O. Lake
The many voices of Rastafarian women: sexual subordination in the midst of liberation
Author calls it ironic that although Rasta men emphasize freedom, their relationship to Rasta women is characterized by a posture and a rhetoric of dominance. She analyses the religious thought and institutions that reflect differential access to material and cultural resources among Rastafarians. Based on the theory that male physical power and the cultural institutions created by men set the stage for male domination over women.

This PDF-file was downloaded from http://www.kitlv-journals.nl
Jamaican Rastafarians emerged in response to the exploitation and oppression of people of African descent in the New World. Ironically, although Rasta men have consistently demanded freedom from neo-colonialist forces, their relationship to Rastafarian women is characterized by a posture and a rhetoric of dominance. This discussion of Rastafarian male/female relations is significant in so far as it contributes to the larger “biology as destiny” discourse (Rosaldo & Lamphere 1974; Reiter 1975; Etienne & Leacock 1980; Moore 1988). While some scholars claim that male domination in indigenous and diaspora African societies results from European influence (Steady 1981:7-44; Hansen 1992), others (Ortner 1974; Rubin 1975; Brittan 1989) claim that male physical power and the cultural institutions created by men, set the stage for male domination over women in all societies. This article elaborates on the latter theory through an analysis of religious thought and institutions that reflect differential access to material and cultural resources among Jamaican Rastafarians.

The ways in which Rastafarian women are dominated in various societal spheres and how this domination is reified by religious ideology will receive major emphasis. This discussion of Rasta women is juxtaposed against the position of Jamaican (and Caribbean) women as a whole who are obliged to contend with male privilege (Douglass 1992). Men exercise their privileged status as heads of households, religious and ceremonial leaders, and controllers of political and economic institutions (Harrison 1988). These claims are based on my observations of male/female relations and on extensive interviews gathered from a wide range of Rasta informants.¹

This discussion is significant because it includes diaspora-African women

New West Indian Guide/Nieuwe West-Indische Gids vol. 68 no. 3 & 4 (1994): 235-257
in the nature/nurture debate and also recognizes their struggles as a missing, but important component of the general anthropological literature. While there is a plethora of literature (Robertson 1976; Obbo 1980; Shostak 1981; Hansen 1992) regarding the relative position of indigenous African women, similar discussions regarding diaspora Africans are all but absent. The literature on Rastafarian women has also been conspicuously absent until very recently (Kitzinger 1969; Llaloo 1981; Rowe 1985). The discourse on Rastafarian women relative to Rasta men is broadened by clarifying the specific religious beliefs and cultural practices which "legitimate" women's subordination.

HISTORICAL-RELIGIOUS ROOTS OF RASTA

Before discussing women’s positions within and attitudes about Rastafar1, it is necessary to briefly outline the genesis and progress of Jamaican Rastafarians. Although many people feel that they “know” who the Rastas are, this “knowledge” is often limited to cultural expressions manifested by dreadlocks, reggae music, and Bob Marley. These are only some of the more popular cultural expressions or symbols of this group and do not reflect the full range of historical and socio-political circumstances that gave rise to Rastafar1.

The literature (Barrett 1968, 1977; Owens 1976) indicates that the birth of Rastafar1 occurred in 1930. While this date marks the crystallization of a number of social and political-economic dimensions, including the coronation of Haile Selassie who Rastas consider a God, one might more accurately say that Rasta originated with the transport of African slaves to Jamaica beginning in the sixteenth century. The consistent resistance by these Africans throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Clarke & Garvey 1974; Barrett 1977; Campbell 1990) contributed to the emancipation of slaves in 1834 which brought about de jure freedom while the power relations between people of African and European descent remained in place (Beckford & Witter 1980). Post-emancipation Africans in Jamaica had few skills that would allow them any degree of autonomy and were, therefore, forced to sell their labor as their only means of survival. The continued exploitation of the laboring class by the plantocracy included low wages, poor working conditions, and landlessness. These social conditions were instrumental in instigating the 1938 rebellion which prompted legislation to ameliorate these conditions. This legislation, however, did not increase the working class’ access to the means of production.

Foremost among early twentieth-century leaders who fought for fair
labor practices in Jamaica was Marcus Garvey (1887-1940). His advocacy of better working conditions resulted in his being blackballed by Jamaican businesses. This compelled Garvey to travel to other colonies and countries in the Caribbean and Latin America where he encountered similar conditions of exploitation (Martin 1983). Garvey’s awareness of the international nature of the oppression of diaspora Africans encouraged him to form the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) which launched his career as a pan-African proponent (Lewis 1988; Campbell 1990). The main thrust of Garvey’s message was on the redemption of diaspora Africans in Africa. He preached that there were no opportunities for people of African descent in the diaspora and that chances for their cultural and political-economic advancement could only be realized in Africa (Clarke & Garvey 1974:liii-liv, 379; Martin 1976:23-24).

Even though this back-to-Africa plan failed, the literature credits Garvey with organizing the largest movement among people of African descent in the twentieth century which instilled in his followers a renewed sense of pride in their African roots. Although Garvey was not a Rastafarian, one of his most important contributions to the Rastafarian movement was his notion of a “Black God.” This, as well as the continuity of African religious practices in Jamaica at large, are major factors in the rise of Rastafarl. Garvey (1967:34) strongly advocated that diaspora Africans worshipped a god in their own image by proposing that “(w)e Negroes believe in the God of Ethiopia, the everlasting God, God the Father, God the Son and the Holy Ghost, the One God of all ages. That is the God in whom we believe, but we shall worship Him through the spectacles of Ethiopia.” That the crowned Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, (whose former name was Ras Tafari) claimed to be the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords lent further credence to the idea of a black God in the minds of these Jamaicans. These set of events, as well as Garvey’s political ideology, laid the groundwork for a Rastafarian ideology which incorporated his ideas regarding secular and religious Ethiopianism (Clarke & Garvey 1974:381-82). From a cultural perspective the emergence of Rastafarl and the belief in the divinity of Haile Selassie was significant since people of African descent could now think of themselves as “being one with, and of sharing in an attribute of God” (Chevannes 1990:135) thereby elevating the status of people of African descent.

There are a number of Jamaican personalities who are credited with the formulation of Rastafarl. The history of its leaders, most notably Leonard Howell, Robert Hinds, Joseph Hibbert, and Archibald Dunkley can be studied in a number of works (Barrett 1977:80-89; Williams 1981:30-35; Campbell 1990:69-72, 93-95). One aspect of Rastafarian leadership that is
important to note for our purposes is that there were no women among them. This, it should be emphasized, is typical of Jamaican political leadership, and to a large extent, of Caribbean governments in general. Not only have women been relegated to second-class status in the political realm (Harrison 1988:115-16), but this subordinate position has been the norm in other spheres of Jamaican life as well (Senior 1991; Spaulding 1993).

Early Rastafarians were not well accepted by the general Jamaican populace nor by the Jamaican authorities (Yawney 1984). The generalized antipathy toward Rastafarians was precipitated by a Rasta ideology which reiterated Garvey’s back-to-Africa promulgations. The wearing of dreadlocks, the consumption of ganja (marijuana), and their belief in its divine properties also served to alienate them from the rest of Jamaican society (Campbell 1990:95-120). Rastas have rejected (at least theoretically) the social and political-economic structure of capitalist Jamaican society (which they call Babylon), a stance that further antagonized middle-class Jamai-
cans and those aspiring to this position.

In the 1950s and 1960s isolated violent confrontations between sectors of Rastafarians and the police were generalized to give a negative image to Rastas as a whole. Beginning in the late 1960s, this image began to change as a result of in-depth research on Rastas by scholars, from the University of the West Indies in particular (Nettleford 1972:64). Ensuing reports emphasized Rastas’ concern for “peace and love.” Moreover, the fact that the Jamaican government “was itself displaying much interest in Africa” added legitimacy to Rasta claims regarding the centrality of Ethiopianism (Nettleford 1972:64). At the same time, “some members of prominent families deviated from traditional patterns by exploring new ideas ... some smoked ganja and were open to Rastafarians, reggae, and African culture and style” (Douglass 1992:159). This remains the case today as is witnessed by the incorporation of Rasta symbolism into every-day Jamaican life (Yawney 1984:95; Waters 1985:106; Austin-Broos 1987:6).

Presently, Rastas live in all of the parishes (districts) in Jamaica, but are most heavily concentrated in the Corporate area (Kingston and St. Andrew) and St. Catherine. According to the most recent figures, there are 2,588 Rasta women and 11,661 men out of a total Jamaican population of 2.5 million (Statistical Institute of Jamaica 1982). Austin-Broos (1987:21) explains the disparities in membership between men and women by asserting that the Rastafarian religion “has not been attractive to working-class women with religious sensibility simply because its ethic, symbolism and social context, more often address the concerns of men.”

Even though Rastas distinguish themselves in religious interpretation, language, and food ways (Lake 1985) they resonate with other Jamaicans in
a number of ways. One of the most palpable areas of cultural articulation is their devotion to Christianity. While many Rastas claim that they are not a religious group, they use the Judeo-Christian Bible in religious ceremonies and as the basis for their ideology. They contend that both the New and Old Testaments are distorted versions of sacred texts written in Amharic (the official language of Ethiopia). Thus, they read selectively from the Bible and apply their own interpretations.

Although Rastafarian depart in some ways from more “traditional” revivalist religions in Jamaica, “crucial aspects of the Revival world outlook are very much alive in Rastafarian” including ritual structure, songs, and spirit possession (Chevannes 1990:139). Other carry overs from Revivalist, or African centered religions, include a new mode of speech and the beliefs in “the nearness of God and oneness of being between Him and man” and “women as a source of evil” (Chevannes 1990:142). This latter religious tenet gives sustenance to the subordinated roles and statuses of Rasta women and is in keeping with the patriarchal nature of Christian dogma which legitimates the secondary position of women in general (Ruether 1974; Dunfee 1989).

WOMEN IN JAMAICAN SOCIETY

The subordination of women in Jamaican society can be witnessed at every level. Men hold the most powerful political positions and control the more lucrative economic transactions. This political-economic stratification has its counterparts in everyday male/female relations. As Douglass (1992) asserts, the “marked” status of the female cuts across class boundaries where women defer to men in spite of the level of economic independence of the former.

Even though African Jamaican women, like African-diaspora women everywhere, had to work as hard as their male counterparts during slavery and post-slavery periods (Sutton & Makiesky-Barrow 1981; Mintz 1981) this was not equivalent to their being on equal footing with men. The unevenness of these relations should not be surprising since women in traditional African societies were also subject to the rules and mores created and enforced by African men (Obbo 1980). The post-slavery period in Jamaica did not bring much relief to women who came to epitomize the feminization of poverty based on two important factors: first, traditionally women have been circumscribed to the lower-paying wage labor or small scale market enterprises and second, women by and large have born the brunt of child care single-handedly which has had the effect of further eroding their already fragile economic position (Standing 1981; Senior 1991:187-94).
These disadvantageous realities in the economic sphere are given sustenance by a cultural ideology that places more restrictions on women than on men in daily life. It is important to note that middle-class and elite women are also dependent on their male partners. Economically independent women of any class also feel compelled by social norms to defer to the needs of and to accept the behaviors of Jamaican men (Douglass 1992:250). What is important to understand relative to the connection between the secular and religious spheres, is that religious ideology and everyday practices are not separate from one another, but are mutually reinforcing in legitimating sexual hegemony. For example, the fact that men (both Rasta and non-Rasta) are considered to be heads of households is legitimated by Biblical passages which deem men to be superior to women (see Ephesians 5:22-24).

Rastafarian women have been victims of the same constraints as Jamaican women at large (Rowe 1985:16). Strict Biblical interpretations and other cultural beliefs that constitute Rastafarian ideology work to further institutionalize their subordinate status. These constraints include the absence of women in leadership positions, proscriptions on ways of dressing, and notions of female pollution.

VOICES OF WOMEN RASTAFARI

I have done research among Rastafarians at different intervals since 1984 (Lake 1985). On each of these occasions I conducted interviews with Rastafarian women regarding infant feeding practices, the use of herbal medicines, and their views regarding the position of Rastafarian women within the movement. During my most recent visit in 1993, I talked with approximately thirty women and asked them various questions regarding this latter topic. These informants were between twenty-five and forty years old and all but two had one or more children. Most of them lived in the Kingston area although several women lived in the parishes of St. James, Clarendon, Westmoreland, and St. Thomas. The majority of these informants have a high school education and five hold a college degree.

A discourse on Rastafarian women is in general difficult to launch because RastafarI do not constitute a monolithic group. The most prominent sectors of this movement include the Twelve Tribes, the Nyabingi, and the Buba Shanti. Not all Rastas are affiliated with a particular group. The Buba Shanti, who live as a community in an area in St. Thomas known as Bull Bay, are the most orthodox of all Rasta groups. One of the main aspects that distinguishes them from the others is their belief that their leader, Prince Emmanuel, is divine and that Haile Selassie is a leader of the same
magnitude as Marcus Garvey. Prince Emmanuel has claimed to be “descended bodily from heaven to the parish of St. Elizabeth in 1915 and thus, like the biblical Melchizedek, ... had no mortal parents” (White 1983:31). The Nyabingi also consider Haile Selassie as a king, but not as Christ. Buba Shanti orthodoxy is reflected in a more strict dress code for women which includes full-length skirts and the requirement that their heads be covered in public. While these prescriptions are generally applied to all Rasta women, those who are not Buba Shanti do not always adhere to them. In economic terms, the Buba Shanti are more self-sufficient, although not better off, than the other groups since they make and sell brooms and other crafts in order to maintain their community.

Although the majority of Rastafarians fall within the lower economic classes, many middle and upper-class Jamaicans became Rastas in the late 1960s. Most of this constituency are members of the Twelve Tribes which is generally thought to be more conservative and more organized than other Rasta groups. Formerly this group held regular meetings at its headquarters near the estate of Bob Marley on New Hope Road. Recently this headquarters was abandoned and, while the Twelve Tribes members still identify themselves as such, these meetings have ceased.

Other variations among these groups are reflected in differences of opinion regarding the degree of supremacy of Haile Selassie, varying ideas on race relations, and the relative position of women in Jamaican society and within Rastafarl. Similarities that pervade all groups are the belief in the divinity or elevated status of Haile Selassie,\(^\text{11}\) that redemption lies in repatriation to Africa, and that ganja (marijuana) is a holy weed.\(^\text{12}\) These commonalities notwithstanding, Rastas are acephalous and lack the kind of unity that could serve as a basis for political activism (Chevannes 1990:143). All of these components of Rastafarl have been discussed elsewhere (Owens 1976; Barrett 1977); however, the position of Rastafarl women has been given very scant attention.

Christianity has long been part of religious philosophy held by Afro-Jamaicans. Rastafarian women are particularly affected by its Biblical teachings given the strict interpretation Rastafarians lend to this text. Rowe (1985:13-14), a Rastafarian scholar, concedes that because

\[\text{Rastafarl is based on the Bible. It, therefore, follows that its structure and philosophy would pattern that which unfolds in the Bible ... To understand Rastafarl attitudes to females it is necessary to understand the roles of females in the Bible.}\]

The relative position of women and men is explicit in many sections of this sacred text. In Biblical fashion, Rastafarians assume that “(m)ales are the physical and spiritual head of the female as well as the family” (Rowe
That Rastas strictly interpret many parts of the Bible is most clearly demonstrated in their adherence to the following passage.

Let the wives be subject to their husbands as to the Lord: because a husband is head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the church, being himself savior of the body. But just as the Church is subject to Christ, so also let wives be to their husbands in all things (Ephesians 5:22-24).

The Buba Shanti clearly embody this biblical passage and invigorate Rubin's (1975:164ff.) findings that "women do not talk to god." During my research in 1992 I asked several Buba Shanti women about their roles in the church. It is interesting to note that even though I asked to speak to women in the group, a man came in to join us and did most of the talking. (This was not the only time that this occurred throughout my fieldwork.) On this occasion, his response to my question regarding women leaders in the church was as follows,

A woman can't speak to the congregation. You can't have women preachers going up on a pulpit. Her nakedness could be displayed. The man creates everything so he must be the head. That's why the world is like it is because women are doing too many things that she shouldn't be doing. It is an abomination for a woman to do things pertaining to the man and vice versa.

This view closely mirrors Biblical passages which sacralize the subordination of women. The most direct passage was given by Paul in 1 Corinthians XIV:34-35:

Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak: but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home, for it is shameful for women to speak in church.

An informant who owned and operated a small business, and who is raising her children on her own, asserted that

a woman must know when to speak in the congregation, but that don't say she don't know truth and right. But for me, this [not being able to speak until allowed by men] won't work. For other dawtas [daughters] like me, we are more independent. We are economically independent.

Another informant told me that

You have the order of the Nyabingi where at one stage women were not really permitted to be vocal in the sense of making statements and contributing to reasoning conversations in the house. This has now changed where women are now seen and heard.
Rastafari, like most cultures, is mutable, but changes are coming slowly, as they are in Jamaica as a whole, in part because male domination has been internalized by Rasta women. Witness the following interview excerpt:

So man is the head of women. The Bible clearly says that the man must respect the woman. But you must have that head in the family. I know some feminists have a problem with that, but I don’t see a problem with it. I don’t remember exactly where, but somewhere in Corinthians it says that man is the head of woman and god is the head of man.

Another Rasta woman, who was not a member of any of the three Rasta groups mentioned above, offered a different perspective. While she stated that she “honor(s) and respect(s) a man,” she added that:

I think the statement that a man should be the head of the household is a wrong statement. The reason is that the majority, in the whole earth set up, it is the woman who passes on education, philosophy, and all information to the youths. So I see the woman as one of the main builders of the nation. So I think in black and white issues, we got some things wrong, and I think we got some things wrong in gender issues also. But it’s a thing that people don’t want to look into.

Another Rasta informant asserted that

[d]Jawtas who come through their king man. They shave their heads when their king man leaves them. Some of them fade out of the Rasta movement. But those who come through Jah (god) themselves, they are strong. We are equals with men.

Clearly, there are different views and experiences among Rasta women relative to male supremacy, although the majority with whom I spoke agreed that the man is the spiritual leader among Rastafarians and within the household. Women who were part of common living arrangements (two or more families living in the same household or small communities) tended to adhere to this way of thinking more than others, although women cannot be strictly categorized in this way.

Even though part of Rastafarian ideology posits that women cannot enter Rastafarian except through a man, Rastafarian women can, and do, join all of the groups at will. A Rastafarian woman in Kingston who owns a public relations business put it this way:

I came into Rasta through self-exploration. If it didn’t come out of that, I’d be accepting dogma. And those elders who are really true Rasta elders would have less respect for somebody who is going to put themselves a certain way to gain acceptance than for somebody who is naturally following where their heart is leading.
The popular Rastafarian belief that women are not privy to man’s wisdom is one reason offered by many Rasta men for restrictions placed on women. Another has to do with the alleged connection between women and pollution. Historically many other religions, including Christianity, consider women polluted during the time of their menstruation (Ruether 1974:273-74). More than one scholar (Anderson & Langley 1988; Meigs 1991:45-58) has attributed men’s irrational construal of a natural, biological process as unclean to be a manifestation of their fear or jealousy of women’s capabilities. Muslim and Christian religions in contemporary societies circumscribe women’s physical mobility within places of worship as well as their mobility within leadership roles (Cornell 1992; Steinfels 1992). Buba Shanti are not exceptional in this regard.

Buba Shanti women are excluded within a restricted area during their menstruation (although I was told by these women that this area is not small or claustrophobic) and are not permitted to interact with men or “non-polluted” (“free”) women during this period. Almost all other Rasta women I spoke with on this topic indicated that they accepted the principle of pollution and enjoyed the reprieve from household duties that this period of seclusion provided.

A Rastafarian lawyer whom I reasoned14 with, although she, too, curtailed certain activities around menstruation, presented another perspective relative to these restrictions:

What you find is that in the various mansions [Rasta groups], they have different ways of expressing Rastafarl. For example, the Buba Shanti house has strict menstrual laws where the male and female are not allowed to communicate for three weeks of the menstrual cycle. However, what you will find is that when the Buba Shanti male comes out of the commune, he goes to the market, he comes to see his lawyer. She may be within the twenty-one days [pre- or post- menstrual]. She may be actually menstruating and so on. But then this is the order that they set upon the camp, which is a camp livity [way of life].

Other women who were not part of the Buba Shanti group adhered to the principal of uncleanness during menstruation as was expressed by the following informant.

[Another] Rasta principle is when you’re getting your period. You mustn’t do anything for the king man. Not [just] your own [king man], you know, but all the bredren for seven days because you’re unclean. It is the period of purification.
The significance of this discussion is that the alleged polluted status of women has not only silenced them, but has done so by structurally precluding their eligibility for leadership (even co-leadership) status in the domestic and public arenas.

Although Rastafarian espousals for "liberation" is ostensibly a liberation for all people, de facto practices suggest that this quest for liberation is a qualified one that assumes certain mobilities for men and Biblically sanctioned proscriptions for women.

**Language**

Language is another medium where male and female statuses are clearly delineated. Among the Buba, little boys are called "princes." Men are called "priests" or "prophets." Little girls are referred to as "princesses," and at twenty-one they become "empresses." Among Rastas in general, men are called "king" or "kingman" and women are called "queen." Many Rasta women, however, found it interesting that even though the term "queen" is sometimes used, women are generally referred to as "daughters" by both men and women.

Music is also used to reify the perceptions and roles of women. One woman mentioned the fact that even in the Rastafarian anthem "there is not that much attention given to Queen Omega." The language used in reggae music also acts to symbolically reproduce the subordinate position of Jamaican women (Silvera 1980; Campbell 1990:199). Even though reggae is touted as a revolutionary expression of Rastafari (Campbell 1990:124-52), it is conservative on the issues of women's freedom and equality. In a study done by Anderson and Langley (1988:4), it was shown that reggae lyrics perpetuate the notion of women’s primary roles as housewives and sex objects. "Women who do not elect or reject the role of housewomen are portrayed as lacking in substance, as shallow, [or] as superficial."

The Buba Shanti reject reggae altogether as a symbol of Rastafari. A number of other Rasta women, as the following excerpt indicates, are disenchanted with the messages portrayed in some reggae music. This passage is particularly interesting because it includes an excerpt from a Rastafarian woman (Rf) and her partner (Rm) who voiced different views on the direction of reggae music. Referring to the European and European American promotion of reggae music, Rf offered the following.

Rf: I think the Europeans just want to see the black race laughed at according to the things that they promote, things that are not edifying to our young. singing so many
derogatory things about women. When you start to underrate the woman of this world, I think you are doomed.

Rm: I think it's just one aspect of reggae music.

Rf: Yes, but they are playing upon it.

Rm: I think you should tell her [the interviewer] that we still have conscious reggae music whose message hasn't changed from Bob Marley.

Rf: Yah, man, you have that, but what they are promoting now, the most popular person now in reggae, Shaba Ranks, he's not saying much. He's even leading the youths astray more than anything else. And you have great reggae artists who do not gain that popularity because of social status here.

To me I don't see many Rasta women in music and I don't know why because you have talented Rasta women. I've traveled quite a bit going to different shows. And of all the shows I've been on, maybe I might be the only Rasta woman there, sometimes I'm the only woman. I think that's why the music is getting out of hand because we don't have a lot of women even coming out and saying that we don't appreciate what they're saying about us.

The derogatory or subordinate roles assigned to women in Jamaican music is not new (Hebdige 1987:66). Calypso and other Caribbean music, which preceded reggae, also contained themes that depicted women primarily as objects for man's sexual pleasure (Elder 1968:33; Douglass 1988; Senior 1991:167-68). The use of musical lyrics to undermine the social and personal integrity of women is not limited to Jamaican music, but is witnessed in a number of musical forms.

Derogation of women in Jamaican music has been viewed as a manifestation of "(m)ale resentment against female competence and assertiveness which often encourage men to control or dominate women lest the latter's alleged cleverness, deviousness, and promiscuity endanger men's standing in the home and community" (Harrison 1988:114). Popular expressions that act to perpetuate women's subordinate status are also found in other popular representations, for example, mass media advertisements (Henry & Wilson 1975:193-94; Antrobus & Gordon 1984:120; Harrison 1988:114) that clearly legitimate women's economic and sexual subordination.

Women's Dress and Hair

The vast majority of Rastafarians with whom I spoke contended that Rastafarism is not a religion. This view notwithstanding, Rastas use the Christian Bible as their sacred text; they are very familiar with its contents, and inter-
pret many of its passages in the strictest terms. Rasta proscriptions pertaining to women’s dress is but one example that embodies the following Biblical passage.

The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth to a man, neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the LORD thy God” (Deuteronomy 22:5, emphasis in original).

A Nyabingi woman spoke positively of Rasta women’s distinctive dress:

When you see a Rasta dawta come, you know she’s a Rasta because of the way she adorns herself. We no wear pants. we no wear shorts, you know. In the good old ancient way, that’s the way we dress.

While Buba Shanti men sometimes dress in turbans and long robes, most Rasta men cannot be distinguished from other Jamaican men by their dress. Rasta women, on the other hand, do not wear pants and must wear calf or ankle length dresses and head coverings. Other Rasta women followed codes of dress that differentiated them from other Jamaican women and stated that they were symbolic of what it meant to be a Rasta woman.

Rasta women have certain dignity, the way they dress and the way they speak and the way they walk in such a dignified way. You’d never see a Rasta woman dye her hair six different colors and wearing some little thing. It’s a total consciousness. So we are seen as more of a moral people in terms of keeping the sanity of the flesh on a low profile. Yes. That is how we as a people gain respect from society.

Even though this informant felt that Rasta dress codes were part of what made Rasta women Rasta, she called for some latitude on these matters.

I’m one of the women who likes to wear my hair without a tie and you might find that the [Rasta] sisters have a problem with that. So others who are radical like me might defend it and say, “No. she’s a Rasta because she do this and she do that. Just what Rasta is about.” Because we are about development and progress. yes. And being a Rasta is one of the highest forms that you should definitely try to promote in terms of His Majesty [Haile Selassie] because he’s a progressive man. He speaks of development, that we should develop ourselves so that our race can be strong. So I might put beads in my hair and somebody might have problems with that. A Rasta woman might say that I shouldn’t decorate my hair, but that’s just her concept. Because whether you wear it on your hair or on your neck or ankle, it’s no different because each part of you is important. So when I wear it in my hair, it’s no different. My hair is as important as my neck. So you get different people’s views. You just have to live and be satisfied deep down within yourself and know what you want.

This more radical stance among Rasta women may be indicative of a new wave of Rastafarianism, but one that I suggest will not move faster than the gender relations in Caribbean society at large.
The vast majority of women with whom I spoke shared the view with Rasta men that the latter were the spiritual leaders of the movement and the heads of their households. Most believed that a Rasta woman could not become Rasta except through her Rasta man. There were a number of women, however, who found these notions unacceptable. This dissent from current ideology can be explained in part by the women's educational level and economic independence.

The majority of Rastafarian men are engaged in a variety of small-scale entrepreneurial activities. The majority of women I spoke with were living with their husbands or male partners, and carried an equal or greater burden of economic responsibility. Professional women were lawyers, teachers, or business women. Others engaged in a variety of income producing activities which included craft production, sewing and embroidery, food marketing, and selling ganja. Rasta women, in spite of the view regarding male supremacy, are very clear on the pivotal role they play in keeping hearth and home together.

In the summer of 1992 Rastafarian women were featured on a weekly television program called “Tuesday Forum.” A Rastafarian woman who has a law practice in downtown Kingston commented on the discussion that took place on the show:

A lot of us [Rasta women] should have been there and could not because of the Centenary celebrations and we are very busy. But one of the sisters on that program made the point that what is happening in the Rastafari tradition is a part of the society and world at large where the woman is seen a secondary being. She came from the rib of Adam and, therefore, she must listen and hear what he has to say. She is subservient and so forth. But this has to be balanced against the reality, especially in our society where the woman plays a very strong role in that she is raised often in the absence of a father. So the woman has to be both mother and father.

This excerpt expresses the very fundamental ways in which Rasta women share the experiences of Jamaican and African Caribbean women in general (Henry & Wilson 1975; Clarke 1979). Even given a certain acceptance of religious doctrine this informant as well as others saw themselves as playing a major role in the development of their families. As mentioned earlier, women assume roles as the primary care takers (whether or not there is a man living in the house). That a large proportion of these women are also working outside the home, makes child care particularly burdensome. Facing this task, as well as grappling with racial and cultural discrimination are clearly articulated by the following informant.
Interviewer: Do you think that Rasta women have any particular problems or goals that are different, say, from other Jamaican women?

Rf: Lot. a lot. Because the thing is that we have three things up against us – being black, being a woman, and being Rasta. We have a lot of barriers to break down before we can even reach what we want to reach in a satisfied way. The majority of what I know came from either my mother, or my grandmother, or my aunt. I can hardly think of much that men in the family taught me. My grandmother passed on a rich history to me. My grandfather was always there but he did not know how to bring it across like my grandmother. And I’ve always seen that in other families. So I think it’s a wrong concept [to say that men are the head].

[Her partner, whom I will call Rm, joins the conversation.]

Rm: The black man doesn’t have anything to do with the household. He’s not totally responsible for it.

Rf: No. he’s not totally responsible. but he has something to do with it. He’s not just a person who is being led. He can think, he has feelings; he can relate. So he can’t just give to somebody else that responsibility.

Rm: He spends seven days trying to find bread.

Rf: But sometimes the woman is spending the same seven days trying to find bread and then she has to come home and relate to those youths and wash, cook, clean ... What women do, I’m telling you! I’m working hard and trying to give women some credit in this world and I’m going to achieve it.

In contemporary Jamaican society, working class women not only bear the brunt of the domestic duties, but contribute more than their economic share to the household. Deere (1990:72) reported that 63 percent of all the women in stable unions were directly responsible for household expenditures. Bolles (1983:154) also found that “women [factory] workers were directly responsible for the major household expenditures in 84 percent of the visiting-union households, 81 percent of the single-woman households, and 63 percent of stable-union households.” These economic responsibilities notwithstanding, it should be understood that women who are heads of households, and, therefore, do not have stable male partners, still depend on male support to supplement their incomes (Senior 1991:133-35; Douglass 1992). Although many Rasta women are also heads of households, one Rasta woman commented on the difference between Rasta and non-Rasta men:

To be honest, I would say that Rasta men are far more gentler than other men. You don’t find much Rasta men abusing women. The thing that makes Rasta men different from other men is that they try to liberate themselves and try to know more about how to deal with their home and their family. You find other men come from work and go to the rum bar, while Rasta men don’t deal with the rum bar so much ... So they find more time to educate themselves and to deal with their family.
There is a plethora of literature that recognizes the correspondence between women's economic dependence and their deference to men (Henry & Wilson 1975; Gill 1984; Safa 1986; Sen & Grown 1987). While the literature is somewhat united on the connection between economics and subordination, it is less clear on strategies for change. Douglass (1992:256-57) comes closest to addressing these issues by emphasizing the connection between race, class, and gender in her explication of women's subordination in Jamaica. She points out that it is mostly lighter-skinned women who represent the elite and middle classes, but that even these women defer to men since their status as women is defined as subordinate relative to all men.

To add to Douglass's very cogent argument regarding ways in which race, class, and gender reinforce one another, I hasten to suggest a closer look at the political-economic system as a partial basis for Jamaican sexual stratification. In this regard, it is important to point out that male/female relations of dominance has been historically characteristic in Jamaican society, and operates within the same matrix as European/African hegemony. That is, just as Africans and people of African descent became dependent upon Europeans by virtue of the latter's usurpation of African material resources, women lack the necessary control over material resources (land and technology) that would obviate their dependence on men. A movement toward a more egalitarian society, free from domestic or foreign capitalism is, I suggest, the first step (although not the only step) in ameliorating the position of women.

Even though Rastafarians derogate the notion of capitalism, they are very much a part of this system as is exhibited in their financial relations within the wider society and in intergroup transactions (Campbell 1990:148-49). This is not to suggest that without capitalism Rastafarian women would be on an equal footing with men, but to suggest that equal access to material resources would facilitate their de facto independence.

While Jamaican women in general, and Rastafarian women in particular, have made some strides in social and economic spheres (Senior 1991:3), barriers to achieving an egalitarian position relative to men are still in place (Bolles 1983). In spite of these realities, the myth of the matriarchy in Jamaican society, especially among the lower classes, remains an unsubstantiated normative construct because of what I suggest is a confusion between domestic responsibilities on one hand, and power in male/female relationships on the other. That is, many working-class women are often forced to support their households almost single-handedly. This is a burdensome task which is not to be equated with liberation. Even while bearing these respon-
sibilities dominant men may be permanent or transient members of households (Smith 1982; Douglass 1992). These uneven relationships in the domestic sphere are a reflection of male control in larger societal institutions.

Men own and control all of the large social and economic institutions (Klak & Key 1992) and maintain a monopoly in political positions of power (Douglass 1992:248-50; Spaulding 1993). Labor market segregation allows employers to pay women, as a group, lower wages than men. In situations where men are permanent members of households, these factors reinforce women's economic dependence on men and lay the ground work for women's subordination both in the workplace and in the household.

In addition to the creation of a society where women would have equal access to material resources, women need to produce positive cultural images that would resonate with their newly acquired positions in society. Currently, male control over cultural resources (e.g., religious texts and popular media) also operate to derogate women and augment male prerogatives.

Women's status in Jamaican society, in general, is paradigmatically defined by her relationship to males. This status is kept in check by explicit boundaries that define female acceptable behavior. This dynamic is elucidated by explicit definitions as to what constitutes a lady. According to Douglass (1992:248) a Jamaican woman's status as a lady "is threatened if she remains (or becomes) single because a lady should also be a wife. Being a lady entails devotion and sometimes even subservience to men and other family members: A lady is expected to place their interests over her own." Douglass's findings make clear the derogated position of lower-class women, many of whom are unmarried. For upper-class women, their main source of status is by virtue of their being married, but this status "is simultaneously circumscribed by men and by family."

The subordinated position of lower class women necessitates a certain aggressiveness in their struggle for survival. Cultural images of the Jamaican woman higgler are a perfect example of the discouragement of such female behaviors. Even though the higgler is admired for her relative autonomy, she is also regarded as a comical character, a caricature of a woman ... [A]lthough she is highly independent and self-sufficient, women like the higgler possess little of Jamaica's economic and political power. The image of the higgler, this woman whom Jamaicans claim as their powerful 'matriarch,' reigns only within the restricted limits of power relegated to people of her sex, color, and class ... In regard to femininity, Jamaicans ridicule the higgler and praise the lady. When they do this they are not simply expressing preferences about female style. The discourse surrounding these two contrasting images also encourages practices that help to reproduce a social order in which men dominate
women, where whites rule over people of color, and where everyone is ranked by class (Douglass 1992:248-49).

Rasta women continue to exert tremendous influence and authority over children and the maintenance of their households; however, these dimensions are acted out under economic duress and are subject to male prerogatives. Men act out their privileged status by freely exercising their sexual prowess in the form of multiple partners – without negative societal sanctions –; they have more mobility in congregating in various public spheres, and continue to exercise violence against women in and outside their families (Senior 1991:166-68, 183). Religious texts and interpretations constitute a sacred legitimation of these behaviors. In this regard, the fact that religious texts are produced after cultural ideologies and practices are in place, and are reproduced and elaborated on by men, is critical to any analysis of male domination. Although Rasta men may differ in their rhetoric of liberation and their Afrocentric symbolism compared to other Jamaican men, their de facto relationship to women is retrogressive (Campbell 1990:199-200).

On this matter, I will give the last word to a Rasta informant who called for more clarity on the part of Rasta sisters as a strategy in bringing about equality among men and women.

I'd say that Rasta women are in the forefront in terms of African-Jamaican women and are the Jamaican women who really stand up in livity in the society and who have to be respected. It is my honest view that Rasta women need more support from Rasta men, more real support. Giving credit where credit is due. Rasta men compared to many other men in this society are usually very conscious about family, about children. There are very few Rasta children who you'll ever see in children's home because they are like the African family. They take care of one another. At the same time, like the majority of women, but sometimes more so, the initiative and spirit of the Rasta woman is many times too oppressed. It was a good thing when some RastafarI sisters got together and brought Queen Mother Moore to Jamaica and they really had an idea to work towards the setting up of an educational center and welfare center. And I think this is a good idea. But instead of some RastafarI bredren seeing the assertion of the women and the great activity of the women as something that uplifts the whole family and the whole African people, too many Rasta bredren looked on it as a threat. And I think this type of attitude, this behavior, keeps back both the Rasta man and the Rasta woman. Because I think that it is the woman – in the same way that I said that black people have a special responsibility in fighting for our freedom and for freedom for all peoples – similarly women as a gender have that responsibility. They should clear the roadblocks which men put up in front of them.
NOTES

1. These interviews were conducted during fieldwork in Kingston in 1992 and 1993.

2. Many Rastafarians prefer that they not be referred to as a movement. Therefore, I use one of their own terms, Rastafari, to describe the philosophy and the members in their groups.

3. Dreadlocks, the distinctive natural hairstyle adopted by Rastafarians, are an expression of their African identity. Rastas wear their hair in long locks which they claim is not combed or styled. This practice, as with many others, has its foundation in the Bible (Leviticus 19:27 and Numbers 6:5).

4. Garvey established the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League in Kingston on August 1, 1914. He established the American branch of the UNIA in New York in June 1917 (Hill 1987). Although the term “pan-African” was not used until the early twentieth century by Henry Sylvester Williams (Martin 1983:14; Skinner 1973:8), people of African descent before Williams, such as Edward Blyden, Alexander Crummel, and Martin Delany, used the term “pan-Negro” and proposed that only the unity of people of African descent across cultures and across geographical boundaries could bring about self-determination.

5. Chevannes (1990) points out that Garvey did not advocate the wholesale repatriation of diaspora Africans. Nevertheless, he was the strongest advocate of diaspora African emigration in the twentieth century. These emigration proposals included trade between Africa and the African diaspora which was driven by a compulsion to create an environment where political-economic integrity was possible for indigenous and diaspora Africans. To remedy the predicament of diaspora Africans, Garvey and other members of the UNIA negotiated with the Liberian government to settle diaspora Africans in that area. Garvey may have realized his plans had not the U.S. government collaborated with Liberian officials to install the Firestone Rubber Company in Liberia at the expense of Garvey’s repatriation schemes. Resistance to Garvey’s preachings also came from a number of quarters including W.E.B. DuBois and other African-American elites (Fax 1972:133-36; Clark & Garvey 1973:378; Martin 1976:274-311) and the U.S. government. For this and other reasons having to do with a lack of business acumen, Garvey did not repatriate the large groups of diaspora Africans he had envisioned. His conviction for mail fraud in 1923 and his subsequent deportation (1925) greatly affected his political momentum to organize repatriation. Nevertheless, Garvey’s influence in many parts of the Americas and in Africa was unequaled. His anti-colonialist philosophy reached Africa via his newspaper, The Negro World, which spurred many indigenous Africans to revolt against European suzerainty (Martin 1976, 1983; Lewis 1988).

6. Garvey and Rastafarians use the term Ethiopia symbolically to refer to the continent of Africa.

7. The only exceptions are Eugenia Charles, prime minister of Dominica, and Maria Liberia-Peters, former prime minister of the Netherlands Antilles.

8. In standard Jamaican patois, the first singular person is “me.” The Rastafarian sees this as an expression of subservience, making the speaker always the object and never the subject, and overcompensates [by dropping the first syllable of a word and replacing it with ‘T’] (Waters 1985:106-7), e.g., “Ital” for vital. There are a number of other terms that Rasta replaces with their own version, such as “Jah,” [which is] a variant of the Hebrew Yahweh, the name of the Judeo-Christian god” (Waters 1985:107).

9. Most of the interviews were recorded on a cassette recorder and lasted from one to two
hours. In addition, I engaged in participant observation within the homes of some of these women, as well as in other settings.

10. In addition to referring to a group of elders, "Nyabingi" is also used to refer to important Rastafarian meetings which are presided over by a "leading brother" (Barrett 1977:120). The term Nyabingi is East African and referred to a religious-political group who resisted colonial domination in the first part of the twentieth century. "In Jamaica the term means 'death to the Black and White oppressors'" (Barrett 1977:121).

Buba Shanti, or Buba, is the name and spelling that is most often used for this group in Jamaica. The formal name of the group is the Ethiopia Black International Congress (Rastafari Speaks, June 1983:26). There are no official figures on the numbers of Rastas who are affiliated with the various segments. Based on my observations and informants' testimonies, the Twelve Tribes and the Nyabingi are the largest groups.

11. Most Rastas believe in the divinity of Haile Selassie. The Buba Shanti and a small proportion of other Rasta consider him to be a powerful leader, but not a God.

12. Although ganja is consumed ritually and secularly by most Rastas, consumption varies from one group and one individual to the next. Although widely consumed by this group, and Jamaicans in general, there are Rastas who do not consume ganja.

13. King man is the term used by Rastafarian women to refer to their male partners.

14. Rastafarians use "reason" to connote discursive conversation.

15. The vast majority of Rastafarian women do not wear slacks. There is, however, a small number who think that it is acceptable to wear slacks of African design and made from African cloth.


17. Queen Mother Moore is an African-American human rights activist who has been influential in the movement for diaspora-African reparations and civil rights for the past several decades.

REFERENCES


OBIAGELE LAKE
Department of Anthropology
University of Iowa
Iowa City IA 52242, U.S.A.