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Understanding Rastafari (Part II)

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Rastafarians use decorative drums in their performance.

RASTAFARI, THE spiritual movement pioneered by Leonard P. Howell in the 1930s, was born out of Howell's belief that Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia, born Lidj Tafari Makonnen, was the black messiah, the manifestation of God or Jah on Earth.

Despite several attempts to silence and wipe out the movement, it has grown to become one of the most significant spiritual movements of the 21st century.

"It is one of the most important popular movements of the modern age, and it has influenced Jamaican culture, changed other cultures and helped defined Jamaica's image abroad. It has impacted almost everybody's lives in one way or another," writes Dr Jonathan Greenland, director, National Museum Jamaica, in the preface of *Rastafari*, a journal published by the Institute of Jamaica in July 2013.

But what exactly is Rastafari, and what is it espousing? "The Rastafari community seeks to preserve its ancestry and the traditions it has inherited and sustained in the face of slavery and colonialism. The community has always strongly affirmed its desire for repatriation to Africa, the physical and spiritual homeland and of its ancestors," writes Rastafarian Attorney-at-law Marcus Goffe in the same journal. Thus, Rastafari has a serious spiritual connection to Africa, and has developed its own culture and philosophy.

It is credited for the development of reggae music, which has "evolved from traditional Rastafari drumming patterns and the community's spiritual ideology". The drums are a major part of Rastafari's chanting and ceremonial rituals, which "form the basis of Rastafari traditional cultural expressions", Goffe writes, "the ceremonial beating of decorative Rastafari drums ... along with spiritual cleanliness of community members, is believed to evoke protective, as well as offensive powers". Rastafari believe that 'word, sound is power'.

Like all religions/faiths/movements, Rastafari has symbols that are easily recognisable. The Star of David, the Lion of Judah, the staff of correction, the image of Hail Selassie I, red-green-and-gold clothes, scarves, flags, banners,

pennants, the Nyabinghi drum, the map of Africa, the chalice, are some of the symbols that represent Rastafari, which is regarded as a way of life.

Rastafarians, invariably vegetarians, lead a natural lifestyle, often referred to as 'livity'. Salt and processed foods are eliminated from their diet, which is called Ital. "Ital signifies the unity of the individual with nature and includes a diet of natural foods that increases life energy or 'livity'," Goffe writes.

Herbal healing is a part of Rastafari livity. Thus herbal, and not synthetic, medicines are used to treat a variety of illnesses.

Because of this concept of livity, many do not see Rastafari as a religion like Christianity and Islam. It has more than one leader and no central administrative buildings. In the movement, there are a number of houses or mansions. The main ones are Twelve Tribes of Israel, Nyahbinghi and Bobo Shanti. Some of the early pioneers were Joseph Hibbert, Archibald Dunkley, Robert Hinds, Athlyi Rodgers, and Howell himself.

The movement which he started is now a force to be reckoned with. It has a huge legacy, and has evolved in many ways. But what has not changed is "his message of hope and his example of black self-determination". "This philosophy became the cornerstone of the Rastafari faith," write Jahlani Niaah and Ijahnya Christian in the journal.

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