

Herbs Against Babylon

The Spiritual Meanings of the Rastafari Struggle Over the Sacrament of Ganja in Reggae
Lyrics

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Abstract

The adherents of the Rastafari movement have long been persecuted by state powers over their sacramental use of 'ganja', or cannabis. One function of reggae music is to act as a discursive arena for the construction and communication of a constellation of spiritual meanings related to the persecution of ganja use, as well as Rastafari attempts to resist and overcome said persecution. This thesis aims to outline the spiritual meanings within reggae lyrics related to the ganja struggle, as well as to elucidate their connectedness to each other and the social context of their production. To achieve this, lyrics from a selection of reggae songs are analyzed using theoretical and methodological principles of Critical Discourse Analysis in the Faircloughian vein, combining closer textual analysis with reflections on the social context surrounding their creation to arrive at an understanding of how the social realities of historical struggle are narrated by Rastafari artists ultimately attempting to transform them. The findings of the thesis suggest that within the wider field of reggae discourse, a coherent narrative pattern consistent with the general principles of Rastafari philosophy can be discerned, one framing the struggle over ganja as an integral part of a metaphysical conflict of good and evil eventually culminating in a millenarian transformation of society and the onset of social liberation. The thesis demonstrates how spiritual meanings composing a theology of liberation are a discursive response by Rastas to a social context of persecution and marginalization.

Keywords: Rastafari, ganja, cannabis, struggle, reggae, drug prohibition, spiritual meanings, millenarianism, liberation, anti-imperialism, holy war

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	4
1.1	The Object and the Significance of the Study	4
1.2	Essential Definitions	4
1.3	Research Questions	5
1.4	Background	6
1.4.1	A Very Short History of Rastafari	6
1.4.2	The Sacrament of Ganja	7
1.4.3	The Reggae Discourse	8
1.4.4	The Decriminalization and the Rastafari Reaction	9
1.4.5	The Global Rastas	9
1.5	Prior Research and the Framing of the Study	10
1.6	Theoretical Framework and Methodology	12
1.6.1	Social Constructivism, Discourse and the Dialectical Creation of Culture	12
1.6.2	Critical Discourse Analysis	14
1.7	Researcher's Position and Ethical Considerations	16
1.8	Material	17
2	Analysis	20
2.1	Herbs Against Babylon – The Framing of a Spiritual Opposition	20
2.2	A Holy Drug War? – The Intersection of Spirituality and Conflict	25
3	Conclusion	32
	References	34
	Appendix	36
	Appendix 1. Discography	36

1 Introduction

1.1 The Object and the Significance of the Study

In this thesis I am examining the narrativistic image of a spiritual struggle over the Rastafari sacrament of ganja as it is constructed and expressed in reggae lyrics. Applying principles of Critical Discourse Analysis in the Faircloughian vein, I am analyzing a sample of reggae lyrics from songs by Rastafari artists within the social context of their production – a social context characterized by religio-political persecution. Throughout the analysis, I am highlighting meanings pertaining to the spiritual framing of the prohibition of ganja and the Rastafari resistance to that prohibition. Through an associative pattern apparent in the discourse of reggae, the meanings form a coherent constellation, which may be interpreted as a theology of liberation with some holy war -like meanings. Through the discourse, Rastafari artists participate consciously in constructing social realities which challenge hegemonial narratives and social structures, with the ultimate aim of collapsing the imperial structures maintaining their oppression.

Beyond the obvious inherent importance of elucidating Rastafari thought and discourse and thereby contributing to the amplification of historically marginalized voices, the value of this research lies in offering contemplations regarding the ways spiritual meanings and materially grounded realities can be intertwined, contributing to a wider understanding of the processes involved in the production of spiritual meanings and symbols, particularly under the pressure inherent to a social context of oppression.

1.2 Essential Definitions

“Ganja” is a widely used Jamaican term for cannabis, which is variously called “herb”, “marijuana”, “weed”, “collie”, and “sensi”, among other names, in the Rastafari vernacular. For the sake of clarity, in this thesis I shall refer to the plant exclusively as “ganja”, while in the songs quoted other names appear.

In this paper, I shall repeatedly refer to “social realities”. Borrowing a phrase from Berger and Luckmann (1991, 15), let us define “social realities” as “specific agglomerations of ‘reality’ and ‘knowledge’ pertaining to specific social contexts”. Being composed of ‘reality’ and ‘knowledge’, social realities are inherently produced, experienced, inherited, transformed, and re-produced by human agents both explicitly and/or consciously, as well as tacitly, implicitly,

and/or unconsciously. It should be noted that ‘knowledge’ in this sense does not refer to empirical facts, but rather socially constructed meanings. Social realities are regarded as capable of interlapping and exerting influence over each other. Social realities exist across many scales, and human agents can exist in multiple social realities at once.

I have decided to use the term “spiritual struggle”, when referring to the spiritually imbued aspects of the sum total of Rastafari efforts to resist the legitimized state persecution of ganja use. To be clear, Rastas resist the persecution of ganja use for both spiritual and non-spiritual reasons, although the two are often related. “Spiritual struggle” refers henceforth to the part of that struggle which is given spiritual meanings. I chose to favor ‘spiritual’ over ‘religious’ in this matter, not only due to the emphasis on individual spirituality within Rastafari, but also to establish a connection apparent in the material between the material persecution and a higher, spiritual, metaphysical destiny.

The term “constellation of meanings” is used in this paper to refer to any set of socially constructed meanings which appear in a specific pattern of relation to each other and partly derive their significance from that pattern. The constellation typically retains some fluidity of form and the exact relations between its meanings may vary slightly, but the overall pattern remains recognizable. The narrativistic image this study is most interested in elucidating can be discerned to be an example of such a meaning-constellation. Most often the meanings of any given constellation are signified by corresponding symbols.

1.3 Research Questions

The primary research question this study aims to answer is:

- What spiritual meanings related to the struggle over the sacrament of ganja do Rastafari reggae artists construct in their lyrical narrations?

The secondary questions meant to elucidate the primary question are:

- How is the opposition of Rastafari and ‘Babylon’ framed, especially as regards their attitudes towards ganja? What spiritual and holy war -like meanings are evoked in the framings?
- What qualities are associated with ganja? How is its spiritual significance framed?
- How do teleological and millenarian images of the future feature in the narrations?

While recognizing the diversity of Rastafari thought, I hope to delineate a general constellation of the spiritually imbued narrativistic meanings employed in relation to the issue of ganja rights in the reggae songs analyzed, in order to contribute to a better understanding of the social realities constructed and inhabited by Rastas in relation to their spiritual struggle over the sacrament of ganja.

1.4 Background

1.4.1 A Very Short History of Rastafari

Blending aspects of Christianity, various African religions, Hinduism, Old Testament Judaism, and intercontinental racial politics, Rastafari was established in Jamaica in the wake of an early 20th century wave of idealistic preachers including Marcus Garvey, Joseph Hibbert, Henry Dunkley, and Leonard Howell, who may justifiably be titled the founder of the movement. A poor, predominantly black British colony, Jamaica was reeling from the effects of slavery and racial-economic inequality and offered a suitable fruiting ground for the preachers' message of Pan-African liberation. Rastafari is named after the former emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie I, known before his coronation as Ras Tafari Makonnen. Haile Selassie was crowned emperor in 1930, becoming a symbol of African liberation worldwide and a messianic figure for the emerging Rastafari movement. As Rastafari is a movement consisting of the descendants of enslaved people, liberation, emancipation and the claiming of autonomy are at the forefront of Rastafari ideology. Rastafari millenarianism envisions a grand return to Africa, heralded by Emperor Selassie, a motif bearing deliberate resemblance to the return of the people of Israel from their exile in Babylon in the Old Testament. (Urban 2015, 114-119; Ferrara 2016, 90-93.)

Rastafari differs from most religions in that it has neither a unified doctrine nor official membership protocols. In fact, it can be argued that Rastafari, while possessing religious and especially spiritual qualities, is more akin to a way of life than a religion. While there are certain quasi-organizations within the movement and while it has seen its share of preachers, there is nothing comparable to a central church or figures with indisputable religious authority. The lack of organizational structure is deliberate and meant to cultivate independent thought and democratic discussion over all matters ranging from theological to political (which are by no means always distinct in Rastafari thought). (Chevannes 1995, 31-32.)

Therefore, it is often not possible to give an exhaustive account of Rastafari thought and belief. Moving forward, we ought to keep in mind that each Rasta reggae artist discussed is a philosopher in their own right – and generalizations, while necessary and useful, can not cover the entire width and depth of Rastafari thought. Not to mention that most Rastas are not reggae artists and we ought not presume that any artist can speak for the entire movement. Nevertheless, enough similarities in core beliefs and communications are present to warrant a delineation of a unified discursive pattern.

In literature, the movement is variously called Rastafari, Rastafarism, or Rastafarianism, while its adherents are referred to as Rastas, Rastafarians, or Rastafarianists. For the sake of clarity, in this thesis paper I shall exclusively refer to the movement as Rastafari and to the adherents of Rastafari as Rastas.

1.4.2 The Sacrament of Ganja

The smoking of cannabis was introduced to Jamaica by (East) Indian laborers, whom the British brought on the island to work in agriculture after the end of slavery in 1834. The term *ganja* was adopted into the Jamaican vocabulary from Hindi. Cannabis has been used in India as both a medicine and a sacramental spiritual aid for at least 3000 years, and it is this dual-purpose of healing both the body and soul that Rastas still use ganja for. (Urban 2015, 117-118; Benard 2007, 94-97.)

While used communally by the Jamaican peasant class to endure grueling workdays long after ganja's introduction to the island, Rastas explicitly combined the communal aspects of ganja with its entheogenic potentialities. Rastas organized around its usage ritualistic settings called *reasoning sessions*, which see Rastas (typically, but not always men) gathering in circles, smoking ganja, and partaking in plant-inspired discussions over matters concerning black liberation, enlightenment, and world-redeeming wisdom. (Benard 2007, 95-97.)

Ever since the days of Howell, most Rastas have regarded ganja smoking as a central spiritual sacrament irremovably essential to the practice of Rastafari. Rastas believe that ganja is a divine plant capable of leading people from ignorance and mental slavery to a revitalizing proximity with God, or Jah, as he is known by name. Rastas interpret several passages from the Bible as references to ganja and its life-affirming qualities. As Revelation 22:2 states, “the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nation” – a sentiment which is echoed extensively in the material of this study. The sacralization of ganja has delivered Rastas to a

long-standing tension with the Jamaican state, which has long treated cannabis as an illegal narcotic, essentially criminalizing Rastafari faith and persecuting Rastas over their use of the plant. As such, since the inception of the sacramental use of ganja, it has carried further symbolic qualities as a form of protest and conscious disobedience for the anti-authoritarian, liberation-aspiring Rastas. (Murrell 2008, 117-119; Hope 2013, 342-346; Pretorius 2006, 1021.)

1.4.3 The Reggae Discourse

Originating in the newly independent Jamaica in the late 1960s, reggae swiftly became the soundtrack of political resistance, at first domestically but soon spreading around the world on the back of the global mega-stardom of Bob Marley & The Wailers. The rise of reggae saw the emergence of a new image of the Rasta – a dreadlock-headed “warrior” with an explicitly religio-political agenda expressed through their music. With charismatically sung proclamations gliding over slow, bouncy, upbeat-emphasizing instrumentals, the early reggae artists propelled many Rastafari ideas, such as the spiritual opposition of Babylon and Zion (symbolizing the oppressive capitalist-imperialist system and divine liberation), into global collective contemporary consciousness. Notably, they were not fearful or apologetic about their advocacy for the spiritual use of ganja, even among the flared tensions of the recently sparked US-led war on drugs. (King 2002, 61-62.)

Throughout its history, reggae has functioned as a sonic space created and maintained by the socio-economically marginalized black population of Jamaica within which they have claimed an otherwise largely suppressed agency to narrate, define, produce, and re-produce the historical social realities hidden beneath the whitewashed power structures and hegemonial discourses of their nation (King 2002, 10-12). Daynes (2010, 21-24) appropriately calls attention to the fact that the link between reggae and Rastafari is not all-inclusive. Not all reggae arises from a Rastafari social context and not all Rastas embrace reggae. Nevertheless, the space they intersect at is notable and remains an integral component in the process of Rastafari self-definition and social activism. For the purposes of this study, it is essential to emphasize the role of reggae music as a discursive arena for the negotiation, explication, and expression of Rastafari consciousness. In fact, reggae has been considered so subversive and politically threatening by the governmental authorities of Jamaica that live reggae concerts were legally prohibited for a time (Winders 1989, 231-232).

1.4.4 The Decriminalization and the Rastafari Reaction

The Jamaican state decriminalized and partially legalized cannabis in 2015, with the aim of taking control of the previously illicit market. Despite being the most significant change of direction in Jamaican cannabis policy in independent history, many Rastas view the reforms with suspicion. The legal licenses to grow cannabis can be too expensive for many Rastas to afford, not to mention the private property and mandatory resources necessary to engage in regulated cultivation, thus shutting them out of the emerging formal market dominated by large producers. Despite certain exemptions made to allow for Rastas to use ganja for religious purposes, many reject the bureaucratic oversight extended over their sacrament as an attempt by Babylon to maintain a level of control over the Rastas – something that is inherently against the very core values of Rastafari. Critics of the reforms regard them as insufficient when contrasted with the century of persecution and continue to demand for full legalization in a reparatory framework facilitating their participation in the economy. (Araujo 2023, 203-212; Edmonds 2023, 305-310; Goldson 2021, 589-593.)

Most of the material analyzed in the present study will be from the pre-decriminalization period, reflecting the prevailing views among Rasta artists as they existed then. Nevertheless, Rastafari attitudes have not changed overnight. Considering the emphasis on ‘roots’ in Rastafari philosophy, just like Rastas have long recalled into contemporary consciousness the historical atrocities of slavery, the history of ganja-related persecution and the suffering thereby endured has been etched into the collective memory of the Rastas, becoming a major root in the metaphorical tree representing the social realities of Rastas today. The songs written before the policy change are also still listened to, widening their discursive footprint in time and allowing the communicated sentiments to persist in the minds of new listeners. Though a change has occurred, history is not over, nor has Babylon yet fallen. Therefore, I believe the study at hand to be relevant not only as a historical examination of spiritual narratives during an active drug war, but as an elucidation of a particular worldview constellated around a spiritual struggle that continues to this day.

1.4.5 The Global Rastas

A necessary adjunct to the above is to note that while Rastafari was born in Jamaica and while Jamaica continues to be the uncontested epicenter and spiritual cradle of Rastafari to this day, not all adherents of the movement are Jamaican. Made accessible by the acephalous nature

and flexible principles of the movement, Rastafari has been adopted all over the world by people resonating with its core messages of liberation and anti-imperialism. Today, people who define themselves as Rastas or who subscribe to at least some aspects of the Rastafari lifestyle can be found on every continent. (Edmonds 2012, 71-93.) With this in mind, not all ganja-using Rastas are subjected to Jamaican legislation. Nonetheless, ganja remains illegal or tightly controlled in most parts of the world, resulting in significant similarities in the related spiritual struggle of Rastas worldwide (for example, Pretorius 2006, 1012).

An essential part of the global success of Rastafari ideas has been their ubiquitously relatable character among the oppressed and alienated peoples of the world. The concept of 'Babylon', for instance, refers so broadly to the system of Western-led exploitative capitalism that it can easily be transposed onto the particular dominant institutions of any given oppressive dynamic. For Jamaican Rastas, 'Babylon' most often refers to the Jamaican state, but for a Rasta in apartheid South Africa, 'Babylon' could have referred to the apartheid system, whereas a Rasta in South Korea might refer to the hyper-capitalist corporate culture of the country as 'Babylon'. Rastafari provides a near-universally applicable symbolic constellation of spiritual opposition, denoting not only the oppressor as 'Babylon', but also offering poignant symbols of defiance, chief among them ganja. (Edmonds 2012, 89.)

Therefore, I feel confident in asserting that the social realities constructed by Rasta (and even Rasta-adjacent) reggae artists around the world overlap and conjoin in a manner constructive of a common, though by no means homogenous discursive pattern. Hence, since the present study is concerned with elucidating a particular spiritual aspect of the discursive field, an aspect not confined by the coastline of Jamaica, I find it not only justified but fruitful to include non-Jamaican Rasta reggae artists in the discussion without fear of diluting the analysis, while retaining an awareness of the obvious differences in lived experiences and social realities.

1.5 Prior Research and the Framing of the Study

Though Rastafari is a relatively marginal movement in the number of followers, the ganja use associated with it has been researched extensively across a variety of fields ranging from anthropology to the study of religion, criminology, and sociology. There are numerous papers examining the long-standing Rastafari frustrations with the prohibitionist policies of the Jamaican government. Goldson (2020), for example, presents a comprehensive overview of the history of ganja-related persecution in Jamaica and contrasts it with Rastafari reactions to

the recent partial legalization. There are also a number of papers analyzing the religious symbolism and spiritual functionality of ganja use in Rastafari. Pretorius (2006) offers a succinct analysis of ganja's spiritual merits for the Rastas, drawing attention to ganja's interconnectedness with other aspects of Rastafari worldview. Benard (2007) on the other hand explicates on the historical development of ganja symbolism, connecting it to the material realities of Jamaican working classes.

Research focusing on the intersection of reggae and ganja is represented best by the likes of Niaah (2023), who chronicles the essential developments of ganja advocacy within the world of reggae, offering notably also a contribution to the little-studied feminist angle of the ganja-reggae connection with a section on female artists in the field. Hope (2013) examines the role of popular music in the production of Jamaican identities, drawing attention to the prominence of ganja within Jamaican popular music discourse and analyzing its subsequent central relation to Jamaican identities.

While the latter papers mention the opposition between state-enforced prohibitionist policies and the Rastafari aspiration for the liberation of ganja use as expressed through the discursive vehicle of reggae, as far as I can tell, no research has been conducted specifically to outline the spiritually inclined narrativistic patterns employed in said discourse in any holistic manner. I hope this thesis offers a viable contribution to the issue. While drawing from related fields, such as history, media studies, sociology and anthropology in an interdisciplinary manner, the perspective of the thesis is decidedly that of the study of religion. The focal point of the study is in explicating a narration of a spiritual issue, narrated from a spiritual perspective using a matrix of spiritual symbols and meaning-constellations. Thereby perspectives of the study of religion are apt to be applied.

It should be noted that most of the songs analyzed do not exclusively revolve around the specific meanings of spiritual opposition this study is concerned with. Often most of the song is devoted to various depictions of ganja smoking and growing, to the praising of the recreational, medical and spiritual benefits of ganja, to humor, evocations of feelings of happiness, peace and confidence, and a vast range of miscellaneous matters specific to each song. Many times, the meanings we are after feature in only a section or two, while in some songs they do also take center-stage. What this study aims to unravel and lift into focus is a thread among threads (or a dread among dreads) of the discursive tapestry that is the lyricism of Rastafari reggae. Evoking the image of a tapestry, however, calibrates our awareness to the

interwovenness of these numerous levels of discursive meaning, the depth of which can only really be appreciated through a recognition of their relatedness.

And it is in that interwoven relatedness of meanings, which on their surface may even seem paradoxical, that the challenge of understanding Rastafari discourse really lies. Meanings denoting materially realized, politically affected realities of racial discrimination, economic inequality, drug policy, and criminal (in)justice blend seamlessly with spiritual conceptualizations of enlightenment, biblically symbolized metaphysical dualism of good and evil, and divinely ordained destiny. Therefore, it seems not only impossible, but dishonest and counterproductive to demarcate a clear distinction between ‘spiritual’ and ‘non-spiritual’ in Rastafari discourse. Rather, I find it conducive to understanding to treat spirituality in Rastafari discourse as an all-encompassing field, which nonetheless varies in intensity according to the conceptualization and, crucially, its context. In other words, some semiotic particles of Rastafari discourse, such as direct references to Jah or I-and-I consciousness, are *more obviously spiritual* than others, which can nonetheless intensify in their spiritual connotations in the right association.

This fluidness of spiritual meanings in Rastafari discourse presents us with a certain difficulty of framing the object of the study. If everything in Rastafari discourse risks melding together into an infinitely interconnected whole, within which any wayward reference can be interpreted as contributing to the grander pattern, how are we to orient our focus on the meanings we are most interested in? As so often in cultural research, compromises are a necessity. While the possibility of a truly objective framing may be obsolete, I aim to focus the analysis on the *more obviously spiritual* meanings associated with the Rastafari struggle to liberate ganja use, expanding, when relevant, onto less obviously spiritual meanings along the thread of their association with the former. In this formidable task, I aim to remain faithful to the associations made by the discursive agents behind the material, the artists – while appreciating the delicate, at times implicit fidelity of lyrical association.

1.6 Theoretical Framework and Methodology

1.6.1 Social Constructivism, Discourse and the Dialectical Creation of Culture

The present study applies perspectives deriving from the theoretical field of social constructivism. Detel (2015, 228) defines “the core idea of social constructivism in its broadest sense” as the notion “that some things are produced (and in this way constructed) by

social actions, i.e., by actions that we carry out by interacting with other people”. In this broad sense the idea of social constructionism is naturally vague, and the field is marked by an extensive debate on precisely how much of the reality we interact with is socially constructed, with perspectives ranging from limiting social constructivism to mere beliefs and obvious cultural artifacts (social epistemology or weak social constructivism) to all-encompassing views regarding even the empirical facts of natural science to be socially constructed (radical or strong social constructivism) (Detel 2015, 228-232). For the purposes of this study, I shall be adopting a position more closely aligned with weak social constructivism, regarding discourse (defined as the use of language) an essential (but not the sole) constituent of cultural reality, which interacts with non-discursive constituents through a dialectical process explicated as follows.

Since the linguistic turn of the human sciences in the 1960s and 1970s, the active role of language as a culture-creating modality has come under closer scrutiny. The essential leap in understanding is that instead of merely reflecting reality, language, to some extent, constructs reality. Cultural meanings are perpetually produced, negated, re-produced, and transformed within an entangled web of discursive processes unfolding through natural language as well as a myriad of other modes of communication. (Egan Sjölander 2011, 13-19; Potinkara, Raippalinna and Turunen 2022, 329-331.)

Furthermore, I shall be proceeding from the presumption that the process of cultural change is dialectical. As Berger and Luckmann (1991, 104) stress, “knowledge is a social product and knowledge is a factor in social change”. Fairclough (2007, 10) elucidates the issue even further, positing that “the emergence, consolidation, reproduction and transformation of all social phenomena involves dialectical relations between meaning . . . and materiality”. Fairclough (2007, 12) invokes Harvey’s (1996, 78-81) categorization of the “six distinctive and dialectically related moments of social process”, which include “discourse, power, beliefs and values and desires, social relations, institutions and rituals, and material practices”, each of which is seen to be realized in a relational field of the others. Notably for the study at hand, “discourses internalize in some sense everything that occurs as other moments”. Fairclough continues:

The actions of social agents and agencies are conditioned and constrained by existing structures, actions produce and reproduce structures, and actions can transform structures. Social change takes place through dialectical interconnections between existing structures and the strategies of social agents and agencies to sustain or transform structures. Strategies have a discursive

moment – part of what distinguishes one strategy from others is its particular configuration of discourses and narratives, narratives which connect the present and the past with predictive or prescriptive imaginaries for the future. (Fairclough 2007, 12.)

Fairclough's theory of the dialectic process between discursive and non-discursive elements (or moments) lends itself well to the present study. As further explicated in what follows, the discursive moment in the reggae songs analyzed is irremovably realized in a particular cultural context with its existing structures – structures which the agents involved (reggae artists) are participating in reproducing and prescribing a transformation for.

1.6.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

The material is analyzed in accordance with methodological principles largely derived from the field of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). While the approaches applied in the present study are primarily indebted to the strain of CDA represented by Norman Fairclough's work, we ought to recognize the diversity of approaches within the field. What is emblematic of all CDA approaches (and of all discourse analysis in general) is that the primary object of study is the use of language (or discourse) as an active constituent of social realities. Fairclough (1992, 63-64) emphasizes that “discourse is a mode of action” capable of affecting reality beyond the agent, and that discourse is in a dialectical relationship with social structure, which both shapes discourse and is perpetually changed by discourse. Social structure includes entities such as socio-economic divisions, institutions, systems of knowledge, and social norms. The dialectical relationship between discursive and non-discursive elements is further explicated above under the heading *1.6.1. Social Constructivism, Discourse and the Dialectical Creation of Culture*.

The recognition of the dialectical relationship in question is the foundational theoretical basis of Faircloughian CDA and the most essential point where it diverges from traditional linguistic textual analysis. Within CDA, the meaning of any text can only be understood within the social context of its production. “Context” literally means “that which accompanies text”. Because of this principle, CDA is essentially an interdisciplinary approach, uniting linguistics with branches of sociology and cultural research. With this wider contextual perspective of CDA comes the understanding that discourses, employed both strategically and non-strategically, “contribute to the creation and reproduction of unequal power relations between social groups”, being often tools for the maintenance of socio-cultural hegemony. It naturally follows that discourses can contribute to the transformation and re-configuration of

said power relations as well. In fact, CDA typically assumes a socially conscious critical position with the explicit aim of elucidating the role of discourses in maintaining (and transforming) social injustice in order to contribute towards social change and the dismantling of oppressive social structures. (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 61-66.)

CDA can be applied in a multitude of fields for a wide variety of research aims. It suits the present study particularly well due to the focus on the dialectical relationship between discourse and its social context. Rastafari is essentially a protest movement arising as a response to particular historical realities of oppression. Therefore, Rastafari discourse can only be understood within the social context shaping its production – a social context which the discourse (particularly reggae) is a conscious strategy for transforming. In reggae we encounter a discursive process within which an oppressed social minority challenges hegemonial discourses by narrating the socio-cultural dynamics involved from a perspective conducive to their emancipation. Social realities are made conscious and re-defined with prescriptive visions of the future. The spiritual meanings at the focal point of this study constitute a theology of liberation, a discursive strategy for social change, which CDA can be instrumental in explicating.

The basic framework for my analysis follows Fairclough's three-dimensional conceptual model of discourse (figure 1). Every "communicative event" consists of text (an instance of spoken, written, or otherwise communicated language), discursive practice (the production, distribution, and consumption of text), and social practice (the wider sphere of social action of which discursive practice is a part). Discursive practice and the wider social practice form the context of any particular text. CDA consists of both description and interpretation.

Description refers to the analysis of the linguistic features of the text, whereas interpretation denotes the analysis of the discursive practice and the wider social practice contextualizing the text. (Fairclough 1992, 71-73; Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 66-68.)

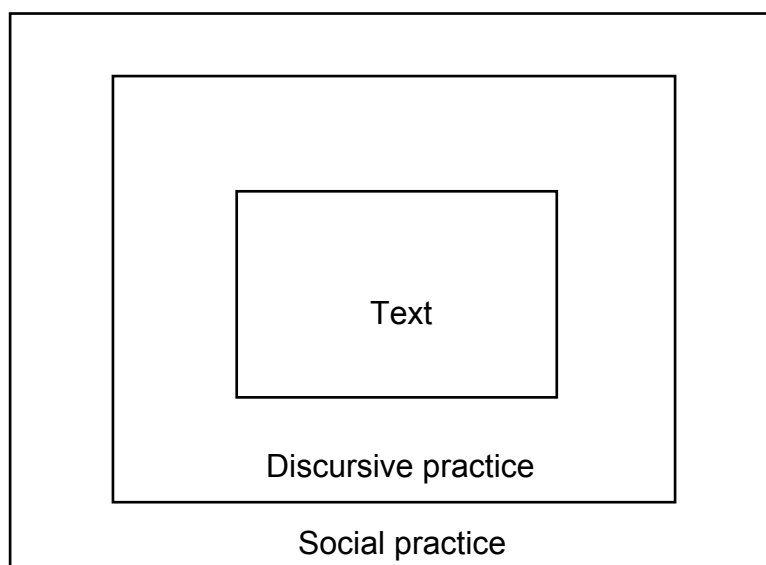


Figure 1. Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional conceptual model of discourse (1992, 73).

Practically, the analysis in this study involves combining the textual analysis of reggae lyrics (description) with reflections on literature on Rastafari history and the development of Rastafari thought (interpretation), revealing the interface of dialectical interchange between the oppressive social context and the discursive strategies reggae artists employ to transform it. Thus, the meaning-constellations within the discourse are interpreted in a continual consultation with literature describing the social context. Naturally, the consulted literature is also the product of discursive processes occurring in dialectical relationships with further social contexts. Fortunately, since the post-colonial turn, we may expect researchers to retain a level of consciousness about their own position and to reflect on the possible interference of their inherited normative assumptions with the research process.

1.7 Researcher's Position and Ethical Considerations

Which leads me to reflect on my own position as a researcher in relation to the object of the study. As a white European, I am decidedly an outsider to the social realities of the Rastas. Furthermore, as an inhabitant of the Global North, I have doubtlessly inherited many associative structures from hegemonial discourses related to social progress, race, class, economics, law, and religion, among a multitude of other subjects. Nevertheless, I refuse the notion that such semiotic contamination renders people from the Global North inherently unable to approach topics related to oppressed or marginalized communities in the Global South. Individual researchers can – and must – not only reflect critically on the hegemonial discourses we inherit but also assure that historically marginalized voices are magnified

through our research. Furthermore, any research conducted upon a marginalized group from a Western academic standpoint must remain sensitive to the power relation between the researcher and the researched, especially considering the widely recognized discursive legitimacy of the academia.

This is precisely what I have set out to accomplish with this paper. Hegemonial presuppositions concerning phenomena such as drug use, legality, state authority, and religiosity are suspended to the best of my ability, while the historically marginalized Rastafari discourse is summoned into focus with an earnest effort to understand the meaning-constellations communicated within it. Simply put, it is not my task to propose what to think about Rastafari. Instead, my task is to attempt to elucidate what the Rastas themselves think. The outsider's position may in fact offer its own advantages in engaging the insiders' discourse with a degree of detachment conducive to producing an academic 'translation' of its meanings.

More personally speaking, I am sympathetic to the Rastafari movement and the historical struggle inherent to it. I regard the war on drugs a human rights disaster and one of the most lurid examples of consistently bad policy from the 20th and 21st centuries. While far from identifying as a Rasta, I find some Rastafari philosophical conceptions alluring. Much like the Rastas, I consider the neo-colonial global capitalist system signified by 'Babylon' to be an existential threat to humanity. I have no ideological interest to misrepresent Rastafari. On the contrary, because I harbor many views congruent with Rastafari thought, I must consciously avoid imposing my own ideals onto Rastafari and remain faithful to my best interpretations of the material.

As the material analyzed in this study consists entirely of songs released to a public audience, no ethical issues are related to the acquisition or utilization of the material.

1.8 Material

The material analyzed as part of this study consists of 37 reggae songs by Rastafari artists¹. Due to the limited length of the thesis, not more than eight of the songs could be afforded closer analysis with specific quotations, but the 29 songs not quoted in the final paper served to inform my thought processes and the orientation of perspectives applied to the analysis. The 37 songs composing the bulk material of the study were selected based on the following

¹ For a full list of the 37 songs used for this study see *Appendix 1. Discography*.

criteria. Each song selected must be a reggae song by a Rastafari-presenting artist, while noting that due to the lack of denominational structure in Rastafari, there is no official way beyond personal testimony and presentation to define whether a particular person is a Rasta. Additionally, each song must include in its lyrics references to the Rastafari struggle over ganja rights and/or to the spiritual qualities of ganja. An exception to the second criterion is *Chant Down Babylon* by Bob Marley & The Wailers, which, despite not mentioning ganja, is included in the analysis due to a noteworthy intertextual reference in another analyzed song.

The eight songs picked out for varying degrees of closer analysis were selected as the best exemplifiers of the different discursive patterns under examination. When researching a phenomenon as wide and diverse as the discourse of reggae, it is not possible to present a comprehensive overview of everything encompassed by the object. Neither is that the goal of this study. The selection was made based on the prevalence of the particular meaning-constellation the study is attempting to outline, with the obvious and necessary omission of a vast number of songs with a wide range of diverse discursive output. Being sensitive to the diversity of Rastafari thought expressed through the discursive vehicle of reggae, we ought to avoid the illusion that any sample can be representative of the entire discursive field. This study is not meant as a concluding statement, but as a contribution to a larger discussion over Rastafari thought and the discourse of reggae, one requiring interdisciplinary engagement, post-colonial sensitivity, critical approaches, innovative perspectives, and substantially more pages.

The songs included in the material of this study were found through various channels. Some were songs I have been aware of for many years due to my long-running interest in reggae. Others were recommendations shared by friends or internet forum users. Despite my best attempts to be thorough in my search for the material, it is obvious that some songs which would have fit the selection criteria were omitted from the sample simply because they have not come to my attention.

It bears repeating that neither reggae nor Rastafari thought can be reduced to the meaning-constellation outlined in this study. Most reggae songs either do not deal with the topic of ganja or approach it from a perspective differing from the sample presented here. Many songs are focused on meanings which are *less obviously spiritual*, such as the recreational and medical value of ganja. There are even reggae songs from Rastafari artists which outright deny the divinity of ganja, such as *Dispel the Lie* (1991) by Mutabaruka, thus directly

contradicting the meaning-constellation present in the songs showcased in this study. While the latter viewpoint appears by all measures to be in the minority, it demonstrates the diversity of thought emblematic of the individualistic nature of Rastafari philosophy. Certain meanings are more prevalent than others, but no perspective is dogmatic.

2 Analysis

2.1 Herbs Against Babylon – The Framing of a Spiritual Opposition

In an instance of successful reapplication of Biblical symbolism, Rastas have integrated the term ‘Babylon’ into their emancipatory discourses. Invoking the similarities in imperialistic dynamics of their own historical position with the subjugation and exile of the ancient Hebrews at the hands of the Neo-Babylonian empire described in the Old Testament, Rastas use the name ‘Babylon’ to refer to the Western (neo)colonial, capitalist empire, of which the Jamaican government and police are the most immediate incarnation. Being the descendants of Africans stolen into slavery by Euro-American colonialists, Rastas regard themselves as exiles in Babylon seeking a return to their ancestral homelands across the Atlantic, understood either as a literal physical repatriation to Africa (often specifically Ethiopia) or as a liberating spiritual rejuvenation of their freedom, independence, and Africanness, both referred to as the kingdom of ‘Zion’, after the Biblical name for the City of God. (Edmonds 2012, 38-42; Tomei 2023, 100.)

Especially in accordance with the latter image of Zion as a spiritual reality rather than a physical location, ganja is viewed as a vehicle towards salvation, leading Rastas towards a oneness with Jah and a freedom of mind, disentangled from the cultural and mental entrapments of Babylon maintaining their oppression (Pretorius 2006, 1017-1024). As such, beyond its practical use as an entheogen, ganja has taken on symbolic meanings of resistance and defiance among Rastas, largely catalyzed and perpetuated by the Jamaican state’s longstanding criminalization of the plant. As Benard (2007, 97) succinctly summarizes, “the arrests and harassment over marijuana sustain a ritualized drama”, which posits the empire of ignorance on one side and the herb of enlightenment with its devotees on the other. This “ritualized drama” is a social reality constructed within the religious framework of Rastafari worldview, which imbues an otherwise bleak struggle against a materially superior enemy with a dimension of sacred righteousness and teleologically derived hope.

This dramatic, spiritually significant opposition of ganja and Babylon, often personified by its state-legitimized enforcers, the police, is a frequently featured and imaginatively expressed lyrical topic in reggae. The ‘wicked’ Babylon’s unenlightened, destructive mode of conduct is often contrasted with the Rasta artist’s enlightened, ganja-inspired state of mind and behavior. Let us elucidate the dynamic with a few examples from the material.

When Babylon pursue them nuclear enrichment
 Man, I sell marijuana by the tons and the shipment

Chezidek – *Marijuana* (2015)

Here Chezidek is constructing a dichotomy between Babylon pursuing the means of destruction – in the case of nuclear weaponry, even the means of the apocalypse – and himself engaging in the proliferation of ganja, the supposed bringer of enlightenment. The dichotomy not only exposes the absurdity that it is Babylon’s activity that is legal and tolerated while the ganja merchant is persecuted, but it also frames Babylon as a violent, potentially apocalyptic threat in the spiritual warfare over the destiny of humankind. In this spiritual conflict with planet-wide implications, ganja is the ally of righteousness, a divine tool capable of setting free the spirit oppressed under the Babylonian system. As Chezidek clarifies in the chorus,

Marijuana, it is the real green gold
 It’s no drug, free up your heart and soul
 Marijuana, it is the real green gold
 Gift from Jah, Jah
 Free up your heart and soul

Chezidek – *Marijuana* (2015)

In this light, Chezidek’s participation in the proliferation of ganja is framed from a distinctly spiritual lens. Whereas Babylonian discourses may depict him as a drug dealer liable to be criminally prosecuted, Chezidek’s own framing paints him as sharing the tool of liberation, a tool gifted by the almighty Jah for the very purpose. Within the Rastafari social reality Chezidek participates in constructing, the earthly authority of Babylon is refuted and replaced with the divine authority of Jah. As a Rasta elder interviewed by Araujo (2023, 212) crystallized the dynamic, “You see, my youth, a Rastaman abides by the law of the creator. Rasta do not abide by the laws of men.” A dichotomy similar to Chezidek’s is constructed by Jesse Royal on *Gimmie Likkle*.

Cause Babylon a walk round wid so much long gun
 And me can’t walk free wid my chillum

Jesse Royal – *Gimmie Likkle* (2014)

The absurdity of Babylon’s normalization of state violence is again highlighted by comparing the instruments used by the opposing sides to realize themselves. Whereas Babylon’s mode of

existence relies on an abundance of weaponry and the continuous threat of violence, the persecuted Rasta only carries around his harmless chillum (a kind of clay pipe for ganja smoking). The benefits reaped from the usage of such an instrument are described by Sizzla on *Smoke Marijuana*.

Smoke the marijuana and get high
 Stay above the wicked and fly
 I'm feeling so very good about myself
 Babylon ain't feeling good, damn that's their problem

Sizzla – *Smoke Marijuana* (2006)

'Babylonians' are often referred to as "the wicked" in Rastafari discourse. Sizzla is invoking an image of himself staying in a higher state of consciousness and well-being with the aid of ganja than the ganja-rejecting Babylon. Rastafari thought commonly associates ganja with a variety of healing qualities relating to the body, mind, and spirit (Pretorius 2006, 1020-1022). Many view it as a kind of panacea destined to bring forth "the healing of the nation". As mentioned above, the phrase comes from the Book of Revelation (22:2) and refers for the Rastas to a millenarian process of healing the spiritual sickness festering under Babylonian rule, resulting in a utopian vision of a self-realized humanity organized around freedom and social harmony. For the Rastas, personal enlightenment through the realization of 'I-and-I consciousness' (a kind of apotheosis revealing the essential oneness of the individual human with Jah) is intimately tied to a larger process of social transformation. (Ferrara 2016, 119-122.) Peetah Morgan articulates the divinely ordained role of ganja in the restoration of society on *Healing of the Nation*, created on the cusp of the Jamaican legal reforms of 2015 in collaboration with the producer Irie Ites.

Babylon no rob we meditation
 No touch the herb, just make it grow now, now
 Jah bless every farmer in the fields right now
 This how a Babylon fi 'low now, now
 Herb is the healing of the nation
 ...
 The herb healing plants are for every nation
 Jah create them with no discrimination
 ...
 I chant the message that Jah sent to them

Babylon fi 'low and I di farma dem
 Cause every nation is in need of them
 So don't make the herbs a problem
 Fire the herbs within creation
 To pray for the healing of the nation
 So tell me why Babylon now fight it
 Why dem is like it?

Peetah Morgan and Irie Ites – *Healing of the Nation* (2015)

We can distinguish three central narrativistic association complexes from Morgan's lyrics. Firstly, ganja is a healing agent meant to facilitate a *global* restoration. Not only is ganja (or "herb") for the healing of the nation, it is for the healing of *every* nation. Within the social reality Morgan is re-producing, the spiritual malaise experienced under Babylon's domination is a global issue. Therefore, the antidotal influence of ganja must also reach every corner of the world. Secondly, Jah's divine will is on the side of ganja and Rastafari. Jah has created ganja precisely for the purpose of facilitating a global remediation. Thirdly, Babylon resists ganja in its divine purpose of healing the world, something Morgan laments and rebukes Babylon over. By virtue of resisting ganja, Babylon is also opposing Jah. Here the dialectical relation of meaning and materiality theorized by Fairclough (2007, 10) is particularly prominent. The material manifestations of the war on drugs, namely, the persecution of ganja use, is framed from a spiritual, millenarian perspective which imbues the material struggle with a grander, divinely ordained meaning. The dialectical interchange is naturally reciprocal, as the higher, spiritual meaning motivates Rastas to persist in their rebellion, with material consequences.

Niyorah, on his track *Positive Herb*, is particularly explicit about the connection between ganja and Jah.

I and I will never fight down anything created by the Most High
 And you see, marihuana
 It was a plant created by God (by Jah)
 Some say dem love God
 But dem no love marihuana
 How could that be?
 Are you crazy?

Are you crazy?

...

Tap into Zion I, marihuana high

In my head, head, head, head

Homey skunk herb hit my brain nerve

I can't be misled, led

Niyorah – *Positive Herb* (2005)

Niyorah constructs a powerful association between God/Jah and ganja. As ganja has a special place in God's creation, accepting God with the exclusion of ganja would be illogical. Through this associative narration, Niyorah is re-producing the metaphysical framework of a social reality within which the value of ganja is derived logically from the ultimate value of God. Echoing the sentiment of Peetah Morgan in the previous example, Niyorah asserts that resisting ganja is tantamount to resisting God and setting yourself at odds with cosmic destiny.

Noteworthy is also the phrase, "Tap into Zion I, marihuana high". The symbolism of the sacred place of Zion, while deriving from Judaism, has become a multi-faceted discursive element for Rastafari. Another demonstration of the paradox-embracing nature of Rastafari philosophy, Zion is simultaneously a physical and a metaphysical location, existing on the physical plane in Ethiopia, but accessible on the metaphysical plane by the means of consciousness as a "state of freedom from oppression and subordination [that] can exist simultaneously everywhere and anywhere", as Donne (2000, 102-103) summarizes it, going on to note that the discursive concept of Zion in Rastafari is a mythical construction shaped by the historical circumstances and contextual dynamics of the movement's development. (See also Tomei 2023.)

Again, we recall Fairclough's (2007, 10-12) emphasis on the dialectical interconnectedness of meaning and materiality and Harvey's (1996, 80) notion of discourses as "experientially grounded manifestations of social and power relations". Ironically, it is Babylon that has inadvertently facilitated the creation of the symbol of Zion through the perpetuation of its oppressive system. The long history of oppression of the Jamaican black population is reflected in every facet of their discourses. Their disadvantaged position within the context of societal power relations has created a motivation to construct the mythical symbol of Zion as a "center of meaning", as Donne (2000, 103) labels it. Zion is a center within a larger

constellation of spiritual meanings, a center with a kind of a psycho-spiritual gravity orienting Rastafari consciousness towards itself.

This is also the foremost spiritual purpose of the sacrament of ganja. An entheogenic aid for the contemplation of spiritual realities, ganja allows Rastas to free their minds from the constricting limits set upon them by the Babylonian system, realize their mystical I-and-I consciousness and thus “tap into Zion”, like Niyorah describes in his lyrics (Pretorius 2006, 1023-1024). Zion is essentially the ultimate symbol of Babylon’s negation, realized in a sacred state of mind characterized by the foremost of Rastafari values, freedom, agency, peace, and unifying love – a state of mind conducive to the healing of the nation, into which the Rasta is propelled by the might of ganja.

2.2 A Holy Drug War? – The Intersection of Spirituality and Conflict

Since the inception of reggae, many artists have embraced it as a discursive mode of defining social realities of oppression and emancipation from the systematically disempowered perspective of the oppressed, thus making conscious the historical realities overlooked or deliberately concealed by the narratives of the oppressor. Whether evoking consciousness over the historical atrocities of the trans-Atlantic slave trade or the unjust criminalization of ganja, the reggae artist is engaging a creative process of constructing social realities into which the listener is invited to participate – not only by internalizing the explicit information communicated, but through an emotional response localized in their own body and person, as long as the listener is an heir to the particular social realities re-produced, that is to say, a Rasta, or at least Rasta-adjacent. In fact, the power of reggae to affect people through the construction of social realities charged with feelings of righteousness and emancipatory aspiration has led some artists to refer to reggae as a “weapon”. (Macaulay 1993, 71-75)

The framing of reggae as a weapon lends itself to a fascinating possibility to examine the applicability the concept “holy war” to the “ritualized drama” observed by Benard (2007, 97) and to attempt to outline a constellation of meanings pertaining to ganja-related violence and forceful confrontation between Rastafari and Babylon as framed from a spiritual Rastafari perspective. This possibility becomes even more enticing when we bring into focus the Rastafari symbol of “the warrior”, an archetypal identity image characterized by agency, aggressive action towards the goal of liberation, and an uncompromising attitude towards the ills of Babylon (Semaj 1980, 22; Stokke 2021, 90-92). Reggae artists have long played an instrumental role in popularizing the warrior image by constructing in their lyrics narrations

of the Rasta warrior beating Babylon down with the blessing and/or intervention of Jah (King 2002, 62).

Since the inception of the movement, Rastas have repeatedly been targeted by systematic state violence, often under the pretext of the drug war. Prior to the rise of the Rastafari movement, ganja was widely used by the working classes of Jamaica. The class- and race-conscious Rastafari movement gaining support among the disenfranchised black population was labelled a political threat by the state, and with the purpose of safeguarding the colonial order, a deliberate discursive strategy was employed at the turn of the 1940s to explicitly associate Rastafari with ganja and ganja with a propensity for violent behavior, manufacturing a political mandate to essentially outlaw the entire movement. The enforcement of said outlawing has been carried out through arrests, beatings, killings, evictions, property seizures and destruction, intimidation, forced cutting of dreadlocks, forced mental institution admissions, and other forms of harassment too numerous to list. (Goldson 2020, 573-576.) While ganja had been associated with spiritual meanings probably ever since its introduction to Jamaica, the move to explicitly sacralize it as a “sacred form of resistance” was largely a dialectical response to the material circumstances characterized by state violence and legally sanctioned persecution (Benard 2007, 97).

Despite being heavily outgunned by the state forces, some Rastas have engaged the Jamaican state violence apparatus in lethal confrontations, especially during the first decades of the movement, a radical few even waging limited guerrilla warfare, usually suffering a forceful response by the state. Though most Rastas avoid violence, a thread of militant thinking is irremovably intertwined with the historical development of the ideology, one blurring the lines between spiritual conviction and political action in a way emblematic of Rastafari. (Edmonds 2012, 15-31.)

Let us now turn to the concept “holy war”. Bronisch (2015, 35-47) demonstrates the historical difficulty and variety of opinion in defining the term, noting that some commentators have felt challenged by the inextricable intertwining of political and religious motives in most conflicts, before offering his own definition as follows.

A “holy war” is a military enterprise that God orders one to undertake or that God forces upon His people through the bellicose imminence of another nation, which functions as a divine instrument. The basic cause of the war lies in divine providence, contributing, in the broadest sense, to the implementation of His salvation plan. God himself makes an appearance, guiding the campaign through

the king as His instrument and defeating the enemies through His people. The stimulation for holy war originates in the prescriptions of the religion being challenged and not in the religion of the Pagan adversary or the deviating conceptions of the heretic opponent. (Bronisch 2015, 47.)

I take issue with some elements of the definition, most notably the exclusively monotheistic and monarchic phrasing, as well as the normative assumption of war being a phenomenon restricted to a confrontation between opposing nations. Yet, looking beyond these points, we may discern multiple elements which can be transposed onto the corresponding meaning-constellation in Rastafari discourse. Let it be noted that the purpose of this analytical approach is not to impose a label as loaded as “holy war” onto the Rastafari struggle in any straightforward manner, but rather to help us orient our thinking around dynamics common to the intersection of spirituality and conflict in order to better discern significant meanings within the discourse.

Indeed, we ought to proceed in the analysis with the understanding that though bearing some warlike qualities, the Rastafari struggle for liberation, including the liberation of ganja, is decidedly not a “military enterprise”. However, what we are interested in is the related *discursive enterprise* within which meanings with *holy war -like qualities* are constructed. With that, let us note the sliding meaning of the term “war” and especially that the international institutionalized mission to enforce laws related to substance use is near-ubiquitously referred to as the “war on drugs”, thus conferring further legitimacy to the current analysis. As “holy war” is essentially a discursive construction dialectically related to material circumstances, the spiritual meanings produced by Rastas in the context of their historical persecution as part of the “war on drugs” may be analyzed in a fruitful manner in this vein. Nevertheless, even in analyzing the holy war -like qualities apparent in Rastafari discourse, I shall continue to favor the term “struggle” over “war”.

From the above definition we may discern four central elements of a “holy war”, which, when re-phrased slightly to correct for the issues noted, are found in the Rastafari discourse analyzed:

1. The struggle is forced upon God’s people through the “bellicose imminence” of a powerful adversary.
2. The struggle contributes to the “implementation of [God’s] salvation plan”.
3. The defeat of the adversary is achieved by God’s people with divine aid.

4. The “stimulation for [the spiritual struggle] originates in the prescriptions of the [way of life] being challenged”.

The Trinidadian reggae artist Marlon Asher, on his song *Ganja Farmer*, narrates a fictionalized instance of instigation by the state forces, met by his forceful response.

[Chorus]

Yes, I’m a ganja planter

Call me di ganja farmer

Deep down inna di earth where me put di ganja

Babylon come and light it up on fire

Me a chant

...

[Verse 1]

Big stinkin’ helicopter flow through di air

What dem call it? Dem call it weed eater

Dem never did there when me wa totin’ water

Or when me did applying fertilizer

Yet outta di sky dem spittin fire

And I’m a little youth man with a hot temper

Me dig up me stinkin’ rocket launcher

And in a di air dispense the helicopter

...

[Verse 2]

True Jah, Jah bless I with ‘nuff a good vibes man

And true mi a di artist with di ganja inna di land

Make doctors get ‘nuff medication

And so dem coulda give it to dem sick patients

Make chemists get ‘nuff medication

And so dem coulda brew new medication

Make singers get some inspiration

And so dem coulda spread Jah message ‘pon di land... Me a chant

...

[Verse 4]

Well, it’s like ten thousand Babylon in one blue van

Waan come trespass on dis man damn ganja land

Marlon Asher – *Ganja Farmer* (2006)

Asher's narration, while humorous, features the four holy war -like qualities listed above. (1) The violent confrontation is forced upon him by the instigation (or "bellicose imminence") of the Babylonian police forces, who trespass upon his ganja field and burn his plants from a helicopter (chorus and verses 1 and 4). (2) In the second verse Asher constructs his version of the "healing of the nation" -constellation discussed above, describing ganja's divine healing qualities and the inspiration it grants singers to "spread Jah's message 'pon di land". The word "chant" is an intertextual reference to the song *Chant Down Babylon* by Bob Marley & The Wailers, in which Marley makes a powerful declaration over the power of reggae music to bring down the wicked empire.

Come we go burn down Babylon one more time
Come we go chant down Babylon one more time

...

Men see their dreams and aspiration
Crumble in front of their face
And all of their wicked intention
To destroy the human race

...

Reggae music, chant down Babylon
Reggae music, chant down Babylon

Bob Marley & The Wailers – *Chant Down Babylon* (1983)

Asher associates the artistic power to chant down Babylon with the divine inspiration granted by ganja, in effect producing a narrativistic image of the Rasta "warrior" armed with reggae music and ganja, the weapons of emancipation, and in his case, the more tangible weapon of a rocket launcher, rebelling against the metaphysical evil threatening not only his ganja field, but the very idea of emancipatory salvation it represents. (3) Thereby, the inspiration granted by ganja for the emancipatory cause acts as an extension of divine powers exerting influence over a material struggle, which the Rastas are destined to win. (4) The stimulation for Asher's defiance follows from the prohibitive action of the state/Babylon, challenging the prescriptions of Rastafari way of life regarding the sacrament of ganja.

While Asher does lyrically brandish his rocket launcher, evoking imagery of a material conflict, it is ganja and reggae that intertwine as the foremost weaponry of the *holy war in discourse* waged over the minds of subjugated people. Rasta reggae artists challenge decades of establishment propaganda about ganja with songs not only celebrating ganja but explicitly

associating its liberation to Babylon's downfall. In this, they are deploying a strategy for social change through a recognition of the dialectical interconnectedness of discourse and existing structures (Fairclough 2007, 12). The grander narrative being constructed connects the past and present struggle to a millenarian vision of a future victory, becoming itself a conduit for that very change. By narrating Babylon's downfall, Rasta reggae artists are consciously contributing towards that downfall. In a symbolic vein, Asher's song itself is the rocket launcher, loaded with the inspiration of ganja, "dispensing" the Babylonian system of social control represented by the police helicopter.

Kabaka Pyramid, on his song *Herb Defenda*, participates in the holy war in discourse by constructing a particularly explicit opposition between ganja and Babylon, with frequent millenarian references.

Chalice² inna we palm
 Babylon, you're gone
 Them your Rasta youths are not gon' calm
 It's gonna be a weepin' and a moanin'
 If them put a finger upon me herb
 It's gonna be a weepin' and a moanin'
 Babylon are gon' get what them deserve
 In a oneness the youth them sit up in all a reverence
 Babylon them want be sneak up upon a me residence
 Feels that the youth them weak up in a decadence
 True and chalice trick up fi pick your preference
 ...
 Said that it's illegal, show me where's the evidence
 This are the fumigation for your pestilence
 ...
 Hey, no touch me ganja
 Fire will burn up you and your people
 We them can't conquer
 ...
 Yes, through the natty 'pon me head them want to stop the herb consumption

² The "chalice" is a symbolically laden name given either to the chillum or the waterpipe used as an instrument for ganja smoking. It references the eucharistic cup of Christian sacramentality to emphasize the sacramental role of ganja. (Goldson 2020, 581.)

Chalice me a burn from Westmoreland to Junction
 Cops a pull me over, still the beast we'll have a run from
 ...
 Them a fight the Rasta and that's the meat of the matter
 The herb is the healing of the nation
 ...
 Rasta is the cleansing of this earth

Kabaka Pyramid – *Herb Defenda* (2013)

Like Marlon Asher on *Ganja Farmer*, Kabaka Pyramid assigns the blame for instigating the confrontation to Babylon. (1) The targeted Rasta youths are simply existing in a state of ganja-inspired spiritual oneness and reverence, when Babylon “sneaks up upon [the] residence”, provoking a spiritually justified response. (2) As well as being once more hailed as the “healing of the nation”, ganja is called “the fumigation for [Babylon’s] pestilence”, a spiritual cure for a spiritual ailment. The reference to “pestilence” in conjunction with references to “cleansing the earth” and “the beast”, serve to construct a meaning-constellation with monumental, biblically inspired millenarian imagery. (3) The Rastas, armed with the fumigating power of the sacramental ganja chalice, are in this narration destined to triumph over the metaphysical monstrosity of Babylon attempting to (4) break the sacramental bond of oneness (I-and-I consciousness) between the Rastas and Jah represented by the ganja chalice. Even a more straightforward form of divine intervention (3) makes a plausible appearance with the line “Fire will burn up you and your people”. Babylon’s eventual demise is framed as a teleological certainty.

In Kabaka Pyramid’s narration, the historically marginalized Rastas are assigned a central role of global importance (the sentiment is at its clearest in the line “Rasta is the cleansing of this earth”). The struggle for ganja rights is no longer framed as only a local issue restricted to the relationship of a particular social group and the state, but as a crucial feature of a monumental conflict between the metaphysical forces of good and evil. In the paradoxical manner embraced by Rastafari thought, instances of material encounters in the day-to-day reality of the war on drugs, such as a police raid and a traffic stop, become symbolized as something akin to battles in a cosmic war over the fate of the planet.

3 Conclusion

Rastafari artists utilize reggae as a discursive tool to challenge the hegemonial discourses maintaining their oppression. Through the discourse of reggae, Rastafari artists construct social realities orbited by particular meaning-constellations conducive to their liberation. A major spiritually charged meaning-constellation within the discourse of Rastafari reggae relates to the sacrament of ganja, attempts at its eradication by the central institutions of the dominant social order, signified by the biblically derived symbol of 'Babylon', and the defiant Rastafari resistance to these attempts. My best attempt at outlining the meaning-constellation narrated within the sample of reggae lyrics examined unfolds as follows:

At present, humankind (especially the African diasporic population) is subjugated under the ignorant, destructive imperial order of Babylon. In addition to manifesting materially through an unjust social order, this subjugation is apparent in a spiritual malaise dividing humans from their true apothotic oneness with divinity.

Ganja is a divine gift given by the almighty Jah to humankind to produce a global wave of awakening called the "healing of the nation", eventually culminating in a millenarian societal transformation, which will see Babylon fall and a new social order take its place. The new social order is signified by the symbol of 'Zion', and it is characterized by freedom, autonomy, peace, and unifying love. Ganja acts as an entheogen, facilitating the awakening of the aforementioned qualities in individuals through the inspiration of "I-and-I consciousness", an apothotic state of mind uniting the individual with Jah. Hence, the smoking of ganja is a sacramental act, a meaning further amplified by the designation of the smoking instrument as the "chalice".

Babylon is attempting to restrict the use of ganja in an ignorant, even incomprehensible attempt to preserve its dominance. The Rastas know the truth about Babylon and ganja, choosing to use ganja and facilitate its proliferation in an act of blatant disobedience. In this they are joining forces with Jah and participating in fulfilling the divinely ordained millenarian process of the healing of the nation.

Alongside ganja, reggae music is a spiritual enterprise through which the truth about this theology of liberation is disseminated and realized. The relationship between reggae and ganja is reciprocal. Ganja inspires the creation of reggae music in accordance with Jah's message, and reggae offers a discursive vehicle for the promotion of the virtues of ganja.

While the material lends itself to the composition of a coherent image of a central meaning-constellation, we ought to conclude with the reminder that Rastafari promotes individual thought and democratic discussion over dogma. The discourse of reggae is a heterogenic discussion, not a homogenous theological pipeline. Nevertheless, significant similarities persist and certain meanings appear within the discourse with such prevalence that the delineation of the meaning-constellation offered above may prove a useful benchmark to help orient future considerations. Additionally, the present thesis contributes to a wider discussion about the dynamics involved in the creation of spiritual meanings under the pressures of situations of social oppression.

The research on Rastafari discourse is an ever-evolving field. Based on the experience of writing this paper, I have a couple suggestions for areas which would benefit from further research. One such area involves the change in reggae lyrics after the 2015 partial legalization of ganja in Jamaica. While researchers such as Edmonds (2023), Araujo (2023), and Goldson (2020) have mapped out the Rastafari reaction to the 2015 reforms at large, a discourse analytical approach to the plausible change in rhetoric in reggae would contribute to our understanding of the evolving nature of the discursive arena of reggae. Another angle would be to study the possible changes in the spiritual meanings associated with ganja regarding the shift in Jamaican drug policy. As the sacramentalization of ganja was in large part a protestive response to persecution over the plant, how has ganja's role in Rastafari philosophy changed following a relative laxing of prohibitive structures, if at all? A fascinating research angle would also be one comparing theologies of liberation from oppressive social contexts around the world with the aim of understanding their similarities and differences. Such a comparative approach could make a crucial contribution to our understanding of the deployment of spiritual narratives as a response to systematic oppression – perhaps also offering a new point of view to understand the socio-political underpinnings of religious radicalization from.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Discography

The following is a complete list of the 37 songs used for the study.

- Anthony B. 2011. Ganja Blaze. On *Rasta Love*. Born Fire Music.
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