

Gimme di weed: popular music constructions of jamaican identity

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Gimme di weed, good ganja weed
Jigsy King

Resumo

Este artigo explora uma das variações da identidade nacional jamaicana através das trajetórias discursivas da música popular, particularmente o reggae e a dança de salão. Usando exemplos destes dois gêneros, o artigo examina a centralidade e celebração da herva marihuana nesses discursos líricos. O trabalho também teoriza o papel da música popular como um componente dos debates sócio-culturais jamaicanos, projetando discursos identitários no imaginário local, regional e internacional. O argumento do artigo coloca que esta projeção acompanhada de uma ambivalência local tem criado uma abertura para uma interpretação da identidade nacional jamaicana que está inextricavelmente vinculada à marihuana.

Palabras claves: marihuana, danza de salón, reggae

Resumen

Este artículo explora una de las variantes de la identidad nacional jamaicana a través de las trayectorias discursivas de la música popular, particularmente el reggae y la danza de salón. Usando ejemplos de estos dos géneros, el artículo examina la centralidad

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y celebración de la yerba marihuana en esos discursos líricos. El trabajo también teoriza el papel de la música popular como un componente de los debates socio culturales jamaicanos, proyectando discursos identitarios en el imaginario local, regional e internacional. Argumenta el artículo que esta proyección emparejada a una local ambivalencia ha creado una apertura para una interpretación de la identidad nacional jamaicana que está inextricablemente vinculada a la marihuana.

Palabras claves: marihuana, danza de salón, reggae

Abstract

This paper explores the construction of one variant of Jamaican national identity through the discursive pathways of its popular music, particularly Reggae and Dancehall. Using examples from these two genres, the paper examines the centrality and celebration of the weed/marijuana in these lyrical discourses. The work also theorizes the role of popular music, as a component of Jamaica's sociocultural debates, in projecting identity discourses into the local, regional and international imagination. It argues that, these sociocultural projections, coupled with local ambivalence, have created an opening for a rendition of Jamaican national identity that is inextricably bonded to the weed/marijuana.

Keywords: dance hall, reggae, marijuana

Weed/Marijuana in the Local Imagination

The relationship between the weed/marijuana, Jamaican music, and identity is rooted in the relationship of marijuana and Jamaica's working classes. Scholars remain divided as to whether the weed/marijuana was brought onto slave plantations by indentured Indians or by enslaved Africans; however, the weed/marijuana has been illegal in Jamaica since the passing

of the Ganja Law of 1913.¹ Nonetheless, it remains Jamaica's most celebrated plant, in popular and varied use by many in the society. As a component of the weed/marijuana's relationship to Jamaica's working classes, local folklore is rife with myths about its mystical and medicinal properties, and many claims are made about its multiple, positive abilities as an aphrodisiac, appetite booster, meditative aid, religious sacrament and panacea, among others. For example, one Jamaican belief is that feeding "steamed" weed/marijuana leaves to dogs can enhance their aggression, making them better tools for to secure personal and private property. Despite its common use as a smoking agent, however, many Jamaicans avoid smoking the weed/marijuana, and instead it is often used in the preparation of hot beverages, and as a spice in foods such as ganja cake.

Another popular conception in Jamaica is that the weed/marijuana is a "natural" plant that can flourish in any soil. Therefore, it is not a harmful substance or an illegal drug. On the other hand, crack, cocaine and other such narcotics are perceived as "unnatural" and "bad drugs", which are harmful to the mind and body, as well as the general social and cultural fabric and so these "drugs" are perceived as justifiably illegal. For example, the Ganja Commission's Report of 2001 detailed a mother's plight in which her son, a crack addict, was a pain to her heart because he stole and would even sell her things to support his habit. She wished it was the ganja that he smoked because it wouldn't have that effect on him noting "...a dat the people must hail out on, not the ganja."² As a result of this sociocultural perception that imputes positive tropes to the weed/marijuana, local and international trade in it is viewed with great ambivalence by many Jamaicans. For example, in the case of the December 2009 internationally publicized arrest and subsequent charge and conviction, in February 2011, of popular Jamaican artiste, Buju Banton, many Jamaicans lamented the fact that he

had been involved with the illegal drug, cocaine (aka the “white lady”) and not the natural plant, marijuana/weed. Buju Banton’s socio-cultural positioning as both a Rastafarian and a Reggae artiste creates an ambivalent identification with marijuana/weed and a related negation of all other forms of “drugs”. Here, Veal notes that, according to legendary drummer Lenroy “horsemouth” Wallace, “the people respect you in Jamaica when you can put 40 and 50 bag a ganja on a plane, we don’t call that drugs. This is ganja business...we do those things like we are revolutionary. We put 40 bag on a plane and feel good...we send those so people in America could smoke the good ganja, not just for money alone” (Veal, 2007 p.17).

The sociocultural perceptions of and responses to marijuana/weed, particularly among Jamaica’s underclasses, are encoded in the country’s popular music, which has historically emanated primarily from this group. As such, the weed/marijuana is celebrated by Jamaican musicians, particularly in the rocksteady, reggae and dancehall genres, as the holy herb, the religious sacrament, the meditation herb, the wisdom weed, the “natural” or organic herb, the panacea for all ailments, the calmer, the adrenaline pusher and the aphrodisiac, among other labels³. Indeed, the “benefits of ganja are deeply rooted in the folklore of the people” (Chevannes et al., 2001 p.23) and dispelling it would prove almost impossible. The belief in these benefits continue to ring true throughout the cultural and popular music frameworks of Jamaican life and society and, correspondingly, these frameworks project multiple signifiers that highlight an overwhelming focus on the centrality of this plant in the construction of a popular notion of what it means to be Jamaican. In this regard, the cultural and creative space of Reggae music, and its attendant Rastafari culture, stands as a critical location for the creation of multiple signifiers of a Jamaican identity, linked symbolically to the weed/marijuana, that are disseminated across the world.

Rastafari reggae and the weed

Reggae music of the sort internationalized by cultural icon, Robert Nesta Marley is historicized for its promulgation of positive, uplifting themes, as well as its role in spreading the message of Rastafari across the globe. The fact that a significant number of Reggae artistes are also Rastafarians remains critically important in this exercise, as their dual role ensures the promotion of the messages of Rastafari, simultaneously with the dissemination of entertaining Reggae ballads. These religious messages include, but are not limited to, deifying Haile Selassie, centralizing Africa as the motherland, and Ethiopia as the site of repatriation, projecting the upliftment and development of Africans globally, beating down the corruption and oppression of Babylon, promoting the One Love philosophy, and promoting a 'natural' lifestyle, free from various contaminating influences. The weed/marijuana or ganja, also known as the holy herb, was identified as a religious sacrament for the Rastafarians as the movement gathered momentum in the 1930s, and its use is promoted as a central religious tenet and practice of the movement. According to Rastafari worldview and theology, its use is grounded in several Biblical scriptures, including Psalm 104:14 "He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man; that he may bring forth food out of the earth". Campbell et al (2002) notes that "The Rastafarians quoted bible scriptures such as Genesis 1 verse 11, 'then God said let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed according to their various kinds'; also at Proverbs 15 verse 17, Solomon the wise king said 'better a dinner of herbs where love is than in a stalled ox and hatred therewith'. This identification of the weed/marijuana as a sacred and central component of its religious activity and beliefs was symbolic of the group's anti-systemic protest, against the oppressive "Babylon" in a context where Jamaica's overarching power structures

had deemed its use illegal from as early as 1913. One should note at this juncture, that while Rastafari draws from Christian Fundamentalism, and identifies the Christian Bible as a sacred text, its public stance on the weed/marijuana differs radically from the public stance of practicing Christians in Jamaica. In Jamaica, Christians see the weed/marijuana as a secular and illegal drug and do not interpret the Biblical scriptures as they are done by Rastafarians to impute sacred properties to the weed/marijuana.

Thus, the discursive process of the construction a variant of Jamaica/Jamaicanness connected to the weed/marijuana, is raised on the integration of Rastafari themes into Reggae music and the overwhelming popularity of Rastafarian Reggae musicians internationally. This international reach and popularity has, arguably, resulted in an ideological fusion of Reggae and Rastafari in the imagination of many across the world, where the construction and dissemination of signifiers that conflate Reggae with Rastafari and the weed/marijuana through lyrics, images and lifestyle, has been a staple almost since the inception of Reggae⁴. This is particularly so because the Rastafarians' use of marijuana, or ganja, is perhaps the most dominant force in the movement's religious ideology, as well as the most controversial.

As a part of their promotion of the virtues of the weed, and, by extension, the promotion of a Jamaican nation and nationals contained within its smoky haze, many Rastafarians also used the vehicle of Reggae music and its international stage to advocate for the legalization of weed/marijuana/ganja. For example, Peter Tosh often performed with a spliff in hand, and lobbied for the decriminalization of marijuana. His *Legalize It* and is one of the most popular songs on this theme:-

*Legalize it - don't criticize it
Legalize it and I will advertise it*

*Some call it tampee
Some call it the weed
Some call it Marijuana
Some of them call it Ganja*

*Legalize it - don't criticize it
Legalize it and I will advertise it*

*Singer smoke it
And players of instruments too
Legalize it, yeah, yeah
That's the best thing you can do
Doctors smoke it
Nurses smoke it
Judges smoke it
Even the lawyers too*

Here, Tosh identifies the weed and cries out for its full legalization, imputing that a range of high status individuals (e.g. doctors, nurses, judges, lawyers) will also benefit, and thus suggesting that the weed/marijuana is not just a feature of the lives of poor or working class individuals.

Another popular example is Jacob Miller's *Tired fi Lick Weed In a Bush* which articulates similar sentiments as Tosh:

*Ooh, now, want to be free....
Tired fe lick weed in a bush
Tired fe lick pipe in a gully
We want to come out in the open
Where the breeze can blow it so far away*

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*To the north, to the south,
To the eas', an' to the wes', to the wes'
Talkin' about Jonestown, Trenchtown, Concrete Jungle, too
From Waterhouse, that's the wes', that's the bes', that's the wes'

From St. Ann's it comes to you
The best kali weed you ever drew
So why should you run and hide
From the red seam, the blue seam, the khaki clothes, too,
hmm

Tired fe lick weed in a bush
Tired fe lick chillum in a gully
We want to come out in the open
Where the breeze can blow it so far away
To the north, to the south,
To the eas', an' to the wes', to the wes', ooh now

We want, we want to be free....*

Miller imputes the notion of freedom for weed/marijuana smokers so that they are able to smoke in the open. This freedom understandably can only come through its legalization/ decriminalization so that smokers would no longer have to “*run and hide, from the red seam, the blue seam, the khaki clothes too*”. Here, Miller identifies the role of the Jamaican police at all levels based on colours associated with their uniforms. “*Red seam*” imputes the members of the Jamaica Constabulary Force at all levels up to the rank of Corporal and “*blue seam*” does the same for the Island Special Constabulary Force. “*Khaki clothes*” imputes both JCF and ISCF officers at the higher ranks from Inspector, upwards to the Commissioner whose red or blue seam uniforms are replaced with the “*khaki clothes*” that are used to identify higher-ranking police officers. The role of the state and its officers in enforcing the various laws that make the use, possession and trafficking of the weed/marijuana an illegal

act, remains a constant referent point and debatable issue for Rastafari, Reggae and Dancehall artistes and other Jamaicans who are pro-weed/marijuana use.

In addition to calls for its legalization/decriminalization, Jamaican/Reggae/Rastafari artistes were strong advocates for the smoking and use of weed/marijuana as a regular component of daily life. Popular examples of reggae songs highlighting and celebrating marijuana usage include Tosh's aforementioned *Legalize It*, Bob Marley's *Kaya* and *Easy Skanking*, Culture's *International Herb*, Lee Scratch Perry's *Free up the Weed* (Veal 2007:17), and Rita Marley's *One Draw*. What is critical about these songs is their propensity to lyrically construct a relationship between Reggae, Rastafari the weed/marijuana and a version of Jamaicanness that has been elevated to overarching levels of influence in Euro-American conceptions of what it means to be a Jamaican, live in Jamaica and to enjoy the "natural" fruits of the Jamaican soil. In many instances this becomes fixed in a harmful and negative discourse wherein Black bodies, particularly Jamaican males, are criminalized and marked as potential or actual drug dealers - a stereotype that Jamaicans living abroad contend with and challenge in their day-to-day lives⁵.

In adding to the debate, Sizzla's defiant stance against the criminality of ganja is portrayed in his treatise *Got it Right Here*, where he simultaneously proclaims that Jamaica is 'a weed place' and 'we ought not to care' what is said to the contrary. The 'we' in this instance imputes Jamaicans/Jamaican identity. Sizzla further encourages 'ghetto youts' to "bill it up" or partake of weed/marijuana/ganja, and lauds its economic benefits noting that "it feed mi, clothes me and school mi." As a Rastafarian, he also declares that ganja is a sacrament of Rastafarians, and a natural herb created for the use of man by the Almighty. The setting up of this illegal herb as a religious sacrament remains

a critical tenet of Rastafari which continues to challenge and overturn the colonial/religious values that have been imposed on Jamaicans by Europeans, in this instance, within the framework of Christianity.

In a related vein, Veal notes the feelings of some Jamaicans musicians that the prominence of this weed/marijuana theme led to a distorted view of reggae in the world at large, as musicians played to the expectations of their international audiences. According to him, Jamaican musician Paul Henton voiced a sentiment common among some Jamaicans, who felt that their colleagues sung about marijuana just because they know the white people love it. "If tomorrow morning the people or the fans say okay we don't want to hear anymore of this ganja stuff", they would stop singing about it and stop promoting it (Veal, 2007, p.18). To my knowledge this commercialization/capitalist use of the weed/marijuana in Reggae has never been a direct focus of Reggae singers, even if it is mentioned in passing. What is more arguable is that Reggae/Rastafari singers continue to sing about the weed/marijuana regardless of their white audience, because of its centrality within Rastafari worldview, and also based on the symbolic nature of the weed/marijuana in Jamaican life and culture. This symbolic nature of the weed/marijuana in Jamaican life and culture is, arguably, one of the critical foundations upon which dancehall music, as a succeeding genre of Jamaican popular music, has continued this discussion about the positive properties of the weed/marijuana.

Gimme di weed: the dancehall expression

While the greater proportion of dancehall artists project a secular image, with a few sometimes sporting Rastafari locks primarily as signifiers of contemporary fashion and style, the lyrical value placed on the perception of regular use of the weed/

marijuana to their lives and identity, and that of their audience is undisputable. Dancehall artists' explicitly secular focus on the weed/ganja/marijuana constructs it as the meditation herb, the wisdom weed, the "natural" or organic herb, the panacea, the calmer, the adrenaline pusher, the aphrodisiac, and the income generator – and thus as of seminal importance to the daily lives and identity of Jamaicans. These constructions are related to, but differentiated from, the Reggae/Rastafari insistence on the weed's holiness, its appropriate placement as a religious sacrament and its mystical properties. Since the dancehall is a secular, socio-cultural space it draws its weed narratives from the base of Jamaican folk, popular and religious culture. However, the pervasiveness of Rastafari culture in the lives of Jamaicans, also acts as a critical plank upon which dancehall's weed/marijuana narratives are formed, even if dancehall artistes are themselves not practicing the faith. Thus, dancehall artistes also draw upon the same Biblical imperatives as Rastafari, to contextualize their use of the herb, even if they simultaneously claim to be of a Christian orientation. This paradoxical duality remains a component of Jamaican identity which utilizes fluid and often competing discourses to articulate its multi-faceted nature. Thus, in the dancehall, the weed/marijuana and its usage and celebration are at once both secular and religious, and identified as ultimately Jamaican. Notably, while this paper does not focus explicitly on a discussion of patriarchy and gender, it is also critically important to note that, in the main, the cultural, social and popular music connotations of the weed/marijuana is a gendered debate that remains predominantly masculine and highly patriarchal. This does not detract from female use and celebration of the weed/marijuana, however, in all instances (including the publicized arrest and conviction of individuals on weed/marijuana charges) masculinity is privileged. This is borne out in the almost total absence of popular songs/lyrics by female artistes as a part of this discussion.

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Dancehall's watershed computerized hit song, *Under Me Sleng Teng* by Wayne Smith, not only announced dancehall's move into high tech riddims, but also the genre's maintenance of a Jamaican socio-cultural orientation biased positively towards weed/marijuana debates. For many, *Sleng Teng* is the quintessential "Weed Song" stating:

*Under me sleng teng, me under me sleng teng
Under me sleng teng, me under me hey hey*

*Way in my brain, no cocaine
I don't wanna, I don't wanna go insane*

Here, Wayne Smith highlights very early what has been identified in the foregoing as dancehall's propensity to polarize the virtues of the weed/marijuana against the negative impact of cocaine. This persistent post-1980s theme in dancehall music documents and simultaneously rejects the incursions of crack/cocaine into Jamaica, and highlights its early negative impact on the lives and bodies of locals. Smith notes "*I don't wanna go insane*", a theme that consistently resonates through local discussions about cocaine, and which was spurred on by the then growing visibility of the new phenomenon of wasted hulks of humanity, deemed *cokeheads*, that began to proliferate in various communities. Cokeheads are identified as cocaine users and scum of the earth, who have lost all morals and will even sell their mothers to get a fix. For many Jamaicans the belief is/was, "cocaine use makes you go mad". Thus, cocaine use was (and still is) deemed a greater evil than the use of the weed/herb marijuana, which had many positive healing and mystical properties, even while it was also identified as an illegal drug. Indeed, cocaine's rise to prominence in Jamaica in the late 1970s is due to several factors, including the decimation of the local weed/marijuana

industry, and Jamaica's growing importance as a transshipment point for cocaine from Colombia to the USA. Scholars and writers also identify the collapse of Jamaica's patron-client network that had functioned to transfer state largesse from political leaders to urban youths in return for their political loyalty and maintenance of garrison communities – usually backed by intense violence and the use of guns (See for e.g. Chevannes, 2001b and Gunst, 1995). Of note is the fact that, even while crime and violence predates the rise of cocaine in Jamaica, cocaine's entry paved the way for transitions in the profile and power of the former state henchmen – the Dons and Area Leaders. Many of these individuals were transformed into drug lords, with extensive networks stretching across transnational pathways, for example, into the USA and England, under the protection of aggressive and violent foot soldiers. Since the 1980s, local commerce in cocaine has corrupted and damaged many inner-city communities and reportedly resulted in multiple incidents of intra-gang warfare and reprisals over money. Indeed even with the successful challenges to and collaborations against the cocaine trade, once the cocaine trade finds fertile ground, subsequent instability in the market, (as has happened in Jamaica) can also have a major impact on levels of violence in the society (World Drug Report, 2010, p.235).⁶ The residual impact of the cocaine trade includes not just the now ever-present phenomenon of the local cokehead, and state and civil society-led interventions against addiction, but also the growing waves of violence perpetrated by former drug Dons and gang leaders who struggle to find new means of earning large sums of money illegally, to support their lifestyles.

In addition, the foregoing consistent theme of cocaine use as synonymous with insanity that continues through the 1980s and into the post-millennial era, also projects the very popular socio-cultural construction of the “natural”, organic weed/marijuana as polarized against the unnatural, artificial

drug cocaine. This construction conflates a popular concept of Jamaica as a local, organic paradise that is polarized against foreign, inorganic developed nations. In this regard, the weed/marijuana signifies Jamaica as an organic, natural paradisiac Utopia and bestows multiple positives on Jamaica and Jamaican identity. Thus, King Yellowman's hit song, *Sensimillia*⁷ not only exemplified the rejection of any form of legal sanctions against the public smoking of marijuana, but also expressly underlines dancehall and Jamaica's anti-cocaine stance noting that "*cocaine will blow your brain but the sensimillia is irie...it haffi bun.*" According to Yellowman, the irresistible lure of sensimillia is so powerful that even the security forces are overpowered by its potency. Consequently, in a direct sample from Sugar Minott's *Herbman Hustling*, Yellowman delivers the exhortation to the converted police officer to "*wrap up ah draw fi di Commissioner, wrap up ah draw fi di Inspector, wrap up ah draw fi di lawyer, wrap up ah draw fi di doctor*" by the converted police officer. Here, the state and its intelligentsia are lyrically converted to the use of the weed and, according to Yellowman, participate in public commendation of the weed. This lyrical construction of high-ranking members of the police force who are highly visible agents of the state involved with law enforcement, as actively engaged with marijuana use, conflates both state and national identity with a positive bias for and identification towards the weed/marijuana. The inclusion of high-status national actors, such as lawyers and doctors, also impute a similar focus, particularly since involvement in weed cultivation, smoking and trafficking are activities that, in Jamaica, are generally identified with the lower classes or criminals.

Dancehall artistes also utilize their lyrical treatises to call for the weed to be legalized, and, like their Rastafarian predecessors in the Reggae genre, they too discuss the different levels of meditative highs reached with the aid of the weed. In

Legalize the Herb, Ninjaman joins the range of Jamaican artistes who call for the legalization of the weed/marijuana and insists that legalizing the herb will “get rid of the crackhead them”, which as noted in the foregoing, remains a consistent theme in post-1980s dancehall. In his similar treatise *Legalize It*, Sean Paul also notes that since “*Herb ah di healing of di nation*” it should be legalized ‘right now’. Like many other reggae and dancehall artistes, Sean Paul highlights the popular notion that many individuals subscribe to that “*di best high grade ah Jamaican*”.

In the dancehall, the weed/marijuana is also celebrated as the weed of wisdom. This popular myth about marijuana is used by many as justification for its use and also as a rationale for its value to individuals who display high levels of intellect. According to Jamaica’s ‘wisdom weed’ myth, the plant was found growing on King Solomon’s grave and, since he was the wisest man of his days, then smoking the weed will ensure enhanced wisdom and heighten intellectual capacity. Indeed, some artistes state that in the studio marijuana helps them to tap into their creative side and aids in the production of better quality and more lyrical musical compositions. For example, in *High Grade Forever* Bounty Killa states that *High grade mek you clever, boil tea wid it forever* and notes in the chorus that if you “*Guh back a Solomon grave you find di ganja it ah grow pon it*”. In a similar weed song, *Smoke the Herb*, he again highlights the valuable properties of the weed/marijuana stating that the herb “*Increase mi wisdom, understanding and mi knowledge*” and again constructing the link between the weed/marijuana and wisdom, Bounty Killa highlights in *Smoke the Herb* that “*It was found on King Solomon’s grave, he was the wisest man in his days*”. Thus, this myth also carries Biblical significance with both its reference to King Solomon, and the notion that use of the weed/marijuana can put you in touch with a Higher Power (e.g. via meditation). In this regard, it also resonates with Christian

theology, even while Christianity stoutly condemns the use of the weed/marijuana.

Dancehall culture and music also brokers its discussions on marijuana through the popular culture standpoint where it is identified as a good and “natural” plant with many medicinal properties. The lyrics of Tony Curtis’ *High Grade in My Head*, speak of the ‘stress relieving properties’ of the herb, and in *Gimme di Weed*, Buju Banton proclaims that “ganja is the healing of the nation” and that it “tes’ and was passed by scientists and ‘docta man’” so it is “our tradition.” Buju Banton also glorifies the cultivation of ganja in St. Ann⁸, noting that the quality of weed/marijuana grown in that parish is exceptional. This notion that the weed/marijuana grown in Jamaica is superior to all other forms grown elsewhere in the world pervades local discussions and filters outwards to international spaces. This notion also supports the argument of economic prosperity for Jamaica if the weed/marijuana is allowed to be legally sold locally/exported for medicinal purposes as with the growing, international Medical Marijuana movement.⁹ In addition, the ideological conflation of Jamaica as paradise with an organic lifestyle is also a powerful trope that positions Jamaica/Jamaicanness from the view of the outsider, within the midst of a weed/marijuana garden or tropical forest of the highest grade.

Another important trope, that is linked to the foregoing and deserves some examination, is the celebration of the weed/ganja/marijuana, as an aphrodisiac. This concept is particularly common among working class and inner city groups in Jamaica where a combination of the weed/marijuana as “High grade” or “highest grade”, and the once-popular Guinness Stout, was mythologized as a potent aphrodisiac for men (and strong women) who would extol the excellence and power of their sexual performance after ingesting both substances. This is explicitly captured in Mr. Vegas’ *Unda Mi Guinness* when he states:

*Undah mi Guinness and mi high grade ting
Some body ago get mash up dis evening
Can't wait fi hear all di doorbell ring
Cause Jaclyn a go dead dis evening*

In a similar lyrical turn, (minus the Guinness), Bounty Killer notes in *High Grade Forever* that:

*Dah weed yah mek mi have dem gyal week in di knees;
Dah weed yah mek mi yeye narrow like ah Japanese
Plus dah weed yah mek mi ride mi cocky like ah Mercedes
Unda Jackie and Yvette and har sister Janice*

And in his sexually explicit treatise, *Give it to Dem*, Sizzla notes:

“ah ganja mi smoke and ah fuck off dem gyal yah”.

In a related vein, dancehall's anthropomorphic framing of the weed as a female love interest is also common. For example, Vybz Kartel celebrates his love for the weed/marijuana where he refers to it as a lady he loves, *Marie*, in his song of the same name:

*Mi love it when you roll up
You look good inna di Rizzla when you fold up
Mi prefer you when you cure up
Cah when you fresh yuh burn mi chest
Now look how far wi ah come from
Like Metromedia, like Stone Love
Di day when you see mi touch di white lady
Ah di day mi laid to rest*

Dancehall artiste, Wayne Marshall, also utilizes this anthropomorphic turn in his song *Marry Wanna* where he describes the weed/marijuana as a seductress whose wiles are so great that he is completely smitten and claims that 'she' is the best thing for him. A similar twist is voiced in the line “*and keep yuh lips pon mi like yuh marijuana*” in Tanya Stephen's *These*

Streets, which also articulates the female dancehall artiste's similar eroticization of the weed/marijuana.

The mystical and mythical properties of the weed/marijuana are further extolled in Vybz Kartel's collaborative work with Don Corleon and Bounty Killa, in the song *High Altitude*, where Vybz Kartel exalts ganja use and describes the weed as "being taller than Bin Laden's guns". The weed is also endowed with mystical properties that make you 'fly to high altitudes.' This ability metaphorically generate flight is also an important trope in Kartel's two popular weed/marijuana anthems *Visa* and *Sen On*.

As a component of the sociocultural celebration of weed/marijuana and its promotion as a positive component of life, trade in the weed/marijuana remains a critical source of income for many Jamaicans, despite the legislative sanctions leveled against it. For example, a visit to particular locations in downtown Kingston may reveal men and women with their stock of the weed/ganja shouting 'hundred dolla bag', 'two bills bag', 'five bills bag'¹⁰, openly in the streets to make a living. For many, the sale of marijuana is identified as critical for their economic stability, as this assists with their daily expenses and bills. Sugar Minott's *Mr. DC* and *Herbman Hustling* of the 1970s highlight this economic component, which is pervasively touted as critically important to the livelihood of the poor and working classes. Rastafarian Reggae/DJ Tony Rebel's song *Chatty Chatty* of the early 1990s highlights same where he notes "*tru mi a try a little hustling a sell some weed*" and outlines the challenges with a chatty chatty (gossip) woman who "carries his name gone a (police) station to Sergeant Reid". In a related vein, Dancehall deejay artiste, Beenie Man's post-2000 "*Hundred Dollar Bag*" refers to him selling the weed/marijuana and being able to generate profits and make a living from this activity.

It is noteworthy, in this regard, that while the weed/marijuana remains illegal in Jamaica, there are many stage shows and popular music events which take place across the island where there is open smoking and selling of the herb without attempts by the security forces to arrest and criminalize individuals for use, sale and possession. Chevannes (2001b:37) identifies this as an “expedient and sensible approach” as the pervasiveness of its use at these events may provoke a riot if the police engaged in widescale arrest of patrons and artistes at the event. As a result, this creates a temporal and temporary space, a kind of “Weed Island”, where individuals are granted a momentary hiatus to freely revel in the virtues of the weed/marijuana, and to earn an income from it. Nonetheless, once these events come to an end, this temporal and temporary space evaporates. Indeed, there are multiple reports of persons being detained for possession of the weed/marijuana after leaving stage show and popular music venues in Jamaica. Additionally, Reggae and dancehall artistes historically face arrests and charges from local and international authorities, many times for small portions of weed/marijuana for personal use including the arrest and charge of Reggae artiste, Peter Tosh for smoking marijuana in 1978 and the more recent examples of dancehall artistes Beenie Man in 2003, Buju Banton in 2008 for two live marijuana plants, Bounty Killa in 2009, Chucky B from Monster Twins in 2009, Jah Cure in 2010, Vybz Kartel in 2011, Popcaan in 2011 and Tommy Lee who was arrested for marijuana possession in Grenada in April 2012. Most of these arrests are for portions of the weed/marijuana, too small to be for anything but personal use, convictions for which often carry a minimal fine – and which do not act as a deterrent for personal use of the weed/marijuana. Here, the temporary/temporal hiatus that is granted at many reggae and dancehall stage shows is thus a momentary, but culturally sanctioned break-away from legislative norms. This paradoxical situation is brokered on

the social and cultural understandings of the use and value of the weed by Jamaicans from diverse religious, social and economic groupings even, while the legislative standpoint remains firmly against its use and trade.

Another very popular song that expresses the economic/trade viewpoint that is critical to Jamaican socio-cultural debates is Buju Banton's *Driver*, which became the theme song for the Jamaica Labour Party ("JLP") during their successful general election campaign of 2007. Delivered over an updated *Sleng Teng* rhythm/riddim, *Driver* uses relevant themes and codes to delineate spaces (Alba Mall/Albermarle) and practices (Nextel phone with a Cingular Chip) that are particular to the movement of marijuana in the USA, even while simultaneously imputing the role of Jamaicans in this transnational activity¹¹ that cuts across borders. These and other themes discussed in the foregoing continue proliferate in Jamaican popular music and thus fix Jamaica/Jamaicanness as a signifier for the weed/marijuana in the international imagination.

Conclusion: jamaica/jamaicanness in the international imagination

Jamaican popular music's consistent and popular lyrical projections of Jamaica and Jamaicanness, particularly in Reggae and dancehall music have been critical facets of the mystical and mystical conception of Jamaican life and culture as synonymous with good, high grade weed/marijuana. The exotic notions of Jamaica/Jamaicanness, connected to the weed/marijuana compete and collide with other variants of Jamaica/Jamaicanness in the international imagination. One such variant is the exoticized discourse of tourism that utilizes skillfully crafted advertisements to "sell" Jamaica as space and place of a

particular sort – a paradise that is at once unspoilt and pristine, organic, laid back and peopled with unthreatening nubile, Rasta bodies¹². Additionally, the identification of Reggae Superstar Bob Marley as an International Ambassador for Jamaican music and culture has arguably driven the internationalizing of a discursive Jamaican triptych – Marley as synonymous with Rasta, Reggae and the Weed, and thus an internationally acclaimed signifier of Jamaica/Jamaicanness. Thus, the symbolic relationship between the weed/marijuana and roots Reggae “helped clear a psychological space for the flourishing of Jamaica’s brand of cultural nationalism, yet in all likelihood, its significance to Jamaican culture transcended both this and its function as a religious sacrament for Rastas. As Reggae musicians extolled the virtues of ganja to the international audience, Jamaica, roots Reggae and ganja essentially became interchangeable advertisement for each other” (Veal, 2007). Undeniably, this type of ‘advertisement’ played a role in the September 2012 comments of Zimbabwean President, Robert Mugabe that “In Jamaica, they have freedom to smoke mbanje (marijuana), *varume vanogara vakadhakwa* (men are always drunk) and universities are full of women”. The article stated that Mugabe went on further to note that “The men want to sing and do not go to colleges *vamwe vanobva vamonwa musoro* (some are dreadlocked). Let us not go there,”...¹³ Mugabe’s comments sparked intense controversy and invoked the ire of many Jamaicans who felt that his portrayal of Jamaican men was stereotypical and at best flawed and at worst, an outright lie. Nonetheless, the image of dreadlocked Rastafarian Reggae artistes smoking and celebrating the weed/marijuana, and the corresponding image of “blinged out” dancehall artistes (some dreadlocked), also involved with and extolling the virtues of the weed/marijuana remain critical point signifiers of Jamaican (male) identity in the international imagination.

Consequently, these mystical and mythical conceptions of the weed/marijuana in Jamaica's popular music also constructed a powerful socio-cultural image that refracts an immutable Outsider perspective of Jamaica and Jamaicanness to those who exist within and without the confines of Jamaica. One conceptualizes Jamaica/Jamaicanness as the Other re-constructs and re-returns same to its site of origin, in a constant process of identity negotiation and formation that is bound up with process that emanate from the Outside. According to Stuart Hall "far from only coming from the still small point of truth inside us, identities actually come from outside, they are the way in which we are recognized and then come to step into the place of the recognition which others give us. Without the others there is no self, there is no self-recognition" (Hall, 2004, p. 582-583). Thus, as Jamaicans continue to socio-culturally conceptualize the weed/marijuana as harmless panacea, religious sacrament, aphrodisiac, among other positive connotations, these also act as discursive pathways to notions of Jamaican identity that proliferate outside of the country. These refracted notions of the Jamaican self return from outside to re-create a version of Jamaica/Jamaicanness that has become internationally renowned and fixed in the international imagination as both positive and negative signifiers of representations of Jamaican masculinity and concepts of Jamaican identity that are inextricably bound up with the weed/marijuana in its many manifestations.

Notes

¹ According to the Ganja Commission Report there are six acts relevant to ganja in Jamaica. These are: (1) The Dangerous Drugs Act, (2) The Money Laundering Act, (3) The Drug Offences Act [forfeiture of proceeds], (4) The Mutual Assistance Act [criminal matters], (5) The Sharing of Forfeited Property Act, and (6) The Drug Court Act and the Drug Court Regulations [treatment and rehabilitation of offenders].

² “...that is what the people should cry out against, not the ganja”.

³ One should note at this point that in the international discourses of Black music both Jamaican dancehall and American rap music/hip hop culture are often correlated. Rap music and hip hop culture use the term “chronic” to signify the weed/marijuana, however, while both rap/hip hop and dancehall associate the uses of weed/marijuana to signify meditation, in Jamaican dancehall culture, the symbolic use of weed carries multiple meanings as will be discussed further in this paper. I make this point to underwrite the multiple readings of the weed/marijuana that is discussed within this paper and to suggest that the Jamaican signifiers cannot be misread solely within the context of promoting a drug/criminal culture.

⁴ This image also undoubtedly attracts tourists to Jamaica, with the pervasive Rastafarian (who imputes the weed/marijuana) being featured in some tourist advertisements.

⁵ Indeed, during my Doctoral study in the USA several Americans and Europeans approached me, inquiring if I had access to any “good Jamaican weed”. One individual, in particular, requested my intervention in providing him with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to visit a “real Jamaican weed field” whenever he visited Jamaica. In all instances, I had to express my lack of possession of, knowledge about and access.

⁶ For example the UNODC’s World Drug Report 2010 notes that “Estimates of the cocaine flow through Jamaica dropped from 11% of the US supply in 2000 to 2% in 2005, and 1% in 2007. This is reflected in declining seizures in Jamaica and declining arrests and convictions of Jamaican drug traffickers in the United States. It is also negatively reflected in the murder rate, which rose from 34 per 100,000 in 2000 to 59 per 100,000 in 2008”.

⁷ Sensimilla or Sensi is another popular name for the weed/marijuana.

⁸ In Jamaica, St. Ann is popularly known as “The Garden Parish” and is famed (or notorious) for the quality of its weed/marijuana plants, particularly during the heyday of marijuana cultivation in the 1970s.

⁹ Recreational use of the weed/marijuana remains illegal in many parts of the world as in Jamaica. However, many countries are beginning to entertain varying levels of decriminalization for medical usage. This is known as the Medical Marijuana movement where countries such as Canada, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Czech Republic, Spain, Israel, Italy, Finland, and Portugal are all involved in this debate. In the USA, use, sale and trafficking of the weed/marijuana remains illegal at the Federal level, but fifteen (15) states have sanctioned the Medical Marijuana stance for its use and sale as medicine for use in the presence of specific illnesses including cancer,

HIV/AIDS, glaucoma, Alzheimer's, arthritis, chronic pain, etc. These states are Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Maine, Michigan, Montana, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington. Other states have legislation in the works or marijuana-friendly laws including Alabama, Arizona, Delaware, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland (allows a medical-use defense in court), Massachusetts, Mississippi, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Wisconsin, and Virginia.

¹⁰ A “hundred dolla bag” is a small portion that is sold for J\$100.00. The successive “two bills bag” and “five bills bag” refer to portions that are sold for J\$200.00 and J\$400.00. In November 2012 the exchange rate was US\$1.00 = J\$91.70.

¹¹ Buju Banton's subsequent arrest, incarceration and trial on drug-related charges has left many to question the veracity of the lyrics and to chastise Buju, a Rastafarian, for his renunciation of the ‘natural’ sacrament, ganja, for the “illegal, artificial, and foreign, drug” cocaine.

¹² Note use of BBC's Song of the Millennium, Bob Marley's One Love in Jamaica Tourist Board Ads.

¹³ See article “Don't be Like Jamaicans – Mugabe” in the *Sunday Gleaner*, Sunday, September 9, 2012.

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