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Afro-PanaVisions.com

Visions of a more united, self-determining, nurturing, and networking community

On-Line Newsletter

October 2008

Evaluating the Mis-Education of the Afro-Panamanians

Our Tradition of Preserving our Heritage/History/Image

(Trapped in the Colonial Heritage of Panama)

Grade: 'F'

(For Complacency as well as for Wallowing in Self-Perpetuating Mediocrity)

Our ability to perverse our history/heritage/image is rated unsatisfactory. In our minds/way of thinking, if you cannot identify/claim/own up to and address your problems, you have failed. Therefore, as we see it, complacency and its crafty sibling, mediocrity, are the main designated culprits for the poor performance grade. We are, perhaps, the most docile and tractable (not to mention gullible) people on the planet of the earth. What we have come to be satisfied with whatever extent/measure the Panamanian government and others believe we should be allotted-- obviously not much--and be satisfied with! We cannot simply be contented with menial services or remain content with our ghetto/colonial images as a group. We must begin to act and govern ourselves in a more professional, sophisticated, cultured, educated manner that would encourage our children to look at life with a fresh and uplifting eye. We cannot continue to settle for mere handouts and mediocrity and not attempt to improve our image in Panama by doing something constructive-- as a group--and not for ourselves. Emerging and new models of collective black leadership must be able to promote a version of this politics and put some new blood and meaning to the struggle. Simply shouting "discrimination," when the "handouts" and the insults are already flying in our faces, is totally exhausted and not going to change anything!

With all the new skyscrapers outlining Panama's coastline, one would believe that perhaps the colonial past is a remote, picturesque time that has little relevance to the way Panamanians live today. However, Panama is still stuck by characteristics/features that are patently colonial. We, Afro-Panamanians, are in no way representative of the picturesque scenes of Panama today, and our identity remains part of Panama's colonial heritage. In this light, the La Sociedad de Amigos del Museo de Afro Antillano de Panamá (SAMAAP) Museum, which remains one of those institutions/symbols of the inventory of colonial survival in Panama, is the focus of our discussion in reference to, support of, the above conclusions, coupled with other noted



observations:

Respecting and Preserving the Past

By way of background, the Panamanian government (in its aggressive attempt to win over/reward the coming-of-age Afro-Panamanians for their Canal Treaty efforts), by way of the Cultural and Artistic Institute restored an old Baptist chapel in the WI district of Marañón and made it into the Afro-Antillean Museum. The chapel was built during the Construction Era when canal officials expended \$100,000 to build churches or remodeled other structures in the Zone and Panama as part of their programs of "social control" that was designed then as a stabilizing force in the WI communities. "Religion means very much to the WI. He prefers his church to everything else."



Embracing the Future

(Our amateurish rendering of a new SAMAAP Museum. We will, of course, leave the rendering to the experts)

Afro-PanaVisions

Where Two Communities Share One Vision;

Where the Sum is Greater Than the Individual Parts

Since its opening in December 1980, the Museum has spent almost the past 30 years in this small former colonial-type church in the slums of Caledonia. At its opening, community leaders contributed artifacts and oral histories. The old colonial building in itself is, in our estimation, mundane and without character. We should be able to "preserve" the old structure, surrounded by/within a new and innovative setting. We, the people, our WI history, are more deserving of a building/edifice/structure that celebrates and marks our past and propels us into the future—especially after a 100-year history in Panama.

We acknowledge that SAMAAP is one of the longest-running Afro-Panamanian organizations in the community and, as such, did not make our lists of short-lived organizations in our prior editions. Today, the Museum itself, is reported to belong to and is administered by the Patrimonio Histórico del Instituto Nacional de Cultura. Thus, it is perhaps fair to say that the primary reason for SAMAAP's longevity is the fact that the building housing the museum is owned by a Panamanian government agency. Without that support, it makes you wonder about its longevity and whether the community would continue its support.

Here again, we believe that Gen. Torrijos and his advisors were masterful in their plans in assuring our 'assimilation' into Panamanian culture and the Museum "handout" was all part of a deliberate act to exploit us through economic restriction and segregation. More importantly, it was their cunning attempt to assure that we would not be able to combine/organize forces within the community; thus, keep us divided into distinct factions.

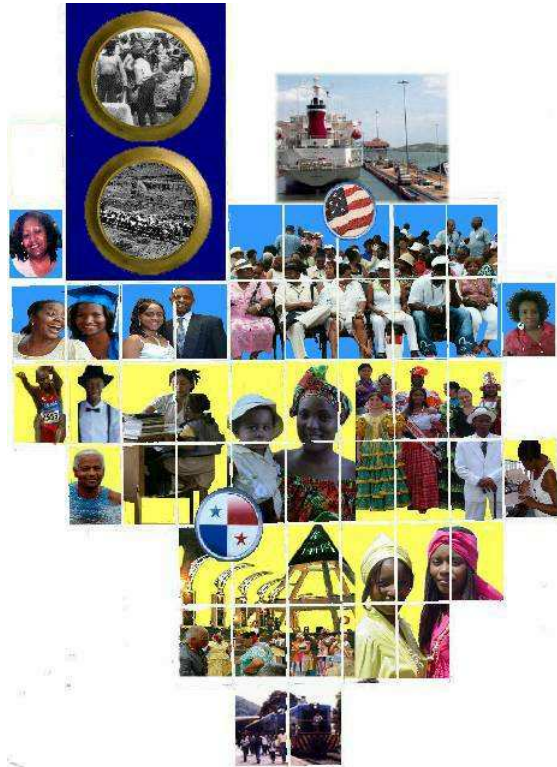
How we believe they accomplish this? Briefly, the very astute Gen. Torrijos carefully observed the manner in which the *Zonians* controlled our destiny. He knew the up-and-coming Afro-Panamanians were fragmented and lacked leadership. Many of the talented fled the oppressive atmosphere of the Zone where their education and skills were ground and beaten down by years of frustration. A 1970 study published by Torrijos' office called for the integration of the WI descendants, many of whom still lived isolated in the ghettos with a high rate of unemployed teenagers, absence of "self-identity and defiance to authority in the WI community. The generational/cultural identity gap in the community widened and the alienation of the youth was palpable. The WI benevolent societies in the community were a dying breed because the youths showed no interest and failed to join as they no longer felt an attachment to the community. Torrijos believed that an active publicity campaign would promote our assimilation into the cultural mainstream. He used a subtle game to keep subordinates (WI vs. *Costeños*, the privileged ones remaining on the Zone vs. the poor in the ghettos, etc.) occupied; playing one against the other, exploiting natural rivalries of regional origin, and ideology. Moreover, Torrijos sought out (cherry/hand picked) and cultivated those of us he could count on to lead the charge in the WI community. He encouraged us to form the two organizations: the Acción Reivindicadora del Negro Panameño (ARENEP) and the Asociación de Profesionales, Obreros, y Dirigentes de Asendencia Negra (APODAN); the latter was created to counterbalance the militant image of ARENEP. He would fund these organizations' operations, albeit at times covertly and veiled. He knew that once he financed the leaders of these organizations and gave them sufficient publicity, (beforehand of the rest of the WI population); they'd be willing to do certain things they personally desired to have accomplished. He also befriended a social worker in Rio Abajo, and urged him to run for the Assembly in 1972. In essence, he and his advisors formed a community of so-called black 'elites' privileged and separate from the rest of the WI population.

A further note, the same year that the government financed the Antillean Museum they also financed a Spanish edition of a lengthy manuscript by George Westerman as well as the Second Congress of Black Culture in the Americas—all designed to win us over. At the same time they quietly hastened the demise of the Panamá Tribune by encouraging businesses from giving him their advertising. But with or without government harassment, the paper could not have continued much longer because many of the youths in the community did not support it. The government-owned newspaper, La República, (Formerly the Panamá América) dropped its English section. So the WI community lost what had once been an effective forum for cohesion, identity and defense.

When Torrijos returned from talks in the U.S. regarding the Treaty, ARENEP strung banners at the airport proclaiming, "Chombos Support the General!" Torrijos and his advisors, perhaps, had a good, private laugh at the situation. Unfortunately, sadly, Torrijos had become our hero by "pulling the wool over our (poor) eyes," with handouts, deception and trickery. Furthermore, we must come to realize that we all have been duped. Our easy access to the USA was just an extension of the Diaspora. The only difference this time is that we were 'free' to fly and not packed like sardines on boats.

As to the museum itself, it is in need of a transformation, both physically and mission-driven. It is time for the communities, as a whole, begin reaching for a higher/progressive culture. There is a need for innovation in the matter; that is, in our opinion, a need for reconstruction, rethinking and redesigning. We need a museum of continued progress. To counter its image and reinvigorate the museum's presence, it is obvious that we need a contemporary piece of architecture that represents the 21st century and Panama's growing skyline, with more space to expand a greater visibility/higher profile as well as to show case our collective innovative and creative minds. It is time to create a visitor friendly public environment that brings a good deal of positive attention to its philosophy, and one that supports established goals. These goals should include the museum becoming a more attention-getting destination. That is, to create a wow factor, a must-see factor, so that the museum becomes one of the mandatory stops for visitors and more importantly can be used to hook people in and making them want to learn. It must be able to give meaning to life with improved curatorial and educational projects, tailored to everyone, particularly our children.

There appears to be no clear indication of creative visions on the horizon that would speak and spark creativity and innovation in the matter. Without such visions, major change cannot become reality. A museum is not simply about objects, a museum is about telling stories in verse and print. A museum cannot truly serve its community without grounding in knowledge; that is, without true history, detail objects and belief. It must lead the community into the unknown past, the present and the future by expanding and integrating its collection galleries while utilizing the new media state-of-the-art technology available today to enhance its galleries and displays. We believe our museum, as is, in its present state reflects on our second-class citizenship status in Panama. The question we should ask ourselves: How come the other ethnic museums are



"Thinking Outside the Box"

(Those who Write, (should) Teach)

We at [AfroPanavisions](#) understand that most in our community need an education in our history because we truly believe that our poor community performance to date has been made possible by a system designed by the evildoers of mis-educating innocent people who did not know what has been happening. We were purposely taught how to quarrel among ourselves and, thus, have been unable to develop a doctrine of our own in our struggle forward. In fact, the evil system has simply been just a sequel of slavery. The dehumanizing behavior from slavery has left a wicked scar inscribed in the souls of blacks we can't seem to remove or rid ourselves of. Our minds have been perfectly enslaved in that it has been trained to think what is desired of us. The keynote to this control has been to assure that there is no promising future for solidarity/racial empowerment and development as a group. We are hopeful that by providing a sense of cultural history some in the communities may find that it's time to "see around the corner," and help rid ourselves of the our "backward" colonial image/ways.

We further understand that historical, creative literature requires a degree of monomania—in attempting to get our messages/thought-provoking ideas to sink in. It can be an uncomfortable fact because many a times, as creative writers, we don't know exactly where we are going next with our stories, but somehow we believe we get there. We listen to the voices and echoes of 4 to 5 centuries past in order to help put the community in a position to say "NEVER AGAIN!" Our so-called community leaders, to this day, have been all about themselves and their legacy. One is afraid that the other may prosper more and be recognized accordingly. We have created an atmosphere in which image, not ideas dominate. Even when so-called ideas are presented today, they resemble worn-out civil rights theories of the '60s. It appears to be nothing more than "chest beating" by the "old guards" wanting to take credit for ridding ourselves of "Jim-Crowism."

Our creative writing goes beyond simply imparting knowledge to empowering others with the ability to think constructively and independently— and hopefully act thoughtfully. We also obviously feel strongly that a self-evaluation of our community leadership activities is considered warranted and important. Furthermore, we like to consider ourselves to be thinking outside of the box. We like to pause and think things through and provide analyses that enlighten and educate. We write to express, not to impress. We not only tell you what we believe is wrong but we offer reasonable and open solutions for addressing actual/foreseen problems. We realize from experience, however, that some of the chronic fault-finders/so-called leaders in the community will view the style of this presentation as "confusing" (not "cookie cutter" enough for them to understand). However, like most of our presentation, it is designed to enable folks to read and re-read—and think it through for themselves; which above all is the main purpose of education. To the suggestion that we use less "big words" in our presentations, we can only advise to pick up a dictionary for the meaning of such 'big words' and read the

not located in the slums of Panama?



Calidonia's slums c.a. 1940s - (Some first-born Afro-Panamanians.)

We are asking that both communities come together and pool our human and financial resources to assure that our museum is to be more than it is—not just to reflect its colonial identity but to be a source of information and cultural diversity. People will come more readily to the museum knowing that they're going to see galleries that is relevant to them and to the community. There is an obvious need for better chronological accounts of our heritage—from slavery to Panama— including its economic impact. We must tell our own story! We should also be able to mount exhibitions on hot-button topics/issues like AIDS, abortion, etc, each with a different curator in an effort to keep the perspective fresh at all times. In addition, the museum should be a scholarly resource, a place of lively and active discussions of all nature.

The overall point we are making is that we need a bigger and brighter picture, a panoramic view—if you will. To upgrade the museum will obviously require some serious collective grassroots, community fundraising activities. Such tasks require an honest commitment to soliciting and gathering funds, with a high premium on accountability. All of our programs, policies and practices must be fully transparent. The greater things in life can be attained only by wise and courageous leadership.

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article again—you would have added a new word to your vocabulary! Our minds, for the most part, have long been enslaved from infancy into old age in that regard. Break the cycle! We feel our articles are written for all to comprehend, we cater to and serve a wide and diverse audience. Keep reading, stay informed!

The present we currently know is just a movie of the past. Again, we continue to let other folks control our thinking. One case in point: a few years back we readily supported the "Plaza de la Cultura" project (in honor of the various ethnic groups that built the Panama Canal) in Amador because the idea was, for the most part, presented/borne by others for whom many of us perceive as a better breed, capable of doing a better job with such project than we ever could. We feel incapable, as a group, of taking on or doing any such endeavors for ourselves by ourselves. We have been made to despise and undermine our own capabilities/possibilities and have been developed into/viewed as, parasites—always piggybacking! This sad 'inferiority complex/self-hate attitude is somewhat reflective of the despairing remarks quoted below by Samuel Whyte-- which perhaps gave him the designation by the *Zonians* as the 'Uncle Tom' in-charge of the community back then.

Anyway, a main goal of ours is for both communities to rise higher than to plunge into trifling competition with each other. We must be civilized towards each other. The prevalent 'them vs. us' attitude that we observe in the community is viewed as ridiculous, if not childish. This is particularly evident on the US side where again the so-called leaders/elites are willing/anxious to show those in Panama how things are/should be done. The question is: What have they done for themselves as a group? To lead such charge one must lead by example. This childish mindset is a result of the "curse of (limited) knowledge" ('knowingness) to be imparted. (To be further explained in the next On-Line issue).

Obviously, another one of our goals is to rearrange our history in redefining ourselves. That is our reason for seeking a group of like-thinking citizens in advocating a certain platform/philosophy in rearranging that history and the way we do things today. We are seeking thinkers who are willing to hold their feet under the fire until we are satisfied with results. Quality leadership is not about individual standard or personal status or our ability to simply plan and organize activities. It's having a moral vision, it's taking the higher ground in our efforts to organize (not just periodically energize with cultural pride and photo-op opportunities) and stimulate our minds. Re-energizing deeply-rooted traditions of fairness, decency, democracy; developing our minds, shaping and molding our talented and gifted to achieving continuum and ensuring succession in community leadership and organizing



Let us shake hands and start working together in putting forth a vision of fundamental changes, for our children, particularly in the slums of Panama.

"Our Quote of the Month"

"One white man can lead a thousand Negroes better than ten Negroes could." - Samuel Whyte, c.a. 1921 (Balck Police Officer on the CZ)