Jahlani Niaah & Erin MacLeod (eds.)


“Rastafari does not fit into a paradigm. It is its own paradigm” (p. 3). This apothegm distilled the ethos of the Rastafari conference convened in 2010 at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica. *Let Us Start With Africa* reports on the conference while doing much more. It inaugurates Rastafari studies as a field; it connects the early Rastafari scholars with the present-day ones; it reminds us of the connection between Rastafari and the academy that dates back to 1960; and it presents the reflections of conference speakers Rex Nettleford, Mortimo Planno, Roy Augier, John Homiak, and Barry Chevannes. Editors Jahlani Niaah and Erin MacLeod provide an invaluable resource for all who are interested in the Rastafari paradigm.

“From the Cross to the Crown,” by the late Rex Nettleford, focuses on the impact of the Rastafari on Jamaica, an impact that remains “greatly underestimated” (p. 12). It points out how the Rastafari made a “quantum leap” in the speed with which they fashioned both their own God and image (p. 13), and the way they made Jamaicans revisit their own “inner landscape,” that is, their self-consciousness involving, race, class, and color (p. 16). And it shows that Rastafari emphasized race without being racist and inspired their fellow Jamaicans to acknowledge the necessity of equity and justice for all.

“Polite Violence,” by the celebrated Rastafari elder Mortimo Planno, uses the titular trope to convey the violent and subtle suppression of both the Rastafari and poor Jamaicans generally. It points out the verbal and physical abuse heaped upon the Rastafari, the extreme sentences for possession of Cannabis, the burning out of “slums” inhabited by the Rastafari, and the undermining of the local agricultural economy by importing produce (p. 30). This essay describes the structural violence experienced daily by Jamaicans and tells engaging stories, such as how Planno became the man who welcomed Emperor Selassie I to Jamaica in 1966.

Roy Augier, the sole living author of the “Report on the Rastafari Movement in Kingston, Jamaica,” discussed the Report in “You Must Be Willing to Reason Together.” Augier sees as positive the impact that the Report had on improving the status of the Rastafari in Jamaica and characterizes Premier Norman Manley and Principal Arthur Lewis as pragmatists who were sympathetic to the Rastafari. Lewis intended the mission to introduce the Rastafari to the realpolitik of Africa. Augier’s recall rests uneasily against a recent critique (“Our Man in Mona: A Conversation between Robert A. Hill
and Annie Paul”) that explained the Report as a factually inaccurate product of covert action against the Rastafari. However, Augier’s positive assessment of the Report notwithstanding, he continues to suggest that repatriation is misguided: “So, I say unto you ... Why not turn Jamaica into a homeland?” (p. 53).

John Homiak’s chapter, “When Goldilocks Met the Dreadlocks,” illustrates how Carole Yawney made an immense contribution to the study of Rastafari. It details Yawney’s field research, which began in 1970 with her apprenticeship to Planno and his Yard. Yawney then played an active role in Rastafari affairs, both as the Rastafari saw it, and as she saw it. Any field student of Rastafari will know that gaining the trust to enter into the intimacy of Rastafari life can be a formidable challenge. For Yawney, this was triply complicated by being a white woman seeking entrée into a male-dominated black liberation movement. Yawney’s approach was ahead of her time, exemplified by her view of the Rastafari as a traveling, decentralized, and fluid cultural phenomenon, and her recognition of the need for scholars to be clear about how their relationship to the people they study shapes what they report.

The volume concludes with an essay by the late Barry Chevannes, who ruminates on the way the Rastafari disrupted Jamaica’s silence on its “African Presence.” Chevannes sees the convening of Rastafari and non-Rastafari people to discuss Rastafari as a significant achievement, and addresses some of the tension revealed through the exchanges. Echoing Augier, he identifies repatriation as a source of tension: “as long as the choice is for ‘Africa as geography,’ then all who stand for Jamaica ... will face obstacles” because that implies the “irreconcilability of the Rastafari with Jamaica” (p. 125). Another tension is the view among some Rastafari that Rastafari scholarship misrepresents them by making their world an object of academic concern. These tensions could be interpreted as productive, Chevannes suggests, as long as they lead to positive growth.

The chapters are loosely connected, with a consistent theme of the happenings of the 1960s and 1970s. In some ways the book is reminiscent of the Rastafari themselves, with diverse views of Rastafari jostling against each other, and a tone that is dialogic—the authors and audience talking to each other in pursuit of higher learning. It reminds us that Rastafari studies consider Rastafari as its own paradigm. Not all of the conference is included, though Chevannes’s chapter will give readers a sense of the range of both participants and papers presented. Let Us Start With Africa is a must read for scholars of Rastafari, and