

**MacLeod, Erin C. 2014. Visions of Zion. Ethiopians and Rastafari in the Search of the Promised Land. New York/London: New York University Press. ISBN: 978-1-4798- 8224-3, 299 pp, 49 \$**

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- <1> Visions of Zion is a book that engages with repatriated Rastafari in Ethiopia by focusing on the Ethiopians' perception of Rastafari. As an in-depth study of Rastafari in Ethiopia but also, and in particular, of diverging narratives within a contested space, the book constitutes a pioneering study looking at issues of integration and attitudes and opinions of the host society. The author investigates the Ethiopians' perception of Rastafari not only through interviews with Ethiopians but also by looking into different domains which offer a broader perspective, for instance, coverage of Rastafari in the media, theses written at Addis Ababa University dealing with Rastafari and the music business, in particular the Ethiopian reggae scene. In a greater picture, the book contributes to the understanding of the relation between Diaspora and continental Africans in the context of repatriation and integration.
- <2> Rastafari, which emerged in Jamaica in the 1930s but today constitutes a global phenomenon, embodies a philosophy, which highlights the importance of repatriation to Africa.<sup>1</sup> Repatriation has been and continues to be an important theme among the descendants of enslaved Africans in the "New World". "Shashemene", the land granted to members of the African Diaspora by Emperor Haile Selassie I in gratitude for the support during the Italian invasion, constitutes a special place for Rastafari (and beyond) and has attracted repatriates since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> The Rastafari community in Shashemene, as well as the Rastafari presence in Ethiopia in general have lived through various stages and yielded different reactions within the Ethiopian host community. During MacLeod's extensive research in Ethiopia she interviewed Ethiopians who live in Shashemene<sup>3</sup> but she also draws on a range of other sources.
- <3> The book starts off with an introduction in which the author tells a personal anecdote of a bus trip from Addis Ababa to Shashemene to introduce one of the major observations of this study: that repatriated Rastafari are regarded as immigrants, as foreigners, by Ethiopians while they see themselves as Ethiopians, as repatriates to their homeland. These positions, as the book argues, express conflicting narratives of identity, which are at the heart of the problematic relationship between Rastafari and Ethiopians on the ground and determine Ethiopians'

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<sup>1</sup> In different accounts and contexts repatriation can be understood as physical as well as spiritual repatriation.

<sup>2</sup> The "land grant" that was given to the African Diaspora is located at the outskirts of Shashemene, a town in the Oromia region in Southern Ethiopia.

<sup>3</sup> It is significant to point out that many of interviewees quoted in MacLeod's book who live in Shashemene are not in direct contact with the Rastafari community. Most of them appear to live in Shashemene town whereas most of the repatriated Rastafari live on the "land grant", the area designated for the African Diaspora by His Majesty Haile Selassie. The land grant is located approximately 5 kilometers from the center of Shashemene and in the direct vicinity of the village Melka Oda. In that area, Rastafari and Ethiopians live next-door to each other and are in much more direct contact with each other as compared to the Ethiopians living in Shashemene town. The distance is also evident in some of the answers provided by interviewees in MacLeod's book who advised the author to speak to those Ethiopians who deal with the Rastafari community

perception of the Rastafari presence in Ethiopia. The introduction continues with a description and summary of Rastafari's history and ideas focusing on the role of Ethiopia and Ethiopian-ness, and the narrative of repatriation and Ethiopian identity. Against this introductory background MacLeod then turns to the Ethiopians and their perceptions and reactions. She did extensive fieldwork in Ethiopia and interviewed more than 90 people, among them high school and college students, farmers, teachers, merchants, NGO workers, business people, journalists, municipal government officials, musicians and artists, members of Haile Selassie's family, Orthodox priests and Protestant pastors and also some members of the repatriated Rastafari community (p. 24). While the author states that "Rastafari receive a varied reception – both positive and negative – in the country" her discussions tend to dwell on the negative, problematic and conflicting aspects of the Rastafari-Ethiopian encounter on the ground which she explores and analyzes within their specific as well as wider socio-cultural, political and historic contexts. While she discusses the conflicting perspectives and contested identities and spaces at length she also outlines some positive developments with regard to the integration process and community work on the ground, especially in the final chapters of her book.

- <4> After the introduction follows a chapter on the concept of *Ethiopianness*, which discusses Ethiopian concepts of *Ethiopianness* and Ethiopian identity and establishes that they are characterized by a plurality of views which differ significantly from the perspective of Rastafari. MacLeod also looks at concepts of *Ethiopianness* in terms of their historical developments and complexity. Comparing the conflicting identity discourses of Rastafari and Ethiopians, she describes them within their socio-historical context and thus illustrates how postcolonial meets non-colonial and which challenges arise from these differing narratives. Moreover, the chapter discusses the notion of "Ethiopian exceptionalism", an identity discourse which constructs Ethiopia as being disconnected from other African countries and which is informed by various narratives, especially by the powerful story that Ethiopia, unlike other African countries, has never been colonized.
- <5> The next chapter of the monograph engages with Rastafari-Ethiopian relations and the latter's perspective of the former on a local level in Shashemene. The author witnessed the Rastafari community's celebration of Haile Selassie's birthday and further reflects on the multifaceted views of the Emperor before turning to what she calls "the miracle story". She analyzes in great detail and by quoting many sources and voices how the event of Haile Selassie's visit to Jamaica in 1966 is remembered and narrated according to Rastafari's/Jamaican's and Ethiopian's collective memory respectively. While in Jamaica the story goes that the rain stopped when Haile Selassie arrived in Jamaica (a fact that is evident in the video of the Emperor's arrival, which exhibits wet tarmac of the runway), the Ethiopian version tells the opposite: upon Haile Selassie's arrival, it started raining after a long drought. MacLeod connects the Ethiopian story to the role of miracles in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition and states that "[r]elief from drought and divine intervention are relevant to Ethiopian culture and belief" (p. 69). Furthermore, she assesses: "I see these conflicting narratives of Haile Selassie's arrival as emblematic of the conflicting narratives of Ethiopian identity. As the chapter continues the author deals with the Emperor's reaction to Rastafari's beliefs - mostly as seen and told to the author by members of His Majesty's family. The bottom line is that they believe "that Haile Selassie did not encourage the Rastafari movement" (Prince Ermias Sahle Selassie in an interview with the author, quoted on p. 71).<sup>4</sup> Rather, he and other Ethiopians engaged in attempts to lead Rastafari to the Ethiopian Orthodox church. The remainder of the chapter investigates integration and Ethiopian perception on the family and community level. She states that most Ethiopians do not approve of Ethiopian-Rastafari intermarriages, or at least consider them as "not normal" (cf. p. 82) and that the Rastafari belief system is usually not passed down to the Ethiopian-born children of such marriages. The latter aspect is connected to the Ethiopian born children's lack of the historical experiences of the repatriated Rastafari (p. 85). Her

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<sup>4</sup> Though not directly part of MacLeod's book, this constitutes another theme charged with conflicting narratives, as Rastafari usually present a different account of His Majesty's perception of their beliefs and draw on narratives of Rastafari who had met the Emperor.

research on community contact between Rastafari and Ethiopians in Shashemene yields that the contact is quite minimal and that the two communities do not engage with each other a lot. Finally, MacLeod analyzes the negative perceptions of Rastafari by Ethiopians by drawing on the “integrated threat theory”, a theoretic approach that was developed and mostly applied to attitudes towards immigrant communities in Western societies. While there is no further discussion of the question whether such a Western approach can be directly applied to Ethiopian society, the author investigates to which extent the Rastafari presence in Ethiopia may constitute a threat to Ethiopian society. In this context, the use of marijuana seems to be seen as a major threat by Ethiopians.

- <6> The next chapter focuses on the issue of space, in particular the space of Shashemene, which is also highly contested. MacLeod explores how the space of Shashemene, and especially the space of the land grant, became charged with different meanings by the various people who inhabit the area. She discusses the production of social space and how it reflects social relationships (p. 97ff). She also elaborates on the ways how the space of Shashemene has changes over time and how it is conceptualized differently by Rastafari and local Ethiopians respectively. She thus states that “Shashemene is a site in which the many notions of Ethiopianness are being negotiated”. Her interviews with Ethiopian residents of the area reveal that the Rastafari presence, and their taking of Ethiopian land, is a thorn in many Ethiopians’ side. The chapter illustrates how the contested space of Shashemene, despite various shifts and developments and despite the fact that Rastafari have been present in the area for more than half a century, continues to be an issue of conflicts especially between Rastafari and the local Oromo population.
- <7> Chapter four constitutes a journey into media anthropology and a switch from Shashemene to Addis Ababa. In this chapter, the author investigates the *Africa Unite* concerts which was held in Meskel Square, Addis Ababa, in honor of the sixtieth birthday of the Jamaican reggae legend Bob Marley. Making use of a media anthropology approach, journalistic reporting, and thick description MacLeod describes the celebrations and looks at the Ethiopian perception of the event. She analyzes print and broadcast media reporting on the event and also looks at pamphlets about Rastafari which were produced and distributed by the Protestant church during the festivities. She observes differences between state and independent media, the former reporting positively about the event (which is partly achieved by not digging too deep into Rastafari culture and beliefs in the reports) and the latter raising more critical questions and stating (afterwards), for instance, that Africa Unite was a concert for “VIPs and Rastafari” and “not for Ethiopia” (p. 149). A rather negative perspective is also presented in the pamphlets by the Protestant church which attempt to make Rastafari look less attractive through the way they describe them and even incorporating a range of assumptions which are far from reality.
- <8> Chapter five, entitled “representations of Rastafari” deals with reggae music, which is often highly influenced by Rastafari discourse and philosophy, though reggae and Rastafari are not essentially equal, and looks at the ways in which Ethiopian musicians appropriate and use the music. The chapter starts by highlighting the strong connections between reggae and Rastafari and discusses the impact of reggae and especially of Bob Marley’s music before turning to reggae in Ethiopia. In that section, the author introduces the famous Ethiopian singer Teddy Afro, whose Amharic pop music does incorporate a few reggae elements and also picks up some thematic aspects of Rastafari, as well as Ethiopian reggae musicians Jonny Ragga, Henock Mehari, Ras Mule, Jah Lude, Haile Roots and Yakob Tafari. Quoting them and discussing their music and styles she concludes that while they adopt the music and certain other features of Rastafari style and rhetoric to varying degrees, none of them has fully adopted Rastafari beliefs and views and they still differentiate themselves and Ethiopian culture from Rastafari.
- <9> Issues of citizenship are the topic of the following chapter in which the author brings the problematic situation concerning the legal status of most of the repatriated Rastafari into the discussion. While Rastafari see themselves as Ethiopian and aspire to achieve Ethiopian citizenship, hardly any of them, perhaps none, have attained this legal status, and “no

citizenship process had been developed” (p. 194). To offer a solution to this problem, MacLeod introduces the concept of “cultural citizenship” which may serve as an alternative way to belong and identify. The concept of “cultural citizenship” was mostly applied to “globalized Western societies” (p. 199) and the author now translates it into the Ethiopian context. Connected to “cultural citizenships” is the decision “to live, [...] engage, negotiate and integrate” (p. 202) which is then analyzed with regard to Rastafari’s economic and business engagements in Shashemene. A tofu producing company is looked at in more detail in the next subsection in terms of its contribution to processes of integration and the attainment of “cultural citizenship”. Furthermore, the author turns to humanitarian initiatives such as the Jamaican Rastafarian Development Community School (JRDC school). As MacLeod describes, on the one hand, the school contributes to education and development in Shashemene, on the other hand it is a breeding ground of conflicts and conflicting views about Rastafari (p. 210ff). Another organization that is mentioned is a rainwater-harvesting project run by the Ethiopian World Federation (EWF)<sup>5</sup> which “works to bridge the Rastafari and Ethiopian communities” and establishes connections (p. 215). Furthermore, MacLeod notes the Yawenta Children’s Center run by Sister Isheba Tafari which also brings together members from both communities and is basically perceived positively by Ethiopians. Finally she summarizes, with a discussion, the Rastafari development projects in Shashemene and **concludes** that “[t]hese initiatives allow them some control over the way they are perceived” (p. 226).

- <10> In chapter seven an outlook on the possibilities to solve the problems of Rastafaris’ integration and citizenship challenges outlines two strategies whose plausibilities are discussed. The first is the “ethnic identity argument” according to which Rastafari should become an “ethnic group” or “nation” under the “Right of Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” (p. 229). The second strategy which the author refers to as the “African Diaspora Strategy” would see Rastafari as part of the African Diaspora. Since the agenda of integrating the Diaspora has gained momentum in Ethiopia in the past years, especially in order to enable and enforce contributions to development in Africa, this could open up another possibility for Rastafari to attain legal recognition while at the same time prove to be challenging as nowadays, Rastafari as a global phenomenon comprises many members who are not descendants of Africans and thus cannot be regarded as members of the African Diaspora (p. 233ff).
- <11> The final chapter, the conclusion, briefly recalls the major objective of the book and places it into the current situation of Ethiopia. The author states that the discussions in this book have helped to “expand and illuminate our notion of diaspora” (p. 240) and to understand issues of migration, Diaspora and citizenship in this special case of repatriation. She also summarizes her work in more detail. Moreover she also presents an outlook on both, further research perspectives as well as possible further developments and implications for Rastafari in Ethiopia.
- <12> The book presents a very detailed and well-informed in-depth study of the perception of Rastafari by Ethiopians and the Rastafari-Ethiopian relationship. It explores the perception and relationship in arrange of different contexts and domains. At the same time, and as the author herself puts it in the conclusion, the book is “an incomplete and only partially coherent description of the Ethiopian perception of the repatriated Rastafari and the implications arising from their presence” (p. 245). This means that there are many more aspects of the Rastafari-Ethiopian relationship and the Ethiopian perception of Rastafari yet to explore and shed light on. For instance, taking into account the voices of those Ethiopians who live more closely together with Rastafari, not only through business and job connections but also for private reasons be it friendship or marriage may yield some other insights into the complex thematic.

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<sup>5</sup> The EWF is an organization founded in 1937 in the U.S. by Melaku Bayen.