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Rastawoman as Rebel: Case Studies in Jamaica

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"How do you remain committed to a movement where male domination is so strong? Don't you pose a serious threat to patriarchy within Rastafari?" some cynics ask. My usual retort is that I-an-I remain committed to Rastafari because it is more than having a relationship with a man; it is about having an identity, seeing the Almighty in oneself and experiencing a fusion with that One. It is about sharing a cosmic consciousness, exploring spirituality, and finding my holistic self-realization, which is at once a creative and re-creative process. It is the authentication of myself as a black queen, with no apologies to the norms and ideology of Babylon.

Without a doubt, Rastafari is a patriarchal movement.¹ However, as with all social systems, Rastafari has, over the years, experienced dynamic shifts in gender power relations as a result of females revisiting their own self-definitions, juxtaposed against designations ascribed by males who created the movement. Rastafarian scholars Carole Yawney² and Maureen Rowe perceive a possible "conjunct" between gender relations that operate in the wider society and those within Rastafari. Rowe, one of the female intellectuals within Rastafari, further intimates that the close alliance between Rastafari doctrines and the teachings of the Bible, particularly of the Old Testament, guarantees androcentric interpretations of male-female roles within the family and in relation to the wider society. Rowe traces the evolution of the Rastafari woman from the 1960s through the early 1980s and says that "1980 was significant for daughters³ [because] the issue of daughters and their abilities and place in Rastafari was raised. . . . The Brethren reiterated their love for the daughters and that the man is the head."⁴

The inclusion of my reflections in a reader on Rastafari might be one means of continuing a conversation that actually began, informally, in 1979 with my own realization of Rastafari. Further, the conversations and testimonies that I record in this chapter may be seen as valid in and of themselves. They provide the critical self-analyses and mechanisms for healing and growth at an individual level. But more important, the rebel voices that echo in these pages may provide a catalyst for deeper interaction within the

wider Rastafari community. My literary "reasoning"⁵ explores the role of woman in Rastafari from a gender perspective. To arrive at a greater "overstanding"⁶ of woman, it is necessary for a female to ascertain the perspective of her significant others, who, in the case of the Rastawoman, are the Rastafari man and the "youth" (child/children). The stereotypes of maleness and femaleness that converge and diverge in society are mirrored "close up" in Rastafari's elongated traditional values, which are preparing to give way to the dawn of a new era. This dawn is hastened by the awakening consciousness of the "sistren," the sometimes silent rebels.⁷

The Rebel Woman Tradition

The historical paradigm of the Caribbean women's movement is informed by the living metaphor of a rebel woman tradition⁸ in the person of Nanny the Ashanti Maroon queen, Jamaica's only female national hero, who led her guerrilla army against the British marauders, whom she defeated with amazing regularity. So effective were the Maroons under Nanny that the British failed to infiltrate the freedom fighters' camp and were thwarted by the Maroons until they agreed to a treaty in 1739. The Rastafarians regard themselves as inheritors of the Maroons' freedom-fighting tradition, and the Rastafari woman is appropriately characterized as a "lioness," positioning rebel woman against the Babylon system.⁹ Of course, for this lionhearted queen to choose to commit herself to an acknowledged patriarchal movement is an apparent contradiction. Such allegiance is absolutely incomprehensible unless one bears in mind the spiritual transformation of one's life through Rastafari and all the other positive impacts that being a part of the Rastafari family entails.

The issue of the brethren's attitude toward women was raised officially in 1981 within the context of a "Bingi,"¹⁰ or celebration. Eight years later, in the research project on "Gender Relations in Rastafari" that I facilitated,¹¹ the questions from sistren¹² were more clearly defined and deliberate. The sistren demanded more specific responses from brethren regarding the revision of gender relations to reflect the imperative for female autonomy. For brethren and sistren to be meeting at the headquarters of Sistren Theater Collective (STC), the women's organization concerned with the analysis of working women's lives, was unprecedented in the mid- to late 1980s, to say the least. Extending the scope of Rastafari's social considerations, STC supported the attempt by Rasta brethren and sistren to clarify gender issues related to ideology, sexuality, roles, and image. And for Rastafari to be probing these issues within the space of a feminist organization was doubly significant for the impact the process had on confronting stereotypes associated with women's struggles for the realization of personal power.

Due to women's own aggressive response to conventional classifications of female roles and responsibilities, these stereotypes are quickly being eroded. In 1985, Maureen Rowe observed that the 1970s saw evidence of daughters challenging the restrictive dress codes and demonstrating assertive attitudes: "Daughters are speaking out

more and more about their concerns and their hopes. Even more important, daughters had begun to articulate their own perception of Rastafari. More and more daughters were beginning to reason together and this created a solid base from which to approach the society in general and the Rastafari community in particular."¹³

The changes evident in the wider society are also currently being echoed in the voices of resistance to patriarchal norms in Rastafari. This profile of the Rastafari woman as rebel is located along a continuum that originates in traditional acceptance of male dominance and moves to a contemporary questioning of male-designated role definitions and an affirmation of independence. Some theorists hold that within the context of domestic organization, a nexus exists between males' diminishing ability to act as breadwinners and increasing female autonomy within the faith. This lessening of male control over women has implications for the traditional hierarchy¹⁴ that has informed the ideology and reinforces a renewed consideration of the Rastafari woman's role as rebel against Babylon and within the parameters of her faith.

Domestic arrangements are critically important to power relations that exist between brethren and sistren in Rastafari. The various household formations that encourage the woman to live independent of male authority inadvertently challenge males' abilities to enforce the concept of men being the household heads. Recently published figures from the Statistical Institute of Jamaica reveal that women comprise just over 45 percent of household heads in Jamaica and 51 percent of the urban population.¹⁵ This social fact has relevance for the Rastafari community: if the majority of sistren are heads of their households, less chance exists for a man to be their head.

Most sisters come to a knowledge of Rastafari through a relationship with a Rastafari man. While this relationship is maintained in some cases, "breakdowns" occur that sometimes result in disenchantment with the "livity" (strict Rastafarian lifestyle). By contrast, Rastawoman¹⁶ often emerge from such painful experiences stronger in their faith in Rastafari but conjugally alone, and less accepting of the "humble" role defined by the brethren as ideal for the Rastafari woman.

The Rastafari woman rejects the status quo that characterizes fundamental institutions of society. For example, the metaphor of self as object is categorically rejected; it is the subliminal norm pounding out of television, billboards, posters, calendars, and like media of mass communication, consistently treating women as commodities or mere stimuli for the commercialization of goods and services. This lionhearted response to the systemic inhibitors of self-actualization in Babylon is not without its internal contradictions. On the one hand, the livity of Rastafari is designed to ensure a healthier way of living because of the emphasis placed on things natural, or "ital." On the other hand, encouragement of natural practices in spheres such as that of sexuality raises challenges: procreation may not be desired every time one is fertile, and as one informant, Nefertiti, suggested, the protection from risks—for example, venereal diseases—is critically important to woman. Sistren also pose the question of whether the Judaic principles from which much of Rastafari's patriarchal ideology derives are currently proving inappropriate for the self-definition and independence of females.

Patriarchy: Panacea or Painful Pill?

To a great extent, patriarchal emphases in Rastafari are due to the translation into the liveliness of practices and beliefs derived from Ancient Israel and Christianity. Furthermore, gender relations in the Jamaican society as a whole have historically been hierarchical and informed by the application of values that reinforce social-stratification stereotypes of race, class, and gender. That is, Rastafari does not present a unique example of the manifestation of patriarchy in the Jamaican family or in other social institutions and more; the patriarchal language of the Rasta doctrine may just be more articulate and the community more easily identifiable than those in the general Jamaican society. The sentiments the elder brethren express regarding the roles of females point to a "reification" of the role of woman, as empresses, queens, princesses, and earth mothers—which is not at all offensive. In fact, Rastawoman take pride in being elevated to queens and empresses, as counterparts to the kings and princes, against the Babylon designations "men," "women," and "people." The role of king involves a Rasta ministering to his queen and offspring in domestic affairs.

This male domestic competence and responsibility is one significant way in which Rastafari males counter the general "normlessness" of male irresponsibility to the family in Jamaican society. The Rastaman is then likely to take care of children, cooking, and performing associated family responsibilities. But the man's role as head in Rastafari is described in economic terms, with no value being ascribed to the other domestic contributions that he makes in the household. Without financial independence, men are perceived as incompetent. This contributes to the pitting of the genders against each other with reference to economic issues.

The House of Rastafari is divided into many mansions. While there may be variations across houses, members of the different houses tend to share central beliefs. Patriarchal dogmas are encountered in all realms, and one exists with—or in spite of—them. One mansion that most clearly organizes around differentiation of roles is the Bobo Shanti,¹⁷ which is typecast into the House of Rastafari and where gender differentiations, especially as they relate to sexuality, are pronounced. In an ethnographic study documenting Priest Emmanuel's¹⁸ life history, C. A. Newland, a member of the Bobo Shanti, notes some of the peculiarities of his group. Newland's views are worth examining in order to appreciate communal definitions of gender relationships within what has been aptly described as the most ascetic¹⁹ aspect of Rastafari. Newland notes, "Perhaps one of the most controversial of all the principles of livity of the Bobo Shanti is the operationalization of the ancient Judaic principle governing the separation of man from woman [or, more accurately, woman from the rest of the congregation] at the time of their menstrual flow. The Bobo Shanti have evolved a twenty-one day observance of separation, a tripling of the custom noted in the Bible."²⁰ The biblical text in Leviticus says, "And if a woman have an issue and her issue in her flesh be blood she shall be put apart seven days: and whosoever toucheth her shall be unclean until the evening" (Leviticus 15:19 KJV). Bobo Shanti princesses and empresses in the age range between puberty and menopause are required to remain "in house" during the separation period, along with young children and other "polluted."

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According to Newland, some Bobo priests argue that the biblical injunction also applies to men. They quote Leviticus 15:2, which says, "When any man hath an issue out of his flesh, because of his issue he is unclean. . . . And when he that hath an issue is cleansed of his issue, then he shall number to himself seven days for his cleansing and wash his clothes, and bathe his flesh in running water and be clean" (KJV). Newland witnessed Bobo priests who claimed that they were ineligible to enter the tabernacle because they had bruised a finger from gathering coconuts. He reported that some priests even claimed they could not enter the tabernacle because they had had a wet dream.

Newland thinks that having to spend three weeks in almost complete social isolation is probably designed to discourage the woman from entering the camp or to prove that men are better than women in the worship of Jah. He conjectures, "Apart from being a period of spiritual purification, the twenty-one day principle, in theory, allows the woman time for her own productive activities and her intellectual and spiritual growth. This principle will never, I think, be favorably viewed from within the paradigms of modern gender role differentiation and modern hygiene."²¹

To suggest that because males are penalized for any emissions they might experience, the separation observances might just be coincidental, based on a biblical teaching, is tempting. However, the multiplication of the sistren's in-house period is excessive and smacks of patriarchal control. During this period, the woman simply receives food from her Kingman, passed through a small "aperture" from which she might glimpse him fleetingly. Sistren from this mansion have told me that to compound the situation, older sistren tend to be even more rigid than some males in enforcing the taboos, an example of internalization of or collusion with oppression. One sistren informant, M. Silver, remarked, "I'm remembering other instances where brethēn have defined us as inferior and where we've demonstrated how we have internalized this imposed inferiority by our silence."²² The question is raised of whether this attitude renders women incapable of economic independence.

Self-Definitions: History or Herstory?

An important outcome of the Rastafari woman's conversion is the cultural freedom that she experiences through a deeper understanding of Jah and of the tenets of Rastafari. The liberation from Babylon, expressed in the growth of locks, is one of the principal statements against the abnormal processing standards of Babylon that emerges from the self-realization that the Rastawoman experiences on "sighting up."²³ This is balanced by the Black-centered ideology of the livity. Her self-identification as a lioness is ideally complemented by union with a lion man to produce their young replications. Sistren have also been attracted to the livity of Rastafari for a number of other reasons. Foremost is their intimate association with a Rastafari man, which invariably leads to their "sighting Rastafari." Some of the sisters have taken their teachings so well that they end up performing their own spiritual leadership roles, both outside and within their rela-

tionships. This success extends to the material realm, in which the man may be unable to manage domestic affairs.

That women have been able to achieve through self-sacrifice and soul-searching is attested by David, an informant who describes himself as an "independent Rastafari" (not affiliated to any particular house). He reflected on woman's progress through Rastafari, within the context of the paradox presented by the tradition of females' roles being prescribed by the brethren:

Before the late seventies, to the eighties, I did not meet any Rasta woman who could carry my head any further. In the 1960s it was only the street women who would deal with Rasta. In the seventies a new order of consciousness emerged with the release of the seven spirits of Light, Darkness and Knowledge. In the seventies, there was an influx of middle class women into Rasta, ninety-five percent of whom were involved with a Rasta man. As Rastafari became more socially acceptable, most were attracted to the natural lifestyle.²⁴

Bro. Moses, a long-standing participant in the Rastafari livity (of the Nyabinghi House), was lofty in his explanation of the royal role of sistren who were nevertheless restricted by a gender division of responsibility, which he described in terms of the behavioral responses of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I: "His Majesty elevated sisters to the highest level, to the level where him queen was crowned the same day with him, but you would never find the empress chairing a function if His Majesty was there; once he is there, he is the automatic chairman."²⁵ Informant Esther's responses in the recent research exercise articulate an acceptance of a traditional definition of roles as recommended by Bro. Moses: "Jah is the head of everything; Jah is the head of man. And that can be man or woman as far as I'm concerned. I would love it if in my household the man has the chance to be the head, to carry the load, to take care of things, be a leader and all of that as a man. If he is playing that part I don't mind being the woman under him. But if a man is not playing these roles then you as a woman have to come up front and play the role, under Jah."

Esther's Kingman defaulted on male responsibilities as head of the household, particularly in terms of financial responsibilities, and this galvanized her into a dominant role that she would rather not assume. Her comfort with the possibility of being in a subordinate position in relation to her man, providing he could assume the role of head (which is interpreted chiefly in breadwinning terms), is nevertheless interesting. This speaks to the sentiment many woman express in Rastafari of not necessarily wanting to perform the role of "superwoman." Self-employment alternatives usually do not provide monetary returns viable for maintaining a household that includes spouse and children. The frustration that results is not only for the sistren, who fails to receive the support contained in her prenuptial expectations, but also for the whole family, on whom the classic "domino effect" impacts. The woman is depressed; the youth is materially and socially deprived; and the self-esteem of the male is guaranteed to be vulnerable under such circumstances, unless he manipulates the situation to his advantage.

Bro. Moses' definition of the woman's role demonstrates a decided divide in intellectual and spiritual capabilities that gives the man the advantage: "The dawta²⁶ have her

role within tradition. She as the quiet warrior; she must be that balance. Her mind has to be even more analytical than the king because him always going. But she can slow it down and analyze it and correct him, perk him up sometimes and show him seh maybe if we do that we can get a better result than if we do this. She must be that little brain box that is always working."

But what happens when the woman wants to be the one who is "going"? What is her source of succor, her "balm in Gilead"? The passionate answer to this question came from Sheba, a queen in her mid-fifties who does not, by any means, subscribe to the stereotypical definitions of passivity and fecundity that traditionally have been applied to the Rastafari woman: "I am a person. Not because I am a woman anyone going to think that they can beat me down. More time, lioness more terrible than lion in the jungle. Without a woman a brethren is nowhere. Is woman do the planning and fixing. She come up with ideas and him come up with strength and finance. Some brethren only want to reason up with them brethren and not them queen but dem soon find out dat dem don't reach nowhere." As to the source of her strength, Sheba is uncompromising in her reliance on faith in His Imperial Majesty for spiritual sustenance: "I highlight His Imperial Majesty, Haile Selassie I, and the good that Jah has done for I-an-I. I believe in my Father dat if I don't have any money and I go down on my knees, I get that. I speak with authority! I as his daughter have to stand and defend that I-an-I know HIM never dead."

As an early pioneer in Rastafari and the only woman among the brethren in her group, Sheba's role was to attend to domestic requirements of the brethren—such as washing and cooking—which, she admitted, was hard work. She hastened to add, however, "Being in Ethiopia made me feel so free, so renewed, that I didn't feel it. It was worth it." She would not play that role again "because it was a burden," she said, although she expressed willingness to "help out any needy one." Sheba's experience as "helpmeet" to the pioneering males is a story common to individual sistren, as well as sistren who, traditionally, formed the minority in Rastafari retreat communities in the hills or remote rural areas. Her domestic role was decided by all the twelve brethren who took advantage of her generosity. Her reflection that she would not acquiesce to such subtle coercion in the future represents an incipient consciousness growing among sistren, as male-defined roles for females are challenged on domestic and other fronts.

Sheba's strong spirit of independence and confessed relationship with His Imperial Majesty, Jah Rastafari, render redundant an intercessory role by brethren on her behalf. In other words, Queen Sheba's defiant responses suggest that a sistren does not strictly require a male's intervention for personal or spiritual validation. This position is a direct challenge to the notion of man as head of woman. But manifestations of patriarchy in Rastafari, or indeed, in the society as a whole, should not be analyzed monolithically; the possibility exists of males and females effecting bargains with a system that offers some succor. Women's strategies are always played out in the context of identifiable patriarchal bargains, which act as implicit scripts that define, limit, and inflect their market and domestic options.²⁷

Shifting Scales of Power

Is the Rastaman, like males in the wider society, being marginalized as women autonomously advance, as Errol Miller of Jamaica's Teachers College suggested?²⁸ One of my informants, Anijah, thinks so. She anticipates that the sistren's inevitable assumption of more egalitarian roles with brethren, whom the sistren may even supersede in power, will not be happily received by males: "When you start challenging the norm of the system within Rastafari culture you are in for a tremendous . . . spiritual and emotional battle. When you have a woman speaking out for change, people say, 'You a gwaan like you are himportant.'²⁹ But if you are persistent, you will gain respect; the opposition will give . . . and keep on giving." Anijah continued:

Rastaman would like Rastawoman to keep thinking along the lines that say Jah is the head and after Jah is man and woman supposed to know dem place! I don't think it works like that because if you are going to go according to what is written in the Bible, the rib God took to make woman came from man's side, so how can a man say that he is the head of woman? And you know when you have head, you must have tail, so who is then going to be the tail? Man and woman supposed to move together as one force.

Sister Anijah was resolute in her stance that woman in Rastafari are remorselessly set against manmade strictures, and if this were to mean challenging the existing power structures, they would, with the determination of undaunted faith in Jah Rastafari. Anijah reflected that an irresistible trend of change is taking place in Rastafari, much as has occurred in the wider (Babylonian) society: "A lot of women are becoming more aware and more feel that they should control their lives. [With] the changes [that are] happening with the few instead of the majority, [many] don't know if Rasta women are struggling, for the most part. Most seem quite happy to be led along and told what to do and what not to do. The females who say, 'No!' are seen as freaks."

The changes that Anijah recommends seem to be taking place in some areas, but brethren who participated in the evaluation process in 1988 spoke to me of initial resistance by elders to the advocacy of autonomy for sistren. However, this resistance has relaxed somewhat, as my own experience of addressing a Bingi in 1991³⁰ on the subject of reform of gender relations attests. Bro. Moses concurred that the changes are quite timely. But he adds, "A lot of dawtas have made a vital contribution to the development of the livity. I have no problem with a woman blocking her own sounds. We shouldn't want to stultify the talent of our very hard working sisters. But I have seen in a lot of cases sisters go out there and make a name for themselves and get so big that the man can't speak to her too tough. It's like she a compete with him. It's now a major problem out inna Rome, not even inna Rasta alone."

Due to the insecurities that are bound to plague brethren who recognize sistren's power, the obvious question is whether sistren's assertiveness is being interpreted as competing with the Rastaman. Another informant, Sister Meesha, argued that change is necessary, since "a lot of brethren are arrogant in the home, but when they are on the street, they go on humble just to preserve their image." Meesha's outspokenness leads

to an astute analysis of the fear that informs the restraint that is traditionally required of the Rastawoman: "I see too often that Rasta women, because they are not well educated and they have a lot of children, they don't have the power that they should have. To be honest, there are a lot of problems in Rasta, it's just that we don't talk about it. And it must stem with the elders, because when you come to Rasta young and fresh with the love of His Majesty burning in you, you come to learn, and that is what has been happening, but the elders don't always have the right answers."

Casting her vision toward the future and onto her own womanhood, Meesha does not see herself following in the "humble" footsteps of her female forerunners. She envisions a more autonomous role for herself than she has at present. A shift in the balance of power between the genders is being precipitated by sistren's challenging of role determinations that are male-constructed and that do not represent woman's current choices. This shift in gender power relations, which is not unique to Rastafari but represents a trend of the past two hundred years,³¹ has threatening survival implications, not only for brethren but for sistren as well. An angry male backlash against the female is not impossible under certain circumstances.

Survival Strategies in the Family

On the question of financial survival strategies, one research respondent, Candace, observed that "most Rastaman don't seem to have it [money]. So, if you are an independent woman, you will find that they lean on you financially. Maybe I attract it too because I make no demands in a relationship. In fact, I don't ask for any particular outcome." She confessed, "I just know that I want to experience a deeper side of myself, reflected through a male."

In response to this evidence of manipulation, Meesha, our young advocate for reforms within the livity, suggested that rather than depending on sistren's earning power or focusing on subsistence forms of survival, "brethren should reconsider" avoiding professions such as law and medicine because "the sistren can't really believe in the brethren's authority when he has no money and they have children to look after." Further, she felt that it was contradictory for the brethren to be denying sistren independence while relying on the woman's resources for survival. Meesha added, "I feel the brethren should not be content to have a craft shop or an ital shop. We can't ignore the value of taking advantage of opportunities which exist in the Babylon system."

Bro. Moses had no sympathy for the man who was unable to maintain his role as breadwinner; he was impatient with rationalizations about the impediments to economic independence. "If a man make the woman become the breadwinner, then he is not a king; he is not a man. That man is a weak man; he has conceded his manhood. The man should be creative about dealing with Babylon . . . lick down³² barriers, go 'round barriers," to find other ways to survive. These views show that, in Rastafari, a divide exists between the ideal of brethren performing in the role of breadwinner/head of the household and the reality that this obligation is the females' responsibility.

Sexuality in Rastafari

In Rastafari the arena of sexuality is fertile ground for the application of normative control of females. Sistren internalize traditional roles of woman as servant. But my own experience with the Bobo Shanti commune convinced me that I would not choose to be subjected to such severe sanctioning of my sexuality. As a Rastafari journalist-researcher, I had my encounter with the Bobo Shanti principles when I visited Bobo Camp in 1986, as part of an entourage of Prince Dawit, grandson of His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Haile Selassie I. Sister M. was there with me for a particular reasoning session but was denied entry into the camp on grounds of ritual impurity. The brethren used a calendar from which they determined the woman's monthly cycle. We were embarrassed and offended when they pried into our personal lives and asked us when was the last time that we had seen our menstrual period. They determined that Sister M. was unclean and not permitted to enter the camp, because of the positioning of her chart that day in relation to her menstrual cycle.³³

Another informant, Sister Nzinga, was adamant about taking steps to control her own procreation process, in spite of the passionate pleas of her Kingman. She said:

I don't want to have any more children. Although I don't have any for him, I already have three and he wants me to get pregnant. He objects very strongly to the fact that I have in a coil, but I have to protect myself because the youths always end up to be my responsibility. I really don't want to tie my tubes, but physically and financially I don't want to have any more. He is threatened by my birth control decision because it means no more production especially for his benefit. . . . I have to be strong about this. That's why I hesitate about legalizing the husbandship [marriage], although, at first, I was insisting on it as a requirement of commitment.

Control of sexuality has implications not only for one's material concerns but for one's spiritual endeavors as well. Avoidance of sexual intercourse has been promoted by brethren who saw woman as embodying many taboos and therefore polluting.³⁴ Interestingly, celibacy is proposed by Queen Sheba as a means of maintaining spiritual clear-sightedness and facilitating esoteric work. By contrast, for Sheba, sex is highly recommended if the two "ones" are attuned. Meesha's views on the control of her sexuality are typically uncompromising. She intones; "I know Rasta men love to go to bed and they don't love to use protection but the woman should think about the responsibility and whether she can manage it because she ends up doing a lot of the work. If a Rastaman is going to tell me that I should have so many children for him without me first agreeing, then he will just have to go."

Sister Abeba, an interviewee, drew a direct correlation between female sexual acquiescence and male application of behaviors of power and control. This moment, she felt, identified the climax of a relationship and was the potential portent of its ultimate demise. This self-styled Ethiopian princess said, "Fom mi see seh dem [males] naw deal wid nutten, mi tell dem pack up and gwaan.³⁵ Before you had sex with dem, dem sweet, sweet, sweet to yuh, but from the moment dem get dat, dem want to control you, tell you what to do, where to go, and hall of dat."

When someone at the 1988 workshop, mentioned above, suggested that tubal ligation could be explored as an alternative method of birth control,³⁶ many "ones" were shocked. On the one hand, the contemplation of birth control use is taboo in Rastafari, and on the other, the finality of the act of tubal ligation bordered on the sinful, almost like abortion. The admission from one sistren that she was wearing a coil might be as shocking ten years later. But there is nothing new under the sun. African women have always devised means of birth control. On the continent, the common knowledge was retained through many generations and in many forms, including the use of papaya seeds as one pro-active, preventative method in slave population control. The knowledge that African women have passed on through generations³⁷ is culturally reinforcing; in many cases, knowledge about female sexuality is passed on among females to the exclusion of males, and vice versa. The problem, as Meesha sees it, is that Rastaman love to go to bed (i.e., have sex) and invariably eschew the use or accept their partner's use of birth control methods. The underlying agenda "to have a youth" (a baby) is more rather than less common.

In the final analysis, there is a correspondence between the efforts that sistren are making to rebel against the restriction caused by her chains and the historical struggles that the ancestral Africans waged against all forms of oppression. But to rebel against oppressive structures and values of the Babylon system and, at the same time, to internalize norms within the livity that militate against one's achieving a pragmatic definition of autonomy is contradictory. Sistren's response to this area of conflict has direct implications for the future of Rastafari.

Domestic Violence

Physical abuse is another taboo issue in Rastafari; it is spoken of in hushed tones, if ever at all (as is the case in Christianity). I might even be considered irreverent for mentioning it in writing. I am convinced, however, that facing the fact of domestic violence through discourse is one step on the path to dealing with the symptoms and resolving the problem.

Without making a precise statistical claim, we can readily acknowledge that the incidence of domestic violence in Jamaican society is extraordinarily high and is on the rise. Currently, it accounts for almost half the murders committed in the country. Again, we observe an instance of collusion between the Babylon system and gender relations in Rastafari. As much as Rastafari would like to separate itself from the exigencies of the Babylon system, there is no escaping the fact that individuals are products of their history and socialization in Babylon. Someone who is preconditioned to perpetrate violence against another will do so, despite religious or other persuasions.

Informant Nefertiti admitted to having several times endured the painful experience of physical abuse at the hands of her Kingman, for whom she has mothered many children; she started conceiving from a very early age. She expressed some bitterness at the fact that she also does not get the financial support she needs for herself and the chil-

dren, who range in age from five to twenty-four. She referred to her experience of being beaten with thinly veiled venom. This creative artist claimed that the abusive treatment meted out to her at the hands of her Kingman distanced her from him to the extent that she had no choice but to engage in another relationship.

Nefertiti had strong views on the soldierlike role that sisters have to play as Rastafari when they are concerned about not abandoning the faith just because of personal relationship disappointments. She observed, moreover, that the abuse of women is not restricted to Rastafari. "It's a Jamaican Caribbean man thing," she thinks. King Shacker, a Ras from the eastern Caribbean, where males are reputedly more gentle than the aggressive Jamaicans (although this myth might defy empirical research), disgustingly denounced domestic violence in general and its manifestations in Rastafari in particular.

The attempt to deny the existence of domestic violence in order to protect the holy image of Rastafari is not likely to contribute meaningfully to the application of effective response management to ensure that sistren and brethren do not perpetuate this insidious form of self-annihilation, which smacks of psychic preprogramming.

Is Childrearing Only for the Female?

Because women bear children, society has automatically deemed them responsible for the rearing of the children as well. Men are perceived to be peripheral to this process; they help out when they can or if they feel like doing so. Not being able to abdicate their responsibilities without jeopardizing the health of the youth, the majority of working-class women³⁸ bear the lioness's share of this area of domestic work. As informant David noted, the role of socializing the youth is crucial in determining the direction in which the individual and, eventually, the social group advances: "The woman is traditionally to nurse and feed the youths and be humble because they see man as a brighter light than them. It is true though that sometimes the Rasses level off and the sistren rise in awareness and consciousness, and many [sistren] turn out to be more fervent and righteous."

Here David named some of the quintessential elements that determine woman's role in Rastafari and the basis on which a system of gender discrimination is perpetuated. Unless sistren are prepared to break the cycle of internalized oppression, patriarchal precedents will continue to inform social and power relations in Rastafari. Meesha's youthful perspective on the issue of childbearing and childrearing was as potent as it was precise. She felt that her upbringing and the teachings of Rastafari, which informed her home education, put her at a distinct advantage among her peers, whom she saw as easily influenced by material things. When asked about the coping strategies that she had evolved to address the needs of her children, especially when her income was sporadic, Nefertiti responded, "Mi naw tell you no lie, it hard, because you constantly have to be thinking how to manage to raise them. I did not choose to grow their locks as Rasta except the last one who is so strong! It makes me wish that I had been strong enough to grow them with that kind of confidence because they wouldn't have gone the

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In addition to child care, the job of caring for the elderly is also, invariably, seen as a female's task. Five years after repatriating to Ethiopia, Queen Sheba was required to return to Jamaica to care for her ailing mother. This responsibility came to dominate many years of her life; it was literally a reversal of roles and status.

Anijah, who is a mother "many times over," acknowledged that women have always been responsible for the discipline, training, and general rearing of the children. She is also keen in her observations of the options available to her progeny and their peers, as they contemplate the viability of replicating the Rastafari livity. She said they do not find poverty attractive and so are contemplating trodding the Babylon road to achieve professional qualifications.

As far as the process of childrearing is concerned, the bottom line seems to be that effective management of this area of social responsibility is predicated on the parents sharing the responsibility involved. This means that fathers should contribute their time and energies, as well as finances, to the upbringing of their offspring. A prerequisite for appropriate parenting has also been identified as financial solvency, which, according to Anijah, is being demanded by the youth. Coping with the dramatic changes in outlook being exhibited by their youth undoubtedly has presented a tremendous challenge to third-generation Rastafari. Both are forced to come to terms with the contradictions that characterize their lives as they grapple with Babylon system and a way of life that is still evolving, but not in their interest.

The best that Rastafari parents can hope to do is "roll with the punches," with strong doses of domestic and financial creativity to ensure the proper care and education of the youth so that they may be equipped to face the challenges presented to them as inheritors of the livity's struggle. The grim alternative to equal parental responsibility is that the youth might abandon the framework of the livity altogether. They may, like Nefer-titi's children, come to process their hair (the ultimate act of denial of one's natural, African self and beauty), thus denying everything that their parents stand for.

Classism and Sexuality in Rastafari

My informant Anijah hesitated to put a name to it but eventually admitted that social cleavages exist in Rastafari, as within any other institution of the Jamaican society. She recognized that attitudinal differences are evident among sistren—who should by no means be regarded as a homogeneous entity—with regard to their perceptions of material possessions or the lack thereof:

Some Rasta women will tell you dat mi naw deal wid Babylon situation none t'all! They look at non-Rasta women in a negative light, almost. Some think you have to be very aggressive. Some think you are not supposed to be neat say in your dressing. Those ones have the view that you are not supposed to look fashionable and, moreover, *modern*. I think, though, that you live in a society and if you can't beat 'em, you have to join 'em to some extent. Rasta is

... a serious thing, and in order to command respect, you have to move with some amount of dignity.

An immediate response to this experiential critique is that it is definitely class-based. However, to suggest that without finances, due to unemployment, one cannot afford the self-presentation that will command the respect of which Anijah speaks might be circular reasoning. Juxtaposed against this argument, following the lead of Burning Spear, a leading reggae singer, is the suggestion that ones "who cannot get work should make work, be creative." In other words, failing to represent oneself in appropriately royal attire on the grounds that spiritual pursuit demands forsaking material amenities for a "sackcloth-and-ashes" existence, is incompatible with the impetus to command respect through self-presentation.

A modern perspective on the Rasta livity tends to suggest a "dialectical" shift away from practices that would serve to stigmatize and ghettoize adherents as unworthy of social acceptance. While prejudices against Rastafari engaging the Babylon system are still strong, some "social closures" have become more and more invalid with the evolution in consciousness as well as the increasing acquisition of intellectual and material means by some Rastas. The class divide might very well be the intellectual distance that exists between the haves and the have-nots; educational achievement in the wider society, as in Rastafari, is the salient ingredient that offers the poor a chance to confront the hurdles of poverty with jumping power. Class operates as a divisive factor, both in the wider Jamaican society and within the livity of Rastafari. It functions as a divisive scale of judgment from which "bald-heads," as non-Rasta members of one's family are called, draw the class ascriptions they use to define their Rastafari relatives or associations within the livity.

Informant Nzinga's struggle to find the right mate is an explicit statement about the class distinctions that undoubtedly pervade the lives of ones in the livity of Rastafari. Her testimony is fascinating because of her expression of social expectations, on the one hand, and the dilemma that her choice of a Rastaman poses to her personally and, more painfully, to her family, on the other hand. Nzinga said she is contemplating getting married because she really wants "a man to provide me with security and stability." She is "not going to be the kind of wife he wants," because she needs to preserve the freedom that she now has. The man she knows is "sexually very good," but she worries "about the fact that he's not physically presentable in a way that people would respect him." Jamaican class consciousness echoes again in Nzinga's voice as she continues to reason about her Kingman:

What compounds the situation is that my family don't want me to be doing this—mainly because of his social, physical, and intellectual presentation. My mother would not like to identify him as her son-in-law. If him was a Rasta with high school standing, my relatives would not object so strongly. . . . He's not rich but I feel secure with him—perhaps because I know he won't go to anyone else. My king has respect for me, yes; but when I'm alone I can't help thinking about the importance of his poverty.

The importance of class, as defined by Anijah, is directly related to engagement with the Babylon system and the bargains that are effected along the lines of self-presentation,

in order to bear an impression of grace and dignity. This form of self-presentation communication, as the sistren suggested, acts as a means of exploding the stereotype that would cast Rastafari as social outcasts, dirty and unkempt.

As Anijah and Meesha suggest, easing into traditional professions is being suggested as a strategy that youth in Rastafari should employ to beat the Babylon system down. This privilege will be available only to a few. The socioeconomic status of the majority of Rastafari adherents combined with the scarring prejudices that still haunt members of the livity constitute a self-fulfilling prophecy that militates against the majority accessing quality primary school education. Still, it is inevitable that some will attain a profession and be competent to confront the Babylon system on familiar territory.

Numerous class issues are bound up in Nzinga's dilemma. She is caught at the crossroads between her expectations for a conjugal relationship and for herself, the one whom she has chosen to be. This confusion stems as much from her upbringing as from her vulnerability to her mother's disapproval of her choice of mate. Nzinga's search for a marriage that would offer her stability and security enacts a value that is presented by the churches and the state as a solution to the woman's as well as society's problems. It was, in fact, a solution recommended by the Moyne Commission³⁹ after the 1938 riots in Jamaica—that an increase in marriages act as a social healer. For African women in Jamaica, marriage has always been viewed as an institution that competes with their independence, and the Moyne Commission's marriage campaign was resisted accordingly. Many marriages are therefore consummated late in the relationship.

Nzinga's self-esteem can be considered low for her to require the status of being married to validate her existence as a woman, and also for her to find it so difficult to extricate herself from a situation that, by her own admission, she should not have chosen. One might also suggest that the intrusion of the mother's values regarding who constitutes a suitable son-in-law is permissible because Nzinga actually shares her mother's class position and perspectives. This response seems to speak to Nzinga's identity as a woman in general, rather than as a Rastafari woman as such. Girls in Jamaica are socialized early to become "marriage material." Home, school, and social values and institutions prepare the way for a girl to be found by a "nice guy." She has to go to great pains to attract his attention and keep him interested. Nzinga's desire for marriage is rooted in personal insecurity and the expectation that marriage will fill her void. The fly in the ointment, however, is that the rescuing knight—or "correction king"—is not made to order. The fact that he could be provider is an asset that is not offset by his ineligibility to be admitted into certain social circles.

One does not quite abandon one's socialization on sighting up; values imprinted from early in one's conscious and unconscious development remain with one for life. Adult Rastafari are, therefore, acting out roles taught from childhood. Everyone has an agenda. the Kingman is relying on his Queen's proven productive capacity to provide him with Rastafari youths in his own image. Nzinga's intelligence guarantees that the children will be exposed to learning that her Kingman was denied. Her presence in his life in a remote rural village greatly enhances his prestige. Nzinga likes his simple gal-

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In this discussion on the Rastafari woman as "rebel with a cause," I-an-I was obliged to employ the concept of gender as an appropriate tool of analysis. This has allowed us to consider some of the various views and roles that are established in the articulation of these elusive, evolutionary definitions. The complex power relations embodied in the enactment of transactions denoting and affecting sexuality are central to the discourse on sistren's transitional rites of passage toward autonomy. The trend toward the realization of female independence in Rastafari is by no means a generalized phenomenon; however, it speaks to the transience of the practice of brethren maintaining control over their queens through the reinforcement of a hierarchy of "man as the head." This headship is usually expressed in financial terms of reference, but the definition is null and void unless it is substantiated by the physical *fulfillment* of this role. In addition, headship suggests an application of authority that, by extension, requires wives to submit to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22). Paradoxically, the social organization of Jamaican households, including those of Rastafari, is heavily biased toward female headship, which militates against the enforcement of certain male ideological norms.

Financial responsibility, or irresponsibility, in the household has implications for the way children are brought up. Role models are mandatory for the development of positive self and other concepts. The nuclear organization that, in spite of the contradictory agenda, informed the definition of an alleged remedy for social ills is referred to as the ideal family order. However, as Bro. Moses, Nefertiti, and Anijah point out, this ideal does not always correlate with reality. The issue of financial capability has even more challenging implications for sexuality. One may have as many children as one can afford. The choice is the sistren's. Given that females bear the brunt of childrearing responsibilities, theirs should be the ultimate decision regarding procreation.

Domestic violence has left scars on Rastafari just as it has left a trail of pain through the wider society. Sistren will have to fight this form of oppression and abuse while they chant down Babylon and procure their full autonomy.

The issue of class differentiation is also important to the study of woman's roles in Rastafari. The voices of the youth have suggested that there be a concerted attempt to beat Babylon at its own game. Accessing the formal professions could be employed as a strategy to elevate Rastafari to a higher realm of respect than it has traditionally occupied. This tactic could be implemented as a form of resistance against the widespread ghettoization of the livity, due to the underdeveloped lifestyle that characterizes those who find themselves among the poor and the powerless.⁴⁰ Class has also been observed acting as a divisive impediment to the pursuance of gender relationships. The social values that children internalize inform their attitudes and behaviors as adults.

What is clear is that the contradictions of race, class, and gender distinctions operate as beguilingly in Rastafari as they do in the wider society. Emancipation from this "mental slavery"⁴¹ that serves to cement the codes of "divide and rule" among Rastafari is a foolproof method of maintaining the positive outlook of Rastafari.

Some Rastawoman are determined to point the way to full consciousness, which will

eventually lead to the oppressed throwing off the remaining shackles. As a rebel with a cause, these Rastawoman defend woman's autonomy as a vital ingredient for the maintenance of one's family and integrity. Certainly, the debate is ongoing; these reasonings have merely touched the tip of the iceberg of Rastawoman as rebel with a cause. While the sistren are oppressed in society, we must fight to beat down Babylon. As Judy Mowatt sings so sweetly, "I-AN-I struggle through the pressure, dance through the fire but we never get weary yet."⁴² The rebel sistren will overcome Babylon and patriarchy with faith in Jah.

Notes

1. See Maureen Rowe, "The Woman in Rastafari," in Rex Nettleford, ed., *Caribbean Quarterly Monograph: Rastafari* (Kingston: Caribbean Quarterly, University of the West Indies, 1985), 13-21; N. Samuel Murrell, "Woman as Source of Evil and Contaminant in Rastafarianism: Championing Hebrew Patriarchy and Oppression with Lev 12," *Proceedings of the Eastern Great Lakes and Midwestern Bible Society* (1994): 191-209.
2. Carole D. Yawney, "To Grow a Daughter," in A. Miles and G. Finn, eds., *Feminism in Canada* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1983).
3. An appellation for Rastafari females. *Daughters* is used interchangeably with *dawtas*, while *woman* often replaces the plural *women*.
4. Rowe, "The Woman in Rastafari," 19.
5. A concept employed by Rastafari to denote any form of discourse. Reasonings usually meander from subject to subject, at great length and depth.
6. Rastas conclude that if you are standing and grasping a truth, you should be over and not under a subject matter; hence the term *overstanding*.
7. The view of Rastawoman as rebel is a juxtaposition of her relationship with Babylon alongside her role in the family.
8. L. Mathurin, *The Rebel Woman in the British West Indies during Slavery* (Kingston: Afro-Caribbean Institute of Jamaica, 1975).
9. The Babylon system refers to the social-political culture of exploitation and oppression in the West, and in Jamaica in particular.
10. A Bingi is a celebration of noteworthy dates and events, observed by participants of the Nyabinghi Order.
11. See Imani Tafari-Ama, "An Historical Analysis of Grassroots Resistance in Jamaica: A Case Study of Participatory Research on Gender Relations in Rastafari" (M.A. thesis, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, 1989).
12. The designation for women, to complement *brethren*.
13. Rowe, "The Woman in Rastafari," 19.
14. Jah is the head of man, and man is the head of woman; see Rowe, "The Woman in Rastafari," 15-19.
15. "Statistical Institute of Jamaica Figures," *Jamaican Herald*, June 21, 1995, 10-11.
16. The Rastafari woman eschews the use of the plural in this instance; "woman" as a collective is comparable to the concept of the indivisible "I-an-I" instead of the polar renditions of "you and me."

17. Officially referred to, by Bobo Rases, as the Ethiopia Africa Black International Congress.
18. The spiritual leader Priest Emmanuel was defined as the reincarnation of Melchizedek, operating in tandem with the king (Haile Selassie I) and the prophet (Marcus Mosiah Garvey).
19. Women are deemed to pollute unless they are "free," that is, potentially unproductive. Females have begun to question the restrictions that observances of the menstrual-time separation place on their movements.
20. C. A. Newland, "The Life and Work of King Emanuel Charles Edwards" (unpublished manuscript, 1994; in Newland's files), 26.
21. C. Arthur Newland, interview with Imani Tafari-Ama, Kingston, 1994.
22. Quotations from various informants come from interviews by the author, done over a period ranging from 1980 to 1990, and are not cited in the notes. Identities have been changed to protect respondents' privacy.
23. That is, acquiring Rastafari consciousness in the commune.
24. Tafari-Ama, "Grassroots Resistance in Jamaica," 89.
25. Rastafari take speeches, utterances, and the life history of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I as gospel.
26. The Jamaican patois rendition of a shortened form of "daughter of Zion."
27. See D. Kyandoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," *Gender and Society*, ed. Jayawardena (September 1988): 10; quoted in Tafari-Ama, "Grassroots Resistance in Jamaica," 46.
28. Errol Miller, *Men at Risk* (Kingston: Jamaica Publishing House, 1991).
29. Patois meaning "You are pretending to be more impressive than you really are."
30. At the Pitfour Center in Montego Bay, Jamaica, 1991.
31. Miller, *Men at Risk*, 241.
32. Patois meaning "knock down," as in "chant down Babylon."
33. Newland, interview with Tafari-Ama.
34. The phenomenon of the menstrual cycle is a principal taboo issue, in accordance with Judaic principles.
35. Patois meaning "From the time I see that they are not dealing with anything, I tell them to pack up and go."
36. Use of condoms was condoned by some and rejected by others. Some brethren thought their sperm should not be thrown away but should be emitted into the female, the natural receptacle.
37. Examples of such knowledge in African tradition include quilt making, storytelling, hair braiding, food preparation, language, and forms of dress.
38. The designation "working-class" represents the social point of departure of the majority of Rastafari sistren.
39. The colonists instituted the West India Royal Commission, chaired by Lord Moyne, to investigate social and economic conditions in Jamaica. It produced the Moyne Commission Report in 1945. See J. French, "Colonial Policy toward Women after the 1938 Uprising: The Case of Jamaica" (unpublished conference paper, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, 1985).
40. C. Y. Thomas, *The Poor and the Powerless: Economic Policy and Change in the Caribbean* (London: Latin America Bureau, Research and Action, 1988).
41. Bob Marley and the Wailers, "Redemption Song," on *Uprising*, Island Records 422-846211-4, 1980.
42. Judy Mowatt, "Never Get Weary," on *Look at Love*, Shanachie Records 43087, 1991.

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