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Abstract

The involvement of Caribbean youth in drug distribution (marijuana from the mid-1960s to 1981; cocaine hydrochloride powder and crack from 1981 to 1987, the time of writing) throughout the Circum-Caribbean area and in North America is described. Social, economic, and cultural outcomes of these engagements are highlighted, and the relationship between the underground economy of drugs and the corporate, capitalist economy is explored. Responding to high rates of unemployment and to other problems of migrant adaptation, young Caribbean African males established a multimillion dollar marijuana (ganja) trading network which linked cultivators on the islands with exporters/importers and street-level distributors in North American cities. By 1976, its participants had become Rastafarians, or followers of an ideology of self-reliance and indigenous development. Following its precepts, they reinvested marijuana revenues to revive cottage industry and agriculture. In Caribbean or mi-
nority neighborhoods, therefore, marijuana was a "positive vibration" and its distributors were lionized.

Key words. Marijuana economy; the informal sector; reinvestments of marijuana revenues; revival of cottage industry and indigenous enterprise; the relation between underground economies and corporate economy.

The relationship between underground economies (or the informal economic sector) and the corporate capitalist sector is a necessary and indispensable one. In the 13th and 14th centuries, when "capitalist entrepreneurs" were launching such capitalist forms of enterprise as cattle herding and the urban economies in Western Europe, Eastern Europe experienced its "second feudalism," in which non-capitalist (or "backward") relations of production were reinforced (and with unprecedented cruelty) so as to supply grain and other foodstuffs made scarce in Western Europe on account of these same novelties in the use of land and resources (Malowist, 1972). The symbiotic relationship has persisted to the present day. Where "feudalisms" do not already exist, they are recreated or invented. Carnivals, mafias, saints' feast days, drug trafficking, numbers running, and beancurd manufacturers in South East Asia, or bazaars in Iran, are all examples of "feudalisms" or enclaves in which "not-free" and "not-competitive" labor and capital persist (see Appendix A: Note and Bibliography on the Informal Sector).

The benefits which these "feudalisms" bestow upon capitalist enterprise are many. Where the latter cannot offer employment, the former offer idle men the opportunity to be productive. Their discontent is thereby alleviated. Talents and skills are honed informally, without taxing official educational and manpower training resources. The self-trained tailors, tinkers, builders, repairmen, "quacks," herbalists, and food suppliers then offer services at prices poorly paid workers in capitalist enterprises can afford. Retired workers are also able to make ends meet by relying on cheaper services. In these ways, labor unrest is subdued. Eventually, talents, skills, and capital developed in noncapitalist forms of enterprise may be accepted wholesale into the capitalist sector, thus expanding and strengthening it (Quijano, 1974; Portes, 1978; Hamid, 1980).

At the same time, the availability of capital through sources other than the legally recognized financial institutions, and of labor earning less than the minimum wage (if necessary), are important prerequisites when the entrepreneur is unequipped, without creditworthiness, and lacking accredited business and managerial skills for entry into the mainstream economic world. An immigrant especially must first use cousins, co-religionists, or his ethnic ties in order to later become an employer who uses employees (Light, 1972).

The international marijuana economy launched in the 1960s by young Caribbean-African males in this hemisphere illustrates these functions of the informal sector clearly.

In the 1960s, Caribbean neighborhoods experienced the catastrophic impact of continuing legal and illegal migration to the United States. In some Trinidadian neighborhoods, for example, the entire generation of productive adults (those born in the 1930s and 1940s) had gone abroad in search of work (Hamid, 1980), leaving behind aging grandparents and unemployed, delinquent/truant adolescents. Houses had fallen into serious disrepair while hardship and hard feelings tore occupants apart within them (Hamid, 1980; National Joint Action Committee, 1970, 1973; McDonald, 1970; Tapia, 1970; Alum, 1971; Best, 1970). When the grandparents died or moved away, buildings on the verge of complete dereliction were occupied by the young people and their friends. Since real-estate speculators sought out these properties, or else landlords wished to reclaim them for demolition and new construction, the youthful occupants were under constant harassment or siege.

In New York it would take migrants until the mid-1970s to make the remittances and annual return trips necessary to salvage what remained of these neighborhoods (Thomas-Hope, 1976; Chaney and Sutton, 1979; Hendricks, 1978). A story of different woes had prevented them before this time. In Flatbush, Crown Heights, and East New York where they had settled in apartment buildings and homes vacated by earlier Jewish, Italian, and Irish immigrants, many had found work, but they had had a hard time adjusting their island codes of exchange between fellows to the demands of getting ahead in New York as well as a constant battle against racism (Chaney and Sutton, 1979; Bryce-Laporte, 1980).

An early sign of the gradual accommodation of migrants to life in New York was registered in the early 1970s when they began sponsoring the immigration of younger dependents to the United States and New York (Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1980). They were frequently the identical young people who had been occupying neglected "family" property in the Caribbean, and their removal from that unhappy situation introduced them to another here (Chaney and Sutton, 1979). A parent who had finally managed to secure permanent employment, and who was putting by savings to acquire a home outside of Brooklyn and to renovate family holdings on the islands, had little patience with a young man or woman who had been a school dropout at home, was destined to be a dropout in New York, or was too old for school and had no employable skills. From grandparents' disapproval at home, therefore, young people plunged directly into conflict with parents in New York.

As a result, many young people were disillusioned about the worth of family ties altogether (Hamid, 1983). Gradually they built up a life of their own which featured a migratory experience quite different from their elders'. In addition to yearly visits to the islands, they charted a unique migratory itinerary which in-
cluded residence in the US Virgin Islands, California, Florida, Texas, and Montreal/Toronto. In each stopover point they found short-term employment as messengers, store clerks, or unskilled manual laborers. The unique itinerary and work experience were put to lucrative use when the marijuana economy was set in place.

In New York, several locations—abandoned lofts and buildings—served as lodgings and meeting places. In some locations the young migrants formed communities which lasted several years. Participants were from all the islands, and they shared food and the costs of upkeep. A variety of interpersonal and sexual relations obtained among individual members. At the same time, relationships were marked strongly by individualism, competition, and violent encounters fomented by joblessness and the struggle over petty, income-generating “hustles” (Hamid, 1980; see also Whyte, 1943; Liebow, 1967).

By 1970, similar groupings had been politically radicalized both in New York and on the islands. In Trinidad, for example, they united spontaneously in the 1970 Black Power Revolt which, occurring simultaneously with the army mutiny, brought the government close to downfall (National Joint Action Committee, 1970; Oxala, 1971). In Grenada, many were anticipating Maurice Bishop’s revolution. In New York, groupings of Caribbean males and females in unauthorized housing excited curiosity and hostile attention from the police—a situation marked by several violent confrontations (New York City Police Department, 1985).

Marijuana use was adopted at this time. Popular culture promoted experimentation with “drugs,” alternative lifestyles, and “consciousness expansion.” Popular music, for example, had extolled marijuana use during the 1960s among European-American youth, and its great festival—Woodstock—had been a showcase for marijuana use and the “youth culture.” Among African populations in the Americas, such artists as Jimi Hendrix, influential personalities in the Civil Rights Movement, and a vocal contingent of Vietnam servicemen and veterans set an example of use. Migrants returning to the Caribbean communicated the countercultural ethos to islanders.

There is good evidence, however, to show that it was in the Caribbean rather than in New York that smoking marijuana first became entrenched among Caribbean youth (Scott, 1986). In Jamaica, for example, use had been diffused by East Indian indentured laborers to rural folk in the 1860s and had become an institution of country life (Rubin and Comitas, 1976). Now urban youth and younger members of the middle class were drawn into that nexus. In Trinidad, the opposite had happened. Most East Indian indentured laborers had discontinued the centuries-old custom by the 1900s, and had not diffused it to other Trinidadians (Weller, 1968; Hamid, 1976). Until today, knowledge of marijuana had been expunged from the national memory. Nevertheless, as young, unemployed, urban, African males initiated marijuana use, they were encouraged by the discovery that a few elderly East Indians living by self-subsistence in forest villages had continued cultivating and

smoking it. Sometimes supplied by them, young urban Trinidadians gathered in the abandoned buildings (described above) to use the substance (Scott, 1986), and a first fruit which they experienced was “togetherness” and a sense of “brotherhood.” From similar locales in the Caribbean, where users also secluded themselves on beaches and in rural or semi-rural retreats, this effect of marijuana was diffused throughout the Caribbean diaspora.

Marijuana presented an economic opportunity which was quickly appreciated. At onset, members of using circles had secured small quantities of marijuana from intermittent suppliers like returning sailors or migrants, traveling salesmen, or schoolboys from the countryside. The marijuana was exchanged among co-users without any profit being realized. In this arrangement the unit of sharing was the “cigarette joint” (since wrapping papers were unavailable, cigarettes were emptied out and refilled with marijuana). If sold, it fetched $1.00. However, irregular supply soon proved inadequate to address growing demand. Initiatives were then taken to ensure regular supplies either from abroad or from growing areas on the islands. In neighborhoods, interpersonal relations were transformed so that the role of “pusher” was more clearly differentiated. The new directions initially provoked violent rivalries, but working against them were many associative efforts (Hamid, 1980). Husband and wife, coworkers, syndicate cooperation between two or more emergent “pushers” in a single neighborhood—these were among the trial relationships fielded in the attempt to meet increasing demand peacefully and efficiently. Finally, by the mid-1970s, when the clientele had grown much larger and included a sizable number of middle-class users, circles of unemployed African users/pushers were completely reorganized into “blocks” or “gates,” groups capable of offering constant supplies of marijuana at all times (Hamid, 1980). In short order they became international entities, represented simultaneously on several islands and in mainland immigrant communities. The main sequences of this development are summarized in Table 1.

The “block” or “gates” was a distinct form of social organization which replaced earlier, destroyed ones. A chief distinguishing feature was the division of labor among personnel: a leader was recognized who depended upon the loyalties of several associates. This form of cooperation therefore replaced the individualistic, competitive relations which had existed formerly. The leader usually made the initial purchases of marijuana, oversaw the packaging of it, and decided upon selling strategies and the redistribution of profits. In exchange for their labor and trustworthiness, he would pay associates with cash gifts or quantities of marijuana at preferential rates, and he arranged for bail and other legal assistance in case of arrest. If he provided lodgings and food, associates contributed domestic labor too. As soon as blocks became distinct, recognizable entities, signaling the growing maturity of the ganja traffic, leaders, their associates, and then several of the low-income or unemployed clientele became Rastafari. Among them, the leader now assumed the additional role of spiritual mentor.
The Rastafari revere marijuana (ganja) as the biblical herb prescribed for the “healing of the nations” (Genesis: See Note 1), and they modeled beliefs and behaviors in other areas of life upon it. For example, they sought land and communal settlement as an alternative, “natural” like ganja, to life in cities. They restricted their diets to foods “alive” like ganja, and turned to a vegetarian or vegan diet (see Note 2). They eschewed alcohol and all other stimulants (LSD, cocaine, mandrax, heroin) except ganja, and proscribed many prepackaged or prepared foods (manufactured tea, coffee, tobacco, white rice, sugar, tinned and frozen foods, etc.). They grew their hair in long, uncombed locks, following biblical examples and imitating the way the mature ganja buds. Living according to “nonartificial,” “traditional” principles, they anticipated a return to spiritual and material self-reliance in Ethiopia, with the coming of the king, Haile Selassie I.

As in the Jamaican countryside, where Rastafarianism had been an influential blend of the Bible, the teachings of Marcus Garvey, and realpolitik since the 1930s, the newly converted Rastafari claimed that they were the true Israelis and took as their model of action the biblical drama of the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt (Barrett, 1977; Boot and Thomas, 1977; Owens, 1976; Beckford and Witter, 1982; Smith et al., 1966; Nicholas, 1979; Prince Naza 1, 1982; Watson, 1972; Yawney, 1972; Patterson, 1964). In this example they had discovered a formula by which an oppressed people facing extinction can produce spiritual leaders who have access to “natural” or “divine” healing and combative powers: reject assimilation in any form, accentuate difference, honor tradition and teachers, disavow the material, and tend the spiritual. As the formula is applied, the “material” usually follows: a homeland and a national economy will be gained.

Many Caribbean persons—for example, non-Rastafari East Indian growers in Trinidad—viewed the marijuana economy as such an indigenous economy. The paths connecting “blocks” or “gates,” yards and plantations, and homes of users or distributors seemed like the boundaries of a “homeland” where “African” traditions could be revived. As police and public campaigns against marijuana escalated, a parallel was drawn with the Pharaoh’s threat to the Israelites in the Bible. Rastafari beliefs were strengthened and attracted more adherents (Hamid, 1980).

Rastafari have dominated the subsequent development of the marijuana economy in the Caribbean and in low-income, minority communities in North American Cities, where they exert a powerful influence on their European-American, Hispanic, and African-American neighbors.

First, Rastafarianism “deepened” the core of the marijuana phenomenon, distinguishing the original users, the African unemployeds and the low income clientele, from other using populations with respect to manner of use, justifications for use, and effects.

Then, because Rastafari had been “called” to handle marijuana by Jah-Rastafari (God: see Note 1), the religion endorsed the developing traffic. It enabled the number of “blocks” to be multiplied peacefully throughout the Caribbean, New

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Drugacey</th>
<th>Social organization</th>
<th>Traffic</th>
<th>Ideology</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Ganja</td>
<td>Distributing “tunes”</td>
<td>Cigarette joints/joints</td>
<td>Youth Power/Black Power/American music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Marijuana</td>
<td>Marijuana makes us think constructively</td>
<td>$10 bag; once, pounds</td>
<td>Shuffie (Lower East Side)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Marijuana</td>
<td>Marijuana makes us see the light</td>
<td>Export/increased cultivation</td>
<td>“eighty” “quaranteen” “joints”/gram/half-gram/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Cocaine powder for snorting</td>
<td>As above</td>
<td>“cigars”/“quarters”</td>
<td>$20 piece</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982-1984</td>
<td>Cocaine powder for freebase</td>
<td>From $10 and $20 to $5, $1</td>
<td>Modified Rastafari/new forms</td>
<td>$50 and $5 vials</td>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Disintegrating “blocks”</th>
<th>Recognized “blocks” with lesser “levels”</th>
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<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>“Blocks”/“gates”</td>
<td>“Blocks”/“gates”/“levels”</td>
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<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>International “blocks”</td>
<td>Reconstructed “blocks”/“levels”</td>
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<td>1978</td>
<td>International “blocks”</td>
<td>Reconnaissance “levels”/“various others”</td>
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<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>International “blocks”</td>
<td>Reconnaissance “levels”/“various others”</td>
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<td>1985-1987</td>
<td>Reconnaissance “levels”</td>
<td>Reconnaissance “levels”/“various others”</td>
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Table 1: Marijuana and Cocaine Distribution among Caribbean Distributors 1968 to 1988—Main Developments.
York, and the Caribbean diaspora after the mid-1970s, and it justified the social division of labor at the “block” or “gate.” Associates were loyal to their leader because he was leading them “through the stages of the ganja” to the desired self-sufficiency, toward the fuller realization of the inner man, the “natural” man, the “I-man” (Hamid, 1979).

With Rastafarianism, marijuana “made men see the light” (Hamid, 1980). Its significance in the redistributive and exchange phenomena of the marijuana economic system was manifested. Pursuing self-sufficiency, Rastafari “block” leaders channeled marijuana revenues into legitimate self-employment enterprise. On the islands, local operators as well as their Brooklyn counterparts/associates bought land, an excellent solution to redistribute problems on the block — revenues invested jointly which can be worked together to achieve complete self-sufficiency for all. On the islands too, both Brooklyn and local Rastafari started vegetable gardens and purchased farm vehicles and taxis. Everywhere they encouraged their associates and co-religionists to join in operating foodstalls and small-scale craft industries (especially leatherworks, carpentry, and garments). They introduced health foods to minority populations in Brooklyn, and they created a special potential in cooked foods—Rastafari/Caribbean vegetarian cuisine—and beverages (Hamid, 1983). A very significant milestone was reached when some blocks moved to forested areas in Trinidad, Grenada, and Jamaica to cultivate marijuana themselves (Scott, 1986). In mainland America the unique migratory itinerary of young Caribbean males (described above) was put to use when brethren apprenticed themselves to “hippie” growers in Florida, Northern California, and Oregon, thus securing supplies of sinsemilla [more intensively cultivated marijuanans with high concentrations of THC on the unpollinated flowers and buds, and with greater yields per plant (High Times Magazine, 1979, 1980, 1981) for their principals in Brooklyn (Hamid, 1983)].

Thus Rastafarianism, occurring in the heart of the ganja phenomenon, served to strengthen all the institutions—production, distribution, consumption and exchange — of the marijuana traffic. At the same time, the various elements of the Rastafari ideology—African protest (Barrett, 1977; Nettleford, 1972; Smith et al., 1984; Waters, 1985), Garvey’s notions of self-sufficiency/repatriation (Cronon, 1955; Edwards, 1967; Jacques-Garvey, 1963, 1967), the biblical idea of the spiritually accomplished man (as exemplified in the Books of Moses, Daniel, Joshua, Samuel, David, and Solomon)—are energized as a self-consistent whole by the circumstances of the traffic.

Perhaps the most signal achievement of Rastafari was to “Caribbeanize” completely a sizable corner of the New York marijuana market (Hamid, 1983). By 1980, Rastafari growers in Jamaica (and to a lesser extent, in Trinidad and Grenada) were supplying Rastafari middlemen with all the commercial marijuana and sinsemilla (see above) they needed for retail to Rastafari blocks and street-sellers in Brooklyn. The increased cooperation between entrepreneurs from the different islands fostered the Pan-Caribbeanism which had been the dream of federalists and development experts (James, 1961; Ryan, 1972), and it also encouraged a very brisk import-export trade between the islands and the mainland in goods other than marijuana.

From the late 1970s to 1982, the marijuana traffic had grown to resemble an ample, peaceful, smooth flowing conduit which broadened and deepened in the middle wherein many Rastafari grew enormously wealthy. Hitherto abandoned neighborhoods in Crown Heights, Flatbush, and East New York were revitalized by them. Derelict storefronts were renovated to house restaurants, health food stores, record shops, clothes boutiques, and grocery stores which were outlets for legitimate goods as well as ganja (marijuana). Marijuana revenues also bought cars, apartments, and houses. The Rastafari block leader or middleman resembled Renaissance royalty, with entourages of comely damsels engaged in cottage industry, reggae musicians, calypsonians, and artists enjoying their patronage (Hamid, 1980). The Rastafari “positive vibrations” (Marley, 1976), fattened by “ganja” revenues, asserted a forceful Caribbean presence in Brooklyn and among the youth cultures in Greenwich Village, where reggae and calypso artists were featured regularly at clubs, discos, and concerts (Village Voice, 1976–1981).

Thus one relationship between the corporate economy and underground economics may be established. Hundreds of rebellious youth who had preyed formerly on workers and housewives on such strips as downtown Fulton Street (or similar locales on the islands) abandoned these petty criminal pursuits (New York Police Department, 1976–1981). Their conversion to entrepreneurship ended not only their own unemployment and penury, but created an initiative and an energy which affected many others benignly and productively. A level of cooperation between these youths and the elders with whom they had been in conflict was also achieved; many Mom and Pop grocery stores, for example, were financed by the “ganja” earnings of a formerly delinquent son (Hamid, 1983).

APPENDIX A: NOTE AND BIBLIOGRAPHY ON THE INFORMAL SECTOR

A growing literature has drawn attention to the informal economic sector. In Latin America, Africa, and Asia, very many goods and services are produced, exchanged, and consumed according to rules quite opposed to those which obtain in the mainstream economy. In some countries the informal economic sector is the major provider of food, shelter, and transport.

A bibliography is provided below of publications in which attempts are made to measure the extent and value of the informal sector and to provide various indices of its economic functioning. Since this paper adds drug distribution to the list of informal sector economic activities, and notes their existence in 20th century North
American cities, the bibliography offers novel theoretical perspectives for drug studies.


ACKNOWLEDGMENT
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NOTES
1. "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" (Gen. 1:29, King James Bible).
2. "But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat nor with the wine which he drank ... And Melzar gave them pulse ... And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat" (Dan. 3:8-15, King James Bible).

REFERENCES

FROM GANJA TO CRACK. 1
THE AUTHOR

Ansley Hamid is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, New York City. He was trained at St. Mary's College (Trinidad and Tobago), at the London School of Economics (UK), and at Teachers College, Columbia University. He has been doing ethnographic fieldwork in the areas of drug use, misuse and distribution in the Caribbean and in Caribbean communities in New York since 1976. Professor Hamid has also served as a social worker/crack specialist at treatment centers in Harlem. He has written several articles on marijuana and crack use and distribution, and he is currently preparing a manuscript on these topics.