2012

Yes, Rasta! : Authenticating Rastafarianism in a Coastal Kenyan Context

Katia Iverson
Augsburg College

Follow this and additional works at: https://idun.augsburg.edu/honors_review
Part of the African Languages and Societies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://idun.augsburg.edu/honors_review/vol5/iss1/9

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate at Idun. It has been accepted for inclusion in Augsburg Honors Review by an authorized editor of Idun. For more information, please contact bloomber@augsburg.edu.
“Yes, Rasta!”: Authenticating Rastafarianism in a Coastal Kenyan Context

Katia Iverson, Augsburg College

This May will mark the completion of Katia Iverson’s undergraduate career at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Minnesota with a degree in Cross-cultural Studies and Spanish. Her academic interests include internal migration and resettlement, interdependence, and language studies. Following her graduation, Katia will be working in Minneapolis as a refugee settlement intern.
Abstract

The following research seeks to describe, organize and understand the perceptions and interpretations of Rastafarianism in Lamu, Kenya. Those who identify with Rasta are categorized by beliefs, goals and lifestyle and these facets are briefly compared to traditional Rastafarianism coming out of Jamaica in the early 1930s and globalized Rastafari movements today. The role of tourism, Kenya's colonial and post-colonial history, and Islamic tradition in Lamu's Rasta movement are also taken into consideration.
Introduction and Rationale

After multiple unsolicited conversations with self-proclaimed *Rasta* men in Lamu Town, I began to recognize themes and inconsistencies within the *Rasta* identity, and started to consider the idea that there might be something deeper than costume to these potential Rastafarians on the eastern coast of Kenya. Some of the interactions I had with these men and boys emphasized Bob Marley and reggae music as foundations of Rastafarianism, others placed a peaceful, conscious mindset at the center of their *Rasta* identity. I ultimately settled on the topic of Rastafarian identity because I truly hoped that I could tap into an understanding of a coastal community which is misunderstood by most of greater society—including their families, neighbors and friends. Rastafarian identity, which I will unpack in subsequent pages, is both an established culture in Lamu and an incredibly flexible identity, ever-changing with waves of tourists and international media.

My goal at the beginning of the project was to outline the intersections of Islam and Rastafarian beliefs and practices. What I moved toward was both a definition of Rastafarianism in Lamu and an organization of the various interpretations of Rastafarian thought there: two untouched tasks that remained essential to the legitimization of an ever-changing, established human identity in coastal Kenya.

Definitions

The term Rastafarianism generally refers to the roots of the movement, the traditional Rastafarian doctrine and practitioners coming out of Jamaica in the 1930s and following decades. This research, however, also includes analysis based on Modern Rastafarianism, interpretations of Rastafarianism in the post-colonial era and Rastafarian thought specific to the Kenyan coast. In the next paragraphs I account for common terms and ideas used to more easily distinguish between the various Rastafarian movements, Rastafarian slang or *dread language*, and the categories of Rastafarianism specific to Lamu that were established for the purpose of this research. It is important to note that there remains no formal creed of Rastafarians, so all interpretations are to be viewed as part of an ever changing and expanding social movement.

**Traditional Rastafarianism** refers to beliefs, practices and doctrines established by Rastafarians in Jamaica in the 1930s up through the time of Bob Marley, a key figurehead within the movement, whose life ended in 1981. Leonard E. Barrett Sr., an expert at the time of writing in 1977, documented six basic
principles of Traditional Rastafarianism:
The six basic principles of Traditional Rastafarianism as defined by Leonard E. Barrett Sr., an expert at the time of writing in 1977:

"Haile Selassie I is the living God."
"The black person is the reincarnation of ancient Israel who, at the hand of the white person, has been in exile in Jamaica."
"The white person is inferior to the black."
"Jamaica is hell, Ethiopia is heaven."
"Selassie is arranging for expatriated persons of African origin to return to Ethiopia."

"In the near future blacks shall rule the world."

You may have noticed that the basic principles of Traditional Rastafarianism reflect black racial dominance and the role of “white” as enemy. As Haile Selassie secured leadership in Ethiopia and black Jamaicans remained colonized by outsiders, a kind of liberation theory emerged in which Ethiopia (and Selassie) were resounding saviors to the powerless blacks. Placing Ethiopia as “heaven on earth” and claiming black dominance gave hope to generations of impoverished Jamaicans who saw little hope in their native communities.

Modern Rastafarianism is defined, here, by the ten tenets of belief established by Michael Jagessar in 1991. This updated understanding of Rastafarianism was established to define its modern implications which might additionally apply to non-African practitioners of the movement including those outside of Jamaica. This interpretation deemphasizes the role of Haile Selassie I and Black superiority and begins to emphasize the role of industrialization and capitalism in “Babylon.” Listed below are some beliefs which define Rastafarianism in some contexts today. It is important to read this list simply to better understand the grand changes that Rasta has undergone as it moves and is adopted by diverse people groups.

Modern Rastafarian Beliefs:

"God is found within every man."
"God is in history: all historical facts are to be viewed in the context of God's judgment and work."
"Salvation is earthly rather than heavenly."
"Respect for nature including animals and the environment."
"Power of speech: enables the presence and power of God to be felt."
"Evil is corporate: sin is personal and corporate."
"Judgment is near."
"Priesthood of the Rasta: rastas are chosen people and on earth to promote their power and peacefulness."

Other important concepts when learning to understand Rastafarianism, today or in history, are Babylon and Zion. **Babylon** refers to institutions and corporations within a society which oppress its common people. **Zion**, originally used to refer to Ethiopia as heaven, is more generally used in reference to "a better life," or afterlife. These terms and historical considerations are helpful foundations as we begin to consider complex incarnations of the religion in Lamu, Kenya during the time of this field study.

**Methodology**

My methods for research included brief inquiries, informal interviews, participant-observation and strict observation. I began with informal interviews of individuals who had previously self-identified as Rastas, and followed their suggestions for further interviews. To minimize stereotyping, I interviewed individuals of all ages, social identities and genders. Unfortunately my Rasta interview base lacks female respondents as I was only introduced to one female who identified as Rasta.

Other limitations include community privacy and language access. Because association with Rastas is not necessarily a relationship one seeks to publicly establish in Lamu, there were individuals who may have avoided my inquiries or may have provided less information to me than was available to them. Also, most interviews were conducted in English and Swahili, though I did not have access to formal translation which limited my interview base to those with fluid English skills.

As a final count on informants and interviewees, I spoke with 15 outsiders and 18 Rastafarians in Lamu. Outsiders include Muslim and Christian religious leaders and practitioners, business owners, neighbors and family members of Rastas. Rastafarians include one Traditional rasta, five rasta Artists, eight Pwani rastas and four Heart rastas. Each of these Rasta categories comes from this research's outcomes, so their titles will become clearer as you read further.

**Historical Introduction**

Rastafarianism began with the crowning of Ras Tafari Makonnen as Emperor of Ethiopia in the year 1930, better known by his name upon leadership, Haile Selassie I meaning "Power of the Trinity" (New York Times). At that time, Jamaicans were fighting for their livelihood under an oppressive British colonial system and many saw Selassie's appointment as an affirmation of his majesty.
Rastafarians were those that believed he was the living God, the second coming of Jesus Christ, an idea which they found Biblical backing for in verses stating, “Princes shall come out of Egypt,” and “Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands to God” (New York Times). Traditional Rastafarians also believed, and some continue to believe, that Selassie was the beginning of a movement of all peoples of African ancestry back to their homeland, His Majesty’s courts, Ethiopia. The religious movement of Rastafarianism thus began as one of hope for emancipation from colonial structure and oppression (sometimes referred to as ‘Babylon’) and an exodus to paradise (‘Zion’ among many practitioners of Rasta). The first commune of Rastafarians was founded in Jamaica by Leonard Howell in the year 1940 (New York Times).

Rasta Goes Global

The movement gained momentum with the appearance of Jamaican dancehall, reggae artist Robert Nesta Marley, commonly known as Bob Marley, circa 1964. Along with his band The Wailers, Marley climbed to the top of the Jamaican music scene and, in time, gained international fame for both his reggae music and his religious values which were deeply rooted in Rastafarianism and are highly evident in his music. In 1976 Bob Marley and the Wailers were awarded the title “Band of the Year” by Rolling Stone Magazine, and in 1978 Marley himself was awarded the United Nations’ Peace Medal of the Third World. By this time he was internationally recognized as a highly moral, albeit rebellious, and talented musician with fans worldwide taking note of his dreaded hairstyle, positive attitude and message, and focus on unification of all peoples. Bob Marley has remained highly popular throughout the world since his death in 1981, releasing reggae’s best selling album of all time, “Legend,” three years after his death. Despite his personal success, many point to Marley as the key figurehead of global Rastafarianism, an expert at the Smithsonian Museum in New York stating in 2008, “What Selassie did in the political realm, Marley did in the cultural realm giving Rastafari ideas worldwide distribution (New York Times).

An Ever-changing Doctrine

Since its inception in the 1930s, Rastafarianism has changed and grown moving away from some of its traditional core beliefs. What began as a sort of black empowerment theology has, in many newer interpretations, become a movement focused on self-liberation of the mind, the divinity of our selves and our earth, and a mistrust for material wealth, industry and corporation (Jagessar). Its relatively young age as well as the introduction of widespread globalization through
the internet and increased access to international travel have resulted in movement experts, like Carole Yawney, calling Rastafari an institution of “globalization used in a counter-hegemonic sense,” that is, globalization which empowers the marginalized individual rather than the dominant structure (Yawney). The origins of globalized or “modern Rastafarianism” have been thought to be attributable to three major “crises of capitalism” in recent history: the early twentieth century, 1930s to 1960s nationalist struggles and the present period of structural adjustment by organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Turner).

Globalization of Rastafarianism has also caused some to ask whether Rasta, a movement coming out of a relatively small, oppressed group of colonized Jamaicans eighty years ago, is truly Rastafarianism when its exported. Yawney asks another important question in regards to this, “Can [Rasta] be adopted by others without being appropriated by them?” These inquiries around authenticity and “real Rasta” raise controversy over the validity of the religion and bring many outsiders to disapprove of the Rasta and his identity. James Clifford, a postmodern critic of the movement, urges researchers to recognize the authenticity of all interpretations, not only focusing on the “rooted” and the “native,” but equally on the “hybrid and cosmopolitan” which exist among the diaspora.

Taking these accounts into consideration it becomes important to recognize the setting in which any one interpretation of Rastafarianism has come to be. Yawney further reminds researchers of the importance of any place's history and present setting when she writes,

“*The formative history of the Rasta...demonstrates that a number of cultural themes were strategically and creatively woven together in response to local and global events.*”

As with any religion or idea which spreads outside of its place of origin, certain cultural norms and values will add to, eliminate, emphasize and deemphasize elements of the original doctrine and its intended interpretation. Again, interpretations of Rastafarianism are especially prone to interpretational shifting at the present time because it is a young religion which is spreading across vast distances and entering settings with new social challenges, new cultural norms, new language and new communities of practitioners.

**Historic Ties to Rasta in Kenya**

Kenya presents a particularly interesting setting for the flourishing of Rastafarian interpretations because of a shared history of British colonization, its own group of dreadlock-wearing rebel freedom fighters, the Mau Mau, and its present status as a post-colonial, developing nation. The Mau Mau were an anti-
colonial rebel group, dominated by members of Kenya's Kikuyu tribe, who came together to oppose the British colonial structure. They were banned by the British authorities in 1950, and by 1952 the Mau Mau had forced the declaration of a state of emergency in the country. In 1956, an estimated 11,000 rebels had been killed, along with 100 Europeans and 2,000 African loyalists. 20,000 people were detained and pressured to convert their political views and eliminate nationalist aspirations. The Mau Mau set the stage for Kenyan independence and the election of one of their leaders, Jomo Kenyatta, as Prime Minister in 1963. Their uprising and violent resistance sent motivation to all of Africa in hopes of fighting colonization and seeking native independence. The ban on Mau Mau was lifted in 2003. The Mau Mau have been linked to the Rastafari movement through the dreadlocked hair of many of the rebels as well as their anti-colonial mission (Turner).

Many of those wearing dreadlocks during the Moi era, following Kenyatta, report a great deal of harassment by the Kenyan police who, many say, blatantly profiled and searched young men and women who fit the stereotype for using drugs or carrying other illegal substances. The Las Angeles Times published a short blurb in 2003 after Moi left office recognizing a Kenyan activist who had vowed, thirteen years prior, to keep his dreadlocks until Moi left power. He said, at the time, that he “hopes [Moi's departure from office] means that we have the power to begin fighting these problems.”

The current situation is much less blatantly oppressive than colonial government; however, many postcolonial structures have continued to function in a manner oppressive to the common Kenyan. There are remnants of colonization and postcolonial challenges in the way that foreign aid programs function within the country, an ongoing struggle to establish English as a language of business while maintaining deteriorating Kiswahili roots, and in many regions a continued dependence on foreign investment and tourism for the fulfillment of basic needs and decent livelihood (Abdulaziz). Especially in the Coast province, tourism remains a leading source of income. Simultaneously, the Kenyan government is plagued by tribal alliances and corruption which is now being targeted by the Kenyan people as an obvious detriment to their development as an independent nation (Jama).

Case Study: Lamu Town, Kenya

The historic roots and global spread of Rasta beliefs are wholly evident in the small, traditional Swahili town of Lamu, Kenya. Lamu Town is a highly traditional Muslim town located on the Lamu Archipelago on the eastern coast of Kenya. The economy of Lamu is centered on tourism, especially since its declaration by the
United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a World Heritage site in 2001. Long before that, Lamu Town was a favorite living space for hippies traveling from India to Lamu because of its connection to the Indian Ocean as well as a welcoming and well-maintained traditional Swahili and Muslim culture.

Nowadays the powers of globalization have hit the island of Lamu and traditional Lamu Old Town. Facebook.com is now used as a means for dating within a culture where male-female relationships are generally inappropriate unless there is intention to marry. Secondhand clothing is imported from the United States and elsewhere; football jerseys, tennis shoes and the latest electronics are imported from Dubai. In her piece, "Rastafari and the New Society: Caribbean and East African Feminist Roots..." Terisa Turner suggests that such "communications revolutions" have been "central" to the emergence of social movements around the world—the spread of Rastafarianism a "dramatic example" of this communicative power, the music of reggae as its "harbinger" (Turner).

All of this connection to the outside world occurs alongside traditional Swahili culture of Lamu. Small, informal shops line the streets selling minor essentials and treats while carts are pulled past carrying sacks of charcoal for cooking and cart hospital patients from their homes. Donkeys roam the town, haul goods from shore to store and interact with enthused tourists.

In "Veils and Videos," Minou Fuglesang writes specifically about the present effects of tourism on the youth and society of Lamu. She writes, "Many community leaders worry about the impact of tourism," and recognizes that tourist consumption has also affected the way that the community of Lamu views consumption and possession which now work as "tools of dreams, communication, confrontation, as well as identity," (Fuglesang). This is visible in the way that Lamuians act and hold themselves in daily interactions and in the increased emphasis on individual appearance and identity. So called "beach boys" in Lamu hold a particularly interesting role in that much of their daily work centers on tourist interactions and fitting into the tourist's expectations for his or her holiday.

There is a rightful concern regarding tourism at this time because it commands so much of the economy of Lamu and affects the lives of its residents. Tourism has overtaken Lamu in that literally all sectors are linked to foreign consumption. As an outsider walking around town, constant inquiries and invitations are directed toward you. Offers of heena painting, dhow trips, jewelry, and "authentic Swahili meals" are commonplace for the visitor. As much as tourism benefits Lamu, it's difficult to overlook the desperation in the eyes of many Lamuians who rely daily on outsider consumption.
Complex Identities

One of the major challenges I faced when exploring the generic question “Who are the Rastas in Lamu?” was the mixture of identities and interpretations of Rastafarianism that I experienced very early on in my research. When I spoke to the community outside of Rasta, all Rastas were put into one category: they were Lamu’s “beach boys” who, in the eyes of the majority, wear dreadlocks, smoke marijuana, and use their status as Rasta to create relationships with wazungu (foreigners) in hopes of personal gain via financial help, partnership, or a visa out of Kenya.

Conversely, those who identified as Rasta did not necessarily place all other Rastas in their particular category or interpretation of the movement. While this creates somewhat of a mess in terms of conclusive research and data collection, I found it useful to clump interviewees, and their companions with similar interpretations of the movement, into loose categories of Rasta (see Figure 1, Appendix A). While I recognize that no individual’s interpretation is the same as any other, these categories aid in understanding the way that Rastafarianism has been interpreted given the current situation in Kenya and Lamu and are based on appearance, values and lifestyle.

Physical Identities

How do you find a Rastafarian in a crowd? In general, my inclination is to “Look for dreadlocks!” Interestingly, while many of those who identify with Rastafarianism sport locks, there is a whole side of Rasta interpretation in Lamu that does not necessitate dreadlocks (called rastas on the coast) at all. In my encounters with these individuals, I gave them the nickname “heart Rastas” because they are easily identifiable by their catchphrase, “Rasta is in the heart.” Heart Rastas hold the same core values as the dreaded Rasta, but may only sport Rastawear (Bob Marley tees and accessories or Rasta colors) or may not outwardly wear anything Rasta-affiliated at all. While these individuals often go unrecognized as Rastas by the greater community, they maintain Rasta status among other Rastas and those that understand the movement on the coast more fully. The heart Rastas beg an interesting question regarding what it means to be Rasta on the coast. While most assume that a Rasta must have certain outward qualities, they have taken the identity to a new level by holding onto a set of values based on coastal Rastafarianism which do not, for them, necessitate dreadlocks or any other outward display of commitment to the movement. The heart Rastas are especially important in establishing the validity of the Rastafarian movement on the coast because they combat the widespread belief that the Rasta is simply a costume inspired by Marley
and put on for the tourist.

On the other side of things, the more recognizable Rastas are those that sport dreadlocks. However, it is important to note that not all individuals who wear dreadlocks identify with Rastafarianism. On the Kenyan coast, anyone who wears dreadlocks receives a related nickname, something like “Rasta” or “Natty,” and is called that name by both peer and stranger. I had many experiences with this phenomenon as my own dreadlocks had established a street name for me before I realized that it was mine. Walking around the streets in Mombasa upon arrival I started to notice that people shouting “Rita Marley!” were everywhere! I soon realized that I was Rita Marley, Bob Marley’s female counterpart. In the same vein, restaurant workers with dreadlocks are often summoned by Kenyan guests with calls of “Rasta” and “Dread,” as are dreaded individuals among local friends. Whether a person identifies with the Rasta movement or not, such nicknames link all dreadlocks to Rastafarian identity.

Influences of Islam

While coastal Rastas may be able to distinguish between those that wear dreadlocks for fashion and those that identify with the movement, the greater community generally does not. In Lamu, all of those who wear dreadlocks are submitted to the same stereotypes and assumptions whether Pwani (Rasta beach boy), artist, or follower of traditional Rastafarianism. Dreadlocks are a common sight on the island, but are not widely accepted by the mostly Muslim, Swahili community in Lamu. For example, despite the fact that most of the Pwani identify as Muslim in addition to Rasta, the wearing of dreadlocks and the “beach boy” lifestyle are looked down upon because they break traditional culture norms and disappoint the expectations of older generations. Both Christian and Muslim traditions are evident throughout the town of Lamu and while Muslims dominate Swahili culture, Rastas are an agreed upon outlier among both groups.

Several community members outside the movement stated that Rastas are seen as “outsiders” and “strangers” in Lamu society. When asked why they were viewed in this way, I found that most Muslim community members believed that this feeling of “outsider” comes from the fact that dreadlocks are, reportedly, seen as “unclean” within Islam. One young man suggested a traditional belief that says long hair is “a place where devils can get caught,”—a sentiment which is rooted in both Muslim and traditional African belief. While most community members didn’t themselves have a problem with dreadlocks, they recognize a foundational tradition of purity and cleanliness for the purpose of traditional Muslim practices such as ablution before prayer, hajj, and sexual relations. Thus, dreaded individuals...
discussed being constantly reminded by parents and community elders to cut their hair in order to show cleanliness, respect and good character. Even within the language of Kiswahili, there is a relationship between being clean, *safisha*, and being morally well, *safi*.

While popular Muslim thought necessitates the cutting of dreads under Islam, the reality is that mosques in Lamu allow dreadlocks. After a group of dreaded individuals approached one of the mosques in Lamu concerned about having to cut their dreadlocks, elders came together to discuss the subject of dread cleanliness. The result was dreadlocks being deemed acceptable both when entering the mosque on a daily basis, practicing tradition and within proper Muslim marriages, as long as the locks were properly washed—“water must be able to reach the scalp to clean.” Despite this reality, common belief in Lamu remains that dreadlocks should be cut. This is true among Seventh Day Adventists as well. One practitioner stated that although no one would keep an individual with dreadlocks from entering the church, dreadlocks are not worn among Christians in the town.

In line with some sects of traditional Rastafarianism which are strictly against the cutting of any body hair, the cutting of dreadlocks is not done often or taken lightly in the community of Lamu. Most often, dreadlocks are cut off completely as a result of pressure from one's family or the community which, as discussed previously, is generally rooted in claims of uncleanness. After a dreaded individual cuts his or her dreads, many work hard to maintain their identity within Rastafarianism and discuss their deceased dreadlocks when the opportunity arises and generally reassure the listener that they fully intend to re-grow the locks as soon as possible.

The Kenyan police have also taken to cutting the hair of individuals who are taken into their custody, which several of my contacts had experienced. For Rastas, this has created a pride attached to long dreadlocks which signify good behavior (having not been detained by the police for any reason) and a commitment to maintaining dreadlocks. If a Muslim has to cut his or her dreadlocks for personal reasons (pressure from family, religious affiliation, etc.), he or she generally waits until Ramadan which is seen as an inconspicuous time to rid oneself of dreadlocks. Some will only trim half of their locks to show respect for their Muslim religion while maintaining dreadlocks for the sake of Rasta identity. During this time the community, both Rasta and non-Rasta, will associate the haircut with religious piety rather than trouble with the police or otherwise.

Pressure to remove dreadlocks is heavy on the coast despite the fact that they are a common sight. With religious communities, families and the government against the dreaded individual, why have dreadlocks at all? In Lamu,
each category of Rasta has his own reasoning behind the keeping of dreadlocks. For the traditional Rasta who follows an original Jamaican doctrine closely, dreadlocks are kept because body hair is not to be cut. Locks are in line with his religion and hold great importance (Kaka). The artists’ reasons for keeping dreads are diverse, as their identification with Rasta is also diverse. In general, though, dreadlocks are worn to show solidarity within the movement and a commitment to quiet rebellion against the greater system (Wright).

Tourism and the Pwani Rasta

The Pwani Rasta is, in most cases, holds different reasoning all together. Because he works on the shore, often as a crew member or captain of a dhow, his appearance becomes important because he is working with tourists who, ultimately, supply his livelihood. The Pwani is highly visible within the greater community and uses his appearance to gain recognition among peers and potential clients (Wright). Although the artists and even traditional Rastas may incorporate Rasta imagery and symbolism to market their work, the Pwani’s personal identity is tied to his appearance as Rasta and the tourists’ response to that identity.

Despite many of the Pwanis deeper commitments to Rastafarianism as a movement, the use of Rasta appearance to attract tourists creates a sharp divide between the Pwani and other groups of Rastas and the community. When Pwani Rastas were brought up among the artist Rasta groups, they were dismissed as actors. When I spoke to my main contact for traditional Rastafarianism about the topic he stated, “For many in Lamu [Rasta] is a fashion they’ve accepted, I cannot speak for their hearts.”

Here it becomes hard to distinguish between those with actual Rasta beliefs and those who simply wear the fashion, but I feel it is important to recognize that this phenomenon is occurring and that Rasta identity on the coast has depreciated in the eyes of the community and many Rastas because of it. Community interviews continually reinforced the idea that the dreaded man on shore is simply out to get a mzungu who can serve as a companion or a visa out of the country. A self-identified “friend of the beach boys” who came to Lamu from Nairobi has a blunt perspective on the topic. “What you see are guys trying to [have sex with] a mzungu…they are my friends but they are sleezy when it comes to this.” Interestingly, the common belief among male youth (around the ages of 15-25) in Lamu is that if one grows dreadlocks, he will be exponentially more attractive to the white woman. Young Swahili women are also aware of this belief, but many fight it saying that it is possible to be with a mzungu woman even without dreadlocks. Dreadlocks have even been nicknamed “fishing lines” among those who interact with tourists on
a consistent basis, the implication being that it is easier to “catch” a mzungu with the dreads working for oneself. For a while it seems that this method was effective for many dreaded beach boys, but the frequency of wazungu actually providing an opportunity for locals to leave the country has decreased greatly “due to negative perceptions of Islam and Coastal communities [tied to piracy] in the West.”

But it seems that the men on the coast have not given up. Upon arrival in Lamu, one Heart Rasta says he was approached by a dreaded beach boy and told that he should walk around Shela, the nearby tourist hot spot, for he’d be likely to catch a mzungu because of his good facial features, long hair and overall “good look.” It becomes apparent in interactions like this one that the Pwani Rastas and beach boys are as involved in the needs and expectations of female tourists as they are in their daily work on the shore.

During a combined seven weeks in Lamu Town, I observed eight couples which paired local men with dreadlocks and white, visiting women. The more I kept my eyes open to these relationships, the more I realized that many of the local men were experts at appearing attractive to the wazungu. One man recalled an occurrence from two years prior. A couple had come to Lamu for their honeymoon, he remembered, and two nights later the bride had dropped her groom for a local beach boy. A handful of the more forward dreadlocked men changed partners on a bi-weekly or monthly basis and others, reportedly, have seasonal relationships in which women fly to visit at staggered dates throughout the year. While some of the relationships turn out to be legitimate, there is a fine line between the mutual, happy relationship and the one which pairs a struggling coastal Rasta and a playful, vacationing Western woman.

**Global Trends**

Upon doing more research which focused on the key words “dreadlocks,” “Rasta,” “sex” and “tourist,” I found a handful of strong sources which place the “mzungu- hungry 'beach boy'” in an array of different contexts around the world. In her chapter entitled “Tourist-Oriented Prostitution in Barbados: The Case of the Beach Boy and the White Female Tourist,” Joan L. Phillips offers her perspective on the fascination of Western females with the Rasta. She argues that the core of the issue is the privileged, Western woman’s outlook on travel:

“...an arena to test out new notions of a liberated femininity that goes in quest of the sexual other, an other who is endowed with a primitive masculinity that can no longer be found in the West.”

In Lamu, there is a history of this type of Western-local relationship going wrong. Tens of men in the past few years have been pulled off the island by
researchers, tourists and students to go to "a better life," and shoved back a few years later for countless reasons including an equal struggle for survival and happiness on the other side of the world. There is no telling whether this momentary freedom from a tourist-driven society is the goal of Rasta, but it seems that it functions as an outcome for some. Such relationships are even being had in Jamaica where Rastafarianism is a native belief system. The fact that this situation is being replayed around the world in various contexts is an indicator that there is something bigger and more destructive than international flings occurring.

**Substance Use and Abuse**

Despite the widespread popularity of Rastas amongst themselves, the dreaded Rastas in all categories of the movement are particularly looked down upon by the higher community of government officials, business owners, religious leaders and, in many cases, their own families. They are the target of disappointment for all Rastas—both dreaded and undreaded—for they represent the typical bangi smoker to the greater community.

Almost everyone in the small town of Lamu seems to be connected to dreadlocks or Rastas on some level of kinship, although many of those people in higher positions in the community seem to be blind to any Rasta relations they have. It's these higher powers, namely government forces, that maintain a level of anti-Rasta uptightness that associates the illusion of angry rebellion with Rasta in all categories.

The greatest complaint and accusation toward the Rasta in Lamu is the alleged use of bangi. While alcohol and intoxicating drugs have been deemed haramu (illegal) under Islamic law because they are blatantly harmful in demonstrable ways, the smoking of bangi (also referred to as ganja and dawa dawa) and chewing miraa are controversial within the Muslim community. The debate goes on about whether they are to be haramu as well (Fuglesang).

The smoking of bangi is one aspect of Rastafarianism that Lamuian Rastas can all agree upon. Whether or not my interviewees personally indulge in the drug, all of those that I spoke with agreed that marijuana has benefits for all who take it. Their smoking of the plant has lead to a community which blames the Rastas and beach boys for most of their drug problems when, in reality, Rastas are apparently contributing very little to the sale, trade and consumption of any harder drugs.

The Rastas say that the main benefits of marijuana use are meditation and freedom from "one's self." They claim that those who use marijuana find relief from worry, depression and are given a new perspective. Other stated
benefits of marijuana use were increased concentration and confidence in daily activities such as work, interactions with customers and friends, and any creative endeavors in between. Among some Rastas the drug is referred to as the "holy herb" used for the purposes of meditation and art. An older Rasta man stated that smoking allows him to "know his mind" and was always beneficial "in small amounts." Many of the Pwani Rastas say that smoking once or twice throughout the day gives them the confidence to interact with potential tourist clients wholeheartedly. Smoking is not a must for any Rasta. It does not appear as an essential value of the movement in either the traditional or modern value sets, though it is generally valued among the Rastas in Lamu.

To the Rasta, both traditionally and among many in Lamu today, alcohol is a much more serious substance. Alcohol is not widely available in Lamu because the town is dominated by Muslims who generally do not consume alcohol, thus much of the community is readily in line with the traditional Rastafarian perspective which is anti-alcohol. Among my interviewees, the topic of alcohol was one of the most uncomfortable subjects to discuss in my entire set of discussion points. Most Rastas stated that alcohol was technically bad, but okay in limited consumption. The traditional Rasta is the outlier here in that he, like the Jamaican Rasta, avoids alcohol completely. While I was impressed by the fact that all Rastas expressed a need for caution and restraint when consuming alcohol, I was not surprised to encounter a handful of them, from both Pwani and artist groups, highly intoxicated on various occasions.

Finally, harder drugs such as cocaine, heroin and methamphetamines are present in Lamu as well. To my knowledge, I never encountered a Rasta in Lamu who dabbled in any of these substances. In general, these drugs are referred to as "shit drugs," among well-behaved Rasta youth, and are seen as a great problem among the coming generation in Lamu. Those who use such drugs are, in most cases, avoided by the dedicated Rasta.

Beliefs, Values & Lifestyle

In Lamu, Rasta appearance has ultimately become a fashion trend among, mainly, male youth. Aside from traditional urgings not to cut the hair, nothing within the modern doctrine or globalized literature defines a necessary Rasta appearance, although it is the appearance that has spread more quickly than Rasta values and practice. The spread of the image is often attributed to Bob Marley whose rapid, global popularity brought attention to the Rasta image. Marley also popularized reggae music which is lyrically filled with traditional Rasta values and doctrine. For example, in one of his most popular works, "Redemption Song," Marley sings about
the history of the Jamaican people under colonization and their redemption by "the Almighty," Jah Rastafari. Rather than simply stating his personal attachment to colonialism, he goes on to prescribe a solution to colonization for his listeners—

"Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds. Have no fear for atomic energy, 'cause none of them can stop the time. How long shall they kill our prophets while we stand aside and look?"

--His solution, the ability to find freedom through one's internal self and inherent power, is one which is applicable to the people of Jamaica at the time of the songs release and continues to be reinterpreted and followed in places like Lamu, Kenya today. This is just one example amidst hundreds of songs. His words have been adopted by Rastas in Lamu Town and are highly respected among the Rasta. While tee shirts and dhow flags of Marley's face are clustered throughout town, suggesting some sort of fashionable Rasta trend, the individual values and beliefs of most Rastas in Lamu Town incorporate many of the core values that Marley has brought to Lamu, some even look to him as a prophet, but most see him as a strong and successful leader. A brief outline of core Rasta beliefs and values as stated by the four groups of Rastas is below in Figure 2.

Figure 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value/Belief</th>
<th>Pwani</th>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Heart</th>
<th>Traditional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unity among all people</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rastaman is a good example</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rastaman is an honest man</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meditation opens the mind</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God is omnipresent</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One can learn from all people</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rasta is freedom</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope is necessary for contentment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The extent to which Rasta culture Marley's message of personal agency despite oppression resonate with globalized places like the Swahili of Lamu is dependent upon the state of the existing culture. The values that a culture identifies with will more likely be adopted or adapted whereas completely foreign values and beliefs will likely be disregarded. Rasta lends itself well to the combination of established values, beliefs and circumstances existent in Lamu today, as evident in Figure 2. I never handed out a survey or solicited specific information about
individuals' beliefs; I simply listened to what they wanted to tell me. Rooted in the current Kenyan coastal situation and traditional Swahili culture, but complimented by the adoption of Marley's philosophies by many Rastas in Lamu, two key points stand out in the attitudes and actions of Lamu people: freedom and unity.

Much like Traditional and Modern definitions of Rastafarianism, interviews in Lamu suggest that freedom from the self, from society and from Lamu's post-colonial situation remain important. Related to this is the need for unity—the coming together of struggling and affluent people for the sake of understanding one another and healing wounds.

Globalization has introduced countless phenomena to the people of Lamu, but the Rasta identity has managed to survive and flourish on the coast. The argument from movement outsiders is that Rastas on the coast are simply "imitating" a movement and culture they know very little about. This perspective, however, does not take into account the origins of Rastafarianism or its development upon globalization. The Rastafarian movement cannot be limited to "traditional" and "imitative offshoots" because it has no formal doctrine or holy book. Its value systems come out of those communities who adopt the core of the movement because it resonates with them. Thus, the fact that Rastas on the coast keep their Muslim faith (many Pwani) or refuse to define themselves solely as Rastas (true for the artists I met) is a non-issue. Rasta movements throughout its spread have been characterized by the societal issues they encounter and the core values which they establish as useful within their particular situation. The vast dissimilarity between traditional and modern values outlined in the "Definitions" session of this document is a strong indicator of this ever-changing movement (Barrett, Jagessar). The core values of Rasta in Lamu is the unity, freedom and empowerment, and each Rasta group outlined here has found its way toward that core.

For the Pwani, the marketability of their appearance and personal identity has become the focus of the community and tourists; however, many of the Pwani and beach boys are highly involved in youth empowerment and activism within the community of Lamu. The establishment of the dhow organization Promise Ahadi was the result of beach boys and Pwani Rastas organizing themselves for their benefit, functioning like a union, and the benefit of tourists who could, then, have fixed prices for dhow trips and other related services. Pwani Rasta have also organized to establish anti-drug campaigns targeting hard drug use in Lamu and waste management initiatives. Many of the Pwani Rastas are also involved in local government campaigns to elect fresh leaders.

The artists market Rasta symbols combined with Lamu, African and native Kikuyu influences in much of their artwork (Wright). They recognize the benefit in
catering to the desires of tourists, but do so in a way which preserves their personal identities within the movement and doesn't compromise their art. During free time at the Culture Art Studio in Lamu, Rasta artists hold workshop time for young kids, allowing them to learn and create art; introducing them to the skills to make their own artwork and to the idea of self-empowerment within the system.

The traditional Rasta I spoke with in Lamu relates all of his art back to the Rasta movement. He designs metal jewelry inspired by his interpretation of the movement and religion, and ties much of his other work to Rasta through the use of color. In Nairobi he lives in a self-sustained commune with a group of Rastas and invites Rastas from around the world to visit free of charge. Some of the groups he's involved with hold entrepreneurial seminars for youth in Nairobi and play large reggae shows to bring individuals in their community together.

Each group has its own interpretation of the movement in the Kenyan, Coastal context but all involve a focus on self-empowerment, freedom and unity—values that are clearly emphasized in Marley's lyrics too. Speaking specifically about interpretations of Rastafarianism outside of Jamaica, Turner writes, “the importance of Rastafari is not the rejection of official society, but their creation of a new one,” an overwhelming task which has been beautifully carried out by Rasta youth and practitioners in Lamu.
Figure 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Appearance</th>
<th>Key Values</th>
<th>Lifestyle</th>
<th>Other Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pwani</td>
<td>Marley and marijuana tees; accessories Dreadlocks popular</td>
<td>Solidarity, independence</td>
<td>Beach dwelling, dhow work and fisherman</td>
<td>Rasta-based language is especially important and widely used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artist</td>
<td>Basic, plain clothing. Dreadlocks popular.</td>
<td>Non-materialistic, self-employment, simplicity</td>
<td>Tourist art, self-employed, academic</td>
<td>Rasta symbols displayed in artwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional*</td>
<td>Dreadlocks, Rasta colors and symbolism widely worn</td>
<td>Autonomy from government, simplicity</td>
<td>Self-employed, self-sustained community, entrepreneurship</td>
<td><em>(Based on two interviews, most are in Nairobi)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart</td>
<td>Varies, no dreadlocks</td>
<td>Moral strength, solidarity</td>
<td>Varies</td>
<td>Most have worn dreadlocks in the past</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bibliography