

How Rituals and Traditions Are Used as Tools of Socialization at Black Women's Colleges

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Introduction

In many cultures there are ritualistic practices that are interwoven into the fabric of the culture as a means to socialize individuals who participate within that culture. This is also true in higher education. Rituals are an essential part of the culture of higher education. Institutions use such rituals as a way to bring new members into a culture and introduce and influence them with artifacts and symbols that are all socializing agents used in the socialization process. Rituals provide meaning and relevance to institutions while at the same time connecting with the past.

“The purpose of education for all women in patriarchal America, as determined by most analyses, has been socialization” (Coleman-Burns, 1989, p. 145). The purpose of this study is to examine how historically black women's colleges (HBWCs) in the United States use various types of rituals and traditions as tools of socialization. Currently, there are two historically Black women's colleges in the United States, namely, Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina, and Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. This study observed and attempted to understand how rituals and traditions influence the socialization process at these two HBWCs through a case study analysis.

The traditions that take place at both Bennett and Spelman College help to shed light into the culture of both institutions. These traditions are initiated by individuals in the environment such as faculty, admin-

istration, alumnae, and students to bring new students into the campus community. Traditions are interwoven into the collegiate experience for students from the moment they step onto the campus. They are greeted by campus artifacts and symbols. Traditions allow for interaction with the members of the community that seek to influence them and it is the vehicle by which history of the past connects with the future.

In order for socialization to be successful, participants of the culture of these two colleges must influence those seeking entrance into this community, both knowingly and unknowingly. In the case of both Bennett and Spelman College, faculty, administrators, students (peer groups), and alumnae work together as socializing agents that are purveyors of the organizational culture. In order for these institutions to get the results that they desire, it is important for participants in the community to accept the relevance and significance of the cultural perspectives of the community.

What makes Bennett College and Spelman College so unique in their development of Black women is that they take the time to develop these young women, both personally and professionally. These institutions focus on the particular needs of their students, and they offer a nurturing environment, a critical mass of role models and mentors, and structures which involve rituals and traditions that help students in their transitions from student to alumnae.

Summary of Literature

In studying the processes of socialization of Black women at HBWCs, it is important to realize that there are varying processes involved in socialization. Brim (1968) notes:

In each instance of socialization a key element is the role prescription or expectation that someone else has for the person in question, which involves a change in, or addition to, that person's beliefs, attitudes, or behavior, or motives or values, with reference to some social situation. (Brim in Clausen, 1968, p. 186)

Weidman (1989) outlines a conceptual framework for understanding the undergraduate socialization process. In analyzing undergraduate socialization, Weidman divides the socialization processes of undergraduates into three categories. These categories are interpersonal interaction, intrapersonal process and integration (social and academic). Interpersonal interaction focuses on the frequency of interaction between active participants in the environment, in which the student is seeking acceptance. The intrapersonal process refers to the student's self-perceptions of their collegiate experience. Social integration "refers to the extent to

which an individual's behavior in groups is characterized by willing acceptance of group norms and solitary relationships with other member" (Weidman, 1989, p. 294). The second type of integration, according to Weidman, relates to faculty student interactions and is referred to as academic integration.

Manning (2000) discusses rituals of incorporation and rituals of entering and exiting. Rituals of incorporation focus on bringing new members into the culture and welcoming them after they have gone through a series of activities or rites of passage. Rituals of entering and exiting is "the act of crossing a threshold, whether in marriage, entering a new house, or embarking on a new stage of life, has traditionally been endowed with considerable meaning" (Manning, 2000, p. 7). This particular ritual focuses on the fact that some colleges have special symbols or artifacts that are dedicated to the exiting and entrance of students (e.g., Bearden Gates of Bennett College and the Alumnae Arch of Spelman).

Methodology

This study is a qualitative case study investigation. The case study draws its evidence from individual interviews, document analyses, and observation. After receiving permission to use the campuses as sites for this study, a one-week visit was set up at both colleges. Semi-structured interviews were done with faculty, administrator, alumnae, and students. During these visits, time was also spent reviewing the college archives, taking campus tours, and directly observing campus activities (e.g., classes and convocation). Telephone interviews were conducted with alumnae of both Bennett College and Spelman College in an effort to understand their collegiate experience. Alumnae were interviewed from all across the United States and range six decades from the class of 1948 to the class of 2000.

The case study draws its evidence from individual interviews (alumnae, faculty, administrators, and students), document analyses, and observation. Site visits to each campus allowed for direct observation of campus activities and relationships among students, faculty, and administrators in their natural setting. The visits allowed for the review of historical archival documents that cannot be viewed anywhere else.

Audiotapes from tape-recorded interviews were transcribed in preparation for interpretation and analysis. Documents collected from the institutions, transcripts from interviews and research, and observations recorded in research journals were reviewed to find themes, words, and ideas that recur. The data collected was analyzed and coded by researcher into different categories in order for themes to be noted.

Case Study Participants

Bennett College is a small liberal arts college located in the city of Greensboro, North Carolina. The Bennett campus is built in a quadrangle shape and is surrounded by four walls. The ceremonial Bearden Gate is at the entrance to the campus and is opened only twice a year. The Bearden Gate is in perfect alignment with the doors of the Annie Merner Pfeiffer Chapel where all ceremonies and convocations take place. The campus has walkways that line the campus and the lawn known as the "Unbroken Green" because people are not allowed to walk on it, is decorated with magnolia trees that are in perfect alignment with each other.

Spelman College is located in one of the largest cities in the United States, namely, Atlanta, Georgia, and it has a student body of approximately 2,000. Spelman College is located in a section of the city referred to as the Atlanta University Center (AUC). In addition to Spelman, the AUC is comprised of Clark University-Atlanta, the Interdenominational Theological Center, Morris Brown College, and Morehouse College (an all men's college). Spelman's motto "Our Whole School for Christ" reflects the deep religious faith and beliefs of its founders Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles.

Both colleges will be cited interchangeably to illustrate comparisons and similarities among the development of sisterhood and socialization processes of African-American women.

The Value of Sisterhood

Through the case study analysis, the socialization process and integration is explained conceptually through the value of sisterhood. The value of sisterhood and community is prevalent on both the campuses, but each institution has different activities which facilitate the socialization process of sisterhood. The term sisterhood is used as a metaphor for family and community on both campuses. Students are not biologically sisters, but they are sisters in terms of a common experience, a common goal, and the faculty and administrators represent surrogate parents who want them to succeed. On both campuses there are rituals of incorporation and rituals of entering and exiting, which are designed to welcome newcomers into the campus community, and also used as a method of transition from one role in the community to another. Each of these rituals will be discussed for each college.

At Bennett College, the bonding of sisterhood begins each academic year, and each first year student is given a big sister, who is a member of the junior class. This begins the bonding experience between the freshman and junior class. This relationship continues until the big sister

is a senior and graduates, and then the little sister will become a big sister the following year. These sisterhood relationships are intended to be a way of bringing the community together while at the same time allowing for upperclassmen to mentor lower classmen. The big sister is responsible for helping her little sister with her academics if she is having problems, showing her the campus, and helping her to become acclimated as a student. The end of this sister bonding involves a ceremony where the little sister adorns her big sister with an academic robe on Senior Day.

Spelman College hosts a ceremony for the induction of its female students into the bonding of sisterhood. This ceremony follows a number of different activities that take place during orientation week, at the beginning of a semester, and is a highlight of the week when new students are welcomed officially into the Spelman sisterhood. This ceremony is a ritual of incorporation which is designed to welcome newcomers into the campus community, and it is also used as a method of transition from one role in the community to another.

The word sister is used as a term of endearment for fellow students, alumnae, faculty, and administrators of Spelman. "That's my Spelman Sister." This phrase was repeated often in interviews with students, alumnae, faculty, and administrators of Spelman College. This endearing term reflects the close-knit community of the college. "My Spelman Sister" is a way for members of the community to identify other members and it is used as a form of campus language.

The Hooding Ceremony

The value of sisterhood is an overwhelming theme in the socialization of Black women at Bennett. At the beginning of each academic year, they are given a big sister, and this sister bonding begins between the first year student and junior class. This relationship continues until the big sister is a senior and graduates, and then the little sister will become a big sister the following year.

The big sister and little sister relationships continue until the senior year of the big sister and the hooding ceremony, which is a closure to this bonding. During the hooding ceremony the little sister adorns her big sister with her first academic hood. An administrator said, "This is the last outward bonding gesture between these students, and students have tears running down their faces as they realize this is the last time they will have such a common experience together."

Senior Day

Senior day is held every spring on Thursday, usually in the month

of March. This is the first time that graduating seniors have an opportunity to put on their academic regalia. This ceremony is taken very seriously on the campus and seniors and sophomores are given a half day of classes. At four o'clock the entire campus community comes together in Annie Merner Pfeiffer Chapel to watch the robing of the seniors by their little sisters, which is the sophomore class.

The seniors and the sophomores march in a processional from the campus gym wearing white dresses, flesh-tones stockings, and black shoes. They march through the Bearden Gate and around the campus into the chapel. The faculty, administrators and staff are robed in their academic regalia and they follow this processional into the chapel.

One graduate of the class of 1996 recalls:

Senior day is when seniors get their robes and then there is a program that is held at four o'clock. The whole campus comes together on Senior Day. Seniors march from the gym wearing their robes from the gym, across through the Bearden Gates, and the sophomores and the seniors are on each side. The faculty and staff are robed in their academic attire and they are in the processional. After the program there is a special dinner that the sophomore's class organized for the seniors.

During this ceremony graduating seniors are hooded with their academic hood by their little sisters. After this ceremony seniors are required to wear their academic regalia to convocations as a symbol of their accomplishments and the beginning of their transition from student to graduate.

The Tradition of Sisterhood

The value of sisterhood is a continuous theme from the moment new students walk on the campus of Spelman, and are told about Spelman sisterhood. The first week of orientation activities are developed for new students to help them understand the rich history of Spelman College and what is expected of them as Spelman students. One of the activities requires that new students be paired with one younger alumna and one older alumna. The alumnae talk to the students about the history and tradition of the college. First year students have to approach upperclassmen, faculty, and administrators and request permission to ask questions about Spelman. If they get the answer right, they get a signature. New students have to get approximately one hundred signatures. If the student sings the Spelman Hymn, the student gets three signatures. This process is all a part of getting students to understand the history of Spelman, and the expectations that faculty, administrators, and staff have of students.

Induction into the Sisterhood

During orientation week upperclassmen bang at the doors of all new students and wake them up in the early hours of the morning. Students are supposed to be unaware of this ritual, and if they do know about it, they don't know when it will occur and when they will be awakened during the night. Alumnae note, "They come banging on the door telling you to get up and they wake you up and they wake you up out of your sleep." An administrator/alumna says:

We wake them up in the middle of the night and take them to the Chapel, and require them to sing the Spelman hymn. It makes them angry when they first do it, but they love it because the next day it's always powerful. Here it is 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning, and we're sitting in Sister's Chapel. We've got hair rollers on and all that. Everybody says their name out in Sister's Chapel no matter how many freshmen there are, so everyone gets to hear their names echo in the Chapel. And then they sing the Spelman Hymn maybe ten times, which helps them learn the hymn. I think it gives them a sense they've been through something almost like pledging, or whatever that emotion brings out.

Later that evening at seven o'clock an induction ceremony takes place on campus at which the young women are required to wear the Spelman uniform which is a white dress, flesh-toned stockings, and black shoes. This ceremony is a candlelight service in which new students are then inducted into the sisterhood.

Rituals of Entering and Exiting

Both Bennett College and Spelman College have dedicated rituals of entering and exiting socialization processes and traditions that help students in their transitions from student to alumnae. This particular ritual focuses on the fact that some colleges have special symbols or artifacts that are dedicated to the exiting and entrance of students (e.g., Bearden Gates of Bennett and the Alumnae Arch of Spelman).

Introduction to the Bennett Community

The ritual of introducing all new students to the Bennett community is called "Convocatum Est." This is a formal ceremony to introduce the new members of the campus community, and it is a transition from outsider to actually becoming a member of the Bennett family. This ceremony requires all new students to dress in white dresses flesh-toned stockings, and black shoes. The young women organize at the Colleges Gym, and they line up for a procession that will go from the gym through the Bearden Gate across the campus and into the Annie Merner Pfeiffer Chapel.

During this ceremony, new students are introduced to the entire campus community by having their names and hometown spoken aloud in the Chapel. As names are being called, students check their names and hometowns in the register. The calling of a person's name is a declaration of their arrival, and for all of those around them to take notice of this particular person's entry. This call is a declaration of the new students' arrival at Bennett. This is where the students are officially introduced to the college community, and this is an opportunity for everyone to see the new faces. An alumna discusses this experience and remembers:

Everybody is looking at you to see who these new students are. Anyone who has matriculated at Bennett is in that book... And people are watching and they are watching while you're up there signing the book and they are looking to see what you're wearing and asking did she put on a slip? How did she come down those stairs? And the upperclassmen are really watching you and the professors are watching you, too.

The Bearden Gate

The Bearden Gate is the ceremonial gate and is named after a former dorm matron at Bennett, Catherine Kennedy Bearden. The gate is opened only two times a year, when first year students are introduced to the Bennett community and Senior Day. The Bearden Gate "...represents many hopes and dreams for the students and welcomes them to the new life, to the community of educated men and women on the high occasion of graduation" (Brown, 1998, p. 11).

The Parting Ceremony at Spelman

The Parting Ceremony takes place during student orientation, and it is a way of bringing new members into the campus community. The ritual involves first year students going through a ceremony in which they are separated from their parents and given to the president of Spelman. A graduate of 1999 recalls this ceremony:

The President says to our parents "thank you for giving your daughter to me." Then there is a drum roll and you walk under an arch with your parents. As you come from under the arch your parents are instructed to go to the left, and we went to the right. When you go to the right, the President gives us a hug and takes us from our parents. But when you graduate you go under the Ivy arch and you are reunited with your parents.

The Alumnae Arch

The Alumnae arch is located within the campus oval, and it's made out of ivy. The arch is symbolic of graduating seniors leaving Spelman,

and moving into the role of alumnae. Most students are told at orientation that it is bad luck for students to walk underneath the arch before it is time for them to do so. After a special graduate service is held in Sister's Chapel, the graduating seniors along with alumnae go out to the oval for this ceremony. Alumnae who are present go through the arch first starting with oldest alumnae present going through first until they get to the senior class. The graduating senior goes through the arch and is greeted by the President and their family as they exit the college and enter into "greater service."

Class Day

Class Day is when the senior class comes together before graduation to reflect on their experiences and time spent at Spelman. During this ceremony the class valedictorian gives a speech known as the "ivy oration." After the ceremony the class valedictorian plants ivy beside one of the campus buildings.

Comparative Findings

In examining the socialization of Black women in education one will note that the process was deliberate and systematic. The early socialization of Black girls at these colleges focused on moral development, spirituality, behavior, appearance, and intellectual development. The White women missionaries sought to control every aspect of the Black women's education. To understand socialization theory, one must realize that processes of socialization are implemented through some type of social control. Claussen (1968) notes, "...As an underlying basis for social control, socialization efforts are designed to lead the new member to adhere to the norms of the larger society or of the particular group into which he is being incorporated and to commit him to its future" (p. 6). In the past, women's colleges were referred to as "grooming schools." But to what extent are these schools still doing the same thing now? These institutions continue to educate black women, but they are still grooming them to be successful members of society.

In this study, the various rituals that take place on both campuses were described. There are rituals of incorporation that are designed to welcome newcomers into the campus community. Examples of this would be at Bennett College's "Convocatum Est" and Spelman College's "Induction into the Sisterhood" ceremonies. Rituals, ceremonies, symbols, and artifacts help to bring relevance to the culture's existence and purpose. In order for students to have a willing acceptance of groups' norms, the use of rituals becomes an important aspect of the process of socialization.

In order for socialization to be successful, participants of these two college cultures must influence those seeking entrance into the community, both knowingly and unknowingly. In the case of Bennett and Spelman, faculty, administrators, students (peer groups), and alumnae work together as socializing agents that are purveyors of the organizational culture. In order for these institutions to get the results that they desire, it is important for participants in the community to accept the relevance and significance of the cultural perspectives of the community.

This study is important because it shows insight into the environment that has focused specifically on the needs of Black women. As time has gone, by the mission statement, faces of faculty and administrators, and internal and external factors have changed, but the use of traditions, rituals, and ceremonies as symbols of the campus community connects the present day college with its past.

A major concern for these institutions in the future is that students do not always understand the relevance of rituals and traditions. One Spelman alumnae noted "tradition is only good when everyone enjoys doing it and they understand its relevance." This is valued at Bennett and Spelman where a lot of emphasis is placed on tradition and rituals so that the relevance of these activities can be understood and the new generation of students can be convinced to buy into their value system.

Note

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