

THE NEED FOR THE REVITALIZATION OF BLACK LODGES IN
BERMUDA

PRESENTATION
TO THE BERMUDA FRIENDLY SOCIETIES ASSOCIATION

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by

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HISTORY

Friendly Societies have been in existence for hundreds of years. Indeed, various forms of such associations have existed in ancient China, Greece, and Rome. And, arising out of the guild system in Britain, they were in the 17th Century “very extensive”. However, they became well established in Britain, when in the 18th Century, the Industrial Revolution not only hastened the growth of English towns but changed the contour of much of the modern world. So too did the 19th Century saw their development in the United States.

Whether in the 19th Century Britain or the United States, Friendly Societies, also termed “fraternal societies”, “mutual aid societies”, or “benefit clubs”, had one thing in common, that was to enable people to contribute voluntarily to a common financial fund from which, on the occasion of illness or death, a benefit, as a right, not charity, would be available to meet immediate needs. In many of these societies, such organization was underpinned by a strong element of self-management and social activity.

Formed by people with a common denominator such as the same occupation, the same ethnicity or religion, Friendly Societies had, during the 19th Century, expanded beyond the American and English borders to the British colonies. Not unlike the USA where Peter Ogden, an African-American is credited with the formation of the first black Lodge there, race was also a common denominator in the formation of Friendly Societies in the British West Indies. For having no home of their own or schools, churches, or places of commerce or business, the recently emancipated black slaves had to build their own infrastructure. This they did by organizing savings and lending schemes to provide funds for families, widows and orphans in need and also to purchase land, houses and to build their schools and churches.

The social history of these colonies is replete with records and stories of the significance of Friendly Societies to these communities. Barbados is a case in point. In Barbados, members who went to Panama to work on the Panama Canal sent their remittances to their families and Friendly Societies back home who, in turn, bought land and built homes. So successful were the Societies in this practice that the government of the day limited the purchase of land to one acre per family.

That Bermuda, itself a British colony, was not void of the activities of black Friendly Societies or Lodges as they were called underscored by the fact that in 1868, the Bermuda government, introduced legislation to govern their activities. For already and during the immediate post-emancipation period, several of these societies came into existence under the inspirational leadership of Joseph Henry Thomas. In fact, Thomas, after travelling with others to New York to join a lodge, returned to Bermuda to help establish the first Odd Fellows Lodge in Bermuda. That was the Somers Pride of India Lodge which was opened in St. Georges in 1848. And, four years later, in 1852, he along with others established the Alexandrina Lodge in Hamilton and the Victoria and Albert Lodge in Sandys.

If the parameters for the operation of the Friendly Societies had been outlined by the Act of 1868 that of 1930, though specifying increased penalties for any contravention, could not curtail the growth of black Lodges. For close to one hundred years after the the first Lodge was established in 1848, there were, by world War 11, some 50 black Lodges in existence.

Whether affiliated with the Odd Fellows, Shepherds, Samaritans, or a variety of other fraternal organizations, they shared a common objective. That was, the development of both self and the black community. Consequently, they sponsored saving projects, gift clubs, credit unions, sickness and death benefits, and a variety of other economic and social benefits. Indeed, through their mutual assistance undertakings, members then could receive all of the services which today are provided by the banks, insurance companies, and government and private support agencies.

However, the black Lodges were more than organizations for mutual assistance as they also ran recreational programmes such as family picnics and sporting events.

So too were they the locus of and for cultural events, which included musical productions and variety shows for the enjoyment of both members and the wider community. They were also single-minded in this community ethos as they built schools, established churches, provided community nursing services for which the Packwood Nursing home stood as an example. They cared for orphans and the destitute, irrespective of their membership status; and supported education and training both locally and abroad.

I, for one can attest to this. For during the early days of my study in the UK, I recall receiving a gift of 100 pounds which in those days was a lot of money.

Whether this gift was a function of the fact that both my grandparents, Mr. Adolphous Dillas and Mrs. Marian Dillas were members of the Manchester Lodge and the Mayflower Lodge respectively, I cannot say. What I can say though, is that the gift confirmed the Lodges ethos of giving educational support, particularly to females.

The picture that emerges from the foregoing is the extent to which, institutionally, the black Lodges were central points in the life of the black community. For apart from their economic, social, and cultural activities, they were also the repository for political meetings as the political associations which for some 50 years prior to the advent of party politics, served to educate the black community on political and civic matters.

But sadly, and for a variety of reasons, the black Lodges declined in significance both to and for the black community such that today, only 8 of these Lodges are in existence. Inclusive of the three Lodges already mentioned, the remaining lodges are:

- The Loyal Flower of the Day Lodge of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, Manchester Unity, Hamilton.**
- Loyal Irresistible Lodge of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, Manchester Unity, Somerset.**
- Princess Royal Union Lodge of the Independent Order of Good Samaritans and Daughters of Samaria, Warwick.**
- Household of Ruth of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, Grand United.**
- Loyal Mayflower Lodge of the Independent Order of Odd fellows, Manchester Unity, Hamilton.**

Whatever the reason for their decline, many of us here today owe something to such Societies. However, as I reflect on the past activities and achievements of Friendly Societies in other parts of the world in yesteryear and particularly here in Bermuda, I wonder how could they be revitalized to play their past roles for both self and the black community in Bermuda.

Revitalizing the Black Lodges

Unquestionably, Bermudian society today is qualitatively different from that of the years when as part of the Friendly Society movement, black Lodges were the first social institutions in the black community. For one thing, it is no longer a racially segregated society. But secondly, and no less significant, is the fact that, as already stated, many of these activities are now performed by other agencies such as the banks and insurance companies which, arguably made available more comprehensive programs than the Lodges were able to provide. And, as a feature of the modern state, the government has found it necessary to respond to the society's needs by offering a range of social services.

However, neither singly nor collectively, do these factors mean that the black Lodges cannot be revitalized to play an important role in re-generating a sense of community spirit that had developed during the heyday of the black Lodges. Indeed, several factors speak to the necessity as a matter of some urgency, for re-kindling this sense of community and self worth. These include, but are not limited to the following:

- The internalization by the black middle-class of the Eurocentric notion of individualism and therefore, their increasing alienation from their black community roots.**
- The manifest disconnect between the black youth and their elders as evidenced by the disrespect both groups demonstrate to each other.**
- The alienation of the black youth from the black community as evidenced by their nihilistic behaviour.**
- The rapacious consumptive patterns of the black community that negate the philosophy and practice of thrift, prudence, and self-reliance that were encouraged by the Lodges.**

What these factors, to which I am sure you could add others, speak to, is the underside of Bermudian society. More specifically, they reflect upon a community that has lost its soul which, is contrary to the ethos of the black Lodges.

In addressing the question of how the Bermudian Black Lodges can be revitalized, I wish to draw upon the recent example of Trinidad and Tobago (T&T). Trinidad, like other Caribbean countries had several black Lodges which like Bermuda declined both in number and significance to the country over time. However, T&T have sought to revitalize its Friendly societies.

A continuation of a process that began in 1984, a one-day seminar organized by the Friendly Societies Division of Trinidad and Tobago's Ministry of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise development was held on June 30, 2008. At that Seminar, those in attendance were urged to adopt modern management techniques if they are to succeed and survive in an increasingly competitive world. More specifically, the main speaker at the event urged the 40 attendees to make more use of the mass media and information technology that are now widely available. And, three years later the 27th National Annual Conference of Friendly societies or Lodges was held on June 4th and 5th 2011. The theme of two-day Conference which featured addresses by the Minister of Labour, other government Ministers and Friendly societies/Lodges spokes-persons was "Creating New Products and Services for Youth Involvement in Friendly Societies"

Whether or not there was an increase in membership as a function of these initiatives is not known. In a sense, the latter is immaterial for our purposes. What is important is that by recognizing the significance of Friendly Societies for the general welfare of its people, the Trinidad and Tobago's Government is prepared to be involved in the process of encouraging the growth, development, and expansion of their Friendly Societies.

In drawing on the Trinidad and Tobago's experience, I am advancing the following proposals both as a means to inject "new life" for the remaining 8 black Lodges in existence and to encourage their growth.

- The government must now play a role in helping the Black Lodges by incorporating them into the government apparatus.**
- Organize under the auspices of the appropriate Ministry or Ministries, a week-long event entitled "Celebration of Friendly Societies/Lodges Week" which as is the case in Trinidad and Tobago, is to be marked by a parade and cultural displays.**

In addition to the above, the following are also proposed:

- **Hold national, annual conferences to strategize on future development and growth of the Black Lodges.**
- **As a means of and for enhancing the profile of Black Lodges participate in national political forum. In particular, select a team of delegates to serve either as interest or pressure groups at political party conferences.**
- **Campaign for the inclusion of the role of Black Lodges in school curriculum.**
- **Undertake publication of the history of Black Lodges in Bermuda as a means of and**

These recommendations, if accepted and followed should go some way in increasing the profile of the Black Friendly Societies or Lodges.

Ladies and Gentlemen, you have heard much about the role of the Black Friendly Societies or Lodges in Bermudian society. Some of these, you already know. However, unlike you, this has been a learning experience for me and I can truthfully say that I too have been a beneficiary of the work of these organizations.

Thank you.

