

CHAPTER V

SEXUALITY AND THE CARIBBEAN MALE

The Caribbean male's attitude towards sexuality has been formed from the historical and cultural factors which sought to dictate the responses which should emerge from the authoritarianism of the church, the laissez-faire culture with its rum, calypso, reggae and steel band, and the socialization practices of the culture.

The Caribbean man has been referred to as a 'village ram', a 'woman chaser', an irresponsible 'begetter' of babies, and an 'over-sexed', easy-going, carefree individual who is afraid of commitment.

In order to come to an understanding of the factors which have shaped the Caribbean man's attitude with regard to sexuality one must be careful to look at the way in which contributory values and characteristics have been passed on.

Socialization

The high incidence of visiting relationships and single-parent homes have helped to mold the Caribbean male's attitude. Graham Dann, writing about the Barbadian male states:

"The young Barbadian male is therefore typically introduced to society by a woman who may have one or more boyfriends, depending on her economic circumstances. In many cases there is no father figure to whom he can relate or on whom he can pattern his life. In such an environment of maternal dependency he learns that matriarchal households, male absenteeism and outside affairs are normal. For him they constitute an anticipatory role model for the formation of the self and for future expected behavior."

There is often found, especially in lower economic class communities in the Caribbean, an exclusive and often obsessive mother-son relationship. This dependence upon the mother is cultivated as a compensatory allowance for the absence of the father in the life of the young boy.

Edith Clarke points out that this persistent dependence on the part of some young men, if extended into adolescence and beyond, inhibits the development of satisfactory relationships with other people, and the ability to achieve personal independence.

A common feature in Caribbean socialization is the development of an overarching affection and love for the mother, which is seldom given to fathers. It is an unwritten rule that a man's or, for that matter, a boy's mother not be mentioned in a disparaging manner when two males are engaged in a disagreement. The person who openly disparages another man's mother to his face must be prepared for fight or flight. The Caribbean male is socialized to defend with his fists, or other appropriate weaponry, the name of his mother, whether what the person says is true or not. Cursing a man's mother is a sure way of provoking a fight.

It is commonly held in Caribbean society that the male is given a 'free rein' and allowed to express his sexuality physically on reaching mid to late teens. Because as it is often said, he cannot 'bring home trouble', get into trouble as a girl can.

The dependence upon the mother in a matriarchal society inheres in the need of some men to remain living with their mother when they are in their thirties, and the way men often speak of their mothers. Graham Dann found that certain men saw in their mother a model they would make reference to in the selection of their future partner.

"The words 'caring', 'understanding', 'kind', 'good', and 'loving', were frequently used in descriptions of mothers. 'Warm' and close even 'passionate', also occurred as epithets, almost as if the woman of childhood was viewed as a future model partner. In this respect one respondent was quite explicit: 'I would like to marry someone like she'."

The absence of the father from most West Indian homes contributes towards the negative light in which he is held in the eyes of the young boy. The woman compensates for the lack of the availability of the man in the home by acting as mother and father. Many Caribbean males speak of their mother as being a strong, hardworking person.

In many cases the grandmother plays a more significant role than the father. This is most apparent in visiting relationships when a woman becomes pregnant and has to continue living with her mother. Whatever authority the father may have had is further undermined in the eyes of the young boy growing up in a home where his mother is still under the control and authority of her mother. One can well see that a father who is in a visiting relationship will not have very much impact upon the socialization of his child. As a matter of fact, if the grandmother is a dominant person the influence of the mother herself may be negligible.

Edith Clarke points out the extent of the grandmother's authority within the home:

"The child may learn the meaning of the term where he sees the mother, as in the situation of the first pregnancy, treated as just another child in her mother's home and as a baby may even be taught to call the grandmother 'mother' and the mother by the name or pet name by which she is referred to by her parents and other members of the household. He will copy the behavior pattern towards the mother of her brothers and sisters and be taught to obey and respect the grandmother as the head of the family. Suckling the infant may be the only act which establishes the exclusive maternal relationship; providing for its other needs, fondling and playing with it, may be shared with, or largely taken over by the grandmother or other relative.

Given the dominance of the matriarchal figures in the socialization of the young boy, and the absence and seemingly insignificant role of the father in many homes, we need to look at the image of the father, how he is perceived from the viewpoint of the young boy.

Psychoanalytic theory tells us that as the growing boy matures he must be able to transfer his attachment from his mother, the parent of the opposite sex, to the parent of the same sex, from whom he gains a model for his own future behavior. With the absence of the father in the home of many young and growing boys, this modeling often comes from uncles, grandfathers, stepfathers or what they can derive from the visits of their own fathers.

If we subscribe to the Oedipus theory, then the role the father or father-figure plays is pivotal in the socialization process in helping the young man to give up his sexual idealization of his mother.

Some would assume that because the father may be absent from the homes of many Caribbean boys, he will not play an important role. Graham Dann seems to think that with the absence of the father, a son is doomed to failure in terms of his socialization. He writes:

“What chance does a son have with his father blanked out of his life? It is interesting, but perhaps also rather depressing to realize that in all the descriptions of fathers, in only one case did an interviewee refer to his father as daddy.”

I do not share the apparent despair of Mr. Dann, not that I am underestimating the significance of the father; rather, I think Caribbean society has learned to cope with the varying roles of the father.

It seems to me that instead of stereotyping the role of the father, Caribbean society has adapted itself to the particular situation of compensating for the absentee father, and allowing the father to play a role which may be seen by some societies as insignificant. The form of fatherhood in the Caribbean, although it has much to decry it, must not be seen as hopeless.

Margaret Mead comments on the often incessant need to stereotype fatherhood roles:

“One often hears in our society, ‘if his father had been a different sort of man, then his problems would have been quite different.’ But it would be even truer to comment also – ‘if he had been born into a society with a different form of fatherhood ...’ Where the style of fatherhood calls for great strength and self-contained dignity, a weak father threatens the development of the son so that a son has a lesser chance than his neighbours. But where the style of fatherhood calls for friendly, easy-going ally father, then a strong, self-contained powerful father becomes a threat. Even in our highly diversified society in which each small family is so isolated from others that no one knows how peculiar or how usual are the feelings and behaviours that are shut behind each yale lock, there is still a style to which individual actions are referred, albeit facilely.”

Men in the region – this does not speak to all situations – learn that for the most part their fathers have an indirect role in their socialization. In the middle class families and in the lower class families where legal marriage prevails, the absolute authority of one parent is stressed. But even in these homes where the father is in residence, much of the counseling and discipline is often left in the hands of the mother.

It seems that although the father is present, these middle class and lower class families give the impression that the matriarchal situation should be the norm, with the father being called upon to administer discipline to teenage boys, whom the mother feels unable to control.

The historical dominance of the mother in the home appears to be unconsciously perpetuated by the mother, despite the father's presence; hence the young boy, and teenage boy, internalize a picture of male instability and irresponsibility, which he in turns acts out in his family life and sexual unions.

The seemingly irresponsible and unstable formation of sexual unions by men in the Caribbean cannot be simply attributed to the absence of fathers, but moreso to the inability or seeming reluctance of some mothers to allow the father to play his role. Some fathers, for the sake of peace and tranquility in the home, and captive to the memory of the maternal dominance, have allowed the women an almost free hand in the home.

Judith Blake is reluctant to admit the legitimacy of the mother's dominance in the home:

"...The mother acquires a 'by default' status as a pseudo-father if the father is absent. However, this effort on her part to supply the attributes of the father is not legitimized. In the minds of lower-class Jamaicans it is not she, but the father himself, who should play the father role. Far from being an expendable figure whose frequent absence causes little concern, the father is considered to play a unique and highly important role in child-rearing, a role for which women do not feel suited."

Many Caribbean men seem to be fixated at the oedipal stage, where there is a prolong adulation and seemingly sexual affection for the mother figure. This is not to say that this affection is the kind which will lead to incest; on the contrary, the devotion to the mother is seen in the search by many men to replace the image of the mother by having a sexual partner who can fit that image.

"The notion of hardwork and caring in the absence of male support often led respondents to idolize their mothers with such descriptions as 'the best person that ever live' and a 'godsend'. However, absence of the father figure and role substitution by the mother could and did lead to ambivalent perceptions by male offspring..."

It is therefore important to make the point that although Caribbean society cannot be deemed an ideal society, if one looks at it from his/her particular perspective and orientation, there are nonetheless certain positive features which one has to be willing to posit as reflective of the culture of the society.

The home, which is the primary shaper of a person's sexuality, often gives ambivalent messages to Caribbean men; the mother is seen as the one in charge, the one who seems to be more concerned for the growing boy, whereas the father, who is often absent, is perceived as laid back and willing to hand over whatever role may have been assigned to him to the mother, who often complains and berates him for not playing a greater part in the discipline of the teenage boys in the family.

The apparent relegation of the father in the home to a less than leading and role model position, has a lot to do with the way men in the Caribbean act out their sexuality. The reservations and fears about settling down and the concomitant 'running around' from one relationship to another, is due in large part to the example set by the father figure, and the role he plays in the home and society.

Looking at the family from a psychological systems perspective, I am of the opinion that there will be a great deal of compensatory behavior on the part of men in their dealing with women in the Caribbean.

We will look at the attitudes of men in the Caribbean in a systemic way when we come to the part the pastoral counselor can play in ministering to men.

Sexual Experiences

Many Caribbean men postpone marriage and the establishing of stable non-legal unions until around the age of 30-35. However, they are engaged in sexual intercourse from around the age of 16, some as young as 14. One can therefore say that most are engaged in sexual encounters for approximately 17 years before they do settle down. One is led to ask the question: how precocious are Caribbean men, what do they think about pre-marital sex, what do they think about their sexual experiences, how are they initiated into sexual knowledge, what are their feelings about women?

In her study of three communities in Jamaica, Edith Clarke found that attitudes and practices in regard to sex and procreation varied considerably between the communities.

As was mentioned in our discussions on unions, class and economic position have a lot to do with the attitudes and practices of Caribbean people with respect to sexuality. In upper economic class circles the discussion of sex is often steered away from; it may be tolerated as a discussion topic in middle class conversations, and at social gatherings. Among the lower class people in the Caribbean where living quarters are cramped and three or four children sleep together in a bed, sex is widely discussed among men and women.

In making reference to the lower economic class community of Sugartown, Clarke writes:

"In Sugartown, by contrast (to the upper class community of Orange Grove) sex, was a favourite subject of conversation with both men and women. Men enjoyed talking about their sexual prowess, the number of children they had fathered and the number of their conquests, referring with special pride to any relationship with a virgin. Both men and women regarded sexual activity as a normal part of adult and adolescent life, and there was never any attempt to temper the discussion if children were present. Childish and adolescent precocity was, on the contrary regarded with tolerant amusement and, in the case of boys, with admiration."

One of the features of Caribbean society is that many parents find it difficult to explain sexuality to their children. As was mentioned by Clarke, parents are not reluctant about discussing sex and sexual practices among themselves within the

earshot of their sons, but to sit the teenager down and formally explain the 'facts of life' is not easily or very often done by Caribbean parents.

One of the chief means whereby one acquires knowledge about sex is in one's peer group. Another means is by listening to older boys and 'experience' men. Whether he is under the street lamp or around the rum shop a young male is sure to acquire some knowledge; the accuracy of the knowledge will have to wait upon some personal experience.

Boasting about one's conquests and the need to be macho to attract the attention of the opposite sex are features of Caribbean male group discussions.

Morris Freilich in a study of a peasant farming community in Eastern Trinidad found that the men in the community expressed their sexuality in a 'game', a sex-fame game where sexual conquest is the primary object:

"Anamatian negroes believe that everyone has a sexual appetite the satisfaction of which is natural and pleasurable. Men whose sexual needs are almost insatiable are referred to as 'hot boys', 'sweet men', and 'wild men', and such 'real men' require sexual gratification both frequently and in great variety. Hot boys who are frequently sexually involved with many women receive the social acclaim known as 'fame', and to be a 'famous man' is the goal of almost every adult male. Men receive additional acclaim for their 'fooling abilities' – abilities to make convincing promises to women which they expect to break."

The casual and conquistadorial approach to sexual encounters suggests a compensatory behavior which is aimed primarily at the building or restoration of ego strength which is in danger of weakening in the light of learned or realized perceptions of the father figure.

Most men in Graham Dann's study had no problems about engaging in premarital sex; even though some did mention the biblical injunctions against it, they felt these injunctions were not realistic for the present age.

It is not uncommon in the Caribbean to hear men speak of their friends being under pressure to perform. Because of the seemingly incessant need to move in and out of relationships, and the communities being relatively small, comparisons on performance are often made.

Eugene Brody relates his experience in his study:

"Several men and a number of female informants noted that women may judge men on the basis of sexual performance and make fun of them if they are not competent."

The performance component of relationships has been a particular feature of Caribbean society, in terms of fertility. To have a child was often seen by many in the lower classes of society as an accomplishment. To have many children from many women was often looked on with admiration and as a measure of a man's strength and overall sexual ability.

With the rise of middle class and metropolitan values, many began seeing that fertility must also be reckoned in economic terms. A factor which has been influential in limiting the number of children a man may father is the emphasis on contraception. To this may be attributed the willingness of men to have sex without the anticipated burden of having to maintain many children (which could be, and is often mandated by the courts of law).

Graham Dann found in his study that most men expressed positive reactions when they learned for the first time of their responsibility for a pregnancy. For many men in the Caribbean having a child gives them a sense of accomplishment, and it may be prelude to a relationship eventually culminating in legal marriage.

As we saw when we looked at female attitudes with respect to sexuality, having a child for a man sometimes strengthens the relationship and moves it in the desired direction of stability.

As has been highlighted in the chapter on unions, visiting relationships by men who are in good positions socially and economically may represent an accommodation for women, mostly wives, who seem to become less and less interested in sex on reaching menopause.

Men often see themselves as having, and naturally so, a greater need for sex than women. 'Calypsos' (a type of music unique to the Caribbean) glorify the macho image and sing the virtues of the man who is able to move from one woman to another, leaving them all satisfied with his sexual performance. However, the need of a man to be in control sometimes shows itself in the battering of women. As men move up on the economic scale there is usually a more determined attitude on their part to restrict the number of child they father. There may be a reduction of the number of women the man may have lasting relationships with. One finds that there is still some boasting about sexual performance among these men as they would often have a steady girlfriend, or wife, and not be unwilling to reassure themselves about their sexual prowess by having short sexual encounters.

The belief that men must satisfy their sexual urges, and that women want men to be in control of them, are motivating factors in the approach to sexuality of the Caribbean male.