

The Rastafari Community in Scouting



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Rastafari parents, once they have found out about the values, ethos, educational focus and international scope of the Movement, will regard Scouting as an ideal organisation for their young people to belong to. Scouting principles of community service and personal development are compatible with Rastafari principles.

Of the 25 million Scouts world-wide, over one million live in the African Region and 30,000 live in the Caribbean. Scouting is particularly strong in countries which were once part of the British Empire (such as Jamaica, Kenya and Uganda), but there are Scouts in almost every Caribbean and African country, including Ethiopia. There has been a considerable growth in the number of Rastafari in the United Kingdom since the 1960s, when many African-Caribbeans looked at Rastafari, at a time when many white people began to study Eastern religions.

Rastafari is as much a way of life ('livity') as a religion. The Rastafari code of behaviour and values embraces all aspects of their culture, morals, family & social relationships, finances, politics, food and dress. As with any world religion Rastafari is made up of thousands of individuals, and each person finds their own way of expressing their culture. This fact sheet aims to highlight the major common elements that exist among the majority of Rastafari.



RASTAFARI

Rastafari believe in one God - **Jah** - who sporadically shows Himself in human form. In Jamaica in the 1920s, it was prophesied that Jah would show himself as a black African King, who would help black people who had been forcibly removed to the Caribbean by the slave trade to return home to Africa. Ras (meaning 'prince') Tafari was born in 1892 and proclaimed Emperor Haile Selassie 1 of Ethiopia in 1930. He was seen as the King of the prophecy, and is worshipped as **Jah Everliving**. Hence, those that follow the faith (and the faith itself) are known as "Rastafari". Rastafari believe that Haile Selassie 1 is 225th in the line of King Solomon, the son of David of Israel.

Rastafari has many links with the early Jewish and Christian faiths: most Rastafari believe that Adam and Jesus Christ are reincarnated human forms of God before Haile Selassie I (the climax of God's revelation); Ethiopia is revered as the biblical home of an ancient black Jewish community, The Falashes; Ethiopia is also revered as an African state with a longer Christian tradition than England; Haile Selassie I was Christian. However, Rastafari is disassociated from Jewish and Christian belief by its core principle of Haile Selassie I as God, and it is important to remember that Rastafari is not a form of Christianity, as the modern practise of Christianity (particularly Catholicism) has been rejected as a western construct.

Marcus Garvey (born Jamaica 1887) is the central prophet of the faith. He formed the United Negro Improvement Society, which aimed to prevent the suffering he believed black people still endured as a result of slavery. He organised thousands of black people in Jamaica and America by encouraging unity and pride in their African heritage. Among these were Leonard Howell, J N Hibbert and Archibald Dunkley, who were the first to preach of the divinity of Ras Tafari. Marcus Garvey died in the United Kingdom in 1940.

The key principles of orthodox Rastafari include:

Haile Selassie 1 of Ethiopia is the living God, reflecting the Rastafari principal of eternal life. If a person lives correctly (by following the precepts and statutes of Jah's commandments) they can recreate Eden and will not die, they will be free to return to their spiritual homeland (a New Jerusalem) that is Ethiopia. Rastafari represent an order of black supremacy. This belief is not anti-white, but a re-assessment of history essential for self-respect and the destruction of oppression. It is an acknowledgement, amongst other things, that original man was black, and that black peoples (such as the Egyptians and Ethiopians) were cultured before whites. Though white people are seen as the oppressors of black people, they are not viewed as evil; every person is accepted on individual merit. Anyone can become a member of the Rastafari community if they ascribe to these beliefs, and therefore it is possible for white people to embrace the Rastafari faith.

Rastafari do not see themselves as Jamaicans (or British), but as Africans (or Ethiopians or ancient Israelites) in exile. Their aim is to be freed from the evils of the western world (**Babylon**) so that they can return to their true home in Ethiopia.

That **ganja** is a 'holy weed'. Ganja is the Hindi word for cannabis, which is also called lley (the Rastafari spelling of the Jamaican word Callie). The use of ganja represents both the spiritual and political facets of Rastafari. As a religious sacrament it was seen as a way to heighten community spirit and bring tranquillity to the mind, and was also seen as a form of protest against the laws of Babylon.

THE HOLY BOOK - THE BIBLE

Christianity has been the official religion of Ethiopia since 330 AD, and was the faith practised by Haile Selassie I. As a result the Rastafari Holy Book is **The Bible**. Rastafari particularly study the teachings of all 87 books of the Old Testament (the version used by most Christian churches has 66 books), place an emphasis on the 10 commandments of the Old Testament, and follow the teachings of Jesus Christ (as an avatar of God) in the New Testament. The Book of Psalms and Revelations are crucial in understanding the divine nature of Haile Selassie I.

The Bible is understood within an Afro-centric interpretation (e.g. that the 12 Tribes of Israel

were African people), and is seen to support all Rastafari beliefs, for example:

that God is black - Jeremiah 8:21:

For the hurt of the daughter of my people am I hurt; I am black; astonishment has taken hold of me.

Haile Selassie 1 as God - Psalm 87:3-4:

I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon to them that know me; behold Philistine, and Tyre, with Ethiopia, this man was born there.

and - Revelations 5:5:

Behold the Lion of Judah has prevailed to open the Book and reveal the seals.

that cannabis is a 'holy weed' - Genesis 3:18:

...eat every herb of the land.

and - Psalm 104:14:

He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man ...

WORSHIP AND PRAYER

Some Rastafari (those affiliated to a Rasta organisation such as Ethiopian World Federation or the Twelve Tribes of Israel) attend a weekly **meeting** which is both a spiritual and business gathering. The meeting is led by a **Chaplain**, who is elected each year and who has special duties (such as visiting the sick) in that community.

Before entering the meeting room (which for most Rastafari communities in the United Kingdom is in a local community centre or in the home of one of the congregation) all adults are met by the Sergeant-at-Arms and sign the security book. Before entering men have to remove their hats, while women must keep them on. The Chaplain opens the meeting with the Ethiopian National Anthem, before leading the congregation in song, prayer and music. This forms the spiritual part of the meeting, and lasts for about 20 minutes. The elected **Chairperson** then leads the business part of the meeting, where everyday duties and special events are planned, and representatives from the committees (looking at topics such as education and money) and the Chaplain report to the membership on their work. The meeting ends with

prayers and drumming known as Nyahbinghi (see Behaviour and Values).

Rastafari say prayers as a part of their daily life. Rastafari link their fingers and hold the tips of their thumbs and index fingers together when they pray. The shape of their hands represents a heart and a spear, and reflects key Rastafari principles of peace and the combat of oppression.

RASTAFARI FESTIVALS

Rastafari follow the Ethiopian calendar which has 13 months in the year. The months broadly follow the western calendar, except between August and October when the last (13th) month of six days occurs. **Ethiopian New Year's Day** is celebrated on 11th September, and marks the beginning of a section of a four year cycle, each year of which is named after an apostle (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John).

Holy Days are celebrated with singing, dancing, drumming and prayer. Cultural festivals are arranged on Holy Days by the community, and usually involve dance and drama, art exhibitions and vegetarian food.

The **Anniversary of the Coronation of Haile Selassie I** is celebrated on 2nd November and **Birthday of Haile Selassie I** is celebrated on 23rd July. These are the holiest days in the Rastafari year.

Marcus Garvey's Birthday on 17th August, and **African Liberation Day (ALD)** are also celebrated. Many Rastafari also celebrate **Christmas**, which is celebrated on 7th January.

Many Rastafari do not celebrate personal birthdays; nor do many Rastafari emphasise or attend funerals, as their faith celebrates life rather than death.

VALUES AND BELIEFS

Rastafari obey the 10 commandments from the Old Testament, and also follow a Rastafari moral code:

- that sharp implements should not be used to desecrate the human figure, and therefore all cutting of hair or flesh, shaving, and tattooing are forbidden;
- to be mainly vegetarian, pork and shell fish are forbidden;

- that there is one God, Ras Tafari;
- to love all, but that a Rastafari's first love must be to his brothers and sisters;
- to abhor hate, jealousy, envy, deceit, guile and treachery;
- to reject the pleasures of western society;
- to create a world of one community;
- to extend a helping hand to any person in distress, first to a brother or sister, and then to any human or animal;
- to adhere to the ancient laws of Ethiopia;
- to remain true to the love of Rastafari, and not be swayed by the riches of the western world.

ORGANISATIONS WITHIN THE RASTAFARI MOVEMENT

Nyahbinghi is the original manifestation of the faith, that gave rise to all the different houses and organisations within the movement. It represents the ancient Nazarine vows that give those of the faith an order toward perfection and internal life. Rastafari are guided by the culture and traditions of Ethiopia, as it embodies Rastafari principles, founded in African-Caribbean resistance to slavery, such as when Haile Selassie 1 overcame fascist western oppression by defeating Mussolini in 1941. Many Rastafari are members of the Ethiopian World Federation, founded by Haile Selassie 1 in 1937 in New York, who gave 500 acres of Ethiopian land to benefit all black people living in the west.

Many Rastafari in the United Kingdom are members of another important Rastafari group called the **Twelve Tribes of Israel**, whose central aims include the education of the young to benefit the advancement of black people, the liberation of Africa, and the promotion of Ethiopian and African culture. The Twelve Tribes of Israel was founded in the early '70s by **Carrington Gad**, and espoused a move away from some of the practises of contemporary Rastafari. Members of the Twelve Tribes of Israel believed that Carrington Gad was a prophet, and while central principles such as issues of repatriation and the use of ganja remained, there was a greater emphasis placed on the reading of the bible; Haile

Selassie 1 was seen as the second coming of Jesus Christ (such that they are interchangeable figures). The sect advocated sexual and racial equality (which were less distinct policies within contemporary Rastafari) and moved away from some of the traditional core principles, for example members believe that dreadlocks are not fundamental to Rastafari belief. Within this sect the number 12 is pivotal: 12 Biblical tribes, 12 disciples, 12 signs of the Zodiac, 12 months of the ancient Egyptian calendar. Every member is given a name based on the tribe into which he or she is born. Another important difference to traditional Rastafari is the reverence of Bob Marley (who was a member of the sect) and of reggae music.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

The community is central to Rastafari people. Members are responsible for the education of children and the care of all those who require it within their community. Members of the Rastafari community organise activities and special classes for their young people. Some classes are to help children keep up with their school work, while others are to teach children Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia. As well as preparing them for repatriation, this also reflects the caring nature of Haile Selassie I. Before he became King, the most important written language in Ethiopia was Ge'ez, but as Ge'ez was not easily understood by most of the population Haile Selassie 1 replaced it with Amharic.

Like all Scouts within a Group, you will have a better understanding of their needs and beliefs if you get to know the Scout and their family as individuals.

SPIRITUALITY AND CULTURE

A central aspect of Rastafari is restoring positive African history, which has been distorted and hidden, to enable black people uprooted from Africa to gain a better understanding of their own cultural identity. For Rastafari in this country there has been an additional attack on their cultural traditions by moving from the Caribbean to the United Kingdom.

Language is an important expression of Rastafari spirituality and African-Caribbean culture. Rastafari have developed their own language forms, used in everyday speech, which are Iritical (spiritual and critical of English). The letter 'I' is used to show oneness with Jah, and replaces the letter(s) at the beginning of many words to give increased expression, e.g. Ily (holy), Iscience

(conscience), lower (power), Ital (natural food - from vital). It is also used as an expression of Rastafari being in the expression 'I and I' (used for both I/me and we depending on the situation). The semantic associations of words are also important in Rastafari expression.

Creative activities are an important part of Rastafari culture, and are a way of practising core principles of the need for self-employment and of working collectively; African music, dance, and arts & crafts are especially important. Drumming has an integral place within the spiritual culture of this faith, and is used to accompany hymns, songs and dances. When Rastafari come together to drum and chant it is called **Nyahbinghi**, and is one of the most important form of worship or prayer within this faith.

Reggae music is based on Nyahbinghi, and is used by many Rastafari to sing about their beliefs and the social conditions they live in. Many Rastafari believe that reggae is divine music, while other Rastafari do not; whether divine or secular reggae has a central place within African-Caribbean culture advocating, as it does, a pride in African-Caribbean ancestry long negated by colonialism and racism. Reggae has had an important influence on the interest in, and membership of, the Rastafari faith in the United Kingdom.

Haile Selassie 1, Marcus Garvey and other black leaders are represented in Rastafari art, as are other important Rastafari symbols. Key symbols include: the crowned Lion of Judah carrying the cross over his shoulder from which flies the Ethiopian flag/a flag bearing the insignia INRI (I Negus Rules Israel), often used to represent Haile Selassie I; the use of the colours of the Ethiopian flag (red, gold and green), and the colours red and green as symbols for blood and vegetation (respectively) symbolising the hope for victory over oppression. The colour black is often added to represent the Rastafari as a people.

NAMES AND NAMING

Rastafari children are given English, African influenced English, African and Old Testament names. Members of the Twelve Tribes of Israel are given a name based upon the tribe they are born in to. These names are based upon the phase of the moon (roughly equivalent to the 12 signs of the Zodiac) and the months of the ancient Egyptian calendar. The names of the tribes (and their associated colours) are as follows:

October - Dan (blue)
 November - Gad (red)
 December - Asher (grey)
 January - Naphtali (green)
 February - Joseph (white)
 March - Benjamin (black)
 April - Reuben (silver)
 May - Simeon (gold)
 June - Levi (purple)
 July -Judah (brown)
 August - Issachar (yellow)
 September -Zebulun (pink)

Thus Vernon Carrington (the founder of the Twelve Tribes of Israel) is known as Carrington Gad.

Rastafari people may address one another as 'Rasta', 'Dread' or 'Dreaddy' when their formal names are not used.

FOOD

Many Rastafari are vegetarian, though some are vegan (will eat no meat, eggs or dairy produce) and many are demi-vegetarians (will eat fish with scales). Pork and shellfish are strictly forbidden. Some Rastafari follow other Jewish dietary restrictions and will not eat grapes, currants or raisins. Tobacco, coffee and alcohol are also strictly forbidden.

Rastafari believe that vegetarianism and/or good nutrition are an important part of a natural and healthy lifestyle. They reject processed food, and only use food in its natural state - **Ital** - such as fruit, juices and herb tea.

Herbal treatment for medical problem is favoured, but conventional treatment (if necessary) is acceptable; some Rastafari will refuse a blood transfusion. Patented medicines (if there is no herbal alternative) are acceptable, but all contraceptives are forbidden. Rastafari people believe that self control is the best form of birth control.

DRESS

Rastafari follow God's instructions given to the Nazarites in the Bible to keep their hair natural and uncut. They reject chemically processed goods (such as shampoo) and so only wash their hair in water and natural herbs. Their hair is worn uncombed in matted braids called dreadlocks (the name of which probably came from traditional Jamaican society's 'dread' of those who went beyond their society), and shaving is forbidden.

Rastafari people usually keep their heads covered, but females must cover their heads for a meeting, while males must not. Knitted hats (**tams**) are popular, and often include the colours of the Ethiopian flag or the person's tribal colour. Rastafari can wear standard Scout uniform with the head-wear they would usually wear for religious or cultural reasons.

Rastafari do not usually place much importance on clothes, except that they should conceal the body, e.g. dresses and skirts should be below-knee length and Rastafari women and girls are not encouraged to wear trousers. There is a lot of interest in African dress and so these clothes are often worn for special occasions. White may be worn on Holy Days, following Ethiopian custom.

SCOUT MEETINGS

Rastafari people hold their main worship at the weekend, and so a Rastafari Scout should be able to attend Scout meetings on weekdays. However, a Rastafari Scout would not be able to attend a Scout meeting on important dates in the Rastafari calendar.

Many Rastafari children are involved with community activities, such as learning Amharic, which may affect their attendance at some Scout activities, particularly those held at weekends.

THE PROMISE

There is no official alternative for "Duty to God" for Rastafari Scouts nor is there, as British subjects, an official alternative to "Duty ... to the Queen" in the Promise. For the Rastafari, nationality is not a matter of place of birth but is a part of their personal, internal beliefs, and as a result many would consider themselves to be African-Caribbeans or Africans rather than British subjects. Also, the Queen is not only the head of state, but also the head of the Church of England. Decisions on how a Rastafari Scout takes their Promise should therefore be made at a local level.

CAMP

With a little consideration during the planning stages, it is easy to facilitate the Rastafari Scout's wish to practise their faith at camp. With some help from the local Rastafari community, a Scout Leader can lead a multi-faith Scouts Own.

Before planning a camp menu ask your Rastafari Scouts what their diet requirements are.

Vegetarian options would be suitable for all Scouts.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The SHAP Working Party on World Religions in Education publishes an annual calendar of festivals which will list the appropriate dates for a particular year. The calendar is available from

The SHAP Working Party,
7 Alderbrook Road,
Solihull,
West Midlands.

I-Vision Video Productions specialise in videos for education and insight in to the faith of Rastafari. A list is available from I-Vision Video, PO Box 3132, London, E8 1DD. An information video on Rastafari is available from the Programme and Development Department at Gilwell Park.

For a further list of resources on the Rastafari Community, or other minority ethnic communities in the United Kingdom, please contact the Information Centre at Gilwell Park.

Further information and advice on developing Scouting in the Rastafari Community is available from the Programme and Development Department.

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