

Jamaican Religion

Summary: Jamaican religious traditions in the United States include Obeah, Jamaican Revivalism or Pukumina, and Rastafarianism. Obeah is a system of herbal and spiritual technology to cure diseases, offer protection, and even to harm one's enemies. The Pukumina tradition is more structured than the Obeah tradition, and its rituals share some characteristics with Haitian Vodou. Rastafarianism, known within the U.S. through its reggae music and its characteristic hairstyle of dreadlocks, interprets Africans and African Americans as successors to Biblical prophets.

Over 750,000 African captives came to Jamaica from the Bight of Biafra, the region of present-day Ghana, and west Central Africa. Beginning in the late 18th century, Jamaica saw the emergence of a variety of African and African-influenced religious traditions. The three major traditions that then reached the United States are called Obeah, Jamaican Revivalism or Pukumina, and Rastafarianism.

Obeah is a form of herbal and spiritual technology used to cure ailments and to harm one's enemies. In Jamaica, Obeah men were believed capable of poisoning people and of dominating them by catching their shadows. Some researchers attribute the origins of Obeah to the Ashanti people of what is now Ghana and their practice of *obayifo*. In Jamaica, these practices were a legendary component of slave resistance and revolt. In the United States today, Obeah men and women, commonly referred to as "readers" and known as skilled herbalists, are sought primarily for the healing of physical, spiritual, and mental disorders, and for protection from malevolent spiritual forces.

A Jamaican Revivalist tradition called Pukumina—more structured than Obeah in belief and practice, with numerous churches and congregations—is practiced in most major U.S. cities today. Like mainland black North American Christianity, Jamaican Revivalism is much more likely to be described as "African" by outsiders than by insiders, though there are many parallels between Jamaican Revivalist movements and West African cultures. Various Jamaican Revivalist practices recall West African and Haitian religions. For example, each of the various spirits venerated in Revivalism is said to prefer specific foods, colors, and music. Recalling Haitian Vodou, Pukumina ceremonial space includes the "ritual architecture" of a central pole, to which Jamaicans add a basin of water used for spirit-channelling. This apparatus stands at the center of the sacred space, whether it be in the backyard or in a special meeting hall. Drumming and dancing culminate in trances and contact between the worshippers and the spirits who bring about divine healing or divine inspiration. In the Revivalist traditions,

however, it is often said to be the Holy Spirit who “possesses” the devotees, or the spirits of Biblical figures such as the prophet Jeremiah and the apostle Peter.

The most famous Jamaican religion is undoubtedly Rastafarianism, a complex spiritual and political movement that emerged in Jamaica during the depression years of the 1930s. It combined inspirational Jamaican folk Christianity with pan-Africanist sentiments inspired by Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association. In repudiating British colonialism, Rastafarians were inspired by Ethiopia, noted as the one land of Africa mentioned in the Bible. Ethiopia’s 20th century emperor Haile Selassie, “the Lion of Judah,” was believed by Rastafarians to be the 225th king of biblical Ethiopia; they took Haile Selassie’s name, *Ras Tafari*, the “Prince of Tafari Province,” as their own. Garvey’s dream of a return to Africa became the Rastafarian dream as well, and some Rastafarians have indeed settled in Ethiopia, Ghana, and Zaire.

Rastafarians interpret the Old Testament as the history of the black people and as a prophetic key to understanding events in the modern world. They see themselves as successors to the biblical prophets and, like devotees of Jamaican Revivalist movements, often speak as the present-day voices of biblical prophets such as Moses, Joshua, and Isaiah. The characteristic Rastafarian hairstyle, dreadlocks, is said to symbolize both the lion’s mane and the strength of Samson. Some Rastafarians believe that African warriors wear their hair in a similar style. The sacramental use of marijuana among Rastafarians is believed to bring divine inspiration, to cure diseases, and to enhance strength.

In the United States, the rhythm of Rastafarian reggae music has become one of the best known aspects of this Jamaican religious tradition. The lyrics, like the Rastafarian lifestyle, often include a strong note of social protest as well as the dream of returning to the biblical Ethiopia. As Bob Marley sings,

We are the children of the Rastaman.

We are the children of the Higher Man.

Africa, Unite 'cause the children wanna come home.

Africa, Unite 'cause we're moving right out of Babylon.

And we're grooving to our father's land.

Just as Rastafarian identification with the biblical Ethiopia was a strong form of resistance to British colonial society in the 1930s, so today Rastafarian protest affirms African identity in the face of Eurocentric Jamaican and American cultures.