

Taking Care of Business:
The Black Family and the Black Church

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The story of Africans in America is a story of enslavement, brutalization, exploitation, animalization (Fairchild, 1995), and neglect. The psychological and material deprivation forced upon African people was met with a resilience unmatched in the known history of hu(wo)manity. Two social institutions ensured the survival of African people: the family and the church.

The Family

The capture and enslavement of African people wreaked horror on their families (and, by extension, their communities) in Africa as well as in the Americas. Deliberate attempts were made to break up families as family members were sold from plantation to plantation at the whim of their captors (Haley, 1976). Early sociologists, such as E. Franklin Frazier (Loury, 1997) suggested that the contemporary (dis)organization of Black family life in America may be traced to the legacy of three hundred years of enslavement.

The Church

Slavery also had a demonstrable effect on the religious practices of the enslaved Africans. In addition to the cultural imposition of European religions (particularly Christianity) upon Africans throughout the Diaspora, laws were passed that prohibited Africans from engaging in their traditional religious rituals and beliefs (Alkalimat, 1986). Yet, Africans adapted European religions to serve their unique needs as a people in captivity.

The Readings

Basu and Fairchild (2000) offer readers a set of articles that explore these two social institutions in America, Europe, and the Caribbean. Unfortunately, the presentations often leave

the reader wanting for a more authentic and complete discussion of the vital roles of Black family life and the Black church as they evolved from the antebellum to the modern period.

Alkalimat's ambitious paper seeks to provide a 500 year history of African religious expression in a mere 16 pages. In this, he gives scant attention to the origins of monotheism in Africa throughout the tremendous diversity of religious practices that developed within the earth's second largest continent for more than ten thousand years. With an emphasis on West African religious traditions, Alkalimat attempts to demonstrate the "survivals" of traditional religious practices in North America. He correctly points to the ambivalent role of the Black church: encouraging liberation and activism *versus* placating the masses with the promise of freedom in the afterlife. In the latter regard, we note that religion is, all too frequently, "the opiate of the people." In tracing African Americans' development of a religious autonomy in Baptist and later African Methodism, Alkalimat strangely suggests that other self-conscious religious movements were "cults" or "sects," and he includes the Nation of Islam in this latter category. He concludes by lambasting contemporary Black churches for failing to adopt a more activist posture, and blames them for the current "backwardness" of the African American community.

The web-based pieces by Mamiya (1999/2000) and Matory (1999/2000) are taken from the rather dubious website, *African.com*. Mamiya gives a similarly brief overview of the development of the Black church, with a focus on North America. The treatment is truly "encyclopedic": what it lacks in depth it makes up for with a superficial breadth. Although one might credit Mamiya for describing Christianity as a tool for oppression (by encouraging docility among the African captives), he negates this positive by capitulating to the dehumanization of the African captives by referring to them by their social status: as "*slaves*." Like Alkalimat,

Mamiya's rapid-fire history of denominational development among Africans in America points to the role of the church in political leadership, economic development, and education.

Matory's focus on Afro-Caribbean religions (Matory, 1999/2000) is similarly encyclopedic in providing superficial breadth without depth. And although we might applaud his attention to the variety of religious forms in the Caribbean, and his attention to the survivals of continental African religious rituals and terminology, we are appalled at his suggestion that the entirety of the North American (U.S.) slave trade involved only between 74,000 and 400,000 captured Africans. And this is over a history of close to 200 years (from 1619 to 1808, when the slave trade was abolished in the United States). Other historians provide figures closer to 28 million Africans forced to the Americas during approximately the same time period. And although this latter figure is inclusive of North America, the Caribbean, Central America and South America, it stretches credibility to think that, at most, only 400,000 Africans were forcefully brought to what is now the United States of America over the entirety of the slave trade. Even *Encarta Africana*, the flagship resource of Africana.com, places the figure at 11 to 12 million, with as many as 7,000 enslaved Africans forcefully brought to Charleston, South Carolina, in *one* year. This criticism notwithstanding, the editors are to be credited with bringing to the attention of their readers the wide diversity of African-Caribbean religious forms and their origins.

The readings on the family are somewhat more mixed. The inclusion of Loury's castigation of the Black poor is very curious (Loury, 1997). One would be hard pressed to find a more flawed analysis that succeeds only in blaming the victim for his or her destitute condition. Without mentioning the legacy of forced segregation, planned mis-education, and malignant neglect, Loury engages in the radical conservative fantasy that a lack of moral scruples among

Black men has somehow caused their unemployment. It is due, according to Loury's cancerous thinking, to the fact that Black men have not taken up their responsibility to provide for their ill begotten children, and this has led to their not seeking employment. Unemployment, for Loury, can be cured with the simple "act of will." The inter-generational poverty in the Black community is not due to the rapacious economic appetites of the ruling White male capitalists, but by the *moral in turpitude* of Black teen ages who exhibit few if any scruples about premarital sex and even fewer inhibitions about bearing children out of wedlock. The solution to this problem is foisted, then, on the shoulders of the more successful Black middle class who have to serve as moral role models to their desperately poor and morally bankrupt brethren.

Thankfully, Basu and Fairchild (2000) provide an apt juxtaposition to the nauseous politicizing of Loury with the nicely analytical piece by Tracey Reynolds, an African-Caribbean born and reared outside of London. Reynolds explodes the myth of family pathology that is created and perpetuated by the mass media (and by rabid conservatives such as Loury and his mentor, Charles Murray), and demonstrates that Black men are neither lazy nor "feckless," and Black women are not "super" or doing all that well either. It is not a glass ceiling that these men and women face, it is an impenetrable barrier wrought of stone and iron. Reynolds provides the historical and institutional frameworks that more adequately characterize the impediments to economic and familial development of Africans who were stolen to the Caribbean and later sought liberation in England. The parallels with the situation in the U.S. are eerie, and Basu and Fairchild (2000) would be advised to find a companion piece to make these parallels more concrete, such as the well documented but only weakly analyzed chapters by Chideya (1995).

Conclusion

Africans have survived and thrived into the 21st Century. But it may be the 22nd or the 23rd Century before true liberation is to be won. It is likely that the most potent revolutionary forces will come from the longstanding social institutions of the family and the church. Although Basu and Fairchild (2000) provide readers with a comprehensive statement of the problem, the *Introduction to Africana Studies* is better served with articles that focus on programmatic solutions to African oppression. These solutions are more likely to be found in texts such as Robert Hill's classic book, *Strengths of Black Families* (Hill, 1972) and the emerging forms of liberation theology that were inaugurated by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X (see Fairchild, 1994).

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