

## Diversity or Exclusivity

There is a disturbing trend in The Bahamas concerning who people think should occupy The Islands of The Bahamas. We hear many saying that The Bahamas is for Bahamians only. On the other hand, for many others, who understand the importance of native Bahamians participation in nation building prefer to say "Bahamians first." It appears that many do not understand the difference between "Bahamians only" and "Bahamians first." Which one of these understandings can truly propel a nation into greatness? A more relevant question is which one of these understandings have propelled The Bahamas toward greatness in the past? It is sad to read in our newspapers, listen to talk shows or in meeting rooms the many who dread the presence of foreigners in our country. We hear it in their language. We see it in their behavior. We feel it from their attitude. It is pathetic. It is embarrassing. They want uniformity or purity in the Bahamian blood line. They refuse to accept that all Bahamians (whites and blacks) descended from foreigners who migrated to The Bahamas voluntarily or who came here against their will in slave ships.

I hasten to say that there is no nation today that can truly claim exclusivity. Every nation is a smorgasbord or fruit salad of multiple nationalities. Accept it or not, The Bahamas is also a fruit salad of multiple nationalities that has obtained its strength from the diversity of cultures. Denying this will only make it more difficult for us in the future.

Let me remind us all about a few facts concerning our history. Wikipedia states that "The history of the Bahamas, begins with the earliest arrival of humans in the islands in the first millennium AD. The first inhabitants of the islands now known as The Bahamas were the Lucayans, an Arawakan-speaking Taino people, who arrived between about 500 AD and 800 AD from the islands of the Caribbean. Their ancestors came from mainland South America, where Arawakan-language peoples were present in most territories, and especially along the northeastern coast." Did you notice that some of the first settlers, long before Columbus visited our shores without a passport, came from other Caribbean islands? The official website for The Bahamas, "The islands of The Bahamas" identifies even earlier settlers to The Bahamas. "As early as 300 to 400 AD, people who came from what is now Cuba (there was no country named Cuba at that time) lived on The Islands of The Bahamas and relied on the ocean for food. From around 900-1500 AD the Lucayan people settled here. They enjoyed a peaceful way of life and had developed viable political, social and religious systems."

Here is an interesting question? Did these "visitors" meet Bahamians here when they landed on our shores? No. They are the ones who became "Bahamians." It is safe to understand that some of the first settlers on these shores came from Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti, Barbados, etc. So why treat these "foreigners" so badly? One of them might actually be your ancestor.

Here's another interesting fact about our early settlers. "English Puritans known as "Eleutheran Adventurers" arrived here in 1649 in search of religious freedom. Instead, they found food shortages. Captain William Sayles sailed to the American colonies for help and received supplies from the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Upon his return, the settlers thanked them by shipping them brisiloto wood. The proceeds helped purchase land for what later became Harvard University."

OUR PARENTS

Do you realize that many of our fore parents descended from islands in the Caribbean but too many of us look down upon? Haitian, Jamaican, and Turks and Caicos citizens made this land their home in the late 1800s and early 1900. Dr. Keith Tinker, from the Antiquities, Monuments & Museums Corporation reminds states. "Those waves of migrants included white and black American loyalists who arrived with their slaves in the late 1700s, Africans liberated from slave ships by the Royal Navy in the first decades of the 19th century, and a series of lesser known migrations from within the region itself - which form the main core of the book. These included Barbadians recruited in the late 1800s as constables to replace the West India Regiment troops stationed here, Turks Islanders who came to work in the lumber industry during the first half of the 20th century, West Indian artisans who filled labour shortages during the 1920s construction boom, increasing numbers of Haitian economic refugees from the 1950s, Jamaican teachers and Guyanese professionals recruited from the 1960s."

Dear Bahamians, wake up and sense the beauty of our diversity. Be aware that the very ones you detest being here might in reality be the progenitors of your own families. The one person we proudly call the founder of the modern Bahamas, Sir Lynden Pindling, had a Jamaica father. Some of the great Bahamian educators, whom we proudly refer to, are from Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad. We are reminded by Dr. Tinker that "Other common Anglo-French names like Bodie, Deleveaux, Dupuch, Duvalier, Godet, Moree and Marche attest to the large Haitian influence in the Bahamas. There is even a strong belief that former Haitian dictator Francois Duvalier was born in the southern Bahamas." I would not be surprised if more than sixty-five percent of every natural born Bahamian today has at least one foreign ancestor.

## BAHAMAINS FIRST

What does it mean to put Bahamians first? For me it means that when considering job placements, property ownership, national development generally, etc., the one who has Bahamian citizenship should be given the opportunities first. However, never forget, as alluded to earlier, that many genuine Bahamians are not genetically pure Bahamians. In fact, some of the white Bahamians have a longer heritage of Bahamian purity than many black Bahamians.

Please remember this important fact. If Bahamians want to be considered first for a job opening, these Bahamians must be diligent, hardworking, honest, faithful and committed. Why get upset at a "foreigner" who gets a job when you refuse to display the proper work ethics to be qualified for the same job?

Here's another concern of mine. There are countless, genuine naturalized Bahamians who have lived here for decades, and who might have migrated here, upon our request, as children, whose accents do not sound like ours. If they keep their mouths shut, we will treat them with respect and honor. But when we hear their accents we treat them with disdain. "They are not Bahamians" we say. How pathetic. There is too much bitterness and disrespect towards these kinds of Bahamians. It is clear that "Bahamians only" means that anyone who we think does not look or sound like our own ideas of whom a Bahamian is, must not have certain jobs or certain rights in our country. Never forget that many of these people fought for our rights and freedoms. They march down Bay Street to ensure freedom for all. Ironically, many Bahamians visit for long periods or have migrated to other countries to settle have expected their community neighbors to recognize them as viable residents of that place. Why can't we do the same here?

Dear fellow citizens. We are Bahamians because our ancestors migrated here centuries ago as non-Bahamians. Never forget that. Let us honor and respect everyone, regardless of their place of birth. Our country can be greater when every legal resident of our country can joyfully participate in its development and growth. There is strength in diversity.

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