

The Social Nexus of Ganja in Jamaica

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary complex of behavior and values associated with cannabis use among the working-class population of Jamaica is considered as an institution. Preceding the main discussion, brief summaries of the East Indian paternity of the complex as well as the extent of current cannabis use are presented. Substantive sections are organized around three principal themes: patterns of activities related to cannabis (cultivation, distribution, and consumption); social groupings of cannabis users (as related to specific activities and to age factors); beliefs and values underlying the cannabis institution (variations related to different modes of consumption, cannabis as energizer, and "the motivational syndrome"). A final section considers cannabis use as a social class marker; cannabis and social mobility; and stereotypes and misconceptions about cannabis reportedly held by the socially superordinate sections of Jamaican society.

Although not native to Jamaica, cannabis has become a plant of major social and economic significance in that West Indian nation. Its illegal but widespread proliferation, the extent and variety of uses to which it has been put by the folk, and the legal and political problems it has raised make cannabis, or *ganja*, a social phenomenon of vital interest.

The nature of *ganja*-related behavior and beliefs in Jamaica lends itself

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easily to a form of institutional description and analysis. S. F. Nadel, the noted British anthropologist, has defined institutions as "standardized modes of co-activity" (1951:108) with charters of values, distinctive forms of social grouping and personal relationships, set cycles of activities, material apparatuses, and purposive character. The Jamaican *ganja* complex, as it presently exists, fits well within this definition, exhibiting as it does a series of definable and repetitive activities, characteristic social groupings, and a coalescing corpus of beliefs and values. Also, by pursuing an institutional approach, it is possible to attain an efficient ordering and presentation of the materials which follow.

The roots of the Jamaican *ganja* complex can be traced to the Indian sub-continent. During the latter part of the 19th century, its prototypical forms were carried to the island by East Indian indentured laborers recruited to replace the emancipated slaves in the cane fields. Present day techniques and types of *ganja* use, critical parts of the *ganja* lexicon, as well as much of the justificatory ideology lend strong support to a claim of a direct India to Jamaica diffusion. The great majority of *ganja* users in contemporary Jamaica, however, are not East Indians, who form only a small minority of the population, but Black laboring people, both rural and urban, descendants of the African slaves forcibly brought to the New World in the 17th and 18th centuries. Although the exact process is not known, it appears that *ganja* and associated behaviors were relatively quickly incorporated and reworked into the cultural inventory of the Black lower section of Jamaican society and, despite sixty years of stringent sanctions against its cultivation, distribution, and consumption, it, as a complex, has thrived and proliferated throughout the country. At this point in time, the Indian paternity of the complex has, for all intents and purposes, been forgotten. In fact, some culturally militant Black users now claim Africa as the original source of Jamaican *ganja*, and cite Biblical references to the existence of "the herb," or marihuana, on King Solomon's tomb.

Putting questions of derivation aside, it is clear from *prima facie* evidence that *ganja* use in Jamaica is extraordinarily widespread. Although national statistics on these illegal practices are non-existent, estimates of the number of users range from one-third to two-thirds of the "lower class." A somewhat more precise estimation can be made based on the work of the Research Institute for the Study of Man anthropological team. For example, a survey of *ganja* smoking in one of the seven study communities indicated that of all males over the age of 15, fully 50% were smokers (half of these being classified as heavy smokers); 7.3% were former smokers: only 20% were non-smokers; and 22.3% were unclassi-

fiable due either to conflicting information or reluctance to provide information by respondents. If we were to include only half the unclassifiables (11.1%) to the smoker group, a conservative procedure, we would generate a figure for adult smokers of over 60%. If we were to add the 7.3% former smokers, then over 68% of the adult males in the community at the time of the study were either current smokers or had smoked *ganja* in the past. After comparing these data with those derived more generally from the other six study localities, we believe that 68% does not seriously misrepresent the extent of male smoking in the rural parts and, in fact, supports the higher ranges of earlier, somewhat more impressionistic estimates.

Male *ganja* smokers, however, make up only part of the *ganja* using population. Women, in lesser numbers, also smoke. A larger pool of individuals, including women and children, adult smokers and adamant non-smokers, drink *ganja* teas and tonics for medicinal or prophylactic purposes. Many utilize preparations from the plant as external salves and a relatively small number will make occasional use of *ganja* in food. Given the extent of non-smoking uses, one could estimate with confidence that some 65 to 75% of the lower section of the rural population, men, women, and children, inhale, ingest or use *ganja* in some form and to some degree — undoubtedly one of the highest rates of marijuana use for any non-deviant population in the Western world.

What are the institutionalized characteristics of the *ganja* complex? What are its constituent activities, its social groupings, its rules, ideas and values? We shall deal with each in order.

PATTERNS OF ACTIVITIES

Ganja activities can be divided for analytic purposes into three distinctive categories — cultivation, distribution, and consumption.

Cultivation: Jamaica does not import *ganja*. In fact, in recent years, it has developed an illegal export trade with North America and the United Kingdom. In most regions of the island, two crops a year can be harvested, the growing cycles generally running from April to August and from June to November. The physical conditions for growing *ganja* are good, individual land ownership, particularly in the hilly interior, is high, and unattended bush lands are available for cultivation. In essence, all the potential grower requires is access to relatively isolated land removed from regular traffic. In Jamaica, this is not difficult to find. In one quite typical farming community, at least 25% of all households are known to include

members who cultivate *ganja*, almost always on land away from the settlement. And given the secrecy attached to this cultivation, there can be little doubt that this figure underestimates the total number of *ganja* growers. Of 39 known cultivators, 56% grow only for personal or household use; 31% cultivate for sale as well. Only five growers (13%) cultivate primarily for commercial purposes. Significantly, members of this latter group do not smoke *ganja* and are of higher social standing in the community.

In the main, however, the cultivation of *ganja* is a poor man's enterprise which fits well with the agricultural patterns of mixed cropping common to the Jamaican folk. Not unexpectedly, then, the amount of *ganja* grown by any given individual is relatively small. In our typical community, for example, the largest "planter" will cultivate some 200 "roots" or plants, the next four in importance might cultivate 100 on the average, and the rest of the cultivators who sell some of their crop for profit may put in anywhere from 30 to 100 roots. Those who grow for their own use generally plant about ten, and sometimes less, per growing season. For the great majority of growers, *ganja* is an agricultural side line, which may bring some much needed income, but which does not seriously impinge on established patterns of economic and social life.

The very physical conditions which permit the cultivation of *ganja* may well become impediments to successful harvesting. Since remote and not easily guarded land must be utilized, the cultivator is at constant risk of theft from outsiders, competitors, and adolescent boys. Statistically, preadial larceny of legal crops is one of the most common crimes in Jamaica. *Ganja* is certainly no exception to the rule. But the victimized *ganja* grower, even if he knows the thief, has little direct recourse to the law. As a consequence, he is left to his own and group resources to protect his crop. Although violence against suspected depredators has been reported as have allegations of police protection, these means do not appear to be as important in controlling indiscriminate theft as more subtle and informal methods. The principal mechanisms of control are, in fact, firmly rooted in the cultural patterns and social alignments of the folk as broadly illustrated in the following cases:

Mr. A, a *ganja* cultivator, discovered that Mr. B, another *ganja* cultivator, had been stealing his 'herbs.' Recognizing the futility of directly confronting Mr. B, he went to people closely associated with the culprit and told them that he knew B was stealing his *ganja*, that he planned to put poisonous seeds that looked like *ganja* seeds into a few of his plants; and that this poison would bring instant death to the consumer. All this was imparted with an air of great secrecy and with the plea that his plan not be told to B. Predictably, Mr. B's friends warned him of the "plot" and the depredations of Mr. A's *ganja* fields ceased.

If such a tactic fails, the *ganja* cultivator has recourse to other alternatives. For example, the Pastor of the Pentecostal Church in our typical community is also the local "science man," or practitioner of magic. In this dual capacity, he keeps well informed of local events and has intimate and current knowledge of village relationships and alignments. With such information and skillful use of his position, he has amassed sufficient power so as to be able to manipulate effectively a given situation for the advantage of his client, as in this case:

Mr. C discovered that a large quantity of *ganja* that he had cut and left for curing was stolen. After making discreet inquiries, he determined who the thief was. Unable to go to the police, he turned to the Pastor with his problem. The Pastor, while not promising that he could guarantee the return of the stolen *ganja*, instructed Mr. C as to the steps that should be taken to punish the thief. Following these instructions, Mr. C posted a parchment on a pear tree near the place where the *ganja* had been stolen. On the parchment, inscribed with doveblood, was a biblical psalm decorated with magical symbols. A few days after the posting, the wife of the thief came to Mr. C with the half-cured *ganja*, begged for forgiveness, and asked him to remove the curse. Mr. C, gratified with the results, assumed that the thief had seen the parchment and recognized its significance. In reality, the wife of the thief was a member of the Pastor's congregation, and he had called her in, lectured her strongly on the evils of theft, and told her to return the *ganja* before serious misfortune befell her and her husband.

In the somewhat unlikely event of arrest for illegal cultivation, again the local system of relationships may come into play. It would not be unusual for an apprehended grower to turn for advice, influence, and even financial assistance to powerful "science men" who often count police and civil servants among their clientele. Other local power brokers may also be petitioned for help.

Distribution: The distribution of *ganja* can best be characterized as a small, albeit illegal, individual business activity engaged in by a relatively large number of occasional and part-time vendors. In the abstract, and given the patterns of occupational multiplicity found in rural Jamaica (Comitas 1973:157-173), *ganja* selling can be viewed as another supplementary economic enterprise available to the poor. In the seven communities studied, no evidence was found of any centralized, hierarchically organized distribution net that operated on either the local, regional, or island-wide basis.

In our illustrative community, sixteen men out of a total of 178, or nearly 9%, sell *ganja* in some quantity to others in the community. This figure does not include the five "commercial" producers who grow locally and sell in Kingston, the capital city. Of these sixteen, twelve are also *ganja* growers. Eight of this latter group sell *ganja* in small quantities to

friends and acquaintances until their stock is depleted, when they become buyers for their own use; the remaining four cultivators also sell their crop during the season but buy additional stock in the capital as the need arises. Four vendors are not cultivators and buy their entire *ganja* supply in Kingston. None of the sixteen vendors are full-time specialists; all combine selling with agricultural or other work, even though dealing in *ganja* may, for some, bring in a major portion of their income.

In general, the life style of *ganja* vendors adheres closely to that of the majority of the population. Almost all can be classified as belonging to the upper levels of the working class or lowest social sections. Nearly all rely on general cultivation of their own land for their primary source of livelihood. With an occasional exception, all have stable marital unions; all have children and established households. None are active in community level organizations. Significantly, these vendors are not known frequenters of rum shops; they appear quiet and law abiding, except for their activities in selling *ganja*; and they voice the same attitudes and make the same protests against criminality and violence as do the more affluent and respected members of the community. In all visible respects, the personality and demeanor of vendors tends to be pleasant and friendly, and they are thought of as "nice guys," jocular, inoffensive, and not given to quarrels or anger.

Consumption: There are four major methods of *ganja* use: smoking; drinking as medicinal teas and tonics; applying externally as plaster and ointments; and cooking food. *Ganja* is smoked in spliffs, or *ganja* cigarettes about four inches in length containing variable amounts of marihuana and tobacco, or in the *chillum*, the Jamaican equivalent of the "hookah" or Middle Eastern water pipe. Spliff smoking, however, is far more popular in Jamaica than smoking the *chillum*. It is more convenient, and safer than pipe smoking which generally requires the gathering of several smokers, the apparatus itself, and substantially greater security precautions. Individual consumption levels vary considerably. For example, in the sample of 30 smokers intensively examined in the clinical phase of the Research Institute for the Study of Man study, the consumption range was from one to twenty-four spliffs a day, the average number consumed per day being seven.

Of all methods of *ganja* consumption, tea drinking, which is widely reputed to have therapeutic and prophylactic properties for specific or general complaints, is the most prevalent, and is used across socioeconomic lines. It is particularly recommended for infants and children who may well consume, in this form, a substantial part of the *ganja* used in rural Jamaica. Tonics blended from rum and/or wine poured on *ganja*, bottled,

and allowed to set, are also used for therapeutic and prophylactic purposes. *Ganja* poultices and compresses are utilized for the relief of pains and for open wounds. Topical *ganja* preparations for neonates are not unusual.

Consumption of *ganja* with food has been noted and reported. The occasional use of marihuana in soups or with assorted greens or with cooked bananas is not unknown but this method of ingestion appears to be limited.

SOCIAL GROUPINGS

The proliferation of *ganja* use in Jamaica has generated distinctive social groupings and alignments in all areas of *ganja* activity — with one significant exception. *Ganja*, in the main, is cultivated individually without assistance rather than as a group activity. Such a pattern, induced by the severe legal sanctions against *ganja* cultivation, runs counter to traditional small farming practices among Jamaicans who, in order to avoid or decrease outlays for necessary farm labor as well as to solidify social ties within the community, have developed patterns of ongoing work partnerships and other forms of labor exchange for legal cultivation. Throughout most of Jamaica, *ganja* partnerships are non-existent, thereby avoiding the recriminations that would almost inevitably follow if a jointly worked *ganja* field is raided by the police, plundered by others, or neglected by one of the partners. For the somewhat precarious venture of *ganja* cultivation, the grower assumes full responsibility and expects all the profit. In so doing, he minimizes the social risks of rupturing harmonious work relationships in ordinary cultivation as well as legal risks. There appear to be few exceptions to this rule.

In *ganja* distribution, however, patterns of social clustering are clearly discernible. As already indicated, Jamaican communities tend to have substantial numbers of occasional or part-time vendors. Each vendor of this type establishes his own network of clients, usually from ten to twenty trusted individuals. These networks are relatively contained, with entry generally based on the personal knowledge of the client by the vendor. But these networks are also flexible, occasionally adding potential clients vouched for by older members. Nevertheless, much *ganja* buying on the island is indirect — an ultimate consumer requesting some trusted person to purchase *ganja* for him. This friend, in turn, may ask another, so that *ganja* often passes through an amorphous screen of middlemen who may receive little or no cash reward. Given this pattern, the consumer may well end up having purchased *ganja* from a nearby neighbor without

either knowing. Consequently, while vendors sell directly only to those few they can trust, they may indirectly supply a much larger number. Individual amounts of *ganja* sold are generally small. The most common quantity purchased, variously called a "stick," "bump," or "head," with weight ranging from two to six grams, is sufficient at the very least for one spliff.

Larger-scale distributors may service anywhere from 50 to 100 smoker-clients. Their operations, unlike the small vendors, are usually localized in what are commonly referred to as "herb camps" and "herb yards." Often the major vendor in the community will operate a "herb camp" in the immediate vicinity of his house. In addition to *ganja*, he may offer beer, ale, or stout for sale. He provides a recreational atmosphere with dominoes, a record player, and occasionally even a television set for his customers. Less important dealers run "herb yards," places where a user can come to smoke. No other facilities are provided and a user-client may either purchase limited quantities of *ganja* from the vendor, or bring his own.¹

The nature of social groups directly involved with *ganja* consumption is heavily influenced by age factors. Social patterning changes as individuals move from one significant period of their life to another. For the average rural user, at least four such periods are discernible.

During the first period, infancy-childhood, infants and young children are introduced to *ganja* through the ingestion of *ganja* teas. Even though these brews are consumed in a familial setting, an aura of secretiveness often surrounds this ordinary practice; words denoting *ganja* are not commonly used to identify the tea served, and since its taste is almost always obscured by milk and sugar, the young drinker may well be unaware of the basic ingredient. Significantly, tea drinking is the only method of *ganja* use and childhood is the only period of life in which the social use of *ganja* is not peer related but intergenerational, with adults prescribing and providing *ganja* for minors in their care.

Adolescence characterizes and influences the form of social grouping in the second phase. While young boys are warned about the evils of smoking *ganja*, such occasional admonitions, sometimes modified by cautions not to get caught, appear to have minimal impact particularly in households where fathers or surrogate fathers are regular smokers. While parental example undoubtedly serves as a role model, there is substantial evidence indicating that the initial experience with *ganja* smoking is in the

¹ For the distinction between "herb camp" and "herb yard," I am grateful to Claudia Rogers, member of the Research Institute for the Study of Man anthropological team, now in the Department of Anthropology, University of Miami.

company of friends of similar or slightly older age. In contemporary Jamaica, boys may begin smoking during pubescence, with the more precocious starting as early as ten years of age.

During the first years after introduction, smoking is more often a sporadic rather than a systematic and regular activity. Not until boys begin to earn their living is it economically feasible for them to indulge habitually. Adolescent smokers typically interact in relatively large and amorphous peer groups, sometimes dominated by a *ganja* vendor of roughly equal age. Since boys, as a rule, do not purchase *ganja* from adult vendors in their communities for fear of exposure, they rely on young distributors who are also friends and confidantes. Participation in these youthful groups varies in relation to the individual's ability to buy as well as his commitment to *ganja*: some young boys are essentially only curious bystanders; others may smoke an occasional spliff; still others, particularly the oldest, are confirmed and steady smokers. This adolescent phase may best be characterized as experimentation in *ganja* smoking.

The third period is that of adulthood. In their twenties, young men begin to establish their own households, choose mates, acquire children, and settle into their adult occupational routines. As their life style changes, so do their *ganja*-related alignments. For one, regular *ganja* users may begin to cultivate their own supply in order to save money and to decrease dependence on vendors. More significantly, groups diminish in size and stability in membership as choice of smoking companions is deliberately limited to work mates and trusted neighbors. Finally, smoking *ganja* is no longer the central preoccupation of these small networks, as it is for the younger age grades, but rather a natural part of the daily round, an almost unnoticed routine at work parties, lunch breaks, evening visits, and the like. These more tightly knit groups are also more egalitarian than adolescent ones, with no discernible hierarchical structure. Typically, each man supplies his own *ganja* and smokes his own spliffs or, on occasion, members take turns supplying all the *ganja* needed for an evening.

Old age is the fourth and last period. Compared to younger age groups, there is a smaller percentage of regular *ganja* smokers over the age of sixty and a corresponding breakdown of smoking groups. Explanations for this vary: some villagers claim that the brains of old people become weak and "dem kyáan take ganja"; some old people say that as they become older and closer to death they become more Christian, feel guilty about *ganja* smoking, and give it up. It is possible, however, that other factors are operative. For one, the incidence of *ganja* use was considerably less when these men were in their formative and young adult years so

that there should be proportionately fewer confirmed smokers among the older males. Second, older males who are smokers tend to lose their customary settings and incentives for smoking as they lose their smoking companions through illness or death. Finally, there are physical and economic factors: many old men are simply incapable of working their own fields, so that their incomes are markedly reduced and their supply of *ganja* is limited.

BELIEFS AND VALUES

What are the principal beliefs and values which give life to the *ganja* complex in Jamaica? Most importantly, users firmly believe in the efficacy of the substance. Nevertheless, a sharp distinction is made between the effects of tea drinking and those of smoking. The folk explanation is that teas and tonics are absorbed into the blood stream, strengthen the blood, and enable it to ward off disease, whereas *ganja* when smoked goes directly from the lungs to the brains where it may have sometimes unpredictable consequences. Whatever the objective truth, beliefs about the differential effects of *ganja* drinking and smoking are reinforced and perpetuated by differences in the general attitudes of those who only take *ganja* as tea, primarily members of the higher social levels and aspirants for higher status, as compared to those who smoke as well as drink *ganja*, members of the lowest social level.

Ganja, primarily in the form of teas and tonics, is widely believed to have medicinal properties, both prophylactic and therapeutic. It keeps the user in good health, prevents constipation, colds, gonorrhoea and a host of other ills. It is held that it is particularly good for children, preventing disease in general and marasmus in particular. With *ganja* tea, the youth grow stronger and smarter. For the mass of users, *ganja* is valued as a cure for a wide assortment of complaints from arthritis to stomach ailments.

There are strong beliefs related to physiological, psychobiological and psychodispositional effects of *ganja* — beliefs related to sleep, appetite, sex, reflection, relaxation, and the like. Descriptions of these effects, however, are typically qualified by mention of necessary, prior conditions. For example, if a user is in the mood to go to bed, *ganja* will make him sleepy. More importantly, however, there is little evidence indicating that *ganja* is systematically consumed by adults specifically for the purpose of inducing these states.

There is one important exception to this rule — *ganja* is regularly taken

to increase work capacity. Almost universally, users maintain that *ganja* enhances their ability to work, that is, to perform manual labor, and they regularly consume *ganja* with this objective. In this regard, *ganja* is believed to take effect in two ways. One is the cumulative benefit that comes with "building" one's blood and strength with regular dosages of *ganja*. The other is that *ganja* has the immediate effect of producing a burst of energy sufficient for completing laborious tasks. If there is difficult land to clear, it is claimed, a farmer-user will sit down, smoke a spliff, and a few minutes later he is able to face and then complete the task. Almost unanimously, informants categorically stated that *ganja*, either in teas or smoked, made them work harder, faster, and longer. For energy-related purposes, *ganja* can be and is taken in the morning, during breaks in the work routine, or immediately before particularly onerous labor.

Putting objective assessments of these claims aside, the belief that *ganja* acts as a work stimulant, and the observable behavior that this induces, casts considerable doubt on the universality of what has been described in the literature as "the amotivational syndrome," or "a loss of desire to work, to compete, to face challenges — interests and major concerns of the individual become centered around marihuana and drug use becomes compulsive" (Smith 1968:37-41). In Jamaica, and we would suspect in other marihuana-using agricultural countries, cannabis, at least on the ideational level, might well be central to a "motivational syndrome." *Ganja*, in the rural reaches of Jamaica, is a substance that apparently permits the individual to face, start, and carry through the most difficult and distasteful manual labor. Following from this, it could be argued that in certain types of non-industrial economies based on small-scale agriculture faced with difficult ecological conditions and complex land tenure systems, marihuana use may well have positive social value.

Ganja carries other values of considerable sociological significance. On one level, smoking the substance is considered adventurous by the adolescent boy: by participating in an illegal practice, even though it is widespread among his elders, the young smoker believes he is demonstrating courage, defiance, and, most importantly, manhood. In subtle ways, the smoking of *ganja* is considered by the young almost as a *rite de passage*, an audacious act signifying transition from adolescence to maturity. On another level, particularly for males from the lowest socioeconomic rung of the society, smoking symbolizes camaraderie, equality, and belonging; it is a sign of friendship and trustworthiness. Confidence can be placed in a man who joins in a smoke; those who will not have, potentially, "somet'ing over you." In such a milieu, adult males who do not smoke *ganja*, with the exception of avowed "Christians," can almost be con-

sidered deviant — often “loners” and withdrawn; these non-users are rarely included in male gatherings and are even sometimes thought of as simple-minded or deranged. Well based on customary behavior, *ganja* smoking has developed into a social activity limited only to age, work, and status peers. Therefore, among the rural poor, to smoke is to conform; not to smoke may mean social marginality — the reverse of the situation found on the higher social levels.

In the preceding sections, the case for a working-class Jamaican *ganja* institution has been sketched. Whether proven or not, it is nevertheless true that for a large part of the population the *ganja* complex or institution is of considerable consequence with well demarcated social parameters and culturally bounded behavior and effects. However, it is a complex that is legally condemned and publicly denounced by the socially more important sections of Jamaican society. Consequently, an individual's position regarding *ganja* is typically linked to his social status and to his aspirations for upward mobility in the society. In the Jamaican context, *ganja* usage and particularly *ganja* smoking implies participation with others in an illegal activity uniformly judged to be “lower class” and, therefore, “bad” by those with or hopeful of higher status. Public use of *ganja* by such individuals would leave them socially vulnerable and would affect their chances for maintaining or obtaining higher status and the benefits derived from such positions. These individuals, as a consequence, predictably avoid as well as denounce *ganja* and *ganja* smoking as they do other forms of clearly “lower-class” behavior such as common law marriage, bastardy, or reliance on the magical practices of *obeah*.

Not suprisingly, differences in class or sectional *ganja* attitudes are strongly correlated with differences in the prevalence and frequency of *ganja* use between the major social groupings. The social factor is vital to the understanding of cannabis in Jamaica. Most revealing in this regard are the *ganja* patterns of the mobile or socially aspiring individuals of the working or lowest social stratum. To rise in status in a sharply stratified society such as Jamaica is no mean accomplishment. At a minimum, it requires the shedding of obvious “lower class” markers. *Ganja* use is one such marker and from observation appears one of the easiest to divest. In our typical community, the mobiles present a dramatically different smoking profile from that of their more socially static peers in the working class. Despite the fact that many were known to be committed *ganja* smokers in the past, most mobiles are now non-smokers; none are heavy smokers; very few are regular or even intermittent smokers.

The upper elements of Jamaican society hold *ganja* responsible for increases in delinquency and criminality. Such views are continually

reinforced by a stream of newspaper reports vividly describing assaults, robberies, and murders allegedly perpetrated by individuals under the influence of *ganja*. Little, if any, objective and substantiated evidence exists, however, which can support these charges. On the contrary, our research indicates that compared with non-smokers of similar stations in Jamaican life, smokers are similar in every major dimension — certainly no less hard-working and no less socially capable. The overwhelming majority of even the heaviest smokers are law-abiding citizens, except with regard to cannabis, with no criminal involvement with police or court. Nevertheless, the stereotypes held and promulgated by the upper elements persist and flourish in Jamaica.

The Jamaican *ganja* laws which date back to 1913 appear, in historical retrospect, to have been based on class and racial factors rather than on objective medical and social evidence (Rubin and Comitas 1972:43-90). In any case, they are so viewed by the *ganja*-using population who see this legislation and its enforcement as arbitrary, directed against the laboring masses, and utilized by those in control for purposes far beyond the intent of the letter of the law. Some users hold the relatively benign opinion that "government" simply does not understand that *ganja* causes no harm and does not lead to violence. Most, however, cling to conspiratorial views: "government" is antagonistic to poor people having anything good and will take *ganja* away; or, legalizing *ganja* would adversely affect the "big men" who make "plenty profits" from the plant; or, medical doctors are against *ganja* because users do not get sick; or, more generally, *ganja* laws make the vulnerable people of Jamaica more vulnerable.

Granting the biases and distortions in these convictions, they should not and cannot be summarily dismissed. From one perspective, they reflect more general feelings of societal abuse harbored by many in the laboring population. From another, they underscore the social danger of institutional and institutionalized misunderstanding in a sharply stratified society.

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