**Jamaica: A Brief Report**By Artemis Allison

**Preface**

When talking about the culture and ideals of another nation, it is extraordinarily easy to just go onto Google and Wikipedia and search up buzzwords as to what that nation appears to believe, but in order to get a truly accurate picture of what it is like in that nation, it’s often best to go and try to reach out to someone who lives there and to ask them what it is like, to listen to them and speak alongside them instead of to speak over them. In the process of working on this project, I remembered that, in an MMO I used to play, I had a clanmate who was from Jamaica; I used this as an opportunity not only to talk to him as a valuable primary source as what life is like for him and what he knows and has lived through but as an opportunity to reconnect with a friend I hadn’t spoken to in a while. Out of respect for his privacy, he’ll be referred to as Blue here in this paper, and any sources that he used for questions that he wasn’t entirely sure about will be provided in an appendix. As most of our communication was done over instant messages, there won’t be an entire log, and snippets of a document that me and him worked on together during our conversation will be included in quotes as part of our conversation.

**Introduction**

Jamaica, in the mind of the average American, is often thought of as the “land of reggae and Rastafarianism”, almost; “the land of smoking weed and those guys on TV with the funny accents”. It’s something that frustrates Blue to this day: “For starters, Americans have more access to weed than Jamaicans do – it was only until a few years ago that it was made somewhat decriminalized, and so up until then weed was associated with Rastafarians so weed and weed smokers were heavily targeted by police, alongside Rastafarian.” What makes up a big part of Jamaica’s culture in the eyes of the rest of the world, in reality, makes up very little of Jamaica’s true culture, but part of that is just due to how Jamaica is often viewed. “There are non-Rastafarians who smoke weed, and people do like reggae music, but the frequency is heavily exaggerated by foreigners. It’d be like calling America the land of just hamburgers and country music. There’s truth to it, but it’s an exaggerated stereotype.”

Like many Caribbean countries, it’s seen as a place to go on vacation and party, with, often, little attention paid to the “true” Jamaica, the Jamaica that struggled for years under British rule and struggles from a divided political culture still today. Most tourists aren’t even aware of the struggles that Jamaica goes through today, and admittedly, it’s not entirely their fault: American schools are notorious for not even fully covering America’s own struggles; it would take a small miracle for these same schools to suddenly care about their Caribbean neighbors that aren’t Cuba. For all of its richness in culture, the way that Jamaica is often boiled down to just being viewed as a Rastafarian stereotype does the nation a great discredit to its history, to its beauty, to its culture, and to what it is now today.

**The Culture, History, and Beauty of Jamaica**

Perhaps the easiest way to get a glimpse of Jamaica’s culture without needing to see the nation or to know its people is to recognize what its flag stands for; the colors on it represent a great deal of what makes Jamaica, Jamaica – one thing that Blue is quick to point out, however, is what the black stands for: it’s “not their skin colour, please do not say it represents the colour of the people”, but rather they represent “the strength and creativity of the Jamaican people”. The yellow diagonal cross is supposed to showcase the “large abundance of sunshine and wealth in the form of natural resources”, when I asked Blue, and he also clarified that the green triangles are supposed to be a representation of the nation’s hope, alongside “the country’s natural resources and biodiversity”. He was rather keen to note – and proud of the fact too, as a vexillology nerd himself – that the Jamaican flag is, supposedly, the only national flag without any white, red, or blue present on the flag.

Blue was also keen to share his love for the national dish of Jamaica, which is a dish of ackee and saltfish. Neither of the main components, the ackee nor the saltfish, are actually native to Jamaica: ackee is native to Ghana and was brought over by slaves, and saltfish, a form of codfish or other non-oily whitefish preserved in salt, was brought to the country by trade. Preparation of the dish is careful: ackee has in it a fatal toxin when ingested unripe, and seeds, alongside red veins, inside the fruit must be cleaned before it can be eaten. They’re both boiled, the saltfish to remove salt while the ackee is boiled until soft, while seasonings such as chopped onions, garlic, tomatoes, dried pimento seeds – “also known as allspice,” says Blue – scallions, and scotch bonnet peppers are sauteed in oil. Then, the ackee and saltfish are added to the seasonings and lightly fried until done, and then served alongside a variety of sides such as dumplings, fried plantains, or, as Blue put it, “food” – in Jamaica, he says, “food is a term given to an array of boiled ground provisions and starchy foods like potatoes, dasheen, yellow yams and unripe bananas”.

“My general idea for ackee and saltfish is that the vegetables and seasoning should complement the ackee and saltfish rather than be more abundant than them, so I let that influence how much I put of each I put in. But that's personal preference. With ackee it's probably that the ackee is the perfect vessel for the seasonings used. The ackee itself has a subtle taste which is good by itself but when combined with allspice, garlic, tomatoes etc. it just carries those flavours really far, if that makes any sense. Plus, the soft texture makes it easy to pair with other sides.”

He provided a recipe alongside this for how he prefers to make his ackee and saltfish, as well as acceptable substitutes and another Jamaican dish, Jamaican Oxtails, He provided a recipe alongside this information for how he prefers to make his ackee and saltfish that’ll be provided in an appendix, as well as acceptable substitutes in preparing ackee and saltfish. Blue also mentioned another Jamaican dish, Jamaican Oxtails, which itself invokes the tradition of one-pot cooking that was brought over to Jamaica by the slaves brought there, but we spent less time talking about it, instead choosing to focus now on one of Blue’s favorite topics: history and politics.

To understand the rest of Jamaica’s culture and its current status, its exports, its ethnicities, the languages spoken, the tourist attractions, all of this, it’s important to understand the steps that brought Jamaica to this point, starting with the European colonization of the land. It’s a result of the European colonization that would result in Jamacia having, currently, over 90% of the population on the island made from people of African descent as a result of the indigenous populations of the Tainos and Arawaks being almost completely wiped out in a genocide by the Spanish; those that survived, today, live in a semi-autonomous part of the island alongside the descendants of runaway slaves as a result of treaties made during the British colonization of Jamaica. In fact, as a result of Jamaica being part of the British Commonwealth still as a former colony, the Queen of England is still technically the head of state – though she exerts little power over the government, which his a multiparty, unitary – “we’re not broken into federations” – state with a democratic parliament, featuring a prime minister that serves for five years. As a former British colony, English is spoken and the official language, there is a creole of English spoken in Jamaica called Patois that’s spoken as a sort of slang by the majority of the population; like many creoles and similar off-shoots of language, it’s rarely used in an official manner and is viewed, much like many creoles, as a crass, “poor” version of the language.

Currently, at the time of writing, the Prime Minister of Jamaica is Andrew Michael Holness, who is the leader of the center-right Jamaica Labour Party, which is one of two major political parties in Jamaica alongside the People’s National Party, a center-left party “formed originally from middle class, non-white Jamaicans”. Former Prime Minister Michael Norman Manley, often considered a “populist” leader, was part of the party, and is notable for his emphasis on social programs, literacy, unionization, and similar equality measures were what made him a remarkable leader; however, he’s often considered a controversial leader due to supposed ties with Fidel Castro and the fact that the middle class of Jamaica felt alienated by his redistributionist policies.

Like many former colonies, Jamaica too suffers from a bit of disorder politically – while the nation has never suffered from an unpeaceful transition of power, the nation is “still plagued by corruption and the suppression of minority groups by the state and by individuals in the form of gangs” such as the Eventide Fire, which, while not confirmed to be politically motivated, occurred in a time of political violence in Jamaica that it is suspected to have been politically motivated. In the fire, over 150 people perished. The commonness of violence like this, when I talked to Blue, wasn’t common, but at the same time, he mentioned that it wasn’t infrequent enough that it ever truly felt unexpected, especially with rising political tensions in recent years. Part of this is because, in the lower class, entire groups of housing are often overseen by gang leaders known as “dons” that are, “in varying degrees of secrecy”, supported by one of the main two parties to intimidate voters into voting for their respective party while inflicting violence on rival communities. Gang violence that’s less politically sponsored is also rampant, and it focuses mostly on things like lottery scamming, extorting businesses, and drugs. Discrimination and violence against women and the LGBTQIA+ population is also, sadly, common; while women make up around 60% of all managerial population, they make up only 30% of parliament members, have little protection against sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination, and “one in four Jamaican women report experiencing some form of abuse”. Gay marriage is still illegal in Jamaica, gay sex can be punished by up to ten years in jail, and overall, the queer community faces high rates of violence “in the form of stabbings, acid attacks, corrective rapes, and murders”. Blue talked to me about the murder of Dwayne Jones, someone who was “either a crossdresser or trans, I’m not entirely sure, sorry”, and, when it was discovered that they were male while dressed in female clothes, they were beaten, stabbed, shot, and then ran over by a car; their friend, Khloe, was also attacked and almost rapped, and the house that Dwayne used to live in was burnt down in an act of arson later in the year.

Religion is a big motivating factor in this, as the sects of Christianity in Jamaica disapprove heavily of queerness in any sense. “Jamaica has the most churches per capita in the world, and the church is an extremely powerful social force,” Blue told me as we talked about how Christianity makes up 70% of the religious beliefs in Jamaica; Rastafarianism, which shares some Christian beliefs, is one of the most prominent religious minority groups on Jamaica, shares a similar disdain for queerness, seeing it as unnatural and something that exists to “get rid of black people”. “It’s funny how they pull off being incredibly strict with their beliefs and coming off as some of the chillest [sic] people in the planet given that they aren’t openly ranting about something they find judgement worthy.” Beyond these beliefs, however, there are fringes of African spirituality that is practiced by small parts of the population, in the forms of Myal, a Christianized version of an African spiritual practice that “focused on dancing and possession” alongside Revivalism, Pocomania, and Kumina. The practice of “Obeah, a form of witchcraft,” is illegal, as are most of occult.

It’s interesting, too, that Rastafarianism is one of the reasons, in Blue’s eyes, that queer expression is suppressed in Jamaica, given the rich history of Rastafarianism involves being oppressed themselves; as a religion unique to Jamaica, it’s important too to understand the religion’s origins. The religion, which takes on parts of Christianity, focuses heavily on black empowerment and nationalism and to “return to Africa” – often to a degree that Blue says “it can be seen as black supremacist”. Rastafarianism, of which Bob Marley was a part of, is the reason that Jamaica is known internationality for dreadlocks and weed, and it was heavily suppressed under British colonial rule – and, to some degree, still today – due to their antiestablishment beliefs that openly condemned the British monarchy, which culminated in such events like “Bad Friday”, in which the then-Prime Minister called for a mass detention of all Rastafarians after a fight between them and police burned down a gas station.

All of this, however, does not detract from Jamaica’s growing economic wealth, nor its uniqueness. As exports, Jamaica is growing due to its exportation of aluminum oxide and alumina, which it is able to do thanks to its large quantities of bauxite. Similarly, through a joint venture with Venezuela, there is a single petroleum refinery in the country that refines crude oil that is imported then from Venezuela and exports it abroad. Things like coffee and alcohol, alongside other processed food items, make up a smaller, but notable, part of Jamaica’s economy as well.

Tourism, however, is of course a big one – one of the things that Blue emphasized about Jamaica was its beauty and how it was where Ian Fleming wrote all the James Bonds novels after he fell in love with the nation’s beautiful scenery. It’s tourist attractions such as Dunn’s River Falls that highlight the natural beauty of Jamaica, while things like the Devon House and Rose Hall Great House showcase much of the manmade history of importance in Jamaica. Like many Caribbean islands, it’s a beautiful place; like many Caribbean islands, Jamaica is still completely unique for its rich history and culture.

Appendix A: Blue’s Sources

As mentioned, during our conversation, Blue was fact checking himself constantly to make sure that he was giving me correct information. These sources can be found compiled for easy of access; due to the interview nature of our conversation, however, it was difficult for me to individually include citations where the information presented itself.

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Appendix B: Blue’s Recipe

**Ingredients**

1) Enough ackee to fill a small pot like 3/4 way (that's probs like 1 or two cans of ackee though canned ackee kinda sucks from what I hear). For me its just a small bag, I never really looked at the exact size.

2) Saltfish/Dried Salted Cod (Little under half a pound, it's really up to what ratio you like)

3) Half or a whole yellow onion (Diced)

4) A medium sized tomato (Diced)

5) 1 or 1/2 a Sweet/Bell Pepper (Chopped)

6) Seasonings: Garlic (3 cloves minced), Escallion (1 or two stalks chopped), Scotch Bonnet Peppers (Or any hot pepper you can find, use as many as you feel necessary, you can deseed and mince or throw in whole but be careful not to pierce them), Thyme (2 sprigs is good), Allspice/Pimento (A small spoonful of the dried seeds or powdered. Be careful not to bite into them though)

7) Vegetable or coconut oil

8) Salt and pepper to taste.

Blue’s notes: “If you can’t get saltfish, corned pork also works (cured pork tails would likely be the easiest to find), and many of the seasonings can be substituted for their dried or powdered version. Jamaican all-purpose seasoning has pretty much everything there.”

**Cooking:**

1) Clean and desalt the saltfish. The saltfish can be desalted via soaking overnight or just boiling for an extra time (This may or may not be necessary depending  on how its packaged. Same applies for corned pork you just gotta boil it for around half an hour to 45 mins)

2) Boil the saltfish for around 10 -15 mins. This gets rid of extra salt and softens it.

3) Remove saltfish from pot and break into flakes (ie chop it up til you get small pieces)

4) Boil ackee in lightly salted water for around the same time as the saltfish or until its almost as soft as you want it (Unnecessary for canned ackee since its already cooked)

5) In a large pan/skillet/whatever best suits you, pour in around a tablespoon or two of oil and turn to medium heat.

6) Sauté onions, tomatoes and seasonings until translucent and/or fragrant

7) Add in saltfish and sauté for a few additional minutes to get the fish acquainted with the seasoning. Before you do this though, make sure to taste the saltfish to see if it needs additional boiling (is too salty) (If you’re using dried seasonings, add them in now)

8) Add drained ackee into skillet and gently mix with other ingredients

9) Allow the ackee to cook for a few minutes until adequately softened, stirring occasionally.

10) Serve with your choice of Ground Provisions, Vegetables or Jamaican sides.