

# African american rhetoric



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BUSTER**

Looking at cotemporary African American society through the prism of the popular press, and comparing the scenario with what obtained in the 50s and 60's one would not help but observe an apparent disconnect between the two eras.

One would be wont to ask “ where have all the notable people of substance gone to?” For rarely would one now hear mentioned in public discourse the like of such departed great African Americans as W. E. Dubois, Martin Luther King of Marcus Garvey; men who were more renowned for their brain than their brawn.

Commanding centre stage in the cotemporary African American rhetoric are the exploits of African American entertainers and sports people, and more of the dishonourable than the honourable. The achievers in the field of sports, music and gangster world are the new icons on the block.

Their exploits are extolled and publicised to high heavens, whereas the everyday advancement of worthier African Americans in the academia, business, politics and sciences are rarely heard of.

This fact was unequivocally demonstrated by Senator Biden (one of the '08 presidential hopefuls), who in commenting on the presidential ambition of Senator Barak Obama, was quoted to have referred to Obama as “ the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy.”

Attributing the limited information about the progress of worthier African Americans in the media to a deliberate ploy related to “ the media's control on what is shown and what isn't.” Ramkissoon (2006) posits that “ Perhaps “

someone or someone's" don't want black scholars to be glorified for anything but their physical capabilities."

This he argues may be an attempt to perpetuate the practice under slavery where " blacks were not prized for their intelligence or creativity- their size and strength were tragically the only things valued on the slave block."

It is therefore not surprising that the current state of affairs has effectively restructured the African American youth into thinking that the path to glory and success laid no more in labouring through years of education in the classroom but on his prowess in the neighbourhood basketball court, on his way to the NBA.

Here again Ramkisson wonders " How can young blacks be motivated to attend college in a society that pays professional athletes and entertainers much higher salaries than the school teachers? This is also the same society that spends twice as much funding on prisons than educational resources."

Being witnesses to the catapulting of the lives of his neighbourhood athlete into the dizzying heights of celebrity status and riches through the juggle of the ball on the court, many an African American youth does not need much more persuasion to locate and identify with the visible present-day African American role models portrayed in the media.

Another apparent manifestation of the success in the sustained effort to fit the African American back into his historically determined mould as a creature of brawn and sex is revealed in the prevailing wrong headed focus of the typical African American youth.

A focus that is headed out of the schools and class rooms into lives of crime, lofty expectations, juvenile detention centers, prisons and the garbage dumps of the American society.

The socially correct focus at the moment is demonstrated by the prevailing avid celebrity obsession where African American youths, overawed by the seemingly greater- than-life postures portrayed in the popular media about the lives of their sports idols; fixate their minds on becoming celebrities just by wishing it. In so doing they sacrifice their chances of amounting to something of substance in their lives by ignoring the chances earned for them by the civil rights marchers of the 60's.

These opportunities for self improvement and education presented to the by the American system are shunned by them for lives outside the system, dreaming forlorn dreams of glittering things to come in the indefinite future. These same opportunities are steadily being taken over by immigrant Africans from the continent and African descendants from Caribbean nations.

The result of the wrong headed focus is seen in the disproportionate number of African American youths heading for the ever expanding American correctional institutions, of which Allen (cited by Woods 2006) rightly observed that “ The money that could support 10 undergraduates at a premier campus, \$44, 000, maintains just one prisoner. But in the last decade or so, California has built 21 new prisons and expanded pre-existing ones while opening only three new campuses.”

Locating the Root Causes

A number of reasons can be advanced for these observed negative growth patterns amongst African Americans youths. The most notable of these reasons are:

#### Break down of Marriages and the Family Institution

A recent study on the effect of marriage on the African American man or woman showed that “ As local marriage rates increase in Black communities, violent crime decreases.” The study also revealed that parental marriage was shown to produce better adjusted children amongst African Americans, which “ apparently protects against early sexual debut and pregnancy.” (Blackman 2005)

But the current reality among African Americans shows that marriage and family, as primary vehicles of socialisation, have recorded major reversals in their influence on the lives of African Americans.

Revered family values and traditions have taken the greatest beating amongst African Americans than any other group in America as marriages have recorded an ever steady decline amongst the group while divorce, single parenthood and juvenile pregnancy have assumed an ever greater growth.

Commenting on this, Wooten (2006) stated “ The unmentioned reality is that children in alarming numbers are being brought into the world without a mother and father in the home, and among minority children the problem is epidemic. In 2004, 69.3 percent of births of black children were to unmarried women.”

The effect is that an ever increasing number of black youths are being denied that important element of sound and rounded upbringing essential for character formation and which the family structure has been known to provide for generations.

#### Warped Role Models and Peer Pressure

Highlighting the salutary effects good role models could have on the psych of African Americans wishing to pursue academics, Mitchel (2006) related the words of Rodney Howlett, an architect and alumnus of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, “ Just being able to name African-American architects has had a great effect on me personally. In order to succeed, you have to see someone who looks like you.”

African American youths are definitely not in short supply of those who look like them to emulate, the problem is that most of such role models are now outside the confines of schools and classrooms and increasingly within the confines of neighbourhood gangs and prisons.

This fact and peer pressures have gained ascendancy and their lure on impressionable African American youths, as their single parents steadily lose their grip in the face of other contending demands for survival facing them in the larger society.

Unable to meet up with the demands of raising their children, many single parents also lose out to external forces in the struggle to be role models to their own children.

#### The Effects of a Racially Determined American Society

Other major determinants of the predisposition of African American youths towards the sports arenas in their search for a life of fulfilment are the effects and dynamics of the race factor, which the main stream American society would rather wish away than confront, or acknowledge.

Cohen (2006) noted that social and public policy analysts often rush to “measure the behaviour and negative outcomes of young African Americans with little concern for measuring and analyzing their attitudes, ideas, wants, desires and politics.”

This lack of cognate information about what drives the average African American youth could be the reason for their being misunderstood by the main stream American society. Stressing this point, Jankowski (2002, cited by Cohen) argued that “[a] person’s socioeconomic position and their ethnic group’s history in America influence the type and intensity of their civic involvement.”

This civic involvement would have normally included the willingness or unwillingness of such individuals to obey laws, or avail themselves of such services as education, which is provided by the state.

Alluding to such seemingly anti-social behaviours as “survival strategies”, Cohen stated that a recent research she undertook revealed that “Some of the participants, especially those most vulnerably positioned, indicated that they engage in a strategy of invisibility, making themselves invisible to authority figures like the police, teachers, and correction officers that they believe are out to ‘get them.’”