



Treated as ‘niggers’ in our own country: lived experiences of Rastafarians in the Democratic Malawi

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is on the lived experiences of Rastafarians in post-1994 Malawi. The one significant change brought about by the elections of 1994 was the amendment of the constitution which had long ignored issues pertaining to human rights. Despite this change, this paper will come to show that democracy did not necessarily improve the conditions of Rastas in Malawi. Some of their concerns include the issue of Rasta children being denied their right to wear dreadlocks into the classrooms, the right to smoke marijuana freely without hindrance from the law and the denial of employment opportunities. This paper brings about the question of whether democratic societies are upholding their ideal of promoting tolerance specifically regarding religious pluralism.

Keywords: Rastafari, Malawi, democracy, post-1994, religious freedom, constitution, religious pluralism, religious minority, religious discrimination

Introduction

Rastafari continues to attract a growing number of people worldwide, it is represented and has followers in various countries such as Jamaica, New Zealand (Douglas & Boxill, 2008: 90), Cuba (Hansing, 2006: 69), South Africa (Chawane, 2012: 177) and Malawi (Mhango, 2008: 218). Despite its heavy presence, Rastafari remains misunderstood by outsiders who view it as being some sort of “fad” (Murrell, 1998: 1). Because of this, many Rastas have found themselves victims of discrimination on several levels. These include being detained in prison under conditions that violate their religious beliefs (Button, 2013), being scapegoats of violent crimes (Barnett, 2008: 102) and being denied employment opportunities (Maganga, 2019: 205 – 207). This paper shows that even in the present day, Rastas find themselves being targeted by government, police and corporate bodies. Further that they are still falsely accused of possessing illegal substances and their children denied access to school due to wearing dreadlocks.

The Rasta situation raises questions regarding democratic society’s commitment to uphold their ideal of promoting religious freedom. In Malawi specifically there is dearth of scholarship and knowledge on the lived experiences of Rastas, one of the reasons for this paucity of scholarship and knowledge is the fact that during President Banda’s period, scholarship and writings was controlled by the regime and Banda would not have permitted writing on other religious formations other than Christianity and furthermore, Malawian Rastas themselves did not bother to write about their religion. This paper addresses this existing gap specifically by



showing that despite the democracy brought about by the elections of 1994, the rights of Rastafarians who make up a minority of Malawi's religious population are still disregarded.

The rise of Rastafarianism

Rastafari traces its origins to Jamaica, an island largely dominated by descendants of African slaves who were forced to endure both slavery and colonialism. From the moment many of these Africans were placed on a ship heading to the Americas, they were forced to think of themselves as being less human. This was affirmed by late Jamaican scholar Barry Chevannes (1994: 10) who noted that around 1865 efforts were made, if not to cause the people to forget Africa, at least to think of it as an uncivilized, primitive. What would perhaps be significant in so far as the emergence of the Rastafari movement is concerned was when Marcus Garvey made the supposed prophecy that Black people should look to Africa where a Black King is to be crowned and it was there that they would find their redemption. It so happened that on 2 November 1930, a young Ethiopian prince named Tafari Makonnen was crowned Emperor and eventually took upon the baptismal name of Haile Selassie which in Amharic means "Power of the Trinity".

For most Jamaicans of African descent, the coronation of Haile Selassie had both racial and religious resonance (Edmonds, 2003: 7). Furthermore, the coronation of Haile Selassie augmented the idea amongst Rastafarians that they were first and foremost Africans and need not be ashamed of this despite not being of the continent (Tafari, 1980: 2). As Rastafari has spread around the world, it has resonated spiritually with people of all different shades, ethnicities including economic strata yet at the crux of it all is the call to resistance. Whereas Rastafari was a call to resist against colonialism in the Jamaican context, it is found that in other parts of the world, it has played a pivotal role in addressing all forms of social ills. For instance, in Cuba, it is found that Rastafari serves as a critique against race relations which has long been a silent issue in that island (Hansing, 2006: 78). In other societies like New Zealand, it is found that Rastafari has called upon the indigenous people known as the Maori to take pride in their heritage especially in the face of British domination (Douglas and Boxill, 2008: 88).

Persecution of Rastafarians

The persecution and discrimination of Rastas is not an entirely new phenomenon. Its stretches as far as back as the 1930s when the movement was first formed. Its leader, Leonard Howell has been a victim of political harassment from the moment he had landed in Jamaica from America in 1932 (Dunkley, 2013). Despite Rastafari providing many of its adherents around the world a spiritual platform, it is found that many have been victims of all forms of discrimination. There are many examples of Rastafarian prejudices all over the world, for instance; Trevor Dawkins a bus driver from United Kingdom unfair dismissal from his job (Edmonds, 2012: 76), Gareth Prince a qualified lawyer from South African (Mpholo, 2015: 12 – 13), a six-year-old Zimbabwean who was expelled from school on the basis of wearing dreadlocks (Mhango, 2008) and many more.

In Malawi, Rastas found themselves being an underground movement. It was difficult to be a Rasta during Banda's presidency and the fact that the dreadlocks worn by Rastas was viewed as being in contravention with the Decency of Dress Act. This legislation which initially started out as a national dress policy effectively became law in 1973. It did not permit men to wear their hair long which in this case could be in the form of braids or dreadlocks (Kambili, 2002: 80). Although this law had been repealed once Malawi embraced a democratic system of government in 1994, what is found is that the public schools in Malawi continue to uphold a policy implemented by the Ministry of Education regarding the length of hair that one must wear. The problem with the policy is that it has tended to side-line religious groups namely



Rastafarians who maintain that the cutting of hair is in contravention with their religious beliefs. One would have hoped that after Malawi embraced democracy in 1994 there would be a significant change in terms of minority and marginalised religious groups. Alas, this change took place only on paper and in the new constitution of 1994 but the reality is that as a minority religion, Rastafari remains under attack.

Theorising religion

The question of what makes Rastafari a religion requires understanding the concept of religion. The general understanding of religion largely emanates from the Judeo-Christian perspective which is that religion is the belief in a Supreme Being (Harrison, 2006: 133 – 134). The problem with this perspective is that it fails to accommodate the fact that other religions do not hold to the belief of a Supreme Being. Furthermore, not all religions hold the equivalent of the evil spirit Satan as Christians do. One such example of a religion which does not hold onto this ideal is *Vodun*. In *Vodun*, it is found that all spirits are accorded the same respect, be they good or bad (Chevannes, 1994: 21). There is further need to consider that not all religions hold onto to the belief in spirits as seen in the case of Rastafari. Too often the perspective that tends to colour the way religion is portrayed in much of the scholarship is the Judeo-Christian perspective. Winkelman and Baker (2009: 8) acknowledge this when they further add that this perspective has tended to be the normal standard that scholars use when evaluating other religions. Anthropologists would be the first to break away from the tradition of viewing Christianity as being superior to other religions (Winkelman & Baker, 2009: 8). They maintained that such views tended to promote ethnocentrism and can often lead into conflicts that could be avoided (Winkelman & Baker, 2009: 8).

Anthropologists' curiosity of religion can be traced to the days of the Greek historian, Herodotus when he was the first to utilize the "comparative method" as propounded by Greek philosopher, Xenophanes when it came to studying the various religions that he encountered throughout his travels. He would also be credited for propounding the idea that religion is a universal feature found in all societies. To support his argument on the universality of religion, he proposed that 'the various tribal and national gods he encountered were all local names for the same universal deities' (Eller, 2007: 13). For instance, the Egyptian god Horus is viewed as the Greek god Apollo. This would further lead him 'to the notion of cultural borrowing and diffusion to explain the recurrence of the same beliefs in disparate locations' (Eller, 2007: 13).

It was not until the nineteenth century that the "comparative method" was taken up by scholars. This was largely in response to the explosion of the European awareness of non-Western religions (Winkelman & Baker, 2009: 10). One of the first scholars to utilize this approach during this century was a German language scholar named Max Müller. Müller maintained that '[i]n order to free the study of religion from bias, a researcher had to look at all religions with the same objectivity that he might bring to the study of rocks or clouds' (Winkelman and Baker, 2009: 11). Müller's idea would help lay the groundwork for anthropology becoming a formal discipline during this century. During this same period, accounts regarding the diverse religions came from merchants, soldiers, colonial officers and others. Despite making Europeans aware of other religions that existed outside of Europe, the problems that were associated with their accounts were that firstly, they did tend to use the scientific approach to studying religion which emphasises on objectivity and secondly, there was the tendency of viewing other religions as "exotic" (Winkelman & Baker, 2009: 11). Therefore, there was need for a scientific and objective approach to the study of religion which emphasised on the need to emphasise on the universal features that existed amongst religions as well as viewing religions within their own cultural perspective without any bias.

A number of anthropological theories were proposed to explain the universality of religion. The first was the intellectualist theory that was propounded by Edward Burnett Tylor. Tylor maintained that people turn to religion as a way of explaining why they continually experience



dreams, trances and death (Ember & Ember, 1996: 485; Eller, 2007: 17). Other intellectualist explanations for religion came from James Frazer who argued that people turn to religion in order to provide them with answers to a problem or question (Eller, 2007: 17). Although the intellectualists may have been credited to have been the first to provide an intellectualist understanding into why humans turn to religion but the one limitation with this approach is that humans not only turn to religion purely to provide them explanations to some of the problems they encounter in their daily lives. Humans can also turn to religion during times of fear or uncertainty as emotionalists would argue.

Scholars like Bronislaw Malinowski maintain that humans turn to religion during times of doubt, fear or anxiety (Henninger-Rener, 2017: 3). This would further lead to Malinowski arguing that 'religion is born from the universal need to find comfort in inevitable times of stress' (Ember and Ember, 1996: 485). Other scholars have maintained that people do not only turn to religion in times of anxiety. Scholars such as William James, for instance, argue that humans turn to religion in the hope of providing them with a 'feeling of union with something larger than oneself' (Ember & Ember, 1996: 486). In certain instances, humans turn to religion with some moral grounding in order to prevent them from committing selfish acts as the psychoanalysts would demonstrate.

Psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud maintain all humans share a common set of unconscious drives and instincts, most of which are anti-social and asocial in a way (Eller, 2007: 16). Although Freud's approach to religion may have not been agreed upon by most social scientists, both past and present, but the one thing that they could have perhaps agreed upon is the fact that religion does provide individuals with some moral grounding on what or what not do in any given situation.

Scholars do not only view religion from a psychological perspective. They also take into account the social perspective. One of the social perspectives of religion is the functionalist theory propounded by French sociologist Emile Durkheim. He views religion as providing people with shared values and behavioural norms that would further allow them to create solidarity between them (Henninger-Rener, 2017: 3). He also maintained that religion plays a vital role in building connections between people through the creation of shared definitions of the sacred and profane (Henninger-Rener, 2017: 3; Eller, 2007: 21). Therefore, the functionalists maintain that religion has a vital role to play in social role as well as setting the guidelines for acceptable behaviour (Havilland, Prins, McBride and Walrath, 2011: 232). Other social perspectives on religion include the symbolic/interpretive approach. This approach was developed in the mid-twentieth century by an anthropologist named Clifford Geertz. Geertz viewed 'religion as a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, persuasive and long-lasting moods and motivations' (1973: 87). For Geertz, religious practices were a way of enacting important cultural ideas (Henninger-Rener, 2017: 5). For instance, when it comes to the Christian cross, it is normally associated with death and resurrection yet at the same time, it demonstrates the idea of selflessness and sacrifice for others. It also demonstrates that with suffering comes the idea of something beyond the current reality (Henninger-Rener, 2017: 5).

In the case of Rastafari, there are a number of features that make it to be considered to be a religion. Like all other religions, Rastafari takes into account the sacred and profane. The sacred in this case would include recognizing Haile Selassie including the idea of Zion which is normally associated with Ethiopia or Africa whereas the profane would include ideas like Babylon. Moreover, Rastafari has symbols such as dreadlocks, *ganja* and so on. In addition, it creates solidarity amongst its adherents, yet what distinguishes it from other religions is the fact that it is one that addresses the issue of social justice. This is especially in regard to the fact that its roots lie in oppression and social injustice that have been perpetrated towards Jamaicans of African descent. Rastafari is not simply a religion in the common sense of the term but rather a "socio-political religion". Furthermore, Rastafari is not just a religion that has limited itself to the Jamaican context. It is found that globalization has made it possible for



Rastafari to spread in many corners of the world. For a long time, religion has been viewed as being static, in other words, limited to one place but globalization has further raised questions as to the static nature of religion. This has further led to Hackett (2005: 144) arguing that there is need for scholars to treat “religion” as a pervasive rather than a bounded category.

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 of Malawi but more specifically Blantyre and Lilongwe. The reason for this study being carried out in the urban areas is because they offer a better platform for Rastas to establish their business considering that most of the informants run small businesses.

The methodological approach taken for the study was qualitative and this was because with a qualitative approach, the emphasis is on allowing the respondent to express him or herself freely thereby considering the human factor (Neuman, 2003: 141). Since the study seeks to focus on the experiences of being Rasta in post-1994 Malawi, it is impossible for them to be quantified thereby making the qualitative approach appropriate for this study. 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.

Study findings

Participant's profiles

A total number of 44 individual interviews with three focus group discussions were conducted, each focus group was composed of 15 participants. All participants were males and this is recognised as one of the weaknesses of this study. 30 of these interviews were conducted in Lilongwe and 14 in Blantyre. Participants were between the age ranges of 23 and 50. In terms of educational background, most of my informants with the exception of one have only been as far as vocational college level. Some have had to stop at Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE)¹, others at Junior Certificate (JC)² and Primary Leaving School Certificate of Education (PLSCE)³. For some informants, it had to do with the fact that they did not have the adequate points required to enter university or vocational college. Because most of my informants have not gone as far as university level, it is found that most worked in the informal trading business. This would include selling fruits for passer-bys', second hand clothes or owning small businesses such as arts and crafts. This would further include the selling of curios for tourists or even painting street signs or even signs for other businesses. With that

¹ Malawi Secondary School Certificate of Education is the national secondary school leaving exam written by students that wish to enter university or vocational level. It is normally written at the final secondary school level. The Malawi school system is divided into primary and secondary level. The primary level runs from Standards 1 to 8 whereas at secondary school level, it is from Form 1 to 4. This system mainly applies at public schools in Malawi.

² This was a secondary school exam that a student was expected to write to enter Form 3 but it was eventually scrapped by the Ministry of Education in 2016

³ A primary school qualifying exam written for entry into secondary school

⁴ Ndirande is a township found in the city of Blantyre



said, only one of my informants was not found in informal trading business since he was a hereditary chief of a village found in the semi-urban area of Ndirande⁴. Most of my informants tended to live in the townships of Blantyre, Lilongwe and Zomba and would often travel to the cities to carry out their businesses.

What does it mean to be a Rastafarian in the Democratic Malawi?

The horrible experiences of Rastas and other religious groups, especially the Jehovah's Witness has already captured in this paper. This is in spite of the fact that in paper, the Constitution of Malawi does currently give recognition to minority religions such as Rastafari. The informants noted that as much as the Malawian Constitution does permit religious freedom, they do not experience such a freedom as members of the Rasta community in Malawi. This is further reflected in some of the statements made by some of the informants below;

[Sigh] It is not easy being a Rasta in this society of ours. We say that we live in a democracy but what democracy are we talking about here. As Rastas, our government treats us as though we are part of the "Third World". They don't consider us at all. We are basically a forgotten people
(Interview Ras Maziko, 3 December 2015)

Democracy did not bring freedom to us Rastas. What is found is that the Rastaman is a foreigner in his own land
(Interview Ras Revelation, 21 January 2016)

For Rastas in Malawi, democracy is not fully implemented and they do not fully experience its fruits. They see themselves as outsiders in their own country and as a result they call Malawian law a "system" which to them implies a system that is against everything a Rasta stands for. For most Rastas in Malawi, democracy has brought them discontent and false hope.

'Holy herb' is not legalised

The other matter that was raised by my informants included the legal right to freely smoke "chamba" or marijuana which they also call 'holy herb'. At present, marijuana is illegal under the laws of Malawi and carries with it hefty fine of 5,000, 000 Malawian Kwacha (MK) including a prison sentence of 14 years with hard labour (*Malawi 24*, 3 February 2018). Despite this, the study found that like elsewhere in the world, Malawian Rastas do not simply treat marijuana as though it were some recreational substance. Instead most expressed the fact that marijuana can be used for a variety of purposes namely medicine, hair oil and so forth yet they have expressed the concern that they cannot freely smoke or grow marijuana without facing harassment from the police. On 31 January 2018, two Rasta adherents were arrested for the cultivation of "chamba" (*Malawi24*, 3 February 2018). This is despite the fact that Rastas arguing that "chamba" is used for sacramental purposes and not recreational. On the other hand, the government of Malawi maintains that if "chamba" were to be legalized in Malawi, it will then be subjected to abuse (*Nyasa Times*, 1 June 2015). In spite of the Rastas' concern that democracy may have not improved their situation as a community in Malawi, there is also the need to explore the experiences that come with being a Rasta from a societal perspective.

Rastafarian children and access to education

Malawi has two types of education systems namely the public and private school system. With regard to private schools there are two types, with one owned by indigenous (black) Malawians and the other owned by white or Asian Malawians. The latter type mainly caters for expatriate children, white or Asian Malawians as well as black Malawian children that come from upper income families (Matemba, 2009: 48). The schools that are owned by indigenous Malawians



were not likely to turn away kids with dreadlocks just as long as the parents were paying fees. Most of the Rastas would like to take their children to private schools owned by the indigenous Malawians but there are too expensive for them given that most Rastafarians are informal traders. The public schools are run by Ministry of Education that implements policies and it is expected that the public schools nationwide should abide by them. Such policies in this case would include the dress code, the length of hair one has to wear and so forth. This long standing tradition can be traced to the British colonial administration which had been in existence from 1891 to 1964 and has been adopted by the Ministry of Education as one of its policies (Mhango, 2008: 219). In most public schools in Malawi more especially in primary schools, children of both sexes are only required to keep their hair short. In the case of girls, they are not permitted to wear braids in their hair or straighten it with chemicals.

Rastafarians argue that the schools more especially public schools used every possible way and form to discriminate against Rastafarians and dreadlocks was just one of them. Almost all informants complained about the fact that their children have not been allowed into classrooms on the basis of their dreadlocks. Although “all persons” would in this case include Rastas, the problem is not so much that they are discriminated against on the basis of their being Rasta. Rather, it has to be attributed to the fact that most public schools in Malawi have failed to accommodate multi-faith approaches to their religious education curriculum (Matemba, 2009: 41). What is found instead is that most public schools prefer to maintain Christian confessionalism (Matemba, 2009: 41).

Mhango (2008: 219) noted that preventing Rasta children from attending public schools in Malawi on the basis of their dreadlocks is inconsistent with the demands of both constitutional and international standards. For most Rastas, the wearing of dreadlocks separates them from those who are still in the “Babylon system” as it were. Furthermore the wearing of dreadlocks is viewed as response to the “call” of Haile Selassie whom they regard as the Creator³. With this in mind, most Rastas maintain the view that dreadlocks do not necessarily make an individual a Rasta. This has also been confirmed in the Morgan Heritage song *Don't Haffi Dread* (1999). In this song, the group Morgan Heritage makes mention of the fact that to be a Rasta, one does not necessarily need to have dreadlocks. What matters most is the “divine conception of one’s own heart”. This has to do with the fact that there have been people who have worn dreadlocks and committed crimes. It is found that such people have tended to give Rastas a bad name as a result of their actions (Edmonds, 2012: 82). Because of this, Rastas have tended to be viewed negatively in most parts of the world (Edmonds, 2012: 82; Hansing, 2006: 73).

School curriculum on Religions in Malawi

One of the main issues for Rastas in Malawi is that in general it seems that Rastafarianism is not regarded as a religion and that has been confirmed by the school religious education curriculum. All textbooks on Religious Studies make mention of only three religions that exist in Malawi; namely Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religions. There is also no mention of other minority religions such as Hinduism, Rastafari, Baha’i or Greek Orthodox. Matemba (2009: 42) makes mention of the fact that most of the religious education syllabuses in Malawi tend to place emphasis on Christianity to the extent that it undermines other religions. Matemba (2009: 45) further noted that religious education syllabus did not cover much on Islam until 1994 and this was as a result of the election of Bakili Muluzi who was himself a Muslim. Prior to 1994, Islam did not receive much coverage in the religious studies

³ When informants were asked the question of whether they regarded Haile Selassie as God, most answered in the affirmative. For most Rastas in Malawi, Haile Selassie is regarded as the Creator or in the Chichewa language “Mlengi” which basically means creator. For informants, regarding Selassie as God is considered a form of idolatory. This notion of idolatory could also be possibly linked to the fact that Rastas do not wish to associate themselves with religion.



curriculum due to the fact that Islam at the time was viewed as a “religion of backward people” (Matiki, 1994 as cited in Matemba, 2009: 45). This has to be attributed to the fact that Kamuzu Banda wished to promote Malawi as a “Christian” nation when in reality, there were other religions such as Islam and Hinduism. During the period Banda was president, Islam was a minority religion but in recent times it has become the second largest religion after Christianity (Matemba, 2009: 45).

In terms of the idea of having multi-faith religious education in schools, it is found that the Christian community in Malawi are gravely concerned by the fact that it can lead to Christian values being eroded and its heritage lost among the youth (Matemba, 2009: 42). Because there is lack of information on minority religions such as Rastafari in the school curriculum, it is found that the authorities of public schools specifically at primary level are found to be treating Rasta children in the same manner as other non-Rasta children who are seen to be wearing their hair long. The reality is that this tends to lead the Rasta parents to believe that it is a form of discrimination on the part of public schools.

Refusal of employment and shaving of dreadlocks

Although the general literature does make mention of the fact that Rastas do not wish to seek employment in any formal organization (see Price, 2009), what is found in the Malawian context is a different matter altogether. Although informants found themselves as informal traders, this does not necessarily mean that they are happy with the state they are in. There are some that feel that by gaining employment in the private companies or government organizations as Rastas, they will earn better salaries in order to improve their livelihoods. Further that such an opportunity will make these institutions better aware of Rastafari and perhaps influence some individuals to accept and respect Rastafarian religion. Regarding the employment of Rastafarians, Ras Danny has this to say;

.....It does not matter whether a Rastaman has a degree, diploma or even an MSCE or JCE certificate, he will never gain employment in this country. There have been worse cases where Rastas have never been shortlisted for interviews not even gaining a simple job as a messenger just because one identifies himself as a Rastaman
(Interview Ras Danny, 3 December 2015)

According to Ras Danny’s statement, Rastas in Malawi cannot advance in society unless they give into the “system” which in this particular instance involves the cutting or shaving of the locks. This is irrespective of whether one holds a degree, diploma or certificate. In the Malawian context, any man who is seen to be wearing dreadlocks irrespective of whether or not they were grown naturally or shaped in the salon, is considered a Rasta. This is also regardless of whether or not he adheres to the tenets of Rastafari. Men that are seen to be wearing dreadlocks in the workplaces in Malawi are not taken seriously by employers. This has to do with the perception that unkempt hair is treated with disdain in Malawian society. At the same time, any man that is seen to keep his hair in dreadlocks is also seen as being “mad”. Rastas in this case are viewed as “mad” because they talk about a “God” who to most educated Malawians was just simply a mere mortal being. It must be acknowledged that as a human being, Selassie has had his flaws. For instance, he was noted for spending millions of dollars in holding his 80th birthday celebrations whilst famine was experienced in the north eastern region of Wollo (Lemma, 1985: 54).

Rastafarians being targeted by police

According to informants, being a target of the police is not something new to Rastas. This stretches as far back as the days of Leonard Howell whom Dunkley (2013: 89), describes as being ‘the most victimized of the early Rastafari leaders’ As a Rasta, Howell has found himself



being arrested numerous times in his lifetime for what the British colonial government regarded at the time as sedition. The current Rastas find themselves in a similar predicament as their predecessor Howell, except that in their case, it has more to do with their “menacing” dreadlocks and the smoking of cannabis (Hansing, 2001: 741). In the Malawi context, the arrest of Rastas has generated considerable attention from the national media. Perhaps the first Rasta to generate national media attention in so far as the police was concerned was the late reggae musician Evison Matafale. Although his arrest was not related to the fact that he was a Rasta but instead it was to do with the fact that he was outspoken against the way the then president Bakili Muluzi was running the government. At the time Muluzi was in power, corruption was rife in Malawi (Rubin, 2011: 76). Matafale’s stance against the way government ran things at the time further demonstrates the vital that Rastafari can play in democratic Malawi. Matafale found himself being tortured by the police and he would later contract tuberculosis from which he would eventually die from on 27 November 2001. At the time of his death, Matafale was only 32 years old. Since Matafale’s death, an annual event is held to commemorate his life at his home village in Blantyre.

All participants noted that when one is a Rastaman in Malawi, they must be prepared to be the first target of the police. Other mentioned Rastamans cannot travel freely in Malawi. Some shared common experiences of cases where they were traveling from Blantyre to Lilongwe by bus and at roadblocks they were targets among all other buss occupants. It seemed that to them Rastafarians were often easy targets for the police. Ras Afrikan Kalam said that;

In 2006, there was a brother named Ras Gift who came from Nkolokosa⁴. He was innocently heading to the city of Blantyre until one time the police stopped him and asked him if he had chamba. When he said no, they didn’t believe him so put him in the van and took him to Chichiri⁵ Prison. It was there that they had him executed

(Interview Ras Vuto, 19 January 2016)

The death of Ras Gift in 2006 that Ras Vuto is referring to did not generate considerable attention from the national media therefore making it one of the few cases where police brutality has been perpetrated towards Rastas in Malawi. There may be other cases of Rastas being brutalized by the police that are yet to be known yet they have not received as much coverage from the national media.

Discussion and Conclusion

Since this study focuses on the Rastafari experience in contemporary Malawi, the question that ought to be asked is does Rastafari have a place in a democratic Malawi? To start with, the Rastafari phenomenon only gained visibility in Malawi after the national elections of 1994. It would therefore be easy to assume that this was what promulgated the existence of Rastafari in Malawi. Although this may be true to a certain degree but the one thing that is for certain is that despite there not being any written information on the origins of the Rastafari phenomenon in Malawi, its roots can be traced to the regime of President Banda which was characterized by oppression and intolerance towards foreign ideas. It is the democracy that was brought about the general elections of 1994 that made it possible for the voices of Rastas to be heard. For Rastas, democracy did not automatically translate into total freedom. It is found, for instance, that Rastas cannot wear dreadlocks to school or gain formal employment. They also find themselves being harassed by the police for wrongful reasons. To paraphrase Dennis Forsythe, it is found that Malawian Rastas are treated as “niggers” in their own country of birth (1980: 64).

⁴ Township found in the city of Blantyre

⁵ Chichiri is a suburb found in the city of Blantyre



We contend that Rastafari does certainly have a place in a democratic society like Malawi. This is specifically when considering that most African countries such as Malawi depend upon foreign aid and one of the conditions that need to be met in order to gain foreign aid is for the countries to be democratic. Since Malawi embraced democracy in 1994, it is found that it has had to meet with the conditions of donor communities thereby bringing about questions concerning its sovereignty like, for instance, the issue of homosexuality in the country. Despite the fact that Malawi as a country does not tolerate homosexuality purely on the basis that it is regarded as being “unMalawian”, Rastas, on the other hand, view it as a ploy for Malawians to give into the demands of the donor community. As a socio-religious movement that seeks to resist against neoliberal and neo-colonial authoritarianism (Mulder, 2011), Rastafari in Malawi certainly has a greater say on how some of the policies imposed upon it by the neo-colonial order. It further has a greater say on the growing corruption that is stifling the country’s economy especially when considering that corruption continues to grow rampantly in Malawi as noted by both Chitsulo (2015: 304) and Maganga (2019: 223). Rastas need to do more in raising the voices against the corrupt practices by the politicians which continues to make the country poorer and poorer by the moment. Politicians must further not ignore the pleas and concerns of the Rastafari community in Malawi because they are perhaps the only socio-religious group that can raise awareness of what is happening on the ground.

Moreover, Rastas have a greater role to play in educating the public school system in particular about the significant role of Rastafari belief system. It is easy for the Rasta community to assume that they are discriminated against when in reality it is about lack of knowledge over the Rastafari belief system. This also extends to the workplaces as well, both public and private. Individuals who identify themselves as Rastas fear the idea of wearing dreadlocks to the workplace or even indicating in the job application that they are Rasta for fear that they may not be considered for an interview or even a job for the matter. Despite the fact that most Rastas would prefer to work in the informal economy since it is basically in line with their idea of self-reliance, it is found that the money that is generated from the informal economy tends not to be sufficient in terms of supporting their growing families or even sending their children to private schools which are often expensive by Malawian standards since it is often an exclusive few that are able to send their children to such schools. With that said, this does not necessary mean that Rastas need to necessarily give in to the “system” once it does happen that they do gain formal employment. They must continue to remain firm in their faith despite the temptations that are associated with public workplaces such as shaving off the locks which is commonplace for most Rastas entering into the workforce. Also in these workplaces, they can play a role in informing others regarding their faith. In that manner, it can possibly play a role in eliminate some of the misunderstandings between Rastas and non-Rastas alike.

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