RASTAFARIAN SISTREN BY THE RIVERS OF BABYLON

> *"During the three weeks of the conference, argument and counter-argument were put forward, and differences of view and approach arose between Quddus and Tahirih. At last it was Tahirih's unheard of gesture, courageous beyond belief and description, followed by Baha'u'llah's decisive intervention, which made clear to all that a new Dispensation had begun. Tahirih's brave act was to cast aside her veil. Men were shaken to the depths of their being to see her thus. Some fled with horror from the scene. One, in desperation, tried to cut his throat."*
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> (H.M. Balyuzi, *The Bab: The Herald of the Day of Days)*

Carole Yawney

Le mouvement rastafarian, qui débuta dans les années 30, est encore très actif en Jamaïque à l'heure actuelle. Ses quatre objectifs sont: le pan-africanisme (y compris, souvent, des demandes de rapatriement), le fondamentalisme biblique, l'anti-colonialisme, et l'appel aux valeurs universelles (paix, amour, justice).

Le mouvement rastafarien a développé une idéologie explicite de la soumission des femmes. Le chemin vers Dieu se fait par les hommes, de sorte que, pour mener une vie vertueuse, une soeur rastafarienne doit être contrôlée par un homme.

Récemment cependant, certaines femmes de ce mouvement ont commencé à faire pression pour que des changements soient effectués. Les soeurs des Etats-Unis et du Canada, par leurs questions, ont contribué à rompre le silence.

L'auteur conclut que les femmes ont bien raison de rejeter le contexte social de toute pratique spirituelle qui renforce le sexisme. Il est tout à fait vraisemblable que les expériences spirituelles des femmes soient différentes de celles des hommes, et elles doivent être reconnues pour que les femmes se sentent à l'aise dans une tradition religieuse.

The preceding quotation illustrates the revolutionary role that women can play in purifying decadent religious traditions. It also raises the question of why women are participating in these patriarchal undertakings in the first place. To answer this question it is necessary to distinguish between two aspects of religion.

On the one hand, because religion is embedded in society, we can regard it as a cultural system of meaning with definite ideological content. We can connect to this through belief and intellect. On the other hand, most religious traditions have a central spiritual practice to which one relates experientially and subjectively. In a sense, such spiritual practices have as their goal the transcendence of the cultural/ideological dimension of religion. While symbolically and ideologically a particular religion may be patriarchially oriented, the practice itself might be appreciated by women because it can potentially provide relief from habitual patterns and maybe even point the way to the Ultimate Truth. A shell of culture can thus nurture a germ of practice. When we examine religion as a cultural mechanism to ensure its essential practice — in contrast to isolating its central practice — then we can see that the whole issue is fraught with contradictions, especially for women.

There has been a growing dialogue among women about the special problems they encounter in following a spiritual path in the present time. Indeed, throughout recorded history, women have had to struggle either to find an integral place for themselves within a traditional religion or to develop their own independent spiritual practices in the face of considerable opposition. Since most women's religions have been silenced or forced underground, those women who are interested in metaphysical matters have had to pursue their spiritual path within the context of patriarchal religions. This paper discusses some of the issues confronting women who are members of the Rastafarian faith, a predominantly Black religious movement, based on traditional Judeo-Christian principles, with origins in Jamaica but now international in its appeal.

The Rastafarian movement began in the 1930s during a decade of political and economic turmoil. Rastafarianism still makes a lot of

sense in contemporary Jamaica, which has inherited a legacy of colonialism and underdevelopment. Generally speaking, we can say that Rastafarianism is characterized by four themes: 1) pan-Africanism, which for many includes demands for repatriation; 2) biblical fundamentalism, including both the Old and the New Testaments; 3) a determined anticolonialism; and 4) an appeal to such universal values as peace and love, truth and justice. Objectively speaking, this means recognizing all Black people as African brothers and sisters and cultivating a lifestyle based on freedom and dignity. One popular expression of African identity is the fashion of growing one's hair in long, uncombed Dreadlocks, the visible statement of association with the movement.

While some Rastafarians are organized in a formal way, most connect with others through informal means. To the end of developing consensus and shared understandings, Rastafarians engage in what we could regard as the central spiritual practice of the movement: reasoning collectively over a glowing herbs pipe. The ritual smoking of cannabis in this fashion is called "Communion"; the pipe is the "Chalice." During such sessions brethren articulate and elaborate their understanding of doctrine in a highly stylized form of discourse, taking advantage of the inspirational and creative dynamics attached to this state of mind. However much women identify with the movement, traditionally they have been excluded from this Communion.

While several progressive social movements possess egalitarian ideologies but are in fact subject to sexism, Rastafarianism has actually developed an explicit ideology about the subordination of women. Despite insight into political and economic oppression, Rastafarians share a common cultural heritage with other Jamaicans in this regard. What I want to examine here is the emerging role of Rastafarian women in cutting through these cultural accretions in an attempt to shatter self-defeating patterns and

to redeem what they regard as valuable about the movement.

It must be appreciated that in the context of Jamaican society the Rastafarian perspective provides meaning that makes sense out of cultural chaos. Yet not only are women excluded from its central practice, but they are also subject to a line of reasoning that says their way to God is through men, that only by yielding to the "control" of a Rastaman can a woman or "Daughter" (a cultural term used to refer even to adult women) lead a righteous life. Rastafarian sisters are subject to all kinds of restrictions that do not bind men. They should cover their locks and dress modestly, they should isolate themselves when they menstruate, they should have sexual intercourse with reproduction in mind, and so on. Their social role should be one of deference. Though such an orientation might have survived longer if left unchallenged in traditional Jamaican society, now that the movement has opened itself to international influences there are increasing pressures to change such dogmatic attitudes and practices. The major impetus for change is coming from Rastafarian sistren who either live abroad or have been exposed to foreign cultural influences. For the first time, in the last few years, a public discus-

sion has been initiated about the role of women within the movement. Courageous sistren from Canada and the United States have been instrumental in raising these questions.

While some fair-minded brethren have responded favourably to such challenges to male hegemony, the entire affair for most Rastafarians is emotionally intense and extremely threatening. In July, 1982, the First International Rastafarian Conference was held in Toronto. On this occasion several issues related to the role of women within the movement came to a head. Here the liminality of the somewhat more neutral ground may have contributed to the mood of testiness that developed in some quarters. On the first day of the conference, which consisted of a religious celebration, the guest of honour was a well-known elder Dread from Jamaica. There were also several sisters in attendance, mainly from Canada and the United States — more than usually attend such occasions in Jamaica. (None of the official representatives from the West Indies were women.) Several of these sistren, temporarily freed from domestic and economic duties, sought out each other's company to bask in the sun. Dressed in traditional African-style, bare-arm robes (as opposed to Jamaican tailored attire) they shook their locks free from their head ties and relaxed. Were things getting out of hand? The elder Dread called everybody together in a central location to try to establish the familiar format for such events. Asking one of the sistren to read some passages from the Bible about the fate of women who fall into the fashion of Babylon, he extemporized a running commentary on such practices. Here was the first of many attempts over the weekend to come to terms with the independent behaviour of the sisters. One focus of contention was the right of women to wear their dreadlocks freely.

At the conference itself the session that ran well past its scheduled length was that on Rasta and the Family. Here several very articulate and dynamic sistren vigorously defended their interests in the face of much opposition. Finally, at the closing of the session, the chairman recognized that sistren needed "room to grow" within the movement — but he also cautioned that if they are to pursue their interests in Rastfari, there are things they must never question!

This dialogue continues, though how much it will be restricted to sistren only is difficult to know. There is no doubt that Rastafarian sistren who have access to both Canada and Jamaica will play a critical role. In many ways the contradictions present in the movement are further exposed and heightened in the Canadian context. Here the economically marginal situation of the Rastafarian family is even more precarious, because it is isolated from traditional community support. Distances are more difficult to negotiate, and Rastafarian sistren often find themselves alienated from social contact. At the same time, they are exposed to feminism and women active in non-traditional roles, creating new expectations and possibilities. In the past year two Toronto-based Rastafarian sistren, Makeda Silvera and Pam Afua Cooper, have given expression to these new directions in both poetry and prose. Sistren's voices are just beginning to break the silence.

Will Rastafarian sistren and other women engaged in similar struggles be successful? Disabused of the question of patriarchy, women have every reason to reject the social context of spiritual practice if it reinforces sexist assumptions and behaviour. More than men, they can be quite unswerving in their efforts to cut away oppressive cultural baggage. In this sense women can regard themselves as purifying traditions that have fallen into decadence.

In addition, we must also consider the likelihood that women have altogether different experiences in following a spiritual path. In relation to Rastafarian culture, for example, we now know that women and men have quite different responses to the use of cannabis. The point is not to enshrine those experiences, for they are not ends in themselves, but in fact by-products along the path to realization. However, if women are to feel comfortable within a religious tradition, their experience of the central practice needs to be recognized for what it is and encoded somehow in the cultural presentation. Women have every reason to be suspicious of blitheful statements about the unity of the human spirit, where in fact such sentiments serve to disguise male dominance. If a religion is intractable to such input on the part of women, it has to be rejected. Women can then abscond with the central practice and turn it to their own ends.

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Carole Yawney teaches anthopology in the Department of Sociology, Atkinson College, York University. Her research interest in the Rastafarians began in 1970 when she undertook extensive fieldwork in Jamaica.