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Title: Smoking as Communication in Rastafari: *Reasonings* with ‘Professional’ Smokers and ‘Plant Teachers’

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Smoking as Communication in Rastafari: *Reasonings* with ‘Professional’ Smokers and ‘Plant Teachers’

Abstract: In Rastafari, smoking *herbs* (cannabis) and tobacco is central to spiritual practices, such as *grounding* (the process of initiation into Rastafari) and *reasoning* (ritual discussions). This paper presents ethnographic research with (primarily) Jamaican Rastafari smokers in England. It shows that smoking is considered to be a ‘professional’ activity that communicates dedication to the movement, aids in learning different dialects and modes of speech, and facilitates experiences of communication with the *herbs* ‘herself.’ Through various rituals that ‘professional’ smokers engage in, *herbs* can become a ‘plant teacher,’ which Tupper (2008: 300) defines as ‘a natural divinatory mechanism that can provide esoteric knowledge to adepts skilled in negotiating its remarkable effects.’ An appreciation of smoking as a form of multi-species communication between ‘professional’ smokers and ‘plant teachers’ recasts the role of agency in anthropological studies of smoking and contributes to our understanding of consciousness and intentionality in both humans and plants.

Key Words: multi-species ethnography, ethnobotany, cannabis, agency, consciousness, habitual smoking, England

Smoking as Communication in Rastafari: *Reasonings* with ‘Professional’ Smokers and ‘Plant Teachers’

Introduction

Smoking and burning are elemental practices of Rastafari, a social, spiritual, and political movement indigenous to Jamaica and growing in popularity among African peoples on the continent and throughout the diaspora. From a Rastafari perspective, burning is purifying in both a literal and symbolic sense. Fire is used to clear and fertilise agricultural lands, while ‘burning *Babylon*,’ (i.e. speaking out against corruption) spiritually incinerates social injustice. The smoke of *herbs* (cannabis) and other incenses may be used to bathe and perfume the hair and skin, as well as clear away negative spirit(s) from an area or person. Many Rastafari people also smoke *herbs* (and often tobacco), in the form of *spliffs* (hand-rolled cigarettes, usually smoked individually) and *chalices* (water-pipes, generally smoked in groups) as a meditation aid or to improve health (see Congo-Nyah et al. 2013). While destructive capabilities of smoke and fire are respected, Rastafari learn to harness their power to stimulate growth and healing.

During the 2010/11 academic year I co-organised an international, multidisciplinary, academic conference on psychedelic consciousness. As part of the anthropological contribution and to make sure that cannabis was represented, I invited Rt. Hon. Binghi Congo-Nyah, an aspiring Nyahbinghi high priest, to give a presentation about *herbs* and Rastafari. We met for the first time in my university office on the opening day of the conference, along with two of my former students and one of Congo-Nyah’s *bredrin* (brethren). Congo-Nyah told us that the event was going to be historic because it would be the first academic conference to include a plant on the programme of speakers. He then went on to explain that he would not actually be making a presentation; instead the *herbs* would be

speaking through him. For a year following the conference one of my old students (the other moved abroad), the *breddin* and I made regular visits (sometimes individually, other times as a group) to the BaRaKa Tabernacle, a small, smoky room in south London, where Congo-Nyah offers mentorship in Rastafari history, theology and culture, as well as spiritual guidance. We were engaging in a process of *grounding*, which Homiak describes as initiation into Rastafari based on mutual exploration of self and other through ritual smoking and discussion. Among other things, our year of *grounding* led to a co-authored, scholarly publication that put several ‘communications’ from the *herbs* in writing (i.e. Congo-Nyah et al. 2013).

The idea of smoking as communication is not new. Klein (1993) describes how cigarettes are used as instruments of communication in literature and film, as well as how smoking involves an implicit language of gestures. In many Native American rituals, tobacco is burned so the smoke will carry messages to the spirit world and/or Creator (Alderete et al. 2010; Makosky Daley et al. 2006). However, my experience with Congo-Nyah also suggested a different kind of communication, between smoker and plant. This paper takes a closer look at the communicative aspects of smoking in Rastafari, using ethnographic data from England (the largest of the four countries that comprise the United Kingdom), which I collected between 2011 and 2016. It shows how smoking *herbs* communicates Rastafari social values and cultural knowledge, and is integral to the process of learning Rastafari ways of discourse. It also suggests that Rastafari smokers in England have ‘professional’ knowledge and skills that can make them more receptive to botanical communications. In other words, when smoked in a Rastafari context, *herbs* assumes the role of ‘plant teacher,’ which Tupper (2008: 300) defines as ‘a natural divinatory mechanism that can provide esoteric knowledge to adepts skilled in negotiating its remarkable effects.’ An appreciation of smoking as a form of multi-species communication between ‘professional’ smokers and ‘plant teachers’ recasts the role of

agency in anthropological studies of smoking and also has important implications for 21st century cannabis policies, as well as for our understanding of plant and human consciousness.

Anthropological Perspectives on Smoking, Plant Agency and Cross-Species

Communication

The anthropological literature on smoking is generally conflated with work on cigarettes and the tobacco industry (see Kohrman and Benson 2011 for a review of the anthropology of tobacco). Much of this literature is in medical anthropology and is aimed at cessation (e.g. Pego et al. 1995; Quintero and Davis 2002; Marshall 2005; Makosky Daly et al. 2006; Alderete et al. 2010), although Schivelbusch's (1993) historical work highlights the role of tobacco smoking in contemplation and concentration among 17th and 18th century writers. Likewise, while smokers' voices are absent from tobacco control policies (Bell and Dennis 2013), there is ethnographic evidence that smoking cigarettes has positive benefits, which persist despite the known risks (e.g. Zhao and Davey 2015). Global health policies are based on the assumption that people smoke because they are addicted to nicotine and enslaved by the tobacco industry (Bell and Dennis 2013). However, simple addiction models don't fully explain tobacco's attraction to humans (Black 1984) and diminish smokers' agency (Bell and Dennis 2013). Moreover, they completely overlook the agency of the tobacco plant, or indeed the cigarette.

Throughout history, Western philosophers have held a variety of views on the question of whether plants have souls, intelligence and/or consciousness, but most have assumed them to be unthinking and inanimate, without the ability to sense or move (Marder 2012). However, work in plant neurobiology and chemical ecology suggests that plants exhibit intelligent behaviours, such as memory and communication (Myers 2015). According to Trewavas (2003) living plants exhibit a 'computational capability' to scrutinise their environments and interact with their neighbours in the form of resource competition, release of nitrogen into

soil, and even chemical warnings of predatory attack. For example, tobacco plants have an agency that includes exuding sticky scents that attract pollinators and using light to predict the growth patterns of neighbouring plants (Russell and Rahman 2015). However, many plant scientists are careful to avoid anthropomorphizing (i.e. ascribing intentionality, desire, etc. to) plants, and emphasize that because plants have abilities that are amazing on their own terms they should not be compared to humans (Myers 2015). Likewise, Marder (2012) suggests that plants are neither passive nor active, as these are both human projections, and describes plant thinking and intelligence as non-conscious intentionality, memory, etc. Even Tupper's (2008) description of 'plant teachers,' as natural divinatory mechanisms and providers of esoteric knowledge can accommodate denial of the *conscious* agency of plants.

In contrast, the attribution of agency, memory, communication and (conscious) intelligence to plants is more welcome in anthropology, thanks to its ethnographic approach. For example, it was only through participant observation and extensive interviewing that Myers (2015) discovered that in the lab senior plant scientists talk about whether or not their plants are happy, as well as their likes and dislikes. In other ethnographic contexts, people don't just talk about the desires of plants, but also communicate with them. Kohn (2013), describes biotic life as a highly embodied and non-symbolic sign process. Humans may be the only species to use symbolic reference, but all life forms use signs and semiosis. This makes interspecies communication possible, assuming the parties involved are able to move between semiotic modalities, which Keane (2013) suggests is a source of divine efficacy. In communication between humans and plants moving across semiotic modalities may take shape in a variety of forms. Ethnographic examples include singing to medicinal species before harvesting them, an Amazonian way of entering into a cross-species exchange (Swanson 2009), while ailing houseplants indicate the presence of spiritual malice to African Americans (Snow 1993). Moreover, in making an involutory (as opposed to a neo-

Darwinist evolutionary) interpretation of chemical ecology, Hustak and Myers (2012) suggest that the volatile compounds that plants emit articulate their experiences and desires.

Work on the agency of matter suggests that plants and animals don't necessarily have to be alive to influence humans. For example, Reed (2007) demonstrates how the agency of hand-rolled cigarettes structures life in a Papua New Guinean prison, and manifests as the time invested in building and smoking them, as the social relationships that are cultivated to maintain the flow of tobacco into the prison, and as currency that can be used to purchase other goods. In addition to Reed's analysis, which suggests an unconscious agency, there are ethnographic examples of communication made possible by the ingestion of dead matter. For example, through Tantric practice, the bodies of lamas produce red and white substances from the nostrils, upon death. These substances are understood to encapsulate the altruistic drive of the lama and are diluted with water, mixed with herbs and drunk by devotees. The practice, combined with meditation, allows devotees to merge their minds with that of the lama. As such it enables deceased lamas to permeate and influence the emotional states of their followers (Zivkovic 2014). Similarly, in the life-world of the Runa of Ávila souls are manifested physically in the bodies of many animals (e.g. agouti souls are in the gallbladder) and consumed by hunters to increase their knowledge and awareness of them (Kohn 2013). While some Jamaicans can hear the voices of living plants (see Wardle 2018), Attala (2017) argues that hearing plants occurs when they have been digested, assimilated and absorbed into the chemistry of the consumer.

When plant compounds resemble human neurotransmitters their ingestion can lead to experiences of being instructed by plants. For example, the Amazonian shamanic brew *ayahuasca* is both a vehicle of communication with the spirit masters of animals (Kohn 2013), and a living 'spirit mother' that teaches, disciplines and reveals (Madera 2009). Some Amazonians also consider tobacco to be a revered healer (Brabec de Mori and Rahman 2015),

who shares an instructive capacity with other 'master plants,' through the production of visions (Russell and Rahman 2015). However, recreational smoking involves the ingestion of tobacco on a more moderate scale than when it is used in shamanic practice (Wilbert 1987), which is why any transcendental effects of smoking cigarettes are fleeting (see Klein 1993; Macnaughten et al. 2012). But what about smoking cannabis, a practice with widely recognised effects on human consciousness, even at recreational levels? Are experiences of plant teachers as personified, spiritual beings limited to shamanic cultures? Before I consider how cannabis is communicative when smoked in a Rastafari context, the following sections provide background information on Rastafari smoking rituals, the particularities of conducting ethnographic research on cannabis smoking in England, and the social contexts in which Rastafari smoking takes place.

Rastafari, *Herbs* and (Pan) African Spirituality

Rastafari began as a movement to defend African culture in Jamaica, which was inspired by the crowning of Ras Tafari Makonnen as Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia in 1930. Selassie I is recognised as a divine African king, in no small part for his contribution to keeping Ethiopia free from European colonisation. The founders of the movement (e.g. Leonard Howell) were also contemporaries of and inspired by the Jamaican born black nationalist Marcus Garvey who is considered by many to be a Rastafari prophet. Rastafari has played an important role in deepening the Pan-African consciousness of the Jamaican population (and elsewhere throughout the diaspora). Chevannes (2011) finds it ironic then that Rastafari has several key characteristics (including explicit monotheism, lack of dramatic spirit possession, taboo on blood sacrifice, asceticism) that distinguish it from other Pan-African religions in Jamaica. Nevertheless, through rituals that involve smoking *herbs*, Rastafari has preserved the inseparable link between natural and human domains, which is characteristic of African-oriented, Jamaican folk religion (Homiak 1985).

Rastafari is often described as a *livity* (lived spirituality) that values, encourages, and draws strength from working with (rather than trying to conquer or force) natural laws and ecological principles, as understood from an African perspective (Morgan 2013). The *livity* of many Rastafari people involves consuming *ital* foods (i.e. vegetables, fruits, grains, legumes, and nuts) to reground the body within the physical and social environment (Dickerson 2004). The term *ital* is derived from ‘vital’ and implies purity as well as naturalness. *Ital* food contains only ingredients that are considered to be vital to proper bodily function. The purity of mind and body that comes from an *ital* diet is necessary for conducting life energy to achieve certain spiritual objectives (Waldstein 2016). Although not quite as ubiquitous as eating, smoking is widespread among Rastafari adults. Most smoke *herbs* (some on ritual occasions, many on a daily basis), for which there is a rapidly growing body of research documenting numerous healing benefits (see Waldstein 2010). An *ital spliff* or *chalice* is built purely with *herbs*, which is generally (though not unanimously) considered to be vital to health. However, while ‘smoking *ital*’ is the way to achieve the highest states of Rastafari consciousness (Congo-Nyah et al. 2013), there is a long history of smoking *herbs* combined with tobacco (see Yawney 1978), even among people who ‘eat *ital*.’

Cannabis appears to have been first domesticated somewhere in Central Asia and was probably spread through Africa by Arab traders (Rubin and Comitas 1975). The earliest good evidence of cannabis smoking in Africa comes from two pipes excavated in Ethiopia, dating as far back as the 13th or 14th century (Phillips 1983). Hemp (un-smokable, fibre producing varieties of cannabis from Northern climes) was first brought to the British colonies of North America and the Caribbean in the early 17th century (Rubin and Comitas 1975). Campos-Costero (2006) hypothesises that in the hot climate of Mexico, hemp plants (introduced by the Spanish) evolved into less fibrous, ‘drug’ producing varieties. It is possible that something similar happened to hemp in Jamaica. However, most Jamaicans (especially Rastafari) believe

that cannabis was brought to the West Indies by African slaves (Rubin and Comitas 1975).

Although smokable cannabis probably grew in Jamaica during slavery it is less clear whether it was used by slaves (Benard 2007). Cannabis is generally known as *ganja* in Jamaica, which is a name introduced by Indian indentured servants and there is no documentary evidence for cannabis smoking or use as a medicine before 1845, when Indians first arrived (Rubin and Comitas 1975).

Benard (2007) attributes the adoption of *ganga* into Rastafari, and its transformation into a holy herb, to syncretism between Christian and Hindu ideas and practices. In Rastafari, meditation is one of the primary rituals involving *herbs* (Yawney 1978) and indeed resonates with yoga meditation practices (Congo-Nyah et al. 2013). However, Rastafari has also maintained and revitalised the African aspects of Jamaican folk religions. As Christensen (2003) argues, in Rastafari spirit possession is replaced by the ritual of *reasoning*, which is similar in structure to certain practices of the Revival church in Jamaica. However, a key difference between Revival and Rastafari is that in the latter the ritual smoking of *herbs* (i.e. Baptism by fire) has replaced Baptism by water, and the use of water as a medium of spiritual communication more generally (Homiak 1985; Christensen 2003). *Reasoning* is a process of thought production (Christensen 2003) and involves verbal (and sometimes telepathic) communication within a group of Rastafari smokers. The objective of a *reasoning* is to shed new light on a subject and uncover the truth about something (Yawney 1978). *Herbs* is central to the process of *reasoning*, which enables a smoker to gradually become conscious of certain realities (Homiak 1985).

Moreover, both Yawney (1978) and Homiak (1985) described their initiation into smoking and *reasoning* as a way to learning about Rastafari, including its modes of communication (i.e. speech and intersubjectivity). The vernacular that Jamaican Rastafari share includes a mix of Patois (the local creole dialect) and *Iyaric* (a liturgical mode of

speech, the name is derived from the Ethiopian language Amharic) in which meaning is derived from context as much as content. This means that private business can be discussed, even when outsiders are present (Yawney 1978; Homiak 1985). Smoking is thought to aid the process of learning Rastafari vernacular by opening the passages between nose, ears, eyes and brain so that the smoker can listen to the ‘word sounds’ (Yawney 1978). Becoming adept at this rhetorical inventiveness, along with the extrasensory state achieved through smoking *herbs*, establishes the social and cognitive basis for intersubjectivity (Homiak 1985).

Researching Rastafari and *Herbs* in England

Through the spread of Reggae music (a vehicle for Rastafari teachings) and the migration of Jamaicans to the United States, UK, and various African nations, Rastafari has become globalised. It has been present in England since the relatively large migrations of Jamaicans and other West Indians that began in 1948. England is politically and spiritually ambiguous in Rastafari. While it was once the centre of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, there was a time when Haile Selassie I and his family were offered refuge in England. Fairfield House, where the Selassie family once lived in exile, still draws Rastafari travellers to the city of Bath from all over the world. It’s difficult to say how many Rastafari people are living in England (estimates by community leaders are as high as 70,000), as one does not have to be part of an established order or church to participate in or identify with the movement. Moreover, it’s not always easy to tell if people are Rastafari, based on their appearance alone. Even a man wearing a turban and robe could be a ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing’ who has grown *dreadlocks* (matted hair) and a beard only to hide his identity, while a bald man in a hoodie can recognise Haile Selassie I as a manifestation of *Jah* (the Creator) and follow Rastafari *livity*.

Many spiritual practices and other aspects of Rastafari *livity* are maintained in England, including individual meditation and prayer, the consultation of oracles, and group

rituals such as drumming and chanting at sacred sites and/or on holy days (see Waldstein 2016). There are representative organisations of all three major ‘mansions’ (orders) of Rastafari: the Twelve Tribes of Israel, the Nyahbinghi, and the Boboshanti, as well as several Rastafari churches, and a number of political/activist organisations. In contrast, the agricultural foundation of the *livity* is difficult to put into practice in England, as most Rastafari people are concentrated in urban areas. Likewise, eating *ital* is a challenge due to the high price of organically/sustainably-produced fruits, vegetables, grains and legumes, not to mention limited availability of the basic ingredients of many recipes from Africa and the West Indies. Thus, Rastafari people in England live as wisely as they can, though exceptions are made; tinned ackee is eaten because it is the only ackee available and *herbs* are smoked with tobacco.

Building *spliffs* with tobacco stretches precious reserves of *herbs*, which is expensive and of inconsistent quality in England due to the prohibitionist drug policies of the UK. Although the UK has been the top producer of cannabis for the world’s licit medical market since at least 2016 (Wills 2018), the government only acknowledged that cannabis has medical applications and approved the prescription of (some) medications derived from cannabis in July 2018 (Lemon 2018). In a rare ethnographic study of cannabis growers in northern England, Potter (2010) describes certain norms among British cannabis growers/smokers, including preferences for cannabis grown outdoors, as this was recognised as the most natural and potent. In a follow up study of people who grow and use cannabis for medical reasons, Klein and Potter (2018) found a substantial amount of overlap between medical and recreational use. Nevertheless, despite recent shifts in medical cannabis policy, herbal cannabis use and cultivation will remain illegal (even for medical reasons) and there are no plans to loosen restrictions on recreational use (Osborne 2018). Conspicuously absent

from current debates about legalising cannabis in the UK is any mention of its use in spiritual/religious practice.

While Potter's study participants were predominantly white, there has been an association between cannabis use/supply and black men from the Caribbean since the 1950s (Heal 2015). As Heal (2015) argues, the simultaneous passage of the UK 'Immigration' and 'Misuse of Drugs' Acts in the early 1970s further conflated illegal drug use and supply with African Caribbean migrants. There are rifts between established (i.e. Windrush generation) migrants and newcomers who arrived in the 1990s (simultaneous with the arrival of crack cocaine), as the former perceives the latter to be aggressive and antisocial 'yardies' (Reynolds 2012). *Yard* is the Patois word for home and in Jamaican English/Patois a 'yard man' or *yardi* is someone who has recently arrived from Jamaica. However, the British media, criminal justice system and even academic literature have conflated the term 'yardie' with gangster. This means that any Jamaican male living in England is at risk of being associated with drug crime (Heal 2015), especially a Rastafari *herbsman*.

Criminalization of *herbs* places practical and ethical limitations on ethnographic research about Rastafari smoking. Some of these can be mitigated through the adoption and adaption of *reasoning* as a research tool. *Reasoning* is both a good way to build rapport with Rastafari people and an effective means of collecting ethnographic data (Yawney 1978; Homiak 1985; Congo-Nyah et al. 2013). The ritual is a natural source of ethnographic insights and observations about smoking *herbs*, and inevitably the topic of smoking somehow made its way into most of the *reasonings* I've had with Rastafari smokers. For example, at a recent visit to Fairfield House I joined a *reasoning* during which I was asked about my new research project on deportability. As I explained how the deportation of Jamaican nationals denies their British children their human rights to family life under Article 8 of the European Human Rights Act, the *reasoning* quickly shifted focus onto how cannabis prohibition and the

persecution of Rastafari smokers contradict their human rights to religious freedom under Article 9.

To protect participants from such persecution, I did not make any audio/visual recordings of *reasonings* about *herbs*. My ability to understand the language(s) spoken during *reasoning* sessions was important in the collection of ethnographic data about smoking. Through my research experiences with Rastafari and other Jamaican people in the UK I have become competent in Jamaican English and have a reasonable understanding of Patois and *Iyaric*. The *reasonings* I take part in generally involve code switching between multiple dialects, and often include periods when rapidly spoken Patois forces me to concentrate so much on listening that I speak few words. But *reasonings* also shift and evolve (both in topic and mode of speech), creating openings for thoughtful questions about *herbs*, smoking, spirituality, etc.

Another distinctive characteristic of *reasoning* is the employment of various rituals to maintain a meditative state of higher consciousness, which helps participants to refrain from taking personal offence to disagreements. Even if one is not smoking, holding the hands in the 'seal' position (a yogic posture that is meant to focus the mind, in this case on the words of one's interlocutors) precludes taking notes until after the *reasoning* has finished. When I travelled to London by public transit (the mode of transport I used most often) I made handwritten notes on the way home. When I travelled in a friend's car (in which *reasonings* often continued throughout the journey), I took notes upon arriving home, directly onto my computer. *Reasoning* provided me with some means of determining which concepts and practices associated with *herbs* are widely represented and which are more idiosyncratic. To explore the spiritual aspects of smoking more deeply (and to enable some triangulation of data from *reasonings*), I also conducted a more conventional interview with Congo-Nyah (who made his own audio recording) and one of his *bredrin*.

Although I paraphrase their words in academic English, this paper is focused on what Rastafari smokers say about what they do with *herbs* rather than on what they actually do. Details of the specific contexts in which smoking *herbs* takes place will be kept vague. This may give the account a ‘normative’ character but is necessary for protecting individuals and organisations that are engaged in/endorse this spiritual, yet illicit activity. However, before presenting what I heard during *reasonings*, etc. I include some sketches of what I observed at the different times and places I *reasoned* with Rastafari smokers. The research that this paper is based on took place in three phases; my initial *grounding* with Congo-Nyah and his *breddin* from 2011-2014 (including joining a number of Rastafari Facebook groups that Congo-Nyah moderated), attendance at Rastafari events in London, Bath and Bristol from 2012-2014, and ethnobotanical study of Jamaican medicinal plants in London from 2014-2016. While the subsequent analysis would be enhanced if it included more ethnographic and biographical details about specific smoking sessions and personal experiences, the following sketches will have to suffice until cannabis prohibition ends in the UK.

Ethnographic Sketches: Social contexts of Rastafari smoking in England

Though occasionally we met at his home or another location, I usually *reasoned* with Congo-Nyah at his tabernacle (i.e. the box room at an aunt’s house), where he was routinely visited by *breddin* (and *sistren*) in need of spiritual advice and/or divinatory services. During our first few private meetings we underwent a mutual, prior informed consent process. I explained my plans to use *reasoning* as a way of collecting ethnographic data, his rights as a research participant, and that anthropology has colonial (if not racist) roots. In return Congo-Nyah clarified the ways that he would ‘brainwash’ me. This included the use of music, images (e.g. posters of Selassie on the walls of the room) and incense (*herbs*, tobacco and frankincense) to put me in a suggestible state so that he could ‘programme’ me to ‘up my

livity,’ (i.e. to take up jogging, meditate daily, eat more vegan food and refocus my work on the African diaspora).

Congo-Nyah and I were brought together by a mutual interest in cannabis and thus *herbs* was a topic of *reasoning* during most of my monthly visits to the tabernacle. After our initial private *reasonings* Congo-Nyah began inviting a few *bedrin* (in addition to my former student and the *bredrin* who participated in the conference) to join us. This helped with expanding my knowledge of Rastafari and training my ear, and also exposed me to a lot of smoking behaviour. Sometimes people arrive at the tabernacle because they need *herbs* but it is customary to bring a few *spliffs* worth to share (or some cash to contribute toward the purchase of *herbs*). Although *herbs* was shared, each smoker in the tabernacle (like most British cannabis smokers I have met) built his or her own *spliff*. Smokers offered contributions of *herbs* to Congo-Nyah who in turn offered some to everyone present, along with unbleached rolling papers, loose leaf tobacco, fresh juices (sometimes mixed with Guinness beer), kola nut, and/or *ital* food. At the tabernacle, I not only learned to follow conversations in various Rastafari ways of speaking, but also to read the subtle behavioural cues about etiquette and social hierarchy that are expressed in the process of sharing and smoking *herbs*. For example, I figured out which *bedrin* had the closest relationships to Congo-Nyah because they were given the bag of *herbs* to take a portion from (in contrast he would offer just a portion to more tenuous relations).

Between April 2012 and February 2014 I attended (and sometimes helped to plan) Rastafari gatherings sponsored by various organisations in London (see Waldstein 2016 for a description of a ceremony at a sacred site in Wimbledon), Bath and Bristol. These events included celebrations of Selassie I’s birth and coronation days, musical performances, and academic lectures. Because most Rastafari events (from ceremonies to reggae shows) involve drumming, chanting/singing, and dancing they tend to be quite loud. The only way to really

engage in any kind of conversation is to go outside, backstage, or some other quietly secluded place where the smokers congregate. While the *reasonings* I took part in at the tabernacle were all with first and second generation Jamaican migrant men in their 20s and 30s, I met elders and youth, as well as Rastafari people from UK, Trinidad, St. Lucia, Ghana, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia at the events I attended. Moreover, these events provided opportunities to *reason* with and observe the smoking behaviour of Rastafari women.

During Rastafari events at Fairfield House discrete smoking of *spliffs* (or even a *chalice*) is tolerated on the grounds, but it is explicitly prohibited inside the house. Smoking indoors would not only be disrespectful to UK laws that prohibit smoking in public buildings, but also to the Selassie family. The only people who I have seen break the indoor smoking ban are elder women, who sometimes light up at the end of the final drumming/chanting session after most of the crowd has made its way outside, heading for home. Based on smell, the Rastafari women who I have *reasoned* with at Fairfield House smoked *ital spliffs* (at least on these special occasions). Like men they built and smoked their own *spliffs*, but they also sometimes passed them around to one another (something I have never seen men do). As Lake (1998) notes, there has been a historical perception that in Rastafari smoking *herbs* is a male activity (although the consumption of *ganja* tea is recognised as widespread among women). Knowing this, I once asked an elder Empress from Guyana if more women were smoking *herbs* now than they did in the past. She agreed that this is true and explained it's because more women are getting involved in Rastafari, in order to take some control and provide guidance to the men who were 'messing things up.'

From August 2014 through the end of 2016, with the help of a Jamaican research assistant, I conducted ethnobotanical research on Jamaican 'bushes and roots' (i.e. medicinal plants) in Brixton, which was a hub of African Caribbean culture in London for over half a century. Brixton is gentrifying and most of the Jamaican people who I have *reasoned* with

there live elsewhere. They visit Brixton to socialise, shop, network and trade ethnobotanical items, including roots tonics (fermented decoctions of the roots, barks, leaves, etc. of Jamaican medicinal plants), tobacco, cannabis and numerous other herbal products (from 'black seed' oil to spirulina tablets). My research assistant introduced me to his Rastafari (and other) *bredrin*, primarily migrants from Jamaica in their 30s and 40s, as well as some elders from the Windrush generation. This provided opportunities to observe smoking outside the Rastafari ceremonial context and how Rastafari smoking compares to the smoking of others in the Jamaican diaspora. Homiak (1985) observed that many working class Jamaicans shared Rastafari perspectives and sometimes participated in ritual activities, such as *reasoning*, while Yawney (1978) found that even among the most spiritual Rastafari, there are occasions where *herbs* are smoked for more secular purposes. In Brixton, Rastafari smokers engage in both *reasoning* with non-Rastas, and smoking outside of *reasoning* and meditation.

With my research assistant, I frequented several spots within a kilometre radius of the Brixton underground station where men (and sometimes women) of the Jamaican diaspora gather to smoke and *reason*. While drinking, listening to music and dancing are the main activities that go on inside the few clubs that still cater to the black community, outside smokers assemble to participate in all aspects of smoking (from procurement to consumption of materials), as well as *reasoning*. When the weather is tolerable, Jamaican men might also meet up in some of the tiny green spaces around Brixton to trade, smoke and *reason*.

Jamaicans and their British-born descendants tend to be very social and those who are fortunate enough to secure comfortable accommodation (especially in relatively central areas like Brixton) may be inclined to open their homes to friends, extended family and associates several nights a week. Everyone always ends up in the kitchen, which becomes a regular place to *reason*, listen to music, play dominoes, eat, drink, smoke, etc. at almost all hours of the night. Some nights it may also be possible to buy small amounts of *herbs* or sample a

home-brewed roots tonic in a *breddin's* kitchen. In these places *breddin* of the Jamaican diaspora routinely trade small, unrolled portions of cannabis, as well as cigarettes as a way of maintaining good social relations.

'Smoking is a Professional Thing:' Communicating bodies of knowledge

Rastafari smokers hold a wealth of knowledge about *herbs* (and tobacco), which is communicated through smoking, *reasoning* and *grounding*. This of course includes knowledge of the UK cannabis market. Most Jamaican Rastafari smokers prefer *herbs* imported from Jamaica (or failing that from Ethiopia, West Africa, Thailand, or North America), which comes dried and pressed into bricks. *Mersh* (derived from commercial) has seeds and stems pressed into it along with the smokable buds and flowers. High-grade *mersh* (referred to as 'high-grade') has fewer seeds and stronger potency, due to better growing methods and/or cannabis varieties. The most desired (and difficult to find) type of Jamaican cannabis brick is *ses* (derived from *sesimilla*, an Anglicised version of *sinsemilla*, Spanish for 'without seed'), which is unfertilised, making it seedless and strong. *Mersh*, and *ses* are more likely to have been grown outdoors (ideally in Jamaica), which means the spiritual energies of the sun, rain, wind and earth, manifest within the *herbs* are balanced properly. *Skunk* (various strains of unfertilised cannabis from the UK, Netherlands, or North America that is usually not pressed into bricks) has a controversial reputation in the UK (see Waldstein 2010) and is also viewed with suspicion by many Rastafari smokers. *Skunk* may be spiritually unbalanced and potentially dangerous if it has been grown indoors, under artificial lighting, and without soil.

I met relatively few Rastafari men who smoked *ital*, thus most were also knowledgeable about different forms of tobacco. Derived from '*bacco* (a Jamaican idiom for tobacco) *fronto* is a play on words that in typical Rastafari linguistic style inverts a negative sounding word into a positive one (in this case the back is negative-as in, to turn one's back

on someone). *Fronto* usually refers to a particular type of tobacco, also known as *grabba*, which is grown and marketed in Jamaica. It is sold dry (often in bunches that resemble rope) but otherwise minimally processed. Along with brands such as American Spirit, *fronto* is considered to be a natural form of tobacco, which was added to a *chalice* on two out of the three times I observed its use. Because little *fronto* is sent to the UK and the 'natural' brands of tobacco are among the most expensive, many Rastafari people smoke other brands of loose leaf tobacco-usually known as *blem* (derived from blend) or 'roll-up'-that are treated with various additives. All forms of loose tobacco are generally considered to be less adulterated and safer than commercially rolled cigarettes. However, on the road in Brixton I have seen Rastafari (and other) men break open pieces of cigarettes to roll into their *spliffs*.

As explained by Congo-Nyah in our interview, 'it's difficult to get the right balance between tobacco and *herbs* in a *spliff*...Smoking *herbs* is a professional thing. If no one shows you how to mix, build, and smoke you get madness.' The idea that smoking is a serious activity, requiring expert knowledge and skill is widespread among Rastafari smokers. To reach the highest states of Rastafari consciousness, it can take years of regular smoking, which means that smokers must learn both to tolerate large amounts of smoke and to integrate smoking into their daily lives. There is a historical relationship between smoking cannabis and working in Jamaica (Rubin and Comitas 1975) and in England I have met Rastafari smokers in a variety of professions (e.g. academics, artists, carers, chefs, community organisers, tradesmen) who feel that smoking *herbs* enhances and/or facilitates their work. Thus, they smoke on a daily (sometimes hourly) basis, at least when economic circumstances permit. Men of the Jamaican diaspora who cannot find sufficient employment in the formal economy may get involved in the *herbs* trade to support daily smoking habits. Such heavy smoking has health (and legal) risks and requires substantial financial and temporal investments. However, demonstrating 'professional' knowledge (e.g. how to minimise risks of

smoking), and accompanying skills (e.g. building and smoking *spliffs*), is an important way of communicating one's mastery of a key aspect of Rastafari *livity*.

To have a healthy relationship with tobacco and/or *herbs* Rastafari smokers must learn to minimise the perceived risks of smoking (i.e. madness, addiction, and respiratory disease). There has long been anecdotal evidence of 'reefer madness' in the Caribbean (e.g. Rubenstein 2000) and it is widely recognised in Facebook discussions and *reasonings* that smoking *herbs* does not agree with everyone. Nevertheless, Rastafari smokers are increasingly questioning whether symptoms of mental illness are really attributable to *herbs* or to the tobacco that has been inconspicuously mixed with it all along. Tobacco is also held responsible for increasing the addictive potential of smoking and gossip circulates on Facebook and through *reasonings* about how the cigarette industry makes its products more addictive by adding sugar, extra nicotine, etc. Smoking *fronto* and additive-free brands of roll-up is a strategy for minimising risks associated with tobacco use. Moreover, reports of research on the anticancer effects of cannabis (e.g. Melamede 2005) are spreading through Rastafari social media. Thus, a *spliff* comprised primarily of *herbs* may be seen to further mitigate the potential harms of moderate amounts of tobacco. However, this still begs the question of why Rastafari smokers use tobacco in the first place.

One reason may be because moderate amounts of tobacco can attenuate potential complications of smoking *herbs*. One of the most salient self-critiques of the UK Rastafari movement is that there is too much smoking and *reasoning*, and too little time spent putting ideas into action. While smoking a certain amount of *ital herbs* may be stimulating and energising, heavy cannabis smoking is widely associated with tranquillity and mellowness, a state referred to in Rastafari as *irie* (derived from alright). With the help of *herbs*, a person who is *irie* is happy, peaceful and connected to *Jah*, even when faced with suffering or adversity. Building *spliffs* with tobacco adds a different energy to the experience of smoking.

In the doses provided by a cigarette or *spliff*, nicotine is a stimulant with hunger and thirst suppressing properties (Wilbert 1987). Tobacco is also the incense used to evoke *Herukhuti*, the faculty of divine justice/karma according to the Pan-African 'Ausarian' spiritual teachings that are popular among some sections of Rastafari (see Waldstein 2016). According to Congo-Nyah, *souljahs* (soldiers of *Jah*, i.e. Rastafari activists) on the spiritual *baklefield* (battlefield), must suspend feeling *irie* and embody *Herukhuti*; so smoking tobacco may even be considered (v)ital in certain situations. Thus, while for some smoking *ital* is something that sets Rastafari apart from the majority of cannabis smokers in the UK, tobacco has a place in the *livity* of many Rastafari smokers.

Knowledge of the relative merits of smoking *herbs* and tobacco flow through *reasonings* at Rastafari events and in Brixton. However, to fully communicate the embodiment of Rastafari, a 'professional' smoker not only needs to be familiar with the physical and spiritual effects of smoking, but he or she also must be proficient in the art of building a *spliff*. Based on smell, texture and colour, experienced smokers can estimate the potency of *herbs* and the relative amount of tobacco that can be added to a *spliff* to achieve a particular pharmacological effect. They know whether to use a grinder or scissors to process *herbs* and tobacco products with varying moisture contents and how much plant material to use relative to rolling paper size. They also have the muscle memory in the fingers to roll a *spliff* that will burn slowly and evenly and the ability to rectify *spliffs* that 'burn bad.' These skills are not necessarily unique to Rastafari smokers, but constitute embodied knowledge that comes with habitual smoking. In addition, Rastafari smokers develop smoking skills that combine various breathing techniques (e.g. holding smoke in the lungs, exhaling through the nose) and mantras with the pharmacological cocktail of a well-built *spliff* to achieve various meditative and trance states (see Congo-Nyah et al. 2013; Waldstein 2016). As described in the next section, 'professional' smoking does not just communicate possession of a body of

knowledge and/or a set of skills. In a Rastafari context it can also open communicative channels between smokers and various manifestations of the divine, including the *herbs* ‘herself.’

Smoking ‘Plant Teachers:’ Communication across ontological borders

Smoking *herbs* puts the mind and spirit in a suggestible state (Congo-Nyah et al. 2013), which can cause problems for smokers if they are subsequently exposed to negative images/messages. As Congo-Nyah elaborated in our interview ‘when smoking *spliffs* you are in a programmable state and you see the (tobacco) pack with the warning sitting there, it will have to kill you because the mind is being programmed to die.’ However, in Rastafari there are also forms of meditation and trance that smokers can use to ‘programme’ the mind with positive thoughts, images, etc. Moreover, ‘professional’ smokers are not only sensitive to positive and negative images, etc. but also to messages from other (conscious) agents. This is evident in the link between *blazing* (a term for smoking, particularly in reference to *herbs*), ‘holding a *meds*’ (i.e. meditating) and intuiting the future (or perhaps even what’s on another person’s mind). For some, intuitions are understood to come from the ‘higher Self,’ which *herbs* is seen to facilitate communication with (see Waldstein 2016). For others, smoking *herbs* is thought to open communicative channels between the smoker and the spirit of Haile Selassie I and/or *Jah*. There are also many Rastafari smokers who identify *herbs* directly as the source of insight.

While I have never heard anyone use the term ‘plant-teacher’ during *reasonings*, *herbs* can be a source of divinatory knowledge for ‘professional’ Rastafari smokers. A *reasoning* with one of my Rastafari friends, in the kitchen while he was preparing a meal, was illustrative of the way that *herbs* offers inspiration to smokers. As he moved back and forth through the room (variously dicing vegetables, frying fish and adjusting the seasoning on a large pot of rice and peas), I sat at the table listening to the cooking instructions that he was

giving me with the dexterity and eloquence of a television chef. At one point, after listing all the seasonings that go into the sauce he was preparing, he stopped to take a pull from his *spliff*. ‘And this goes in it too,’ he said pointing to the *spliff*. ‘You mean you’re putting cannabis in the food!?’ I asked. He explained that ‘no, the weed (i.e. cannabis) tell me what to cook.’ This doesn’t necessarily mean that my friend thinks of cannabis as a conscious, personified source of information and instruction, but I found other evidence that suggests some Jamaican Rastafari smokers do attribute more human qualities to the plant.

According to one of Wardle’s (2018) key informants Revivalists (and perhaps others) in Jamaica can hear the voices of living plants that express feelings such as antipathy. Many Jamaicans who I have known in England are interested in plants and appreciate their importance in sustenance and healing. Some dote over house/garden plants, and do things like hang floral print curtains to make the plants happy, because they are part of the family. Wardle’s (2018) informants refer to plants with the personal pronoun ‘him,’ and similarly, when Rastafari bush doctors had trouble recalling the name of a plant during *reasonings* in Brixton, they asked themselves “what is his name?” Homiak also (1985: 299) observed that *herbs* is ‘regarded as the “twin brother” of Rasta’ in Jamaica. However, according to Congo-Nyah et al. (2013: 269) *herbs* is a “sensitive *hempress*” (a play on hemp and Empress, the Rastafari honorific for women). During *reasonings* in England I have also heard people refer to *herbs* as a lover to particularly heavy (male) smokers; she demands all of her man’s time, money, and attention. This may be because Rastafari smokers in 21st century England have more knowledge of botany than did the Jamaicans of Homiak’s day; *Cannabis spp.* is dioecious and only the female buds and flowers are smoked. There is also a stronger female presence and orientation in the UK Rastafari movement (where Empress Menen is revered alongside her husband Haile Selassie I), compared to what is described in the anthropological literature (e.g. Yawney 1978; Homiak 1985; Chevannes 2011; Lake 1998).

Whatever the reason for the recognition of *herbs* as female in England, ‘she’ is the only plant in the Rastafari pharmacopoeia that provides intuitions and visions to professional smokers. In the Jamaican diaspora there is a widespread distinction between drugs (e.g. heroin, cocaine, viagra, prozac, etc.) and cannabis (i.e. a plant). Although I have met Rastafari smokers in England who have tried other substances that alter human consciousness (most commonly alcohol), they are generally wary of all drugs (licit and illicit alike) as well as other botanical entheogens. I have *reasoned* with Rastafari men who decry the practice of dealing drugs as morally reprehensible, while supplementing their own incomes by selling *herbs*. This is because *herbs* is not only a natural plant, but one with spiritual and healing qualities. ‘Bushes and roots’ are medicinal plants that heal, but unlike *herbs* they are not used in meditation. Tobacco is neither a medicinal plant, nor recognised as having any role in meditation or divination, unless it is combined with *herbs*. But it isn’t exactly a drug either, rather it is a smokable plant that balances the energy of a *spliff*.

Congo-Nyah claims that *herbs*, but not tobacco, can communicate through him because smoking allows direct access to ‘the web of collective consciousness that connects all people, the ecosystem, inner-beings from etheric planes of existence and ultimately “the Most High”’ (Congo-Nyah et al. 2013: 267). Smoking *herbs* is also a way to enter ‘ecstatic trance’ (see Congo-Nyah et al. 2013), which includes the experience of connection between self and other (see Waldstein 2016). This is a psychedelic/spiritual experience (see Watts 1968) involving dissolution of and communication across ontological borders (e.g. between species), which makes plant teaching possible.

However, there is a significant difference in the way that cannabis is used compared to the use of other plant teachers (e.g. *ayahuasca*). Eating and drinking substances like *ayahuasca*, or even *herbs* leads to a relatively slow chemical exchange (and breakdown of ontological barriers) because the messages must be released by our digestive process before

being able to reach our consciousness. In contrast, fire has the ability to liberate chemical agents that are locked up in plants. Inhaling smoke is a rapid, effective and aromatic way of infusing plant metabolites throughout the human body (Pennacchio et al. 2010). Moreover, while drinking *ayahuasca* may take several hours to have any effect on consciousness (in contrast to the nearly immediate effect of smoking *herbs*), ultimately it induces purging and intense visions. Thus, many adepts advise taking it in a ritual context, in which the obligations of everyday life are suspended. In contrast, many professional Rastafari smokers can smoke *spliffs* almost continuously without hindering daily activities (although smoking a *chalice* is a more intense experience and generally saved for ritual occasions), especially if they are built with tobacco to balance the tranquillising effects of *herbs*. This keeps the lines of communication between smokers and *herbs* perpetually open, making smoking a particularly intimate and effective method of transmitting phytochemical messages to humans.

From a biomedical/psychiatric perspective (particularly in the UK where medical cannabis policies have lagged behind other parts of the world) daily cannabis smoking is usually interpreted as dependency and/or addiction. However, there are ethnographic cases of very different interpretations of daily smoking. For example, in Morobe Province, Papua New Guinea there is no real concept of addiction. Instead, habitual cannabis smokers are understood to be transforming their bodies into 'drug bodies,' which are easy going, confident and very social, and are good to have around because they reduce anger and tension (Halvaksz 2006). Based on my *reasonings* with and observations of Rastafari smokers in England, the effects of habitual smoking are not exclusively positive. I have met a few Rastafari couples who experience tension because of *herbs*, usually when one partner consumes more than the other (i.e. when one partner is a 'professional' smoker and the other is not). However, both men and women insisted that most of the tension comes from the illicit status of cannabis in the UK, which makes smoking *herbs* risky and expensive. A non-

smoking spouse might be troubled by the high cost of daily smoking but still appreciate the importance of *herbs* in the ‘professional’ smoker’s spiritual development. In Rastafari when ‘professional’ smoking is combined with meditation/trance it can be an important means of becoming what Macphee (2003) describes as a ‘spiritual body,’ with heightened sensory awareness (see Waldstein 2016) that allows smokers to recognise *herbs*’ ability to communicate.

Conclusion

Smoking a Rastafari *spliff* encapsulates some of the most intriguing anthropological questions about agency, personhood, consciousness and multi-species communication. Although cannabis is widely known as the most sacred plant in the Rastafari pharmacopoeia, for most who follow the *livity* in England, tobacco is its constant companion. In Rastafari *reasonings*, ceremonies, and musical performances, *herbs* and tobacco are smoked together in *spliffs* and *chalice*s, which aim to keep participants in higher states of consciousness. However smoking is also a way of communicating one’s dedication to Rastafari, an aid in learning different dialects and modes of speech, and a spiritual practice that increases consciousness of the connections between humans and the other animate beings in our environments (e.g. *Jah*, the spirit of Haile Selassie I, *herbs*). Based on my *reasonings* with Rastafari smokers, it seems that tobacco provides energy and/or spiritual power, and in this sense may facilitate human agency. In contrast, *herbs* is attributed an agency or even personhood of her own (she is sensitive, she provides insights) and is a source of divine knowledge to ‘professional’ smokers (i.e. *herbs* fits Tupper’s definition of a plant teacher). Moreover, while many Rastafari smokers acknowledge that they receive wisdom from smoking without necessarily attributing conscious agency to *herbs*, others like Congo-Nyah and his *bredrin* know the plant as a powerful and complex spiritual being that can communicate with and through humans.

In reference to tobacco, Klein (1993) claims that the history of revolution against tyranny is inseparable from the struggle for the freedom to smoke. This is certainly also true of Rastafari (a movement of resistance to oppression) and *herbs* (a widely prohibited medicinal plant). The criminalization of *herbs* makes it difficult to build *spliffs* properly (whether *ital* or balanced with a small amount of tobacco) and their use in England carries the burden of illicitness. Though legal, 'natural' forms of tobacco are difficult to come by in a UK context where processed cigarettes dominate the market, leaving smokers exposed to untold additives, not to mention the burden of supporting their environmentally and socially unjust production. However, as nation after nation experiments with the decriminalisation and even legalisation of cannabis, Rastafari smokers can not only teach others about its spiritual and healing uses, but also provide a channel through which we can learn lessons from the 'plant teacher' herself. Indeed, in Congo-Nyah et al. (2013) the main 'communication from the *herbs*' was that Rastafari people should assert their inalienable rights to cultivate, trade, and heal with their most sacred plant.

Fear of psychological problems (including addiction) in habitual cannabis smokers is one of the main reasons why the British government is maintaining its prohibition. But this does not mean that daily cannabis smoking is always problematic. When smoking is seen as a relationship between subjects, rather than something a subject does to an object, it becomes more difficult to explain it away as addiction. Instead, in a Rastafari context, inhaling the smoke of plants like cannabis and tobacco may be seen as a form of spiritual embodiment that bonds humans and plants in communicative relationships. For experienced Rastafari smokers, *herbs* provides insights that can be used to answer questions and solve problems. In other words, rather than loss of agency through addiction, the knowledge and skills that 'professional' Rastafari smokers develop allow them to use and experience smoking as communication. This case shows that a multi-species ethnographic approach can not only lead

to greater insights about consciousness, intent, and expression in plants, but also helps us to better understand the nature of our own agency.

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