

The Rastafari movement in South Africa: Before and after apartheid

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Abstract

Rastafari as a movement originated in the Caribbean Island of Jamaica during the 1930s. From Jamaica, it spread to other parts of the world including South Africa. It is argued in this article that the ideological foundation that formed the base upon which the movement emerged in South Africa was laid long before its formal introduction in 1997, comprising Ethiopianism¹ and Garveyism.² The ideology of Ethiopianism in South Africa gained its expression when groups of some Black Christians broke away from missionary authority during the late 18th century. Garveyism, on the other hand can be traced back to 1920, in the wake of the International Conference of Negro Peoples of the World. This article further traces the formalisation and spread of Rastafari in South Africa and argues that its development in the country took place through three phases, namely, Ethiopianism and Garveyism as the foundation period, the period of the apartheid government (i.e. between 1948 and 1994), and the post-apartheid era (after 1994). There are significant differences between the Rastafari that existed before 1994 and that of the post-apartheid period. This article thus identifies these differences, explains why and how the transformation took place after 1994, and the current state of this Movement in South Africa. Their impact (“positive” and “negative”) certainly should be considered.

Keywords: Ethiopia; Rastafari; Garveyism; Ethiopianism; *Ganja*; Dreadlocks; Marcus Garvey; South Africa.

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- 1 SV Davidson, “Leave Babylon: The trope of Babylon in Rastafarian discourse”, *Black Theology: An International Journal*, 2008, 6, 1, pp. 46-60. Ethiopianism is the belief that the modern state of Ethiopia fulfills biblical prophecy of the rise of a dominant black state interpreted to be Africa or Zion.
 - 2 CR Reed, “Garveyism”, *The electronic encyclopedia of Chicago*, 2005. Garveyism is described as the body of thought and organizational activities associated with Marcus Mosiah Garvey of Jamaica. This body of thought has come to be called Ethiopianism. His organisational activities culminated in the formation of Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (the UNIA) in 1914.

Introduction

From its inception in the Caribbean Island of Jamaica during the 1930s, Rastafari grew into an international movement. Though the movement can be said to have formally originated after 1994 in South Africa, its informal roots can be traced to the introduction of Ethiopianism during the 18th century and of the philosophy of Marcus Garvey (Garveyism) during the late 18th and early 20th centuries respectively.³ It was only after 1994 (after the demise of apartheid) that Rastafari became an organised movement in South Africa, but apart from these two ideologies there are various other factors and events that contributed to its formalisation in South Africa in 1997.

Supplementing secondary sources with personal observation and oral interviews,⁴ this article traces the ideological origin and development of Rastafari in South Africa, focusing on the reasons the movement was not active or noticeable before the end of apartheid, and why it emerged as a formidable group in the post-apartheid South Africa. Since its emergence, Rastafari has managed to position itself as an important pressure group, challenging and sometimes complementing the prevailing social, cultural, economic and political dispensation. However, in post-apartheid South Africa, adherents are faced with a number of challenges, which this article will discuss.⁵

Rastafari: Origin and Nature

Rastafari originated in Jamaica as a social religious cult which developed into a dynamic social movement from whence it spread to other parts of the world acquiring a status of global movement.⁶ Rastafari owes its origin to Haile Selassie and Marcus Garvey. The word Rastafari is derived from Haile Selassie's (the Ethiopian King) original name Ras (Ethiopian word for Prince) Tafari Makonnen who in 1930 was crowned as *His Imperial Majesty, King of Kings, Lords of Lords, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God, Light of this World, and King of Zion*. Haile Selassie was reported to be the

3 JM Chirenje, *Ethiopianism and Afro-Americans in South Africa, 1883-1916* (Louisiana State University Press, London), 1987, pp. 1-2.

4 Rastafari is comparatively a new phenomenon in South Africa. The result of this is that there is a lack of written documents. This is the reason why the study relies more on information obtained through participant observation and oral sources.

5 Anon., "Should we smoke dope?", *Pace Magazine*, July 1995.

6 A Kebede and JD Knottnerus, "Beyond the pales of Babylon: The ideational components and social Psychological foundations of Rastafari", Vol. 41, Issue 3, 1998, p. 8.

225th restorer of the Solomonic Dynasty and to represent one of the oldest thrones on earth, more than three thousand years old.⁷ For the Jamaicans, the coronation reaffirmed the ancient roots of Ethiopia and its independent place in Judea-Christian religions.⁸ By identifying with the new black king, the powerless become powerful. Because Selassie was a black emperor of virtually the only African nation to successfully resist colonialism, he evoked black nationalist sentiments and provided hope for an eventual triumph over racism.⁹

The name Rastafari is literally derived from the Amharic language: Ras means “prince” and Tafari “Head Creator”.¹⁰ Ras Tafari was the birth name of His Imperial Majesty (H.I.M as he is called by adherents of Rastafari movement) Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia, who is also the divinity of the Movement.¹¹ Thus, the word Rastafari can be taken to refer first to Haile Selassie himself as head of the movement. The word Rastafari also refers to the creed, religion, and movement or organisation. When used within this context the word Rastafari is preferred as opposed to “Rastafarianism” because it implies *ism* and *schism* (which in turn implies division), to which adherents are strongly opposed.¹² In this article, Rastafari(anism) is seen as a convergence of the heritage of the Maroons,¹³ Ethiopianism and the emergent Pan-African movement that culminated in Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA).¹⁴ In another sense, the word Rastafari is also used to refer to adherents as opposed to frequently used terms such as Rastas or Rastafarians, as one Rastafari clearly put it during reasoning (which takes part during religious gatherings) that “His followers shall be called by his name.”¹⁵ In short, the word Rastafari

7 P Napti, “Jamaicans of Ethiopian origin and the Rastafarian faith” (available at <http://web.syr.edu/~affellem/napti.html>, as accessed on 23 September 2003), p. 3. The Chinese throne is considered to be also one of the oldest in history.

8 B Chevannes, “New approach to Rastafari”, B Chavannes (ed.), *Rastafari and other African-Caribbean worldviews* (The Hague: Institute of Social Studies, 1998), pp. 20-41.

9 JA Johnson-Hill, “Rastafari as a resource for social ethics in South Africa”, *Journal for the Study of Religion*, Vol. 9, 1996, pp. 3-39. Selassie is also considered by Rastafari adherents as *Jah* (Rasta word for God).

10 Anon., *Jabug*, 1992, p. 4.

11 T Gondwe, “Positive vibration: The story of Rastafari”, *Design Indaba Magazine*, 12 February 2002, p. 9. In return to the recognition, in 1948 Haile Selassie donated part of his private land to allow Rastafarians from Jamaica to repatriate to Africa. The back to Africa movement as propagated by Marcus Garvey was one of the major preoccupation of most Rastafarians.

12 T Bosch, *The making of I-story: Rastas in Cape Town* (Honours Research, University of Cape Town, 1996), p. 7.

13 R Price Maroons: Rebel Slaves in the Americas (available at http://www.folklife.si.edu/resources/maroon/educational_guide/23.htm, as accessed on 29 January 2013).

14 T Gondwe, “Positive vibration”, *Design Indaba Magazine*, 12 February 2002, p. 9.

15 Participant Observation, MH Chawane (Researcher, University of Johannesburg), 20th April 2002. Rastafarians do not prefer to be called followers of Rastafari or Selassie but to be called his children. That is why they also object to being called Rastafarians but prefer to be called Rastafari.

can be used to refer to either Haile Selassie, the Movement itself or to the adherents.¹⁶

Marcus Garvey, a descendant from the Maroons, was born in 1887 in the town of St. Ann, Jamaica. At the age of fourteen he noticed that there were differences between human races and eventually became conscious that his Jamaican roots could be traced to Africa.¹⁷ Garvey travelled extensively throughout the Caribbean and Central America, where he reoriented Blacks towards self-respect and self-reliance, telling listeners that a black skin was not a symbol of shame but rather a glorious symbol of national greatness of which they should be proud.¹⁸ Among Rastafarians and some people in South Africa (Ethiopianists), Marcus Garvey was seen as a “Black Moses” who would lead them out of *Babylon* (slavery and colonialism). Primarily, he was concerned with what he described as the black man’s inferiority complex and he made a number of predictions about their greatness when he prophesied that a black king would be crowned, for the day of deliverance was near. When Selassie was crowned in Ethiopia in 1930, many of his followers felt that it was the fulfilments of that prophesy.¹⁹ From Jamaica, Garvey’s ideas spread to other parts of the world including South Africa. In South Africa, the majority of the political activists of the 1920s who were influenced by the ideas of Marcus Garvey included members of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU), the Communist Party and the African National Congress (ANC).²⁰

In 1914, Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), his vision being to support and identify with a free and independent Africa, Black unity and the establishment of a united Africa. The latter was encapsulated in the slogan “Africa for Africans at home and abroad”, which became a rallying point for oppressed Blacks around the world. In contrast to the notion of “Back to Africa”, a move to repatriate African Americans, with which he is most commonly associated, the nucleus of his ideology was freedom for black people to guide their destiny, based primarily on racial nationalism and freedom from colonial domination for Africa and all people

16 It should be noted that in this study, however, the word Rastafari is used to refer to Haile Selassie, ‘Rastafarians’ to the adherents, and ‘Rastafarianism’ to the Movement, in order to avoid confusion.

17 JA Johnson-Hill, “Rastafari as a resource for social ethics in South Africa”, *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 1996, Vol. 9, pp. 3-39.

18 ED Cronon, *Black Moses: The story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin), 1987, p. 4.

19 S Pragg, “UN recognises Rastafari; Move praised and criticised”, *The Jamaican Observer*, 24 November 1996, p. 2.

20 N Worden, *The making of modern South Africa; conquest, apartheid and democracy* (Blackwell, Oxford, 2012), p. 62.

of African descent.²¹

Internationally there are three distinct orders of Rastafari; namely, the Nyabbinghi Order, Bobo Ashanti and the Twelve Tribes of Israel.²² Although these groups differ in terms of their beliefs and symbols, they agree on two common principles. They all exalt the status of Haile Selassie and reject the white Eurocentric images of divinity.²³ They also believe that *ganja* is a sacred herb that has been part of the Jewish Sabbath service since the days of King Solomon's Temple. That it was the holy smoke from the burning bush of Mount Sinai, and was the sweet weed that was growing from King Solomon's grave.²⁴

There is widespread disagreement among scholars concerning the nature of the Rastafari movement; that is whether the movement is a religion or something else. Some notable scholars writing on Rastafari (such as Rex Nettleford, Barrington Chavennes and Jahlani Niaah) refrain from calling Rastafari a religion and argue that to do so the movement would be narrowly defined. These scholars prefer to define Rastafari as a creed, movement, tradition, way of life or a phenomenon. This is based on the fact that Rastafari as a movement draws on all indexes of culture known to mankind – language, religion, kinship pattern, artistic manifestations, political organisation, and system of production, distribution and exchange.²⁵

On the other hand there are those scholars who see the movement differently. These include amongst others who describe Rastafari as a “liberation theology” or “black Theology”, but differentiate it from other religions; this marks it as unique.²⁶ Leonard E Barrett (a Jamaican sociologist) as cited by Kebede and Knottnerus, has described Rastafari as a Messianist-millenarian cult and argues that:²⁷

Its Messianism resides in the Rastafarians' faith in the divinity of the late Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia. The Rastafarian movement, Barrett argues, is

21 J Smith-Irvin, *Marcus Garvey's footsoldiers of the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (New Jersey, Africa World Press, 1989), p. 3.

22 Anon., *The Rastafarian orders*, 2003. It is important to note that in South Africa there the fourth denomination called Milchezedec Order. This is a very new denomination which is trying to find its roots.

23 Anon., *The Rastafarian Orders*, 2003.

24 DT Siwek, “Zion riddims” (available at http://0web21.epnet.com.raulib.rau.ac.za/citation.asp?tb=1&_ug=sid+3700D3A5%2D89E, as accessed on 18 January 2006).

25 Anon., Article presented, *The inaugural Rastafari conference*, 17 August 2010.

26 T Witvleit, *A place in the Sun: Liberation Theology in the Third World* (New York, Orbis Books 1985), p. 5.

27 A Kebede and JD Knottnerus, “Beyond the pales of Babylon: The ideational components and Social Psychological foundations of Rastafari”, Vol. 41, Issue 3, 1998, p. 9.

millenarian because of the followers' expectation that heaven will be "realized" on earth or more specifically in Ethiopia. From this perspective, Ethiopia is awaiting the racial redemption of the black person from the shackles of Babylon, which, in their opinion, are those societies in which black people are held captive.

Some authors, such as Campbell (1987) view the movement as a revolutionary force, and Yawney sees it as a popular front.²⁸ Some prefer to appreciate Rastafari as a political movement with a religious component because of its emphasis on the ideology of Pan Africanism and African Nationalism and argue that:²⁹

To simply define the Rastafari as a religious movement, however, is misleading. We suggest that the Rastafari is primarily a political movement with a very strong religious component. It is a collective enterprise whose political motivations and goals are intertwined with religious symbolism and interpretations.

It is difficult to classify Rastafari as a particular form of a movement. Though it started off as a religious movement, it has developed to encompass all aspects of lives of its members, which makes it a way of life. Ideological Foundation of Rastafari in South Africa

The origin of Rastafari in South Africa (as elsewhere in Africa) can be linked to two important movements. The first, *Ethiopianism*, is the notion that the modern state of Ethiopia fulfills a biblical prophecy of the rise of a dominant nation, as represented primarily in Psalm 68:31 and interpreted to be a reference to Africa. This idea places Ethiopia either as symbolic or actual homeland and, therefore, functions both as a source of identity and a destination for repatriation for Africans living outside of Africa. The second, *Garveyism*, lays out an argument for the creation of this black homeland, Ethiopia or *Zion*.³⁰

The ideology of Ethiopianism originated in the United States of America (USA) during the late 18th century with the establishment of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). Formed in 1787, when Richard Allen broke away from the predominantly white Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia in response to the depressing lot of Africans in the Americas, the

28 JA Johnson-Hill, "Rastafari as a resource...", pp. 3-39.

29 A Kebede and JD Knottnerus., "Beyond the pales of Babylon...", p. 9.

30 TJ Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (Oxford University Press, Oxford), 1995, pp. 304-305.

AME was equated with Ethiopianism because of its aim to establish churches across the entire African continent. The term “Ethiopia” was used in the biblical sense, by which Africans were referred to as Ethiopians.³¹

As in the USA, Ethiopianism in South Africa was the product of missionary teachings, its roots having been laid in 1849 by the Tswana chief Sechele after his suspension from the London Missionary Society (LMS) by David Livingstone (head of LMS in South Africa) for refusing to divorce four of his wives.³² Sechele’s approach to Christianity was to use Christian and African religious practices to enhance the wellbeing of his people by interpreting the scriptures in the light of their experiences.³³ Sechele saw Livingstone’s demand and his subsequent suspension to be in conflict with African culture.³⁴

The first serious secession was a breakaway church organised by Nehemia Tile in 1884 in Tembuland, a region in present-day Eastern Cape Province inhabited by the Thembu people, one of the sub-groups of the Xhosa nation. Ordained in 1880, Tile was one of the groups of African leaders of the Wesleyan Mission Church who, after quarrelling with his white superior Theophilus Chubb over racial discrimination and criticism for his strong Tembu-nationalistic sympathies, was rebuked and left the church to form an independent church with Ngangelizwe (chief of the Tembu clan) as its visible head. Tile maintained that “as the Queen of England was the head of the English Church, so the Paramount Chief of the Tembu should be the *summus episcopus* [visible head] of the new religious organisation”. The Taung clan in the North West Province made another attempt to break away in 1885, and their chief, Kgantlapane, took an active part in founding the Native Independent Congregational Church. The movement for an Independent African Church then spread to other parts of South Africa.³⁵ By the time of Tile’s death in 1891, Ethiopianism was starting to gain ground in the province of Transvaal, as well as in Natal, where the leader of the secessionist movement was Mbiyana Mgidi, a convert of the American Zulu Mission, who because of what he perceived as racial discriminatory practices of the mission launched an independent church, the Zulu Mbiyana Congregational Church, in 1890.³⁶

31 JM Chirenje, *Ethiopianism and Afro-Americans in South Africa...*, pp. 1-2.

32 It was and still is customary and traditional in Africa for a chief, a rich man or man of high status to have more than one wife.

33 JM Chirenje, *Ethiopianism and Afro-Americans in South Africa...*, pp. 16-17.

34 JM Chirenje, *Ethiopianism and Afro-Americans in South Africa...*, p. 2.

35 B Sundkler, *Bantu prophets...*, p. 38.

36 JM Chirenje, *Ethiopianism and Afro-Americans in South Africa...*, p. 17.

On the Witwatersrand (part of the former Transvaal province), a group of Christians and their ordained minister, Mangena Makone, unhappy with what he perceived to be racial segregation within the church where white and black were attending different conferences, had broken away from the Wesleyan Missionary Society in 1892. He resigned from the Wesleyan Church and together with other disgruntled members formed a new religious organisation,³⁷ calling themselves Ethiopians after the prophesy of African redemption in Psalm 68, which reads: "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hand unto God".³⁸ In 1895, they met with the leaders of the AME Church and in 1896 their church was formally incorporated as its South African arm.³⁹

In South Africa during the mid-1920s, Wellington Buthelezi,⁴⁰ who was a disciple of Marcus Garvey, had announced that a day of reckoning was at hand in which black Americans were coming to liberate Africans from European bondage. In Pondoland (in present day Eastern Cape Province), Garveyism and the idea of Wellington combined with indigenous prophetic traditions and the activities of the young established ICU ignited a typical millenarian movement,⁴¹ involving a charismatic prophet-figure and a day of reckoning. Garvey's influence reached Wellington through a West Indian, Ernest Wallace, a representative of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League.⁴² Thus: Wellington did not initiate his movement in a vacuum since Garveyism had caught hold in Southern Africa after the First World War and its fundamental concepts - the emphasis on the creative capabilities of African peoples, the potential for unification of peoples of Africa and of African descent, and the hope of reclaiming Africa from Europeans - were well received by Africans. The Wellington movement exhibited an indecisive attitude toward European culture. Europeans were to be driven away, while at the same time Africans were to share in their material wealth. Factories were to spring up overnight; clothing was to be distributed

37 B Sundkler, *Bantu prophets...*, p. 38.

38 This Psalm is one of the Psalms that Rastafarians recite in their prayers during the opening and closure of whatever gathering that they hold. This shows a connection between Rastafari and Ethiopianism.

39 TJ Campbell, *Songs of Zion...*, p. 306.

40 N Worden, *The making of modern South Africa...*, p. 62. Wellington Buthelezi was a leader of the Willington movement. As a result of Garvey's influence, the Movement rejected integration into white society and called for "Africa for Africans".

41 N Worden, *The making of modern South Africa...*, p. 63. This is one reason Rastafarianism shares some features with millenarian movements. Some people even go to an extent of classifying it as a millenarian movement which is refuted by Rastafarians.

42 B Sundkler, *Bantu prophets...*, p. 38.

to everyone; Africans were to have their own government.⁴³

Wellington preached in English, dressed in ministerial garb, and his meetings usually began with prayer, scripture reading and hymn singing. The hymns his congregation sang reinforced the themes of African freedom and unity.⁴⁴ Thus, based on similarities between the two Movements, the Wellington movement served as a springboard for the Rastafarian movement. In some senses, both Rastafari and the Wellington movement are based on the fundamental concepts of a united and free Africa, and the rejection of European culture (albeit selectively) and the existing order of things.

Garveyism is the philosophy of Marcus Garvey. This ideology was not, however, new in Africa, or in South Africa in particular. In the wake of the International Conference of Negro Peoples of the World held in Liberty Hall, New York, on August 1, 1920, administrators across Africa were bombarded with rumours of the imminent arrival of African American colonists, even of Garvey himself. During the same year, South Africa awoke to the widespread circulation of both *The Negro World* and *The Black Man newsarticles* (its local version). The government reacted by invoking the 1913 Immigrants Regulation Act, which prohibited the entry of blacks who were not domicile in the Union of South Africa, as it was then called.⁴⁵ This in essence meant that the government of that time could do anything possible to prevent the spread of Garveyism.

Garvey can thus be regarded as an immediate contributor to an Afro-centric reading of the Bible that some breakaway churches in South Africa and Rastafarians inherited. Garvey built upon these ideas and presented for them a model of an African-centered approach to biblical interpretation that starts with critical reflection upon the social and political conditions of persons of African descent. His Afrocentric interpretation of the Bible, his Ethiopianist vision and philosophy of Blackness influenced the emerging Ethiopianism ideology and the Rastafari movement.⁴⁶

43 R Edgar, *Because they chose the plan of God: The story of the Bulhoek massacre* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1988), pp. 159 and 161.

44 R Edgar, *Because they chose the plan of God...*, p. 161. This is the same with Rastafarians. During congregation which they call groundation, Rastafarians priests preach in Jamaican English, dressed in ministerial gown, read the scripture, and sing hymns that enforce the themes of African freedom and unity.

45 TJ Campbell, *Songs of Zion*, pp. 304-305.

46 SV Davidson, "Leave Babylon...", *Black Theology: An International Journal*, 2008, 6, 1, pp. 46-60.

The other most important link between Rastafarianism and South Africa is found in the *Holy Piby* (Rastafarian bible) authored by Athlyi Rogers. This text, which came to be known as the “Black man’s bible”, was banned in South Africa but was smuggled to the Kimberly diamond fields, where it had a great impact on Black diamond mine workers, the effects of which remain to this date.⁴⁷

Rastafari in South Africa before 1994

From the introduction of Garveyism and Ethiopianism since the late 18th century to 1994, Rastafari in South Africa existed only as a philosophy rather than an organisation or a formal movement. It was however during this period that the seeds of Rastafari that were to germinate and flower after apartheid were sown. Even though there was no Rastafarian organisation, individual wearing dreadlocks and the colours of Marcus Garvey’s thoughts could be traced since or in the late seventies.⁴⁸ A lack in organisation was probably due to lack of freedom of expression and censoring of information during the apartheid era. There is no recorded history of when Rastafari entered South Africa. Academic work on the movement started in 1986 with Oosthuizen’s *Rastafarianism*. According to Oosthuizen, it was only during the late seventies that South Africans became aware of the presence of individual Rastafarians, mainly in Soweto where he was able to interview some. The general public became aware of their presence when the first person to be killed during a strike in Uitenhage was referred to as a Rastafarian by the press media.⁴⁹ During the 1970s and 1980s, Rastafarians in South Africa were mainly unemployed black youth with an average age of nearly 26 and an average schooling of just over Std 6 (Grade 4).⁵⁰

The distorted of information becomes apparent when one looks at responses given to Oosthuizen by some Rastafarian interviewees. For example, one

47 Anon., “Establishment of the Rastafari forum”, *Founding Article of the Rastafari Forum in South Africa* (North-West University Mafeking Campus, 27 November 2006).

48 GC Oosthuizen, *Rastafarianism* (Honours Research, University of Zululand, 1990), pp. 46-47. Garvey used these colours for the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) flag which were black, green and red. With permission from Garvey, they added the colour yellow or gold. According to Garvey, black symbolises the skin colour of the black man, green for nature, red for the blood of blacks that has flowed in oppression, and yellow, which, according to Rastafarians, stands for wealth.

49 GC Oosthuizen, *Rastafarianism*, p. 34.

50 GC Oosthuizen, *Rastafarianism*, p. 38.

responded said, when asked about the history of the movement:⁵¹

Somewhere in those days there was a man by the name of Haile Selassie who moved from America, where he was a slave, to Ethiopia. In Ethiopia he became an emperor. As a leader he tried to promote his religion...

Another example is of a Rastafarian informant who had this to say about Bob Marley:⁵²

Bob Marley used to live close to a certain Island...when Bob was in the USA the military wanted to conscript him to the army but he refused. After his refusal he decided to go back to Jamaica.

According to Johnson-Hill the large-scale transfer of Rastafarianism from Jamaica to South Africa, as in other parts of the world, was caused largely by reggae music,⁵³ which preached Garveyism and Ethiopianism, the bedrock of the Rastafarian movement. Of the early stages of the movement in Cape Town, Papa Sam (one of the Rastafarian elders) says that because there were not many Rastafarians or reading materials then, reggae was the main source of information.⁵⁴ Reggae music also became popular amongst freedom fighters (those involved in the struggle against apartheid), including those in exile and the township youth.⁵⁵

The first reggae artist Jamaica to visit South Africa was Jimmy Cliff who performed in Soweto, Cape Town and Durban in 1976. This was at the height of apartheid. His tour was controversial because it was during the era of international cultural boycotts in protest against the apartheid system.⁵⁶ In spite of the prevailing conditions, Cliff's performance did much to familiarise black South Africans with reggae music which sings against oppression in tracks such as *House of Exile* which sings:⁵⁷

51 GC Oosthuizen, *Rastafarianism*, p. 34. The informant seems not to know the history of Rastafari, that Haile Selassie was never a slave in the Americas, and that Selassie was not a Rastafarian and did not promote Rastafarianism as a religion.

52 GC Oosthuizen, p. 35. This informant shows lack of knowledge amongst early Rastafarians in South Africa. For example, Bob Marley was and lived in Jamaica not close to a certain Island. There were never attempts to conscript him to the army when he was in the USA.

53 JA Johnson-Hill, "Rastafari as a resource...", *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 1996, Vol. 9, pp. 3-39. Reggae is characterised by deep bass rhythms punctuated with heavy drumbeats. Reggae music has the function of what is called *musica franca* for Rastafarians internationally, transcending ethnic, national and regional boundaries.

54 N Tolsi, "The rise and rise of the Rastafari", *Mail and Guardian*, 14 October 2011.

55 JA Johnson-Hill, "Rastafari as a resource...", pp. 3-39.

56 DM Collins, "Jimmy Cliff: boom! smash! it went smash!" (available at <http://larecord.com/interviews/2012/04/09/jimmy-cliff-boom-smash-it-went-smash>, as accessed on 5 November 2012).

57 Anon., "Jimmy Cliff: House of exile lyrics – absolute" (available at Lyricswww.absolutelyrics.com › Jimmy Cliff Lyrics, as accessed on 29 January 2013).

*There's a day of feasting and a day of famine
Day of sadness and a day of joy
You could see in the day of feasting
Life isn't just a little play-like toy.

So the day arrived when you least expected
Cos you always thought you were well protected
Now you feel like a fish out of water
So now you're wondering what's the matter.*

The song is warning to the oppressor and gives hope to the oppressed that the days of oppression will come to an end one day. According to the song, there are good days and bad ones, days of plenty and those of inadequacy which translates to days of oppression and days of freedom. When the days of oppression comes to end, the oppressor will feel unprotected.

The visit by both reggae superstars, Peter Tosh and Bob Marley to Southern Africa in the early eighties contributed to the spread of Rastafarianism in South Africa. Peter Tosh performed in Swaziland during Christmas of 1983. Bob Marley performed at the independence celebration of Zimbabwe on 17 April 1980. These two visits contributed greatly towards drawing the attention of youth in Southern Africa to the movement.⁵⁸

In South Africa, the 1980s also saw the emergence of local reggae musicians such as Carlos Jeje, Dr Victor and the band called *Haile and the Rasta Family*. More than any of the above musicians, it was Lucky Dube (sometimes considered the “father” of reggae music in South Africa) who had the greatest impact. Dube released his first album entitled *Rastas Never Die*, but keen to suppress anti-apartheid activism, the ruling National Party banned the album in 1985.⁵⁹ By the time of his death in 2010, Dube had released 12 albums and was an internationally acclaimed reggae artist.⁶⁰ Today there are many reggae artists in South Africa such as Bufallo Soulja, Zoro, Crosby aka Digi Analog, Jahnett- Tafari, Dabangpro and a lot more others.⁶¹ These artists play a great part in promoting Rastafari in South Africa through reggae music.

58 GC Oosthuizen, *Rastafarianism*, p. 14.

59 Anon., “Lucky Dube biography” (available at <http://www.luckydube.net/biography.htm>, as accessed on 20 November 2012).

60 Anon., “Lucky Dube biography” (available at <http://www.luckydube.net/biography.htm>, as accessed on 20 November 2012).

61 Anon., “South African reggae artists”, 23 September 2008 (available at <http://maffed.blogspot.com/2008/09/south-african-reggae-artists.html#!/2008/09/south-african-reggae-artists.html>, as accessed on 20 November 2012).

Despite the “injection” to Rastafarian ideas via the above-acclaimed Reggae artists, supporters of Rastafari did not form an organised movement in South Africa before 1994. A possible explanation is that the movement was overshadowed by political organisations fighting against apartheid with the liberation movement being the only channel through which people fought for freedom. This explains why the role played by Rastafarians in the struggle against apartheid remains unclear. Some people such as Oosthuizen are of the view that Rastafarians did not take part in the fight for liberation. This view is fostered by Rastafarians themselves who believe that their movement is apolitical and non-violent. Oosthuizen goes on to argue that while Rastafarians in Jamaica have been politically active like when they took up arms in the Grenadian Revolution,⁶² the same cannot be said about Rastafarians in South Africa in the struggle against Apartheid. For Oosthuizen, this explains why the Rastafari movement in South Africa acquired more of a cultural and/or religious than a political form. The Movement remained an expression of, and struggle for, black identity.⁶³

Some Rastafarians argue that it is difficult to determine the involvement of Rastafarians in the fight against apartheid injustices because they did not form a Rastafarian organisation. According to Jah Power,⁶⁴ the reason why they could not organise themselves was that “it would be difficult because the government could have simply classified us as terrorists thereby forcing them to operate an underground organisation.”⁶⁵ Thus, most of them participated as individuals under different political organisations. Most people who were Rastafarians or who later joined the movement were preoccupied with the struggle for liberation, with most belonging to the African National Congress (ANC), Pan African Congress (PAC) or the Azanian People Organisation (AZAPO). This was the case with Ras Bongane and Jah Power.⁶⁶ They were politically active before they decided to become Rastafarians. Because Rastafari is a leaderless organisation, members converted into the movement individually and became official members after its formalisation in 1997.

62 GC Oosthuizen, *Rastafarianism*, p. 14.

63 GC Oosthuizen, *Rastafarianism*, p. 15.

64 Jah Power can be regarded as one of most knowledgeable and experienced members of the Rastafari movement. He was present when the Movement was formalised in Grasmere in 1997. In addition, he was the most educated amongst my informants as he was busy with his law studies with the University of Pretoria. He also had a lot of reading materials on Rastafari.

65 J Power (Rastafarian), Interview, MH Chawane (Researcher, University of Johannesburg), 7 January 2003.

66 B Masuku and J Power (Rastafarians), Interview, MH Chawane (Author, University of Johannesburg), 7 January 2003. Bongane met a Rastafarian during a political demonstration while Jah Power was a member of the Pan African Congress before he became a Rastafarian.

A common trend amongst those who were to become Rastafarians is that those who were politically active before their conversion lost interest in party politics when they accepted Rastafari. One informant said the ideology of Pan Africanism influenced him; he became aware that *politricks* (Rastafarian word for politics) was a “dirty game” and then turned to Rastafari:⁶⁷

Before the general elections of 1994, I was a member of the African National Congress Marshal structure. During the same year, I wanted to join the *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (a military wing of the ANC) cadres. When I was called upon to join the cadres, I was already a member of the Pan African Congress of Azania after having being inspired by the philosophy of Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe of Africanism. After realising that politics was full of tricks I quit and I was introduced to reggae by Ras elder Bafana.

This is a similar position to that of Bongane Masuku, whose politicisation was later followed by conversion to Rastafari. Bongane indicated a profound disillusionment with formal politics. It seems to be a common sentiment, confirming that the general attitude towards politics and other religions is that Rastafarianism is a non-political and non-religious movement.⁶⁸ This in a way concurs with Oosthuizen’s assertion that as Rastafarians, they did not take part in the fight against Apartheid.

Lack of structural organisation amongst early Rastafarians in South Africa meant that they did not congregate for spiritual purposes. Rastafarians in Soweto and Durban only came together to listen to reggae music, recruit others, and to listen to their generals (leaders).⁶⁹ This happened without any formal structure, constitution or knowledge of what should be done during congregation. The most important thing during this time was that some of those who joined the movement were recruited, something that was not the case after 1994 (as it will be seen later).

In the 1990s, Rastafarians started to comprise of a wide range of social classes. It no longer consisted of only the poor, youths, illiterates or only the blacks. There were also wealthy middle-class (for names of middle-class Rastafarians, see page 9 of this article) and whites (such Ras Bruno from Auckland Park) who adamantly asserted their identity as Rastafarians.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ J Power, Interview, MH Chawane, 7 January 2003.

⁶⁸ B Masuku (Rastafarian), Interview, MH Chawane, 7 January 2003.

⁶⁹ GC Oosthuizen, *Rastafarianism*, p. 39. It must be noted here that this was during the early days when Rastafarians did not have any idea on how they should be organised structurally. As a result they established their own structures and positions.

⁷⁰ T Bosch, *The making of I-story: Rastas*, p. 10.

The formalisation of Rastafarian movement in South Africa

Attempts at formal organisation amongst South African Rastafarians started during the early 1990s. In Knysna, Cape Town, Rastafarians decided to form their own community in the Nekkies location in 1993 called Judah Square.⁷¹ This became even more possible in 1994 when South Africa became a democracy. Thus, the emergence of the movement in South Africa was a direct result of the fall of the Apartheid regime, with the year 1994 marking a turning point for followers. The dawn of a new South Africa stimulated a desire to constitute a formal organisation. The start of a new era also made communication and interaction possible, because members could now move from one township to another as a group, with little police harassment. Meanwhile, Rastafarians could visit South Africa from overseas.⁷²

When Rastafarianism emerged in South Africa it was in the form of the Nyahbinghi Order. By 2012 there were three Rastafarian denominations in South Africa. Following the international trend, these denominations are the Nyahbinghi itself, the Twelve Tribes of Israel and Bobo Ashante.⁷³ The name Nyahbinghi, which means black victory, is derived from Queen Nyahbinghi, who is believed to have ruled Uganda in the 19th century and fought against the colonialists there. Nyahbinghi operated as a revolutionary order during the early years of European colonial occupation with the aim of banishing the Europeans from Africa and preserving the spiritual and cultural integrity of the ancient African way of life.⁷⁴ The Bobo Ashante was found by Emmanuel Charles Edwards in Jamaica in 1958. Edwards is believed by his followers to be the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. Followers of this sect believe in black supremacy and the repatriation of blacks to Africa. They can be identified by their dress codes of long flowing robes and turbans.⁷⁵ The Twelve Tribes of Israel was formed by Dr. Vernon “Prophet Gad” Carrington in 1969. Members are free to worship in a church of their choosing. Each member of this sect belongs to one of the 12 Tribes which are Reuben, Simeon, Levi,

71 B Zeb, “Living in harmony with nature: Rasta Earth Festival 2011” (available at <http://www.rastaearthfestival.co.za/>, as accessed on 13 November 2012). Judah Square is reputed to be the largest Rastafarian community in South Africa consisting of about 30 families. Every year the community organises and hosts a Rastafarian Earth festival, which kicks off with a big celebration every July 23 and involves live bands, ceremonies and plenty of activities. The Rasta Earth Festival draws in Rastafarians from South Africa and abroad and is currently rated 300 out of the world’s best festivals.

72 J Power, Interview, MH Chawane, 23 September 2003.

73 Anon., *The Rastafarian Orders/Sects and N Tolsi*, “The rise and rise of the Rastafari”, *Mail and Guardian*, 14 October 2011.

74 N Tolsi, “The rise and rise of the Rastafari”, *Mail and Guardian*, 14 October 2011.

75 Anon., *The Rastafarian Orders/Sects*.

Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Joseph and Benjamin. Bob Marley was from the tribe of Joseph, and Haile Selassie from the tribe of Judah. These Rastafarians consider themselves more of an ethnicity rather than religion.⁷⁶ They believe that Haile Selassie was the descendent of Kings David and Solomon. Based on the 12 sons of Jacob, a member of the tribe assumes the name of Jacob's son that correlates with the month of his birth.⁷⁷

Image 1: Rastafarians of the Nyahbinghi Order



Source: Personal collection (MH Chawane), Kingstone Jamaica, 20 August 2010.

The Rastafari of the Nyahbinghi Order was introduced formally in South Africa, on 28 December 1997 when Rastafarians from most provinces attended a meeting in Elder Siphos' house in Grasmere,⁷⁸ south of Johannesburg. The aim was to establish a Rastafari National Council (RNC) for the entire country. Elder Joseph from London and Bongo Time (Congo Wattu)⁷⁹ from Jamaica attended, as did representatives from all other provinces except KwaZulu-

⁷⁶ Anon., *The Rastafarian Orders/Sects*.

⁷⁷ N Tolsi, "The rise and rise of the Rastafari", *Mail and Guardian*, 14 October 2011.

⁷⁸ Elder is a position given to a person in consideration of his/her age. From that time onwards, Grasmere has become an important centre where provincial and sometimes national gatherings are held.

⁷⁹ The two elders are well known and respected by all members of the Nyahbinghi Order worldwide.

Natal, with no reason given for their absence. Rastafarians from Cape Town (Knysna) and Gauteng (especially those from Yeoville and Soweto) hosted the visitors, not only because they were the ones who seemed to know most about the movement, but also, according to Jah Power, they appeared to be “upful in the ways of the Most High”, implying that they knew how the *binghi* (process of congregation) was conducted and could sing the anthem and chants, recite the creed and play drums, things that most of the people who attended the gathering did not know. Bongo Time chaired the gathering, which proceeded to shed light on what Rastafari entails. His message was very clear to those who attended, for the representatives to go back to their branches to organise, unify and centralise the members in preparation for the next gathering. Documents such as the Nyahbinghi constitution, guidelines and hymnbook were distributed. The Constitution distributed was for the International Nyahbinghi Order. It was only in 2001 that the South African version was drafted.⁸⁰

Organising according to the Nyahbinghi Order

In South Africa, the Rastafari movement in the form of the Nyahbinghi Order is organisationally divided into national, provincial, regional and local houses,⁸¹ in accordance with the Constitution of the Order (Drafted on 15 May 2001 in Phillipi, Cape Town). The National Nyahbinghi has its headquarters in Cape Town and is known as the Marcus Garvey Tabernacle, under the control of the Rastafari National Council (RNC). The RNC is constituted of the National Office in Cape Town, the National Council of Priesthood in Knysna/Cape Town, the National Chair in Kimberley, the Secretaries in Southern Cape/Mpumalanga, Public Relations Office (PRO) in Cape Town, and the Financial Advocate in Port Elizabeth (Constitution of the Nyahbinghi Order), its main duty being to pass on information to the provincial houses, which in turn pass it on to the regional and from there to local houses.⁸²

80 J Power, Interview, MH Chawane, 23 September 2003. It was, according to the informant, not clear how many members to be attended because they were counted per province represented.

81 Following the Nyahbinghi Constitution, Rastafari in South Africa is thus hierarchically organised. The International Nyahbinghi in Jamaica is the supreme structure with the National Nyahbinghi in various countries falling under it. The National Nyahbinghi consists of the Provincial Nyahbinghi which is in turn divided into regional and local houses.

82 Constitution of the Nyahbinghi Order, 2001.

The Provincial Nyabbinghi is situated in all the provinces of South Africa and is under the control of the Provincial Executive Administration (PEA).⁸³ It is the responsibility of the PEA to communicate with representatives of all regions, who must know the Regional and Local Administration Executives as well as where the land is to be used as *Hailfari Ground* (or where the Tabernacle is located). It is also the duty of the PEA to introduce the way of the Rastafarian syllabus, to identify locations or buildings for Rastafarian schools, and to obtain sites for commercial and industrial development.⁸⁴

From the time of its formal inception, members of the Nyabbinghi Order have been in communication with each other through the national, provincial and regional gatherings.⁸⁵ The number of registered Nyabbinghi members fluctuates between 200 and five hundred per province. A large number is those of unregistered and members of the other two denominations. The importance of these types of gatherings, especially the national gathering, is that they serve as a channel through which Rastafarians can express themselves as a group. These expressions are open in a way that they can reflect international, national and local sentiments. The language of expression can be Rastafarian, any African language or a mixture of both.⁸⁶ Regional and provincial meetings are usually held in preparation for a national gathering, with announcements from the National Council and other houses made during them. For example, an announcement may be about the opening of a new house that requires the presence of whoever can attend. The National gathering takes place twice a year under the auspices of the RNC, and is attended by representatives of houses from all provinces. The provinces alternate in hosting the gathering, the purpose of which is to review progress and discuss issues affecting all Rastafarians at the national level, such as membership and registration. It is during the meeting of the National Executive that general policies and demands of Rastafarians directed at government are formulated.

Regional religious and administrative gatherings usually take place every second week of the month where members from different houses from around

83 B Bunny (Rastafarian Priest), Interview, MH Chawane, 5 January 2003. Not all provinces have a provincial Nyabbinghi branch. The known ones are the Cape, Gauteng, Free State, Mpumalanga and North West. The aim of the National Nyabbinghi is to make sure that all provinces establish Provincial Nyabbinghi.

84 Rastafari National Council, *Constitution of the Nyabbinghi Order, Phillipi*, Cape Town, 15 May 2001 and Participant Observation, M H Chawane (Researcher, University of Johannesburg, 20 April 2002. Rastafarians in South Africa believe that their children should attend Rastafarian school where they would be taught a Rastafarian syllabus in Amharic language (the official Ethiopian language).

85 B Bunny, Interview, MH Chawane, 29 January 2013.

86 Participant observation, MH Chawane, 7 February 2004.

the region gather. Each house in a particular region is given an annual chance to host the gathering. The gathering lasts the entire night, starting on Saturday evening and ending on Sunday morning.

The Rastafari movement in South Africa is grounded on the following religious rights:⁸⁷

- It shall abide by the Bible (King James Version), Holy Piby, all teachings and speeches of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I.
- The first Saturday of every month shall be the official day of worship for all houses.
- The *holy herb* (marijuana) shall be used at all gatherings of Nyabbinghi Holy sessions.
- No youth (under 18) shall be permitted to smoke *ganja* unless used in another form with parental supervision.
- All members must be married especially the Priesthood and those who live with the Queen.
- Members of the Nyabbinghi shall not be persecuted or discriminated against for wearing dreadlocks, as it is a holy vow.
- No polygamy is allowed in the House of Nyabbinghi Order.
- No fornication is allowed.

Rastafarians of post-apartheid South Africa have developed their own ways of performing certain rituals, such as burials, marriages and sanctifications. In addition, they have devised their own way of celebrating important events, such as *earthday* (birthdays) within the house. Performing and celebrating these in their own way is very important in that it confirms the completeness of their separate identity. Their inability to do these things on their own means that they need to depend on Rastafarian leadership but not on priests from other churches who would perform the rituals without any consideration of the Rastafarian way of life. The value of these events, especially burials and marriages, lies in their ability to attract a large number of Rastafarians and non-Rastafarians at the same time. It is during such occasions that other people come into direct contact with Rastafarians.⁸⁸

87 Rastafari National Council, *Constitution of the Nyabbinghi Order*, 15 May 2001.

88 Participant Observation, MH Chawane, 7 February 2004. It is during celebrations of these occasions that Rastafarians come into contact with each other. Important announcements are also made here.

Unlike pre-apartheid Rastafarians, those of the post-apartheid congregate to give ises (praises) to the *Jah* or Rastafari. The gathering takes place on Saturdays or Sundays depending on the decision taken by the local house. The congregation of Rastafarians is called *groundation* or *grounation*. The word grounation is derived from the word 'ground', which means the place where Rastafarian gatherings take place for spiritual purposes. In other words, is where the divine assembly (congregation) takes place. Among members of the House of Fire, the ground is also known as the *binghi*. The *Jahug* describes the process of grounation:⁸⁹

... [as] a congregation of Rastafari in Ivine Issemble which is the serious and sincere duty of the Nyahbinghi Order which commemorates the origin coming together to chant down Babylon and to give Jah glory. For one man alone is but a voice in the wilderness, but the congregation of man is omnipotent.

Grounation takes place in a tabernacle⁹⁰ and is presided upon by the priest. The process of grounation is divided into three sessions, which Rastafarians refer to as churchical, reasoning and governmental. This is the first session of grounation; it is characterised by singing, drumming and dancing. As the words churchical or ises (for praises) suggest, it is a sort of church sermon where Rastafarians give praises to Jah.⁹¹ Reasoning, which is the second session, is an ad hoc dialogue on virtually any topic, ranging from religion or the Bible, politics, education, social problems, ancient African history, current news, ganja, love and hatred – anything that the house may agree to discuss or that may arise from the house. With the aid of the Bible, newsarticles and other written material, reasoning entails critical reflection on Eurocentric ideologies and evils that are manifest among humankind. The *Jahug* describes reasoning the cornerstone of Rastafari within the Nyahbinghi Order. Through Word Sound Power *I an' I*⁹² can bring judgement to pass, therefore *I an' I* have no

89 Anon., *Jahug*, p. 5.

90 Anon., *Jahug*, p. 44. The tabernacle is built according to specific Rastafarian guidelines. On the ground there is also a round tabernacle made of poles still under construction – the most important structure. This was built following the Nyahbinghi Order guidelines with twelve outer posts representing the Twelve Patriarchs, the twelve gates of New *Jerusalem*, the Twelve Tribes of Israel, and the Twelve Apostles. At the centre, is the largest post of all which represents: *Ian' Ivine Majesty*, that is, Emperor Haile Selassie I who is the head of the Nyahbinghi Order. The roof of the tabernacle takes the shape of an umbrella. At its centre there is an alter made of six outer-posts surrounding a centre post. This symbolises the Book of the Seven Seals, the Seven Golden Candlesticks.

91 *Observation*, 27th December 2003.

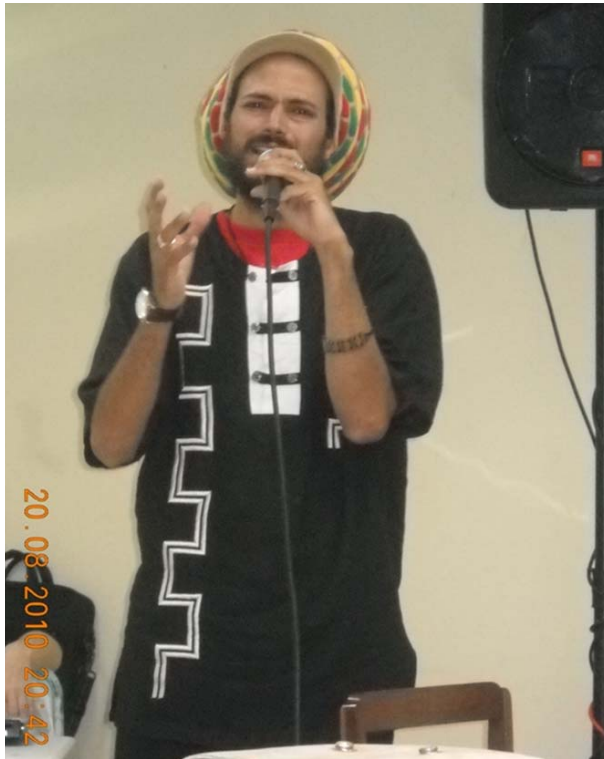
92 M Denis-Constant, "The choices of identity", social identities. Vol. 1, Issue 1, 1995, p. 2. *I an' I* is Rastafari manner of speaking in the first person. It refers to me and you (or *I 'n I*, *I in I*, or *I and I*) emphasises the importance of the first person (granting the other person equal first person status rather than the second or third person status of English personal nouns) reality of conscious self while it may be a constant reference to the unity of *Jah*.

need for weapons.⁹³

Rastafari in South Africa today

From 1994, the Rastafarian movement has grown to become a popular movement not only amongst the black uneducated youths who were facing rejection from society and searching for some identity. Since 1994, it has grown in membership to include school and university students, adults, whites and professional people. Examples are those of Ras Malapane (who is a Programme Assistance), Gareth Prince (attorney), Ras Afro and Ras Mantula (Advocates), and Ras Blackroots (Medical Doctor).⁹⁴

Image 2: A white Rastafarian



Source: Personal collection (MH Chawane), Kingstone Jamaica, 20 August 2010.

⁹³ Anon., *Jahug*, p. 5.

⁹⁴ T Weavind, "Rastafarians rule as professionals", *Sunday Times*, 22 May 2012, p. 5.

The growth and popularity can be linked to the availability of information and the fact that they started to speak out against the social, economic political ills of the new South Africa. Their stance against drug abuse, violence and crime has made them even more popular with some sections of the society. Generally, the media in South Africa is playing a major role in the dissemination of news and information about the Rastafarian course. Though the coverage is mainly for its more sensationalist aspects, this is helping in popularising the movement. From 1994, radio stations (of the South African Broadcasting Corporation) started to feature programmes that not only played reggae music but also explained to the listeners the underlying philosophy behind.⁹⁵ Unlike the period before 1994, newsarticles and magazines are becoming more interested in publishing stories on Rastafarian issues such as dreadlocks and *ganja*. The year 1994 was thus a transitional point for the movement. In addition, some Universities have become interested in studying the Rastafari phenomenon. The University of the Witwatersrand, for example, has been inviting and hosting (more than once) Mutabaruka for workshops and poetry sessions. On 14 November 2006 the North-West University held the Rastafarian Forum with Ras Nathaniel from Washington as a keynote speaker, the main objective of which was to increase awareness of the movement through teaching, research and community outreach programmes.⁹⁶ Furthermore, the Anthropology and Sociology Department of the University of the Western Cape was able, through research, to show how condition of denigration by society contributed to youth's decision to turn to Rastafari.⁹⁷

In present day South Africa the Movement is faced with a number of challenges. Opposition arises from the government, school authorities, employers, some members of civil society, the police, the judicial system and other religious movements such as priests of Christian churches who all have

⁹⁵ Examples include: Radio Thobela FM (broadcasting in Sepedi) hosting Lesiba "Ronaldo" Maubane between 14h05 and 15h00 on Saturdays; Radio 2000, presenting Roots Reggae every Sunday between 13h00 and 15h00, hosted by Bongani Radebe; and Phala Phala FM (broadcasting in TshiVenda) having a reggae slot on Saturdays between 06h00 and 10h00 presented by Tshiane; Munghanalane FM presented every Saturday between 19h00 to 20h00 hosted by James. During some of these programmes, reggae music is played and prominent Rastafarians are interviewed. In addition, listeners phone in to comment either on the programme or the movement. The latter point is new and does mark a change, for prior to 1994 African radio stations played reggae music without talking about the movement itself. It should be noted here that most of the radio stations featuring Rastafari programmes are those that were traditionally meant for African listeners. Today, Rastafarians take part in television talk shows in which they discuss their beliefs. The period after 1994 has seen the growth of Rastafari documentaries shown on television.

⁹⁶ Anon., *Establishment of the Rastafari forum*, The North-West University (Mafikeng Campus), 14 November 2006.

⁹⁷ N Tolsi, "The rise and rise of the Rastafari", *Mail and Guardian*, 14 October 2011.

a problem with the question of decriminalising ganja (marijuana) and the wearing of dreadlock by Rastarian learners and employees.⁹⁸

Image 3: Rastafarians sharing *ganja*



Source: Personal collection (MH Chawane), Daveyton, 16 February 2002.

The issue of legalisation of *ganja* has led to protests and conflict with the police. The protests started in 1995, just a year after political liberation with the first one in July 1995 in Cape Town followed by that of May 2001 in Johannesburg.⁹⁹ Relations between Rastafarians and the police has in most cases been characterised by violence, intimidation and harassment. Sometimes persecution and intolerance has led to bloodshed as depicted in a short film, *David v Goliath* which deals with the murder of Ras Champion. According to the film, the Rastafari community in the Marcus Garvey informal settlement in Philippi was accused dealing in drugs. The police responded by pulling down the structures which included a crèche. In the ensuing squabble, a Rasta elder who was allegedly defending a crèche was shot dead by the police.¹⁰⁰ The question of decriminalisation or legalisation of ganja in South Africa remains unanswered and opinions remain divided.

98 *Ganja* is central in the lives of Rastas. As a sacrament it smoked, burnt as an essence, boiled and taken as tea, and used in baking of *ganja cake*. Dreadlocks are thick matted thatch of hair and is important external feature of Rastas.

99 Anon., "Should we smoke dope?", *Pace Magazine*, July 1995.

100 N Tolsi, "The rise and rise of the Rastafari", *Mail and Guardian*, 14 October 2011.

The Department of Education (DoE) has faced several legal cases in response to Rasta children being expelled from local schools or being forced to cut off their locks.¹⁰¹ One example is that of a Grade 8 learner in 1911 from Joe Slovo Engineering High School in Khayelitsha (Western Cape), who, was suspended from school for wearing dreadlocks and told to come back after cutting them. The school made the fifteen year old choose between what it calls “his religion” and education. The principal of the school told the mother that he did not want Rastas at his school, however the learner, his family, community organisations such as “Equal Education”, all vowed to fight for his rights to attend the school.¹⁰² To resolve conflicts such as these, Section 29 of the South African Constitution stipulates that each learner has a right to education. A similar case is one of a learner who was expelled from Navalsig High School in Bloemfontein in 2010 because of her dreadlocks. The matter was taken to the Human Rights Commission (HRC) in Bloemfontein, which ruled that the school authorities should pay R10 000 in compensation to the learner and publish an unconditional written apology in a national newsarticle.¹⁰³ The learner was eventually allowed back to school but it is not known whether they paid the fine.

Like in education, there is also no law in South Africa that is against the wearing of dreadlocks in a work place. As a result, the decision lies with employers. While some are allowed to continue work, some are denied employment or dismissed from work because of being Rastafarians. Two cases can be used to demonstrate this, namely that of Gareth Prince and five prison warders in Pollsmoor on one hand, as mentioned, and that of Detective Sergeant Zenzele Dlomo on the other. Prince lost a legal battle to continue the Rastafari observance of smoking *ganja* while at the same time practising as an attorney.¹⁰⁴ In 2007 five Rastafari prison warders were fired from Pollsmoor Prison for wearing dreadlocks. While Prince and five prison warders were discriminated against because of their lifestyle, the Kwazulu-Natal state attorney Jackie Henriques granted Dlomo permission to wear his dreadlocks. Like Prince, Dlomo admits to smoking the *holy herb* during prayer and outside his police duties while the law requires him to arrest anyone else using or smoking it.¹⁰⁵

101 N Tolsi, “The rise and rise of the Rastafari”, *Mail and Guardian*, 14 October 2011.

102 N Davids, “Suspended for dreadlocks”, *The Times*, 14 March 2011, p. 2.

103 V Vena, “Battle of the dreads rages on”, *Mail & Guardian*, 23-29 July 2010, p. 12.

104 S Chetty, “In the land of dagga”, *Sowetan*, 18 May 2001.

105 T Msomi, “Detective in dreadlocks”, *Drum Magazine*, Vol. 291, 11 November 1998, pp. 20-21.

However, if the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural Religious and Linguistic Communities (established in terms of Chapter 9 institutions)¹⁰⁶ can have its way, *ganja* laws may be relaxed. According to the Commission, the ban on *ganja* is inconsistent with the Constitution. The Commission made the following recommendations (to be tabled to parliament in January 2013):

- That Rastas should be allowed to carry 100 grams of *ganja*;
- Rasta-related school children should be allowed to wear dreadlocks;
- Rasta priests be given access to prisons for preaching, become recognised marriage officers and be part of interfaith prayers;
- Six Rastafarian holidays be recognised and employers will be forced to honour them;
- Rasta language should be recognised in schools;
- Land should be set aside for Rasta place of worship;
- Journalists must stop stereotyping Rastafarians;
- Government should invest money to celebrate reggae music.¹⁰⁷

If the proposal can be accepted by parliament, Rastafarians will interpret this as a victory. On the other hand, those who are against most of the things that Rastafari stands for will feel let down by the government. The relaxation of *ganja* laws will not signal an end of debate between those who are against its use and those who oppose it.

Conclusion

The emergence of the Rastafarian movement in South Africa can be said to have taken place through three stages. The first stage was the introduction of Garveyism and Ethiopianism both of which laid the ideological foundation for the emergence of the movement. The second was that of the late 1970s and early 1980s when individual Rastarians started to make their appearance in South Africa, a period characterised by insufficient knowledge about the movement. The third stage was the period after 1997 when Rastafari was

¹⁰⁶ Chapter 9 institution is a group of organisations established in terms of Chapter 9 of the Constitution. Its responsibility is to guard democracy and includes amongst other organisations, the Public Protector, the Human Rights Commission and Commission for Gender Equality.

¹⁰⁷ L Sidimba, "Rastas closer to legalizing it", *City Press*, 18 November 2012.

formalised in South Africa.

From 1997, the movement has grown to become a major force in the South African social, cultural, political and religious landscape. Though the number of adherents is difficult to estimate due to the defused nature of the Movement, the growth can be seen by the attention is getting from the media and Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural Religious and Linguistic Communities. Its popularity amongst people across the social spectrum is another sign of its growth since its inception. While its fight against such social ills as violence, crime and drugs makes it somehow acceptable to society, it is its practices and appearance (of smoking *ganja* and wearing dreadlocks) that some members of society and government institutions are against.