Original title / título original:

The Ras Tafari Movement - its Genesis and Functions.

Author(s)/ autor(es):

Ewa Nowicka

Published originally as/ Publicado originalmente en:

DOI: https://doi.org/10.36447/Estudios1974.v2.art2

Estudios Latinoamericanos is a journal published by the Polish Society for Latin American Studies (Polskie Towarzystwo Studiów Latynoamerykanistycznych).

The Polish Society for Latin American Studies is scholarly organization established to facilitate research on Latin America and to encourage and promote scientific and cultural cooperation between Poland and Latin America.

Estudios Latinoamericanos, revista publicada por la Sociedad Polaca de Estudios Latinoamericanos (Polskie Towarzystwo Studiów Latynoamerykanistycznych).

Sociedad Polaca de Estudios Latinoamericanos es una asociación científica fundada con el fin de desarrollar investigaciones científicas sobre América Latina y participar en la cooperación científica y cultural entre las sociedades de Polonia y América Latina.
Not much has been written so far about Tafarism,¹ though the movement certainly merits attention as a manifestation of contemporary protest among the lowest strata of Jamaica’s black population against their economic and social discrimination. Literature on the subject does not adequately deal with the rather important question of a typological description of the Ras Tafari movement in general notional categories. It is also important to draw attention to other, alternative forms of protest created by socio-religious movements among the Jamaican people. Written works contain many suggestions concerning a theoretical interpretation of Tafarism, which it would be worthwhile to compile into one comprehensive attempt at an explanation, taking into account bath social and psychological factors.

Of the many problems deserving closer examination, selected as the subject of this article have been those which are linked with the

¹ It is not difficult to list the basic works devoted to the Ras Tafari movement which appeared before 1963. Presented in a chronological order, these included the articles by Professor George E. Simpson of Oberlin College (Ohio) based on research conducted in Kingston in 1953 into four groups of Ras Tafaris, under the auspices of the Institute of Social and Economic Research USWI. The articles are; The Ras Tafari in Jamaica; A Study of Race and Class Conflict, “Social Forces”, Vol. XXXIV, 1955, No. 2; and Political Cultism in West Kingston, “Social and Economic Studies”, Vol. IV, 1955, No. 2. An important place among works on Ras Tafarism is occupied by a collective work by three authors - M. G. Smith, R. Augier, and R. Nettleford: The Ras Tafari Movement in Kingston, Jamaica, Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1960. It is based on two weeks of studies conducted in June, 1960 and is the most thorough and detailed presentation of the history of the movement. The studies were conducted at the initiative of the Jamaican authorities, which became alarmed with the violence of Ras Tafari demonstrations. The task of the study group was to define the goals, aspirations and the attitudes of the movement as well as to indicate measures to relieve the tensions which had arisen between the Ras Tafari brotherhood on one side and the government and the police on the other. New theoretical problems were raised in an extensive article by G. E. Simpson: The Ras Tafari Movement in Jamaica in Its Millennial Aspect, printed in: S. L. Thrupp (ed.): Millennial Dreams in Action: Essays in Comparative Study. Comparative Studies in Society and History, sup. II, the Hague 1962, pp. 160 - 165. Three above quoted works were based on on-the-spot research. Many other authors interested in Ras Tafarism, attempted to establish a theoretical interpretation for the movement.
origin and the functions of the Ras Tafari movement. Furthermore the article has basic historical limitations, in that it discusses the history of the movement from its inception in 1930 to the day when Jamaica was granted independence in 1962. For the fact is that systematic studies of Tafarism began rather late and consequently, available information pertains, in principle, to the late 50’s and early 60’s. The ideological contents and attitudes of the movement, described in the course of the last decades, originated of course, much earlier, but their genesis is only briefly discussed here. Thus the historical limitations of this article are actually even greater. Because the Ras Tafari movement was studied mainly by sociologists and then only over a period of about 10 years, the picture of the movement’s ideology and activities construed on that basis is of necessity largely static. In order to avoid misunderstandings, it should be noted, therefore, that the description of Tafarism here deals with those of its ideas which are characteristic of all periods of its development. Approximate dates of their emergence are given only with regard to those elements of the movement which appeared in later periods and had not existed in its initial stages.

**Tafarism - a political or a religious movement?**

The Ras Tafari movement should be placed among the broad category of social movements which combine in their ideology political and religious elements, linking phenomena of both in their doctrine and activity. Thus the problem of whether Tafarism is a political or a religious movement is insoluble. In some cases it tends to be religious, in others - political; some of its followers interpret its ideology in political categories, while others choose to adopt a religious interpretation. But the religious elements and the secular ones - which-sometimes have a political flavour’ within, the framework of the – movement - should be treated separately. In order to make such an analysis, the component parts of the social movement must be distinguished in order to find in them the religious and the political contents.
The basic components of any social movement are first, the doctrine, which consists of the objectives and such means of their realization, which are regarded as proper and feasible, and of the whole gaunt of conceptions about the world which form the foundation of the very construction of the doctrine, and second, the activities accepted and pursued within the movement. Such a presentation of the components is necessary for the evaluation of the movement’s general character.

In this way we can characterize the individual components of the Ras Tafari movement, bearing in mind, however, that between what we refer to as its political and, on the other hand, its religious nature, there lies continuum of various values. The goals of Tafarism are wholly temporal. The main goal is to attain a radical improvement of the living conditions of Jamaica’s Negro population. Also the ways and means by which Ras Tafari members seek to realize their goals are basically secular. The lot of the black man in Jamaica is to be quickly and radically bettered through a mass migration to Ethiopia, which is generally identified with Africa. Return to Africa is regarded as a return to the ancient homeland, where the Jamaicans will find their place in the world and their destiny. The Tafari idea of the return to Africa, called also repatriation, and seen as a way to free the Black people from oppression and exploitation by the whites, stems from the evangelism of Marcus Garvey who, in the early 20’s, proclaimed the slogan „Back to Africa”. Another of his slogans - „One God, One Goal, One Destiny” - emphasized the unity of black people everywhere, that is in America and in Africa, and the third slogan, „Africa for Africans” lay at the root of black racialism. Jamaican-born Garvey had begun his political activities on the island in the years 1914 - 1916 and then moved to the United States, where he continued to preach his gospel. In 1918 he established the Universal Negro Improvement Association - an organization of a

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2 The lay and the political nature of Has Tafarism are stressed by G. E. Simpson. On that basis he says that it cannot be presented as a solely religious movement, though it does fulfil functions similar to those of religious movements flourishing in Jamaica. G. E. Simpson: The Has TafaTi Movement in Jamaica; A Study of Race and Class Conflict. Other authors, like M. G. Smith, R. A Ugierand R. Nettelford (op. cit.) emphasize the religious character of the movement referring to its other elements. It should also be noted that for some Ras Tafari groups the political and lay contents of the movement are more important whereas others give priority to its religious content.
religious-political character. In 1927 Garvey was deported to Jamaica and there he managed to evoke the interest of the lower sections of the population in his idea of repatriation to Africa. Three years later, in 1930, the Ras Tafari movement, clearly inspired by his teachings, began to develop. To this day the followers of Tafarism revere Garvey as a prophet and cofounder of the movement, ascribing to him a greater role than he, in fact, had played.

The Tafaris claim that Garvey was sent by God „to cut and clear”, thus giving vent to their belief that with his coming a radical turning point would occur in the situation of blacks in the United States as well as in the West Indies. Garvey prophesised that the day of liberation and salvation was near and that it would come with the crowning of the King of Africa. This was of great importance for the emergence of the first manifestations of Tafarism at the time of the coronation of Ras Tafari in 1930, as Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia.

Though the goals and the means of the Ras Tafari movement return to Africa as the only way to improve the lot of the black Jamaicans - are of a basically secular-nature, they are however, intermingled with many purely religious conceptions which give the movement its specific character. Those religious elements are based on Biblical ideas, taken mainly from the Old Testament and carefully selected and interpreted. Far from the moment when power on the island was taken over by the British in 1655, the local population was subjected to protestant missionary activities, and this was bound to exert considerable influence on both the Ras Tafari movement and on other religious movements in that region. Yet the followers of Tafarism did not readily accept all the conceptions of Christianity. Some were rejected as false and as pure inventions of the whites, who sought to subjugate the blacks. For example, the white missionaries were accused of preaching equality beyond the grave, white at the same time carefully concealing and upholding in practice the existing social inequalities.

Characteristic of the Ras Tafari movement is its concept of God. They claim that the whites have invented a false idea of God, who was allegedly residing in heaven, and who, as a spiritual being was invisible and inscrutable. According to the Ras Tafaris the situation
is different; God lives on the earth and He is the Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie ¹. He is Jehovah himself, King of Kings, Lord of Lords and the only ruler on the Throne of David. He is the supreme lord over the rulers of all other countries, who bow to Him. All Ras Tafaris, however their views on various matters may differ, regard Haile Selassie, i.e. Ras Tafari, as the living God, the Messiah come to earth, the envoy of God the Father. The name of Haile Selassie is translated as „the power of the Holy Trinity.” Referring to verses from the Bible they call him „the Conquering Lion of Judah,” „the Saviour of Israel” (i.e. of the black people)⁴. The invincible Emperor Haile Selassie even wields complete power over the atomic bomb. The proof of this power is the photograph printed in newspapers in 1936 after the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, showing the Emperor standing with one foot on an unexploded Italian bomb. Ras Tafari is the undisputed sovereign, not only of the Ethiopians, but of all black men the world over, who are, in fact, the real Hebrews and the true Israelites - the Chosen People of which the Bible speaks. The Jews, as white, cannot be the real Biblical Israelites and are fraudulently masquerading as Such.

At the root of black rada’lism, professed by a majority of the movement’s followers, lies the conviction that the blacks are among the most powerful people in the world. They built a high, civilization when the whites were still living as savages on the trees or in caves. The Ras Tafaris believe that the Biblical Hebrews, King Solomon, the Queen of Sheba and Jesus Christ were black.⁵. From the point of view of morality, the white man has always been inferior to the black man. During the colonial period the white plantation-owners were simple criminals - they killed infants or took them away from their mothers and drove the women to slave labour⁶. All Ras Tafaris agree that the present exploitation of the black people in Jamaica is the continuation of the era of slavery. Some conceive the question in purely political terms - others tend to give it a religious

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¹ Haile Selassie is the name assumed by the Emperor of Ethiopia at the time of his coronation in 1930. His own name is Täfârî and his title before the coronation was Ras. Hence the name of the movement.
² M. G. Smith, R. Augier, R. Nettleford: op. cit., p. 22.
³ E. Simpson: The Ras Tafari Movement in Jamaica...
⁴ Ibidem
interpretation\textsuperscript{7}. The whites accuse the blacks of committing all kinds of crimes, mainly of theft. But the truth is, say the Ras Tafari followers, that the whites have always been murderers and thieves of entire continents. Now the time is drawing near when the whites will pay for their crimes, for which they cannot escape responsibility, because as the members of the movement say: „The tree bears the fruit and from the seeds grow the trees“\textsuperscript{8}. This metaphor obviously reflects social memory and traditions upheld by generations. The present generation of black Jamaicans feels burdened with the problems of its ancestors, and accordingly interprets the idea of reincarnation to the extent that some followers claim that they themselves were beaten with the slave-driver’s whip\textsuperscript{9}. This is a vivid example of history lingering on in the minds and consciousness of the Jamaicans and surely not only among the followers of the Ras Tafari ideology. Black Jamaican interest in the history of their own people is no doubt enhanced by their social and psychical degradation in conditions of a comparatively well-developed orientation in general political and historical questions.

The Ras Tafari followers Claim that also nowadays the whites can not be trusted because they purposely lie to the blacks in order to keep them in slavery. But happily, the black man now knows ,the truth; he can stand up to the white man and take his fate into his own hands. The most despicable part of the white community are the clergy and the police. The priests deceive the blacks in the church, and schools “Serve the same purpose because an they teach black children is nonsense”\textsuperscript{10}. The whites are purposely keeping the blacks in poverty and ignorance in order to perpetuate slavery, which has now assumed its worst form - mental slavery. Nothing will change in this until the return to Africa.

The Ras Tafari followers have also a religious explanation for the appalling situation of the black men in Jamaica and in neighbouring countries. The slavery which is now their lot in the West Indies is a punishment method out by God for former sins. But the black people

\textsuperscript{7} M. G. Smith, R. Augier, R. Nettleford: \textit{op.cit.}, p. 22.

\textsuperscript{8} G. E. Simpson: \textit{The Ras Tafari Movement in Jamaica}...

\textsuperscript{9} M. G. Smith, R. Augier, R. Nettleford: \textit{op.cit.}, p. 52.

\textsuperscript{10} G. E. Simpson: \textit{The Ras Tafari Movement in Jamaica}...
have already atoned for their trespasses and the time of freedom has come. This will be won with the return to the homeland, which is a Paradise for the blacks. Every people has its homeland - the yellow people have China while the blacks have their Ethiopia.

In Tafarism, the identification of Ethiopia with Africa as a whole is rooted in the Bible. Its followers maintain that at first, the entire continent was called Ethiopia and only later the whites invented the name „Africa”\(^\text{11}\). The whites also invented the heaven which is to come after death, in order to delude the black people with the promise that they would get everything they want in the hereafter. Yet the whites have no proof for the existence of their God and their heaven. The God of the Ras Tafaris, on the other hand, dwells on this earth and heaven is a real country where one can live.

Ras Tafari followers declare Ethiopian nationality and have accepted the Ethiopian flag as the flag of their own movement. The green in the banner is the symbol of the pastures of Africa, the yellow - of the riches of the land, and the red represents Haile Selassie’s triumphant Church of Israel.

The image of the Ethiopian paradise in the Ras Tafari doctrine gives the movement its millennial character, at least in part. Various such movements contain political as well as religious elements, and Tafarism has precisely such a mixed character. As a point of departure for discussing the millenary element in the Ras Tafari movement one can use Norman Cohn’s classical definition of millenarism. According to this definition millenarian movements are those which proclaim close and inevitable redemption on earth, attained with the help of factors regarded as supernatural\(^\text{12}\).

Following this definition one can discern elements of millenarism in the Ras Tafari movement. One of these is the idealized picture of Ethiopia, that is of Africa, as the paradise on earth. It contains miraculous elements and elements of a rather vaguely-conceived

\(^{11}\) Such identification is a feature not only of the Ras Tafari movement but is encountered also in the many sects and independent churches, so abundant in South Africa. B. G. M. Sundkler: *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, London 1948

glory. Symptomatic also is the fact that the movement’s followers do not seek to acquire a closer knowledge of Africa and thus to build a more concrete image. Elements of millenarism are contained also in the Ras Tafari ideology of the return to Africa and of the approaching era of justice. One version of such a concept claims that return to Africa will be effected by way of negotiations between the government of Jamaica and the governments of African states, but the majority profess the view that it will be realized through the divine powers of Emperor Haile Selassie. The latter believe that soon a great war will break out between the black race and the white race, that is between good and evil. This will be the Biblical Armageddon. The forces of good, led by Haile Selassie, will win a resounding victory over the forces of Babylon, incarnated in the whites, the yellows and in the „fat blacks” (the black bourgeoisie who have sold themselves to the white men). The whites will then be driven out from Africa where all the blacks will return to live ever after. In this way the slogan „Africa for Africans at home and abroad,” proclaimed by Garvey, will become a reality. All who oppose the divine power of the Emperor who will finally extend his rule over the entire world will be swept off the face of the earth. Justice and love will then reign supreme and all exploitation will vanish.

The first manifestation of the coming war was, according to the Ras Tafaris, the 1952 Mau - Mau revolt in Kenya. The Mau-Mau warriors were liberators sent by the Emperor of Ethiopia to turn the whites out of Africa\(^\text{13}\). Is Other Ras Tafari followers, however, conceive their journey to Africa in more realistic terms. The passport to Ethiopia will be a photograph of the Emperor, which could be bought for a shilling\(^\text{14}\). They say that the whole meaning of their ideology is contained in the following sentences: „The white man tells us to wait until Jesus comes but we are not going to wait. In the near future we are going back to our homeland. The only future for black man is with Ras Tafari”\(^\text{15}\). This, coupled with the hope of a speedy departure from Jamaica, is the way in which the Ras Tafaris

\(^{13}\) G. E. Simpson: *The Ras Tafari Movement in Jamaica*...
\(^{14}\) M. G. Smith, R. Augier, R. Nettleford: *op.cit.*, p. 10.
express their contempt for official Christianity and of the missionary system introduced by the whites. Some of them frankly describe it as the white man’s instrument to oppress the black Jamaicans.

But regardless how the different groups of Ras Tafaris imagine their return to their homeland - they all live with the thought of that happy day. In hymns sung during Tafari rites they sing of what they will find in the homeland after returning from the West Indies. As a rule no exact date is fixed for the departure but, on the basis of Marcus Garvey’s announcement, it was to have taken place around 1960, when the lot of the black man in the Western Hemisphere was supposed to undergo a radical change. There was, at that time, great excitement and from all parts of Jamaica faithful Ras Tafaris began to converge on Kingston, convinced that very soon a ship sent by the Emperor would arrive and take them aboard. They said that 23 million pounds would suffice to transfer the black Jamaicans to Africa. Others claimed that already Queen Victoria earmarked a sum of 14 million pounds to take the black Jamaicans to Africa - but the money was used for other purposes.

Yet the desire to return to Africa must not be seen as merely wishful thinking, devoid of all factual support. Their conviction that the journey to Africa is feasible was based on an authentic announcement published by an organization called Ethiopian World Federation (inc.) to the effect that Emperor Haile Selassie has set aside five hundred acres of land in his country for black people of the West who had helped Ethiopia in her days of distress during World War II. This information, true as it was, was transformed by the Ras Tafaris into almost a miraculous prophecy. For the fact is that all the news which reaches the lowest classes of the Jamaican population through press or radio is interpreted in accordance with Ras Tafari ideology. Hans Toch pointed to the amazing combination among the Ras Tafaris of the belief in the improbable with a very good knowledge of events in Jamaica and elsewhere. As they read newspapers regularly and eagerly discuss political problems among themselves.

16 G. E. Simpson: *The Ras Tafari Movement in Jamaica in Its Millenial Aspect*...
Considering these views and beliefs of the Ras Tafari followers, Vittorio Lanternari has described the movement as an „irredentist cult,” thus emphasizing its religious nature. He sees the possibility of comparing Tafarism with other religious movements and cults, and in making a comparison with such cults as the Ghost Dance or the syncretic cults of Africa, he has stated that Tafarism does not distinctly advocate millenarian activities as it seeks only the return to the homeland\(^\text{18}\). It seems, however, that both movements have elements of millenarism, though they play a much more prominent role in the Ghost Dance than in the politically more highly developed Tafarism. On the basis of the idea of the return to Africa Lanternari speaks of Tafarism as a „typically escapist movement.” But, in fact, there are considerably fewer escapist attitudes in Tafarism than, for example, in the Ghost Dance, which never urged a transfer to another place or country. If we applied to the Ras Tafari movement the E. J. Hobsbawm scale, at one end of which there are political and at other extreme millenarian movements, Tafarism should be placed closer to the former, though its mixed character is indubitable\(^\text{19}\).

The political content of Tafarism is quite extensively developed and is concerned with many current Jamaican problems. The Ras Tafaris argue that the government of Jamaica is corrupt and bad. They do not recognize it as their own government because no party represents their interests. Hence many Ras Tafaris do not vote in elections. Nothing good, they claim, can be expected from the Jamaican government which is a colonial government and a puppet of the British. Every political decision of the authorities is regarded by the Ras Tafaris as a conspiracy among the parties, the police and the fascist (as they call it) government\(^\text{20}\). At one time rumours spread among the Ras Tafaris that the Peoples National Party promised them to arrange the trip to Africa in exchange for their votes cast for that party during elections. The party leaders, however, firmly denied these rumours as unfounded.


\(^{19}\) E. J. Hobsbawm: *Primitive Rebels; Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Manchester 1959.

Tafari followers are very critical of the two-party political system in Jamaica, modelled on that prevailing in Britain, and which is a source of pride of that country. They insist that a single party system is far better, and some Ras Tafaris, linked with left-wing groupings in Jamaica and in the United States claim that the communist system of government is superior to the capitalist. All members of the Ras Tafari movement show great interest in events in Cuba, and many say that the government of Fidel Castro is doing more good for the people than the government of Jamaicans. For certain sections of the movement, such typical notions of leftist ideology as „capitalism”, „the bourgeoisie”, and „class exploitation” are readily translated into racial categories - „whites, browns, blacks”, „exploitation of blacks by whites” etc. Revolution, on the other hand, is identified with the idea of redemption and of repatriation
text. Some of the movement’s followers urge the government to carry out social reforms such as allocation of funds for general education or adult education. They are convinced that, irrespective of striving for the implementation of the plan of repatriation, they should seek to improve the situation of the Jamaican paupers now, by all available political and economic means.

The most extreme political views are proclaimed by „Locks-men” so called because of their unkempt hair, glued together into strings or plaited into thin tresses, and equally filthy beards. As a rule they are chronically unemployed. A less radical group also wears their hair and beards long but they maintain personal cleanliness. The politically least radical group does not differ in their outward appearance from average Jamaicans, and consists predominantly of persons with permanent employment.

The years from 1950 to 1960 were marked in Jamaica by a general increase of political interest and political activity. Events which were taking place in Cuba, India or Egypt boosted interest in left-wing ideology, especially among unemployed youth mainly of middle-class origin. This group became increasingly attracted by Marxism.

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21 Ibidem, p. 25.
22 Ibidem, p. 31.
In watching the development of the Ras Tafari movement, one can notice its progressing political radicalization. The growth of the movement’s political activities could be seen in the increasing frequency of public meetings with the inevitable political speeches, of protest marches or night gatherings with bonfires etc. Towards the end of the 50’s the cult of force, of violent and even criminal attitudes, spread among Ras Tafari members. It was at that time that the Locksmen emerged, proclaiming the Niyabinghi ideology. These extremists changed the theory of revenge into a theory of terrorist political activities\(^\text{25}\). Their oft-repeated slogan was: „We shall do unto the whites as they did unto us,” together with the assertion that in Ethiopia the whites will become slaves of the blacks. A particularly rapid growth of openly aggressive measures undertaken by the extremist factions was noted in the period 1959 -1960. Verbal attacks, so characteristic in normal protest demonstrations were then turned into acts of violence. During a demonstration on June 21, 1960 two officers on orderly duty were killed and three were wounded. The June disturbances were officially recognized as an abortive attempt aimed at setting up a Negro state in Jamaica. In a court trial many participants in the demonstration were severely punished, but the real leaders were never caught\(^\text{26}\).

The authors of the book *The Ras Tafari Movement in Kingston, Jamaica* point to the socially dangerous aspects of this political radicalization of the movement. They think that it can assume alarming proportions unless the Jamaican government is prepared to carry out social reforms, which would benefit at least the poorest sections of the population living in the slums. They also envisage the possibility of a partial realization of the Ras Tafaris’ goals and aspirations.

In addition to their political activities developing mainly from 1953, Ras Tafari members conduct many religious rituals. Regular meetings are

\(^{25}\) The Negro organization which proclaims the slogan Niyabinghi, or "death to the whites" was founded in the Congo and reached a powerful position uniting its members in Islam. The Ras Tafaris claim that this will be the first organization to launch a war against the whites under the supreme command of the Negus - the Ethiopian emperor. M. G. Smith, R. Augier, R. Nettleford: *op.cit.*, p. 46

\(^{26}\) G. E. Simpson: *The Ras Tafari Movement in Jamaica; and The Ras Tafari Movement in Its Millenial Aspect*
held, at which collective prayers are said and hymns are sung, similar in style to protestant hymns, and sermons are preached interpreting chosen excerpts from the Bible to prove the correctness of particular concepts of the Ras Tafari doctrine. During the rites, the Ethiopian banner is carried aloft, flanked by a photograph of Emperor Haile Selassie I. The religious service concludes with a hymn beginning with the words: „Deliver us, oh Lord, from the hands of our enemies”.

From 1930 the Ras Tafari movement developed as a collection of rather loose religious groupings. It never had a coherent organizational structure nor did it have a leader or a group of leaders. The organization of the movement is of a spontaneous character, similar to that of other religious movements and sects. Some Ras Tafaris form groups of 12, led by a chairman and a deputy chairman, but the followers of the movement are linked together above all by a strong feeling of solidarity and the desire to live in a community.

When in 1937 in New York was founded the Ethiopian World Federation (inc.) as an organization of solidarity of the world’s black population with the fighting Ethiopia, its leaders sought to incorporate the Ras Tafari movement into its organizational framework. Yet Tafarism always too firmly professed the principles of egalitarianism and democracy to be attracted by the strong and authoritarian Ethiopian World Federation (inc.). Moreover the EWF formulated its objectives in purely political terms. The introductory declaration of the Federation begins with the words: „We, the black peoples of the world [...]”27 While Ras Tafarism, especially in the initial period of its development, expressed its goals mainly in religious slogans. Thus, to this very day, the movement has preserved its original form of loosely-connected sects, differing from each other with regard to their doctrines and their activities.

In the main, the movement has developed among urban communities, though its ideas have spread far beyond the boundaries of urban centres. During the 1959 events large numbers of country people came to Kingston in expectation of the arrival of the Emperor’s ship, which would take them to the Ethiopian paradise. But when the ship

failed to materialize and hopes vanished, many of the villagers, afraid of ridicule in their communities, remained in Kingston to augment the ranks of the jobless proletariat in the city slums\textsuperscript{28}.

Two basic phases could be observed in the growth of the movement up to 1962: 1) the period which ended around 1953, during which religious activities predominated almost exclusively, and 2) the period after 1953 which was marked by ever more frequent political actions undertaken by extremist groupings professing the cult of violence. Conflict then grew between the movement and the authorities, which began to suspect the Ras Tafaris of ties with „subversive” organizations.

It seems as though the authors of the cited work - Smith, Augier and Nettleford - emphasized the deeply religious character of Tafarism for purely tactical reasons, namely to protect the movement’s followers from persecution at the hands of the government and the police, initiated by acts of violence perpetrated by this group of extremists, numerically small but very noticeable in public life\textsuperscript{29}. The quoted authors believe that the growth of these rather dangerous manifestations of protest in the Ras Tafari movement could be averted by carrying out a political programme aimed at the implementation, within reasonable limits of course, of the Tafari doctrine. In this connection they recommended that the Jamaican government facilitate the departure for Africa of those of the Ras Tafaris who desire it most, stating at the same time that the final destination need not be Ethiopia. Emigration to Africa could, in their opinion, help solve the problem of unemployment which, in view of Jamaica’s over-population, is insoluble. According to the authors the government adopted a wrong policy in encouraging Jamaicans to emigrate to Great Britain, where the black immigrants from the West Indies were bound to feel even more socially and racially alienated than they did in Jamaica. Thus, emigration to Africa was certainly a better policy. Smith, Augier and Nettleford suggest that initial information be collected with regard to the possibilities of settlement


\textsuperscript{29} Ibidem, p. 27.
in Africa and also to the willingness of various African states to accept immigrants from Jamaica. They insist, however, that illiterates and persons without a trade should not be allowed to leave the island. Consequently sufficient funds should be appropriated for preparing future emigrants for departure and for settling in Africa. Only so organized and planned emigration could, the authors claim, solve the social problems which give rise to the Ras Tafari movement. Apart from the planned emigration programme, they also propose the implementation of extensive social reforms: the stamping out of slums and the construction of cheap but solid dwellings for their inhabitants. In this way many Ras Tafaris would relinquish their desire to leave the island.

However, the solutions proposed by Smith, Augier and Nettleford tend to over-simplify the problem of the Ras Tafari movement, for the eradication of the conditions at its roots would require a radical change of the entire socio-economic and racial structure of Jamaican society.

**Genesis of the Ras Tafari movement.**

In the literature on the subject, Tafarism is explained in either psychological or sociological categories. These explanations have a complementary character and could well be combined into a single causal-functional sequence of phenomena. The social situation creates specific attitudes; these in turn are the source of the ideology of social movements which in a definite manner give form to that very social situation from which they grow, to become its part. The links between the individual factors shaping a social movement could be presented as follows:

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\text{Social situation prior to the emergence of the movement} \rightarrow \text{Attitudes} \rightarrow \text{Social movement} \rightarrow \text{Social situation after the emergence of the movement}
\]

The above static model of a situation in which a social movement is emerging should be presented in its historical sequence:

At the turn of the 17th century Jamaica was the world’s largest slave market. There, the slaves brought from Africa were put onto ships
plying different routes in the New World. Some remained on the island to work on the plantations. The proportion of the black population in Jamaica varied considerably over the four centuries of colonial rule, but today it is the highest of all former British possessions in the West Indies. Because of Jamaica’s special role in the slave-trade, the most drastic features of slavery were particularly strongly visible there. Today, Jamaica’s past history is very well known among her black population and this knowledge constitutes an integral part of their world outlook. Protest against oppression of the slaves once took the form of popular uprisings. From the time when the British occupied the island until the abolition of slavery, some 35 Negro uprisings took place, that is one every 5 - 6 years. One of the most important forms of these uprisings was that of the Maroon slaves who from the 17th century escaped from the plantations to hide in the inaccessible mountain ranges in the island’s interior. There, they built defensive hamlets were they put up effective resistance to the whites. This form of struggle was not limited to Jamaica, and was recorded in many other plantation areas though in Jamaica the uprisings had a particularly extensive scope and force, owing to the favourable conditions created by the natural geographic surroundings.

As compared with the other Caribbean islands, especially those under French domination, Jamaica’s economic development in the 19th and 20th centuries began rather early and was quite intensive. There too the effects of contemporary capitalist exploitation were felt earlier than in the more economically backward regions. In Jamaica, modern cities have grown with large slum areas, the inevitable hallmarks of intensive economic development in former colonial territories. The capital city, Kingston, has extensive slum areas, mostly situated in its south-western part. There are also slums in the two smaller towns of Jamaica - Montego Bay (24 thousand inhabitants) and Spanish Town (15 thousand). The quoted figures indicate a high level of urbanization. The average population density is 178 persons per square kilometer, but because of the mountainous nature of the island’s interior, a majority of the population lives in urban centres

along the coast. Hence the population density in the latter part greatly exceeds the average for the whole country. This situation cannot but exert a considerable influence on social conditions, on the development of social movements and on other forms of collective behaviour. Because of the high degree of urbanization and of population density all kinds of rumours and ideas which give birth to new social movements can spread rapidly and without hindrance. This is facilitated, above all, by the atmosphere predominating in the poor, over-crowded districts which have the same stamp everywhere, irrespective of country or town.

During the slavery period Jamaica’s social structure was determined by the racial factor. The law of the land guaranteed a very strict, multistage social gradation in which the place of an individual depended on the number of Negro ancestors on both the father’s and the mother’s side\textsuperscript{31}. Though with the abolition of slavery these social regulations were eased and simplified, distinct social divisions in Jamaica have remained up to this day.

The existing social structure in Jamaica could be presented, in a simplified manner, as a pyramid at whose crown are the whites - some 2 per cent of the total population. Lower down are the mulattos - about 18 per cent, and the place of the blacks, who make up almost 80 per cent of the population, is right at the bottom. The picture is completed by the Asiatic component, represented by Chinese and Hindu elements whose number is between 2 and 3 per cent of the total. Some of these have intermarried with the blacks or mulattos, thus giving rise to a new racial mixture in the mulatto category. This somewhat simplified picture brings out an important feature of the country’s social structure, namely its inherent contrasts and disparities, as well as the fact that the racial and economic hierarchies are strictly correlated. The whites and a small group of mulatto families have in their hands accumulated nearly all the socially profitable values - the wealth of the land, the power and the prestige. The socially lowest strata - descendants of black slaves - possess none of those. This is a society marked by vast social, material, racial and cultural differences and distances. Moreover, it is

\textsuperscript{31} Ibidem, p. 46 - 48.
a society with a relatively closed social structure. In the conditions prevailing in Jamaica, one cannot speak of equal chances in life for white, brown and black children. To leave the slums and to extricate oneself from the lowest ranks of the population is virtually impossible. This closed social structure, which deprives individuals of all opportunities for advancement, gives rise to feelings of hopelessness, and social and political helplessness. Formally, Jamaica’s political system guarantees all citizens an equal right to vote, but among the poorest strata of the population prevails the feeling, not without good reason, of disbelief in the possibility of alleviating their lot by available political means. This attitude is the chief source of the ideology of black racialism, whose supreme argument consists of postulating extreme attitudes: the black man - oppressed, good and morally superior versus the white man - the oppressor, evil and morally inferior. Similarly, the racial character of the ideological attitudes of Tafarism has its source in the fact that racial barriers run parallel with social barriers. To be white means not to live in slums; to live in slums means being black.

The slums of which the largest are in the capital city of Kingston provide fertile soil for the growth of black racialism. The slum shacks lack elementary sanitary facilities, have no water supply and not even garbage disposal or cesspools. Unemployment is rampant and many slum dwellers look for a job year after year, only occasionally finding a seasonal one. It is precisely from these groups that members of the Ras Tafari brotherhood are recruited. Many of the chronically unemployed Ras Tafaris have abandoned efforts to find a job and are living on the charity of their brethren. The Ras Tafaris have created a system of mutual assistance, which in the conditions of slum life is of great importance.

The situation of the poorest classes of the population has changed but little since 1962 when Jamaica became independent, and the marks of slavery are still dearly visible. It would therefore be wrong to think that the attitudes and ideologies which emerged during previous decades have undergone any considerable change in recent years.

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The social situation described above has its psychological consequences. According to Yinger, the psychological attitudes of Ras Tafarism can best be explained by the following cause-effect sequence: deprivation - frustration - aggression. However, this simplified explanation has immediately apparent serious limitations. For it would be incorrect to reduce the complex ideology of the Ras Tafari movement and its various forms of activity solely to aggression, though acts of aggression do occur in it.$^{33}$ Yinger’s scheme is not erroneous in itself but it is too general to adequately explain the genesis of a social movement. If we were to apply the theory of deprivation to the Ras Tafari movement, we must remember that deprivation is a relative term; it does not necessarily imply that an individual or a group have been deprived of all material goods, values and privileges which they formerly possessed. Deprivation could well be an effect of juxtaposing one’s own situation with that of other social groups. Thus, for example, G. E. Simpson has observed that the living conditions of the Ras Tafaris are not any worse today than they were in the past. However they do not compare their present situation with what it was formerly like, but with the present living standards of the higher echelons of Jamaican society. Considering that the social divisions and differences in Jamaica are so vast, the effects of making such comparisons are quite obvious. The economic situation of Jamaica’s bourgeoisie has recently greatly improved. A narrow group of people live in luxurious houses, buy the latest models of cars and concentrate in their hands all the goods which are inaccessible to the lower strata of the island’s population. It is this social situation which lies at the root of the feeling of deprivation which has given rise to the ideology and the activities of the Ras Tafari movement.

An interesting interpretation of Tafarism, linking together both psychological and social factors, is given in the book by Hans Toch, *The Social Psychology of Social Movements*.$^{34}$ The author classifies the Ras Tafari movement in the category of social movements based

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$^{33}$ Yinger, quoted after G. E. Simpson, *The Ras Tafari Movement in Jamaica; A Study of Race and Class Conflict*.

$^{34}$ H. Toch: *op.cit.*
on illusions, defined as beliefs which are more readily accepted than others. According to Toch, beliefs which bear a promise of the most desired solution to particularly difficult situations, *i.e.* problem situations, are much easier to accept. There is a broad category of social movements which promise their members an immediate improvement of their situation. Such promises of a better life are, of course, implicit in all social movements but, according to Toch, these movements differ, above all, in whether and to what extent they seek to solve the problems - in a Utopian manner or by realistic means. Toch is particularly concerned with beliefs in quick solutions or an immediate escape linked with rapid transition. He accepts the Freudian concept of illusion defined as beliefs that derive from man’s wishes. Illusions are not necessarily false, though they often are. Freud placed religious beliefs in this category, too. Accepting these psychological premises and theoretical categories, Toch starts his analysis of the Ras Tafari movement by depicting the social conditions in which it was born. In the squalor of the slums, belief in a miraculous solution is the only hope. He writes: „The degree to which a person accepts unrealistic and improbable promises of escape reflects the extent to which life has become intolerable for him.”35 The slum dwellers see their situation as intolerable and it was on the basis of that feeling of despair that there grew an ideology replete with illusions of miraculous escape.

In explaining the genesis of Rag Tafari ideology, Toch refers to the feeling of complete alienation from Jamaican society prevailing among the Ras Tafari members and among the social groups from which they come. This alienation stems from the fact that a large part of Jamaican society finds nothing in common with that society - no social institution and no authority to which they can turn in their search for ways to improve their lot. Jamaican paupers, writes Toch, could find not a single „redeeming feature,” not a single institution which could command their loyalty or could satisfy their needs. The various fractions in the Ras Tafari movement - more or less radical in their political outlooks - recognize a different hierarchy of values. Thus, for instance, the Locksmen, the group most violent and radical

35 *Ibidem*, p. 32.
in action, has adopted a system of values which greatly differs from that professed by the rest of Jamaican society. They also have another point of reference - namely, the idealized Ethiopia and her emperor. The less radical group, the one more neatly clad, maintains that the filthy Locksmen compromise the movement, unnecessarily express their hatred of the whites in violent terms and bring up an all Ras Tafarís suspicions of links with the illicit peddling of marijuana. The Lacksmen have their own specific norms of behaviour and values, the basis of which is racial pride. They claim that black men should look like east African tribesmen. Because those tribes are said to use marijuana, it has therefore a positive influence and thus it is not a crime to use it or to sell it. The whites have forbidden its dissemination because they are aware of the beneficial effects of that valuable plant. The politically less radical group shares the norms of behaviour and values accepted by Jamaican society.

The fact that the poorest and socially most oppressed group feels alienated from the society which does not satisfy its needs and aspirations is psychologically clear. Toch writes: “The Ras Tafari movement illustrates that illusory beliefs originate in an intolerable situation.”\(^{36}\) Whether a situation is or is not intolerable depends entirely on the subjective opinion of an individual. Toch says, however, that in Jamaica we find fully objective conditions for forming such opinions and, consequently for belief in an illusory escape from the existing situation. For Jamaica offers no possibilities for and no prospects of satisfying the needs and the desires of the lowest social classes. The desire to escape from Jamaica is explained by Toch as „the logical last resort.”\(^{37}\)

Such an ideology is born out of feelings of futility of efforts and despair. Jamaican blacks have nothing to lose and there is no reason for them to remain in Jamaica. Everything that they have experienced in that country can thus be regarded as bad. In this situation, escape is seen as the only solution. The information which reached the Jamaicans about the Ethiopian emperor’s gift of land for the black people of the Western Hemisphere encouraged their hopes and

\(^{36}\) Ibidem, p. 33.

\(^{37}\) Ibidem, p. 33.
became an integral part of the dogma. On that basis the Ras Tafaris, despite their political orientation, reject all arguments and attempts of persuasion meant to weaken their belief in ultimate emigration to Africa, seeing in them nothing but the perversity of the Jamaican government, which seeks to thwart their plans. Characteristic of the Ras Tafaris, as of members of other movements described by Toch as movements based on illusions, is belief in miracles. In the situation of the lower strata of Jamaican society the mechanism which creates such beliefs is, according to Toch, as follows: „Conditions deteriorated to a point where all avenues of personal development were closed.” Even a realistically-thinking Jamaican cannot but conclude that there is no place for him in a country in which he can only starve. He does not and cannot see any cultural pattern or social institution from which he can expect any improvement of his life. A man placed in such a situation behaves like psychotic who escapes into a fantasy world. So also does a society which turns to escape as a solution of an intolerable situation. Toch’s analysis is very aptly summed up in the following sentence: „The extremity of miraculous solutions is a reflection of the extremity of the problems they solve.”

The basic functionality of ideologies such as Tafarism is presented by Toch in the following way: belief in improbable solutions provides a means of individual adaptation and, at the same time, a basis for endurance until the appearance of genuine and realistic ways of improvement. Thus - to supplement Toch’s argument - such beliefs help preserve the integration of personality in conditions which exert a disintegrating influence. Hope, no matter how illusory it is and to what degree it depends on ideologies replete with miraculous solutions, is indispensable for the preservation of psychological and social integration in conditions in which realistic solutions are non-existent.

A shortcoming of Toch’s analysis lies in its static character. On the basis of this analysis it is difficult to understand why the Ras Tafari

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38 Ibidem, p. 42.
39 Ibidem, p. 43.
40 Ibidem, p. 43
41 Ibidem, pp. 43 - 44.
movement emerged precisely at the historical moment when it did. Toch does not show the fundamental transformations within Jamaican society which were decisive for the emergence of Tafarism. This otherwise cogent observations should, however be given a historical background. For the emergence of the movement should be linked not with the state of Jamaican society at a specific period, but with the changes which were taking place within that society. These changes consisted in opening up for a narrow social group the possibilities of advancement and of acquiring wealth in what once was a strictly „caste” society. In addition to the whites, this group was joined by small numbers of mulattos and Negroes, a fact which enhanced the feeling of resentment among the masses of the blacks for whom social and material advancement was unattainable. The feelings of deprivation and resentment caused by the lack of any chance of advancement arise only in situation when in society there exists a group of people for whom such opportunities are open and with whom one can to some degree identify oneself. A completely closed social structure provides much less propitious conditions for the emergence of such types of ideology as Tafarism, than structures in which a narrow but a visible road of advancement has been opened even if for only a minute part of the population. Hence social unrest and religious movements professing millenarian doctrines appear, as a rule, during periods of social and economic transformations which place before individuals new, sometimes insoluble problems. Such social situations create anxieties and feelings of uncertainty because of their incomprehensibility and inadequacy with regard to older social customs and cultural patterns.

**The development of forms of protest in Jamaica.**

In addition to mutinies and armed risings, the black population of Jamaica -like those in other regions to which slaves were brought - expressed their protest against racial oppression and economic exploitation in religious forms. According to Daniel Guerin the reason for this lies in that the only thing that the Negroes - the black slaves - could preserve from their old African traditions and culture
was religion. For the slave-owner were not concerned with this sphere of the cultural heritage of their slaves since they did not consider it contrary or dangerous to the slavery system.

The earliest manifestations of such unarmed protest were the night meetings in the forests, where the slaves conducted their ancient rites and rituals far from the watchful eyes of their white masters. Occasionally such gatherings led to armed revolts and uprisings as was the case, for example, in San Domingo and also in Haiti where the Voodoo cult was linked directly’ with the beginnings of independence struggles\textsuperscript{42}. These forms expressed, above all, the protest against enforced acculturation and against forcible conversion in particular.

In later years, when Christianity had clearly impressed itself on the religion of the Jamaican blacks, the function of protest against religious oppression was taken over. by syncretic movements which combined African with Christian elements. From the beginning of the 19th century there emerged in Jamaica syncretic cults which reverted to the already vanishing ancient African beliefs, especially to old rituals. Vittorio Lanternari describes the process of development of the syncretic and at the same time nativistic cults in Jamaica. The first stage was the “Great Awakening” - a nativistic movement of 1861. Then came the „Bedwardism” of the 20’s of our century. Contemporary forms of that process include such sects as Pocomania, Zion Revival and others, and also Tafarism. Lanternari traces the various shades of nativism and its links with African culture. In referring to the syncretic cults of the 19th century as well as to the Ras Tafari movement, he uses the term „Return to Africa” though he indicates that for the syncretic cults this „return” meant something different than what it did for the Ras Tafari followers. To put it more precisely the 19th century syncretic cults reverted in their doctrine and rites to the remnants of the African culture as to their own and not imposed upon them by the white masters. In Ras Tafarism, on the other hand, there prevails the consciousness of the Jamaicans’ African descent. Africa is the homeland for them, the historical nest and the destiny of the black man. The term „return to

\textsuperscript{42} D. Guerin: \textit{The West Indies and Their Future}, London 1961, p. 84.
Africa” in relation to pre-Ras Tafari movements can thus be used only metaphorically. Nevertheless Lanternari correctly observes that Ras Tafarism was not the first movement with redemptive features. Social conditions ensured that millenarian ideas have long held an attraction for the black population of Jamaica. Social and psychological functions which are today the domain of Ras Tafarism were formerly fulfilled by syncretic sects and, since 1953 - 1954, increasingly by protestant churches and Christian sects run by missionaries, such as Christian Science, the Salvation Army, the Seventh-Day Adventists, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Pentecostal Church, the Bible Students etc. These sects meet the spiritual needs, above all, of the lower layers of Jamaican society. We can thus speak of the Jamaican’s possibility to choose between functional choices provided by a variety of social movements - from purely religious to purely political. Cults like Pocomania express and satisfy the need for compensation and express escapism and, in part at least, express also rejection of the religion and culture of the white masters. The heaven offered by these religions is an escape from the anguish and sufferings of everyday existence while the rituals help to wrench participants away from the hopeless monotony of everyday life. Characteristic of such cults is the state of possession, in which an individual identifies himself with the supreme power. The one possessed is accorded the highest esteem and reverence of his fellow-worshippers. „By mounting him the god infuses him with pride.”43 The multi functional psychological and social character of these movements is emphasized by Alfred Metraux, who writes that the place of worship is a church, a club, a theatre and a dance hall at the same time. It can thus replace all these forms of cultural life which were denied to the slaves and later to the underprivileged.44 G. E. Simpson refers to these cults as to „Afro-Jamaican,” including among them the Native-Baptist Revival, the Zion Revival, Cumina and Convince. In his opinion they provided means of expressing and of relieving repressed grievances. They worked on the principle of the emotional

43 Ibidem, p. 87.
excitement and relaxation which came upon their followers through violent physical motorial exercises and through verbal aggression while in the state of possession.

The importance of these Afro-Jamaican sects began to diminish around 1953, giving way to protestant sects on one hand and to Ras Tafarism on the other. The latter distinguishes itself from the above described group of sects and cults by its considerably more advanced development of political views and by its much stranger roots in the specific socio-political reality. The change from religious to politico-religious expressions of protest is a result of the appearance of political possibilities of activity, which despite the oppression and exploitations have emerged in the course of the past few decades, and also of the higher level of education and wider dissemination of political, historical and social knowledge.

Ras Tafarism is a contemporary manifestation of protest and its appearance is connected with both the internal development of the social situation and the general growth of involvement in political life. It is a movement born out of the specific conditions of the recent decades. Hence, it should be analysed in context of ideologies which propagate a return to Africa and against the background of the development of the Negritude movement.

Originally Tafarism was linked with the ideological trends of the 20’s and 30’s of this century; its further development was tied up with ideologies which emerged later. During the past half-century many and close ties have been established between Jamaica and the United States, especially with Harlem. Consequently the ideological trends which appeared there soon spread to Jamaica too. Thus from the 20’s the black population of Jamaica became deeply involved in the ideological movements inspired by Marcus Garvey. At the same time there began to appear radical political programmes, initiated chiefly by Jamaicans who spent some years in the United States.

Garvey, like other prophets and ideologists of the return to Africa, maintained that the way to eradicate from the consciousness of America’s black inhabitants their inferiority complex and to imbue them with a feeling of dignity was to make them proud of their

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45 D. Guerin: *op. cit.*, p. 120.
African origin. Both in the teachings of Garvey and in Ras Tafarism this premise acquired its extreme expression in the doctrine which proclaimed that Africa was both Homeland and Paradise. Garvey’s slogan “Back to Africa” exerted an enormous influence on the mentality of the black inhabitants of the West Indies, though only in Jamaica did it give rise to the socio-religious movement of Ras Tafarism. Among those who regarded Africa as the homeland of the black people from the Western Hemisphere, mention should be made of W. E. B. DuBois, and ideologists from the former French colonial possessions in the West Indies, of whom the best known are Aimé Césaire, Jean Price Mars and Jacques Roumain. They created the Négritude movement, whose objective was to overcome the feeling of shame of having a black skin by stressing the glorious African past of the pre-slave period. The movement seeks to reject criteria characteristic of white culture. Similar elements can also be found in Tafarism.

The intellectual movement of Négritude contains also extreme trends, which have a clear mark of black racialism, such as for example the teachings of the Haitian ideologist Professor Daniel Fignolé. Daniel Guerin refers to the movement as „the Caribbean Renaissance“. Most of its leaders, however, try to avoid racialism in their views. Professor Fignolé’s racialism resembles that professed by Ras Tafarism and consists in identifying the oppressors with the whites and the oppressed with the blacks, and also in attaching a special importance to the colour of the skin. In this connection many ideologists pose the question of whether the black bourgeoisie is really any better than the white one. The question was answered in the negative by Frantz Fanon, originally from Martinique, who stresses the prevalence of economic over racial criteria. At the same time Jamaica’s artistic milieu follows a trend seeking inspiration in African art.

These ideas are widespread among the black intellectuals of Jamaica and of the entire West Indies, chiefly on the French-speaking islands. The same ideas, though differently formulated, prevail also among the lower strata of society. It is precisely among those groups that

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46 Ibidem, pp. 103 - 105.
there developed syncretic cults containing elements of African religions and where Ras Tafarism is active. The identical content, though expressed in differing terms, appear in the ideological trends of Négritude, Tafarism and the syncretic cults. These terminological differences in expressing the basic ideas reflect the social and cultural inequalities dividing Jamaican society. Like Ras Tafarism, the Négritude movement too, draws attention to the glorious history of Negroes in the Western Hemisphere, who centuries ago built great civilizations in Africa which are only now being re-discovered. Both these movements seek to inspire pride in their African origin among the black people of the West Indies, oppressed during the period of slavery and now degraded and debased by utter poverty. Thus Ras Tafarism is by no means an isolated social movement. Many elements of its doctrine can be found in other movements, though the doctrine itself is certainly distinctive and characteristic.