

Rastafari culture

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Rastafari Culture The Extreme Ethiopian Rasta Vs. The Mellow Dallas Rasta

Not unlike the widely accepted religion of the Indian people - Hinduism many people all over the world wrestle with what it means to be a Rasta. Of those I've spoken with a number seem to have difficulty grasping its true meaning mostly because they look at Rastafari as being merely another religion rather than way of LIFE, a SOCIAL MOVEMENT, as well as a STATE-OF-MIND. Perhaps another reason why some people have a hard time understanding Rastafari is because it lacks the solid structure that most of the world's religion seems to be based upon. Some people are under the impression that Rasta's are people that primarily live in Jamaica, smoke pot, and have Dreadlocks. These are the people that do not have their eyes and perhaps their hearts open and do not think of what is behind the movement. The idea that Rastafari is strictly Jamaican is very wrong. Since its origination of Rastafari, the Rasta movement has expanded far beyond the small island of Jamaica. Rasta's now proudly live all over the world amongst all cultures in Europe, Asia, New Zealand, United States, and above all Africa.

The Development of Rastafari The Rastafari movement stems from the teachings of Marcus Garvey he was a great Jamaican leader that motivated masses. His vision was for the " Blacks to overcome their feelings of inferiority and build upon their own unique and evolving culture, and ultimately return to Africa to redeem their homeland and to build a future" (Dubb. Pg2). To this end Garvey told the African people of the world to unite and to return to African, the homeland. Garvey enlightened the Jamaican people through his vision of what was going on around them in the world. To this end he founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (U. N. I. A) a Black Nationalist fraternal organization and the Negro World newspaper which helped keep

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the people of Jamaica well informed. When Garvey spoke he would often include biblical terms to free his movement from the oppression of the “White Man”, whether he meant them to be taken literally is unclear, but what is clear is that many Jamaicans took them literally. In 1930 an important event took place that was to the Rastafari not unlike the birth of Christ is to Christians. A man named Tafari Makonne or Ras Tafari (Ras meaning king) claimed himself Emperor of Ethiopia Haile Selassie I as well as the traditional titles “King of Kings, Lord of Lords, and Conquering Lion of the Tribe Judah. To a number of Jamaican people this meant that Garvey’s prophecy had been fulfilled. These people tuned to the Bible and through literal translation of the documents found much correlation into what had taken place. An important correlation to the Bible is the fact that Selassie claimed to be a direct descendent of King David. By Selassie claiming his relation to David, he had made a coalition to Revelation 5: 2-5. To some Jamaicans this meant their Messiah had arrived. In Jamaica some people such as Leonard P. Howell, J. N. Hibert, and Archibald Dunkle, began to spread the word of the Messiah coming to save the African people. To Dunkle Howell, and Hibert Haile, Selassie became their living god. The people who listened to this soon began to call themselves Rastafarians. To these new Rasta’s, Ethiopia became their Zion, and Haile Selassie their Messiah. The Rastafari religion would continue to follow this trend of interpreting the Bible literally which lead to practices that make the Rastafari religion unique from any other. What it means to be Rasta The beliefs of the Rastafarian are often misunderstood. To many, anyone who has dreads, smokes ganja, and plays Reggae music is a Rasta. So based on that logic set; if you wear a button-up shirt and own a bible — then you’re a Christian. There is much more than

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those three elements to being a Rasta. Rastafari is more than just a religion. It is a movement - a way of life. The Rasta lifestyle is one of peace, or at least it seeks to be one of peace. I say this because throughout the world the Rasta are oppressed and harassed forcing Rasta's to turn to violence for survival. It is important when reading this section of the paper that one understands that the Rastafari has no set book of rules. The Rasta way of life that is laid out here is not true for all Rasta's. What is said in this section is the basic beliefs of Rasta and not all Rasta's follow these customs exactly.

Marijuana One of the first aspects of Rastafari that often comes to mind when people speak of Rastafari is the use of marijuana (Ganja). The smoking of Ganja for a Rasta is a special and significant experience. Ganja helps free the mind of the daily burden in order to correctly reason the ways of the world. Ganja is always smoked in a ritualistic way. Before smoking the Rasta will say a prayer to Jah (God) or to Haile Selassie I. When using Ganja for Niyabinghi it's called a reasoning session. A Niyabinghi is considerably different from a casual marijuana smoking. Most people smoke marijuana for social and entertainment reasons this often leads to a silly time of laughing and perhaps horse-play. A Niyabinghi is taken very seriously. Acting silly would be considered disrespectful to a Rasta. Before Rasta smokes the ritual plant, a prayer is said to Jah (God) or to Haile Selassie I. Niyabinghi doesn't have any relationship with Ethiopian history or Haile Selassie, it is strictly a part of the Rastafari movement and a manifestation of the wisdom of Jah. Niyabinghi are considered the strictest mansion of the Rastafari movement in Jamaica, preaching the ideals of a global theocracy to be headed by Emperor Haile Selassie I, whom is proclaimed to be the promised Messiah and incarnation of Jah, the Supreme. Unfortunately for Rastafari, the

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smoking of Ganja has also become one of its biggest struggles. This is due to the fact that Ganja smoking is illegal in every country in the world with the exception of two. The Rastafari is constantly fighting for the legalization of Ganja for its religious purposes but countries such as Great Britain, United States of America, South African, and even at home in Jamaica the use of Ganja for any purpose is illegal. As a result innumerous Rastafari have ended up in jail because their religious use of this plant is banned. The use of Ganja stems to the beginning of Rastafari in Jamaica. In 1941 one of the early teachers of Rastafari, Leonard P. Howell, set up a Rastafari community named Pinnacle with other 1600 followers. At Pinnacle, Howell grew Ganja as a cash-crop. It was during this time that Rasta discovered that its properties helped their reasoning process. The Rastafari soon turned to the Bible and found reverence to the use of this holy plant. Particularly the following passages are extracted and taken liberally by the Rastafari Matthew: 25: 39-40, Genesis 1: 12 and Isaiah 18: 4-5 from this Ganja was born into the Rastafari culture. Those Crazy Dreadlocks Dreadlocks are another well-known part of Rastafari. The origin of the dreadlock traces back to ancient Africa, originating in eastern Africa worn by warriors in Kenya, and a Hairstyle of ancient Kemet and Nubia. However in Jamaica, The Rasta's also believe that they should not put sharp metal objects to their head. This comes again from interpreting the Bible literally. Due to this belief they do not believe it is right to shave or comb their hair. Another belief that led to the dreadlocks among Rasta's is that the wearing of the Dread resembles the main of a lion. The lion is significant because the lion is the respected king of the animal kingdom, as well as humble animal. Both of these traits the Rasta believes are divine and important to the " Black Man". Haile

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Selassie I also was called “ the conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah”, this makes the wearing of the dread connected to the Rasta god. The dreadlock is also a natural state of the African person hair, and by being natural the Rasta feels they are more connected to Jah. The wearing of the dread first appeared in the Rasta Community at the original Rasta community of Pinnacle. At Pinnacle Howell was growing Ganja as a cash crop and the police where constantly raiding the farms. Because of this and other border problems at the Rasta community, Howell was forced to create a group of guards to protect the area. These guards grew their hair long in the form of ancient African warriors and became known as “ locksmen”. With this and the reasons given in the previous paragraph, the Dreadlock became the hairstyle of the Rasta. Just like the smoking of Ganja, the dreadlock hairstyle has lead many problems for the Rasta. In the early days of Rastafari, Rasta who wore their hair in dread form where brutalized by the police for no reason. This pushed many Rasta into the bush of Jamaica so that they could live in peace. Things have not gotten a whole lot better for dreadlocked people. In Jamaica and other parts of the world children who have dreads are not allowed to attend some schools. Just like the Ganja issue the, the dreadlock school issue is constantly being fought in courts throughout the Rasta world. It came up lately in a South African school where a young child was not given the right to go to school because of her dreads and the issue had to be fought in court. The Rasta Diet The Rastafari diet is something that is often overlooked by many people who do not know a great deal about Rastafari. The Rasta has a very interesting belief in their thoughts about dead beings. The Rasta’s do not like being around any animal that is dead. This idea stems into their diet. The Rasta believes that it is wrong to eat

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animals that have died because then you are turning your body into a cemetery. This does not mean that a Rasta will not eat dairy products. Most Rasta's have no problem with the consumption of milk because it does not come from a dead animal. Although most Rasta's will not eat animal meat, many Rasta's will eat fish. However the Rasta will not eat shellfish. This stems from more readings in the Bible. Some but not all Rasta will go as far as to not eat fruit that has been altered from its original form. This means they would not eat fruit that has been peeled, cut, or smashed. There is also a large number of Rasta that will not eat any processed food. Rasta Dialect

The dialect of the Rasta reflects their beliefs in many ways. " If you Really want to know how Rasta's think, listen to them Talk"(Nicholas pg. 37).

Rasta's take their speech very seriously. Rasta's are often trying to make their speech sound very powerful and grateful. The Rasta's speech reflects how they often think literally. Their speech uses a literal translation of words, just like their beliefs use a literal translation of biblical readings. Their speech reflects their protest against oppression, as well as their protest against authority. When the Rasta's speech is analyzed, it shows how the Rasta's are always trying to think positively. The Rastafarian rhetoric changes the English language in a way that helps them make more sense of the world, as well as to protest against what the Rasta believe to be unjust. Rasta will often change word from a negative meaning to a positive meaning. The changing of the word understand to " overstand" is an example of this. To " overstand" means to fully and entirely have a grasp of a concept. This Rasta reasoning for this is that something that is under is worse than something that is over it, so they change " under" to " over". A Rasta might say " I and I, must not just understand but overstand, seen". A Rasta will almost never

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use a negative term. They will always replace it with something positive. This is a great reflection on how the Rasta always sees things positively. Another interesting concept of the Rasta's language is their concept of I and I. The letter "I" is in almost every part of their language. It is in the name of their Religion "Rastafari", and it is part of their gods title Selassie I. The Rasta use the word to connect themselves to god, to show that that god is always part of them. A Rasta will never "I am going there" instead it would be "I and I am going there". The Rasta does this to show that god is part of him, and that he is not separate from any other person. "I" is also used to replace letters of powerful words. This too is reflected in the word "you" not being part of the Rasta language. The Rasta believes that first there was just "I" and then the devil came and created "you". The Rasta's Social Thought. The Rasta believes in peace and they are constantly trying to preach down violence. This preaching down of violence is often hard for Rasta's to do because most Rasta live in poor areas where peace is often unattainable. The Rasta fear world wars, and especially Nuclear war. This want for world peace is heard often in the Rasta's Reggae music. One of the most important parts of Rasta thought is the protest against authority and structure. The Rasta's refer to the authorities that rule the world as Babylon. Babylon is connected to the devil and is ruled by the oppressive "white man". This rejection of authority can be seen in how Rastafari has no rules like many other religions do. There is not one thing that Rasta has to do to be a Rasta because that would defeat the whole purpose of being a Rasta. The Rasta's reject the Pope very much. "Burn the Pope. Burn the Pope man.... The Pope is a vampire, wants our blood. Selassie I is the head. The Pope is the devil"(Lewis pg 45). This quote of a Jamaican Rasta is an example of how the

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Rasta's feel about organized religion and the Pope. Rasta's economic beliefs are anti-capitalism. The Rasta's believe that Capitalism is part of Babylon. Rasta's believe what is yours is also your neighbors. This does not mean that Rasta's would approve of Communism. To a Rasta Communism would be too structured. They would also reject the idea of a leader telling them what to do. Most Rasta's also do not believe in paying taxes. Because of this most Rasta's do not take part in the formal economy. Instead they either live in a place where they can survive on what they can grow or they take part in the informal economy and survive through street vending. Some Rasta's survive by selling Ganja, or other illegal substances. One unfortunate part of Rastafari is their negative attitude toward females. Most Rasta's believe that females are not equal to men. They believe that a good woman must always respect men and do what they ask. This is very contrary to much of their other beliefs about people being equal. Rasta men often beat their wives for being lazy. Rasta men believe that being naked is good because you are closer to god in your natural state. However Rasta's believe that women should not show off their bodies. Rasta's belief of sexual contact also differs from men to women. Rasta men often have many different partners, while it is wrong for Rasta women to give more than a hand shake to more than one man. Rastafari in Ethiopia. For many Rasta's moving back to Ethiopia is their dream. Fortunately for some this dream has come true. In 1963 Emperor Haile Selassie I gave 500 hectares of land to any African that wished to return to Ethiopia. The land that was given is located in the small southern Ethiopian town of Shasemene. The small town of Shasemene has a population of 13, 000. The people living in this town are 90% Christian and 10% Muslim. The town has many visitors because it is a cross roads of the <https://assignbuster.com/rastafari-culture/>

three largest Ethiopian cities. Prostitution is very common in this town and many women make good money through this business. Other than prostitution there is little contact between the sexes. The town's economic base is in trade and farming. The staple crops are maize, beans, potatoes, wheat, barley and injera (a local grain used in traditional Ethiopian breads). Separate from this economy the Rasta's have set up a commune that lies three miles outside of the main market of Shashemene. The town has grown from the original 12 Rasta's to two hundred families. Almost all of the Rasta's living in the town have come from Jamaica. For the most part the only ones who have not are Ethiopian woman who have intermarried with the Rasta's. The Rasta's who live here are members of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The Twelve Tribes is the most organized form of Rastafari that there is. The origin of the group is in Jamaica and has branches in Brooklyn, NY. The Twelve Tribes tend to be more radical in their beliefs than other Rasta's. They believe strongly in the return of all Rasta's to Africa. The Rasta's compound is made up of houses that are made out of mud, straw, clay and loose concrete mix. The structure of these houses is very strong, but none of the houses are more than one story. This is because the Rasta's of this area believe that building their houses over one story would be invading Gods area. The walls of these houses are also very porous because the Rasta's say that is so they can breath while inside. The Rasta's that live in the compound at Shashemene are able to live without being controlled by any kind of state. Their economy is completely informal. This is able to work because the land is very fertile and they can grow almost all they need to survive. What they can't grow they get from the trading at the market and other funding that comes from Jamaica and other organizations. Because of this the people of

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the compound are completely free and truly live with no other person governing their actions. There is no class order in the compound. Work projects are done by the most skilled person in that field, being in charge of the project. Life for women in the Rasta compound at Shashemene is not great. In fact it is more oppressive than in other areas of Rastafari culture. Women are often severely beaten for taking too long to go to the market. The men often time how long it takes to go to the market and come back with out wasting time to talk or any other pleasure. If the woman does not return in this pre planed time they are often beaten. “ She showed me scars she bore from such a beating when she was punished for lingering too long in the daily market. Her husband had carefully timed her trips to the market and lateness aroused suspicions of infidelity”(Lewis pg 112) This is grossly unfair for when men go to the market they spend much time lingering around, smoking Ganja, listening to the BBC to see what is happening in the world as well as discussing their view of world politics of other Rasta’s. The daily life for a man living in the Twelve Tribe compound is much different than that of the women. The men spend most of their time involved in activities that are not related to work. They will spend much of their time smoking and discussing Rasta world views, as well painting pictures of Haile Selasie I. Most Rasta’s living on the compound do not do much work in the fields. Newcomers to the compound do most of the work that is done in the field. Most of these new comers do not stay long in the community because they are worked too hard by the older members. A Ethiopian women who lived in the compound for a while claims: The newcomers, she claimed, are exploited and overworked through a process which the brethren call education. If they do remain it is because the brethren put fear in their

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hearts that the Twelve Tribes in Jamaica will shoot them should they leave. To return to Babylon is forbidden and sacrilegious (Lewis 112). Most of the money that the members of the compound receive comes from the money that has been donated by people who live in Jamaica. Different people that live in Shashemene perceive the Rasta's differently. Some people reject the Rasta's because their way of life is in conflict with the rest of the community, while others find the Rasta's to be a harmless group that does nothing to hurt the community. However, there are very few among the villagers that feel that the Rasta's do anything positive for the struggling town. There are a few reasons that some people in the town do not like the Rasta's. One of these is that even though the Rasta's preach anti-violence, people in the village claim that they are very quick to pull out a knife when they disagree with each other. A second complaint about the Rasta's is that they are lazy and sell cloth at the market that was given to them as charity. A third complaint about the Rasta's is one that is universal throughout every place that Rasta live. This is the complaint about their use of Ganja. " All they do is smoke marijuana, which the Ethiopian farmers here grow for them. Some people in the town don't like this, as our children have also started to use this drug. We like them as they integrate and there is a lot of inter-marriage, but the marijuana has to stop," says 27-year-old mechanic Adbul Onduka. (Bhalla). A fourth complaint out Rasta's is simply that their religious beliefs clash with those of other Muslim and Christian beliefs. The Rasta's that are currently living in Shashemene welcome any African that wants to come to live in their community to come. They say their community can handle any amount of people that want to come back to African. The Rasta's believe that they will some day turn the town of Shashemene into the most

important city in Africa. They claim that some day it will be a thriving African city that will be able to defeat the oppression of the “ White Man”. As of now the Rasta’s have done little to nothing to improve Shashemene. Rastafari in the United States. Rastafari has ventured out of Jamaica and Africa to the United States. The center of Rastafari in the United States is by far New York City, but Rastafari is not limited to New York City at all. There are large populations of Rasta’s living all over the U. S. from California to the Methodist dominated Texas. It seem wherever there are people of African decent that have been or are being oppressed by the “ White Man” Rasta’s will emerge. Dallas Texas One of the more interesting places that Rasta ‘ s have emerged is Dallas Texas. Texas is one of the most religious areas in the western world. Texas is a place where Christianity dominates the social life a great number of people. Texas is also a place that has a great amount of discrimination of African people and this is probably one of the reasons that Rastafari has emerged in this area. Rastafari first came to Dallas 20 years ago. Most of the first exposure to Rastafari came from Reggae music that became popular in that era. It is not know how many Rasta’s are living in the area, but at a recent Rasta event to celebrate the birthday of Haile Selassie I over 500 Rasta’s showed up. Most of the Rasta community in Dallas is African Americans who looked for answers through the Black Panther movement, or Nation of Islam, and other African churches, and were left felling empty. A Rasta by the name of Moore is a good example of this. Moore spent much of his life looking for answers. He turned to the Nation of Islam and felt more oppressed than before. Moore is now a Rasta and his outlook on life has improved very much for him. “ It been a rough life, but as Rasta, we’ve got to keep on”(Jones pg. 4). This quote of Moore shows how

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Rastafari helps him get through his hard day-to-day life. Rasta's in Dallas face many of the same problems that other Rasta's face. Like most other Rasta's living throughout the world, they face the problem of smoking their religious herb, Ganja. Despite this the Rasta's in Dallas hold Nyabinghi rituals on every full moon in the Dallas area. The Rasta's in Dallas try to help their issue of Ganja use by helping the community fight other drug problems in the city. Rasta's come to the anti drug rallies that the Muslims of the area held and by doing this the Rasta's hoped to show that they were not pro drug. By showing that they wanted to help the drug problems the Rasta's hoped it would help them to legitimize their ritual use of Ganja. Rasta's also face discrimination of their religious style in Dallas. The son of Rasta Moore, Jameel Moore was suspended from his school for wearing his crown in his sixth grade elementary school. The school officials suspended Jameel because they said he was violating the school rules that prohibit the wearing of hats. The Moores disputed the ruling arguing that the crown was not a hat but a "Cultural Headdress", just like the yarmulkes is to a Jew, and a turban is to a Hindu. The issue was dropped when the school scared young Jameel so much that he had to swallow his pride and agree not to show his faith and not wear the crown. Another case of Rasta's harassment by authorities is the case of Carols and Dana Jackson. The Jacksons are a Rasta couple that tried to improve their run down West Dallas neighborhood. The couple bought up run down homes in their neighborhood and renovated them. During the renovation of the homes they painted pictures of Marcus Garvey and Haile Selassie on the walls of the homes. They grew vegetables and purchased animals to be raised on the area for means of self-sufficient survival. When the couple began to hold Nyabinghi sessions they were

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sighted for code violations and eventually arrested for possession of marijuana. The women in this Rasta community of Dallas Texas seem to be treated much better than Rasta Women throughout of the rest of the Rasta world. Although they are not seen as equals, they are part of the Ganja smoking rituals and are not forced to stay at home like many other Rasta women are throughout the world. This is probably a reflection of the low intensity of the Rasta community of Dallas. It is also mostly a result of the surrounding that the Rasta woman are in. The way in which woman are treated in Dallas Texas is much better than how women are treated in Jamaica or Ethiopia as a whole. In general, Rastafari culture in Dallas Texas is much less intense than it is in most other parts of the world. These Dallas Rastas do not seem to have the desire of rebellion that most other Rasta feel. Many of the Rasta's are part of the legitimate economy, pay taxes and have legitimate jobs. This is partly because it is very hard for the Rasta to survive in the informal economy in Dallas. The Dallas Rasta seems to be one of the most relaxed, least rebellious, and least motivated to help bring Babylon down. The reason for this is most likely the level of oppression in the area is much less intense than it is other places. Another reason for the lower level of intensity is the large separation that Texas has from the African world. Texas does have a large population of people of African decent, but these people do not feel the same oppression that black people feel in other places such as Jamaica. A third reason for the low intensity is that there is not a large following of Rasta's in the area, which would effect how intense their lifestyle can be. Rastafari in Dallas is more of religious movement than it is a social or cultural movement. In both Jamaica and in Ethiopia it is a major cultural movement. The Dallas Rasta is much less

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intense than the Rasta's of Ethiopia. This does not mean that the Rasta's of Dallas are not Rasta's. What it does show is how Rasta's can differ throughout the world. This is not different from people of other faiths. Every religion has people that believe in the religion at different levels. A good example of this is in the Jewish faith. There are Jews such as the Orthodox Jews that believe in the religion to a very strong degree and then there are people of Jewish faith, such as the Reform Jews that follow the religion to lowest degree. Therefore the Twelve Tribe Rasta's of Ethiopia could be compared to the Orthodox Jews, and the Rasta's of Dallas could be compared to the Reform Jew's. Despite the differences that these two Rasta's cultures have they still share the basic principles of Rastafari. The first and most important of these principles is their love and worship of Haile Selassi I. Second, they want to fight the oppression of the black man. Third, their hatred of authority and preaching down of Babylon (although this is felt to a lesser degree by the Dallas Rastas). Fourth, their ritual use of Ganja to reach clear thought and to connect to God. A fifth connection is their appearance wearing their hair in dread locks and having unshaven faces. The last and most important connection is their love for the world, and their desire for the unity of man. The purpose of this paper in discussing Rasta's in very separate environments was to show Rastafari in way that shows how broad the faith is. By showing Rasta's in the their most extreme form, the Twelve Tribes that live in Ethiopia, I was able to show how serious Rasta's can be. On the other hand by showing Rasta's in the much less intense culture of Dallas I was able to show that the religion is not always so radical. The paper also showed that Rasta's exist all over the world, from Africa to Dallas. The point is Rastafari is everywhere, just like oppression is

everywhere. There is always positive thought (Rasta) where there is negative thought (oppression). Bibliography Bhalla, Nita. " The Town That Rasatafarians Built. " Ethiopian World Federation June 1 2002 Dubb, Adjua. " Rastrari Way of Life" JahWorks. org Nicholas, Tracy. Rastafari A Way of Life (Pamphlet no other info given) Jones, Linda. " The Rasta Way — Dallas Rastafarian community steadfastly practices an often misunderstood religion" 08/11/96 Niceup April 4 2002 Lewis, William. Soul Rebels The Rastafari. Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, Inc., 1993 " Rastafari Campaigner Taking Cannabis Case To African Commission" South African Press Association 20 March 2002