

A New Day for Blacks in *ECUADOR*

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When 23 Africans wrecked Spanish slave ship liberated themselves and created a palenque, a free Black community, in October 1553, they set a standard of resistance and empowerment that would inspire their descendants hundreds of years later. Today, Black Ecuadorians honor their ancestors by celebrating the National Day of Black People the first Sunday of October. This year, festivities included sports competitions, music concerts and an Afrocentric Catholic mass.

Those courageous Africans might be disappointed with their commemoration, however. There are few celebrations and ceremonies. In fact, says Black activist Catherine Chalá, "It is not a national holiday and it is not even well known. News about it is spread only within Black communities." Declared in a resolution by *Ecuador's* National Congress in 1997 after intense lobbying by Black organizations, the National Day of Black People is nevertheless considered a significant triumph. Considering the political and social environment in which Black Ecuadorians live, it is no surprise that this resolution is a very big deal.

Today in *Ecuador*, a South American nation of 12.1 million people with a land area about the size of Colorado, employers advertise for job applicants with a "good appearance," a euphemism for white or European characteristics. Landlords openly reject applications from Blacks looking for housing in middle-class areas. In *Ecuador*, you can see Whites in blackface on television and logos of major companies featuring caricatures of Blacks designed to look more like monkeys than humans.

In rural Black areas, lack of government investment is evident. In the province of Esmeraldas, which has the highest concentration of Afro-Ecuadorians, entire towns are without electricity, schools and other basic services and infrastructure. Many communities that live off the land there are being forced out as lumber, oil, mining and shrimp-farm companies (many of them U.S.-owned) exploit the natural habitat.

The percentage of Ecuadorians living below the poverty line jumped from 34 percent in 1995 to 56 percent by the end of the decade. The poverty rate grew fastest over the last decade in the coastal region of the country, where there is a higher concentration of Blacks.

Many Blacks are fleeing to major cities, but even the capital city, Quito, and the largest city, Guayaquil, offer them few modern amenities. "The urban [Black] community lives on the periphery of the city. There are no basic services, insufficient electricity, housing of very poor material. And there are few schools to attend," explains Ibsen Hernández, president of Afroamérica XXI, a civic group in Guayaquil. "They don't tell you that you can't study, but subtly they are saying that you can't."

"Marginalized, exploited, excluded from national development," is how Oscar Chala describes the daily reality of *Ecuador's* African descendants. An anthropologist in Chota, the northern valley region with a significant Black population descended from enslaved Africans, he says, "We are terribly vulnerable. We are the greatest mass of poor people in the country."

"The majority [of Blacks live] in misery. The majority is very poor. They are illiterate, unemployed, without health care, education," says Josefina Orovio, a federal official.

Tenacious racism and overwhelming poverty paint a grim portrait of Black life in *Ecuador*. Add to that a citizenry devoid of racial consciousness and it's easy to understand why Black oppression seems so intractable. But a bustling movement of activists is stirring up change, spurred by the triumphs of the bold political movement

of *Ecuador's* indigenous people and inspired by Black activism throughout the Americas.

"There's this fervor to organize," says Sheila S. Walker, who holds the Cosby Endowed Chair for the Humanities at Spelman College. Walker has visited every South American country except Guyana, as well as much of Central America and the Caribbean. As a guest of the U.S. Embassy in February, she made her first sojourn to *Ecuador*, where she gave Black History Month lectures around the country. "As compared to every place else I was, there were more [Black] organizations in *Ecuador*."

Blacks Don't Count

Known for eco-tourism, *Ecuador* boasts the world's highest active volcano (located in the Andes Mountains), a tropical Pacific coast and part of the Amazon rainforest. Ecological diversity is a source of national pride. Human diversity is another story.

In *Ecuador*, where African slavery lasted from 1534 to 1854, Spanish colonizers sought to forge a homogeneous population through *blanqueamiento*, a policy of "whitening" or making the population as visibly and culturally European as possible through race-mixing. Today, most Ecuadorians are considered *mestizo*, a Spanish-indigenous mix, although many identify themselves as White.

"Race-mixing, the center of national identity, involved indigenous people and Whites. Although indigenous people have been suffering tremendously from racism throughout history, they nevertheless are included in this ideological biology of national identity, while Blacks aren't," explains Jean Muteba Rahier, an anthropology professor at Florida International University in Miami.

As a result, Black Ecuadorians have been rendered virtually invisible and excluded from the education system and most employment sectors. *Ecuador's* constitution did

not acknowledge Afro-Ecuadorians as a distinct group until 1998.

The diversity of the Ecuadorian people is unclear. The picture may soon get a little clearer. *Ecuador's* 2001 census was the first to count citizens by race, after Black and indigenous Ecuadorians demanded it. "People want to be counted so that they can say [for example], 'This area is 90 percent Black. Why do we own no land?'" says Norman Whitten, an anthropology professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

The official figure the Ecuadorian government has been using for the Black population is 3 percent. Activists estimate the Black population to be as high as 15 percent. The final tabulations have not yet been released, but many expect that Black people will be undercounted because many do not self-identify as Black. Hernández acknowledges that in *Ecuador* it's still "not good business to identify yourself as Black."

With *Ecuador's* deepest roots, indigenous people represent between 25 and 50 percent, according to various estimates. Activists expect that they will also be undercounted. "The census asked, 'How do you define yourself: White, mestizo, indigenous or Black?' This depends on the level of consciousness," explains Oscar Chalá. "There are many mestizos that define themselves as Whites. So you have to be careful with this data."

[A Rich Culture](#)

Jacqueline Pavón is the coordinator of Intercultural Workshop, a monthly forum addressing Black and indigenous issues at Simon Bolívar Andean University in Quito. She is tall and slim, with a medium-brown complexion: "When I began to work here, people came looking for me, asking for Licenciada Pavón. (In *Ecuador*, licenciada is a graduate degree title for which there is no U.S. equivalent.) It was a surprise for mestizos who entered the office and saw a Black woman. It was a shock, a problem for them. They weren't able to [understand] how a Black woman could arrive to this

position."

After four years in the same job, Whites and mestizos meeting her for the first time still have the same reaction. "It seems that Black people are only good for domestic jobs, nurseries, messengers and cleaning. Not for sitting in a chair behind a desk and giving an opinion to a mestizo," says Pavón.

This writer, who taught at a university in Quito earlier this year, was mistaken for a maid several times despite her office casual dress --skirts or pants and a blazer.

Black men in *Ecuador* are equally limited by being stereotyped as physically strong and aggressive. As a result, the only jobs they can easily access are those of gardeners, security guards and bodyguards.

Activists say the stereotypes and lack of opportunity are slowly changing as the numbers of Afro-Ecuadorians finishing high school and going on to college have increased over the past decade (exact figures are unavailable). But Black children must learn in schools, in fact in an entire society, that ignores not only their presence, but also their rich history and culture.

"Either by running away from Spanish authority and establishing alternative communities or by contributing to the formation of colonial society as *slaves*, Africans set the tone for the development of *Ecuador*. That's been ignored," says Kris Lane, a professor of history at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va. "The African contribution is central, not just in terms of labor, but also in terms of resistance and culture." Music, literature and spiritual expression are some of the spheres of culture in which Afro-Ecuadorians have excelled.

Without such knowledge, however, racial consciousness and pride among Blacks in *Ecuador* is low. On one episode of a daily television game show, loosely translated as *No Holds Barred*, the White male host appeared in blackface, his makeup designed

to make him look more like a gorilla than a man. For this segment, the Afro-Ecuadorians in the audience were moved to the front row next to the host in an apparent attempt to mock Black people, yet none in the audience seemed disturbed by it.

Stories, incidents and language that demean Black and indigenous people are an open part of Ecuadorian popular culture. According to Ecuadorian folklore, for example, a man with kidney problems can be cured by having sex with a Black woman, an allusion to the persistent myth of super sexuality. Former professional basketball player Alvaro Alemán says spectators sometimes try to distract Black players by making monkey sounds.

It is in this social climate that professional soccer player Hugo Guerrón was pulled over by police March 2. Officers refused to believe the 24-year-old owned the new red Volkswagen Golf he was driving. One officer sprayed Guerrón in the face with tear gas, partially burning his corneas. A day later, José Caicedo, then a mid-ranking federal official, was being driven by a chauffeur in a government car when stopped by police. The officers didn't believe Caicedo, 35, was a bureaucrat. They beat him and threw him in jail for five days.

"It is incomprehensible [to the police] that a Black man would have a car when it is impossible for him to have access to a job," says Hernández, explaining why police abuse is no surprise. In neither case were officers punished or required to apologize. Guerrón had to pay \$250 for his own medical expenses after the attack. Caicedo had to pay \$1,000 in bail to get out of jail.

[Change Is Coming](#)

The United States' history of legal segregation left African Americans to create their own schools, churches and other institutions. No such history exists for Black Ecuadorians. The modern Afro-Ecuadorian movement extends back only 23 years to the founding in 1979 of the Center of Afro-Ecuadorian Studies, an organization that

researched Black culture and promoted racial consciousness. According to Oscar Chala, one of the Center's founders, there are now hundreds of Afro-Ecuadorian organizations.

"How do we create change? Little by little, through these small organizations from rural communities or cities, sitting down to dialogue, thinking of small but feasible things [we can do], not in grand things that don't get us anywhere," he says.

Black Ecuadorians have gotten much of their inspiration from the political movement of *Ecuador's* indigenous people, who commanded international attention with protests in 1990, 1992 and 2000. With minimal funding and support from multilateral banks and foreign governments just beginning to trickle in, a young Black social and political movement in *Ecuador* is advancing with little more than sheer will and ingenuity. As a consultant with PRODEPINE, a four-year-old foundation operated by Blacks and indigenous people, Chala is putting the strategy of change "little by little" to work. His organization supports 362 Black community organizations and 4,748 indigenous groups by distributing among them \$50 million in foreign-backed development loans, including \$25 million from the World Bank.

In July, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) brought 21 Black Latino community leaders, including six Ecuadorians, to Washington, D.C., for a month-long intensive training course on social organization management. The IDB is poised to fund a \$150,000 technical cooperation grant to identify the problems of Afro-Ecuadorians. Awaiting approval from the Ecuadorian government, the project will be carried out by four Black civil society groups, the mayor of Esmeraldas and the Federal Afro-Ecuadorian Development Corporation. The IDB has set aside another \$150,000 to help strengthen Black organizations in a project scheduled to begin in early 2003.

According to Hernandez, the only African American politician to aide Black Ecuadorians directly was Rep. Cynthia McKinney (D-Ga.). "She got the IDB to pay us a little more

attention, to at least put the issue of Afro-descendants on its agenda," he says.

Meanwhile, the Canadian government is funding small-scale development projects in Black communities through its Ecuadorian Canadian Development Fund established in 1991. The United States, among other countries, has also contributed to development efforts that reached Black communities. The U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) financed about 95 percent of a 10-year, \$20 million conservation project in northwest *Ecuador*, which ended in August. Run by the Atlanta-based development organization CARE, the project included a mandate to strengthen the Union of Black Organizations of Northern Esmeraldas, the National Confederation of Afro-Ecuadorians and the Regional Palenque Council. And in July, leading Afro-Ecuadorian historian Juan Garcia received a \$10,600 grant from the U.S. State Department to preserve and publish Black oral histories and photographs collected over 20 years.

Citizens of the World

Rahier contends Black activism over the last two decades has amplified not only because Afro-Ecuadorians followed the trail blazed by the indigenous movement, but also because of increasing exposure to Black political movements throughout the Americas. Garcia and several other young, Black Ecuadorians were inspired to create the Center of Afro-Ecuadorian Studies after returning from the First Congress of Black Culture of the Americas in Cali, Colombia. Black activists throughout South America have been meeting and learning from each other's strategies and experiences. Their mutual support systems were strengthened significantly during organizing meetings in preparation for the 2001 World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa.

The conference benefited Black Latin Americans by raising awareness of their challenges worldwide, but anti-Black racism in Latin America is still a neglected issue, even by prominent human rights organizations such as Amnesty International. One

exception is the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a Quaker organization with a history of anti-racism work. AFSC launched its Quaker International Affairs Program in the Andean Region when it opened an office in Quito in 1995. Its initiatives have included training Black leaders and organizations, getting regional human rights groups to include the issues of African descendants on their agendas and sponsoring Black activists to travel to the UN World Conference Against Racism.

Throughout Latin America, inequality is commonly considered more a matter of class than race. Until the early 1900s, only *Ecuador's* landowners could vote. Generally impoverished, Black Ecuadorians gained the vote at the same time as other poor citizens. "Until recently, most Afro-Ecuadorians did not stress their Blackness when they defined their identities. Rather, most considered themselves to be part of the poor who have an antagonistic relationship with the [elite]," says Carlos de la Torre, an Ecuadorian sociology professor at Boston's Northeastern University.

Now Black activists emphasize the importance of race. Thanks to the efforts of civic groups and a multiethnic commission in the National Congress, *Ecuador's* new constitution recognizes the nation as pluri-cultural and multiethnic, including the first official acknowledgement of Afro-Ecuadorians as a distinct group.

Being debated within the commission this summer was a law of collective rights for Afro-Ecuadorians to give Black rural communities more self-governing power. An "ethno-education" law, which would require schools to acknowledge the Black and indigenous presence throughout *Ecuador's* history in lessons taught in public schools, is also being discussed in the National Congress.

"What we are proposing is that *Ecuador* develop policies for the benefit of sectors that never have been beneficiaries, that the state must guarantee the strengthening, development and harmony of Black peoples," says the commission's current president, congressional deputy Luis Guilberto Talahua, a Quichua Indian. The city of Quito has taken a tentative step toward inclusive education, training about

100 teachers to incorporate information about Afro-Ecuadorians in their curricula.

The Afro-Ecuadorian Development Corp., an office of the Federal government, is another potential mechanism for improving government responsiveness to Black citizens. Ecuadorian President Fabián Alarcón created the corporation by presidential decree in 1998, three days before leaving office. It didn't begin to operate until May 2001, when Josefina Orovio was hired to run it. She plans to submit proposals for funding for small businesses such as laundries and beauty supply shops, and sugar cane and trout farming late this year.

Leadership for the Future

The most visible Black Ecuadorians this year have been soccer players on the majority-Black national team, *Ecuador's* first to qualify for the World Cup. Star player Augustín Delgado, who has started a foundation that helps educate Black children, broke another barrier when he was hired as a celebrity spokesman for an electronics firm's advertising campaign. In comparison to other Black television images, an articulate athlete is a major improvement.

Other Afro-Ecuadorian role models, the mayor of the capital city of Esmeraldas province and the head of the Esmeraldas port authority, serve as "an element through which Black people as a whole become visible," says Oscar Chala. No unifying Black leader has emerged, however. The most prominent Afro-Ecuadorian politician, Jaime Hurtado, was assassinated in 1999. Race is not believed to have been a motive in the unsolved crime. Hurtado, popular with the masses for championing causes of the poor, didn't identify publicly with the Black movement until a few months before his death, when he helped facilitate the first Congress of Blacks in *Ecuador*, an attempt at creating a national organization.

Many Black activists recognize that a lack of unity among all the Black organizations, the lack of one consolidated group that represents them all, may be a significant challenge to their movement. Nevertheless, Black groups are united in their

understanding of the challenge. They are organizing protests in response to police brutality. They are helping impoverished women start small businesses. They are hosting concerts and fashion shows to build pride in African heritage. They are teaching adult literacy and English and helping Black high school students get into college.

Black Ecuadorians are putting their government and fellow citizens on notice that change is on the way.

"It must be recognized that there are Black people in *Ecuador* and in Latin America, that the construction of these nation-states would not have been possible without Black hands," says activist Alexandra Ocles.

"We want them to know that we are human beings that have dignity, that we are capable of achieving anything."

MAP: *ECUADOR*

PHOTO (COLOR): Women in Northern *Ecuador* learn new skills at a CARE training workshop.

PHOTO (COLOR): Soccer player Hugo Guerrón

PHOTO (COLOR): Historian Juan Garcia

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