

# **The Smoke that Thunders: A personal perspective on how the absent father hinders the growth of black men in the new millenium**

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This paper asks whether a history of slavery, enforced separation from fathers and a culturally reinforced need to be seen as strong (or 'cool') hinders the development of black men.

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A dream: I'm standing at the top of a waterfall, on a rock in its middle—a massive waterfall. To my left all I can see is water, tumbling over the edge and into the depths far below, and to my right the same. For some reason I do not understand it reminds me of Victoria Falls. I look down. All I can see is billions of gallons of water racing away from me, further and further away from me, so I jump. Feet first I jump down, my back to this thunderous wall of water, and I fall, I keep falling, feeling nervous at first, but then gradually more relaxed with what I've done. Then, suddenly, I land on a wooden platform embedded into the waterfall.

As I look around I notice a waterwheel to the side turning slowly as the water tumbles past. I realise this is a house, so I walk inside. Two naked people, one male, one female, both white, spot me and run away in different diagonal directions as I walk towards them. I don't call out to them, I just let them go, before making my way back outside. Again I'm back on the platform, at its edge, the waterwheel to my side, and ready to jump.

So I do.

And again, I fall feet first downwards, with my back to the waterfall, its raging noise tremendous, its torrent of water spraying me delicately, and even though I'm falling, even though I feel nervous, I know, somehow, that everything is going to be alright.

## **A black dad**

My father arrived in Britain from Jamaica in 1944 as part of the Royal Air Force, fighting for the Commonwealth during World War II and, when the conflict

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ended, stayed in the United Kingdom. He had various jobs, lived in numerous places, endured prejudices and racism of all kinds, but struggled through, eventually becoming an engineer, before marrying and having two children, both boys, in the late 1960s.

My experience of him was of a distant, aloof man; a man unable to relate to his sons in anything more than a disciplinary fashion. Whilst other boys in our local park were wrestling their fathers to the ground, mine was always sitting in his armchair, hiding behind his copy of *The Guardian*. He would normally only lower this barrier to take his own frustrations out on the pair of us, and when we were teenagers the level of interaction became even more difficult with this older gentleman feeling as if he had to quite literally fight his sons in order to hang onto the position of strength he had carved out for himself within his own home. If he wasn't argumentative, he was undermining, with no idea of the nurturing and guidance needed for young boys who wished to be seen as men.

### **Where are we now?**

2007 is the 200th anniversary of the end of British slavery. A time not only when millions of men, women and children were taken forcibly from their homes and transported to the New World, but also during which the well defined role of black men in the various African peoples came to an end.

For example, as Akbar (1996) points out, 'Slavery does away with fathers, as it does away with families' (p.19), and 'the African-American man was evaluated by his ability to endure strenuous work and to produce children. He was viewed by the slave master as a stud and a workhorse' (p.20). These two quotes show just how narrow the view of black masculinity became during this period of history, a view that in many ways has not changed.

The most important aspect of this lack of change, in respect of this article, is the absence of the father: a position vital to the growth of young black boys into adults. It is my hope that this article will outline to therapists and counsellors of all cultures just some of the obstacles that black men encounter in their development.

Afro-Caribbean men are over represented in the prison system and within the mental health systems of many major British cities. Echoing this from an American perspective, Majors and Mancini Billson (1992) point out 'African American males die earlier and faster, from suicide, homicide and stress related illnesses' (p.2). But what are the causes of this? Has the lack of a black father figure or role model got a part to play in the position many black men find themselves in?

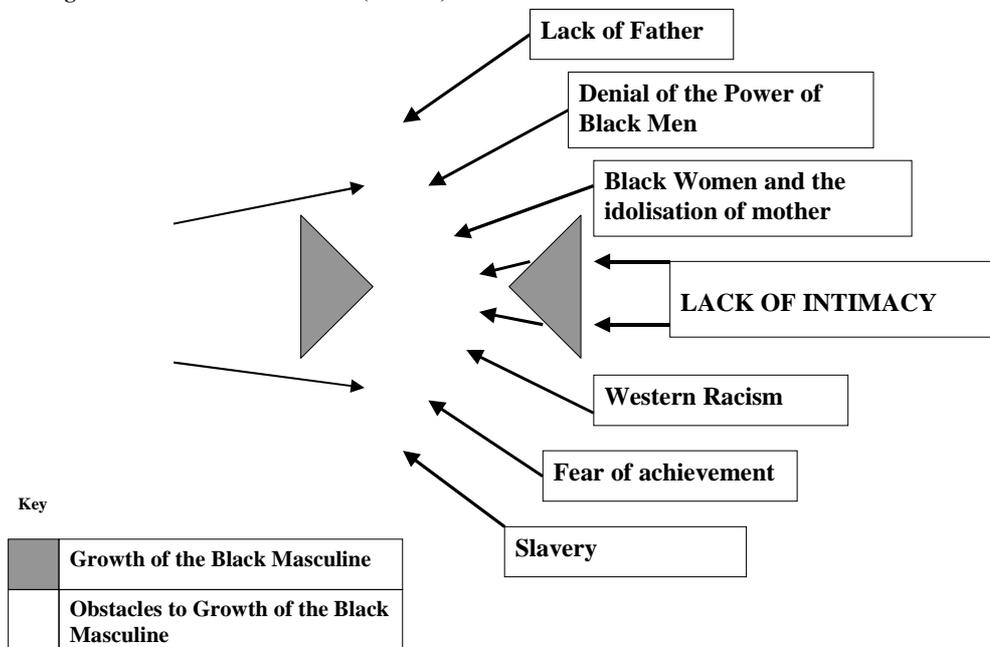
McCloughry (1999) puts forward an answer to my question where he suggests 'if a boy is struggling psychologically it is likely to be because his father was abusive or neglectful' (p.125). And Corneau (1991) adds to this as he believes that if the fathering was inadequate then 'the son will often remain immature and overly dependent, given to anxiety, depression obsession,

compulsions and phobias. In addition, he will tend to repress his rage strongly' (p.19).

Taking this further, Majors and Mancini Billson (1992) suggest that 'presenting the world an emotionless, fearless and aloof front counters the low sense of inner control, lack of inner strength, absence of stability, damaged pride, shattered confidence and fragile social competence that comes from living on the edge of society' (p.8). Is this what black men do?

It is important for us as practitioners to understand that there are a great many suggested reasons why black men seem to find it difficult to achieve their goals in life, and to understand how the lack of that father figure post-slavery has contributed to this. As another way of outlining some of these issues, I have presented them in a more visual format (see Diagram 1).

**Diagram 1: The Black Masculine (Present)**



I have already discussed much of what is on the chart; the lack of self confidence which often leads on to a fear of achievement, the position of slavery and its lasting legacy and, to a lesser degree, the lack of intimacy and the affect this has on black boys who are in the process of becoming men.

An area discussed less is the role of women in this process. Majors and Mancini Billson (1992) again suggest that 'black females are sometimes turned on or attracted to black males who look cool. Those who do not act cool may suffer a heavy penalty of rejection' (p.43), a suggestion that there is a price to pay for those who move away from suppressing much of how they truly feel inside.

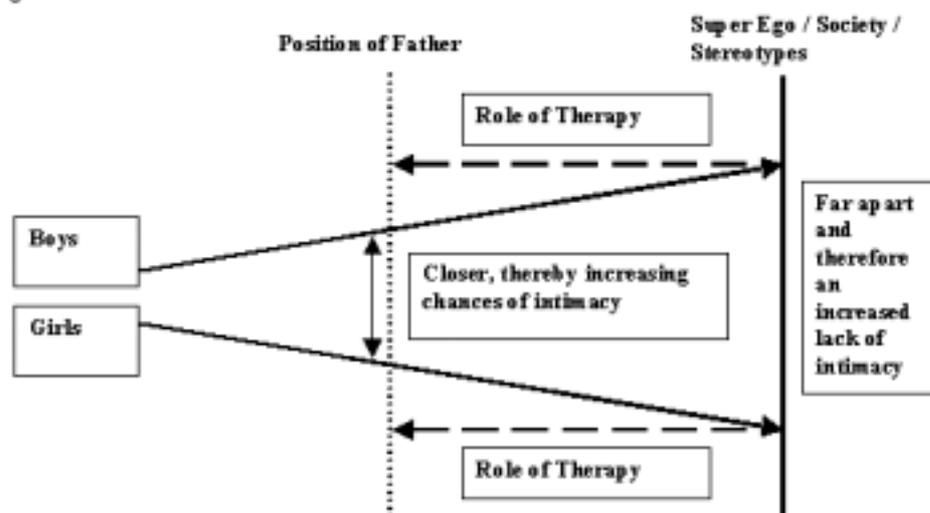
There comes with this, I feel, a continuing of the relationship as already described by Akbar (1996) whereby any feeling is rejected by a woman in favour of a black man's ability to provide strength, sustenance and children.

If this is sometimes the case then it only maintains the lack of intimacy within black males and their relationships with women, and also importantly between black men and themselves. Their persona is what is valued, not what is inside them, something that the relationship with an active connected father, or father figure, would assist in revealing. This might go some way to changing the positioning of black British men in our society.

### Black men in counselling and therapy

It is probably obvious, yet still important, to outline just how young black men obtain their sense of self, and how the lack of what I sometimes call 'masculine parenting' influences this (see Diagram 2).

Diagram 2: Influences on Black Men



The lack of a father for young black men means that they miss out on the mirroring they should receive which would give them a better idea of who they are externally and internally. They are then left to receive this sense of self from society, to engage with the stereotypes already in place, or from their peers, who on the whole may have just as poor a vision of who they are themselves. This will lead them towards a narrow way of being, or as Stevenson (2004) states 'black male youths are often pressurised into presenting a static identity, not ambiguous or multidimensional, because their social interactions within a context demand it.' (p.60)

As there will also be a distinct lack of intimacy with themselves then these young men will struggle to achieve intimacy with others. They often suppress much of what they feel in favour of 'real masculinity', creating an emotional

backlog which might escape at inappropriate times, leading to outbursts of an often violent nature or to a breakdown. Or this backlog might not escape at all, which can have physiological affects such as anything from stress related illnesses to heart attacks.

But as McCloughry (1999) says, 'the boys who are happiest are not those with fathers who shut them off from those things considered feminine in the name of 'real masculinity' but those who nurture their sons' (p.125) suggesting that these boys becoming men have access to the feeling nature of their fathers. They are allowed to become intimate with themselves, which in turn offers a doorway into intimacy with others.

Counsellors or psychotherapists who are able to work well with this nurturing masculinity are invaluable to the development and growth of the black male clients they may work with, but they will inevitably encounter a number of problems. For example, male therapists may have to face a lot of anger and fear from their clients, a fear derived from either not knowing their father, or from knowing a father who was predominantly there to discipline the boy.

As Jung (1989) states, this 'fear of the father may drive the boy out of his identification with the mother, but on the other hand it is possible that his fear will make him cling still more closely to her. A typically neurotic situation then arises: he wants and yet does not want, saying yes and no at the same time.' (p.74). This can lead to the boy coming to counselling or therapy and wanting to grow and separate, but unable to, whilst also not sure of how to express this conflict which he feels within him.

For female counsellors or therapists there will also be challenges. Many young black men may still see their power as derived from their sexuality, something again hinting back to their historical past. This may often play itself out with practitioners through flirting, joking around, and suggestive remarks that can be challenging to contain. What one needs to be aware of is that this display is to do with what little power black men feel they have, and is because there has been a split between the sexual complex and the rest of that person's inner world.

As Jung (1989) once again states 'the less the sexual complex is assimilated to the whole of the personality, the more autonomous and instinctive it will be. Sexuality is then purely animal and recognises no psychological distinctions. The most inferior woman will do.' (p.56)

This occurs because, to me, fathers are left outside the family, while the mother and son relationship is maintained and stronger than any other. It is as if the Oedipal conflict has been resolved only so that the mother sides with the son. The fear of real intimacy means that the mother can have a man of sorts in her life, her son who idolises her, an almost incestuous relationship and one which undermines much of the boy's masculinity, hinders his sexual development, and prevents true intimacy with women.

Black men need to feel, and to realise that there are other ways of being a

man which don't have to rely on just being cool or brash or a stud. They need to see that it is ok for them to speak to someone about their problems, whatever they might be, and therapists of all cultures need to work on developing a greater awareness of the needs of Afro-Caribbean men.

In all there needs to be a movement away from Diagram 1 to a position where a proper nurturing relationship with an appropriate male figure allows the client to experience his inner world and the power contained there. He needs to be able to challenge his fear of achievement, looking at the ways he might sabotage himself from achieving. There needs to be a mature breaking of the link between mother and son through the mirroring a mature masculine figure would bring, allowing the son to grow and become his own healthy man.

Ultimately, for black men to achieve what they want to in life, for them to reach their full potential, they need to gradually rediscover their internal self and become whole again. Normally, this would be achieved with the help of the father but, without him, it has left generations of young black men unknowing of their own power, and sense of who they are.

Some of these viewpoints are nothing new. As Khanna (2003) writes:

in his essay 'Black Orpheus' Sartre claimed, in highly androcentric and phallogocentric language, that 'the black man has to learn to feel whole again after experiencing colonist racism'. (p.29)

### **A dream of Africa**

I have had two therapists, the second being male. This therapy was for me very much about being seen, being acknowledged as a man and guided to a place where I felt that my masculinity was worth something. I learned much about my masculinity, finished my degree and completed all of the things I had desired to do with my life since I was in my mid-twenties. My personal relationships changed, as the realisation of what it is to be a man broadened, and my desire to prove myself through limited means diminished considerably.

I presented the dream at the beginning of this paper to my therapist and we discussed the symbols within it extensively; the water wheel, with its idea of power, the water, which, from a transpersonal perspective, refers to my emotional and creative sense. And in the summer of 2006 I travelled through East Africa, ending up mid way through my journey at Victoria Falls in Zambia, or as the locals call it Mosi Oa Tunya (translated as 'The Smoke That Thunders'). Sitting there before that awe inspiring sight left me in tears, as I bathed in the waters, or the 'smoke', whilst sitting opposite the Zambesi River which dropped into the distance below me.

To witness this, and to remember the dream, gave me a new perspective on just what my unconscious was telling me. To see the power I have within me displayed before me was an experience I will never forget, but always respect.

This, for me, is what it means to be a black man in the modern age.

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