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Capturing the Bahamian National Identity

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ABSTRACT

The Bahamas have struggled with capturing their national identity. With the Bahamas' close proximity to the United States, the general public fail to see their developed traditions, customs, and language. Efforts have been enforced to obtain and preserve their culture by passing it on to younger generations. This investigation aims examine how the Bahamians have fulfilled the requirements of building a national identity. This investigation took place at the Cape Eluethera Institute where a survey was administered to the Bahamians in order to identify and understand the cultural aspects linked to their national identity.

INTRODUCTION

The Bahamas became a tourist attraction well before the country became an independent nation in 1973. Their shallow sea attracted Christopher Columbus to settle temporarily in the Bahamas and use the resources available (The Islands of the Bahamas 2016). To this day, tourism plays a huge economic influence on the Bahamas. With its heavy reliance on the United States for economic growth, the Bahamas is deemed as one of the tourism capitals of the world. However, there is much more that comes with the Bahamas than tourism. The Bahamas has a rich culture that is shielded by tourism. This shield hinders the ability for visitors to see, understand, and appreciate the Bahamas' national identity. Countries such as China, India, or Ghana have distinct national identities that are easily recognizable because they have strived to sustain their culture. Cultural sustainability is described as working together to protect, identify, and enhance traditions, ways of life, and spaces unique to a specific culture (Dodge 2016). This project aims to investigate strategies that Bahamians have used to highlight their culture to tourists and communities in an effort to preserve their identity. Most people can point out flags and recognize

the food that belong to what nation. Ways in which the Bahamas have aimed to protect their national identity is by creating their own specialty foods, prints, language, customs, and festivals. Most importantly, younger generations are exposed to the culture of the Bahamas in their households and make efforts to pass it down to future generations. Junkanoo, which aims to celebrate the Bahamian culture, occurs on Boxing Day and New Year's Day. Junkanoo plays a huge role in their cultural sustainability by educating tourists on their culture in a fun and exciting way.

BAHAMIAN CUISINES

The Queen conch is consumed all over the Caribbean, but is mostly eaten in the Bahamas due to its abundance. Queen Conch will migrate to the shallow waters of the Bahamas to lay their eggs (Robertson 1959). Because of this, conch is considered the main dish of the Bahamas. It can be served raw as a ceviche or cooked as a burger or fritter. Tourists will find themselves traveling to the Bahamas to taste the delicious Queen conch. The Bahamas is also known for their mass exports of the spiny lobster and conch (Randall 1964). To the Bahamians, conch is an important food source because of its availability. Conch, in the Bahamas, has also been known to

decrease the cases of poliomyelitis and copper-deficiency anemia (Randall 1964). Studies suggest that high consumption of conch decreases prevalence of diseases by increasing resistance of the body to diseases (Medical World News 1961). Because of these benefits and the availability of Queen Conch, Bahamians have developed different conch dishes unique to the island. In a traditional Bahamian household, cuisines such as conch salads, conch fritters, cracked conch, and stews with conch as the main meat are introduced and eaten on a daily basis. Often, mothers will teach their daughters how to prepare such foods so they can also teach their daughters when they have their own families (Bowleg 2016).



Figure 1. Conch fritters, a popular appetizer in the Bahamas. Taken by the author.

Besides conch, Bahamian fisherman fish for grouper and snappers because of its high densities (Mumby et al. 2011). A 20-year ban on fishing in the Exuma Cays land gave groupers a chance to reproduce exponentially (Mumby et al. 2011). Because of this growth, the grouper fish became another main seafood that attracts tourists. Tourists can order a grouper sandwich or buy the Bahamian stewfish which consists of grouper, celery, and other vegetables.

Another cuisine that is special and unique to the Bahamas is the Guava Duff dessert. Due to the abundant guava trees, Bahamians can use it to make

one of their most popular desserts. The steamed dessert, usually prepared during special occasions, combines the fruit with a sweet dough, inspired by the British pudding (Tru Bahamian Food Tours 2014). Bahamians will often wrap the dough in a white pillowcase and steam it over boiling water (Bowleg 2016). This highly nutrient packed fruit makes an excellent edible treat sacred to the Bahamians. Guava duff, cracked conch, and stewfish are a few of the must haves that tourists get to try when visiting the country (Adsit 2014).

ANDROSIA PRINT

Androsia is a print worn by younger and older generations in the Bahamas. Manufacturers in Nassau and Andros Island use a Batik process which is an ancient wax-resist dyeing technique (Murphy-Larronde 2003). Because of the beautiful natural surroundings on the island, designers have produced fabrics that have radiant colors of tropical fish, shells, conch, and vegetation (Murphy-Larronde 2003). Guava pint and aquatides are names given to the cloth (Murphy-Larronde 2003). Because of the simplicity and beauty of the fabric, it has become popular for not only clothes, but tablecloths, blinds, and blankets. Not only do the native Bahamians wear it and use it around the house, but tourists have grown to love the design of Androsia (Bowleg 2016). Tourists from the United States claim that Androsia reminds them of the ocean and that the print is exclusively “Bahamian” (Murphy-Larronde 2003). A New York jewelry designer who frequently visits the Bahamas started stocking up on the Batik print to make curtains, pillow shams, and wall hangings (Murphy-Larronde 2003). Tourist from the United States understand that Androsia plays a major part in the culture from observing younger and older generations wearing them.

BAHAMIAN DIALECT

Just as Puerto Ricans speak Spanish or Haitians speaking Creole and French, the Bahamians have their distinct language that is a dialect of English. Many countries in West Africa will have different dialects of English. Pidgin, also known as “broken English,” uses similar English words but varies in the sentence structure. Pidgin was first spoken during the Atlantic slave trade by Africans to communicate to one another. Pidgin still exists today in the Sierra Leon, Ghana, Nigeria and other West African regions. The Creole language has Pidgin English implemented in

the language. The Bahamian dialect is a dialect of English, but is more similar to Creole (Donnelly 2008). Over the years, the Creole similarities have dwindled, but the Bahamian dialect originates from the Creole language (Donnelly 2008). Similar to most languages, the “H” gets dropped, so instead of saying “things” a Bahamian would say “tings”.

JUNKANOO AS A NATIONAL SYMBOL

Junkanoo is a traditional festival celebrated to remember a West African chief who demanded a day to celebrate with his family during the holidays in the Bahamas. The slave chief was named John Canoe, and he initiated the festivals of Junkanoo (Sanders 1989). Junkanoo existed in the Bahamas first and then dispersed to other surrounding islands (Sanders 1989). Other islands like the Barbados, have a celebration similar to that of Junkanoo. This carnival-like celebration takes place on Boxing Day and New Year’s Day in the Caribbean and some areas in the United States. In the Bahamas, Nassau holds one of the biggest celebrations which starts early in the morning (Sands 1987). This festival includes instruments built from cowbells, goatskin drums, and whistles (Sanders 1989). Group members will collaborate well before the festivities to come up with unique costumes, music, and dances based on their choice. Different groups across the Bahamas will compete for the grand prize money. Examples of various groups include the Valley boys and the Saxons, who are the leading competing groups (Sanders 1987).

Junkanoo’s popularity over the years has attracted many tourists. Although not initially intended, Junkanoo brings in a source of income for the Bahamas by attracting non-native Bahamians. Most importantly, it brings the Bahamians a sense of pride. Festival goers will also try their share of conch by purchasing conch fritters at Junkanoo (Bowleg 2016). The Junkanoo festival brought in about \$325,000, opening jobs for local Bahamians (Bethal 2014). Initially, Junkanoo was established by the Bahamians and for the Bahamians, but over the years, it has been receiving national attention (Bowleg 2016). In the past, Junkanoo was looked at as an event for the lower class which would sometimes end in men fighting (Sanders 1989). Over time, it grew into more organized festivals where both women and men participate in the parades (Sanders 1989). Now, this event attracts thousands of Bahamians.



Figure 2. Junkanoo costume Lynden Pindling International Airport. Taken by author.

Today, Junkanoo still lives and is still one of the most popular celebrations in the Bahamas. Many kids look forward to attending the festival and seeing their favorite groups compete to win the first place title (Bowleg 2016). Figure 2 shows the intricate costume designs that can take up to six months for Bahamians to make. The designs of the costumes follow a central theme that the groups aim to achieve. Junkanoo comes from the legacy of John Canoe and reminds Bahamians of their unique culture and perseverance. Junkanoo is the culture of the Bahamas, and every child is taught the history of the legacy to John Canoe. The main reason it still lives today is because the younger generations attend and participate in Junkanoo (Bowleg 2016). Junkanoo is a time where Bahamians can come together as one.

Junkanoo continues to live to this day because the country has built a Junkanoo Expo Museum for preserving the costumes and instruments every year. The museum is an opportunity for natives and tourists to learn about the culture of Junkanoo even if they miss the festivities. Each year, the museum imports new costumes and artifacts from that year’s Junkanoo festivities. This museum serves as nostalgia and an opportunity to immerse in Bahamian culture. Although costumes and artifacts swap out annually, the chance to learn and understand the cultural identity of the Bahamas still holds its purpose in this museum.

MEDICINAL GARDENS IN THE BAHAMAS

Another essential component of the culture and national identity of the Bahamas is the use of bush medicine. Bush medicine is utilized in the Caribbean and in West Africa to cure various ailments. Many of the medications we are encouraged to use come from plants and trees found in subtropical areas. A lot of anti-itch creams will have Aloe plant as the sole ingredient because it is known to reduce itching sensations. Many elders in the Bahamas will stop their car and pick out special plants known to cure a range of ailments if it's available on the side of the road (Bowleg 2016). Most Bahamians will boil the essential parts of the plant and drink it as tea. Although this tradition is dying out due to the lack of oral tradition, Bush medicine is still practiced and very much engraved in the Bahamian culture (Eldridge 1975).



Figure 3. The National Tree, Lignum vitae, showcased at Leon Levy Native Plant Preserve. Taken by the author.

Some of the famous trees in the Bahamas that claim to cure ailments include the Lignum vitae and the Gumbo-limbo tree. The Lignum Vitae is the national tree of the Bahamas (Bahamas gateway 2000). The tree contains a vast array of colorful flowers and a glossy finish on the leaves (Bahamas gateway 2000) (Fig. 3). The bark was initially used for construction until it became scarce (Bahamas gateway 2000). It was used to treat back pains and to help strengthen the back (Bahamas gateway 2000). The Gumbo Limbo tree, on the other hand, is used for a variety of reasons. It is used to treat insect bites, UTIs, colds, and serves as an aphrodisiac (Bahamas gateway 2000). This tree, also known as the Tourist Tree, treats burns by using

the red peeling bark to soothe their wounds (Bahamas gateway 2000).

CONCLUSIONS

The Bahamas continues to build and sustain a country with a national Identity. After gaining independence from Great Britain in 1973, the Bahamas strives to develop their customs and traditions. Bahamians established their Bahamian dialect that has West African roots and created cuisines that are special to the Bahamas. The Bahamian print, Androsia, is worn all over the island and is recognized as *their* print. Lastly, the Bahamas hold an end of the year celebration with its people and tourists to celebrate their culture and their nation as one by recreating their music, dances, and costumes. The best way to continue preserving the Bahamian culture is to be familiar with it as a tourist and for the Bahamians to continue passing the culture to future generations.

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