

Rastafari Repatriation to Ethiopia and the All-Africa Rastafari Gathering (AARG)

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Abstract

Repatriation, the return of descendants of enslaved Africans back to Africa,¹ is at the heart of the Rastafari movement. Triggered by the coronation of Ras Tafari as Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia in 1930, the Rastafari movement emerged in Jamaica in response to a long tradition of an Ethiopia-centered reading of the Bible among enslaved Africans and their descendants and the eschatological expectations this had widely caused. After Haile Selassie had indeed granted “the Black Peoples of the World” land to return to near Shashemene in southern Ethiopia in the 1950s, Rastafarians have repatriated there ever since and recently called an international gathering in Shashemene to put it back into focus.

Introduction

When the 2nd All-Africa Rastafari Gathering (AARG) on “intra-African trade for a prosperous Rastafari nation” was recently convened in the southern Ethiopian town of Shashemene in November 2018, it was not only a trade conference where stakeholders from the diaspora and the continent came together, it was also a stock-taking of more than half a century of Rastafari repatriation to Ethiopia.

The All-Africa Rastafari Gathering, which had its premiere in November 2017, was the vision of Ras Mweya Masimba, a pillar of the Rastafarian repatriation community in Shashemene since the early 1990s, whose untimely passing in 2016 prompted the community to finally “put [his]

¹ The use of the term in this context goes back to Ethiopianists such as Marcus Garvey (1986b: 118), who already in 1924 gave a speech on “Repatriation of Negroes to a Homeland of Their Own in Africa”.

vision to reality".² This vision of reigniting the dream of Shashemene as a successful development model driven by repatriates from the African diaspora had been carried by many pioneers before him, as the All-Africa Rastafari Gathering only constitutes a recent milestone in the long history of the continuous longing for Africa among descendants of enslaved Africans in general and Rastafarians in particular. A historical overview will explain why.

The Ethiopianist Dream

Since the first slave-ships arrived in the so-called new world in the sixteenth century, enslaved Africans and their descendants have kept alive their African identities and the dream of their eventual return to their ancestral homeland. Although colonial propaganda vilified and demonized Africa, enslaved Africans nevertheless found ways and strategies to keep the continent of their origin in self-empowering memory. Once these direct memories began to fade³, positive images of Africa were looked for wherever they could be found in their new environments. One such place was, of all things, the Christian Bible.

This might come as a surprise, but although the Bible and Christianity in general were often instrumentalized by European nations trading in humans to justify slavery, the Bible itself was of course not a European scripture but predated European colonialism and its trans-Atlantic slavery by millennia. As such it contained many passages contrary to the ideology of European slavery such as the positive mentioning of Africa under the name of Ethiopia: "In the King James Version or authorized English version of the Bible, published in 1611, translators used the term *Ethiopian*, which was quite popular at the time, to render the Hebrew *Kush* or the Greek *Αἰθιοπία*, designating black people. This term covered a rather vague expanse, an origin extending beyond modern Ethiopia to all of sub-Saharan Africa" (Bonacci 2015: 49).

This biblical terminology referring to Africa inspired an ideology (as Post [1970: 4] insisted to call it) of positive identification for enslaved Africans and their descendants with Africa, called Ethiopianism. Therefore, "Ethiopianism in North America and the Caribbean owes its origins to the

² As Rastafarian superstar Bob Marley said in "Wake Up And Live" on his 1979 "Survival" album.

³ Although they never fully faded, as direct contact from the continent was kept alive by new arrivals through the ongoing slave trade as well as indentured laborers from the Congo region after slavery.

'Ethiopian references in the Bible which had a liberatory promise and which, when contrasted with the indignities of plantation bondage, showed the black man in a dignified and humane light'" (Chevannes 1994: 33f quoting George Shepperson). This "liberatory promise" that an Ethiopianist reading of the Bible constituted in the eyes of enslaved Africans who now identified as dignified Ethiopians was the reason why, "[u]nlike Haiti, where the slaves were commanded if not forced to be members of the Catholic faith, the English planters in Jamaica adamantly refused to share their religion with the slave population" (Barrett 1997: 17). It was therefore not until an enslaved Baptist preacher from America, George Liele, "arrived in Jamaica in 1783 and founded the first Native Baptist church, which he named the Ethiopian Baptist Church" (Barnett 2018: 8), that Christianity and the Bible became widely accessible to enslaved Africans in Jamaica.

To the surprise of many of these enslaved Africans, the Bible spoke well of Ethiopia while their Christian slave-holders objectified and denigrated Africans. According to Genesis 2:13, Ethiopia was part of the Garden of Eden where all humanity and its civilization originated. Numbers 12:1 identifies the family of Moses' wife, where Moses first learned about the God of the Bible, as Ethiopian. Jeremiah 13:23 reminded them that despite their social and cultural alienation due to slavery, just like the leopard who cannot change his spots, the Ethiopian cannot change his skin. Therefore, such messages of salvation pertaining to Ethiopia as contained in Psalm 68:31, that "Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God", or Psalm 87:4, that a messianic figure will be born in Ethiopia, still applied to them. And not to forget, according to Acts 8:27, the first foreign national to follow Christ was identified as an Ethiopian at a time when the European forefathers of their Christian slave-holders were still so-called "pagans" and "heathens" for centuries to come, ironically terms with which the Christian slave-holders later tried to justify the enslavement of Africans.

Once enslaved Africans in Jamaica realized that the Bible did not condone the dehumanization of Africans as the slave-holders had tried them believe, but on the contrary, spoke more and better of Ethiopia than it did of Europe, masses of enslaved Africans flocked to the newly established Native Baptist churches where a subversive Ethiopianist reading of the Bible fueled such momentous rebellions against the plantocracy as those of Sam Sharpe during slavery, or Paul Bogle after slavery (Chevannes 1994: 12).

Such was the Ethiopianist background on which Marcus Garvey built his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in Jamaica in 1914 and which elevated him to international black leadership after relocating to the

USA in 1916, because it “was in Garvey – the prophet of African redemption – that the spirit of Ethiopianism came into full blossom. Through his writings and speeches, the glory of Ethiopia-Africa became the glory of things to come” (Barrett 1997: 76f). Marcus Garvey did not only allude to the well-known staples of Ethiopianism, such as Psalm 68, but interpreted them as prophecies finally coming true, and his followers with him: “‘Princes shall come out of Egypt and Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands unto God’. At this moment methinks I see Ethiopia stretching forth her hands unto God and methinks I see the Angel of God taking up the standard of the Red, the Black and the Green, and saying ‘Men of the Negro Race, Men of Ethiopia, follow me.’”, Garvey (1986a: 93) proclaimed during the *Second International Convention of Negroes* in 1921. This Ethiopianist rhetoric of “things to come” combined with the greatest organizational power people of African descent had ever had in the western hemisphere, had already caused Garvey to be regarded as a prophet in his native Jamaica among revivalist Christian groups out of the Native Baptist tradition such as the Bedwardites long before Rastafari emerged: “To the Bedwardites of his day, Garvey was the reincarnation of Moses, as Bedward was the reincarnation of Aaron – the two brothers, one prophet, the other high priest, on whom God had bestowed the responsibility of leading his chosen people out of bondage” (Chevannes 1994: 99).

It was in this context ripe with Ethiopianist expectations that the coronation of Ras Tafari⁴ as Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia in 1930 was seen as the fulfillment of Garvey’s philosophy understood as prophecies by those of his followers who, henceforth, began to be known as Rastafarians.⁵ But although building on the logic concerning Garvey of such groups preceding them as the Bedwardites, “the Rastafari abandoned the view that identified Bedward as the reincarnation of Aaron and that placed him alongside Garvey, the reincarnation of Moses. Instead Rastafari compare Garvey to John the Baptist”, because “Garvey prophesied the arrival of Haile Selassie

⁴ Actually, Tafari Makonnen, who held the title of Ras since he had become regent in 1916, had already been Negus (King) Tafari since 1928 when he was crowned Emperor (Negusa Nagast = King of Kings) in 1930. But in the perception of the African diaspora he was still best known and often celebrated as Ras Tafari, which is why the name stuck with Marcus Garvey even after the coronation and consequently with the Rastafari movement.

⁵ As Rastafarian scholar Ikael Tafari (2010: 421) pointed out, the controversies around which specific “prophecies” Garvey actually uttered in regard to the coming of a Black Messiah “miss the point” since all of Marcus Garvey’s philosophy was fuelling messianic expectations.

in the same way that John the Baptist prophesied the arrival of Jesus” (Chevannes 1994: 108, 102).

For Rastafarians, Haile Selassie represented the fulfillment of messianic end-time prophecies and thereby personified centuries of Ethiopianist hopes finally come true. After all, nobody could deny that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, one of the oldest Christian churches in the world, had officially declared him to be a direct descendant of King Solomon of Israel and the Queen of Sheba and publicly anointed⁶ him as King of Kings, Elect of God, and Light of the World, bearing the motto of the Conquering Lion of Judah, upon the ancient throne of King David of Israel (Bellizzi 2013: 97). These titles and positions brimming with messianic allusions constituted the fulfillment of end-time prophecies in the Rastafarians’ eschatological reading of the Bible, including all the Ethiopianist prophecies pertaining to their liberation from colonial oppression through repatriation to the only territory in Africa free from colonial domination at that time: Ethiopia.⁷ And while Garvey (1986a: 86) saw the fulfillment of Ethiopianist prophecies such as Psalm 68 right around the corner and had already connected them to messianic expectations of the second coming of Christ, saying “that one day Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hand, and whether it be at the second coming or before, we shall all sing our Hosannas”, Haile Selassie (1967: 337) himself went even a step further, proclaiming on the day of Ethiopia’s victory (with British support) over Mussolini’s fascist Roman troops in 1941 that “[t]oday is a day on which Ethiopia is stretching her hands to God”. For Rastafarians, there could be no doubt, the second coming of Christ must have come in the person of Haile Selassie. Surely, it was only a matter of time, therefore, until “they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree” (Micah 4:4).

⁶ Rastafarians’ messianism is quite down-to-earth, much in line with Old Testament messianic expectations, in that they observe that the Hebrew term *Masheach*, which was rendered into English as Messiah or, through the Greek, as Christ, literally only means anointed; therefore originally referring more to the worldly kings of Israel than to otherworldly expectations with which the terms have later been associated in Christianity. (Bauks 2019: 358f)

⁷ Although, technically speaking, Liberia was also free, echoing contemporary Ethiopianist sentiments, Martin Delany described it as “not an Independent Republic: in fact, *it is not* an independent nation at all; but a poor *miserable mockery* – a *burlesque* on a government – a pitiful dependency on the American Colonialists” (quoted in Bonacci 2015: 29), and it therefore never captivated Ethiopianist thinking as Ethiopia itself did.

Shashemene: The Dream Come True

Indeed, their Messiah did not let them wait for long. In 1937, only about four years after the first Rastafarians in Jamaica, such as Leonard Howell, had begun to attach messianic significance to his 1930 coronation from about 1933 onwards, during the Italian fascist occupation of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie sent his envoy Melaku Beyen to New York to establish the Ethiopian World Federation (EWF). With its constitution claiming to represent “the Black Peoples of the World”, validating centuries of Ethiopianist claims about “Ethiopia, which is our heritage” (Barrett 1997: 227), from the highest authority of the Ethiopian Government itself, the EWF was founded in order to organize a multitude of Black American organisations supporting the Ethiopian struggle against fascism and its Emperor in exile in England under one umbrella. While the UNIA had already begun to decrease with the set-up incarceration of Marcus Garvey in the USA and his deportation back to Jamaica about ten years earlier in 1927, “Melaku recognized the EWF’s symbolic debt to the UNIA” (Bonacci 2015: 102), so that even the UNIA’s *Universal Ethiopian Anthem* was sung at EWF meetings, virtually superseding the UNIA. Two years later, in 1939, the first EWF local opened in Jamaica and many of the early Rastafarians began to rally around it.

After Haile Selassie had victoriously reentered his country in 1941, following Ethiopian tradition, he showed his appreciation to different groups that had supported Ethiopia’s struggle by granting them land possessions, the only resource that was still abundantly at the disposal of the government in the war-torn country. One of these groups, for example, “were soldiers from Eritrea who had abandoned the Italian forces in order to fight alongside the Ethiopian army. For their commitment to the Ethiopian cause, the emperor himself granted these soldiers land near Shashemene” (MacLeod 2014: 101). In the same context, Haile Selassie also granted another group that supported Ethiopia during the war land near Shashemene: “the Black Peoples of the World” through the Ethiopian World Federation. It is not entirely clear how quickly that land was granted after the liberation of Ethiopia in 1941, MacLeod (2014: 10) claims as early as 1948, but it must have been granted by “1955, as the news of the donation was publicly announced in Kingston, Jamaica, that year” (Bonacci 2015: 111). Thereby, “[t]his was, in fact, the first initiative of the kind on the part of an African head of state with respect to the black people of the world” (Ibid: 110). And by following this call more sustainably than any other “Black Peoples of the World”, Rastafarians “have taken the concept of

Ethiopianism and added to it a spatial dimension, transforming the idea of a symbolic Ethiopia into reality” (MacLeod 2014: 95). In other words, the Ethiopianist dream had finally come true.

But the first Ethiopianists for whom it came true were not Rastafarians. Helen and James Piper, the first EWF administrators and settlers of the land-grant near Shashemene, were Black Jews from New York. Originally from Montserrat in the Caribbean, the Pipers had acquired US nationality probably during the 1930s and there represented a generation of Ethiopianists for whom the EWF had already superseded the UNIA, whereby the abstract Ethiopianist notion of Africa had increasingly become identified with the concrete destination of the Ethiopian state. They arrived in Ethiopia in 1948 as part of a movement of professionals of African descent from the West who came to help reconstruct Ethiopia after the war, and as such “James Piper accepted a job as a teacher at the Gundrandt Technical School in Addis Ababa, and Helen Piper occupied an administrative position on the site of the airport” (Bonacci 2015: 110). Even if MacLeod’s 1948 date for the granting of the land is correct, the Pipers only moved to Shashemene to administrate the land-grant and settle there after they had returned from a brief promotional visit for the EWF to the USA in 1953. While the date remains obscure, it is well established that the size of “the granted land covered an area of five *gashas*” (Bonacci 2015: 271), which translates roughly into about “two hundred hectares” or “between 400 and 500 acres” (MacLeod 2014: 107).

After the Pipers had finally arrived on the land-grant probably sometime shortly after 1953, it took about another ten years until the first Rastafarian settled on the land-grant in 1964. But although Gladstone Robinson was a Rastafarian, he also arrived from the USA and not from Jamaica. And although the Pipers as Harlem Black Jews and Gladstone Robinson as Rastafari, being EWF members, “all were imbued with Ethiopianist biblical and symbolic values” (Bonacci 2015: 115), ideological and organizational differences⁸ soon led to confrontations which in turn led to Gladstone

⁸ Gladstone Robinson (quoted in Bonacci 2015: 108) explained these ideological differences which exemplify the differences between the Rastafarian approach to the granted land from others who did not share Rastafarian sentiments: “James Piper was a black Jew, a Hebrew, went to all ceremonies like Friday they lock down everything, no work, they cook and they stay in the house. [Once in Ethiopia] they tried to get me in into that because I sat in a [Sabbath] session with them, and he do all the rituals and things and the sad part is when His Majesty came down and ask for Mr Piper he said he can’t come out ‘cause he is praying to his God’. He wasn’t a Rasta, ‘cause Rasta can’t say that!

Robinson securing the administration of the land-grant in 1967 for Rastafarians ever since. This is the reason why, although originally given to all “the Black Peoples of the World” and initially administrated and settled by non-Rastafarians, the Shashemene land-grant has become exclusively associated with Rastafari. From then on only Rastafarians, from Jamaica, the Caribbean and eventually from many other places, have arrived and settled in Shashemene (Ibid: 285).

In the ten years between the first Rastafarian arrivals since 1964 and the military coup in 1974 which abolished the Ethiopian monarchy, for Rastafarians Shashemene really was the centuries-old Ethiopianist dream come true, their promised land: Squatters from some of the most desperate slum areas in the western hemisphere had become land owners, written off as unemployable, they had become employers or got prestigious jobs in the school of arts and crafts in Addis Ababa or the Imperial Highway Authority in Shashemene (Ibid: 298). The Rastafarians’ God had truly provided for them abundantly.⁹

But this abundance was in the midst of southern Ethiopian populations that were historically not part of the grand north-Ethiopian national narrative and its monarchy, but who, on the contrary, were often in opposition to it and its granting of land and resources to the newcomers. Opposition like this aggravated in the urban centers, fueled by Cold War interests and instrumentalized by parts of the military led to the abolishment of the monarchy and the land it had granted in 1974 (Lockot 1993: 113). Although part of the original land-grant was reinstated by the new military administration called Derg, for the Rastafarians this meant years of hardship under constant scrutiny and obstacles from the anti-monarchist government: “They experienced integration at the lowest rung of the Ethiopian social ladder, and their standard of living, which was already low in Jamaica, declined even further in Ethiopia” (Bonacci 2015: 317). And yet, Rastafarians continued to repatriate, and since the overthrow of the military

God come to you and [*sucking his teeth*].... The Emperor turned around and left right back to Addis. I didn’t get involved with the black Jews cause they don’t believe in Haile Selassie.”

⁹ Although the Imperial Ethiopian Government supported the settlers with land and other resources, they had to finance their journeys to get there themselves. Especially the Twelve Tribes of Israel, which set out as Charter 15 of the EWF and then became the biggest Rastafarian organisation, supported its members in financing their journeys themselves through the organisation of Reggae dances and other social events. (Bonacci 2015: 208)

dictatorship in 1991, Shashemene has reignited the hopes of repatriation for many more again.

In 1992, the global Rastafari community, mainly represented by delegates from Jamaica and the UK, took the opportunity of the new, more democratic circumstances to reinforce its presence and claims in Ethiopia by celebrating the 100th birthday of Haile Selassie, what has become known as the Centenary among Rastafarians, with public events in Addis Ababa and Shashemene. The Centenary, a landmark for Rastafari captured in Rastafarian video productions (Masimba 1993; Masimba/Tamann 1992) and even a commemorating chant added to the Nyahbinghi¹⁰ repertoire, was heralding the biggest increase of Rastafarian repatriation to Shashemene ever. But not only did the Rastafarian community grow. “Between 1994 and 2007, the population of Shashemene nearly doubled from 52,000 to just over 102,000 people” (MacLeod 2014: 112). While the original land-grant was a rural area outside of Shashemene, this growth meant that “the city had expanded in 2003 to include the Jamaica *sefer*”, as the area of the land-grant is even officially known since all Rastafarians from no matter where are usually referred to by Ethiopians as Jamaicans, putting “the entire space of the original land grant within the boundaries of the city of Shashemene itself” (Ibid: 119, 109). This congestion caused a lot of conflict over the sensitive issue of land resources between Rastafarians and local Ethiopians who by then had occupied most of the original land-grant.

Concerning the Ethiopian host-community, some of these tensions could be relieved by various Rastafarian development efforts, which MacLeod (2014: 206) stresses as the best strategy towards Rastafarian acceptance in Shashemene. There is, for example, the Jamaican Rastafarian Development Community School that has “over four hundred students – with capacity for even more – the majority of whom are Ethiopian” (Ibid: 210). Then there is “the Self-Sustainable Water for Life Community Based Rain Water Harvesting Project, undertaken by the EWF,” which “between 2003 and 2007 [...] resulted in the construction of 165 water harvesters that serve 3,240 people” (Ibid: 214). Another showcase project is Sister Isheba’s Yawenta Children’s Center which mainly cares for Ethiopian children affected by HIV/AIDS and “the board of directors contains both Ethiopians

¹⁰ Nyahbinghi is the oldest of the still-functioning Rastafari organisations, called houses or mansions, and the chanting it has developed. For a quick overview, see the short-documentary entitled “Chanting Rastafari - The Story of Nyahbinghi” by I Never Knew TV on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aYP_hfjrGf8&frags=pl%2Cwn [24.02.2018].

and Rastafari” (Ibid: 219). Although Sister Isheba has meanwhile handed over the project to her colleagues and is already pursuing a community-based health insurance project in the slums of downtown Shashemene, the “effectiveness of her project, like that of the EWF’s water harvesting and the JRDC school is evident to the community and helps to counteract negative perceptions and assumptions about Rastafari in Shashemene” (Ibid: 221). Beyond development projects like these, “members of the Rastafari community have established two flagship local hotels: the Majestic Rift Valley Hotel and the Lily of the Valley Hotel” (Ibid: 203), which contribute to the economic development of the town, and a tofu factory, which “connects the Rastafari practice of vegetarianism or veganism with the Ethiopian Orthodox practice of fasting” (Ibid: 207). All these endeavours have contributed to relieving some of the tensions on the side of the Ethiopian host-community.

On the side of the Rastafarian community, the mounting tensions over land resources due to the increasing congestion were somehow relieved when the Ethiopian Government announced in 2017 that Rastafarians who can prove their being in Ethiopia for a substantial period of time¹¹ would be provided with IDs that basically constitute permanent residence permits, including work permits, putting them more or less on the same level as Ethiopian citizens only without the right to vote or join the military and police. The government was indeed following up on this promise by issuing first IDs in 2018.

¹¹ Sister Isheba Tafari, a resident in Shashemene since the late 1990s originally from Austria and founder of one of the main Rastafari showcase projects in Shashemene, the Yawenta Children’s Center (MacLeod 2014: 219ff), explained to me in a personal conversation (as there is no scholarly literature on the IDs yet) that the criteria by which she got her ID finally were: 1. a supporting letter from either the EWF or the Twelve Tribes of Israel organisations; 2. proven residence in Ethiopia for at least ten years; 3. a valid passport; 4. a fee of 5.500 Ethiopian Birr (about 170 Euros) for five years of ID after which it can be renewed. But in the meantime she has heard about Rastafarians getting IDs also without a valid passport and the time of residence in Ethiopia has apparently become flexible between five to ten years. Specifically interesting is that, although being of European background, her support letter was from the EWF, while EWF membership itself remains restricted to “the Black Peoples of the World”, which was traditionally also the EWF approach to the land-grant.

The All-Africa Rastafari Gathering (AARG)

The preceding overview was intended to give the reader both an ideological background on why Rastafari are in Ethiopia in the first place and also a broad understanding of the situation on the ground which constituted the context for the All-Africa Rastafari Gathering (AARG).

There was much excitement going through the global Rastafari community when rumours about a first major international Rastafari conference in years were confirmed by a concept note published in March 2017 announcing the first All-Africa Rastafari Gathering (AARG) to take place in Shashemene during the week of the annual festivities commemorating Haile Selassie's 1930 coronation from 1-7 November 2017. As such, the AARG stands in a long tradition of Rastafari international conferences since the 1980s: "in Toronto in 1980; in Kingston in 1982; in the Eastern Caribbean in 1983; in Toronto, again, in 1984; in London in 1986; in New York, Washington, DC, and California in 1988, and finally, in New York, Baltimore and Washington, DC, in 1989-1990" (Bonacci 2015: 241). This trend decreased somehow in the 1990s with only two international Rastafari gatherings or conferences, one in 1992 commemorating the Centenary of Haile Selassie in Ethiopia and the other in 1998 in Barbados. The 2000s saw a further decrease with only one conference, the *Global Reasoning Conference* at the University of the West Indies (UWI) in Kingston, Jamaica, in 2003. This was followed by the *International Rastafari Studies Conference* also held at UWI in Kingston in 2010. The next international Rastafari conference was then commemorating the 50th anniversary of the infamous 1963 persecution of Rastafari at Coral Gardens, Montego Bay, Jamaica, in 2013, also held at UWI in Kingston. The last international Rastafari gathering that Rastafarian scholar Michael Barnett (2018: 102) has listed in his most recent study on *The Rastafari Movement* was in 2016 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Haile Selassie's 1966 visit to Jamaica (in which I took part).

And yet the AARG was not only continuing this legacy, but, being not only the first major international Rastafari conference in years, but specifically in Africa, caused such excitement internationally as it was last reported from the 1980s conferences. This special attention given to it also caused me to get involved with some of the organizational preparations of the first AARG in 2017 and to support the attendance of the delegation from Ivory Coast, although I myself was in the end unable to attend and therefore had to wait for the second annual AARG in 2018 to see it for myself.

Both the first and second AARGs had as their theme "Intra-Africa Trade for a Self-Reliant Rastafari Nation". Accordingly, the vision of the AARG, as

formulated in the concept note, was expressing the key idea of the gathering by connecting repatriation and economic development in Africa: “Showcasing Shashemene to visiting Rastafari delegates to support repatriation and promote intra-trade initiatives in Africa”. The concept note also acknowledged that the AARG “was the vision of the late Shashemene resident and well-known cultural entrepreneur, Ras Mweya Masimba. As Chair of the Nyahbinghi National Council (NNC Ethiopia), Ras Mweya envisioned Rastafari cultural and trade linkages strengthening Rastafari communities across the continent.”¹²

Although there was a special effort to enable Rastafari communities on the continent to participate, which was also the cause for my organizational involvement and supporting the Ivorian delegation to attend, the first AARG was also well attended by representatives from the diaspora and generally deemed a great success by participants. The agenda contained sessions ranging from Rastafari history, to country reports from continental representatives, to repatriation and African citizenships, trade and investment, Rastafari women in business and cultural youth industry, over the course of four days of conference and three days of Nyahbinghi cultural festivities for the coronation anniversary. The main outcomes were the landmark Shashemene Declaration, mainly a position paper outlining what the Rastafari community represented at the first AARG was committed to, convinced of and determined to, as well as the establishment of the Rastafari Continental Council, which was described at the second AARG as “a movement coming out of the first AARG”.

As the first AARG in 2017 was a pilot, it was not immediately clear that the AARG would develop into an annual event, and so the turn-out for this presumably one-of-a-kind event was reportedly much higher than for the follow-up event the next year. Especially the turn-out from continental representatives decreased, which pointed to the economic differences between continental and diaspora representatives often addressed during the conference. The second AARG itself, however, increased from 1-11 November 2018, with four days of coronation festivities, five days of conference, followed by another two days of celebration, a cultural trade bazaar by conference participants and finally Nyahbinghi “seal-up”, as Rastafarians call it.

¹² Both quotations taken from the unpublished concept note circulated via email and online by the official AARG coordinating committee in March 2017.

Having witnessed United Nations and other international conferences before, and having been involved with the Rastafari movement for nearly two decades, I could immediately see that one success of the conference was its professional implementation itself. Hosted at the Lilly of the Valley Hotel, Rastafari-owned and therefore one of the main Rastafari showcases in Shashemene, it presented itself just like any other professional international conference. Its agenda was highly ambitious from 9am to 6-7pm every day, with presenters ranging from Rastafari professionals and entrepreneurs living in the Shashemene community, other African countries and the diaspora, to professors from the Oromia State University, a representative from the Ethiopian Ministry of Science and Technology, and even the ambassador of Antigua and Barbuda to Ethiopia, who is a well-known Rastafari elder. Accordingly, and in line with my own impression, the keynote speaker, Ras Reuben Kush, pointed out already at the beginning of the conference that the implementation of such an ambitious event, financed by Rastafari themselves, was already a big success in itself for a so-called grass-roots movement. To ensure its success, he immediately reminded the participants that “this conference is not about doctrine” but about trade success and development, to avoid doctrinal distractions which have often derailed Rastafari initiatives in the past. That there was a new breeze in the sails of this event was not only clear by the “heartical vibes” with which representatives from sometimes opposing organisations “reasoned” with each other on partly sensitive and even controversial issues, but also that one of the main organizers and chairpersons preceding over most of the conference was a Rastafari elder sister, Sister Ijahnya Christian. Anyone only slightly aware of the complex factionalism and gender history¹³ within the Rastafari movement will appreciate the massive ground that was being broken there.

The keynote speaker was the president of the Ethiopian World Federation Shashemene, and the conference was solemnly opened with Nyahbinghi chanting of the *Universal Ethiopian Anthem*. The UNIA anthem chanted by EWF Rastafarians was some of the history described above to touch. In line with this history, the Rastafari elder sister presiding over the event pointed out that although the conference was on intra-African trade, the diaspora was of course welcome to trade with the continent as long as Africa benefits

¹³ As Barry Chevannes (1994: 256) remarked, although “[u]p to the mid-1970s the ritually enforced subordination of the Rastafari woman to her Rastafari ‘king man’ precluded any role outside of the domestic sphere”, developments such as the AARG prove that “[n]ow all this has been changing”.

from it. In general, diaspora representatives, sometimes called-out by continental representatives for a long history of diasporan patronizing towards the continent that goes as far back as certain Marcus Garvey statements¹⁴, were keenly demonstrating their humbled approach towards the continent and the need for the diaspora to learn from the continent, so much that the president of the Rastafari Continental Council from Ghana even attributed an apocryphal saying to Garvey, claiming that “Garvey said that when the diasporans come to Africa, they must learn from the Africans”.

While the non-Rastafarian presenters from the university and ministry initially focused on their very technical presentations on trade statistics and challenges, marketing, value chains, customs, taxation, cross-border transportation, business plans and proposals, stakeholders and trade agreements, they were soon inspired by Rastafarian approaches to development and tried to surpass each other by pointing out the spiritual dimensions of the different topics engaged and using Rastafarian lingo to much applause from the Rastafarian audience. In fact, they enjoyed the discussions so much that they participated in the audience even during other participants’ presentations and engaged in lively discussions with Rastafarian participants during lunch and other breaks. Rastafari presenters mainly focused on their own business experiences from cross-border trading, online trading, different businesses in Shashemene itself and other African locations, to traditional community approaches from Ethiopia, South Africa, Cape Verde, Guadeloupe, etc. It was emphasized that African products must be associated with quality and a checklist on quality assurance and control was handed out and discussed. A major issue was how to stay competitive without compromising on Rastafarian social and environmental values.¹⁵ It was amazing to see what a fruitful exchange it

¹⁴ Although it is true that Marcus Garvey (1986a: 60, 70f) was convinced that “we of the Western World” had a duty “in the higher development of the African natives”, he also cautioned against going “to Africa for the purpose of exercising an over-lordship over the natives” and “any Negro who expects that he will be assisted here, there or anywhere by the Universal Negro Improvement Association to exercise a haughty superiority over the fellows of his own race, makes a tremendous mistake. Such men had better remain where they are and not attempt to become in any way interested in the higher development of Africa.”

¹⁵ A Cabralist Rastafarian from Cape Verde, for example, initiated a far-reaching conversation on the pitfalls of capitalism, to which other Rastafarians and a professor from the Oromia State University replied, much in line with Haile Selassie’s and Marcus Garvey’s pragmatic approaches to the topic, that capital is necessary to development,

was to bring together technical experts with Rastafari professionals and entrepreneurs, an exchange that was visibly appreciated by all participants. One of the highlights for the audience, next to seeing and engaging with a real-life ambassador who is also a well-known Rastafarian, was obviously the presentation by the son of pioneer settler Donald “Flippin” Leach. Donald Leach had arrived in Shashemene in 1975 and became famous from pictures with Bob Marley when the latter visited Shashemene in 1978, during which period Donald Leach reportedly assisted Bob Marley in writing his song “Zimbabwe” (Bonacci 2015: 306). His son Phillip caused special excitement at the conference because he represents for many what successful repatriation should look like. Although he is not a dreadlocks¹⁶, which is not mandatory in the Twelve Tribes of Israel Rastafari organization of which his father was a member, although the father himself was a dreadlocks, he still captivated the admiration of his audience, being the manager of one of the local Shashemene branches of the Ethiopian Commercial Bank. As such, he was giving a presentation on foreign investment and explained that the new ID cards for Rastafarians made them eligible for a diaspora account, including diaspora housing and business loans (for those with business licenses), from his bank. In general, he explained that the new ID alleviates the main grievances of the Rastafari community in Ethiopia, namely land and property issues, as all with such an ID can now legally register their houses and property. Stories of Rastafarians losing their property are among the main causes of conflict between Rastafarians and local Ethiopians. Therefore, he reassured them that although “being in Ethiopia as a foreigner is very hard, but with the ID things will change”. A well-to-do and successful bank manager among the second generation of repatriates helping future home-comers to return was definitely one of the main success stories highlighted at the conference.

A more controversial point which came up many times during the conference was the well-known lack of security in Shashemene of which some of the conference participants got a first-hand experience. Rastafarians feel especially targeted which brings up a long history of difficult integration. Most Rastafarians living in Shashemene are not fluent in neither Amharic nor Afan-Oromo, the two main local languages, and are not included in most social networks. They therefore not only feel to be easy

whereas the exploitative aspects with which capitalism has been widely associated must be shunned.

¹⁶ The term “dreadlocks” designates in Rastafarian lingo both the hair as well as the wearer.

targets but also that they do not get the necessary support from local authorities. When a thief was caught red-handed while trying to steal the handbag of a Rastafari repatriate sister during the coronation festivities at the Nyahbinghi tabernacle, the Rastafarians tried to be good citizens and called the police, only to be told that they had to handle the situation themselves. Consequently, the thief soon escaped and later attacked a Rastafari sister from South Africa on her way to her hotel. But although these incidents caused much bitter feeling and debates at the conference, the fact that also a Rastafarian from the continent was attacked shows that the issue is not only affecting home-comers from the diaspora, as it used to be perceived by many Rastafarians in the past, which especially caused resentment among Rastafarians who felt that incidents like these happened to them because they were not accepted as Africans. The mixed attendance made up of Rastafarians from the diaspora as well as from the continent, including some Ethiopian Rastafarians, obviously helped participants from the diaspora to deal with realities on the continent. For example, when the issue of security began to dominate discussions at the conference, I reasoned with the president of the Rastafari Continental Council from Ghana to find out if he could relate to these problems from the experience of Rastafari in Ghana. Being familiar with the Rastafari communities in Kenya and Tanzania, where also most Rastafarians are locals, which is the rule in most African countries to which actually only Ethiopia seems to be the exception, his answer did not surprise me. He immediately disconnected the topic from notions of diaspora Rastafarians or Rastafarians in general not being accepted in Africa. He said that wherever people are perceived as tourists or otherwise wealthy foreigners, local thieves and scammers will try to take advantage of their unfamiliarity with local contexts. That can happen at the tourist sites of the slave castles in Accra just as it can happen in Shashemene. Also, the reaction of the delegates from the continent, including Ethiopian Rastafarians, who were cautioning against any false sympathy with thieves and other attackers, obviously took away some of the insecurities of participants from the diaspora who were not sure how to handle the situation both emotionally as well as practically. Besides the learning experience on trade and development issues as well as the pan-African networking opportunities provided by the conference in order to strengthen participants in their engagement on “intra-African trade for a prosperous Rastafari nation”, obviously, it was this demonstrated unity between Rastafarians from the continent and the diaspora that illustrates both the success as well as the necessity of events like the AARG.

Rastafari Has Come Home

The second AARG (and, according to reports, even more so the first one) can be said to have been highly successful in that its aim was to implement a professional conference where Rastafari representatives from the diaspora and the continent could come together to become better acquainted with each other, exchange with each other on various levels and learn from each other as well as from local Ethiopian scholars from a university and a ministry about “intra-African trade for a prosperous Rastafari nation”. Especially successful in this regard were the workshops where representatives from the diaspora and the continent got together in groups to find out from each other what diasporan involvement in intra-African trade for Rastafarians should look like. Diaspora representatives already sensitive about their roles in African development were further sensitized by discussions of negative examples of diasporan involvement on the continent, such as Liberia, and accepted the challenge to leave behind a long history of patronizing the continent. Continental representatives, on the other hand, recognized the vital role diaspora investment and involvement can play and assured them that they were more than welcome.

To fully appreciate the contribution Rastafari in general and the AARG in particular have made to overcoming the divide between the diaspora and the continent, a concluding word on diaspora is appropriate. Oliver Bakewell (2008: 8, 11) has pointed out that, although “[m]any authors appear to use the term diaspora as a synonym for migrants or the descendants of migrants” in general, “the term ‘the African diaspora’ was first used in 1965 at the International Congress of African History at the University of Dar es Salaam by George Shepperson, who drew parallels between the dispersal of Africans caused by slavery and imperialism to the experience of the Jews”, and was therefore originally “referring to the descendants of the Atlantic slave trade”. As Bakewell explained, and as Rastafarians often point out similarities between their own experiences and biblical history, the term was originally associated with the Jewish diaspora and designated scattering and dispersion. Tessa Rajak (2014: 54) further explained that in this context “[d]ispersion, as in the Hebrew Bible, is a temporary condition of dislocation, to be surely followed by an ingathering”. Rastafari in general and successful initiatives such as the All-Africa Rastafari Gathering in particular demonstrate, therefore, that the long history of diaspora has finally reached the point of ingathering. Rastafari has come home.

In line with the AARG's pan-African self-conception, it was agreed at the culmination of the conference that the All-Africa Rastafari Gathering should rotate and next time be hosted in South Africa in 2019.

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