



## Rastafari

**Author:** Susannah Crockford

**Published:** 15th January 2021

Susannah Crockford. "Rastafari." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 15 January 2021. Retrieved from [www.cdamm.org/articles/rastafari](http://www.cdamm.org/articles/rastafari). (First published 3 January 2018 [censamm.org/resources/profiles/rastafari](http://censamm.org/resources/profiles/rastafari).)

### Summary of movement

---

Rastafari originated in the 1930s in Jamaica. Aspects of the movement are both messianic and millenarian. The Ethiopian King, Haile Selassie I (1892-1975), is identified by Rastas as the messiah, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the redeemer of God's chosen people. In the early days of the movement, black people were identified as God's chosen people who would be saved because they were special to God; it was they who, as the 'true' Israelites referred to in the Bible, were in a covenant relationship with God.

Rastafari can be seen as a response to the history of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism. The early Rastafari preachers vehemently rejected white colonial society and European Protestantism as oppressive. Jamaica, 92 per cent of whose population were descendants of the African slave trade, remained part of the British Empire until 1962, and early 20th century social order continued to treat black people as second-class citizens.

Millenarianism in Rastafari is expressed through the concept of repatriation, with the return to Africa being conceived of in physical, spiritual, and psychological terms. The descendants of those who were forcibly taken as slaves continued to live in exile in Babylon, the biblical symbol for white, colonial society or, more generally, for anything identified as evil or oppressive. Africa, often referred to simply as 'Ethiopia' as the biblical term for Africa, is identified as the Promised Land, also called Zion. Haile Selassie I, in his role as messiah, would come to save his people in Jamaica, which in the early movement was identified with hell. The saved will sail to the Promised Land of Africa in seven miles of ships, leaving darkness and hellfire, with Babylon being destroyed in its wake.

### History/Origins

---

Rastafari began as a religious protest against the social order under colonialism that enslaved and subjugated black people of African ancestry. There is a long history of resistance and rebellion against slavery in Jamaica, a Caribbean island which has had the highest rate of slave revolts and conspiracies in the history of any slave society (Chevannes 1998: 1). When the British expelled the Spanish from the

island in 1655, many of those enslaved by the Spanish escaped into the mountainous interior and from there defended their freedom, establishing long-term communities. Known as Maroons, their numbers swelled with those escaping forced labour by the British. After a series of revolts and wars, they forced the Jamaican colonial government to sign a treaty of accommodation in 1739 (Brown [2016](#)).

The slave trade was outlawed in the British Empire in 1807, however this did not change the status of those already enslaved. It had, however, created an anticipation of emancipation, and the frustration and anger when this did not occur led to The Baptist War of 1831-1832, thereby hastening the abolition of slavery as an institution throughout the British Empire in 1833. Nonetheless, many former slaves continued to experience severe poverty and disenfranchisement, leading to the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion, which resulted in over 400 deaths and the declaration of martial law on the island. It also ended the British Governor's career. Such rebellions often took a religious form among the slaves and peasants.

Revivalism was a major form of religious devotion and inspiration for Jamaicans. It combined European Christianity with traditional African religions, holding a belief in Jesus alongside a pantheon of lesser spirits (Guano 1994). In the late 19th to early 20th centuries, it was common to see small itinerant bands dressed in white following a 'shepherd', the preacher, carrying drums and a Bible and some flowers. They met up in communities, holding meetings at night, when they danced, sang 'sankeys' (songs from hymnbooks by Ira D. Sankey) and performed healings through the laying on of hands. They also induced spirit possession, in which those 'getting in the spirit' would start 'labouring' or 'trumping' (hyperventilating to a rhythmic stomping while bending at the waist).

There were several different strands of Revivalism. Zion Revival worshipped only apostles and [prophets](#), as distinct from Pukumina, which also revered satanic spirits and fallen angels, and was more influential on Rastafari (Chevannes 2011a: 570-572). Alexander Bedward (1859-1930), a notable Zion Revival prophet and healer in early 20th century Jamaica, was arrested for sedition after preaching that blacks should rise up and overthrow white colonialism. He also prophesied the imminent end of the world, when all believers would be taken up to heaven in an assumption. He died in a mental hospital in 1930.

#### *A short documentary about Revival Zion in Jamaica*

The political inspiration for Rastafari came from Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), an advocate of black nationalism and the founder of the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). A Jamaican, he found his most welcoming audiences in the United States for his message of economic and political advancement of Africans 'at home and abroad'. He used the term 'African' to mean not only those in Africa, but also the African diaspora of slaves in the Americas. His was the political claim that 'negroes', as Africans, were not inferior to Europeans, but heirs of the great ancient civilisations of Africa, such as Egypt and Ethiopia – a liberation philosophy aimed at ending white supremacy and enacting social and economic emancipation of all black people.



Marcus Garvey taken in August 1924. Source: Library of Congress Collection.

Garvey argued that black people would never be free if they remained in the Americas; they should return to Africa. For Garvey, this was a practical proposal that did not rely on a supernatural intervention. However, he himself never went to Africa. His injunction, 'look to Africa for the crowning of a king to know

that your redemption is nigh', dated variously to 1916, 1920, and 1927, was widely known among the African diaspora, and it was this that set the stage for the messianism of Rastafari, despite the fact that Garvey himself rejected Rastafari as religious fanaticism; he was no fan of Haile Selassie, and never named him as the redeemer he foresaw of black people.

Ras Tafari was crowned Haile Selassie I, Negus Negusta (Amharic for King of Kings) of Ethiopia, on 2 November 1930. This coronation was a significant event, religiously as well as politically. The coronation was attended by the British King, George V, and other white colonial leaders, who were perceived as paying homage to the black king. The Ethiopian royal lineage claimed descent from the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon of Judah, and this descent was read *prophetically* as meaning that Haile Selassie, like Jesus, was descended from the line of the biblical King David. Haile Selassie identified himself as the 225th King of biblical Ethiopia. He adopted the titles 'King of Kings', 'Lord of Lords', 'Elect of God', and 'Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah', the Lion of the Tribe of Judah being the Prophet Isaiah's image of the Messiah. King of Kings and Lord of Lords are messianic titles used in the apocalyptic visions of the Second Coming to be found in Revelation 19:16. The name 'Haile Selassie' means 'power of the Trinity' in Amharic.

Haile Selassie's lineage, together with his titles and the deference of the white rulers, led to his coronation being perceived as the fulfilment of Marcus Garvey's *prophecy*. Haile Selassie was seen as the messiah, a black king in Africa and incarnation of Jesus Christ. It was a sign that the redemption of black people was nigh and led to the birth of a new religion, which took Haile Selassie's original name, Ras Tafari, as its own.

Leonard P. Howell (1898-1981), Joseph Hibbert (1894-1986), Archibald Dunkley (dates unknown), and Robert Hinds (dates unknown), were primarily responsible for spreading the movement for its first 20 years. They preached spiritual redemption through repatriation, the physical return of all Africans to Africa. They promulgated the idea of a black God amongst people who saw God and Jesus as white and blacks as inferior. That they were made in God's image was a powerful message: Africans were the true chosen people referred to in the Bible who would be saved. The Rastafari preachers held street meetings in much the same style as Zion Revival (a Jamaican Afro-Christian religion), handing out pictures of the black God, Haile Selassie, to prove that he was physically living among humanity now, and proclaiming that all Africans shared in his divinity. The preachers found a ready audience among the uprooted peasantry in the slums of Jamaica's capital Kingston, who were suffering economically from the effects of the Great Depression and devastating hurricanes.

Leonard Howell became the most famous of the early Rastafari preachers. Portraying himself as Christ, he claimed that he was sent by his father, Haile Selassie. In 1940 Howell founded the Pinnacle commune which was to act as a model for later Rasta communes, when he purchased an abandoned colonial plantation in Sligoville, St Catherine. This was a self-sufficient community, living off the land, with up to two thousand followers who also grew ganja (a variety of marijuana) which they traded, resulting in multiple raids by police and militia. Eventually the police succeeded in destroying Pinnacle in 1958, and scattering the group, while Howell was confined to a mental hospital.

It is unclear whether Haile Selassie ever supported the Rastafari belief that he was divine. During a visit to Jamaica in 1966, he did not deny it, but neither did he encourage the desire to move to Ethiopia. Instead, he urged the Jamaicans to work at liberating themselves in Jamaica. The death of Haile Selassie in 1975 in unclear circumstances after being deposed by Marxist revolutionaries was a potential problem for Rastas

who saw him as the living embodiment of the eternal spirit, Jah (Edmonds 2003: 55). Three explanations emerged: (1) he was not really dead, just in hiding, and the agents of Babylon were lying about his death; (2) he had left the human sphere but had not actually died; he had just taken a different form in a different dimension; (3) it did not matter because the spirit of Jah remained eternal and Haile Selassie had been merely a physical manifestation. Haile Selassie remains an important symbol for the Rastafari movement.

## Beliefs

---

Rastafari is not an organised religion in that it has no formal creed or central organising institution. There are, however, two central beliefs that are accepted by Rastas: the divinity of Haile Selassie and salvation after repatriation to Africa. Haile Selassie, in his role as the messiah, can redeem the black people who were exiled in the world of white oppression. The exile occurred through slavery, but the underlying reason was lack of fidelity to Jah; their ancestors, the ancient Israelites, strayed from Jah and broke their covenant with God as His chosen people, which resulted in exile.





Haile Selassie I in full royal regalia. Public domain.

For Rastas, Jesus was black and a Rasta, and is seen as a previous incarnation of the living God. The crucifixion did not result in his death but marked his disappearance into a different realm or state of being. Haile Selassie was the Second Coming of Jesus, and his death was viewed through the same lens by many Rastas. Both are manifestations of Jah, the divine spirit behind all of creation. The mission of the messiah is to redeem his people. This takes the form of repatriation to Africa, which is seen as the Promised Land. The Jesus of white people is a false god, serving the interests of Babylon, and is used to conceal the identity of the true messiah and keep black people from perceiving the truth. The Bible is read as a coded document. It has to be interpreted, not read literally, as it has been twisted for use by Babylon into an instrument of oppression; Rastas read their own meanings into many passages.

God is referred to as 'Jah', which is a shortened form of the biblical 'Jehovah'. Jah is present in all people - a concept invoked through the phrase 'I and I', the oneness of two persons (Cashmore 1983: 6). Everyone is connected through Jah. However, only Rastas are conscious of Jah. Since the divine is found in the individual there is no single authority on doctrine; it is left up to the individual to interpret how one lives as a Rastafari. Rastafari identity is fluid, as is membership, and becoming a Rasta is often a gradual process. There is a general dislike of 'isms', which is why the movement is not called Rastafarianism. Rastas use the phrase the 'Livity' to mean righteous, everliving living. Its essence is the realization that an energy or life-force, conferred by Almighty Jah (God), exists within, and flows through, all people and all living things. 'The Rastafari Livity is a commitment of love and honour to and for Jah, the Almighty Creator of all living things all the days of a Rastafari's life' (Empress Yuhja 2014).

Scholars of Rastafari distinguish between 1930s-1970s beliefs and post-1970s beliefs (Chevannes 1991: 144-145). The early movement was more strongly black supremacist. It tried to invert the colonial social order by claiming that white people were inferior to black people. The ways of white people were evil and, in some formulations, white people were thought of as devils. Black people would come to rule the world by throwing off white colonial oppression and returning to Africa. This would destroy the white social order. Repatriation was considered literal and physical in the early movement, and only for black people. However, the beliefs changed to become less focused on physical repatriation and more on accepting of all people as incarnations of Jah. Rastafari has spread around the world through migration and reggae music, and there are now Rastas who do not have Afro-Caribbean ancestry, including white Rastas, Japanese Rastas, and Maori Rastas (Douglas and Boxill 2012; Sterling 2010; Chevannes 1994: 262-279).

Alongside the black nationalist aspect, Rastafari was more strongly patriarchal prior to the 1970s. Women could only join the movement as the 'dawtas' (wives) of their 'king-men' (husbands). Women were 'grown' as Rastas through their men, they could not join on their own. They did not attend ceremonies; they had to observe certain menstrual taboos; and they had to dress modestly. However, since the 1970s, women have been gradually breaking down these customs and taking an equal place as Rastawomen (Christensen 2014; Rowe 2012).

## Millennial Beliefs

---

Rastafari is a millenarian movement in that it believes an imminent and total transformation of the social

world will occur miraculously through the supernatural agency of Haile Selassie (Cashmore 1983: 3). The end of this world is to be realised supernaturally, suddenly and soon through the destruction of Babylon. The world is in the last days of white colonialism. It is God's will that this will change; white oppression will be brought down and the black king will reign. Salvation for black people is seen as attainable and inevitable. It will occur in this world, not the next, manifest in the physical realm not on a spiritual level. Judgement Day will bring the destruction of Babylon when Nature reasserts herself, and the saved will return to the Promised Land to live forever without evil. Europeans will be returned to Europe, and the Americas returned to the Amerindians. It will be the undoing of colonialism and slavery in a dramatic divine intervention of restorative justice. Freedom means a return to Africa, symbolically, spiritually, or physically.

Early Rastas wanted complete and total change – just as Marcus Garvey did. For them, repatriation meant a physical return to Africa through mass migration. This was a practical task for Garvey. To accomplish it he tried to start a shipping company in the U.S. called the Black Star Line in 1919, but this was beset with financial and technical problems, and resulted in Garvey's deportation to Jamaica after being convicted of mail fraud. The company went bankrupt and closed in 1922. However, it remained a symbol of repatriation. For Rastas, repatriation was an act of divine intervention revealed by [prophecy](#). 'The entire social universe would be totally transformed and they would be returned to Africa through the power of the then Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I' (Cashmore 1983: 3). Repatriation would occur through Haile Selassie, as their redeemer, at whatever time he decided it would occur.

The early Rasta preachers expected Haile Selassie to arrive with ships in Jamaica soon. Leonard Howell sold pictures of Haile Selassie as 'passports' back to Ethiopia in 1933. There were marches for repatriation through the streets of Kingston in 1934. That year Howell preached that the repatriation date would be on 1 August. One requirement for travel was to have a beard, like Haile Selassie. The Rasta street preachers, influenced by Zion Revival, had meetings summoning African spirits to aid in the repatriation process. They would invoke the image of ships from Ethiopia coming to take them to land reserved for them in Africa. The arrival of the ships would mark the advent of the millennium. Stories spread telling how Marcus Garvey's Black Star Line would come for them with a flotilla stretching for seven miles – or that Haile Selassie was building a navy and sending ships to Jamaica to take God's chosen people back to Africa.

*The album Black Star Liners by reggae musician Freed Locks expresses many Rasta millenarian symbols and themes.*

Repatriation was still thought to be imminent in the 1950s. Throughout 1956, small groups of Rastas would gather at Kingston piers and docks, waiting for ships to arrive. In 1958, a Rasta called Prince Emmanuel Edwards held a convention, advertised through the circulation of handbills announcing that his Coptic Theocratic Temple, on Kingston Pier in the Back-o-Wall slum beside the main market, would be the point of departure for the return to Africa. Prince Emmanuel claimed he had received a message from Haile Selassie in 1943 telling him to prepare for repatriation fifteen years later. He also claimed to be in spiritual contact with Leonard Howell. The convention consisted of several days of celebration prior to transportation that would mark the event with dancing, fires, rituals, and drumming. It lasted for two weeks and turned into an armed insurrection. Around 300 Rastas entered the marketplace and declared their intention to capture the city of Kingston. A violent confrontation with the police ensued. Rastas planted their flag in the marketplace as a symbolic 'capture' of the city. It was rumoured that many had



sold their possessions because they expected to be taken to Africa. The Back-o-Wall slum was razed by the government, leaving many without a home. Prince Emmanuel lost credibility when the ships did not arrive; nevertheless, he managed to found a commune in Bull Bay, east of Kingston, called the Bobo Shanti, which continues to this day. The Rastas continued to expect repatriation, and even sued the Jamaican government in 1988, requesting free transportation on seven, nine, or thirteen miles of Black Star ships (Chevannes 2011b: 425). The convention was the origin of the Rastafari nyabinghi ceremony, in which Rastas continue to 'burn' or 'chant' down Babylon symbolically, ushering in a spiritual repatriation.

A further abortive repatriation attempt took place in 1959, this time led by Claudius Henry, a migrant who had returned from the U.S. Henry founded the Seventh Emmanuel Brethren, later called the African Reform Church, and called himself 'God's Anointed Prophet and Repairer of the Breach'. October 5 was announced as 'Decision Day', when all Israel's scattered flock would be returned to Africa. Henry sold 15,000 blue cards as tickets at one shilling each, entitling the holder to travel to Africa. On the card was written, 'Please reserve this ticket for removal. No passport necessary for removal.' Hundreds sold their property and possessions and travelled to Kingston, expecting to travel in the ships. This profited Henry but left his followers penniless and stranded when the boats did not arrive. Henry also wrote a letter to Fidel Castro inviting him to take over Jamaica prior to the imminent departure to Africa, and was subsequently charged with fraud, disturbing the peace and, a year later, treason.

After the ships repeatedly failed to appear there was an ideological vacuum that was gradually filled by increased political activism for repatriation, summed up in the slogan of the period, '*Ethiopia, Yes; England, No! Let My People Go!*'. Repatriation was considered to be part of the reparation that should be made for slavery by the governments and countries that had profited from it, and in 1961, a fact-finding 'Mission to Africa', sponsored by the Jamaican Government, explored the feasibility of mass migration by Rastas and others back to Africa. However, this was not acted upon. Haile Selassie's 1966 visit to Jamaica was interpreted as the final step before repatriation. When he arrived, his plane was surrounded by thousands, leaving him unable to disembark. Rasta elders were summoned to help. They accompanied him out of the plane and had a private meeting with him. Haile Selassie reportedly told the elders to liberate themselves by turning to Jamaica, rather than going to Ethiopia. After this, Rastas became less interested in physical migration, using the new slogan '*Liberation Before Repatriation*'.

Lacking any confirmatory realisation, Rastafari millenarianism was reconceptualised. This took the form of a routinisation of millennial beliefs (Barrett 1977: 147). The expectation of a physical and literal repatriation subsided, and yielded instead to a symbolic repatriation through connecting with and celebrating Africanness. Spiritual repatriation meant that Jamaicans would become fully aware of their African identity and would discover the truth about themselves through 'head resting' with Jah (Chevannes 2012: 23-31). Repatriation is still seen as a moral right, correcting the wrongs of slavery by allowing black people to return to their African homeland (Chevannes 2011a: 568). However, this belief is tempered by an awareness that many of the social and developmental problems that Rastas want to escape from in Jamaica are present and, indeed, often more severe in Africa: 'by insisting on repatriation, the Rastafarian is liable to jump from the frying pan into the fire' (Bamikole 2012: 135). Africa is still considered the Rastafari homeland, but Rastas now tend to return there through embodying the spirit of African norms in daily life rather than going there physically.

### *A Rasta elder talking about repatriation*

Nevertheless, some Rastas continue to predict a sudden, supernaturally induced Judgement Day. A small group called the School of Vision, led by Dermott Fagan, calculated that 11 September 2007 would mark 6,000 years from the creation of Adam according to the Ethiopian calendar (Chevannes 2011b: 430-431). In the [prophecy](#), flying saucers replaced Black Star Liners. Haile Selassie would appear on a chariot of fire at the head of a fleet of flying saucers. He would repatriate those who were prepared to travel, and those who remained would be consumed by fire. Followers of the School of Vision moved to the Blue Mountains, outside Kingston, to await the millennium on the predicted date, but when Haile Selassie did not appear, Fagan shifted to focusing less on a specific date and more on the increasing use by the government of microchips which, he claimed, were omens of the coming Judgement Day.

## Practices

---

Following the failure of the ships to appear physically, symbolic or spiritual understandings of repatriation now dominate the life of Rastas. This involves a whole new way of understanding the world from a black perspective and ridding themselves of an internalised white colonial perception. It also involves changing their ways of thinking and talking, often framed in terms of raising consciousness, phrased as being a 'conscious Ethiopian' rather than a 'careless' one. Freedom from oppression comes through the Rasta way of life. Redemption can occur through living practice; through visible manifestations of repatriation in the ways Rastas organise, speak, dress and act – a rejection of Babylon in everyday life, which involves rejecting anything 'artificial' in favour of the 'natural'. The ways of Babylon are seen as poisoning and corrupting the earth as well as human beings. Rejecting Babylon and embracing Rastafari grants everlasting life, known as 'everliving'. True Rastas can never die; they share in the immortality of Haile Selassie. Those who do die are believed to have somehow strayed from the true path into the ways of Babylon. Salvation means eternal life in this material world, not in a spiritual afterlife, although, like repatriation, this is no longer always interpreted literally.

The rejection of the ways of Babylon is encoded in the structure of the Rastafari movement. There is no central organisation, its organisational structure being characterised as 'reticulate' (Edmonds 2003: 120). It is centred on individual participation, avoiding bureaucratic or hierarchical organisations and rejecting government in general – and the 'colonial British' government of Jamaica in particular. Even post-independence, Rastas do not generally vote or participate in politics. There is no individual leadership. The respect that elders receive is based on individual appreciation of their commitment to Rastafari. There is an open form of Rasta organisation called a 'House', and any who cultivate dreadlocks can be a part of a House. Membership is not based on baptism or any particular conversion ritual. It is often a gradual, intellectual process of coming to appreciate and agree with Rasta ways of seeing and thinking about the world. This allows mainstream Rastafari to be inclusive of any who support the central beliefs in the divinity of Haile Selassie, the religious use of ganja, and the expectation of repatriation. Rastas are then free to live their lives individualistically without collective discipline. In other words, 'they have a sense of identity but without ritual obligation' (Chevannes 1994: 190). Rastas characterise their association in terms of kinship, they are 'brethren' and 'sistren', but not hierarchically ranked, as that is the manner of relating in Babylon. There is thus an ethos of coming, going and participating based solely on individual volition and conviction (Christensen 2014: 65).

As English is the language of Babylon and therefore of the enslaved, emancipation required a new

language for liberation. This is an on-going process, rather than a defined lexicon. Known as 'dread-talk', 'I-talk', 'Iyoric', 'Ivialect', and 'wordsound', it is based on Jamaican Patois, with specific words and grammatical constructions consciously recreated (Pollard 1982). Syntax and grammar is used philosophically. It is almost devoid of subject-object opposition and verbs. Rastas do not use 'me' and 'you' but 'I and I'. This aims to overcome binary oppositions and identify with the sufferers and oppressed of society. The use of 'I' as both subject and object is a way of reminding each person of their worth and value and that they are not a 'slave by nature'. 'I' means the ability to see; it is the central concept of Rastafari word/sound/power. Seeing and knowing are synonymous. 'I' is aware of the innate connection to Jah whereas 'me' is unconscious of this. 'I' is also placed as a pronoun in certain words, such as receive as *I-ceive*, desire as *I-sire*, create as *I-rate*, divine as *I-vine*. Rastas avoid language that contributes to servility, self-degradation, and objectification. They refer to themselves as kings and queens. The knitted tams that cover their dreads, and the dreads themselves, are called 'crowns'. They use language that captures the world as they see it, Hence, '*down-pression*' in place of '*oppression*' because it drags you down rather than lifts you up. Other descriptive sound vibrations include 'destroy' to '*downstroy*', 'understand' to '*overstand*', and 'politics' to '*politricks*'. They change negative to positive sound vibrations such as 'dedicate' to '*livicate*', and 'library' to '*truebrary*'.

### *The Story of Nyabinghi*

Language and music have power for Rastas. Chanting the name of Haile Selassie resurrects him, and Rastas will often refer to him as 'HIM', which stands for 'His Imperial Majesty'. Words are a creative force. This derives from the African concept of *nommo*, that words and word-sounds have inherent power (Christensen 2014: 70). 'Reasoning' is the name given to Rasta discourse. It is an important part of their philosophising, verbal culture. Rastas come together spontaneously and regularly to have lengthy discussions on any subject, during which people join and leave fluidly, and topics change rapidly. It is a ritualised process through which they interpret the world (Cashmore 1983: 10-11). The conscious creation of their own manner of speaking operates as a way of fostering group identity. It is a way of fighting against oppression and slavery through language, conceived of as a spiritual battle and a battle of consciousness.

Rastas have grown and smoked marijuana since the Pinnacle days of the commune in the wilderness from the late 1940s to early 1950s. They use the term 'ganja' in Jamaica. For Rastas, ganja is a sacrament likened to the Christian communion. It is also a way of opposing Babylon and asserting their own authentic form of freedom. Ganja is illegal in Jamaica so it became a way of demonstrating freedom from the laws of Babylon. It also enhances spiritual states, reduces stress, produces visions, brings unity among Rastas and tranquillity to the dispossessed. It became a dominant symbol of Rastafari, called 'callie' and 'iley' in Iyoric. Ganja is viewed not as a drug but as a natural product, often referred to as a herb, and so part of the valorisation of nature and things that grow 'naturally' from the earth, unlike the synthesised products of Babylon. For Rastas the free smoking of ganja is seen as a religious right and an issue of religious freedom. It is, however, widely seen as a criminal activity by governments.

Cultivating their own foodways is seen as a further way of breaking free of Babylon. To this end, Rastas follow a strict diet called *ital*, or 'natural' food. *Ital* means the essence of things, or things in their natural states (Barrett 1977: 141). It is 'a complex of lifeways that offer an alternative to the unnatural man-made Babylon system' (Christensen 2014: 142). The *ital* complex was first adopted by the I-gelic House group in

the hills beyond the Kingston ghetto in the mid-1950s to mid-1960s (ibid: 70). Food is grown without fertilisers. Alcohol, milk, coffee, salt, cigarettes, heroin, cocaine, pork, shellfish, and animal oil are prohibited. Vegetarianism is preferred, but those who do eat meat will avoid pork, shellfish, scaleless fish or snails, and fish over 12 inches long. This is similar to Jewish Kosher food rules, and Rastas follow the same Leviticus dietary and hygiene rules. Pig and cod are also disdained because they are associated with slave food (Chevannes 1994: 205). They prefer food from their own gardens or plantations and avoid food from unknown sources. The abiding principle is one of naturalism. In personal care products as well, Rastas tend to avoid chemically processed goods, such as soap or shampoo, and prefer to wash their hair with only water and locally grown herbs.

This principle of naturalism can also be seen in the cultivation of dreadlocks. A primary symbol of Rasta identity, dreadlocks form when Afro-textured hair is left alone. Those created by a hairdresser or chemical product are called 'bathroom locks'. Rastas are following Leviticus rules in this as well, with what is known as the Nazarite vow, which prohibits trimming or shaving the hair, as well as tattoos or any form of cutting the flesh. But it is also a potent anti-establishment act that symbolises a break with the old, corrupt tradition and is, in this sense, a prerequisite for salvation. Rastas separate themselves from the European establishment visibly through the way they wear their hair. In the early movement this was a highly confrontational action. Dreadlocks were cut off by police and schoolteachers in the 1950s and 1960s as a way of suppressing the movement. It is seen as a visible symbol of difference and rejection, especially of European beauty and appearance standards that valorise straight, combed, trimmed, and conditioned hair. Rastas liken dreadlocks to telepathic antennae or a lion's mane and wear them under a colourful tam. Dreadlocks are said to have come from the Maasai warriors of Kenya who fought against British colonialism. However, not all those who wear dreadlocks are Rastas, and Rastas distinguish between those who have dreads on their heads but not the love in their hearts that makes one a Rasta.

Beyond the hair, Rastas reject mimicking white Europeans dress conventions, and try to embody symbolic repatriation through wearing red, green and gold, which are the colours of the Ethiopian flag, and wearing Afrocentric clothing and decorative buttons with African leaders depicted, especially Haile Selassie. The colours are also brightly displayed on buildings. Homes are decorated with the signature colours, pictures of Haile Selassie, maps of Africa, posters with African themes and ganja symbols. Some Rastas will go further by learning Amharic, the official working language of Ethiopia. Music and drumming rituals are important for Rasta, the smaller rituals being called reasonings and the larger called nyabinghi. In these, they are symbolically chanting down Babylon. The distinctive drum beats of Rastafari music have formed the basis of reggae, which has spread Rasta themes and symbols, and made social commentary through its music a form of political protest against Babylon. The most well-known exponent of reggae, Bob Marley, was a Rasta of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, generally regarded as the most liberal of the Rastafari orders.



Bob Marley's mausoleum and former house at Nine Mile, Jamaica. Public domain.

## Controversies

---

The rejection of the colonial state by Rastas meant they have been viewed as seditious. Their millenarianism was a powerful political challenge to the social order, which in turn brought repression. Especially in the 1940s and 1950s, they were outcasts from society, perceived as subversive, dangerous, and even insane. Leonard Howell and other early preachers were arrested, and some were imprisoned for saying that the king of black people was Haile Selassie, not the British King. At the time, this statement was tantamount to treason. Furthermore, Howell advocated hatred of and violence against the white ruling class because of their oppression. He encouraged Rastas to withdraw allegiance from the British Crown, and to remain loyal only to the black messiah.





A Rasta church in Shashamane, Ethiopia. Source: ©2013 Blackdoom77. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported.

This antagonism towards the state was fuelled by Rastafari actions aimed at repatriation. Claudius Henry, after his unsuccessful announcement of a return to Africa, had his home raided in April 1960. Police found home-made bombs, dynamite, detonators, guns, machetes, swords, batons, clubs, and conch shells filled with cement. Contemporary news reports called it a guerrilla camp. Police arrested Henry with 24 of his followers, and courts convicted them of conspiracy to overthrow the government, using a law that had not been invoked since the 1865 Morant Bay rebellion. More arrests followed, as firearms shipments from America were apprehended, revealing links to black separatists in New York. After a shoot-out in a petrol station in which two British soldiers were killed, Ronald Henry, Claudius Henry's son, was hanged for murder in March 1961. More violence followed against the tourist industry and police officers whom some Rastas attacked as agents of Babylon. In response there was an indiscriminate wave of intimidation against Rastas, involving shaving of locks, arrests, beatings and imprisonment.

There were fears of Rastas as violent militants, trying not only to leave for Africa but also to burn down Jamaica as they left. This view is summed up by Clinton Parchment who wrote in the Jamaican newspaper *The Daily Gleaner* on 30 April 1960:

*There may be a few sincere and decent Rastafarians in this odd semi-religious, semi-political sect, but it is self-evident that the majority are lazy, dirty, violent and lawless scoundrels mouthing religious phrases to cover up their aversion to work and their ill habits. (Quoted in Cashmore 1983: 33)*

Rastas saw Babylon as evil, and in return mainstream Jamaican society saw Rastas as 'folk devils', criminals and revolutionaries. Rastas were confined to mental hospitals for being Rasta, their beliefs being diagnosed as a type of lunacy. Tensions were resolved somewhat by a University College of the West Indies Report of 1960, commissioned by the government. This scholarly account of Rastafari went some way to convincing Eurocentric middle classes in Jamaica that the Rastas beyond Claudius Henry and his followers had peaceful intentions. Problems with police repression continued, however, as officials viewed Rastas as being violent because they smoked ganja (at the time, it was believed that simply smoking marijuana made one more prone to violence). But, from the 1980s onward, Rastas progressively gained mainstream acceptance, especially through their reggae music, and the spread of Rastafari abroad.

Engagement with the Jamaican government was never the primary aim of Rastas, who maintained the primary goal of repatriation to Africa. However, physical migration remained problematic. A 500-acre piece of land was given by Haile Selassie in 1955 near Shashamane, Ethiopia (Campbell 1985: 224-229; Christensen 2014: 146). The Ethiopian King dedicated this land to any in the African diaspora in return for their support during the war with Italy (1940-1941). However, the Rastas who moved there faced primitive living conditions. There was no running water, no electricity, and no housing. It was just land on which they had to start from scratch. They were given nothing else from the King to support themselves, as this would have increased the hostility from the Ethiopians who already lived there. Relationships with locals were tense from the outset. Resident Ethiopians had expected skilled workers from the Americas and Europe; instead, those who had moved there were mostly poor people without significant assets to develop the land. Moving to Ethiopia was more difficult than many Rastas had assumed because they were associated with the King in the minds of the locals. While Haile Selassie was the messiah to Rastas, he was hated by the tribes around Shashamane who had been persecuted by him. After his overthrow, the Rastas were rejected by the Marxist revolutionaries, who saw them as occupying foreigners and the 'Emperor's men'. Much of their land grant was nationalised in 1974 following the revolution. Furthermore, Rastas were less enthusiastic about moving there after the Ethiopian famine of the 1980s. Nevertheless, there were still around 800 Rastas at Melka Oda near Shashamane in 2014 (Summers [2014](#)).

## Further Reading

---

### *Academic Works*

Bamikole, L.O. (2012) "Rastafari as Philosophy and Praxis", in *Rastafari in the New Millennium: a Rastafari reader*, edited by M. Barnett. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, pp. 125-141.

Barrett, L.E. (1977) *The Rastafarians: the dreadlocks of Jamaica*. London: Heinemann.

Campbell, H. (1985) *Rasta and Resistance: from Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney*. London: Hansib

Publishing.

Cashmore, E.E. (1983) *Rastaman: the Rastafarian movement in England*. London: Unwin Paperbacks.

Chevannes, B. (1991) "The Rastafari of Jamaica", in Miller, T. (ed.) *When Prophets Die: the postcharismatic fate of new religious movements*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

– (1994) *Rastafari: roots and ideology*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

– (1998) "Introducing the native religions of Jamaica", in *Rastafari and other African-Caribbean worldviews*, edited by B. Chevannes. Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, pp. 1-19.

– (2011a) "Ships that will never sail: the paradox of Rastafari Pan-Africanism", *Critical Arts*, 25:4, pp. 565-575

– (2011b) "Millennialism in the Caribbean", in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, edited by C. Wessinger. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 420-434

Christensen, J. (2014) *Rastafari Reasoning and the RastaWoman: gender constructions in the shaping of Rastafari livity*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Clarke, P.B. (1986) *Black Paradise: the Rastafarian movement*. Wellingborough: Aquarian Press.

Douglas and Boxill 2012 in Barnett

Edmonds, E.B. (2003) *Rastafari: from outcasts to culture bearers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Empress Yuajah. 2014. *Rasta Way of Life: Rastafari Livity Book*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

Guano, E. (1994) "Revival Zion. An Afro-Christian Religion in Jamaica," *Anthropos*, 89:4/6, pp. 517-528

Pollard, V. (1982) "The Social History of Dread Talk", *Caribbean Quarterly*, 28:4, pp. 17-40.

Rowe, M. (2012) "The Woman in Rastafari", in *Rastafari in the New Millennium: a Rastafari reader*, edited by M. Barnett. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, pp.177-190.

Sterling, M. (2010) *Babylon East: performing, dancehall, roots reggae and Rastafari in Japan*. Durham: Duke University Press.

### *Popular Works*

Brown, L. "The Obscured History of Jamaica's Maroon Societies" *JSTOR Daily*, 31 August 2016, <https://daily.jstor.org/maroon-societies-in-jamaica/>, accessed 22 November 2017.

Freston, T. "The Promised Land" *Vanity Fair*, 14 February, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/politics/2014/02/shashemane-ethiopia-rastafarian-utopia>, accessed 22

November 2017.

McKeon, L. 2017. "The True Story of Rastafari" *The New York Review of Books*, 6 January  
<http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/01/06/the-true-story-of-rastafari/>, accessed 22 November 2017.

Summers, C. 2014. "The Rastafarians' flawed African 'promised land'" *BBC News Magazine*, 12 September,  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-28059303>, accessed 22 November 2017.

© Susannah Crockford 2021

## Note

---

This profile has been provided by Inform, an independent charity providing information on minority and alternative religious and/or spiritual movements. Inform aims to deliver accurate, balanced, and reliable data. It relies on social scientific research methods, primarily the sociology of religion. Inform welcomes feedback, comments, corrections, or further information at [inform@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:inform@kcl.ac.uk).

## Article information

---

Susannah Crockford. "Rastafari." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 15 January 2021. Retrieved from [www.cdamm.org/articles/rastafari](http://www.cdamm.org/articles/rastafari). (First published 3 January 2018 [censamm.org/resources/profiles/rastafari](http://censamm.org/resources/profiles/rastafari).)

Downloaded: 2021-10-01

Provided under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0