Elitism in Black Greek Letter Organizations

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Introduction

Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) are an intricate part of the emerging black identity. While membership in such organizations is strongly desired, it is simultaneously hard to obtain. Many reasons can account for this, however, a central reason often overlooked is social class. In order to be remotely eligible for membership, you must be enrolled as a full-time student in a university. Attending college alone, is considered a privilege of the middle and upper class. Today, there are certainly many opportunities present for members of the lower class to attend accredited universities such as scholarships, nevertheless, it is still a privilege that middle and upper class citizens often enjoy without circumstance. Furthermore, if you are granted such opportunity to attend college, you then must foster funds that can average up to $1300 for initiation and about $300 a year to remain an active member. This financial commitment makes it nearly impossible for *anyone* to join. Therefore, those of the higher social classes typically gain such membership. Subsequently, a divide between members of black greek letter organizations and the rest of the black community have formed over time, mostly due to class difference. With such being true, the question at hand becomes: how do black greek letter organizations practice or promote elitism and how is such elitism performed within the black communities? From research and testimonies thus far, I have found that the performance of class hierarchies in BGLOs is very well present and has contributed to major segregation within those organizations, and also, within the black community. Today, BGLOs represent wealth, power, and sovereignty which can be attributed to the class issues that both the black community face, as well as the world around us.

Background

Black Greek Letter Organizations were not the first "Greeks" to exist. In fact, the first Greek letter organization was Phi Beta Kappa Society founded on December 5, 1776 at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Created to give members freedom of speech and a secret society to congregate during a politically charged moment in history, this white Greek organization set the standard, structure, and tone for the creation of other fraternal organizations such as BGLOs (Chambers, 630). Organizations such as the Prince Hall Masons, which were predominately black, and the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows proceeded soon after. Notably, Phi Beta Kappa did not accept African Americans nor women into their organization. Even after the first acceptance of African Americans and women in the 1870s, the struggle for minorities to prove themselves equal still existed, leading to the creation of organizations in which they could thrive. According to Chambers,

> "Just as White students created Greek-letter organizations as a means of securing and maintaining their position of wealth and prosperity, Black students, in an attempt to conform to the standards of White America, also modeled their own Greek-letter organizations after many of these existing White organizations." (631).

In 1904, Sigma Pi Phi was established as the first African-American Greek letter organization. This organization was comprised of black male elites who had the greatest accomplishments and influence during such time. However, there were no collegiate chapters present. Therefore, two years later on December 4, 1906, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc. came to be on the campus of Cornell University, as the first black intercollegiate Greek letter organization. Not long after,

other BGLOs began to form including Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc. (1908), Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc. (1913), Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Inc. (1911), Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Inc. (1911), Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Inc. (1914), Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Inc. (1920), Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Inc. (1922), and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity Inc. (1963). All of these organizations, including Alpha Phi Alpha, were, and are currently, referred to as "The Divine Nine."

In 1906, during the conception of the first black intercollegiate greek letter organization, Alpha Phi Alpha, there were extremely high racial tensions. With the new acceptance of African Americans into accredited colleges and universities, the sense of free expression, belongingness, and uplift amongst the black community was longed for (Bradley, 20). Therefore, Alpha Phi Alpha sought to provide what its members believed to be absolutely necessary for the African American community: racial uplift. W.E.B. DuBois, a spearhead of the "racial uplift" movement idealized that in order for African Americans to succeed beyond borders, profesional, social, and political freedom was necessary through higher education (Chambers 629). This concept of racial uplift became the path in which Alpha Phi Alpha fought against racial inequalities, though many struggled to holistically define the term. Preceding organizations to follow would too struggle with this module, especially given that not all of the "Divine Nine" were founded on historical black college campuses such as Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, and Sigma Gamma Rho. Still, Alpha Phi Alpha carried these models of self help and perseverance throughout its founding, paving the way for the many other organizations to come. Unfortunately, members of the black community, and even members of the black middle and upper class, would later find issues with these black greek letter organizations and subsequently, the black upper class of

which these organizations were comprised. They would go on to argue that racial uplift gave room for the black upper class, the black elite, to thrive in ways that excluded the rest of the black community.

The Black Middle Class & The Black Elite

In the emerging 1900s, African Americans were on a rise to the top. They began leaving behind their lives as farmers and factory workers to seek a more professional and sustainable life. When African Americans were allowed to attend the same Ivy League and accredited universities as white Americans, they thrived at doing so, becoming masters in professions such as doctors, lawyers, and more. Those people specifically, constituted the black upper class, the black middle class, and the black elite. According to Thomas J. Durant and Joyce S. Louden in their article, "The Black Middle Class in America: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives", what constituted the black middle class did not sound much different from previous descriptions of members of black greek letter organizations:

> The black middle class, whose reference group was the black community, began to emerge toward the end of the nineteenth century. Members of this class derived their status and prestige almost totally from the black community. One of their major roles was to advance the Negro race and create conditions under which lower-class Negros could elevate themselves. During this period, however, class differentiation and social mobility in the black community developed very gradually, due to institutional racism and inequities in social and economic opportunities (Durant & Louden, 198).

It is important to note this emerging status was granted by the black community, as class within races vary and often intersect. Better explained, middle class in white American can constitute a completely different range in black America. We know this to be true from reading Karen Sacks' article titled, "Toward a Unified Theory of Class, Race, and Gender." She writes, in relation to the female workforce, "A number of black, Latina, and Asian feminists argued that women of color also have experienced domestic labor as waged labor, and that this has entailed forms of subordination that are at once different from white women's, and that pit them against white women" (537). While this statement does mention gender, and our focus here is on class and race, the point Sacks' makes about the difference in black women and white women in the workforce certainly attest to the intersectionality of race and class. Black women have a significantly different experience with class than white women do, as do African Americans, in general, experience class significantly different than white Americans. With that, the black elite continued to define their own means of success after its emergence. By the time the 1970s rolled around, black elites were curious on how to continue the perceived success of the black middle class. In an EBONY magazine, leaders of BGLOs, who were all considered black elites, gave their input on the emerging black middle class. One leader, a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc., attributed the desired success of the black middle class to education and replication of White America (160). She notes that white success had previously been characterized by economic gains and advanced education, therefore black success could continue to focus on those ideals as well. Other leaders of BGLOs placed focus on the youth within the black community. They believed it was important to start young, training them to be black elites from conception. Others in the magazine such as the current president, at that time, of Zeta Phi Beta

Sorority Inc., and Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Inc., pushed for the continuance of the black middle class through uplift and advancement of the black poor class, as Alpha Phi Alpha did since during its founding. The president of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc. at the time, agreed by stating, "the future of the Black middle class is directly entwined with its success in building coalitions, providing opportunities, and inspiring others to break down the barriers that lock millions of Blacks in mental and physical prisons of drugs, poverty and pain" (160). However, what many of these leaders would fail to note during this time period is the complexity of an elite system. To not have a black lower class, or a lower class at all would subsequently mean there is no class and instead a world of economic equality. This concept is touched on in Luna Glucksberg article, "A gendered ethnography of elites: Women, inequality, and social reproduction," as he notes, women, specifically non-elite women, and their labor contribute to the reproduction of elites (17). This concept applies to the class systems as a whole. The existence of elites in the world thrives off the existence of non-elites, therefore as long as non-elites exist, elites will too. However, that does not deem elists attitudes to persist. To be an elite does not mean to be elitist. Therefore, when it comes to BGLOs, while they may be compromised of black elites, this does not mean that these organizations have to exclude others from the things which black elites enjoy. Unfortunately, though, this exclusion has happened since the founding of these BGLOs and has led to greater issues within the black community then, and now.

Methodology

For enhancement of this ethnographic report, private interviews were conducted with ten members of various BGLOs. Four of the ten interviewees are not connected to the University of

Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, while the other 6 are current members on the UIUC campus. The four members not on campus are currently alumni members, all of which pledged in undergrad between 1960 and 1970. All interviews were conducted in private and anonymously to protect the identity and interests of the interviewee in sharing both personal and controversial information. Although each interview varied, most participants were asked the basis of 10 questions:

(1) Why did you want to become a member of your respective organization?

(2) What was the hardest part about joining your organization?

(3) Was financing an issue when joining your organization?

(4) Were the funds you paid for initiation money you had to consciously save up over time, or were you able to attain the money almost instantly upon request whether from yourself or parents/guardians?

(5) Is there a noticeable divide between members of BGLOs and other members of the black community?

If so, why do you think that divide exist?

If not, why do you think people say it exist?

(6) How would you define class and classism?

(7) Do you think members of BGLOs are an elite group?

(8) Is classism or elitism an issue between BGLOs and the rest of the black community? In other words, does class status of BGLO members affect the way the members interact with the rest of the black community?

(9) Do you plan to remain financial after undergrad?

If alumni: have you remained financial after undergrad?

(10) In what ways have your respective organizations been a positive force in your life?

In various interviews, other questions fostered from conversation. However, the results were compiled from the list of questions above. The goal of these interviews were to assess the views of BGLOs from members themselves, as well as, provide tangible data for the claims made within the paper. These interviews paired with extensive scholar research help to uncover the illeged elitism in BGLOs.

Results

After completing all interviews, recordings were transcribed and compiled into cohesive results. In relation to the first question, 6 participants mentioned the theme of their respective organization "sticking" out or "running the yard," noting that their organizations were prominent on campus and they themselves wished to follow suit. Still, nearly all of them mentioned doing service or giving back to their communities, as well as, gaining sisterhood or brotherhood for a lifetime. One participant mentioned that part of her reason for joining was about proving that a girl from her background, being from the lower end of the city, could attain such stature within the black community. When asked what was the hardest thing about joining their respective

organization, 30% of the participants mentioned finances, and that same percent were the only participants to answer yes to whether finances was a obstacle for them. Ninety percent of the participants agreed there is a divide between members of BGLOs and the rest of the black campus community, with majority not really able to articulate why. Those that could, about 3 of the 10, mentioned it may be because of the secrecy of the organizations and the perceived snobbery members exuberate. Furthermore, 70% of the participants said they would describe the members of BGLOs as an "elite" group, 2 of which were the alumni members. Nearly all of the participants, 90% to be exact, agreed there may be some form of classims that exist within BGLOs, although 3 of the participants noted *almost* anyone can become greek. All 10 of the participants agreed they would, or have. remained financial after undergrad. In the end of the interview, all the participants shared the ways in which the organization they choose to join had a positive influence on their lives.

Discussion

Research and testimony have proven these things to be true of BGLOs: black Greek-letter organizations were patterned after Eurocentric organizations as a means to assimilate into American society, therefore leading African Americans to create their own oligarchy of black elites within their communities, and subsequently within the BGLOs, of which were ran by these black elites, despite trying to combat the elitism within white America. The interviews conducted provided the tangible evidence necessary to argue so. One of the alumni participants stated:

> "People do not think it's true, they think it's made up or even that black people are not capable of it: but colorism was real, classism, was real, and still is today; but back then it

> was in your face. Even years after the founding. I am light skinned but my line sister's best friend who pledged at Howard definitely felt out of place in our sorority with her darker skin. It was no rule, but that undertone still existed in the 70s. It's not something that had to really be said but it's no secret Alpha Kappa Alpha did not jump at the opportunity to pledge darker skin women (Anonymous 7).

Colorism in BGLOs was a reflection of BGLOs patterning their own organizations after white greek organizations such as Phi Beta Kappa, who did not even accept African Americans into their fraternity for the first 100 years of its existence. Organizations such as Phi Beta Kappa had developed these ideologies from slavery. In *Black Bourgeoisie,* E. Franklin Frazier wrote,

> "[M]ulattoes, blacks with white progenitors, led a more privileged existence when compared with their "pure black" counter-parts. During slavery, these fair-skinned blacks were at times emancipated by their white fathers. After slavery, their kinship ties to whites gave them an advantage over other blacks in obtaining education, higher-status occupations, and property" (p. 159).

When white organizations began to finally accept black elites into their organizations, before African Americans had created their own, they used their racial tactics to decide membership. This was true for many of the white elite organizations, such as the Blue Vein Society that implemented the brown paper bag test which was later used within BGLOs, specifically sororities (Chambers 633). In a letter from Howard addressed to the the black campus community, the board confronts the rumors of discrimination stating that such colorism is disgraceful and should not be tolerated (Watch the Yard). Yet, this occured for many years down

the line -- some remnants still present today. When the black middle class decided to step out and create their own organizations, they used the white ones they wanted so much to be apart of, as a module of success. As a consequence of integrating white America into their organizations, they "internalized racial prejudice and created a hierarchy based upon Social Darwinist attitudes" (Chambers 631). This later lead to a divide amongst color, but amongst class as well.

When Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc. came to be, the goal was racial uplift, not racial divide. However, the conflicting notion of what such term meant made it just that much harder for the black community to progress. Even the aim of Sigma Pi Phi, the first black greek letter organization, got muddled. Walter Kimbrough, in his book, *Black Greek 101* quotes a speech given by W.E.B. Dubois, a member of Sigma Pi Phi, in which he stated, "What the guiding idea of Sigma Pi Phi was, I have never been able to learn. I believe it was rooted in certain exclusiveness and snobbery, for which we all have a yearning, even if unconfused" (25). Dubois was not the only one who felt this way. Many people in the black community became critical of the black middle class, and subsequently the BGLOs of which were ran by those black elites. That exclusiveness led to the divide that many of the participants in the interview mentioned. One participant stated:

> "Now it feels like it is us greeks, and then everyone else -- and I'm not really sure why that is, but I can definitely see why people feel that way. I've heard the whole 'y'all think y'all all that' speal, and sometimes I think greeks play into the idea of the black elite. We think we can do anything because 'we're greek.' We skip lines for parties because, 'we're greek.' People don't think it's fair. Shit, I used to hate it when I was not greek. I used to

> say, ‘who do they think they are?’, cause I mean, we are here just like the rest of the community. Why do we get special treatment? (Anonymous 1).

This sense of entitlement was the same entitlement black elites possessed during their emergence. Furthermore, what made them powerful was this sense of entitlement, amongst other characteristics. According to Tijo Salverda in *The Franco-Mauritian Elite,* “it is the elite’s privileged access to, or control over, particular resources that to a large extent determine the elite’s power. These resources have many forms, ranging from land, financial means, parliamentary control, knowledge, access to the ancestors or access to force” (10). On the campuses of these BGLOs, members have exactly that, control over desired resources. Whether it be getting into a party before everyone else, or getting access to a scholarship before the general public, the control over resources certainly exist. But again, it is not the control that constitutes it an elitist attitude, but the interaction, or lack of, with those who do not enjoy the same luxuries. Elites with elitist attitudes believe themselves to be superior or above others, which tends to shift how they interact with people, as well as how they distinguish themselves from other classes (108). When members of BGLOs “use the term, GDI -- Got Damned Individual” or “post shady memes or tweets regarding their black counterparts who are not apart of these BGLOs” they are certainly exuberating the very elitist behaviors that Salavedra, Franzier, DuBois and others discussed (Anonymous 4). Certainly, the issue of class does not exist in the same manner that it has 40-50 years ago, but the divide those elitist attitudes have created very well still exist today. Many have attempted to bridge this gap, but this solidarity starts from within. It means admitting the faults of these organizations and receiving the constructive criticism from the community which it serves.

Conclusion

Without a doubt, BGLOs have made many positive contributions to the black community, since its founding, that has made them the very organizations that members of the community have grown to loved and join. From the start, BGLOs provided a safe space for African Americans, during a time of turmoil, to express themselves, brainstorm, and create plans of action that allowed for major progression in the black community. Not to mention, the bonds of sisterhood and brotherhood that foster and extend across the world. One interviewee mentioned,

> "I would not change joining my organization for anything in the world. The amount of support I gained from my line brothers and chapter brothers does not compare. I recently went through a rough patch last semester. . . I was pretty much depressed. Having my line brothers and the support of my chapter advisors probably saved my life. So yeah, the orgs are not perfect, but they do a lot right -- more right than wrong" (Anonymous 3).

Tis was the goal. Unfortunately, while the positive aspects of white greek organization, of which black greek organizations mimicked, did transfer, so did the negative aspects. Within these BGLOs, elitism trickled in, creating major hierarchies of class within the organizations and the communities they served. These elitist attitudes have not only created major divides between BGLOs and the rest of the community and within themselves, but it has also contributed to other socialist problems such as colorism within the black community. Today, elitist attitudes and colorism have certainly subsided, however, the remnants still showcase a divide between BGLOs and the rest of the black community. The solution is not to accept everyone or anyone into these organizations, or else it would certainly lose its selectivity. Instead, it would be to select those

based on their accomplishments, their efforts, and their passion of the service of the community, as well as, disintegrate the ideas that BGLOs rule the world, or in this case, the campus. Then, is when the black community on college campuses, and beyond, could thrive.

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