

COLOMBIANS REDISCOVER THEIR  
AFRICAN ROOTS

**HON. CHARLES B. RANGEL**

OF NEW YORK

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, June 9, 2006

Mr. RANGEL. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in praise of an article written by Howard Dodson in *Africana Heritage*, a periodical from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, in New York City. I praise the piece because it touches on a very little known subject, that being the lives of Afro-Colombians in the Americas, a people with a rich and radiant culture who are so often ignored by mainstream Colombia.

Their presence in the region dates back to the age of European exploration of the Americas and, in particular, the transatlantic slave trade. Dodson pointed out in his article that, "the Afro-Colombian population had become so marginalized that for the overwhelming majority of Colombians as well as the world's people they were invisible." With over a quarter of the population being of African descent, there is no way this society should have been treated the way they were for so many years.

He also describes how the system might now be changing: "presence of Afro-Colombians as part of the Colombian nation may be at an all time high." The Afro-Colombian people understand their history, their identity and national heritage and the need to keep it alive for the generations to come. For such a rich and vibrant culture to dissolve with time would be a detriment to an entire race of people.

What makes these people so unique is the one thing that may have kept them in isolation for so many years, their African ancestry. For years, the nation has been in denial about its connection to the people of Africa. However, the connection is so strong that, "what makes Colombia's culture distinctly Colombian is likely the African presence in it," as noted by Dodson. The people of African descent in the Americas have carried with them over the Atlantic aged traditions and concepts unknown to the western hemisphere prior to their arrival.

The plight of Afro-Descendent populations in Latin America and the Caribbean is one that I take special interest in, for their struggles have long gone on ignored for so many years. That was why I sponsored the bipartisan historic resolution H. Con. Res. 175 recognizing, for the first time ever, the struggles of African-descendent populations in Latin America and the Caribbean. This in turn urged the United States and the international community to support social development and economic programs targeting these groups.

Usually denied the most basic necessities, African-Descendent populations, particularly in Latin America, are among the poorest, least educated, and most marginalized groups in the region. In terms of the Afro-Colombian population, they have the shortest life expectancies and the lowest literacy rates of any group in Colombia. Displacement, guerilla and military violence, and fragile economics make the struggle of these groups even more difficult.

I enter into the RECORD the article by Howard Dodson for his continuing effort to give a face to the often ignored Afro-Descendent population in Latin America. Dodson took it

upon himself to research and get a first hand account about the situation below our borders. I believe that this is an ideal opportunity for African Americans to reach out to their brothers and sisters in Haiti, Cuba, Brazil, Colombia and the rest of the hemisphere, for they are experiencing the same second-class treatment African Americans received in this country forty years ago. We need to come together to safeguard access to healthcare, education and basic human rights.

[From the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 2006]

COLOMBIANS REDISCOVER THEIR AFRICAN  
ROOTS

(By Howard Dodson)

I returned to Colombia after a 40-year hiatus this past November. What was new there that I did not see during my visits from decades ago was the emergence of the consciousness of the Afro-Colombian population within the nation and an Afro-Colombian consciousness among Afro descendants. Forty years ago, indeed 10 years ago, the Afro-Colombian population had become so marginalized that for the overwhelming majority of Colombians as well as the world's people they were invisible. This is no longer the case. Consciousness of the presence of Afro-Colombians as a part of the Colombian nation may be at an all time high. And Afro-Colombians' consciousness of themselves as a critical but neglected segment of the Colombian national identity, heritage, and future is also at an all time high.

When I visited Colombia in the 1960s, I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Ecuador. All of my travels in Latin America during my two-and-a-half-year tour of duty were partially a mission of discovery. As an African American living and traveling in South America for the first time, I was especially interested in meeting and learning more about people of African descent who lived in Latin America. In Colombia, I traveled to the Caribbean and Pacific Coasts and visited Cartagena, Barranquilla, Santa Marta, Cali, Medellin, Manizales, etc. I also spent some time in Bogotá where I met a lot of Afro-Colombians, but at the time even they were reluctant to discuss their Africanness.

While my most recent visit was limited to Bogotá and Quibdó in the Chocó region, the context in which it occurred announced for me the existence of a new era in Afro-Colombian history and culture. The Universidad Tecnológica del Chocó, the country's major black university, has launched an initiative to establish a National Center for Documenting Afro-Colombian Cultural Expressions. I was invited, in my capacity as Director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, to participate in a two-day planning symposium to continue to develop the concept and program for this new national initiative. I have devoted over 20 of the last 40 years of my life developing the Schomburg Center into the world's leading research library devoted exclusively to documenting the global black experience. Organizers of the planning symposium thought the Center's and my experiences might be helpful in developing the Center in Quibdó. Over the last decade, we've placed a special emphasis on the Afro Latino or Afro descendant populations in South and Central America.

One recent collaborative effort took place in Colombia. The staff of the National Archives of Colombia in Bogotá unearthed a plethora of historic documents on slavery and black people in Colombia during the colonial period. With funding from the Schomburg Center and York University in Toronto, Canada the Archives staff was able

to digitize these records. A grant from UNESCO made it possible to develop these digitized resources into a robust website and now these historic documents on Afro-Colombians' colonial past are accessible to the world on the Internet. This project was an important beginning, but documenting the centrality of the African presence in the development of Colombia's national history and culture will require much more research and documentation. This is what the Universidad Tecnológica del Chocó proposes to spearhead through its National Center for Documenting Afro-Colombian Cultural Expressions.

Why is such an effort warranted at this time? First of all, recent scholarship on the African presence in the Americas has unearthed a startling demographic fact that is forcing scholars to rethink their understanding of the African presence in the Americas as well as the historical and cultural development of the Americas themselves. Between 1492 and 1776, or roughly the first 300 years of what is commonly referred to as the European colonization of the Americas, 6.5 million people survived the crossing of the Atlantic and settled in the Americas—North, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. Of those original 6.5 million settler pioneers, only 1 million were Europeans.

The other 5.5 million were African. This simple demographic fact challenges all of our conventional notions about who were the principle history-and-culture-makers in the Americas during the colonial period.

Cartagena, Colombia was the principle entrepot for the Africans who would eventually populate the Pacific Coast of South America and Colombia (or New Grenada as it was called). Two hundred plus years later, Colombia's Caribbean and Pacific Coast provinces still have the overwhelming majority of the nation's African descended population. Their marginalized and seemingly invisible state notwithstanding, they still constitute over 25 percent of the nation's 40 million people.

Of equal importance, over the last decade and a half, thanks to the Constitution of 1991 and Law 70 of 1993, the nation has committed itself to ending black marginalization, integrating the African descended population into the national body politic. While fulfilling those commitments has been fraught with difficulty, the Afro-Colombian population has developed a new sense of entitlement and consciousness of its rights and is actively seeking to have the nation correct the consequences of centuries of neglect, discrimination, and invisibility.

While the nation has been in a state of denial about the African roots of its past, the African presence in the national culture has been undeniable. Indeed, in the realm of culture—be it art, music, religion, dance, language, cuisine, etc.—what makes Colombia's culture distinctly Colombian is likely the African presence in it. Recent scholarship has begun this process of documentation, but more, much more needs to be done if the total integration of the society is to be realized.

Finally, Afro-Colombians themselves have been in denial about their African heritages. As a consequence, they frequently know little or nothing about it. Their historical and cultural heritage are not included in the textbooks or taught in the schools. Stereotypical representations of African descended Colombians have all too frequently dominated the public media. And Afro-Colombians' unique cultural heritages have all too frequently been mocked or denigrated.

The National Center proposes to foster the development of new scholarship that will reveal the true nature of the Afro-Colombian historical and cultural legacy. The project is

off to an excellent start. During the two-day planning symposium, representatives of the National Library, The Colombian Institute of Anthropology and History, the National Archives and the Ministry of Culture were in attendance as were some of the country's leading scholars in the field of Afro-Colombian Studies. All have gone on record in support of this effort. Eduardo García Vega, Director of the Universidad Tecnológica del Chocó, has made a major commitment to the effort. There is already an academic program in Afro-Colombian Studies and plans are underway to offer a Masters Degree in the field. A full floor of the new technology building that is currently under construction has been designated to house the Center. It is scheduled for completion and occupancy in June 2006. Members of the faculty and staff of the University are already working with the Rector to make the Center a reality. Finally, Georgetown University's (Washington, D.C.) Colombia Program and the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá have thrown their full support behind this effort.

Among the unique features of the Center is that it will house a 21st century archive. The Center will conduct oral histories and document through film, audio, and audiovisual media contemporary Afro-Colombian cultural expressions. And it will collect and preserve some printed records. But the central archive of the Center will be a virtual one. Using the 21st century Internet technology, the Center will assemble a comprehensive virtual archive of print, audio, and audiovisual resources documenting Afro-Colombian history and culture. Developing a virtual resource will allow libraries, museums and archives that currently house Afro-Colombian materials to participate in the development of this national program without having to give up their original materials. Once online, the materials will be accessible throughout the country as well as throughout the world. Researchers and scholars will be able to conduct their research without having to leave their homes or their institutions. This national digital archive on Afro-Colombian cultural expressions will be the centerpiece of the Center's larger program of research, education, and celebration.

I cannot begin to underscore the importance of this initiative. While we at the Schomburg Center attempt to document the global black experience, we are clear that no single institution can carry out such an ambitious agenda. Every country in the world that has large African descended populations needs a Center that is focused on preserving the records of their past. We have done an extraordinary job of documenting the African-American experience in the United States and our collections contain representative documentation of black people around the world. A national documentation center such as the one contemplated in Colombia will go a long way toward preserving the Afro-Colombian heritage for the Colombian people as well as filling this important gap in the documentation of the global black experience.

#### TRIBUTE TO LEILANI SPERBER

#### HON. MARILYN N. MUSGRAVE

OF COLORADO

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

*Friday, June 9, 2006*

Mrs. MUSGRAVE. Mr. Speaker, I rise to pay tribute to the memory of Leilani Sperber whose sunny disposition and compassionate heart touched many lives in northeast Colorado. Leilani was born in Holyoke, CO and

spent most of her life in Phillips County. She and her husband Gary taught school for a few years before settling in Holyoke where Leilani was a full-time mother and homemaker. Together they raised a daughter, Shawn and two sons, Eric and Mark.

Leilani always had time to nurture friendships and gently encourage those she encountered each day. Her generosity and deep faith led to her involvement in numerous church activities including serving on the Missions Committee, teaching Sunday School, sponsoring the youth group, helping with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes High School Huddle group, and participating in two mission trips to Mexico.

Leilani always followed wherever her strong convictions led her, but she did it with a kind heart and was always respectful of the needs and concerns of people around her. She worked on numerous community projects. She was actively involved in the Friends of the Library and served as president. She worked to get the Heginbotham Library in Holyoke in the register of historical places. She was also part of the effort to raise funds and help restore the Peerless Center in Holyoke. She was a huge supporter of local sports, especially when her husband was coaching or her children were participating. Leilani also was actively involved in the Republican Party and served as precinct chairman and delegate to the State Conventions.

When her children were out of the home, Leilani's eagerness to learn and grow led her to return to school and earn her Master's degree in agency counseling. She worked for Centennial Mental Health as a counselor before taking a position with the Haxtun Hospital as a Social Service director. While in this position, Leilani organized a cancer survivors support group.

Leilani's life was a lesson in how to enjoy life, honor God, care for others, face difficulties with courage, and make a positive impact on the world. I am proud to honor Leilani who is the embodiment of all the values that have molded America into the great Nation it is today. "Strength and honor are her clothing; she shall rejoice in time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness. She watches over the way of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: Many daughters have done well, but you exceed them all. Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised" (Proverbs 31:25-30) Leilani was a precious, beautiful woman.

#### HONORING MICHAEL SCOTT

#### HON. RAHM EMANUEL

OF ILLINOIS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

*Friday, June 9, 2006*

Mr. EMANUEL. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize the distinguished tenure of Michael Scott, president of the Chicago Board of Education. Michael recently announced that he will retire from the board on July 21, 2006. Chicago's public school students and parents will miss the dedication and professionalism he has brought to the public schools and his service to the city.

Michael was raised on the west side of Chicago, attended St. Philip's High School and later earned a B.A. in urban planning from Fordham University. He first became involved in local government after spending many years as a developer. His early dedication to the betterment of Chicago's communities drew attention from the late Mayor Harold Washington. Michael went on to serve in the administrations of Mayor Washington and Mayor Richard Daley.

In June 2001, Michael Scott was appointed to the Chicago Board of Education, and elected president of the board that same month. For the past 5 years, Michael has dedicated his energy and talents to this challenging and time consuming position, working on a voluntary basis. Under his direction, the Chicago Public Schools have thrived. One of Michael's key initiatives, in partnership with Mayor Daley, was Renaissance 2010, a program that closed underperforming schools and reached out to private donors to build new ones. Together they built the first new Chicago public school in 29 years.

Michael has combined strong managerial skills with an ability to bring students, parents, and teachers together to solve problems and create opportunities. He has worked very hard for the students of Chicago and cares about them deeply. His engaging personality has also helped him build strong relationships with parents and teachers.

Michael's success can be seen in the students' improved math and reading test scores. The schools have also worked hard to reduce truancy. Michael's creativity and innovation have also resulted in new programs such as ballroom dancing and other opportunities for student creativity.

Mr. Speaker, I ask my colleagues to join me in recognizing a true public servant on the successful completion of his tenure. On behalf of all of Chicago's families, I thank Michael Scott for his dedication and wish him the best of luck in the future.

#### HONORING ELIZABETH LODAL IN RETIREMENT

#### HON. TOM DAVIS

OF VIRGINIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

*Friday, June 9, 2006*

Mr. TOM DAVIS of Virginia. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to honor Elizabeth Lodal, who is retiring after 40 years of service to Fairfax County Public Schools.

Mrs. Lodal, the principal of Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, studied math and physics at Rice University. She began her career as an English and history teacher; later, she was the principal of Joyce Kilmer Middle School and Langston Hughes Middle School. After her tenure in the middle school system, she served as the principal of McLean High School for 10 years. She will be retiring this August, which comes 6 years after she came out of retirement to lead Thomas Jefferson High School at the behest of Daniel Domenech, the former supervisor of Fairfax County Public Schools.

Mrs. Lodal has received numerous accolades, which are all testaments to her dedication to this community. In 1998, she received the Distinguished Alumni Award from her alma