

# Is Rastafarianism Replacing Gospel in Jamaica?

The robed Rastafarian priest looked out over the turquoise sea off Jamaica's southeast coast and fervently described his belief that deliverance is at hand.

Around him at the sprawling Bobo Ashanti commune on an isolated hilltop, a few women and about 200 dreadlocked men with flowing robes and tightly wrapped turbans prayed, fasted, and fashioned handmade brooms—smoking marijuana only as a ceremonial ritual.

“Rasta church is rising,” declared Priest Morant, who wore a vestment stitched with the words “The Black Christ.” “There’s nothing that can turn it back.”

The Rastafarian faith is indeed rising in Jamaica, where new census figures show a roughly 20 percent increase in the number of adherents over a decade, to more than 29,000. While still a tiny sliver of the mostly Christian country’s 2.7 million people, Jalani Niaah, an expert in the Rastafari movement, says the number is more like 8 to 10 percent of the population, since many Rastas disdain nearly all government initiatives and not all would have spoken to census takers.

“Its contemporary appeal is particularly fascinating to young men, especially in the absence of alternative sources for their development,” said Niaah, a lecturer at the University of the West Indies.

Founded 80 years ago by descendants of African slaves, the Rasta movement’s growing appeal is attributable to its rejection of Western materialism, the scarcity of opportunities for young men in Jamaica and an increasing acceptance of it.

For the black nationalist Bobo Ashanti commune, the Rastafarian faith is a transforming way of life, where Rastas strive to live a frugal existence uncomplicated by binding relationships to “Babylon”—the unflattering term for the Western world. They share a deep alienation from modern life and Jamaica is perceived as a temporary harbor until **prophecy** is fulfilled and they journey to the **promised land** of Africa on big ships.

Life is highly regimented at the isolated retreat, cut off from most of the comforts of modern society. But it has a strong appeal for some, among them 27-year-old Adrian Dunkley, who joined the strict sect two months ago after years of questioning his Christian upbringing and struggling to find work as an upholsterer.

“This place is helping me a whole heap. I’m learning every day, and things are starting to make sense,” the new recruit known as Prince Adrian said in the shade of one of dozens of scrap-board buildings painted in the bright Rastafarian colors of red, green and gold.

Other Rastafari adherents follow a more secular lifestyle, marked by a passion for social justice, the natural world, reggae music and the ritualistic use of pot to bring them closer to the divine.

A melding of Old Testament teachings and Pan-Africanism, Rastafarianism emerged in colonial-era Jamaica in the 1930s out of anger over the oppression of blacks. Its message was spread by the reggae songs created by musical icons **Bob Marley**, **Peter Tosh**, Burning Spear and others in the 1970s, and the movement has attracted a following among reggae-loving Americans, Europeans and Asians. Academics believe at least 1 million people practice it worldwide.

In the United States, the population of Rastafarians appears to be steadily growing due in part to **jailhouse conversions**,

said Charles Price, associate professor of anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the author of "Becoming Rasta: Origins of Rastafari Identity in Jamaica."

"I regularly get letters from inmates seeking information," Price said. "I also get regular invitations to talk to prisoners at local North Carolina juvenile facilities, often from chaplains trying to figure out what to do."

Besides the well-known ritual use of marijuana, Rastas endeavor to reject materialist values and practice a strict oneness with nature, eating only unprocessed foods and leaving their hair to grow, uncombed, into dreadlocks.

Most of its many sects **worship** the late Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, even though he was widely considered a despot in his native land and paid little heed to his adulation by faraway Caribbean people whose ancestry tended to be West African and not Ethiopian.

The worship of Selassie is rooted in Jamaican black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey's 1920s prediction that a "black king shall be crowned" in Africa, ushering in a "day of deliverance." When an Ethiopian prince named Ras Tafari, who took the name Haile Selassie I, became emperor in 1930, the descendants of slaves in Jamaica took it as proof that Garvey's prophecy was being fulfilled. When Selassie came to Jamaica in 1966, he was mobbed by cheering crowds, and many Rastafarians insisted miracles and other mystical happenings occurred during his visit.

Adherents were long treated as second-class citizens in Jamaica and other Caribbean islands, looked down on for their dreadlocks and use of marijuana. But discrimination never stopped businessmen from cashing in on the faith, whose red, green and gold clothing and accessories earn millions in sales of T-shirts, crocheted caps and other items. Marley's music and the faith's pot-laced mysticism has also been used to

promote Jamaica as a tourist destination

Rastafarian and veteran reggae luminary Tony Rebel said discrimination against Rastas has faded considerably in recent years in Jamaica.

“That discriminatory vibe has relaxed. But even so, we still we don’t see a person with locks working in a bank these days, we don’t see a person with locks in the police force as we would see in America or other places,” Rebel said.

The first dreadlocked politician in Jamaica’s Parliament was elected only last year.

Many Rastas advocate reparations for slavery and a return to Africa. The latter is a particularly fervent desire among those at Bobo Ashanti, who differ from other Rasta sects in the belief that their founder, King Emmanuel Charles Edwards, was the black incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Some Jamaicans dismiss the faith as bizarre.

“There is a whole part of the society that would still consider Rastafari to be delusional, and this is largely hinged on the claims made about Emperor Haile Selassie and also the consumption of (marijuana) and the idea of repatriation,” Niaah said.

But for adherents like Prince Xavier, a 27-year-old Frenchman who moved to the Bobo Ashanti commune a couple of years after being introduced to Rastafarians in his native Paris, it’s providing answers and a positive self-identity.

“I’m learning a lot about Rastafari and about our heritage,” said the bearded Frenchman, clad in a red turban and black robe. “It is a matter of life and death.”

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