

The Gleaner

Jamaica WI
Established 1834

Haile Selassie celebration - Rastafarians to commemorate the 45th anniversary of Selassie's three- day visit in April

Published: Sunday | January 2, 2011 | 12:00 AM



Haile Selassie (third right) on his historic visit to Jamaica on April 23, 1966. - File
Howard Campbell, Gleaner Writer

WHEN ETHIOPIAN Emperor Haile Selassie I arrived in Jamaica on April 21, 1966, it was considered more than just a state visit by the country's growing Rastafarian population. It gave the religion of dreadlocked disciples a sense of legitimacy in their homeland.

"People used to call us mad and say Selassie would not come here. It brought recognition for I and I in Jamaica," said Shephan Fraser, chairman of the Ancient Council and a priest in the Nyabinghi Order.

The various Rasta groups in Jamaica plan to commemorate the 45th anniversary of Selassie's three-day visit in April with a series of events dubbed 'Survival World Culture Music Festival' to be held at the Trelawny Multi-purpose Stadium.

Lance Ho Shing, spokesman for the Ancient Council, told **The Sunday Gleaner** that several cultural acts are scheduled to perform on the live segment of the event, including some from Africa. The series actually starts April 20 with the lighting of a symbolic fire at the Trelawny stadium.

Ho Shing said the events will also mark the 50th anniversary of independence for several African nations from European colonialism.

Embraced Rastafari

Repatriation to Africa, a cornerstone of the Rastafarian message, will be one of the issues to be discussed during the activities.

Fraser was 27 years old when Selassie came to Jamaica. The St Catherine-born pastor's son said he embraced Rastafari at age 15 and suffered social prejudice because of his beliefs.

He was among the hundreds of Rastafarians who showed up at what was then the Palisadoes Airport to welcome Selassie, whom many Jamaicans hailed as a hero, due to his courageous leadership of Ethiopian troops against armies of the Fascist Italian dictator Benito Mussolini in the 1930s.

Most Rastafarians at the time regarded Selassie as God because he is reportedly a direct descendant of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

The Ethiopian monarch's trip came at a time when Rastafarians were experiencing widespread aggression from Jamaican police and shunned by mainstream society. At the same time, the Jamaican Government was taking a studied look at Rastafarians.

In 1960, Rastafarian leaders approached University of the West Indies (UWI) lecturers M.G. Smith, Roy Augier, and Rex Nettleford to conduct a study on the group which many scholars believe originated in west Kingston during the 1930s. The 50th anniversary of that report was recognised with the Rastafari Studies Conference at the Mona campus of the UWI last August.

One year later, three Rastafarians - Mortimo Planno, Douglas Mack, and Philmore Alvaranga - were part of a government-sanctioned team that went on a fact-finding tour of Africa. A technical mission, again funded by the Government, also visited the continent that year.

Selassie's visit to Jamaica was the second stop in a four-country Caribbean trip that also included visits to Trinidad and Tobago, Haiti, and Barbados. During his Jamaican stay, Selassie met Prime Minister Alexander Bustamante, was awarded an honorary degree from the UWI and addressed Parliament.

His visit inspired rebellious Jamaican youth to accept Rastafarianism, and by the dawn of the 1970s, the faith was the voice of reggae music standard-bearers like Bob Marley and Burning Spear.

While reggae was making international strides in 1974, Ethiopia was in the midst of an economic crisis. Selassie was deposed by the Ethiopian military that year and was reportedly executed in August 1975.

Copyright © 2015 The Gleaner Company (Media) Limited. All Rights Reserved.

Pasted from <<http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20110102/lead/lead6.html>>