

Black first family 'changes everything'

By John Blake
CNN



President Obama and his wife, Michelle, and their daughters, Malia and Sasha, greet the nation.

(CNN) -- Jamaal Young was watching Barack Obama and his family greet an ecstatic crowd in Chicago, Illinois, on Election Night when he realized that something seemed wrong.

Obama didn't shout at his wife, Michelle, to shut up. The first lady didn't roll her eyes and tell Obama to act like a man. No laugh track kicked in, no one danced, and no

police sirens wailed in the background.

Young had tuned in to celebrate the election of the nation's first African-American president. But he realized that he was witnessing another historic first. A black family was being featured as the first family, not the "problem family" or the "funny family."

"They are not here to entertain us," says Young, a New York Press columnist. "Michelle Obama is not sitting around with her girlfriends saying, 'My man ain't no good.' You're not seeing this over-sexualized, crazy black family that, every time a Marvin Gaye song comes on, someone stands up and says, 'Oh girl, that's my jam.'"

The nation didn't just get a glimpse of its new first family when [Obama](#) and his family waved to the crowds on Inauguration Day. The Obamas are offering America a new way to look at the black family, Young and other commentators say.

America has often viewed the black family through the prism of its pathologies: single-family homes, absentee fathers, out of wedlock children, they say. Or they've turned to the black family for comic relief in television shows such as "Good Times" in the '70s or today's "House of Payne."

But a black first family changes that script, some say. A global audience will now be fed images of a highly educated, loving and photogenic black family living in the White House for the next four years -- and it can't go off the air like "The Cosby Show."

"The last time we had an image of a black family that was this positive it was ["The Cosby Show,"](#) but this is the Real McCoy," says Jacqueline Moore Bowles, national president of Jack and Jill of America Inc., a predominantly black organization for youths.

A new vision of black intimacy

The new first family could inspire some of their biggest changes within the black family itself, some say

In 1965, the late Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a Democratic senator from New York, warned the nation about the rise of fatherless black families. He concluded that many black families were caught in a "tangle of pathology." The pathology persists. The U.S. Census Bureau said that 69 percent of black women who gave birth in 2005 were unmarried (it was 31 percent for white mothers).

The relationship between Obama and his wife may help untangle some of that pathology, some black commentators say.

It could start with black intimacy. The American public is routinely exposed to sexually charged relationships between black men and women. "Street lit" books with titles such as "Thugs and the Women Who Love Them," and "A Project Chick" now crowd bookstores and public library shelves.

Yet the new first couple offers America an example of a black, passionate, *marital* relationship, says Jennifer Brea, a writer for EbonyJet.com.

"They are the most natural and accessible first couple this country has ever had," Brea says. "You see a politician give a peck on his wife's cheek after a speech and often it looks staged. When you look at them, you feel like that there's this chemistry and spark."

Several black women actually sighed as they talked about how much Obama seems to touch his wife and exchange soulful glances with her in public. They said Obama will show young black men how to treat women -- and young black women how they should be treated.

"We don't get to see black love," says Heidi Durrow, the prize-winning author of the forthcoming novel, "Low Sky Dreaming."

"But every time you see them [the Obamas] on stage, it's been super," she says. "It's an amazing image to see these dynamic, smart, progressive people just openly affectionate. I'm all for it."

Obama's apparent closeness to his wife may help untangle another pathology -- the preoccupation with skin color and "looking white," Bowles, president of Jack and Jill, says.

Bowles says some powerful black men marry women who are white or fair-skinned. Obama's decision to marry a darker-skinned woman like Michelle Obama shows black women that black can indeed be beautiful.

"Too often successful black men look for other things ... a white woman or someone who is light, bright and darn near white," Bowles says. "She [Obama] is a true sister, and she makes no bones about it."

'They're not 'Bebe's Kids' '

But what about those blacks who haven't been considered "true sisters" or "true brothers." A black first family changes that script as well, some say.

Obama's family shows that there is not one way, but many ways for someone to claim membership in the black family, some say.

Brea, the writer for EbonyJet.com, is the daughter of a white mother and a Haitian-American father. She says she felt pressure to claim one race growing up. She never quite felt like a full citizen.

Obama's biracial background and his "exotic" upbringing relieves her of that pressure. Obama will help other blacks who come from multiracial backgrounds and immigrant communities to be comfortable in their own skin, she says.

"It's changed everything," she says. "You can sort of be whatever you want in all of its complexity, and it's something to be proud of."

The Obamas' two daughters, Malia and Sasha, also offer America a new way to look at black kids, others say. Throughout Inauguration Day, the two girls stood before the cameras and waved, smiled and played to the cameras.

Durrow, the author of "Low Sky Dreaming," says it's refreshing to see well-spoken black children on television who act nothing like "Bebe's Kids," the unruly black kids from the ghetto immortalized by the late black comedian Robin Harris.

"It's wonderful for people on the world stage to see young black kids who are so poised and vivacious," Durrow says. "They're not 'Bebe's Kids.' I see them and I get the sense that they're going to be OK."

Though the new first family may seem like a novelty to some, for others they are familiar.

Barbara McKinzie, international president of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, says she grew up in a small town in Oklahoma surrounded by black couples and an extended family of teachers and neighbors, who were knit together like the new first family.

She didn't need to look at the [Inauguration Day](#) festivities to see a vibrant black family.

"It's not new, but it appears new," she says. "The president and his wife and children are not a novelty in the African-American community."

"It's the only family I've known in my life."
