

# **The significance of the use of ganja as a religious ritual in the Rastafari movement**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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*In 2000, the South African Constitutional Court ruled that religious freedom, including the exercise of religious rituals, may not contradict the laws of the country. This ruling came as a result of the Western Cape Law Society's refusal to admit a Rastafarian as lawyer because of his habit of smoking marijuana. He appealed to the Constitutional Court and claimed that the ruling infringed upon his right to religious freedom. The Constitutional Court upheld the decision that no exception may be made for one religion.*

The smoking of marijuana or “ganja” as it is better known is viewed as a deeply religious ritual element in the worship of the Rastafarian movement. But what significance and value does this ritual have in the Rastafari religion? The conclusion of this article is that irrespective of the negative connotations often associated with the use of ganja, it remains an important religious ritual in Rasta spirituality. The significance lies in the experience associated with an altered state of consciousness when ganja is used. A spiritual enlightenment or revelation of God is obtained during this altered state of consciousness, that is, a closeness or oneness with Jah. A type of spiritual/psychological healing or transformation also takes place during this period of altered consciousness in terms of establishing the self-worth of a person through what is known as the “I-and-I” consciousness. Finally, the use of ganja seems to bring relief and relaxation on this road to freedom. The use of ganja has a long history as a vehicle to enlightenment, ultimate Rasta salvation and restoration of the self.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

The Rastafari movement grew out of the deep depression experienced by the descendants of African slaves in Jamaica in the 1930s. Apart from their culture which was “stolen” from them on the slave ships bound for Jamaica, their living conditions once in Jamaica amounted to little more than shacks of zinc and cardboard

built on the garbage jungle of Kingston's waterfront (Anon 2006b:1). These conditions led them to believe that society had nothing to offer them except more suffering. The Rastafarian faith, which stands for "Freedom of Spirit, Freedom from Slavery, and Freedom of Africa" (Anon 2006b:1), was born out a quest for freedom.

Religions always reflect the social and geographical environments from which they emerge. In the case of the Rastafari movement, the use of marijuana as a sacrament is logical as the "herb" grows freely on the island of Jamaica. The Rastafari movement, which has seen phenomenal growth since 1975, has spread throughout much of the world, including Africa, primarily through immigration, the *Nyahbinghi* cult<sup>1</sup> and reggae music. This growth is attributed largely to the so-called "prophet" of the Rastafari movement, Bob Marley, a reggae artist, who through the worldwide acceptance of reggae music found an avenue for Rastafarian self-expression (Anon 2006b:3). In appreciation of his work, the Jamaican government bestowed the Order of Distinction on Marley, which allows him to be referred to as the Honourable Robert Nesta Marley (Erskine 2005:xiii). By the year 2000, there were more than one million Rastafarians worldwide (Anon 2006a:1).

## **2 ROOTS OF THE RASTAFARI MOVEMENT**

The colonial lifestyle in Jamaica expressed itself in a system whereby a handful of influential white people at the apex of Jamaican society ran the country's affairs with the support of the police. One of the Rastafari movement's first preachers, Leonard Howell, called on Jamaicans to give alliance to Haile Selassie who was then arrested and jailed for two years. Nevertheless, the Rastas continue to fight against oppression. A theological and ideological base for the Rastas' protest was eventually provided when Prince Regent Ras Tafari was crowned Emperor of Ethiopia (Erskine 2005:59). The Ethiopia Emperor took the name Haile Selassie and received titles such as "King of Kings", "Lord of Lords" and "Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Juda" (Witvliet 1985:112). This

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1 *Nyahbingi*, which the Rastafari claim means "she who possesses many things", is a cult that brought together diverse tribes of this region of Africa against European rule. It was considered effective, because it forged resistance against colonial rule utilising traditional African religious beliefs (Minda 2004:37).

turn of events caused Rastas to look for signs of deliverance from oppressive Jamaica or Babylon, which caused the Rastas on the island and in New York to begin to study their Bibles more closely. They recalled the pronouncement by Marcus Garvey: “Look to Africa where a black King shall arise --- this will be the day of your deliverance” (Barrett 1974:157-158). The Rastas made a connection between Garvey’s prophecy that a black king would emerge in Ethiopia and the need for deliverance in Jamaica. This meant the beginning of the end of colonial rule in Jamaica and a signal for black people to repatriate to Africa (Erskine 2005:60).

### **3 RASTAFARI BELIEFS**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The Bible has a pre-eminent place in Rasta theology. Most of their teachings about the Messiah and themselves are based on their belief that the Bible was written by black people for black people.

According to Rasta theology, Solomon and Christ were black; they also believe that there is sufficient biblical evidence to justify the claim that God’s chosen people are also black. But the Bible is not the only source of this unique knowledge (Erskine 2005:71) --- another even more important source is the inner knowledge that is obtained from their likeness to the Israelites of biblical history (Barrett 1997:119). Rasta theology draws parallels between the history of the Israelites and the history of Rastafarianism, and identifies commonalities in events such as slavery, exile and the scattering in Diaspora. All black inhabitants have been scattered throughout the whole world The following quotation is a clear expression of this view: “Jah says: I shall scatter my people among the wicked, for in the times when the people should have known the fullness of Jah, they have turned their backs against I” (Owens 1975:39).

#### **3.2 Rastafari theology**

The Rastas has been described by Barrett (1977) as a messianic millenarian cult: messianic because they believe in the person of Haile Selassie I, and millenarian because of the expectations of an imminently good future on earth.

Their belief system depends on the significant impact racism and colonialism had on them as victims. Racism, in their view, gives rise to economic exploitation and implies a total rejection of the

manhood of the other, namely, the black person. Racism and colonialism uphold a Manichaeic world in which a black skin symbolises inhumanity and bestiality. In terms of Rasta theology, however, this Manichaeic world of division between black and white is portrayed the other way round. The world of the black, the world of Africa is human. The Western capitalist and imperialist world, in which there is no prospect for blacks, is inhuman (Witvliet 1985:113-114).

Rasta theology draws a comparison between the economic and political systems of Jamaica and biblical Babylon, seen as the land of captivity, and Ethiopia, the Promised Land. Ethiopia is Zion, the place of salvation or heaven. Rasta heaven is, therefore, not a place hereafter, but a specific place on earth (Witvliet 1985:114).

Rastas adopt a way of life that displays great freedom and mistrust of authoritarian leadership as a means of rejecting the ruling and dominant ideology. Although there are numerous differences between individual Rastas, they have a common lifestyle that breaks with the dominant culture and makes room for the experience of personal identity. For many Rastas, dreadlocks are an outward sign of their religious calling, that is, that they are set apart by God --- just like the Nazarenes in biblical times. The use of ganja has both religious and medicinal significance. Rastas prefer I-tal food, that is, natural, vegetarian food. Another mark of their unique identity is their specific Rasta language. An important example of this language is their avoidance of the word “me”, as it expresses the subjection of the slave as an object. They therefore prefer to use “I” instead of “me” and “my”. “I” expresses that they are the subjects of their own history (Witvliet 1985:115).

When the Rasta movement is referred to as a liberation movement, it is not so much articulating a political and economic programme for social change, but creating room for people to experience mental and physical liberation from a slave’s existence (Witvliet 1985:116).

All Rastafarian brethren hold sacred three basic concepts of the culture, to which biblical and historical concordance is offered, namely:

- 1 Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia is the returned Messiah, the Godhead, the Ancient of Days.

2 All African people brought to the Western hemisphere through the advent of European slave trading, whose progeny still survive, have the inherent right to demand their repatriation back to the African continent if so desired.

3 Ethiopia is an integral part of the Garden of Eden, as recorded in the book of Genesis (Mack 1999:51).

### **3.3 Jah Rastafari**

Rasta or the Rastafarian movement sees Haile Selassie I, who was crowned Emperor of Ethiopia in 1930, as Jah, the Rastafari name for God Incarnate. The term “Jah Rastafari” is used to depict Haile Selassie as God (Erskine 2005:200).

The Biblical text of Revelation 5:2-5 became crucial for the Rastas in their search to make theological sense of the events unfolding in Ethiopia. Revelation 5 describes “...a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, who is worthy to open the book and lose the seals thereof? And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. Then one of the elders said to me, weep not: lo, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals”. Rastas find a strong correlation between the claims made by the new Ethiopian Emperor and the Biblical injunctions, and sufficient proof that the new king is divine.

The divine nature of Ras Tafari is further enhanced by Revelation 19:16: “On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, King of Kings and Lord of Lords”. Rastas interpreted the Bible in their African context and became convinced that Ras Tafari was none other than Jesus Christ returned to redeem Africa and people of African descent (Erskine 2005:70).

The belief that Ras Tafari was indeed Jesus Christ was further acknowledged through the homage paid to him by Western heads of state. One of the dignitaries who visited the new Emperor was the Duke of Gloucester, son of His Majesty King George V. The Duke presented the Emperor with a twenty-seven inch sceptre made of solid gold and was inscribed with the following inscriptions: “Ethiopia shall make her hands reach unto God” and “King of Kings of Ethiopia” (Hill 1981:43-44). Two other texts that confirm the divinity of Ras Tafari is the prophecy of Howell, an earlier leader, based on Psalm 72:9-11: “They that dwell in the wilderness shall

bow before him, and his enemies lick the dust! The King of Tashish and of the isles shall bring presents: the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts. Yea, all kings shall fall down before him”; the other text used is Genesis 49:10: “The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a law giver from between his, until Shiloh comes, and unto him shall be the gathering of the people be”.

Rastas are convinced that Haile Selassie is the Messiah. They also believe that the day is fast approaching when all nations will acknowledge the kingship of Haile Selassie, that is, that they will affirm his universal reign. Ultimately, every tongue shall confess his supremacy (Erskine 2005:71).

### **3.4 Salvation**

It is common knowledge that salvation has different meanings in different religions. The question is thus: “What does salvation mean in the Rastafari movement?”

The crux of salvation, according to Rastas, is the connection between the knowledge of God’s identity and a response to God with one’s whole life. God came to set all men free. All who know that he is the high Rastafari shall have access to the tree of life, regardless of their nationality or the language they speak (Owens 1975:172).

God is found when a person looks within. Poor people have a decided advantage, because of their oppressing circumstances to look within and confront themselves (Owens 1975:173). God, according to Rastas, took the initiative and freely made known the divine identity in each person’s heart. The knowledge of God is thus inborn in all people.

Contrary to Christian salvation in which individuals must ask “What must I become and do to be saved?” Rasta salvation seems to ask “What must I know?” The emphasis is on knowledge rather than on becoming. Knowledge in Rasta theology focuses on truth as intellectual assent rather than truth as sharing in the divine life and identity. The saving knowledge of God then is understood as the knowledge that Rastas are free from Babylonian captivity, and the esteeming knowledge of God who makes man whole, who gives peace and who fulfils us in relation to God and others (Erskine 2005:196).

Rasta’s also voluntarily practice a kind of self-emptying in the belief that by emptying the self, they will discover a new self

(Erskine 2005:191). A Rasta is born of Jah and elected by Jah. Faithfulness is expressed in fidelity to the Rastafari community and to the Rasta family (Erskine 2005:73).

Salvation in the Rastafari movement is viewed as freedom from slavery and repatriation back to Africa, to Zion. Rastas place their hope in God to deliver them from exile in Babylon.

#### **4 SYMBOLISM**

The Rastafari movement makes use of the following symbols to give structure to their spirituality:

- *Ethiopia - Heaven or Zion.* Ethiopia, specifically, and Africa, in general, are viewed as Rasta heaven on earth. They are also referred to as Zion. Rastafarians do not believe in hell or the afterlife (Anon 2006c:2).
- *Babylon.* Babylon is the term used for the white political power structures that suppressed the black race for centuries. Today, black people are held down by poverty, illiteracy, inequality and trickery by the white man (Erskine 2005:199; Anon 2006c:2).
- *Return of Diaspora to Africa.* Rastas believe that Jah will finance their Exodus back to their homeland Ethiopia
- *Ital food.* True Rastas eat ital food, that is, food that has never been touched with chemicals. They prefer to eat natural food or food that is cooked but served in the rawest possible form, without salt, preservatives or condiments. Most Rastas are vegetarian. Those who eat meat are not allowed to eat pork, because they are the scavengers of the earth. Fish forms part of their staple diet, but they are not permitted to eat crab, lobster or prawns, because these types of fish are the scavengers of the sea. Fish may be no longer than twelve inches in length. They drink anything that is herbal, such as tea, but liquor, coffee, milk and soft drinks are viewed as unnatural (Anon 2006c:2)
- *Colours: red, black and green.* Red stands for the blood that martyrs have shed for the sake of the black struggle and the Rastafarian movement. It is also symbolic of the Triumphant Church, that is, the church of the Rastas. Black symbolises the colour of Africans. Green

represents the beauty and vegetation of Ethiopia, the Promised Land. Yellow is sometimes added and represents wealth of the homeland.

- *Dreadlocks*. Dreadlocks are worn to contrast the straight, blond look of the white man. Dreadlocks are symbolic of the movement's roots, for which support is found in the scripture Leviticus 21:5: "They shall not make baldness upon their head, neither shall they shave off the corner of their beard, nor make any cuttings in the flesh".
- *Lion of Judah*. The Lion of Judah represents Haile Selassie. Others believe that the Lion of Judah represents the male majority of the movement (Anon 2006c:3).
- *I-and-I*. This expression is used frequently by Rastas. It means that no person is more privileged than another in the basic truth of life. All people are equal. Rastas use "I-and-I" instead of "you and I" because they believe that all people are bound together by one god, Jah (Erskine 2005:19; Anon 2006c:3).

The use of ganja is another important practice in Rasta spirituality and is discussed in more detail below.

#### **4.1 Ganja**

Rastafarians take exception to the fact that Rastafari is associated almost exclusively with ganja, but despite this, it remains the most visible part of the movement and a common unifying symbol. The earliest archaeological proof of hemp smoking in Africa outside of Egypt comes from an Ethiopian site dated 1320. Cultivation of hemp spread southward, but practice of smoking became more prevalent when the Dutch arrived with their pipes in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The native people of South Africa had only eaten the leaves previously. The large-scale use of ganja in Jamaica and the Caribbean can be traced back to the importation of indentured Indians into Jamaica (Bosch 1996:14).

In 1924, before ganja was added to the list of dangerous drugs by the League of Nations, it was brought to the Caribbean by the British and sold to Indian indentured workers (Cambell 1985:62). Some believe that when black slaves gained their freedom in the British Caribbean in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, indentured labourers from India replaced them. They found hemp growing wild,

the result of an abandoned industrial hemp project started by the British in 1800 (Lewis 1985:93).

It is not clear why Rasta adopted ganja as their “holy weed”, because ganja appears to have been in use for centuries. One theory is that Rastas in Jamaica smoked ganja to irk the colonials who wished to control the use thereof and thereby also control the working classes (Barrett 1977:19). In the wider society, there is a perception that violence, disruption and friction can all be attributed to the use of ganja. Rastas, however, argue that ganja is but the smokescreen that veils the deeper problems of poverty, inequality and police violence.

## **4.2 Ganja in Rastafari spirituality**

The use of the term “spirituality”, referring to the lived experience, has increased dramatically in the last few decades; it was once an almost exclusively Roman Catholic term before Vatican II, but has since been adopted by Protestantism, Judaism, non-Christian religions, and even other movements such as feminism and Marxism. Although the term is difficult to define, the experience is analogous in all of these movements.

The adoption of the term “spirituality” by a wider spectrum of cultures and belief systems has also altered the meaning of the term. It no longer refers exclusively or even primarily to prayer and spiritual exercises, nor to an elite state or superior practice of Christianity. Rather, the term has broadened to include the whole of faith life as well as the life of the person as a whole, including its bodily, psychological, social and political dimensions (Schneiders 1989:679).

Central to Rasta spirituality is ital living through ital food<sup>2</sup> and the belief in herbal healing. Rastas believe that the whole universe is organically related; the key to physical and social health is thus to live in accordance with organic principles. Rastas commit to a virtual vegetarian diet and to the use of various herbs that they believe promote human wellbeing. Foremost among the herbs is ganja, which is also referred to as the “holy herb” or “wisdom weed” (Edmonds 2003:60).

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2 A term for “natural” food, that is, food that has never been touched by chemicals. No canned food is allowed.

Rastas close association with the use of marijuana or ganja is also based on their belief that God has chosen to reveal himself to human beings through herbs. Herbs are not only intended to heal the nations, but also to assist in understanding Jah. Chief amongst these herbs is ganja (Erskine 2005:96).

Rastas cite Bible verses to justify their use of herbs, particularly ganja. Genesis 1:29: “And God said, Behold I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat” (Erskine 2005:96); Genesis 3:18: “... thou shall eat the herb of the field”; Exodus 10:12: “...eat every herb of the field”; Proverbs 15:17: “Better is dinner of herb where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith”; Psalm 104:14: “He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man”. Another text that underscores their view is Revelation 22:2: “...the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nation”. Rastas even suggest, based on Psalm 18:8, that God enjoys smoking ganja: “There went up a smoke out of his nostrils, and fire out of his mouth devoured: coals were kindled by it” (Erskine 2005:96).

The smoking of ganja in Rastarari spirituality may be categorised as follows: (a) general recreational use; (b) a healing substance; and (c) a form of religious worship, as communion.

Rasta’s life in a fractious society divided by inequalities of class, economics and privilege have caused them to believe that smoking ganja will result in the nations being healed. Recreational use of ganja is also not excluded. The use of ganja as religious ritual is, however, the most prominent.

### **4.3 Medical value of ganja**

Different viewpoints exist on the value of marijuana (ganja). The Rasta belief that ganja can heal the nations implies that its use is beneficial for the health of all human beings. Medical practitioners, however, disagree on the medicinal value of marijuana.

Some medical practitioners believe that marijuana has certain health benefits, for example: relieving certain types of pain, nausea, vomiting and other symptoms caused by illnesses such as multiple sclerosis, cancer and Aids (Elders 2004; Cavanaugh 2002). Others, however, believe that smoking mariju-ana affects perception, but acknowledge that it is unlikely to cause permanent brain damage

(Grant 2003). Zimmer and Morgan (1997) assert that no medical proof has been found that marijuana, even long-term high-dosage use, causes brain damage in humans.

Some medical practitioners, however, are concerned about the negative impact of marijuana. Frist (2003) wrote:

Although I understand many believe marijuana is the most effective drug in combating their medical ailments, I would caution against this assumption due to the lack of consistent, repeatable scientific data available to prove marijuana's benefits.

Bachs (2005) is of the opinion that marijuana has no more medical advantages than other therapies, especially when one takes side effects into consideration. Cresswell (2006:1) claims that smokers of marijuana are at risk of developing emphysema twenty years before it tends to strike tobacco smokers.

Despite the different viewpoints on the medicinal value of ganja, the use of ganja as a sacrament remains important in Rasta spirituality.

#### **4.4 Ganja as sacrament**

The smoking of ganja is considered to be an act of religious worship amongst Rastas (Erskine 2005:96). The act of smoking the pipe is preceded by a careful preparation of the herb. Virtually every time the chalice<sup>3</sup> is lit, whether on an individual or group basis, a ritual is followed. Rastafarians will stop talking, take off their caps and pray for a blessing upon them and in praise of Jah Rastafari. These prayers are frequently based on verses from Psalms 19 and 121. The smoking of the herb is freely compared to the communion cup and the burning of incense practised in various churches.

A type of water pipe is often utilised for the smoking of the holy herb during communal rituals. The pipe can be constructed from a variety of containers, such as gourds, cow or goat horns, bamboo or tin cans. A clay or wooden bowl is attached to the container and the cannabis is placed in it. Rastas refer to this kind of water pipe (or sometimes the bowl on top) as a chalice or *kochi*. A small object referred to as a *gritty* stone (a small piece of nutmeg,

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3 Chalice is the name for the pipe used in the ceremonial smoking of ganja.

stone or clay upon which the marijuana rests and through which the smoke is drawn) is placed at the bottom of the *kochi*. Another pipe that is also used commonly is the *chillum*, a conical cylindrical pipe. The mouth end, sometimes covered with a piece of cloth, is known as a *sapi* (Bilby 2000:73).

Although not all Rastas smoke ganja (some are unable for health reasons) or wear dreadlocks, they still recognise the importance of these symbolic gestures for the faith (Erskine 2005:190)

#### **4.5 Significance of smoking ganja**

The smoking of ganja has clear significance for Rastas, as it is viewed as a sacrament and compared to the communion cup. Rastas believe that they are showing obedience to Jesus' command to partake of the cup when they puff deeply on the pipe, that is, that they are sipping from the cup and thus from Jesus (Erskine 2005:97).

They also believe that smoking the holy herb is the purest and most natural form of communion with God.

Smoking ganja is further viewed as incense offered to their God. Their smoking of the holy herb as an offering to God is viewed as a pure and sacred act of worship. They compare this sacrament to the burning of incense in the Roman Catholic Church; the Roman Catholic Church burns incense in a building, which to them, is not the true church. The true church is the person of a true believer. By inhaling and exhaling ganja, the believer burns incense in the true temple (Owens 1975:160).

The smoking of ganja provides a medium for contemplation, inspiration and insight. It is through this holy sacrament that Rastas are able to reach into the depths of wisdom and discover the revelation of God that is given to reason. The reasoning faculty is intensified through smoking of the herb --- a new world of illumination, vision and enlightenment is opened (Edmonds 2003:355). Ganja enhances understanding and assists Rastas to pray, contemplate and reason (Erskine 2005:98).

Smoking frees the mind from the snares of colonialism and provides (through the reasoning faculty) a means to supersede and transcend any limits imposed on the brethren of Rasta by the system of Babylon (Erskine 2005:98). Through the smoking of ganja, Rastas attain what they refer to as the "I-and-I" consciousness --- the

breakthrough of the intersubjective experience of the individual and Jah. The terms “I-and-I” and “I-man” refer to a final transformation of a non-person (as a result of the old slave society of Babylon) into a person (Owens 1975:XIV).

The significance and value of ganja is deeply rooted and touches on the physical experience and on spiritual and psychological development and betterment.

#### **4.6 Ganja and an altered state of consciousness**

An altered state of consciousness is a state of consciousness that differs significantly from baseline or normal consciousness. It is the state where one loses the sense of identity with one’s body or with one’s perceptions (Carroll 2006:1).

Altered states of consciousness can conveniently be divided into *the natural*, *the traumatic* and *the induced* (Foster 1997:61). An altered state of consciousness is created by the following two operations: by forces that break up the ordinary basic states (actions of a psychological and/or physical nature) and by structural, psychological and physiological forces that are applied to create the desired altered state of consciousness. It is, however, important to note that, given the large number of components of consciousness which can be affected and the many induction techniques, together with the variety of cultural settings within which they operate, it is impossible to give a unified definition of any individual aspect or of the overall group of phenomena. Each induction technique merely modifies human consciousness and does not contain its own content. Experiences thus brought about by this induced state, also relate to the specific cultural setting, mental structures, specific expectations with which the experience is approached as well as to the symbolic meaning which is attached to it (Bourguignon 1979:241).

An altered state of consciousness could thus be brought about in a number of ways. Craffert (2002:69) points out the following situations which bring about alterations of states of consciousness: bodily conditions or experiences (eg highway hypnosis), certain illnesses (eg fever) or injuries, certain recreational activities (eg mood-altering drugs or long-distance running) or certain religious practices (eg rituals). Induction can, therefore, be deliberate (eg meditation) or accidental (eg highway trance), it can be brought about by artificial means (eg drugs) or within a natural setting (eg dancing or drumming). Induction can even be spontaneous (eg

during solitude or prayer) or be brought about while participating in a group activity (eg a ritual dance or chanting).

Different viewpoints do exist on the value of altered states of consciousness. Some sceptical psychological researchers label claims of revelation and transcendence through altered states of consciousness as delusional and self-deceptive, while others ask for more serious research in order to ascertain the significance of each state on the totality of the human entity. Some researchers believe that the notion must be abandoned that the waking, rational consciousness is the only form of any value (Anon 2006d:1).

Although some critics believe that there is no proof to substantiate the claims that altered states transport a person into a transcendent realm of higher consciousness or truth, ample evidence exists to show that extremely pleasant feelings are provided by these states and that these states can profoundly affect personality. Some religious experiences are described as providing a pleasant sense of divine presence, and of oneness, interrelatedness and significance of all things (Carroll 2006:1-2).

An altered state of consciousness includes the following specific characteristics (Ludwig 1969:13-18):

- (1) Alterations in thinking, including predominance of archaic modes of thought, blurring of cause-effect distinctions, and cognitive ambivalence;
- (2) A distorted perception of time or of temporal reality, compared to ordinary reality;
- (3) Depersonalisation, a loss of control of the self and inhibition;
- (4) Increased empathy, followed by sensations of becoming one with other people or objects;
- (5) Body-image changes and perceptual distortions;
- (6) Changes in meaning; attachment of increased or specific significance to subjective experience or external cues, leading to thrilling feelings, insights and revelations of “truth” that then carry an unshakable conviction;
- (7) Sense of the ineffable; the essence of the personal experience is felt to be not directly communicable, and this is often explained by varying degrees of amnesia;

(8) Feelings of rejuvenation, renewed hope or of rebirth;

(9) Hyper suggestibility. Altered states of consciousness increase suggestibility and the susceptibility and propensity of persons to accept uncritically and/or to automatically respond to specific statements (i.e. commands or instructions of a leader, shaman, demagogue or hypnotist) or non-specific cues (ie cultural or group expectations of certain types of behaviour or subjective feelings). Hyper-suggestibility can also refer to the increased tendency of a person to misperceive or misinterpret various stimuli or situations, based on his or her inner fears or wishes.

Marijuana is classified as a psychoactive drug, meaning that it influences the user's state of consciousness (Hayes 2002:74). Marijuana was widely used as a tranquillizer in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and has been used for more than 2 000 years in the Far East. It acts as a mild depressant by damping down the actions of the autonomic nervous system --- it thus produces muscular relaxation. Some users report that time passes very slowly, while others report an increased sensitivity to sensory stimulation such as music and art (Ibid 78).

The value associated with smoking ganja in the Rasta movement correlates with some the following characteristics of an altered state of consciousness:

- The thinking processes are changed and the reasoning faculty intensified in order to reach into the depths of wisdom and to discover the revelation of God that is given to reason. Ganja enhances understanding and assists Rastas in praying, contemplation and reasoning (Erskine 2005:98).
- Feelings of rejuvenation and new hope, as well as a new world of illumination, vision and enlightenment are opened. This new hope is enhanced through the feeling that the individual has been trans-formed from a slave to a person of worth free from the bonds of Babylon.
- Change in meaning, insights and revelations of "truth" that then carry an unshakable conviction, for example: their view of their saviour, Haile Selassie; Ethiopia as Zion; and heaven and salvation being linked to freedom from slavery and trickery.

- A sense of ineffability. Smoking frees the mind from the snares of colonialism and provides (through the reasoning faculty) a means to supersede and transcend any limits imposed on the brethren of Rasta by the system of Babylon. Through the smoking of ganja, Rastas attain what they refer to as the “I-and-I<sup>4</sup>” consciousness --- the breakthrough of the intersubjective experience of the individual and Jah (Owens 1975:XIV).

## 5 CONCLUSION

There is little consensus amongst Rastas about the use of ganja, with some Rastas claiming that they prefer not to use ganja at all. Although the use of ganja plays an important role in the Rastafari movement, it must not be overemphasised at the expense of other symbols.

The important role it plays in the movement is emphasised in their efforts to legalise marijuana. Whereas in the past, the struggle was to articulate black identity, the struggle today is to legalise ganja as a “holy herb” and for Rastas to assert their right to smoke it freely as an expression of their spirituality. This struggle to legalise ganja must be understood in the context of their religion. Ganja is viewed as a “holy herb”, firstly, because it was created by God and is therefore safe. Secondly, Rastas believe that ganja has medicinal and spiritual qualities (ie enlightenment and healing of the crushed spirit). The altered state of consciousness induced by the use of ganja seems to play an important role in their spirituality of salvation. It is through this deeper contact with God and the knowledge of his identity that spiritual enlightenment and revelation is obtained. A spiritual/psychological healing is also evident in that the transformation from a worthless slave to a worthy person is obtained through reaching the “I-and-I” consciousness. It seems also true that the use of ganja has another important recreational function, namely, to provide relaxation or escape from the harsh reality whilst in the struggle for freedom.

Marcus Garvey, a modern day John the Baptist, has expressed strong views on the use of ganja. He describes ganja as a dangerous

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4 “I-and-I” is an expression used in the place of the first person singular or plural. It points to harmony between the human and the divine in Rasta consciousness.

weed that is very harmful to the user. He further asserts that users of ganja can “act crazy”, while others use it to escape reality. He has asked for serious steps to be taken to suppress the use of ganja (Lewis 1998:152). Despite Garvey’s view, however, ganja remains part of the Rasta movement.

Not all Rasta grow dreadlocks. They also seem to differ in terms of other practices/beliefs, such as abstaining from meat washing their hair with pure water or with shampoo; and deciding whether Haile Selassie is God or just a representative of God. But ganja is the one thing that is very alive amongst Rastas.

The smoking of ganja is a deeply-rooted practice that developed out of suppression and inequality. Despite all the negative and unflattering reports, the “holy herb” is valued. Whether it is viewed as an escape from reality or as a religious ritual with much value, it remains part and parcel of their struggle for freedom and salvation. It remains one of the vehicles through which Rastas believe they receive wholeness as a person and obtain salvation.

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