

Firstborn in the North

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ONE segment of the so-called Black community to which very little attention has been given is the northern-born son of the Negro migrant. Much has been written about the Negro who migrated North in the period prior to and immediately after World War I, but some commentary about the influences this new culture had on his children should be made. The movement was made to take advantage of what was offered for the family of the migrant and himself. The social milieu, however, caused problems unlike those found by the European migrant. This fact was observed by the writer as a youth on the south side of Chicago, which was known as the "Black Belt."

Research shows that the larger number of Negroes who migrated from Mississippi to the North usually went to Chicago. My parents migrated from New Orleans to Chicago in the decade prior to World War I, and, therefore, my brother and I were able to see many Negro families arrive via the Illinois Central Railroad in the decade prior to World War II. These citizens were easily identified by their shoe boxes filled with fried chicken, the shopping bags filled with clothes, poorly dressed men, women, and children, and the great expression of fear of the unknown. However, once they became integrated into the new life, the physical and facial appearances changed. Within weeks these "soul brothers and sisters" would become newborn. Many became most adamant in the denial of their Mississippi birth.

Like most people who migrate, the Negro moved into the areas occupied by friends and relatives. Those who were single and of age soon married. The question brought forth

was: Would the matriarchal system known in the South be carried over in the North? It appears that the matriarchy either remained or the responsibilities to the family were abdicated. However, the culture brought from the South influenced the migrant male and his son in the North.

The Matriarchy

The Negro mother enjoys a unique place in the lives of her children. She is catered to by all. The facts of history reveal that she has had to be the head of the household, because the man has always been taken away or not given the opportunity to support his family properly. She has always been the educated member of the family. She has never had a problem obtaining employment—day work has always been available. Because of circumstances, the self-concept of the Negro male has suffered.

Self-concept develops from what an individual learns about himself by observing what others think about him. He sees himself in many dimensions: the conception of self as he really believes he is; the self to which he realistically aspires; the self which he believes others see in him; the self as he hopes he is now; and the self as he fears now he is. When the Negro mother points out negatives about the Negro father to their children, the children respond in kind. It is not unusual to hear a Negro child remark, "I'd do anything for my mother, but I won't do a thing for my no-good daddy!" In turn,

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the father responds in kind to the alienation of himself by his children. As a result, the Negro mother becomes the true head of the household.

The facts reveal that there were and are many Negro men who are not victims of the matriarchy. One can see this in the families where the men assume their responsibilities and educate *all* their children—including the boys. In the Negro matriarchy, only the daughters are educated. In these cases the father has abdicated his responsibility in permitting such customs, and has accepted a subordinate role. In the matriarchy, the son is encouraged to quit school and go to work to send his sister to school so she will not "have to work in the white folks' kitchens." Once the girls are degree holders and the mother has some time, she and not her husband or son returns to school for additional education. Once she has, she continues the emasculation by correcting her husband's English, social graces, friends, etc. The first-born son has been left to follow or reject this pattern.

The emasculation of the Negro male is traced to the period prior to Reconstruction; it also continued in the North in the process of migration. In his book, *Manchild in the Promised Land*, Claude Brown tells of his family's migration to the North at his uncle's suggestion. His mother was told she would no longer have corns on her fingers from picking cotton on Mr. Charlie's farm, but he did not tell her that she would have corns on her knees from scrubbing Mrs. Goldberg's floors. In addition, the father's farm skills were of no use in the North; the mother's domestic skills were. This variable contributed greatly to the emasculation. The father's image before his children would be castrated by the mother's remarking that the family would not eat if it were not for her. It was not unusual for the Negro mother to say before her children in the father's presence, "If I want something done, I'll go to the white man!"

Because the Negro mother sought education for her daughters, the firstborn male had problems in the selection of a wife. The social system of our country permits without great

social alienation marriage between the Negro female and the Caucasian male. In fact, the Negro female appears to favor such a union. Negro females appear to seek males who are their educational peers, racial and religious background notwithstanding. Those who marry Negro males (who usually are not their educational peers) continue the matriarchy. The Negro female appears to be "caught up" in what I would call the "Caucasian color syndrome."

Because of generations of miscegenation, color hues in the Negro community range from ebony black to white. The "children" of the "house Negro" are usually very fair in hue; such is not the case with the "children" of the "field Negro." In my parents' generation, the male college graduates are usually direct descendants of the "master" and female "house Negro." The Negro mother favored the "children" of the "house Negro" as potential mates for their daughters—if the choice appeared to be limited to Negroes. They openly admitted that they wanted their daughters' children to have "good hair" and "good color"; the descendant of the "house Negro" was the only way.

Because of this visual reality, a caste system within the Black community was established. This was brought to light in the late E. Franklin Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie* with a historical chronology in Lerone Bennett's *Before the Mayflower*. The "high yellows" were divided into three groups: Mulatto, the product of a Caucasian and Negro; Quadroon, the product of a Caucasian and Mulatto; and Octoroon, the product of a Caucasian and Quadroon.

On this matter the late Malcolm X is reported to have remarked that one should not be proud of being "high yellow" for it means that "some white man took advantage of your grandmother."

A Choice Must Be Made

Reality demands that the firstborn be the complete head of his household. To work and "bring home the pay check" is not enough. The late W. E. B. DuBois in his *The Souls of Black Folk* said: "We shall

hardly induce men to believe that if their stomach be full, it matters little about their brain." What was true in 1902 is true in 1968—and so must be education for the Black males. Those who are firstborns, who, in fact, are educated with the surrogate middle class values are now being ostracized by segments of the Black community. We are pointed out as "thinking white."

The firstborn is now in quandary. His parents migrated hoping he would be able to move toward the mainstream of the society through education, and now he is damned for it. He is charged with not being supportive of the "true" movement nor being empathic with Blacks in the ghetto. The charge has no logical basis due to the fact the firstborn middle class has always been active in the movement and realizes that as long as color beliefs are as they are none is truly free.

As a teenager I noticed that Negro women straightened their hair—many men did too. The bushy-headed "natural" so-called African style is now "upon the scene." Strange as it may seem, Africans use hot combs (women that is) to straighten their hair, and the men now cut their hair close. Even with them the "African smell" is out—they use our deodorants. The firstborn middle class has to decide between the methods he has supported or the new Black power-complete separation ideal. Black power advocates believe no white man can be trusted and that "Whitey" is bent on genocide.

Consideration should be given here to the question of racially mixed marriage. White males and Black females in marriage are accepted by Black females; the reverse is not true, even if both are peers. Regardless of status of both, the white female who marries the Black male is regarded by white males and Black females as "trash." The "Guess who's coming to dinner?" question is being asked by many white parents about their sons' fiancées. The Negro male's problems are compounded in the obtaining of a wife.

The firstborn has certain questions he must answer, quickly: Should he continue as a middle class Negro to try to make in-

roads into the mainstream of American society? or, should he join the group that supports complete separation? or, should he continue to endure the matriarchal system which emasculates his self-concept? or, should he remain silent as the obviously racist society sits by while the gap between himself and the ghetto Black widens? or, should he defend himself against the charges made by the young militants that he is too old and complacent to be concerned about the Black man in New York's Harlem, Chicago's 47th and Federal, Cleveland's Hough Street, Denver's Five Points, or Los Angeles' Central Avenue? Although such questions must be answered and acted upon, nevertheless certain factors are sacred and must be considered.

We firstborns who are middle class oriented decided that education was a vehicle to employ to move toward the mainstream of American society. The fact that we have been here some 400 years supports the thesis that we do have a stake in the country. We have decided not to be supportive of the Negro female's efforts toward emasculation. We now find ourselves in or near the forties, living as comfortably as our means will permit us, and we resent being called "Uncle Tom" because we have chosen to live where we can and work in the professions for which we are certified and qualified. We cannot, due to the fact that our color identity does not permit us to escape, move as if we are not affected by the plight of the Blacks in the ghetto. We support the theory of self-determination, and one way, we believe, is to change the system which is in control of our immediate homes and community—the matriarchal system. When the matriarchal system commences its exit, the positive self-concept of the Black American male will emerge. This is one variable which must be acted upon, as I perceive it, if the change is to be.

All in all, the decision made by the firstborn male will have great impact on the future for himself, his son, and grandson. The question is, "How will the tide go for the second-born generation of the Negro migrant to the North?" □

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