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## Cannabis in Africa

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### AFRICA

Africa is confirming its role as a production area, a transit territory and a consumer market. South Africa is probably the world's leading producer of marijuana, but most of it is consumed on the domestic market, which also absorbs the output of neighboring countries, notably Lesotho, where cannabis is the main cash crop. At the other end of the continent, Algeria's market for cannabis products is supplied not only in hashish from Morocco but also, recently, in West African marijuana. In some countries, such as Congo, war is to blame for the boom in illicit crops, which have slowly become the prize of rural conflicts. More peacefully, in Kenya, khat represents major political and economic stakes. African and international organized crime are also involved in transit-trafficking of hashish, heroin and Mandrax from South-east Asia, and of South American cocaine. In addition, they distribute these substances on booming African markets. ...

### THE CANNABIS INDUSTRY IN LESOTHO

Lesotho is a small, mostly rural, mountainous Southern African country of about 2 million inhabitants, which is completely landlocked in South African territory. Although it is politically an independent state, Lesotho's geographic location makes it very dependent on its powerful neighbor, which absorbs most of its exports. Additionally, given Lesotho's lack of industry, poor soil and general state of underdevelopment (it is one of the world's poorest countries, with a GNP per capita of US \$770 in 1995), South African mines are the largest employer of Basotho workforce.

Lesotho produces large quantities of cannabis, called matekoane in Sesotho, the language spoken in Lesotho. Although there is a domestic consumer market, Lesotho basically grows cannabis in order to supply the large South African market of marijuana. Cannabis production clearly represents one of the country's three main sources of hard currency, the other two being international aid and the wages sent home by Basotho miners working in South Africa.

The largest mass market for cannabis products in the region is undoubtedly South Africa. It seems that there exists a kind of South African "cannabis complex" whereby some areas have specialized in producing cannabis in order to supply the consumer markets, most notably those in the large urban areas of Johannesburg (and Gauteng province in general), Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, and Cape Town, Western Cape province. Although there is little doubt that cannabis is grown throughout South African territory, OGD has identified 4 distinct areas that seem to have specialized in cannabis production as a significant source of income. These are parts of the South African provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape (the former Transkei), as well as the two small independent states of Swaziland and Lesotho, which are in reality highly dependent on South Africa, both politically and economically. It must be noted that the increasing specialization of these countries' agricultural sector in cannabis production for the South African market reinforces their dependency vis-a-vis their powerful neighbor (see below).

The information on cannabis cultivation presented in this article is based on an OGD field study and on various reports produced by the Lesotho Highlands Development Authority (LHDA) prior to the construction of the large Mohale hydroelectric dam (in Maseru and Thaba-Tseka districts), which will produce electricity for Lesotho and provide water to six South African provinces, including Gauteng Province (Johannesburg). OGD has interviewed six cannabis growers (hereafter identified as "OGD-growers") whose lands in the eastern, mountainous region of Maseru district will be flooded by the Mohale dam. Yet the resulting data is not entirely satisfactory, since it was obtained from a limited sample of growers living solely in the zones affected by the construction of the dam. Strictly speaking, therefore, it cannot be viewed as reflecting the situation prevailing at national level. In addition, although cannabis cultivation is widespread in the mountains, and although all residents of the zones in question (and the country at large) are aware of this fact (as are all local, national and international authorities) - in short, although cannabis production is an open secret and enjoys de facto decriminalization - it nevertheless remains a very private activity. The LHDA points out that growers are very reticent to discuss the issue, and that it could not gain official access to their fields in order to establish its estimates (in spite of the fact that the LHDA is seriously considering including cannabis revenues in the compensation plan for residents of flooded zones). This information nevertheless provides a fairly detailed picture of the situation of cannabis crops in some farms of the country's mountain regions that furnish, according to all sources, the vast majority of the national harvest.

#### A Historical Tradition

The first historical record of cannabis in what is now Lesotho dates back to the 16th century. According to historian Stephen Gill, oral tradition has handed down the story of a "colonizing" use of marijuana by the Koena people. The Koena group moved from the northeast of what is now Mpumalanga province (the former Orange Free State) and settled in Lesotho around 1550 (thereby becoming one of the ethnic components of the Basotho group today) by "purchasing" land from San tribes (the earliest inhabitants of South Africa, better known today as "Bushmen") in exchange for marijuana. It is nevertheless very likely that the San knew and used cannabis long before the Koena arrived, these latter simply providing it in great quantity. Furthermore, Gill notes that in the nineteenth century - shortly after the bases of the Kingdom of Lesotho were firmly established by King Moshoeshoe I and the local populations began to depend more on agriculture than on livestock - marijuana figured among the main staples grown in Lesotho, along with sorghum, gourds, and beans.

This historical background suggests why matekoane is now one of the seven plants most often cited by mountain dwellers for their curative and magic qualities. Rural people still use marijuana to treat ailments like heartburn, high blood pressure, and "nerves". It is also used to rid horses and donkeys of parasitic worms (papsi in Sesotho). Two of the six OGD-growers also claimed to smoke marijuana in order to "get strength" and work harder, one of them saying that it stimulated his appetite. According to other sources questioned by the OGD (a psychiatrist and members of a prevention/rehabilitation NGO), these two "utilitarian", or functional, properties are ascribed to matekoane by a high proportion of users throughout Lesotho, both urban and rural.

Among the most "traditional" segments of Basotho society today (i.e., mountain dwellers), marijuana is a medicine considered to have various virtues. But alongside this medicinal status, the field study showed that the general public partly uses the plant for utilitarian or recreational ends not recognized by local traditional medicine.

Nowadays, cannabis is grown almost everywhere in the country, even on small plots in the capital, Maseru. However, the main growing regions are found in the high mountain zones in the center and east of the country, as well as in the western foothill region. Plantations are generally situated in the valleys, where numerous streams and rivers drain the mountains.

### Marijuana Essential to Survival in the Mountains

According to all sources interviewed during the field study, cannabis production is most prevalent in the following districts:- Berea: production occurs in the foothills and mountains located in the east of this district:- Mokhotlong: the eastern sector of this mountainous district (a zone stretching east and south from the Moremoholo River Valley, and including the district capital, Mokhotlong) is part of a region known for its high-quality marijuana ("first grade"). This region also covers parts of Thaba-Tseka and Qacha's Neck districts (see below). The top-grade marijuana is shipped to Durban in South Africa, where it is probably marketed and exported under the name "Durban Poison" (notably to the Netherlands). The western sector of Mokhotlong district yields marijuana of lesser quality;- Thaba-Tseka: whereas the mountainous western sector produces "second-" and "third-grade" cannabis, the equally mountainous south and east belong to the "first grade" production zone mentioned above;- Qacha's Neck: This basically mountainous district belongs almost entirely to - indeed, is the heart of - the 1st Grade cannabis region. The mountains to the west, however, apparently produce 2nd and 3rd grade quality.

The spread and almost universal presence of cannabis crops in every small mountain farm - mountains occupying the largest part of Lesotho, considered as be the only country in the world with an altitude that never drops below 1,000 meters - is also due to soil degradation. Rural dwellers represented 80% of the nation's estimated 2.1 million inhabitants in 1995, but in that same year agriculture supplied less than 15% of Lesotho's GDP, as compared to 25% four years earlier. The beauty of Lesotho's mountains should not mask the serious soil erosion. According to Gill, this erosion accelerated in the early nineteenth century, when areas devoted to grain crops were significantly increased, notably in the lower fields, in order to profit from attractive prices on the international market. These fields were left fallow less and less often, becoming poorer and poorer, while livestock was sent to higher pastures. Every year torrential rains have therefore washed away a little more topsoil from mountains no longer protected by bush (cut for firewood) or grass (overgrazed by the ever-increasing livestock).

Country dwellers consider cattle to be a very important cultural and economic resource, to the extent that all government programs designed to limit its growth and halt overgrazing have failed. The country's population, meanwhile, has grown steadily since the early twentieth century (demographic growth was estimated to be 2.6% per year in 1993). The upshot is that today only 9% of the total surface area of the country is arable land, and it is estimated that an additional 1,000 hectares become inadequate for cultivation each year due to erosion. At this rate, only 8% of Lesotho will be arable in 2001. Note that the sources consulted use "arable land" to refer to fields of marketable crops like grains or beans. Cannabis, meanwhile, can grow in highly depleted soil. The people's two main reactions, historically, to insufficient land have been emigration to South Africa (starting in 1900) and cultivation of cannabis as an export crop (which probably spread sometime later). These two sources of revenue now drive the rural economy.

Emigration has had a distinct if hard-to-quantify impact on the drug situation in Lesotho. Money sent home by emigrant relatives represents the number two source of income for mountain-dwelling households by supplying, according to the LHDA, 38% of the total. In 1993, authorities in Pretoria estimated that 89,400 Basothos worked in South African mines, whereas in 1991 the Maseru authorities estimated that 126,000 Lesotho nationals lived abroad. South African mines, although still the main employer of Basothos, have conducted numerous layoffs in recent years, and are continuing to reduce personnel. Laid-off Basothos do not all return home, but it is probable that some have done so, adding more mouths to feed from over cultivated land, which most likely spurs the (not quantifiable) extension of cannabis crops. Another potential measure -perhaps in addition to extending cultivation - in order to face the new situation characterized by fewer remittances and more people to feed, would be to add value to crops. This trend was noted by a source who declared that he observed that more and more cannabis growers were packaging their produce themselves in the form of ready-to-smoke cigarettes prior to selling to dealers.

According to Gill, the commercial cultivation of cannabis in Lesotho increased considerably from the mid-1980s onward. The LHDA's estimates suggest that households in the Mohale dam zone currently draw 39% of their annual income from agricultural activities. Nearly 50% of that agricultural income (personal consumption included) comes from the sale of cannabis. Cannabis is cultivated in the same way as other crops. Farming in Lesotho's mountains is not modern but is based on rainfall. And except for matekoane, crops are mainly destined for personal consumption. Mountain farmers use very little fertilizer (not even natural, like the manure that exists in abundance), pesticides or fungicides, all products of which they remain wary (only 8% of farmers questioned by the LHDA use them).

Mountain agriculture, and cannabis crops in particular, seems to obey the following model: little investment, little risk, low returns. This model appears adapted to the poor mountain soil, which, even with more intensive input, would not yield returns justifying the needed investment. That, at least, is the opinion of local farmers as reported by the LHDA, which does not entirely agree with them.

Whatever the case, cannabis is an indispensable part of the precarious but real equilibrium maintained by mountain farms. Studies by the LHDA, based on low estimates, show that the extremely high value of matekoane means that it supplies nearly half of all agricultural income even though it covers only 10% of land under cultivation. The LHDA estimates the profit from a hectare of corn to be 209 malotis (M209), as compared to M354 for a hectare of wheat, M493 for a hectare of peas and M4,379 for a hectare of marijuana. It is thus probable that most mountain farms in Lesotho grow a "cluster" of crops, the majority of which are for personal consumption, the sole cash crop being matekoane.

According to available information, all of the cannabis grown in Lesotho comes from small peasant farms in the regions listed above. Various sources indicate that cannabis is usually grown in conjunction with sweet corn, which is the staple crop of Basotho peasants, as well as the basis of their diet. Some cannabis is nevertheless grown as a single crop in more isolated regions, on surface areas that might be as large as five hectares, according to OGD-growers. When planted as a single crop, the size of the OGD-growers' cannabis field is never less than three hectares, which is also the average size of their corn fields. It is worth noting that other sources, generally well-informed on rural life, claim that single-crop cannabis fields are only very rarely larger than one hectare. It is possible that OGD growers have exaggerated the size of their fields thinking (wrongly) that they would obtain more compensation money from the LHDA. According to the studies conducted by the LHDA, the vast majority of mountain farmers work their own land. Some sharecropping and tenant farming exist, but remains marginal. The conclusion is that cannabis production is mainly an economic activity of small owner-farmers.

Planters sow cannabis between mid August and early October, that is to say during the southern spring. Harvesting occurs at the end of the summer, between February and April. Most of the harvest is sold during winter, generally in July. Given the important and increasing supply, winter prices offered by dealers are low (M200 to M300 per bag). Much better prices can be negotiated between November and January (M400 to M600) when the previous year's marijuana stocks are low. Thus, farmers who are able to stock part of their harvest can increase profits by selling during the months when prices are highest. Cannabis therefore constitutes a form of savings for Basotho producers.

Cannabis is sown with seeds obtained from the previous harvest or bought from a neighbor. In both mixed and single-crop fields, matekoane is sown directly in the field where it matures (reportedly, nurseries and transplanting are not employed, as they often are in West Africa). Care involves weeding the plot and, in a few cases, applying manure and irrigating. Women generally perform these tasks, but there are many phases that involve all members of the family, as is always the case at harvest time, when men, women, and children work together. Harvesting and packing (see below) are sometimes the occasion for "work parties" where neighbors and paid workers join in, although this system would not seem to be the rule.

The first harvest, probably carried out in January, is done on what farmers call majaja. According to accounts provided by the OGD-growers, majaja comes from the same seeds as "the real matekoane", yet bears no flowers or seeds. It can then be deduced that majaja is the male plant of cannabis. The majaja harvest therefore represents a thinning of the plots, leaving only the female plants. Whereas in other countries such as Morocco this thinning is normally viewed as a task designed to improve the final product, it seems that in Lesotho it has a commercial goal, namely to market another full-fledged product. It was difficult to obtain information on majaja, which growers distinguish from matekoane in terms of labor (only the leaves of majaja are retained) and income (majaja earns less). The leaves of male plants are separated from the stalks and sold in bags. It is probable that Sesotho majaja is the substance sold in South Africa under the name of maajut, poor quality marijuana basically used for smoking with Mandrax in what is called "white pipe".

The main harvest of "real matekoane" (which contains seeds and flowers) begins in February and may continue until April; depending on weather conditions and geographical situation. The harvested plants are carried to the farmhouse where they are generally left to dry outside, on the ground. The flowers are then separated from the stalks. The flowers are stuffed into bags (probably together with a certain amount of leaves) which normally contain 50 kilograms of corn and which constitute the unit of sale in the fields.

A Basotho source whose work entails frequent contact with the mountain-dwelling communities stated that in recent years increasing numbers of growers in the Qabane river valley (on the eastern edge of Mophale's Hoek district) were rolling their matekoane into cigarettes prior to selling it, thereby adding value that increased prices. According to this source, the task is carried out by women, and involves no machinery. If this innovation extends to other areas of the country (it was not mentioned by either the LHDA studies or the OGD-growers), that would represent another sign of the already obvious de-criminalization of the cultivation and, to a lesser extent, the sale of cannabis in Lesotho.

Above all, however, it might indicate a growing specialization in cannabis crops in certain areas, with a concomitant monetization of the economy, insofar as packing even a part of the marijuana harvest in the form of cigarettes probably requires a great deal of time. That time would no longer be available for other tasks generally allotted to women, for example cultivating food crops, especially vegetables. An hypothesis may be made that if these tasks are abandoned in favor of rolling marijuana into cigarettes, rural households will increasingly depend on commercial networks rather than their own labor for food.

According to the OGD-growers, who live relatively far from the country's borders, the harvest is usually taken from the production zone by traffickers who employ automobiles (usually 4-wheel drive vehicles, known as "bakkies" in Lesotho and South Africa). The harvest for a given zone is first brought to a spot accessible by car, at the buyer's expense. According to the OFD-growers, the purchasers are sometimes Basotho but usually Zulu or Xhosa (two South African ethnic groups) and pay mountain dwellers (usually women) to transport the matekoane harvest to the assembly point. Purchasers sometimes also rent the growers' donkeys to get the harvest to more distant assembly points. In other regions of Lesotho, for example in Mokhotlong, Thaba-Tseka, and Qacha's Neck districts (in Eastern Lesotho, near the border with South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province) caravans of donkeys and "porters" carry the marijuana across the border, probably into Zulu villages. From there it is shipped on to Durban, usually in collective taxis.

It should be noted that the temporary hire of farmers as porters, and the rental of their donkeys, are advantageous arrangements for growers, because it means that transporting the cannabis harvest provides another distinct source of income in addition to straightforward cultivation. It proved impossible, however, to obtain details - even approximate - on the scope of the income thus generated.

#### Trafficking and its Effects

The tense political atmosphere reigning in Lesotho in the southern winter of 1997 made the study into trafficking, networks rather difficult. No one wanted to risk even hinting on the possibility that local prominent citizens might be implicated in trafficking in any way whatsoever. It would nevertheless be quite surprising, at least as far as cannabis trafficking goes (which entails little social or penal condemnation), if traffickers enjoyed no bureaucratic or military - or, indeed, political - protection. Non-Basotho sources moreover declared that some Basotho politicians more or less openly viewed cannabis revenues as an unofficial but useful boost to the country's balance of payments. A Basotho civil servant, when confronted with the contradictions in his comments, finally admitted that, given the political situation, "civil servants don't dare take action because they can't foresee the consequences of their acts". The September 1998 insurrection in Maseru, followed by a joint military intervention by South Africa and Botswana, resulted in the destruction of the capital. This further weakened the capabilities of Basotho law enforcement and severely restricted the country's independence.

Like their counterparts in other Southern African countries, Basotho officials often place all the blame on "foreigners", who are convenient scapegoats because they are politically neutral. Basothos are even reticent to offer detailed information on compatriots arrested in Lesotho itself on drug charges. South Africans, on the other hand, are accused of fomenting cannabis production in the mountains, while Nigerians are blamed for the growing (if still limited) use not only of cocaine and but also synthetic drugs like LSD and ecstasy (in which Nigerian involvement is improbable). The Indo-Pakistani community, meanwhile, is suspected of extensively trafficking Mandrax, although no scandal has ever come to light (at least publicly) to confirm such suspicions. Although some of these accusations may not be totally unfounded, they help disguise local responsibility for the demobilization and disorganization of drug enforcement measures, not to mention the protection and perhaps even collusion required for certain operations.

All the cannabis grown in landlocked Lesotho is exported to South Africa, at least initially. There are two main export routes. One heads west and north toward Bloemfontein and Ficksburg, then on to Johannesburg. This is the route taken by 2nd and 3rd grade matekoane grown in western and central Lesotho. Transportation is usually done by motor vehicles (cars and trucks). It is likely that at least part of the marijuana is centralized in the towns of Maseru and Mafeteng prior to being shipped across the border. It is also probable that these towns have relatively large storage facilities.

The other route leads to Durban, the destination for 1st grade marijuana grown in the eastern districts of Mokhotlong, Thaba-Tsella, and Qacha's Neck (see above). According to OGD's sources, high-grade matekoane often arrives in KwaZulu-Natal villages on the backs of donkeys and porters. It is likely that cross-country motor vehicles are also used. Once in South Africa, Basotho marijuana is taken to Durban townships by collective taxis (many of the taxi firms in townships around Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town are owned by dealers in dagga - as marijuana is usually called in South Africa). Once in Durban, the cannabis will be packaged and sold on the national market or exported to Europe (until now it seems mainly to the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) or even to North America, often mixed with marijuana grown in KwaZulu-Natal.

According to the available information, these two routes are mainly used by networks of South African traffickers, who supply their country's urban markets. Yet there also exist parallel marijuana networks supplying Basotho miners working in South Africa. Most miners in South Africa are known to make "utilitarian" use of marijuana, and sometimes Mandrax, to crank themselves up for work and to "chill out" afterward. The South African police have raided hostels where Basotho miners stay and has found sacks of marijuana. According to South African and Basotho police officials, Lesotho marijuana is highly appreciated by users all over South Africa.

It is worth noting that the isolation of the central and eastern mountain regions of Lesotho makes aircraft the best means of transportation. Some thirty small airfields are scattered across the country. It seems likely that certain airfields are used to ship middling-size quantities of marijuana to Maseru or other urban centers, even though most sources questioned in Lesotho, including the police, remain sceptical. Although no concrete evidence has ever come to light, it would hardly be surprising if small aircraft flew marijuana directly into South Africa.

It seems that a mutually fuelling relationship exists between the cannabis trade and other kinds of illicit activity in Lesotho:

The first activity concerns stolen cars (like everywhere else in Southern Africa). Cars stolen in South Africa and beyond are sold cheaply in Lesotho. Vehicles are also stolen in Lesotho for re-sale abroad (primarily South Africa and Zambia). Once construction began on the Mophale dam, South African expatriates working on the site in the mountain zone were often victims of car theft, sometimes also losing their lives. Ever since, many South Africans working in Lesotho carry weapons, and car thefts have become the main concern of South Africa's High Commission in Maseru. Many members of the Chinese community (which control the small garment industry) also carry guns. The Chinese, known as very tough bosses, are detested by the locals and have been the victims of violent attacks and car theft (anti-Chinese riots took place in January 1998).

The second smuggling activity concerns stolen livestock (cows, sheep, and goats stolen in Lesotho for resale in South Africa, and vice versa). As already noted, livestock is a sign of wealth among Basothos (many of whom also live on the other side of the border), so there are cows everywhere. But there is also a constant desire to own more. Farmers are arming themselves defensively against thieves. Furthermore, even though marijuana trafficking is generally non-violent, the police claim that some producers have armed themselves against enforcement agents. Moreover, in the spring of 1997, marijuana smugglers in a national park on the country's northern border attacked South African hikers.

It can be deduced from the above that the cannabis trade is partly based on barter arrangements and that it is linked, at least indirectly, to the proliferation of small arms in Lesotho (and, as an OGD study has shown, throughout Southern Africa).

#### "Laundering" Cannabis Revenue

Cannabis cultivation and trafficking probably constitute two of rural Lesotho's more widespread and rewarding economic activities. Growers use marijuana income

for everyday expenditures, notably for sending their children to school (secondary education is expensive in Lesotho). It is hard to speak of money laundering in this instance, since income from matekoane is an integral part of mountain farmers' economy. Moreover, South African and Basotho traffickers go to the mountains and buy directly from the growers, which means that the revenues generated by cannabis in the countryside are broadly distributed, rather than concentrated in a few wholesalers' hands as is the case elsewhere, for instance in near-by Swaziland. Concentration occurs among South African traffickers and probably also among Basothos in the urban zones in western Lesotho, although no trustworthy information is available on this latter group.

An unusual form of "laundering" will certainly take place in the context of compensation for lands flooded by the Mohale dam. Sources claim that the LHDA is working on a project in association with many foreign institutional investors to take into account income generated by matekoane when it comes to compensate for losses incurred by flooding farmlands. Therefore, top level institutions judge - correctly, we feel - illicit crops to be a key part of economic life in Lesotho's rural heartland.