

AMERICAN SOCIO-CULTURAL STUDIES

Part 1: Black American Heritage in Institutions of Higher Learning

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Introduction

It took about two decades for the Black studies to catch a foothold in the world of serious scholarship, particularly after the emergence of the Black* revitalization movement (but just only in the last nine or ten years has serious study on Black Americans began to emerge with any regularity). Most of the major colleges and universities in the United States have tried to incorporate more material or information into various academic disciplines. For instance, a number of sociological surveys and empirical studies conducted by social scientists (even system scientists) have reported on the way in which Black Americans have raised the socio-economic level of the entire race or how they have boosted themselves into the mainstream of American society. Much has also been written about the work of Black writers or literati such as Alex Haley, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison; scientists such as George Washington Carver; the role of Black Americans in the field of sports through the effort of Harry Edwards; in music and in other entertainments; and the work of such people as Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Bunche and Andrew Young at the United Nations, and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall; educators such as Booker T. Washington and W. Edward B. DuBois; and others. Even so, the amount might better be described as a steady stream than an inundation even in the United States. There is little information available about the Black American's contributions and Black American heritage in other fields. This is particularly true in the field of higher education. Gordon, for example, proclaims that Black Americans like other minority ethnic groups in the main have been, by patronizing omission, long robbed of their past contributions and efforts in American society and of a rightful pride in the nature of their role in the making and shaping the American nation (Pinkney, p. x.). Most of their contributions and efforts were in general surrounded by controversy, irony, and myths.

In this paper, the writer intends to give a few historical sketches about Black American ethnic heritage and efforts by Black Americans directed at the establishment and development of Black institutions of higher learning, and to introduce some of their contributions in the field of medicine which have made a profound

* Inasmuch as the term "Negro" carries a derogatory connotation, the word either "Black" or "Afro" (used by Americans after the early 1960's) was chosen in this paper.

influence on the possibility of the advancement of human existence.

It should be noted here that this study does not intend to take a long-range historical overview of their heritage and contributions, nor does it delve into the intensity or degree of racial issues, or attempt to be an account of the enslavement of Afro-Americans; rather it strives to provide a descriptive overview of their ethnic heritage, as it relates to higher education. This study will hopefully enable the reader to reduce biased views and long held myths about Black Americans and to facilitate a better understanding of the considerable complexity inherent in the multiethnic society—the United States of America.

Foundations

First of all, it is essential to begin with a few historical facts to discredit two long held myths.*

The first myth is related to the assumed position of the Black Americans characterizing them as “an illiterate caste.”

It is reported that Africans, such as Pedro Alonso Nino, first touched upon the shore of the new world as explorers along with Columbus in 1492 and later with other explorers, to Latin America and the Caribbean as slaves in 1517, and long before the 17th century to the American continent. Hughes wrote, “Hear the wind in the sails of the ships of Columbus? They say one of his pilots, Pedro Alonso Nino, was a Negro (Black). That was in 1492” (p. 16).

There is substantial agreement among historians that the African’s presence in the United States was first highlighted on August 20, 1619 with the arrival of indentured servants and slaves from Africa aboard a Dutch vessel. However, their first presence in the United States was recorded in 1526 when Afro-Americans in the State of South Carolina rebelled and fled to the Native Americans, and in 1538 when the African explorer Estavanico discovered what is presently called the State of Florida, the State of New Mexico, and the State of Arizona. Foster, for example, provides some information as to how the first Africans came to the American shore:

(In contrast to African history in English America), the first Negro (Black) slaves to come to United States territory arrived with Lucas Vasquez de Ayllon, the Spaniard, who set up a colony at the mouth of the Peedee River in South Carolina, in 1526. The Negroes (The Blacks) rebelled, the colony failed, and the whites sailed away, leaving the Negroes (the Blacks) behind, they thus becoming the first permanent immigrants to this country, pre-dating the Virginia settlers by almost a century (p. 32).

* The writer has been benefited a lot not only from Ploski and Kaiser’s study, but also from works by other authors listed in the Notes. The writer also found it a great advantage to have been able to discuss the interethnic studies on an inter-personal level with many Americans, including Black Americans on and off the campus during his stay in the United States.

Hughes also portrays circumstances under which Estavanico (a man of great versatility) discovered what is today Florida, New Mexico, and Arizona as follows:

“Tierra! Ahi esta tierra!” from the deck of a Spanish galleon he (Estavanico) cried, “Land!” when he first sighted the coast of what is now Florida. On that coast his ship was wrecked....Perhaps because he was colored, Estavanico got along well with the Indians. He learned their various languages, and soon became a famous guide and translator for other explorers who could not communicate with the Indians. All the way across the southern part of what is now the United States, and as far as Mexico City, for eight years Estavanico wandered....And he discovered the rich and beautiful country of gold, copper, cotton, and flowers that is now Arizona (pp. 16-17).

Contrary to a pervasive belief that the Africans who migrated to North America were representatives of less advanced civilizations, or they did not carry with them to the new world a knowledge of the complex culture and academocentrism at all, the Africans who arrived in North America were previous residents of West Africa, which was endowed with a rich cultural and educational history before slavery. The Arab sources in 800 A.D. already mentioned the West African Empire of Ghana, which later became the Empire of Mali. Timbuktu and Gao were recognized as important cultural centers of the Moslem world for three hundred years. A school system was set up during the 6th century by Emperor Askia Mohammed Toure—ruler of Songhay from 1493 to 1512. One university deserves to be mentioned here is the University of Sankora at Timbuktu since it played a significant role as an institution of higher learning. Not only Black students, but also other students in the Moslem world flocked to the university for the purpose of learning such subjects as literature, law, philosophy (mainly works of Plato and Aristotle), history, medicine from distinguished scholars. There were some students who journeyed from some distance to study those courses at Sankora. The contributions of Black Americans as a result of higher education are especially remarkable in the medical field (some of which will be treated later) (Polanski & Kaiser; & Guy).

However, after being brought to North America by force, the institution of slavery evolved into one in which Blacks, partly because of their physical differences, were to be given a caste position. Jordan is of the opinion that by the time the institution of chattel slavery crystallized on the statute books of Virginia, Maryland, and other colonies (around 1660), they came to be treated strikingly different from English and other European settlers (p. 26). Furthermore, Black people were denied both physically and legally every semblance of educational opportunities. Southern states, for instance, made it a crime to teach slaves to read and write, and they were also prohibited from speaking their own native tongues and practicing their culture. It was not until 1865 (the year which marked the end of the Civil War) that the opportunities for formal education were extended to most Black Americans.

The second myth taken into consideration is the widespread notion that North-

ern missionary groups took a leading role in starting higher education for Black Americans. Those who supported higher education of Black Americans were: first, Black American people themselves;* second, slaveowners who showed interest in the moral and spiritual well-being of the Black Americans (especially, those who were born out-of-wedlock). But such a practice was soon considered to be unfavorable and dangerous on the ground that, "those very Negroes (Blacks) who did learn to read and write and speak English were the ones most likely succeed in running away" (Dillard, p. 29). Third were philanthropists and other benevolent people who desired to provide subsidy or aid as the Northern conquest of the South proceeded; and finally, some white missionary groups and other sympathetic Americans who wished to give support to many Black Americans through charitable organizations and foundations.**

The Emergence of Black Institutions of Higher Learning and its Irony

By the middle of the eighteenth century, oral religious instruction of the Black Americans began to be approved as favorable to morals and good order. Litwack's study indicates that it was in the early nineteenth century that a systematic religious instruction started to spread:

After 1830...Cincinnati abolitionists, prompted by Theodore Weld, provided instruction for the Negro (Black) community through the establishment of a regular adult school, Sabbath and evening schools, Leceum lectures, and Bible classes (p. 16).

The period when the growing liberalism and secularism were developing in America was the age of the introduction of occupational training, and of the emergence of the land-grant institutions and normal schools. But the period immediately after the Civil War did not spill over into the area of the higher education of the Black Americans. For instance, while there were a number of Black Americans who were in pursuit of learning at collegiate levels, many of the private colleges (except Oberlin, Western Reserve, Baldwin, and some others) and the state colleges and universities, in particular, did not agree to the admission of the Black students in the nineteenth century.*** Their quest for educational opportunities often resulted in violent protests, and many Black Americans found it desirable that Blacks should teach Blacks rather than for Northerners to do so. In order to meet this need,

* Good points out, "Although they received much help from their white neighbors, not always cheerfully given, the fact that the Blacks to a great extent educated themselves (as early supporters)" (p. 262).

** John D. Rockefeller, Caroline P. Stokes, John F. Slater, the Ford Foundation, and others like Peabody fund and board later became active supporters. However, UNCF (1943) and Black church support, the American Baptist Home Society, the United Presbyterian Church, and the American Missionary Association had also given important support.

*** One of the state universities like the University of Georgia first admitted two Black students in the winter of 1960-1961 (Good, p. 522).

Blacks living in the South had to establish their own predominantly Black colleges and normal schools as a first step.

It was in the late nineteenth century that black land-grant colleges were founded in the seventeen states of the South under the second Morrill act, but were supported in relatively small ways by the federal government, and minimally, by state governments (Pifer, p. 12). For a long time the land-grant colleges for Black Americans had to strain very limited resources to maintain their faculties, institutional programs, and facilities. They were (and have been) treated radically different from other land-grant colleges and universities* which received adequate funds from both the federal government and state governments, and maintained long established communities of scholarship and teaching. On the one hand, the 1890 act by Congress served to further higher education of Black Americans. On the other hand, it is part of the irony that the act was to confirm the "separate-but-equal" doctrine (the Plessy v. Ferguson case which lasted until 1954).

The groundwork to expand and broaden higher education of Black Americans was laid by the end of the nineteenth century. The vast majority of black colleges and universities, both private and state supported, have continued to operate. Many of these institutions (some of which will be cited later) have provided black people with the skills necessary to get into the mainstream of American society. Individual Black Americans graduated from these institutions made a number of contributions to all spheres of American social and cultural life. To cite an example, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall received all of his undergraduate and graduate training at black universities. These institutions have retained their relationship with the old black middle class, which could still be perceived as an avenue to success. But there were predominantly black colleges which could not keep their institutions in operation because they were faced with financial difficulties.

The reader may wonder why the predominantly black colleges and universities remain. The answers to that question are speculative. But Riesman and Jencks's research gives the following answers: in the first place, all educated black people of the communities where the college or university exist attended and graduated from either black colleges or universities; and secondly, "Cultural heritage and pride in race" have kept them in operation (pp. 28-40). And when it comes to a question of "Who will, then, keep these institutions in operation?" Both Riesman and Jencks do not offer substantial data. However, they speculate on that question and provide the following answers: first, those who do not see the advantages of integration; second, those who are unable to get into an integrated college or university nearby; third, those who cannot find an integrated college or university with a black subculture; fourth, those who show a preference for the black middle

* Many of the state universities, which belong to the Pacific 10 conference and the Big 10, were established as land-grant institutions. Cornell and the MIT are the only private (land-grant) institutions that received federal grant from the Congress.

class values over the white; fifth, those whose parents want their children in a protective environment; sixth, those whose aspirations are limited; and lastly, a few exploratory, idealistic whites (p. 42).

Historically Known Black Colleges and Universities

According to a government report published by U.S. Department of Commerce, Business and Defense Service, as of 1963-64 there were one hundred and twenty three predominantly black colleges and universities throughout the United States. Seventeen were listed as junior colleges (pp. 45-50). At present there are approximately a little over one hundred black institutions of higher learning existing in twenty states and the District of Columbia in America. Since listing all of these black colleges and universities is beyond the scope of this paper, the writer will select some of the black colleges and universities which have special historical importance:

(1) Cheyney State College, founded in 1837 in Cheyney, Pennsylvania, is regarded as the oldest black college. It was established by Quakers as an institute for colored (Black) youth; (2) District of Columbia Teachers College in Washington D.C. saw its beginning in 1851 as public Miners Teachers College for Black girls; (3) Lincoln University known as a private coed liberal arts institution started as Presbyterian Church college in Pennsylvania in 1854; (4) Wilberforce University in Ohio was set up by Methodists in 1854 (or 1856). This University was a good example of the beginning of the movement to expand the educational opportunities of free Black Americans; (5) Atlanta University started as a nonsectarian liberal arts institution in 1865 (the year the Civil War ended). Not only the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the American Missionary Association, but also the Freedmen's Bureau took the initiative. This University is one of the largest Black institutions, and consists of five graduate schools; (6) Fisk University, which was founded in Tennessee in 1865, is famous for its liberal arts studies. One of the most well-known graduates is W.E.D. DuBois, who later obtained a doctorate degree at Harvard. Black Americans themselves contributed to the establishment of Fisk. Freemen's Bureau and other philanthropists also provided aid; (7) Howard University, which is recognized as one of the prestigious black universities, began its operation in 1867 in Washington D.C.. General Oliver Howard, Commissioner of the Bureau for Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Hands, was one of the major contributors. Although Howard University first started as an interracial college, as time went on, it became a predominantly black college. At present Howard enrolls about 10,000 students, but not all enrollees are Blacks. Howard is also known as a good medical school in the United States; (8) Meharry Medical College in Tennessee was founded in 1876 through the effort of five Meharry brothers and Freemen's Aid Society; and (9) Mississippi Valley State College, which was founded in 1945, is the last predominantly black college to be established (Holmes, pp. 40-47

& McGrath).*

To summarize, it can be said that there are a large number of Black Americans who are sympathetically looking back on the contributions these institutions have made to the advancement of their ethnic group. Others, infused with pride in their own ethnic group, are hoping to maintain these institutions which could enhance the culture they value. But the major issue facing all of the black institutions today is how they can gather continued support. Unless most of the black colleges and universities receive a great deal of financial support from the government, various foundations and organizations, private citizens, and black communities existing throughout the United States, they will not continue as they have been.

New Horizons in the Realm of Medical Science

Since the earliest times of the Black American's stay in the United States, there have been notable contributions in the realm of medicine. The magnitude of contribution of the following medical doctors has paved the way for new advances in the field of medical science.

(1) William H. Barnes is regarded as an inventor of a delicate instrument to facilitate the approach to the pituitary glands. He was also a diplomate of the American Board of Otolaryngology; (2) W. Montague Cobb is an internationally famous anatomist. He was also a physical anthropologist who helped perfect the standard color plate of the anatomy of the heart; (3) Charles R. Drew came up with the blood plasma theory. The blood bank which saved millions of lives during the Pacific war was established by him; (4) Solomon C. Fuller was a well-known neuropathologist at Boston University. His published writings on psychiatry opened up a new avenue in the field of Psychology and Social Sciences; (5) William A. Hinton is the originator of the Hinton test for syphilis which has saved countless thousands of lives in the world. Dr. Hinton was closely connected with Harvard University and also maintained academic connections through the Boston City Dispensary; (6) Ernest E. Just was a prominent biologist. He held a chair on physiology at the Howard University Medical School and did pioneer work in cell structure; (7) Theodore K. Lawless is known to be an innovator of new dermatologic techniques. He was a distinguished professor at Northwestern and in Israel. In appreciation of his work, Israel named a medical school facility in his name; (8) Daniel H. Williams was the first heart surgeon. He was a charter member of the prestigious American College of Surgeons; (9) Louis T. Wright served as Director of surgery at Harlem Hospital under whom the aureomycin was first tested in man; and (10) David K. McDonough worked his way through college. He took up a position at the New York Eye and Ear Infirmary. The first private hospital established by Black Americans in New York city was named after him (Smythe,

* For further information, see the catalogues of these colleges and universities.

p. 13; Morais; & Guy).

As we have seen, their influence has been enormous within the United States and even more so abroad. It is, indeed, hard to imagine what the field of medical science would be like today without their contributions.

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