

Language and Resistance: Memories of transatlantic slavery, and its continuing afterlives in the use of Rastafari language and terminology

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Language within the Rastafari culture, known as Iyaric, or Word Sound, has been formed in resistance to the effects of white supremacist domination as it manifest in slavery and colonisation.

A famous scene in the landmark 1977 series *Roots* shows the moment when language is recognised as being significant in the fight for power – for the Africans, in our struggle for liberation, for slave masters, in their plan to dominate a whole set of people by violent and cultural means. The scene shows Kunta Kinte being tortured to force him to relinquish his African name, after he was caught again trying to escape the plantation. Other enslaved Africans are gathered to witness him being whipped to within an inch of his life, with his slave master demanding that he accept the European name of Toby.

From a physical perspective the battle was grossly unequal, with Kunta's arms and legs bound. But from a psychological perspective, the fight was by no means one-sided, with Kunta having to be severely beaten before he finally conceded. Both Kunta and the slave master recognised that language is power, with the overseer determined to prevent the enslaved from holding on to any sense of self-worth, pride, or notion of individual and cultural empowerment. When Kunta does eventually concede, even his enslaved family and friends look disappointed – since his surrender marks a significant moment in the defeat their liberation struggle.

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From the late 1930s onwards, Rastafari use of language emerged out of the shadow cast by slavery and these kinds of practices as a means of (re-)building an

autonomous, black identity. *Iyaric*, as that language is known, emerged in a context in which speaking 'Oxbridge English' was a way for the poor and working classes to escape from poverty, even if doing so saw them alienated from, and alienating, their peers. Iyaric rejected that English and its alienation, as part of what scholar Horace Campbell calls "a determined effort to break with the sophistry of the English culture of Jamaica" and "to form a language which reflected...solidarity, self-reliance and Africanness".

Rastafari challenged the Anglophile culture that was dominant amongst Jamaica's elite and sought to embrace our African heritage at a time when any association with that continent was resisted. Early Rastafari ideology stemmed from the ideas of Jamaican pan-African philosopher and activist Marcus Garvey who, when asked whether he was African or Jamaican, famously [responded](#), "I will not give up a continent for an island".

Unsurprisingly, personal name changes were one of the first stages in this development and in the development of a Rastafari self. Rastafari shed both our slavery-given surnames and our European (or otherwise) first names. Although replacement names were not always strictly African, they included many that were, as well as names that were Biblical, were symbols of power reflecting Ethiopian royal titles, and names that referenced African culture (such as Lion, Addis, Bushman, and Simba), or that were Rasta-fied nicknames (such as Natty, Iyah, Dread, and Bongo).

Naming and framing the world

Yet Rastafari use of language transcended the realm of personal names to form new words and grammars, syncretized by adapting English, Jamaican patois, Amharic and creole, in order to build a vocabulary capable of reflecting on broader society, philosophy and theology.

For example, Iyaric is seen as 'lived', not merely ephemeral, but with tangible physical presence and impact through the vibrations each word makes. This is encapsulated in the Rastafari chant of *Word Sound Power*, which is intoned in response to speech of inspirational significance, that strikes a chord in the hearer's heart.

Another important (and common) element in Iyarc is the 'rule' of avoiding the word 'back', in the sense of 'back to Africa'. Instead, Rastafari use the word 'forward', since Africa is our spiritual homeland, or Zion, and therefore a place of philosophical and spiritual progress. One moves forwards towards it, one develops, without any negative connotations of regressing. Although *forwards to Africa* is that terminology used in its deepest sense, it is also used in more mundane situations, such as to forward home. To consciously move forward through space and time is seen as a religious state of progress and potential, with the concept 'back' a negative *Babylon* designed to stifle self-development and growth.

This complex psychological-linguistic turn is encapsulated in our mantra '*Forwards Ever Backwards Never*'. Such mantras point to the diachronic pedagogic philosophy that underpins Rastafari language, theology and philosophy. Another is '*Each One Teach One*', which asserts that everyone is teacher and pupil alike, that life is fluid, and that ones moves forwards into history, towards self-determination and liberation.

Forward movement is evident even in the preferred name of our faith itself – Rastafari, rather than Rastafarian(s) or Rastafarianism. The latter two monikers are fixed and bound, the ends of the words rendered static, pinned like a butterfly, beautiful, yet powerless. In contrast, *Rastafari* is both singular and plural, also noun and verb, the 'i' at the end constantly vibrating in the air, floating above any enclosing full stop.

The use of 'i' as a unifying connector wherever possible is a common factor in Iyarc,. Words that have been used by Rastafari since the early days of the movement include Inity (unity), Iwa (hour/time), Iver (ever), and Ises (praises). The most well-known 'i' phrase within Rastafari culture is *InI*, ("I-an-I"), which is a collective we – you and me combined, and also singular. It denotes shared values and lessons, It accepts that there is sameness-in-difference, and that despite individuality, InI move forward in Inity (unity). The term InI appeals to broader senses of solidarity, empathy, and the building of a notional Rastafari citizenship towards the broader rallying cause of *One Aim, One God, One Destiny*, which optimistically encompasses many paths towards the same goals of equal rights and justice.

The phrase InI appeals to this broader sense of solidarity within not only us members of the Rastafari faith, but also to 'goodwill' people of whatever creed or religion, as

there is the belief that people fundamentally want to be, and see, good, and it is Babylon that corrupts. When certain lghts (heights) of knowledge and wisdom have been reached, Rastafari say that something is Overstood, in the sense that if InI understands something, then InI are not underneath the knowledge, InI are over it, so InI say Overstand, never under.

Ultimately, what is important in this discussion is that language is and has long been one of the tools that Rastafari use to decolonise and resist. Since its inception in the late 1930s, Rastafari have attempted to build a decolonised lexicon, to turn perceived negatives to positives, and effectively construct a linguistic programme of *re-programming* the emancipated, post-colonial, pan-African, Rastafari mind, free from the shackled mind-states imposed during slavery. With our dreadlock hair, green, gold and red clothes, and our own language, Rastafari challenge the oppressor both inside and out.