

In Search of the Real Brother Man: An African Centered Approach to Black Cultural Identity

by

Mwatabu S. Okantah, M.A.

mokantah@kent.edu

Associate Professor, Department of Pan-African Studies
Kent State University, Kent, Ohio

As early as 1903, in his classic, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois wrote:

"Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, how does it feel to be a problem? They say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, how does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word."¹

And in his seminal collection of essays, DuBois spoke eloquently of a tortured *double consciousness*. He described that feeling of a *two-ness* of being "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."²

The 20th century has passed, and Americans of African ancestry remain more of a problem than a people in the eyes of too many citizens in America today. America still wonders, "What shall be done with Negroes?" During the 1980s and the 1990s, this same question was posed against the backdrop of the almost universal idea of Black men in America as an endangered species. In 2016, that same question is now being raised again in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement. I have always resented that not too subtle notion. In the final two decades of the last century, it became fashionable, and even now, it continues to be acceptable for people to speak openly about the poor state of Black men. However, very few of these commentators have taken the time to dialogue *with* Black men. Fewer still are those who genuinely listen when real Black men speak.

Public “talking heads” are rarely concerned with the names and the faces of the Black suns that did, and do, rise and shine. Indeed, if Black men *are* an endangered species, who then, is the predator, so bent on creating the conditions that would lead to inevitable extinction? What happens to a people when a systematic attempt has been made to blunt their collective will and murder their group spirit? How many more fathers will have to dream their American dreams in a bottle? How many more sons, before they become fathers, will have to smoke up their deferred dreams in a crack pipe? If there is a problem affecting Black men in this society, it is a homegrown American problem. It is time to acknowledge the diversity of Black men as an emphatic means of saying *no* to being permanently rendered a chronic problem for Americans to dismiss, or discuss, or resolve according to their whims or discretion. No single person or leader can speak for Black men. Rather, there is a virtual anthology of stories that must be shared.

It will be the purpose of this essay to engage in a discussion of the African man in the United States of America within a clearly defined Pan-African context. I will employ an approach that places African origins at the theoretical/philosophical center. I contend so-called African-Americans are one of several groups of New World African people that were literally forged into existence as Brazilians, Haitians, Jamaicans, etc., in the crucible of the so-called New World. Given the current state of material and spiritual chaos, any discussion of group healing and recovery must be cast in culturally specific terms. The discussion of Black men cannot be abstracted outside the overall state of the larger American-African community.

The inference has always been that Black men in America are endangered because of some innate flaw in Black people’s collective and racial character. The toxic consequences of race relations in this nation, however, suggest otherwise. Black reality in America continues to be shaped by those same historical forces that have worked to define forever the African presence in the New World. The condition of being an endangered people in this society has always been endemic to the American experience. The very parameters in how we examine the African experience in America must be redefined to accommodate the unique character of the African-American experience. The challenge is to find a working language and appropriate terms. To place this discourse inside the illusion of being an “American” and a “Negro,” for example, is to obscure the point. To accept being an American and a Negro *is* the problem. Both identities are the creations of radioactive Eurocentric thought patterns; hence, the virtual figments of a sick European imagination.

The scope of this discourse will not permit a fully detailed treatment of the African origins of American-African culture. The premise, nonetheless is that authentic Black culture in the United States is the product of a dynamic process in which peoples born into a traditional African worldview and way of life were compelled to adapt and transform themselves inside a truly New World—a White Anglo Saxon Protestant dominated cultural field of reference. Leonard E. Barrett, in *Soul-Force: African Heritage in Afro-American Religion* describes this manner of cultural transformation in very concise terms. He writes:

“...the best of African manhood entered the New World and so thoroughly marked it with African customs that in a short while, the sound of the New World was the sound of Africa. There is no place in which the African influence has not made an inroad. This influence on the language, folklore, medicine, magic and religion, music, dress, dancing and domestic life of the New World, can be called Africanization or indigenization”³

The questions of cultural origins and group identity are crucial to understanding the overall experience of enslaved African people throughout the Americas. The fundamental dilemma for people of African origin is cultural in nature. In African centered terms, the shaping of an individual’s personality is never considered outside of the setting of the group's mode of identity formation. What does it mean to be African-American in cultural or ethnic terms? If we are not “Negroes” or just “Americans,” what are we? What is our proper name? It is imperative in the search for *the real Brother Man* not to be isolated from the larger topic of African-American community development. The real focus of this investigation of Black men must be grounded in the state of African-American families as a true barometer of the real condition of Black people as we stagger into, and, through, this new millennium.

Internal Dialogue

It goes without saying that Black men must take a critical look inward collectively, and as individuals. Group and individual self-appraisal must be honest, because serious impediments exist and negative behaviors need to be altered. The pressing challenge is to find a balance and harmony between strengths and weaknesses. In *The Healing Drum: African Wisdom Teachings*, Yaya Diallo writes, "The fool is content to be himself, to be what he is today. He has ceased dreaming of what he ought to be and will never be. I am a fool who is healing. In Africa, when a fool is healed, he is called a former fool. So, having been a fool, I will always find this term attached to my name."⁴

In old World Africa, the true measure a man was seen in the ability to maintain his family and raise his children. Status in the community was derived through the successful rearing of one's children. Men and women could not participate in governing the society if they could not maintain their families and govern their own homes. The public behavior of one's children is *the* indicator of the quality of an individual man or woman's parenting skills. In this traditional African way of life, it should be noted that although parents were responsible for raising their children to successfully complete the village level of their education and the proverb, "it takes a village to raise a child," provided the cultural fabric that held the community together.

Individual parents were never left isolated inside their own compounds. Family included kinship ties, age-group support networks and the presence of a respected class of elders that dispensed wisdom and offered stability. According to these same criteria, how do we define being a man? In relation to the need to define what it means to be an African-American, how do we measure being a Black man? It is on this very level that the question of identity is such a vexing one. To revisit the formation/evolution of the traditional African family is to discover a truer definition of masculinity that will allow us to more precisely locate our search. The ongoing quest to restore African agency in this new millennium requires new definitions based on old models that will speak directly to both the psychological demands, as well as the spiritual needs of a dynamic, yet nurturing way of life.

From The Inside Out

This discussion has evolved out of my work as a Rites of Passage facilitator with the National Rites of Passage Institute under the local (Cleveland, Ohio) direction of Paul Hill, Jr., formed in 1993 to implement an African centered approach to adulthood based a Ghanaian model, and with the African Systems for Human Enhancement (ASHE) Culture Center, Inc. under the leadership of David Whitaker. In *Rites of Passage: A Journey of Transformation*, Whitaker states:

... in the final analysis, the strength and future of a people depends upon the guided transfer and successful incorporation of the knowledge and wisdom from responsible adults from one generation to the receptive youth of the next generation.... 'Rites of Passage' is the traditional African process whereby Elders and adults would ensure that youth ... received the knowledge and wisdom of the time as well as a clear understanding of the important role that they would have to play as adults in continuing the growth and development of their family and village. The fact that we no longer live in traditional villages makes the need for this 'rites of passage' process more critical....The very idea of wisdom—which is critical to a healthy future—is not even a part of the national conversation.⁵

It is on this level that this effort is also very personal. My Rites of Passage experiences have had a profound influence on my growth and transition into the age group of the elders.

The Rites of Passage movement has introduced an approach and a language that can accommodate the inner struggle to find a true spiritual center. In *Bringing the Black Boy to Manhood: the Passage*, Nathan and Julia Hare argue, "Although it may generally not be advisable to borrow lost cultural elements entirely intact from the African past, we may nevertheless begin to learn from their example and to reconstruct what is necessary and appropriate to the present...."

In pre-colonial Africa, customs, rituals and ceremonies not only regulated the roles of the people; they also gave special qualities and purposes to the land, the 'thingira' (bachelors quarters in the Gikuyu society of Kenya), animals, and other objects under given circumstances."⁶

The African centered Rites of Passage model can provide a means and a method to break out of the all-consuming conundrum Herb Goldberg describes as the "male harness" in *The Hazards of Being Male*. He contends that:

Most men live in harness.... Our culture is saturated with successful male zombies, businessmen zombies, golf zombies, sports car zombies, playboy zombies, etc. They are playing by the rules of the male game plan. They have lost touch with, or are running away from, their feelings and awareness of themselves as people. They have confused their social masks for their essence and they are destroying themselves while fulfilling the traditional definitions of masculine-appropriate behavior....Their reality is always approached through these veils of gender expectations. ⁷

Although Goldberg's emphasis is not on Black men, per se, I think his case is instructive on at least two important levels for the purposes of this examination.

First, the whole "Black men as an endangered species"/"Black men as problem" discourse measures Black men against a Eurocentric model that does not even work for most Euro-American men. As such, looking to the standards that have failed White men so miserably must be a proverbial red flag for those of us considering solutions to the plight of Black men in this country. Returning to Goldberg, he writes that:

The most remarkable and significant aspect of the feminist movement to date has been woman's daring willingness to own up to her resistances and resentment toward her time honored, sanctified roles of wife and even mother. The male, however, has yet to fully realize, acknowledge, and rebel against the distress and stifling aspects of many of the roles he plays—from good husband to good daddy, to good provider, to good lover, etc. Because of the inner pressure to constantly affirm his dominance and masculinity, he continues to act as if he can stand up under, fulfill, and even enjoy all the expectations placed on him no matter how contradictory and devitalizing they are....It's time to remove the disguises of privilege and reveal the male condition for what it really is. ⁸

Second, Goldberg's work makes it clear that contemporary white society in America is trapped in the throes of what I prefer to call an acute state of emotional, psychological and spiritual *disease*.

Discovering the work of Nigerian musician and philosopher Chief Fela Sowande provided a path toward healing. He writes,

"...the current search for identity by the Black American is...more than necessary ...especially for the Negro in America. He is not a whole person unless and until he knows himself for what he is, unless and until his individual consciousness is firmly rooted in the Group Consciousness of the Black Race, and the channels of communication between the two are left open and are fully functional and functioning. The Negro in America must choose between recovering and becoming fully conscious of his own identity, or being washed down the plumbless drains of history, as a mindless freak of nature."⁹

It took time to realize that my internal conflict as a Black man was not mine alone. It is an historical, as well as a collective struggle. It is a challenge Black men inherit from birth. It is said that Frederick Douglass, in describing the differences between himself and his contemporary Martin R. Delaney, remarked that when he awoke in the morning, he thanked God for making him a man. He said when Delaney awoke; he thanked God for making him a Black man. For those of us that are kindred spirits of Delaney, embracing Blackness—not as skin color but as an attitude toward the World of the Spirit, informs the way we see and react to our personal struggles as individual men.

Hence, in reference to the African centered approach to adulthood based on Ghanaian Anthony Mensah's model, "*Rites of Passage and Initiation Processes with Akan Culture*." Paul Hill writes,

"Out of the need for the development of community and caring adults to raise children, the National Rites of Passage Institute was developed. The need for Rites of Passage is the result of the collapse of traditional cultures, the loss of shared myth and rituals that enfold the individual into the group, and the spread of a postindustrial society which has produced generations of unbonded children and adults who are not initiated into the purpose and meaning of their own lives."¹⁰

I can look back on my study with Chief Sowande as the beginning of my own Rites-of-Passage initiation. My initial sojourns to West Africa were part of the crucial “separation phase.” A harrowing visit to Ogbunike Cave in Nigeria—a location where Africans hid from slave catchers—and to the House of Slaves *Door of No Return* on Goree Island, Senegal forced me to make peace with the truth of being descended from enslaved Africans. Yet, it was an encounter with a 102-year-old Nigerian village woman that helped me become one with our story as New World Africans. When told I was visiting from America, great grandmother asked, “How did he get there?” She had always wanted to know what had become of the people that had been taken away. At that precise moment, I knew I had to make my personal story make sense to her if I was going to provide a faithful understanding of our life as a people of African descent living in the Diaspora. At that moment, I could see our stories come together in the light I saw reflected in her eyes.

Sowande stressed, “...the Black American does not merely represent Africa; he is Africa. What the cultured Black American is today, the cultured African must be tomorrow, or else become a relic of history. Thus the Black American is perhaps the most direct link Africa will have with the New World now on the horizon, already casting its shadows on the old.”¹¹ As Paul Hill described Mensah's Akan-based Rites of Passage model, I realized I was in the right place, with the right people, at the right time. I was attracted to the Rites of Passage movement because I viewed it as a serious attempt to build a new and re-invigorated sense of a Black community. In keeping with the warning from Nathan and Julia Hare, it was also evident that Mensah was dealing in the present and not attempting to invoke a false sense of an idyllic African past.

Writing in *The Spirit of Intimacy: Ancient African Teachings in the Ways of Relationships*, Sobonfu Some describes the African village concept of community as a:

Community is the spirit, the guiding light of the tribe, whereby people come together in order to fulfill a specific purpose, to help others fulfill their purpose, and to take care of one another. The goal of the community is to make sure that each member of the community is heard and is properly giving the gifts he has brought to this world. Without this giving, the community dies. And without the community, the individual is left without a place where he can contribute. The community is that grounding place where people come and share their gifts and receive from others.¹²

The Rites-of-Passage movement made it possible to incorporate African centered educational principles more thoroughly into the work of salvaging shattered Black communities. More importantly, it offered a real process to move from theory to practice.

Transformations

I was drawn to the opportunity to work as a Rites of Passage facilitator because it provided a perfect opportunity to share Fela Sowande's traditional African wisdom. It was unmistakable that Anthony Mensah also saw a potential in Black people this society did not, and, does not see or acknowledge. Both men saw Africa alive in African-Americans in ways we still do not know how to see in ourselves. They were committed to working with, and teaching those Americans of African origin that genuinely wanted to reconnect with a traditional African cultural foundation. They understood the importance of reestablishing viable African models in our desperate efforts to revitalize Black community progress.

In the final analysis, I am arguing that Black people—men, women and children—are at risk in contemporary American society. We are a people in crisis. The discussion of America's Black men as an endangered species must evolve from the "Black men are a problem to be solved" mode to an approach based upon a new paradigm. Viable alternatives informed by a new cultural critique must be obtainable. I think the Rites of Passage method exists as an option that works. The Sowande and the Mensah models offer the kind of return to African values African people in Africa and peoples of African descent throughout the Diaspora need in these very troubled times.

Their African centered approaches are relevant because they are grounded in Yoruba and Akan traditions, respectively; two West African ethnic groups that supplied large numbers of captives that were kidnapped and sold into slavery in the New World. If we look to works like Leonard Barrett's, *Soul-Force: African Heritage in Afro-American Religion*, or Edward Ball's, *Slaves in the Family*, we can plainly see that the roots of African-American culture can be traced back to the various African ethnic groups that were dispersed throughout the Americas. Thus, the search for a healthy American-African group identity is more attainable than many critics are willing to concede. No people can develop a healthy self-esteem on the group or the individual level so long as that people remain confused or ambivalent about its identity.

Mensah writes, "This lecturer, an African in America, surmises that Black culture in America is possibly in conflict with the dominant culture, and that it may become necessary for Blacks to return to the primordial source to rediscover their cultural forms."¹³ He continues to argue that:

What is being offered here is designed to help individuals in a group to know more about the mystical nature of the physical being they possess. It is designed to help them understand who they are and what they are about, and to experience breakthroughs in their own psyche and awaken the ultimate energies and powers they possess but have been lying dormant within them, until the breakthroughs. This will help them to understand the roles they play and to better guide adults and young people as they grow and mature into adulthood....

The processes of Rites of Passage and initiation begin with the bonding of the group to their collective unconscious; which Freud refers to as the archaic heritage, and is also referred to by Carl Jung as the collective unconscious which is ultimately bound up with the symptomatic behaviors of all the individuals who make up the members of the group that has assembled. This helps the group to bring itself into accord with the cosmic purpose for which they have assembled. Out of the collective unconscious--the cosmic purpose they discovered as a group, each individual in the room will begin to search for and discover his or her own cosmic purpose that makes him or her identified with the collective unconscious they have unearthed as a group, and then enter into initiation to identify with the cosmic energies that assist him or her to live who and what he or she is, in accordance with his or her conscious world.¹⁴

Sowande and Mensah, therefore, were concerned with empowering each of us to find answers to the critical identity questions that continue to confound: Who am I? How did I come to be who I am? Am I really who I think I am? Am I all I ought to be?

The search for *the real Brother Man* must lead to a genuine spiritual centering of our lives as men. It must lead to better relationships with our women. Like the traditional Yoruba Gelede masquerade in which men dance to honor women and to solicit their support, we must begin to see our women as valuable human beings. They are so much more than the male tendency to reduce them to mere reflections of our petty egos and distorted self-images. Only after becoming better men—which is to say, better husbands, fathers, uncles, brothers, sons—will this quest lead to a real strengthening of Black families and Black communities. The reclamation and positive development of Black men in America is a key element in the overall enrichment of Black people throughout the entire Pan-African world.

I began this discussion with the reference to DuBois' classic, *The Souls of Black Folk*, because I think we are still struggling to retrieve a clearer sense of identity as a distinct people of African ancestry living in the United States. Toward this end, the Rites of Passage movement is engaged in the attempt to create no less than a New World African community. We are participating in the creation of a new, yet time honored paradigm. We have adopted a holistic approach that is grounded in a traditional African cultural heritage and is designed to meet the needs of the present as well as the demands of a new vision for the future.

For those people that are skeptics, and who feel that an African centered methodology has no relevance, I think the thoughts from Malidoma Patrice Some's, *Ritual: Power, Healing and Community*, sum up the essence of this endeavor. He warns:

...Western technology is being put into the hands of people who have lost touch with the spiritual. Western Machine technology is the spirit of death made to look like life. It makes life seem easier, comfortable, cozy, but the price we pay includes the dehumanization of the self...It has made the natural way of living look primitive, full of famine, disease, ignorance and poverty so that we can appreciate our enslavement to the Machine and, further, make those who are not enslaved by it feel sorry for themselves...the truth is that the Machine must eliminate every alternative to itself and focus every attention on itself because it knows that its purpose is not to give life, but to suck the energy out of it.¹⁵

American and European models can offer no real alternatives to the myriad of social, cultural and economic issues that confront people of African descent no matter where we may be domiciled on the planet. If we are to become a psychologically and spiritually whole people once again, it will require more than simply rendering Eurocentric imperatives into some kind of Black face imitation.

We are no longer the same people whose ancestors were kidnapped and ripped out of Africa to be sold into slavery in the New World centuries ago. Africa is not a place we come from or travel to, so much as it exists as the *Life-Force* that continues to sustain us. As African-Americans, we must realize that being African is no longer a function of geography. It is now a product of our thought patterns. Returning to Malidoma, he writes:

How relevant is a small village in the wilds of Western Africa to the hustle and bustle of Western society? The West is crowded with people who want healing—this much I have been able to notice. There are people who know that somewhere deep within is a living being in serious longing for a peaceful and serene life. These are people who are so dissatisfied with the existing system that they will embrace anything that promises to rescue them from a sense of entrapment. Without real ritual there is only illness. Such illness cannot be healed with pills or drugs or alcohol, or shopping at the mall, or being tranced out many hours a day in front of the TV screen.¹⁶

Africa is *in* us. Through an African centered Rites-of-Passage process, we are not suggesting that we somehow attempt a return to a sense of a nonexistent unspoiled past. Rather, we have been gifted with a viable means to rediscover our cultural heritage in a concerted effort to use that past as the foundation on which to build whatever it is we will become in the future. Ultimately, the future is not a place we go to; the future is a place we must create.

To paraphrase Asa Hilliard's *African Power: Affirming African Indigenous Socialization in the Face of the Culture Wars*, we are not yet a community. We are a population. We are a collection of individuals who do not quite understand or see just what it is we should have in common as a people. I truly believe people like Chief Sowande and Nana Mensah were sent by the ancestors to help guide African-Americans out of the wilderness. Thanks to their efforts, we have a road map. We do not have to be lost on the long journey to genuine self-knowledge and enlightened self-awareness.

In the introduction to *Visions for Black Men*, Na'im Akbar puts the *Search for the Real Brotherman* into proper perspective when he writes:

“Our resilience and apparently stubborn determination to survive and thrive are nothing short of a miracle. It would be most informative to assess the potential for anything approaching our triumph among any other human beings on the planet. We were never intended to survive and our survival has been in direct defiance of the most consistent and devastating assault on human life in the modern history of humanity. The overwhelming evidence that we continue to produce exceedingly effective human beings whose intellect, talents—and most importantly their human sensitivity and moral life—have remained intact is nothing less than clear evidence of Divine intervention in modern history.”¹⁷

Endnotes

1. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Boston: Bedford Books, 1997, Pg. 37.
2. DuBois, Pg. 38.
3. Leonard E. Barrett, *Soul-Force*. Garden City: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1974, Pg. 75.
4. Yaya Diallo and Mitchell Hall, *The Healing Drum*. Rochester: Destiny Books, 1989, Pg. 13.
5. David Whitaker, *Rites of Passage: A Journey of Transformation*. Cleveland: ASHE Culture Center, Inc., 2006, Pg. XIV.
6. Nathan and Julia Hare, *Bringing The Black Boy To Manhood: The Passage*. San Francisco: The Black Think Tank, 1985, Pg. 21.

7. Herb Goldberg, *The Hazards of Being Male*. New York: New American Library, 1976, Pgs. 1-3.
8. Goldberg, Pg. 7
9. Chief Fela Sowande, "African Studies and the Black American in 1968," Hansberry Memorial Lectures, Howard University, December 12, 1968, Pg. 9.
10. Hill, Jr., Pg. 2.
11. Sowande, Pg. 38.
12. Sobonfu Some, *The Spirit of Intimacy*. New York: Harper Collins, 1997, Pg. 22
13. Anthony J. Mensah, *Rites of Passage and Initiation Processes with Akan Culture*. Milwaukee: NTU Rites of Passage, 1993, Pg. 5.
14. Mensah, Pg. 9.
15. Malidoma Patrice Some, *Ritual: Power, Healing and Community*. Portland: Swan Raven & Co., 1993, Pg. 85
16. Some, Pg. 120.
17. Na'im Akbar, *Visions for Black Men*. Nashville: Winston-Derek Publishers, Inc., 1991, viii

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