

# ***From Yard to Nation: Rastafari and the Politics of Eldership at Home and Abroad***

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## ***Introduction***

During the early 1970s politically conscious reggae, fused with the ideology of black power and socialist politics, gave rise to a renaissance of Rasta culture in Jamaica. Few at the time – save for the prophets of Rastafari themselves – dared to envision the extent to which their culture would travel. By the end of the seventies, the rhythms of the culture (in its reggae-Rasta inception), would spread to the rest of the Caribbean, Europe, North America, Japan, New Zealand, and, of course, Africa. This can be seen in retrospect as the first stage in a process of the globalization of Rasta cultural forms. I draw this distinction because in the 1980s a few of us close to the Movement began to discern a second wave of Rasta influence outside of Jamaica. This was initiated not by artists like Bob Marley or Burning Spear but by traditional Rastafari, many of whom were the teachers of those who initially carried the message abroad. I am speaking of the Elders of the Divine Order of the House of Nyabinghi who, only in the past decade, have trod into the heart of Babylon to deliver their message.<sup>0</sup> These historical figures of Rasta continue to serve as the core members of a yard culture which is little understood or appreciated outside of Jamaica.

In this paper I draw upon my experience with three missions (or “trods”,

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0 The term “Nyabinghi” – interpreted as “death to black and white oppressors” – first entered Jamaica through a piece of propaganda circulated in association with the Italian-Ethiopian conflict. A newspaper article published in the Jamaica Times of December 7, 1935 declared that Emperor Haile Selassie was the head of an African secret society known as the Nyabinghi Order which would be mobilized against the Italian invasion. Those in the nascent Rastafari Movement sought to align themselves with the Ethiopian cause by declaring themselves to be “Nyahmen”, members of this Order. For a fuller discussion of the Nyabinghi concept as it relates to Rastafari music and ritual, see Leib 1983).

as they are more commonly known) of Nyabinghi Elders who visited the United States between 1988-89-90. I am particularly interested in looking at the ways in which these trods have increased the options around the social construction of eldership both within the Nyabinghi House and the Movement generally. This also leads me to consider certain contradictions which have arisen within the social order of the House due to this new process of missionization.

I have chosen to frame this discussion by a contrast between the concepts of yard and nation, terms which both have broad currency in Rasta discourse. I use them here, however, primarily for heuristic purposes to analyze the tensions between the local and global frames of reference presently operative within the Rasta Movement. This includes a dialectic between an inward-looking spirituality by which Rastafari address the internal condition of the community and an outward-looking philosophy by which they seek to expand the scope and relevance of their message. These terms also encompasses a tension between egalitarian and hierarchial principles and the distinction between a community as based on long-term face-to-face relations as opposed to one merely posited on the basis shared identity.

Throughout the West Indies, the term yard indicates a unit of residence, both rural and urban. I use it here to evoke the social context in which the Rastafari Movement has developed in Jamaica among participants who share a loosely evolved set of interpersonal norms and understandings.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary Rasta yard life not only has strong historical continuities with Afro-Jamaican folk culture, it is an oral culture which can be traced more directly to the decline of the Garvey Movement in the 1930s. It is grounded in an ethos which emphasizes interpersonal relations of equality rooted in ideals of human as opposed to social worth. This follows from the fact that yards are the controlled social space in which relations of trust and respect are nurtured among the predominately male members of the Movement.<sup>2</sup> However, it is also essential to understand that this culture initially developed as a strategy of resistance to the legacy of slavery, institutionalized racism, and the exploitation of black peoples in a British Crown colony. This helps one to understand how Rasta principles of yard life effect forms of symbolic closure designed to prevent infringement upon their spiritual and cultural precepts. The heuristic concept of "yard" which I have developed here thus presumes continuous face-to-face interaction among pe-

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1 In Rasta speech the term yard entails a symbolic set of associations which may be expanded or contracted according to usage. "Yard" may refer to one's site of residence, to Jamaica, or even to the ancestral continent of Africa. In this latter regard, Rastafari usage of "yard" and "nation" are often closely linked according to symbolic expressions found elsewhere in the Caribbean. Mintz (1989:246-47), for example, notes that among Caribbean peasants the yard symbolically links a group of kinsmen and at the same time may express continuity with the beginnings of life through the customary burial of an infant's navel string cord in the yard. In addition, he observes that "yard" may refer metaphorically to one's total sphere of activities. Rastafari extensions of the term "yard" to refer to Africa can be understood in similar terms, i.e., the birthplace of all black peoples as well as a sphere of political concern within their pan-Africanist philosophy. For a discussion of the symbolic meanings linked to West Indian yards, see Mintz 1989:246-47.

2 A major shortcoming of this discussion is that it ignores the issue of gender and the role of women in the changing Rasta Movement. For insights into these issues, see Yawney 1983, 1987, Silvera 1983; Sister Ilaloo 1981).



ople who share a loose set of precepts and understandings and who are concerned to insure the integrity of the lifeways engendered by such precepts.

The concept of "nation", as I use it here, can be seen to have both ideological and sociological relevance for the present-day international Movement. Derived from the biblical discourse of Ethiopianism and the associated teachings of Marcus Garvey, Rastafari nationhood carries strong connotations of race pride cultural sovereignty. It affirms that all peoples of African descent – those at home and those abroad – share a common historical destiny (see Scott 1978; Shepperson 1953). In this sense, "nation" is a term which ideologically undergrids an expansive "imagined community" (Anderson 1983:15-16) of indefinite membership encompassing Africa, the Diaspora, and contexts which now extend to other historically oppressed peoples.

The sociological reality of this "community" abroad derives from Jamaican and West Indian migration to the United States, Canada, and Britain and from "the international trade in vinyl" by which reggae music has entered the world system (see Bilby 1983:202-4). The collectivities of people associated with this process need not entail actual or continuous social interaction. Moreover, they can be expected to generate new contexts for and interpretations of Rasta cultural symbols as they are disseminated out of "yard." The heuristic concept of nation I have developed here thus presumes only a shared basis for identity among people and who may experiment with the symbols and icons of Rasta culture as it travels globally.<sup>3</sup>

I believe it is fair to say that, ideologically, features from both frames of reference have coexisted within the Movement from its inception. It is only recently, however, that traditional Rastafari from "yard" have had the opportunity to disseminate their culture in the context of "nation" outside Jamaica. In order to develop this contrast further with respect to eldership (the operative principle of leadership within the Movement), I now turn to an overview of the House of Nyabinghi.

### ***The Nyabinghi House: From Yard to Nation***

Likening themselves to the ancient Israelites in exile, Nyabinghi Rastas have traditionally pursued a disciplined vow of separation from the wider Jamaican society they term Babylon. These lifeways, symbolized most visibly by the dreadlocks covenant, can be traced historically to the camp and yard experience of Rastafari in the 1940s and 1950s, the period from which the House of Nyabinghi derives its foundations. Although sometimes described as a sect within the wider Rasta Movement, the House of Nyabinghi is more properly seen as a loosely-knit ritual collectivity whose principal adherents upholding the most

3 Yard and nation can be seen as polarized types on a continuum applied to the contemporary Rasta experience. "Yard" can be taken to represent the traditional Dreadlocks solidarity of the Nyabinghi House based on an Israelite vow of separation from "Babylon." "Nation" can be seen in the North American contexts for urban social interaction formed recently through the musical crossovers between Jamaican dancehall reggae and African-American rap.

orthodox version of Rasta lifeways. In addition, the House – also known as the Haile Selassie I Theocracy Government – is central to the sponsorship of three- and seven-day celebrations at which the Rastafari annually commemorate key dates on their calendar.

Having “moved with” Rastafari in yard over the past twelve years, I estimate that somewhere between 75-100 Elders of different generations form the mainstay for the ritual life of the House island-wide even though a much small number of individuals are counted among it “leading lights.” These individuals dominate its discourse and serve as ritual adepts during full Nyabinghi celebrations. One must hasten to add, however, that all Rastas have access to and can coordinate with the House based on the egalitarian principles espoused by its members. This follows from the key organizational feature of the House which is its principle of “free association”.<sup>4</sup> One does not “join” the House as there are no formal criteria of membership. Rather, each individual asserts his “works” based on a personal “visionary” tie with Jah (see Yawney 1976).

The contemporary significance of the House for Rasta brethren and sistren can be seen to rest on at least three points: the historical placement of its members in relation to the development of a culture of resistance (Yawney 1985:2; Campbell 1987); the authoritative voice of its members in relation to a complex of practices known as livity; and its function as a ritual polity which encompasses Jamaica and, more recently, has been extended to Rastafari abroad. Typically, the informal authority of any given Elder is a composite which draws variably upon all three of these domains. Due to the different ways in which the Rasta presence has developed in Jamaica and abroad (and contrasting time-spans of this presence), these sources of influence are differently framed and interpreted at home and abroad. A brief excursion into the social construction of eldership will serve to further illuminate these contrasts.

On the first point it is to be noted that the oldest living members of the House provide continuity with both the Garvey Movement and the first cohort of Rastafari preachers. Many of the contemporary Elders have been in the vanguard of the Movement's politics of confrontation since the late 1940s. This has included theatrical disruptions of the court, street marches, organized protests directed at the ministries of government, as well as other forms of symbolic resistance related to the Rasta advocacy of repatriation to Africa. Such forms of symbolic confrontation intensified throughout the 1960s as the wider society reacted to the innovations of a dreadlocks counter-culture and as authorities sought to criminalize the Rastafari for their sacramental use of ganja.

The way in which Elders establish their individual pedigrees in relation to the history of the Movement can be seen as an important feature (although by no means the only one) of the oral tradition of Jamaican Rastafari (for example,

4 Much of my recent work has been with a generational cohort of Rastas who innovated the linguistic code currently known as either “Dread Talk”, I-ance, or I-tesvar (see Homiak 1992). According to some accounts, the common Rasta greeting I-rie was initially conceived to gloss the phrase, “mon free” (i.e., “every man is free.”) This became a common refrain during the decade of the 1960s when younger Dreadlocks were asserting themselves within the House by insisting upon their freedom to introduce new cultral expressions into the Movement based on their own spiritual inspiration.



see Homiak 1985). Outsiders to the culture, however, need to appreciate such testimony as an organic feature of yard life, the social and cultural domain over which Elders exercise primary influence. Here the brethren frequently “perform” their personal testimonies as a way to inspire younger adherents. Alternatively, they may construct shared accounts which reaffirm spiritual bonds forged through mutual struggle and sacrifice as they “came up” in the Movement. In this context, oral testimony is not simply about factuality, but is appreciated for its persuasiveness as well as for its ability to enliven social discourse.

In Jamaica, younger Rastafari “coming up” in the faith typically gain access to a wide range of such testimony as they move between the yards of different Elders. The impact of any given account on listeners is thus greatly relativized as such history/testimony tends to be repeated (or “dubbed”, as it were), and received through many voices (see Homiak 1992). By contrast, travels abroad, which may include anywhere from a few to a dozen or more Elders, present us with a different picture. Here oral testimony is likely to be deployed as part of more formal cultural presentations. And even when this is not the case, the account of an emissary-Elder abroad tends to stand out for its rarity and singularity. It may even acquire mythic status among Rastafari exposed to such testimony for the first time.

On the second point we must note the authority of the House in spiritual and cultural matters. Here we find those first-generation Dreadlocks Rastas who are the principal architects of the Movement's present-day ritual and devotional forms (see Yawney 1985; Homiak 1992). This includes the complex of beliefs and practices referred to as *livity*, a term which is glossed roughly as “lifestyles” or “way of life” in the total sense. It is sufficient to note that *livity* constitutes those precepts which address the care of the physical structure (i.e., to the Rasta, the temple of Jah) and which define the sober non-violent ethic of the brethren. These include ideas about “the proper use of herbs” and the concept of an *I-tal* diet.<sup>5</sup> The former refers to the use of cannabis (as enjoined by a Rastafarian reading of the Holy Bible), for medicinal purposes and as the substance of sacramental communion (see Yawney 1979:165-69).<sup>6</sup> The latter typically defines a saltless, vegetarian diet with the strict avoidance of tobacco, alcohol, and processed foods. Furthermore, the avoidance of animal flesh, as well as animal products such as leather goods, underscores the Rasta belief that it is inappropriate for a life-affirming people to shed blood in order to sustain life. Similarly, the use of herbs and the growing of locks is seen as consistent with the theme of “natural living” and the life-giving forces of nature.

Elsewhere Yawney (1985:3) has drawn attention to the fact that the Nyab-

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5 The word “I-tal” is derived from the English “vital”, referring to the organic, life-giving attributes of nature. *Livity* encompasses a complex of beliefs and practices including the wearing of dreadlocks, the sacramental use of “herbs” or cannabis, and various devotional activities. In addition, it also includes a rich set of ideas which address the proper care of the physical structure which the Rastafari regard as the temple of Jah.

6 Among the biblical justifications cited by the Rastafari for the medical, dietary, and sacramental use of cannabis sativa are Genesis 1:11, 1:29-30; Exodus 3:1-4, 10-15; Deuteronomy 11:10, 32:10; Proverb 15:17; and Revelation 8:3-5, 22:2.

inghi House, notwithstanding variable beliefs and behaviors within its own ranks, has traditionally served as an idealized model for the practice of livity. While a small number of exemplary I-mples (I-tal brethren) can be seen to represent, almost by excess, an idealized model, the House accomodates more relaxed versions of practice based on the principle of "man free" (i.e., that each individual is free, within limits, to establish his/her own orientation within the culture). Juxtaposed with this principle, however, is the fact that a strict construction of livity is enforced by these exemplars for the duration of annual Nyabinghi celebrations. On these occasions Elders are known for inspirational oratory which exhorts the members of an assembled congregation to "live up." It must also be noted, however, that the livity of an Elder is also subject to ongoing critical review within this ritual community.

This nuanced approach to the practice of livity in yard can be distinguished from a more doctrinaire orientation encountered abroad. Yawney suggests that this derives from the different ways in which adherents become Rasta in Jamaica as opposed to North America. She comments, for example, that "...most Rastafari outside of Jamaica [...] do not come up in the faith by reasoning in small groups with seasoned Elders, but rather are more likely to acquire their concept of Rasta through the electronic media..." (1985:1). This typically entails a focus on the outward forms of wearing dreadlocks and living I-tal. By contrast, it can be said that Jamaican Rastafari place a high value on an inner process of self-realization as this develops over time through reasoning and grounding with other brethren. I think it is fair to say that most Jamaican brethren – given their participation in overlapping yard networks of brethren who reason together – tend to be more tolerant toward differently evolved orientations within livity. This makes for flexible associations and remains one of the ideological strengths of the Movement as it has evolved "in yard."

While these organizational dynamics may be absent outside Jamaica, there are factors exogenous to the Movement which make the issue of livity a matter of concern to Rastafari abroad. One is perhaps the need for roots in an historic tradition with its own apparent coherence. Another, and strongly related concern, derives from the stigma of criminality which is frequently applied to Rastafari in North America. This fuels a concern among Rastas outside Jamaica to be able to coherently specify livity as a disciplined and moral code. Whatever the combination of reasons, I wholly concur with the observation by Yawney that "there appears to be greater pressure placed on traditional Rastafari Elders to clearly articulate and even to systematize just what constitutes livity" (Yawney 1985:5).

The third point of relevance is the functioning of the House as an island-wide ritual polity which bridges the various "mansions" of Rastafari. Whereas the length of an individual's commitment to the Movement and the quality of his/her livity may form a basis for respect among peers, these criteria must be joined with ritual abilities and charismatic attributes in order to translate into the authority associated with eldership. In the present-day Jamaican Movement, Nyabinghi celebrations constitute a ceremonial arena for the recognition



and validation of this authority. It is, I believe, in this domain that missions of Elders abroad pose new concerns for the politics of the House. Not only do they represent a potential sphere for recognition not previously available to the Elders, they also intensify the tension between the traditional egalitarian principles of the House and the ritual claims to status which Rastafari implicitly recognized among themselves.

In present-day Jamaica, Nyabinghi ceremonies have become primarily rural events during which communicants gather within a specially constructed tabernacle. At these island-wide events congregants "give Ises" through the chanting and drumming of Nyabinghi music and the sacramental smoking of herbs. Elders who assume responsibility for orchestrating these events must command of a range of expressive skills including biblical oratory, musical abilities, and skill in "reasoning" and "argument."<sup>7</sup> It can be argued that until recently the Nyabinghi has been a set piece of local culture through which congregants "represent themselves to themselves." Throughout the 1980s, however, the House experienced an increasing number of "pilgrimages" by Rastas abroad to Jamaica to participate in the Nyabinghi roots of the culture. This, in addition to developments internal to the House, has directed the attention of more Elders abroad.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to trace the varied changes which have affected the House since its inception in the 1940s. Nevertheless, two aspects of the demographic and economic structure of Nyabinghi ritual warrant mention here.<sup>8</sup> One is the development of Nyabinghi as primarily rural-based events during the 1970s. The other is the fact that in recent years these "duties" have been progressively monopolized by a relatively small cohort of Elders who command the social and practical resources necessary for sponsorship of these celebrations.

Whereas a tradition of grounation or Nyabinghi grew spontaneously out of the 1950s West Kingston experience and its network of closely linked camps and yards, today Nyabinghi celebrations are specially prepared-for island-wide ceremonies which last three or seven days. It is considered an honor to "receive a duty" from the House and, in fact, the effective sponsorship of these events now constitutes a path toward eldership. This demands a considerable investment in time and resources on the part of one or more sponsors. It is necessary to provision a site where perhaps 200-300 Rastafari can congregate for the duration of the event. To effect this an Elder must control a suitable piece of land, construct a semi-permanent tabernacle and other structures, and have the ability to mobilize other brethren in his district for ritual and material support. Given the fact that the Nyabinghi House (perhaps the most among all Rastafari), has typically drawn its adherents from the lower economic strata of society, these practical requirements mean that only a small number of Elders are posi-

7 The aesthetic criteria of performance at these events are closely related to that counter-cultural complex of values which Wilson (1973:7) labels as reputation.

8 The emergence of Nyabinghi ceremonies as rural events initially developed from the destruction of Back 'O Wall, Ackee Walk, and the other concentrations of Rastafari along Foreshore Road in West Kingston in 1964 and 1966.

tioned to assume leading roles in the sponsorship of these affairs. Moreover, the fact that only six or seven official dates are celebrated on the annual Nyabinghi calendar further circumscribes opportunity for the exercise of ritual authority. It would not be too much to see this as an incipient "bigman" phenomena within the House which runs against its longstanding egalitarian ethos.

On the other hand, it must be noted that over the years the House has evolved its own protocols whereby hierarchial tendencies and unilateral actions by members are kept in check. All actions or pronouncements made in the name of the House are subject to what the brethren term "collective security." By this Rastas mean democratic input from all present with vigorous debate leading to consensus. As every Nyabinghi is an ad hoc council of Elders, these sessions are often transformed into heated public dramas in which individual Elders display their moral resolve, psychological resilience, and intellectual maneuverability. On these occasions, displays of vanity, pride, or "bigmanism" are subject either to direct challenge or filtered through modes of linguistic indirection. In effect, the House has ritualized its own version of "crab antics" – a form of disputing behavior designed to level claims to superior status which is widely recognized elsewhere in the English-speaking Caribbean (see Wilson 1973:58; Besson 1988:5-6).

This said, it is also necessary to point out that such behavior almost never compromises what is, for communicants, the solemnity of the event as a divine proceeding. The Rastafari themselves recognize a hierarchy of texts and subtexts within the Nyabinghi celebration. First and foremost, they regard these ceremonies as a means to enhance their collective and individual spiritual power by coming together in unity to "praise Jah and chant down Babylon." At the same time, all recognize that Nyabinghi involves a kind of ongoing ritual work which effects a spiritual cleansing of the community and which restates the moral principles on which the Order is based. Thus, the concept of a Nyabinghi assembly as a "crucible of fire" or a "throne room of judgement", for example, is frequently invoked to cover "arguments" over cultural principles, the airing of greivances, or contentious exchanges which may errupt around intrigues over power. From this perspective, even the most heated public exchange tends to be seen as a sign of community vitality rather than as a threat to the unity of a congregation.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, these exchanges are implicitly recognized as part of the invidious process by which Elders establish rank within the House. Such a process, however, does presume a collectivity of individuals who are known to each other, who interact regularly, and who share certain understandings. This aspect of the ritual politics of the House is largely without foundation abroad.

A more complex situation (including challenges to the egalitarian concep-

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9 Words of rebuke are often part of the gamesmanship with a Nyabinghi council, a context in which "seasoned" individuals are expected to exhibit self-control. Since Rasta precept has it that "man is word, living sound", the true Rastaman cannot be offended by word-sound. Even in instances where co-ritualists may harbor genuine grudes, they must, out of necessity, find ways to coordinate since they are bound by the moral framework of the House. Again, a Rastas precept – that "the Church is One Foundation" – is instructive here. The moral authority of the House rests on the fact that, in principle, it affords every man his say in an equal and democratic forum.



tions of Nyabinghi and injunctions against unilateral action) began to emerge in the 1980s. These took the form of international Rastafari conferences which were convened in 1980, 82, 84, and 86. The first was held in Toronto, the second in Kingston, Jamaica. The second officially acknowledged the authority of the Nyabinghi House in matters of livity and spirituality. Subsequent international exchanges include "trods" to the small islands of the Eastern Caribbean (1983), Toronto (1982, 1984), London (1986, Caribbean Focus), New York, Washington D.C. and California (1988), and New York, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. (1989-90). These missions – linking yard with communities abroad – greatly expanded the arena in which traditional Nyabinghi Elders could maneuver as well as the potential sources of prestige open to them. At the same time, these "trods" have opened debate about the qualities of eldership which are relevant to the frames "yard" and "abroad."<sup>10</sup>

### ***The Rainbow Circle Throne Room Delegations: 1988-1990***<sup>11</sup>

In mid-1986 I became involved with members of the local Rastafari community of Washington, D.C. in an effort to assist them in bringing a delegation of Elders to the United States. The project was specifically conceived in response to a massive raid on February 6, 1996 by the Metropolitan D.C. police which targeted members of the local Jamaican community in general and the Rastafari in particular. The drug raid – labeled as "Operation Caribbean Cruise" – was highly publicized by the local press and broadcast media. This was much for the scale of the raid (involving 500 metropolitan police officers), as well as for the embarrassment it caused the police (few arrests were made), and for the response it drew from the local Jamaican and Rastafari community which it targeted.

The community was incensed by what they considered an lawless invasion by the police. They were also deeply concerned over the attempt by law enforcement to villify Rastafarians by linking them with the violent drug dealing gangs. Known as "possees", these Jamaican gangs had become common in the urban U.S. during the early 1980s. A copy of the police manual used to prepare officers for the Operation was quoted as describing the Rastafari as "...members of a religious cult...organized for the purpose of distributing narcotics in order to generate funds...for the violent overthrow of the present [Seaga] Jamaican Government" (Iere: A Caribbean Community Newspaper p.1, 3/86);

10 To a certain extent, these trods harken to a "first Rasta tradition" which emerged directly out of the Garvey era. During the 1920s and 1930s the nascent Rasta Movement drew its inspiration from well-traveled individuals who had seen and experienced first-hand the circumstances of black people outside Jamaica. These were individuals respected, among other reasons, for their broad experience. Qualities of experience and broadmindedness continue to inform the oft-heard Jamaican contrast between terms like "local" and "international." Despite a fierce pride in their own indigenously evolved culture, Rastas often attach the same negative connotations to use of the term "local" as do other Jamaicans. To assert that someone is "too local" is to disparage his or her views as provincial, uninformed, or lacking in consciousness.

11 I wish to acknowledge the Smithsonian Office of Folklife Programs and the Smithsonian Office of International Affairs for their assistance in making these programs possible.

and as cultists who "... favor the use of automatic and semiautomatic weapons coupled with a willingness to use them under any circumstances" (Washington Post, p. 18, 2/23/86). The social impact of the massive police invasion of a black community, coupled with the effect of this propaganda on the metropolitan Rasta community resulted in the formation of a grass roots coalition to protest the action. Led by two prominent local Rastas (neither of them Jamaican), the coalition was determined to counter the popular media image of Rastas as "gun-toting, Johnny-too-bad urban terrorits" and to educate them about the true Rasta's commitment to a lifestyle of sobriety and to principles of "peace and love."

The above misperceptions of the Rastafari are framed within the context of present-day race relations. Particularly in the United States, the face of race relations has changed considerably since the post-sixties Civil Rights period. With rising levels of racial intolerance during the Reagan-Bush years and epidemic levels of black-on-black violence in most metropolises of the U.S., Rastafari abroad find themselves stereotyped by the press and media as drug dealers and violent criminals. These tropes, associated with the Elders' public pronouncements on matter of livity, have accordingly been called upon to fulfill an important public educational function (see Montague & Yawney 1985; Homiak 1988; Hyikhyon Hyawhycuss 1989; Wartofsky 1989).

About two months after the raid I was contacted by associates of the Rasta community leaders noted above. This came about through my network to the Nyabinghi House in Jamaica among whose members I had worked since 1980. The D.C. Rasta community felt that a mission by members of the House would assist them to educate the public about the culture and counter many of the negative stereotypes about the Movement. Unofficially, the Jamaican Embassy in Washington supported the idea. In this first mission I became involved both on the basis of my ongoing work in Jamaica and through my Smithsonian affiliation. As a quasi-agency of the United States government, the Smithsonian could insure the necessary visas and cut through the "magisterial dismissiveness" which most Jamaicans (not to mention Rastas) would encounter at the U.S. Embassy.

Although the proclaimed desire for a mission from Jamaica was voiced early in 1986, it would be another two years before the required ground-work between the House in Jamaica and the local D.C. Rasta community would be worked out (SEE FIGURE 1). During April of 1988 I spent three weeks in yard caucassing with members of the House who gathered from around the island. This involved me in extended sessions of reasoning with the Elders, both in separate yards and in more formal meetings where I was received variously as a representative for the D.C. Rasta community, a sympathizer and brethren, an academic opportunist, and a CIA spy.<sup>12</sup> In some of these attributed roles I was understandably the focus for public dramas played out for the benefit of the community. These were typically responses to my existing alignments within

12 Although I had attended a number of full Nyabinghi congregations between 1980 and 1987, many Elders had never reasoned with me personally and were suspect of my motives. Much time was spent in these sessions assessing the potential conspiratorial overtones of my work at the Smithsonian and the scope and nature of this institution.

please add

Fig. 1



the factional organization of the House as well as my Smithsonian credentials. In the latter regard, a perception of the Smithsonian (a quasi-agency within the U.S. government) as a citadel of Babylon was widely propagated among some of the brethren and sisten. This served to greatly increase deliberation within its ranks about the merits of the trod.

Arrangements had already been put in place through the Smithsonian Office of International Affairs to prepare the paperwork for fifteen Elders. Despite this "official list", an additional sixteen individuals traveled en masse to the U.S. Embassy on the day when visas were to be obtained. Twenty-six persons eventually received visas to enter the United States.

Issues of livity were prominently foregrounded in these staging councils for the trod. Assurances had to be given that proper provisions for I-tal dietary observances could be met within the community abroad. The trod was seen both as a divine mission and an historic event which had to be conducted under strict Nyabinghi protocol. Moreover, there was considerable "jostling" over the official list of nominees which the House had selected for the mission. Of the 15 Elders nominated by the House, only two had ever traveled abroad to North America. Both were historic figures within the Movement with markedly different orientations to the livity complex. One was the first Rasta to contest for a seat in the Jamaican Parliament – a highly controversial move given the traditional "non-political" stance of the Rastafari. While widely respected for his intellectual abilities and outspoken social views, he was not regarded as exemplary in his approach to livity. Nor was he a frequent presence within the Naybinghi tabernacle. The other was a patriarch respected for his inspirational oratory and ritual abilities as a priest within the "churchical" order of the House. He was known for his disciplined and uncompromising position on issues of livity. Prior to departure, this brethren let it be known within the backstage of the House that he, as "holy man", would not travel on the same delegation with a "politician."

The result was that the other patriarch came to serve as the ranking Elder and principal spokesperson for the mission during its official presentations abroad. This became a source of some controversy during the mission as well as upon its return to yard. Detractors of the mission leveled charges that the precepts of the House had been compromised on various occasions, one being a cultural visit to the Piscataway Indian Reservation in Maryland outside Washington, D.C.<sup>13</sup>

In this sense, these trods have become a powerful catalyst in the "argument of images" contained within Rasta ideology – between images of enclosure around prophets "crying in the wilderness" and those of expansion around international emissaries preaching a universal message of peace and love. Atti-

13 During the mission's first cultural presentation at Howard University (Washington, D.C.), a predominantly black institution, a delegation of Native Americans spontaneously honored the Elders with a gift of sacred tobacco from the chief of the Piscataway nation. The Elders subsequently made a number of trips to their reservation. There, a few brethren, including the acknowledged "high priest" of the House, joined the chief in his sweat lodge for a purification ceremony. Detractors in yard charged that this compromised the integrity of the mission by "mixing up" with an alien culture.

tudes toward race relations and the vision of repatriation are cases in point. Whereas observers of the Movement in the fifties and sixties associated Rasta with a psychology of withdrawal from the wider society (Nettleford 1971:46), the Rastafari of the seventies and eighties have renewed their determination to "gather the people." This extends to the communities of the "second diaspora" in North America and Europe where significant numbers of West Indian and African peoples have migrated.

The ranking Elder on the 1988 trod, when pressed to explain why the Elders had come out of Jamaica, frankly stated that the Movement had "passed through stages" and that now "Rasta come like it no big 'ting again...de people a yard just tek it feh granted." It was time now for attention to shift abroad, or as he put it, to expand its relevance beyond a focus on Ethiopian divinity:

If I was to narrow this thing to Emperor Haile Selassie I would be looking only at Africa. Rasta movements is a thing that grow from stage-to-stage. What I-n-I deal with in this time is to expand border and boundaries, to expand political power, and all such thing. I-n-I duty is to RASTASIZE THE WORLD! [It] is to make people think in a naturalized, civilized way of humanity so that all man knows himself as ONE MAN!

The international impetus within the Nyabinghi House has required that the brethren debate and evolve a working consensus on a variety of concerns. Among the issues that I have heard frequently voiced are: how is the Movement to be projected to the non-Rasta world? For what reasons should the House authorize an international "trod" and what forms of protocol are to be observed during such a mission? What kinds of collaboration with outside institutions should be entertained. And finally how should these missions be constituted and chosen?

During the initial trod, the role of the Elders as gurus to younger brethren abroad became apparent. Nearly all claimed a authorial role in the liturgical practices of the House. And all circulated their own versions of inspirational testimony in informal daily gatherings in the homes and shops of local brethren and sistren, much of which focused on the prophetic "passing through great tribulation" by which the true Rasta validates his/her calling.

One notable performance of such testimony evolved spontaneously during a reasoning in which the Elders and some of the younger local Rastafari were comparing the kinds of treatment which they have received for "defending Rasta." After a young Washington Dreadlocks described how he would be regularly eyed as a potential shoplifter in local stores and at times accosted on the street and searched for drugs by police, two Elders, Ras I-mes and Bongo Shep, responded with their account of a police raid on a Nyabinghi in 1976.

Following this raid, some 15 brethren were drawn by rope, in the pouring rain, at faststep behind a jeep for over a mile to the Morant Bay police station, St. Thomas (eastern Jamaica). After being led into the station they were forced to stip to the waist, their clothes being used as rags to clean the wet and muddy station floor. As an act of public humiliation, Ras I-mes and Bongo Shep had



their locks tied and knotted together by one of the police. In his turn, I-mes' name was called for processing. When Shep, of necessity had to step off with him, he was struck in the side with a iron rod by one of the police. "Your name no call", said the policeman. To which the brethren replied, "Then where must I guh? De two of we is tied together so anywhere he guh, I must guh!" Following this the police resolved to separate the brethren in the most demeaning way possible. Although the following recorded excerpt cannot do justice to the performed word, the two Elders described what followed thusly:

Shep: Deh hold him (I-mes) and draw dis mon tight, one big fat police, and one hold mi and draw me de other way...and deh tek de two locks and a bigger police come wid de iron rod and look between de two locks...him drawn back (the rod overhead) and RAM INA IT!

Mi brain...mi brain...mi brain guh round and round and round...and de top and de back a mi head feel like it was gonna bust out!

I-mes: ...and when him do so...WHOOM! – one time, and him see seh it no bust, him do so again....WHOOM! And when him see seh it no bust, him tek guh do so again (i.e., drawn the bar overhead), but him hand couldn't guh down. And (then) him tek a knife now and start to cut between de two of we now feh loose de locks. But de knife turn dull...like it was de back of de knife him a use. It couldn't cut it. So him tell de we bredrin dem ta separate we.

Shep: ...and after all dese things was done and we were beaten, we were being thrown into a cell...and it tek de bredrin about two hours ta pull (untangle) de two of us locks apart. (Bongo Shep then displayed a bald spot in his head were part of his locks had been pulled out by the roots.)

Part theatre, part charismatic testimony, and part history lesson, the Elders' testimony enthralled the small group present. Beyond this, however, it began to circulate throughout the community in second-hand oral accounts and on a cassette recording that a younger Rasta had made. In many ways, this lived account is emblematic of the Nyabinghi creed: "never bow before force." It also came to stand as a metaphor for the overall purpose of the trod, i.e., to affirm that the bonds between true Rastafari, be they in Jamaica or elsewhere, cannot never be sundered. Five months later, two of the witnesses to this testimony in Washington were "in yard" seeing for themselves the proceedings within the Nyabinghi tabernacle.<sup>14</sup>

14 In a similar fashion, another oral narrative from Nyabinghi history was widely disseminated during a 1984 Elders' trod to Toronto (see *The Atkinsonian* vol. 19, no. 5, 1984, and Montague and Yawney, 1985:29). These trods present the Elders with fresh forums for the retelling of their history and, at the same time, have generated an interest among younger brethren (as well as ethnographers like this writer), to record and compile that history. My article, "Dub history: Soundings on Rastafari Livity and Language", is largely a result of working with the Elders around these trods.

### ***“With a Clean Hands and a Pure Heart”: Authorizing Tradition Abroad.***

In 1988 there was a great deal of collective reasoning among members of the Elders concerning who should be authorized to represent the House abroad. Despite many weeks of caucassing, however, agreement was never fully reached on the “official” list of representatives. At least two Elders with whom I was close made the trip due to my personal involvement in the mission. This happened without any stated objection, indeed, it was never clear whether the House actually sanctioned their participation. This points to another feature of collective action within the House which, in an oblique way, frequently contravenes the stated ideal of “collective security” (i.e., the notion that individuals cannot/should not act unilaterally). This is the idea that when a matter has been tabled for reasoning and debate, and when participants feel that there has been a reasonable airing of the matter without full resolution, they are free to act according to their individual conscience. Rastafari frequently term this principle “moving with a clean hands and a pure heart.” It is not difficult to imagine the problems of factionalism inherent in such organizational principles.

I draw attention to this fact because it was “with a clean hands and a pure heart” that a second Elders’ trod was formed in 1989 to attend the annual Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife in Washington, D.C.<sup>15</sup> My involvement in that year’s Festival was such that I had responsibilities to contact members of other Afro-Jamaican traditions while in Jamaica. This prohibited any lengthy involvement in councils of reasoning within the House. Moreover, a number of the Elders with whom I was personally close had, following their return from abroad, been somewhat ostracized by the House. The point being that the second delegation which formed, which included a number of the principals from the first trod, did so without the formal acknowledgement of the House.

Most of these Elders had, on the basis of their first mission, evolved their own “personal charters” which they felt sufficiently authorized them to represent the House abroad. For example, they had been honored by institutions like Howard University, Johns Hopkins, and the Smithsonian Institution with certificates or medallions which commemorated their presentations at these venues. They reasoned that they, better than others without experience, knew how to properly communicate with the public. That they were “international” in their outlooks and attitudes, if not by their initial dispositions in Jamaica, at least by virtue of having spent three months moving between Washington, D.C., Baltimore, and New York.

A single – and quite remarkable event – which transpired during the Folklife Festival was subsequently cast as the legitimating narrative for the trod and

15 The 1989 Folklife Festival featured a focus on Afro-Caribbean music, dance, and ritual (see Portes de Roux, 1989:67-79). During this two week program the Elders performed Nyabingi drumming, chants and oratory, conducted language workshops in I-tesvar, their creolized subdialect of Jamaican speech, and explained the basis of the livity code. A discussion of the difficulties of presenting Nyabingi culture within the framework of the Festival is beyond the scope of this paper.



for their moral authority to represent the House. The event occurred on the National Mall during the final day of the Elders' participation in the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. It involved an unannounced visit to the festival by the paramount King of Ghana's Ga peoples. The king, shaded by an enormous red-gold-and-green umbrella emblematic of his office of state and followed by a flamboyant African-clad entourage, proceeded around the venue. In turn, he was received by the Hatian, Afro-Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Jamaican participants in their separate venues. However, it was between the Nyabinghi Elders and the King and his delegation that the most significant public exchange took place (SEE FIGURE 2). [\*caption: Bongo Earlites greeting the paramount King of the Ghana's Ga peoples]

The meeting occurred as an ironic twist perfectly fit to the symbolic inversions characteristic of Rasta culture. Having concluded their formal circumambulations around the site, the Ga delegation was casting about for a shaded place to rest. A spot near the Jamaican "dancing booth" was suggested. There, on the other side of the booth beneath a tree and obscured from sight, the Elders had staked out their place to kotch (rest). (While all the other groups at the festival had been allocated their own specific areas with a recreated "yard", the Rasta group, much as in Jamaica, found themselves more-or-less "squatting" wherever they could find space.) There, beneath the tree, Ga King and Rasta Elders meet, giving resonance to the prophetic understanding held by the brethren that "the last shall become first" or that "the least of the world shall rise to confound the wise and prudent."

As the King's group rounded the corner of the booth, the Elders broke into cries of "Rastafari", "lightening, thunder, and earthquake." Sensing the moment, they formed themselves into a group began to improvise a ritual of greetings and praise. After some informal caucassing, during which each of the Elders was individually greeting by the King, the two delegations – Ga and Rasta – entered the dancing booth where the Elders regaled the King with drumming and a Garvey-inspired 'binghi chant. Afterwards, the King's priest and linguist addressed the assembly in their own fashion and invited the brethren to join them the following day for a reception at the Ghanaian Embassy.

On both sides of this cultural exchange the encounter engendered interpretations and emotions that spanned an ocean and 400s years of separation. For their part, the Rastafari recognized a link on various levels: that many Afro-Jamaica are descendants of ancestors from the former Gold Coast and that Garvey, Jamaica's first national hero, was so prominently implicated in the liberation of the Gold Coast as Africa's first independent nation. Moreover, much of what the King's priest had to say about Ga traditions was fit to Rasta cultural sensibilities.<sup>16</sup>

16 It is well known that Kwame Nkrumah acknowledged his debt of inspiration to Garvey by placing the five-point black star of the Garvey Movement in the Ghanaian flag. At another level, the Rastafari attached great importance to a number of pronouncements by the King's priest concerning the taboos he was to observe. These included the avoidance of any contact with death and menstruating women, the necessity of an austere lifestyle (including walking barefoot so as to maintain contact with the earth). As one of the Elders put it, "The whole of those custom is custom that we black people from ancient







The following day I recorded a reasoning with the Elders about the significance they attached to this exchange. A repeated theme was their interpretations of how this encounter with an African king sanctioned the appropriateness of the trod. They had come "on the King's (Selassie I's) works" and were met by another African king. Moreover, of all the other Afro-Caribbean representatives, they shared the principal public spotlight with the Ga delegation. Their emphasis on this as a legitimating narrative must be contrast with rumours which were already circulating from yard (Jamaica). Among these was that the Elders who embarked on it did so without support from the House and would be sanction upon their return, that the trod had become a commercial venture "selling Rasta culture", and/or that the Smithsonian was exploiting the group.<sup>17</sup>

In the course of the 1988 and 1989 missions a more-or-less well-defined group of Elders, most of whom had never before traveled out of yard, had been received by, among other dignitaries, an African king, the Jamaican ambassador to the United States, and officials from various universities. In addition, all collected certificates, medalions, and commendations from some of the most prestigious institutions in the U.S. This included the Smithsonian Institution Folklife Program, the American Museum of Natural History, the National Museum of African Art, the Johns Hopkins University, and the Organization of American States. This celebration abroad of their status as African patriarchs contrasts starkly with the years of "sufferation" in yard where the brethren have traditionally made a prophetic virtue out of their lot on the "dunghill." Similarly, the instant respect and attention they commanded from audiences abroad must be seen in counterpoint to yard where nothing less than a virtuoso performance within the Nyabinghi tabernacle secures the acclaim of an audience of one's peers.<sup>18</sup>

All-in-all, the atmosphere surrounding these missions was a bouyant one during which the Elders build community bridges and became enmeshed in social networks abroad. For a number of the Elders, these new networks – in which they had become unique personalities – became the solvent for the withdrawal from one community – that of yard, and entry into communities abroad. No doubt this transition was greatly assisted by the consecutive nature of these trods and the cultural tendency common to Jamaicans (and other West Indians) to "treat the world as a system of potential relationships" (Carnegie 1982:12). These factors enabled the brethren to forge personal networks abroad which influenced their decisions to remain in the U.S.<sup>19</sup>

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days live and support. So when we the Jamaican Rasta come to America here and meet the king, and he is saying the same thing, we could see we are all in one line – Africanized."

17 It is of note that both during the 1988 and 1989 trods there was almost daily telephone contact between brethren and sistren in yard and in Washington, D.C./Baltimore/New York. Information passed quickly along the lines of established networks and it became clear that these networks served then, as at other times, as conduits for processing rumour.

18 In addition, most of the Elders on these missions who returned to yard had to endure a variety of charges from others within the House that they had, in one way or another, compromised the Nyabinghi traditions abroad. In my view, these crab antics and their leveling implications were a direct response to the enhanced vitae of those who had traveled on an international mission.

19 There is little doubt that both spiritual and material factors influenced these decisions. These brethren readjusted their ideological sights to missionizing abroad. At the same time these decisions reflect

Because of my longstanding relationship to these brethren, my advocacy for the ideological outlooks of the Movement was perceived as a concern to promote their personal interests. Accordingly, a number of the Elders brought into play a number of contradictory conceptions of interclass conduct which I will discuss further below. These were at play during the initial staging of the first mission. Simply put, I was both an equal – “brethren” – and a social superior – a kind of “patron.”<sup>20</sup> This became a considerable source of tension between us, with both the Elders and myself finding it necessary to constantly redefine our working frames of reference. All the while, the timing of these trods (with many of the same personnel involved from 1988-90) highlighted the behavioral strategy which I have noted above: the tendency to treat the world as a potential system of relationships (Carnegie 1982:12).

In light of the fact that a number of Elders made their own decisions to remain in the United States after the second trod, it became apparent that they had approached these trips not only as spiritual missions, but as opportunities to forge new social ties and to explore their options abroad. This was a real possibility given the three months spent in the United States during the first trip and a similar duration of time on the second. I think it fair to say that those who relocated used their social and spiritual credit to forge relations of generalized reciprocity and to keep open options for patronage and support from individuals abroad.<sup>21</sup>

### ***The Challenge of the post-Marley Era: Egalitarianism and Hierarchy***

From my own experience it is clear that these missions pose a number of organizational challenges which the Movement in general (and the Nyabinghi House, in particular) is struggling to meet. A central problematic in this regard are the contradictions which arise from the nature of the Rastafari as an “embedded egalitarian community” within the wider hierarchial society (see Brienness 1988:500-501). In this regard, the Rastafari can be seen as but one example, and perhaps the most unique example, of an Afro-West Indian community in which local egalitarianism “...coexists with contradictory hierarchial conceptions of the

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adaptive behavior which Dirks (1972:569) and others have noted for African American communities where access to economic opportunities is limited and intermittent. In such cases a positive advantage is conferred on individual flexibility in communities as resource opportunities open and close under conditions over which community members have little control.

20 Over the years I was repeatedly struck with that fact that many of the same individuals who fiercely defended the egalitarian ethos of the Rasta faith were seemingly concerned with the development of my “big man” status outside the Movement. I would often hear, and dismiss as irrelevant, comments like, “You could roll a bigger ball by now”, or that “You come to Rasta as a ‘patient’ and now you’re a ‘doctor’” (i.e., Ph.D.). Not until my involvement in these missions did the social significance of such remarks become clear.

21 One product of this patronage is the recent l.p. Nyabinghi recording RASTAFARI ELDERS distributed by RAS Records, Washington, D.C. Several of the Elders aligned themselves with a local reggae promoter (an African American sistren) who served as their agent and assisted them in cutting this l.p.



local order and the meanings of economic differentiation, class stratification, and appropriate modes of interclass conduct" (Williams 1987:83).

Much of what has been written about the splendid biblical communalism shared by members of the Movement invariably gives prominence to the ideal of *communitas* inherent in their concept of I-n-I. This concept, encoded ubiquitously in Rasta speech, emphasizes the human equality of individuals based on respect for the interdwelling of the divine within each person. To be sure, this is part of the spiritual reality which different Rastafari actualize in varying degrees. This emphasis on ideology, however, has obscured our ethnographic understanding of on-the-ground lived-in reality of Rastas, both within their own cultural frameworks and in relation to the wider hierarchial society.

The Rastafari, like all other members of Jamaican society, find it necessary to negotiate in a world which recognizes status differentials and rewards variable social abilities in uneven ways. The practical demands associated with organizing an international *trod* serve as one such case in point. Because of the requirements of articulation with formal institutional structures, these missions create a different order of tension between hierarchial norms recognized by the wider society and the egalitarian principles by which the brethren relate to each other spiritually.

The Smithsonian-sponsored delegation in 1988 and my own role within this mission served to reveal many of these contradictions and conflicts. Inasmuch as I was accustomed to the democratic norms which prevail within the councils of the House, I arrived in Jamaica in 1988 prepared to coordinate with the Elders in terms of traditional Nyabinghi protocol. I soon discovered these to be significantly modified to meet the exigencies of mounting the *trod*. In order to manage the ongoing communication between the D.C. Rasta community and the House as well as to facilitate contacts with local Jamaican institutions, the House had "delegated" a brethren with a professional background to organize and oversee the process. Let us call him Ras Wari. Indeed, to say that the House had "delegated" this authority to Wari is somewhat of a fiction. He had taken the initiative and, as he had an office, telephone, and social connections – and was already the "chairman" of an adjunct organ to the House – the role fell to him more-or-less by default.

It is of note that the group which Wari chaired had its own hierarchial structure and functioned somewhat differently from councils of Elders at Nyabinghi. From this seat he was empowered to exercise near total control over the scheduling of meetings and the flow of discourse and debate among the Elders during our initial staging sessions for the *trod*. In addition, it was at Wari's discretion that various practical matters were undertaken, including the timing of the contact with the U.S. Embassy and the subsequent handling and control of the visas.

During this staging period, the class differences between him and the majority of the Elders – most of whom engaged in various forms of "hustling" to provide for themselves and their families – emerged in sharp relief. For the

most part, the Elders were required to be at his disposal and to accommodate their movements to his timetable and the demands of his professional routines. A number of Elders, due to their distance from Kingston and lack of transport and telephone facilities, even found it necessary to congregate in an urban yard and "kotch" until a decision was made by Wari to approach the embassy for visas.

Because of this, there was considerable bickering behind the scenes about Wari's "bigmanism" and the unilateral actions he was taking. Much of this was dropped within earshot for my benefit. At no point, however, did the Elders directly challenge his authority nor at any point did Wari ever show any interest in or concern about their circumstances. On a number of occasions he even chose to flaunt the respect norms by which Rastas customarily protect each others' dignity. Having frequently seen other brethren "dressed down" within Nyabinghi councils for the most inadvertent infractions, I found it remarkable that none of the Elders called him on this behavior.

Gradually, however, I came to realize that – at least for the purpose of mounting the *trod* – the Elders had chosen to recognize a different cultural framework to evaluate and respond to Wari's "authority." It was a code more closely tied to the hierarchial status sensibilities of the wider Jamaican society than to the sensibilities of *I-n-I* and the communalism of the House.<sup>22</sup> I do not mean to imply that Wari was not regarded or related to as a brethren in traditional terms, only that a kind of "code shifting" was at work in terms of how others might define his status within the community. I am, moreover, thoroughly convinced that it was the class position of this "society Dread" and his role as a potential patron for the community which insulated him – at least in this situation – from any public challenge to his authority. In the short run many of the Elders may not have appreciated his behavior; in the long run, however, they had to recognize that, given the impetus to internationalize the House, Wari was a community resource they would call upon in the future. Moreover, it was well known that Wari himself had "been blooded" and "paid his dues" within the House.

The vicissitudes of the ethnographer would normally be of little moment here except that they reveal another dimension of how the brethren attempt to manage their concerns with equality in a hierarchial world. Much of their discontent concerning Wari's "bigmanism" was unleashed in a series of reasonings in the Rasta yard where they were forced to "kotch" while waiting for his decision to travel to the embassy. Although I did not fully understand the strategic implications of these sessions at the time, I am convinced that I was being re-programmed by the Elders backstage to publically contest his authority. "Nuff respect" was repeatedly rendered me in terms of my Smithsonian credentials, my Embassy contacts, and my indispensability to the mission. At the

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22 This is but another example of how Rasta expectations are continuous with, rather than discrete from, the wider Jamaican society. This case is, I believe, further evidence that the Rastafari, like other Jamaicans, construct their social behavior on a cultural continuum (see L. Drummond 1980).



same time, a number of Elders went to some lengths to point out Wari's disdain and even disrespect for "my works."

Even so, the invisible hand of Jah seems to have been at work within this intrigue. One afternoon, while seven or eight of us were gathered in the midst of one such reasoning, an earthquake struck Kingston! For all present, this was unmistakably a sign from the Most High; and it precipitated an immediate march on Wari's downtown office with me thrust into the breach. My demands for an immediate move to the embassy evolved into confrontation and quarrel between us. For their part, the Elders remained silent. I, of course, would not have to bear the consequences of the brethren's ire and, moreover, was the perfect "buffer" category to throw down such a challenge to his authority.

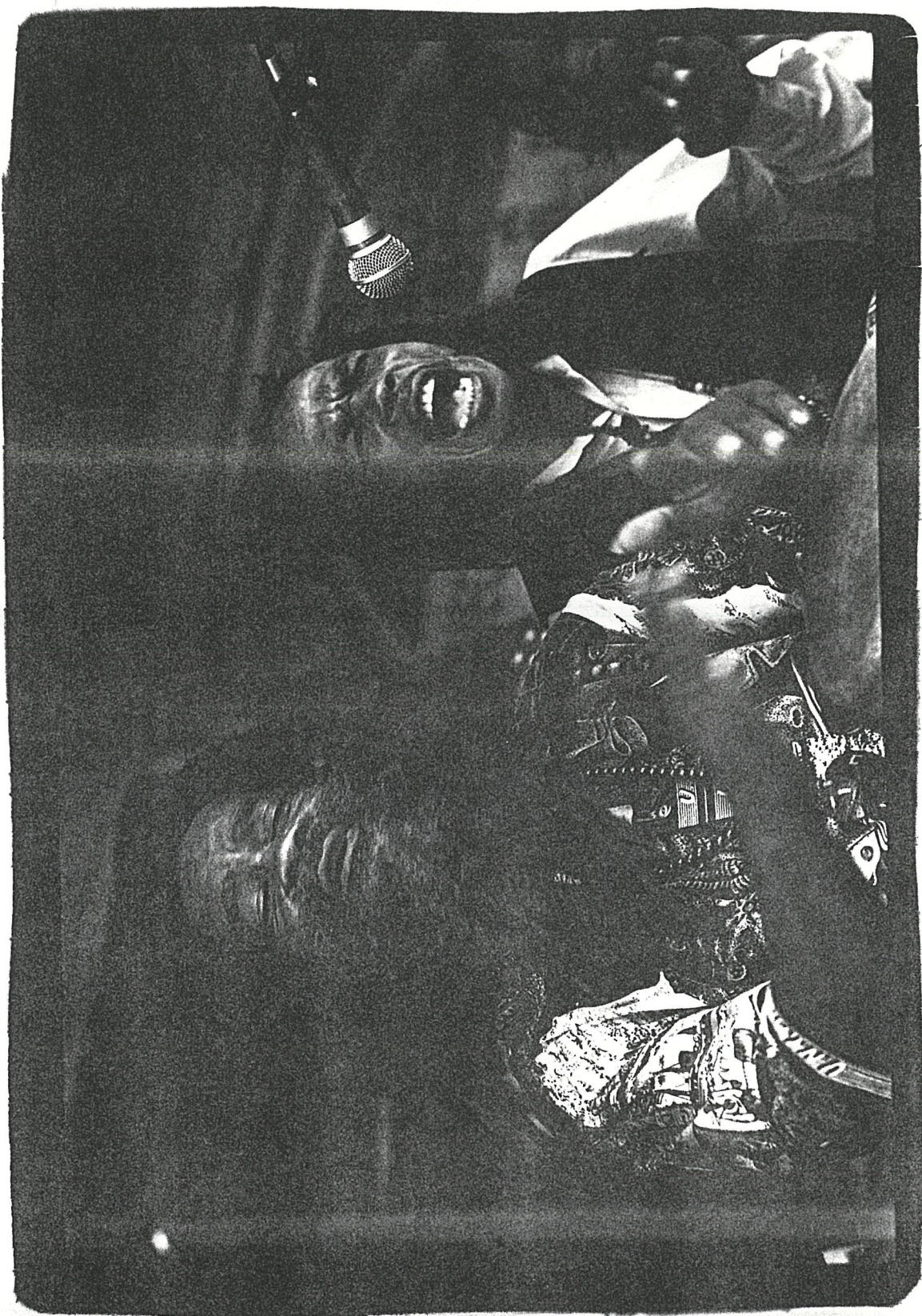
Some months later, when the trod abroad was being successfully concluded in Baltimore, I again found myself thrust into the breach in a similar scenario and for reasons related to the same kind of "bigmanism." This time the grievances of the Elders were directed at the self-appointed chairman of the Washington, D.C. Rasta community who, it was felt, attempted to "program them" in order to restrict their local movements. Again, drawn into the intrigue (and with issues of my own at stake), I became the voice for their resentment while they remained passive and silent in the face of his "authority." In both cases, I believe that the Elders weighted the cost of publically rebuking either individual against the cost of risking their future support for the House or for them personally. To be sure, I was not without reason for pressing a confrontation in both instances. At the same time, I allowed myself to become embroiled in their agendas.<sup>23</sup>

Other facets of the missions with which I was involved raised further questions about Rasta ideals of equality within a hierarchial world. One of these was the enormous amount of attention, indeed adulation, which the Elders received within the black urban communities they visited and in which they lived for period of up to three months. In New York they were fetted and outfitted in kente cloth garments. In Washington, D.C. they toured the city, were featured in a front page story in a widely read local paper, and opened the annual Washington, D.C. REGGAEFEST in 1990 (SEE FIGURE 3; \*caption: Bongo Shepan and Bongo Bigga chanting I-ses at Washington's annual reggae festival). Among the Rastafari of New York, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. they were treated as v.i.p.s. Each was received as an unparalleled source inspiration and archive of Rasta history. For those who participated in these trods these kudos served as their own legitimacy for future tours, be they on personal initiative or through the House.

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23 I have had pause to reflect upon these episodes in terms of the oft-heard Rasta idiom of "control" (e.g., "mon control", "Dread at the controls." It was the Elders, not this writer, who were in "control" on these occasions.







## **Conclusion**

To date, the impact of these trods, in terms of public education, has been mixed. In the local Washington, D.C.-Baltimore communities these programs have initiated a dialogue with other community groups. The Elders has also been featured in several newspaper articles. One Elder who remained in Baltimore now keeps an annual "African Family Day" celebration in which there is always a strong Rasta presence. The publicity which the Elders received via the Smithsonian has also been translated into calls for other cultural programs involving the brethren. This included a smaller trod (which brought three additional Elders from Jamaica) to participate in a program called "Rastafari: Beats of the Heart, Rhythms of Resistance" at the American Museum of Natural History in New York (May 1990). This was followed by a Jamaican cultural presentation at the Organization of American States, and more recently, one at JAMFEST '90 held in Washington, D.C. to commemorate the 30th anniversary of Jamaican Independence. Currently, the Elders are involved with the Smithsonian's Anacostia Museum (the African-American section of the Institution), in a ongoing program called "The Black Mosaic" which seeks to document the diversity of African cultures in Washington, D.C. In addition, the Elders are involved throughout the year in a range of programs including "Bob Marley Day" and the annual D.C. REGGAEFEST. Two points can be made here. One, that these works to educate the public about the true nature of Rasta continue to exist in counterpoint to the media's periodic, and indeed more powerful, distortion of the Movement and its participants. And two, that the work of the Elders abroad is destined to bring the popular and spiritual aspects of the culture into closer coexistence both for the Rastafari themselves and outsiders interested in the culture.<sup>24</sup>

Following upon this second point, there is little doubt that these trods have brought the frames of "yard" and "nation" into closer juxtaposition. The local Washington, D.C. Rastafari community has been formally chartered under the umbrella of the Divine Order of the Nyabinghi. This, coupled with the presence of a core of Jamaican Elders in D.C., has given rise to annual Nyabinghi ceremonies held to commemorate the key dates on the Rasta calendar. Although the organizational problems of collectivism, with its attendant problem of "bigmanism", are not likely to be resolved either at home or abroad, two things do seem clear. One, that participation in international missions will progressively become one of the emblems of eldership within the Jamaican context. And two, that the House of Nyabinghi is destined to play a more prominent role in the future of the Rasta Movement internationally. I am personally of the opinion that these trods herald something of a revival of Nyabinghi traditions in Jamaica.

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24 Two reggae figures, Mutabaruka and Ras Michael, were involved with the Elders in cultural presentations on the trods in which I was involved. One of the Elders in D.C. also works with a number of local reggae bands. And when reggae artists from Jamaica visit D.C., the Elders almost always use this as an opportunity to create a social occasions at which to ground with a brethren from yard.

Developments abroad are not unrelated to this. Increasingly, Nyabinghi ceremonies in D.C. and New York are becoming harder to distinguish from their Jamaican counterparts. This is not surprising as there is also increased flow of personnel between communities abroad and those in yard. There are increasing numbers of African-Americans, Jamaicans, other West Indians, and even Africans (including Ethiopians) who have initially "sighted up" the faith abroad. Many of these now make their own "pilgrimages" to yard (Jamaica) to attend 'binghi celebrations and to further ground themselves in the Nyabinghi roots of the culture.

Communication between yard and abroad is frequent with information on 'binghi events and venues being disseminated on both sides. The social networks linking migrants with home are now to the point where, in the aftermath of a Nyabinghi celebration, brethren and sisten in Washington, New York, Atlanta, and elsewhere know within days what has transpired within the backstage of the House in yard. This happens both over the phone and by "pilgrims" who carry reports on their return from yard.

Since this paper was first drafted, two other trods have embarked from yard, one to the U.S. Virgin Islands (1991) and, more recently – and most historical of all – one to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia to commemorate the centennial of Emperor Selassie's birthday. But perhaps the most striking example of how the frameworks of "yard" and "nation" continue to be collapsed involves the case of a brethern from D.C., an expatriate Ethiopia-become-Rasta. One of a number of Ethiopian Rastas in this area, he has grounded with the Elders in Washington over the past few years and recently spent a month in Jamaica during the Nyabinghi centennial there. This Ethiopian now resolves to relocate "to yard" where he sees the roots of his culture as strongest. If, as some brethren are fond of saying, the a reality of Rastafari is one of "circles within circles", then perhaps it is also progressively becoming one of "nations within yard."



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