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AFRO photo by Newson

LEFTY'S FRUIT STALL IS AMONG THE FANCY SHOPPING OUTLETS IN DOWNTOWN BALTIMORE'S FAMOUS LEXINGTON MARKET

The evolution of the black family

By Dr. Andrew Billingsley, Morgan State University

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Family life among black people in the United States had its origins in Black Africa. When blacks were forcibly brought to America beginning in the early 17th Century, the brought with them memories, values, attitudes and behavior patterns of traditional African family and community life. We get a view of what family life was like in Black Africa from the writing of two men who were captured in Africa and sold into slavery in this country and who later wrote their own autobiographies.

Equiano tells us that he was born in Benin, West Africa in 1745. When he was about 11 years old, he was captured and sold into slavery. He was brough to America and sold first to a Virginia plantation owner, later to a British naval officer and still later to a merchant in Philadelphia. Subsequently, he was allowed to purchase his freedom and traveled widely as a ship's steward. In 1791 he wrote his autobiography (under his slave name, Gustavus Vassa) in which he described his childhood and family life in Africa and the manner in which this was disrupted by slavery. He provides one of the most sensitive insights into the historical development of black families.

Vassa has described for us the portion of Africa where he was born as follows:

"That part of Africa, known by the name of Guinea, to which the trade for slaves is carried on, extends along the coast about 3400 miles, from Senegal to Angola, and includes a variety of kingdoms. Of these the most considerable is the kingdom of Benin, both as to extent and wealth, the richness and cultivation of the soil, the power of its king, and the number of warlike disposition of the inhabitants."

He was born in rather fortunate circumstances. His father was an elder or chief of his tribe and he was born into a large household where his father had several wives. He has told us also something of the basic pastoral nature of his country and the manner in which this helped to sustain the spirit of community which was another strong feature of our ancestral heritage:

"Our land is uncommonly rich and fruitful, and produces all kinds of vegetables in great abundance . . . All our industry is exerted to improve these blessings of nature. Agriculture is our chief employment; and everyone, even the children and women, are engaged in it."

The conditions of the land and the patterns of land utlization, then as now, had an important influence on the social life of the people. Vassa has introduced us to an important aspect of the interaction between the social organization of the family and these basic life conditions:

"The head of the family usually eats alone; his wives and slaves have also their separate tables. Before we taste food we always wash our hands.

Furthermore, black people in America today are the inheritors of a most expensive tradition. Vassa has observed: "We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets. Thus every great event, such as a triumphant return from battle or other cause of public rejoicing, is celebrated in public dances, which are accompanied with songs and music suited to the occasion."

Still another description of family life in Africa at the time of our ancestors is provided by Venture Smith in a volume of slave narratives edited by John F. Bayliss. Smith tells his own story as follows:

"I was born at Dukandarra, in Guinea, about the year 1729. My father's name was Saungm Furro, Prince of the tribe of Dukandarra. My father had three wives. Polygamy was not uncommon in that country, especially among the rich, as every man was allowed to keep as many wives as he could maintain. By his first wife he had three children. The eldest of them was myself, named by my father, Broteer. The other two were named Cundazo and Soozaduka. My father had two children by his second wife, and one by his third."

These two excerpts of family life in Africa show something of the patterns of family life among our ancestors. They also show something of the nature of community life and of the problems confronted by our people on the coming of Europeans to that part of Africa.

These excerpts help to illustrate the finding of Professor Chancellor Williams in his brilliant study, **The Destruction of Black Civilizations.** He has observed that during the 4000 years of African civilizations studied by him, there was a series of African kingdoms which rose and flourished and which were destroyed and often rose again. He cites three major factors which help to account for the destruction of those civilizations. One was natural forces which included the expanding desert, pestilence, and other natural phenomena. The second factor was the invasion from outside, first on the part of Arabs, then on the part of Europeans. The third major force, which accounted for the destruction of these great civilizations, was internal bickering and dissension and the lack of unity among the Africans themselves. What Professor Williams points out in his book is that as these civilizations and kingdoms were destroyed, people would often have to disperse and move from one part of Africa to another. New kingdoms arose and even after hundreds of years of being scattered throughout various parts of Africa, there was a strong similarity between the new and the old civilizations. According to his view, this indicates a strong cultural continuity among African people which lasted over hundreds of years so that the values were similar and therefore the new kingdoms were similar in structure to the ones which had been destroyed. In other words, despite the forces of destruction which have been ever present in our experience as African people, there is a strong value base which enables us to put together new civilizations and continue the basic values of our African heritage.

Thus, we see that while patterns of family life varied somewhat from region to region and people to people within the large sub-Saharan African Continent, there were distinctive features of family life in a pastoral, agrarian, tropical region near the earth's equator.

First, extended familism was a permanent feature of life in Africa. The community, including its political, economic and cultural dimensions, was an extension of the basic family unit. Indeed, it was difficult to observe where family left off and community life began.

Secondly, structure of family life, while varying somewhat from region to region and among different ethnic groups, nevertheless allowed for three distinctive patterns including monogamous marriages, polygamous marriages and polygynous marriages. Monogamous marriages, though not dominant in Africa, were nevertheless very common and normative. Thus, one man and one woman often lived together as husband and wife with their own children in their own home. Polygamous marriages involving one man married to more than one woman was probably the dominant pattern of marriage in most of the West African territories from which most of the American enslaved blacks came. Such marriage forms were far from random, precipitous, irrational or simply exploitative. Norms governing polygamous households were strictly observed and enforced by the community. Even today, for example, many African families follow the laws of the Moslem religion which permit one man to have four wives, but only if he can afford them, and the rights, duties and responsibilities of the several wives and the household are clearly established in tradition and custom.

The place of wife number one in the system was pre-eminent. A man violated custom and law if he took a new wife without the permission of his first wife. While there was often some friction, envy, and even divorce among polygamous marriages, there was also a great deal of stability and functional utility associated with this form. Thus, if the wives managed the children, worked the fields, did the marketing and commercial functions while the man hunted, fished, gathered berries and fruits, went to war, and took part in government, it was a system of well-established and highly functional role reciprocity. Moreover, in regions where there were more women than men, which was often the case, a system of polygamy was a rational and functional pattern of marriage and family life. In many parts of the United States today there are far more women than men. If polygamy was sanctioned, there might well be fewer unwed mothers.

In some situations, where there were fewer women than men, polygynous forms of marriage evolved where a woman was married to more than one man. Again, however, this pattern was governed by norms and standards which evolved over thousands of years and became part of the customary law.

A third feature of family life in Africa was the role of descent which also allowed for four major descent patterns. In matrilineal societies people reckoned their kinship line through the mother's ancestry alone. Children of families following the matrilineal pattern belonged to the mother and the mother's relatives from birth until beyond death. Fathers in this situation had no legal rights to the custody of their children. Even so, however, this pattern of descent was governed by rules and tradition and a great deal of rationality. The natural affection between father and children was recognized and honored in a variety of ways. Moreover, fathers had defined rights and responsibilities with respect to their children, though in Western terminology the basic "fatherhood" rights to children were invested in the mother's brother, or the children's maternal uncle. The Ashanti people of northern Ghana are an outstanding example of this matrilineal pattern who nevertheless find a very important social role for the biological father of children in these families.

A second descent pattern, perhaps less common, was a patrilineal pattern. In patrilineal societies, people reckon their kinship through the father's line only. Thus, many of the Western conceptions of motherhood roles were bestowed upon and performed by the father's sister and his mother. Indeed, in both matrilineal and patrilineal societies, grandmothers played an unusually prominent role in the care and protection of the grandchildren.

A less common pattern than the other two was the duo-lineal pattern of descent in which individuals reckon their kinship through both the mother and the father. This pattern of descent, which is most common in Western societies today, was the least common in sub-Saharan Black Africa.

In any case, however, and among the three descent patterns, children in the families belonged not to one or both parents alone, but to the entire ethnic group or community or people with whom they reckoned their lineage. Thus, family life was a community affair in the fullest sense.

A fourth aspect of family life in Africa was reflected in patterns of residence. It sometimes happened, but was uncommon, that a man and a woman and their children lived together in their own house. It was more common for them to live in a larger group in a compound within the housing facilities of their parents or their people. Sometimes the family lived in the compound of the husband and father's people. They followed a patrilocal pattern of residence. At other times they lived in the compound of the mother's people and thereby followed a matrilocal pattern of residence. Sometimes they alternated between the one and the other following a

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