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Rastafari Dialectism: The Epistemological Individualism and Collectivism of Rastafari

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This paper explores the essentially dialectical nature of the Rastafari Movement, with regards to its simultaneous collective and individualistic orientation. On one hand the movement is characterized by a strong regard for individuality, by virtue of its emphasis on the radical freedom and liberty of the individual (Edmonds 1998); on the other it is characterized by a strong sense of collectivism, communalism and community as a result of its anti-capitalist, anti-materialist ethos. Herein lies the dialectism of the movement and an interesting irony. At one level the movement is based on the individualistic I and I concept; that is the notion that a divine essence lies in all Rastafari adherents; that in effect they are all Sons and Daughters of the Most High, and thus have no need for priests or mediators to facilitate their communication with the Most High. To know what is right and how to act, Rastas just need to get in touch with the God within. There is no need to follow the guidance of a minister or religious leader. In fact as things stand now there are no formal leaders in the Rastafari movement; there is no emphasis on hierarchical structures; each Rastafari individual can be considered to lie at the same level with an equal potential to exert influence on the movement as a whole. On the other hand the movement rejects the crass individualism of modern day capitalism, with its emphasis on unbounded consumerism and gluttonous materialism, in favor of a non-materialistic free-spirited communalistic existence. In fact the long standing existence of Rastafari communes has been well documented (Smith et al 1960; Barrett 1997; Chevannes 1994; Campbell 1987). Lenord Howell's Pinnacle Camp which was first established in 1940 (Smith et al 1960) is the best known early commune, while Prince

Emmanuel's Boboshante Camp in Bull Bay, St Thomas, Jamaica, affectionately referred to as Foundation Camp by Boboshante Sistren and Brethren, is an example of a still existing Rastafari commune.

The dialectism that exists within the movement only goes to emphasize the multi-faceted and indeed multi-dimensional nature of the Rastafari movement. The movement while not relying on an authoritative leader or executive board to bind it together or to impose a structure as in the case of centralized movements such as the Nation of Islam, still clings to the concept of cohesion but through a shared consciousness and common consensus, (arguably somewhat reticent of Emile Durkheim's conception of mechanical solidarity for pre-industrial societies.) Decisions are reached via inter-subjective reasonings rather than via a chain of command. There is just as Durkheim conceived for non-industrial societies a collective consciousness. Each person can do whatever the other person can do; each possesses a divine essence; therefore each person is *equal* but *independent*. This is curiously different from the case of the Nation of Islam for instance wherein which we find various ranks among the membership and a distinct dependence on the Mosque ministers for guidance (Barnett 2000; Lincoln 1969). In accordance with the more centralized, hierarchical structure of the Nation of Islam, the membership of the Nation do not have the extensive radical freedom of Rastafari adherents; this in fact is sacrificed for the sake of the greater uniformity and cohesion enjoyed by the organization (Barnett 2000). Similar to the case of the Army, an individual Nation of Islam member forsakes their own individuality for the greater good of the organization as a whole. A noticeable outward expression of the varying degrees of individuality in both movements is the way the male adherents of the Nation of Islam wear their hair in comparison to their counterparts in the Rastafari movement. That is, the male

Nation members are characterized by their short haircuts and in some cases cleanly shaved heads, whilst the Rastafari adherents are characterized by their long flowing dreadlocks. Symbolically shortly cropped or shorn hair signifies conformity or strict obedience while long unkempt hair signifies individuality and freedom from social control (Barrett 1991). In an interview with the author, Ronald Muhammad, the assistant minister of the Miami Mosque, remarked that a sense of structure, uniformity and conformity were important features of the Nation of Islam and as such the outward appearance of the members went a long way to ensuring the internalization of these organizational characteristics (Barnett 2000). Not only was reference made to the men being clean-cut and the women covering their heads, but also to uniforms. For instance the men are expected to wear either Fruit of Islam uniforms (which are very militaristic in appearance) or suits and bow-ties, and in some cases suits with conservative neck-ties. The women usually wear a shawl with a matching loosely fitting robe, such that they resemble their Eastern Muslim counterparts. Barrett (1991) contends that the uniform is perhaps the ultimate expression of the harnessed body, remarking that it is emblematic of a regimented order and signifying that the individual is at the service of the organization. He insightfully points out that if the body is held in check, if it is harnessed in some way such as with the means of a uniform, the person's behavior will itself become constrained in some manner, causing them to behave in a predictable, uniform fashion.

For Rastafari there is no such sense of conformity, rather a strong sense of individuality. Members (especially the men) are free to dress as they want and in many cases will wear African clothes, such as dashikis as opposed to the more European oriented modes of dress such as suits and ties. Being Rasta means individual freedom of expression, with almost unlimited boundaries

and few restrictions. If we simply consider the variety of forms in which the dreadlocks of a person can grow and the different styles of clothing that they may wear the individuality of Rastafari becomes evident (Barnett 2000).

However having said this there is a price to pay for almost unlimited freedom and that is a loss of structure and order for the movement. In fact as a result of the lack of structure and order within the Rastafari movement, it is not viewed as an organization, but simply as a movement. The lack of centralization is viewed by some Rastafari members as a distinct advantage, while for others it is viewed as a hindrance to progress. When the author spoke to legendary Reggae recording artist, Bunny Wailer, early this year (2001), it was clear which side of the fence he was on. “ The Rastafari Movement cannot be trampled, downtrodden or destroyed,” he exclaimed, “This movement is bigger than any one person, it is an unstoppable force. If the enemy attempts to cut down anybody they consider to be influential it will be of no avail because the power of Jah is in each and everyone of us.” In contrast Ras Miguel Lorne, a leading Council person of the Nyahbinghi Order in Jamaica exclaimed, “ We as a movement need more structure and more order if we are to accomplish some of the objectives and goals that we have set for ourselves. The more centralized and organized we are, the more of a force that we as Rasta will be (Lorne 2000).”

One clear example of an attempt at centralization in the movement is that of the R.C.O. the Rastafari Centralization Organization, an organization founded in Jamaica in 1995 to encourage centralization within the Rastafari movement. The chairperson of the organization is Ras Sydney De Silva and the secretary is Ras Gabre Selassie Campbell. In an interview with Bongo Kosmos in Kingston in November 1998, Ras Gebre tells him (Kosmos 1998), “ The

purpose of this (organization) is to organize and centralize the general Rastafari movement, national and international, so that we can speak under one umbrella, with one voice to the national and international worlds such that we can get to get our needs.....” He goes on to say, “The program (of the R.C.O.) is to coordinate and unify all Rastafari mansions and houses. God is for all color, class and creed as long as I and I recognize that His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie is our Almighty Creator; that his Majesty is the returned Messiah, the fulfilment of prophecy and the visible Christ.” This statement speaks clearly to the matter of how far reaching and ambitious the goals of the R.C.O. are. Current Rastafari organizations that have affirmed their affiliation to the R.C.O. are (De silva 1998) : the Theocracy Reign Order of the Nyahbinghi (Jamaica), Mystic Revelations of Ras Tafari, 100 Drums, Iritical House of the Centenary Commitee, Ethiopian United Front, Rastafari Mammar Cultural School, Imperial Ethiopian Federation, Rastafari House of Dread, Rasses International Sistrens, Haile Selassie I Theocracy Government, St. Thomas Bath Nyabinghi House, Rastafari International Theocracy Assembly, Rastafari Patriotic Unity, Peace Makers Association, Ethiopian World Federation.

In an audience with the author at the 1998 International Barbados Conference, Ras De Silva described the R.C.O. as an organization that acts as the mediator and organizer of the Rastafari community globally; that in effect it was a nucleus organization amongst the various Rastafari organizations that existed both nationally and locally. De Silva retorted, “ the Rastafari community must be mobilized into productive independent communities with the ultimate goal of establishing a Rastafari Theocracy Government. “ Hence it is clear here that while the R.C.O. strives for greater cohesion between the various Rastafari houses, they are not asking or expecting that the various houses and organizations give up their autotomy to achieve this, they are simply

asking for more inter-linking among the houses and more focus on common goals. As Jabulani Tafari (2000) puts it, "Unity without Uniformity is the way forward for the Rasta community and indeed for all Black people." Ras De Silva identified the common goals of the movement as the three Rs: Redemption, Reparations and Repatriation.

Another attempt to bring about some centralization in the Rastafari movement albeit on not such a grand scale was in the case of the formation of R.I.T.A. (The Rastafari International Theocracy Assembly) at the 1983 International Rastafari Conference in Jamaica. The purpose of this organization was to bring about a united front to the diverse houses and ranks of Rastafari so that a coherent unity might emerge (between the constituent Rasta organizations). The organization attempts to meet annually with the goal of discussing issues and problems facing the movement, as well as devising strategies and solutions to address these problems (Lorne 2000).

For various reasons however this organization has essentially been limited to being an international conglomerate of Nyahbinghi mansions (Barnett 2000).

The source of the collectivism of Rastafari is due to several features of the movement: firstly as the outcome of the movement's vehement rejection of capitalism and all the social ills that are associated with it such as greed, selfishness, individualized-materialism and a weakened sense of morality. Secondly as an outcome of the movements's quest for what it refers to as Ital livity; that is their commitment to an earthy, organic, natural lifestyle. Rastas by and large criticize the West for its departure from naturalness and its commitment to artificiality and passionately advocate a return to nature. In this way Rastas seek to build un-industrialized communities with a natural lifestyle wherever possible. (Shashemane in Ethiopia and settlements in Ghana are examples). Such communities where farming is the key activity and means the of subsistence

mirror the pre-industrial, mechanical solidarity based societies that Durkheim discussed in his classic work, The Division of Labor in Society (1893). In an ideal Rastafari community just as in Durkheim's conception of hunting and gathering societies there is less emphasis on hierarchical structures where decisions that affect the whole community are only made by the elite few and more on decision making via a collective consensus where everybody has a say. For Rastafari because everybody has a divine essence within themselves they are all essentially equal and thus are justified in having non-hierarchical social structure. A good example of the collective consensus within Rastafari is in the case of a Rastafari- reasoning, which is based on the notion of the inter-subjectivity of truth, wherein which because all participants possess the higher I as well as the lower I, they all have the truth within them, but more importantly only tease this out after interacting with each other. Thus all are capable of arriving at this truth, via consensus, after adequate reasoning. The reasoning tradition of Rastafari is just one example of the collective dimension of Rastafari, however it is a very important one in that it clearly tempers the individualism that is inherent in the movement (Edmonds 1998:356).

Another example of the collective dimension of Rastafari is in fact that of the Nyahbinghi ceremonies. Here there is collective worship of His Imperial Majesty, Haile Selassie I, with the beating of drums, singing of hymns and chanting of praises for the emblematic savior of humanity. The Nyahbinghi is effectively a congregation of brethren and sistren who through communal interaction connect with the divine essence of the creator that lies within them.

The Nyahbinghi ritual then, centers on drumming, dancing and chanting and represents the fullest expression of the individual and collective experience known as "Praising Jah." In the Bobo-

Shante house of Rastafari, which is considered by some to be the most churchical, or most steeped in religious ritualism, (Morgan Heritage 1999), there is a Nyahbinghi every week on the Sabbath, (Saturday). It is for this reason that this mansion of Rastafari is not only considered the most churchical, but in fact the most communal. Out of the churchical (religious) music of the Nyahbinghi came the foundation and basis for Reggae music (Savishinsky 1998). It was Count Ossie and the Mystic revelation of Rastafari that first carried the essentially Kumina and Burra rhythms of Nyahbinghi to the Jamaican recording studios. Then there was Ras Michael and the Sons of Negus, another Rastafari Roots group, who were also very instrumental in influencing the early soon to be Reggae musicians of the late 50's and late 60's. Savishinsky (1998) specifically details Count Ossie's direct influence on the definitive Ska band of the 1960s, the Skatalites, who in turn laid the foundations for the evolution of Jamaican Ska to Rock Steady and then Reggae. Additionally, he argues that the percussive foundation for Reggae music came from the Nyahbinghi drumming of Rastafari (Savishinsky 1998). It should be duly stated here that Reggae music in and of itself may be utilized for the "Praising of Jah," and is notably done so by the Twelve Tribes of Israel mansion (Barnett 2000). Savishinsky (1998) posits that for those who would argue that there is little in Reggae that is religious- since the music is typically listened to, danced to, and performed in secular settings- one can counter that the blurring of the lines between the secular and the sacred represents just one of the African features that characterize the African based religion of Rastafari. As numerous researchers have noted, among Africans and their New World descendants, few rigid dichotomies exist between the sacred and the secular, particularly in terms of music and dance (Alleyne 1971; Herskovitz 1958; Thompson 1966). Another communal activity for Rastafari is the smoking of herbs (Bilby 1985). Bilby writes on the

ritualistic aspect of smoking the herb for Rastafari, as well as the strong communal dimension that is inherent in the act. He provides an ethnographic work by Carol Yawney that clearly illustrates the communal dimension of the ritual. An excerpt is given below:

When the pipe is ready it is invariably blessed. Whatever the level of activity there is a temporary respite as attention turns to the brother giving the blessing. It is generally he who prepared the herbs, although younger brethren often give it to their elders to light as a gesture of respect. He may ask: who will accompany me? Brethren doff their tams and I have even witnessed those who have long precepts or beards tucked up under their chins, unroll them for the occasion. It's not mandatory to remove the tams, and some brethren only do so when they want to emphasize a particular occasion. According to the Rastas the secret to herb-smoking is to bless the pipe, to give Jah Praises, and then you won't get mad.....A communion bond develops among those sharing the pipe, and it would be a transgression to leave the circle until the last draw.

Source - Carol Yawney 1979.

Dread Wasteland: Rastafarian Ritual in West Kingston.

The source of the individualism or authoritative individuality of the Rastafari movement is not only rooted in the I and I concept, but also in the way that it originated (Barnett 2000:106). In the early days of the movement there were a number of Rastafari protagonists (or leaders) effectively competing with each other in terms of the recruitment of prospective Ethiopianists. There was Leonard Howell, J.N.Hibbert, Robert Hinds, Altamont Reid and Archibald Dunkley to name some. As a result of all these leaders starting separate simultaneous and independent Rastafari missions in Jamaica, the movement immediately took on a decentralized, polycephalous structure. This type of structuring led to an eventual mushrooming of the movement into various houses and organizations which in turn has resulted in the acquirement of highly individualized

approaches to Rastafari among its initiates and adherents.

Now that we have considered to a large extent the dualism of the individualistic and collective dimension of the Rastafari movement, let us consider specifically the dialectic of the epistemological individualism and epistemological collectivism of Rastafari. Epistemological individualism argues McFarlane (1998) centers largely on the I and I concept which affirms that knowledge resides in the soul and is teased out with introspection, in this sense we need not rely on anyone to give us knowledge, as the knowledge lies within us (McFarlane 1998). However having said this for Rastafari members it is via the reasoning sessions that truth and knowledge, (or notions of truth and knowledge), in most cases, are actually arrived at. In other words truth is often arrived at inter-subjectively via a collective process and not ,in practice, in isolation. Even in the cases where much of an individuals theological and ideological orientation in Rastafari is arrived at introspectively, there is reinforcement via collective, communal experiences. However individualistic a Rastafari adherent may profess to be, there generally is some reaffirmation of identity at a collective gathering of some sort, whether this is at a Nyahbinghi, a Rastafari-reasoning session or even a Reggae dance.

In light of our discussion on the dualism of the individualistic and collective orientation of Rastafari a key point that should be emphasized in this paper is the limited way that the I and I concept has been conceived of by previous authors (Mc Farlane 1998; Edmonds 1998). The I and I Rastafari terminology and concept should not only be conceived of in an individualized way, but also in a collective way. In other words when brethren and sistren say, “I and I” they may also mean ‘We’ in the collective sense, ‘We’ in the sense of ‘we’ as the Rasta movement as a whole, or

as a mansion, or a house, or simply as a small gathering of sistren and brethren.. The I and I terminology is not only limited to the individual person and their divine self but also may reference an entire group. When used in this fashion we see clearly that there is a collective dimension to the I and I concept. This author feels that any future scholarly work on Rastafari would do well to balance any individualized aspects of Rastafari with its collective aspects.

Addendum

Despite the fact that the individualism of the Rastafari movement is to a large extent tempered by its collectivism it must be said that many of the movement's adherents and members have acquired highly individualized approaches to living and existing as Rastafari. Not only are there the numerous possibilities of orientation provided by the various mansions of Rastafari, there is also the option of being a self built unaffiliated Rasta. This opens up numerous more possibilities of orientation. The outcome of this radical freedom that is offered by the Rastafari movement is that there is a strong resistance to centralization within the movement, additionally because the number of theological divergences within Rastafari continues to increase as time goes on, a climate of confusion is beginning to materialize.

Many Rastafari aside from those of the R.C.O. are calling for greater centralization of the movement to reverse the divergent trend that it is presently traversing. For instance, Denroy Morgan (1999), a loyal Twelve Tribe member has made the passionate plea for all the houses and mansions of Rasta to come under one umbrella, so that the movement may have one voice for official matters, say for deliberations with the U.N. or the O.A.U. or even with the governments

of nation-states.

Whilst one theology and one doctrine for the Rastafari movement as a whole is, at this point, unrealistic, there must be some kind of restrictions or limitations to the number of splinter groups which are steadily on the uprise within the movement. In other words there must be a move towards stricter adherence to mansion doctrines and if possible a convergence of doctrine (rather than a divergence) if the movement is to become more directed and more focused. A more centralized cohesive ideology is far more likely to stand the test of time and provide concrete results than a conflux of unconnected ideas.

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