

## Introduction

### A Black Family from Mississippi as a Socio-Ecological Phenomenon

The King family was a twentieth-century anomaly – a middle-class black family living in rural Mississippi.<sup>1</sup> Academic studies, mainstream writing, and anecdotes corroborate the same reality – that blacks living in the historic South experienced deleterious conditions due to racism, segregation, and de jure as well as de facto discrimination. Whether prior to or during Reconstruction or as a result of Jim Crow, they were subjected to profound and unrelenting economic, political, legal, and social oppression, often accompanied by the threat of violence, particularly lynching.<sup>2</sup> How did black families navigate these systemic, oppressive conditions daily?<sup>3</sup> What strategies did they use? And how could becoming middle class be possible?

This book presents the lives and experiences of seven generations of a black family that originated in Mississippi. Limited mixed-methodological, multi-disciplinary research has been performed on this topic. This book is one response to this omission. We rely on sociology and ecology (or a socio-ecological lens) as well as their own voices to examine how race, religion, education, and their intersection as a familial ethos influenced economic and non-economic outcomes of the King family. Empirical reports document the context. Narratives explain how intangible beliefs linked to religious and secular education fueled socioeconomic outcomes – under the ever-present specter of racial, gender, and economic stratification.<sup>4</sup> The Kings did not reflect the “well-scrubbed black middle class,” but experienced economic challenges as they lived and worked alongside the many struggling black and white sharecroppers and farmers in Gallman, Mississippi.<sup>5</sup> Family members do not romanticize their lives and experiences, but rather candidly describe trials and triumphs, inter- as well as intra-racial problems, and views and values that help expand our understanding of what constituted middle-class living for rural blacks during that period.<sup>6</sup>

## A DEFINITION OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

This analysis operationalizes “middle class” in a certain way while also acknowledging alternative definitions as well as the elusiveness of this broad socioeconomic classification.<sup>7</sup> Because their lives played out in largely agrarian locations, we focus on a definition of middle class that is linked to dynamics upon which people were stratified in farming communities: home and land ownership; high school completion (considered the principal educational milestone in rural spaces at the time that often eluded sharecroppers); perceived economic security; mindset about one’s class position; formal and informal networks; belief in delayed gratification; fears about downward mobility; and efforts to stave off poverty. Moreover, based on an ecology of segregation, it is important to consider how a middle-class position was used to navigate its menacing, potentially debilitating effects.

Thus a three-pronged definition of middle class is employed here that includes a structural position in the broader system of class stratification based on social group position between labor and capital; economic position, narrowly interpreted, based on factors such as relative wealth, income, educational attainment, and/or occupational status; and certain beliefs associated with this class position such as delayed gratification and respectability norms associated with both religious and formal education. We do not dispute other possible operationalizations. This definition reflects the agricultural context in which the early generations of the King family lived, challenges notions about what constituted the middle class during that period, and creates an opportunity to broaden scholarly research on alternate ways to consider stratified spaces.

To our knowledge, few studies have presented a *generational narrative* that explains how some black rural families negotiated racially charged locales in search of security, stability, and safety. Moreover, this counter-narrative centers the potentially mediating effects of religion, education, and their nexus (referred to here as “religious education”) in fostering beneficial decisions and outcomes.<sup>8</sup> But the King family did not achieve their goals in isolation. Just as chronic inequality and oppression were part of the historic landscape in Mississippi, so were predominately black churches and black schools designed to help blacks survive with pride, courage, and dignity.<sup>9</sup> *Kings of Mississippi* documents one black family’s attempt to be adaptive and resilient during discriminatory times and in discriminatory spaces. And just as the economics of what it means to be

middle class is important, the *how* and *why* of their experiences are equally salient and central here.

#### BOOK OBJECTIVES

To be clear, *Kings of Mississippi* is not a tale about grit. Nor is it a story of exceptionalism, but rather chronicles a family's attempt to navigate racial and economic disparities in a highly stratified society. And in sharing their story, the Kings provide a glimpse into dimensions of the black experience in the United States circa 1900–2015. National and local economies provide a backdrop on the experiences, perspectives, and responses to racism, poverty, discrimination, oppression, and other inequities in Gallman, Mississippi, and post-migration. Some of the accounts by King family members are colorful; some are grave. Individuals present vivid, nuanced portraits and recollections of twentieth-century life in the segregated South; strategic inter- and intra-racial interactions for family survival; and sacrifice as well as strain during migrations. Central in their history is the role of religion, as well as formal and informal education, and their intersection as buoys to traverse societal stratification and broader social change.<sup>10</sup>

The following questions are considered: (1) How were local blacks and whites stratified in Gallman, Mississippi, based on factors such as race, class, and gender? (2) What was the nature of inequality as experienced, in general, by blacks in the area? (3) How did the Kings understand, experience, and navigate life in the South and, for some members, migration North and to the Southwest? (4) What kinds of inter- and intra-racial conflicts and/or compromises did they experience? and (5) How did formal as well as informal education, religion, organizations, and social structures influence family decisions and outcomes? Answers to these queries will also help explain how black churches and schools could influence attitudes and actions in ways that were both ideological and practical. Personal stories, family reflections, and empirical data inform this multi-disciplinary endeavor. The legacy of the King family has academic and applied import by illumining, analyzing, and documenting successes, pit-falls, and impasses that individuals believe shaped and continue to shape their family's lives.

#### RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AS A SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND ECONOMIC BUOY

King family members posit that religious education was just as salient as formal education for their upward mobility. Its espousal and application

varied, yet Christianity specifically emerged as a central motivator for action or, in some instances, inaction. Although this project presents economic, political, and social contexts in which the Kings found themselves, it also documents biblically based proactive and sometimes reactive responses to challenges. Narratives, many as reflections by older family members and peers, illustrate attitudes and actions among the Kings who endeavored to achieve their goals *despite* harrowing constraints. Equally important, religious education helps explain why certain family members believed that they would achieve economic stability – even though most blacks around them had not done so and most whites directly and tacitly endeavored to squelch these aspirations. The explicit use of scripture and religious practices as cultural tools is central to their narratives. Explanations linked to biblical practices of prayer, obedience, peacekeeping, and the Protestant Ethic provide further insight about family decision-making processes. In addition to assessing the effects of practical application of biblical dictates, insights emerge about inter-faith differences and outcomes based on variations in factors such as education, age, and gender. This book also assesses the role of religion in positioning the King family as “good Christian Negroes” and, later, “good Christian blacks” to their black and/or white counterparts. In addition, we consider how perceived deservedness, largely based on the matriarch’s “religious reputation” among influential whites, provided crucial alliances as well as a protective mechanism against animosity and physical violence from local whites for whom racism was a way of life. But how is *religious education* defined here and how did it influence this family?

### Religious Education Defined

For the Kings and their progenitors, religious education was steeped in Christianity and instructionally informed by the bible. However, this concept extends beyond “The Book” to include context-specific values and practices. As a guiding process, it was decidedly conservative in its stance on family expectations and gender roles, particularly among the four earliest generations of Kings. Prescriptions around work and the appropriate work ethic were clear. However, in contrast, religious education often manifested in views that were unexpected for the time, particularly among certain female family members. Formative biblical tenets included the Virtuous Woman of Proverbs 31, Greatest Commandment in Matthew 22:34–40, and parental instructions in Proverbs 22:6. Yet race-based differences in religious education are best summarized in *All God’s Dangers* (Rosengarten 1974): “It’s just a different performance from one

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church to another. Same God, but they [black Christians] serves Him different; different enough for you to set and look it through, and hear the difference in the sermons that's preached and the songs that's sung" (p. 455).

The family did not seem to be beholden to a particular theology. Yet key tenets of their religious education were decidedly practical and stressed common sense and core Christian principals. We contend that these dual practical and religious dimensions enabled scriptural application in ways the Kings believed to be authentic and empowering. Moreover, how the Kings typically applied scripture had a decidedly socio-ecological thrust because it reflected the specific contexts and circumstances in which they found themselves. So although core tenants existed, some aspects of them could be adapted. Lastly, religious education as illustrated by the Kings reflected a certain comfortability combining the bible with formal and/or informal educational practices. In this way, "if any would not work, neither should he eat" in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 took on a specific charge and fueled the drive among some family members to earn as much formal education as possible to best compete for gainful employment.<sup>11</sup> And just as such beliefs and behavior could have a positive impact, like other ideologies, they could also be used as a chastening rod. Readers should note that this definition does not suggest that every King family member understood, espoused, or applied religious education identically. To the contrary, this definition reflects a dynamic, broad-based rubric that was differentially employed by family members and thus differentially shaped their lives, in general, and socioeconomic trajectories, in particular. As becomes evident, religious education reflected a broad constellation of formal and informal instruction and guidance that was the bedrock for the daily lives of the King family in religious, economic, social, political, cultural, and practical ways.

ABOUT THE KING FAMILY: PERFORMING A BLACK FAMILY  
GENERATIONAL STUDY

The King family lived in the rural farming community of Gallman, Mississippi, in the early and mid-1900s (details on both the town and state are provided in Chapter 1). Like most blacks, they were initially sharecroppers on white-owned farms.<sup>12</sup> Yet a series of events gradually altered the family's socioeconomic trajectory. These include: the family matriarch, Irma's, dream of owning her own land and livestock; military stints of her husband and family patriarch, George Franklin, and other family members; inter-racial networks forged by Irma as

a domestic;<sup>13</sup> high school graduations of their children;<sup>14</sup> and “migration spells” by relatives who relocated North and Southwest.

As a result of such experiences, by the mid-1900s, the King family owned 20 acres of land including a fishing pond (would later become 40 acres), a house, numerous livestock, and several vehicles. We are not suggesting that the King family was the *only* middle-class black family in Gallman, that every family member fared similarly, or that their lives paralleled those commonly associated with the black middle class in other studies, but rather that the family’s experiences provide an important portrait for understanding some of the religious, economic, and social dynamics that led to a certain degree of economic security in the South.<sup>15</sup> The *how* of their story is also important. Some economists postulate that “individual’s social capital, or family and community background, yields nontradable social relations and cultural attributes that include economic well-being . . . social capital is a vital element of inter-generational transmission of socio-economic status” (Mason 2003: 60). For the Kings, in addition to their homestead, the most salient social capital took the form of religious as well as secular education and practical trades. We attempt to uncover how members of this family carved out a niche in this farming community that enabled them to weather an extremely harsh, often unpredictable racial, social, and economic climate.<sup>16</sup>

Black families have historically been mainstays in black communities; so have black churches and black schools. Many studies suggest that these three entities are *stewards* of the black community.<sup>17</sup> Yet their effects vary and had differential effects on the Kings. These sites, black churches and black schools, were selected here because of their historic interconnectedness in the broader black community and often under-estimated influence on efforts to forge socioeconomic stability.<sup>18</sup> We seek to inform existing literature with nuanced portraits of black family life as part of these institutions. Just as inequality is understood and experienced differently – even within the same family – beliefs, priorities, and responses associated with social problems like segregation, racism, discrimination, and poverty had differential effects on members of this family. Moreover, conditions may appear different when one is experiencing them rather than reflecting upon them years later. Our research considers the dynamics of oppression and resistance based on narratives from people who lived through egregious conditions and from relatives who would later benefit. We also consider how beliefs and behavior cultivated in the South over time became central to survival and successes there and in other locations.

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### Applying a Socio-Ecological Lens to the Study of Black Family Life in the Segregated South

A socio-ecological theoretical framework combines aspects of sociology and ecology to examine phenomena. First, this lens focuses on the influence of environmental factors that are historic and structural across time. In this book, ecology helps frame the broader social context and the King family's place in it.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, a sociological lens enables the study of, among other dynamics, the influence of religion and education on the King's behavior and beliefs. Additionally, literature from the sociology of religion enables us to consider effects, motivators, and explanations for family members in ways uncommon in ecology. This two-fold lens also focuses on the intrinsic and extrinsic impact of religiosity, particularly Christian edicts, that guided and continue to guide most of the Kings. Insights from the sociology of education help assess how organized and informal educational tenets and practices influenced the family ethos (refer to Figure I.1). This multi-faceted model is employed to better understand individual- to structural-level experiences and outcomes. For example, in addition to assessing how family members were influenced *daily* by factors such as racism, sexism, segregation, and the specter of poverty that were systemic/macro in origin, it is also crucial to focus on the effects of the local black church and schools, black migration, labor market patterns, the military, and racial tensions about group position and property attainment across time.<sup>20</sup>

However, unlike the traditional ecological emphasis on human or childhood development, this analysis concentrates on *individual* as well as *collective familial development*. Although ecological theory has been used to study environments such as schools, to our knowledge, it has not included the additional sociological lenses on the black family, black community, black religiosity, and the specific impact of religious education. Furthermore, ecological theory is often utilized to study micro-level developmental change. We too examine individual experiences, in this instance, those of King family members. However, we also document broader dynamics linked to black churches and black schools as *familial assets* – their ideologies, cultures, and programs that the Kings suggest were purposefully harnessed to help meet their goals and foster dignity and respect in a society designed to deny these basic rights (refer to the appendix about the research methods used here).

Although the family matriarch, Irma, never left Gallman, Mississippi, many of her siblings migrated circa 1920–1950 to the following locales:

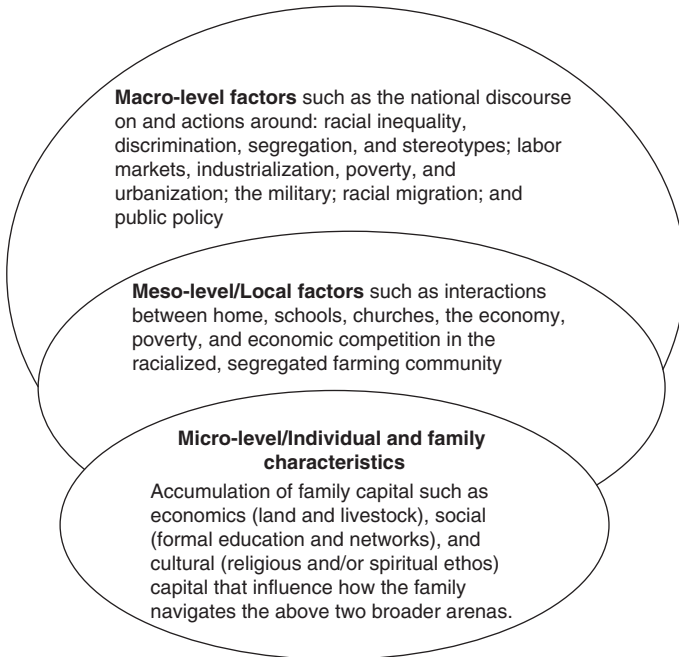


Figure I.1: Socio-Ecological Model for *Kings of Mississippi*  
 Key: Application and Extension of Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979, 1986)

Jackson, Mississippi; Chicago, Illinois; Detroit, Michigan; Toledo, Ohio; St. Louis, Missouri; and, Denver, Colorado.<sup>21</sup> Several decades later, her children would all end up in Gary, Indiana. These seven socio-ecological sites are of particular interest because their demographic and social distinctions played important roles in the mobility experiences of the Kings and their offspring. In addition, inter- and intra-racial comparisons of factors commonly associated with socioeconomic status such as income, education, and poverty become particularly salient for family members who migrated to urban areas. And just as resettlement patterns directly and indirectly affected the Kings, local decisions also shaped their lives, particularly in Copiah County, where many of the first four generations of family members initially lived.<sup>22</sup> Narratives and empirical information help gauge dynamics such as farm ownership by race and racial education gaps. A family tree and timeline help document lineage, offspring, and related economic outcomes. The way family members *understood their class position* and explained their economic trajectories is equally important.



## ABOUT THE BOOK AND ITS CONTRIBUTIONS

How do race, place, class, gender, and religion play out in the daily lives of one black family across time? Do their experiences help to better understand black families more broadly? This study extends existing research by focusing on these factors and their intersection to examine anew black family and Black Church dynamics. This research cannot do justice to every aspect of black life for the Kings and their offspring, but rather documents some of the complexities evident in the historic black experience in light of religion-informed motivations and behavior.

Chapter 1 provides background information about the King family matriarch's abiding wish – to own land and a milk cow. Despite the ever-present shadow of segregation and resulting inequities and discrimination, her simple desire shaped the family ethos, behavior, and socioeconomic outcomes. Moreover, the chapter positions religion and secular education as important features in the lives of many blacks in the rural South and the primary influencers for the Kings. Generational narratives, demographic and military statistics, and the family typology help explain seminal experiences, decisions, and dangers as family members pursued their understanding of economic and non-economic facets of middle-class status. The several Great Migrations provide the context for Chapter 2 as King family members trekked to new spaces in northern and southwestern cities in search of employment opportunities and to escape Jim Crowism. Decisions to leave Mississippi were just as strategic as those to remain. Using life on the family's homestead as the point of departure, the chapter recognizes a linked-fate mentality that helped sustain relatives economically, emotionally, and practically. Employment and labor market statistics also help explain how structural dynamics linked to segregation influenced efforts to be agentic. These quantitative and qualitative results document the relationship between behavior, beliefs, and economic outcomes to develop and reinforce customs such as self- and group-efficacy.

Various forms of education that were central to this family's socioeconomic and personal outcomes are juxtaposed in Chapter 3. Major life choices associated with acquiring social capital, such as formal education, espousing religiosity, and navigating rural spaces, influenced personal and familial outcomes. Family experiences illustrate the seminal effects of formal education and training. The broader educational landscape of such outcomes for whites and blacks provides the ecological framework to assess educational and occupational outcomes for the Kings. In Chapter 4, *blurred* and *bordered socio-ecological boundaries* are

introduced as pivotal concepts to assess some of the non-traditional religious, educational, and practical approaches used by family members to make decisions and address challenges. Moreover, the concept of *boundary crossing* is presented as a strategic decision-making process to help navigate difficult situations. The impact of familial dictates on these same decisions is also considered, including examples of how the three above-noted concepts provide insight into the complex interplay between life in Mississippi that often resulted in tensions – and incongruent beliefs and behavior. Based on adherence to *religious education*, specific guiding scriptures reinforce the family ethos and encourage generational outcomes such as educational attainment, delayed gratification, and belief in the Protestant Ethic, and, in some instances, to stymie inappropriate lifestyles. Using the family's local church in Gallman, Clear Creek No. 1 Missionary Baptist Church, as the point of reference, the chapter examines the influence of religious education on early generations of Kings.

Chapter 5 details varied post-migration experiences for King offspring as urban living influenced both the life chances and quality of life of later generations of family members who were no longer under the direct influence of the family patriarch and matriarch. The concept *migration spells* and the continued importance of the family homestead illustrate another less often considered outcome of middle-class status for blacks. Migration spells are broadly defined here as strategic time periods during which family members lived on the King's farm in Mississippi or with other relatives for economic, non-economic, and practical reasons. According to family members, these living arrangements, some short-term and others much longer in length, enabled many of them to navigate challenges and/or help establish or re-establish themselves financially in ways that would have otherwise been extremely difficult. The chapter also considers the varying mediating effects of religious education and the manufacturing sector on how individuals responded to social forces associated with employment discrimination and urban conditions as well as how more recent generations understand religious education.

How does the King family experience inform us about the contemporary black family? What are some of the implications? The concluding chapter responds by revisiting the life and legacy of the family matriarch, Irma. It considers how her ideology about religion, education, and family ultimately informed the family's ethos and outcomes associated with middle-class status. Additionally, by broadly comparing and contrasting demographics between contemporary black and white families, the dual realities of routinization and resistance among blacks are examined to suggest

broader predictions about black family approaches to survive and thrive in the face of continued socioeconomic challenges and inequities in the USA. Lastly, a *new millennium DuBoisian Mode of Inquiry* grounds a discussion of the impact of black family culture apparent among the Kings to inform a more culturally sensitive socio-ecological theory as a nuanced lens to better understand, equip, and empower contemporary black families.