Black Manhood and Sexual Diversity: Can the Two Be Mixed?

The brother behind the “I Am a Man” conference and film talks about manning up, homosexuality, hip-hop and HIV in the black community.

December 21, 2011 By Kenny Miles

This past summer, Black Men’s Xchange (BMX) National joined forces with the National Action Network and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement to present the community forum “I Am a Man: Black Manhood & Sexual Diversity in the Black Community.” The Harlem event featured a panel helmed by the Reverend Al Sharpton and including Our World With Black Enterprise television host Marc Lamont Hill, PhD; R. L’Heureux Lewis, PhD, an assistant professor in the sociology department at The City College of New York; radio talk show host Esther Armah; Bishop John L. Selders Jr.; and Cleo Manago, the CEO and founder of BMX, an organization that specializes in the leadership, affirmation, health and education of same gender loving (SGL) men in the black community.

Manago used footage from the “I Am a Man” conference to create a provocative educational short film—also titled I Am a Man. Recently, Real Health sat down with Manago to further explore the intersection of homosexuality, bisexuality, heterosexuality and manhood in the black community.

You had an eclectic panel for the conference. Were the panelists specifically selected to attract a diverse crowd?

The work BMX does tends not to be what’s traditionally done to get the black community to talk about same gender loving people. When you advertise a community discussion as being about homosexuality, people tend not to come. But when you focus on the event as one that’s relevant to the interests of diverse [groups of] black people, then you get an eclectic black crowd. Manhood is something that concerns most black folks whether they know it or not. Sexuality as it relates to black men is intriguing. Al Sharpton partnered with BMX some years ago, so we already had a connection with him. Then, I wanted to make sure there was a woman—there’s always a woman involved in my work. Again, the traditional gay vacuum approach is to act like women don’t exist. Well, I don’t agree with that. Women are our mothers and our sisters; they are part of our lives. They are a part of our growth, so I wanted to make sure that there was a sister. I also preferred that in this instance she be a heterosexual sister so that there could be some diversity in terms of the sexuality identity of the panelists. In addition, because she [Esther Armah] is from Africa there

was also an element of cultural diversity. What's more, it was also important that the other brothers on the panel, who are considered scholars, be heterosexual men. [This is] because there needed to be some real discussion around our differences as opposed to getting everybody together who thinks the same.

What inspired you to name the conference and film I Am a Man?

Brothers in particular put in a whole lot of effort into coming off hard and putting on a particularly masculine male public performance. That's where this "thug" delusion comes from. Actually, thug ain't nothin' but an outfit. When you take your clothes off, you're nothing but a naked boy or man. [Being a] thug ain't genetic; it's a costume. Hat to the back, pants sagging, walking hard about to break your neck with a chain around your neck is all crap! That's all a drag show; it's an exaggerated costume.

Why is it important for the black community to have community forums about sexual diversity?

There hasn't been any conversation in this country that deals with sexuality, manhood, and same gender loving people from a black cultural context. That's not going on except for BMX work. I'm not bragging—I'm really complaining, because I wish that wasn't true. Most of the people who do work that touches on issues of sexuality do it inside of this gay identity vacuum that alienates a lot of people, so [folks] don't come to these events. Most of them would never get the type of crowd attending you witnessed that day. Most of them have a small conference of the choir, you know, everybody who thinks like them. They all sit in the room and do what I call mental masturbation. There is no transformation.

It's that same approach applied to the HIV/AIDS issue for over 30 years, which is why it hasn't advanced and is still stuck in neutral with no progress. You read the statistics [on rates of HIV infection]—they're disproportionate [among African Americans]. What's going on is that what's bad has never gotten any better. The black community in this country has been preoccupied with trying to survive in a hostile environment, trying to feel relevant in a context that often tells us that we're not relevant, that we're not as beautiful as somebody else. This has been so distracting that we haven't worked on healing ourselves. As I said in the film, we're busy praising white gods, which can do nothing but make you hate yourself. Why? Because you are never going to be [white].

What can we do as individuals to promote acceptance of sexual diversity in the black community?

One of things that we do at BMX is teach other people in our community how to initiate these types of forums. Brothers across the country and some sisters are doing similar forums in Atlanta, Los Angeles, Detroit and Chicago. We believe in not just being a group-think organization, but also teaching people how to discover their own leadership capacity.

What are you thoughts about the homophobia in hip-hop?

Hip-hop is a sometimes-brilliant synthesis of black male creative skills and industrial-strength compensatory black male drag wrapped up in itself, because hip-hop culture is full of attitude. Hip-hop is full of bravado, hip-hop is full of post-slavery toxicity. For example, the words “nigger,” “bitch” and “ho.” Hip-hop is a mixture of things—black genius and black insanity. But, hey, you can’t help but be dysfunctional until you heal, and that’s why we do our forums.

You seemed pretty passionate talking about the Tracy Morgan gay joke controversy from earlier this year. Do you feel Morgan’s jokes were taken out of context in the media?

As you know, being called a “punk,” “faggot” and “bitch” may or may not be relevant to homosexuality when the word is used. As I said in the film, if a brotha can’t shoot hoops or do a lot of the male drag stuff, then you might get called a punk or a “sissy.” But that doesn’t mean you have a husband. In most cases, the names mean you are not “manning up.” In the black community, where there’s all this male anxiety and manhood insecurities, the manhood drag show, which is what manning up is, has sacred value. It’s the only social capital a lot of brothers have. Frankly, that’s who Tracy Morgan is. He embodies this exaggerated manhood and machismo drama. When Morgan said [his son better not speak to him in a] gay voice, this is the same thing as saying don’t be a punk, don’t be a sissy, which means manning up. But white folks don’t understand that because they are not from our culture. That’s what Tracy Morgan was talking about. Tracy Morgan never, ever, ever said, “If my son ever came home and said he was gay I would kill him.” Basically, what he said was, “If my son allowed himself to be bullied, and he came home talking to me weak or in a ‘gay voice,’ I would kill him.” Of course, it was a joke. But let’s be clear: Most black comedy is dysfunctional and self-deprecating. Tracy Morgan is one of the biggest buffoons that ever walked on the stage, and I’m not a fan. But Tracy Morgan was talking about manhood not sexuality.

Homophobia and stigma play a part in the high rates of HIV/AIDS among black men who have sex with men (MSM). What advice would you give to a young black male confused about his sexual identity who may be reading this and doesn’t feel any support from his community?

The first thing we need to acknowledge is that we are in a [serious] situation. Then we can get some clarity on loving ourselves in our own images and defining who we are as men, as opposed to being trained on how to be men from a dysfunctional culture. Frankly, the culture of manhood in the black community is dysfunctional. It’s not based on being responsible and being loyal to your community. It’s based on a black male drag show. I want brothers out there who are same gender loving who are not interested in the black male drag show and who are not interested in acting like they are heterosexual to be true to who they are. [I want them] to realize who they are and learn to embrace that. What’s more, I want to erase all the influences on these men that typically come from un-credible sources that have them questioning their worth. Critical thinking is key to people getting better and being less victimized by the opinions of others.

For more information on Black Men's Xchange, click here. And click here to watch the I Am a Man *37-minute film.*

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