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# **Beyond the Black Atlantic: Black Outernationality and Afrocentrism in Aotearoa/ New Zealand Roots Reggae**

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# **Beyond the Black Atlantic: Black Outernationality and Afrocentrism in Aotearoa/ New Zealand Roots Reggae**

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Roots reggae has been labelled a roots music because its stylistic elements, associated iconography and cultural practices, as well as the linguistic and thematic content of song lyrics, have enabled some Jamaicans

(descendants of African slaves transported to Jamaica's sugar-cane plantations) to maintain, renew and (re)create African identities. Although roots reggae has been globally disseminated, adopted and localized in numerous cultural contexts, it remains strongly associated with African geographical and cultural origins. This article explores how some New Zealand Polynesians have engaged with roots reggae's African roots, and the socio-political and psychological implications of their doing so. It argues that perceived similar experiences of rootlessness have led some Polynesian New Zealanders to form transcultural alliances with African-Jamaicans and other members of the African diaspora via their engagement with roots reggae, thereby showing that reggae's rhizomatic roots network extends far beyond the boundaries of Gilroy's Black Atlantic and into Oceania.

## **Introduction**

This article examines Polynesian New Zealanders' formation of transcultural alliances with Africans and/or blacks as a result of their engagement with roots reggae. Following brief sections on this article's research methodology and outlining reggae's introduction and popularity in New Zealand, the article is organized into two main sections. The first of these discusses how various symbolic markers of Africanness and/or blackness have potentially been used to enable New Zealand Polynesian reggae musicians and their fans to express and construct transcultural affiliations with Africans/blacks.<sup>1</sup> The remainder of the article discusses various ways in which the making of such transcultural affiliations has been facilitated and legitimated; in other words, how and why New Zealand Polynesians have been able to form transnational identifications with Africans/blacks. It also examines some of the socio-political and psychological implications of

making such identifications, and some of the tensions and debates around essentialism and anti-essentialism that have

arisen as a result.

## Methodology

The research material for this article consists almost entirely of data from secondary sources, such as magazine and newspaper articles as well as Internet websites featuring reviews of live New Zealand reggae concerts and recordings, and interviews with local 1  
Throughout this article, I use 'construct' not in the pejorative sense of culture being contrived and false, but

from a recognition that culture is continually being recreated and remade. q 2013  
Musicological Society of Australia

artists. The material also consists of analyses of New Zealand reggae song lyrics,

music and album covers. When conducting this research, I contacted the members of nine local reggae groups by using the bands' websites and by contacting journalists and music critics who had interviewed these artists, as well as their record companies, managers and the owners of venues where they had performed. I sent band members a questionnaire designed to gather information about their reggae backgrounds, their musical influences, their reasons for adopting reggae, the impact that reggae had on them and the kinds of people and places that they try to connect with through their music. Of the three musicians who responded, only Tigilau Ness' response is relevant to the present discussion. His comments thus comprise the only primary ethnographic data included in this analysis. In depth ethnographic research into New Zealand reggae music is needed.

This article is restricted to a discussion of New Zealand Māori and Pacific Islanders'

engagement with roots reggae. Although this genre has attracted many Pākehā devotees<sup>2</sup>—myself included—roots reggae has been most popular amongst and has been of particular relevance to New Zealand Polynesians. Additionally, a paucity of publicly available data currently exists regarding Pākehā engagement with reggae's strong associations with Afrocentrism and black transnationalism. Although of direct relevance to the topic of this article, this is an area that necessitates further inquiry.

## Context

Before launching into a discussion of African/black-New Zealand Polynesian transculturalism in relation to New Zealand reggae, it is first necessary briefly to establish the context for the following discussion.

Roots reggae was first introduced to New Zealand in the early 1970s via imported recordings,<sup>3</sup> and was adopted by bands such

as Unity (founded in 1975) (McLennan 2003) and Sticks and Shanty (established c.1976). The seminal year in the history of reggae in New Zealand, however, was 1979: Keskidee (a British ex-patriot Jamaican theatre troupe) toured the country; the film *The Harder They Come* (starring Jimmy Cliff as the lead character Ivan O'Martin) played to New Zealand audiences in a limited two-week season in a Queen Street (Auckland) cinema; and, most significantly, reggae superstar Bob Marley performed at Auckland's Western Springs on his *Babylon by Bus* Tour. New Zealand bands such as Herbs, The Twelve Tribes of Israel, Dread Beat and Blood, Aotearoa and Ahurangi were subsequently established.<sup>5</sup>

In the global context, the degree of reggae's popularity amongst New Zealanders is significant. New Zealanders are reportedly among the biggest consumers of reggae per capita anywhere in the world, particularly of Bob Marley's music (Reid 2003, E5). As

Dennis O'Reilly asserts: 'outside of Jamaica, I would say there was no other country where reggae had such an impact as in New Zealand' (quoted in Catherall 2002, 3).

Reggae, and Marley's music in particular, has been particularly popular amongst Māori.

When Marley 2 Pākehā is a term that was first used by Māori to categorize non-Māori, and at present is most commonly used

as a designation for people of Western European (specifically British) ethnicity.

3 The earliest reggae album released in New Zealand was *The Harder They Come* (29 October 1973), featuring Jimmy Cliff. For a list of early reggae releases (1973–1982) from Festival Records New Zealand (initially the only company that had the import licensing rights to Island Records) by Jimmy Cliff, Toots and the Maytals, and Bob Marley and the Wailers, see Hawkeswood (1983, 75).

4 This film had been released in 1973, but

had been banned in New Zealand to prevent giving 'Black youth any

encouragement in the wrong direction' (see Hawkeswood 1983, 67).

5 For a list of reggae-influenced bands and artists, see Cattermole (2004, Appendix B).

died in May 1981, the Hawkes Bay freezing works came to a virtual standstill as hundreds of Māori workers stayed at home to mourn his death (Dix 1988, 333). Māori remain Marley's biggest consumers, reportedly 'buying 7 out of 10 units' of his music in 2003 (Katchafire n.d.). Reggae underwent a revival in 2003 with the release of Katchafire's aptly named album *Revival* (which featured the highest-selling single of that year, 'Giddy Up'; Katchafire 2003), yet its popularity has generally declined, particularly amongst Māori and Pacific Islanders, with the ascendance of hip hop since the 1990s. Marley's legacy is evident, however, in the

continuing popularity of reggae festivals, such as the One Love Unity celebrations on Waitangi Day and the Raglan Soundsplash, and the widespread local interest in touring museum exhibitions on the subject.<sup>6</sup>

Although there has been a growth in scholarly interest in the subject in recent years,<sup>7</sup> there remains ample scope for further research on New Zealand reggae. Prior research into identity issues surrounding other music genres adopted and adapted by New Zealand Māori and Pacific Islanders, such as hip hop and brass band music,<sup>8</sup> provides a useful point of comparison with the present study. To the author's knowledge, however, this research into African/black-New Zealand Polynesian transculturalism via an engagement with reggae is unique. This study's findings may provide a useful point of comparison with any future ethnographic research undertaken to investigate this topic further, and may yield useful insights to researchers investigating transculturalism in

relation to reggae's adoption and localization in other contexts.

## **Constructing and Expressing African/Black Identities**

Roots reggae is thus an important genre in the context of New Zealand's soundscape, and one that is of particular significance for Māori and Pacific Islanders. This genre owes its status as a 'roots' music to African-Jamaicans (the descendants of African slaves transported to Jamaica to work on sugar-cane plantations) using this genre to articulate their African cultural roots. These roots are celebrated in band names (e.g. The Abyssinians, The Ethiopians and The Congos), in the lyrics of numerous reggae songs,<sup>9</sup> on album covers (depicting, for example, the African continent, African fauna, its people and the flags of various African nations),<sup>10</sup> and in the use of Swahili or Ethiopian languages (e.g. by Peter Tosh, The

Abyssinians and Black Uhuru) (Daynes 2004, 28).

6 The Rotorua museum exhibition 'Coming in from the Cold: The Bob Marley Story' attracted around 7000 people in December 1997 (Press 1998, 4). The Bob Marley exhibition at the Robert McDougall gallery in Christchurch (November 1995–January 1996) attracted around 42,000 people. This exhibition was also displayed in the Museum of New Zealand and in Wanganui (Lane 1996, 13). The 'Coming in from the Cold' exhibition at the Mangere Community Outreach Services Gallery (4 August–15 September 2001) was expected to attract around 10,000 people (Manukau Courier 2001, 9). The Te Papa exhibition 'ReggaeXplosion' (29 March–14 July 2002) was also shown at the Canterbury Museum (Manson 2002, 17; Press 2001, 30). 7 See, for example, Keam and Mitchell (2011, particularly chapters 4 and 10) and Cattermole (2004). A projected book on New Zealand reggae (originally

scheduled for publication in 2008) by Patrick 'Dubhead' Waller and Jeff Neems does not appear to have yet been published.

8 See, for example, Zemke-White (2001) on hip hop and Hebert (2008a, 2008b) on band music. 9 See, for example, Peter Tosh's 'African', 'Apartheid' and 'Equal Rights' (1977); Marley's 'War' (1977), 'Africa Unite', 'Zimbabwe', 'Ambush in the Night', 'So much Trouble' and 'One Drop' (1979); and Burning Spear's 'Marcus Garvey', 'Old Marcus' (1976) and 'Mister Garvey' (1994).

10 See, for example, Burning Spear's Jah Kingdom (1991), Culture's Live in Africa (2002), Peter Tosh's Mama Africa (1983), Bob Marley and the Wailers' Survival (Marley 1979), The Abyssinians' Reunion (1998) and Ruff Cutt's Ruff Cutt in Roots (2000).

Whilst New Zealand Polynesian reggae musicians have not (to my knowledge)

articulated African cultural roots using such means, they have utilized various other symbolic markers of Africanness (i.e. practices and symbols for which Africanness has been attributed or recognized; Daynes 2004, 28) in order to construct and express African identities. These African signifiers can be loosely categorized into four types: musical, symbolic, cultural and linguistic (each of which is discussed in turn below).

For the purposes of the present discussion, the reading of these symbols is deliberately narrow, focusing only on their potential African meanings. The position adopted in this article is therefore rather extreme, and does not account for the semiotic ambiguity of these signifiers. It needs to be emphasized at the outset that these signifiers can have a variety of meanings and usages—many (even most) of which bear no African associations whatsoever. As a further caveat it needs to be remembered that, although encoded as African, these symbols and practices have

been appropriated by members of the black nationalist and pan-African movements, and can therefore also be used in the construction and expression of black identities.

## Music

Although New Zealand Polynesian reggae musicians have localized the reggae genre in important ways (see Cattermole 2011), this article focuses solely on the African musical signifiers that are present in locally produced reggae, as it is these that have potentially enabled New Zealand Māori and Pacific Islanders to form transcultural and transnational

links with Africans (and, by extension, with blacks).

Reggae is often used as a generic term to describe Jamaican popular musics produced since the 1960s, such as ska, rocksteady, one-

drop, rockers, lovers, dancehall and dub (Weber 2000, 6). To be more precise, reggae is the form of Jamaican music that was most popular from around 1969 to 1983, a period that can be subdivided into the early reggae period (1969–1974) and the roots reggae period (1975–1983) (Manuel, Bilby, and Largey 1995, 166). This article is primarily concerned with the roots reggae style, which was popularized internationally by artists such as Bob Marley. This particular style of reggae synthesized elements derived from many different musical styles, including: American styles, such as rock 'n' roll, funk,<sup>11</sup> rhythm and blues, jazz, country and western,<sup>12</sup> blues,<sup>13</sup> soul,<sup>14</sup> gospel and Latin American; Trinidadian Calypso; Jamaican African-influenced traditional and folk forms, such as revival, kumina, Rastafarian nyabinghi drumming, obeah, etu, gombay, jonkunnu, pocomania and Maroon music; and Jamaican popular musics, such as mento, ska and rocksteady (Manuel, Bilby, and Largey 1995, 165–71). The musical roots of

roots reggae therefore lie predominantly in African-American and African-Jamaican genres.

Roots reggae features several African musical signifiers, making it an ideal vehicle for the expression and construction of African cultural roots. Hand drumming is perhaps the key musical signifier of Africa and a crucial element of Rastafarian nyabingi ceremonies. The use of African hand drums is not generally characteristic of New Zealand reggae,<sup>15</sup> <sup>11</sup> See, for example, Marley's 'Is This Love?' (1978b). <sup>12</sup> See, for example, Toots and the Maytals' 'Beautiful Woman' (1996). <sup>13</sup> See, for example, Marley's 'Talkin' Blues' (1974).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Toots and the Maytals' 'Reggae got Soul' (1976). <sup>15</sup> Some New Zealand reggae musicians substituted Polynesian drums and drumming patterns for African ones, localizing the genre and making it a vehicle for the expression and

construction of Polynesian identities. For example, on Herbs' Long Ago (1984), 'Going Home' features a percussion performance by the Rarotonganui although William Hawkeswood notes that in the early 1980s 'the Conga player is usually the star performer' in Auckland reggae bands, and that bongos and nyabinghi drums ( funde, akete and bass) were also used (1983, 132). Such instruments can be heard on recordings by Rastafarian New Zealand bands Sticks and Shanty and Boil Up.

Not only the instruments themselves but also their characteristic rhythmic patterns have been incorporated into reggae. Jamaican roots reggae musician Count Ossie's song 'Oh Carolina' (1961) was the first to incorporate fully the three burra drums (the bass, fundeh and akete/repeater) used in Rastafarian nyabinghi ceremonies, and over time these drum patterns were distributed to instruments that, although capable of playing melodies, are used percussively in reggae

(Reckford 1997, 78). For example, the off-beat (beats two and four in 4/4 time) skank (triadic harmony chords played on the rhythm guitar and/or keyboard instrument) derives from the fundeh drum pattern.<sup>16</sup> Decorations or elaborations of the fundeh drum pattern (such as the Hammond Organ shuffle that can be heard, for example, on The Abyssinians' 'Satta Massagana') derive from the akete drum patterns used in Rasta nyabinghi drumming.<sup>17</sup> The bass guitar and drum kit riddim (rhythm),<sup>18</sup> which is derived from that of the Rasta bass drum, interlocks with those mentioned above.

Other African musical retentions that can be found in reggae include the use of polyriddims (polyrhythms);<sup>19</sup> call-and-response vocal interaction between the lead and backing vocalists;<sup>20</sup> and the predominance of minor tonalities,<sup>21</sup> an element that Verena Reckord suggests is derived from the pentatonic scales used in African traditional music (1997, 72).

# Footnote 15 continued

Cultural Club at the end; Cook Island drumming can be heard throughout D-Faction's album *Take a Little Piece* (1998), and Polynesian drumming is also used extensively on Mana's (1993) eponymously entitled album.

16 The off-beat skank is an identifying characteristic of the reggae genre. It is present in all New Zealand roots reggae songs. Sticks and Shanty's 'We Love Reggae' (1988) is a typical example. In Herbs' 'French Letter' (1983), a two-quaver rhythm is used instead on the off-beats.

17 Similar decorations of the fundeh drum pattern can be heard in Boil Up's 'Earth Right' (Various 1995) and

Unity Pacific's 'Red Squad' (2002).

18 The bass/kick drum commonly plays four-on-the-floor (playing every crotchet beat); while the snare drum (or timbali, a Cuban drum that resembles a snare drum, but only has one skin as opposed to two and no snare) emphasizes the third beat of every bar, and sometimes also the last semiquaver beat of each bar. Rim shots (where the drum head and rim are struck simultaneously with the side of the stick) and crash cymbal accents add rhythmic variety to the music. The bass guitar usually enters no later than the third beat of the bar, and emphasizes the tonic and fifth notes of the harmony skank chords. Like the skank, the riddim is characteristic of the reggae genre.

19 Polyrhythms can be heard, for example, in Marley's 'One Love' (1977), The Abyssinians' 'Satta Massagana' (1993) and Burning Spear's 'Slavery Days' (1976). New Zealand examples include Herbs' 'French Letter' (1983), Dread Beat and Blood's 'Waitangi'

(1997), Hori Chapman and Ahurangi's 'E te iwi Māori' (1998), Ruia Aperahama and Ranea Aperahama's 'Mura Ahi' (2000), Mana's 'Ain't gonna Stop' (1993), Aotearoa's 'Maranga ake ai' (1985), Unity Pacific's 'Red Squad' (2002) and Katchafire's 'Giddy Up' (2003). 20 Call-and-response can be found in, for example, Marley's 'One Love' (1977) and Burning Spears' 'Slavery

Days' (1976). New Zealand examples include Dread Beat and Blood's 'Waitangi' (1997), Hori Chapman and Ahurangi's 'E te iwi Māori' (1998), Aotearoa's 'Maranga ake ai' (1985) and Katchafire's 'Giddy Up' (2003). 21 Songs such as The Abyssinians' 'Satta Massagana' (1993) are in a minor tonality. It is important to note that the international style of roots reggae exemplified by the music of Bob Marley and the Wailers (and thus the style of roots reggae that has had perhaps the greatest impact in New Zealand) features major rather than minor tonalities (see Reckford 1997, 72). Nevertheless, there are

several examples of minor-key New Zealand roots reggae songs, including Dread Beat and Blood's 'Waitangi' (1997), Hori Chapman and Ahurangi's 'E te iwiMāori' (1998), Ruia Aperahama and Ranea Aperahama's 'Mura Ahi' (2000), Sticks and Shanty's 'We Love Reggae' (1988), Unity Pacific's 'Red Squad' (2002) and Boil Up's 'Earth Right' (Various 1995).

For New Zealand Polynesian reggae musicians who are aware of the African origin of such features and who wish to self-identify as African/black, the use of such features in their music could facilitate and strengthen this transcultural identification.

## **Symbols: The Red, Gold and Green Tricolour and Lion of Judah**

In the visual symbolism associated with reggae, colours and symbols derived from

flags function as potent markers of identity. For example, the use of the red, gold and green tricolour and the Lion of Judah symbol derived from the Ethiopian national flag signify Rastafarians' Ethiopian identity. The colour black, derived from Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) flag (the other two colours of which, red and green, coincide with those of the Ethiopian flag), has also become associated with the Rastafarian movement and with reggae (see Figure 1).<sup>22</sup> The colours themselves have been given meanings that strengthen their 'Africanness': black is said to symbolize the African people, red their blood, green Africa's verdant vegetation and gold Africa's mineral wealth (Chevannes 1995, 15–16). Figure 1

Although these flag-derived elements function as multifarious sign vehicles (e.g. signifying an ideological commitment to Rastafari or to the freedom of oppressed peoples, or a love of reggae), their use has

potentially enabled some New Zealand Polynesians to express African (and, more specifically, Ethiopian) identities. They are commonly seen on items of clothing, such as T-shirts and tams (knitted hats), worn by reggae listeners and musicians; celebrated in reggae songs, such as Herbs' 'Reggae's doing Fine' (which contains the following lyrics: 'I-den-ti-ty, will always be what we see yeah / The yellow, the red, the green I-den-ti-ty'; Herbs 1981); and are a feature of band logos, such as that of Katchafire (see Figure 2), and album covers.

In several cases, these symbols are used in conjunction with Māori cultural symbols (particularly those of Māori nationalism) on New Zealand reggae album covers. For example, on the cover of Dread Beat and Blood's album *Tribute to a Friend*, the band's name is in red, green and gold (the tricolour appears in conjunction with koru motifs). There are also images representing Hone Heke chopping down the flagpole flying the

British flag, Māori wood carvings and a male moko (tattoo).<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the Tino Rangatiratanga Māori flag (and its constituent colours of red, black and white) is used, for example, on the cover artwork and liner notes of David Grace and Injustice's *Weapons of Peace*, and the name of the band is superimposed upon a red, gold and green background. The album covers for *Waiata of Bob Marley* and *Waiata of Bob Marley 2* both feature a stylized Bob Marley with a full facial moko. The first album uses the red, green and gold tricolour on the album cover and liner notes, while the second replaces this with the red, black and white tricolour of the Māori flag (see Figure 3).

The use of symbols derived from both the Ethiopian and Māori national flags (see Figure 1) articulates Māori nationalism, decolonization and freedom from neo-colonial oppression and connects their struggle to that of Africans and black peoples worldwide. In

22 The UNIA ran an African repatriation programme. 23 Other examples comprising a mixture of African/Rastafarian and Māori symbolism include the cover of Sticks and Shanty's album *Jah Magic* (1987), which features an image of a Māori waka (canoe) superimposed over a red, green and gold background; and *Māori Reggae Vol. 1* (Various 2001), on which the album title in yellow and green is set against the background of a typically red-painted Māori wood-carving. D-Faction's *Take a Little Piece* depicts the acronym of the band's name, DF, with Polynesian/Pasifika patterns superimposed over the red, green and gold tricolour (1998).

The UNIA flag

The Rastafarian flag

# The Maori flag

Figure . 1