

The Gleaner

Jamaica WI
Established 1834

Hail Rastafari

Published: Sunday | July 4, 2010 | 12:00 AM



A Rastafarian man instructs a little girl how to beat a drum during a lecture by His Imperial Highness Prince Ermias Sahle-Selassie Haile Selassie, one of the grandsons of Haile Selassie. The prince lectured on Africa and the new millennium at the University of the West Indies' undercroft. - File

Mel Cooke, Gleaner Writer

Academic interest in Rastafari has accelerated and deepened extensively in the half-century since the Rex Nettleford, M.G. Smith and Roy Augier authored 'Report on the Rastafari Movement in Kingston, Jamaica', published by then University College of the West Indies.

Rastafari has spread from its beginnings in Jamaica, transplanted by itinerant or migratory persons, as well as through adaptation by persons who may not have come into direct contact with Jamaicans but have been influenced by art and literature. Academic interrogation has accompanied those literal movements of the Rastafari movement.

Now, timed to celebrate the report's 50th anniversary as well as to coincide with National Hero Marcus Garvey's 123rd birthday on August 17, the Inaugural Rastafari Studies Conference will be centred around the University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona. It is subtitled 'Negotiating the African Presence: Rastafari Livity and Scholarship'.

Schedule

Dr Jalani Niaah, lecturer at the UWI, tells **The Sunday Gleaner** that "the conference schedule takes place within a week of celebrations".

So while the conference runs from Tuesday, August 17, to Friday, August 20, there is a 'Sunday to Sunday' schedule, beginning on the 15th, which also incorporates the Ethio-Africa Diasporic Union Millennium Council and Liberty Hall.

"The idea is that using the facilities of the council (on Mona Road) Liberty Hall and the university, that week of activities will share a Pan-African agenda," Niaah says. The Smithsonian Museum, which put in the 'Discovering Rastafari' exhibit in 2007, is also involved in the conference.

The conference will consist of presentations by persons who have submitted abstracts, about 75 of which have been accepted, and there will be about 120 speakers overall.

There are a number of proposed papers highlighting gender and Rastafari thought, and philosophy is also a popular category.

Niaah said: "I am sure on the spot we will be getting some persons wanting to contribute." This, however, cannot be accommodated.

The earliest days of the week are considered to be more of a Rastafari family gathering in preparation for the conference, and part of the plans is a proposed village at the Mona Road location.

On the UWI campus, there will be an exhibition on Rastafari in the Multi-Functional Room, which will move into the main library when the conference ends.

With the work of Jerry Small, Suzanne Moss and Dr Clinton Hutton combining for a photography and painting exhibition, and seven films (Moss included in the presenters, as well as Deborah Thomas and Oliver Hill) are programmed.

Role as a mediator

Niaah points to the "university's role as a mediator between the (Rastafari) movement and the public" and underscores the effect of the 50-year-old report.

It stopped the society and caused serious interrogation of Rastafari to the government level, that leading in turn to the mission to Africa within a year of the report.

While that mission, of which the late Mortimer Planno was a noted member, is much storied, there was also a following technical mission in which Nettleford participated. The report on that mission, which was never published, will be made available as part of a three-in-one publication.

And with Sir Roy Augier slated to deliver the opening keynote address, the link between the report 50 years ago and the Inaugural Rastafari Studies Conference will take on flesh. The international reach and impact of Rastafari has been reflected by significant interest from South Africa, as well as submissions from Haiti, Martinique, Trinidad and Tobago, New Zealand, the United States, and other countries.

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