What's Black Love Got to Do With It?

by Dr. Andrea Little Mason

Foreword by Eugene Mason III, MBA
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Foreword

Romantic Partnerships are like businesses, you need a road map. A sustainable romantic partnership is the product of having sound individual road maps that combine rather than collide.

I can’t explain the excitement I have in presenting to you Dr. Andrea Little Mason’s commentary on *What’s BLACK LOVE Got to Do with It?* I have so much appreciation, admiration, honor and respect for my wife, Dr. Doula. What a great read of inspiration for those who desire to be Power Couples. It is insightful and illuminating. Why? Because it’s a culmination of our lived experiences as an African American couple in the United States, living against the grain of modern culture and managing what we’ve learned at home, at church and in society. It is a much needed discussion and reckoning for not only Blacks in America, but people of African descent throughout the Diaspora and on the Continent. This writing challenges majority culture’s perspective of history about Black couple relationships and encourages you to boldly take initiative to begin rewriting your truth.

To be perfectly honest, in the first few years of our marriage, I was only able to mentally internalize and accept the “happily-ever-after” and the “I’m the man!” model of marriage constructed from what I saw in majority culture.
At the time, I did not know I was experiencing my own level of cognitive dissonance due to a lack of context because I was not fully embracing the many stories beyond the great African American Heros & Sheros.

It wasn’t until much later, at the culmination of Andrea’s doctoral research, that I realized that I (we) were in search for and in need of cognitive justice. An inward awakening of our place in the World, related to the extraordinary pre-colonial history of our African ancestors. Why did it seem strange anytime “Black” or “African” was mentioned? This was something I had to work out individually. Andrea’s research put me on the right path. I realized within myself that researching my historical heritage did not have to cause division, but could provide a framework for a contextual roadmap to my truth. This enabled further cultivation of sustainable relationships, and enhancement of my most important partnership with my best friend, Dr. Andrea Little Mason. I am grateful she has been willing to walk out this tremendously painstaking journey toward cognitive justice.

Thank you, Andrea. In this commentary you have provided me and your audience, a ‘lightened tunnel” perspective, towards a spirit of Sankofa - realizing it’s not taboo to go back and retrieve what was lost, abandoned, stolen or forgotten. We are Building Legacy!

Eugene Mason III, MBA
Coach Green Gene
Managing Director, Harmonic Connections PLUS
What’s BLACK LOVE got do with anything?

This question was at the forefront of my mind when I began my research that was eventually titled *Non-Conventional Gender Roles in Relationship Education Curricula for African Americans: A Content Analysis.*

It was the end of the first decade of the 21st century and the United States government was pushing forth the Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI). There were millions of dollars set aside to support the development of marriage education programs. HMI was based on research that suggested that children’s outcomes would improve in various areas if they grew up in stable households with married parents. With about 75% of African American children born to unmarried mothers, the programs were especially geared toward Black couples, as an effort to improve and increase marriage rates among Black families.

I wanted to know specifically what was being taught to Black couples, so I sought out the most popular Black marriage curricula and found three that were similar in that each was developed between 2001 and 2010, contained videos and written guides for facilitators and students, was offered in religious institutions, was created for Black people and taught by Black people.
Over some months, I analyzed each conclusion in detail. (You can see the complete research, with data and results, HERE.) Each of the curricula taught the standard principles of relationship education, such as communication, problem solving and conflict management. However, there was one statement that stood out to me as I reviewed the material and it was the only statement expressed in each of the three curricula in some form.

The gist of the statement was this:

“There was a time in this country when women stayed at home and took care of the family, while the men worked outside the home to support the family.”

Each time I heard it spoken, I audibly said:

“That’s not true for everyone... Who’s history is that?”

When I was growing up, I only knew TWO Black women who did not work outside of the home, and my mother, grandmothers and aunts were not those women.

Throughout U.S. history, Black women working was the norm whether they were married or not. It bothered me that Black people were expressing a sentiment to other Black people that was not directly related to Black peoples’ history and experiences in the United States. It was as if a Black face had been put over a white message. It also presented Black couples with an image of relationships that suggested that they were already broken if the two partners were not fulfilling certain roles.
I struggled to find a systematic way to show the discrepancies I found in these relationship courses. While at a research conference, I met a professor who had written a book called *The S.P.E.L.I.T. Power Matrix*. His book offered a simple way to analyze organizational dynamics. I considered how households were related to organizations and realized that, in many ways, they are the same. When the areas that were not related to romantic partnership were removed, the letters S.P.E.I. remained. When rearranged the letters spelled P.I.E.S. I took it as a sign that I was on the right path, since my husband and I had been using the P.I.E.S. acronym in the relationship work we were doing.

This ebook is intended to challenge common assumptions about romantic partnerships and encourage African Americans seeking to build strong relationships to critically think about the foundations of gender role expectations, consider how they fit into them, and find solutions so they can cultivate their own satisfying relationships.
Introduction

Nigerian author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, has spoken about “the danger of a single story” and how where a person begins a story matters. For far too long, a single perspective and narrative of the African in the Diaspora has been accepted as the ultimate truth about who we are. That belief that there is a single story, a single way to view the world, a single interpretation of events that have occurred, and a single truth about the historical context of humans in this world is pervasive in modern culture. Not only is the “single story” detrimental to the collective, but it is often the story of conquests and colonization of indigenous peoples from a perspective that minimizes achievements and demonizes histories of other cultures.

The single story in a country like the United States, a nation that is a conglomerate of ethnicities, serves as a tool of erasure of the cultures that have sustained the country. For those who are not a part of the majority culture, there is often cognitive dissonance, which occurs when a person is forced to co-exist with or reconcile two incompatible ideas or beliefs. In modern culture, cognitive dissonance usually shows up as the tension or discomfort between what is broadly accepted as the single story that we should all embrace as the truth, and all of the other stories that make up the tapestry of American culture. While the concept of telling a story seems harmless, the power of the influence of the story that a person embraces is undeniable.
As a descendent of Africans who were kidnapped from West Africa during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, I am finding the stories of my ancestors, before they arrived in the Americas, more valuable than I could have ever imagined. Even with all of my Western education, I realized that listening only to the single story had disabled me.

There have been great efforts taken to hide these stories that included pillaging, destruction and blatant sins of commission. In fact, the tellers of the single story have gone to great lengths to ensure that certain people are always portrayed as good and others as evil, no matter what their deeds. These inconsistencies in what had been presented as universal truth caused a lot of internal conflict in me. Additionally, as I met new people and traveled to other countries I saw people existing in different ways that verified what I had begun to believe was true - that embracing the single story of the United States had required me to surrender parts of myself that were necessary for me to re-member who I am as a daughter of Africa.

While I have written specifically about its effects on people of African descent, the single story is harmful to everyone. Cognitive dissonance is a perpetual mental state for any person that accepts the single story of the United States as it is presented in school or mainstream culture. In many ways, it weakens the ability to reason and think critically about situations. Once individuals have been presented with additional information that shows that there are contradictions in the story, then there is a decision to be made. At that moment, the person has to decide whether they will accept the new information and allow it to alter
their perception of reality, or rationalize the new information away to maintain belief systems as they have always been.

When I understood my problem, I decided to attack it head on. I began to look for myself and African influence in everything. When I did that, it was as if I could see myself for the first time. There is literally nothing you can study that does not have an African influence, if you look for it.

What I ultimately found was that the cure for my cognitive dissonance was cognitive justice. Cognitive justice challenges the notion that the only viable story is the single story of the dominant culture. It asserts the right for diverse paradigms to co-exist. When considering romantic partnerships among African Americans, it is of vital importance that we have more than a single story or paradigm as a model for our lives.

This ebook represents cognitive justice in relationship education where African Americans are concerned. It represents an opportunity for individuals, regardless of ethnicity or background, to resolve some of their cognitive dissonance by expanding some limiting perspectives about the historical context of Black people. For African Americans, resolving cognitive dissonance is an opportunity to free ourselves in a different way that is necessary to fully embrace self-determination -- the ability “to define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves and speak for ourselves”.

If you identify as Black/African American/Diasporic African/Person of African Descent:

I understand that unless you have been taught about our history in your family or your community, you most likely do not know our history. While we are not a monolith with the same history and experiences, I also understand that in many cases some have been taught to be ashamed of our African ancestry and, for many, Africa is viewed in the same negative perspectives as those who first trafficked our ancestors to this land. While some people travel for missionary work and contribute to benevolence operations, many still cannot fathom what Africa could have to offer to the descendants of the Africans who were enslaved here. I hope that this ebook will offer the additional perspective necessary to see yourself as one with a proud history that extends beyond the single story we have been offered through Western culture.

If you identify as Bi-Racial/Mixed Race:

I understand that your experiences are distinctive and that the diverse heritages represented in your families are all worthy to be explored and honored for the unique perspectives they offer to your life and understanding of the world. I understand that you may be a person who has been challenged about race and ethnicity throughout your life or even been “othered” by people, making it challenging to know where you fit in. I encourage you to allow this ebook to add to your understanding of who you are and your appreciation of your African ancestry.
If you identify as one who is White/Caucasian/Person of European Descent:

I understand that this topic may be challenging because it seems to promote division between different races of people. I also understand that if you are in an interracial relationship it may seem to speak directly against your relationship with your partner and any children that may be born of your relationship. In the context of this book, #BlackLove represents more than how Black people relate in romantic partnerships. Black Love first begins with love of self, which Western culture does not promote for people of African descent. If your partner is a person of African descent or you have children that have African ancestry, this ebook will surely enhance your knowledge and appreciation for the diversity in your family and equip you to help those you love celebrate who they are.

If you identify as a Person of Color/Other Ethnicity:

I understand that most people of color and cultures have histories of discrimination interacting within dominant white cultures. There is also a practice of creating hierarchies between people of color and diverse cultures, and these hierarchies often place people of ethnicities with lighter skin in higher social positions than people with darker skin. This can mean that people of color/culture have also been inundated with certain prejudices about people of African descent and found refuge from some external biases, solely based on their ability to assimilate and blend into majority culture. This ebook will offer cognitive justice that can also help you break free from the cognitive dissonance of a system that offers positions in society to you as a person of
color, while also treating you as a subordinate in majority culture.

If you identify as one who is not heterosexual and/or in a monogamous relationship:

This ebook was inspired by research that sought to fill in the gaps of studies that had already been conducted about male and female gender roles with regards to African Americans. While much of what is written in this ebook is useful for general information, it is specifically focused on monogamous, heterosexual romantic partnerships. I expect that you will see other gaps that can be addressed through additional research. Please let me know if my work inspires you to continue to expand this conversation or if you use it to support some research that is already in progress.

Finally, this ebook is an informal extension of my formal research titled *Non-conventional gender roles in relationship education curricula for African Americans: A content analysis*. For ease in reading, I have only included hyperlinks to useful resources about certain topics. If you desire to read the formal research with the results and complete reference section, please follow [this link](#).

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Throughout this ebook I have included opportunities for you to offer real time comments about what you are reading. Use the link in the graphic to share your thoughts about “What’s BLACK LOVE Got to Do With It?”

What do you think about what you have read so far? [CLICK HERE](#) to share your thoughts real time.

WE LOOK FORWARD TO CONNECTING WITH YOU!
A Historical Context for Marriage in the U.S.

The culture of the U.S. has been influenced by people from all over the world. However, the first major influences were from England, so let’s consider Europe’s contributions to marital practices, including the influence of religion as the beginning context of the history of marriage practices in the United States of America. This is not an exhaustive review, but it is intended to provide some context for consideration about marriage practices.

❖ The earliest formal European religions were pagan and based on practices of Greeks and Romans who considered themselves religious. Religious piety was based more on adherence to prayer and rituals that helped maintain social order, than faith and spirituality.

❖ The patriarchal expectations for men and women were similar to those that would be considered traditional in modern times, where the husband is dominant over the wife.
After many years of persecution in Rome, in the 4th century, Constantine introduced Romans to Christianity. He had had a vision of a cross, by which he was told he would conquer.

As the Roman Empire expanded, it absorbed other religions rather than attempt to totally eradicate them, which was a practice continued later by the Catholic Church as it spread Christianity in the Americas.

The expansion of Christianity helped establish financial stability and military dominance throughout Europe and later in the “New World”.

Christianity continued to spread across Europe during the Dark Ages.

The Church of England (The Anglican Church) was established in 1534 by Henry VIII of England, because he wanted to divorce his wife and Catholic doctrine did not allow divorce.

➢ The Church was a part of Protestant Reformation after it broke off from the Catholic Church because of what was perceived as errors in Catholic doctrine.

➢ From its inception, the monarch was considered Head of the Church of England and monarchs regulated the religious practices of the church.

The traditional marriage vows come from *The Book of Common Prayers*, which was first authorized by King Edward IV in 1549 and was written 60 years before the 1611 version of the King James Bible was released. The Book of Common Prayers is still used by many ministers today in the U.S.
➢ Each new edition of The Book of Common Prayers was revised to accommodate the wishes of the monarch that ruled England as the Head of the Church at the time.

➢ The wedding vows became a part of the official marriage ceremony in 1552 in England.

➢ Before 1552 in England, couples only needed to commit themselves to each other and their spoken words would suffice as evidence of their marriage commitment to one another.

❖ **Coverture**, marriage and property law that stipulated that wives did not have a legal existence apart from their husbands, was brought to the American colonies by English settlers. It was a legal symbolism of a husband and wife’s oneness and the wife’s submission to her husband.

❖ **Common law marriage** is still recognized in 15 states in the U.S. and District of Colombia with certain stipulations or requirements. Common law marriages still require divorce procedures for the dissolution of the marriage.

❖ No fault divorce became legal in the United States in 1976.

Now, let’s consider how these contexts and expectations have affected people of African descent in the U.S. and other ways that Black couples can approach romantic partnerships in a manner that is connected with their historical context.
Eurocentric Practices’ Influence on Black Couples

The origins of the marriage practices in the United States are important to consider in order to understand the principles upon which many people base their relationship expectations.

It is also important to acknowledge that, for centuries, the marriage unions and partnerships of enslaved Africans and their descendants were not acknowledged. For hundreds of years, Black romantic partnerships and family structures were disregarded and not legally recognized by the U.S. government as authentic marriages. Oppressed people of African descent understood that their commitment to each other could not be based on the definitions promoted or condoned by their oppressors. They created their own marriage ceremonies based on the practices that were significant to them based on their traditions.

These Africans who had lost autonomy over their own bodies understood fully that they would have to be creative if they were to ensure that children who were left behind would be cared for if parents were sold away. They knew how to create family quickly with those who arrived suddenly in strange, new locations. And whether those that oppressed them acknowledged their romantic partnerships or not,
those relationships were legitimate. And they worked together to endure and hold on to their relationships even when their men were used for breeding and their women were raped and forced to bear their oppressors’ children.

Since the Civil Rights Era when African Americans’ citizenship was recognized and laws were changed to support integration, there has been a continued effort toward assimilation in many areas of the lives of African Americans. This includes their romantic partnerships. Some African Americans who followed certain religious traditions looked toward the marriage traditions and gender roles practiced in the majority culture as a road map because it was aligned with their spiritual beliefs. To some, if they were able to function in the same manner as white families were shown to function - in their power dynamics, masculine and feminine expressions, economic/educational/employment achievements, and domestic roles and responsibilities - then that would be evidence that they had been fully embraced as citizens in the United States who could achieve the American dream.

In an interview with Harry Belafonte, Martin Luther King, Jr. is quoted as saying: “I have come to believe that we are integrating into a burning house.” While that statement was to acknowledge deeper needs of the Civil Rights Movement to address economic freedom, it also aptly described the situation that was occurring in other contexts of American culture at the time.
For example, while many Black people were fighting for civil rights, many women from the majority culture (including some women of color) were fighting for women’s rights and freedoms. These women were marching as well and burning their bras to protest the structures that supported women’s subjugation to men in power, freedom of expression, economic/educational/employment achievements, and domestic roles and responsibilities.

They were protesting beliefs that suggested that women needed permission from their husbands for simple tasks like owning a credit card. Moreover, women who wanted to leave dangerous marriage situations were required to prove the faults of their husbands to a system that considered disciplining a wife as acceptable as disciplining a child. Stated another way, they were fighting laws that suggested that there was only one way for a man and a woman to function alongside one another in society and in a romantic partnership.
Many African Americans who chose to try to assimilate into the majority culture by imitating gender roles of marriage were literally integrating into a burning house. The oppressive ideals and the structures that upheld them had already begun to burn; and they had already been shown to be unsustainable and unsuitable for a society that claimed freedom and equality for all of its citizens.
Why Considering the Context is Important

As stated earlier, people attempt to hold on to the traditional constructs of marriage gender roles for different reasons. Some non-religious people hold tightly to predetermined concepts of manhood and womanhood, even though they are based on religious laws and ideals that they do not agree with. English settlers brought these practices to this land hundreds of years ago and they were largely based on the religious expressions of the monarchy in England, which at that time was considered the Head of the Church of England.

Why do I mention this connection between marriage laws and the monarchy in England in an commentary about Black Love? It is to encourage you to allow yourself to rethink or think again about your beliefs about men and women in romantic partnerships. It is also an effort to encourage you to consider whether your beliefs about the roles of men and women are universal truths or the personal truths of individuals who, at the time, had the power to
spread their personal beliefs broadly and create laws to uphold them.

At that time, the people trusted the kings and queens of England to be their spokespersons for God, much as the Pope is for the Catholic Church. With each new monarch, there was new doctrine added or subtracted about how their subjects worshipped God and carried on their daily lives. Some might say that it was the epitome of making God in one’s own image.

Are the convictions about marriage that have been passed down from those monarchs working in your favor? And if people have been making laws that are not universal truths, then why are some so fearful to reevaluate their personal situations and realign themselves with ideals that work toward their highest good?

In the U.S., the laws of the land often hold the same stature as religious texts do for some people. For those who want to minimize slavery, explain inexplicable actions of individuals that have gone unpunished or why a thing is permissible one day and not permissible the next day, the easiest answer pertains to whether that thing was legal at the time or not. I heard a journalist say that “the law” is like the national religion of the U.S., and I agree. One major difference to organized religions, however, is that laws are constantly changing and redefining our realities.

I cannot imagine that any of our African ancestors arrived on this land involuntarily and then voluntarily chose to surrender their names, cultures, languages, family lineage or rites and ceremonies around birth, death or marriage. For their descendants, the freedom to embrace what has been
lost, stolen, surrendered, and forgotten is a privilege and an opportunity to honor their resilience and sacrifice. Considering the contexts around pre-colonial gender roles and relationships in Africa, and allowing that knowledge to inform how we live our lives today, has the ability to free us in our relationships and so many other areas of life as well.

What do you think about what you have read so far? Click here to share your thoughts real time.
Reaching Back to Move Forward

“To go back to tradition is the first step forward.” ~African Proverb

This African proverb reminds me of the Adinkra symbol - SANKOFA. Actually, there are two symbols that are used to represent the West African principle of Sankofa that means: “It is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot” or more simply: “Go back and get it!”

While one symbol resembles a heart, the other is of a bird that is walking forward yet reaches back to grab what is described by some as an egg and by others a seed. Both the egg and the seed represent the essence of the best of what our past has to offer us that can be used to help us grow toward the future.

Sankofa is a reminder that in order to have a strong foundation, we must empower ourselves by gathering up the knowledge and skills that those who came before us can teach us. Sankofa reminds us of the importance of moving forward, but not forgetting where we come from, and remembering that we can make more progress when we build upon the past and stand on the shoulders of our ancestors.
Look for Yourself in the Story

Before continuing, it is important that this statement is clearly stated: **It is okay for African people (Black people, African Americans, Diasporic Africans and any other people of African descent) to have a story that begins with Africans.**

What other ethnic group does not seek to see themselves in their history? There is sometimes hesitancy for people of African descent to embrace an African story, especially if they have already believed the miseducation that goes forth in much of society that suggests that there was no African civilization before Europeans arrived in Africa.

When one looks beyond these shores, the evidence of contributions of all people groups, and specifically those from the African continent, is plenteous. While much has been destroyed through conquest and colonization, some artifacts and monuments still remain and allow contemporary scholars and explorers to weave together a more complete story of our complex histories.

For those who find it challenging to accept the notion of being called “African,” consider that other people are often referenced by their ethnicity even as American citizens. Asian Americans are still referred to as “Asians” even though they may have never traveled there and have been in the U.S. for generations. The same can be said about Indian people from India and so on. In every country that I have ever traveled, my ethnicity has been assumed to be African before any specific nationality.
In my research, I share from an African context. This is similar to the way western culture refers back to Greek and Roman cultures or even more recent European contexts as its foundation. I always resist those who would like to suggest that African Americans have been orphaned and bastardized. We have a place of origin and our DNA has memory. Even though much has been lost and stolen, there are still remnants of our pre-colonial customs, behaviors, and beliefs that we can hold on to when we want to re-build and re-member who we are. We can re-connect.

The story of the African in the Americas is so complex and rife with so much degradation that some still prefer to disassociate themselves from any aspect being related to Africa. For some, it is because they may desire to focus more on the diversity of their backgrounds, and not just the African part. I encourage you to embrace your African ancestry as well. Go back and consider the good, bad and the ugly of whatever ethnicities you have.

If you are in the United States, unless your ancestors are native to this land, you are away from the pre-colonial homes of your ancestors. What makes the experience different for those with African ancestry that came by way of the TransAtlantic Slave Trade is that language, cultures, traditions, and family lineage that would have been passed down generationally was lost, stolen, abandoned and forgotten. As a result, many Black people embrace more of others history than they do the greatness of their own.

There is a saying: When in Rome, do as the Romans do. There is a caveat for African Americans, especially those that seek to do all that they are expected to do to achieve success in this country. While some of the adopted practices
may ensure greater safety in hostile situations, other practices will mean greater detriment for African Americans over time. This dynamic can be clearly seen with regards to gender roles as Black people seek to adopt power structures in various areas of their lives that have been shown to be unsustainable, undesirable and oppressive, even in the lives of those who promote them.

The Africans who were brought here against their wills were not monolithic, they were from hundreds of tribes and nations from various parts of Western Africa with different languages and customs. We, their descendants, are not a homogenous group either. We have different experiences, exposure, expertise, education, and come from different environments. We should expect that our romantic partnerships will also be diverse and unique to satisfy our unique needs and work for our highest good.

When I was growing up, people talked about the United States being a big melting pot. As I have grown older, I have leaned more towards calling it a chunky stew and at times a tossed salad. The nature of a country that is built around immigration and freedom presupposes a tolerance for differences in beliefs, cultures, and traditions. A melting pot gives the impression that individuality and cultural differences have blended and melted away. For many African Americans, nothing could be further from the truth.

The history of Blacks in America is not the beginning of Black people in the world and history shows the success of romantic partnerships among African people since Antiquity. Most research and statistics about African Americans involve some type of pathology, something that suggests that we are inherently unfit for many tasks and that there is something
innately dysfunctional or wrong with us as a group. Comparisons are made between white and Black people in relationships as well.

There is a quote that says: *History is written by the victors.* It would be unwise to base Black people’s beliefs about themselves and their history solely on the reports of those who have been walking in the role of the victor for the past few hundred years.

The recorded history of mankind over thousands of years of recorded history is one of cycles, uprisings and defeats, and dominating kingdoms from around the world. Every group of people has influenced the earth over that time. Wisdom would encourage us to celebrate the best of what those histories have to offer about people’s cultures and give credit where credit is due.

In the work that I do with birthing mothers through Sankofa Birth, I encourage women to “reclaim their birth rites” and reach back to embrace the birth skills and knowledge that the women before us practiced. These “knowings” allowed them to sustain themselves in a culture
that did not allow them to have access to many modern resources.

Likewise, in our work with individuals, couples and families, my husband Eugene and I encourage couples to reach back toward the strength of our ancestors. BLACK LOVE existed before we arrived on these shores and it continues to exist. However, in order to experience it in its fullness there may be a need to reexamine some of the beliefs and practices that some consider to be undebatable truths and consider whether what you currently do works toward your highest good.
A SPECIAL NOTE TO READERS

The next section is optional. It does not specifically relate to relationships and is not necessary to understand the information offered toward the sustainability and resiliency of Black couples.

This section is for those who may be like I once was, challenged to see beyond a single perspective that I had been shown throughout my life. For me, it meant that there were automatically realities that I should not doubt and questions that I should not ask.

While researching gender roles from an African American context, I was required to ask all of the questions. And any assumptions that I was making needed to be supported with research. So I asked all of the questions that came to my mind (nothing was off limits) and allowed the answers I found to influence my personal life, my work and ultimately my world view.

For those who may find yourself on a similar path, I offer the next section:
“Addressing Some of the Contradictions”

For those who prefer to continue reading about BLACK LOVE please jump to page 48:
“An African Context for Black Couples”
Addressing Some of the Contradictions

Before we can fully engage BLACK LOVE with others, we should consider how BLACK LOVE relates to us LOVING OURSELVES FIRST as people of African descent. In order to do that, we need to examine our beliefs about Africa and the systems that have been put in place to nurture separation of African Americans from their original land and the people that remain there. When one takes a closer look, the contradictions presented to us about who we are and where we come from become clearer and we can make our own decisions about how we will or will not allow these contradictions to control our lives.

Allow Your Paradigm to be Shattered

Africa, also referred to as Alkebulan by some, has the most diverse people on the planet. From the Amazighs (more commonly known as Berbers) and Arabs of the north to the Khoisan people of the south to the Nubian people of the east to the Bantu people who are spread throughout, Africa’s ethnic groups are the most diverse with different skin complexions, facial features, hair textures, body types, shapes and sizes. Much like the Africans throughout the diaspora, skin complexions can show up as dark as night to very pale and anywhere in between. While diverse in ethnicities, languages, cultures, histories, religions, etc., African people groups born on the continent share some
similarities which link them to the continent and to each other.

From the beginning of recorded history, Africans from northern, southern, eastern, and western parts of Africa established great civilizations. However, their great accomplishments have often been ignored and, as they are being brought to the forefront, some find it challenging to imagine how the greatness of Africa can co-exist while observing its current post-colonial state.

It is worth noting that some African history is omitted because it would mean that Christian Western countries would be promoting the accomplishments of Muslim African people. An example of this is Timbuktu, in the Muslim Kingdom of Mali. In the 14th century during the reign of Mansa Musa, the richest person to ever live, Timbuktu became a center of learning of Islam, astronomy,
mathematics, history and medicine. It rivaled Ancient Egypt in the way it educated its people and welcomed all who desired to learn in the universities. Arabic was to Africa what Latin was to Europe as a way to encourage literacy and the spread of religion through educational institutions. While it is well documented that Europeans also visited Timbuktu to learn with others from around the world, the influence of Timbuktu on Europe as it was exiting the Dark Ages is not often mentioned in Western history.

Each individual should decide whether their account of history and the progress of humankind will only be based in celebrating the accomplishments of those who look like them, worship like them and/or believe like them. Ultimately, for people of African descent the decision to acknowledge all of Africa’s diverse history is an effort to fully know oneself.

Have you ever considered this? Europeans hold tightly to the legacies of the Greek and Roman Empires, even though after Rome’s last emperor was defeated, Europe was plunged into the Dark Ages which lasted roughly 1,000 years, from 500AD - 1500AD. However, while Europeans were enduring the wars and invasions that marked this time, Africa continued to thrive in education, science, mathematics, medicine, architecture, trade, etc.

As Europe was exiting the Dark ages, Africa was entering one of its own. For more than 500 years, Africa has endured enslavement by European Christians on the west coast of Africa, with even longer enslavement by Arab Muslims on the east coast of Africa, followed by destruction
and looting of African artifacts and treasures, ultimately leading to colonization by Western European countries.

When civilizations die they often take most of the evidence of who they were with them and those who follow are left to piece the history back together. Should there not be an expectation that Africa will rise again? Without fail, history shows that civilizations rise and fall and, at some point, the conquerors are conquered and other civilizations rise to take their places. As one examines historical contexts, the importance of unity between the disenfranchised peoples of African descent becomes more evident. Whether a descendant of those who remained to be colonized on the African continent or a descendant of those who were forcibly kidnapped from its shores and carried to the New World, we are all daughters and sons of Africa.

The Renaissance Monument in Dakar, Senegal
was designed to symbolize “rebirth of Africa” and her traditional culture and heritage, both in Africa & the Diaspora
I still recall being at a research conference for Black scholars a few years ago and hearing a continental African professor speak about Africa. She closed her lecture with this statement: “Africa has been great before and Africa will be great again... Africa is rising!” It was the first time I had heard anyone say anything like that, but after that lecture, I seemed to hear people everywhere saying it: “Africa IS rising... Africa is RISING!”

As my family and I have reconnected with the continent and I have expanded my knowledge outside of what has been presented in the United States, I have begun to see the world in a totally new way. And I have joined in the chorus with so many others in proclaiming, “AFRICA, with so many of her children around the world, IS RISING!”
The Legacy of Race in the United States

I was born in the United States of America, a country that from its inception distinguished between who was “white” and who was “other”. In this country, the same individuals responsible for the Declaration of Independence were also responsible for determining that every five enslaved Africans would be counted as three people for the purpose of voting and increasing the government’s revenue. A century later, the “one drop” rule would ensure that a person with one drop of African blood in their lineage was considered Black. Ironically, the “one drop” rule in reverse has applied to Native Americans, the indigenous people of the Americas.

The U.S. Constitution and other laws have upheld a legacy of racial disparities that predates the birth of the country. In 2000, for the first time in United States history, citizens were allowed to identify more than one race on the
U.S. Census. This has been useful as more and more people who have mixed ethnicities have chosen to identify themselves as bi-racial or mixed raced, and have moved away from Jefferson’s limited context of ethnic identity.

Because of white men’s forced sexual encounters with enslaved African women, most African Americans have mixed ancestry. A DNA Ancestry report says that I have about 7% Western European ancestry, although one would be hard pressed to see any trace of it in me. People, from other countries especially, look at my husband’s complexion and say he is mixed. His family knows the name of an ancestor on his mother’s side of the family who immigrated from Eastern Europe with her family four generations ago. Still, most of his family members have identified themselves as Colored, Negro, Black or African American, even when visually one could not clearly distinguish any African ancestry in them.

Great People… Great Civilizations

The irony is that while the U.S. and some European countries have spent centuries promoting their superiority over those who have any trace of African blood, they have not applied that rationale to matters that surround ancient African civilizations like Egypt. Of these African empires and kingdoms, they have asserted that the greatness of their civilizations could have only come from outside the continent of Africa. Or more commonly they state that they were not Black Africans or real Africans, but mixed race and that is why they were able to amass such greatness in their societies.

Stating that mixing with other “races” of people improves the Black race to the point that they could establish
one of the greatest kingdoms in recorded history, while simultaneously stating that one drop of African blood makes a person inferior and less than human is evidence of cognitive dissonance in those that seek to push these perspectives forward. Critically thinking individuals should question any scholar that has a problem acknowledging the contributions of Africans based on their race, ethnicity or religion.

These same standards are not upheld in other countries and contexts. For example, Africans invaded the Iberian Peninsula in 711AD and occupied parts of Spain for almost 800 years. That is more than three times the length of time that the United States has been a sovereign nation. Yet, today little credit is given toward the strong Muslim influence in daily life, trade and architecture of Spain that allowed the area to prosper while the rest of Western Europe was passing through the Dark Ages.

These same individuals still declare the United States of America to be a “white nation” even though that status has
only been maintained because the “race” category on the U.S. Census has been continually updated since 1790. As a result, some people groups that would not have been considered “white” in the U.S. less than 100 years ago now are, regardless of their physical appearances. This includes Italians, Greeks, North Africans, Middle Easterners, Jewish people, Latinos, etc. Additionally, up until 1965, great efforts were made to maintain the Western European majority of racial composition of the country by means such as the 1924 National Origins Act.

Any great civilization involved in trade and commerce will be influenced by those they interact with and as different ethnicities intermarry cultures will begin to blend. As great scientific minds, scholars and artisans exchange ideas, new procedures are developed and practices are intertwined. The same happens today in the U.S. as people migrate to the country and use their skills. Any accomplishments or discoveries are still credited to those sovereign nations, which has been the practice for thousands of years around the world.

None of the presumed influence of other ethnicities and cultures have been used to undermine the accomplishments of contemporary sovereign nations, such as Spain or the United States of America. Likewise, people of African descent should apply resistance toward those who would attempt to minimize the influence of Africans in ancient civilizations, culture, and scientific advancements simply because of their interactions and affiliations with outside people groups.
There is often a major distinction made between Northern Africa (Berber/Arab Africa above the Sahara desert) and Sub-Saharan Africa (Black Africa below the Sahara Desert). The problem is that there is no consensus about which countries it includes. If one looks at geography, then Sudan is considered to be North African territory, even though some of its people have some of the deepest, darkest skin on the planet. If one considers the ethnic makeup of the people they would be considered Black African. But those that divide the continent based on Islam being the dominant religion would place Sudan as a part of North Africa with the other Muslim countries. Which of these is the correct way to group people on the African continent?

There is a similar situation with Europe and Asia, or Eurasia as it is also called. If one looks at a geographical map, there is no clear separation between Europe and Asia. Based on governmental boundaries of countries, on a political map, Russia is located in the continent of Asia. Yet, the people of Russia are considered to be Eastern European. Ninety-five percent of Turkey’s land mass is in Asia, but it
has been an applicant to become a part of the European Union for over 20 years.

Some suggest that the separation between Eastern and Western Europe occurred as a result of the Great Schism of the Christian Church in 1054, but that would mean that parts of Italy and all of Greece would be considered Eastern Europe. For some, Italy and Greece seem more identifiable as Eastern European countries, especially when considering the close knit family structures that differ from Western Europe and the political structures as well. But with Greek
and Roman Empires being the foundation of European history, it is important for European countries to hold them in a high esteem, even though their people have not always been treated that way by the rest of Europe.

Is there a definitive geographic separation between Western and Eastern Europe or Europe and Asia? Most of Western European countries - Belgium, France, Portugal, Netherlands, England, Italy, Germany, and Spain - were involved in the Scramble for Africa and the colonization of
the continent. Besides looking at the differences in family structures, the wealth of countries has also helped demarcate boundaries between Western and Eastern Europe. A better question might be, how can there be a definitive geographic separation between what is termed the East and the West when most of Europe and all of Australia is in the Eastern Hemisphere?

While England and other European countries colonized territories all around the globe, depending on context, only some of them are considered Western countries. All of the Americas, Europe, Australia and New Zealand are considered to be Western countries based on having shared cultures based on Ancient Greek and Roman histories and philosophies, some South American countries are excluded because they are economically still developing countries. For others, “western culture” is synonymous with “latin/european culture” and could include countries like Japan because it has been so heavily influenced by Europeans. Still, for others, political alliances are indicators of whether a country is seen as Eastern or Western.

In many instances, “Western” culture has been synonymous with “Christian” culture. However, those places outside of Western Europe that are fully accepted as Western countries are those where European countries were able to colonize territories, establish institutions and win the culture war by establishing their philosophies, languages, political systems, etc. Places like India were heavily influenced by colonization, but never culturally dominated.

What do you think about what you have read so far? CLICK HERE to share your thoughts real time.
Where does Africa Fit?

But what about Alkebulan? Where does it fit in this discussion of what is Eastern or Western Culture? Although the majority of the continent is geographically in the Eastern hemisphere and more than 90% of the continent was colonized by European countries, it is not recognized as being a part of Eastern or Western culture. Some suggest that African countries are considered south, however, the majority of the landmass of Africa is above the Equator. And again Australia is physically located in the Southern and Eastern hemispheres, yet is considered a western country.

So even the concept of what is up, down, left and right are subjective. There were two ancient African Kingdoms, Egypt and Nubia, who both identified Upper and Lower parts of their kingdoms in opposite ways than the way they would be identified on a map today. What is commonly shown as north today was south for them. They based their identifications of upper (south on a map) and lower (north on a map) on how the Source of the Nile River flowed, which allowed them to grow food and assisted in trade as a source of transportation in an otherwise desert area.
Much of what we accept about the foundations of our knowledge and understanding of the world, that we hold as universal facts, have been decided by those who were in power at the time. For example, the Prime Meridian is an arbitrary line representing $0^\circ$ longitude on the globe. It was only accepted worldwide in 1884. It has been used universally less than 150 years out of thousands of years of recorded history.

Before that time, countries and territories were existing much more independently based on their own practices or the preferences of the leaders that governed them. Had a different government been dominant instead of England, which at the time was a reference point for imperialism, then a different location may have been chosen as the reference point that we now call the Prime Meridian. It could have literally been placed anywhere.

We should be mindful of what we consider to be irrefutable fact. Definitive definitions are not always possible, but when they are, those who seek to remain in power use them to suit their needs. It is important for people of African descent around the world to understand this truth: The definitions used to categorize people, places and ideas are developed to serve the people who design them; and to promote and sustain the
systems that allow them to maintain favorable conditions.

Those in power create scenarios that help accomplish their ultimate goals. If the goal is religious, things are categorized in a certain way. If geographical or economic situations are being observed, and it is more advantageous to divide and categorize in a different way, then that is what is done. If the objective is to ensure that certain groups do not know of their contributions to humanity or see themselves in history so that they willingly remain in subservient roles throughout the world while undergirding other cultures and societies, then facts and truths must be hidden. It will seem reasonable to deface statues so ethnic identities are less recognizable. If sequestering the truth is the goal then it makes sense to loot burial grounds for treasures and artifacts and then seek to destroy remaining evidence that would allow these people to see their greatness in history. And it would seem reasonable to feel entitled to determine how people should define themselves and seek to discredit all those who disagree with THE STORY as it is told.

There is no need to have your truths and observations affirmed by those who have systematically sought to eradicate your people, your culture and your spiritual beliefs on a global scale. People of African descent would be wise to work to reclaim and maintain their personal autonomy - physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually - and to more fully embrace the Kwanzaa principle of KUJICHAGULIA, which is Self-Determination. We must stop willingly handing over the power we have "to define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves and speak for ourselves."
An African Context for Black Couples

For an African context regarding gender roles, I looked back toward the Cradle of Humanity and Civilization - to Africa itself. While researching gender roles for African Americans, I realized that if our ancestors brought indigenous practices of childbirth, agriculture and healing that could be traced back to the continent, surely there were other dynamics that could be seen about romantic partnerships between men and women as well. I decided to look for women in historical contexts and observe how they were positioned in leadership. Growing up in a Christian home, I wanted to look at pre-colonial Christianity in Africa as well and consider how it developed among Africans.

While many begin their exploration of Africa in Antiquity in Kemet (Egypt), I wanted to avoid the controversies about the ethnicity of Pharaohs that are still being debated and look a little further south to Ethiopia and Nubia. I found Ethiopia and Nubia to offer very useful examples of African women in leadership and connections to
Judaism and Christianity as well. This is not an exhaustive review, but is intended to provide some context for your consideration and later research if you desire.

**Nubian Kingdom of Kush**
(sometimes referred to as “Ethiopia” by Greeks and Romans)

- In present day southern Egypt and northern Sudan, Nubian civilization can be traced back to Kerma, one of the earliest developed indigenous societies in that region, which emerged thousands of years before the First Pharaonic Dynasty in Egypt.
- There are more than 250 pyramids marking the burial grounds of Nubian rulers, although some were partially destroyed when European archaeologists set off explosives and plundered them looking for treasures.
- As neighbors, Nubia and Egypt had been trade partners, military allies and foes, and at one point, Nubia conquered Egypt and established its own Egyptian dynasty.
- Nubia is said to have been heavily influenced by Egyptian culture, however, more recent evidence suggests that Nubia and Egypt developed side by side, each with their own unique culture. One area where cultural differences are clearly shown is in the leadership roles of women in Nubia.
- While some Nubian queens ruled without kings, Nubian empires were known for having co-regents. These queens...
were crowned along side the kings, had pyramids of the same stature, exercised power jointly, and commanded armies.

❖ Queens of the Kushite Kingdom (also known as Kandakes) lead multiple successful resistances against Rome who consistently tried to conquer it.

➢ Kandake Amanirenas was known as the one-eyed queen. Her husband had died, but she continued what turned out to be a five year war with Rome to protect the Kushite people from being conquered as Egypt had been conquered. She battled back and forth with Caesar Augustus, the first ruler of Rome, considered by some one of the world’s greatest leaders. His failure to subdue this Nubian Queen lead to a peace treaty. As evidence of these encounters, when archeologists excavated one of the Nubian temples they found the head of a statue of Augustus. It had been buried where it would always be under the feet of the Nubians.

❖ There were 10 sovereign ruling queens and six that ruled as co-regents with their husbands. Some are listed below:

➢ Shanakdakhete (177 BCE–155 BCE)
➢ Amanirenas (40 BCE–10 BCE)
➢ Amanishakheto (c. 10 BCE–1 CE)
➢ Amanitore (1–20 CE)
➢ Amantitere (22–41 CE)
➢ Amanikhatashan (62–85 CE)
➢ Maleqorobar (266–283 CE)
➢ Lahideamani (306–314 CE)

❖ Like the men, women rulers were called “qore” meaning “ruler” and some were also called “kandake” meaning
“queen mother”. Queen mothers were often depicted as powerful with more “masculine features” and fuller figures in artwork. There was evidence of a different standard of beauty than what was shown in Egypt. Some married co-regents were known to have facial markings which were common in Central Africa.

❖ The Kemetic religion lasted for 3000 years in Nubia, where Isis is one of the deities worshiped as the “Queen of All Gods, Goddesses and Women”. Women were also spiritual advisors and priestesses in Nubia.

❖ Christianity reached Nubia (modern day Sudan) and replaced the Kemetic religion that was prevalent in the region as Nubia was fading in power toward the end of 1AD.

❖ The Meroitic language and writing system existed from about 300 BC - 400 AD in the Kingdom of Kush, and is believed to be derived from Egyptian hieroglyphics. However, scholars are still working to understand and decode the language, which has both cursive and hieroglyphic scripts.
Ethiopia

❖ Is considered to be the cradle of humanity.
❖ The home of the “Queen of Sheba” (Makeda) written about in the Bible in 1 Kings 10:1-13.
  ➢ The first Emperor of Ethiopia, King Menelik I, is said to be the son of Queen Makeda and King Solomon of Israel.
  ➢ Ethiopia accepted Judaism at the beginning of the Ethiopian Empire in 950 BC.
  ➢ According to legend, the Ark of the Covenant was carried to Ethiopia by King Menelik I and remains there
❖ Aksum (Axum), in present day Ethiopia
  ➢ King Ezana of Aksum established the first Christian state in Africa around 341 AD.
  ➢ The home of the oldest church in Africa, St Mary of Zion, and one of the oldest in the world was built in the 4 AD.
❖ Ethiopia established a pre-colonial Christian church, not influenced by European colonial powers. Christianity was not a western concoction for African people. The current iteration of Christianity is a Western creation and many agree that Western Christianity has played a major role in politics and the development of Western Culture.
  ➢ Ethiopian empire (Aksum) was involved in international trade and, while Christianity was its primary religion, multiple religions (including Islam) coexisted in Askum.
➢ Ethiopia is the location of the rock hewn Lalibela Christian churches from the 12th century that were carved into mountains and still serve as places of worship.

➢ In the 16th century, Ethiopia rejected the Catholicism that Portuguese missionaries brought to them. Catholicism was viewed as a foreign version of Christianity, while the Ethiopians believed their Emperors to be descendants of King Solomon and their Orthodox Christian traditions and beliefs to be in line with the practices of the earliest Christians.

❖ It is important to note that some doctrines in Orthodox Churches, like those in Ethiopia, differ from Protestant doctrines practiced in Western countries, similar to the way Catholic Church doctrine differs from Protestantism.

➢ For example, in Eastern Orthodox beliefs (which precede Catholicism and later Protestantism), heaven and hell are not literal places. In Catholicism, hell is a place, but there is also purgatory where a person can undergo ‘purification’ for heaven after death. For, Protestants there is only the physical heaven and physical hell after death. How does one reconcile these differences in the way the Gospel is interpreted, especially with the concepts of “heaven” and “hell” being such major parts of evangelism in Western Christianity? Which is the right doctrine to follow?
Ethiopia was the only African country to successfully resist colonization by Europeans.

Ethiopians use binary math, a system that was also used in Ancient Egypt and is the basis of our modern computer technology.

Ethiopians maintain a 13 month calendar, which begins on September 11 each year. The calendar is also seven to eight years behind the Gregorian calendar that most of the rest of the world uses.

Other African Queens

Earlier, I mentioned queens from ancient times in eastern African Kingdoms of Kush and Aksum. However, queens who also served as advisors and warriors continued to lead their people in battle for centuries all across Africa, defending against European imperialism and other invaders, especially in West Africa where most African Americans have ancestry.

Women of African descent have always had a context that extended beyond expectations of women being gentle, passive and docile. Couples can exhibit complementary roles in their relationships in diverse ways. Just as all women do not see traditional roles as oppressive, all men do not view strong assertive women as threats to their manhood or their position in society.

Evidence of the fierceness of the African spirit is still evident in the descendants of the Maafa, and both Black men and Black women have been criticized because of it throughout society. It is important that these differences and
expectations for romantic partnerships expand to include the possibility of roles of women who function in ways that exemplify who African women have been since Antiquity.

For pre-colonial African people, it was common to see the value placed on both masculine and feminine energy and to see it expressed in their deities as well as their rulers. It was not uncommon to see the male Pharaoh, the female Kandake or a husband and wife serving together as Co-Regents. I consider those to be some of our first examples of POWER COUPLES!
Why Does it Matter?

All of this information is important because every other culture, ethnicity and race of people that makes up the U.S. landscape looks back to the land of their people to establish cultural context. Those of Asian descent are not criticized for valuing their cultures or for honoring their ancestors. Western Europeans reach back to the accomplishments of the Greeks and the Romans as a foundation upon which they can build. African people, though dispersed around the world, should do the same.

When thinking about marriage and committed romantic partnerships, consider these thoughts:

❖ Just as African peoples have different names for God/the Most High/the Divine based on their language, with different explanations for the “helpers” (angels, ancestors, orishas, etc.); they also have unique marriage practices.
❖ Marriage means different things in different cultures. In some countries in Africa, the traditional commitment before the family and the community still carries more weight than the “white wedding,” as it is often called. Who gets to decide what customs carry the most weight in your relationship? Ultimately, YOU DO!
❖ While in the U.S. there is often a hierarchy and arguments about whether a married woman should drop her family name. There are places, even in the Diaspora in Latin America, where it is customary to carry both family names or emphasize the matrilineal lineage. Many practices are more about cultural traditions than they are
about evidence of a commitment to live in partnership with another person in a certain way.

❖ If you don’t fit the mold, you can either seek to further assimilate (like a square peg in a circle hole) or you can accept that you really do not fit that mold and do something different.
❖ You can serve yourself and your family best if you prioritize making, maintaining and maximizing the connection in your romantic partnership.

One of the greatest challenges to African American couples in the U.S. in recent years has been the continued attempt to adopt practices and patterns from the majority culture that do not serve us. It is double-mindedness that creates cognitive dissonance and, for some, mental instability.

When we do not understand the different facets of our relationships, we can experience cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance occurs whenever there is a contradiction between someone’s knowledge, opinion, or belief about something and the reality of the person’s life, behaviors or environment. Simply put, it is the internal discord that can be birthed when a person believes one thing, but seeks to do another.
This often happens in romantic partnerships when one or both partners have individual beliefs that do not line up with their behaviors. For some, the internal discord may cause partners to try harder to fit themselves or their partners into expected roles. However, this dissonance can also provoke individuals to seek new ways to relieve the tension and disharmony in their relationships.

After hundreds of years of romantic unions not being acknowledged in the same way that white men and women’s relationships were acknowledged in the United States, we should be intentional about how we decide to partner with others so that our relationships work toward our highest good.

God… Ourselves… Others…

As I am completing this writing, I am listening to a documentary about Africa that stated that in 2000 a survey taken of young white Americans and Europeans, 80% said that Africa still represented “death, darkness and the fear of the unknown”. They described it as a place where there is opportunity for adventure and mystery as well as a mythological paradise. For people of African descent, Africa should represent much, much more.

Ultimately, BLACK LOVE cannot fully express itself if we do not yet know how to love ourselves beyond what others have told us about ourselves and shown us about our stories. The truth is that the presence of people with deeply melanated skin, gravity defying hair, broad noses, full lips, diverse body shapes and any other non-European feature is not new. African people have been here from the beginning and have made contributions throughout the world for
thousands of years. Africa has always influenced the world in diverse ways.

Additionally, people of African descent have historically valued spirituality, craved to be connected to the Divine and respected the diverse ways that people groups across the vast continent of Africa practiced their spirituality. People of African descent have never expected all people groups to be a monolith.

There is diversity on the continent and different ethnicities of Africans with different cultures, yet most are able to co-exist even with their differences. The various tribes and nations that co-exist understand that there will be differences in the way they do things; and that there has never been a single language, practice or culture that all people should adopt or accept.

The ability of African Americans to *acclimate* and *assimilate* into majority culture expectations has always been vital to survival in the U.S. One is often rewarded with acceptance when hair, clothing, language, behavior, etc. matches the expectations of the environment, so it is understandable why assimilation into the majority culture with traditional marriage expectations can be so important for some. For others, there may be a fear of operating outside of anything that is not accepted by the broader society.
The fact still remains that the guidelines and rules about gender roles that are regarded as unquestionable truths were based on religious beliefs, but have also been influenced by the preferences of kings and leaders throughout European and American history. These leaders were in a position to establish rules and determine what would be acceptable and unacceptable. However, there is no evidence of a single perspective on gender roles across the continent of Africa.

The Africans that were kidnapped from the continent did not have a choice about certain aspects of their lives. For hundreds of years, their descendants did not have many choices, except those that also included the prospect of death in the New World. But today, we have options. Today, we can choose what we cling to as truth without the fear of death.

You and your partner can choose how you will interact in your relationship. Remember your autonomy and if you find certain gender roles challenging to fit into in your relationship, consider reconstructing them to fit your needs. Take a look at the next page for some ideas about how you can do that.

FIND YOUR TRIBE!

If you look across the continent of Africa, you will still find different models of romantic partnerships. While some indeed have the traditional structures that we are accustomed to seeing, others differ. In some cultures women may be responsible for the care of the home but also for building, working the land, gathering food, etc. While we most often hear about women’s subjugation to men and lack of ownership, there are other people on the continent where
the opposite is true. Those people focus more of matriarchal lineage and any land the woman works belongs to her. Among these people, the men are not the foundation of their culture, the women are. Whereas one culture practices polygamy where the men are able to marry as many wives as they are able to support, in another culture, it is the women who may live with more than one man. Some tribal groups are known for being warriors, while others are considered to be more demure.

For Africans of the Diaspora, there are many aspects of our family lineage, languages, and traditions that we can no longer know in detail. Still while most cannot pinpoint our exact lineage or cultural practices, we can know that we are sons and daughters of Africa. We can remember that when our ancestors arrived here, they did not know each other’s languages or specific traditions. They were moved around, and disconnected from family and violated in many ways. They faced so many challenges, and yet they figured out how to survive and thrive. And now we, the descendants of the Maafa, find ourselves in a better position than we have ever been while in the United States.

➢ We have the freedom of movement and travel.
➢ We have the ability to earn money.
➢ We have opportunities for education.
➢ We have the internet to freely access information.
➢ We can communicate globally with people from around the world.
➢ We can freely speak our thoughts and convictions.
➢ And in our relationships...

WE CAN FIND OUR TRIBE!
Yes... I said, “FIND YOUR TRIBE!”

Take a look at the chart below. What Power Couple TRIBE resonates most with you?

### PIES Dimensions of Couple Styles in Romantic Partnership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Power</th>
<th>Classic Couple Tribe</th>
<th>Crown Couple Tribe</th>
<th>Alliance Couple Tribe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Style</td>
<td>Hierarchical Leadership</td>
<td>Servant Leadership</td>
<td>Co-Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headship Structure</td>
<td>Man is the head where headship means leader, commander, or supervisor; the one who is “in charge”</td>
<td>Nominal (name only) leadership that may exclude responsibilities; man perceived to have innate and intrinsic leadership abilities</td>
<td>Interdependent; flexible; head viewed anatomically as a metaphor for the husband as the “head” and the woman as the “body”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power Dimension</td>
<td>Husband makes decisions</td>
<td>Decisions likely made together, with greater weight on the husband’s perspective</td>
<td>Both man and woman are decision makers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Dimension</td>
<td>“Man and woman innately created with certain characteristics to fulfill predetermined roles”</td>
<td>“God-given” or innate characteristics of male headship/leadership</td>
<td>Emphasizes mutuality and partnering that highlights each partner’s strengths, while acknowledging physical differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Dimension</td>
<td>Man holds economic responsibility for the household</td>
<td>Man expected to be the financial provider and the woman may assist</td>
<td>Either man and/or woman may contribute to household finances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Dimension</td>
<td>Man focuses outside the home; wife is in charge of domestic affairs</td>
<td>Men and woman have greater responsibility in the home</td>
<td>Domestic responsibilities likely to be determined based on strengths, abilities, time, etc. of individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pros</td>
<td>Hierarchical leadership is pre-established and there are fixed gender roles, when both spouses willingly accept roles, conflict about gender roles is reduced</td>
<td>Reduces conflict about leadership positions in the home</td>
<td>Allows each spouse to operate in his or her own strengths to function within the household, allows compromise and flexibility about gender roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>Man or woman may not naturally fit or be equipped to fulfill the traditional expectations of the gender roles</td>
<td>Potential conflict about expectations for leadership roles; dependent on woman’s compliance and agreement to view the man as the leader of the home</td>
<td>Requires continual communication and problem solving to maintain agreement and make adjustments in relationship roles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The **PIES Dimensions of Romantic Partnerships Model** is based on research titled *Non-Conventional Gender Roles in Relationship Education Curricula for African Americans: A Content Analysis*. Additional commentary about the PIES Dimensions of Romantic Partnerships Model available in *Who’s the Man?* articles at Harmonic Connections PLUS.
These three styles represent three of the romantic partnership styles that are most visible among African Americans. Which *Power Couple Tribe* do you identify with? Does your partner share the same perspective?

Listen... when I started homeschooling my sons in the 1990s, I received a lot of criticism from people that said, “Black people don’t do that... That’s for white people...” Ultimately, it worked for our family and has served our sons well. Twenty years later, few people question a Black family’s decision to homeschool. Similarly, I have known Black couples where the woman worked outside of the home and the husband stayed home with the children. I watched them walk a very challenging path and they told me they had heard the same statements we had heard when we did something different: “Black people don’t do that... That’s what white people do...” They have also done what was best for their families and reaped the reward. Let’s resist the urge to allow the limited relationship paradigms we see around us to define who we are in *our* romantic partnerships.

Need help deciding your Power Couple Tribe? TAKE THE [POWER COUPLE QUIZ](#)!

![Power Couple Styles]

THEN [TELL US](#) ABOUT YOUR POWER COUPLE TRIBE!
“Go to FREEDOM!”
“Eat the fish and spit out the bones...”

I feel the need to repeat this: *Every country, society, and culture has unfavorable practices that you may not desire to be associated with. Take what you can that can add value to your life and leave the rest.*

However, I will say this as well... If you cannot look for the good or appreciate all of the contributions that come from the African continent, but you *are* able to forgive the role that the Western Christian Church has played in the oppression of Africans and people of color all over the globe, then I would wonder... Why? How is it possible for you to overlook Western and European countries’ role in the Maafa, the colonization of the African continent, and the continued abuses of African people, but it is not possible to see beyond the challenges that exist on the African continent to its greatness in the past and promise for the future. That ought not be so.

There is an African proverb that says: “Until the lion tells his story every story will glorify the hunter.” Not only is it time for us to ROAR and tell our own stories, it is also time for us to determine for ourselves what our stories mean.

If you remember nothing else from what is written on these pages, please remember that my greatest admonishment is for you to **GO TO FREEDOM**! My Zulu sister said that to me once when I was having a hard time processing how I felt about being a daughter of Africa and
expanding my relationships with those who were born on the continent, and it set me free! Whether you are considering ways you can reconnect with the African continent or thinking about how you can transform your romantic partnerships... Make a decision to GO TO FREEDOM! Don’t just think outside the box... CRUSH THE BOX!

I believe that BLACK LOVE is elusive in our culture because our time is consumed with trying to fit into others expectations for us that are most often not designed to work toward our highest good as people of African descent in this country. Just as we have external freedoms, we must contend to gain and maintain freedom in our minds. Don’t be afraid to analyze how your life and society impacts the way you desire to function in certain gender roles. And don’t be afraid to do something different.

What did you think about the book? CLICK HERE to share your thoughts real time.
If you would like to read more about the PIES Dimensions of Romantic Partnerships Model, check out the free *Who’s the Man?* articles available through Harmonic Connections PLUS. If you would like support in navigating your romantic partnership and fully embracing BLACK LOVE in your relationship, visit [www.WeBuildLegacy.com](http://www.WeBuildLegacy.com) and take the [Power Couple Quiz](http://www.WeBuildLegacy.com). You will also find other resources on the website that will assist you in making, maintaining, and maximizing the connections in your life.

Let us help you create a foundation necessary to build relationships and establish a Romantic Partnership that is mutually satisfying and dynamic, based on principles that transcend ethnicity, nationality, and culture.

**LEARN ABOUT THE #RelationshipGoals Online Series**
Inspiring, thought provoking and brilliantly explained. This book should challenge all people of African descent to take a deeper look at their personal romantic relationships and build a lasting legacy for their descents that watch them navigate through life.

DeAndre and DeLynn Hudson
Board Members, Harmonic Connections PLUS

What’s Black Love Got to Do With It is a timeless treasure in a space where Diasporic Afrikans are waking up to who they truly are. This work by Dr. Mason is prolific, and will go down in annals as the match that starts the fire of paradigm shifting for the children of the Maafa. She writes with honesty & integrity on each and every page. Her commitment to not only ask the hard questions, but to diligently walk her own Sankofa to unearth the answers is to be applauded. Using her steps to “walk back & retrieve” from the Motherland, and the easy applicability of her PIES Dimensions of Romantic Partnerships Model, will serve well those of Afrikan descent as they learn to see themselves through their own eyes instead of the eyes of others. This work encourages the practice of Kujichagulia and the gaining of a deeper “inner standing” to Afrikan love relationships for generations. If you are planning to marry, already married or in counseling to save your marriage, this book is for you. The Ancestors Asé is all over this work as it is truly PHENOMENAL! Modupe

Iyaláwo Angela Yaa Oyafunmike, MACM
Author of Unapologetically Me: From the Diaspora to the Motherland, One Wombmyn’s Journey to Becoming
Dr. Mason deconstructs and reevaluates the familiar yet questionable notions concerning people of African descent and committed romantic relationships. In doing so, she does not neglect tradition. Rather, she investigates the customary aspects of religion and gender roles, all while presenting an unconventional but credible knowledge in their regard. Speaking as someone who aspires to get married, I appreciate having a source that espouses an African perspective. It's apparent to me that the Western outlook does not necessarily correspond to my experience as a black man. I am accustomed to the majority of the women in my community being highly educated and able to lead. It's because of this that I've sought and found a different approach to marriage in this book; one that recognizes that it's okay to operate outside of the status quo.

_Eugene Thulani Mason IV_
_Master Musician_
_1st Born Son of Eugene and Andrea Mason_