

Amendments to Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee Act:

Hearing before the Subcommittee on Census and Population of the Committee
on Post Office and Civil Service, House of Representatives,
One hundredth Congress, first session on H.R. 2309,
July 7, 1987

Statement of Ivan Van Sertima,
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The following is a testimony by Ivan Van Sertima, D.H.L. (1935-2009), Rutgers: The State University of New Jersey professor of Africana Studies, and editor-founder of *The Journal of African Civilizations* held July 7, 1987 before the U.S. Congress to discuss the Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee Act, established on August 7, 1984 (98 Stat.1257) and formed on September 12, 1985. The Commission consisted of 30 members whose mission was to plan, encourage, coordinate and conduct the commemoration of the voyages of Christopher Columbus and to set forth general provisions and policies governing the process of recognition and support of the Quincentenary projects. In accordance with the terms of the Act that established it, the Commission was terminated on December 31, 1993 after submitting a comprehensive report to Congress that incorporated the Commission's recommendations for the commemoration. Hence, this presentation is from the "Amendments to Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee Act : Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Census and Population of the Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, House of Representatives, One Hundredth Congress, First Session on H.R. 2309" of July 7, 1987 (Washington, DC: United States Congress House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service Subcommittee on Census and Population; U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987), pp.18-25.

Introduction and questions were provided by Mervyn M. Dymally (1926-2012), a former California assemblyman (1963-1966; 2002-2008), senator (1967-1975) and lieutenant governor (1975-1979) who also served in the U.S. Congress (1981-1993) representing the south Los Angeles area of Los Angeles, California. He was born in Trinidad and the first Black lieutenant governor in California when he was elected in 1975. He completed a B.A (1954) in Education from California State University at Los Angeles, a Master's degree (1969) in Government from California State University at Sacramento, and a Ph.D. (1978) in Human Behavior from United States International University (now Alliant International University) in San Diego, California. And additional questions and commentary was provided by Constance 'Connie' A. Morella, now Ambassador in Residence in the Department of Government at American University in Washington, D.C.

She served as U.S. ambassador to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in Paris from 2003 to 2007, and represented Maryland's 8th district in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1987 to 2003. While in the U.S. Congress, she initiated legislation addressing domestic violence and child support, as well as programs for the elderly, environmental protection, health care reform, and human rights issues. She has a M.A. (1967) from the School of Public Affairs at American University; a B.A. (1954), and an A.A. (1950) from Boston University

Mervyn M. Dymally:

Now we have Professor Van Sertima. I take this opportunity to introduce him, not that we normally do this because I want him to know that he has a colleague on this committee, a professor, so if he talks in professorial language we have Professor Morella to interpret his eloquence to us.

Professor Van Sertima is an historian and anthropologist, a prize-winning author of the book, "*They Came Before Columbus*" and a professor at Rutgers whose specialty is African and African-American Studies.

Dr. Van Sertima, you are welcome and you may introduce yourself for the record.

Ivan Van Sertima:

I am Ivan Van Sertima, professor of African Studies, Rutgers University. I have recently been appointed by UNESCO to the 28-member International Commission to Revise the History of the Scientific and Cultural Developments of Mankind.

I think it is very important since I am before a committee or a commission that deals with Columbus and I am the author of a major work on him, that I should say a few things about Columbus, his so-called voyages of discovery and evidence that we have of other people that preceded him.

It is not my intention; I want to make it clear, to seek to belittle the voyages of Columbus, but to place them in a larger and more liberating perspective. They are not, as most of us would like to believe, voyages of discovery. But they are of great significance since they changed the character of the whole world, both the old world and the new.

They changed the relationship between the races of man forever. Although it is fashionable to make a special case for one racial or national identity I want to point out that I am a cosmopolis of almost all old world and new world races. I am largely African, of course, but I am also Native American, I have Macusi Indian blood and also European traces of Dutch, German and Scottish. I am, therefore, concerned that our vision of the world of these Americas take full cognizance of all these peoples and all these ancestors so that one does not live in constant war and uneasiness with the other.

The European side of me is insulting the Native American side of me by calling these voyages "voyages of discovery", also insulting the African side of me by insisting that these are the first of such voyages when there is hard archaeological proof of earlier contacts.

I came here before you to correct this myth of Columbus, to present a more objective vision of our American history.

Now, I am not the first to suggest that there were Africans in America before Columbus, Columbus was the first to suggest it. Columbus actually said in the journal of his second voyage when he was in Haiti, then known as Espanola, Native Americans came to him and told him that Black people had come in large boats from the south and southeast trading in gold-tipped metal spears. Probably Columbus did not believe this and that fact in itself would not be enough because the so-called Black people could be any people. It could be dark, bronze people from South America. However, Columbus actually sent back on a mail boat to Spain, samples of these gold-tipped metal spears. When the metallurgists in Spain assayed these spears, they found they were identical, not similar, but were identical in their ratio of gold, silver and copper alloys as spears then being forged in African Guinea.

Furthermore, it is not only the metallurgical evidence but the botanists found to their astonishment that when they were looking at cotton found in the Cape Verde Islands just off Africa, cotton which had been taken by the Portuguese in their settlement before Columbus they had taken cottons from Africa which they thought to be African-botanists found to their astonishment that it was a form of cotton which is not African, it grows in the area where Columbus went and it was found in Africa and in the Cape Verde before Columbus.

Not only that, linguists discovered in the 1920s that the word being used for these gold-tipped metal spears, "guanin", comes from a series of words, kani, ghanin, et cetera, which were being used all along that Atlantic Coast of Africa to refer to the gold and to refer to these types of spears.

So we have a combination of things: what Columbus said, what the natives told him, what the botanists found, what metallurgists found, what linguists found, and in addition to that every major figure of the Columbus contact period sighted Blacks among the Native Americans.

Fray Gregoria Garcia sighted Blacks off Colombia. He says so, "these are the first Blacks we have seen in the Indies". Vespucci, returning home, sighted a boat with tall Black men. Peter Martyr, the first historian of America cites these Black men and calls them Ethiopian, pirates shipwrecked on the East Coast. Vasco Nunez de Balboa, after the discovery of the Sea of the South, the Mar del Sur, reports finding two Black men among Native Americans and asking them where did these men come from and they did not know, but that they were in a large settlement off Quarequa in the Isthmus of Panama, Lopez de Gomara sights Blacks. So it is not only Columbus.

However, these visits can be dismissed because they were not as significant as the Columbus visits. They were prior to Columbus but not as significant because Columbus, by deceiving people into thinking that he had found the lands of Cathay, the great lands of Marco Polo, was able to draw vast numbers of people in massive continuous movements across the Atlantic and we cannot dismiss the significance of this visit, but we should stop referring to it as voyages of discovery. No important anthropologist now can refer to this as voyages of discovery.

Since 1964 the Congress of Americanists ruled that there cannot- I quote them- "there cannot now be any doubt that there were visits from the old world to the new long before Columbus." No one in the scholarly world outside of conservatives who refuse to accept or to look at new evidence accepts that as the voyage of discovery. Therefore, I am not against this quincentenary celebration, I merely want to point out that these voyages should not be referred to as voyages of discovery.

I, as a Native American, find it insulting and as a scholar I find it to be unobjective and ethnocentric to talk about discovering other people. Europe has been invaded or entered by other peoples in many periods, and nobody said they discovered Europe. The Native American was not involved in primitive cultures. Columbus never once set his foot on the American land mass north or south. He only wandered in the peripheral islands. In the third voyage three of his ships landed in South America but he, Columbus, would not come off the ship. He said he had arthritis. He therefore never set foot on the American land mass.

It was Cortez, the first European of the Columbus era, who entered the heartland of America, and Cortez said and I quote, "when I saw their pyramids and palaces and floating gardens [known only then in Medieval Ghana and Mexico] and their aqueducts and zoos and reservoirs and running baths, (he said) I had not seen its like anywhere." So that when they were coming across in the area of the Caribbean which was peripheral and semi-primitive, true that was something that could be dismissed, perhaps, in terms of technological or cultural sophistication, but what they met in the center of America was something tremendously important, and it is only because of the death or twilight of American civilizations that we have no idea of what actually was involved in some parts of that conquest or some parts of that contact.

I am not here, however, as I say to run down Columbus but merely to point out the voyages, voyages made much earlier, are far, far more significant. We have evidence of a voyage that was made, that was formative and seminal because it affected the first major American civilization known as Olmec. This was dated in 1950s by carbon 14, a process which only entered Anthropology in 1946. They dated a ceremonial platform in this civilization in the Gulf of Mexico at a time when Mexico was the center of American civilization, not the Mexico of today but Mexico that included Texas, Colorado, parts of California, right up to La Plata in Canada.

They dated it 814 plus or minus 134 BC. There they found astonishing things. A team from the Smithsonian, from the *National Geographic* and the University of California discovered stone heads with African features. Where this dating occurred they found four stone heads rooted inextricably in wood where they were able to make a dating. They found also a pyramid for the first time in America. Whereas they found earlier things at Copalillo, they have never found a pyramid until this period. Nowhere in America is this found. They found both the step pyramid and true pyramid (conical-shaped). They found it on the north/south axis and orientation.

Nothing, no ceremonial center in America before then was built on this orientation. That is the orientation used by all pyramidal structures in other parts of the world.

Now the big problem that arises here is people ask where are these people, these people who came? What did they look like? How do we know they were there? They have found 14 colossal African-type stone heads. They are still finding stone heads. One of them found in 1862 has not only African-type features, it has Ethiopian braids, a seven-braid hairstyle, and none were known in the Americas before or since.

They have found terra cotta, hundreds of terra cotta, they are there in the Von Wuthenau collection. Hundreds of these are distinct, racially distinct from the Native American population, not only with different noses and mouths, et cetera, but texture of hair and an attempt by the American artist to capture and evoke coloration of the skin by oxide dyes used in the clay.

Professor Guadarrama, Wiereinski, Davalos, all have shown skeletal remains at Tlatilco, Cerro de las Mesas, and Monte Alban, in the very civilization and same historical period. They have shown skeletal remains with skulls distinct from the skulls of the natives in the grave yards of the same place. Different nasal index, different brow ridge, structure of the jaw, different length in relationship of limbs indicating an Africoid type.

Apart from any movement of Africoids across the Bering Straits. the Bering Isthmus, we have evidence of Atlantic movement. This is something that 10 years ago, when I brought out my book, was dismissed by most anthropologists, but many of them are taking this very seriously now because we have a growing body of evidence.

One of the most stunning pieces of evidence is maps. We did not know that America was mapped before Columbus. We have evidence now of this in maps. The Piri Reis map is something that shows us astonishing things. The Atrato River in Colombia is mapped for 300 miles accurately. Nobody in the time of Columbus could map the Atrato River in Colombia. We have found the map indicating that things although it is a composite of several maps.

This very map found in the sacked Library of Alexandria shows the correct longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates between the African coastline and the American coastline. Nobody even 150 years after the era of Columbus could have plotted those coordinates. We found this is only about half a degree off and in much later periods it is much more off. We have found the Amazon River plotted. Nobody had plotted the Amazon River. And we have found evidence of ritual and technological correspondences.

But let me point out that the object of all this is not to belittle Columbus' achievements because, even though Columbus was not the first one to suggest the world was round, he thought that because the world was round he could go far to the west and end up in the east. He was wrong because you need an airplane to do that, and he collided with the edges of the American continent. Columbus did not know he discovered the New World. On the third voyage, Columbus was sent with six ships around Africa. He landed in the Cape Verde Islands, and then he sent three ships along the earlier route but he took three ships on the African route which the Portuguese told him would be coming in on the edge of South America. He landed in Trinidad just about a day's journey from South America, and that journey is something that has been shown to be very easy.

Those routes take people and boats automatically to America. This has been tested 120 times. It is not a speculation. Thor Heyerdahl and Alain Bombard have tested African boats on these currents. Heyerdahl is the most famous. Heyerdahl got the Buduma people to build an ancient boat used in Africa before Christ. This boat was sent in 1969 from Safi in North Africa all the way to Barbados without steering. The currents took them there. Once off the Cape Verde coast currents take things automatically into America. Africa is only 1500 miles from America. Europe is 3000 miles away. Europe does not have the advantages of these currents.

People have said the Africans did not have boats. That is not true. Africans invented 7 major ships along the Niger. They had the papyrus reed boat; they had the catamaran-type boat, and the double canoe, the power canoe. They had a range of ships on the Niger. They had a range of ships on the Nile. They had 3000 years of ships on the Nile. Even the Phoenician ships make use of the structure of the African boat and introduce several variations. Along the Indian Ocean coast of Africa, where I spent a year in Tanzania studying, ships that carried elephants to China in the thirteenth century are reported. There are reports of Africans bringing elephants to China two centuries before Columbus.

I want to make one point clear. If we want to have a quincentenary, I think this has to be clear, the part about all these cultures and our taking cognizance of all of this. Let us have a commemoration in which we take note of what this multiple heritage means. I know it in my own life because I was born in South America. I lived among the Native Americans. I spent seven and-a-half years in the forest with them. I spent ten and-a-half years in Europe, both Eastern and Western Europe. I have spent a year in Africa. So I am very well aware of what that multiple heritage means. And if we are to have a commemoration, let us take the opportunity not to consolidate a myth but to open a new window upon the universe of peoples.

Let us have whatever it is we are developing to take full cognizance of other civilizations here in a true cross-cultural fashion so we can really speak of ourselves as true Americans, New World people, because that is what the New World means. It is the bringing together of all these old world elements into a new world.

Columbus' visit would not have been possible without the Moors.

The Moorish invaders brought things into Europe that were totally unknown. Europe had its scientific genius, but that genius had to draw upon, to be cross-fertilized by other cultures. The compass came out of China. That was an instrument on the Columbus ship. Even the sails that Columbus and Vespucci used were not European sails. They were Arab/lateen sails that the Moors introduced into Europe. Even the gun. The fire stick first appears in an assault of the Muslims on India. The gunpowder technology came out of China and was brought by the Muslims into Europe.

So, even these elements are part of a world thing. This is what the New World means. This is a new world in the sense of merging the genius of the Arab world, of Africa, of China, and of Europe so that European genius-was given a stimulus by the pooling of these elements, and this is what I would like to say when we celebrate perhaps the greatest event in terms of changing the history of the old world and the new.

Thank you.

Mervyn M. Dymally:

Thank you, Dr. Sertima. I have got a couple of questions for you.

In light of your testimony concerning the presence of African and Native American peoples prior to the coming of Columbus, what suggestions do you have other than that which you have already given, on how we may make this commission a more relevant commission?

Ivan Van Sertima:

I think, for example, when one of the members of the commission was talking about the Caribbean that he should pay much closer attention to what he is saying because the so-called United States is a recent development and, if you are talking about Columbus, you are not talking about something that happened yesterday in Puerto Rico, in the Virgin Islands. You are talking about 500 years of history. As it is, that 500 years already closes us into a little room because many people don't look beyond that 500 years. You close yourself into an even smaller room by saying only those parts of the Caribbean which we can call the United States should be included in our serious consideration.

I think that suggestion about the Bahamas should be taken up, and it could be restricted. I can see the danger. I saw that particularly in my own studies. There are so many claims going on about all sorts of people discovering America and a defensive wall has to be built up. But if you take the commemoration seriously, I think that is one of the things that should be looked at. I think also you should look carefully at the stamps and flags that will be developed so it doesn't become an ethnic enterprise and that one should take cognizance of the multiple heritage of the Americas.

Mervyn M. Dymally:

Then what is your response to the amendment that we include some representation from the Caribbean?

Ivan Van Sertima:

I think that is something that should be pursued.

Mervyn M. Dymally:

Thank you very much.
Ms. Morella?

Constance 'Connie' A. Morella:

I am mesmerized by your testimony; I know that you have got to be a brilliant scholar and professor. I assume that much of what you said is probably encompassed in your book. If in fact it is not, I hope that we will have a copy of your testimony in some way.

Ivan Van Sertima:

I shall submit the book as well as a more recent essay and the book that is coming out on this subject, which is really sort of a sequel which comes out next month. I would like to submit that in the record, because that has the latest maps and discoveries that have been made by a body of scholars, not just myself.

Constance 'Connie' A. Morella:

Perhaps even just excerpts from it will be appropriate for us and for the commission to be able to peruse, too, because I think what you are saying is really not out of touch with what the commission is hoping to do. Your quest is that of discovery not being taken literally because literally this didn't happen. But if we are talking about reaching out to all the organizations without making it ethnic, as you suggested, then perhaps the commission can accomplish that very thing. The fact that America is made up of many diverse elements and with such a diverse history, perhaps the commission can, in the educational endeavor, reflect that this history was intertwined with other earlier discoveries and people from African nations and South America and all of the diversity.

Don't you think that can be done in a harmonious and positive manner?

Ivan Van Sertima:

Yes, I think that is possible provided that mythologies of the past are not taken that seriously. I do appreciate that. Columbus is a very important figure, and it would be good to use him as a pivot, but I do believe that one should not in doing so close a door because it is very easy to utter liberal clichés. They don't necessarily mean anything. It calls for very serious reexamination of one's mythologies before you actually get into serious cross-cultural dialogue with other peoples, because it is very easy to say it. It doesn't take much strength and energy to say it, but to do it involves thinking-a rethinking, and that is the reason why corrective histories have to be developed, not necessarily to put one history against another, but in order to prevent some of these unfortunate clichés about discoveries going on because there is an insult involved.

For example, we have an instance of Americans actually entering Europe, a shipwrecked American boat entering Europe. It is reported by the Romans and Germans. But the Americans are crazy to claim they discovered Europe.

But even though we say one is not taking it literally one sometimes finds in the deliberations you get closed structures that are produced by these words, so even though they may not be taken literally or assumed not to be taken literally, they create a frame of reference which locks one in.

Constance ‘Connie’ A. Morella:

We look to Columbus as the symbol, but, as you say, not with the specificity that would lock one into that kind of conviction. I can appreciate what you say. It is not like George Washington cut down the cherry tree; I think that is what you are saying; so I think this can be an educational situation, too, still using Christopher Columbus as a symbol, don't you?

Ivan Van Sertima:

Oh, yes.

Constance ‘Connie’ A. Morella:

Thank you very much for your testimony.

Mervyn M. Dymally:

Professor, I have a couple more questions. Is it possible to give us a copy of your testimony?

Ivan Van Sertima:

If you transcribe it, you would have it as it is.

Mervyn M. Dymally:

Fine, very good. Does the Commission have a copy of your book?

Ivan Van Sertima:

I do not know, but I am quite willing to submit it into the record, and the latest essays that have been done in that field.

Mervyn M. Dymally:

What you are saying in effect, that we need to have a broader view of this celebration than just the man, the events, and the people surrounding this celebration are important?

Ivan Van Sertima:

Yes. I think it could be used as a window rather than as a closed door, because it has been used as a closed door before, and I am aware that people have moved away from those sorts of certitudes, but there is the danger, so to move somewhat away from that sort of direction--

Mervyn M. Dymally:

My own judgment is that your testimony here in the presence of the Chairman and Director of the Commission is very important, because I hope it will set the tone for subsequent celebrations. This is analogous to Justice Marshall suggesting that as we celebrate the Constitution, we ought to look at its shortcomings and use it as a lesson, not to just celebrate without looking at some of the shortcomings, because it was not in itself a perfect document.

I thank you very much for your testimony.