



## Rum and Spirits The “Meaning” of Alcohol

*There is no comparison between ganja and rum  
The former keeps you “cool” the latter makes you glum  
Rum as we know is an agent of death  
With the using of ganja you draw new breath  
~ Rastafarian poet*

As the poem suggests, followers of the Jamaican-born Rastafari religion have unique views on drugs. Unlike followers of other Afro-Caribbean religions, Rastafarians reject rum (and all alcohol) as a symbol of “Babylon,” a term they use to refer to greedy, corrupt governments and institutions that have oppressed the black race through physical and economic slavery.

Rastafarians view alcohol as destructive to people’s spiritual lives—they describe it as a processed, impure substance that doesn’t belong in the temple of the body as it clouds thinking, truth-seeking and the path to Jah (short of Jahweh, the name of God in the Hebrew Bible). They point out that alcohol harms individuals and communities when used in excessive amounts, causing health and relationship problems and weakening people’s resolve to break free from poverty and oppression. Rastafarians feel that cannabis (ganja), on the other hand, is a sacred herb, and that smoking it cleans, heals, brings peace and pleasure, brings them closer to God and therefore away from the lies that form the foundation of a secular, capitalist society. Many Rastafarians suspect cannabis is only illegal because Caribbean rum companies see it as competing for alcohol sales.

Rum sales have been a big deal in the Caribbean since the substance was first invented in the 1640s (after alcohol distilling was introduced to British Barbados and French Martinique by Dutch Jews who had been ousted from Brazil by the Portuguese). Made from fermented and distilled sugarcane juice or molasses, rum was immediately popular particularly among slaves, sailors, poor whites, and pirates. Rum developed into a valuable commodity in the Caribbean and was shipped primarily to markets in the American colonies and Africa. It served as a medicine, currency and a kind of liquid motivation to keep slaves working (and keep African chiefs selling slaves to Europeans).

The slaves came from different parts of west Africa, where their people had been using various forms of alcohol for centuries to communicate with ancestors in the spirit world. They believed alcohol offerings, poured onto graves or presented as gifts, could protect them from evil, give rest to angry spirits, and heal illnesses. Separated from their traditional communities and thrust into new mixed African slave settings, these people wove their various traditions together to form new religions. Obeah, in Jamaica, and Voodoo, in Haiti, are two examples of Afro-Caribbean religions that emerged in this way. Since alcohol was a common element in most of their traditions, the slaves quickly made their own versions of rum, or acquired it in various ways, for use in their social and religious rites. Rum rituals helped keep African slaves symbolically connected to their homeland and created social bonds in their new settings.

Over time, rum became central to the development of a new Afro-Caribbean identity, based on the shared experiences of being captured, shipped overseas and enslaved by Europeans to make sugar, molasses and rum. Rum drinking gave some slaves a temporary feeling of freedom from the hardships of slavery. Old slaves gave new slaves rum to comfort them through the transition. Early “rum shops,” consisting of dirt-floor shacks, became gathering places where slaves could hang out and drink. Later, rum shops came to be places that offered much more than alcohol—they were places to meet, eat, play games, gossip, share news and feel human. But they also played a role in increased drunkenness and the social ills that came with it. By the 19th century, alcohol use was less and less about communicating with the spirits and more about socializing and escaping economic hardships resulting from competition in the international sugar trade, which in turn led to more focus on rum.

A new faith emerged in Jamaica in the 1930s following the divine coronation of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I (Ras Tafari) and in the wake of official prohibition. Like Obeah and Voodoo before it, this new faith was a blending of various traditions, this time drawn heavily from Judaism, Ethiopian Christianity and Islam. Like these faiths, Rastafari includes a strong prophetic tradition concerned with social justice and the living conditions of the poor. Rum was now identified as “an agent of death” and a means of keeping people enslaved to an evil economic and political system.

Sources: Smith, F. H. (2005). *Caribbean rum: A social and economic history*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.

## Redemption Song

by Bob Marley

Old pirates, yes, they rob I;  
Sold I to the merchant ships,  
Minutes after they took I  
From the bottomless pit.  
But my hand was made strong  
By the 'and of the Almighty.  
We forward in this generation  
Triumphantly.

Won't you help to sing  
These songs of freedom?  
'Cause all I ever have:  
Redemption songs;  
Redemption songs.

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery;  
None but ourselves can free our minds.  
Have no fear for atomic energy,  
'Cause none of them can stop the time.  
How long shall they kill our prophets,  
While we stand aside and look? Ooh!  
Some say it's just a part of it:  
We've got to fulfill de book.

Won't you help to sing  
These songs of freedom?  
'Cause all I ever have:  
Redemption songs;  
Redemption songs;  
Redemption songs.

[Guitar break]

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery;  
None but ourselves can free our mind.  
Wo! Have no fear for atomic energy,  
'Cause none of them-a can-a stop-a the time.  
How long shall they kill our prophets,  
While we stand aside and look?  
Yes, some say it's just a part of it:  
We've got to fulfill de book.

Won't you help to sing  
Dese songs of freedom?  
'Cause all I ever had:  
Redemption songs  
All I ever had:  
Redemption songs:  
These songs of freedom,  
Songs of freedom.