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## Prelude

### **Black Fraternities and Sororities in Historical Perspective**

There have been black fraternities and sororities since the early days in tribal Africa. People have long found one reason or another to cluster together on a voluntary basis, which is the foundation of brotherhood or sisterhood. Tribal Africans were initiated into fraternities based on age. They had to prove themselves worthy by undergoing hardships, running in the forests alone, being separated from their families and friends, thinking and contemplating. When they had passed these hurdles, they were given secret codes and charged with the responsibility of upholding the values for which the groups stood.

Women followed roughly the same rules. There were ceremonies, called “rites of passage,” which marked off one status from another. Some of these initiation rites involved circumcision, perhaps the most widely publicized ones, because they so sharply conflicted with the values of Westerners. Jomo Kenyatta’s book *FACING MT. KENYA* is just one of the several which describe the rites that initiates went through. In West Africa there were the Poro Societies whose initiation ceremonies have been widely described.

African societies also used what anthropologists called a classificatory system in which people in about the same status and age were bound together and had about the same relationship to each other. Oftentimes the persons entering the same status saw themselves as a special club, which we would call a fraternity or sorority.

Secret societies were prohibited during the slave period, but many did exist. Quite often these societies had as their purpose the breaking of the bonds of servitude. Slaves were united, insofar as possible through such values. Probably one of the oldest of the African fraternities which survived in the New World was based on their agreement to continue the practice of some phases of voodoo. By holding onto the old teachings around the area of religion the slaves could retain a sense of integrity and unity. So wherever a slave saw another he could be practically sure that there was a similarity, even unity, based on a belief in old African values. This belief in spirit worship might be more important than the idea that there was unity in color for not all blacks were slaves and not all slaves were black. There had been a great deal of intermixing and a color range from dark to light was soon found in the New World. Because of the failure of owners to allow unsupervised gatherings of slaves, for fear that they might foment trouble, the secret societies could not flourish openly. This did not mean that one slave would not help another. But before the Revolutionary War, Prince Hall petitioned the British Government to charter a Masonic Lodge among blacks in North America, among freemen who had previously been Masons. This lodge was probably the first recognized black fraternity in the New World. Its counterpart for women became the Eastern Star.

After the Civil War black people began to get some schooling, though a few had been given that privilege before the war. Phi Beta Kappa was the first Greek letter society established on an American campus. It was begun in 1776 at William and Mary College in Virginia. The idea that Greeks loved learning and that people who loved learning had much in common was the germ giving rise to Phi Beta Kappa. There were no academic requirements at first for membership in the association, just a willingness to learn more in the artistic and cultural fields. The atmosphere was hostile to science and so the only people who could qualify for Phi Beta Kappa were those in such fields as the liberal arts. Practical scientists then had very limited status on the campuses of America.

As more people went to college more societies sprang up. Every school had several academic societies and some for other purposes. Uniforms, grips, and other rituals were used to distinguish members. Because some of the schools of the East did not so freely practice racial discrimination a few blacks were admitted to membership in campus societies if they were otherwise qualified.

It was in the late 1890s when, following the Hayes-Tilden Compromise that segregation began to be widely practiced in the U.S. Blacks were systematically excluded from a large variety of organizations and were forced to try to build their own societies. Some claim that Booker T. Washington helped to encourage segregation by offering his 1895 Cotton States Exposition speech during which he asserted that the races could be as separate as the fingers in regard to those things social but one as the hand in things relating to mutual progress. In the late 1890s the Sigma Pi Phi Boulé was organized, its membership comprised of black men of achievement. They wanted to provide models of success and learning so that other blacks might want to emulate them in their own achievements. The Boulé was exclusive, barring men without college degrees, holdings, material wealth, or community status. The Boulé was probably the first organization to try to make a national black group noted especially for its learning, business influence, and community standing. It was almost natural that they would encourage younger men in college to follow their example.

Greek letter societies followed the pattern of the times when nearly all institutions in America were segregated. The concept was called parallelism: blacks would establish a counterpart of all societies and clubs and actions of whites. They would develop their own society, but on the same basis of the whites. Black schools, churches, lodges, communities, businesses, and myriad other activities, banks, professions, etc., would be established and embellished. The concept today would be called apartheid. And since blacks attending the colleges above the Mason-Dixon Line would

scarcely be allowed to join white societies, they would begin their own. These societies had as their purposes generally black improvement under the heading of scholarship and service, though other terms were often used. The counterpart black academic society was Alpha Kappa Mu which was said to be the black Phi Beta Kappa, admitting only the most accomplished of black students. The attempt was even to limit Alpha Kappa Mu to the same fields of study as Phi Beta Kappa.

The social fraternity movement began on white college campuses after the Civil War for the most part when there was a general expansion of youth going to college. Harvard and Yale had their Clubs which took the place of national fraternities and so did Radcliffe, Smith, Wesleyan, etc. But in the more common schools it was found that students loved these organizations and would pay to join them.

But fraternities and sororities have other functions. They help a student learn to present himself or herself better. Confidence is stressed through the pledge process, along with better social adjustment. You become better disciplined, caring more about those around you. If you are too shy, you open up more. If you are too forward and aggressive some of the steam is taken out of you. Whatever the group does is usually for the benefit of the pledge, or so it is believed.

Some say the fraternities and sororities are rating and sorting groups, helping members to find possible mates by giving them groups with whom they may relate. In years past certain fraternities paired with certain sororities, so it seemed in the public mind. Much of that has changed. One Greek is as good as another. They all stress very similar values. They stand for the student's making the most of oneself, developing a sense of humanism and appreciation for those underneath and that efforts are not forgotten to try to uplift those who need it.

During my day all Greeks had high status. We had to know the names of all Greeks on our campus regardless of whether they were affiliated with our fraternity or sorority. We had to show signatures of all Greeks on campus during our pledge period. There was believed to be a sense of harmony and brotherhood in Greekdom. No matter what colors a person wore he or she was expected to stand a little taller, be a bit more outstanding, show a little more leadership, be more highly self-motivated to use talents and resources wisely. I hope that much has not changed. I don't think it is chauvinistic to expect that Greeks provide much of the leadership on campus so that when they get out in the world this will be a natural extension of what they have been doing all along.

And I do not need to say that most Greeks have more fun than non-Greeks. Even the service projects they carry out are fun and learning experiences. Other students look up to Greeks, if they demand it by their deportment and achievement. Any fallen Greek is damaging to the whole Greek movement. So when you wear the colors remind yourself that you represent something that many others would like to find in themselves. You are a little special; you made the grades, you took the blows; you showed that you are trying to stand for something.

Several years ago I asked a particular church pastor in the black community to allow a Greek society, the Omegas, to present a public program which would have benefited the community. He said no, that the House of God was not a fitting place for Greek activities to take place. I was hurt for in more than 20 years of working with college students and Greeks there had been no separation between community and congregation and campus. We had tried for years to have at least one public program per year in the black community. This community had not seen black Greek societies and thought they behave like some of the boys and girls of the other ethnicity who are in Greek societies. The pastor, not a college man, did not know that we tried to be of benefit to the community, to serve as inspiration to the youth who have no hope. Role modeling was not invented by the present generation. But for this pastor all Greeks are the same--partying, getting in trouble, and behaving in

ways unbecoming gentlemen, ladies, educated, or even sensible people. We do not need that type of image.

I had some reservations 11 years ago (when this was written the Greeks had been on this campus that many years), when the first black Greek societies were formed on the campus. I did not want black youth to get a poor reputation in the community. I did not want them to be distracted from the things of the mind. But I also realized that it is not illegitimate to be a black Greek. It is one of the many good things that we have kept alive and well over the difficult years of our transition from Africa to the more general society. I believe our organizations can compete with others, that we can attract participants of all ethnicities. On this campus (University of Arkansas) we have had at least two white members pledge and be initiated into black societies. That is a poor record but it is better than most of the white society records. Around the country there are a few members who are white in each of the black Greek societies. They are there because they found something in us which they liked and wanted to be a part of our groups. We must find something in ourselves to make us want to do the very best that we can.

On campuses today black students are not always the first of their families to go to college. Parents, one or both, may be Greek. They want their children to become Greek. Make them proud. Get your grades together and go Greek. People will talk about you if you do and if you don't. The choice is yours. The ball is in your court. We do not apologize for being Greek. We don't have to apologize for Thurgood Marshall, U.S. Supreme Court Justice, Marva Collins, nationally known educator, Samuel Lee Kountz, world famous kidney transplant surgeon, Carter G. Woodson, Charles Wesley, Benjamin E. Mays, Jesse Jackson, dozens of world class athletes, and people of general good character who are not in the limelight. A Greek society will not make you a better person; you will have to do that yourself. But it will help you get a better handle on yourself, to become more introspective. It will encourage you to do your best, to sharpen your talent, to blame yourself for your legitimate failures, to bring you out of that shell of narrowness. Not all of you need that help, but even if you don't, you will probably be a lot better off being a Greek than not being one. (Delivered at the Delta Sigma Theta Convocation, University of Arkansas, Fall 1985).

### **Addendum to Prelude**

When the students at the University of Arkansas, at which I teach, found that I was Greek, they wanted to know what that life was like during my time as an undergraduate. It had been nearly 20 years since my initiation in 1950 that these questions began to be asked. Twenty years was a fair length of time to be Greek. Then, I was not so hopelessly removed by age from the students. I could still relate to them. As time went on the questions continued, particularly from the newer and younger students, for others graduated and moved on to other activities in the more adult world.

I also changed and, before it, my time as an Omega Man was approaching 40 years. It was time to stop repeating the stories presented through the years and to write at least some of them down. My intention had been to pen a memoir entitled *Forty Years a Que*, which was done, but which was hidden in my cluttered files. Occasionally, students came by wanting information from more senior brothers and I would pull out the manuscript. They would look quizzically at the pictures, read a little of the prose, or just sit and talk about Greekdom then. Before I could bat my eyes, ten more years had passed and the same stories were being told. Now I was slower of speech, grayer, more seasoned. The titled had to be changed to *Fifty Years a Que*. *It would be changed later because of the fast passage of time.*

This memoir is dedicated to the many young people who were curious about what black Greekdom was about now more than half a century ago. It is further dedicated to the memory of my son, Bryce, who followed in his father's footsteps to become an Omega legacy.

I am glad that my family and some relatives found something positive in the example I tried to set as an Omega Man. It is with great pride that I mention them and their interest and dedication to the principles on which the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Incorporated, was founded. In this work, materials about other fraternity members who had a big influence on my life are included. I cite especially Bro. Charles D. Henry, from my hometown of Conway, Arkansas, and my old college roommate Bro. John M. Kilimanjaro, with whom I always had a running competition. It was invigorating as well as challenging. We were the best of friends and remained so through the years. Perhaps it was the spirit of Omega that held us together in something of an unusually tight bond. Steve, as we called him, was a creative person, a writer of his own scripts. Sometimes his ideas were thought of as a little bit unusual, but that is often the characteristic of a creative and talented person. Perhaps Steve's major accomplishment was the opening and continuation over some 50 years of a community paper, *The Carolina Peacemaker*, in Greensboro, North Carolina.

When the children were growing up we tried to have them associate with persons who were considered as "going somewhere." This did not mean they could not associate with children of all social descriptions and categories. If there is anything we detested, it was the snobbishness of false social class. It was not easy for college professors' children to grow up. The little differences that we had in terms of homes, automobiles, and other status symbols were not sufficient to place us in another category. But there was a difference in perceptions of people toward people who had advanced degrees. While they might not have had the money, the learning they were assumed to have was enough sometimes to cause others to stand back off them.

The boys were pretty good friend-makers. They engaged in the rough and tumble with children of all classes. They could mix with the high and the low and recognized no basic differences between any of them. They were not good athletes but they could carry their part. They were runners, not really outstanding, but they were pretty good. And they held down some of the back chairs in strings. They were pretty fair students overall. The main thing was that they tried to develop winning personalities, to be friends to all, to take their lumps without crying.

The girls were more withdrawn. Maybe it was harder for girls to grow up than boys. The reins on them were a lot tighter, but they imposed some on themselves. Their early achievements in schools were not as notable as the boys. But that did not matter much to us.

We tried to instill in the children the meanings of things we did when we were much younger. As our parents told us of their elementary school days--that was the limit of their schooling—we told our children of our days at the various levels of schooling. When they were small we told them of the exciting days we had in grammar and junior high school. I was particularly pleased to tell them how I cried the first time I was to kiss a girl in a part in elementary school. My mother still has the little tuxedo they made out of very thin cloth for me to wear in the school play. They learned all about our spelling bees, our attempts at playing sports, tricks on teachers. We couldn't believe that a 32 mile bus ride to Little Rock when we were growing up was a two hour affair and that one day on my first ever trip to Little Rock, a school outing to the zoo, I was given 15 cents for my lunch and dinner. I would not spend a cent, even after some heavy prodding by my teacher, Mrs. Hill. Needless to say, I was a very hungry child when we reached home in the late afternoon.

As they got older and Omega men came around, we introduced them. I told them about these men being brothers. Of course that encouraged them to want to know what we meant. There were symbols displayed around the house which caught their attention as they grew up.

Our older son was 15 when we began a chapter of Omega Psi Phi on the campus of the University of Arkansas. The younger boy was eight. There were Omega men in and out of the house fairly frequently. My brother-in-law, my blood brother in California, and some of their friends, as well as faculty members at the campus were at the house often enough to impress upon the boys what Omega meant. At that age they were somewhat encouraged by some of the visitors to consider Omega when they were ready.

In an effort to widen our own knowledge and theirs too, we traveled fairly often. We drove to Mexico City just before the 1968 Olympics. But one year we went to Washington, D.C. A highlight of that visit was to Howard University to see the shrine of the Omegas. The boys were still pretty young but I am glad that made an impact on them.

After my older son had been in college for a year he decided to join a pledge line. His line was discontinued by order of the National Office after a pledge was killed in initiation rituals. That son joined the Air Force after graduation and will probably complete his initiation when he has a chance to do so. It was my younger son who most internalized the meaning of the fraternity. I fondly recall one year that the chapter was having some sort of function in a downtown hotel. My wife and I were at the head table. Somewhere through the deliberations we saw our youngster casually stroll into the meeting, come up to the table and ask us for something, I don't recall what it was. But he was very impressed with whatever the Omegas were doing. I had no idea at the time that he would become a great believer in the fraternity.