

## Rites and Rights: Two Worlds of Rastafari, c. 1930-1961

### Abstract

*Common perceptions of early Rastafari history hold that before 1960, the date of the University of the West Indies-run study into their social conditions, Rastafari were a class apart in Jamaica. In popular and to an extent scholarly imagination, they were said to live separately, and avoid contact and interaction with the institutions of “Babylon,” such as political elections and government systems. This article reveals how between the 1930s and early 1960s, Rastafari built their own versions of state institutions to recreate an alternate world beyond Babylon. They learned to manipulate and “work” the institutions of Babylon from law courts to the political machine in order to survive. They followed national and international news – often from Africa – and absorbed knowledge about the United Nations they could use to fight legal cases and write petitions protesting the conditions of their existence. All this suggests a novel stream of Rastafari intellectual thought and action that we must add to our understandings of the movement. Studying Rastafari in this manner – possible because of extensive research in its rich history – provides an opportunity to understand the actions of more marginalized groups acting beyond the traditional nation state in the moment of decolonization.*

On July 23, 2016 at Scott’s Pass, a Nyabinghi commune in Jamaica’s Clarendon Parish, Rastafari gathered from across the island nation. The evening was part of a week-long celebration of the birthday of His Imperial Majesty, the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, whose divine presence is celebrated by Rastafari the world over. As the evening progressed, I found myself engaged in a long conversation with Mr. Brooks, a 69-year-old Rastaman whose life was defined by a single day in 1966, when he viewed Selassie in his motorcade on the emperor’s state visit to Kingston. I had asked Mr. Brooks about Rastafari participation in Jamaican politics during the 1960s, a question to which he responded by dismissing the importance of the institution. He explained how governments and their functions are irrelevant for one’s spiritual journey, then cited an American newspaper where I could view Selassie’s words in support of his point: “Read the *Chicago Tribune* on June 24, 1973.”<sup>1</sup>

On that day, the *Chicago Tribune* carried an interview with Selassie conducted by journalist Oriana Fallaci. The controversial Italian had pressed Selassie on the anachronism of his monarchy in the contemporary world. Selassie had responded in French: “We [I] don’t even notice any difference between monarchies and republics,” and then rhetorically, “What is the difference between a republic and a monarchy?”, dismissing the journalist’s stated distinction between the two institutions.<sup>2</sup> Brooks had subtly tweaked Selassie’s meaning, using the emperor’s words to form the basis of his reasoning, and at the same time applying his ultimate authority in support of Brooks’s point. The power of Brooks’s argument rested on two diametrically opposed pillars. The first represented the post-Enlightenment western academy: a concrete, precise citation to a printed source. The second was pure Rasta: thinking through, reasoning about, and finally interpreting Selassie’s words to discern their correct meaning. The

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Mr. Brooks, Scott’s Pass, Clarendon, Jamaica, July 23, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> “An Oriana Fallaci Interview: Journey into the Private Universe of Haile Selassie,” *Chicago Tribune*, Section 2, June 24, 1973, 1.

bifurcation was so distinctive because I had noticed a similar theme in my own work on early Rastafari history in Jamaica.

Common perceptions of early Rastafari history hold that before 1960, the date of the University of the West Indies-run study into their social conditions, Rastafari were a class apart in Jamaica. In popular and to an extent scholarly imagination, they were said to live separately, and avoid contact and interaction with the institutions of “Babylon,” such as political elections and government systems. Ennis Edmonds, one of the foremost scholars of Rastafari, described the movement thus in the very first line of his *Rastafari: A Very Short Introduction*: “While some are repulsed by the reputed copious ganja (marijuana) smoking and gorgon-like hairstyle of Rastas, others are attracted by the anti-establishment impulse they have come to represent.”<sup>3</sup> That “anti-establishment” approach, as the work of Edmonds himself, the pioneering Barry Chevannes, and others shows, was never complete in reality: there was simply no way for Rastafari to be entirely divorced from mainstream Jamaican society.<sup>4</sup> But archival research reveals how Mr. Brooks’s skill in pivoting between two contrasting worlds had deeper, historical roots. Between the 1930s and early 1960s, Rastafari built their own versions of state institutions to recreate an alternate world beyond Babylon. They learned to manipulate and “work” the institutions of Babylon from law courts to the political machine in order to survive. They followed national and international news – often from Africa – and absorbed knowledge about the United Nations they could use to fight legal cases and write petitions protesting the conditions of their existence. All this suggests a novel stream of Rastafari intellectual thought and action that we must add to our understandings of the movement. Studying Rastafari in this manner – possible because of extensive research in its rich history – also provides an opportunity to understand the actions of more marginalized groups acting beyond the traditional nation state in the moment of decolonization.

### *Creating a State*

A wide swathe of historical scholarship has drawn attention to the ways marginalized individuals and groups have historically seized upon and carefully learned the workings of colonial bureaucracy in the fight for ameliorating their conditions. Such a process could be as simple as a wife learning the workings of the legal system in order to demand a divorce from a difficult husband.<sup>5</sup> In Martin Chanock’s classic rendering, it could involve elders invoking “tradition” as a way to formulate customary law on their terms in front of an immature colonial official.<sup>6</sup> But it could also mean aping the mechanics of the state – its bureaucracy – to provide an alternative realm of living. Derek Peterson’s careful work on the Mau Mau war in Kenya during the 1950s provides an instructive example. Operating from bases in central Kenya’s forests and less commonly in Nairobi, Mau Mau troops carried identity cards and flew flags. Forest leaders composed instructions on heavy, cumbersome typewriters that had to be hauled up

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<sup>3</sup> Ennis Edmonds, *Rastafari: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Barry Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995); Ennis Edmonds, *Rastafari: From Outcasts to Culture Bearers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Recently (and originally) told in Trevor Getz and Liz Clarke, *Abina and the Important Men* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). See also Benjamin Lawrance, Emily Osborn, and Richards Roberts, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Martin Chanock, *Law, Custom, and Social Order: the Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

and down slippery hills in often-frigid conditions. Commanders built their own postal system, kept records, and wrote histories to memorialize their cause, all in an effort to imagine and build a sovereign state beyond the British grasp. It created patriotism among followers, and demanded recognition from the British and colonial Kenyan states.<sup>7</sup>

Initial efforts to create a separate “state” in Jamaica derived from Leonard Howell, popularly given the moniker of the “First Rasta.”<sup>8</sup> In Howell, Rastas found a replacement for the officialdom of the colonial state during the 1930s and 1940s. Howell was, as Edmonds describes him, “prophet/preacher/teacher, autocratic administrator, legislator, judge, and folk healer.”<sup>9</sup> Perhaps this shouldn’t surprise us: Howell had become familiar with the workings of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) while living in New York during the 1920s.<sup>10</sup> By the early 1940s, Howell had formed the semi-autonomous community of Pinnacle, where Rastafari gathered, in Sligoville in the hills above Spanish Town. It was run under laws created by Howell for the community, and was a place where the dispossessed and poor could safely gather, including those of East Indian descent.<sup>11</sup> Extraordinarily, even the government of Jamaica seemed to recognize Pinnacle as a separate sphere: “the government should take no steps to break up the settlement of his [Howell’s] followers,” ran the attorney general’s report in 1944, “[S]o long as Howell’s followers observe the law, they are entitled to continue to live unmolested in whatever way they please.”<sup>12</sup>

It is important to recognize that Howell’s inspiration derived in significant part from Ethiopia. Rastafari were well informed about the Ethiopian state, voraciously reading any publications about the country, and demonstrating extraordinary acumen in procuring them. Colonial officials specifically drew attention to the issue in their correspondence, with one Jamaican official explaining he was, “concerned about the number of publications and documents about Ethiopia which reach the Rastafaris here,” and the “encouragement” they were receiving from the materials.<sup>13</sup> Officials were especially concerned by the *New Times and Ethiopia News*, Sylvia Pankhurst’s newsletter on Ethiopian affairs that began publication in 1936. “[W]d [Would] it not be possible for copies [of her publication] to be intercepted and accidentally ‘lost’ in the Post Office on arrival?” wondered one reader.<sup>14</sup> Drawing inspiration from Ethiopia, Howell drew his organization in contrast to the colonial state. He told his followers they should not pay tax, which had proved so crippling to the Jamaican poor in the post-depression years; their contributions to the community would come via their labor. He informed his followers that George VI was not their monarch, but that Ras Tafari was. Howell suggested that his supporters should use the Ethiopian calendar – which runs seven or eight years

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<sup>7</sup> Derek Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004), Chapter 8.

<sup>8</sup> The title given to an excellent book on Howell. Hélène Lee, *The First Rasta: Leonard Howell and the Rise of Rastafarianism* (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 2003), Chapter 4.

<sup>9</sup> Edmonds, *Rastafari: A Very Short Introduction*, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Lee, *First Rasta*, Chapter 4.

<sup>11</sup> See also Ajai Mansingh, “Rastafarianism: The Indian Connection,” *Sunday Gleaner*, July 18, 1982 cited in Lee, *First Rasta*, 299.

<sup>12</sup> Jamaica National Archives, Spanish Town (hereafter JNA), Pinnacle Papers, April 1944 cited in Lee, *First Rasta*, 159.

<sup>13</sup> TNA, CO 1031/1958, Foot to Phillips, September 10, 1956.

<sup>14</sup> TNA, CO 1031/1958, Anonymous Note, October 19, 1956.

behind the Gregorian version – and contributed to creating a new style of speaking in vocabulary, phonetics, and grammar, drawing from Jamaican creole, folk language, and African history.<sup>15</sup>

Pausing to peer into Pinnacle’s living conditions provides a sense of the sort of life Howell was providing for his followers. It stood in contrast to the poor conditions of western Kingston’s shanty towns. In late 1940, the *Gleaner* had published a report alleging that the conditions at Pinnacle were unsanitary and dangerous. It inspired Howell to invite government inspectors to view the commune. The subsequent report revealed that 275 followers were residents of the camp. 35 wattle and thatch houses were occupied, each of which had four doors. Rooms contained one to two beds, and the fly-proof latrines, drums of boiled water, and “good natural drainage” impressed the official. Around the encampment, residents grew cassava, peas, and corn, and by the 1950s, would supplement their income with extensive ganja sales. Howell was – in short – providing all the facilities to permit the settlement to operate independently, and in provisioning clean water was doing more than the government could do in some parts of Kingston.<sup>16</sup> By the 1950s – before the police razed Pinnacle – Howell even took over police duties, assigning feared guards to protect the compound. Policemen who visited alone or without sufficient backup were often beaten and dismissed unceremoniously.<sup>17</sup> Howell had formalized a social security scheme in 1941 based on the length of membership in his newly formed Ethiopian Salvation Society. Someone who had been a member for six months would receive £1/week for the first week he or she was sick; a maximum of 15 shillings for the two weeks that followed; and a maximum of 10 shillings per week for the following six.<sup>18</sup>

Creating a system of justice was central in ensuring followers obeyed community regulations. In the case of Howell, community standards were largely determined based on his personal views. But it is in Robert Hinds that we find the clearest articulation of legal prescription. Initially an associate of Howell, by the early 1940s, Hinds had forged his own path, establishing the successful Kings of Kings Mission. At the core of Hinds’s Rastafari organization was his “Cabinet,” comprised of seven senior elders who would aid him in the running of the mission. Chevannes describes its workings in detail:

[A] week’s notice of the trial by cabinet was given to the defendant and to the membership in general. One judge in the lot by agreement presided over the proceedings; the rest acted as appeal judges.... Punishment ranged from fines of a shilling to “hinder him from do it again,” to a period of fasting, or a period of suspension.... Sometimes it was not possible to thrash out a case conclusively. The accused was then given “a next chance”.... [One case] was finally dropped because the guard lacked sufficient evidence.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> In 1940, Howell explained that “white men” had falsely pushed forward the Gregorian calendar by seven years. JNA, 1B/5/79/735, Report of Leonard Howell Speech, January 7, 1940. On language see Velma Pollard, *Dread Talk: The Language of Rastafari* (Barbados: Canoe Press, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> JNA, 1B/5/77/283, Report on Pinnacle, November 30, 1940.

<sup>17</sup> “Ganja Growers Expelled,” *Public Opinion*, April 26, 1958, 2.

<sup>18</sup> JNA, 1B/5/77/283, Rules and Constitution of the Ethiopian Salvation Society, Friendship and Benevolent Society, Kingston, Jamaica, c. 1941.

<sup>19</sup> Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology*, 126-131.

Chevannes's description reveals several important points. First, the system's workings and practices were highly formalized. Second, it provided the defendant with ample opportunities to prove his or her side; and finally, the defendant would go free if the evidentiary basis was insufficient. One's chances to receive a fair trial were infinitely greater here than in the court at Halfway Tree where Rastafari suffered, frequently receiving lengthy sentences of detention for minor offences.

Despite the anti-establishment approach that Rastas came to represent, command of bureaucracy was essential in building a following and keeping it manageable. Howell had formalized his organization as the Ethiopian Salvation Society – registered in 1939 – perhaps recognizing the credibility such a title conveyed. It held regular meetings on the first Monday of each month at 7pm at 76 King Street, once the headquarters of Marcus Garvey and the UNIA. The society had rules and a constitution, which outlined the responsibilities of office holders. The rules contained prescriptions for who could speak at meetings and in what order.<sup>20</sup> A similar theme appeared in the guise of George Myers, a former Jehovah's Witness-turned-Rasta who created his own religion with formal decrees and booklets.<sup>21</sup> Prince Emanuel Edwards, described below, did the same with the Ethiopia Africa Black International Congress, and Barry Chevannes expands on these sorts of groups in *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology*. At other times, Rasta leaders utilized identity cards. In late 1959, as thousands of followers descended upon Kingston and his residence at 78 Rosalie Avenue, Reverend Claudius Henry issued them, "blue Church membership cards." These were their "passports" for when the ship would arrive to transport them to Ethiopia.<sup>22</sup> The move evoked a suggestion attributed to Howell two decades earlier that photographs of Haile Selassie he was selling would also permit the bearer to travel "back." Howell denied this at his trial.<sup>23</sup> By 1963, the Rasta United Front would go so far as to reject Jamaican citizenship and demand Ethiopian passports.<sup>24</sup>

A core requirement of any state or community is a usable past, and a method for its constituents to learn and debate that past. As the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche has put it, only an animal could live entirely "unhistorically"; a past conveyed legitimacy and is an essential tool in seeking recognition from outsiders.<sup>25</sup> In this context, Howell published the foundational text of the Rastafari movement in 1935. Entitled *The Promised Key*, Howell's text sought to fuse politics, belief, and history to create legitimacy and appeal for the world's black population. He described biblical figures Adam, Eve, and Abraham together with "Anglo-Saxon" as "all white people if you please." They stood in contrast to King Alpha and Queen Omega, "Black Arch Sovereign[s] of most Holy Times," who were black. Arguing that Alpha and Omega pre-dated Adam and Eve, Howell argued that Haile Selassie was their direct descendant. But creating a usable past also requires a method for debating and learning its core material,

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<sup>20</sup> In April 1954, Howell was arrested in the middle of "dictating letters to his two stenographers." "Cops Raid 'Doc,'" *Star*, April 7, 1954, 1. JNA, 1B/5/77/283, Rules and Constitution of the Ethiopian Salvation Society, Friendship and Benevolent Society, Kingston, Jamaica, c. 1940.

<sup>21</sup> "Myers Now 'King of Judah,'" *Public Opinion*, June 13, 1959, 1; "A King is Born," *Public Opinion*, July 18, 1959.

<sup>22</sup> "Back to Africa Move Explodes," *Public Opinion*, October 10, 1959, 1.

<sup>23</sup> "Leonard Howell, On Trial Says Ras Tafari is Messiah Returned," *Gleaner*, March 15, 1934, 20.

<sup>24</sup> JNA, 4/143/3/13, Ras Tafari Brethren to Secretary General of the United Nations, New York, c. September 1963.

<sup>25</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 61.

which necessitated a separate system of thought. Howell viewed the mainstream school system (which was in any case frequently off-limits to Rastafari before the 1970s) and its methods as perpetuating Babylon. Howell attacked products of this system as “college hogs” with “college filth” in their minds.<sup>26</sup> It stood in opposition to the open-minded “reasoning” of Rastafari in Kingston’s yards and at Pinnacle. In this way, Howell was creating a new, separate intellectual universe.<sup>27</sup>

### *Playing the State*

But what of *the* state – the British colonial state in Jamaica? The colonial state slowly rescinded its hold over the island during the 1940s and 1950s, culminating in full, national independence in 1962. The mechanics of state bureaucracy, however, changed little: neither Jamaica’s legal code nor its police force would do so until much later. Rastafari interacted with the state in a range of ways: at times, they aligned themselves with politicians to see whether they might offer some benefit. More commonly, they challenged the state’s institutions, showing a detailed understanding of how the court system and state bureaucracy operated. Much of this was built upon a deep understanding of the international world. The brutal Italian invasion of Ethiopia in October 1935 was a significant moment in drawing the attention of black West Indians to Africa, and the development of the Rastafari belief system. As a result, from its earliest days, Rastas looked beyond Jamaica to understand their circumstances, reflecting a Pan-Africanism that has defined their lives. The experience of Africans and African Americans – and even white revolutionaries – suggested solutions for their own challenges.

International knowledge was driven by a small number of highly intelligent, well-informed Rastafari who possessed the ability to communicate their knowledge to followers. Barry Chevannes has convincingly outlined the reading culture that flowed through Rastafari communities, though as he explains, the lack of extant sources makes a detailed reconstruction difficult. In the 1930s, Leonard Howell had established this trend, publishing a newspaper called *The People’s Voice*, which contained articles on African issues. The *Ethiopian Observer* and African American-run *Pittsburgh Courier* were commonly ordered from the United States and read in these communities (Hinds would typically order twenty or twenty-five copies for his followers to read).<sup>28</sup> It was the responsibility of senior members to translate and lead discussions with their juniors about these sorts of topics. Howell went so far as to informing the leading Pan-Africanist of his generation – the Trinidadian George Padmore – about his organization, telling him in 1939 that he had renamed his African Salvation Society the Ethiopian Salvation Society, one of at least several letters he sent to Padmore.<sup>29</sup> Padmore’s International African Service Bureau had sent Howell two “packets of literature” the previous year.<sup>30</sup>

Mortimer Planno and Reverend Claudius Henry took up Howell’s mantle in the 1950s. Planno – the Cuban-born thinker and later confidante of Bob Marley – was a great reader and writer. He published articles in the Pan-Africanist journal *International African Opinion*, edited

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<sup>26</sup> G.G. Maragh, *The Promised Key* (Brooklyn, NY: Publishers Group, 1993 [1935]), 14.

<sup>27</sup> A clear theme in oral interviews carried out by the author. “History is not a concise or scientific thing really,” explained one man, describing how it might flex and change over time. Interview No. 4, Mona, Kingston, July 1, 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology*, 122, 133.

<sup>29</sup> JNA, 1B/5/79/735, Kell to Grantham, Secret, September 17, 1939.

<sup>30</sup> JNA, 1B/5/79/735, Kell to Woolley, Secret, September 14, 1938.

by CLR James.<sup>31</sup> When future Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson – a Jamaican – visited Planno he was surprised to learn that, “There is... much discussion on current political events throughout the world,” and declared the Rastafari “unusually well informed.” He commented, tellingly, on the only furniture Planno owned: “Apart from a small cot to sleep on, the only other piece of furniture... was a large and expensive radio set.”<sup>32</sup> Claudius Henry traveled to Ethiopia and frequently brought the American Civil Rights struggle into his Rastafari meetings in Kingston. He would lecture on Alabama and Mississippi, doing so at one point in front of large images of lynched African Americans, in talks that ranged in content from the Archbishop of Canterbury to atomic weapons.<sup>33</sup>

Among Rastafari, Jamaica’s domestic political machinations were *usually* things to be dismissed. Due to the levels of dishonesty prevalent in its practitioners, Rastas labeled the institution “politrix,” and sometimes claimed Ethiopian citizenship to dismiss Jamaica’s significance. But Jamaica was too small, and the Rastas too close to major population centers, to be entirely removed. In addition, extensive knowledge of the international situation, combined with the charisma of their leaders, meant that Rastas flirted with mainstream politics during the 1940s and early 1950s. Howell was the puppet-master in chief. Robert Hill – as well as Rastafari intellectuals – suggests that this began as far back as 1938, with Rastafari communities playing a catalyzing role in the labor unrest that broke out in Jamaica and more broadly across the British Empire.<sup>34</sup> But by the 1950s, the two national political parties – Norman Manley’s People’s National Party (PNP) and Alexander Bustamante’s Jamaica Labour Party – could not afford to ignore the Rastafari influence. Howell was a threat: unlike Manley and Bustamante – both of mixed race – Howell was visibly “black,” and his advocacy of an alternative to nationalist politics attractive for those of African descent.<sup>35</sup>

At his newly established commune of Pinnacle, Howell seems to have won the ear of both the intellectual Manley and the more down-to-earth, populist “Busta.” Howell knew Bustamante from either New York or Panama, but it seems that the two had an arrangement to publicly “steer clear” of one another, especially given Howell’s increasing role in the ganja trade by the 1950s. Hinds was more direct, encouraging his followers to vote for Bustamante.<sup>36</sup> There is some suggestion, however, that Bustamante was financially benefitting from Howell’s success in the ganja trade: certainly, police and politicians across the island were doing so, with weapons from police stores making their way into Pinnacle and shanties in Spanish Town and Kingston. Perhaps aware of this connection, Manley fought back: by the mid-1950s, he sided with the colonial government in trying to stamp out the ganja trade – possibly aware of a connection between its profits and Bustamante’s campaign finance. Howell allowed electoral officials to place ballot boxes at Pinnacle in 1954, and the PNP won most votes there. Manley then made an

<sup>31</sup> African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica (hereafter ACIJ), V321, Interview with Mortimer Planno, June 28, 1995.

<sup>32</sup> Orlando Patterson, “Ras Tafari: Cults of Outcasts,” *New Society* 4 (1964), 17.

<sup>33</sup> JNA, 1B/7/1/6, Report of Detective Corporal Duncan, “Public Meeting – Royal Flat, 14/9/58,” September 15, 1958; JNA, 1B/7/1/6, Standing in the Gap, United Ethiopian Pioneer Movement, September 4, 1958.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Hill, “Leonard P. Howell and Millenarian Visions in Early Rastafari,” *Jamaica Journal* 16 (1983), 34; Ras E.S.P. McPherson, “Introduction,” in Maragh, *Promised Key*, xxxi.

<sup>35</sup> Daive Dunkley, “Leonard P. Howell’s Leadership of the Rastafari Movement and his ‘Missing Years,’” *Caribbean Quarterly* 58 (2012), 1-24.

<sup>36</sup> Edmonds, *Rastafari: A Very Short Introduction*, 15.

even more naked play for Rastafari support.<sup>37</sup> Aware of Haile Selassie's visit to the United States in mid-1954, the PNP suggested that the emperor might visit Jamaica at the same time, and by the end of the decade, was devoting significant time to visiting Rasta communities in Kingston.<sup>38</sup>

These experiences helped Rastafari to learn how to negotiate the courtrooms of Jamaica, where most would find themselves during the 1940s and 1950s at one point or another. Again, we turn to Howell as the first to recognize the powerful platform a dock could make. In 1934, Howell was tried by the Crown at the St. Thomas Circuit Court in Morant Bay on two counts of sedition. In a three-day trial, covered extensively by the daily *Gleaner*, Howell took the unusual step of eschewing a barrister and conducting his own defense. He began by refusing to swear on the Bible, an approach later repeated by numerous other Rastas who were arrested. He utilized the dock to expound on Rasta theology for a full day, share his own version of black history, and liberally sprinkle his words with biblical quotes. Dressed in a three-piece suit, Howell was unfailingly polite to the judge, but "caustic" in his cross-examination of the police, one of whom he subjected to a "dictation test" in front of the crowded courtroom. The jurors took fifteen minutes to deliver a "guilty" verdict; but he had brought knowledge of Rastas to Jamaican society in a new way.<sup>39</sup>

Jamaica's press consistently covered Rastafari court appearances, aware that its reading public was fascinated by the movement. Like Howell, common Rastas used the extensive press coverage to expound on their cause: they dressed in the red, yellow, and green tricolor; held photographs of Haile Selassie; and appeared at the court house in large numbers to support their detained brethren. Many directly challenged the authority of the court to try them, refusing to engage in its mechanics. When asked whether he had any witnesses, one Rasta replied, "Jesus Christ."<sup>40</sup> Another suggested in "polished English" that "the word and [his] bones" would suffice.<sup>41</sup> Others gave no answer when asked their names, or said only "Ras Tafari" or "Ras

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<sup>37</sup> Lee, *First Rasta*, 161-168; 189-200.

<sup>38</sup> TNA, CO 1031/1799, Jamaica Monthly Political Report, April 1954. These pivots between mainstream political life and a movement based on separation from it are difficult to categorize, as are occasional efforts to draw from Pan-Africanist thought, Revivalism, and other Ethiopianist movements. The large number of Rastafari yards – combined with the relative autonomy of their leaders – only magnified this trend. The movement evokes Sana Aiyar's work on Kenya's Indian community around the same time, and perhaps provides a way to approach the subject. Aiyar describes Kenya's Indians as possessing two diasporic "homelands": one the ancestral home of India, and the second, the actual homeland of Kenya. This bifurcated approach meant that Indian activists could "simultaneously establish political proximity to and create distance from Africans" as the situation called for.<sup>38</sup> For Rastafari – with an ideological homeland of Ethiopia, and an actual one of Jamaica – they could undertake the same. Yet despite these pivots to island politics, the Rastafari approach maintained a line of theological consistency. While prophets like Garvey occasionally came under criticism in Rastafari communities – particularly when Garvey "castigated" Selassie for his lack of organization in the face of the Italian invasion of his country in 1938 – Selassie remained inviolate, the theological underpinning of the Rastafari faith. Sana Aiyar, *Indians in Kenya: The Politics of Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 11.

<sup>39</sup> Information on the court case is drawn from: "Leonard Howell being Tried for Sedition in St. Thomas," *Gleaner*, March 14, 1934, 21; "Leonard Howell, on Trial Says Ras Tafari is Messiah Returned," *Gleaner*, March 15, 1934, 20; "'Ras Tafari' Disciple Found Guilty," *Gleaner*, March 16, 1934, 16.

<sup>40</sup> "'Beard' Before Court," *Star*, April 29, 1954, 7.

<sup>41</sup> "History of Ganja (Beard's Version) Told Court," *Star*, May 11, 1954, 3. The Jamaican National Archives contains a fascinating set of petitions written as early as the 1930s by Howell's supporters to British officials. They detail their harassment in clear, articulate sentences. See, for instance, JNA, 1B/5/77/283, Petition of Francella McNish, September 1, 1934 or Petition of Rachel Patterson, 1934.



Rasses” when asked.<sup>42</sup> Some were more direct: one man told the judge “your law has no justice.”<sup>43</sup> In another case, three Rastafari charged with disorderly conduct stated that they were treated like “slaves” in Jamaica (an approach used broadly across the world to challenge British claims to be bringing “civilization” and benefits to colonized peoples).<sup>44</sup> The *Star*’s reporter then summarized that they: “demanded... [to] be transferred to a higher Court under ‘military administration’ in accordance with the Declaration of Human Rights signed by the Emperor of Ethiopia.”<sup>45</sup>

By the 1950s, newspapers record several examples of Rastafari using the court system to demand restitution from those who sought to attack them. In August 1957, Vincent Anderson, Dalbert Ferguson, and Dulhaney found themselves in the dock on charges of resisting arrest and vagrancy, as well as participating in unauthorized public meetings. While in custody, they were subjected to a common indignity: several policemen forcibly shaved them. When released, they sued the policemen. Superintendent Lack was forced to appear in defense of his officers, who were lambasted by the judge for arresting men on vagrancy charges who possessed jobs.<sup>46</sup> This transition in the mid-1950s was in large part due to *pro bono* representation given by Irish lawyer Peter Evans to Rastas. Evans had served on Jomo Kenyatta’s legal team in 1953 in Kenya, and was deported from there, apparently for drawing attention to British indignities against Mau Mau detainees.<sup>47</sup> Evans was highly skilled at drawing government attention to his cases, and helped many Rastafari avoid jail. A fierce advocate, it was probably Evans who helped the Reverend Claudius Henry unsuccessfully sue columnists and editors at the *Gleaner*, *Public Opinion*, and the *Star* in 1960.<sup>48</sup> He would even defend Henry’s son Ronald, ultimately hanged for murder, in mid-1960.

Rastas undertook a range of actions when it came to protesting in Kingston. On some occasions, they held impromptu meetings, which avoided the cumbersome process of applying for permission from the police. On others, they found out about prearranged marches – for instance, of the Afro-West Indian Welfare League – and appeared in large numbers, attempting to use the other group’s police permission to hold their own gathering.<sup>49</sup> Rastafari were apparently so prevalent in Kingston by the mid-1950s that the police often ignored them; in other cities like Montego Bay – a tourist destination – they took a far stricter line.<sup>50</sup> In Kingston, the marches included hanging tricolor banners on prominent government buildings, directly representing an undercutting of the state’s authority.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> “‘Disgraceful,’ Warns the JP,” *Star*, August 25, 1954, 3; “Beards Besiege Court,” *Star*, September 15, 1954, 1.

<sup>43</sup> “Unquenchable Rastafari,” *Star*, November 19, 1955, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Derek Peterson, ed., *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010).

<sup>45</sup> “Rastas Shock Court,” *Star*, September 19, 1956, 11.

<sup>46</sup> “Beards to Take Policemen to Court,” *Public Opinion*, August 31, 1957, 2.

<sup>47</sup> On his years in Kenya see Peter Evans, *Law and Disorder; Or, Scenes of Life in Kenya* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1956).

<sup>48</sup> “Henry Fails in Contempt of Court Issue,” *Public Opinion*, June 4, 1960, 1.

<sup>49</sup> JNA, 1B/7/1/4, Note of Martin (?) to Assistant Commissioner of Police, July 11, 1957.

<sup>50</sup> JNA, 1B/7/1/4, Minute of Assistant Commissioner of Police, July 23, 1957.

<sup>51</sup> JNA, 1B/7/1/4, Minute of Assistant Commissioner of Police, July 23, 1957.

The more experienced Rastas learned more techniques with each passing year. Joseph Nathaniel Hibbert – one of the original formulators of the movement and associate of Howell – by the 1950s had joined the Ethiopian World Federation and was a high-ranking member. The neat, formal letterhead of the organization, with its address on Woodrow Street, made for smoother sailing at police review.<sup>52</sup> Charles Dunkley – one of the most prominent Rasta voices by the late 1950s – utilized a different tactic. He frequently held meetings in downtown Kingston featuring a diverse audience including, of course, many Rastas. When the police arrived and asked for his permit he would explain to them that he was holding a religious meeting, and therefore did not need one as he was only preaching.<sup>53</sup> A couple of months later on the corner of Spanish Town Road and Regent Street – with Dunkley this time in the audience – Richard Hobson used the same defense when the police arrived.<sup>54</sup> Separating religion from politics – a dichotomy with legal standing that fits relatively easily in many parts of the west – made little to no sense in the land of Marcus Garvey. By the late 1950s, more and more Rasta groups would realize that formal associations with religious titles provided even more protection: Hibbert formed the Ethiopian Orthodox Coptic Church, a forerunner of the Ethiopian Zion Coptic Church of the 1970s that gained notoriety for its role in the ganja trade.<sup>55</sup>

#### *Bobo Shanti, the United Nations, and Communism*

During the 1950s, all across the colonized world, the United Nations (UN) came to represent an opportunity. An appeal to the UN (or other extra-national bodies like the World Council of Churches) suggested that the authority of a nation from which little had been gained or promised might be superseded. The creation of the independent state of Israel in 1948, too, appeared to set an example for ethnic groups, kingdoms, and smaller “nations” across the colonized world desirous of their own sovereign territories. Many of these smaller groups – from the western Ugandan kingdom of Rwenzururu to Zambia’s Lumpa Church – viewed the moment as one in which independence from colonial rule – and any potential succeeding national state – might be seized.<sup>56</sup> The optimism of the 1950s would be dashed in the following decade as both the UN and Organisation of African Unity showed themselves unwilling to support secessionist regimes.

In Jamaica, the Bobo Shanti mansion concerned itself more than any other with the UN and the international political realm. Interestingly, however, among Rastafari communities, Bobos have maintained arguably a greater distance from Jamaican society than any other. Wearing distinctive turbans and dress, Bobos are – as one adherent puts it – visibly “separate from the world... we are not of this world.” The group dates its origin to March 1, 1958 when Prince Emanuel Charles Edwards founded the Ethiopia Africa Black International Congress in Back

<sup>52</sup> JNA, 1B/7/1/4, Hibbert to Commissioner of Police, August 7, 1957.

<sup>53</sup> JNA, 1B/7/30 (1), Report of the Jamaica Constabulary, July 13, 1953.

<sup>54</sup> JNA, 1B/7/30 (1), Report of the Jamaica Constabulary, “Public Meetings – Rastafarians,” November 23, 1953.

<sup>55</sup> JNA, 1B/7/1/6, Hibbert to Commissioner of Police, April 17, 1959.

<sup>56</sup> These examples are just two in an important volume that speaks to broader themes about creating and reworking the past in Africa. Derek Peterson, “States of Mind: Political History and the Rwenzururu Kingdom in Western Uganda,” in Derek Peterson and Giacomo Macola, eds., *Recasting the Past: History Writing and Political Work in Modern Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009), 171-190; David Gordon, “A Community of Suffering: Narratives of War and Exile in the Zambian Lumpa Church,” in *Recasting the Past*, 191-210.

O'Wall at 54B Spanish Town Road.<sup>57</sup> In the group's original charter, handed down since the days of Prince Emanuel, it asserts that adherents must not vote, become engaged in politics, or accept money from any organization, political or otherwise.<sup>58</sup> Were one to create a rendering of the distance various Rasta groups occupy away from mainstream society, the Bobos would likely be at the extreme of one end, with their commune at Bull Bay still living very much in the rigid prescription of its founder.<sup>59</sup> Yet archival evidence, put together with contemporary oral evidence, hints at a richer story. The light blue flag flying at the Bobo compound at Bull Bay – representing the UN – hints at this deeper history.

Employees of the African Caribbean Institute in Kingston have carried out a number of interviews with Bobo members in recent decades. They speak clearly to the role of the UN and international dialogue in Bobo intellectual thought and reasoning, as does Ionie Angella Matthews Wallace in her recent two-part biography of Prince Emanuel and the continuing work of his church.<sup>60</sup> One 2002 interview, for instance, describes Prince Emanuel's divinity in the same breath as his role as a "champion of human rights and justice." Emanuel had taken on this role realizing that he could best represent the Bobo desire for "repatriation" to Africa. For this interviewee, the Bobo were not a community – but a "documented nation," and deserving of international protection as a result. The interviewee calls on the UN to follow through on Article 1 of its charter, a sweeping document that includes calls for peace, the guarding of human rights, and guarantees of self-determination, amongst other things.<sup>61</sup> Another group interview stresses the importance of dialogue with the UN in multiple places, and the role that international courts of justice might play in Bobo repatriation.<sup>62</sup> As a result, the Bobo charter includes Prince Emanuel's title, among other honorifics, as "Black Secretary General of the Black United Nations."<sup>63</sup>

Little-known documents in the Jamaica National Archives in Spanish Town permit a deeper understanding of this genealogy. One letter, dating from November 1958, is written in the scratchy hand of Prince Emanuel himself. He wrote to the commissioner of police requesting a permit to hold a march on December 10, 1958, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the United Nations's Human Rights Day. The day itself commemorated the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document of immense importance for people across the colonized world. Attached to the letter was a flyer that Emanuel and his compatriots were distributing around Kingston:

It is for all black men from the soldiers, to the Police, down to the People who had to find their food in the Dungle [a shanty in western Kingston, now Tivoli Gardens] to claim their nationality through the United Nations Charter, Article 15. Every man has got

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<sup>57</sup> Ionie Wallace, *The Black Christ Unveil: Biography & Philosophy of Prince Emanuel Charles Edwards*, Vol. 1 (Bull Bay, Jamaica: Ionie Wallace, 2016), 61.

<sup>58</sup> ACIJ, T1761, Interview with Bobo Rasta ("Bobo Dread"), January 28, 2002.

<sup>59</sup> Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology*, Chapter 6.

<sup>60</sup> Wallace, *Black Christ Unveil*.

<sup>61</sup> ACIJ, T1761, Interview with Bobo Rasta ("Bobo Dread"), January 28, 2002. United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations*, <http://www.legal.un.org/reptory/art1.shtml>, accessed September 26, 2017.

<sup>62</sup> ACIJ, T1763, Interview at Bobo Camp, April 18, 2001.

<sup>63</sup> ACIJ, T1761, Interview with Bobo Rasta ("Bobo Dread"), January 28, 2002.

the right to a nationality. Africa for the Africans home and abroad.<sup>64</sup>

Emanuel was referring to Article 15 of the Declaration of Human Rights – not the UN charter itself – which lays out the following two provisions: first, that “Everyone has the right to a nationality,” and second, “No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.”<sup>65</sup> In the years that followed at least one Rastafari house would write directly to the Secretary General of the UN in New York requesting assistance, again directly citing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>66</sup> But without doubt the most important invocation of the body came in the Minority Report of the Jamaican government’s official mission to Africa in 1961 to investigate the possibilities of relations across the Atlantic. Authored by three Rastas – Filmore Alvarenga, Douglas Mack, and Mortimer Planno – it concluded by requesting that African states represent their case to the UN.<sup>67</sup>

Like Pan-Africanism, communism represented an affiliation beyond the nation that was attractive to some Rastafari. The links between Rastafari and Pan-Africanist thought are important, but because they are described in some depth elsewhere, they do not form part of this article.<sup>68</sup> There were close links between Rasta leaders and Marxist/communists. Of most significance was the connection between Rastas and the People’s Freedom Movement (PFM), a “communist party by another name,” as Colin Clarke observed in 1961.<sup>69</sup> The PFM – led by Ferdinand Smith and Richard Hart – were responsible for bringing Guyanese socialist Janet Jagan to Jamaica, delivered lectures to Rastafari, and suggested that the PFM would defend them from the police, from whom harassment was common.<sup>70</sup> Hart would even suggest in 1960 that if Reverend Claudius Henry was arrested, the PFM might take over his Africa Reform Church.<sup>71</sup> Hart was a close associate of Sam Brown, founder of the Black Man’s Political Party, and who would become the first Rasta to run for election before the 1962 vote.

In interviews in 2016, I spent considerable time discussing communism with older Rastafari who were alive and active during the 1950s and 1960s. For many, communism represented revolutionary potential.<sup>72</sup> In their yards, Rastas studied Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’s *Communist Manifesto*, searching for how its ideas might contribute to social consciousness. They were “warrior versions of Rastas,” remember one man.<sup>73</sup> For some Rastas,

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<sup>64</sup> JNA, 1B/7/1/6, Prince Emanuel to Commissioner of Police, November 19, 1958.

<sup>65</sup> United Nations, “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” 1948, <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights>, accessed September 15, 2017.

<sup>66</sup> See, for instance, JNA, 4/143/3/13, Ras Tafari Brethren to Secretary General of the United Nations, New York, c. September 1963.

<sup>67</sup> Filmore Alvarenga, Douglas Mack, and Mortimer Planno, *Minority Report of the Mission to Africa* (Kingston, Jamaica: Government Printer, 1961), 23.

<sup>68</sup> Horace Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance: From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney* (London: Hansib, 1985).

<sup>69</sup> Colin Clarke, *Race, Class, and the Politics of Decolonization: Jamaica Journals, 1961 and 1968* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>70</sup> The National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter TNA), CO 1031/1801, LSIC Report, October 1956; TNA, CO 1031/2767, Jamaica Constabulary Report, “The Rastafarite Cult,” January 5, 1957.

<sup>71</sup> TNA, CO 1031/3994, Jamaica LSIC Report, July 1960.

<sup>72</sup> Howell was interested in the power of organized labor, and had subscribed to *The Negro Worker* in the late 1930s. Lee, *First Rasta*, 117. In the early 1950s, Rastas on street corners had introduced union leaders to speak to crowds together with them. JNA, 1B/7/30 (1), Report of Jamaica Constabulary, July 13, 1953.

<sup>73</sup> Interview No. 4, Mona, Kingston, July 1, 2016.

communism's apparent historical successes via revolution provided a prescription for action, and the "mindset" required to be a part of either movement was similar.<sup>74</sup> Perhaps for Rastas there was a middle road between the two poles outlined by George Padmore.<sup>75</sup> But for every supporter of Brown who believed mainstream politics offered a solution for Rasta woes, there was one more who believed Jamaica offered nothing and that repatriation was the only solution.

### *Towards the UCWI Study*

In popular perception, the 1961 Mission to Africa – that included the three Rastas mentioned above – signaled the beginning of the process in which Rastas were brought in from the cold. But it was preceded by a range of smaller scale events. From the 1950s onwards, Rastas had begun playing a more direct role in Jamaican life. Some Rastas had even applied to join the police several years earlier, and at least one member of the police was Rasta and was attempting to recruit from within.<sup>76</sup> In 1959, the Moral Rearmament Movement – popularly imagined as a colonial antidote to movements like the Rastas and Mau Mau – invited several brethren to Canada in mid-1959. They apparently conducted themselves well, and received a high profile welcome on their return from the mayor of Montego Bay and Custos of St. James.<sup>77</sup> In 1960, government officials had contacted Rasta leaders to see whether they would be interested in playing a role in the census. They had anticipated that without assistance, their efforts would meet with strong "resistance" in areas where many Rastafari lived. Rasta leaders acquiesced and assisted in the counting.<sup>78</sup> Soon, as noted above, Sam Brown would become the first Rasta to run for political office.

This is the context in which the UCWI study should be read. It derived from this background as well as significant links that were built between the campus and Rastas in the decade before Walter Rodney arrived in Mona. To read the university's fortnightly student newsletter, *The Pelican*, is to realize the degree to which the Rastas had entered student consciousness, and even the students' physical space. Throughout the 1950s, student leaders appeared with "Ras" before their names or nicknames. One humorous poem "Nonsensical Hashey" by Omega read thus:

Yussi indeed has gone back to Africa  
Darkest continentalism shows everywhere  
Bearded Rastas stroll the campus  
Scientists, goats, doctors and grampas  
Ras Jomo of intellectual fame,  
Ras Jaho of great acting name,  
Ras Ebony formerly Ras Tropical

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<sup>74</sup> Interview No. 3, Mona, Kingston, July 1, 2016.

<sup>75</sup> George Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism? The Coming Struggle for Africa* (New York, NY: Roy Publishers, 1956), 186.

<sup>76</sup> The connection with the police had historically concerned officials. In 1954, Constable Jackson had led Rastas marching in Kingston. When his police colleagues had asked him questions he had simply replied: "Lay down arms and come with me." "Will Not Give Their Names," *Star*, April 15, 1954, 3; "Beards Want to be Cops," *Star*, March 31, 1954, 1.

<sup>77</sup> Editors, "Rastafari," *Public Opinion*, August 29, 1959, 4.

<sup>78</sup> "Census: Rastafarian Enumerators to Count Brother Census," *Public Opinion*, April 9, 1960, 1.

Ras Roy of topics historical;<sup>79</sup>

Scholars at UCWI including Arthur Lewis – the Vice Principal – as well as Rex Nettleford and Roy Augier were in close touch with Rastafari leaders. Augier remembered being “frequently invited” by Rastafari leaders to meet with and reason with them. The culmination of this process was when Mortimer Planno contacted Lewis asking for the assistance of the university in serving as an intermediary between them and the government and middle class Jamaica.<sup>80</sup> The government seized upon the suggestion, resulting in Roy Augier, Rex Nettleford, and M.G. Smith’s two-week study in Trench Town in western Kingston from July 4 to July 17, 1960. The study played an important role in legitimating the Rastafari cause, and was a way for the government to affiliate itself more with Jamaica’s black poor.<sup>81</sup>

This article reflects how the men and women who participated in the early years of the Rastafari faith perpetually resisted simple categorization. Contrary to popular perceptions of the movement, a proportion of its adherents – and especially its leaders – pivoted towards and away from the state in an effort to negotiate better circumstances. While Edmonds is clearly correct in noting how Rastas “delegitimize[d]” colonial institutions, when necessary, they demonstrated a deep knowledge of functional bureaucracy, often fighting the indignities of colonialism on its own terms.<sup>82</sup> In deploying a variety of allegiances and orientations in this manner, Rastas blurred traditional efforts to classify them. That Rastafari activism proved itself so flexible should come as little surprise. The origins of the movement – explored so effectively by Barry Chevannes – reflected a heady mix of inspiration drawn from Ethiopianism, Bedwardism, Revivalism (and Myalism), and more.<sup>83</sup> This diversity of intellectual approach was then laid over Jamaica’s vibrant black peasantry, engaged in the historic search for tools to resist or survive the slave and plantation systems over the previous three centuries.<sup>84</sup> This approach was a distinct stream of intellectual activism that featured in the otherwise relatively well-known Rastafari activities of the period.

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<sup>79</sup> “Ras Jomo” was Kenny Small, who presumably took the name after the detained Jomo Kenyatta. “Ras Roy” was likely historian Sir Roy Augier. University of West Indies-Mona, West Indies Collection, ULH3.P43, “Nonsensical Hashey,” *The Pelican* 3, 6 (March 1956), 1.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Sir Roy Augier, August 7, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RznJr07F284>, accessed August 18, 2016.

<sup>81</sup> M.G. Smith, Roy Augier, and Rex Nettleford, *Report on the Rastafari Movement in Kingston, Jamaica* (Mona, Jamaica: University of the West Indies, 1960).

<sup>82</sup> Edmonds, *Rastafari: Short Introduction*, 40.

<sup>83</sup> Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology*.

<sup>84</sup> Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (London: Verso, 1988).