

BLAMING THE OTHER VICTIM: Sexism and Afrikan Liberation

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THE PROBLEM --- *"A couple of years ago, I heard a male colleague tell some brothers that one of the major problems with Black People was the Black Woman. I gave this matter serious thought then concluded that one of the major problems with Black People was brothers like him."* --- Zak Kondo, "They Call Me Radical"

From the "disobedience" of Eve and Pandora, to the myth of the Black matriarchy today, women continue to be the victims of a worldview that is anti-female. This goes against the traditional Afrikan worldview, which has historically maintained that a balance between both sexes is essential to the dynamic process We call life.

When We look back to the 1960's, which saw a transition from a Civil Rights Movement to a Black Power Movement, We see a period of tremendous political activity for Afrikan people in the United States. In fact, not since the 19th century days of the anti-slavery and Afrikan emigration movements had the Black Nation in amerika been so galvanized around a particular issue. It was during this period of activity that the struggle for Afrikan liberation within the U.S. took qualitative leap, most notably in the participation of the masses across the U.S. in organizations, demonstrations, protests, rebellions and ideological struggles. Out of these ideological struggles came the identification by Sisters of the sexism within our movement and the Nation as an impediment to our liberation. The status and concerns of women were by and large ignored, ridiculed, and labeled divisive, which in turn created diversions (divisions) to our energies and antagonisms between Sisters and Brothers. Unfortunately, although the problem has been acknowledged and struggles waged towards the eradication of sexism, its legacy remains with us still.

If Afrikan people are to develop and progress towards liberation from all forms of oppression, in Afrika, the U.S. and elsewhere, We must first admit that sexism as it relates to male - female relations does exist, that any hint of Afrikan liberation without resolving this issue is impossible, and development of practical ways to purge this sickness from our lives must be devised and implemented. Before this can happen, however, We must understand the development of sexism.

SEXIST ATTITUDES OF THE 1960'S

The 1960's also saw a horde of articles, books and research reports flooding our Nation promoting the image of the "castrating Black matriarch" as the cause of all the ills our people suffer, not the good old racist, sexist, imperialist USA. Thus, demands and ultimatums to the state for change were diverted to victims themselves; the victims created their wretched conditions and not amerikan society. This climate created the context for the following remarks by some of our most well-known activists and leaders during this era:

The New Afrikan Declaration of Independence, which was signed March 31, 1968, lists among "the aims of the revolution", "To build a society that is better than what We now know and as perfect as *man* can make it" (italics added).

Stokely Carmichael (now known as Kwame Ture) once remarked that the proper position for women in SNCC was "prone".

Maulana Karenga, Chairman of the US organization, stated in the book The Quotable Karenga, "What makes a woman appealing is femininity, and she can't be feminine without being submissive."

The Hon. Elijah Muhammad, messenger of Allah and leader of the Nation of Islam, in his aptly titled Message to the Black Man In America, devotes two and a half pages to the Black woman. After declaring that "The woman is man's field to produce his nation, if he does not keep the enemy out of his field, he won't produce a good nation." He also states that in addition to protecting the Black woman, the Black man must also "control" her.

At a major 1970 conference of the Congress of Afrikan Peoples, an organization founded and guided by Amiri Baraka, a position paper on "The Black Family and the Black Woman" was presented declaring that the [Black] man... "is the leader of the house/nation because his knowledge of the world is broader, his awareness is greater, his understanding is fuller, and the application of this information is wiser."

Before his exile in Algeria, Eldridge Cleaver (Minister of Information for the Black Panther Party), commenting on women's rights, said "I guess they should exercise pussy power." (Cleaver did time at Soledad Prison for raping white women after "practicing" on Afrikan women.)

These remarks coming from the mouths of such respected leaders and spokesMEN of the time were very damaging to the self-esteem of Afrikan women; showed a level of extreme ignorance concerning Afrikan man's partner in life, Afrikan woman; a lack of serious regard for the holistic development of the Afrikan family through the Afrikan woman, and a disregard for the unique conditions facing women.

What is most frightening about the ideas and attitudes behind these statements is that they have survived to this day and are threatening to accompany Afrikan men and women through the 1990's into the 21st century.

ORIGIN OF EUROPEAN ECONOMIC SEXISM

The poisonous baggage of sexism that We carry is at root a European phenomena, a consequence or product of patriarchy, the system where man is head of the family and wields all power in areas of political, social, economic, and religious life. This is not to say life was peachy-keen in Afrika, for We understand that contradictions are ever-present. However, as Cheikh Anta Diop points out in his work, The Cultural Unity of Black Africa (1958, 1974), patriarchy which devalues the place of women, is unique to Europe and her people whereas matriarchy or a matri-local social system, which sees woman as an indispensable part to group success, is unique to Afrika and her people.

The point being that a people's physical environment conditions them to develop in a certain way. Afrika produced a physical environment hospitable to its children with an abundance of natural resources, which then allowed for the development of equality in roles pertaining to food production and the family. By contrast, Europe's environment proved less harmonious haven for its inhabitants, mother nature being much more harsh and uncooperative, and natural resources were in scarce supply. Consequently, food production/acquisition rested mainly on hunting animals. Woman having a different physique in comparison to men, and having the extra duty of childcare, proved virtually ineffective on the hunt. Hence, We have a primitive economic basis for European sexism.

Since the economy of the group in Europe was paramount, the basis for all future social systems was built upon the economic foundation, most notably religion.

RELIGIOUS SEXISM

The Europeans, in their wanderings in search of natural resources to meet their material needs, swept down into Afrika and through cultural imperialism and intermarriage with the indigenous peoples, the European worldview was forced onto the Afrikan and from that point on nothing was sacred, especially religion. For if We examine just two of the major world religions that were initially of Afrikan origin but are currently contaminated by the European worldview, Christianity and Al-Islam, (with all of the prescribed rituals, symbols, and scriptures that are necessary to reinforce a particular worldview), We see the position of woman as "secondary" at best, and oppressed at worst.

Indeed, the Holy Bible of Christianity, (Authorized King James version) states in Genesis 3:16 that:

"To the woman he [God] said, I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."

and in Corinthians 14:34-35 We are advised to:

"Let your women keep silence in the churches; for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home, for it is a shame for woman to speak in the church."

It is interesting to note that this is the same holy book that explains the fall of the entire human race as being the fault of a disobedient woman (Eve), a Holy Trinity or divine trio as the FATHER, the SON and the Holy Ghost (two male images, one genderless), and then, We are given an account of a truly remarkable even that has not been duplicated in the history of humanity: men giving birth; God creating MAN in HIS own image, and then, Adam's rib being responsible for the creation of Eve.

The history of Al-Islam towards women, the mothers of civilization, seems to be just as unkind, to say the least. According to Al-Quran, Sura 4:34 states:

"Men stand superior to women in that God hath preferred the one over the other...Those whose perverseness ye fear, admonish them and remove them into bed-chambers and beat them, but if they submit to you then do not seek a way against them."

As late as 1974, it was reported by Peter Farb that mosques in many parts of the Islamic world bore signs prohibiting "women and dogs and other impure animals" from entering. Most noteworthy, however, is that Barbara Walker and Robert Briffault contend that the Arabic word for God, "Allah" is in fact a masculinization of the name of the Arabians ancient Goddess, Al-lat, part of a female trinity. Walker writes that for over a thousand years prior to the coming of Islam, Arabia was a matriarchal land.

The Eurocentric economic-religious basis of sexism, coupled with pseudo-scholarly research condemning Afrikan womanhood has thus impacted upon the mother and father civilization, Afrikan woman and Afrikan man, in an extremely harmful way (to state it mildly).

Being under the domination of the Europeans for so long has ingrained in us an ignorant, narrow-minded view of how We should liberate ourselves from the mess that the Europeans are responsible for in the first place. "Revolution is a man's thing," and "Sisters should make babies for the revolution and stay home" are ideas that live and breathe in the hearts and minds of many Brothers today and those Sisters who question this sexist nonsense are labeled "castrators" and "counter-revolutionary". It is interesting to me that Afrikan women, who have never embarked upon a program of murder and the mutilation of the genitals of Afrikan men like the Europeans have, are called castrators.

A movement that started out to free all Afrikans became a movement to free Afrikan men from the limitations imposed upon them by European males. Racist European patriarchal ideology manifesting itself as amerikan culture dictates that a "REAL" man provides for and protects his family. However, this same culture, through various maneuvers, systematically denied the Afrikan man legitimate ways to provide and protect his family. Racist hiring practices (union and non-union), and education/literacy requirements beyond the reach of the average Afrikan man effectively cut off potential employment in the limited middle class and working class sectors for thousands of Brothers, which has historically been the major employer of the masses of Afrikan men. Thus, the Afrikan man's sources for employment in legitimate fields were limited. On the other hand, Afrikan women were able to secure hundreds of jobs as domestics, sometimes working two and three households, and despite the odds, were able to attain certain degrees of educational mobility which allowed for the development of middle class incomes based upon teaching. For the masses of Afrikan women who were, by and large, turned away from jobs requiring manual labor and union membership, domestic employment and jobs as teachers provided much needed income in families where Afrikan men were either unemployed or forced to accept menial unskilled jobs.

This backdrop effectively set the stage for the next act: Brothers and Sisters at each others' throats blaming one another for diseases caused by outside bacteria. Afrikan men have blamed Sisters for the lack of employment opportunities for Brothers and decay of the race, and Afrikan women have blamed Brothers for the same thing. "Black women are too proud and outspoken"; "Black women are raising their sons to be girls"; "I'm gonna get me a white woman"; "Black men ain't shit"; "Black men don't know how to take care of their families"; "All Black men want to do is stand on corners all day long"; "I want a white man." etc., and so on.

These are but a few incidents of how Afrikan men blame Afrikan women, and vice versa, for the bulk of our predicament, as opposed to the real cause, domination by white amerika. Recognizing that although We have made progress in this area, We have a long way to go in resolving the problem and We must continue to seek meaningful ways of dialogue that will lead us to the identification of the true causes of our oppression, and to the true solutions to eradicate it.

* (Most of the Muslims whom i have dialogued with on this issue have stated that those Muslims who profess/practice this line are not TRUE Muslims and that this is not TRUE Islam. The reader is urged to seriously study and ask questions for her/himself.)

SUGGESTED READING

Monica Sjoo and Barbara Mor, The Great Cosmic Mother
Barbara Walker, The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets
Cheikh Anta Diop, The Cultural Unity of Black Africa
Yosef A.A. Ben-Jochannan, African Origin of the Major Western Religions
The Holy Qu'ran
The Holy Bible
Paula Giddings, When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex In America
Bell Hooks, Ain't I a Woman
Clayborne Carson, In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960's
Robert Briffault, The Mothers
Peter Farb, Word Play
Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam

FREE THE LAND!
BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY!

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