Rastafari in the Promised Land.  
*An Investigation among Israeli Rastafari.*

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**ABSTRACT**

Alongside the recent sociological theories related to multiculturalism, recent years have been marked by the development of anthropological theories on critical multiculturalism, in particular regarding the importance of ‘de-essentialising’ cultures, in order to avoid cultural essentialism. This article contributes to a de-essentialisation of the Rastafari movement, by studying its local manifestation in Israel. Since its inception in Jamaica in the 1930s, the Rastafari movement has been strongly influenced by Judaism. Nevertheless, the consequent globalisation and “glocalisation” of Rastafari also seems to suggest that Jewish people in Israel have been influenced by the Rastafari “way of life”. Rastafari in Israel seem as a result to be people “in between” Judaism and Rastafari, the secular and the orthodox, and peace and war.

**Introduction**

This article builds on my own previous research, which explored Rastafari as both a social and a religious movement. Judged purely in terms of numbers, Rastafarianism is one of the most significant new religious movements, with one million followers (Wilkinson, 2003: 284). However, its status as a religion is contestable: it has been described by different scholars as a “political cult” (Simpson, 1955); a “messianic movement” (Barrett, 1968); a “millenarian movement” (Albuquerque, 1977); a “poliico-religious protest cult” (Kitzinger 1969), (all in Pollard, 1982:19); and as an “antisystemic religious-cultural group” (Price, 2003:9). If it is better therefore described as an international and transnational ‘religious social movement’, this movement is characterised by processes of ‘globalisation’ and ‘glocalisation’. The overall aim of the current research is to understand whether, and in what ways, this holds true of the Rastafari movement in Israel in particular.

In the first part of this article, I consider the causes of the development of the Rastafari movement in Israel. I first analyse the basic structure and inception of the Rastafari movement in Jamaica and consequently in the United States, in order to reveal similarities and diversities between Rastafari and Judaism, and explore how the historical and religious links between the two developed. It is argued that the sharing of the same religious mythology and symbolism gives the Rastafari a fertile soil to flourish among the Jewish people.

In the second part, I explore how the traditional Rastafari movement localises within social processes of globalisation and adapts to different contexts losing its global essentialism, with particular reference to the case of the Rastafari in Israel. Based on an analysis of my fieldwork notes, examine the context
in which the Israeli Rastafari live and how their Rasta lives and Rasta views are shaped within this. One contextual factor of particular significance for the particular trajectory and current form of Israeli Rastafarianism is the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict.

Essentially, this article is based on the resulting anthropological fieldwork research conducted in Israel between the 18th and 29th of March 2014. Analysing the notes gathered during my visits to Israel, I show how even a movement such as Rastafari, which is fully embedded with Jewish symbolism and mythology and which easily finds its roots in Israel, can be, once glocalised, changed and forged by its members to express local needs or confirm local beliefs. Consequently, this demonstrates that even Judaism in Israel can assume different forms and develop new kind of identities, such as the Israeli Rastafari. In the second part, I also thereby de-essentialise the Rastafari movement, comparing the Rasta traditional movement of Jamaica with the Israeli one. According to recent social theories regarding critical multiculturalism as promoted by anthropologists such as May and Bourdier, it is necessary to de-essentialise cultures and identities in order to avoid cultural essentialism within (in this case) both Rastafari and Judaism.

Theories

Recent anthropological scholarship has argued that, in seeking to differentiate ethnic identities and recognise multiculturalism within societies, multicultural studies tend to ‘essentialise’ identities and religions.

Multicultural essentialisation will typically “homogenize and stereotype people’s identities” (Carrim & Soudien, 1999, cited in May, 1999:155), and may contribute to the creation of ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1991, cited in May, 1999:83), such as the Jewish or the Rastafarian ones. According to Appadurai, “this view of the role of the imagination as a popular, social, collective fact in the era of globalisation recognises its split character. On the one hand, it is in and through the imagination that modern citizens are disciplined and controlled—by states, markets, and other powerful interests. But it is also the faculty through which collective patterns of dissent and new designs for collective life emerge” (Appadurai, 2000: 6).

Consequently, constructed identity is a phenomenon concerning both the local and the global (May, 1999:83). As recent anthropological studies seek to demonstrate, in order to study contemporary cultures, it is necessary to ‘de-essentialise’ the “conception of identity” (Carrim & Soudien, 1999, cited in May, 1999:169). This is particularly important if we want to go beyond heuristic generalisations so as to capture “more accurately the ways in which people live their lives, the nature of the experiences they have and the ways in which their identities are actually formed” (Carrim & Soudien, cited in May, 1999:169). Accordingly, this research aims to de-essentialise the traditional Rastafari movement by studying it locally, specifically in Israel, in the hope of revealing a different kind or a contingent expression of both Rastafari and Judaism. In fact, as is illustrated in this article, it is possible to be both Rastafari and Jewish; the two are not mutually exclusive.

In fact, through the de-essentialisation of the Rastafari movement in Israel, it should be possible to gain a deeper understanding of the local and glocal conscientisation expressed by its members, and a more realistic view of the traditional Rastafari movement in its global complexity.
Rastafari and the link with Judaism

Roots and Christian Judaic Revivalism

This section explores the religious mythology and symbolism which is shared between blacks (Caribbean and American) and Jews. This, it is argued, is one of the main factors that enabled Rastafari to flourish in Israel among Jewish people. Surprisingly, the first historical religious link that, after centuries, gave life to the development of Rastafari in Jamaica, and subsequently in Israel, is Judaism itself. A strong case can even be made that if Judaism had never existed, then neither would the Rastafari.

It is clearly established in religious history that Christianity evolved from Judaism and part of its theology. At the time of its inception, Christianity was considered one Jewish sect among many others. Nevertheless, with the passing of centuries, Christianity became one of the biggest monotheistic religions in the world. During the years of English colonialism in the Caribbean (from the XVI to the XIX century), Christianity was exported from Europe by many missionaries and absorbed by the Caribbean people (Chevannes, 1994:37). During that time, the Caribbean population was mainly composed of blacks that had been deported from Africa and a small white hegemonic colonial community that ruled the area. The absorption of Christianity especially by the black Caribbean society is testified by the work of Chevannes regarding Jamaica in particular. According to Chevannes (1994:18), the Myalism religion present in Jamaica during the XIX century “was absorbing and transforming Christian ideas”, to the extent that it created new forms of Christianity.

In 1860, thanks also to the influence of a great religious Christian Revival that began in Europe, the Myal religion in Jamaica was “transformed into two variants, Zion and Pukumina, both under the general name of Revival” (Chevannes, 1994:20). Christian Revivalism can be considered as something that, according to Chevannes, had shaped and “had remained alive in” the Rastafari movement (Chevannes, 1994:21). Its historical significance is evidenced by its ongoing influence within the Rastafari global movement on preachers such as Marcus Garvey or Leonard Howell (Hutton & Murrell, 1998:45). Marcus Garvey can be considered the ‘charismatic’ leader that marked the beginning of the Rastafari movement. For instance, between 1920 and 1935, Garvey, who was nicknamed ‘the black Moshe’, founded a Pan Africanism movement (UNIA) and proclaimed that all Africans were Hebrews (Boykin, 1996). It was in this kind of religious Revivalist context that the Rastafarian religion was born and developed in Jamaica during the 1930s. Indeed, one of the characteristics of

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1 See, for example, Neusner (1989).

2 Myalism is a religion originating from the Ashanti African cult, which developed in Jamaica during the colonial time, highly influenced by Christianity (Morris, 1982:46). According to Morris, it “was originally a form of white magic, claiming to counteract the evil powers” (ibid: 45).

3 The UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association), become a mass universal global movement, defending blacks against racial oppression and supporting the idea of a free Africa (see Chevannes, 1994:87; Campbell, 1987:54; Barrett, 1988: 66).


5 According to the Eyewitness Companion of Religion (Wilkinson, 2003: 284), Rastafarianism is one of the largest new religious movements, with in the region of one million followers. Nevertheless, it is not considered yet a religion in many countries. Rastafari themselves within the movement express different opinions regarding the recognition of Rastafari as a religion, as many recognised it just as a “way of life” (Yawney & Homiak, in Stephen, 2001:257)

6 A fuller outline of the history of the movement is provided in Appendix 2.
the Rastafari inception was the use of the Revivalist Christian Bible (Edmonds, 2003:33), from which the first Rastafari preachers borrowed many Christian Judaic symbolisms, religious codes and their Biblical mythology and ontology, such as the concepts of Babylon\(^7\) and Zion\(^8\).

**The Black Jewish King and the Promised Land**

Another crucial event in the foundation of Rastafarai in Jamaica and which links blacks to the Jewish people was the crowning of King Haili Selassie in Ethiopia in 1930s. Rastafari see King Silassie as the attended Jewish Messiah. According to Campbell (1987:65), for the worldwide black community “the crowning of Selassie finally replaced both the White-God and White British King, with a Coptic version of a black God who was both divine and human, Ras Tafari”. The beliefs of the first Rastas were “a response to centuries of oppression of the colonial society” (Campbell, 1987:65), and the coronation of Selassie served to confirm a sense of identity as the ‘Black Jew’ in the creation of the Rasta ontology and mythology. During those years, the idea of being the “Black Jew” was even supported and promoted by an article that appeared in the newspaper *Voice of Ethiopia* (1937), which gives a historical Judaic account of the Falasha, the tribe which King Selassie belonged to (Campbell, 1987:77). According to Murrell & Williams (1998), the fact “that people known as the Falasha exist in Ethiopia, and that they claim their roots in the Jewish stock” will be very important for Rastafari who will claim to be Falasha or black Jews.\(^9\) The identification with Ethiopain civilisation provided a strategy for the creation of a historical heritage for the black diaspora (Bruder, 2008:76). According to Bruder, “the assertion of ‘great cultural heritage’, claiming to an exclusive lineage, led to the assimilation of Judaism as a source of black identity” (ibid). For instance, at the beginning of the 20th century in America, the birth of black Judaism “arose from the metamorphosis of religious fact into an identity weapon against white supremacy: the need to create a new identity that broke away from past discriminations and was linked to the search for an ancestral and mythical place of origin” (Trevisan Semi, 2002, in Bruder, 2008: 79). Thus, King Silassie “was seen as the deliverer who would take his people back to their promised land” of Ethiopia (Menelik, 2009:10).

With regards to the Promised Land, Rastafarians “compare their exile from Africa with the Israelites’ exile to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar (2 Chronicles 25). Hence the word Babylon is used for any system that oppresses” (Menelik, 2009: 10). According to Bruder, “by the end of the XIX century, the doctrine of Ethiopianism\(^10\) posited that the Africans were the people chosen by God for the redemption of the black race” and the Biblical Zion (the Promised Land) was Ethiopia, (which is called by Jewish Beta

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\(^7\) The term Babylon is full of Biblical significance for the Jamaican orthodox Rastafari movement. According to Genesis 11, Babylon represents “violence, sexual and moral degeneracy”, and its leaders are characterised by egomania (Edmonds, 2003:43). For Rasta nowadays, Babylon represents the complex of economic, political, religious, and educational institutions that evolved from colonialism (Edmonds, 2003:45) and gain economical benefit from the international capitalist system (Owens, cited in Edmonds, 2003: 45). According to Kebede, for Rastafari: “all oppressive systems are referred as Babylon” (2010: 185).

\(^8\) Rastafari generally believe that Zion is Ethiopia, the Promised Land, the Heaven on Earth (Menelik, 2009: 10). Contrarily, for Jewish people, the Promised Land of Zion is the ancient Israeli land.

\(^9\) One factor, which probably prepared the Israeli soil for the local development of Rastafari, is the recognition of the Falasha as Jewish by the Israeli Government. As Parfitt and Trevisan Semi assess “in 1985 and 1990, the repatriation of thousands of Ethiopia’s Falasha to Israel under the ‘law of return’ was legitimated by Israeli rabbinic authorities through their official recognition as descendants from the tribe of Dan” (Parfitt & Trevisan Semi, 2002, in Bruder, 2008: 12).

\(^10\) According to Barrett (1988: 76), the concept of Ethiopianism, was born in Jamaica and was coined by George Liele, a preacher who founded the island’s first Baptist church in 1794. The cult of this church was characterised by a combination of various African and Christian traditions.
Israel) (Bruder, 2008:81). According to Bruder, Ethiopianism “was adopted by various movements with Caribbean origin, such as Garvey’s UNIA or Rastafarianism in Jamaica” (ibid:82).

This statement is confirmed by the words of the Revival preacher Marcus Garvey, who in 1920 stated: “a new spirit, a new courage come to us at the same time it come to the Jew. When a Jew says ‘We shall have Palestine’, the same feeling come to us when we say ‘We shall have Africa’” (Bobi, 1999, in Bruder, 2008: 81). The appropriation of Jewish history by Afro Americans and Caribbean people, between the XVIII and XX century, “followed the path of a search for origins that give them back a history and allowed them to overthrow American racism’s hierarchy of values” (Felton, 1974, in Bruder, 2008:80).

Black Judaism and the Bible

According to H. M. Brotz (1983), “the reading of the Old Testament, specifically the Psalms, Proverbs and Prophet, influenced the formation of the cultural framework upon which black people began to construct a collective identity” (in Bruder, 2008: 81). For example, for Rastafari, the idea of being Black Jews is emphasised by the adoption of the Nazirite Levitical Code of conduct, called ‘Livity’ by Rastas, which relies on ancient Jewish practices present in Number 6:5 of the Bible (Savishinsky, 1998). In this sense, the Rastafari movement has been ‘Israelised’ since its foundation.

Therefore, the link between the historical experience of Blacks and Jews, that is to say, the shared sense of exile, as a common history of dispersion and exclusion, facilitated the adaptation of Judaism into the black religious aspiration (Bruder, 2008: 80) and this is particularly important for the development of Rastafari in Israel. According to Barrett, the Rastafari “cultists have been unable to break from the word ‘Israel’, to them ‘Israelite’ and ‘Ethiopian’ are one and the same... simply referring to holy people” (Barrett, 1988:111).

The Rastafari glocalisation

The development of social processes of globalisation, in the past 50 years, is one of the main factors that have helped the development of the Rastafari movement in Israel. According to my previous studies on Rastafari, “the globalization of the movement since its inception in Jamaica in the 1930s, and its consequent glocalization during the 1960s has resulted in the movement being characterised by both homogeneity and plurality” (Capparella, 2012:2). In fact, on the one hand, the traditional Rastafari movement expresses its global homogeneity through the adoption of common symbols and a common language; on the other, Rastas express their plurality locally, and, develop a ‘glocal conscientisation’. Investigating Rastafari local consciousness is fundamental for a de-essentialised study of the Rastafari movement. By de-essentializing the traditional Rastafari movement and studying it locally, it should become possible to demonstrate, as is the case for many political or religious movements, that there is not just one Rastafari view (or one Jewish view), but a multiplicity of views. Moreover, through a brief de-essentialisation of the movement it should be possible to explore features that characterise the particular glocal conscientisation of the Israeli Rastafari. The following section highlights the commonalities and differences between the traditional and Israeli local Rastafari that emerged from the analysis of my own fieldwork notes.
Rastafari in Israel

As mentioned earlier, I lived in Israel for two weeks hosted by a Rastafari family. The family comprised Natty, Congo and their children Cohen, Clyl and Haili. Natty and Congo run an organic farm in Ayanot, called Shorashim (Roots). Congo built and made many parts of the house on his own, decorating walls and doors with Rastafari symbols and colours, as for example, the main door of the house (See plate 1).

Outside the house, there are two sofas, where they generally spend all their evenings, while their children are sleeping; we spent most of our evenings talking here. Once, while we were there chatting, they told me: “We love to be outside, even during winter, keeps us close to nature and to the sky”. In the garden, Congo has built a beautiful hut (see plate 2), which, according to him, is big enough to celebrate Sukkoth properly, with all the family. This exemplifies the way that Israeli Rastafari often follows all the traditional Judaic religious feasts – a point which will be discussed later on.

I slept in the living room on the sofa, where ‘dub reggae’ music from an internet station could be heard all day and night. In these circumstances, I was lucky to be a reggae lover. During my stay at Natty’s and Congo’s house, I had the opportunity to meet some of their Rasta friends, such as Ras Moshinton, I-Jah Salomon, Ras Asaf, Ras Daniel, Criss, Guil, Yegal and Ulrich, and converse with them about many topics such as the war, compulsory military service, religious orthodoxy and the holy land.

Congo and Natty live in Gan Yavne, a small town close to Ashdod. Residents of Ashdod and Gan Yavne are keenly aware of their closeness to the Palestinian Gaza strip; they live in a dangerous area with a significant risk of missile attacks, and are reminded of this regularly by alarms being raised. These war conditions form a very particular context for Rastafari in Israel, and appear to be a strong shaping factor in their contemporary senses of identity.

Rastafari under war

Since Israel was founded in 1947, the country is involved in ongoing land-related disputes and conflict with the Palestinians (for more historical information see Hebert, 1994:249). This history appears to have a strong influence on local Rasta’s everyday life and thoughts, and the sense they have of themselves as a community: most of my interviewees needed little or no prompting to express their opinions about the war situation or the army.

For Rastafari generally, the ‘Promised Land’ of Zion is equated with Africa, and more particularly

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11 These symbols included the Star of David and the Lion of Judah – both very commonly used by Jamaican Rastafari, and related to King Silassie, who is considered the Lion of Judah (Barrett, 1988:142).

12 Rastafari has adopted the Ethiopian national colours “red, gold, and green as a means of symbolizing their identification with and allegiance to Africa” (Edmonds, 1998:31).

13 Sukkoth (meaning ‘hut’ in Hebrew) is a Jewish feast during which religious Jews live in a hut for the first seven days of the feast in remembrance of the days spent in the desert. According to Arbib, in Judaism the celebrations of Sukkah “represent the necessity to have a spiritual life and to have the heart and mind looking to the sky” (Luzzati & Della Rocca, 2007: 261, my translation).
with Ethiopia. Simultaneously, Zion is considered a mystic (interior) state of spiritual awareness. Israeli Rastas, however, believe in the latter, but not the former; for them, Zion, the Holy Land, is Israel. This was confirmed when I first heard Natty on the phone, “Welcome to the Holy Land sista” (Notes 18-03-14).

During my stay, I had many opportunities to talk to Natty regarding her feelings about living in a state of war. Once she told me, “Being under war is something that even if I remember every day, I have to live with it, trying to forget it sometimes. This is the land where I was born and even though as a Rastafari I am against the army and the war, I think we need to defend our land and protect ourselves” (Notes 20-03-14). On the one hand, Natty seems favourable to the army as a form of defence, but on the other, on many occasions she spoke about her worries for her children dealing with war. More than once, she told me that she prays to Jah in order to not have to see her children go to war.

Furthermore, one morning, while I was talking with Natty about my journey to Hebron, she told me: “We never go to Hebron; we wish to go but it is very dangerous. There are many Jewish living in Hebron, but they should not live there, that is Palestine. Within Israel there are different opinions regarding the Israeli Palestinian partition of land, it depends on the peoples’ political view. There are the ones that want two different and separate countries; there are others that would like just one country, living all together; and others that would like just Israel, or just Palestine. These opinions are the same on both sides”. (Notes 27-03-14).

Even though for Israeli Rastas, Zion is Israel, they also consider Zion an interior place of spiritual awareness. Once Ras Congo told me, “To be Rastafari and have spiritual awareness puts me in a position of responsibility. I cannot follow my ego and live attached to material things such as money or success. Jah give to InI everything we need, water, land, seeds – that is my spiritual conscience, but humanity always wants more, and instead of appreciating what we have and use it in a proper way, with respect and gratefulness, we are destroying it” (Notes 20-03-14).

Just a week before my arrival in Israel, some rockets were sent from Gaza in the exact direction of the Ashdod area. It was the first thing that Congo told me as soon as we met. I personally felt that he wanted me to be aware of the real danger of war that is part of their daily life. He told me: “Here sometimes it is scary, when the alarm rang last week, Natty and I were in the fields and the children at school. Once the alarm rang, Natty started to shout and crying worrying about the children of course. It is heavy for InI. However, InI cannot be scared, I cannot live with fear. Jah protects InI and when it is my time to go, I will go to embrace Jah. Unfortunately, this war or situation is a Babylon thing. I think Israel has enough money to help the Palestinian people, but Babylonian people from both sides do not want this. Without helping each other there will be no peace. We have streets and developments here, and it’s normal that in Palestine they want the same thing” (Notes 20-03-14).

Among Israeli Rastafari, opinions regarding the war varied, but no one I spoke to expressed strong support for it; rather, there was strong opposition to the idea of using violence to resolve the dispute. For instance, Ras Moshinton, Congo’s best friend once told me: “I am against the army. Of course [looking at his girlfriend, who seemed a little disappointed], they protect us, but let’s say I am against

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14 For Rastafari InI (pronounced ‘I and I’) means ‘me and you’ or ‘me and God’, perceived as oneself. For Rastafari, the “I” – the individual – is directly connected ontologically and spiritually to both God and other individuals. An essential element of Rasta theology is a recognition of the divinity or God within us, and, accordingly, of the self as the real Creator (Edmonds, 1998: 33).
the war. The law in Israel has changed, now even the orthodox have to do 2 to 4 years of military service. The changing of the law will bring a lot of problems among Israeli people, especially between secular and religious people”. Ras Moshinton told me that as a Rasta, he is against the war, but he asserted that unfortunately “Palestinians do not accept compromise!” (Notes 21-03-14). Furthermore, according to Yigal, “military service should be abolished and people should be free to decide whether to join it or not” (Notes 18-03-14). From their words, one can see both their frustration in dealing with the war, which according to them is a Babylon thing, but also their positive attitude as Rastafari: to be an example to both sides, Israeli and Palestinians. The words of Ras Daniel summarise this view: “Rastafari cannot judge! InI have to be the example, we have to give the example, and not look at what others do, what Babylon does, but follow the Rasta Livity. Changing oneself will change the world” (Notes 20-03-14).

The statements above suggest an ambivalence in some of the local Rastafari ways of viewing and dealing with the context of war, which is indicative of the localisation of broader Rasta culture in a specific context. In fact, as a rule, internationally, the Jamaican Rastafari movement is against armies and war, although in their religious mythology they consider themselves the soldiers of Jah (God) army. Nevertheless, this symbolism is purely spiritual, aiming at the victory of good over evil (Babylon) (Murrell and Williams, 1998:343).

Rastafari and music

The majority of Rasta that I met in Israel are involved somehow in reggae music, either as producers, such as Ras Moshinton, Ras I jah Salomon, Ras Sataman and Ras Asaf, Alrick; as players and chanters, such as Ras Congo and the Twelve Tribes; and finally as promoters such as Guil and Yigal.

When I was in Tel-Aviv, I met Yigal in his vinyl shop, full of rare old style reggae vinyl. He claimed to have been the first to import reggae music from America, UK and Jamaica to Israel; he and Guil then started to promote it around the country. Yigal use to run a reggae radio program, but now he dedicates his life to his shop. While we were talking, he elaborated that for him, “Babylon is all that works for divide”. This statement suggests a Rasta conception of Babylon, which has returned to the Judaic world from which it developed, and a particular form of consciousness of this. Yigal’s shop is a point of reference in Israel for all Rasta lovers of genuine old roots reggae. In Yigal’s shop, I met Guil, who was the first to translate a book on Bob Marley into Hebrew (see plate 3) (Notes 18-03-14).

Among Rastafari there is a strong concern regarding the music promoted in Israel. Once, Congo told me that he worries about “the sound that Babylon spreads”. With a sad voice he said, “the time of the sound system is changing now, everything is digital, and the young ones, they like dancehall”, especially the ones in the military service. Dancehall does not help these youths to develop love. Contrarily, it emphasises shooting and killing” (Notes 19-03-14).

Even Ras Daniel, expresses the same concern about the spreading of dancehall music among Israeli youths. Ras Daniel has a sound system called Junior Brown Selecta and often held reggae sessions during reggae concerts. He told me that “recently not many people enjoy reggae as before, now there is the spread of

15 If we were to ask someone outside the Rastafari movement “what is Babylon for you?” he or she would probably answer: Babylon was an ancient city. For Rastafari the Babylon oppression is happening now and means much more than a city, because it represents any form of oppression to Rastas (Reckord, in Mullerr et al., 1998:251 note26).

16 Dancehall music is a musical style recently developed in the ghetto of Kingston. Unlike reggae, the lyrics contained within dancehall songs make regular reference to pornography and violence.
Dancehall music which makes young people (especially soldiers) aggressive. In a state of war, this kind of music can be very dangerous if youths in the military service are made to listen to it. The government should promote reggae music as it is the only music to bring love and peace to the heart of InI” (Notes 19-03-14).

**Chanting their roots**

The religious environment and the context of war, and their influences upon Rastafari Israeli life, are evident through the music produced by Ras Moshinton, Ras I Jah-Salomon and Sataman. The music that they produce embeds a mixture of Reggae dub and Judaic rhythms, language and symbolism, which evidences the mix of the two cultural traditions within their music, linking this to their identity more generally. I spent a whole evening in Ras Moshinton’s house, listening to the music they produce. For instance, while we were listening to the song ‘13 measures’, he explained to me, “the lyric of the song is the Kippur’s last prayer and the sound has been forged in a way that resembles the sound found in a synagogue”. This testifies how in their music production local Rastas adopt some Jamaican Rastafari features, such as rhythm and symbols, and adapt it to the Jewish context and religiosity. The fact that he was aware of this process of adaptation, as the co-author of this special combination, proves the effectiveness of the Rastafari glocal conscientisation in Israel. Within their songs, there is a constant presence of African influences, both in the rhythm and in the lyrics, such as in the song ‘Mandela march’ written with I-Jah Salomon, regarding the death of Mandela (Notes 26-3-14). The song about Mandela demonstrates the existence of ongoing African influences on the Israeli Rastafari. The absorption of the belief, within the orthodox Rastafari movement, of being the ‘black Jews’ is what created a mythological link between the Jews and Africa and it is expressed within the life, music and attitudes of Rastafari in Israel. Ras Moshinton and I-jah confirmed this existing link when they told me they had recently returned from Shashamane in Ethiopia.

Ras Congo, Ras Moshinton and I-jah Salomon have their own sound system called *The Twelve Tribes* (see plate 4).

Congo has a special room outside the house where he plays with his group. In the room, he keeps all his vinyl, his sound system and his djembe. The room is covered with stars of David, Rasta colors and Silassie pictures. I participated in one of his sessions and recorded his chanting. He told me that when he chants he feels like he is praying and meditating: “while I chant I pray Jah and chant down Babylon”.

From the statements above it seems that Rastafari in Israel use the Rastafari attitude, of *Chanting*
down Babylon,\textsuperscript{21} instrumentally in order to promote peace and spirituality within the country as well as in their own lives. The music that they listen to, chant and promote (reggae dub music) is full of prayers and mythology regarding the holy land, repatriation and Jah. Thus, the re-appropriation of these Judaic symbols, through reggae music, seems to work within the Israeli movement (wittingly or unwittingly) as an instrument, which emphasizes and supports their own heritage and history, locally and globally. Albeit perhaps without conscious intent on the part of the Jamaican Rastafari movement, the absorption of Judaic mythology, symbolisms and norms, along with their singing about the Exodus, Babylon, repatriation, and Zion, has a clear alignment with and an apparent empathy towards its broader Jewish context.

**Religion, practices and beliefs**

In their everyday life, Israeli Rastafari speaks in Hebrew, but while they were talking to me in English, they often used ‘Dread talk’\textsuperscript{22} and were conscious of using Rastafari words or mythology, such as Babylon and InI. Usually they called me Rasta, and during my fieldwork, I discovered that almost everybody within the group calls each other Rasta. This illustrates the consciousness within the group of all belonging to the same group, sharing the views and the same way of life, the Rastafarian one.

Nevertheless, all the Rastafari that I met in Israel told me “I am a Rasta Jew”, “Judaism is my religion; Rastafari is my way of life”. They are all Jews following the Rasta way of life, Ital Livity.\textsuperscript{23} We spoke several times about their religiosity as Rastafari Jews. They all told me that they mainly follow the law of Nazirites. Through the renaissance and re-enactment of this ancient Jewish practice, the Jamaican Rastafari brought back to the Israeli Rastafari their ancient religious heritage. Many anthropologists such as C. Levi-Strauss and Mary Douglas “have found food symbolism to be an important index in assessing social groups...and this is very important within Rastafari” (Barrett, 1988:140), globally as well as locally. In fact, the Rastas that I met in Israel all strictly follow the law of Nazirite, exactly as the Jamaican Rastas do:\textsuperscript{24} they are all vegetarians, eat organic, do not add salt, do not drink alcohol, do not cut their dreadlocks, and dress modestly. According to my findings, both Rastafari and reggae music are well accepted within Israeli society. For instance, they told me, that while in a society like Jamaica, the growing of dreadlocks is seen as indicating an antisocial attitude (Edmonds, in Murrell et al., 1998:31), in Israel, people interpret dreadlocks as a symbol of great religiosity, and therefore Rastafari are seen as religious people and respected for it.

During the days that I spent with them it was possible for me to observe not just their Rastafari

\textsuperscript{21} According to Savishinsky, “Among Jamaican Rastafarians, Nyabinghi ritual-centered on drumming, dancing, and chanting, represent the fullest expression of individual and collective religious experience, the best means available for ‘praying Jah’ and ‘chanting down Babylon’” (Savishinsky, 1998:129).

\textsuperscript{22} ‘Dread Talk’ developed within the Jamaican Rastafari movement in the 1960s. According to Pollard (1982) in many cases, English words are transformed, in a conscious process of subversion of conventional meanings. For example, the English word ‘understanding’ in Dread Talk becomes ‘over-standing’; ‘Justice’ becomes ‘Just-ice’; ‘democracy’ becomes ‘demon-cracy’; ‘you’ becomes ‘I’; ‘oppress’ becomes ‘downpress’. The invention and transformation of words constitutes an effort to create a common global Rasta language, ‘over-standable’ only by Rastas and those used to reggae music (Pollard, 1982:20).

\textsuperscript{23} Ital means, “springing from the earth, natural”, while Livity is “living according to the strict principles of Rastafari”, Ital livity is therefore “a commitment to using things in their natural and organic states” (Edmonds, 1998: 354).

\textsuperscript{24} According to Edmonds “Rastas invoke the biblical teaching concerning the Nazirites, whom the Levitical law (Number 6) forbade to trim their hair or shave” or to eat meat (Edmonds, 1998:31).
attitudes but also their Jewish religious attitudes. For instance, the first Friday that I was in Gan-Yavne, Congo and Natty invited me to celebrate the day of Shabbat with them. The importance of Shabbat was very visible among the Rastafari that I met. For instance, on Saturday morning, while I was having breakfast with some dates and nuts, I told Natty about the amazing taste that the dates had. She replied: "because on Shabbat everything you eat has a different taste and everything you do has a different meaning. Shabbat is a spiritual day for the Jewish people and many go to the Temple" (Notes 22-03-14). And she added: "I do not like extremists or religious fanatics. That is the main reason why I hug the Rastafari movement, because it is flexible. I do not go to the temple on Shabbat; I do not need the temple but spend time with my family and friends. I am Jewish of course but it is Rastafari Livity that rules or governs my life. I do not eat meat or drink alcohol, and I believe that we should all live more connected to nature. We should go back to the roots, to a simple life, that is why all my children were born at home, naturally" (Notes 21-03-14). Even though Natty feels the spiritually of Shabbat, she does not go to the Temple, as an orthodox Jew would. Nevertheless, Natty lives her religious attitude not only through what appears to draw on Jewish traditions, but also through the adoption of a strict natural way of life, the Rastafari Livity. Even though through reggae music Judaic religious symbolisms are already embedded in the life of the Rastafari, all the Rastafari I met were against forms of religious orthodoxy, especially within Israel, as is testified by the words of Yigal: "I am against any religious orthodoxy, because it causes divisions". He told me that recently the orthodox have been protesting against the recently imposed obligation to do military service, which is compulsory for all Israeli citizens, except for orthodox (previously), and Palestinian Israeli. About the orthodox protesters, he said: "they are extremists and they just think about themselves, when instead everybody should be free to decide whether to do military service or not" (Notes 18-03-2014).

The religiosity adopted by Israeli Rasta relies on the Rastafari way of life, which through Livity brought back the ancient Nazirite religious law to Israel. Even though they all appear to be religiously Jewish, they all condemn religious orthodoxy. Furthermore, even though Rastafari in Israel share the same symbolism and mythology with the traditional Rastafari of Jamaica, they reinterpret these in their own way. For instance, the Star of David, which for Rastafari represents the lineage that Silassie has with the Falasha and King David, for Israeli Rasta instead represents their own heritage and history about King David. Their Jewish traditions make them religiously different from the traditional Rastafari. In fact, no Rastas that I interviewed believe in the divinity of King Silassie or see him as the Messiah, as the Jamaican Rastas do. They see him as a Great Jewish Man, king of the Falasha, but as Jews, they are still waiting for their Messiah. Furthermore, they all stressed that their being Jewish does not exclude the fact of being Rastafari, and vice-versa, as is proved by their mixed attitudes and beliefs.

Religiously, Rastafari in Israel can represent a flexible form of Judaism, through which wittingly and unwittingly, a new form of Judaism is created as well as a Rastafari one.

25 Shabbat (which starts on Friday night) is considered the day of rest and it commemorates the seventh day, on which the world was created (Luzzati & Della Rocca, Ebraismo, 2007:246, my translation).

26 Among Jamaican Rastas, the belief that Silassie is the Messiah is based on the prophecy of the Christian New Testament (Revelation), in which the Lion of Judah will defeat the Armageddon on the judgement day. The coronation of Silassie is seen as the fulfilling of the prophecy (Murrell and Williams, 1998: 342). According to Barrett "all true Rastafari believe that Haile Silassie, Emperor of Ethiopia, is the true living God, at least of the black race" (1988:104).

27 Within the global Rastafari movement, being a Rasta does not exclude the possibility of being or belonging to another faith, such Judaism, Islam or Buddhism etc. In conversations in Israel and elsewhere, Rastafari have explained to me that they place great emphasis on ‘keeping local tradition alive’.
**Natural mystic**

The reconnection to nature, which Natty emphasised above, is one of the main features that characterises the Rastafari movement in Israel. In fact, as we will see, what they really borrow from the Jamaican Rastafari movement is their concept of *Livity*. Furthermore, their belief that they live in the holy land emphasise their love for it. As the words of Natty testify: “The true revolution, sista, is to go back to the land. As the symbol of the seed of life (See plate 5), any circle touches and influence the others, as well as humanity. If some people go back to work the land, more and more people will. Go back to the land, be autonomous vis-a-vis Babylon, is the only solution against pollution, smog, and technological production” (Notes 21-03-14).

Even Congo shows the same attitude regarding the importance for humanity to go back to nature. Once he told me: “as a Rasta I believe that the vegetable I grow with love can plant a good seed in the people that eat it. Life is a circle and people do not seem to want any more accept life and death. Nature teaches us everything, even to accept change, as happens with the different seasons. As we accept the arrival of autumn, in the same way we should accept death as part of the circle of life. When my time comes, the circle will close. However, what people don't seem to understand, is that every circle of life is linked with another and this creates other circles, all interconnected, the whole of humanity and nature. Babylon wants to control InI [our] life, and make us scared. Like, nowadays, when a woman is pregnant she looks as if she is sick and goes to the hospital to give birth, Natty gave birth at home, why should she need a hospital? It is Babylon that wants to control InI [us] and make InI even scared to give birth, but Jah gives InI everything and we are destroying it instead of appreciating and protecting it” (Note 20-03-14).

In the dialogues we had, Natty and Congo both refereed often to a Judaic symbol, the *flower of life* (See plate 6), especially when they are talking about nature and the meaning of life.

The flower of life figure consists of “seven or more overlapping circles in which the centre of each circle is on the circumference of up to six surrounding circles of the same diameter” (Melchizedek & Drunvalo, 1999). According to Luzzati and Della Rocca (2007: 170), the flower of life comes from the Judaic Cabbalistic tradition, for which “the only way through which is possible to reach the supreme rank of the soul, is the mystic” (Sholem, in Luzzati & Della Rocca, 2007: 171). I have to say that the majority of Rastafari that I met believe in mysticism. Once Congo told me: “I don’t need to go anywhere, when I want to see my friends from abroad, I just close my eyes and I see them through meditation, they will feel it too”. It seems that even though mysticism is present in Judaism, it is established and emphasised further among Israeli Rastas, through the adoption of the Rastafari view of life.

**‘Rasta-farmers’**

As we saw above, traditional Rastafari hold the strong belief that they belong to a holy land to which

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28  Jah is the Rastafari name for God and one of the 72 Jewish names for God.

29  From the flower of life emerges the *Seed of Life*, “which is formed from seven circles being placed with six fold symmetry, forming a pattern of circles and lenses, which act as a basic component of the Flower of Life’s design” (Melchizedek & Drunvalo, 1999).
they will one day repatriate. The fight for repatriation is still an aim within the Rastafari movement, and in fact, many do repatriate to Shashamane in Ethiopia (Edmonds, 1998: 30). Israeli Rastafari – at least the ones that I interviewed – were born in Israel; typically, their families had repatriated to Israel when the state was founded. Contrarily to Jamaican Rastafari, for Israeli Rasta repatriation has already therefore taken place; the prophecy to go back to the holy land has been fulfilled.

However, the question of land in Israel does not only involve Israel and Palestine, but also the state of Israel and its people, especially the ones that would like to follow a ‘natural’ and independent way of life. According to my sources, all the Israeli land, except those parts which were bought directly from Palestinians, belong to the state of Israel. Because of this law, Israelis are forbidden to work the land freely. Some of the interviewees, such as Moshinton and Ras I-Jah, have their own land, which was bought by their grandparents from the Palestinian, during the years of repatriation. Ras Moshinton explained that: “The land here belongs to the state. We are not free to grow in our houses or garden if the land belongs to the state. I have my own land, so I can grow corn. The ownership of land is a big issue in Israel and a big problem because only those who bought the land from Palestinians can grow their own vegetables. Natty and Congo can have a farm because the school [which hosts the farm], gave them permission”.

As already mentioned, Congo and Natty run an organic farm as part of an agricultural school for youth with social needs. The farm is called Shorashim which means ‘roots’ (see plate 7).

On March 20th 2014, I spent all day on their farm (See plate 8 and 9). I decided to help them in return for their hospitality and in order to get involved with their everyday life. Seven Rastas regularly work together on the farm. On the farm, they play reggae music all day, which the workers believe, as Congo once said “keeps them going, Rasta cannot stop”. I had a long conversation with Ras Daniel and Criss. It is about nine months since they started working on the farm and they really like it, “keeps In close to nature”, they told me. However, Ras Daniel told me that they would like go to Shashamane in Ethiopia for a while.

For Congo and Natty, farming is their life and represents the material representation of their Livity. For both of them the land represents both material and spiritual symbol. They both strongly believe that “we are what we eat”. Furthermore, for all the Israeli Rasta that I met, self-sufficiency is the primary aim in the struggle against Babylon’s destruction and capitalistic slavery. Congo once told me that he lived in Jamaica for a year: “I lived with a Rastaman on the Kingston Hills. This man taught me how to be self-sufficient with regard to Babylon. In Jamaica they are some own lucky. They have a lot of land; they are free to grow crops and to be autonomous. Babylon’s system keeps them in the ghetto context and does not show them other ways as for example the Rastafari way. I personally prefer to stay in contact with nature to find my spirituality. If I need something from Babylon, Natty will see to it, she knows me and she knows that I keep my distance from Babylon and the Babylonians in order to not be contaminated by bad energies”. Self-sufficiency and Rastafari Livity are the strongest attitudes in the life of Israeli Rastafari.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through the study on local Rastafari in Israel, it has been possible to de-essentialise the political, social and religious attitudes of the traditional Rastafari movement. The de-essentialisation of the movement leads us to discover a different expression of both Rastafari and Judaism.
Analysing and comparing similarities and diversities between Rastafari and Judaism and how they have influenced each other within processes of globalisation has been of fundamental importance in order to understand how Rastafari religious practices and symbolism were easily adopted in Israel and vice versa.

On the one hand, local and global Rastafari share religious symbols. On the other hand, many features differentiate them, which are clearly related to context, and in particular the religious historical background. Through the analysis of fieldwork notes, regarding Rastafari life within Israeli social, religious and political context and their attitudes towards it, it has been possible to observe features that differentiate the local movement from the traditional. Differences between the two include, for example, the belief among Israeli Rastafari that King Silassie is not a Divine person or the Messiah; Zion is Israel and not Ethiopia; and that beliefs should be lived not as an orthodox religious movement but as a flexible way of life. The fact that Israeli Rastas are not only different from the traditional movement, but aware of these differences, is proof of glocal conscientisation within the Israeli Rastafari group.

Further evidence of glocal conscientisation is provided by the consciousness within the group of having adopted the Rastafari way of life as Jews. They are conscious of being both a different kind of Rastafari and a different kind of Jew. Examining the lives of the people I met, it emerged that their Jewish views and religiousness are strongly influenced by Jamaican Rastafari Livity, especially in relation to their attachment to the land. They repeatedly stressed the importance of the land as a special gift from God. The constant emphasis on ‘naturalness’ leads these people to aim for, or claim, self-sufficiency. According to Israeli Rasta, the earth does not just assume a rule or way of material production of vegetables. The land seems to be linked with the soul. In fact, according to them, it is through the naturalisation of their lives, achieved through Rastafari Livity and the strict link with the earth, that they achieve spiritual consciousness.

From the ethnographic studies above, the Rastafari in Israel appear to be people living ‘in between’ Judaism and Rastafari, orthodoxy and secularism, war and peace, to the point of creating a new form of Judaism and new kinds of identities within the Israeli society, as within the identity of the Rastafari movement itself. Ulysses Santamaria coined the expression “mimetic conversion” in order to explain the appropriation of Jewish religion practices by Africans. In this case, we could use the same expression to explain the appropriation of Rastafari religious practices by Jews in Israel. Nevertheless, as we saw above, the latter has been more a re-appropriation of an ancient Judaic law, which is the consequence and the product of a globalised Rastafari movement and its localisation in Israel.

This research reinforces the argument that religion and social movements cannot be studied as homogeneous social phenomena and, by extension, we might expect there to be limits to which we can think about Rastafari, or any religious movement, as homogeneous even at the local level. Rather, acknowledging the complexity behind the global development of religion and social movements is crucial in any attempt to understand the nuanced complexity of their local manifestations and hybrid realisations. An accurate local study, within the macro and micro cosmos of the people that compose any religious or social movement, will lead ethnographers and anthropologists to always discover more particular realities within the life of any man studied, despite their belonging to Judaism or Rastafarianism.
References


Monica Haim (2012). film “Awaking Zion”.


Images

Cover picture: Ras Moreno (Mexico) visiting Israel
Plate 1: Congo and Natty’s house.
Plate 2: The hut in Congo and Natty’s Garden used to celebrate Sukkoth

Plate 3: The first Rastafari book translated into Hebrew by Guil.
Plate 4: The twelve Tribe Sound System and Ras Semi (from UK), at Congo's house

Plate 5: The seed of life

Plate 6: The flower of life.
Plate 7: The logo of the organic Shorashim farm.

Plate 8: Natty, Congo and Cris, on the farm at harvest time.
Plate 9: Ras Congo working in the fields.