

## “You don’t have to be a Rasta to be Rasta-minded”

For many, the mention of the word ‘Rastafarian’ conjures images of dreadlocked men sitting in the shade of Jamaican palm trees, swaying to the mellowing rhythm of a Bob Marley tune and enshrouded in a cloud of herb smoke.

But to those who have embraced the Rastafari movement, it is about liberation and a ‘consciousness’ about their identity and self worth. Much of its theology is rooted in the teachings of Marcus Garvey – who many see as a modern John the Baptist – and the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie (1892 – 1975), regarded by some as a pampered and pilfering monarch and revered by others as a deity.

Selassie, whose reign is believed to have been predicted by Garvey, was deposed exactly 40 years ago in a military coup, ending his more than half a century reign over the only African nation never to be officially colonised. Today, he is still considered to be one of the cornerstones of the religion. Ras Habte Wold, from West Midlands-based research group Rastafari Heritage, said: ‘HIM Emperor Haile Selassie I is the light that brightens the world during an age of darkness and he is the guide to the Almighty.’ **INSPIRED** But Rastafarian and world renowned poet, Dr Benjamin Zephaniah, say the movement that inspired him is often misunderstood. ‘You have Rastafarians who eat meat and some like me who will only eat ital. There are capitalists and then you have those like me to the left - freedom fighters, from the Bob Marley school. Then you have those for whom it is all in the head and actually I don’t think any of us are false.’ ‘It’s not just about music - I love my roots reggae, but I also listen to rock and roll – or dreadlocks or smoking, because some of us don’t smoke. These things are superficial.’ He added: ‘I have looked at Rastas all over the world, and the things that really define Rastafarianism is first an understanding that Marcus Garvey was a modern day prophet. Second, a recognition of Selassie’s lineage, that he was a direct descendant of Solomon and David and finally; the belief that all black people came from Africa.’ While Zephaniah reveres Selassie as an important feature of Rastafarianism, he does not agree that he was infallible. He explained: ‘Some people describe him as Christ returned to sit on the throne and then there are people like me who recognise the lineage but who also know that he was flesh and made mistakes as a politician.’ ‘I separate the two things – him as a politician and him as symbol of resistance. It has to be acknowledged that he did some good things. He stood up to Mussolini and the fascists when they tried to colonise his empire and he also modernised Africa.’ **MISUNDERSTOOD**: Emperor Haile Selassie It was Selassie who established one of Ethiopia’s first universities, now Addis Ababa University, which taught political economy and law among other subjects, as well as enabled the Ethiopian military to learn the sophisticated training techniques of allies like the United States – which were to be used against him in the military coup in 1974. His Pan-Africanism ideology was influential across the globe, reflected in the civil rights movement in the US and in South Africa. It is based on the belief that unity is vital to economic, social, and political progress and aims to ‘unify and uplift’ people of African descent. **MESSAGE** Zephaniah said: ‘If you put the message into the context of a time when black people really didn’t like themselves, when they felt they had to bleach themselves, that message raised our consciousness.’ ‘It was urging us to stand up! It made us proud to be Africans, and we were no longer ashamed of the colour of our skin or the texture of our hair.’ He added: ‘If you look at the black community worldwide you would see that Rastafarianism has helped to raise the consciousness of people. You don’t have to be a Rasta to be Rasta-minded.’ The self-confessed reformed bad boy believes that Rastafarianism saved his life. He reminisced: ‘As a young person growing up it gave me strength. I probably would be dead now if it wasn’t for the movement and my poetry. I used to sleep with a gun under my pillow, but then I realised that I was being a hypocrite.’ Today, there is still a strong Rastafarian movement in the UK. Habte describe the religion as ‘organic’. He said: ‘It has grown in every community in the world, Rastafari transcends all boundaries. Our ancient principles govern and guide our modern-day journey to repatriate with reparations from Britain to Africa.’ But even before the rise of the movement, Selassie was having an impact on the UK. Between 1936 and 1941 he spent his exile years in the city of Bath, which bestowed upon him a Freedom of the City – the highest honour that could be given to a citizen, putting him in the company of the likes of Churchill. When he left the UK he donated his residence, Fairfield House, to the people of Bath. Steve Nightingale, who is part of a trust set up by the people of Bath to preserve the house, said Selassie made a ‘marked impact on the city’. On a website dedicated to the property, they posted what has been recognised as one of his most powerful quotes: ‘Throughout history, it has been the inaction of those who could have acted; the indifference of those who should have known better; the silence of the voice of justice when it mattered most; that has made it possible for evil to triumph.’ Source: voice-online.co.uk