

Dreading Dreadlocks in Havana

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A few journalists and professionals who write for the official media have affirmed that the Cuban population rejects Rastafarianism. It would be useful to know just who and how many of these Cubans they are thinking of when they say ‘the Cuban population.’ I would also be helpful if they offered some data to support their claims, that is, like with survey results, or something like that. Yet, this is not the most outlandish of their claims. It is worse yet when they maintain that the people responsible for the Cuban population’s rejection of Rastafarians are some of the movement’s actual representatives, since they are connected to the use and sale of drugs and other illegalities like prostitution.

It would seem that the recent increase in popularity of the Rasta movement in Cuba, and in Havana, particularly, has caused one of our society’s endemic ills to resurface: fear of blacks and black things, which, oddly enough, is much more visible now in the governing body’s strata than in the common population—a population in which the increased proportion of blacks and *mestizos* is notable.

In reality, these opinion makers are not certain of the disdainful attitude they attribute to ordinary, everyday Cubans. They can’t be, because it has only manifested itself concretely in a subset of a minority presumably made up of racists, who are like parasites: instead of dying out when they are crushed, they

multiply in number. Yet, knowingly or not, and even when they act or pretend to operate at the phenomenon’s margins, in practice, they help propagate this epidemic fear of blacks. The impact of Rastafarians on the tumescent, Cuban, drug-selling scene, prostitution and pimping is miniscule—a drop of water in the ocean. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the simple act of having dreadlocks and other attributes associated with that movement are attractive extras useful in being successful in the sex market aimed at tourists. No more than being black, having or not having braids, or wearing tams or woven caps.

Inauthentic Rastafarians (nicknamed *rastafalsos* [Rastafakes] in Havana) offer something unique to our shores. Not unlike in so many other places around the world, the bad or good opinions people might have about this movement—which is enjoying enough international and historical attention to actually influence other people to adopt their way of dressing or other practices—are not harmful to them. Instead, they reaffirm their ascendancy.

They are few, but there are some (authentic) Cuban Rastas who could be justly accused of engaging in criminal activity, and this within an environment in which corruption—at all levels—is common everywhere from the highest heights of the power structure to the lowest levels of the poorest Cubans, who are

driven to illegal activities because they have no other choice. Those who look like Rastafarians only because of how they look or dress, the *rastafalsos*, exist—no doubt. There is no shortage of them (although they are not all drugtraffickers, prostitutes or pimps, as is believed) yet they alone cannot determine or cause the entire population to disapprove of the movement. The reason for this is because it was born from within the midst of the poorest levels of society, and has a code of ethics that leaves no room for errors. It may be the case that some of this code's precepts, and not the behavior of the *rastafalsos*, is what really concerns those in power and caused the official consternation.

Looking out for number one

Another oft repeated thing on the State media is the insistence with they say that Rastafarians in Cuba tend to be different from those in other countries, that is: they have managed to more or less Cubanize their Rastafarianism. Those who write these media pieces should know that this situation does not only exist in Cuba. On the contrary, the movement's own fundamentals (as far as itinerant culture is concerned) promote the adoption of local tendencies and practices, according to the place it is taking root. The extraordinary thing may be in the fact that the official media fixates on the phenomenon of a Cuban Rastafarianism, hopeful, perhaps, that this kind's distance from the original source will be open to influence by those in political power, something that orthodox Rastarianism does not and is reticent to allow—in principle.

In a study published at the Center for Psychological and Sociological Research, sociologist Angie Alejandra Larenas¹ acknowledges that the Rastafarians surveyed by her generally rejected the government's mono-

lithic structure. This position, when combined with their resolve to reject racist attitudes and policies that affect blacks, align with the basic precepts of their principles, which are no different than those of other similar movements around the world. Yet, those with political power continue to insist upon integrating them in to their obedient fold, by various means. They resort to their customary demagogical allegations, in a very special attempt to Cubanize their customs and beliefs. As a political strategy, it is much too obvious to not inspire mistrust. Furthermore, this movement has now awakened interest in the *Casas de Cultura*, *Hermanos Saíz Association*, *Casa del Caribe* in Santiago de Cuba, the network of *Casas de la Cultura Africana*, the *Union of Writers and Artists*, the *Union of Communist Youth*, and *Cuban Federation of Women*, and other official institutions. If Rastafarianism had shown signs of expansion just a few years back, and not now, the government would have put an end to it immediately, because it is a thorn in the side of its totalitarian system and a conduit for the permanent denunciation of the disadvantages blacks in Cuba have had to endure, despite all officialdom's flowery rhetoric. Yet, it is true that there are certain national and even international conditions at this time that warrant caution. Thus, the government has preferred to handle this inconvenient matter by trying to get the Rastafarians into its own camp. It couldn't achieve this without the indolent support and perhaps even complicity of journalists and specialists from different fields, who act to shape public opinion through the media.

With me or against me

Of course, despite this new initiative, the Cuban government can just apply the concept



“either you’re with me or against me” to the Rastafarians; this is what has always typified this regime. In fact, it is already doing this against those members who are openly rejecting the government’s official actions to attract the movement to it. In fact, the two high points of this new approach are an attempt to control the Rastas within their own power structure, and the use of relatively subtle mechanisms that work to manipulate public opinion by distinguishing good Rastafarians from bad ones, authentic ones from false ones, those who are respectful of the law and have integrated into society and those who are marginal, unassimilated, riddled with vices, and enemies of the State—all according to whether or not they allow themselves to be controlled.

Anthropologist Katrin Hansing, a visiting professor at the Center for African Studies at Bayreuth University (in Germany), has conducted very well documented research (it is also politically impartial, as it should be) about Rastafarianism in Cuba. She describes it as a movement that began to grow in the 1990s, when:

“the Cuban economic crisis and the opening up to and subsequent increase in tourism facilitated and increased the ability of foreign ideas and lifestyles to come into, circulate and influence folks. Despite the fact the State continues to control official cultural production and maintains its anti-imperialist stance against what it sees as U.S. cultural hegemony, there is less of a restriction on the influx of foreign cultural trends, or the interest they inspire in Cubans. Young people, particularly, are adopting a full gamut of foreign styles, and behave much more audaciously when expressing themselves. One result has been that many more of them are growing dreadlocks and openly identifying with the movement.”²²

Karina Velázquez Pérez, who has based her conclusions on Katrin Hansing’s work, mixes rigorous data with her own dubious premises. She is of the opinion that Rastafarianism—its precepts and late arrival in Cuba—is somehow explainable, one way or another, via our nation’s history and the sociohistorical changes that have occurred:

a) The island’s Afrodescendant’s legacy of a humiliating, slave past.

- b) The upsurge in “Back to Africa” movements during the early twentieth century.
- c) The active participation of Cuba in various Pan-African movements.
- d) The hosting in Cuba, in the “1960s, of different Latin American conferences in which ideologies strongly vocal about the problems of black people, like those in favor of Negritude and Black Power.
- e) The influence of Garveyism and the existence in Cuba of more than fifty chapters of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in the mid-1920s, whose creed—One God! One Aim! One Destiny!—is still embraced by Rastafarianism.
- f) The presence of religious Ethiopianism in the black Cuban population, which held up the figure of José Antonio Aponte, a brilliant, nineteenth-century, pan-Caribbean, pan-African, abolitionist and anti-colonialist thinker.
- g) Continuity and appreciation for the role of our African legacy.
- h) The arrival in Cuba of foreign workers and students, principally Caribbeans who practiced Rastafarian culture.
- i) The influence of reggae music.
- j) The circulation of foreign information, ideas and styles that are taken up by Cubans, thanks to the increasing tourism of the 1990s (access to these was almost inevitable), and the concomitant legalization of the dollar.
- k) The persistence of old inequities and racial prejudices.
- l) A resurgence of religiosity or religious revivalism in the Cuban population.³

After reviewing these twelve points that have conditioned the actual state of Rastafarianism amongst us, one pressing question remains: how is it possible that this move-

ment did not prosper earlier in Cuba, despite the convergence of so many old conditioning factors? We have already seen what Katrin Hansing has offered us as a few key concepts with which to understand the issue. Yet, she does not explain (perhaps remaining true to her political impartiality) that, above and beyond it all, it did not happen because the revolutionary government would not have been willing to allow a movement like this to act freely, given its ideas and practices, which go against the only permitted party’s *status quo*, atheism and legal monopoly over power.

There are other reasons that somehow relate to all this. For example, in *La cultura Rastafari en Cuba* (2011), the first, Spanish-language book published in Cuba and the Caribbean on this subject, its author, researcher and Arts and Sciences expert Samuel Furé Davis, asserts: “It was really difficult for society, in general, and the institutional authorities to accept—overnight—a culture based on religion, linked to someone who at the time was known as the “Black God,” Haile Sellasie I; who idealized the African continent.”⁴ I don’t see why general society resisted the spread of Rastafarianism. This is a risky statement, at the very least, because it cannot be proved. Yet, what is important here is that the institutional authorities have resisted it, something that is not only provable, but also obvious. This is not only true on the street, in plain sight, or if one coexists in the humble neighborhoods with Rastafarians, but also from the perspective of specialized research. Marialina García Ramos, with a degree in Art History and post-graduate degree in Sociocultural Anthropology, wrote *De las reivindicaciones míticas a las tribus urbanas: Rastafarismo en La Habana* (2012) and sees its spread today in the following manner:



“Another view of them that demonizes them, that focuses on criminalizing them, and representations of them in which Rastafaris—almost always black and marginalized—are linked to drug use, threats to foreigners, prostitution, or other, informal, criminal activities. Thus, I believe that one of the most polemical issues stems from the way in which the criminalization of these people is also driven by the police and other law enforcement authorities. There are often actions and rhetoric that insist on categorizing these young people as a source of danger and risk for civil order.”⁵ Neither Velázquez Pérez or Larenas seem inclined to identify the government’s intolerant attitude as a primary reason for the late development of Rastafarianism in Cuba. Neither do they seem concerned about the power elite’s currently negative attitude towards the movement. In discussing the reasons for its late rise, Larenas sins in her application of a weak conceptualization that is actually pretty common among Cuban researchers who work for State institutions, and are devoted to studying topics related to slave descendants. For her, the increase in Rastafarianism recently “has come about, also as a result of an obvious socioeconomic divide, and its consequent inequality of opportunities as regards access to material and spiritual well-

being.”⁶ This is how one more Cuban researcher once again glaringly ignores the fact that this obvious socioeconomic differentiation, with its consequent inequality of opportunities, is not something that just began in the 1990s, but rather much earlier—and that what initiated the crisis actually only revealed it.

The Center for Psychological and Sociological Research reveals a tendency to present Rastafarians as a movement that does not—*sui generis*—totally discount the possibility of working more closely with the power elite. According to Larenas: “Cuban Rastafarians could be considered inheritors of a national tradition linked to the black struggle to participate in society as true subjects. Establishing the links necessary to the current situation, they reproduce that tradition and use it as a tool for their production and reproduction as a social group.”⁷

One might want to ask how today’s reality is treating Rastas like Riscart Mustelier, priest Bobo Shanti, and reggae band leader Herencia, the latter of whom was jailed without proof after trumped up drug charges. His hearing was held behind closed doors in a room where only cases involving actions against the State are conducted—and this is not the only such case, only the most recent. Similarly, one might ask many Rastas how the current situation (dressed as policemen) responds to their retreats in the woods, where they are followed and pursued, for the purpose of arresting them without charging them, because official fear of those meetings in wide open spaces—where the only real witness is the sky—is not articulated in any of the Penal Code’s articles.

Lately, in its attempt to get the Rastas to join them, the government has organized massive, *in situ* retreats and vigils, like the summer one in Cienfuegos, *Hombre, vida y naturaleza*.

There are many examples of the government's concern on account of Rastafarianism's rise, no matter how much it pretends to hide it with hypocritical and manipulative paternalism. To be brief, perhaps a few more questions are in order, yet not for the Rastafarians, but rather for the authorities or their employees who shape public opinion:

- Why are Cuban Rastafarians required to cut their dreadlocks at their workplaces, or face losing their jobs?
- Why is it generally difficult for them to find work with the State?
- Why are the only employment options for Rastas in Havana cleaning streets, in agriculture or in construction?
- Why is it that on our island there are no Rastafarian doctors, journalists, scientists, managers or National Assembly representatives—as is the case in any other country in the world?
- What has been and continues to be responsible—till this minute—for the fact that the Casa Rastafari Organization in Cuba—which was conceived exclusively among Rastafarian groups—has no legal support?

Notes:

- 1- Larenas Álvarez, Alejandra Angie. “La inserción social del rastafari en Cuba: ¿Tendencias contraculturales?” <http://biblioteca.clacso.edu.ar/ar/libros/cuba/cips/caudales05/Caudales/ARTICULOS/ArticulosPDF/031115L087.pdf>
- 2- Hansing, Katrin. “Surgimiento y desarrollo de los rastafari en la Cuba socialista.” <http://laventana.casa.cult.cu/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=2554>
- 3- Velázquez Pérez, Karina. “¿De lo Sagrado a lo Profano? El Yo Rasta en Cuba.” <http://www.monografias.com/trabajos82/sagrado-profano-yo-rasta-cuba/sagrado-profano-yo-rasta-cuba2.shtml>
- 4- Furé Davis, Samuel. *La cultura Rastafari en Cuba*. Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 2011.
- 5- García Ramos, Marialina. *De las reivindicaciones míticas a las Tribus Urbanas: Rastafarismo en La Habana*. http://www.ahs.cu/seccionesprincipales/entrenos/contenido/rastafarismo_en_cuba.html
- 6- Larenas Álvarez, Alejandra Angie. *Op. cit.*