

The Treatment of Haitian Bahamians in Bahamian Society

Fiona Joseph
The College of The Bahamas¹

ABSTRACT

Originally presented as an informal paper at a discussion panel on Statelessness, this paper outlines some of the policies that hinder Haitian Bahamians from participating in mainstream society, the stigma that is attached to such policies and the unethical standpoint that justifies them. It briefly touches on migration and focuses on the issues of nationality and citizenship.

INTRODUCTION

It has been 40 years since The Bahamas gained independence and it still struggles to live up to its motto “Forward, Upward, Onward, Together”. This motto should include those who make their lives in The Bahamas but are not considered to be Bahamian citizens. In a letter to the editor of the *Nassau Guardian*, Darling (2013) asserted that “No such creature has ever existed, exists or will ever exist” (p. A5). This is an angry Bahamian who finds the term Haitian Bahamian “an illogical mental construct designed to appease and mislead the susceptible” (p. A5).

The population of The Bahamas consists of people from many different cultures, backgrounds, ethnic identities, races and religion. With such diversity in Bahamian society, it is difficult to say who is a “true” Bahamian and what makes one a Bahamian. However, the basis of the Bahamian national

identity is the political framework established by the Constitution which is a legal document, written and designed by Bahamians. It defines who is and who is not a Bahamian and how citizenship is conferred.

Nicolls states in her newspaper feature article “The Myth of Identity and Our Dirty Little Secrets” that “Bahamians live their life with a possessive, sometimes almost fanatical sense of pride; they stand unwavering in defense of this identity” (2010, para. 2). Although many Bahamians are aware that their country hosts immigrants, both illegal and legal, there is, on the other hand, a segment of the population who believes that the Bahamas is for Bahamians and no one else. This belief is evident in how they treat Haitian Bahamians: the children who are born to Haitian parents in the Bahamas. The treatment of these individuals in Bahamian society is an issue that has long been overshadowed and should now be openly addressed.

¹ Fiona Joseph, Undergraduate Biochemistry student, The College of The Bahamas, P.O. Box N-4912, Nassau, Bahamas.

Acknowledgments: A version of this paper was presented on April 10, 2014 at "Statelessness: A Panel Discussion", organized by the School of Social Sciences and School of English Studies.

The author thanks Alsinor, Charles, John, Lafrance, Myrtille, Octaveus, Paul, Peti-fere, Pierre, Santilus, and James St.-Louis for participating in interviews held September–November 2013.

E-mail: fionajoseph9@gmail.com

APA reference: Joseph, F. (2014). The treatment of Haitian Bahamians in Bahamian society. *The International Journal of Bahamian Studies*, 20(1), 63-69. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.15362/ijbs.v20i1.226>

Haitians have been migrating to The Bahamas since 1804 (Craton & Saunders, 1998, p. 464) and for many, The Bahamas is a gateway to their pursuit of happiness and a better life and/or a passageway to America. Some of them have settled and made a better life for themselves by assimilating into Bahamian society and culture. Nicolls (2010) states that:

Many Bahamians accuse Haitians of breeding like lionfish, and so with more than two hundred years of migration it is not difficult to do the math. United Nations statistics from 2001 show the fertility rate of Haiti was 4.4% while [that of] The Bahamas was 2.6%. Considering the population of the Bahamas just exceeds quarter of one million, one could expect the density of Haitian heritage to be high (para. 4).

It is no wonder Bahamians feel such animosity towards Haitians and their offspring; they believe their identity as a people is threatened by the integration of Haitians and their culture into Bahamian society. To contain the Haitian Bahamian “problem” policies have been put in place that not only work against Haitian Bahamians but also serve to hinder their assimilation into Bahamian society. Haitian Bahamians’ rights to citizenship, education and employment are some of the policies that will be discussed in this essay.

The Citizenship Issue

Citizenship, as defined by Webster’s dictionary, is the status of a person recognized under the custom or law of a state that bestows on that person the rights and duties of being a citizen. Haitian Bahamians are not citizens by birth and are thereby not protected by the state. In *Islanders in the Stream*, Craton and Saunders state that “The ‘Haitian problem’ has metamorphosed from one of uncontrolled migration to the government’s reluctance to grant citizenship to ‘Haitian

Bahamians’” (1998, p. 465).

According to the Bahamian constitution:

a child that is born to parents in the Bahamas that are non-Bahamians is not entitled to automatic citizenship, however, the child is eligible to apply to be a registered citizen on or before the day of his/her eighteenth (18th) birthday and has a window period of one (1) year to apply, after which his/her application may not be considered for naturalization as the time period for submittal of application has passed (1973, Chapter 2, Article 7).

This policy in turn requires that the applicant produce official documents to verify that the applicant was indeed born and raised in The Bahamas. This process is tedious and is easier said than done. There is a long process that these Haitian-Bahamians endure before it is possible for them to be granted citizenship. The waiting time for a response from the government is often two to six years, and it is an inconvenience to most Haitian Bahamians. Alvarado et al. (2013) state that “approximately 30,000 to 50,000 Haitian immigrants and their children are denied Bahamian citizenship, despite some being born in The Bahamas and are also without citizenship in Haiti, leaving them in a state of limbo with no place to officially call home” (p. 48). However, if there is an upcoming election, then applicants might be lucky as the waiting time is shorter and the application is processed in a timely manner so that the individual may be able to vote in the imminent election.

Strachan (2011), a professor at The College of The Bahamas, argued in his *Nassau Guardian* article “The Haitian Problem”:

Disenfranchising a person for 18 years or more, while they await entry into the exclusive club of Bahamian citizenship,

creates frustration, shame, anger, alienation and bitterness in the hearts of thousands of young people who know, have, and want no other home but this one. It's simply inhumane, short sighted and stupid (para. 11).

Haitian Bahamians are *de facto* stateless. Belton (2010) describes *de facto* statelessness as occurring "when a person, who falls under the operation of a State's law, does not enjoy the rights or protections associated with that State's citizenship. The person's citizenship is consequently ineffective" (p. 36).

I conducted interviews with 10 Haitian Bahamians, asking whether they were registered citizens of the Bahamas: six were registered Bahamians while the other four were waiting for their 18th birthday to submit an application to the Department of Immigration. While waiting to get approved by the government these persons have no status, and the only "papier"² that seems to work for them is the government-issued Certificate of Identification which is not accepted in places such as airports and banks. Fielding, Ballance, Scriven, McDonald, and Johnson (2008) note that "without a [passport], one cannot open a bank account or travel abroad" (p. 47). A Certificate of Identification, which is issued for a period of five years, is a travel document, a quasi-passport, available for non-citizens legally residing in The Bahamas under age 18 and having been born in the Bahamas after July 10, 1973 (Bahamas Government, 1973). Without a Certificate of Identification, Haitian-Bahamians face the possibility of being deported to Haiti, a place that they have no knowledge of; this is inhumane and unacceptable. A perfect example would be Lovy Jean's experience as described in a *Bahamas Journal* editorial:

You're in this internal conflict because you don't know where you belong. You cannot go to school, you cannot get a scholarship because you simply do not have a nationality. In the schools down here, you are not a Bahamian, your parents are Haitians. But back home in Haiti, you're not Haitian; you were born in The Bahamas. So imagine what that must be like for someone to go through that for 18 years and more until they gain citizenship (Haitian-Bahamians want citizenship, 2013, para 5).

With such stigma it is no wonder that living in the Bahamas is a challenge for Haitian Bahamians.

Strachan (2011) further asks:

If we cannot bring ourselves to make citizenship automatic upon one's birth for all those born here, we should at least amend the constitution to lower the eligibility date. Why not 10 years old instead of 18? Avoid creating frustrated stateless teens that can't get scholarships, can't fully participate in national life (para. 12).

Haitian-Bahamians are unable to vote during a General Election because they do not have a passport. Their voices are not heard, leaving them frustrated and angry. No citizenship means no status. As a result, Haitian Bahamians are unable to apply for jobs. As the local ads say, "Bahamians need only apply." If there is a promotion available at a company at which a Haitian Bahamian works, then it is inevitable that a "Bahamian" would get the promotion, as there is often prejudice against Haitian Bahamians in the work place. As Strachan states, "There is a stigma attached to Haitian origins" (2011, para. 6). With such barriers, employment or to advancement in the work place, it is no wonder that Haitian Bahamians are often unemployed and angry. Crime may well

² "papier" means paper in Haitian creole and is a representation of legal status, such as a work permit.

increase when persons are without jobs, enraged and frustrated. But if society and government do not recognize these persons as a part of the country, or even give them an opportunity to be regular day-to-day citizens, then society and government in effect confer criminal status on these people and proceed to punish them for their crimes? One can only say that this is unethical.

As Strachan continues, “There is a social/ethnic blemish that many young people try to hide because of the stinging ridicule and contempt heaped on them through no fault of their own” (2011, para. 6). Taunts such as “carry your Haitian self”, “go back to Haiti” and “dumb Haitian” are what Haitian Bahamians hear for most of their lives. The constant taunting and name-calling has caused some of these individuals to disassociate themselves from the Haitian culture. They no longer want to speak Haitian Creole with their parents but rather Bahamian dialect.

In “The Stigma of Being ‘Haitian’ in The Bahamas,” Fielding et al. state that “Surnames can be an indicator of ethnicity and used to discriminate” (2008, p. 47). This is a reason some would even go to the extent of anglicizing their names. Strachan notes, “I remember a young man at COB who insisted on Anglicizing his name in my class and others who tolerated all sort of mispronunciations because they at least didn’t sound French” (2011, para 6). Haitian Bahamians do not feel accepted in society because of this stigma.

Education is the key to success, at least that is what teachers teach their students, but if one is being denied an education how can succeed in life? Every child has the right to an education, but in The Bahamas, Haitian Bahamians have been denied an education in the past, as Sears (1994) reported:

The Bahamas Ministry of Education sent a circular to the principals of public

schools that students of Haitian parentage were not to be registered until their parents’ status was determined and that Haitian school children were sent home from the Golden Gate Primary School in the Carmichael area in Nassau (p. 16).

These children were denied an education simply because their parents were Haitians. The Grand Bahama Human Rights Association conducted an investigation into the matter and based on their findings, the Ministry of Education in The Bahamas was requiring that all children born to any foreign non-Bahamian parent leave the public schools at which they were already registered and refused registration to any such child during the academic year. This was a violation of The Bahamas Education Act which states, *inter alia*, that the Minister shall:

... promote the education of the people of The Bahamas ... to enable the children of The Bahamas to understand the privileges and responsibilities as members of the community, to contribute to the well-being and progress of The Bahamas by the full development of their natural abilities and to earn an adequate livelihood as adults (Ch. 46, Sect. 3).

This stigma against Haitian school children also violated the Bahamas Constitution’s guarantee, Article 15(b), which provides for equal protection by law. The government’s unethical treatment of foreign children comes about because of the constant complaints of Bahamians who often say that the schools in New Providence are overcrowded and that Haitians are a burden to The Bahamas because they do not contribute to society.

Sears (1994) points out that given the Haitian contribution to The Bahamas, it is unfair to claim that they are a burden to The Bahamas. Moreover, he observed that since Bahamians pay only indirect taxes, non-Bahamians pay more taxes, in the form of stamp duty on

conveyances, land tax in the Family Islands and departures and hotel taxes for tourists (p. 16). So to deny these children an education because their parents are undocumented or because there is an assumption that they do not pay taxes is simply a misleading argument.

Apart from being denied an education there is an additional problem that Haitian-Bahamians encounter in the education system which is college tuition. There are scholarships that are awarded to Bahamians only and at The College of The Bahamas, non-Bahamian students are charged extra per credit thereby making their bills higher than those of Bahamian students. From a recent case study that was conducted, the interviewee was of Haitian descent, had been born in The Bahamas to Haitian parents and had lived in The Bahamas all his life. When asked whether or not he attended The College of The Bahamas, he answered with a hesitant yes and made the following statement:

I do attend The College of The Bahamas however, it was a tedious process to get admitted to the College. I had to search for documents to prove that I had received an education in The Bahamas for at least six years, if such documents were not produced, then the non-Bahamian tuition and fees would have applied to me (personal communication, 2014).

According to Nicolls, "This is not likely to provoke the feared civil unrest, but it is still a significant reminder, not to mention a financial strain, of that failure to belong experienced by many Haitian Bahamians" (2010, para 6). It is not fair and it leaves Haitian Bahamians at a disadvantage. If one cannot get a scholarship it makes it even harder for them to obtain the money necessary to pay their school fees and tuition. Also if they cannot afford it, Haitian Bahamians do

not attend college at all. This is not fair to them and it restricts them from obtaining a higher degree of education that could possibly benefit The Bahamas in the future. This is an added stigma Bahamian society inflicts on Haitian- Bahamians. Darling (2013) asserted:

I challenge anyone of this mindset to present a passport that says the bearer of the document is a Haitian-Bahamian ... to my analytical mind it represents a Bahamian of Haitian descent whose loyalty is not to The Bahamas, its people or our government, but rather to Haiti, the Haitian people and to the president of Haiti. Such people, in my view, ought not to be granted Bahamian citizenship (para 2).

These are the words of a Bahamian citizen who rejects the notion of the granting of Bahamian citizenship to Haitian-Bahamians in The Bahamas. If one is not accepted in the only place they know as home and the only society that they know, then their rejection by the only society they know is obvious. One cannot expect these individuals to be loyal to The Bahamas if they are not being treated as citizens of The Bahamas. These individuals have been discriminated against and suffered abuse because of their ethnicity for most of their lives. Belton (2010) quoted an interviewee's observation:

The Bahamas was "creating more Haitians, or more foreigners than Bahamians" with its current immigration and citizenship policies, and that it was ludicrous to expect these children, who "for the first 18 or 25 years of their lives were not treated as citizens," to suddenly accept The Bahamas as "their country" and to show "loyalty" even if eventually provided Bahamian citizenship (p. 41).

Treated thus, it will forever be in their minds that The Bahamas never had their best interest at heart. Haitian-Bahamians are looked at as

Haitians first and then Bahamians and in some cases they are not even acknowledged as Bahamians even after they became registered citizens of The Bahamas. Sears observed that “the continued isolation of Haitian Bahamians is politically unwise, as it will result in the creation of a permanent underclass with no stake in the progress and development of Bahamian society” (1994, p. 17).

The Solution to the Problem

The Bahamian Constitution prevents children born in The Bahamas to non-Bahamian parents from calling themselves Bahamian and so they reside in a country to which they cannot say they belong. Some job opportunities are not available to them because they are of Haitian descent and job advertisements specifically state “Bahamians only.” Hence, Haitian Bahamians are usually not in high positions as they would like to be even though some may be qualified. Also in education there are the taunts and torments of the other students and the mentality of people that Bahamians are more intelligent than Haitian Bahamians. As Fielding et al. note, “It is in the best interest of the country to educate rather than marginalize [Haitian Bahamians]” (2008, p. 50). They are turned away from receiving scholarships and they are

charged more at the college level for not being Bahamian. They are bashed for being something they were born into and Bahamian society makes it a problem for them just because their parents are not born Bahamian.

Why treat these individuals as if they do not belong and as if they are a burden to society? Why not grant them citizenship upon birth so that they can become productive citizens of The Bahamas, instead of the constant ridicule and stigma that is bestowed upon them on a day-to-day basis. As Nicolls wrote:

It could really be “Better in The Bahamas” if the country recognized its Haitian roots and the Haitian presence, truly representing its rich and diverse cultural heritage. Imagine the positive impact Haitian Bahamians could make if they felt truly accepted as Bahamians and proud to be Haitians; if they were confident enough to emerge from behind the shadows (2010, para. 12).

It is only right that The Bahamas should recognize these individuals first as Bahamians then as Haitians. They should be granted the right to fully participate in mainstream society, so that it could really be “Better in The Bahamas”.

REFERENCES

Alvarado, E., Damschroder, D., Antoniskis, A., Auteri, G., Garg, A., Singer Hurwitz, E., Elliott, C., & Addison, T. (2013). Regions. *Human rights brief*, 20(2), 46-58.

Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1843&context=hrbrief>

Bahamas Government. (1973). The Bahamas Education Act. Retrieved from http://laws.bahamas.gov.bs/cms/images/LEGISLATION/PRINCIPAL/1962/1962-0015/EducationAct_1.pdf

Bahamas Government. (1973). The Constitution of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas. Retrieved from http://laws.bahamas.gov.bs/statutes/statute_THE_CONSTITUTION.html

Belton, K. (2010). Arendt’s children in the Bahamian context: The children of migrants without status. *The International Journal of Bahamian Studies*, 16, 35-50. Retrieved from <http://journals.sfu.ca/cob/index.php/files/article/view/127/143>

- Craton, M., & Saunders, G. (1998). *Islanders in the Stream: A history of the Bahamian people. Vol. 2: From the ending of slavery to the twenty-first century*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Darling, L. (2013, September 14). The privilege of Bahamian citizenship: Dispelling the myths [Letter to the editor]. *Nassau Guardian*, A5. Retrieved from <http://www.thenassauguardian.com/opinion/letters/41819-the-privilege-of-bahamian-citizenship-dispelling-the-myths>
- Fielding, W., Ballance, V., Scriven, C., McDonald, T., & Johnson, P. (2008). The stigma of being "Haitian" in The Bahamas. *The International Journal of Bahamian Studies*, 14, 38-50. Retrieved from <http://journals.sfu.ca/cob/index.php/files/article/view/97>
- Haitian-Bahamians want citizenship. [Editorial]. (2013, March 18). *Bahama Journal*. Retrieved from <http://jonesbahamas.com/haitian-bahamians-want-citizenship/>
- Nicolls, N. (2010, February 8). Bahamas, Bahamians, Haiti, Haitians, Haitian Bahamians: The myth of identity and our dirty little secret. [Weblog]. Retrieved from <http://caribbean-webcrat.blogspot.com/2010/02/bahamas-bahamians-haiti-haitians.html>
- Sears, A. (1994). The Haitian question in the Bahamas. *Journal of the Bahamas Historical Society* 16, 10-20.
- Strachan, I. (2011, June 2). The Haitian problem. [Editorial] *The Nassau Guardian*, Retrieved from <http://www.thenassauguardian.com/opinion/op-ed/10752-the-haitian-problem>