

# Praying for Rain? A Rastafari Perspective from Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

*Climate change remains one of the most enigmatic questions that humanity urgently needs to address. Emanating from the ecological crisis, climate change threatens the survival of some species (including humanity) and the depletion of natural resources. The situation is deplorable, but arguably religion/spirituality can contribute to meeting the challenge. This study explores a Zimbabwean Rastafari perspective on praying for rain against the backdrop of climate change. The article posits that praying for rain is integral to Rastafari “livity” and liturgical life. Among other pertinent questions, the study asks: What is the value Rastafarians accord to nature? How do Rastafarians pray for rain? Do they take responsibility for the environment? The research concludes that Rastafarians operate as post-20th-century Nazarenes, where prayer is a practical and tangible manifestation of work that is crucial to living harmoniously with nature. Rastafari “green philosophy” is a practical spiritual consciousness that decisively complements global efforts of shared responsibility for nature in the context of the climate change crisis.*

*“Let the hungry be fed, the naked clothed, the sick nourished; the aged protected, and the infants cared for.”*

– The Royal Ethiopian Creed<sup>1</sup>

The Ethiopian, or Nyahbinghi, Creed quoted above is central in Rastafari theology, ethics, lifestyle, philosophy, and spirituality. This is fascinating in the context of how Rastafari, a religio-political and cultural movement with an Afrocentric ideological

<sup>1</sup> See Iyoel Jabulani Tafari, *A Rastafarian View of Marcus Mosiah Garvey: Patriarch-Prophet-Philosopher* (Chicago, Ill.: Frontline Distribution International, 1995), 24.

worldview, is perceived in society. Rastafari has been regarded as a “song and a riddle, a song unto the sky and a riddle unto the earth.”<sup>2</sup> This observation by Tafari has been echoed by Yasus Afari in the Jamaican context: “This epic movement of the millennium has been grossly misunderstood, as a consequence, The RASTAFARIANS are the most exploited, underutilized, underdeveloped, misused and abused natural resource at the disposal of the Jamaican-Caribbean community.”<sup>3</sup> Despite this negative rating, Rastafari identity and consciousness have gained widespread recognition. Among other things, Rastafari *ital* (natural) food and their environmental ethic make them a force to reckon with. In recent years, Nyahbinghi Rastafarians gathered in Marondera to pray for peace in Zimbabwe,<sup>4</sup> publicly demonstrating the Rastafari contribution through their peaceful and shared One Love ethos.

In spite of the prayer for peace referred to above, Rastafari is an oft-forgotten and misunderstood player among religions, one that is sometimes not taken seriously or engaged with in secular forums and inter-religious dialogues, and particularly debates dealing with climate change. It is within this context that this contribution seeks to explore a Zimbabwean Rastafari perspective on praying for rain in the framework of climate change discourse. The article posits that praying for rain is integral to Rastafari *livity* and liturgical life. I further argue that Rastafari “green philosophy” complements global efforts to promote shared responsibility for nature in the context of the climate change crisis. Among other pertinent questions, this contribution asks: What is the nature of prayers in Rastafari? To whom, where, how, and how often do Rastafarians pray for rain? What value does Rastafari accord nature? Do Rastafarians take responsibility for the environment? Before delving into these questions, it is important to provide the kaleidoscope of Rastafari history, beliefs, and practices.

## Rastafari History, Beliefs, and Practices

In its history, the emergence of Rastafari is generally traced to the Caribbean island of Jamaica.<sup>5</sup> It arose partly due to the inspiration and influence of Marcus Garvey, an

<sup>2</sup> Iyoel Jabulani Tafari, “The Rastafari – Successors of Marcus Garvey,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 26:4 (1980), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Yasus Afari, *Overstanding Rastafari: Jamaica's Gift to the World* (Jamaica: Senya-Cum, 2007), n.p.

<sup>4</sup> Emilia Zindi, “Rastafarians Pray for Peace” *The Sunday Mail* (27 November – 3 December 2011), 2.

<sup>5</sup> The origin of Rastafari according to Ras Alexander Munyuki, an Elder from Cherutombo Nyahbinghi Rastafari House in Marondera, is Ethiopia and not Jamaica. In his words, “This [Rastafari] is the true religion which is from Ethiopia and not Jamaica.” See Zindi, “Rastafarians Pray for Peace,” 2. This position is not inconsistent with Rastafarian views as long as they acknowledge the divinity of Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia as the inspiration behind the Rastafari movement.

early-20th-century Jamaican black nationalist and evangelical preacher.<sup>6</sup> The original Rastafarians were largely black ex-slaves occupying the lowest strata of Jamaican society and influenced by Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement, which was meant to instil black pride.<sup>7</sup> Besides Garveyism, Rastafari was inspired by the ideological pillars of Pan-Africanism and Ethiopianism. Indeed, the coronation of Haile Selassie I in 1930 as Negus of Ethiopia – as the 225th leader in an unbroken succession of Ethiopian kings from the Queen of Sheba, who bore King Solomon's son – was significant in Rasta theology since it fulfilled a biblical prophecy and Garvey's words. The followers of Garvey had been told to look to Africa for the coronation of a black king who would redeem the black people suffering from oppression.<sup>8</sup>

Rastafari spread beyond Jamaica to become an international movement that also found root in African countries, including Zimbabwe, mainly through Rastafari art, music, poetry, and philosophy. The debate on the emergence of Rastafari in Zimbabwe is inconclusive, as some trace it to the pre-independence period when the power of reggae music, particularly Bob Marley's songs and messages, influenced Zimbabwean freedom fighters. Others place the development of Rastafari in post-colonial Zimbabwe, triggered by the euphoria of independence and the historic performance of Bob Marley at Rufaro Stadium in Harare in April 1980.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, today Zimbabwe is host to Rastas belonging to different varieties of groups, such as Nyahbinghi, Bobo Shanti, and Twelve Tribes. For the purposes of this article, I will focus in the following paragraphs on the beliefs and practices of Nyahbinghi Rastafari Houses in Zimbabwe – such as Chaminuka, Marcus Garvey, Marondera, Cherutombo, and Khami Army – mainly following Sibanda,<sup>10</sup> except where indicated otherwise.

### The divinity of Haile Selassie I

The Nyahbinghi Order recognizes the divinity of Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia, whom they declare as the almighty representing the whole Trinity of the Father, the Son, and

<sup>6</sup> Fortune Sibanda, "The Impact of Rastafari Ecological Ethic in Zimbabwe: A Contemporary Discourse," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 5:3 (2012), 66.

<sup>7</sup> Ivor Morrish, *Obeah, Christ and the Rastaman: Jamaica and Its Religion* (Cambridge, U.K.: James Clarke, 1982).

<sup>8</sup> John Adebayo Afolabi, "By the Rivers of Babylon: The Bondage Motif in the Performing Arts, Life and Aesthetics of Rastafarians," *Tinabantu: Journal of African National Affairs* 2:1 (2004), 37; see also Sibanda, "The Impact of Rastafari Ecological Ethic," 66.

<sup>9</sup> Sibanda, "The Impact of Rastafari Ecological Ethic," 67.

<sup>10</sup> See Fortune Sibanda, "Legalize It! Re-thinking Rastafari-State Relations in Postcolonial Zimbabwe," in *Law and Religion in Africa: The Quest for the Common Good in Pluralistic Societies*, ed. P. Coertzen, M. Christian Green and L. Hansen (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2015a), 189–90.

the Holy Spirit. They regard him as the head creator and black messiah, Christ in his kingly character, Jah Rastafari.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Bible as a holy book**

The rules of conduct of the Rastas are based on the Bible. On this basis, the members of Nyahbinghi identified themselves as Israelites and are much influenced by the Old Testament. Rastas claim that the Bible requires reinterpretation because Christians distorted it. Some of their dietary practices and teachings on the use of *ganja* and cultivation of locks are biblically based.

### **Use of *ganja* as a holy herb**

Rastas consider *ganja* as a natural sacred herb, known by various names such as *marijuana*, *mbanje*, weed, grass, and cannabis, which are used interchangeably in this study. Afari says that the herb has multiple roles that include “medicinal, nutritional, pharmaceutical, industrial, biological, cosmetological, cosmological, spiritual, intellectual and therapeutic properties for the benefit of all humanity.”<sup>12</sup> When Rastas are praying for rain, *ganja* has a spiritual and ritualistic use as *ishence* (incense).

### **Dreadlocks**

Rastas consider dreadlocks as a natural hairstyle that is a distinctive marker of black pride and identity, challenging colonial legacies that placed blacks in an inferior position to whites.<sup>13</sup> Dreadlocks are part of the Nazarene tradition, biblically inclined following the Nazarite vow (Lev. 21:5; Num. 6:5), and an emulation of the *dreaded* lion’s mane. On this basis, Rastas refer to themselves as lions.

### **Ital food and diet**

Rastafari diet and food follow the biblical teaching that avoids the eating of blood. On this basis, most Rastas avoid eating meat and follow a vegetarian diet of *ital* food. The vegetarian diet of Nyahbinghi is determined by Leviticus 11:41–42. The Nazarite vow also forbids Nyahbinghi Rastas from eating grapes, whether dried or moist, or anything else that grows on the vine trees (Num. 6:3–4).

### **Rasta music**

Music for the Rastas is called “Jah music.” This includes the reggae music popularized by Bob Marley as well as Nyahbinghi music, which are important vehicles for propagating their messages of peace, love, unity, justice, tolerance, and harmony. “Jah music” is also useful when praying for rain.

<sup>11</sup> Afolabi, “By the Rivers of Babylon,” 95.

<sup>12</sup> Afari, *Overstanding Rastafari*, 89.

<sup>13</sup> Ezra Chitando and Anna Chitando, “Black Female Identities in Harare: The Case of Young Women with Dreadlocks,” *Zambezia* 31:1&2 (2004), 1.

### **Rasta colours**

Rastas respect the symbolic colours of red, gold, and green as vital to their *livity*. These colours are based on the Ethiopian flag, a country regarded as a “promised land” and “Zion” for Rastas. They are colours of African liberation movements. Within the climate change debates, the colour green is significant with regard to Rastafari green philosophy, vegetarian diet, growth, and life in general.

### **Dread-talk**

This is a Rasta language developed as a creative venture for surviving in an oppressive environment that Rastas regarded as a “Babylon” system. This makes Rastafari a counter-cultural movement. Dread-talk is spread through word, sound, and power.

## **Focus of Faith, Concept of Prayer, and Nyahbinghi *Grounation* in Rastafari**

The focus of faith for Nyahbinghi Rastafari communities is His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie I, whom they worship and serve as the most high and the creator. Worship in Rastafari is an integral lifelong, day-to-day, and eternal devotion.<sup>14</sup> As Afari further notes, Rastafarians regard themselves as “the spiritual, mental and intellectual children of The Most High, His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Haile Selassie I, JAH RASTAFARI”<sup>15</sup> – indicating that Haile Selassie of Ethiopia is held in reverence, honoured, served, and worshipped by Rastas. Marcus Garvey encouraged blacks to Africanize God and contextualize the solutions to their problems. Worship is thus a functional activity that constitutes the Rastafari way of life.

In their concept of prayer, Rastafarians are aware that a person’s entire life is a devotion and service to the purpose for which they were created. In prayer and meditation, Rastas embrace a spirituality that connects them to The Most High, who is served through thoughts, words, and deeds.<sup>16</sup> Rastafari prayers are a mixture of adoration, giving thanks and ISES (praises), and petitions to The Most High. Rastas also pray for the protection of life and health. Health is desired for humans, animals, crops, society, and the natural order. Notably, since “life is a valuable gift, it is clear that any means by which it can be saved or prolonged when it is threatened is of paramount importance to the

<sup>14</sup> Afari, *Overstanding Rastafari*, 86.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

African.”<sup>17</sup> This is evident among Rastas, as they seek spiritual growth and development. What C. C. Okorochoa observed about some ethnic groups in West Africa is applicable to the Nyahbinghi Rastafari communities: They “pray not only for the health of the young and the old, the increase of their family, and the health of their animals, but also for the health of the natural order: that the rains may fall peacefully, that an old year may pass away uneventfully and usher in a peaceful new year.”<sup>18</sup> Among Rastas, prayer entails acknowledging and invoking the presence of The Most High, Jah Rastafari.

Besides Rastafari daily devotion to prayer, thanksgiving, and praises, also vital in their *livity* are special events, ceremonies, occasions, and moments.<sup>19</sup> Rastafari prayers for rain can be conceived in the context of special events and ceremonies. During Nyahbinghi *grounation*,<sup>20</sup> a bonfire is lit and elders and warriors offer praise in chanting, reasoning, prayers, and meditation through poems, songs, psalms, as well as utterances of His Imperial Majesty and testimonies.<sup>21</sup> Some of these utterances give guidance to Rastas on matters of spiritual, social, and political significance. Nyahbinghi Rastafari congregations in Zimbabwe usually last from a day to up to seven days. Despite the vitality of reggae music, Rasta music was traditionally Nyahbinghi music, characterized by drumming, chanting, and dancing in a *binghi* or tabernacle.

Nyahbinghi drumming, chanting, and dancing constituted the trinity or trilogy of “word, sound, and power” that united people spiritually and physically through the drum language. In an interview, Ras Trevor Hall explained the importance of music:

What is played on the drum becomes like a language that speaks to people. It vibrates within the *bodiment* (body). The *binghi* drumming works and vibrates as one with the natural heart beat complemented by chanted words. The sound of music attracts everyone before the lyrics, which can entrance one into dance. Dance, physically translates the sound of music to a spiritual mode.<sup>22</sup>

The power of word is realized through the reading of the relevant psalms at the beginning and before sealing the Nyahbinghi meetings. When Rastas begin their Nyahbinghi sessions, they drum, chant, dance, and read specific psalms as the fire is lit in the Fire

<sup>17</sup> C. C. Okorochoa, *The Meaning of Religious Conversion in Africa: The Case of the Igbo in Nigeria* (Aldershot, U.K.: Avebury, 1997), 67.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Afari, *Overstanding Rastafari*, 88.

<sup>20</sup> Nyahbinghi *grounation* is also known in Rasta diction as *groundation* or *issemble* (assembly).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Ras Jabulani Trevor Hall, Rastafari Elder, Waterfalls, 30 December 2012.

Key, and this fire is kept burning until the end of the *binghi* session. Similarly, the Hebrew tradition instructed that “the fire on the altar must be kept burning, it must not go out” (Lev. 6:12). Fire in Nyahbinghi has a symbolic and utilitarian significance. It represents a process of purification and cleansing of evil forces among members and reminds them of the judgment of The Most High. During worship, prayer, and meditation, Rastas utilize *ganja* as incense and herbal sacrament shared communally through the Rastafarian chalice.<sup>23</sup> The ritual significance of the chalice pot is noted in the following explanation by Iata Farika Birhan:

The chalice, the Rastafari *ganja* pipe, passes from bredrin’s hand to bredrin’s hand around the alter [sic] table, ritually activating the symbols of earth, air, water, and fire, the primal forces of Creation. Through the Word, Sound, and Power of the Nyahbinghi, the Faithful are united with the Godhead in mystic telepathy to chant down Babylon, to scourge the Earth of wickedness and restore the natural order of Creation to its original state of perfection.<sup>24</sup>

The chalice pot can be prepared for particular events, such as in prayers for peace or for rain.

## The Place of Water in Rastafari Worldview

Most religions, Rastafari included, regard water to be of central importance to all aspects of human life. Indeed, water is pivotal to survival itself, given that without it, plant and animal life would be impossible. The very existence of life depends on clean water.<sup>25</sup> Water is a central component that controls the world’s weather and climate. This is the foundation of the adage that “water is life.”<sup>26</sup> Water can be transformed and retransformed from solid, to liquid, to gas, and vice versa,<sup>27</sup> showing that the hydrologic cycle is renewable. But this has become unpredictable because of global warming. Like other religions of the world, Rastas see water as a sign of birth and death. It sustains and makes new life possible – both underground and on the surface. In addition, water possesses a purifying force in rituals, allowing the attainment of spiritual purity. Therefore, water symbolizes purity, clarity, and calmness. Alongside fire, ritual purity is

<sup>23</sup> Afari, *Overstanding Rastafari*, 90.

<sup>24</sup> Iata Farika Birhan, “Head Creator of the Nyahbinghi Order,” *JAHUG* 2:2 (1992), 7.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen E. Draper, *Sharing Water in Times of Scarcity: Guidelines and Procedures in the Development of Effective Agreements to Share Water across Political Boundaries* (Reston: ASCE, 2006), 2.

<sup>26</sup> Anne Hellum, Patricia Kameri-Mbote and Barbara Van Koppen, eds, *Water Is Life: Women’s Human Rights in National and Local Water Governance in Southern and Eastern Africa* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> Afari, *Overstanding Rastafari*, 78.

also achieved through water. Water and fire are thus important components of the Rastafarian chalice. As Afari explains, the chalice “encompasses the solid (the herbs), liquid (the water used as a coolant and filter) and gas (the fumes and smoke).”<sup>28</sup> Thus, water is an element in the physical and spiritual healing of the nations. Rastas also recognize that water is useful for food production in rain-fed or irrigable agriculture, to support good public health, recreation, and a sustainable environment. In light of the water demands in human life, Rastas pray for rain and also advocate for water resource sustainability.

The centrality of water in Rastafari can be understood through an anecdote presented by Man Soul Jah,<sup>29</sup> a Rastafari elder, involving Emperor Haile Selassie I and Mengistu Haile Mariam. Man Soul Jah said that Colonel Mengistu, the son of a cook, was raised by Haile Selassie I, a monarch who introduced constitutional government in Ethiopia. Mengistu challenged Selassie to abdicate in 1974 by leading a military coup that resulted in the establishment of a “Dergue” after 1975. For Man Soul Jah, Mengistu’s committing of this crime marked the beginning of the droughts and famines in Ethiopia – those referred to by musical artists such as Bob Geldof from the UK in a series of concerts under Band Aid.<sup>30</sup> Mengistu’s defeat in 1991 saw him seeking asylum in Harare, Zimbabwe, and it was at that same time that normal rains resumed in Ethiopia, revealing the divinity of Selassie I. According to Man Soul Jah, the resumption of the rains, which had ceased for over a decade, signified that it was a spiritual issue: the evil committed by Mengistu was eventually overcome by the good when Jah cooled and blessed Ethiopia, land of the God King. We can thus better understand the Zimbabwean Rastafarian perspective on praying for rain through this anecdote.

## Praying for Rain: Rastafari Perspectives from Zimbabwe

Praying for rain is an important celebration date among the annual commemorations that Rastafarians observe in Zimbabwe. Along with the dates dedicated to praying for rain, Nyahbinghi Rastas in Zimbabwe have identified other important times observed

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Man Soul Jah, Nyahbinghi Rastafari Elder, Gweru, 23 May 2017.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, “Band Aid 1984: Fighting the Ethiopian Famine,” [YouTube video], [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLhA\\_TB0CPCV3jGWloFG7vfnVB8XMybami](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLhA_TB0CPCV3jGWloFG7vfnVB8XMybami). Band Aid released a charity single entitled “Do They Know It’s Christmas?” in response to the Ethiopian famine of 1984 that featured various artists. See also Tafari, *A Rastafari View of Marcus Mosiah Garvey*, 8, which refers to the “Land of Africa” famine-relief record of 1984 by the third-world band and Rita Marley, who collaborated with reggae groups, singers, and Dub Poets in Jamaica and whose proceeds went to help the famine-relief drive in Ethiopia.



on the Rastafari calendar.<sup>31</sup> These are times when Rastas gather in celebration characterized by Nyahbinghi *grounation*, as when praying for rain.

### When do Rastas pray for rain?

Ras Bondomali of Marondera Nyahbinghi House testified that Rastas pray for rain during the Ethiopian New Year.<sup>32</sup> He explained that the Ethiopian calendar has 13 months in a year, beginning on 11 September. The last, or 13th, month has six days. Between the 12th and the 13th month is when Rastas fast for rain and a new beginning for all of life and creation. Rastafarians have a festival every year on 11 September to thank Jah for the rains and new creation. The Rasta elder added, “JAH blesses with new life evidenced by *pfumvudza* (the sprouting of trees and vegetation, marking the beginning of spring). When it is a leap year Rastas *Selabbrate* (celebrate) to mark the beginning of a new year on 12 September. They fast during the last three to seven days of the year and break that fast on the New Year.”<sup>33</sup>

Rasta prayers for rain are therefore guided by their calendar. This period coincides with the prayers for rain in Christian churches and African indigenous religions, where, in the latter case, *mukwerera* (rain-inducing rituals) are held in Zimbabwe. Man Soul Jah stated that the prayers for rain are held before the first rains, known as *gukurahundi*, and the beginning of the planting season.<sup>34</sup> The Afrocentric notions held by Rastas in the context of praying for rain are further confirmed by Man Soul Jah, who stated that rain, in the Rastafari perspective, is not ritualistically triggered. To explain this, he referred to the *Nyusa* tradition, in which the arrival of the traditional rain messenger *Manyusa* from Matonjeni in an African calendar triggered the rain.

### Space and purity when praying for rain

Rastafarians regard space as non-homogenous, reminiscent of the Eliadean framework of space and time. Rastas have sacred spaces located in the hills and mountainous areas consecrated for the Rastafarian *grounation* of praying for rain. The Rastafari shrines in the hills and mountains are located on the margins of cities and towns. Each Nyahbinghi Rastafari House in Zimbabwe possesses such a space. In these spaces, Rastas experience an existential connection with natural living as they walk barefooted and sometimes even sit in the dust of the earth as part of expressing their Rastafari

<sup>31</sup> The Rastafari calendar includes the following important dates: 7 January (Ethiopian Christmas); 25 May (African Liberation Day); 23 July (Earthday [Birthday] of Emperor Haile Selassie I); 17 August (Marcus Garvey Earthday); 11 September (Ethiopian New Year); and 2 November (Coronation of HIM Haile Selassie).

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Ras Bondomali, Marondera Nyahbinghi Rastafari House, 15 December 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Man Soul Jah.

consciousness. This shows that Rastas behave differently when they are in sacred space, treating the holy ground with reverence.

Ritual purity among Rastas is central. For Man Soul Jah,<sup>35</sup> Rastas are Nazarenes, guided by the social and spiritual conduct stipulated in the Bible, especially sections of Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Leviticus. He added that because of their spirituality, water plays an important role in the ritual purity of Rastas. He compared this with the Essenes in the desert, explaining that the Nazarenes (Rastas) are vegetarians who regard water as vital for ritual cleansing for their *livity*. According to Man Soul Jah,

Rastas are continuing an old and esoteric tradition of purity traced from four to five centuries back. In the 20th century, the Rasta in the *Binghi* live in the hills, like the Essenes. Ritual baths are vital. When anything divine is to happen, Rastas fast, pray, and cleanse their bodies. The water rituals correspond to ritual cleansing of the mind and body through meditation.<sup>36</sup>

This reveals the importance of ritual purity when praying for rain.

In line with the above, no women or men should enter Rastafarian holy grounds if they are ritually impure. For example, according to Man Soul Jah, women were forbidden to attend “the fasting and prayer [of] the Nyahbinghi *Ivine Issemble* [divine assembly] whilst menstruating.”<sup>37</sup> In addition, men and women would be considered unclean if they had engaged in sexual activity during the night previous to the assembly. It was feared that blood would desecrate the holy space and taint the Nyahbinghi *grounation* for rain. Even outside these situations of ritual uncleanness, Rastas purify and cleanse evil forces among members using fire and *ganja*. In the quest for ritual purity, then, the agency of Rastas is continually expressed through their created sacred space in the hills. Rastas are close to nature, seeing jungles and forests as suitable environments for fasting, prayers, and meditation.

### Typical proceedings when praying for rain

Rastafarians hold Nyahbinghi *grounations* dedicated to praying for rain annually. One elder said these may last for seven days and seven *lights* (nights), when the Rastafari *brethren* and *dawtas* (daughters) come from different *mansions* (houses) to participate in the *Ivine Issemble*. During these periods when Rastas pray for rain, a normal service, such as those held every sabbatical (Sabbath), is conducted. However, as Man Soul Jah explained, one day is also dedicated for Jah to cool the earth. Rastas call upon Jah to

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

activate the energy of those who are spiritually gifted in praying for rain.<sup>38</sup> In order to ensure purification, they light fire on the Fire Key, which must not be put out until the end of *grounation*. The lighting of fire is done concurrently with the hoisting of Rastafari and national flags, as well as with the reading of the Fire Keys Psalms from the Bible and, subsequently, the chanting of the Royal Ethiopian prayer.

The Fire Key Psalms are read and chanted in the following order: Psalms 101, 68, 2, 83, 94, 11, and 9. This shows that fire in Nyahbinghi has a symbolic and utilitarian significance, representing a process of purification and cleansing of *duppies* (evil forces) for the members. After reading and chanting all the psalms, members go around the fire three (or seven) times in ritual action, stomping and chanting the following words: “There gonna be fire; Fire Nyahbinghi Fire.” The specific numbers of three or seven times circling the fire represent the power of the Trinity or the Seven Seals, respectively. In other words, Rastas expect to receive power through chanting and purification from fire. Rastas talk of baptism through fire, and not water. The significance of fire for Nyahbinghi can be compared to the use of fire in the traditions of state formation in Africa, where fire was regarded as a symbol of both transition and royal power. Bhila asserts that in Africa “fire symbolises life, vitality, and continuity. Its burning is the symbol of prosperity of a ruler and his people.”<sup>39</sup> However, no rubbish can be thrown into the holy *ital* fire of purification: one elder stated that only *ganja* can be put into such fire to purify the tabernacle.

Following the purification of the tabernacle and participants, drumming, singing, and chanting bring forth word, sound, and power of judgment, which, in the Rastafari perspective, trample Babylon underfoot. The drums and chants are the spiritual weapons of Rastafarians. Rastas say it is their duty to paralyze all evil conception and to restore the natural order to its original state of perfection. Rastas pronounce the *Binghi* Fire Burn! They call for fire to burn down Babylon, ignorance, witchcraft, evil, backwardness, licentiousness, and environmental terrorists – things that are creating energies that may impede rain. “The judgment duty of the Order of Nyahbinghi is to liquidate and terminate all evil conception.”<sup>40</sup>

This also shows their agency even in the face of climate change. Nyahbinghi *grounation* for rain includes reasoning sessions among Rastas. The sharing of ideas and prayers occurs simultaneously with the sharing of the Rastafari chalice dedicated contextually

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Hoyini H. K. Bhila, *Trade and Politics in a Shona Kingdom: The Manyika and Their African and Portuguese Neighbours 1575–1902* (Harare: Longman, 1982), 12.

<sup>40</sup> Words on the cover page of *JAHUG* 2:2 (1992).

to prayers for rain. Above all, Rastas say that *ganja* brings climate restabilization, averting destabilization. The cosmic energy in Rastas is activated. Thanksgiving and *Nyamining* (eating) of the *ital* fruits and food follow, before benediction with the words “Let the words of I an’I mouth and the meditation of I an’I heart, be acceptable in thy sight O Most High JAH, Rastafari.” Man Soul Jah said that in 90 percent of the cases, rain will fall soon after the Nyahbinghi *grounation* for rain.<sup>41</sup> With abundant rain, the Nyahbinghi creed resonates with the words “Let the hungry be fed, the naked clothed, the sick nourished; the aged protected, and the infants cared for.”

## Returning to the Garden of Eden through Rastafari: A Paradigm for Transformation under Climate Change

The Rastafari prayers for rain are consistent with the ecological ethics and vegetarian diet of the Rastas. The pronouncements of “*Binghi* Fire Burn” and judgment duty at the Nyahbinghi *grounations* for rain reflect a spirituality that is sustained in their *livity*. It is the basis upon which Rastafarian attitudes toward nature and climate change can be further understood. Notably, Rastafari prayers for rain are an appropriate response to the impact of climate change.

However, Rastafari efforts to preserve and protect the environment transcend the calendar-based action of praying for rain. Essentially, Rastas claim to be typical “environmental *Italists*” whose ideology is summed up by the “green philosophy.” This philosophy is part of the green eco-theology and eco-justice that Rastas advocate in response to the wanton anthropogenic and greed-driven consumerist practices detrimental to the environment.<sup>42</sup> The power behind the Rastafari green philosophy is Emperor Haile Selassie I, who once encouraged Rastas to plant a million trees every year for food (to nourish and feed the hungry), medicine (to heal the sick), and as a spiritual consciousness of the environment. These are symbols of life resonating with some of the issues raised in the Ethiopian creed.

In line with the above, Rastas argue for the need to return to the Garden of Eden as a paradigm for transforming negative forces in the challenges of climate change. This is like going back to the beginnings, reminiscent of Adam and Eve, who were commanded to “till the garden and keep it” (Gen. 2:15) as stewards. In the same manner,

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Man Soul Jah.

<sup>42</sup> Fortune Sibanda, “Rastafari Green Philosophy for Sustainable Development in Postcolonial Zimbabwe: Harnessing Eco-theology and Eco-justice,” in *African Theological Reflections: Critical Voices on Liberation, Leadership, Gender and Eco-Justice*, ed. F. H. Chimhanda, V. M. S. Molobi and I. D. Mothoagae (Pretoria: UNISA Research Institute for Theology and Religion, 2015), 187.

Rastas are vegetarians who love nature and who can help to create a balanced ecosystem among humanity, animals, and the natural environment. Man Soul Jah made the following claims in this regard:

Climate change is a product of Babylonian creation. The lungs of planet earth have been choked through concrete surfaces [produced in the name of development] that fight nature and the chopping down of forests in Africa. *Ganja*, a holy herb, will bring climate restabilization. Hemp is an environmental[ly] friendly miracle tree that enhances soil fertility and can produce countless products such as cooking oil, paint, fuel and timber resistant to termites. In the age of knowledge, why arrest the Rasta for possessing *ganja*? Arresting a *ganja*-smoking man for eating something natural and mandated by the Creator is a waste of resources ... Instead, legalize marijuana (*ganja*) to save the earth from climate change!<sup>43</sup>

A number of lessons can be drawn from the above quotation. The words show that Rasta response to climate change is in solidarity with the victims of climate change. The Rasta elder is concerned that *ganja* continues to be illegal in Zimbabwe, in spite of its spiritual, herbal, economic, and environmental benefits, as well as its having been recently legalized in neighbouring South Africa. In addition, the words advocate respecting the sacredness of the Earth through organic farming of environmentally friendly crops, instead of using chemicals and artificial fertilizers that pollute land, air, and water and exhaust the soil. Rastas in Zimbabwe are also reducing, reusing, and recycling through their “Jah works,” which is a spiritual and economic endeavour. Rastas in Zimbabwe are typical stewards who call for the protection of the cleanliness and productivity of Mother Earth by all means necessary, including through *fire-burnin’* Babylon and the “environmental terrorists.”

## Conclusion

The article shows that Rastafarians are among those who pray for rain in Zimbabwe. They play drums, sing, and dance while praying to King Selassie I. In this context, Rastas consider ritual purity as key to fasting, meditating, and praying for rain. Nevertheless, along with praying for rain, Rastas love nature and are helping to create a balanced ecosystem through planting trees. It can be concluded that Rastafarians are the post-20th-century Nazarenes, whose prayer constitutes a practical and tangible manifestation of work crucial to living harmoniously with nature. Rastafari green philosophy is a very practical spiritual consciousness that decisively complements global efforts of shared responsibility to embrace nature in the context of the climate change

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Man Soul Jah.

disaster. This is in tandem with the World Council of Churches' call for eco-justice, characterized by "justice, peace, and the integrity of creation."<sup>44</sup> It is high time the world at large accorded Rastafari green philosophy "*nuff respect*," in this way enhancing the ecological and social responsibilities of the entire globalized village in the context of the climate change challenge. Examining a Rastafari perspective from Zimbabwe thus reveals that one can still pray for rain, but the more precise thrust of what one should pray for is that humanity rules creation in freedom and love, since greater privilege means greater responsibility under "Just One Earth."

<sup>44</sup> Holmes Rolston III, "Environmental Science and Religion/Science," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, ed. P. Clayton (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2011); Sibanda, "The Impact of Rastafari Ecological Ethic in Zimbabwe," 63.