

Mask Off

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Masculinity Redefined

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Introduction

Mask off: Being a man

One sunny Saturday afternoon during my teenage years, before touch screen and selfies, before 4G, before social media had permeated every aspect of our being, I was walking through the vibrant, often tumultuous, multicultural, dynamic Tottenham High Road in North London. I was with a large group with about ten, of my 'uncles'. They weren't really my uncles. They were not blood relatives, but the men who made up the Congolese community I had grown up in. On Saturdays, as part of their church group, they ran activities for young people in the community, which included the brass band music and other cultural activities.

After attending one of these Saturday sessions, I was invited for food at one uncle's house who lived locally, just off the high street. My excitement could not be contained. It was an unexpected treat of *pondu*, *makemba*, *mikate* and *ntaba* (stew, plantain, doughnut balls also known as puff puff, and grilled goat) – truly a privilege. We walked along the high street making our way to the house, chatting excitedly. I was noticeably the only teenager in the group, dressed in my tracksuit bottoms, hooded jumper and Nike Air Force 1 trainers. They were mostly dressed in the unique fashion of Congolese men: high-waisted jeans, colourful t-shirts fitted tight to unathletic, pot-belly type bodies, designer brands and eccentric designs.

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As we walked, I began to feel very self-conscious and increasingly aware of the group I was with. Although I was very familiar with Tottenham – I spent a lot of time there as a teenager and had walked the same streets often, though with an entirely different group and a different purpose – I felt self-conscious because we were attracting a lot of attention, not just as a large group, but as a large group of eccentrically dressed men of African descent speaking loudly in Lingala. I also saw lots of other teenagers. Some began staring, pointing, and even laughing in the distance. I was certain some of them recognised me as I tried to hide by putting my hood up. In hindsight, this probably had the opposite effect.

We continued to walk through as a group, now split up in pairs or in threes, each holding their separate conversations. I walked with my uncle, holding hands. This is perfectly normal in Congolese/Francophone African culture, and I would later learn, in many other cultures around the world too. It is a way for men to bond and show affinity, as well as affection towards each other. This is the culture I had grown up in. I had often watched my father holding hands while speaking with other men in the community, or as they walked. It was normal, and in those situations I did not think twice of it. However, outside of the cultural norms of this group, it took on an alien and embarrassing quality.

Much to my relief, we turned off the high road, and walked towards the housing estate where the uncle who was hosting us lived. I had been to his house many times before. I wanted to run there on my own, ahead of the uncles, and wait there for them but the burden of explaining this behaviour would last with me much longer than I wanted or needed it too.

I was breathing a bit more relaxed and freely, though still walking hand in hand with my uncle. We were no longer in the

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direct gaze of all of those people on the street, particularly the teenagers. As we turned onto the estate where my uncle lived, with a renewed sense of vigour and boisterousness, a group of teenagers who were hanging out on the estate noticed us. They watched us; their eyes focussing on me and the uncle I walked hand in hand with. I could see their faces portraying a range of negative expressions, everything from confusion to disgust.

I had seen those youths on the estate before. Sometimes I'd even given them the subtle head-nod, an in-group greeting that comes with respect and acceptance. On these estates – and every estate, inner-city area, hood, ghetto, ends, slums, whatever the moniker – respect is all about how strong you are, or at least, how strong you are perceived to be. I had participated in this façade long enough to be granted respect. I was tall and athletic looking. Having had an early introduction to press ups and weights, I appeared just intimidating enough. All of this respect earned quickly dissipated before my very eyes, as I was seen walking hand in hand with another man.

I wanted to put my hood back on and bury my face but it was too late, I had already been seen. I quickly removed my hands from my uncles, pretending to reach for something in my pocket, which he seemed non-fussed about; another futile act.

'Yo, big man?' I heard a voice call over. I knew he was talking to me and no one else. I looked over. His eyes punched through my chest. I felt my legs shake as if my knees would buckle at any given step. He had his hood up over his head, and wore the grey Nike tracksuit and hoodie that was envied by all.

'You holding hands, yeah?' he said, and the crew around him chuckled, and exploded with laughter. I can still remember the pain; the sting in my heart. It is the same feeling from when spicy food goes from tasty to too hot to bear, and it makes you wish things could return to normal.

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'No,' I replied, in a tone indicating that I was offended at the suggestion.

'*Alobi nini?*' My uncle, wondering what the commotion was about, asked what he had said.

'Nothing,' I replied with bitter disdain, 'he was asking for the time.'

* * *

This is one of the many experiences that I had growing up that made me question my masculinity, leading me to reflect on the question that we're not supposed to ask: what does it actually mean to be a man? Why was it that in one part of the world, two men holding hands did not turn any heads, yet in another part of the world everybody stopped and stared? I wondered about men's emotions and feelings, or rather, the apparent absence of it. I was quite an emotional boy. I cried if I was sad or upset; I cried if I was happy; I cried from anger. I expressed myself fully, whether that was through sadness or joyousness. But as I got older, this slowly changed. I become more stoical, more repressed, more reserved; I never let anyone else know how I truly felt, sometimes not even myself. There was a burning anger or rage inside that I disguised as anger issues, a short fuse or inability to control my temper.

Moving forward to the present day, what do our own perceptions of masculinity and the wider cultural norms around it mean for young boys growing up into manhood? What do they mean for young men and older men grappling with a society that encourages them to hold on to the anger that destroys the lives of women as well as the lives of many men? There are many urgent questions to consider about modern-day men and masculinity. Why are men overwhelmingly represented as per-

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petrators of violent crimes in statistics, particularly in regards to sexual violence, from harassment to rape? Why is suicide the biggest killer of men under the age of 45 – more than disease or accidents? What can we do to change this?

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the notion of being a man and masculinity, we have to understand patriarchy, which is the ideology and hierarchical structure that places men at an advantageous position above women, granting them power, privileges, entitlement, and access to resources in various domains and contexts: from within the family to business and the workplace, informing us of the roles that men and women should adhere to, while dictating their material realities. The expectation that women should cook and clean while men should be the primary wage earners is a rigid idea that may not hold the same weight and expectation as it did 50 years ago. But does that mean we live in an equal society? People may argue that women are liberated from such strict confines. On the surface, the image of the housewife is not as prevalent in our minds, but if women are still paid less than men in the same job, what does that tell us about how far we've come? As I discuss throughout the book, patriarchy is a thread that runs throughout the family, the education system, the mainstream media. It socialises men's behaviours, attitudes, and actions, telling them the way they should act, feel, and behave in all aspects of their lives, particularly in relation to women, as well as other men.

The system of patriarchy is something that impacts the lives of men and women, from birth through to childhood, adulthood and onwards, in sometimes seemingly simple ways such as the colours that they should wear, blue for a boy, pink for a girl, and the types of clothes or the toys that they should play with. These all have a significant impact on the way masculinity is viewed within society and how men and women interact with

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each other. A patriarchal society is a society in which men hold the primary stakes of power on a public level, for instance, in governance and politics, economics and business, education and employment, and religion, and on a private and interpersonal level, in the household, within relationships, and within friendships too. The patriarchy protects and prioritises the rights of men over the rights of women.

Patriarchy is not a term or system that many people are familiar with outside of academia, classrooms or textbooks. Nor is it used with frequency or in everyday regular conversation, although the conversation about feminism has been taking centre stage in recent years, resulting in a lot more exposure to the term. However, once a discussion gets going, it isn't difficult to get people to understand the notion of patriarchy, even if they haven't thought about it before, because it plays out in our everyday lives. The ways in which it does are the focus of this book.

I did not hear about patriarchy growing up. Not in school; not so much at university – at least not in a way that stood out to me – nor in my area or neighbourhood, on my block, among my male and female friends, in my family, and not from my parents, aunts, uncles, or siblings. It wasn't part of my everyday language – although I wish it had been as I would have been able to prepare myself for so many things. However, it did permeate virtually every aspect of my being and significantly influence the way I saw myself as a young boy, and later as a man, as well as the way that I saw other men and women. I recall being confronted with the ideas of male dominance in one form or another. For example, when I first heard the song 'Keep Ya Head Up' by Tupac Shakur, at approximately twelve or thirteen years old, in the late 90s/early 2000s. The following lyrics really struck me:

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You know it makes me unhappy?
When brothers make babies, and leave a young mother to be
a pappy.
And since we all came from a woman,
Got our name from a woman, and our game from a woman,
I wonder why we take from our women, why we rape our
women,
Do we hate our women?
I think it's time to kill for our women, time to heal our
women,
Be real to our women.
And if we don't, we'll have a race of babies that will hate the
ladies
And makes the babies. And since a man can't make one, he
has no right
To tell a woman when and where to create one.

These lyrics are a commentary on aspects of gender inequality; on men who abandon women they've impregnated, men violating women, including rape, even asking 'do we hate our women?' Hearing this particular message from a gangster rapper who was firmly considered to be a masculine man; the epitome, of what a man should be, had a profound effect on my thinking as an adolescent.

When I did eventually come to understand the term patriarchy, it helped me to understand and make sense of the many questions I had as a young boy. For example, my curiosity about lyrics such as those above came to be understood within the wider context of women's reproductive rights. The same kind of questions, many boys still have growing up nowadays. Through my work with teenagers, as well as adult men, it seems we are still navigating the complexities and issues of being a

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man that were around decades ago, along with the new issues that have emerged in the modern day.

I have seen young boys, and men, quietly suffer with issues such as anxiety and depression, heartache and emotional trauma, lash out with aggression, at others and themselves, all because, repeatedly, somewhere along the line, they were told that a man has to be strong; tough, stoic, logical, a type of soldier in difficult times, never succumbing to emotion or vulnerability, always showing indifference to any kind of pain or suffering. And I too have learned from my experiences and the ways I have navigated issues around my masculinity and manhood, from the questions I had as a young boy, and teenager, and the questions that emerge as a man and how I have dealt with them, often in the very stereotypical form of male repression.

This is one of the reasons I decided to name this book *Mask Off*. Because men are taught to wear a mask, a façade that covers up how we are really feeling and the issues we are faced with from a young age. And because society is generally patriarchal, in that, it favours men that occupy privileged positions, it makes it seem as though men do not have issues that they are also suffering from. It is a kind of double-edged sword, a poisonous panacea; that is to say, the same system that puts men at an advantage in society is essentially the same system that limits them; inhibits their growth and eventually leads to their break down. The other reason for the title *Mask Off* is that it is a reference to the song, of the same title, by American rapper Future. The song is very hyper-materialistic, violent and misogynist, with braggadocios and lyrical references to drugs and money, gang-violence, and derogatory monikers for women (the b-word etc), all over a melodious flute sample. I later found out this is a sample from the original song by Tommy Butler called *Prison Song*, a song written for the play *Selma*. It captures the issues of racism,

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police brutality, and of love and freedom during the civil rights era. This contrast – two very different messages, over a span of time, existing in one song – is a very symbolic representation of how manhood and masculinity has changed over the years. And how it has been so deeply influenced by popular music and mainstream media.

With *Mask Off* my aim is to unmask the illusion of the rigid and limited masculinity that renders boys and men incapable of dealing with their emotions, and turns them into aggressors and dominators of other people, whether intentionally or otherwise, and to offer solutions as to how men can begin not only to heal from their own personal trauma and unlearn what they were taught as absolute, but also to make changes that will allow the next generation that are growing up to live in the fullness, fluidity and the wholeness of understanding of what being a man means.