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School for International Training
Study Abroad- Ghana

Spring 2010

**Babylon by Tro-Tro: The Varieties of Rasta Identity and Practice in
Ghana**

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Abstract

1. **Title:** Babylon by Tro-Tro: The Varieties of Rasta Identity and Practice in Ghana
2. **Author:** Jonathan Tanis (tanis@usc.edu; University of Southern California)
3. **Objective:** Intrigued by the lack of scholarship in Ghana on the highly visible and prominent Rasta culture, I sought to examine aspects of Rastafari identity and practice including the following:
 - a. How the Rasta identity is defined, constructed and maintained by both Rastafarians and non-Rastafarians of varied backgrounds.
 - b. How Rastafarians perform and express said identity through specific practices
 - c. The importance of iconography and symbolism in transmitting Rastafarian identity, and the negotiation of identity through this discourse
4. **Methodology:** I conducted fieldwork, primarily participant-observation and interviews, at various places in and around the city of Accra. Field-sites included the Arts Centre in downtown Accra, a Rasta enclave in Achimota, a Rasta school in Adenta, and a Bobo-Ashanti camp in Tafo, Eastern Region. I attempted to expose myself to the greatest possible spectrum of Rastafari practice without compromising the depth of understanding necessary to analyze specifics. Throughout the research process I conducted formal interviews with a number of Rastafarians and non-Rastafarians alike, recording them for the creation of a mini-documentary that I have compiled. However, most of my findings arise from informal discussions and observations with respect to the daily lives of my informants. Because of the lack of scholarly material on Rastafari, I was unable to rely much on review of prior literature, yet this afforded me more time to spend on ground level ethnography, which I feel is more important in this sort of research.
5. **Findings:** Throughout my fieldwork, the most striking findings were involved not with outlining the structure of Rastafari identity, ideology and practice, but with exposing the degree of heterogeneity which could be described as the defining characteristic of the movement in Ghana. Under the banner of Rastafari include such identities as celibate priests, cannabis smoking reggae musicians and political revolutionaries. I began to develop an understanding that Rastafari can be understood as a movement only on the plane of discourse, i.e. on the level of iconography, symbolism, language and fashion. Rastafari is an *aesthetic*, not a complete structure of belief and lifestyle. Nevertheless, this aesthetic links all Rastas in Ghana in an utterly unique manner.
6. **Conclusion:** I can only offer speculation as to the explanation for Rastafari's peculiar relationship in respect both to itself and to mainstream culture. From a historico-materialist perspective, the Rasta discourse has been displaced from the socio-political and economic conditions of 1930s Jamaica that originally produced it. Thus, the discourse has remained constant but the intrinsic referents have been lost, altered or diminished. Today, the discourse is continually reproduced but no longer has the ability to develop novel content. It survives, however, because it fulfils the social need for an outlet of countercultural activity.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to sincerely thank my mother and father first of all for bringing me first into the world and then into Ghana; my fellow SIT students for being amazing friends; Papa Attah, Yemi, and the rest of the SIT staff for keeping us safe, happy and healthy; Dr. Brempong for the advice and friendship; my informants for being so much more than just informants; and everyone in Ghana for hospitality that can't be found anywhere else in the world.

Introduction:

My introduction to Rastafari approached me sometime during the first week in Accra, balancing a young, transplanted coconut tree on his head and wearing a shirt that simply read, 'Out of the Blue'. His name was Eric, and we walked on opposite sides of the street but in the same direction. In some respects the *Rastaman* and the *Obroni* share a common condition; they are intensely visible markers of difference within the boundaries of a dominant culture that stresses consistency.

I met Eric as a result of my own attempts at individualism. While the eleven other American university students in my group had purchased mobile phones soon after arriving, I had made it nearly a full week before caving in to the pressure from friends and my home-stay parents. In Ghana, as I learned, you just can't make it on your own. In any account, my mild stubbornness and serendipity collaborated in arranging my collision with Ghanaian Rastafari, and from that day onward, I threw in my lot with the *brethren*.

I could never disparage the famous Ghanaian hospitality that I have encountered all over the country. However, there's simply nothing like *communitas*, the camaraderie between the liminal and marginal (no matter what direction they have been liminalized or marginalized in respect to the mainstream), in terms of bringing strangers together. In my experience, it has been the Rastafarians in Ghana who have been most open, friendly, and inviting, despite the fact that economically speaking they often have the least to give. Perhaps the *communitas* between the Rastas and myself was augmented by our both wearing long hair in a land of shaven heads, but in any case the critical attitude of many Ghanaians towards the Rastafari struck me as curious.

Even more peculiar, particularly given my only experience conducting research at higher institutions of learning had been in the United States, was that not a single book or

academic article existed at the University of Ghana discussing Rastafari history, ideology or sociology. It was almost as if the academic community had completely ignored the most prevalent counter-cultural presence in the country. Indeed, Rastafari culture is ubiquitous in every corner of Ghana—whether it manifests as reggae on the radio, dreadlocks walking the streets of Accra, or Lion of Judah stickers on the windows of Tro-Tros.

My original intention with this research project was to conduct an ethnography of sorts on the Rastafari community in Accra, examining the structure of their social and cultural relationships with each other and the mainstream Ghanaian society. This undertaken proved impossible for two reasons: (1) a serious ethnography would have taken far more time and training in research methods than the four weeks of fieldwork and single semester of practicum that I had, and (2) the very objects of inquiry that would have been involved in a structuralist approach to Rastafari, i.e. a ‘Rastafari social structure’, do not even legitimately *exist*. Of course, a post-structuralist would problematize such notions in any social group, but the Rastafari in Ghana are particularly decentralized.

I sought to discover the meaning of ‘Rasta’, only to find that not only does it not possess an inherent, essentialist meaning—there is not even anything resembling a general consensus as to what the word refers to. Nearly everyone I talked to gave an entirely different definition of *Rasta*. Furthermore, as opposed to varied sects of Christianity who disagree on the specifics but at least agree that the concept of Christianity falls under the category of religion, there is no consistency as to what manner of things Rastafari is. Even among those who personally identify as Rasta, it is alternatively understood as a religion, a practice, a philosophy, political movement, hair-style or the ‘true nature within the spirit of every African’. Various group of self-identifying Rastas are, for the most part, isolated both from other and from any sort of centralizing agency. Thus, no opportunities are available to provide consistency of belief or practice among the ‘brethren’.

As such, I was given no other choice but to abandon my initial plan to detail the beliefs, practices and social structure of the Rastafari, considering that my subject matter proved to be a figment of the Ghanaian imagination. I needed to radically reconsider my strategy and shift theoretical approaches. The Rasta as an essential cultural entity may not exist, but *something* certainly does, to say otherwise would be ludicrous.

The markers of distinction which, in practice, establish the initial difference between the relative homogeneity of the Ghanaian mainstream and the Rasta or *obroni* walking on the street are not ideologies, political activity or religious/spiritual practices, but outward appearances. Ghanaian children yelling '*Obroni bye bye!*' are responding to phenotype, not genotype. It is on this plane where consistency lies. If nothing else, the *signifiers* of Rasta identity are concrete entities with potential for study, and it was to them that I turned my attention.

After only four weeks of formal fieldwork and two months of prior informal observation, I could not in good conscience claim that this study describes the reality of the situation regarding Rastafari in Ghana. I doubt whether another year or ten could hope to achieve that. Instead, I can only claim to describe 'my' idiosyncratic and limited perception of Rastafari, like Roland Barthes' Japan. When I speak of Rastafari, I refer to a field of discourse, in which outward signifiers act as pivot points. This discourse includes a relatively static and limited vocabulary of language, pictures, sound, dress and practice. Imagery including the Lion of Judah, the colours of red, gold and green, and dreadlocks are fixed stars in the sky upon which various individuals and groups ascribe their own meaning.

As to the question of 'what is the state of Rastafari in Ghana today?' I am in no position to answer. All I can do is reject what it certainly is not and organize my limited impressions into speculations as to what the answer might resemble. It will take someone

with a great deal of time and a more sophisticated theoretical framework to begin that work. Nevertheless, I have attempted to conduct a reconnaissance mission of sorts, a survey into a significant and influential field of Ghanaian culture that moves beyond an understanding that is non-existent at worst and myopic at best. The Ghanaian cultural complex contains a great deal more internal depth than the simplistic and reductionist traditional/Western dichotomy that is often presented, and I believe that an acknowledgement of Rastafari's significance would represent a major step forward.

Methodology:

As my initial intentions were to conduct an in-depth structural analysis of a single Rastafarian community in Ghana, the initial methodology reflected this. I choose a single field-site, the Art Centre in Accra, which I approached with the mindset of a classic ethnographer entering a traditional settlement. Located adjacent to the Kwame Nkrumah Mausoleum, the Art Centre is a sprawling complex of shops catering primarily to tourists, and contains arguably the highest concentration of Rastafarians in Accra and perhaps the whole of Ghana. After moving through the hundreds of shops that constitute the public, tourist face of the Art Centre, one enters a shantytown of assorted homes, drinking spots and other buildings, including a Rastafari bookstore and Nyabinghi (a relatively organized 'mansion' of Rastas originating in Jamaica) church.

What made the notion of the Art Centre so appealing to me was that it appeared to be a fully functioning community of Rastafarians. As a student of anthropology, I am particularly interested in the ways spiritual beliefs and practices express themselves in the social structure. I wanted to observe if the way Rastafarians organized, policed and governed themselves would differ significantly from a comparable non-Rastafarian community. Rastafari presents an especially intriguing case because of its history as anti-authoritarian, anti-government and anti-systems-in-general. While I understood that such a project would likely have been overly ambitious, I hoped to at least conduct as comprehensive an inquiry into the social organization of the Art Centre as possible in a few weeks time.

I entered the Art Centre with my backpack loaded with a mosquito net, a change of clothes, a notebook, extra pens and my toothbrush. Meeting informants was hardly an issue, as craft sellers immediately target any foreigners as soon as they enter within a block or two.

After making my intentions as a student researcher clear, I made several friends who became my chief informants for the next few days.

It was during these days at the Art Centre that I began to understand the nature of Rastafari in Ghana, that there is nothing resembling a consistent set of beliefs and practices. In reality, most inhabitants of the Art Centre only stayed during the day when the tourists were present, only some even considered themselves Rasta, and even among those that self-identified as such, only a small minority displayed any knowledge regarding what constitutes Rastafari. It quickly became apparent that even if I interviewed everyone at the Art Centre I would not end up with the clear structural picture I was looking for.

As I began to shift my understanding from Rastafari as an static set of beliefs and practices to a discursive vocabulary upon which a dynamic range of meanings could be ascribed, I likewise decided to abandon the idea of retaining a single field-site. Instead, I wanted to expose myself to a wider spectrum. While even within the Art Centre I found a multiplicity of meanings, the sharing of space engendered a sharing of meaning, and I wanted to experience as total the full extent of deterritorialization. I continued to conduct interviews, but my approach changed from gathering concrete data through questioning to viewing the interviews as a performance by the interviewee. Rather than looking for consistency between interviews, I focused instead on the differences. For example, when asking a question about the meaning of a certain term or idea, like *Babylon*, I would interpret the answer not as *Babylon means this to a Rastafarian*, but as *Babylon means this to this particular Rastafarian*. Certainly a subtle shift in interpretation, but one that makes a world of difference in analysis.

Both formal and informal interview techniques were used throughout the research process, for both proved to have advantages. Because formal interviews were mostly understood by the interviewee, especially in the early stages of research, as me 'learning

about Rastafari', questioning yielded responses of whatever they felt the generally accepted answer to be. During the more conversational setting of informal sessions, interviewees tended to feel a greater level of comfort talking about their own beliefs and practices, often highlighting where they veered from the 'company line'. Of course, each Rastafarian constructs his or her idea of the official position in an individual manner, so I tried to maintain a critical perspective, interpreting the interview as both performance and text. Having had little previous experience with interviews before this project, it was not until the final week or two of fieldwork that the sessions became most fruitful.

I expanded my research to include several field sites in and around Accra, but I also made sure not to limit myself to human subjects. To understand the Rasta image, rather than Rastafari itself, it was important to pay attention to those images in every manifestation. This meant maintaining awareness wherever I went in Ghana, to Rasta symbols and signifiers on television, radio, advertisements, public transportation, small shops and clothing. I paid special attention to the presence of Rasta imagery in the corporate controlled mass media, as this represented perhaps the most radical re-appropriation of the original Rasta message. Although this work, adopting methodology of the semiotician, was easily incorporated into my routine daily movements throughout the city, it contributed greatly to my understanding of the subject.

As the foundation of ethnographic methodology, participant-observation played the single most important role in my research. I learned the most from walking, sitting, playing music, eating and living with assorted Rastafarians in Accra. I helped to set up shops in the Arts Centre, taught children at a school in Adenta started by Rastafarians, sang hymns at a Boboshanti Sabbath church service, discussed revolutionary strategy with Rasta scholars, planted moringa trees with Rasta farmers, and did (almost) everything the Rastas did. Simply spending time mingling with Rastafarians, far more than conducting interviews or reading

books, allowed me to identify and empathize with the experience with the realities of life for Rastafarians. Furthermore, the sheer variety of Rastafarian experience forced me to focus on the heterogeneity of Rastafari and avoid any temptation to essentialize. Participant-observation humanizes the research process, turns them from objects back into real people, with not only significant ethical implications but also helping the researcher to avoid some of the reductionism that goes along with objectification.

A final note on participant-observation: the majority of self-identifying Rastafarians in Ghana practice illegal drug use to a varying extent (in fact for some this is the only deciding factor in that identification). This is a delicate situation because whether I participated or not the research would be compromised in some form. However, I feel like I made the right decision in not partaking, because the little lost by not being able to appreciate the full Rastafari experience was made up for in keeping a sharp mind and not being at risk for arrest.

Because the area I was researching has not, to my knowledge, been the subject of scholarly inquiry in the past I was forced to rely less on a review of prior literature than I have in past research projects. In any case, there were no resources at the University of Ghana related to Rastafari in general and certainly none on Rastafari specifically in Ghana. Lack of adequate internet service further hindered my ability to find academic books or journal articles to use. A Rasta bookstore at the Accra Arts Centre had a few (quite expensive) photocopies of relevant books regarding the history of the movement that were very useful to put my current research into some historical perspective. Additionally I found a few useful articles from academic journals online. However, for the most part my participant-observation and interviews will have to stand on its own awaiting further research. Regarding literature, I have drawn far more from theoretical perspectives than ethnographic writing.

Findings:

Brief History of the Movement:

The Rastafari movement began in Jamaica during the 1930s in conjunction with the crowning of Haile Selassie as Emperor of Ethiopia. It emerged from the Pan-Africanist political ideologies of Bedwardism and in particular Garveyism. Known as Ras Tafari (Ras is an honorary title equivalent to Duke) before being crowned, Selassie fulfilled a prophecy Marcus Garvey had made about a Black sovereign taking the throne in Africa. More importantly, the Emperor served as a symbolic foil against Queen Elizabeth, the face of British colonialism in Jamaica.

In its early days, Rastafari was primarily a political movement, agitating for freedom from oppression in Jamaica and for repatriation back to Africa. With little military or economic power, the first Jamaican Rastafarians combated the forces of oppression symbolically, through images, language, fashion and music. The elements of discourse that characterize Rastafari's presence in Ghana today were fashioned in response to particular historical and social conditions.

As these conditions changed and reggae music spread Rastafari around the globe, the discourse took on a life of its own. No longer tied to their original meanings, symbols were left open for re-appropriation for anyone who wanted to use them, as is the case in modern Ghana.

Rasta Discourse:

By discourse, I refer to a far wider range of expression than just language, although language does play a major role. Specifically, I am discussing collectively the *signifiers* of

Rastafari. In the semiotic tradition of Saussure, elements of culture are described as *signs* consisting of a signifier and signified. In terms of language, the signified is the idea and signifier the word. In terms of Rastafari the signified is a Rastafari identity, while the signifiers are the extrinsic expressions of that identity.

As stated earlier, my original intention with this research project was to investigate what constitutes the essence, the signified, of Rastafari identity. Outside small, isolated groups, there was nothing in the way of agreement as to what the signified was, despite relative consistency of the signifiers. The significance of red, black and green varies according to who is asked, but the colours themselves remain a constant.

Rastafari culture, then, is a patchwork of empty signs that nevertheless unite a heterogeneous community of peoples in its own peculiar way, through the (re)production, transmission and manipulation of discursive elements.

Elements of Rastafari Discourse:

Image

- Haile Selassie – Belief in the divinity of former Emperor of Ethiopia Haile Selassie I (1892-1975) was perhaps the single most important tenet of the original Rastafari movement. Born Tafari Makonnen, the name Rastafari is in fact taken from the addition of the “Ras” title to Selassie’s given name. His ascension to the throne fulfilled a prediction/prophecy made by Marcus Garvey that an African king would soon be crowned in Africa. Selassie provided an alternative to the Queen of England and the Jesus of the white colonial oppressors in Jamaica, and his deification was largely a result of religious elements entering into and strengthening the country’s

revolutionary political struggle. The Emperor's speech to the League of Nations in 1936, during which time he was the only black monarch in Africa, precipitated a totemic alignment under "His Imperial Majesty" wherein he could stand in binary opposition to the figures of Western politics and religion. Many Rastafarians I talked to, particularly those more devoted to their practice, asserted belief in Selassie's divinity to be the single most important factor in whether an individual could identify as a Rasta. Selassie's name (always pronounced Selassie "I") is constantly invoked by many Rastafarians in greetings, expressions of agreement or simply for no particular reason at all. A great deal of the Rasta symbolic canon is derived from Haile Selassie's life, deeds and philosophy.



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- Lion of Judah – During his lifetime Haile Selassie was referred to as “Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah”, and the lion was the symbol of the Ethiopian monarchy. Subsequent to adopting Selassie as their God and King, the first Rastafarians also adopted his iconography as their own, although today few Rastas in Ghana are aware

of their historical origins. Most Rastas who I queried concerning the meaning and history of the lion symbol gave entirely different explanations, exemplifying the manner in which Rastafari's icons have endured and thrived in West Africa while their intrinsic meaning was left in the Caribbean.

- Red/Black/Green, Red/Gold/Green – The “Rasta colours” which adorn most Rastafarian imagery in dress, architecture were derived originally from the red, black and green of Marcus Garvey. Red represented the blood of martyrs, black the African people and green the lush natural vegetation of the African continent. The colour gold is also frequently included in reference to the Ethiopian national flag. In Ghana, the colours are less effective as a marker of identification because they are the same as the Ghanaian flag. As with the lion symbol, there is little consistency among explanations for the meaning of the Rastafarian colours.



- Dreadlocks



Sound

- Iyaric - Early Rastafarians, in resistance to the colonial language of English, began to modify the language with certain neologisms, creating a specific dialect which became known as Iyaric. The dialect reflects elements of Rastafari political philosophy and metaphysics.
 - I-and-I: A term used in place of potentially any personal pronoun, but generally it replaces the word “we”. It refers to unity of all things—both the oneness of God/Jah and man, as well as among every individual human being.
 - Overstanding: Rather than say “understanding”, which was said to have elements of negativity because of the word “under”, many Rastafarians will say *overstand* to indicate that the process of over/understanding is a vehicle to reach a higher place.

- Downpression: Just as Rastafarians don't like to associate the word under with the concept of understanding, the "up" sound in oppression was also thought to be incongruous with its meaning as well as socioeconomic and political effects. As a result, "oppression" was replaced with *downpression*, because the process holds down the masses rather than allowing them upward mobility.
- Irie: "I respect I eternally", *irie* is a general term referring to a positive and lively emotional, physical and spiritual state in an individual. Instead of saying "how are you?" one would ask "everything irie?" or "are you feeling irie?".
- Reggae – Owing to the international popularity of Bob Marley, Peter Tosh and other reggae artists, the musical genre has become for many synonymous with the movement as a whole. It has, in truth, likely done far more to spread the doctrine and imagery of Rastafari worldwide than any other factor. The music originated in the ghettos of Kingston, Jamaica out of ska music, which had in turn been a syncretised blend of Jamaican folk music with American pop genres.



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Rasta Place:

Eric, the first Rastafarian I met in Ghana, ended up bringing me to buy a phone and make sure I got a good price, but not before taking a detour to drop off the coconut tree he was carrying on his head. Less than one hundred meters from the urban madness of Achimota Tro-Tro Station, in the middle of a residential neighbourhood, we cut through the grounds of a primary school and into a field of sugarcane. Blocked off from the world around by row of strategically planted tall foliage lay a dense mass of mangroves, with a carved out tunnel leading inside. Too curious for circumspection, I followed Eric through into a large open area built into the trees. The dim lighting that made it through the tarpaulin overhead illuminated a thickly furnished space of perhaps ten by ten metres. Most of the floor space was inhabited by chairs of varying shape and repair, which in turn were inhabited by men with dreadlocks of varying shape and repair. One stood up to offer me a fist pound. *Welcome to the palace.* He said. *This is Zion.*

Identity and everything that goes along with it is strongly tied to constructions of place. This is why displacement can have such drastic effects on the psyche of peoples and individuals. In most of Ghana's populated environments, the Rastafarian is an anachronism. There is an incongruity between the identity as Rasta and the place constructed by mainstream Ghanaian culture. For many Rastafarians, mainstream places are hostile territory, *Babylon*, and when out and about don their pride like a suit of armour. The lone Rasta walking is an enclave of counter-culture, a living bubble of resistance.

Above all, it is the particular idiom in which a Rastafarian expresses himself that defines his relationship to the non-Rasta place. Many Rastas, particularly those more personal and business ties to the mainstream society and economy, choose not to adopt the outward signifiers of Rastafari. They wear few pieces of jewellery, dress 'well', shave their hair, and

move among the non-Rastas at ease. They are Rasta because they identify as such, for varied reasons, but what is significant is how they strategically negotiate personal associations to Rasta signifiers in order to manipulate their relationship with respect to mainstream society.

Because they are unwelcome, to varying degrees, in many public spaces, Rastafarians tend to create specific places where they can freely congregate. Like the palace in Achimota, these places are the *architectural* signifiers of Rastafarian identity, and thus a significant element of the Rastafari semiotic discourse.

Rasta places often emphasize natural construction, from bamboo and palm fronds, over processed construction materials. They are decorated with the familiar iconography: the Ethiopian flag, posters of Haile Selassie and reggae musicians, and everything painted in red, gold, black and green. Cannabis is smoked freely, and in fact requiring a safe place to partake in the practice of smoking was often one of the chief reasons given for the creation of “Rasta spaces”

It was in Rasta spaces, where Rastafarians are free to act as they please away from the oppressive forces of the mainstream cultural environment, where I learned and observed the most about Rastafari practice. I conducted fieldwork a few Rasta places in and around Accra, including the aforementioned palace, the Arts Centre in downtown Accra, the homes of various Rastafarians and a Bobo-Ashanti camp in Ghana’s Eastern Region.

Bobo Dreads:

Although most Rastafarians describe themselves as independent, there exist a number of “mansions” or organized sects of Rastafari. These include such organizations as the Twelve Tribes of Israel, the Ethiopian World Federation, the Nyabinghi and the Bobo-

Ashanti. The Bobo-Ashanti mansion was founded in 1950s Jamaica by Charles Edwards, known by his followers as Prince/King Emanuel. The Bobo-Ashanti consider him the incarnation of Christ, part of the Holy Trinity along with Haile Selassie and Marcus Garvey. As they say that one can only know the father through the son, they pay more heed to the ideologies of Emanuel than to Selassie.

I was brought to the Bobo-Ashanti camp by a Rastafarian informant who had spent some time there over ten years ago. We travelled from Accra to Koforidua and then to Tafo, where the camp is located. I learned that it was founded in 1991 by three Bobo-Ashanti from Jamaica, who had built up a commune-style community on the land and planted farms for subsistence. Although my informant asserted that when he had lived there the camp housed over fifty people, when I visited that number had dwindled to between six and ten, depending on how many were visiting at the time.

The Bobo-Ashanti follow the strict tenets of Prince Emanuel, which closely mirror Old Testament Jewish Law, particularly observing the Sabbath from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday, fasting and rigid regulations regarding symbolic, physical and conceptual cleanliness.

Cleanliness and pollution, in the sense of Mary Douglas, carries over into every aspect of life at the camp. The symbol of the Bobo-Ashanti is the broom, which they make for sale as part of their subsistence. Before entering the camp I had to have my bag searched, remove my footwear, pray to the East, and tuck in my shirt. Because I had no turban or robes (the attire of male Bobo-Ashanti), I was only allowed in certain areas, couldn't enter the kitchen or take water from the well. The rules for menstruating women are especially strict, as they are not allowed to be visible to men during this time.

Of the three founders of the camp, one had passed away and one had returned to Jamaica, leaving only the one to govern the community. According to informants outside the camp, he had enforced the rules of pollution so strictly that everyone who disagreed with his governance, including all the women, had left the camp.

Male Bobo-Ashanti are all either prophets, priests or in-training, and the inhabitants of the camp spent most of their day in the church (known as the Tabernacle) or performing daily duties around the camp. They congregate for the singing of Psalms three times each day, and have extended fasting services on Mondays and Wednesdays. Saturday, the Sabbath, is spent in almost constant prayer.

“We are not Rastas or Rastafarians”, they told me. “We follow Rastafari.” The Bobo-Ashanti take great pains to distinguish themselves from the larger Rasta community, and in beliefs and practices bear little resemblance to most Rasta informants I met. This emphasis on distinction carries over into the realm of Rasta discourse and some of its most prominent expressions. Bobo-Ashanti do not listen to reggae or play football, asserting that such activities are the “entertainment of Elizabeth” designed to fool the people. Instead, hymns are sung to the accompaniment of Nyabinghi drumming. The Rasta colours of red, black and green are still present, but their order is reversed on the Bobo flag. All Bobo wear dreadlocks, but keep them wrapped up in turbans. While the fist pound is the universal greeting of most Rastas (itself creating a distinction between Rasta culture and the finger-snap of mainstream Ghanaian culture), Bobo-Ashanti bow and greet each other as “my Lord”. Lastly, instead of Haile Selassie as the most prominent figure, it is Prince Emanuel who occupies that position.

Thus, the field of Rasta discourse once again displays its remarkable versatility in being open for appropriation, in this case for establishing a dualistic boundary within Rastafari itself. Dualism carries over into every aspect of the Bobo-Ashanti mentality. They

strongly condemn any mixing of conceptual categories, particularly when it comes to ethnicity and homeland. “China for the Chinese, India for the Indians, America for the Americans, and Africa for Africans home and abroad”, a quote of Prince Emanuel, could be heard many times during services and also during general conversation. Mixed race coupling was strongly discouraged, being likened to mules that cannot reproduce.

The Arts Centre: The Arts and Cultural Centre is located in downtown Accra, south of Tema Station, as I described in the methodology section. Rastafari at the Arts Centre is Rastafari at its most decentered, nebulous and heterogenous. While I repeatedly heard that half the inhabitants were “Rasta”, these Rastas spanned the entire spectrum of shaved head cannabis smokers to Nyabinghi priests. It was at the Arts Centre that I began to truly understand the multiplicitous nature of Rastafari in Ghana. Exposed to such a dynamic range of individuals who identified themselves as Rastas, there was no way to reconcile the spectrum into a single essence, and I had to come to terms with the fact that it was neither possible nor even desirable.

I spent several days at the Arts Centre conducting fieldwork, and continued to return for interviews and more participant-observation. One Rasta woman (*empress*) who ran a Rasta bookstore and reggae music shop proved to be an especially helpful resource, and was one of the few Rastafarians I met during the entire course of the fieldwork who had much familiarity with the beginnings of Rastafari as a political movement. I noticed that the more “conscious” Rastas like her networked mainly, but not exclusively, with other conscious Rastas. By *conscious* (a term used by themselves in self-reference), they set themselves apart from “dreadlock” Rastas who may express the fashion and speech of Rastafari but not its

essence. Interestingly enough though, even among conscious Rastas there was surprisingly little agreement as to the constituency of that essence.

Despite the presence of some conscious Rastas, the Arts Centre was a place where the Rasta *image* dominated. One possible reason for this as an economic function, as the Arts Centre is primarily a place for artisans to sell crafts to foreigners, many of whom are attracted to the Rasta image for its novelty among other reasons. In a place where vendors outnumber shoppers ten to one, any advantage in attracting foreigners to one's shop can make a significant difference in one's income. Of course, that is mere speculation, but it likely plays some role.

The Palace: The palace at Achimota, which I've mentioned earlier, was the first Rasta place I experienced and remains utterly unique. This is primarily because of its location, directly in the middle of a relatively dense residential neighborhood. Most Rasta places tend to be somewhat isolated, either on the beach or out in the bush, but the palace is literally located in a backyard. In fact it seemed more like a clubhouse than a palace, an enclave where mostly middle-aged males could escape from the pressures of life outside. In my time there I only saw one woman, a relative of the "king" of palace.

The king and his family are the owners of the land, and he farms sugarcane, coconuts, plaintains and other crops on the plot. He built the palace about thirty years ago, and his family still lives a conventional lifestyle in a conventional house on the same property. Inside the palace, the king is set apart from the others who frequent the place: anyone who enters must pay their respects, he sits in a bounded off area on one side of the room and is treated with a degree of reverence by all others. However, he occupies more of a "first among equals" position, and the social dynamics involving the king and others is approached as a

playing at royalty rather than as a serious hierarchy. Indeed, the palace bears much resemblance in form and function to a pre-adolescent boys clubhouse.

Each time I visited the palace there were between five and ten people present, with a few of the king's closest friends there every time as well as new faces. Not all were Rastafarians, although the king and the regulars were. Many who passed through were well dressed and clean shaven—to them the palace was a place where one could act freely. The freedom to ingest cannabis away from hassle by authority figures and disapproving family members was given by many as a reason why they came to the palace.

Also notable is that the palace was a place for intellectual reasoning and sociopolitical debate. The radio was always on and tuned to BBC World News rather than the reggae music one might expect. The king especially placed high value on books and was enthusiastic about showing me texts on Buddhist philosophy and cultural studies. Still, many of those at the palace displayed no interest in such intellectual matters.

The palace then, is a microcosm of Ghanaian Rastafari. It is a place set apart from the mainstream, but set apart in no strictly defined manner. Rather, anyone desiring to partake in unconventional activities of any kind could use the space for their personal expression, but all under the banner and name of Rastafari.

Adenta School: One of the more admirable modes of practicing Rastafari was displayed by four Rasta friends from Madina. Having grown up together and now in their mid-20s, they have established a school in Adenta for children who had been too poor to pay for their education. According to them, a Rastafarian does not work with or through the government bureaucracy, and thus they had to take matters into their own hands. Compared to other

Rastafarians they spoke little about the divinity of Haile Selassie or other religious concepts, preferring to practice Rastafari by educating the youth.

The school—really just a 5x10 metre structure normally used as a church—could still be considered a “Rasta place”, for it is a physical locale where Rastafari is practiced. None of the four has any training in education, and I question exactly how effective their teaching is, but the effort and dedication I observed among them was admirable and one of the more life affirming displays I have seen in this country. Neither the students nor teachers have money to spend on school supplies, but what money they do come across goes mostly to the children. It is a full time job, and the Rastas teach from eight to three every weekday. Besides teaching, as musicians they play music for and with the students, although this was the only area I noticed where Rastafari (specifically its embrace of music as a form of education) influenced the curriculum. For all the talk about working independently of the system, lessons came straight from official lesson-books.

Mediascape: Not a physical place but abstract one, the mediascape as defined by Arjun Appadurai is one of the “locations” in Ghana where Rastafarian imagery and symbolism is most present. All over the country, reggae music containing Rastafari discourse can be heard playing from minibuses, shops and corporately owned radio stations. It is one of the primary areas where this discourse is transmitted and reproduced. Not only in music, but images such as the Lion of Judah are featured prominently, especially in urban areas.

Discussion/Conclusions:

In my quest to discover the essence of Rastafari identity and practice, I ultimately found that no such thing really exists. Rastafari identity is a multiplicity, connected through symbols and icons carried over from a Jamaican political movement in the 1930s.

How then to account for this utter decentralization of Rasta culture? If the movement began with a high degree of internal consistency, then how did it become what it is today? I can make no definite statements on the issue, but only offer some speculation.

The discourse of Rastafari was adopted by political revolutionaries as strategic tools; for many, symbolic warfare was the only method of resistance. Thus, the discourse was tied to a central force of production, that being the political and socioeconomic conditions of colonial Jamaica. Even spiritual and religious elements like the divinity of Haile Selassie originated in political agitation against the British oppressors. The shared conditions acted as a centralizing force among Rastafarians and tied together their identity by being attached to a concrete material entity.

When Rastafari was displaced in time and space from the colonial conditions and across the Atlantic to West Africa, its material basis was lost. For the most part, only the extrinsic aspects made the crossing. Thus, Rastafari exists in Ghana as a field of aesthetics, a vocabulary of language, images and music. It is a genre, with defined form but not content. Rastafari discourse is no longer produced but instead *reproduced*; no new iconography is being created because the political forces of production no longer exist.

For this reason, Rastafari has become steadily more and more decentralized, and today the term Rasta has no consistent referent. It means something different to everyone, Rasta and non-Rasta alike.

The reality of Rastafari then begs the question, how can a discourse survive when cut off from the forces of production? Again, I can only give speculation.

One of the most striking aspects of Ghanaian society that I've observed is the suppression of counterculture. This was especially odd coming from America and California in particular, where individualism is encouraged and even glorified. In Ghana Rastafari isn't an example of a countercultural movement, it *is* the counterculture. Any current going against the mainstream is thus taken up under the Rastafari flag, because consolidation into a single entity is the only way any could survive. Thus, the extreme variability of Rastafari practice reflects the entire spectrum of countercultural movements that one would see under a vast variety of different names in a more culturally heterogeneous nation. If a Ghanaian wishes to take part in some sort of unconventional lifestyle, then they typically have no other option than to label themselves as Rasta.

Thus in a way, Rastafari retains at least some element of its original political orientation. It is a collective movement against the dominant and oppressive culture which seeks to homogenize and control.

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