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Transnational popular culture and the global spread of the Jamaican Rastafarian movement

Discusses the spread of the Rastafarian movement in the British Caribbean, North America, Europe, Africa, New Zealand, and the Pacific. In the vast majority of cases it has been reggae music which has functioned as the primary catalyst for spreading the religion and culture of Rastafari beyond Jamaica.

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INTRODUCTION

The need to place culture in a broader, more globally-based perspective has never been more crucial than it is today, as powerful transnational concerns, acting in concert with the omnipresent (and increasingly omnipotent) forces of a rapidly expanding electronic communications industry, have nearly succeeded in consolidating the entire planet into a single unified system.[1] But until recently most social scientists engaged in world systems research have focused solely on the political and economic aspects of globalization, leaving unexamined vast and relatively uncharted areas of cultural interconnectedness (in the realms of art, music, cinema, fashion, sports, and religion, for example).

This article attempts to redress some of these omissions, by focusing on processes relating to the diffusion and globalization of "culture." The Jamaican Rastafarian movement and its attendant forms of expression are central to this study. With the increasing availability of low cost/highly sophisticated technologies, widespread transnational corporate expansion, global mediaization, and the commoditization of culture which inevitably arises from the combined actions of these agents (cf. Schiller 1976), it is no longer possible to ignore or underestimate the role such processes play in shaping the development and transformation of present-day human societies and culture.

In September of 1973 a friend had just returned from attending a summer-long oceanography course in Jamaica. Apart from the usual tales of sun, sand, and coral-laden turquoise seas, he spoke about a new type of music he

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had heard and of an elderly, "pot-smoking" gentleman he met during his many forays throughout the island. My curiosity aroused, I pressed him for further details. About the music all he could say was that it sounded like a fusion of rock, soul, and calypso underscored by a heavy syncopated bass guitar line and drums; as for the "stoned-out" old man, he apparently belonged to some strange Jamaican religious cult whose adherents grew their hair in long matted locks, smoked enormous quantities of *ganja* (marijuana) and worshipped the emperor of Ethiopia Haile Selassie.

Who could have imagined back in 1973 that this obscure island music and the religious, social, and political ideologies it espouses would, in only a few short years, spread far and wide and become another notable addition to the expanding repertoire of transnational popular culture. That the terms "reggae" and "Rastafari" should in so brief a span of time emerge to become almost household words throughout the Caribbean and in many parts of North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Pacific is a truly remarkable occurrence – so remarkable in fact that I felt compelled to examine this phenomenon more closely in the hope of gaining a clearer understanding of just how and why this came to be.[2]

What is perhaps most interesting and unique about Rastafarianism is that it may represent the only contemporary socio-religious movement whose diffusion is directly linked to various mediums of transnational popular culture, most notably reggae music. The terms "reggae" and "Rasta" have become so closely linked in minds of many that they are frequently accorded the status of synonyms. And while this popular perception of the movement is by no means an accurate one – since it encompasses a great deal more than just a contemporary style of Jamaican pop music – the confusion is, nevertheless, understandable. For whereas many who have written about Rastafari claim it to have acted as a major source, inspiration, and catalyst in the creation of reggae, nearly *all* acknowledge the fact that reggae has functioned, and in many instances continues to function, as the principal medium through which people the world over have acquired their knowledge and awareness of Rastafari (the lyrics of Jamaican reggae songs having been dominated since the early 1970s by Rastafarian themes, imagery, and symbolism).[3]

Over the course of the last three decades this planet has witnessed the global penetration of pop music (mass-produced music created with a large, often multinational audience in mind and marketed as such by the recording industry) and the technology essential for its widespread distribution (transistor radios, portable cassette recorders, TVs, VCRs, etc.). As Roger Wallis and Krister Malm (1984:xiv) point out in their groundbreaking study on the effects of the international music industry on nations in the developing world:

> The 70s have taught us that music industry technology penetrates faster than any other technological development in the history of mankind ... and has found its way into every corner of the globe. The most isolated village can get its first cassette recorder before it has running water or mains electricity.

What is more, with the recent introduction of laser, digital, microwave, satellite, and cable technologies, the rate of penetration is accelerating at unprecedented speeds.

Responsibility for the creation of this huge international pop market lies in the hands of both the manufacturers of music-related hardware and the multinational record companies and conglomerates who have created a global network of consumers. Working in tandem these two forces have contributed to the creation of transnational or nationless types of music through a process labeled "transculturation" by Wallis and Malm (1984:300-11). Briefly put, this process involves the multi-directional flow of musical influences between local music cultures and the international pop market, each feeding on and contributing to the other's development.[4]

The global expansion of transnational pop music continues at a staggering pace, and during the last two decades the popular music of Jamaica has come to play a major role in such revolutionary developments, representing one of the rare instances in which culture originally produced by and for the periphery has made a substantial impact on the center.[5] Today reggae holds a commanding position in the global pop music scene, contributing as much as if not more than it once had borrowed.[6] And, as we shall see below, in the vast majority of cases it has been reggae music which has functioned as the primary catalyst for spreading the religion and culture of Rastafari beyond its original island homeland.

RASTAFARI IN THE CARIBBEAN

Over the course of the last few decades the Rastafarian movement has managed to extend its reach and influence throughout the entire English-speaking Caribbean (and to a lesser extent the non-English speaking Caribbean as well), serving as a powerful social common denominator linking disparate youth across the region by simultaneously providing a vehicle whereby blacks in the diaspora can cultivate or recreate a lost African heritage and cultural identity and ideologically distance themselves from what many perceive to be the misguided and unjust societies in which they live.[7]

Local Rastafarian reggae bands are to be found on nearly every island in the Caribbean (Bilby 1985; Guilbault 1993), enabling Jamaican Rastas to successfully export their "culture of resistance" regionwide (Campbell

1987). For decades Rastafari has functioned as a corrective to the prejudices and white bias of corrupt and inefficient neocolonial Caribbean societies, and even the established Christian organizations have, after many years of indifference and hostility, been forced to recognize the important role the movement has come to play here. The Caribbean Council of Churches has even accepted the Rastafari into the Christian fold (Witvliet 1985:117).

In recent years Caribbean Rastas (particularly those outside Jamaica) have begun to put much less emphasis on African repatriation[8] and the deification of Haile Selassie, and have instead assumed more active political, and at times even militant, roles. Examples of this can be seen in the revolutionary and anti-capitalist positions adopted by Rastas on the islands of Dominica, Antigua, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent during the past decade and a half, many of whom have been harassed, arrested, and in a number of instances even murdered for professing adherence to the faith.[9]

The fears commonly expressed by local authorities in the Caribbean about the subversive and potentially destabilizing influence of Rastafari are not wholly unfounded. In 1979 and 1981 respectively, groups of dissidents whose ranks included large contingents of Rastas made several unsuccessful attempts to take over political control of the Grenadines and Dominica.[10] And in Grenada in March of 1979, more than four hundred Rastas took part in the Peoples Liberation Army's overthrow of the Eric Gairy regime, after which the island's Rasta population was reported to have been integrated into the new revolutionary society set up by Maurice Bishop. Rastas, according to Campbell (1987:162-66), went on to attain a high status in the army, enjoying unlimited freedom of religion – including the freedom to smoke ganja.

In Trinidad, Rastafari represents a powerful force among the island's lower-class population, membership in the movement cutting across both racial and ethnic lines. A substantial number of East Indians have, according to the anthropologist Ansley Hamid (1981), donned the mantel of Rastafari – growing dreadlocks, smoking ganja, and embracing an *ital* or healthy way of life. It is not uncommon to find Trinidadian calypso singers incorporating Rasta themes into their music, and in 1979 the Mighty Sparrow dedicated a song entitled "De Caribbean Man" (which won first prize at the annual Calypso Monarch Competition) to the region's Rastafarians.[11]

As Hamid (1981) discovered while conducting research on Rastafarian communities in San Fernando, Trinidad, during the mid- to late 1970s, the spread of the movement on the island was inextricably linked to the development of local ganja networks of trade, with the revenue procured from the sale of this illicit substance being used by Trinidadian Rastas to establish legitimate businesses and agricultural enterprises, thereby promoting Rasta

ideals of self-sufficiency and independence from metropolitan centers. By 1976 the movement had become such an established presence in many lower-class neighborhoods, according to Hamid, that Rastas began to achieve a certain degree of prestige and respect as a result of their enterprise and exemplary behavior, although the media continued to link the movement to violent crime. By encouraging young people to take an active interest in the land through their establishment of small-scale agricultural projects, by promoting the use of ganja as a substitute for alcohol and other more harmful drugs, and by creating an appreciation and demand for locally manufactured goods, Rastas in Trinidad have served as a positive social force, especially among the island's poor.

It can be argued that the Rastafarian movement represents one of the most visible, potent, and progressive pan-regional cultural forces at work in the Caribbean today, one that has in a relatively short period of time proven effective in breaking down the many inter-island and inter-ethnic rivalries that have polarized this region for centuries (Campbell 1987:173).

RASTAFARI IN NORTH AMERICA

A walk through any of the West Indian neighborhoods in large urban centers like New York, Miami, Houston, or Atlanta would be sufficient to convince even the casual observer that the Rastafarian movement is alive and thriving here – as one could not help but notice the many individuals sporting dreadlocks and talking *iyaric* (Dread Talk); the colors (red, gold, black, and green) and symbols of Rastafari adorning storefronts, homes, and vehicles; and the various Rasta-owned shops selling Afrocentric clothing and ornaments and *ital* (health) food (cf. Lewis 1993:83-94). Similarly, if one were to turn on the radio at the appropriate time, he or she would no doubt hear local reggae shows which serve as conduits through which information about upcoming Rasta events and activities pass. But in spite of this visible Rastafarian presence, little serious research has yet been undertaken to assess the movement's impact in the United States. And while American media will occasionally feature reports on local Rastafarians, most only reinforce the negative images and stereotypes of the group harbored by the vast majority of the U.S. public, i.e., a heavily-armed and dangerous assortment of thugs, murderers, and drug dealers.[12]

In addition to the thriving West Indian Rasta population, there are a number of other interesting manifestations of Rastafari currently functioning in the United States, one of which is the Ethiopian Zion Coptic Church. According to Campbell (1987:115-16), this group of middle-class whites for-

merly headquartered on Star Island in Miami, represents the largest non-black Rasta formation in the country. Over the past ten to fifteen years these "Coptics" have been carrying on an international campaign to legalize cannabis while simultaneously expounding their stridently anti-communist "Rasta" philosophy, and by 1979 they managed to attract so much media attention that the popular weekly CBS television program "60 Minutes" aired a feature story on the group.

Two thousand miles northwest of Miami at the bottom of the Grand Canyon live some four hundred Havasupai Indians, many of whom have become ardent devotees of reggae (particularly the music of Bob Marley, who is a figure of veneration here for many) and the Rastafarian ethos this music conveys. On the wall of the community's only café hangs a photograph of a dreadlocked Rasta. Bearing the inscription "I Love Supai Rastafarians," it is personally signed by Wailer Tyrone Downie who, fascinated by the existence of this unusual Rasta group, flew into the Canyon by helicopter in 1982 to perform a free concert.[13]

Not only do the Havasupai listen to reggae, but some even play it as well. Many also smoke ganja[14] and strongly identify with the anti-Babylon (anti-Western) sentiments expressed in the lyrics of numerous Jamaican reggae songs (Trepper 1984). In the words of Arnold Shaw (1986:265), Director of the Popular Music Research Center at the University of Nevada,

> Unquestionably, the initial appeal of reggae to the Havasupai was its sound and beat. But the Indians also found parallels between their oppressive and deprived lives and those of the black Jamaicans among whom Rastafarianism developed as a socio-political religion.

The Havasupai claim that reggae music was first introduced into their community by three Indians from California who brought with them a large collection of Bob Marley cassettes. Over the years enthusiasm for the music grew among the younger members of the tribe to the point where in the early 1980s reggae and Rasta culture came to play a major role in Havasupai life (Trepper 1984:12-15).

The Havasupai's attraction to Rastafari has a number of historical antecedents in the various revitalization movements that developed among Native American groups over the course of the last hundred years, most notable among these being the Peyote Cult which arose around the turn of the century both in reaction to and as a defense against the continuing encroachment of European settlers and the alien values they imposed on native populations. Similar to the Rastafari, this cult's adherents relied heavily upon indigenous interpretations of the Old Testament, preached a form of pan-Indianism (where Rastas preach pan-Africanism), prohibited

the use of alcohol, and held a drug (peyote) to be the only remedy for the social, physical, and psychological ills introduced into their societies by the white man (La Barre 1969; Lanternari 1963).[15]

Up north in Canada, the Rastafarian movement grew slowly during the 1960s and 1970s among the large West Indian population in Toronto (estimated at 200,000), frequently coming under attack by police and immigration officials who viewed it as a "bizarre, criminal, and violent-prone cult" (Campbell 1987:180-81). As is the case in the United States, significant research has yet to be undertaken on the Rastafarian movement here, but given the massive popularity of reggae in places like Toronto, and with local black musicians using this music as a medium for promoting Rastafarian culture,[16] interest in the movement among West Indians in Canada no doubt continues to be substantial.

RASTAFARI IN EUROPE

The Rastafarian movement experienced substantial growth in the European metropolitan centers of London, Birmingham, Paris, and Amsterdam during the mid- to late 1970s, as immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa faced a burgeoning urban crisis (crime, drug abuse, inflation, and unemployment) and the growing specter of racism. Under such adverse conditions and circumstances, Rastas tended to view themselves as a "minority elite," attaching a positive value to a racial and cultural identity that had up till then been denigrated and suppressed by the dominant white European society (Cashmore 1977:383; Campbell 1987:184-86).[17]

In England, the Rastafarian movement first surfaced among inner-city West Indian youth during the mid-1950s and continued to increase in numbers throughout the 1960s and 1970s as blacks found most avenues for economic mobility and social integration closed to them. After 1975, membership in the movement increased dramatically – due in large part to the growing influence and popularity of reggae music – and by 1984 an estimated 25,000 young blacks in Britain professed adherence to Rastafari.[18]

It comes as no surprise to discover that reggae music made its initial impact outside the Caribbean among Britain's large West Indian community. Between the years 1955 and 1962, close to 200,000 Jamaicans left their island homes and emigrated to the United Kingdom (Davis 1982:156), where along with their dreams and meager belongings they brought a taste for Jamaican music. The first independent record labels emerged in London in the 1960s to cater to the growing demand for authentic "island sounds."

By the early 1970s, reggae music could be heard exploding from sound

systems, discos, and record shops throughout the West Indian neighborhoods of London and Birmingham. In addition to serving as a much needed source of entertainment, the music also provided disaffected black youth with an alternative cultural outlet and sense of identity. By the middle of the decade a new generation of mostly British-born West Indian reggae artists emerged on the scene, many of whom adopted the Rastafarian beliefs, practices, and lifestyles of their Jamaican counterparts, and it was not long before these artists and groups began expressing their new-found Rasta identities through their own distinctive brand of British reggae – the Anglo-Jamaican groups Aswad, Steel Pulse, and Misty in Roots being among the earliest and most popular (Chambers 1985; Hebdige 1987).

Although the Rastafarian movement in England was for years heavily influenced by the mystical and religious ideology that coalesced around the divinity of Haile Selassie and repatriation to Africa, lately more and more Rastas have begun to take an active part in trying to improve life within their own communities and, like their Caribbean counterparts, have begun to adopt a more political and even militant stance. During the 1980s, Rastas helped to establish many urban-based community centers and youth programs throughout the country, and in 1981 large numbers played a role in the riots that exploded in England's black ghettos in response to police harassment and the regressive and racist policies of the Thatcher government (Clarke 1986:59, 85; Campbell 1987:188, 206).

The Rastafarian movement also managed to attract a sizeable number of working-class white British youth who, along with their West Indian counterparts, found their hopes for a productive life thwarted by the many social and economic barriers placed in their path (Cashmore 1981:178, 181). Moreover, small numbers of middle- and upper-class Britains have within past years donned the mantle of Rastafari in symbolic defiance against the privileged lifestyles afforded them and their elders in socially stratified, class-conscious English society.[19]

In general, the position of Rastas vis-à-vis mainstream British society has remained somewhat ambiguous. Although in 1982 the Roman Catholic Church's Commission for Racial Justice urged the British government to accept Rasta as both a valid (though non-Christian) faith and a "legitimate cultural form,"[20] and Lord Scarmen (PC, OBE, and Lord of Appeal), in his report on the Brixton riots of 1981, expressed the opinion that "the Rastafarians, their faith, and their aspirations, deserve more understanding and more sympathy than they get from the British people" (cited in Clarke 1986:96), the media and police have continued to issue reports and directives projecting Rastas as violent criminals and psychopathic deviants.[21] But regardless of the negative ways in which the movement is perceived by the

British media and public, it continues to represent a dominant cultural force within the nation's West Indian communities.

Over on the Continent, since the early 1980s significant numbers of young Surinamese in the Netherlands have adopted the beliefs, practices, music, and dress of Rastafarians in an attempt to forge a distinct "black" identity for themselves in their alien (predominantly white) European home (Sansone 1984). As Peter Buiks (cited in Cashmore 1984:70) observes:

> Many of these immigrants came to Holland with high expectations about our country as a welfare paradise to find themselves within a short time deprived of adequate housing, employment, and education. I expect that for some of these immigrants, their black skin gets a special meaning in these conditions. I have the impression that the attractiveness of the Rastafarian movement is that it offers an adequate frame of reference for a more satisfying interpretation of their situation, identity, and future. It is also attractive to them as a basis for renewed self-confidence, and as a vehicle for cultural emancipation.

During two months spent in Amsterdam in the summer of 1990, I came into contact with a fairly large contingent of Rastas, the majority Surinamese immigrants or first generation Dutch-born Surinamese who claimed to have been initially attracted to the movement through their prior exposure to reggae music.[22] Interestingly enough, this city also harbors the largest population of white Rastafarians I have yet come across, a situation perhaps best accounted for by the semi-legal status afforded marijuana by the Dutch authorities and the vibrant counterculture that continues to flourish here.[23]

In France, the only other nation in Europe known to harbor a fairly sizeable Rastafarian population, Rastas from French-speaking West African countries like Senegal, Mali, and the Ivory Coast have managed to incorporate into their worldviews additional anticolonial elements picked up through their contacts with other Africans living in large urban centers like Paris and Bordeaux; individuals who, like themselves, are struggling to find some meaning and direction outside the narrow confines of Francophile culture (Clarke 1986:98).

RASTAFARI IN AFRICA

Spurred on in part by the many local musicians who have taken on the appearance of Rastafarians, and to a lesser extent a serious commitment to the faith, and have incorporated Rasta/reggae-inspired influences into their music, a relatively small though conspicuous number of urban African youth have over the course of the last decade and a half begun to profess adherence to Rastafari.

In Ethiopia, Jamaican Rastas began settling in the early 1970s on land set aside by the emperor Haile Selassie for blacks in the New World seeking repatriation to Africa. Throughout the years these Rastas have subsisted mainly by growing their own food as well as ganja, and selling locally manufactured handicrafts. The former Marxist government showed a surprising degree of tolerance towards these Jamaicans, given their veneration of Haile Selassie. The Jamaicans managed to maintain relatively good relations with both the local authorities and the public prior to the overthrow of the Mengistu regime in 1991 (although tensions did flare-up periodically between local farmers and the group over issues centering around land-rights and the latter's deification of Haile Selassie). The presence of Jamaican Rastas in Ethiopia appears to have stimulated some interest in Rastafari among a small contingent of urban-based youth, as evidenced perhaps by the numerous reggae bands that surfaced in the capital Addis Ababa during the early to mid-1980s.[24]

In Zimbabwe, the impact of Bob Marley's appearance at the nation's first Independence Day celebration held in April of 1980, and the subsequent appearances by Jimmy Cliff and the Anglo-Jamaican reggae groups Aswad and Misty in Roots, served not only to popularize reggae music here but proved instrumental in promoting the culture of Rastafari as well. By the mid-1980s, as Fred Zindi (1981:21) reports, reggae had become such an integral part of the urban pop music scene – with reggae bands and sound systems all the rage in the capital Harare and the music being played frequently on Zimbabwe's two leading radio stations – that one might have easily mistaken it for a local pop music genre. Moreover, during this period many young Zimbabweans began sporting dreadlocks, smoking ganja, speaking iyaric, and wearing "Rasta colors." In addition to emulating the outward appearance and practices of Jamaican reggae artists, a handful also frequently read the Bible and other Rasta-related literature (e.g., books on Marcus Garvey) and held a firm belief in the divinity of Haile Selassie.[25]

Reggae (and Rasta culture) has for decades enjoyed considerable popularity in South Africa, where interest in this music and the Rastafarian ethos it projects frequently takes on heavy political overtones. For instance, at the conclusion of a "Free Peoples' Concert" held in Johannesburg in 1983, two members of a local reggae band were arrested by police and sentenced to four years in prison for calling for the release of Nelson Mandela (Street 1986:22), and Peter Tosh's album *Equal Rights* was at one point banned by the South African government for its "subversive" messages (Grass 1984:29). Lucky Dube – a Rastafarian who also happens to be one of the most successful, innovative, and internationally renowned African reggae artists to emerge on the continent in recent years – hails from South

Africa, where his first album *Slave* was a massive hit with sales totalling over 300,000 copies, breaking a record previously held by a local mbaqanga group, the Soul Brothers (Gardner 1991:29). Unfortunately, there is no current information available on Rastas in post-apartheid South Africa.

As the journalist and long-time chronicler of the African pop music scene Billy Bergman (1985:24) observed back in the mid-1980s, throughout the African continent both "reggae and the Rasta mystique remain a strong current in the urban youth culture," and this assessment by and large continues to hold true for much of West Africa today – particularly in the Anglophone nations of Ghana, Gambia, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria (Savishinsky 1994). In Ghana, for example, two distinct Rastafarian communities are presently functioning: one is located in the capital Accra and affiliated with the Ethiopian World Federation (the EWF) and the other, located just a few miles up the coast in Labadi, is connected to the Jamaican-based Twelve Tribes of Israel. The majority of Ghanaian Rastas, however, are not affiliated with any organized community or group and instead move within a general circle which includes independent Rastas, the Twelve Tribes membership, and those aligned with the EWF, all of whom come together on various occasions (such as reggae concerts, national festivals and celebrations, and weekends at Labadi Beach) to listen and dance to reggae, reason, smoke ganja, read and discuss the Bible, and express their pan-Africanist leanings.

Throughout West Africa, reggae is a major force in the urban pop music scenes of both Anglophone and Francophone nations, where one finds a profusion of cassettes by Jamaican, Anglo-Jamaican, and African reggae artists for sale in record shops and market stalls in every major city and most large towns. The music is also regularly heard on local radio stations, in taxis, discos, on street corners, and almost everywhere young people congregate. Furthermore, a large percentage of West African pop musicians have either played reggae music at one point in their careers or utilized reggae rhythms and/or Rasta-inspired lyrics in their songs (Savishinsky 1994).

In addition to being an integral part of the urban musical landscape, reggae music has, for the past fifteen years or so, also functioned as the principle medium for the diffusion of Rastafarian religion and culture in West Africa. Eighty percent of the Rastas I interviewed in Ghana and 66 percent of those in Senegal – where a small Rastafarian community has been functioning for over a decade on the island of Gorée – admitted that their initial interest in Rastafari came about as a direct result of their prior exposure to reggae. And in the vast majority of cases it was the music of Bob Marley that made the most intense and lasting impression, although the music of West

African reggae artists like Alpha Blondy, Evi-Edna Ogholi, and Majek Fashek has in recent years exercised a considerable influence here as well (Savishinsky 1994).

The impact of Bob Marley – both his music and media-generated image – on young people in West Africa in general, and West African Rastas in particular, cannot be understated. Throughout much of the region (and from what I can gather the continent as a whole), his songs can be heard blasting out of boom boxes and stereo systems everywhere; his cassettes are offered for sale in urban and even rural marketplaces; and his dreadlocked profile can be seen staring out from t-shirts and wall posters in market stalls, homes, and restaurants. Along with Muhammad Ali, James Brown, and Michael Jackson, Marley ranks among the most popular and influential pan-African heroes of our time – being widely known, listened to, admired and even idolized by young people everywhere. One would be hard pressed to find an urban-based African youth who is not familiar with this man and his music, and for many Africans the name Bob Marley is synonymous with both reggae music and Rastafarianism (Savishinsky 1994).

In many parts of West Africa the use of and trade in cannabis is, along with reggae music, closely associated both in actual fact and public perceptions with the culture of Rastafari. In Ghana, for example, the smoking of cannabis (often in the context of extended "reasoning sessions") is a common practice among Rastafarians, and people will often refer to any young man seen hanging out on the street smoking or peddling "wee" (a local Ghanaian term for cannabis) as "Rasta." And while few Ghanaians would openly admit that their involvement with Rastafari was influenced by their prior or parallel involvement with this illicit substance, my research shows that in a substantial number of cases initial entry into the Ghanaian Rasta scene came about as a direct result of an individual's predilection for smoking cannabis and/or his dealings with Anglo-Jamaican or West African Rasta cannabis peddlers.

Apart from the fact that Rastafarian sentiment and ideology is steeped in themes relating directly to Africa and African repatriation and that for years reggae artists have championed the cause of African liberation movements in their music (Bob Marley's song "Zimbabwe" and Peter Tosh's "Apartheid," to cite but two examples), the attraction of African youth to Rastafari may also be viewed as a direct outgrowth of their desire to participate in a contemporary international movement – to be a part of the "global scene" as it were (the appropriation of Rastafarian religion and culture being one of the various strategies employed by West Africans wishing to establish such global connections). Evidence for this can be gleaned from the fact that throughout the region the term "Rasta" is often used by non-

Rastas when referring to rebellious Western-oriented youth. Also, West African Rastas generally tend to be more outward-looking and globally-orientated than their non-Rasta contemporaries.

In certain respects this embodies a fundamental contradiction wherein alienated urban youth who are basically out of touch with many aspects of traditional African culture turn for a sense of meaning and identity to an ostensibly anti-Western, anti-neocolonial movement that places considerable emphasis on the recreation of or return to a more authentic "traditional" way of life, but which in fact rejects many aspects of indigenous African belief and practice and in its place utilizes forms of religion (Judeo-Christianity) and popular expression (transnational pop music) closely linked to the alien culture of the "oppressors" (the West or "Babylon"). Subsequently, for many West African youth involvement and identification with Rastafari is fraught with contradictions, ambivalence, and mixed allegiances.[26]

Although the total Rastafarian population in West Africa is relatively small, the impact of the movement and its attendant forms of cultural expression on urban-based youth is significant. To cite one illustration of this: in Ghana in 1989 a large reggae concert was organized at Labadi Beach as part of the nation's Independence Day celebrations. Sponsored by the government-run Ghana Tourist Board and billed as a dawn to dusk "Reggae Sunsplash Beach Festival," this afternoon event, which featured three local reggae groups as well as a massive sound system manned by local DJs, drew a large and appreciative crowd numbering in the thousands, most of whom were not Rastafarians. In addition, another concert sponsored by the Ghanaian Twelve Tribes' chapter and billed as a "Special Reggae Festival for Rastafarians" was held in Accra at the Orion Cinema that very same evening (Savishinsky 1994).

As elsewhere, Rastafarianism in Africa appears to have a number of historical parallels and antecedents. The first revolts against European imperialism and colonization on the continent took the form of religious movements aimed at countering the disruptive effects of the white man on traditional African society. As Terence Ranger (1986:51) points out, these formations were particularly well suited for such a purpose since they could draw on the ambiguous power inherent in religious myth, ritual, and symbolism and could therefore "mean many things at once and contain many potentialities." Like Rastafarianism, many of these twentieth-century African formations (e.g., the Kimbangu and Orunula movements; the Mvungi, Tonsi, and Kitawala cults; and the Zionist Churches of South Africa) were millenarian in nature and represented an Afro-Christian synthesis wherein ideas, images, themes, and terminology taken from the Old and New Testa-

ments were used to express their membership's desire for religious autonomy, political emancipation, and deliverance from poverty and oppression. As is also the case among the Rastafari, many of these groups and their leadership expressed a belief in a black God; prophesied the coming of a black Messiah who would usher in the Kingdom of God and a Golden age of prosperity free from foreign domination; identified their group (and sometimes the African race in general) with the Biblical Hebrews; and finally were highly critical of European civilization and the destructive elements (alcoholism, moral corruption, the alienation of land, etc.) introduced into their societies by the white man.[27]

RASTAFARI IN THE PACIFIC

During the last decade and a half the Rastafarian movement has also become a visible presence throughout much of the Pacific. In October of 1981, the *Melbourne Age* published a report about a Rasta "survival center" set up in Australia to cater to the needs of the many Aborigines who had joined the movement during the late 1970s and early 1980s.[28] And while indigenous Rasta communities can be found on many islands throughout the region – Samoa, Panape, Tonga, and Fiji, for example[29] – the largest contingent of Rastas are those in New Zealand.

Bill Hawkeswood, a New Zealand anthropologist who in the early 1980s conducted research on Rastafarian communities in the capital Auckland, found the movement there to be extremely diverse as regards ethnicity (incorporating whites as well as blacks[30] from many ethnic groups – the largest proportion being Maori and Samoan) and socio-economic status (including among its ranks office and factory workers, truck drivers, students, artists, and unemployed – the latter accounting for over 50 percent of the total Rastafarian population). As Hawkeswood discovered, New Zealand Rastas generally participate in a wide range of practices typically associated with Jamaican Rastafarianism – e.g. sporting dreadlocks, smoking ganja, holding reasoning sessions in "iyaric," listening to and playing reggae music, adopting Rasta names, and reading and discussing the Bible and the speeches of Marcus Garvey and Haile Selassie (Hawkeswood 1983:99-109).

Spurred on in large part by the international success of Bob Marley, Rastafarianism first took hold in Auckland in the mid-1970s, and to this day reggae music represents the focal point around which the movement revolves. Listening to reggae may be likened to a form of homework for aspiring Rastas here, as most obtain the greatest degree of knowledge about the movement through their contacts with this music and the Rasta-based

messages it espouses. As one of Hawkeswood's (1983:114) informants observed:

> Most of the street kids got into Rasta through the music. And reggae music has a message. This message is what the knowledge is. So once they get into the music, the message is reaching them. I 'spose that's how we all got into it. We heard about Ras Tafari, Marcus Garvey, and all these things in the songs.

Adherence to Rastafari appears to provide black New Zealanders with a concrete and unambiguous cultural identity, as many find it difficult accepting the British-based "New Zealander" identity, and being cut off from their "roots," find it equally difficult to maintain their own distinctive ethnic characters.[31] Caught somewhere in between these two inviable alternatives, young blacks in Auckland have over the years been turning to Rasta in substantial numbers, utilizing the symbolism of the movement and the social relationships obtained therein to construct and sustain a more satisfying self-image and identity (Hawkeswood 1983:179).

As typifies the movement in its other global incarnations, Rasta groups in New Zealand are for the most part loosely organized, acephalous units – information about Rasta-related activities and events (reggae concerts, meetings, gossip, etc.) being disseminated via an informal network (the "Rastavine") which functions primarily through word of mouth (Hawkeswood 1983:92-93).

Gaining knowledge about Jamaican history and current events is considered an essential duty incumbent upon every New Zealand Rasta, as most are wont to identify their own situation and plight as oppressed blacks with that of lower-class Jamaicans. Many also view the Africans' transportation to and exile in the New World as analogous to what befell their own forefathers who, after being seduced by promises of high wages and a "better life," abandoned their homes, families, and traditional ways of life to settle in an alien, European-dominated society (Hawkeswood 1983:135-36).

As is so typical of Rastas everywhere, adherents in New Zealand face strong opposition to their beliefs and practices from the media, the police, and the general public. Although typically branded as dope-smoking, lazy, and violent "cultists," a great many are in fact involved in activities aimed at improving the quality of life among the nation's poor. For example, one group of Rastas established a youth center in Auckland that catered to the needs of young men belonging to local street gangs, many of whom subsequently abandoned their criminal and antisocial lifestyles and joined the local Rasta community (Hawkeswood 1983:8, 84, 182).

Rastas here often cite the more universalist aspects of the movement – its anti-colonial and anti-imperialist stance, espousal of a return to a more nat-

ural and traditional way of life, and condemnation of the Christian Church and Western civilization – as justification for their adoption of the faith. Many also defend the emphasis they and Rastas everywhere place on the study of African history and culture by explaining that since mankind evolved on the African continent, all humans, regardless of race and ethnicity, can ultimately trace their ancestry back to Africa. And while some have taken this argument a step further by insisting that the only real solution to their present predicament is African repatriation, the majority have instead chosen to focus on more practical goals such as working to change the social, economic, and political structure of New Zealand society and to gain a greater knowledge and understanding of their own indigenous traditions and culture (Hawkeswood 1983:114-29).

CONCLUSION

It is my belief that the global appeal and spread of the Jamaican Rastafarian movement can be linked to a number of elements or factors. The first is the pre-eminent position the Bible holds in Rastafarian ritual and ideology. Second, the stress Rastas place on healthy, natural living and their subsequent rejection of Western artificiality in the realms of food, medicine, social relationships, etc. Third, Rastas' outspoken condemnation of the hypocrisy, corruption, injustice, and white biases inherent in colonial and neo-colonial societies and institutions. Fourth, Rastas' exhortation to the colonized and subjugated peoples of the world to take pride in their ancestral heritage and culture and to look to their own indigenous traditions for guidance and support. Fifth, the amorphous and decentralized nature of the movement, which gives adherents everywhere the freedom and flexibility to select and interpret specific aspects of Rastafarian religion and culture in a way that is best suited to their own needs and situations. And finally, but perhaps most importantly, the powerful links that exist between the movement and various aspects of contemporary transnational popular culture – namely music, drugs, and fashion.

For Rastafarians everywhere, listening, playing, and dancing to reggae music represent essential components in both religious worship and personal/collective expression. And as detailed above, reggae music has over the past two decades managed to attract a sizeable following among both black and white youth throughout the developed and the developing world. What is more, reggae music has served and in many instances continues to serve as the principal conduit through which the religious, social and political messages espoused by Jamaican Rastafarians have reached out to and affected the lives of thousands of young people worldwide.

Likewise, ganja, both its trade and the rituals associated with its use, while perhaps playing only a secondary role to reggae music, has also contributed significantly to the global spread of the movement, functioning as a mechanism for personal spiritual transcendence and a highly visible symbol of Rastafarian defiance to the laws and institutions of "Babylon." Moreover, the smoking of cannabis provides an important rallying point, social activity, and common denominator around which Rastas from diverse groups and backgrounds can unite, distinguishing those who belong or might someday belong from those who will forever remain outsiders – the smoking of cannabis being viewed by the vast majority of Rastas everywhere as one of the most essential elements of religious expression and shared group identity.

That drugs, music, fashion, and socio-political protest constituted the major features of first the sixties counterculture movement in the United States and later the "punk" phenomenon in England helps in part to explain the appeal generated by reggae music and Rastafarianism among young people in Europe and North America a short time thereafter. The emergence of Rastafari on the global scene also followed closely on the heels of the Black Power movement – both representing important manifestations of black pride and self-assertion – and during the mid- to late 1970s a substantial number of young disaffected blacks in the Caribbean, Canada, and Great Britain turned from this movement to Rastafari (Hamid 1981:204; Campbell 1987:175-79).

The ideologies and practices of the Rastafari are, as detailed above, not new to many of the societies in which the movement has gained a following, but to the contrary represent a continuation of earlier historical traditions and processes rooted in anti-colonial struggle and the desire on the part of indigenous and oppressed peoples to improve their economic and social positions and to preserve a culture and way of life that has suffered and continues to suffer progressive erosion in the face of Western economic, political, and cultural domination. That these historical legacies are in no small part responsible for the interest Rastafarianism has generated among thousands of young people in the Caribbean, the Pacific, and Africa – as well as among Native American Indians in the United States – is beyond doubt.

As the Rastafarian movement continues to grow and undergo modifications – such as a decline in the emphasis placed on African repatriation and the worship of Haile Selassie – and as it spreads, via transnational popular culture, the mass media and the electronic communications industry beyond the confines of its original homeland, it faces the ongoing challenge of becoming a significant contributor to the rapidly expanding "global culture." But whether or not the movement will prove potent and flexible

enough to meet such a challenge, one thing remains certain, the view beyond Jamaica is, to quote Derek Bishton (1986:2), "increasingly an international one."

NOTES

1. See, for example, Wallerstein 1979, Mattelart 1983, Schiller 1989, Hannerz 1992, and Wriston 1992.

2. In 1988-89 I conducted field work on the spread of the Rastafarian movement in Ghana and Senegambia, and much of the material contained in this article is adapted from the dissertation that followed from this research (which included a lengthy chapter on the global diffusion of reggae and Rastafari) (see Savishinsky 1993).

3. In recent years "dancehall music," a subgenre of reggae with minimal connections to Rastafarianism, has become increasingly popular in Jamaica and among West Indians in Britain and North America. Similar in form to African-American rap and hip hop music, a typical dancehall tune is structured around a DJ "rapping" (often in a heavy Jamaican patois) over a computer generated reggae-based rhythm track, with little expression given in the song texts to either religious, social, or political themes (see the *New York Times* June 21, 1992, p. 23). And with the recent upsurge in popularity of dancehall and the subsequent decline of other forms of reggae, it appears as if the links that once bound Jamaican popular music to the culture of Rastafari have finally begun to erode (at least throughout much of the Caribbean and among West Indians in England, the United States, and Canada).

4. While it may be true, as Hannerz (1987) suggests, that such modern developments have provided people the world over with access to a greater diversity of music than they ever had before (and in the process has led to the "creolization" of global pop music and the subsequent creation of new syncretic, indigenized forms of popular expression), some (cf. Hamelink 1983) voice fear that the longterm effects of transculturation may lead to the eventual formation of a homogenized global music culture and the loss of much of the world's stock of distinctive, local musical styles.

5. Hannerz (1992:265) argues that the interplay between center and periphery which develops out of such "multidimensional cultural encounters" creates a greater affinity between the two, resulting in the heightened ability of the latter to "talk back" to the former. And as the periphery increasingly makes use of the same organizational forms and technology as the center, its new cultural products become more attractive to the global market – hence the popular music of the Third World becomes "World Music."

6. In the 1950s and 1960s the playlists of Jamaica's single radio station were almost identical to those of pop music stations in major U.S. cities (Clarke 1980:62), and even as recently as 1979, 80 percent of all the music played on Jamaican radio was foreign in origin (Link 1979:10). Consequently, reggae was influenced to a large extent by American rock, soul, rhythm & blues, and gospel music (for a detailed description and analysis of the origins and development of reggae in Jamaica see Clarke 1980 and Nagashima 1984).

7. Campbell 1980:19-20, 1987:153-75; Forsythe 1980:62; Semaj 1980:22; Hamid 1981:6-7.

8. As a spokesman for the movement in St. Lucia asserted: "Unlike Jamaican Rastas, the St. Lucian Rasta does not want repatriation to Africa. Most believe that wherever they are, Africa is." (cited in Campbell 1987:160).

9. On the island of Dominica in the mid-1980s, an individual found wearing his or her hair in dreadlocks risked being sentenced to up to eighteen months in jail, and in Guyana the government was so worried about the potential Rasta had for mobilizing large segments of the population that it banned reggae music from the nation's airwaves in July of 1980, (see Campbell 1987:159, 171).

10. *New York Times*, September 12, 1979, p. 21 and July 10, 1981, p. 20.

11. Interestingly enough, a major conflict arose between Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians (see Klass 1991:66) over the Afrocentric nature of the song's lyrics and the exclusion of the latter group from many of its most prominent messages – the controversy apparently focusing on the following lines:

Dem is one race – De Caribbean Man
From de same place – De Caribbean Man
That make the same trip – De Caribbean Man
On the same ship – De Caribbean Man

12. See, for example, "Two Portraits of Rastafarians: A Sect of Violence or Righteousness," *New York Times*, June 21, 1977, p. 35; "Gang Arrests Dismay Jamaicans: Mainstream Community Fears Image after Police Crackdown," *USA Today*, October 14, 1988, p. A3; "Film Insults Faith, Say Rastafarian Protesters," *Los Angeles Times*, October 23, 1990, p. B3; Lewis (1993:96-98).

13. *The Arizona Republic*, October 31, 1982, pp. 139-54.

14. According to Tom Nicas, a public school teacher in nearby Peach Springs, by the time Havasupai children reach the age of six they can weave a basket and roll a spliff (a cannabis cigarette) with equal dexterity (cited in Trepper 1984).

15. Interestingly enough, as is also the case with ganja among Rastafarians, all biblical references to the word "herb" were interpreted by cult members as referring to "peyote," which they viewed as a holy sacrament equivalent to the bread and wine of the Christian Eucharist (Lanternari 1963).

16. According to *BillBoard Magazine* of January 26, 1980, p. 63, Toronto was one of the leading centers for Reggae in North America. See also Burman 1985:19 and *Canadian Composer* 6, 1980, pp. 4-16.

17. Such "cultural denigration" is painfully evident in the following passage taken from a history textbook once widely used in English schools: "To the conquest of nature through knowledge, the contributions made by Asiatics have been negligible and by Africans (Egyptians included) non-existent" (cited in Campbell 1987:185).

18. Clarke 1986:53-55; Campbell 1987:186; *Christianity Today*, September 21, 1984, p. 13.

19. This situation was brought to public attention when an article by the Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* February 16, 1986 describing his sixteen year-old son's conversion to Rastafarianism: The boy being one of among a dozen or so pupils at an elite English boarding school who grew dreadlocks and practiced a strict adherence to orthodox Rastafarian beliefs and practices.

20. *London Times*, January 19, 1982, p. 2d.

21. Cashmore 1981:177; Campbell 1987:189; "Fighting Street-Fighting Men," *London Times*, August 1, 1992, Saturday Review Section, pp. 12-16.

22. Reggae has enjoyed sporadic though at times intense success in Western Europe during the past fifteen years, spearheaded by Bob Marley's rise to international stardom in the mid-1970s. In the late 1970s, for example, Marley's album *Exodus* made it to the top of the

charts in Germany, and in 1980 a Toronto-based reggae duo sold over 100,000 copies of their single "Hop, Skip, and Jump" in Belgium and Holland alone (*BillBoard* January 26, 1980; *Canadian Composer*, 6, 1980). Jamaican reggae artists who toured Europe drew large and enthusiastic crowds; during the 1970s, Peter Tosh played to packed houses in Holland, Italy, France, Sweden, Switzerland, and Norway (*BillBoard* September 8, 1979), and throughout their careers both Bob Marley and Jimmy Cliff experienced little difficulty in selling out stadium-sized venues throughout the continent (Davis 1982:90; *Rolling Stone* June 8, 1981).

23. "Letter from Amsterdam, Where the Sixties Keep on Toking'," *Business Week*, April 25, 1994, p. 26A.

24. Bishton 1986:40-41; Campbell 1987:222-29; *The Daily Gleaner*, October 12, 1976, p. 4; *New Zealand Evening Post*, February 22, 1984, p. 13. To my knowledge nothing has been written about recent events in Ethiopia as they relate to the local Rastafarian population there.

25. With the exception of a relatively small number of orthodox Rastas, Africans tend to downplay the importance of Haile Selassie, many refusing to accept the legitimacy of his divine status. The following statement by the Ivorian reggae star Alpha Blondy – who like many an African reggae artist is a self-proclaimed Rasta and ardent pan-Africanist – may best express the attitudes held by the majority of African Rastas towards this former Ethiopian monarch: "I, as an African Rasta, do not consider Selassie as being a living god. I consider him to be a symbol with a biblical background, like King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba as his ancestors. I believe in that. And I believe that he was the African who built the O.A.U. [Organization of African Unity], the first African consciousness of unity above political ideology and tribal consideration" (cited in Davis 1988:35).

26. Such contradictions and ambivalence are also apparent among Jamaican Rastas, the vast majority of whom prefer to distance themselves from those aspects of Jamaican religious experience most closely linked to indigenous African beliefs and practices (cf. Bilby & Leib 1986:23; Bilby 1993:35).

27. Sundkler 1961; Lanternari 1963; Baeta 1968; Bond, Johnson & Walker 1979; Jules-Rossette 1979; Fields 1985.

28. Cited in the *New Zealand Listener*, January 17, 1981, pp. 18-19.

29. Bill Hawkeswood, personal communication.

30. The label "black" in New Zealand is commonly applied to all persons of non-European descent such as Polynesians, Samoans, Tongans, Fijians, Maori, Niueans, Indians, and Chinese (Hawkeswood 1983:171).

31. In the past a number of native socio-religious movements emerged in New Zealand in direct response to the presence of Europeans, movements which share a host of features in common with the Rastafari. For example, the Hau-Hau, a group which arose among the Maori in the early part of the nineteenth century, called for the expulsion of all whites from the island and the restoration of ancestral beliefs and practices. Like Rastafarians, the Hau-Hau spoke of the imminent destruction of the world followed by a Golden Age free from European domination and exhibited a strong affinity for the Old Testament and ancient Jewish history and culture, believing themselves to be descendants of the tribe of Judah and as such God's Chosen People (Lanternari 1963:248-55).

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