

# A Reasoning on Rastafari Reasoning

## PSYCTM007 - The Psychology of Spiritual Practice

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Rastafari is a relatively young religion, originating in Jamaica in the 20th century amongst tumultuous social conditions that followed an horrific history of slavery. One of the religion's practices, reasoning, is the focus of this discussion. However, the circumstances of the religion's origin are intertwined with the religion itself, the psychology of its adherents and the spiritual practices that they engage in. So to begin with we will discuss the origins of Rastafari.

Jamaica was settled by white Europeans during the 16th and 17th centuries. The country participated in the Atlantic slave trade from the 16th to the 19th century and became slave-dependent. In the aftermath of this historical mistreatment, though no longer slaves, blacks in Jamaica still suffered the injustice of oppression and poverty. During the 1920s, Marcus Garvey, a black Jamaican publisher, entrepreneur, writer and orator became popular.

Garvey was uncompromisingly pro-black and pro-African, arguing for and working to implement, a single pan-African government and the return of all blacks around the world to Africa. Amongst other activities, he founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association, an umbrella organisation to assist anybody of African ancestry and incorporated the Black Star Line, a shipping company with the purpose of eventually facilitating the return of blacks to Africa. Barrett (1977) writes that:

“Garvey was no ordinary man, but one of those rare creatures of history whose fate it is to be seized with the social and economic oppression of a people and who see this oppression as his or her own spiritual mission.”  
(Barrett, 1977, p. 66)

Garvey's popularity was extreme in Jamaica, the United States and Africa and gave rise to a movement with millions of followers. Garvey made what is now considered a prophesy within Rastafari. Although undocumented, the following phrase is attributed to a farewell speech by Garvey just prior to his departure from Jamaica for the United States:

“Look to Africa when a black king shall be crowned; he shall be the redeemer.”  
(Barrett, 1977, p. 81)

In 1930, an Ethiopian prince regent named Ras Tafari was crowned emperor and assumed the title ‘Haile Salassie I’ (‘King of Kings, Lord of Lords, the all-conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah.’) This crowning was interpreted by some Garvey followers in Jamaica as the fulfilment of his prophesy; that the emperor would be the force to redeem the black peoples of the world:

“His crowning was to portend a worldly transformation in which the white colonial structure was to be dissolved and all black people returned to Ethiopia, like Garvey used interchangeably with Africa. Further, Ras Tafari himself was to instigate the transformation”  
(Cashmore, 1979, p. 22)

Though unclear as to how the idea originated, the emperor was seen not only as the fulfilment of Garvey's prophesy but as the fulfilment of Biblical prophesy; that Haile Salassie was, indeed the

messiah. This idea spread amongst Garveyites in Jamaica and laid the foundation for what is now known as the Rastafari religion (although Rastafari has also been labelled a *cult* by Cashmore (1979) and, perhaps more accurately a *movement* by Edmonds (1998), Barrett (1977), Stokke (2005) and others.)

One Garvey follower who preached the divinity of Haile Salassie was Leonard Howell, described by Lee (2003) as “the first rasta.” Howell established a commune called Pinnacle where, amongst other activities he and his followers grew ganja (marijuana) as a cash crop. Though not certain, Barrett (1977, p. 88) speculates that this is the origin of the use of ganja as a spiritual practice in Rastafari.

The use of ganja is not a practice in and of itself but the herb is used as part of the practice of *grounding* and its associated *reasoning*. Homiak, quoted by Edmonds (1998), defines grounding as

“informal instruction in Rasta precepts and ideology; the ritual process [reasoning] by which circles of like-minded brethren are formed and maintained.”  
(Edmonds, 1998, p. 354)

In Jamaica, this practice commonly takes place within different scopes. There are no well defined boundaries and, indeed groundings can take place “anywhere and anytime” (Edmonds, 1998, p. 355) but they most often occur: daily at the homes of leading Rastas; in larger weekly or monthly gatherings that may last all night and include feasting, drumming, dancing, chanting, etc.; or periodically at much larger gatherings called Nyabinghi which draw members from a much wider area, up to and including national level and can last several days.

Closely associated with groundings is the practice of reasoning, an open-ended and informal dialogue on subjects in and around Rastafari, drawing on the experience of participants and with the goal of “the exploration of their intersubjectivity” (Edmonds, 1998, p. 355). Originally, reasoning played an important role in the emergence of the religion. As Rastas let go of the learned Euro-centric world view and accepted the pro-African, Garvey-inspired world view, the practice became what Cashmore (1979) describes as a “reciprocal reassurance process” (p. 64):

“members came together in informal social interactions to discuss spontaneously practically any issue concerning them personally and how this related to the movement.”  
(Cashmore, 1979, p. 64)

Thus, groundings bring together members of the movement, assisting in the development of individual and group identities. Individuals develop their identity as blacks with African heritage; as the descendants of slaves still suffering in a system dominated by whites, the same system that had given rise to the enslavement of their ancestors and whose downfall was signalled by the crowning of Ras Tafari. Groups developed an identity as a movement, Rastafari, that exists in opposition the system dominated by whites, Babylon.

There can also be seen a therapeutic aspect to reasoning sessions. As noted, the Rastafari movement advances the lives of and originates from, a group of abused and oppressed people. The trauma of the group’s suffering runs deep. The explicit discussion of these traumas, how they came about and how they can be prevented in future, has therapeutic value. Discussion of an individual’s negative experiences within the group is a common phenomenon. The group consists of understanding individuals who will likely have had similar experiences. This has clear similarities to Yalom and Leszcz’s (2005) group psychotherapy.

Reasonings have profound spiritual import and the use of ganja is intended to aid in the manifestation of the spiritual aspects. Edmonds (1998) cites Rogers (1977) who states that ganja smoking gives access to “inner and worldly knowledge” (p. 355.) Going further, Edmonds (1998) quotes Yawney (1978) who states that ganja is “the key to the lock of understanding; God chooses to reveal himself through herbs.” (p. 355.)

Hence, ganja smoking is intended as a means through which Rastafarians can attain knowledge of the divine, ‘knowledge’ here having the same meaning as Ferrer’s (2002) ‘participatory knowing’ as opposed to abstract intellectual understanding.

Beyond the use of ganja, the dialogical aspects of reasoning also have great spiritual import. Reasoning is an intense dialogue that can continue for hours. This is intended to enlighten the participants, raising their level of consciousness. Stokke (2005) quotes Ayinde, the administrator of an online reasoning forum who states that reasoning is “a discussion in pursuit of higher truth” (Ayinde, 2003) and going further,

“reasoning is about the realization of higher truth and requires honesty and willingness to question one’s own perceptions. Conscious development means becoming conscious of one’s self and realize oneself [sic] in the world.” (Stokke, 2005, p. 53)

Again, this pursuit of higher truths is noted by Edmonds (1998) who quotes Yawney (1978):

“Two brethren may reason together, each prompting the other to *higher and higher I-ghts* [heights], accreting layer upon layer of meaning until a satisfactory view of reality is reached.” (Edmonds, 1998, p. 356)

Here, the meaning of ‘satisfactory’ is in reference to a fit with an internal compass of reason, as opposed to an appeal to desire. Indeed, this internal compass is central to the process. Jahson (2003) explains this clearly, defining reason as:

“the capacity that we all have to **feel** when something is right. We get to clearly **see** something that someone tells us, and we can confirm this in the very inside of our conscience [sic].” (Jahson, 2003)

The language used during reasoning also has spiritual import. Stokke (2005) refers to the concept of ‘nommo’, an African philosophy where language acquires power beyond the surface meaning of words. Referring to Chevannes (2003), Stokke (2005) describes reasoning as “a ritual drama centred on words, but which involves more than the exchange of words.” (p. 52.) Ayinde (2003) goes further, explaining that reasoning

“is a very sacred thing as what is being said must be the truth, as the speakers understand it. It involves the exchanges of meaning and not simply repeating words that both parties interpret differently.” (Ayinde, 2003)

The parallels with hermeneutic mystical traditions such as Kabbalah are striking. The belief that language is primary to reality is in line with the Rastafari view and similar to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (eg Whorf, 1956) that our thoughts and hence understanding of reality are based on language. This is exemplified in the use of the expression “I-an-I” which usually signifies the self in speech. The dual ‘I’s are a reference to the self *and* the divine within everyone. Edmonds (1998) explains that the expression is

“an assertion of the godlike nature and dignity of every individual ... the basic notion of “I-an-I” is that the principle of divinity inheres in each individual, truth is equally accessible to all.” (Edmonds, 1998, p. 352)

The meaning behind this expression is profound in its implications. “I-an-I” is not so much an expression of an abstract equality in the minds of Rastafarians but is, itself a state of mind, accessed through ganja. Edmonds (1998) writes: “In the visionary state induced by ganja smoking, Rastas come to the “I-an-I” consciousness” (p. 355) then quoting again from Yawney (1978), the depth of this state of mind is made clear; it is

“the merging of the individual with all life forces, the realization that all life flows from the same source, and the collapse of the distance between internal and external, subject and object.” (Edmonds, 1998, p. 355)

This collapse of Cartesian dualism is a staple of transpersonal literature, a common element in numerous mystical experiences. As Ferrer (2002) states in nearly identical phrasing, “transpersonal phenomena collapse the distinction between subject and object.” (pp. 29-30.)

The importance of language in Rastafari goes beyond “I-an-I” consciousness. The Rastafari dialect, called “Iyaric”, is heavily modified English and its modification is consciously done. For example, the word “overstand” is used instead of “understand”; the latter implying a subordinate position *under*, echoing the situation of black slaves subordinated by Babylon. The word “livication” is substituted for the word “dedication”, the first syllable of which, ‘ded’, has connotations of death. Many other examples exist. Indeed, Rastafari speech can often be unintelligible to speakers of ordinary English. Of course, this is not without intent again; the unintelligibility places a barrier between Rastafari and Babylon.

The immediate purpose of this modification of language is to change the way that Rastafarians think; to extinguish any extant influence of Babylon and to preclude any future influence. However, the ultimate goal is to modify the *reality* of the lives of oppressed blacks through this modification of language. Hence there is a sophistication that, again seems to echo hermeneutic traditions and linguistic theories of reality-as-language.

Rastafari is a deeply spiritual movement whose adherents make full use of the very powerful technique of reasoning to develop themselves, their religion and in doing so their people and ultimately all of humanity. Analysis of this technique reveals a great deal of spiritual and psychological depth and shows similarities to a number of existing psychological and transpersonal theories, in addition to other traditions.

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