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Rastafari in the Promised Land: The Spread of a Jamaican Socioreligious Movement Among the Youth of West Africa

Neil J. Savishinsky

Parallel with and spurred on in part by the emergence of Jamaican reggae onto the international pop music scene in the mid-1970s, the Jamaican Rastafarian movement, whose origins are to be found on the island of Jamaica in the early 1930s,¹ has within the past two decades managed to expand beyond its island homeland and attract a widespread and culturally diverse global following.²

Until now, the movement has drawn its largest and most committed following from among those whose indigenous culture has been suppressed, and in certain instances completely supplanted, by Western models imposed during centuries of European and American colonial expansion. For the young unemployed or underemployed Maori in New Zealand, Havasupai Indian living on a reservation at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, West Indian struggling for survival in Brixton and Ghanaian in Accra trying to come to terms with urban living in a multi-ethnic, post-colonial African society, adherence to Rastafari provides an alternative source of meaning and identity to a life frequently punctuated by hopelessness, alienation and despair in what is often perceived as a hostile, corrupt and hypocritical Eurocentric environment.

If Rastafarianism functions as an ideological corrective to the suffering, exploitation and alienation experienced by young people of color the world over, it holds an especially heightened resonance and appeal for Africans and those of African descent. And while the messages expounded by the Rastafari promote love and respect for all living things and emphasize the paramount importance of human dignity and self-respect, above all else they speak of freedom from spiritual, psychological as well as physical slavery and oppression (things Africans have come to know much about over the course of the last four centuries, be it directly via the holocaust of the *Middle Passage* or indirectly through the degrading experience of colonization). In their attempts to heal the wounds inflicted upon the African race by the *civilized* nations of the world, Rastas continually extol the virtues and superiority of African culture and civilization past and present. And for many young people in Africa and throughout the African Diaspora,

Rastafari serves as a potent symbol and expression of defiance, independence, racial pride and solidarity.

Like the Pan-Africanists who preceded them and from whom they borrowed so much (individuals like Edward W. Blyden, Dr. W.E.B. Dubois, Frantz Fanon, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and most notably Marcus Mosiah Garvey³), Rastas have been instrumental in helping Black youth become more aware of their long and venerable history and in teaching them not to be ashamed of their race and cultural heritage. As one writer put it (Forsythe 1980), Rastafari represents the "resurgence of African revivalism and spiritualism, and hence qualifies as an authentic mass African renaissance movement."

The primary aim of this paper is to examine the spread of the Jamaican Rastafarian movement and its attendant forms of cultural expression to West Africa,⁴ and in so doing to pinpoint the various mechanisms and processes that have over the course of the past two decades contributed to its diffusion among urban-based West African youth. Throughout I will be using the terms Rastafarian, Rastafari and Rasta interchangeably in referring to this basically amorphous and decentralized movement whose membership the world over is commonly identified by adherence to and/or utilization of a core set of:

(1) **Beliefs**-That God ("Jah") is black; that Haile Selassie I (the deceased former emperor of Ethiopia who is also referred to by his given name and title *Ras Tafari*, is the Messiah prophet of the Black race and God incarnate; that the evils of the world can be attributed to the pervasive and corrupting influences of Western civilization ("Babylon"); that the redemption of Blacks in the Diaspora is contingent on their return "home" to Africa ("African Repatriation"); that Rastas are the true descendants of the ancient Israelites depicted in the Old Testament; that Western Christianity represents a corruption of a purer and more ancient Judeo-Christian tradition that has been faithfully preserved throughout the millennia by the 1500-year-old Ethiopian Coptic Church; and that the world will shortly self-destruct as prophesized in the Book of Revelations ("The Apocalypse") and be replaced by a new, divinely inspired age populated by those judged righteous enough to survive the final battle of Armageddon.

(2) **Rituals and practices**-The ritual/secular use of music (Reggae and *Nyabingi*⁵ music) and drugs (*ganja*); strict adherence to dietary proscriptions derived in large part from the Old Testament; constant study, discussion and reinterpretation of the teachings contained in the Bible and the speeches of Marcus Garvey and Haile Selassie (usually within the context of collective "reasoning sessions"⁶); and the cultivation of attitudes and habits deemed conducive to promoting a healthy and upstanding way of life (e.g. eating only pure, unprocessed foods, eschewing the use of hard drugs and alcohol, placing maximum emphasis on individual freedom and self-initiative and acting honestly in all dealings with one's fellow human beings).

(3) **Modes of appearance, dress and speech**—The wearing of “dreadlocks” (the long matted hair style that has the world over become synonymous with the culture of Rastafari) and brightly colored clothing and ornaments in various combinations of the colors red, gold (or yellow), green and black (the “colors of Africa”), along with the use of “iyaric” or “Dread talk” (a special language or dialect, consisting of a mixture/modification of Jamaican Creole and Standard English, created by Rastas to express their heightened consciousness and profound awareness of the true nature and power of the spoken word) (cf. Pollard 1980; 1982).

Mediums of Diffusion

The spread and popularity of Rastafarian religion and culture in West Africa can, it appears, be linked to the following set of interrelated agencies or factors: (1) the widespread appeal and penetration of reggae music and the religious and sociopolitical messages embodied therein, (2) the ritual/secular use of cannabis and its associated trade, (3) the appropriation of Rasta-inspired fashions and (4) the missionary work carried out by Jamaican and Anglo-Jamaican Rastas. Below I will examine each of these components separately in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the contributions they have made and continue to make in spreading the religion and culture of Jamaican Rastafarianism in West Africa.

The Music

What is perhaps most unique about Rastafari is that it may represent the only contemporary socioreligious movement whose diffusion is directly tied to a medium of popular culture, reggae music (a form of Jamaican pop music which developed in the late 1960s from a fusion of its antecedents ska and rock steady with African drumming techniques and American rhythm and blues, soul, gospel and rock music [see Clarke 1980; Davis 1982]).

That reggae music caught on fairly quickly in Africa is not surprising, given the tremendous popularity Caribbean music has enjoyed throughout the continent for the past 50 years. In the 1960s and 70s for example, Zaire represented one of the largest markets in the world for the sale of salsa and rumba records (Bergman 1985, 47), and much of the African pop music being played today (e.g. the ubiquitous Zairian soukous and its many offshoots) has been heavily influenced by Latin American rhythms and melodies (Bergman 1985; Collins 1985; Graham 1988; Stapleton and May 1987). Similarly, many contemporary African pop musicians who later went on to develop their own unique indigenous styles—people like Youssou N’Dour of Senegal and the Zairians Tabu Ley Rochereau and Franco—began their careers playing the then

widely popular Afro-Cuban "rumba" music (Cathcart 1989; Stapleton and May 1987).

Since the mid-to-late 1970s, Africa has also served as a major international market for reggae music. As Sebastian Clarke (1980, 167) points out:

some of the white record companies' motivation for entering the reggae music business is the large market for reggae in Africa . . . Since the early 1950s Calypso, and later all forms of Jamaican . . . music, sold massively on that continent, so it does not come as a surprise that this market absorbs a greater proportion of sales [in reggae] than that of Europe or America.

Like everywhere across the globe, it was Bob Marley who served as the foremost apostle of reggae on the African continent. During a trip to Africa in the early 1980s, Stephen Davis (1982, 82) heard Marley's songs being played wherever he traveled, and in an article published in the *Village Voice* in March of 1984, Randall Grass claimed Marley to be one of the best-selling musical artists on the continent (second only to the country singer Jim Reeves). African reggae musicians frequently cite Marley as their earliest and most enduring musical (as well as ideological) influence, and I can personally attest to the immense popularity he continues to enjoy in places like Mali, Senegal, Gambia, Ghana, Burkina Faso and the Côte d'Ivoire.

The impact of Bob Marley (both his music and media-generated image) on youth in West Africa, and West African Rastas in particular, should not be underestimated. Throughout much of the region (and from what I can gather, the continent as a whole), Marley's songs can be heard blasting out of boom boxes and stereo systems in bars, discos and taxicabs; his cassettes are on sale in urban and even rural marketplaces; and his dreadlocked profile stares out from t-shirts and wall posters in market stalls, homes and restaurants. Along with Muhammad Ali, James Brown and Michael Jackson, Bob Marley ranks among the most popular and influential pan-African heroes of all time—being widely known, listened to, admired and idolized by young people everywhere. One would be hard pressed to find an urban-based West African youth who is not familiar with this man and his music, and it is, I believe, no exaggeration to claim that for many the name of Bob Marley is synonymous with both reggae and Rastafarianism.⁷

Reggae made its initial impact in Africa during the mid-1970s, and since this time it has served as a major force in the urban pop music scenes of numerous (particularly Anglophone) West African nations. And while the reasons for this are fairly complex and varied—ranging from the structural and functional affinities that exist between indigenous African musical forms and reggae, the potent appeal of the music's religiously inspired and sociopolitically charged song texts and the ea-

gerness on the part of young people in Africa to identify with a Black, transnational pop music idiom—there is little doubt that as foreign musical styles and influences go, reggae holds a prominent place in the hearts and minds of a fairly large contingent of young West Africans. As one astute Nigerian reggae musician observed:

The problem with people in the diaspora is similar if not identical to the situation here in Africa. The colonies are fighting for freedom, the independent states are fighting against neocolonialism, and the overall effect is perpetual instability, with the common man feeling the brunt of it all. Living in a depressed economic condition where the standard of living is deplorable, there will always be a cry for improvement especially where protest cannot be directly registered. It is inevitable to embrace the messages and philosophies of reggae music as a means of protest against the oppressors and self-aggrandizement.

The images and tribulations portrayed through the records of reggae musicians make the music very attractive to the African people. The fact that the original roots of Reggae music is Africa facilitates the swiftness in rekindling the flames of the music, especially after its refinement with scientific tools and instruments in the Western world, even though the messages remain very original and unadulterated. *Just like cocoa seeds taken away raw and brought back fully refined as cocoa drinks, beverages and body lotions, it will always find a place in the heart of our people at all times* (Tera Kota, cited in Steffens 1990, 64) [emphasis added].

Throughout the region one finds a profusion of cassettes by Jamaican, Anglo-Jamaican and African reggae artists on sale in record shops and market stalls in every major city and most large towns. Reggae is also frequently heard on local radio stations, in taxis, discos, on street corners and everywhere young people congregate. Furthermore, many West African pop musicians have either played reggae music at one point in their careers or incorporated reggae rhythms and/or Rasta-inspired lyrics in their songs.

In an article by Graeme Ewens (*West Africa* 1990, 2136) chronicling the growth of pop music in Africa during the past decade, the vital contributions made by reggae to the West African pop music scene are duly noted—Ewens in turn asserting that the upsurge in popularity of reggae among West African youth developed out of their growing dissatisfaction with both the overproduced, high-tech Western disco/rap/funk that has lately been “swamping the dance floors” of urban nightclubs and the perceived stuffiness and rigidity of traditional music. Reggae’s widespread appeal, according to this author, is based upon its ability to successfully combine both these musical forms by utilizing innovative Western technology while at the same time retaining much of the music’s original African flavor, creating a unique blend of both the old and the new.

For decades now, Nigerians have been listening and dancing to reggae; initial interest in this Jamaican music can be traced back to the early 1970s when the film *The Harder They Come*, which featured the Jamaican reggae artist Jimmy Cliff and a soundtrack consisting entirely of reggae songs, was first shown in movie theaters in the Nigerian capital, Lagos. Since then the growing appeal of reggae here has, according to Roger Steffens (1990, 14), founding editor of *The Beat*,⁸ resulted in its adoption as the nation's "preeminent rhythm and urban youth culture phenomenon":

Name this country: There are dreadlocks in its teeming streets, sporting red, gold, and green clothing festooned with badges whose patois inscriptions call for peace, love, and I-nity. Its jam-packed nightclubs feature djs toasting over dub tracks, while couples wine and grind till dawn. Its stores rapidly sell out the latest Reggae hits by artists with names like Ras Kimono, Kole-Man Revolutionaire, and the Mandators. Meanwhile, perplexed authorities lament the eclipse of the country's traditional culture and the hold that reggae has taken of its youth. Jamaica, right? Wrong. You're in Nigeria, where reggae is king.

And while this journalistic description may be somewhat overstated, the many reggae clubs and groups presently functioning in Nigeria and the regional/international popularity that a handful of the country's major reggae artists have attained (people like Sonny Okusun, Evi-Edna Ogholi and Majek Fashek), no doubt underscores the vibrancy of the current reggae music scene here.

In the other Anglophone nations of West Africa—Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Ghana—the situation vis-à-vis reggae and contemporary urban youth culture is similar to that described above. To cite just one example: with the possible exception of Gambia and Nigeria, nowhere in the region does reggae enjoy such a large and devoted following as in Ghana. Nearly all the music outlets (from large record shops to tiny market stalls) in the capital Accra and other large Ghanaian cities and towns stock a wide assortment of reggae cassettes by African, Jamaican and Anglo-Jamaican reggae artists (the most popular among these being the West African singers/songwriters Evi-Edna Ogholi, Majek Fashek and Alpha Blondy and the Jamaican superstars Bob Marley, Peter Tosh and Jimmy Cliff). Accra even boasts a number of music shops devoted entirely to reggae, (one of which is even owned and operated by a Jamaican) where the largest selection of LPs and cassettes by both the more popular and lesser known African reggae artists can be found.

In a survey conducted by the ethnomusicologist Andrew Kaye in 1989 of 210 young people residing in Accra and Kumasi, Bob Marley ranked highest in popularity from among a list of a dozen well-known foreign and Ghanaian musicians: 73 percent of those sampled cited

Marley as one of their favorite artists, while the African-American pop singer Lionel Ritchie, the Ghanaian highlife singer A.B. Crentsil, and the American country and western singer Jim Reeves all vied for the number two position, each with popularity ratings of approximately 60 percent) (Kaye, personal communication).

Reggae also receives a substantial amount of airplay on GBC's (Ghana Broadcasting Corporation) Radio One. In a survey I conducted over a two month period, in which a total of 45 hours of radio programming was sampled on different days and during varying timeslots, reggae received on average 20 percent of the airtime taken up by music—a figure only slightly lower than that for Ghanaian Highlife (24 percent) and Anglo-American pop music (27 percent), and one significantly higher than that for American country (8 percent), other African (8 percent) and gospel music (5 percent). Andrew Kaye received very similar results when he asked 82 record store salesmen in Accra (mostly young men in their 20s) to state their favorite type of music: 30 percent chose funk, 30 percent highlife and 18 percent reggae (Kaye, personal communication).

And while neither the preferences of the populations sampled in Kaye's surveys nor the types of recordings played most frequently on the radio by local DJ's accurately reflect the musical tastes of the majority of Ghanaians nationwide, they do, however, provide a fairly good picture of the types of music listened to most by the country's major trend setters (i.e. DJs and urban-based youth).

Apart from just listening to reggae, African musicians have for the past few decades been experimenting with this musical genre as well. And while much of the reggae recorded by these artists is virtually indistinguishable from its Caribbean prototype (containing standard Jamaican reggae beats, melodies and lyrics sung in English), there are those artists who have gone a step further and utilized their native languages and focused on themes of local, national and/or regional import in at least a sampling of their songs. An excellent example of this can be seen in the work of Evi-Edna Ogholi—the "Queen of Nigerian reggae"—a substantial portion of whose repertoire is sung in her native Isoko and focuses on issues relating specifically to Nigerian society and culture. In her song "One Kilometer" (1988), for example, Ogholi comments on the incredible amount of linguistic diversity that exists in her country and the urgent need to find a viable common language:

Which one of them me go speak
I say which one of them me go speak
Which one of them me go speak
Which one of them me go speak

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Me travel to Emede me go speak Isoko
Me travel to Urhelli me go speak Uroko
Me travel to Enugu me go speak Ibo
Me travel to Sokoto me go speak Fulani
Me travel to Kaduna me go speak Hausa

One kilometer means another language
One half kilometer means another language

All I'm saying's lingua franca
All I'm saying's lingua franca

As discussed in greater detail below, across West Africa reggae music often functions as just such a *lingua* or *musica franca*—transcending ethnic, national and regional boundaries through its perceived connections to Caribbean and transnational pop music culture and its heavy reliance on the use of English (and in francophone countries, both English and French) song texts.

While African musicians have over the years been incorporating stylistic elements borrowed from reggae into their music (the Zimbabwean Thomas Mapfumo, to cite one prominent example), some like the Ivorian Alpha Blondy and the Ghanaian Sympleman Canteley have created a totally new form of syncretic African pop music, singing for the most part in their own local languages and employing indigenous African instruments, melodies and rhythms in their mix. This musical synthesis has proven so potent that it has been feeding back into the international pop scene, influencing the music of both Jamaican and British reggae musicians. As the musicologist John Collins (1985, 93) observed, "With reggae music looking to Africa for inspiration, and African musicians playing local versions of reggae, it is no wonder that the resulting Afro-reggae fusion is breaking all national boundaries and drawing the pop scenes of Europe, the New World and Africa closer together."

The attraction reggae holds for Africans may be attributed in part to the fact that it functions simultaneously on two very important levels: as an entertaining and very danceable form of consciousness raising and, just as importantly, as a means of expressing pan-African solidarity with their brothers and sisters in the Diaspora (a kind of "spiritual hands across the water between the Old World and the New" to once again quote Steffens [1990, 64]).

As my research bears out, throughout much of Western Africa reggae music also serves as the principle medium for spreading the religion and culture of Rastafari. Of the 100 or so Rastas I interviewed in Ghana, where two distinct Rastafarian communities are presently functioning—one affiliated with the Ethiopian World Federation [EWF] and the other with the Jamaican-based Twelve Tribes of Israel—80 percent admitted that their initial interest in Rastafari was stimu-

lated by a prior exposure to reggae. And in the vast majority of cases it was the music of Bob Marley in particular that made the greatest and most lasting impression on these young people (although the songs of Peter Tosh, Jimmy Cliff and African reggae artists like the Ivorian Alpha Blondy, the Nigerians Evi-Edna Ogholi and Majek Fashek, and the South African Lucky Dube have exercised a considerable influence here as well).

That reggae should play such a crucial role in the spread of Rastafarian movement in West Africa is not surprising when one takes into account the special emphasis placed on music (and in certain instances popular music) in many of the region's new urban-based religious formations. Strong links are known to exist, for example, between juju music and the Nigerian Aladura churches (Collins and Richard 1982, 127, 132), and many of the musicians and hymns used by independent spiritual churches in Ghana are drawn from highlife music (these churches having in turn spawned a new and popular music genre called "spiritual highlife") (Chernoff 1985, 165). The anthropologist John Chernoff (1985) could just as easily be speaking about the two major centers of Rastafarian activity in Ghana (i.e. the Twelve Tribes compound in Labadi and the EWF house in Dzorwulu) when he mentions how these churches often serve as places where members can "experience brotherhood and sisterhood in an atmosphere of love, obtain spiritual guidance and support to deal with their problems, and, of course, have a great time dancing and singing."

In both the Western and the non-Western world popular music frequently serves as a powerful symbol of cultural identity and an important medium of expression and conflict mediation for those struggling against the alienation, exploitation and impoverishment that is often a byproduct of the changes wrought by urbanization and modernization (Manuel 1988). Similarly, popular music also functions as a major contributor to the creation and maintenance of new social images and identities that have developed in response to the novel conditions engendered by urban living; large cities often serve as "bridge-heads of transnational cultural influences" and urban-based pop musicians highly visible "culture brokers" who play a dominant role the shaping of an "urban consciousness" and defining the aspirations of urban-based youth¹⁰ (Hannerz 1992, 230).

In West Africa, these new urban-based identities are often rooted in the construction of a pan-ethnic and/or pan African consciousness, and pop music—which tends to cut across linguistic, ethnic, social and national boundaries—has proven a potent force for promoting interethnic and cross-cultural contacts and communication and for fostering a heightened sense of urban, national, regional and pan-African awareness and solidarity (cf. Barber 1987, 77; Chernoff 1985, 156; Coplan 1978, 110-12 and 1982, 116; Ware 1978, 315-18).

Local reggae musicians, who have been instrumental in promoting the culture of Rastafari, continue to function as outspoken critics of the divisive ethnic and nationalist tendencies that work to impede unity and growth in West Africa. With their apparent lack of ethnic chauvinism, their frequent use of English as *lingua franca* in their song texts and their intense commitment to pan-Africanism, these Rastas and reggae artists provide a highly visible model for those seeking to escape from the narrow confines of ethnic or kin-based social relationships and establish wider, more inclusive networks of belonging and allegiance. And while other facets of life exist in the urban West African setting which promote the development of similar interethnic, heterogeneous worldviews—Afro-Christian syncretic churches, sports clubs, the workplace, school and non-ethnic based voluntary associations, etc.—none of these come close to providing the intense national, regional as well as pan-African identifications commonly fostered by reggae music and adherence to Rastafarianism.

The Drug

Throughout West Africa the use of and trade in cannabis is closely associated both in actual fact and public perceptions with the culture of Rastafari. Most West African Rastas smoke cannabis on a regular basis and a substantial number are or have in the past been involved in either peddling or smuggling this illicit substance. For example, among the Rastas I interviewed in Ghana, only three did not smoke *ganja* (the Jamaican-Hindi term for cannabis used by many of my Rastas informants), while a third had been involved at one point in their lives with either its cultivation or sale. Furthermore, Ghanaians will commonly refer to any young man seen hanging out on the street smoking or peddling "wee" (a local Ghanaian term for cannabis) as "Rasta."

The smoking of cannabis by Rastas in West Africa serves, among other things, to create well-defined social boundaries between those who belong or who may someday belong to the movement and the rest of society. And while few would openly admit that their involvement with Rastafari was in any way influenced by their prior or parallel involvement with cannabis, my research shows that in a substantial number of cases initial entry into the local 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.

Similarly, whereas an interest in reggae may have provided the initial attraction for many to the movement, the smoking of cannabis (often in the context of extended "reasoning sessions") served as the most prominent ritual activity engaged in on a daily basis by the ma-

jority of Rastas in West Africa; an activity which also helped to inspire in neophytes a serious commitment to Rastafari by providing the insights, visions and transformative experiences that are commonly required to bring about full-scale conversion to the faith.

From a review of the available archaeological, historical, ethnographic and linguistic records, it would appear that the introduction of cannabis to West Africa is of relatively recent origin.¹¹ Brian Du Toit (1980, 9-18, 26), in his comprehensive survey of the diffusion of cannabis in Africa, remarks upon the lack of evidence for the traditional use of this substance in West African populations and claims it to have only been widely available here beginning around the time of the Second World War (when it may have been introduced into Nigeria and perhaps a handful of other West African countries by sailors and soldiers returning from the Far East, the Middle East and North Africa).

A number of my informants (both Rastas and non-Rastas) claimed that the spread of reggae and Rastafarianism in West Africa was directly responsible for the upsurge in cannabis use that occurred within the past 10 to 15 years (in Ghana for example, the cultivation and smoking of cannabis has, in a relatively brief amount of time, increased to the point where 1990 was officially declared the "Year of the War on Wee" [see the *People's Daily Graphic*, 6 January 1990]). Taking into account, on the one hand, the evidence outlined above which points to the fairly recent introduction of cannabis to West Africa and, on the other, the strong links that exist throughout the region between cannabis and the culture of Rastafari, these claims may be valid (although more extensive research must to be undertaken before they can be substantiated).

The Fashions

One of the most conspicuous elements associated with the spread of the Rastafarian movement in West Africa is the fashion trends it has inspired, trends engendered in large part by the wide-scale popularity and proliferation of reggae music. In a great many instances the appropriation of reggae/Rastafarian fashions represent the total extent to which young people in West Africa personally relate to Rastafari, especially those who are not connected to any of the local Rasta communities and as a result have no role models, overarching precepts and/or standards of behavior to guide their actions and education in the faith.

Throughout the region dreadlocks, Rasta colors and Dread Talk are frequently adopted by young men¹² wishing to identify with this global, pan-African movement or subculture, many of whom possess little or no insight into the deeper historical, religious and sociopolitical

aspects of Rastafarianism. Among these individuals, the stylistic elements and forms of expression associated with the Rastafari represent little more than another Western or transnational pop culture idiom that can be manipulated and employed to serve specific material ends like joining a reggae band, meeting women, interacting with young tourists and gaining the respect of one's peers that comes with the appearance of being trendy.

To serious-minded Rastas, on the other hand, these components serve mainly as external symbols of their inner commitment to the fundamental precepts and practices of the faith, the "higher consciousness" they have achieved as a result of their adherence to Rastafari, their alienation and self-imposed estrangement from the wider society and their solidarity with other Blacks throughout the globe who, driven by deep religious convictions and/or antineocolonial fervor, have donned the mantle of Rastafari.

That an imported, transnational style of Black popular music like reggae should spark the wide scale adoption of new fashion trends in West Africa is by no means a unique phenomenon. In Sierra Leone, for example, the growth in popularity of American soul music and its accompanying fashions in the late 1960s was so rapid and intense that by the fall of 1969 "Afro" hairstyles were all the rage in Freetown (a situation which appears all the more remarkable when one takes into account the fact that just six months prior to this time few Afro's could be seen in Sierra Leone) (Ware 1978, 311). And today African-American pop music and fashion continue to exert an influence on growing numbers of urban-based West African youth (cf. *New York Times* article "U.S. Black Culture Plays Well in Africa," 4 September 1988).

With young Nigerians in Kano performing break dancing routines at traditional durbar celebrations honoring the local Emir; with Michael Jackson, M.C. Hammer and Bob Marley blaring out of discos, bars and taxi cabs throughout the region; with movies, television shows and music videos featuring African-Americans all the rage in places like Lagos, Banjul and Accra; and with U.S. cosmetic companies going all out to hawk their products to an increasingly receptive African market (through media ad campaigns, the distribution of fashion magazines and posters and the organization of local fashion shows)—it is becoming more difficult than ever to overlook or ignore the expanding role played by Caribbean and African-American pop music, fashions and culture in urban, and to an increasing extent, even rural African societies. Viewed from this perspective, the spread of Rastafarian music and fashions in West Africa appears to represent but one more chapter in the ongoing assimilation by urban-based African youth of the culture of the Diaspora,¹³ which itself represents a reworking of elements derived in part from indigenous African sources.¹⁴

The Messages/Belief System

The strong emphasis and reliance placed on Judeo-Christian teachings (i.e. the Old Testament and the millenarian visions and prophecies contained in the Book of Revelations) by Rastafarians also accounts in part for the movement's initial as well as continued success in attracting West African adherents. For individuals already familiar with the basic tenets of Christianity as a result of the missionary work carried out in Africa by Catholic and Protestant evangelical orders during the last four centuries (cf. Baeta 1968; Debrunner 1967; Sanneh 1983), the Biblical themes and imagery pervading Rastafarian belief, symbolism and practice have a familiar ring and are readily understood and accepted. But perhaps more importantly, Rasta critique of the dogmatic, institutionalized "White" versions of Christianity promulgated by Americans and Europeans find a particularly receptive audience here, especially among those who find it difficult accepting in toto these alien, and in many instances, Eurocentric teachings and practices.

In Ghana, for example, close to 90 percent of all Rastas come from Christian backgrounds, and the prevailing Christian orientation of contemporary Ghanaian urban society¹⁵ appears to function as one of the major factors responsible for the relatively large number of serious-minded Rastas to be found in this country today. Further confirmation of this hypothesis may be gleaned from the fact that the only other nation in West Africa that harbors a sizable Rastafarian population—Nigeria—also contains the largest total number of Christians in the region (approximately 19 million) (*Africa South of the Sahara* 1992).

Similarly, the relatively small following the movement has managed to generate in Senegal and other Islamicized West African nations may be due in no small part to the absence there of large numbers of Christians. With the sole exception of a handful of "orthodox" Rastas living on the island of Gorée a few kilometers off the coast of Dakar—all of whom were personally indoctrinated into the movement and its teachings in the early 1980s by a Jamaican named Ras Walda Ab—few Senegalese Dreads¹⁶ express any serious interest in or commitment to the more religiously oriented Judeo-Christian based aspects of Rastafari (most continuing to maintain a nominal affiliation with Islam or claiming to identify with no organized religion whatever). Consequently, the majority of Dreads in Senegal rarely read the Bible and refuse to accept the divinity of Haile Selassie or adhere to the Biblically-derived proscriptions that are part and parcel of the "authentic" Rastafarian experience.

In Gambia, where reggae music and Dread culture is ubiquitous but, like Senegal, the dominant religion is Islam and where Christians make up only a tiny fraction of the nation's total population, a serious

adherence to the religious tenets of Rastafari also represents the exception rather than the rule. And even those Gambians who profess to being Christians "in the Rastafarian sense of the word" (a common response given by young Gambians wishing to qualify their affiliations to Christianity, one which frequently emphasizes the Rastas' Afrocentric interpretations of Judeo-Christian scripture) tend to exhibit little knowledge of or real interest in the Bible (few own their own copies) or the religiously-based teachings and precepts typically espoused by serious Rastafarians.

Rather, it is in their commitment to and outspoken support of pan-Africanism and Black solidarity where non-religiously oriented West African Rastas exhibit the greatest degree of concordance with their more orthodox brethren. Concerns centering around the political and economic unification of Africa and the global brotherhood of all peoples of African descent inform the thinking and rhetoric of nearly every West African Rasta I came into contact with and proved to be one of the few overarching principles of the movement upon which all could agree.

And while many Rastas did little more than give lip service to these principles, a number were actively working to bridge the gap dividing themselves from their brothers and sisters in other local ethnic groups, other African nations and throughout the Diaspora. Through their establishment of business partnerships and collectives with Africans from other countries as well as with Blacks from Europe, the Caribbean and the U.S.; through their promotion of interethnic and interregional cooperation and understanding via the universal language of pop music; and perhaps most significantly, by serving as role models for others who are seeking an alternative to the ethnic rivalries and chauvinism that still feature so prominently in many contemporary African societies—Rastafarians throughout the region view themselves as vital contributors to positive social change and active participants in the centuries-long struggle to make the pan-African dream of ethnic, regional and continent-wide unity a reality.

Jamaican Apostles and Missionaries

Due in part to the Afrocentric nature of Jamaican Rastafarianism and the strong emphasis placed within the movement on African repatriation, various Jamaican and Anglo-Jamaican Rastas have over the course of the last two decades either resettled in or traveled extensively throughout Africa. And during their sojourns on the continent, a By far the most orthodox and committed Rastas I encountered in West Africa were those affiliated with communities originally established by Jamaicans or Anglo-Jamaicans, many of whom have continued to remain in close contact with the groups they spawned. It was a

Jamaican named Wolde Mikal who founded the EWF in Accra during the mid-1970s, and another Jamaican Ras Walda Ab who, in addition to carrying on Wolde's work in Ghana, was responsible for establishing the small Senegalese Rasta community on Gorée island alluded to above. Similarly, the largest group of Rastas in Ghana, the Twelve Tribes of Israel, was set up as an African branch of the Jamaican Twelve Tribes organization by its leader Prophet Gad, who made a trip to Ghana in the mid-1980s for this very purpose (to this day many Jamaicans and Anglo-Jamaicans associated with the Twelve Tribes continue to maintain close personal contacts with the Ghanaian chapter—spending long periods of time or just vacationing for a few weeks with the group at their compound/headquarters in Labadi).

It is the literature provided by these apostles of Rastafari and, perhaps more importantly, the deeper personal knowledge and understanding of the movement that they bring to Africa—a much deeper knowledge and understanding than may be gained through just listening to reggae music (which is how the vast majority of West Africans obtain their information about Rastafari)—that accounts in large part for the more serious attitude and commitment shown by those affiliated with either the EWF, the Twelve Tribes or the Gorée community. Moreover, it may be assumed that the apparent lack of contacts between local Dreads and Jamaican or Anglo-Jamaican Rastas in Gambia is responsible in part for the apparent shallowness of Rasta life there.

Anglophone vs. Francophone Contexts

The impact of the Rastafarian movement has generally been much greater in the English as opposed to the French speaking regions of West Africa. Apart from the Gorée community and the Senegambian-based Baye Faal sect (a heterodox Islamic group whose membership is noted for their donning of dreadlocks and use of *ganja* [see Savishinsky, 1994]), one encounters few Rastas or dreadlocked youth in Senegal and other Francophone countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso and the Côte d'Ivoire. This stands in sharp contrast to places like Ghana, Nigeria and Gambia, where Rastafarian/Dread culture represents a fairly widespread and conspicuous urban phenomenon.

The reasons for such differences can, I believe, be linked to two key factors: (1) the linguistic components that have either favored or inhibited the spread of reggae music, the primary medium for the dissemination of Rastafarian culture throughout the region, and (2) the patterns of emigration that commonly obtain in Anglophone as compared with Francophone West Africa.

As discussed in some detail above, reggae has in the past enjoyed and continues to enjoy considerable popularity throughout West Africa.

But the intensity of interest this music has generated in Anglophone countries far exceeds that typically found in Francophone ones. With the sole exception of the Ivorian Alpha Blondy (whose interest in reggae music and Rastafarianism apparently took root during his brief stay in Liberia in the late 1970s and blossomed during the subsequent three years he spent in New York attending first Hunter College and then Columbia University [Davis 1988, 34]), all the regionally and internationally renowned African reggae artists—the Gambian Demba Conta, the South African Lucy Dube and the Nigerians Evi-Edna Ogholi and Majek Fashek, for example—hail from Anglophone Africa.

The vast majority of the West Africans I interviewed (Rastas as well as non-Rastas) attributed such differences in the impact and popularity of reggae to the inability of French-speaking Africans to fully understand and appreciate the music's song texts. In the words of one dreadlocked Gambian youth:

Sure, the Senegalese by all means enjoy reggae, but to them it is just the beat that matters, since they don't speak English and so they only get half the thing, because the words sung by Marley, Peter Tosh, Jimmy Cliff and all those other Jamaican reggae musicians are just as important as the music. Listening to Bob Marley without "overstanding" what he's saying is like eating *benachin* [a local Senegambian dish made with fish, rice, tomatoes, chile peppers and other assorted vegetables] that doesn't have any fish. How can a person really enjoy *benachin* when no fish is in the pot? It's just the same as listening to reggae without "overstanding" the lyrics.

In West Africa, as elsewhere, reggae music has served as the primary medium for spreading the religion and culture of Rastafari. And as one might expect, the movement has experienced its greatest impact in those places where reggae has enjoyed its widest influence and appeal—i.e. Anglophone urban centers (cities everywhere, as Hannerz points out [1992, 201-3], typically serve as transcultural "switchboards" and havens for subcultures—attracting those from the countryside who wish to become involved with these subcultures and, in the case of the Third World, metropolitan culture in general).

The second major factor contributing to the spread of reggae and Rastafarian culture in West Africa is tied directly to differential patterns of transcontinental emigration. Whereas France was the most popular destination for those emigrating to Europe from Francophone West Africa during the last few decades, Anglophone West Africans have by and large opted to settle in England. Such patterns of emigration can be attributed, on the one hand, to the less stringent restrictions imposed in the past by the metropolises on former colonial subjects wishing to obtain visas, political asylum or residence permits¹⁸ and, on the other, to the relative lack of linguistic barriers immigrants face in the metropolises (language being a factor which also helps to explain why

large numbers of Anglophone West Africans have emigrated to Holland, where English is widely spoken, and Francophone West Africans, Belgium) (cf. Castles 1984; Hammer 1985).

It comes as no surprise then to discover that for decades now large numbers of Ghanaians, Gambians and other Anglophone West Africans have been residing in or traveling to England and the Netherlands—countries which have served as major centers of reggae and Rastafarian activity in Europe for the past 20 years. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, many young Anglophone West African immigrants came into direct contact with the burgeoning Rastafarian scenes in places like London and Amsterdam, and as my research bears out, it was many of these very same individuals who were responsible for bringing reggae music and the culture of Rastafari to the attention of friends and relatives back home in Africa.

Rastafari in West Africa: African Christian Church, New Age Movement or Pop Culture Idiom?

The search for too narrow a definition of or category in which to place West African Rastafarianism would ultimately prove futile since, as elsewhere, the movement means a number of different things to different people and as such manifests itself in a variety of guises (e.g. as either one or any combination of the following: a millenarian, messianic, revivalistic, pan-African or anticolonial/antineocolonial movement, as well as an appropriation of Black transnational popular culture). Consequently, I will make no attempt to fit Rastafari into some taxonomic straightjacket but will instead try to demonstrate just how fluid, eclectic and multivocal the movement is in its West African setting.

The specifically religious character of Rastafarianism in West Africa is best exemplified by those individuals belonging to any one of the organized Rasta communities presently functioning in the region, wherein a strict observance of religiously-based proscriptions, an expectation of the imminent arrival of the millennium as outlined in the Book of Revelations, a zealous devotion to Biblical study, the deification of Haile Selassie and a sense of belonging to a centuries-old religious tradition with links to ancient Judaism and Ethiopian Christianity¹⁹ prove to be the rule rather than the exception.

In many ways West African Rastafarianism fits comfortably within the basic pattern or scheme of the growing number of syncretic, independent Christian-based churches and religious movements that have been flourishing on the continent since the turn of the century. Harold Turner, in his book *Religious Innovation in Africa* (1979, 261-2) presents a list of features shared in common by these independent

African churches, many of which represent defining features or characteristics of West African Rastafarianism as well. The most prominent among these are (1) the dramatic break made with various elements of traditional religion such as magic or juju, fetishism and ancestor veneration, (2) moral reform as a major theme and the subsequent prohibition of corrupting influences like alcohol and tobacco, (3) the evolution of new forms of social organization that transcend the boundaries of language, tribe and region and contribute to the development of a pan-Africanist outlook, and (4) a deep concern for "personal and corporate spiritual renewal" and the recovery of individual pride and self-esteem.

If one ignores the fact that Rastafarianism originated not in Africa but in the Diaspora, what Turner (1979, 301) has to say about these independent African churches in the following paragraph applies equally as well to the various manifestations of Rastafari found functioning today in West Africa:

Many of these new religious movements have been able to replace the tribe and its mythology by a new "place in which to feel at home," the independent all-African church, founded in Africa by Africans and for Africans, under the prophetic leader specially raised up in African by God himself. Here we have the beginnings of a new sense of identity over and against other races and their churches, often coupled with the vision of a great African church that will command the respect of the whole world and make its own special contribution to the religions of mankind. This church finds its mythology in the "Ethiopian" concept, derived from the biblical references to Ethiopia and embodied in the ancient Christian kingdom of Ethiopia—an African nation not dependent on Europeans for its religion and even able to defeat them in battle, as proved in the defeat of the Italians at Aduwa in 1896.

Similarly, one cannot help but notice the obvious parallels that exist between Rastafarianism in West Africa and the more universalist, Christian-based African sects described by Bennetta Jules-Rosette in her book, *The New Religions of Africa* (1979, 221):

The groups that use "world" religions or transplanted churches as a rubric for change stress that these religions form interethnic and transcultural associative networks. Christianity in Africa has most notably had this pluralizing effect. While some of the new Christian groups of Africa originate in ethnically homogenous areas, most emphasize the potential and even the necessity for cultural sharing through overarching symbols and doctrine. . . .

Still there remain a number of areas in which West African Rastafarianism differs significantly from the new African religious movements mentioned above. For instance, among the Rastafari one finds an obvious absence of (1) local charismatic leaders (preachers,

prophets, messiahs and healers), (2) large numbers of female participants and (3) ritual practices aimed at invoking the Holy Spirit and effecting spiritual healing—all of which represent defining features and characteristics of many of these African Christian groups (see Assimeng 1989; Baeta 1962; Jules-Rosette 1979; Turner 1979; Wyllie 1980). Taking such fundamental differences into consideration, it may perhaps be wiser to view West African manifestations of Rastafari in a far less circumscribed light.

One of the more striking features of urban life in Africa today is the extremely pluralistic nature of religious belief, practice and affiliation. In Ghana, for example, in addition to the proliferation of a wide array of independent African Christian churches, there exists a large number of spiritual or mystically-oriented global New Age movements or sects,²⁰ the origins of which are to be found mainly in Asia and the United States.²¹ Among the most active of these groups are the U.S.-based Eckankar, Church of Scientology and Rosicrucians (AMORC); the Indian-based Satya Sai Baba Foundation and Divine Light Mission; the Korean-based Unification Church of the Reverend Sun Yung Moon; and the Japanese-based Nichiren Shoshu Buddhists (*Africa Now*, January 1983; Assimeng 1989; personal field observations).

Ghanaians' eclectic taste for novel religious/mystical knowledge and experience is also readily apparent in the fairly large selection of occult books²² offered for sale in bookstores and bookstalls in Ghana's major cities and larger towns, as well as in the advertisements for New Age literature and organizations that regularly appear in local newspapers and periodicals.

In one of the few studies ever done on the origins and growth of New Age movements in West Africa, Rosalind Hackett (1991, 2) claims that trends similar to those currently appearing in Nigeria are surfacing throughout much of the region (a fact which, as she points out, should come as no surprise since for decades West Africans have shown a profound interest in things having to do with the mystical, metaphysical and occult). And much of what Hackett has to say about New Age groups in Nigeria helps shed light on the numerous points of contact that exist between these groups and West African Rastafarians.

For example, like the Rastafari, many of these organizations appeal mainly to disillusioned Christian males (a general absence of women is a common feature) and were established in West Africa either through direct missionary contacts, the acquisition of organizational literature (in the case of Rastafari, reggae music must surely qualify as such a form of literature) or by Africans who have lived or traveled overseas (1991, 3, 11, 13). Furthermore, as is also the case among the Rastafari, "internationalization" (i.e. the desire on the part of groups and individuals to belong to an international overseas religious, spiritual or political organization) serves as one of the principal factors re-

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sponsible for the continuing growth and appeal of these New Age movements in West Africa:

As *New Age literature* circulates more freely and because of more general trends, namely religious pluralization and globalization, growing consumer culture, increased communications and environmental awareness, we are likely to witness *New Age-style* religious developments in Nigeria and other West African countries. The bricolage offered by such a multi-media religious perspective provides an important material and symbolic interface between the local and the global (1991, 13) [emphasis added].

By substituting the words "reggae music" and "Rastafarian" in place of "New Age literature" and "New Age-style" in the above paragraph, one gains a clear sense of the strong ties and affinities that exist between these groups and Rastafarians in the West African context.

As mentioned earlier, for the vast majority of West Africans, Rastafari means little more than another local expression or adaptation of Western or transnational, albeit Black, pop culture. And even for those who consider themselves to be "bonafide" Rastas, a preoccupation and identification with the more superficial aspects of the movement (reggae music, dreadlocks, Dread Talk and Rasta clothing and accoutrements) represents the major extent of their understanding of and commitment to the faith. This situation is by no means unique to West Africa but tends to manifest itself wherever Rastafarianism has taken root, Jamaica included. For example, back in 1977 a noted Jamaican Rasta musician had this to say about the legions of new young converts to Rasta:

People coming into the faith are not really grounded in the hard-core religious philosophy, and some tend to go only by the paraphernalia and outward appearance of the culture. These temporary adherents do not necessarily weaken the faith but set the stage for a greater thrust of the Rasta message in the society at large. The danger however to the force of the teaching is that the outward appearances, the paraphernalia and the trappings, become the expression of the faith—rather than the deeper philosophy and discipline (Cedric Brooks, cited in the *Jamaica Journal* 1977, 14).

As one explores the varied meanings and functions popular art and culture have for groups and individuals in Africa today, the rigid dichotomy often assumed to exist between religious expression and popular culture begins to blur, giving way to a more holistic understanding of the vast array of interconnected elements and forces that currently work in tandem to shape African, and in particular urban African societies and cultures.

Johannes Fabian (1978, 316) views the popular arts in Africa as being closely bound up with a wider field of cultural practice and as

such argues that religious movements "can and must be understood as developments in the context of emerging popular culture" (which comprises secular as well as religious expression). In his study of newly emergent urban societies in southeastern Zaire, Fabian found that expressive media as diverse as popular song, charismatic religion and painting share common images, themes and messages which reflect the actual life experiences and preoccupations of urban dwellers—all three mediums contributing, in the words of Fabian, to the development of "creative forms of popular expressions which serve to underlie specific processes of consciousness-formation shared by the masses" (1978, 328).

The symbiotic relationship that often exists in Africa between the popular arts—most notably popular music²³—and religion has in a number of other instances led to the creation of new forms of popular expression that uniquely reflect the life experiences and consciousness of the masses. In West Africa this can be evidenced in the strong influence exerted by highlife and juju music in the urban-based Ghanaian and Nigerian independent churches respectively, as well as in the intimate relationship that exists between reggae music and Rastafarian religion and culture throughout the region. In these and no doubt numerous other cases, the popular arts and religion are so closely intertwined and interconnected that it is difficult if not impossible to disentangle the one from the other.

Bearing in mind all that has been discussed so far, it is perhaps best that we leave aside all attempts to find a single category in which to place West African Rastafarianism—e.g. as either a religious, social, political or "New Age" movement, or a current fashion trend and manifestation of transnational pop culture—since this would ultimately prove meaningless given how fluid, shifting and blurred these categories tend to be in the contemporary urban Africa environment.

West African and Jamaican Manifestations of Rastafari: A Comparative Perspective

Although similar in many respects, West African Rastafarianism appears to lack the vitality, depth and intensity of its Jamaican counterpart,²⁴ a situation which may have resulted from the very different conditions under which the two evolved. For one thing, whereas the Jamaican experience encompassed such horrors as the Middle Passage, slavery and the violent uprooting of individuals from their homeland, kin, traditions and collective pasts, those remaining behind in Africa were subject only to the far less traumatic upheavals associated with colonization. And whereas Rastafarianism in Jamaica originally surfaced as an attempt by a small segment of the Island's underclass to reclaim a lost ancestral heritage and with it a sense of dignity and self-

worth through the rediscovery or recreation of links with "Mother Africa," Africans on the other hand have never completely lost these links,²⁵ and so their expressions of Rastafari rarely if ever take on such passionate, profound and desperate overtones.

In contrasting Caribbean and African responses to the *négritude* movement, the South African journalist and scholar Colin Legum hits upon what I believe is one of the most prominent factors which account for the differences inherent in Jamaican and West African expressions of Rastafari. It comes as no surprise to discover, writes Legum (1976, 96), that "the cult of *négritude* is primarily the cult of the 'exiles' since it is only natural that those who have grown up furthest from their own roots should be fiercest in their attacks on Western traditions and more strongly emotional in their search for something they had never really known." And whereas for Jamaicans and other Blacks in the Diaspora, Rastafari functions first and foremost as a "cult of exiles," for Africans it often serves and can only serve as a "cult of the alienated"—alienation no doubt being a far less painful, distressing and potentially debilitating condition than that of exile.

Cut off from their ancestral homeland and its indigenous arts, music, religion, diet and social structure, the Rastas of Jamaica—like their slave forbearers and the children of Israel stranded in the deepest despair by the banks of the rivers of Babylon—wondered how they could "sing the Lord's song in a strange land,"²⁶ and yearned for cultural and spiritual revitalization. And since this search for cultural and spiritual revitalization represents the core message and mission for Jamaican Rastafarians, one might expect that these very same themes and aspirations would be taken up by West African Rastas, whose own cultural and ethnic identities have begun to erode in the face of increasing urbanization/modernization and Africa's continuing incorporation into the global capitalist system.

But this is simply not the case. While Jamaican Rastafarians on the whole tend to be deeply introspective and inward looking—ostensibly searching for origins and beginnings, links to a long forgotten past—the vast majority of West African Rastas appear to show little interest in maintaining, exploring or returning to their indigenous African and/or ethnic "roots." Instead, most reach outward and embrace Jamaica as their spiritual homeland and the contemporary, urban-based global scene as their chosen milieu and area of focus.

Another important feature that serves to differentiate Blacks in the Diaspora from their counterparts in West Africa, and one which applies equally as well to Rastafarians, centers on the basic difference in attitudes held by each of these two groups towards Europeans and European culture, prompted in large part by their very different encounters with racism (Legum 1976, 100). As the Sierra Leonean scholar Davidson Nicol pointed out some 35 years ago, these differences are

clearly evident in the literature produced by African as compared with African-American writers. In West African writing, as Nicol observed:

There is a lack of the motive power of burning racial injustice which carries through in the writings of other peoples of African descent. This driving force will be noticed in most of the literature by modern Negro writers. The nineteenth century attitude of easy social inter-racial mixing and the current British post-war colonial policy of rapid advance toward self-government has out-stripped extreme nationalism, Communism, and racial bitterness in British West Africa. The distressing but stimulating convenience of a setting of Afro-European conflict is thus fortunately or unfortunately denied them (cited in Legum, 1976, 100).

This absence of a "setting of Afro-European conflict," as this author put it, may in fact help to explain the more positive, less racially motivated attitudes and biases exhibited by West African Rastas towards White Americans and Europeans, as well as their rather half-hearted and unimpassioned condemnation of Western culture and civilization.

Moreover, while Rastas in the Diaspora are already connected to the global system by the mere fact of their close physical and cultural proximity to the United States or their actual residence in places like New York, London and Amsterdam, their West African counterparts must actively seek to establish such links either through emigration or affiliation with international organizations and transnational pop culture. Consequently, the latter's attacks on the West and Western civilization tend to take a far less spirited, confrontational and acrimonious tone.

Finally, one last aspect that deserves mention here which sets West African Rastas apart from their Jamaican brethren has to do with the extremely high levels of internal conflict, contradiction and ambivalence experienced by many of the former as a direct result of their involvement with the movement. And while a certain degree of ambivalence may be experienced by Rastas and Rasta sympathizers everywhere, conditions unique to the African scene have, I believe, brought such inherent contradictions into much sharper relief among West African adherents. For instance, having first hand knowledge and experience of the often corrupt and despotic nature of African politics and political leadership, many Rastas in West Africa find it difficult accepting the divinity of Haile Selassie, whom many believe to have been at least partially responsible for the massive famine that led to the death and starvation of millions of Ethiopians in the mid-1970s.²⁷ Rastas in Jamaica are, on the other hand, much more willing to acknowledge "His Imperial Majesty" as both god incarnate and a symbol of African pride and independence since their knowledge of Africa and its history, cultural and contemporary sociopolitical climate is, to a

great extent, clouded by a plethora of idealistic, and largely misinformed, images and notions.

Similarly, while Rastafarians everywhere tend to exhibit ambivalence to specific aspects of both European and African culture, among West African Rastas this ambivalence appears to be somewhat more pronounced. As mentioned earlier, in their open disdain for anything having to do with indigenous African religious systems and their distinctly urban orientation, West African Rastas have placed themselves in direct opposition to one of the most fundamental precepts of the Jamaican Rastafarian movement—i.e. the revitalization of a “traditional” African culture and the adoption of an “authentic” African identity. And while Jamaican Rastas may in fact never come close to fulfilling such aspirations, in most cases reinventing as opposed to actually reviving an “authentic” African culture and identity,²⁸ their indirect and therefore limited knowledge and understanding of Africa tends to obscure their awareness of these inherent contradictions and the wide gap that so often exists between their intended goals and actual achievements.

Conclusion

One evening in Ghana I viewed the television broadcast of an annual dance contest sponsored by a local cigarette company. The competition was divided into two parts: the first consisted of contestants in traditional (or as Ghanaians call it “countryside”) dress performing traditional dances, and the second, these same contestants sporting Western garb and performing contemporary African-American dance routines (e.g. hip hop and breakdancing). Apart from the impressive technical ability displayed by nearly all the participants, it was fascinating to observe how many features the “countryside” dances shared in common with their more modern African-American counterparts—a situation which, among other things, served to highlight the African roots of contemporary Western pop music and dance. While at first glance these young Ghanaians appeared to be offering mere imitations (albeit very competent ones) of African-American urban dance styles in the final half of the competition, in light of what I had previously witnessed it was obvious that in a number of instances they were actually performing re-worked versions of the traditional or “countryside” dances displayed earlier on (this situation reaffirming once again the continuing importance of processes such as re-Africanization in the creation and evolution of popular culture among Blacks in the Diaspora).

At the time, this realization prompted me to rethink the basic attitudes I had developed towards the various West African manifestations of Rastafari thus far encountered in my research. For instance,

instead of just dismissing West African Rastafarianism as a blanket imitation of its Jamaican progenitor, I began to search for similar forms of belief and practice present in the many syncretic African Christian churches currently active in the region and to try and place the movement within the context of these new urban-based religious formations (see above).

On the whole, West Africans do not view their adoption of religious beliefs and practices, music, lifestyles and fashion trends that originated in Jamaica as a "rip off" of Western culture because they believe that what they borrowed, they borrowed from their own people—i.e. their "cousins" in the Diaspora. Being immediately recognizable and fairly easy to imitate and reproduce, Jamaican Rastafarian culture, according to these Rastas, "feels a lot like home" and has legitimate meaning for Africans everywhere who have shared in the suffering and humiliation brought upon their race through centuries of European exploitation and colonial/neocolonial domination.

Furthermore, West African Rastas, like their Jamaican counterparts, hold that the Bible and European Christianity as a whole represent a corruption of original African forms (i.e. those rooted in ancient Judaism and Ethiopian Coptic Christianity) and as such justify their appropriation and use of specific aspects of "Western" religion as a means (through admittedly imperfect) by which they can reconnect with ancient African religious traditions.

In his writings on popular culture and center-periphery relationships in Nigeria and the Third World in general, Hannerz (1992, 241) argues that those in the periphery rarely play a passive role as sponges mopping up influences emanating from the center and reproducing globally homogenized culture in return. Instead "local cultural entrepreneurs," as he labels them, gradually learn to master alien forms of expression and use these and the new technologies appropriated from the center to refashion and reintegrate "locally rooted materials." And being, as Hannerz points out, "more responsive to, and at the same time outgrowths of, local everyday life," these "indigenized" cultural forms often prove more attractive to consumers in the peripheries than the cultural forms coming from the center.

In a number of interesting and important ways West Africans' adoption of the culture of Rastafari, which is often perceived of as emanating from the center (i.e. Jamaica via the global electronic communications media and transnational pop music industry), fits very comfortably within this world systems paradigm. For example, African reggae has evolved to the point where it now represents a musical idiom quite different from its Jamaican prototype, incorporating indigenous musical elements and expressing themes of purely local significance. And among West Africans, the music of popular African reggae artists like Alpha Blondy and Lucky Dube is often preferred over that of both Jamaican

and Anglo-Jamaican international reggae stars. Similarly, the emphasis placed on the promotion of interethnic harmony and cooperation by West African Rastas represents a local reworking of the Jamaican Rastas' pan-African agenda, which focuses on broader issues relating to the global solidarity of Africans and people of African descent.

While the total Rastafarian population in West Africa may be relatively small and numerically insignificant, the impact of reggae and Rastafarian culture on young people in many of the region's urban centers is not. To cite one particularly revealing illustration of this: in 1989 a large reggae concert was organized at Labadi Beach as part of Ghana'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 featured three local reggae groups as well as a massive sound system manned by local DJ's, and drew large and appreciative crowds numbering in the thousands, the vast majority of whom were not Rastas. 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.

One flaw common to studies dealing with diffusion, acculturation and world systems theory is that they have up till now tended to overlook the fact that in a substantial number of cases the flow of cultural elements from one group or society to another represents an interactive exchange or transaction involving two-way or multidirectional, as opposed to unidirectional, processes. And whereas most early studies of Caribbean and African-American culture and society (cf. Herskovits, 1958) have focused on such unidirectional configurations (the one-way movement of cultural elements from Africa to the New World, for example), the research undertaken here on the spread of the Rastafarian movement in West Africa has, I believe, helped to broaden our understanding of the ongoing relationship that has existed over the centuries between Africa and the African Diaspora and how various aspects of this relationship continue to shape and transform contemporary African societies. As Bennetta Jules-Rosette (1979, 221-2) writes with regard to new religious formations in Africa:

More than ever before, the present-day religions of Africa are an exercise in cultural encounter and mutual influence. In this regard, many scholars simply gloss the similarities in contemporary Afro-American and African religions. These similarities do not develop from a unidirectional cultural diffusion. Instead, similar processes of culture change and contact within the respective societies have taken place simultaneously, and the influence of New World black churches on the new African religions is also felt.

When all is said and done the African Diaspora experience must, as the Nigerian scholar Okon Edet Uya contends, be placed within the basic continuum of the African experience, both representing the "saga of African people and culture challenged, modified and altered by the New World milieu" (1982, 79). And as has been demonstrated time and time again throughout this paper, the transplanted of Jamaican Rastafarian religion, music and culture on African soil represents another important link in this centuries-old process wherein Blacks and Black culture in the Diaspora have had a substantial impact on and influence in Africa.²⁹

With serious efforts being made by multinational corporations to find new markets for their products and the continuing inclusion of the developing world into the global capitalist economy, with the growing sophistication and reach of the electronic communications industry and the rapidly expanding influence of transnational popular culture, with Blacks in the Diaspora actively seeking to renew or recreate cultural links with their ancestral homeland and Africans looking to connect to the global system and forge closer ties with their "brothers" and "sisters" in the Diaspora, it is getting increasingly more difficult to untangle the many threads of influence and cross-influence currently stretching between and uniting Africa, Europe and the Americas. Through examining the various manifestations of the Jamaican Rastafarian movement currently functioning in West Africa and, in so doing, isolating and describing a number of these individual threads, one gains a more accurate and engaging picture of the "complex processes, personal networks and institutional linkages" (Steiner 1987), that have in the past bound and continue to bind Africa to the African Diaspora.

Notes

1. On the origins and development of the Jamaican Rastafarian movement see Barrett 1977, Bishton 1986, Clarke 1986 and Hill 1981.
2. The movement's reach currently extends to nearly every part of the English-speaking Caribbean, throughout much of Anglophone Sub-Saharan Africa, among Native-American Indians in the U.S., West Indians residing in the metropolitan centers of Britain and North America, Surinamese immigrants in Holland, Maoris in New Zealand and Aborigines in Australia (for the Caribbean see Campbell 1987 and Hamid 1981; for Europe, Cashmore 1984; for North America, the *Arizona Republic* 1982 and Trepper 1984; and for the Pacific, Hawkeswood 1983 and the *New Zealand Listener* 1981).
3. Although the Jamaican-born Garvey (1887-1940) never had any direct dealings with the Rastafari, he has served as one of the major inspirations of the movement throughout its fifty year history, ranking second only to Haile Selassie in the Rasta pantheon of "African" saints and saviors. Rastas everywhere read and discuss his speeches, compose songs and poems in his honor and hang his pictures in their homes and meeting places (cf. Barrett 1977, 65-7).

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4. Much of the data presented here is based upon fieldwork I conducted in 1988-90 on the spread of the Rastafarian movement in West Africa, and appears in similar form in my dissertation "Rastafari in the Promised Land: The Spread of a Jamaican Socioreligious Movement and Its Music and Culture Among the Youth of Ghana and Senegambia," Columbia University, Department of Anthropology, 1993.
5. *Nyabingi* in this specific context refers to a type of religiously-based Rastafarian music that combines African and neo-African drumming techniques and instruments with Christian-based Rastafarian hymn singing and chanting (cf. Homiak 1985; Leib 1983).
6. One of the most prominent of all Rastafarian ritual practices, reasoning sessions are considered by Rasta adherents the world over to be the ultimate form of human communication. During these sessions—which can last many hours and often include the smoking of large quantities of *ganja*—Rastas typically discuss issues of a deeply personal, religious, historical and/or doctrinal nature.
7. The full extent of Marley's impact on young people in West Africa became apparent to this researcher when, after being in the field for some months, I finally discovered why people here danced to reggae in such a strange, animated and untypically West Indian manner (e.g. jumping up and down, swaying from side to side with hands waving high in the air and heads shaking back and forth). As pointed out to me by one perceptive Ghanaian Rasta, they were in fact mimicking the bodily movements exhibited by Marley when performing in concert, which they no doubt had witnessed through watching the music videos of Bob Marley and the Wailers that are a staple in many of the "video bars" found operating in the larger cities and towns throughout the region.
8. Formerly *The Reggae and African Beat*, this Los Angeles-based magazine currently features articles and advertisements focusing on popular Caribbean, African and "World Beat" musical genres.
9. Steffens (1990, 64) claims that in 1990 there were more than 100 working reggae bands in Nigeria.
10. As the anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (1992, 240) observed, in Nigeria, where involvement in popular culture is seen as being above all else a "manifestation of metropolis-oriented sophistication and modernity," the pop music groups that frequently tour the countryside "display not only the newest in sounds and in dances but also fashion and argot."
11. While various seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century European travelers and ethnographers made repeated references in their writings to the use of cannabis among groups in southern, eastern and central Africa, none who visited West Africa prior to the twentieth century mentioned the use of cannabis in any of their journals or reports (Du Toit 1980).
12. While I did encounter a small number of female Rastas during the course of my research in West Africa, their overall participation in the movement and its attendant forms of cultural expression appeared on the whole to be quite negligible.
13. In turn elements of African culture, most notably African fashions, have over the years been feeding back across the Atlantic to influence lifestyles in the Diaspora; the donning of African dashikis by Black radicals and intellectuals in the U.S. during the late 1960s and the more recent upsurge of interest in African fashion among African-Americans (e.g. their appropriation of African or African-inspired clothing, ornaments and hairstyles) represent just two of the more obvious examples of this.
14. On African contributions to the origins and development of Black culture in the New World see Alleyne 1988; Crahan and Knight 1979; Herskovits 1958; Holloway 1990; Simpson 1978; Smith 1957.
15. Current estimates place the number of Christians in Ghana at 43 percent of the population (a greater proportion than that found in any other West African nation) (Dostert 1991, 46), the highest concentration is to be found in the southern half of the country where approximately three quarters of the total population reside and where the country's three major urban centers are located.

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16. The term "Dread" is commonly used by Rastas to refer to any individual who sports "dreadlocks," regardless of whether the person is a serious adherent to the faith or just someone who takes on the outward trappings and appearance of Rastafari.
17. As Anthony O'Connor has pointed out (1983, 109-10), ethnic consciousness and identity in Africa, which are frequently strengthened and not attenuated by the exigencies of city life, continue to function in the urban arena as major factors in determining an individual's political, social and economic ties and affiliations (see also Hanna and Hanna 1981; Peil 1984).
18. This situation has been changing in recent years, and it is becoming increasingly more difficult for West Africans, no matter what their country of origin, to obtain visas or residence permits for countries like Britain, France, Holland and Belgium. As a result, many Francophone and Anglophone West Africans have, over the course of the last decade, begun to settle in places like Germany and Scandinavia where the standard of living is high and immigration policies have remained relatively liberal (see Hammer 1985) (although this too is changing as many of the more prosperous West European nations have recently begun to tighten immigration controls to limit the influx of immigrants from Eastern Europe as well as the Third World [cf. *The New York Times* 10 February 1993]).
19. Ethiopian Coptic Christianity is in many respects more similar to Judaism than it is to other contemporary forms of Christianity, containing as it does a profusion of Hebraic elements transmitted into Abyssinia via the numerous Jewish communities residing in Southwestern Arabia during the first millennium (see Ullendorf 1989).
20. Max Assimeng (1989, 273) compiled a list of some 500 religious associations that were functioning in Ghana in the mid-1970s, included among which were groups with such exotic sounding names as the "Christ Yoga Church of Ghana," the "Mystery of All Mysteries Research Society" and the "Independent Order of the Essenes Messianists Occult and Spiritual Science of the Holy Temple of Ghana."
21. For a detailed description of international New Age groups and their origins, creeds and global penetration see any of a number of books written by J. Gordon Melton (e.g. *The New Age Almanac* 1991).
22. The Kabbalah Revealed, The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ, The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses and The Book of Magical Arts, Hindu Magic and Indian Occultism, to list but a few of these titles.
23. Fabian (1978, 315) believes popular music to be "the most conspicuous carrier of this new culture" in Africa, while Vail and White (1980, 4) see it as exercising a claim over every other form of popular culture as representing the "true voice of the people."
24. My knowledge of Jamaican Rastafarianism is the result of extensive contacts I have maintained over the years with Jamaican Rastas living in New York and London, a year and a half of archival research I conducted on the movement and its global diffusion, as well as a brief visit I made to Jamaica in the summer of 1984.
25. Although urban Africans have to some extent lost connections with their "ancestral pasts," the majority still manage to maintain close ties to their rural hometown family and culture through kin-based support networks, periodic visits and participation in ethnic and regional urban-based voluntary associations (see Guglar and Flanagan 1978; O'Connor 1983; Pei 1984).
26. This line is taken from Psalm 137, parts of which were rearranged and adapted for use in the lyrics of the classic Rasta-inspired reggae song "Rivers of Babylon," first recorded in the early 1970s by the Melodians:

By the Rivers of Babylon, where we sat down
and there we wept, when we remembered Zion
and the wicked carried us away captivity,
Required from us a song

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But how can we sing King Alfa's song
In a strange land

27. See, among others, Ryszard Kapuscinski's biography of Haile Selassie (1983).
28. Like African-Americans who throughout the centuries have expressed nominal recognition of their ancestral ties to Africa by appending the word "Africa" or "African" to their institutions and churches but who at the same time rejected anything intimately connected with traditional African religion (e.g. the mention of African Gods like *Shango* or *Nyame* would be considered sacrilegious in the A.M.E. and many other African-American churches) (cf. Drake 1982, 365), Rastas in Jamaica generally try to distance themselves from those aspects of Jamaican religious and cultural expression most closely associated with indigenous African beliefs and practices (cf. Bilby and Leib 1986; Bilby 1993, 35).
29. Refer, for example, to the various African-American religious organizations (most notably the A.M.E. Church) that were active in establishing both religious and political links between Blacks in the Diaspora and Africans from the late eighteenth century onwards (see Skinner 1987).

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