

# Babylonia

too Can Be a red

## Island in the *Caribbean*

**Luis Cino.** Writer and journalist

The Special Brigade police officers descended from their truck into the dark Havana night. Awhile later, they intercepted their first suspect as part of a routine raid. It was a young black male wearing frayed and tattered tie-dyed blue jeans and a T-shirt bearing Bob Marley's face. He also wore a knitted cap that covered his long and tangled dreadlock braids. After showing the police officers his identification card, they separated his legs, placed his open hands against the wall and searched to see if he had any firearms. Another officer searched through his belongings, which he carried in his backpack and were now scattered on the sidewalk.

The black youth thought that if he did not end up at the police station all night, he would continue his way around the city. Yet, this incident could be the drop that overflows his cup, his feelings of being trapped between the walls of a Babylonia, a place proclaimed to be a paradise but is hostile and racist. Babylonia, is a red island in the Caribbean. He believes that only Jah can save him.

In Cuba, being a rasta is the only requirement for raising police suspicion. Dreadlocks incriminate them. Police

officers ask themselves why black youths wear, despite the heat, the black, green, yellow, and red colored caps of the Jamaican and Ethiopian flags. They link those who wear them to marijuana usage. The officers view the wearers as practitioners of "strange beliefs". The rasta appeared in Cuba during the 1980's and were considered more as fashion than as a religious cult. Reggae and Bob Marley were at the height of fashion. Today, thousands of black youths and mulattos (mixed race), especially in Havana and Santiago, Cuba, proclaim Jah as their only God and live according to his teachings. No church can give figures on the number of Jah followers, but they are more visible in the streets. Little is known about them. Many people ignore that they are a religious sect. They are surrounded by prejudice, misunderstanding and hostility. They await the day of redemption, that is when Jah will remove them from Babylonia—from oppression and racism in the white world—and guide them to their ancestral Africa.

For Yaser, a 23-year old rasta of Mantilla, everything that goes against the black man and nature, is Babylonia. It does not matter whether they are capitalist or communist, he believes those are

things of the white man. Yaser never gave up on his destiny. Nothing in his existence made sense. He did not find answers in the saints, alcohol, marijuana, books or in the Pentecostal temple. His questions were those of a poor, young black boy. The son of an alcoholic bricklayer who died at the foot of a scaffold and a washerwoman. Only the rastas made him and his parents feel proud to be black. The rastas say blacks are reincarnations of the lost tribes of Israel.

In its vast variety of beliefs, rasta is adorned by African religious concepts and a self-assured biblical mysticism that makes interpreting the old testament complicated. These beliefs concur with those of the divine character, Ras Tafari Makonen, best-known by the Christian name of Haile Selassie. Selassie was the last Ethiopia emperor who supposedly was a descendant of King Solomon and of the Queen of Saba.

Omar, a strong 29-year old mulatto (mixed race) rasta from Old Havana, has the Lion of Judas tattooed on one of his arms. He knows little about Selassie. However, he admired the fact that I told him how Selassie headed the Abyssinian resistance to the Mussolini aggression. He listened to me with incredulity when I referred to Negus's blood thirstiness and despotic methods of reign. Nevertheless, the rastas do not question his divinity.

Paradoxically, Cuba is where so many rastas venerate Selassie as the superior incarnation of the black man's virtues. Supported by his army, Mengistu Haile Mariam ousted Selassie as emperor and kept him captive until his death. Mariam established a state not less despotic and bloodthirsty than that of Negus in Ethiopia.

Richard is a rasta of San Miguel del Padron. At the end of the 1970's, his father fought Somalians in the Ogaden as

part of the Cuban military contingent of soldiers. His father's Ethiopian experience has not influenced Richard. He trusts that all will change "when Jah takes us to Ethiopia and we live like brothers".

The festival of Kings are celebrations of the glory of Jah. They take place in the humble, mainly black neighborhoods in Mantilla, Parraga and San Miguel del Padron. The police often times interrupt them and the reggae [music] is turned off. The police officers often times walk around searching for marijuana and its users.

Cuban rastas are aloof and fearful when asked about marijuana. They attribute it to having properties of medicine. "It is not drug, because it is natural", says Richard. Omar explains that it is a sacred plant because it was discovered in Solomon's tomb: "It aids in relaxation, meditation and allows one to free their mind". Further, alcohol and pork meat are prohibited, but rastas drink on occasion. Although they prefer vegetables, they are not rigorous with this diet in Cuba. Some of them practice a combination of the orichas and worship to Jah.

Yaser is making final preparations to go to Sweden with Agnes, a lawyer in her forties from Stockholm. They met two years ago on a street named Obispo (Bishop). He never thought that he would be involved in the sexual tourism of European women who sought love in the Caribbean. Soon, if it is Jah's will, Yaser's divine migratory plans will begin and he will leave Cuba with his Scandinavian wife. In any case, Yaser, believes that Jah, who is omnipotent, will rescue him on come judgment day to guide him to Ethiopia with his brothers. For Jah, nothing is difficult, neither the Scandinavian cold, the warm Caribbean island or confinement in Babylonia.