

## **Diane Lazar, Afro-Venezuelans**

The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela is located in between Colombia, Brazil and Guyana. Venezuela, a population of approximately of twenty-seven million inhabitants of Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Arab, German, African, indigenous and descent has had a long history of marginalizing its Afro-Venezuelan community through its legislative, educational, and cultural policies. Afro-Venezuelans first arrived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century as slaves to cultivate cacao (United States 1-2). After Simón Bolívar won independence from Spain, the Afro-Venezuelan were not considered citizens. Similarly, the Afro-Venezuelan community today is still not a recognized ethnic minority because they, unlike the indigenous minorities, are not mentioned in the constitution. Regardless of their lack of representation in legislature, eighty percent of Afro-Venezuelans voted in the presidential election in the August 15, 2004 referendum (Early 51). They support Chávez because through his social programs, he has supplied the Afro-Venezuelan community with basic human needs such as education, health care and nutrition. The Afro-Venezuelan community basic needs such as health care, education and nutrition supersede issues of racism in the government and in the country as a whole. Despite the fact that Afro-Venezuelans are not included in the Venezuelan constitution, the majority of Afro-Venezuelans continue to support Chávez. In large part, this is due to the fact that the reforms instituted throughout the course of Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution seek to lessen the inequalities that disproportionately plague the lower classes, which include most Afro-Venezuelans.

Historically, socially and politically, the Afro-Venezuelans' needs have been neglected. Beginning with slavery, the Afro-Venezuelans were stripped of their humanity. In Venezuela, slavery began with a strong need for labor to cultivate the cacao fields. The Cortez family was the first family to cultivate cacao in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. They tried to enslave the indigenous people, but they later claimed the indigenous were inefficient workers. They found African slaves to be a better source of forced labor (lecture Javier Marquez, January 7, 2007). During the 1630s and 1640s, cacao sales rose and gave a significant boost in acquiring slaves (Ferry 623). By 1674, there were an estimated 16, 000 slaves in the Caracas region (Ferry 630).

During slavery, there were a few attempts by slaves to acquire their freedom and their humanity through different means. However, the rebellions failed. The first rebellion recorded and known was the failed rebellion led by "El Negro" in 1552, in the Buria mountains in Congo (Garcia 38). Later, in the eighteenth century, the *Africa cimaronjes* also known as the *maroons* were slaves who had escaped their masters. Jesus Garcia, the founder of *Fundacion Afro-America* explains how the *cimaronajes* can be classified as either passive or active. Passive marooning refers to the Africans and their descendants who through the law or the Catholic Church fought against their enslavement. During the middle of the eighteenth century, enslaved people and their children could purchase freedom if their masters wrote it in their will. Active marooning referred to slaves who directly fought against the system of slavery. In fact, after the slave rebellion led by Miguel Luango in 1749 in Caracas, he proclaimed himself king of the community of slaves. These active *maronejes* created their own free communities in remote areas all over the country; they were called *cumbes* (Garcia 38). The rebellions demanded the end of a racist government. If the rebellion had succeeded, Francisco

Loango (an Afro-Venezuelan) would have been lieutenant general, Manuel Loango (an Afro-Venezuelan) a mayor and Simón Bolívar, an attorney general (Garcia 6). Cocofio and Jose Leonardo Chirinos instigated another rebellion in 1795. With all these rebellions, one can see evidence of an African idea of independence. However, the colonial government prior to and during independence continued to ignore the basic freedoms of the Afro-Venezuelan community.

In 1813, Bolívar led Colombia, Venezuela, Uruguay and Panama to their independence from Spain. There were many attempts to pursue the Bolivarian ideas of freedom and equality- politically and socially. However, they failed regarding the Afro-Venezuelan community. Bolívar only ensured conditional freedom to the slaves. Soon after the wars of independence, former slaves were forced into servitude (Garcia 7). In the constitution of 1830 did not grant citizenship to Venezuelans of African descent or indigenous people. The constitution decreed that all Venezuelans were Roman Catholics, explicitly ignoring the needs of the indigenous and the Afro-Venezuelans. This pattern occurred up into the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the constitution written in 1961 declared that all Venezuelans were equal (Wilpert 4). However, there was no article that penalized any form of racial discrimination. Arguably, up until today, racism is permitted because it is not penalized in the constitutions of 1830, 1961 and 1999...

...With the rise of the oil industry, a new social ladder emerged in which the oil producers became the elites and the new urban workers were placed at the bottom. Many workers moved to the cities to work for oil companies. As a result, shantytowns were created where prostitution, gambling and drinking became very common. For instance, between 1900 and 1929 Maracaibo's population grew by 80,000. Specifically in Maracaibo, many skilled workers from Trinidad, African descendants flooded in the area, raising the population even more (Coronel 10).

Eleázar Contreras (1936-1941) continued to focus on the growth of the oil industry and overlooked the rights of the workers, many of which had some African descendants, or *mestizajes*. In 1939, laborers went on strikes asking for a minimum wage of \$3 per day, potable water in the working area, and Sundays off. After forty-three days, the government ordered the strikers to go back to work. The government increased the minimum wage by \$0.30 a day, and the companies were instructed to supply potable water (Coronel 12-13).

When president Betancourt took control in 1945 with a coup d'état against Medina (Contreras' successor), he and his political party, Acción Democrática, created a optimistic plan to improve Venezuelan society; however, in the process, he became so preoccupied with perpetuating the growth of the oil industry that people's civil liberties were ignored. He ruled for an intermediate period of three years, the *Trienio* period. In his political plan, his goal was to assure political democracy, raise taxes on petroleum, industrialize Venezuela, implement an agrarian reform, modernize education and supply health care programs. Another main focus of his was the expropriation of *latifunda* (a large estate owned by one family). Although he was able to provide 6,000 peasants with 73,770 hectares expropriated from the Gómez family, the land reform program exclusively affected former Gómez properties (Hellinger 62). Betancourt himself would insist during the 1950s that the goal during the *Trienio* was not to revolutionize the social and economic structure, but to modernize it.

Even in recent years with the advent of President Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution, the Afro-Venezuelans continue to be marginalized through legislature, education and culture. The constitution ratified in December 1999 does not include the Afro-Venezuelans. Because they are not mentioned in the constitution, they are excluded from many basic privileges regarding land reform, and educational and cultural opportunities. Chucho Garcia, the founder of *La Red Afro-Venezolano* and the director of *International Relations of La Red*, claims that “There is no real, profound, sincere revolution without the incorporation of the issue of African descent” (Early 49).

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