

Constructing Community and Nation in the Archipelago: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

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INTRODUCTION

Good morning. I dedicate this presentation to the greater glory of God and to my parents Carl Henry and Patricia Louise Ginton who gave me a love of reading, reflection and writing and the understanding that selfhood and community could coexist in beneficial mutuality.

My specific topic today is “Constructing Community and Nation in the Archipelago: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow.” I thank the organizing committee of this conference for according me the privilege of addressing a plenary session. I offer even profounder thanks for your challenging me to speak on community. In this 40th year of our national independence, it is imperative that we do so through empirical research and intelligent dialogue in inclusive fora. There must always be an intimate and continuous interlocution among our diverse communities regarding national goals. Similarly, there must be on-going interrogation of the Bahamas Constitution that enshrines the tenets of our identity, collectivity and rights as a people. That precious document, now viewed by many as adamantine commandments, must be reimagined as an instrument of community construction, that must necessarily admit

amendment, as new knowledge and greater wisdom point to a need for change. Without national conversation, without analysis, without privileging necessary change, how can we expect to staunch the issues of blood, physical and metaphorical, which sap our country’s vitality? How will we identify and amplify those traits that helped us make a bloodless transition from colony to independent nation, so that they may serve again to assist Bahamians to realize the high ideals embedded in The Bahamas national pledge: *One people united in love and service?*

With the past, present and desired future as my organizing principles, I will focus initially on those factors, such as geography and history, which provided the building blocks of our collective and our identity as a distinct people. My primary concentration will be on the psycho-cultural realm of Bahamian life, namely the norms and values which contribute to or detract from the nation-building project. This is what I will refer to as the hidden, too little explored, but dominant dimension of community construction.

I contend that nation construction did not end with the attainment of Independence.

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Acknowledgments: This essay was presented at the plenary session of College of The Bahamas Independence Conference: The Bahamas at 40: Reflecting on the Past, Envisioning the Future, June 14th, 2013.

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APA reference: Ginton-Meicholas, P. (2013). Constructing community and nation in the archipelago: Yesterday, today and tomorrow. *The International Journal of Bahamian Studies*, 19, 70-87. <https://doi.org/10.15362/ijbs.v19i1.187>

Communities must continue to evolve in response to internal dynamics, and also to those of the wider world of which we are inescapably citizens, whether or not we wish to be. It is therefore imperative to examine changing dynamics and attendant normative factors of today. I maintain that the placenta that nourishes the more intransigent conflicts in Bahamian society today lies buried deep in the psycho-cultural realm of Bahamian life. I will attempt also to show that there are groups and individuals who exploit Bahamian culture and psychology to fuel their sectarian agendas, countervailing the national aspiration of “One Bahamas.”

I will close on the necessity of building community and intercultural competence, which strives for ever-increasing mental health and cooperation among the peoples of the nation and the creation of educational modalities and environments that are supportive of that development. I believe community and intercultural competence to be the foundation and pillars of a progressive nation and greater national security.

As a prerequisite to clarity, I have collated the following definitions of *community*: “a group of people sharing common characteristics”, “a body of persons having a common history and common cultural, social, economic and political interests and values”, or “a group linked by a common policy, under the same government and living in the same locality”. Notions of shared identity, cooperation, participation and joint ownership are also of prime importance. It is clear that *unity*, *harmony*, *accord* and *solidarity* are the operative words in defining community. To my way of thinking, they are essential to productive and sustainable collectives.

It is important to note that a community is not a monolith, but an aggregate, comprising

many subordinate communities of wide-ranging character and aspirations. In their lifetime, people everywhere attach to several. Communities of shared space are one of the central organizing principles for humankind, just as territoriality is important to other members of the animal kingdom. The people of our archipelago can belong to an island community, a settlement, a district encompassing a subgroup of islands or neighbourhood. People are aggregated by language, culture and increasingly by the new dogmas of gender, sexuality and technocracy. We affiliate in kinship groups, and collectives of religion and ideology. In describing communities of memory, Ann Boyles, a noted member of the Bahá'í, adds a significant dimension: associations “in which people who may be strangers share ‘a morally significant history’ and ‘face-to-face personal interaction governed by sentiments of trust, co-operation, and altruism” (1996-97/2013, para. 1).

From our various affiliations and groupings, real or imagined, our lives derive meaning. They provide a sense of context, order and continuity by transmitting knowledge, values, ideals and aspirations from one generation to the next. In short, they tend to provide rudders to stabilize us on the turbulent seas of life on earth. In contradiction, the way we define or imagine community can become a source of great national conflict.

I conceive of the nation as the ultimate community, with a superordinate personality that should account for at least some of the characteristics of all its constituent communities. Although no one culture can reflect the diversity of human personality and values, the ethos of this umbrella collective we call “nation” should be as encompassing of the diversity of its citizens as is practicable in human terms. Its goals should be superordinate, unifying, reflecting

and providing for as many as possible of the just needs, aspirations and actions of its constituents, whether individual or corporate. *Just* is defined here as the degree to which such factors enhance the common good, rather than detract from it through toxic particularism. The nation should be greater and better than the sum of its parts. It should be organic, able to change and evolve, as time and the needs of the collective compel. Such flexibility tends to frighten some of us. Consequently, we resist change or fabricate mythologies of stasis and other psychological tropes to exercise an accessible measure of control over realities we do not understand or are unwilling to accept.

We in The Bahamas fought for and created, through years of struggle against great odds, a collective that has exhibited much that is praiseworthy for the forty years of our independence. Yet, today, an oppositional tension is developing between the nation, as delimited by its founders and their successors, and many of its constituent communities. The latter feel, with much justification, that their rights are being abrogated by a seldom reflective, monopolistic majority. This sense of exclusion does not augur well for the community-building project or an equitable and prosperous future for the Bahamian people and future generations. At age 40, our nation is at a crucial turning point in its development, making its fundamentals and its future a subject infinitely worthy of serious discussion and purposeful action.

I begin by looking at some of the foundational community forming and organizing principles that have shaped The Bahamas and have informed the Bahamian people's self-identification, what decides who has the right to claim the demonym Bahamian or who belongs or doesn't belong and what drives our interactions.

Undoubtedly, the archipelagic context has dictated certain inescapable characteristics in terms of society, culture, national development and unity. Separation is inherent in the archipelagic mix of water and discrete land masses. In our chain of islands land represents only about 20 percent of the territorial unit and waters about 80 percent. This means that, from the earliest days of settlement, the population was fragmented—separated by a most challenging barrier to unity—miles of turbulent, shoal-filled ocean.

Bahamian islands, the larger ones particularly, tend to feature a spine of a high, ancient dune. For purposes of communication, the path of least resistance was to create a coastal road on the lowest land. Of necessity, people tended to form settlements around or near the best harbours to facilitate inter-insular and external trade, which were the lifelines of these generally isolated communities. Village populations tended to be small and exhibited a high degree of consanguinity. Far away from the greater range of social interactions that the capital offered, the church, school and society halls provided the pivot points of our island settlements, as they did in the formerly more integrated communities of New Providence. These settlement patterns brought a high degree of sociocultural homogeneity.

Island geography enforced also a maritime culture and the sea became an essential element in our food culture and trade. Bahamians became great boat builders and sailors with an instinctive ability to navigate the shoal-filled waters of the archipelago by knowledge of wind patterns and the ability to judge the navigability of the seas by their colour. The geographical position of an island, particularly its distance from the seat of government and trade, even influenced the nature of boat design. The Ragged

Islanders, great seafarers, developed a vessel with a deep keel for ocean crossing as opposed to the shallower vessel used for coastal activities.

Over time, individual Bahamian islands and sub-archipelagos developed unique cultural identifiers, including linguistic variations. An example is the transposition of the letter 'h' in the Abacos and Eleuthera group, where, in speech, an initial 'h' can be dropped from words such as *harbour* or *hand* and added to words beginning with a vowel. Thus, a sentence such as "I'm going home to Abaco" would be rendered "H'am going 'ome to Habaco."

Among Androsians, the verb form *have* is rendered *how*, just as the rest of us would pronounce the adverb *how*, as in "How does the computer work?" By the same token, the Androsian adverb becomes *have*, as in "Have are you today?"

For the greater number of Bahamians, the letter 'z' as in *zest* is unvoiced. For others, such as natives of Long Island, that letter tends to be voiced and *zest* is pronounced *sest*. Cat Islanders tend to convert the diphthong 'ai' in *rain* to the open 'e' that we hear something like the name of the bird *wren*.

In the isolated Crooked Island District, older inhabitants still exhibit an accent that shares features with what we term the Jamaican accent. I believe we are hearing the archetypical result of the meeting of British dialects with residuary African traits. Much of this is changing. Proximity to external influences has textured accent patterns throughout the archipelago.

Geography once influenced architecture, creating community-distinguishing vernaculars. In the past, Bahamian builders exhibited genius their understanding of environmental factors and the wisdom of

working in consonance with, rather than against them. This can be seen in the distinct divide between the buildings of the more northerly islands and those of the south-central and deep-south communities. One of the major differences was occasioned by the type of forest that prevailed on the islands. Especially in Grand Bahama, Abaco, Eleuthera subgroups pine was readily available and easily worked. Jacksonville pine from Florida was also accessible, so a timber vernacular developed in the upper Bahamas. On New Providence, several high east/west dunes running across the island, permitted the quarrying of limestone for the more imposing public structures like the forts and private dwellings like the impressive Roberts building on the corner of Parliament and Shirley.

In the other half of the archipelago, the forests were primarily hardwood coppice, producing timber that is hard to work with manual tools. *Lignum vitae*, the national tree, is so dense a wood that it had to be harvested young, if it was to be cut and worked by hand. Even so, builders used it only in limited ways; that is, to frame doors and windows to add strength to a structure. For the greater part, southern buildings were generally of tabby construction; that is, a mixture of gathered stones and lime mortar.

Archipelago-wide, but especially noticeable in the tightly clustered ancient neighbourhoods of New Providence, the porch was an essential housing element, functioning as an environmental control, a centre of social interaction and a key contribution to community security from which neighbours watched out for each other.

Unique cultural expressions have derived from the food sources most abundant on an island. Andros grows a lot of coconuts and

this factor and the abundance of land crabs have distinguished Androsian cuisine. The ubiquitous crustacean is even celebrated in an annual Crab Fest, as part of that island's economic activities.

To understand the nature of community in The Bahamas, one can also not avoid invoking the past. As author Jonathan Safran Foer suggests, "Everything is illuminated in the light of the past" (Schreiber & Foer, 2005). It is important that, from 1629 to 1973 when we obtained independence, the islands of The Bahamas were a colony of Great Britain, which country was once a principal in the pernicious transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans. African slavery thus formed a primary building block of trade in Britain's American colonies until Emancipation was declared in 1834 and took full effect in 1838. As such, Africans became axial components in creating community in our region, generating wealth and other benefits, in which they seldom shared. This unequal relationship was to cast its iniquitous shadow over post-slavery, post-colonial societies and its aberrant grasp reaches even into these supposedly enlightened times obstructing much-needed unity.

The preeminent chapter in the colonial enterprise was the resettlement in the islands of thousands of people forced to leave the new United States following the American War of Independence because of their direct, vicarious or suspected allegiance to Britain. The majority were men and women of African descent, some free, the greater number enslaved. Forced to accompany their masters into exile, the latter provided the labour for plantations established throughout the archipelago by the new immigrants. Out of the plantation and enforced servitude sprang some of the most basic elements of community organization and ethos in this land, including the

demographic majority's centuries-long exclusion from political and economic power and social mobility.

Benedict Anderson asks, "What made exclusion appear rational in the metropole?" He answers his own question: "Doubtless the confluence of a time-honoured Machiavellism with the growth of conceptions of biological and ecological contamination that accompanied the planetary spread of Europeans and European power from the sixteenth century onwards" (2006, p. 60).

Slavery and colonialism erected a rigid hierarchy based on race, establishing people of European ethnicity at the apex and Africans fixing at the bottom with limited opportunities for upward mobility socially or economically. For long years, black Bahamians had no representation in Parliament and, for a much longer time, no real voice in governance of the country. While also constrained in the early days, Bahamians of mixed heritage, to the degree in which they exhibited European phenotypical features, enjoyed greater upward mobility and even dominance over time.

History demonstrates that Bahamians of the slave and colonial era always desired self-determination, but wisdom dictated the adoption of more subtle and gradual thrusts towards independence. In all probability, archipelagic geography and relatively small, scattered populations with limited inter-island access probably impeded the large-scale, violent uprisings which characterized freedom movements in other British colonies.

The British abolition of the slave trade in 1807, subsequent policing and interdiction of slaving vessels on the high seas brought about another influx of Africans to the west. It became the practice of the British to settle

many of these African “recaptives” in the eastern Canadian provinces and in its West Indian colonies, including The Bahamas. In this way thousands of un-creolized Africans joined the Bahamian population. The African diaspora created the demographic majority in the archipelago and thus began to shape a kind of cultural nationalism, which we know today in the form of our zealous allegiance to jankanoo and the more tentative privileging of other cultural artefacts of African origin. The homeopathic healing tradition we term “bush medicine” is one of them. So are Bahamian folktales, which bear an unmistakable relationship with the traditional stories of West Africa, not only in basic story lines but also in development structure and manner of telling. Characters, such as Bouki and Rabby, are clear cognates of Bouki and Leuk le Lievre, the tricksters with whose antics the Senegalese storytellers regale their audiences.

That British imperialism was not directly assimilationist as regards culture assisted the retention of African traits in Bahamian material culture. With their overriding goal being the maintenance of territorial control and management of the internal affairs of their colonies to greatest advantage, the British attention was focused primarily on the mechanisms of administration and the justice system. Nevertheless, the British, in pursuit of control, promoted, through the mythologies of ceremony, ritual, the education curriculum and songs such as *Rule Britannia*, a jingoism that focused the glance of belonging towards the British Isles. This fictive motherland could only be what Anderson (2006) termed an “imagined” community, as the British would only receive its far-flung subjects on home territory to the degree and timeliness of their utility to Britain.

The pre-20th century Bahamian economy

was characterized by cycles of extreme and persistent times of lean and much shorter, but intense periods of fat or, as we say in Bahamian Creole, “swongering.” Besides a lack of the mineral wealth to support heavy industry before the modern era, our fragile soils, cyclical hurricanes and pests put paid to our planters’ aspirations to agricultural dominance. As Bahamians would express it, our islands, especially those farthest away from the capital, existed between “Oh Lord and thank God.” Scarcity and fear of scarcity gave rise to great determination and capacity for hard work, resourcefulness and invention. For example, because of a love of music and scarce access to musical instruments, Bahamians developed various forms of acapella singing, including “rhyming” and “dicey doh”. To create instruments other than voice, they co-opted various readily available and humble objects—wooden barrels or old metal containers became drum shells and denuded goatskins were turned into drumheads that were heated frequently during a performance to maintain the tension necessary for resonance. Also put into service were the conch shell, a paper-covered comb, a carpenter’s saw, and sometimes a tin washing tub, creating the instruments of the rake ‘n’ scrape band.

With the duality that often defines human development, the necessity of overcoming the impositions of scarcity, Bahamians developed also a carpe diem mentality and became expert at opportunistic enterprise, both legal and illegal. Of even greater moment, the “seize the day” perspective, continued to the present, has locked Bahamians into a continuous present where history and future are obliterated. The rest of the world fades and so does an appreciation of consequence. This psychology, this escape from temporality tends to efface ambient conditions,

restrictions and needs other than one's own. Consequently, community declines and the 'I' rises triumphant.

In the 20th century The Bahamas came to experience an unprecedented degree of economic stability with the advent of the tourism industry. Over time it flourished for several reasons: the beauty of the natural environment, the once hospitable temperament of the Bahamian people and later, geopolitical forces. The initiation of highly organized tourism promotion began in the early 1950s bringing income-earning opportunities from direct employment in service and related, independent creative industries, primarily in music, entertainment and souvenir-making. When the United States embargoed trade with Cuba, following the latter's Marxist revolution, The Bahamas, peaceful, friendly towards its neighbour and easily accessed, won over the tourists who once flocked to Cuba. The business multiplied rapidly and grew to a year-round enterprise employing many in the capital and bringing greater economic freedom.

Tourism growth and pervasiveness was to have its downside. First of all, the industry was centred on New Providence, one of the smaller islands of the chain and the seat of The Bahamas capital, Nassau. In this way, tourism occasioned a significant rural/urban drift, which depleted the out islands of their most active workforce. This emigration and further departures for contract work abroad led to the abandonment of some of the smaller settlements and thereby reduced options for economic growth in the affected islands. The influx to New Providence occasioned a flooding of the older black townships and tended to create extended family households. Newly developed black suburbs would soon experience similar population pressures. These factors led eventually to detrimental overcrowding on

the 80 sq. mi. (207 km²) island, where, according to the 2010 Census, reside 246,329 souls who represent about 70 percent of the 351,461 total population. A comparison of New Providence statistics with those of two larger islands brings the problem starkly into view: Andros, 2,300 sq. mi. (5,956 km²), population 7,490 and Inagua, 599 sq. mi. (1,544 km²), population 913 (Bahamas Department of Statistics, 2012).

The fresh wave of colonization from North America in the form of vacationers and winter residents, their demands and the capitalist expansion engaged to meet those demands, created the newest form of imperialism in this country. While giving impetus to economic development, the phenomenon exhibited as many regressive tendencies as its predecessor forms. It served to deepen stratification based on race or, more likely, phenotype and intensified community bifurcation, as exemplified in the advent of the John Crow brand of segregation of public spaces and urban businesses prevailing in the Southern United States. Furthermore, the land deeds of many of the residential enclaves constructed by wealthy British, Canadian and United States citizens contained clauses excluding non-whites from ownership; Skyline Heights, an Oakes development and the western Grove, are examples.

The fact that most large public institutions and the most valuable land were controlled by white Bahamians and non-Bahamians created the perfect matrix for this de facto apartheid. Foreign-owned banks contributed by feeding inequality of opportunity by discriminatory lending policies and practices, retarding homeownership and large-scale enterprise among Afro-Bahamians.

The Bahamas Government of the day

underwrote many of these separatist systems, no so much by active legislation, but by permissive government practices or non-engagement under the guise of protecting needed foreign investment. Craton and Saunders quoted Etienne Dupuch, long-time editor of *The Tribune* on the practices of American hotelier Frank Munson who once owned the British Colonial Hotel:

... Munson was so bigoted that even in New York, where elevator operators were normally blacks, he employed only whites in such jobs. ... Under pressure, a few blacks were employed as bellmen in the New Colonial Hotel from 1925 (2000, p. 516).

The various foreign influxes and the imperatives of tourism amplified the ethnic and racially based dichotomies in other ways and were to have a discernible impact in the psycho-cultural realm.

Bahamians of darker hue, while occupying the lower ranks of the tourism enterprise, still had close interface with visitors. This proximity presented tourism promoters with a challenge. In their view, Bahamians and their culture in the raw accorded ill with the brand of smiling, trouble and identity-free subservience that was essential support for industry, so the myth of the carefree paradise had to be created and take centre stage in tourism promotions. The solution was to promote a national schizophrenia. Bahamians had to don a daily mask to hide away fears, anger, ambitions and feelings in general, so that the skittish tourist would not be frightened into the ever-open embrace of a competing destination.

With anthropomorphic sleight of advertising, beaches and translucent waters incarnated Bahamian identity. When Bahamian people appeared in the glossy advertisements, these pictorial metaphors

represented them as temporary intruders in paradise, albeit necessary ones. They entered bearing props demonstrating the transient and non-threatening nature of their occupation—towels, umbrellas, frosty drinks and the Cheshire cat smile that swallowed up individuality and the demographic realities of the archipelago. For the sake of tourism, even Bahamian culture was declawed, sanitized, bowdlerized, made pabulum for easy consumption. Junkanoo, the load-bearing artefact of African heritage, was not excluded from gentrification. Once a medium for African ceremony and later for protest, it was recast as entertainment for visitors in search of an authentically “native” experience.

This ethos has worked against the industry. Where tourism could and should exemplify a dignified and mutually respectful partnership between locals and visitors, it came to project humiliating servitude for many, nourishing a resentment that leads to a travesty of hospitality in some quarters.

The fact that colonial and tourism domination have borne a predominantly European countenance accounts for another sociocultural phenomenon. Herein lies the root of the afro-Bahamian and Caribbean tendency to privilege European traits over the African, particularly as regards standards of beauty and perception of ability. Bahamians still talk about *good hair* and *bad hair*. These salient forms of imperialism fostered also our now deeply ingrained valuation system, whereby many devalue things Bahamians, while looking outward for models of superiority and models upon which to base our lifestyles and institutions and often sanctioning less than desirable imports.

The Bahamas has always been influenced by Britain’s North American colonies, especially those that formed the foundation

of the United States, as referenced earlier. It would not be unfair to say that we have become a client state of that great nation in economic terms and, to a certain extent, in internal and international politics. Additionally, the infiltration and pervasive nature of American media has significantly informed the aspirations of the Bahamian people. We are also seeing the proliferation of second-home communities and other investments by people and corporate groups of various other nationalities. It is illustrative that the Chinese have invested in the giant Baha Mar, multifaceted resort. Genting, the Malaysian conglomerate is partnering in a 10,000 square-foot casino on tiny Bimini. In May 2013, the news media reported that the Ministry of Tourism was in talks with European companies to bring an Italian village concept to the Family Islands. Whether positive or insalubrious, sociocultural change will come.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Marcellus declares to Horatio, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark."² No Bahamian living in this second decade of the 21st century, certainly none but the most politically or self-delusionary optimistic can fail to see that, in this fortieth year of our country's sovereignty something is gravely amiss in the state of The Bahamas.

According to government statistics, 90 percent of the total Bahamas population now lives in the three main economic centres: New Providence, Grand Bahama and Abaco. The remaining 10 percent is scattered over the other 27 stable communities and many more tiny cays.

Growth and development in such areas as trade, transportation and communication continue to be hampered by the difficulty of interpreting and satisfying needs of out-islanders far from the national administrative

centre in Nassau. Because standard forms of communication were frequently lost during hurricanes, the central government has had to supply satellite telephones to distant communities. Providing equity of opportunity in the archipelago continues to be problematic at best and tragic at worst—consider the deaths that occurred in Mayaguana in 2013 for want of airstrip lights. On April 4, 2013, a Cessna on a medical rescue mission crashed into one of several vehicles providing illumination for the landing, killing the three occupants of the truck (Nunez, 2013, p. A1).

Similarly, the scattered nature of our islands continues to make national security an expensive and seemingly unconquerable problem. Our highly permeable borders tragically convenience human trafficking and illegal immigration. Opportunism actively fuels them.

If we judge by the actions or apathy of officialdom, we come to believe that everything is illuminated in the light of tourism. It seems that even the very foundations of nationhood must be subject to its every whim—our children's education and social learning, our culture and the apportionment of development funds. Even the degree to which our security is considered problematic is translated mostly through the Rosetta Stone of tourism. God forbid that any human being should endure injury by criminal action in our land and we all should feel diminished by every incident, no matter the colour, ethnicity or creed of the victim or the offender. But why is it that only the spilling of tourist or high-ranking foreign or Bahamian blood can jolt the administration out of its mythifying apathy towards acknowledging the magnitude of the problem and admitting its inability, as sole agent, to redeem us from our deepening night of crime?

² *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 4, Marcellus to Horatio

There are less explored dimensions of community construction that are feeding dispossession, the greatest foe of harmonious community and progressive nationhood. Exclusion or the perception of exclusion is now infiltrating every corner of this country in its many caustic forms and hinders the development of the collective ideals and interests that must underpin the edifice of nation.

In the fight for majority rule, the Progressive Liberal Party made good and necessary use of the African past to unify the African-descended masses to win the day. It was important to rescue the black heritage from the depths in which prejudice forced it to hide. With government recognition at last, there was a flourishing of literature from the sons and daughters of the great continent and a revival and privileging of cultural artefacts of African origin.

Given impetus in the early, post-Independence years was the policy of “Bahamianization”, a noble attempt to redress the inequities of opportunity promoted by slavery and colonialism. Sadly, attendant upon the best of intentions and inherent in the most marvelous of human achievements are the seeds of discord and even tragedy. Bahamianization came to be interpreted in many quarters, in government and among citizens, as a guarantee of entitlement and permanent exemption from personal effort. Obviating common sense and standard criteria for employment and other forms of engagement, Bahamian status is expected to trump knowledge, skill, competitive ability and even probity.

Declarations around the time of Independence conflated “Bahamian” with “African” and it became an article of faith not to acknowledge the fact that we are a diverse society in terms of race and ethnic

heritage. The strategy reached an apogee when our Independence prime minister stood in Parliament and declared, not that junkanoo is a precious cultural artefact, which deserves to be a cherished part of the national patrimony, but that it was the definition of Bahamian culture. Although this peremptory equation was music to the ears of the main proponents of our marvelous, multilayered art form, no single cultural form could possibly embody all the values, customs and aspirations of an entire nation.

As notions of Bahamian “purity” were pushed, even blacks whose ancestral ties in The Bahamas were not deep were ostracized and Haitian immigrants bore the brunt of the disdain. I will not deny that certain groups cultivate separation and I believe that that is to their discredit and ultimate loss. The misfortune comes when Bahamians who are not overly analytical begin to view endogamy and the retention and celebration of non-African heritage as an insupportable insult to the black majority. Why should cultural diversity be deprecated, rather than celebrated for the richness it can bring to all Bahamians? How much we lose when we discount parts of the national patrimony.

A few words on this country’s limited contribution to museology are necessary. It is significant that forty years past July 10th 1973, the Pompey Museum is the only major, government-sponsored historical museum in our capital. It is significant that it is dedicated to slavery and emancipation. It is significant too that it is located in the heart of the main tourist strip and not of easy access to the Bahamian majority. As essential as it is to national identity and unity, why is building a national museum reflecting all our lines of heritage not been a matter of urgency? Why do we not hold it as obligatory to represent the contributions of the Greeks, the multiplicity of Caribbean

ethnicities and even the discounted British? Yes, British imperialism did much damage, but what of the forgotten British priests and teachers, who gave access to previously denied opportunities for development? What of the American Benedictines who gave their lives to contribute to community construction under duress in isolated islands? What of the Haitian Stephen Dillet who was the first man of colour to be elected to Parliament? I would be open to discussion as to the proxemics of this phenomenon.

One of the answers is simple. In the minds of many Bahamians, belonging became a historic, fixed entity, exclusionary and not subject to discourse or change. It is an attitude that is highly detrimental to beneficial national growth, as it denies an inflow of fresh blood, new ideas, skills and innovation and even of new investment.

A woman I admire greatly for her intellectual acuity and love of homeland has spoken of her sense of dispossession owing to growing sentiments that are anti-white and anti-non-African ethnicity. At the same time, she pointed out a national schizophrenia:

The reality is that we court xenophobia and repeal our cultural diversity and talent in the same breath. We continue to be a Third World banana republic, we excel in mediocrity and have no idea how to dig our way out of this quagmire (**personal communication**).

There is more evidence of schizophrenia. As anti-foreign as we are, we build schools that obfuscate rather than promote a sustainable national identity. Our curricula are built on unadjusted foreign models that accord ill with our culture and our needs for economic diversification and the inculcation of norms and values that serve to bind societies rather than cultivate rupture. Given

the amount of criticism the national education system has received, it is fair to say that our schools are in crisis. It is not that we don't have good ideas as to how to fix what is broken. It is not that we don't have people with the skills to heal the ailments. Trouble is, when these two essentials enter our schools, they are reported to school officials who interrogate them to determine their political and religious affiliations and sexual orientation. They are then sentenced to a purpose-eviscerating detention and made to write lines of confession to effrontery: "I must know my place; I must know my place. I must not be so bold as to think I know better than those ordained to lead." Are Bahamian political and educational leaders afraid that a brand of education that teaches analysis, creativity and reasoned judgment and decision-making will lead to revolution and usurpation? The opposite is true. Without enlightenment, there can be no renaissance, only anarchy and eventual chaos.

Unity defines community. One of the most implacable enemies of harmony in this country becomes immediately obvious with an understanding of the science of proxemics, which is the study of human non-verbal communication. Although powerfully influencing how we see ourselves in the context of the world we inhabit, proxemic guidelines are dangerously ignored in the formation of systems, institutions and habitation in The Bahamas.

Master Bahamian artist John Beadle gets it, as demonstrated by the works featured in "The John Beadle Project", his 2013 solo exhibition, which ran from April 25 to June 25 at the National Art Gallery of The Bahamas. He attempted, with great success, to show how intimately connected humankind is to environment. As he has perceived, the individual and the environment become one materially. Sadly,

the defining materials of the union are inflexible. As Beadle's work suggests, provisions intended to ensure safety abrogate the potential for the linking among us that is essential to building a productive and order-promoting community ethos.

We make visibly obvious the economic, social, privilege and opportunity divide. We communicate dispossession to Bahamians of lesser of economic means by the apportionment of space and the nature of the built environment on densely populated New Providence and on Paradise Island, the main satellite of the New Providence subgroup. A look at a map or a simple island tour tells much of the tale. The coastal ring is almost entirely taken up with members-only, high-value residential enclaves. High-rise luxury hotels exercise a visual dominance. We cram the majority in the former African townships that were built on less desirable, often swampy land. We pack them into substandard houses, many of which still lack running water and indoor toilets. Further aggravating the problem is the flaccidity of town planning and those other public agencies that are mandated to create and police adherence to building codes that support rather than hinder community well-being, safety, sustainability and productivity. By dint of hard work and personal sacrifices, many Bahamians manage to accumulate enough equity to acquire a mortgage to build a home. Sadly, piratical developers thwart their aspirations. All too often, by the rubberstamping of poor design, substandard building materials, inadequate foundations that lead to flooding, an inadequate inspection mechanism or by the tortoise movement of civil matters through our courts, the comfort and security of homeownership are subverted. By allowing these and other forms of construction malpractice to recur year after year, we send the message to victims that they are not

worthy to share equitably in the good things of this land.

Add to this the limited number of planned spaces for productive recreation and the lack of manned and funded community centres that foster skill-building and the flourishing of the abundant creative talents inherent in Bahamians. Creativity, which I believe to be God within us, is such a powerful drive that it must have an outlet. If thwarted by the absence of character and skill-enhancing institutions, or frustrated for want of a nurturing familial matrix, as is increasingly the case in this land of family dysfunction, the creative impulse will force its way through the cracks of consequent dwarfed personalities and atrophied moral sense to inseminate crime or other monsters that disembowel consonance and peace.

In his book, *The Hidden Dimension*, Edward T. Hall, elaborates the essential nature of an appreciation of proxemics and proposes that we ignore its dictates to our cost as a society.

Thus it must be impressed upon architects, city planners, and builders that if this country is to avoid catastrophe, we must begin seeing man as an interlocutor with his environment, an environment which these same planners, architects, and builders are now creating with little reference to man's proxemic needs (1990, p. 6).

One of the greatest of the exclusionary forces in our country is the behaviour of politicians when their party wins the right to administer the government. It is a sad and generally accepted fact of life that when the formerly oppressed gain power, they oppress. In post-colonial states, such as ours, independence seldom means radical transformation. Having absorbed too well the ethos of the colonial masters, new governments chafe at the bit of confining democracy. The personal pronouns change.

The ‘We’ of the campaign becomes the ‘I’ of absolutist rule. The new leaders tend simply to continue the imperialist programme with minor adjustments in titles and ceremony, paying little more than lip service to equality. The post-nominal letters MP and the blue license plates are received as an 007 designation, with license to kill due process, constitutional provisions and the just aspirations and rights of the citizenry. How many times have we watched the discarding, without empirical research and with impunity, election manifestos and commitments along with the other promotional literature?

Like countries that remain at the highest level of battle readiness long after the end of a war, some of our politicians through the years have insisted that we remain at DEFCON 1 following a win in the general elections. They conflate political party machinations with the mechanisms of state administration. They confuse political patronage and feathering of the nests of supporters with acquitting obligations to the Bahamian people at large. When party generals meet at headquarters following general election, everyone seeking his or her pound of flesh, sentiments no doubt echo the promises Albany makes to Edgar and Kent in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*:

you, to your rights:
With boot, and such addition as your
honours
Have more than merited. All friends
shall taste
The wages of their virtue, and all foes
The cup of their deservings.³

And there’s the rub. Partisan politics have dangerously infected the body politic and the outcome is an extreme and harmful polarization of society. No matter how injurious a position a political party may

take, leaders expect adherents to support unquestioningly and vociferously, no matter how lacking their assertions may be in evidence of research or discernible fact. Partisanship dictates that, in the fractionalization of opportunities, which should be open to every citizen, the best of the distillates become the closely guarded bounty of the privileged. The worst of it? Bahamians grow angry and restive when patronage and cronyism are not available.

On the job, unthreatened by competition, political appointees and those favoured with contracts on the same basis feel no need to strive or achieve, yielding a bitter harvest for the nation. Patronage and paternalism have served to increase an already debilitating sense of entitlement among Bahamians, while militating against acceptance of personal responsibility for personal and community development, as well as countervailing good work ethics, innovation, excellence and a truer meritocracy.

Worse still, the pundits of the religious right, in pursuit of a higher political profile, have been increasing their demands for constitutional condemnation of certain groups, which they cook into a single confused pottage for the feeding of the ignorant and hold to be the root cause of our increasing national disarray. While they should be exemplars of the Christianity imputed to Bahamians in The Bahamas constitution, their dogmas nullify the very inclusiveness upon which the faith was founded—“Whosoever will may come.” In the Bahamian-revised edition of the Gospels, one may come if one is not Haitian, a gambler, happily sexually active or gay.

Note, too, that occupying a leadership position in Bahamian churches implies a righteousness that is often sadly lacking. The result has been much like the situation described in a statement issued by the

³ *King Lear*, Act V, Scene III:

Society of Jesus, a document avers that:

Some cultures which were once shaped by Christian faith have, in differing degrees, turned away from Christianity towards a form of life in which the values of the Gospel are marginal. Religious belief is often dismissed as a disruptive source of social divisions which the human family has outgrown; in the eyes of many of our contemporaries the Church has no credibility as a commentator on human affairs (2007, para. 80).

It is my ardent wish that many of today's public servants and politically-minded religious leaders would emulate the spirit that George Washington exemplified. Even though supporters were imploring him to vie for another term in office, he opted for retirement explaining his reasons thus: "Satisfied that if any circumstances have given peculiar value to my services, they were temporary, I have the consolation to believe that, while choice and prudence invite me to quit the political scene, patriotism does not forbid it" (1796/2000, p. 3).

But let us also give mature consideration to the warning George Washington, first President of the United States, gave in his retirement remarks and to which I strongly subscribe:

And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle (1796/2000, p. 20).

To our cost, demagoguery goes beyond the avowed political and religious realms and

infects every stratum of society, be it for personal profit or power or the result of some twisted philosophy of patriotism. Whatever form it takes, it is most often separatist in intent or realization. In this regard, aspects of the fight as to who "owns" the Clifton Heritage area have reached the heights of farce. One side asserts that Clifton Bay is ecologically at risk from industrial effluence, structural intrusions engulfing more and more of the seabed and unwise fishing and boating habits.

In a tour de force, the leader of the opposing group launched a campaign encompassing all the key lexical terms that trigger the ire of the Bahamian masses or bind them together in mischief—an indictment of racism and charges of threats to African heritage and foreigners taking away land from Bahamians. This being The Bahamas, religion has been invoked as the banner under which his side of the fight will triumph. I share small portion of a speech given to encourage solidarity:

I want all the young people to study the Psalms that you hear these religious people talk about because this is to say that our inheritance just like in Zion will not be given to the infidel, will not allow Babylonia to take our land and turn it into something else. And then take us somewhere else and tell that we are to sing the songs for them when we want to sing something else, when you have to disconnect friends from your heritage. (Smith, K., 2013).

How imprisoning is such rhetoric. Does it not propose the application of emotion rather than research and reasoned, truthful dialogue to national problems? This emphasis on the *us* and *them* dichotomy could be the spark to light the powder keg already primed by malcontents. There are some who would even grasp at an obvious

red herring being dragged across the landscape of Clifton as justification for violence. The sad truth is Clifton Bay and many other marine environments in The Bahamas are indeed seriously threatened by pollution and other forms of abuse, as evidenced by our own eyes and many scientific studies.

There is no greater dispossession with which we have afflicted Bahamian youth. Invoking the African proverb “It takes a village to raise a child”, McKnight and Block note:

And yet, most of our children are not raised by a village. Instead, they are raised by teachers and counselors in school, youth workers and coaches out of school, juvenile therapists and corrections officials if they are deviant, television and computers and cell phones if they have spare time, and McDonald’s if they are hungry.

Instead of a village, they are surrounded by paid professionals, electronic toys, and teen marketers. They are trained to be comprehensive consumers and clients (2010, p. 21)

Sounds familiar? This is the life of too many Bahamian children, consumed by materialism and offered a vacuous, unfulfilling education that does not teach for developing a healthy inner life that is not dependent upon things and violence for a sense of identity. We have taken heritage and meaning from them. Is there any wonder many turn to knife and gun to feel a sense of worth and power. We have discarded the village—the grandparents who passed on family history and struggles and taught morals and brotherhood in stories the parents who were not too sophisticated, ashamed or absent to pray with their children, hold them and sing them to sleep. We have managed to turn away the neighbour who took our clothes from the

line if she saw rain coming and the one who would guide a straying child home. In short, we have turned our backs on community competence, the best bonding material and safety net. In fighting for wealth, we have deepened our poverty in the worst way—we have impoverished our souls.

And what of the freedom our independence supposedly represents? I have read somewhere that liberties are inherent in a country’s constitutional arrangements. This certainly should be the hallmark of all democracies. Yet, in The Bahamas, as elsewhere, practice refutes this dictum. Our constitutional liberties must run the gauntlet between the enemy lines formed by leaders whose every impulse is mired in partisan politics, religionists of theocratic ambition, gender imperialists and virulent xenophobes. Then, when those liberties are panting from exhaustion, their vitality sapped by PTSD, they must climb the razor-wired wall of widespread ignorance and nation-denying insularity. It is understandable that some of our freedoms are in grave danger of expiring.

To our even greater loss, socially and economically, even the definition of Bahamian is being subjected to the fractional distillation of people from the politician and the theocrat to the holders of stalls in the Straw Market and the everyman we Bahamians term the “small man”. Nowadays, being a Bahamian with full citizen’s rights is inconsistent with being white, not born here, gay, Rastafari, Bahá’í, female, of Haitian ancestry or anything that poses an affront to our whimsical definition of belonging. Of course, money can erase all of these assigned deficiencies, even among those to whom enlightenment, difference and perceived liberality in any form constitute sin.

Because of the growth of these and many

philosophies and practices that rend rather than heal, our country is fast becoming what was described in Shakespeare's *King Lear* as a "gored state", with the murder count overtaking the weather and the prices in the supermarket in popular conversation. The year 2013 has already written its history is a script of blood and economic insufficiency. When the well-meaning among us consider the present situation, we experience the terrible grief of King Lear at the death of the favourite of his three daughters. As he enters the scene carrying Cordelia's body he cries:

Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are
men of stones.[295]
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use
them so
That heaven's vault should crack.⁴

By all means let us howl for a time, but count that time in seconds, not days or months, and certainly not for another forty years. The sun of our nationhood has only begun to decline and has not yet sunk beneath the bloody horizon of anarchy. We have only to look at benighted countries around the globe to see what it means to reach the midnight of national disintegration, where the next dawn will reveal that self-determination and personal liberty are completely forfeit.

The very first step towards a brighter future for the nation and its people requires each of us to take a long look into the mirror of truth. Let it show us where we have contributed, in whatever degree, to the growing disorder. See where we have failed to uphold our end of the social contract, of the national contract. See where you have, if only in a smallest way, failed to acquit the obligations honesty, fairplay and civility. See that we have all compromised unity, if only by remaining inert.

⁴ *King Lear*, Act V. Scene III

How do we move forward? Not by wailing in constant jeremiads against the challenges, nor by inveighing against those to whom we prejudicially attribute the authorship, nor by fulminating against government impuissance, while acquitting ourselves of all responsibility. There are still purposeful actions that we can and must take to halt this bitter progress and commence building a more just and inclusive community. It will require foundational reversals on every level, not by methods of short duration and even more limited efficacy and not by putting spins on our reality. Neither will we accomplish much by politically motivated apportionment of funds. Have we considered the potential positive yield of diverting the millions we spend on partisan character assassination to grants for Bahamian writers who explore the history and soul of the people and have the courage to take a stand? Consider what flourishing might result if some of that money spent on a recent forensic audit had been given to the cash-starved College of The Bahamas to fund ground-breaking research on the roots of disorder and the fundamentals community development?

Indonesia faces even greater archipelagic challenges to economic and social equity than The Bahamas, by virtue of sheer geographical and population size and racial and cultural diversity. One of that nation's former ambassadors to Japan has weighed in on building stronger nationhood with a degree of wisdom that Bahamians would do well to invoke:

The instrument to unite the nation, therefore, lies in a series of political, economic and cultural policies that place greater importance on fairness and that are founded on an "emotional bond" that will strengthen the people's sense of nationality. Evidence shows that a sense of nationality, the will to

achieve prosperity and the fulfillment of a just society are intertwined. If the management and administration of a country are deemed imprudent and unfair, then there is a huge possibility for political disintegration to occur. In contrast, nationalism will emerge if there is prosperity and wealth.

It is only appropriate that a more preferable cultural approach, rather than a confrontational one, is chosen as a positive alternative in order to establish a stronger sense of nationalism (Abdul Irsan, 2010, p. 192).

It is time to take an unvarnished look at our political culture. As James Hanvey comments:

Politics does need a moral vision even when it is at its most mundane and pragmatic. It needs constantly to reflect upon the sort of society that creates and sustains human flourishing for all its people, not just the articulate, powerful or privileged. It is precisely our disagreements about what this society might look like and how it can best be achieved that makes democratic politics worthwhile (2013, para. 14).

Will the administration now see that governments do not have the omnipotence they project? When will they apprehend and act on the immortal truth that citizens cannot be the objects of government decisions and actions, but must become active participants if we are to build a securer nation?

It is time to look at our religious culture and spend more time in spreading the good news of redemption and remembering that God makes it clear that judgment is his prerogative alone.

It is time to institutionalize the development of social learning. From our children's earliest days leading to a truer perception of

reality, instead of individual, state, political and religious creative "reinterpretations" of reality. We must do more to promote self-understanding. We must not only promote norms and values conducive to community stability, prosperity and peace; it is incumbent upon Bahamians, of whatever estate, to model them. We must institutionalize them, so that they are passed down from generation to generation.

For an economically sustainable Bahamian nation, we are in urgent need of an education system capable of generating productive human resources, rather than thousands of graduates with high aspirations and few employable skills to back them. We need schools that will foster the development of analytical and critical skills, rather than produce human chaff that can be blown away by the lightest winds of change. Education must support values that generate community-building purpose and are conducive to peace. The degree to which any educational process can succeed in knitting bonds of unity is still highly dependent on the nation's ability to assure a more equitable distribution of opportunity, welfare and justice.

Is it not time to embrace a new definition of citizen? I can think of none better than the following:

A citizen is one who is a participant in a democracy, regardless of their legal status. It is one who chooses to create the life, the neighborhood, the world from their own gifts and the gifts of others (McKnight & Block, 2010, p. 7).

In this 40th year of our country's independence, we must reinvigorate the meaning of freedom and brotherhood, lest we lose all that our forebears sacrificed to secure for us. I'm willing to commit to the effort the rest of the days the good Lord sees fit to give me. Who will stand with me?

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