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Rasta, Reggae and Ethiopia
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If you were following the news on Sunday, Feb. 6, you would have noticed the reggae music extravaganza in Ethiopia in honor of Bob Marley's 60th birthday. Thousands of Jamaicans traveled across the Atlantic Ocean to the Horn of Africa to attend this concert celebrating Marley, now dead 23 years. He brought reggae music to international attention and, along with it, the religion from which it grew, Rastafarianism. If you wondered why this concert honoring a Jamaican was in Ethiopia, rather than Jamaica, you were not alone. The answer comes from their Rastafarian beliefs.

Rastafarianism arose from two sets of political circumstances, one on each side of the Atlantic. Ethiopia is the only African country that was never colonized by a European nation, although Italy occupied a small part during World War II. It was also the first African country to defeat a European nation (Italy) in battle in 1898. Within Ethiopia, this is seen as part of the nation's proud heritage that extends back more than 3,000 years. Indeed, Ethiopia traces the lineage of its emperors back to a child born to the Queen of Sheba (Sheba being Ethiopia) and King Solomon of Israel.

When heir to the throne, Ras Tafari, became the emperor in 1930, his coronation name was Emperor Haile Selassie I. At the start of his long reign (he died in 1974), he declared that he was the messiah, the descendent of King David, whom the Bible predicted. As such, he was the incarnation of god. This declaration was presumably done in part to help ensure his subjects' loyalty. Over the decades of his rule, his human side showed through, however, and few Ethiopians believed in his divinity for long. The difficulties of WWII, his authoritarian rule, the increasing poverty, corruption, and so on, left a mixed legacy at best.

On the other side of the Atlantic, in Jamaica and across the Caribbean, Marcus Garvey had been preaching a black-power ideology to the descendants of African slaves. He blamed the white slave-based society for the difficulties continuing to face them and saw the current white establishment as working to keep blacks in poverty and powerlessness. He told them, "Look to

Africa for the crowning of a Black King; He shall be the Redeemer."

Selassie's claim fulfilled this prophecy perfectly. In the Jamaican slums and shanty towns, the belief in Selassie as a divine redeemer for blacks was combined with Garvey's ideas and other beliefs. This mix gained hold among the impoverished Jamaicans over the decades and was gradually formulated into multifaceted religion of black power against white domination and exploitation. This religion is now known as Rastafarianism, or simply as Rasta. Although originating in Christianity, it views the standard Bible as being corrupted by whites to subjugate blacks. They adopted as their scripture a text that claims to restore the changed sections called the Holy Piby.

Since Jamaicans were never subject to the difficulties of Selassie's rule, nor did they know much about the realities of Ethiopia, they were free to emphasize and elaborate aspects of Selassie's divinity. As the descendants of slaves taken from Africa, a return to Africa became an important spiritual goal and Ethiopia itself was seen as the "Promised Land." Since it had never been conquered by whites, its independence was seen as evidence of divine favor.

Given these two different backgrounds, it is not surprising that the reggae concert last week was a study in cultural mismatch. The Rastas arrived in Ethiopia to discover that in Selassie's own country he is not considered divine, and that the laid-back Rasta beliefs about worship, spirituality and goals of life were not shared by the Ethiopians.

Ethiopians have a long, strong history of Christianity (Ethiopian Orthodox), which is accompanied in some sections of the country by a fervent Islam. Both religions are quite conservative, both theologically and ethically, and many Ethiopians even saw the arrival of thousands of Jamaican Rastas as threatening to the nation's moral values.