
Edet A. Thomas

Edet A. Thomas earned a Master’s degree at University of Massachusetts, Boston. His research focuses on the political and social history of West Africa and Nigeria. His background includes nearly a decade of journalism in Nigeria working for Silverbird Communications, one of the biggest media companies in sub-Saharan Africa. Edet also edited Nigeria’s first free newspaper, 40 Minutes. In his free time, he volunteers at his local church and is an avid soccer fan.

Abstract

This paper examines the portrayal of Nigerian women involved in the illegal international cannabis trade by the Nigerian newspaper press between 1970 and 1980, to offer a new perspective on gender based discrimination in Nigeria. This paper analyses news reports, opinion articles, letters to the editor, and pictures published in various Nigerian newspapers: Daily Times, New Nigerian, West African Pilot, Daily Express, and Punch. The evidence heavily suggests that the managers and writers of the newspaper press, guided by patriarchal notions of how women should behave in traditional Nigerian society, deliberately sensationalized stories about female suspects in the illegal cannabis trade. In terms of extent and intensity, there was far more press coverage of cases involving women, who made up only two percent of the 1,169 persons convicted for cannabis-related offences between 1966 and 1975, than men. This paper aims to demonstrate how prevailing socio-economic conditions shaped the Nigerian press’s framing of women’s drug-related activities in an era of relative economic prosperity.
Introduction

The phenomenon of international cannabis trafficking in Nigeria, especially between 1970 and 1980, is an under-researched area of the country’s postcolonial history. This paper aims to shed light on Nigeria’s social history through a gendered analysis of how the Nigerian press reported misleading information about women involved in the illegal cannabis trade. This paper is organized into three sections. The first section describes the methodology of using the Nigerian newspaper archives as a primary resource and how the reports were collected. The second section examines the legal history of cannabis regulation in Nigeria. The third and main section analyzes and discusses how the press wrongly portrayed women as the primary agents of a perceived moral crisis surrounding illegal cannabis in Nigerian society. This work uncovers how the Nigerian press disproportionately reported about women accused of or caught trafficking cannabis abroad, despite the fact that the majority of people involved in the illegal cannabis market were men. The press blamed and shamed women who trafficked cannabis with frequent and detailed follow-up reportage, while it rarely reported on most men whom were involved in the cannabis market. The exaggerated reportage of women cannabis traffickers reflected the political climate of the Nigerian authoritarian regime, which enforced reactionary laws to punish those involved in illegal drugs with severe sentences.

Methodology

It is difficult to comprehensively examine the history of Nigerian crime, such as illegal cannabis trafficking, due to the absence of official documentation like police records, court records, and interviews with traffickers. To fill the gap in evidence, this paper mined an underutilized source: the Nigerian newspaper press. Archives of newspaper reports have proven to be a substantive and innovative source of evidence of Africa’s past in written form by African academics. This paper primarily draws its information from newspapers published in Nigeria in the 1970s and 1980s, namely Daily Times, Daily Express, New Nigerian, Punch, and West African Pilot. These newspapers were selected because they represent a wide range of press organizations in terms of editorial policy, ownership, and location, yet they were united in their condemnation of cannabis cultivation, use, and trafficking. Other source materials researched for this paper include annual colonial and police reports. These reports disclose data regarding total arrests and seizures of those involved with illicit drugs, however, they lack detail about the individual persons. Although official court records would have strengthened the argument, many of the records are decaying inside a poorly preserved archives building, as documented by the Nigerian Building Conservation Project, a community preservation group.

A Brief History of Cannabis Regulation in Nigeria

Regulation of cannabis predated Nigeria’s independence through various international treaties on drug control. After Nigeria’s independence in 1960, national laws on drug control began to specifically target illegal cannabis trafficking. The few available works tracing the history

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1 Only two history scholars, Emmanuel Akyeampong and Stephen Ellis, have published articles and a monograph on the history of the international drug trade in West Africa and Nigeria. Their works also contributed in inspiring this paper. See Stephen Ellis and Emmanuel Akyeampong in bibliography.
of cannabis and its regulation in Nigeria tend to attribute its widespread use to demobilized West African soldiers returning from India and Burma after World War II. This preferred position by many on the history of drugs in West Africa may in fact be accurate, considering the first Nigerian mentioned in connection with cannabis abroad was a demobilized former soldier from the war. On January 4, 1952, a 25-year-old Nigerian, Joseph Aaku, was stabbed to death in North London and “a small packet of hemp was found lying on the carpet [in Aaku’s flat]. A further search revealed more packets of cannabis in Aaku’s jacket.” The suspected murderer was a Gambian, Backary Manneh. Manneh was previously convicted of cannabis possession in London in 1949. Both men served on the Asian front during World War II. Aaku served with the Army in Burma, where Manneh also served for six years starting in 1940 as part of the Royal West African Frontier Force.

The first law regarding cannabis, the Indian Hemp Decree of 1966, criminalized the possession, use, cultivation, and trafficking of cannabis (Indian hemp is a term commonly used for cannabis in Nigeria). Among other provisions, the 1966 Decree included a 10-year jail term for smoking and/or possessing cannabis regardless of quantity and a 21-year jail term or death penalty for cultivators of the herb. Importers could be sentenced for up to 15 years of prison time and any convicted exporter could be sentenced for up to 10 years of prison time. The 1966 Decree was inspired by the Dangerous Drugs Act of 1935 and promoted by Nigeria’s military rulers. While it was the first Nigerian law to address the exportation of cannabis abroad, it was one-dimensional and had no provision to address other drugs such as heroin, cocaine, and synthetic drugs like dexamphetamine and methamphetamine, which were in circulation.

The Nigerian press, which reported frequently on the mandatory minimum sentencing required of those involved with cannabis, called for the law to be amended. In response to the pressure by the Nigerian newspaper press, the Nigerian federal government announced an amendment in December 1975. Notably, the 1975 law expunged provisions for the death penalty on illegal cannabis trafficking and significantly reduced sentencing on cannabis related matters. The new law ensured the release of 1,169 people who had been convicted under the 1966 decree broadcast by Nigeria’s first military ruler, JTU Aguiyi-Ironsi. The press continued to demonize cannabis suspects in general, but it gave disproportionate attention to women and belittled their capacity to manage criminal enterprises. While only 22 women were convicted through provisions of the 1966 decree, the media attention on women arrested locally and abroad thrived for the scandal value of the headlines and content.

The rise in the number of Nigerian cocaine and heroin traffickers arrested abroad in the early 1980s put international pressure, particularly from the United States, on the Nigerian regime to stop their citizens from trafficking illegal drugs. Consequently, the regime — seeking to

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5 Mills, Cannabis Nation, 65-6.
6 Ibid., 66-7.
7 Indian Hemp Decree, 1966.
10 Indian Hemp Decree, 1975.
11 Kalunta-Crumpton, Pan-African Issues in Drugs, 126.
13 “Dr Koiki, 1,168 others out of prison,” December. 5, 1975.
legitimize its rule — re-introduced the death penalty for drug traffickers in 1984, with a new law, Decree Number 20.\textsuperscript{14} Another decree was made three months later, Decree Number 31, to include a penalty fee to the government.\textsuperscript{15} However, the Ibrahim Babangida authoritarian regime reversed the death penalty two years later.\textsuperscript{16} In 1989, that same regime created the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), modelled after the United States’ Drug Enforcement Administration.\textsuperscript{17} The NDLEA remains the exclusive agency for curtailing the illegal drug trade in Nigeria.

**Table 1. Decrees and Laws regulating Cannabis in Nigeria**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decree (Law) Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indian Hemp Decree No. 19</td>
<td>1966</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian Hemp Decree No. 34</td>
<td>1975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Tribunal (Miscellaneous Offences) Decree No. 20</td>
<td>1984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Tribunal (Miscellaneous Offences) Amendment Decree No. 31</td>
<td>1984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Tribunal (Miscellaneous Offences) Decree No. 22</td>
<td>1986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Drug Law Enforcement Agency Decree No. 48</td>
<td>1989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Drug Law Enforcement Agency Amendment Decree</td>
<td>1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Drug Law Enforcement Agency Act No. 30</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**(Mis)representation of Women Cannabis Traffickers**

**Changing Gender Roles**

The volume of news items produced about female cannabis traffickers by the newspaper press was in sharp contrast to the total number of women convicted. Between 1966 and 1975, during the period of Nigeria’s most punitive laws against illegal cannabis trafficking, only two percent of the 1,169 people convicted for cannabis related offenses were women.\textsuperscript{18} The arrest, trial, and conviction of these women locally and abroad served as the basis for the vilification of women as the primary agents of illegal cannabis trade in the newspaper press.

Often times, one story of a female cannabis trafficker would be reported by multiple newspapers with frequent follow up reporting (Table 2). There are several explanations for why the media disproportionately reported about women cannabis traffickers. One hypothesis is that the Nigerian press served as a public critic for women who violated cultural norms of expected behavior. The 1970s and 1980s was a time of radical change in Nigerian society, especially in

\textsuperscript{14} Special Tribunal Decree No. 20 of 1984.  
\textsuperscript{15} Special Tribunal Decree No. 31 of 1984.  
\textsuperscript{16} Special Tribunal Decree No. 22 of 1986.  
\textsuperscript{17} NDLEA Decree, 1989; NDLEA Decree, 1990; NDLEA Act, 2004.  
\textsuperscript{18} “Dr Koiki, 1,168 others out of prison,” December 5, 1975; “British among drug offenders,” December 5, 1975.
urban areas such as Lagos, the largest city and economic capital. Men dominated most areas of society. However, during a period of strong economic growth, women were being afforded opportunities outside of the traditional gender roles. The changing gender roles during this time were characterized by increased access to Western education and mass media, as well as increased migration to urban areas and abroad. The growth of urban areas, specifically Lagos, was due to high crude oil prices, with oil revenues remaining Nigeria’s major source of foreign trade earnings. It is visible through the lens of the Nigerian press that men, and urban men in particular, were uncomfortable with these changes in Nigerian society. The analysis of the newspaper reportage on women cannabis traffickers illustrates the press’ bias toward traditional methods of criticism to shame these women. It did so despite women only constituting a small part of the Nigerians who transported cannabis to Western Europe, a phenomenon that marked the insertion of Nigeria into the global drugs trade.

Table 2. Number of reports from each Nigerian newspaper of women arrested or convicted of cannabis trafficking.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Daily Express</th>
<th>New Nigerian Daily Times</th>
<th>West African Pilot</th>
<th>Punch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iyabo Olorunkoya</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olayemi Oke</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther Oladosu Oke</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Folorunsho Cole</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Okeowo</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate Bintu Ofili</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iyabo Makinde/Iyabo Olojo/Shade Mumuni</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna Onuoha</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Okafor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alison Piggot (Briton)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy G. Middleton Smith (Briton)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kay Stuart (Briton)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean Carson (Briton)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathyline Saunders Flowers (American)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilda Ann Obi (Trinidadian)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Stereotypical portrayal of women cannabis traffickers

Misreporting these women’s identities was a common theme in newspaper reports. News content did not elaborate on the background of these women but consistently labeled them as “socialites.” The word socialite was used interchangeably with “high society woman” or “modern woman” in several reports when introducing female cannabis traffickers. The connotation with the term socialite in Nigerian society is suggestive of someone who spends a

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lot of time and resources on entertainment. Such labeling was problematic because men arrested for cultivation, use, and trafficking of cannabis were identified in most cases by their occupation(s) before their arrest. In contrast, the negligible number of women arrested for trafficking cannabis were negatively portrayed with derogatory language. It is difficult to determine how these women actually earned a living as the reports focused on the sensational portion of their arrest, trial, and conviction. Thus, the implication of introducing women cannabis traffickers as “socialites” suggested that they had no visible source of livelihood and were full-time cannabis traffickers.

This representation of women in the Nigerian press was sexist, especially when it concerned women breaking new social grounds, and revealed the societal tensions surrounding new opportunities available to Nigerians regardless of gender. For instance, musicians praised materially successful Nigerians, with such praise being rewarded by “spraying” such musicians in local currency notes. To “spray” money involves public and lavish showering of money. This is common in many events organized by Nigerians locally and abroad. It was not uncommon to find that in addition to the reward of spraying, some local musicians produced praise songs on a vinyl record in honor of a person.

One example of a popular individual who had a record waxed in her honor was Ms. Iyabo Olorunkoya, who had attempted to smuggle 170 pounds of cannabis into Britain via London’s Heathrow Airport on October 13, 1973. Her arrest generated frenetic media attention because of her alleged ties to top officials of the military government. The press later celebrated her subsequent conviction. One article by Bola Efunkoya condemned “the way some high society ladies and gentlemen show their wealth in public gatherings […] imagine a man spraying twenty ‘fivers’ on the forehead of a woman — all in the name of prestige!” It was inconceivable to Bola Efunkoya and many others that women, who were stereotyped as subordinate in society, could also have access to and publicly display such wealth.

The press’s response to the conviction of Ms. Iyabo Olorunkoya indicates that the actions of successful women were threatening to a cultural and social order that expected them to behave in certain ways. Nigerian female cannabis traffickers were the first set of suspected or convicted criminals to be consistently described by the newspaper press as the cause of the perceived moral crisis prompted by the widespread use of cannabis. This is not a dramatic leap from the Nigerian press portraying and shaming women as prostitutes during British colonial rule, without addressing the demand side of the job. Just as the colonial Nigerian press scorned female sex workers, Nigeria’s postcolonial press degraded women for cannabis trafficking. Patronizing these women for trafficking cannabis was an implicit way for the male-dominated press to show their discontent with women breaking tradition even when records of arrest and prosecution proved that women were minor players in the illegal cannabis market.

One of such columnists, Mr. Gbolabo Ogunsanwo, while reacting to Ms. Olorunkoya’s widely publicized case in London, described her as a “wayward society beauty” and “an unmarried grandmother.” Mr. Ogunsanwo also implied that had she escaped detection in

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20 “Spraying” in Nigeria is a public act intended to portray wealth. It is the act of placing paper money on the forehead or over the head of a woman, man, or couple on special occasions such as their wedding or birthday. This cultural practice symbolizes showering the person or the couple with good fortune. It can also be done for a singer, musician, dancer, master/mistress, or minister at an event to show appreciation for that person’s talent or skill.


24 Aderinto, When Sex Threatened the State, 115-137.

25 “Dr Koiki, 1,168 others out of prison,” December 5, 1975.

London, Ms. Olorunkoya would have been celebrated for her crime and worsened the perceived moral crisis in Nigeria:

the social malady that afflicts this country is such that makes us, rather to hold [socialites] at a safe distance, to regard these wenches with mixed admiration and envy. Iyabo, I am told, had a record waxed in her name singing the praise of her absent virtues and lauding her as a worthy example for young girls to follow. If Iyabo had been lucky to have unloaded [...] her cargo of hemp [in] Britain [...]. I would be surprised if she does not come back to take chieftaincy because in Nigeria where and how you get your money is not important.27

Mr. Ogunsanwo’s reaction reveals the potential cultural influence and power that women like Ms. Olorunkoya could wield in the society. Ogunsanwo was eager to make it clear that Ms. Olorunkoya was not deserving of being a positive role model to young girls. It is also important to note that many cultures in southern Nigeria prefer to confer chieftaincy titles, a West African tradition of giving titles of dignity, to only men while women who receive chieftaincy titles normally earn it as spouses, not on their own merit as individuals.28 Furthermore, Mr. Ogunsanwo implied that Ms. Olorunkoya did not earn her wealth in a legitimate way and as such does not deserve respect. He suggested to his readers to “hold [socialites] at a safe distance, [and] to regard these wenches with mixed admiration and envy” which implied that women cannabis traffickers, at least in the case of Ms. Olorunkoya, also doubled as prostitutes because of her alleged romantic relations with top officials of the Nigerian government.29 Mr. Ogunsanwo’s speculative labelling of Ms. Olorunkoya was published despite there being no evidence of her involvement in prostitution. His position is also a paradox since he can admire and envy a prostitute, yet it is clear that he was merely expressing the norm in the oil boom years, regardless of gender. According to an informant, the 1970s was a time when Nigerians became obsessed with wealth regardless of the consequences. The informant, who was an undergraduate in Nigeria in 1979, said, “I don’t know what it was but people wanted to be rich by all means.”30

Another columnist, Mr. Olu Onagoruwa, asserted that Ms. Olorunkoya epitomized the social crisis caused by cannabis. In this case he noted that Ms. Olorunkoya’s bid to get rich at any cost ended in disgrace:

lyabo, who has ritually come to symbolise our collective tragedy and come to mirror the irretrievable moral stench of our miserable lives as a people, must now be ruminating on the whole criminally futile adventure which has starkly ended the glamour and make-[believe] life she had hitherto led [...]. It, for instance showed that modern women, in our relatively developing society, have abandoned their passive role.31

27 Ibid.
29 During her London trial, Iyabo Olorunkoya mentioned two Brigadiers General of the Nigerian Army, Benjamin Adekunle and Foluso Sotomi, as close acquaintances. Both men were suspended and eventually retired from the Army. The inquiry set up to investigate Iyabo Olorunkoya’s claim never revealed its findings to the public.
30 Interview with Professor of Political Science, Brooklyn College, March 4, 2017.
31 Onagoruwa, “Most of us are guilty,” March. 17, 1974.
The above extract highlights the discomfort of Nigerian educated urban men regarding the activities of those in urban areas whom Mr. Onagoruwa called “modern women.” The phrase “modern women” hints at the relative benefits women seemed to enjoy through the cultural influence of colonial rule, such as the access to university education, monogamous marriages, and the relative freedom which urban centers afforded women, among other benefits. Women like Ms. Olorunkoya provided the arsenal for the press to shame women for supposedly using their sexuality and education to conduct illegal activities. Ms. Olorunkoya engaged in crime not because she was a woman but because she chose a path like other criminal minds irrespective of gender. Mr. Onagoruwa’s article is an example of how the press misrepresented crimes related to cannabis as a gendered phenomenon.

Figure 1. Cover page report after Iyabo Olorunkoya’s conviction in London. Courtesy African Studies Library, Boston University.

Cultural Shaming of Women Cannabis Traffickers

The press exploited culturally recognized methods of censure in Nigeria to shame women cannabis traffickers. This shaming mostly related to women’s reproductive capacity as well as their sexual objectification and marriage. The press judged women by deploying graphic language in such reports in addition to generous use of the pictures of such women to illustrate the salacious slant of reports intended for a conservative audience. The same level of graphic language was not used in reports when men were arrested for involvement with prohibited drugs.

News reports were subjective as the reports often queried about the women’s motherly instincts. Terms such as ‘nursing mother’ and ‘young mother’ were also used to describe the women, thus implying women convicted of cannabis trafficking failed to serve as the nucleus of the family, the most basic unit in society. On June 19, 1973, Daily Times reported the conviction of Mary Okeowo, a woman who attempted to disguise 35 pounds of cannabis as spices during a

32 Olu Onagoruwa, like many men in Nigeria, studied abroad. Onagoruwa earned a doctorate degree in Law from a British university and eventually served as Nigeria’s Attorney General.
34 “Young Mother on hemp charge,” April 19, 1974.
trip to London on April 5th of the same year. The headline of the story, “Woman caught smuggling hemp,” was hardly related to the first sentence of the first paragraph of the story. The reporter, Peter Osugo, began the article not with the Mary Okeowo’s conviction and sentence of two years, but instead by introducing her in a biologically descriptive way, as “an expectant Nigerian mother of four, carrying a baby, was caught smuggling more than N10,000 worth of cannabis.” The story, which was about the sentencing of Mary Okeowo in a London court, was explicitly crafted to patronize Mary Okeowo, as the reporter elected to include quotations from the court session in order to portray her as a negligent mother.

The Judge of the Kingston Crown Court, Surrey, whose name was not mentioned, was quoted as saying, “I am able to take a more lenient view because of your children and the child you are expecting, but the least sentence I can pass is one or two years.” Moreover, this quote was made poignant as it was the final sentence of the report. In other words, the story began and ended with the report querying, albeit indirectly, how a mother could traffic cannabis. In contrast, there was not a single report on men that focused on his identity as a father and was subsequently shamed for trafficking a prohibited drug. The reporter referenced the judge’s stress on the “wicked and illegal traffic” of cannabis, which stigmatized Mary Okeowo as someone who valued financial gains over being a law-abiding mother. The descriptive nature of the report reinforces the use of epithets such as “wicked” to label women who did not conform to what was regarded as socially accepted behavior.

The Daily Express reportage on Olayemi Oke’s trial for cannabis trafficking is brimming with examples that typify the shaming of woman based on her reproductive credentials. A front-page Daily Express report with the headline “Hemp: Yemi Oke admits her involvement,” which describes a written statement that was admitted as evidence, referred to Olayemi Oke as “now heavy with pregnancy.” In the same story, reporter Nuru Owo described how Olayemi Oke reacted to the threat of detention in a remote town in northern Nigeria, saying “She started to bleed and a bundle of pad was bought for her by Mr Usenekong [the Police prosecutor].” Other reports also include phrases that seem innocuous but are revealing. For example, it was reported that Olayemi Oke lived in the same house as Captain Nathan Marsh “but that they are not married.” When the same newspaper reported Olayemi Oke’s conviction, the sub-headline emphasized the fact that she was “leaving behind her 98-day-old baby girl.” The first paragraph of the story, which is deemed the most important if considered from the inverted pyramid form of writing in journalism, also found space for Oke’s new baby. Put together, Daily Express portrayed Olayemi Oke as irresponsible and incapable of managing the basic unit of society, the family. In other words, her criminal activity has led to a child being without a mother’s love, care, and protection.

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36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., Emphasis added by author.
44 “Yemi smiles into a decade of jail tenancy,” July 24, 1974.
45 Ibid.
Sensational Reportage on Women Cannabis Traffickers

Headlines cast by various newspapers on women cannabis traffickers were sensational in the attempt to further embarrass the women involved and to attract readers’ attention. Three newspapers reported the conviction of one Folorunsho Cole on two counts of possession and attempting to export cannabis from Lagos to London on March 7, 1973. All three newspapers dwelled on the dramatic aspects of the story rather than the facts when they published the verdict of an Ikeja high court in their Saturday editions on June 1, 1974. The story was about the conviction of Folorunsho Cole and the acquittal of her nephew Shamsudeen Ailara, who had accompanied her to the Ikeja Airport. However, there was little connection between the headlines and the story. In the *Daily Times* article, a bold-font headline declaring: “Folorunsho collapses in the dock,” with a subhead set in the body of the story, “20 years for hemp.” The first paragraph stated that Folorunsho Cole was handed a 10-year jail sentence for attempting to export “large quantities of Indian hemp to Britain.” This is an example of misrepresentation, as the report failed to acknowledge the real reason Folorunsho Cole collapsed in court. The real story was that Folorunsho collapsed after the judge announced his decision to declare her nephew not guilty. *Daily Times* regarded her collapse as more newsworthy than her conviction. This framing of Folorunsho Cole’s collapse exemplifies the stereotyping of women as weak in difficult situations.

![Daily Times newspaper article](image)

**Figure 2.** Cover page report on Cole’s reaction to her conviction for cannabis trafficking. Courtesy of the African Studies Library, Boston University.

Exaggerated news reports on women’s involvement with cannabis shaped the public opinion that these women were responsible for the drug-related crisis in society. These stories consistently featured headlines that were not in concord with the paragraphs of the report,

45 “10 yrs jail, Cole faints,” June 1, 1974; “Folorunsho collapses in the dock,” June 1, 1974; “Hemp convict (Folorunsho Cole) collapses,” June 1, 1974.
46 “Folorunsho collapses in the dock,” June 1, 1974.
47 Ibid.
especially the first paragraph, which is customarily a short summary of the story and reveal basic context questions. This is illustrated by three reports on a certain Anna Onuoha, who was charged for possession of cannabis.

On August 4, 1970, *West African Pilot* published a cover story with the headline “4 Charged For Indian Hemp.” The first paragraph, which is a brief summary of the report, stated that that Anna Onuoha, “a 30-year-old woman trader” and three men were charged on three counts in possession of Indian hemp, a term commonly used for cannabis in Nigeria. This opening paragraph appears to be an accurate report of the court sitting. However, providing further details about only the female suspect portrayed her as the ringleader. The only details about the three other accused persons were their names, but Anna Onuoha was described by age and profession as a “trader.” Moreover, one of the men charged with possession resisted arrest, but this information is not revealed until the third paragraph. While it is subtle, the order of information in news articles is critical. The anonymous writer chose to include compromising details about the only women involved in this incident before revealing compromising details about any of the men.

Another example from the same incident is on August 6, 1970 when the *West African Pilot* published the the headline “Accused Not In Court,” with the sub-headline “Bench Warrant Ordered.” Rather than including other major details of the main headline in the first paragraph of the story, the anonymous writer presents Anna Onuoha as the focus of the story in the opening paragraph. *West African Pilot* reported, “A case of Indian hemp involving a woman trader, Anna Onuoha and three others held up at a Magistrate’s court.” While Chibuzo Nwaogwu was the absent accused person, he is not mentioned until the second paragraph. The direct naming of Anna Onuoha in the first paragraph was unnecessary. The author could have phrased the beginning paragraph a number of different ways more fitting for the title, but chose to highlight the only woman involved in the incident.

*West African Pilot*, like the other newspapers, engaged in a media trial of suspected women cannabis traffickers such that when they were discharged and acquitted by the courts, their reputation was badly damaged. This was the case with Anna Onuoha. On September 8, 1970, the Magistrate’s Court discharged and acquitted all four accused persons for lack of evidence on illegal possession of cannabis. When compared to two previous reports on the case, the headline of the third story was the only one that was relevant to the first paragraph of the accompanying report. The headline “Accused In Indian hemp case Freed For Lack of Evidence” accurately described the story as a whole; the sub-headline “One Convicted For Resisting Police Arrest” also strengthened the first paragraph of the story by detailing the conviction of Anthony Nwakeze for resisting arrest. It was editorially unnecessary to include Anna Onuoha as a descriptive marker for illegal cannabis possession since she had been found innocent. However, Anna Onuoha’s acquittal was an exception, considering most of the women tried for cannabis trafficking locally and abroad were convicted, and their conviction was the basis for their vilification by the newspaper press.

49 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
Pictures of female cannabis traffickers were also excessively published in the press accompanying the use of graphic language. Using pictures to illustrate a news report or article is standard practice, but the ratio of pictures used in stories about women was extremely disproportionate compared to the pictures used in stories about men arrested for cannabis in Nigeria. In over 40 articles concerning men reported to be using, cultivating, or trafficking cannabis, the use of pictures was very rare. In eleven separate reports of farmers arrested between 1972 and 1978, none of them were identified with a picture while some of the reports only identified the farmers as male without including their names. The only picture of a male cannabis trafficker was Dr. Babatunde Koiki and his photo was only used twice among the 31 news reports of male cannabis traffickers arrested and/or convicted.53

Photos of women cannabis traffickers frequently graced the cover pages of mainstream newspapers. In the case of Folorunsho Cole, Daily Express published her picture three times in the four reports on her arrest, trial, and conviction, and only one of the photos included the two men who were arrested and accused with her.54 In the case of Ms. Olorunkoya, Daily Times published her picture three times in eleven separate reports.55

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55 “Adekunle welcomes an inquiry,” March. 19, 1974; “Boy-Friends pay for my trips,” March. 5, 1974; “How Iyabo Dodged Customs,” March. 11, 1974; “Iyabo jailed;” March. 7, 1974; “Iyabo on my several trips,” March. 6, 1974; “Iyabo was held,” March. 1, 1974; “Iyabo was never my girlfriend,” March. 13, 1974; Onagoruwa, “Most of us are guilty,” March. 17, 1974; Ogunsanwo, “Sisi Iyabo,” March 10, 1974.
Daily Express also reported on the trial of Olayemi Oke and her mother, Oladosu Oke, for sponsoring Francis Tetteh Lawson, a man, to traffic cannabis from Nigeria to Britain, twenty times. Daily Express published photos of Olayemi Oke more than a dozen times, with ten of those pictures featured on the cover page. It is difficult to explain why there was excessive coverage of Olayemi Oke’s case. One cause could be that her case was the only one in which a woman had sponsored a male to traffic cannabis. It was also the first case of a mother and daughter being involved in cannabis trafficking in Nigeria at the time.

Conclusion

Official documents and mainstream sources of history are silent on the role and contributions of women to shape postcolonial Africa. It is now imperative to rethink the historical methods of researching the gendered dimension of African history. This method, of analyzing Africa’s past through the rich archives of newspaper press, is a largely underutilized tactic that has the capacity to provide an alternative and compelling perspective for understanding modern African history.

This paper aims to reveal a previously unknown dimension of patriarchy in postcolonial African society. It demonstrates how the Nigerian newspaper press, and more importantly the men behind it, used the media as a tool to wrongly portray women as the major group involved with the international drug trade in Nigeria during the 1970s. In the making of this paper, over 76 different stories about 15 women arrested and/or convicted for involvement with cannabis were collected and analyzed. Overemphasizing women’s involvement in the illegal cannabis market was an effort of the Nigerian press to patronize and administer blame on women as major culprits for what was perceived as socially deviant behavior. It was for this reason that accused women were portrayed as socialites, society woman, prostitutes, and irresponsible mothers.

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