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## MASCULINITY IN THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

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### Abstract

Masculinity in the African Diaspora, as an area of academic study, has generated a lot of controversy. Critical to the debate is the correct picture of the impact of slavery and discrimination in post-emancipation period on the personality of an African male. On one side of the divide, are scholars who have tended to portray a picture of total emasculation of the African male. On the other side, are writers who have not seen any negative impact on the manhood of the African whatsoever. Adopting holistic approach, this paper argues that it is neither there nor here. Rather, what transpired in the African Diaspora should be seen by standing astride the Atlantic ocean, looking at manhood in Africa and manhood in the Diaspora. A more than cursory look at the phenomenon indicates the emergence of a manhood continuum, showing both resilience and vulnerability.

**Keywords:** Masculinity, African Diaspora.

### INTRODUCTION

With the explosion of interest in Men's Studies, and increasing realization of the fact that masculinity can successfully be analysed only in the context of a continuum, and by taking into consideration the cultural milieu, a careful study of manhood in African Diaspora won the attention of the academic community. This work is, therefore, designed to add to the growing intellectual contribution. The methodology adopted here is deliberately interdisciplinary, holistic and eclectic. To do justice to Masculinity in the African Diaspora, it is pertinent to have a firm grasp of African cosmology and worldview, indeed, African culture. And to understand the forces which were at work in the emasculation or marginalization of masculinity in the African Diaspora, we must patiently analyze the American slave system and the disabilities suffered by African-Americans since emancipation.

### MASCULINITY IN AFRICA

In Africa, maleness pervaded the air. People ate, drank, and breathed maleness. Maleness so dominated the thinking and actions of people that the matter entered into the realm of absurdity, at least, in some contexts. Marriage was a highly esteemed institution in Africa because it was the route through which the continuity of a community was guaranteed. Thus, Africans welcomed the arrival of children with celebration. Because of the importance Africans attached to procreation, it was not uncommon to excuse the lateness of the newly wed male to communal work. As it was

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usually put, 'he has work at hand', the assignment being to increase the population of the community by putting his wife in the family way. During sharing of palm wine, he would be served the dregs in addition to his entitled quantity. The reason being the belief in the efficacy of the substance in the making of babies. Here ends the baby stem. Beyond this point, the philosophy, the policy, and the practice of procreation took different routes for both sexes. The old in the game of child making found it fashionably to tell the newly wed to put his feet hard to the wall and do it well to have male child. Why male child? The reason is simply the continuity of the lineage. The disparity between male and female children was marked right from the moment the new born baby inhaled his or her first air. The "oro onu" {the sound of the mouth} from the rejoicing women who heralded the arrival of the child would tell those far away the whole story. If they had a female child, the sound would be thrice. But, if they had the ultimate, i.e. male, it would be four times. It is important to note here that, in Igbo cosmology and worldview, only four objects put together as an entity would be considered complete and whole. This is evident in the presentation of Igbo traditional kolanut. A kolanut with four parts was said to be complete, and one was not expected to present kolanuts to a gathering with any figure that was less than four. The preference for male children as the life wire for the continuity of the lineage could be seen from the kind of names they gave their children. The name, 'Ahamefula', given to a male child, meaning, 'my name should not get lost', emphasized their enormous interest in posterity and immortalization. It was not uncommon to find a wife, who, after years of giving birth to females, used her own money to procure a wife for the husband, with the hope that she might give birth to a male child to save the husband's name from extinction. There were cases where the quest for male children and the survival of names, made some men, who realized they could not impregnate their wives, to secretly contract the services of their trusted friends to sleep with their wives. A male child was made to feel his important position in the family right from the beginning of his socialization processes. He was taught male roles...how to become a successful man, how to rule his household and wield authority over his wife and children, how to effectively participate in the decision making process in the community, and was thoroughly initiated into manhood. He took his seat in the village assembly and walked with his head held high. He was bold and prude. He was pro-establishment and pro-institution. He was also a patriot. He cherished life, and prayed to Chineke {God the Creator}, and to the lesser gods and goddesses for protection, health, and abundant life. This was the setting from which the Africans, who were up-rooted and sold into American slavery, found life worthy of living.

#### **AMERICAN SLAVERY AND THE MARGINALIZATION OF MASCULINITY**

The impact of American slavery on the character of the African slave has been an issue of enormous controversy. According to Stanley M. Elkins, American slavery transformed the African slave to a sambo. In his own words:

Sambo, the typical plantation slave was docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing, his behaviour was full of infantile silliness and his talk inflated with childish exaggeration. His relationship with his master was one of utter dependence and child like attachment.. For most southerners in 1860, it went without saying not only that Sambo was real...that he was a dominant plantation type...but also his characteristics were the clear product of racial inheritance.. It was achieved partly by the type of authority-system to which they were introduced and to which they had to adjust for physical and psychic survival. The new adjustment, to absolute power in a closed system involved infantilization, and the detachment was so complete that little trace of prior {and thus alternative} cultural sanctions for behaviour and personality remained for the descendants of the first generation. <sup>1</sup>

Elkin's infantilization thesis has generated a lot of debate in the discussion of African experience in the New World.<sup>2</sup> Crucial in the on-going controversy is the impact of American

slavery on the enslaved Africans. Admittedly, slavery represented the worst form of social oppression, unprecedented in human history. A slave was the property of the owner, an outsider, a legal non-person, and a 'socially dead' person. Everything was done to deny his humanity, obliterate his mind, annihilate his soul, and crush his intellect. The USA Constitution defined him as three-fifth of a free person. The trauma, which the evil institution engendered on the enslaved, is not debatable. The complexities of human conditions elicited diverse responses. Thus, we have the picture of the "banzo". He represented an African who adopted one of the most tragic forms of rejection of slave life. He "suffered a pathetic paralysis of will and energy, and with mounting despair, slowly died".<sup>3</sup> There were overt and elaborate rejection of slavery such as slave revolts that led to the establishment of semi-independent and organized slave communities in the Caribbean and Latin South America called, Maroons and Quilombos, respectively, and the very successful Haitian revolt. Some African slaves showed their discontent in somewhat covert ways. There was the tendency to sabotage their work by feigning illness and by destroying the instruments of bondage. Others resorted to a more discreet violence such as the poisoning of the slave master's food. Prominent among the renowned poisoners was a maroon named Francois Macandal of Haiti.<sup>4</sup> There was also the inclination by some slaves to be very passive and to wear the mask.<sup>5</sup> Here, they took pains to conceal their sorrow, having one mind for the white community, and another for themselves. In the circumstances of instant punishment and certain death, many slaves in the antebellum south acted out, though consciously, the sambo stereotype:

Got one mind for white folks to see.  
'Nother for what I know is me.  
He don't know, he don't know my mind  
When he see my laughing  
Laughing just to keep from crying.<sup>6</sup>

In their frustration and defeatism, some took solace in spirituals. These songs were properly worded to reflect not just their servile status, but also their conviction that a day would come when their bondage would cease. These songs were usually and generally referred to as "Let My People Go: Spirituals". "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel" is a good example.<sup>7</sup> In the final analysis, there is no doubt that, in the overwhelmingly dehumanising world of American slavery, African male slaves were denied considerable avenues to exercise their manhood as they knew it in Africa. Their descendants suffered similar fate. The male gender roles like being the head of the family and the automatic exercise of authority over wives and children, participation in decision making process, etc. were denied the slaves. As they were not part of the mainstream of the American society, African slaves naturally could not come into the picture in Euro-American definition of manhood. Thus, every male slave, adult or a child, was addressed as a 'boy'. Thus, as a system of political, economic, and social emasculation, the American slavery occasioned structural damage to the masculinity of Africans in the era of slavery.

### **MASCULINITY SINCE EMANCIPATION**

The Masculinity of Africans in the Diaspora has been an issue of tremendous debate, and a lot of works have been written on it.<sup>8</sup> Black Masculinity has also been analysed specifically within the context of family life.<sup>9</sup> From the literature, we have varying portrayals of black males. Blacks have been portrayed as dope addicts, punks, troublemakers, lazy, gang-bangers, hostile, deprived, dumb, dangerous, deviant, and disturbed. They have been portrayed as predominantly useless, unfit, powerless, burdensome to their spouses and children, and irresponsible husbands/fathers. We have also been shown the images of clowns, buffoons and gladiators. In the words of Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson:

Historically, racism and discrimination have inflicted a variety of harsh injustices on African Americans in the United States, especially males. Being male and Black has meant

being psychologically castrated....rendered impotent in the economic, political and social arenas that whites have historically dominated.<sup>10</sup>

Also illuminating in this discourse, is Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and as the narrator comments that he is invisible "simply because people refuse to see me". "When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination....indeed, everything and anything except me".<sup>11</sup>

As the present writer has observed in his portrayal of the movement of a boat against the tide that:

The various Emancipation Proclamations and Acts technically ushered the ex-Slaves into twilight zone between slavery and freedom. The liberated slaves were confronted with monumental problems, and there were struggles to resolve their crisis of identity and to achieve equality and respectable humanity. For liberated slaves in USA, for example, the exigency of the situation dictated the making of very hard and difficult decisions, such as emigration, integration, and adoption of self-help ideology. These were against the background of Grand father clause, literacy test, Vagrancy law, "Separate But Equal" ruling, "last hired and first fired" norm, violence, etc.. It is true that.. some people of good will from the master group aided the ex-slaves and their descendants in their efforts towards physical and psychological adjustments, the fact remains that the majority have been insensitive to the plight of the ex-slaves and their descendants and maintained this perilous state of affairs, and the legal prescriptions and judicious systems were, and still is, ill-equipped and feeble to tackle the problems and to penetrate the critical province...the area of mental attitude. Thus, their boat was, and still is, against the tide.<sup>12</sup>

While we can safely ignore some of the character traits on the basis that they are not universally applicable to African-American males, and strongly affirm the position that Stereotypes are basically false classificatory labellings and, thus, empirically useless, we must admit the fact that certain trends are indeed disturbing and emotionally numbing. Put differently, many African-American males, evidently their "Talented Tenth", made tremendous efforts and were able to break the vicious cycle of demasculinization and the institutionally entrenched 'Boy' syndrome, the fact remains that certain sections of the population are still trapped in the ugly emasculated manhood. This is true psychologically speaking. From the inner recesses of their minds, the crisis of identity spring forth comments like, "I am a man". A physically well-formed male and psychologically stable person does not announce his manhood. This is because what is self-evident requires no proof. There is no denying the fact that inferiority complex breeds over reactions and over indulgence. This is particularly true in the areas of sex and violence. In respect to the former, sexual prowess became a weapon to prove manhood to, and command the respect from, the women folks, who have been institutionally favoured. As regards violence, the institutionalisation of violence by the mainstream America engendered a culture of violence. Violence, they say, breeds violence. The result being that those who have been schemed out of the "American Dream", placed on the margins of the society, or "in the depth below the depth", and realizing that "he who is down, fears no fall", became anti-establishment and anti-institution. It is an iron law of nature that people, universally protect institutions they took part in their creation and in which they are stakeholders. To appreciate the functioning of the mind of the oppressed, let us re-capture here, Claude McKay's poem, "If Must Die", composed in the Red Summer of 1919 as Blacks fought the white mobs in Chicago:

If we must die.. let it not be like hogs Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot, While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs Making their mock their at our accursed lot. If we must die.. oh. Let us as nobly die, So that our precious blood may not be shed in vain; then even the monsters we defy Shall be constrained to honour us though dead! Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe; Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave, And for their thousand blows deal one death blow! What thou before us lies the open grave? Like

men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back.<sup>13</sup>

The culture of violence and apathy towards law and governmental institutions which were occasioned by years of oppression and violence developed dynamics which resulted in Black males constituting 45 percent of the USA prisoners in 1994, in spite of the fact that they accounted for only 6 percent of the country's population.<sup>14</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, it is pertinent to state that oppression and violence inflicted on male Africans in the Diaspora caused emasculation of their masculinity. Through tremendous personal and group efforts as well as institutional support, some of them were able to break the vicious cycle of marginality and, consequently, attained respectable manhood. For some sections of the population, slavery and discrimination to have caused irreparable damage. This is because remedial measures adopted by government agencies and people of good will, both black and white, have not been able to regenerated their masculinity. Thus, whether conceptualised by the American mainstream or Africans in the homeland, the masculinity of this fraction of the African-American male population has failed to fit into the acceptable frame. Thus, the masculinity of Africans in the Diaspora remains a continuum, with shades ranging from healthy and actualised manhood to emasculated masculinity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), pp. 82, 88-89.

<sup>2</sup> See, Ann J. Lane (ed), *The Debate Over Slavery: Stanley Elkins and His Critics*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971). For more discussion on Africans in American slavery, see, Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1970); E.F. Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United State*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); H. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975); J. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), and Alex Haley, *Roots*, New York: Dell, 1977.

<sup>3</sup> Abdias Do Nascimento, "Racial Democracy" in Brazil: Myth or Reality? (A dossier of Brazilian Racism), (Ibadan: Sketch Publishing Co. Ltd., 1972), p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> Alvin O. Thompson, "Africans in the Caribbean and the Guianas", *Tarikh*, Vol. 5, no. 4, 1978, p.45.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Lawrence Dunbar, *The Complete Poems of Paul Lawrence Dunbar*, (New York: Dodd Mead, 1922), p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Okon E. Uya, "Resistance to Slavery in the New World: A Comparative Perspective", A seminar paper presented at the Department of History, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria, April 25, 1984, p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas R. Frazier, (ed), *Afro-American History: Primary Sources*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1970), pp. 94-95.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Richard G. Majors and Jacob U. Gordon, (eds.), *The American Black Male: His Present Status and His Future*, (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1994); Garth Kasmu Baker-Fletcher, *XODUS: An African American Male Journey*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); L. Gary, *Black Men*, (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1984); J.T. Gibbs, *Young, Black, and Male in America: An Endangered Species*, (Dover, MA: Auburn Publishing House, 1988); M. Mauer, *Young Black Men and the Criminal Justice System: A Growing National Problem*, (Washington, D.C.: The Sentencing Project, 1990); H. Madhubuti, *Black Men: Obsolete, Single, Dangerous?*, (Chicago: Third World Press, 1990); R. Majors and J. Billson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*, (New York: Lexington Books, 1992); D. Wilkinson, and R. Taylor, *The Black Male in America*, (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1977); Ronald B. Mincy, (ed), *Nurturing Young Black Males: Challenges to Agencies, Programs and Social Policy*, (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 1994); C. Lee, *Empowering Young Black Males*, (Ann Arbor, MI: Eric Counselling and Personnel Services Clearinghouse, 1992); R.E. Hall, "Clowns, Buffons and Gladiators: Media Portrayal of African-American Men", *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 1, 1993, pp. 239-251; J. McGhee, *Running the Gauntlet: Black Men in America*, (Washington, D.C.: National Urban League, 1984); R. Staples, *Black Masculinity: The Black Male's Role in American Society*, (San Francisco, CA: Scholar Press, 1982); National Urban League, *Fact Sheet: The Black Teen Male*, (Washington, D.C.: National Urban League Research Department, 1988); and J.B. Stewart and J. Scott, "The Institutional Decimation of Black American Males", *Western Journal of Black Studies*, 2, 1978, pp. 82-92.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, J. Bernard, *Marriage and Family among the Negroes*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall 1966; A Billingsley, *Black Families in White America*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966); H. E. Cheatham and J.B Stewart (eds.), *Black Families: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1990); J. Robinson, W. Bailey, and J.

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<sup>10</sup> Majors and Billson, *Cool Pose...*, p.1.

<sup>11</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, (New York: Vintage, 1972).

<sup>12</sup> Paul Obiyo Mbanaso Njemanze, "A Boat Against the Tide: Ex-slaves in Post-Emancipation Igboland and the Americas", A Paper presented at an international conference: "Repercussions of the Atlantic Slave Trade: The Interior of the Bight of Biafra and the African Diaspora", Nike Lake Resort Hotel, Enugu, Nigeria, July 10-14, 2000, abstract page; website: <http://www.yorku.ca/nhp> See also, Paul Obiyo Mbanaso Njemanze, "A Century of African-American Experience in Nigeria, 1839-1939", Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria, October, 1992, pp. 10-125.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Thomas R. Frazier (ed), *Afro-American History: Primary Sources* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1970), p. 275.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Majors and Jacob U. Gordon, "Introduction: The Purpose of this Book" in Majors and Gordon, *The American Black Male...*, p. x.