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The Black Family In America

By Basil Matthews

The Black family structure in America did not commence in 1619 when the first Blacks arrived in Jamestown, Va. It extends thousands of years back into the societies of Africa, particularly the western part.¹ The Blacks who were brought to America to be enslaved against their wills, belonged to societies that were fully developed within their own frame of reference.² They were not "deprived persons" in any way when they arrived in Jamestown. They had certain skills—mainly agricultural—and certain values in their minds. The skills they possessed were very useful to plantation owners. Perhaps this was the reason why Blacks were preferred to Indian or other kinds of slaves, including the indentured servants from Europe. The agricultural skills and labor of captive Blacks were in large part the fundamentals upon which the overpowering economic wealth of America was subsequently built.

True, the skills that Blacks brought with them were mostly material and perishable ones, but they had non-perishable skills in their minds, that is: values. Because of these values, it was possible for them to adjust to their new environment — an environment which represented a threat to their survival. These values enabled them to read, interpret, accommodate and adjust to the bewildering and upsetting conditions in a foreign environment. Freud³ would have one kind of label for the adjusting techniques. Erikson⁴ another, and Piaget⁵ still another. So far as Black people are concerned, the key to their adaptive technique is the Black perspective — a multisystem of meanings, techniques, attitudes, institutions and strategies around which Black people organize their lives toward a meaningful fulfillment.

One of the basic values that the early Blacks brought with them to this country is the second nature sense of: self as family and self as community. In the social context of slavery, this sense of self as family became, specifically, sense

of self as Black family. The slave owners, in their own interest, thought it wise to separate the slaves in order to disrupt all possible communication among them. This was done to prevent the slaves from organizing against the system. Therefore, slaves from different parts of Africa were often distributed in such a way that none of them could understand the language of the other. In this way, the slave owners and the system thought to prevent communication and to break up any possible link. But the masters were mistaken. It never dawned on them that no particular language was necessary for human beings to communicate.

The linguist, Albert Mehrabian⁶, established that among mankind (meaning white people at this point), 93% of all communication is nonverbal. Despite language barriers, the slaves and their descendants communicated through feelings, and through the values and institutions they brought with them. Because of this interpersonal communication, they were able to survive under the most adverse conditions that man has ever faced. The record shows that there are some 30 million Blacks in the United States today.

The first survival project the slaves undertook was to regroup around the family and community, and form a viable slave community.⁷ To this day, Black family togetherness has remained basic to the structure and function of the Black community.

Family Values

In spite of all the pressures exerted by the legal system against what is called illicit adoption, it is still a fact that in many segments of the Black community, 90% of all child adoptions are of traditional nature—unacceptable to the prevailing standards of law. Charles S. Johnson, in *Shadow of the Plantation*,⁸ showed that the larger a family was the more likely it would adopt other people's children. Therefore, there were no great economic or prestige motives involved in adopting children. This came from the deep sense

of self as family, and the need for survival.

This family feeling is observable as well in marriages. Among Black people in America, in the Caribbean and in Brazil, one-third of all those living in marital unions live in marital arrangements which are not sanctioned by the law or the church. This behavior is adopted in the face of stern legal, economic and religious pressures. Those people apparently find the justification for their behavior in the sanction of their own communities and in a deep-rooted traditional sense of self as family and self as community. There were certain conventional modes of entering into marriage in the traditional African society from which these Blacks came.⁹ Marriage in the African society was arranged between two groups of people—the family of the male and the family of the female. Transactions went on for months (sometimes for two or three years) between the relatives on both sides. The reason for this was that the community felt responsible for, and had an investment in the successful outcome of the marriage. The community needed children to strengthen the tribe. To make cooperation possible in the rearing of children for the society, the related families had to learn to work with each other. Hence the lengthy preparation for marriage.¹⁰

When the marital union was finally sealed, it was done through a bond or pledge that guaranteed a successful matrimony. In the history of West African societies, many occasions arose when the regular conventions could not and did not work due to situations of war, famine, migration, displacement, enslavement, and other forms of social disadvantage. How was the continuity of the race or the group taken care of? Certain subsidiary forms of legal marriage developed within the community. What we call consent union was just one of about half a dozen others.¹¹ [This was confirmed in interviews with elders during my visit to Nigeria and Senegal.] It is helpful to know

ground to the tradition of marriage and Black family in this country or in any part of the world that is populated by Black people.

The Extended Family

From this overall model of approach to marital arrangement emerges the Black extended family. This type of family grew out of the definition of self as family and self as community, the necessity of togetherness in order to survive physically and emotionally. Although Blacks—like other people—can be classified by sociologists into nuclear families, the Black family is not a nuclear unit like the white family. It is part of a much larger network—the extended family. Whereas the “nuclear” family is very much an isolated unit, with its members fragmented and individualized; where independence and self sufficiency are considered to be the hallmark of real growth and maturity, the contrary is true in the Black family where interdependence is the key element.¹² A Black person—consciously or unconsciously—does not, has not, and apparently cannot function efficiently and optimally except in relationship to others of his own.

Some manifestations of this extended family operation may be seen in the yearly Black family reunion in the South.¹³ The reunion is so important that a family member must have very profound and serious excuses not to attend. Southern whites also have family reunion, but there is a big difference. Whites in this society have the system going for them; Blacks do not, rather the societal arrangements are stacked against them in a system of institutional racism. For this reason, the coming together of whites does not have quite the same importance and function as the coming together of Blacks. The Black reunion serves to give emotional support and the strength necessary to help its members cope with a hostile environment.

The Funeral

The Black funeral is another occasion

where this sense of Black togetherness is demonstrated. When an elder in the community passes, everyone comes home for the funeral. The home folks usually hold the body for as long as it takes for all relatives to arrive. Everyone is so conscious of family that the seating arrangement in the church for the funeral services is made according to the degree of proximity or closeness to the deceased.

A Black funeral is a happening which reflects some of the realities as well as the differentials and the needs of Black people living in America. [Some years ago when I was teaching at Talladega College in Alabama, I tried out my students' awareness and sense of consciousness of family by asking each to list on the spot, from memory, as many relatives as each could and to state the degree of kinship to those persons so listed. The results were amazing. The students were able to tell who their third, fourth and fifth cousins were and where they lived. They came up with numbers of relatives ranging from 18-188.] To do this requires a tremendous consciousness of family ties.

Three years ago, the *Washington Post*¹⁴ carried a series of articles on the loneliness industry. It was amazing how some enterprising people capitalized on the loneliness and depression of others by setting up bars, clubs and beach houses for singles. Yet it was mostly for lonely whites. How about Blacks? Being humans, they too must get lonely like everyone else. Well, they do. But they have something built into their family system which takes care of this, thereby negating the need for a commercial establishment.

There are about 3,000 communes in this country serving mostly white people. Although there are a few Black satellites in white communes, the existence of an all-Black commune is unheard of. This suggests that while other people find it necessary to seek to create artificial or substitute family institutions to offset the ravages generated by the workings of the technological society, Blacks already

⁶ have genuine family built into their system. It must be emphasized at this point, how important and central to the structure, functioning and understanding of Black people is the Black family system,¹⁵ particularly in the Black extended family pattern.

Mental Health

In the area of mental health, Charles Valentine has illustrated in dramatic fashion how the Black extended family operates to achieve repeated success where institutional methods of treatment resulted in repeated failures.¹⁶ From Valentine's account, it also emerges that a young Black patient found a receptive extended family in several locations away from his own home.

Many scholars are of the opinion that the Black extended family as an institution does not exist today, particularly in the cities. This view can be reasonably questioned.

For example, in Washington, D.C., surveys have been conducted which¹⁷ tend to show how operational and functional the Black extended family still is. The surveys also show that the extended family has made certain adjustments in response to the demands of urban living. These surveys were done in the Shaw community, in LeDroit Park, and in Takoma Park. To be part of an extended family, the members do not all have to live under one roof; they do not have to live next door, they do not have to contribute financial aid on a regular basis. It is this type of relationship between persons which shows whether they are family-oriented or not.

In the big city today, life is so hard that family members may not have adequate means to make regular financial contributions. [The modern African township is going through a similar experience. I observed some of this during three field trips to three different West African countries. Urban stresses make it difficult for family members to contribute in cash or in kind to the slew of relatives left behind in the villages¹⁸.] But financial contribu-

tion is only one form of family function and support. There are values and other arrangements which are just as important for survival and functional effectiveness than economic support. They are: emotional support, moral support, human understanding, and interpersonal communication.

Is the Black Family Different?

Sooner or later someone will ask this question: What is so different about the Black family; do not Jews, Italians and other ethnic groups also possess the extended family? Yes, they do. So what!

There are only seven colors in the rainbow, yet an endless diversity of color schemes and art forms derive from just these seven. There are eight notes in the Western musical scale, yet a great diversity of sounds and musical forms have been produced from just these eight. Similarly, certain universal family types exist in the world, but there seems to be no end of variations on these universal family themes. It is this variation on basic themes that makes for significantly different social structures, cultures and civilizations.

There are variations which make the Black family significantly different. These variations result from the interplay of cognitive, affective and directive elements. Some of these observable variations relate to Black consciousness, to ethnic self image, to the definition of family, family relationships and function; they relate to the socialization practices of the Black community, their use of human emotions, and the function of religion. Yet other variations relate to world view, work ethics, the communication process, the structure of identity, personality and power. The combined net outcome of all these variations contribute to a significantly different Black family system—so different that many non-Blacks find it difficult to understand or analyze objectively.

The Black family is unique in that it is the only place where Black people living

in a racist society can possibly acquire a true sense of belonging. This is to say: the Black family is the only place where the Black person can really feel free. It is the only place in which they can be socialized into responsible Black adulthood. The Black family is unique in certain other respects as well. Family on the whole is increasingly being defined in the Western world—particularly in the United States—in terms of statistical and economical function. If, for example, one looks up "family" in the Bureau of Census statistics, one would come out with a structure, a function of a definition of family which is nothing but a function of statistics and economics. This is far from what a family is expected to be.

If one applies the Census definition to Black people, one would know very little about the Black family value system. Therefore, Blacks have to look for another perspective in defining the Black family. This means defining the Black family from a value system derived from their African heritage. The Black family is the sense of self as family and as community. The self in the traditional system of Black values is more than an individualized self. What is being suggested here is that the Black family member is sort of a corporate person (I am because we are). This is togetherness, because Black family members do not function in isolation or as individuals. Consciously or unconsciously, they function as members of a cohesive force.¹⁹ But this does not mean that Blacks are immune to dissension and discord. The sense and structure of togetherness referred to here is rooted in a complex of patterned feelings, emotions and distinctive forms of interpersonal communication rather than in economically or statistically conditioned structures.²⁰ This activity of feeling and emotion is obviously of a spiritual dimension. This dimension is apparently germane to the Black family, society, and civilization. At least history suggests this. But the need for this dimension became even more acute when Blacks came to



America, where their traditional economic trappings and support were repressed or expunged, and as a result, they had to resort to the support of spiritual themes, dynamics and dimensions in order to survive.

Viewed in this light, the Black extended family in its contemporary form is extremely significant. Nothing in this presentation detracts from the rich fluid diversity of Black family patterns. What we are talking about is a Black family system; diversity within the system may itself be a part of the Black difference.

The realities of the relationships which constitute the Black family are more adequately described or defined in terms of a communication process rather than by reference to socio-economic models or residential status or the composition of the household unit. In the perspective projected here, economic models and residential arrangements provide an infrastructure and an ambience. In such settings various types of creative communication procedures occur across the spectrum of the Black family system. Indeed the economic model and the other familistic contrivances appear to be but different forms of a wider and more basic human communication process. The position taken in this article represents a departure from current sociological postures on the Black family. □

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