

Rastafarians

Profile

Rastafari make up a distinct religious and cultural minority within Jamaican society. Although referred to by the general population as Rastafarians, most genuine followers of the philosophy prefer to be referred to as Rastafari.

The manner in which the Rastafari philosophy is lived and expressed is very much an individual matter; followers of Rastafari have always approached it more as a lifestyle and a set of values than as a movement or specific creed. There are three distinct orders of the Rastafarian movement which hold different beliefs and symbols. These are: Boba Shanti, Nyahbinji and the Twelve tribes.

Historical context

Marcus Garvey

Rastafarianism traces its roots back to both the Jamaica tradition of Maroon resistance and the influence of Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey (1887–1940) with his vision of African redemption. This included political and economic independence, cultural pride and the reuniting and return of the worldwide African Diaspora to their ancestral continent. Garvey's philosophy grew out of his travels to South and Central America, which included investigative visits to sugar plantations, banana company enclaves and the Panama Canal during its construction. This led him to conclude there was a commonality in the conditions and experiences of African descendants in the New World and those in the countries of a still colonized Africa.

Garvey coupled this with the knowledge and appreciation of African history and culture he had acquired especially during his visit to England in 1912, prompting a decision to work towards building a sense of confidence and purpose in what he came to regard as a universally downtrodden people. He returned to Jamaica in 1914 and shortly thereafter founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the African Communities League.

UNIA

Garvey and the UNIA had the ability to inspire and mobilize the poorest sections of the black population, especially in the US and the Caribbean. The organization spread rapidly in the years after the First World War, establishing chapters in over 40 countries and regularly publishing a newspaper in four languages.

The UNIA set an agenda for the global social and economic independence of people of African descent, and especially for the end to colonialism on the African continent. It started cooperative businesses, opened schools and promoted self-determination. It also developed a tri-colour flag (red, black and green) that was eventually adopted by a number of post-independence African states. Above all it

provided a vision of nationhood, dignity and self-respect when none existed.

Haile Selassie

In 1920 Marcus Garvey, who was a forceful author and orator, wrote a play that included the declaration: 'Look to Africa, when a black king shall be crowned, for the day of deliverance is at hand'. Ten years later Ras (Prince) Tafari Makonen was crowned the 225th Emperor of Ethiopia, claiming direct descent from King David in an unbroken line of Ethiopian kings dating back to the union of King Solomon and Queen Makeda of Sheba.

The new Ethiopian monarch took the name Haile Selassie I, which means 'Might of the Holy Trinity' and adopted the title His Imperial Majesty, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God.

Drawing both on Garvey's words as well as on biblical prophecy, the belief arose among some sections of the Jamaican population that Selassie was the long foretold 'God of Ethiopia' whose reign presaged the end of European domination and African suffering throughout the world.

Several preachers in Jamaica began to venerate Haile Selassie (Ras Tafari Makonen) as the living God and the hope of global African redemption. Worshippers of Selassie became known as Ras Tafari or 'Rastafarians,' which later evolved into 'Rastamen' and 'Rastas'.

Rastafari

Early Rastafari came largely from poor, marginal communities in Jamaica, attracted by the movement's message of hope, self-pride and redemption. In the early years Rastafari encountered strong disapproval and frequent hostility from the colonial authorities and mainstream Jamaican society for their uncompromising anti-establishment social and political beliefs. Among other things they equated the existing political and economic order with the biblical Babylon, which was destined for destruction, and advocated repatriation to Africa.

Some of the early preachers were charged with subversion and treason by the colonial authorities and received jail terms for selling pictures of Haile Selassie.

The Rastafari bond with Africa, and especially Ethiopia, became a major political issue in Jamaica when they sought to rally support for the defence of Ethiopia following the 1934 invasion of that country by Italian forces.

This relationship continued in the post-war years and took on an increasingly pan-African dimension, particularly with the anti-colonial struggles in Uganda and Kenya. With the growth of the Mau-Mau and the Nyabingi movements in those countries, images reaching Jamaica of the Kenyan Mau-Mau generals, who let their hair grow, immediately became an inspiration to Rastafari followers.

The Rastafari in the marginalized communities of Jamaica let their own hair and beards grow long, finding support in an Old Testament edict (Nazarite), which stated that razors should not touch the head of the faithful. They therefore also became known as 'Locksmen' or 'Dreadlocks', or in some cases 'Dreads'.

In keeping with the Jamaica Maroon tradition, Rastafari increasingly retreated into the hills and formed their own communes where they waited for the day of deliverance and eventual repatriation to Zion

(Africa). Their distinctive dreadlocks and their use of ganja (marijuana) as a religious sacrament to aid mystical revelation led to increasing harassment and arrests. Despite dedicating themselves to living peaceful healthy and spiritual lives, their self-isolation, appearance, beliefs and practices caused them to be viewed as a highly dangerous and subversive cult of outcasts well into the 1960s.

There are three currently recognized orders of Rastafari, each with its own symbols and beliefs.

However, two common principles shared by all Rastas include; the exalted status of Haile Selassie I and the rejection of white Eurocentric images of divinity.

The word Bobo Shanti is derived from Bobo, which stands for Black, and Ashanti, which is the African tribe from Kumasi, Ghana. It is believed that most of the slaves brought to Jamaica were from the Ashanti tribe and are the ancestors of many Jamaicans. The late Prince Emmanuel Charles Edwards founded the Bobo Shanti order in Jamaica in the 1950s. The new Bobo Shanti order leader is Trevor Stewart. He is regarded as the reincarnate Black Christ in a priestly state. He is called by most members of the Bobo Shanti as Prince Emmanuel Charles Edwards, without Mother or Father, a Priest of Melchizedek, the Black Christ in the Flesh. He, along with his descendants and Haile Selassie are seen as Gods. Marcus Garvey is regarded as a prophet. The Bobo Shanti believe in Black supremacy and that there should be repatriation of all black people to Africa. In addition, the Bobo Shanti order also believes that black people should be reimbursed monetarily for slavery.

Members of this order wear long robes and very tightly wrapped turbans. They live separately from society and other Rastafarian orders in their current base in the Nine Miles area of Bull Bay, Jamaica. They function similarly to the Accompong Maroons, an unofficial independent nation within Jamaica with their own constitution. They do not accept the values and lifestyle of the general Jamaican society. Their lifestyle closely emulates those of the Old Testament Jewish Mosaic Law, which includes the observation of the Sabbath from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday, hygiene laws for menstruating women and special greetings amongst themselves. No work is allowed during the Sabbath and the consumption of salt and oil is avoided.

The Bobo Shanti are a self-sufficient group who make and sell straw hats and brooms to support the community and grow their own produce. The members of this order do not smoke marijuana in public as it is only reserved for worship among members.

The Nyahbinghi order is the oldest of the Rastafarian orders. The name Nyahbinghi is derived from Queen Nyahbinghi, who ruled Uganda in the nineteenth century. She fought against the colonialists in Uganda.

All other orders came from this sect. Members of this sect focus mainly on Emperor Haile Selassie and they proclaim that he is the incarnation of the Supreme deity.

The Nyahbinghi order pushed for their repatriation to Ethiopia, from where they believe all black people came. Ethiopia plays a major role in this sect and is represented in all their symbols including their flag.

Their flag is a little different from others as the placement of the colors is different: green (top) – the vegetation of Ethiopia, gold (middle) – the mineral wealth of Ethiopia, and red (bottom) – the blood of Ethiopians.

This sect was founded in 1968 by Dr Vernon ‘Prophet Gad’ Carrington and is the most liberal of the Rastafarian orders. The members of this sect are free to worship in a church of their choosing or within the privacy of their house.

Members of Twelve Tribes sect consider themselves the direct descendants of the 12 Sons of David. The 12 Sons are divided into 12 Houses which are determined by month of birth. Each House is also represented by its own colour.

Rastafari international

The visit of Haile Selassie to Jamaica in the late 1960s, which brought thousands of 'Rasta faithful' out of the hills and gullies, showed the country how widespread the movement had become. However a major turning point came in the 1970s with the growth and spread of Jamaican reggae music. This was both influenced by Rastafari concepts and helped to popularize them. Recorded music containing Rastafari-inspired lyrics performed by popular musicians spread from Jamaica and began to influence others elsewhere.

The movement expanded quickly and was highly attractive to the alienated young African descendant youth across the Caribbean. While some merely adopted the outward appearance others also began rejecting the prevailing establishment value system and turned to a more 'rootsy' lifestyle, including living off the land. This led to the emergence of a loosely defined but distinctive international Rasta culture.

This trend alarmed the traditionally circumspect Caribbean political establishment, who saw the growth of this movement at best as deviant behaviour and, at worst, as a direct challenge to their political power and more globalist worldview. Nevertheless the reaction that was stimulated often forced Caribbean societies to begin examining new alternatives in their search for social change.

Furthermore, the influence of Rastafari philosophy, as conveyed in the lyrics of the songs of Bob Marley, Peter Tosh and Burning Spear, have been adopted by groups extending from urban youth on the African continent, to European and Japanese counterculture advocates, indigenous Americans on Native reservations and Aborigines in Australia.

Current issues

Rastafarianism has always been more of a philosophy and cultural lifestyle than a movement. There are no leaders, no definitive creed and, apart from reggae performers, there are no official spokespersons. Where mystical symbolism pertains it is usually biblically influenced and linked to African messianic expression and millennialism.

While in some instances Rastafari are in the forefront of repeated calls on the governments of the region to decriminalize the use of marijuana, for the most part they avoid the political arena. Like other use-advocates around the world Rastafari claim that the marijuana plant has valuable spiritual and medicinal qualities and argue that the state is morally misguided in seeking to criminalize the possession of a naturally occurring weed. Moreover, use of marijuana by Rastafari is far from universal. Some Rastafari smoke while others avoid it.

The combination of their distinctive appearance, coupled with their perceived association with marijuana, causes many Rastafari to be profiled and harassed by law enforcement and other state agencies – ostensibly as part of the overall official effort to control the local and international drug trade. However, many Rastafari argue there may be deeper social motives involved that are more connected with historically inherited caste and colour prejudice. This frowns upon any open celebration of African-derived physical and cultural traits and principles in a society that has always placed greater value on European-derived norms.

In a region where the tourism industry offers an important opportunity for informal sector income generation, the issue of Rasta profiling is further complicated by the tendency of various individuals to take on some of the superficial elements usually associated with Rastafari, such as the hair and distinctively coloured attire. These are generally utilized as a cosmetic veneer in order to take advantage of the international reputation Rastafarianism has acquired among visitors who come to Caribbean in search of the exotic.

Some of these opportunistic cultural actors at times can be involved in legally marginal activities, but the complaint by Rastafari is that, for the most part, state authorities seem unwilling or unable to distinguish between 'real' Rastafari and others who do not hold genuine Rastafari beliefs or seek to practise a healthy holistic, productive, spiritual, self-reliant lifestyle. This, Rastafari argue, is the one main criterion that differentiates them from others and that has always underpinned the traditional Rastafari worldview from its earliest beginnings.

As consequence some young Rastafari have been seeking to become more organized in order to better advocate at a local and regional Caribbean Community (CARICOM) level for greater appreciation and acceptance of their right to cultural autonomy. Others have developed more religiously oriented communities that stress more self-reliance and greater piety.

Rastafarians have always traditionally equated the existing political and economic order with the biblical Babylon, which they believe is destined for destruction, and they continue to advocate repatriation to Africa. This is an increasingly important political issue for the movement. In July 2007, at a special select committee on reparation for slavery which met at Gordon House, Ambassador of the Almighty Rastafarian Kingdom, Queen Mother Moses, Dr Marcia Stewart, demanded that repatriation should be included as part of claims for reparations from Britain for treatment during slavery. According to the Ambassador, more individuals and groups are reclaiming their African identity and, for those who want to return to their land of origin (Africa), any talk of repairing damage must include repatriation as a primary component.

Dr Stewart's point was supported by committee member Mike Henry, who had first brought the motion on reparation to the House. Henry went on to demand that Britain pay the state of Jamaica in economic proportion to what it paid to the slave owners, but that a reservation must be within that for repatriation.