

Tribute to Bongo Shephan Fraser (1939–2015):

Thanksgiving for the Life and Works of a Nyahbinghi Patriarch

Live for yourself you live in vain
Live for others you live again
In the kingdom of Jah man shall reign
...so pass it on [Bob Marley and the Wailers]

Greetings in the names of His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie I and Empress Menen--

Dear brethren and sistren, friends and family, it is with heartfelt sadness that I tell you that our beloved ancient Bongo Shephan has made his cosmic transition to the ancestors. He is among the very last of the ancients of Rastafari to have trod Jah winepress in the legendary sanctuaries of Back 'o Wall, Trench Town, Foreshore Road, and the Dungle. It was from these sites of community that "Jah rose the least of the earth to confound the wise and prudent." Bongo Shephan was a living testimony to that prophecy.

Born in the rural hamlet of Ben Bow, St. Catherine in 1939, Shephan was the oldest of seven children. He left his parent's home at the age of 15, putting on his covenant to pursue a Rasta life at a time when the Rastafari in Jamaica were treated as social outcasts and pariahs. He was not turned out by his parents, as many of his generation were, but chose this path on the basis of a personal vision for His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Haile Selassie the First. His first groundings were in Ochios Rios in the mid-1950s until he came to Kingston in 1958. There he spent nearly two years in the yard of the legendary Nyahbinghi Elder, Bongo Watto (aka Ras Boanerges) on 9th Street in Trench Town. Later he relocated to Foreshore Road with Ma- and Pa-Ashanti and by the mid-1960s found himself in Waterhouse among brethren like Bongo Lou, Joslin, Bongo David Wolfe, Mission, and others. Following the Emperor's visit to Jamaica in 1966, he would be among those stalwarts who carried Nyahbinghi celebrations to the fourteen parishes of Jamaica. In 1974 he relocated to the fishing beach community at Bull Bay where he was present at the founding of the Emperor Haile Selassie I Theocracy Government. For the next decade this would be an important grounding site not only for the Elders of the House but for Rastafari of all backgrounds including Bob Marley, Joseph Hill, Cedric Myton, Bunny Wailer and other. Today the site is known as "Bob Marley Beach."

During the camp-and-yard period from the late sixties through the seventies in Kingston, Mama Bubbles, a renowned Nyahbinghi chantress, was Shephan's constant companion. It was at Bull Bay in the early 1980s, however, that Bongo Shephan would start his family with Sister Marlene. This include two beautiful daughters, I-Resa (b. 1980) and I-Tesha (1982) and a son, Tafari (1984). His children were always an

enormous source of pride to him and were his way of fortifying the ‘lineridge’ of the sons and daughters of Jah. Tragically, his daughter I-Resa was killed in Montego Bay in 2005, an event which was arguably the most devastating blow the Elder and his family had to endure in his lifetime. Of the strength that Bongo Shephan radiated to her, Sister Marlene has said that “From the beginning he was like an angel—the brightest angel in the House. He was a great inspiration to me because he made me know myself, he gave me strength and he allowed me to control my own destiny.”

During the 1980s Shephan’s gates at Bull Bay were always a site of grounding and sociability with brethren and sistren coming in to spend days or weeks on end. In 1987, Shephan build a tabernacle there—one of the venues in the all-island Nyahbinghi celebration of Marcus Garvey’s Centenary earthstrong. At times his gates became a staging area for brethren and sistren who were preparing to trod to ‘binghi or, conversely who were returning to their home parishes by way of Bull Bay. On my visits I frequently encountered elders like Bongo Tawney and Sister Pam and family, Bongo Bigga, Bongo Kasha, Ma- and Pa-Ashanti, Sister Ina, Ras Derminite, Ras Mabrak and others.

Bongo Shephan had limited formal education and he lacked the ability to read. This limitation, however, was offset by his considerable native intelligence and the wise-mind that he cultivated on a daily basis first as a student and later a teacher in the counsels of Fari. He had an ability to relate to people of all backgrounds and social positions. A natural-born preacher, words were his currency and he never lacked for them. He had the facility of a true teacher as well.



[Bongo Shephan, Ras Idan, and bredrin in reasoning at Bull Bay beach camp 1983]

When I first met Bongo Shephan in the Bull Bay Nyahbinghi camp he was 41 years of age. While there were others in the camp much older, it was Shephan who personally assumed responsibility for my ‘teaching’ in Rastafari. On the occasion of my second reasoning with several Elders and him, he turned to me at one point and stated, “Jah son, you must know knowledge don’t come in a day. So wi haffa tek time an’ feed the I with a small spoon. Time does everything, ya understand? If we try gi yuh evert’ing one time, you couldn’t tek it. Yuh surely vomit an’ wi no wan dat.” Suffice it to say Shephan ensured that I was properly ‘fed’ and edified. That reasoning began a journey that lasted 35 years.

Over the course of those years Bongo Shephan traveled internationally to represent Rastafari. This included several missions supported by the Smithsonian and the Washington, D.C. and New York Rastafari communities. These missions included the “Rainbow Circle Throne Room Mission” in 1988 with presentations at Howard University, Johns Hopkins University, Morgan State, and Southeastern as well as at the Smithsonian’s Ripley Center. There was the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in 1989, the “Rhythms of Resistance” trod in 1991 at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, and the opening and closing of the “Discovering Rastafari” exhibit in 2007 and 2011. Bongo Shephan was also a key participant in the First Hispanic Rastafari Summit in Panama in 2005 and a Nyahbinghi Trod to Santiago, Chile in 2007. His testimony appears in two videos—Jah Lives (1977) and Rastafari Voices (1978).



[Bongo Shephan, Mama Iffiya, Empress Ester, Ras Sela and Ras Dom in I-ses, Santiago, Chile 2007]

During his first trods in the U.S., Bongo Shephan established connections in the New York, Baltimore, Washington, D.C. and Atlanta communities. In Atlanta he formed a Rastafari churchical order that served to ground an entire cohort of young brethren and sistren who remember him fondly. Always an international communicator, Shephan hosted the patriarch Jah Bones of Rastafari Universal Zion (London) when he traveled to Atlanta in 1991 on U.S. trod. The two had known each other during the late fifties when they moved together in camps like 'Fiya Key' and Back 'o Wall. In 1992, Bongo Shephan was one of seven Elders (along with Bongo Tawney, Bongo Pidow, Ras Headfull, Bongo Bigga, Mama Bubbles, and Baba Marcus) who went into the studio to create the CD "Rastafari Elders" produced by Dr. Dread at RAS Records. To this day, that recording of Nyahbinghi chants and personal testimony remains a unique gem within the soundscape of Rastafari.

From 2006 through 2008, Bongo Shephan served as the Sabbatical Priest for the Scotts Pass Nyahbinghi Center. In July of 2009 my wife Amy and I were blessed to have the patriarch officiate at our wedding on the banks of the Potomac River with our families—including our Rastafari family—in attendance. I remember Bongo Shephan's joy on the occasion, being temporarily reunited with other Elders like Ras Irice Clarke and Pa-Jack Hewitt who were also "coming from far" in the trod-ition.

Today, Bongo Shephan's voice still resounds on video that plays in the "Rastafari Unconquerable" exhibition presently mounted at the Institute of Jamaica that runs until December of this year. He was a 'binghmon though-and-through. My beloved Elder, may unquenchable fire, ceaseless chants and hola bands of I-gels carry the I home to Zion.

Your Most Humble Student

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