

Introduction: This factsheet is not intended to be definitive guide to the Rastafari Faith. Alternatively, it attempts to provide basic known facts as well as some information that is perhaps less well-known.

Rastafari



Rastafarian flag with the Lion of Judah¹

A young religion², Rastafari is African-centric with its origins in Jamaica in the 1930's following the coronation of Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia in 1930. The Emperor is considered by some Rastafarians to be God. Others believe Him to be Christ, the Messiah, and as part of the Holy Trinity. As a name, Rastafari is derived from 'Ras' meaning 'head/king' (an Ethiopian title) and 'Tafari Makonnen', which was Emperor Haile Selassie's name prior to his coronation.

Numbers in the UK

According to the 2001 Census, there are 5,000 Rastafarians living in England and Wales.

HIM (His Imperial Majesty) Emperor Haile Selassie

Rastafarians believe in the divinity of HIM Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia³, that he is part of a direct descended line from that of the Biblical King David and that he will lead a return to Africa of members of black communities exiled through the machinations of the slave trade and colonialisation. Rastafarians believe that Ethiopia is the Promised Land and refer to it as Zion.⁴ In the early 1930's, The Emperor was the only African monarch of a fully independent state⁵. Though the Emperor was not a Rastafarian as such (Rastafari is therefore an example of an exocentric religion), his divine presence is fundamental to the Rastafari faith. His symbolic status as the 'Lion of Judah' is reflected in the Rastafarian flag.



¹ Source: Wikipedia (http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rastafari_lion_flag.jpg)

² Though some see Rastafari as having ancient beliefs.

³ Photographs of HIM Emperor Haile Selassie. Sources: G.Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection (left) and United States Office of War Information (right). From Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haile_Selassie_I_of_Ethiopia)

⁴ There are firm parallels in Rastafarian belief with the experiences of the 'Lost Tribes' of Israel and Jewish communities, their exile and subsequent return. Rastafarians would make reference to Zion and Babylon, for example, and indeed see themselves as descendants of one of the Lost Tribes, the tribe of Judah.

⁵ Ethiopia retained its independence from this time to date.

Slavery

It would be an understatement to consider the impact of slavery on African and Caribbean communities as being massive and of a long duration. Consequently such an impact is a key cornerstone of the Rastafari faith and its customs. It manifests itself in its core beliefs, in the lives of those considered sacred within the faith and in areas such as reggae music.

Beliefs and Customs

- Rastafarians are predominantly, but not exclusively, black. They believe that they are the chosen people of God, 'the reincarnation of ancient Israel'⁶, but that the role, status and access to dimensions of power of black people have been historically suppressed through colonisation, the slave trade and racism. Righting such wrongs and the return of black people to their ancestral African homelands are core Rastafarian concerns and goals.
- It is a belief amongst many Rastafarians that following their return from exile to the African homelands, black communities will in a sense turn historical tables and achieve greater power and influence in a world in which white domination is eroded. However, this should not necessarily mean a literal historical inversion. Many Rastafarians will point to a new world order in which the status and power of black communities is respected and increased to its legitimate level, and will promote true and genuine multiculturalism.
- Not all Rastafarians advocate a literal return to Africa for all black communities. Some see a more symbolic reverence and admiration for the African continent and a recognition of pride for their African roots.
- A number of laws from the Old Testament form a basis of Rastafarian belief. Such laws, for example, impact on Rastafarian diet and on the belief that cutting hair or flesh is wrong.
- There are strong moral principles in Rastafarianism and a focus on fraternity, love, charity and modesty. There is also an inherent and strong conviction in aiding and defending the poor and oppressed and fighting for their rights and status advancement.
- Rastafarians believe in reincarnation and in eternal life.
- Followers of the Rastafari faith are known by a number of names: Rastafarians, Rastas, Sufferers, Locksman, Dreads or Dreadlocks (the latter because of the way Rastafarians who choose not to cut their hair, tie it as a result). Dreadlocks also symbolise the lion's mane in the Rastafarian flag.
- Rastafari ceremonies involve the use of drumming, chanting and meditating as a means of developing and attaining a heightened and intense sense of spirituality. Spiritual awareness and community togetherness is also attained through the practice of inhaling marijuana/ganja (known as the 'wisdom weed' or 'holy herb') in a spiritual and ritualistic sense.
- Rastafarian music has had a number of influences, specifically 19th Century Gospel singing and African drumming. Traditionally, the religious music is called 'Nyabingi'.
- Religious meetings or gatherings are known as 'Reasoning sessions'.
- A Rastafarian diet traditionally involves natural and clean produce ('I-tal') such as fruit, vegetables and herbs. Some follow strict dietary laws, including refraining from meat (pork in particular), alcohol and even milk or coffee.
- Rastafarians oppose abortion and contraception.

Rastafarian Colours

Rastafarian colours are red, green and gold, with the occasional inclusion of black. Red symbolises the historical blood sacrifice of black communities; green the vegetation characteristic of Africa and the symbolic end to suppression; and gold, the prosperity and wealth of Ethiopia, but also to symbolise the riches stolen from black communities. Black is used to denote the skin colour of Africans central to the foundation of Rastafarianism as a faith.

Other Key People

- Leonard Howell is known as 'The First Rasta'. A Jamaican preacher and religious activist, Howell talked in the early 1930's of the position of HIM Emperor Haile Selassie as a 'Messiah' and of the other central tenets of Rastafarianism. It brought him into conflict with Jamaican authorities and dominant

⁶ From the BBC website (www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/rastafari/beliefs/)

organisations in Jamaican society and in many ways this battle is symbolic of the Rastafarian focus on suppression and discrimination, and of the negative depiction of Jamaican power structures.

- Marcus Garvey was a Jamaican political activist in the cause of black community self-empowerment. Rastafari theology has its roots in Garvey's philosophical ideas and he is therefore considered to be a prophet. He was a key figure in the development of the black nationalist movement in the USA and strongly influenced the development of such beliefs globally. He too, saw the significance of the position of HIM Emperor Haile Selassie.
- Knowledge and the global diffusion of the faith was significantly helped by the popularity of Bob Marley and his music from the 1970's onwards. Rastafarian thought, belief and ideals pervade his music.
- Other influential people in the development of the Rastafarian faith include Alexander Bedward, Robert Hinds and Prince Emmanuel Charles Edwards.



Marcus Garvey, photographed in 1924⁷

Reggae Lyrics

Reggae music has been and retains a strong influence on the Rastafari faith. Reggae often uses slavery, oppression and repatriation as subjects.

The following are examples of lyrics from the songs of Bob Marley.⁸

Slave Driver

Ev'rytime I hear the crack of a whip,
 My blood runs cold.
 I remember on the slave ship,
 How they brutalize the very souls.
 Today they say that we are free,
 Only to be chained in poverty.
 Good God, I think it's illiteracy;
 It's only a machine that makes money.
 Slave driver, the table is turn, y'all. Ooh-ooh-oo-
 ooh

Exodus

Open your eyes and look within:
 Are you satisfied with the life you're living?
 We know where we're going;
 We know where we're from.
 We're leaving Babylon, y'all!
 We're going to our Father's land.
 Exodus, all right! Movement of Jah people!
 Exodus: movement of Jah people!
 Movement of Jah people!
 Movement of Jah people!

⁷ Source: United States Library of Congress. From Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Marcus_Garvey_1924-08-05.jpg)

⁸ From www.bobmarleylyrics.org/

Holy Days and Significant Dates⁹

The following are significant dates for Rastafarians:

- 7th January: Ethiopian Christmas. Ethiopia is considered as a spiritual homeland.
- 21st April: Groundation Day. The Anniversary of HIM Emperor Haile Selassie's visit to Jamaica in 1966.
- 16th July: Ethiopian Constitution Day
- 23rd July: Birthday of HIM Emperor Haile Selassie I
- 17th August: Birthday of Marcus Garvey
- 11th September: Ethiopian New Year's Day.
- 2nd November: Anniversary of the Crowning of HIM Emperor Haile Selassie I in 1930.

Subdivisions

Rastafarians can belong to different groups within the faith, such groups holding slightly different views. Examples of groups include Bobo Shanti, the Nyahbinghi Order and the Twelve Tribes of Israel

Leicestershire Contacts

For further information on contacts and sources, contact Julian Harrison at Leicestershire County Council¹⁰.

Credits and Sources of Further Information

BBC – Religion and Ethics (www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/rastafari/)

Bob Marley Lyrics (www.bobmarleylyrics.org/)

Jamaicans.com (www.jamaicans.com/culture/rasta/index.shtml and

www.jamaicans.com/culture/rasta/believe.shtml)

Rasta Speaks (www.rastaspeaks.com/lan/)

Rastafari Online Community (<http://rastafarionline.com/>)

Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rastafari_movement and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonard_Howell)

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⁹ Further information on these and other Holy Days can be found in the Interfaith and International Calendar produced by Julian Harrison at Leicestershire County Council.

¹⁰ Julian Harrison can be contacted on 0116 305 7018 or julian.harrison@leics.gov.uk.