



# In search of identity: Being a Rastafarian in Democratic Malawi

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## Abstract

Although the Rastafari movement continues to attract a growing number of people around the world, not much is known in relation to how they have managed to sustain their identity despite the persecution and discrimination that most encounter. This is especially so in the case of Malawi where Rastafarians make up a minority of the country's religious population, the majority of whom are adherents of the Christian and Islamic faiths. As Malawian Rastafarians continue to be marginalised, this paper sets out to explore how they have managed to remain firm in their identity. Using the Nigrescence Theory of 1971 that was formulated by American psychologist William Cross to describe one's process of becoming Black, we set out to investigate how this theory could be utilized to understand the identity transformation of Rastafarians in Malawi. This was in line with the fact that Rastafari is rooted in Afrocentrism.

**Keywords:** Rastafari, Malawi, identity, identity transformation, Nigrescence Theory, religious conversion, minority religion.

## Introduction

In his study of the Rastafari phenomenon in Jamaica, Charles Price (2009) sought to investigate why one would seek to become a Rasta even to the point of being persecuted? Such a question is relevant especially when considering that Rastafari had spread in many corners of the world leading to people of different backgrounds embracing it. The secondary question to the one asked by Price is a question of what has kept Rastafarians<sup>1</sup> faithful to their spiritual convictions for several years. Price may have been one of the few scholars to pose this question when studying the Rastafarians and his findings are relevant to Jamaican milieu and not all contexts. Recently, Rastafarianism has gained momentum in many African countries including Malawi. In Malawi, the Rastafari movement has influenced and attracted a growing number of adherents. In as far as the globalization of Rastafari is concerned, this paper adds value to the broader discussion of what would make a certain group of individuals to wish to embrace Rastafari even when it is regarded a minority religion in most parts of the world. Despite this, most governments around the world fail to recognise Rastafari as a religion. This is as a result of the misconception that its adherents are viewed as a bunch of "crazy individuals" that have little or nothing to contribute to society. We contend that what attracts people to join Rastafari in the context of Malawi has to be far more than just dreadlocks

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the terms 'Rastafarian' and 'Rasta' will be used interchangeably



and the smoking of marijuana. Although in the midst of all discrimination and persecution Rastas experience in Malawi, the Rasta community keeps on growing day by day and their faith is becoming stronger and stronger. In this case the Nigrescence theory assists in giving some explanation on why people still join Rastafari and also expound on the reasons that sustains them within their religion. Furthermore, this theory explains the journey that Rastas in Malawi undertake in the faith and in their new Rastafarian identity search.

## **Methodology**

This paper is based on a doctoral study that was conducted amongst members of the Rastafari community in Malawi. It is worth pointing out that the study does not speak for the whole of Malawi. This is specifically when taking note of the fact that Malawi is a country that is divided into three regions namely north, centre and south. Although Malawi is a country that is primarily rural, it has four urban centres namely Mzuzu in the north, Lilongwe in the centre as well as Blantyre and Zomba in the south. Lilongwe serves as the capital city in Malawi. The study was carried out mainly in the urban areas more specifically Blantyre and Lilongwe, the reason for that is because urban areas offer a better platform for Rastas to establish their small business.

The methodological approach taken for the study was qualitative and this was because with a qualitative approach, the emphasis is on allowing the respondents to express themselves freely thereby considering the human factor (Neuman, 2003: 141). The data was collected in the form of semi-structured interviews and focus groups. One of the advantages with utilizing a semi-structured interview when it comes to obtaining information is that it allows for the researcher to have full control of what he or she wants from the interview as well as giving both the researcher and respondent the freedom to follow new leads (Bernard, 2006: 212). The interviews were carried out in both English and Chichewa, the vernacular language spoken in Malawi. During the whole research process the rights and the welfare of participants were prioritised. Furthermore, participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any time when they feel that their rights were not respected. Participants were assured that their names would not be disclosed and pseudo names would be used instead in the process of reporting findings. Ethics approval for this study was received from the Nelson Mandela University in Port Elizabeth.

## **Religion and Identity**

The question surrounding the impact of religion on identity requires understanding the nature of identity. Identity has generally been understood as something that is stable and naturally given when the reality is that it is not as unproblematic as it may appear to be (Hall, 1990: 222). The approach normally taken when it comes to understanding identity is that it is something that ought to be preserved and protected (Tomlinson, 2003: 269). The reality, however, is that identities change due to the fact that there are 'no longer serviceable – "good to think with" – in their original and unreconstructed form' (Hall, 1996: 6). Under such circumstances, it is found that identity change is necessary especially when it comes to the understanding that identity change is a strategic process (Hall, 1996: 3). This is because a change in identity normally stems 'across a "lack", across a division, from the place of the other' (Hall, 1996: 6).

In religion, it is found that identity change does certainly occur because identities are not static. This is especially true when it comes to the issue of religious conversion. In recent times, anthropologists have shown great interest on the relationship between religious conversion and identity. In anthropology, for instance, it is found that religious conversion poses a powerful challenge 'concerning the connection between culture and the self' (Buckser and Glazier, 2003: xi). This has to do with the fact that '[c]onversion involves a change of worldview and affiliation by a single person' (Buckser and Glazier, 2003: xi). The question of why one



changes their religious affiliation to another requires understanding the notion of identity. This is because '[i]dentities are storehouses of information that persons draw on to navigate their lives' (Price, 2009: 101). It requires drawing upon resources of history and further questioning "who we are" or "where we came from" for this is because identities are representations in themselves (Hall, 1996: 4). In as much as identity is linked to religious conversion, there is also an essential need in understanding the nature of religious conversion. The general understanding of religious conversion normally comes from either the Christian or Islamic perspective therefore leaving little room for exploring how conversion is understood in other religions (Rambo, 2003: 212). Rambo admits that defining "conversion" is 'a vexing problem' (2003: 213). This is specifically true for religions like Rastafari where emphasis is placed upon "inborn conception" rather than "conversion" as is practiced by the Christians or Muslims. The essence of inborn conception is that it requires for an individual to discover his or her Rasta identity in him or herself especially 'after living a major part of his or [her] life in dissolute unawareness' (Price, 2009: 142). It further provides cultural frameworks that help to explain how and why people become Rastas. These cultural frameworks, that include the notion of being blinded from oneself, are normally informed by oppression or injustice of any kind (Price, 2009:142). The one salient feature guiding the theory of inborn conception is Blackness.

There is often the tendency to associate blackness with skin colour when the fact is that it is not the case. The late political activist Steve Biko (2004: 52) argued that blackness is far more than just a matter of pigmentation – it is also a reflection of a mental attitude. In the case of Rastafari, this entails valorising African culture, history, heritage and black identity as essential features for black consciousness and eventually human consciousness (Wakengut, 2013: 68). Although the theory of "inborn conception" does emphasize on Blackness being a predominant feature, it does not necessary mean that the notion of "inborn conception" is limited to black people. This can further explain why Rastafari emphasises that anyone 'regardless of race [or nationality] can be a Rastafarian if he or she acknowledges what Rastafari consider to be *truths*' (Price, 2009: 142). For instance, Nicholas (1996 as cited in Loadenthal, 2013: 15) noted that in the case of those white people that became Rastas, they need to acknowledge the chains of condemnation brought by their white predecessors on people of colour for it is only then that they will be truly liberated and lead a "holy" life.

### **Nigrescence Theory**

As already noted, in this paper we apply the Nigrescence theory. This theory was first propounded by psychologist William Cross in 1971 to describe the process of becoming Black. Although this theory has been utilized to explain the experiences of black people in America, Charles Price (2009) found the same theory most appropriate in exploring the religious conversions of his informants in Jamaica. Similarly, we found it appropriate to utilize this theory when attempting to study an identity related to religious conversion of Rastafarians living in Malawi. It is worth mentioning that we are not aware of any African research that utilized this theory. One of the reason could be that Africans did not encounter the same experiences of racism as their counterparts in the diaspora except a few African countries like South Africa where racism continues to remain a problem. Moreover, the Nigrescence theory does not necessarily have to be limited to black Rastas. It can also be used to study the identity transformation experiences of white Rastas (Wakengut, 2013). This is because the underpinnings of Rastafari lie in Afrocentrism. Hence, we found the Nigrescence theory relevant and most appropriate in exploring how the interlocutors moved from just being ordinary Africans to those who propound Afrocentric ideas.

The Nigrescence theory emphasises that there are four stages an individual goes through in order to achieve an Afrocentric identity (Price, 2013: 1). Such stages include the pre-encounter stage; the encounter stage; the immersion-emersion stage and the internalization stage. The stages will be discussed in detail under the following headings, comparable to the stages we



have identified our own stages with fit very well in defining the lived experiences of Rastafarians in Malawi. Our four stages which are parallel to the main stages are; the pre-encounter – life before Rastafarian, the encounter stage- encountering Rastafari, the immersion-emersion stage- pathway to Rastafari and the internalization stage- embracing Rastafari.

### **Pre-encounter stage -Life before Rastafarian**

As already noted, the pre-encounter state stage is the first stage and in this stage an individual tends to express a pro-establishment assimilation identity (Charles, 2013: 1). This has to do with the fact that the individual has been miseducated about black people which in this sense includes their history, culture and achievements. Because of this, it is found that the stance that is normally taken at this stage is anti-black. This further means that anything that is associated with blackness is deemed as “dangerous” (Hooks, 1992: 9). Also at this stage, the sense of oneself ‘has evolved through childhood socialization and is grounded in a person’s understanding and experience related to kin, education, communities, and prior social interaction’ (Price, 2009: 117). Therefore, what can be said here is that there is a lack of awareness on the part of the individual on anything that is associated with Afrocentricity or blackness at this stage. In line with this stage we proposed that in the case of Malawi this stage is life before Rastafarianism, and hence below we have some quotations that can best illustrate the background of informant’s lives before they became Rastas:

Before I became a Rasta, I was a member of the CCAP<sup>2</sup>. In fact, it was not a religion of my own choosing. I was just a member purely on the basis that my parents belonged to this particular church and nothing more. This was as a result of the fact that I was young and could not make decisions for myself at the time.

(Interview Ras Jah Knows, 2 December 2015)

I used to belong to the Seventh Day Adventist Church. This was not the church of my own choosing. I was merely attending because of the fact that my parents belonged to this church. Obviously when you are young, it is impossible to make decisions for yourself so you find that parents make decisions for you.

(Interview Binghi Penhuss, 27 January 2016)

Before I became a Rasta, I was a member of the Roman Catholic Church. What I do recall was that I was indoctrinated into being a good Catholic and a good citizen. I never questioned things about life the way I do today as a Rasta or even the fact that there was such a thing as Rastafari

(Interview Ras Maluwa, 4 December 2015)

Prior to becoming a Rasta, I was a Muslim. This was on the basis that my parents were themselves Muslims. As a Muslim you were expected to attend the mosque every Friday. That was what my life was like. At the time I could not question the religion of my parents in much the same way I do today.

(Interview Ras Samuel, 2 December 2015)

Based on the responses provided by the informants in regard to their background, it was found that they came from either a Christian or Muslim background. When speaking of Christianity in this sense, it includes the Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Pentecostal, Methodist,

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<sup>2</sup> CCAP stands for Church of Central African Presbyterian. This is a Protestant denomination that was introduced to Malawi by the Scottish and White South African missionaries (Ross, 2013: 46). This denomination is divided into synods namely Blantyre Synod in the south, Nkhoma Synod in the centre and Livingstonia Synod in the north.



Seventh-day Adventist and Baptist denominations. Christianity and Islam are considered as being the two dominant religions despite the fact that Christianity has a slightly higher population than Islam and at the same time, they are both not native to Malawi. Both religions were introduced to Malawi in the nineteenth century. Although Christianity came with the European missionaries, Islam was introduced to Malawi by the Swahili Arabs of the East coast of Africa but it was the Yao-speaking people<sup>3</sup> that would come to embrace the religion.

Despite the benefits that both religions may have brought for the people of Malawi, it could be said that both religions were merely propagating tools. It is found that Malawian Muslims have found themselves embracing an Arab form of Islam which in some senses can be regarded as alien to a population that is predominantly black (Phiri, 2004). As far as Christian Mission Education is concerned, it can be said that although it may have led to Africans learning to read and write, they would find themselves having to learn about European culture far more than their own further resulting in the denigration of African culture (Manala, 2013). The embracing of Christianity would further force Malawians to look down on local customs such as *nyau*<sup>4</sup> (Kamwaza, 2008: 76). Because of this legacy brought about by the missionaries, it is found that most Malawian Christians tend to frown upon several of their ancestral traditions and religions which they deem as “satanic”. The other thing that is to be found with Christianity is that it forces one to accept the notion of Jesus as white (Charles, 2013: 6). In as far as Nigrescence theory is concerned, it is found that the interlocutors at this stage tended to place less emphasis on anything associated with Afrocentricity largely because they have been socialized into thinking that it holds less value in this case.

The fact that the interlocutors came from either a Christian or Muslim background does not necessarily mean that they accepted themselves as such further raising questions in terms of the way one looks at religious identity. Identities have generally been thought of as stable but the encounter-stage further demonstrates that identities are not stable as some may assume. This is because an individual comes to recognize that there is something lacking in their current identity. Further that, that Nigrescence theory emphasises that this encounter is normally triggered by some life event. For instance, it would be an individual's first encounter with racism which shatters the notion of racial unity (Allison, 2008: 647). In the case of my informants, it was in their adolescent stage that they came to recognize that the religion that they were brought up in did not provide them the satisfaction they had hoped for. In such cases, it was found that some turned to alcohol, smoking or even womanizing in the hope of finding meaning in their lives. In other instances as is seen in the case of one informant, it took changing from one religion to the next.

### **The encounter stage- Encountering Rastafari**

The assumption that is normally held at this stage is that the individual comes to recognize that “something is not right with the system”. It is further assumed that the individual starts to recognize things when they are at the adolescent stage of their life (Charles, 2013: 1). What further triggers the individual to recognize that something is not right is a particular life event. Charles (2013: 3) noted that there are a number of life events that could influence an individual to change their identity and these include encountering a black leader or social movement, the presence of an influential Afrocentric friend or relative including the experience with racism.

One good example of this is that of the late African American civil rights leader, Malcolm X. Born Malcolm Little, he aspired to become a lawyer when he grew up only to be told by his white teacher that American society would find it difficult to accept a black lawyer (Haley, 1965:

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<sup>3</sup> The Yao-speaking people are found mainly in the Lower Shire area which is in the southern part of Malawi

<sup>4</sup> *Nyau* are a group of masked dancers that are associated with the Chewa-speaking people who can be found mainly in Central Malawi. They are most noted for their traditional dance known as *Gule Wamkulu* which in the Chewa language means the “big dance”. It is also as a “secret society”.



37 – 38). At the time, Malcolm was living in an America where opportunities for black people were limited and at the same time, the world was entering into the Second World War. What this further meant for young men like Malcolm was that in the pretext of fighting for his own country, he would be made a “sacrificial lamb” (Haley, 1965: 108). To avoid being made a “sacrificial lamb” like the black men of his generation, Malcolm X was left with the choice other than to enter into the world of hustling. Once his actions caught up with him, he was eventually arrested and sentenced to ten years in prison. It was during his time in prison that he received a letter from one of his brother who had just converted to Islam. The letter written by his brother would force Malcolm to re-evaluate his life and force him to recognize that he had been miseducated into believing that he belonged to an inferior race and that the only way he could free himself both mentally and physically if he embraced the religion of the Nation of Islam (Haley, 1965; Harnes, 2009).

Like Malcolm X, the individual at this stage further has to recognize that he or she has been miseducated in one form or another. This could be in terms of not learning about one’s own culture, history or even the past and present achievements of one’s own people. Consequently, similar to this stage in the context of Malawi we have come to call it the stage of encountering Rastafarianism due to the fact that at this stage the informants had an encounter which have let them to long for change. The normal response taken at this stage is one of remorsefulness, anger and rage (Charles, 2013: 3). Miseducation can take a number of forms be it in the schools, churches, families or even normal social interactions with friends or acquaintances. In the case of my informants, it was religion that forced them to question themselves:

As I started growing older, I started questioning my parents’ religion. When I was young, I thought that it was normal for there to be rules in church but that changed as I grew older. As someone who was initially brought up in the CCAP, I found that I could not stand these rules such as what to do and what not to do or even to wear and what not to wear. It was from this that I started asking, is God that strict? This further forced me to rethink about continuing to remain in my parents’ church.

(Interview Ras Soya, 13 January 2016).

For a long time, I was brought up to believe that Christianity was about love but the experience that I had at this church forced me to think twice about this thing called Christianity. I was once a drummer at my church and at one time, I felt the need to play the drums differently because I was tired with the usual way of playing drums at the church so one time I decided to do that until I was chastised by the members of the choir. I was then reported to the reverend who told me that I should either leave the church or play the drum as is usually done. I then decided that perhaps I was done with this Christianity business that I decided to leave the church

(Interview Ras Nathan, 27 December 2015)

Although the Nigrescence theory emphasises that an individual experiences emotions such as anger and rage as a result of miseducation, what was found in the case of some of my informants such as Ras Samuel, is that they resorted to vices such as alcoholism and womanizing:

I thought that by going to the mosque every Friday, it would make me into a good Muslim. How wrong I was at the time. I found myself womanizing and drinking all because the religion that I was brought up did not provide me any purpose or meaning in life (Interview Ras Samuel, 2 December 2015)



For others like Jah Warrior, it took having to change from one religion to the next in order to find meaning in his life:

I was brought up in the CCAP church and this was on the basis that my parents belonged to this particular denomination. I didn't question things back then the way I do now. I thought that going to church every Sunday was the normal thing. It was only when I began to get older that I started questioning things such as "who brought this idea that church should fall on a Sunday?" At the same time, I started to become disillusioned with the church because it was all about rules at the end of the day and no spirituality. I eventually found that I stopped going to church altogether. I remember one time my parents started asking me why I was not going to church and I told them that it was not for me. This led from one argument to the next until I eventually decided to leave my parents' home and stay with my uncle who was a member of the Baha'i church. (Interview Jah Warrior, 20 January 2016)

Despite the fact that the Nigrescence theory emphasises that the life event needs to be racial, what was found in this study was that the experience was not racial. What was found was that the informants were reacting against the institutionalization of religion. Rastas have normally objected to the idea of their phenomenon being regarded as a religion purely on the basis that they have justified that religion has been used to oppress black people, instead they prefer Rasta to be called a way of life. The case of Malawi is no different. Historically, the religion of Islam played a major role in the trading of African slaves in Malawi. This has to be attributed to the fact that the practice of slavery was condoned and this was on the basis that Holy Qu'ran did permit the trading of slaves and at the same time, it was codified in the Sharia Law (Alexander, 2001: 45). Moreover, the Yao-speaking people were themselves Muslims, thus they were involved in the trading of slaves in the hope of making money for themselves (Kamwaza, 2008: 46). What is significant about this stage is that it emphasizes the notion that the life event experienced by the individual must provide the catalyst for changing one's way of thinking which in this particular case is towards Afrocentricity (Ritchey, 2015: 102; Charles, 2013: 3).

### **The immersion-emersion stage- Pathway to Rastafari**

At this stage of the Nigrescence theory, the assumption is that the individual has eventually come to terms with the fact that he or she has been miseducated and the only way that they can break free from this is for the individual to re-socialize him or herself in the process (Price, 2009: 120). In order for this happen, it will require for the individual to learn the cultural practices including understanding the knowledge associated with the symbols as well as the obligations and identity that are attendant to the new identity (Price, 2009: 120). At this stage the individual is already on the new path, hence we called it a pathway to Rastafari. The informants are by now embracing the new identity. In the case of some of my informants, one pathway was through reasoning:

For me to learn about this "livity"<sup>5</sup> called Rastafari, it took a concerned brother to point to me that I was heading to a road of destruction. At the time, I was one that drunk alcohol and smoked cigarettes. I was basically in the "system". Anyway, this brother became a Rasta before I did. We knew each other when we were still under the "system". We would drink and smoke together but this time I noticed that there was something particularly strange and I could not figure what it was. He told me that it was Rastafari that opened his eyes and I too can be redeemed from the "system". He then decided to introduce me to

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<sup>5</sup> Rasta term meaning "Way of Life"



other Rasta brethren whom we reasoned together. They told me that Rastafari is not a religion but a way of life.  
(Interview Ras Peter, 9 December 2015)

The other pathway that my informants used to learn about their identity was searching for knowledge in the books:

I took it upon myself to learn more about this thing called “Rastafari”. I need to make mention here that I was not necessarily religious at the time nor was I interested in being part of a new religion. One time I decided to go to the library and it was there that I took out a book called “World History”. When I turned to the page that made mention of Haile Selassie and the fact that he was Jesus Christ incarnate in his kingly character. Despite not being religious, the one thing that I knew of Jesus was that he was this white man whose pictures appeared in the books, films or even in the paintings that hang in the wall of people’s living rooms. I asked myself the question, how can Jesus be black? It took me a while to fully comprehend this idea of a black Jesus  
(Interview Ras Afrikan Kalam, 26 January 2016)

Although it is uncertain as to when both Ras Peter and Ras Afrikan Kalam finally reached that of fully embracing their Rasta identity but the one thing that ought to be noted about the immersion-emersion stage is that the individual does not have an internal roadmap about how to create the right kind of convert (Charles, 2013: 3). This is in spite of the excess information that is available to the convert (Price, 2009: 213). It will take time for the individual to fully ingest and make sense of what is expected of his or her newfound identity. Despite having reasoned with his “brethren”, Ras Peter did not instantly become a Rasta. In most instances, it will require ‘moving away from the routines and relationships associated with their existing identities’ (Price, 2009: 170):

Being a Rasta means you have to do away with your old way of life. This is because it is a spiritual livity. Like in my case, I found that I had to abandon drinking alcohol, I had to give up smoking. This is because anything that is spiritual cannot be associated with uncleanliness  
(Interview Ras Peter, 9 December 2015)

I was one person that used to like womanizing. I was never faithful to one partner. One I became a Rasta, I find that I no longer have to be doing committing such promiscuous acts. Thankfully I am married now and I do not have to be unfaithful to my wife  
(Interview Ras Samuel, 2 December 2015)

Once I became Rasta, I came to recognize that it was not all fun and games. There are a number of things that one has to sacrifice along the way. One of those things was abandoning friends whom I felt would be a bad influence on me. Before I became a Rasta, I would find myself drinking and smoking with these guys but because I felt that they would interfere with my spirituality, it was then that I decided to abandon them. Through the grace of His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Haile Selassie I, I now know that he is my only *friend*.  
(Interview Ras Nathan, 27 December 2015)

### **The internalization stage- Embracing Rastafari**

The assumption here is that the individual has become comfortable with his or her identity after resolving the problems and crises of the transitional stages (Charles, 2013: 3). It is,





however, worth mentioning that the exact point at which an individual feels sufficiently comfortable is an elusive endeavour (Price, 2009: 185). This is perhaps one of the features that the Nigrescence theory does not adequately address here. One could conclude that informants of this study reached this stage when they were fully comfortable with their newly found identity.

I cannot say that I finally reached my ideal identity. There is still a lot I have to learn in spite of the fact that I have been a Rasta for over twenty years. The one thing that gives me the assurance is the fact that I searched and I found. There is no Rasta that can say out there that they have achieved their ideal state of being then that will be a lie. I for one still cannot say that I have become an ideal Rasta. I am still trying to “learn the ropes” so to say (Interview Ras Makata, 13 January 2016)

Despite having been a Rasta for over twenty years, Ras Makata still finds himself having to “learn the ropes” of his identity. This has further been confirmed by Price (2009: 184) when he added that during the internalization stages, the individual still finds him or herself acquisitioning information except that in this case it is not a focused pursuit of information about the Rastafari. With internalization also comes the need to determine whether the decision of becoming a Rasta is the right one. This is because being Rasta comes with so much hardship that individuals do end up giving into the “system” as it were. Price (2009: 185) stresses that the importance for researchers not overlooking the idea of Rastas abandoning their identity along the way. There have been notable cases whereby individuals who once became Rastas have found themselves abandoning their identity. This is as a result of events that have existed along their journey and two examples come to mind. The first has to do with the death of Haile Selassie in 1975 and the second is the death of Bob Marley in 1981. Edmonds (2012: 28) acknowledges that both these events have forced some not to consider becoming Rastas. Yet at the same time, there is further need to consider that societal pressures may also force an individual not to pursue or even become Rastas. These can include pressure from family or society at large. In this paper, we explore how in spite of societal pressure, the informants in this study have been able to commit to their Rasta identity using the example of the interview that was held with Ras Culture:

Sometimes one does feel like giving up. The one thing that I can tell you is that I will never give in. Yes, the road may be hard but never give in. The reason why I have not given in is because I know who I am. When you are Rasta, it is important to know who you are. People join Rasta because they think it is some sort of fad. That is not the case. It is important to have an idea of knowing who you are and where you are going. Although the road may be swift and narrow but the one thing that gives me assurance is that Jah is guiding my footsteps (Interview 23 December 2016)

The need to know one’s self was the key to committing to a Rasta identity according to Ras Culture. Aside from the need to know one’s self, there have been other ways of displaying commitment to one’s identity. One of these is through perseverance as illustrated in some of the quotations provided by informants below:

Most people out there assume that we became Rasta on the basis that we were attracted to the *chamba*<sup>6</sup>. They fail to recognize that this is a higher calling from Jah. Once you receive the calling from Jah, there is obviously a high price that one ought to pay. Persecutions will come because the name “Rasta” is associated with evil. It is important to recognize that as Rastas we are in the battlefield. Perhaps the one thing that kept us going to this very day is the fact

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<sup>6</sup> Chewa term for “marijuana”



that we have persevered. Some of us would have given up on this *livity*<sup>7</sup> a long time ago (Interview Ras Biko, 7 December 2015)

One thing I have learned about being a Rasta is that one has to persevere. You cannot afford to be weak hearted when you are a Rasta. There are a lot of trials and tribulations that we go through as Rastas that require of us to persevere (Interview Ras Moses, 9 December 2015)

The need to persevere is further 'a sign of commitment, that a person is willing to bear the "cross" of Rastafari' (Price, 2009: 187). This is especially true for a society like Malawi where most people who are non-Rasta still fail to comprehend why a certain group of individuals would seek to become a Rasta. In the case of the informants in this study, it was about recognizing that they were the "chosen few":

As Rastas, we have a saying that "many are called, few are chosen". What is meant by this is that there are a few people out there that are brave enough to answer the call of Jah but because of societal pressure, they are afraid to face scorn. Think of Jesus Christ while he was on this earth. He faced a lot of humiliation. The same can be said of the Rasta man. Rasta man is not even afraid of death because death may take away the flesh but never the spirit because we Rastas know that the spirit will live on in another person. (Interview Jah Righteous, 19 January 2016)

Being a Rasta is an inborn thing. One does not wake up and declare himself a Rasta. It does not work that way. It's a feeling, you see? It is a commitment that one makes with the Creator. One does not force you to become a Rasta. That is why we Rastas have a saying that "who feels it, knows it" (Interview Ancient Order, 2 December 2016)

Although hardships do come with being a Rasta, there is the need to recognize the rewards that are associated with embracing a Rasta identity. When asked about what it means for them to be Rasta or asked to mention traits that define their Rasta identity, some mentioned that acknowledging Jah (God) as provider of all things seems to sustain them in their faith journey. For instance Ras Mofayah, said that being a Rasta means that one does not have to concern themselves with the things of this world such as what clothes to wear or what food to eat because Jah is the provider of all things (Interview Ras Mofayah, 2 March 2017). Some participants like Ras Wise and Ras Adam noted living a healthy lifestyle is an important trait that makes a Rasta. They argue that the body is the temple of Jah and one needs to keep it healthy both physically and spiritually. It is for this reason that *chamba* is taken to satisfy their spiritual needs. When it comes to the physical aspect, it is found that some of the benefits that come with living a healthy lifestyle include Rastas getting hardly sick and therefore living a long life.

One of the things that keep Rastas healthy is that they do not eat everything for instance they do not eat meat and instead eat fruits and vegetables. Most draw a strong relationship between foods and spirituality, arguing that eating healthy is part of living a holy life. Some informants felt that once they made the decision to become Rasta, it has brought purpose to their lives "It was only when I answered the call of Jah that I finally came to recognize that I most certainly had a decision to live. Through Jah Rastafari, I feel that I have a purpose in life" (Interview Jah Righteous, 19 January 2016).

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<sup>7</sup> Rasta term for "way of life"



For some participants being a Rastafarian meant having peace within oneself, while some mentioned self-reliance. They noted that to self-reliant means that one does not have to be another person's slave but instead create work for other.

## Conclusion

In this study, the Nigrescence Theory was utilized to understand the identity transformation experiences of Rastafarians in Malawi. Although this theory was originally intended to address the black condition in the United States, it has been utilized in other contexts as well. For instance, Charles Price utilized this theory to understand the identity transformation experiences of Jamaican Rastafarians. Considering that Rastafari is rooted in Afrocentrism, it was felt appropriate that the Nigrescence Theory be utilized. What this study found was that religion can in itself be a form of miseducation especially if it does not address the spiritual and cultural concerns. As a society with a black majority, Rastafari in Malawi can play a role in critiquing institutionalized religions that have blinded people from knowing themselves as Africans. Although this theory is the first attempt in addressing the African context but what can be recommended is that there is need for more research to be carried out particularly in African societies where racial inequities remains prevalent as seen in the case of South Africa.

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