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The Functions of Roots Reggae in Early Postcolonial Jamaica (1970s)

An exploration of its lyrical and formal features

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I hereby declare that, in line with the Faculty of Arts' code of conduct for research integrity, the work submitted here is my own original work and that any additional sources of information have been duly cited.

Abstract — Dit artikel onderzoekt een aantal kenmerken van roots reggae in het Jamaica van de jaren ’70. Het land was een decennium eerder onafhankelijk geworden, maar het koloniale tijdperk liet zijn sporen na. Tijdens deze turbulente periode was roots reggae voor Afro-Jamaicanen een manier om kritiek te uiten op de maatschappij; daarom worden in het artikel thematische en vormelijke kenmerken van roots reggae onderzocht in hun relatie tot die kritiek. In het artikel worden een aantal kenmerken en strategieën geïdentificeerd om vervolgens te onderzoeken wat hun functie is. Dat gebeurt aan de hand van twee gebruikelijke motieven in de roots reggae traditie; door deze motieven in detail te bekijken, worden er een aantal mechanismen in de muziek blootgelegd. Die mechanismen worden vervolgens geïnterpreteerd in hun postkoloniale context. Daaruit blijkt dat de bestudeerde kenmerken niet louter een muzikaal nut hebben, maar veelal een impliciete vorm van kritiek zijn. Ze ondersteunen op die manier de inhoudelijke kern van roots reggae: het in vraag stellen van de Jamaicaanse natiestaat, maar ook algemener, van Westerse structuren en het creëren van een draagvlak voor een inclusieve maatschappij.

Introduction

> “No chains around my feet, but I'm not free, oh-ooh!
> I know I am bound here in captivity”
>
> Bob Marley and the Wailers in ‘Concrete Jungle’ (1973)

With these lyrics, Marley captures perfectly how the Afro-Jamaican population felt in the 1970s. Although slavery had been abolished for almost 150 years and Jamaica was now an independent state, black people in Jamaica still felt like victims of societal infrastructures, which had their roots in the colonial period. In the 1970s, newly independent Jamaica was a politically, economically and socially unstable country. The Afro-Jamaican population still remained a victim of historical structures of power, which were supposed to disappear along with the independence of the country. Dissatisfied with the situation and influenced by the Rastafari movement, the black population found an outlet in the Jamaican music genre par excellence, reggae. Not all reggae is concerned with societal commentary however; the songs and lyrics that form the subject of this paper are exemplary of the ‘roots reggae’ subgenre. In roots reggae, musicians address social injustice, deprivation, political and economic issues, prevailing power imbalances and so on. The critique of society of the time is combined with an alternative view on the global world order; this view stems from their experience of modern society.

In postcolonial reggae studies, there is been written about the societal critique that characterizes roots reggae (Edwards; Tracy) and about the inherent political dimension of black Atlantic music in general (Gilroy). These studies confirm that roots reggae not only constitutes a societal critique, but also that this critique is indissolubly connected to the country's status in the postcolonial world. In addition, some scholars have examined (roots) reggae themes and formal features (Thompson; Murrell; Arbino; Bousquet). However, none of these scholars have investigated in a profound way the role of 1970s roots reggae's features in the formation of a postcolonial critique.

Hence, the question remains how this critique and alternative world view is expressed on a thematic and formal level. Which features of roots reggae constitute a societal critique and how are they to be interpreted? Through a more profound understanding of the problems of Jamaican society and racial injustice in the 1970s, we can gain insight in the messages expressed in roots reggae. These messages are often expressed within thematic frameworks or intertextual tropes. The best-known roots reggae trope is probably the biblical trope. Departing from a biblical framework, Afro-Jamaican artists creatively produce a terminology to express their thoughts and construct an exilic identity around it. Besides this, roots reggae artist draw much inspiration from the history of their country. An important event was the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865. The second trope discussed will focus on lyrical content about this event; the mechanisms at work in this trope are illustrative of roots reggae songs about history in general. In using this trope, the artist articulates his criticisms of contemporary society through a revision of the past. Both tropes are thus used to criticize the postcolonial nation state of 1970s and the society that is produced by it. This critique not only situates itself on a lyrical level, but also on thematic and formal levels of the music. Through a lyrical analysis of songs by Afro-Jamaican artists, written in the 1970s, I will identify and interpret key features of roots reggae songs and investigate how they function as a critique of postcolonial Jamaica and create an alternative worldview.

Jamaica in the 1970s

Before we go on and explore roots reggae's functions and features, it is important to understand the context of everyday life in Jamaica in the 1970s. Therefore, I am going to take a look at the economic and socio-political situation in Jamaica at the time, drawing upon Orlando Patterson's *The Confounding Island*. As Patterson explains, the economic situation after independence in 1962 was rather turbulent. The problems began in the middle of the sixties with the import-substitution industrialization, an economic approach with the goal to decrease dependence on other, often more developed countries. However, this approach was not up to the task and other problems such as great inequality among the population, mass unemployment and expeditious urbanization came on top of it, not to mention the oil crisis in the early 1970s (Patterson 96). This poor state of affairs did not come out of nowhere, but has its roots in Jamaica's history as a colony of England. Jamaica was what Patterson calls a 'colonial settler elite democracy', which shares with settlement colonies the characteristic that the institutional infrastructure was a copy of that of the colonizer. Different from settlement colonies, the colonizer formed a racial minority – a characteristic we normally find in non-settler or extractive colonies. The latter are a form of colonization for the purpose of exploiting natural resources instead of living. Although the British formed a small minority, they used their power and the institutional infrastructure mainly to their own advantage. Typical of the colonial settler elite democracy is thus the exclusion of the mass population from the institutions, what eventually made these institutional infrastructure highly desired by the population, as they wanted to have what the elite denied them. As a result, when Jamaica had become an independent nation, the desired institutions were already in place, but the native Jamaicans did not dispose of the procedural knowledge to run these institutions effectively. This may seem a logical effect of colonization and decolonization, but Jamaica is an extreme example of this. If we compare Jamaica to Barbados, a country that at first glance has gone through a fairly similar course, we see that Barbados has done way better in the postcolonial phase. Lots of different factors were at play here, but the major difference is that the Barbadian population had the chance to learn and master their procedural institutional knowledge, where the Jamaican population did not get this chance (Patterson 112-113; 104).

The lack of procedural institutional knowledge not only has economic implications, but also political ones. During the fifties and sixties, well-intentioned programs to decrease the poverty rate and to increase the GDP were implemented, but did not have the desired outcome – the GDP did grow, but poverty did increase too, especially among the Afro-Jamaican population (Tracy 23). When the government wanted to change tack through the 'basic needs approach', focusing more directly on improving the living conditions of the poor, this effort also failed (Patterson 282). Although this may seem primarily an economic problem, the deeper reasons for this failure are to be found elsewhere. In the case of the Basic Social Needs Program, a lot of different factors were at play: incompatibility between the program and what local leaders wanted, great administrative costs and different interests of the concerned parties are just a few. These superficial reasons for failing have a deeper cause: "Like the nation at large, then, the urban upgrading project failed because available institutions did not work due to the country's chronic 'implementation deficit' and because of contradictory political aims and decisions" (Patterson 313). So we can say that Jamaica's problem is not the lack of goodwill, but rather a lack of institutional know-how, due to their colonial history.

Another flaw was the way the Jamaican political system worked (and still does today). At a formal level, Jamaica's political system looks the same as that of her former colonizer, namely a two-party-system democracy. The political dynamics in Jamaica did, of course, differ. The party leaders took the elections very seriously; as they very much wanted to be re-elected in 'their' constituencies, they made every effort to make that happen. That is how, shortly after independence, a negative pattern of political clientelism arose, also referred to as the 'garrison system'. This system consists of the provision of housing or jobs in exchange for votes in certain urban areas. As if that was not enough, often drug dealers had more power than politicians in these areas and could play the latter in exchange for the votes they needed. That way, the garrison system brought a lot of violence in Jamaican society (Patterson 79-80).

Taking these economic and political problems into account then, it's not a surprise that the situation back in the 1970s was also turbulent at a social level. First of all, everyday life was very violent; this has partially to do with the fact that Jamaica had only recently become a democracy and was thus wat we call an 'intermediary democracy'. Due to this, society suffered from symptoms of change, as young democracies are more likely to be violent: "As countries become more democratic they become more prone to internal violence, (…) as democracy consolidates, they become less prone to such violence" (Patterson 131). But more important is the cultural dimension of this chronically violent society. As Jamaica is a post-slavery society, and therefore has a history of centuries of institutionalized violence, traces of that period were still present in the 1970s. Throughout the colonial period, the idea that all forms of obedience must be enforced by means of violence, had nestled in Jamaican society. In the post-independence era, this mentality persisted among the population, both in domestic and working relationships, as well as at an institutional level; corporal punishment of prisoners for example was certainly not uncommon at the time (Patterson 154; 156).

More complex was the question of racial equality. In legal terms, everyone, independent of ethnic background, was equal. The Jamaican population consisted of many different ethnic groups; the majority was black, as they were descendants from the originally African slave population. The rest of the population consisted of minorities of whites, but also Chinese, Lebanese, Syrian and East-Indian people (Patterson 105). After independence, as a way of breaking with the colonial past, racial identity was officially considered irrelevant; everyone on the island was considered Jamaican, whether their skin was light or darker. This ideal, however, did not correspond with reality; after independence, class and skin color were still strongly correlated (Edwards 24). The reason for this is once again to be found in the colonial past of the island. In the last phase of Jamaica as colony – the crown colony government period (1866-1962) – the British rulers removed nearly every black or mixed-race person who occupied a commanding position from their function. Thus, the Jamaican population was excluded from the institutional and procedural level of society, later resulting in the previously discussed lack of institutional knowledge (Patterson 61-62). Furthermore, during the colonial era the idea prevailed that people with darker skins were lazier, less intelligent and more disobedient. This idea is obviously outdated, but nevertheless leaves its mark in Jamaican society. Black Jamaicans remain, 150 years after the abolition of slavery, the 'lowest' social group, while Chinese and Lebanese migrants, for example, have less difficulty in climbing up the social ladder (Chevannes 8). This shows how the problem is deeply rooted in history and cannot simply disappear by officially declaring that everyone is equal, regardless of their ethnicity.

On the other hand, it is also true that *active* separation in Jamaica was practically non-existent. Especially in politics, race was never an obstacle for people to take part in it or to become a political leader, nor did politicians mobilize voters based on their skin color (Patterson 105; 146). The problem of racial inequality then, situated itself at a deeper level; due to Jamaica's history, it had become a part of society.

Reggae and the postcolonial era

As I tried to make clear in the previous section, Jamaican life in the 1970s was beset by interlocking social, cultural, economic, and political problems. The problems society faced all stemmed in a way from the colonial era. It should not surprise us then, that for many Jamaicans, and especially Afro-Jamaicans, the postcolonial era felt little different from the colonial era. Edwards points out this problem: “Slavery thus continues under new guises. Mental servitude replaces physical bondage, and the real struggle becomes that of emancipating the self (…) from mental slavery” (Edwards 27). Mainly with respect to the class-color correlation and the exploitation of the poor, Edwards sees no difference between the colonial and the postcolonial periods. Simply dismissing racial identity as unimportant was not going to solve this problem, on the contrary. In contrast to the Eurocentric status quo, Afro-Jamaicans were highly conscious of their ‘blackness’ – and thus of their African origin and the horrible slave past their ancestors had to endure – and considered this an important part of their identities (Edwards 24-25).

Roots reggae: Black Atlantic culture

Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* provides us with a useful framework to gain understanding of the complexity of cultural intermixture in society and its inevitable cultural hybridity. Jamaican society is not a simple encounter between opposing groups of different races, ethnicities and nationalities; it is a place of – albeit fragmented – cultural-political exchange and, more importantly, transformation. The Afro-Jamaican identity, as with all cultures we count as Black Atlantic, is thus necessarily a heterogeneous one (Gilroy 2; 15). The Afro-Jamaican population of the postcolonial era may not have had to endure slavery themselves, but the memory thereof was still alive and transformed the way they interpreted the world they lived in. Consequently, the Afro-Jamaican experience of modernity is influenced by this and cannot be the same as Western experiences of modernity. They felt that the structures of racial subordination were still present and wished to overcome these (Gilroy 71).

In this regard, it is important to gain insight in the evolution of historical notions of identity and race, although Gilroy warns us not to simplify and not to conceive the encounter of two different cultures in pure ethnic terms. In pre-modern Europe, notions of race and place were very strongly intertwined, resulting in a view were being British or European and being black were considered incompatible elements. This led on both sides to a form of cultural nationalism, which celebrated the authenticity of their culture and that was averse to cultural influence of the other. Gilroy emphasizes that the idea of ‘outsiders’ versus ‘insiders’ has played a large role here, as it operates in the construction of our national memories. Problematic was thus, on both sides, that conflicting ideas about culture and values were automatically and unfairly linked to race (Gilroy 7; 9-11; 15).

What caused this 'cultural conflict' was not so much ethnic difference though, but the displacement of one culture into the framework of another. The effects of exile, relocation and displacement are not to be underestimated; it has shaped the identity of the Black Atlantic subject through the accompanying "fractal patterns of cultural and political exchange and transformation" which "indicate how both ethnicities and political cultures have been made anew in ways that are significant not simply for the peoples of the Caribbean, but for Europe, for Africa (…) and of course, for black America" (Gilroy 15). When cultures meet, exchange is unavoidable; defenders of a 'black nationalism' for example, rely, ironically enough, heavily on Western notions of 'people', 'race', 'nation' and the presumed relationships between those concepts (Gilroy 18; 15; 34). Gilroy thinks that Black Atlantic culture is better understood as a complex whole, as a melting pot of cultures characterized by doubleness and cultural intermixture. Although roots and identity are still closely related in modern black political culture, the black subject is necessarily fragmented by gender, class, sexuality and so on. Gilroy proposes thus to consider blackness as an open signifier, which is internally divided. (Gilroy 4; 19; 32-33).

As mentioned above, Afro-Jamaicans, like other Black Atlantic populations, necessarily have a different experience of modernity than Western populations since they are, by virtue of their colonial past, both part and not part of the West; they experience thus an inevitable cultural hybridity (Gilroy 30). They are influenced by Western cultural forms, but do not just simply 'accept' these forms; they use the forms, and reshape them to a form that aligns with their own cultural and political experience of the world (Patterson 259). Therefore, the themes of exile, diaspora and pan-Africanism are prominent in music of the Black Atlantic, and hence, in reggae. I am going to follow Gilroy in his suggestion to interpret Black Atlantic music and culture in general as a counterculture and a philosophical discourse that falls outside the Western division between politics and culture, and apply this to roots reggae. Roots reggae can thus be seen as a subversive form of thinking that represents a different perspective on the world we live in (Gilroy 81; 38-39; 76).

What characterizes cultural expressions of the Black Atlantic is the interconnectedness between politics and aesthetics, and, consequently, a critique of the capitalist world order, of which the racially subordinated subject is a victim. At the same time, the critique transcends anti-capitalism by actively creating a counterculture, opposing the world as it is to the world the black subject would want to see. This counterculture is characterized by a normative and a utopian aspect, which are closely related to each other (Gilroy 36-38). The normative aspect is linked to what Gilroy calls the 'politics of fulfillment': "the notion that a future society will be able to realize the political and social promise that present society has left unaccomplished" (Gilroy 37). By virtue of these politics, (roots reggae) music becomes a medium in which demands for a fairer world can be articulated. The utopian aspect is expressed through a 'politics of transfiguration':

> This emphasizes the emergence of qualitatively new desires, social relations, and modes of association within the racial community of interpretation and resistance *and* between that group and its erstwhile oppressors. It points specifically to the formation of a community of needs and solidarity which is magically made audible in the music itself and palpable in the social relations of its cultural utility and reproduction. Created under the very nose of the overseers, the utopian desires which fuel the complementary politics of transfiguration must be invoked by other, more deliberately opaque means. This politics exists on a lower frequency where it is played, danced, and acted, as well as sung and sung about, because words, even words stretched by melisma and supplemented or mutated by the screams which still index the conspicuous power of the slave sublime, will never be enough to communicate its unsayable claims to truth. The willfully damaged signs which betray the resolutely utopian politics of transfiguration therefore partially transcend modernity, constructing both an imaginary anti-modern past and a postmodern yet-to-come. (Gilroy 37)

Gilroy points to the politics of transfiguration to demonstrate how radically different the Black Atlantic understanding of culture is from Western understandings. In an attempt to express the ideal of a solidary community across racial differences, Black Atlantic artists exceed verbal means, which fall short to describe, capture or represent this ideal, as words do not reflect true meaning but rather represent the constructed meanings of a dominant culture. Instead, artists within the Black Atlantic perform, portray and enact the social relationships desired by the racially subordinated population. Because of the inherent presence of this ideal in Black Atlantic cultural expression, culture cannot be separated from politics. This is what distinguishes Black Atlantic culture from others; it poses an aesthetics that cannot be isolated from politics, in contrast to Occidental approaches, which consider aesthetics an autonomous field (Gilroy 38; 36).

Gilroy does not treat roots reggae explicitly, but as a Black Atlantic musical form, roots reggae too is inherently political, communicating information to the audience and raising their consciousness. Thomas, too, argues that political developments in the construction of a new Jamaica after independence went hand in hand with an attempt to establish a cultural identity. The music became a zone where hegemonic structures were contested and where postcolonial issues were expressed. Roots reggae's emphasis on racial equality stems directly from the colonial class-color relationship, still deeply entrenched in 1970s society. As unfair societal structures were perpetuated by the Jamaican elite, reducing the Afro-Jamaican population to subjects, roots reggae became a way to escape this status and achieve self-development (Thomas 512-515; 533).

This manifests itself in the music by the experimentation with modes of subjectivity, which provides a political agency and leads to alternative and informal forms of knowledge. While Western forms of knowledge were institutionalized and perpetuated through institutions like the school system, alternative forms of knowledge remained marginal. In roots reggae songs, these modes of subjectivity and their alternative forms of knowledge are expressed through, among others, a different interpretation of time and history, refusing the Eurocentric, official but one-sided version of history (Arbino 153). These official accounts portray the Afro-Jamaican population as voiceless subjects. Through oral forms as roots reggae, Afro-Jamaicans could reclaim their stories and empower themselves (Cooper 22). By not distinguishing between colonial history and postcolonial present, roots reggae musicians tried to create a new version of history that corresponded with the way they experienced the colonial traces in society and processed the trauma of slavery that still lived among the Afro-Jamaican population (Arbino 157). This strategy is a way of making visible the part of history that is forgotten by the state, but not by the racial memory of the Afro-Jamaican population. Consequently, notions of nationality and race are contested too in roots reggae music, as they were produced by the Western framework that the reggae artist is trying to counter (Edwards 26; 22).

Rastafarian influence

The Rastafari movement has been a major influence on roots reggae; many roots reggae singers were Rastafarians and vice versa, and both were popular among the Afro-Jamaican youth. But it is of course important to remember that roots reggae and the Rastafari movement do not coincide, though they were both important in the formation of an Afro-Jamaican identity, one that was different from Eurocentric notions of Jamaican-ness. The Rastafari movement has greatly contributed to the spread of pan-African and diasporic ideas among the population, in an attempt to construct an identity that was not imposed on them by Western hegemonic cultures (Arbino 153-154; 156; 158).

The Rastafari movement arose from African religious traditions, which could survive on the island because of the constant import of new slaves to the island due to the harsh living conditions there. Of course, colonial slave systems in general were brutal, but in Jamaica this was even more the case than in other places. The British landowners thought it was economic profitable to make the male slaves work as hard as possible, till death even, to then import new slaves. As a result, there were far more males than females on the island, leading to a low reproduction ratio. This in contrast to most colonies, where the offspring of the slaves could form a new generation of labor force and import was not necessary. This import, however, ensured that the Afro-Jamaican population still had a high affinity with African culture (Patterson 42-43). That eventually made possible the emergence of Rastafari, a creole belief, influenced both by African traditions and Christianity. With the latter the Afro-Jamaican population became acquainted only two centuries after the arrival of the English colonizers in Jamaica. This was because the planters felt too superior to share their beliefs with the black slaves. When the black population eventually came in contact with the Bible (more specifically the King James Version), it happened via nonconformist split-off's of the Christian church, like for example the Baptist church (Thompson 332).

Around this time, the local religion Myal became more and more popular among the slave population. Soon the slaves, also becoming acquainted with the Baptist Church, began to apply Christian symbols to the Myal religion. This lead to a situation where a great part of the population was, on a formal level, member of the Baptist Church but informally also still engaged with Myal, leading eventually to a Christianized form of Myal, often called Native Baptism. This in turn, led to local forms of religious revivalism among the Jamaican farming population in the 19th century. Both Rastafarian rituals and values know their roots in these local but related revivalist religions (Chevannes 18; 20-22).

Equally important for the emergence of Rastafari was the idea of pan-Africanism. This idea was preached by civil rights-activist Marcus Garvey (1887-1940). It is important to note that the pan-African ideas he proclaimed were not his, but in Jamaica he was indeed the most important representative of these ideas. Under his influence, the Afro-Jamaican population began to identify themselves with Africa. Garvey saw Africa as the real homeland of all black people and foresaw a black prophet who would lead a repatriation back home. When in 1930, Ras Tafari Makonnen, better known as Haile Selassie I, became emperor of Ethiopia, many people saw this as a fulfillment of Garvey's prediction (Chevannes 38; 42; 1).

The Rastafari movement is thus founded on a number of assumptions. The first is that Haile Selassie I is a reincarnation of Christ and a living God, as predicted by Marcus Garvey. According to the founders of the Rastafari movement, the belief that he is the prophet is supported by a passage in the Bible, namely Psalm 68:31 (KJV): "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God." They were further strengthened in their vision when the emperor was given the title 'Emperor Haile Selassie I, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Elect of God, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah'. This matches Revelation 19:16 (KJV): "And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords." They also believed that Haile Selassie I was a descendant of King Solomon and King David (Murrell 527). Furthermore, it is important to note that Rastafarians believed that the Bible was originally written for and by Africans, in Amharic, an Ethiopian language. Apart from the biblical references to Ethiopia, the country has a special value because it was never really colonized by a Western nation and so it symbolizes cultural continuity and resistance. At the same time, the notions 'Ethiopia' and 'Africa' are partly idealized concepts of a homeland and are often used interchangeably (Arbino 154).

Another foundation of the Rastafari movement was the belief that the black diasporic population needed to be redeemed by a repatriation back to Ethiopia, under the guidance of the prophet Haile Selassie I. Middleton subsequently notes that when the emperor died in 1976, this may have caused a paradigm shift within the movement. He suggests that, since Selassie I did not come to repatriate the Afro-Jamaicans back to their homeland, the movement began to commit to social change within Jamaica (Middleton 17-18). However, this component of the Rastafari movement was certainly already present before the death of Haile Selassie I.

The rise of roots reggae

The Rastafarian idea of pan-Africanism and Black pride gained acceptance by a wider public through the lyrics of roots reggae and had a major impact on the socio-political consciousness of the Afro-Jamaican population, especially among the poor population. As Gilroy argued, it is impossible to distinguish between the political and the musical values of Black Atlantic music, and hence, roots reggae (Gilroy 38). The socio-political dimension is deeply embedded in the music it by virtue of its evolution; especially the persistent relation between class and color has played a major role in the development of roots reggae.

Jamaica's musical tradition originated in the music brought over by West-African slaves and was influenced by lyrical-melodical lines of Celtic and British music of the 19th century. The musical genre 'mento' arose out of this in the 1920s. This early precursor of reggae was soon successful in the USA, starting a process of cultural exchange between the two countries. Jamaicans, in turn, were influenced by the American rhythm and blues and some artists started to cover and imitate this musical genre. However, they complemented these imitations with local rhythms and dialects, giving the music a local touch. In addition, the music was exposed to the influence of neo-African cult-related music like Pocomania and Kumina. Lastly, jazz swing music also contributed to the genesis of this musical style. The convergence of all the named elements and styles led eventually to the emergence of ska in the late 1950s. Ska can be considered as the direct precursor of (roots) reggae (Patterson 261-263). The emergence of this musical genre coincided with the emergence of 'sound system culture'. Sound systems are systems equipped with massive bass-speakers where the owner played his records on. They became popular because many people could not afford their own record-playing system. This way, the sound system functioned like a stereo for a whole neighborhood. At first, the disc jockeys would play American singles, but soon enough local artists started making music themselves, being innovative with the technological aspects of musical creation. This in turn led to a quick rise of an organized musical industry (Patterson 264-265). Most record labels were not too big and were run by individual producers. As they owned the studios and sponsored recordings and surrounding facilities, they also owned the rights of the music recorded at their studios (Borthwick 99). This would have a great impact on Jamaica's musical landscape, as we will see further on.

In the second half of the sixties, ska evolved in to rocksteady, which was a slower type of music and betrayed the influence of Motown soul. Rocksteady, in turn, evolved to reggae. Reggae differs from rocksteady in its faster tempo and its emphasis on the offbeat, an emphasis that was already present in mento. During this period, the Afro-Jamaican population got acquainted with Rastafari ideology and was attracted to its values, still constituting the lower working class and poor section of society. The very people developing reggae music and sound systems belonged to this class and consequently, the ideology shaped the lyrics for a great part, leading to content that commented on socio-political themes such as poverty (Patterson 266-267). Like the Rastafarian burru drums and 'riddims' influenced the musical characteristics of roots reggae, the often socially-engaged lyrics of these songs shaped the socio-political consciousness of many Afro-Jamaicans; a lot of people did not have access to newspapers and such, due to poverty, and were consequently reliant on other sources to stay updated. For a large part of the Afro-Jamaican population, roots reggae became an accessible source through the medium of the sound system and so its lyrics came to be a means to stay informed about the socio-political climate as well as the general news (Tracy 23-24; 28).

Accordingly, roots reggae soon served a communicative function. That is at odds with Western interpretations of music, in which music is considered to be emotional, non-representational and thus not apt for the conveying of truths. Although the West too has produced political music, like punk for instance, the mainstream understanding of music during the 1970s was that it functioned as an autonomous field. This view has its origins in the late 18th century, more specifically in Kant's distinction between music as art and political music. This dichotomy lead to the 20th century notion that music and politics are separate functioning domains (Garratt 33-34). However, this was an advantage for roots reggae artists; this way their critical messages could reach the masses without having to fear possible repressions; the Jamaican political climate was not always hospitable to criticism (Tracy 30-31). Tracy adds that the combination of lyrical content and musical elements in roots reggae "move us toward a reconciliation of the dichotomous conceptions of communication and (musical) art by suggesting the specific communicative possibilities afforded the former by the latter – reggae as an oral form of commentary and reportage of and for the oppressed" (Tracy 28). The highly communicative function of reggae is therefore not only possible because of its content and its reach in the neighborhood, but also because of the supporting musical elements; together they constitute a higher understanding (Tracy 28). This ties in with the transcendence of the boundaries between politics and aesthetics described by Gilroy, which is elementary to Black Atlantic forms of culture (Gilroy 38-39).

Sound system culture not only had a major influence on the awareness of the population, but also on the characteristics of roots reggae. The so called 'aesthetics of repetition' were elemental in transmitting the message of the artist to the audience. Deejay's often played songs several times in a row in order to get the content absorbed optimally by the audience (Arbino 158). Besides this, sound system culture caused the phenomena of musical quotation and intertextual repetition. Artists often sang about the same themes or tropes and used each other 'riddims' to reinforce the idea of a tradition (Bousquet 75). This freedom in the use of musical material was made possible by the Jamaican ownership model, where the record labels owned the music recorded at their studios, and not the artists (Borthwick 99). Lastly, the call-and-response strategy also falls under this aesthetic principle, but I will discuss this more extensively further on. The aesthetics of repetition has contributed to the formation of a cultural Afro-Jamaican identity (Arbino 158), as well as to the communal function of roots reggae music, which was typical of West-African music from the musicians ancestors (Bousquet 73-74). Next to the named functions, the different forms of repetition in roots reggae also have a symbolic value. In contrast to the Western idea of history as a sequence of unique events, the roots reggae artist emphasizes through repetition the circularity of history, as is typical of African diasporic forms of music (Edwards 31-32).

Reggae: an expression of socio-political critique

As I hope has become clear in the previous sections, roots reggae constitutes on many different levels a critique of Jamaican 1970s society and the global state of affairs, which were still heavily marked by (post)colonial power relations. In what follows, I will elaborate on two common intertextual clusters or tropes in roots reggae that artists use to criticize society. First, I will discuss 'the biblical trope', which is constructed around the exile of the Israelites in Babylon, but also entails other biblical references. It is necessary to discuss this trope as the reliance on biblical concepts to criticize the system brought on Jamaica by the former colonizer can seem conflicting, knowing that the same colonizer brought the Bible as well. Secondly, I will discuss a trope centered around a more recent historical event, namely the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865. Artists often refer to slavery and colonial history in general and anchor their criticism in it. I will focus on the Morant Bay Rebellion in particular because it is an important chapter of Jamaican history. There are, of course, various other tropes to be found in roots reggae, but to discuss them all is not the purpose of this article. A detailed discussion of the two named tropes will suffice to uncover the mechanisms at work in constituting a criticism of society. In this, I will pay attention to thematic, lyrical, formal and musical characteristics of roots reggae and how they represent this critique.

The biblical trope

As roots reggae was greatly influenced by the Rastafari movement, and as the Rastafari movement has drawn a considerable amount of inspiration from the Bible (more specifically the King James Version), using biblical tropes grew out to be one of the major ways in which roots reggae musicians voiced their criticism of society. Any casual reggae-listener will have noted that 'Babylon' as well as 'Zion' are frequently featured in these songs. A good case in point is Dennis Brown's 'Rivers of Babylon' (1971), which I will use to explain the Babylon-Zion dichotomy. The song cites Psalm 137 (KJV) and opens with the verses: 'By the rivers of **Babylon** / Where we sat down / And there we wept / When we remembered **Zion**.'

In the first verse, Brown mentions 'Babylon' and a river, referring to the original place of Babylon, going back some four thousand years ago. Historically speaking, 'Babylon' was a Mesopotamian city, on the banks of the Euphrates, where Jewish people, also referred to as 'Israelites', had to live in exile in the sixth century B.C.E. 'Zion' refers in this respect to one of the mountains of Jerusalem in Israel, the place the Israelites want to return to. It would be wrong though to interpret the references to these places as references to the two described historic entities. The references to Babylon and Zion are to be understood in an allegorical way; moreover, this allegorical dimension was already present in the Bible. In the Bible, Babylon symbolizes imperialism, corruption and bondage, for the Israelites, but also for other populations who had to endure something alike; it is the embodiment of evil. Therefore, Rastafarians see themselves and the rest of the black population as Israelites; not only do they identify themselves with the Israelites, they believe they *are* the Israelites portrayed in the Bible. (Thompson 332; 335; 348). A verse of Culture's 'Holy Mount Zion' (1978) illustrates this: 'I and I and I and I wan' go home / To Mount Zion (Children of Israel) / Waan' go home, to Mount Zion'. 'I and I' is a common expression in roots reggae, to which we will come back later on.

In an Afro-Jamaican context then,

> Babylon is the complex of economic, political, religious, and educational institutions and values that evolved from the colonial experiment. The church and the police get honorable mention. (…) Globally, Babylon is that worldly state of affairs in which the struggle for power and money takes precedence over the cultivation of human freedom and the concern for human dignity. (Edmonds 45)

In roots reggae music, Babylon is thus a symbol for Jamaica as a place of exile and oppression. More generally, we could say that Babylon symbolizes the system that perpetuates any form of oppression and injustice. Zion – located in the symbolic Jerusalem – is its opposite; it is the promised land, the land longed for by the Israelites during their exile in Babylon. As many Afro-Jamaicans wish to reconnect with their roots, Zion symbolizes Africa, which they view as their spiritual homeland. It is important though to keep in mind that the Africa or Ethiopia they are longing for, is a romanticized version, and is a place they may never reach. This way, Zion also symbolizes the hope for an alternative system, one that does not discriminate and one that is not marked by its colonial past, be it in Ethiopia or in Jamaica.

When we look once again at Browns' lyrics, we can see that he is unhappy ('there we wept') because he feels that society could have been different if the colonial era did not create and consolidate the existing global power imbalances. Although Brown has never lived in the society he wishes for, he sings as if he has known a pre-colonial past ('we remembered Zion'). This is illustrative of an alternative form of memory that characterizes reggae: "reggae memory does not organize this history into pre- and post-emancipation or colonial and postcolonial periods. Memory holds past, present and future in a seamless continuum of experience" (Edwards 27). The use of the Babylon-Zion dichotomy as symbolic places of evil and good altogether, is just as much a form of alternative knowledge, with the intention of countering the colonial perception of history (Arbino 156-157).

Besides this, there is a lot more biblical symbolism and terminology to be found in roots reggae songs. I will discuss some exemplary cases hereof, using the lyrics of different songs. There are a lot of different types of biblical references in roots reggae music, from literal citations to implicit references. We can find an example of the former in Culture's song 'Calling Rastafari' (1977). 'Many will be called / a few shall be chosen' looks very much like Matthew's verses 22:14 (KJV) 'For many are called, but few are chosen.' The first lines of the earlier mentioned Dennis Brown song are another example of a biblical citation, this time of Psalm 137:1 (KJV), 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.'

Drawing further upon the lyrics of 'Rivers of Babylon', we can see that a major part of the lyrics are 'taken' from the Bible. The song continues with the verses: 'For **the wicked** carried us away in captivity / Required from us a song / How can we sing **King Alpha** song / In a strange land?' These lines also refer to Psalm 137, this time to lines 3-4. However this time, the lyrics are not a copy of the psalm, but a little bit modified. Compare: 'For there **they** that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing **the Lord's** song in a strange land?' (Psalm 137:3-4, KJV). First, the neutral 'they' that captured 'us' (the African descendants), is replaced by 'the wicked', referring to the British colonizers who enslaved their ancestors and deported them to the Caribbean. The second part of verse three of the psalm was not included in the song. If we look at verse four, we can see that 'the Lord's' was replaced by 'King Alpha'. Like the Lord refers to the Judeo-Christian God, King Alpha refers to Haile Selassie I, the living God. The term is a contraction of Selassie's title 'King of Kings, Lord of Lords' – which is also a biblical reference – and 'Alpha and Omega', the biblical symbol of beginning and end. So, apart from the shortening of verse three and the replacement of some terms, the meaning of the verse has remained the same; only the context in which the meaning functions has changed (Thompson 344). Where the original verses referred to the Babylonian exile of the Israelites, the modified verses refer to the Afro-Jamaican exile in Jamaica, which they do not see as their home, but as a place built on the blood of their ancestors, that is still not freed from Western influences.

The transformation the Psalm has undergone is illustrative of the process of syncretism. Gilroy writes that the ritual of storytelling in Black Atlantic culture involves a particular use of language, accentuating their specific cultural dynamics. This way, the stories about exile and slavery adopted from the Bible are told again, this time as a part of the Black Atlantic struggle against racial subordination. Here, the act of storytelling is at least as important as the content of the stories told: "Both storytelling and music-making contributed to an alternative public sphere, and this in turn provided the context in which the particular styles of autobiographical self-dramatization and public self-construction have been formed and circulated as an integral component of insubordinate racial countercultures" (Gilroy 200).

Consequently, biblical language has had a profound impact on Jamaican speech. This impact is also partly explained by the wide-spread belief that the Bible was a book for and by blacks, as it is full of references to Africa and Ethiopia (Murrell 526). Jamaican Patois has adopted certain terminology from the King James Bible through the Rastafari movement; over the years, however, these words have transformed and are not recognizable as biblical language (Thompson 333). The idea behind singing in Patois goes beyond singing in one's own language. By subverting the norms of standard English, the artist creates spaces of spiritual sustenance, which their Jamaican nationality cannot offer. This way, the artist stresses the idea of being an outsider in the postcolonial nation, or as roots reggae singers would put it, an exile from Zion, living in Babylon.

Knowing that roots reggae pioneers were heavily influenced by the Rastafari movement, it is not surprising that the vocabulary soon found its way into roots reggae songs. An example of deformed, Rastafari-influenced language is the typical roots reggae phrase 'I and I' (or 'I-n-I'). Artists use it to refer to themselves and others at once; verses that start with these phrase usually express not only the thoughts of the one who utters them, but the thoughts of a whole community. The phrase implies a kind of human encounter in which the experience of the subjects is so similar that, apart from the physical boundaries between bodies, there exists no separation between them. Additionally, the pronoun 'I' is used to shorten words; examples are 'I-tal' (for 'natural') and 'I-rate' (for 'create'). In the transformation of the words, their meaning is also slightly altered. An extra layer is added to the original; like in 'I and I', a sense of unity is included. 'I-tal' thus means natural, but also being one with nature (Middleton 19-20).

Likewise, the Rastafarian word for God, 'Jah', has its roots in the Bible. It appears one time in capital letters in Psalm 68:4 (KJV), 'Sing unto God, sing praises to his name: extol him that rideth upon the heavens by his name JAH, and rejoice before him.' Originally, in the Bible, Jah was just short for Yahweh, but through the 'appropriation' of this holy book by the Rastafari movement, it has come to mean something else. 'Jah', like Yahweh, is still a god, but He is another God. Jah directly refers to Haile Selassie I, a living and a human God, for the Rastafarians believed that God was within people, and not somewhere in the sky. We can thus see that roots reggae singers use the same religious 'materials' as Jews and Christians, but they invest it with their own meaning, a meaning that best expresses their own senses of (Afro-Jamaican) identity (Murrell 526-527).

These are some examples of how roots reggae is deeply involved with the Bible, and it is not my intention to list all of them. The examples discussed are illustrative of the reliance on biblical symbolism, as well as of the way in which these symbols and concepts are being reshaped. We already know why roots reggae draws so heavily upon the Bible, but more important is the question what this heavy use of the Bible means and implies for roots reggae. Is it problematic that roots reggae uses biblical tropes to criticize the consequences of the colonization, while they have only been able to become familiar with the Bible because of that same colonization? It is a question we must answer if we want to know how roots reggae functioned in the Jamaican society of the 1970s, but it is not the research question of this article, so I am going to take just a brief look at it.

In postcolonial reggae studies, the view prevailed for a long time that this relationship was indeed problematic. Murrell's stance is exemplary of this viewpoint; he sees the Rastafari reading of the Bible as 'unorthodox', because this reading creates a whole new theology. According to Murrell, "Rastas detest Jewish and Christian readings of the scriptures that separate the person and character of the God of the Bible from human responsibility, as in, for example, government policies that result in the exploitation of the poor and the downtrodden" (Murrell 538). In contrast to mainstream Christian or Jewish traditions, the Rastafari movement deliberately seeks parallels between biblical stories and contemporary life. Additionally, both traditions have a different conception of God. Rastafarians do not believe there would be a God who is sitting in the sky and does nothing about the wrong in the world; therefore they believe God to be within people (Murrell 536). While Murrell frames the reliance on biblical tropes in terms of 'plagiarism' and 'hijacking', he nonetheless recognizes that biblical values and Rastafarian political-ideological values do essentially not differ much from each other (Murrell 528; 534). Altogether, Murrell seems to problematize mostly *the way* the movement reads the Bible and not the fact *that* they use the Bible, which contains the moral values of the former colonizer. On the other hand, by using terms like 'hijacking' and 'plagiarism' Murrell still seems to imply that the Rastafari movement has no right to biblical content.

A dive into existing scholarship about postcolonial Bible readings learns us that there is no need to problematize alternative Bible readings. The inscription of one's culture onto the Bible is undertaken by different kinds of marginal groups in an attempt to regain their culture, which was degraded trough colonial structures in society (Sugirtharajah 177). An alternative reading of the Bible allows marginalized groups to

> erase the painful memory of this degradation and effacement, and to make a fresh start by returning to one's roots. (…) it is an attempt to go 'home'. It is a call to self-awareness, aimed at creating an awakening among people (…) It implies a fierce self-esteem, an assertion of self-hood and self-respect instead of slavish conformity to received ideas, or abject helplessness over one's colonized state. It is undertaken by (…) those who have a deep distrust of the centralizing tendencies of Euro-American critical theories which have failed them. It is a struggle for the historical and political presence of groups suppressed or marginalized by colonization and modernization. It is, by definition, an oppositional category which has come to challenge the very idea of Eurocentricity modernism and internationalism. (Sugirtharajah 177-78)

The tendency to read the Bible alternatively is thus correlated to a groups marginal status in a (post)colonial world order. An alternative reading allows these groups to reflect on geo-political relations and official accounts of history, as they still affect existing structures of power, and entails liberatory possibilities (Davidson 52; 56). Ultimately, it is a group's reaction against their exclusion from the general discourse; via the texts, they reposition themselves in it (Sugirtharajah 226).

Within postcolonial reggaes studies, Murrell's stance has more recently been critiqued too, by Thompson. Like Murrell, he questions whether the relationship between the Bible and the Rastafari movement is problematic, but he emphasizes the parallels between the different readings rather than the differences; the texts are still about exile, oppression, diaspora, the wish to head back to their homeland. The context in which the texts function has of course changed. The biblical trope has been a great instrument for roots reggae musicians, given the many similarities between the history of the Israelites and that of the Afro-Jamaican population. The Bible has helped Afro-Jamaican artists to voice their criticism of society through a reinterpretation, but also a transformation of the ancient biblical stories (Thompson 337; 333; 328-329). The biblical trope and the prophetic character of these texts are thus to be seen as a vehicle to express the criticisms they have of society, that serves the roots reggae call for liberation and for a system that does not perpetuate racial inequality (Edwards 30).

Since the values contained in the Bible are so universal, Thompson argues that they cannot be hijacked. Therefore, he thinks that Rastafari and roots reggae's dependence of the Bible is better understood as a tribute to the power and relevance of the original text. All in all, the various readings of the Bible are still part of the same tradition, each with their own peculiarities. Additionally, Thompson argues that if we considered reggae's and Rastafari's use of the Bible a form of hijacking, than texts and stories of Christianity and Islam could equally be considered as a of hijacking the Judaic narratives. These examples make it clear that framing Bible use in roots reggae music as theft, like Murrell does, is misplaced. Rather, the biblical trope in roots reggae can be considered a strategy of demarginalization; they adopt the same text that was once used by the colonizer to endorse oppression and systemic racism, to proclaim the opposite (Thompson 350; 347-348). After all, the marginal position Afro-Jamaicans find themselves in has been imposed on them by the present oppressive structures. Instead, roots reggae artists places themselves in another marginal position, this time a self-designated one. It is a position of resistance, located within the music and provided through the telling of alternative stories (Edwards 25). Instead of a problematic given, we can consider the biblical trope thus as a means to take back the agency that the former colonizer took away, as well as a means to critique the marks they left behind in Jamaican society.

The Morant Bay Rebellion trope

Next to the biblical trope, we encounter what I am going to call the 'Morant Bay Rebellion trope'. I will mainly focus on lyrics that refer to the Morant Bay Rebellion, but I will also discuss direct references to Marcus Garvey. This trope is only a part of a wide range of references to the colonial period in roots reggae music, but suffices to illustrate the mechanisms of critique at work.

To understand the lyrical references that form the subject of the following section, it is necessary to know what happened at the Morant Bay Rebellion. The event was an important chapter of Jamaican history; protagonists Paul Bogle and George William Gordon continue to be celebrated as national heroes until today. On October 11th of 1865, Paul Bogle (1820-1865), a black deacon, led about two to three hundred Jamaicans to Morant Bay, as a reaction to the political and economic power of the white planters, who formed a small elite. Governor Edward John Eyre repressed the rebellion immediately with disproportionate force, causing a bloodbath. Afterwards he had the initiator Bogle hanged, as well as George William Gordon (1820-1865), a mixed-race businessman and political opponent of Eyre's who did not participate in the rebellion (Reddy 73-74).

At the time, slavery was already abolished – since 1833 – and the former slave population constituted the new working class. In the 1860s, the poor living conditions of the black population peaked, as the sugar prices dropped and they had to pay the price for this in the form of taxes (Reddy 83). In addition, the country had suffered from drought and epidemics of smallpox and cholera during the previous decade (Heuman 109). However, these conditions cleared the way for the Great Revival, the growing popularity of the many syncretic religions in Jamaica, including various Baptist churches. These religions provided a means of organized resistance in the form of 'Underhill meetings'. The meetings were organized in response to the harsh living conditions of the Afro-Jamaican population, and named after Baptist Edward Underhill who wrote a letter to the government in which he denounced these conditions (Winter). An important figure in this matter was Native Baptist George William Gordon, who built his own church, where Paul Bogle served as deacon (Reddy 83; 102). During religious gatherings, Gordon complained about the oppression of black man by the government, the high wages and poverty and expressed himself negatively about governor Eyre (Heuman 122). In addition, he was Justice of the Peace until 1862; Eyre dismissed him from his task as a response to his criticism. The following year however, Gordon was elected as member of the House of Assembly, where he continued criticizing Eyre (Winter). Governor Eyre, in turn, believed that the poverty and crime that plagued Jamaica was the fault of the population's laziness and indifference. As an adherent of the Anglican church, he saw Gordon and the Baptists as troublemakers who contributed to the escalation of the unstable political-economic situation (Heuman 115; 111; 118). Needless to say, Gordon and Eyre were political enemies who were diametrically opposed on all levels.

When the rebellion finally took place, the lightly armed rebels were soon attacked by a militia with firearms. Some joined the rebels, both men and women, which resulted in them being about 2000. In the following days, they spread across the countryside and by order of Governor Eyre, the British army hunted them down. In doing so, they not only killed the alleged rebels, but everyone who crossed their paths. In addition, they burned down thousands of houses. Bogle was caught and hanged after a court martial. Gordon, as well as Bogle, was executed by hanging, although there was no evidence that he had anything to do with the rebellion. His hanging was 'justified' by the martial laws Morant Bay was under back then; as the colony was in a state of exception, the violence against Gordon, Bogle, the rebels and even innocent people was deemed correct, serving civilization. State of exception or not, let it be clear that Governor Eyre, saw an opportunity to eliminate Gordon, who posed a real threat to him as opposition politician, and grabbed it with both hands (Reddy 83-84; 107).

The song 'Innocent Blood' (1979) by Culture is built around the Morant Bay Rebellion trope, thematizing the Morant Bay Rebellion, and the stories of George William Gordon and Paul Bogle.

> **One year after slavery** / The people were all suffering from **small pox** / Ooh yeah, I say / **George William Gordon** was Justice of the Peace / At **Morant Bay** during that time / So he sent abroad for some of his doctors friends / To come and administer unto them / To see what they could do, oh, oh / And because he did such a good / They catch him and **hang him** on top ring the **Cotton tree**, whoa oh / Man, if you think a lie **I** a tell / Take a look upon the **ten dollar bill**, whoa oh.. it true / There you can see him with **his neck wrapped up** / There he was hung with his eye glass on (Jah know)

In the first stanza, singer Joseph Hill tells the story of George William Gordon. The stanza opens with a reference of time, 'One year after slavery', which can historically only refer to the year 1834. According to the song, 'The people were all suffering from small pox' at the time. However, the smallpox afflicted Jamaica during the 1850s; more specifically, according to Seaton and Dalby, the smallpox epidemic took place in 1852. Then, Gordon comes into the picture as 'Justice of the Peace at Morant Bay during that time'. This statement is correct when 'during that time' refers to the smallpox period, but not when it refers to the year after slavery. The following three verses could be an illustration of Gordon in exercising his function as

Justice of the Peace, as one of his occupations was visiting hospitals (Winter). Then Hill jumps over to his death by hanging, without mentioning the rebellion.

What immediately stands out is that Culture tells this history anachronistically. This is rather the rule than the exception in forms of cultural memory, like music, but it nonetheless deserves our attention. If we would ignore the first verse, the story already seems to be more correct in terms of time, but there are still some holes to fill. The years between Gordon as Justice of the Peace (which lasted until 1862) and his death in the aftermath of the rebellion in 1865 were not mentioned in the song. Culture mentions as reason for his death 'Because he did such a good'. One possible reason for not mentioning the rebellion could be that Culture wants to emphasize that the rebellion was only the occasion, but not the reason for Gordon's death. Eyre and Gordon had been political opponents for some time and the rivalry began when the latter was Justice of the Peace. By leaving the rebellion out of the story, the real reason for his death is conveyed more clearly to the listener; namely, because Gordon stood up against Eyre so the latter would stop exploiting the black population. Another, or an additional explanation for the anachronistic storytelling is in line with this and is a common strategy in roots reggae music (Arbino 161). By transcending historical truth, the artist gains control over it and thus obtains the agency his ancestors could never hope for, while also questioning the course of history, which got distorted by the colonial occupation. This can be seen as a form of informal education; the artists want to teach their audience alternatives to Western history and society. At the same time, the story acquires a symbolic value in transcending 'the truth'; the story comes to symbolize colonial malpractices in general. It is a way of processing the societal trauma of the colonial occupation (Arbino 168; 159).

Returning to Gordon's death then, Culture elaborates on his hanging. Interestingly enough, Culture locates the execution at the top of 'the Cotton tree'. According to a sketch of the execution, however, the rebels were hanged at the ruins of the Court house. But the Cotton tree did actually have a special value for Gordon and the other Native Baptists. At the time of the Morant Bay Rebellion, there used to be a big cotton tree at the crossroads near Morant Bay. Just before the rebellion broke out, Bogle and the other rebels gathered at this tree and often religious meetings by the Baptists were held there. The tree had thus a sacred meaning within the Native Baptist church, through the influence of African religious elements. It was believed that Cotton trees held the spirits of the death (Sheller 549; 565-566). In the light of this information, Cultures reference to the tree makes more sense; Gordon might not be hanged at the tree, but his spirit is believed to reside there.

The song continues with the following lines: ‘Man, if you think a lie I a tell / Take a look upon the ten dollar bill, whoa oh.. it true / There you can see him with his neck wrapped up / There he was hung with his eye glass on (Jah know)’. There are two important elements to discuss here. First of all, Culture mentions ‘the ten dollar bill’, which supposedly depicts Gordon ‘with his neck wrapped up’. This phrasing immediately evokes the image of Gordon with a noose around his neck. Looking at the ten dollar bill then – which is a coin nowadays – Gordon indeed has his neck wrapped up, but not with a noose. Instead his neck is wrapped with a shirt collar, as he is depicted in the typical clothing of the former colonizer. As a high-ranking member of society, this clothing was imposed on him by the British. Culture purposely places the two images next to each other, thus framing Gordon’s costume as a figurative noose.

Secondly, the verse ‘if you think a lie I a tell’ is worth looking at as well. Earlier in the stanza, Culture also sings ‘I say’. At first sight, these utterances may seem just lyrical filling of no considerable importance. Nonetheless, the use of ‘I’ serves a key function in roots reggae music, because it allows the singer to pose himself as a witness of the rebellion. As Arbino explains, “Among other lyric devices, reggae blends trauma and eye witnessing by using the personal pronoun ‘I’ in song lyrics. More than a mere stylistic decision, (…) the ‘I’ functions in reggae music for the artist to position him or herself as a victim or witness to emphasize the processing of a cultural trauma within their work” (Arbino 155). On the other hand, later in the song, Joseph Hill sings ‘Don’t believe I, but believe the history book’. However, this does not detract from the applied witnessing strategy; in this case, the singer refers to the history book because he knows it supports the story told. In other cases, the witness strategy is used the other way around and undermines the history that is written in the books (Arbino 157).

In the second stanza, Culture tells the story of Paul Bogle.

> **Paul Boggle** walked from Spanish Town to Stony Gut / For the justice of black mankind, whoa, oh, oh / Nine men and himself make ten / When he **reached Spanish Town** / They refused to hear what he was saying, man / So they walked away and say: / "Come on, let us form our own government", whoa, oh, oh / Then straight after that you could see / Where **the rebellion**, rebellion start / Whoa, oh, oh, man, hear what I'm saying

This stanza does address the Morant Bay Rebellion, but also highlights the events that led to it. A month before the actual rebellion, Bogle and a group of poor peasants had in fact walked from Stony Gut to Spanish Town (and not like in the lyrics, 'from Spanish Town to Stony Gut') because they wanted to speak Governor Eyre about their living conditions. After a more than 70km walk, the governor refused to hear them, aggravating political tensions (Winter). As Culture sings, Eyre's refusal has indeed directly contributed to the happening of the Morant Bay Rebellion.

It is obvious that in 'Innocent Blood'*,* Culture criticizes Eyre's position in the course of this historical event. But as the event was more than hundred years ago when they wrote the song, there should be other explanations for the application of the Morant Bay Rebellion trope as well. A musical reliving of the event allows

> Jamaican listeners to "re-experience" the trauma of their colonial history and process it. These lyrical revisions, fictional or otherwise, also put Jamaicans in control of colonial history, an important intervention of agency. Jamaicans desperately needed this agency as Jamaica became a postcolonial nation, and reggae provided them with an identity largely based on pride in their African roots, which the colonizers had attempted to denigrate (Arbino 159).

Finally we must not forget that the song first and foremost criticizes the status of Afro-Jamaicans in the society of the time. As Edwards writes, "most songs about slavery and the historical past are directed at present conditions" (Edwards 31). Gordon and Bogle both died for the civil rights of the Afro-Jamaican population, and the moment Culture wrote the song, Jamaica was still not an equal place. By revising this particular past event, it seems like Culture wanted to raise consciousness among the black population about their socio-political position.

Next, we have also the Jamaican national hero Marcus Mosiah Garvey (1887-1940). Although he was not born yet during the Morant Bay Rebellion, he is an important figure to discuss in this matter. More than one might expect at first glance, the rebellion has shaped his worldview and way of thinking. In fact, his father was known to be present at an 'Underhill meeting' where Gordon gave a speech. That day Gordon posted placards with the words "Remember that he only is free whom the truth makes free— You are no longer slaves; but free men" in St. Ann and St. Thomas. These words soon make us think of the words

Garvey spoke in Canada in 1937: "We are going to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery because whilst others might free the body, none but ourselves can free the mind." It is doubtful that Garvey was directly influenced by Gordon's placards, but through his father, Gordon's ideas could have influenced Marcus Garvey to become who he was, a civil rights activist who continued the work of Gordon and Bogle (Sheller 566).

Garvey, too, is a much-sung figure in roots reggae music. Burning Spears album *Marcus Garvey* (1975) is in itself an example of that, with two songs named after him, 'Marcus Garvey' and 'Old Marcus Garvey'. In the former, he seems to refer to Garvey's prophecy on which the Rastafari movement is built, singing 'Marcus Garvey's words come to pass'. If we think about it, however, the verse does not necessarily refer to the prophecy; it can refer to anything Garvey spoke about. Education, for example, is something Garvey spoke a lot about. He called on the Afro-Jamaicans to teach themselves, not through the existing institutions but through alternative modes that were not biased by Western structures, and about important things such as how to live (Karenga 184). If we look at the verse from this perspective, Garvey's words come to pass too, as Burning Spear is teaching his audience like Garvey did once. It is quite common for roots reggae artists to take on the role of teacher (Bousquet 73). In addition, Burning Spear connects his tribute to Garvey to societal critique: 'Can't get no food to eat / Can't get no money to spend'. Needless to say, in these lines he denounces the prevailing poverty in Jamaica. By connecting the two topics, it seems like he calls on the population to keep believing in Garvey's philosophy; that is the ultimate way to leave Babylonian society behind one day.

Another song featured on the *Marcus Garvey* album is 'Slavery Days'. I will quickly look into the song, because an important mechanism is at work here. The song opens with Burning Spear singing 'Do you remember the days of slav'ry?', followed by an answer of the backing vocals, repeating the question. Throughout the whole song, Burning Spear's verses or calls are answered by them and even by the instrumental accompaniment. This mechanism of call and response is called antiphony. Gilroy has described antiphony as the most important formal feature of the musical traditions of the Black Atlantic, "which symbolizes and anticipates new, non-dominating social relationships" (Gilroy 78-79). Trough antiphony, boundaries between self and the other are blurred, especially during live performances, as the audience sings along the answers. Consequently, antiphony implies that the process of meaning construction is fundamentally collective, as the lyrics are product of the dialogue between different voices

(Bousquet 75). In addition, the participation of the audience increases the proliferation of the systems of informal knowledge propagated by roots reggae songs and creates a sense of community, as the values sung are shared and constructed together (Arbino 162). Lastly, as a technique that falls under the aesthetics of repetition, antiphony underpins the circularity of history. This way, Burning Spear reminds his audience that, although the days of physical bondage are over, one must watch out for mental enslavement.

Behind the tropes

The tropes discussed both deal with a different subject, but are closely related to each other through the way they function in roots reggae music. The tropes have in common that they are both a means to express a critique. In the biblical trope, artists construct allegorical concepts to refer to society as it is on the one hand, and to the ideal society on the other hand. The trope is used not only to criticize, but also to create hope and a vision for the future. In the Morant Bay Rebellion trope, the critique seems directed at the past, but in reality, it is not. The musical revisiting of the past has the objective of being in control, and can be seen as a figurative recuperation of the agency the ancestors of the artists had lost. At first sight, the subject of critique seems to be different in each trope, but a closer look learns us that the critiques are essentially directed at the same issue, being 1970s Jamaican society. Both tropes are deployed to raise the awareness of the audience on their unfair living conditions and they provide a framework for the artist to take on the role of teacher. Besides this, the tropes serve a communal function. As a great deal of roots reggae songs take the same tropes as starting point – this is especially the case for the biblical trope – the tropes are part of a tradition and contribute to the formation of a community.

Accordingly, both tropes are at the service of the political, communicating alternative truths. As we have learned, the political is inherently (and often implicitly) part of Black Atlantic culture, and hence, of roots reggae. Through the use of these tropes, the political dimension comes more explicitly to the fore; this makes them postcolonial tropes par excellence. In the biblical trope, this manifests itself through an alternative approach of the former oppressor's texts. In doing so, roots reggae artists reflect on and oppose dominant cultural discourses – and by extension the dominant socio-political discourse. In the Morant Bay Rebellion trope, the political dimension is even more clear; the artist relives and investigates a past event that has a major political value. This way, the roots reggae artist wants to gain political agency in the postcolonial present.

Conclusion

During the 1970s, Jamaican life was overrun by economic, political and social issues. Especially Afro-Jamaican people lived in poverty and felt out of place in their country. With the emergence of roots reggae, Afro-Jamaican artists found a way to express their dissatisfaction of the state of affairs. They do this trough lyrics, but also trough thematic tropes and through strategies related to the formal elements of the music. In doing this, they proclaim an alternative worldview and spread their ideas among the population. As roots reggae aesthetics cannot be separated from politics, the music is invested with the rejection of the postcolonial nation state they live in, consequently shaping the socio-political consciousness of the Afro-Jamaican population. By means of a number of salient thematical tropes, roots reggae artists share their experience of Babylonian modernity, which are placed in contrast to Western experiences of modernity.

The tropes prove to be productive reference points for the creation of an alternative discourse. In the biblical trope, the shortcoming of a Jamaican national identity is emphasized. An alternative identity is sought in biblical language and symbols by altering their original meaning into concepts that are more suitable to express their thoughts. The roots reggae artist disregards previous biblical interpretations and uses the text to create a new narrative, one that corresponds with the Afro-Jamaican experience of the postcolonial world order. In doing so, they nurture the belief that someday, Zion will be within reach. But for now, the biblical trope provides a means to criticize Babylon so maybe one day the structures of racial subordination and global power imbalance will disappear. The Morant Bay Rebellion trope, as a revision of the historical past, is deployed in a similar way. In the music, historical events transcend their context and come to symbolize the colonial era as a whole; artists and audience find in it a means to process the trauma the colonial past has left. The revision and criticism of the Morant Bay Rebellion can be considered as a criticism of this past, but above all, of its consequences in Jamaican 1970s society. The revision of such events is important, as it brings agency with it, agency that was long-denied to the Afro-Jamaican population by the course of history.

The roots reggae artist achieves a critique of postcolonial society by deploying specific strategies mobilizing these tropes. Anachronism, moments of witnessing through the use of 'I', deformation of language and the aesthetics of repetition are all such strategies and not only do they question contemporary society in Jamaica, they question Western conceptions of knowledge in general. Notions as race, nation, memory and history are subverted and replaced by renewed understandings of those concepts. In contrast to the Western framework, the framework created by roots reggae artists leaves room for modes of subjectivity and introduces an alternative form of knowledge characterized by orality, informality and spirituality. Both on a lyrical-thematic as on a formal-strategic level does roots reggae address questions and criticisms of the Western framework, guiding the way to a world built on inclusive structures.

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