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WINTER COUNTS AND COUP COUNTS: PLAINS PICTORIAL ART AS NATIVE HISTORY

by Candace S. Greene



[Editor's Note: Candace Greene, an ethnologist long interested in Plains Indian art, is coeditor of the forthcoming publication, *The Year the Stars Fell: Lakota Winter Counts at the Smithsonian*, available in 2007. She was also one of the developers of a new interactive online exhibit, *Lakota Winter Counts* (<http://wintercounts.si.edu>), which recently won a UN World Summit Award in e-culture, and is the subject of this issue's Teacher's Corner. At this website, viewers can explore these visual histories and hear how they are viewed by contemporary Lakota people.]

There is an old saying that history is written by the victor—meaning that the voices of the defeated are often muted in the historical record, overwritten by the perspectives of the more powerful. I would add a further caveat to this truism—history is written by the literate. During the course of the nineteenth century, all of the Indians of the Great Plains region of North America were either conquered or marginalized, and almost all were non-literate. It is therefore not surprising that their views were long omitted from the story of American history, which has traditionally relied heavily on written source material.

History is always being rewritten, however, as new information is discovered or biases in old information are recognized. Oral history is a major source that scholars have tapped to incorporate Native views into a wider American history, using both contemporary narratives of the past and Indian perspectives recorded at an earlier time. But there is another source of information that has not yet been used to its full poten-

tial—the extensive pictorial record that people of the Plains produced of their experiences, both immediate and of the more distant past.

Pictorial art, more or less realistic representations of people and things, was produced by many of the Native peoples of North America, but it was particularly well developed on the Plains, where people drew or painted thousands of narrative scenes illustrating activities and events in their lives. The oldest surviving examples are those scratched or painted on rock surfaces, but it seems reasonable to assume that rock art was just a particularly durable part of a wider tradition of painting on hides. Painted hides are well known from travelers' accounts from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and many have survived from the middle and the later years of the nineteenth century. Buffalo robes worn as outer garments were the most common site for the production and display of pictorial art until the herds were destroyed. Plains artists quickly found new media for their art: trade materials such as muslin and paper, which became available in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In painting as in most other aspects of life, there was a clear division between men's and women's work: representational, pictorial art was the province of men, while women embellished hides with geometric designs.

Categories of Pictorial Art

Plains pictorial art of the nineteenth century can be divided into three general categories: representations of supernatural beings, pictures depicting men's accomplishments, and pictorial art to create records. These categories superficially resemble each other but were





A buffalo robe painted with scenes of warfare. Tribe unknown, Upper Missouri River, ca. 1830-40. Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution, cat. no. 2130.

made for quite different purposes (Greene 2001:1043). Representations of supernatural beings, often appearing in human or animal form, were painted on the shields that men carried to war and sometimes on the tips of particularly fortunate families. These images speak to a history of spiritual experiences rather than a secular event. Pictures depicting men's accomplishments, primarily their "coups" (formally recognized deeds of war for which a man was honored by his community), were the most common usage of pictorial art, and many thousands of such coup scenes painted on hides or drawn on sheets of muslin or paper survive today. These are direct narratives of secular events and accord most closely with Western concepts of history as concerned with things that occurred in the "real world." Pictorial art also created records, using pictures in much the same way that literate societies use writing to keep lists, label maps, or leave a note regarding direction of travel. Among the most interesting of these records were the calendars, or winter counts, which tracked a series of years by recording one or two pictures of events for each year.

Narrative pictures and winter counts have enormous potential as sources of information about Plains Indian history, as recorded by members of those societ-

ies. Several tribes may have once produced winter counts, but most that have survived were made by the Lakota (also known as the Sioux) and the Kiowa. The Lakota were located west of the Missouri River during the nineteenth century, primarily in what is now North and South Dakota and adjacent areas of Montana and Nebraska. The Kiowa lived far south of the Lakota in a territory that centered around what is now western Oklahoma. Both groups produced a rich body of narrative pictorial art, and in both of their languages, the words they used for making drawings were the same as those they came to use to refer to Western systems of writing. For them, pictures and words were both visual records of information.

Lakota and Kiowa Winter Counts

Lakota pictorial history came to scholarly attention as early as 1877 when Garrick Mallery, an Army officer and avocational scholar, announced with excitement that he had discovered an object that recorded seventy years of Sioux history (Mallery 1877). It consisted of a series of simple pictographs painted on a buffalo hide, representing one event for each year, from 1800 to 1870. Lone Dog, a Yanktonai who had painted the hide, provided the explanations of the pictures that Mallery studied.



Drawing on paper by Sitting Bull, Hunkpapa Lakota, showing himself triumphing over a Crow enemy, 1882. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Ms. 1929B, 08590800.



Copy on muslin of the winter count kept by The Flame, a Sans Arc Lakota, covering the years 1786 to 1876. The count begins in the lower left corner and entries are arranged in serpentine form moving back and forth across the surface. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Ms. 2372, 08633800.

While pictorial hides with scenes of warfare were well known among the Plains Indians, this was the first time that a Western scholar had encountered a record that he could equate to a written historical text. Mallery made further inquiries among frontier associates, and he soon discovered that a number of such calendric records existed among the Lakota (Mallery 1886). The people called them *waniyetu wowapi* or “winter counts,” explaining that years were counted by winters, with each year named for a memorable event during the year that had been selected by community leaders. A designated winter count keeper was responsible for remembering these year names, as well as details of the event to which they referred and for keeping them all in order. These keepers painted simplified images referencing the year names on hides (and later other materials) as a mnemonic device to help them keep the year names in the proper sequence.

Several of the winter counts that Mallery examined shared many of the same year names, while others recorded different events. All of them, however, had one

entry in common, “The Year the Stars Fell.” This made it possible for Mallery to correlate them with each other and eventually to tie them to the Western calendar system by identifying that event as the Leonid meteor storm of November 1833, a remarkable display that was visible throughout much of North America.

The Smithsonian anthropologist James Mooney learned of the Kiowa calendars after he began work with the Kiowa in the 1890s. He used the native calendar system as the framework for organizing a history of the tribe, which he published under the title *Calendar History of the Kiowa Indians* (1898). Unlike the Lakota, the Kiowa recorded two events for each year, one for the summer months and one for winter. In the pictorial record, winter events were connected to a black bar. Summer events were distinguished by an accompanying picture of the Medicine Lodge where summer ceremonies were held, or merely a picture of the forked center pole of the lodge. Rare summers when the ceremony was not held were marked with a leafy tree.

Like the Lakota, the Kiowa used very simple pictures to suggest the name of the associated event. Interviewing many Kiowa people over a period of years, Mooney learned that there was an extensive narrative associated with each of the simple pictures and brief year names. He also found that the Kiowa used the year names regularly when discussing other events, which placed them in time by reference to named calendar entries. People knew the name of the year when they were born, and a man might say that he went on his first war party in “The Winter that Thunder Boy Was Killed,” or that he had last hunted in the region of Timber Hill Creek in “The Summer the Koitsenko Were Initiated.” When men met to pass the pipe and discuss triumphs or losses, the calendar keeper was often invited to attend. If any question arose regarding the date or sequencing of events, he could be called upon to resolve it, connecting events to other events, tying them firmly to the temporal graph of the pictorial record.

(continued)



Entries from two Lakota winter counts. Left, Storm of Stars Winter, Battiste Good, 1833-34. Right, Young Man with Smallpox Shot Himself, American Horse, 1784-85.

Many other Lakota and Kiowa calendars are now known. Some Lakota counts reach back to the early years of the eighteenth century, while the Kiowa record begins in 1828. Calendar keeping continued well into the twentieth century, gradually merging with and finally being replaced by written systems of recording knowledge. These records took many forms as they were copied over and over, passing from keeper to keeper or being duplicated for use in different communities. They were drawn on lengths of muslin cloth or on large sheets of brown wrapping paper. They were copied into books and re-copied onto old buffalo robes. The pictures may be placed in spiral or serpentine form on a large surface, or move in a straight line across a page or a strip of cloth. As literacy became more widespread, notes might be added to the pictures and occasionally lists of written year names were kept without any pictorial accompaniment.

Winter Counts as Historical Sources

Winter counts have fascinated scholars for decades, and they have been used for a remarkable range of studies. An astronomer has looked for occurrences of celestial phenomena in Plains calendars and has found records not only of widely documented lunar and solar eclipses but also of locally observable fireballs (Chamberlain 1984). Years when the Kiowa did not hold the usual Medicine Lodge ceremony have been correlated with drought episodes, documenting the influence of environment on annual cycles of population dispersal and coalescence (Levy 1961). The spread and duration of epidemic dis-

eases such as smallpox, cholera, and measles that devastated Plains populations have been tracked through winter counts (Thornton 1987). Calendars document where bands were at particular times, and they provide a unique record of shifting intertribal alliances and enmities. Lakota winter counts reveal a deep history with European traders long before Lewis and Clark visited these tribes.

Such studies have creatively mined the winter counts as indirect historical sources, records created for other purposes but which contain data of use to answer particular questions. But very few studies have used them effectively as direct historical documents, as native accounts of their own history. While historical information can be gleaned from these pictographic records, they do not conform well to Western concepts of an historical record. A list of year names offers a thin record of the past. Moreover, events that the keepers noted were not necessarily ones of major importance but often ones of purely local interest. Great and decisive battles were passed over in favor of recording "The Year that the Woman Was Struck by Lightning."



Entries from the Kiowa winter count kept by Little Bear. The figure on the right designates the Peninsula Medicine Lodge (summer 1839), with a line representing the Washita River bending around a picture of the Medicine Lodge. To the left, a picture of a man covered with spots drawn above a black bar indicates Smallpox Winter (1839-40).

Native View of History

Before we can fully use winter counts as a native record of a people's own history, we must seek to gain a better understanding of their concepts of history and its recording. James Mooney and later scholars who spent substantial time working with Kiowa and Lakota people learned that they held vast stores of historical information that was not noted in these records but was transmitted instead by oral tradition. These stories could be placed in time by reference to the years named in the winter counts. Winter counts, it seems, were not created to stand as independent records, but were integrally connected to a vast web of knowledge carried in memory and transmitted orally. The counts served as sequencing tools, not as major repositories of knowledge. Year names were indeed richer and more evocative than year numbers, but their purpose was much the same.

While some individuals such as winter count keepers no doubt had a particularly deep knowledge of historical events, such knowledge was not consolidated in a single person or a central repository. It was dispersed throughout the community, with various individuals carrying knowledge of importance to them. The maintenance of the winter counts as a central reference tool, however, provided a mechanism for this dispersed but overlapping knowledge base to be fitted together if one wanted. The continued existence of winter counts indicates that people did indeed want to fit these pieces together, to look for meaning in the patterns of the past. Counts were not independent histories but armatures around which a shared history could be constructed through social discourse. Their maintenance over such a long period of time suggests an active historical consciousness.

Coups Counts as Personal Narratives

The pictures in winter counts contrast strikingly with the scenes painted on hides or drawn on the pages of ledger books. These narrative scenes are more elaborately developed and contain a wealth of significant detail. They are full illustrations of events, rather than terse mnemonic devices. To those familiar with the conventions of Plains art, these drawings tell remarkably detailed stories. Individual men are identified by items of clothing and weaponry or by the designs painted on their shields. Key elements of hairstyle and dress signify the tribal affiliation

of opponents, and the nature of the encounter is made clear by flying arrows or bullets.

These pictures differ from the winter counts in content as well as in style. Warfare was a major focus of men's lives at this period of time and features prominently in both types of art but with an important difference. The narrative drawings illustrate the coups of particular men, their personal achievements. Winter counts record wars more generally or note deaths in battle, but they include almost no references to personal honors. The content of the two types of records is mutually exclusive. Why?

Public and Private Ownership of Knowledge

Plains societies such as the Kiowa valued independence highly, and many aspects of "tribal culture" were actually individually owned, ranging from beadwork designs to the right to perform religious ceremonies. Much knowledge was similarly viewed as private property and could not be publicly displayed without proper authority (Greene 1993). Men's heroic deeds, their coups, were seen in this light, and the right to tell of them, either verbally or visually, was closely guarded. The story of these events was a form of personal property, although an intangible one. Each man "owned" his heroic deeds and only he had the right to recount them publicly. Winter counts, on the other hand, were very public, a common reference work that might be cited by anyone. Events included there were necessarily in the public domain.

When men gathered to talk of their past, to share their achievements and tragedies, individuals of note were invited to tell their stories. Communal history, a rich mosaic built from the pieces contributed by many individuals, came together only at such times when people gathered to share it formally. The calendar provided the framework around which this history could be constructed, as each man knew the name of the year in which his particular event had occurred.

The two types of pictures, the winter counts and the more detailed narrative scenes, thus represent two types of historical knowledge, one public, one private. Both types were enduring visual representations of a much wider base of knowledge carried in memory, which again was divided into what might be reproduced orally by any member of the community, and what could only be told by authorized individuals.



The "Lakota Winter Counts" online exhibit is an access point to explore ten different winter counts in Smithsonian collections. Viewers can follow each count year by year, compare all the counts for any given year, or search by topic or keyword. Other sections of the website include background information on the Lakota and videos of contemporary Lakota people discussing their history (<http://wintercounts.si.edu>).

Today much of the historical knowledge once carried in oral tradition has been lost through a harsh history of death and oppression, yet a great deal has survived. Indian communities are actively engaged in reconstituting that knowledge, creating new forums in which to share it and redefining their history in their own terms. The visual record of winter counts and coup counts created by their forebearers is a rich and valued resource.

For Further Reading

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TEACHERS CORNER: USING PRIMARY SOURCES

by Anh-Thu Cunnion



[Editor's Note: This lesson plan for high school students was adapted from the author's *Teacher's Guide* created for the *Lakota Winter Count* website and authored by Cunnion. Winter counts are pictorial calendars or records used by the Plains Indians. Additional educational material is available for download on the Learning Resources page, <http://wintercounts.si.edu>]

Primary sources expose students to multiple perspectives on events and issues of the past and present. Incorporating winter counts into the classroom can encourage students to develop visual literacy skills, greater analytical abilities, and a deeper understanding about the Lakota people and their culture. By dealing directly with archival records, students engage in asking questions, thinking critically, and developing reasoned explanations and interpretations of events, issues, and peoples of the past and the present.

For this lesson, students will become "investigative historians" whose task is to use the winter counts to learn as much as they can about the Lakota people's history during the nineteenth century. Once divided into eight groups, students will be assigned one of the eight pictographic winter counts to use as their primary resource (do not use the "text only" winter counts for this exercise). Using the searchable database of winter count entries, students will look for general information about the community whose history is documented in the winter count. Students will report back to the class as a whole with their findings, citing individual entries as evidence and correlating the events mentioned in the winter count with events studied in their textbooks.

Curriculum Standards

Because each state has its own social studies curriculum standards, the National Council for the Social Studies' 1994 publication, *Expectation of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*, was used as a guideline for this lesson plan. In accordance with this set of standards, the lesson focuses on themes of Time, Continuity, and Change. At this level, students engage in "more sophisticated analysis and reconstruction of the past, examining

its relationship to the present and extrapolating into the future." Through the study of both primary and secondary resources, students integrate individual stories about people, events, and situations to form a more holistic conception, in which continuity and change are linked in time and across cultures. These skill objectives, or variations of them, are also found in several states' curriculum standards for high school students. The ability to use technology for research is also a skill required of many states' high school students.

Performance Objectives

By completing the lesson, students will be better able to:

- Identify, seek out and evaluate multiple perspectives of past events.
- Obtain historical data from alternative sources of historical documentation.
- Question issues of voice when evaluating historical sources.

Materials

- Computer Lab with at least eight computers equipped with high-speed internet.
- Image of a winter count, either for overhead projection or general distribution. Digital images of the winter counts can be downloaded off the Smithsonian's *Lakota Winter Count* online resource <<http://wintercounts.si.edu>>. (Images are located in the "Learning Resources" section, under the Teachers' Guide in "Downloadable Images.")
- Writing material.



Cloud Shield pictograph, 1807-08. Many people camped together and had many flags flying.

Procedure

1. Divide the students into eight equal groups and assign each group a different pictographic winter count (Lone Dog, Long Soldier, American Horse, Battiste Good, Cloud Shield, Flame, Rosebud, Swan). If the majority of groups have more than three students, create more groups and overlap assigned winter counts. Each group should have its own computer to use for research.

2. Discuss the difference between primary sources and secondary sources. Ask the students to identify examples of primary sources and secondary sources that they have encountered during their studies. The definitions used by the Smithsonian Archives are as follows:

a. **Primary sources** are documents or objects created as part of daily life—birth certificates, photographs, diaries, letters, etc.—or reports from people directly involved in the subject.

b. **Secondary sources** are documents that interpret, analyze, or synthesize information, usually produced by someone not directly involved in the subject. Examples include textbooks and obituaries.

3. Provide background information on the Lakota. Locate the region of the United States that the Lakota people lived, from prior to the eighteenth century to the present (South Dakota, North Dakota).

4. Introduce the winter counts. Show images of the winter counts, preferably a variety of them so that students can compare and contrast each winter count keeper's style and medium (students should not think that winter counts were only produced on buffalo skin or hide).

5. Explain how the Lakota used winter counts as mnemonic devices (memory aids) to recall their community's history.

a. Each pictograph represents a memorable event occurring during each year of the community's past.

b. One person, the keeper, was responsible for not only maintaining the winter count, but also for remembering the entire history recorded within it.

c. The oral history tradition survived the U.S. government's campaign to outlaw the expression of both American Indian culture and language.



Page from the Cloud Shield winter count. The winter count spans 1777-1878 and is stored at the Smithsonian's National Anthropological Archives.

d. Winter counts are among the few primary sources that remain that document American Indian history during the nineteenth century from a non-White perspective.

6. Next class (in the Computer Lab). Describe to the students how the winter counts are accessible through the searchable database on the Lakota Winter Count online exhibit (<http://wintercounts.si.edu>). As practice, ask them to zoom in, zoom out and rotate the pictures of the whole winter count; view individual entries; scroll across the database; access collector's notes for individual counts; and "collect" entries.

7. Inform the students that they will be doing historical investigation using their assigned winter count, in order to discover ideas about how the people represented in their count lived and what happened to them during the nineteenth century.

8. Instruct students to answer the following research questions using their assigned winter count as a reference and citing individual entries as evidence. Students may not be able to find evidence to complete some questions, but they should do their best to extrapolate as much information as they can. In this case, it is best for them to "make an educated guess" rather than to leave a section blank. However, students should be instructed that if they are unsure of an answer, they should make note of it (as any good scholar should). Students should work together but be asked to record their own answers.

Research Questions

1. Where did the Lakota live? Describe geographical landmarks (rivers, streams, hills, etc) as well as environs (wildlife, plants and animals).
2. How did the Lakota live? What did they eat? How did they get food?
3. What health issues did the Lakota face?
4. What other groups of people did the Lakota interact with? How did they interact? Were they friends or enemies? Did that relationship change over time?
5. When did the Lakota first meet White explorers and settlers? What types of interactions occurred between the two cultures?
6. What astronomical or meteorological phenomena are mentioned in the winter counts (star activity, extraordinary weather patterns)?

9. Next class (in the classroom). Ask students to name primary and secondary sources from their own lives. Then review winter counts with the class by asking students to explain why winter counts are considered primary sources. Have groups present their answers to the research questions to the class. Once all the groups have presented, work with the class as a whole to identify similarities and difference among the counts. Students should be taking notes on their classmates' findings as well as the class discussion. Issues that should be addressed are:

- a. What would account for the differences among the counts? The similarities?
- b. What events documented in the popular version of U.S. history are also documented in the winter counts?
- c. Why don't the winter counts seem as comprehensive as the textbook version of history? (Winter counts are not the definitive history of the Lakota community, but rather mnemonic devices used to support an oral history, which was more elaborate and detailed, containing not only the most memorable event, but other important events that are associated with the year.

Unfortunately, the oral history tradition suffered greatly from the U.S. government's campaign to suppress American Indian culture during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.)

10. Discuss winter counts as primary sources.
 - a. Whose perspective is represented in the winter counts? Who is the author?
 - b. What traditional sources could the students consult for additional information about the Lakota? Who is the author or authors?
 - c. What other types of primary sources could the students reference for information on nineteenth century U.S. history? Whose perspective do these sources represent?
 - d. Whose version of events is true? Can history be recounted through only one perspective?

Homework Assignment

Have students write an essay outlining (1) the history of the Lakota based on what they learned from the winter counts; (2) the history of the Lakota based on what they learned from their textbooks and other secondary sources; and (3) an evaluation of how the two histories relate and where the student would go to research the topic further.

Teacher Notes

Refer to historical and cultural content on Lakota Winter Count Web site (<http://wintercounts.si.edu>).

Evaluation Tools

Students will be evaluated on:

1. Data collection methods (the research questions).
2. Class participation and group discussion.
3. Assigned essay's ability to reflect the student's understanding of historical research.

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ETHIOPIA ARISEN: DISCOVERING RASTAFARI

by John P. Homiak



[Editor's Note: Anthropologist John Homiak has spent over 25 years conducting research on Rastafari communities in Jamaica, the smaller islands of the Eastern Caribbean, South Africa, Panama, the United States, and Ethiopia. The themes he addresses in this article will be the focus of the first in-depth exhibit on the Rastafari at the National Museum of Natural History, anticipated to open summer 2007. *Discovering Rastafari!*, co-curated by Homiak and Ella-Maria Ray of the Denver Museum of Nature & Science, will provide an opportunity to give voice to those architects of Rastafari culture who have sustained its vision of "equal rights and justice" for over 70 years. Homiak's long-term involvement with the Rasta Movement has shaped an extraordinary level of acceptance of his work among the Rastafari who are well-known for the guarded approach they take toward researchers. Today Rastafari born in Jamaica and elsewhere in the Caribbean, as well as in England and North America, reside in far-flung Rastafari communities in Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, Malawi, Benin, Senegal, and Ghana, among other nations.]

The Ritual Pilgrimage

Another annual cycle has passed. It is again Maskaram—Ethiopian new year—a time of celebration and renewal throughout the countryside. In observance of the occasion, two hundred or so pilgrims have already gathered at an appointed site where they are offering praises to the Lord composed upon the 'harps of David.' They are assembled within a specially prepared tabernacle above which flies the Ethiopian flag emblazoned with the Lion of Judah. Framed by a rising moon, the structure is indistinguishable from hundreds of rough-clad churches that punctuate the Ethiopian highlands.

Stragglers continue to trickle-in, funneling down the country road by every available means of conveyance—on foot, by truck, car, bicycle and even donkey. One venerable pilgrim, Ras Daniel, appears shortly after my own arrival. Barefoot, wielding a prophet's rod and adorned in the long flowing 'robes of Solomon', he is an imposing presence. Striking directly for the center of the tabernacle, the patriarch takes his place next to an assembly of ten or so drummers. There he quickly assumes the lead role, directing the

chants and exhorting his cohorts as they play a steady heartbeat rhythm that pulsates hypnotically into the night.

Guided by this small group of ritual adepts, the assembled congregation proceeds to explore the spiritual possibilities of a simple repetitive chant. In the resting beats between the choral lines, Daniel punctuates the performance with short phrases in Amharic (language of the dominate Ethiopian ethnic group)—"Satta amasagana la amlak Anbessa Heuda." As the chants go up, clouds of 'incense' drift skyward and envelope an opaque tapestry of red-gold-and-green and Judeo-Christian symbols that forms the backstage of the tabernacle. Behind this structure, two priests go about their duties. Their crowned heads, backlit by the ceremonial fire, appear as shadows alternately surreal and gorgon-like. Unexpectedly, the prevailing mood of solemnity is broken as one of the priests drives his staff into the core of the ceremonial fire sending a stream of embers and pyrotechnics into the night sky. The assembly responds with a spontaneous chorus of enthusiastic rolling ululations.

To the uninitiated, this scene might appear as an ancient ritual fitting Ethiopia's status as the only nation on the African continent never to have been colonized. The gathering described above, however, did not take place in the Ethiopian highlands—but on the island of Jamaica at a rural site surrounded by cane fields near the village of Hayes, Clarendon. I have attended thirty or more such events in Jamaica and elsewhere. The ceremony is a Rastafari gathering known as a *Nyahbinghi*, a ritual pilgrimage lasting for seven days during which the faithful gather to "praise Jah and chant down Babylon." *Jah* is simply a praise name for His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia—the historical figure whom Rastafari brethren and sistren praise as their God and King. 'Babylon' is their term of reference for the entire neocolonial power structure that enslaved, oppressed and marginalized peoples of African descent over the past 400 years.

The 'harps of David' are not actually biblical harps, but the African-derived *Nyahbinghi* drums, and the melodies are not psalms but evangelical Christian chants adapted to this African drumming style. The 'incense' rising around the tabernacle is neither frankin-



A rustic church in the Ethiopian highlands (left). Nyahbinghi tabernacle, Clarendon, Jamaica, 1988 (right).

cense nor myrrh, but columns of smoke from the ritual ganja pipes passed among male communicants. The ululations of the congregation are not the high-pitched tones associated with the soundscapes of East Africa, but cries of ‘lightening,’ ‘earthquake,’ and ‘judgement’ hurled by Rastas at the Babylonian world. And the ‘robes of Solomon’ are not the flowing silk and gold garments of the Ethiopian Orthodox priesthood, but massive dreadlocks that cascade around and envelope the head and shoulders of Rastafari Elders who conduct the ritual.

Despite its hybrid and invented symbolic elements, the Nyahbinghi ceremony is arguably the most African-oriented of Rastafari religious observances. Derived from the name of a Central African anti-colonial society and interpreted as “death to black and white oppressors,” the term *Nyahbinghi* entered the Jamaican vocabulary of protest in the early 1930s shortly after the birth of the movement. Since that time, it has been a watchword symbolizing determined resistance to the European colonial and neocolonial forces that are viewed through the prism of slavery, oppression and denigration. As the Rastafari movement evolved within a crucible of containment in colonial Jamaica, an array of

nested meanings have become attached to the concept of *Nyahbinghi*. Today, the term not only refers to the religious rituals described above, but to the drums played and chants sung at these events as well as to the loosely-knit organization (or “House” as it is termed) that sponsors these events and the council of Elders associated with this organization.

In Jamaica and in most parts of the Anglophone Caribbean, Nyahbinghi assemblies are typically island-wide events held six to seven times a year to commemorate important dates in a ritual calendar. Unlike reggae concerts and dances that are well-known expressions of the popular culture of Rastafari, these events are part of a guarded ‘backstage’ that have long been significant to the spiritual life of the Rastafari. Nyahbinghi gatherings do more than focus the worship of Emperor Haile Selassie, they periodically make communicants mindful of their self-declared status as Africans-in-exile, many of whom equate redemption with repatriation to Ethiopia. Like all rituals, they also serve a host of subsidiary purposes. They are an arena within which Elders—those esteemed for their ability to coin ideology—authenticate their charisma through inspired oratory. These rituals are



Repatriated Elders in the Rasta tabernacle in Shashemane, Ethiopia.

also the context for observing the most austere forms of *livity* (i.e. spiritual way of life), and a periodic means of establishing community. Finally, Nyahbinghi ritual is seen as a means to channel the forces of nature, thus serving as a ritual 'weapon' by which the Rastafari chastise backsliders and destroy the oppressors of black people. Little known outside Jamaica until perhaps the last two decades or so, these celebrations began to spread to other parts of the Caribbean in the early 1980s largely through the impact of Elders who traveled as emissaries of the culture.

From 'Yard' to 'Nation': Rastafari Globalization

The House of Nyahbinghi is not the only expression of Rastafari culture and spirituality. Although organized around a common core of concepts and symbols, the contemporary Rastafari movement is a large-scale social phenomenon that encapsulates a broad range of ideological and organizational diversity (Yawney & Homiak 2003). At least two other main organizations within the movement orient the lifeways of specific Rastafari—one

known as the Ethiopian African Black International Congress (or Boboshanti House) and the other the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Because of links between Nyahbinghi House and the origins of the movement, however, the latter is most frequently acknowledged as representing the revival core of Rastafari principles and spirituality.

A capsule history of the Nyahbinghi House might go something like this. In Jamaica, the aesthetic and performative elements of Nyahbinghi ceremonies evolved during the 'yard' and camp period of Rastafari in the legendary shanty towns of Kingston from the late 1940s through the 1960s. This was a period of widespread internal rural-to-urban migration that saw tens of thousands of Jamaicans, many of them young males from the Jamaican countryside (like Bob Marley and Peter Tosh), swell the ranks of the black poor in the Kingston ghettos. During these decades, the Rastafari were generally harassed and disparaged by members of the wider society. They also were routinely persecuted by the colonial authorities for claiming the right to use *ganja* (cannabis) as a basis of their worship and for their practice of wearing dreadlocks to publicly declare an African identity. A network of urban and rural yards (units of residence) became their haven. During these years, the Rastafari collectively agitated for repatriation to Africa—some seeing this as a divinely inspired event and other insisting that it was the responsibility of the colonial government to ensure their return to the continent.



Ras Bigga with ritual ganja pipe, 1985.



Artwork proclaiming repatriation to Ethiopia. Rastafari often speak of Marcus Garvey's Black Star shipping line as their means of return to Africa.

"Those who took us out of Africa are the same ones who must return us," many declared. Tensions between the movement and the wider society were exacerbated by these demands as well as associated cries for social justice.

By the late 1960s, elements of the Rastafari message came to play a major role in the fledgling Jamaican music industry that gave rise to a new music called "reggae." Due largely to Rastafari-inspired reggae during the early 1970s, the movement began to spread elsewhere in the Caribbean. At the same time, the international popularity of the music and its principal expounder, Bob Marley, resulted in widespread co-optation of the symbols and message of the Rastafari by Jamaica's two political parties. These developments transformed Nyahbinghi celebrations into a site of political struggle over both the definition of Rastafari identity and the goals of the movement. Nyahbinghi ceremonies became increasingly important as the ritual context within which Rastafari re-affirmed their African-Ethiopian identity, their symbolic separation from the wider society, and their uncompromising demands for repatriation to Ethiopia.

During the 1970s, reggae music and its principal 'messen-Jahs' inspired thousands of individuals to embrace a Rastafari identity throughout the Afro-Atlantic world. This was followed in the early 1980s by delegations of Nyahbinghi Elders who began to travel to Rastafari communities both inside and outside the Caribbean for the express purpose of formalizing the practice of Rastafari *livity* (i.e., spiritual way of life). Individuals of the generation of Elders who helped socialize Bob

Marley became part of a transnational culture linking Rastafari in North American and European cities like New York, Toronto, Miami, and London with Rastafari communities across the Caribbean, as well as emergent Rastafari communities on the African continent in Ghana, Benin, South Africa, Tanzania, and Ethiopia. The result is that the Rastafari now think of themselves as a nation or transnation, a far flung imagined community that is global in scope. It is increasingly in terms of the symbols and protocols of the Nyahbinghi ritual through which members of this geographically dispersed 'community' imagine themselves bound in mutual communion. At the Nyahbinghi ceremony described on page 1, one of the well-traveled Elders in attendance addressed the congregation asserting his understanding of Rastafari as a transnational community:

Beloved bredrin and sistrin, the great thing about Iyahbingh (Nyahbinghi) is that as I-nI (we) celebrate here this light (night), Nyahbinghi is being celebrated in



Rastafari procession in Shashemane, Ethiopia, July 23, 2002.

St. Lucia, in Grenada, in Antiqua, in Jamaica, in Shashemene (Ethiopia), in Cape Town, in London, and all over the earth...through the power of His Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie I.

Ethiopia Arisen: Preludes to Rastafari and the Black Transnation

Ask the average person on the street what they know about Rastafari, and they are likely to say “Bob Marley and reggae.” Most are aware that Rastafarians are well known for wearing dreadlocks and smoking ganja (cannabis) but they are likely to know little about the meanings of these practices in Rastafari religious belief. Outsiders would certainly be unaware of the fact that the herb marijuana (ganja) is considered sacred, that it is consumed communally in a ritual pipe known as a chalice, or that many Jamaican Rastafari refer to well developed locks and to the most potent forms of ganja by the same term—*kali* (a Hindi word appropriated from East Indian indentured laborers that came to Jamaica following Emancipation.) Few are aware that Rastafari is far deeper and older than Bob Marley and reggae music. And even in Jamaica—where Rastafari emerged—the vast majority of Jamaicans themselves have little to no idea about the role that Jamaican Elders have played in spreading Rastafari culture over the past 25 years. Nor are they likely to understand the complex interplay that exists between the popular culture and orthodox expressions of Rastafari as these have been disseminated globally.

Perhaps it is not surprising that a once-despised movement of social outcasts in the slums of a British Crown colony has become a world-wide movement organized around issues of social and racial justice. As the descendants of slaves in Jamaica, the Rastafari are part of the violent history of plantation slavery and its links to the origins of modern capitalism and the spread of European Christianity. Jamaican history, in particular, resulted in more slave rebellions than anywhere else in the Caribbean. At the same time, resistance to European control in Jamaica from the eighteenth century onward has been expressed primarily in religious terms. But most outsiders to Rastafari are still perplexed by the connection between the descendants of slaves in Jamaica and the last Emperor of Ethiopia and the land he ruled: “Why Haile Selassie?” and “Why Ethiopia?” many ask.

Caribbean Societies Examined

The answer to these queries—as to most questions about the Rastafari movement—is best explored in thinking about Jamaica and other Caribbean societies as artifacts of modernity. These post-plantation societies are not merely linked with European expansionism, they have long been strategically positioned between the influences of North America and Europe on the one hand, and Africa on the other. Caribbean societies are ones in which questions of identity, as well as conceptions of social justice and a moral order, have long been tied to the legacy of plantation slavery and to the tragic history of exploitation of peoples of African descent.

So why Ethiopia? The overwhelming majority of peoples of African descent in Jamaica came from West and Central Africa and many of the cultural elements woven into Rastafari culture reflect these connections. The answer to “why Ethiopia?” traces to English colonies in North America and to Christianity as it was interpreted by African American Christians as far back as at the eighteenth century. It was in the American colonies, after all, that a small group of educated black Christian converts—including figures like Phyllis Wheatley and Prince Hall—identified themselves with references to Ethiopians in the *Holy Bible* (Exodus 18:22-24; Psalms 68:32). Also in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, literary and cartographic practices frequently referred to the entire African continent as “Ethiopia.” English settlers applied the term to Africans upon their arrival in the New World, a practice that was similarly adopted by Africans themselves (Scott 1993: 14). Over time, Ethiopianism emerged with powerful redemptive associations. References in the *Bible* that depicted blacks in a dignified and human light were particularly valued, the most frequently cited of these being *Psalms* 63: 31: “Princes shall come out of Egypt, and Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.” These references to racial nationhood first reached Jamaica in the aftermath of the American Revolution as British loyalists left the North American colonies with their slaves for England’s Caribbean possessions. In 1784, a black preacher from Savanna, Georgia, by the name of George Liele, started the first Ethiopian African Baptist church in Kingston, Jamaica. Then, in March of 1896, reports circulated in the world press that drew the worldwide attention of black people to the modern country of Ethiopia, the only free and

sovereign nation on the African continent. Forces of the Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II had defeated a large invading army of Italians at Adwa in the Abyssinian highlands and thwarted Europeans in their attempt to extinguish the final symbol of African freedom.

Marcus Garvey's Impact

The Ethiopian victory at Adwa not only inspired a continent of Africans under the yoke of colonialism, it mobilized millions of Diasporic blacks in their own local struggles, especially in the Caribbean. Menelik's victory over an invading European power crystallized a new identification among Afro-Americans and Afro-West Indians with the actual country of Ethiopia such that virtually all Pan-Africanists of the day—from Albert Thorne and Edward Wilmot Blyden to W.E.B. Dubois and Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey—drew prominently upon Ethiopianist rhetoric in their writings and public speaking.

It was in association with Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)—the largest black movement in history and one that spanned four continents—that Ethiopianism acquired the trappings of ritual nationhood. The Garvey movement, which reached its height in Harlem during the 1920s, was characterized by florid oratory, rituals, and pageantry, all organized around the motif of nationhood. This included a constitution, a list of officers (including Garvey as the Provisional President of Africa), ministers, titles, and agencies assigned to perform quasi-governmental tasks. His functions and parades featured UNIA members in variegated military uniforms with swords, helmets, and plumed hats. Garvey drew prominently upon both religious and back-to-Africa themes with Ethiopianist associations. It was Garvey who argued for a unified religious faith for all black people and who encouraged his followers to view God in their own image—"through the spectacles of an Ethiopian."

Two events in the early 1930s transformed these precedents into the socioreligious movement that would become Rastafari. The first of these was the crowning of a young Ethiopian nobleman, Ras Tafari Makonnen, as Emperor Haile Selassie, monarch of Ethiopia, an event attended by representatives of the European powers and widely reported in the world press. The other was Mussolini's invasion in late 1935 of Ethiopia (a nominally Christian country from the fourth century). Most

accounts of the Jamaican genesis of Rastafari point to the relationship between the biblical literacy of the masses of Jamaicans and a few black preachers who submitted the events of the coronation and the Italian-Ethiopian War to biblical interpretation. Like Ethiopian monarchs before him, Ras Tafari claimed descent from the biblical union of Solomon and Sheba and assumed the titles in the Holy Bible reserved for the Second Coming of Christ.

The preaching of Emperor Selassie's identity as the Returned Christ converged with a militant form of Afro-Christian Revivalism that had already come to be cast in racial terms. This, in fact, grew out of the collective experience of tens of thousands of Jamaicans who—from the last quarter of the nineteenth century through the first decades of the twentieth century—had been drawn up in the cycles of labor migration throughout the wider Caribbean Basin and North America. These itinerant Jamaicans had gained a new perspective on the place of black people in the world order—one that placed them at the bottom and one in which they routinely suffered racial prejudice and insult. It was within this context that not only Garveyism, but a series of proto-Rastafari preachers (and their published pamphlets and tracts) gained currency as they circulated throughout the Afro-Atlantic world, from Colon, Panama to Kimberley, South Africa.

Equally important, and largely overlooked in treatments of the movement's origins, was the nature of news reportage and the associated visual media related to the spectacle of Haile Selassie's ascension to the Throne of David in Addis Ababa on November 2, 1930.



Marcus Garvey in ritual attire during a UNIA parade.



Emperor Haile Selassie on white charger (see Revelation 16). This image circulated during the Italian-Ethiopian war and has become enmeshed in the visual culture of Rastafari.

Virtually all of the European colonial powers as well as the United States and Japan sent representatives to the coronation where they paid honor to the world's only sovereign African ruler. American and European film companies were there to record the event, and Emperor Selassie ultimately appeared on the covers of all of the major European illustrated news publications in full coronation regalia. The press, in fact, objectified for African peoples the sight of European nobility bowing to an African counterpart whose own symbols of authority (crown, scepter, robes) were familiar (i.e., European in form). The *National Geographic* magazine (January 1931) ran a full 60-page spread on the coronation.

What evolved from this combination of texts and visual media was a re-ordered Christian cosmology that interpreted the collective experiences of African-Jamaicans. This was a cosmology shaped by an opposition between the domains of Zion and Babylon—both of which are seen to entail an alliance between church-and-state—holy and unholy, respectively. Zion (Ethiopia/Africa), identified with the theocratic state ruled by

Emperor Selassie, is regarded as a sacred and inviolate domain. By contrast, Babylon (Europe/America) is identified as the corrupt neocolonial and imperialist sphere sustained in its spiritual and temporal dimensions through an unholy alliance between church-and-state. Just as Selassie is the living and incarnate God of Zion, so the Pope of Rome is seen as the embodiment of the Anti-Christ and ruler of Babylon (see Homiak 1987; 1999).

The Challenges to Representing Rasta-Far-Eye in the Twenty-First Century

Working with and moving amongst Rastafari is not for the faint of heart. Within the interpretive community of speakers that constitutes the movement, there is a generalized understanding that “*every tub haffa siddong ‘pon its own bottom*” (i.e., that each individual stands to be judged on his own words and deeds). Rastafari apply this principle to themselves as well as to outsiders and especially to researchers to whom they have always taken a guarded approach irrespective of their race, color, or class. Suffice it to note here that I was fortunate to work with Elders who had seen and heard both Marcus Garvey and the founders of the movement preach in the 1930s and 1940s. In their generous spirit, these Elders provided me with the cultural competency to ‘move amongst’ other Rastafari brethren and sistren.

It is notable that there has never been a single individual in the history of the movement authorized to speak on behalf of the Rastafari as a whole. With a few notable exceptions, Rastafari has remained a diffuse, decentralized movement structured in terms of egalitarian principles. Within the House of Nyahbinghi, for example, it remains the case that male adherents assert their own individual prophetic ‘commissions’ based on the personal visionary relationship that each claims with Jah Rastafari. This relationship is expressed in manifold ways. The most common is through the use of Rastafari speech and the term *I-n-I*. The Rastafari use this term rather than the phrase “you-and-me” to express their understanding of all communicants as a single spiritual corporate body. But the phrase also expresses the spiritual and mystic inter-dwelling of God-in-man as well as the individuality of each communicant (Homiak 1987). This gives rise to a broad range of contending voices, ones that in any given situation call into question who speaks for Rastafari and with what authority. And herein rests one of the

most significant challenges to representing Rastafari whether in publications or exhibition form.

In its contemporary global context, the Rastafari 'nation' (its egalitarian ethos notwithstanding) is heterogeneous not only in terms of race and gender, but in terms of class, ideological orientations, ethnicity and national boundaries (if not national origins). Although the Rastafari movement developed as a response to the dominant white European colonial order, it is now the case that asymmetries of power exist within the ranks of the Rastafari themselves that tend to shape the workings of authority within local and global spheres of influence. Since the mid-1980s, the international Rastafari community has evolved its own emerging intelligentsia. The global or transnational context in which the movement operates is one in which some individuals are increasingly free to travel and speak on behalf of the movement while others remain 'yard bound.' It is also the case that Jamaican Rastafari, based on the claim that Jamaica is the birthplace of the movement, frequently mount something of a rear guard action in asserting their place as 'first among equals' relative to Rastafari elsewhere. Surprisingly, none of these internal factors have been the subject of critical scholarship to date (see, however, Homiak 2005).

All of these factors—related to what one might call the positioning of 'the voice'—constitute major challenges to mounting an exhibit on Rastafari in the twenty-first century. Because Rastafari (wherever they may be) have experienced oppressive treatment from the state, their contending voices also raise challenges about how to adequately cover the enormous sacrifice and struggle that has been part of the collective Rastafari experience. Nearly all of the Elders I have known over the years have served prison and jail terms (mostly for marijuana possession) and have had to find ways to support themselves and their families outside the framework of the formal economy. But there is a danger in representing this only as "the Jamaican" experience. Rastafari in the Eastern Caribbean have suffered equally. In Grenada, it is little known that many of the first members of the New Jewel Movement, which brought Maurice Bishop to power, were Rastafari and were subsequently harassed and killed by those who ousted Bishop. Similarly, in Dominica, those who wore dreadlocks were—under a law called the "Dread Act"—subject to being shot on

sight during the 1970s. Similar testimony of persecution and sacrifice exists for South Africa. Beyond that, there are challenges to incorporating the voices and story of Rastafari women who, in a movement with strong patriarchal values, have traditionally had a low profile. Finally, there is the challenge of striking a balance in giving voice to the varied 'Houses' within the movement, each with its own somewhat distinctive ideology and forms of social practice.

Conclusion: 'Half the Story has Never Been Told'

Rastafari has long been a maligned and poorly understood movement. The Rastafari themselves are fond of pointing out that "No one knows how Rastafari has survived—I-n-I are here today against all odds." The answer they assert is in "the half of the story that has never been told." From an intellectual perspective, various questions arise. How is it that a movement whose first preachers were all sent either to the mental asylum or imprisoned for sedition has now become woven into the fabric of Jamaican life and Jamaican nationalism? How is it that a movement without any formal positions of authority or any formal organizational structures has managed to spread not only throughout the Caribbean, but around the world? What actually serves to constitute culture and community among such a far-flung and differentiated group of communicants? How does a movement that began among peoples of African descent, and, which is organized around African symbols, incorporate and accommodate people of different races—including those historically associated with their white oppressors? And, for that matter, how do Rastafari construct their notions of race? The answer to these and other questions is not merely of interest to understanding Rastafari but has relevance to contemporary issues in anthropology associated with concepts of diaspora, globalization, cultural hybridity, and concepts of place and belonging.

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(continued)



Jake Homiak (center) with Nyahbinghi Elders Ras Irie Ions (left) and Bongo Shephan at the First Rastafari Hispanic Summit, Panama City, Panama.

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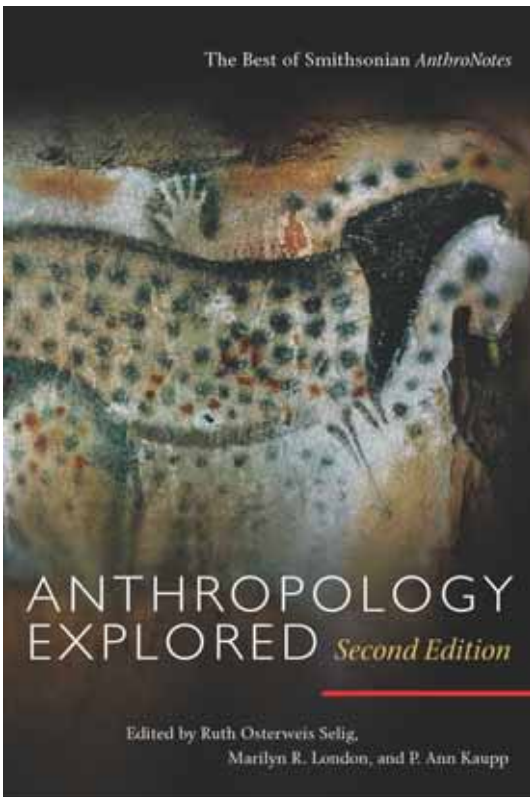
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