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**A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF AFRO-AMERICAN/MAORI FAMILIES:
THE SUBTEXT OF MINORITY STATUS**

by

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INTRODUCTION

Many changes have occurred in the world since 1940, covering a wide array of personalities, values and institutions and bringing about a marked change in the functioning of society as a whole. These changes have been most dramatic within the institution of the family where they have had a most telling effect on our personal lives. We are all, to some degree, affected by increasing sexual permissiveness, changes in sex role expectations, a declining fertility rate, altered attitudes toward child bearing and rearing, a continuing increase in the divorce rate, and the like.

One would not expect families of color to be immune to the forces modifying our family forms. There is ample evidence that they are not. At the same time their special status as a racial minority, with a varied history, continues to give the colored races marital and family patterns a unique character. Despite what many allege to be the positive gains of the sixties and seventies, the problems of poverty and racial oppression continue to plague large numbers of people of color. They are still spatially segregated from the majority of the more affluent white citizenry and certain cultural values distinguish their family life in form and content from the middle-class, white Anglo Saxon model. Nevertheless, the commonality of the two may be greater than the differences. We lose nothing by admitting this. Moreover, the variations within the colored population may be greater than the differences among the racial groups. Therefore, it becomes even more important to view them from the widest possible perspective.

In attempting to understand where our particular families of color will be in the year 2000, it is necessary to begin by defining and classifying the concept of minority group. The term minority would appear to be a misnomer since it generally applies only to groups physically distinctive from the European majority. Black Americans, for instance, are not regarded solely as a "minority" due to their numbers but are

differentiated from white ethnic groups based on physical traits such as skin color and hair texture. No serious student of race and ethnicity would suggest that the status of Blacks can be legitimately compared to that of White American ethnic groups (e.g., Jews, Italians, Irish). Yet, a larger number of Black Americans can identify their ancestry to Africa than any white group can identify their ancestry with a single country except Germans¹. Obviously, the concept of "minority" is based on much broader phenomenon than the relative size in the population. Ethnicity, for example, refers to a national identity and distinctive culture and language whereas minority status connotes a history of discrimination, social stratification, and phenotypic characteristics.

The last fifty years have witnessed such changes in international migration, booming fertility rates and volatile economic systems that would bring into question the use of national borders to define a group as a minority. The geopolitical changes of the last century have resulted in the decline of population in the largely white nations from 30 percent of the world's population to 15 percent in 1985². Thus, the groups that north America defines as minorities constitute about 85 percent of the world's population and is rising. In almost every predominantly white nation, Marxist, socialist and capitalist, the downturn in fertility rates has resulted in zero population growth while 90 percent of population growth has occurred in nonwhite societies. Of greater significance, with significant policy implications, is the fact that immigration patterns and fertility rates will irreducibly alter the racial composition of the largely white nations. Demographic projections are that the ten most populous countries in the year 2100 will have a majority of nonwhite population, including the Soviet Union and the United States. By the year 2080, if current immigration and birthrate trends hold up, slightly less than half of all Americans will be non-Hispanic whites³.

For classificatory purposes, the families of color are grouped into American Indians, Blacks, Asians and Latinos. While most of the groups and subgroups will deviate from the phenotypic norm and have a shared history of racial discrimination by

the European majority, many individuals in those groups will share none of the above characteristics. Some Latinos, for instance, have the same phenotypical traits as the Euro-American majority. The discrimination they still face will be based on their cultural difference and not their socioeconomic status or physical traits. Conversely, Japanese-Americans have one of the highest educational and economic attainments in the United States. Although one of the most acculturated groups in North America, they still have to confront current attitudes and practices of racial discrimination based on their physical differences. Black Americans and American Indians represent a special case since the first had involuntary entry into and the second were indigenous to a white settler nation. While having the longest tenure of all the racial "minorities," they are disproportionately subjected to poverty status and institutions insensitive or hostile to their aspirations.

Class differences exist in all people of color and are said to be more of a fundamental barrier than race to structural integration into white settler society. Yet the basic problem is that the Euro-American majority sees people of color as monolithic, independent of the minority groups' socioeconomic status. Much attention has been paid to the Black American family, not as a unique cultural institution but as the focus of social problems such as welfare dependency, teenage pregnancy, illegitimacy, and female-headed households. Yet a third of all Black families earn \$25,000 to \$50,000, and are not the concern of any public policy⁴. It is obvious that there are economic, not racial or cultural, factors behind those social problems. However, Black Americans of all social classes find themselves identified with the lowest members of their group while Euro-Americans are identified with the highest achieving members of their group.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SOUTH PACIFIC

The South Pacific is an arc of islands located on the fringe of Asia. Some Anthropologists and archaeologists believe the origin of Homo-sapiens was in Africa and that they eventually dispersed into Europe, Asia, the South Pacific and ultimately the

American continent. Due to the necessity of adapting to the physical environment, Homo-sapiens lost some of their African characteristics but retained their pigmentation in other tropical or temperate climates. In the South Pacific there was a tripartite racial division: (1) the Melanesians, prototypically Black people (2) Micronesians, composed of a racial hybrid of Black and Asian peoples and (3) the Polynesians, a group assumed to be Black in origin but amalgamated with Asian Mongoloids and white Europeans⁵. As is true of other Blacks throughout the world, who would be classified as Black by American criteria of racial membership, many of these groups have taken on a racial identity that fuses their African heritage.

Whatever their racial origins and contemporary appellation, these groups now have an American Black strain in their genetic makeup. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, Black Americans came to the South Pacific as whalers from ports in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. These Black sailors were welcomed by the Pacific Islanders who valued them for their knowledge of Western customs and their skills with munitions. Many of these Black Americans mated with the native women and produced offspring that were assimilated into the Pacific Island community. Unlike the rigid American system of racial classification, the Pacific Islanders accept multiple racial identities without any invidious evaluation. Those part-Black Americans are no different from Melanesians and Polynesians in physical appearance, dress, manners, language or self-identification. Hence they are absorbed and accepted in the South Pacific Island society⁶.

Probably the greatest influx of Black Americans in the Pacific Islands occurred during World War II. Many were stationed in those islands and mingled, without discrimination, among the native Islanders. Some met and mated with native women, the children of such unions often being absorbed in the Pacific Island community. Others, where possible, married and brought the women to the United States. In the white settler nations, Australia and New Zealand, they were not as welcome. During World War II,

planes carrying Black soldiers were not permitted to land in Australia. Later this policy was changed to allow Black soldiers into some northern Australian territory that were war affected or war likely areas. However, Black soldiers were confined to the more squalid areas and forbidden to venture into other parts of town. Folklore has it that when Black soldiers attempted to venture beyond their designated areas, white American soldiers lined up and killed them⁷.

Among those countries in the South Pacific with a substantial or interesting Black/Polynesian population are Australia, New Zealand, Tahiti, Papua-New Guinea, the Solomons, New Caledonia, Samoa, and the Fiji Islands. Many of these groups identify with the minority status of Black Americans but do not regard themselves as members of the African diaspora. While they would be defined as Black by American standards, their racial identity is often based on their geographical location, language, hair texture and religion. Africans, and even some Black Americans, came to that part of the world years ago.

The most prominent country in the area is Australia, a nation of 17 million European immigrants and about 500,000 Blacks who are indigenous to the country. First, we must deal with this country's image as a racist nation. That image is based on the white Australian immigration policy that existed until 1972. That policy, which forbid citizenship to non-whites was originally aimed at Asians but just as strongly applied to Blacks. Since Australia is surrounded by 2 1/2 billion Asians, they were trying to prevent their smaller numbers from being overwhelmed by the Asian horde. Although few Blacks applied for citizenship, they, too, were not welcome as citizens or visitors. Since 1972 the policy was dropped and about a third of the immigrants to Australia in the recent years have been Asians.

Across the Tasmanian Sea from Australia is the island nation of New Zealand. Similar to Australia in many ways, it is a smaller country of four million people, most of them British immigrants. The country was originally occupied by a Polynesian group

known as Maori. There has been sufficient miscegenation in New Zealand to make racial categories meaningless. However, Maori is officially defined as any person who has 50 percent or more of Maori blood. Maoris consider any person Maori who identifies as one. By the latest unofficial count, there are approximately 400,000 Maoris, about 10 percent of the population. Unlike the Aborigines they are an urban working class group, more acculturated, have a higher level of education and income, speak English and are more integrated into New Zealand society⁸.

As a Black American I knew little about the South Pacific and even less about the native groups occupying the white settler countries of Australia and New Zealand. By chance I was invited to be a visiting research fellow at the Institute of Family Studies in Melbourne, Australia, during the spring and summer of 1982. Although allowed to work on projects of my choice, I elected to study and work with Australian Aborigines. Whereas I developed a fraternal bond with the Aborigines and still maintain strong ties to that community, there were great differences between their situation and ours. They were a rural, land based group that comprised less than one percent of Australia's population. Hence, I journeyed to Auckland to seek out the Maoris with whom Black Americans share a greater commonality.

Having obtained the names of a few Maoris from my Aboriginal friends, I flew to Auckland for a brief visit. As soon as I called Mr. Colin Reeder, an urban planner for the Auckland City Council, he immediately came to get me and I was introduced to other members of the Maori community. At once I was struck by the degree to which we shared a similar situation in our respective white settler countries. Both the Maori and Black American groups constitute 12 percent of the total population of their respective countries, and each group is an urban, working class population. Those salient characteristics, coupled with their existence in a country settled by Anglo Saxons has led to an incredibly surprising resemblance between the two groups.

RACIAL MEMBERSHIP IN WHITE SETTLER SOCIETIES

Before pointing out the likenesses between Afro-Americans and Maoris, it is incumbent upon me to note some variations between the two groups. Maoris are the original inhabitants of their land, an indigenous group which has retained much of its language and culture. Black Americans were brought to the United States as slaves and stripped of their names, language and culture. An interesting distinction between the two groups is that Maoris were not allowed to claim Maori membership until recently unless they were of more than half Maori origin. Conversely, Black Americans had no choice in their racial membership: any degree of Black ancestry classified them as Black. Because of their native status, the Maoris have a special relationship to their white settler government that Black Americans do not. There is a special political roll for Maoris, and other governmental units devoted entirely to them. While Black Americans receive some special governmental assistance, it is generally assistance available to all economically disadvantaged groups in the United States. That assistance targeted toward special groups has to be shared with other racial minorities (Indians and Hispanics) and occasionally with women of European descent.

An interesting similarity between the two groups is the role of women. In my encounters with Maori women I observed that many of them were strong and independent but retained their femininity. I found out that Maori women held leadership posts in many Maori organizations. Some of them had organized what might be called a Maori feminist movement to deal with women's issues. Those patterns parallel similar tendencies among Black American women. A disparity between the two groups is the sex ratio. The 1981 New Zealand census reports that there were approximately 567 more Maori men than women, a sex ratio of 99.6 females to every 100 males⁹. In the marriageable years, 20-44, there are slightly more Maori women than men. In the United States, there are approximately one million and a half more Black women than men, a sex ratio of 87 males to every 100 females¹⁰. Such an imbalance in the sex ratio makes

it difficult for many Black women to form a monogamous family and contributes to the high proportion of female headed households.

Because Maori and Black American men are both physically aggressive groups, they play a dominant role in their nation's athletic teams. While the sports played in the two countries differ (U.S. - football, N.Z. - rugby) the two groups bring to their sports a special style of speed and aggressiveness that makes them sought after for these activities. The two groups are also over-represented in their respective nation's military, partly due to a high unemployment rate among their youth and because they are physically aggressive.

Of course, some of the Maori/Black American differences are traceable to diversities in the two countries. New Zealand is a small country of four million inhabitants with a gross national product based on agricultural activity, whereas the United States is an industrialized society with more than 250 million people. Hence, persons of Maori descent numbered 385,524 at the 1981 census in comparison to 30 million Blacks in America¹¹. Nevertheless, the statistical evidence is cogent proof that non-whites do not fare well in white settler societies. While there has been much progress in the last twenty years, it is clear that due to differences in skin color, cultural values and life styles, non-whites do not have equal access to opportunity structures in countries dominated by Anglo-Saxons.

Beginning with the right to earn a living, the United States and New Zealand census shows an unemployment rate of 21 percent for Black Americans and 27 percent for adult Maoris, a rate much higher than that of Anglo-Saxons (8 percent, U.S.A.; 6 percent, N.Z.) in 1983. Similarly, and even worse, is the unemployment rates of Black and Maori youths. The rate of unemployment for Maori youths was 49 percent and for Black American youths 53 percent in 1981. Both Maori and Black American families earn about 55 percent of the income of Anglo-Saxon families. In terms of occupational distribution, the main occupations of Maoris were laborers, food and beverage processors

and transportation equipment operators. Black Americans were in three summary occupational groupings: operators, fabricators and laborers. Anglo-Saxons were more heavily concentrated in managerial, farming and technical occupations.¹²

Educational differences between the groups are harder to measure as are the school qualifications for certain occupations. The educational differences between Black Americans and Anglo-Saxons have narrowed in the last decade, with Anglos having a median educational attainment of 12.3 years of schooling compared to 12.0 for Black Americans in 1982. In that same year, the percentage of Anglo-Saxons between the ages of 25-34, who had completed at least one year of university training was 46 percent, whereas 36 percent of Black Americans had attained the same level. The comparable figures for New Zealand show that in 1981 the highest school qualification held for 18.5 percent of the Anglo-Saxons was university entrance or equivalent and that only 3.7 percent of Maoris had reached the same level.¹³

Because Black Americans and Maoris have higher rates of unemployment and less income than Anglo-Saxons, they are also over-represented among those arrested and imprisoned for violations of the law. Again, the statistics show the remarkable affinity of the two groups. In 1982, Maoris made up 33.1 percent of all New Zealanders arrested and brought to trial while Black Americans composed 36 percent of all arrests, much higher than their percentage in the general population. Another factor contributing to their higher arrest rate is the younger ages of the Maori and Black American population. Chronic offenders are often under the age of 25. The median age for the Maori population was 18.3 years compared to a median age of 28.9 years for the Anglo-Saxon population. In the United States, Black Americans have a median age of 24.3 years; Anglo-Saxons had a mid-point age distribution of 30 years¹⁴.

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Because non-whites in white settler societies share a common situation and a shared fate, I have used the term "internal colonialism" to conceptualize their commonalities. Such societies share the following characteristics: (1) non-whites are not in the social system voluntarily, but have it imposed on them; (2) their native culture is modified or destroyed; (3) control is in the hands of people outside their community and (4) racism prevails, i.e., a group seen as different or inferior in terms of alleged biological traits is exploited, controlled, and oppressed socially and psychologically by a group that defines itself as superior¹⁵.

However, an internal colony need not be defined solely by the negative effects of its status. It is also a world community of people that places people above property in their value schemes, that possesses a spirituality that puts them in touch with nature and their feelings, a world culture that believes in mutual aid and compassion for the downtrodden, where the kinship group is still strong and the elderly receive respect. These are all aspects of tribally organized group life that have not been destroyed by European conquest and settlement. And, it is this bond that connects us across oceans and epochs.

A COMPARISON OF BLACK AND MAORI FAMILIES

Consider, for instance, the unit of the family in white settler nations. Over a hundred years ago Karl Marx and Friederich Engels wrote that the European family had become an appendage of capitalism. With the development of private property, the monogamous family came into existence in order that man could pass on property to his "rightful" heirs. Women became sexual objects, were relegated to the sphere of household labor and children were rendered a commodity whose number and value rose and fell with their importance in the relationship to production¹⁶. The nuclear family supplanted the extended kinship structure in order to accommodate the need of industry for a mobile labor force. In contrast, peoples of color were tribally organized and

communal in character and spirit. Property belonged to the group not the individual, and land was not an economic unit but contained the spirit and heritage of the group. In their cultural context, the family was a cultural and spiritual form and not subject to the economic rationalizations imposed by the European ethos.

As peoples of color were subject to European cultural values and economic pressures, their family structure has been transformed from its original purpose and character. Nowhere is this truer than among Black Americans, the most acculturated and de-tribalized of our racial groups. Still, the influence of European settlement and influence is so pervasive as to create a commonality among Black American and Maori families. Both groups have a family system currently defined as experiencing a crisis because it fails to produce individuals capable of meeting the educational and economic requirements of the white settler nation. Hence, it is claimed that the different family structure of Maoris and Black Americans account for their unequal status in their respective societies.

What, exactly, is the different family structure of Maoris and Black Americans that renders them ineffective in reproducing the European ideal. Centrally, it refers to the higher number of single parent households and out-of-wedlock births among Maoris and Black Americans. In particular, the out-of-wedlock births to teenage women is blamed for the high proportion of school dropouts among these two racial groups and their subsequent high unemployment rates. Alternative explanations are available if one understands the nature of the minority group's culture and the current dynamics of European based societies. As the transmission of sexual values has been transferred from the tribe/family to the schools and mass media, youth of color have been sent the message that sexual relations are separate from reproduction. Thus, the sexual instinct has been liberated from its traditional control by the family and tribe. At the same time the technological means for controlling the number of children has been perfected and made accessible through the means of contraceptives and abortion.

While both Black American and Maori women have a higher abortion rate than European women, they also have a higher fertility rate¹⁷. Both are causes and consequences of their different cultural values. They have a higher abortion rate because they are less likely to use contraceptives and, if pregnant, less likely to use abortion to prevent a birth. A child, regarded as the soul of their culture and family, is brought to fruition and accepted into the family without stigma. This contrasts with the European value system that no longer needs children as laborers in an agrarian society and produces them only in the context of the nuclear family's need to perpetuate its lineage. Moreover, those Black American and Maori women who wish to marry the biological fathers of their children are unable to do so because many of the men have been rendered redundant in the labor market. Almost half of Black American and Maori men under the age of 21 are unemployed. Thus, marriage becomes problematic for men who can not support families in the urban industrial system of white settler nations. Additionally, marriage registration is just one means of legitimating unions in Maori and Black American society.

Despite the clash with their traditional cultural values, the fertility rate of Maori and Black American women has declined over the last twenty-five years, especially among married women. For Maori women, their declining fertility rate is about the most rapid change for a national population anywhere in the world. Still, the growth rate for both Black Americans and Maoris remain higher than that of Europeans. Almost one half of the population for both groups is aged between 10 and 29 years of age. The infant mortality rate for both groups fell in the last twenty-five years but remains twice as high as that of Europeans¹⁸. This continued racial differential reflects the unequal social conditions and life chances of people of color.

Another commonality of these two groups is their alleged matriarchal structure. It is claimed that women are the more powerful of the sexes in decision making, both for household and general affairs. Since matriarchy refers to women who rule an entire

society, it would appear to be an inappropriate label for Maori and Black American women who are victimized by both racism and sexism. Among Maoris, women have higher rates of unemployment and lower levels of income and education than Maori men. Black American women have lower levels of income than men of the same race. Perhaps there is a confusion of dominance with strength. Both Black American and Maori women are strong because conditions of group survival required them to be. The European ideal of a subordinate woman prevailed because European men controlled every aspect of their society. Men of color only had that control before the advent of European settlement. As former Secretary to the United Nations, Andrew Young notes, "This is a generality but a system of oppression tends to produce strong women and weak men."¹⁹

In sum, the family system of Black Americans and Maoris have been impacted by their contact with Europeans, the subsequent imposition of a Eurocentric value system and structural inequalities in the political economy of white settler nations. Enough of the Black and Maori values have been retained to put them at odds with the European ideal of a stable family system. As a people largely stripped of their ties to the land, and discriminated against in the wage labor system, the economic links between marriage, children and the nuclear family are weaker. Thus, the union between men and women does not have to be legitimated by marriage registration in order to facilitate property division in case of a nuptial dissolution. Community recognition is sufficient for a people largely bereft of property to dispose of when disharmony erupts in the marital union. Children born to these unions are regarded as a value in themselves, regardless of the conditions of their birth. Paternity is not insured by the monogamy of women imposed by marriage registration as much as it is a function of the male's ability to sire and recognize the children of his blood. Conversely, the European tendency is to regard children as a playful commodity or a reproduction of their race and lineage entitled to inherit their estate and perpetuate their status. This predisposition is mirrored in their

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reluctance to adopt children other than newborn, healthy children of the same race. In Black American and Maori culture, the extended family is the basic unit of socialization and support of children in contrast to the more restricted and isolated nuclear family environment of European children.

Where there are no cultural explanations for the variations between these and white settler families, analyzing economic inequalities enhances our understanding of those differences. Some Maori and Black American women fail to marry in the event of an out-of-wedlock birth because the father of their child is not gainfully employed, especially among the young people where a majority of males are unemployed. Such young men are often perceived as undesirable husband/father candidates. The economic status of Maori/Black American women can also often shape the decision to bring an illegitimate child into the world. One American study found that there exists a link between school failure and adolescent pregnancy. Girls with poor basic skills were four times more likely to have a child in their teens as those with average skills. The author of that study concluded that these girls with poor basic skills felt no avenues of opportunity were closed to them by a teen pregnancy because they never believed that any opportunities existed for them²⁰.

Thus, the structure of Black and Maori families is not the cause of their unequal status in white settler nations. In part, it is the cultural and economic discrimination they experience that accounts for problems in their family systems. Even the problematic aspects of Black and Maori family life is frequently a function of the European definition of what constitutes the ideal family organization. The solution lies in the recognition of and respect for Black and Maori family values and the elimination of racial and economic inequalities that impact on members of these racial groups.

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