



Rum and Spirits

*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.

Instructional strategies

1. Share the [handout](#) with the class, and then facilitate a class discussion about the intersection of alcohol, religion, cultural identity and values. Some of the following questions may be useful:
 - a. How did the symbolic meaning of alcohol evolve for the people brought as slaves from Africa? How was alcohol viewed and used in the African villages, among the Afro-Caribbean slaves and in Rastafari churches? What do you think contributed to this changing significance and meaning?
 - b. What roles did religion play in the lives of the slaves? How would you describe the relationship between religion, Afro-Caribbean identity and alcohol?
 - c. Why do you think Rastafarians reject the use of alcohol altogether?
 - d. What role does religion play in attitudes toward alcohol or other drugs in your community?
 - e. What other factors influence how we view and use alcohol and other drugs?
2. Reggae artist Bob Marley is probably the most well-known Rastafari. Marley was heavily influenced by the Jamaican-born prophet Marcus Garvey, who promoted Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism (the belief that black people world-wide should join to reclaim Africa from colonial powers). The issues of slavery, colonialism and social injustice are reflected in many of Marley’s songs, including “Redemption Song.”

Hand out copies of the [handout](#) and draw attention to the lyrics to “Redemption Song” and then play the [video](#). Facilitate a class discussion using questions like:

- a. What do you think Marley means by “mental slavery”?
- b. Do you think the Rastafarian rejection of alcohol is related to this idea of “mental slavery”? Explain.
- c. Why do you think Rastafarians have a different attitude toward cannabis? How do you think cannabis differs symbolically from alcohol for them?
- d. What does Marley suggest or imply about a solution? How can slaves emancipate themselves? What roles might religion play (note the discussion about “de book”)? What are “songs of freedom”/”redemption songs”?
- e. Have you ever felt enslaved by something? What did you do to free yourself? What did you learn from that experience?

Curricular competencies (English Language Arts 10-12)

- Think critically, creatively, and reflectively to explore ideas within, between, and beyond texts
- Recognize and identify the role of personal, social, and cultural contexts, values and perspectives in texts
- Recognize how language constructs personal, social and cultural identity
- Respectfully exchange ideas and viewpoints from diverse perspectives to build shared understanding and extend thinking

Curricular competencies (Social Studies 10-12)

- Assess how prevailing conditions and the actions of individuals or groups affect events, decisions, and developments (cause and consequences)
- Explain different perspectives on past or present people, places, issues, and events by considering prevailing norms, values, worldviews, and beliefs (perspective)
- Recognize implicit and explicit ethical judgements in a variety of sources (ethical judgements)
- Make reasoned ethical judgements about controversial actions in the past and present, and whether we have a responsibility to respond (ethical judgement)

Drug literacy objectives

- Assess the complex ways in which drugs impact the health and wellbeing of individuals, communities and societies
- Explore and appreciate diversity related to the reasons people use drugs, the impact of drug use and the social attitudes toward various drugs
- Recognize binary constructs (e.g., good vs bad) and assess their limitation in addressing complex social issues like drug use
- Recognize how official responses to drugs may have less to do with the drug than with other factors
- Develop social and communication skills in addressing discourse and behaviour related to drugs
- Develop personal and social strategies to manage the risks and harms related to drugs