

**Schnabel, Carsta 2017. Heimkehr aus Babylon. Rastafari repatriieren nach Äthiopien. Cologne: Köppe. ISBN: 978-3-89645-913-8, 621 pp., 4 maps, 45 photos, 1 figure, 1 b/w photograph, paperback, 39.80 €**

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**Review**

- <1> Carsta Schnabel's monograph *Returning from Babylon. Rastafari Repatriate to Ethiopia*<sup>1</sup> [translation by AH] offers in-depth insights into the lives of repatriated Rastafari in Shashemene, Ethiopia. The author, who has a background in anthropology and African studies, chose a non-academic, or rather non-theoretical approach to the community she studied. Throughout the book, she lets her interlocutors tell their stories in their own words, embedded in textual descriptions that not only shed light on the context of the respective individuals, institutions, situations, or places, but also reflect the author's own background and positioning. This approach, which could be regarded as a personal ethnography, offers an insightful perspective as it gives voice and agency to the people under study who represent themselves as actors of their lives and the community, yet within the framework set by the author.
- <2> The book is divided into four parts, including a preface by Kai S. Cortina and supplemented with references, a glossary, and an appendix. In the first part, which can be regarded as an introduction, Schnabel describes how she developed the project. She sheds light on several key themes and issues with regard to Rastafari and repatriation in Ethiopia and Shashemene in seven of chapters. The author describes her first contact with Rastafari in the Seychelles, how she developed her interest in learning more about Rastafari's identity practices and their quest for repatriation to Ethiopia. Schnabel's account of her initial travels to the East African country is enriched by detailed background information on the development and history of Rastafari, together with its transnational and Biblical ties. Her in-depth descriptions of encounters with Rastafari and Ethiopians during the initial stages of her study offer insights into her personal perceptions of the environment, the individuals and the cultural and spiritual background. In the first part of the book the author provides a few details on the land grant offered to members of the African diaspora by Haile Selassie in 1948. While this sheds some light on the relation between the Rastafari settlement and the land grant near Shashemene, a more detailed and systematic account of the land grant at the beginning of the book would have clarified the basis for settlement for readers who are not familiar with the history of repatriation to Ethiopia. Instead, the reader must assemble bits and pieces of information about the land grant in order to understand the history of the land grant.
- <3> The voluminous second part of the book introduces individual repatriates who were a key focus of Schnabel's research. The author organized her presentation of these people according to their organization membership, in particular the Ethiopian World Federation (EWF), an international organization founded in New York in 1937 by Malaku E. Bayen, and the so-called Rastafari houses or mansions, including the Twelve Tribes of Israel, the Nyabinghi, and

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<sup>1</sup> A common English term to represent members of the Rastafari movement is "Rastafarians". I have decided (following the author of the book) to stick to the term "Rastafari" for the movement as well as for the people, as this is more in line with emic perspectives of Rastafari themselves.

the Bobo Ashanti.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the author includes a chapter in which she introduces “independent Rastafari” which she places between the Nyabinghi and the Bobo Ashanti.

- <4> The Ethiopian World Federation is a large international organization, which is largely represented by Rastafari in Shashemene.<sup>3</sup> As the organization has been concerned with repatriation, and has provided financial support for moving to Ethiopia in the decades after land grant, some of the Rastafari introduced in the book are first generation repatriates, belonging to the group of the so-called “pioneers”, or the 12 families among whom the land grant was initially divided.
- <5> The largest and most international Rastafari organization is referred to as the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Due to their international standing and support, they were able to build several guest houses, buildings and the infamous headquarter located on the King's Highway, the main asphalt road leading from Addis Ababa to Shashemene. Repatriation is one of the aims of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, and the organization has provided financial support for numerous Rastafari to settle in Shashemene and continues to help Rastafari upon arrival (e.g. with their guest houses where members can stay). The organization has a strong Christian orientation and promotes daily Bible reading. They organize regular events and meetings, while promoting education, music, and art. Another of the group’s aims is the restoration of the Ethiopian monarchy, as they are closely related with Crown Prince Zara Yacob, grandson of Emperor Haile Selassie. The author interviewed numerous members of the Twelve Tribes who have repatriated from various countries (the Caribbean, Europe and New Zealand) between 1972 and 2011. After introducing the individual repatriates and their personal stories, Schnabel discusses aspects of the Twelve Tribes house, including the role of Prophet Gad, the founder of the organization, the Christian focus of the group, and the importance of the study of the Bible and other literature.
- <6> The next chapter of the second part concerns the Nyabinghi, another Rastafari group that is present in Shashemene. The Nyabinghi have erected a place for ceremonies and worship (“Ises”), known as the Tabernacle. In sections of the chapter concerned with the repatriates belonging to the Nyabinghi house, we learn that the Tabernacle was built by house members following the celebrations of Haile Selassie’s 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, which was a significant Rastafari event in Ethiopia celebrated with visitors from numerous other countries. Ras Mweya, a British-Jamaican member of the Nyabinghi house, was mainly concerned with building the Tabernacle that also hosts a small museum. The chapter introduces Rastafari from the United States, the Caribbean, Kenya and Sweden, such as Ras Kawintseb, a singer, songwriter, and music teacher from Trinidad who plays an important role in the Ethiopian reggae scene, and Ras Ibi, a herbalist and natural healer from Sweden. In this chapter, we also find an account of the author’s experiences during her visits to the Tabernacle. She sheds light on the Nyabinghi *Ises*, and the worshipping ceremonies of the Nyabinghi, with a special section on Nyabinghi drums and drumming style conveying members’ understandings of the symbolic fire and word, sound and power. The final sections of the chapter present detailed information on the role of Jesus Christ and Haile Selassie, especially the ways in which individual views differ from those of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The chapter also addresses the concept of the trinity of man, woman, and child in the Nyabinghi belief, as well as the historical background and development of the Nyabinghi order.
- <7> The following chapter, entitled “Independent Rasta” [translation by AH], introduces individual repatriates who do not see themselves as members of any of the Rastafari organiza-

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<sup>2</sup> All of these Rastafari organizations are also known by longer and alternate names. The names provided here are the short forms by which these “houses” are popularly known.

<sup>3</sup> However, as the author explains, the EWF is not a Rastafari organization. It was founded by non-Rastas and comprised members of the African (“Ethiopian”) Diaspora, although Rastafari became the largest constituent group of the EWF soon after its inception.

tions. However, as the author argues, these individuals' practices mostly resemble those of the Nyabinghi, especially with regard to their faith and *livity* [i.e. way of life], which why she decided to situate this chapter subsequent to the chapter on Nyabinghi. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the different views on God and Haile Selassie among those Rastafari who do not belong to any of the aforementioned organizations.

- <8> The last large chapter on individual repatriates focuses on the Bobo Ashanti. The Bobo Ashanti constitute the smallest group among the established Rastafari houses in Shashemene, whose members are mostly repatriates from Jamaica and their Ethiopian *Empresses* (wives). The author explains that there are two Bobo camps in Shashemene, the older one led by Priest Paul who repatriated in 1992, and the newer one established by Priest Kevin who came to Ethiopia much later. The urge to build a second Bobo camp emerged due to dissonances with regard to the complex *livity* of the Bobo Ashanti. Apart from introducing individual repatriates, the chapter also includes sections on Prince Emmanuel Edwards – the founder and spiritual leader of the organization – including his teachings, beliefs, and rituals among the Bobo Ashanti, such as the Sabbath ceremonies among others. The second part of the book ends with summaries on similarities in views on Babylon and Zion, on becoming Rasta, and on patterns of repatriation.
- <9> The third part of the book centers on Rastafari community, discussing the daily lives of repatriated Rastafari, including community life, cooperation, and internal support, as well as the respective backgrounds of repatriates coming from different parts of the world (Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean), and the children of repatriates born in Ethiopia. In this chapter, we learn more about the problematic issues, conflicts, and the daily struggles faced by Rastafari in Shashemene. Here, the reader encounters tensions between ideal and reality, which is suggested in the chapter title: “Community Spirit of the Repatriates – Ideal and Reality” [translation by AH].
- <10> The extensive fourth part of the book discusses a number of issues that situate the Rastafari community in the Ethiopian context. It deals with various aspects of cultural and social contacts and collaborations between repatriates and the local communities, as well as frictions and problems. Schnabel dedicates a few sections to the Land Grant as a contested space (by repatriates and Ethiopians) and also discusses the loss of land and the repatriates' struggles for obtaining legal status in the East African country. Moreover, this multifaceted chapter addresses both Ethiopian Rastafari (i.e. Ethiopians who adopted Rastafari beliefs and practices) and critical perceptions of repatriated Rastafari by Ethiopians. While the author structured this chapter according to specific topics, she draws on statements from interlocutors introduced in the second part of the book, thus enriching her observations with views of community members, both repatriates and Ethiopians. Schnabel describes various cultural and transcultural practices involving food, celebrations, and language, and focuses on social relations with particular attention to love and work. The fourth part of the book thus sheds light on various aspects of the complex life and challenges faced by Rastafari, as well as the contested identities that repatriated Rastafari must deal with in the space of Shashemene.
- <11> While Schnabel largely presents the views of her interlocutors through direct quotes, the book offers a personal account of the author's experiences. This is reflected in the writing style: The book is permeated by personal statements that shed light on the author's individual experiences, including ways she that perceived community members and life in Shashemene. Such revelations present interesting insights on how Rastafari practices can be perceived by visitors: on the one hand, they express the author's admiration for certain skills or accomplishments, for instance with regard to education, family life, or the construction of buildings; on the other hand, they also show how the author evaluates people, for instance with regard to language, for example “... from time to time, however, he lapses into a slang-murmur which I can hardly understand” (p. 56), or “his English, which shows no dialect-coloring, is pleasant” (p. 175) [translations by AH]. In this regard, it becomes very clear that

the book presents a view on Rastafari in Shashemene through Schnabel's eyes, who does not claim to provide an objective account of the community. The author also exerts influence in her representation of the community through the way she structured the book. It is true that the community in Shashemene is heterogeneous and characterized by a complex and multi-layered network (who lives with whom, who comes from where, who belongs to which group, who is the neighbor of whom, etc.). Furthermore, the author met various members of the community by establishing personal connections throughout the neighborhood, rather than through organizations or systematic grouping. Therefore, the author had to make decisions with regard to the order in which she introduces the repatriates, deciding to proceed according to organizations and institutions, and then adding chapters that shed further light on aspects that she chose to elaborate, such as views on God and religious beliefs, ceremonial practices, relations between different Rastafari groups, repatriates in the Ethiopian context, among others. Therefore, the structure, sequential arrangement, and the respective foci set by the author in various chapters have not directly been provided by members of the Rastafari community, or the local circumstances on the ground; rather, they represent themes and questions that appear meaningful to the authors who experienced community life and individual life stories as an outsider. On the other hand, Schnabel is very concerned to let repatriated Rastafari represent themselves in their own words and quotes extensively from her interviews with them. This gives the book a unique flavor as a collage made from her interlocutors viewpoints and her own experiences. This structure also challenges the reader's memory at times, as Schnabel brings in snippets from interviews that do not appear in chronological order, but according to the respective thematic that she discusses in particular sections (especially in the fourth part of the book).

<12> In conclusion, the book makes a valuable contribution to the history of repatriation to Ethiopia by focusing on biographical narratives and aspects of community life. While there are other publications on the Rastafari community in Shashemene (e.g. Bonacci 2010, 2015, MacLeod 2014), Schnabel's monograph constitutes the first comprehensive account of the community in German. The book is written for a broader readership beyond academia and will draw attention to those people who are interested in Rastafari and Reggae, Ethiopia, migration, intercultural communication, and biographies.

## References

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