Rastafari in Germany: Jamaican Roots and Global–Local Influences

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Abstract

The Rastafari movement arose in Jamaica in the 1930s and spread from that small island to a variety of areas around the world. Having emerged as a response to colonial legacies, racialization, and racial oppression, the movement of marginalized black Jamaicans transcended its local Caribbean borders and became a way of life for people of very diverse cultural origins. Rastafari, born within a tradition of resistance in Jamaica, helped its adherents reconstruct their “black consciousness” and African heritage. The worldview of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora challenged established colonial views in the struggle for social justice. Also for many people in the West, this worldview became a source of spirituality as well as a philosophy criticizing Eurocentric assumptions of superiority. The Rastafari philosophy spread in Europe, producing a multicultural phenomenon. I focus on Rastafari in Germany, its peculiarities and similarities to, as well as its differences from, the Jamaican movement. This study poses questions about identity in the Rastafari movement in Germany and explores crucial issues in Rastafari, such as identity transformation, identity work, self-identification, representation, cultural resistance, and globalization. My argument is that “Africanness” and “black consciousness” can be adjusted and interpreted in a European context as a cluster of ideas and symbols that offer German Rastafarians identification and embody social justice.

Keywords: Rastafari, globalization, Africanness, identity formation, strategic essentialism

Introduction

The Rastafari movement arose in Jamaica in the 1930s and spread from that small island to a variety of areas around the world. Born within a tradition of resistance

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20 In this article, the term Rastafari is used to describe the movement and its adherents. The terms Rastafarian(s) and Rasta(s) connote only the adherents of the Rastafari movement. I use the term movement as the most acknowledged term among both Rastafari and non-Rastafari.
in Jamaica, the movement of marginalized black Jamaicans transcended its local Caribbean borders and became the way of life of people from diverse cultural origins. The new religion of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora was also appropriated by Western people and adjusted to Western thinking as a source of spirituality, a philosophy and culture. The Rastafari movement gained wide popularity: “Seldom has such a relatively small cultural phenomenon as Rastafari attracted so much attention from young people, the media, and scholars in the fields of religion, anthropology, politics, and sociology” (Murrell 1998:1). This is true of Jamaican Rastafari, but in Europe, Rastafari has attracted the attention of researchers mostly in the Netherlands (van Dijk 1998:184). The local phenomena, such as German Rastafari, which claimed, on the one hand, to be autonomous from the Jamaican movement and, on the other, to be identical with it, have not been researched in great depth.

In this article, I argue that “Africanness” can be adjusted and interpreted in a European context as a cluster of ideas and symbols that serve for European people as a basis for the construction of Rastafari identity. My assumption is that metaphorical Africanness and identification with various aspects of the Rastafari way of life as well as the symbolic struggle for equality, which the German Rastafari often articulate, represent a challenge to Eurocentrism and racism that the Rastafari, with their egalitarian principles and “global consciousness,” often perceive as an unjust ideology present in local and global contexts. Reinterpretations of Afro-Jamaican religious thought and of black liberation philosophy became for white Europeans a framework for cultural identity as well as a source of identification with black Rastafarians and Rastafari culture, born in Jamaica as a resistance strategy. Initially practiced by oppressed black Jamaicans, this religion was appropriated by white people and is now being articulated in a European context as an alternative, spiritual way of life in a globalizing world and as a universalistic philosophy of unity and justice. In this article, I examine constructions of identity and processes of identity formation among the German Rastafari, as well as the sociocultural mechanisms they employ to build up and articulate Rastafari culture in Germany. To discuss Rastafari identity both in Jamaican and German contexts I will explore theories of identity work, of blackness as a cultural phenomenon, of strategic essentialism, as well as “inborn conception.” Given that the globalization of the Jamaican cultural phenomenon led to the emergence of local forms


22 Although this ethnographic study discusses important issues of identity in Rastafari, it cannot claim comprehensiveness. It cannot deal with a whole range of global–local adaptations, with the issues of gender relations that have raised much controversy around Rastafari, as well as with Western Rastafari identity in the African diaspora. Therefore, ethnographic research on Rastafari in various local and global contexts as well as research from an internal Rastafari perspective remains on the agenda of academic enquiry.
of Rastafari in various countries beyond the Caribbean, studying these global–local forms is of great significance. This ethnographic study presents an image of a group of Rastafari in Germany. I have attempted to reveal various “glocal” interconnections, cultural adjustments as well as questions of resistance and identity of Western Rastafari with no obligatory reference to the movement’s place of origin, the island of Jamaica.

Research Participants, Research Questions and Methods

The Rastafari philosophy spread in Europe and produced a multifaceted culture with diverse adjustments and interpretations. The central questions of this research are the following: What connections and similarities are there between Jamaican and German Rastafari? What are the differences between them? How do Rastafarians in Germany define their identity and the movement? What role does the movement’s central figure, Haile Selassie I, play for them? What does one of the central themes of the Rastafari movement – repatriation to Africa, “back to the roots” – imply for German Rastafarians? Given the importance of the issue of “black consciousness” in Jamaican Rastafari, what issues and motivations are primary for German Rastafari? Can Rastafari in Germany be described as a religious movement or subculture? What patterns of resistance emerge within Rastafari in the global context, or outside of the Caribbean?

To answer these questions I conducted problem-centered and semi-structured interviews with seven German Rastafarians. In addition, I conducted participant observation at a Rastafari-gathering where I could experience a celebration of Rastafarian traditions.

The protagonists of this research are seven Rastafarians. In contrast to what is common in qualitative studies and according to their preference, I do not present the participants of this study as anonymous: Jochanan, 28, writes documentary and interpretative books about Haile Selassie’s state visits and speeches.23 Uwe is a 46-year-old reggae artist. Chris, Jah Roc, is 27, and worked as a computer programmer but quit the job in order to do “Jah works” and to “spread Jah vibes” – he creates dub music, organizes Rastafari gatherings and dub gatherings,24 and administrates the online Rastafari Works Association.25 Ohla, 21, worked as a pharmacist until recently but also quit her job to work “for Jah,” such as cooking in a vegan restaurant or producing Rastafari artifacts.26 Maria, Sista Righteous, is 21 and studies African languages and cultures in Hamburg and frequently visits Kenya where she runs a program “Mama Afreeka Repatriation Initiative” for Kenyan families with the motto “Out

23 Jochanan became my “key informant.” He was the first Rastafarian I was in contact with (via the internet, on a reggae forum); he shared with me information about the community and invited me to a Rastafari gathering.
24 Music events for the community.
25 http://www.rastafari-works.org/blog/
26 She sews clothes, bags, etc., and also makes dreadlocks. She quit her job because she sees pharmacy as an instrument of the government to “make profits” from illnesses.
of the slum – on to the land!” Dennis is 24 and studies landscape ecology. Carmen is a 29-year-old painter.

All of the research participants were born and currently reside in various parts of Germany, except Maria who was born in Niamey (Niger). All the participants are ethnically German. They do not belong to a Rastafari organization (Rastafari organizations are also called mansions), so they can be described as the “independent intelligentsia” serving to develop the Rastafarian community without a direct attachment to any particular mansion. Their appearances are orthodox Rastafarian: long dreadlocks are often covered; the men have beards; and the women wear long skirts. The colors red, gold and green are also frequently featured in their clothing.

Sistren and brethren usually attempt to use the opportunity to meet each other at the gatherings where they can exchange experiences and praise Jah together. Rastafari gatherings in Germany take place two or three times a year. I was invited to one of these by Jochanan after a few conversations that proved to him my “serious” intentions in studying Rastafari. Before the gathering, Jochanan told me: “You don’t need to bring anything – except openness.” As a sympathizer of the Rastafari movement, I was open to new experiences, new knowledge, and new Rastafarian acquaintances, of whom Jochanan was the first. I was lucky to receive the invitation because the gatherings are largely closed events for the community. Every sistren and brethren is individually invited with the time and place of the gathering. Although it is common for the German Rastas to communicate in new media social networks, such as Facebook, the time and place of a gathering is not publicly announced to avoid “external” interference. To be able to spend three or four restful days in a quiet place, the organizers rent a house near a forest or in a field, where the chances of coming across strangers or “outsiders” is quite small. The gatherings have taken place for several years, and each gathering has welcomed twenty to forty German Rastas as well as guests from the Rastafari communities of nearby countries (such as the Netherlands, Denmark, or Italy). I was welcomed very warmly, and despite Jochanan’s advice not to immediately tell the sistren and brethren about my research, I preferred to let them know that I would later write an essay about Rastafari in Germany. Some of them were skeptical about it, but skepticism is common among Rastafarians in relation to academic research. In their opinion, scholars and media are generally inclined to represent Rastafari in an inappropriate, stereotypical way. Others were ready to tell their stories and answer my questions in interviews.

28 Her parents worked there; they returned to Germany when Maria was a year old.
29 I have borrowed this term from Yasus Afari, p. 212.
30 The most well known organizations (or mansions) are the Niah Binghi, Bobo Shanti (E.A.B.I.C.), the Twelve Tribes of Israel, the Ethiopian World Federation, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.
31 The more widespread word for a Rastafari gathering in the diaspora is groundation.
All interviews were recorded, including telephone and in-person interviews. Two interviews were conducted in English, others in German. Most of my interlocutors perceived anonymity as superfluous because they had “nothing to hide,” and the interviews often resembled informal conversations or “reasonings,” as some of my interlocutors called them.32 During these reasonings they shared personal experiences of becoming and being Rastafari.

**Key Figures and Concepts of Rastafari**

The central figure in Rastafari is Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie I who is regarded as the “Living God.”33 Many Rastafarians believe that Selassie’s coronation was prophesied by Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican proponent of Pan-Africanism, “Back to Africa,” and other black liberation movements, the founder of the “Universal Negro Improvement Association” and proponent of the rights and freedom of black people. Garvey’s words were crucial to the emergence of Rastafari: “Look to Africa for the crowning of a Black King; he shall be the redeemer” (Andwele 2006:13).34 When Ras Tafari Makonnen was crowned Emperor of Ethiopia on November 2, 1930, he took the name Haile Selassie (“Power of the Trinity”), King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering

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32 Reasoning means sharing wisdom in Rastafari.
33 The Rastafari have asserted Selassie’s divinity both before and after his death in 1975.
34 Garvey’s role is contradictory, since Garvey himself never showed any commitment to Rastafari. Paradoxically, as Price also writes, he “has remained an icon to the Rastafari in spite of his disdain for them” (2009:48).
Lion of the Tribe of Judah, and Elect of God. “Attentive Black Jamaicans” associated these appellations with the Messiah described in the *King James* Bible (Price 2009:ix). Rastafari derives from Haile Selassie’s given name Ras Tafari. He was the 225th Ethiopian king whose descent can be traced back to Menelek, the son of the biblical King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Garvey’s followers regarded the crowning of Haile Selassie as the fulfillment of prophecy; Selassie became the long-awaited king and savior of black people (Andwele 2006:13). This idea of black redemption was an interpretation made by the first Rastafarians because in their view the Ethiopian emperor, the Messiah, was *first* a redeemer of black people, and then of humankind (Price 2009:x). Rastafari emerged as a new community who privileged a positive conception of black identity and culture, challenging the hegemony of whiteness in Jamaica (Price 2009:x).

The central concepts of Rastafari are Zion, Babylon, and repatriation. Zion refers to Africa (particularly Ethiopia), the “paradise” on Earth, and the “homeland.” In contrast, Babylon is largely understood as the Western world system where Africans in the diaspora have been living in exile under oppression. As the Rastafarian author Adisa Andwele puts it, “For the Rasta man, the Western life that was whipped into the African is evil” (Andwele 2006:16). Rastafari interpret themselves as the lost tribes of Israel sold into the bondage of Egypt; black Africans are believed to have sinned in primeval days and to have been punished by Jah in the form of enslavement in a Caribbean Babylon (Davis 1977:72-73). “Back to the roots” and repatriation thus mean “back to Africa” and away from the “Babylon system.”

*Ital livity* is a concept that describes the “natural” ways in which the Rastafari construct their everyday life, which applies to the Rastafari lifestyle and culture in general and also the German Rasta way of life. Rastafari strive for harmony between humans and nature and reject the artificial in favor of the natural (Edmonds 2003:60). *Ital* refers to a vegetarian or vegan diet and to a rejection of tobacco, alcohol, and drugs. *Livity* refers to a lifestyle that includes natural organic living and peaceful coexistence, and provides alternative ethical approaches that oppose the individualism and materialism of globalization (Jaffe 2010:32). *Ital livity* is, then, an indicator of Rastas’ “departure from Babylon” (Edmonds 2003:60). As practiced by German Rastafarians, *Ital livity* largely represents anti-consumerist approaches that tend to avoid products of the food industry and mass production of goods.

*Word, Sound and Power* is another important concept in Rastafari, which refers to a philosophical and aesthetic view of language and of the word. Rastafari believe in

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35 Cannabis used by Rastafari is not considered a drug but a natural herb.
36 In their *Ital livity* they often cook vegetarian or vegan African dishes that are considered “natural” and completely reject such products as fast food, meat, alcohol, and cigarettes. Some of them grow vegetables in a garden instead of buying them, and sew or knit clothes by themselves or buy homemade clothes from other sistren and brethren.
the evocative power of words as well as in the power of names (Alleyne 1988:146). The philosophical concept that language has the capacity to create and to destroy is embraced by Rastafari. A word is both sound and power, with positive and negative forces (Chevannes 1994:227). The most positive force is perception, “physically realised [sic] through the eye by means of the sense of sight and leading to the metaphysical realisation [sic] of the self, the ego, the ‘I’” (Alleyne 1988:148). As Mervyn Alleyne states, in Rastafari words not only symbolize the forces, but embody them; so the “I” as a word and as a sound sequence (ai) is used in a variety of linguistic structures, expressing highly positive forces. The most significant examples of such creativeness are Haile (Selassie), Zion, and Rastafari, “pronounced with the ‘eye’ or ‘I’ sound at the end. It is now the most productive derivational device in the Jamaican language” (Alleyne 1988:148). Other examples of the importance of the “I” as word and sound are the following: I and I (meaning “I,” “you,” “we,” and “unity”); Ital (vital); Iritis (spirit); Iration (creation); Ises (praises for Jah); Idren (brethren); yes I (yes); and Irie Ites, deriving from the words “free” and “heights,” and denoting highly positive spiritual forces and “vibrations.”

The German Rastafari practice Word, Sound and Power actively, especially when they speak (Jamaican) English. They often code-switch, that is while speaking German they abundantly use Rastafarian English-derived words and phrases that are considered particularly meaningful, such as I and I, Jah Rastafari, Ital, Zion, consciousness, and so forth. In this way, the important words and sounds are made to preserve their positive power in a language different from the original Rastafari tongue.

Rastafari and Questions of Identity

Questions of identity are of particular importance in Rastafari. The Rastafari have, according to Charles Price (2009), their own theories of race: they criticize both white hegemony and oppression, and the oppression black people practiced upon themselves and others. Rastafari psychology, according to Clinton Hutton and Nathaniel Murrell, involves “expressions of self-confidence, affirmation of one’s Blackness and personhood, rejection of Eurocentric understandings of Black people in their cultures, and a longing for liberation and ultimate redemption of the Black peoples of the world (especially the oppressed)” (1998:36). Rastafari psychology is, then, resistance and liberation psychology with a strong emphasis on one’s African heritage and exodus to Africa, though the latter has a largely symbolic character for black identity (Hutton and Murrell 1998:37). This means that “Africa” must be understood here as a cluster of ideas and symbols that are significant in Rastafari struggles for black liberation.

The Rastafari became an example of how identity can be created and actively used. They have consciously made “blackness” a resource of identity. As Price (2009) explains, black identity has been socially constructed and assigned to people, but assignment of an identity does not mean that identity will necessarily be accepted or
that it will be interpreted as the inscribers intended; however, categorizations and prescriptions can influence people’s self-perception. Therefore “being and becoming Black” involves mutual commitment between the ascribed category and the personal awareness of blackness (Price 2009:4). Price’s concept of being and becoming black then, points to how Rastafari identifications are constructed. This conception presupposes that identities have histories and can be transformed in various ways.

As Price (2009) also points out, in understanding that race is socially constructed, the Rastafari have privileged an identification of blackness as a salient and positive feature. Therefore, in so doing they have subverted race as a social category. This is a dialectical process of simultaneous affirmation and negation. This process involves emphasizing blackness as a salient feature, on the one hand, and challenging the assumption of race as a biological and social category on the other. It must be emphasized, however, that blackness, as asserted by Rastafari, should be understood not as “biological” but primarily as cultural. As Paul Gilroy (1993) suggests, the culture of the black Atlantic (as well as black identity) is a “hybrid” of African, Caribbean, American and European cultures. He argues that the black Atlantic does not embody a single black essence, but is created out of many different ideas and cultures. According to Gilroy, identities are changeable, “always unfinished” and “always being remade” (1993:xi). Black identity, on the one hand, is not a single essence, and on the other, it is a “coherent sense of self.” Gilroy writes, “Black identity is not simply a social and political category to be used or abandoned […] it is lived as a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self. Though it is often felt to be natural and spontaneous, it remains the outcome of practical activity” (1993:102).

As Price similarly explains, blackness is a cultural phenomenon that acquires meaning through symbols, ideas, social memory, self-awareness, and a sense of shared history and experience. These themes define formations of blackness (Price 2009:4). Race formation – the acts of using different ideas and practices to make race socially significant – has been an essential aspect of the development of blackness, which “has shown itself to be a remarkably durable and compelling source of identification in Jamaica” (Price 2009:3). Blackness, as Price contends, is a dynamic condition, worldview, and cluster of cultural resources, which are flexible and can serve many purposes.

Strategic Essentialism: Rastafari’s Revisions of Identity

Emphasizing blackness can also serve a purpose. Presumably, Rastafari’s emphasis on blackness can be viewed as a strategy applied to achieve solidarity and practice successful resistance to cultural oppression.  

Strategic Essentialism

The idea of strategic essentialism as applicable to Rastafari’s articulations of identity was proposed by my supervisor Dr. Annika McPherson.
refers to the “strategic use of a positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (Spivak 1993:3). That is, in order to achieve certain goals, different groups of people may choose to “essentialize” themselves and their group identity. “The strategic use of an essence as a mobilizing slogan [...] is, ideally, self-conscious for all mobilized” (Spivak 1993:4). In strategic essentialism, the emphasis is on strategy, and its usage should be only situational and should pursue certain policies. Rastafari’s black solidarity can be described as strategic essentialism because it serves a purpose of achieving cultural liberation.

Along with theories of race, the Rastafari have developed theories of identity, one of which is called “inborn conception” (Price 2009:141). The idea of inborn conception, as Price explains, describes cultural frameworks for understanding why and how people become Rastafari. The inborn conception presupposes that black people like Rastafari are “predisposed toward peace, freedom, justice, and equality” and that Rastafari identity offers a potential antidote to oppression (Price 2009:143-145). Price’s reading of this theory also suggests a reference to essentialism, which he denotes as “malleable” and which resists cultural oppression of black people whose embrace of blackness is based on “justice motifs.”

Price writes, “the theory positively preordains Blackness, while allowing some contingency. This essentialism works as a bulwark, if not battering ram, against counter-essentialisms that denigrate Blackness. By essentialism, I mean the view that Blackness is a “natural” and real phenomenon with central, recognizable features such as the justice motifs. However, this type of essentialism is malleable because it also recognizes the absence of such features, which therefore are worthy of pursuit” (2009:141). Blackness as a “real” phenomenon with the justice motifs implies that Rastafari view African culture, history, heritage, and black identity as essential for achieving black consciousness and, further, human consciousness. Therefore, African culture and black identity are considered essential for achieving social justice and equality. If the notion of strategic essentialism can be applied to Rastafari’s valorization of black identity as a fundamental feature, it is possible to assume that the strategy of valorizing blackness is one of Rastafari’s acts of identity work. This act of identity work is also an act of resistance to cultural oppression.

The Rastafari identity thus implies resistance, and resistance of Rastafari is equivalent to an assertion of black identity. As Price points out, there have been black people in Jamaica who accepted the racial status quo, that is the colonial assumptions of white supremacy and black inferiority. In contrast, the Rastafari recognized the necessity of psychologically “becoming Black” (cf. Price 2009), which means reconstructing and reinterpreting their African heritage and becoming proud of one’s blackness. Affirmative interpretations of African heritage and of blackness became for

38 “Justice motifs” are understood as the perception of blackness as self-consciousness necessary for the cultural liberation.
Rastafarians in Jamaica an absolute prerequisite for psychological and cultural liberation. Positive interpretations of blackness are essential for what Price calls “racial conversion.” Becoming a Rastafarian requires an identity transformation that is a result of a conversion process that is not only religious but also racial (Price 2009:8). Racial identity transformation, religious conversion, and social movement formation are crucial aspects of the Rastafari ethnogenesis: the birth of a new identity and people (Price 2009:124).

The Jamaican tradition of resistance to colonialism and racial oppression drew strength from affirmative interpretations of African heritage. Rastafari identity, born within this tradition in Jamaica, is now a symbol of the struggle for justice and liberation far beyond the Caribbean. In Germany, adjustments to Rastafari thought and reinterpretations of Africanness created new articulations and identities that represent “global consciousness” as a worldview aspiring to universal justice and the unity of humankind.

**Rastafari and the Global Context**

Rastafari are often viewed as both participants in and products of globalization. According to Carole Yawney’s review, the first diaspora of the movement occurred during the 1950s and 1960s through the emigration of Jamaicans to the United Kingdom. The second diaspora began in the 1970s with Bob Marley and other reggae musicians, and the most recent phase of Rastafari globalization has been facilitated by international travel and internet technologies. Meanwhile, there may be more Rastafarians living outside of Jamaica and the Caribbean than in Jamaica (Yawney 1999:158). The history of the movement, according to Yawney, should be observed in terms of a dynamic relationship between local and global influences, namely the contributions of Ethiopianism, Garveyism, and Pan-Africanism. In addition, the international experiences of Rastafari’s leaders and inspirations, such as Leonard Howell and Marcus Garvey, have reinforced this dynamic (Yawney 1999:157).

The global context, according to Richard Salter (2008), has always been important for Rastafari. He makes three historical observations: the Caribbean region has been operating in a global context since Columbus, i.e. since the discovery of the “New World” and the subsequent colonization; Afro-Caribbean religions, and Rastafari in particular, have considered a global context as part of their worldviews; and Rastafarians “were and continue to be intentional participants in and products of a global context” (Salter 2008:2). In other words, the Rastafari were created by globalization and then the movement spread around the world again by globalizing processes. The ‘I-consciousness’ of Rastafari becomes a global consciousness (Salter 2008:22-25) that provides universalistic identifications of solidarity, justice, and equality. Rastafari can also be viewed as a counter-culture and resistance to the dominance of “westernization.” In fact, as Werner Zips (2006) argues, the global anti-globalization movement borrows much from Rastafari. This position of Rastafari, its emphasis on
unity and equality, and the ease with which Rastafari symbols can be reinterpreted in local contexts facilitate the rapid spread of Rastafari around the world (Salter 2008:25).

In this global process music has played a major role. It is a common belief that Rasta culture spread across the world with reggae music, which emerged in Jamaica in the 1960s. Jamaican music is largely associated with the figure of Bob Marley as the symbol of reggae culture. He is often considered the most well known reggae artist and Rastafari prophet who made an immense contribution to the global spread of reggae music. Bob Marley emerged from the ghettos of Kingston and became “the only third world superstar,” as Jason Toynbee describes him (cf. Toynbee 2007). But foremost, Marley was a prophetic social critic (cf. Bogues 2003), Rastafarian, public intellectual, and “herald of a postcolonial world” (cf. Toynbee 2007) who translated Jamaican reggae into international music and thus spread the Rastafari message globally. By the early 1970s, Marley became “the leading voice of the ghetto,” telling of the suffering, defiance, and hope of ghetto dwellers (Edmonds 2003:112). By the mid-seventies, he became the leading voice of the reggae phenomenon that had transformed from a local presence into a global culture.

In James Clifford’s words, Bob Marley and the articulation of reggae have been involved in “globalization from below” (2007:20). His songs could be interpreted both locally and globally; for example, in a global context they could be read in terms of class injustice. As Louis Chude-Sokei suggests, Marley was able to transform local and micropolitical metaphors from Jamaican rural culture into allegories of a global hegemony (2007:139). Eventually, the process of symbolic struggle led Marley to the status of the symbol of Jamaica. His musical legacy still continues to influence people of various cultural origins across the world. This influence is also evident in German Rastafari, as demonstrated by my interlocutors’ statements about becoming Rasta.

Finally, the global spread of Rastafari was arguably facilitated by the movement’s “symbolic insurgency” that has helped different individuals and communities construct a “symbolic counterworld” to the system of domination that can be found anywhere. Rastafari has become a “traveling culture” and has raised a variety of representational dilemmas – those of defining, categorizing, and representing Rastafari. The scale of Rastafari’s claims, beliefs, and knowledge challenges efforts to find an all-encompassing term to define it. As a result, it appears problematic to just define it as a sub- or counterculture, or as a social and religious movement. Given a variety of representational challenges – especially in the global context – ethnographic research on Rastafari is often considered the most appropriate way of approaching this phenomenon, since rather than categorizing and providing definitions, ethnography is

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39 I have borrowed the notions of symbolic insurgency and of symbolic counterworld from Anthony Bogues (2003).

40 The term “traveling culture” was introduced by James Clifford (1997).
largely directed toward self-representation and toward reflecting the worldviews of the researched phenomena.

*Rastafari in Germany*

Yes His Name Shall Be  
Praised for I-ver!\(^{41}\)

Descriptions of the process of becoming Rastafari are strikingly similar among my interlocutors. According to all of them, it was a gradual process; some also said that one “is born a Rastafarian,” and actually becoming Rasta only required “discovering” it inside oneself.\(^{42}\) Almost all of my interlocutors “discovered” it in adolescence, largely through reggae music. Only Jochanan’s way to Rastafari had nothing to do with music. Rather, it was the religious background of his upbringing that facilitated his “conversion.” As the ten-year old son of evangelical Christians, he saw a picture of Haile Selassie on the cover of a book, said Yeshua, “Jesus,” and felt “warmth” while looking at the picture. Some six years later during a visit to Jamaica, he found, through seeing other pictures of Haile Selassie and talking to “the brothers from the diaspora,” he finally could find answers to the existential questions that the evangelical church had appeared unable to give him.

Religious upbringing, however, is surprisingly rare among my interlocutors. Few of them, for example, read the Bible in the childhood, but even when they did read the Bible, the religious context was typically not strongly marked in their lives. In some cases, Catholic or evangelical Christian traditions failed to offer identification to the young people in search of identity. The primary factor in the conversion process was attraction to reggae music rather than a religious background. Jochanan, though, has a critical attitude toward the common spread of Rastafari through music, for the reason that in this case most people acquire information only by means of song lyrics, which is not sufficient for “true” knowledge. Yet, the situation is different when music serves as a trigger for further inquiries. Fascination with music and interest in meaningful song lyrics initiated most of my interlocutors’ preoccupation with historical literature on the Rastafari movement, Haile Selassie’s speeches, and the Bible.

Becoming Rastafari involves identity transformation and the process that Price (2009) describes as “becoming Black.” However, the same can be stated in relation to my interlocutors: all of them, in one way or another, experienced identity transformation, and some of them articulate what Price (2009) calls “being and becoming Black” where one must recognize the unity of humankind and maintain

\(^{41}\) From a Rastafari chant.  
\(^{42}\) This kind of articulation also falls within what Price (2009) describes as “inborn conception.”
Africanness (largely as a symbol) in order to become Rasta. Metaphorical Africanness, which the German Rastafari articulate, falls within what Price (2009) describes as cultural – rather than “biological” – blackness, which should be understood as a worldview. That is to say, blackness is not a social category or biological feature but self-awareness that acquires meaning through symbols. This is made clear by Chris, who says, “for me, to be black is the consciousness, the awareness that we all are black from Creation. We all come from Africa. 43 We are all of the same blood. So I agree that only black people can be Rasta. Only when you accept that you are black from Creation, can you be a Rasta.”

Roots reggae with its critical, yet positive message has been the decisive transformative factor for many of my interviewees. The music’s appeal embodies one’s potential to “be the change,” as Uwe put it. Reggae music also preceded an awareness of the importance of Nyahbinghi music, which is the “heartbeat” of Rastafari. Some others were first attracted by the unusual dreadlock hairstyle and then later by reggae music, its “vibe,” and its revolutionary spirit. Initial signs of identity transformation were largely of a subcultural character, which gradually, and through identity work, became “spiritual” and more religious than countercultural.

Identity transformation that began with music was, nevertheless, seldomly unproblematic for my interlocutors; many of them admitted that they had to go through certain difficulties and conflicts before they could discover their “true self.” For example, changes to dietary habits (rejection of meat or alcohol) can cause conflicts with one’s family or closest friends. At the same time, identity transformation is viewed as rightful and positive: as Maria says, Rastafari “saved her life” by redirecting her way of life from “high heels and makeup” to “love and righteousness.”

Rastafari as Way of Life

How do the German Rastafarians define the Rastafari movement and culture? Their descriptions commonly suggest such terms as “spirituality” and “way of life.” The “ancient” elements of Rastafari culture as well as of African culture are often of particular importance, which is an example of a cultural adjustment developed in the processes of globalization, such as the global distribution of popular music. Such adjustments arguably offer my interlocutors and other Western Rastafarians an alternative to the cultural and religious aspects of Western society, which is largely perceived as Eurocentric, materialistic, and consumerist. In contrast, social justice and equality are the values that the German Rastafari repeatedly articulate.

Some of my interlocutors’ characterization of Rastafari suggests a notion of religion and simultaneously implies demarcation from other religious practices. This demarcation is based upon the claim to “truth,” “facts,” and “proof” that other religious

43 This reference is to the paleoanthropologic “recent single-origin hypothesis,” or the “Out-of-Africa” theory which maintains that humanity originated from Africa.
systems lack. Uwe said, “to me, the difference between Rastafari and other types of religion is that within Rastafari there is a real proof. [...] His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I is the King of Kings, [...] which had been prophesied in the old scriptures, in the Bible, whereas many other beliefs or religions are based upon something that you cannot really see or have a proof of.” Chris articulates similar views on the “realness” of Rastafari: “Ras Tafari is reality – he is not a man who sits upon the cloud watching over you, wearing the long white beard... His Imperial Majesty is the reality to I and I.”

Rastafari represents reality for my interlocutors on the one hand, and on the other they articulate that there can be no precise definitions of Rastafari. The term is “too big” to categorize; Rastafari is “knowledge, love, respect, nature, just everything,” according to Dennis. The definitions are descriptive rather than categorizing; they also vary according to the differences in individual perception. Often mentioned are the “truth,” “knowledge,” “reality,” “proof,” and fulfillment of prophecy, which “others are still awaiting.” This confidence in the rightness of one’s values strengthens the sense of authenticity of the worldviews and of the self.

Similarly to the Jamaican Rastafari, the figure of the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie I is the key aspect of the perception of reality for the German Rastafarians who participated in the gathering. At some point during the gathering it became clear and unambiguous that for these participants, Haile Selassie is God. Indeed, the way the gathering was organized – with prayers, chants, and worship service – left no doubt of the emperor’s supreme position to the Idren. Later during the interviews, my interlocutors commonly confirmed this presumption: they referred to Haile Selassie as God and as the fulfillment of the Biblical prophecy of the Second Coming.

My interlocutors observe the Sabbath and forbid work on Saturdays because this day must be completely devoted to Jah. The gathering was no exception. Early in the morning before breakfast and during a long worship service in the afternoon, they read from the Bible and praised Jah in Amharic, English and German. Then we had a lesson in Amharic where the elder Sister Ifua taught us to pronounce Amharic words.44 After that, the sistren cooked Ethiopian food that was eaten in the Ethiopian tradition: with one’s hands, without using forks and knives.

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44 Sister Ifua also leads a “Rastafari school” where she teaches Amharic to the community members. She learned the language by herself and also during her visits to Ethiopia.
The gathering had the warm, friendly atmosphere of a family event, where such rules as politeness become superfluous and kind humor is a part of communication. At the same time, the reasonings revealed certain disagreements in their views. For example, some demonstrated more tolerance for different possible non-Rastafarian convictions and ways of life than others did, but all of them seemed to acknowledge each other’s views and treated each other with great respect. From time to time some of them went outside to continue the reasoning while smoking herb. In contrast to the Jamaican Rastafari tradition of the collective ritualistic smoking, the participants in the gathering smoked individually from their own supplies. After smoking the “weed of wisdom,” peaceful reasonings continued, which then gradually turned into long chanting and playing powerfully sounding, massive Nyahbinghi drums that made everything around vibrate. During the Nyahbinghi sessions the large room filled with incense smoke and with an extraordinary aura of deep meditation. The sistren and brethren stood with their eyes shut, repeatedly singing chant verses to Jah, to the accompaniment of the drums. With the help of the forceful Nyahbinghi drums they were praising “the Most High” Haile Selassie and simultaneously “chanting down Babylon.”

**Haile Selassie’s State Visits as a Source of Identification**

The gathering was dedicated to the coronation of Haile Selassie and the emperor’s first state visit to Germany in 1954. This visit is of great importance for the
German Rastas; it is, perhaps, one of the main local peculiarities of the movement. Many Rastafarians view the reactions of many different people during the emperor’s state visits as prophesied in the Bible: “For the kingdom is the Lord’s: and he is the governor among the nations” (King James Bible, Psalms 22-28). German Rastas claim that the fulfillment of the title of the King of Kings was confirmed by the German people, which is for them another form of available “evidence” and a source of pride. According to Jochanan:

It is important for everyone, actually. Not only for me or for us but for every German because the importance is in the fulfillment of the title which Haile Selassie had. A title “King of Kings” can only be fulfilled if all the countries and peoples have bowed before him. And one of these countries was Germany […]. Germany is a part of this fulfillment of the title. On the one hand, a king is a king when he makes himself a king. But if the people don’t accept him as the king, then he is just formally the king. The fulfillment of the title of the King of Kings […] must also be confirmed by the people. So this title was fulfilled by the state visits and by the people […]. Not only Germany but also many other countries have shown that.

Haile Selassie’s state visits are thus interpreted as a fulfillment of a prophecy: “Tens of Thousands [sic] of citizens had gathered together to pay tribute to His Majesty”; “The people were stubborn as a wall and waited in the rain for Haile Selassie.”

In addition, the fact of the king’s state visit to Germany gives my interlocutors a feeling of personal involvement: “To imagine that I’ve been or can be in a same place where He was is an amazing thing; it is unbelievable to be where He has been. And the fact that He was there makes those places special and blessed.” Thus the state visits, to Germany in particular, are seen as evidence of Haile Selassie’s divinity, in conjunction with the Biblical prophecies. Alternately, my interlocutors describe Haile Selassie as: “the fulfillment of prophecies from Yeshua”; “the recurrence of Yeshua, the prophesied King of Kings, the Lion of Judah”; “the King of Kings, the God of Creation, the God of Jacob, the God of Abraham, read it in the Bible.”

45 The community published a book that presents a detailed documentary of Haile Selassie’s visit to Germany: “… auf den Spuren Seiner Kaiserlichen Majestät Haile Selassie I. … in der B.R. Deutschland (08.11.1954 – 14.11.1954)”, by Jochanan Fey. There are also electronic books about Haile Selassie by other authors from the community: http://issuu.com/tafariverlag.
46 From the online documentary publication King of Kings, by Jochanan Fey. http://issuu.com/tafariverlag/docs/kingofkings.
Identity Work of the German Rastafari: In Search of Information on Haile Selassie

My interlocutors’ identity work involves awareness of the importance of certain facts, such as Selassie’s state visits or his speeches on various occasions. They search for information in libraries and on the internet and exchange it with each other. To be informed is part of their identity work that is accomplished by other Rastafarian principles such as Itali livity. Access to information is also what makes German Rastafari different from Jamaican ones. One of the differences between the movements in Jamaica and Germany, as Jochanan characterized it, is in the nature of the source of belief and knowledge that “He is the One.” In Germany, there is a high level of access to information, and thus, according to Jochanan, “belief is based upon knowledge,” and vice versa. Moreover, “belief is the first step on the way to knowledge.” This knowledge base is one of the aspects that create a “different direction” and a “different ideology” and is said to distinguish the younger German Rastafari generation from the older Jamaican one. The knowledge Jochanan refers to is acquired from a variety of documents available in libraries and provided by modern technologies, such as the internet. The documents that are very significant for my interlocutors include texts and photographs on the history of Selassie’s coronation, throne, and state visits, as well as the speeches of Haile Selassie that are considered as important as Biblical texts. They all serve as a proof of the emperor’s divinity to the German Rastafari, and similarly to Rastafari around the world.

Identity Work and Demarcation

Identity work also involves demarcation from the norms. In some cases, my interlocutors radically demarcate themselves from a “materialistic” and “consumer” society. Demarcation is not always radically articulated, however. As a Rastafari elder and reggae artist, Uwe often emphasizes the “we” rather than the “I” and the personal perspective. This Rastafarian rhetoric often suggests the word “unity.” This is a strategic unity through which one’s self-conception is constructed. Uwe said: “Within the Rasta movement itself, there are many independent groups, even in Jamaica. All of them are different organizations within the Rastafarian faith, but they all share the Rastafarian faith, you know? They might have different ways of living it, but we all share the same faith and the same spiritual ways. […] That’s why, although we have different groups, it’s also important to remind ourselves that in the end we share the same faith, and that we should stand as one.” Some of my other interlocutors also articulate this kind of Rastafarian rhetoric in which they strongly emphasize the “we” and “unity.” This is the concept of I and I, which is one of the most powerful in Rastafari: “Consistent with the Rastafarian philosophy of one love, self, family, inity (unity), oneness and humanity,

47 Technological progress as a means of acquiring knowledge, therefore, is not regarded as a contradiction to naturalness of Rastafari livity.
the I and I language reflects the Rastafarian concept of one-in-all and all-in-one; the one-for-all and the all-for-one” (Afari 2007:114).

Coping with Prejudices as Identity Work

Identity work and identity transformation are often associated with conflicts caused by stereotypes and prejudices that are spread in society, as was evident from the interviews. Stereotypes regarding Rastafari have persisted on different levels, including within the academy. The most widespread idea is the assumption that Rastafari is merely about listening to reggae music, wearing “fashionable” dreadlocks, and smoking marijuana. Viewing Rastafari through these facets is simplistic and superficial. For my interlocutors, affection for reggae and growing dreadlocks were initial signs of identity transformation leading to a deeper identification with Rastafari. In relation to cannabis, smoking the herb (if practiced) is strictly connected to the notion of consciousness that is the main component of the Rastafari livity. For the Rastafari, the main argument in favor of cannabis use is Biblical. The herb is considered God’s blessing and gift to humans: “He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man” (King James Bible, Psalms. 104-14). The Rastafari also refer to Ethiopian tales that can be traced back to King Solomon. According to one of these tales, ganja plants grew out of Solomon’s grave, and that is why “to smoke renders one as wise as Solomon” (Hausman 1997:61). In addition, my interlocutors interpret the use of the herb in terms of available scientific information propagating the harmlessness of cannabis as a substance that can be used for medicinal purposes.

As my interviewees articulate, negative perceptions of Rastafari can be often explained by people’s superficial judgments and by the lack of understanding of what Rastafari “really is.” At the gathering I observed the reactions of passers-by during a stroll: indeed, what I observed was curious staring at the Rasta sistren and brethren. However, this was explainable as the Rastafarians’ appearances differ from the “normal” and thus attract attention, which can be both positive and negative. Although they seem to have become accustomed to the different kinds of attention they receive, sometimes my interlocutors appear to be frustrated by it. People’s suspicions about Rastas’ constant marijuana-smoking and other stereotypical judgments and questions (e.g. as to whether dreadlocks can be properly washed) are frequent in my interviewees’ everyday lives. Suffering from misunderstanding and prejudices is thus part of identity work. In this work, however, the experienced injustices are rewarded by the feeling of strong collective identity and, most importantly, by the “protection and love of His Majesty.”

Reinterpretations of Christianity and Resistance as Identity Work

Identity work also includes subversion of established Christianity. The subversive interpretations of the Bible that, in Jamaica, challenged white hegemony and its versions of history are to a certain extent present in the German Rastafari community.
as well, as in the articulations that maintain the divinity of an African king. Therefore, white hegemony can be subverted by any person or group regardless of “race.” Rastafari, then, becomes a unifying force in this process of resistance against social realities, be they race or class relations. The resistance inherent in Rastafari acquires local forms and features, and thereby becomes global.

However, it must be pointed out that none of my interlocutors explicitly admit to “resisting” anything. Rather, they emphasized their primary wish to follow His Imperial Majesty and to live according to “God’s laws and rules,” which indicates the religious rather than subcultural character of German Rastafari. However, in some cases symbolic struggles become evident, as in public calls for social justice (for example, in reggae lyrics or in Facebook communications) as well as in criticisms of the indoctrination (or “brainwashing”) of people by the government and mass media. Thus, in realizing that countercultural aspects are a part of Rastafari worldview, it is possible to assume that resistance, consciously or unconsciously, is also being practiced by the Rastafari in Germany. In the Jamaican context, the specific forms of resistance to colonialism and oppression lay at the heart of the initiation of the Rastafari identity and movement. In Germany, resistance can hardly be assumed to be at the core of Rastafari; rather, certain forms of resistance (that are clearly of a different character than in (post-)colonial Jamaica) supervene with the key ideas and beliefs (that largely represent creative adjustments of the Jamaican Rastafari philosophy). It is also possible to assume that at the initial stage of my interlocutors’ identity formation, resistance to hegemonic culture, that is subcultural or countercultural factors, played an important role. Identification with reggae music and its revolutionary message as well as aspiration to spirituality and, as Rivke Jaffe (2010) puts it, an international tendency toward slow, natural, and ethical living were the initial factors of identity transformation which, through identity work (such as studying and interpreting the Bible and history) led to identification with various aspects of the Rastafari way of life. These aspects, involving certain forms of resistance, include recognition of Haile Selassie’s divinity and thus the challenging of Eurocentric assumptions and of Christianity which is based on them; appreciation of spirituality rather than materiality, and of unity rather than individualism; practicing Word, Sound and Power as a more constructive alternative to standard language; and Ital livity, that is a strictly vegetarian or vegan diet, rejection of alcohol and tobacco, and of artificiality in favor of naturalness. Rastafari culture in Germany therefore challenges Eurocentric hegemony, racism, capitalism, consumerism –in short, what is implied in the notion of the “Babylon system.”

**Zion and Babylon: Repatriation to Africa and Reference to Jamaica**

One of the central tenets of Rastafari in Jamaica has been repatriation to Africa, back to the roots, to the “motherland” Zion. Interpretations and adaptations of this focus among the German Rastafari are creative and rather diverse. Generally, Jamaica is important to my interviewees as the place of the movement’s origin and as a source
of Rastafari culture, but the major reference is to Africa, as for Jamaican Rastafari. In this sense, the German Rastafari movement is “independent” from the Jamaican one, as Jochanan stated. Chris also emphasized, “we have to look to Africa; we don’t have to look to Jamaica.” Jamaica is “not a holy land” but still “Jamaica has shown the world that Ethiopia is the place where I and I should be.”

Similarly to Jamaican Rastafari, my interlocutors criticize the “system of Babylon” – for example, Western capitalism, the consumerism of society, or the Catholic Church. For many of them, repatriation is a purpose – metaphorically for some, physically for others. They refer to Zion (Ethiopia or Africa in general) as a place where life is closer to nature and simultaneously farther from what is perceived as Babylon.

Life is therefore more likely to become a spiritual _livity_ in Zion than in Germany, as some of my interlocutors explain. Cultural and spiritual education, however, must precede physical repatriation: “Repatriation does not mean to take the next plane to _Ithiopia_ and to continue the things I did in Germany. This is not repatriation because physically I am in Africa but spiritually I am not in Zion.” Uwe offers a creative interpretation of repatriation: he views it as a necessity of one’s contribution to the “improvement” of Africa (i.e. of its material condition) and, respectively, of humanity. The issue of black consciousness, thus, also implies for him the “reestablishment of justice:”

If you look at humanity in the global sense and look at the fact that the entire humanity is coming from Africa from where it spread all over the world, then of course I could also say that I can kind of repatriate and go back to the motherland. […] But the issue of repatriation is mainly among Africans whose foreparents were taken away from their homelands by force, against their will. So there is a different quality or form of the desire to repatriate among the people in the West. Many places in Africa need to build up and develop, and I think it should be a duty for every human being who wishes to contribute to this development. Black consciousness definitely plays a major role, but I think it’s more in order to reestablish justice on earth and justice to the humanity, you know?

Struggling for justice and equality is thus vital. Repatriation is accordingly considered an important part and embodiment of this struggle. Also, repatriation presupposes the recognition of the significance of Africa as origin of human civilization. For the German Rastafari therefore, the issue of repatriation, whether metaphorical or physical, is a step on the way to humankind’s liberation from prejudices and division.

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48 For example, Maria is determined to “repatriate” in the near future to her “homeland” Kenya.
Conclusion

One of the central enquiries of this research has been the question of similarities and differences between the Jamaican and German Rastafari movements. The most obvious answer is that there is one major similarity, in spite of a diversity of local features and adjustments. The key unifying force is Haile Selassie and the supreme position that the Ethiopian emperor holds for both German and Jamaican Rastafari. Just like the people in colonial and post-colonial Jamaica, the people born in Germany identify Haile Selassie as the Messiah described in the Bible. There are, however, certain distinctions in this view: if for Jamaican Rastafarians (at the time of their emergence) the Messiah was first a redeemer of black people, then for the German Rastafari (as, obviously, for other followers of different cultural origins), the Ethiopian king is a redeemer of all humankind, regardless of racial, cultural, geographic, or any other boundaries, and this is what makes the Rastafari philosophy “universal” for the German Rastas. As my interviewees articulate, German and Jamaican Rastafari are “one movement” despite much diversity in the historical, cultural, social, and economic backgrounds of the countries. Thus, they commonly emphasize the similarities between the two movements as well as the unity and equality of humankind; that is, they maintain egalitarian principles of being and living.

If Rastafari in Germany were observed in subcultural terms, it would be possible to conclude that their way of life is a mode of resistance to materialistic and individualistic society, to the Babylon system, to global capitalism, to racism and other injustices of the world. In other words, Rastafari would be viewed as a counterculture to hegemonic culture. However, my current vision of German Rastafari is different: if earlier I looked at it through the lens of countercultural characteristics, now I assume that Rastafari exceeds the definition of counterculture. In the beliefs, practices and lifestyles of my interlocutors, the emphasis is on spirituality rather than resistance. Yet it is possible to state that resistance is inherent in German Rastafari, even if its character is more religious than countercultural. The resistance, of which my interlocutors are not necessarily always aware, is largely directed to the system of ideas, beliefs and practices understood as Babylon. Against this system, it becomes essential for the German Rastafari to construct a symbolic Zion, the collective identity, the “we” that is the I and I. If in the Jamaican context repatriation has been interpreted in terms of resistance to oppression, then in Germany ideas of repatriation function as a response to more general issues and problems (that are caused by globalization and capitalism). These ideas involve recognitions of Africa as the origin of humanity and views of humanity itself as sister- and brotherhood. The repatriation goals in Germany, therefore, represent metaphors for justice and equality among humankind.

49 Despite its religious significance, repatriation to “underdeveloped” and “backward” Ethiopia (presented as such by the mass media) can be viewed as “a typical Jamaican response” to social and economic pressures (cf. Nettleford 1970:104).
What seems to be, in the German context, a specific local feature of the
globalized phenomenon of Rastafari is the interpretation of Haile Selassie’s visit to
Germany. In this global–local variety of the movement, the identity, self-perception, and
worldview of the European Rastafari are fundamentally constructed through the figure
of the Ethiopian king. Viewing Africa as the cradle of humanity and referring to African
culture as a source of identity constitute Rastafari worldview and consciousness. These
tendencies are inherent not only within the African diaspora but outside of it as well.
The assumption that “we all are Africans,” as Chris put it, refers to metaphorical
Africanness and to cultural self-awareness. Arguably, this assumption gives the German
Rastas legitimacy and authenticity being Rastafari beyond the African diaspora. The
same assumption also reinforces reconsiderations of Christianity. Africanness as a
cultural phenomenon and a worldview can be adjusted and interpreted as a cluster of
ideas and symbols that offer meaning and identification and represent metaphors for
social justice and equality. The recognition of the black God and of Africa as the origin
of humanity, the idea of metaphoric or physical repatriation, and maintaining symbolic
Africanness are thus essential for becoming and being Rastafari in Germany.

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