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THE TWELVE TRIBES OF ISRAEL: RASTA AND THE MIDDLE CLASS¹

INTRODUCTION

A quiet, unobstructive revolution is taking place among the Rastafarians. This revolution is having far-reaching implications for traditional Rastafari theology and ideology. Respectable, well-educated middle class sons and daughters are drifting into Rastafarianism, leaving behind a trail of horrified and embarrassed parents and friends as well as frightened Christians (Boyne 1981).

The sons and daughters of the "horrified and embarrassed parents" mentioned in the above quotation have, in most cases, become members of the Twelve Tribes of Israel and the rise and growth of this Kingston-based organization is without doubt one of the most important and interesting recent developments in the Rastafarian movement.

The Twelve Tribes of Israel are known to be the largest organization at the moment. The exact number of members is unknown, but it might very well be somewhere near eight hundred, maybe even more. And besides the Jamaican branch, there are branches in ten other countries.

The Twelve Tribes are not only the largest, but also the best organized and disciplined group within the movement. Rastafari is known for its dispersed organizational structure. Most Rastas do not belong to one of the many, more or less informal groups and, although there seems to be a trend towards closer cooperation, the more institutionalized groups are rather an exception than a rule. Strong organization has developed mostly in commune-like situations and under prophetic leadership. Leonard P. Howell's Pinnacle commune in the forties and early fifties and the still existing Bull Bay commune of Prince Edward Emmanuel are two of the better known examples. In the case of the Twelve Tribes of Israel there is strong prophetic leadership, but without a communal structure.

Probably most interesting of all is the fact that the Twelve Tribes have a strong middle- and upper-class following. Rastafari has traditionally been a movement of what the Rastas sometimes term "the sufferers," the really impoverished ghetto dwellers. The presence of middle-class members and a Rasta intelligentsia has been noticed, but at the same time neglected (e.g., Barrett, 1968, 1977; Owens 1976). With the rise and growth of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, the middle class has firmly established itself in Rastafari.

Last, but certainly not least, the Twelve Tribes of Israel have developed a theology which differs markedly, on some points, from that of "mainstream" Rastafari.

So far, little has been written about the Twelve Tribes. Before 1980 only Chevannes (1977) and Cashmore (1979) mentioned the organization. After 1980 the Twelve Tribes appear more frequently in publications (e.g., Rowe 1980; Campbell 1980; Forsythe 1980; Ryle 1981; Catholic Commission for Racial Justice 1982; Semaj 1985; Waters 1985; Bishton 1986; Clarke 1986). However, very little information is provided by these authors. Somewhat more informative sources are two biographies on the Twelve Tribes' best-known member, the late Bob Marley (Davis 1983; White 1983) and an article in the Jamaican newspaper *Sunday Sun* by Boyne (22, 29 March; 5 April 1981). A closer look at this 'new' house of Rastafari seems to be justified.

READ YOUR BIBLE – A CHAPTER A DAY

To understand the theology of Rastafarians, and thus of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, it is necessary to understand their perception of the world. There are, in short, two systems: Zion and Babylon, the good and the evil. Zion is Africa or Ethiopia, which is to Rastas one and the same. Africa is the mother of all nations, a mighty continent with the most powerful civilization that ever existed. It was here that man originated and the biblical acts took place. The evidence is plenty: biblical references to Egypt and Ethiopia, countless highly developed civilizations and scientific publications. Africa was an earthly Eden, until Babylon raped her.

Babylon is the West, the oppressive system that enslaved the black man and ruled the world for the last twenty centuries. As Zion is associated with black people, so Babylon is associated with white people. The headquarters of Babylon is Rome, the breeding ground of imperialism, Catholicism, fascism and mafia, all under supervision of the Pope. Was it not Tiberius' Rome that brought Jesus to the cross and was it not Mussolini's Rome that invaded Ethiopia centuries later, to mention only two examples?

Rastafarians see clear parallels between ancient biblical and modern times.

Time is perceived as a cyclical process. "As it was in the beginning, so shall it be in the end," Bob Marley sang.² So, Babylon is heading for its destruction and Zion will be restored, as it is promised in the Bible.

To the Twelve Tribes of Israel the Bible is everything. "Read your Bible – a chapter a day" is the most important lesson of their prophet. Members of the Twelve Tribes often call themselves Bible-students. Every word, every sentence is carefully studied, a chapter a day. It takes about three and a half years to finish the Bible in that way and the period of membership is frequently expressed in the number of times the Bible has been read.

The Twelve Tribes accept the Holy Book, from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22, unreservedly and without any restrictions. Preference is given to the *Scofield Bible* (1967), but any other version will do as well. That the white man corrupted the Bible when he translated it from the original Amharic, as some Rastas claim, is nonsense according to the Twelve Tribes. Every word of the Book is true and only by studying it over and over again one can come to the wisdom and knowledge of Rastafari. Interpretations are to a large extent left to the individual. The prophet and elder members are there to give the necessary guidance, but, as they say, "every man has to find out [the truth] for himself."

The Bible should not only be understood as a religious text, but above all as a history and a prophecy. Both past and current events are placed within the biblical context. The Twelve Tribes are vivid readers of other than religious texts. Among the favorite topics are African history, slavery in the New World, World War II, and the Jewish holocaust. White provides an example:

In promulgating their beliefs, the Twelve Tribes of Israel made use of a book called 'Hebrewisms of West Africa – From Nile to Niger with the Jews', by Joseph J. Williams, S.J., published in 1930. A dense, abundantly documented study by a Jesuit historian ..., the book describes the proliferation of Judaism and Jewish culture through Africa (1983: 294).

According to the Twelve Tribes, Williams (1930) provides the scholarly evidence that black Jamaicans, though enslaved on the African West Coast, do have a link with Ethiopia and the biblical Israelites.

Newspapers are equally interesting to the Twelve Tribes. All kinds of events are viewed as signs of a world heading for the end of days. Earthquakes (like in Mexico City in September 1985), the spread of AIDS (especially when Roman Catholic priests turn out to be among the victims), explorations in space (the Challenger explosion in January 1986), and nuclear energy (the Chernobyl disaster in April 1986) are some of the more recent examples.

But, even more important than histories and newspapers are texts of and about Haile Selassie. These have been given an almost sacred character and

copies of his speeches at the United Nations (4 October 1963) and the Organization of African Unity (24 May 1973) circulate among the members. Ullendorff's publication on the Ethiopians (1973) and the Emperor's autobiography (Ullendorff 1972) are no less important.

THE CHOSEN

Although the Twelve Tribes of Israel as an organization started in 1968, members usually date back their history to the book of Genesis. They often start with Noah's three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth (Genesis 6: 10), who are said to be the progenitors of "the brown, the black and the white man" respectively. A worldmap (without the American continent), which occasionally can be seen at their dances, shows that Shem represents Asia, Ham Africa and Japheth Europe. All three peoples have their own unique characteristics. The "Shemit" are the more laborious, the "Hamit" the creative, and the "Japhethit" the scientific. In spite of these differences, the Twelve Tribes insist that all mankind is one big brotherhood, since its origins go back to one and the same father, Noah. As such, race or skin color are absolutely irrelevant. The fact that there are a handful of white members in the organization is presented as sufficient evidence that this is not only a matter of words, as with some other Rastafarian groups.

The history continues with the descendants of Shem, of whom Abram (Abraham), Isaac and Jacob, who later became Israel, are the more prominent. Israel begot twelve sons, in order of birth: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph and Benjamin, and one daughter, Dinah (Genesis 29, 30, 35). These sons became the founding fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel, the chosen, whose story the Bible tells.

As the name suggests, the Twelve Tribes of Israel regard themselves to be the true and only descendants of the biblical twelve tribes. When asked about the Jews, members insist that one is not a Jew by birth, but by heart, referring to Romans:

For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outwardly in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God (2: 28-29).

The Twelve Tribes of Israel were one day scattered and lost through the African slave trade, the real diaspora. Now, they have been found again in the island of Jamaica by their leader, the prophet Gad.

Depending on the month of birth and the new moon in the month of birth, a member belongs to one of the tribes. Every tribe is associated with a color, a body part (see below) and certain personality characteristics.

April is the first month of the year. The Twelve Tribes make use of the Hebrew religious calendar and not, as White (1983: 294) states, "the ancient Egyptian calendar." The first month of this lunar calendar, known as *Nisan* or *Abib* (Exodus 13: 4), falls in March-April of our Julian calendar, which is seen as another Roman corruption. The exact dates vary, depending on the new moon. When a new member is registered, the Twelve Tribes check his passport for the correct date of birth as well as a lunar calendar at the Institute of Jamaica to determine the new moon in the month and year of birth, so as to make sure a member becomes registered with the proper tribe.

The colors, body parts and personality characteristics are also said to be based on the Bible. However, when asked, none of the members was able to point out references. Except for the colors, it all neatly fits in current notions of astrology, and in the Zodiac. As can be seen below, the signs of the constellation are substituted by the names of the tribes. According to Davis:

It was a complex system of beliefs, difficult to synthesize or summarize, that held that common astrology was an evil Babylonian science. Was not Aquarius the name of a Roman god? And was not Rome the headquarters of Babylon and thus the source of all evil in the world, with the Pope sitting as anti-Christ? According to the Twelve Tribes, black people should renounce astrology and identify instead with the Biblical sons of Jacob, and be recognized as the true lost tribes of Israel, yearning for redemption and Zion (1983: 262-263).

The origin of the colors and their relation to the tribes remain obscure. Members simply affirm that it is in the Bible. There is, however, no biblical foundation, whereas in astrology the signs of the constellation are associated with various colors, depending on the 'school' followed. It must be assumed therefore that the choice of colors has been somewhat random.

In Genesis 49 the twelve sons each received blessings of their dying father, Israel. The Twelve Tribes attach great importance to these mysterious words: "Joseph is a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by the well; whose branches run over the wall." Such a blessing could easily be related to Bob Marley, born 6 February 1945 and thus a Joseph; if not for his musical career, then because of his many children. The words became even more powerful when 'gunmen' tried to assassinate him and he was shot in his left arm.

The archers have sorely grieved him, and shot at him, and hated him: But his bow abode in strength, and the arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob (Genesis 49: 22-24).

the tribes ³	the (Hebrew) months ⁴	the (Julian) months
Reuben	Nisan (or Abib)	March-April
Simeon	Iyyar (or Ziv)	April-May
Levi	Sivan	May-June
Judah	Tammuz	June-July
Issachar	Ab	July-August
Zebulun	Elul	August-September
Dan	Tishri (or Ethanim)	September-October
Gad	Marchesvan (or Bul)	October-November
Asher	Chislev	November-December
Naphtali	Tebeth	December-January
Joseph	Shebat	January-February
Benjamin	Adar	February-March
(Dinah)	---	---

the colors	the body parts	the signs	the dates
silver	head	Aries	21 Mar.-19 Apr.
gold	neck	Taurus	20 Apr.-20 May
purple	arms	Gemini	21 May-21 Jun.
brown	breast	Cancer	22 Jun.-22 Jul.
yellow	heart	Leo	23 Jul.-22 Aug.
pink	bowels	Virgo	23 Aug.-23 Sep.
blue	reins (kidneys)	Libra	24 Sep.-23 Oct.
red	secrets	Scorpio	24 Oct.-22 Nov.
grey	thighs	Sagittarius	23 Nov.-21 Dec.
green	knees	Capricorn	22 Dec.-20 Jan.
white	legs	Aquarius	21 Jan.-19 Feb.
black	feet	Pisces	20 Feb.-20 Mar.
(many colored)	---	---	---

But, by far the most important blessing was that of Judah.

OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST

Judah, thou art he whom thy brethren shall praise: thy hand shall be in the neck of thine enemies; thy father's children shall bow down before thee. Judah is a lion's whelp: from the prey, my son, thou art gone up: he stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as an old lion; who shall rouse him up? The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be (Genesis 49: 8-10).

To the Twelve Tribes of Israel the blessing of Judah alone is sufficient proof that Haile Selassie I, the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah and direct descendant of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, is the Messiah returned. But, like other Rastafarians, they are always ready to provide more evidence for those not so easy to convince: the *Kebrä Nagast*⁵, Selassie's coronation titles (King of Kings, Lord of Lords), numerous biblical references, Marcus Garvey's prophecy, but above all the life of His Imperial Majesty itself. They will bring in his genealogy, his splendid coronation, court and reign, his heroic actions during the Italo-Ethiopian war, his activities for the Organization of African Unity, his religiosity, his wisdom, his prophetic words and his mysterious disappearance.

There is, however, a subtle but all-important difference with most other Rastafarians. All agree that Selassie is the second and final coming of Christ and that Jesus was (one of) his earlier manifestation(s). But, whereas many Rastas claim that the image of Jesus, as portrayed in the New Testament, has been corrupted by the white man, the Twelve Tribes fully accept this description of Jesus. In this respect there is not the slightest difference with the established Christian churches and the Twelve Tribes therefore frequently claim to be Christians. "Only through the Son one can come to the Father" and "Greetings in the name of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who has this day revealed himself in the personality of His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie I" are two of the often-used phrases. Or, as one of the members expressed it: "Jesus is real, real, real!"

Christmas, however, is not celebrated in December and neither, as some Rastafarians do, on 7 January, Ethiopian Christmas. The Twelve Tribes of Israel celebrate on 23 July, Selassie's birthday, the only proper day according to them. That Christmas could never be in December becomes evident from Luke 2: 8, where it can be read that when Jesus was born, "... there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night." December is a very cold month in Israel and no shepherd would even think of staying out in the open by night at that time of the year.

The Twelve Tribes absolutely deny the death of the Emperor in August 1975. For one thing, needless to say, Selassie is immortal. But, neither has there been any evidence of his death whatsoever. There is no body, no ashes, no funeral and no grave. There is nothing except the announcement of his death by the *Dergue*, the Ethiopian junta, and there is of course every reason not to believe them. In 1976 the Twelve Tribes of Israel sent a delegation to Ethiopia to check the reports of the Marxist coup, Haile Selassie's downfall, the famine and, above all, the Emperor's death. The story goes that members of the delegation opened the tombs of both the Emperor and his wife, Princess Mānān, who had died in 1962. Her body was there, but the tomb of

Selassie was empty. So, the King of Kings had not died, but simply moved to an unknown place in an unknown form. He had temporarily removed himself from the earthly scene, only to return someday to fulfill the prophecies.

In the meantime, the Twelve Tribes consider Selassie's eldest son and heir to the throne, Asfa Wassän, to be the only legitimate ruler of Ethiopia. As the son of Jah, Wassän is of course divine himself. At dances and meetings his portrait is always next to that of his father and most of the pictures the organization uses of the Emperor also show the Crown Prince.

Instead of ruling over Ethiopia, Asfa Wassän lives in exile in Great Britain. The Twelve Tribes send him some money every now and then. After all, a large family in exile must experience some difficulties and, though the members insist that it is no more than a token, the money is gratefully accepted. They also proudly recall that the royal family once sent a representative to one of their meetings.

In *The London Times* of 7 April 1977 a letter was published by Asfa Wassän, denying allegations that his father transferred millions of dollars from the Ethiopian treasury to European banks. Copies of this letter circulate among the members. To them it is yet another part of the evidence that the West is trying to discredit the Emperor and, far more important, that Selassie is still alive. "Jah lives!" was written on one of the copies.

Ten years later, another member of the royal family confirmed what the Twelve Tribes knew already. In an interview with Barry G. of the Jamaican Broadcasting Corporation (JBC 1, 12 March 1987) Dawit Makonnen, a grandson of the Emperor, said:

Well, as far as I know, there is no proof to that he's dead. Now, the best proof to me is if they have a body that they have killed or whatever, they should show it to the people and there is no better proof than a dead body.

Makonnen also paid a visit to the Twelve Tribes.

BLESSED BE HE THAT ENLARGETH GAD

The Jamaican branch of the Twelve Tribes of Israel is the oldest and probably largest, but not the only one. Other branches can be found in Great Britain, the United States, Canada, Trinidad, Grenada, St. Vincent, Barbados, Grand Cayman, New Zealand and Ethiopia. To a large extent all these groups operate independently, though, as the original group with the prophet Gad as its first member, the Jamaican branch is considered first among equals.

Unfortunately, very little is known about the 'foreign' branches. In Great Britain there are two groups of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, one in the Brixton area of London and one in Old Trafford, Manchester. On 2 November 1986 a ball was organized in Great Britain to celebrate the fifty-sixth anniversary of Haile Selassie's coronation, a happening that takes place in a different country each year. Trinidad will be organizing the ball in 1987.

Although many of his informants must have been members of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, Cashmore does not provide much information on the organization, except for the fact that the British branch came into being around 1973,

... when one of the founders [of the Ethiopian World Federation, FJvD] named Pepe branched off to form his own separate Rastafarian group, the Twelve Tribes of Israel, again a branch of a Jamaican group (1979: 53-54).

The Twelve Tribes of Israel in the United States are based in Brooklyn, New York City (Waters 1985: 16) and somewhere in California, probably Los Angeles. The Canadian branch seems to have its headquarters in Toronto, the center of West Indian activity in that country. Nothing at all is known about the branches in the smaller Caribbean islands. The New Zealand branch was established only very recently. The prophet spent half a year there in 1986 to organize this branch. It seems that Rastafari is rapidly gaining adherents among the Maori-population. Finally, the Ethiopian group consists of members from other branches who have settled there. This is probably the smallest group of the Twelve Tribes.

According to Vermeulen (1984: 76), a small group of Surinamese and Dutch Rastas, calling itself the Twelve Tribes of Israel, can be found in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Although this group is said to form the core of the Rastafarian movement in the Dutch capital, it has never been recognized by the Jamaican branch.

To return to the Jamaican branch of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, one of the first and most difficult questions to be answered is how many members there are. As for the total Rastafarian population, only estimates can be made. It was not possible to get any exact information about the total membership of the Twelve Tribes, and estimates of members varied from five hundred to over two thousand. Based on observations made during meetings and dances, a membership of somewhere near eight hundred seems most likely. This however is little more than a 'guestimate.'

The membership of the Twelve Tribes is predominantly young; about seventy to eighty percent is under forty years of age. Compared to other Rastafarian groups, the percentage of women is large and estimated to be about thirty.

The Twelve Tribes of Israel are organized in a strict hierarchy, at the top of which stands the prophet Gad, also known as Gadman. His birth certificate identifies him as Vernon Carrington, a former sky-juice (sirup) vendor in downtown Kingston, living in the ghettos. Gadman is in his late fifties, small of stature, without dreadlocks, but with a well-kept beard. He is said to be a singer. On most photographs he is wearing a long red robe. Carrington is known as the prophet Gad because he was born in November; red is the color of his tribe. Officially he is the first member of the Jamaican branch, but in fact he is the leader of all branches.⁶

Members often compare Gad, the modern-day prophet, with Moses, leading his people out of captivity into the promised land. He is the one who found the scattered and lost tribes of Israel again in Jamaica. He is the one with a vision – a mediator between the human and divine, sent and used by Jah for a special purpose. His knowledge, wisdom and authority are therefore unquestionable. Gad is part of the fulfilment of biblical prophecy: “Israel will never be short of a prophet.” Like Jesus, who came from among the poor of the backward area of Nazareth, Gadman came from among the poor of West Kingston and in both the old and modern days it was said that nothing good could come from there.

The second layer of the organizational structure consists of the twenty-five members of the executive board; twelve male and an equal number of female representatives of the tribes, along with a Dinah, a female of course. Many of the executives are founding members, who have occupied their seats since the very beginning in 1968. They are known as, for instance, Brother Asher First or Sister Benjamin First. A seat in the board is a seat for life and only in very exceptional cases will an executive step down.

When a seat becomes vacant, a new executive is chosen. The board asks members who consider themselves to be qualified and of the right tribe and sex to come forward. As a general rule an applicant should have been a member for a longer period, which means that he or she should have finished the Bible at least once. If so, passport, registration and lunar calendar are checked to make sure the new representative belongs to the right tribe. After acceptance, the new member of the executive body has to go through the same *rite de passage* the others already went through. This means he or she has to organize the first meeting in which the seat is taken. Such a meeting is not held at the headquarters, but at the place of residence of the new executive. Furthermore, a trip has to be made to Ethiopia, since the executives went there collectively in 1976. Finally, a dance is organized in honor of the new member of the board.

Within the board there is no formal hierarchy, but some of the members are clearly more prominent than others. Also, male representatives generally

precede their female counterparts. They are seated in front of the female executives during meetings. As paradoxically as it may seem, this does not mean that women are subordinate in the Twelve Tribes of Israel. They may speak as often and with as much authority as the male representatives. Women are considered to be equal in all respects, but the male comes first, just as in the Bible. Prominence is largely based on personality; some executives are simply more voluble than others. Levi, however, is an exception; he represents the tribe of the priests and therefore leads the meetings.

The executive board is independent, but its authority is limited. Every decision of some importance ultimately requires the approval of the prophet, or is left entirely to him. This becomes clear from a confusing "incident" that was discussed at three successive meetings. The story changed several times, but the essentials were as follows: The person looking after and living at the headquarters was in one way or another involved in a row with his "daughter" (wife or partner) and supposedly hit her. The Twelve Tribes strongly disapprove of any kind of violence, certainly in their own "yard". Normally, the board would have denied further access to the headquarters to a member involved in such an incident. This, for example, had happened when two members had a fight at a dance. The ultimate decision was to be taken by Gad, who was off the island at that time. In the case of the person looking after the headquarters, however, the executives were unable to take any decisions at all, since it was Gadman who had given him the responsibility over the yard. Refusing him further access to the headquarters would be overruling a decision of the prophet and that was out of the question.

At the bottom of the organizational pyramid are, of course, the common members. Everyone can become a member, regardless of class or race, provided Haile Selassie is accepted as the second and final coming of Christ, Gad as the modern-day prophet and Africa as the true and only motherland of all nations. It has little or nothing to do with a formal "conversion," as suggested by White (1893: 295). Like all other Rastafarians, the Twelve Tribes speak of an "inborn conception" (Kitzinger 1969: 246; Owens 1976: 35). Through reading the Bible "a chapter a day and with an open mind, every man has to find out for himself."

SNOBbish AND CLASS-BIASED

Rastafari has traditionally been a movement of the oppressed, with strong anti-establishment sentiments, and most authors have emphasized the importance of social and economic conditions in the rise and growth of the movement (e.g., Simpson 1955a, 1955b, 1962; Smith et al. 1960; Norris 1962;

Kitzinger 1966, 1969; Barrett 1968, 1977; Owens 1976; Chevannes 1977, 1978). The growing involvement of the middle class, however, is difficult to explain in terms of socio-economic deprivation. Rather, the incorporation of members of the middle- and upper-class should be seen as the result of what Wallace (1956: 275) terms "routinization." This can be described as the process by which a religious (or political) movement and its system of beliefs and ideas become established as "normal." Especially after the mid-sixties, Rastafari gradually won broader social recognition, and Rastafarian ideas, values and styles slowly, but increasingly found their way into Jamaican society, in particular among its younger generation (Nettleford 1970; Barrett 1977; Waters 1985). It seems clear that the Rastafarians' increasing social acceptance was closely linked to their contributions in the field of arts, and perhaps especially to their emphasis on the theme of (national) identity.

Out of the remnants of a plantation society based on slavery, modern Jamaica had emerged with a social structure in which class and color strongly correlated: a small and privileged white-mulatto minority at the top, the poor black masses at the bottom. Along the road to independence (1962), and even after, the dominant cultural identity remained "white" and focused on Europe and the United States, in spite of the growing upward mobility of black Jamaicans. As Nettleford points out:

The fact is that we are still enslaved in the social structure born of the plantation system in which things African, including African traits, have been devalued and primacy is given to European values in the scheme of things (1970: 36).

More than anything else, the Rastafarians reacted to what they call the hypocrisy of a country in which more than ninety percent of the population is black. They gave primacy to "African" values and, in great part thanks to them, "African" identity gained some acceptance among those who previously had preferred to ignore their "roots." Part of the middle-class youth recognized that Rastafari points out the falsehood of society, while at the same time providing an alternative. After all, cultural identity is not merely a matter of concern to the lower class, but to all Jamaicans of African descent.

However, opposed to this growing acceptance among the younger generation is the cultural conservatism of their well-to-do families. A son or daughter turning Rasta is still one of the worst things that can happen to a "decent" family, since many people only see Rastafari as a threat to Christianity, to the fragile Jamaican national unity, and to law and order. To them, it is a horrifying and embarrassing experience, which, in addition, entails a definite loss of status. Not surprisingly, this loss of status is of concern to their middle-class Rasta children as well and it is interesting to see how hard these

try to compensate for it by making their form of Rastafari as respectable as possible.

The Twelve Tribes of Israel are a haven for most middle-class Rastas. Among its members are many who are either students or alumni of the University of the West Indies (UWI) and the College of Arts, Science and Technology (CAST). Members from the lower class are by no means absent, but maybe because the highly educated tend to make themselves more visible, the organization has the image of an "uptown" group. To many Rastafarians they are even, as Birhan (1982: n.p.) points out "snobbish and class-biased."

There are several reasons for the involvement of the middle-class and the intelligentsia in the Twelve Tribes of Israel, and respectability is probably one of the most important. The Twelve Tribes respect the Government and submit to its laws, since even the Jamaican Government is part of the fulfilment of prophecy. They are non-political, peaceful and unobtrusive, trying to avoid any possible confrontation with the law. The Twelve Tribes are non-racist and Christian, open and absolutely honest in their beliefs. All in all, they try to live the lives of the righteous, in which many succeed. Even the greatest anti-Rasta fanatic would have a hard time finding arguments to object to the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

Another factor for the involvement of the middle-class is without doubt the solidarity both between the poor and the better-off, and between the "Hamit" and the "Japhetit." There is, as Boyne writes, a strong sense of brotherhood among the members of the Twelve Tribes:

One striking thing among the middle class Rastas in the Twelve Tribes movement is their sense of egalitarianism. The snobbery and social ostracism prevalent in many middle class congregations in Christendom are said to be absent in Twelve Tribes. Their many poor and oppressed are made to feel wanted and are accepted as equals *in practice* (Boyne 1981).

Of no lesser importance is the rather liberal character of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, despite their well-structured organization. Membership involves only a few obligations, the most important of which is to attend the meetings and dances as often as possible. Rules directly influencing the life-style are almost absent. For example, growing a beard or wearing dreadlocks are preferred on religious grounds, as is keeping a vegetarian diet, and, for women, wearing a skirt instead of pants. But, those who do not want to do so are accepted in their own right. Whatever the issue, the emphasis is on the freedom of choice and the responsibility of the individual, though some executives and common members are clearly more tolerant than others.

On the one hand, the Twelve Tribes of Israel are proud of their educated and well-to-do members. As an older, apparently lower-class member once

expressed it: "W'at I like 'bout Twelve Tribes is dat dem 'ave so many intelligent people, ye know brains." On the other hand, however, the organization is painfully aware of its uptown-image among other Rastafarians. In defense, members of the executive board frequently reiterate that any one who wishes to join the Twelve Tribes is welcome to do so, regardless of class, race, or skin color. Also they often refer to the fact that the organization has its roots in the heart of the ghettos, Trench Town.

To many Rastas, all this does not alter their opinion that the Twelve Tribes are "snobbish and class-biased" and can hardly be considered true Rastafarians. "Them naw deal wid nothin," was the reaction of a Rasta elder to Boyne's (1981) enquiries about the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The fact that so many of them are middle- and upper-class is reason enough to raise suspicion. The way in which the Twelve Tribes are organized makes it all even worse. Hierarchy is to many Rastas one of the most atrocious things in the world. Registration of members and raising money goes against every basic Rastafarian belief. After all, it means that only those with money can become a member.

The Twelve Tribes of Israel do indeed raise money for their repatriation fund, and also to cover the overall expenses of their organization. There was a time, probably until about 1980, when every member was supposed to contribute twenty cents a week (White 1983: 295). Since not all members were able to raise the money, and possibly because of the awareness of their uptown-image as well, contributions are now made on a voluntary basis.

It is not clear whether the organization still collects a registration fee of either twenty or fifty cents. Some claimed that this had stopped, while others said it was still collected. Apart from an occasional contribution, some money is also needed to attend the dances, at least an entrance fee of two dollars.

MY LESSON WILL BE TAKEN FROM...

Every last Sunday of the month a few hundred Rastas gather at the headquarters of the Twelve Tribes of Israel to attend the meeting. Most of them are members, easily distinguishable by the knitted red, gold and green tams they (have to) wear at such occasions. Non-members, with or without tam, are allowed to join the meetings as well.

The headquarters of the Twelve Tribes are located at 81-83 Hope Road, Kingston, not far from the residences of both the Prime Minister and the Governor-General. The organization has occupied this place since about 1980. Before, the Twelve Tribes used to gather at different places downtown.

The front side of the headquarters is protected by a high concrete wall with barbed wire on top, the other sides by high fences. From the outside, only a large poster, announcing the next dance, shows that this is where the Twelve Tribes reside.

The yard, as they call it, is a well-maintained place with three wooden buildings. There is an office, a building for the "arts-body" and the musicians, and a construction with an open front where the executives are seated during meetings. Here, the twenty-five chairs are grouped in two rows behind a table with a red cloth. On the wall behind it are portraits of Haile Selassie, Asfa Wassân, and the prophet Gad. There is a huge Ethiopian flag with a golden lion and a painting with the text of 1 Corinthians 1: 18: "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness, but unto us which are saved it is the power of God." There is also a painting of an airplane of Ethiopian Air, showing persons boarding it and one standing in front, strongly resembling the prophet Gad. Underneath the painting, there is a quotation from Revelation:

And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people. Saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgement is come: and worship him that made the heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of water (14: 6-7).

On the top of the building are three texts: "Ethiopia, yesterday, tomorrow, and forevermore," "Long live the prophet Gad," and "Exodus!" Everything is done up with a lot of red, gold and green, Stars of David, hearts and crosses.

Meetings usually start about seven o'clock in the evening. Mothers with young children and babies, also with tams, are sitting in front of the executives, while all others are standing. Except for the tams, members wear a normal, daily dress. All women wear skirts of at least knee-length. The executives, however, are wearing long robes in the color of their tribe, with matching head-dress. They take their seats in the sequence of the tribes; Reuben at the left up to Benjamin at the right. Dinah is seated in the middle and the female representatives are behind their male counterparts.

Levi, representing the tribe of the priests, always opens the meetings with greetings to the brothers and sisters, and the request to "put away your smoke and thing, and cool down the youth them." The first act is the singing of a hymn from the book "Redemption Songs." All are asked to stand up and sing the lines Levi reads, for instance:

Blest be the ties that bind
 Our hearts in christian love
 The fellowship of kindred minds
 Is like to that above.

Before our father's Throne
 We pour our ardent prayers
 Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one
 Our comforts and our cares.

We share our mutual woes
 Our mutual burdens bear
 And often for each other flows
 The sympathizing tear.

When we asunder part
 It gives us inward pain
 But we shall still be joined in heart
 And we hope to meet again.

And hope to meet
 Again
 In Mount Zion
 With King Alpha and
 Queen Omega
 Father and Mother of
 Creation
 Hallelujah.⁷

Levi ends with "Selassie I!" to which the gathering reacts with "Rastafari!"

This hymn is followed by a short prayer whereby the meeting is formally opened; those who want to may sit down again. The meeting continues with "lessons," chapters of the Bible read out loud by the executives. These lessons may be taken from any book and any chapter between Genesis 1 and Revelation 22, though there seems to be a slight preference for Genesis, Exodus, Isaiah and Revelation. Many of the lessons refer to the twelve tribes of Israel. There is no particular order in reading, but in general the male representatives read first. Some of the executives, probably (semi-)illiterate, have their lessons read by one of the others, often Issachar.

After this long session, any three members are given the opportunity to read a lesson of their own choice, usually with the (futile) request to keep it short. Then, the religious part of the meeting is concluded with another hymn from the Redemption Songs.

In the second part, the executives discuss matters of a more general character. They frequently call upon the members to pray for the prophet and

to remind that his work is for the benefit of all. The executives may discuss incidents or complain about too much criticism from their fellow-members. They may emphasize the importance of solidarity and understanding, faith and Bible-reading or trust and support towards the board. There seems to be some tension between the executives and members who are of the opinion that there should be more mobility in the board. But there may be criticism from the executives as well. The behavior of certain members, a sister wearing pants, members supposedly using crack (a hard drug), too little attendance of the dances or stage shows, too much selfishness and too little respect for the ghetto-roots or the work of the executives. Then again, there may be criticism to criticism and a call to pay more attention to the really important issues of faith: Haile Selassie, Asfa Wassän, Africa, the Bible and so forth.

No matter the subject, everything is discussed openly and again three members are allowed to come forward and speak. Agreement with the speaker is either expressed by exclamations like "Selassie I!" and "Rastafari!" or by rewarding him or her a "big hand." If the latter is not done spontaneously, one of the executives usually asks for it. When everything has been said, the second part of the meeting is concluded with singing:

The Conquering Lion
shall break every chain.
The Conquering Lion
shall give us a victory,
again and again.

The Lion of Judah
shall break every chain.
The Lion of Judah
shall give us a victory,
again and again.

After this, it is time for financial matters. One of the executives, Brother Asher First, goes through a long list with names and contributions. Members are asked to check the counting. Contributions normally range from twenty cents to a couple of hundred dollars. The receipts and expenditures, debts and credits are added and a balance is made up.⁸ The bookkeeping is concluded with a big hand for all contributors.

Then, following some announcements, Levi starts closing the meeting by reading from the Psalms, directly followed by the Ethiopian Prayer, of which the first two lines are an interesting adaptation from Psalm 68: 31: "Princes shall come out of Egypt, Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God."⁹

Princes and Princesses shall come out of Jamaica
 Ethiopians now stretch forth their hands unto God.
 O thou God of Ethiopia, Thy divine Majesty,
 Thy spirit has come into our hearts to dwell in
 the path of righteousness, lead us,
 Help us, to forgive that we may be forgiven.
 Teach us love, loyalty on earth as it is in Zion.
 Endow us with Thy wisdom, knowledge and understanding to do thy will.
 They blessing to us, that the hungry be fed, the naked clothed.
 The sick nourished, the aged protected and the infants cared for.
 Deliver us from the hands of our enemies,
 That we may prove fruitful in the last days,
 When our enemies are passed and decayed.
 In the depths of the sea, in the depths of the earth,
 Or in the belly of the beast,
 Oh give us all a place in thy Kingdom forever and ever.

Finally, the very last song of the meeting follows, usually not before midnight. It is the Universal Ethiopian Anthem, an adaption of the official hymn of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, "Ethiopia, thou land of our fathers."¹⁰ All members face the North, said to be the direction of Ethiopia.

Ethiopia the land of our fathers
 The land where our God loves to be
 As the swift bee to hive sudden gathers
 Thy children are gathered to thee.
 With our Red, Gold and Green flowing o'er us,
 With our Emperor to shield us from wrong
 With our God and our future before us,
 We will hail thee with shout and with song.

Chorus:

God bless our Negus, Negus I, who keeps Ethiopia free,
 To advance, with truth and right, truth and right,
 To advance with love and light, love and light.
 With righteousness leading,
 We haste to our God and King,
 Humanity's pleading One God for us all.

O Eternal thou God of the ages,
 Grant unto our sons that lead
 Thy wisdom thou hast given to the sages
 When Israel were sore in need.
 Thy voice through the dim past has spoken
 Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands,
 By thee shall all barriers be broken
 And Zion bless our dear Motherland.

Ethiopia the tyrants are falling
 who smote thee upon thy knees,
 Thy children are lustily calling,
From over the distant seas.
 Jehovah the Great One has heard us.
 He has noted our sighs and our tears,
 With the spirit of love he has stirred us
 To be one all through the coming years.

“Selassie I!” “Rastafari!”

THE TWELVE TRIBES OF ISRAEL KINDLY PRESENT

Apart from meetings, the Twelve Tribes of Israel organize dances, every last Saturday of the month. Dances are held at various rented locations in Kingston, preferably not too often in the same place. These dances serve the dual purpose of entertainment and socializing for the members, as well as raising some money.

Normally, a dance is organized by two members who are selected on the basis of seniority. The income of the evening is for the benefit of the two organizers. It is up to them whether they want to donate part of the earnings to the organization, but a (biblical) tenth is customary.

In their honor, all members appear dressed in the colors of the organizing members' tribes. A dance held in honor of, for instance, an Asher and an Issachar means that every member is supposed to dress in grey and yellow. If they do not possess clothing of the required color, they are supposed to borrow or buy it; to appear in other colors is out of the question. Non-members, familiar with the meaning of the colors, may do the same, but are not obliged to do so. One can tell the colors of a dance from the invitation cards and posters.

If a dance is held in honor of a new member of the executive board, there is little difference, except that there is only one color to wear.

The places where the Twelve Tribes organize their dances are always decorated with many red, gold and green banners, posters and texts, as well as with the indispensable portraits of Haile Selassie, Asfa Wassân, the prophet Gad and Marcus Garvey. The huge Ethiopian flag with the golden lion and the paintings from the headquarters are also present. Texts include biblical passages, “utterances” from His Imperial Majesty and words of wisdom from the prophet Gad: “What man makes, man must have,” “Scatter, but stay together” and – inevitably – “Read your Bible, a chapter a day.”

At the entrance, the members organizing the next dance distribute professionally printed invitation cards for their night.

The dances of the Twelve Tribes are well-organized. They are open to everyone, and are very popular. They often attract a few thousand persons. Admission, drinks and Ital-food¹¹ are relatively inexpensive; the "cultural sound" of *Jahlovezmuzik*, the regular deejay-group, provides the pulsating reggae rhythms, many with religious texts. It all continues until the next morning.

Besides dances, the Twelve Tribes sometimes organize stage shows: reggae concerts, given in such places as the National Arena. There, performances are given by the many reggae superstars who are members of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, such as Dennis Brown, Freddie McGregor, and Judy Mowatt, as well as guest-performers. The earnings of the stage shows are, of course, for the benefit of the organization, "the reggae house of Rastafari," as Birhan (1982: n.p.) called it.

GOT TO LEAVE THE WEST, THE WEST MUST PERISH

Notwithstanding all their activities in Jamaica, the Twelve Tribes of Israel strive towards only one goal: to leave the West and return to their father's land. "How can you give up a continent for an island?" and "Leave Babylon and find your own land!" are some of the slogans expressing their feelings for both Jamaica and Africa.

Unlike such groups as, for example, Prince Edward Emmanuel's Ethiopian Africa Black International Congress Church of Salvation, the Twelve Tribes are not waiting passively for the ships of the Emperor to appear at the Babylonian shores. Instead, the Twelve Tribes prefer to take action themselves, and the first members have already established themselves in the promised land.

In 1955 Haile Selassie made a land grant "to the black people in the West, who aided Ethiopia during her period of distress," the Italian occupation (1935-1941). The responsibility for the settlement was given to the Ethiopian World Federation (EWF), and through this organization about two dozen exiles returned, among them some Rastafarians. They farmed the five hundred acres of land near Shashamane until, after the Emperor's downfall in 1974, the *Dergue* seized their land and redistributed it. As Bishton writes:

That, logically, would have been the end of Shashamane. But it wasn't ... because just as most of the original, disillusioned EWF pioneers were pulling out, a new group was arriving. Not members of the EWF ..., but Rastas who had grown up in the ghetto's of West Kingston in the sixties ..., streetwise philosophers with a new orientation to the Promised Land - all members of an organization called the Twelve Tribes of Israel (1986: 40).

It is, however, not entirely clear whether the first members of the Twelve Tribes arrived before or after Selassie's downfall, nor is it known exactly how many people are involved in the repatriation. Some members told that they had stopped counting because every branch is sending members independently, and not a year goes by without one or two leaving Babylon forever. A reasonable estimate, however, is that the group in Shashamane does not exceed forty persons, children included. Up to now, the Twelve Tribes have once sent a larger group, on 8 December 1976. Two days later, *The Daily Gleaner* published the following report:

Thirteen members of the Rastafarian organization, the Twelve Tribes of Israel left on Wednesday for Ethiopia, the country regarded by most Rastafarians as their rightful homeland. Of the thirteen members, seven who are executives of the organization, will be sojourning in Ethiopia for a period of one month during which time they will be gathering information to bring back to their 'sisters' and 'brethren' here. The six remaining members will be residing in Ethiopia permanently along with other 'sisters' and 'brethren' already there. It is understood that it is the organization's intention to set up an executive committee of the Twelve Tribes of Israel in Ethiopia. The Twelve 'brethren' and one 'sister' were seen off the airport by hundreds of happy and peaceful 'brethren' and 'sisters' who wore 'banners' (knitted tams) of red, gold and green which are the colours of the Ethiopian flag. When the British Airways aircraft took off from the Norman Manley International with the 'brethren' and 'sister' on board the voices of the Rastafarians who had gathered on top of the waving gallery rose in unison with praises to His Imperial Majesty, Haile Selassie [sic] I. Prayers were uttered for a safe flight for the 'brethren' and 'sister' also. It is not the first time that members of the Twelve Tribes of Israel have gathered at the airport to bid farewell to 'brethren' and 'sisters' from the organization, but it is the first time that the organization has sent so many as thirteen members at one time (10 December 1976).

The Twelve Tribes claim to have only minor difficulties with the Marxist regime in Ethiopia. Not without pride, members boast that this is because of the good work the organization carries out in Shashamane, and add that the Twelve Tribes of Israel are the only Rastafarians allowed to settle in Ethiopia. According to a rather negative article in *The Star* (23 March 1984), the Twelve Tribes "live by growing their own food and marijuana and by making and selling handicrafts, such as knitted caps" Further, one of the members was quoted saying that the relations with the Ethiopian government are good and that "quite recently they have distributed land to us: 98.8 acres, which is in addition to the 49.9 acres we have been allowed to keep for subsistence farming." The Twelve Tribes carefully try to avoid the slightest provocation; they do not smoke their ganja in public nor do they publicly advocate their beliefs. They may abhor the regime, but they will always respect it; it is yet another part of the fulfilment of prophecy.

Shashamane is not necessarily the only destination for the Twelve Tribes.

Up to now, they have not found any other lands to settle, but the organization continues to look for it. At the end of 1986, the prophet Gad left on a mission to try to find such lands in Nigeria.

Whatever the results, repatriation is only part of the millennial dream of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The end of time is at hand, Selassie is going to return, Babylon shall be destroyed, and Zion restored, precisely as foretold in the Bible. Judgment shall come over the earth. The wicked shall perish and the righteous shall be saved. One hundred forty-four thousand, twelve thousand of every tribe, and a remnant, a mixed multitude of every nation and tongue, shall be gathered from all corners of the earth. Eternal life in the African New Jerusalem shall be their reward.

The Twelve Tribes of Israel will therefore continue to strive towards perfection. They will try to live the lives of the righteous, with faith and patience. "We've got to fulfil the Book."¹²

POSTSCRIPT

From a personal letter of a member of the Twelve Tribes of Israel (8 June 1987) I learned that since the prophet Gad has returned from his long absence "lots of changes have been made, the dance being one of them." Now, there are "parties," instead of dances; full silver (Reuben) in April, full gold (Simeon) in May, and so forth. The details of these and other changes are as yet unknown to me, except for the fact that the first party "was the talk of the town."

The letter finished with a sentence worth quoting at the end of this article. It read: "The Twelve Tribes of Israel cause is based upon righteousness, and anything that is not righteous we have no respect for, as God Almighty is our Leader and Jesus Christ Selassie I, our Standard Bearer."

NOTES

1. The information on which this article is based was collected during five months of training-fieldwork in Kingston, Jamaica in 1986-1987. The fieldwork was part of the M.A. program of Cultural Anthropology at the University of Utrecht, the Netherlands. I would like to express my gratitude to Professor H. Hoetink (University of Utrecht), Professor R.M. Nettleford (University of the West Indies) and drs. A.F. Dijkstra for their support and encouragement.

2. Bob Marley/C. Mayfield, 1977. *One love/People get ready*. Island Records Ltd.

3. The sequence of the tribes is said to be based on Genesis 49: 3-27. There, however, Zebulun is mentioned before, and not after, Issachar. The tribes are only partly listed in order of birth, since Dan, Gad, Asher and Naphtali were born before Issachar and Zebulun. Neither are they listed by mother, since Dan and Naphtali were the two sons Israel begot with Bilhah. The first six, Reuben until Zebulun, were born with Leah, Gad and Asher with Zilpah, and Joseph and Benjamin with Rachel. Throughout the Bible, the twelve tribes are listed in various sequences, though nowhere in the exact sequence used by the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Members, however, were unable to give any explanations apart from Genesis 49 and the remark that this is simply the way it is.

4. The religious calendar of Israel began in the month *Nisan*, the civil calendar in the month *Tishri*. Since it was a lunar calendar, a leap-month, the *Second Adar*, had to be added about every six years.

5. The *Kebra Nagast* (the Glory of the Kings) is an ancient Ethiopian legend relating the Ethiopian monarchy directly to King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

6. Unfortunately, the information on the prophet Gad is somewhat scanty. He was off the island during the period of research.

7. Hymn no. 946 in *Redemption songs: a choice collection of one thousand hymns and choruses for evangelistic meetings, soloists, choirs, the home*. London and Glasgow, Pickering & Inglis. This hymn was also on a pamphlet of the Twelve Tribes of Israel which included the Ethiopian Prayer and the Universal Ethiopian Anthem as well. The last verse, not in Redemption Songs, is added to all the hymns of the Twelve Tribes.

8. For obvious reasons, more detailed information about the finances of the Twelve Tribes of Israel is withheld.

9. Psalm 68: 31 has played an important role in the long tradition of Ethiopianism and was interpreted as the prophecy of restoration of Africa and the people of African descent by almost all black Christian denominations as well as by a number of cults in the New World.

10. The original Universal Ethiopian Anthem (Jacques Garvey 1967: 140-141), a poem composed by Burrell and Ford, reads as follows:

Ethiopia, thou land of our fathers,
Thou land where the gods loved to be,
As storm cloud at night suddenly gathers
Our armies come rushing to thee.
We must in the fight be victorious
When swords are thrust outward to gleam;
For us will the vict'ry be glorious
When led by the red, black and green.

Chorus:

Advance, advance to victory,
Let Africa be free;
Advance to meet the foe
With the might
Of the red, the black and the green.

Ethiopia, the tyrant's falling.
 Who smote thee upon thy knees,
 Ant thy children are lustily calling
 From over the distant seas.
 Jehovah, the Great One has heard us,
 Has noted our sighs and our tears,
 With His spirit of Love he has stirred us
 To be One through the coming years.

O Jehovah, thou God of the ages
 Grant unto our sons that lead
 The wisdom Thou gave to Thy sages
 When Israel was sore in need.
 Thy voice thro' the dim past has spoken.
 Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hand,
 By Thee shall all fetters be broken,
 And Heav'n bless our dear fatherland.

The Twelve Tribes' adaption of this Anthem is, especially in the first verse, far less militant. Further, they have, in the second line of the first verse, changed the plural "gods" into the singular, and also changed the past tense "loved" into the present tense "loves." After all, Selassie cannot be spoken of in the past tense. The "red, black and green" of the Universal Negro Improvement Association's flag has been changed into the red, gold and green of the Ethiopian flag.

11. Ital-food is the name the Rastafarians have given to their natural, vegetarian diet.
12. Bob Marley, 1980. *Redemption song*. Island Records Ltd.

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