

## Black Female Identities in Harare: The Case of Young Women with Dreadlocks

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### Abstract

*The construction of post-colonial African female identities has faced a number of challenges. Colonial ideologies and African patriarchal traditions threaten to stifle African women. African cities have become sites of struggle as black women strive to express themselves in spaces that are defined in masculine terms. This article examines the theme of black female identities in Harare. It focuses on how some young women have cultivated dreadlocks as a signifier of their consciousness and of their own identities. It outlines how for these women dreadlocks are more than just a fashion statement or a hairstyle. Dreadlocks seek to defy colonial images of blackness as inferior to whiteness. They also challenge dominant notions of being a "presentable" woman. The article highlights reasons that have been put forward to resist the cultivation of dreadlocks by women. Using historical, literary and phenomenological approaches, the study highlights the complex factors that influence the formulation of black female identities in a cosmopolitan setting.*

### Introduction

Harare's fashion scene is as sophisticated as that of any other cosmopolitan centre. Despite facing a major economic crisis, most residents of Harare remain fashion conscious. The growth of the Zimbabwean Diaspora since the late 1990s has enabled many people to keep pace with international fashion trends.<sup>1</sup> Many families now have members who are staying in the United Kingdom, South Africa, Botswana, the United States of America, Canada, New Zealand, and other countries. These individuals remit foreign currency, clothes, electronic goods and other gifts. They also constitute a major medium for the transmission of styles and tastes. Through these contacts, women and men in Zimbabwe become aware of contemporary standards of dress, hygiene and attitude. It is within this context that we

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1. For a helpful critique of the notion of the African Diaspora, see Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, "Rewriting the African Diaspora: Beyond the Black Atlantic," *African Affairs* 104 (414), 2005, 35-68.

have to understand the popularity of dreadlocks amongst young women in Harare.

Since the late 1990s, dreadlocks have become fashionable amongst black young women in Harare. Alongside their openness to external influences where the images of successful dreadlocked African American women like the actress Whoopi Goldberg and musician Tracy Chapman receive coverage, they are also responding to local ideologies. The increase in the number of women with dreadlocks coincided with the period when the government of Zimbabwe stepped up its rhetoric on maintaining African identity. In the context of the land reform programme, especially between 2000 and the first quarter of 2005, President Robert Mugabe called for an end to mental slavery and an acceptance of African pride and dignity.<sup>2</sup> As we shall illustrate, our interviews with dreadlocked young women highlight the dimension of being “proudly Zimbabwean”. They clearly wish to be understood as individuals who are at peace with the colour of their skins, the texture of their hair and the fact of being women.

This article highlights the complex nature of post-colonial female identities. It utilises one distinctive marker of identity, hairstyle, to analyse this theme. In the first section, the study provides a historical overview of colonial attitudes to blackness and black hair. In the second section, we identify the popularity of dreadlocks amongst young women in Harare. We highlight how the young women consider their dreadlocks as a statement of their self-consciousness. In the third section, we focus on resistance to the wearing of dreadlocks by young women. We concentrate on the arguments that dreadlocks are not “decent”, concerns from within the church and resistance by employers. A concluding section brings the study to a close.

### **Data and Methods**

The data used in this study were collected through formal and informal interviews conducted in Harare between May 2003 and June 2004. Field research involved interviewing young women with dreadlocks, religious leaders like pastors, indigenous healers and prophets, as well as lay Christians. Opinions regarding women with dreadlocks were sought from respondents with diverse backgrounds. These included commuter omnibus touts, school teachers, personnel working in the hair dressing industry, university and college students, academics and security guards. Responses regarding dreadlocked women were sought from employers in different sectors. Interviews were also conducted with Zimbabwean Rastafarians at musical and other cultural events in Harare.

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2. Robert G. Mugabe, *Inside the Third Chimurenga: Our Land is Our Prosperity* (Harare, The Department of Information and Publicity, Office of the President and Cabinet, 2001).

Qualitative data on dreadlocks were found in books, journals, newspapers and internet sites. Data collection was also done by the use of questionnaires and interview guides in formal and informal settings. The ages of dreadlocked female respondents ranged from 19 to 45 years. Most of these respondents were formally employed in Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), universities or colleges. Others were students pursuing undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. We randomly interviewed respondents for their views concerning dreadlocked women in Harare's central business district, commuter omnibus ranks, gospel music concerts, homes and other places. In all, 500 people were interviewed for this study.

Harare proved to be an ideal location for ascertaining societal attitudes towards young dreadlocked women due to its cosmopolitan outlook. In addition, many NGOs have their headquarters in Harare. This allowed us to interact with dreadlocked female employees of such organisations. However, it may not be possible to generalise the results of this article as people in other smaller towns and the rural areas might have different views concerning dreadlocked young women. As a political dictum that was coined recently goes, "Harare is not Zimbabwe, and Zimbabwe is not Harare."

We should also point out that although we undertake a historical overview of colonial attitudes to black hair and blackness, we did not set out to establish whether dreadlocks are "authentically Zimbabwean." We feel that this goes beyond the purview of the present article. Our approach is predominantly phenomenological and descriptive. While some respondents claimed that dreadlocks have always been part of indigenous spirituality, we contend that it requires a separate historical analysis to verify this claim.

### **Colonial Attitudes to Black Hair and Blackness: An Overview**

In order to appreciate the upsurge in the number of women cultivating dreadlocks in Harare in the contemporary period, it is necessary to undertake a brief historical excursion. This will allow us to grasp colonial attitudes to black hair in particular, and blackness in general. Issues of race and gender in the post-colonial period have been influenced by colonial experiences. As a settler colony, Zimbabwe has been grappling with the race question since colonial penetration in 1890.<sup>3</sup> During the same period, African and European patriarchies joined forces to make the position of women in society tenuous. In this section, we seek to highlight the enduring influence of colonial discourses on blackness, and patriarchal subjugation of African women.

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3. See for example Ibbo Mandaza, *Race, Colour and Class in Southern Africa* (Harare, SAPES Books, 1997).

While men with dreadlocks have been a regular part of the urban terrain in Zimbabwe, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of dreadlocked women since the late 1990s. This is a significant development since dreadlocks have generated a lot of debate since the colonial period. In propaganda by the settler state, the freedom fighters were portrayed as *magandanga* - unkempt rebels. During the liberation struggle, soldiers harassed anybody with dreadlocks as they interpreted them to be a sign of rebellion. Many had their hair pulled out, while physical assaults for wearing dreadlocks were common. The colonial state rightly understood that dreadlocks were a call for a return to the "African past", and a return of the stolen ancestral lands.

Black hair has been a site of contestation. Colonial ideology sought to devalue African hairstyles. It portrayed curled African hair as primitive and ugly. Consequently, many Africans have tried hard to "upgrade" their hair, in particular African women have resorted to stretching or perming their hair. African men have kept their hair short and "presentable" in line with the colonial and missionary teachings on hygiene. European values and standards have been dominant in the evaluation of black hair. Thus,

Hair is thought to be good if it approximates European hair in straightness (grade) or curliness. If a person has kinky African hair, many people of African descent refer to it as "bad" hair. Along with negative views regarding hair, dark skin is also considered by many to be a badge of inferiority . . .<sup>4</sup>

The colonial ideology sought to instil an inferiority complex in the minds of the colonised. As some leading theoreticians of postcolonial theory like Frantz Fanon<sup>5</sup> have observed, most colonial subjects internalised the values propagated by the colonial masters. Unfortunately, the mimicry has often been carried over to the period after decolonisation. Some African women get hair extensions so that they too can let their hair fly. The impact of colonialism runs deep.

Discourses of kinky and inferior black bodies were an integral part of the colonial project that sought to deny the humanity of the colonial subjects. Trivialising African languages, religions and systems of knowledge was intended to undermine the confidence of the Africans. The "civilising mission" of Christianity and colonialism left many Africans convinced that their own traditions were infinitely inferior to those that were being introduced by the white people. Whiteness became normative in colonial Zimbabwe. Skin bleaching was an expression of the desire to become white.

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4. Obiagele Lake, *Rastafari Women: Subordination in the Midst of Liberation Theology* (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 1998), 106.

5. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London, Pluto Press, 1952).

Beauty was defined in white terms. Consequently, to be beautiful was to leave the black skin and to assume a white identity. It is common to hear statements like, *Musikana uyu akanaka, murungu chaiye!* (This woman is as beautiful as a white woman). Women with dark complexions have become objects of derision, while those light in complexion are celebrated for approximating whiteness. This is different from traditional approaches to beauty where light-skinned women were viewed sceptically. Sayings such as, *Mukadzi mutsvuku akasaroya unoba* (If a light-skinned woman is not a witch, she is a thief) buttressed indigenous attitudes to light-skinned women. Christian colour symbolism has not helped issues by associating evil with blackness and righteousness with whiteness.<sup>6</sup>

Colonialism in Zimbabwe affected gender relations in a profound way. Through the introduction of wage labour and urbanisation, the status of women was undermined. The early decades of colonial rule were characterised by the loss of women's social status and their economic marginalisation. The urban areas were regarded as the preserve of the whites, with blacks being considered temporary residents. The number of urbanised women remained low before the Second World War.<sup>7</sup> There was a strong conviction that decent African women should not occupy urban space. Colonial ideology helped to entrench the notion that African women have to seek male approval for their appearance, including hairstyle.

Against the backdrop of a society that tended to portray many African urban women as prostitutes,<sup>8</sup> one may understand why Christian women's organisations sought to promote images of righteous women in Harare. Christian missionaries from various organisations were worried that urban influences would corrupt African women. They sought to promote domesticity. On their part, African Christian women's organisations like the Methodist *Ruwadzano* and the Catholic *Chita chaMaria* encouraged African women to remain faithful to the teachings of the church. As early as 1907, some African women came to settle in Mbare from Chishawasha. Christian women's organisations emphasised the need to become "respectable and responsible".<sup>9</sup> Such values did not threaten African patriarchy, and Christian women's organisations have flourished in Zimbabwe. However, they do

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6. See for example Gay L. Bayron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Blackness in Early Christian Literature* (London, Routledge, 2002).

7. Diana Jeater, *Marriage, Perversion and Power: The Construction of Moral Discourse in Southern Rhodesia, 1894-1930* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993), 183.

8. See for example Terri Barnes and Everjoice Win, *To Live a Better Life: An Oral History of Women in the City of Harare, 1930-70* (Harare, Baobab Books, 1992), 117.

9. Marja Hinfelaar, *Respectable and Responsible Women: Methodist and Roman Catholic Women's Organisations in Harare, Zimbabwe (1919-1985)* (Zoetermeer, Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2001).

provide alternative space for women to express themselves outside male control.

In line with colonial thinking, advertising agencies sought to create new tastes and values amongst blacks. Women were especially targeted as it was believed that they were the major consumers. Hair care products were put forward as providing solutions to “troublesome” black hair. The strategy involved portraying natural African hair as somehow bad and inferior. Women with natural African hair were made to feel inadequate and out of touch with contemporary fashion trends. One product, Hair Glo, described natural African hair in offensive terms. It called upon consumers to “Banish Mufushwa Hair Forever”. Glossy pictures contrasted a scruffy-looking individual with “*mufushwa*” hair with a neat, Hair Glo-using individual.

The assault on natural black hair was consistent with the colonial project. As Walter Rodney observes, the brainwashing enterprise during the colonial enterprise was so effective that it has convinced “many black people of their inferiority”.<sup>10</sup> To be well-groomed has often implied submitting oneself to Eurocentric morality and standards. In this scheme of things, dreadlocks would never be embraced since they do not fall within the European standards of what is acceptable. During the colonial period, dreadlocks were criticised for belonging to the “primitive African past”. In colonial historiography, Africa’s history begins with the entry of white people. Prior to that, Africa is one vast lost continent. Consequently, to cultivate dreadlocks was to lapse into “non-history”.

We would like to underline the fact that the inferiority of blacks to whites has been accepted as a matter of course by many white people through different historical epochs. What is of great concern is the fact that even some highly intelligent whites could not transcend these parochial views. The German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), one of the greatest thinkers of the Enlightenment, contended that Africans were a “savage” people. He surmised that under the influence of the heat and the sun, they had not been able to develop intellectually.<sup>11</sup> Such arguments were later used to justify colonialism. Spurious “scientific evidence” was marshalled to illustrate the inferiority of blacks. Signe Arnfred writes:

According to the ‘the great chain of being’ established by evolutionary theory, white man was at the top and black man at the bottom, with various other races in between. Since women in general were perceived

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10. Walter Rodney, *Groundings with My Brothers* (New York, Panther House, 1971), 10.

11. Wolbert Smidt, “Fetishists and Magicians — The Description of African Religions by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)”, in Frieder Ludwig and Afe Adogame (eds.), *European Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa* (Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004), 109-115.

as lower, less civilised and more animal-like than men, black women were even further down than were black men.<sup>12</sup>

Our overview of colonial attitudes to black hair and blackness brings a number of themes to the fore. In the first instance, it indicates that natural black hair was considered inferior. Efforts were made to encourage mimicry amongst colonial subjects, leading to the promotion of artificial hair. Second, colonialism helped the construction of urban space in masculine terms. This imbricates with African patriarchy and has posed a major challenge to the acceptance of women in Harare. Furthermore, both colonialism and African patriarchy have sought to define and contain African women's sexuality. Third, Christianity introduced puritanical notions of decency, especially through the activities of women's organisations. All these factors provide the background for interpreting the popularity of dreadlocks amongst young women in Harare.

### **Locked Hair, Liberated Identities: Dreadlocked Young Women in Harare**

In the preceding section, we outlined aspects of Zimbabwe's history during the colonial period that have a bearing on the cultivation of dreadlocks by young women in Harare. In this section, we describe the increasing visibility of women with dreadlocks in Harare. Since the late 1990s, dreadlocks have become fashionable for many black women. Some prominent individuals like the First Lady, Mrs Grace Mugabe and legislator Priscilla Misihairambwi-Mushonga, wear dreadlocks. As we shall discuss below, some female artists also have dreadlocks.

Dreadlocks have been present on the Zimbabwean cultural scene for some time now. Male musicians like Thomas Mapfumo, Pio Farai Macheka, Cephas Mashakada, members of the gospel music group The Black Saints, Andy Brown and others have worn dreadlocks. Dreadlocks have also been popular amongst female artists. Mbira musicians Stella Chiweshe and Chiwoniso Maraire, and pop artists like Busi Ncube have dreadlocks. As Mwenda Ntarangwi observes, such artists, "seem to use their mode of dress as a way of expressing their cultural ideology of Africanness rather than their identity as sexualised performers".<sup>13</sup>

Some female Zimbabwean writers who have achieved international recognition for their works have also cultivated dreadlocks. Until her

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12. Signe Arnfred, "African Sexuality/Sexuality in Africa: Tales and Silences," in Signe Arnfred (ed.), *Rethinking Sexualities in Africa* (Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2004), 63.

13. Mwenda Ntarangwi, "Musical Practice as a Gender Experience: Examples from Kenya and Zimbabwe," in Patricia McFadden (ed.), *Reflections on Gender Issues in Africa* (Harare, SAPES Books, 1999), 50.

untimely death in 2005, Yvonne Vera had worn dreadlocks. Tsitsi Dangarembga, author of the widely acclaimed *Nervous Conditions*, has dreadlocks. One could argue that for such female cultural workers, dreadlocks serve to identify them as black women who can hold their own in the global village. Dreadlocks enhance their refusal to uphold the colonial verdict that a black woman's body is inferior, or that blacks have to embrace white values. Our argument here is that while creative works are an important resource for appreciating female identity in Zimbabwe,<sup>14</sup> the hairstyles of the artists themselves are equally eloquent.

The movement of dreadlocks from female artists to the "mainstream" has been slow and continues to be contested, as we shall highlight below. Artists appear to have the license to dress differently and to adopt unconventional hairstyles. Nonetheless, it is crucial to observe that the domain of the artists has been associated with *mashavi* (alien spirits) or *hurombe* (spirit of poverty). Furthermore, long hair that gives the appearance of being unkempt is often associated with mental disorder. Indigenous culture struggles with mental illness. It attributes mental illness to witchcraft (*uroyi*), or avenging spirits (*ngozi*). Some of our respondents who were opposed to the cultivation of dreadlocks by women made reference to the image of mental patients in Harare who have "accidental dreadlocks". They wondered why any "normal" person would want to have an appearance similar to that of mental patients.

As we noted in the introduction, the popularity of dreadlocks among young women in Harare coincided with the period when the government's rhetoric on African identity reached a crescendo. In one of the most intensive and sustained propaganda campaigns in Africa, the ruling party and government called upon Zimbabweans to be proud of their identity and to shun external influences. Between 2000 and 2005, the national broadcasting environment was saturated with the message of African cultural authenticity and black pride. Jingles and slogans were played with intoxicating frequency on radio and television, seeking to engender a distinctively Zimbabwean identity.

The recovery of stolen ancestral lands had to be accomplished alongside rehabilitating African identity. Cultivating dreadlocks in this instance chimed completely with the official ideology. In interviews, some dreadlocked young women in Harare articulated the significance of their hairstyles by applying Mugabean jargon. Concepts like "African pride", "true black identity", "defying Tony Blair", "I am not made Britain" and others were used frequently. While the urban areas have become aligned to the

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14. Katrin Berndt, *Female Identity in Contemporary Zimbabwean Fiction*. Bayreuth African Studies 73 (Bayreuth: Pia Thielmann and Eckhard Breitingner, 2005).

opposition, many young women found the government's nationalist arguments quite appealing. This highlights the fact that the propaganda efforts were yielding some results, at least at the ideological level. A dreadlocked young woman could therefore support the opposition, while upholding the ruling party's ideology of African cultural liberation.

Some dreadlocked women have been, or are, married to white men. They do not regard this as negating their blackness in any way. They see their dreadlocks as an affirmation of their black identity. Dreadlocks are used to underline their consciousness of blackness. As one such woman, Salome argued, "Dreadlocks announce that I am a black woman who is at peace with herself. My partner has to accept me as I am." In our own interpretation, some dreadlocked women who are married to white men appropriate the hairstyle to assert their racial and cultural pride. However, there is need for further research to ascertain the dynamics at play in such relationships.

### **The Influence of Rastafarianism**

Dreadlocks are an integral part of Rastafarianism. Some women with dreadlocks in Harare are actually members of the Rastafarian tradition. Even those who do not fully subscribe to its tenets identify with its teachings concerning dreadlocks. Rastafarianism has a considerable following among young people in Harare. At the core of Rastafarian beliefs is an affirmation of blackness. One of its leading prophets, Robert Nesta Marley, popularly known as Bob Marley, preached the need for black people to be proud of their racial and cultural identities. He called for self-love among blacks. One of his key statements was, "emancipate yourself from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds." The theme of black pride and liberation runs through the Rastafarian tradition.<sup>15</sup>

It is significant to note that this ideology has attracted African politicians and intellectuals who may not necessarily share other aspects of Rastafarian beliefs and practices. President Robert Mugabe, a Catholic, has acknowledged that he sometimes utilises Marley's ideas in his speeches. He said that he occasionally makes reference to Marley's conscious gospel and protest music in his speeches.<sup>16</sup> This helps to account for the fact that he has received standing ovations at international gatherings on a number of occasions for his oratory, passion and bluntness.

Bob Marley played a major role in the popularity of Rastafarianism and dreadlocks in Zimbabwe. He was the main entertainer at the Zimbabwe independence eve celebrations at Rufaro Stadium on 17 April 1980. This

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15. Horace Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance: From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney* (Trenton, NJ, Africa World Press, 1987).

16. *The Daily Mirror*, (Harare), 25 March 2005.

marked the success of the black people's struggle against settler colonialism and racism. It highlighted the close ideological links between Rastafarianism and African nationalism. Marley had penned the popular song, "Zimbabwe", as a dedication to the black people's fight for emancipation from the yoke of oppression. According to one account of Marley's performance on the eve of Zimbabwe's independence:

Dressed in leather, thick locks cascading down his back, Bob slapped and scratched his face as he sang, improvising kinky bongo dance routines and high-stepping in half-time during the instrumental sections. It was perhaps the single greatest moment of Bob Marley's life.<sup>17</sup>

Alongside his prominence during Zimbabwe's independence celebrations in 1980, Marley's music has been well-received in the country.<sup>18</sup> His death is commemorated every year in Zimbabwe. The country's emergence as a black-led, sovereign African state provided fertile soil for the growth of Rastafarianism. The number of young people with dreadlocks increased significantly,<sup>19</sup> especially among men. Fred Zindi also identifies the impact of touring reggae groups like Aswad, UB40, Misty in Roots, Jimmy Cliff and Don Carlos in the rising profile of Rastafarianism among black youth in the urban areas.<sup>20</sup> We would like to add that South Africa's Lucky Dube, a dreadlocked artist, has toured the country on a number of occasions. His music is quite popular in Zimbabwe. Tracy Chapman, a dreadlocked African American female musician, performed in Harare during the Human Rights Now! Concert in 1988. All these international stars have helped to promote dreadlocks in the country.

Our respondents indicated that they shared Rastafarian interpretations of the significance of dreadlocks. Within the Rastafarian movement, dreadlocks are a multivalent symbol. They stand for pride in one's racial identity, history and culture. The notion of "dread" is intended to strike fear in those racial groups that mock blacks. The shaking of dreadlocks is believed to cause tremors in "Babylon", the oppressive white, capitalist system. According to Ennis B. Edmonds:

Aesthetically, dreadlocks indicate a rejection of Babylon's definition of beauty, especially as it relates to European features and hair quality. According to Rastas, hair straightening and skin bleaching by black people reflect a yearning for Whiteness and are therefore symptomatic of

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17. Stephen Davis, *Bob Marley* (New York, Doubleday, 1985), 228.

18. For an analysis of Marley's music and its ideological thrust, see Adebayo Ojo, *Bob Marley: Songs of African Redemption* (Lagos, Malthouse Press Limited, 2000).

19. Fred Zindi, *Roots Rocking in Zimbabwe* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1985),

20. Zindi, *Roots Rocking in Zimbabwe*,

alienation from a sense of their African beauty. Against this background, dreadlocks signify the reconstitution of a sense of pride in one's African physical characteristics.<sup>21</sup>

The adoption of dreadlocks by Rastafarians in Jamaica in the 1950s was an ideological statement in favour of African identity. Dreadlocks symbolise fearlessness and resistance.<sup>22</sup> The connections between Rastafarianism and Africa can be detected in how images of the dreadlocked Mau Mau warriors in Kenya's resistance struggle inspired the emergence of dreadlocks in Jamaica. Rastafarians also find justification for dreadlocks in the Jewish-Christian Bible. The verse referring to the Nazarite vow, "During the entire period of his vow separation, no razor shall come upon his head" (Numbers 6: 5) is used as evidence that Rastas are following a divine commandment. The biblical story of Samson who had "seven locks" (Judges 16: 13) and who derived strength from his hair has also been appropriated by Rastas. We should underline the fact that the Bible is the central text for Rastafarians, although they insist that white Christians have distorted it. Dreadlocks represent the Rastas covenant with God, and are often shaped after the head and mane of the lion. They signify the Rastas' self-awareness and refusal to conform to the norms of white society. They are truly a mark of pride in Africa's long history and civilisation.<sup>23</sup>

### **An Appeal to Tradition: Dreadlocks as *Mhotsi***

Although the influence of Rastafarianism on the cultivation of dreadlocks in Zimbabwe is quite pronounced, some respondents maintained that the Rastas borrowed the hairstyle from Africa. They also argued that dreadlocks have always been part of Zimbabwe's heritage. They insisted that the term "dreadlocks" was an imposition: what they had was in fact "*mhotsi*". According to the *Duramazwi Guru ReChiShona*, *mhotsi* has two meanings:

- 1 *Mhotsi ivhudzi rakamonyana-monyana, turi tupfupi pfupi.*
- 2 *Mhotsi ivhudzi rakapeturwa ndokutsindirwa rakati tsvete nemusoro, kazhinji ramboswatudzwa nokurigeza neruredzo.*<sup>24</sup>

While these definitions do not account for long dreadlocks, they draw attention to the reality of locked hair within Zimbabwean traditions. The

21. Ennis B. Edmonds, "Dread 'T In-a-Babylon: Ideological and Cultural Revitalization," in Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer and Adrian Anthony McFarlane (eds.), *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader* (Kingston, Ian Randle Publishers, 1998), 32.
22. Obiagele Lake, *Rastafari Women*, 106-110.
23. Peter B. Clarke, *Black Paradise: The Rastafarian Movement* (San Bernadino, California, The Borgo Press, 1986), 89-92.
24. Herbert Chimhundu (mupepeti), *Duramazwi Guru ReChiShona* (Harare, College Press and The African Languages Research Institute, 2001), 560.

*Standard Shona Dictionary* appears to be closer to this fact when it translates *mhotsi* as, "Length of tangled hair (eg of *svikiro*)."<sup>25</sup> Of special interest is the example of an individual who is likely to cultivate dreadlocks, namely, the *svikiro* (spirit medium). This indicates that, as in Rastafarianism, dreadlocks have a religious significance in Zimbabwean traditions. Traditionally, most individuals with dreadlocks were people set apart for special religious purposes. However, many young people could also have *mhotsi* as a hairstyle.

The appeal to tradition in the cultivation of dreadlocks highlights the challenges of forming post-colonial identities. Young women, mostly in their twenties and thirties, claimed to be upholding "an ancient Zimbabwean practice" in the cosmopolitan city of Harare. As far as they were concerned, those who thought that dreadlocks were a result of foreign influences were not aware of their cultural heritage. An awareness of Zimbabwean traditions would indicate that dreadlocks were nothing new. Africans have been cultivating dreadlocks since time immemorial, the young women claimed.

It emerges that what constitutes acceptable traditions is heavily contested in post-colonial situations. Critics of dreadlocks are quick to associate them with "decadent foreign influences" that the government of Zimbabwe condemns on a regular basis. They seek to harness President Mugabe's rhetoric by projecting dreadlocks as an imported hairstyle that can only quicken the corruption of African women and culture. On their part, young dreadlocked women appeal to the same rhetoric and jargon of African cultural authenticity to defend their hairstyle. As Amy Shupikai Tsanga, herself a dreadlocked woman academic observes, in postcolonial contexts like Zimbabwe, culture is contested. Furthermore, complex factors come into play in the politics of identity.<sup>26</sup>

### **A Profile of Dreadlocked Women in Harare**

From our analysis of the data, it emerges that dreadlocked women in Harare are likely to be aged between 19 and 45. While some older women have cultivated dreadlocks, they are likely to be top professionals and unmarried. Most of the young women were well-educated and held professional jobs. Some had a number of postgraduate degrees, including doctorates. A few of the dreadlocked women participated in cross-border trading or the trade in foreign currency. However, those who espoused Rastafarian beliefs tended not be formally employed, and were married to Rastas. Some Rastafarian couples also had young children with dreadlocks.

25. Midrael Hannan, *Standard Shona Dictionary*. Revised Edition with Addendum (Harare, The College Press with the Literature Bureau, 1987), 356.

26. Amy Shupikai Tsanga, *Taking Law to the People: Gender, Law Reform and Community Legal Education in Zimbabwe* (Harare, Women's Law Centre, University of Zimbabwe with Weaver Press, 2003), 66.

In terms of marital status, dreadlocked women were distributed across the different categories, namely, single, separated, divorced, married and widowed. Those who were married tended to be married to men who had high incomes and high levels of education. While most of the women indicated that they decided to cultivate dreadlocks themselves, some were persuaded to do so by their partners. Most paid for the initial locking of the hair and meet the cost of maintaining dreadlocks, while others indicated that their partners contributed. Some married women indicated that their mothers-in-law (*vamwene*) and sisters-in-law (*vana atete*) had indicated their displeasure at dreadlocks, although there had been no direct verbal censure. As we shall elaborate below, young women who cultivate dreadlocks have to negotiate resistance from various sources.

The NGOs employed the highest number of young women with dreadlocks. These women occupied various positions as directors, programme and administrative officers. In the late 1990s, NGOs absorbed a significant number of university graduates. The NGOs also increased their visibility and advocacy roles.<sup>27</sup> NGOs dealing with gender and women's empowerment, governance, civic education, and HIV/AIDS provided dreadlocked women with employment. International organisations like UNESCO, UNIFEM, and others also absorbed young women who cultivated dreadlocks. NGOs that are faith-based tended to discourage the cultivation of dreadlocks. This is in line with the general Christian resistance to dreadlocks that we highlight below.

Apart from the NGOs, dreadlocked women are likely to be employed as lecturers at universities, colleges and high schools. Others were students at universities, including the University of Zimbabwe, Catholic University, Women's University in Africa and the Zimbabwe Open University. Some of the statements by the young women highlight high levels of awareness of the theme of black female identity in a post-colonial, cosmopolitan African city. Ellen, aged 26 and working for an international NGO, said, "Dreadlocks say who I am as an African woman." Tendai, aged 21 and a student at the University of Zimbabwe described dreadlocks as, "an affirmation of my black identity." Tinashe, aged 37 and a Rastafari woman said:

There is a misconception that since we tend to cover our dreadlocks, we are therefore inferior to our Rasta men. This is totally false; when I feel I want my locks to flow and be visible, nobody stops me from doing so. Our headgear is simply a symbol of respect, and not a sign of oppression. Dreadlocks show the power of the natural state. They are a statement of my identity as a daughter, a princess and a proud African woman.

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27. See Sam Moyo, John Makumbe and Brian Raftopoulos, *NGOs, the State and Politics in Zimbabwe* (Harare, SAPES Books, 2000).

Another respondent, Rutendo, aged 29 and working in the area of gender and HIV/AIDS, maintained that dreadlocks gave her a sense of identity as she worked amongst whites. According to her, "Some white people think we should all look like them. My dreadlocks tell them to back off. Dreadlocks illustrate how comfortable I am with my skin, history and sexuality." Iris, 36, a doctoral student with a university in the Netherlands, responded: "Dreadlocks are my own simple way of expressing my blackness. I scare white people with my dreadlocks." Other young black women made references to the effect that dreadlocks were "cool", "neat", "different", "appealing" and so on. However, these young women have faced resistance from various actors.

### **Contested Hairstyle: Resistance to Dreadlocks**

Women's dressing, hairstyle and access to public space have been contentious issues throughout history. Whether African women should be "allowed" to put on trousers, for example, continues to be a matter of debate. Cultural traditions, religious factors and social change have a bearing on what is considered acceptable and appropriate for women.<sup>28</sup> African patriarchy tends to restrict women's choices in the name of protecting "our culture." It is significant to note that even progressive sections of society can become quite conservative when it comes to women's issues. University of Zimbabwe male students easily join hands with commuter omnibus touts in regulating female clothing. Even something that at first glance would appear quite innocent, like dreadlocks for women, is bound up with questions of power and control.

One of the most recurrent statements that we encountered was to the effect that "decent" women should not cultivate dreadlocks. This ensued from the conviction that dreadlocked women had a rebellious outlook. Dreadlocks were associated with the refusal to conform to social values and norms. Women with dreadlocks were seen as potentially "dangerous". Mubaiwa, a 34 year-old commuter omnibus male tout, opined: "*Icho chinombozoita kuti mwanasikana akabva kuvanhu ade kumonyanisa vhudzi chii?*" (What is it that could possibly lead a woman who was brought up properly to have dreadlocks?). He suspected that most women with dreadlocks were girlfriends of married men ("small houses") as, in his opinion, no "real" husband would tolerate a woman with "twisted hair" in his house.

Some male respondents expressed the fear that once a woman defied society by cultivating dreadlocks, she would proceed to express her freedom in all the other areas of life. Dreadlocks were read as indicating the young woman's refusal to be subjected to social pressure and control. Apparently, the length of the dreadlocks is indicative of a woman's degree of non-conformity. Women with shoulder-length dreadlocks were seen as the

most extreme “rebels.” We observed that most young women settled for shorter dreadlocks or comb twists, which represent the “baby” stage of dreadlocks. These had a higher degree of acceptance than longer dreadlocks. However, we should acknowledge that most respondents indicated that the fact that their dreadlocks were short was due to the fact that cultivating them requires patience and time. Stylists indicated that it takes between 6 months to 4 years to have quality dreadlocks.

Discourses on decency ultimately moved in the direction of controlling black women’s sexuality in Harare. As we noted earlier, colonialism sought to limit the presence and visibility of black women in urban spaces. Lynette Jackson argues that there was collaboration between European and African patriarchies. She writes, “These two patriarchies, while unequal in terms of the colonial dispensations of power, were in rough agreement about where African women belonged and when they strayed from that place.”<sup>29</sup> Such patriarchal forms of control include subjecting women to physical and verbal abuse for putting on clothes that are deemed “offensive” by self-appointed male custodians of urban space. Women, homosexuals and all those who are regarded as “polluting” masculine ideals in Harare are promptly chastised. As a result, “Incursions of sexual or gender non-conformity into insular, male-dominated spaces are met by brutal retaliation.”<sup>30</sup>

An analysis of Zimbabwean literature shows that the notion of black female decency in the urban areas has received considerable emphasis. As we have shown elsewhere, literature provides us with an opportunity to examine African women’s struggle for emancipation.<sup>31</sup> In Zimbabwean literature, urban women are portrayed as being of questionable morals. Rudo Gaidzanwa highlights how Shona and Ndebele novels portray urban women as loose and vicious.<sup>32</sup> It is therefore not surprising that some respondents considered dreadlocked young women as “loose”. Socio-

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28. For an account on cultural change in Zimbabwe, see M. F. C. Bourdillon, *Where Are the Ancestors? Changing Culture in Zimbabwe* (Harare, University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1993).

29. Lynette Jackson, “‘Stray Women’ and ‘Girls on the Move’: Gender, Space and Disease in Colonial and Post-Colonial Zimbabwe,” in Ezekiel Kalipeni and Paul T. Zeleza (eds.), *Sacred Spaces and Public Quarrels: African Cultural and Economic Landscapes* (Trenton, NJ, Africa World Press, 1999), 151.

30. Human Rights Watch and International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, *State-Sponsored Homophobia and its Consequences in Southern Africa* (New York, HRW, 2003), 149.

31. Anna Chitando and Ezra Chitando, “Weaving Sisterhood: Women African Theologians and Creative Writers,” *Exchange* 34 (1), 2005, 22-38.

32. Rudo B. Gaidzanwa, *Images of Women in Zimbabwean Literature* (Harare: The College Press, 1985), 12.

linguist Pedzisai Mashiri notes the same trend in his discussion of the representation of blacks and the city in the post-independence television drama.<sup>33</sup> In the current local television soap, *Studio 263*, a dreadlocked character, “Dread Welly Wemapurani”, is doomed as he is naïve and short-sighted. This feeds into the stereotype that people with dreadlocks are not mature and in charge of their lives. Furthermore, Welly is a womaniser and resorts to questionable survival strategies as he tries to come to terms with the demands of urban life. Such casting increases the prejudice against the cultivation of dreadlocks. Religious ideologies also play a major role in the resistance to dreadlocks. We turn to this theme below.

### **Religiously-Inspired Opposition to Dreadlocks**

Christianity in its various forms has had a major impact on Zimbabwean ways of life. As a religion of modernity and having operated in tandem with colonialism, the Christian ideology tends to be dominant. Such has been its preponderance that when asked, virtually everyone has a denomination that they identify with, even if they may no longer be actively involved in church affairs. Most of the country’s nationalist leaders received their education at mission schools. Christian ritual specialists preside over burials at the Heroes Acre, while Christian programmes dominate on radio and television. In Harare, Pentecostal churches continue to grow at a phenomenal rate, converting cinema houses into houses of prayer. Gospel music has invaded popular culture,<sup>34</sup> increasing Christianity’s grip on the national consciousness.

Many conservative Christians are opposed to the cultivation of dreadlocks by both women and men. During our interviews, we were informed of a priest belonging to a Protestant church who refused to officiate at a marriage ceremony in Beitbridge in September 2004 because the bridegroom had dreadlocks. The priest insisted that the man had to remove his dreadlocks first since “Christianity and Rastafarianism are totally different religions.” The bridegroom refused to do so, and the couple had to resort to the services of the local magistrate. Many pastors, bible college students and lay Christians considered dreadlocks as the epitome of “the spirit of rebellion.” Once again, the idea of female decency, submission to male authority and humility came into play when discussing women’s dreadlocks.

In the foregoing section we drew attention to the association of *mhotsi* and *svikiro* in indigenous religions. Many Christians brought this issue up,

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33. Pedzisai Mashiri, ‘The Representation of Blacks and the City in the Zimbabwean Post-Independence Television Drama,’ Paper Presented at the Sixth Annual African Studies Consortium Workshop, University of Pennsylvania, 2 October 1998.

34. See for example, Ezra Chitando, *Singing Culture: A Study of Gospel Music in Zimbabwe* (Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2002).

maintaining that dreadlocks tied one to the ancestral cult (*mweya yemadzinza*). This is contrary to Christianity's rhetoric of "rebirth", "breaking with the past", "leaving the old" and so on. Pentecostals, who emphasise the role of the Holy Spirit, were particularly opposed to the cultivation of dreadlocks by young women. They charged that demons (*madhimoni*) lived in such "untidy" hair, and suggested that they could exorcise such spirits. For them, dreadlocks signify the persistence of the old spirits of Zimbabwe that should now give way to the cleansing power of the gospel.

The association of dreadlocks with Rastafarianism only aided the resistance by some Christians. They regard Rastas as lost people who have failed to recognise that the African past was one chapter of utter darkness. Prior to the introduction of Christianity, Zimbabweans were languishing in the land of darkness (*nyika yerima*), according to this specific stance.

We can highlight that the struggle between Rastas and Christians is over how to interpret the pre-Christian African past. While for the Rastas Africa had a glorious past, some Christians tend to reduce this past to a groping in the dark. Some Christians were also quick to dismiss the use of the Bible to support the cultivation of dreadlocks that we noted in the preceding section. According to Pastor David, "Even the devil can cite scripture; we need to employ the spirit of discernment." Consequently, dreadlocked converts were expected to get rid of the "old" hairstyle and adopt new ones, in line with their assuming a new life.

Despite the resistance, some dreadlocked young women in Harare were members of older mainline churches like the Catholic and Anglican. Others attended newer, "upper class" Pentecostal churches like Hear the Word Ministries. They maintained that in such churches, dreadlocks are accepted as an indication of one's sophistication. One dreadlocked respondent, Audrey, belongs to such a Pentecostal church. She was quite articulate in her analysis of the attitudes of most Christians:

I had stopped going to church until recently. I had stopped church because of the hypocrisy in modern churches which really disgusted me. I would rather be called bad and know that they are talking about me than come off as a saint while the devil is my pal outside church because then you'll really burn in hell, I think! I hate hypocrites and was a "church prostitute" for a while, hopping in and out of churches until I found one that I was comfortable with. It's a small church with really unpretentious people who've walked the true path of life and done their bad deeds — and won't hide it — and are now trying to set themselves straight. I hate people who judge and most Christians do that unmercifully and unfairly, based on their OWN ideals on life which they won't even adhere to. God and his love are not about that.

As we noted, a Christian moral regime is operating in Zimbabwe. Many parents are opposed to their children cultivating dreadlocks. In some

instances, young men and women have been thrown out of the family home for daring to have dreadlocks. In some cases, parents are concerned that members of their churches would accuse them of failing to control their children. This is the same fear that has worsened the silence and stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS in Zimbabwe. The need to be considered responsible parents has meant that there are generational conflicts, and issues like dreadlocks bring underlying tensions to the fore. In the next section, we examine how some employers resist dreadlocks.

### **Employers and Dreadlocks**

We have already highlighted the fact that NGOs, tertiary institutions and the informal sector tend to absorb most of the young women with dreadlocks in Harare. With a high level of unemployment, employers in Zimbabwe can afford to be selective. This has disadvantaged some young people with dreadlocks. Many of our respondents indicated that when they appeared for interviews with dreadlocks, interview panellists appeared unsettled. Given the dominance of Christianity, it is likely that some of the panelists are conservative when it comes to hairstyles. They tend to have reservations regarding dreadlocks. One dreadlocked male respondent who had been in charge of student welfare at one of the local universities but was later relieved of his duties felt that his hairstyle was the major reason for his dismissal. He argued that his superiors had always accused him of “twisting” the minds of the students as he had “twisted” hair.

Some respondents from the education sector also drew attention to the role of the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture. They noted that the ministry issued a circular (no. 76 of 2002) on the “Standard of Dress.” With specific reference to women, it announced, “The wearing of dreadlocks is not acceptable within the Ministry. This provokes an outcry from communities which need role models.” Our respondents argued that this loaded statement insinuates that dreadlocked women are not capable of serving as role models. Apparently, the notion of decency is at play among the policy makers. Critics also suggested that since dreadlocks are part of Zimbabwe’s cultural heritage, the Ministry should in fact be promoting dreadlocks. The resistance to dreadlocks within the Ministry highlights the extent to which “African culture” is being conceptualised by male indigenous elites with strong Christian backgrounds.

It is worthwhile to observe that some people with dreadlocks in Zimbabwe have had to approach the courts to seek relief. In 1995, Munyaradzi Gwisai, who later became a dreadlocked opposition Member of Parliament in 2000, filed an application to the Supreme Court after a High Court judge refused to grant him permission to take oaths of loyalty and office while having dreadlocks. Chief Justice Anthony Gubbay ruled that lawyers wearing

dreadlocks as an expression of Rastafarian beliefs could appear in court. Similarly, Ish Mafundikwa, a journalist, had to go to court so that officials processing passports could accept his photograph with dreadlocks. Some school children with dreadlocks have also faced the wrath of headmasters who regard them as rebels. All these examples illustrate the deep-seated nature of resistance to dreadlocks in Zimbabwe. Such resistance becomes magnified in the case of young women.

### **Conclusion**

Despite resistance by many employers, parents, sections of the church and from some members of society, dreadlocks have become popular among young women in Harare since the late 1990s. Although some consider them a mere fashion statement, the majority contend that dreadlocks pose a challenge to personal and contemporary notions of beauty. For them, dreadlocks signify their self-awareness as black women and acceptance of their sexuality. Dreadlocks challenge colonial and racist discourses of frizzy, nappy and kinky African hair. Young women with dreadlocks in Harare “speak” against colonial and patriarchal oppression through their hairstyles. Consequently, we can say that dreadlocks are multivalent symbols that radiate and deploy meaning at different levels.

Although we have celebrated black female identities throughout this article, we remain painfully aware of the serious threats that continue to stalk young women in Zimbabwe. They face violence when they access public space, while the HIV and AIDS epidemic poses a serious existential risk. While most of the dreadlocked women we interacted with possess economic power and are therefore better placed to face the challenge, many other women lack such power. Many have been forced to submit to patriarchal dictates as married women, “small houses” and as casual girlfriends to abusive men. It is our hope that the same levels of empowerment that characterise most dreadlocked women in Harare will be transferred to other women. Dreadlocked women have shown the resilience and courage to defy social definitions of “decency”. They have been confident enough to express themselves in a stifling environment. For us, the total liberation of women should not wait for tomorrow: it should have happened yesteryear!

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