

Black Political Engagement and Political Progress in 21st Century Panama:
Afro Panamanian Cultural Organizations and Celebrations
as Political Resistance Toward Societal Progress

by
Trinity Henderson

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Thesis Committee:

Dr. Mary Evins, Thesis Director

Dr. John Vile, Thesis Committee Chair

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APPROVED:

Dr. Mary Evins, Thesis Director
Professor, History

Dr. John Vile, Thesis Committee Chair
Dean, University Honors College

Dedication

I dedicate this research project to my grandmother, Charlene Dunn Anthony. Thank you for teaching me how to carry myself through all the trials and tribulations of life. You are the matriarch of our family. I look to your actions and words for guidance as I pursue my life goals and career aspirations. Making time for family and service is second nature to you. Our family is characterized by selflessness, annual reunions, and high spirits. Your precedent has inspired me to discover different versions of our family bond in similar communities.

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Abstract

Afro Panamanian civil society organizations facilitate the pride and confidence of its members. This community began to organize in the 20th century to create a sense of belonging for its community members. In the 21st century, Black-led civil society organizations are finally receiving a response from the Panamanian government to develop the community. Through newsletters, social media, newspapers, nonprofit organizations, and cultural celebrations this community attempts to produce fundamental changes in terms of political positions, job opportunities, and education.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction: Black Engagement and Progress in Panama

Afro Panamanian societal organizations and cultural celebrations in the nation-state of Panama generate political resistance and community engagement that help elevate Afro Panamanians' well-being and position in society in the face of racial and cultural obstacles that they face.

Like many countries in Latin America, Panama has deep roots in African heritage.¹ The current significance of the Afro community in Panama can be attributed in large part to the Caribbean workers, primarily from British Jamaica and Barbados, who migrated to Panama in the 19th and 20th centuries in great numbers looking for employment on the continent, due to the economic instability in some of the Caribbean island nation states. The significance of the Afro community can also be attributed to the Africans who were forcibly brought to the country as slaves by Spanish powers in the 16th -18th centuries.²

The Afro *Caribbean* populations in Panama today are known as “West Indians,” which refers to the Afro Panamanians who migrated to Panama from the Caribbean “West Indies,” from the Caribbean nations colonized by the British in the Caribbean

¹ Alexander Renee Craft, *When the Devil Knocks: The Congo Tradition and the Politics of Blackness in Twentieth-Century Panama*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2016, 6, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/36973#info_wrap.

² Lorna V. Williams, “Carlos Guillermo Wilson and the Dialectics of Ethnicity in Panama,” *Afro-Hispanic Review* 4, no. 2/3 (May and Sept. 1985): 11-16, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23053871>.

islands.³ “East Indians,” Indians from the Asian subcontinent of India, which was once also colonized by the British, migrated globally to other British territories such as the West Indies in search of work in agricultural labor and for construction opportunities after 1857.⁴ It can be inferred that the term “West Indians” may also have grown in part out of such British Empire migration to the Caribbean.

The Gold Rush in 1849, the construction of the Panama railroad in the 1850s, the failed attempt of the French canal excavation in the late 1800s, and construction of the Panama Canal between 1904 and 1914—all encouraged West Indians over two centuries to migrate from the Caribbean islands to Panama on the southern end of Central America, which increased their presence in Panama over time.⁵ The West Indian/Afro Caribbean Afro Panamanians spoke English and largely practiced Christian Protestant religions on arrival in Panama.

The Afro Panamanians whose history dates back centuries to the Spanish colonial period when Africans were forcibly removed from their continent and burdened with a

³ Sonja Stephenson Watson, “Are Panamanians of Caribbean Ancestry an Endangered Species? Critical Literary Debates on Panamanian Blackness in the Works of Carlos Wilson, Gerado Maloney, Carlos Russell,” *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 4, no. 3 (Nov. 2009): 232, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17442220903331605>.

⁴ S. K. Pachauri, “Indian Population Migration Around the World: Late 19th Century to Recent Times,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 65 (2004): 616, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44144776>.

⁵ Rebecca Herman, “The Global Politics of Anti-Racism: A View from the Canal Zone,” *American Historical Review* 125, no. 2 (Apr. 2020): 464, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhaa150>.

life of slavery, also known as Afro Colonials,⁶ spoke Spanish and practiced Catholicism because of their geopolitical ties to Spanish hegemony. Thus, the diversity within the Afro Panamanian population in Panama today can be attributed to the cultural and historical differences between the *two* groups of African descendants.

To reiterate, Panama has a history of slavery,⁷ similar to the Caribbean islands and all the other South and Central American countries colonized by the Spanish in the 16th century. Thus, direct descendants from African slavery *in* Panama from the Spanish colonial period currently account for a portion of the Afro Panamanians in Panama today.⁸ The Africans who were enslaved in Panama in the 16th century, and their next generations, were forced to assimilate to the politically dominant Spanish culture during the centuries of Spanish occupation. The two differing cultural pathways today differentiate the two Afro-descended populations currently residing in Panama. Therefore, Spanish-speaking Afro Panamanians who descended from African slaves brought to Panama on the mainland during the colonial period, plus the English-speaking Afro Panamanians who descended from African slaves in the British colonies and with centuries-long British West Indies/West Indian heritage, together, today, in present-day

⁶ Carla Guerrón Montero, “Afro-Antillean Presence in the Latin American Melting Pot,” in *African Diaspora in the Cultures of Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States*, ed. Persephone Braham (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2015), 29-45, <https://www.uni-bielefeld.de/einrichtungen/cias/forschung/black-americas/resources/guerron2014b.pdf>.

⁷ Craft, *When the Devil Knocks*.

⁸ Williams, “Carlos Guillermo Wilson and the Dialectics of Ethnicity in Panama”; Robert Cushman Murphy, “The Earliest Spanish Advances Southward from Panama along the West Coast of South America,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 21, no. 1 (Feb. 1941): 19, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2507517>.

Panama, make up the full Afro community of Panama, which is diverse both historically and culturally.⁹

To integrate the English-speaking, or anglophone, Caribbean population, and in Panama's search for national independence and identity in the 20th century, the Panamanian government mandated that the West Indian immigrants assimilate into mainstream Spanish-speaking Panamanian culture in 1914 after the Panama Canal was completed.¹⁰ However, many West Indians/Black Caribbean Panamanians rejected that assimilation requirement because they believed it was essential to preserve their cultural heritage. Additionally, divisions created by the race-based "Gold and Silver system" of payment utilized during the construction of the Panama Canal in the early 20th century intensified this resistance to Spanish culture.¹¹ Panamanian Mestizos, people with mixed Indigenous and Spanish heritage, thus older inhabitants of Panama, rejected the Black Caribbean immigrants' skin color and English language. They wanted the immigrants

⁹ Robert E. Ferrell, Aminta Nunez, Terry Bertin, Darwin R. Labarthe, and William J. Schull, "The Blacks of Panama: Their Genetic Diversity as Assessed by 15 Inherited Biochemical Systems," *American Journal of Biological Anthropology* 48, no. 3 (Mar. 1948): 269-75, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajpa.1330480302>.

¹⁰ Watson, "Are Panamanians of Caribbean Ancestry an Endangered Species?," 234.

¹¹ J. A. Zumoff, "Black Caribbean Labor Radicalism in Panama, 1914-1921," *Journal of Social History* 47, no. 2 (2013): 429-57. The Panamanian Gold and Silver system was the racialized payroll system through which white U.S. citizens were paid in the "gold roll" higher-pay category during the building of Panama Canal, versus the Afro Caribbean Panamanians, and all remaining groups of Panamanians, who were categorized in the "silver roll" lower-salary payment class (Julie Greene, "Spaniards on the Silver Roll: Labor Troubles and Liminality in the Panama Canal Zone, 1904-1914," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 66 [Fall 2004]: 79, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27672959>).

to adopt the Panamanian, Spanish-influenced, cultural traditions in Panama and cast aside the West Indian heritage that originated from the British Caribbean islands. Therefore, the nation's Mestizo social-political structure viewed the *Afro Colonials* as *less* of a threat to the nation's homogenous identity than the Afro Caribbeans, because the Afro Colonials had assimilated into the Spanish-speaking Panamanian culture. Some Mestizo Panamanians feared that the combination of the West Indians' Protestant religions and the immigrants' use of the English language would change the racial, linguistic, and cultural paradigms of Panama.¹² Thus, English-speaking Afro Panamanians from the West Indies were portrayed as anti-patriotic accomplices of U.S. (canal) imperialism.¹³ By understood ideas of racial distinctions, "Blackness" became associated with anti-nationalism,¹⁴ which affected, and still affects, all Afro descendants in Panama today.

All members of the African Diaspora in Panama though are connected, not only through race, but also through Black culture, values, and traditions,¹⁵ not to mention their shared experiences. Many Afro Panamanians contemplate the "double consciousness" of being both Panamanian and Black, which is the dual self-perception experienced by

¹² Watson, "Are Panamanians of Caribbean Ancestry an Endangered Species?", 236.

¹³ Rebecca Herman, "The Global Politics of Anti-Racism: A View from the Canal Zone," *American Historical Review* 125, no. 2 (Apr. 2020): 465, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhaa150>.

¹⁴ Marixa Lasso, "Nationalism and Immigrant Labor in a Tropical Enclave: The West Indians of Colón City, 1850-1936," *Citizenship Studies* 17, no. 5 (2013): 552-60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2013.818370>; Watson, "Are Panamanians of Caribbean Ancestry an Endangered Species?," 246.

¹⁵ Ben Vinson III, "Introduction: African (Black) Diaspora History, Latin American History," *The Americas* 63, no. 1 (The African Diaspora in the Colonial Andes; July 2006): 4, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4491176>.

subordinated groups within a larger culture in which they are a minority, the duality that W. E. B. Du Bois explained for Black Americans.¹⁶ In the case of Panamanians of African descent, they must reconcile their identity within the Mestizo national mainstream of Panama—as Panamanians in their home country—and also with being people of African heritage.¹⁷ Further, the combination of the difference of skin, language, *and* culture of Afro Caribbeans in Panama raises their subordination to the “second power.”¹⁸ This national-personal conflict has pushed some Afro Panamanians into community involvement in hopes that the government of Panama will recognize Afro Panamanians as an established group of people fundamental to Panamanian identity.¹⁹

The cities of Colón, on the Caribbean/Atlantic side of the country, and Bocas del Toro, a region in northeastern Panama, and in the poorer neighborhoods of Panama City on the southern/Pacific side of the isthmus, have relatively high populations of Afro Panamanians. There is typically a lack of, or very poor, government services and social

¹⁶ Sonja Stephenson Watson, “‘Black Atlantic’ Cultural Politics as Reflected in Panamanian Literature,” PhD diss., University of Tennessee, 2005, [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://trace.tennessee.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3870&context=utk_graddiss](https://trace.tennessee.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3870&context=utk_graddiss); W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 3.

¹⁷ Vinson, “Introduction: African (Black) Diaspora History, Latin American History,” 1-18.

¹⁸ Lorna V. Williams, “Carlos Guillermo Wilson and the Dialectics of Ethnicity in Panama,” *Afro-Hispanic Review* 4, no. 2/3 (1985): 11, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23053871>.

¹⁹ Dawn Duke, “Black Movement Militancy in Panama: SAMAAP’s Reliance on an Identity of West Indianness,” *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 5, no. 1 (Mar. 2010): 75-83, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/17442220903506958?needAccess=true&role=button>.

sector investments in the areas where these populations constitute the majority.²⁰ The high unemployment rate within the country and the underdeveloped educational system adversely affect the communities populated by mostly Afro descendants.²¹ Thus, limited educational and economic opportunities have prevented many Afro Panamanians from participating in social mobility and in political processes.²² In response to disparities and exclusion that exist among Afro communities in Latin and Central America, Black-led Latin non-governmental organizations have markedly increased in the 21st century.²³ These organizations are referred to as civil society organizations (CSOs) within Panama that work to promote Afro identity and solidarity. In the context of this research, the terms *CSO* and *NGO* will be used interchangeably.

Examples of civil society organizations, both fully registered and in the beginning stages of establishment, focused on the Afro Panamanian community, include the *Fundación de la Etnia Negra* (Foundation of the Black Ethnicity), *Acción Reivindicadora del Negro Panameño* (Redemption for the Black Panamanian/ARENAP), *Unión Nacional del Negro Panameño* (National Union for the Black Panamanian), *Asociación de Negros Profesionales* (Association of Black Professionals/APODAN), *El Centro de Estudios Afro-Panameños* (the Center for Afro Panamanian Studies/CEDEAP), and

²⁰ “Afro Panamanians in Panama,” Minority Rights Group International, accessed Sept. 24, 2023, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/afro-panamanians/>.

²¹ Daniel Barría Yorins and Leonel Gondola, “Strengthening Panama’s Afrodescendent Civil Society Organizations,” International Republican Institute, Nov. 6, 2020, <https://www.iri.org/news/strengthening-panamas-afrodescendent-civil-society-organizations/>.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Vinson, “Introduction: African (Black) Diaspora History, Latin American History,” 6.

Sociedad de Amigos del Museo Afroantillano de Panamá (the Society of Friends of the West Indian Museum of Panama/SAMAAP).²⁴ Many of the organizations that address the issues that the West Indian Panamanian population experiences were inspired by the civil rights movement in the United States because of Afro Panamanians' own marginalization and aspirations for social-political equality. In addition to the support provided by civil society organizations, Afro Panamanian cultural celebrations—such as the *Fiesta de la Etnia Negra* (the Black Ethnic Celebration), Black Heritage Month in May each year, and Colón Day, which celebrates the Afro populated province of Colón's protection of Panama in 1903—all encourage cultural empowerment for Panamanians, even for those without a direct link to their African roots.

Engagement Elevates Afro Panamanians

These rising Afro organizations' promotion of cultural celebrations serves to increase Afro Panamanian social and political resistance in present-day Panama. This Honors research project investigates the efficacy of the cultural organizations and cultural celebrations in which Afro Panamanians participate and evaluates their utility in furthering Afro Panamanian political progress in twenty-first-century Panama.

Afro Panamanian societal organizations and cultural celebrations in the nation-state of Panama generate political resistance and community engagement that help elevate Afro Panamanians' well-being and position in society in the face of racial and cultural obstacles that continue to be faced by Afro Panamanians in Panama today.

²⁴ Watson, "Are Panamanians of Caribbean Ancestry an Endangered Species?," 237.

The Afro community in Panama is an integral part of Panama's overall heritage. Unfortunately, Afro Panamanians are far removed from political power and processes in Panama due to the existing forms of discrimination and exclusion in that country.²⁵ Thus, Panama's Afro population lacks political representation to raise awareness about the problems that adversely affect Afro Panamanians' lives and well-being. The lack of policy and force to address Afro Panamanian issues with the Panamanian government (in which power is primarily held by the Mestizo, or *Mestizaje*, populations of Panama)²⁶ has encouraged Afro Panamanians to establish grassroots civil society organizations to preserve their culture, raise their visibility, and demonstrate their contributions to Panamanian life.

The efficacy of these Afro Panamanian civil society organizations is examined, looking into how Afro Panamanian CSOs improve overall Afro pride and Afro identification in Panama and how they positively impact governmental responses to the systemic obstacles that impede Afro Panamanian social, economic, and political progress. The present study shows that, through the organizations and the cultural celebrations in which Afro Panamanians participate, Afro Panamanians demonstrate political resistance

²⁵ George Priestley, "Antillean-Panamanians or Afro-Panamanians?: Political Participation and the Politics of Identity During the Carter-Torrijos Treaty Negotiations," *Transforming Anthropology* 2, no. 1-2 (Jan. 2004): 64, <https://doi.org/10.1525/tran.2004.12.1-2.50>.

²⁶ Daniel E. Bauer, "Emergent Identity, Cultural Heritage, and *El Mestizaje*: Notes from the Ecuadorian Coast," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 21, no. 1 (Apr. 2012): 113, doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2011.652601; Sonja Stephenson Watson, "Conclusion: Forging Afro-Panamanian Identity?," *The Politics of Race in Panama: Afro-Hispanic and West Indian Literary Discourses of Contention* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2014), 144-59, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvx1hsp3.10>.

and engagement despite the social and economic hurdles they face in present-day Panama.

CHAPTER II

Afro Panamanians: The Black Populations of Panama, Past and Present

For many Panamanians, recognizing the full extent of their ethnic heritage is encouraged because it is reflected in the dominant culture, Mestizo, the national identity that is emphasized. A national identity can be used to create a sense of national unity and common values,²⁷ however, it is also utilized to “forge identity and buttress self-esteem” by emanating “personal or communal self-interest.”²⁸ In fact, Dr. Carlos E. Russell, a Panamanian-born U.S. scholar, dedicated his life to the “preservation of Panamanian West Indian culture, language, and heritage through his literature and activism.”²⁹ Ethnic heritage creates a necessary unity to work toward societal progress and face external enemies. However, recognition of ethnic heritage is encumbered with political and social consequences for Afro-descended Panamanians.³⁰ Afro Panamanians are made up of two separate groups of African Diaspora populations: the descendants of slaves in Panama during the 16th-18th centuries and the descendants of Afro Caribbeans who immigrated

²⁷ Bauer, “Emergent Identity, Cultural Heritage, and *El Mestizaje*,” 113.

²⁸ David Lowenthal, “Identity, Heritage, and History,” in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John R. Gillis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 46, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv39x64g>.

²⁹ Sonja Stephenson Watson, “Tribute to the ‘Last Buffalo’: Panamanian West Indian Writer Dr. Carlos E. Russell (1934-2018),” *Palara, Publication of the Afro-Latin/American Research Association* 22 (Fall 2018): 3, <https://palara.journal.library.uta.edu/index.php/palara/article/view/71/102>.

³⁰ Lorna V Williams, “Carlos Guillermo Wilson and the Dialectics of Ethnicity in Panama,” *Afro-Hispanic Review* 4, no. 2/3 (1985): 1, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23053871>.

into the isthmus in the 19th century in search of economic prosperity. These Afro populations of Panama encounter paradoxes of identification.

On the one hand, Afro Panamanians are culturally Panamanian, meaning that they all recognize the Hispanic influence in their country and identity. On the other hand, Afro Panamanians are descendants of Africans, so therefore solely presenting Panama as a Mestizo nation in an effort to unify the country for socio-economic progress dismisses the African heritage that belongs to the two groups. Afro Panamanians' heritage involves its own set of influences and unique realities. Further, Afro Caribbeans possess a heritage that is historically Protestant and anglophone, meaning, that the national push for a country defined as Mestizo encourages Afro Caribbeans to deny their African/Caribbean heritage *and* their native English language (deriving from the British Caribbean islands), an even further dismissal of their cultural heritage. Diversity is undermined when a government encourages its African-descended people to ignore a part of their heritage. When that happens, Afro Panamanians are left to relegate themselves as secondary Panamanians—an alien element within their own country that does not naturally fit into the country's perceived or imposed socio-political structure.

The term “mestizo” or *mestizaje* was meant to elevate, enlarge, and bring visibility to the mixed race in Panama of white (European) and Indigenous (Native American) heritage by the 1930s, which was when the Panamanian census proactively designated people who had previously been classified as Afro-descended in the 1920 census as now Mestizo in the 1930 census.³¹ This idea of mestizo, which has a closer

³¹ Ricardo Henrique Lowe, Jr., “Las Caras Negras Invisibles: Assessing Black Statistical Invisibility in the 2010 Panama Census,” PhD diss., University of Texas at San Antonio,

association to whiteness, grew out of the desire of the Panamanian government to become a respectable “modern state.”³² In the early 20th century, there was an aggressive national movement in Panama to shift its population from being “Black” to being whiter in color and more European in heritage, behavior, and appearance.³³ The 19th century had been characterized by an effort by the then-Colombian government to create a Hispanic, Iberian, or Spanish-cultured nation. With the abolition of slavery in 1851 by the Colombian Congress,³⁴ Black men were politically included in Panamanian society for the first time. However, with the fear of becoming a Black English-speaking nation, Panama painted both Afro Caribbeans and Afro Colonials as undesirable foreigners in the land—but the Afro Colonials, who had long adopted the Spanish language, were accepted as more desirable than were the Afro Caribbeans.³⁵

Race relation tensions grew during the building of the canal.³⁶ The treaty to build the canal across Panama was finalized in 1903 by way of the Hay Bunau-Varilla Treaty

2023), 6, <https://ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/las-caras-negras-invisibles-assessing-black/docview/2819930028/se-2>.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Mara Loveman and Jeronimo O. Muniz, “How Puerto Rico Became White: Boundary Dynamics and Intercensus Racial Reclassification,” *American Sociological Review* 72, no. 6 (2007): 915-39, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25472503>.

³⁵ Marixa Lasso De Paulis, “Race and Ethnicity in the Formation of Panamanian National Identity: Panamanian Discrimination Against Chinese and West Indians in the Thirties,” *Revista Panameña de Política* 4 (July-Dec. 2007): 69, https://cidempanama.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/4-06-Race-Ethnicity_Marixa_Lasso.pdf.

³⁶ Alberto Barrow and George Priestley, *Piel Oscura Panamá: Ensayos y reflexiones al Filo del Centenario* (Panama: Editorial Universitaria Carlos Manuel Gasteazoro, 2003);

between the U.S. and the newly independent nation of Panama, which gave the United States sole rights to a canal zone across the isthmus to build the canal and also guaranteed independence for Panama (eventually) from the U.S. after the canal's completion.³⁷ Afro Caribbean immigrants, who made up the bulk of the canal construction workers, were the recipients of this race tension. In an effort to create an entirely new nation apart from Colombia, Panamanian elites worked to introduce a homogenous nation in culture and racial composition.³⁸ The Afro Caribbeans were often discriminated against based on the assumption that even as their families became settled in Panama and their children were born in country, birth in Panama did not grant them the same citizenship that other Panamanians enjoyed, due expressly to their African and Caribbean heritage.³⁹ Indeed, non-Afro-descended canal workers, i.e., white immigrants who also entered the country to benefit from employment in construction, maintenance, and running the lucrative canal operation, accrued "privileges [that] included municipal leadership levels and province-wide commercial and legislative power, [which was] unattainable for most Afro-Caribbeans."⁴⁰ Mirroring civil rights efforts and the political and social progress of

Alberto Barrow, *No Me Pidas Una Foto: Develando el Racismo en Panamá* (Panama: A. Barrow, 2001), 53-54.

³⁷ "Building the Panama Canal, 1903-1914," Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, U.S. Department of State, accessed Feb. 13, 2024, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1899-1913/panama-canal>.

³⁸ Peter A. Szok, *"La Última Gaviota: Liberalism and Nostalgia in Early Twentieth-Century Panamá"* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2001), 417.

³⁹ Barrow and Priestley, *Piel Oscura Panamá*; Barrow, *No Me Pidas Una Foto*, 53-54.

⁴⁰ Kaysha Corinealdi, *Panama in Black: Afro-Caribbean World Making in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 125.

African Americans in the United States during the 19th and 20th centuries, Afro Panamanians resisted this political exile.

Through political involvement and community building, beginning in the 19th century, growing throughout the 20th century, and manifesting today in the 21st century, Afro Caribbean Panamanians have strongly defended their presence on the Panamanian isthmus and have pushed back hard against their social status as lesser-than and excluded from access, privilege, and power in Panama.”⁴¹ Indeed, Afro Caribbean Panamanians have demonstrated their leadership and commitment to Panama and have been the group who created and have led a powerful “activist movement...that challenged the notion of [their own] conditional citizenship,” never settling for marginalization within Panamanian society.⁴²

Population Matters

Population figures that strive to capture the actual numbers of Afro-descendant Panamanians in Panama today only apply if individuals self-identify as Afro descendants. The 2010 census in Panama estimated that only about 9 percent were Afro Panamanians.⁴³ These numbers were incredibly low and disappointing to the large

⁴¹ Watson, “‘Black Atlantic’ Cultural Politics as Reflected in Panamanian Literature,” 227.

⁴² Corinealdi, *Panama in Black*, 122.

⁴³ Ibid.; Astrid Chang, “Afro-Panamanians Preserve Their Cultural Identity,” *Latina Republic*, Jan. 21, 2021, para. 4, accessed Feb. 13, 2024, <https://latinarepublic.com/2021/01/21/afro-panamanians-fight-to-preserve-their-cultural-identity-amid-the-pandemic/>.

numbers of Afro Panamanians in the country.⁴⁴ According to the Panamanian National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC) in 2015, around 15 percent of the population was Afro Panamanian,⁴⁵ a 60% larger percentage than had been counted only five years earlier. Given the predominantly Afro Panamanian populations in the Panamanian provinces of Darién, Panama, Colón, and Los Santos, a larger estimate was more realistic.⁴⁶ Then, in 2020, around 24% of people in Panama defined themselves as “Afro descendants,”⁴⁷ reflecting a major shift in Afro pride and self-identification that has taken place in the early 21st century. As of 2021, the national census estimates that 28.6 percent of the Panamanian population identifies as Afro descendants.⁴⁸ A 2023 article that focuses on the 2023 Social Inclusion Law administered by the Republic of Panama, which also created the governmental social development entity that is the Ministry of

⁴⁴ “Video: For the Inclusion of the Afro-Panamanian People in the 2020 Census!,” Institute on Race, Equality and Human Rights, accessed Feb. 13, 2024. <https://raceandequality.org/resources/video-for-the-inclusion-of-the-afro-panamanian-people-in-the-2020-census/>. The Institute on Race, Equality and Human Rights works with counterparts in the Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities and the LGBTI Movement in Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, and Peru, as well as with Regional Afro-descendant and LGBTI networks in the Americas.

⁴⁵ As cited in “Afro-Panamanians in Panama,” Minority Rights Group International, accessed Feb. 21, 2024, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/afro-panamanians/>.

⁴⁶ Chang, “Afro-Panamanians Preserve Their Cultural Identity,” para. 14.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ World Bank Group, “Panama: Systematic Country Diagnostics Update 2023 (Sept. 8, 2023), 86, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099092023102017335/pdf/BOSIB0764ca91c0bc087f700f00315dd88e.pdf>.

Social Development in Panama, estimates that the Afro Descendant population is actually 34%—at least a third—of the total Panamanian population.⁴⁹

Beginning in the 2023 census, Afro descendants were able to choose from several different self-identification categories under the blanket of “Afro Descendant”: Afro Descendant, Afro Panamanian, Moreno (which refers to individuals with dark skin who speak Spanish), Black/Negro/Negra, Afro Colonial, Afro Antillean (meaning, West Indian immigrants), and “other.”⁵⁰

Around 620,000 people (48% of the people who filled out the Afro Descendant field) identified as *other* Afro Descendant group, from among the 1,286,857 in Panama who termed themselves Afro or some variant of Black⁵¹ “Afro Colonial” had the lowest number (approximately 13,000 people, or only 1% of the Black population) to identify as having the oldest Black roots in Panama.⁵² Only 976 out of the 1,286,857 Afro Panamanian respondents neglected to declare *any* racial/ethnic/historic status at all: less

⁴⁹ Soledad Quartucci, Panama Sanctions Social Inclusion Law, Latina Republic, 2023, <https://latinarepublic.com/2023/05/30/panama-sanctions-social-inclusion-law/>.

⁵⁰ Comptroller General of the Republic of Panama, “Chart 26. Afro-Descendant Population in the Republic, by Sex, by Province, Indigenous Region, Afro-Descendant Group to Which It Belongs and Age Groups: 2023 Census,” National Institute of Statistics and Census 2023, <https://www.inec.gob.pa/archivos/P053342420231009170713CUADRO%2026.pdf>; Juan Salvador Sepulveda-Figueroa, “Racializing Discourses: An Exploration of Moreno Subject Formation in Oaxaca, Mexico,” MA thesis, Portland State University, 2021, 3, https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6857&context=open_access_etds.

⁵¹ Comptroller General of the Republic of Panama, “Afro-Descendant Population...2023 Census,” scr. 5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, scr. 4.

than 0.1% of the population. Thus, of the Black Panamanian population captured in the 2023 census, 99.9% of the individuals define themselves Afro Descendants.⁵³

There is a pattern of a lack of published data defining the different ethnic groups within Panama. Most of the population is categorized as Spanish, Indigenous, Chinese, and African ancestry.⁵⁴ However, through deep review, the term Mestizo, instead of highlighting mixed ancestry, emphasizes only Indigenous (or Indian) and European heritage as the ethnic groups that represent the country, reaffirming Panama's nation-state goal of homogeneity. This systemic ethnic hierarchy and erasure of marginalized groups within Panama is correlated with the lack of inclusion of Afro Panamanians in Panamanian society. The Afro Panamanians, in fact, are *minoritized*, instead of being a minority, given the significance of African ethnicity in about a third of its population.⁵⁵

Therefore, the lack of recognition as Afro Panamanian in the national census markedly contrasts with the actual, high rate of Afro descendants within the country. Due to the increase in self recognition and appropriate Panamanian governmental collection of Afro Panamanians considering their complex history in the country, as well as the slow progress for the community overall, several Afro Panamanian civil society organizations have been “working for the defense, promotion, and recognition of Afro

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ “Panama (11/07),” U.S. Department of State, Jan. 20, 2009-Jan. 20, 2017, sec. 5, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/panama/95380.htm#:~:text=The%20majority%20of%20the%20population,%2C%20Chinese%2C%20and%20West%20Indian.>

⁵⁵ Quartucci, Panama Sanctions Social Inclusion Law.

descendants in Panama,”⁵⁶ to increase Afro Panamanian pride, identity, visibility, and societal value.

Legal Framework

Several nondiscriminatory and direct laws for the Afro-descendant community in Panama have been established in the last few decades. Beginning in 2000, Law 9 declared a Day of the Black Ethnicity of the Republic of Panama.⁵⁷ This day falls on May 30 of every year to highlight the contributions of Afro Panamanians.⁵⁸ This achievement has led to the entire month of May being designated the month of Black ethnicity.⁵⁹

In 2002, Panama established Law 16, which regulates the “rights of admission to public establishments and dictates measures to avoid discrimination.”⁶⁰

The question is, have these measures effectively contributed to the improvement of the Afro Panamanian community’s socioeconomic and political standing? And why are such laws only coming to fruition now? Three years after Law 16, Executive Decree

⁵⁶ “Video: For the Inclusion of the Afro-Panamanian People in the 2020 Census!”

⁵⁷ UNDP and INAMU, *Situation of Afro-Panamanian Women*, United Nations Development Program and National Women’s Institute, 40, Dec. 9, 2020, accessed Feb. 13, 2024, <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/pa/UNDP-PA-Mujeres-Afro-Estudio-20201215.pdf>, https://www-undp-org.translate.google.es/panama/publications/situaci%C3%B3n-de-las-mujeres-afropaname%C3%B1as?_x_tr_sl=es&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en&_x_tr_pto=sc.

⁵⁸ “Día de la Etnia Negra,” Fundación Gabriel Lewis Galindo, May 30, 2022, para. 2, <https://fglg.org.pa/dia-de-la-etnia-negra/#:~:text=En%20Panam%C3%A1%2C%20el%2030%20de,realiza%20desde%20el%20a%C3%B1o%202000.>

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ UNDP and INAMU, *Situation of Afro-Panamanian Women*, 40.

No. 124, of May 27, 2005, created a Special Commission in Panama to address the problems Afro Panamanians face, with the intention to implement an action plan to move Panama toward full inclusion of the Afro Panamanian population into Panamanian society.⁶¹ In the same year, 2005, on April 22, Law 11 officially prohibited employment discrimination in Panama based on race.⁶² Then, in 2007, because of the forward legal actions to fight race discrimination being employed by the Panamanian national government, the National Council of the Black Ethnicity was established by Executive Decree No. 116 in May 2007 to attempt offer even more access to resources and opportunities for Black Panamanians.⁶³ It is evident that the Panamanian government is finally proactively moving ahead to recognize the Black community in Panama in this century.

However, these efforts, to see fundamental results, will need to mitigate decades of discrimination and also the current obstacles that still exist for Afro Panamanians due to the government's earlier negligence. More recently, in 2016, hundreds of years after Afro-descendant populations began arriving in the isthmus, either by force or voluntarily, the National Secretariat for the Development of Afro Panamanians (SENADAP) was created.⁶⁴ SENADAP has made some impactful strides for the community, as it is an

⁶¹ UNDP and INAMU, *Situation of Afro-Panamanian Women*, 40.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ "National Council of Black Ethnicity," *Latinno*, accessed March 7, 2024, <https://latinno.net/en/case/15135/>.

⁶⁴ UNDP and INAMU, *Situation of Afro-Panamanian Women*, 40.

independent body with its own budget dedicated to the fundamental progress and inclusion of Afro Panamanians.⁶⁵

In the last decade, Afro movements for recognition and inclusion have reaped some of what they have sown through their active participation within the social and political scene in Panama. According to the 2022 Panama Human Rights Report from the United States Department of State, no laws specifically, or blatantly, limit Afro Panamanians from being involved in political processes in Panama, and indeed, Afro Panamanians are—somewhat—involved.⁶⁶ Still, the provinces within the country that are mostly populated by Afro Panamanians lack significant government investment in the form of developmental services for vulnerable communities.⁶⁷ For example, residents in Colón, a predominately Afro Caribbean area, emphasize that racial discrimination and a lack of government investment perpetuate the high unemployment rate, among other issues within the region.⁶⁸ Part of the neglect from the government can be attributed to the limited data and information about Afro Panamanians collected over the years.⁶⁹ The lack of access to data on Afro Panamanians reflects its population’s lack of recognition

⁶⁵ Secretaría Nacional de Políticas Desarrollo AfroPanameños, <https://panamaafro.com/>.

⁶⁶ “2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Panama,” Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State (2022), 14, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/panama/>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ World Bank Group, “Panama: Systematic Country Diagnostics Update 2023” (Sept. 8, 2023), 57, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099092023102017335/pdf/BOSIB0764ca91c0bc087f700f00315dd88e.pdf>.

and acknowledgment and has limited investment in Afro Panamanian economic development.⁷⁰

Since 2018, however, steady improvements have been made in surveys to properly count Afro descendants in Panama.⁷¹ Important progress is seen in the outstanding estimated figure of 34% of the Panamanian population identifying as Afro Panamanian in 2023, as well as further inclusion of different Afro-descendant identifications and choices in the 2023 national census to accurately reflect the population.⁷² Despite the systemic barriers that have existed for Afro Panamanians stemming from their government's barriers to their visibility and despite discriminatory social norms perpetuated in Panamanian society, growing and vibrant Afro/Black cultural movements in Panama have shown a deep commitment to developing and expanding Black societal progress. The products of these efforts are evident in 21st century Panama.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 58.

⁷¹ Ibid., 80.

⁷² Ibid., 86.

CHAPTER III

21st-century Afro Panamanian Nongovernmental Organizations and Celebrations

According to the United Nations, a civil society organization can be defined as “any non-profit, voluntary citizen’s group, which is organized on a local, national, or international level.”⁷³ The focus of a civil society organization (CSO) tends to be humanitarian and brings citizens’ concerns to the government.⁷⁴ Civil society organizations are characterized by the unique interests and solutions they emphasize that the government may neglect. CSOs can often promote the implementation of the United Nations’ goals.⁷⁵ For instance, sustainable development goals are regularly emphasized for the Society of Friends of the West Indian Museum (*Sociedad de Amigos del Museo Afroantillano de Panamá* or SAMAAP) in Panama.⁷⁶ CSOs can also serve as a filter for governmental policy changes and offer thorough, simplified analyses of governmental processes to community members. Based on the findings of a journal article titled “Civil Society, Political Capital, and Democratization in Central America,” civil society

⁷³ “About Us,” United Nations, Civil Society, accessed April 5, 2024, <https://www.un.org/en/civil-society/page/about-us>.

⁷⁴ George Kaloudis, “Non-Governmental Organizations: Mostly a force for good,” *International Journal on World Peace* 34, no. 1 (2017): 82, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45014365>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ This conclusion was made through an interview conducted on Zoom with a member from the SAMAAP organization. More information about the interviews is discussed in chapter 4.

activism helps form political and social capital.⁷⁷ Interestingly, whereas participation in formal groups such as unions, professional groups, and civic associations assists urban Central Americans in their grasp of political information, that involvement does not benefit their interpersonal trust levels. Rather, “communal-level civil society activism” in CSO organizations such as outlined in this research, tends to do the opposite, tends to build political engagement.⁷⁸ Therefore, civil society organizations lend themselves to social interrelations within the Afro Panamanian community and between the Afro Panamanian community and the larger Panamanian society.

Afro Panamanians utilize civil society organizations toward societal progress. Early on, the neglect of Afro Colonials, seen in the forced assimilation that categorized Panamanians with African heritage as Mestizo,⁷⁹ solidifies why Afro Colonials were socially isolated and inclined to form their own community. Then, when West Indians came in the 20th century, to preserve their culture in Panama, Afro Caribbeans forged friendships, attended Protestant church, and socially organized within *their* own community. Both groups collectively faced the instability of their citizenship and race-based segregation in the 20th century. Civil society organizations, formed in the 20th century, laid the groundwork for increased organized efforts by Black groups to come together and to advocate for all Afro Panamanians in the 21st century. Now, many Afro Panamanian organizations can be identified in a database, which was begun by

⁷⁷ John A Booth and Patricia Bayer Richard, “Civil Society, Political Capital, and Democratization in Central America,” *Journal of Politics* 60, no. 3 (1998): 780-800, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2647648>.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Craft, *When the Devil Knocks*, 39.

SENADAP in 2023, known as PanamaAfro⁸⁰ for interested parties to be able connect and collaborate with one another.

The Foundations: Church and Press

Afro Panamanian organizations exist for the improvement of socio-political positions of Afro descendants in Panama. Some Afro Panamanian CSO organizations also have units within other countries in Central America as well as in the United States to unify the different groups of Afro descendants within the Americas.⁸¹ One of the most significant nongovernmental organizations on the Panamanian isthmus is the church.

Protestant churches served, as they continue to serve, as spaces to reinforce Afro-Antillean values and traditions for individuals having Caribbean roots.⁸² The church communities allowed the Black populations in Panama to gain knowledge and skills to socially adapt to life in the isthmus. For instance, the practice of music and public speaking were part of church services that prepared Black populations for public life; the church offered leadership opportunities, that could translate into congregants' work environments and in their interactions in society in general after the construction of the Panama Canal.⁸³ The Baptist church and the Methodist Episcopal church dominated the

⁸⁰ Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) and the National Secretariat of Policies and Development for Afro-Panamanians (SENADAP) and Espacio Encuentro de Mujeres (EEM), PanamaAfro, 2023, <https://panamaafro.com/>.

⁸¹ "What We Do," *Afro Resistance*, 2022, www.afroresistance.org/what-we-do-1.

⁸² UNDP and INAMU, *Situation of Afro-Panamanian Women*, 60.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 78.

spiritual life of the Afro Antilleans in Panama (the West Indian community).⁸⁴ According to George Westerman, “The church served as a channel for various kinds of expressions and met the needs, stimulated the pride and preserved the self-respect of these workers who might otherwise have been submerged in despair and futility.”⁸⁵ Their “despair” emanated from the governmental focus on Mestizo/white as the cultural identity that solely constituted the country—which it did not—that blatantly discriminated against Afro Panamanians.

It is important to note that many of the nongovernmental organizations within Panama that uplift the Afro Panamanian community were, and are, led by mostly individuals of West Indian origin (thus, the Afro Caribbeans).⁸⁶ Their leadership in galvanizing all Black Panamanians is likely due to the lay-leadership efficacy within the Protestant religions of the Afro Caribbeans, to other British law and traditions of Caribbean society, and also to the West Indians’ darker skin tones that served to spur and fire up their actions against the political, social, and racial hurdles they faced in Central America,⁸⁷ which is, and was, actually a place of rich ethnic and cultural diversity even when the forced Mestizo cultural identity was attempting to disavow Black contributions to Panamanian society.

⁸⁴ George W. Westerman, “Historical Notes on West Indians on the Isthmus of Panama,” *Phylon* (1960-) 22, no. 4 (1961): 340-50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/273537>.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 343.

⁸⁶ UNDP and INAMU, *Situation of Afro-Panamanian Women*.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

A second fundamental arm of civil society organization that was integral to the Afro-descendant community in Panama was the press—the Black press.⁸⁸ *The Independent*, *The Workman*, and also the *Panama Tribune* served as important, integral newspapers in the 20th century that recognized the work and social conversations of Afro-Caribbeans on the Panamanian isthmus.⁸⁹ The *Panama Tribune* was one of the longest-running, Black-led newsweeklies in all of Central America.⁹⁰ Its founder, Sidney Young, was born in Jamaica and raised in Panama. Newspapers such as his sprouted up during the Panamanian new-nation-building initiative in the early 20th century in which Panama was seeking to define itself as a culturally Iberian nation, separating itself from “Black undesirables.”⁹¹ According to Lara Putnam, “The Panama Tribune's global vision meant that even when readers found themselves at the margins of Panamanian national belonging, they could understand themselves to be at the center of a community of struggle that was far, far bigger.”⁹²

⁸⁸ Westerman, “Historical Notes on West Indians on the Isthmus of Panama,” 343.

⁸⁹ Corinealdi, *Panama in Black*, 4.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹² Lara E. Putnam, “Sidney Young, the Panama Tribune, and the Expanding Geography of Black Belonging,” Abstract, 128th Annual Meeting, American Historical Association, Jan. 2014, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267900856_Sidney_Young_the_Panama_Tribune_and_the_Expanding_Geography_of_Black_Belonging.

In supporting Black Panamanian identity, the *Panama Tribune* and the other newspapers served as the “staging ground” for local activism.⁹³ They highlighted the strides of Afro Panamanians that would encourage other members in the community to build their pride as an Afro descendant in a minorized community (figs. 1-2). Even more, the Black newspaper content emphasized the intersectionality and disparities that Afro Panamanians experienced as largely low-income and middle-income citizens.⁹⁴

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ John Biesanz, “Cultural and Economic Factors in Panamanian Race Relations,” *American Sociological Review* 14, no. 6 (1949): 775, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2086679>.

Set Limits Of 'National Monument'

Give "Squatters" 30 Days To Leave "Old Panama"

A decree setting the limits of the former city of "Old Panama" as a national monument, and giving a

period of 30 days to all persons who have erected dwellings within the area to remove the structures to other sites, was issued Friday noon by the Department of Education.

The decree states that "Old Panama" was declared a National Monument in 1941 under law 68 of June 11, but for many diverse reasons a number of persons have constructed dwelling places within the area, affecting its "security and historic and touristic merits as a National Monument"; that the limits of the area have been definitely set, and all persons residing within the limits will be required to remove the structures within 30 days from the date of the Decree.

The problem of squatters in the Old Panama area has occupied the attention of various governments for years. It is estimated that over 400 families, the majority "squatters" occupy ramshackle houses within the territory.

Safety Exhibit At Paraiso

Public interest has been considerably aroused by recent announcement of the Paraiso Civic Council's SAFETY FIELD DAY next Saturday, July 23, and indications are that thousands of visitors will attend the exhibitions and displays which have been prepared with the help of the Safety Branch and various Safety Representatives of the Panama Canal Company.

These exhibits will include (Continued on Page 9)

Seeks Reconsideration

Cassiopeia Lodge Suspended For Impeaching Of Deputy

COLON.—For impeaching its female deputy, a right said to be reserved only to the District Lodge, Cassiopeia Lodge No. 2383, Loyal Order of Ancient Shepherds, was recently suspended by the Atlantic District of the Order.

At a special meeting Monday night at Court Brock Hall, the members of Cassiopeia voted to seek reconsideration of the

Brit. Honduras Gets \$1-1/2 Million Aid In Six Months

COLON.—Since the beginning of 1955, British Honduras has received from Colonial Development and Welfare funds \$1,543,911.20 for development schemes approved by the Colonial Office.

The total amount approved for the first three years of the Five-Year Plan is \$7,200,000 with \$10,811,120.00 to be expended in the remaining two and a half years.

List 10,000 Autos In Panama Area

In a statement made public here this week, Municipal Treasurer Victor M. D'Anello revealed that 7,631 private automobiles and 2,349 commercial vehicles are registered in the District of Panama.

The volume of traffic in the city of Panama increases at a surprising rate, and its regulation is causing the traffic department much concern.

Negro Official Named To New High Post

WASHINGTON, D. C.—The White House has named Everett Frederick Morrow, a Negro, to a top job in President Eisenhower's executive office.

Mr. Morrow of Hackensack, New Jersey, started work on Monday as administrative officer for the Special Projects Group at an annual salary of between \$12,000 and \$13,000. He is the first Negro of such rank in the executive office which has headquarters across the street from the White House in the old State Department Building. He was selected by Sherman Adams, chief assistant to the President.

Since Sept. 14, 1953 Mr. Morrow has been an adviser on business affairs to Secretary of Commerce Sinclair Weeks. Mr. Morrow served on President Eisenhower's campaign train in 1952. He has been with the Columbia Broadcasting System public relations staff and at one time was field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Visit To School For Blind By HBM's Ambassador

The Salvation Army School for the Blind in Panama City was signally honored today (Friday) by a visit from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth's Ambassador to the Republic of Panama, His Excellency Ian Leslie Henderson, who was accompanied by Mrs. Henderson and Miss DeWitt.

Welcomed to the school by the manager, Senior Captain Edward W. Hodgson, the Ambassador and his wife seemed to be at home with the sightless pupils. Mr. E. T. Williams, himself blind, and a former Secretary of the British West Indian Committee, welcomed the party on behalf of the students, requesting that a prepared speech be read to the Ambassador. This was done (Continued on Page 8)

Interim Judge



Claudio Liverpool, prominent Panama city "politico", has been appointed Interim Judge of the Calidonia Police Magistrate's Court for a 15 day period by Mayor Miguel Argal Ordoñez, Alcalde of Panama city. Mr. Liverpool's appointment was motivated by the illness of Don Gaspar Ordoñez, Magistrate of the Court. He assumed his new post Saturday morning at 7:30 a.m.

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No. 1462 Sunday, July 17, 1955 27th Year

Westerman Study Handed Pres. Arias

Need Over 10,000 Dwellings To Meet Housing Problem: 20,000 Families In Single Rooms

No less than 9,000 to 10,000 dwelling units would be necessary to meet the actual requirement of housing for the low and middle income groups of Panama City, President Ricardo M. Arias was told this week by George W. Westerman, as he handed the Chief Executive a detailed study prepared by him on the housing situation in the District of Panama.

It marked the first time other than an official or governmental agency presented such a report to the National Government relative to any of the social problems confronting the country.

The study revealed that there were 972 families in San Felipe, 4,856 in Chorrillo, 5,872 in Santa Ana and 5,429 in Calidonia living in single rooms, thus emphasizing at a glance, the density of the city's population.

With a maze of statistical facts Westerman proved that in one-third of the rooms in Gua-

Engineer Roberto Lopez Fabrega a member of the faculty of Panama's University, in the prologue to this study, claims: "With the mind of a statesman, an expert in the problems which touch the very foundation of our nationality, don George W. Westerman has pro-

Act Of Blasphemy Strikes Woman: Drops Dead In Court

BRIDGETOWN, Bdos. — Constance Marshall, 59, of the parish of St. Joseph, who was contesting a case in court, swore violently to her neighbors that if she lost the case she would drop the bible and abandon Jesus.

The case was called. During the hearing on Saturday June 30, Marshall dropped dead in the courtroom.

Dies



JOSEPH A. MAYNARD

(See Story on Page 2)

Jamaica Athletes Arrive For Games At Olympic Stadium

The three-day Jamaica-Panama international track and field meet is scheduled to open at 7:30 o'clock this Sunday evening at the Olympic stadium.

Ten athletes, including two female sprinters, will be seen in action in the opening night competition. They arrived here Thursday night from Kingston accompanied by their coach Herb McKenley, member of the world record holding 4x400 relay team at Helsinki 1952, and holder of five American track records besides the world's 400-yard mark since 1948.

Heading the delegation is George Bowen, Kingston insurance executive and sportsman.

The tour is being sponsored by the Physical Education (Continued on Page 6)

Key Men At 'Summit Talks' Starting Monday

WASHINGTON. — President Dwight Eisenhower departed Friday night for Geneva, Switzerland, to take part in the "Big Four" conference "At the Summit" with the leaders of the governments of Britain, Soviet Russia and France in an



BULGANIN

EISENHOWER

EDEN

Figure 1. The Panama Tribune, July 17, 1955, p. 1, weekly newspaper article. In the bottom right corner, Claudio Liverpool, a prominent Panamanian politician, appointed Interim Judge, is recognized for his promotion by the mayor of Panama City.

The Passing Review

Housing Of Majority
Of Working People
Leaves Much To Be Desired

by George W. Westerman

The following "introduction" is borrowed from **THE SHAME OF PANAMA'S HOUSING**, a study which we have recently completed covering the deplorable situation in the City of Panama.



Westerman

"The present housing of the large majority of the working people in Panama City leaves much to be desired. In many places it is deplorable. In some the conditions are such that any human habitation of buildings now occupied by large families must seem impossible to a stranger. The decrepit homes found in several areas are so seriously overcrowded that it is not surprising that some of them are dirty and verminous, in spite of the praiseworthy efforts of the inhabitants to keep them clean.

"In short, every condition that tends to produce disease is here to be found in a serious form. The conditions of squalor almost beyond imagination are accentuated by appalling overcrowding. These properties which represent an eye-sore of ramshackle, run-down tenement houses, are focal centers of diseases and crime; they contribute health hazards of grave proportions.

"That half of the population of Panama City should be rehoused is certainly an understatement of the actual position. The rapid growth of the population and exodus from the interior provinces to the terminal cities is one cause. Another cause has to do with the lack of new buildings in sufficient number to handle such an increase and replace the large number of dwellings which, because of their sad state of deterioration have been condemned as uninhabitable by the public health authorities.

"There is no country without a housing problem and what is more, it is growing worse each year rather than better, as population increases, combined with the backlog of decaying and substandard lodgings that must be replaced. For many years now Panama City has suffered from the effects of inadequate housing. This inadequacy has contributed to the worsening of the city's unsanitary living conditions and the alarming increase in social problems.

"Approximately 45 per cent of the houses in Panama City are wooden-structures and were constructed 30 to 40 years ago. No less than 64.6 percent of these dwellings can be considered as obsolescent and woefully deficient in the essential physical and social requirements.

"Add to the present housing

shortage the resettlement of hundreds of families now occupying quarters in the Canal Zone and the housing problem confronting the Republic becomes so acute that no means which makes for a solution of it should be neglected. An adequate housing development in Panama is needed to establish new knowledge and techniques for the better conservation of human life and human dignity. Such a program of construction will immediately create new outlets for the employment of labor, material and capital which might otherwise remain idle.

"It has been pointed out by the Pan-American Union that 80 per cent of the total Latin American population are affected by inadequate housing. The Ad Hoc Committee of the Organization of American States (OAS) studying the housing problem, estimate that the annual total of new houses required in Latin America amount to 1,221,392 new units.

"Under-production in housing, then, is not a condition peculiar to this Republic but one cannot fail to note that solutions to the housing problem are being included as an integral part of most economic-development and social-welfare plan of the more progressive states in this Hemisphere. Being in this category it is not to be expected that Panama will lag behind."

Figure 2. The *Panama Tribune*, July 17, 1955, p. 8, weekly newspaper article. George Westerman highlights decrepit housing conditions in Panama City that affect most of the population and, consequently, intensify social issues, which during the 20th century were centered around the West Indian population on the isthmus. The Afro Panamanian press was an important voice of and for Black Panama, pointing out societal problems and needs beyond the confines of the Mestizo mainstream.

However, these Afro Panamanian—more specifically, Afro Caribbean—newspapers in Panama not only spoke to the multilayered experiences of being Black in Panama, but also produced revolutionary knowledge. These newspapers were part of African Diaspora world-making. Both the expansion of the Protestant church in Panama and the visibility granted to Blacks in Panama through the West Indian press laid the foundations for the emerging nonprofit organizations that became commonplace in Panama by the 21st century. Despite the fact that Black advocacy organizations emerged initially from the West Indian/Afro Caribbean arms within Panama, nonetheless the objectives of these organizations for the benefit of civil society maintained the objective of preserving the cultural practices of all Afro Panamanians—the Afro Panamanians who descended from Caribbean nation-states and also the Afro Panamanians who descended from African slaves from the 16th and 17th centuries in Spanish Panama.

21st-century Civil Society Organizations

Society of Friends of the Afro-Antillean Museum of Panama, SAMAAP.

SAMAAP, the Sociedad de Amigos del Museo Afroantillano de Panamá (or the Society of Friends of the Afro-Antillean Museum of Panama) is the friends group or backing organization that strives to support the West Indian Museum of Panama. The Afro-Antillean Museum of Panama, an ethnographic museum in Panama City currently operated by the Panamanian Ministry of Culture and housed in an old church building that had been a mission church constructed in 1910 by and for Barbadian, or Bajan, immigrants into Panama, was opened in 1980 to showcase the history and of Caribbean

Panamanians.⁹⁵ A year after the museum was founded, SAMAAP, the friends group, was created in 1981 to financially assist the museum's survival, and SAMAAP continues today. It has become a preeminent, standout CSO within the Afro Panamanian community in the 21st century. The museum itself and the activities of its friends group contribute to socio-cultural advancement, academic development, respect, and societal visibility of the West Indian community across Panama.⁹⁶ The society of friends of the Afro Antillean Museum in Panama has been "essential" in keeping the museum open for so long: 43 years.⁹⁷ 250 members make up the organization as it continues to have the "largest membership base in the country, (with) 1/3 of membership in the U.S." As such, the members are comprised of mainly West Indian descendants. Due to their large membership base and status as one of the longest running Black organizations in Panama, SAMAAP assists smaller groups who are less established.

SAMAAP publishes a newsletter, *SAMAAP News*, which is the organization's bulletin and facilitator of public communication.⁹⁸ A message from the editors of the February 1, 2019-January 31, 2020 *SAMAAP News* edition recognized the Afro-Caribbean/West Indian railroad and canal workers who paved the way for the existing

⁹⁵ "The Museum is Housed in What Was Formerly the Christian Mission Church Built by Barbadian Worker in the Year 1910," Our Museum, SAMAAP, accessed Apr. 16, 2024, <https://samaap.com/our-museum>.

⁹⁶ Society of Friends of the Afro-Antillean Museum of Panama, "About Us," SAMAAP, June 21, 2023, <https://samaap.com/about-us>.

⁹⁷ This information was gained from the 2024 president of SAMAAP.

⁹⁸ Duke, "Black Movement Militancy in Panama."

benefits that the current generations of Afro-Antillean descendants experience today.⁹⁹ The February 1, 2018-January 31, 2019 newsletter highlighted the annual West Indian Fair, but, note that in that year, the fair focused on “Congo culture,” representing the activities and culture of descendants of the enslaved Africans from the Panamanian Spanish colonial era.¹⁰⁰ Recognition of Congo culture by SAMAAP—who hosted, not just supported, a cultural celebration for the Afro Colonial community—affirms that the CSO seeks to highlight the diversity of African descendants who make up the wider Afro Panamanian community in Panama, not narrowly representing only the history and interests of just Afro Caribbeans.

Each edition of *SAMAAP News* lists the hundreds of current members/stakeholders in the organization, emphasizing the group’s influence across Afro Panamanian life. Additionally, SAMAAP highlights cultural celebrations in its newsletters, festivals such as Black Ethnicity Month, or Mes La Etnia Negra, which occurs during the month of May. May’s cultural significance is commemorated with individuals both within and outside of the Afro Panamanian community.¹⁰¹

SAMAAP representatives consistently participate in workshops offered by the National Secretary for the Development of Afro Panamanians (SENADAP) that focus on forging more national and international links with different nonprofit groups and offering

⁹⁹ Verónica D. Forte and Melva Lowe de Goodin, eds., 2020 SAMAAP Newsletter, *SAMAAP News*, Feb. 1, 2019-Jan. 31, 2020, <https://samaap.com/2020-newsletter>.

¹⁰⁰ Verónica D. Forte and Melva Lowe de Goodin, eds., 2019 SAMAAP Newsletter, *SAMAAP News*, Feb. 1, 2018-Jan. 31, 2019, 4, <https://samaap.com/2019-newsletter>.

¹⁰¹ Melva Lowe de Goodin and Verónica D. Forte, eds., 2012 SAMAAP Newsletter, *SAMAAP News*, Feb. 1, 2012-Jan. 31. 2013, 11, <https://samaap.com/2012-newsletter>.

the Afro Panamanian perspective to governmental/policy and constitutional changes.¹⁰²

The Afro Panamanians who are internally linked to the organization intentionally and proactively carry out development work for the purpose of furthering opportunities for and advancing the societal engagement of the larger, wider Afro Panamanian community.

As was true for the *Panama Tribune*, Panama's first West Indian newspaper, *SAMAAP News* creates a space for Afro Panamanians—and all of Panama—to be exposed to and learn about a variety of Afro Panamanian contributions and important social topics. Overall, SAMAAP's mission emphasizes a sense of belonging for Afro Panamanians within the Mestizo mainstream of Panama.¹⁰³ The newsletter connects SAMAAP with the larger West Indian community in Panama and the United States and connects the larger Afro Panamanian community.

Overall, SAMAAP challenges the false assumption that African descendants are inherently in Panamanian society's lower echelons and associated with poor education, poverty, and crime.¹⁰⁴ SAMAAP's events and its news bulletin increase visibility of the richness of Afro Panamanian life in Panama. Consequently, SAMAAP works, with intentionality, to improve the socio-economic and socio-political standing of Black Panamanians in Panama.

¹⁰² Forte and de Goodin, 2020 SAMAAP Newsletter, 14-15; "SAMAAP Members in Action," SAMAAP, 2019, para. 2, <https://samaap.com/artwork/samaap-members-in-action>.

¹⁰³ Dawn Duke, "Black Movement Militancy in Panama," abstract.

¹⁰⁴ George Westerman, *Toward a Better Understanding*, 2nd ed., July 1946, VIII, https://www.slideshare.net/The_Afrolatino_Project/foster-pag18-1-towards-a-better-understanding-westerman-1946.

Latin American and Caribbean Community Center, AfroResistance. El Centro Comunitario de América Latina y el Caribe (the Latin American and Caribbean Community Center, or LACCC) was established in 2004 in New York City with a focus on the diverse political, economic, and cultural needs of marginalized communities within Latin America—especially on Afro descendants and Indigenous groups.¹⁰⁵ The organization is now known as “AfroResistance,” which emphasizes the communities that the organization wants to help lift and develop, every intentionally, throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. AfroResistance’s purpose is to “educate and organize for human rights, democracy, and racial justice in the Americas.”¹⁰⁶ In this context, the “Americas” are understood to be North America, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean, where racial tensions are high for Afro descendants.¹⁰⁷ Still, racism extends beyond the Eurocentric binary of Black versus white.¹⁰⁸ The intersectional principles on which AfroResistance builds its platform include Black unity in the Americas, gender as the starting point for intersectionality, racial justice that centers Blackness, reproductive rights, and migration that honors the movement of Black

¹⁰⁵ AfroResistance, “Our History,” About Us, AfroResistance, 2022, <https://www.afroresistance.org/about-us>.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Yafza Tamara Reyes-Muñoz, “Situación de Personas Afrodescendientes En América Latina e Impactos Del Racismo En Las Maternidades de Mujeres Negras En Chile: Una Breve Discusión,” *Utopia y Praxis Latinoamericana* 28, no. 103 (2023): 60-75, <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=9356563>.

¹⁰⁸ Alastair Bonnett, *Multiracism: Rethinking Racism in Global Context*. (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2022).

populations.¹⁰⁹ AfroResistance also works to ensure that equity and full rights for Black women and girls are leading objectives in the group's movements for liberation. To achieve its goals, AfroResistance implements advocacy and capacity-building programs and maintains international solidarity with Afro descendants outside of the Americas.

This organization's blog essays discuss a wide range of socio-economic and political issues that disproportionately affect Afro descendants, focusing especially in the Americas on Colombia, Haiti, and Brazil, where Black populations are significant yet their intersectional barriers are not recognized in the white and Mestizo mainstream.¹¹⁰ Recently, the AfroResistance blog included an opinion-based editorial about the implementation of a mining territory contract within Colón, Panamá, the province in the Republic of Panama with the highest percentage of Afro Panamanians.¹¹¹ The Republic of Panama's executive branch confirmed on October 20, 2023, that it was allocating mining rights to an international mining corporation, directly against the wishes of the local population who want to control the industry internally and maintain authority over natural resources and environmental protection.¹¹²

Julie Velásquez Runk argues that Panama has embraced neoliberal reform that inadvertently weakens Indigenous populations within the country whom the government

¹⁰⁹ AfroResistance, "Our History."

¹¹⁰ Afro Resistance, Blog, <https://www.afroresistance.org/blog>; Vinson, "Introduction: African (Black) Diaspora History, Latin American History," 3.

¹¹¹ Chevy Solis Acevedo, "People's Resistance Against Mining in Panama: The Twilight of a Betrayal," AfroResistance, Oct. 21, 2023, para. 4, <https://www.afroresistance.org/post/people-s-resistance-against-mining-in-panama-the-twilight-of-a-betrayal>.

¹¹² Acevedo, "People's Resistance Against Mining in Panama."

gives semblance of supporting.¹¹³ The “reforms” to which Runk refers include an embrace of market economies, diluting centralized power, and encouraging individualism.¹¹⁴ Further, Stanley Heckadon Moreno affirms that the area that borders the Panama Canal has a fragile ecosystem, pointing to mining as one of the ways the area is progressively deteriorating.¹¹⁵ The city of Colón lies near the Panama Canal and is populated by mostly Afro Caribbeans, yet Colón remains one of the most prominent provinces in Panama lacking significant government investment. For decades, Indigenous populations have protested the developments within their vulnerable area vis-a-vis mining plans.¹¹⁶ The AfroResistance blog affirms that such decisions reflect prioritization of the market instead of the social and ecological needs and choices of vulnerable communities.¹¹⁷ The blog’s sentiments explore the issues that affect Afro descendants in Panama and demonstrate the importance of AfroResistance to educate for social awareness and build solidarity and resistance.

¹¹³ Julie Velásquez Runk, “Indigenous Land and Environmental Conflicts in Panama: Neoliberal Multiculturalism, Changing Legislation, and Human Rights,” *Journal of Latin American Geography* 11, no. 2 (2012): 21-47, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24394811>.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Stanley Heckadon Moreno, “Impact of Development on the Panama Canal Environment,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 35, no. 3 (1993): 132, <https://doi.org/10.2307/165971>.

¹¹⁶ Runk, “Indigenous Land and Environmental Conflicts in Panama,” 29.

¹¹⁷ Solis Chevy Acevedo, “People’s Resistance Against Mining in Panama: A Twilight of Betrayal,” AfroResistance, para. 6, October 21, 2023, <https://www.afroresistance.org/post/people-s-resistance-against-mining-in-panama-the-twilight-of-a-betrayal>.

Red de Jóvenes Afropanameños, Afro Panamanian Youth Network. La Red de Jóvenes Afropanameños can be translated in English as the Afro Panamanian Youth Network. This is an organization of individuals from a wide variety of age groups that was formed to create spaces that promote involved, organized, and trained Afro Panamanian youth in Panama. They act as a mother organization for other Afro Panamanian organizations by supplying necessary items and support to different organizations. The Afro Panamanian Youth Network's presence on social media documents the group's political and social achievements as a nonprofit organization for young people.¹¹⁸

SENADAP, or the Panamanian Secretaría Nacional de Políticas y Desarrollo para los Afropanameños (National Secretariat of Policies and Development for Afro Panamanians), is a product of Afro Panamanian political involvement, building governmental resources to assist Black Panamanians.¹¹⁹ SENADAP has the power to develop social inclusion policy for Afro Panamanians in the national area, and SENADAP promotes the full inclusion of Afro Panamanians in governmental decision-

¹¹⁸ Red de Jóvenes Afropanameños, Facebook, created September 14, 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/JovenesAfropanama>; Red de Jóvenes Afropanameños, Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/jovenesafropanama/related_profiles/; Red de Jóvenes Afropanameños, Link Tree, https://linktr.ee/jovenesafropanama?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTAAAR2stcg1zyDaoAEYIuiIRNfGiF-C1jCjRkyVXLzHQ5lmFwBNtjxOuKN8aRI_aem_ATkl0hMBuq5dXtvxDVvYUKDNpYRONP8nr6UhaSsh4yA0SY2KaNcyWuK1AfeHtkrOrctiuPFwFl0h3xgYhodkiLO2. Link Tree is a site the Afro Panamanian Youth Network utilizes that directs web users to all its social media accounts, contact information, and YouTube channel.

¹¹⁹ National Secretariat of Policies and Development for Afro-Panamanians (SENADAP), PanamaAfro, 2023, <https://panamaafro.com/senadap-secretaria-nacional-de-politicas-y-desarrollo-para-los-afropanamenos/>.

making. In 2019, representatives from the Afro Panamanian Youth Network met with the director of SENADAP to establish an annual meeting.¹²⁰

The youth nonprofit organization works in conjunction SENADAP to promote, celebrate, and protect the Afro Panamanian community. The Afro Panamanian Youth Network's current campaign focuses on the affirmation of Black beauty in Panama through culturally Black hairstyles. The group's social media campaign emphasizes "mi afro mi marca," which directly translates to "my afro my brand" (fig. 3).¹²¹ Different Afro Panamanian women are pictured with either braids or their natural, dark curls that signify African heritage. In fact, the Antidiscrimination Commission of the Afro Descendants in Panama declared through a formal written campaign that the prideful showcase of Afro descendants' youth natural hair is a natural right and should be permitted in schools to produce inclusive and intercultural education (fig. 4).¹²²

¹²⁰ Somos Afro, "Afro Panamanian Youth Network Meets with SENADAP," Somos Afro, 2019, <https://www.somosafro.org/red-de-jovenes-afropanamenos-se-reune-con-senadap/>.

¹²¹ Red de Jóvenes Afropanameños, Facebook, posted March 10, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/JovenesAfropanama>.

¹²² Antidiscrimination Commission of the Afro Descendants in Panama, Official Statement from the Anti-Discrimination Commission of Afro Descendants in Panama, March 3, 2023.



Figure 3. MiAfroMiMarco post on Facebook from the Youth Network of Afro Panamanians or Red de Jóvenes Afropanameños.



**Comisión Antidiscriminación
de los Afrodescendiente en Panamá**



Campaña Este regreso a clases porta tu cabello con orgullo... es tu derecho

La Comisión Antidiscriminación de los Afrodescendiente en Panamá, este viernes 3 de marzo hace público el lanzamiento de su **Campaña “Este regreso a clases porta tu cabello con orgullo... es tu derecho”**, para que este lunes 6 de marzo de 2023, los padres y madres de familia, con estudiantes afrodescendientes que deseen mostrar su cabello natural con los peinados propios de nuestra cultura, lo hagan sin temor, porque les respalda el derecho a la identidad étnica, religiosa y cultural de los pueblos afrodescendientes.

No existe ninguna normativa o reglamento que pueda estar por encima de estos derechos que tienen los pueblos. El no permitir el ingreso a clases a un estudiante afrodescendiente por portar su cabello natural o un peinado propio de nuestra cultura, es una violación al acceso a la educación, al derecho a su identidad. Es hora de superar el colonialismo mental, que considera todo lo afrodescendiente negativo, especialmente en el ámbito educativo.

Panamá en un país que, dentro de los Objetivos del Desarrollo Sostenible, propende por avanzar hacia una educación inclusiva e intercultural, donde lo distinto no es una amenaza sino una riqueza, que permite a los estudiantes tener encuentros con sus pares e intercambiar las riquezas de sus orígenes. EUNICE

Invitamos a los padres y familiares de estudiantes afrodescendientes a tomar fotos o videos a sus niños y jóvenes cuando estén entrando a su centro escolar, y subirlo a sus redes sociales con el **#PortaTuCabelloConOrgullo**

Por cifras preliminares de los Censos Nacionales Década 2020, sabemos que el 32.8 % de la población censada se ha autorreconocido afrodescendiente, lo que muestra una visibilización de la conciencia de sus raíces ancestrales africanas. No somos una comunidad somos un pueblo que en el Decenio Internacional de los Afrodescendiente demanda al Estado RECONOCIMIENTO-JUSTICIA-DESARROLLO. Ahora exigimos de las autoridades educativas el respeto y la justicia para nuestros estudiantes.

No vamos a permitir ni una violación ni hostigamiento más hacia nuestros estudiantes. Ustedes no están solos. Denuncien a los agresores al correo: coanpa2023@gmail.com, y suministrar la siguiente información: grabación del hecho (si es posible), su número de teléfono, descripción de lo ocurrido que incluya nombre del Colegio y del director; nombre de la persona a quien se denuncia; nombre, edad y año que cursa el alumno e indicar si dan su consentimiento o autorización para usar el video y la información.

***Nuestro cabello afro, es nuestro orgullo y resistencia.
Panamá, 3 de marzo de 2023.***

Figure 4. Official antidiscrimination statement on Facebook by the Commission of the Afro Descendants in Panama, March 3, 2023.

Further, due to Panama’s proximity and relations to the United States, the Afro Panamanian Youth Network invites members in the community and within their organization to celebrate the Black History Month,¹²³ which was created in the U.S. to recognize the contributions and stories of African Americans in February. However, Afro Panamanian Youth Network’s efforts are not limited to February, nor to May (Panama’s Black Ethnicity month). The group promotes a variety of events to educate the community about black history all year. For example, in July 2023, a representative from the Youth Network of Afro Panamanians led a master workshop on the use of anti-racist language in the work environment at the Embassy of the United States in Panama.¹²⁴ Another example is that for April 18, 2023, the organization was eager to promote the approval of Law 934¹²⁵ that initially created the SENADAP entity.

Overall, the Afro Panamanian Youth Network utilizes social campaigns that are publicized to media to reach Afro Panamanian youth, to create more space for Black youth in Panama to acknowledge their ethnic background, and to equip Afro Panamanian young people with knowledge about their community outside of the perspectives of the white and Mestizo populations in Panama—and globally for all African descendants.

¹²³ Red de Jóvenes Afropanameños, Facebook, posted February 22, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/JovenesAfropanama>; Sonja Stephenson Watson. “Are Panamanians of Caribbean Ancestry an Endangered Species? Critical Literary Debates on Panamanian Blackness in the Works of Carlos Wilson, Gerardo Maloney, and Carlos Russell,” *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 4, no. 3 (2009): 237, doi:10.1080/17442220903331605.

¹²⁴ Red de Jóvenes Afropanameños, Facebook, posted July 7, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/JovenesAfropanama>.

¹²⁵ Panama Afro, “Sanction of New SENADAP Law,” 2023, <https://panamaafro.com/sancion-de-nueva-ley-de-senadap/>.

21st-century Cultural Celebrations

Black Ethnicity Day and Month in Panama, *El Día de la Etnia Negra y El Mes de la Etnia Negra*. Republic of Panama Law 9 of May 30th, 2000, established Black Ethnicity Month in Panama, a festival and cultural celebration that highlights the “scientific, cultural, gastronomic, labor and economic contributions” of Afro descendants in Panama.¹²⁶ Black Ethnicity Month also raises awareness about nondiscrimination and diversity. The month reemphasizes the Afro Panamanian community’s avenue to equip their members through education. The emphasis of a special month to express value and appreciation has the power to combat disparity and stigma associated with Blackness. Because Panama is very multiracial and multicultural, discrimination needs to be fully eliminated, according to Ligia Margarita Grenald Rochester, an Afro Panamanian activist.¹²⁷ The celebrations throughout Black Ethnicity Month are additional ways to affirm that Afro descendants are an intrinsic part of the country’s makeup.

May 30th serves as the official Día de la Etnia Negra, or Black Ethnicity Day, which honors Afro heritage, ethnic diversity, and the abolition of slavery in 1851, when Panama was still conjoined with Colombia.¹²⁸ Highlighting positive ethnic identity and working on breaking apart racial discrimination have long been neglected in Panama. The

¹²⁶ Sumarse, “Mes de la Etnia Negra: Celebremos la Multiculturalidad y Erradiquemos la Discriminación,” Sumarse, <https://www.sumarse.org.pa/mes-de-la-etnia-negra/>; “Celebration of the Month of the Black Ethnicity in Plaza Santa Ana,” Panama Casco Viejo, Black Ethnicity Month, para. 3, https://panamacascoviejo.com/black-ethnicity-panama/#google_vignette.

¹²⁷ Ligia Margarita Grenald Rochester, cited in Sumarse, “Mes de la Etnia Negra: Celebremos La Multiculturalidad y Erradiquemos la Discriminación,” paras. 3-6.

¹²⁸ Zumoff, “Black Caribbean Labor Radicalism in Panama, 1914-1921,” 430.

May holiday serves as a noteworthy historic reminder and validating commemoration. Yet, deep in Panama's roots, racial discrimination has long persisted. Thus, participation in the Black Ethnicity Day celebration, not even yet twenty-five years old in Panama, is nationally important. People celebrate wearing bright colors, clothing with African prints, live music, dance, and large gatherings across many specific regions within Panama.¹²⁹ It is a celebration that encompasses and includes all Afro descendants.

Diablos and Congos Festival. Diablos and Congos festival can be translated to devils (diablos) and slaves (congos). The festival takes place on the east coast, the Caribbean coast, of Panama. The devil in this celebration, dressed in a black costume, represents the Spanish colonizers. A crew of angels surrounds the devil to banish him from the land to represent the relationship between the enslaved Africans and the Spanish colonizers. Males can dress as "congos" by wearing old clothing inside out and speaking in a distorted way to represent how the African ancestors may have communicated while being heavily restricted and watched by slave traders. Females dress in the national dress of the country known as the *pollera*.¹³⁰ Many of the reenactments and activities are spontaneous and done in the streets.

The congos in the Panamanian coastal city of Portobelo are descendants of runaway slaves known as *cimarrones*, who were the resilient Black slaves who escaped

¹²⁹ "Celebration of the Month of the Black Ethnicity in Plaza Santa Ana," Panama Casco Viejo, Black Ethnicity Month, https://panamacascoviejo.com/black-ethnicity-panama/#google_vignette.

¹³⁰ "Diablos y Congos Festival—Portobelo, Panama," Trans-Americas Journey, Nov. 4, 2014, <https://trans-americas.com/diablos-y-congos-festival-portobelo-panama/>.

slavery and became “congos” instead.¹³¹ They escaped slavery and built villages, or *palenques*, on the Atlantic coast of the Republic and a few along the Pacific coast of the Republic.¹³² Due to the cimarrones’ formidable *palenques*, and guerilla warfare,¹³³ Spaniards were forced to recognize the freedom of the escaped slaves. Thus, today, the Congo Festival acknowledges the African ancestors who found freedom in Panama in the 16th-17th centuries.¹³⁴ Congo is a festival of resistance and rebellion. Through African dance, modern-day Afro Panamanians critique slavery and colonialism. Attendees often paint their faces black with charcoal in an emancipatory manner to represent the dark skin of their ancestors.¹³⁵

The festivals of diablos and congos are loud, vibrant, and lavish. They draw attention to the fights and struggles the Afro Panamanian ancestors faced. The celebratory traditions have been passed down from generation to generation to today, showcasing how Afro culture persists in Panama. The Diablos and Congos Festival celebrates the descendants of Africans who arrived by force in the province of Colón but

¹³¹ Craft, *When the Devil Knocks*, 37.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 192.

¹³³ Craft, *When the Devil Knocks*, 37.

¹³⁴ “Festival of Diablos and Congos,” Colón City, accessed Apr. 16, 2024, <https://www.coloncity.com/congos.html>.

¹³⁵ Andrea Crossan, “This Panamanian Carnival Tradition Manages to Make Blackface ‘Playful’ and Emancipatory,” *The World*, Feb. 20, 2015, <https://theworld.org/stories/2015-02-20/panamanian-carnival-tradition-manages-make-blackface-playful-and-emancipatory>.

also celebrates the even wider Afro Panamanian populations today due to their respective persistence of African/Black Caribbean culture in Panamanian life ¹³⁶

Festival of the Black Christ, *Cristo Negro*. The Black Christ Church in Portobelo, Panama, is home to the renowned Black Christ statue, the *Christo Negro de Portobelo*, that depicts the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.¹³⁷ The Black Christ festival is held on October 21st every year, and tens of thousands of people migrate to the community to attend. Legend says that the arrival of the statue in Portobelo, possibly as early as 1658, eradicated a disease plaguing the nation along its coast.¹³⁸ As a result, African descendants began thereafter pilgrimaging to the city to venerate the Black Christ figure. Several theories suggest how the figure arrived on the isthmus in the first place, but none has been confirmed.¹³⁹ Regardless, the tradition of festival, to celebrate the Black Christ, has persisted into the 21st century because it is believed that the figure is responsible for miraculous deeds in the lives of its devotees.

In 2022, 60,000 pilgrims arrived in Portobelo to celebrate the festival.¹⁴⁰ To some, the festival is more a form of protest than a religious holiday. In this sense, the festival

¹³⁶ Alexander, *When the Devil Knocks*, 38.

¹³⁷ “Black Christ Church, Portobelo,” Colón City, accessed Apr. 16, 2024, <https://www.coloncity.com/blackchrist.html>.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Shannon Sims, “Panama’s Black Christ Festival Stirs Up Sorrow and a Sense of Survival: For Afro-Panamanians, October Offers a Chance to Celebrate Catholicism and their Blackness,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, Sept. 28, 2022,

can be an outlet from the frustration that accrues from racism and discrimination.

According to Renée Alexander Craft, the Black Christ tradition depicts African triumph over slavery and makes a mockery of the Spanish Crown and the Catholic Church.¹⁴¹ It can be inferred that the suffering of Christ alludes to the suffering of the Black population in Panama, past and present.

Civil society organizations actively take part in these important cultural celebrations across Panama and create some of their own. To better understand the scope and impacts of these organizations and celebrations, interviews with CSO activists describe the influence and effects that such organizations and celebrations are having on the Afro Panamanian community, highlight recent advancements Blacks have achieved in Panama, and make clear how much still remains to be accomplished by and for Afro Panamanians in order to attain full equity in their home country.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/panamas-black-christ-festival-stirs-up-sorrow-and-sense-of-survival-180980836/>.

¹⁴¹ Craft, *When the Devil Knocks*, cited in Sims, “Panama’s Black Christ Festival Stirs Up Sorrow and a Sense of Survival.”

CHAPTER IV

Facilitation of Afro Panamanian Pride: Better Understanding of CSOs Through Interviews

The qualitative portion of this inquiry is in the form of two interviews, one with the most recent president of the Society of Friends of the West Indian Museum of Panama (SAMAAP) and one with a member of the Red de Jóvenes Afropanameño (the Afro Panamanian Youth Network). Both interviews took place in March and April 2024, with the emailed permission of the interviewees. Both interviews were conducted via Zoom, they each lasted approximately an hour, they were conducted in a combination of both English and Spanish, and both were recorded, with the interviewees' permission.¹⁴² The information learned from the interviews is presented collectively—woven together—to highlight common and opposing themes between the two interviewees' responses.

The interviews here included were undertaken as a means to support the primary- and secondary-source research on Afro Panamanian progress in Panama in the 21st century, and they are employed to enhance understanding. The interviews and their response contents cannot be understood as anything more than anecdotal. However, they provide additional, personal perspectives. They offer authentic, experienced views by Panamanian nationals about their own country's progress. And they offer insight into how fuller research into questions about Afro Panamanian socio-political and socio-economic growth may in future be more comprehensively approached. They are present-

¹⁴² The journalistic-style interviews did not require MTSU IRB approval, but the project was submitted to MTSU Internal Review Board for evaluation as Exempt Review, and indeed falls under Exempt Review status for discussions that only involve a small risk of exposure for detailing personal, possibly painful, experiences.

day native voices. Whereas selections taken from the interviews are included in the present discussion and analysis, full transcripts of the two conversations are attached as appendix D.

Originally, at the outset of this research, it was assumed that the qualitative findings from NGO members would help explain how the organizations are improving Afro pride in Panama. As it turns out, a more specific function of Afro Panamanian CSOs/NGOs and celebrations is the *facilitation* of pride for Afro Panamanians' cultural and historical roots. In response to a question concerning how his cultural history affects his cultural pride in Panama, the president of SAMAAP, Mr. Arturo Harris,¹⁴³ responded that the contributions of the West Indian community nourish his pride and are the motivation for his involvement with the SAMAAP civil society organization in which he is engaged. He insists that he is “proud of who we are and proud of what Panama has become.” Even more, his cultural upbringing was and is instrumental in how he carries himself as a Black man in Panama. His answer clarifies that there is a balance of his pride for his Panamanian culture and nationality as well as for his historical, ethnic, cultural African and West Indian backgrounds.

The significant societal contribution or outcome by a nonprofit organization that was impactful to a member of Red Jóvenes Afropanameños, according to Mr. Sebastián Cabal, whom I interviewed, is the current campaign for the inclusion of “Black Hair” in common places in Panamanian society such as school and the workplace. “Black Hair” is

¹⁴³ Note that the actual names of the two interviewees are not utilized in this discussion. I have created pseudonyms for each of the two.

characterized by tight curls, afros, braids (or *trenzas*).¹⁴⁴ Unfortunately, the display of Black Hair in the largely Mestizo society in Panama traditionally has had a negative connotation and is deemed unprofessional. As discussed in chapter 3, the Afro Panamanian Youth Network produced the “#mi afro, mi marca” ad campaign to address that widespread cultural bias. The interviewee himself has thick, long, curly, black hair that signifies his African heritage, of which he is most proud. To achieve full success for this campaign would look like overall national acceptance, not only tolerance, of Panamanians with visible African heritage in their hair, or *pelo*. On the Afro Panamanian Youth Network organization’s Instagram and Facebook pages, multiple participants pridefully smile with their afros against a background of yellow, red, and green, the Pan-African colors that represent “an intentional show of support and solidarity from when, in the 1960s, dizzying waves of nationalism swept across the (African) continent and countries yanked their freedom from colonial Europe.”¹⁴⁵

Similarly, the president of SAMAAP also affirmed that there was “strong opposition in schools” from the wider Panamanian community towards young Black girls wearing braids and afros, which in recent years influenced the Ministry of Education of

¹⁴⁴ A thorough understanding of “Black Hair” is derived from my personal experience as an African American young woman for 22 years.

¹⁴⁵ Shola Lawal, “Red, Green, and Gold: A Pan-African History of Flags and Remarkable Woman Who Inspired It,” *Mail and Guardian*, para. 4, June 13, 2020, <https://mg.co.za/africa/2020-06-13-africa-flags-history-continent/>; David A. Butz, “National Symbols as Agents of Psychological and Social Change,” *Political Psychology* 30, no. 5 (Oct. 2009): 779-804, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41502459>.

Panama, said Mr. Harris in the interview, to publish a decree to deny the prohibition of braids and other forms of Black Hair.¹⁴⁶

The establishment through law of “El Día de la Etnia Negra,” or Black Ethnicity Day, which eventually was mandated to be the entire month of May, is the significant societal contribution the president of SAMAAP deems as the most impactful cultural recognition that has been established in Panama in the 21st century. This holiday is widely celebrated by the Afro Panamanian community, who tend to begin it even a week before the holiday officially starts and extend it well into June. Furthermore, Mr. Harris confirmed that “all Black nonprofit groups” take part in the celebration. It is a holiday they all can agree is worth celebrating for their community and for the country. This cultural celebration is testament to the growing and manifesting potency of the Black community in Panama despite the socio-economic barriers that still persist to negatively impact many Afro Panamanians.

In contrast, from the perspective of the interviewed member of the Afro Panamanian Youth Network, cultural celebrations can be both good and bad. Mr. Cabal highlighted how, yes, Black Ethnicity Day/Month is a victory, yet celebrations of African/Caribbean culture are limited to that annual spring timeframe. Outside of that celebratory month, he said, it is no longer widely acceptable in common social spaces to represent one’s African heritage through culturally specific clothing and hair styles.

Another question posed to the interviewees was, how did their experiences as Afro Panamanians lead them to their current political involvement? The question

¹⁴⁶ The official decree Mr. Arturo Harris mentioned in our interview has not been found online.

produced a similar mixed-response outcome. The 2024 president of SAMAAP, a gentleman in his 60s who grew up in the 1960s and 70s in a politically tense and very segregated Panama, delved into how his work as an employee of the Panama Canal had been instrumental in his understanding of self. He explained that he did not consider himself in the Panamanian context when he worked in the Canal Zone. This was for good reason, considering “by birth [the Afro Antillean immigrant canal workers such as Mr. Smith and his family members] could not be considered Panamanian, but in spirit they were perpetual foreigners” by wider Panamanian society.¹⁴⁷ Although the racist gold and silver payroll system had been outlawed, the interviewee was raised in Rainbow City, a segregated area within the Canal Zone and the largest community in the Zone. According to the *Panama Canal Review*, the city was named “Rainbow City” by its own local Canal Zone residents who needed agency, or a sense of making their community their own; the name claimed for them pride in a land where they were deprived of it.¹⁴⁸ The convoluted world-construction that Mr. Harris experienced from birth caused him to be “more critical of political events” and to be “politically conscious,” which developed into his involvement in and support of Black organizations in Panama. As a direct subject of cultural and racial discrimination, his political analysis of the fault in events, policies, and the social order was abundantly clear to him, because it was his reality.

¹⁴⁷ Kaysha Corinealdi, “Envisioning Multiple Citizenships: West Indian Panamanians and Creating Community in the Canal Zone Neocolony,” *Global South* 6, no. 2 (2012): 102, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/globalsouth.6.2.87>.

¹⁴⁸ “Rainbow City,” *Panama Canal Review* 6, no. 2 (Sept. 2, 1955): 8-10, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-W79-e66e8492fcb1e4ab4fc19dca296f45fa/pdf/GOVPUB-W79-e66e8492fcb1e4ab4fc19dca296f45fa.pdf>.

Further, the Afro Panamanian Youth Network member explained in his interview that, in his experience, it is extremely difficult to make space in domains where Mestizos and whites are already on top of the social class; they do not readily cede social, political, and economic power. Mr. Cabal reminded that SENADAP, the national Secretariat of Politics and Development of Afro Panamanians, was created to work toward achievement of that very equity. SENADAP, he explained, tries to further health and economic progress and to include individuals who have a lack of access to money and high positions in national decision-making. In his own experience, he works with Indigenous and Black groups to create political opportunities for underrepresented groups in Panama, the members of which actually constitute a very large proportion of the Panamanian population (chap. 2). In a Facebook post from the Afro Panamanian Youth Network, Mr. Cabal is found leading a workshop on behalf of the Afro Panamanian Youth Network on anti-racist language in the work environment at the United States Embassy in Panama.¹⁴⁹

When the interviewees were asked about the role of Afro Panamanian civil society organizations toward more societal progress, Mr. Harris said the Black CSOs in Panama promote “pride [and] recognition of historical truth” as well as educating the younger generations on this pride and self-knowledge. Afro Panamanian civil society organizations are committed to educating and implementing self-worth in the Black community. The point he made reemphasizes the high hopes that Black-led organizations in 21st century Panama are making in assisting the Black community to prosper. They are

¹⁴⁹ Red de Jóvenes Afropanameños, Facebook, July 7, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/JovenesAfropanama>.

building the identity and self-esteem of Afro Panamanians while also pursuing political and socio-economic changes in wider Panamanian society.

Still, the actions to improve the community are fundamentally internal. Unfortunately, Afro Panamanians have not witnessed adequate systemic changes, according to Mr. Cabal of the Afro Panamanian Youth Network. He insists that nonprofits have helped the advancement of the community, yet Afro Panamanians remain still at the bottom of the social pyramid. Additionally, the effects of the programs, such as the different inclusive departments assisted by SENADAP, are not substantially noticeable. One example of the limited impact is the lack of Afro Panamanian representatives in political positions and how *structurally* Afro Panamanians in the 21st century continue to face obstacles that are similar to the ones they endured in the segregated racism of the 20th century.

On the other hand, there have been changes within the Afro Panamanian community internally. Although the community lacks political power and social equity, the overall self-identification and focus on the civil rights of Afro *Panamanians*—instead of as Black Panamanians perceiving themselves to be foreigners residing within Panama—began in the 20th century and is maturing in the 21st century, according to the president of SAMAAP. He has experienced that in his own life. He explained that prior to the 21st century, there was a joint national goal amongst Mestizos and Blacks to regain the Panama Canal as a territory of Panama in the 1970s. After this goal was achieved, Afro Panamanians started to look toward individual achievements and societal successes. (SAMAAP was created between 1980-1981 as discussed in chapter two). Interestingly, the civil rights movement going on in the United States in the 20th century

had a similar impact on the Afro Panamanian community; Afro Panamanians recognized the related history and obstacles that African Americans were facing in the U.S., which gave Afro Panamanians courage.

In the 21st century, Afro Panamanian nonprofits became “bolder in their demands.” A stronger sense of self is a recipe for an increased fervor for equality and equity.

External outcomes from the work of Afro Panamanian civil society organizations are of equal importance. In response to a question posed to the interviewees, about to what particular areas have Afro Panamanian civil society organizations contributed most, the president of SAMAAP identified the increased availability of jobs for young Black descendants, particularly in the cities of Panama. Call centers, according to Mr. Harris, are one of the main employers of young Afro Panamanians, in the increase in employment opportunities.

Politically, the SAMAAP has made great strides in communicating with political officials. The organization, along with other participating individuals, leverages its influence and numbers with Black Panama by hosting forums for political candidates and elected officials to hear the political demands of the Afro Panamanian community. These forums can look like town hall gatherings, with presidential candidates and Black activists who submit petitions to the candidates. In fact, SENADAP was a result of one of these forums with political representatives. The Black activists at the meeting, according to Mr. Harris, petitioned for SENADAP to become a formal governmental department with its own federal budget. In 2023, the bill creating the national SENADAP bureau dedicated to the development of Afro Panamanian progress was signed into law. The

president of SAMAAP confirmed that the office has been instrumental in raising awareness, consciousness, and pride. Also, the rise in self-identification as Afro Panamanian in census data-gathering can be attributed to the work of the SENADAP office. The president of SAMAAP explained that the next goal of SENADAP is to include the history of Black descendants in Panama in school curriculum, educational representation that is long overdue.

Education is a large factor in individual success. Often, location—urban versus rural—can determine what resources and job opportunities are available to students. In Panama, better access to resources and job opportunities in urban areas offers increased potential for accruing affluence and healthier lives for city residents.¹⁵⁰

Rural families, however, struggle with fewer opportunities for upward mobility; underfunded rural schools are *part* of the reason. In the interview with Mr. Harris, the president of SAMAAP, he confirmed that Black education is “marginalized, as [is true for] other groups in rural areas,” which is why Indigenous people and Blacks support one another in their demands for socioeconomic equity. It is important that the two groups work with each other on shared objectives because, as recorded in the 2023 census, about 32% of the population of Panama is Afro Panamanian, while the Indigenous population makes up over 17%. Although the two groups have been *minoritized*, together they comprise about half of the entire population of the nation of Panama.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Mizuki Kai, “5 Facts About Poverty in Panama,” Blog–Latest News, The Borgen Project, Oct. 6, 2020, <https://borgenproject.org/poverty-in-panama/>.

¹⁵¹ “Panama, Communities,” Minority Rights Group, May 2024, paras. 3-4, [https://minorityrights.org/country/panama/#:~:text=English%2C%20Creole%2C%20Hakka%20Chinese%20and,%2C%20Ng%C3%A4bere\)%20are%20also%20spoken.&text=M](https://minorityrights.org/country/panama/#:~:text=English%2C%20Creole%2C%20Hakka%20Chinese%20and,%2C%20Ng%C3%A4bere)%20are%20also%20spoken.&text=M)

Paradoxically though, although schools in rural areas in Panama may lack resources, the education of the children in those areas highly depends on the teacher of the students, despite backwater settings. Very devoted teachers, the SAMAAP president explained, can override a local area's bare circumstances. To explain this, he used the example of many students entering schools in Colón to further their education. The rural areas do not always cripple the students, even though their opportunities are limited.

A similar paradox can also be seen with Afro Panamanian women. According to the Situation of Afro Panamanian Women report by the United Nations Sustainable Development Group, "quality formal education and social advancement have not prevented [Black Panamanian women] from being affected by racism."¹⁵² Even for urban women with greater chances of success and for the rural women who have been provided pathways out of poverty, opportunity-blocks simply because they are Afro Panamanian limit social growth, according to the interview with Mr. Arturo Harris.

Overall, the two interviews explained some of the internal and external innerworkings that have been produced by Black-led civil society organizations in Panama in recent years. The Afro Panamanian Youth Network utilizes its visibility on social media as a means for social change. It also serves as an umbrella organization, similar to how SAMAAP's overarching structure works with connections and respect throughout the nation that build impact. They unify and mobilize smaller groups that

ain%20minorities%20and%20indigenous%20peoples,cent%20of%20the%20total%20po
pulation.

¹⁵² UNDP and INAMU, *Situation of Afro-Panamanian Women*.

coalesce to also energize, inform, and develop the Afro Panamanian community. They help facilitate the small scale, yet still impactful, efforts from less established Afro Panamanian groups. Collectively, the civil society organizations in Panama, together with the celebrations and holidays they have been instrumental in helping create for the country, have improved pride and identification of Afro Panamanians with their African and West Indian heritage.

Still, fundamental changes to uplift the community economically, politically, and socially remain sorely lacking. Cultural celebrations are nationally relevant. They are symbols of perseverance. They encourage *desfiles*, or parades, with other Afro Panamanians and build community. Yet they too are a reminder of the long road ahead and of the need for substantial societal progress in Panama for its Black community.

With Afro Panamanians constituting a third of the nation of Panama, their demands, confidence, and resistance are maturing in the 21st century.

CHAPTER V

Conclusions, Personal Reflection, Future Work

Afro Panamanian. What does this word represent to the individuals to whom it applies? Panamanians of African descent in Panama are mostly Afro Caribbean. Those whose ancestors were enslaved Africans brought to the isthmus by Spanish colonials in earlier centuries are known as Afro Colonials. This present-day diversity of “Afro Descendants,” especially the diversity of self-recognition and personal experience in Panama, creates a larger shared community that encompasses both groups. In recognizing the magnitude of Afro Caribbeans in Panama, they have greatly contributed to the Black culture that is unique to 20th- and 21st-century Panama.

With about 34% of the population in Panama claiming African/West Indian heritage, the efforts by Panamanian civil society organizations to improve overall pride have helped generate these results. Even more, by using their large numbers, Afro Panamanians have tirelessly worked to create a governmental body for the development of Afro Panamanian society, known as SENADAP. The civil society organizations of the 21st century were created from the foundation of earlier groups in the 20th century. Protestant churches and the *Panama Tribune* developed a staging ground to provide Afro Panamanians with a sense of belonging, as the Society of West Indian Friends of the Afro Antillean Museum of Panama (SAMAAP) demonstrates in its monthly newsletters. The cultural celebrations and holidays of Afro Panamanians act as symbols of hope and resistance. However, they also serve as a reminder of the fundamental changes that are

yet to come for this community. Nonetheless, these organizations and celebrations facilitate Afro Panamanian pride in their cultural heritage.

In the 21st century, not only have the demands of this community become bolder, but the dignity and self-respect have as well; which can be seen in the “Mi Afro, Mi Marca” campaign by the Afro Panamanian Youth Network’s social media and by the gradual increase in the national census as people identify an “Afro Descendant” in ever larger numbers. The socio-economic and socio-political positions of the Afro Panamanian interviewees demonstrate how their identity and experience have been instrumental in their sense of self, in their awareness of Panamanian society structure and government, and their involvement in civil society organizations.

Fundamental change is yet on the horizon, which a main objective of the Afro Panamanian community. Further action is desperately needed to implement greater, more widespread equity throughout Panamanian society. For example, adding the history and current state of Afro Panamanians into school curriculum, creating more high-ranking job opportunities for Afro Panamanians, and investing in marginalized communities such as Colón and other rural areas along the coast of the isthmus represent the magnitude of still-needed progress this community is pursuing, in order to achieve societal structural change that can equate to the growing Afro Panamanian pride.

Moving forward, what needs to be asked is, why are information and history of African Descendants in Panama so extremely hard to find? With the help of some strong journal articles, I was able to gather a moderate understanding of the obstacles this community faces, as well as its members’ potency and influence on the larger Panamanian society. What should also be explored is, what attitudinal, governmental, and

legal obstacles are blocking greater social mobility for this community? A significant turnaround, at least internally, for the Afro Panamanian community is occurring in the 21st century, but only after a century of suffering experienced by West Indians/Afro Antilleans and even more centuries of suffering by Afro Colonials.

As a larger society, we need to ask ourselves, why can African Descendants move their culture and livelihood forward and yet be still forgotten and under studied. If I have the opportunity to return to this research topic, I will attempt to utilize a fuller ethnographic approach and study Afro Panamanian society from within Panama. I would welcome the prospect of developing further contacts with Black-led civil society organizations in Panama in the future, given the new, only-now-barely-established online presence of Afro Panamanian organizations at present. Also, only obtaining two interviews for this research was not the original goal. In a perfect world, I would have strongly encouraged the interviewees to connect me with at least two more willing contacts respectively for more interviews. In this way, I could have worked with multiple perspectives and utilized the knowledge that I have gained over the course of the last few months.

Throughout the course of this research, I thoroughly enjoy exploring the complexities of Black communities. Black or Afro communities within Latin America give me courage that my community is not a monolith. I have also gained a new, more eye-opening, complex, and nuanced perspective when analyzing how African *Americans* socially organize. Interestingly, it was comforting to learn that the civil rights movement within the United States had a global impact. Discovering the pride of Afro Panamanians has assisted me in paying homage to being Black in America while also recognizing, to

the best of my ability given my community's global displacement, my own original African/Caribbean heritage.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ As of 2024, many African Americans continue to lack the historical information of their ancestors' migration (forced and voluntary).

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Questions for Nonprofit Organizations

—for the one-on-one conversations with Afro Panamanian nonprofit participants about changing socio-economics in Panama in the 21st century—

To start, please state your name, age, and general area of residence in Panama (province, town, city).

Please understand that you may choose not to answer any of these questions at any time, and you may choose to exit this conversation at any time.

Thank you very much for the privilege of your time and participation.

- 1) How does your cultural history in Panama affect your cultural pride in Panama?
- 2) What significant societal contribution or outcome by a nonprofit organization has been the most impactful for you?
- 3) Can you describe your experience as an Afro Panamanian and how it influences your social or political participation?
- 4) What do cultural celebrations like Black Heritage Month or Colón Day mean to you?
- 5) What role do nonprofit organizations play in the journey toward more societal progress for Afro Panamanians in Panama?
- 6) In the 21st century, how has the recognition of Afro Panamanian heritage shifted? How have the policies toward honoring the unique experiences of Afro descendants shifted in the 21st century?
- 7) Are you aware of the Resolution for an Inter-American Week for People of African Descent in the Americas? If so, have you felt or seen the effects of this 2018 resolution in recent years?
- 8) Are you aware of the Social Inclusion Law introduced by the Panamanian Government in May of 2023 that established a National Secretariat of Policies for Afro Panamanians to execute policy for the social inclusion of people of African descent within the national territory? Do you feel the law was a step in the right direction? Why or why not? How and in what ways?
- 9) Are you familiar with nonprofit organizations such as *Foro Afropanameños* and the *Coordinadora de Organizaciones Negras de Panamá*, which were involved in the celebration of the Social Inclusion Law?

- 10) Do you, or the primary nonprofit organization of which you are a part, collaborate with other civil society organizations to improve the social and economic standing of Afro Panamanians? If so, how and in what ways?
- 11) In what particular area, would you say, civil society organizations have contributed the most in advancing Afro Panamanian equity and power in Panamanian society? For instance, toward economic progress? Policy changes? Afro pride? Afro Panamanian political participation? Employment opportunities? Please explain/elaborate, how and in what ways.
- 12) Can you describe the socio-cultural and experiential differences between Afro Panamanians in rural areas v. those living in urban areas? Are there significant differences in access to a good education for Afro Panamanians living in urban v. rural residential circumstances?

Appendix B

CITI Course Completion Certificates (Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative)

Social and Behavioral Research Course Certificate



Completion Date 01-Feb-2024
Expiration Date 01-Feb-2028
Record ID 60961123

This is to certify that:

Trinity Henderson

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

Human Research
(Curriculum Group)
Social & Behavioral Research
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Middle Tennessee State University



Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative
101 NE 3rd Avenue, Suite 320
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301 US
www.citiprogram.org

Generated on 15-May-2024. Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w84e3f940-20f6-4576-997b-2bd0d82c329b-60961123

Students Conducting No More Than Minimal Risk Research Course Certificate



Completion Date 09-Nov-2023
Expiration Date 09-Nov-2028
Record ID 59556822

This is to certify that:

Trinity Henderson

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

Students conducting no more than minimal risk research
(Curriculum Group)
Students conducting no more than minimal risk research
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Stage 1
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Middle Tennessee State University



Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative
101 NE 3rd Avenue, Suite 320
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301 US
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Generated on 15-May-2024. Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w95c709db-eac0-426c-a8e9-97db54115f9e-59556822

Appendix C

MTSU Cayuse IRB Access Permission to Apply for MTSU IRB Exempt Review Approval

From: Aanuoluwapo Adekoya ORSP Aanuoluwapo.AdekoyaORSP@mtsu.edu 
Subject: Cayuse IRB Access
Date: November 20, 2023 at 9:13 AM
To: Trinity Henderson tmh7t@mtmail.mtsu.edu

AO

Good Morning:

I have set up your access to the **Human Ethics** module in Cayuse. You should be able to access it in 48 hours.

Please visit the **IRB** website <https://www.mtsu.edu/irb/> and download the quick start guide. Let me know if you run into any issues.

Regards,
Aanu Adekoya
Graduate Assistant
ORSP



Appendix D

Interview Transcriptions

SAMAAP Interview

This interview was conducted in English, via Zoom, March 20, 2024.

TH: Trinity Henderson

AH: Arturo Harris (pseudonym), 2023-2024 SAMAAP President

AH: (I'm) Involved in quite a few organizations. Church, being made in one of them. I've been involved in church ever since.

And SAMAAP, which is the Society of Friends of the West Indian Museum, Panama. That's the next one. And also, I'm involved with a group called, well, they call it SHORT-CGM, but it's the Foundation for the Preservation of the Corozal, Gatun and Mount Hope Cemeteries, CGM.

And there is, out of that CGM comes out one that's called Pan-Caribbean Sankofa. And that's a group that is organized to provide the University of Florida with as much information regarding West Indians in Panama as we can muster now that there's no museography type of artifacts that you can contribute to put in your museum. So we've been conducting a series of oral histories, interviews to provide them with a base of knowledge of the past in Panama.

Those are the organizations I'm involved in and of course, here with the forum.

When you are, you can start from how you want to run the interview, we'll go with you.

TH: Okay, so based on my research, SAMAAP is one of the most prominent Afro Panamanian organizations that I could find on the internet. And so you all were established in, I think it was, 1981.

AH: Yes. In one of the only, or maybe I think it's the only, West Indian Museum in Panama, is that correct? That is correct. That is correct. The West Indian Museum of Panama, which was established in December of 1980, and SAMAAP was organized in March of 1981.

So, the museum is 43 years, this month, in fact, Sunday the 24th, their anniversary, and we'll be completing 43 years in support of the museum. I think we're probably jumping ahead of all the questions you asked, you're wrong, but this has been essential in maintaining that museum open. If somebody would study the history of museums in Panama, we probably have over 25, 30 museums across the country, I can think of.

And, but museums traditionally will open, and then after a few years, they close, and then it might spring open again. Even large museums, or a museum is a small museum compared to some of the other museums. But it has maintained, it has remained open and functioning for the 43-year period, because of the support that it has from this community organization.

SAMAAP is the oldest of the Black groups in Panama. There's probably, there's over 25, there's probably close to 30 different groups in Panama, small groups. And they have, in the last 20 years or so, started coming together under what you refer to as the FORO, the Foro Afro-Panameño.

Foro Afro-Panameño is an umbrella organization that doesn't yet have legal status in Panama. It is tacitly recognized, it's a recognized name, but they don't really have a legal status because they have not completed a formal registry with the government as such, even though they have done quite a bit of work together. But they just did that, they just submitted the documentation in order to gain their registration as a formal NGO, a non-profit organization.

And they're going to be the umbrella bearing over all these other small Black organizations. Of the close to 30 small groups, we probably only have maybe about 10 of them that have their formal registration with the government. SAMAAP being the first one, and the oldest, the oldest.

There are a few others that have theirs, but not them. The vast majority don't have any formality before the government. Yeah, that's where I'm from, yeah.

So SAMAAP is an organization that comprises over about 250 members, really. So it's not only the oldest, but it's the largest, with a membership base that spreads all the way to the US. We have maybe a third of our membership is in the US.

And it's comprised of, of course, because it's a support for the West Indian Museum, it's comprised mainly of West Indian descendants, but it also has other ethnic groups within it who have supported it over the years. And so it's, like I said, we have maybe about a third of them in the US and the others here in Panama, spread across both in Colón, some probably in Bocas, that are spread out here in Panama.

TH: Yeah, I read online through a lot of research that Colón and Bocas del Toro were the main two places or provinces within the country that have the most Afro-Panamanians.

AH: The larger percentage-wise of Black, yes, Panamanians in Colón mainly. And I don't have the figures ready to hear, there's actually a map that shows the results of the last census that was published last year.

And Colón is very high in its percentage of Black population. Bocas has a higher, and yet there are provinces like Herrera and Los Santos that were traditionally considered to be

non-predominant for Blacks. Yet with the census, it showed surprisingly a larger number, a larger percentage than had been expected before.

And I believe that that has been a result of the work of the Black organizations over the last few years, as they have managed to provoke a greater level of appreciation and pride in folks within their own ethnic groups. So that has resulted. The census of 2010 gave an official result of something like 9.2% of the Panama's population recognizing themselves as Black or have some reference Blacks.

The census of 2000 published last year, 2023, showed over 32%. And when I always rush to point out that in addition to looking at it from the 32%, 32.7 or something like that percent that it is, you also have to take into consideration that there is a 17.1% that are considered Indigenous, original, day-to-day to Americans groups, those Indian groups that are here. 17.1% of the population is in that group.

So, when you add, I'm sorry, something just popped into my mind. Anyway, we'll find out how it works. When you add the 32% Blacks and the 17%, getting 49% of the entire population are within these two groups.

So, you have a roughly a 51% that has to be divided between the Chinese, the Mestizos, the whites. And suddenly you no longer have probably any of those groups that are more than 30%. So technically, rather than being a minority group, we're probably now a majority group.

TH: And so, with that being the case, I know that there have been a lack of policy changes for this group, but would you say in the 21st century that, well, I guess I want to ask you, what area have you seen the work of these organizations showing up the most? And is that going to be like shown in economic progress or policy changes, Afro pride, or a combination of all three?

AH: But policy say that you're not seeing a lot of, it's not as strongly seen probably economic changes. They're still pushing. And of course, you want to see more of that.

You want to see more of Blacks in positions of greater income, levels of income. What we are seeing, especially now that there's been a number of call centers coming into Panama, finding that quite a few of those Black descendant, the kids are finding jobs, especially those that can speak English are finding jobs in these areas. And so those job opportunities tend to be a little better than the norm in a country.

So that helps in somewhat in economic standards. But what you find as resulted is the push for greater, I guess, a level of respect for the government, especially from all those that are in power or these groups. The photo has managed over the last four, well, the last three elections, last three previous elections.

And in this one, we're doing it again. They will gather the presidential candidates have done that in 2004, 2014, 2019. They did what would be similar to like a town hall gathering all the presidential candidates to meet with a force of Black presentation.

So, this Black communities there, they come out and they have all the presidential candidates and they will submit a series of petitions, maybe a list of five or six or seven petitions. And they've asked and they've managed to get the presidential candidates assigned, committing themselves to attend these petitions if they were elected. And we have had results from that.

They may not attend to all, but they will at least attend to some one of those petitions that are listed. And we have an organization, or an office here called SENADAP and I think you are familiar with SENADAP. That's the Secretaria Nacional de Políticas y Desarrollo de los Afrodescendientes.

That office is a result of a petition that was made by the forum when they met with the presidential candidates. Way back in 2004, started out as a little office and then they will in the next government act for more. And in this government, even though SENADAP became an office, recognized office under the Ministry of Social Works, they petitioned for it to become an independent office with its own budget.

And that was signed into law last year, 2023. So, it has elevated that office out to an independent office and secretariat with its own budget and its own working strength. So, it doesn't respond to the ministry.

And that office has been instrumental in moving around the country and raising awareness and raising consciousness and raising pride. And so, the results in the census are a great measure of results from the efforts that this office has put up. So, when you sum it all up, you're seeing that the Black movement has brought this to be, and this is some of the results that we are benefiting from.

They have petitioned also, and they're brought in the government to, I know it was passed in a cabinet. I don't know if it was already implemented in law in the assembly, but to have included in a curriculum of the schools, history of Black development in Panama. So, whereas you did not have that as a particular focus in education before, it's now to be included in a curriculum, a particular focus on Black development over there.

So, you said that that- In fact, we're having this meeting with the presidential candidates this Friday. Oh, wow. Just Friday this week we'll be having, we have already had of the eight candidates, we have seven who have committed themselves to be there.

TH: Okay. What are you all planning on presenting to them this time?

AH: One of the petitions is, I have it somewhere here close by. Okay.

There's a plan for the development of Colón. Of course, again, Colón is an area with a predominantly Black population. There's a strategic plan for developing of Colón, and we're presenting that, asking that they commit themselves to making this plan work.

There's also a strategic plan for Blacks that the Senate office has developed. We're asking them that they also attend to that strategy plan and make it something that becomes a reality. We're asking them to, there's a group of a young youth group, youth Black group, who have also developed their own petition, and we're bringing that, giving them an opportunity, a space for them to present that.

So, the youth will present your petition as young Blacks within the country. Women, the Black Women Organization, Enes Negras, Consejo de Mugresa, and they will present your petition as well. So there is, all of these will have, be a part of that listing that will be presented for the government, for whoever becomes the elected candidate, to commit himself to looking into attending to these areas of concern.

TH: Do you work with other organizations pretty often? We do, especially now with the photo, because like I said, the photo's an umbrella, and so the photo brings them all together. And so to some extent, we have done work together. SAMAAP also, because SAMAAP's of history and its own level of experience, SAMAAP is also an assisting body for many of the, some of the smaller groups.

AH: For example, we have a well-established structure. So the government, about a year or so ago, wanted to fund, wanted to provide some funds to the Black organization in Colón. They were responding to a flood situation there, as it really hit them hard at their petition, and the government was going to provide them with funds to do some work.

And they decided they would channel those funds through SAMAAP to get it to them, because they did not have a structure, they did not have a bank or account, so they did that through SAMAAP. The embassy, U.S. embassy, has also channeled funds through SAMAAP to get to some of our organizations, our Black organizations here. For example, a Black women group, and they had developed a program for training, and so the funds for that were channeled through SAMAAP for their assistance. So we do collaborative work with the organization.

TH: Could you point to one or two organizations that you work closely with the most?

AH: Well, there is APU. APU is the Afro-Asociación de Afro-Paramilitares Unidos, guess what? And many of the members in the APU organization are also members of SAMAAP, so we both support each other in their activities.

There is, well, like I said, there's these ones from Colón, FENCO, we do give them a lot of support. There is, well, as we come, these are the ones that we probably work closer with, part on a one-on-one. The young group also, they're the Jóvenes Paramilitares, we have done work with them directly.

So that's, we're not on a regular basis doing a collaborative thing. We come under the forum, and we do this big work within the community. The group in APU, they do a march now in May, especially for Black Ethnic Month.

And we'll probably be organizing their march, and we'll support them in that, so forth. So yes, we do work together. Okay.

TH: So I'm going to shift toward your personal experience being Afro-Panamanian. Also, I do want to ask, I was reviewing the census, and I know there's different ways to identify, so I was curious as to what you personally, I guess, refer to yourself as. Like, do you say West Indian? Do you say, like, no, there's different things for different people, so I wanted to know what you were.

AH: I actually class myself as West Indian descendant, yes. Okay, gotcha, gotcha. Afro-Antillean.

I maintain my own level of pride with my West Indian name, so I place myself in that category. I know others who simply call themselves Afro-Panamanian because they figure, well, that's making me Panamanian, but, you know, to each his own. I recognize myself as Black, and I still embrace my roots back into the Caribbean.

I'm very proud of those. Great, okay. Okay, and then I wanted to ask you, I mean, this is probably what we could talk about the whole time, but I just wanted to get a clear answer.

TH: How does your cultural history in Panama affect your overall pride? My cultural history?

AH: Well, it's, I'm sure it has played a role. Like I said, just mentioned, you know, I am proud of my West Indian roots, and one reason I'm involved with SAMAAP is because SAMAAP supports this museum, which is the only monument that really kind of lifts or highlights the West Indian contribution. And I believe that West Indians have had a significant contribution in Panama.

So that part of me, that part of my identification helps to nourish and fuel my own pride, and my identification also that I made. So I am proud of who we are, where we came from, and I'm proud of what Panama has become because of what we did. So that, you know, it fuels that.

My cultural identity, I am proud of being able to speak English and speak it well. So I hold on to that dearly. I ensure that my children also grew up being strong in speaking English, and that they would know part of their own roots as well.

So, yeah, I think that my entire cultural upbringing has been instrumental in me being who I am and how I maneuver myself within the context of a Black man within Panama.

TH: What specific or significant societal contribution has been the most impactful for you from a non-profit organization? Like, what is one that you can point to that you feel has helped the Afro-descendants in Panama the most?

AH: Probably the establishing by law of a recognized day for Blacks, you know, the Dia de la Etnia Negra, which these organizations campaigned for, in essence, and managed to get obtained from the government as by law, a day that has been declared to recognize and honor the Blacks within the country. And that has evolved so that it's no longer just a day, it's the entire month.

And over the last few years, you know, it overruns the month. And you're having that even maybe the week before, the last week of April, people are starting to do activities, and into June, they're still, because the month itself doesn't seem to be sufficient to take up all that they want to do. So I find that to be one of the big impacts in things that Black groups, and it's, you know, they're all non-profit groups that dare to do that.

I've managed to get that kind of recognition. There is campaigns that have been on the way over the last few years also regarding your braids. You know, you have your braids and your own Afro-identity look.

And there were strong opposition in many schools for the kids to come to school in braids. Girls could not, you know, they didn't want them to show up in braids in any way, and they'll have their hair probably straightened out and all these sort of things. And that has been, the campaign has managed now to, they got last year, the Ministry of Education, Minister of Education, actually published a decree declaring that no school should deny a child access because of this natural hair condition.

So these are, I find these to be significant achievements that have come about because of these organizations, all of the prof organizations work. Yeah, that makes sense. The same thing similar happened here as well, where it started as a day and then it was a week, and then it became a whole month.

Yeah. So I understand that. And as far as the braids, I would say that that was a thing kind of here too, but at least as of right now, it's more so acceptable.

TH: But I think still when people are going into professional situations, it's still seen as inappropriate or, you know, it's not professional enough and things of that nature. So a lot of times we have to either, you know, pin it back or, you know, straighten it, but I hate straightening my hair. So I don't do that anymore.

And, but yeah, that's definitely a very evident problem here. My mom for a long time actually wore hair. She had a perm for a very long time and I did not like it because it didn't show in her any curls.

And she always kept it like that because it would afford her more opportunities. So she just had to, I guess, assimilate in order to climb that social ladder. So, yeah.

AH: Well, I remember some years back when I was still in the canal and that being retired from the canal a little over eight years now. But in fact, it was way back when we were doing, probably just, they were doing the work for the expansion of the canal somewhere back there. And there was this delegation that came from the US.

I don't remember exactly why they came. They were doing some kind of research and investigations. And among the group, among the team that came, there was this one Black fellow who was from a university in the States.

And he had his hair in braids, you know? And I was impressed because here's, you know, he's in this professional rank, he's doing all that he's doing. And he had his proud braids and he was there and it didn't do as matter of fact for him, you know, as the way he walked with it. And I thought I was impressed with that because yes, it was at a time when, here especially, walking to your office and walking with braids would have been, you know, kind of frowned upon.

So I'm glad to see that it's been evolving over the years, the greater level of acceptance, folks to deal with that and deal with it with pride.

TH: Okay, so with being someone that's of West Indian descent in Panama, how does that influence your political participation? Has that made it stronger? Has it made you want to hold back at times? And if there's a whole journey of you being involved and less involved, that's okay too. Because I didn't start getting politically involved until I was, I think, about 18 years old. And so what has that been like for you?

AH: Well, you know, I was never really politically involved. Okay. And I think that it's now that I've become more involved in the organizations that have become more political conscious and more, I guess, more selective also in the political sense.

And looking at those who do what for the Black community. Yeah, my journey has grown and become stronger in my political analysis over the last few years than it was, you know, 30 years ago, definitely so. And I think also that especially as I was a part of the Panama Canal, which was a US run agency, I probably did not fully identify myself with the entire Panamanian political structure.

You know, I was kind of caught up in the work area and what that represented, that I didn't really do much of looking at it from the other angle, the other side of the fence. That has changed over the last few years. And I have become a lot more, studying a little more what's happening on the political side and certainly become more critical about what they do or don't do.

TH: Mm-hmm. So you said you worked on the Panama Canal for 46 years. I'm sorry, I didn't hear that one. You worked on the Panama Canal for 46 years, is that what you mentioned?

AH: A little over 46 years, yes. All right, and so that was, did you, I'm sure, I don't know if you did, but that was the gold and silver roll system that was still in place at that point, you know? No, no, the gold and silver roll was implemented back in the construction days of the Panama Canal. So, you know, we were brought in in 1904.

And it would have been very evident here even into the 50s. Since then, it has really disappeared. The gold and silver roll is no longer a part of the system here.

It's part of the casino and the museum. But it remains, of course, in the minds of some people who experienced it. I really never had to live in a gold and silver roll, except for that, I shouldn't say I never lived.

Because even, and I grew up in the Canal Zone. I grew up in the Canal Zone. But we grew up in segregated communities.

So that was part of the gold and silver roll conditioning. We were in, I grew up in Rainbow City. And so there were communities that were segregated for Blacks.

And there were communities that were segregated for the whites, the Americans. And I was definitely grew up in a segregated community, in a segregated school. So I inherited that, I experienced that as part of the entire structure from the gold and silver roll system.

TH: Okay. So you previously mentioned Black Ethnicity Month. And there's another celebration I wanted to speak about was the Colón Day.

There have been, I wasn't really sure what to make of the information I found online. Some people said, or sites talked about how Afro-Panamanians in the country and people within Colón helped, I guess, establish independence from Colombia. And then there are some sites that say that, well, it didn't really necessarily highlight the Black contribution to that event. So what does Colón Day mean to you specifically? And could you give me some understanding of what it really is?

AH: Okay, at the turn of the events in the independent period, I wouldn't say that there was a significant role play of Blacks versus anybody else. What made Colón Day stand out is Colón is a port city. And it had the railroad run from Colón to Panama City.

And so when Panama declared its independence, Colombia launched a naval vessel to arrive in Colón with the hopes of getting to Panama City to quench the independent movement. To do that, they would have had to catch the train. That would be the quickest way to get over to Panama City.

And in Colón, they blocked that. They blocked getting them access to get on a train, to get over there, to be able to get involved in quenching the movement. And that effectively consolidated the independent movement.

So that's why it's declared a Colón Day, because even though the declaration was made on the 3rd of November, the movement in Colón on the 5th helped to consolidate that independence. So they celebrate that day as well. So it was not back then, even though Colón and I don't want to say just Colón, because in fact, when you dig into the history of it, when Panama became independent from Spain, 1821, and they joined to Colombia, Panama was sort of not, it was relegated to the sidelines.

So even though it was a country, it was part of Colombia, they were not getting their fair share, just like folks in Colón today don't think they're getting their fair share from government. Panama as a whole was not getting its fair share. And Colombia looked at Panama as a Black province.

They were so, there was such a numerous amount of Black population in Panama that they looked at it as an entire Black province. And so it, you know, over a period of time, that's one of the reasons why it actually eventually made a declaration of independence, because with the canal, the canal construction, when the U.S. proposed the canal, Colombia rejected the proposal, and Panama had aspirations, they were going to change their luck, it was going to bring development into the country. And when Colombia rejected that, and Panama declared its independence, and of course, the U.S. government supported them, because they wanted to be able to build the canal.

So that consolidation in Colón was a part of a movement that was jointly supported by, you know, both the Blacks and everybody else that was part of Panama. Thank you, I'm glad I understand that part now. Okay.

TH: What role do you believe nonprofit organizations play in the journey toward more societal progress? I know that there may be different aspects in the community that play different roles, but how do nonprofits specifically, I guess, advance that social progress for Afro-descendants?

AH: Well, for one thing, one thing that I think the groups are doing, and they're doing it even as they do it individually, is they're trying to promote pride. They're trying to promote pride, they're trying to promote recognition of historical truth.

And so in doing so, you're educating the newer generations. And I believe that education is key, in the sense that if you know who you are, you know where you came from, gives you a better strength in standing up for where you want to go, what you want to achieve. And so I think that the nonprofit organizations at present have that type of commitment.

They're committed to building up that type of appreciation, pride and self-worth in the Black community. I think that is important for what we hope to aspire for future developments. So in the 21st century in particular, how would you say it's different from the changes that were made in the 20th century by nonprofit organizations? Okay, definitely in 21st century, in 2000 forward, I believe that they have become bolder in their clamoring, in their claim and their demands.

Prior to the 21st century, when they were just, the Black, well, there was a time when the clamor really in Panama, I can't say this from a scientific study point, but for a long time, Panama was unified in a clamor. And it was a clamor that both Blacks and the Mestizos joined in. That was a recovery of a territory.

And so as they joined in clamoring to the U.S. for the canal, when that finally occurred or when that finally was set in motion to occur. So you have a treaty that was signed in 1977 that began to take place in 1979. At that time, you have achieved a certain joint goal.

Now you start looking at the individual goals. And I think that the consciousness of the Black group started to grow more so at that point, because you're seeing that even as you clamor for these things, that you clamor for these rights, that you come together to fight for it. It's, let me jump back, it's like somewhat when the Blacks in the U.S. would have gone to fight in the Second World War or the First World War, whichever one.

And then they come back home and they find that, hey, nothing has changed for me, nothing is. So it sparks a different appreciation and a different way that you start to demand your own rights. I believe that this started to grow in Panama.

And so, for example, that's when you find SAMAAP becoming established in 1981, as an organization, and it's developed by folks who had already started some degree of militancy in claiming their own rights as Blacks. And so that begins, but it becomes perfected somewhat in the 21st century. It starts out in that later years of the 20th century, in the 70s or so, late 60s, that, and I think also as an offshoot of what was happening in the U.S., in the civil rights movement in the U.S. certainly had its impact here in Panama as well in developing Black consciousness down here.

And so as that, you know, they're developing later, but they're getting stronger as things grow. And so what you're finding now in the 21st century is a result of that growth and that strengthening that started in the latter part of the 20th century.

TH: And you referred to a treaty, what was this treaty that was a clamor for?

AH: The treaty that, well, you know, even after the U.S. signed a treaty to give the Panama Canal in 1904, that treaty gave the U.S. rights over the canal zone, the area where the canal was built, as if they were owners.

So they had their own governor, they had their own police force. They had, it was a no man's land. It was, they cut the country in half with that swath of canal zone and became a land apart that was almost prohibited entry for the Panamanians.

So there was resentment over the years and the local U.S. community, especially the white community that were establishing here, did not do anything to make that better. They were always sort of grating on the nerves of the others. And eventually it broke into a riot.

So while they were clamoring for recognition, the U.S. government in Washington would have said, for example, okay, we want to rectify some of these conditions and we want to allow the flag, both the U.S. flag and the Panamanian flag are to be flown within the canal zone. But the local U.S. residents here refused to let that happen. So some students from a high school in Panama went across to raise the Panamanian flag.

They took it. Parents and students took the flag and ripped it apart. A riot broke out.

At the end of the day, there were 21 Panamanians dead. There were some, maybe about six or seven U.S. dead. Panama broke relationships with U.S. and eventually they had to sit down and negotiate this treaty, which was eventually signed in 1977, declaring that at the end, by 1999, the territory known as the Canal Zone, which was a U.S. occupied territory, would be returned in full to Panama.

TH: So I know that the, you mentioned that a lot of Afro-Panamanians reside in Panama City, but a lot of, I think Colón is predominantly made up of Panamanians, correct? Or Afro-Panamanians. And so how, like, what is the difference as far as access to education or Afro pride and What is the difference between people who reside in like the urban areas, people who reside in the rural areas in terms of Afro pride and seeing the results of these nonprofit organizations?

AH: The Afro, there's a large Afro-Panamanian community in Colón in the rural section, especially the coast of Colón. And that's a rural side.

And what you're finding is education for them is just as marginalized as it is for the Indians... Or that may be other areas in focus. So these minority groups in the outlying rural areas all are suffering the same thing.

And which has also led over the few, over a few years for them to somewhat join forces. You'll find that both the Indians and the Black communities tend to support each other in their demands because they're both kind of suffering the same malice. So the education, what you're going to have is the schools may not be as equipped as the schools that are on the Panamanian side.

And that sort of thing happens. However, the driving force in education, personally, without having had a scientific study to it, I think a lot of it depends on the teacher. And you may have rural settings with few resources, but you may have a very devoted teacher.

And they manage to get the students to override their deficiencies in other areas. And so that can make a big difference. So you're finding that even though even though Colón predominantly has less, when the studies have been concluded, they find that you're having sometimes more, a higher percentage of students from these areas that are entering to university, even though they're entering and still coming out, not having a job,

but there are greater numbers in percentage wise that are actually applying to get education, trying to get ahead.

So the elementary schools, the high schools may have deficiencies, but it does not stymie, it does not cripple the ambition that comes up from these folks coming from that area.

TH: And then something I also found was there was a high percentage of Afro-Panamanian women that would have a lot of education. And as you said, didn't come out with jobs. So I'm just trying to wrap my head around where do these women go when they have all this knowledge and everything, do they just go back to a job that doesn't necessarily reflect what they can offer?

AH: Yes, that unfortunately is one of the realities and that's one of the demands that has been presented by the Black women group as they were putting the petition forward towards the president. Because they're looking at some of these situations that are real for them and demanding that there is be more equity in regards to how you open up opportunities for advancement. We have quite a number, in fact, we have a larger population of women in the university than we actually do for men.

It's maybe at least a two to one rate in universities. So there are a large number of women that are well-educated, well-prepared, but the opportunities for them is always somewhat limited. I think that may have been, oh, yes, okay.

TH: So I know that you all are stationed in an area in Panama. I forgot what the city was referred to. But I was wondering, as far as the global aspect of it, how are you guys working to, I guess, build that solidarity with other Black communities across the world? Across the world?

AH: I don't know that, well, we have, I know a few of our members in the forum, for example, that are, they're taking part in the conferences and the debates and so these open-air meeting areas where the Black needs are being discussed. That's being done at the UN level. That's being done in African forums.

I know one person that's participating in African forum. And so there is some degree of link and connection with the other areas of the world and what they're having. We have a lot that will link.

We have, we're part, in fact, some of it's part of a thing called ONETA, which is the Organización Negra Centroamericana. So it connects with all these others, Costa Rica and Colombia and Guatemala. They're Black groups all stretched along, are all coming under this one organization.

So we're a part of that. So we, they're working together with these groups and looking at what's happening here. How can we all work together to make it better for each one in the right? So there is some amount of cooperation.

TH: Okay. I think that was the majority of my questions. Did you want to leave me with anything else that possibly I need for research or that you think that would be essential to the project?

AH: Well, it's also part of an organization called the Museums Association of the Caribbean. And as a member of the Museums Association, and I should say this because SAMAAP is a support organization. We don't own the museum. The museum is owned by the government.

We've been involved in over the years with this organization in Caribbean, which promotes museums and promotes the strength and the value of museums. And they also do a sort of collaborative work amongst them. They rotate their meetings every year in all the Caribbean countries.

And this year, we have planned to have them accept to have their conference in Panama. So they're coming to Panama in November. SAMAAP is coordinating that event here in Panama.

And we're confident that this is going to give some exposure to Panama, of course, in what it's doing. But it's also going to strengthen what a Black organization is doing within context of showcasing the country to the world. So it is not one of the other groups that is bringing this.

It's a Black organization and one of the small NGOs. So I think as we move forward, we're hoping that this will consolidate. I am one of the meetings that I'm taking part in now, at 12:30, the government has opened up a space, a commission to deal with what they call the Encuentro Nacional de Culturas. It's the national culture meeting or coming together. And so it's a startup of looking at how to establish an appreciation for the diversity of culture within the country.

And they have captured folks from the organization. They've captured me. So I'm going to be a part of this development.

And so slowly you're getting a space where you have more, you have an opportunity to vocalize your views, vocalize your demands, you know, and we're getting more participations in a sense. And I think this is something that you're seeing evolving over the last few years within Panama. They're opening up more spaces for that.

So I congratulate you. Closing, I want to congratulate you for your interest and your reaching out. And I hope that this will eventually lead to your visit to Panama.

TH: I hope so. Yeah, that's the goal. Yes, we need to consolidate that.

We need to plan that so that you're here at one of these festive times, whether it's in May or when it's in February, when some of this happens, it's fair. One of these moments, even if you came down in November, when we're having a conference, you're going to plan

around one of those details so you can be here. I have been contacted by a group, a Black caucus group, and they're coming into Panama now in May.

And they'll be meeting with us as well. And so somehow, you know, you're starting to evolve, you're starting to, one of the things that I did, becoming president, is we developed a strategic plan for Panama for summer. And we have put it on the web.

So I think that has allowed a lot more folks to find us, see us, know what we're all about. And they're making contact. And as they make contact, you know, they're reaching out for more exposition to what's happening here.

So this is some of the results, I guess, of the 21st century as these new areas of these platforms allow for that type of connection. Folks, I think your even reaching out is part of that, is a result, I think, of that.

TH: Yeah, I honestly don't know how I came to find SAMAAP or just my overall research topic. I think overall, I just really like to look at Black communities within Latin America. I always find that kind of intersection really interesting for me. So yeah, I was happy that, I think I originally found you guys on the Panama Afro website. And it was all these different organizations and everything. And you guys were one of the only ones that had an established website, email, things of that nature. So that's how I came to speak with you today.

AH: Good, that's great. Glad you did, glad we connected. Yeah, thank you so much for speaking with me. I look forward to that developing even stronger. Yes, I will look forward to that. I wish you much success with your work and your thesis.

TH: Thank you so much. Have a great day. I appreciate it all.

Red de Jóvenes Panameños/Afro Panamanian Youth Network Interview

This interview was conducted in both English and Spanish, via Zoom, also March 20, 2024. The italicized sentences are my personal interpretation of the discussion conducted in Spanish. I am an intermediate Spanish speaker.

TH: Trinity Henderson

SC: Sebastián Cabal (pseudonym), organization member from the Afro Panamanian Youth Network

TH: Hello, how are you? Hello, can you hear me? Yes, and you? I can hear you, yeah. Okay, perfect. Okay, nice.

SC: Okay, so nice to meet you. My name is Trinity. Hello, my name is Sebastián.

TH: Yes, yes. Okay, so are you comfortable speaking in a little bit of English or do you want to do the whole interview in Spanish?

SC: We can do a little bit of English. Okay, okay.

TH: Okay, so how old are you?

SC: 28, okay. 29, sorry.

TH: So, the first question I wanted to ask was, how does your cultural history in Panama affect your pride as someone that's an African descendant in Panama? Wait, let me, like, I'm going to say this in Spanish too. Okay. *How does your cultural history in Panama affect your pride as someone that's an African descendant in Panama?*

SC: *Um, I think it's a little bad, because in Panama, I think, I don't think, the truth is that African people contribute a lot, whether it's economic development, social development, cultural, um, if you think about it, we are a Latin American country, but our culture is Caribbean. Mm-hmm. Because, um, the majority of African people come from Trinidad and Tobago, or Barbados, or Jamaica.*

Now, if this is something positive, um, unfortunately, no, it's not like that, because in Panama, there's a very, very hidden racism, right? There's a very hidden racism, and it's in all the institutions. Now, it's here, in these institutions, so you have to point it out so that it's seen. It's not like the type of racism that existed in South Africa, which was like apartheid.

Mm-hmm. It's not like it's hidden. There used to be an apartheid in Panama, but it was brought in by the gringos, well, the North Americans. It exists exactly in the Canary Islands.

TH: Okay, what would you say is the most, or, yes, the most significant or impactful thing that your organization has done?

SC: Well, I had, like, four or five years in my organization. The most impactful thing, wow, is that we've done a lot, like, we do a lot, so I had to choose, like, we, like, impactful, I don't know, actually. Like, right now, we're making, like, a campaign about the hair, because in Panama, a couple years ago, the kids, could not enter school with braids. So, the last year, the government made a law. So, I think that, at least, that's one of the most important things we've done, like, to try to get the kids to receive their education, which is a human right, and to practice their culture or their religion, I don't know, an environment for that.

TH: Yeah, I saw on you all's Facebook that it was, like, these protests or something. And you had signs that said, mi pelo es adecuado, I think, it's, like, appropriate and stuff. Yeah, I saw those demonstrations, that was really cool.

SC: We do that here a lot, too, as well, but more so, it's focused on, like, you know, like, Black Lives Matter and police and stuff like that. Okay.

TH: Alright, can you describe how your experience as someone that's Afro-Panamanian has affected your, I guess, like, social participation and, like, being involved in the community?

¿Puedes describir tu experiencia como Afro-Panameno y cómo influye en tu participación social o política?

SC: It's very, very hard, because in Panama, we have, like, a political class, and it's really close. So, it's, like, very hard for us to make a space in, well, in spaces where, where the, how you say, is very difficult for Afro Panamanians to enter spaces where they take or strong political opinions.

If you see, like, we have, like, ministers, you know, like, so everyone is, like, you never see, like, an Afro-Panamanian minister. Just one time. So, it's a little hard to integrate into political spaces where there make radical decisions or that can change ours, its too closed.

This, as Afro-Panamanians, we have to enter almost with bad force. I mean, it makes a lot of impact, it walks a lot, this one, I talk a lot to Members, at least. To give you an example, an example, we have a secretariat for Afro-Panamanians, a secretariat for Afro-Panamanians, and that space took, that space, that idea began in 2007.

And this year was that it was given complete independence. I mean, imagine, it has passed, we are going to regulate it almost 20 years, so that an office for afro-descendant affairs was created. It is the only space we have.

TH: That's like the, or it was called like the SENADAP, like S-E-N-A-D-A-P.

SC: *Yes, exactly, exactly, it was almost 20 years. Now, when we make the comparison with Indigenous people, the Indigenous are everywhere.*

Indigenous people have a space in the Ministry of Health, they have a space in IFARU, which is basically like a government institution that is responsible for giving scholarships. Now, I have to say, we are even kicked out of the spaces. There are scholarships that are given to us exclusively to people who do not have access to, people who are poor, because we do not have much money, we do not have many possibilities in life, which are usually more Afro-Panamanians in Panama.

So, those scholarships are from the World Bank, if I'm not mistaken, from the Inter-American Bank. Now, scholarships exist, and they are given to us, the Indigenous. There is a condition, because already later they made a condition, that one needed a godfather, that basically was like the guarantor.

Two godparents who were like your guarantors. Now, if I am a person who is Afro-Panamanian, who does not have many resources, I cannot do that scholarship, because I do not have sponsors, because I do not have guarantors. Because usually people in my social circle are people who earn minimum wage. Now, the Indigenous people are not asked for that. Now, what happens? Most scholarships are left to people who are close to politicians, the truth is. That's another problem with Panama.

Now, the Indigenous people are not asked for that. Now, what happens? Most scholarships are left to people who are close to politicians, the truth is. That's another problem with Panama. Institutions are too politicized. So, one must enter there. One must receive a benefit from the very institution that, in theory, is created for that.

That's like your goal, to benefit low-income people or to work for citizens who need certain benefits. But it is not so. Well, the year passed a scandal with that. And that has always been the case, because institutions are too politicized, most of the benefits come from people in political parties.

And that's always been the case, because the institutions are too politicized, most of the benefits go to people from the political parties.

TH: Well, then, my next question was... What do cultural celebrations like Black Ethnicity Month or Black Ethnicity Day mean to you?

SC: For me, it's a little difficult question. Because it is good and bad. *Its pretty okay, because we have a space for us. However, it is only a month in reality.*

TH: So, it is bad because the people that are Black only have one month. That is it.

SC: *It's like... Let's say he's like an engineer. It's pretty good to be a Black engineer. But the rest of the year is pretty bad. We have a parade and you can wear your clothes with Black designs, African designs. You can go to work, to school, to any place, but after this month, you can not do that. You would have to straighten your hair.*

SC: *That's why it's a bit tricky, because it's only a month. And for me that is not enough.*

TH: Yes, it's not enough for us either. I believe the same. For us (African Americans) it started as a day, then it became a week and then it became a month.

TH: How do specifically nonprofit organizations specifically help facilitate the social progress of Afro Panamanians in Panama? Can you see an impact in the community? How do you think the impact was affected by your nonprofit organization?

SC: *Yes, a little. I am going to speak about my personal experience. In the community, in my 29 years, there has not been change.*

There are too many times that show statistics where everything is fine in Panama. They say, no, Panama is a high-income country, which is true. But the truth is, we are one of the most unequal countries in Latin America. So there is an economic, social, and political structure that makes most of the money entering Panama not go above. The social structure is a kind of pyramid.

So most of the money that goes into the tip of the pyramid, say, high-class people, gets fixed a little bit, gets fixed for middle-class people a little, and the lower-class people get like pennies. So I think that many more advocacy projects are needed. I also know that, I do not know, the IMF or the UN Community can intervene directly in government policies.

But I think they should work a little more with social organizations, with civil societies, with civil society organizations, because it is very tricky. And a few months ago, I found out, because it seems that multinationals have inclusion departments. I did not know.

Multinationals have inclusion departments. So, when multinationals arrive in Panama, they go directly to the Ministry of Economy and Finance, obviously. To know, I imagine what are the requirements for you to open a multinational in Panama, X, Y and Z. And there is a person who is in charge of doing business there, then, of a high-ranking public official.

So when companies ask you, hey, here in Panama there is inequality or there are problems of inclusion, or there are human rights problems, the person says no, it does not exist. Then the department grabs it and closes it. And it's a department that's needed a lot, because most, what's this called? When you go to companies, most senior positions, managers, often most of the staff are not up to the level.

I mean, you know, go to people, let's say it that, see people who are clear, see people who are clear, with yellow hair, with red hair. But you don't see many Black people in offices, like a little weird. I think I do a little, but I hope to answer your question.

TH: So, even if you haven't seen the changes in the last 29 years of your life, would you say it's an improvement of the 20th century?

SC: *No, no, it is the same. We have a couple of changes in reality. I only had 5 years in the movement, but we have changes, yes, but not like... As fundamental changes, no. Yes, like we don't have equality. We don't have that right now.*

TH: OK, I wanted to ask about inclusive social law, I think it was last year. Is that right?

SC: *At the beginning of the year, we give the government a program. From the Senate. And organizations.*

In this program, we want to make sure that different aspects that the Afro-Panamanian community needs are included in the program. Whether it's housing, health, education, work. That sort of thing.

A Law...we had on inclusion, a decree on hair. Independence of the Senate. Now the Senate is an independent institution. But already, those are the two we had. The other is a program that as far as I know is not mandatory compliance.

SC: *Our organization is called the Afro Panamanian Youth Network, Red de Jóvenes Afro-Panameños. Basically, we provide spaces. We have a space where we help all the Afro Panamanian organizations in their early stages.*

We have already worked with other Afro-Panamanian organizations that are more open. Like the APU. And there is another one... There are quite a few Afro-Panamanian organizations with which we have worked a little bit of our hands. Well, but most, that is, that is something else, another important aspect of Afro-Panamanian organizations, most Afro-Panamanian organizations are older people. That is, if you see the meetings, only a few are young. There are very few young people aged 18, 20, 30. Most people are 40, 50, 60 years.

SC: *Our organization is a center. We are like a space for all the other Afro-Panamanian organizations.*

It is always better to work in an organized and focused way. It is okay that there are many organizations and that they pursue different goals, but at the end of the day, we always pursue certain central objectives that are the same.

TH: Is your organization predominantly female?

SC: No, it is *diverse and mixed*. *We have people from all of the provinces. Men, women, etc.*

TH: How do they identify themselves?

SC: *People identify themselves in different ways. I do not know. There are people from a lot of different organizations and different age groups.*

TH: That was all. I appreciate you speaking with me today.

SC: Thank you.