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**Exodus! Movement of Jah People<sup>1</sup> in Contemporary  
Ethiopia with Reference to Shashemenē<sup>2</sup>**  
(a report from field research)

**Abstract**

This work concerns Shashemenē – a city in southern Ethiopia, which is often and unofficially called the capital of the Rastafari Movement. The article contains some facts about this place and its history, description of living conditions there and the author's personal impressions from the visit to this city. Moreover, there is a short paragraph about relations between Rastas and native Ethiopians.

*Keywords:* Ethiopia, Shashemenē, Rastafari

Whole Africa and especially Ethiopia take up special place in hearts of millions of black people from the New World. Idea of repatriation or exodus to the motherland appeared with the first black slaves from Africa on American soil, and has been passing through consecutive generations until today. It has special meaning for one group of people, originally consisting only of slaves' descendants in Jamaica – Rastas.

It is quite hard to classify what Rastafari Movement exactly is. Scholars tend to categorize it as religion, socio-religious or socio-

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<sup>1</sup> Title of this paper is derived and inspired by Bob Marley's 1977 album: „Exodus. Movement of Jah People”.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper I'm using following transcription system: Romanization System for Amharic, BGN/PC GN 1976 System.  
[http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140402150947/http://www.pcn.org.uk/Romanization\\_Amharic.pdf](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140402150947/http://www.pcn.org.uk/Romanization_Amharic.pdf); access 12.09.2014

cultural religious movement or even religious political movement<sup>3</sup>. Rastas themselves prefer to call it philosophy, movement or simply – the way of life. Regardless of categorization, members of Rastafari movement do not accept the term ‘Rastafarianism’ and that connected with it – ‘Rastafarians’, which they see as ‘Babylonian’ and degrading. That is why I am not going to use these terms in this paper.

Below, I would like to describe the image of people (mainly members of Rastafari Movement) who have managed to fulfill the idea of repatriation and are now living in Ethiopia. This article is to a large degree a product of my recent trip to Ethiopia in January 2014, and is thought to be as much up-to-date as possible.

### **Shashemenē – myths and reality**

Shashemenē is widely known amongst Rastafari Brethren around the world as a land of milk and honey. Most of them hear about this place in Ethiopia at least once in their lifetime, but only few read something more about it and even less have been there. Most probably this is the reason why a lot of legends and myths are aroused around Shashemenē. I am going to tackle them here.

If you are Rasta or someone interested in the Movement or Shashemenē itself, there is a high probability that you heard or read something like this:

“This small village near the District Town of Malkoda gained international attention in the African Diaspora in 1948, when 500 acres of its fertile land was granted as a gift to the black people of the West, by His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie I, the reigning Ethiopian Monarch, for their massive support to Ethiopia during the Italian occupation of 1935-1941.”<sup>4</sup>

This piece of information, taken from official website of The Shashamane Settlement Community Development Foundation, could

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<sup>3</sup>Check for example entry ‘Rastafari’ in Encyclopaedia Britannica: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/491801/Rastafari>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.infoexgraphics.com/shashamane/?page\\_id=11](http://www.infoexgraphics.com/shashamane/?page_id=11)

be often found in works concerning this place. Unfortunately, some of this data is not accurate anymore but many people still believe it is. Like in the quotation above, in many reportages, articles or books one can read about a “village” or “town”, while Shashemenē is none of them. Admittedly in 1994, so only twenty years ago it had a population of ca. 52 000 while now (according to 2012 national census) its population is estimated at 122 000. In fact, nowadays Shashemenē is large and very crowded city. According to actual administrative partition the city lies in Oromīya Region Ethiopia and it is located around 240 km south from the capital – Addis Ababa.

It is true that in 1948 Emperor Hayīle Selassē I decided to give 500 acres of his private land for members of the Ethiopian World Federation (EWF), the Rastafari Movement, and all black people in the West who wanted to go back to the motherland. It is also well-known that Emperor decided to make this donation in order to express his gratitude for the black diaspora, which massively aided Ethiopia during its struggle to recapture independence from the Italian occupation. Unfortunately, the communist Derg<sup>5</sup> regime confiscated most of the original 500 acres and left only 27 acres for the newcomers. Thus, the stories about great stretch of fertile land does not reflect current reality.

As I already have mentioned, for the Rasta people Shashemenē is the Promised Land, Paradise on Earth or something like the capital of their Zion. This type of thinking is hardly understandable for other people. For the average travelers or tourists Shashemenē is “grubby and raucous”<sup>6</sup> town where one needs to be careful with his wallet. I had browsed through some reports and forums concerning Shashemenē before I left for Ethiopia last time and I have to admit that rather I would not go there if it was not so important for me. Shashemenē does not have good opinion neither in

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<sup>5</sup>Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police, and Territorial Army later on renamed the Provisional Military Administrative Council – communist regime which ruled Ethiopia from the overthrow of Hayīle Sellasē in 1974 until 1987.

<sup>6</sup> M. Phillips, J.B. Carillet, 2006, *Ethiopia & Eritrea*, Footscray: Lonely Planet Publications Pty Ltd, p.174f.

westerner's nor in Ethiopians eyes also as I realized during my stay there. It is famous for "rude and hostile treatment of travelers"<sup>7</sup>, occasional thefts and importunity of self-appointed guides and *ganja* dealers. In my opinion it definitely does not resemble a heaven on Earth or Zion. It is dusty, loud and has a characteristic, unpleasant smell. In fact, the city lies on Cairo-Cape Town Trans-African Highway and air pollution is perceptible here very distinctly. For someone from Europe or so called Western World a walk around the town could be nearly an extreme sport. The main streets and roadsides are wide, but continual flood of cars, *bajajs*<sup>8</sup>, people and animals make the trip hard and force you to watch out all the time. Finally, I need to mention beggary: children, old, healthy and disabled, poor and those in probably quite good financial condition. It is really sad and at the same time extremely annoying, because firstly it makes you feel like a walking money-box, secondly like disgusting miser (even if I decided to give away all my money it would be still too little) and thirdly, you are furious for everyone thinking – why did I come here?

Well, everything is true, but to be honest I have to add that all things are also present in other places in this country, especially in Addis Ababa's Piazza. Maybe somewhat other and in different intensity, but that is nothing extraordinary. Trying to be as much objective as I can, I have to admit that Shashemenē looks like every other big city or town in Ethiopia. It is chaotic and deterrent at a first glance, but if you are not afraid and have some time to look deeper, you will see that not only normal life runs there, but perhaps you will perceive something interesting.

### **Everyday living**

It has been nearly 60 years since the first settlers – the Piper's family (members of EWF) came to Shashemenē in 1955. After them, more and more followers settled on the land granted by the Emperor. At its peak, the society of newcomers – followers of Rasta philosophy, members of EWF or other sympathizers of Ethiopia

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> *Bajaj* – a kind of auto rickshaw, vehicle known wider as tuk-tuk.

counted over 2 000 people. Now, their number is estimated for around two or three hundred. Even so Shashemenē is still home for the largest Afro-Caribbean Society in Africa<sup>9</sup>. They live in northern outskirts of the town known as ‘Jamaica’. Certainly, the name reflects the most numerous national group within immigrants’ community. Apart from Bob Marley’s compatriots, there are also representatives of other Caribbean countries (e.g. Trinidad and Tobago, St. Vincent) as well as United States, Great Britain and others. Yet nowadays, in Shashemenē there are more and more... Ethiopians. While it is true that they have foreign parentage, but also there is insignificant number of fresh newcomers now. The city is still visited in large numbers by followers of the Movement from all over the world, but I am wondering whether it is possible that one day there will be no “settlers”, “newcomers”, “immigrants” or “Jamaica” in Shashemenē.

The settlers never had an easy life in their Land of Promise, but the worst period, when they were discriminated the most in their history, was the time of the communist regime. In 1975 all the land in Ethiopia was nationalized. Of course, the Land Grant was included. Some of the settlers gave up and went back to Caribbean or USA, but some remained to fight for their rights. After some time and with the assistance of Jamaican government land was returned to the settlers, but much reduced as I mentioned above. In 1992, after several hard years of Derg’s rule “in order to represent the collective interest of the Community to the Ethiopian Authorities”<sup>10</sup>, the settlers inaugurated non-governmental organization – The Jamaica Rastafarian Development Community (JRDC)<sup>11</sup>. Few years later, in 1998 they brought The Shashemane Settlement Community Development Foundation into existence. Its purpose and goals are as follows:

„to promote awareness of and organize developmental support for the Shashamane Settler Community and similar charitable causes throughout the world; to foster better local, regional, national, and international rela-

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.infoexgraphics.com/shashamane/?page\\_id=11](http://www.infoexgraphics.com/shashamane/?page_id=11)

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.infoexgraphics.com/shashamane/?page\\_id=11](http://www.infoexgraphics.com/shashamane/?page_id=11)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

tions through the promotion of trade, sports, and cultural linkages; to support and contribute to U.S. based Ethiopian and other charities whose objectives are in harmony with the Foundation's goals; to establish and facilitate communications networks with the Settler community, particularly the youth; to develop methods of establishing self-help, self-sufficiency, and community enrichment programs for the Shashamane community”<sup>12</sup>.

Thus we can notice, that Rastas and other settlers, are deeply set in Ethiopian reality and seriously take their exile here. In the past, immigrants' children learned at home, sometimes in small groups of peers. Now, there is The Jamaica Rastafarian Development Community School which was originally established to teach the immigrants' children, but also native Ethiopian children attend there. The school, (which is financed only thanks to private donations) is large. Around 400-500 children attend there and 27 teachers are employed<sup>13</sup>.

In ‘Jamaica’ community all three Rastafari Mansions<sup>14</sup> are represented but Twelve Tribes of Israel seems to be the most numerous. There is Rasta Nyabinghi Church in the settlement, which is being built for years and Black Lion Museum, but it seems that it is closed now<sup>15</sup>. One of the most interesting and positive people I met there was Ras Hailu Tefari (his real name is Bany Payne) who is an artist running “Banana Art Gallery”. Apart from him and probably some other members of the community, the majority are farmers.

I am bound to say that Shashemenē made me confused. I was trying to be interested, objective or even positively oriented, but I have to say that this city made a sad impression on me. In my opinion, Jamaica resembles paradise definitely more than Shashemenē.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.infoexgraphics.com/shashamane/>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> In other words – branches which are as follows: Twelve Tribes of Israel, Nyiabinghi, Bobo Shanti.

<sup>15</sup> Probably since 2012, when its founder – Gladstone Robinson, the first Rasta settler in Shashemenē died.

## **Ethiopians and Rastas**

Emperor's great-granddaughter Esther Sellasie Antohin wrote: "Ever since Ethiopians in the diaspora became aware of the Rastafarians, their views of them have been tenuous at best and antagonistic at worst"<sup>16</sup>. In my opinion this sentence reflects also attitude of Ethiopians living in their motherland towards their Rasta neighbors.

It is necessary to acknowledge that from the beginning Rasta Brethren has faced misunderstanding and alienation in their Zion. During the communist Derg period they were even treated as some kind of public enemy. The main reason was simple – completely different views on the Emperor's figure. He was a God or Messiah for Rastas, and an old despot for some people in Ethiopia and abroad. To be honest, newcomers often were and still sometimes are conducive to preserve negative stereotypes about Jah People. In the past they were often engaged in marijuana cultivation or smuggling and it was not well-seen by locals. Now they are rather inducting native Ethiopians to cultivate herb for them, and locals' attitude towards this drug is also changing. The Movement had an unusually bad reputation during communists' administration, because aside from their evident distinctness, they were at that time against the system. Military revolution, overthrew the monarch, who was and still is the central figure of the Rastafari philosophy. It is not difficult to guess that members of the Movement with inseparable attributes and references to abolished regime, did not have an easy life in those times. Nevertheless, they continued to sing songs which glorified the Emperor, hung up his pictures, hoisted the flag with Lion of Judah or collected and featured other symbols related to Hayīle Sellasē I and Ethiopia's past. Moreover, the settlers always had better, richer households. These aspects of Rasta's culture and life did not make them friends of course.

During the Derg's regime, newcomers struggled with the land problems. As I already have mentioned, communists seized the great majority of the ground granted by Emperor Hayīlē Selassē I.

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<sup>16</sup> E.S. Antohin, 2007, *Ethiopians & Rastafari*, Sellasie Pub., p.10.

Today, there is still no possibility to buy some land because according to Ethiopian law land cannot be private property and every part of this country is in state ownership.

From my interviews with native Ethiopians *in situ* and in Poland results one main reflection – Rastas and their beliefs (especially the one about divinity of Hayīle Sellasē I) are strange for the common people. Their philosophy is incomprehensible and obscure. According to some people, they are even inferior to Ethiopians, because they are black<sup>17</sup>.

Rasta Brethren in Ethiopia still have problems, and one of the biggest is their separation from the rest of the society. Members of the movement are ethnic minority with their own traditions and rituals which are still alive and cultivated. They emphasize their difference in many ways like their manners, style of dressing, characteristic hairdo (dreadlocks), different language (usually English) and customs.

After all, in my opinion, the situation is slowly changing. Long time ago the newcomers were hardy to assimilate, but now they are trying to adapt somehow to local conditions. As I described above, they established a foundation. One of its aims is to improve relationship between them and the local community. JRDC is also responsible for foundation and operation of school in Shashemenē. Some individuals from among Rasta Brethren are plunging into work for the common good. Last but not least, more and more members of the movement are able to communicate in Amharic, which is already lessening the distance<sup>18</sup>.

Locals' attitude to Jah People is evolving as well. From my

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<sup>17</sup> The majority of Ethiopians have light or medium brown skin colour and have Semitic features. They like to call their skin colour as honey or caramel whereas Rastas are mainly slave's descendants, who came from West Africa and had dark brown skin with Negroid features.

<sup>18</sup> It comes from two factors. First of all, as I wrote above, the number of first settlers' descendants, born and raised in Ethiopia is increasing. Therefore they know Amharic and also their parents are learning it (if the fathers did not learn the language before). Secondly, some individuals, even new in the society, are trying to communicate with locals in their language to be more familiar.

observation results that being a Rasta is simply becoming popular among some groups of young people in Ethiopia. It seems that at present this phenomenon concerns only the largest cities, which in practice means that it is limited mainly to Addis Ababa and Shashemenē. There everyone can see young males with dreadlocks (usually this is the only Rasta attribute for this type of people), who will try to “help” or make friends with white travelers. For the time being it seems that this popularity comes mainly (or even only) out of possibility to make easy money on naive tourists but I may be wrong. Reggae and dancehall music is very fashionable, so maybe the attitude of Ethiopians towards Rastafarians will change in the future.

## **Conclusion**

Shashemenē definitely is not a city in which one is going to love at first sight, but with curiosity and patience one will discover that under hard, dusty crust, there is another, more human picture. For almost sixty years it has been home for brave people who were not afraid to leave their native countries and set off to their spiritual motherland. I admire their steadfastness, especially the first settlers who left the United States or Europe in fifties or sixties last century and found themselves in completely new environment of Ethiopian interior, which in that time belonged more to nineteenth than twentieth century. Of course I am aware of race discrimination and other problems of black people in USA, Caribbean and UK. Fortunately, I did not experience alienation in my own country and I did not have to escape anywhere to be treated as citizen of full value. Nonetheless, I can imagine that decision to move from bad but familiar conditions into probably better but completely different and unknown must have been extremely difficult. It is worth to add that sixty years ago world was definitely “bigger” than today – telecommunication and transport network were weaker, knowledge about distant corners of the earth was smaller and harder to reach and obviously there was no Internet. Newcomers who settled in Ethiopia and remained there were most probably strongly convinced that their beliefs are right and real. Despite the courage and steadfastness, which I already have

mentioned they had to be strong and patient and to have fortitude, skills, a lot of optimism and at least a little bit of luck. No matter what we think about and how we evaluate their efforts, they fulfilled their dreams about Zion on Earth. This is the reason why their history and they themselves are so fascinating to me.

### **Afterword**

Despite all unfavorable, critical or even warning opinions regarding Shashemenē I was trying to be as much positively oriented and open minded as I could during my stay there. Unfortunately one of the most unpleasant situations during my trip to Ethiopia took place in that city. We were looking for Black Lion Museum and our driver stopped the car on the roadside to ask for the way. After a while we were mobbed by a group of young Rasta boys offering their services as guides. We were trying to refuse politely although decidedly, but there were no place to debate. The boys showed us that this is an offer we cannot reject. Some of them stuck to our car and a few blocked the way. The lockup lasted only a few minutes including the time we and our driver lost to excuse ourselves from the situation. However, it was sufficient to notice the boys' red eyes and excitation, characteristic to *ch'at*<sup>19</sup> users who are in big opposition to *ganja* stoned, calm and relaxed, real Jah People. Finally, after quite impetuous quarrel between our driver and sham-Rastas we fortunately drove away. Of course, it was not the hair-raising accident but this definitely harsh situation fits unusually well to all the stereotypes about Shashemenē. The question remains – was it unusual case for sure? I still hope it was.

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<sup>19</sup>*Ch'at'* (*khat* or *qat*) – edible plant, characteristic to Horn of Africa, where it is chewed by a lot of people. It contains cathinone – amphetamine-like stimulant. The plant is present in Ethiopia from a long time. It is legal in this country and still very popular.

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(transcription of conversation between CNN correspondent Seema Mathur with Gladstone Robinson – first Rasta settler in Shashemenē and few other members of the Movement)

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