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# “THEY TOOK US BY BOAT AND WE’RE COMING BACK BY PLANE”<sup>1</sup>

## An Assessment of Rastafari and Repatriation

GIULIA BONACCI

*In loving memory of*

*Ras Mweya Masimba (Bradford 1964–Shashemene 2016)*

*Sister Welete Medhin (Kingston 1949–London 2019)*

*Sister Ijahnya Christian (Anguilla 1957–St Kitts 2020)*

**Abstract** Repatriation to Africa represents a cornerstone of Rastafari faith and livity, a structuring paradigm of the movement’s development, and an on-going physical mobility toward Africa. This paper proposes an assessment of the significance of Repatriation, which is still largely ignored in the literature on the Rastafari movement. The claim for the right to return to Africa ties Rastafari to the broader history of Black peoples in the Americas who have emphasized return as a redemptive mobility or as a political solution to their marginalized condition. Repatriation is a concept and a practice that raises many challenges and contradictions; and it endures in many different forms and places. Particular attention is given to repatriation to Ethiopia, but other African countries are addressed as well.

**Keywords** • Repatriation • reparation • Africa • Ethiopia • land grant

Since the inception of the Rastafari movement in the 1930s in Jamaica, repatriation to Africa has been prominent in the discourses produced by Rastafari. In fact, repatriation represents a cornerstone of Rastafari faith and livity, as well as a structuring paradigm of the movement’s development, and an ongoing physical mobility towards the African continent. The significance of repatriation—here used interchangeably with return<sup>2</sup>—traverses the religious, the racial, the cultural and the political ethos of Rastafari, and as such represents one of its organizing principles. However, repatriation to Africa is often analysed as a utopia, a cultural trope or a theological motive, and rarely as a social process of mobility and integration in African societies. In the Jamaican context, repatriation remains often dismissed as mere underclass fantasy, and this is reflected in the paucity of scholarship focusing on repatriation. Some of the best references on Rastafari only allude to the actual, physical

returns to Africa, despite Rastafari appearing as the main force claiming for repatriation to Africa since the 1940s until today (for example, Campbell 1994, 211–231; Chevannes 1998b, 30; Edmonds 2012, 78–79). This article proposes an assessment of the social and political significance of repatriation with a perspective that ties Rastafari with the wider world, and that faces the challenges and contradictions born in the wake of actual returns to Africa. It is based on almost twenty years of research in the archives and the press (in the United Kingdom, the United States, Jamaica and Ethiopia) and extensive fieldwork in the Caribbean, in Ethiopia, as well as in other African countries (in particular Ghana and South Africa). Aiming at summarizing and presenting the state of knowledge on the dynamics of Rastafari and repatriation, this paper does not discuss specific sources nor individuals’ trajectories as they can be found in other publications.<sup>3</sup>

### **THE MANY CLAIMS TO RETURN**

Repatriation, or the right to return to Africa, ties Rastafari to the broader history of Black peoples in the Americas who have emphasized return as a redemptive mobility or as a political solution to their marginalized condition. Since enslaved Africans were brought in ships to the Western plantations, there has always been a desire to return. This desire was expressed in ritual practices and in folk stories while memories of actual places and people in Africa were fading away in time and distance. The idea of return staged mythical images of Africa, and of a golden age toppled by slavery and colonialism, while the language of the biblical book of Exodus came to express the yearning for a place to belong for Black communities and congregations in the Americas. The archetype of the Hebrews, living in a land of bondage until Moses would lead them to the Promised Land, functioned as a metaphor for the fate of Black people in slave and post-slavery societies. Another archetype was at play there, as the Ethiopia mentioned in the Bible became synonymous with Blackness. Since the seventeenth century and the emergence of classical Ethiopianism, there are numerous occurrences of individuals, writers, travellers, communities or congregations who identify themselves as Ethiopian by virtue of their Black skin. It is only after the battle of Adwa, won by Ethiopians against Italians in 1896, that biblical Ethiopia became closely associated with political Ethiopia, a lone sovereign state in colonial Africa, thus launching what is known as modern Ethiopianism—of which Rastafari is a stalwart representative.<sup>4</sup>

Desire to return to Africa was fuelled by religious-based discourses on the prophetic destiny of Black people, supposed to contribute to the regeneration of Africa, and by political positions defending emigration against separation from or integration into mainstream society. In most cases, going to Africa was understood as an escape from the marginalized condition assigned to descendants of the enslaved Africans in the West

and an exit from second-class citizenship. Early experiences of return to Sierra Leone and Liberia<sup>5</sup> involved philanthropist and paternalist practices as well as the reproduction of unequal relationships with natives while giving birth to early cosmopolitan societies on Africa's shores. It is significant to note that Caribbean people were over-represented in these projects (James 2004, 151–153). Engaged as they were in the development of modern education and media, they acted as forerunners to West African nationalism and to the pan-African idea of shared destiny between Africans and African-descended people.

A paradigmatic example in this regard is that of Marcus Garvey (1887–1940), the Jamaican printer and Black nationalist who founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1914 in Kingston, Jamaica and inaugurated the New York Division in 1918. His programme of race primacy, economic self-empowerment, nation-building and return to Africa had a major impact on Black communities in the Americas and worldwide, in an age of increasing circulation of ideas and people. In particular, his project of a Black Star Liner that would enhance trade among Black communities and bring people to Africa had a social and popular impact much wider than what a few old ships bought with dues were actually able to offer. A charismatic and controversial leader, Marcus Garvey never reached Liberia where his program was unsettling the political elite and their Western partners in their exploitation of natural resources. Nonetheless, his impact on Caribbean popular culture and Black politics in the Americas, and his influence on early African leaders like Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta set him as the tutelary figure for return to Africa and for pan-Africanism in the twentieth century (Ewing 2014).

In Jamaica, claims for return predate the Rastafari movement. Indentured workers from Sierra Leone fought to get their right to return, and veterans of the First World War unable to survive decently in Jamaica pleaded for settlement in Africa. Local chapters of the UNIA drafted repatriation petitions and bills in the 1940s, while numerous other local civil society organizations (Afro-West Indian League, Afro-Caribbean League, etc.) mobilized their members towards establishing an African consciousness, in an effort to pulling Africa out of the shame it was usually associated with in Caribbean colonial societies. This broad social spectrum claiming some form of return is important as it evidences that Rastafari were not the first ones to claim return, and that Rastafari actually built their claim to repatriation on older discourses prevalent in the Americas.

### **RASTAFARI IN JAMAICA AND REPATRIATION**

One of the specificities of Rastafari is to tie closely the claim to return with contemporary Ethiopia, where Emperor Haile Selassie I who they consider as the Living God was sitting on a throne priding biblical roots. Here three dimensions are intimately entangled: religious interpretations,

political aims and framework, and self-development; these provide return with a unique significance for Rastafari, and function as a cornerstone to their faith and livivity. In fact, repatriation is to be found at the heart of the cultural system developed by Rastafari. Return to Africa—and its synonyms, Ethiopia, Zion—is chanted in the Nyahbinghi repertoire of sacred music and in hundreds of roots reggae tunes, it is called upon in rituals and ceremonies, it influences participants’ attitudes towards society, and its associated symbols adorn bodies, houses and community circles. The ubiquitous use by Rastafari of the call of prophet Isaiah (46:3), “I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth”, acts as a signifier of this centrality. Repatriation is at the core of the discourses and the practices of Rastafari and is inseparable from the history of the movement.

Instead of following a chronological analysis of the many claims, hopes and failures of repatriation to Africa, I will focus here on a few significant aspects, keeping in mind that the distinction between the religious and the political is blurred more often than not. Rastafari claim repatriation as a prerequisite for redemption, which literally means “buying back” the Black bodies from slavery, an action that God only could conduct. Return and salvation are thus intimately related, and are often embedded in a form of social passivity. If one only need to wait upon “fireball” or upon “seven miles of Black Star Liner” to bring them back to Africa, no social or political action is deemed necessary.<sup>6</sup> The promises of imminent return made by Leonard P. Howell in 1934 or by Rev. Claudius Henry in 1959 led astray thousands of people who believed that life elsewhere was possible. These well-known events conceal other initiatives, like that of a number of individuals who in the 1940s addressed letters and petitions to the Colonial Secretary. These letters, framed in biblical terms, were early Rastafari addresses to the British Crown who was urged to take its responsibilities and carry back to Africa the descendants of those deported to the Caribbean. In 1958, as the Jamaican public opinion shivered when Rastafari took over Victoria Park in downtown Kingston for their first public convention, a letter written by charismatic Mortimo Planno was published in *African Opinion*, a pan-African journal produced in New York. Planno used the Universal Declaration of Human Rights publicized ten years earlier to legitimize the call for Rastafari’s right of choosing another—Ethiopian—nationality, and the associated right of return to Africa. Rastafari claims climaxed in the late 1950s with the news that land was available for settlement in Ethiopia, and they felt reinforced in their harsh critique of the flourishing creole nationalism.

Beyond the mythology associated with return, and beyond the utopia it represents, repatriation is really a political critique of the state of the nation. A form of response to economic and social oppression, it addresses the current legacies of historical responsibilities. Colonial officials

acknowledged very early the explosive potential of return. In 1933, colonial correspondence reveals the British were weighing the risk taken in entertaining the idea of return: it could potentially concern hundreds of thousands in the Americas. The colonial silence and repression of early Rastafari claims shaped a political response that remained roughly unchanged since then. The 1960s did start on another note though. The methods and objectives of the 1960 *Report on the Rastafarian Movement* remain debated among scholars, but it was the first occurrence when a putatively independent research team listed among its recommendations the need to study the feasibility of emigration to Africa (Smith et al. 1960). A government sponsored mission including Rastafari and other Black organizations visited five African countries in 1961, and was followed up by a technical mission the following year. However, with festivities for independence culminating in August 1962, all projects of facilitating repatriation were buried. As much as return threatened the British Empire, it did threaten as well independent Jamaica.

The strategy implemented since then by the Jamaican government relied heavily on the project of rehabilitating Rastafari, that is changing the social conditions of the Jamaican poor in order for the claim to repatriation to lose its social significance, and of co-opting Rastafari in order to exert some type of control over prominent representatives of the movement. In fact, by expressing allegiance to Ethiopia, identified as a Black sovereign state in Africa, Rastafari were opposing the nascent Jamaican nation and repelling the idea of a multicultural society. The insistence of Rastafari on the primacy of Blackness, on belonging to another country, and their despise of local politics formulated not so much their anti (Jamaican) nationalism but rather their alter-nationalism, that is their allegiance to another (Ethiopian) nation. The answer of the Jamaican State to this situation was clearly a repressive one: the massacre of Coral Gardens in 1963, the razing of Back O' Wall in 1966, the banning of Guyanese revolutionary historian Walter Rodney in 1968, as well as the numerous occurrences of police harassment and brutality against Rastafari that became a steady pattern of the 1960s. However, the 1966 State visit of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I in the Caribbean represented a turning point in the social relations at stake. The British and Jamaican governments had hoped that Haile Selassie I would deny the divinity attributed to him by Rastafari, and that this visit would put an end to the movement. But the opposite happened. The State visit was marked by massive popular fervour and enthusiasm, and it not only gave a prominent place to Rastafari in various official receptions, it signalled the spectacular growth of Rastafari and launched Rastafari departures to Africa. Vying for political influence in Jamaica, Prime Minister Hugh Shearer (JLP) visited Ethiopia in September 1969, and Michael Manley (PNP), then leader of the opposition, soon followed him. In the lead-up to the 1972 general elections that he won, Manley made extensive use of



the “rod of correction” supposedly given to him by Haile Selassie I, thus illustrating the power of the discourse around repatriation to Ethiopia specifically. Local politicians largely instrumentalized symbols of Rastafari and repatriation, at a time when the voice of Rastafari in reggae music was beginning to have a massive impact locally and internationally (Waters 1985).

A lesser-known aspect of the significance of repatriation for Rastafari is located in its influence on the internal life of the movement. What research reveals is that the very issue of repatriation in part structured the politics of Rastafari (Bonacci 2015, 183–219). Rastafari is often considered an acephalous movement, and rightly so, as no single leader ever controlled or influenced the totality of its participants, and as individual sovereignty is deemed a primary step towards redemption. However, such an interpretation should not impede analysis of the many associations, organizations and institutions that are as well constitutive of Rastafari. Interestingly, claims to repatriation play a great part in the structuration of the movement. Suffice to give a closer look at the institutions of Rastafari to understand the significance of repatriation in the development of the movement. The Ethiopian World Federation (EWF), founded in New York in 1937 in the midst of the Italian-Ethiopian war, was first branched in Jamaica in 1939, but it was only in the 1950s that Rastafari invested in the pan-Ethiopian organization despite the reluctance of some of the US-based EWF leaders. This move happened really because, by then, it was public that EWF members were granted land in Ethiopia, and this fact acted as a magnet among Rastafari who became members in existing chapters or founded their own. While organizing return was not the primary aim of the EWF, return is the main reason why Rastafari joined. Along the years, very few EWF members from Jamaica left for Ethiopia, and the meagre resources available were channelled to the New York headquarters. Because of the inability of the EWF to mobilize effectively its members, some chapters decided to leave the historic organization and rely on themselves for funding effective return. The 1968 birth of a major Rastafari organization, the Twelve Tribes of Israel, is precisely located in this tension. The Twelve Tribes of Israel met with rapid growth in Jamaica and internationally, not least because its doctrine leaned towards Christianity, and accommodated members from the middle class, gave public positions to women, and rationalized non-Black membership. In addition, the Twelve Tribes of Israel largely contributed to the popularity of reggae music through its dances and its numerous artiste members. The centrality given to repatriation to Ethiopia represented a major fuel for the growth of the organization; it was built in the membership through various means: songs, weekly dues, personal identification to one of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, and a leadership structure focusing on Ethiopia. In fact, dozens of Twelve Tribes members have settled in and visited Ethiopia since the early 1970s. It was only later,

in the 1990s, that other Rastafari mansions sent settlers to Ethiopia, namely the Nyahbinghi Order and the Ethiopia Africa Black International Congress.

#### INTERNATIONAL RASTAFARI AND REPATRIATION

Encouraged by the 1992 month-long celebration of the centenary of Haile Selassie I organized in Ethiopia by an international coalition of Rastafari, a number of individuals found their way to the East African country. They were coming from established mansions, as the EWF had been revitalized in the United Kingdom, and as the Twelve Tribes of Israel had expanded into numerous international branches, even though they did not “wait for their turn” as the blueprint of the organ recommended. The growth of the Rastafari movement in the United Kingdom appears as a major landmark both for the movement and for repatriation. A young generation of sons and daughters of Caribbean immigrants, fed up with the racism met in all strata of society, were at the forefront of the 1980s riots demanding social justice. Often radicalized by the very context they grew up in, they found no political relays, except for the support of a few MPs like Bernie Grant, from Guyana, who was elected for Tottenham in 1987 and a leader of the debates around repatriation and reparation during the 1990s. The dynamism and social relevance of Rastafari in the United Kingdom, and their ties with Jamaica and established mansions, gave a new breath to the movement that was then internationalizing quickly. In Trinidad, Rastafari has a long history, often shadowed by Jamaica, and can claim a major role in the development of the movement, its mansions, its livity and its practice of return. Other individuals and families returned as well, mainly Rastafari coming from places where no mansion was established, in particular from the Eastern Caribbean small islands and the French Caribbean. Despite the somehow minor position of Rastafari in the United States—compared with other Black-centred movements—Caribbean migrants and African-American Rastafari did return as well, the formers finding resources not available in the islands to facilitate their movement. As a reflection of the internationalization of Rastafari, a few Euro-American, British, Irish, Swedish, German, French, Austrian and even Italian Rastafari settled in Ethiopia, some for a few years and others for decades. Most of them legitimize their presence through a discourse on the African origins of humanity, thanks to their insertion into established mansions, or as a proof of the universality of their faith. While their presence is not without contradictions, and not without reluctance on behalf of some Caribbean or British-based Rastafari, they have become active participants in the community of returnees, and sometimes funders of community initiatives, which adds to the complexity of the local situation.

By the early 2000s, the Rastafari community in Ethiopia counted a few hundred people representing about twenty citizenships, thus reflecting



the internationalization of Rastafari from Jamaica and the Caribbean to the world.<sup>7</sup> Of course, over the years many Rastafari never felt directly concerned by the tangible process of organizing themselves in order to leave. While repatriation has remained pervasive in Rastafari culture, in faith, music, rituals, media, public debates and sociably, a rationalization process did occur and was expressed in the distinction between a “physical” return and a “spiritual” return, which would legitimize remaining in “Babylon” within an Afro-centred personal and social position. Still, in the twenty-first century, return endures, in many different forms and places, and the international Rastafari movement remains a major actor of repatriation to Africa, a shared goal with other Black communities and congregations in the Americas, despite major changes in Jamaican and global discourses and political environments.

### **THE SHASHEMENE LAND GRANT**

The Shashemene land grant, where an international Rastafari community lives today, has a central place in the discourses and social practices of repatriation (Bonacci 2015a; Christian 2011; MacLeod 2014; Niaah 2012). In fact, it is of particular significance in the history of return for a number of reasons. First, it ties directly the early Rastafari movement to the mobilization of a prior generation engaged in the defence of Ethiopia during the war with Italy (1935–1941). Second, it is the first gesture of invitation, in 1950, made by an African Head of State to members of the African Diaspora.<sup>8</sup> Third, Shashemene represents the symbolic centre of the contemporary international Rastafari movement. As such, the Shashemene settlement anchors return in an African society, it ties firmly the fate of Shashemene within a wider internationalist and pan-African history, and it evidences that the myth of return can actually survive to the vicissitudes of settlement in Africa.

Analysis of repatriation and settlement on the Shashemene land grant, located in the periphery of a southern Ethiopian market town, must articulate two distinct chronologies: a social chronology of arrivals in Ethiopia, and a political chronology of contemporary Ethiopia. The very first settlers to arrive on the Shashemene land grant in 1952 were Helen and James Piper, Black Jews and Garveyites from Montserrat, and they were followed by a handful of other people coming from the United States, the United Kingdom and Jamaica until the mid-1960s. In 1968, small groups of Jamaican Rastafari, unaffiliated or EWF members, started to arrive, followed after 1972 by Jamaican Rastafari members of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. This dynamic was slowed then halted by the revolution of September 1974 that took place in Ethiopia and dethroned Haile Selassie I. During the years of the military regime, with civil war raging and restrictions like food rations, mobility and curfew, some of the settlers left the land grant, and very few new settlers arrived. Some visitors made the journey, like Twelve Tribes international officers, and in

December 1978, Bob Marley who spent three weeks in Ethiopia. When borders reopened in 1991, a slow normalization took place in the country, and settlers came in, with peaks around 2000 and 2007, representing the Western and the Ethiopian millennia.<sup>9</sup> This chronology of arrivals, constrained in part by the political situation in Ethiopia, reflects the moving history of the Rastafari movement, of its mansions and of its international diffusion.

On arrival in Ethiopia, returnees met with the Ethiopian State that has a long tradition of authority and administration. Before 1974, the government helped those arriving in getting papers, work and access to land. The original land grant was of 200 hectares (or 5 *gasha*) in the periphery of Shashemene, and it was divided among twelve people in 1970. However, despite its pan-African motive, this land grant was nationalized in March 1975 like all rural land in the country. Returnees lost everything, their land, their houses, and the dream of return could have stopped there but for the determination of a few families who remained in Ethiopia during a difficult period. No constructions were allowed and primary materials were scarce, but following various petitions, eighteen lots of land were attributed in 1986 to eighteen families of returnees. These lots were situated within the borders of the original land grant, and are the last ones officially attributed to Rastafari families in the country. In the late 1990s, thanks to the ground-level involvement of some Rastafari turned middlemen, hundreds of lots were made available by the local peasant associations against retribution, thus allowing the settlement of numerous individuals and families. However, returnees have always lacked some kind of documentation regarding the land they settled. As in other African countries, land issues are central to the social fabric of society, and the Shashemene returnees were fragilized by their lack of land titles and their undocumented houses. Since the promulgation of the 1994 constitution of Ethiopia establishing a federal government, Shashemene is located in the federal state of Oromia, and returnees have faced the tortuous, and sometimes arbitrary, practices of local, regional and federal administrations.

Shashemene, a multi-ethnic underdeveloped town hosting migrants from the whole of Ethiopia, has developed quickly from six thousand inhabitants in the early 1950s to over 130,000 in the mid-2000s. As a consequence, the once rural land grant is now a very dense neighbourhood situated within town limits, which is identified as the “Jamaica *sefer*”, the Jamaican neighbourhood. Living with the Ethiopian people has taken many forms, and collecting life histories of the returnees and their Ethiopian neighbours is the best way to document the family ties, the business initiatives, the trade relations and the everyday practices unfolding in and around Shashemene. Thanks to in-depth fieldwork, it is possible to understand how concern for local development (roads, water, health, schools, urban planning, agriculture) and for security remain

central in the life of the community, in particular as burglary, rape and violent deaths have sadly landmarked the experience of repatriation. In a difficult environment typical of much of Ethiopia’s secondary towns, the returnees have developed community sites, like the Twelve Tribes HQ, the EWF HQ and the Nyahbinghi Tabernacle, and community projects like the Ancient of Days Elders fund, Social Security services, involvement with the local police force, and a cemetery. Due to the cultural taboo around death within Rastafari, the cemetery still suffers from underfunding and lack of community support, even if it is a symbolically crucial issue, a marker of human dignity for Ethiopians, and a needed space as Rastafari who are not baptized in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church cannot be buried in Christian cemeteries. Various community organizations have strived, like the Jamaican Rastafari Development Community (JRDC), which runs a school in the neighbourhood. The major celebrations of Rastafari are held in the Nyahbinghi Tabernacle and in the Twelve Tribes HQ, and attract Ethiopian youths as well as international Rastafari. In addition, during the annual 23 July celebration of Haile Selassie’s birth, a motorcade is always organized, involving a couple trucks crowded by drums, flags and Rastafari families dressed in white, who proudly parade in the centre of the town of Shashemene. Naturally, Rastafari are well known for their practice of reggae and sound-systems, and if they have to showcase in Addis Ababa to actually make a living of it, they do play in various community events in Shashemene as well. Some artistes like Sydney Salmon and the Imperial Majestic Band, as well as Ras Kawintseb and band Aethiofrika have played a critical role in teaching the practice of reggae to Ethiopian musicians and in developing musical collaborations (Aarons 2017).

The formal representation of the community has been plagued by rivalry and tensions between individuals and between mansions since the 1960s, and this has certainly contributed to the numerous setbacks faced by the community in order to be properly acknowledged by the Ethiopian government. However, the government announced in Spring 2017 that Rastafari will be granted formal recognition and national IDs, in line with the status of “Foreign Nationals of Ethiopian Origin” established in the early 2000s, which targets first of all the Ethiopian Diaspora, and gives them all rights except the right to vote and to get involved in the security services of the country. In fact, most members of the community were illegal residents in Ethiopia; they had expired visas and expired foreign passports, and because of their low resources many did not comply with the financial obligations of investors (Bonacci 2015b; Contreras 2018; MacLeod 2012). As a consequence, their mobility in and out of the country was extremely limited, and they risked arrest and deportation. This situation was particularly acute concerning the youths of the community born in Ethiopia of foreign parents as their lack of status impacted their schooling, their studies and their family life. On a

few occasions over the past twenty years, the Ethiopian government has conducted surveys into the legal status of community members. The recent announcement was followed by implementation and by late 2019 a majority of Rastafari residents in the country had obtained residency permits. This represents a major evolution in the national insertion of the community, a very practical victory for returnees, and symbolically a great step in advancing the cause of repatriation to Africa.

The centrality of Shashemene in the international Rastafari movement is evident in the many ties between the community and the international associations dedicated to its support, like the Shashamane Foundation and IDOR in the United States, Sick Be Nourished and Rastafari The Majesty and the Movement in the United Kingdom, and international branches of Rastafari mansions as well as many other smaller associations. Because it is almost 70 years old by now, and has survived two violent changes of political regime, the settlement of returnees in Shashemene appears as a unique laboratory for the everyday practices of pan-Africanism.

#### RASTAFARI SETTLEMENTS IN OTHER AFRICAN COUNTRIES

Quite naturally, Rastafari have also settled in other African countries. What distinguishes Ethiopia from other countries, aside from the political will at the origin of the Shashemene land grant, is that it is almost only Rastafari returning there. Very few non-Rastafari go to live in Ethiopia, and they are often African-American educators. In other African countries, there is a wider diversity in the type of returnees, which include pan-Africanists, entrepreneurs, political activists, professionals, writers, and other religious congregations like the African Hebrew Israelites. This is due on the one hand to the difficulties of living in Ethiopia, a country that has restrictive laws with regards to foreigners, a very scarce use of the English language, and a specific culture that impregnates all aspects of everyday life (administration, calendar, religion, sociability, etc.). On the other hand, other African countries have something very important in common with the societies of the West, the Americas and the Caribbean: an experience of the convergence of racial policies and political violence, historically rooted in colonialism, and promoted by White supremacist regimes or by dictatorial regimes engaged in large-scale civil oppression.

The case of Ghana is probably best known as since its independence in 1957 President Kwame Nkrumah invited numerous African-American personalities, doctors and professionals: Trinidadian George Padmore was a member of his government and African-American W.E.B. Du Bois spent the last years of his life there. With this pan-Africanist orientation, and relatively peaceful changes of regimes, English-speaking Ghana acts as a magnet for would-be returnees. In 2014, thirty-five hundred returnees, including Rastafari, were counted in the country, even if many of them were without papers.<sup>10</sup> The Right of Abode, a specific

status promulgated in 2000 that is designed for people of African descent in the Diaspora, is mobilized for members of the Ghanaian Diaspora rather than for returnees. Eventually in December 2016, thirty-four African-Caribbean Diasporans were granted citizenship by Ghana; and in 2019, coined the “Year of Return”, the President of Ghana Nana Akufo-Addo granted citizenship to about 130 returnees. In Benin, the Famille Jah from Guadeloupe settled outside Ouidah with their four children in 1997. They have developed holistic agriculture, vegan restaurants and a school, and they are well known in the country and beyond thanks to the Cultural Embassy of the Diaspora and of Jah people they founded in 2001. They represent a major hub in the (French-speaking) African network of returnees. In Tanzania, the progressive politics of Julius Nyerere have facilitated the settlement of numerous people, including Black Panthers members and Rastafari (Bedasse 2017). There are reports of Rastafari settling in countries as varied as Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mali, Congo-Brazzaville and Niger. South Africa has a vibrant returnee community involved in numerous sectors including education, culture, entertainment, entrepreneurship and grassroots communities. However, there is yet no continental map or global numbers of returnees’ settlement, and many of those initiatives remain little known, even by local politicians or specialists of these countries.

Quite interestingly, the phenomenon of return is intimately related to the growth of an African Rastafari movement. Highly visible in Accra or Johannesburg, it is much less detectable elsewhere, even if there is evidence of their communities in Abidjan, Bamako or Nairobi for example. Historical mansions of Rastafari are sometimes known on the continent, through the works of particular individuals, and the cultural identity of Rastafari is often adopted by African youths despite the reluctance of their relatives and their society. Rastafari is given new significance in Africa, and some African Rastafari have developed elaborate interpretations putting in line Rastafari thought with their own specific cultural background. This is prevalent in South Africa, where Rastafari has grown to become a major force in the national, social, cultural, political and religious landscape (Chawane 2012, 188). It is fascinating how quickly Rastafari has become an endogenous feature of South Africa. Rastafari have local and national social and ritual institutions; they have developed herbal knowledge based on traditional uses and lobbied successfully for the right to use ganja, or *dagga* as it is called. In new township neighbourhoods, the settlement of Rastafari families is encouraged in order to provide impartial referees in conflicts involving the local community (Ross quoted by Laplante 2012, 98). In Cape Town, Rastafari control a significant part of the greens and vegetables market; and despite the violence and the injustice still felt by a majority of the population twenty-five years after the fall of Apartheid, dreadlocks are widespread and worn by professionals and even police officers. Access to land, self-sustainable communities and villages, and

music production appear as some of the areas of predilection for African Rastafari. In fact, the continent seems one of the places where Rastafari will undergo serious growth in the decades to come, which will in turn influence the very definition of what is Rastafari.

In November 2017, the All Africa Rastafari Gathering was held in Shashemene, Ethiopia. Born of the desire of returnee Ras Mweya Masimba to share continentally among Rastafari sustainable skills and trade, it was implemented thanks to the leadership of Sister Ijahnya Christian and the organizing committee based in Ethiopia. During a week, national representatives from Angola, Benin, Cameroon, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Malawi, South Africa, South Sudan, Seychelles and Zimbabwe were hosted in Shashemene. They produced a formal declaration with delegates from the United States, the United Kingdom, Brazil and the Caribbean, a co-production illustrated by a few words mentioning the “examples of Haile Selassie I and Empress Menen, infused with the universal principle of Ubuntu”.<sup>11</sup> Ubuntu is a word from Bantu languages widespread in central and southern Africa that defines humanity, or the bond of sharing that connects all humanity, and that acts now, in this particular context, as an African translation of the humanist aims of Rastafari. Under the auspices of the Nyahbinghi Order, participants joined in full nights of drumming and praise, an otherwise rare occurrence in Shashemene. The ubiquitous presence of dreadlocked Rastafari from all over Africa acted as a magnet to Ethiopian youths who observed and participated in the eventful week. Such an event while expanding Rastafari aesthetics in Ethiopia makes a powerful statement: history has been dividing African people for centuries, and now, the people have the power to create reunion and platforms uniting them in the name of Rastafari.<sup>12</sup>

On the threshold of the twenty-first century, repatriation finds a new breath with the debate on reparations, launched in the global arena at the occasion of the World Conference against Racism held by the United Nations in Durban in 2001. The significant political move of civil society and Caribbean states in particular towards getting reparations for slavery is unsettling European and African states, and intellectual communities, as they plead for revisiting the link between history and contemporary societies. Repatriation is among the ten-point plan pushed by CARICOM, the organization of Caribbean states, that is meeting a strong resistance and reluctance—to say the least—from many other states, including African states still dependent upon their good relations with their former colonizers (Beckles 2013). In fact, the role of African states is central in the unfolding of repatriation. The Diaspora Initiative developed by the African Union, the organization of African states since 2002, is supposed to give a place to the African Diaspora in the affairs of the continent. Despite numerous forums organized by the AU in the United States, the United Kingdom and the Caribbean, the main instrument of this initiative is an Institute of Remittances targeting the new African Diaspora, born of



colonial and postcolonial migrations. And the definition of Diaspora proposed by the AU does not mention the returnees who did not wait on any African state to settle in Africa. These institutional shortcomings regarding return are not surprising, but it is interesting to see how Rastafari and repatriation occupy a place in the international pan-African arena, including in the recent and rival 8th Pan African Congresses, held in 2014 in Johannesburg, and in 2015 in Accra.

### **CONCLUSION**

Repatriation to Africa is a cornerstone of Rastafari faith and livity, and, as well, it ties Rastafari with the broader experience of Black people in the Americas. It is simultaneously a very Jamaica-centred, Rastafari concern, and an internationalist issue located deep in the fabric of the pan-African idea. Return is a concept, a discursive space that gives ample room to political critique and mobilizes the imagination. At the same time, it is a practice, it is worked for, it is experienced, and it aims to overwrite the contours of historical geographies. While millions claimed return in the 1920s, only a handful of Rastafari settled in Africa, thanks to the organizations they built, and more recently, thanks to the determination of individuals and families. Repatriation is often still dismissed as a non-issue in Jamaican society in particular, but detailed studies do offer precious insights into the insertion of Rastafari into contemporary African societies and politics. Not to be assessed solely in terms of failure or success, return really talks about a certain idea of freedom, a freedom that no state, no government can hinder. This freedom is at the root of the pan-African project that historically ties Africa and the scattered Africans. Despite the many shortcomings of such a project, the returnees are some of its key actors, with Rastafari at the forefront, who contribute to redefining the central role of Africa in our contemporary world.

### **Notes**

- 1 From interview of author with Brother Trika, Shashemene, October 2002.
- 2 The term repatriation is usually used in the social sciences to designate the return of a population to their country of origin. The term implies that it is a government-sponsored movement, or a movement backed by international agreements. Despite the overall absence of government support to the repatriation claimed by Rastafari and other descendants of Africans, it is used in this text in line with Rastafari’s uses. It is here interchangeable with the term return, which opens a wider perspective on the same mobility (going back, going home, back and forth, etc.).
- 3 See for example some of my publications in English: Bonacci (2011; 2012; 2013; 2015a; 2015b; 2016; 2018).
- 4 Ethiopianism is an ideology that ties intimately racial, religious and political interpretations and that runs deep in time and space, as some of its occurrences can

be traced to the USA, the Caribbean, Brazil, as well as Western, Central and Southern Africa, and Ethiopia. For the USA, see for example William Scott (2004), and for an analysis of Ethiopianism vs. Egyptocentrism and Afrocentrism, see Bonacci (2019).

- 5 There are other classical examples of return, beyond the cases of Sierra Leone and Liberia. We can think in particular to the “return” of Afro-Brazilians to the Gold Coast after 1835; and to Haiti. Haiti, the first republic born in 1804 out of a successful slave revolt was hoped to become an alternative to Liberia, in particular by some pan-Africanist activists in the United States.
- 6 These terms are vernacular landmarks and refer to divine intervention (fireball) and to Marcus Garvey’s project of a fleet (Black Star Line) that would connect and increase trade and exchanges between Africa and the Diaspora—brilliantly conveyed by Fred Locks in his reggae hit “Black Star Liner” (1976).
- 7 These numbers are taken from a 2003 survey on the Rastafari community undertaken by the Ethiopian government. In 2017, estimations are that about 800 Rastafari live in Shashemene, with about 400 more Rastafari settled in Addis Ababa and in Baher Dar, close to Lake Tana in the north of the country.
- 8 While oral tradition and vernacular history within Rastafari often quotes 1948 or 1955 as the year land was granted, archival research points to 1950. Future documentation from the Ethiopian archives might contribute to additional information regarding dates.
- 9 Ethiopian society and administration functions with the Julian calendar that is annually constituted by thirteen months, starts on 11 September, and is seven to eight years “behind” the Gregorian calendar in use in Western societies.
- 10 Sister Imahkush, a US returnee in Ghana, mentioned these figures at the occasion of the 8th Pan African Congress held in January 2014 in Johannesburg, Republic of South Africa.
- 11 This phrase is taken from the Shashemene Declaration, a text produced at the end of the All Africa Rastafari Gathering in 2017, and translated as well in French. For the full text, see <http://rastaites.com/africa-rastafari-gathering-shashemene-declaration/> (accessed 4 December 2017).
- 12 I want to thank Dr. Jahlani Niaah and Sister Berenice Morizeau for their kind sharing of the details of this week-long All Africa Rastafari Gathering held in Shashemene in 2017.

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