

# Dreadlocks or Dreadfully Locked?

by Monica Arac de Nyeko

Everyone will tell you, hair is what makes a person, hair is sexy, hair tones attire, hair defines character, hair accessorises appearance, hair is imperative—it's all about hair, hair, hair. Women will sit in plaiting saloons until their butts ache and their legs freeze for the single pleasure of hair strands the size of spaghetti. The heat of the dryer is endured just for a single, momentary sparkling hair day.

With all this fuss about hair and grooming, my friend Beatrice almost developed hypertension when I told her I was doing dreadlocks. My sister, if she could, would have whipped me and ordered me to go and sing in the church choir because I was so bored with life to the extent of considering such a dreadful sin as dreadlocks. Instead I received an occasional pat on the back and some sincere and well-meant reminders that I was still in Uganda, Africa, and not the United States or Caribbean, and that I should not forget that I was a schoolteacher. No school would stand a deadlocked teacher in class! I nevertheless took the step and knotted my hair to dreadlocks.

People have said they who wear dreadlocks do so "to cause rejection," to feel different from others, to feel more secure about themselves, to show off, or to demonstrate they belong to a peer group. Another thing related to dreadlocks is marijuana use. Some also associate dreadlocks with non-conformity. And for others, only dirty people who never wash wear dreadlocks. Yet another twist to this is that most people in Uganda and other African societies find dreadlocks more acceptable for men than the women.

I remember a passing comment a friend made when I made my intentions known: "But you are woman, not a man. Don't forget that some things are better left for men!" Perhaps this is because most of these communities have a heavy patriarchal idealised perception. It has always been okay for the male sex to do most things—good or bad—and get away with them because the male is a symbol of authority and respect. Whatever he does is justifiable to the community. So if a woman's husband chooses to wear dreadlocks, she would find it difficult to tell him to do otherwise because she is only the wife. If the son wore dreadlocks, the parents would find this more tolerable than if it was the daughter who chose to wear it.

## Misunderstood Hairstyle

Never has a hairstyle been so dreaded and misunderstood, and generated so many rumours and beliefs. Before I myself began wearing my locks, I thought it was a male

thing. I am not sure why as I ponder over the perception now, but perhaps it was because the majority of dreadlocks wearers I had come across were male or maybe because everyone around me said so.

I had the pleasure of joining Dreadlocks, an electronic discussion forum where people of colour, specifically Black people, discuss every aspect of Dreadlocks. One of the discussants who prefers to call herself Te said of men and women wearing dreadlocks: "It is my observation that women with locks are more accepted than men with locks." Perhaps to her it was because women traditionally have longer hair, or because men are viewed as threatening when they promote their cultural attributes (African roots) while women are perceived as only wearing a hairstyle.

Chango, another discussant, posed the question "Accepted by whom?" Does this mean that to him, acceptance by whomever of whatever was not necessary? He says that he often does and says things that are not part of a group because he enjoys thinking for himself. When he was in his 20s, it was important to secure the approval and acceptance of other black people, so he put a Scary Curl in his hair and even considered getting gold caps on his teeth. But now that he is older, he doesn't care what his mother, his women or his boss think, he enjoys the dreadlocks.

For most dreadlocks wearers, male or female, the question has not been "Should I wear dreadlocks because it's acceptable for my gender?" Either way, it's not a question of when dreadlocks will gain acceptance as just another hairstyle because most people are too hostile anyway to even consider dreadlocks decent. Says an instructional guide from the *School of Allied Health Professions*:

Men's hair must be neatly trimmed and not fall below the collar. Ponytails, spikes, and dreadlocks are not acceptable. Women's hair, if long, may be required to be tied back. Spikes and dreadlocks are not acceptable.

Dreadlocks are rejected despite the gender of the wearer.

A female visitor to St. Louis said of people's reactions toward her dreadlocks, "A number of people in St. Louis took one look at me and ran for their cute little lives, pulling out chequebooks on which to write big donations to right-wing causes as they ran. Because dreadlocks indicate confusion of thought and character—good children have shiny, combed



hair. Bad children, poor children, have bushy, urchin hair.”

It's clear that the hair issue is not something anyone can run away from. Long or short hair, for instance, has been used as an identity of femaleness and maleness at different points in history and in different cultures. For dreadlocks, that is not the case. This is because for anyone who wears dreadlocks, it's for a reason they best know—a reason and definitely close to their heart, identifiable on a personal level, not at a generalized level.

#### Identity and Nonconformity

The most common connotation of dreadlocks, which dates back to the 1920s, is religious and derived from the

Rastafarians. The most familiar feature of Rastafarian culture is the growing and wearing of dreadlocks—uncombed and uncut hair allowed to knot and mat into distinctive locks. Rastafarians regarded the locks as both a sign of their African identity and a religious vow of their separation from the wider society they regarded as Babylon.

At a different point in history, dreadlocks were also common during the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya in the 1950s and 1960s when the top leaders often wore dreadlocks. They are said to have used dreadlocks as a sign of African identity and a religious vow of separation from modern, corrupt and unfair society.

Some other dreadlocks wearers justify the style as a biblical revelation. "All the days of the vow of the separation there shall no razor come upon his head until the days are fulfilled for which he separated himself to the Lord, he shall be holy, and shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow." (Numbers 6:5) "His head is as the fine gold, his locks are bushy, and black as a raven." (Songs of Solomon 6:11) "Solomon said, if he will show himself a worthy man, there shall not a hair of him fall to the earth." (1 Kings 1:52)

Everyone who wears dreadlocks has a historical, cultural, political, ideological or just fashionable reason and significance behind doing so. But

it is important to state that although not in all cases, many wearers of dreadlocks have an intense awareness of, and sensitivity to, their roots and culture. They are a positive statement about African values and are a powerful symbol of ethnic pride. Many of the people with "dreads" have a strong awareness of their ethnicity. However, the art of a perfectly executed dreadlock creation is a testimony to the individualism and creativity of the men and women who wear and contribute to the beauty of this style.

I for one am a Christian. I believe in God and Jesus Christ. I believe in love, faith, humility, and perseverance



and in all the things the bible requires of me. I believe in the rights for humanity. I work and I do my work to the best of my ability and talent. Dreadlocks bear witness to the fact that I know, practice, and understand who I am. It is an avenue through which I choose to express my individualism. I know dreadlocks carry a lot of negative associations; however, I will not cut them until I get tired of them. My knotted hair draws attention to my value for life; my acceptance to be creative and complex, to live and to love; and my agreement with nature to pursue happiness.

It should be remembered, however, that not everyone can wear dreadlocks, and dreadlocks cannot be for everyone. It is a unique hairstyle. It sets the person apart from everyone else in a certain way; the only problem is that people view it all in negativity. Sophie a friend a few days ago told me, "Everyone who wears dreadlocks probably has no sense in their heads." And I asked what she meant, if she meant therefore that I had no sense in my head because I chose to dread my hair, and she said, "It's only after you speak that the sense comes out." She probably said that because when you wear dreadlocks in a way society believes you have crossed a boundary. But dreadlocks, no matter the attitude toward them, are decent and striking. Dreadlocks are time saving and give a great feeling, as long as you take good care of them and keep them clean, of course. Wearing dreads is like a brotherhood or sisterhood kind of thing that not too many people would understand and open their minds to. It is with this in mind that one who wears dreadlocks doesn't pass another dread head on the street without some nod or smile of acknowledgement.

Slowly but surely, dreadlocks are coming to be accepted in almost all spheres of life—sports, arts, the professions. People who associate them with illegal substances or criminality miss the whole point. Jeffrey Bradley, in his book *Don't Worry Be Nappy*, says that to him, dreadlocks symbolise success, freedom, self-expression, and naturalness. For him, dreadlocks have become a declaration of determination to succeed in life on his own terms. And Neely Fuller Jr. in his essay *Do not "worship" hair* says Don't spend great time and/or effort: combing it, twisting it, patting it, brushing it, pulling it, greasing it, oiling it, shaping it, or looking at it. Don't spend so much time/effort, wondering about whether your hair is "right" or "wrong" or "good" or "bad." Don't worry about the hair: on your head, on your chin, on your face, over your eyelids, etc. Show more concern about the lack of constructive knowledge inside your head. He said it best for me. ☺

*Monica Arac de Nyeko was born and raised in Uganda. She is a teacher of literature at St Mary's College Kisubi (SMACK), and a fellow on Crossing Borders, a British Council-funded Creative Writer's Course. Her forthcoming fiction is by Fountain Publishers and Greenwillow books.*