

Gone But Not Forgotten

African Beliefs and Practices Regarding Philanthropy

As we look more closely into the African culture, we find a people who had a long respectful association with nature. They held to a strong belief in the sanctity of human beings and of the earth. Africans of the past and present approached life with a high respect for others because they believe all relationships depend on being in harmony with the ancestral spirits. This unifying bond includes immediate family members, extended family members, as well as close friends, ministers, and other non-family members who are often given family titles such as aunt or uncle.

In regard to giving, the African American maintains a high regard for family. Close family ties for immediate family members generally take top priority in the area of philanthropy. The extended family ranks second in importance when it comes to giving and serving. Extended family includes relatives living outside the household such as grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles.

The next most important avenue for giving after family is giving to the neighborhood or community. The idea of giving to the community is based on the concept of "giving back." Historically, African Americans felt a strong sense of mutual obligation toward their neighbors. Their belief was that a good neighbor assisted others in good times and in bad. They also perceived neighborhoods as havens surrounded by an inhospitable, powerful, and dominant society. They needed to rely on one another for emotional, financial, physical, psychological, spiritual, and social support. These included: communal child rearing, sharing utilities, rent parties, housing, psychological support, sharing tools, equipment, and labor, circulating hand-me-down clothes, furniture and toys, neighborhood collections in time of celebration and crisis, assistance for sick and elderly neighbors, assistance with bereavement, and advice and counseling. Although the neighborhood ties may not be as strong as they once were, community and neighborhood still hold importance. It is the idea that helping any part of the community is improving the whole. Often times this is seen when outsiders are welcomed into a neighborhood. They easily become acquainted and begin to nurture strong ties of friendship that may eventually grow into bonds of kinship with a select few. In cases of crisis or adversity, most neighbors provide material and/or emotional support even if the particular family is not well known to them.

The church continues to be the most important institution for African-American philanthropy. Two thirds of African-American charitable dollars are given to the church. (Fairfax 1994)



Instead of the notion that philanthropy is a requirement for achieving salvation, African-Americans refer to giving and serving as spiritual qualities. Giving and serving selflessly are signs of a truly spiritual person, those who are at peace with God and themselves and who in turn are to be admired and respected.

Ethnic giving may be based on the development of the "Free Societies" in the 1700's. This philanthropic endeavor provided aid by the feeding and clothing of slaves and former slaves. It also included assistance in the areas of moral and skill development as well as general education. Statistics show that 57% of contributing African-American households gave half or more to African-American organizations but they have traditionally helped others regardless of race. (Hall-Russell, Kasberg 1997)

Although a majority of African-Americans give priority to fellow African-Americans, many claim their philanthropy is not based on race but on need. They donate their time and money to any needy person. Extending their philanthropy to unknown others comes from the ideas of: first, what goes around comes around, that good begets good and evil begets evil, and, secondly, you may at any given time find yourself in need. If you share while you can, when you are confronted with adversity you can expect help from others, especially those you have assisted.

As we look at what has been learned about African-American philanthropic beliefs, we see that great emphasis is placed on family and kinship ties. Their giving and serving traditions extend into the community and are seen as obligations rather than philanthropy. They are generally more spontaneous than formal givers. They are often reluctant to make donations to open-ended funds and charities and rather prefer to give to individuals. Contributions of time are more highly valued than money, and when formal contributions are made they prefer giving through the African-American church.

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