

A WORD OR 2

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“Black Nationalism is the only real solution for Black People in the United States.”

Afrovenezuelans, Hugo Chavez and Revolution

(1) Who are Afrovenezuelans?

Afrovenezuelans are the descendants of Africans whose roots are primarily in Central Africa (the Congo region) and West Africa. They are generally referred to as Bantu people. They make up the third largest African population in South America, behind Brazil and Colombia. Their ancestors were attacked, enslaved and forcefully transported to the Americas (Abya Yala). They fought against enslavement in much the same ways Black People in the United States did, trying everything from buying their freedom to participating in slave rebellions to establishing maroon communities to fighting alongside other Venezuelans for independence from Spain.

Slavery was ended in Venezuela in 1854, but Afrovenezuelans were not accorded any type of legal status. As of this moment, Afrovenezuelans have no constitutional recognition and are not counted as a separate race in the national census. This makes it difficult to statistically quantify the life Afrovenezuelans are living; to draw a numerical picture that documents the political, economic, judicial, cultural and educational racism that is so prevalent in Venezuela.

It seems that some Blacks in Venezuela began referring to themselves as Afrovenezuelans in the 1940s. During the 1950s the term became more popular. In the 1980s it began to be expressed within a political context and has continued in that vein. At the end of the 20th century, a national network of Afrovenezuelan organizations was established that indicates how much Afrovenezuelan consciousness has taken on a political context.

Today, Afrovenezuelans want to know where they are in Venezuela, how many they are, what their political pull within the established system can be and what their economic prospects within the established system are. A special count or census is supposed to be carried out by the government that will provide that information. It undoubtedly will reveal that the poorest Venezuelans

are Afrovenezuelans and most of the Venezuelans in the prison system are Afrovenezuelans.

(2) What is Venezuela?

Venezuela is a country in the northernmost portion of South America. Venezuela was colonized by the Spanish and was still a Spanish colony when the Blacks in a colony called San Domingo revolted and successfully carried out the Haitian Revolution. One of the objectives of the leaders of the Haitian Revolution was to liberate Black People everywhere, so they encouraged all of the Spanish colonies to make themselves independent of Spanish rule. One of the reasons Haiti is so despised is because it did so much to help other colonies in South America and the Caribbean free themselves from white power.

Not long after Haiti fought for its independence, the areas now known as Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador united under the name of New Granada or Gran Colombia and began a war for independence. Not long afterwards, New Granada fell apart and each country fought its own war against the Spanish. The person who is identified with these wars and cherished in five South American countries because he led them in their fights for independence is Simon Bolivar.

Bolivar started his war for independence in Venezuela, but he really wanted all of the Spanish colonies to unite as one country. Bolivar would not have succeeded if it had not been for assistance he received from the Haitians. On at least two occasions Bolivar was defeated on the battlefield and barely escaped with his life. Both of these times he ran to Haiti, where he was given protection and provided with the arms and materials he needed to continue the war for independence. All the Haitians asked Bolivar to do was outlaw slavery.

But Black People in Venezuela during the early 1800s, like Afrovenezuelans today, were not supporters of Bolivar. They realized that Bolivar could not view them as his equals; he was fighting a war for independence but



not a war for social justice or social changes. Instead, Black People and poor people fought alongside a person named Jose Tomas Boves. It was only 2 to 3 years after Boves was killed in battle that the Blacks, hoping they could achieve freedom in the process, began to fight alongside Simon Bolivar.

Venezuela declared its independence in 1811 but did not grant independence to those who were enslaved until 1854. The leaders of an independent Venezuela never did much to make Venezuela progress or claim a position of prominence in the world, preferring for the most part to be pawns of the United States. They learned to equate international standing with skin color, and in the 1950s initiated a government policy of “whitening” Venezuela by encouraging white people from western Europe to make Venezuela their home. As a result, Venezuela’s “white” citizens grew to make up nearly 20% of Venezuela’s population, and the whites began to decide the political and economic direction of the country. That meant very rich individuals at the top and very poor people at the bottom. As late as the 1990s Venezuela, while rich with oil, was content with an unusually high percentage of its 26 million people living in poverty and illiteracy, and experiencing unnecessary privations. This began to change when Hugo Chavez was elected president in 1999.

(3) Who is Hugo Chavez?

Hugo Chavez was born in Venezuela and grew up poor. Although he calls himself an Indian, he appears to be the typical Venezuelan mestizo. Whereas he has quite a bit of African blood, his life has been dominated by his Indian roots and upbringing. Chavez joined the military and eventually participated in a golpe del estado (coup d’etat) in 1992. The golpe failed and Chavez was sent to jail for 2 1/2 years. When he was released, he began organizing poor, disfranchised and illiterate Venezuelans around the political process and, as a result, was elected president in 1998.

Before Chavez became president, 80% of Venezuelans lived in poverty. In spite of all the oil money the country was generating, only \$40 million was put into social programs a year. That is changing. Already, under Chavez, the amount of oil money put into social and civic programs has increased by 500 times (to more than \$1.7 billion). There is a push against discrimination, illiteracy has been practically wiped out, and all Venezuelans with a high school diploma or equivalent are eligible to receive a free college education. Chavez wants to transform the economy so that it focuses on “social needs and the full time incorporation of the population.” As a result, 500 medical clinics have been opened that provide more than

10 million Venezuelans free medical attention and medications. Hugo Chavez also paid off Venezuela’s debt to both the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, thereby avoiding interest charges that have crippled many countries. He has paid private investors large sums of money in order to nationalize telecommunications and electrical companies, and is threatening to do the same with the steel industry. And Chavez is cutting as many critical economic strings with the US of A as he can.

Internationally, from November 2006 through March 2007, 100 million gallons of heating oil were delivered to poor families in 19 states in the US of A, including major cities like New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and Wilmington, at a 40% discount off of wholesale price. Additionally, a Tribal heating Oil program benefited 173 United States Indian tribes in six states. The program that provides oil at a discount to the poor is active in other countries as well.

One of Chavez’ first priorities as president was to amend the Venezuelan constitution. He proposed changes that would give status to the indigenous people of Venezuela, the Indios. As a result, they were recognized as a distinct ethnic group that had legitimate rights over the land they occupied. They gained the right to maintain their ancestral customs, name deputies to the national assembly, and develop their own economy. Soon, it is expected that their lands will be recognized as special economic zones, which would give them even more control over what economic initiatives can be legally carried out in their territory. In short, the constitution will guarantee them the power to fight against the advance of capitalism if they choose to do so.

Chavez also sought recognition for Afrovenezuelans in the constitution, but I have not seen what he recommended so I do not know what he sought. I do know that the Afrovenezuelans submitted a list of recommendations that were relevant to them. Neither their recommendations nor those of Chavez were included in the constitution of 1999. Thus, the constitution of 1999 did not acknowledge the existence of Afrovenezuelans.

Now it is 2007 and Hugo Chavez is seeking additional changes to the Venezuelan constitution. Again he is asking for recognition of Afrovenezuelans, but the recognition he seeks is of a cultural nature. The Blacks of Venezuela think that falls far short. They want the same type of recognition the Indios or indigenous people have; recognition that includes political, economic, educational and social status, and protection against the advance of capitalism in the areas they have traditionally occupied.



Just so you might know the actual language, I'll reveal what was in the constitution before Chavez's proposal, what is in Chavez' present proposal, and what is in the present proposal of the Afrovenezuelans.

Articulo 100 Before Chavez:

“The popular cultures that constitute venezuelidad deserve special attention, recognizing and respecting the equality of each culture. The law shall establish incentives and encouragement for the persons, institutions and communities that promote, support, develop or finance plans, programs and cultural activities in Venezuela just as it does abroad. The state will guarantee to cultural workers their incorporation into the system of social security that will permit them to live a life of dignity so long as they conform with the law.”

Articulo 100 Chavez:

“The Bolivarian Revolution of Venezuela is the historical product of a confluence of various cultures. Because of that the State recognizes the diversity of its expressions and values the indigenous, european and afrodescendiente races that gave origin to our grand South American nation. The popular cultures, those of the indigenous and afrodescendientes, constitute venezuelidad and deserve special attention, recognizing and respecting the equality of each culture. The law shall establish incentives and encouragement for the persons, institutions and communities that promote, support, develop or finance plans, programs and cultural activities in Venezuela just as it does abroad. The state will guarantee to cultural workers their incorporation into the system of social security that will permit them to live a life of dignity so long as they conform with the law.”

Los Afrovenezuelans:

“Art. 127: The state will recognize the land occupied by Afrovenezuelans as community territories for sustainable development, and their ownership shall not be transferred to neither private entities nor persons. This will guarantee the conservation of the natural resources and its ecological balance.

Art 128: The state will respect the spiritual and ancestral traditions of Afrovenezuelans as part of the religious diversity of our country.

Art 129 The state recognizes the moral, political, cultural, spiritual, linguistic and technological contributions of Afrovenezuelans as fundamental and permanent elements of the formal and informal systems of education.

Art 130: The state will protect the ancestral knowledge of Afrovenezuelans, guaranteeing its intellectual protection and prohibiting the registration of patents related to ancestral knowledge and innovations on the part of private Venezuelan and foreign organs.

Art 131: The state shall establish a judicial process that will combat all forms of racism and racial discrimination.

Art 132: The Afrovenezuelan communities have every right to participate in the political process. The state shall guarantee that the maximum number of Afrovenezuelan congresspersons be elected from the electoral districts.

(4) What Afrovenezuelans think of Hugo Chavez?

Afrovenezuelans think Hugo Chavez is a good person and they support him, but no Afrovenezuelans I encountered considered himself or herself a Chavista. A Chavista can be called someone who openly advocates Chavez positions and works to promote his program. Even more, my impression is that Afrovenezuelans don't consider Chavez one of them. Chavez' experiences have been those of an Indian or a mestizo, not an Afro. Whereas it is fact that Hugo Chavez has plenty of African blood in his veins, I was told that he makes much of this when he is in the United States but little of it when he is in Venezuela. However, his support for Africa and the Caribbean countries seems to be sincere. No Afrovenezuelan that I talked to seemed to doubt his sincerity in either of those regards.

But, as of this writing, there are no Afrovenezuelans in Chavez' cabinet, and no Blacks in his entourage, so to speak. One is not likely to see Black People hanging around with Hugo Chavez, or vice versa. In his first term as president, there was one Black person in Chavez' cabinet, Aristobulo Isturiz, Minister of Education. According to the Afrovenezuelans that I asked, Isturiz was doing a very good job introducing changes and improvements to the educational system. Isturiz is also a close friend of one of the leaders of the Afrovenezuelan network, so he understands the Afrovenezuelan perspective. However, after being reelected to the presidency, Chavez replaced all of his cabinet members, including Isturiz, and none of the new cabinet members are Afrodescendants. I asked several of them why Chavez acted in that manner, but no one seemed to know enough to explain it.

Maybe it's because Chavez is in a very delicate position, something we can discuss later. One can't put a limit on what politics has to do with those type of decisions. Or, maybe Chavez' commitment to Afrovenezuelans is something akin to paternal; maybe he wants to help Blacks and see that Blacks are treated right instead of recognizing that Blacks need to have the status and power to do things for themselves and make sure things are done that are good for Afrovenezuelans. Chavez might be taking a posture that is much like the one Castro seems to have taken in Cuba. The Cuban government

does a much better job of dealing with the race issue than the United States government, so Blacks in Cuba do not face the racism that Blacks in the United States face. Still, racism is a pretty touchy issue in Cuba. If that is the case, racism will probably remain a touchy issue in Venezuela as well.

(5) The Afrovenezuelan Struggle

There is a network of Afrovenezuelan organizations throughout Venezuela. There is an appreciable Afro population in 13 of the Venezuelan states, and an Afrovenezuelan organization is present in each of those states. That network of Afrovenezuelan organizations itself is part of a network that runs throughout South and Central America and the Caribbean.

According to the Afrovenezuelans that I talked to and materials I've read, the struggle for human rights is first and foremost for them, not a struggle for constitutional rights. The struggle for constitutional rights is important for them, but I was told that whether or not the 2007 constitutional proposals submitted by Afrovenezuelans are approved, they will continue their struggle as they have been doing all along because human rights trump all other types of rights, including constitutional and civil rights. They talk of introducing economic initiatives that promote the development of the people, like cooperatives and socialist business structures, and they are very much anti capitalist and anti imperialist. But, to paraphrase what one African sister told me, capitalism is what is ever more prevalent in Venezuela, not socialism.

Whereas Afrovenezuelans recognize the importance of establishing an independent power base, how much work they are putting into developing that was not clearly evident to me. Moreover, some Afrovenezuelans say those in the forefront of the struggle are making good strides getting international recognition for their struggle, but are not making similar advances within Venezuela. The sentiment seems to be that those in the forefront are spending too much time waiting for government responses, trying to secure government positions and waiting for the government to support Afrovenezuelan programs and initiatives and not enough time working on empowerment issues within the community.

I don't know how the Afrovenezuelan organizations are financed, but it seems that many of their publications and trips to conferences throughout the world are paid for by non- Afrovenezuelan sources, either an agency of the Venezuelan government, an international agency like the United Nations or a support group based in a foreign country. Additionally, there are some tensions within the network; jealousies, behind the back type decisions, a lot of conversations that lack relevance or focus; similar to

those in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s.

Nearly all of the Afrovenezuelans I talked to stated that they recognize how important remaining outside the government is to their struggle. On the outside they can more easily maintain a revolutionary perspective. I should make it clear that when they speak of being outside the government, it does not mean they will be anti Chavez. Afrovenezuelans and Hugo Chavez have many objectives in common and can be mutually beneficial. Chavez surely must realize how important it is for him to have Afrovenezuelan support, and Afrovenezuelans realize that it is better for someone like Chavez to be president of Venezuela than the type of persons who preceded him.

Are measures being put in place that can help make the organizations somewhat self-sufficient? I don't know. I can say that independent schools are being developed, but I don't know if the same is true of independent economic and political initiatives. I repeated to them time and time again something they seem to have already been aware of: the need to be able to function without government assistance as well as with government assistance. La Universidad de Barlovento (University of Barlovento) is proof that Afrovenezuelans can do for themselves. It was founded by Afrovenezuelans in the early 1990s, and since that time has been run by Afrovenezuelans and financed by Afrovenezuelans; all within a non-capitalist context.

If the time comes when they have to make a choice between being independent and being dependent on the status quo, what will they choose? Will they opt like the Blacks in South Africa and the United States, where those in the struggle who worked closely with establishment forces were effectively converted into organs of the establishment, or will they be true to their community and rhetoric? Those who are converted into organs of the establishment have historically become useless as a revolutionary or socially beneficial factor. We know that all too well in the United States of America. Will Afrovenezuelans learn the same lesson firsthand?

Because Venezuela has a different feel than the United States, I think Afrovenezuelans should try to get a foothold in local and national politics because that could help them make strides within the status quo while increasing their ability to develop independently. There might be reason for hope in Venezuela that is absolutely out of the question in the United States. But I don't think anyone should get carried away. The struggle of Afrovenezuelans is just beginning to attract the attention of the government and impact on the lives of many Venezuelans. As it intensifies, prejudices and hypocrisies that have not

needed conscious expression for decades are likely to re-emerge and express themselves in extreme ways.

The struggle of Afrovenezuelans and Black People in the United States have much in common, but there are two factors that need to be mentioned that presently differentiate the two struggles. With Hugo Chavez as president, Venezuela has a head of state that is serious about eliminating injustice and combating racism. Venezuela also has a non-white ideological majority. Neither of these has never been the case in the United States of America. The question is, "How much difference can one person (Chavez) make?" Secondly, violence has always played a prominent role in white Black relations in the United States. State sponsored and state initiated violence was a premeditated response of the government when Black People in the United States became politically active, and Black People's failure to neutralize this violence could explain why the struggle of Black People in the United States has taken such an unfortunate direction. What role, if any, violence will play in the struggle of Afrovenezuelans is yet to be seen. It is important to note that political violence, USA style, has already been transported to other parts of South America. Will status quo forces in Venezuela resort to it? Time will tell.

(6) What African Americans Can Learn from the Afrovenezuelan Struggle.

These are personal opinions, nothing more. They by no means cover the entire spectrum. These are simply a few things that jumped out at me as I observed Afrovenezuelans.

(a) How much We have lost, or how much We have changed. Since the 1950s, Black People in the United States of America have come to resemble white people a lot more than We used to. We have become so sterile. We used to be chocolate, but We have moved in the vanilla direction more than We might think. We used to generate so many responses, so much spontaneous energy; now the energy We generate is low wattage, predictable, bland and lifeless. I wrote a book entitled NOT DARK WHITE: The 411 on Black Nationalism. In that book I start off each essay with "We are Black People, We are not dark skinned white people. We need a nation of Our own." But watching the Afrovenezuelans, I saw what We were like in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I don't think We are like that any more. We are very close to being dark skinned white people. As a result of settling for a cowardly and reactionary civil rights struggle, white America's system has converted Us a lot more than We have affected it.

(b) We have become too structured. To be a minority that is systematically discriminated against, We value

too much structure too much. Structure is good for capitalism and a status quo, but it is not good for creative energy, not good for spontaneous energy, not good for breaking the mental and physical chains. Too much structure is not good for a people like Us; a colonized people who want to gain control of their destiny.

(c) How much the feeling of community has been drained out of Our community. African Americans in the United States lost that feeling for Ourselves somewhere. That feeling is extremely obvious among Afrovenezuelans in Venezuela. I don't think there is a concerted effort on their part to showcase it, it is there because it is still inside the individuals who make up the community. It must still be inside Us somewhere, but We have allowed something to cover it up to a large degree.

Family by family, We are still somewhat close. But the family unit is too small to support a substance based social movement on. As of this writing, African Americans are far from being a revolutionary people, a truly progressive people. We need to make the Black community the family each of Us values most.

(d) I sense that We can learn something economic from the Afrovenezuelans who stay in the smaller towns and villages. I think they can develop a living model that is not rooted in capitalism if given the opportunity because they have not been practicing capitalism that much; they are not caught up in it like We are (We act like We can't imagine life outside of a capitalist context). Additionally, they still have an appreciation for the land, tradition and mundane values that We need to reacquire Ourselves with.

(e) How politically detached the majority of Black individuals are in the United States. It seems that consumerism and petty materialism took control of Us and made Our concern for Black Power and self-determination stale. We fell for capitalism and white superiority even though they place Us at the absolute bottom of the economic and social pole. The political and economic warfare that has been waged against Us has generated devastating measurable consequences, but even more havoc has been wreaked on the intangible qualities We possessed that kept Us strong and dangerous for so long. Today, We are a weak minded and weak spirited people. That is a relatively new reality for Us. In my book Ten Lessons: An Introduction to Black History, I wrote that Black People in the United States were politically irresponsible and politically immature. That was 30 years ago. We are worse off now than We were then.

(f) There are other things, obvious things like leaders not functioning as part of the Black community. The way the members of the Afrovenezuelan network moved

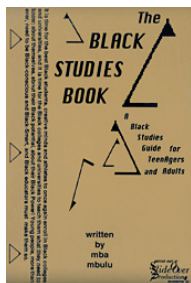
around and worked with and among the people in the community reminded me of the late 1950s and 1960s in the US of A. We can look at them and see how much alienation exists between the Blacks in the United States who are so called aware and those who are not. I saw this alienation developing among Us in the mid 1970s and wrote about it in an essay entitled "Alienation In The Black Community". That essay is reproduced in my book entitled Black Smart.

Conclusion

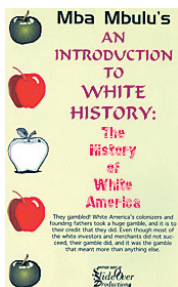
What I have presented here is based on what I was told and what I read, in addition to what I observed. The question is, "How valuable is what one says and what one writes?" After all is said and done, what people do is all that counts. What people do is the most significant indicator of what they think, feel and fear.



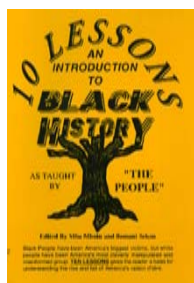
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Power Quotes

"Dont wonder about what will happen in the future. Instead, act in a way and carry out functions that can help produce the future you desire."

"I can't always be in control of every situation, but I can always be in control of the decisions I make."

"Individuals who want to do something don't look for guarantees, they look for opportunities."

"Smart individuals don't know that much, and individuals of average intelligence know even less."

"War is barbaric, and the terms of such a confrontation are dictated by the lesser civilized group. In racial relations, the lesser civilized group has historically been white people."

"Reality is not relative."

"You can't change the system from within. You can help the system fine tune some of its contradictions from within, persuade the system to let you participate on its terms, or make it more efficient doing what it was designed to do. But change it from within? You're deluding yourself."

"Every dog is entitled to wag its own tail. As long as it isn't wagged in anybody else's face, that's the natural thing to do."

"Some individuals adapt to domination as if it were the weather."

"The underdog mentality always thinks the opponent has the upper hand."

"Any Black person who is overly proud of how well s/he speaks a white language is probably suffering from a ruptured self-concept."

"Black Power can't integrate with the United States constitution."

"Enough surgery can't be performed on white America's public school system to make it address the needs of Black students."

"The longer Black People fail to take the lead, the longer We will be content with relating to the backside of the white race."

"It doesn't take a genius to recognize that there's a difference between the legal system and justice."

"The innocent, weak and powerless are the early victims of an oppressive system. Later, the system's gutless accomplices, getting their just due, are themselves victimized."

"Sometimes you never know how things are going until you look back and see what has happened."