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The evolution of Rastafarianism is probably the most fascinating and dynamic religious-social phenomenon of the past few centuries in any society around the world. The ontogeny of religious myths, rituals, theology, philosophy, social codes, ideologies and aesthetic expressions through art and music, which had taken centuries of the early periods of Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam to evolve, is being telescoped with admirable success within a few generations by a cross-section of Afro-Jamaicans who have been striving for spiritual meaning and purpose for their fragile and fugitive existence in the New World. Their struggle and achievements deserve not merely sympathetic tolerance but respectful, unbiased and unprejudiced analysis and principled acceptance. (Dr. Ajai Mansingh and Laxim Mansingh, Hindu Influences on Rastafarianism)

As the leaders and people of the Caribbean prepare to meet the onrush of the 21st century, it may well also be the final hour for them to reckon with that most remarkable and enduring of

African presences in the region— the Rastafari. The birthplace of the dreadlock movement was, of course, Jamaica in the turbulent era of labour struggles in the 1930s, and the movement's early thunder of black redemption was heralded by the great Afro-Jamaican prophet and Pan-Africanist, the Honourable Marcus Garvey.

Rasta, however has always defied rigid, static categorisation— despite the various conceptualisations contained within numerous volumes of research on the brethren/sistren by a wide cross-section of scholars from different academic disciplines. At its ideological core is a vibrant biblically-based Afro-Christian creed focused around the divinity of His Majesty Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia, and blended with Garveyite Black Nationalism. But notwithstanding certain religious features encrusted on the movement, it is generally agreed that Rasta is much more than a religion. It represents, in fact, an authentic return to the roots of African spirituality. Rastafari, then, is the living nucleus of ancient Ethiopian cultural tradition reborn in the crucible of the New World. This much is certain: despite its deep Ethiopic inspiration, Rasta is a quintessentially Afro-Caribbean reality in the

sense that only the sons and daughters of de-tribalised Africans in the Caribbean could have created it.

For a start, Rastafari, in spite of its militant black nationalism, still proclaims— in the words of Haile Selassie, which were made immortal by Bob Marley— that “the colour of a man's skin is (ultimately) of no more significance than the colour of his eyes”. This bold universalness is a product of the Caribbean experience. Perhaps the closest parallel movement to emerge among African Americans is the Nation of Islam, yet the gap between Caribbean Rasta and the Black Muslims of North America on this racial question is significantly wide— for the latter, the white man is the devil incarnate. The man who challenged that dogma from within the Black Muslim movement— Malcolm X— was of necessity brutally eliminated. Apparently only the Caribbean— with its peculiarly global ethnic configuration encompassing virtually the entire racial spectrum of humankind (Africans, East Indians, Europeans, Chinese and Amerindians)— has been capable of sharing such a universal quality of vision within black counter-hegemonic movements.

Rasta, in its unfolding contours, has already moved through what are

By Ras Ikael Tafari

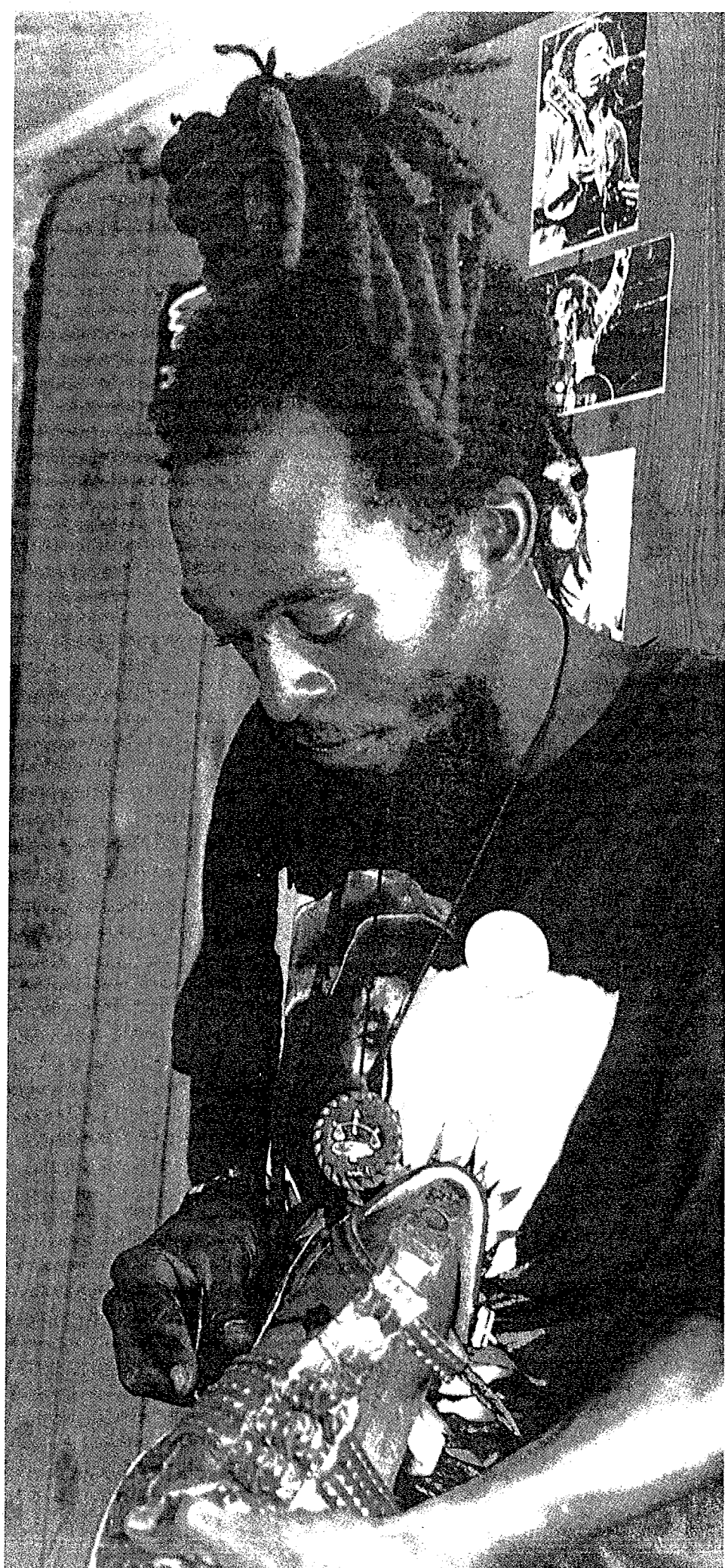
Photography by Sue moss

Rasta

arguably three distinct, developmental cycles. The movement's emphases have been shifted, elements incorporated or abandoned, rituals reinterpreted or reshaped and symbols fused to create new meanings out of the old logic, through which new social forces it can aptly be described as a movement of the next millennium. Surely, Rasta is more backward-looking, more a celebration of the return to our African genesis. And yet, the undeniable truth is that the Africa to which the brethren/sistren seek to return is the same ancestral womb which gave birth originally to all the different races. Thus, in a sense, Rasta revisited the kernel of African tradition the better to evolve a universal vision whose psychological texture can accommodate other cultural legacies and touch the peoples of the world from Russia to Japan, from Canada to Nigeria, from Melanesia to Holland— in short to encompass all the diverse regions of our globe.

In the words of a white Canadian social anthropologist, Professor Carole Yawney of New York University, "Overall, the range of symbolic ambiguities in Rastafari imagery encourages oppressed people everywhere to resolve their grievances with redemptive imagery... Why such symbolic resolutions can be achieved on a global scale has to do with the kind of common issues faced by people of all nations: the ecological crisis stands over against Rasta's ital livity; the pervasive corruption of secular leaders is counterpoised by the Rasta theme of theocratic morality; engulfing materialism is challenged by their vision of pre-industrial Ethiopia; and disenchanted youths are awakened by the words of the Elder."

Professor Yawney is here, to some extent perhaps, echoing the sentiments expressed by Haile Selassie himself in responding to what he termed "the ultimate challenge" presently facing humankind. "We must become bigger than we have ever been, more courageous, greater in spirit, larger in outlook. We must become members of a new race, overcoming pretty prejudice, owing our ultimate allegiance to our fellow humans in the world community."

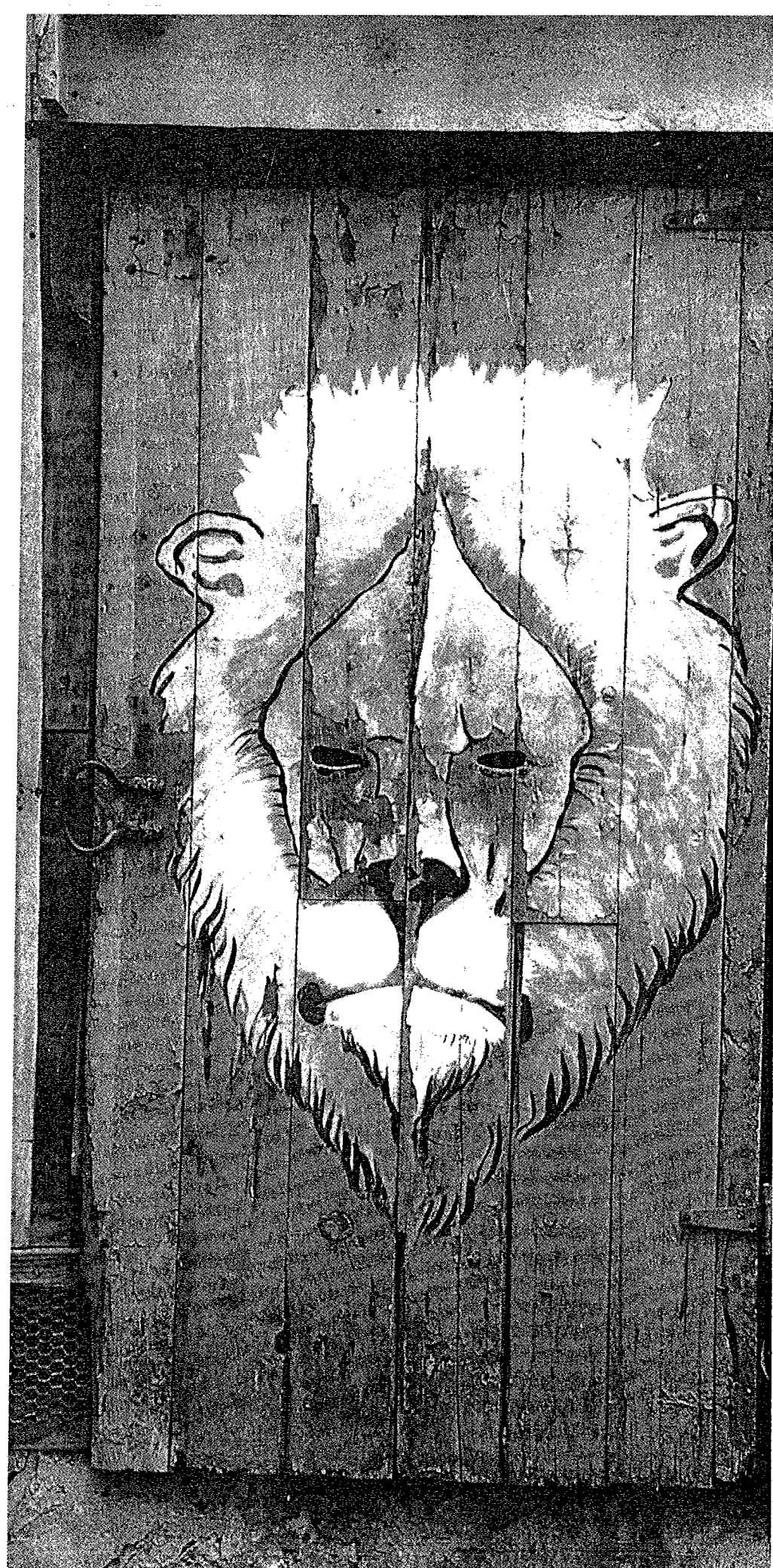


It is also worth remembering that the Rastafari have, for two thirds of this century, revitalised our awareness of the pristine glory of black civilisation, and thrown up from the grassroots modern mythical heroes of the likes of Brother Bob Marley, his Queen, Rita, and the wailing Wailers, who, through the intense rhythmic language of their reggae music, provided a new canopy of Africanity under which a whole generation of blacks and youths from all the other nations, have been able to shelter, however fleetingly, from the ravages of a modern western world currently devoid of dreams, mystery and dread.

As the creators of a now global avant-garde counter-culture, the Rastafari can indeed be justifiably acknowledged as the children of the next millennium. After all, from as early as the 1940s Rasta was practising the cultural patterns and holistic way of life which is currently being dubbed 'sustainable': for example, adhering to a vegetarian diet without salt, and the use of biodegradable kitchen utensils such as calabashes. The rest of the world has simply just begun to catch up.

At the crucial Inaugural Rastafari International Conference, Trade Fair and Cultural Exposition mounted in Barbados in August of this year, the assembled brethren/sistren addressed the urgent priority of formalising their growing networks of trade and cultural exchange across the black world. Rasta has already broken down the barriers between the smaller and larger islands of the region, and the movement also increasingly transcends the old colonially-based language groupings that still divide the Caribbean Sea. An international secretariat, ultimately aimed at building corridors of power linking the black people of the West to the African motherland, has been put in place.

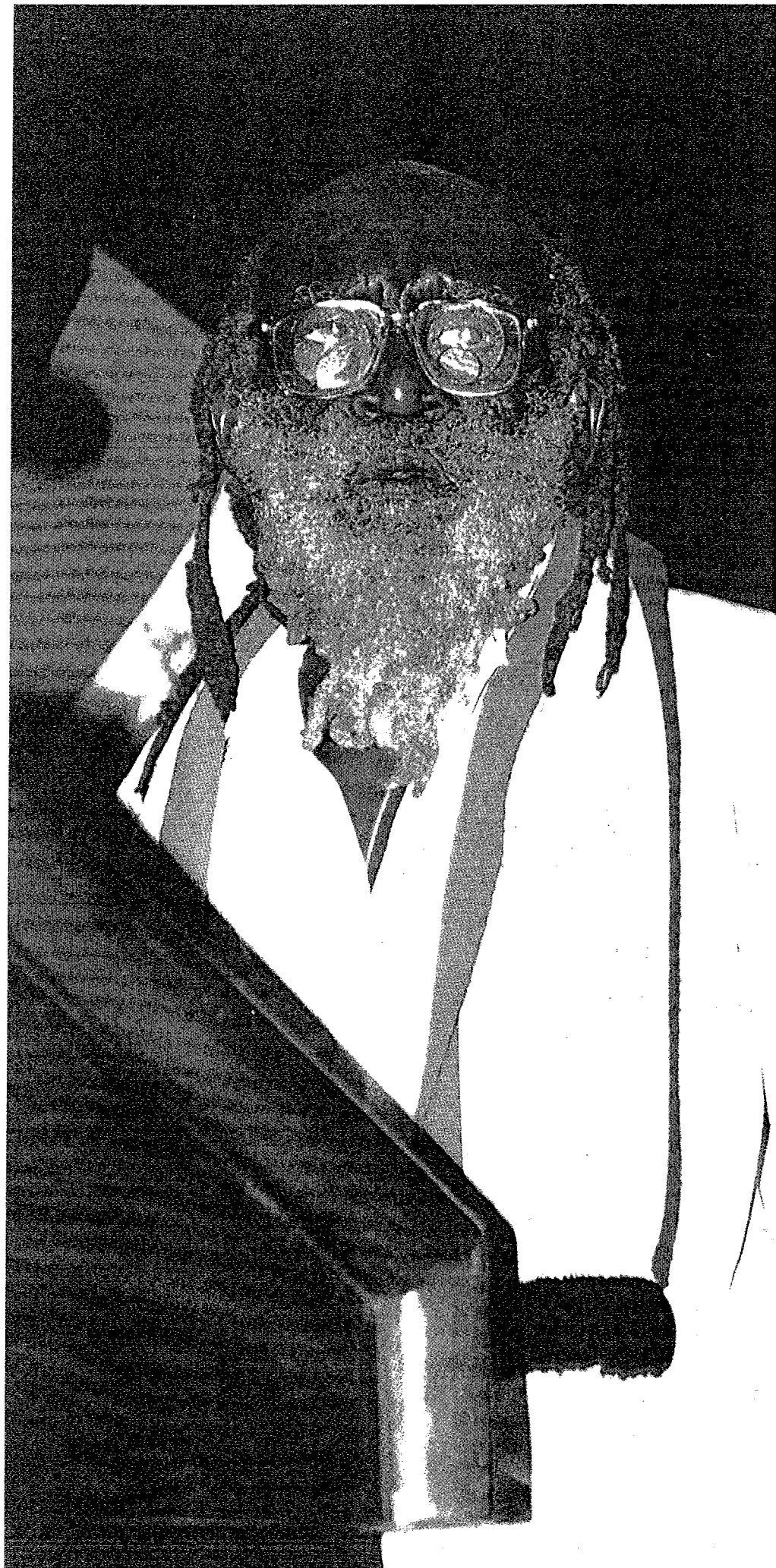
Unprecedented worldwide tremors will no doubt be set off by the coming to being at the close of this century, of an event long prophesied by the Rastafari—Repatriation to the Mother Continent. This will definitively close the gate on the present, race-obsessed century, as well as open a new gateway of universal brother-



hood and sisterhood into the one to come. In the process, this should seal the fate of the old European ideology of world domination through racial supremacy, which has for so long sought to forestall the physical return of a remnant of Africa's exiled children to their ancestral home, thus ultimately denying their right to rule their own destiny. Indeed, communities of Rastafari are already effectively networking across the New World diaspora and in the UK metropolis. The glorious occasion of the Haile Selassie I centenary celebrations in July of 1992 witnessed large delegations comprising hundreds of Rastas from the UK, the US and the Caribbean visiting Ethiopia. The long established settlement of brethren and sistren at Shashamane just 100 miles outside Addis Ababa was the major venue, as the Ethiopians at home played host to a rare and mighty gathering of some of Africa's finest sons and daughters from over land and sea.

In the new millennium, the prospect of a free, black-controlled and immensely resourceful South Africa— which will eventually mean an economically self-sustaining continent of Africa— will represent but the tip of a gigantic, long-frozen iceberg of culturally submerged black humanity that is now finally thawing and, like the legendary subterranean Atlantis, rising fast to the troubled surface of world history. A vast mega-bloc, such as that comprising Africa, Latin-America, the Caribbean and black communities in the US and the UK, offers by far the most viable hope of sustaining black sovereignty and economic progress in the upcoming global age. It would be the fulfilment of a vision which the children of Jah have shared with us for most of this century, and it leaves us with a positive omen which unmistakably suggests that the Rastafari— with their fiery black love, their pulsating drums, and their rainbow hues of ites, gold and green— will be around for countless generations to come.

The late Ras Sam Browne



now

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