

Introduction

Just a few decades ago, a reference work titled the *Encyclopedia of African American Society* would have been very different from the two-volume work offered here. Obviously, the sheer passage of time makes updating necessary (Tiger Woods wasn't born until 1975, and a young girl named Mae Jemison only dreamed of becoming an astronaut). But the differences I refer to are more complex than mere updating to reflect the brute accumulation of facts that always accompanies the ongoing movement of time. Perhaps the major difference between what might have been published sometime during the 1960s and the entries chosen here can be summed up in two words: *greater diversity*. Back then, the editor might have given great consideration to an alternative title, such as the *Encyclopedia of the Black Community*. Because the black population of the United States has always been characterized with more diversity and nuance than Americans' everyday references to it might suggest, that title would have been something of a misnomer even then, but at least until the late 1970s, blacks were prone to refer to themselves as "the community." Also, the much higher degree of social and economic cohesiveness that characterized the black population back in earlier decades certainly provided license to those who referred to black Americans as a "community," even if the term might not have been justified strictly on sociological grounds.

At the beginning of the 1960s, African Americans (who of course weren't called by that name but were referred to as "Negroes" or "colored people") were on the verge of asserting themselves to be Black Americans. That assertion was a pivotal stage in a process of identity change initiated by a self-awakening and movement toward a new, more assertive, and

confident consciousness of who Americans of African descent were and where they should be going. At the time, Americans of African descent were largely segregated in nearly every major segment of life. That segregation both reflected and enforced a harsh discrimination designed to keep them in an inferior and subordinated status that denied their individual differences and therefore their basic humanity. That segregation also enforced and sustained among blacks a strong sense of a linked fate—a belief in a common future that would be shaped by the existence of similar needs, goals, and obstacles.

Although a strong belief that Americans of African descent share a linked fate persists among African Americans today, the social and economic cohesiveness that once existed is no longer a sociological fact or as prominent a factor in many African Americans' everyday lives. Early in the twenty-first century, African Americans, as a distinct population more or less identified in U.S. census statistics, are nearly as diverse as many other ethnic or racial groups. While African Americans are still disproportionately poor (they vie with Hispanic Americans for the distinction of having the highest poverty rate among major race or ethnic groups, approximately 24% and 22% for African Americans and Hispanics, respectively, in 2002), increasing numbers of African Americans are also among the most affluent and influential citizens in the nation. Young entrepreneurs have amassed fortunes in the growing mass consumer market that appeals to youth of all races, and an African American woman succeeded an African American man as U.S. secretary of state in 2005. The number of African Americans remains disproportionately high among high school dropouts and lags behind the average American

college graduation rates, but unlike the 1960s, black students can be found in every major institution of higher learning in the country. Furthermore, an African American woman, Ruth J. Simmons, is president of historic Brown University and is one of several African Americans who have headed major academic institutions with predominantly white student bodies. Such diversity in African Americans' college attendance patterns has meant that the number of historically black colleges and universities has declined, but many such institutions continue to thrive and graduate large numbers of students who become leaders in all fields of society.

The formal definition of *society* that is relevant to the *Encyclopedia of African American Society* may be given in two parts: a society is “an enduring and cooperating social group whose members have developed organized patterns of relationships through interaction with one another” and have “common traditions, institutions, and collective activities and interests” (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, tenth edition). Thus, although the African American population has been transformed by incredible social and economic diversity during the past few decades, its venerable institutions have been retained, and its collective activities and the organizations required to pursue those activities live on, although each has had to adapt to changing conditions both within the greater society and among African Americans themselves. The nearly 700 entries in the *Encyclopedia of African American Society* reflect both the continuity of cultural and social institutions and patterns of interaction among African Americans and between them and others, as well as the increased diversity evident within the African American population.

The objective of the *Encyclopedia of African American Society* is to capture the spirit of the aforementioned idea of a “society”—to provide a reference base for those interested in obtaining information about the significant events, institutions, and activities that have taken African Americans along the path leading to their present positions and that have provided the source of continuing cohesiveness that allows both African Americans and the rest of the world to think of Americans of African descent in terms that justify the nomenclature “African American society.” Thus, while biographic information on a

wide list of the usual suspects important to African American history (e.g., Phillis Wheatley, David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, W. E. B. Du Bois, Jackie Robinson, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., the AME Church, the Baptist Church, NAACP, Tuskegee Institute) and scores of others can be found in the *Encyclopedia*, an effort has been made to focus on social events, issues, and ideas of consequence. The final result is therefore necessarily multidisciplinary, covering a broad range of categories.

We arrived at our selection of entries by assembling our choices into three general categories or groups: social issues, humanities, and people and places. The social issues discussed include social and civil movements, law and justice, economic growth, and policies and politics. Entries within the field of humanities cover areas including art, literature, popular culture, religious life, and education.

The reader searching for entries on specific people will, as mentioned above, find many of them listed alphabetically by name as main entries. However, information about some well-known people is not presented in that format. Instead, several of the longer or medium-length entries are accompanied by additional information in boxes that accompany topical entries. For example, biographical information on Ida B. Wells may be found in the “In Their Own Words” feature that accompanies the entry on the Anti-Lynching bill sought by African American activists during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This box quotes her reactions to the Silent Protest Parade of 1917.

A word or two about the breadth of coverage in this book within the three general topics noted above is in order. Entries on social issues include relatively long entries on traditional topics such as abolition and the civil rights movement—two topics that tie the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and show continuity in both the struggle for the rights of African Americans and the struggle to achieve the vision of full democracy in America. The reader will also find medium-length entries covering issues such as feminism and the Afrocentric movement, as well as shorter entries on topics such as the TransAfrica Forum and the bread riot of 1863. On the general subject of “policies and politics,” entries range from transracial adoption and affirmative action to the National Welfare Rights

Organization and the relation between Italian Americans and African Americans. Entries on social issues also include a number of topics related to law and justice, such as capital punishment and racial violence, as well as a long entry on Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and an entry on *Richmond v. Croson*. The latter entry discusses an important 1989 U.S. Supreme Court case that set benchmarks affecting the ability of cities and other local governments to redress past and ongoing discrimination by encouraging minority business formation through specific programs meant to increase minority contracting with such governments. On the subject of economic growth, we include several important labor market and business topics such as domestic workers, steelworkers, the automobile industry, and black entrepreneurs.

Entries in the area of humanities include especially broad coverage of topics on culture. Users may find, for example, entries on two of Harlem's famous institutions (the newspaper *The Amsterdam News* and the Apollo Theatre), long entries on visual art and popular music, and an explanation of the southern vernacular term "Miss Ann," to mention only a few. The coverage of religious life includes entries on the major churches serving African American society as well as less numerically representative groups such as Black Hebrews and other entries on specific topics such as the clergy and slave worship practices.

The topics and entries I discussed here represent just a fraction of what is available in this two-volume reference work. I have not mentioned, for example, coverage of important social and economic developments such as the fact that some of the nation's most important corporations are now headed by African

Americans. I have also not mentioned that the evolution of black consciousness appears to be ongoing. The last decennial census allowed people of mixed ancestry to declare themselves members of more than one racial category. Hundreds of thousands took the opportunity to do so. In place of what previously would have been, in the census data at least, a population of black people uncomplicated by the result of real-world interracial interactions, we now have another source of diversity and a subpopulation calling themselves of mixed race but still, in most cases, no less proud of their African heritage. That cultural and social development is reflected in several entries such as "Colorism" and "Biracialism." Nor have I discussed that along with black poverty and joblessness, as well as segregated housing patterns producing black housing projects in many major cities, we also have African American wealth and educational attainment. Moreover, many African Americans live in affluent predominantly white suburbs such as Cleveland's Shaker Heights and New York's Westchester County, as well as affluent suburbs such as Prince Georges County, Maryland, where the majority of the population is black.

Each of these developments demonstrating the great diversity and continuity characterizing African American society is remarked on in some way in the entries that follow this introduction. I could discuss these changes in even greater specificity, but there is of course no better way for the reader to taste these significant developments than to open the pages and start reading.

—Gerald D. Jaynes
General Editor