

Remembering Rasta Pioneers: An Interview with Barry Chevannes

by

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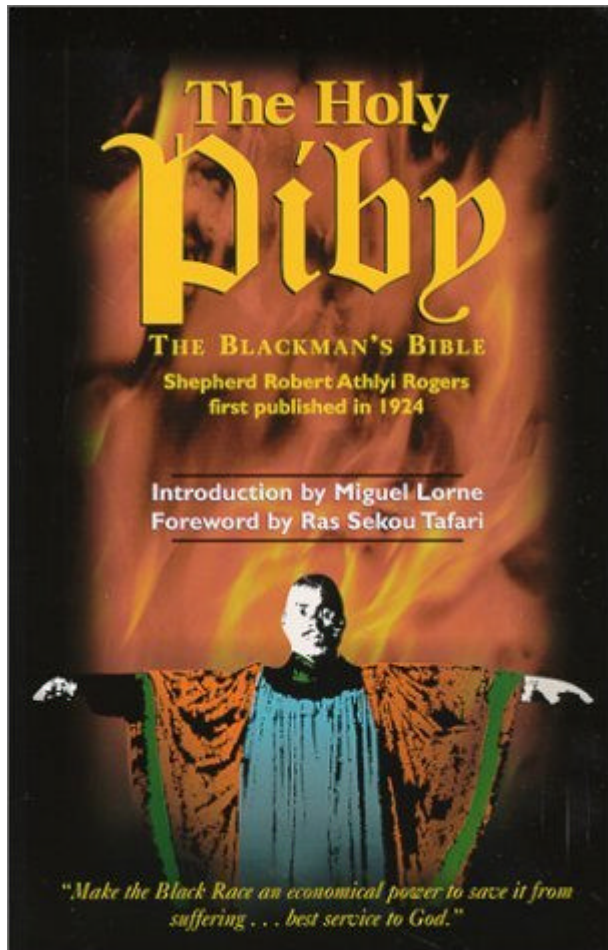
The following interview was conducted on 24th November 2006 by Jérémie Kroubo Dagnini with Barry Chevannes in Kingston, Jamaica. The following photo was taken at the University of the West Indies in Kingston, Jamaica, by Jérémie Kroubo Dagnini © 2006.



Barry Chevannes and Jérémie Kroubo Dagnini (November 24, 2006, UWI, Kingston, Jamaica)

*Was Robert Athlyi Rogers¹, the author of *The Holy Piby*, influenced by Ethiopianism?*

From what I do know, yes he would have been influenced by Ethiopianism. Let me explain. Ethiopia came into consciousness during the period of slavery when the missionaries – so we are talking about the 18th century, the end of the 18th century – in order to promote Christianity began to refer to the Africans as Ethiopians, children of Ethiopia. Why? Because the only mention of Africa in *The Bible* is Ethiopia.



The Holy Piby was first published in 1924 in New Jersey. Here is the 2000 edition front cover (Research Associates School Times Publications).

What about Egypt?

Well, you see, the Europeans have never considered Egypt as part of Africa, though it is! But it was Ethiopia that was the main thing because Ethiopia means “the land of burnt face people” and the Africans were burnt face, I mean they were – are – black. So missionaries referred to verses like “children of the Ethiopians” (Amos 9:7), that sort of things. And then, in the late in the 19th century, when the Ethiopians defeated the Italian invaders and carried out a fantastic victory over the Europeans and so forth, Ethiopia gain much more importance into Jamaican consciousness.

And then, of course, the rise of Marcus Garvey, the Pan-African movement in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, the fact that Ethiopia had the only kingdom that did not succumb to the European colonization and so on nurtured the image of Ethiopia in Jamaican popular consciousness.

Were Marcus Garvey and Robert Athlyi Rogers close together?

No. There is no reference in Garvey's writings to Rogers.

*That is correct, but in *The Holy Piby* there are many references to Garvey?*

Yes, because Garvey, remember, he made people call themselves Garveyites, even people who were not members of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). But they were Garveyites because they were followers of his ideas and so on. Rogers was clearly influenced by the Garvey movement but I do not think that they knew each other.

I think that both of them used to stay in the US where they could have met each other?

The First Rasta, Leonard Percival Howell, was also in the States at the same time, you know? But I do not think they met each other...

What about the nature of the relationships between Marcus Garvey and Alexander Bedward², Did they know each other?

Well...I am fairly certain that they knew *of* each other, yes! But there is no evidence that they knew each other. And I do not think that Garvey would have arranged or subjected himself to a meeting with Bedward. I will tell you why. First, Garvey looked on Revival as a backward. He didn't see it as a progressive religion. He was more in tune to replicating a kind of European type of Christianity, but in a Black perspective. So for that reason, I do not know very much that he would have attended a meeting with Bedward. Secondly, Garvey's activism and his international fame came about during the last years of Bedward. [*In 1921 Bedward was confined to a mental hospital where he remained until his death in 1930*]. So he would not have been in Jamaica, he would not have been very active in Jamaica.

*But in your book, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology*, you say that Garvey was very influenced by Bedward?*

It is not that Garvey was influenced by Bedward, it is that many of Garveyites, people who followed Garvey, were also followers of Bedward. I do not think very much that they would have known each other but they would have known *of* each other and they most certainly respected each other in the sense that Garvey would probably have to respect Bedward for being a leader of people, but he would have been very critical of Bedward as being basically backward.

And what about Garvey's views on Rastas?

Garvey certainly knew about their religious belief because Rastas were in the news at that time. And one of my informants, who became a Rasta in the 1930s, told me that at one of Garvey's conventions, the Rastas showed up and Garvey very politely told them that they could not sit themselves where they were sitting at the convention and they had to go the way down the back. Why? Because Garvey would not have believed that the Emperor was the Messiah. It would have been clearly out of his mind and Garvey would have seen it as a religious cult and backward and would not have wanted to be associated with it. However, those early Rastas were Garveyites because they believed in Garvey, they were followers of Garvey.

Even people like Leonard Howell³?

Yes. They would have considered themselves as Garveyites, but with the revelation that came to them, then, they would consider themselves something beyond being Garveyites, namely Rastafarians. So it is interesting because from those very days, they have regarded Marcus Garvey as a prophet who regardless of himself became an instrument through whom the coming of the Messiah was foretold.

Despite the fact that he was not a Rasta himself?

Yes, or did not like them.

Could we say that Garvey was kind of elitist?

I do not know what you mean, but you see, Garvey appreciated the role of education and elitism in that sense it is no question. I think he did. Garvey understood that, for example, in his promotion of the arts, the fine arts needed to be developed and therefore they would not be popular. There would not be the popular mass culture. For example, in his programme he had plans to set up an opera house. So he liked that. Not that it is elite culture; it is culture that is appreciated by an elite, by educated and "civilized" elite, open to civilization of Europe and other countries and so on. So it is not populism and in that sense, I think, one could say that he was elitist but if the phrase went beyond that I think it would be wrong; because I would also think that Garvey himself was the promoter of the popular arts and many artists including the comedian Ranny Williams, [*Randolph Samuel Williams*], got their first exposure on stage at Garvey's Edelweiss Park. So you have to contextualize what his elitism consisted of. It could not mean anything more than that because his success and the power that he held were really based on this mass following. So it could not be elitism in that sense.

Do you know the exact date and place when Garvey said the famous sentence "Look to Africa, for the crowning of a Black King; He shall be the Redeemer"?

We do not know the exact date. The place, we think, would have been Edelweiss Park and we also think, from working through whatever oral and unwritten sources, that it would have been about 1929.

Now, when I say *we* I do not include myself, I just mean “some of our scholars.” It is Beverly Hamilton, I think, who really did a lot of investigation into that. She, I think, and somebody else – I am not sure if it is Robert Hill – were able to find that Garvey did write a play called “The coronation of the King and Queen of Africa.” Now, if Garvey wrote a play, it would have been performed at his headquarters which was where the cultural performances were done. And 1929 was when that play was put on.

So now let's talk about Leonard Howell. He was kind of a mysterious person. What do you know about him and about his life at the Pinnacle?

Not much. Not any more I have been able to find out from some of his followers whom I interviewed in my study. It seemed that Pinnacle was not a commune. It was just a place where many of his followers lived. So, they would have had their own separate houses, and cooked separately and had their own position like the livestock (chickens, goats) and may be their own cultivation, and selling in the market and so on. But at the same time, they did worship in common and socialized because they formed a community, if not a commune they formed a community. They shared the same ideas and literally worshiped a man who exerted an authority over the entire community; and I think they supported him as well because he did not have any independent source of income except what they produced in the community. There was a recreation life too. There would have been kumina type of recreation, drumming brought from St. Thomas. I remember vaguely, because it is a long time ago, we are talking about thirty years ago. In my research, one of my informants described that there was a central area, like a parade area, with a pool or small lake in the middle. And the community was downside around it and him upon the hill. That is what I remember. So it seems that the communal ground was a place where they recreated. I can see children running up and down, and somebody drumming, people drumming and so forth. You know it had a real life. But it is said that he exerted a lot of discipline in the community.

Was he a kind of guru?

Yes, sort of. He was sort of that but he was also more a political leader. But, you know, he led a rather mystical life, mystical in the sense that he was known as a mystical sort of man who, at one point, had an office on Duke Street or East Street, one of the streets where you find a lot of lawyers and other professionals; and they spoke of him as being a doctor, a medicine man who used to wear a stethoscope around his neck. So he had a little clientele, people coming consulting him. That could have been before Pinnacle. He also had a bakery. Informants told me that he operated a bakery downtown and how generous he was to people who did not have anything; they could go get something from the bakery. Again that was before Pinnacle. Pinnacle was the last phase of his life. And he moved his community there and set themselves upon the estate.

But after the Pinnacle, he still remained in life for quite a long time. What did he do?

He receded into the background. He had a small following out in Tredegar Park. That is in the Spanish Town area. They had their own community of worship. But you see, the invasion of the Pinnacle by the police, the destruction of the community would have made that people scattered – because people would have to try to escape arrest – and dispersed. But a core of his following did remain. I did not interview him because he was not accessible to me at the time. If I had been persistent, I think maybe I would have got through but he remained very withdrawn and he did not speak much.

You saw him, did you?

I saw him, yes. But he was not communicative and so I was not allowed to see him. And I did not go back and kept at it, and instead I interviewed a number of his followers, Howellites. The majority of them dispersed. Some of them have gone back to St. Thomas and so on.

It is said that he died at the Sheraton hotel. Where did he get the money to remain at the Sheraton for several weeks before passing away?

Well...to be honest, I do not know much about that phase of his life. I have not interviewed him and I did not research specifically on Howell. The first scholar who really took Howell as a point of departure was Robert Hill. I do not know if he had any great substance but, you know, you have a lot of persons who live a fairly opulent life and they do not work, they do not get pay for what they do, but yet they do live an opulent life. I think it could be that. In other words, his followers supported him, yes! He did not have any rent that he could not fulfil.



The Remains of Pinnacle. © Jérémie Kroubo Dagnini.

How could you explain the increase of the Rastafari movement in the 1960s?

Well, I think the report on the Rastafari movement and the visit of Haile Selassie I in 1966 were the two very important events which marked a turning point in the society's acceptance of Rastafari – to the extent that society accepted them because they still do not in a way. But those two events separated by six years apart would have served as a moment of contestation with the society. But actually, the real growth of the Rastafari, I would attribute to two processes rather than two events. One was the incursion of youths into the movement in really larger numbers than before, and that took place in the late 1950s into the 1960s; in the 1960s mainly. And the second factor was in a way what the youth brought into the movement with themselves, that is to say: music. Those two things brought a creative energy within the movement. The rest is history! The youth, I am telling you, they founded movements as the signs of hope for them with this vision of just society and the rejection of a non-just one, and Africa as the main point of observation and they clutched to that. Those two processes, I think, really made the Rasta movement burgeon.



The front cover of the legendary *Report on The Rastafari Movement in Kingston, Jamaica* written by scholars M. G. Smith, R. Augier and R. Nettleford.

What about Mortimo Planno⁴? What did he bring exactly to the Rastafari movement?

Mortimo's influence was largely in the 1960s. After the 1960s, Mortimo's health began to decline, he had thyroid problems and it limited him. It began to affect his life and his work. Planno was a very powerful leader who, through the 1960s, was considered the most influential Rastafarian for reasons that I think you already know.

One, he was the main architect of the move to get the University on board. Secondly, he was the only dreadlocks to get legitimacy, to a sort of speak, because he was appointed a member of the “Mission to Africa”⁵ and everybody could see from the pictures that he stood out as the only dreadlocks. The other two Rastafaris were “combsomes.” But above all, it was the recognition that he received from his Majesty at the airport and there is this beautiful photograph standing on the steps of the plane looking on the crowd and asking the crowd to move away and so forth his Majesty backward. So he knew his Majesty and was received in Ethiopia when the mission went there. Planno also went back later in the 1960s and in the 1970s. He would have had audience with his Majesty and received gift from him. So it was that influence that Planno exerted. Therefore, I would say that Planno’s main role was the bridge that he became between the Rasta movement and the rest of the society.



Mortimer Planno (on the right) with Haile Selassie I (in the centre) on the tarmac of Kingston’s airport. Above photo courtesy of Jamaican *Daily Gleaner* (22 April 1966, page 15).

Why did Planno not set up his own organization like Garvey, Howell, Prince Emmanuel (the founder of the boboshanti order) or Gad (the founder of the Twelve Tribes of Israel)?

He was not that kind of personality. He was charismatic but he was much more a political activist in a way, but not in the narrow sense of politics. He never formed a party. In fact, he was upset with Sam Brown⁶. He and Sam Brown fell out. But when I say he was political, you know, Planno was that kind of politician who would read papers daily and listen to his radio and therefore who would be attuned to all the events that were happening around him, and would be using these things happening, interpreting them for points of discussions. So he was more a philosopher than a religious leader. So he did not have that kind of intention in any case to form a group.

In other respects, can you tell me a few words about the role of Walter Rodney⁷ regarding the increase of the Black power movement in Jamaica in the 1960s?

Well...Walter came back to the University as a lecturer in 1967 or 1968; that particular academic year, in fact. He was very energetic in promoting African history. At the time, you have to understand that the government was very paranoid and very weary of Black power. It did not want to offend the US not only because it saw itself as a US camp but also because it had started the tourism industry and the idea was hundreds and thousands American tourists coming. So, if they were coming to Jamaica and were subjected to Black power that means they would leave Black power in America to find Black power in Jamaica...So they would be very intent to crushing the Black power sentiment. They even banned books like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*, even the book called *Black Stallion*, which is a story about a horse, just because of the word "Black." [Laughs]. So it was very repressive and paranoid, and Walter then, was teaching African history. In the second term, in 1968, I think, he called a meeting during which he announced his decision to set up a Black power movement. It was in the Faculty of Humanities and many people intended it, students mainly. He lectured but it never got anywhere because it was shortly after that that he was excluded. The government alleged that his activities were subversive. Walter used to go to the grassroots speaking to communities, small groups of people in the ghetto communities about the history of Africa and so on. Among the groups that he went to and spoke with was Claudius Henry's group. Claudius Henry had just come out of prison where he had served for seven years out of a ten years sentence; he came out on parole. He had been sentenced for treason and for writing a letter to Fidel Castro to come and take over Jamaica. At the time, when he wrote the letter in 1960, Fidel Castro was just simply a revolutionary. But by the time Henry came out of prison, Fidel was then into the communist camp so it made it even worse and Henry was under suspicion and surveillance. So Rodney to be seen consulting Henry brought him also under suspicion. Consequently, in October he and a small group of university lecturers went to a conference in Montreal, a black writers conference, Robert Hill went and George Beckford also went; and on the way back, at the airport, they met him and turned him back to the plane. So that triggered the whole riot that followed. That is when the Black power movement really took off. But it was a very short period, just a few months. What he had done and the manner in which he was suppressed, it propelled him into prominence as a very solid intellectual who was the object of the assaults of the kind of neo-colonial government. So people began to read him more and people began to understand what he stood for. So he became a symbol not only of Black power but also a symbol of the kind of relationships that the progressive intellectuals at the University should have with the masses. Walter was like a bridge between the university world and the masses.

So Walter Rodney was close to Rastas, wasn't it?

Yes. He met Rastas because Rastas were the only groups to share his view on Africa. The UNIA was no longer active, you see? It was active among the old guard but among the youth, it was the Rastas that was prominent.

Do you think that at some points there were some links between Rasta leaders and politicians?

Yes. It has always been that sort of links in the sense that Rastas have always sought to get politicians to hear their cause. During the 1960s, Planno would have had a meeting with the Minister of Home Affairs; at the time Home Affairs would be Internal Security. I do not know of any other meeting with politicians that they would have had in the 1960s. But in the 1970s, when Michael Manley⁸ won, he visited the Rastas and tried to enlist their support with promises of land, farming and so on. Those were the main links in terms of official links between politicians and Rastas.

Could we talk about co-opting the Rasta movement or not really?

Not really. The attempt has been made through the manipulation of the symbol (Rasta talk, the rod of correction and so on), but, other than that, they have not been able to co-opt Rastafari.

So, Howell died, Prince Emmanuel died, Planno died, Gad died. How do you foresee the future of the Rasta movement?

Well, the Rasta movement is in a stage of routinization. I mean thinking of it from an anthropological point of view, it is becoming routine in that the charismatic leaders have died and they live beyond organizations. Those organizations for them to survive they have to become bureaucracies. Well...that is taking place, it is taking place slowly...

Well, Thank you very much prof. Chevannes for giving me a bit of your precious time.

You are welcome Jérémie. No problem!

Notes

¹ Robert Athlyi Rogers was born in Anguilla, but migrated to the United States (US) at an early age. In the 1920s, he created an Afrocentric religion called Afro Athlican Constructive Church and published a book, *The Holy Piby*, or *The Blackman's Bible*, which is one of the most important texts in Rastafarian theology.

² Alexander Bedward (circa 1859-1930) was one of the most successful preachers of Jamaican Revivalism in the early 1900s. He was the founder of Bedwardism.

³ Leonard Percival Howell (1898-1981) was one of the first Rasta preachers in Jamaica. In 1940, he founded the first official Rasta community, The Pinnacle, in St. Catherine, Jamaica. Located near Sligoville, The Pinnacle is today regarded as the birthplace of Rastafari.

⁴ Mortimer “Tata” Planno (1929-2006) was a renowned Rasta elder, best known as Bob Marley’s chief mentor.

⁵ Implementing one of the recommendations of the university study, the Jamaican government sponsored a “Mission to Africa” in 1961. One of the purposes of the mission was to determine which African states would allow Jamaicans to repatriate. The delegation, composed of scholars, civic leaders and Rastas including Mortimo Planno himself, visited Ethiopia, Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

⁶ Ras Sam Brown (early 1920s-1998) was a Rasta elder well known in Kingston for his politics after he participated in the 1961 elections with his Suffering People’s Party.

⁷ Walter Rodney (1942-1980) was a prominent Guyanese historian and political figure. In the 1960s-1970s, he became well known around the world as an activist and Pan-African scholar, and was important in the Black power movement in the Caribbean.

⁸ Michael Manley was Prime Minister of Jamaica (1972-1980, 1989-1992) and leader of the People’s National Party, a democratic socialist party.

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