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# Journeying Through Millennial Masculinity

By Darius Okolla



The problem with becoming a man is that no one really teaches you how to live it out, partly because everyone will do masculinity in their own unique ways. But most importantly masculinity is really about the humanity of men and like all personhood, it carries in it the glories of personal questions, angsts, fears, and the pitfalls of a fallen soul in a complex world where up is sometimes down and down is sometimes up.

Masculinity is about being human. It is a core aspect of the male identity. My own personal journey of identification has always been a constant fight to shed off the resultant outcomes of falsely understood masculinity as a medal granted after fulfilling a 'real man is' kind of to-do-list. It does not help that for the most part the social hyper masculine man has been treated as the ideal while we of the nerdy, bookish, sensitive type males are seen as less masculine. Falling for the trap that sees ideal manliness as a forceful, public demonstrative role has forced many of the younger males who don't fit the macho image to incessantly pursue ways to caricature a gendered identity. This in turn renders male identity to be posturized and performative rather than authentic and human.

It's honestly a murky struggle navigating a world which observes the role of manhood as a performance rather than a human identity. The maxim, 'a real man' lends credence to manliness as a status; a hierarchical symbol achieved through jumping through subjective, socially instigated loops is disingenuous in character and practice. I personally consider maleness in all its variations as a complex identarian facet with different idiosyncrasies, insecurities, shortcomings, and desires.

According to J.R. Macnamara, in, *Media and the Male Identity: The Making and Remaking of Men*, less than 20% of media profiles reflect positive themes in depicting men and manhood. Violent crimes, including murder, assault, and armed robberies account for over 55% of all media reporting of what we males are thought to do. He also opines that over 30% of all male sexuality discussions in the media tend to be in relation to paedophilia, moreover, male heterosexuality is seen as violent, aggressive and domineering.

Over six months, the study involved a detailed analysis of over 2,000 media articles and program segments and an extensive content analysis of mass media portrayals of men and male identity focusing on news, features, current affairs, talk shows and lifestyle media.

By volume, 69 per cent of mass media reporting and commentary on our identity as males was unfavourable, compared with just 12 per cent favourable and 19 per cent neutral or balanced. Some of the recurring themes in the media content portrayed men as violent, sexually abusive, unable to be trusted with children, 'deadbeat dads', and commitment phobic and in need of 're-construction'.

*"We are predominantly reported or portrayed in mass media as villains, aggressors, perverts and philanderers, with more than 75 per cent of all mass media representations of men and male identity showing men in on one of these four ways,"* Dr Macnamara says.

These perceptions and archetypes of manhood that are repeatedly endorsed by the media fraternity are incredibly damaging to the younger men whose concept of being a man is still forming. They live in a culture that continually treats them like defective girls according to Christina Hoff Sommers. This is a culture that equates masculine gender with propensity to violence, corruption, and other social ills. I empathise with men who are younger than me because the slant reporting and onslaught adds psychic violence to the neglect.

So acceptable has it become to view our male identity as a modern day pathology that even though fatherhood, we are often told, is important, few fathers tend to be home. Even then you'd think that fatherlessness is solely about derelict dads. It isn't. Father absence is primarily about a culture that has little regard for the male parent and the role they play in children's lives.

This modern society has no qualms publishing titles like *'Are fathers necessary?'* right on the front page of global dailies, and *'The End of Men'*. This same society is influenced by gushing, well-resourced militant and hostile attitudes in academia, media fraternity and the public sphere more broadly, which are filled with manufactured performative rage, misplaced resentment and sentiments that share in a collective hatred for anything male or masculine.

As young Kenyans, it's even harder to centre our male identity within the global paradigm that views African masculinities through the lenses of fetishism on a good day and pathology every other day and twice on Sunday. It has become acceptable to ignore any male struggle denying it human empathy and identification because men, we are forever reminded have historically oppressed women. What is preferred is to ignore or downplay the role that reinforced trauma has done to African masculinity through the triple axis of slave trade, colonial racism and modern day criminalisation of blackness, and male blackness in particular.

These traumas for the most part accompanied by the muddled-and murky-gender power dynamics and relational confusion thanks to the "hook-up" culture and its societal wreckage have left my generation of men grappling with listlessness. I see this quandary all the time; the pressure to demonstrate material capacity within the gendered mating dance; the irony that in the dating market patriarchal men still rule the roost. Surprisingly male desirability is still tied to patriarchal ideals and pretensions, top among them displaying alpha tendencies, and hyper-maleness both in

personality, phenotypically, and socioeconomic capacity.

Being countercultural as a man means getting comfortable with not having to embrace these popular, pre-packaged male identities and making peace with the fact that the alpha/beta males theory after all only applies to wolves, peacock, and maybe in the crab patriarchy, but not humans.

That, my masculinity is informed by my personality, history, worldview, messiness, pain and relief, answers (or lack thereof) and a litany of endless variables has meant that I've had to learn to be comfortable in who I am as a millennial man in a world that wants to mass produce men within a fetishized hyper-masculine ideal. Eff it! Sounds like my attitude and honestly, it's the relieving end-point in my journey of trying to be a millennial man or often just a man.

Looking at my father's generation their role(s) largely imploded into one bucket, that of providers. However, the changing relational dynamics has meant that this role within modern coupling has been split three-ways to accommodate the distinct aspects of functional responsibility for males; economic providers, good fathers, and active lovers/mates.

As an African man in a fast-changing social environment where gendered spectrums get widened by the day, I'm keenly aware of the stark portrayal of masculinity as a problem to be fixed; as a pathology; a flawed notion in its entirety, suspect and prone to incivility and violence. This is such a disempowering legacy and it exasperates me daily on how it's politically correct to talk about men in animalistic precambrian references. Truth is, every time we, young men feel emasculated and disempowered we are likely to react with passivity or perversion; an outcome that further entrenches the belief in the inherent evil(ness) of masculinity. The perversion often takes the form of gambling, alcoholism, porn, lewdness, and sometimes-outright violence.

Contra intuitively we seem to regard femininities as inherently good, that's why we tell men to get in touch with their feminine side; a call word for becoming good in a rather twisted view of virtue, identity and vice. Thanks to this incessant demonization, by now, it's becoming manifestly clear that more and more young men-tired of the vilification-are opting out of any meaningful economic or social contribution to society.

These are the reasons as to why I am often skeptical of these programs seeking to mentor young men. Most of them fall for the misconstrued idea that it is we the young males, rather than our environment which is the problem. It is of little use to encourage young men to be healthily masculine and noble in a culture that continually treats masculinity, in all its forms as bothersome, defective and unnecessary.

Growing up in a rural working class community, my upbringing and economic opportunities though markedly fewer, still count as a lot compared to the massive underclass of millennial men that I see around me. There also exists this massive contrast between the economic capacity expected of males as sold by advertisements and mass media vis-à-vis my economic fortune and that of the many males my age. Between commercialised manliness and the everyday lived experience of your average man, there exists this wide chasm filled with despair and depression among those who don't see themselves fitting into the popular archetype of the wealthy male. Then there are also those who see in themselves the need to play capitalist racketeering to shore up their masculine desirability within the romance market and greater society.

My fortunes look a bit better compared to the boys I used to mentor in Gaza, Kayole a few years back-some of whom got felled by the dreaded Flying Squad. In them, I saw providence having placed me a little above their lot-which ties them to the perennial tag of suspects. The irony within Kenyan masculinities is that while criminal masculinities is top heavy, made up of who's who in the politics,

trade, academia and civil society, the actual criminalised masculinity is made up of faceless, often nameless teenage boys in slums – pinned down by economic racism, negative ethnicity, and classism – who linger awaiting the anti-crime police units to snuff their lives under any pretext.

Meanwhile, with my university education, relative exposure, a bit of socioeconomic wiggle room and social stratification I exist in the eye of that quandary, while playing the role of a temporary arbiter with my fate tied to whether I effect an upward or downward mobility.

No doubt that the successive generational trauma tied to black masculine pains and tragedies often goes unacknowledged and sometimes derided. I have had to unshackle myself from the toxic strain of manhood that comes with the stiff stoicism manifested by our father's generation. I talk about my mental health when I need to and I reject the idea that women are more emotionally attuned and expressive. I see emotional expression not as a feminine ideal to grasp for, but as a mere human instinct.

I have alongside friends and acquaintances explored the complexities of PTSD as a natural mental and emotional reality. Depression, especially in men my age-late twenties-often goes unnoticed, and rarely acknowledged. We have no problem getting in touch with the humanity of our male identity and the occasional need for remedies in moments when mental stress reflects through too much or too little sleep, physical pain and stress, irritability, and even unprovoked aggressiveness.

There exists 3.6 billion masculinities out in the world, and any attempt to tie any man down to clustered and cloistered stratifications masquerading as manliness whether through media portrayal, functional roles or fetishized notions is violence. As a man I am free to explore, live, interact and interpret my male identity based on who I am and view myself, disregarding all the 'a real man does/is...' sensibilities that populate popular conversations about the male gender.

I see being a man as being true to self, embracing it as such and flatly rejecting any populist social constructions that seek to replace character with achievement as the standard for manliness; a prospect that has many young men killing their souls in pursuit of insane wealth and power. Thankfully more young men are becoming accepting of their own versions of maleness and stubbornly deflecting the pressure that comes with materialism as the standard for masculine desirability especially in the marriage eco-system.

Living up to your values as a millennial man means standing up to-not toxic masculinity, first and foremost-but demonisation of manliness. Gendered identity is about context and the context we live in-much as male privilege remains a popular epithet-it only seems to work for upper class men. These powerful men are the manufactured native elite that not only does the bidding of the foreign white man but has an insatiable desire to be like them.

To further complicate modern African male identities, the economic deprivation, thanks to the current mafia state upheld by the three criminal dynasties and the rising impetuous 'hustler dynasty', limits opportunities to a select few. Accepting that I still live in a largely poor, largely rural, largely young, largely uneducated society where few males get to achieve their dreams is a tragic spectacle especially in a still largely hypergamous nation.

Maybe we are the generation of men that will finally demand the humanization of manliness, and put an end to the demonization of masculinity-though this will be hard because it pays bills in some quarters. We'll have to acknowledge the successive traumas inflicted on our African manliness and end the misperceptions that have riddled the African male identity in all its forms and fashions. At the end of the day, there's no such thing as a real man, there is just every man existing in his own contradictions, aches, triumphs and complexities the best way he knows how.

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