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The Black Family Structure: A Viable Structure or a Myth?

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My objective for writing this essay on the black family was to examine and interrogate a myriad of stereotypes surrounding this family structure. Slavery and its inception need to be explored because it enables one to acquire a better understanding of the modern day black family. It is my hope that once we achieve this level of understanding, if not acceptance, that we may be able to start the healing process that is so necessary.

THE MOYNIHAN REPORT. SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES. POVERTY. CHILDREN IN TROUBLE. The aforementioned are descriptions and reflections associated with the black family. Although these iden tifications are different, they all reflect one negative connotation. The connotation is that of families of African descent being "problem ridden" and "dys functional." Despite the fact that many families are dysfunctional, the question is: " Why are families of African descent frequently labeled as such ?"

The state of black Americans and their families has been at the center of debate for decades. Biased and inaccurate reports such as the infamous Moynihan Report by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan have helped to solidify the false stereotypes surrounding the black family. Such reports and their counterparts have had a long and lasting detrimental effect . Em phasis has been placed on personal biases and racist testing procedures such as the Bitch Test instead of actual data and observation. The Bitch Test (as you can tell from its name), is very racist. It was an intelli gence test designed for children of African descent. This test unlike the Stanford - Binet IQ test, asked questions which were irrelevant to the child's IQ. Questions such as, "What type of car would you call a 'hooptie'?" were asked. Instead of using the aca demic terminology applied to children of European descent, this testing procedure employed slang terms. The application of this testing to those of African descent prompted the labeling of the IQ test as the "Bitch Test."

Eradicating and contradicting such beliefs perpetu ated by the Moynihan Report and the "Bitch Test" has been a long but steady process. Nevertheless, it is a process that those of African descent have undertaken with a great deal of vigor. Before anyone, including black Americans themselves, can truly understand where the black family is going, one has to take into account certain factors. These factors are numerous, but the one that has had the most profound effect was the institution of slavery. An in depth study of this factor will help to answer whether the depiction of the black family as "dysfunctional" and "problem -rid den" are a reality or simply a myth.

Despite its inception some 400 odd years ago, slavery continues to impact families of African descent. Al though forcibly taken to American shores with shack les and chains draped around them like garments, Africans retained some sense of family both mentally and spiritually. The familial bond which was present those 400 years ago still exists today. It is the tradi tional African family structure that is the baseline for the past, present and future black American family. It is therefore imperative that we examine this tradi tional structure.

In tribal Africa, the most important aspect of life and survival was the family. Unlike the European concept of family, the African family structure consisted of the entire community. In essence, ancestral and actual blood lines were not the primary basis for defining a family. This type of family structure continues to exist today. The institution of "fictive kin" (which consisted of individuals throughout the community) during slavery and thereafter enabled individuals to protect one another whether or not they were related. Once again, we witness how the communal bond that existed in tribal African families corresponds to contem porary black American families.

The black family has been surrounded by inaccuracies and mythology. Yes, mythology. It is not the same mythology which is embedded in Greek culture, in stead it is a type of mythology whose basis is that of stereotype and fear. It is the fear of what the black family will become, not what it actually is that has promoted such negative feelings by European authorities.

African American psychologists in particular, have cited specific examples which serve as a means of labeling the black family as "dysfunctional" and "prob lem ridden". Some myths that continue to prevail about those of African ancestry are the following: (1) Raw and uncontrollable sex is at the root of the black family problem. (2) Blacks lack a family tradition and came to America without a sense of morality and a background of stable relationships. (3) The black fam ily collapsed after Emancipation. (4) The black family is a product of white paternalism and government welfare. (5) The black family has always been a matri archy characterized by strong and domineering women and weak and absent men (Bennett).

When taken into perspective, we are able to see how the previously mentioned myths are based on the institution of slavery. The belief that sex was at the root of the family problem is correct in one sense. The sense that the European practice of miscegenation underscored the problems that those of African ances try were destined to face. The depiction of Africans as wild sexual animals was in actuality an attempt for white slave owners to overlook their own sexual de pravity and promiscuity of which they engaged in with the black female servants.

The only individuals engaging in raw and uncontrol lable sex were the white slave owners. Yes, raw and uncontrollable sex was at the root of the black family problem, but it was directed towards Africans, not practiced by them. If we are to question this myth, we would most likely come to the conclusion that these slave owners

engaged in bestiality. In their eyes, Afri cans had the attributes of animals and therefore were treated as such. Despite this belief, European slave owners continued to engage in sexual activities with individuals of whom they thought to be sub-human. In technical terms, engaging in sexual activities with animals is bestiality. In essence, the slave master's beliefs did not belie their actions. If these individuals were so animalistic in nature why did European-American women allow their children to be breast fed by female slaves? No "mother" in her right mind would allow such a thing to take place. Once again these individuals did not practice what they so ear nestly believed.

A lack of family tradition and an absence of morality and a stable background is believed to be at the heart of the collapse of the black family. Although the issue of morality is often linked to the area of sex, in this sense, a lack of morality also reflects the absence of a stable family structure. The question that we often encounter is: "What type of family structure can an uprooted people have ?" The answer: "Plenty".

As is often the case in American society, those who are different and who possess different beliefs are viewed as deficient. Contrary to popular belief, and as I pre sented earlier in this essay, an African concept of

family did exist. What European slave owners failed to realize is that those of African descent not only had a family structure but that it was based on African religious practices. "Religion is the strongest element in traditional background and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned" (Mbiti 1). In addition to contra dicting such European inaccuracies, the presence of religion also dispelled the myth that Africans lacked a religious foundation. What must be pointed out is the fact that just because the African family structure and practices were different, its presence should not be rendered non-existent.

The myth which has transcended both political and moral realms is the myth stating that the black family collapsed after Emancipation. In reality the black family was provided with the opportunity to collapse after Emancipation. With freedom came the following hardships for the black family: (1) A "freedom" to die of starvation and illness. (2) A majority of African -Americans remained on plantations as tenants for their former owners with little or no wages for their labors. (3) The severing of ties during the crisis of Emancipation (Eshleman 161- 162). Although Emancipation brought forth hardships it did not destroy the black family. Evidence of this is given by the simple fact that the black family still exists today.

Perhaps the most well known vehicle that has helped to strengthen such false beliefs is that of film. D.W. Griffiths' Birth of A Nation, while a cinematic master piece, is also a racist film. Birth of A Nation depicts the chaos and unrest that black Americans would engage in if they obtained the right to franchise. Throughout this film, we witness the so- called African-based tendency to self-destruct and destroy. Stereotypes such as the "brutal black buck" and the "tragic mu latto" further exemplified the behaviors that these individuals would exhibit after obtaining the right to vote. The words "brutal" and "tragic", in a subliminal manner convey the to endow such "brutal" individu als with such a privilege as voting. The compelling question is not whether or not the black family could withstand Emancipation, but more importantly whether or not the European-American family could deal with it.

Once again, we witness the fear that was inherent in emancipating those of African descent. Along with the status of being free came all of the opportunities (i.e. voting) that were supposed to come with it. It was Emancipation that compelled European- Americans to examine and consider their actions. For the first time, in a long time those of African ancestry were given the rights previously granted to only those of European descent. With freedom came the realization that those of African descent were not sub- human. This revelation enabled their former oppressors to see what they did to the black family and therefore they feared what the black family could now do to their families.

The belief that the black family is a product of white paternalism and government welfare presented in documents such as the Moynihan Report, is a myth that is misinterpreted and misconstrued. It has been the government's aim to make the black family a product of white paternalism. What is disguised as philanthropy is in actuality a means of keeping the black family in a role that is both dependent and subordinate. The welfare system, more so than black Americans themselves, has weakened the family struc ture. A prerequisite for being accepted into the wel fare program is that a woman cannot have a husband or boyfriend if she wishes to receive assistance. What the welfare system fails to realize is that there are two parent families that are also in need of government assistance.

According to Rosemary Bray, a black woman who grew up on the welfare system, ". . . the welfare question has become a race question." It appears that the welfare system is simply an example of the U.S. government's lack of courage in addressing the prob lem that these individual face. Money is viewed as the panacea to all off society's ills. Poverty is portrayed as an ethnic and generational trend. It is a vicious cycle. The question is, who will break that cycle? The black family has already undertaken this task via the pro cess of sacrifice. Sacrifice is the one element that has never been absent from the black family structure. In a black family, sacrifice includes sacrificing one's dreams and aspirations and even a part of oneself. A parent possessing a minimal amount of education who attempts to send their child to college is a prime example of this type of sacrifice. The fact that their child may surpass them in terms of education does not dissuade these individuals from helping their chil dren succeed. Sacrificing a part of oneself (such as the dream of attaining a better education for oneself) is totally altruistic. It is this one element in itself that makes the black family structure viable.

According to Norma J. Burgess, a member of the sociology and anthropology departments at Missis sippi State University, "The phenomenon of the fe male - headed family is not new to African-American culture, nor does it call for a need for women to marry and abandon this structure" (Burgess). In the Ameri can social structure, the female-headed family is not a new product of the black family structure. In essence, the female-headed family could be viewed as a prod uct of European interference. Burgess also lists two fundamental factors leading to the

Sylvester

Sylvester: The Black Family Structure: A Viable Structure or a Myth?

formation of this particular family structure: (1) the female-headed fam ily developed during slavery when slave marriages were not legally recognized. (2) The large number of pregnancies resulting from rapes by the slave master also lead to the formation of female-headed families (Burgess).

The fact that the black woman is often the backbone of the black family, does not coincide with the myth that the black family has always been characterized by "strong" and "domineering" women and "weak" and "absent" men. The truth of the matter is that the black woman often has no other choice than to be strong . If she is a single parent, an alternative does not exist if she and her family are to survive. There is nothing abnormal about a female headed household. In Africa, the family lineage is traced through the mother's or the female's line. Therefore, when has been being strong been viewed as a flaw? The answer: When it is in relation to the black woman.

Regarding the black woman herself, she is often de picted as promiscuous. It is this so called promiscuity that accounts for the myth of the black woman as always with child and unwed. This misconception is supposedly the foundation as to why black women do not have husbands and are therefore forced to raise their children alone. Once again, assumption and a love of "mythology" set the black family into a posi tion that is viewed as "dysfunctional."

The black man's presence in the family structure as "weak" and "absent" is a stereotype in every sense of the word. While the black man may be perceived as weak and his presence non - existent, it is not univer sal. Not all black men are weak and not all black men are absent from their role as father. No one denies that some men appear weak and are absent from the family structure, but they do not appear this way by choice. The black man's perception of weakness is due to circumstances such as the raping of their women and a raping of his own pride. How is it possible for a black man to act or feel like a man when he is unable to protect his own family? It is difficult for any indi vidual, much less a man of African descent, to be strong if the dominant culture has drilled this belief of being weak into him and does not allow him the opportunity to dispel such a notion.

What one may view as absence may actually be some thing totally different. The black man's absence in the black family structure is not necessarily a sign of weakness. Bray viewed her father's absence in an entirely different light. In her eyes, her father's departure from the apartment via the backdoor upon the arrival of social workers was a swallowing of pride on the part of her father. Like so many other men, he had to deal with the fact that the welfare system rendered him non-existent. In order for his family to receive any government assistance, he could not be a member of his household nor feel like a "strong" man in any sense of the word.

Perhaps one reason that the black family has been labeled in such an unfavorable manner is due in part to the African practice of polygamy. From a Catholic or Protestant perspective, polygamy was barbaric and a sign of promiscuity. This belief is one that has prevailed for years and continues to be associated to those of African descent. While polygamy was inher ent in the African family structure, its presence did serve a purpose. Contrary to the assumption that Africans performed polygamy due in part to a lack of morals, Africans viewed this practice as a means of achieving social and economic stability. Due to such factors as war and the inevitable loss of males, po lygamy enabled the plurality of wives to maintain a means of population. Another possible reason that the black family structure has been labeled unfavorably is based on the connection between slavery and familial ties.

The actual concept of slavery itself is a direct contribu tor to the problem that black families face today. According to W.E.B. Dubois, slavery not only affected the size of the Negro family but also their familial ties. Dubois believes that slavery created a great dispro portion among the sexes. He states: ". . . such social derangement due the effects of violence, war and severe economic competition was a major cause for wide spread sexual irregularity" (4). It was the ad verse effects of violence, war and the severity of eco nomic conditions that have rendered communal and kinship ties non-existent in the families of slaves in America.

Upon their deportation to the "New World" Africans were unable to exercise the marital practices that they had once performed. The enslavement of African people lead to: (1) No legal marriage. (2) No legal family. (3) No legal control over children. These three restrictions in themselves resulted in the eradication of the concept of the African family. Instead of adopt ing white patriarchal structures, Africans had to re vamp their previous familial structures. Their obvi ous goal being that of surviving in another land while at the same time retaining their Africanity. These individuals were able to do this by storytelling and African orature. This orature served as the link to their African motherland.

Although the legality of marriage was not based on a written contract, it was nevertheless based on some type of contract. The different meanings inherent in the words "legal" and "contract," although numer ous, did exist. Perhaps the most devastating blow to these African people was the denial of legal family. Prior to their enslavement, the life and survival of these African people was based on the community. The community was the backbone of the African family structure. In an hierarchical family structure, (a family structure that pertains to both European and African families) that type of family structure can exist if its base is absent? The fact that these individu als had no "legal" control over their children further weakened the familial bond. It is obvious that the term "legal" is often employed. In contrast to the European concept of family, the African family did not rely on legalities to determine who or what consti tuted a "family." Inherent in the attempt to eradicate the African marital structure were the following re strictions: (1) A slave cannot contract matrimony. (2) Slaves may be sold and transferred from one to another without any statutory restriction, as to the sepa ration of parents and children. (3) Slaves cannot marry without the consent of their masters (Dubois). In essence, the black family appeared to be devoid of a definite family structure due to the fact that they were not allowed to have one.

It is unquestioned that the practice of slavery was instated primarily for economic purposes. Therefore the concept of monetary gain did apply to those of African descent. The monetary value that a slave could bring for his white slave master, compelled slave owners to separate Africans from their families and sell them into chattel slavery.

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The African con cept of economy could be viewed as "primitive" and "simple" in contrast to the European ideology. The traditional concept of African economy was based primarily on the division of labor system. The men performed tasks such as hunting and cattle raising while the women prepared the meals.

Under the forces of slavery, the economics of the black family took on a very dramatic turn. No longer was the division labor theory the main focus of the eco nomic structure. Instead Africans were viewed as the only type of laborers . Everything was one sided; the African side being the one that did all the work. Economics brought forth a change in the manner in which the slaves lived. Evidence of the deplorable conditions that these individuals endured are cited in The Maryland Journal (May 17, 1788). The newspaper lists the following conditions: (1) A single peck of corn a week or the like measure of rice is the ordinary quantity of provision for a hard working slave. (2) The master puts the unfortunate wretches upon short allowances, scarcely sufficient for their sustenance, so that a great deal of them go half starved much of the time.

The economic system transcended more than just food rations and meager allowances. Africans were clothed in the flimsiest of garments. The slave family was issued two suits; a coarse suit consisting of cotton and wool for the winter and a thin suit for the summer. Overall, the provisions issued to the slave family were extremely scanty.

It is undeniable that slavery had a deep and detrimen tal effect upon the black family. These individuals now have to deal with feelings of low self-esteem and a very low sense of self-worth. Adverse factors are still prevalent and these factors make it extremely diffi cult, although not impossible, for black Americans to go from experiencing a negative self- image to a more positive one. This difficulty to transcend a collective negative self-image, contributes to the problems that so many black Americans face in today's society.

Black Americans and other minority groups have set out particular goals in order to strengthen family and inter group relations. The two goals which groups such as black Americans hope to achieve are (1) Plu ralism. Pluralistic societies grant their members the freedom to preserve their cultural heritage. (2) To develop independent societies. (Yinger). In Yinger's opinion, segregation appears to be an attack on plu ralism. Fortunately it is this same segregation that has compelled the black family to seek autonomy and independence. In this case, segregation did not have its desired effect. Segregation eventually resulted in the black family's desire to re-explore the traditional practices of the African family structure.

Despite the negative stereotypes that plague the black family, the family structure continues to prevail. The contemporary black family has taken on the task of correcting these negative images. Black families: (1) Adopt children at a higher rate than their white coun terparts. (2) For the hundred year period between the end of slavery and the aftermath of WW ll, the struc ture of African-American family life was characterized by a remarkable degree of stability (Billingsley). Thus, black families are working to dispel the myths of instability and of being dysfunctional.

The black family structure is one whose evolution has been continuous. The black family is not a retrograde trend, it is a structure that is here to stay. This is not to say that the black family structure maintains the best type of family structure. There are problems that continue to plague this group of people. It has not been my attempt to portray the black family structure as the ultimate family structure. What has been my attempt is to portray the family structure as one that is viable and enduring. Like any other group, black Americans have undergone change and will continue to do so. What we should all attempt is to do is keep an open mind. Mythology should be kept where it belongs; in a book, not as a basis for oppression and inequality.

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