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The Migration of People from the Caribbean to the Bahamas

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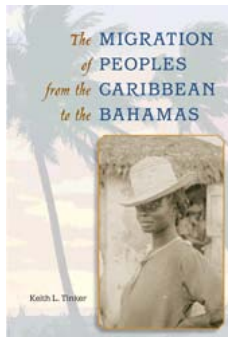
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Keith L. Tinker. *The Migration of Peoples from the Caribbean to the Bahamas*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011. x and 199 pp., maps, bibliography, index. \$69.95. Hardcover, ISBN-13: 978-0813035314.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archeology Newsletter by Jane Eva Baxter and John Mazzeo, DePaul University.

Dr. Keith Tinker has produced a largely descriptive study on the nature of migration of peoples to and from the Bahamas. In doing so, he attempts to explore the very real but often ignored relationship between the Bahamas and the West Indies as a socially and historically constituted region, and to examine how migration has shaped and in some respects defined Bahamian identity. He summarizes his work in saying (p. 167):

It is an established fact that migration is an essential and widely accepted aspect of West Indian life. It is equally established that all West Indians -- including Bahamians -- are descendants of immigrants. Bahamians, like other West Indians are dramatic personae who include descendants of European colonists, African slaves, indentured Asian laborers, Catholics, Protestants, Hindus, Muslims, Rastafarians, and "Voodoo" adherents, planters and merchants, felons and pirates, all fashioned into a fascinating, restless tropical *mélange*.

While migration is the platform from which the author chooses to examine Bahamian history, the idea of migration is only minimally placed into broader historical and theoretical contexts, and the result is a series of particularistic treatments of migration events and specific cultural exchanges. The first substantive chapter is a summary of Bahamian history and prehistory to 1888, which skims the surface of historical narratives that can be found in depth elsewhere, but also effectively recasts this well known history as one that can be understood as a continual ebb and flow of peoples moving into and around the Bahamian archipelago. This

recasting of deeper history and prehistory sets the stage for the remainder of the work, which focuses on migrations between people from specific places in the West Indies and the Bahamas. Chapters on Barbadian, Jamaican, Haitian, and Turks and Caicos migration focus on the historical circumstances that compelled people to migrate to the Bahamas from particular places over the course of history. These chapters allow the reader to comprehend how people from elsewhere viewed the Bahamas, were treated relative to the Bahamian population upon arrival, and how the influx of non-Bahamians has continually worked to shape Bahamian understandings of their cultural identity.

Particular emphasis is placed on the migration of Haitians, which has deep historical roots but is also a contemporary issue of paramount concern in the Bahamas. Dr. Tinker explains that Bahamians express a strong intolerance for Haitians and a fear that they pose a threat to the survival of Bahamian culture while at the same time Bahamians depend on the skilled labor of Haitians and obtain it at lower cost with the assistance of an exploitative work permit system. The chapter on post-independence West Indian migration and the Afterword describe the “pull” factors for recent Haitian migration, the degree to which Haitians have been integrated on different Bahamian islands, and their marginal living conditions that offer residents some protection against immigration enforcement.

The impact of this book on scholarship can be characterized as an attempt to integrate a Bahamian narrative into West Indian history in a way that demonstrates the interconnectedness of these many nations, as well as their place in broader hemispheric history. Dr. Tinker’s narrative shows the historical depth of these connections as well as the circumstances and implications of migration into the later 20th century, thereby setting the stage for contemporary understandings of regional and national identities.

There is a significant weakness to this work: particularly that the bibliography ends in the mid-1990s and no contemporary scholarship is integrated into the content or analysis. This deficit is notable throughout the book from the characterization of prehistoric migration to the discussion of recent and contemporary movement of Haitians into the Bahamas. As a result, the concept of migration and its broader social and historical impacts is not aligned with the nearly 20 years of scholarship that have transpired since these sources were compiled. In particular, his discussion of Haitian migration relies on sources from the late 1970s and would have been aided

by an engagement with more recent scholarship produced by The College of the Bahamas.¹ The greatest strength of this work comes from the source material, particularly the series of oral history interviews the author conducted with migrants who came to the Bahamas from other West Indian islands. The circumstances of these interviews are not revealed to the reader, but the voices of individuals who were a part of the historical movements described in the book deeply enrich the primary documentary material.

Finally, it is worth noting that Dr. Tinker writes this work with a clear Bahamian voice. The narrative style is at once scholarly and also one of a Bahamian citizen who understands on a personal and cultural level the implications that migration has had on his country. This combination of scholarly history and personal reflection allows the reader to understand the complexity of migration in the West Indies and also as the author intended -- as a platform to launch an exploration of Bahamian identity.

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1. The College of the Bahamas. 2005. Haitian Migrants in the Bahamas 2005. Technical report for the International Organization for Migration.