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THE CHILDREN OF HAM

Bob Marley: Songs of Freedom. RITA MARLEY, ADRIAN BOOT & CHRIS SALEWICZ (eds.). London: Bloomsbury, 1995. 288 pp. (Paper £ 14.99)

Marley and Me: The Real Story. DON TAYLOR (as told to Mike Henry). Kingston: Kingston Publishers, 1994. xxxv + 226 pp. (Paper US\$ 16.95)

Dread Talk: The Language of Rastafari. VELMA POLLARD. Kingston: Canoe Press, 1994. x + 84 pp. (Paper J\$ 150.00)

Rastafari: Roots and Ideology. BARRY CHEVANNES. Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994; Kingston: The Press – University of the West Indies, 1995. xiv + 298 pp. (Cloth US\$ 34.95, Paper US\$ 17.95; J\$ 500.00)

Seeking a myth to justify the enslavement of Africans, explorers, scholars, and others turned to the Bible, that most sacred and preeminent of Western texts, conjured-up an old biblical curse, and set it to work one more time. As Europe entered the Modern Era, Africans were reinvented as the children of Ham and were targeted for a life of servitude in the New World. Five hundred years later, black folk in Jamaica seized upon an event in Africa, re-interpreted a passage in the Revelation of John, and set in motion a project that transformed enslavement and exile into a religious movement of global proportions.¹

The loose aggregation known as the Rastafarian Brethren are one of several “unofficial” religions practiced in contemporary Jamaica.² They coalesced as a community of practitioners during the interwar decades when they proclaimed the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie to be a living

African Messiah, declared Jamaica to be New World Babylon, and began referring to themselves as the “elect” and “chosen” spoken of in the Bible. Scorned and reviled during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, their representations achieved international acclaim in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s when they were carried around the world by musicians such as Bob Marley, poets such as Mutabaruka, and a cadre of Elders. The books under review here open windows on the culture history of this movement, from its formation during the interwar decades to its transformation into a global phenomenon during the post-World War II decades. The first two can be categorized as popular because they speak to a general audience about the life of Bob Marley, while the second two can be characterized as scholarly because they speak to an academic audience about issues concerning cultural analysis. There is much to learn from all and when taken as a whole they have added to a growing but loosely defined corpus known as “Rastafarian Studies.”³

Bob Marley had achieved prophet-like status long before his demise in 1981. *Songs of Freedom* is a “discography” that describes the life, times, and music of the late Robert Nestor Marley. In a ritual-like inversion in keeping with the world-view (but not the practice) of Rastafari, the editors begin *Songs of Freedom* with the end (the funeral and near beatification of Marley) and move back to the beginning (his life in Trench Town). Along the way we meet Peter Tosh, Neville (“Bunny Wailer”) Livingstone, Carleton Barrett, the I-threes, and Chris Blackwell, as well as Marley’s family and friends. All have contributed their personal reminiscences concerning Marley and the influence of reggae and Rastafari on Jamaica and the world. Limitations of space preclude a more detailed discussion, but the testimonial by Winston Rodney (“Burning Spear”) calls for elaboration. Rodney’s description of his encounter with Marley, while riding a donkey along a backcountry road in the parish of St. Ann, typifies the way Rastafarians situate their life-histories within a constructed space, a seemingly fortuitous conjuncture of time and events.

Marley’s “countenance” or identity has often been likened to that of the biblical David and reggae with the Psalms. Like David, Marley was able to translate the feelings and emotions of a generation into a musical form that appealed to a local and a global audience. Several songs were “chants,” a form of talk-singing based on spirituals, hymns, and the Psalter. Two such songs, “Rastaman Chant” and “Babylon System,” exemplify the way Marley re-worked an already re-worked form of sacral music and transformed it into a new and novel form of cultural expression. In a third song, “Time Will Tell,” Marley set the issues subject to “reasoning” or debate at that time to the rhythms of reggae. It, too, opens windows on

the “vibes” and tells us much about the relation between form and content during a critically important juncture in the history of Rastafari. Marley’s music was a truly apocalyptic endeavor and *Songs of Freedom* should be read to the accompaniment of the CDs to fully appreciate the activities of a Rastafarian whose “work’s trod ert still.”

Don Taylor’s *Marley and Me* picks up where *Songs of Freedom* leaves off. Taylor, who was Marley’s manager, is less concerned with telling us about musical achievement and more with detailing, in an autobiographical style, the nuts and bolts of managing what became a heritage and a legacy. *Marley and Me* is no ordinary autobiography but recounts the intersection of two lives set within the dynamics of postwar Jamaica. As such, it describes and reveals as much about patron-client relations and life in Kingston as it does about the relationship between Taylor and Marley. No ritual inversions here. Whereas Burning Spear framed his encounter in terms of the fortuitous, Taylor was contacted by Marley because of his managerial skills. Though there was considerable alignment between the life and times of both, Taylor begins his story at the beginning, and the beginning for Taylor occurs on February 10, 1943 in Victoria Jubilee Hospital in Kingston. Like Marley, Taylor was a child of an African-European union and, like Marley, the racially charged dynamics of the time prevented him from ever encountering his father again. He fended for himself from the age of nine and produced a livelihood in the tourist industry. This is instructive. There were few opportunities for employment in Jamaica as the island underwent a shift from a plantation economy based on agriculture to an industrial economy based on tourism, mining, and manufacturing. Taylor, like Marley, drew upon entrepreneurial aspirations and turned to the entertainment industry, first in Kingston and later in the United States, where he managed Little Anthony and the Imperials. He interceded on behalf of Marley for a local performance and assumed the position of manager not long after. Unlike the editors of *Songs of Freedom*, Taylor does not describe Marley’s relationship with Chris Blackwell in glowing terms. In the remainder of the book, he provides a view of the backstage manipulations that characterized patron-client relations in the music industry and the convoluted personal relations that unfolded among Bob Marley, Rita Marley, and a host of others before and after Marley’s death. Although confessional and at times apologetic, *Marley and Me* is well worth reading for, if nothing else, its descriptions of an era gone by.

Velma Pollard’s *Dread Talk* focuses on the importance of language to Rastafari. Those who have worked with Rastafari in Jamaica and abroad will appreciate this book. Pollard, a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at UWI, Mona, who has published widely on issues concerning

education and language in the Anglophone Caribbean, brings together a series of previously published (and largely unrevised) essays and academic papers concerning the verbal art of Rastafari as practiced in Jamaica, Barbados, and St. Lucia. This is a welcome addition to an extremely important domain in Rastafarian Studies. As historians and linguists have argued, Creole languages are deeply implicated in processes of resistance and accommodation. Such is the case with Rastafari. Expanding upon Cassidy's "Jamaica Talk," Pollard has invented the term "Dread Talk" and has used it to describe a way of speaking known to practitioners of Rastafari as I-yaric or I-ance. In addition to providing a descriptive term, she has sketched a history of Dread Talk, provided an orthography of sorts, described several (but not all) semantic processes at work, and discussed the relation between Dread Talk, Jamaica Talk, and language change in Jamaica and the Caribbean.

Pollard's emphasis on "la langue" (the word, lexical change, and formal analyses such as broadening and narrowing) was a suitable choice given the limitations of cassette recordings and transcripts (produced by and for someone else in another context). I-yaric, however, is a socially constituted and constituting means of communication. While *Dread Talk* has provided a solid foundation, formal analyses tend to gloss or background "la parole," the speaker-hearer dyad. This is of both methodological and theoretical importance. Language, for Rastafarians, is an arena, a site of struggle and transformation. It is necessary to pay attention to what linguistic anthropologists and ethnographers of speaking refer to as multi-vocal dialogics (the speaker-hearer dyad, and the reflexive or contrapuntal banter that distinguish the verbal art of Rastafari from ways of speaking in the non-Rastafarian speech community) if we are to understand the social basis of meaning and the various ways language, literacy, and cultural practices are implicated in processes of change.

In *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology*, Barry Chevannes discusses the activities of what can best be described as a postwar generation of Rastafarians. Chevannes, a Professor of Anthropology in the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work at UWI, Mona, is one of a handful of scholars who have long-term relationships with Rastafari. He assisted Lambros Comitas and Vera Rubin in their study of cannabis and he has published widely on issues concerning religion and society in Jamaica. The book under review here, a revised dissertation based on life-history interviews conducted during the 1970s, adds to our understanding of Rastafari in several important ways. First, the world view of Rastafari is by no means a monolithic creed. Rather than impose an artificial uniformity on a diversity of ideas and beliefs, Chevannes's stated purpose is to explore "continuity

rather than break, ideas rather than action, and culture rather than politics" (p. xi). Second, reliance on participant observation and cultural description balances earlier work that leaned heavily on second-person accounts and printed materials such as newspapers and colonial documents. Third, Chevannes is less concerned with narrative, as such, than with reproducing the way his interlocutors have experienced the events that unfolded during the interwar and postwar decades.

Chevannes frames his text with a prefatory chapter that situates Rastafari, and his research, in a history of resistance. Building upon the work of Monica Schuler and Kamau Brathwaite, Chevannes has outlined and abstracted four thematic phases (Pre-Christian Period, Period of Christian Evangelization, The Pan-Africanism Period, The Period of Rastafari) in a tradition of slave rebellions and maroon wars that date to the seventeenth century. He then proceeds to recount the life-histories of various individuals (using quoted or reported speech) and to discuss their relationship to changes within and between Rastafari and the larger society. He concludes with a postscript that discusses current issues and trends as Rastafari has embarked on an international phase.

Leaving aside disclaimers concerning the value of oral testimony, the decision to let local folk speak for themselves serves as a corrective to accounts that have depicted the interwar decades in terms of numerical equations and abstract political theory. In Chapter 2, "The Uprooting," we read the how, when, and why as recounted by people who lived through those events: how global events affected local households, why people picked up, and when they moved to Kingston. This is an artful and clever use of reported speech.

Similarly, the literature often speaks about Rastafari in terms of a unitary "movement," but the process of formation and consensus was contested and uneven rather than unilinear or continuous. In Chapters 3 and 4, Chevannes discusses how "missions" formed in "yards" and "camps" in Back-of-Wall and elsewhere. In a process of fragmentation, local groups debated issues of belief and practice (between Revival and Rastafari), broke with existing leaders (such as Howell), and formed separate but related organizations dispersed throughout Kingston. It was out of this tension (a dialectic of discussion and debate, formation and transformation in spatial and ritual relations within and between Rastafari and the larger society) that camps became "houses," social and political aggregations known by such names as Boboshanti, Youth Black Faith, and Nyabingi. These were not utopian organizations, and resistance was by no means confined to a "spiritual or mystical plane" (p. 164). Although Chevannes has privileged "ideas rather than action" and "culture rather than poli-

tics,” his discussion of the rupture between “combsomes” and “dreadlocks” in Chapters 5 and 6, ritual and language in Chapter 8, and repatriation and divinization in Chapter 9 would suggest the opposite: ideas are action, culture is politics.

Rastafari: Roots and Ideology is a major contribution to the field but there are a few minor points that need clarification. For example, while phases and periods provide a framework, they tend to mask and level diversity. In addition to “proto-Rastafarian” groups, it must be recalled that European missionaries (Moravian Brethren) were also active, and it was during what Chevannes has defined as a “Pre-Christian Period” that biblical texts, epistolary literature, and contesting interpretations (of diaspora, identity, etc.) were broached.

Similarly, neither Moses Baker nor George Liele were “slaves” in the standard sense of the term. Although a minor point, it is well worth mentioning, given the nature of their activities in pre-1838 slave society and their influence on the formation of Afro-Christianity or “Native-Baptists” during “The Period of Christian Evangelization.” Moses Baker and his family were born into the free black community in New York City, while George Liele was manumitted in Georgia. Both were part of a Black loyalist diaspora that followed the American Revolution.⁴ They drafted a charter, established a network of religious associations (Ethiopian Anabaptist Society of Jamaica), and codified a discourse, a way of reading, and a form of biblical interpretation. Our understanding of “roots” would have benefited had Chevannes explored points of rupture and connection (e.g., divinity, exegesis, and oral testimony) between such residual and alternate, dominant and emergent formations.⁵

Although Chevannes is correct in exploring theoretical foundations, it is unclear how our understanding of theory and practice has been advanced by the way he has employed the concepts of “pre-capitalist relations” and “false consciousness.” The utility of these concepts is a much contested issue and, given the discussion of Africa in Chapter 1, exchange-value in Chapter 2, and the tension between religious and political ideologies in Chapter 5, their deployment has taken little notice of current debate or theoretical presuppositions.

Minor points aside, all four books are significant contributions to the culture history of Rastafari. In addition to opening windows on the other half of the story, they have set the stage for the next generation of practitioners, dread and nondread, popular and scholarly, who will pursue the story at home in Jamaica and abroad in Africa, Europe, and North America.

NOTES

1. For discussion of the curse of Ham, see Felder 1991:130-33 and Jordan 1969:17-19.
2. Barrett 1982:214 provides a census of official and unofficial religions in Jamaica.
3. Bilby 1983, 1985 and Yawney 1995 offer similar understandings of Rastafarian Studies as a corpus of popular and scholarly texts.
4. Pulis 1997 discusses Moses Baker, George Liele, and the black American diaspora to Jamaica.
5. See Williams 1977: Ch. 8 for "dominant," "residual," and "emergent."

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