

The Influences of Conservative Christianity, Rastafari and Dance Hall Music within Jamaica on Homophobia and Stigma against People Living with HIV and AIDS

Roderick Hewitt

Abstract

This article argues that the conservative patriarchal bias Christianity of the Jamaican churches' understanding of human sexualities, Rastafari's selective use of the Hebrew Scriptures to oppose homosexuality and the rouge masculinities and the anti-LGBT (Lesbians, Gays Bi-sexual and Lesbian Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender community) narrative culture of Dance hall music constitute three potent sub-cultural forces within Jamaican context that promote negative influences of homophobia and stigma against people living with HIV. In spite of intense and persistent international pressure from LGBT and other human rights groups to force the government of Jamaica to change the colonial bequeathed laws that discriminate against homosexuals, public opposition from religious groups have also prevented the government from taking steps to liberalize and legalize homosexuality.

In order for a more enlightened attitude towards the LGBT community and victims of HIV and AIDS to emerge within Jamaica fundamental changes are needed in the embedded conservative church and Rastafari theologies on human sexuality. Also the anti-LGBT and hegemonic masculinities narrative culture of Dance hall music must give way to conscious advocacy of healthy life affirming gender relationships.

Keywords: Rastafari, Conservative Christianity, Homophobia, Stigma, Reggae, Dance hall, HIV and AIDS

Introduction

Jamaica is known around the world as a prime tourism destination with its pulsating and dynamic culture, fast runners, Reggae music, Rastafari movement, white sand beaches, Blue Mountain coffee, excellent cuisine and hospitable people. However, below the surface of the Brand Jamaica ,advert of ‘Jamaica ... No Problem’ lies the reality of a dark dehumanizing homophobic subculture that thrives on an intense intolerance of Lesbians, Gays Bi-sexual and Lesbian Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender community (LGBT) lifestyle. The paradox is that the nation boasts a multi-ethnic population of 2,950,210 million (Jamaica population: 2016) with a ‘Out of Many one People’ national motto. The national anthem constitutes a prayer requesting: Eternal Father Bless our Land and the country is generally classified as a Christian Nation with more churches per sq. kilometer than any other country (Jamaica Religion: Data 2016). From the time of the arrival of the Roman Catholic Church with the first Europeans in 1493 (Sherlock & Bennett 1998:63-64) and the change over to the British in 1655 with the Church of England being the State Church, followed by Protestant Missionary movements in 1754 (Senior 2003:332) that resulted in what is classified as the ‘Traditional or mainline Churches’. However, the period since national independence in 1962 has seen a fundamental shifted in church allegiance where majority of the Christian population has changed their membership migrating into a diverse mix of pneumatological driven Pentecostal/ Charismatic churches.

The chapter argues that the contemporary international focus of human Rights bodies on the plight of the LGBT community in Jamaica has exposed the deeply rooted religio-cultural opposition of the Jamaican government and people to liberalize and legalize homosexuality that is currently outlawed under the colonial influenced constitution. In order to adequately explore the nature of the place hostility to homosexuality and the stigma linked to HIV and acquired immune-deficiency syndrome (AIDS), this chapter has chosen to interrogate the unholy toxic mixture of conservative evangelical patriarchal bias Christianity of the Jamaican churches in ideological solidarity with Rastafari selective use of the Hebrew Scriptures health laws from the book of Leviticus to oppose homosexuality and the rouge masculinities, anti-LGBT narrative culture of Dance hall music.

A Colonial Bequeathed Hegemonic Masculinities

These three culture shaping forces on attitudes towards gender relationships in Jamaica have bequeathed a fundamentalist literal reading of the Bible on issues of sex, sexuality, gender, masculinity, patriarchy and homosexuality that has created unhealthy gender relationships. In addition, the structural European white supremacist political domination of the society and the systemic marginalization of the underclass African-Jamaican male since colonization and slavery have ensured minimum social advancement through education and economic capital attainment (Hope 2010:8). The system was fixed and set to keep the African-Jamaican male down and never was able to attain middle-class 'the masculine ideal' and was therefore playing catching up all of the time. In this can't win social environment, alternative forms of masculinities emerge to survive and 'provide financial support for his children and 'baby mother'. Being head of the house was internalized as having sexual power over women (Hope 2010:10f).

This resulting hegemonic masculinities developed within the Jamaican socio-political landscape and reinforced by patriarchal evangelical Christianity, Rastafari ideology and Dance hall musical narrative have influenced the evolution of a highly toxic life denying environment that creates negative social factors, including the strong stigma associated with AIDS and homosexuality that engenders intolerance and even violence. The high levels of homophobia and negative gender stereotyping are nurtured in the mis-education given in the reading of the bible and structure Christian education for children and young people about sexualities, gender roles ensured that stigma and discrimination thrives and therefore weakens prevention and treatment measures for HIV and AIDS victims. These victims are ignorantly viewed as being divinely punished for participation in gay sex. The issue of hegemonic masculinities is very important to deal with because the social, cultural, religious and economic contributing factors to the spread of HIV are primarily linked to behaviour of men engaging in unsafe sex with multiple partners and also having sex with underage female that expose them to risk at an early age. The Euro-American brand of missionary Christianity that evolved in a colonized society where peoples of African ethnicity were commoditized and enslaved to meet economic objectives of imperial powers. Christianity as the dominant religion in partnership with the State forced other religious expressions linked to African Retentions to the margins because they were not legally

allowed to practice in the open public sphere.

The Socio-Political Linkages

HIV and AIDS became a health issue in Jamaica in 1983. The disease was thought to be linked only to practice of unprotected sex between homosexuals. However, research data has linked the spread of the epidemic to include other actors such as sex workers that engage in unprotected sex and illegal drug users who inject drug into their bodies using unclean contaminated needles (Figuroa, Brathwaite Ward & DuCasse 1995). There is increasing recognition that HIV spread is directly linked to underdevelopment that contributes to economic inequality. Poverty has been a persistent reality built into the design of the Jamaican economy since the period of colonialism and slavery (Beckford 1972). It was meant to dehumanize and control peoples of African ethnicity to reinforce their ideology of white supremacy. The injustices that are structured (Anderson 2001:1) into the contemporary labour market ensures the continuation of poverty. It is this phenomenon of injustice that breeds gender inequality in the labour market that plays a key role in increasing the vulnerability of women to HIV through unsafe sex because of their need of money to survive and take care of their family.

The relatively stable political climate in Jamaica since independence in 1962 with its smooth change of government every five years belies the deep hostile opposition towards any governmental measure to legislate for a more tolerant environment towards homosexuality in the country. The electorate and general public is deeply influenced by the unholy partnership of convenience between the conservative Church community, the Rastafari religio-cultural hostility and the dominant use of Dance hall music to communicate and educate the people to put up resistance against any political measures to legalize homosexual practice.

According to 2012 data:

Eighty-eight percent of respondents believe that male homosexuality is immoral and nearly 84 percent believe that female homosexuality is immoral. More than 75 percent of respondents are against repealing the ‘buggery’ law and 65 percent oppose amending the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms to protect the rights of members of

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the LGBT community (Human Rights First-LGBT Issues in Jamaica, Fact Sheet).

Jamaica has had Buggery laws on its legal books since the British Colonial period (1864). It is also referred to as ‘buggery Statue’ that classifies homosexual acts to be illegal ‘levying sentences of up to 10 years of imprisonment with hard labor for those convicted under Article 76 of the Offences Against the Person Act’:

‘Whosoever shall be convicted of the abominable crime of buggery [anal intercourse] committed either with mankind or with any animal, shall be liable to be imprisoned and kept to hard labour for a term not exceeding ten years’ (Human Rights First-LGBT Issues in Jamaica, Fact Sheet).

This law is mainly used against homosexual men and it contributed to members of the LGBT community being discriminated against exercising their basic human rights in their local communities and this has made them vulnerable to persecution, violence, homelessness and HIV. The political parties that make use of Reggae and Dance hall music to communicate to the people have also embrace some of the antigay rhetoric in their electioneering campaign in order to gain popular support. One of the Prime Ministers, Bruce Golding in his effort to strengthen his political base, declared in 2011 that he would never appoint a practicing homosexual into his cabinet (Gleaner November 6, 2011) Jamaica has come under intense international pressure to remove the Buggery laws and make homosexual acts legal. However, even when Parliament acted in 2012 to pass the updated Charter of Rights. It failed to recognize the right to same sex marriages. Another Prime Minister, Portia Simpson tried in 2014 as a result of her election promise to repeal the Buggery statues but her years in office up to January 2016, failed to act because the political will to confront the opposition forces within the nation and Parliament (Pink News: 19th May 2014). It is therefore the political inaction by failed leaders that are scared of losing political power that has also helped to create the environment of homophobia and stigma against HIV and AIDS. They have failed to challenge and openly oppose the cultural bias that linked HIV and AIDS primarily to homosexuality than to the hegemonic masculinities.

The Church, Homophobia and HIV and AIDS

The majority conservative evangelical Church community embrace a fundamentalist theology that unleashed divine judgement ‘of Brimstone and fire’ upon those deemed to be anti-God in their sexual lifestyles. Literalist reading of scripture such as the Sodom and Gomorrah story of Genesis 19, condemnation of homosexuality in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, the paradigm of a pro-creative norm being emphasized in Genesis 1:28 have all being used to marginalized the arguments used by the LGBT community to legitimize their lifestyle. It is from this base that Rastafari and Dance hall music borrow to advance their narratives against the LGBT community and that which flows over into stigma against people living with HIV.

The number of people living with HIV and AIDS in 2015 was 29,000 and the number of deaths was estimated at 1,200 (Jamaica Religion data: Protestant). The rate of HIV and AIDS has remain steady around 1.7%-2% and this has weakened the sensitiveness of persons to the plight of persons facing the challenges of stigma and social rejection (Dawes & Lambertson 2014. *Shame: HIV and AIDS and The Church in Jamaica*). Sections of Jamaican Church have sought to give support to the efforts to increase awareness and acceptance of people living with the disease but it remains a difficult task. Because of its many years of narrow conservative teachings on issues of sex, sexuality, homosexuality and gender there is a credibility gap between the church’s theological certainties and the need to save the lives of victims. The result of this self-inflicted contradiction is an unacceptable silence and neglect of the plight of victims. In a study of the church’s response to the epidemic and its understanding of homosexuality, Kwame Dawes and Andre Lambertson interviewed a cross-section of ministers, theologians, church workers, activists and advocates, and people living with HIV identified a complex secret world in which the victims of HIV and AIDS live with shame, bravery, compassion, paranoia, anxiety, hopefulness, anger, and fear (Jamaica Health Data). The moralistic underpinning of the conservative brand of Christianity in nation has therefore created a kind of religiosity that thrives on anti-gay rhetoric that provides oxygen for stigma against victims of HIV and AIDS.

Rather than seeking to fight stigma in society as it primary task, the church should focus on reeducating its own faith community to counter the ideology of stigma that it created, nurtured and later transported into the wider society. With its majority membership/adherents within the general population,

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its capacity to influence change of attitudes toward people living with HIV is very limited because the stigma prejudice is very deep in its identity and witness. One positive example of the slow changing attitude towards persons who are affected is embodied in the work of Rev Delroy Harris who work to challenge and transform the church's negative attitude through its policies and the behaviour of ignorant members. He argues that:

‘If society doesn’t show love and care, the person is going to turn to the church. It’s at the point now where some persons who are HIV positive no longer want to come to the church because they feel that the church people are rejecting them. Now we need to change that... ‘We had persons that were HIV positive sharing with us [one] Sunday morning ... the high point for me ... was when I pronounced the benediction, afterwards, the same people who had a problem with me doing the session, lined up to embrace the persons living with HIV with tears in their eyes (Christian Aid, Jamaica: Fighting HIV Stigma in Church: November 2014).

The conservative Evangelical Christian narrative that is constructed around a bi-polar world of good and evil sees the world outside of the church community as ungodly with people like gays and other victims being scapegoat as threats to God’s standard for righteous living (Pavlovitz 2015). The Bible plays a critical role in the ideological moral construct of Jamaicans toward justifying their prejudices towards Homosexuals and persons living with HIV. The Euro-American ministry and mission heritage bequeathed by white conservative Christians into the Jamaica ecclesial culture has uncritically accepted their imperial bias interpretation of scripture that once legitimized the enslavement of African-Jamaicans. It is paradoxical that the contemporary Jamaican Church has also internalized the life denying misuse of the bible in evangelical conservative political theology to support homophobic prejudices. Therefore, any serious commitment to overcome stigma against requires the church to revisit its theological underpinnings which according to Hewitt requires an,

...an intentional but sensitive process of uncovering/unmasking the cultural ‘baggage’ of Euro-American Christianity that has been accepted uncritically as orthodox Christianity (Hewitt 2012).

Contradiction and Opportunities within Rastafari Religio-cultural Discourse

The conservative theology of the Jamaican evangelical Christian ensures that no revolution or transformation in its worldview on sex, sexuality and gender issues will be achieved quickly. Therefore social transformation in attitudes towards people living with HIV must come for other life affirming cultural forces of change. Rastafari constitute a powerful and influential religio-cultural movement within society however its capacity to be a change agent for the reduction of stigma is also greatly reduced through its ideological enslave and addiction to aspects of non-life giving ‘overstanding’¹ (Afari 2007) of the Bible. Rastafari can be identified as an Afro-centric religio-cultural belief system that critiques Euro-American missionary Christianity and its use of the bible to oppress people peoples of African descent. It constitutes the contemporary expression of the long continuum of agents since the era of colonialism and slavery who have resisted the Euro-American imperial worldview through their radical African retention that postulates an alternate discourse on human dignity and other issues of injustice unleashed by the ‘Babylon System’ (Cooper 1993: 121) that is expressed through the social, religious and economic systems of Western imperialism.

Rastafari philosophical hermeneutics is built on a strong anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist and liberative ideology. However, on the subject of sexuality its liberative discourse on sexuality is severely compromised in some of its adherents advocating violence toward homosexuals. The Rastafari faith seems is embedded in an ideological selective use of the scriptures especially the Hebrew Scriptures with the ancient social laws code in the book of Leviticus. It could be argued that Rastafari theological reflections have also become psychological enslaved to a bias conservative reading of the Hebrew Scriptures like other conservative and fundamentalist Christians churches. Their nutrition and other aspects of their lifestyles are modelled on ancient Jewish practices.

The Influence of Reggae and Dance Hall Music

Reggae music is central to the understanding of Jamaican culture. It tells the

¹ ‘Overstanding’ Rastafari uses the term to mean ‘Elevated intelligence’.

story of the people's journeys of struggle for fullness of life. Various Rastafari musicians embraced and developed the music as their primary means of communicating their faith and to educate the public how to respond to imperial forces of oppression that threaten their wellbeing and finally it serves to bear witness to Rastafari's prophetic, emancipatory, raw, justice-oriented, anti-imperial and anti-colonial message of hope (Safi 2013). However, in spite of the global reach with its revolutionary ethic and life-affirming narrative, the subject of gender justice and protection of LGBT practitioners' rights do not feature. The two most influential contributors of stigma against people living with HIV are the embrace of toxic masculinities and the powerful impact of Dance hall music a derivative of Reggae music on the local culture. Dance hall music constitutes the transporter of music and lyrics that promote homophobic, misogynous and violent outlook on what it classifies as deviant sexual behaviour such as homosexuality. It emerged in the 1980s during a period of political upheaval within the inner cities communities of the capital, Kingston. The more upbeat heavy bass rhythms rap narrative that embraced sexual domination of the female body and violence to homosexuals (Afari 2007:132), and promiscuous polygamous heterosexuality aimed at subjugating the feminine and elevating the hegemonic masculine (Hope 2012: 19). Dance hall lyrics are obsessed with male sex using many creative colloquial and slang terms created in the inner city poor communities as and used as synonyms to describe the male and female sexual organs. The masculinity paradigm of Dance hall, authority, control and producing life is acted out on the female body with aggression and even violence. It is this dysfunctional masculinity that is at the heart of homophobia and stigma within the Jamaican society.

Popular Rastafari Dance hall artists Buju Banton whose real name is Mark Myrie, released in 1992 a very popular song: *'Boom Bye Bye'* that became an anthem of Dance hall culture calling for deadly violence against homosexuals. The controversial song done in a deep booming voice speaking patois that the non-Jamaicans would find unintelligible a haunting powerful message was communicated calling for death to all Gays referred to 'BattyMan' The song catapulted him to national fame but it also triggered the international Gay Rights movement to work toward bringing him down for his murderous lyrics. Selective extract from the song is very frightening:

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'Boom Bye Bye'

World is in trouble

Anytime Buju Banton come

Batty bwoy get up an run

A gunshot me head back

Hear I tell him now crew

(Its like) Boom bye bye inna batty bwoy head

Rude bwoy no promote no nasty man

Dem haffi dead Boom bye bye inna batty bwoy head

Rude bwoy no promote no nasty man dem haffi dead

(Two man) Hitch up on an rub up on

An lay down inna bed hug up on another

Anna feel up leg send fi di matic an di Uzi instead

Shoot dem no come if we shot dem--

Don't want Jackie. Give dem Paul instead

Dem don't want di sweetness between di leg

Gal bend down backway Aan accept di peg

An if it really hot you know she still naw gon fled

A some man still don't want di panty raid

Pure batty business dem love

(Me say) Boom bye bye inna batty bwoy head

Rude bwoy no promote the nasty man dem haffi dead

Boom bye bye inna batty bwoy head

Rude bwoy no promote no nasty man dem haffi dead

(Woman is di) Greatest thing God ever put pon di land

Buju lovin dem from head down to foot bottom

But some man a turnaround where dem get that from

Peter is not for Janet Peter is for John

Suzette is not for Paul. Suzette is for Ann

Where the bomboclot dem get dat from

Here come the DJ name Buju Banton

(Come fi) ((Straighten yuh talk?))

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*(Caw me say) Dis is not an bargain (Me say)
Dis is not a deal Guy come near we
Then his skin must peel burn him up bad like an old tire wheel
Gwaan buju banton yuh tough*

*(Two man) A hug up on an kiss up on
An lay down inna bed hug up on another
Anna rub dung leg Send fi di matic an di Uzi instead
Shoot di batty boy come if we shot dem--
Dem don't want Jackie give dem Paul instead
Don't want di poom poom between Patsy leg
All dem want Is the body from Fred
But dis is Buju Banton Me say (Banton 1992).*

The narrative is frighteningly filled with violence: *Batty boy* (a derogatory term used for men who engage in anal sex); *A gunshot me head back* (shoot him in the back of his head); *Boom bye bye* (The sound of gunshot aimed to kill the gays that engage in sex). Within the Dance hall culture gay anal sex is viewed as being done by 'nasty boys' who are not real men. On the other hand Dance hall culture celebrate the female but primarily for her body which should be available for rough (hard) sex. Therefore this misogynistic music culture in essence does not promote healthy masculinities nor respect for the female. The woman's body is viewed as a trophy that must be conquered. The addiction is with sex, right and wrong sex. Wrong, when it is done between men and right, when it is done between men and women. It is this toxic masculinity promoted by certain Dance hall artists that creates the stigma among people living with HIV because they are all falsely linked to gay sex. One of the many derogatory dehumanizing terms used by Dance hall culture to describe the unacceptable identity and behaviour of Homosexuals is 'Chi-Chi Man' (Hope 2010: 78-81). This word was original used in the culture to describe very small insects-termites that can destroy the wood of a home and weaken its foundations until it falls. Therefore, the owner of the house must do whatever is needed to eradicate the termites. Not surprisingly, the local Dance hall quartet T.O.K in the year 2000 gave the public his anti-homosexual anthem:

From dem a par inna Chi-Chi man cyar

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Wave di fiya mek we bun dem
From dem drink inna Chi-Chi man cyar
Wave di fiya mek we bun dem (Hope 2010:80).

The English translation of this narrative is shocking: ‘Once they are see sparring (having sex) in a homosexual’s car, wave the fire and let us burn (kill) them’. This violent anti-homosexual approach within Dance hall culture confirms and affirms ones powerful masculinity.

Tim Padgett writing for the Time magazine questioned whether in the light of Jamaica’s deep cultural opposition to gay lifestyle that Human Right Watch is correct in classifying the country as *the most homophobic country on earth*. He pointed to the work of Dance hall Artists such as Elephant Man (aka O’Neil Bryant) who expressed in one of his songs ‘When you hear a lesbian getting raped/ It’s not your fault ... Two women in bed/ That two Sodomites who should be dead’ (Padgett 2006).

Tanya Stephens a Dance hall artist in 2004 offered what could be classified as a Womanist Dance hall Narrative critique of unhealthy sexual relationship between men and women within the Jamaica culture. In her hit song: *Weather Change (So many Men)* (Stephens T. 2004) she uses the medium of Dance hall music as the discourse through which she interrogate toxic masculinities. Tanya is an influential Jamaican female Reggae and Dance hall artist who is known as one of the premier singers that offer a particular genre of ‘seductive lover rock’ Reggae music. Prior to her song, ‘Weather Change (Too many Men)’ in 2004, she was best known for her song ‘Yuh Nuh Ready Fi Dis Yet’ (*You are not ready for this as yet*). This was a stinging rebuke to men who exercise their sexual prowess without due respect for the feelings or readiness of the female. She exposed the immaturity of men and their lack of sexual education that would equip them to respond positively to the felt needs of women.

In *Weather Change (So many Men)* Stephens called upon women to raise their level of conscientization in their sexual relationship with men. The title sums up the mandate of her commitment to advocate for women to realize that they have choice in making the right decision concerning their relationship with men. She postulates that there are more than sufficient men who are around in the society for women to decide who they want to be with and should not therefore be pressured into making decision based on access to a limited number of available men. Women should exercise their freedom in deciding

who they want to be with and they should not shed tears if their male lover moves on to be with another woman. Rather, she argues, the woman should exercise her sexual freedom and exercise her right to change partners. In order to maintain the sexual health and be psychologically strong the Jamaica woman must not cry when men prove to be unfaithful but should set their own agenda that is not dictated by men behaviour. Stephens discourse on male/female sexual relationship dynamics seems to suggest that the Jamaican woman must not depend up patriarchal bias power system to decide on the sexual rights or health of the woman. The answer to the challenges of stigma within the society begins not with moralistic pleading with religious and cultural power systems that are dedicated to maintenance of the status-quo. Rather the quest for a stigma free future for women whether it is linked to her sexuality or prevention of HIV, should begin with her taking action in claiming her sexual freedom in not being controlled by toxic masculinities. Donna Hope argues that the lifestyle impact of the toxic form of masculinities ultimately result in dysfunctional gender relationships (Hope 2010: 1-15). Stephens postulates an alternative sexual health affirming model of gender relationships in which the woman should not depend on any man to decide of her rights to exercise her sexual freedom by having any control over her body. The woman alone must be the final authority because only when there is mutual respect and reciprocity in sexual power relations that discrimination which leads to stigma in HIV and AIDS will be overcome.

Conclusion

This paper began with the assertion that behind the tourism headlines of Jamaica being a prime destination with excellent attractions, lies a dark dehumanizing homophobic subculture that thrives on an intense intolerance of Lesbians, Gays Bi-sexual and Lesbian Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender community (LGBT) lifestyle. An unholy alliance between patriarchal bias conservative evangelical Christianity unhealthy gender relationships, solidarity with Rastafari selective use of the Hebrew Scriptures health laws from the book of Leviticus to oppose homosexuality and the rouge masculinities, anti-LGBT narrative culture of Dance hall music. All of these have influenced the evolution of a very intolerant and homophobic society that nurtures hostile and even violent response to the LGBT community that also

flows over into stigma against HIV and AIDS victims. For a more life giving attitude towards the LGBT community and victims of HIV and AIDS to emerge within Jamaica a fundamental changes would be needed in the church's theology on human sexuality. The church will have to go far beyond the 'keeping up of appearances approach' simple holding workshops to talk about the state of HIV and AIDS, a more in depth integrative approach is needed by all of the key public opinion stakeholders within the nation to agree on key intervention strategies. The Church and The Rastafari community have a challenging task to revisit their theological certitudes on human sexuality. Their addiction to a patriarchal bias power relations in their understanding of the bible have also resulted in extreme discrimination against homosexuals and people with other expression of their sexuality. Finally the anti-LGBT and hegemonic masculinities narrative culture of Dance hall music must give way to conscious advocating of healthy life affirming gender relationship. This is the only way that these religio-cultural forces can be transform the Jamaican society to overcome their homophobia against the LGBT community and stigma against people living with HIV.

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Roderick Hewitt
Systematic and Practical Theology
School of Religion Philosophy and Classics
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Email: Hewitt@ukzn.ac.za