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ABSTRACT

Family life among black people in the United States has its roots in Africa. Many distinctive features of African family life were carried out in modified forms in the early African settlements in this country. The importance of the extended family, communalism, the important role of the grandmother, the collective responsibility of the care of the children and the adaptability of family structure are prominent features of Afro-American life today. Although many of the most prominent features of slavery were antithetical to the condition of viable forms of family life among the African people, black families always maintained patterns of family life even during slavery. These patterns often diverged, but not always, from the dominant patterns prevalent among the Europeans. Underscoring that the concept of family is culturally determined and culturally bound, the factors that define and condition family life are considered in relation to the black family. After the Civil War, the elements of family life, which had survived and been modified into distinct patterns in relationship to slavery, came into full fruition. The family, along with the church and the school became the three institutions most responsible for black progress. Two sources of achievement of black families after the end of slavery are the acquisition of land and the opportunity to save money through the Freedmans' Savings Bank. (Author/AM)

THE EVOLUTION OF THE BLACK FAMILY

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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, they 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 writings 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 brought 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 hereitage:

"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 utilization, 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 expressive 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

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 kindgoms 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 nevertheless some major patterns which 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

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 mariages, 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 fathers 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 prominant 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 duolocal pattern of residence. Still more rarely, they established and maintained their own home following a unilocal pattern of residence.

The determining factor in patterns of residence was the basic conditions of life, the history of the region, and the traditions of a particular people. Thus, living close to the soil and close to nature, the African people were able to adapt to the prevailing conditions and to maintain viable forms of instrumental and expressive family relationships despite these differing conditions. Indeed, it was their ability to adapt to the various conditions of life which enabled African families to continue to survive in this country and adopt new forms of life where the conditions were vastly different from what they had known in Africa. Even so, many of the distinctive features of African family life were carried out in modified forms in the early African settlements in this country. Thus, the importance of the extended family, the communalism, the important role of the grandmother, the collective responsibility for the care of the children and the adaptability of family structures are prominent features of Afro-American family life even today.

Of the five major and distinctive features of African family life pointed up by National Urban League Research Director, Robert Hill, each has its antecedents in the African traditions. Thus, the adaptability of family roles, strong kinship bonds, patterns of informal adoption, strong orientation toward work and strong religious orientation are all part of what Leopold Senghor terms the African elan which persists wherever Africans go in all parts of the world.

Robert Hill concluded that, "although these (five) traits can be found among white families, they are manifested quite differently in the lives of black families because of the unique history of racial oppression experienced by blacks in America." He concluded, "the particular forms that these characteristics take among black families should be viewed as adaptations necessary for survival and advancement in a hostile environment."

The African Continuum

It has often been said by historians and sociologists that all the vestiges of African influence and all the elements of organized family life were destroyed and prevented by the European-American slave system. Indeed, many of the most prominent features of slavery were antithetical to the condition of viable forms of family life among the African people. Even so, however, a number of modern historians including John Blassingame, George Rawick and Eugene Genovese, together with the Cliometricians, Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, have provided overwhelming empirical support for the continuance of family life among the African people even during the slave era. Thus, both in the slave states and the free states, among enslaved and free Africans, and in the South and the North, organized black family life survived and was a prominent feature of life in the black community.

Despite the controversial nature of their findings and conclusions, Fogel and Engerman have argued that, "both moral convictions and good business practice generally led planters to encourage the development of stable nuclear families." (Ref. 12) Even so, however, they state that, "during the relatively infrequent instances when economic forces led the planter to destroy, rather than to maintain slave families, the independent striving of slaves to maintain their families came into sharp focus."

Genovese has pointed out that slave children did have important role models in the black men even under those harsh conditions. "A positive male image existed even in those cabins without resident fathers," he found.

"Critical scholars have made the mistake of measuring the slave family by middleclass norms; naturally, they have found it wanting. Even when a slave boy was growing up without a father in the house, he had as a model a tough, resourceful driver, a skilled mechanic or two, and older field hands with some time for the children of the quarters. . . Some of these men devoted themselves to playing surrogate father to all the children. They told them stories, taught them to fish and trap animals, and instructed them in the ways of survival in a hostile white world. The norm in the quarters called for adults to look after children whether relatives or not. Every plantation had some men who played this role."

The extent to which black men held strong ties to their families is eloquently illustrated by the last words of Peter Poyas, Denmark Vesey's chief lieutenant, when the judge sentenced him to death, "I suppose you'll let me see my wife and family before I die."

Rawick has pointed out:

"While it is true that slaves were not allowed to make legal marriage contracts, it is also true that men ad women under slavery did not simply breed promiscuously. There were a variety of socially approved and culturaly sanctioned relationships between men and women as well as less structured sexual contacts which led to the birth of progeny."

When we realize how essentially human were the Africans, and resist the temptation to view them as simple reactors to the oppression which they experienced, it is possible to appreciate the extent to which they were able to develop among themselves and instill in their children much of the human qualities which are so important in Afro-American life today.

Free Black Families

Our own studies of family life among the African population in America also provides support for the theory of continuity. It is our view that the years between 1700 and 1800 represent a critical period in the study of black family life in America. It was during this period that the nation was formed. It was during this period that the basic values of white Americans toward black Americans were established. Finally, it was during this century that the basic structure of black family life in America was developed, the broad outlines of which have continued to the present day. Patrilocal residence, nuclear family forms, small family size, husband-wife families with a small relatively stable and enduring pattern of female-headed families, and dual breadwinners are all features of Afro-American family life which took root and form during the 18th Century and are still with us today in only slightly modified form.

The first census of the United States, taken in 1790, enumerated 5,192 free black families. Six New England states, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Maine and Vermont reported 1,605 free black families. Two other northern states, New York and Pennsylvania listed 1,177 free black families and four southern states which were later to become part of the Confederacy, Maryland, North Carolina, Virginia and South Carolina contained 2,410 free black families. A major observation which may be drawn from this data is that in each of the 12 states the overwhelming majority of these families had both husbands and wives as family heads. Altogether 85% had male/female heads and approximately 15% had female heads.

The Family Surname. Dating back to the African origins, among free blacks the use of the family or surname has been a sign of respect and status. It has been such a strong feature of African family life that many women who marry continue to use this maternal family name as a symbol of belonging and respect. The absence of a surname which most blacks experienced during slavery and the reluctance of many whites to recognize black family or surnames long after slavery, are among the indignities long suffered by a proud people. In our analysis, therefore, we were interested to know the prevalence of family or surnames used for the free heads of households enumerated in the 1790 census. As might be anticipated, consistent with other findings above, this practice was most common in New England and relatively less common in the South. Even so, however, most free black family heads had their surnames recorded in the 1790 census. Male heads were more likely to have surnames than female heads.

The highest incidence of surnames was in the northeastern region. In Maine all of the 36 free black heads of households had surnames; 98% of the free black families in Rhode Island and 96% in Vermont had surnames. The other states show less, with Connecticut showing only 35% of free black family heads with surnames. Among the southern states, Virginia had the highest incidence with 98% and Maryland had the lowest with 62%.

Enslaved Blacks in Free Black Families. One of the more intricate aspects of family life among the free black population is the degree of interaction and relationships they had with enslaved blacks. There are several ways in which this interrelatedness was structured. First, it must be observed that despite their legally free status, free blacks were generally viewed and treated by the white community with something less than complete acceptance. This was true not only in the slave states where they often were presumed to be slaves unless they proved their free status, but also in the North where they were sometimes assumed to be runaway slaves and treated with less respect and provided less opportunity than white families experienced. Secondly, free blacks often lived and worked in close proximity to enslaved blacks, in part because of cultural affinity and in part because of limited opportunities and common oppression. Thirdly, free blacks often married enslaved blacks. Finally, free blacks sometimes owned slaves by purchase, inheritance, or because a free man was the father of children by an enslaved wife.

Thus, slave-owning existed among free black families, but involved very few familes and relatively few enslaved persons. In 1790, altogether 156 free black families in seven states

owned a total of 668 enslaved blacks or an average of 4.3 per family. It seems highly likely that these enslaved persons were relatives, co-workers, household servants and the like rather than the more typical field slaves. They were also much less likely to be exploited and oppressed. Indeed, by belonging legally to free blacks who had a special relationship to them, they were provided a measure of care and protection not known to black slaves owned by white persons.

Dr. L.D. Reddick, in his forthcoming book, *Search for the Black Family in America*, found very stable patterns of marriage and family life among free blacks in Boston as early as the beginning of the 18th Century. The official marriage register of the early 1700s contained actual names, date and marriage official for dreds of black families.

Thus, we see that black families always maintained patterns of family life even during slavery. These patterns often diverged, but not always from the dominant patterns prevale ong the Europeans.

The Limits of Legality

A great deal of attention has been drawn to the question of legality and illegality of marriage and family life among the African people during slavery. Indeed, much of the almost unanimous scholarly conclusion that family life did not exist among the enslaved Africans turns implicitly and sometimes explicitly on the question of legal status. Legal status is a very important conditioner of marriage and family life, but as modern students of society are becoming increasingly aware, legality is one among many conditions which help to define family. Being defined by the state as legal is neither necessary nor sufficient to determine existence of the viability of family life. In our studies we have given considerable attention to the variety of factors which help to define family. Chief among the realities which define and condition family life are legal sanctions, social functions and psychological meaning.

The Concept of Family

Like all concepts referring to human aggregations, the concept of family is itself culturally determined and culture-bound. In those societies whose cultural heritage emanated from the European peoples, particularly northern European peoples, the concept of family refers to two or more individuals who are related to each other by legally recognized marriage or by legally recognized lineage or ancestry and who live in contiguous relationship with each other in patterns of intimate interaction over sustained periods of their lives.

According to this conception, a man and a woman become a family after they get married by the state and/or the church, but not before, and if they become legally separated or divorced, they are no longer a family.

A child who is born to this union or is legally adopted by both parents becomes a member of the family for life.

This conception of family is three conceptions in one. It is a legal conception of family in the sense that it is prescribed, recognized, supported and protected by the laws of the countries involved. It is at the same time social, in the sense that it is actually practiced by large numbers of individuals in these societies and sanctioned by large numbers of members of those societies. At the same time, this conception of family is psychological in the sense that individuals who are part of arrangements such as the one described above feel themselves to be members of families, those who are not, do not.

This conception of family, dependent so heavily on marriage and direct lineage and common residence, is not a universal conception for all peoples. It was and is, not the exclusive or even dominant conception of family among some other great peoples including particularly the African peoples, the Asian peoples, and many of the peoples of South America. It was certainly not true of the native Americans whom we call American Indians. For these peoples, the concept of family was somewhat broader and more embracing than the European conception. It included a larger number of people who could be members of te family by a variety of routes sometimes without legal marriage and without direct lineage and sometimes without sharing a common residence. For many of these non-European peoples and for certain southern Europeans as well, the concept of family turned on a set of relationships and feelings which include arrangements of legal marriage and direct lineage and common residence, but are not confined to these states of affairs.

Culture Is Man-Made

Since the population of the United States is made up of peoples from all these major cultural groupings in the world, and since culture is man-made, cumulative, interchangeable and fairly enduring over time, it is important to recognize the cultural pluralism inherent in the concept of family. One way to do this is to recognize the distinctions among the legal, the social, and the psychological conceptions of family.

Socially, a family is a group of people related to each other by a variety of means, including but not confined to the legal relationships above, who share patterns of intimacy, sustained interaction, mutual interdependence, and mutual responsibility of an enduring nature and who perceive themselves as belonging to a common unit and who act in common, and who hold themselves out to the public to be so related and interdependent.

Psychologically, a family is a group of people related to each other in either of the two ways above, legally or socially, and who are not related in either respect, but whether related or not in a legal (by law) way or social (patterns of interaction) sense, feel themselves to belong to a relatively small intimate circle of belonging.

The key elements in family, then, are intimacy and interdependence, mutual responsibility and a sense of boundries which distinguishes that behavior appropriate within the family only and that behavior which may also be shared with the larger society. Intimacy may be physical or psychological, but must be sustained. Interdependence and mutual responsibility may be legal, social or psychological. It may be voluntary or mandated, but must be sustained and recognized by parties both inside and outside the family.

There are two important implications of this way of categorizing families based on the sources of their legitimation. First, it helps us to examine the strength and viability of family life in relation to the cultural context of family life. Second, this typology helps us to understand directly the structure and the functioning of modern black families with their roots in slavery when there were vast distinctions to be drawn between legal, social and psychological conditions and opportunities.

It is clear from both theoretical construction and observation that families without legal sanctions, but with strong and active patterns of social interaction and strong psychological interdependence ccan be very viable in meeting the needs of their members, both instrumentally and expressively, though they may not be able to meet the requirements of the larger society as well as if they had legal status. The crippling effects of the absence of legal status will be experienced most acutely in the area of instrumental functioning of these families. The extent to which the lack of legal sanction is crippling, however, depends heavily and directly on the extent to which the forces of society, the police, and other legal agents are active in their hostility towards units holding themselves out to be families and functioning as families without the sanction of the state. This varies from time to time and from group to group. In the black community before, during and after slavery, these types of families have existed side by side.

After Slavery

After the Civil War, the elements of family life among the Africans which had survived and been modified into distinct patterns in relationship to slavery, came into full fruition. Thus, the family along with the church and the school became the three institutions most responsible for black progress. Professor Reddick has observed:

"As we have seen, one of the first things the former slaves did as soon as they got free was to start looking for the members of their family, who had been separated from each other.

"Often, as soon as the family was reunited, the next move was to make the family legal.

"This urge on the part of the freedmen often preceded the legislative changes that were expected or required. Congress by act of July 25, 1866 and even earlier in support of the policy of liberating slaves, who were inducted into the military, included the freeing of the entire family of the black soldier. Later on, the southern states as a part of the process of their own return to the Union, joined Congress in recognizing "common law" and "informal" marriages that had occurred among slaves as well as free people.

"But the blacks did not wait for the technicalities to come through. Immediately upon recovering his mate and offspring, the "husband" and "father" sought a church or civil ceremony that would make his union "official". His "wife" or "bride", depending upon whether there were any children very often exceeded him in enthusiasm for a "marriage paper".

"The marriage fever also involved couples who had no children or had not been separated from each other. Also, sweethearts who had just met could look forward to a wedding in a simple ceremony or with elaborate frills.

"Thus, as the Civil War ended, the blacks stood on top of an upward curve of progress and hope. Their real life was beginning with freedom as its foundation and full citizenship its goal."

Some Problems and Some Achievements

In those days just after the end of slavery, however, there were several major sources of achievement of black families which are not generally understood. One of those is the acquisition of land which was available to only a very few of those families. In 1865, immediately after the Civil War, a program was developed by the U.S. Government, and administered by the Freedmen's Bureau which provided for black families, newly freed from slavery, to receive 40 acres of land. It was not, however, an outright gift. In a research project my associates and I are conducting at the National Archives, we have found that the granting of titles of confiscated lands varied among districts and states. The official policy stated in July of 1865 said that every male, whether freedman or refugee (those whites in the Confederate states who did not bear arms against the Union) could be assigned not more than 40 acres of land for his cultivation and use for three years at an annual rent up to 6% of its tax value as of the 1860 appraisal of the land. The settler could purchase the land at any time during those three years if he could pay the appraised value of the acreage.

Various states, however, seemed to operate for some time under their own regulations. In Mississippi, for example, all freed blacks and loyal whites could possess up to 80 acres of land if they were at least 20 years of age, head of a family and had been loyal to the Union. They paid a five dollar registration fee and at the end of five years, if they had cultivated the land, they were to pay another five dollrs to receive title to the land. And apparently, as the program continued in different locations, other charges were required to be paid before title would be granted.

In the Sea Islands of South Carolina, each black head of a family could settle on not more than 40 acres of land. No refugee white persons were allowed to settle on these islands. In our preliminary study, we have found 747 freedmen who obtained possessory titles to these Sea Island lands during this period, and this was a major source of the achievement of those families down through the years.

Freedmen's Savings and Trust Company

There was another source of achievement as well in those fateful years just after the end of the Civil War — that is the savings among black people, particularly as made possible by the Freedmen's Savings Bank. on March 3, 1865, the Freedmen's Savings & Trust Company was incorporated as a banking institution established in Washington, D.C. for the benefit of the newly freed slaves. By 1872 there were 33 branches including two in the northern cities of New York and Philadelphia with the others in southern states. By 1874, when the company failed, the deposits in all branches totaled $3,299,201. In our research at the National Archives, we have been looking at microfilm publications of 55 volumes of signatures of deposit in 29 branches of the Freedmen's Bank. These records are rich in black history, many of them containing such information on the depositor as name, birthplace, place brought up, residence, age, occupation, family members, etc. In the remarks section of these forms there are often indications of family members the depositor wished to receive his or her funds in the event of death.

Amounts of deposits, where indicated, range from a dollar or less to thousands of dollars. For example, 43-year-old Martha Moore, wife of George Moore, went to the District of Columbia branch where she deposited $500 in silver, $250 in gold and $3500 in paper money for a total of $4250. Mrs. Moore said that she had no living children, but had had one son named Robert, who was sold. She thought Robert was sold to a slave owner in Georgia, but she was never sure. Mrs. Moore could not write so she signed the deposit slip with her mark, an "X". This small act, which was major at the time, was another source of major achievement in the building of the early black middle class.

The Early Black Middle Class

There are still other sources of achievement in the black middle class in northern communities.

In his still definitive study, *The Philadelphia Negro*, DuBois found that early in the history of the colony of Pennsylvania, "the custom of hiring out slaves, especially mechanics and skilled workmen" led t he early development of a skilled occupational class which laid the groundwork for the rise of the black middle class in colonial Philadelphia. (Ref. 23) As early as 1708 and again in 1722, this practice of hiring out slaves to earn money was attacked through petitions to the legislature, but it survived because it was consistent with the economic self-interest of a few highly influential slave owners and other citizens. Thus, DuBois tells us, "before and after the Revolution, there were mechanics as well as servants among the Negroes." (Ref. 24) In 1820, mechanics, coachmen, shopkeepers, and barbers made up the small but growing basis for black leadership in the city. By 1848, men in these occupations represented about five percent of all black families in the city.

What can be said, then, about the style of life and the values of the early black middle class in Philadelphia before the turn of the century? In his profile of 12 families arranged by incomes. DuBois relates the story of one family of four adults and three children whose total family budget for the year, exclusive of rent, was $805.00. They spent $420.00 for food, $60.00 for fuel, $150.00 for clothing, $20.00 for amusements, $5.00 on illness, and $150.00 for travel and other purposes. The family had one servant.

Then DuBois describes for us the precarious nature of the black middle class which plagues us till this day: "This class to which these last families belong is often lost sight of in discussing the Negro. It is the germ of a great middle class, but in general, its members are curiously hampered by the fact that, being shut off from the world about them, they are an aristocracy of their own people, with all the responsibilities of an aristocracy, and yet they, on the one hand, are not prepared for this role, and their own masses are not used to looking to them for leadership."

The bulwark of the early black middle class, as with other middle class families, was land or property. Also, in the days just after the Civil War, there were other instances of the rising sources of the new black middle class.

In 1880, for example, 28% of northern-born black workers occupied white-collar and skilled occupations. This was true of 16% of southern-born and 19% of the foreign-born blacks.

There are other parts of the country where the rise of the black middle class can be traced to its being interwoven with the fabric of the larger community. In his book, *Black Americans in Cleveland*, Russell H. Davis has shown how the growth of the city has involved a substantial participation of the black middle class.

The Evolution of the Black Family

After 1900, a substantial increase in the black middle class took place due mainly to the great migrations from the rural South to the urban areas of the North and West, which began about 1915. By the end of World War II, roughly 16 percent of black men were employed in middle class occupations in the clerical, craft, managerial and professional classes. This was true of nearly a quarter of all employed black men in the North and West, but only 12 percent of those in the South. By 1960, in the nation as a whole, roughly 22 percent of black workers occupied these middle class occupations, and by 1972, it had increased to 38 percent. Thus, our estimate that roughly 40 percent of black families may be considered middle class today follows fairly closely the occupational distribution. Occupation for black families is a much more stable and reliable indicator of well-being, status and opportunity, and stability than the common measures of income and education.

The Future of Black Families

As we look to future developments in the structure and the functioning of black families in

American society, it seems highly likely that the shape of family life will continue to respond to and reflect some of the basic characteristics of American society. Chief among these characteristics is racism in both its overt and more subtle forms. The December 2nd, 1975 edition of the Detroit Free Press, carried an editorial endorsing the view of racism defined by U.S. District Court Judge Damon Keith in an address before the Annual Meeting of the Detroit Urban League. "To many Americans," the distinguished jurist said, "racism merely means active bigotry and discrimination, a charge from which they readily acquit themselves." He continued:
"Racism, I can assure you in reality and in practice is more subtle and wears many masks. It is hate. It is also indifference. It is the implied inferiority that is practically expressed in demeaning jobs, low wages, limited horizons and countless small and daily indignities suffered by millions of black Americans."

A second societal force which promises to continue its impact on the shape of black family life is economic in nature. While many families have moved into middle income status since the turn of the century, the pervasive reality is that the structure of income distribution still closely follows the color line. Thus, black families of whatever level of education or occupation persistently suffer average family incomes ranging between a third and two-thirds less than their white counterparts. Moreover, the fortunes of black families, though not necessarily the relative inequality of incomes, follow closely the economic condition of the nation as a whole. Unemployment and underemployment in the black community always exceed that in the white community. A study conducted by the Research Department of the National Urban League in 1975 on the impact of the then current economic recession on black families pointed out that the consequences of the weak economy of the nation were much more intense on black family life than on white family life.

Moreover, as late as December of 1975, Julius Shishkin of the U.S. Department of Labor issued a report showing the disparity of black and white unemployment rates. Unemployment among white workers slowed and stood at 7.6 percent of the work force. For black workers, however, unemployment remained at a three month level of 13.8 percent. Unemployment was highest among black youth, followed by black adult men, then black adult women, and then among white women, with white men benefitting most from the upturn in employment at the end of 1975.

It was the combination of unemployment and inflation which much more than the structure of family life or the preferences of family forms among individuals which caused family breakups and suffering among the low and moderate income families during this period. There are also the economic forces which caused a substantial rise in the cost of public social welfare programs all over the nation. In a report prepared by the U.S. Government's Social Security Administration, it was estimated that state and local social welfare expenditures rose $47 billion during 1975, which was the highest annual increase in the nation's history. The total national expenditures for all forms of social welfare including veteran's benefits and unemployment compensation totaled $389 billion which accounted for about 27 percent of the gross national product which is the total value of all the nation's goods and services. Public spending was 73 percent of the total and private philanthropy, which was declining sharply, accounted for 27 percent. It is striking to note, however, that the Federal Government paid only about 58 percent of the cost of these social welfare programs despite the national character of their causes. Thus, the need for a stronger federal role in social welfare programs was pointed out more intensively by leaders in health, education and social welfare fields.

For black families, then, the ebb and flow of full employment, inflation, and social welfare programs in the years ahead will vastly affect their ability to meet the needs of their members much more than their own individual behavior and preferences.

Finally, in looking at the future of black families in this country, a word must be said about education. For it is clear that as the level of education increases among black families, the level of well being increases, the level of independent and constructive functioning increases and the level of antisocial behavior diminishes. It is also true that family size and the crude birthrate also decreases as the level of education increases. Thus, even while some experts question the absolute value of further advanced education for increasing income and job advancement for white youth, education continues to be the single best indicator of well-being of black families and individuals. The future of black family viability, thus, depends heavily on the future of the nation's commitment to educational equality.

Families cannot be expected to pull themselves up by their proverbial bootstraps. They never have. The society plays the dominant role even as individuals and families must play a significant role in self-improvement and in taking advantage of the social forces and opportunities of the larger society. For black families, particularly as the nation celebrates the two hundredth year of its birth, the picture is mixed. There is some cause for celebration because of the survival and the strength of black families and the contribution they have made to the nation. There is also cause for cautious concern about the direction of racism, economic health, and education as these impact on the viability of these families.

Dr. Andrew Billingsley, President of Morgan State College, is a distinguished Sociologist with extensive background in the study of black family life. A former Vice President for Academic Affairs and professor of Sociology at Howard University before being named to his present position, Dr. Billingsley also served with distinction on the faculty of the University of California. A member of the editorial board of *The Black Scholar* and the *Journal of Social And Behavioral Sciences*, Dr. Billingsley is a prolific writer and is the author of several books, among them: *Black Families and the Struggle for Survival* and *Child Development and Family Life in the Black Community*.

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