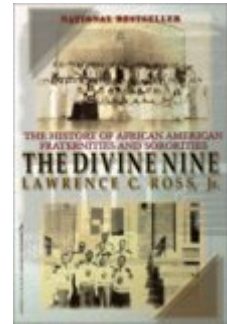


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lawrence C. Ross, Jr. *The Divine Nine: The History of African American Fraternities and Sororities*. New York: Kensington Publishing Corporation, 2000. x + 465 pp. \$16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57566-634-1.

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A Guide to African American Greek Organizations

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Lawrence Ross, Jr. states that his purpose for writing *The Divine Nine*, a “national bestseller,” was to provide a history of the organization of African American organizations that “stress[es] education, philanthropy, self-improvement and excellence” (p. xii). This compilation of information about nine Greek organizations is aimed at current “fraternity and sorority members, prospective members of these organizations, high school students and all those interested in African American history” (p. xii).

The Divine Nine is divided into four sections: Fraternities, Sororities, Conversations, and General Information. Section One, Fraternities, summarizes the founding, community activism and philanthropic activities of Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, Omega Psi Phi, Phi Beta Sigma, and Iota Phi Theta. Section Two, Sororities, is organizationally parallel and focuses on Alpha Kappa Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, Zeta Phi Beta, and Sigma Gamma Rho. Through a “Question and Answer” format, selected members of both collegiate and alumni chapters offer information about the chapter’s social events, academic standing, stepshow participation, and other characteristics.

Undeniably, the author’s underlying message is that fraternal (fraternities and sororities) affiliation ensures one’s success in higher education and professional life. To that end, he lists the names of “famous” alumni/nae drawn from the world of sports, entertainment, politics,

business and other spheres. While contemporary names predominate, one can also find references to scientists, social scientists, artists and Harlem Renaissance figures such as Percy Julian, E. Franklin Frazier, Marian Anderson, and Zora Neale Hurston.

In section Three, Conversations (or “The Achievers Talk”), twenty-eight men and women who represent The Divine Nine discuss what motivated them to join, whether or not they remain an active member, and what they consider to be the organization’s greatest legacy.

Section Four contains appended information related to the National Pan-Hellenic Council (including its position on stepshow conduct, rushing and hazing) as well as membership information for persons who are interested in joining the fraternities or sororities.

Although the book provides a historical background on the founding of the organizations, the subtitle, “The History of African American Fraternities and Sororities,” is a misnomer. Historians will find it particularly unsatisfactory for its reliance on anecdotal information and lack of documentation. As a reference guide or handbook for those who wish to better familiarize themselves with black fraternities and sororities, however, it serves as an interesting and informative text. In addition to the author’s target audience, I would recommend that this book be required reading for college student personnel staff members and made available for purchase at college/university bookstores.

The Divine Nine provokes, but fails to directly address, several significant questions. First, how has the role of black fraternal organizations evolved? In a recent conversation, one of my colleagues (a Sigma affiliated with the Tuskegee University chapter) remarked that during the 1950s and 1960s membership was virtually required, because fraternities were largely responsible for the social life of the campus. Non-members experienced a certain amount of isolation, even on the campus of an historically black institution. Second, are chapters that are located at majority white institutions forced to operate differently than those at black institutions? And finally, both white and black fraternities have recently been accused of injurious hazing activities. What are the larger implications of the role of hazing itself in respect to student life? On these and other issues of interest to scholars of higher education and African American life, Ross's work has little to say.

Those who are interested in African American social organization should also read the book, *Our Kind of People*, by Lawrence Otis Graham.[1] In Graham's exploration of the world of the black upper class, certain fraternities and sororities (in particular, AKA and Delta Sigma Theta) play a significant role at the collegiate level. Beyond that, however, adult organizations such as the Links, the Girl Friends, and Sigma Pi Phi (the Boule') continue many of the collegiate philanthropic traditions and networking opportunities. Membership in these organizations by invitation only—is predicated upon social class (another issue Ross avoids). Their emphasis on education as a key to excellence, however, is a value shared by the fraternities and sororities profiled in *The Divine Nine*.

Note

[1]. Lawrence Otis Graham. *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class* (New York: Harper-Perennial, 1999).

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