

El Despeertar de Las Comunidades Afrocolombianas

A review of *El Despeertar de Las Comunidades Afrocolombianas* (The Awakening of Afro-Colombian Communities) by Jorge E. Porras, PhD (Professor of Spanish Language and Linguistics, Department of Modern Languages, Sonoma State University).

Hernández, María Inés, ed. *El Despeertar de Las Comunidades Afrocolombianas*. Houston, TX: LaCasa Press, 2012, pp. 307.

This book, written entirely in Spanish, consists of the following sections: an introductory section written by Angel G. Quintero; references and maps; a preface; an acknowledgement section; and a formal introduction. In general, volume contains five testimonial stories, which make up the rest of the book and meet the aims of the publication. These testimonial stories examine five Afro-Colombian community-organizational leaders, their daily lives, and the personal accomplishments of these individuals as active members of various social groups such as the Process of Black Communities (PCN) and OCN. It is worth noting that Afro-Colombians, which was been the case in many other parts of Latin America, were deprived from their Civil and Human Rights for many decades. It was not until the Decree Law 70 of 1993 that this scenario officially change in Colombia

The first testimonial story is by Dorina Hernández, who was born in Cartagena in 1966. Hernández worked for many years as a teacher in (San Basilio de) Palenque, a rural town populated with African descendants. She was nationally and internationally known as a community organizational leader and an active advocate for the ethnic, socio-cultural and educational rights of Afro-Colombian communities.

What is particular about Palenque is that it is the home of one of the two only Spanish-based African Creole languages in Latin America, *Palenquero* (the other being *Papiamentu*, in the Nederland Antilles). *Palenquero* (or *Lengua*) dates back to the seventeenth century, when a group of *Cimarrones* (Maroons) escaped from the Spanish Colony and settled in a then inhospitable jungle region near Cartagena. This language threatens to die out and thus is an extremely important issue that concerned people such as Hernández. For some time now an increasing number of multidisciplinary scholars have fought and struggled to prevent from happening. Hernández, moreover, has been determined to fight racial discrimination and marginality by educating the youth and general public in the respect and recognition of ethnic and cultural differences. She has addressed academic audiences in US and Europe as well as is an active member of numerous organizations in and out of Colombia.

The second story is by Libia Grueso, who was born in 1959 in Buenaventura (Western Colombia), and a child of Mestizo mother from Boyacá (East) and Chimbiqui Black father from Cauca (West). With a strong background in social work and political activism, Grueso won the Goldman prestigious prize in environmental studies in 2004. Also she is an active scholar and a well-known lecturer who has given numerous talks at several National and International Environmental Professional Conferences, a platform that that given her a prominent position among Afro-Colombian communities. Her testimony reveals that as a High School student she felt racially and linguistically discriminated. Later, in California, because of her poor and rural origins, she also felt isolated and oppressed. However, from childhood, she enforced “Mount-River rules” that involved hunting, fishing, agriculture, and mining. This fact allowed her to understand that real poverty among marginalized black people lurked around big cities like California, rather than in the countryside. In short, Grueso has done extensive socio-cultural and ethnic work in the Pacific Coast of Colombia and beyond, struggling for equity and dignity in labor, and promoting a sense of ethnic identity by calling for national and international solidarity.

The third story is by Carlos Rosero, also born in Buenaventura in 1959. A graduate in Anthropology from the National University of Colombia, Rosero was a political student leader who participated in the analysis and writing of Black issues for the Colombian Constituency Reform of 1991, as well as the foundation of PCN (Process of Black Communities). Rosero attended numerous professional conferences around the world and lecturing, educating, and denouncing about the hard conditions and violence in which black people in Colombia live. Rosero tells about his high academic achievements in High School, where he had to show that he was not a “raw Black.” His research and experience on political activism revealed to him that there is environmental racism, but being black in the region is a political identity rather than a race. His academic work and College lectures on human rights have also granted him international recognition.

The fourth story is by Marino Córdoba, born in Quibdó (the capital of Chocó), in 1964. After his family moved to Riosucio (Lower Atrato), Córdoba went to school and frequently helped his father take notes at community meetings. He eventually got involved in an array of social activities, which helped forge his authentic leadership. As a riverside dweller, he was aware of his people’s precarious socio-economic and geographical conditions, still worsened by petty, ambitious incoming adventurers and abusive evictors. Narrow dirt roads and muddy trails forced Chocó dwellers to use risky river transportation. He tells that Chocó main livelihood, beside mining, was banana crop, but exploitation of wood by Mestizo invaders caused plugging of the rivers and crop loss. Córdoba strove to change these conditions through political leadership and social struggle. He participated in the making of Decree Law 70, and organized community meetings to raise awareness about these problems. Before, national government and even guerillas treated Chocó residents unfairly, so this law greatly improved the living conditions of black communities.

The last story is about Zulia Mena. She was born in 1964 in Campobonito, north of Quibdó. Mena got involved in community activism and organizational work very early in her life, first as a Catholic Church religious servicer in Chocó, then as a political leader in Bogotá. Her full dedication to community service in Chocó kept her away from partying and dancing, a social must for young black women at the time. She is a member of ACIA (Atrato Association of Integrated Area Peasants); she also founded OBAPO (Chocó Organization of Popular Barrios). Moreover, she has held prominent positions in the national sphere such as Congresswoman and she was instrumental in claiming ownership of the lands under collective qualifications in the Constitution of 1991. In short, Mena has contributed greatly to educating black women about her ethnic identity and self-esteem in Colombia and her leadership has been recognized nationally and internationally.

In conclusion, this book constitutes a great stride toward the socio-cultural and political recognition and appreciation of the historical struggles of black communities in Colombia and beyond. Thus, I highly recommend this volume to students and scholars who are working in the area of social leadership and in community organizations as well as those individuals whose focus is on ethnic identity, gender issues, and various other related topics about the African diaspora in the Americas.