Root of David: The Symbolic Origins of Rastafari, by Matthew Charet. Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2010, 257pp., pb., \$15.00. ISBN-13: 9788184651010.

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Rastafari is, along with ISKCON, perhaps the most visible and respectable of the “old” New Religious Movements. As I write this, the documentary *Marley* is receiving widespread and generally laudatory coverage in the mainstream press. It is curious then that the historiography of Rastafari should be such a lacuna in the academic literature. Barrett’s *The Rastafarians: Dreadlocks of Jamaica* remains the standard text, despite being published 35 years ago.¹ *Root of David* is therefore a welcome attempt at a systematic scholarly study of the historical development of Rastafari, focussing specifically on the social conditions that fostered the emergence of the conception of the divinity of Haile Sellassi, crowned Emperor of Ethiopia in 1930.

As Charet argues in his comprehensive introduction, three issues have prevented this from being successfully carried out before. Firstly, and in common with some other NRMs, Rastafari has actively resisted academic scrutiny. Rastafarians conceive of academia as a tool of the white oppressor, and as Patois is a *détournement* of English in an act of cultural resistance (82), so Rastafari has typically denied scholars the right to view the movement through the lens of Western academia (48). This has begun to change in recent decades, however, as a number of Rastafarians have themselves entered academic study. However, etic studies are needed to balance emic accounts.

The second issue is that Rastafari is acephalous and orally transmitted, and therefore intrinsically resistant to codification and formalisation (74). As the revelation is considered on-going and collective, emic codifications of doctrine are not only difficult, but somewhat pointless; as Charet notes, the right of any Rasta to contribute to the revelation means that there can never be one correct interpretation (45). A predominantly oral tradition, focussed on

1. Leonard E. Barrett, *The Rastafarians: Dreadlocks of Jamaica* (London & Kingston: Heinemann, 1977).

the practise of discussing spiritual issues collectively in the “yards”, means that few Rastafarian theological texts appeared in print, and of those which did, low-quality production meant that even fewer survived to the present day, making historical reconstruction problematic. This has also been the case with formative documents such as the June, 1931, edition of *National Geographic* featuring the coronation of Haile Sellassi, which was to become a major formative influence of Rastafarian theology (196–197).

Thirdly, the few academic studies of Rastafari we do have have constructed it in very different ways and in different contexts—for example as a messianic movement, as a political resistance movement, as syncretistic and as a nativist revival movement. Charet’s solution is to bring all these perspectives together by considering them all as manifestations of *revitalization* movements, drawing from Anthony Wallace. A revitalization movement is an “organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture”, Wallace claims, and explains more rapid social change than classic processes of cultural change allow (1956, 265).² In this way, Charet attempts to avoid the distortions of earlier studies.

The remainder of the book uses this theoretical basis to examine the historical factors that created the conditions necessary for the eventual deification of Haile Sellassi. Chapter 3 considers the particular social culture of Jamaica in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Jamaica, unlike other Caribbean countries colonized by the Spanish and Portuguese, was never settled by large numbers of white immigrants; rather, the majority of the population became controlled by a small elite of white slave owners, who moreover were absent for large periods. Furthermore, Christianity was not imposed on the Jamaicans, who were left essentially to their own spiritual devices (144). When African slaves were brought to Jamaica, tribal groups were separated to prevent continuity of their social and religious customs. Instead, a complex socio-religious matrix developed.

This syncretistic milieu is then considered in Chapter 4. Charet first considers the development during the eighteenth century of *obeah*, a bricolage of African magical practices including spirit possession, healing and the production of amulets. Importantly, these amulets offered protection against the colonial powers, rather than the more metaphysical power embodied by witches as was typical, foreshadowing the anti-colonial narrative of later Rastafari. In the later 18th century, Myalism, to some degree in reaction to

2. Anthony F. C. Wallace, “Revitalization Movements.” *American Anthropology* 58 (1956): 264–281.

obeah and other unsuccessful revolutionary programmes, sought to reframe the discourse from physical to ideological freedom, and developed a position of accommodation for the central Christian tenets within a pan-African Weltanschauung. Although this is markedly different from the cases of Condomblé or Santarí, where the obligation on the slaves to practise Christianity led to them disguising their native practises in Catholic clothing, it is interesting that this religious freedom nevertheless produced a bricolage of Christian and African spiritualities. Charet's exposition of this process is one of the book's major contributions.

The influence of Marcus Garvey is considered in Chapter 5. Jamaica's free interpretation of biblical tradition and culture of resistance meant that Garvey's Ethiopianism, which used the bible to argue that Ethiopia was the rightful homeland of all black people, found particularly fertile soil. The physical return to Africa was to be accompanied by a spiritual return to purity. The transmissions of African customs meant that Jamaicans were particularly open to recognizing certain individuals (typically older men) as prophets. Their considerably variant interpretations of Garveyism were fostered through the yards, eventually to emerge as Rastafai. It may have been worth relating this idea to Matthew Wood's model of "non-formative" religious structures, where individuals act as focal-points to which individuals may be more-or-less committed, more-or-less exclusively.³ Such a comparison would have gone some way toward relating this book to broader contemporary trends in studying new religions, to which I feel it has a contribution to make.

Charet's exposition of the complex socio-religious milieu of the 17-19th centuries of which Rastafari was the ultimate inheritor is persuasive. Having said this, that the book ends with the beginning of Rastafari as we know it was disappointing. I wanted to know how these formative threads had continued to influence the movement in its later transformations, firstly in becoming increasingly tied to Jamaican cultural identity, and later in becoming international through the *dreadlocks* movement in the UK and elsewhere, and the international currency of Bob Marley, recognised as a prophet within the Rastafari movement. These threads, however, remain available for development in the future.

Root of David is a persuasive addition to a growing body of work on New Religious Movements which seeks to place them not into narratives of alterity, violence and marginality, but rather locates them historically into broad

3. Matthew Wood, *Possession, Power and the New Age: Ambiguities of Authority in Neoliberal Societies* (Aldershot, Hants and Burlington, VA: Ashgate, 2007).

social and societal currents. Charet explains the unique features of Rastafarian belief and culture as the result of tangible and specific cultural processes, without attempting to codify, reify, or in any other way simplify the phenomena that it examines. For this reason, *Root of David* is a strong contribution to both the historiography of Rastafari, and to a more nuanced and culturally located social-scientific study of new religious movements.