

Interview with Afro-Peruvian Activist Jorge Ramírez

Lily Céspedes and Jorge Ramírez

“We want win respect for our rights and to have an important political presence”

Afro-Peruvians continue to struggle for the recognition of their rights, respect for their culture and to an education that takes their identity into account. Of the 28 million Peruvians, just 10 percent are estimated to be Afro-descendants, most of whom live along the coast. Jorge Ramírez, president of the Black Association for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights, or ASONEDH, and of the National Network of African Diaspora in Peru (Afro-Peruvian Network) spoke with Latin-American Press collaborator Lily Céspedes about Peru’s black movement.

What is the history of Afro-Peruvian organizations? When did they come about and why?

Starting in 1950 various organizing processes began in Peru to fight discrimination and to strengthen our identity and self-esteem. During the 1950s and 60s, there were some important experiences. The first was the Cumananá group, led by siblings Victoria and Nicomedes Santa Cruz. They carried out an important work by compiling and disseminating Afro-Peruvian culture’s contributions, using black Peruvian dance, music, theater and song.

In the 1960s the Melamodernos formed, led by lawyer Juan Tasayco, who, inspired by the civil rights movements in the United States, proposed demanding our civil and social rights as citizens in Peru. Tasayco was one of the pioneers of the sentiment of citizenship that today motivates many Afro-Peruvian organizations.

In 1972, the Black Youth Cultural Association was created. In 1983, the Afro-Peruvian Research Institute emerged, through which came about experiences of participatory research,

above all in the rural communities of the southern coast of the country, affirming their identity, history and contributions. This conscience of blackness was a fundamental factor in the later formation of autonomous organization experiences by these residents.

In 1986, the Francisco Congo black movement was founded, which does grassroots work, with experiences in training for small business development and the promotion of Afro-Peruvian women. In 1990, the Black Human Rights Movement was founded, now the Black Association for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights, which seeks to contribute to the development of conscience, legal aid, respect for fundamental rights for Afro-Peruvians and fight against racism.

Later came others such as the Black Peruvian Women's Development Center, the Ebony World Youth Association, Cimarrones, Lundu, the Pluriethnic Association for Community and Social Development, the Center for Ethnic Development, Todas las Sangres ["All Bloods"], Orgullo Negro ["Black Pride"], Mama Ine, the Association for the Development of Afro-Callao People, the Millenium Theatre, Black Woman and Development, Afro Pastoral and the National Afro-Peruvian Movement.

What are the demands of the Afro-Peruvian movement?

Under the issue of health care is the [distribution of] information about sickle-cell anemia as an illness particular to Afro-descendants. In citizens' participation there is citizen-bound [or – oriented] education, and in politics, we're seeking politically inclusive participation. We want to win the respect of our rights and to have an important political presence. In addition, ASONEDH is dedicated to legal defense in cases of manifestations of racist or discriminatory attitudes. We are pushing for the state to launch education programs with an identity element and for Congress to write stronger laws against discrimination.

What has the Afro-Peruvian Network achieved in the two years since it was created?

It has contributed to strengthening the sensitization process through central government and local regional government bodies (Ica, Metropolitan Lima, the Lima provinces, Arequipa, Tacna, Huaraz, Callao, Lambayeque and Tarma), being the regions where ASONEDH's work is concentrated, and as a result, we have the recognition, support and participation of different rural Afro-Peruvian organizations and of local authorities.

The process of improving the work of 50 rural Afro-Peruvian leaders to help them promote democracy and governance has continued.

We promoted the participation of women through democratic processes and of 40 rural Afro-Peruvian organizations around the country. We have also incorporated young people on the boards of directors of different rural Afro-Peruvian organizations.

Local authorities, such as mayors, city councilors, district governors, school principals and other social and political actors have been incorporated into Afro-Peruvian organizations from their towns and into the Afro-Peruvian Network.

We also promoted the participation of seven Afro-Peruvian leaders of the communities and rural organizations in the last municipal elections [in July 2007] as candidates to mayoral offices, of which a member of the Afro-Peruvian Network was elected mayor for the Malacasi district in Piura.

Other leaders of rural Afro-Peruvian organizations hold public positions in their respective districts, such as justices of the peace, governors, lieutenant governors and municipal employees.

What do you take from the Afro-descendant organizations of Colombia or Ecuador? Are there any plans to work together?

There are quotas in place for the election of Afro-Colombian lawmakers, and Afro-Ecuadorian organizations have joined together. We're currently working on forming the Network of Afro-Descendent Organizations of the Andean Region. — *Latin-American Press*.