamanism gave way to religion organised on a larger scale. Hemp does not seem to have been used to any significant degree for its psychoactive properties by the Japanese people, although hemp strands were an important symbol in betrothal and marriage (as were hemp seeds in Europe, see below). The 'gohei', a sacred rod used by Shinto priests to banish impure spirits, has traditionally been made of hemp.

In contrast to the history of hemp in China, cannabis (bhang, ganja) has been widely used in India throughout its history and down to the present day. In the ancient text Artharvaveda, cannabis is described as one of a number of herbs that 'release us from anxiety'. Various psychoactive preparations containing cannabis were sacred to the gods, particularly Shiva and Indra. One of Shiva's epithets was 'Lord of Bhang'. Cannabis has been widely used in the Tantric tradition as an aphrodisiac incorporated into ceremonial practices. Cannabis seems to have been introduced into south-east Asia around the sixteenth century. Since almost all the common terms for the plant have their etymological root in the Sanskrit word ganja (in Laos hemp is kan xa, in Vietnam can xa, in Thailand kancha or kanhcha, and in

Cambodia kanhcha), it is clear that it was under Indian influence that cannabis spread into the region.

The method of use of the plant for its psychoactive effects in south-east Asia has been in for form of 'grass', i.e. the leaves, flowering tops and stalks were smoked, usually with tobacco. In Cambodia the plant is sometimes boiled and some of the resulting liquid is sprinkled on tobacco and then it is smoked. The smoking of cannabis resin in the region seems to be due to recent foreign influence. Although Cambodians are reported to be light smokers of the plant, in Thailand the problems that sometimes occur with chronic habitual smoking are traditionally treated by native medicine men who employ a certain root to wean the inveterate smoker off the drug. At least until the current 'drug problem' (introduced and caused by Western foreigners) it was common-place in Thailand to employ cannabis for its analgesic and other medical uses. An infusion of the tops was given in small quantities (to avoid intoxication) at meal times to women who had just given birth. Similar practices are reported from Cambodia (although there the hemp is an ingredient in an alcoholic decoction). Fewer medical applications for cannabis are reported from Laos which, according to the researcher Marie Alexandrine Martin, is most likely due to the ready availability of opium derivatives which are used instead. For both their psychoactive effects and flavour, hemp leaves are popular in the local cuisines of the region, being variously used in soups, curries, fish fritters and other dishes.

Hemp moved westward out of its Central Asian home at a very early date. Evidence for its use in eastern Europe as a psychoactive substance can be traced to the later part of the third millennium BC. Two archaeological finds are of particular interest. The first was found in a pit-grave burial in Romania and is an artefact known as a 'pipe cup'. This particular pipe cup and another one, roughly contemporaneous, from a north Caucasian early Bronze Age site, both contained the charred remnants of cannabis seeds. This evidence, in conjunction with other finds across Europe (such as the great number of hemp seeds found in Neolithic contexts in central Europe) has been interpreted by the Oxford archaeologist Andrew Sherratt as foreshadowing the later ritual use of cannabis. There is further prehistoric evidence that cannabis was widely used as a psychoactive substance on the steppes. Russian archaeologists have discovered large-scale Iranian fire temples in the Kara Kum desert region of western Central Asia which contain the remains of cannabis, opium and Ephedra in ritual vessels. These ancient temples are dated to the first millennium BC.

In the fifth century BC the Greek historian Herodotus wrote of the use of cannabis by the Scythian people of the Black Sea region:

On a framework of tree sticks, meeting at the top, they stretch pieces of woollen cloth. Inside this tent they put a dish with hot stones on it. Then they take some hemp seed, creep into the tent, and throw the seed on the hot stones. At once it begins to smoke, giving off a vapour unsurpassed by any vapour bath one could find in Greece. The Scythians enjoy it so much they howl with pleasure. Amazingly, almost identical hemp-smoking equipment was found by the Russian archaeologist Rudenko at the Pazyryk site in southern Siberia at the other end of the vast stepped of Asia. Not only was the equipment the same but the dating of the site makes it contemporary with the report of Herodotus from the Black Sea area thousands of miles from Pazyryk. No clearer proof could be found to indicate that the ritual use of cannabis was widespread in prehistoric Asia and Europe.

Cannabis was also widely used in the ancient Near East. It was used by the Assyrians as a fumigation to relieve sorrow and grief, which is surely an indication of psychoactive use. Hemp was widely used in Ancient Egypt as a rope fibre. Remains of hemp have been discovered in the eighteenth-dynasty tomb of Akhenaten (Amenophis IV) at el-Amarna and cannabis pollen was found on the mummy of Rameses II (nineteenth dynasty). The suggestion that cannabis was kaneh bosm (one of the ingredients of the Holy Oil which God instructed Moses to prepare; see Exodus 30:23) has been rejected by most authorities.

Its use among the Islamic mystical order of Sufis and Dervishes has been equally controversial. Many contemporary Sufis have wanted to distance themselves from what has now become a disreputable substance to many governments. Nevertheless, bearing in mind the long tradition of cannabis use in Central Asian and Middle Eastern religious life, that the Sufis made no use of it is something difficult to believe. Sufis have been called 'the hippies of the Arab world' by Ernest Abel in an otherwise accurate book on cannabis, but this is a trite and unfounded comparison. Sufism has been a continuous mystical tradition for over a thousand years and is a spiritual path that has been followed by many of the greatest poets, thinkers and scientists of the Islamic world. The hippy movement (if indeed it is such) has been around for just over thirty years and the literary and philosophical output (let alone the scientific!) scarcely bears comparison. Certainly cannabis was, and still is, widely used for recreational purposes in Muslim countries and this was certainly the case in Arabic Egypt. The diffusion of the plant into sub-Saharan Africa seems to have been partly due to migrant communities of Muslims from the north and to Arab merchants trading along the east African coast. Although it seems difficult to believe cannabis was not, at least according to some experts, present in West Africa before the Second World War.

In a source cited by Brian Du Toit, the famous explorer David Livingstone describes the use of matokwane (cannabis) by the Makololo people:

we had ample opportunity for observing the effects of this matokwane smoking on our men. It makes them feel very strong in body, but it produces exactly the opposite effect upon the mind. Two of our finest young men became inveterate smokers, and partially idiotic. The performances of a group of matokwane smokers are somewhat grotesque; they are provided with a calabash of pure water, a split bamboo, five feet long, the great pipe, which has a large calabash of kudu's horn chamber to contain the water, through which the smoke is drawn Narghille fashion, on its way to the mouth. Each smoker takes a few whiffs, the last being an extra long one, and hands the pipe to his neighbour. He seems to swallow the fumes; for, striving against the convulsive action of the muscles of the chest and throat, he takes a mouthful of water from the calabash, waits a few seconds, and then pours water and smoke from his mouth down the groove of the bamboo, The smoke causes violent coughing in all, and in some a species of frenzy which passes away in a rapid stream of unmeaning words, or short sentences, as, 'the green grass grows', 'the fat cattle thrive', 'the fish swim'.

Potted histories of cannabis often imply that hemp's intoxicating properties were virtually unknown in Europe until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when travellers to Egypt and other parts of the East 'discovered the drug'. Such versions of events are built on the false premise that alcohol is and always has been the inebrient par excellence of European culture and that other substances like cannabis and opium are recent arrivals. The evidence for the use of hemp in prehistoric Europe has already been mentioned and there is no shortage of early historical references to its use throughout European history. Palaeobotanical studies have shown that hemp was cultivated (presumably as a fibre first and foremost) in eastern England by the Anglo-Saxons from AD 400 onwards. A cloth made of hemp was found in the late sixth-century tomb of the Merovingian queen Arnegunde in Paris. Its use among the Vikings is known from the discovery of plant remains at a castle in Denmark, fishing line and cloth made of hemp from Norwegian graves and cannabis seeds found in one of their ships.

Antoine Rabelais, who was the father of François Rabelais (c. 1494-1553), the famous doctor and writer of the immortal Gargantua and Pantagruel, is known to have cultivated hemp on a large scale at his property at Cinais, south-west of Chinon in France. It was perhaps in helping out on his father's property that the young Rabelais first gained knowledge of cannabis. In the aforementioned work he dedicates three chapters to hemp, which he calls 'the herb Pantagruelion'. Under King Henry VIII of England a law was passed that instructed all subjects having arable land to put aside some of it for the cultivation of hemp or flax to provide sufficient fibre for the making of rigging for ships. In England, as elsewhere in Europe, hemp was indispensable as a fibre plant; its use permeated all spheres of life. William Bulleyn (1500-76), who was related to Anne Boleyn, Henry's second wife, extolls it thus: 'no Shippe can sayle without hempe … no Plowe, or Carte, can be without ropes … the fisher and fouler muste have hempe, to make their nettes. And no archer can wante his bowe string: and the Malt man for his sackes, with it the belle is rong, to service in the Church.' The word canvas is derived from cannabis on account of its use as a fibre.

Cannabis was known by numerous names – neck weed, gallows grass (this because of its being the fibre from which the hangman's noose was made) and Welsh parsley among them. In certain parts of Britain (such as the Welsh border, Herefordshire and Oxfordshire) the seeds of the hemp plant were used in a very specific form of folk divination. In order to see a vision of her future husband a girl would have to retire alone at the witching hour to a churchyard, and whilst throwing the seeds over her left shoulder, enchant the following short rhyme:

Hempseed I sow, Hempseed, grow.
He that is to marry me,
Come after me and mow.

If she was lucky a spectral form of her husband-to-be mowing with his scythe would be there when she looked behind her. If she were not so fortunate she would see a coffin behind her, signifying that she would die whilst still young and unmarried. Such a use of hemp seed is known from the seventeenth century and certainly continued into the nineteenth and, perhaps, even the twentieth century. What is remarkable is the fact that very similar folk practices are also known from the Ukraine. Ukrainian girls with hemp seeds in their belts jump on a pile of hemp, crying out:
Andrei, Andrei,
I plant the hemp seed on you.
Will God let me know
With whom I will sleep?

Then they take off their blouses, fill their mouths with water to spit on the hemp seeds and run around their houses a magical three times. Dances involving hemp were also common in eastern Europe, sometimes in connection with magically aiding the hemp crop to grow and sometimes as part of marriage feasts and other wedding celebrations. Sula Benet sees another cultural role of hemp as having archaic roots:
[a] custom connected with the dead in parts of eastern Europe is the throwing of a handful of seeds into the fire as an offering to the dead during the harvesting of hemp – similar to the custom of the Scythians and of the Pazyryk tribes, two-and-a-half-thousand years ago. There is no doubt that some of the practices, such as funeral customs, were introduced by the Scythians during their victorious advance into southeast Russia, including the Caucasus, where they remained for centuries … hemp never lost its connection with the cult of the dead. Even today in Poland and Lithuania, and in former times also in Russia, on Christmas Eve when it is believed that the dead visit their families, a soup made of hemp seeds, called semieniatka, is served for the dead souls to savour.
As the use of hemp goes back far further into European prehistory than even the Scythian period (see above) such customs may have their ultimate origins even further back than Benet supposes.

Hemp also had a number of uses in early medicine, being used to treat gout, worms, tumours and inflammation. Nor were its psychoactive properties forgotten. Bulleyn warns that it can bring madness and it was a seventeenth-century belief that apothecaries and others that traded in cannabis often became epileptics, an effect attributed to the seeds. Although the seeds of cannabis are the last part of the plant that we would associate with psychoactive effects, this was a widespread idea in past centuries. William Turner (c. 1508-c. 1568) quotes an earlier author called Simeon Sethy (or Sethi) who wrote that: 'hemp sede if it be taken out of mesure taketh mens wittes from them.' Turner himself says it is the powder of the dried leaves that makes men 'drunk'. William Salmon, writing in 1693, says that cannabis seeds, leaves, juice, essence and decoctions were readily available in druggists' shops at the time, thus showing that cannabis was a widely used medicine.

Despite precursors such as Rabelais, sustained interest in cannabis among the literati may be said to have begun with Le Club des Haschischins. This informal club met in the privately owned baroque palace known in the 1840s as the Hôtel Pimodan at 17 quai d'Anjou on the Isle St Louis in Paris. Whilst many of its members were prominent in the artistic community (Honoré de Balzac, Alexandre Dumas, Théophile Gautier, Gérard de Nerval and Charles Baudelaire) its driving force – and supplier of the hashish in the form of a green paste (an echo of the witches' drugs which were greenish ointments) – was a psychiatrist named Jean-Jacques Moreau de Tours (1804-84). Moreau, who also experimented with the possible medical applications of Datura stramonium, is often described as the first psychiatrist interested in the use of psychoactive substances as a means of treating mental illness. In fact, even though Anthony Störck was too early to be called a psychiatrist (he published the results of his work in 1762) he conducted systematic experiments – very much in the modern style – with henbane and thorn-apple specifically to ascertain their potential in treating mental disorders.

The first cultivation of hemp in the Americas seems to have been in Nova Scotia in 1606 and it subsequently became widely grown across North America for its use as a fibre. It seems, however, that there was no awareness of its psychoactive properties until the middle of the nineteenth century. In two books published in the 1850s the popular writer Bayard Taylor wrote of his hashish experiences in Egypt in a manner not unlike that of some members of the Parisian Hashish Club. Although rarely read today, his books were, for many of his numerous readers at the time, the first they had heard about the psychoactive effects of the hemp plant. The author of The Hasheesh Eater: Being Passages from the Life of a Pythagorean (1857), Fitz Hugh Ludlow, who is often considered to be one of the best writers on the subjective effects of hashish, never reached the contemporary audience that Taylor did, despite his posthumous fame.

It was not, of course, only writers that began to spread the word. Dubious figures in the unofficial world of medicine (better known as quackery) seized upon the 'new' drug and peddled it as an aphrodisiac. Ernest Abel has unearthed what must be one of the earliest and certainly one of the best lurid headlines concerning drugs. It is from the Illustrated Police News of 2 December 1876, and next to a drawing of elegant young women lounging in a swish apartment in a state of intoxication are written the immortal words: 'SECRET DISSIPATION OF NEW YORK BELLES: INTERIOR OF A HASHEESH HELL ON FIFTH AVENUE.'

It was not just the media but also the medical profession that were becoming increasingly aware of cannabis. Although doctors used it in treating many disorders (ranging from epilepsy and hysteria to alcoholism and asthma) the demonisation of drugs that began with opium was soon to spread to other psychoactive substances, including cannabis. As the anti-opium movement was intertwined with bigotry against the Chinese so with marijuana it was to be the turn of the Mexicans and then the Blacks. In 1915 California became the first state to make it illegal to possess cannabis. By the 1920s marijuana (called muggles or moota and later mezz, sassfras or tea; marijuana cigarettes or joints were known, as they still sometimes are, as reefers) had become a major 'underground drug'.

It was the first psychoactive substance (apart from alcohol) that became a common subject in modern popular music, with jazz classics from the 1930s such as Louis Armstrong's Muggles and Cab Calloway's That Funny Reefer Man topping the bill of marijuana-inspired fare. In opposition to the positive portrayal of cannabis in the jazz scene were wildly sensational accounts – supposedly based on fact – of the intimate connection of the drug with violence (drawing on the tradition of the Assassins, an Islamic sect who were supposed to take cannabis before committing murders) and sexual promiscuity. Finally, in 1937, through the considerable persuasive powers of Harry J. Anslinger, the first commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, the Marihuana (Marijuana) Tax Act became federal law and in 1956 the drug was incorporated into the more comprehensive Narcotics Act.

Although the most well-known anti-marijuana film, Reefer Madness, was designed to shock young people with its vivid portrayal of the drug menace, it seems to have had little effect. Today it is something of a cult movie (mainly among cannabis smokers!) since its plot of moral and social decline is so utterly unconvincing and ludicrous. A less well-known film about hemp was made by the US Department of Agriculture and was entitled Hemp for Victory (1942). It was made as a propaganda film to encourage the growing of the plant for its fibre by American farmers during the Second World War as, due to the conflict, sufficient overseas supplies were unavailable. Due to the controversy surrounding the psychoactive use of cannabis the very existence of the film was later officially denied; having seen it myself I can attest to its existence.

Grifos was a name given to cannabis in the Caribbean and derives from the Spanish grifos, meaning 'crinkly', which some have seen as a description of the female plant's flower heads. The word found its way into America by its use among Puerto Ricans. In 1920s Harlem it became anglicised as 'reefers' but also continued to be known as 'griffs' or 'griff'. There are innumerable vernacular and slang names for cannabis. Among the most common are weed, blow, gear, grass, draw, smoke, shit and herb. Other terms have a more restricted use, as is the case with the name 'lamb's bread' used by Rastafarians, for whom it is a sacred psychoactive plant or entheogen. A number of medical uses for cannabis have made the whole debate about its legalisation a major issue. Cannabis is known to have real value not only in pain relief but also as a preventative medicine.

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