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THE MYTH OF THE BLACK MATRIARCHY

IN DEALING WITH THE QUESTION of the role of the black woman in the black struggle one must ultimately encounter the assertion that the black community is organized along matriarchal lines, that the domineering black female has been placed in a superordinate position in the family by the historical vicissitudes of slavery, and that her ascendancy to power has resulted in the psychological castration of the black male and produced a host of other negative results that include low educational achievement, personality disorders, juvenile delinquency, etc. One of the solutions to the "Negro" question we hear is that black males divest themselves of this female control of black society and reorganize it along patriarchal lines which will eventually solve the problem created by black female dominance.

And one can easily understand how the typical black female would react when told that the problem of black liberation lies on her shoulders, that by renouncing her control over the black male, their other common problems such as inadequate education, chronic unemployment and other pathologies will dissipate into a dim memory.

The myth of a black matriarchy is a cruel hoax.

It is adding insult to injury to black liberation. For the black female, her objective reality is a society where she is economically exploited because she is both female and black; she must face the inevi-

table situation of a shortage of black males because they have been taken out of circulation by America's neo-colonialist wars, railroaded into prisons, or killed off early by the effects of ghetto living conditions. To label her a matriarch is a classical example of what Malcolm X called making the victim the criminal.¹

To explode this myth of a black female matriarchy, one must understand the historical role of the black woman and the development of that role as it was influenced by the political and economic organization of American society. Like most myths, the one of a black matriarchy contains some elements of truth. Black women have not been passive objects who were satisfied with watching their menfolk make history. If they had been contented to accept the passive role ascribed to the female gender, then the travail of the past four centuries might have found the black race just as extinct as the dinosaur. It is a poor tribute to their historical deeds to characterize them as "sapphires," an opprobrious term that belies their real contribution to the black struggle.

Referring to black women as matriarchs is not only in contradistinction to the empirical reality of their status but also is replete with historical and semantic inaccuracies. It was in the study by J. J. Ba-

1. George Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks*. New York: Merit Publishers, 1965.

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by ROBERT STAPLES

chofen² that the term matriarchy was first employed. He was attempting to present a case for the high position of women in ancient society. His conclusion was that since free sexual relations had prevailed during that time and the fathers of the children were unknown, that this gave women their leading status in the period he called "mother-right."

A matriarchy is a society in which some, if not all, of the legal powers relating to the ordering and governing of the family—power over property, over inheritance, over marriage, over the house—are lodged in women rather than men.³ If one accepts this formal definition, the consensus of most historians is that "men reign dominant in all societies; no matriarchy (*i.e.*, a society ruled by women) is known to exist."⁴

From a historical perspective, the black woman has always occupied a highly esteemed place in black culture. The African woman who first reached the shores of the American continent was already part and parcel of the fabric of history. She was descended from women who had birthed some of the great militarists of antiquity and from whose number had come some of the most famous queens to sit upon the thrones of ancient Egypt and Ethiopia. Her exploits and beauty were remembered by Semitic writers and fused into Greek mythology.⁵

Despite her important historical role, there is little doubt about the respective authority patterns in the black family of the

pre-slave period of African civilization. There, the family organization was patriarchal in character and was a stable and secure institution. E. Franklin Frazier described the African patriarchal family this way:

"His wife and children gathered around him, and served him with as much respect as the best drilled domestics serve their masters; and if it was a fete day or Sunday, his sons-in-law and daughters did not fail to be present, and bring him some small gifts. They formed a circle about him, and conversed with him while he was eating. When he had finished, his pipe was brought to him, and then he bade them eat. They paid him their reverences, and passed into another room, where they all ate together with their mother."⁶

The ordeal of slavery wrought many changes in the family life of Afro-Americans, including the male and female roles. Family life of the African model was an impossibility when the slave's existence had to be devoted primarily to the cultivation and manufacture of tobacco and cotton. The buying and selling of slaves involved the splitting up of families, while the main-

2. J. J. Bachofen, *Das Mutterrecht*, Stuttgart, 1861.

3. Margaret Mead, *Male and Female*, New York: William Morrow and Company, 1949, p. 301.

4. William Goode, *The Family*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1964, p. 14.

5. John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, New York: Random House, 1947.

6. E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939, p. 7.

tenance of discipline on the plantation prevented the husband and father from protecting his wife and children against his white masters and other more favored slaves. The financial value set on slave children and the rewards given to successful motherhood in cash, kind, and promotion from field slave to house slave gave an especially high status to the mother, a status which the father could only enjoy if placed in a position akin to that of a stud animal, this leading to a breaking of family ties and the degradation of family life still further.

Under the conditions of slavery, the American black father was forcefully deprived of the responsibilities and privileges of fatherhood. The black family's desire to remain together was subordinated to the economic interests of the slave-owning class. Only the mother-child bond continually resisted the disruptive effect of economic interests that dictated the sale of fathers away from their families. Not only did the practice of selling away fathers leave the black mother as the prime authority in the household but whenever the black male was present, he was not allowed to play the normal masculine role in American culture. Davie reports that:

"In the plantation domestic establishment, the woman's role was more important than that of her husband. The cabin was hers and rations of corn and salt pork were issued to her. She cooked the meals, tended the vegetable patch, and often raised chickens to supplement the rations. If there was a surplus to sell, the money was hers. She made the clothes and reared the children. If the family received any special favors it was generally through her efforts."⁷

Just as in the society at large, power relationships in the family are aligned along economic lines. The power base of the patriarchal family is, in large part, based on the economic dependence of the female member. In the black slave family, the black woman was independent of the black male for support and assumed a type of leadership in her family life not found in the patriarchal family. At the same time,

white society continued to deny black males the opportunity to obtain the economic wherewithal to assume leadership in the family constellation.

THE REASONS for this suppression of the black male are found in both the economic imperatives of slavery and the sexual value system of white America. In the early period of colonial America, the white family was strongly patriarchal and many of the income and property rights enjoyed by women and children were those 'given' to them by the husband or father. White women had primarily a chattel status, particularly in the Southern part of the country. They were expected to remain chaste until marriage while white southern males were permitted, or often encouraged, to sow their wild oats before, during and after marriage.⁸

A double standard of sexual behavior allowing premarital sex for men while denying it to women, always poses the problem of what females will provide the source of sexual gratification for bachelor males. There is adequate historical evidence that black slave women were forced into various sexual associations with white males because of their captive status. That physical compulsion was necessary to secure compliance on the part of black women is documented by Frazier, in relating this young man's story:

"Approximately a century and a quarter ago, a group of slaves were picking cotton on a plantation near where Troy, Alabama, is now located. Among them was a Negro woman, who despite her position, carried herself like a queen and was tall and stately. The overseer (who was the plantation owner's son) sent her to the house on some errand. It was necessary to pass through a wooded pasture to reach the house and the overseer intercepted her in the woods and forced her to put her head between the rails in an old stake and rider fence, and there in

7. Maurice Davie, *Negroes in American Society*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1949, p. 207.

8. Arthur W. Calhoun, *A Social History of the American Family*, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1919.

that position my great-great-grandfather was conceived."⁹

Thus, the double-standard of premarital sexual behavior allowed the Southern white woman to remain "pure" and the bodies of the captive female slaves became the objects of their ruler's sexual passion. Consequently, black males had to be suppressed to prevent them from daring to defend the black woman's honor. For those black males who would not accept their suppression passively, the consequences were severe. As one person reports the story of his father's defense of his mother:

"His right ear had been cut off close to his head, and he had received a hundred lashes on his back. He had beaten the overseer for a brutal assault on my mother, and this was his punishment. Furious at such treatment, my father became a different man, and was so morose, disobedient, and intractable, that Mr. N. decided to sell him. He accordingly parted with him, not long after, to his son, who lived in Alabama; and neither mother nor I ever heard from him again."¹⁰

During the period of slavery, the physical resistance of black males to the rape of their women was met with all the brutal punishment white society could muster. That they were not totally successful in their efforts to crush the black man is evidenced in the heroic deeds of Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, David Walker and others. The acts of these black males are sometimes played down in favor of the efforts of Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and other black females in securing the slave's freedom. Such favoritism can be expected of a racist society bent on perpetuating the myth of a black female matriarchy, with males pictured as ineffective husbands and fathers who are mere caricatures of real men. The literary castration of the black male is illustrated by the best selling novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*,¹¹ which generated much heat and little light, in terms of understanding one of the most important black revolutionists of his time.

The cultural stereotype of the domineering black woman belies the existence of the

masses of black women who constituted a defenseless group against the onslaught of white racism in its most virulent sexual and economic manifestations. That black women are still involuntarily subjected to the white male's lust is reflected in the revelations of a white employer to John Howard Griffin, as reported in his book, *Black Like Me*:

"He told me how all of the white men in the region crave colored girls. He said he hired a lot of them both for housework and in his business. 'And I guarantee you, I've had it in every one of them before they ever get on the payroll.'

'Surely some refuse,' I suggested cautiously.

'Not if they want to eat — or feed their kids,' he snorted. 'If they don't put out, they don't get the job.'"¹²

BLACK WOMEN have frequently been slandered by the cultural folklore that the only free people in the South were the white man and the black woman. While there have been a few black women who have gained material rewards and status through the dispensation of their sexual favors to white men, the massive indictment of all black women for the acts of a few only creates unnecessary intra-group antagonisms and impedes the struggle for black self-determination.

Many proponents of the black matriarchy philosophy assert that the black female gained ascendancy in black society through her economic support of the family. Although the unemployment rate of black males is disproportionately higher than that of white males, only a very small minority of black families with both parents present are dependent on the mother for their maintenance. It is a rather curious use of logic to assume that black females, who in 1960 earned an annual wage of \$2,372 a year as compared to the annual

9. E. F. Frazier, op. cit., p. 53.

10. *Ibid*, p. 48.

11. William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, New York: Random House, 1967.

12. John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me*, New York: Signet, 1963.

wage of \$3,410 for white women and \$3,789 for black men,¹³ have an economic advantage over any group in this society.

However, what semblance of black female dominance that is found in our society can be traced to the persistent rate of high unemployment among black males which prevents them from becoming the major economic support of their family. The economic causes of female dominance are manifest. For instance, the percentage of black women in the labor market declines as the percentage of black males employed in manufacturing and mechanical industries is increasing. The effect of higher black male employment is the male's added responsibility for his family's support; the authority of the wife declines and that of the husband increases.

Many black men have not been permitted to become the kings of their castles. If black women wanted to work, there was always employment for them – even during depressions. Sometimes it was even a higher kind of work than that available to black men. Historically, black males have suffered from irregularity of employment more than any other segment of the American proletariat. Thus, they have been placed in a weak economic position which prevents them from becoming steady providers for their families. Any inordinate power that black women possess, they owe to white America's racist employment barriers. The net effect of this phenomena is, in reality, not black female dominance but greater economic deprivation for families deprived of the father's income.

THE MYTH of a black matriarchy was strengthened by the Moynihan Report released in 1965.¹⁴ Moynihan's central thesis was that the black family was crumbling and that a major part of the blame lay with the black matriarchy extant in the black community. Some of the evidence cited would lack credibility to all but a group bent on making the victim responsible for the crimes of the criminal. Such sources of proof as the higher educational

level of black females vis-a-vis black males conveniently overlook the alternative possibility – that many black males are forced to terminate their formal education early in order to help support their family. Instead, they cite the wholly unsupported statement by a "Negro" expert that, "Historically, in the matriarchal society, mothers made sure that if one of their children had a chance for higher education the daughter was the one to pursue it."¹⁵ In a society where men are expected to have a greater amount of education and earn a higher income, it is difficult to imagine black women celebrating the fact that over 60 percent of the college degrees awarded American blacks are received by women. The end result of this disparity, according to one study, is that almost 50 percent of black female college graduates are married to men employed at a lower socio-economic than their wives.¹⁶

Moreover, according to Moynihan and his cohorts, the black matriarchy is responsible for the low educational achievement of black males. In marshalling this arsenal of evidence, Moynihan was apparently unable to find any likelihood that the racist educational system, with its concomitant racist teachers, bore any responsibility for the failure of black males to reach acceptable educational levels by white standards. In the criminalization of the victim, countervailing evidence is dismissed out of hand. The fact that black schools are more likely to be housed in inadequate buildings, with inferior facilities, staffed by inexperienced and racist teachers and over-crowded,¹⁷ only confuses the issue, especially when there is a matri-

13. *United States Census of Population Report*, 1960.

14. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, United States Department of Labor, 1965.

15. Whitney Young, *To Be Equal*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964, p. 25.

16. Jean Noble, *The Negro Woman College Graduate*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1956, p. 64.

17. *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Office of Education, 1966.

archal structure that is more handily blamed.

According to the "experts" on the black family, the black male is harshly exploited by the black matriarchy. Many black mothers, they report, express an open preference for girls.¹⁸ This charge is confirmed by a white psychologist, described by a major magazine as devoid of any racism, who states that black males have an inordinate hatred for their mothers.¹⁹ Although there are research studies that reveal no sex-role preference on the part of black mothers,²⁰ it appears that the practitioners of white social science have not been content with pitting husband against wife but also wish to turn sons against mothers, brothers against sisters. The evidence for these assumption is not only flimsy, but in some cases also non-existent. If the research is similar to other psychological studies, they have probably used a sample of ten blacks, who, on the verge of a psychotic breakup, wandered into their mental clinic.

These charges of black men hating their mothers must be very puzzling to the black mothers aware of them. They would be puzzled because they realize that if a preference is shown for any sex-role in the black family, it would more likely be expressed in favor of the male child. The problems of raising a black male child in a racist society have been great. Many black mothers out of fear – real or fancied – repressed the aggressive tendencies of their sons in order to save them from the white man's chopping block. For to act as a man in a society which feared his masculinity, the black male was subject to the force of brutal white retaliation. The black mother had to constantly live with the realization that her son might be killed for exercising the prerogatives of manhood. For those black mothers who exorcised their son's aggressive drives out of concern for their safety, hatred seems to be an inappropriate, and most improbable, response.

In addition to the host of pathologies putatively generated by the black matri-

archy, the familiar theory of a relationship between fatherless homes and juvenile delinquency is brought up again. While there is nothing inherently wrong with a woman heading a family, the problem arises when she tries to compete in a society which promotes, expects and rewards male leadership. Consequently, she is unable to bring to her family the share of the social and economic rewards received by father-headed households. It is this very factor that probably accounts for any discernible correlation between mother-headed households and juvenile delinquency. The children in a fatherless home are frequently relegated to the lowest living standards in our society. The problems facing husbandless women with children are compounded by the inequities in American society based on sex role ascriptions.

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to state that the black woman is just like the women of other races. Her history is different from that of the prototypical white woman and her present-day behavioral patterns have evolved out of her historical experiences. In general, she is more aggressive and independent than white women. There are studies that show that black females are more non-conforming than white females as early as age ten. The reason for her greater self-reliance is that it has been a necessary trait in order for her and her children to survive in a racist and hostile society. Moreover, the society has permitted her more self-assertion than the white female.

Among male chauvinists, aggressiveness per se may be considered an undesirable trait in women and should be restricted to the male species. But this is all part of the

18. Thomas F. Pettigrew, *A Profile of the Negro American*, Princeton, New Jersey: D. Van Nostrand, 1964, p. 16.

19. The particular psychologist in question, Herbert Hendin, was quoted in *Newsweek*, November 17, 1966, pp. 119-120.

20. Robert Bell, *The One-Parent Mother in the Negro Lower Class*, Unpublished paper presented to the Eastern Sociological Society, 1965.

age-old myth about the inherent nature of woman as a passive creature. More often than not, it has served as a subterfuge for the exploitation of women for the psychological and material gain of the male species. Black women lose nothing by their greater tenacity. That tenacity has, historically, been a source of strength in the black community. While white women have entered the history books for making flags and engaging in social work, black women have participated in the total black liberation struggle.

While recognizing these differences, the question before us now is how much power do black women really have and how is it exercised? Power is commonly defined as the ability to dominate men, to compel their action even against their wishes.²¹

THE BLACK WOMAN has often been characterized as a more powerful figure in the family because she participates more in making decisions about what kind of car to buy, where to go on a vacation, etc.²² In certain cases, she is the only one to make major decisions. A closer inspection of her decision-making powers often reveals that she does not make decisions counter to her husband's wishes, but renders them because he fails to do so. The reason he defers to her in certain decisions is simply because she is better equipped to make them. Usually, she has more formal education than her mate and in matters relating to the white society, she knows her way around better. She is more familiar with the machinations of white bureaucracies since contacts with the white world have been more available to black women than to black men.

Making decisions that black men cannot, or will not, make is a poor measure of the power a black woman has in the family. The chances are good that no decisions are made which he actively opposes. The power of black women is much like American democracy – it is more apparent than real. Power alignments are frequently based on the alternatives a individual has in a situation where there is a conflict of

interests. It is here where the black male achieves the upper level of the power dimension.

Whenever a black man and black woman find themselves in objective and irremediable conflict, the best solution is to find another mate. The objective reality of black women is that black men are scarcer than hen's teeth. For a variety of reasons, there is an extremely low sex ratio in the black community, especially during the marriageable years – 18 to 45 years.²³ This means that black women must compete for a relatively scarce commodity when they look forward to marriage. They are buyers in a seller's market. Black women, like all women, have their affectional and sexual needs. Many a black male's shortcomings must be tolerated for the sake of affection and companionship. In a sense, many black women have to take love on male terms.

The low sex ratio hardly allows black women to exercise any meaningful control over black men. In fact, as one black woman states:

"As long as she is confined to an area in which she must compete fiercely for a mate, she remains the object of sexual exploitation and the victim of all the social evils which such exploitation involves.

In the Negro population, the excess of girls is greatest in the fifteen-to-forty-four age group which covers the college years and the age when most marriages occur . . . the explosive social implications of an excess of more than half a million Negro girls and women over fourteen years of age are obvious. . . . How much of the tensions and conflicts traditionally associated with the matriarchal framework of Negro society are in reality due to this imbalance and the pressures it generates."²⁴

21. Henry P. Fairchild, *Dictionary of Sociology and Related Sciences*, Totowa, New Jersey: Littlefield, Adams and Co., 1965, p. 227.

22. Robert Blood and Donald Wolfe, *Husbands and Wives*, Illinois: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1960.

23. In New York City, for instance, there are only 75 black men for every 100 black women in about this same age range.

24. Pauli Murray, *The Negro Woman in the Quest for Equality*, paper presented at Leadership Conference, National Council of Negro Women. (Washington, D.C., November, 1963), pp. 11-12, 12-13.

ANOTHER INDEX of the matriarchy is simply the percentage of female-headed households in the black community. The Moynihan theory of the black matriarchy derives from his findings that 25 percent of all black families have a female head. This "proof" of a matriarchal family structure brings up many interesting questions, not excluding the important one: **over whom do these women have control?** Logically, the only power they have is to face a super-exploitation by the system of white racism that bi-parental black families do not encounter to the same degree.

The matriarchal myth is not always applied to only black families. **A number of social scientists claim that suburban white families are matriarchal. They point out that the commuting father's disappearance during the day leaves the mother in charge of the home and children. As a result, the father's power is reduced in these areas, and he is relegated to enacting the "feminine" role of handyman.**²⁵ This observation has prompted one person to suggest that exhorting black slum dwellers to emulate the presumably more stable white middle-class, restore father to his rightful place, and build a more durable family life will subsequently expose them to the threat of the suburban matriarchy.²⁶

Any profound analysis of the black matriarchy proposition should reveal its fallacious underpinnings. Recognition of this fact raises the crucial question as to why white society continues to impose this myth on the consciousness of black people. This writer submits that it has been functional for the white ruling class, through its ideological apparatus, to create internal antagonisms in the black community between black men and black women to divide them and to ward off effective attacks on the external system of white racism. It is a mere manifestation of the divide-and-conquer strategy, used by most ruling classes through the annals of man, to continue the exploitation of an oppressed group.

In the colonial period of Algeria, the

same situation existed wherein the colonists attempted to use the female population to continue their colonial rule. Fanon reports that the colonial administration devised a political doctrine for destroying the structure of Algerian society. **By encouraging Algerian women to break the bonds of male domination in their society—setting male against female—the colonialists hoped to dilute the Algerian capacity for resistance.** According to Fanon, it was:

*"... the woman who was given the historic mission of shaking up the Algerian man. Converting the woman, winning her over to the foreign values, wrenching her free from her status, was at the same time achieving a real power over the man and attaining a practical, effective means of destructing Algerian culture."*²⁷

IN CONTEMPORARY America, a female liberation movement is beginning to gain impetus.²⁸ This movement is presently dominated by white women seeking to break out of the centuries-old bondage imposed upon them by the male chauvinists of the ruling class. Whether black women should participate in such a movement is questionable. Hatred of a social curse which is part and parcel of an exploitative society that discriminates not only against blacks but also women should not be confused with hatred of men. The adversary is not one sex or the other — it is the racist, capitalist system which needs, breeds and preys upon oppressions of all types.

Any movement that augments the sex-role antagonisms extant in the black community will only sow the seed of disunity and hinder the liberation struggle. Whether black women will participate in a female liberation movement is, of course, up to them. One, however, must be cognizant of the need to avoid a diffusion of energy

25. Ernest W. Burgess and Harvey J. Locke, *The Family*, New York: American Book Co., 1960, p. 112.

26. Eric Josephson, "The Matriarchy: Myth and Reality," *The Family Coordinator*, 1969, pp. 18, 268-276.

27. Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, tr. by Haakon Chevalier, New York: Grove Press, 1967, p. 39.

devoted to the liberation struggle lest it dilute the over-all effectiveness of the movement. **Black women cannot be free qua women until all blacks attain their liberation.**

The role of the black woman in the black liberation struggle is an important one and cannot be forgotten. From her womb have come the revolutionary warriors of our time.²⁹ The revolutionary vanguard has a male leadership but the black woman has stepped beside her man engaged in struggle and given him her total faith and commitment. She has thrust herself into the life or death struggle to destroy the last vestige of racism and exploitation in the American social structure. In the process of continuing her life-long fight against racist oppression, the myth of her matriarchal nature will soon join the death agony of America's racist empire. Until

that time arrives, the black woman should be revered and celebrated – not only for her historical deeds in the building of African civilization, in the struggle to maintain the black peoples of America as a viable entity – but for her contemporary role in enabling black people to forge ahead in their efforts to achieve a black nationhood.

28. See Evelyn Reed, *Problems of Women's Liberation*, New York: Merit Publishers, 1969, for one white radical's approach to the matriarchal origin of society question.

29. It is interesting to note that, despite unfounded rumors about the emasculation of the black male, the thrust of the black liberation struggle has been provided almost exclusively by a black male leadership. In selecting leaders of black organizations, black females inevitably defer to some competent black male, an act which shows how much they really prefer the dominating position they supposedly have in black society.

The women of China are becoming free. They wear pants so that they can walk, climb and dig; and climb and dig they do. They are not dressed simply for sex indulgence or beauty parades. They occupy positions from ministers of state to locomotive engineers, lawyers, doctors, clerks and laborers. They are escaping "household drudgery"; they are strong and healthy and beautiful not simply of leg and false bosom, but of brain, brawn, and rich emotion. In Wuhan I stood in one of the greatest steelworks of the world. A crane which moved a hundred tons loomed above. I said, "My God, Shirley, look up there!" Alone in the engine-room sat a girl with ribboned braids, running the vast machine.

W. E. B. DuBOIS, "Autobiography"