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Black thoughts from the Caribbean: i-deology at home and abroad


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In 1953 the anthropologist George Eaton Simpson carried out a study of religious cults in the severely depressed outskirts of the Jamaican capital of Kingston. There, in the midst of dire poverty, he happened upon a sociological goldmine. Alongside the "Pocomanian" and Revivalist traditionalists, with their otherworldly blends of Christian doctrine and African "survivals," was blossoming a newer phenomenon which could not have failed to whet a social scientist's appetite. The Rastafari Movement, Pro-
fessor Simpson was quick to note, was a form of "political cult-
ism", embodying a clear, albeit mystical, expression of protest
against its members' desperate living conditions. It involved an
explicit rejection of the values of the ruling Jamaican elite, the
assertion that emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia was the living
God, and the prophecy that the faithful were soon to be trans-
ported and repatriated, by divine means, to the "homeland" of
Ethiopia/Africa, while the iniquitous Western world would be left
to perish in flames. Here was a phenomenon whose general out-
lines would be instantly recognizable to the alert anthropologist, if
only because similar religious manifestations were being ident-
ified, described, and catalogued by his professional colleagues in
nearly every corner of the colonized non-Western world. (The
terms used by Western observers to label such phenomena have by
now become commonplace in social science literature: "crisis
cults", "religions of the oppressed", "charismatic", "mille-
narian", "messianic", "cargo cults", and so forth.)

To have anticipated the future trajectory of the Rastafarian
movement at the time would have been to imagine the un-
imaginable. Writing in 1955, Simpson glanced at this rather
exotic object — this "crisis cult" belonging to an inconsequential
speck of land in the Caribbean sea — and from a comfortable
distance, bravely ventured a forecast:

... Ras Tafarism is an adjustive activity which helps its members to live with
poverty, squalor, and the disdain of the better-off. Ras Tafarism will grow or
decline as the economic and social conditions of lower-class Jamaicans change
and as its functional alternatives increase or decrease in appeal. It is one index
of the integration, or lack of integration, of Jamaican society [Simpson 1955:
149].

Owing to a series of improbable linkages and unpredictable con-
junctions of events, the Rastafarian movement's future impact was
far to exceed the wildest imaginings of either Professor Simpson or
any of the other early social commentators. Consider the following
implausible but more or less true-to-life scenario (taking place in
one of the remaining colonial outposts of a major world empire),
which in the 1950's would probably have struck anyone but the
Rastafarian brethren themselves as a most ludicrous projection of
what might lie ahead for them. Around the time of independence, a search for a national cultural identity is set in motion, and a new form of indigenous popular music emerges. Members of a local politico-religious protest movement — a bona fide millenarian “crisis cult” — and popular musicians, fellow ghetto-dwellers, forge a creative alliance which is to continue over the next few decades. Many popular musicians become members of the movement, while a number of traditional cult musicians join forces with them, and a new and more complex popular music form is born. Although this music becomes a primary vehicle for the expression of the movement’s ideas, it is a thoroughly “modern” electrically-amplified music, and is performed by an instrumental ensemble which differs little from that employed by American and European rock bands. The burgeoning local music industry continues to expand, and contributes to the rapid spread of the movement’s influence. The ideology of the movement begins to penetrate national politics.

Meanwhile, an astute entrepreneur from the local elite realizes the potential appeal and marketability of local popular music abroad, particularly among white middle-class Americans and young Europeans, but also among fellow “sufferers” in other parts of the postcolonial world. A highly talented and “charismatic” musician is selected from the ranks of the movement, cast in a “pop star” mold, and promoted internationally. The timing is right, and the exotic “product” clicks. The way is paved for the acceptance abroad of other cult artists, and the music — which remains largely faithful to local aesthetics and continues to be a primary vehicle for the movement’s ideas — finds significant markets in Europe, North America, Africa, Japan, and other parts of the world. Along with the music travels a rich body of cultic texts and visual symbols, which are interpreted variously by the consumers of the music in different parts of the world, but which nearly everywhere have a similar, more general ideological appeal, based on the movement’s apparent “utopian” thrust and anti-colonialist, anti-capitalist (or more vaguely, rebellious, anti-authority) stance. The movement becomes firmly established within the “world system” and, by the good grace of various interlocking social, economic, and political forces, scores “converts” and sympathizers in every corner of the globe.
While admittedly something of a caricature, our little sketch will be recognized by any long-term observer of Rastafari as no flight of fancy. Consider briefly the state of the movement over the last few years. During the 1960’s, the Rastafari movement — whose original exponents had been reviled by the larger public, persecuted by the police, and declared madmen by the press — began to win substantial support in Jamaica. (For a discussion of the process of gradual acceptance, see Nettleford 1972.) By the end of the 70’s one prominent social scientist had already felt it necessary to assess (albeit with negative conclusions) “The Potential of Ras Tafarianism as a Modern National Religion” (Cumper 1979). But the true coup came about through the international trade in vinyl; the liaison with the popular music industry opened doors for Rastafari which might otherwise have remained closed. The other critical factor was the ongoing exodus of Jamaicans and other West Indian immigrants to major urban centers in England and the United States, where they were able (and in some instances, forced) to maintain a distinct ethnic identity, and could help spread the Word, electronically and otherwise. Thus it is that as of this writing, Rastafarian ideas have begun to pierce the very heart of the Babylonian West.

By way of example, one could cite the sudden appearance of dreadlocked black urban-dwellers throughout the eastern Caribbean, in the United States, and in parts of England, Holland, France, and other European countries. And then there are the numerous fragile alliances and ideological liaisons between white youth and young Rastas (starting with a shared preference for reggae music) which have cropped up in Europe now and again — the most obvious example being the limited Punk movement-Rastafari rapprochement in England. Perhaps the most interesting development in the internationalization of reggae (and Rastafari ideology along with it) is its growing impact across the African continent (“Zion” to the Rastaman); in countries such as Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa, reggae has become a favored music, and a number of local popular musicians have begun to grow dreadlocks and preach their own versions of Rastafari. Through all its convolutions and ideological permutations, what was once widely thought of (at best) as a mere cult of poverty
— a pathological response to extreme deprivation — has come to be viewed as a major cultural force, a powerful call for black liberation reminiscent of négritude, and at a more general level, an ideological weapon capable of stabbing the conscience of the industrialized West, even as it stirs revolutionary consciousness in the underdeveloped rest.

The sudden excitement has inevitably resulted in an increase of publications on reggae/Rastafari (often treated in the literature as inseparable). In the last few years, such publications have appeared not only in English, but in a number of other languages, including German, Norwegian, and Italian. More serious publications on the Rastafarian movement have so far been few and far between. The five small volumes reviewed here (perhaps with the exception of Owens' *Dread*) represent, in different ways, responses to the recent boom of interest in reggae and Rastafari, and may be seen as attempts to straddle the popular/scholarly divide. This in itself says something about the distance the Rastafari movement has traveled since its early pariah days.

Joseph Owens' *Dread: the Rastafarians of Jamaica* is a good book with which to begin, for it is in some ways the most satisfying of those examined here. Originally published in Jamaica in 1976, and in England in 1979, Owens' book has probably played a greater role than any other single piece of writing in helping Jamaicans unsympathetic to the movement to see Rastafari as an actual *religion*, as opposed to a pathological and lunatic collection of superstitions and delusions. Father Owens, a Catholic clergyman who came to Jamaica as a social worker, spent the better part of two years during the early 1970's living in West Kingston. Equipped with a tape recorder, a genuine sense of respect, and an obvious devotion to his task, he set out to engage as wide a selection of Rastafarian brethren as possible in an ongoing dialogue.

Owens approaches his subject not as a social scientist but as a sort of liminal theologian, drawn to the beauty and power of Rastafarian images and ideas — ideas that are dialectical transformations of a sacred text with which he is already intimate — and yet unable fully to make the transition to the reconstituted
reality confronting him. As a man of God himself committed to the irreducibility of religious experience, Owens refuses at the outset to objectify that which he is studying:

The main section of this work shall attempt to abide by the canon that the only legitimate exposition of another person's religious faith is in terms and propositions that the other person can understand and accept. No other approach is justified... Any further analysis which attempts to judge a religion according to its 'truth', its functionality, or its integration with the larger society must be subsequent and secondary to the type of exposition which the believer himself finds orthodox... In attempting to be faithful to this canon of orthodoxy in this work, I shall also be fulfilling the oft-repeated request of the Rastas themselves: "Write as if you were a Rasta yourself! Make people think that you are in fact a Rasta!" [p. 13].

It is perhaps only because the author does not always succeed in obeying this admonition that he provides us with a rare and valuable document which is ethnographic, yet not just another ethnography. In spite of his genuine empathy, Father Owens cannot become a Rasta, nor is he able to write quite as if he were one. But his communicative skill and sensitivity, and a largely shared mode of discourse, have allowed him to hover on the very edge of identification with those whose thoughts he is attempting to understand. Like the best participant observers in the social sciences, he is able to strain the limits of the "self" without crossing over into the "other," and to maintain this balanced state of tension. For this reason — and also because he permits the brethren to speak throughout the book in their own words, by means of interspersed quotations — Dread turns out to be a first-rate piece of "cultural ethnography". In ten compact chapters the author explores the complexities of Rastafarian doctrine and belief, symbolism and meaning, progressively building a coherent picture of the integrated but flexible worldview which the faithful possess.

But as ethnography, Dread is no more than a beginning. Owens cannot be faulted for this, for he makes no pretense at being a social scientist. Yet the usefulness of his study for non-theologians is greatly limited by its singular lack of concern for actual behavior as opposed to verbalized thought. The author appears to have been more "participant listener" than participant observer, and the result is a series of texts which read as if they were timeless
gospel truth. The reader — especially if he happens to be an anthropologist or sociologist — cannot help but feel that some tremendous nether world of doubt and compromise, manipulation and adjustment, underlies this pristine portrait, though never quite surfacing to sully it.

In spite of its drawbacks (and there are other minor ones which cannot be covered in this space), *Dread* remains, seven years after its first publication, one of the finest studies available on Rastafari. Perhaps because Father Owens chose to concern himself from the beginning with knowing and understanding Rastafari thought, rather than hastily explaining it, he has been able to penetrate it to a greater depth than most. Add to this the fact that the range and number of his informants were unusually large for a study of this sort — though limited primarily to the environs of Kingston, the “sample” consisted of 61 Rastafarian “circles” — and one can begin to appreciate the author’s achievement. Although *Dread* goes only part way as ethnography, telling us what Rastas say and think but not what they do, it nevertheless does this with unusual perceptiveness and sensitivity. For this reason, it will remain an indispensable companion volume, to be consulted in conjunction with those studies of Rastafari which adopt a more etic approach.

A very different work is *Jah Music*, by Sebastian Clarke. It is probably fair to say that the Rastafarian movement has gained widespread recognition primarily through its vital musical expressions, and a serious study of this process is long overdue. Unfortunately, Clarke’s study has little to offer in this regard. As the first book-length treatment of the history and development of Jamaican popular music, *Jah Music* leaves much to be desired. Although the author states in his preface that his goals are modest, and seems to disclaim any scholarly intentions, he nonetheless uses footnotes liberally and writes with an air of authority. It is thus all the more irritating that the text is littered with minor errors, mismatched footnotes, facile platitudes, and sweeping assertions which betray the author’s limited control of the already-existing literature on Caribbean and African music.

Clark’s study begins with “History and Roots”, and moves from discussions of Rastafari and the birth of Jamaican popular
music (predictably with a chapter on the Wailers) through to dub music and the growing British reggae scene. The author is at his weakest when dealing with the traditional roots of popular music. His discussions of the African background, slave religion and culture, and post-Emancipation developments are musically, linguistically, and sociologically naive. He seems to be oblivious to the work that has already been done on traditional Jamaican music. At one point (p. 25) he quotes a passage from a well-known article on Jamaican drumming by the ethnomusicologist Helen H. Roberts (see Roberts 1924) — citing an uncredited manuscript copy which he found at the West India Reference Library — and attributes it to an "anonymous" British observer. In short, this book offers nothing new on the subject of traditional Jamaican music, and much that is superficial and misleading, based on a limited acquaintance with what is already known.  

On the positive side, *Jah Music* makes a real contribution to the historiography of reggae music. Although Clarke does not go as far as one might wish, he makes considerable use of oral sources in his attempt to document the beginnings of the Jamaican popular music industry and the various phases and styles through which the music itself has passed. His interviews with a number of key figures in the development of reggae (most of them conducted in Kingston during the late 70's) provide an important inside viewpoint, even though only bits and pieces are incorporated into the text, and will continue to be of use to future researchers. The book also includes a valuable appendix with mini-biographies of important figures in reggae; in spite of several glaring omissions (for example, Junior Byles, Eric Donaldson, and Clancy Eccles), this appendix shows that the author went to considerable pains to compile the basic facts on those whose creative efforts lie behind the flowering of Jamaican popular music. Clarke is at his best in his chapter on "The British Reggae Scene," for it is obvious that this is the area he knows best. The book closes with a few comments on the possible future directions that reggae might take, and an astute analysis of its international potential, its marketing relationship to other forms of black popular music, and its systematic exploitation by British and other commercial interests (even as it is opposed and discriminated against).
The final three books reviewed here can be treated together, for they all deal with some aspect of the same phenomenon — the growth of the Rastafari movement among West Indians in Britain. Plummer's book deserves no more than a brief mention. A sort of public relations tract written by a British "community worker" who lived in the heavily West Indian Handsworth section of Birmingham for seven years, *Movement of Jah People* was produced with the primary aim of offsetting the negative publicity from which the British Rastafarian movement began to suffer during the late 1970's. Although it serves its purpose well, it offers the serious student of Rastafari little more than the broadest overview of the shape taken by Rastafari ideology following its transplantation to British soil. The latter half of the book, devoted to relations between Rastafarians and the wider community, is dominated by descriptions of the persecution of Rastafarians and their clashes with authority. A brief glance at this slim little volume, which captures the sudden eruption of Rastafarian consciousness in England and the equally sudden and violent backlash against it, is enough to convince one of the power of Rastafarian ideology and its potential adaptability to social contexts which have little to do with that from which it originally emerged.

Ernest Cashmore's *Rastaman*, also a product of the British crisis in race relations, attempts to explain the sudden growth of the movement in England. Cashmore, a sociologist by training, has produced a highly problematic account which would seem to offer very few explanations beyond the more obvious ones — regurgitated in new guises page after page — having to do with the need for a positive sense of identity among children of West Indian immigrants, who face constant discrimination in British society. The study is annoyingly long-winded and repetitive, and could be cut down to half its size without losing much of its substance. Cashmore gives the impression that his study is based on many hours of interviewing and discussion with Rastafari brethren, yet he tends to use the same two- or three-line quotes from a few informants over and over again in different places, to make different points.
One of the more interesting parts of the book concerns what the author calls "reality creation" — the process by means of which Rastafarian ideology has been recreated and adapted to the British context. Yet one has to wonder about Cashmore's grasp of this new ideological reality when he writes that the word "natty" (as in "natty dread") is "derived from 'nutty', meaning weird and unstable" (p. 102); given his supposedly close rapport with the Rastas, Cashmore ought to have been able to ascertain that "natty" (i.e., knotty) refers to the texture of the hair during the early stage of growing dreadlocks. Likewise, if Cashmore were really "tuned into" Rastafari culture, one would expect him to know that the name of the popular Rastafarian drum ensemble is Ras Michael and the Sons of Negus, and not "Ras Joseph" (p. 58), and that the well-known Wailers song is "Put It On," not "Put It Down" (p. 111). There are additional subtle, but significant, lapses in accuracy which serve to lower one's confidence in Cashmore's comprehension of Rastafarian ideology.

Cashmore also seems to be poorly acquainted with more recent developments in the literature on Caribbean culture and social organization, as becomes apparent whenever he discusses the background of the first-generation West Indian immigrants to England. He claims, for example, that Rastafarian male dominance is a reaction against the "matrifocal emphasis" stemming from "the lack of family structure in the days of slavery" (p. 78). And he asserts that the slave ancestors of the West Indian immigrants were stripped of their culture and prevented from developing a "true" culture to take its place because "the diversity of background of the slave populace of Jamaica militated against the development of any shared meanings" (p. 163). Little wonder then if their present-day descendants in England speak a "heavily slurred patois" (p. 119, and repeated frequently thereafter) and suffer a condition of relative "cultural vacuity" (p. 171, and see pp. 182–190).

Although Rastaman may have its redeeming insights, it is difficult to look kindly upon a book which is comfortable drawing parallels between the early Rastafarian movement and the Family cult of Charles Manson (p. 26), and which suggests that the present-day Rastafarian movement in Britain may be treated...
as the functional equivalent of Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Church, the Hare Krishna followers, and the UFO cults (pp. 145–146). By making absurd functionalist comparisons such as these, and “explaining” Rastafari with reference to abstract models and obtuse charts and little boxes (pp. 24; 89; 142), the author insidiously negates the issue of the modern movement’s possible legitimacy, and by extension, the legitimacy of that part of its ideology that offers a wide-ranging critique of contemporary English society. This sort of careless objectification is a luxury that students of the movement may soon have to forego, as Rastafari ideology makes further inroads into the industrialized Western world.

Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* is a fitting book with which to end, for it is the only study of those reviewed here that concentrates not on Rastafari itself but rather on its interplay with other social and cultural forces sweeping Britain during the 1970’s. It is an intriguing analysis of interpenetrating ideologies, fluid symbols and signs, and cross-cutting codes, in which Rastafari plays a relatively small part, as but one of several “subcultures”. Hebdige’s semiotic analyses manage never to become too obscure, and whether or not one happens to agree with his particular structuralist approach, its application in this case makes for fascinating reading. Rastafarians make only occasional appearances in Hebdige’s tableau, mainly as fellow pariahs and cultural inspirers of the emerging British Punks. As fragile and short-lived as the Punk/Rastafari liaison was, it nevertheless showed that the ideological boundaries between what were once thought of as separate worlds — home and abroad, colonizer and colonized — are far from indissoluble.

One could fault Hebdige’s study for a number of misunderstandings regarding Rastafarian ideology or the nature of the creole language of Jamaica, but that would be beside the point. What makes this study important is the way it highlights the increasing vulnerability of the “West” to ideological currents once easily dismissed as distant illusions belonging to foreign lands and peoples. The power of Rastafarian ideology can no longer be ignored, as the riotous citizens (both black and white) of English
cities such as London (read: Brixton), Liverpool, and Bristol taught the world during the summer of 1981. By the same token, social scientists and other observers will find it increasingly difficult to avoid becoming entangled in the ideological web that becomes more thickly woven with each confrontation between Babylon and the new faithful. Lesser mortals have already succumbed, including Shiva Naipaul, who used the British press in the summer of 1982 to “tell the truth about” the Rastas, and ended up merely battling ideology with ideology:

His existence confirmed by the slack-jawed wonderment of his Babylonian audience, the Rastaman is not required to justify either himself or his faith. Rastafarianism does not bring its devotees closer to self-comprehension. If anything it has led them further away from understanding. At best, it gives the black a congenial image of himself. At its worst, it stimulates lethal visions of grandeur ["The Rise of the Rastaman", The Observer Review, Sunday, July 4, 1982].

As Johannes Fabian (1979) has pointed out, modern religious movements such as Rastafari, with their shifting modes of discourse and political volatility, strain the concept of cultural relativism to its limits. This is acutely recognizable with Rastafari, now that its ideology has begun to enter the Western “mainstream” and has gained access to the mass media. The time is past when total detachment could be feigned, for the movement’s ideology, transformed though it may be, is now a part of “us.” Its challenges can no longer be dismissed as narrowly context-bound. Overconfident students of exotic religions, eager to “explain” what they see, would do well to watch this Caribbean upstart, for its painful lessons to the West may not be the last of their kind.

NOTES

1. An indication of Rastafari’s increasing acceptance, in England and elsewhere, as a full-fledged religion is the recent addition to the British-based Ward Lock “Living Religion Series” of a volume called The Rastafarians (Williams 1981).

2. A curious booklet (Kaagman 1982) dealing with a similar example of rapprochement in the Netherlands (involving the Dutch Punk movement, such as it is, and Surinamese as well as Jamaican Rastas) bears the ironic title Papua Punk (a sidelong reference to Dutch colonialism).
3. I list but a few examples here: in Dutch, Breeveld 1980; in German, Hoppé 1981 and Michels 1980; in Italian, Assante 1980 and Pedote & Pinardi 1980; and in Norwegian, Morgenstierne 1979. Although I have not had the opportunity to look at most of these (which run the gamut from glossy pop journalism to serious studies), I list them here for the interest of readers who may have access to some of these languages.

4. For recent discussions of the roots of Jamaican popular music in traditional forms, see Logan & Whylie 1982, White 1980 and 1982. See also Bilby & Leib 1983.

5. For another interesting “public relations” pamphlet of this sort, which is oriented, however, more to the black community itself, see Garrison 1979.

6. In an interesting discussion of the riots in England, Terry Jones (1982: 380–83) points out a number of similarities between the situation of the West Indian immigrants in England and that of the Surinamers in the Netherlands. Taking the comparison yet further, he notes the recent growth of the Rastafari movement among the urban black population in the Netherlands, and suggests that worsening economic conditions there could lead in the near future to disturbances similar to those that rocked England in 1981.

REFERENCES


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