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A defiant message from the Church of Haile Selassie I

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Abbot Shubael - Contributed

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It is noon on Sunday and I am in the belly of West Indian Brooklyn. Just off Nostrand Ave, a multi-coloured building bearing the emblem of The Lion of Judah - a strutting lion - proud with its foreleg carrying the Rastafarian flag is displayed. The chanting from inside the church pierces its thick doors.

I enter just in time for the liturgical service of the Church of Haile Selassie I (Ba Beta Kristiyan Haile Selassie I), referred to as a "*bona fide* Ethiopian religious institution in exile". The inside exudes a kinetic ecclesiastical feel. The usher, a young man with a red, green and yellow sash, directs me to one of the pews, not before being cautioned against photographing the proceedings and taking notes from the Anaphora (Divine Liturgy). I make a faint protest. After all, I followed their protocol and had scheduled an appointment several days before. One Rastafarian, obviously with some sway, baulks, and allows me to transcribe the words of Abbot Shubael, who by now held court.

The Church of Haile Selassie I is touted as the only veritable Rastafarian group in the US. It is chartered as an Ethiopian institution and incorporated in New York, a fact that is repeated during the fiery sermon of Abbot Shubael, a bespectacled, slightly built man fully draped in all the accoutrements of his august position.

Treading down the thorny road of sectarianism, the Abbot stridently blasts other "Rasta outfits" such as the 12 tribes of Israel, Bobo Shanti and Nyabingi "that use the jargon of Rastafarianism but practice a skewed creed". He teaches that these groups are short on a structured liturgy and philosophy. "There are organisations out there that distort the true meaning of Rastafarianism," he laments. "These groups congregate, while we worship. That's a big difference." His message is unswerving and defiant.

He assails "dancehall" Rastas, steeped in secularism and the ways of 'Babylon'. "We follow a definitive philosophy. It

is Rastalogy, the path of knowledge. It is an attitude of mind and very academic."

The Church of Haile Selassie I is well structured, managed and hierarchical - an Order that is headed by the Abuna (a title equivalent to 'Pope'), who resides in Jamaica. Clerical training is challenging and requires at least seven years of study and devotion.

Unflustered Message

With branches in Jamaica, Britain, Barbados, and eyes on Trinidad, its message of redemption and restoration of the Ethiopian monarchy is unambiguous. Its homilectics is culled from the books of Proverbs, Mark and John. The message is unflustered. "Rules and regulations are mandatory so there must be discipline and order." Abbot Shubael preaches in a thick vernacular. His oratory is plied with Caribbean aphorisms on discipline. "Licks never kill nobody." It elicits scattered laughter.

On every pew are Bibles, liturgical booklets and prayer scripts that ascribe Godhood to Haile Selassie I. The sexes are separated and the reverence to the tabernacle catches the eye (members are prohibited from turning their back to the "Holy of Holies," carefully walking backwards through the aisle. Newly arrived members approach the tabernacle, bow and gesture symbolically, with circular hand movements followed by what seems to be the signing of a cross inches away from the chest.

Abbot Shubael and the sacerdotal group of five young men circumambulate the tabernacle on several occasions. Pictures of Haile Selassie I and his lineage adorn the walls. The tabernacle itself is draped in white, lit and adorned with a menorah and the Star of David. The chanting is repetitious and infectious. The frankincense and myrrh blur your vision and overwhelm your olfactory sense. The blessings and benedictions are personalised. With chalice swaying, each member is fumigated, followed by a priest with an open Bible that he places before the forehead of devotees, while chanting with a rapidity that is barely comprehensible. Interestingly, the holy book is parted on Psalm 87 with the adjacent page bearing the likeness of Haile Selassie I.

The service is highly ritualistic and solemn. There is veneration with a ceremonial character that is unmistakable. But this takes little away from a message that rivets and stirs the passions of believers. The Abbot later counsels me on being a "true Rasta". He vigorously rejects the "propaganda" that Haile Selassie I was under house arrest before his passing. The former Emperor of Ethiopia, according to Abbot Shubael, is one with the Creator and the Head Creator. He is in fact called "The Might of the Trinity". In a belief that borders the abstruse concepts of the Ascension and the Assumption, Haile Selassie I, he says "walked away, never to be seen again" thereby "fulfilling prophecy".

"The Emperor is still alive and can never die," he assures me.

He later explains his affinity to Rastafarianism in a revealing exchange that appears to echo the spirit of Dr Sultana Afroz, who dispelled the myth of European discovery of "the so-called New World".

Abbot Shubael also concurs that East Africans predated Columbus in the form of 15th century Zara Yacobite people of Ethiopia and recoils at the thought of his foreparents being slaves.

"My lineage has nothing to do with slavery, but is part of the great tribes of Ethiopia. It was easy for me to identify and embrace Rastafarianism because of my ancestry."

Hours later, I continue to ponder. As guarded as it might be, I cannot help but reflect on the rich fraternity of this unique church. It projects an authenticity that cannot be feigned. Handshakes, smiles and greetings of "Rasta" made for an enviable, elucidating experience - refreshing and equally thought-provoking.

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