

THE ROOTS OF RASTAFARI



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An essay (1995)

INTRODUCTION

*WEEP NOT: BEHOLD THE LION OF THE TRIBE OF JUDAH,
THE ROOT OF DAVID, HATH PREVAILED TO OPEN THE BOOK,
AND TO LOOSE THE SEVEN SEALS THEREOF.*

REVELATION 5: 5

Centuries after these words were written in the Bible, on November 2nd 1930, Ras Tafari Makonnen was crowned Emperor of Ethiopia. He took the name Haile Selassie I, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah. He became the 225th ruler of the 2000 year old Solomonic Dynasty. In Jamaica, religious men who were used to reading between the lines of the King James Bible realised the coronation as fulfilment of Biblical prophecy...

BACKGROUND



The original Jamaicans were **Arawak Indians**. The name Jamaica comes from their word “*Xyamaca*”, (pronounced: eye-my-kah or eye-may-kah) meaning “*Land of wood and water*”. Europeans became aware of Jamaica in 1494 when Columbus landed. **The Arawak** were converted to Catholicism by the Spanish, before disease, warfare and mass suicide drove them to extinction; so the Spanish began to bring in Africans to Jamaica to replace them. British pirates, privateers and soldiers took the island from the Spanish in 1655 and the British continued importing slaves to Jamaica, uprooting hundreds of thousands of Africans to work and die on their sugar plantations.

When the Spanish fled Jamaica, they turned their slaves loose to harass the British. These “*cimmarons*”, meaning *wild* or *untamed* in Spanish, became known to the British as Maroons. **The Maroons** made their strongholds in the impenetrable terrain of the western cockpit country and the rugged mountains of the east. The terrifying sound of the conch shells known as **the Abeng** blown in the hills struck terror in the hearts of the Planters. This effective means of communication was brought from Africa. Some of the great Maroon leaders were **Cudjoe, Accompong, Quao, Cuffe** and **Nanny, Queen of the Maroons**. They were experts in guerrilla warfare and entire units of the British redcoats would march into dense jungle, never to be seen again. After 94 years of battles, the British crown recognised the independence of the Maroons, but at a price. Under articles 6 & 9 of the treaty of 1738, the Maroons agreed to return all other run-away slaves; a service for which the Planters would pay them, a treaty which Nanny, Queen of the Maroons didn’t agree with, she wanted to continue the fight.

Africans remained locked in slavery more securely than ever. Nowhere were the conditions of slavery more brutal than on the island of Jamaica. They were treated as property with no rights, their culture was dismissed as savagery, and their humanity questioned. A large amount of them died through over work at an enormous rate and the British answer to this was a steady stream of replacements. The Africans blood, sweat, tears and death made a handful of Planters some of the richest people in the world. In order to control so many people, the Planters had to control the Africans minds as well as their bodies. Education of the slaves was not permitted, including the teaching of the bible, so the original African culture had many decades to establish itself on the island.

When [George Liele](#) an ex-slave from Virginia started the first Baptist Church in Jamaica in 1783, the Planters objected. Baptists and Methodists were considered radicals at the time because they were opposed to slavery. Their spirited rituals mixed easily with those of the Africans. There were many religious leaders who were among the people brought from Africa. They were unable to practice their religion in the open, so they did it in secret and performed various [rituals](#) such as [Kumina](#) and [Poccomania](#). A new form of Christianity emerged which put fear in the hearts of the Planters.

By the 1800's, the American and French revolutions along with the rebellion of slaves in Haiti had taken place. Rumour spread among the Jamaican slaves that the King had freed them, but the Planters were withholding their free papers. In this highly charged atmosphere, [Samuel Sharpe](#), a minister of the Native Baptist Church inspired rebellion in the Montego Bay area of Jamaica. The anger of the slaves was uncontrollable and many plantations were burned. The out-numbered British army issued a pardon to all slaves willing to return to their plantations. Feeling that freedom was at hand, most rebels returned. The Planters ignored the pardon and many slaves were hung in Montego Bay Town Square. Within two years of [the Sam Sharpe rebellion](#), the King of England did free the slaves. The Planters were reimbursed for the loss of their property, the slaves however, received nothing of the riches they had toiled and died for.

In Jamaican Parliament, [George William Gordon](#) spoke out against conditions that held most people in poverty. Gordon was the son of a white merchant and slave mother. He had become a wealthy landowner and magistrate of the parish of St Thomas. By 1865, the situation there was so poor that [Paul Bogle](#) trained a militia and marched on [Morant Bay](#). [Governor Eyre](#) declared martial law and the rebels were eventually defeated. Gordon was held responsible for provoking the rebellion and Paul Bogle was captured. Both men were ministers of the Native Baptist Church. Paul Bogle was hung from the yardarm of the HMS Wolverine and George William Gordon was hung in Morant Bay. This act was deemed as illegal; Governor Eyre was recalled to England.

The Planters had to turn their power over to the British government, but the island's wealth remained in the hands of the Planter class. They continued to impose European standards on Jamaica. Society was divided along strict colour lines. To achieve anything, a black man and woman had to participate in a world that valued light skinned European features over African ones. The Planters maintained that plantation life was good for the blacks and sought to keep them there with heavy taxes and unequal distribution of land.

MARCUS MOSIAH GARVEY



It was into this world that Marcus Mosiah Garvey was born in St Ann's Jamaica on August 17, 1887, the son of a Methodist Deacon descended from the Maroons. Marcus developed a love of knowledge and became an avid reader. He travelled widely as a young man. In Central America, he was appalled by the conditions West Indian labourers faced which were the same as slavery. In England he met black intellectuals from who he learned about the past glories of African civilisation.

In 1914, Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association, (UNIA), devoted to uplifting the black race. Its motto was "*One God; One aim; One destiny.*" UNIA had 900 branches and claimed over 6 million members around the world. Garvey's goal was a free, strong African homeland for black people. He felt this was the best way for black people to finally achieve equality. He was a powerful speaker and prolific writer. Garvey published the landmark *Negro World* and *Blackman* newspapers. To foster freedom of movement for black people, he launched the *Black Star Shipping Line*. Ironically, many of Garvey's adversaries in Jamaica, America and even Africa were themselves black, with vested interests in the colonial system.

Knowing freedom for black people lay not just in returning the African to Africa, but returning Africa to the African, Garvey would always quote the 68th Psalm verse 31: "*Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her*

hands to God...” Garvey’s efforts were to see their fullest effect in Africa in the late 20th century with successful revolutions of independence all over the continent. Many leaders of these movements were students of Garvey.

Marcus Garvey realised that black people had to interpret the bible for themselves, to “worship HIM through the spectacles of Ethiopia...” He was credited with saying, *“Look to Africa for the crowning of a Black King; he shall be the redeemer...”*

HAILE SELASSIE I – (RAS TAFARI)



In 1930, Garveyites looked and they saw Haile Selassie I, Emperor of the only original African Kingdom still free from colonial domination. Ras Tafari (Haile Selassie) was born July 23rd 1892; he traced his lineage back to Menelik I founder of the Solomonic Dynasty. Menelik was the son of Solomon and Sheba, Queen of Ethiopia, Solomon was the son of David, thus Ras Tafari is the root of David.

In his youth, Ras Tafari had been rumoured to communicate with animals and possessed an uncanny knowledge of sacred Biblical texts kept hidden by priests of the Ethiopian Coptic Church. He said that the information came to him at the moment of his baptism.

Ras Tafari had risen to power against great odds and had become even more of a world figure when he and Ethiopia stood against the forces of Fascism as Italy invaded with tanks airplanes and poison gas at the start of World War II. He was so kind, that many defeated Italians chose to stay in Ethiopia after the war. When World War II ended, Haile Selassie visited numerous countries from Yugoslavia, to the USA, Jamaica, April 21 1966 and Trinidad & Tobago in 1968 to name a few; spreading his message of peace, love, unity and justice for all human beings, regardless of race or creed. His inspiring words of wisdom made him a living legend.

RAS is an Ethiopian title for royalty, similar to Prince. TAFARI was Selassie’s given name. In Amharic, RAS TAFARI means: *Head Creator*. HAILE SELASSIE means: *Power of the Trinity*.

REACTION

Here in UK the appearance of the Rastafarian was a shock. Many in the black community would attempt to straighten their hair to copy the white man and woman. Rastas let their hair grow naturally into knots known as dreadlocks and they became known as “dreads”. In the UK during the mid to late 70s, the first generation of black British born youth (whose parents came from the Caribbean during the mass migrations of the 1950s and 60s), were fertile ground for the Rasta movement. The youth were feeling alienated by British society and this was heightened by the ‘suss’ law initiated by the police who would stop and search black youth on the streets for no apparent reason. There was the energy crisis, mass trade union strikes, redundancies and record unemployment. Unemployment in the young black community was well over the national average compared to their white contemporaries. Around that time as well, Britain was labelled by their European neighbours as “*The sick man of Europe,*” and it was a well known fact that many employers chose to employ white people rather than black.

To the parents of the black British youth, Rasta represented the ghetto mentality and it seemed to make a mockery of the reasons why they came to UK in the first place. Within the black communities across the cities of Britain, a religious revival began to transpire. The Rasta musical uprising in Jamaica was influencing the first generation of black British born youth to follow the teaching and glory of Rastafari. Singers and players of instruments sung about the black Kings and Queens of Africa and African civilisations before slavery, as well as the freedom fighters during and after the holocaust, a history they were never taught in school. This led to a moral conflict between the generations, which turned mother against daughter and father against son. So while the parents went to church to praise the lord, their children packed out the dance halls to dance and listen to the sound systems play the musical bible of Rastafari.

The message of Rastafari was/is a powerful one and their numbers and influence grew. The Rasta message is a simple one. They know God as JAH. JAH has made all men and women of all colours and therefore dwells within each and everyone. It is up to each individual to find the almighty in him/herself. Everyone is a Rasta, if only one would look in his/her heart and find the truth. It is up to each and everyone to know them self and do right.

***SING UNTO GOD, SING PRAISES TO HIS NAME:
EXTOL HIM THAT RIDETH UPON THE HEAVENS BY HIS NAME
JAH, AND REJOICE BEFORE HIM.***

PSALM 68: 4



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