

Traditional Culture in The Bahamas

by John W. Franklin

When most people in the United States think of The Bahamas, they think of vacations, cruise ships, beaches, sun, snorkeling, casinos, and possibly banking. What they do not realize, however, is that a rich and vibrant Bahamian culture has evolved in these islands over the past four centuries, shaped by the forces of migration. After the Spanish removed the last of the indigenous Lucayans to work elsewhere in the Caribbean, the archipelago was settled by English who had left Bermuda for greater religious freedom and brought enslaved Africans with them. After American independence, British Loyalists and their slaves arrived from Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. In the 1820s, Black Seminoles escaped from the Florida coast and settled on the island of Andros. Throughout the 19th century, British ships freed Africans headed for slavery in the Americas and gave them land in The Bahamas. In the 1880s, tourists from the United States, en route to Havana, began to stop in Nassau, and hotels instituted racial segregation to accommodate them. Chinese, Syrian, and Greek immigrants, as well as people from throughout the Caribbean moved to The Bahamas, and Bahamians traveled to Europe, the United States, and Panama, primarily in search of work but for schooling as well. Although White Bahamians make up less than 15 percent of the population today, they dominated politics until majority rule in 1967.

All of these people from Britain, Africa, U.S. African-American and British-American communities, Asia, and the Caribbean have had to develop strategies to survive in The Bahamas, and adapt their cultures to local realities. They express their creativity using local materials and themes. Communities throughout The Bahamas have developed their own specialties in crafts and foods, sacred and secular music, storytelling and narrative traditions, and their own particular accents. Over the past year, a team of Bahamian researchers knowledgeable in the history and culture of The Ba-

hamas have worked with the Smithsonian to assess and document contemporary traditional Bahamian culture. Bahamians have welcomed the researchers into their homes, farms, workshops, and places of worship, to family holiday gatherings and national celebrations, such as Junkanoo. To all we are grateful, for without these local experts, our project could not have succeeded.

Nassau, capital of The Bahamas on the island of New Providence, is a bustling city of banking, business, and tourism. It is home to more than half of the nation's 255,000 people and has attracted inhabitants from all of the other Bahamian islands. In Nassau can be found many layers of what constitutes Bahamian cultural life. It has well-stocked supermarkets, as well as fruit and vegetable vendors selling green-and-white pumpkins, hand-ground island grits, goat peppers, green pigeon peas, dried conch, sugar apples, caged land crabs, and bottled tomatoes. Nassau has cut stone and timber buildings that date back to the 18th century, old-money homes, new-money homes, homes that you can lift off their concrete- or cement-block bases and move to a better neighborhood when you can afford it. Nassau is a city of neighborhoods, from the White-owned Bay Street business district to the Black "Over the Hill" communities. It also has churches of every denomination.

Traditional Bahamian culture coexists with the modern and popular in Nassau, but it is sometimes difficult to discern. One must go to the Family Islands, or Out Islands, as they are still sometimes called, where the pace is less hectic and the distractions fewer, to meet many esteemed tradition bearers in their own element. Most Bahamians have not had the opportunity to visit more than one or two of the Family Islands, but they know people and stories from the islands.

On these islands, the "settlements," as towns are called, have not always been in close contact. Now

This program is a collaborative effort with the Commonwealth of The Bahamas Ministry of Tourism and the Department of Archives.

Father Rex Seymour shares his knowledge of the people and places of Cat Island with researchers.

Photo by John W. Franklin



they are often linked to one another by a single road; before these roads were built, people generally traveled from one settlement to another by boat. Their relative inaccessibility led to distinct differences between settlements and between regions of an island. Some houses, called “tabby” houses, are built of limestone and a mortar made of lime; others are built from native pine, imported wood, or cement and/or concrete block. Houses of an extended family are frequently clustered around a “big yard” that may include a well, a cistern for rain water, and a separate, thatched, outdoor kitchen with a fire hearth and “barn” (pantry). Nearby are fruit trees such as banana, citrus, and mango, other plants such as pepper bushes and pigeon pea plants, and herbs for use in bush teas.

Most of the houses have porches, and it is here that people sit and talk with passing neighbors, tell their grandchildren stories, shell peas, and plait straw. It was on porches like these where Ishmael Gaitor told us of the seven parts of the Quadrille dance, where “Trouble” McPhee welcomed us for a discussion of the bush medicine tonics she prepares, and where we learned that the women of Dumphries, Cat Island, would be baking flourcakes the next morning in a rock oven to sell at the Baptist board meeting later in the week. People selling homemade items often display them on the porch: preserves, coconut bread, straw mats, baskets, dolls, papayas, and watermelons.

The Family Islands are the breadbasket for Nassau and Freeport. The elder farmers produce the corn, tomatoes, cabbages, onions, okra, pumpkins, and fruit consumed in the big cities. The mail boats take this produce as well as fish and conch to the city; the Family Island residents in turn receive their supplies of fuel, chickens, pre-

scription medicines, canvas for sails, and timber and hardware for construction from the city. In addition to the inhabitants one expects to find on these rural islands – elders, their grandchildren and “great grands” – are young adults in their 30s and 40s who have moved to the Family Islands, disenchanted with the cities and seeking opportunities to establish new service

businesses. These newcomers now have the chance to learn the history of their settlements, the lore of their island, and the traditions that have sustained previous generations.

In addition to this physical interdependence between the cities and the Family Islands, there is a spiritual or cultural interdependence as well. Many of the oldest Bahamians were born in the Family Islands and associate them with home. The next generation spent part of their childhoods or memorable summer vacations with grandparents or aunts and uncles in the Family Islands. They heard the stories told by the elders at night; they helped with the chores when the island had neither electricity, paved roads, nor running water. They appreciate the boiled corn fresh from the field, the perfectly cooked crab and dough, and the flourcakes baked in the rock oven. Family Island associations have been established in Nassau to maintain ties in town among people from the same island, organize events, and assist in times of need. It is to these generations and their children that returning to a mother’s or father’s Family Island for Regatta or for Emancipation Day is so important. They do so not only to reacquaint themselves with family and neighbors, and sing and dance songs of their youth. They return to a place where tradition is revered. People know, trust, and speak to one another. There are street lights now, as well as speedboats, satellite dishes, and refrigerators, but Bahamian traditions are strong in the Family Islands, and everyone, Bahamian and visitor alike, can benefit from experiencing them.

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