

RASTAFARI IN THE GRENADA REVOLUTION

On March 13th, 1979 the Caribbean awoke to the news of the revolutionary overthrow of the government of Prime Minister Eric Gairy of Grenada. Having taken by force 'True Blue Barracks', the Head Quarters of the Grenada Defence Force and the national radio station, radio broadcasts called on the population to rise in support of the revolution and disarm the police stations. Within twelve hours and only three casualties, (one accidental) the New Jewel Movement (NJM) led, 'Provisional' then later 'People's Revolutionary Government' had taken responsibility for governmental authority in the newly independent Caribbean micro-state, Grenada.

Among the first published visual images of this unprecedented and dramatic turn in Anglophone Caribbean political history, were those of young, dreadlocked, Rastafarian revolutionaries armed with light assault rifles on mobile patrols and on security detail in front of police stations overtaken by 'the Revo'.

"The people's response was overwhelmingly positive. Five days later at a rally of twenty-five thousand people, about one quarter of the island's population, the People's Revolutionary Government was proclaimed, with Maurice Bishop as Prime Minister and Bernard Coard as Minister of Finance. Gairy conceded defeat".¹

The Revo's first week impact on the ears of Grenada's one hundred thousand (100,000) strong population was as dramatic as the published visuals. "People were calling us the revolution through radio", recalled Major Leon Cornwall, former Chairman of the NJM National Youth Organization,

Ambassador to Cuba and member of the Central Committee of the NJM Party in a recent conversation in St. Georges Grenada.

“For the whole of the first week [of the Revo] people kept commenting on the very different sound being broadcast on the airwaves through the programming of Radio Free Grenada. It was mostly Rasta music, revolutionary reggae music, Bob Marley, Peter Tosh an’ dem. A very different vibe from the Soca music people were used to hearing.”ⁱⁱ

The revolution’s popularity became rooted not only in the hearts and minds of the masses of the Grenadian people but soon enjoyed the support of the wider Caribbean through a range of regional and national civil society organizations representing trade unions, the women, youth, centre and left political groups and parties of a generally anti-imperialist orientation, the church and a growing number of Caribbean governments led by the administrations of Guyanese President Forbes Burnham and Jamaican Prime Minister, Michael Manley. The revolution’s gains in cementing solid popular support among the Grenadian people were evidently a result of the fairly successful implementation of a social policy that included; expanding literacy and educational access, land reform and a reorganization of the agricultural sector, and perhaps most importantly, deepening the democratic participation of the Grenadian citizenry in the day to day governance of their affairs through the establishment of structures to facilitate the development and involvement of mass organizations of the workers, youth, women, small farmers. In all of this, indicators of sound fiscal management and healthy growth trends dominated this period of Grenada’s history. When the U.S. turned its focus on Grenada and Nicaragua after successfully engaging in programmes of destabilization against Chile and Jamaica in 1973 and 1980 respectively, Bishop’s response to U.S. pressure was proud and defiant;

“We are a small country, we are a poor country, with a population of largely African descent, we are part of the exploited third world...Grenada is a sovereign and independent territory and

we expect all countries to strictly respect our independence just as we will respect theirs. No country has the right to tell any other country what to do. We are not in anybody's backyard and we are definitely not for sale... Though small and poor we are proud and determined!"ⁱⁱⁱ

Bishop remained a very popular leader in Grenada not because he was a dynamic speaker and an attractive personality but because the New Jewel Movement addressed many of Grenada's concerns which Gairy had neglected. The World Bank praised the financial and economic achievements of the PRG in a 1982 report, unemployment fell while real living standards rose. Education received the highest priority as evidenced in the outputs of the National In-Service Teacher Education Programme (NISTEP) and the Centre for Popular Education which significantly improved adult literacy.^{iv}

My first visit to Grenada in March 1980 was as a member of the Theatre Group for National Liberation (TGNL), a Jamaican anti-imperialist popular theatre group that had become in effect, the cultural arm of the Workers Party of Jamaica. We were invited to the "Festival of the Revolution", a first Anniversary commemoration of 'the Revo', as guests of the P.R.G. to perform a Jamaicanized interpretation of Bertold Brecht's classic play about the Russian Revolution, "The Mother", at venues throughout the island. We were also asked to perform an edited version of our song "Forward March" which included, at the request of the leadership of the P.R.G., verses which honoured Grenadian heroes, Fedon, Marryshow, and Rupert Bishop. We proudly sang in the troops of the People's Revolutionary Army whose impressive ceremonial drill was received by Prime Minister Bishop and visiting Heads of State, Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua and Michael Manley of Jamaica. I did not realize then that these troops had been trained by Ras Nang or Prince Nna Nna, leader of Grenada's Nyabinghi House of Rastafari, nor did I realize that at the time of this display, Nang had already been imprisoned by the P.R.G.! I will return later to Ras Nang and his

extraordinary personal testimony of being—at one and the same time—both a co-creator and victim of the revolution.

I first became aware of the saga of Prince Nna Nna in the early 1990s when a Jamaican Nyabinghi elder shared with me the unedited manuscript of the interview done with Nang by Ras Ikael Tafari, a leader of the Nyabinghi House of Barbados. It was a shocking expose of the brutal oppression of Rastafari detailing allegations of beatings, imprisonment, torture and executions. Some thirteen years later I met Ras Nang for the first time at the, '**Rastafari Global Reasoning 2003**' a Rastafari Community assembly, supported by the UWI Mona. It was hard for me to express in that first meeting with Ras Nang the deep emotions I experienced as one who as a 'bald head' member of the Workers Party of Jamaica had met and became friends with comrades on both sides of the Grenadian revolutionary leadership which imploded horrifically after factional conflicts in the NJM party leadership culminated in Prime Minister Bishop being placed under house arrest on October 12th, 1983.

Outbreaks of public protests followed the announcement of Bishop's arrest and on the 19th October his release from house arrest occurred as a result of a protest march of some twenty thousand of his loyal supporters who after freeing Bishop proceeded to march on to Fort Rupert, where the armoury of the PRA was located, disarm the People's Revolutionary Army command there and arm themselves. His subsequent execution at Fort Rupert along with Jacqueline Creft, Unison Whiteman, Vince Noel, Norris and Fitzroy Bain occurred after three armoured carriers carrying PRA officers supporting the Marxist-Leninist/Bernard Coard faction then in control of the NJM Party's Central Committee, arrived at the Fort and opened fire killing some fifty (50) Bishop supporters.

On March 14th, 1984, Dr. Bill Riviere, scholar and former leader of the Dominica Liberation Movement gave what is in my view one of the most comprehensive, step by step accounts of the

chronology of the collapse of the revolution in an address to the Black Studies Department of the City College, City University of New York. According to his accounting of the events;

In late 1982 Coard resigns from the NJM's Central Committee and Politbureau but retains his state positions as Deputy P.M. and Minister of Finance and Planning. This is hardly discussed and remains a secret of the twenty (20) member C.C. The reason offered by Coard was that he was being portrayed as the Revolution's 'hatchet man' as no other leader, including Bishop, was willing to take strong decisions for the advance of the revolution. Almost a year later in July 1983, a C.C. meeting concludes that the party was plagued by ideological, political and organizational weaknesses, as a result of the emergence of two trends within the party, one 'petty bourgeois' and the other Marxist-Leninist. Then one month later on August 26th, 1983 an extraordinary C.C. meeting was held at which the M-L trend presents an assessment that sections of the party rank and file were becoming not just disillusioned but silently rebellious, that this needed to be nipped in the bud if not, would grow into open rebellion, that the petty bourgeois trend seemed likely to prevail and that the situation needed to be resolved in a, 'special way'.

On September 14 – 16, 1983, persuaded by the argument of the self styled Marxist-Leninist wing that the catalogued problems of the revolution were due to the limitations of Maurice, and that if the situation was not speedily halted the revolutionary process could be overthrown by counter-revolutionary forces within a year, the meeting, despite attempts by Maurice to secure consensus and delay, the C.C. endorsed by a 9 – 4 vote, a resolution calling for Coard to lead jointly with Bishop. The C.C. informs Coard two days later of the decision. Reports say that at first Coard expressed preference to serve the Revo from outside the P.B. and C.C. but later welcomed the invitation to share leadership of the party. Bishop and the so-called petty bourgeois trend were reportedly absent from the meeting.

On September 25th 1983, the proposals were taken to the whole membership of the party (and there it was approved by an overwhelming majority of the gathered membership of the party (totalling no more than two hundred comrades). Maurice reportedly votes in favour. Two days later Bishop leaves for a trip to Czechoslovakia and Hungary accompanied by George Louison, Minister of Agriculture and Unison Whiteman, Minister of Foreign Relations, two of the strongest supporters of his original reservations regarding joint leadership. He returns home on October 8th, but is not met at the airport by Coard nor is he briefed by any other party leader on developments since his departure as was customary.

Between October 9th and 11th Grenada intelligence services pick up a rumour implicating Coard and his wife Phyllis (also a member of the C.C.), in the masterminding of a plot to assassinate Bishop. The rumour is traced to Bishop's personal security, Cletus St. Paul who reportedly later identifies Bishop as the source. On October 12th the C.C. meets again in another crisis management session. Bishop now rejects joint leadership after earlier acceptance. With the assassination plot rumour on the streets and the lives of C.C. members being threatened he is now cited by the M-L group as being the main cause of the crisis in the party. "Cold blooded" (sic) measures were called for. These included the indefinite detention of Bishop, disarming him and denying him telephone access and visitor rights.

On October 14th after a trial by the party for his alleged invention of the assassination rumour information is released to the Grenadian people and the world that Prime Minister Maurice Bishop was being held under house arrest "for his own safety". His release from house arrest by some twenty thousand protesting supporters, their march to Fort Rupert, the location of the armoury of the People's Revolutionary Army, their disarming of the officers in command, the arming of the supporters of Bishop and escalating with the arrival of armoured personnel carriers into the atrocities previously noted.

Riviere concludes that despite the factional cleavages, the NJM Party was in fact united on the notion that the age old problems facing the people of Grenada originated in the exploitation of their human and material resources by colonialism and imperialism, that lasting solutions to these problems could only be found by escaping the stranglehold of imperialism and constructing a socialist society in preference to the existing dependent, underdeveloped capitalist situation and the knowledge that movement from capitalism toward socialism was a process rather than an act constituting a period of transition called national democracy.

Disagreement, Riviere argues, occurred in terms of different understandings of the dynamics of the transition period, differences not of ideology but in terms of tactics and strategy. These in his view were the underlying reasons for the resignation of Coard from the C.C. and P.B. late in 1982. The Coard group he suggests felt that the pace of the revolutionary process was being needlessly slowed because of incorrect direction set by Bishop and other leaders of government such as, Whiteman, Bain, Ramdhanny and Radix. The M-L perspective saw speeding up the revolutionary process in terms of nationalizing the whole economy and declaring Grenada on the road to socialism, on March 13th 1984. Bishop, Riviere asserts, thought otherwise. What is obvious is that these disagreements in strategy for advancing the revolution were never seriously discussed, let alone clearly articulated. Had discussions taken place opines Riviere, there would have been no room for the kind of internecine name-calling which characterized the last month of the People's Revolutionary Government. And there certainly would not have occurred the shooting down of the people and the execution of [some of] the finest revolutionaries the English-speaking Caribbean has given to the world^v.

Riviere's chronology and conclusions though considered largely accurate, but for the still contested account of the events at Fort Rupert on October 19th, make no mention of the brutal repression against the Grenadian Rastafari revolutionaries that may have started from as early as

the first months of the revolution. Note should be taken of the fact that Riviere's account was written only five months or so after the factional crisis and gruesome self destruction of the revolutionary government.

Dr. Ikael Tafari's 2001 publication, "Rastafari in Transition" examines the Rastafari movement's engagement of 'the politics of cultural confrontation in Africa and the Caribbean (1966 – 1988) and provides among other things, a more detailed critique of the NJM led Grenadian process.^{vi} In an early section of his work captioned, 'Criticism and Counter criticism: Rastafari and the left', Tafari acknowledges the value of Horace Campbell's treatment of the "new political role of Rastafari in the Eastern Caribbean, and most notably Grenada in allying with radical political forces from the mid-1970s." He directly engages Campbell's assessment that in the case of the Grenada Revolution, "certain Rastafari were used by reactionary elements to fight against both pro-PRG brethren and against the Bishop Government".^{vii} Tafari, with substantially more grounded connections goes on to present the Grenadian Rasses refutation of this [and other charges made by Campbell] and their own counter charges against "elements of false consciousness on the part of radical leftists in the Grenadian case". From the point of view of the Grenadian Rastafari brethren,

"...the relationship between Rastafari and the left has been marred by the insensitivity of the latter in not internalizing the full force of the cultural critique of the brethren. In particular, the Bishop People's Revolutionary Government (PRG) stands charged by the brethren [for] retreating from their earlier positive stand on 'Black Power'. Especially after the entry into the picture of Bernard Coard and his Organization for Revolutionary Education and Liberation, (OREL) faction with their hard-line, doctrinaire, Stalinist stance, the more positive position of Bishop's wing of the party (which had been more sensitive to the racial and cultural issues of struggle) faded rapidly. With the added negative influence of the Cubans towards black cultural symbolism like the wearing of dreadlocks in the army and the use of Ganja, the alliance between

the Rastas and the PRG was replaced by mutual disenchantment. In all of this one must bear in mind that Rastafari had been the first -and most decisive- group to throw in its lot with the revolution, and without its grassroots support, it is popularly believed, the NJM would not have so readily achieved success. Thus, the paradoxical situation occurred in which the brethren who decided to resign from the army rather than to trim their dreadlocks were summarily imprisoned indefinitely and en masse.”^{viii}

Tafari elaborates on the issues of contention that contributed to the souring of relations between the Grenadian Rastafari community and the PRG in an endnote to the first chapter of his work. In it he states,

“On Coard’s position re the controversial issue of Rasta and the place of ganja in the Revolution, see Maurice Patterson’s Big sky, little bullet, St. Georges Grenada 1992, pp. 59 - 60...where the author states, ‘...when the Hopevale Labour camp was created for the ganja-smoking Garveyites, (sic) the issue had been to Coard less an issue of ganja and more about who should control the minds of young people – Haile Selassie or Karl Marx?”

Tafari continues by in sharing Patterson’s views concerning the hegemonic influence of Cuba on the revolution in general.

“It is interesting that in the October 1982 Minutes of C.C. meetings it had been pointed out that contributions to NJM’s line of march (Declaration of Strategy) had come from members as well as prospective members of the Cuban Communist Party. As yet Cuban closeness to the Grenadian cabinet had not become an issue. The Ambassador, Rizo had frequently attended Cabinet meetings, offering advice on a range of social issues from monitoring of church activities to the correct practical approach to handling the *Rastafarian situation*”^{ix}

Tafari cites Gregory Sandford and Richard Vigilante, *Grenada: The Untold Story*, London, Madison Books, 1984, for shedding an interesting light on the nature of the Cuban intervention re the Rasta situation.

“Having noted that the PRG began in earnest to round up and “rehabilitate” the Rastas in July 1981, the authors go on to state that the Cuban ambassador, ‘counselled caution lest Grenada be isolated regionally and internationally, and suggested waiting to let the Rastas make the first move, so as to ‘legitimise’ the PRG’s measures (pp. 136 -137). To Tafari, these considerations of Rizo appear to have been purely tactical. For his part, Bishop is said to have declared himself ‘totally against taking up 300 of them and cutting their hair as was promised’. (p.137). But by this time Bishop was already no longer in full control. In its final meeting of 1981, the Central Committee would congratulate itself on having crushed the ‘counter revolution’ (including the Rastas)”.^x

Having come to the evidence based conclusion that the actions of the middle strata led PRG had become authoritarian, even ‘commandist’, Tafari goes on to note the contribution of C.Y. Thomas to the elaboration of thought on the ‘variable ideological contours of the authoritarian state’, in particular his observation that such a state can develop either a “left” or “right” posture. He goes on to comment on the development of the thought of Dr. Brian Meeks on the matter, eventually citing an unpublished doctoral dissertation circa 1988 entitled, “Social Formation and Peoples Revolution: A Grenada Study”. In addressing the peculiar features of Grenada historically;

“Meeks”, observes Tafari “concedes that the [same] social formation catapulted both Gairy (on the right) and Bishop (on the left) into a position of relative autonomy from the mass base”.^{xi} Thus leadership from the middle strata consistently runs the risk of becoming detached and alienated from its popular base. Regarding the ‘left oriented’ PRG, Meeks further admits that: “While a healthy populist tendency which sought to expand democracy and involve the working people existed, it

competed with and eventually lost out to an authoritarian tendency which felt that the party and the C.C. could substitute for the people.”^{xii}

Tafari’s critique goes further. Invoking Trimberger and in contention with Halliday and Molyneaux, he revisits ideas concerning ‘revolution from above’ with a view to determining possibilities for the co-optation and derailment of the revolutionary process by petty bourgeois leadership. Tafari suggests biting that in the case of the Grenadian and Ethiopian revolutionary processes of the 70s and supported by references to Ambursley, Cohen and Watson, that what was at stake was not the fulfilment of the objectives of the mass movement from below but its pre-emption, co-optation and betrayal by the petty bourgeois leadership. Thus, “The force of the repressive measures unleashed in Ethiopia and Grenada then, is an index of the extent to which ‘revolution from above’ is prepared by mass struggle from below, and shows the lengths to which the petty bourgeois leadership of the revolution is willing to go to neutralize their more radical forerunners, and thus ultimately derail the revolutionary process.”^{xiii}

Moving to contend with “the non-capitalist path” of development, the main target of his issue with the ideological/political path taken in Grenada as in Ethiopia, Tafari states,

“While the revolutions’ achievements particularly in the areas of literacy and health services were considerable, the non-capitalist path reflected contradiction between social advance and political regression and led to similar economic and social problems. In Grenada the previous liberal democratic system (which Gairy had so ruthlessly caricatured) was formally restructured, ostensibly in the direction of greater popular participation, but in fact the previously authoritarian pattern of decision-making subsequently became more monolithic and elitist. This was so notwithstanding the charade of zonal and village assemblies so as to appear to be...fostering participatory democracy. Meanwhile continues Tafari, the basic economic framework remained intact, although there was some flirtation with the standard

'non-capitalist' prescriptions concerning land reform, nationalization (of banks and insurance companies) and cooperatives in the agriculture and fisheries.

“The major lesson to be learnt from the continuity between the pre- and post-revolutionary regimes of Ethiopia and Grenada is that there exists “an almost unbridgeable ideologico-cultural gap between the Western educated, technically oriented, Eurocentric intelligentsia (from among the upper section of the petty bourgeoisie) which manages the state, and the Afro-centric religious oriented, traditionalist, poor peasant/artisan/semi-proletarian mass base of the peoples struggle, both in Africa and the Caribbean”^{xiv}.

Tafari's overriding assessment of Rastafari and the politics of Black Liberation in the Grenada Revolution is that: To secure and maintain the overall unity of the revolution, the movement was challenged to find flexibility needed to transcend the dogmatic limits of the absolute creeds of the four main political ideological trends that comprised the revolutionary movement in Grenada – Marxism-Leninism/Stalinism, Islamic Fundamentalism, Rastafari and Black Power. Only the Rastafari were able to make compromises with certain entrenched core areas of their tradition thus generating the momentum potentially for a new stage in the political liberation of the black masses in the commonwealth Caribbean. Tragically, the Marxist-Leninists, Muslims and Black Powerites basically consolidated the pre-set doctrinal lines of their creeds. Particularly in the case of the first mentioned group, this led inexorably to the worst manifestations of the politics of “religious” orthodoxy, that is, dogmatic sectarianism, clandestine caucusing and inquisitional persecution – and thus ultimately to fratricidal military conflict and the judgemental executions at Fort Rupert on October 19th, 1983, climaxing in the revolution's sudden death and regional disaster”^{xv}.

As part of my own efforts to gain a better ethnographic assessment of events that shaped the collapse of the Revolution and how the Rastafari experienced these events, my attempts to link up with Prince Nna Nna started from my first day on the ground in Grenada in June this year. I was also

hoping to invite his attendance and participation at the panel discussion, “Rastafari in the Grenadian Revolution”. My efforts intensified after attending a forum which allowed a limited public to meet, greet and have some interchange of views with about nine of the former members of the PRG leadership most of whom had spent in excess of a quarter of a century in jail having been found guilty of the murder of Maurice Bishop et al. Though unsuccessful in being able to reach Ras Nang before the panel, it was interestingly the efforts of Lt. Col Ewart Layne, former Chief of Staff of the PRA and an affine relation of ‘Nang’, that eventually allowed me to once again link with Ras Nang by his jewellery shop in St. Georges public market. Two long sessions of discussion followed with Nang, the first with Ewart Layne, his wife, and Dr. Jalani Niaah in which Ras Nang gave a surreal rendering of moments when he was “killed by the revolution”.

In a style reminiscent of the visions of John in the Book of Revelations, and in many ways characteristic of highly spiritually gifted leaders in the diverse traditions of African-Caribbean revolutionary spirituality, Ras Nang re-enacted two of the moments when he faced the many guns of, of his own army, aimed at him. The index finger of the officer nearest him was tightening on the trigger. The putrescent smell of the approaching ‘angel of death’ enveloping him, (“Bongo Aata! Maan, da is one baad, baad smell, like rottin’ bodies in a morgue.”) finding himself in a waking vision of the presence of The Almighty, the bright lights of the extraterrestrial craft, and the many eyes on the countenance of the

Almighty... Finally waking again, alive but critically wounded in hospital.

Even as startling as his visions are, the facts of Nang’s case are known on the road in Grenada to be true. These truths are evidenced by the many gunshot wounds shockingly visible on the torso, hands and legs of Ras Nang. To many, these wounds are embodied testimony of Prince Nna-Nna as a mortal yet death defying presence of Rastafari. Ras Nang explained that from before the Revo he had been Grenada’s first Black Belt and most accomplished Martial artist, winning medals for

Grenada in international competition on three occasions. He recalled being drawn to supporting the Revo from the 'front line' not out of any malicious feelings against Gairy, but because the Revo was promoting people's rights and freedom, defending the poor and oppressed, land for the landless, an end to discrimination against Rastafari including the prevention of Rastafari children from attending school and the freeing up of the herb, ganja. "I became the physical Trainer for the PRA and served as Maurice's bodyguard".

"Yes, I trained those troops that paraded in Queen's Park at the Festival of the Revolution on the First Anniversary when your group [the TGNL] performed, but I was not there. I was in jail. My problems with the revolution started after I proposed to the Comrade Leader that Rasta should be included in the government as Rasta was a major foundation of the support base of the revolution and that such a move would bring the revolutionary leadership closer to the people and the people closer to the leadership, making the revolution more secure. I was summoned to the office of the Deputy Commissioner of Police who asked me, 'Nang, why when your Bredren passin' by the station dey should be shoutin, 'Fire!' I tell him das like a password among InI. I showin him sey wen I visit a Rastaman gates or a Bredren trod to visit I, the firs wud we would say is, "Fire!" Das wen I see armed officers appearing from behind doors in his office approachin I. I was struck to the ground with a rifle but from behind"^{xvi}.

Leon Cornwall affirmed knowledge of the proposal by Ras Nang. "Perhaps because I was in working with and closer to the youth, I tried to show the comrades on the political bureau that Nang's idea was a good one that should be supported, but they did not agree"^{xvii}

Nna went on to raise another issue that became a sticking point with the revolutionary leadership, the issue of holding elections. "I told Comrade Maurice, hold elections as you promised. The people strongly support your government there is no way you could lose"^{xviii}.

The following abridged excerpts from Prince Nna Nna's published interview with Ikael Tafari adds further insights into the mind and thinking of Grenada's largely unsung Rastafari revolutionary.

I.T.: Prince Nna, the crucial question is: why did the PRG look on the Rastafari as a threat during the course of the Grenada Revolution?

Nna: Because the Rastafari were more popular, more grassroots and genuinely more revolutionary than the Maurice Bishop administration at that time.

I.T.: What kind of following did the Rastaman have during that period?

Nna: Rasta had a bigger following then than Bishop and his people

I.T.: What kinds of numbers among the Rasses themselves are we talking about here?

Nna: At this stage remember, it wasn't Rasta alone, it was Rasta and the general public which fully supported the Rasta cause. You could see this at our weekly Nyahbingi meetings. Plenty more people were coming to our Nyahbingi celebrations than those going to Maurice an dem political meetings. And that caused jealousy.

I.T.: What number of Rasses in the town areas would be gathering at these Nyahbingis?

Nna: At that time approximately a thousand to twelve hundred Rastas – I not speaking yet of sympathisers and people coming to hear what the Rastaman had to say... whole villages of people, especially in places like Victoria, Gouyave, Sauteurs, and right in St. Georges.

I.T.: There were more Bingham in the country than in the town at that time?

Nna: The Rasta people in Grenada in that period lived more in the mountains, in the interior. A good portion of brethren lived in the town but the biggest concentration lived in the hills. Rasta in

Grenada was more originally a hills vibration like in most of the other Caribbean islands. It was the Maurice Bishop administration that ran Rasta out of the hills.

I.T.: At what stage?

Nna: That was just at the time that the Cubans started to come into Grenada, say around the first three months of the Revolution...Yes very early in the revolution Maurice Bishop started fighting against the Rastafari...Technically, psychologically, and then openly...

I.T.: How many Rastas were in the original Peoples Liberation Army?

Nna: The Liberation Army was predominantly Rasta. Let's say two thirds at least...More than a thousand. There were Rastas in it from all regions of the island.

...I.T.: Did the Muslims sympathise with the views held by the Rastas?

Nna: At first some of the Muslims were vexed with the Rastas for taking up arms to support the Revo, especially since the Muslims were more advanced in revolutionary strategy. They were more aware when it came to politics than the Rastas and in their military training too...But when the Revolution began to get into full swing and Maurice cry out for help and made his covenant with the nation, the Rastaman began to gear up himself militarily. He was always in the revolution as the vanguard of the people's consciousness you see but now he began to get himself more politically organized.

I.T.: Were the Muslims in close coordination then with the Rasses?

Nna: True. Both were prepared to struggle alongside one another in the Revo, because at one stage, all the people who believe in the Supreme Architect, the Mighty I Am, - the Rasses call Him Rastafari the Muslims call Him Allah and the Christians call Him Jesus Christ - at that stage there was real spiritual unity among all these different religions in Grenada in the face of a

common persecution. Some of the Muslims were InI true brethren and when we get the opportunity, we pray together too. I pray in my own Rastafari tradition and they pray in their Muslim tradition and we respect each other...There was never any conflict between I and the Muslims because I read the Koran and I even come to the understanding that certain things in there pertain to Haile Selassie I. Also I taught all the Muslims martial arts in prison...even before the revolution there was solidarity between us. The two religions actually sprang up in Grenada at the same time. The Rastafarian was earlier and more predominant, had more followers...and was more you know a local thing, but the Muslim and the Rasta had a very firm alliance. At one time I discovered that the unity was so strong that we together could have ruled Grenada...

I.T.: Did Rastaman play a part in some of the national organizations, like the National Youth Organizations, the cooperatives for instance?

Nna: The Rasta people took part in all the different arms of the Revolution, even the political arm. There were brethren such as Pyta from Gouyave who was an instructor in Marxism-Leninism. He was a member of the party also.

I.T.: So there were Rastas in the NJM party structure?

Nna: Truly... from before and after the Revolution. Plenty Rastas were a part of the NJM. A good portion had joined the party before they came to a consciousness of the Rastafari faith. Many in the NJM carried dreadlocks, while they were at the same time studying Marxism and prepared to administrate it too, as it was later practiced - with full brutality - at Hope Vale, for example.

I.T.: But surely no genuine Rastaman would have supported these policies of the PRG, carried out in many cases against other brethren?

Nna: Many man supported them to the very end. Many dreadman were in the army up to the end of the war. But the majority of these ended up trimming their locks, you see. To be frank the revolution started with dread and ended up with bald head”.

...I.T.: What about the role played by Kabinda (Desmond Trotter) from Dominica in all this...As I understand it he was a key player in the whole drama between Rasta and Maurice Bishop?

Nna: ...He came to Grenada when Bishop had I in prison. He went to Maurice and begged for my release from detention and Maurice agreed to let me go on humanitarian grounds. But at the same time he was pressuring I to sign documents stating that I would never practice my spiritual concept against the PRG, and that if I ever engaged in such activity I would have to go into prison or exile. In this way my faith, the Nyabinghi tradition was technically outlawed under Maurice an dem administration...

Maurice an dem deport Kabinda from Grenada when the reality start to come out in the open that the PRG was oppressing Rasta. He [Kabinda] loved Maurice but he had to draw sword on him wordically and show him he was being unjust. From the time Kabinda spoke out at the Binghi in Gouyave in September '79 where the Rasta house for the first time brought up charges against the PRG – from that time, Kabinda’s days were numbered. From the first days of the Revo, the PRG were encouraging Rastas to trim their locks and when they did trim, they were given rank”.^{xix}

I spent my last morning in St. Georges, Grenada, Saturday June 8th, at the Home of Ras Nang. My old friend and comrade, Leon “Bogo” Cornwall accompanied me to Ras Nang’s home/Tabernacle Ground early in the morning. Well known to each other from before the Revo, (Bogo, as many Caribbean revolutionary youth of varying political and ideological persuasions at some time spent time ‘grounding’ with Rastafari) both brethren reminisced on moments and persons that joined memories in a sharing that revived bonds broken by politics and imprisonment. The visit the

evening before with Headache, Caren and Jalani had ended in a moving moment of sincere apology on behalf of the Revolution on the part of Ewart 'Headache' Layne, the reciprocation by Ras Nang of a simple but powerful ritual of forgiveness and blessing (from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet) of protection good health and extended to Headache and family. The extended moment with Bogo and Ras Nang the following morning had the added 'spice' of us going a short distance up an incline to 'Priest' Nang's Nyabinghi Tabernacle located at the highest point of his well ordered yard. There to spend a few memorable hours of fellowship, chanting favourite chants; "I an I a chant down colonialism", "Black Liberation Day", "Be Still Babylon", "Neida yu gold nor yu silver brought I here", "One Perfect Love it shall open Jah Door" and closing as the evening before with apology, forgiveness, atonement, blessing and the benediction, "Behold how good and pleasant it is for brethren to live together in unity".

Mrs. Jeremiah, the pleasant and matronly sixty-five year old housekeeper of our accommodations in Grenada was open and responsive to my question of her, "what did you think about the revolution as it was happening thirty years ago and what are your thoughts on 'the Revo' now?"

"Well, at first I was afraid... there were so many guns everywhere, and we were real vexed with Bernard Coard an dem after the bloody executions. But it was only long afterwards when we see what dem other governments going on with that we came to really appreciate what the Revo was trying to do"^{xx}.

In conversations with curio sellers on Grand Anse beach, shop owners in the Mall, security guards, and taxi drivers and in casual contact with the public, the general impression I formed was that there remained similar sympathy towards the period of revolution., despite the known catastrophic end and other perhaps as yet untold horrors of a shrinking, increasingly disconnected

vanguard resorting to repression in response to the stresses of the increasing load of revolutionary tasks and an increasingly excluded and disenchanting party and popular base.

I was moreover struck by a generally warm and welcoming attitude to Rastafari (we were often a group of three Rastafari brethren trodding through). Prince Nana Nana's name appeared to command much respect and regard from the contacts noted above as well as from wide sections of the Grenadian society, including former PRG and PRA leaders. (I had been inquiring of Grenadian conference staff at varying levels of authority, of means to link with Nang). Most knew of Nang and responded very favourably to my enquiries. A liaison aide took time off to volunteer a ride to Ras Nang's home but unfortunately he was not there. As already mentioned, it was 'Headache', former PRA Chief of Staff, who took time off along with a family member to finally link me with Ras Nang. Amidst the joy and excitement of our link up with Nang in the St. Georges Market amidst, I took note of the attitude and expressions on the faces of the circle of interest that the greetings and salutations of our happy reunion evoked. Again there appeared to be friendly and hospitable regard for our group of Rastafari brethren and relaxed, fraternal and respectful regard for Nang. What was also very noteworthy were the many greetings of sincere goodwill that I observed being offered to Bogo and Headache, the former NJM state, army and party officials that I spent time with in search of Nang and doing sightseeing around the island.

As a national of Jamaica, a small island Caribbean island myself, my reconnect with Grenada, truly one of the Caribbean seas most beautiful, precious jewels, produced a magnified view of the significance of bonds of family, community, culture and tradition as inescapable elements of the foundation on which the projects of vitally required radical social transformation are constructed. Ideological rigidities founded on the 'religious orthodoxy' of those who still think that without being led by a political vanguard capable of enlightening the uprisen revolutionary masses with the

ideological weapon of Marxism-Leninism, any such revolutionary people anywhere would be engaging in the futility of ‘marching backwards into history’.

I, like Ras Ikael value the contribution of Marxism-Leninism in the development of a scientific way of knowing the workings and facilitating the revolutionary transformation the vast regions of our planet still languishing in deprivation, poverty, while a contacting global elite benefits from a monopoly of economic, military, and ideological power simply because as the Caribbean “person-in-the street” knows, “a so di system [capitalism] set. Having said that, I have for long been thankful to that icon of Caribbean revolutionary thought and praxis, C.L.R. James for his timely reminder that in the case of the Haitian War of Independence, 1791 – 1804, “the only successful revolution against slavery in all recorded history”, it was Vodou spirituality, not Marxism that provided the ideological engine for that success.

While I commend my late brother Ikael for his valuable, incisive and insightful critique I am not sure if I share his dismissal as ‘standard non-capitalist prescriptions aimed at creating a charade of mass participation’ the sincere revolutionary sacrifices of a movement of people that constructed new processes and structures for facilitating the inclusion of the grass roots of the Grenadian society in forging their future. Both Tafari and Riviere identify the discussion or lack thereof, concerning the nature of the transitional period from national democracy socialism to a non-capitalist path or path of socialist orientation. However, I am not convinced that arguments presented by Tafari that the adoption of that direction by the united NJM party became the cause of the derailment of the revolutionary process. Beyond the strictly political or more generally ideological, the Rastafari worldview and praxis brings to the period of national liberation revolutions in the 21st century a new revolutionary ethos and philosophical approach, a cultural or symbolic confrontation with Babylon founded on a new representation of theology, divinity, a new revolutionary spirituality. Rastafari has been an essential ingredient in the evolution of a Caribbean,

Pan African and New Global Liberation Movement forged in the fires of resistance to marginalization and exclusion by a Jamaican and Caribbean society willing to abandon our own rich heritage of revolutionary 'freedom making' in aspiring vainly to reinvent ourselves according to imported designs on culture, aesthetics, development, and revolutionary change.

The divinity of all back people- in fact all human beings – here becomes the basis for the equality, liberty, dignity, mutual respect and equity in terms of access to economic resources, and all the values claimed by civic or democratic society. He commends Chevannes for offering a welcome corrective, speaking to the “lineage of ideas as well as forms of actions that is the lineage that Rastafari belongs. That lineage suggests continuity rather than break.....gives primacy to culture over politics and confirms the increasing relevance of the study of Rastafari to the burgeoning body of literature that has at last found form and purpose in the academy. This Nettleford notes, “...has come long after the Rastafari tried to get Jamaican and the world to understand the centrality of their concerns to the reality of human development”.

Continuing, Nettleford notes that, globalization processes are repeatedly transforming the composition and spatial arrangements of power and culture in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean” (ibid. p.316) The engagement of Rastafari in this process has brought to the agenda conflicts between classes of persons on many issues:- Aesthetics and artistic manifestations.. religion; language legitimacy (Standard English versus the Rastafarian “I-an-I” locution and other innovative uses of “the Master’s tongue to discommode in the assertion of powers of autochthonous communication); economic development strategy (“eating what we grow” and engaging in self-reliant enterprise versus importation to satisfy a North American consumption pattern; living within one’s means versus the wanton over-consumption of the ostentatious nouveaux riches; diligence in application of energy on the job (if a job can be found) versus laid back indolence; and,

governance (democratic cooperation, comprising individuals coordinating for social action in defiance of autocratic, self indulgent rule).

The culture of resistance echoes in the tension now evident in a world that is threatened with homogenization under the name of economic globalization. This threat finds a counter –threat in a retreat to the area of specificity that would enable discreet groups of people to be firmly enough rooted so as to withstand the raging “global” whirlwind. Such areas of specificity take different forms – ethnicity, religion, [fundamentalist or otherwise] metaphysical authenticity (as in the case of the Native Americans) and even dietary peculiarities. (ibid.p.317)

In closing this argument Nettleford notes that, “Rastafari has indeed made a difference – not simply as religious expression, but as an ontological cosmological phenomenonthat has in fact drawn on all indices of culture known to mankind...This gives it an inner strength and accounts for its worldwide impact among diasporic Africans as well as others. Finally Nettleford assess Rastafari as a genuine twentieth century liberation Movement. (ibid. P. 322).

Rastafari has been an essential ingredient in the evolution of a Caribbean, Pan African and new global Liberation Movement forged in the fires of resistance to marginalization and exclusion by a Jamaican and Caribbean society willing to abandon our own rich heritage of revolutionary ‘freedom making’ in aspiring vainly reinvent ourselves according to imported designs on culture, aesthetics, development, and revolutionary change.

The Rastafari philosophical contribution to the contemporary revolutionary movement was already well documented in 1983. Bob Marley’s is but the principal marker (or legend) of an extensive, continuing, now global and multi-ethnic legion of ‘Rasta/ Reggae warriors inspiring new generations through conscious reggae to step forward to assist in chanting down Babylon. This vast and ever expanding repertoire of freedom songs contain critical texts that include the sharing of Garveyan concepts; ‘emancipating yourselves from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our

minds', (still fully acknowledging the value of international solidarity and proletarian internationalism) and his own original musings, "we refused to be what [sic] they wanted us to be. We are who we are and that's the way it's going to be. We've been trodden on the winepress much too long, rebel, rebel", remain relevant some 40 years after.

The views of H.I.M. Emperor Haile Selassie on the issues of racial discrimination, social injustice and national liberation, vis; were musically articulate and to my mind continues to be a central text in the material made available for the revolutionary conscientization of new generations willing to get up, stand up and stay up in defence of their rights against all forms of oppression and abuse; "Until the philosophy that holds one race superior and the other inferior is finally and totally discredited and abandoned; and until the colour of a man's skin is no more significant as the colour of his eyes; and until there's no longer first class and second class citizens of any nation and until the basic human rights are guaranteed to all regard without regard to race{ ideology and spirituality may here be added] and until the ignoble and unhappy regimes that hold our brothers in South Africa, Angola, Mozambique are toppled and totally destroyed, the dream of lasting peace, world citizenship, the rule of international morality will remain but a fleeting illusion to be pursued but never attained." The Grenadian Revolution and all processes of progressive social change in the Pan African zone and extending to a wider universe of human struggles against 'Babylonian oppression' in whatever political guise, continues to be strengthened by the inclusion with rather than repression of these views.

Nettleford's discourse on Rastafari has tabled critical components of Rastafari's movement's contribution to confronting global hegemony. Nettleford posits that "Rastafarians have turned religion into a major strategy of demarginalization with the highjacking of the oppressors God in a move that serve to discommode the oppressor.^{xxi} (ibid.p.315). The divinity of all back people- in fact all human beings – here becomes the basis for the equality, liberty, dignity, mutual respect and

equity in terms of access to economic resources, and all the values claimed by civic or democratic society. In commending the late Professor Chevannes for speaking to the lineage of ideas as well as forms of actions that is the lineage that Rastafari belongs, Nettleford proposed that lineage was here suggesting continuity rather than break, ...giving primacy to culture over politics, and confirming, the increasing relevance of the study of Rastafari to the burgeoning body of literature that has at last found form and purpose in the academy and has come long after the Rastafari tried to get Jamaican and the world to understand the centrality of their concerns to the reality of human development”.

The engagement of Rastafari 'livity in the dynamic tension of power and culture in a newly global world has brought to the agenda conflicts between classes of persons on many issues:-

Aesthetics and artistic manifestations; religion; language legitimacy innovative uses of “the Master’s tongue to discommode in the assertion of powers of autochthonous communication);economic development strategy (“eating what we grow” and promoting self-reliant enterprise versus importation to satisfy a North American consumption pattern; living within one’s means versus the wanton over-consumption of the ostentatious nouveaux riches; diligence in application of energy on the job (if a job can be found) versus laid back indolence; and, governance (democratic cooperation, comprising individuals coordinating for social action in defiance of autocratic, self indulgent rule).

Rastafari Nettleford notes “has indeed made a difference – not simply as religious expression, but as an ontological cosmological phenomenonthat has in fact drawn on all indices of culture known to mankind...This gives it an inner strength and accounts for its worldwide impact among diasporic Africans as well as others. Rastafari he concludes is a genuine twentieth century liberation Movement. (ibid. 322). This it seems was acknowledged by the South Africa, African Union, Caribbean Diaspora Conference, Kingston, Jamaica, 2005 that approved changes to the AU’s

constitutional structure adding a sixth region to the union comprising the African Diaspora in the West. The meeting declared Rastafari to be a positive force for integration across the Atlantic.

I carried away from my last contact with Grenada in June the impression of a high level of political maturity and a strong sense of extended community achieved by the revolutionary people of this micro- state. People who appear to strongly value, despite the horrific consequences of the revolution's bloody implosion, a greater collective self confidence and wisdom born of their own priceless life experience gained through blood, sweat and tears from standing up against the Ronald Reagan led U.S. war against all projects of radical social transformation in "his backyard" and against the authoritarian repression that their revolutionary leadership degenerated into. I think that the evidences of an extraordinary willingness to atone and repair deep breaches of social trust and to continue in new circumstances to take the oncoming future into their hands. That challenge remains in Grenada and throughout a Caribbean that will be better poised for successfully securing that future by cherishing the bonds of community within and across our region of states so small as to be easily considered, one people, one family.

Atonement and repair were themes central to the CARICOM Reparations Commission's inaugural meeting was held recently in St. Vincent. It took note of the vanguard role of Rastafari in the Caribbean Community's contemplation of the issues of Repatriation and Reparations for the crime of 400 years of enslavement, torture and genocide inflicted upon scores of millions of enslaved Africans. The Rastafari community's CARICOM leadership caucus is now preparing communication to CARICOM governments requiring an apology to the regional Rastafari community for a generalized criminalization of the community noting particular cases like the Coral Garden's massacre in Jamaica during the Prime Ministership of Alexander Bustamante, Jamaica 1963, the murderous atrocities that followed the Dread Act in Dominica 1974, the extreme repression of Rastafari in Grenada 79 - 84 and the continuing widespread victimization of a

community for its sacred sacramental, medicinal and recreational use of the 'Holy Herb',
Marijuana/Ganja The response of CARICOM to these issues will determine whether we have learnt
anything from the past.

Selah!

[RASTA ITES HOME](#)

[ITES ZINE](#)

ⁱ Bolland, O. Nigel, *Birth of a Caribbean Civilization*. 2003. Pg. 526.

ⁱⁱ Arthur Newland, conversations with Leon Cornwall, Grande Anse Grenada, June 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ Speech by P.M. Maurice Bishop on April 13th, 1979 in *Maurice Bishop speaks*; 1983. Quoted from Boland, op. cit. Pg. 527.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Tafari, Ikael. "Rastafari in Transition: The Politics of Cultural Confrontation in Africa and the Caribbean (1966 – 1988)". Chicago: Research Associates School Times Publications, 2001.

^{vii} Campbell, Horace. *Rasta and Resistance: From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney*. London: Hansib Publications, 1985, pp.128 – 133. Quoted in, *Rastafari in Transition*, p. 46.

^{viii} Op cit. Pg. 48.

^{ix} Op cit. Pg. 62.

^x Ibid. Pg. 63.

^{xi} Meeks, Brian. "Social Formation and People's Revolution: A Grenada Study." Ph. D Thesis, UWI, Jamaica, 1988.

P. iv. Quoted In Tafari, op. cit p. 203.

^{xii} Ibid pp. 539 – 540 quoted in Tafari, Ikael. P. 204.

^{xiii} Halliday and Molyneaux: *The Ethiopian Revolution*, London: Verso Press. Quoted in Tafari. op. Cit. P. 231.

^{xiv} Tafari, Op.cit. p. 263.

^{xv} Ibid. P. 332.

^{xvi} Conversations with Prince Nna Nna, St. Georges, Grenada, June 2013.

^{xvii} Conversation with Major Leon Cornwall, former Grenadian Ambassador to Cuba and former Chairman, NJM National Youth Organization (NJM NYO), St. Georges Grenada, 2013.

^{xviii} Conversations with Prince Nna Nna (Ras Nang), St. Georges Grenada, June, 2013.

^{xix} ^{xix} "Ras Nang speaks": Interview with Prince Nna Nna in Tafari, I. Op cit Appendix II, pp 397 – 413 (abridged excerpts).

^{xx} Conversation with Mrs. J. Jeremiah, tourism sector worker, Grand Anse, Grenada.

^{xxi} Nettleford, Rex. Discourse on Rastafari in "Chanting Down Babylon Murrell, S. and Chisholm, C.(Eds) 1996. Pg. 315.