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Ian Boxill  
Editor

# The Globalization of RASTAFARI

*With an Introduction by*  
Richard Salter





## ***The Globalization of Rastafari***

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## EDITORIAL

This special issue on the ‘Globalization of Rastafari’ has been long in the making. The articles were originally written for a book and then a journal, many years ago. Only two of the original articles are excluded from this issue. We have decided to publish this issue because of the path-breaking nature of many of the articles and the importance of Rastafari as a social and political phenomenon. Rastafari cultural practices are now part of global culture. Rastafari ideas have become part of resistance movements the world over and are no longer seen as strange or threatening to many of those who were once unfamiliar or critical of them. In other words, Rastafari, as a social movement or as part of popular expression, is no longer as peripheral as it appeared only a few decades ago. Many aspects of Rastafari philosophy are now part of our everyday lives.

For this publication, we have kept the original Introduction by Richard Salter. Although Michael Barnett’s piece was not part of the original collection, it adds an important dimension of the Rastafari movement since, as he puts it, he focuses on the “globalization of the Rastafari movement as an outcome of the major migration waves of Jamaicans to England and North America in the fifties and the sixties respectively, as opposed to the more popular perspective that the movement was globalized through reggae music and the emergence of reggae’s first international Superstar, Bob Marley.” Historically, migration has been one of the most powerful tools of cultural transfer for many Caribbean countries. It seems reasonable then for aspects of Rastafari philosophy and practice to accompany waves of Jamaican migration to the Americas and Europe during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*The Globalization of Rastafari* is our largest volume yet. We are truly excited about the uniqueness and the breadth and depth of the articles in this collection. We hope that you will share our fascination

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and excitement when reading this issue.

Thanks to the Department of Sociology, Psychology and Social Work, University of the West Indies, Mona for financing this special issue.

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Ian Boxill  
*Editor*

# RASTAFARI *in Global Context:* *An Introduction*

RICHARD C. SALTER

The articles in this issue had their origins in 1998 with the Rastafari in Global Context Seminar of the Academy of American Religion (AAR). The seminar met annually for three years, with a dozen or so active participants who discussed issues and presented papers relating to the global context of Rastafari. We were an eclectic and interdisciplinary group, coming from fields as far ranging as religious studies, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, theology and literature. We were also an inclusive group, inviting onlookers and other interested parties to our meetings, and doing our best (but in the end failing) to also include Rastafari voices in our discussions. The Rastafari elder, Mortimo Planno, for example, agreed to attend, and was even offered a stipend by the AAR to offset costs, but was continually denied a visa by the US government. Over the course of time some participants in the seminar dropped out, and others, who had planned to publish papers with us, published elsewhere because they were working with especially time-sensitive data. Our hope is that these articles might serve as groundwork for additional research on Rastafari's global context, including specifically additional ethnographic work on the forms Rastafari takes in various communities worldwide, an increased emphasis on the dynamics and change within Rastafari as it continues to grow, and an increased self-awareness by scholars of Rastafari of how Rastafari's global context might reshape methodology.

It is tempting to say that by placing Rastafari in a global context this issue of *IDEAZ* raises exciting new questions that have been precipitated by the rapid growth of the movement and its seemingly recent spread beyond Jamaica in the last twenty-five years. On the contrary, questions about Rastafari in its global context are less a set of new questions than a set of largely unexplored questions, for the context of Rastafari has always been global, and must be understood as such if we are to appreciate the movement's complex origins, diverse forms and potential impact. All too often in the past the movement has been seen solely as a manifestation or revitalization

of local religious nativism. The articles in this special issue of IDEAZ focus most particularly on the latter two concerns: first, how does the global context of Rastafari affect the dynamics of the movement and the forms the movement takes? Second, how do we understand the potential impact of Rastafari on the larger world when we view it in a global light? A third question, corollary to the first two and central to our task as scholars of Rastafari, is how a global view of Rastafari changes the methodology of Rastafari scholarship and the fundamental relationship of the Rastafari movement to academic scholarship. If the articles in this issue can sharpen and clarify these questions so that they will be de rigueur in future considerations of the Rastafari movement, they will have served their task well.

As an introduction to our questions, it is important to quickly lay out why the global context has always been important for Rastafari and why narrower views of the movement may have misconstrued it by only viewing it in local context. Three historical observations make the point: the Caribbean region in general has been inextricable from the global context since Columbus' first voyage; Afro-Caribbean religions (and Rastafari in particular) have always been woven out of a global context and considered a global context as part of their worldviews; and Rastafari founders, early leaders, and current participants were and continue to be intentional participants in and products of a global context.

## **THE GLOBAL CARIBBEAN**

Long before the term 'globalization' became overused, scholars of the Caribbean recognized the region's complex global origins. Since the time of Columbus' arrival the Caribbean has never been isolated; scholars of globalization may speak of an emerging sense of a shrinking world, but the Caribbean has always existed in a 'small world'. As colonies, the territories were pawns in competing European economic and military battles. It does not matter whether we characterize the relationships of the territories to their colonial masters in terms of politics, economics or worldviews, the practical upshot of the Caribbean situation was a fate that tied the region to the broader world and a consciousness that was always aware of other regions of the world.

Politically speaking, the fate of the colony was never just a matter of 'periphery' and 'center', but rather also of relationships to various 'centers' which were always located somewhere other



than the Caribbean. In the early years these 'centers' would have included colonizing countries such as Britain, France, Spain, and the Netherlands. Later they would also include the geopolitical 'centers' of the United States and USSR.

In terms of economics, the wealth and prosperity of the region have never depended on internal markets, but always on global markets, global tariff and trade agreements, and the global economic viability of successive monocrop cultures. For those who speak of 'globalization' in terms of creeping industrialization or rationalization of production, it is worth remembering that the estate and plantation systems were the first proto-industries, always systematized to make the best use of slave labour and rationalized to the end of producing greater wealth for owners. As slavery disappeared, monocrop cultures continued. In some territories it was 'king sugar', coffee, or limes, while on others it may have been bananas or nutmeg, but in each case the territories were inextricably linked to a demand produced externally and foreign markets. Later industries also focused on producing raw materials, like petroleum or bauxite, and selling them on unstable world markets. Currently the Caribbean depends on the global industry par excellence, tourism, which in turn depends on a worldwide marketing strategy designed to 'brand' the Caribbean as the premier travel destination for sun, sand, and problem-free relaxation. This has given rise to additional concerns about the commoditization of culture as various islands compete to represent external perceptions of the 'true Caribbean'. As in the past, capital (both economic and cultural) continues to flow out of the region.

Of course, since the time of Columbus the population of the Caribbean has been a truly 'global' population, comprised of Africans, Asians, Native Americans and Europeans. The former three groups were not only victims of a worldwide trade in slaves, indentured servitude, and the economics of imperialism, but as slavery and indentured servitude ended these groups remained a source for exporting global labour (whether working oil rigs, digging the Panama Canal, or as inexpensive migrant labourers). Through all of this, and again when emigration became more possible, the Caribbean was not only a source of cheap labour but also a source of ideas that mixed, blended, and created new ways of seeing and thinking throughout the world.

## CARIBBEAN RELIGION AND EARLY RASTAFARI LEADERS

Caribbean religion has always been a product of 'globalization.' Christianity has flourished in the Caribbean in its colonial forms, in indigenous forms, and also in new enthusiastic forms that arrived through foreign missions and in turn have migrated with their congregations all over the world. Hindu and Muslim communities have long existed in the Caribbean and in their efforts to guard their identities can be seen as a vanguard of the move to preserve identity through religion that has been remarked upon more generally around the world in the past two decades. Perhaps most importantly, so-called 'syncretic' religions blend African and Christian ideas and practices in the crucible of Caribbean experience and issue forth with new creations that continue to expand as believers participate in a new Diaspora in search of work and livelihood. Not only do these religions spread 'religious' ideas and practices, but they also have become sources of inspiration for art, literature and music around the world.

Arguably, Rastafari can be considered a part of this later 'syncretic' set of religions. It clearly draws from Christian sources, especially its sacred text, but like other 'syncretic' traditions, it gives a prominence of position to Africa to ground its vision of the universe. Like other Caribbean 'syncretic' traditions Rastafari have always been globally aware that a world exists outside of the Caribbean. At times this is a harsh world, discovered through the hardships of migration and racism, or migrant labour. This is a 'vampire' world, sucking the life from people. It is 'Babylon'. But Africa remains as both a paradise and a norm by which 'Babylon' can be critiqued and exposed. Early leaders of Rastafari, such as Leonard Howell, had often travelled outside of the Caribbean, experiencing the vicissitudes of 'Babylon' first hand and drew their inspiration from, among other sources, their awareness of this other world. It is for this same reason that Marcus Garvey is a Rastafari prophet, for he spoke with an awareness not only of the Caribbean situation, but to the Black situation globally, a situation he became aware of also though first-hand experience of the broader world.

From the start of Rastafari in the 1930s, Africa has existed as Zion, the promised land, a paradise, and source of hope and inspiration, but also as a real geographical location, a homeland, a tangible destination. If Rastafari continues a long line of 'Ethiopianism' that has been prevalent in the Caribbean since colonial times, it also differs from past 'Ethiopianism' to the degree that it has striven for

awareness of the real continent of Africa. Not content with only Biblical images, Rastafari through the years have researched Africa, travelled to Africa, settled there, lived there. Rastafari has taken root in Africa, and the African experience has served as a stimulus for growth and self-critique within the movement. Moreover, as Rastafari have travelled to Africa, a de facto network of transnational contacts has been established and maintained that continually informs the Rastafari experience.

And yet Rastafari is not just concerned with Africa and the Caribbean. As the movement has grown, Rastafari has spread with the Caribbean Diaspora to the Commonwealth and to the United States. When Rastafari became associated with reggae music in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, it spread through music. Rastafari can be found around the world today, from Auckland to Zimbabwe. And Rastafari leaders have also spread the movement through missions abroad, both nearby (for example, to the eastern Caribbean), but also as far north as Canada and as far south as Brazil and South Africa. Rastafari is entering its ninth decade with a self-awareness that it resonates beyond its starting point.

## **QUESTIONS: METHOD, FORMS, CULTURE**

What questions are implied when we consider Rastafari in the light of its global history and global consciousness? These articles are organized around three loose themes: how does globalization affect scholarship on Rastafari? How does globalization affect the form of Rastafari communities? And how do Rastafari communities in turn affect the broader world of which they are a part?

### **Method**

The first three articles address methodological concerns. To this point, most of the academic literature on Rastafari has considered it as a new religion of the Caribbean region that can be relatively well defined in terms of several prominent beliefs and practices. Richard Salter's article looks to challenge approaches to Rastafari that characterize it narrowly in terms of beliefs and practices. Instead, he proposes an approach to Rastafari that identifies it with a particular form of knowledge, which he terms 'orthognosy'. According to Salter, the structure of Rastafari 'orthognosy' is what gives the movement an affinity with 'globalization' and lends itself to a broad appeal beyond the Caribbean. Understanding Rastafari through its epistemological

framework also recognizes the movement's flexibility and continual growth.

The article by Samuel Furé Davis deals specifically with the problems that arise with studying Rastafari as it has developed in Cuba. In Cuba, core concepts of Rastafari, such as African identity and race consciousness, become problematic when juxtaposed with the ideals of the Revolution. For example, how does one explore the concept of race in Rastafari, when the Revolution officially ended racism in Cuba? Furé Davis further explores the changes that key Rastafari terms undergo in the Cuban context: if 'Babylon' tends to represent the excesses of capitalism and its entanglements with racism the West, how is 'Babylon' refigured in socialist Cuba? Does the constant threat of US imperialism shift the meaning of 'Babylon'? To what extent may Rastafari in Cuba even be conceived of as a 'religion'? Finally, Furé Davis relates the practical difficulties of research on Rastafari in Cuba. Are Cuban Rastafari more willing to talk to some people rather than others about their lives? How does the global context of Rastafari in Cuba privilege some researchers over others? Do the special conditions of Cuba privilege foreign researchers over local scholars?

The articles on method are rounded out with a 2001 interview of Mutabaruka by Richard Salter in Syracuse, NY. Known not only as a Dub poet and singer, Mutabaruka is an outspoken social critic and has long been a public ambassador of the Rastafari community. One of the most important recent effects of globalization on the Rastafari community is the communications revolution and the ease with which Rastafari can represent itself publicly. The interview with Mutabaruka explores some of the questions discussed elsewhere in these articles, but even more importantly it is meant as a demonstration of the benefits to scholarship when Rastafari speaks for itself. Of course, Mutabaruka's voice is one of many.

## **F**orms

The three subsequent articles explore the forms that Rastafari takes as it expands into new parts of the world. Jan DeCosmo looks at Rastafari in Bahia, Brazil, an area with many cultural affinities with the Caribbean, but with a distinct history and a distinct Afro-Brazilian spirituality. DeCosmo notes the varieties of local manifestations of Rastafari in Bahia, but she also sees a commonality in these as creative responses to the condition of 'homelessness' and 'pariah status' that characterize the contemporary global situation. While some Rastafari in Bahia challenge their marginalization through an emphasis on

'Jah Rastafari' others blend Rastafari expressions with devotions to the orixas (spirits) of Afro-Brazilian spirituality. In the end, Bahian Rastafari is flexible enough to encompass both expressions and use them to challenge the oppression of the contemporary situation; for this reason DeCosmo wonders if Rastafari's global legacy might be as a transnational call to mobilize against 'homelessness,' 'pariah status,' and other forms of alienation.

In contrast to the Afro-Brazilian context of Bahia, Nathaniel Edward Douglas and Ian Boxill explore Rastafari as it manifests itself in a completely different part of the world, Aotearoa (a.k.a. New Zealand). Like Rastafari in Bahia, the movement came to Aotearoa via reggae music, and especially the music of Bob Marley; this means that Rastafari in Aotearoa remained largely unconnected with Rastafari in other parts of the world. Also as in Bahia, Rastafari in Aotearoa has taken many forms. Douglas and Boxill's detailed ethnography focuses closely on Rastafari in one part of Aotearoa, Ruatoria. In this community they observe Rastafari losing its core Afro-centric focus and instead being adapted to the new context of resistance against the loss of Maori identity to Anglo assimilation. Among other things, Ruatoria Rastafari incorporated distinctive Maori cultural practices, such as facial tattooing, to express their experience of Rastafari. Douglas and Boxill end by pointing out how Ruatoria Rastafari has started to connect with other movements of spiritual resistance in Aotearoa.

Michael Barnett's article deals with the critical question of how Rastafari moved into England, Canada, and the USA – three points which have subsequently served as jumping off points for Rastafari's expansion into the broader world. A common feature of Rasta expansion into these areas is an underlying racism and ethnocentrism which predisposed mainstream society to interpret Rastafari as a threatening, violent, and criminal subculture; in turn, inaccurate media portraits of Rastafari, and legal difficulties surrounding the use of marijuana created a hostile atmosphere which itself shaped the perception, development and appeal of Rastafari as in various ways deviant. The first part of Barnett's article serves as a roadmap detailing names and places in Rastafari migration; in the second part of the article he rounds out his presentation with a series of ethnographic analyses of Rasta communities he has encountered in each place. Once again, the diversity of his observations presents a challenge to anyone who seeks a monolithic description of the Rastafari movement: one cannot help but notice that these

communities are very different, but that a common thread still somehow connects them,

### **Culture**

The final three articles in this collection ask about the influences that Rastafari and global social changes have upon each other. As Rastafari expands into new areas it challenges and is challenged by the world in which it finds itself. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell explores how one well-known characteristic of Rastafari, ganja use, is affected by and in turn impacts the legal system of many countries around the world. Among other things, he asks: Why is ganja illegal in the first place? How do individual governments and the international community balance their concerns about drugs with concerns about religious freedom? What alternative legal responses have emerged to the question of ganja use once Rastafari has been legally granted status as a religion?

Leslie James' article frames the question of culture and Rastafari differently, explicitly asking the constructive question of how Rastafari practices can contribute concretely to global democratization and liberation. He finds affinities between the Rastafari practices of 'reasoning' and the liberationist pedagogy of Paolo Freire. For James, Rastafari reasoning is a grassroots example of what Freire described in theoretical terms. Though Freire's process of 'conscientization' is explicitly secular, and Rastafari 'reasoning' is embedded with religious imagery, both restore marginalized voices to the center of conversation. James' article concludes with a practical analysis of how this democratic impulse within Rastafari contributed to the Grenadian Revolution (and was subsequently betrayed by it).

Rounding out these essays, Loretta Collins' addresses the crucial question of gender in Rastafari. Collins explores the way in which women are questioning and challenging traditional views of women in Rastafari, especially as the movement expands beyond Jamaica. Using the voices of women as they are found in music, poetry and fiction, Collins shows how the global context allows women to reclaim elements of Rastafari that may become overshadowed in traditional contexts. Far from the simple picture of submissive and harmonizing queens that patriarchal Rastafari might paint for us, Collins shows women Rastafari in complex, nuanced and ambivalent relationship with their own Rastafari identity. Rastafari emerges from these songs, poems and novels as a growing and dynamic reality, continually expanding its horizons as it encompasses the experiences of more people.

Finally, it is important to mention Carole Yawney, an anthropologist/sociologist and exquisite long-term ethnographer of Rastafari, who was particularly important to the seminar. Her earlier work was inspirational to all of us, and her ongoing research with John Homiak continued to set the standard for research on the transnational aspects of Rastafari. Carole had been working on an article on the transnational networks of Rastafari in South Africa, but was unable to complete it due to illness. Sadly, she passed away on July 23, 2005. In honour of Carole's life and work with Rastafari, we would like to dedicate this issue to her.

# Rastafari in a Global Context

## Affinities of 'orthognosy' and 'oneness' in the expanding world

RICHARD SALTER

Who are the 'Rastafari'? Are they loathsome criminals to be feared and reviled? According to one letter to the editor printed in an eastern Caribbean newspaper in the early 1980s, the height of ambition for a 'Dread' is to tear a man's heart out and eat his genitals.<sup>1</sup> They have been portrayed in Hollywood movies (e.g., *Marked for Death*) and television shows (e.g., *60 Minutes*) as violent dreadlocked gangsters, eyes red and glassy from a haze of marijuana smoke. Examples of both real and imagined Rasta horror stories abound, from the notoriously exploited Coral Gardens incident in Jamaica to Dominica's 'Pokosion' (a 'Dread' outlaw who, among other things, kidnapped and murdered a prominent local landowner); from the 'fiya-bun' songs of Sizzla and Capleton to the arsonists who set fire to a church and a priest and bludgeoned to death a nun in St. Lucia. Rastas have been demonized as dirty, as 'low-lives', as drug dealers, from Malawi to Manhattan, Swaziland to Auckland. They were so feared and loathed in Dominica that they could be "shot on sight".<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, are Rastas the peaceful West Indian 'hippies' sentimentalized in the thoughts of many of my US college students? As I walk through my colleges' parking lot, I always seem to be able to find cars with bumper-stickers of both the Grateful Dead and Bob Marley – it is not just music that links the musicians in my students' minds, but a shared One Love ethos that manifests itself most concretely in a common appreciation for *ganja* (marijuana). There is no denunciation of systemic violence, no idea of race, no implicit call for justice in this portrait of Rastafari.

I was surprised to find among the vineyards in the semi-rural region of upstate New York where I live, a 'Rasta Ranch Winery'; there among the 'Grateful Red' wines and patchouli sticks, between posters of Jimi Hendrix and other 1960s musicians, one poster of Bob Marley adorned the wall. At the 'Rasta Ranch' 'Rasta' stands simply for 'counterculture'.

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In Japan, where African American and Afro-Caribbean culture swung quickly into popularity at the turn of the millennium, it is possible to spend over a thousand dollars on a set of dreadlock weaves. But beyond the hair, the *ites* (liberation colours of red, yellow and green) and the music, the image appears empty. As a global countercultural icon, Rastafari is increasingly appropriated as a means to a sale, but devoid of both its historical legacy of social critique (calls for racial justice, denunciations of capitalism, recovery of African heritage) and overt spiritual content.

Rastas can be the gentle Christ figures Jamaican author Roger Mais presents to us in his novel, *Brotherman*. Or they can be the tragic heroes of the Dungle portrayed by Orlando Patterson in *The Children of Sisyphus*. They might resemble Bernie and Ernie, the comic relief Rastafari jellyfish Disney serves up in *Shark Tale* (tentacles hanging down as dreadlocks beneath bulbous tam-like heads). And they can be the 'two-thirds world' Christians described by William Spencer in his monograph *Dread Jesus*. At the same time, they are the anti-Christian movement characterized by the call to "burn Jesus" ("Burn Jesus") in Dancehall music, or reflected in Mutabaruka's poem, "God is a Schizophrenic" ("God in the sky com down to die, God in the sky a universal lie ...").

Given the diversity of images of Rastafari, the movement itself can no longer be comprehensively defined. It is axiomatic that to define something is to control it, and indeed there are those both within and outside the Rastafari community who seek to authoritatively delimit the boundaries of the movement.<sup>3</sup> My argument is simply that Rastafari's rapid global expansion affords us few commonly observable elements by which to do so. To address what is Rastafari, therefore, we first must acknowledge that there is no one thing as Rastafari, but rather only 'Rastafaris'. According to one line of reasoning, to exclude by definition any of these 'Rastafaris' is reductionistic and treats the movement as a whole inadequately.

Similar problems characterize the treatment of religious and cultural movements ranging from Christianity to punk, and our very concern with the problem of definition is evidence of the way Rastafari as a movement has spread around the world at the same time as the word 'Rasta' has semi-autonomously come to symbolize a broadening range of meanings. The problem of definition is also illustrative of one aspect of contemporary cultural politics: the seemingly paradoxical burgeoning of identity politics and, at the same time, post-modern questions about the reality of the self.

One might object to the term ‘global context’ out of a similar concern for avoiding reductionism. How do we speak of a ‘global context’ when specific locations in the world differ so drastically in language, culture, economics and politics? Just as we might question whether there is any one thing that can exclusively be deemed Rastafari, we might also question if we can ever speak of a global context without at the same time absurdly reducing its essential complexity. Unfortunately, the use (or abuse) of the term ‘globalization’ has made the problem of context all the more acute in recent years. Is it the case that now more than ever people act with an idea of the world as a whole in mind? On the one hand, it is ostensibly true that communications, computers, technology, migration, and other trends make the world seem like a smaller place to some people. On the other hand, the world also seems to be fragmenting into smaller and smaller pieces as ethnic conflict, identity politics, and renewed nationalism replace the Cold War model that characterized international relations in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Despite the many and confusing answers to the question, “Who are Rastafari?” it is undeniable that people who identify themselves as Rastafari exist. Moreover, we mean *something* when we speak of Rastafari – though there is no guarantee that we mean the same things or that our understandings agree with those who self-identify as Rastafari. And, despite disagreements concerning what we mean by ‘global context’, *something* about the world we are in makes it different from the world of the past. If nothing else, we can agree that some people view the world as a whole, and that among those people there is a concept we might call ‘global consciousness’ or ‘sense of the world as a whole’. This consciousness differs from a consciousness aware or concerned only about its immediate surroundings. Put more succinctly, we might not be able to fully measure the ways in which the world is ‘shrinking’, or our awareness of the world is growing, but there are certainly some people who feel that it has. Rastafari, whatever the particular ideological differences among them, are typically among those people who are acutely aware of this wider world; Rastafari typically both understand themselves and act as products of and participants in this wider world. Whatever else they believe or do, Rastafari are concerned to articulate specific identities (e.g., as ‘I’s’, ‘Africans’, or ‘Ethiopians’) and to remember specific histories (e.g., the ‘middle passage’, Diaspora, slavery, the Coronation of Haile Selassie, or Pope Pius XI blessing the Italian

invasion of Ethiopia) that are not limited by national boundaries and that 'chant down' or denounce master narratives of history and identity that interpolate them into more limited settings. By way of articulating these alternative identities and histories Rastafari help produce a kind of 'global consciousness', an awareness that answers the question 'Who am I?' by looking to one's place in world writ large.

In short, regardless of the important objections we might have to the terms in which the questions of Rastafari in global context are posed, there is an intuitive connection between Rastafari and the changing global context.

The first step to exploring that connection is to clarify our terms. I do not believe it is possible to present an all-encompassing definition of 'Rastafari', but a workable minimum characterization of it will be helpful. My focus here will be on Rastafari 'I-consciousness', an element of the movement I have found in my own fieldwork among virtually all Rastafari I have encountered, whatever their other differences. I argue that Rastafari ideas about the 'I' function as an important bridge between local Rastafari communities and the broader global context.<sup>4</sup>

A second term to clarify before going further is 'global context'. Using the theoretical perspective of Roland Robertson, I suggest that contemporary 'global consciousness' is marked by two divergent trends (what Robertson has termed "universalization and particularization" or "glocalization"): on the one hand there is a relativization of national identities that encourages people to form connections to larger, trans-societal realities, especially a universal notion of 'humanity'. On the other hand, we see an increasing concern for individuals to identify closely with particular groups and concerns (e.g., particularistic religions, local cultures, ethnicities). Thus, consciousness in the 'global context' is marked by its simultaneous awareness of both 'universalism' and 'particularism', and the location of the individual self between these poles is increasingly a matter of concern and choice for individuals.

Finally, as a way to conceptualize the relationship of Rastafari to the global context we can ask why Rastafari 'I-consciousness' appears so well suited to spreading globally? I argue that Rastafari often emphasizes a particularly egalitarian notion of selfhood which has an affinity for the global context as Robertson describes it.

## WHAT IS A RASTA?: PROBLEMS OF BELIEF AND PRACTICE

Defining Rastafari according to beliefs or practices is an injustice to the movement. Not only do academic definitions of Rastafari (e.g., as 'a religion') sometimes contravene Rastas' self-understandings (e.g., as 'a way of life'), but as academics our definitions also carry a cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977) that may be used at a later date or in another context to evaluate Rastas' authenticity.<sup>5</sup>

In his book, *Imagining Religion*, J.Z. Smith (1982) argues for the particularity of all religions. To account for that particularity, and at the same time to preserve some way of classifying religions for analytical purposes, he argues for polythetic classification schemes. In other words, rather than defining a religion by one distinguishing characteristic, Smith suggests defining religions via a variety of characteristics, all of which might be found in any one specimen, but none of which are necessary in themselves.

Smith is particularly concerned with Judaism, but I think this approach can also be useful for thinking about Rastafari. A polythetic approach defines Rastafari along a continuum that includes many possible elements, but does not make any particular element essential. This approach remains open to variation among particular Rastas and Rastafari groups, but it also allows us to refer to concrete characteristics that many Rastas may share.

Smith notes two possible methodological operations (1982: 9) we can use to classify religions using polythetic definitions.

The first operation would be to select a single taxic indicator that appears to function within the tradition as an integral agent of discrimination and map it through a variety of materials of early Judaism in order to gain some appreciation of the range of its application. . . . The second operation would be to take a limited body of material from early Judaism and map out all of its taxonomic indicators.

I will not pursue the second operation here, though it would be possible. For example, one could trace the symbolic elements from an early text, such as the *The Promised Key*, to find out what has become of them.<sup>6</sup> For the first operation, Smith suggests that we can choose one element that the tradition holds to be important and trace its use to learn how widely the term can signify.

When Smith pursues the first operation for mapping Judaism, he chooses circumcision as that central item from within the tradition that can function as an indicator of what is in the tradition and what is not. As a central taxic indicator of Rastafari, I will focus on the 'I'.

Clearly Smith could have chosen other indicators for Judaism (e.g., halakic laws); similarly, a more complete map of Rastafari would include items from dreadlocks to 'livity'. Why focus on the 'I'?

'I-consciousness' is a good indicator for mapping Rastafari for three reasons. Most importantly, the 'I' is an indicator that relates to Rastafari identity. Since it is precisely identity that becomes a question in the global context, it makes sense to choose an indicator referring to identity. Second, 'I-consciousness' is extremely widespread among Rastafari. Finally, other possible types of indicators (i.e., beliefs or practices) are particularly difficult to use when it comes to Rastafari because of the variety in the movement.

The immediate problem one runs into when trying to locate central features of Rastafari is one with which all researchers of Rastafari are familiar: Rastafari's central features are not necessarily found in either beliefs or practices, both of which appear rather free flowing, unconstrained, and at times, spontaneous. To put this in terms of a typology typically used in the comparative study of religion, it is impossible to classify Rastafari as either an 'Orthodox' or an 'Orthoprax' religion. That is to say, one cannot say either that beliefs are most central to what Rastafari is (e.g., Rastafari have no creedal professions like the Nicene Creed in Christianity), nor can one say that Rastafari hold practices most central (e.g., there is nothing comparable to the Five Pillars of Islam). Both beliefs and practices are important to most Rastafari, but among Rastafari considered as a whole there is no unchanging essential core of either doctrine or practices. This is particularly the case if we include among Rastafari not only major mansions, such as the House of Nyahbinghi or the Twelve Tribes, but also the many independent groups and individuals who profess to be Rastafari in some form or another. If we do not include these independent Rastas, we as academics participate in essentializing 'authentic' Rastafari.

For example, in an early popular work on Rastafari, Leonard Barrett (1988: 104) followed George Eaton Simpson by listing the following six tenets as core Rastafarian beliefs:

1. Haile Selassie is the living god.
2. The Black person is the reincarnation of ancient Israel, who, at the hand of the White person, has been in exile in Jamaica.
3. The White person is inferior to the Black person.
4. The Jamaican situation is a hopeless hell; Ethiopia is heaven.
5. The Invincible Emperor of Ethiopia is now arranging for expatriated persons of African origin to return to Ethiopia.
6. In the near future Blacks shall rule the world.

Yet, in doing ethnography with Rastafari I have found that none of the beliefs can be called essential. In fact, it is quite common to meet self-identified Rastafari who do not hold these beliefs. During my field research in Dominica, I met many people who identified themselves as Rastafari, but who did not acclaim Haile Selassie to be the 'living god'. Dread X, for example, participates in a local Nyahbinghi, but considers Selassie to have been a corrupt sham.<sup>7</sup> Biye, in contrast, thought Selassie to be a very 'wise' man, but stopped short of making him a deity. Similarly, I never once have met in a reasoning session a Rasta who held out that at an ontological level "the White person is inferior to the Black person". Wah professed that whites and blacks should not intermarry, but never did he suggest any inferiority. And one doubts that white middle class youth in the US attracted to Rastafari hold this belief – *pace* adolescent guilt and self-loathing. Similarly, during my field work in Dominica (a lush tropical island in the Eastern Caribbean), several Rastafari whom I questioned about 'returning' to Ethiopia laughed at me for suggesting that someone would want to leave such a beautiful green island like Dominica for the dry savannah of Ethiopia.

In short, though each of the beliefs listed by Barrett may be found within Rastafari, the movement as a whole does not hold the idea that salvation (or, more appropriately, 'redemption') from Babylon results from believing in these ideas.

On reflection, it is not surprising that the beliefs mentioned by Barrett are not found among all Rastas. There are a number of features of the religion that explain why this is so. For example, Rastafari requires converts to make no creedal profession of beliefs, for it is not a religion which holds that salvation comes through holding the correct beliefs. For that matter, as Biye explained to me, no one 'converts' to Rastafari – everyone is already Rastafari, the only difference is that some people see that and others do not.

As a relatively young religion, Rastafari has faced a series of historical transitions that have called for a rethinking of beliefs. Perhaps most obviously, the death (or 'disappearance') of Haile Selassie has required a tremendous reconceptualization of notions ranging from questions of divinity and 'Who is Selassie?' to questions of eschatology and if there will be any 'repatriation'. Since the movement as a whole did not have a formal structure at the time of Selassie's death, and since one of the most common practices of Rastafari is 'reasoning', it is not surprising that there should be a tremendous range of beliefs about Selassie as different groups

continually 'reason' about who he is, what his death means, and where the movement goes from here.

Additionally we might say that Rastafari is also not structured to allow 'orthodoxy' to emerge. Even where social circumstances permit Rastafari to formally organize (and laws, raids, and slum-clearances have historically precluded this in many places) Rastafari frequently do not organize formally. For example, though there are certain notable exceptions, Rastafari groups are most frequently 'acephalic' or, depending on one's perspective, 'omniccephalic'. In 'acephalic' groups, then, there is no charismatic leader whose authority in and of itself legitimates a particular set of beliefs as 'orthodox'. In 'omniccephalic' groups, each person legitimates his or her own beliefs as 'orthodox'.

There are also few bureaucratic structures among Rastafari, so little charisma is attached to bureaucratic offices. Where it does become necessary for Rastafari to organize more formally, no formal structure is mandated by Rastafari beliefs or by a universally recognized Rastafari narrative of leadership; typically leadership of Rastafari groups is by virtue of competence, recognized *de facto*, or by vote, or by experience. Though offices held by virtue of experience or competence may carry a certain prestige (e.g., 'Elder'), there is nothing to prevent those most active in any Rastafarian organization from disagreeing with one another.

Other than 'reasoning', there is no formal procedure for adjudicating differences of belief; moreover, 'reasoning' is by its nature destabilizing because it presupposes differences in belief and requires at least a minimum level of openness to dialogue – even in the face of hostile counter-interpretations. This means that in 'reasoning' no particular view can be excluded out-of-hand without a minimum hearing. To be sure, there are points of view which are absurd to Rastafari and which must be 'chanted down' (at times even formulaically), yet to 'chant down' an idea is to suggest that it has been spoken and heard or recognized in the first place.

If we turn to examine practices as the distinctive feature of Rastafari, we find a similar dilemma. It is not by virtue of practices that Rastafari escape Babylon. For example, a quick list of Rastafari practices might include 'reasoning', living an 'ital' life, and smoking 'ganja'. But on closer examination it is clear that either these practices are not constitutive of Rastafari as a whole, or that there is no real agreement among Rastafari about what these practices are. Rastafari frequently smoke 'ganja', but so do other people who

do not consider themselves Rastafari; more importantly, no Rasta whom I have ever met would claim that it is by virtue of smoking 'ganja' that one is a Rasta. In fact, if one is reliant on 'ganja' – if one cannot exist without it – one certainly has been trapped by Babylon, which is able to pervert and twist most anything. Similarly, little agreement exists about what constitutes an 'ital' life. Some Rastas do not eat 'flesh', but others do; some eat fish, but no pork; some do not use salt, others do. Some Rastafari recognize 'baldheads', others do not. Some Rastas shave, others do not. Some Rasta prohibit sharp objects from the body, others allow tattoos, piercings and earrings. In sum, what constitutes 'ital' is always under discussion and is constantly being revised. To paraphrase what one Rasta informant said to me, even health food stores can become corrupted to be a whole Babylon unto themselves if one is not careful.

Finally, 'reasoning' itself is seldom formalized among Rastafari, and even where it is, there are vast differences in how 'reasoning' is done from one group to the next. To cite just the most obvious difference, among some Rastafari women can play a central role in reasoning and are able to participate fully, but among other groups women are consigned simply to 'making harmony' by virtue of an ontological inferiority that comes from being 'made' and not 'created'. With such differences group to group it is impossible to characterize Rastafari as an 'orthoprax' religion, a religion which emphasizes 'correct practices'.

So, is there any common feature of Rastafari that might be useful in conceptualizing the religion. I argue that there is, but only if we examine the fundamental way of knowing that for a large proportion of Rastafari authorizes the varieties of beliefs and practices I mentioned above. Further, I argue that because this is a common characteristic of so many Rastafari groups, it is a particularly useful characteristic to use in tracing the development of Rastafari over time.

As an alternative to 'orthodoxy' and 'orthopraxy', I suggest the term 'orthognosy' ('correct knowledge') to describe religions which rely most heavily on a particular kind of internal knowledge as the key to salvation. Thus, to say Rastafari is 'orthognostic' is simply to say that for most Rastas 'correct knowledge', rather than doctrine or practices, is most often a central feature of the religion. Ultimately it is this correct knowledge that frees the Rasta from Babylon. Among Rastafari orthognosy can be seen most clearly in the emphasis on the 'I', a term which is in effect a summary description of the contents



of Rastafari 'correct knowledge'.

For Rastafari, correct knowledge emerges from the mystical revelation of the divine self, or the 'I', which is at the root of what it means to be human. This knowledge is groundwork for other beliefs and practices typically associated with the movement. Knowledge of the 'I' may manifest itself differently to different Rastas, and may be seen outwardly in everything from worship of Selassie to a conscientiously 'ital' lifestyle. However, it is typically at the level of the individual that decisions about these things are made, albeit in concert with others in 'reasoning'. Moreover, I suggest that it is this 'knowledge', and the vagaries and inconsistencies associated with mystical 'knowledge', that make Rastafari symbolism intelligible and appealing to such varied groups of people in such varied contexts.

'Orthognoy' is a fitting characterization of Rastafari because of how it is linked to conversion, common practices, and the diversity of the Rastafari movement. First, conversion stories told by Rastafari frequently make mention of the 'mystical revelation' as the reason for growing dreadlocks or adopting a Rastafari way of life. 'Mystical revelation' is revelation of an eternal truth which is always already present, but which previously could not be seen because of the obfuscation present in Babylon. In fact, in my own fieldwork I never once met a Rasta who even acknowledged the category of 'conversion'; rather, instead of 'converting' to Rastafari, it was the 'mystical revelation' which permitted Rastas to know or 'see' what in fact was already true. The Babylon system falls when people recognize the truth that they already implicitly know: they have living divinity within.

For some Rastas, the 'mystical revelation' comes suddenly. As one informant, Nuru, told me, "The whole world heard it at the same time. All Rastas heard it at the same time. In Dominica, in Jamaica, in England, in the US. They all went through the same thing." What they went through, according to Nuru and others, was a realization that they did not know enough about their own history, that there were issues of equality and justice and Black power that concerned them, that international relations (e.g., the situation in Rhodesia) mattered to them, and that in conversations with others they were starting to see themselves in a new light. A revaluing of African identity, and a recognition of Haile Selassie as symbolic of that identity, was frequently central to their new vision of themselves.

But even when a sudden 'mystical revelation' is not the specific reason given for being Rastafari, often some kind of special recognition

or insight into the truth of the religion (for example, as it is portrayed in musical lyrics) inspires people to Rastafari. Abu, for example, described his becoming a Rasta as a gradual experience. There was, of course, one point at which he no longer cut his hair and allowed it to become dreadlocks, but his consciousness of Rastafari had already been developing for years through exposure to the political lyrics of reggae and calypso, discussions with friends who were Rastas, and finally a decision to temporarily quit his job as a baker to try farming as a way to reconnect to the land. Similarly, D'Jamala describes his encounter with Rastafari as starting with a wholesome way of life and rejection of foreign products. Ultimately, however, what these practices issue forth is a new self-consciousness.

Second, the knowledge that comes from the 'mystical revelation', or insight, serves as the groundwork and guide for Rastafari practices. Thus, good 'reasoning' depends on knowledge of what is true or the ability to recognize what is true; the 'truth' is not just a matter of abstract reason, but more often depends on a mystical insight which goes beyond everyday logic. Most Rastafari would be hard pressed to say in other than metaphorical or allegorical terms of what this insight consists, but when one sees it, it is clear. That is to say that at a fundamental level knowledge of truth is for Rastas an intuitive affair that takes place in the self, or 'I'. 'Ganja' is a gift which may facilitate such insight, but the 'mystical revelation' itself is NOT dependent on 'ganja'. The Bible, for example, though distorted by Babylon, made to seem confusing, and refusing to yield truth to those who scrutinize it with mere reason, can offer Truth to the Rasta by virtue of his insight. He knows the Truth of the Scriptures when he sees it. Or, in 'reasoning', Truth emerges between people, in an 'overstanding' which implicitly recognizes the insight different parties contribute to a discussion. No one party in the 'reasoning' triumphs, as when people reach an 'UNDERstanding'; rather, both parties simultaneously see the greater Truth. The same phenomenon may be seen in considering reggae music – though it is mere entertainment for many people, it offers knowledge to those who have ears to hear. Yet again, the 'ital' life (i.e., the Rastafari way of life) is constituted by no one particular lifestyle, yet comprises many lifestyles which are 'ital' to those whom insight has led to lead them. Thus, Rasta lifestyles may include eating fish or strict vegetarianism, wearing shoes or always walking barefooted, eating salt or not eating salt. In the end, the individual Rasta must make the decision about how to be 'ital'.

Third, and I think most importantly, categorizing Rastafari as 'orthognostic' helps us to make sense of how there can be so many divergent Rastafari communities. When mystical insight is the norm by which to evaluate proper belief and practice, there are few controls over the type of insight or knowledge various people receive. Predictably, in different locations insight or knowledge has different contents. This helps to make sense of why in some contexts Rastafari is so patriarchal, while in others women are more fully included. Though Rastas might disagree vehemently on matters of doctrine, more important than matters of doctrine is the legitimacy of the 'I' in arriving at its conclusions; therefore, authority for the legitimacy of new interpretations of doctrine and of new practices lies in the 'I'. This is the fundamental implication of 'orthognosy'.

Finally, I think it is important to point out that if 'orthognosy' recognizes the fundamental legitimacy of the 'I', and the ability of all 'I's to gain insight, Rastafari implies a certain 'universalistic' ethic whether it is apparent in particular groups' practice or not. More specifically, if one of the most common characteristics of Rastafari is an 'orthognosy' based on the insight of the 'I', there is always the possibility within the religion for 'I's who are excluded to claim insight, so long as the new insight does not violate the norm of 'universalism' which recognizes the legitimacy of other 'I's. All people are potential 'I's, and recognizing oneself as 'I' implies also recognizing others who claim to be 'I's.

Two consequences flow from the importance of the 'I' in Rastafari. First, notions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy are discouraged, for the legitimacy of innovation at the level of the 'I' is already recognized. Second, people who are excluded from society, for any reason whatsoever, may find an affinity with Rastafari, for whatever the beliefs and practices of specific Rasta groups, an equality of 'I's is implied, and therefore the marginalized and excluded can make themselves heard as Rastafari. This opens the door for radical discrepancies in the beliefs and practices of various Rasta groups. For example, women may be attracted to the potential status of being an 'I', even if the particular beliefs of a Rastafari community appear misogynistic. Similarly, middle class, North American, white youth may be attracted to Rastafari even though in its early history many Rastafarian groups held distinctly anti-white views. In sum, 'orthognosy' means there is a fundamental equality in the character of the authority (i.e. 'I-consciousness') which legitimizes Rastafari beliefs and practices.

## WHAT IS THE 'GLOBAL CONTEXT'? PARTICULARISM WITHIN UNIVERSALISM

Just as it is difficult to define Rastafari, it is also difficult to define the 'global context'. Social theorists have proposed too many definitions of 'globalization' to elaborate in this article. Instead, I will focus here on one characterization of the global context which has affinities with the notion of Rastafari 'orthognosy' outlined above.

Following the general approach of Roland Robertson, I think that the most important aspect of the global context for religious developments is the emergence of a distinctively 'global consciousness'. In order to present what that 'global consciousness' is, what it assumes and how it has developed, I rely heavily on a 1985 article in *Sociological Analysis* (v.46, no.3: 219-42) by Roland Robertson and JoAnn Chirico entitled "Humanity, Globalization and Worldwide Religious Resurgence: A Theoretical Exploration".

In addressing the question of globalization, Robertson and Chirico return to Simmel's fundamental question of sociology: "How is it possible to know society?" For Simmel, it is possible to know society because society itself produces in individuals conditions which make society knowable: essentially, society both assimilates people and allows them to remain somewhat separate, able to reflect on the society in which they participate. Robertson and Chirico extend this question to the global context, asking, "How do we, can we, as individuals know the unity of the 'the globe' as a whole?"

As a way of getting at this question, Robertson and Chirico examine the widespread acceptance of the term 'humanity' as an indication that in the contemporary world we are always also aware of ourselves existing in a context that transcends our individual national societies. How, they ask, did this notion of 'humanity' become widespread?

In brief, national societies typically attempt or claim to incorporate individuals as members of a national politico-cultural group. Robertson and Chirico suggest that by virtue of the alienation endemic in national societies, nation states not only incorporate individuals, but also create the conditions which make it possible to transcend strictly national societies, and enable people to view themselves also as part of a larger, trans-social reality, 'humanity'. This becomes increasingly possible as other societies become known, for there are then increasing numbers of extra-societal reference groups by which one might evaluate or compare oneself. As Robertson and Chirico (1985: 234) phrase it, "We are thus suggesting that

alienation from the (national) society is one major and theoretically necessary path toward the generation and generalization of trans-societal foci.”

National societies per se can be understood as alienating only when they can be placed in reference to other possibilities. Because the contemporary world makes this possible, with increased communications, globally recognized cultural images, etc., social problems are no longer seen as the special concern of particular nations, but rather take on a broader significance as it becomes clear that they exist across a variety of societies. This means that increasingly individuals consider their personal concerns to be also the concerns of others around the world: in other words, particular problems in the contemporary world are increasingly generalized and globalized, becoming problems for ‘humanity’ as such, not just the problems of particular groups. This is true whether we are speaking of concerns which directly affect people trans-societally, like environmental concerns, or if we are speaking of problems associated with just one locale, like human rights violations in any particular nation state. Thus, in a global consciousness both social responsibilities and human rights are universalized.

For Robertson and Chirico, the trend to generalize notions of ‘humanity’ and to relativize the importance of particular national societies is particularly important for the growth of religious groups, especially those which make ethico-political demands trans-nationally. Because the concerns of individuals are generalized in the contemporary global context, and the distinctiveness of particular national societies are relativized in the global context, there is also pressure on individuals and particular national societies to define themselves in more distinctive terms. For example, there is pressure to define what a national society “ultimately stands for” and what is sacred about it in order to maintain its distinctiveness; thus, issues that in a previous era would have been the domain of a sovereign nation, like how prisoners are treated, become international concerns for nations who want to define themselves as advocates of “human rights”.

At the same time, as national societies are relativized, and notions of “humanity” are generalized, individuals no longer share as strong a collective identity by virtue of nationality. Individuals can now increasingly define themselves and can claim rights as theirs simply by virtue of their “humanity”. Thus, though globalization involves “universalization”, it has also been said to involve “particularization”,

since individual autonomy is strengthened vis-à-vis the national state. Ironically, globalization involves increased individual autonomy, for it is increasingly up to the individual to define his or her own distinctiveness. And paradoxically, though the relativization of national societies is one of the prerequisites of globalization, globalization often serves to strengthen particularism, for it is in terms of particular identities that individuals mark themselves. Thus, globalization theory allows us to explain not only a broader, more universal consciousness, but also the seemingly paradoxical growth of nationalisms, fundamentalisms, and even self-actualization movements, which give particular content to individuals defining who they are.

In sum, Robertson and Chirico assert that the fundamental characteristics of the “global context” are relativization of national societies and generalization of the self. This in turn produces pressure on both national societies and individuals to define their own distinctiveness. The global context becomes a context of both “universalism” and “particularism”.

## **CONCLUSION: AFFINITIES OF RASTAFARI AND THE GLOBAL CONTEXT**

So what is the relation of Rastafari to the “global context”?

I argue that Rastafari can be characterized as an “orthognostic” religion – that is a religion that emphasizes correct knowledge as the path for salvation. This knowledge is a mystical revelation of the “I’s” divinity that comes through individual insight (though frequently in reasoning with others).

At the same time, following Robertson and Chirico, I have described the “global context” as a situation in which nation states are increasingly relativized and there is a concurrent spread of universalized notions of “humanity”. Individuals in this scenario are increasingly pressured to define themselves, thus creating the seemingly paradoxical situation in which “universalization” leads also to increasing “particularization”.

Given the emphasis in the global context on the individual self as the definer or maker of particular identity, it is not surprising that a religion which emphasizes the authority and legitimacy of the self to make such decisions, and to know intuitively which decisions are correct, would be popular. I am suggesting here that it is precisely the parallel between the focus on the self in the “global context” and the emphasis on the “I” in Rastafari “orthognosy”, that makes

Rastafari particularly suited to spreading in the “global context”.

In other words, the relationship of Rastafari and the global context is simply that both recognize the autonomy and the relativity of the self. The Rastafari “I” is the legitimate authority for insight and the knowledge which permits one to recognize oneself as an “I”; the global context increasingly requires each of us to define himself or herself in particular terms, and thus also extends to individuals the legitimate authority, and need, to define themselves. Interestingly, the recognition of the “I” is the foundation for a universalistic ethic in Rastafari. If it were not it would be difficult to understand why women, or middle class white men, would be attracted to Rastafari. I argue that the world is receptive to Rastafari because the world is already searching for what it means to be both particular and universal, and Rastafari “orthodoxy” authorizes the decisions about identity that the global context is already asking us to make.

It is this general affinity, interpreted through the lens of Rastafari’s “symbolic ambiguity” (Yawney 1994) and its generally non-hierarchical organization which is often fixed upon by new adherents as Rastafari is carried into new contexts. The emphasis on egalitarianism, and the reinterpretation of Rastafari symbols to suit local contexts are all the more possible because Rastafari has frequently been carried into new locations via popular music (e.g. reggae) which itself is symbolically ambiguous and open to reinterpretation. When combined, these factors facilitate the rapid spread of Rastafari in a variety of locations in the world, even when the beliefs of particular Rastafari groups (e.g. particularly patriarchal groups or intolerant groups) do not seem to have affinities with the “global context”

## Notes

1. *The New Chronicle*, January 7, 1981.
2. Under late President Banda, Rastafari was virtually banned in Malawi. In Swaziland, Rastafari relatives of the King were ejected from the royal grounds ostensibly because of their religion. In Auckland there have been protracted discussion about the legalization of cannabis, pressed in part by a Rastafarian MP. On Dominica, see Richard C. Salter, ‘Shooting Dreads on Sight’, in Catherine Wessinger (ed.), *Millennialism, persecution and violence: Historical cases* (NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000).
3. See, for example, Yawney and Homiak’s (2001) discussion of efforts among some Rastafari to establish the House of Nyahbinghi, as normative for Rastafari orthodoxy.
4. I realize that a minimum characterization of Rastafari is by definition reductionistic. I am not arguing that ‘I-consciousness’ is the essence of the Rastafari movement, but rather that it is a common thread among many Rastas. I am not suggesting that individual Rastas must exhibit ‘I-consciousness’, nor that Rastas who do not

exhibit 'I-consciousness' are not really Rastas, for in the end the answer to what counts as a Rasta varies by context. My aim here is descriptive, not proscriptive.

5. One example of this among scholarship of Rastafari is Timothy Taylor's article, "Soul rebels: the Rastafarians and the free exercise clause" (1984 *Georgetown Law Journal*, 72 Geo., L.J. 1605), which defines Rastafari beliefs in terms of six central beliefs listed by Barrett following his early research on Rastafari. Though Taylor is careful to note the heterogeneity of Rastafari, his article has been cited in many court cases and has served as an "objective" standard for what Rastafari is.
6. A good start in this approach can be seen in Spencer (1998).
7. Dread X would not even reveal his name to me because he was concerned about what others at the Nyahbinghi would say if they heard his comments.

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A VOICE *from Cuba*  
Conceptual and practical difficulties  
with studying Rastafari

SAMUEL FURÉ DAVIS

Since the very first years of the Revolution, Cuba has been the focus of multidisciplinary, political, cultural and historical research conducted by both Cuban and foreign intellectuals and professionals. More than in any other country of the Caribbean basin, foreign research in Cuba has been triggered by the existence of the social system we have built and defended against all odds for over forty years. Cuba is the only socialist state in the Americas,<sup>1</sup> but it is also part of the Caribbean archipelago and shares many of the historical and cultural processes of other islands in the region. Together these qualities make our *Isla Grande* an interesting place for researchers ranging from the social sciences to the humanities and cultural studies.

Despite this long history of research, an accurate approach to many cultural and sociological issues of *today's* Cuba depends largely on an objective and comprehensive understanding of the socioeconomic context of the 1990s, a time known as the “special period”, and the effects this decade may have had on the country’s cultural and social dynamics.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of culture, it is indeed a fact that during the special period Cuba has witnessed an upsurge of studies on popular music, religiosity, and race relations, among other things, by both Cuban and foreign social scientists and students. The Cuban Rastafari culture is one of the burning issues which remains neglected in Cuban academic circles: there is little accurate and scholarly exploration of the “obscure” aspects of the movement and the unanswered questions underlying it. A number of reasons might explain this phenomenon. Among other things, Rastafari is a very recently imported trend in the Cuban cultural mainstream. It is also a small minority culture, although it should be noted that the cultural effects of Rastafari on the wider society are extremely significant and disproportionate to the number of Rastafari. It is connected to marijuana smoking and other criminal activities, and it therefore holds somewhat of a dishonored status. It is suburban and therefore

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marginal to the mainstream cultural life in the urban areas.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, it would be wrong to assert that there is a total lack of interest in Rastafari and associated lifestyles among scholars, the media, and people in general. Rastafari is present and growing in undergraduate and graduate courses on Caribbean religion, history, and literature. It has been dealt with in conferences, colloquiums, Caribbean festivals, and other cultural activities **organized by the Rastas, with institutional support**. And, especially as Rastafari was embodied in the music and life of Bob Marley, it has also been in the media, mainly in some printed press releases, and in TV and radio broadcasts which deal in one way or another with Caribbean culture. “Las Claves del Enigma” (The Keys to the Enigma), a TV programme written and conducted by the Cuban musician and musicologist Alberto Faya, is an example of this interest in presenting reggae and its Rastafarian message as part of Cuba’s Caribbean cultural diversity.

Rastafari started to reach the Cuban youth of African ancestry in suburban areas some time in the mid to late 1970s.<sup>4</sup> How, why and when this development started is no longer a mystery, but at a most general level we can say it was due to the globalization of Rastafari, an inevitable effect of the commercial practices and the process of globalization of culture in the postmodern world. I was then a very young, unaware witness of its development. Some years later, around 1986, I accidentally started to gain knowledge about Rastafari through music, just like hundreds (maybe thousands) of Cuban Rastas at the present time. About ten years ago, in an attempt to try to more formally understand this alternative culture, I realized that my university education in the area of philology was not in itself useful for deep immersion into research on Rastafari in Cuba. Thus, I turned to approach Rastafari through the multidisciplinary area of cultural studies.

I live very close to a number of Rastafarians in the South-East suburban neighbourhood of Havana City called ‘La Corea’. Living close to Rastas made my early connection easier and broader; I saw the dreadlocks of some Rastas grow at the same time I was becoming more engaged in Rastafari. However, because I have not grounded with that community, my intention here is not to provide an insider’s view on Rastafari. I simply want to note that my method has gradually moved from naive observation to participant and engaged observation.

Although the situation is somewhat changed now, as I elaborate

below, during the early years of my exploration, I observed that few people had done **serious or conscious** writing on Rastafari in Cuba. These first writings on Rastafari in the early eighties roughly featured two genres. First, as I mentioned earlier, some articles were published in youth magazines, such as *El Caimán Bardudo* and *Somos Jóvenes*. These pieces were essentially descriptive and critical commentaries on the fresh reggae beat and Bob Marley without analysing how and why it started to grow in Cuba at that same time. Second, some university students in the social sciences were motivated by the new music and the culture behind it and wrote their term papers or diploma dissertations on Rasta and its presence in literature as starting points for future studies. Consequently, Rastafari was not a totally alien issue to the media and to academe, although it remained generally unfamiliar and unexplored, and a socially rejected and marginal subculture. It was in this context that my more formal exploration of Rastafari started.

I will now turn to describing some of the larger issues I have encountered during this eight years of research on Rastafari in Cuba. These issues really fall into two categories. On the one hand, there was a need to redefine or to reconsider established or polemical concepts in international Rastafari studies, particularly the prefix “Afro” (as, for example, in the term “Afro-Cuban” when referring to the origins and participants of Rastafari), the notion of Babylon, and the characterization of Rastafari as a religion. On the practical side, there were a number of potential “barriers” that I had to notice and keep in mind on the way to studying Rastafari.

## CONCEPTUAL PROBLEMS WITH THE STUDY OF RASTAFARI IN CUBA

### Afro

The first of these widely used and conceptually problematic concepts is the term *Afro*, typically seen in the phrase Afro-Cuba. This term is problematic especially because it is closely connected to the interaction between unity and diversity in our Cuban cultural heritage. Identifying Rastafari as essentially African raises a pivotal issue in the study of Rastafari, an essentially Black alternative culture.

What does the term *Afro* mean in Cuba? Much has been written and published about this problem by Cuban and foreign scholars, and my intention here is not to define the term; rather, it is important

to point out how the term is of special concern in the study of Rastafari. For many Cubans the concept is problematic because it goes against the idea of racial integration by segmenting the notion of Cuba as a whole. Nonetheless, the term has been widely used after Fernando Ortíz introduced it.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, some foreign researchers usually see first of all only the changing reality of the sharp contrast between the allegedly “raceless” and “classless” nature of our socialist system and the resurfacing notions of race and class resulting from the socio-cultural consequences of the special period. The term *Afro* in Afro-Cuba seems redundant because Cuban culture is already understood to include African elements. Yet, the term *Afro* is not superfluous as a response to some scholars who tend to *homogenize* the Cuban national culture, leading to a dangerous unawareness of its plural ethnic composition. As Rogelio Martínez Furé (Pérez and Stubbs 2000:156) once put it:

the Cuban came in the fusion of African and Spanish, plus other elements. But there are some who evidently choose to forget this. They say ‘Cuban’ and ‘Afro-Cuban’, as if Afro-Cuban is something else and Cuban is chemically pure, Hispanic, or white.

Evidently, the “*cubanía*” is an imaginary cultural space without limits based neither on skin colour nor ethnic background, but the integration process cannot reduce the “*afro-cubanía*” to folklore, religion, music, or, even worse, to a strange, unfamiliar expression, disregarding the social implications of blackness which gave rise to racial prejudice.

Indeed, race relations have always been a key issue in Cuban nationality, especially since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as history records through events and names like *Aponte*, *Conspiración de la Escalera*, *La Demajagua*, the racial repression of 1912, the consequences of slavery, the Revolutionary achievements, and the special period.<sup>6</sup>

However, the ideology of the Cuban Revolution since 1868 through 1895 has always promoted national unity against discord and frictions. Consequently, being Cuban is officially defined as more than being Afro, or Chinese, or Hispanic. Nevertheless, the existence of an *Afro-Cuba* as a cultural category not only in Cuban folklore, religion, music, language or literature but also in interaction with the diverse ethnic ingredients of our nationality is undeniable, and this notion has been very closely related throughout history to the notion of class, just as everywhere else in the Caribbean and “Afro-America”. Besides, the term *Afro-Cuba* was coined by its usage

in the social sciences, not by the people; thus, not all Blacks in Cuba proudly and openly call themselves Blacks, but Rastafarians do accept their blackness and praise the virtues of African culture, even if they are not visibly Black. Just as in other societies, Cuban society has equally mirrored and reproduced slow upward social mobility, whitening of blackness, black self-denigration, and Eurocentric beauty stereotypes. Significantly, Rasta brethren consciously attempt not to reproduce these social problems.<sup>6</sup>

In a nutshell, given the mainstream definition of Cuban cultural identity as a racially mixed uni-ethnic identity, there are two reasons why it could be controversial to use the term *Afro* to characterize the majority of Rastafarians. First, if studying the Cuban version of Rastafari aims at proving the possibility of its future assimilation and acceptance by Cuban society of this universalized “Afro” culture, just like the hip-hop and rock subcultures have been accepted, then using the prefix *Afro* contradicts what is generally understood by Cuban culture. That is to say, a Black Rastafarian is already as Cuban as a White Cuban “rocker”, and to specify the Rasta’s ethnic origins would be irrelevant in this understanding of Cuban culture. Second, though it is well known that Black pride has been one of the philosophical pillars of Rastafari worldwide, Rastafari is not any longer a melanin related cultural alternative in Cuba. It is a growing popular culture among the Cuban youth generally, not only Rastas and sympathizers; and the cultural spread of its message reaches beyond just a Black Cuban audience. Rastas themselves affirm that Rastafari is not about skin colour when they extend the term “Rasta” to those White and fair-skinned brethren who reject the hegemonic Eurocentric views about race and beauty.

## Babylon

Another polemic **concept** for understanding Rastafari in Cuba is *Babylon*. As an alternative culture, Rastafari reaffirms human dignity, love, justice, and peace in a hostile, unequal, violent, racist, and capitalist society. It is in open opposition to Western dominant political systems, police repression, cultural imperialism, and disrespect for nature, in the widest sense of the word.

In Cuba, which is free from that hostile capitalist system but is under the threat of imperial domination, the majority of the Cuban population, including a number of Rastafari, openly accept in one way or another the socialist system and support just revolutionary

causes. Given the Rastafarian sympathy in Jamaica towards Fidel Castro and the Cuban revolution in the early years (see, e.g., Smith et al. 1960: 21; Campbell 1997: 103; Owens 1976: 38; Chevannes 1995: 249), it was clear that the new Cuban social order was far from being similar to the anti-colonialist concept of Babylon in a capitalist society. In those years, however, Rastafari had not yet started to develop in Cuba.

The notion of Babylon among the Cuban Rastafari is quite complex. This concept is very much related to what it means among Rastafari worldwide, mainly the police, the exercise of violence, and the socioeconomic problems of daily life. Because of the social rejection of the dreadlocked hair style, general lack of understanding towards Rastafari, and police harassment of Rastafari in the late 1970s and 1980s, there still exists (mainly among the younger brethren) an association of Babylon among Cuban Rastas with the police and law enforcement. Besides, violent behaviour in social relations is also connected to the meaning of “Babylon”, although the level of violence in Cuba is never comparable to that of capitalist and other third world cities around the world. Since Rastafari disapproves of all violence – non-natural behaviours and actions, i.e. aggressive attitudes at school, in the family, and other domains of social life – this rejection of violence is also part of the image of Babylon among many Cuban Rastafarians, mainly among its most conservative followers. In addition to police and violence, there is also a general perception of Babylon as the economic crisis that led to the special period and the resulting social inequality, prostitution, racial prejudice, and other social problems that emerged in the special period. Cuban Rastafari notions of Babylon are elastic, and they may also incorporate other institutions like the Catholic Church. Turning from Babylon includes rejecting all behaviours considered non-natural and all actions contrary to the peace-and-love ideal of the Rastafari philosophy. The most traditional Rastas may even assume the extreme position of restricting their children’s social relations to protect them from the bad influences acquired in the neighbourhood and the school. A Rastafari mother, for example, who assumed responsibility for the pre-school education of her now seven-year-old daughter, defined Babylon as the “belly of the beast” where the child is exposed to a high level of wickedness, misconduct, malediction, and consumerism.

In sum, Cuba’s socialist context shifts the meaning of *Babylon*. Thus, the term presents itself as a conceptual problem for the study

of Rastafari in Cuba. Of course, as is typical of Rastafari elsewhere, there are various interpretations of Babylon, and they can even coexist in one individual.

### **Rastafari as Religion?**

A third conceptual problem for the study of Rastafari in Cuba is whether to characterize Rastafari as a religion. It is accepted that Rastafari is to many much more than a lifestyle preference: it is also a religion in the sense that it has or has had a deified being, a God (Haile Selassie I), a promised land (Ethiopia, Africa), a hell (Babylon, the so-called New World or Jamaica in the repatriation years), a sacred text (the Bible, essentially the Old Testament), prophets, missionary preachers, and leaders (such as M. Garvey, S. Brown, and M. Planno among others), etc. Rastafari, as in Christian-based religions, has also been organized into “denominations” or “Houses” according to differences in beliefs, habits, and practices; but common to all of them is the celebration of ritual gatherings. Yet, Rastafari in Cuba is still, as in many other countries, a marginal culture and an unofficial religious manifestation. Despite the actions – few and isolated – by Rastafari themselves to get official recognition, approval and respect, the religion survives primarily as a spiritual tendency, individual in character, not as an institutionalized brotherhood. There is no formal leadership, and no prevailing House of Rastafari. There are also no *de facto* Rastafari yards, since in Cuba Rastafari do not live in the same yards (nor even in the same neighborhoods), but rather meet frequently at one brethren’s house. The mushrooming growth of Rastafari in the 1990s, though, took place mainly at the individual and group levels, not at an organizational level, as an isolated but spontaneous religious expression. In this respect, Rastafari differs when compared to the predominant religions in Cuba.<sup>8</sup> According to the Department of Socio-Religious Studies of the Psychological and Sociological Research Center (DESR-CIPS):

In the current religious context, there coexist different religious expressions of various historical origins, as well as a non-institutionalized religiousness of spontaneous development, which is expressed in a varied mosaic of beliefs and religious acts called extended or popular religiousness (Díaz y Perera, 1997:20).<sup>9</sup>

Based on this criterion, Rastafari might be classified as one of these “non-institutionalized” and “spontaneous” religious express-



ions with an increasing influence on the wider society (mainly on the youth) due to its appealing power as a culture or lifestyle of a broader range. Besides, there exist contact points between Rastafari and other spontaneous religions, such as those of African and Asian origin which some Rastafari even identify themselves with. Indeed, as others in this volume have stated, defining Rastafari as a religion is as complex as defining it in the global context.

One way to explore how Rastafari does (or does not) show itself officially in Cuba is to contact the ecumenical institutions that officially grant recognition to religions on the island. Cuba's Council of Churches, for example, which includes most Christian religions, argues that Rastafari cannot be classified within the category Christian. Similarly, the Afro-Cuban religions, which are grouped under the Yoruba Cultural Association and Museum, do not accept Rastafari as one of their own. My own observation is that the association of Rastafari with the use of ganja and the belief in Haile Selassie I are insurmountable obstacles in any official and social acceptance of Rastafari as a religion per se in Cuba.

In contrast, academic studies of Rastafari which may implicitly recognize it as a religion or as an alternative culture, and studies of reggae are now usually welcomed as appealing and contemporary research interests in institutions like the Casa del Caribe,<sup>10</sup> Casa de las Américas,<sup>11</sup> the University of Havana, and the DESR-CIPS. Though the latter does not have any ongoing research on the topic, in a personal interview with the staff, they explicitly expressed interest in the topic.

In a nutshell, "religion" is not the term to use in a broad approach to Rastafari in Cuba, and as a religion itself practised by the most traditional brethren, it is less appealing. What matters in a general study of Rastafari in Cuban culture is the lifestyle associated with it.

## **PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE STUDY AND DEVELOPMENT OF RASTAFARI IN CUBA**

**In addition to the conceptual problems described above, there are also practical considerations affecting the study of Rastafari.**

First, economically speaking, the situation of the special period in Cuba has led to a serious lack or shortage of financial and material resources at all levels. While the country opened itself to international tourism and joint ventures with capitalist enterprises, the society developed a dangerous idealization of the foreigner as a source of dollars and material things. As a result, foreigners typically find that

doors open more easily for them. Rasta brethren also distinguish between nationals and foreigners and react accordingly to foreign or national participant-observation and involvement.<sup>12</sup> At a less direct level, these different reactions influence the time in which study can occur and the information the researcher receives from informants. For instance, Rastafari can express an opinion more readily to a foreigner; moreover, out of fear of saying the wrong thing to the wrong person, what is said without much hesitation and in their very first conversation with a foreigner may not be disclosed to a Cuban national, unless he is “trustworthy” or “recommended” by a brethren or friend.

Additionally, Cuban Rastafari react to published scholarly work about themselves in two ways: On the one hand, there is passive rejection among some who do not want to be the center of any descriptive or analytical study in a society which they think would never understand or accept them. On the other hand, there is an explicit acceptance of this work among other Rastas who see the participant-observer or engaged scholar as another vehicle to positively disseminate their message in the wider society.

Furthermore, the image of the Rastafari in Cuba was viewed with scorn some years ago – as it was in other places in the world. Much of that disdain was caused by the recurring association of Rastafari to deeply embedded social beliefs and prejudices, such as uncleanness, marginality, crime, marijuana, violence, and Blackness. One consequence of that very recent history is either a defensive, evasive attitude or an accessible, responsive position which is determined by the motivation of the researcher, which could be negative or positive in the eyes of the Rastafarian. Sometimes these attitudes are also conditioned by the nationality of the researcher – since the “idolization” of the foreigner (discussed above) can trigger a material interest among some people, which mediates the social relations between Rastafari and the scholar. This can also lead to the inadvertent or intentional “sale” of information in exchange for a few dollars, material things, or favours. In other words, the greater availability of material resources among foreign scholars makes it easier for them to move around as soon as an initial contact is made with the Rastafari community.

A further and last issue addresses what we may call the institutional representation of Cuban scholarship with regard to Rastafari. This experience is also related to explicitly political issues such as the hostility of the United States governments towards Cuba. A great

part of the Rastafari academy lives, works, or meets in the United States. This has made it difficult for scholars from Cuba to present their work to other colleagues in international conferences hosted in US territory; except for few academic activities organized elsewhere, I had been unable to argue against criteria and to exchange research results. My own case is illustrative: a series of panels on the study of Rastafari in the global context was organized in the United States between 1998 and 2001. During these four consecutive years, the American Academy of Religion hosted a seminar entitled “Rastafari in Global Context”.

Richard Salter, one of the participants, commented in an editor’s note to a previous version of this paper:

These difficulties themselves constitute a problem in the globalization of Rastafari and studies on the topic all over the world. On at least three separate occasions we invited international participants (including Samuel Furé, Arthur Newland, and Mortimo Planno). Though the Academy itself made every effort to welcome these participants, including provision of housing for them, they were each denied entry visas to the US on more than one occasion.

In the peculiar Cuban case, visa applications require a long a slow process on the part of both the US Interests Section and the Cuban institutions – and time is therefore an important element in whether or not an application completes the process successfully. Also, protectionist regulations regarding travel from Cuba to the US implemented by Cuban government institutions and applicable to those who travel for professional reasons involve long and painstaking procedures. The application must be approved at different levels. My travel application in 1998 was turned down by the Cuban authorities on the basis of lack of interest in the topic at the government level and tense relations existing between the two countries. The following year, I was denied a visa by the US Interests Section.

Both Cuba-US bilateral relations and travel regulations between the two countries undermines the understanding of the Cuban reality abroad and the possibility of experiential exchange between both the Rastafari academy and the growing communities of Rastas from Cuba and all over the world. There is another cause, however, of this “isolation”. As a consequence of this growing interest worldwide, some Cuban institutions, such as those mentioned earlier in this article, have organized conferences and cultural activities on Rastafari and reggae in one form or another, but few have relied on the attendance and participation of international scholars of Rastafari.<sup>13</sup>

I should note, however, that my non attendance at those seminars did not prevent my being updated on the main topics discussed. Perhaps it is another manifestation of globalization that scholars of Rastafari can continue to be in electronic contact, even when politics precludes physical contact with one another.<sup>14</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

**In the course of its international spread, Rastafari has changed substantially. In Cuba, it manifests itself with a particular complexity due to the plurality of our cultural identity in terms of race, religion and ethnic composition, and our distinctive socialist socioeconomic and political system.**

Rastafari in Cuba has continued to change during the “special period”. The notions of Afro-Cuba, Babylon, and religion in Rastafari are only three among other problematic concepts that must be reexamined in the Cuban context. Out of space considerations, I have not dealt with the appropriation of Caribbean symbolism of Rastafari and reggae by non-Rastafarian segments of the society, nor the language issue,<sup>15</sup> nor have I addressed the characteristics of the interaction between Rastafari and the other two widely accepted alternative youth cultures in the island, namely rock and hip hop. However, they also shape the Cuban approach to Rastafari because this is not an isolated cultural expression; it expands itself not as a religion per se but as an influential cultural force in close connection to these other youth cultures and to Cuban popular music and culture in general – thanks to the appealing power of Rastafari’s musical and visual symbols.

## Notes

1. This paper was written in Leuven, Belgium, between November and December 2001, and has since then only been slightly changed. Many social and political changes have taken place in the Americas, mainly in Latin America. Therefore, it is inexact to say that Cuba is today the only socialist country in the region when a few other countries are promoting progressive ideas towards the “socialism of the 21st century”.
2. The economic strategies of the “special period” were designed by the government to be implemented for survival in cases of extreme emergency, such as at war or military conflicts; nevertheless, it became necessary to implement it as a “peace-time special period” after the disappearance of the Eastern European socialist countries which accounted for 85% of the market for Cuban economy. In order to

understand both the economic difficulties as well as the social consequences of the special period, more emphasis should be given to the role of the relations between the US government and Cuba. In particular, it is necessary to emphasize the US economic embargo/blockade, which was tightened by recurring unilateral and extraterritorial laws after 1989, thus worsening the social and economic effects of the crisis (see Moreno et al. 1998) These actions and this situation have limited the possibilities of economic and social development in the times of crisis.

3. The term suburban is used here to refer to the suburb, i.e. the residential areas in or near the boundaries of the city (downtown). What is not urban is rural; however, suburban lifestyles can also be found because of the complexities of social dynamics marked especially, among other aspects, by the concept of class and opportunities of upward mobility.
4. For more specific explanations of Rastafari's growth in Cuba, see S. Furé, "Rastafari and popular culture in contemporary Cuba: A case study of Caribbean connections", *Pouvoirs dans la Caraïbe* (no. spécial, Série Université de Juillet, CRPLC, U.A.G., 2000); also in *Caribbean Quarterly Rastafari Monograph* (2000).
5. Fernando Ortíz Fernández, one of the greatest Cuban ethnographers, once wrote that the expression was first used by Antonio de Veitia in 1847; but it was extensively used after Ortíz published his first volume where he introduced the expression in 1906 (Ortíz 1943: 72).
6. Although not all of these events have been equally present in school history handbooks and other manuals for educational purposes, they are widely known among the academe and social sciences in general.
7. I would like to point out that these Rasta brethren I speak about are not the so-called drelas (from the English word "dreadlocks") who assume Rastafari as a fashionable way of life to attract white women and often engage in socially denigrating activities that reproduce the anti-Black stereotypes among the wider society.
8. According to research conducted by the Havana based Department of Socio-Religious Studies of the Psychological and Sociological Research Center (DESR-CIPS, in Spanish) the most common faiths are in the Catholic, Protestant, and African originated religions. However, Rastafari is not the only minority religious group. Various other religions, such as Judaism and the Bahá'í Faith, are represented in Cuba with a proportionally small number of believers. Unlike Rastafari, these traditions are officially recognized and institutionally organized.
9. The translation is mine. The original reads: "*En el cuadro religioso actual coexisten diferentes expresiones religiosas de distintos orígenes históricos, así como una religiosidad no institucionalizada y con un desarrollo espontáneo, que se expresa en un mosaico variado de creencias y actos religiosos llamado religiosidad extendida o popular.*"
10. With headquarters in Santiago de Cuba, the second most important city of the island and said to be the most Caribbean city of Cuba because of the cultural similarities with the rest of the region, this institution hosts a yearly Festival and has supported the organization of several workshops and talks about Rasta and Bob Marley.
11. Based in Havana, it is one of the largest intellectual forums for the study and promotion of Latin American and Caribbean culture(s).
12. Several attitudes derive from this distinction, e.g. the Rasta jinetero (a male prostitute, often called "Rastitute" in the Cuban "dread talk": rasta + prostitute.).
13. This chapter was written before February 2002, when Parque Metropolitano de la Habana, Teatro América, and other Cuban institutions organized the first, and so far the only, international reggae concert in Havana with the participation of few international artists, as a tribute to Bob Marley's birthday.
14. I am deeply indebted to Jan DeCosmo and the late Carole Yawney, who provided me with some of the written material and recordings of the three panels at the

annual American Academy of Religions conferences between 1998 and 2000. I am also thankful to Richard Salter who patiently edited the first version of this paper to improve my English.

15. A paper published in *Small Axe. A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* (vol. 10, no. 1, February 2006) co-authored by Velma Pollard, discusses the linguistic complexities derived from using in Spanish a primarily English-Jamaican vocabulary.

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# Interview with Mutabaruka

(BY RICHARD SALTER)

For many years Mutabaruka has been a public voice for Rastafari in Jamaica and abroad, through his own music and performances and for many years as a DJ for Jamaica's IRIE FM radio station. As a key part of the Jamaican music scene, and as an international emissary of Rastafari, Mutabaruka has always been part of the globalization of Rastafari. In the following interview he shares his thoughts on the spread of Rastafari, the integration of Rastafari with other cultures, the place of Jamaica in global Rastafari, and what it means to learn about Rastafari in a global context. The interview took place on October 17, 2001 in Syracuse, New York.

**RS:** Muta, the first thing I want to ask you is what you think about the spread of Rastafari globally, especially how it's moved outside of Jamaica to other countries around the world, and what do you see as the future of Rastafari in other places?

**Mutabaruka:** Well, I can see something good happening and I can see something really bad happening. The purpose of Rastafari was to spread out from Jamaica, and it is through that spread, especially through music, that we see Rastafari known outside of Jamaica. Most people's first contact with Rasta is through the music. On the other hand, there is a lot of what people call "commercialization" of the faith because of the popularity of the music. And because most of the reggae artists seem to be prophesying Rastafari, the link between the faith and music lends itself to a certain... a certain ambiguity when it reaches the wider world. Most of the reggae musicians only speak of Rastafari in the music. In terms of articulating Rastafari outside of the music, there is a lot lacking in many reggae musicians. There are not very many reggae musicians who experience Rastafari outside of the music. Not very many reggae musicians live Rastafari outside of the music. That creates a kind of problem when it reaches places like America, where the reggae musician, even though he speaks of Rastafari on the stage, is found lacking when it comes to articulating the experience,

articulating the philosophy, the theology of Rastafari, in life.

You know, that is how it happens that most of the books written about Rastafari are written by people outside of the faith. They talk to the people who they come in contact with and most of the contacts that they have are reggae musicians. So when you hear them write about Rasta, what they write is coming from the eyes and philosophy of a reggae artist.

Now, people must understand that there are a lot of Rastafari who don't have any contact with the music. As a matter of fact, most Rastafarians in Jamaica listen to the music and like the music because of its message about what they are dealing with, but they are not musicians themselves. Yet people have this feeling... you know, I have been to places in the world where people feel that once you are a reggae musician you must be a Rasta. Or, once you are a Rasta, you must be a reggae musician. And that is not the case. If you come to Jamaica you will find out that there are thousands of Rastafari who have nothing to do with the music and who are living Rastafari without any frame of reference to reggae music.

**RS:** When you go to other countries around the world do you find a lot of Rastas turn out for shows and performances?

**Mutabaruka:** Yeah man! Every where you go, because of the music, as we said before, Rastafari wings have spread. There's nowhere you go in the world today where you won't find a Jamaican or that you won't find a Rasta. We've been to Europe, we've been to South Africa, we've been to some really obscure places, and you would be surprised to see the vast crowd that comes out and the expression of Jah, and Rastafari, and the Rasta culture.

You know, the culture is really what impresses the oppressed in the world. The culture of Rastafari is what grabs the people. This is a very unique culture to the Western world, especially amongst black people. The culture of Rastafari can spread, can be identified with, can be lived true by anyone who identifies with oppression and anyone who feels disenfranchised by the colonial system or white supremacist system that maintains itself all over the world. So people of every kind really gravitate towards Rastafari because of that.

**RS:** What have been some of the places that you've been and have



been surprised to find people? You mentioned that you have been to some “really obscure places” and I’m just curious where were those places?

**Mutabaruka:** Like Australia. When you go to Australia, you meet aborigines who claim themselves to be Rasta. They give up their aborigine indigenous culture. When you go to most Native American areas, there are a lot of Native Americans who are Rastas. I mean, even in South Africa. If you go to South Africa you see people that are from certain tribes, but instead of adapting their tribal ways they see Rastafari, the locks, and they say “Jah.” They try to get information about Rastafari, and when you speak to them, you see that they’re clearly trying to fit into Rasta culture. So there are a lot of places where I’ve met Rastas.

In Cameroon, in the deepest jungle of the Cameroon you can go, you see man there saying they are Rasta, and they really identify with it. As I said before, his only connection is through the music. When he listens to the music that we make, he identifies with it, and that allows him a certain feeling that there is someone else out there that knows what he is going through. There is someone else out there that connects with him. And Rastafari is the only ... I think Rastafari are the only people that use a music that powerful. I don’t think that any other music or genre of music has ever been used in such a way. It is both secular and gospel. The music lends itself to secular minds, but it also lends itself to people who are searching in their spirit, so it’s kind of a ... it’s a “two-tiered” music. People identify with it. Even though they may not be of any faith, they understand the militancy and the revolutionary spirit in the music. And you have people who are talking about God in different religions who see the spirituality that comes out of reggae music.

So, yes, Rastafari has really influenced a lot of things. I was reading a magazine that said that in 70 years of Rastafari the influence of Rastafari is much more than the three major religions in the world, in terms of its length of time being here. What Rastafari has done in just seventy years, the three major religions didn’t do in that same time. So you can just imagine if it was here 500 years! It would be a serious ... the whole earth would be Rasta.

**RS:** If Rasta is spreading around the world in part through music,

what do you see as some of the ways that Rasta is being affected by the world when it spreads? And by that I don't mean what are the ways it gets corrupted by reggae musicians who are not Rasta, but I mean how does the message itself kind of grow as it goes into new places? How does it kind of take on qualities of new places? Does it?

**Mutabaruka:** Yeah, well it does take on new qualities because people identify with it in their own environment. Without changing themselves they identify with and become Rasta in their environment. So, as I said before, for instance, if you go to certain people who are of a certain tribe, let us say in Africa, you will find people who identify with reggae, who identify with Rastafari, who have a picture of Haile Selassie in their house. But they are really from the Asanti. Maybe if you ask, "Where you from?" they would say, "From the Asanti" or "From the Akan," but they identify with the Rasta message in the music, so even though they are part of the Asanti, when they hear the message of the Rasta man coming through the music it is like it's them.

Rastafari does not mean that these people separate from their culture. Reggae music is the only music that talks about Africa so clearly. Rastas are the only group, as a group, in the Western world that speaks of Africa so passionately, so when people in Africa hear this, it's not like they see it as somebody alien to them that is saying it. It is like, "This is my brother. This is somebody who feels what I feel and understands what I feel." This is a connection that has been made through the Rastafari message.

So I feel that we need to understand that the culture of a people is the way of life of the people. When something else comes into that culture, so long as it is not separating the person from their culture, they will accept it. And when they accept it, when it relates to them personally, they will graft it into their culture so it won't become something separate from them.

You see, the problem I have with Christianity is that Christianity does not allow you to maintain your cultural perspective and your sovereignty. When you become a Christian you have to give up your culture. That means that if you are an Aborigine and you used to do a certain thing, you have to give up that. If you are a Native American and you used to worship

the Native American gods, you have to give up that. Rastafari culture allows you keep yourself and still maintain your culture.

But as a Rasta you can't just talk about Rastafari. You have to talk about Rastafari and you live the Rastafari way. You grow your locks; you don't eat certain foods and things. But you can still identify with your culture because Rastafari is not separating you from it. Rastafari is not separating you from your self.

**RS:** One of the things I was wondering was if, as Rastafari spreads around the world, Jamaica remains the center of it anymore? In other words, once you could say that, at least historically, it started in Jamaica. But maybe Jamaica's role gets decentralized?

**Mutabaruka:** Decentralization? I don't think so. I don't think Rastafari will ever be decentralized from Jamaica, because no matter where you go in the world, once a man comes in contact with Rastafari he wants to go to Jamaica. If you go to Africa, you find people who want to go to Jamaica. If you go to Europe, once a man comes in contact with Rastafari he wants to go to Jamaica. It has something like a "gravity-pull" for people. When they listen to the music they want to go to Jamaica. When you hear about Rastafari and start to study Rastafari, you want to go to Jamaica.

I think that there are more Rastas outside of Jamaica. But we're talking about the core, the root of this thing, and I think people will always want to experience the root of the thing. Even if it were decentralized in some sense, maybe because you have more Rastas in England than in Jamaica, Jamaica would still be the center in another sense. You may have plenty of Rastas there, but if you check out those Rastas over there you'll find they want to go to Jamaica. A lot of people tell you they want to go to Jamaica first, then to Africa. So Jamaica's almost like ... it's like Jerusalem to Mount Zion. I don't think people will give up Jamaica in terms of wanting to experience that aspect of Rastafari. While there is what you call "globalization" of the movement, growth outside of Jamaica, Jamaica still seems to have that vibration. It's like this: if you listen to the reggae music that they make in Jamaica and the music that they don't make in Jamaica, there's something about the Jamaican music that says "Jamaica." If you hear a foreigner play reggae and you hear a Jamaican play reggae, you will say, "Well, really I prefer the Jamaican." This is because of its vibes. It is a question of vibes.

So everybody goes to Jamaica just to catch those vibes. It's a vibe more than anything else. You can't really explain it. It's a feeling. It's just that Jamaican people created the movement. It's almost like how Israelis want to go to Jerusalem. Everybody wants to go into Jerusalem, but there's nothing important and significant about Jerusalem other than its history. But there are more Jews outside of Israel than inside of Israel. There are more Muslims outside of Israel, outside of Palestine, than inside of Palestine, but people still gravitate towards Jerusalem. The Church of the Sepulchre is in Jerusalem, and the Dome of the Rock is in Jerusalem, so three religions are caught right in that little space.

**RS:** Right.

**Mutabaruka:** And Jerusalem is not even a big place. A wall just surrounds it. So, when people die for it, it is because people want to experience Jerusalem. I think Jamaica is almost like Jerusalem when it comes to experiencing Rastafari, when it comes to experiencing a culture where Rastafari is so prominent, so unique in this part of the world. Jamaica's really unique. It's almost as if it is a phenomenon really, that a little island has produced such a great spiritual awakening for black people, and most other people, all over the Western world. It is really a phenomenon. I mean, we gave the world Marcus Garvey. Marcus Garvey is the father of pan-Africanism, and it is Jamaica that he comes from.

**RS:** I have spoken to some people in some countries in the eastern Caribbean who sometimes feel like Jamaica dominates them. And that's why I wonder if maybe certain people will try to set themselves up aside from the influence of Jamaica.

**Mutabaruka:** Yeah, what about people who say that? Because you can go to the Caribbean and people will always say that, but if you go around to observe them it's still Jamaican vibes you get.

But they would not say that. They say, "Jamaicans are too arrogant; Jamaican people are too aggressive." But if you go to visit New York, or if you go to Brooklyn, everybody wants to be a Jamaican. If you go to National Avenue or Franklin Avenue, the Trinidadians and others talk like Jamaicans and they look like Jamaicans. But as a matter of fact, those might be a bunch of criminals. They are not even Jamaicans, but because of how

they behave people say that they are Jamaicans. Because they say Jamaicans behave that way.

So, yeah, we hear them say those things. We go all over the Caribbean and we hear people say that, but when it gets right down to it, Rastafari originated in Jamaica and the influence of Marcus Garvey comes from Jamaica. I'm not a Jamaican patriot, but I see the influence of Jamaica upon the world, and I see the influence of Jamaica upon even the music. If you go down to the Caribbean it's not Calypso you hear; Calypso only plays during Carnival. When you go down to the Caribbean, it's pure Jamaican music you hear, pure DJ music and reggae.

**RS:** Yeah. That's what I've heard there.

**Mutabaruka:** But, they wouldn't tell you that. They would say, "Oh Jamaica . . .," but when you turn on the radio, it is Jamaican music you hear. When you look upon their children, you see Rastas and red, gold and green.

**RS:** Do you think that the globalization of Rastafari has implications for the way people study and learn Rastafari? For example, some people have said that the globalization of Rastafari means that you can't anymore have a scholar from outside, an anthropologist or sociologist or someone like that, go down and study Rastafari. Now, because the world is a smaller place, you have to make a place for Rasta voices themselves to be heard to speak about Rasta.

**Mutabaruka:** We were talking about that the other day. There was a conference in Vienna, and this issue came up. Scholars, anthropologists, are always defining what Rasta is, because they go to Kingston and they meet some Rastas in Kingston. When most anthropologists try to articulate their findings of Rasta there's only one aspect of Rasta they always come away with. If you read 10 books about Rasta, all of them show the same thinking, the same sayings and things. They say that Rasta is saying that Haile Selassie is the returned messiah. Or, they say Rastas believe that the Bible says that Jesus is a black man. These little sayings are the sort of talk a Rasta in Kingston would say. But I would put it to you that there are Rastafari beliefs that anthropologists and scholars still haven't tapped into yet.

That is what I have been doing all over the world. I'm trying to show people like these anthropologists and these scholars,

“Look here, Rastafari is a dynamic thing and Rastafari is an evolving thing. Rastafari is not a religion. Rastafari is a way of life. No one Rasta can talk for every Rasta, and no five Rastas can talk for every Rasta.” There are different aspects of Rasta that people haven’t really tapped into yet, so they aren’t able to understand it fully.

You know, people argue about why I walk barefoot, and they ask if it is because Rastas walk barefoot. I say, “Well, Rastas have walked barefoot for a long time.” People say, “Do you think you have to have dreads to be a Rasta.” I say, “People have asked this for a long time.” But you have different aspects of Rastafari, so you cannot come to Jamaica and go sit down amongst three man say, “Oh, yeah! Now I understand.” Then you go back and you write your book and say, “Rasta is this” and “Rasta is that”. You can’t do that because Rasta is an evolution. All the things Rastas were saying forty years ago, they may not be thinking now. The youth who articulate Rasta in the music know that they are not articulating Rasta like people used to. People such as Culture and those men there have a different articulation. It’s an evolution. It’s a ladder you’re stepping up. It is not static. The report on Rastafari that was done in the sixties is not really valid now. The book, *Dread* [by Joseph Owens] is not really valid now for this Rastafari.

There was a time when Rastafari never went anywhere and saw Rasta women. Now you have Rasta women all over the place, but nobody’s articulating how Rasta women see themselves now. Even those who tell you that Rastafari is a sexist religion only know about it from the time when Rasta was still very Judeo-Christian in its thinking. There’s an evolution that is taking place now so that most Rastas are not into the Judeo-Christian thinking anymore. So the sexism is a thing of the past... In other words, most youth now are not validating Haile Selassie and Rasta through Judeo-Christian thinking.

You know, that is what the writers will write. They will tell you, Rastafari is really like a Christian based religion with an anti-colonial thrust. But Rastafari is more than that. There was a time when Rastas couldn’t articulate why they don’t eat meat, why they don’t eat salt, and these things. Man just knew enough not to do it. But now you have man who can sit down intellectually and tell you why he does it and why he doesn’t do it. The elders

really could not have articulated it like that, but they knew not to do it. But when a man writes a book he distorts Rastafari. Rasta is not like a Bible religion where you have to go to where something was written 5000 years ago, and it tells you how it's supposed to go now, 5000 years later. Rastafari is a way of life, a way of life evolved within time and space, and within an environment that the way of life itself sustains.

And if Rastafari is static, it's going to become dormant, or it's going to be irrelevant. The youth right now understand that. Subliminally or unconsciously they understand that. So you will hear a youth say that Haile Selassie is the All Mighty but he won't tell you that Haile Selassie is God, because he says the term "God" is a negative thing now. But the Elders used to say it. Now when you have man who sights that Haile Selassie is God, you might also have man who says "Burn God". You have man who says "Jah" and you have man that says "Burn Jah!" because Jah can't be anything, and he just wants to hear the words Haile Selassie. So there are different levels, different levels of the consciousness, different levels of the movement, that need to be separated. When one speaks of Rastafari one speaks of aspects of Rastafari, not Rastafari full stop, but aspects of Rastafari.

You can't define Rasta. Seen? You can't say, "This is Rasta" and come up with an answer and say, "See you, now you are not a Rasta because this is Rasta." If you do that you're going to get mixed up. You are going to get confused. It's like if you go to India. You will find the Hindus over on this part of the street don't think the same way as the Hindus over on that part of the street, and that confuses tourists. When the tourist walks down the street, and he goes to forty different houses, what does he see Hindus do? Everybody's Hindu and they have different gods. This Hindu has one god; this Hindu has another god. This Hindu does something in one way....

So I think religion is not a good term to use for Rastafari. If we put it in the category of religion, we're expecting it to work a certain way because we have our formula for religion set in front of us. It tells us that when a man says he believes in God, this is how the belief is supposed to form itself. But Rastafari defies that form. So if Rastafari defies your form of what religion is, then you would have to redefine religion or realize that Rasta is

not a religion because you cannot categorize it into a religious perspective.

A man said that Rastafari is a religion because Rastas have a deity, because they smoke herb and they say that the herb is a sacrament. But what about the Rastas who don't sight Haile Selassie as a deity and don't smoke herb? And what if he still hails Haile Selassie, but he burns the idea of deity? What about those who don't burn herb, who don't smoke herb? What about those Rastas?

So you can't bag us, you see? And that is what these people try to do. They try to bag Rasta, and put Rasta into this little bag and say, "Most of the books I read about Rasta say..." I am going to tell you this right now about those men who write this about Rastas, who say that Rastas do this or that. To those who say all Rastas are a set of people who believe that Haile Selassie is the returned Messiah, or that Jesus Christ is the second advent, or that they all want to go back to Africa, or that they smoke herbs as a sacrament like an incense unto their God: that may be so 50 years ago...

**RS:** But not now?

**Mutabaruka:** No! I hear people say that most Rastas now believe Haile Selassie to be like Jesus Christ. Burn Jesus! People say Jesus has a... Man will tell you that Jesus is a "Batyman" [homosexual]. Yeah, Yeah, some Rasta men will tell you that. So they don't have anything to do with Jesus. These are things a man might just have to keep inside himself, evaluate and realize that Rastafari is like the seasons: it doesn't stay the same all the time. You have Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter, understand?

**RS:** So, you have to be connected to the people who are living it?

**Mutabaruka:** Yeah, man. Because if you listen to the music now, and you listen to the music before, you find that the youth who manifest it now and say that they are Rastas don't say the same things they said when you listened to the music before. So there must be something happening that you don't understand. And you will now say, "What? Those men are not Rastas because..." You know what I'm saying?

**RS:** But they are?

**Mutabaruka:** Of course, of course. I mean, those men are articulating it now in this time. But you feel like saying, "Oh,



that man there says the same thing as Rastas, but the man there doesn't say the same thing as Rastas because what the men are saying are not the same things." It is like the Twelve Tribes... The Twelve Tribes of Israel are a Jesus people. They deal with Jesus. Most Rastas "burn" Jesus. Most Rastas don't know Jesus. I don't have anything to do with Jesus. I don't have nothing with Jesus! So how do you articulate that difference? Because if you go to a Twelve Tribes man he will sit down and tell you about Jesus. But if you come to I and I you won't hear anything about Jesus whatsoever. As a matter of fact, you will hear purely negative things about Jesus when you come to I. Because I and I don't have anything good to say about Jesus, because Jesus... because Jesus became like the Devil. We know where the original concept come from, and it had nothing to do with black people and it had nothing to do with Africa, and it had nothing to do with reality. So those differences there are things men have to look into.

**RS:** Thank you.

### Note

1. With Mutabaruka's approval, this interview has been edited for Standard English conventions and style. The question of how to present the English in this interview brings to the surface important tensions in the study of Rastafari and the globalization of Rastafari. Among others, How do we accurately represent what is a local idiom through a more standardized form? Most Rastafari from English-speaking countries can speak Standard English, but most everyday Rasta discourse happens in Jamaican English, *patois*, or other non-Standard English. It would have been possible to transcribe the interview in Jamaican English, spelling Jamaican pronunciation phonetically and including non-Standard verb forms and usages, yet because of this journal's broad audience, it seemed like a better understanding of the interview could take place through Standard English. Moreover, transcribing oral language also produces certain distortions. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that in editing for Standard English conventions and style, a real translation takes place. And, as Gadamer (1975: 346) reminds us, "Every translation is at the same time an interpretation." Or, less generously, "Traduttore traditore" ("The translator is a traitor"). In this case, Mutabaruka has been able to check my interpretation (through that most global of all media, e-mail). Perhaps, then, this interview represents less a transcription of words spoken on October 17, 2001 in Syracuse, New York and more a process of understanding. If so, perhaps it is also paradigmatic of all research on Rastafari.

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# Globalization and Rastafari Identity in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil

JAN DECOSMO

Now that Rastafari has become a transnational, or global, form of resistance rather than being confined to Jamaica or the Caribbean, variations of Rastafari identity are being shaped beyond national borders.<sup>1</sup> The form this identity takes is conditioned by both historical and cultural circumstances as well as the global context in which it takes root. This article explores the shape Rastafari identity has taken in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, from its introduction through reggae music and its revaluation of African heritage, to its ambivalent relationship to Afro-Bahian spirituality. It is important to note that, similar to Rastafari worldwide, there are a number of different manifestations of Rastafari in Bahia, each shaped by distinct local conditions. In describing these manifestations, I will contrast them to a heuristic “ideal type”. More broadly, this article places Bahian Rastafari in the context of questions of identity that have become particularly acute in a global era (but which continue to have as their historical backdrop the African Diaspora in colonial Brazil). The concepts of “homelessness” and “pariah status” borrowed from Max Weber and Hannah Arendt help specify how questions of identity among Bahian Rastafari are related to a sense of loss of “home” in the Diaspora. Understanding the relationship of identity and “homelessness” allows us to see Rastafari as a form of civil religion that creates a sense of home, and makes more clear the global political implications of the cultural symbols of Rastafari.<sup>2</sup>

## SALVADOR, BAHIA

It is important to keep in mind Carole Yawney’s suggestion that the factors influencing Rastafari outside the Caribbean include “pressures such as racism, criminalization, and commodification”.<sup>3</sup> A brief description of Salvador highlights some of these pressures. Salvador (known by the region of northeast Brazil in which it is situated, Bahia) is a city of over two million people, mostly of African descent. Originally colonized by

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**the Portuguese, most of Salvador is characterized by drab urban architecture and concrete expressways. By contrast, colourful colonial buildings and cobbled streets are still to be found in the renovated historic district of Pelourinho, where most of the Rastafari informants interviewed by this author reside.<sup>4</sup>**

In Bahia hundreds of Portuguese Catholic cathedrals inhabit the same city as the Yoruba *orixas* of Candomblé.<sup>5</sup> Their seemingly contradictory presence together helps give Bahia a colourful and magical ambience derived, according to anthropologist Jim Wafer, from a Catholic Baroque sensibility mixed with strong Yoruba retentions.<sup>6</sup> Yet, although they have been able to preserve aspects of their culture, Brazilians of African descent face hardship and oppression that white Brazilians do not, despite a national myth of equality of access and non-discrimination. As Brazilian black activist Abdias Do Nascimento wrote about the myth of racial equality, “The entire educational system, mass communications media, system of justice and other agents influencing public opinion all work to sustain it.”<sup>7</sup> And, on the surface, when one visits Bahia and sees Afro-Brazilian images and mixed-race couples everywhere, one may be prone to conclude that racism does not exist. I was told by a white Brazilian to “look around at all the various colours of people mixing together”. He then proclaimed, “Here we have no racism.” But as Kim Butler wrote, “Interracial amity in Bahia does not negate the reality of the poverty, violence, and lack of opportunity that disproportionately affect people of African descent.”<sup>8</sup>

Bahian Rastafari link institutional racism to a long history of oppression. Ras Carlos, a light-skinned, dreadlocked Rastafari ghetto leader, told me the following: “Here in Salvador, *mestiços*, the daughters and sons of black and white, are used to say ‘no’ to the authentic Negroes. In Bahia people use *mestiços* to be ‘captains of the bush’ [soldiers who went after escaped slaves]. They use the *mestiços* to educate us, to keep us mentally enslaved...” Moreover, as elsewhere in the African Diaspora, colonial authorities attempted to suppress African cultural traditions as they manifested themselves in the process of creolization. For example, Carnival groups (*blocos*) became very “Africanized” upon emancipation in the late 1800s. They were subsequently condemned and banned by Roman Catholic authorities and did not reappear until 1949. During the period of military dictatorship in Brazil (1964-1974), the oppression continued. Practitioners of Candomblé were openly discriminated against and often brutalized by the police. Those who asserted their

African heritage and practised creolized forms of African religions were considered to be ignorant, primitive and uncultured.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, statistics show that racism in Brazil is not just historical. Nascimento wrote that in the 1980 Brazilian census, only 5.89% of people classified themselves as blacks (*pretos*) a figure suggestive of the low status attributed to blackness in Brazil. He noted that whites (*brancos*) were six times more likely to complete twelve years of education or more compared to blacks and browns (*pardos*). Among white men, 17.8% earned only minimum wage (\$30/month) compared to 33% of black men and 32.5% of brown men. 14.6% of white women only earned minimum wage, whereas 28.55% of black women and 19.8% of brown women did so.<sup>10</sup> Based on such data Butler was led to the following conclusion: “At their most fundamental level, Afro-Bahians’ struggles today address the same issues that their African forebears faced when they first arrived in the sixteenth century.”<sup>11</sup>

In addition to racism, poverty is endemic to the area. The average monthly income in the Pelourinho, where approximately 75% of the population is illiterate, is about US \$120. Unemployment is high, and there are a number of impoverished street kids in evidence. The word *pelourinho* means “whipping post” in Portuguese, and the area known by the name contains an open square where tourists from all over the world stand taking pictures, scarcely realizing the suffering of the African slaves who were once brought there to be whipped, sometimes to death. Similarly, the ghettos that exist behind building facades remain unseen by tourists.

I was taken by a Rastafari informant, Ras Ivan, to visit one of the ghettos in the Pelourinho. It was hidden behind the walls of what appeared to be a multi-storied, intact colonial building. Yet once inside the door I saw that the inside was hollow and the roof was missing, appearing as if it had been bombed. Makeshift wood and tin hovels lined the edges of the walls in several, haphazard stories of construction. There was a pipe stand that provided water at the bottom—on the dirt floor of the building. The ghetto turned out to be Ras Carlos’ community. After greeting Ras Ivan and lighting up a marijuana cigarette that he shared with Ivan, he described life behind the façade:

The situation in Salvador, it’s very poor. It’s very precarious. Like the blood that is running in Zaire, in the old Congo Republic, here in Salvador blood is being shed. People are hurting here. The activists, the militants, are very hurt and are repressed by the police. Movements dedicated

to revitalization are being put down very strongly. The policeman goes into the street and fights with his dogs and guns. A majority of us don't have jobs, and we don't have a chance and opportunity. It is not given to us the right that we have, the right of surviving. We survive by miracles. We evoke the all-powerful God and we use the positive, supernatural powers. Like people were fed for 40 years in the desert, like our patriarch Moses, the leader of our people invoked the all-powerful God and the all-powerful God sent food to us. We don't have basic help of any kind. We are left. We are thrown and confined to the concentration camps that in Brazil they call *favelas*. These are concentration camps like Auschwitz. Here is hell.<sup>12</sup>

Such poverty, constructed on the shoulders of a colonial and racist history, and supported by continuing legacies of that colonial and racist history, is one context in which Bahia's Rastafari community has arisen to resist oppression, to call for justice, and to revalorize Bahia's black African heritage. Yet Bahia's Rastafari must also be seen in a context transcending local history and poverty. Bahia's Rastafari are also part of a global context which continues to marginalize the poor; at the same time, the global hegemony leaves gaps that Rastafari use to reinterpret and revalorize their marginalization in terms of a specific, more widely recognized identity. For example, although Rastafari culture (such as reggae music) and symbols (such as "liberation" colours of red, yellow and green) are easily appropriated and co-opted by the tourist industry (into T-shirts and dreadlocked tams, for example), those cultural items also continue to spread the idea of Pan-Africanism, itself a central component of the emerging Bahian Rastafari identity.

## THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

**The transformation of global society, or "globalization," may be seen as the triumph of global "democracy"/consumerism based on the American corporate hegemonic model.<sup>13</sup> This, in turn, has led to growing social and economic inequality, both nationally and internationally, as early social theorists from Marx and Weber to Arendt predicted.**

With the new globalism there is a postmodern conception of identity that may have implications for Diaspora cultures: the concept of the "global soul" or "nowhereian." According to Pico Iyer, the global soul has no fixed identity but is instead invented

or reinvented depending upon context. According to Iyer, such a person has “grown up in many cultures all at once—and so lived in the cracks between them—or might be one who, though rooted in background, lived and worked on a globe that propelled him from tropic to snowstorm in three hours. She might have a name that gave away nothing about her nationality (like Kim, say, or Maya, or Tara), and she might have a porous sense of self that changed with her location. Even the most ageless human rites—scattering his father’s ashes, or meeting the woman who might be his wife—he might find himself performing six thousand miles from the place he now called home.”<sup>14</sup> The “nowhereian” is a person who falls between all the categories and whose boundaries are blurred.

Certainly, groups within the African Diaspora are no strangers to the feeling of being “homeless” or “in limbo.” But unlike Iyer’s “nowhereians” who seem to be comfortable with their status, critics of globalization are well aware that its “we are all one” slogan, aids in the creation of one huge market, and helps line the pockets of multinational and international corporate elites. Moreover, not only has the black underclass in the Diaspora continued to expand rather than contract, but in many ways blacks are further behind whites than they have been in the past. In an effort to survive with some modicum of dignity and self-respect, some groups have countered the global trend of making the margins invisible by commodifying them and thus maintaining a global “neo-apartheid.”

Rastafari has been one such group, and this global dimension of Rastafari is also apparent in Bahia. The informants I interviewed were proud of having rejected the values of the globalized world, or what they call Babylon (in Portuguese, *Babilônia*).<sup>15</sup> There has been a corresponding pride in adopting and proclaiming the values rejected by that world (i.e., adopting the values of “Africa,” or physically manifesting dreadlocks). As Ras Carlos, whose arms are permanently and physically marked with his opposition (contra Biblical taboos placed against tattoos), told me:

These tattoos are a letter, the name of this letter is ‘words of wisdom.’ With this letter what happens? People will not relate to me by the color of my skin; they deal with me because of intelligence, because of love.... I’m a mural, because on my body I go back to the roots of the African people, of the less fortunate poor ones. But even the very small can give a rich spiritual presence.

Ras Carlos went on to vigorously condemn and reject capitalism. He said:

I do not believe in capitalism. Capitalism was taken away from my life. To maintain this hair, I cannot invest in the system. Not a cent. I live from the powers, like Daniel, like Joshua. I live like Jesus Christ. I live spirit because I am spirit. If I live in spirit, I have to walk in spirit. People do not understand why I do not need money to live. I do not need government. I live theocracy [according to God's laws].

Another Rastafari informant called "the philosopher" by his friends, reiterated the view expressed by Ras Carlos, but chose to wear dreadlocks rather than tattoo himself to show his opposition to Babylon. When I asked him what being a Rastafari meant, he answered: "A lot of people especially say that to be a Rastafari you have to have dreadlocks. In my conception you have to have dreadlocks. It's a way to say 'no' to the system." Thus, Rastafari reject the world of Babylon and replace it with a divine order, an order of spirit, of love, of African roots.

However, this does not mean that Rastafari are necessarily apolitical. As histories of Rastafari have shown, much of Rastafari can be traced to inspiration from the Jamaican-born Pan-Africanist leader, Marcus Garvey. These beliefs were then transmitted from the Jamaican Garveyites to the early Rastafari, and then on to reggae musicians and poets such as Bob Marley, whose music in turn has helped to create a new global Rastafari identity. As a further development of Garveyism, Rastafari can best be seen as a response not only to racial and class oppression, but to the homelessness, rootlessness, and dehumanization that they have engendered. Weber's notion of "pariah status" and Arendt's notion of "homelessness" are useful for making sense of the Rastafari response within the global context of the African Diaspora.

The term "pariah" was used by Weber in the early 1920s to describe ancient Judaism and early Christianity, religions whose purpose was to provide explanations for the suffering and loss of dignity experienced by ethnically marginalized groups displaced from their homelands. Because their status was not positively valued, Weber maintained, these groups nourished their sense of dignity by identifying themselves as specially chosen by God to fulfill the conditions by which a return home could be effected. The ethical imperative became that of breaking with the established, institutionalized order.

Some decades later, Arendt applied the term "pariah" extensively in her analysis of diasporic Jews, whom she defined as "homeless" or "worldless". For her, the rootlessness of the "wandering Jew"

antedated the rootlessness of many in the modern age. She agreed with Weber that this condition of worldlessness, or world alienation, often led to the development of new forms of religion as well as vital new expressions in art, poetry and music. She particularly noted the relevance of mysticism to these developments. In her study of 17th-century Jewish mysticism, Arendt wrote, “Today, as in the past, [mystical] speculations appeal to all who are actually excluded from action, prevented from altering a fate that appears to them unbearable and, feeling themselves helpless victims of incomprehensible forces, are naturally inclined to find some secret means for gaining power for participating in the ‘drama of the world.’”<sup>16</sup> For both Weber and Arendt, the important question was whether or not diaspora populations would go on to create or join a political community. “Home” for both of these thinkers meant both territory or land, and the power to defend it.

Certainly the concept of being “homeless” played an important role among Jamaican Rastafari early on. For example, laments about the condition of homelessness were frequently heard in roots reggae lyrics. Reggae singer Bob Andy wrote:

*This couldn't be my home,  
It must be somewhere else,  
Can't get no clothes to wear,  
Can't get no food to eat,  
Can't get a job to get bread,  
That's why I've got to go back home.*<sup>17</sup>

Like Garvey, who had himself been a migrant laborer in Panama, Rastafari came to perceive themselves as doubly homeless as they increasingly left Jamaica for better prospects elsewhere. As Horace Campbell wrote, “Twice removed from their homeland in Africa and their adopted home in the Caribbean, the Rastafari, as part of the black population in Europe, yearned for a land which they could call their home.”<sup>18</sup>

And like the Garveyites, repatriation to Africa became the focus of Jamaican Rastafari. To create a new identity and a new sense of self-respect, they used what Arendt called a “pariah strategy”: they retrieved and used elements of their cultural inheritance that were of great antiquity. Like the ancient Hebrews before them, they saw themselves as God’s chosen people, projecting their powerlessness into an ultimate future power outside of the oppression of Babylon. Examples may be found in Bob Marley’s songs, which assert a morally superior identity (“we are the children of the Rasta Man—



we are the children of the Higher Man”) as well as a concomitant moral imperative (“get up, stand up, stand up for your rights”; “Africa unite!” or “come we go [stet] chant down Babylon one more time”).<sup>19</sup>

The self-identification of Rastafari as a people who are part of a higher reality served to inspire them to act in accordance with that reality, thus becoming instruments whereby they could actively participate in the destiny of humankind. As such, Rastafari identity continues to be linked with cultural resistance and a desire to radically change the world. The political dimension of Rastafari became clear in the words of Ras Carlos, who told me that he was a chosen instrument of Jah [God], a tool to fight against Babylon:

When we get the chance to get in government, in power, we’re going to start a new program, planting, sharing and dividing. We are all partners in the land. Why didn’t we have participation in Brazilian oil and gold? We are a people of the planet. Why aren’t the universal riches of the world invested in us? We have to do that. When we ascend we have to give the people what they deserve: dignity. What I understand by dignity is that man is an instrument for love, to love. Love your neighbor like you love yourself.... Fraternity. To give up, extinguish, and banish away capitalism from the earth. No money. Culture of Jah, yes. Amen.

Also, “the philosopher” related a political vision, describing his mission in life as that of fostering hope for change:

It’s a very difficult job for a man to be a Rastafarian. But soon I believe in a part of the world we’re going to have a president who is going to be a Rastafari, the same way we expect to have a black president in the United States.... In Bahia we see socially a lot of things wrong and blacks have no rights. The black man doesn’t have the right to go to graduate school because it’s a very racist city where racism speaks in silence, where money empowers, like in any other part of the world.... If we have to construct this world again, Rastafari will build this world, because we are from Ethiopia, we are from Africa....

In sum, the double homelessness of West Indians, especially their 20th-century migrations, and the spread of Rastafari through popular music, has made Rastafari transnational. Rather than being confined to Jamaica or the Caribbean, it is now a global form of resistance rooted in the quest for a real “home,” a quest that has become particularly acute in the contemporary era. But the globalization of Rastafari raises new questions, including the following: is there a

definition of Rastafari that includes all its forms worldwide, in spite of different histories of oppression and marginalization and different cultural contexts?

Authors in this issue have suggested a number of ways to define a global Rastafari. Without representing those arguments here, I would simply state my agreement with Yawney and Homiak on this point. They maintained that what unites Rastafari the world over is a special Rastafari sensibility or “vibe”, a “universal pulse” that “seems to be common to its many communities...”<sup>20</sup> Perhaps we should also agree with Yawney that we need not presume the correctness of any one interpretive framework, but simply report what those who identify themselves as Rastafari say it is. Clearly, on the basis of what informants say, we must agree that Rastafari is not necessarily a particular set of doctrines or even particular behaviors. I agree with Yawney that we would do well to “regard Rastafari...as a vast reservoir of interrelated themes and ideas, which vary...”<sup>21</sup> In the context of Bahia, an important part of this “pulse” or “reservoir” is Pan-Africanism. However, it manifests itself in different ways among groups of Bahian Rastafari, as we shall see.

## RASTAFARI IN BAHIA

**Before describing in some detail Rastafari in Bahia, it is helpful to create a heuristic device, a fictitious Weberian “ideal type” of Rastafari against which Bahian formulations of Rastafari can be compared. Despite the acephalous nature and wide variety of beliefs and practices among Rastafari, much of the literature on Rastafari suggests the following might be included in such an ideal type: 1) the idea that Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie is the living God (Jah Rastafari); 2) belief that Marcus Garvey prophesied Selassie’s crowning; 3) emphasis on “livity”--righteous living in accordance with Jah and mother earth; 4) struggle against the racism and oppression of Babylon; 5) wearing dreadlocks; 6) using marijuana ritually, particularly during “reasoning” sessions; 7) belief in the transformative power of the spoken or sung word; 8) belief in the idea of Africa as home and/or repatriation to Africa; 9) symbolic use of red, yellow and green, and other significant symbols of the movement such as the Lion of Judah; and 10) an “ital” diet (generally vegetarian and a prohibition of the use of salt).**

Although many of the above elements may be found among Bahian Rastafari, the situation there is perhaps best represented

by the words of an informant who described it as “open, free, and democratic”. This is especially clear when Bahian Rastafari is compared to the ideal type presented above.

Rastafari ideas arrived in Salvador in the late 70s by way of Jamaican reggae music, in particular the music of Bob Marley and Jimmy Cliff, and the dub poetry of Mutabaruka. Ras Ivan, who referred to Marley as “brother Bob”, told me that “reggae dominated this society living under poverty conditions. And people are learning a lot of things because of the reggae, not because of the Candomblé. Reggae is something serious...” Ras Carlos saved special praise for Marley: “Bob Marley achieved a very Christian job with a lot of sacrifice. He gave up his riches and showed his superior face to us that we received. I believe the work of Bob Marley was similar to that of Christ in Judea.”

However, most Rastafari in Bahia cannot read or speak English and do not understand Jamaican reggae lyrics. Nor are Portuguese translations of Jamaican reggae songs widely available in Salvador, and the accuracy of those I was able to locate (in a local reggae newspaper, *Folha do Reggae*) left much to be desired. Thus, their understanding of reggae lyrics from abroad has often been limited and has perhaps fostered a wide range of interpretations.

Given these origins, it is not surprising that there is a broad spectrum of beliefs within Bahian Rastafari, ranging from religious theocrats on the one hand to free-wheeling individualists on the other.<sup>22</sup> They nevertheless tend to group themselves into “cultural” or “political” Rastafari as opposed to “religious” (“orthodox” or “Protestant”) Rastafari.

“Cultural” or “political” Rastafari wear dreadlocks and consider Rastafari to be a lifestyle dedicated to cultural resistance against a system that oppresses them (Babylon). Some smoke marijuana recreationally but most do not. Those who do not smoke claim that smoking marijuana is a problem among those who do and identify the orthodox Rastafari as smokers. They do not appear to participate in communal or group reasonings, nor do they consistently read the Bible. They are not vegetarian, nor do they believe Haile Selassie was the returned messiah. At best Selassie is seen as a prophet; at worst, a tyrant. They believe in the power of words, music, and visual images to effect change. They utilize Rastafari colours and incorporate Rastafari symbols and proper names into their artistic creations and physical surroundings. They would gladly travel both to the Caribbean and to Africa if the opportunity presented itself,

and they proudly identify themselves as black despite their light skin shades.

By contrast, “orthodox” Rastafari are avid Bible readers. They call the name of Haile Selassie in praise, and write it everywhere they can. But they make a distinction between Tafari Makonen and Haile Selassie. Tafari Makonen was a man; Haile Selassie is the spirit of Jah. In their Trinitarian conception of God, Haile Selassie represents the Holy Spirit, but as manifested in a man. One of the orthodox Rastafari informants, reggae composer and musician Ras Ciro Lima, inevitably calls upon the trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (“*Pae, Filho, e Spiritu Sanctu—Jah Rastafari!*”). Although none are vegetarian, orthodox Rastafari wear dreadlocks and smoke marijuana ritually. For instance, whenever the orthodox Rastafari informants wanted me to audiotape or videotape them, they would smoke so that their words would be inspired by Jah.

Thus, there are two differences between Bahian Rastafari and Jamaican Rastafari that deserve attention. First, among Bahian Rastafari there is much less emphasis placed on physical repatriation to Africa than in “ideal typical” Jamaican Rastafari especially in its early stages. Second, Bahian history has given Rastafari there a special relationship to the religion and culture of the *orixas*.

In Jamaica, an important component of early Rastafari inherited from the Garveyites was the idea of leaving Jamaica for Africa in order to overcome the legacy of colonial and neo-colonial oppression. However, repatriation is not heavily emphasized in Bahia. Although all of the Rastafari informants with whom I spoke considered themselves to be black and their heritage to be Afro-Brazilian or African, none of them spoke of repatriating to Africa. Unlike Jamaican Rastafari, none expressed a belief in a massive exodus to Africa brought about either by divine or human agency. Rather, they felt that the spiritual presence of the Caribbean and Africa already existed in Bahia. As one of the orthodox informants said, “If Jesus leads me to go to Jamaica or Africa, yes, I would go. To want and to do something comes from Jah. If it is his desire, I will go to all of these places. But we know spiritually that we are in all these places.” “The philosopher” noted that he did indeed have a “lot of desire to go to the Caribbean and Jamaica and Ethiopia to find my origins...” but he did not wish to move there permanently. Referring to the Pelourinho, another Rastafari informant proclaimed, “We are the second Jamaica.”

There are historical explanations for the differences between

Rastafari in Bahia and the Jamaican “ideal type”. While there is racist oppression and misery in both places, the cultural connection between Africa and Bahia seems to be more direct than in Jamaica. A well-known saying about Bahia is that it is “a place where the ancestors walk”. A historical explanation for this connection is the fact that slavery ended much later in Brazil (1888) than in the British West Indies, and waves of newly arrived captives replaced those slaves who died before they had a chance to reproduce. These continual “fresh” infusions of Africans (many of whom were Yoruba) meant that African cultural practices were constantly undergoing a process of renewal in Bahia. In other locations in the Diaspora where slaves did live long enough to reproduce and new captives were not brought over in such large numbers, African cultural practices became more diluted. The sheer numbers of Africans imported into Bahia made it impossible to control them and repress their African cultural heritage. Lastly, after emancipation priests and priestesses of Candomblé from Bahia traveled to Nigeria to reacquaint themselves with Yoruba rituals.

The prevalence of distinctly African cultural practices in Bahia explains one of the interesting differences between “orthodox” Rastafari and “cultural” Rastafari: the different levels of tolerance each has for the religion and culture of the *orixas*. Unlike “cultural” Rastafari, the orthodox stand opposed to indigenous forms of Afro-Bahian religion and culture, such as Candomblé and Carnival (where Candomblé is made publicly visible in a secular form). As orthodox Rastafari informant Ras Ivan explained, “Candomblé doesn’t have any relation to the people of God, neither with the sons of God. Candomblé is idolatry. Candomblé divinizes [stet] strange gods, praises strange gods. And Jah, the true God of eternal life, the creator of heaven and earth, abominates [stet] idolatry. Rastafari, or the Son of God, does not bend his knee to idols. Rastafari is only afraid of the name of Jesus, in the person of Jah, Rastafari, Selassie I the First.”

By contrast, cultural Rastafari tolerate and even embrace the religion of the *orixas* as an important element of their African heritage and as a way of mobilizing culture to resist racism; thus, a number of informants with whom I spoke identified themselves with both Rastafari and Candomblé. For example, Gil Abelha, an artist who lived in the Pelourinho, described himself as “40% Rastafari”. He danced with a reggae group (Ska Reggae) during Carnival, but he grew up within Candomblé and remained connected to it. He told me, “In my case, my grandfather was a very high man in Candomblé.

I'm the only man in the family, but inside Candomblé there is a dispensation to a man, a hierarchy, and he gave this job to me. This status in Candomblé was given to me by my grandfather."

Another artist and composer, Gil Nascimento, lived in a poor black ghetto not too far from the Pelourinho. He wore long dreadlocks and identified with Rastafari, but was also an active participant in Candomblé. After several years of work, when I visited him he had just completed a huge wooden sculpture of the *orixa*, Ogum, that took up most of the space in a small studio near his house. Another large wooden sculpture of a vertically rising snake represented Oxumare. Nascimento responded to my question in the following way: "Do I participate in ceremonies in honor of the *orixas*? Of course, of course. My everyday *orixa* is Ogum. I'm the son of Ogum. I practise Ogum every day. Tuesday I eat white meat. Friday I eat white meat. I'm incorporated. Ogum, Exu, all of them. Radically, in the root, with big letters." The politics of his association with Candomblé and the pan-Africanism of his Rastafari background became clear as he continued: "My people are not educated. But Candomblé has everything. It's one of the oldest things on the planet. If the music's black, if our people are black, we are always going to be learning new experiences through the search, through the practices. But I'm open to everybody else, to everyone, and to other cultures. And I do not discriminate against anything. But I do not accept that people can step on me. And finishing this century, the 20th century, with the third millennium coming in, the black people, we will come back. This doesn't mean that we will colonize the white man, but... the black people have a thousand years to put themselves in their right place. But I myself, I did not come from slaves. My ancestors are kings and queens. Slavery is a lie, an imposed lie."

Finally, "the philosopher" blended references to the *orixas* into his notion of Rastafari: "Long ago, before I became a Rasta in the 70s, I was a teenager and I smoked marijuana. It did not bring me any damage... I myself do not consider marijuana to be a drug. I consider it to be an *orixa*, something for people that have the capability of using its strength without violating themselves and the people around them...." "The philosopher" also participated in the Carnival group, Sons of Gandhi (Filhos de Gandhy), a group dedicated to the Indian leader as well as Obatala (Oxala), the Yoruba deity.

What accounts for the differences between these two groups of Bahian Rastafari—the cultural and the orthodox—are their religious backgrounds. Those Rastafari who grew up within Candomblé

(syncretized with Catholicism) see no conflict between Candomblé and Rastafari. However, those who came to Rastafari from an evangelical Protestant background have no tolerance for African spirits. Since both come from a Protestant perspective, in this regard the views of the orthodox Bahian Rastafari are closer theologically to early Jamaican Rastafari than to the cultural Bahian Rastafari.<sup>23</sup>

In sum, Rastafari in Bahia encompass a variety of perspectives, but central to all is a view of Rastafari as a challenge to the existing world order. For some, this challenge is articulated solely in terms of Jah Rastafari, and for others it involves a return to Afro-Bahian roots, including the *orixas*. In each case it represents, among other things, a search for “home,” for dignity, and for a viable place in a world that marginalizes the black poor.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Despite the varieties of lifestyle and belief within a global Rastafari, it may have the same potential as the Garvey movement to educate and mobilize blacks and others within the African Diaspora. According to Randall Burkett, Garvey brought a “diverse group of clergy together with a much more heterogenous group of social, political and economic (and even some anti-religious) radicals.”<sup>24</sup> Perhaps we could add to our list of interpretive frameworks for understanding Rastafari that of Robert Bellah’s civil religion. American civil religion, he wrote, was based on the belief that America was chosen by God to be a “light unto the nations.” It was dedicated to the highest ideals and would transform the world. Those Americans who subscribed to this belief belonged, at the same time, to a variety of religious denominations. Burkett applied the notion of civil religion to Garvey’s movement, explaining that “civil religion... is a ‘powerful motivating myth’ predicated on a shared historic experience, and it possesses the capacity of calling the nation itself first into being, and then into judgement, in the name of the higher ideals to which it is dedicated. Further, the civil religion always stands in a somewhat ambiguous relationship with respect to particular religions; it can stand alongside of, exist in tension with, or subsume or at least seek to incorporate them.”<sup>25</sup> In Bahia, Rastafari call a global black home into existence, even when it stands ambivalently alongside the traditional religion of the *orixas*.

Although they lack a “world-historical” figure such as Garvey, it is evident that many Rastafari feel that they have been divinely called to a special task in the world. Their Pan-African vision of black redemption empowers them to act in ways that they believe will uplift not only the black race, but eventually the entire world. Yet, for Garvey, as with Weber and Arendt, “home” was a political concept: it meant territory or land, and the power to defend it. Many critics of Rastafari, both inside and outside of the movement, are critical of Rastafari because it seems to be most often identified with culture rather than politics.<sup>26</sup> Most of the Bahian Rastafari informants also expressed dismay at the lack of political organization on the part of Afro-Bahians. They nevertheless describe themselves as fighting a “war,” and Bahian reggae music, like Jamaican roots reggae, reflects this fight in its prophetic command to challenge the system and demand justice.

Perhaps the difficulty some critics have with Rastafari is really a fundamental disagreement over the meaning of terms like “revolution,” “home” and “power.” For example, according to Joseph Owens, the term “revolution” for Jamaican Rastafari meant something other than a violent coup or toppling of the system; it meant “a change of heart or mind, such as indicated by the cultivation of locks.” As one Rastafari told Owens, “When you wear locks, you are a revolutionist.”<sup>27</sup> Louis Lindsay explained that for Rastafari the revolutionary process is one of “psychocultural demystification; it is every day resistance to oppression, not something imposed from above by vanguard elites.”<sup>28</sup> In their effort to resist Babylon, Rastafari provide the cultural counter-symbols whereby the system itself can be challenged and eventually transformed, beginning at the level of the heart and mind of each individual. Rastafari are deeply concerned that, even in the absence of armed conflict, when the global political and economic system causes great oppression and suffering, a type of institutional violence is being perpetrated against a powerless people. And Rastafari insist that each person has a right to a place of dignity and social utility within a community—a real home. In this light, for Rastafari “home” is not simply Africa but across the entire globe. And as long as some people are marginalized on the globe, “homelessness” will continue.

The schematic distinction between culture and politics surfaces in the work of other scholars as well. For example, Shalini Puri articulated the challenge posed to us in our capacity as researchers when she asked: “By what labors can we, as academics, help in the



movement from cultural resistance to political opposition?”<sup>29</sup> In this regard, I would like to suggest that perhaps, among all the ways to see Rastafari, that we also see it at least in part, as a civil religion that strives to achieve a Pan-African goal, i.e., social justice for the black oppressed on a globe that can truly be considered a homeland. When they become visible, strong and influential enough—even if they constitute a minority—cultural groups can exert political leverage and begin to make changes to mainstream institutions. As scholars, we can help the religious/cultural (and, perhaps, increasingly political) awakening which we call Rastafari by continuing to study it in all its locations and manifestations, and through publications and conferences, by educating as many people as possible about the Rastafari struggle for self-understanding, for survival, for meaning, and for political empowerment.

## Notes

1. The term “Rastafari” is used throughout to refer to the cultural movement itself, as well as to groups or individuals. The terms “Rastafarianism” and “Rastafarian” are objectionable to the movement’s adherents, especially the former. Cf. Velma Pollard, *Dread Talk: The language of Rastafari* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press and UWI Press, 2000).
2. Much earlier than either Weber or Arendt, Karl Marx described a condition similar to that of homelessness or world alienation with his concept of alienated labor, a product of capitalism engendered by surplus populations of laborers made redundant by ever more efficient forms of industrial production. For the relevance of this concept to Rastafari see Janet DeCosmo, “The Concept of ‘Surplus Populations’ and its Relationship to Rastafari,” in *In depth: A journal for values and public policy* (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute) 4 (1), Winter 1994: 69-90.
3. Carole D. Yawney, “Tell rut King Rasta doctrine around the Whole world: Rastafari in global perspective,” in Alvina Ruprecht, ed., *Latin America, the Caribbean and Canada in the hood: The reordering of culture* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1995), p.57.
4. The research for this article was carried out during annual trips to Bahia beginning in 1997. I would like to acknowledge the Portuguese-to-English translations of audio interviews of Rastafari informants by Brazilian native Welson Tremura, at the time a graduate student at Florida State University in Tallahassee. I would also like to thank the following informants: Ras Ciro Lima, Ras Ivan, Ras Carlos, Gil Abelha (who died last year), Gil Nascimento, and “the philosopher.”
5. Candomblé is one of several Afro-Brazilian religions found in Bahia. Characterized by adepts who are mounted or possessed by deities, adherents use Yoruba dress, rituals, and language. Just as in the syncretistic Afro-Cuban religion of Lucumi (Santería), the Catholic saints (*os santos*) are the spiritual equivalent of the Yoruba *orixas* for the people of Bahia who now openly practise these once prohibited and denigrated religions.
6. The relationship between Roman Catholicism and Candomblé is a complex one,

and is intricately related to both the creolization process as well as issues of race, class, colonization, and identity. Because of space considerations, I cannot detail them here. Cf. Wafer (1991), Burns (1993), Nagle (1997), Burdick (1992 and 1998).

7. Abdias Do Nascimento, *Brazil: Mixture or massacre? Essays in the genocide of a Black people* (Dover, Mass.: The Majority Press, 1989), p.viii.
8. Kim D. Butler, "Afterward: Ginga Baiana—The politics of race, class, culture and power in Salvador, Bahia," in Hendrik Kraay (ed.), *Afro-Brazilian culture and politics: Bahia, 1790s to 1990s* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), p.160.
9. It is worth noting that it was not until after the military regime ended that Carnival groups, with *orixas* leading the way, came to the forefront as the bearers of a new black consciousness. Today the interrogation of race in Brazil is just beginning and lags behind the US Afro-Brazilian activists carry small flash cards of American leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. In Sao Paulo they recently founded the first black university in Brazil.
10. Abdias Do Nascimento, op. cit.
11. Butler in Kraay, op. cit., p.158.
12. Ras Carlos was eager to have an opportunity to be audiotaped and videotaped so that others around the world could be educated about the situation in Bahia. In fact, he told me that Jah had sent me to them. Note that despite his lack of higher education, Ras Carlos was quite sophisticated in his awareness of the Nazi Holocaust perpetrated against the Jews (to which he so movingly compared his own existence in the ghetto) and evidently stayed aware of international news, especially events in Africa and the Diaspora.
13. Morris Berman, *The twilight of American culture* (NY: WW Norton & Co., 2000), p. 63.
14. Pico Iyer, *The global soul: Jet lag, shopping malls, and the search for home* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), pp.18-19.
15. Babylon" makes reference to the enemies and conquerors of the ancient Hebrews described in the apocalyptic book of Revelation in the Bible. In Rastafari language Babylon refers to the oppressive system of globalized capitalism and bureaucracy, the system of the "white man". It includes an anti-colonial and anti-Roman Catholic stance.
16. Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as pariah: Jewish identity and politics in the modern age* (NY: Grove Press, 1978), p.135.
17. Quoted in Horace Campbell, *Rasta and resistance: From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1987), p.135.
18. Campbell, *ibid.*, p.8.
19. Another Marley tune contends, "Some are leaves, some are branches, but I and I are the roots." Yet another paraphrases a biblical proverb: "The stone that the builder refuse [stet], will always be the head cornerstone." Lyrics come from the following Bob Marley or Bob Marley and the Wailers albums: "Africa Unite" from *Survival* (1979), "Get Up Stand Up," from *Catch a Fire* (1973), "Chant Down Babylon" from *Confrontation* (2001), "Roots" from *Rebel Music* (1986), and "Ride Natty Ride," from *Survival* (1986).
20. Carole D. Yawney and John Homiak, paper delivered at the American Academy of Religion Conference, Boston, Ma. (November 1999).
21. Yawney, "Tell Out...", p.62.
22. Theocracy, to Ras Carlos, Ras Ciro, and Ras Ivan, means living according to the laws of Jah (God), not humankind.
23. See Barry Chevannes' discussion of the Protestant Revival tradition's influence on early Jamaican Rastafari in *Rastafari: Roots and ideology* (NY: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1994).

24. Randall K. Burkett, *Garveyism as a religious movement* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1978), p.186.
25. *Ibid.*, p.7.
26. Remarks by Michael Barnett reflect this criticism: "Until Rastafarians are able to infiltrate the power structure of Jamaica, their political ideologies and philosophies will always remain marginal to the British-based mainstream ideology that exists in the island." Michael Barnett, "A focus on Rastafari: The Caribbean expression of Pan-Africanism," unpublished paper delivered at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference of the Caribbean Studies Association, Antigua, West Indies (May 26-30, 1998), p.8.
27. Joseph Owens, *Dread: The Rastafarians of Jamaica* (Kingston: Sangster's Book Stores Ltd., 1976), p.208.
28. Louis Lindsay & Keisha Lindsay, "Beating down Babylon: Marley and the politics of subversion," in Eleanor Wint & Carolyn Cooper (eds.), *Bob Marley: The man and his music* (Kingston, Jamaica: Arawak publications, 2003), pp.76-81.
29. Shalini Puri, "Peripheral migrations: Cultural circulation within the Caribbean," paper delivered at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference of the Caribbean Studies Association, Antigua, West Indies (May 26-30, 1998), p.9..

# The Lantern *and the Light*

## Rastafari in Aotearoa (New Zealand)

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The Rastafari movement came to Aotearoa in the last quarter of the twentieth century, when Maori human rights activists were borrowing ideas and rhetoric from overseas Black Consciousness and Native American protest movements (Sharp 1997:8). In particular, Rastafari beliefs came to Aotearoa through the music of Bob Marley in the 1970s, a period that coincided with the re-emergence of Maori nationalism and a subsequent Maori renaissance. Marley's lyrics brought to the Maori a message decrying 'suffering' under a continuing colonial regime; they have resulted in some of Rastafari's staunchest and most sophisticated converts. Moreover, Rastafari's essentially spiritual and prophetic nature may have made it especially appealing to a people who have traditionally held these attributes in high esteem.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the movement in Aotearoa is that it has taken root without direct or sustained contact with other Rastafari. Maori commitment to Rastafari is further noteworthy because its essential Afro-centrism has been rejected and placed in a New Zealand context. Aotearoa Rastafari have accepted a Rasta identity in response to life crises caused by the power of Anglo-Celtic assimilationist politics and culture and the conflict of identity that has arisen as a result. As Rastafari, Maori in Aotearoa have a sense of belonging to and identifying with a wider group of similar people.

Aotearoa contains a number of Rastafari groups of varying size and commitment. The largest Rastafari community in Auckland has several hundred adherents. While some groups are deeply involved with the religious and philosophical aspects of the movement's teachings, others are little more than reggae fans, groups of marginalised people, or defiant *ganja* (marijuana) users with dreadlocks. Influenced by the music and lyrics of Bob Marley and other reggae musicians, thousands of Maori and Polynesian teenagers and young adults wear their hair in dreadlocks and their clothes decorated with the *ites* (the red, green and yellow colours

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of Rastafari), but more as a fashion statement than to signify their connection to a congregation or gathering of Rasta.

In this chapter we focus on the Ruatoria Dreads, a fluid community of about 100 Rastafari notable for their syncretic beliefs and practices. Living in the most easterly part of Aotearoa and in the heartland of their Ngati Porou *iwi* (tribe), they are deeply religious and have accepted Rastafarian beliefs not to replace but to augment an existing damaged identity. Their beliefs give political and spiritual expression to their desire for release from oppression and their hope for redemption within a secure Maori identity. After a brief historical overview of colonization of Aotearoa and the social context surrounding the growth of Rastafari, this chapter explores the meaning of Rastafari in Ruatoria, focusing especially on distinctive beliefs and practices such as cannabis use, facial tattooing, and local changes to typical Rastafari symbols. We also briefly explore relations between the Rastafari and the rest of the community.

## THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT: COLONIZATION AND RELIGIOUS RESISTANCE

Maori were almost totally isolated from the outside world until the final quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But the first European explorers were quickly followed by resource exploiters, traders, Christian missionaries and from 1840, large-scale British settlement. Literacy was highly desirable for trade, so Maori took to it along with a gradual acceptance of missionary Christianity. From about 1832, Maori perceptions of themselves were transformed by rapid religious conversion and the intrusion of colonial governance. Rapidly rising literacy in both Maori and English, and trade introduced the money economy of British colonialism.

Initially Maori had welcomed British settlers to Aotearoa as their equals, but instead they were over-run by rapacious, land-greedy settlers who considered themselves the natural successors to the land and resources of a people whom they considered to be depraved and dying natives. The settlers sought to create 'Britain in the South Seas', while Maori struggled as their society and culture were set against a vastly different and powerful intruder. By 1860 British settlers (termed *Pakeha* by Maori) were in the majority. As Sinclair (quoted in Asher and Naulls, 1987:27) notes, much more was at stake than just land:

the rivalry that developed between the races was more

than naked contest for land, important though it was. It was also a contest for authority, for *mana* (influence or power), for authority over the land and the men and women that it sustained. Above all, there was the question of whose authority, whose law was to prevail...

As British settlements expanded through a constant demand for more land, wars and disease led to the growing economic marginalisation of Maori. Anglo-Celtic ethnocentrism, backed by British law, allowed British settlers to confirm what they had believed all along: they were superior to all other peoples.

By the end of the 19<sup>TH</sup> century, Maori numbered fewer than 50,000, a mere five percent of the colony's total population. Today Maori constitute approximately fifteen percent of a total population of four million.

### Religion as a Form of Resistance

The new economic order and technological transformation wrought by colonization were accompanied by political subjugation to a settler society that denigrated Maori beliefs as both heathen and fanciful myth. Maori responded defiantly with guerrilla warfare and various forms of more passive resistance including withdrawal. Syncretic messianic movements became very popular; they appeared to be the only hope of redemption for their followers. These religions drew partly on the authenticity of Maori tradition and partly on the Old Testament. Maori leadership has always had a strong element of prophecy, and a dozen or more local messianic leaders arose during the nineteenth century to lead their followers from the bondage of mission teachings and settler subjugation to a New Heaven.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Maori had largely abandoned their indigenous religious system in favor of Christianity, but by century-end many had turned to messianic versions of it. Many in the Ngati Porou tribe followed a prophet named Te Kooti Arikirangi Turuki and the *Hahi Ringatu* (The Church of the Upraised Hand) that he founded. Te Kooti was a profoundly religious man who was hounded, captured, exiled and incarcerated by the colonial government because he opposed further British settlement.

The *Ringatu* church Te Kooti founded has no buildings of its own. It conducts its services in communal meetinghouses on *marae* (kin-based village communities), but unlike most other religions, its services are conducted in the Maori language. Many congregations of the *Hahi Ringatu* thrive today, especially in eastern regions of the country. *Ringatu* congregations are linked together in a loose

federation of adherents. One such group is located in the Ruatoria district that we will turn to shortly. They are seen by outsiders as the most 'authentically Maori' religious faith practiced today. Prophecy is important to their beliefs.

In spite of extensive Maori assimilation into European society and culture and extensive inter-marriage between Maori and *Pakeha*, conflict between *Pakeha* and Maori worldviews continues. Land loss and opposition to political domination and assimilationist policies all eroded the visibility and practice of Maori culture (Spoonley 1988: 8). In political and economic life, Maori remain on the margins of a largely eurocentric society. On all the usual social and economic measures, Maori fare worst with low educational attainment, poor health, high unemployment, low incomes and poor housing. During the structural adjustment programs of the 1980s, forty percent of the Maori labor force became unemployed. Even a decade later, Maori unemployment rates are two to three times higher than the national rate, and despite income support through unemployment benefits, one in three Maori children lives in poverty.

As a result, many Maori teenagers and young adults join potentially violent gangs, especially the *Black Power* and *Mongrel Mob* gangs, which have groups or 'chapters' in most parts of the country. In towns, cities and in prisons, gang members actively recruit younger 'prospects.' Gang behaviour is generally anti-social or criminal, and involves burglary, assault, and drug manufacture, consumption and sale. Both the 'Mongrels' and the 'Power' have made their presence felt in Ruatoria. During the 1980s, when the Ruatoria Dreads had begun to consolidate their presence, Ruatoria and surrounding farmlands experienced a spate of property crimes, cattle theft, boundary-fence cutting, and arson of farm buildings. Almost all of this petty criminality was unjustifiably blamed on the Dreads.

Maori culture, already transformed irrevocably by Christianity and British colonization, is being transformed once again by a growing contemporary interest in Maori language and culture, especially among urban Maori youth. British and American popular music and culture, especially from the Black Diaspora in America and Jamaica, have also been embraced as an additional way of symbolically emphasizing Maori identity as 'blackness' in opposition to mainstream *Pakeha* and hegemonic New Zealand culture with its White, Anglo-Celtic and Anglo-American symbolism.

In that changing cultural context, Bob Marley projected Rastafari

deep into the heart of Maori youth; his message appealed especially to those active in the *tino rangatiratanga* (sovereignty) movement. The viewpoints of those involved in Maori protest movements of the late seventies matched the themes contained in Rastafarian religious philosophies and the Maori religio-protest millenarian movements of the previous two centuries (Levine and Henare 1994: 196). In fact, the Ruatoria Rastas consider Robert Nesta Marley as a twentieth century inheritor of the prophets' role, the prophet of Jah Rastafari.

Marley visited Aotearoa in 1979, at a time when Maori political activism was re-awakening. His very presence had an immense impact, especially on Maori and Polynesian youth. Reggae music expressed their discontent as indigenous people and their experience of colonial domination. The expressions of protest, despair and rebellion in Marley's lyrics were seen as a voice of the philosophy of Rastafarian religion.

The Ruatoria Dreads refer to Bob Marley as the prophet Brother Bob, but the rest of New Zealand society perceived Rastafari beliefs and practices as foreign, heretical and unacceptable. Rastas conjured up negative images centered on their exotic outward appearance of dreadlocked hair and beards, their involvement in marijuana growing and smoking, and other outlawed and iconoclastic activities. Yet to the young, especially young Maori, they conjured up a different image - still exotic, but dynamic, defiant of the established system, part of the broader world of oppressed coloured peoples, with a sophisticated, popular and vital new musical form that had lyrics explicitly rejecting the dominant white society and culture (Turner 1991:7). Dread beliefs remain deeply grounded in protest against the injustices of European colonization; the Rastafari interpretation of the Bible as a prophetic text of emancipation continues the practice of resistant Maori prophetic movements of the previous centuries, such as the *Hahi Ringatu* and *Hahi Ratana*. (Patel 2000)

In sum, Rastafari was initially carried to Aotearoa in the music of Bob Marley. It then developed against the larger background of Anglo-Celtic colonization, displacement and marginalization of Maori, rapid social change, religious resistance to oppression, and the revitalization of Maori culture and politics starting in the 1970s. We turn now to a closer portrait of the Ruatoria Dreads.



## RUATORIA: ITS LOCATION, ITS PEOPLE, ITS RASTAS

Ruatoria is an isolated market town in the Waiapu Valley. It is the most easterly town in New Zealand and lies just west of the International Dateline. With a population of little more than 1000, Ruatoria services surrounding pastoral farms, *kainga* (nucleated tribal settlements), and smaller villages, the closest of which is twenty kilometers away. There are a mere 5000 people in the East Coast region, of whom about eighty percent are Maori. The local *iwi* [tribe], Ngati Porou, call their tribal lands *Tai Rawhiti* (the Coast of the Rising Sun). Their sacred mountain, Mt. Hikurangi (the Tail of Heaven), stands majestic and dominant in the landscape.

In the 1980s the Rastafari of Ruatoria came to national prominence through a spate of civil disturbances, which included trespass and boundary fence cutting, arson of farm buildings, houses and community buildings and the slaying of two of their number. Although relatively small in number and in an isolated rural area, the Dreads of Ruatoria are as a result of these crimes the most nationally recognised group of Rastafari in the land. In order to understand the context of the Ruatoria Dreads, it is first necessary to understand the Ngati Pouru, the tribe of most Ruatoria Dreads.

### Ngati Pouru

Ngati Porou is one of the largest of the fifty or so tribes of Aotearoa. Its 60,000 members trace their descent through more than twenty generations from an illustrious and venerated eponymous ancestor Porourangi. Their traditional tribal boundaries encompass the East Coast region. Nowadays, fewer than one in five Ngati Porou live within its traditional tribal boundaries. Estimates of the number of Rastafari in the Ngati Porou range widely from a hard core of thirty or forty to well in excess of 500. Our own estimates are closer to 100.

In estimating several hundred adherents, Ras Francis includes Ngati Porou living throughout Aotearoa, but maintaining ties with family in the tribal territory:

Ruatoria is the Rastafari capital in Ngati Porou, and probably Ngati Porou would have the most Rastafarians than any other tribe in the country. Well, you find that young Ngati Porou people living elsewhere identify with what is happening back here even though they are living in Auckland, they are dreading it up in Auckland; in the South Island the same. They are identifying with their *whanaunga* (tribal

kin) back at home here. A lot of them had to go through tribulation too though; they were persecuted as those other young fellas.

Ras Francis' comments are an important reminder of the breadth of Rastafari networks in Aotearoa.

### Social Tensions in Ruatoria

Until the arrival of missionaries and settlers in the first half of the 19<sup>TH</sup> century, Ngati Porou lived a relatively autonomous, subsistence existence based on coastal and riverine fishing, foraging in the temperate rain forests and practicing horticulture based primarily on the *kumara* (sweet potato).

As with other *iwi*, contact with the British brought a transformation to their lifestyle through the introduction of new technology. But there was a price to pay: settlement, first on the margins of Ngati Porou's lands, and then amongst them, led to the conversion of their communal land titles to individual Crown title, the clearing of their forest lands for pastoral farming, and alienation of more than half their tribal estate (much of it by missionary families). One hundred and fifty years of European settlement and influence has led to continuous and intense competition for their land.

By the mid 20th century, Ngati Porou had fast out-grown their dwindling natural resource base. There were few work opportunities locally, and encouraged by Government policies, many Ngati Porou left their homeland for distant towns and cities to trade their seasonal and largely subsistence lifestyle for permanent wage labour. Nowadays, three quarters of Ngati Porou live outside their traditional tribal boundaries, contributing to the country's unskilled and semi-skilled urban workforce. In the cities, Ngati Porou live alongside Maori from other Maori tribes and the more numerous, dominant *Pakeha*. Changes to their life-styles have been as profound as they have been rapid, not just to the migrants but also to the *iwi kainga* (the home people).

Many migrants have since returned. They came back because they preferred country to city life or could not afford to live in town. Others raised in cities came back to reclaim their sense of Ngati Porou identity. Most migrants and their families return for major social events, especially *tangihanga* (funerals), weddings and reunions. Others have come back to Ruatoria to take over a family farm or business. Most return as often as they can just 'to recharge their batteries;' that give them the reserves of cultural strength which permit them to survive and flourish in distant and essentially foreign

environments.

The East Coast region is still their ancestral and spiritual home. Here their ancestors lived, loved, fought, died and are buried. In their ancestral lands, every river, every mountain, every other geographical feature and locality carries a tribal name of historical and enduring significance. These lands, as much as the genealogies and relationships of the speakers and listeners, are referred to unfailingly in ritual speech making. Nonetheless, the people at home are fearful that such a large exodus during the latter part of the twentieth century will mean that many of these oral records will be lost to future generations. Preservation of Maori identity plays a critical role in Ruatoria Rastafari.

### **Rasta and Maori Identity**

While there is a strong sense of historical continuity in Ruatoria and the East Coast, quite profound changes have occurred. The Maori language, only a generation ago the preferred language of communication in the region, has been replaced by English. Bilingualism has retreated in the face of increasing English monolingualism among younger adults and children, and consequently, as the language of communication between elders and their descendants. For about seventy percent of Ngati Porou earned income is supplemented by dependency on the state through unemployment or sickness benefits or other welfare payments.

The tribe is still predominantly (but increasingly nominally) Christian. Anglicanism is the tribe's most popular religious affiliation although other congregations there include Catholics, Brethren, Assembly of God, Mormons and Baptists and Bahai'i, besides two Maori messianic churches, the Hahi Ratana and Hahi Ringatu.

When the lantern of Rastafari first shed its light on Ngati Porou two decades ago, it was sustained by younger people, mainly in their twenties and thirties, and continues to glow. These young people were figuratively wandering in the wilderness without firm roots in the culture of their ancestors and marginalised by a mutual rejection of the *Pakeha* majority and its culture. Though some have questioned how Rastafari identity and Maori identity can fit together, Dreads have no trouble distinguishing Maori identity from a Rastafari way of life. An incident related by Ras Daniel makes this point:

This fellah said to the Dread, "How can you be a Rasta and be a Maori?" And the Dread said to him "same as you can be a taxi driver and be a Maori." It's a way of life, eh?

Ras Caleb takes the point even further, noting that Rastafari are

proud of their Maori heritage, but not limited by it. “We are a living force of God’s people; a new a generation of Maori descent. You know, we are proud of our Maori descent we know that the *reo* (language) is not number one, God is.”

The reasons these youth give for becoming Rastafari vary, but generally include references to musical influences, questions of identity, reading about Haile Selassie, and spontaneous realizations.

## BECOMING A RASTA

### Reggae

The Rastafari both in Ruatoria and elsewhere in Aotearoa acknowledge the influence of Bob Marley’s music and other reggae singers in bringing them to their faith and helping them to maintain and reinforce it. They refer to reggae music as messages of the third world brought to them through the music of Brother Bob, Brother Tosh and other reggae artists.

To Sister Rachel, for example, music is an arm that can reach right across the world. As she puts it,

Even though you’re here you can send your message across the world with music. They have managed to convey to us a clear message, that we don’t forget who we are, that we have got no need to try and be anybody else but ourselves.

As Ras Benjamin explained, the message conveyed by reggae is especially edifying when it is combined with reasoning and biblical interpretations of what they considered appropriate social behaviour.

Through the music, it opened my eyes to the real truth, eh? When I read Isaiah that made me look, the things that he [Isaiah] was talking about happened over there at that time is the same thing that was happening here in our time. They go and get drunk all day. Man sleeping with man, all this sort of carry on. Women were falling. Man giving up their families just for lust of the flesh, you know to go with another woman who’d left her family to be with this man - adultery and fornication. It is bad in Ruatoria, is one of the worst places in New Zealand for it, but through me being Rasta it’s avoided me from all that sort of a thing. Drinking, I don’t drink now, although I’ve only just given up cigarettes and that.

Ras Francis, raised on the East Coast, had gone to find work in Auckland, New Zealand’s largest city. By the time he returned to the family farm near Ruatoria in 1977 or 1978, he already identified as a Rasta and believed that Ras Tafari (Haile Selassie) was the second

coming of Jesus Christ. He said that he read about Rastafari all on his own and was not in contact with any other Rastafarians. For Ras Francis, Bob Marley brought the message:

The message of Rastafari came through the music of Bob Marley. I think music was the first thing, and secondly was the message that was coming through. It wasn't really all about Rastafari at that, but there was running down the system and talking about how the whites were oppressing; the experience that the blacks were having with their white oppressors and how they were expounding "hold on to your culture," "don't be afraid of the wolf pack," and all those sort of things.

Francis also spoke of his experience with Bob Marley in person when he attended Marley's concert in Auckland in 1979: "Bob Marley's concert was really moving. It was like a spiritual experience, like going to see an evangelist, that's what it felt like for me."

### Identity

Although Ras Caleb also noted the importance of music in his becoming a Rasta, it was also clear that questions of identity underlie the decision. Ras Caleb had been associated with Rastafari from age 13, more than twenty years ago. His connection was primarily through Marley's music, and secondly through rejection of the eurocentric presentation of Christianity and embracing a marginal identity (along with other Maori youth) of being 'a sufferer,' as mentioned in Marley's lyrics. In his early twenties he accepted the philosophy of Haile Selassie as the Messiah who "would come to us in our time."

At first just listening through the music when I was a teenager, It was just the appeal, [to] my inner wellbeing, eh? Everything about Rasta was what I believed. I do not believe that Jesus Christ was a *Pakeha* with blonde hair and blue eyes. If you read the Bible properly you'll know that God's chosen people were the black from the beginning and he would come to us in our time as a black man. He is the Christ, the true Christ. I never believe anything the *Pakeha* said because they say one thing and then mean another.

Our people are not free, you know since [*Pakeha*] been here our people have been oppressed; you know, like the teachings of our God, our respect towards spiritual things our ancestors knew. Our people have the spiritual *mana* (authority). *Pakeha* came here to bring us the teaching of their God, of Jesus Christ, who was to come to us in our time. I was supposed to be a so-called Christian when I was young, you know, to believe in the *Pakeha* Jesus and all this is, but

everything is white, eh?

Ras Daniel talked about his reasonings on the meaning and relevance of Marley and his music to their own lives.

Brother Bob and Brother Tosh, and all of them in their beginnings, they're saying genuine, they're wailing with the chants eh? that's the feelings of the people. When we had a listen to your Brother Bob, and we sat down and we focused ourselves on our own people we can see where the Bro. was coming from. Like the system trying to overpower the people themselves eh, but the people were getting too far gone, becoming too dependant on the system, and became part of it. Whereas, we just stepped back and sort of jumped out of the system.

### Reading About Haile Selassie

Another Dread, Ras Arama, was in prison when his girlfriend gave him a book about Haile Selassie. On his release he left it with another brother who had been in a gang. He too is a Rasta now.

I think she just got the book 'cause she knew I was right into reggae, just the reggae music. I just loved it eh? And when she got this book, the book told me that there is a Christ and he is black and if you feel it you will know it. Who knows it will feel it eh? If you believe in him, then he will tell you. I like the music and I like what the message was. I didn't know really what the reasons was saying about the Christ had been revealed. You know I didn't really see that side of the reasons, not until I was given the book and it had to do with Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia. He had been crowned okay, the world had seen it, it was on record.

Similarly to others, Ras Arama's story also involves a rejection of *Paheka* religion:

I have been through church and God wasn't there; I didn't feel him eh? But it was through Rastafari - he had everything, he had the freedom I wanted, he gave me a sign that I knew. I believe the power of God had to be, and it was Selassie I that got me through that.

### Spontaneity

Ras Benjamin, aged 27, said that he had grown up a Rastafari. He believed that Jah came and revealed himself to his Maori ancestors, and influenced them to such an extent that Rasta had always been there within him.

Well Rasta has always been there, never, never left me. It's

always been there inside me, inside everyone. I realised this when I was young, well from my learning when I had been an adolescent. Well I've been with Rastas, you don't join it, it joins you eh. From fourteen, He enlightened my life; I was an adolescent a mischievous little snotty-nosed fella.

Another Ruatoria Dread, Ras Gideon, lived in a converted shearing shed about twelve kilometers from Ruatoria. The interior walls of his home were wooden and on them he had written more than forty Biblical texts with a felt pen. He showed us around his home, reading aloud many of the texts as we moved from room to room. We asked him, "You were a member of the Nyahbinghi, you were one of the first, how did that come about?" His response shows a more spontaneous conversion:

Shucks, I don't know Bro. It was just like we've been Rastas all our lives, myself was more Rasta than half of those brothers over in Jamaica and overseas. It sort of like we take it to heart.... I used to be in the Blacks (the Black Power gang) before I became a Rasta. But this one day there, I just threw my patch down and woke up the next morning and I was praising the Lord. The Scriptures and revelations spoke of the uprising and anointing of one that they called The Lion of Judah.

At the same time, Ras Gideon stated that Ras Tafari was a spirit within him, which had existed from earliest times. He said that Ras Tafari was not just with him, but within all Maori, because part of their nature and the values that Jah espoused, were values that were part of Maori culture. The difference between himself as a Rasta and others was that the spirit of Jah Rastafari had been awakened within him, while it still lay dormant within others, or they were led astray by other churches.

The people are getting all upset with the system, eh? They are seeking something different; that difference that they're seeking was always there. In the beginning it was the unity, the understanding of being a person. We have always been Rastafarians, eh? Their beliefs have always been a part of our culture. As a people you change, some of them were here and deceived into their change by the denominations that they call church groups.

### **Dread Beliefs and Practices**

Ruatoria Dreads' beliefs and practices are based on three streams of consciousness used to explain the realities of their lives: the rhetoric of Maori self-determination, the *Hahi Ringatu* messianic religion,

and traditional Rastafari symbols and practices. Chris Campbell introduced this combination of ideas to Ruatoria; he had learnt of and adopted them while in prison. Back in Ruatoria, Campbell practiced as a Rasta and other locals followed his example, forming the collective group that calls itself the Dread. Campbell was also a staunch defender of *tikanga Maori* (Maori culture) and a land rights activist. He often questioned the legitimacy of the Treaty of Waitangi (which formalized British settlement) and local land ownership titles (McCleod 1988: 71). Campbell saw the separation of Maori from their land as oppression and subjugation, against which Rastafarian philosophies were opposed. The dispossession of indigenous people from their land heightened the dislocation of their identity as *tangata whenua* (people of the land). As people of the land, Maori physical and spiritual identities were inextricably linked to it. Thus, most Ruatoria Dreads are deeply dedicated to a spirit of self-determination and independence.

The Dread's philosophy of self-determination leads them to be true *tangata whenua* - people who live off and with the land, who live their *tino rangatiratanga* (sovereignty). As Ras Daniel puts it:

People have got to learn and understand to break that dependency which they have on the system and to become independent. And the only way to do so is to occupy the land instead of giving it to sheep and cows. *He aha te mea nui? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata.* (What is the greatest thing in the world, it's people, it's people, it's people.) Because people have had their *mana* (authority) taken, that they can't provide the simplest things necessary of life for their families, which is food clothing and shelter.

Now the system is structured so that it hinders everyone's chances, especially Maori people, and the other indigenous peoples of the world from standing up. You know people have got to learn to live with one another, that is our only hope as a people. It's *kotahitanga* (unity) eh? but you know, not unto no individual plan, but unto the divine plan eh? In order to have *kotahitanga* everyone must partake, you can't have people sitting on the fence eh? And by doing so it gives each individual a chance to clear the *mamae* (pain) they have on themselves, with their neighbours, with themselves and what they create. We are all allowed a time in the darkness then comes the time of the light, so that in order to understand bad, you've got to once tasted good.

Some Ruatoria groups have taken concrete steps in being self-reliant. The Ahi-ites, a subgroup of the Ruatoria Dreads, have



formed a charitable trust with the help of relatives, friends and some government officials. Members of this Kirikiritangi Trust (which takes its name from ancient martial arts training ground nearby) grow corn, beans, potatoes and other foods for home-consumption, to give away to older people and to supplement their incomes. Members also conduct skills training courses for younger affiliates and regular health and well-being classes for them. Recently they have been able to run two-day field projects on rammed earth and adobe and earth-brick construction, which drew over a hundred participants from much further a field than the East Coast region, half of whom were not Rastas.

The Dreads spiritual beliefs are firmly based on Maori tradition, Te Kooti's Old Testament teachings and the teachings of Garvey and Marley, which they liberally quote to illustrate and justify actions. But there is also a sense that these ideas have to be interpreted by individual reasonings. As Ras Arama explains:

You live your life to according to how you feel it's right to yourself. I've been through gangs and gang warfare, fighting for something that's on the back, the [gang] patch. I see man getting killed for that. That's living a life of vanity. "Judge not least ye be judged, cursed is a man that kills another man. Let him repent" because Jah never put us on earth so you could go round killing each other over a little bit of colly (marijuana) or something like that. He got killed, because he was dipping, taking the colly, giving it to someone else. These other fellas, that was their profits eh? They were looking at the dollar sign instead of the peaceful side of the herb.

Ras Gideon reiterates this point:

Being into Rasta I'm not saying I'm perfect, no-one's perfect, we can do our best 'cause we're not here to live up to what another man can say. The only one who can tell us is that one inside us and that's the spirit of holiness that's in us, that God has given us to guide us in this time. Until He comes and brings on that destruction of all wickedness which is about to commence. I mean He can wipe me away – man, that's it, hellfire for me too. We don't know if we're going into His place (after death). We can only hope that what we're doing as mere humans is right in His eyes.

Ras Francis believed that Ruatoria and the Ngati Porou were awakening to something new, to a change which would challenge the old belief systems, and he likened that to the period when Christianity was introduced.

When Christianity was first introduced here the people went through the same thing. Well, Ngati Porou as a people when religion [Christianity] first came here, it wasn't accepted readily, and any other reform of any kind. Ngati Porou have sort of been cautious in letting that sort of *wairua* (spiritualism) in. I suppose a lot of it is a lack of knowledge. If it wasn't told to them by their mothers and fathers, then who are they to listen to others from outside?

The Dreads' regular gatherings display a mix of Maori and Rasta protocols and objectives, combining eating together with low key demonstrations of what are considered to be appropriate domestic and community behaviours. The structure of the Dreads' meetings reflect normal Maori gatherings. They start with *mihimihi* (speeches of greeting) acknowledging all present; they include singing both *waiata* (Maori sung poetry) and reggae songs, and are followed by reasonings about a range of topics from Biblical texts to issues of the day. Unlike some other Rastafari groups, here both men and women are encouraged to speak out on topics ranging from revolution to gardening to childcare and to sing praises to the god they call Jah, and to the Emperor Haile Selassie I, whom they call Ras Tafari.

In the opening speech at a Sabbath meeting of the Dread, where about thirty people from the Dread community had gathered to eat and reason together, Ras Gideon followed the normal protocols of Maori meetings by opening with *mihimihi*:

At the time of thanksgiving, being together eh, under the banner of the most high, *Kia ora*. (Greetings) It's good to see the I'n'I; good to see the *whanau* (extended family). Good to see the Jah still dreading with I'n'I guarding I'n'I in our words, giving us the encouragement to praise His holy name, to witness the words that are going around and around about us, to see the *kotahitanga* (unity) coming back into the movement that I'n'I can dread on.

Because young children were present, the Dread did not smoke ganja until the food had been consumed and the reasoning session had begun. By then the children were outside playing.

In recalling one issue discussed at a recent Sabbath meeting, Sister Rachel spoke about the need for the Dread to help each other to live better lives. She spoke about the relative deprivation of some of the group and their deprived upbringings, lack of appropriate role models and inappropriate family relationships.

You know, whether great or small, we all have a part to play. For some of the Dreads, they don't know the family life. So

for the children and the women there, we can offer them, teach them, what it's like to have children, to care for the children, for the women to be treated properly by the men and likewise for the men to be respected by their women. You know it's all part of the learning for us to live together, because some of the Dreads they come straight out of prison and they don't know what its like to have a family life to have people that care for them.

Ras Daniel spoke about not confusing the message with the messenger. He said that all too often the Dread are judged by their outward appearances, so what they have to say is dismissed by others in the town. He likened that to a lantern and its light:

It is not the lantern that is important it is the light it makes eh? Just as [it's] not so much what title is on the door, that's really not important. What is important is what's being said. The message is the same. There are two ways a problem can be dealt with - peace and war. Only one of them works. Now if you exhaust all your passive resistance eh, well, what is left? The tools we pick up today eh, they are not weapons of violence but instruments of freedom eh, and the difference is we don't use them to enslave eh, but to fight for our freedom eh? The philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior has finally and permanently been discredited eh? What I'm talking, these things eh, we yearns for peace we do, but we can't countenance the injustice eh?

To the Ruatoria Dread, the Rastafari symbol of Babylon represents the presence of evil in many forms and the supporters of that evil. For example, prisons and the recently built \$750,000 courthouse in Ruatoria were referred to as Babylon intruding into their homeland. Most of the Dreads have been in prison, where they used their time to read about Marley, Garvey, Jah, Haile Selassie and Rastafari and to debate their ideas and feelings in reasoning sessions with other believers. As Ras Francis explains, prison lends itself to reasoning:

In prison you meet a lot of people who don't recognize any authority of any kind. And you know, religion is not one of their favourite subjects let alone talk about God. It's an easy place to talk about oppression when you're in prison eh? There's not much else to talk about; the misery and being in bondage when you're locked up in prison and you feel it. That's just the way it is.

Several examples of Rastafari practice and symbolism in Ruatoria show how syncretic the approach of adherents is, and how the apparently foreign doctrine of Rastafari has been adapted to fit the

prevailing circumstances of young men and women of Ngati Porou. Along with Ras Daniel we liken these examples to beams of Jah's light from the lantern of Ngati Porou culture that shine out into the surrounding darkness. These beams are cannabis, facial tattoo, and repatriation to Africa.

## RASTAFARI PRACTICES AND SYMBOLS

### Cannabis

When reasoning, the Dreads smoke marijuana (generally they use the Jamaican name "ganja"). Reasoning sessions usually involve reading and discussing Biblical texts to understand their meaning and intent. Many texts are committed to memory and liberally quoted.

In explaining the role that cannabis plays in Dreads' lives, Ras Arama argued that using cannabis helped him to deal with the reality of their daily existence, to deal with external as well as internal social interactions, and to deal with the sense of oppression, hopelessness and continued exploitation of Ngati Porou by *Pakeha*.

When you smoke the herb you make peace with yourself as well as creation and others around you. I smoke every day. It does not get in the way of reality, I know what reality is, it's oppression. It's oppression - we have read it's in the bible; Rastafari is freedom from the world as it is. We don't just say nah, nah, its cool man, you know, you grown dread-locks and smoke a bit of marijuana and call yourself a Rasta man. No, no there's more to it than that. Rasta is God.

Sister Rachel confirms his reasoning:

We know for a fact that amongst ourselves and others that when you use the herb it brings us to a point of reason; where we are not yelling and screaming and we are not fighting; where we can sit down and we can talk. That's how we use it, for that feeling. That's the healing of the nations. Because it is used worldwide you can go right around the world and everywhere you go they use it.

Ras Arama tries to live by Biblical law and justifies the use of marijuana because in his interpretation of God's law, marijuana use is not sinful. Although it might be against man's law, that law is not reputable because it permits other activities specifically declared sinful in the Bible.

I don't see harm in cultivating a bit of marijuana in my back

yard, it's not a sin against God. It's only a sin against the law of man that we are supposed to live our lives with, abide by. [That] is the same law that legalises homosexuality - an abomination to our God. To them, they say 'Oh its all right to go and jag that other guy down the road, because when we pass it through legislation we free it.' The law is doing things like that, setting people in different classes, first class, second class, third class.

But marijuana also represents independence and sovereignty to the Ruatoria Dreads, who feel they have the right to grow what they want on their land. Generally the Dreads are good providers for their families. Unlike some other Rastafari, they are not strict vegetarians, so besides growing marijuana and vegetables for home consumption, they continue to survive by selling excess marijuana and employing the subsistence activities of their ancestors; fishing several times a week, hunting feral pigs and deer in the nearby mountains and cultivating their cooperative food gardens.

Although they strive for independence, many Dreads receive government subsidies. Some feel that the dole they receive is part reparation for the extensive land alienations that Ngati Porou have suffered. All of them find justification for their iconoclastic and apparently anti-societal actions either from the Bible, from the teachings of Te Kooti or from a sense of unjust deprivation by *Pakeha* government policies both past and present.

And we tell them no, we've got every right to be on the dole because we're being oppressed in our own land. We're not free to do what we believe to be right. Like the land is ours, we want to cultivate a bit of colly-herb. We want to put the *kumara* (sweet potato) in, well put the *kumara* in, plant the *kamokamo* (type of squash) whatever, so we can live without having to rely on the system all the time. Because if we don't, they are going to lock us away somewhere.

### **Moko (facial tattoo)**

In pre-Christian times, adult Maori males were tattooed as a sign of their status. Because the tattoos were begun in early adulthood they were also seen as a rite of passage into adult roles. *Moko* were intricate lines and swirls that identified the wearer's ancestral lineage and also their achievements or those of their ancestors.

Christian missionaries successfully stopped the practice of tattooing of all but the highest-ranking males before the end of the nineteenth century, and of women by about 1940. Only a handful of women who took the traditional *moko* survive today; all are well past

80 years of age, and greatly revered. But in the past two decades a small but growing number of women have taken the *moko* each year. *Moko* among men has taken a little longer to revive, but increasing numbers of young men, especially gang members and Rastafari have had their faces tattooed in the past decade.

Facial *moko* is the hallmark of the Ruatoria Dread. Most men and women have *moko* (face tattoos) after the style of their ancestors (women with their lips and chin tattooed and men with full-face tattoos). Besides the traditional style *moko*, the Rastamen have engraved on their foreheads, one of the many names of God; whether that be Jah, Rastafari, Lion of Judah, or names in Maori such as *Io* (The Supreme), *Te Kupu* (The Word), *Te Timatanga* (The Beginning), *Aroha* (Love) and *Te Ahi o Te Atua* (God's Fire).

The facial tattoo serves at least three important purposes for the bearers. It identifies them as Rastafari, as Jah's chosen people. According to the Bible (Rev. 7:3) those with his seal on their foreheads will be saved from destruction and will survive the cleansing. It also reinforces their tribal/kinship links as Maori, as one of the first people (both in terms of being indigenous and in being from the original Garden of Eden). To eurocentric New Zealand society it identifies them as someone unwilling to submit to the assimilation pressures of Babylon. Thus, *moko* is another item in a 160-year catalogue of resistance.

Ras Arama saw reason in the Bible to have Jah and Io tatoed on his forehead, but neither of his parents were pleased when he had his face tattooed. His mother was very upset and his father said that he would go mad for breaking the sacred rules surrounding traditional *moko*. As time has passed and they have seen how Arama lives, he feels that they now understand his viewpoint.

My *wairua* (spirit) led me to getting my face tattooed years before any other Dread was tattooed. It was just I had read it in the Book. I never ever regretted getting God's name tattooed on my forehead. How could I? How can I deny it? I believe that no man can express this sort of love of God unless he was of the same belief as me. No, when he's ready, his *wairua* will lead him on that path because it's a big step - to do what we done. When I dedicated my body to God as his true church, my mother was very offended. I told her because I love God and because I'm Maori. She hit the roof, she couldn't dig it. Then my old man said I was going to go *porangi* (mad). Because what I had done was *tapu* (taboo), I should have done it the old way, like our ancestors. But I said I did not do it for them, or for the old way, but for Haile

Selassie I, God. Because I done it for him, he was going to protect me against any spiritual wickedness that could come to me, and he has. That was nearly 10 years ago. They're coming to realise the truth; that I've prospered. I used to be a drunken little gang member, compared to what I am now; dreadlocks, non-smoker, non-drinker and smoke the herb and stay home and be with my family.

Ras Caleb reiterates the point and emphasizes that the *moko* shows other people what is in your heart:

Yeah, yeah, He knows you got it in your heart, but how do you show that to another man? You put it on your head, eh? Put it on your head so that man can see you know who you are. You can see who I am. I've put him right across myself. People here have accepted it now because we are part of all the families here. All of us belong to big families. Well it affects a lot of the families.

Ras Francis does not have a face *moko*. His response to the obvious question was:

I don't need to have a *moko*. As far as I am concerned, well it's already tattooed on the inside, here on the heart. I know what I believe and I don't need to write a little note to myself. I am basically comfortable with the way I am, I have never had to find any other way of affirming my being Maori. I don't see it (*moko*) as an identity crisis for them. It's an opportunity for them to take something that's theirs, belongs to their ancestors, and is something tangible that they can have for the rest of their life.

Non-Rastas in Ngati Porou are ambivalent about Rastafari *moko*. On the one hand *moko* are admired because they are an undeniable and irreversible statement of being Maori. On the other hand, in traditional times only persons of high rank would have *moko*, as a decision of the tribal collective. Rastamen, are considered unsuitable candidates. Some people in Ruatoria had hoped that once tattooed, Dreads would be less Rastafarian than before. Ras Francis who is in his forties, expressed the generally held Rastafari view that the face tattoo makes the brethren even more committed to Rastafari, but likewise even more committed to their Maoritanga. Ras Arama had a similar perspective.

You know, when you write Ras Tafari on your forehead, it's there for life. What the *moko* does is emphasize that we can still be Maori, without losing our identity and belief in being Maori. We didn't have to go through any identity changes to be Rastafari, in fact what Rastafari did was to reinforce the

Maori identity and take it to another level. You know that's a commitment for life.

### **Repatriation**

Two traditional Rastafari ideas that the Dreads rethink are 'Repatriation' and the 'Garden of Eden'. Maori have traditionally traced their origins to *Hawaiiki*, their original tropical homeland; after death they will return there. As it is, this is a belief that has been modified by Christianity but still remains intact in 21st century Maori society. In funeral orations the spirit of the deceased is enjoined to travel to the most northerly point in New Zealand, to *Te Rerenga Wairua* (the jumping-off place of spirits) from there to journey on to ancestral Hawaiiki. At reasonings, Mt. Zion and the Promised Land are localised. Ruatoria's Dreads accept that Mt. Hikurangi, their sacred mountain, is also their Mt. Zion.

For all of Ngati Porou, Mount Hikurangi is symbolic of their tribe, its land, people, and prestige, even though much of their land has been alienated. Dread reasonings about the Bible tell them that Jah will wrest it back from Babylon and return it to them. Their land was taken unjustly, so Jah will return it; they await Jah's intervention. Ras Arama explains: "The Father has to come and return to us what was ours in the beginning, it will be also ours in the end. This land here is a Holy Land, this land was here from all time." Also according to Dread reasoning, the first man came from Mt. Hikurangi, the place where God said 'let there be light.' "That's where he stood, on Mount Hikurangi when the world was one. The East of Eden, the Garden, this is it."

Mt. Hikurangi is the first place in Aotearoa to see the light of each day. Once the International dateline was established, technically it became the first place in the world to see each day. As incorporated into Rasta belief, Mount Hikurangi is the original Mt Zion. This belief is justified by Ruatoria's Dreads through their interpretation of Biblical verses from Genesis where God separated the waters under heaven into one place and dry land emerged (Gen.1:9). Then God created the lights of the firmament to divide the day from the night, and to create signs, seasons and years. These are the sun, moon and stars (Gen. 1:14-18). The Ruatoria Dreads, who quite explicitly identify as practising Rastafari, do not view Africa as their promised land; when Jah comes they will be restored to their own lands, not repatriated to Africa. As they are already in their promised land, repatriation will be its return from the *Pakeha*. Mount Hikurangi, their sacred mountain is their Mount Zion and Jah's coming will demonstrate



that to all the world. Unlike Rastafari elsewhere, the Dread of Ngati Porou do not expect to be repatriated to Ethiopia or anywhere else. Ras Arama rejected Africa as their ultimate destination.

People say Africa. Africa no, Haile Selassie yeah he will come from there, but the East is where he comes from the last time. He's widening his spirit and all his angels come in behind him. Any time zone, whatever you want to call it. I believe that God's bringing every nation here. All nations will be gathering on the mountain to see his light eh, just like that, one day. They want to see his light hit here first; but that light might be too bright for them eh? They'll be looking to see the light, and next minute that light was Jah. The brightest light in there, that's Him, that's Him there, the brightest light. In one second man, the world done, their wickedness gone, cleansing. We'll be all clean.

It is also clear to the Ruatoria Dreads that when Jah comes the third time, only a small number of his people will be chosen to abide with him. Their interpretation of the Scriptures make it clear that only 144,000 will be saved, and they will be those who bear God's seal (his name) on their foreheads. If there is to be any return, it will be to whence each tribe originated. But there is a duality in their beliefs. Some expect that they will go to *Te Rerenga Wairua* and back to *Hawaiiki pamamao*, (far distant) while others expect that when Jah comes again, they are already well placed because they will be free from the bondage of the *Pakeha*. Jah will return them to the original Garden of Eden in Waiapu Valley, their 'Land of Milk and Honey'.

For the Dreads of Ruatoria, repatriation meant freedom from colonial bondage (the Babylon that Garvey wrote about and Marley sang about). *Pakeha* would be swept away from their consciousness and they would be joyful with their bounteous Garden of Eden returned to them. As Ras Caleb explains:

Well in the Psalms it says 'Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands' because God will reveal Himself, Selassie come from Ethiopia - it's in the Bible. You can't refuse what was said in the Scriptures. But it doesn't say in the last days where he will come from in wrath. It just says he'll come from the east. Matthew 24 says that the light come from the east to the west, the coming of the son of man.

When elaborating on the location of the Promised Land and it's meaning to different peoples, Ras Holah said,

The Promised Land will be the New Jerusalem, New Heaven when the cleansing has taken place. It is here; it has to be

have their prophet Gad or something and they talk about repatriation to Ethiopia. Old Hensley [the founder of the Twelve Tribes in Aotearoa] was here, but he done the dirty on them. So the old dollars got to his mind.

Relations with non-Rasta groups have often been even worse. When the Dreads first began to receive the light of Jah's lantern, they were mocked, denigrated, resisted and shunned. When buildings in the township and barns were burnt down, community feelings against them ran high. Although Rastamen were almost certainly responsible for some of these acts, especially where they involved land alienated by outsiders (i.e. by Babylon), they were unfairly blamed for all criminal activity in the area. As Ras Daniel puts it:

Well you go anywhere and when they ask you about "Oh where have you been? Oh Ruatoria? And they'll tell you all about us and they haven't even met us. And it is all negative eh? They just pass it on; they are like parrots. They believe in lies.

Matters are made worse because some illegal activity is associated with people who adopt a Rasta style or who have different beliefs but call themselves Rastas.

All of the Dread in Ruatoria have experienced hostility, rejection and doubt from their relatives and neighbours. But they accept the suffering that comes from outside as fulfilment of prophecy, even as they acknowledge that they are still misunderstood by the wider society. Ras Daniel explains:

The Lord was saying we would be hated for it eh? [Hated] by everyone for doing these things. And I don't see any other church that has been hated as much as the Rastaman. All we ever wanted to do was be culture men eh? From right back then, but we had to go through all that trouble with the *whanau* (extended family); now it took us ten years just for Babylon to leave us alone. They saw us as terrible fellas eh? But now when they look at what are we doing, in all that time we struggled against each other. To them, we're just niggers, we're just niggers in their game of life they play. We are just their little flunkies, they look on Rasta as being druggies and dopers and good for nothing eh? But Rasta is a way of life and it is not all dope. I am a Rastaman who lives day by day. I say I am a Rastaman because I believe that His Imperial Majesty is our way into the kingdom. He is the Son; he is the Father and the Son.

There is a strong belief in the community at large that the Ruatoria Dreads are only "playing" at being Rastas. That is to say, some

right here because Jah first brought his light here on the first day. Only God knows where his Promised Land is, man is only just sort of saying. The Jamaican, the Rastaman in Jamaica 'cause they descended from Africa, naturally they will see Africa is their Promised Land. The Aborigines from Aussie they'd say Australia is the Promised Land, their homeland eh? The Apaches and the brothers over in America they would say that there was their Promised Land. But when you check it out, I have only just come to understand this, I always thought because I believed in Rastafari, it was Jamaica. But when you get to read (the Bible), deep within there's something that will tell you something different, yeah the East. Well, no place is furthest east, this is as far as you can go and this is it.

### ***Community and Outside Relations***

Some Ruatoria Dread were openly scornful of the Twelve Tribes, who speak of their repatriation to Africa. As Ras Daniel put it,

The Twelve Tribes are international; they are a different faction of Rastafari, they have got their own agenda as to what they believe is right. They believe Africa is their repatriation, where they are going, back to Africa. But you see out of Africa came the Garden of Eden; you can't tell me this is not the Garden of Eden that this is not the furthest east.

The Ruatoria Dreads differ from the Twelve Tribes significantly, and though there has been contact between the two groups, it has not been positive. Exploring links with the Twelve Tribes in Auckland, both Ras Francis and Ras Daniel talked of negative encounters, especially due to what they took to be the cultural presuppositions of the Twelve Tribes. As Ras Francis said:

Some of them came to stay with me when I was living in Wellington, but man they're false, you know, laying around, talking like a Jamaican, denouncing their *Maoritanga* (Maori culture) you know. Saying that they were establishing the house in the Rising Sun. But a whole lot of things we fell out about, when they came here, they came right through the *pa* at Hiruharama (a small village five kilometres from Ruatoria, its name translates as Jerusalem). (I said) all your belief systems and you've got no time for *te pa o te Atua* (the village of God). They are a hundred disillusioned people.

Ras Daniel suspected the Twelve Tribes were more interested in money than anything else.

We haven't got the 12 Tribes here [in Ruatoria]. They

members of the community believe that the Dreads' Rastafarian appearance is simply defiance or an excuse to smoke drugs. Like most other New Zealanders, the rest of Ngati Porou believe that smoking marijuana leads to the use of 'hard drugs' and that all gangs, whether they are *Black Power*, *Mongrel Mob* or Rastafari are just a front for drug abuse and criminal behaviour. As a result, the Dreads continue to exist on the periphery of their tribal community, both physically and spiritually, while still living amongst Babylon.

But not all community relations are bad. For example, the Kirikiritangi Trust's field projects have attracted a number of non-Rastas. Even more importantly, about ten weeks before we began to interview in Ruatoria, Ras Gideon and a band of his close followers began to attend the *Tekau-ma-rua* (*Twelfth of the month*) service of one of the local congregations of the *Hahi Ringatu*. Initially *Ringatu* adherents had thought that the Rastafari were attending because services were conducted in the Maori language, and this would give them an opportunity to improve their own fluency in Maori, a language that is becoming more and more the preserve of generations over 50 years old. Most of the Dreads in Ruatoria along with other young adults in the community are not fluent in Maori.

"That's was OK," said the leader of the local *Ringatu* church, "perhaps through the language they will come to the Messiah's message." However, *Ringatu* adherents were pleasantly surprised that the language was not the Dreads' only interest, indeed not even their prime interest. Ras Caleb explains that the Rastas saw a similarity between the *Hahi Ringatu*'s founder, Te Kooti, and Rasta icons, like Marcus Garvey:

You see when the soldiers chased Te Kooti [just] as they chased Garvey out of town eh, Marcus Garvey. Now the works of Te Kooti, the soldiers were sent to stop the man that ties the land together, to stop him, because he is tying the people together as one. Now that's what part the *Ringatu* church plays - the *whakakotahi te iwi* (uniting all the people); and you ask the difference between Rastafari and these things? There is no difference.

Other *Ringatu* were also surprised at the Dreads' depth of study, knowledge and understanding of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, and their willingness to share their 'reasonings' with others of the *Ringatu* faith. This perception had begun to turn community attitudes around. Among the *Ringatu*, Rastas were not seen wholly in negative terms; their presumed association with trespassing, arson, horse and cattle theft and many other anti-social

or criminal activities in the community has been questioned, and the beginnings of acceptance, if not understanding, are under way.

## CONCLUSIONS

Alienation is a major theme of Rastafarian movements worldwide and the Ruatoria Dreads are no exception. Listening to Bob Marley's songs and reasoning kindled their interest in Rastafari and the messages of freedom, spirituality and anti-colonialism that the music contained. Among the Ruatoria Dreads there is also a strong sense of moral propriety and independence. Other than growing and smoking marijuana, there is little that they do which is unlawful; nonetheless, they consider their relations with the outside community to be strained, which they demonstrate by the fact that three of their numbers have been killed in the past two decades and the police (Babylon) have failed to secure convictions against the killers. One of the men killed (Chris Campbell) was their acknowledged leader at the time, considered to be a person with prophetic powers. Today he is revered by the Dreads as a martyr to the cause of Maori liberation and redemption. Nonetheless their exotic religion and appearance has ostracised them from their own relatives and unfairly demonised them as the bad men of the community.

Rastamen in the West Indies have found reason in the Scriptures not to cut their hair, shave their beards, or tattoo their skins, likewise they observe many dietary prohibitions as determined by Biblical teachings. In Aotearoa in contrast, Rastamen, besides having dreads, usually shave and have tattooed *moko*. Their consumption of pork and shellfish, although proscribed in the Bible, is rationalised as part of their ancestral and *Ringatu* teachings, a faith they say they hold as strongly as their Rastafarian consciousness. To the Dreads of Ruatoria, their beliefs and practices are a syncretic combination of Rastafari and *Ringatu* and an expression of their desire for *tino rangatiratanga* (sovereignty), all three elements promising sovereignty and self-determination within the context of their Ngati Porou land, kinship, authority and spirituality.

## Notes

1. Aotearoa is the Maori name for New Zealand.
2. This work was supported by a research grant from the University of Waikato, when the authors were in that University's Maori Development Centre.
3. Spelt Maori in both singular and plural form.

4. Called the Twelve Tribes of Israel, or Gaddites, they were lead by a Jamaican musician (Hensley) who came to New Zealand in 1981, married a Maori woman and stayed on proselytising young Maori and Island Polynesians.
5. There are different groups amongst Ruatoria's one hundred Rastafari. The most numerous are the Ahi-ites, whose leader is Te Ahi o Te Atua (The Fire of God).
6. See, for example, Bronwyn Elsmore's *Mana From Heaven, A Century of Maori Prophets in New Zealand*, Tauranga, Moana Press
7. Currently almost one quarter of all Maori belong to a messianic movement or church.
8. Their preferred name for themselves.
9. All respondents have been given fictitious names.
10. On the twelfth of each month, congregations are 'locked-in' for a 24-hour service, the Tekau-ma-rua. During this time they participate in a patterned form of worship by taking turns at reciting and singing set prayers based on the Psalms, other Biblical verses, and songs written by the church's founder, Te Kooti. The delivery style is more akin to pre-Christian Maori waiata (sung poetry) than hymns.
11. The authors wish to acknowledge Oliver Dragon from Grenada who video-recorded some of our reasoning sessions with the Ruatoria Dread when he was a graduate student at the University of Waikato.

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# The Globalization of the Rastafari Movement

from a Jamaican diasporic perspective

MICHAEL BARNETT

The primary intention of this paper is to consider the impact that the migration of Jamaicans to England, the United States and Canada has had on the globalization of the Rastafari movement. The first significant migration wave of Jamaicans was to England, and this is generally considered to have taken place from 1948 when the now famous ship, the *Windrush* set sail from the Caribbean to England. By the 1950s the migration of Jamaicans to England was considerable. Among these migrating Jamaicans were members of the Rastafari community (Adams 2002). The migration of Jamaicans to England was largely in response to British Government policy of that time, which was to recruit Black people from the Commonwealth to help to rebuild England and its economy after the devastation it suffered during World War II. The opportunity to improve their social and economic development was seized upon by Jamaicans with open arms and, as a result, thousands flocked to England's ports. There were in fact no institutions established in England to welcome and process the Jamaican newcomers. As a result Jamaicans had to learn to cope on their own in their new home, against a background of racial discrimination and prejudice. Notting Hill, West London was the scene of major race riots in England and gave birth to the now famous Notting Hill Carnival. What is not so well known, however, is that it also gave birth to the Rastafari movement in England. In 1958 several Rastafari were in fact meeting at 40 Powis Garden, Powis Square, Notting Hill. Amongst the group of Rastafari brethren that were meeting at Powis Square were Roy Prince, Ascento Fox, Clifford Gully, Keith 'Shaggy' Berry, Earl Luke, Desmond Christie, Nicolas McKoy, Keith Miller, and Brother Tull.

Of note is that Ascento Fox, Roy Prince and Brother Tull were members of the Ethiopian World Federation (EWF), Inc. Local #37 in Jamaica. This was one of the eleven locals that had been established in Jamaica in 1955, when Miss Maymie Richardson came to the island on behalf of the organization's HQ in New York.

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In 1960 the brethren in London, after meeting as a group for two years, were authorized by the executive of the Ethiopian World Federation, Inc., Local #37 of Jamaica to function in London as a sub-local of Local #37.

On March 10, 1960 the British Rastafari brethren had their first official interaction with the Imperial Ethiopian Embassy in London. This was important as it represented the first official contact between the Rastafari community and the Imperial Ethiopian Government. (The fact-finding mission to Africa from Jamaica – arising from recommendations of the 1960 UWI Report on the Rastafari Movement – comprised three Rastafari representatives: Mortimo Planno, Filmore Alveranga and Douglas Mack. That mission did not leave until 1961.) Subsequent to the meeting of the British Rastafari Brethren with the Ethiopian embassy, a Cultural Attaché was sent from the embassy to visit the British sub-Local of the EWF, Inc. in June 1960, to hold further talks. (It was after this meeting with the Cultural Attaché that the Brethren were given the name “the Jamaican Working Committee”. After the Cultural Attaché’s visit, two members of the Jamaican Working Committee met with the Ambassador (who was Endelkachew Makonnen at the time). The Ambassador said that he would undertake the responsibility to become the mediator between Ethiopia and the Rastafari brethren in England. He also said that he would undertake to put the brethren in touch with one of the dignitaries from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. At the end of the visit the brethren were told that they should prepare a report on the movement, which would be given to His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, when the ambassador next travelled to Ethiopia.

As the 1960s progressed, two developments fertilized the soil in which the British Rastafari movement was to sprout: 1) Black Power groups such as the Racial Adjustment Action Society, led by Michael X (Michael De Freitas), and the Universal Coloured People’s Association, led by Obi Egbuna, forcefully began to articulate Black people’s common interest and their right if not obligation to self-fulfillment (Van Dijk 1998). Despite being small and short-lived, the British Black Power movement paved the way for the necessary awareness/consciousness for the growth of the British Rastafari Movement.

In 1967 Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Toure) comes to Britain and helps to launch the Black Power movement there (Adams 2002). After his tour of some of the Black communities in England, he made a speech at the Round House, Chalk Farm, London. He was

well received by Britain's Black intelligentsia, who gathered to hear him define Black Power as the "coming together of Black people to fight for their liberation by any means necessary". Carmichael's speech was considered dangerous by the British establishment and shortly after he left the country, the Home Secretary for the Labour Government, Roy Jenkins, announced in the House of Commons that Carmichael would not be allowed in the country again.

The next few months saw a wave of militancy among various Black Power leaders in the UK. It was Roy Sawh and Michael-X who became the center of the media's attention, however. Both were charged with inciting people to racial hatred under Section 14 of the Race Relations Act (after making what were considered inflammatory speeches to their audiences). Of the two, Michael-X was considered the more controversial figure and he was given a one-year prison sentence while Roy Sawh was fined. In 1968 when Michael-X was freed from prison, Britain was in the grip of a great deal of racial tension. Just a few months earlier Enoch Powell (a member of the Conservative Party) had made his controversial "Rivers of Blood" speech on immigration and anti-discrimination in the UK, and a large influx of Asians (who held British passports) were leaving East Africa for England under a policy of Africanization. It was against this background that in Notting Hill on April 9, 1969 Jamaican-born migrants in London formed the Universal Black People's Improvement Organization (UBIO) (inspired by and modelled after Marcus Garvey's UNIA). This new organization included many Rastafari and Rastafari oriented members, and it gradually reinforced an already growing interest among West Indians in England in Rastafari. The founders of the organization were Ascento Foxe, Keith Berry, Anthony Mohipp and Norman Adams (Adams 2002).

On April 27, 1972, two UBIO founding members, Ascento Foxe and Norman Admas, went on a fact-finding mission to Jamaica where they met with the Bishop of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Laike Mariam Manfredo (later known as Abuna Yesehaq), who was instrumental in the founding of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) in Jamaica in 1970. (A year prior to the visit of Foxe and Adams to Jamaica, the UBIO had been phased out, in March 1971 actually, and the People's Democratic Movement, the political arm of the British Rastafari Movement, was revitalized.) As a result of their visit to Jamaica, Foxe and Adams obtained permission to establish the first British Branch of the EWF, Inc. In August 1972 the first independent British Local of the EWF, Local 33, opened its doors on

Portabello Road, soon to be followed by branches in Birmingham and Leicester (Van Dijk 1998). Two years later at the continuous request of several EWF members, Bishop Manfredo visited London to formally establish the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in England. Many Rastafari at that time, both in Jamaica and England, valued the official religion of Ethiopia as an essential link to African culture and identity. However, some Rastafari found it difficult to accept the EOC's hierarchical organization as well as the fact that the Church did not consider Haile Selassie I to be divine. Therefore what occurred was that just as in Jamaica, the relationship between many Rastafari adherents and the Church became an ambivalent one.

Partly as a result of these differences, one of the founders of the EWF in Britain, during the course of 1972, established a British Branch of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Led by Prophet Gad, the Jamaican Twelve Tribes of Israel, included in its membership many middle class adherents, intellectuals and leading reggae stars.

It should be noted that for the Twelve Tribes of Israel, unapologetic reference is made to Jesus Christ as the Lord and Saviour of Man-Kind, who has recently revealed himself in the personality of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I.

Efficiently organized, yet liberal in its doctrines, the Reggae House of Rastafari (as the British Twelve Tribes Organization was known) soon exerted a strong influence over the movement in England. It established branches in the Streatham/ Brixton area of South London as well as the Old Trafford area in Manchester.

According to Van Dijk (1998) however, many British Rastafari were highly critical of the organized hierarchical institutions that were the EWF, EOC, and the Twelve Tribes of Israel, and chose to remain unaffiliated to any of them. Despite this, however, because of its strong linkage to Jamaica, the core of the British Rastafari movement had an almost identical religious orientation to the Jamaican Rastafari movement.

By the mid-seventies, reggae had experienced its definitive breakthrough into the mainstream pop culture of England. One of the main reasons for its success, of course, was the strong marketing by Chris Blackwell's Island Records of Bob Marley's music. In fact, the first Wailers album recorded with Island Records in 1972, *Catch a Fire*, was a hit in England due to the aggressive marketing of Chris Blackwell's company on its home turf. Then came the second album from the Wailers on the Island label, *Burnin'*. Similarly aggressive marketing of this album by Island Records coupled by the appearance of the

Wailers (Bob, Bunny and Peter) on the big hit British music show of that time, *The Old Grey Whistle Test*, assured this album's success would make a big splash in England. The third Wailers album for Island Records, *Natty Dread*, which featured the new permutation of Bob Marley along with the I-Threes (Bob, Bunny and Peter had parted ways at this point in time), was also a big smash with the British audience. Then came the album, *Rastaman Vibration*, followed by the album, *Live!*, which was recorded live at the London Lyceum in 1975. This firm establishment and entrenchment of roots reggae in England led to the further popularization of Rastafari in England.

Van Dijk (1998) argues that the popularity of reggae music during the seventies served to secularize the Rastafari movement, with many youths embracing the political, social and cultural message of Rastafari, and not necessarily the religious beliefs of the movement. He further argues that some youth in England merely adopted the outward trappings, notably the dreadlocks and the red, gold, and green paraphernalia as fashionable elements of a trendy new style.

The popularity of reggae music in the seventies was not the only thing that contributed to the growing appeal of Rastafari in England at that time. During this decade the economic situation in England steadily deteriorated. This especially affected the second generation West Indians, who now all of a sudden were facing a serious level of unemployment. On top of the chronic unemployment was the situation of inadequate education, poor housing, and meagre social welfare payments. Additionally many faced crises in Identity. They were neither entirely West Indian nor British. They fell as it were between two worlds. An appropriate solution for this seemed to be Rastafari. The movement signified resistance against oppression, the castigation of white supremacy and the anti-Black racism that accompanied it, as well as the positive assertion and pride in one's African heritage.

## **RASTAFARI IN CANADA**

The Rastafari movement grew slowly and steadily in Canada during the sixties and the seventies, specifically in Toronto and Montreal where there were a significant number of Jamaican migrants (Campbell 2007). During the late sixties the Civil Rights struggle in the USA spread across to Canadian Blacks (both local and immigrant). This helped to fuel the growth of the Rastafari movement especially within the Jamaican populace who were already somewhat familiar with the political and cultural aspects of the movement. What also led

to the significant growth of the movement was the closure of a Black education project in Toronto as well as the relocation of the Toronto branch of the UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association), which itself had a long and proud legacy in Toronto, stretching back to the glory days of Garvey in the 1920s. It had from ever since that time been a centre of Black political activity in Toronto. When that branch of the UNIA left Toronto, there was a large void that was (fortunately for the Black community) effectively filled by the Rastafari movement.

In a similar fashion (as was the case in England), by the mid seventies the police and immigration authorities launched an attack on Rastas as a bizarre cult which was responsible for most of the violent crimes in Canada. According to Campbell (2007), the Tacky Study Group (a small Caribbean Group based in Toronto), perceived the police/ media initiative not only to be an attack on the Rastas, but as a continuation of the attacks on the Black community and thus mobilized the progressive elements of the community along with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to refute the claims of the police that the Rastas were violent murderers.

Campbell (2007) argues here that the Rastafari community in Canada, as in other parts of the world, was largely divided into two groups; these being the more religiously orientated Rasta and the more politically oriented Rasta. The more politically oriented Rasta tended to participate in the general struggles of the Black community in Canada, according to Campbell (2007), while those Rasta more steeped in religiosity tended to remain as mere spectators on the sidelines. As the eighties progressed the Black community organizations in Canada were weakened by police infiltration and provocation. This gradually eroded Black political capabilities and leadership for the Canadian Black community such that the level of agitation and political activity noticeably declined. The Canadian Rastafari community was not immune to these developments, according to Campbell (2007), as what transpired was the transformation of the movement such that the more religiously oriented Rastas dominated, with the movement taking on a distinctly more apolitical stance. Thus in summary, the Rastafari movement has taken on a more religious form in Canada as a result of the low level of Black political development that has existed there in recent times.

In terms of the Rastafari mansions that exist in Canada presently, because of its strong linkage to Jamaica (just as in the case of the

British Rastafari community) the Canadian Rastafari community has an almost identical structural arrangement to that of the Jamaican Rastafari movement. Both the Twelve Tribes mansion and the Nyahbinghi mansions are well established in Toronto, and there is a fairly significant population of Boboshanti there, although they have not established a formal mansion branch there as yet (as they have in New York and Miami in the US).

## **RASTAFARI IN THE USA**

The growth and presence of the Rastafari movement in the United States essentially followed the waves of Caribbean migration to North America, during the sixties and seventies. The high concentrations of Caribbean Americans in New York and Miami put these metropolitan areas on par with London and Toronto in terms of the Caribbean-ness of these cities. In fact, South Florida (Miami, Broward and Palm Beach) has so many Jamaicans it is widely known as Kingston 21, while Brooklyn in New York is frequently referred to as Little Jamaica (Hepner 1998). Although many important studies have been done on the diverse Caribbean-American population in the US (especially in New York City), virtually nothing has been done with regard to the Rastafari movement in North America. Notable items of work on the Rastafari movement in the US have been contributed by Hepner (1998) and by this writer in the course of his dissertation research in 2000.

Precise dating of the formal beginnings of the Rastafari movement in the US is still problematic (Hepner 1998; Campbell 2007); however, Leonard Barrett (1977) writes confidently of the existence of the Rastafari movement in the US dating back to the early sixties. So far as Hepner is concerned, however, the formal establishment of Rastafari mansions and associations does not start to take place until the mid seventies. On top of this, the relative visibility of Rastas in the US is relatively low in the sixties with the first media account on this subject (specifically New York) not taking place until 1971.

Hepner (1998) notes quite aptly that sizable Rastafarian communities exist in the US wherever a significant number of Jamaicans reside. Thus we find viable Rastafari communities in Eastern Seaboard cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Connecticut, Washington DC, Atlanta, and Miami. Similarly we find appreciable populations of Jamaicans with a correspondingly significant Rastafari community in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago and Houston. The two largest and perhaps most significant Rastafari

communities however are those located in New York and South Florida. In New York, for instance it is notable that all three of the main mansions of Rastafari (Twelve Tribes of Israel, the Nyaybinghi Mansion, EABIC) are not only present, but are well established there. In addition, we have the headquarters of the newly formed, but now infamous, Church of Haile Selassie I (founded by Ascente Foxe) based in New York, not to mention that of the historical Ethiopian World Federation (EWF), Inc. In South Florida, two of the three main Rasatafari mansions exist formally (the Nyabinghi Mansion and the EABIC), while the Twelve Tribes of Israel mansion exists informally, with gatherings of adherents to this mansion occurring only in the context of informal social events, thus far (Barnett 2000).

Jah T, a Rastaman who immigrated from Jamaica to Fort Lauderdale, South Florida in the US in the mid eighties, told this researcher that the Rastafari community was relatively well established when he arrived. There were regular reggae concerts organized and promoted by Rastafari community members. Additionally many reggae clothing shops, storefronts along with reggae record shops were owned and operated by Rastafari, he remarked. The region was rich with reggae music, especially on the radio, with the notable show, "Sounds of the Caribbean", hosted by Clint O'Neal, on WLRN Radio – the longest running reggae show ever in the US. With such a rich and vibrant reggae culture, you can be sure that there was a rich and vibrant Rastafari community, retorted Jah T. Apparently the Boboshanti house was just getting established in South Florida at that time, while the Nyahbinghi mansion was pretty much established.

According to an article written by Linden Lewis in 1989, the treatment meted out to immigrant US Rastas at the hands of the American law enforcement agents as well as the corporate media illustrates the clear presence of racism. He further lamented that it was basically inconceivable to imagine America embracing the Rastafari culture to any significant degree at all. According to Hepner: Rastafari in the US will continue to experience difficult times and by and large have to contend with being considered as nothing less than criminals. Within a few years of the movement's public appearance in cities such as New York City, Houston, Washington DC, and Miami for instance, the media was at work portraying the members of the Rastafari movement as criminals and illegal aliens intent on doing harm to law-abiding citizens (Hepner 1998). In 1971 apparently a spate of shootings in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn was attributed to so-called Rastafari cultists who, the police

detectives claimed, “shot whomever they felt like”. In 1977 four Rastafarians were found bound and shot to death in an apartment in Brooklyn, an episode that police and media observers dubbed the “Rasta Easter Massacres”. Members of a rival sect of Rastafari was assumed responsible for the killings. For the rest of the decade, New York’s growing Rastafari community would be publicly associated with criminal violence, drug trafficking, gunrunning and homicide. In 1983 a report “Rasta Crime: A Confidential Report” (reprinted in *Caribbean Review*, Vol 14 (1) 1985) was prepared for the New York City Police Department (NYPD) and specialized anti-crime units operating in large West Indian populated communities. The report states, “Many Rasta in this country tend to stray from their religious tenets and engage in criminal activity, using their religious doctrines as a cover for their criminal activity.” The report went further to suggest that Rastafari adherents were highly prone to violence, accompanied by high ingestion levels of marijuana. Additionally, it suggested that the movement had effectively been “infiltrated by Marxist groups, revolutionary Cuban terrorists, and violent pro-Michael Manley supporters”. Allegedly, Rastafari members were being sent to Cuba for extensive training in guerilla warfare and were thus a more serious threat to the US than regular street criminals.

Also in 1983 Jack Anderson wrote a series of articles for the *Washington Post* and the *Philadelphia Daily News* in which he advanced claims similar to the NYPD Report. He warned that the “Marxist-tinged elements” of the Rastafari cult, were “armed to the teeth, and posed a serious terrorist threat, as they intended to strike at American political targets in the next few years”. If this wasn’t bad enough these syndicated articles were reprinted in most of the Eastern Caribbean island papers within a few days. The two articles were alarmingly dangerous in that they succeeded in creating an atmosphere of paranoia so far as the Rastafari in the US were concerned. Arguably the articles contained small elements of truth juxtaposed with many errors and innuendo. Anderson’s prediction however that armed elements of the Rasta movement would begin striking at American political targets in the next few years was too vague to believe. However, the suggestion that criminal elements among the Rastafarians might be receiving small arms from “Jamaicans who work at US arms factories” could have precipitated a witch hunt among Jamaican-American citizens.

Another landmark event in the history of the Rastafari movement in the USA was the airing of two documentaries on the Rastafarian



movement on the prestigious programme “60 Minutes” by Dan Rather, anchorperson for CBS nightly news. The first of these was aired on December 7, 1980 and covered the Rastafarian movement in Jamaica, featuring interviews with Professor Rex Nettleford, Arthur Kitchen (a well-known Rastafarian journalist for the Jamaica *Daily Gleaner*), and a medical doctor involved with the movement. This broadcast was a fair interpretation of the Jamaican movement, with positive points made by all interviewees. Bob Marley and the contribution of Rastafari to reggae in general was also highlighted. The second documentary, interestingly enough, covered the Ethiopian Zion Coptic Church, located on Star Island, Miami Beach, Florida and at White Horses (St Thomas, Jamaica). At the time of the broadcast the Ethiopian Zion Coptic Church, was involved in a celebrated struggle with the US District Court of Southern Florida, in which they had been indicted for the use of marijuana as a sacrament. Little is known about the Ethiopian Zion Coptic Church, which may be considered to be a mansion that is marginal to the Rastafari movement as a whole.

The Ethiopian Zion Coptic Church emerged in Jamaica in the late 1940s and was founded by a Brother Louv. The church started in the Mountain View area of Kingston, and drifted from one location to another, up until the seventies when it based itself in St Thomas (Barnett 2000).

The original Jamaican founders of the movement have faded into the background as the American branch has effectively usurped the Church in both Jamaica and the United States. The Ethiopian Zion Coptic case in Florida finally came to trial; the church lost the case, and the leaders are now in jail. Although the movement has close doctrinal ties with the Rastafarians, it is important to distinguish between the two movements. Devout Rastafari believe in the divinity of Haile Selassie I; while the Ethiopian Zion Coptic Church believes only in the kingship of Rastafari, but it also holds that marijuana is an absolute, an eternally “sacred weed” that is an indispensable part of their religion. At this writing, the movement continues, but with a decidedly low profile.

### **Interview with Brian Olsen, Spokesperson for the Ethiopian Zion Coptic Church**

As mentioned above, the presence of the Coptic Church in the United States is now significantly diminished in comparison with the high profile of its heyday in the late 1970s when it made national news following a “60 minutes” programme in December

1980 which focused on the movement. Prior to this, many people outside of Jamaica were unaware of this branch of Rastafari, which professed marijuana to be a holy sacrament but did not believe in the divinity of Haile Selassie I. As Barrett (1997) mentions, there were numerous meetings between the Coptic Church and the more orthodox Rastafari brethren in Jamaica in the early 1950s, which ended in disagreement over doctrinal differences.

The researcher had an extensive telephone conversation with Brian Olsen, a former Star Island member of the organization during its heyday, now spokesperson for the church in the United States. Olsen, a white American in his late fifties, has now dedicated his life to the legalization of marijuana and to informing people about the Coptics. Residing in Iowa at the time of the interview, he told the ethnographer that he became a practicing member of the church in 1973, after some hippie friends of his came back from Jamaica saying that they had met Christ and discovered themselves through a vital and powerful movement. In actual fact the Christ they were referring to was George Baker Ivy, a young Jamaican who had restored the church from the downward spiral that it had taken since the death of its founder Louva Williams. Ivy is recognized as the first Rastafari leader to encourage whites to be fellow members (Hiaasen 1981). The ultimate reason he gives for joining the church was his complete loss of spirituality: "I did not want to be part of the totally materialistic world that America presented to me anymore, a world devoid of spiritual essence," retorted Olsen. "Ultimately all of us were looking for something, something that would make our lives mean something, and we found it in the Coptic Church." Brian explained to the ethnographer that for him Rastafari had to be the real thing, as he had read enough in the Bible to realize that Christ would not return in a castle, but rather as a Black man, from a people who were at the bottom of the pile, not from a people at the top. For him the organization had a large degree of appeal in that it was inclusive – unlike other branches of Rastafari which did not welcome whites and because of its interpretation of Biblical scripture. "For me," exclaimed Brian, "the Coptic Church allows for a tremendous amount of spiritual growth." He continued:

It emphasizes peace instead of violence, and by uplifting Blacks from denigration, speaks to the evil of slavery. The Christianity preached by the Western World is a hypocritical one which has tried to justify slavery, and has no relevance to a people seeking to live in love and in brotherhood. I can

honestly say that I have seen the spirit of love more from Black people than whites.

Brian closed the interview by elaborating to the ethnographer the key doctrinal belief of the Coptics that made it more attractive to him than the other branches of Rastafari. This was the notion that Jesus was a living God embodied in all men. That is that the body of Christ consists of many members and when there is a strong bond between people, a strong sense of brotherhood and solidarity, Jesus Christ is manifested. He cited Corinthians 1, 12:12 as an example of this. It reads:

For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ.

For him the second coming of Christ amounts to a perpetual process rather than an occurrence which has definitively taken place. He believes that one of the names of God is Rastafari, the Prince of Peace, and that ganja is his birthright on the basis of Genesis 1:29 which reads:

And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb Bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, And every tree, in the which there is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat.

### **Recollections of the Fieldwork Conducted within the Rastafari Community of South Florida**

The researcher conducted his fieldwork primarily at the gathering areas for the two established Rastafari mansions that exist in South Florida. For the Boboshante mansion this was Liberty City, where their Tabernacle is located. For the Nyahbinghi House this was at the Redlands site in Homestead, where the Binghi sessions were then conducted, and where the Nyahbinghi Tabernacle used to be located. As has been mentioned earlier in this paper, in the South Florida region, only the Boboshante House and the Nyahbinghi House are formally established at present. Many Twelve Tribes of Israel adherents live in South Florida, but have never established themselves formally. So far as the case of the Ethiopian Zion Coptic Church is concerned, ever since many of the members who were formally based at Star Island in Miami Beach were jailed for Marijuana possession in the early eighties, the group dispersed all over the USA, and are now keeping a decidedly low profile.

**Attendance at a Binghi (Rastafari religious service) in the Redlands district**

The researcher attended his first Binghi in North America the Redlands district of South Florida (which is basically Homestead), back in 1998, on the Coronation Day of HIM Haile Selassie I (November 2<sup>nd</sup>). The journey itself proved to be long and arduous considering that the site of the Tabernacle was about 3 miles from any main road and required careful navigation along a narrow and muddy dirt track – an extremely precarious experience, as the dirt had become so water-logged that the car was in danger of getting stuck at times. A red glow of naked flame piercing the night sky signalled the end of the journey, and at the entrance to the compound where the Binghi was being held, stood two wooden posts supporting a huge Rastafari flag (the imperial Ethiopian flag). About eight cars and two trucks were parked just inside either side of the entrance. A bonfire was burning about thirty feet inside of the compound; on the other side of the bonfire another thirty feet away was the tabernacle, where the drummers were assembled. The Tabernacle covered an area of about 25 x 25 ft, and was a little more than one storey high. It consisted of several wooden pillars and a wooden roof frame supporting a highly decorated canopy such that it took on a pyramidal shape. The air was thick with the smell of ganja, and just in front of the tabernacle a group of brethren smoked their spliffs as they observed the proceedings. The drummers, seated inside the tabernacle, were pounding out the familiar Rastafari heartbeat rhythm, with the accompaniment of some shakers. The chanting of the hymns was led by the Rasta playing the repeater drum, and the other brethren, both inside and outside the tabernacle, followed his prompts.

Singing the hymns softly or in some cases humming them gently to themselves, the sistren remained noticeably on the periphery of the compound – by the bonfire and over to the left of the Tabernacle in front of four regular sized camping tents erected side by side. A few of the sistren sat with infants in their laps or nestled against their chests. This came as no major surprise for the researcher, being aware of the relatively more marginal roles that were ascribed to women in the Binghi rituals. At that time they were, for example, forbidden from playing the drums (commonly referred to as harps among Nyahbingi Rastafari); but are now able to accompany the percussive elements of the ceremony with shakers.

These particular Binghis were coordinated and organized by the

Nyahbinghi Rastafari house in Miami, known formally as “Theocracy Reign Ancient Order of Nyahbinghi” as such specific conventions apply. For instance, women must cover their hair, and wear a long dress or skirt; no trousers (pants) are allowed. For the men their heads must remain uncovered, no hats, turbans or wraps, when entering the tabernacle. These dress regulations, effectively ostracize other houses of Rastafari, particularly the Boboshante, whose male members wear turbans at all times when in public. Hence the Binghis at the Redlands were primarily a Nyahbinghi Mansion event (as are equivalent ceremonies at Scotts Pass in Clarendon, Jamaica, or at Pit Four in Montego Bay, Jamaica). Interestingly enough a few Boboshante Rastas did turn up to the event, but remained by the bonfire and at the outskirts of the compound. By turning up in the first place they had shown symbolic support for this key Nyahbinghi event. The core of the activity was significantly at the Tabernacle where the drummers pounded away incessantly but rhythmically, lulling much of the crowd into a semi-hypnotic trance. With a continuous beat behind them, the brethren entertained with songs like the Rastafari Ethiopian Anthem, “By the Rivers of Babylon”, and “Let the Power of Jah Fall on I”. One hymn continued for as long as one hour, without a break. Then immediately as that one finished, another was started and continued on and on, until a new hymn was introduced by another brethren. As the drummers tired they would be replaced, such that the singing and drumming was continuous, and uninterrupted in the flow of this highly spiritual event. Many of the hymns sung here were in fact adopted Christian hymns (Sangays) with Rastafari words.

As the evening progressed, more Rastafari entered the compound, and by 1:00pm there were at least seventy Rastafari sistren and brethren present. Many had come from as far afield as Fort Lauderdale and Palm Beach. What became evident as the evening wore on was that while a core group of Rastafari brethren and sistren were engaged in worship by the Tabernacle, some of the late arrivals remained on the periphery of the camp simply observing the proceedings. This continued until the core group of brethren in the Tabernacle invited them to come forward and participate and got agitated – with cries of “FireBun all spys and imposters!” suddenly resonating from near the Tabernacle when some of the arrivals remained steadfast in their tracks. “Unuu give praises to His Majesty, give thanks and praises to the most High, Jah Rastafari.” This seemed to spark a reaction from some of the newcomers who ambled towards the Tabernacle. A few,

however, seemed perturbed and left. The Nyahbinghi brethren had made their point – there were to be no spectators at this event. One either participated wholeheartedly, or one left.

### **A ttendance at a Boboshanti Service (Binghi)**

The Boboshanti house of Miami hold their services (prayer sessions) relatively frequently, every week in fact on Saturdays (the Sabbath), unlike the case of the Theocracy Nyahbinghi house where sessions are held only on special occasions such as the birthday (referred to by Rastafari as earthday) and the Coronation day of Haile Selassie I, as well as the birthdays of Rastafari luminaries such as Marcus Garvey and Leonard Howell.

The Boboshante binghis take place in a hall in an outwardly inconspicuous, unassuming, unalluring, one-storey building. Inside the hall, however, one is greeted with an elaborately painted room which serves as the Tabernacle for the Miami Boboshante group. The walls and the pillars are decorated with the colours of red, gold and green, and pictures of the Bobo-Trinity (Haile Selassie I, Marcus Garvey and Prince Emmanuel) adorn all the walls of the Tabernacle. Upon entering the premises the researcher was asked to empty his pockets completely before entering the main hall where the service was taking place. It was explained upon inquiry that one must leave their Babylonian possessions behind when entering the symbolic Zion that the Tabernacle room represented; this included things such as keys, identification cards, credit cards, and especially money. At the entrance to the Tabernacle room a standard bearer waved the Bobo flag – which differed from other Rastafari flags in that the colour sequence of green, gold and red had been reversed such that the green was now at the bottom of the flag instead of the top, and there were stars on the flag instead of the usual lion insignia.

Before entering the Tabernacle room itself, one was also required to face eastwards and bow one's head in silent prayer. Upon entering, the congregants are required to pay their respects to the seven Priests who preside at the front of the hall facing the congregation, by stooping briefly before them with the right hand placed over the heart. In addition one is required to pay their respects to the congregation in a similar manner as one makes their way to the back of the hall. Before being able to take their place with the rest of the congregation, all arrivals are required to take one of the prayer mats draped over the back of the chairs at the back, and prostrate themselves on it in prayer facing eastwards, the direction in fact in

which the congregation faces. The arrangement of the congregation was very striking for the ethnographer, in that apart from the fact that the chairs for the congregation were arranged so that they were all facing the east wall (which was effectively the front of the hall where the head priests conducting the service presided), the men were separated from the women and the children, so that all the men sat on the left, i.e. to the right of the seven head priests, and all women and children sat on the right of the hall, i.e. to the left of the priests. The members of the Boboshanti House were dressed in long flowing white robes, replete with white turbans and in some cases red, gold and green scarfs.

The service consisted of the reading of Psalms by each of the head priests in turn, whereupon after every verse or so, everyone would say, "Holy Emmanuel I, Selassie I, Jah Rastafari". Interspersed with the readings from the Bible was the singing of Rastafari hymns to the accompaniment of drums. Noticeably during the singing of the hymns the high priests would turn away, their backs to the congregation as they faced East. During the singing of the hymns the atmosphere was jubilant with much of the congregation rocking and swaying as well as clapping their hands in syncopation to the beat of the drums. Some of these hymns were the same as the hymns sung at the Nyahbinghi Mansion Binghis held at the Redlands, but some were distinctly different. Each of the priests would take turns to read a Psalm after the singing of a hymn and would comment on why, as the ambassadors of HIM Haile Selassie I, they should make preparations for repatriation to Africa. As the priests delivered their sermons, they would pay tribute to the persons of their Godhead, Marcus Garvey, Haile Selassie and Prince Emmanuel, and each time would be greeted with rapturous applause from the congregation.

### **CONCLUSIONS GLEANED FROM FIELDWORK AMONG THE BOBOSHANTI AND NYAHBINGHI IN SOUTH FLORIDA**

What became very evident from the attendance of the Binghis for both mansions is their authenticity and their Jamaican-ness. Apart from one's surroundings in the case of the Boboshanti service, it is fair to say that one could not tell that one was not in Jamaica, when one attended these ceremonies. The constitution of the congregations (which were mainly Jamaican) as well as the firm preservation of all the nuances of the Binghi ritual, affirmed the Jamaican-ness and therein the authenticity of the Rastafari practices. This is a very notable characteristic of the movement in the US, particularly in

the metropolises of New York and Miami (South Florida) – that is the preservation of much of the nuances associated with the Jamaican sector of the Rastafari movement.

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# Medicated *Ganja and Rasta Rituals*

## Allies in a global battle

NATHANIEL SAMUEL MURRELL

In the past few decades, the international movement to decriminalize marijuana (ganja) for scientific, medical, and social use has received widespread support in the fight to legalize the drug, even in the United States where the war on drugs is constantly retooled during elections. Increasing demand for medicated marijuana in the West, the strongest case for legalization, has found a natural but unwitting ally in Rastafari in its struggle. Defending the legality of ganja use as a religious pharmacopeia, Rastafari raises the question as to whether the courts can and should legalize medicated marijuana but deny its personal and religious use. This problem has forced courts internationally to scrutinize their marijuana laws and Rastafari beliefs and practices in some unusual cases. The debate affords an opportunity to reexamine the history, use, and criminalization of ganja, its role in Rastafari, and Rastas' religious liberty under the provisions of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA).

### GANJA'S ORIGINS AND CRIMINALIZATION

The international criminalization of ganja is a fairly recent phenomenon, but the use of the drug has a long-standing tradition in Caribbean cultural history and predates the founding of Rastafari by almost a century. There is much to consider in Kenneth Bilby's claim that cannabis was introduced into the Caribbean by enslaved Africans. Bilby traced the pharmacopeia back to *dagga* (called *diamba*, *riamba*, and *liamba* in other dialects), common in regions south of the Sahara and western central Africa, and found traces of the herb in use among the peoples of Kongo-Angola, Xhosa, Zulu, Swasi, Bakongo, Tswana, Nyamwezi, Hutu, Tutsi and many other diverse ethnic groups in central and southern Africa. After locating the origin of Brazilian cannabis in Mozambique and Angola, Bilby found continuity in the use of the drug in the ceremonies of Afro-Jamaican Kumina observers, among whom he did field research in

the parish of St. Thomas in the late 1970s. Bilby said, “Not only did I find that cannabis was still smoked for ‘spiritual’ reasons during Kumina ceremonies, but I learned that members of the “Bungo Nation”, as those who practice the Kumina religion call themselves, regularly employ a number of African derived terms to refer to cannabis. The most common of these is *diamba*, although the alternative terms *makoni* and *chianga* are not uncommon.”<sup>1</sup> Neil Savishinsky agrees with Bilby that, “among central African groups such as the Batetala, the Baskata and the Bakongo, cannabis has played an important religious role, one very similar to the role it plays among Rastafarians.”<sup>2</sup> But like Barry Chevannes and others, Bilby also concludes that the use of the chillum pipe, “the section of the pipe known as Kochi”, the manner in which the pipe is used, and the method used to prepare ganja for smoking has an East Indian origin,<sup>3</sup> or show that the Jamaican use of marijuana is heavily influenced by East Indian traditions.

## A GANJA-FRIENDLY WORLD

The earliest history of marijuana is unknown. One source claims that the plant was used for millennia as a form of textile as well as medicine in Mesopotamia, Persia, Egypt, Arabia, China, India, and many parts of Europe.<sup>4</sup> An uncorroborated source claims that in the third century BCE the Chinese Emperor Sheng Nun relished the use of cannabis.<sup>5</sup> According to Leonard Barrett, marijuana got the name *Cannabis sativa* in the 1750s from a Hindu named Linnaeus and was known in India also as hemp or bhang. In India the cannabis sativa plant is well known. Cannabis was first called “marijuana” in Mexico while “ganja” was the Jamaican name for a finer quality of the Indian hemp or Spanish marijuana. Rastas call ganja various names: “callie” (or kali), “iley”, wisdom weed, and the “holy herb”.<sup>6</sup> The first documented use of Cannabis in Western pharmacopeias is dated 1839 when a physician at the Medical School of Calcutta “observed its use in the indigenous treatment of various disorders and found that a tincture of hemp was an effective analgesic, anti-convulsant, and muscle relaxant.”<sup>7</sup>

Works by Vera Rubin and Lambros Comitas, Ajai Mansingh and Laxmi Mansingh, Horace Campbell, Barry Chevannes and others show that the practice of smoking cannabis became common among Jamaica’s working class as a result of post-emancipation Indian immigration to the Caribbean. The so-called Indian hemp was found

among Indian immigrants in Trinidad, Guyana, and Jamaica in the second half of the nineteenth century. On their ground- provision lands on the plantation, the immigrants “grew Indian vegetables, and other plants, notably ganja and, where others had failed for nearly a century earlier, they successfully established rice cultivation”<sup>8</sup> in those British territories. Since the mid 1800s marijuana has been used widely as a local under-the-counter medicine in those territories among creole Caribbean peoples. The weed is still cooked in foods, chewed, smoked, brewed as ganja tea, and used by people of Indian and African ancestry to treat asthma, various stomach disorders, the flu, fevers, glaucoma, rheumatism, and a slew of other ailments. Native herbalists use ganja as a folk medicine often mixed with tobacco. Like other Jamaicans, Rastas use marijuana among other herbs to make a variety of teas and roots-tonics. Canadian anthropologist Carol Yawney said she knew of several Rastas who made a sizeable part of their income preparing different roots-tonics for sale. Rastafarians, however, “are best known for their extensive use of one particular herb, cannabis, which they regard as a Sacred Herb.... While Rastafarians are not exceptional in this regard, they have developed the most elaborate ritual, symbolism, and ideology surrounding its use.”<sup>9</sup>

With the emergence of Rastafari in 1930, ganja took on a new role as a religious sacrament, a symbol of authentic individual freedom, and a reactionary device to the dominant culture in society. In the 1930s, Rastafari founder and preacher Leonard Howell formed the Ethiopian Salvation Society which imitated a similar branch society in the United States. He acquired an abandoned estate in the parish of Catherine, Jamaica, and with many of his followers, established the first Rasta commune called Pinnacle Hill outside of Spanish Town. Howell converted the abandoned estate into a very productive and self-supporting community, even selling surplus agricultural produce to some government institutions. Ivor Morris says “About five hundred members of the society lived at Pinnacle Hill, paying no rent but cultivating the large property there. The main crops of the plantation were yam and ganja.”<sup>10</sup> Around that time, Howell began growing ganja for use as a religious ritual and saw it as God’s creation and as the herb spoken of in Genesis 1:12 and 3:18. He and other Rastas claimed that ganja enhances meditation, gives clarity of thought in reasoning sessions and Nyabingi services, and soothes the troubled mind. Forsythe, Yawney, and Chevannes, in different publications, summarize the Rastafari attitude toward ganja

succinctly in the statement “herb is for the healing of the nation”. Under this rubric Yawney says Rastas “advocate both smoking and drinking it as a tea for preventive and therapeutic reasons.... Herbs feed the brain; it prevents cancer; it serves as a substitute for sex. Even the smoke of Herbs is blown in the face of babies and children to cure coughs and colds.”<sup>11</sup>

Clearly, the international community was a ganja friendly world. So how did ganja become the opium of the Mafia and “the sword of the devil” around the world? In the early 1890s, the British Government sponsored the Indian Hemp Commission to study mental health and the abuse of cannabis in Indian society. At that time, the British-Indian administration had sanctioned the cannabis trade from which it derived tax revenues. According to Leslie Iversen, the Commission interviewed almost 1,200 witnesses in thirteen different Indian provinces and cities and visited all of the asylums in the British colony. Their primary objective was to find out whether large consumptions of cannabis caused insanity as some governments claimed. The results of the thorough two-year study was published as *The Indian Hemp Drugs Commission Report* (1894).<sup>12</sup> Britain eventually outlawed the cultivation of cannabis in Jamaica in 1913<sup>13</sup> but recreational use of ganja grew on the island in the 1920s. After the Egyptians succeeded in getting the League of Nations to place ganja on the list of “Dangerous Drugs” in 1924, the British government prohibited the use of ganja in all of its territories except for medical and scientific purposes. The British law prohibiting ganja use lay dormant among the statutes until the revolt of the Jamaican underclass in 1938. The Jamaican planters believed that ganja use influenced the revolt among Rastas and declared it a nuisance. This led to a revision of the so-called Dangerous Drug Law (DDL) in Jamaica and its use as a major weapon in the police harassment of Rasta communities. Campbell says, “The use of cannabis went on<sup>14</sup> the statute books under the Dangerous Drug Law, and since then this law has been used against Rastas by the colonial and neo-colonial State.”<sup>14</sup> Laws suppressing the use of marijuana in Jamaica have encouraged Rastas to be creative and form a survival system. Leonard Barrett says, “Since the herb is absolutely essential for ritual uses and the cultists cannot afford to buy the ‘stuff’ from outsiders for fear of being exposed, they have become distributors as well as smokers.”<sup>15</sup>

## CRIMINALIZING A GANJA SPLIF

In 1938, a swat team of 173 armed policemen invaded the Pinnacle Hill commune and arrested Howell on charges of sedition with intent to encourage tax evasion among his followers and dealing in ganja. More than two dozen other members of Howell's Rasta commune were also indicted with him and imprisoned on charges of possessing and distributing the drug. Since Howell's arrest and incarceration, hundreds of Rastas have shared a similar fate. The Jamaican police used the charge of growing and possessing "dangerous drugs" as its main political weapon against Rastas. The media and the Jamaican public also perpetuated one of their most enduring stereotypic symbols of Rastas as ganja pushers.<sup>16</sup> As Campbell says:

The 1941 Amendment . . . for the first time in the history of Jamaican law incorporated the principle of mandatory imprisonment, precisely what the planters had called for after the rebellion. . . The police had discretionary powers over the type of arrest and thousands of Rastas and youths were branded as criminals, and imprisoned for possession of a herb which was part of a popular culture. After the resistance at Coral Gardens in 1964, the law was strengthened so that Rastas could be sent to prison for five years.<sup>17</sup>

Law enforcement officials charge that the Rastas use the ritual smoking of ganja as a smoke screen for illegal drug activities and ties to drug rings and the Columbian drug cartel. Of course, militant actions by some members of the Rastafarian community in the late 1950s did much to aggravate this crisis in Rasta-government relations.<sup>18</sup> In 1959, law enforcement raided the headquarters of ritual ganja user Claudius Henry and found a stash of military weapons, explosives, and information implicating Henry on espionage charges. Rastas were condemned nationally and the so-called ganja-smoking natty dreads were seen as a menace and threat to national security. Arresting of Rastas on charges of unlawful possession of ganja escalated in the 1960s until Michael Manley's government amended the law that required mandatory imprisonment. As a result, the number of Jamaicans imprisoned on possession charges was substantially reduced. In the late 1970s, this move sparked public debate in Jamaica and elsewhere in the Caribbean over the decriminalization of marijuana.

Europe and America had no cause to make marijuana a problem until the mid twentieth century. British and French physicians had prescribed the drug for a variety of ailments since the late 1800s,

and it remained legal in Europe until 1964. The United States prohibited the drug when it passed the Cannabis Tax Act in 1937; but the consumption of cannabis grew substantially in American cities where it gained the unfortunate reputation through the media as the “killer drug”. Because of the drug’s prevalence in New York City, Mayor La Guardia appointed a committee of scientists to investigate its effect on users. After a rather thorough investigation and study of dozens of subjects, in 1944 the committee submitted a very clear and conclusive report that “marijuana was a relatively harmless drug”.<sup>19</sup> But some public officials, the *Journal of American Medical Association*, self-serving pharmaceuticals, politicians and other anti-marijuana advocates criticized the report as unscientific. The report fell silent and the marijuana scare and criminalization has continued into the twenty-first century.

As Iversen says, “As cannabis became an increasingly popular recreational drug during the 1960s and 1970s, however, more and more people were exposed to it.”<sup>20</sup> In the early 1960s, the drug problem intensified in Europe where the heavy use of cannabis influenced the adoption in 1961 of the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs. SCND was co-sponsored by the United Nations, some members of which had criminalized marijuana that same year. On July 24, 1967 the *London Times* reported that British authorities were exaggerating the dangers of cannabis. The British Home Office established an Advisory Committee on Drug Dependence to study the new problem. The Wootton Report of 1968 and subsequent reports arrived at similar conclusions as the *Times*. After the Wootton Report was released, the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare launched the National Commission on Marijuana and Drug Abuse (NCMDA) to study the implications of the use of the drug in the United States. The impact of the first in a series of NCMDA reports published in 1972 – “Marijuana: A Signal of Misunderstanding” (called the Shafer Commission Report) – was rather striking: “It went even further than the Wootton Report in recommending that the private possession or distribution of small quantities of cannabis for personal use should no longer be an offense, and that possession in public of up to 1 ounce (28 g) be punishable by a fine of \$100.00.”<sup>21</sup> Probably because of the Wootton Report, in the 1960s and 1970s there was a substantial increase in the use of cannabis as an intoxicant in the US and Europe. The Shafer Commission Report evoked an outcry from the Nixon administration and led to a national commission whose report in 1973 reversed earlier conclusions on marijuana.

Notwithstanding the amazing findings, the use of ganja by Rastafari in Britain and the US was criminalized with predictable results. The British media inaccurately but effectively painted a picture of Rastas as a type of street gang comprised of black muggers who terrorized neighbourhoods, peddled dope, and preyed on vulnerable, defenseless, and elderly women. This gave “British Bulldogs” a free hand in terrorizing Rastas in South London neighbourhoods, which was the direct cause of the clashes between black youths and police in Handsworth, Birmingham, in 1977 and in the 1981 riot in Brixton. The Jamaican High Commission in London and other authorities contributed to the condemnation and persecution of Rastas by advising the British Government that “in Jamaica, dreadlocks and beards were not regarded as valid religious symbols”<sup>22</sup> nor was ganja recognized as a valid religious pharmacopeia. But public pressure forced the British Government to radically change its policy on Rastafarians and recognize the movement as a legitimate religious phenomenon in its own right.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Rastas were a prime target of the US war on drugs around which the media created a culture of anti-Rasta scares and stereotypes. The hit movie *Marked for Death* associated Rastas with brutal thugs of the Jamaican posse and linked Rastafarians with obeah<sup>23</sup> and a cult-running drug ring in the United States. Law enforcement officials blamed Rastas for the rash of random shootings in New York City in the early 1970s, even the so-called Rasta Easter Massacre in which five Rastas were found tied up and shot execution style. As Randal Hepner notes, “For the remainder of the decade, New York’s growing Rastafari community would be publicly associated with criminal violence, drug trafficking, gun-running, and homicide.”<sup>24</sup> The police and the media fed the public an overdose of stereotypes of Rastas as armed and dangerous criminals, pro-Cuban Marxists, and members of the Colombia drug cartel. *The Washington Post*, *The Philadelphia Daily News*, *The New York Times*, and other media characterized Rastas as “drug-crazed cultists”, and Dan Rather and “60 Minutes” portrayed Rastafari as “a multinational drug-smuggling corporation that used religious beliefs to conceal its illicit narcotics importing activity”. So to the American public, especially during the Reagan-Bush years, “Rasta” was synonymous with dangerous Jamaican mafia and drug dealers. But it is clear that Rastafari do not fit into these stereotypes and they justifiably resist the global drug policies criminalizing ganja as a ploy of Babylon (Western social and political systems) to destroy

Rastafari.

## LEGALIZING THE JOINT

Since Peter Tosh sang “Legalize it! Legalize marijuana!” in the 1970s, sympathy has been growing among the youth for both the slogan and the movement to decriminalize ganja. Many medical professionals, politicians, concerned citizens, and Rastafari support legalization of ganja for scientific, medical, or religious reasons. Some US poles showed strong public support for medicated marijuana.<sup>26</sup> In 1972, NORML (National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws) “petitioned the DEA to reclassify marijuana as a Schedule II drug” so as to “permit physicians to prescribe it to their patients for compassionate use on a case by case basis”.<sup>27</sup> The petition was unsuccessful but support increased for the idea. In 1978 the US Government established the Compassionate Use Program in order to settle a civil lawsuit and allow patient Robert Randall to receive marijuana from the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) as medical treatment for his glaucoma. Other cases have attempted to obtain similar verdicts from states and the federal government with limited success. The May 11, 2001 Supreme Court ruling against the medical use of marijuana as legal evidence makes it more difficult for advocates of the decriminalization of ganja.

Since the passing of the Controlled Substance Act of 1970, eleven states in the Union passed laws that substantially reduced penalties for the private use of insignificant amounts of marijuana. When the national mood swung conservative in the 1980s under Ronald Reagan, such gains were muted. In the early 1990s a full-scale war on drugs forced decriminalization supporters to push for the legalization of ganja for medical use. Since 1996, at least eight states and the District of Columbia passed ballot initiatives legalizing medical marijuana; this in spite of the fact that marijuana arrests reached an all-time high under the progressive Bill Clinton presidency; which did not want to be labeled soft on “inhaling”. On December 30, 1996, for example, Clinton authorized a plan to fight the new state laws legalizing marijuana for those who need it most, the seriously ill. As David Ford puts it, “It didn’t take the federal government long to exert power to crush the will of the people who had triumphed over sixty years of government oppression.”<sup>28</sup>

Hawaii, called “quality marijuana capital of the world”, has fought to make ganja legal since 1970. In the 1980s the Reagan and Bush



administrations launched a full-scale assault on Hawaii's so-called Green Harvest, which took a heavy toll on the state. Many people were arrested and much property was destroyed; but the determined people of Hawaii finally prevailed and the state decriminalized the growing, possession, and use of marijuana as a prescription drug. Under a new Hawaii law which took effect in June 2000, patients with qualifying illnesses can legally use medicated marijuana. An estimated 500-1,000 Hawaiians became "eligible to grow, possess, and use medical marijuana if they have registered with the state".<sup>29</sup> In May 2000 Alaska, which already approved the use of marijuana as a prescription drug, failed in its attempt to decriminalize the personal use of cannabis with regulations similar to those that were used in the case of alcohol.

In November 1996 Arizona passed Proposition 200 and California adopted Proposition 215, marijuana initiatives which legalized ganja for medical use. In November of 2000 California also passed Proposition 36 granting reprieve to thousands of prisoners incarcerated in the state on illegal drug charges, especially for minor offenses. Also in 2000, voters in Colorado, Nevada, Utah, Oregon, and Maine voted on different referenda to allow the use of marijuana for medical purposes. The votes for these ballot initiatives softening the drug laws "came on the heels of a dozen other wins for drug-law reformers in the past six years."<sup>30</sup> But in Oakland, the government sued a cannabis buyers' cooperative to block its distribution of marijuana to persons who are ill. On August 29, the Supreme Court disagreed with the district Court's exercise of jurisdiction in this case<sup>31</sup> and overturned the ruling. Then on May 11, 2001, the controversial US Supreme Court Judge Clarence Thomas delivered the Court's unanimous decision rejecting "the idea that the medical need for marijuana can be used as a defense in federal courts. Although this is a fairly narrow ruling, . . . it could effectively end open, large-scale distribution of medical marijuana"<sup>32</sup> in the United States.

The Canadian government has wrestled with the issue of decriminalizing ganja since the late 1960s. The Canadian La Dain Report of 1970 recommended repealing the prohibitions against the possession of marijuana. Finally, the government agreed to allow the medical use of marijuana. In August 2000 "Health Canada" approved sixty-one Canadian applications for the medical use of marijuana after the Ontario Court of Appeals struck down a criminal law banning marijuana on the grounds that the lower court failed to permit medical use of the drug.<sup>33</sup> With the number of patients

increasing the demand for pot in Canada, Loren Wilberg, an Alberta consultant and merchant, was “awarded a \$5.4 million contract from the federal government in Canada to grow, dry, process and package marijuana” for medical use. The company produces this harvest in the famous “Difffenbunker”, a 1964 77,000-square-foot federal impenetrable nuclear shelter. As Colby Cosh says, “With its climate controls and its 18-inch concrete walls, the bunker is tailor-made for the demands of the federal contract”<sup>34</sup> on marijuana. In October, 2002, the Canadians moved to further loosen marijuana laws in their country but not without criticism from the Bush administration.

Some European countries have decriminalized the use of marijuana while others are debating the benefits of doing so.<sup>35</sup> For the past 30 years, the Dutch Government has taken a different approach to the drug issue. Holland is one of the very few countries to decriminalize cannabis on pragmatic or practical grounds rather than moralism. According to Iversen, Dutch law prohibited cannabis since 1964. But, in order to regulate drug traffic and achieve “harm reduction” in cannabis consumption, in 1976 the Dutch government adopted a formal policy of not enforcing violations involving possession and or sale of rather small quantities of cannabis (“originally 30 g, reduced to 5 g since 1995”).

A group of coffee shops was licensed to sell small quantities of herbal cannabis . . . for consumption on the premises or to take away. The number of such establishments was small, however, until the late 1980s and 1990s. Now more than a thousand such establishments exist in the Netherlands. They must not hold more than 500 g of cannabis in stock, are not permitted to sell alcohol or any other psychoactive drugs, must not cause a nuisance to neighbors, cannot advertize, and are not permitted to sell cannabis to minors.<sup>36</sup>

In 1977 the Government of Jamaica appointed a Joint Select Committee to study the medicinal use and properties of ganja and to make recommendations relative to its abuses, criminality, and legislation. On account of Jamaica’s obligation to the 1961 Convention, the Committee rejected legalization of ganja but made a very strong case for decriminalizing its personal use. It made several recommendations, among them a revision of the DDA in order to abolish punishment for possession of an insignificant quantity of marijuana and to legalize its medical use.<sup>37</sup> In 2001 the Jamaican government again appointed a Commission to study the ganja problem and make recommendations for solving its even more acute drug crisis. Lead by UWI professor Barry Chevannes,

the Committee did a thorough nine-month study of many aspects of ganja in Jamaican culture: in religion, the judicial system, ethnography (including race, class, and gender), the economy, epidemiology, pharmacology, and other health concerns.

The Committee produced a 73-page report documenting the significant medical properties and benefits of marijuana and its positive effects on the body; and it unanimously recommended that the government amend Jamaica's drug laws so as to decriminalize the private personal use of small amounts of ganja by adults and its use as a religious sacrament in Rastafari, intensify research on the medical use of marijuana and, through diplomatic initiatives, seek the support of the international community for its decriminalization programme. To remain on good terms with the Bush administration, however, the committee also recommended that the government step up its war on illegal drugs and launch a national programme aimed at reducing marijuana consumption among the youths.<sup>38</sup>

## **THE RFRA AND GANGA IN COURT**

Notwithstanding Jamaica's bold initiatives, the movement to legalize ganja as a religious ritual faces an up-hill battle in the legal system and within Rastafari itself. In a number of court cases around the world, Rastas have had to challenge the constitutionality of the law infringing their rights to use ganja as a religious ritual and the abridgement of their freedom of religious expression with reference to their dreadlocks. The courts' recognition that Rastafari is a religion *sui generis* in which devotees use marijuana (ganja) as a religious ritual is at the heart of the debate to decriminalize the drug in light of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) – a distinctly US legislation with global influence. At the same time, the house of Rastafari is divided on ganja use. Reggae prophet Peter Tosh's revolutionary call, "Legalize it! Legalize marijuana!" and Mutabaruka's plea to dispel the lie that Rastafari is a drug religion in some ways mirror the international debate over the movement to decriminalize ganja for various reasons and the Rastas' legal battle to defend their freedom of religion under the provisions of the Religious Freedom Act.

As the contradictory exhortations from Bob Marley and the Wailers, Mutabaruka, and Peter Tosh on Rastas' use of marijuana suggest, there is no consensus on the essential role of the pharmacopeia in Rastafari. Contrary to popular opinion, and in spite

of the importance of the ganja smoking ritual in Rastafari, not all Rastas smoke the “stuff”. Most Rastas who inhale and support the legalization of marijuana for religious and medical purposes are, at the same time, against drug trafficking as well as legalizing ganja just for personal use. In the song “Easy Skankin” by Bob Marley and the Wailers, the verse

*excuse me while I light my spliff  
oh God I gotta take a lift  
from reality I just can't drift  
that's why I am staying with this rift*

suggests that some Rastas smoke marijuana for reasons that non-Rastas do; they smoke it to escape the gut-wrenching pressures of life in Babylon or to get a high and calm their nerves while performing on stage. Peter Tosh's song “Legalize it! Legalize Marijuana,” is very clear in its call to decriminalize the pharmacopeia.

On the other hand, Rasta brethren and dub poet Mutabaruka contends that one does not have to smoke ganja to be Rasta. The Jamaican Rasta wants to dispel the lie people tell that Rastafari is a drug religion. That, he says, is “a misconception sent by Babylon to cause distraction”. Mutabaruka's song, “Dispel the Lie”, makes it clear that he is against the use of ganja in his movement and contradicts the dominant claim that Rastas get high on marijuana in order to find themselves through the clouds of social and economic frustration; or that they can only see clearly when smoking a joint or chalice. To Muta, ganja does not make Rastas think straight or enhance their reasoning power. All he sees in the “clouds of **smoke**” is a post-emancipation **yoke** that hangs around the Rastas' neck to discredit their philosophy (“Dispel the Lie”). Muta contends that no clouds of smoke from pounds of collie weed could reveal Jah Rastafari to him.

That there should exist in Rastafari this diverse perspective on the use of marijuana is not surprising. The acephalous nature of the movement allows for multiple conceptions of reality, beliefs, and practices, which suggest that one should not expect a homogenous universally endorsed Rastafarian view on ganja. At the same time, the disagreement among Rastas on the importance of smoking ganja in the movement jettisons the religious argument advanced in recent court cases internationally where Rastas have challenged the constitutionality of courts criminalizing their use of ganja and dreadlocks as an illegal abridgement of their freedoms in matters of faith and practice.

## **DREADS' RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

The visible smoking of a splif and the signature dreadlocks set Rastas apart in public eye as unique but made them the recipients of much persecution, international discrimination, and infringements of religious freedom in First Amendment rights. *Reed v. Faulkner* 842 F 2d 960 (7<sup>th</sup> Circuit 1988) is one of the landmark cases in which Rastas sought legal protection against infringement of their religious liberties under the First Amendment. In *Reed v. Faulkner*, Homer Reed, an inmate in a state prison in Indiana filed suit against prison authorities for abridging his religious liberty when they forced him to cut his shoulder-length dreadlocks. Prison regulations requiring male inmates to wear their hair no longer than a specified length was seen as depriving Reed of the equal protection under the Constitution, especially since prison officials allowed Native American inmates to retain their long hair. In his decision to disallow the plaintiff's claim, the judge said little about the issue of equal protection but cited security concerns and the issue of sincerity as two of his justifications for denial. He claimed that Moore was not sincere but had "backsliden" [sic] because he cut his beard and ate meat, which a sincere Rasta would not do. The judge gave other bizarre justifications for disallowing Reed's "protestations of religious faith", reasons that implied that the judge was either mocking the plaintiff or revealing his personal bias against him. The judge claimed Reed's hair was a prison health hazard because it could harbor lice and other contagious diseases while posing a disciplinary problem for prison officials who would be asked to make exceptions for other inmates. Of course the court held no such derogatory opinions about the hairstyle of Native American inmates.

On the basis of the special exemption for Native Americans, the court should have ruled that the prison policy was not neutral since it allowed an exception for secular or ethnic reasons but not for religious ones. This was the position of the Third Circuit court in the case *Fraternal Order of Police v. City of Newark* (1999). The Newark Police Department's policy requiring police officers to shave their beards allowed exceptions for medical reasons and for undercover officers to not shave their beards. Two Sunni Muslims challenged their department's policy on the grounds that it restricted their religious freedom, to which the court agreed. The Third Circuit court held that the undercover exception did not undermine the department's attempt to maintain its uniformity since undercover officers were not seen in public as obvious law enforcement personnel. However, the

medical exception shows that the department has judged medical motivations for keeping one's beard as deserving preferential treatment over religious motivations and is prejudicial with reference to the "Free Exercise" clause of the First Amendment.<sup>40</sup>

Notwithstanding the judge's controversial decision in the *Reed v. Faulkner* case, it had positive effects; it settled once and for all the question of whether Rastafari is a religion. Counsel recognized Rastafari as a religion with the specific tenets of its faith,<sup>41</sup> much of which is based on interpretations of the Bible. These are now etched in stone in court papers and are being cited internationally in important test cases. Secondly, the issue of religious sincerity has had a direct effect on other Rasta cases internationally, especially on the Chikweche Supreme Court in Zimbabwe. In *Chikweche v. Zimbabwe* ("Supreme Court, Zimbabwe", 1995) Enock Munyaradiz Chikweche, a devout Rastafarian who met all of the statutory requirements for admission to the Bar, filed his application for admission to the High Court only to have the presiding judge refuse to allow him to take the oath of office. In the judge's estimation, the applicant was not properly dressed because he was wearing dreadlocks rather than the traditional court apparel. Counsel contended that for the court to refuse the applicant only on the grounds of his hairstyle infringed his rights to freedom of conscience, expression, and "protection against discriminatory treatment (section 23 (1) (b))"<sup>42</sup> under the Constitution of Zimbabwe.

The matter was determined by the Supreme Court which considered a wide range of evidence presented to it from reputable sources, including the origin, history, and major tenets of Rastafari. The court paid particular attention to an affidavit from Jamaican scholar Horace Campbell, who corroborated Chikweche's testimony that dreadlocks is a Rastafarian symbolic expression that embraces philosophical, cultural, and religious aspirations of the peoples of Africa and, in particular, Africans in the Diaspora. Campbell connected the Rastafarian fight for freedom with the African struggle for dignity and independence from colonialism and said:

The movement was an expression of resentment against British colonial overrule and the complicity of the Christian Church in the colonial enterprise. It emerged in the context of colonialism in Jamaica where the African presence always had to find a new mode of expression and self-proclamation. The wearing of locks developed as an act of defiance to the colonial conception of beauty and good grooming.<sup>43</sup>

The court studied several international cases related to dreadlocks

and the contravention of Rastas' religious freedom. Two Canadian cases: *R. v. Big M. Drug Mart Ltd* (1985 13 CRR 64 at 97 and *Morgentaler v. R* (1988) 31 CRR 1 at 91 and the Constitution of India, all of which guarantee the freedom of conscience and religion, were cited. The court referenced also a British case, *Crown Suppliers (Property Services Agency) v. Dawkins* (1993), in which Rastafarian Dawkins, in response to an advertisement in the newspapers for an experienced driver was invited to interview for a job but was told he needed to have short hair. When the applicant refused to cut his locks, the interview was terminated and he was denied the job. Dawkins sued and won an initial decision against Crown Suppliers based on the "Race Relations Act of 1976" but lost a second before the Employment Appeal Tribunal (EAT) in 1991. The Court of Appeal recognized Rastafarians as a religious sect in which the wearing of dreadlocks was part of their cultural tradition. Yet the court upheld the EAT decision on grounds that Rastafarians do not constitute a separate social group based on their ethnic origin. The Zimbabwean court noted this double-sided ruling and cited several publications showing that "in British prisons Rastafarians are respected as a religious sect and are permitted to keep their dreadlocks".<sup>44</sup> The court compared this case with the New York case *People v. Lewis* in which a convicted felon dreadlocks Rastafarian charged that a prison regulation requiring the head of all male inmates be shaved for reasons of health and sanitation, and for the taking of an identification photograph violated his First Amendment rights under the Federal Constitution. The NY Court agreed that the prison regulations infringed the plaintiff's religious rights and that prison officials could have achieved the same results by having the plaintiff put his locks on his back for the picture taking.<sup>45</sup>

The US cases, *People v. Lewis* and *Reed v. Faulkner*, had a profound impact on the Zimbabwean Court decision in favour of Chikweche. Although the US Circuit Court denied Reed's appeal, the fact that it recognized Rastafari as a religion, accepted its major tenets as valid, and made "sincerity" of belief a major consideration in its determination weighed heavily on the Zimbabwe court decision. In reference to *Reed v. Faulkner*, the court said it was not interested in the validity of the attractiveness of the Rastafarians faith or beliefs; only with their sincerity. One judge was not convinced that Rastafari should be classified as a religion but another judge cited US Justice Douglass' famous words:

Men may believe what they cannot prove. They may not

be put to the proof of their religious doctrines or beliefs. Religious experiences which are as real as life to some may be incomprehensible to others. Yet the fact that they be beyond the ken of mortals does not mean that they can be made suspect before the law.<sup>46</sup>

The Supreme Court concluded that the ruling of the High Court judge that the applicant was “not a fit and proper person, was factually incorrect” since it was based on physical appearance and not on statutory qualifications or personal character. In consequence of this, the Supreme Court directed the High Court to “permit Enoch Munyaradzi Chikweche to take the oaths of loyalty and of office specified in schedule 1 to the Constitution”.<sup>47</sup> So dreadlocks survived another of its many legal challenges around the world.

## GANJA IN THE COURTS

Ganja use is not as visible as the Rasta hairstyle but, as a matter of religious freedom, its use is even more controversial than dreadlocks. One of the first cases to test First Amendment rights and RFRA on the use of marijuana was the case *USA v. Bauer* (1993). In 1991 the FBI learnt from an informant of a drug trafficking operation in Billings, Montana, involving several alleged conspirators. The FBI and the IRS launched a sting operation called Operation Reggae North which resulted in the arrest of dozens of men and women among whom were Cameron Best, Calvin Treiber, Jodie Israel (also known as Jodie Treiber), Kelly Wegner, Dawn Meeks, Ernie Martinez, Pedro Ramirez, and Lexi Bauer. In exchange for leniency some conspirators pleaded guilty and turned government witness against Treiber and Best; ring leaders who allegedly received regular “shipments of marijuana from Mexico, each weighing one to two hundred pounds”, and “used cash to make several large purchases including a farm for \$88,000 and several vehicles.”<sup>48</sup> In November 1992 a grand jury handed 26 defendants a 55-count indictment on charges of conspiracy to manufacture and traffic marijuana. The defendants were also charged with 89 other infractions including “money laundering, illegal use of telecommunications services, use of firearms in relation to drug trafficking, and possession with intent to distribute marijuana.”<sup>49</sup>

Martinez and Ramirez entered guilty pleas and received reduced sentences. Best, Treiber, Bauer, Meeks, and Israel were all tried together. In their 1993 defense, Treiber, Meeks, and Bauer argued that



at the time of the alleged offence, they were practising Rastafarians and that they used marijuana as a necessary religious ritual. Meeks' attorney, Palmer Hoovestall, first used the religion argument when his indigent client, in an *ex parte* application, sought government assistance to pay a physician to testify on her health condition, and an expert on Rastafari theology to testify on her religious use of ganja. Defending the ritual use of the herb was a very hard sell. Relying on a 1990 case, *Employment Division v. Smith*, the district court granted the prosecution's motion "in *limine* to preclude the appellants from presenting testimony or evidence on their possession or use of marijuana for religious purposes as a legal defense".<sup>50</sup>

The trial was underway in October 1993 when the US Congress was proceeding with RFRA. "It had been introduced with one hundred [and] twenty co-sponsors and was passed by the House on May 11, 1993. It was passed by the Senate with amendments on October 27, 1993."<sup>51</sup> The defendants called attention to the report of President Clinton's signing of the bill and urged the court to drop its "in *limine* ruling". Counsel for Bauer, Meeks, and Treiber urged the court to reverse its order and preserve their clients' First Amendment rights as provided under the Constitution but the court declined. Following his trial and conviction, Treiber moved for an acquittal under rule 29 of the Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure (FRCP) because the district court excluded from evidence the religious sacramental purpose of his use of marijuana. The court's response to the RFRA, FRCP, and First Amendment claim was **yes** and **no**. It admitted "the challenged law substantially burdened the free exercise of the Rastafarian religion" but, citing other appellate cases, the court claimed that the US Government had an overriding interest in regulating ganja and its illegal use (p.7).

Only a few months after the *USA v. Bauer* and *Chikweche* Supreme Court rulings, the Jamaican Supreme Court convened to rule on one of Jamaica's most important test cases on Rastafari and marijuana, *Forsythe v. the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Attorney General*. Dennis Forsythe, Barrister-at-Law, author of *Ras Tafari for the Healing of the Nation* (1983), and one of the most often cited Jamaican Rastafarian scholars, was arrested and charged in Kingston in December 1996 with possession of less than a kilogram of cannabis and a chillum pipe. Forsythe's supporters saw his arrest and prosecution as government retaliation for his direct involvement in the campaign to legalize marijuana. Sympathizers argued that, to please the United States, the Jamaican government wanted to foil the

decriminalization of ganja campaign by prosecuting the movement's most well-known and visible promoter. The political action group called Legalize Ganja Campaign organized fund-raising efforts through the media and an Internet website with the solicitation: "If you would like to assist this worthy cause, please send your donation to the 'Legalize Ganja Campaign'" and note that "it is for the Dennis Forsythe Legal Fund" (Website).

The devout Rastafarian who does not wear the signature dreadlocks hairstyle mounted a battle in his own defense challenging his prosecution on religious grounds. He sought to get the Constitutional Court to acknowledge his use of marijuana and the chillum pipe as essential ritual pharmacopeia in his religion. Under sections 21 and 25 of the Jamaican Constitution, Forsythe asked the Half-Way-Tree Court in Kingston to declare that "section 21 of the Constitution has been contravened" in his case, and that his arrest on charges of possession of an insignificant amount of marijuana and a chillum pipe under the Dangerous Drugs Act (DDA) was in conflict with section 21 of the Constitution. It infringed "his fundamental right to conscience and freedom of religion, and to the extent of this inconsistency, those sections of the Dangerous Drugs Act are void".<sup>52</sup> Rastafarian Sistren Barbara Makeda Lee who sat through the five-day hearing (May 12-16) said the Justices missed an excellent opportunity to reconsider the dated DDA in light of the religious freedom case Forsythe presented, as well as the fact that ganja smoking has very important health, therapeutic, and economic benefits.<sup>53</sup> But Justice Wolfe would have none of this. He said:

This case is not about whether ganja is more or less harmful than tobacco or alcohol. Neither is the court concerned with the possible economic benefits which could be derived from legalizing of ganja . . . those matters are red herrings drawn along the trail with the sole object of confusing the issues.

This is about upholding the law.<sup>54</sup>

In their denial of Forsythe's challenge to the constitutionality of the DDA, the Justices cited several international rulings related to Rastafarians – from Australia, Canada, and the Chikweche Supreme Court case in Zimbabwe which dealt not with ganja but with dreadlocks. The Justices denied that the DDA was unconstitutional in its prosecution of Forsythe. One of the Justices responded to the plaintiff this way:

In light of the unchallenged and compelling evidence, I am prepared to hold that the practice of his religion involves the

personal and sacramental use of ganja and chillum pipe. . . Whilst the right to freedom of religion including the right to [practise] it is a fundamental right, it is not absolute. That is why the courts of justice may uphold the constitutionality of laws or acts done... if such laws satisfy the criteria set forth in the subsection.... The court must, on the other hand, be prepared to strike down as unconstitutional, laws which infringe religious freedom.<sup>55</sup>

Seizing on this understanding of the court, Forsythe pushed for the legalization of ganja for religious use and reminded the court that the police did not arrest and charge as dopers and criminals Rastafarians who smoked ganja in public during the visit of Haile Selassie to Jamaica in 1966. To Forsythe, the glaring inconsistency of the government on the DDA calls into question his prosecution for a small quantity of ganja for religious use.

The Justices maintained that Forsythe's arrest under the DDA was done under Section 21 (6) of the Jamaican Constitution and was therefore not unconstitutional. Yet the court upheld the same Section of the Constitution that "Forsythe claims infringes his freedom to [practise] his religion".<sup>56</sup> So while the court recognized Forsythe's constitutional right to practise his Rastafari religion, it found him guilty of possessing "illegal marijuana" and a chillum pipe and thus fined him \$600.00 making him a convicted criminal.<sup>57</sup> The ambivalence of the court in this matter suggests that the debate over decriminalization of ganja in Jamaica had just begun. In the summer of 2001 the Jamaica Ganja Commission recommended the decriminalization of ganja but to the government, legalization is a problematic option because it places Jamaica on the wrong side of the US war on drugs. Rastas in the United States, Africa, the Caribbean, and elsewhere followed the Forsythe case rather closely because of its legal ramifications.

In the case *Prince v. the Law Society of the Cape of Good Hope* 2000 (7) BCLR 823 (SCA), the Rastafari devotee was denied the right to register as a candidate attorney in South Africa on the sole grounds that he had a previous conviction for possession of dagga or cannabis. As Barney Pityana of South Africa reported, Prince swore in his affidavit that he uses cannabis because it is an essential religious ritual. Prince challenged the constitutionality of the "Babylon law" in South Africa which was being used to abridge his religious freedom and, by extension, his rights to pursue a profession. He sought to have the legislation that prohibited possession, use, and trading in the alleged illegal drugs declared unconstitutional on the basis of the

right of South Africa's citizens to religious freedom. But the court ruled that prohibition of the use of cannabis is a legitimate aim of the government and an effective legislation for addressing a serious social problem.<sup>58</sup> The South African judge did not deny the legitimacy of the use of cannabis in Rastafari for "spiritual, inspirational, medicinal and culinary purpose", but he posed the critical question to the defendant: "At what point is it used for religious purposes and how does one distinguish its appropriate use for religious or for unlawful purposes like social uses?" As Pityana concluded, Ras Prince was unable to answer the judge convincingly "because in a religious system that does not distinguish between secular and religious activities, a proper distinction could not be forthcoming".<sup>59</sup>

The case against Ras Prince was not an insignificant test for post apartheid South Africa which, in 1993, sought to recognize, affirm, and preserve its religious diversity as essential for the well-being of all its citizens. The country intended to ensure that all minorities, religious or otherwise, had recourse to due judicial process and preservation of their rights. The Bill of Rights made provisions for the protection and promotion of religious beliefs and freedom of opinion and conscience of all citizens (section 15). Why then did the court deny Ras Prince's appeal for the unconstitutionality of the South African drug prohibition? The court claims that it was not convinced that Prince and other Rastas were using cannabis *only* for religious purposes. Does this imply that, had the judge been convinced that Prince's use of ganja was *only* out of religious convictions, South Africa would have exonerated the defendant? The court's ruling against Prince was another setback for the movement to decriminalize drugs.

## CONCLUSION

The growing sympathy around the world for the decriminalization of marijuana out of medical considerations and social, cultural, or political convictions cannot be underestimated. Holland's pragmatic approach to the cannabis problem has much to offer the rest of the world. Its attempt to de-glamorize the drug on practical rather than moralistic grounds may save the day for the international decriminalization of ganja. The growing use of marijuana to treat terminal ailments is also forcing medical institutions to support decriminalization. Advocates in Canada and elsewhere are pushing for complete legalization of marijuana, and one predicts that Rastas'

battle with the courts on legal and religious grounds will continue to add fuel to that fire. Several other cases in the Caribbean, the United States, Africa, and Canada, in which Rastas challenge the constitutionality of the court, were not discussed here.<sup>60</sup>

## Notes

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37. Barry Chevannes, "National Commission on Ganja, 2002" (manuscript obtained from Chairman Chevannes in October 2002), p.2.
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57. Blake-Hannah, *ibid.*, p.3.
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# Rastafari *and* Paulo Freire

## Religion, democracy, and the New World Order

LESLIE JAMES

At the dawn of the third millennium CE Rastafari has left its Caribbean island home and gone “into all the world”. While the migration or flight of Jamaicans for economic and other reasons has contributed to the global spread of Rastafari, migration is not a sufficient explanation for the spread of the Rastafari movement.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for Rastafari’s spread must also be sought in the special appeal of its ideological and practical features, one of which is its inherently democratic tendency.

The primary task of this article is not to answer why Rastafari has become global, or to describe the forms it has taken, but to constructively explore the potential global significance Rastafari’s features have as a liberation movement. One way to understand Rastafari’s potential significance in a global context is to point out its affinities with other currents of critical pedagogy and constructive thought in the contemporary world.

The central argument here is that the revolutionary “pedagogy of the oppressed” developed by the late Brazilian educator Paulo Freire can help us understand Rastafari as a religio-political practice with the potential to foster true democracy worldwide. More specifically, there is a convergence between Freire’s theory of the “pedagogy of the oppressed” and Rastafari’s practice of Reasoning, a process in which Rastafari discuss and interpret religious beliefs, texts, current events, or anything else deemed important by the participants.<sup>2</sup> Both the “pedagogy of the oppressed” and Reasoning reveal similar commitments to the construction of a new world order from the bottom up.

One of the intentions of the “pedagogy of the oppressed” is to transform plantation societies into sovereign, autonomous, independent states. Fundamental to this transformation is a decolonization of consciousness which allows one to “emancipate oneself from mental slavery” in order to construct a new world; on my reading, this is also the central task of the Rastafari practice of Reasoning. Thus, both Reasoning and the “pedagogy of the

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oppressed” move beyond protest and also have constructive and integrative functions. That is to say, insofar as both perspectives restore marginalized people to the center of history as agents, both are fundamentally revolutionary and empowering. Insofar as both perspectives remind us that true democracy is more than five minutes in a ballot box every five years, that democracy is also a matter of food, employment, medical care, education, leisure, and an authentic relationship to oneself, they both transcend and denounce popular notions of democracy, and they aid in constructing a new world order rooted in solidarity and freedom.

Clearly the two perspectives also differ, for while Freire’s discourse is generally secular, Rastafari discourse is religious. Yet, the sometimes unspoken political goal of both perspectives is to transform the colonized into full participants and actors on the world stage. Both imagine overturning the paternalistic master-slave political culture and replacing it with another order. Rastafari visions of the future are often inchoate or resplendent with Biblical imagery, but in Freire’s terms such an order would be “flexible, efficient, constructive, and [based on] solidarity”.<sup>3</sup>

Both visions hold the premise that the first step toward the creation of such an order is for individuals to come to know themselves as the subjects of their own history. For Rastafari this means coming to recognize the divine “I” in oneself and in others; for Freire it means conscientization – a process of coming into full consciousness of one’s historical agency. In Freire’s terms, “Conscientization (conscientização) refers to the learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, among Rastafari and in the Freiran pedagogical philosophy, change starts with individuals who possess revolutionary consciousness. Epistemologically speaking, this revolutionary consciousness is often found among those on the underside of history. In fact, Rastafari worldwide are often among the oppressed to whom Freire refers in his pedagogy.<sup>5</sup>

I argue that Rastafari Reasoning is a form of conscientization that attends particularly to the historical conditions of West Indian slavery and colonization. This fits Freire’s account of conscientization because according to him,

Conscientization implies a historical commitment... In fact, there is no conscientization without historical commitment. So that conscientization is also a historical awareness. It is a critical insertion into history. It means that humans take on a role as subjects making the world, remaking the world; it

asks humans to fashion their existence out of the material that life offers them. The more they are conscientized, the more they exist.<sup>6</sup>

Toward the end of this chapter, I will use the Grenada Revolution (1979-1983) as an example of Rastafari activity in politics, for Rastafari opposed the dictatorial Gairy regime when it demagogically usurped the democratic process in Grenada. Rastafari were also among the first persons to oppose the trend when authoritarianism threatened the democratic revolutionary process. But the real life context of Grenada also points to some of the difficulties both Freire's theories and Rastafari have to face as they become instruments of democracy at the global level. These difficulties include the realities of power and violence, elitism, and the question of how to integrate Freire and Rastafari pedagogies into mainstream culture in the face of the continuing hold of the metropolis on peripheral Third World countries.

Ultimately, both Reasoning and conscientization must be seen in the context of the rise of the modern nation-state and the modern pursuit of freedom and democracy worldwide. Though the rise of the modern nation-state has claimed dedication to freedom and democracy, it has also been accompanied by the cultural invasion of the Americas, the institutionalization of chattel slavery in the New World, and the gross crimes against humankind in the twentieth century. These events manifest the dark underside of modern history. Through the sustained resistance by slaves, indigenous people, other victims, and their descendants – a resistance that appears again in Rastafari – we see this underside raise its head in antithesis and push toward a free and democratic society. Freire's pedagogical philosophy provides a theoretical framework for understanding the potential behind Rastafari as a force for constructing a truly free and democratic society.

## PAULO FREIRE

Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was Professor of Education at the Catholic University of São Paulo and the University of Campinas, Brazil. His publications include *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1973), *Pedagogy in Process: Lectures to Guinea-Bissau* (1978), and *Pedagogy of the Heart* (1997). He has been described as the most important educator of the second half of the twentieth century. His overall pedagogical philosophy is liberationist,

beginning with “the wretched of the earth” and attempting to construct democracy from the base of society upward.

Richard Shaull argues that Freire’s thought represents the response of a creative mind and sensitive conscience to the extraordinary misery and suffering of the oppressed around him. Born in 1921 to a middle-class family in Recife, Brazil, Freire soon experienced poverty directly. As the economic crisis of 1929 in the United States began to affect Brazil, the precarious stability of Freire’s middle-class family crumbled and he found himself among the “wretched of the earth”, feeling the gnawing pangs of hunger. This experience led him to make a vow, at eleven, to dedicate his life to the struggle against hunger, so that other children would not have to know the agony he experienced.<sup>7</sup>

Freire’s early experiences led him to discover the “culture of silence” of the dispossessed. By “culture of silence” he meant the existential condition in which the masses are “mute” and “prohibited from creatively taking part in the transformations of their society and therefore prohibited from being”.<sup>8</sup> Within this framework Freire argued that even if the masses are occasionally literate because they were “taught” in humanitarian literacy campaigns, they are nevertheless alienated from the power responsible for their silence.<sup>9</sup> He came to realize that ignorance and lethargy were the direct product of the whole situation of economic, social and political domination and of the paternalism of which the masses were victims. Rather than being encouraged and equipped to know and respond to the concrete realities of their world, they were kept submerged in a situation in which critical awareness and response were practically impossible. It became clear to him that the whole educational system was one of the major instruments of this “culture of silence”. The poor were kept oppressed not only by physical conditions, but also because they were shielded from knowledge of their own role as shapers of their history and authentic destiny.

According to Richard Shaull, the basic assumption on which Freire operates is that the ontological vocation of the human person is to be a subject who acts upon her or his world. In so doing a person moves toward ever new possibilities for a fuller and richer life, individually and collectively. The world to which a liberated person relates is not a static and closed order, a given reality that humankind must accept and to which she or he must adjust. Instead, the world comes to the liberated person as a problem to be worked out and solved. The world is the material used by humankind to create history, a

task which it performs as it overcomes what is dehumanizing. For Freire, the resources for that task at the present time are provided by advanced Western technology. However, the social vision impelling us to negate the present comes primarily from the suffering and struggle of the people of the Third World. I argue that Rastafari presents such a social vision.

Another of Freire's central convictions is that every human being is capable of looking critically at her or his world in a dialogical encounter with others, for "men educate each other through the mediation of the world" (Freire 1999: 14). When critical dialogue about the world occurs, words assume new power. They are no longer abstract or magical incantations, but now are means by which humans discover their own power in naming the world. Thus, for Freire, education is "a gnoseological process" – a hopeful process of discovering truth.<sup>10</sup> In the end, hope is validated by the truth that humans are agents of history, that we can make our world, for insofar as we are empowered to hope in ourselves, we are empowered to remake our world.

Rastafari ideology is also empowering, for it locates God in "I" and therefore locates history and power in "I." Though Rastafari emerged from the very different context of Caribbean religion and history, its central ritual of Reasoning can also be understood as a "gnoseological process". Like conscientization, Reasoning opens the thinker to new worlds in encounter, and conflict, with others and with the "I". These processes negate "false consciousness" and lead to authentic self-knowledge and a mode of being that is liberating. Reasoning subverts "the culture of silence" in which one is situated and opens a closed society to the future. In other words, conscientization and Reasoning lead to a kind of self-knowledge that sets the oppressed free. Thus understood, Rastafari practices have the potential for effecting revolutionary change in the contemporary world.

## **RASTAFARI: RESISTANCE AND INTEGRATION**

Rastafari is typical of Caribbean religions insofar as it preserves within it elements of an African past that continually resist absorption, assimilation, and cooption by the dominant hegemonic culture. At the same time, Rastafari does more than simply resist the dominant culture; it also generates and promotes its own vision of the future, a vision that holds as central freedom and solidarity. It is thus both a religion of resistance and a religion of integration. It denounces the

present and announces the future.

### **Resistance**

According to Edward K. Brathwaite, religion is the cultural core of African and African diasporic cultures. Studies of African cultures reveal almost without question the centrality of religion. Moreover, whenever religion is mentioned in reference to the African presence in the Caribbean a whole cultural complex is also presented.<sup>11</sup> Afro-Caribbean religions are homes for diasporic Africans to inhabit. It is, therefore, not surprising when anthropologists tell us that African culture survived in the Caribbean through, among other things, religion. Caribbean religion has always had a revolutionary potential because of the persistence of African cultures in them. Brathwaite argues that it is the potential for explosion that has made blackness such a radical if subterranean feature of plantation political culture. In other words, Afro-Caribbean religious traditions have a popular appeal easily convertible into a force for political transformation. Because African religious sensibilities have been continuously present, like a time-bomb, in the New World, since the abduction of the first slaves, this potential becomes visible at each moment of crisis in the Western hemisphere: 1790 in Haiti, 1860 in Jamaica, the 1930s throughout the West Indies, and from 1960 to the present in the New World generally.<sup>12</sup>

Gordon K. Lewis points to the pathologies of racism as the main engine of religious resistance in the Caribbean. He writes:

Just as the literature of the early Christian revelation saw the rich man as the one who can hardly hope for entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven, so the non-literary tradition of the Caribbean sects has seen him as a white oppressor belonging to a European tradition at once alien, expatriate, unreachable, and ultimately irremediable. It is in this sense that men like Garvey in the twentieth century must be seen not in secular, but in religious terms, a direct descendant, as it were, of those Minor Prophets of the Old Testament who saw the Babylonian Captivity of the Jews as a deserved punishment for their treasonable surrender to wealth and corruption and power.<sup>13</sup>

Rastafari is a classic example of what Brathwaite calls a response of the African presence in the New World to Euro-Atlantic cultural imperialism. It is clear that the pathologies of racism mentioned by Lewis underlie some of the early doctrines of Rastafari, such as the famous six tenets listed by Barrett. In its earlier forms, the movement protested and resisted oppression by radically reversing the subaltern

position of Afro-Jamaicans and others on the underside of history through a millennial prophecy of redemption for black sufferers and a return to the Land of Promise, Zion.

But there is more to Rastafari than simple protest. As the movement spreads around the globe its protests change because historical circumstances change. It still denounces oppression, but even more important is the positive vision it holds out in alternative to the Babylonian captivity of history and humanity.

### **Integration: Word Sounds, the Language of I, the Value of Culture**

To see Rastafari as only a religion of protest, without also seeing it as a constructive religion, contributing to a vision of the future, is to miss a crucial component of the tradition, and one of the most dynamic features of the religion as it spreads around the world. As Rex Nettleford comments:

Needless to say, their bold, 'dread' and defiant exterior masks an organic protest against the Caribbean's 'sufferation' from the centuries-old crime committed against our people. But this dread exterior also conceals a firm inner commitment to peace, love and a quiet determination to guard their own and humankind's self-respect and dignity. Such basic decencies of existence have after all been kept away from them by an economically and socially unjust society which has been a place of enforced and oppressive exile for ancestors over centuries.<sup>14</sup>

The Rastafari vision of the future is therefore constructed in relationship to what it identifies with. Rastafari know what it is to have one's identity torn down as a result of slavery and exile. Coming to grips with the radical disassembling of the African self has allowed the Rastafari to discover the true being and value that lies within. Rastafari refer to this being as the "I". Thus, part of Rastafari ethics calls for and creates a world of communal existence and integrated social structures that preserve the individual's self-respect and dignity.

Stephen D. Glazier recognizes this constructive function of Caribbean religions such as Rastafari. He suggests that we theorize Caribbean religions not only as "religions of protest" or as "religions of the oppressed" in tension with the larger society and imperial culture, but also as "integrative". They situate previously excluded and marginalized Caribbean groups within mainstream Caribbean society.<sup>15</sup> The point can be taken a little further: movements such

as Rastafari are indispensable to the creation of Caribbean nation-states that are independent and sovereign within the world community of nations. And generalizing out to “all the world”, a true global democracy also requires individuals with a revolutionary consciousness who are empowered to act because they see themselves as agents on the stage of world history. Rastafari has, despite the perceptions of some, the potential to be a force in social transformation.<sup>16</sup> Rastafari discourse, thought, and practice have much to contribute to the creation of global democracy and a new world order. At its best, Rastafari liberates the colonized consciousness from mimicry and defining itself in the terms of the Master. It challenges the Master to give up privilege and power and deal with the Other on an equal basis. It demands dialogue while scandalizing hegemonic European values by defining the Divine in the categories of the oppressed. The Divine stands with the oppressed against the oppressor because the Divine is black, and the Divine is “I”. The declaration that God is Black, that God is “I” liberates the Rastafari from denying himself/herself and opens the door for recognition of the Other.

The Rastafari recognition of the Other is explicit in Rastafari language, through the use of the primary combinations of “I and I” in Rastafari conversation. If there is any truth that language shapes reality, it is validated by this Rastafari communal discourse.<sup>17</sup> As Leonard Barrett comments, Rastafari have moved beyond the “I, thee, thou” of the Quakers, and have even gone beyond the classical primary combinations of Martin Buber’s I-Thou relationship. Rastafari discourse, which is fundamentally oral, resists hierarchy and promotes integration through communal existence. Both the previously disparaged self and the Other are accorded ultimate regard in the “I and I”.

The language of the Rastafari is a soul language in which binary oppositions are overcome in the process of forging identity with other sufferers, and thus the language has great constructive potential in forging solidarity across national and historical boundaries. Many Rastafari, when meeting a stranger, do away with superficial greetings common to polite bourgeois society and instead test the “vibration” of the person. If that “vibration” is positive, it does not matter if one is a member of the movement or not, he or she will be immediately addressed in conversation as “I and I”. Once they feel the true spirit of sympathy and sincerity in another person, Rastafari move into a third level of relationship, beyond the I-Thou and the I-It

models, and become “I and I”.<sup>18</sup> Barrett concludes with a comment on the political significance of Rasta language:

It can be seen, then, that long before the philosophy of democratic socialism, which advocates the breaking down of divisions among fellow Jamaicans, was ever heard in the island, the Rastafarians were practicing the philosophy as long as a decade ago.<sup>19</sup>

Barrett’s observation allows us to assert Rastafari’s positive integrative role, as a religious culture, in the creation of a democratic, postcolonial, postmodern new world order in Jamaica and beyond. In other words, Rastafari has the potential to “mediate”, or bring to light, freedom.<sup>20</sup> To the extent that Rastafari’s mediation of freedom brings society together as individuals, Rastafari is profoundly integrative. It shows the contribution of the oppressed to the definition of freedom in the modern world.

In daily life, Rastafari’s mediation of freedom is clear in the explosion of cultural production to which Rastafari has given rise. This cultural production might be seen as the Rastafari answer to what Freire called the “culture of silence” that had quashed the voices of the marginalized. Rex Nettleford understood these dimensions of Rastafari when he drew attention to the fact that Rastafari now boasts great cultural clout among a groping generation of Jamaican and Anglo-Commonwealth Caribbean youths in search of themselves and in search of a just society that they have been taught to expect, but which evades their grasp. “It is as though the Rasta-man is prophet, priest, and advocate – in short the society’s cultural conscience.”<sup>21</sup>

To Nettleford, the identification of cultural action with social change is a developmental imperative in places like the Caribbean. The job of the artist as prime cultural agent, argues Nettleford, is often seen to be synonymous with that of the priest or guru: “to guide individual life back into collective life, the personal into the universal to restore the lost unity of man” (1979: 188), or to negate the negation expressed in alienation and marginalization. Caribbean society, which is in dire need of a sense of community and of integration of personal awareness with collective consciousness, continues to cherish the priest and artist. In serving themselves these functionaries must first serve their society. Rastafari, whose voice first emerged from the lowest substratum of Jamaican society, have played a pivotal role in re-creating this sense of community and integrating personal awareness with collective consciousness. Among other things, they have helped postcolonial Jamaica find



a cultural center. And when Rastafari crossed the bridge between popular and elite culture, they generated a sense of wholeness that lent unity to the nation.

In the end, Rastafari also protests and resists Western post-modern individualism, a worldview that locates its sense of being within a self that it continually deconstructs and against an Other that it continually regards as inferior. Rastafari integrates society by claiming that all “I”s are real and divine. It marks this claim with the use of “I-and-I” in discourse and the production of cultural items that authorize and express the visions of the lowest social strata for an alternative society. In other words, Rastafari has gone a long way in trying to heal Jamaican society of racism and elitism. Rastafari therefore incarnates in practice Freirean concepts such as conscientization and praxis. Rastafari delegitimizes Western political, cultural, religious, and philosophical and other forms of hegemony. It frees the oppressed to be creative rather than imitative. It authorizes them to “stand up” in the conviction that, contrary to the oppressor’s enslaving propaganda, the self really exists and is meant to be free.

In the final analysis Rastafari is inherently committed not only to protest but to the creation of community and solidarity. It is committed to breaking down the walls of hostility and blindness to one another which have historically separated members of the human family. Its ultimate goal is the mediation of peace and love through recognition of individual selves in community, despite the abuses, denigrations, and humiliation imposed on them in Atlantic civilization. To express its ONE LOVE message it chants violently against the Babylonian system and prophecies Babylon’s violent destruction in the fullness of time. Though it emerged from the special conditions of New World slavery, the Rastafari message has universal significance because its transformative vision applies not only to Jamaica, but to global Babylon.

Paulo Freire’s theoretical work on conscientization helps us make sense of the relationship between Caribbean religion’s “integrative function”, the role of freedom in mediating democratic societies, and the role of Rastafari as conscience of the society operating through culture. In fact, Nathaniel Murrell and Burchell Taylor argue that the ongoing Reasoning process, “an essential part of the Rastafari movement’s ethos, is itself a form of what liberation theologian and educator Paulo Freire calls conscientization – arousing a people’s consciousness and sense of self-redemption from the bottom up,

with liberating significance”.<sup>22</sup> Yet, Reasoning is a more freely flowing process than “conscientization”, and since it is less theorized, to the outside observer it often looks like simple talk. Compounded by the informal structure of Rastafari in general, it is easy to miss the significance of this central Rasta practice. At the same time, the informal structure of Reasoning makes it more difficult to co-opt than an institutionalized pedagogy. Rasta discourse is that of the radical Other which daily, like a hidden transcript, expresses resistance to hegemonic power.

## HISTORY AND CONSCIOUSNESS

As the above discussions make clear, there are a number of areas in which Rastafari practice converges and can be illuminated by Freire’s thought. Ultimately, the social visions of Freire and Rastafari converge to decry oppression and to generate a reconceptualization of public space in the contemporary world. Both resent and deplore “the culture of silence” which hides the marginalized. Rastafari and Freire are optimistic over the possibility of an alternative future. Both agree that the final word concerning human destiny is not “Babylon”. They agree that the human vocation is to contradict the “culture of silence” through the liberated imagination creating new worlds and singing out new possibilities. Freire criticizes “unhopeful educator[s] [who] contradict their practice. They are men and women without address, and without a destination. They are lost in history”.<sup>23</sup> But Rastafari are men and women WITH an address, WITH a destination; they are not lost in history. On the contrary, they are creating history. They are creating spaces which they can call home, which they can truly inhabit because they have made them. As the reggae song “Exodus” states:

*Open your eyes and look within,  
Are you satisfied with the life you’re living?  
We know where we’re going,  
We know where we’ve been,  
We’re leaving Babylon,  
And going to our fatherland.*

“Exodus” demonstrates Freire’s notion that the oppressed have an “address”, a destiny to which they are moving. Conscientization and Reasoning are preparatory moments in negating the present and allowing the future to enter the domain of oppression. The song speaks from the perspective of exile and oppression, and anticipates the future as an end to exile.

“Exodus” is implicitly political because it envisions a home transcending exilic alienation; arriving home is a revolutionary moment in which the oppressed consciousness experiences personal integration and integrity. But the politics of Rastafari is complicated precisely because it is both historical and eschatological. At the level of individual consciousness, the eschatological awareness of returning to the fatherland has an immediate effect. Awareness gives Rastafari its own voice, makes it a subject of its own history and lets it transform its world in keeping with its own native, indigenous dreams and aspirations. But at the collective level, Rastafari eschatology leaves it distrustful of politics (“polytricks”) and patiently awaiting the fullness of time. It is this patience and this distrust of politics that has led some to denounce Rastafari as inherently conservative. But the politics of Rastafari are more complex.

Freire looked for a historical situation to transform, or for situations in the process of transformation to implement his theories. Rastafari, on the other hand, were already living in a difficult historical situation, and they had already suffered the disappointment of earthly solutions. Historical circumstances thrust Rastafari into the search to confirm that history has some redemptive dimension, something to hope for, an assurance that “deliverance had come” or was immanent. One concrete example of Rastafari engaging in historical struggle is the Grenada Revolution (1979-1983), where Rastafari played an important role in fomenting the uprising, but were ultimately cast off by the revolutionary elite because of a fundamentally different religious and ideological worldview.

## **RASTAFARI AND THE GRENADA REVOLUTION**

To a large degree the Grenada Revolution (1979-1983) was part of a wider revolutionary process taking place in the Caribbean during the 1970s.<sup>24</sup> Rastafari was part of that revolutionary transition. More than four hundred Rastas were involved in the People’s Liberation Army overthrow of the Eric Gairy regime in Grenada on March 13, 1979. Gairy had grown increasingly dictatorial after he became Prime Minister when Grenada became independent in 1974. Young people in particular faced increasing uncertainty about their futures at this time.

In the pre-revolutionary years, Grenadian Rastafari played a significant role in conscientizing Grenadians against Gairy’s oppression. Long before Maurice Bishop’s New Jewel Movement

(NJM) arrived on the Grenadian political scene, Rastafari was present in Grenada in direct opposition to Gairyism and Gairy's version of the Haitian *Ton Ton Macoute*, the Mongoose Gang. As Horace Campbell wrote euphorically, "Forty-nine years after the first Rastas appeared in the Caribbean, young Rasta brethren in Grenada showed that with ideology and organization the Rasta can be mobilized to participate in a revolution" (Campbell 1987: 162-63). In terms of overt politics, the New Jewel Movement (NJM) succeeded, and to a certain extent co-opted, Grenadian Rastafari, but Rastafari remained an important voice in articulating the conscience of the revolution. By expressing the African base of Grenadian culture they undermined Gairy's own claim that he was responsible for introducing the concept of "Black Power" to Grenada. Above all, Rastafari articulated a vision of liberation integral to the Grenadian situation under Gairy.

Part of the Rastafari association with the revolutionary government in Grenada stemmed from the association of Maurice Bishop, the charismatic leader of the People's Revolutionary Government (PRG), with local and regional Rastafari in their struggle for human rights and justice in the Caribbean.<sup>25</sup> Bishop also made efforts to be inclusive, extending the Revolution to all groups.<sup>26</sup> By valuing the Rastafari vision, the post-revolutionary dispensation in Grenada temporarily opened possibilities for Rastas to participate in the Revolution and construct a new Grenada. According to Campbell:

The change in the direction of the Grenadian society offered new possibilities for the Rastafari Movement. Rastas were integrated into the armed forces, rising to responsible positions; and with the new trust and cooperation offered by the political leadership, the Rastas took their proper place in the community without fear of harassment. Young brethren from St. Lucia, St. Vincent and Dominica flocked to see this new society where Dreadlocks did not have to shave their locks.<sup>27</sup>

Freire himself referred to the Grenada Revolution as one of the world's "beautiful moments", so it is clear that Freire was excited to see the convergence between his ideas and the real world. His educational theory was designed to effect social transformation by "working with people struggling to make their own history".<sup>28</sup> Grenadians were doing just that, and Rastafari Reasonings were one avenue for exploring what that history might be.

In the Grenadian context, the profound point of convergence between Rastafari Reasonings and Freire's theory of conscientization is that both produced the possibility of a new perspective on reality.

For Freire, “Conscientization (conscientização) refers to the learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality.”<sup>29</sup> For Rastafari, a new perspective emerges from an awareness of exile, an awareness that one is not now in one’s “fatherland”, an awareness that despite living “here”, this situation is not “home”. Rastafari Reasonings in the day-to-day context of pre-revolutionary Grenada produced that awareness, and in doing so they generated local opposition to Gairy’s authoritarianism and contributed to the birth of the Grenada Revolution.

But what happened to the Revolution? While Campbell has made much out of the Rastafari contribution to the Grenada Revolution, we also need to balance the record. In practice, according to Grenadian Rasta informants, Rastafari involvement with the Revolution was limited and faded after the initial years. Some say that they were used by the Revolution to create a certain image of solidarity in the face of impending threats of invasion by the United States of America. The reality was that the leaders of the Revolution disconnected from Rastafari. Once the Revolution was under way, some Rastafari claim to have been persecuted for espousing counter-revolutionary doctrine. According to this perspective the conflict was that Rastafari politics were fundamentally monarchical, in contrast to the socialist views of the revolutionary leadership.

But perhaps more vexing than ideological disagreements were problems arising from Rastafari practices; Reasonings are an ongoing dialogical process, thus they continued on after the Revolution. Just as Rastafari had criticized Gairy’s authoritarianism, they equally criticized the People’s Revolutionary Government. So long as they were united in critique of the Gairy regime, Rastafari and the Revolution shared similar goals, but when it came to a vision of the future, they were incompatible.

Freire can help us understand more profoundly what the Rastafari criticisms of the People’s Revolutionary Government were. He argues that “revolutionary leadership needs the people in order to make the revolutionary project a reality, but the people in the process become more and more critically conscious”.<sup>30</sup> It is therefore inconceivable that they will revert to a less conscious stage. If the revolutionary leadership does not maintain communion with the masses, the liberation they offer becomes elitist, and a new oppressive regime simply replaces the old one. In the midst of the Cold War, Grenada Rastafari recognized that the Revolutionary leadership

was reimposing a “culture of silence” as it lost contact with its own people and their voice and instead turned from one metropolitan center (Britain and the United States) to another (the Soviet Union and Cuba). The Revolutionary Government could not withstand the criticisms, and as a result turned to silence their own people.

Freire also helps us understand why the Revolution broke with Rastafari and what the consequences of that break were. In contrast to the metropolitan centers, which can absorb ideological crises through mechanisms of economic power and a highly developed technology, Freire explains that dependent countries such as Grenada are too weak to support popular dissent. This accounts for the frequent rigidity of dependent countries and for the “cultures of silence” within them.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps the Grenada Revolution imploded because it excluded the type of popular expression represented by Rastafari. As Freire warns, such reflective action cannot be denied the people. If it were, the people would be no more than activist pawns in the hands of a leadership that reserved for itself the right of decision-making.<sup>32</sup> One of the failures of the Grenada Revolution was that it broke communion with the people in its treatment of Rastafari who in a significant way represented popular Grenadian consciousness.

## CONCLUSIONS

This chapter situates Rastafari within the global context of liberation, a position represented in the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire. Like other groups interested in liberation, Rastafari seek to construct a new person to inhabit a post-imperial world. Language, and especially dialogue, is critical in this process. In this article I have argued that the Rastafari practice of Reasoning can best be understood as a form of what Freire calls “conscientization”: it helps people reappropriate and rename the world according to their authentic hopes and aspirations. In authorizing people to do this, Rastafari appeals to the oppressed in a variety of contexts, who are trying to restore their humanity. The “revolutionary” and global potential of Reasoning (and conscientization more generally) is rooted in humankind’s primary vocation to be more than current circumstances allow them to be.

Yet Reasoning is more than just talk; its starting point is a particular experience and view of history. The significance of the Rastafari point of departure is in its reminder that Atlantic civilization was built on African slavery and the denigration of African culture. For

example, Rastafari “I and I” language radically subverts the master-slave relationship which was emblematic of Atlantic civilization. There are clearly critical similarities between Rastafari Reasoning and Freire’s critical pedagogy, but because they come from different contexts they show us two different ways of assaulting Western hegemonic thinking. Because of its rootedness in Caribbean history, Rastafari stays close to African diasporic culture and asks specifically whether humanity can hold together without a restructuring of race relations. Because it questions the racist foundations of the Atlantic world, Rastafari calls into question not only specific local concerns but also all of modernity. Yet, because of its fundamental theological grounding in a universal “I”, Rastafari not only questions modernity, but also constructs an alternative vision that transcends the problem.

Can the Reasonings of Rastafari be integrated into mainstream thought and culture? Is it doomed to remain at the margins of mainstream discourse or will it re-invent itself in different forms? The example of Grenada forces us to ask practical questions about the political future of a movement dedicated to “chanting down” oppression wherever it is found.

At the level of the state, liberation requires us to develop mechanisms for internal dialogue and self-reflection. If Freire advocates the need for dialogue in this process, Rastafari reminds us that such dialogue must involve all strata of society and must embrace all of a society’s ambivalent history. Claudia Mitchell-Kernan makes the similar point that “the most outcast substratum has the greatest vitality for playing a culturally undergirding role in those transformations necessary to the political and economic spheres”.<sup>53</sup> In nation-states which by definition are socially and culturally heterogeneous, the most outcast substratum plays a significant role in the creation and maintenance of the state. This stratum, according to Mitchell-Kernan, has its own cultural devices to confront and deal with superior power and with the economic and social disadvantages it has to bear.<sup>54</sup> Its sense of identity is organic rather than generated and maintained through institutional means. Consequently, its survival and perpetuation will not be strictly determined by institutional means. It constructs culture using its own tools and experience. This subordinated stratum, though not without self-pride, is not as sentimental about itself as the many who would like to hitchhike on its energy or channel it for political ends. It possesses its peculiar sense of order and a characteristic cynicism about the claims of

the existing order. “Its vitality lies in its possession of deep roots of personal egalitarianism and devices for achieving equality, at least on the interpersonal level, which should be the envy of many architects of modern socialism.”<sup>35</sup> Reasonings reflect the struggle of a people to create their history within the context of the global imperial situation.

But the Grenada Revolution reminds us that irruptions of freedom tend to be ephemeral. History has shown so often that those who have played a seminal role in successful liberation movements turn around and destroy the very processes they have set in motion. Reasoning threatened the Revolution in Grenada because it exposed the corrupting influence of power and it articulated a different vision of the future. More importantly, the Rastafari presence itself may have been threatening. As Freire explains, conscientization is more than a *prise de conscience*. While it implies overcoming “false consciousness”, it implies further the critical insertion of the conscientized person into a demythologized reality.<sup>36</sup> Freire’s definition of conscientization is clearly incarnated in the Rastafari ethos, an ethos that explicitly correlates words and history in everyday action. Rastafari speak, question, probe. They enter the mainstream by confronting the mainstream, by bothering the mainstream. In a “culture of silence” to exist is only to live. The body carries out orders from above. Thinking is difficult, speaking the word, forbidden.<sup>37</sup> “Only beings who can reflect upon the fact that they are determined are capable of freeing themselves.”<sup>38</sup> The Rastafari ethos calls forth “word, sound, and power”. It enters mainstream culture as a thorn.

Freire believed that other areas of the Third World were no exception to the challenges facing Latin America in the period of historical transition during which he wrote.<sup>39</sup> Each situation presented, with its own nuances, the Latin American situation he described. Inherently critical of developmental theories formulated in the developed world, Freire advocated “paths” that “lead to liberation”.<sup>40</sup> “Cultural action for conscientization” could not be bypassed in these paths to liberation. “Only through such a process can the ‘maximum of potential consciousness’ be attained by the emergent and uncritical masses, and the passage from submersion in semi-intransitiveness to full emergence be achieved.”<sup>41</sup> Rastafari, in their practice of “reasoning”, in their ethos and lifestyle, and in their cultural production present a distinctively Jamaican path to liberation. But insofar as Rastafari philosophy exposes the connection between history, racism and the economy of race, its criticisms of society extend beyond Jamaica. I



argue that when it operates in a democratic way, Rastafari undermines the basic premises upon which global oppression in all its forms is structured. It heals the disease of racial inferiority, unequal power, and the uneven distribution of resources between the haves and the have-nots. With its discourse of “I and I” and a postcolonial, post-imperial ethic that reestablishes communitarian existence, Rastafari constructs a language and practice of healing.

The Grenada Revolution remains a cautionary tale that reminds us of the vicissitudes of liberation movements. Though it was built on processes of conscientization such as Reasoning, it eventually abandoned its connection to the masses and assumed a Marxist-Leninist ideology. In the end it lost its popular support.

Nonetheless, the Rastafari Reasoning process shows us a concrete example of a prophetic process that mediates an alternative future, especially for the marginalized. The specific content of Reasoning may or may not be transferable to other places around the world, but the process itself, its unyielding “chanting down Babylon” in particular, and its announcing of a new future are cultural activities that draw participants into the polity. If democracy is to be true to its definition, if it is not to become “demon-ocracy”, all groups must be included in the polity. Popular participation, in its myriad forms, is the only way to avoid authoritarianism, tyranny and the human degradation that marks the experience of the majority of the global population.

## Notes

1. Barry Chevannes, *Rastafari: roots and ideology* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1994), pp.262-79.
2. For the sake of clear orthography, in this chapter I use a capital R to refer to the Rastafari practice of Reasoning.
3. See Martin Carnoy, foreword to *Pedagogy of the heart*, by Paulo Freire (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1997), pp.7-19; spec., p.11.
4. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, new rvsd, 20th-anniversary edn (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1999), p.17.
5. See Adrian A. McFarlane, “The epistemological significance of “I-an-I” as a response to Quashie and Anancyism in Jamaican culture,” in Nathaniel S. Murrell, William D. Spencer, Adrian A. McFarlane (eds.), *Chanting down Babylon: The Rastafari reader* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), pp.107-121.
6. Paulo Freire, “Conscientizing as a way of liberating,” in Alfred T. Hennelly (ed.), *Liberation theology: A documentary history* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), p.7.
7. Richard Shaull, foreword to *Pedagogy*, by Paulo Freire op. cit., p. 10.
8. Paulo Freire, *Cultural action for freedom*, monograph Series no. 1 (Cambridge, MA:

- Harvard Educational Review, 1970), pp.13, 32-33. See also Paulo Freire, "Cultural freedom in Latin America," in Louis M. Colonese (ed.), *Human rights and the liberation of man in the Americas* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970).
9. Freire, *Cultural action for freedom*, op. cit., pp.13, 32-33.
  10. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Heart*, trans. Donald Macedo and Alexandre Oliveira, (New York: Continuum, 1997), pp.106-107.
  11. Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "The African presence in Caribbean literature," *Daedalus* 103 (2): 74 (Spring 1974).
  12. Brathwaite, *Ibid.*, p.78.
  13. Gordon K. Lewis, *Main currents in Caribbean thought: The historical evolution of Caribbean society in its ideological aspects, 1492-1900* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), p.75.
  14. Rex Nettleford, *Caribbean cultural identity: The case of Jamaica. An essay in cultural dynamics* (University of California, Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, UCLA Latin American Center, 1979), p.187.
  15. See Stephen D. Glazier, "'Authenticity' in Afro-Caribbean religions: Contested constructs, contested rites," *Religion and the Social Order* 6 (1996): 207-25. See especially p.222.
  16. David Scott's Interview with Rupert Lewis, "The dialectic of defeat: An interview with Rupert Lewis," *Small Axe* 5 (2): 85-177 (2001) is relevant here. See Lewis' comments on Rastafari as an agent of political and social transformation (wysiwyg://218/http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/small\_axe/v005/5.2scott.html). See spec. p.9.
  17. With respect to Rastafarian interpersonal discourse see Leonard Barrett, Sr., *The Rastafarians: Sounds of cultural dissonance*, rvsd and updated edn. (Boston: The Beacon Press), pp.143-44.
  18. Barrett, *ibid.*, p.144.
  19. Barrett, *ibid.*, p.145.
  20. On the subject of mediation as used here, see Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of liberation*, trans. Aquilina Martinez & Christine Morkovsky (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), pp.29-39. Dussel defines mediation as possibility for freedom: "Without freedom there is neither person nor being nor sense, because there would only be cosmos, things, stimuli, and animals."
  21. Nettleford, *Caribbean cultural identity*, op. cit.
  22. Nathaniel S. Murrell, William D. Spencer, Adrian A. McFarlane (eds.), *Chanting down Babylon: The Rastafari reader* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), p.399.
  23. Freire, *Pedagogy of the heart*, op. cit., pp.106-107.
  24. David Scott's Interview with Rupert Lewis, "The dialectic of defeat", op. cit., spec. p. 2, is relevant. Lewis's assessment of the Grenada Revolution and the role of the Caribbean Left in the revolutionary process, as well as placing the Revolution in the context of the global Cold War struggle are important: "Between the upheaval in Jamaica in October 1968 and the ruin of the Grenada Revolution almost exactly a decade and a half later, in October 1983, there stretches a shallow grave in which are buried the radical postcolonial hopes of a whole generation: the Caribbean generation of 1968".
  25. Bishop had defended Ras Kabinda (aka Desmond Trotter) in Dominica on a notorious capital murder charge.
  26. Maurice Bishop defined the Grenada Revolution as follows: "People of Grenada, this revolution is for work, for food, for decent housing and health services, and for a bright future for our children and great grandchildren. The benefit of the revolution will be given to everyone regardless of political opinion or which political party they support." See Didacus Jules & Don Rojas (eds.), *Maurice Bishop: Selected Speeches 1979-1981* (Habana, Cuba: Centro de Estudios del Caribe, Casa de Las

- Américas, ca. 1982), p.4.
27. Horace Campbell, *Rasta and resistance: From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney* (New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc., 1987), p.163.
  28. Ana Maria Araújo Freire & Donaldo Macedo (eds.), *The Paulo Freire Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1998), p.199.
  29. Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, op. cit., p.17.
  30. Freire, *Cultural action*, op. cit., p.48.
  31. Ibid., p.34.
  32. Ibid., p.48.
  33. See Foreword to *Caribbean cultural identity*, by Rex Nettleford, op. cit., p.xii.
  34. Ibid., p.xiii.
  35. Ibid.
  36. Freire, *Cultural action*, op. cit., p.46.
  37. Ibid., p.22.
  38. Ibid., p.28.
  39. Ibid., p.52.
  40. Ibid.
  41. Ibid.

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# Journeying Towards Mount Zion

## Changing representations of womanhood in popular music, performance poetry, and novels by Rastafarian women

LORETTA COLLINS KLOBAH

Di road rugged an steep/ I sistren/ It blista di foot/  
It tes out di Irit.../ But di jerney to Mount Zion/  
It lang an wearsome/ Yet I'll neva turn back/  
Though di fire be hot

—Iyawata Farika Fayola Birhan, "Di Road Narra an Steep I Sistren"

Near the end of the late millennium, both academic researchers and Rastafari women creative artists began to break the code of silence regarding the gender-based double standards and patriarchal practices of a Jamaican-born religion and life choice whose global participants wished to usher in a new era of justice.<sup>1</sup> Critics of Rastafari have pointed out the discrepancies between espoused philosophies of liberation and purported forms of gender oppression. Rather than repeating the errors of the early literature on Rastafari by narrowly characterizing the Rastawoman in a generic fashion (as either a peripheral element in the Nyabinghi or a passive adherent of subordinating ideologies and practices), contemporary researchers have begun to discuss with greater complexity the reasons why women living in differing geopolitical regions "sight" Rastafari and how they negotiate their roles as "queens" and "empresses" in the face of obstacles created by both the local society and some Rastafarian brethren.<sup>2</sup> Researchers and artists have argued that a liberationist theology cannot strive for the freedom and dignity of a people without also liberating women (Lake 1998). As the well-known reggae singer Judy Mowatt has explained:

When you talk about equality, we as Rasta women are trying for the same freedom, justice, and equality. We need it from the society at large and we also need it... most of us need it within our own homes, because you find that although the man might be crying out for justice and equality, he doesn't see that his woman in his own house is without justice and equality and needs to have them. Equality is from God and equality is for all. Well, as women, we have to cry out a little

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louder so that the society will hear us, but more importantly, so that our partners can hear us (Liddell 1985: 17).

However, the politics of feminism within the Rastafari context differ significantly from some other forms of feminism, especially movements originating in the United States. As Gilliam notes, mainstream women's movements in the United States have essentially fought for improved "access" to jobs, increased salaries, and leadership positions within the existing system. In general, women's movements have not challenged the foundational structures of the industrial-military complex (Gilliam 1991: 216). Black feminist writers in the African Diaspora have presented provocative analyses of the material and ideological effects of the concurrent oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and various forms of imperialism. Contemporary Rastafari identified women foreground their analysis of unequal economic access and gender/sexual identity issues while practising a "livity" that fundamentally criticizes and exposes exploitative systems in local and global arenas.<sup>3</sup> In "Rastawoman as Rebel", Tafari-Ama briefly describes the 1989 Sistren Theatre Collective sponsored "Gender Relations in Rastafari" project, noting its unprecedented attempt to raise and clarify gender issues such as ideology concerning womanhood, sexuality, and polygyny. In addition to analysing patriarchal structures, "family survival strategies" and class divisions between Rastafarian women, Tafari-Ama also tackles more controversial issues, including a woman's right to procreative decision-making and the need to confront and combat domestic violence. Tafari-Ama positions the Rastawoman as "rebel" but she carefully qualifies that label by explaining that rebellion can come in many forms and express itself in differing degrees of accordance with gender norms in Rastafari: "The profile of the Rastafari woman as rebel is located along a continuum that originates in traditional acceptance of male dominance and moves to a contemporary questioning of male-designated role definitions and an affirmation of independence" (1998: 91).

According to Hutton and Murrell (1998), "adherents of Rastafari, in general, experience a positive reconfiguration of their psyches. When examining why Rastafarian women "sight" a faith that maintains patriarchal codes and practices, it is important to consider the complex range of personal and communal benefits that both men and women derive from Rastafari (as well as the common obstacles that they must face). Far too little attention has been directed to the positive reasons why women choose to "trod the path". As these

scholars explain:

Rastafarian psychology involves expressions of self-confidence, affirmation of one's Blackness and personhood, a rejection of Eurocentric understandings of Black people and their culture, and a longing for liberation and ultimate redemption of the black people of the world (especially the oppressed). Blacks exuding this psychology are characterized by a strong sense of purpose, pride in their African heritage, racial solidarity, racial sovereignty, and self-reliance (Hutton & Murrell 1998: 36).

Rastafarian women have sought personal happiness, independence, spiritual communion, and the integrated, whole, healthy, and sustained self, at the same time that many have worked to achieve effective communities for collective action and education.

This essay examines codes of womanhood as asserted in creative works by Rastafarian women singers, performance/ scribal poets, and novelists from several regions of the Caribbean Diaspora, including Jamaica, Britain, Canada, and the United States. I acknowledge not only the impediments that women attempt to overcome, but also the ways in which women achieve self-determination and collaborative agency. The essay categorizes the three genres of reggae, poetry, and fiction in terms of the degree to which practitioners comply with or subvert conventional conceptualizations of womanhood as defined by Rastafari texts and orally transmitted "reasonings".

The analysis focuses on the ways in which women create both private and public spheres wherein it is possible to critically scrutinize expressions of Rastafari manhood and defend the woman's right to arbitrate gender conflicts and participate equally in activism for societal transformation. Many of the works critically appraise both the woman's life choice of sighting Rastafari and particular aspects of Rastafarian ideologies and male privilege that may distress or constrain women in unproductive ways. In some of these texts, the Rastafari community is urged to reexamine such practices as polygamy, domestic abuse, and homophobia. These women claim their right to the progressive and world healing aspects of Rastafari womanhood and black pride, as well as the spiritual balm of worshipping Jah. They imbue the signification systems of Rastafari with woman centered meanings. However, they also question and expose the strategies deployed in Rasta communities to prevent women from forming beneficial alliances with their sistren – including the Biblical portrait of women as heirs of Eve's fall from grace; the Western Judeo-Christian positioning of women as inferior to men;

forms of African subordination of women; Jamaican patriarchal formulations; menses taboos; and homophobia directed at women who may be suspected of lesbianism if they reject patriarchal codes or seek empowerment through exclusively woman centered organizations.

The following analysis suggests that rebellion takes place at each stage of the continuum, yet some artists are more and some less accepting or transgressing of traditional role definitions. Many of the authors and performers mentioned in this discussion are active outside of a Jamaican context. Although endeavours such as Tafari-Ama's Sistren-sponsored forum, Maureen Rowe's commentary, and the innovative projects of many other sistren in Jamaica demonstrate that women in Jamaica have taken an active role in generating and documenting multiform expressions of Rastafari womanhood, the globalization of Rastafari is also expanding conceptualizations and praxis of Rastafari sisterhood.<sup>4</sup>

## PART I

***Daughters of Jah: Rastafari Womanhood in Popular Culture and Reggae*** – Rita Marley, Marcia Griffiths, Judy Mowatt, and Sister Carol

**Wen mi sey DJ/ Mi no mean disc jockey/  
Mi mean a daughter of Jah**

—Sister Carol

As I sit at my desk ready to begin this section on the reggae divas, I have in front of me a sound system event flyer that I picked up at a reggae shop in Brixton, London, in 1995. Photocopied onto lavender paper, and decorated with a hand-drawn Ethiopian star, a map of Africa, elegant "woman's handwriting", and small hearts (one heart, one love), the flyer advertises the "Jah Lioness, Sister Simeon at the I-Trol Tower", promising "roots, dub, and revival... "inna realy [sic] raw warrior style". Marked with signifiers of conventional femininity and assertive, empowered woman warriorhood, the flyer perfectly conveys the kind of "Omega-balance" that some women reggae singers, deejays, and sound system operators have improvised for themselves as they negotiate an artistic terrain dominated by men and signifiers of Rastafarian manhood.<sup>5</sup>

Roots reggae, as a well established musical genre, draws upon a by-now standardized set of tropes of Rastafarian identity, set

phrases, and ideologies. Most reggae lyricists conform to a similar set of references and themes in terms of prophetic message and ideological positioning. The sheer popularity of the commercialized music reinforces the norms, as well. The women reggae singers adhere to the general conventions of the genre. Women singers protest oppressive gender ideologies and practices, but they do so from the position of the “good”, clean-living, maternal Rastafarian queen who depends upon a well-balanced relationship with a Kingman. Within that set of conventions, the women singers do manage, however, to clearly criticize gender inequality and domestic abuse. The singers pay tribute to the vitally important historical roles that women have played within the African world. They demand respect, attacking ideologies and enumerating behaviours demeaning and detrimental to women. Moreover, they each come across as empowered, intelligent and eloquent spokeswomen ennobled and enlightened by Rastafari. As a result of the popular nature of their forum and their status as celebrities, they have created a significant public sphere in which issues of sexual subordination may be straightforwardly exposed.<sup>6</sup>

Although the contemporary reggae and dancehall scenes have featured several “conscious” women singers, the analysis presented in this subsection is limited to lyrics by Rita Marley, Judy Mowatt, Marcia Griffiths,<sup>7</sup> and Sister Carol. These performers have played substantially influential roles in the history of reggae and have spoken at length in interviews about their views on Rastafari, Afrocentrism, and womanhood. The singers express the common goals that women have with men: the praising of Jah, an appreciation of African ancestry and a spiritual connection to Mother Africa, a societal redemption from the histories of slavery and colonialism, and an end to the schisms between peoples that produce warfare, racism, oppression, poverty, hunger, injustice, and imperialistic actions. However, the singers also counsel women to assert themselves and pay tribute to the strong women leaders who have come before them, be independent thinkers, and reject specified abusive behaviours from men.

Each of these singers pronounces a firm faith in Jah as creator, provider, protector and leader on the journey to Mount Zion. In reggae, Mount Zion signifies a holy place of spiritual redemption and historical redress, a spiritual return or physical repatriation to Mother Africa (Ethiopia), and a utopian land of unity, where African descended brothers and sisters will find liberation and victory over



the histories of slavery, colonialism, apartheid, and imperialism. In “Harambe” (the word itself means “working in co-operation”<sup>8</sup>), Rita Marley asserts her Rasta identity as she comments upon the African Diaspora, the “rainbow” of skin colours created by Jah, and the need for racial harmony, tolerance, and political change:

*A Rasta at the control!  
They try to keep us down  
Scatter us all around  
To diverse parts of the earth....  
Harambe, harambe, Rastaman say, Harambe!*

*What colour is the rainbow?  
Check it the next time it shows.  
That's the way we should be,  
All together in harmony.  
We sailing in the same boat,  
We rocking up the same stream... (1987)<sup>9</sup>*

“Harambe” is the galvanizing mantra of hope – the word that draws dispersed people of the African Diaspora and the world into a unity that has as its objective the abolition of prejudice and colonial domination. Jah’s strength is invincible and will provide for a righteous global liberation of Zimbabwe and other Africans around the globe: “If Jah Jah be for us,/ who can be against us?/ Who, tell a me who, tell a me who?.../ No bombs can’t stop us now./ Jah Jah is our leader./ No weapons can stop us now..../ We cannot lose this war,/ fighting for the lion.../ on our way to Zion,/ fighting for Jah lion” (“Who Can Be Against Us?” 1987).<sup>10</sup> Marley has been ordained by Jah as a “Daughter of Zion” (“That’s the Way,” 1989), while Judy Mowatt, Rasta since 1974 and the first woman reggae artist nominated for a Grammy, proclaims herself a “roaring lioness”— “a lioness inna de jungle” (“Lioness in the Jungle”, 1991). The central symbols of Rastafari — Zion as the promised land and the lion as a symbol of invincibility — are claimed by the women and inflected with new meaning. In Rastafarian identification, women warriors battle for cultural dignity, a pan-African awareness of history, and revolution against repressive regimes in Africa and the Diaspora by claiming their legacy as kinswomen of heroic black women. In “Call Mi Sister Carol” (1994), Sister Carol demands: “Call mi Sister Carol...”/ “a real ‘roots’ girl...”/ “Inna mi stance mi nuh paper soldier./ Mi move like Sister Winnie and the Queen Omega....”<sup>11</sup>/ “like the beauty of a Queen who’s most cultural./ A weh dem seh mi name nuh Queen Mother Carol...” This identification as “Sister”,

“Daughter”, “Mother” and “Queen”, all terms that have been employed by scholars as evidence of paternalism and subordination in Rastafari doctrine (e.g. Lake 1998), are conventional titles of respect that reggae singers readily take on as part of their pride in black womanhood. Although conforming to Rastafarian terminology for women, the singers reiterate the dignity encoded in the titles.<sup>12</sup>

Rather than simply romanticize the African Queen, reggae singers employ these appellations to pay tribute to the hardships of labour and political strife on black women and to urge consciousness raising and education. They “come fe educate and eradicate hate/ism and schism” (“Call Mi Sister Carol” [1994]). As Sister Carol says in “Intelligence” (1989), “mi love intelligence/ education is the key to freedom.” Mowatt seconds the importance of the intellect in “Think” (1988): “Exercise your mind because you don’t know what’s gonna happen to you tomorrow.... pain or sorrow.” These statements closely echo Bob Marley’s advice in “Redemption Song”: “Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery/ None but ourselves can free our minds.”

The Babylon system, or the Western capitalist world, which commodifies women and prizes artificiality, obscures the positive aspects of what it means to be an African woman. In “Slave Queen” (1988) Mowatt discourages women from buying into behaviours that keep them enslaved. Women must “own” themselves and their histories: “Remove the shackles on your mind./ I, too, was blind./ but now I see.../ Your black lips red/ your eyes paint blue./ You don’t know yourself.../ I know there’ll be a day/ when you shall not flourish./ For rearranging yourself/ you will be punished.../ Take care of yourself./ You don’t own yourself./ African Queen, remove/ the shackles from your mind/ You better know where you coming from.” Rather than denounce the woman whose “eyes paint blue” in the way that Bob Marley’s song “Pimper’s Paradise” (1980) condemns the woman who “has lost track of herself”, who “loves to party... screw... sniffing coke...[and] loves to model up in the latest fashion”, Mowatt’s “Slave Queen” shares more in common with Bob Marley’s “Exodus” (1977): “Open your eyes and look within./ Are you satisfied with the life you’re living?/ We know where we’re going./ We know where we’re from./ We’re leaving Babylon.” Mowatt sympathetically identifies with the woman she is addressing— “I, too, was blind”— borrowing words from the gospel standard “Amazing Grace” (“Once I was blind, but now I see”). The woman is not blamed or castigated but offered a warning, enlightenment, and redemption. She is

redeemed not through conforming to Rastafarian precepts about the use of make-up and other artificial adornments, but by escaping the conformist notions of femininity marketed by consumer societies. As Mowatt explains her intentions in the song “Slave Queen”,

being a slave queen doesn't necessarily mean you are in bondage physically, but mentally we are in bondage because the things that we see around us seem that it's a compulsion for us to have it. If we don't have it, well, we are left out of society, society dropouts. And this is the makeup world. You know these daughters tell that they have to paint their eyes blue and their cheeks red and their lips red or pink or strawberry colour whatever. But as black sisters they are queens... God already made us up (Clark & Liddell 1985: 16).

Reggae singers urge women to take pride in their natural beauty as Africans.

Another positive aspect of the woman centered reggae music is that women must know the histories of their greatest leaders. Mowatt assumes the role of historian in “Warrior Queen” (1991): “Harriet Tubman/ Amy Garvey/ Sojourner Truth/ Rosa Parks/ Mary Bethuen/ Queen Makeda/ Nanny of the Maroons/ History should never forget/ Those brave, those black, those beautiful...” The song praises the contributions of black women to history, women who “rocked the cradle” at night and served as revolutionaries and community activists by day. Describing the specific acts of the heroic women listed above — who resisted colonization and slavery, led Pan-African organizations, served as spokespersons for African and women’s rights, fought racial segregation, started colleges, and ruled as African queens — Mowatt reminds listeners: “In history we have seen/ Great Black Warrior Queens/ Though not stars of our history books/ No one can deny/ She was a mother, a rebel, a warrior/ A leader, a teacher, a wife/ To the needy, she was a tower of strength/ To the struggle for equality and justice, she dedicated her life.” Black women, as Mowatt notes, have excelled in both family and community leadership when not constrained by a limiting conceptualization of gender roles. Likewise, Sister Carol’s “Womb-man” (1999) praises women warriors and queens Nzingah, Nanny, and Sheba. The reggae song becomes an alternative means of inscribing and transmitting a history that has been ignored by Western textbooks, a history that praises women for their excellence in multiple roles – not just in the role most often glorified by Rastafari, motherhood.

According to reggae lyrics by women, the lives of common women unacknowledged by the great histories and untouched by celebrity status must also be remembered and appreciated. In “Black Woman” (1988) and “Sisters’ Chant” (1988) Mowatt reminds listeners of the hardships women faced during plantation days and continue to face now: “You’ve travelled long—/ You’ve trod one of life’s roughest roads/ with the heaviest load/ to be someone/ to belong./ Don’t give up now./ Just pray for strength now./ For you I dedicate my song.” Mowatt catalogues the abuses that black women experienced under the system of slavery, the physical brutality of plantation lashes, the degradation of the auction blocks, and sexual exploitation. Women are encouraged to free themselves from that history: “Free ourselves of that now” (“Black Woman”). In “Sisters’ Chant” Mowatt asks Jah for guidance on behalf of baby mothers who must support their children and fight the system, often independently: “Oh, Jah, let the Sisters walk with thee./ Oh, Jah, Oh Jah, Let us communicate with thee/ in these times.../ the struggles we’ve seen / temptation frustration desolation.../ Little children,/ little babies to feed./ Oh, Jah, we’re always in need./ Show us the light/ to do everything that’s right./ Help us to fight when/ the brothers they’re out of sight.” Ideally, in the songs of these four performers, women will not have to battle alone, however.

The singers agree that the preferred situation for a woman is to live in harmony, in a balanced relationship with her Kingman. All of the reggae songs that discuss intimate relationships operate, generally, within the conventions of Rastafari heterosexual partnership. Sister Carol (1994) says that she and her man will live “a recycled version of the original love story” in “Solomon and Sheba”. In “Melody Life” (1992), Griffiths proclaims, “When you’re in love, it’s a lovely life. / When someone asks you to be his wife./ It is so good for you to settle down./ It doesn’t pay for you to run the town.” Marriage is portrayed as the “cure” for a sexually adventurous (or immoral) life, not a particularly progressive portrait of female sexual independence. In “The Beauty of God’s Plan” (1987) Marley provides the most detailed and idyllic description of God’s plan for conjugal bliss: “She is the moon; he is the sun./ Together they become one./ He plants the seed; she bears the fruit./ The tree of life they share is good./ She is the bird; he is the sky./ He loves the space; she loves to fly./ So it takes a woman and a man/ to show the beauty of God’s plan./ She is the mirror of her man—/ forever she’ll stand beside him;/ he’s all she needs.”

A balanced relationship with a man does not necessarily signify subservience, however. These singers demand equality and respect within their unions with men — the right to express themselves and achieve their individual goals. As Mowatt says in an interview with *Reggae Report*:

I always say that man and woman are like two pillars of creation, as one cannot ascend and leave the other grounded. Both of them have to soar, so we can balance creation: The Rasta woman has her role to function, and the man has his. There is no inequality. The woman should not, at any time, feel that she is less important than the man, and the man should not insist on having the superior role. We are both involved with the same amount of gifts that God has given us (Moody 1992: 19).

In “Peaceful Woman” (1991), Griffiths complains: “I don’t believe in doing wrong./ I’m a peaceful woman./ Tell me why, why do they always try to put me down,/ slander my name all over the place.../ Tell me why, why can’t a woman be what she wants to be?” The ability to “be what one wants to be” is essential for the sistren in her fight along aside her brethren. Griffiths again asserts the more moderate position, claiming a certain amount of self-determination within the confines of “good behaviour”. If the speaker is a peaceful woman, why should she be unjustly criticized by men? Sexual equality is a necessity for progress in efforts for racial justice. “A blackman time, di Sisters haffi move up the line,” Sister Carol chants in “Blackman Time” (1994): “And I’m a different woman/ Fi mi aim it inna life it have a conviction./ Mi need fi mi soul and inspiration,/ But it haffi comply with Jah creation./ So get thee hence behind me Satan [Uncle Sam]/ Yuh buck upon the dread and I’m a Rasta woman.”<sup>13</sup> The Rastawoman asserting equality does not have to compromise Rasta ideals of womanhood nor accept American values.

Mistreatment of women and “slackness” on the part of men are unconscionable and are contested by these reggae singers.<sup>14</sup> Men are challenged to be more sensitive, less abusive, chemical-free, and progressive: “A don’t want to sound oversensitive,/ but I have to put something into perspective/ to be effective and most productive/ upfront defensive with an incentive./ Dem say black woman is most attractive/ and when it comes to beauty,/ we’re well possessive/ If a love dem a defend, / we’re seductive/ bound to excel and well-attentive.../ Why in da world yuh so offensive/ to the woman dat yuh love yuh are abusive/ from the influence which is addictive./ It’s time to detox and get progressive” (Sister Carol, “Call Mi Sister

Carol”, 1994). Not only must a man treat a woman well, but he must become committed to her quest for social justice.

In “Only a Woman” (1988), Mowatt rejects conceptualizations of female inferiority and asks men to stand up in defense of women’s progress: “Why treat us inhuman/ just because we’re only woman?/ We’re not weak./ We are strong./ We’ve been held back for too long..../ Mothers of Creation/ there ain’t no equalization./ We’ve got our God-given talents/ just like you./ Open the door and see us through..../ We’re not made of stick and stones–/ out of your flesh and bone/ the spirit of the Almighty..../ The time has come for us to take a stand..../ All will see in a respectful way/ and honour the part we’ve got to play.” The phrase “stick and stones” recalls the taunt “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me”, suggesting the verbal or physical forms of abuse or “discipline” that women have received from men. If the Biblical paradigm of the creation of Eve from Adam’s rib is held as a central tenet of the faith, Eve is not then assigned an inferior status. Adam cannot fail to promote Eve because she and he are made of the same flesh and spirit and must prosper equally.

Women reggae singers do not concentrate solely on issues of gender politics, however. Like Rastafari-influenced male reggae performers, the women foreground international issues of war and peace and the need for Africans of the Diaspora involved in liberation movements to “organize, centralize, and unify”. Working within a medium that has, by now, developed specific tropes and thematic concerns, these women reggae artists conform more strictly in their messages to Rastafari livity and rarefied images of the Rastafari Queen than do either the performance poets or novelists discussed in the following sections. The public sphere created in reggae music – the most public space entered by any of the women artists under discussion – provides a platform for expressing feminist critiques marked by both conformity and idealized portraits of womanhood. “Slackness” in lyrics by Jamaican dancehall performers or rappers will not be found in the lyrics performed by roots reggae women singers. Language choices and models of identity are based upon a sense of female propriety. Nonetheless, as the women singers re-deploy the symbols, images, messages, musical rhythms, sounds, biblical references, and agendas of Rastafari in reggae, they implicitly and explicitly challenge male dominion, creating a popular platform for the Rastawoman.

## PART II

### ***Sisters inna dis Dispensation: Subversions of Judeo-Christian Conventions of Womanhood in Scribal and Performance Poetry:***

Jean 'Binta' Breeze, Afua Cooper, Sista Faybiene Miranda, Iyawta Farika Fayola Birhan, Margaret E. Groves, amuna barakalclarke, and Carmen Tunde

**I art the Dread Lioness/ Upon whose temple men/  
constantly cast stones.**

—Iyawata Farika Fayola Birhan, "I Art the Dread Lioness"

Although the word "dub" originally referred to technologically manipulated, mixed, and distorted instrumental and vocal tracks sampled from rhythm and blues, ska, and reggae music, the term was adopted by some poets influenced by the performances of Jamaican sound system deejays. In 1979 poet Oku Onuora defined the art form as poetry that has a "built-in reggae rhythm" (Habekost 1993: 3). Performance poets influenced by the "dub" style now integrate various creole to standard language registers and musical styles into their poems.<sup>15</sup> Influenced by the more positive aspects of Rastafari respect for women and by the particular worldviews of the men and women who have popularized the form, dub poetry often portrays women in the most supportive light.

Although influenced by reggae music, Caribbean performance poetry has not been restricted to the conventional language, themes, and modes of expression canonized in the musical genres. Much more experimental and varied in form and content, performance poetry inherits the stance of resistance in roots reggae but goes beyond the Rastafari worldview to include a wide range of "voices" and social critiques. Moreover, as performance poets often live in the multicultural and racial metropolitan environment of the Caribbean Diaspora, broadened group affiliations give rise to a poetry that addresses the diverse concerns of various socially committed organizations. Compared to women reggae singers, women performance poets, through the medium of poetry and in published interviews, have launched a much more overt attack against sexism. As Afua Cooper argues, women poets must battle against the sexist aspects of the reggae genre itself in order to adopt the performance style:

The whole reggae scene is very male oriented. I mean even as far as the instruments are concerned. You see a man

going on an ego trip with his guitar.... But, yes, it is a barrier that you just have to keep hitting. Because men who are so progressive — when it comes to the woman question they become so reactionary like they're living in the medieval age. So it's a struggle. And it's very frustrating when you're fighting *white* racism and — well, that might get me in trouble — *black* sexism (Ctd. Habekost 1993: 201).

Facing possible public censure from the brethren, the woman on the poetry microphone loudly exposes her grievances and creates space for complex representations of women's identities. Judeo-Christian definitions of womanhood (from Eve's stain to the Virgin Mary's purity to Mary Magdalene's whoredom) are rejected by some of the women poets, who reveal the hypocrisy of religious practices conceptualized by patriarchies. Interrogating the Evesyndrome of blame and other androcentric Rastafari practices and systems of signification, scribal and performance poets Jean 'Binta' Breeze, Afua Cooper, Sista Faybiene Miranda, Iyawta Farika Fayola Birhan, Margaret E. Groves, amuna baraka-clerke, and Carmen Tunde assert a morality expansive enough to dignify women who choose to reinterpret Rastafari symbolism in accordance with their individualized life circumstances and choices.<sup>16</sup>

Performing in Rastafari communities, clubs, theaters, community action centers, on radio, film, and television, and publishing in print in magazines, journals and anthologies, these poets have asserted varying conceptualizations of womanhood and sisterhood. It is certainly difficult to discuss the Rastafari sistren in a generic manner (as some researchers have) after reading the collection of works presented in this section. Each writer-performer creates persona poems that reconfigure the Rastafari sistren as self-determining and critical of sexism. It is useful to preface the analysis with a reminder of Sistren Tafari-Ama's notion that forms of rebellion vary, as some artists are more and some less accepting of traditional role definitions.

Poetry by women subverts discursive tropes that define women as inferior to men, especially those derived from Biblical passages. For Rastafari, references to women in Genesis (3:16), Leviticus (15:19), Proverbs (31), Ephesians (5:22-24), and I Corinthians (11:3-9; 14:34-35) dictate or condone discriminatory codes of gender relations, mythologize the ideal woman, or rigidly set taboos regarding sanitary practices and the woman's menstrual "issue". Borrowing from Rastafarian ethics to descry the sexually "slack" denigration of women in contemporary musical forms such as



Jamaican raggamuffin/ dancehall, the women poets simultaneously reject Judeo-Christian/ Rastafari paradigms which cast women as Eve, the evil temptress and fallen woman. In “Get back” by Jamaican-born Breeze, the speaker uses the rhetorical strategy of Rastafari to remind the youth that the time of Rasta is not over.<sup>17</sup> Women are prophetesses in this dispensation and must be honoured as such: “Get back/ yuh slack/ caa di dawta yu ah mock/ we a sisters in dis dispensation/ Get back / yuh slack/ caa di dawta yu a mock/ wi tired ah di degradation...” (Ctd. Habekost 1993: 202). In a time of slackness, the titles of “dawta” and “sister” command respect. Yet in Breeze’s poem “Baby Madda”, the Rastawoman realizes the hypocritical distance between the Rastaman’s progressive ideologies against Babylonian society and his own shortcomings as a partner: “mi come troo nine months/ tek all the pain/ den de idren a go tell mi/ Sey im kean tek de strain/ go home to you madda/ she wi help you mind de yout/ go home to you madda/ I a tell you, is de truth” (1988). Bitingly sardonic, this poem depicts a Rastaman who abandons his woman and child as readily as any other man might. At the same time, the poem also projects the strength of the woman who perseveres in her faith even though she has been bitterly disappointed. “Well I heart really shake up/ I a tell you, Jah man/ fa wen I lef I madda / go to dis african/ ah neva did expec / no more a Babylon.” The poet employs Rastafari language usage (word sounds) to testify against the irresponsibility of baby fathers. “I know plenty black sista/ A suffa said like I.” The reassurances given to her sistren in the form of a prayer to Haile Selassie sound a sardonic note as the Kingman’s love proves false: “But I say to de sista/ Neva, neva cry/ Far de love of I and I/ Is for rastafari/ His Imperial Majesty/ King Selassie I.” The imperialistic treatment of the baby mother by her Kingman is bitterly mocked by using Rastafari language strategies. In live performance, this poem gains tremendous power from Breeze’s physical stance and firm, rhythmical, and indignant voice.<sup>18</sup>

Jamaican-Canadian poet Afua Cooper rejects the foundational Old Testament story of Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib and her subsequent fall from grace, the story cited through the ages to justify the inferior status of women in the Judeo-Christian world. “The Ribs Factor”, a poem from the print collection *Breaking Chains* (1984), asks for reciprocity — an acknowledgment that men and women need each other; but more importantly than that — respect and equality: “You say I came/ from your ribs/ how could that be/ why can’t you see/ the reality/ I need you/ you need me/ but what I truly

need/ IS RESPECT AND EQUALITY/ how can I and I/ continue to believe/ an old testament story / in this age/ and livity/ we should erase it/ from our memory.” The Biblical story of Adam and Eve as a paradigm for male-female relations is depicted as an outdated hindrance that prevents true reciprocity and an acknowledgment of male and female interdependence.

New York and Jamaica-based Sista Faybiene Miranda in “I am that I am” similarly seeks to resist archetypal, mythical, and hierarchical notions of womanhood.<sup>19</sup> Echoing a line from the Peter Tosh reggae song “I Am that I Am” (1977) in the poem’s title, Miranda shifts the song’s general demand for equal rights from a question of race and class to also include gender. Tosh’s song calls for justice by asserting the dignity and divinity of selfhood: “Don’t underestimate my ability/ Don’t defame my character/ Don’t belittle my authority/ It’s time you recognize my quality, ye-ah/ I said: I Am That I Am— I Am, I Am, I Am.” Likewise, Miranda’s poem asserts woman’s need for respect by rejecting the defaming story of Eve, while retaining the idea of the fundamental physical connectedness and innate equality of men and women. The “rib factor” for the poet is woman in a state of possibility, potential, and self-definition — before her naming as Eve and her fall from Grace: “I am woman/ Bone of your bones, flesh of your flesh/ When I lay sleeping in your rib/ You called me no name/ I am what I am.” Because Adam-as-Master names all creatures, including Eve (see Gen. 2:20-23), and has dominion over them, this myth of origins must be cast aside, “My name is not Eve, I offer you no temptation/ I am not your concubine by night.” Woman as seductress and sexual servant is rejected. Miranda likewise rejects idealized versions of womanhood (Venus de Milo), motherhood (“I am not the milk you thirst for/ Now dry in your mother’s breast”), childbearing, and denigrating portraits of women as avaricious. She rejects marriage as a situation comparable to slavery: “I am no slave to a promise written in ink.... Bondage is no glory.”

Sister Norma Hamilton, or Iyawata Farika Fayola Birhan, as she renamed herself, was a well-known activist in the Jamaican Rastafari community during the mid 1970s–1980s.<sup>20</sup> Although her poetry has disappeared, published in ephemeral editions and now available primarily from libraries and archives in Jamaica, she penned several inspirational poems that are grounded in both a sense of Rastafari and a sense of her self-determination as a woman. Several poems glorify the conventional image of the Rastafari woman as African mother, such as “Hail to the Young Princess”, which prepares young women

to be the “womb of man” bearing the “Princes and Princesses/ that must come forth/ out of Egypt”. However, her poetry also repudiates the Eve blame and establishes women as divinely appointed leaders of the new dispensation. Though she portrays women with the same imagery as Rita Marley employs in her reggae lyrics — as the moon element compared to the Kingman’s sun (“She draws her strength/ from the male sun”, “Who is Queen Omega?”) — she insists that Queen Omega, the model for Rastafari womanhood, is not “at all/ Like Evil Eve”. The image of sun and moon is complementary, even if the effect suggests the dominance of men in a sexual hierarchy. Her material ranges from reinterpretations of Biblical passages to commentary on the sociopolitical struggles of Jamaica during the mid-1970s.

Recasting Jeremiah 31 :22, a verse that ambiguously announces a new era in which “a woman shall compass a man”, and appropriating the symbol of the lion, Birhan claims the scripture as a prediction of a coming dispensation ordained by Jah when Babylonian society and all men who place women “under/ all kind of cruel tribulation” and “trod” over them will be forced to recognize women as moral victors and leaders of the destruction of “your wicked Queendom/ of Babylon”: “BE STILL YE MEN/ AND KNOW THAT I AM SHE:/ That Mother who in these last days/ Shall encompass a man” (“I Art the Dread Lioness”). Similarly, Birhan reworks the beautifully poetic verse of Isaiah 61 to anoint the Rastafari woman poet as a messenger from Jah. In the King James version, the speaker proclaims: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.” Birhan uses the same catalogue of appointed tasks, but she also acknowledges and rebels against the previous silencing of women. Women are thus added to the list of liberated captives: “I am here this day/ As a Messenger of Rastafari/ As Queen Omega no longer silenced./ The Irit of Jah-Jah is upon I/ Because HE has anointed I to bring good tidings...” (“I Am Here This Day As Queen Omega *No Longer Silenced*”). The poem gains import as a herald of the new era of Queen Omega-balance from its placement facing a photograph of Empress Menen enthroned next to her husband, Haile Selassie, and captioned: “Empress Menen is Queen Omega, the Mother of Creation.” The godhead of Jah is thereby defined in terms of both the male and female instantiation. Like other Rastafari women spokespersons, Birhan

insists upon Empress Menen as an balancing female principle in the holy constellation of Jah. Although conservative and conventional in some of her representations of the Rastafarian woman, Birhan also uses the “tools” of Rastafari, the Biblical scriptures and symbols, to inscribe a respected place for Rastafarian women.<sup>21</sup>

Also quite conventional both in poetry style and message, Jamaican-born Margaret E. Groves’ collection *Lamentation* (1989) condemns the fallen woman and the male sexual predator as retrogressive and corrupting influences in society. Spencer (1998) praises the collection as an example of the “bold challenge” being issued by Rastafari women against their brethren:

This collection of poetry is remarkable for its introspective look at Rastafari. While much Rastafarian communication seems to be externally oriented, and to focus on pointing out the evils of the larger society, poet Groves’ work focuses as well on the Rasta community. In her Foreword, she questions those who ‘abuse their sisters, so that the sisters are afraid to love their blood brothers. There are wolves among our Rastafari brothers, as wild weeds’. This bold challenge assists the swelling women’s consciousness movement within traditionally male dominated Rastafari. Her poems, “Rastafari Voice”, “Up Full Woman”, “Beloved Brothers”, “Carnality” and “Convenient Love” all deal with the problems associated with being a woman in Rastafari (p.277).

Spencer’s critical appraisal of Groves’ poetry does not also acknowledge that the idealized and virtuous woman in Groves’ poems certainly complies with the admonishments of Proverbs 31, a Biblical chapter that she rewrites in the poem “Up Full Woman”: “O give thanks unto Jah Rastafari/ For a pure woman./ She is hard to find/ Her price is beyond rubies/ Her ways are ways of life/ She always humbles herself/ Unto her own husband.” The speaker remarks upon the dignity that women are able to maintain despite “tribulations”; however, in other regards, the poem depicts a woman that is praiseworthy because of her humility and subservience. Neither does Spencer note the degree to which Groves’ poetry, heavily influenced by Old Testament rhetoric, condemns the “harlotry” of contemporary women. Women are blamed as corrupters of the nation in the poem “Saturnine”: “Young girls have become whores/ for they have no direction,/ they loveth the road of wickedness,/ they have become bruisers of mankind,/ Corrupting the nation/ and fumbling in the dark/ year upon year.” Rastafari as well as the larger Babylonian society are condemned for lustful practices,

whoring, and homosexuality (“Ethiopians”). In this regard, Groves’ poetry utilizes the social codes enforced in Proverbs and Leviticus, without critically reflecting upon how representing the corruptions of society through imagery of harlotry might reinforce detrimental conceptualizations of women as potential seducers, deceivers and destroyers of the nation. Rastafarian women are elevated in status through the condemnation of their morally “loose” sisters, a revitalization of the tropes of whore/virgin perpetuated in Western Judeo-Christian tradition. In “Beloved Brothers” Groves also refers to the practice of “growing a daughter”, suggesting that a woman must be guided by a man along her path of spiritual enlightenment: “And return to your sisters,/ Show them the way to Zion/ When you are converted./ Return I say, go and visit them/ Tell them the truth,/ Explain the way of true love./ Let them share the same glory/ The glory of life.” Much of Groves’ poetry quite conventionally follows Rastafari doctrine concerning women.

Rather than mythologize Groves’ poetry as revolutionary on the gender front, it must be seen for what it is – inspirational verse that produces conflicted representations of women as both seducers and victims, rather than fully autonomous subjects. The cover of *Lamentation* depicts the sorrowful Rastafari woman crying and in the bondage of an unbroken chain that crosses in front of her bosom. Spencer’s analysis is correct, however, in acknowledging the fact that Groves’ poetry does condemn hypocritical behaviour of the larger society and Rastafarian men, exposing practices that abuse women. In “Israel” the speaker complains that “The sons of men/ have used the daughter/ of my people by the art/ of the babylonian strategy.” In “Rastafari Voice” the poet launches a more pointed attack at the Rastafari brethren, reasoning with them that “The daughters of my people have been used, ravished, then rejected/ They have been oppressed and put to shame by their own people./ My beloved brethren consider all thy secret sins./ Are there no Physicians among you, my people?” In the same poem she also criticizes Rastafari men for making liaisons with “strange women” who “through lust of the flesh have become thy wives”, a reference, one might assume, to the Rastafari practice of involvement with non-Rastafari or white European women instead of their Rastafari sistren.<sup>22</sup> “Beloved Brothers” contains the most strongly worded attack against the sexually predatory behaviours and the hypocrisy of men who use the rhetoric of holiness to conceal the carelessness with which they end a sexual relationship with one woman as they

prepare to prey on the next: “O my beloved brother/ Why boast yourselves./ When you have practised fornication/ Among the sisters./ Use and abused/ You slowly put them away/ Thinking you are smart./ Converted now/ By your choice of doctrine/ You pretend to be holy./ Having no lust for women/ Waiting for fresh blood/ When you strike again,/ And yet again/ You shall think to ascend into innocence.” In this poem, the speaker expresses sardonic rage and bitterness, approaching but not fully articulating a criticism of the sexual double standard of Rastafari which enforces a woman’s purity and fidelity while condoning a man’s sowing of the seed with multiple partners. As to be expected, women writing poetry while strongly committed to Rastafarian practice (and living in Jamaica) tend to rebel against oppressive practices, while not challenging too insistently the foundational principles upon which the belief system is based.

Making use of Jamaican patois “riddims” and the kind of wry, ironic tone found in dub poetry by Lillian Allen, Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze, and ahdri zhina mandiel, Canada-based amuna baraka-clarke comments in her fresh poem “reggae sistrength” (1999) on the factors that hinder and discourage women who want to form a reggae band of “sistren”: “I wanted 2b in a reggae band/ interlocked wid riddims of mih sistren/ I wanted to create new stylied/ new vibrations/ & jus level some cool vibes/ I wanted 2b in a female reggae band/ & mek a joyful noise unto dih island posse/ & sistren massive/ & jus pulse libations to the ancestors.”<sup>23</sup> The female speaker appropriates the celebratory language of the reggae dancehall massive and biblical Psalms (66:1; 81:1; 95:1; 98:6). Torn between her desire to create new reggae sounds generated by an all-sistren group and her sense of responsibility as mother, the speaker admits that she has given up on her dream. Television advertising, Rastafari livity, and society’s assumptions about good conditions for mothering “bind we down”: “mih know seh/ hotels are not good homes 4 children/ & its hard to separate dih white from dih colour/ prepare Ital dinners every night/ & keep house tidy/ between sound checks.” The wordplay in the substitution of the number 4 for the word “for” in “4 children” suggests that reproduction and creativity are difficult to balance for a woman who has several children. The subsequent playful line invites a double-reading, calling to mind the TV commercials selling laundry detergent, but also implying instances of hindering racial segregation/ racism that a black woman must face beyond the confines of her laundry room. Moreover, the speaker also notes

that the greatest male reggae singers who succeeded and travelled the world had the support of women, a luxury that she lacks as a female: "...mih never did know a man who wd (like rita)/ wait 2 envelop me in fih im ebony arms/ after mih share mih love wid dih world." Significantly, Rita (Marley) is bracketed-off in parentheses, suggesting the supportive but secondary role that Rita played as Bob Marley toured internationally. "[F]amily, lover, & friend" do not set the ambitious woman reggae artist free to "become one with the dub" music, but tie her down. Conventional motherhood, as valorized by Rastafari does not enable the woman to "make a joyful noise", but she still is not completely silenced. She can launch this mocking critique in favour of expressions of sisterhood and female artistry. Although the poem's speaker is defeated, the poem itself serves as a praisesong and strident complaint for women who want to express "sistrength" creatively.

The speaker in Carmen Tunde's poem "Dreadlocks Lesbian" does not specifically claim a Rasta identification; the voice nevertheless does contrast the strength of the woman-loving lockswoman with the more domineering manifestation of the dreadlocksman. Tunde is not constrained by any of the codes ever-present in the poetry of Birhan and Groves. Extremely subversive in asserting a lesbian identity as expressed by a Rastafari associated hairstyle, the poem implicitly and explicitly challenges the homophobia used to suppress outspoken women in Black British communities. In the preface to *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women* (1988), a collection of writings that explore the development of women's consciousness movements in Britain, the editors reveal how homophobic responses to lesbianism hampered women's organizations and closeted women: "We often lacked the political insight and courage to deal with some issues of fundamental importance to us — most blatantly, lesbianism" (Grewal et al. 1988: 3). Claudette Williams, in the collection's essay "Gal... You Come from Foreign", discusses how during the Black Power period men used charges of lesbianism to "deter women" from organizing (Grewal et al. 1988: 155). In the private spaces of female friendships and in the trusted communal spaces of some women's organizations, women began to reveal their identities and discuss the problems they faced because of homophobia in black culture.

Tunde's poem was also published in *Charting the Journey* and functions as a manifesto of unapologetic lesbianism in a sociopolitical and cultural climate that was not exactly receptive and open to

such declarations. Furthermore, by claiming the central symbol of Rastafari, the lion's mane, Tunde challenges the homophobic tenets of Rastafari and narrow definitions of the dreadlocked woman. Diane J. Austin-Broos (1987) cites the by now commonplace interpretation of the symbolism of dreadlocked hair, comparing the male dreadlocksman to the Lion. She argues that the symbolic import of the lion abides not only in the connection to the divine messiah of Rastafari, Haile Selassie, the "King of King, Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of the Tribes of Judah", but also in the mane as symbol of male prowess: "Rastafarianism comes to complement a more diffuse cultural concern with the social, sexual, and political efficacy of the black peasant and working-class male" (p.20).<sup>24</sup> Even though Rastafarian men have also been represented as gentle and loving (Mais 1954), the image of the lion-maned Rasta dread prophet has certainly remained popular in both scholarly and pop cultural representations.

Tunde's poem appropriates the dreadlock as an empowering aspect of the lesbian identity, challenging male braggadocio at the same time. This act is significant since for most Rastafari, only the woman must conceal her locks with a headcovering, a code based upon the Christian Bible's I Corinthians 11:3-9 verses, which proclaim that a man must uncover his head during prayer, while a woman "that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head".<sup>25</sup> Tunde mocks male privilege and the cocky attitude of the locksman, writing: "Dreadlocks lesbian/ is a powerful woman/ because she listen to reason/ no matter where it come from/ and she no need/ to preach 'pon you/ yet she will teach dreadlocks man/ a thing or two/ coz him still a fight/ and show off/ like cockatoo/ But she know sista love/ from time/ And peace is not a sign/ of weakness/ I tell you/ dreadlocks lesbian/ is one powerful woman" (Grewal et al.: 205-206). Tunde's poem represents the lesbian as more inclusive in her attempts at consciousness raising and less dogmatic than the brethren, preferring to cultivate a peaceful and powerful identity rather than to display what Rastafari Sistren Makeda Blake Hannah has called "a female interpretation of a masculine street style" ("The Rastafari Queen", n.d., p.1).<sup>26</sup> The title of Tunde's poem is attention catching because of its seeming oxymoron. How can the speaker claim both an identity as a Rastafari daughter and a lesbian, considering the degree of homophobia and Biblical injunctions against "sodomites" in Rastafari and Jamaican society?



PART III

*Dread Daughters in the Diaspora: The Creation of Public Voices and Private Spaces in Two Novels by Rastafari Women:* Zindika and Masani Montague

**Be in pain, and labour to bring forth, O daughter of Zion, like a woman in travail: for now shalt thou go forth out of the city, and thou shalt go even to Babylon; there the Lord shall redeem thee from the hand of thine enemies.**

—Micah 4:10

**I see lions and queens struggling for dignity and pride**

—A Daughter's Grace, by Zindika

The final section of this essay examines two novels that both feature a strong-voiced, intelligent, thoughtful, loving, but disillusioned Rastafarian woman as protagonist.<sup>27</sup> By exposing how women are detrimentally affected by gender-based double standards, conceptualizations of the Rastafarian woman as procreator, and instances of polygyny, domestic abuse, and homophobia, the novels challenge adherents of Rastafari to recognize dysfunctional practices. Breaking the unspoken code of silence protecting Rastafari from public scrutiny, the authors insist upon bringing to light unfortunate experiences that a woman may have regardless of the benefits that she gains from her identity as a Rastafarian queen. In addition to reappraising the personal decision to “sight” Rastafari and keep company with Rastafari men who, in these cases, ultimately prove to be abusive and unfaithful, the main characters meditate upon proscribed gender roles, the nature of women’s friendships, the courageous situation of women who choose both a Rastafarian and lesbian identity, motherhood, contraception, abortion, inequitable economic burdens, and woman centered means of empowerment. Although Rastafari is centrally important in the construction of the women’s identities, they are well-rounded characters also thoughtful about their lives as students, family members, friends, business people, immigrants in metropolitan settings, and socially concerned individuals. Rastafari, apart from being an aspect of their relationships with men, is a vital element of their own spiritual development and healthful path of healing and living. Both protagonists ultimately reject being subsumed under the guidance of their men, asserting autonomy, and critically reflecting upon, actively rebelling against,

and defending themselves from detrimental male behaviours.

In both *Dread Culture, a Rastawoman's Story* (1994), by Jamaican-Canadian Masani Montague, and *A Daughter's Grace* (1992), by Bajan-British Zindika, the protagonist conceptualizes herself as a Rastafarian woman in ways that distinctively shape her identity and dreams. Life experience teaches a woman that her devotion to the Kingman may end in disappointment and the community may not come to her aid, reacting instead with a silence that conveys complicity or disregard for problematic domestic situations. In the private spaces of female friendships, women discuss their problems with men. With the support of women friends, including platonic friendships with lesbians shunned from the Rastafarian community, the protagonists begin to recover emotionally and financially while redefining themselves as autonomous beings. F. Chioma Steady has argued that “structures of domination are also structures of articulation” (1993: 100). In the case of these two novels, as the authors position their protagonists in structures of domination within Rastafari, Montague and Zindika are able to clearly articulate and dramatize why the contemporary Rastawoman might rebel against male privilege.<sup>28</sup>

Set in London, England and featuring second generation Bajan-British and Jamaican-British characters, *A Daughter's Grace*, by Zindika, grapples with the history of West Indian migration to the “mother country”. *Dread Culture, a Rastawoman's Story*, by Jamaican-Canadian Masani Montague, on the other hand, sets its narrative in the context of the Jamaican immigrant experience in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Although the characters and storylines differ in several regards, they are remarkably similar in the sets of identity questions that the protagonists must sort through. Raised in a comfortably middle-class home in Surrey, Caroline, or Nehanda, as she renames herself, the protagonist of *A Daughter's Grace*, prepared herself for a college career and profession in medicine. The other women in her family modeled distinctive modes of womanhood, her mother cultivating British social graces and her Aunt Lou comfortably expressing her Bajan identity and seeking adventures through travel. Caroline's mother “liked champagne glasses with the long fragile stems, cut glass, fine bone china, expensive perfume, and ballerina's necks” (pp.16-17). In contrast, the aunt was “tall and broadminded, with very few reins to tie her down” (p.16). Nehanda in childhood, reacts against her mother's concept of the ideal “wife”, preferring her aunt's independence and strong character, just as

she will later react against her parent's facade of decency, their anti-Garveyite position, and their distrust of Rastafari. Although her parents have told Nehanda a few stories about her Bajan past, she is cut off from island culture—raised in a nearly all-white neighborhood in Surrey, and uneducated about black history in a country where racism thrives. Part of what is appealing to Nehanda about Rastafari is its grounding in a Caribbean worldview, the emphasis on knowing black history and, most of all, a spiritual identification with the noble African queens of the past that her research helps her to rediscover. The historical “Nehanda” whom she encounters in dreams, visions, and reveries throughout the novel, represents a mode of womanhood much more courageous, strong, rebellious, and free than the model of the “faithful” but contained wife that she has witnessed her mother to be. As Nehanda says, “Back in Surrey all the girls I knew had aspirations to marry firemen, policemen or soldiers” (p.31). Nehanda wishes to escape stultifying suburban housewifery. In her thoughts and dreams, Nehanda scrutinizes alternative modes of womanhood as she shapes her own identity.

Likewise, Sheba, the protagonist of *Dread Culture*, by Montague, also reflects upon the life experiences and opportunities of family members and acquaintances as she shapes her identity as a Rastafari woman. Sheba's mother and stepfather own their home in Toronto, an achievement earned through hard work in the racist climate of Canada. Like Nehanda's parents, Sheba's mother does not approve of Rastafari because she believes that associating with Rastafarians will damage Sheba's opportunities. Portrayed as strong and determined, the mother works to unite her family, bringing her children and other family members, one by one, from Jamaica, despite the disapproval of her husband. Except for the mother, however, most of the Jamaican-born women in the novel, of both the older generation and Sheba's generation, assume roles available to women in Jamaican society. Esther, the grandmother, born the eldest girl in a large family that worked the land in the Cockpit country, had nine children of her own and remained in Jamaica to care for her grandchildren after her husband joined one of the grown children in England. Other peripheral women characters in Jamaica earn their subsistence from running a go-go stripper club, selling clothes on the sidewalk, working in a haberdashery, living a Christian life with a husband who lusts after other women, or serving as a drug mule for posses operating between Jamaica and Canada. In Canada, immigrant women from the Caribbean work as domestics or juggle two jobs to

make ends meet. Each of these women face obstacles, ranging from economic hardship, to discrimination from immigration officials, familial disharmony, or the threat of physical violence. Sheba is certainly depicted as the most ambitious character in terms of her desires to finish an education and start her own business. However, she chooses her lifestyle assertively and sets goals, knowing the life experiences of the women around her. Like Nehanda, Sheba bears a name suited to her desire to achieve, develop her consciousness about black history and the Bible, and gain social agency by starting a healthy daycare center for Rastafarian youths.

While Nehanda ruminates about her Rastafarian identity by calling forth mystical images of Nehanda, the woman warrior, Sheba simply makes a declaration of intent to her mother. Nehanda “sights” Rastafari, in the beginning, out of curiosity. She explains that it was like taking her first covert sip of her father’s “65.5 per proof rum”: “I could say that I had some wild intellectual awakening, the arousal of a dormant spirit, or a visit from the Angel Gabriel in a dream, but that would not be true – it was curiosity” (Zindika 1992: 47). Yet, when she visits her first Nyahbinghi, she feels the “ominous” calling, the vibrations from the drums reverberating in her body and weakening her knees: “I was like a diver on the edge of calamity, calming myself before that uncertain plunge into the unknown” (Zindika 1992: 49). Although this passage suggests prescience of difficulties Nehanda will be drawn into because of her Rastafarian-affiliations, Nehanda continues to be mystically drawn to Rastafari and empowered by her dreams of warriorhood. Readers are allowed to be privy to more of Nehanda’s dream-like reveries. Sheba is more direct and confident in her Rastafarian selfhood. Her positioning vis à vis Rastafari seems to reflect the common statement of faith, that one is Rastafari “from creation”. Sheba attends Rastafarian gatherings on her own volition. The narrative does not suggest that she sighted Rastafari under the tutelage of a Kingman. Similarly, Nehanda attends a Nyahbinghi in order to see for herself “what it tasted like” (Zindika 1992: 47). Both characters determine their Rastafarian identifications apart from how the Rasta brethren will attempt to force them to conform to conventions of womanhood imposed by the faith. Nehanda wishes to model herself after the “headstrong and tough”, “beautiful and free”, fierce Nehanda, who led the Shona resistance against the European invasion of Africa, “fighting musket fire with her bare hands” (pp.3, 16). She wishes to be a guiding star for her people, like her predecessor, gifted with

“magic and the power of touch and foresight” (p. 60). Eventually she does learn how to incorporate some of the features of her namesake into her identity, sustaining her abandoned family by mystical arts, listening to people’s misfortunes, soothing them, and telling their futures for a fee. Sheba appreciates the natural livy of Rastafari and the consciousness raising dimension. She claims her identity forthrightly, as she tells her mother, “Mama, yuh should get used to me being a Rasta. Nuh matter what you seh, ah is a Rasta and ah gwine mek it as a Rasta. Nutten gwine change mi mind. Mi is proud to be a Rasta and determined to graduate from college and own my own daycare centre” (Montague 1994: 50).

Nehanda and Sheba’s self-directed conceptualizations of themselves as Rastafari queens clash with the codes of womanhood imposed by their Kingman, resulting in their careful examination of and rebellion against the gender-based formulations of Rastafari culture. Zindika and Montague expose in graphic terms the acts of societal containment and verbal/ physical oppression that the women experience. After Nehanda drops out of London University to live with Ras, she has three daughters in quick succession, not heeding the stories of her Rastafari women acquaintances. Children are both a blessing and a burden to Nehanda, who rejects her doctor’s suggestion of birth control measures by explaining that would be “against my race, my religion, and my man” (Zindika 1992: 9). When she ultimately claims the right to determine the number of children that she mothers by aborting the fourth pregnancy, her turbulent relationship with Ras is terminated in violence and abandonment. If, however, Nehanda, had rebelled against the Rasta mandate to procreate by setting the limit on the number of children she could support, she also might have encountered adamant resistance from her Kingman.<sup>29</sup>

In other respects Nehanda infantilizes herself and allows her identity to be subsumed in the generic vision of Rastafari womanhood, in part because of the outbursts she might earn from her Kingman if she deviates from these norms: “I was his scholar, to be spoon-fed from the fountain of his knowledge” (Zindika 1992: 20). Along with teaching Nehanda about the positive aspects of Rastafari, reggae, Haile Selassie, and black history, he scolds her into submission, “Well, if you is my woman, you better start acting like a true queen – and carry yourself humble with respect” (p.75). Ras is unwilling to understand that Nehanda feels that he is demanding her passivity and slavery, which causes her to rebel. She raises her

voice, “You don’t want a queen, you want a slave!”: “I was shocked to discover how Ras saw me. I was inferior to him. Ras didn’t want me to be his friend or his equal. My role was clearly prescribed. I was no longer to be a Western woman. Yet I was a Western woman who had never left England” (p.75). Unable to reconcile her perceptions of strong selfhood and Ras’ expectations of “multiplying” and conducting herself with humility, Nehanda experiences sleeping and eating disorders and is prescribed valium by her therapist as the relationship begins to crumble.

Suspecting Ras of infidelity, Nehanda catches him in a compromising position with one of the young singers he produces at his recording studio. Heavily made-up and scantily clad, the young woman hardly represents the “true queen” ideal that Ras enforces with Nehanda, the “baby mother, cook, cleaner, and nanny” (Zindika 1992: 117). Carolyn Cooper cites a phone interview with Maureen Rowe, who wryly explained to her the sexual double-standard for Rasta men and women:

Once redeemed, the Rastawoman becomes Queen/Empress, occupying a pedestal which precludes sexuality. She is separated from her sexual nature and becomes almost a religious icon and cultural role model. This makes it possible for the Rastaman to have at least two women, one fulfilling bodily/sexual needs and the other cultural/spiritual. The rigid dress code prescribed for the Queen contrasts radically with the flexibility allowed the Other Woman: for example, long, loose skirts that conceal the body versus fashionably tight jeans that reveal all (1995: 10).

This description certainly applies to Nehanda’s situation. The abortion later forces the ultimate crisis in their relationship, as Ras beats Nehanda severely when he is given the news, “swinging his hands like a cricket bat” and calling her an “exterminator” (Zindika 1992: 134). Nehanda chastises herself for not being able to accept her role passively, asking why she must “put Omega on trial, question divinity, rights, and nature” (p.137). Imagining herself “surrounded by a high cast-iron gate,” she begins to reassert herself, desiring to use her mind intellectually and be a free, independent spirit again (p.103). As an ultimate act of rebellion, Nehanda cuts off her dreadlocks. She still expresses her reveries in Rastafarian terms, but she rejects restrictive mandates about womanhood. Not only is she ill-suited for a predetermined role because of her social class, educational background, and her upbringing in England, but she also feels a fundamental outrage at the basic subordinating suppositions

about the woman's role that are conveyed to her by Ras. Written in diary style and fully expressive of the angst that a young woman in Nehanda's situation feels, the novel is a hard-hitting and direct challenge against socially detrimental practices and sexual double standards within Rastafari.

Sheba also experiences a series of disillusioning episodes with her Kingman, Iration Dread, who she has not decided to have children with because of his married status: "I nevah even tink bout having a youth fi him. I always see him as a married man, not mi babyfather" (Montague 1994: 124). The ironic combination of polygyny as practised by Iration Dread and violent jealousy and suspicion directed at Sheba disappoints and angers her. Justifying his continuing sexual liaisons with both his wife in Detroit, with whom he has seven children, and Sheba in Toronto, Iration Dread draws upon the Rastafarian interpretation of the Bible, proclaiming, "seven woman fi one man, according to di Scriptures" (p.65).<sup>30</sup> Sheba often articulates her disagreements with male privilege through sardonic, unspoken asides, "How is it, she wondered, dat is always men dat interpret di Scriptures?" (p.65). Like Nehanda, Sheba interrupts her studies, but not because of her involvement with Iration Dread. She takes the time to start a daycare center for Rastafarian youths. More self-possessed and centered as a woman, Sheba nonetheless feels the injury of being in a polygynous situation with her man. She questions the way that women comply with the dictates and practices of polygyny as much as she questions the male prerogative. Of Iration Dread's wife, she thinks, "Why do we women, you and me, sistah, allow ourselves to be hurt dis way?" (p.52). Most injurious is the careless attitude Iration Dread adopts about the women. After separating from him, Sheba complains to her aunt: "Me just couldn't deal wid di whole situation, regardless of how Iration try fi justify it. Ah was being hurt, him wife was being hurt too. Although, Jah know, dere were times I hated her – hated dem both. Like – memba di night mi tell you dat him sleep out wid her? Him never say a word – him just nuh come home" (p.83). Though estranged from Sheba, Iration beats her up, giving her a black eye and bruises on the body, when he suspects her unjustly of cheating on him. The hypocritical double standard of female fidelity and male polygyny is troubling enough to Sheba, but she finds it intolerable to be treated like property and physically abused. The complicity of other men with her physically abusive partner also exasperates Sheba. On a previous occasion, she and Iration had fought in front of her cousin

Kingsley: "Iration Dread had torn out a handful of her locks. Kingsley pretended nothing happened" (p.103).

In both Nehanda's case and Sheba's, neither women report their physical assault to authorities. In the public sphere, the actions of the Rastafarian men go unannounced, but in the private sphere of friendships between women, the stories are told. Before Sheba experiences physical abuse herself, she has a telephone conversation with an admired acquaintance, an older woman from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Sister B. Sister B's husband has beaten her until she has a black eye and "buss" mouth, but she feels she cannot end the relationship because of her five children, "And go where wid five pickney? Mi cyaan leave mi house wid mi furniture and go pon di road wid mi pickney dem" (Montague 1994: 62). The repeated beatings have been so numerous that Sister B has lost count, "One time him kick me so hard him bruk him toe" (p.62). Montague employs phone conversations between women to illustrate the double bind that some Rastafari women find themselves in if they adopt the value of procreating several children and happen to have an abusive partner. Because of the economic reality and the task of caring for five children, Sister B feels trapped. Sheba and another Rastafari sistren, Josephine, also share by telephone their private stories about domestic abuse. Josephine confesses that "when mi pregnant wid my youth, mi babyfather threaten to kick di baby outta mi. Him grab mi in mi hair and box mi up nuff times in mi face" (p.165). Akilah, a lesbian Rastafarian friend and co-worker of Sheba's cut off her locks and got a divorce after her Kingman repeatedly beat her and "bring him woman dem inna di house while she at work" (p.164). Sheba critically responds to these instances of violence and infidelity, stating, "Sometimes I wonder if dese men have any respect fi dem madda? How would dem feel if a man was beating up dem daughters?" She refuses to follow in her sisters' footsteps, choosing the most radical means of protecting herself from subsequent attack. She decides to buy a gun, a remarkably militant decision, given her distress over the fact that her younger brother has been falsely convicted of a drug posse related gun crime.

Both novels identify the private sphere of female friendships as the site where abusive practices and male domination are combatted, while at the same time, the novels, as public documents, expose to a potentially larger audience the problems that Rastafari society must address. Explaining the urgency to lift the taboo on speaking out against domestic violence within the Rastafari community, Tafari-



Ama argues: “As much as Rastafari would like to separate itself from the exigencies of the Babylon system, there is no escaping the fact that individuals are products of their history and socialization in Babylon. Someone who is preconditioned to perpetrate violence against another will do so, despite religious or other persuasions” (1998: 99). If one agrees with Tafari-Ama that Rastafari should not attempt to “deny the existence of domestic violence in order to protect the holy image of Rastafari” because the denial will prevent “effective response management” to ensure that violence against women is not condoned, then the strong critiques offered in the two novels must be seen in the most positive light, as a warning to Rastafari to confront an “insidious form of self-annihilation” (p.100). In a 1997 telephone interview with the author, Montague explained that domestic abuse is one of the most urgent (but covered up) problems that the Rastafarian community must address. She believed that because of the state harassment that Rastafarians have received in Canada, women have been reluctant to speak out publicly about their experiences of violence in the home.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to criticizing polygyny and domestic abuse, the novels each go one subversive step further in their challenge against Rastafari sexual codes, addressing the existence of homophobia. In her essay “Man Royals and Sodomites” (1991), Silvera argues that “[o]ne takes a chance when one writes about being an Afro-Caribbean lesbian. There is the fear that one might not live to write more. There is the danger of being physically ‘disciplined’ for speaking as a woman-identified woman” (p.25). Outspoken lesbians not only face ostracism by men, but by heterosexual black women who believe that lesbian women acquaintances put at risk their credibility in the community and the wider society. “These women are also afraid that they will be labeled ‘lesbian’ by association” (p.25).<sup>32</sup>

Yet, in *A Daughter's Grace*, Nehanda is befriended by a woman who takes both Rastafari and woman-loving as a central part of her well-being, healing, and happiness, even though her relationship to Rastafari is not unproblematic. Both novels utilize private disclosures between women friends to address several controversial subjects within the Rastafari community, not the least of which is the ostracism of women labeled as “sodomites”. The protagonists come to respect and defend the life choices of their lesbian friends, identifying with the hardships and desires for happiness that motivated the women to engage in woman-loving. Nehanda, though surprised at first by her friend Denise’s lesbian relationship, comes to respect Denise’s

choice, as does Sheba when she learns that her friend Akilah is a lesbian. For instance, in *Dread Culture*, Montague inscribes the lesbian nuclear family as a stable and violence free alternative family structure. Thus, though resistance and empowerment are often thought of as the achievements of public acts and organizing, both authors suggest that in the Caribbean Diaspora, private spaces have provided safe havens for those who fight for human dignity without uncritically accepting all of the tenets of Caribbean belief systems. However, Canada and England serve as sites in which women can, though against obstacles, construct their identities out of both the positives of a religion that emphasizes the “beauty of black people’s African heritage” and a sexual orientation that liberates women from “certain challenges” of gender relations in Rastafari.<sup>35</sup>

Masani Montague who published her novel with Silvera’s Sister Vision Press, confronts the difficulties that Rastafari affiliated lesbians encounter when “coming out” in Canada. In *Dread Culture: A Rastawoman’s Story*, Sheba and Akilah cooperate to create a daycare center for Rastafari youth. Parents become suspicious of Akilah’s sexual preferences when she divorces her “dread” and cuts off her locks. Sheba defends Akilah’s actions at the same time that she condemns practices of domestic abuse. A worker warns Sheba about the possible repercussions of employing Akilah: “... yuh know how Jamaicans and dreadlocks dem feel about dem sodomy business. Man get kill fi dem tings deh” (Montague 1994: 164). Yet Sheba defends Akilah’s actions and refuses to judge her, explaining to the worker that Akilah had been beaten up repeatedly by her husband. Akilah’s life choice is presented as a viable “peaceful” alternative to heterosexuality, as Sheba’s relationship is also shattered by polygyny and domestic abuse. Unfortunately, Akilah simply resigns from her post, suggesting the efficacy of the ostracism of lesbians in the Rastafari community. The text does not insist upon Akilah’s full acceptance by Rastafari parents even though Akilah does state that she still carries Haile Selassie in her heart. One problem with the text, not stated but implied, is that Akilah’s choice to “be lesbian” seems to be a result of her negative experiences with men rather than a natural and positive life choice.

In *A Daughter’s Grace*, recovering from the domestic abuse and infidelity committed by her babyfather, Nehanda appreciates her friendship with Denise, a Rastafarian mother of five children. Recovering from a series of damaging relationships with men, Denise begins a serious relationship with Lydia. Their relationship is

presented as an understandable alternative to the kind of emotional devastation and abandonment that Nehanda experiences. Denise's partner brings "real love and pleasure into [her] life" (Zindika 1992: 143), not to mention financial stability and assistance with childcare. Denise explains her own discovery that she could have feelings for a woman, not leaving it up to a reader to infer that Denise chooses a lesbian lifestyle just because she cannot "get a man".

Although the protagonists of the novels state their allegiance towards their lesbian friends, they do not explicitly argue the importance of coalition building between heterosexual and homosexual Rastafarian women.<sup>34</sup> However, these novels do negotiate a space for lesbian women within Rastafari and for lesbian Rastafarians within discursive fields of representation, an act of coalition-building in itself. Akilah reacts to her ostracism by saying, "Dem nuh understand dat sometimes yuh haffi tek certain steps fi yuh own survival and happiness. Haile Selassie still in I heart, but dere were certain tings I had to reconcile fi I self" (p.140). Akilah recrafts Rastafari to fit her own autonomous definitions of faith, divinely inspired living, and healthy womanhood, a decision Sheba respects.

*A Daughter's Grace* and *Dread Culture* make the private public, using private conversations between women friends as the narrative device by which Rastafarian women reveal aspects of Rastafari that tend to be hidden from the public eye. In the process, the novelists positively envision the possibilities of Rastafari womanhood, positioning their protagonists as self-determined thinkers and community makers, rather than just passive adherents or victims of dogma, violence, or inequitable behaviour. These novels demonstrate that it may be useful to think about Rastafari women's experience in terms of agency derived from private as well as public spheres. Since woman centered activities could be suppressed by charges of homosexuality, how did women proceed to develop spheres of influence? What could be accomplished in the private spaces of friendships versus the public spaces of women's organizations? What kind of women's issues could be addressed in public forums?<sup>35</sup> The novels remind the Rastaman and woman about respect and love, principles upon which Rastafari purports to be founded. However, they also suggest a new research directive, to document sistrens' expressions of Rastafari womanhood and acts of agency in both private and public spheres.<sup>36</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This essay has surveyed reggae lyrics, poetry, and novels featuring Rastafarian voices, with the intent of acknowledging the fact that women artists have been active in the construction and dissemination of discourses about Rastafarian womanhood. I undertook this project out of the concern that anthropologists, sociologists, and theologians have not yet done enough to recognize the many modes of self-representation and agency on the part of the Rastafari woman. Although a large body of scholarship on Rastafari has been produced, researchers have not adequately documented the contradictions, conflicts, and differences in the ways that women react to Rastafari doctrines concerning women, devise methods of conciliation and resistance, and mediate their own Rastafari identities.<sup>37</sup> Biblical scripture, reggae idioms, symbols, and codes of livity associated internationally with Rastafari have been re-interpreted and re-styled by women creative artists. Utilizing both private spaces of conversations between women and women's organizations and public forums, women have challenged aspects of Rastafari, taking a stand on such issues as polygyny, gender double standards, domestic abuse, and attitudes regarding homosexuality. Achieving Omega-balance by defining productively the role of women within Rastafari will be one of the most challenging tasks that Rastafari faces as it becomes ever-increasingly globalized. We may predict that women will gain an Omega-balance in determining the nature of Rastafari womanhood in the new millennium.

## Notes

1. I wish to thank Dr. Layli Phillips, the University of Georgia, Atlanta, the Womanist Studies Consortium, and the UGA Institute for African-American Studies, Athens, for a Rockefeller grant that allowed me to research and write two extensive essays about Rastafari womanhood.
2. In the early 1990s, Filomina Chioma Steady pointed out the shortcomings of anthropological studies, in general, arguing that since "male models are the recognized models of articulation in society and since the majority of anthropologists have been male, female models became subsumed and women became lay figures in men's drama" (1993, p.92).
3. "Livity" is a Rastafarian term that signifies a worldview and life practice. Women would differ widely in the degree to which they would want to be associated with feminist agendas.
4. See M. Rowe, Gender and family relations in Rastafarl: A personal perspective, in *Chanting down Babylon: The Rastafari reader*, ed. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer, and Adrian Anthony McFarlane (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998), pp.72-88.

5. “Omega-balance” refers to harmony and balance between man and woman, as exemplified by His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I and his wife, Empress Menen, regarded by Rastafari as the “Alpha and Omega”.
6. Since they are, regardless of Rastafari criticisms of consumer society, a “marketed” product, as well as a public liaison, the singers’ interpretations of Rastafarian womanhood in song and interview cannot be seen as fully representative.
7. Rita Marley, Judy Mowatt, Maricia Griffiths sang as the “I-Threes,”—a back-up trio for Bob Marley— and have continued with solo careers and I-Threes reunions after his death.
8. My thanks to Mahoumbah Klobah for a discussion of the various meanings of “Harambe” in the West African context.
9. For transcription of Marley lyrics, author consulted [http://www.reggaeexchange.com/lyrics/I/Rita\\_Marley-harambe.htm](http://www.reggaeexchange.com/lyrics/I/Rita_Marley-harambe.htm). Lyrics by Mowatt and Griffiths were transcribed by the author, who apologizes for any errors. For Sister Carol’s lyrics, author consulted CD liner transcriptions.
10. Bob Marley has a similar message about Rastafari invincibility to bombs in the legendary “Redemption Song” in which he sings, “Have no fear for atomic energy/ Cause none of them can stop the time/How long shall they kill our prophets/ While we stand aside and look?”
11. Sister Winnie refers, of course, to Winnie Mandela of South Africa. Queen Omega refers to Empress Menen, who serves as the Queen Mother of the Rastafari faith.
12. For further explanation of appellations for the Rastawoman, see M. Rowe, The woman in Rastafari, *Caribbean Quarterly* (Rastafari Monograph, 2000), p.144; I. Ama-Tafari, Rastawoman as rebel, in *Chanting down Babylon*, op. cit., p.92; also L. Collins, Daughters of Jah: The impact of Rastafarian womanhood in the Caribbean, the United States, Britain, and Canada, in *Religion, culture and tradition in the Caribbean*, ed. Hemchand Gossai and Nathaniel Samuel Murrell (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), p.253, n.25.
13. Sister Carol appropriates Jesus’ words to Peter in St. Mark 8:33.
14. “Slackness” refers to sexually licentious, “rude” or morally lax behaviour. The term has frequently been used to refer to sexually explicit Jamaican dancehall lyrics.
15. Many performers reject the label of dub poet, yet several internationally recognized artists continue to be described as “dub poets”: Lillian Allen, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Mutabarauaka, Oku Onuora, Benjamin Zephaniah, Afua Cooper, Michael Smith, Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze, Clifton Joseph, Michael St. George, ahdri zhina mandiola, and Cherry Natural.
16. These poets vary in terms of their on-going self-identification with Rastafari. Some non-Rastafarians borrow the language strategies, some poets were Rastafarian-identified for a period of their lives (such as Breeze), and some continue to identify themselves as Rastafarian.
17. Breeze identified herself as a Rastafarian for three years. She began performing in 1983 and has since toured extensively as a poet and storyteller in the Caribbean, Britain, Europe, North America, South East Asia, and Africa. In addition to her three published poetry collections, she has made several recordings, including *Tracks* and *Riding On De Riddym*. Her film *Hallelujah Anyhow* aired on BBC, and her work was featured in the film *Moods and Moments*.
18. For a detailed analysis of Breeze’s poetry, see M. Morris, Gender in some performance poems. *Critical Quarterly* 35 (1): 78-88 (Spring 1993).
19. The phrase is also biblical (Ex. 3:14), and it represents God’s only self-naming. There is a fascinating literature on this, especially in Feminist Theology, since the translation is equally valid as “I will be who I will be”, implying God’s self-construction. Thus, Miranda also reappropriates the biblical tradition and a relation to divinity in this poem. The title also echoes the sentence “I Yam What I Am”, delivered in the ruminations of the protagonist in R. Ellison’s *The Invisible Man*

(a novel that includes a parodic portrait of Ras the Destroyer). In the novel, the statement signifies an acceptance of one's true selfhood and culture of origins and a rejection of debilitating stereotypes of Southern black identity as shaped by both racist white and assimilationist northern black society. According to K. W. Benston, the protagonist's statement is part of the important process of "(un)naming" that African Americans must go through as a confrontation of the history of "naming" or renaming of Africans in the New World (Benston 1984: 151-72). One might argue, similarly, that the Rasta woman may undergo a process of confrontational "un-naming" and assertion of selfhood in reaction to both the colonial legacy and some of the gender constructs of Rastafari.

20. She attempted to start a Montessori Method school for Rastafarian children, the Royal Ethiopian Basic School. She also published many Rasta poems, wrote radio dramas, television and film scripts for the government's information service, campaigned for adult literacy, organized Rasta sistren within a woman-centered group called the King Alpha and Omega Daughters Theocracy I, edited *Queen Omega News*, started a Rastafari press, Queen Omega News Communication Company (which followed her from Jamaica to Palo Alto, San Jose, and Berkeley, California in the United States), and mothered five children.
21. Birhan's poems appear in ephemeral publications available in the Jamaica National Library.
22. Although the subject of what Lake has called "mixed unions" rarely comes up in the literature of Rastafari, Lake argues that interracial relationships have caused "dissension among Rastafarians since many men and women object to the practice" (1998: 75).
23. In Montreal, amuna baraka-clarke hosted the television programme *Black is... and organized "dap" (diasporic afrikan poets) in 1991. After moving to Toronto, she published poetry in Fireweed and At the Crossroads, serving as an editor for the latter. She belongs to the Sankofa Dance and Drum Ensemble, the Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention, and b current (ahdri zhina madiela's theater/ performance poetry collective). See A. Cooper, Utterances and incantations: Women, poetry and dub (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1999), p. 33.*
24. Austin-Broos (1987) refers to both Dennis Forsythe's and Leonard Barrett's analyses of the Lion/ manhood symbol. Forsythe defines the Rasta Lion: "The trees listen when he speaks and tremble when he cries out in anger." Barrett also explains: "The lion represents not only the King of Kings, but the dominant maleness of the movement. The Rastafarians simulate the spirit of the lion in the way they wear their locks and in the way they walk. To the public the image of the lion suggests strength, dominance, and aggressiveness. See L. Barrett, *The Rastafarians: The dreadlocks of Jamaica* (Jamaica & London: Sangsters/ Heinemann, 1978), p.142.
25. A notable exception is the Boboshanti, who cover their locks outside ritual contexts.
26. Ephemeral photocopied publication, given to the author by Sistren Makeda Blake Hannah.
27. I wish to thank Sistren Masani Montague for our extended telephone conversation, 1997, which has informed my reading of her novel.
28. Sistren Maureen Rowe, a Rastafarian spokesperson, waited nearly twenty years to reveal the degree to which the two 1980s Rastafarian women's organizations she was involved in were suppressed when the brethren issued charges of "sexually deviant behaviour among sisters" (see N. S. Murrell et al., 1998, p.81).
29. Tafari-Ama argues that the issue of procreation must be under the woman's control: "One may have as many children as one can afford. The choice is the sistren's. Given that females bear the brunt of childrearing responsibilities, theirs should be the ultimate decision regarding procreation" (1998, p.104).
30. Isaiah 4:1 (King James Version) states: "And in that day seven women shall take hold of one man, saying, We will eat our own bread, and wear our own apparel:

only let us be called by thy name, to take away our reproach.”

31. Telephone Interview, Toronto, August 1997.
32. Makeda Silvera, an early community organizer, worked with Montague's sister to start the Rasta Cultural Workshop in Toronto (1977-1980). Silvera, now the editor of Sister Vision Press and an activist in the Afro-Caribbean gay and lesbian community, explains forthrightly the challenges of being a lesbian in the Jamaican context. "Dread words", Silvera uses the language of Rastafari to describe the terms used to censure lesbians. "Dread words. So dread that women dare not use these words to name themselves." Quoting Genesis 19:23-4 and emphasizing the importance of the Bible as a foundational text in Jamaican society, Silvera argues that the Old Testament wrath of God is invoked, enforcing the invisibility of lesbians: God "rained down burning sulphur on Sodom and Gemorrah" (1991: 16). In "Dear Sistrens: An Open Letter to Rastafarian Sistrens" Silvera explicitly criticized the Rastafari community for its positioning of women: "As a black woman/ A Rastafarian woman, I know about oppression for I have experienced victimization by both a racist and sexist society, and it hurts and frustrates me to encounter this sexist form of oppression in a cultural identity I've chosen to embrace" (1983: 117). Silvera, in the Leib and Romano film *Rastafari: Conversations Concerning Women*, comments on women's contribution to the preservation and practice of menstrual taboos and other gender specific restrictions (1983). Although Silvera does not represent Rastafari in her recently published novel *The Heart Does Not Bend*, she does interrogate homophobia within Jamaican society. The "Lioness", a Jamaican family's pentecostal matriarch, cites biblical injunctions and codes of damnation (Jude 7, Genesis 19, Romans 1, I Corinthians) to chastise a son and a granddaughter (the narrator) who have both had same-sex relationships: "Mek friend wid yuh Bible, for a de only weapon dat can drive Satan away. Yuh know seh dat di wicked will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Neider di sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor male prostitutes, nor homosexual offenders. So I Corinthians seh. Sodomite cyaan flourish inna God sight. It nuh right, it dangerous" (2002, p.186).
33. I know of no text that features a dreadlocks lesbian who resides in Jamaica.
34. Charlotte Bunch, in an address delivered at a Socialist Feminist Conference in 1975, defined the significance of recognizing the human rights of lesbians: "Lesbianism is more than a question of civil rights and culture.... It is an extension of the analysis of sexuality itself as an institution. It is a commitment to women as a political group, which is the basis of a political/economic strategy leading to power for women, not just an 'alternative community'" (Ctd. Clarke, 1993, p.217).
35. Moreover, how might the threat of charges of homosexuality from the brethren (or black society in general) galvanize women across sexual preference divides to examine homophobia in the Caribbean context and in other regions of the African Diaspora? How did some women's movements, especially in the migrant metropolitan settings of Britain, Canada, and the United States, come to realize that struggles against homophobia are related to the struggle of all women for personhood and community support?
36. Ella Maria Ray's worthy doctoral thesis (1998) includes detailed case studies of Rastafari womanhood in Jamaica and emphasizes agency rather than subordination.
37. I do not in any way intend to contribute to the polarization of relations between men and women, but to reflect upon increasing assertiveness of Rastafarian women in the creative arts and survey the various means by which artists have evaluated the responsibilities, rights, and self-determined/ proscribed roles of the Rastafari woman.

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