

**UNIVERSITY OF THE AUTHONOMOUS REGIONS OF THE  
CARIBBEAN COAST OF NICARAGUA  
URACCAN-Bluefields**

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**Systematization of URACCAN'S Afro Commission Experience:**

*On the pathway to transforming URACCAN*

*Bluefields into a Black Studies campus*

**2010-2017**

Bluefields, South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region.

February 2018.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The following systematization of the Afro Commission takes a retrospective look to analyze what have been done, which have been the learning experiences and where do we head forward. It takes a critical approach into understanding what it means to center blackness as a central theme of work and discussion at the University of the Autonomous Regions of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua (URACCAN), which is an institution that defines itself as communitarian and intercultural. The University authorities considered it appropriate to establish the Afro Commission in the Bluefields campus so that the university will better serve the Afro-descendant communities of the Coast. This constitutes the first step into converting this site into a Black Studies campus.

Seven years after the establishment of the Afro Commission, authorities and members of the commission reflected on the accomplishment and challenges confronted. This retrospective process reveals the emotional weight triggered on members of the commission who have been committed to the task of centering blackness and black issues in a multicultural site. At the beginning no one was certain of which is the path to follow. Nevertheless, through various attempts of creating, failure and rebuilding gave shape to what is today the Afro Commission.

This systematization centers on the experiences of the Afro Commission mainly because, what at first was thought to be a relatively easy task, evolved into challenges and oppositions. It was considered this way because in an intercultural context supposedly, "*racism doesn't exist*," the Commission would be fully supported by all the ethnics groups. Obviously, this was an erroneous assumption. Nevertheless, each experience and lesson has a valuable impact on members of the commission at a personal and collective level. And it serves to establish a better positioning of those who decided to remain committed to the Afro Commission and are convinced that Black Studies must be a priority at URACCAN Bluefields' campus

## **II. THE PROCESS OF SYSTEMATIZATION**

This systematization was conducted on URACCAN's campus located in the city of Bluefields on the southeast Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua. It was implemented from a qualitative perspective, recounting the works and actions developed by the Afro Commission since it was established in 2010, as well as the feelings and experiences of its members while doing the labor of centering Blackness as the key factor of their work, and initiated the process of transforming this site to be specialized in Black Studies. Data was collected through In-depth interviews with university authorities and leadership of the Afro Commission, and a focus group with members of the same. A semi-structured questionnaire was designed specifically to reconstruct the work that has been developed, and to identify their learning experiences. Literature review was used to examine the Commission's annual strategic plans, budget and accomplishment. Content analysis, and discourse analysis were implemented to examine the data.

## **III. THE FRAMEWORK OF THE SYSTEMATIZATION**

### **A. Objective**

To systematize URACCAN's Afro Commission work and experience on the path of converting URACCAN Bluefields in to Black studies specialized campus.

### **B. Object**

To analyze the work and experiences developed by URACCAN's Afro-Commission in order to establish future plans and projections toward the establishment of a Black studies in Bluefields campus.

### **C. Axis**

1. Philosophical framework for the creation of the Afro Commission
2. Strategic actions developed by the Afro Commission
3. Achievements and Challenges
4. Future projections

#### IV. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua has a long-standing experience of racial discrimination and oppression, which is manifested in multi-layered ways. It is a site in which people of diverse culture and ethnicity converge, making of it a multicultural and plurilingual area in which the Mestizos have become the predominant population over the indigenous communities of the Miskito, Ulwa, Rama, also over the Afro-descendant Creoles and Garifuna peoples. In the 1860's enslaved African was brought to these shores by the British to work most of all on sugar and Indigo plantations. At the time, this zone was known as the Mosquitia Kingdom. After years of struggles and resistance, in 1841 slavery was abolished, the newly free blacks constituted the Creole community established in Corn Island, Pearl Lagoon and Bluefields (Gordon E. 1998). After the abolition of slavery in the West Indies, a wave of migration occurred from the Caribbean Islands to the Caribbean Coasts of Central America in Nicaragua, these migrants became members of the Creole Community (Gordon E. 1998; Goett J. 2017). Further on in the eighteenth century, the Garifuna people, whose ancestry can be traced to Africans mixed with Carib Indians and Arawak Indians of Saint Vincent Island arrived to Central America Caribbean shores. In Nicaragua, they settled communities in Orinoco, La Fe, San Vicente, Brown Bank and Justo Point, all located in the Pearl Lagoon municipality (Christie, P., Bradford, D., & Garth, R. 2000). However, today they are spread throughout Bluefields as well.

For Creoles, the abolition of slavery marked an important moment. They were able to constitute their own society and to occupy important position in the government of the Mosquitia. Nevertheless, the enforced military annexation of the Mosquitia Kingdom to the state of Nicaragua in 1894, brought Black and Indigenous people into a majority Mestizo nation where they lost self-government, and were obligated to occupy a low social status. The use of the English language or any native language was prohibited and education in the Spanish language was imposed. The implementation of a "*mestizaje*" ideology by the state of Nicaragua contributed to the invisibilization and/or erasure of Afro descendant and Indigenous Identity, culture and history (Gordon E. 1998); in response, for centuries, Black and

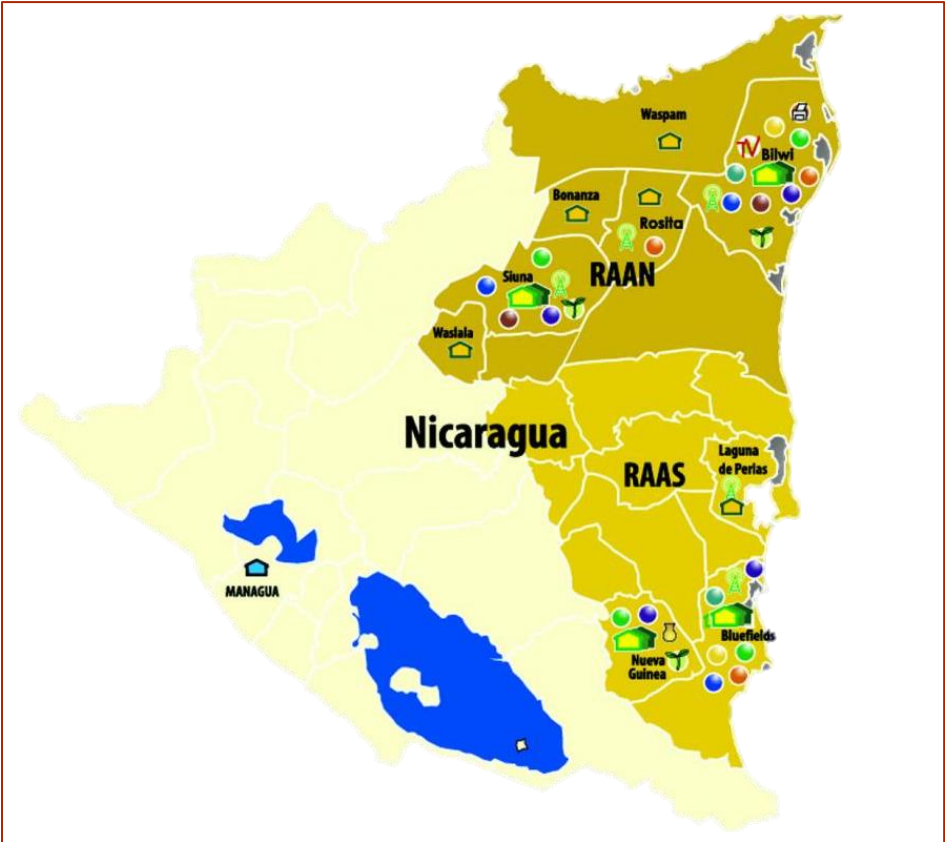
Indigenous have had to resist in order to maintaining and rescuing their ethnic and cultural identity.

Black leaders and intellectuals of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua were convinced that in order to make visible and maintain their ethnic and cultural identity, two main things had to be accomplished; first, to establish an autonomous government and secondly to launch a local university. With the approval of the Autonomic Regime (Law 28) in 1987, Nicaragua transition from being a Mestizo nation to a “*Multicultural state*” (Hooker 2005) after years of attempts, in 1992 the Consejo Nacional de Universidades (CNU) authorized the establishment of the Universidad de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe Nicaragüense (The University of the Autonomous Region of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua), well known as URACCAN. Nevertheless, due to financial and organizational issues, URACCAN opened its doors in March of 1995 in Bilwi, Las Minas (Siuna), and Bluefields. This campus extended its work to Nueva Guinea and in 2001 it officially became another campus of the Southern Autonomous Region (URACCAN 2008).

Overall, URACCAN is a project that responds to the geographical, socio-cultural, political, economic and environmental particularities of the region by adopting a unique model, framed under the paradigm of Community and Intercultural University (URACCAN 2008). Over the years, it has been committed to the strengthening of the autonomic regime, and preparing professional that would contribute to the local economic and cultural development of the region. Nevertheless, as noted by Morris (2010), the university confronts various struggles towards creating effective conditions to assure that Afro descendant are being fully benefited by this project of higher education envisioned by Black leaders. For this reason, one of the strategies proposed by members of the University Association (constituted mainly by the founders of the university) is to “*convert URACCAN Bluefields into a campus specialized in Afro-descendant studies.*” This motion was approved by the University council (maximum authorities) in March of 2009.

As a result of the approval to convert the Bluefields campus to be specialized in Afro-descendant studies/Black studies, the main question that have emerge is What does it really mean to be specialized in Black studies? According to Miriam

Hooker (Member of URACCAN association), URACCAN was conceived with the idea of establishing four campuses, and each would focus “specifically to the history, culture, and politics of the cultural/racial groups native to the region; for example, the Bilwi campus would focus on Indigenous, specifically Miskito peoples, while the Siuna campus would focus on the culture of the Mayagna peoples. The Bluefields campus would be an Afro-descendant studies campus or at the very least have an Afro-descendant research institute or cultural center, and Nueva Guinea, could focus on Mestizo’s culture.” From this perspective URACCAN would be able to fulfill its mission as a multiethnic community university committed to building the intellectual capital of the various ethnic groups living on the Caribbean Coast. (Morris 2010)



URACCAN’s campuses

As explained by Morris (2010), who developed a report called “Reflecting on the Future of Higher Education in the Autonomous Regions” and spent a fair amount of time in conversations with university leaders, the project of converting URACCAN Bluefields to be specialized in Black studies, is an initiative that constitutes another

form of resistance to anti-Black racism. It aims to transform the entire curriculum of this campus in order to ensure that courses are taught, and researches are developed within a black studies framework. Consequently, it seeks to *“make visible and revitalize the culture, histories and cosmovision of Afro-descendant peoples from Nicaragua and the Diaspora, to promote the full exercise of their human and autonomous rights [within the framework of regional autonomy], and their insertion into and active participation in processes of development with identity.”*

In Nicaragua and Central America, URACCAN has being the only institution of higher education that has taken this initiative and particular commitment. The first step taken in order to transform its Bluefields campus to be specialized in Black studies was the establishment of the Afro Commission in 2010. This commission is integrated by Black faculty members and administrative staff that have undertaken various actions in order to make known the history of Black people on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua, and to make visible its Black heritage.

## **V. RECOVERED HISTORY**

### **V.1 The constitution of the Afro Commission**

In an interview, Master Alta Hooker Blandford, rector of the university, explained that since the URACCAN was founded in 1995, most of its intervention has been with indigenous and Mestizo (Indio-Hispano) communities. She continued to clarify that *“previous analysis has demonstrated that Bilwi campus have mostly worked with the Miskito people. Siuna campus is organized mainly around Mestizos and secondly attends the Mayagna and Nueva Guinea works primarily with Mestizo. Sadly, in Bluefields, the area in which most Black people reside, we have not been working with the Afro descendant people and organizations. Our statistic reveals a low percentage of Creole and Garifuna access to the university and the rate of drop-outs is also alarming. Unfortunately, in this area, which is known as the cradle of black people, Mestizos have become majority and once again are mostly benefited.”*

Hooker also emphasized that although URACCAN was a project promoted in joint work between Blacks and Indigenous people, in its majority



it was founded by Black people, and now, for various reasons the Black community are the least benefited. This situation brought the university authorities to implement actions with the intention to work directly with the Black and for their community. As part of this initiative, the Afro Commission was established in the Bluefields' campus. In the words of Hooker, *"the Afro Commission was created with the intention of revitalizing the Afro descendant culture, to make visible their good practices along with their contribution to the development of the Caribbean Coast."* From her perspective, Black people work and contributions usually goes unrecognized and invisibilized. Therefore, it is an institutional commitment to empower Black people and make their work and history visible. The establishment of the Afro commission in Bluefields was a mandate by the University Council (2009/2010), which is the maximum authority of the university. In the words of Alta Hooker, the establishment of the commission is an initiative into converting the Bluefields campus to be specialized in Black Studies, signifying that this campus will focus their research on Black issues, to rescue the history, spiritual and traditional practices of the Black community.

In an interview, Master Grace Kelly, who is the coordinator of the Instituto de Medicina Tradicional y Desarrollo Comunitario (IMTRADEC), and assigned coordinator of the Afro Commission, reaffirms that the Afro Commission was established by a mandate of the university's maximum authorities during Master Zarifeth Bolaños last term as vice-rector. Kelly explained that the Afro Commission was established in Bluefields campus simply because "Bluefields, Pearl Lagoon and Corn Island are the crib of Black people in Nicaragua." With no further debate, under the notions "Nobody but Afro-descendants knows better the needs of the Afro-descendants" the university authorities of the Bluefields Campus (95% Mestizos) decided that members of the Afro commission would be integrated by administrative staff and faculty members belonging to the Creole and Garifuna ethnic groups (period). It was clear then that working closely with Black people was a task of Black people. Members of the Commission expressed that at the beginning they were highly offended by the decision taken by the authorities of excluding Mestizos and Indigenous from the commission especially because Black workers have work

shoulder to shoulder with Indigenous and Mestizos, and for Indigenous and Mestizos. And now that the main focus was being requested for Black people, it seems to be that they were not willing to do the same.

In an interview, a member of the Commission recalls that in 2009, an academic area was assigned to organize a lecture on Slavery on the Mosquitia, at that time, the Academic Dean (a Mestiza) expressed her discontent with this assignment by expressing that the *“Black workers of the university should be the ones organizing the event that had to do with Black people, and not the Mestizos.”* After a profound analysis, those Black workers who decided to be members of the Afro Commission understood that no other people or group would be willing to take up the burden of the Black people. Consequently, they embraced the idea of *“Nobody but Afro-descendants knows better the needs of Afro-descendants.”* The Afro Commission became then, a unique collective of Black professional working on behalf of Black people.

In a Focus group, members of the commission reflected that, *“we no mind if Mestizos or Indigenous want to become members of the Afro Commission, but so far, them no show any interest. Them look on we with suspicions, like if we planning something against them. One thing we know, if them eva integrate the Afro Commission, Black people have to remain in the leadership position and decide which actions we going develop. We can’t make them coming and take ova”*; with that been said, all other ethnic groups are welcome to support the vision and mission of the Afro Commission.

**V.2. Functions of the Afro Commission**

Grace Kelly, who is the coordinator of the Afro Commission, explained that the commission has the responsibility of *“guaranteeing a space in which the Afro-descendant or Black people on the Coast could be able to strengthen each other, to rescue their history, spirituality, and lifestyle. To develop research on specific issues affecting the Black community, and establishing strategies that would contribute to solving these problems as well.”* In a focus group, members of the Afro Commission explained that *“there was a time when Black people were the majority in Bluefields.*

*through the years the Indians (Mestizos or Indio-Hispano) became the majority, they come and take over, and now we Black people are minority,”* for this reason, they continue to elucidate, *“it is important for the university to work closely with the Black community, as minority we have specific problems that nobody going come and solve for us. We have to do it by ourselves.”* During this discussion session, it was clear that one of their main issues of concern is the low presence of Black students and Black professionals in the university.

In the year 2011, the Afro Commission elaborated a framework document in which they defined the purposes and actions of the commission. They established that *“Taking into account that most of the Afro-descendant populations in Nicaragua inhabit the Southern Autonomous Caribbean Region, the URACCAN campus located in Bluefields commits itself to design a special program with a proper approach toward Black people that would ensure their development with identity.”* Additionally, the document explains, *“this accompaniment must take place in a comprehensive and coherent manner and with a long-term vision. The proclamation of 2011 as the International Year of Afro-descendant People by the United Nations is another factor that should serve to generate processes of reflection on the realities of Black people and on the immediate actions that can be promoted by URACCAN.”* It is remarkable that the proclamation of 2011 as the "International Year of Afro-descendant People" served as inspiration for the Afro Commission to organize itself and take actions. Furthermore, the proclamation of the “Decade of Afro-descendant people” (2012-2025) encouraged the Afro commission to be more intentional in making the project of the Black studies campus a reality.

Overall, the Afro Commission established two general objectives to frame their work: First, to design an advocacy program that guarantees the accompaniment of the Afro-descendant people in the rescue, promotion, and dissemination of their culture and ethnic identity. And secondly, to promote accompaniment processes for students of Afro descendant (at URACCAN) that would allow them to improve their academic performance. Yearly, the afro commission elaborates their annual strategic plan based on the main issues they have been able to identify. These are language; self-esteem; lack of knowledge of the history of Black people, spirituality,

and traditional healing; and poor leadership. To respond to these issues, the Afro commission established their strategic actions in Spanish language courses (with an emphasis in communication, writing, and analytical reading). Motivational session for personal development, lectures, workshops on the History of the Caribbean Coast and the Diaspora, Black Spirituality, Traditional Healing and Assertive Leadership.

At a local level the Afro Commission intends to work along with the Ethnic Commission of the Regional Council, Bluefields Creole Communal Board, JEHN-CEDEHCA, Network of Afro Women and the Diaspora, Black Central American Organization (ONECA) (URACCAN 2011).



Afro-Commission planning session

### V.3 Afro Commission Activities Time line

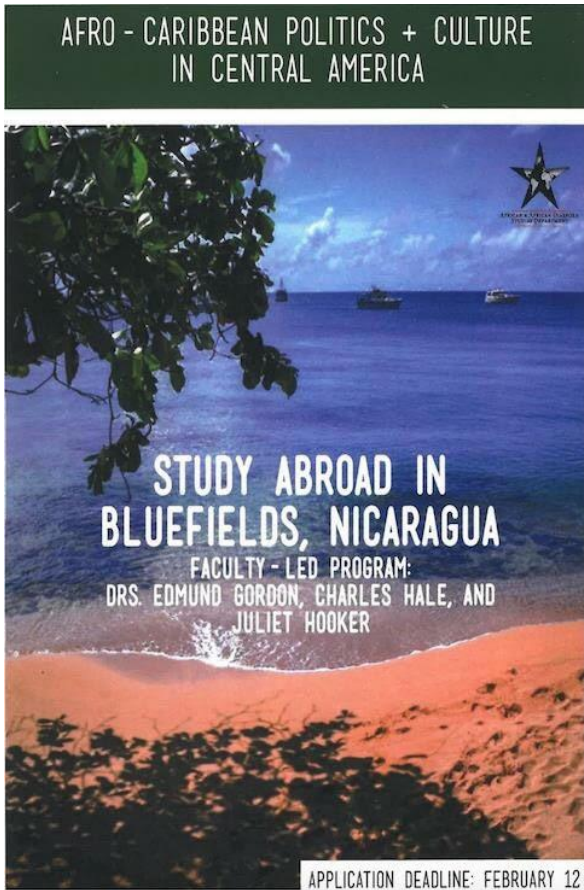
The following chart provides a list of major activities that the Afro Commission have been able to develop from 2011 through 2017.

Month/year	Activity	Sponsor
July-August 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016 & 2017.	Abroad course in Afro-Caribbean Politics and Culture in Central America	ADDS-UT
November 2011 & 2012	Workshop on Black Women and Economic Sustainability.	CLAI
March 2012	Hosting Ph.D. Selwyn Cudjoe, And Ph.D. Dawn Duke.  Lectures and talks on Trinidad and Tobago: Fifty Years After Independence. Black Family Values; Black & Education	URACCAN
2013	Certified Course on History of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua	US Embassy
2013	Lecture on Slavery on the Mosquitia in commemoration Commemoration of the Abolition of Slavery on the Mosquitia (August 10th 1841).  Speaker: PhD. Edmund T. Gordon	URACCAN
2013	Fundraising in Memory of Dr. Henningston Omeir	URACCAN
2014, 2015, 2016 & 2017	Lecture on Slavery on the Mosquitia in commemoration of the Abolition of Slavery on the Mosquitia (August 10th 1841).  Speaker: PhD. Juliet Hooker.	URACCAN
2015	Black Heritage Week in commemoration of the Abolition of Slavery on the Mosquitia (August 10th 1841).	URACCAN
2015	Afro Heritage Month consultation and approval	URACCAN & Ethnic Commission of the Regional Council.
2016	Land Rights Academic International Conference.	AADS-UT URACCAN
2016 & 2017	Black Heritage Month in commemoration of the Abolition of Slavery on the Mosquitia (August 10th 1841).	URACCAN & Regional Council

## VI. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITIES.

## 1. Abroad course in Afro-Caribbean Politics and Culture in Central America

Afro-Caribbean Politics and Culture in Central America is an abroad course

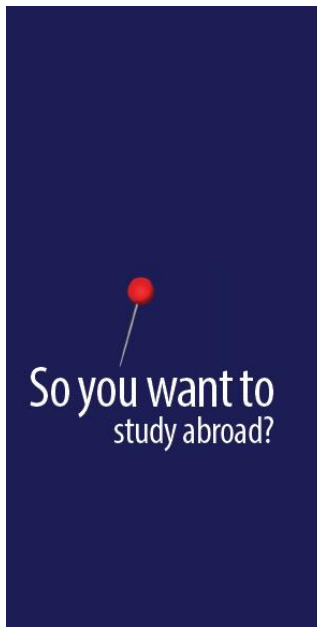


developed by the African and African Diaspora Studies Department (ADDS) of the University of Texas (UT) at Austin in collaboration with the Afro Commission of URACCAN Bluefields. The course had been carried out from 2011 through 2017 completing its seventh editions. This course “examines the politics of race, culture, nation, and political mobilization among Afro communities of Central America’s Caribbean Coast. It discusses the historical process by which these communities were formed in the region during the colonial era, different periods of labor migration, and the emergence of anti-Black

Mestizo nationalism, and contemporary struggles for racial justice.” It is composed by seven modules which are: Introduction to Caribbean History; Race, Gender, and Sexuality; Creole and Garifuna Culture, History, and Identity; Black/Indigenous Spaces and Land Rights Struggles; Mestizaje, Nationalism, and Autonomy; Afro-descendant Political Mobilization in Latin America (Afro-Caribbean Politics and Culture in Central America 2011).

This course has been carried out for six weeks during the months of July and August in the URACCAN Bluefields campus. Classes have been taught by Ph.D. Edmund Gordon, Ph.D. Juliet Hooker, and Ph.D. Charles Hales; and special speakers such as Master Socorro Woods, Master. Dolene Miller, BA. Nora Newball, BA. George Henriquez, BA. Becky McCrea, Ph.D. Jennifer Goett, Ph.D. Fernanda

Soto, and Ph.D. Courtney Morris. In these learning spaces, UT students and URACCAN students interact and learn from each other as they exchange knowledge and experiences in relation to each topic.



## Meet the Faculty ...

The faculty members leading the program, experts in the cultures and politics of the Caribbean and Latin America, are uniquely qualified to provide students with an outstanding intellectual experience in Bluefields, Nicaragua.



Dr. Edmund Gordon is the Chair of the African and African Diaspora Studies Department (AADS). He is the author of *Disparate Diasporas: Identity and Politics in an African Nicaraguan Community* (University of Texas Press, 1998). His teaching and research interests include culture and power in the African Diaspora, gender studies, critical race theory, and the racial economy of space and resources.



Dr. Charles Hale is the Director of the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies (LLILAS) and a Professor of AADS. Professor Hale is the author of *Resistance and Contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State, 1894-1987* (Stanford, 1994) and *Más que un indio... Racial Ambivalence and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in Guatemala* (SAR, 2006).



Dr. Juliet Hooker is an Associate Professor of AADS and of Government at UT. She is the author of *Race and the Politics of Solidarity* (Oxford University Press, 2009), and her primary research interests include black political thought, political solidarity, and multiculturalism. She has also published works on Afro-descendant and indigenous politics and multicultural rights in Latin America.



### Brochure of study abroad program

Members of the Afro Commission have also attended some of the lectures. From their perspective, this course constitutes the only space in which History of the Mosquitia and of Black people of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua is taught. In unison, they lament that schools impart a history of Nicaragua that centers its narrative on the Pacific Coast of the country and erase the History of the Caribbean Coast. Furthermore, although the URACCAN has integrated History of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua in all the curriculums; this continues to be shared from a mestizo's perspective and does not critically engage the history of Afro-descendants. Members of the Commission and URACCAN's students expressed that, learning about the history of Black people of the Coast and as the Black Diaspora enabled them to comprehend the contemporary situation of the black population in the region and in Nicaragua.

Based on this experience, the Afro Commission embraced the collaboration of UT faculty members to develop workshops, conferences, and forum with a broader audience of students, university professors and the community in general. Conversations on “Black enslaved brought by the British to these shores”, “Black enslaved struggles and resistance”, and “The emerging of the Creole society” are some of the topics discussed. These encounters were intended to last one hour; however, they often became sessions of three to four hours. This reveals the need of knowing more of the History of Black people of Nicaragua in order to understand the different contexts afro descendant population lived under a Mestizo national discourse and are now experiencing in a multicultural state; especially when promoting awareness of the Black Diaspora as a political project for all Black people (URACCAN 2011; URACCAN 2012; URACCAN 2013; URACCAN 2014; URACCAN 2015, URACCAN 2016, URACCAN 2017).



Students of the 2016 cohort



## 2. Workshop on Black women and Economic sustainability

Within the framework of the International year of Afro-descendant people (2011), and subsequently, the proclamation of the Decade of the Afro-descendant (2015-2025), in the months of November of 2011 and 2012, the Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias (Latin American Council of Churches), well known as CLAI in coordination with the Afro Commission developed a two days workshops program on “*Black women & Economic Sustainability*” with a total of twenty women (each year) belonging to the Creole and Garifuna communities. According to Rev. Alfred Joiner, Continental Coordinator of the Black pastoral component of CLAI, Black women have been reduced to domestic roles and, for most, are not allowed to engage in paid labor activities, and if she does, her contributions are erased and/or invisibilized, which results in her permanent financial dependency on men. Therefore, considering that it is time to change the “*machismo*” culture that keeps women at a lower position in relation to men, CLAI decided to work closely with Black women who are members of various churches.

Workshops were organized and oriented to demonstrate that female Bible characters always engaged in economic affairs, therefore, the idea that women should depend solely on men is just a myth, and a human invention implemented to oppress women. This analysis was based on Proverbs 30, a Bible scripture known as the virtuous and industrious women. Overall these workshops aimed to create a space in which Black women would discuss and analyze their economic realities as Black women in the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua and to unlearn the traditional patterns that have been established for women by encouraging them to assume an active role in the economic field. This will allow them to obtain financial independence and sustainability. Additionally, these sessions became spaces in which sisterhood and solidarity among Black women were promoted and created.

After a series of analysis, the participants concluded that besides taking care of their families, Black women have always contributed to the economy of their families and communities in various ways. Traditionally, Black women on the Coast engage in the bakery and selling of coconut bread, patty, cassava cake, banana cake, coco cake, etc., they also work as seamstresses, and as washerwomen.

Others are in the formal economy as school teachers and nurses. Most recently, Black young women, in pursuit of better jobs opportunities have migrated to work on a Cruise ship, Grand Cayman, and Panama. Many are the first-hand provider of their family. These are all labor activities which allow her to earn some incomes for herself and her family. Participants also highlighted that the domestic work they do in their own homes is a labor, and it contributes to the financial sustainability of their families. Once again, they regretted the fact that women labor, in and out of their homes is unrecognized, and invisibilized.

This analysis allowed demystifying prejudiced and rationalized ideas that portray Black women as lazy, unintelligent, and incompetent for business. Nevertheless, participants were also aware that most Black women are engage in small-scale businesses that do not fit into the category of micro business (according to the definition, it has a maximum of 10 employees). They all coincide that Black women confront various situations that prevent her from competing in a broader market. First of all, loans requirements established by banks to finance a business are unattainable for the majority. As for example, security deposit most often requests property papers, most Black women don't own properties. Additionally, rate interest is high, which then results in fears of failing to pay back the loan. This is a fearful situation because it jeopardizes the property or good they would have to deposit. This context does not favor Black women; therefore, insecurity and lack of experience cause them not to take the risk of growing their business.

As a result of the first workshop in 2011, participants decided to create the *“sewing and worship club”* a collective of Black Christian women who would gather to sew and sell clothing, sheets, curtains and other items. For this purpose, CLAI provided sewing machines, cloth and sewing accessories. The Afro commission accompanied the club for two years. This was the first initiative in accompanying Black women into the development of their own business (CLAI-URACCAN 2011; CLAI-URACCAN 2012).

*Taller: mujeres negras y sostenibilidad económica.*



Praise and Sewing Club 2011

### **3. Hosting Ph.D. Selwyn Cudjoe, And Ph.D. Dawn Duke**

Within the framework of the Declaration of the International Decade of Afro-descendant people, approved by the United Nation in 2012, and in compliance with the Afro Commission's 2012 work plan, during the month of March hosted Doctor Selwyn Cudjoe, a Trinidadian academic Professor of Africana Studies at Wesley College and historian of Black studies, and Doctor Dawn Duke who is specialized in Caribbean and Afro-Brazilian literature at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. PhD. Cudjoe facilitated a lecture on Trinidad and Tobago: Fifty Years after Independence, and talks addressing the Importance of Family Values & Healthy Societies within the Black communities. PhD. Dawn spoke on the Importance of Higher Education. Participants in the various activities were high school students, high school teacher, undergraduate students, university faculty members, Black churches members, Black poets, and Black neighborhood leaders.

Hosting professor Cudjoe and professor Duke resulted in a meaningful experience for participants in each session. For the Afro-Commission in particular, it allowed the establishment of networks of collaborations with academics who are also dedicated on issues concerning the Black Diaspora (URACCAN 2012).

#### **4. Lecture on Slavery on the Mosquitia in commemoration of August 10<sup>th</sup> of 1841, Day of emancipation of slavery in Bluefields and Pearl Lagoon**

In commemoration of August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1841, day of the slavery abolition in the Mosquitia, on August 09<sup>th</sup>, 2013, the Afro Commission invited Doctor Edmund T. Gordon, who is the author of “Disparate Diaspora” (1997); a book that contains the history of Black people on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua, to speak on slavery on the Mosquitia with URACCAN’s faculty members and administrative staff belonging to the different ethnic groups. This activity aimed to ensure that all workers would acquire knowledge about the history and ancestral roots of people of African descent residing in the region and to discuss issues related to racial discrimination, inequalities and injustices that the Black community in Bluefields and in the Black Diaspora are forced to confront. Unfortunately, attendance was very low (eleven workers attended. 90 were expected); from the Afro Commission perspective, this situation, was interpreted as a manner of apathy on behalf of the mestizo’s attitude and behavior in understanding the particular needs of the Afro-descendant community, and especially those of the Black students who often present a low performance in their classes (URACCAN 2013).

#### **5. Fund Raising in Memory of Dr. Henningston Omeir**

Dr. Henningston Omeir Webster was born in Bluefields Nicaragua in 1935. He was the first Black man to become a faculty member and subsequently Dean of the dentistry faculty at the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua in Leon. Returning to Bluefields, he served as mayor of the city in the early 1990’s and co-founded the University of the Autonomous Region of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua (URACCAN). After his death, in 2009, his family and friends created the Christian Humanitarian Foundation Dr. Henningston Omeir Webster, known as

FUNCAH. FUNCAH is a non-profit organization that intends to help children with limited resources. In the month of November, 2013, the Afro Commission held a fundraising event called “Concert Banquet in Memory of Dr. Omeir.” In 2014 funds were donated to FUNCAH to collaborate with a scholarship for an Afro student studying at URACCAN (URACCAN 2013).

#### **6. Certified Course on History of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua.**

In 2014 the Afro Commission obtained financial support from the US embassy to develop a certified program on History of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua and Afro Caribbean History. The program was structured to be developed in 240 hours with the participation of twenty students. The topics addressed in the various sessions were: *Historical Process of Afro communities’, Labor & Migration, The Emergence of anti-Black Mestizo, Nationalism and Contemporary Struggles for Racial Justice*. With these topics, students learned how Black people on the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast had drawn from their Afro-Caribbean roots to navigate, resist and challenge long-standing patterns of social, racial, gender, and economic inequalities that they confront within a Mestizo Nation. As a requirement for culmination of the program, students were organized into four groups to develop research projects on *Slavery on the Mosquitia, Black’s Land Rights and the Demarcation Process, the Life of Anna Crowdell, and the Life of General George Hodgson*. The course ended with a one-day workshop in which students shared their findings.

Certified programs are short-term training courses that allow the integration of people of all academic levels to specialize in a specific subject. In this way, the Afro Commission can integrate people from different educational background to come together and discuss topics related to race, gender, identity, discrimination, oppression, Black struggles and Resistance. It is an effective way to reach out to the community and share the hidden history of Black people on the Coast (URACCAN 2014).

## 7. In commemoration of the Abolition of slavery: Lecture on Slavery on the Mosquitia

In the year 2014, in commemoration of the abolishment of slavery on the Mosquitia (August 10th, 1841) the Afro Commission organized a lecture on Slavery on the Mosquitia by Doctor Juliet Hooker. After 2013 experience, the Afro commission decided to carry out this activity with leaders of the Black community in Bluefields and Pearl Lagoon. It is notable that the reflections are always related to the absence of this history in the schools. As noted earlier, previous lectures on Slavery & the Abolition of Slavery on Caribbean Coast were mainly held with university students and faculty members. Integrating community members to this lecture, in 2014, marked a turning point in the way the Afro Commission understood their reason for being. The need to involve the Black community as a whole in these learning processes became clear. Participants were highly receptive to an open and sincere dialogue about slavery, racisms, racial inequalities, colorism and privilege (URACCAN 2014).



Ph.D. Juliet Hooker  
Lecture on the Commemoration of the Abolition of Slavery  
August 2014

## 8. Black Heritage Week-2015. 174<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Black Slaves in Bluefields



*“...None but ourselves can free our minds”*  
Slavery”.

In commemoration of the 174<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Black Slaves in Bluefields (August 10<sup>th</sup>- 1841), instead of only organizing lectures on Slavery, the Afro Commission decided to promote the Week of Black Heritage in Bluefields–(August 3<sup>rd</sup> through the 9<sup>th</sup>,2015) with various activities, under the slogan “Freedom from Mental

At the opening press conference Cyril Omeir (General Secretary of URACCAN), expressed that *“the people need to know their past to be able to build their future; the problem is that the Nicaraguan educational system has denied Black people history. We have been denied to know who we are and where we came from; sadly, if we ask primary and secondary students, who was Rafaela Herrera, Andrés Castro, or Benjamín Zeledón? I'm sure they will be able to answer correctly. But, if you ask them who was General George Hodgson, Senator Horatio Hodgson or Sam Pitts? I am sure that they will not be able to answer. And that is precisely, because they have not been given the opportunity to know their own history. Therefore, the week of Black Heritage is a moment to learn our history, to reflect on who we are as Black people and to strengthen our identity.”* Omeir’s words echoed in the hearts of older ones who possessed a little knowledge of the history of Black people on the Coast. They also considered that it is necessary to share this knowledge with the new generations; for this reason, it is urgent to establish strategies for the rescue and preservation of the ancestral roots of the Black people.

It is important to note that although the emancipation of slavery on the East Coast of Nicaragua occurred in Bluefields and Pearl Lagoon on August 10<sup>th</sup> of 1841, and in Corn Island on August 27<sup>th</sup> of the same year, only Corn Island has an account of commemorating this date annually with the traditional Crab Soup Celebration. The oral history transmitted from one generation to another dictates that when Black enslaved was liberated the only food available to them was the blue crab with which they made crab soup and celebrated their freedom. Older islanders regret the fact that the Crab Soup celebration has become just another “*commercialized*” cultural activity, and younger generations are not conscious of the real meaning of Crab Soup.

The Week of Black Heritage carried out in Bluefields included an opening press conference; a lecture on Slavery and the Liberation of Black Slaves on the Mosquitia, a Talk on Black Spirituality, Radio Programs on The Culture of Mental Slavery, a lecture on Black People Land Rights, a concert on Black Spiritual Music in honor of the late Rev. Raymond Humphreys, a Culinary Fair, a pageant on Afro clothing, Fashion & Style. The week ended with a reading on “*The liberation of Black slaves*” in the Black churches and local radio stations. Lectures were facilitated by Master Dolene Miller, Doctor Juliet Hooker and Doctor Edmund T. Gordon. Participants in these events were university administrative staff, faculty members, students, and community in general, primarily belonging to the Creole population (URACCAN 2015).





Food sale, Black fashion parade & Black spiritual, August 2015



Lectures with students and Black community on Slavery And Emancipation of Slavery on the Mosquitia, August 2015

Below are the readings shared in the Black churches of Bluefields and Corn Island:

## **Reading on 174<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Black Slaves**

### **Emancipation in Bluefields and Pearl Lagoon**

#### **Rise ye from Babylon**

*By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, sing us one of the songs Zion. How shall we sing the LORD's song in a strange land? Psalms 137: 1-4*

Many people do not realize that African slavery existed here on the Caribbean Coast of Honduras and Nicaragua. But slavery did exist here. It was a fundamental basis of Coast society for two hundred years. In 1641 enslaved Africans escaped from the English colony on Providence Island when the Spanish attacked. A number of these enslaved people captured a boat and sailed to the Miskitu Cays. There the Miskitu enslaved some. However, within a few generations they had united with them forming the famous Zambo Miskitu. By the 1740's British had colonized the Mosquito Coast bringing with them enslaved Africans. They set up slave holding settlements in Black River (Palacios), Cabo Gracias a Dios, Bluefields, Corn Island, Bragman's Bluff (Bilwi), Punta Gorda, and Pearl Cay Lagoon. In these settlements enslaved Africans worked on sugar and indigo plantations and also as porters in the illegal trade with the Spanish on the Pacific Coast of Central America. Slavery kept on in these areas until a treaty with the Spanish forced the English to leave the Coast. They took their enslaved people to British Honduras (now Belize) where they became the basis for the Creole population there. However, some of the British refused to leave remaining in Corn Island, Pearl Key Lagoon, and Bluefields. In Bluefields Colonel Roberto Hodgson Jr. held two hundred enslaved Blacks. Two hundred and twenty-five years ago on September 10, 1790 the Zambo Miskitu King George II attacked Hodgson's establishment at Bluefields. During the attack Hodgson's enslaved Blacks rose up and with the Miskitu chased Hodgson and his family out of Bluefields to Guatemala where the Colonel died. Hodgson's enslaved

had freed themselves! These rebellious slaves are the ancestors of today's Creole population. However, when these enslaved rose up and proclaimed their freedom, slavery did not die here on the Coast. There were a number of attempts by English slavers to re-enslave the Creoles in Bluefields but these were defeated every time. However, some of the formerly enslaved especially those related to Colonel Hodgson and Suzanne, one of his enslaved women, acquired slaves themselves. The slaves of the small Creole elite in Bluefields and Pearl Lagoon probably worked as domestics or in the hawksbill turtle fishery. These enslaved people were finally liberated seven years after the liberation of the slaves in the rest of the British West Indies.

The Miskitu King Robert Charles Frederick traveled from Belize where he resided landing in Bluefields and on August 10, 1841 freeing all the remaining enslaved people in Bluefields and Pearl Lagoon. He freed 44 people in Bluefields and 28 at Pearl Key Lagoon. Then he traveled to Corn Island where on August 27 he liberated 98 people who had worked on Corn Island growing cotton. On Corn Island this day is marked with celebration by drinking crab soup.

Here in Bluefields we have yet to fully acknowledge the importance of August 10, 1841 to our people. The people who freed themselves 225 years ago and those who were freed 174 years ago are our ancestors. Their suffering and heroism deserves to be remembered and celebrated as we bring our people forward into the future. URACCAN is committed to this task. Through our Afro Commission, by researching and teaching about our past and present as black people, will continue to honor and learn from our enslaved ancestors. (URACCAN 2015)

### **Reading on 174<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Black Slaves**

#### **EMMANCIPATION IN CORN ISLAND**

##### **Rise ye from Babylon**

Most Coast people know that on August 27 of every year people on Corn Island get together to drink crab soup and party. Some know that the tradition has something to do with celebrating the freeing of slaves on Corn Island. Few realize that the celebration represents the final end of two hundred years of the enslavement

of Africans and their descendants in the Mosquitia, the Caribbean Coast of Honduras and Nicaragua. Slavery was a fundamental aspect of Mosquitian society. In 1641 enslaved Africans escaped from the English colony on Providence Island landing on the Coast where the Miskitu enslaved some. By the 1740's British had colonized the Mosquitia Coast bringing with them enslaved Africans. They set up settlements where the enslaved worked on sugar and indigo plantations and also as porters in the illegal trade with the Spanish on the Pacific Coast of Central America. Slavery kept on in these areas until a treaty with the Spanish forced the British to leave the Coast. They took their enslaved people to British Honduras (now Belize) where they became the basis for the Creole population there.

Nevertheless, some of the British refused to leave remaining with their enslaved Africans in Corn Island, Pearl Key Lagoon, and Bluefields. On September 10, 1790 the enslaved Blacks in Bluefields rose up and freed themselves. These rebellious slaves are the ancestors of Bluefields' Creole population. Unfortunately, when these enslaved rose up and proclaimed their freedom, slavery did not die here on the Coast. There were a small number of enslaved Blacks held by the Creoles of Bluefields and Pearl Lagoon. Additionally, Anglo and Creole owners on Corn Island held the majority of enslaved in the Mosquitia. Many of these owners had entered Corn Island from the nearby islands of San Andres and Providencia. They were engaged in the lucrative business of plantation cultivation of Sea Island cotton. Highly prized long staple cotton exported to England and the United States. These enslaved people were finally liberated seven years after the liberation of the slaves in the rest of the British West Indies. The Miskitu King Robert Charles Frederick traveled from Belize and on August 10, 1841 freed the remaining 72 enslaved people in Bluefields and Pearl Lagoon. Then he traveled to Corn Island. There according to the description of island Commandant James Bowden: "*On Thursday the 26<sup>th</sup> August 1841 H.M. Ship Tweed arrived here with His Excellency Col. McDonald, Secretary Pat. Walker, Robert Charles Frederic King of the Mosquito Shore, and several attendants. His Excellency sent a message round the Island to the*

*inhabitants and slaves the same evening desiring them to assemble on the South West Bay on the following morning at 10 O'clock A.M.*

*At half past 9 A.M.; His Excellency, the Secretary, His Majesty the King of the Mosquito Shore [Capt. Gordon, the Doctor and several other officers landed on the Beach. At 10 O'clock precisely he (the Superintendent [Alexander]) called all the Negroes around him and addressed them as follows (first observing to their proprietors that he supposed we all know his intentions for calling here.) – **I am come to make you all free, therefore in the name of HM Queen Victoria, and in the name of the King of the Mosquito Shore I pronounce you all free, your owners will receive the sum of twenty-five-pound sterling per head**”.*

In this way on August 27, 1841, 98 enslaved people gained their freedom on Corn Island. Examination of the surnames of those freed 174 years ago demonstrates that they are the ancestors of many of the current day Creole families of Corn Island, Bluefields and Pearl Lagoon. These names include: Bell, Bent, Archibald, Quin, Downs, Handsail, Hunter, Hamilton, Waters, Gough, Moody, Cash, Rigby, Lowder, Franklin, Parker, and Clark.

Their suffering and heroism deserves to be remembered and celebrated as we bring our people forward into the future (URACCAN 2015).

#### **9. Consultation and approval of August as the “Black Heritage Month” on the Southern Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua**

As a result of the Black Heritage week (August 2015), members of the Afro Commission of URACCAN suggested that the commemoration of the emancipation of slaves should be carried out annually for an entire month. In order to work on the emerged idea (of establishing August as the month of Black Heritage on the Southern Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua) in September of 2015 members of the Afro Commission (Grace Kelly, Ivania Garth, Wendy Joseph, Eva Hodgson, Edmund Gordon, Alta Hooker- Rector of URACCAN, CiryI Omar- General Secretary of URACCAN and Berna Dixon) in coordination with a member of the Ethnic Commission of the Regional Council (Thomas Gordon) elaborated and reviewed the draft of the resolution that would be submitted to the Regional Council’s plenary

session. The draft was first consulted through community assemblies in Pearl Lagoon and Bluefields in the month of October 2015. Unfortunately, financial funds were not available at the time to do the same in Corn Island. Nevertheless, islanders were also in favor of this initiative. After including the observations provided by the consulted areas, the resolution was submitted to the Regional Council and was approved on October 29th of the year 2015. The participating entities in the process of elaboration, consultation and approval of the resolution were URACCAN’s Afro Commission, Ethnic Commission of the Regional Council, Bluefields Communal Board, Pearl Lagoon Communal Board, Corn Island municipal authorities, the Afro and Diaspora women's network, and the Creole community in general. The declaration of August as the Black Heritage Month marked a historical moment of recognition of Black people, African ancestry, history, legacy and rights.



The resolution establishes that “*central acts for the commemoration of the emancipation of slavery on the South Caribbean Coast will be made according to the*

*historical dates in which the abolition of slavery was ordered. This date will be August 10th in the City of Bluefields and Pearl Lagoon, and August 27th for Corn Island and Little Corn Island.*” The declaration defines that during the month of Black Heritage, activities will be held at a regional level at schools and universities, as well as Black neighborhoods. Additionally, media campaigns will be implemented to assure a wide dissemination, tribute, and recognition of the struggles Black enslaved confronted to obtain their freedom. Overall, the month of Black Heritage will also serve to promote Black culture and identity and to create awareness of the current and new forms of racial discrimination.

The plan of activities concerning the month of Black heritage will be elaborated and overseen by the Autonomous Regional Council of the South Caribbean Coast, through its Ethnic Affairs Commission, in coordination with URACCAN’s Afro Commission, Municipal authorities of Pearl Lagoon, Corn Island, and Bluefields, and communal and territorial institutions. To operationalize this plan, an Inter-Institutional Commission will be created which will be chaired by the Ethnic Affairs Commission of the Autonomous Regional Council of the Southern Caribbean Coast and will be formed by:

- a. One Delegate of the Regional Council, in this case the President of the Ethnic Affairs Commission, who will preside over it.
- b. One Delegate from the URACCAN ´s Afro Commission.
- c. One Delegate from the BICU University.
- d. One Delegate from the Majors offices located in Bluefields, Pearl Lagoon and Corn Island.
- e. One Delegate of the Creole Communal Government.
- f. One Delegate of the Pearl Lagoon Territorial Government.
- g. One Delegate of the Secretary of Education.
- h. One Delegate from the Nicaraguan Institute of Culture Delegation located in Bluefields.
- i. One Delegate of the churches (Consejo Regional. Resolución de la herencia Negra, 2015).

The resolution of the Black Heritage Month establishes that activities will be organized according to the following components:

1. Culture

- a. Photographic exposition
- b. Artifacts & Antiques
- c. Music of yesterday and today
- d. Poetry recitals
- e. Theater and Minstrel Show
- f. Gastronomy
- g. Paintings

2. Health

- a. Traditional medicine and traditional healers
- b. Workshop with Young people on Sexual and Reproductive Health
- c. Workshop on promotions of healthy life style within the afro-community

3. Historic Roots and Rights.

- a. Conference “Holding on to our Roots”
- b. Conference: Identification of different forms of discrimination
- c. Debate: Mental Slavery
- d. Conference: Woman in the leadership of our community
- e. Debate: Shared Vision of the Autonomy
- f. Radio and TV debate: “On moral and community values”

4. Religion

- a. Conference: “Black Jesus”
- b. Ancestral spiritual practices

5. Education

- a. Leadership, motivation
- b. History of the Mosquitia Coast for primary and high schools (URACCAN, CRACCS 2015)



## 10. First International Academic Conference, Black Rights to Territory: Creoles' Bluefields

The poster features three logos at the top: 'Afro Commission Bluefields', 'CCARC', and 'AFRICAN & AFRICAN DIASPORA STUDIES DEPARTMENT'. The main text reads: 'First International Academic Conference. Black Rights to Territory: Creoles' Bluefields. Bluefields Nicaragua, URACCAN University. 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> of April-2016'. Below this is a graphic of two silhouettes (one brown, one black) and a map of the La Mosquitia region in Nicaragua, showing its borders with Honduras and Costa Rica, and its proximity to the Caribbean and Pacific Oceans. At the bottom, it states: 'Enslaved, forced free labor, reside here for centuries. ...THEREFORE, WE HAVE RIGHTS TO OUR TERRITORY'.

In Nicaragua, one of the greatest struggles the Black community of Bluefields confronts is the recognition to land and territorial rights, despite the existence of the Regional Autonomy Law (Law 28), approved by the Nicaraguan National Assembly in 1987, and the law of Communal Property of Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples of the Autonomous Regions of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua and the Bocay, Coco, and Indio Maiz rivers (Law 445). Particularly in Bluefields, the demarcation has followed an interesting pattern. The first

approved territories were those claimed only by indigenous people, secondly were those territories claimed by Black and Indigenous. Notable, the one area claimed only by Black people, and submitted by Nora Newball and Dolene Millers (leaders of Creoles Communal Board), has not been approved as yet. According to the government, the claimed which extends from Bluefields to Nueva Guinea does not correspond to what should belong to the Creoles.

Years of claims and resistance, resulted in the government creating a parallel Bluefields Creole Communal Board led by Ralph Mullins, which subsequently caused the displacement of Miller and Newball. The parallel board was willing to accept the portion and location of territory decided by the government. Consequently, this situation caused divisions and confusion among the Creole community in Bluefields. It seems to be that the only way Black people could claim

land rights is in conjunction with the Indigenous population. From the communal board perspective led by Miller and Newball (2015) *“this is a clear act of racial discrimination from the government towards Afro-descendant.”* Interestingly, many Mestizos (who invaded the Coast since 1984 with the incorporation of the Mosquitia to the state of Nicaragua) believed that Black people should return to our place of origin, to Africa. Nevertheless, the questions that emerge from this proposal have not been answered: Return to what? Return To whom?

Amid two Creole Communal Board, on April 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> of 2016, URACCAN’s Afro Commission in partnership with the African And African Diasporas Studies Department of the University of Texas at Austin (ADDS-UT), and the Caribbean Central American Council (CCARC) conducted the first international academic conference on *“Black Rights to Territory: Creole’s Bluefields.”* The conference aimed to discuss the historical, social, political and legal basis that guarantee land rights for Black people, as well as to review the advancements made in the titling of such lands in Central America. Additionally, the conference pursued to create a space in which leaders of both communal boards would have a dialogue toward finding consensus and alternative solutions to the various differences they confronted.

The conference was developed with relative success. Unfortunately and interestingly, on the eve of the conference, the government approved the titling of Creoles’ territory. The official land title was programmed to be handed over to the parallel communal board (known to be created by the government). Apparently, this sudden event denoted the end of the demarcation process for Creoles. This drastic change of context took the Afro Commission by surprise. After the announcement of the approval of the Creole territory, it appeared to be senseless to proceed with the conference. Members of the commission asked themselves if the government sudden approval of Creoles’ territory was in response to considering the conference a threat to their plans, and therefore, by approving this territory, the conference would be cancelled and a massive gathering of the Black community to discuss such a fundamental topic would also be avoided. In spite of this happening, the Afro Commission decided to proceed as planned. The new context represented an historical moment in which the Black community is in need of proper information now

more than ever in order to understand why this moment should mark a turning point in the ways Creoles engage in social and political affairs.

The conference was programmed for two days, divided into four discussion themes. Speakers were AADS-UT faculty members, CCARC members, URACCAN's faculty members and a member of Bluefields Communal Board. On the first day of the conference, three main areas were addressed: The experiences on Land rights in Central American countries presented by Ph.D. Juliet Hooker, Ph.D. Charles Hales and Ph.D. Roy Cayetano. The second theme was presented by Master Marcos Williamson and Master Sandra Rojas who spoke on the Indigenous land claim experience in Nicaragua; followed by the topic "Legal framework of Black People Rights to Land in Central America and Nicaragua" which was explained by Ph.D. Joseph Berra and Dr. Ciry! Omeir. The second day of work focused on Bluefields Creoles communal board experience in the process of the land claiming presented by Master Dolene Miller, and Ph.D. Edmund T. Gordon. Although (from the beginning of the organization of the conference), Ralph Mullins (president of the parallel communal board), and Johnny Hodgson (who at the time served as Regional Secretary of the Frente Sandinista political party) had accepted to participate in this panel to explain the demarcation process that they had initiated, after the approval of Creoles' territory, they also ended all communication and coordination with the organizing committee of the Afro Commission. Members of the Regional government, which had recently approved the Month of Black Heritage, were also invited to attend the conference; they all accepted to attend. Nevertheless, they did not appear.

The conference was carried out in the midst of one of the most political conflictive moments for the Creole community in Bluefields. The first Creole Communal Board and all its members were greatly disturbed, disappointed and angry. Once again, the history was being repeated. The Black community was betrayed by its own. Although the conference provided a space to discuss land rights for Black people, and in particular for the Creole community of Bluefields, as well as to serve as a space for the community to express their anger and frustrations, it did not succeed in reuniting the two boards. Nevertheless, the conference served

several important purposes: First, to acknowledge that land rights are a struggle for Black people in the Diaspora; Secondly, to learn of the successful experiences of the Garifuna’s land claims in Belize, and their “*comunidades afines*”; thirdly, to create awareness among the Creoles of the complexity that land rights involved; and, lastly, that although the government had approved a Land title, Creoles still have the option to claim an extension to their territory, “Not all was lost”(URACCAN Afro Commission 2016).

**Bluefields Communal Board Land Claim and approved territory  
(Designated area in green)**



**11. Black Heritage month-2016, 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Black Slaves in Bluefields**

The month of August 2016 represented the first year of commemoration of the Black Heritage Month Resolution. The URACCAN’s Afro Commission in coordination with the Ethnic Commission of the Regional Council, and the inter-sectoral commission, integrated by a representative of the Major office, a representative of the Bluefields Indian and Caribbean University, a representative of the Culture House, a representative of the Tourism Delegation elaborated and

conducted the schedule of activities. In general, each event pursued to inculcate Black heritage through the remembrance of our ancestor's historical heroism and rights.

This first experience in the celebration of our Black heritage was a month of intense work. The agenda included lectures, photographic exhibitions, gastronomic fairs, music festivals, poetry recitals, minstrel show and the election of Miss Emancipation. Various activities were carried at schools, neighborhoods, universities, local radios, churches, and central park of Bluefields city. Members of the Afro Commission agreed that it was a "*Black pride moment.*" This does not necessarily mean that there is no Black pride in Bluefields. Nevertheless, as expressed by a member of the commission "*to have people taking out time to learn, to recognized, to commemorate, and to celebrate Black heritage, is a historical moment.*" Members of the Creole community expressed that the resolution of the Black Heritage month is URACCAN's Afro Commission greatest achievement. Their reflections lead us to understand that Blackness had never been seeing as a "blessing" or something to find pride in. However, the various activities reminded Black people that self-recognition is a fundamental aspect of one's identity. Another important value is that Black children are learning this history and culture at an early age.

Another significant reflection that emerged during each gathering is the need of promoting these types of activities in all the Black communities along the Caribbean Cost of Nicaragua. As it is well known, Corn Island has been the only Black community to maintain the traditional "*Crab Soup*" celebration, which is indeed a commemoration of the emancipation of slaves in Corn Island. Older folks regret the fact that most people do not know the meaning of "*Crab Soup.*"

The Afro-Commission leaders considered that the first celebration of Black Heritage in Bluefields was a "*sweet-bitter moment.*" The commission struggled to work between two Creole Communal boards and a Regional Council who supported the parallel communal board. When rumors were raised that the government had planned to embrace an event scheduled for August 10<sup>th</sup> 2016 in commemoration of the abolition of slavery, to hand out the official land title to the parallel communal

board became the most stressful moment. The activity consisted of a parade in the main streets of the city, preceded by an act in the central park. It aimed to gather as much Black people as possible as a demonstration of self-recognition, Black pride and to commemorate the struggles and resistance of our ancestors to obtain their freedom. The first communal board gathered a group of Creoles and protested against the government, against the parallel board, and to avoid the delivery of official documents to the parallel communal board. The Afro-Commission of URACCAN was not able to confirm whether or not those were the plans of the government. It is important to reaffirm that no official documents on Creoles' territory were programmed nor given out during this event. However, it was an evening of stress, protest, debates, anger and frustrations; it all reassured that Creole people in Bluefields continued to be divided (URACCAN, Afro Commission 2016).

## **VII. Achievements**

In spite of the difficulties, insecurities and inequity experienced by the Afro descendants workers of URACCAN; the mandate of creating an Afro Commission at the Bluefields campus was embraced as a first step to work in team, rescue their history, revitalized their culture, and make it visible through good practices which contribute to the development of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua.

During the past six years the Afro Commission aimed to create awareness among its members, in order to promote empowerment within the university and community.

The achievements acquired thus far are:

- The declaration of August as the month of Black Heritage in the Southern Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua.
- Development of the First International Academic Conference: "Black Rights to Territory" aimed to discuss the historical, social, political and legal basis that guarantee land rights for Black people, as well as to review the advancements made in the titling of such lands in Central America.
- Certified Course on History of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua with the participation X young people.
- Abroad course in Afro-Caribbean Politics and Culture in Central America in coordination with University of Texas at Austin.

- Recognition and Celebration of the abolition of slavery in Bluefields.
- Establishment of inter institutional coordination for the promotion of Black Heritage Month.
- The use of Kriol-English language in the presentation and various spaces.

### **VIII. Learning experience**

- Been a member of the Afro Commission is not sole a pleasant task but also a challenging one.
- Even though people may say that there is no discrimination on campus, members of this commission have experienced it in different manners.
- Some of the Afro descendant workers of URACCAN are still insensitive towards the different manifestation of discrimination.
- Some of the Afro descendant workers of URACCAN have projected a sense of fear of expressing their inner thoughts about ethnicity.
- The Afro Commission space has been gradually serving as a spiritual, social and catharsis setting for the Creoles or Black workers at URACCAN
- There is a great need to make visible the work of the Afro Commission at URACCAN.
- The Afro Commission work should be constant and permanent, all during the year.
- In order to comply with the mandate of transforming the Bluefields campus to be specialized in Black Studies the maximum authorities will have to active participant in this process, a more intentional attitude.
- The Afro Commission should get the churches more involve in their tasks.

### **IX. Challenges confronting the Afro Commission**

Members of the Afro Commission denoted that at an institutional level, the greatest challenge faced by the commission is *“the interracial conflict with the Mestizos because they do not agree with the idea of transforming this campus to be*

*specialized in Black Studies.*” There is a misunderstanding among Mestizos that the authorities aim to establish a “*Black university*” which is then interpreted as “*only for Afro-descendant.*” This interpretation results in fear, apathy, and opposition from the Mestizos toward the work conducted by the Afro Commission. In a focus group discussion participants referred that “*a clear manifestation of Mestizos’ fear and resistance were in 2012 when Master Sheira Thomas became vice-rector of Bluefields campus. Members of the Afro Commission supported Thomas during the electoral campaign and had envisioned this as an opportunity to demonstrate Black people (Black female) capacity to lead and a space to strengthen the presence of Black professionals and students on campus. Unfortunately, this was not the case, rather than joining forces with the Afro Commission, due to pressure and critics on behalf of Mestizos accusing her and the commission of being racist, Thomas decided to distance, herself- from the commission*”.

Additionally, in December of 2012, in an internal election, the campus University Council decided to vote in favor of removing the only two Black members of this council from their positions in the university, leaving Thomas as the only Black person in position of authority in this campus. It all denoted that from the Mestizos’ perspective, there was space for one Black person to hold a position of authority on campus. Furthermore, it seems to be that in their opinion having a Creole in this position was also representative of the Black community; therefore, they should be proud of this “*accomplishment.*” In the week of that process, the Rector and University Council had to intervene in order to maintain these two Black professional females in their positions. This situation created a clear dividing line between Mestizos and the handful of Creoles who believed in the mission and vision of the Afro Commission.

In a focus group, members of the Afro Commission recalled that when the commission gathered to plan their activities, Mestizos are always suspicious of their motives. As explained by a member of the commission “*them look on we like if we planning to do something against them, like if we planning how to take ova the recinto.*” Another member expressed “*since we start talking about racism, now them say we racist because we only doing things with Black and fa Black. Them even*



*question what kind of interculturality is this?" The Afro-Commission suggested that the authorities have to "talk with those Mestizos and explain to them good what a Black studies campus mean."*

*In response to that question, in an interview, Master Alta Hooker, rector of the university expressed that "We are not converting the URACCAN Bluefields into an Afro-descendant university or a Black campus. That is not the idea. We talk about a specialized campus in Black Studies. From the beginning of this project, there has been a misinterpretation which has created a bigger problem in this campus. Mestizos have always been the majority here and it seems that they mislead the information and stated the message that we want to convert this campus into a Black campus. And of course, Mestizos resist. In fact, when we take a closer look into the situation, there was also an intention to keep out as much Afro descendant as you can think of from this campus. We have even proved that when elections of authorities in this campus, Mestizos go out their way to make sure Afro descendant candidate won't be elected for the important positions. And I think it has to do with that idea that our intentions were to put Afro descendant in the university to take over everything. URACCAN is an intercultural community university, which means that all of us have right to occupy different spaces in the university, and that has been very difficult to understand. So well, we just have to do our best, and I think that little by little they have been understanding the idea, not in the way that we would like it to be, but I believe they are understanding everyday more."*

Based on the previous discussion with the Afro Commission, it is clear then that there is a need to determine what it means to be a Black Studies campus and how to proceed into materializing that idea. Thus far, the commission has not been able to step forward. In this regard, there are two aspects that authorities and the commission will have to analyze carefully. If the idea is to establish Black study as an axis of this campus meaning that all the areas will integrate it into their functions, would Mestizos be willing to engage in research studies concerning the Black community of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua? And, if hypothetically the answer to that question is "Yes," won't then, Black people once again become subjects of mestizo's supremacist perspective? As noted by this commission, the challenge to

materializing a Black Studies campus is complex. Additionally, there will be needs of training administrative staff and faculty members in the application of Black studies perspectives.

Returning to the Rector's note on *"when we take a closer look at the situation, there was also an intention to keep out as much Afro-descendant as you can think of from this campus."* Members of the Afro Commission also expressed their concern on the need to increase the employment of Black professionals. A member of the Commission shared that although the URACCAN's policies establish the need of having a diverse staff, there is *"lack of will" towards complying with that regulation. The ones responsible for selection and admission establish criteria that place Black people in disadvantage. As for example, in a plurilingual context, all workers are expected to be fluent in the Spanish language. Another member of the commission expressed that "we Black people goin always be in disadvantage with the language. We talk Kriol, and ent you know that when we talk Spanish sometimes we no know the right words, or we mix-up the el and the la. And well, at least me no care anymore but these Mestizos like laugh afta you when you make them kind of mistakes."* Another member of the commission expressed *"when I ask the vice-rector when we goin start employing more Black people, she only look on me and say that Black people no like send in them applications, so them have to end up giving the job to a Mestizo."* From the Afro Commission perspective, there is a clear intention to *"keep down"* Black people and unfortunately, as expressed by a member of the commission, *"having a Black person as vice-rector did not make it an easier task."*

The other situation that members of the Afro commission pointed out as a limitation is the fact that they are all overloaded with responsibilities related to the job for which they were primarily hired. Moreover, they are also members of various commissions on campus. For the majority of the members, the work of the Afro-Commission has a second or third place of priority. Another related situation is that most of the members of the Afro commission depend on the approval of their immediate bosses (who are Mestizos) in order to attend the meetings and activities of the commission. According to members of the Afro Commission, *"bosses don't allow them to leave their primary responsibilities to prioritize the ones of the Afro*

*Commission.*” Grace Kelly, who is the coordinator of the Commission, have often requested permission so that members could attend the meetings and activities they organized. Unfortunately, this has not resulted as desired. Therefore, this is an issue that restricts members of the Afro Commission from assuming compromises and causes a greater burden on the few members who are able to participate actively. This is also true for the coordinator of IMTRADEC who is leading the Afro Commission and often in order to advance the agenda of the Commission had lay aside IMTRADECs’ activities.

At an external level, the main challenge is to work amidst two Creole Communal Boards. Previous circumstances have demonstrated the ways in which this division has a negative impact on the community as a whole and limits the development of activities. For the Afro Commission, the most frustrating aspect of this situation is related to the ways politics and partisanship shape the nature of this problem and makes it difficult for the commission to intervene or mediate. This situation produces severe stress on members of the Afro-Commission.

Lastly, but not less important, the Afro Commission highlighted that limited budget is also a challenge. Although for the last three years university authorities have established a small budget to support the activities held by the Afro Commission, much more is needed in order to expand towards the other Black communities in the region. So far, the assigned budget has been used to cover the Black Heritage month expenses.

## **X. Future Projections**

When asked, what should be the Afro Commission future projections, Alta Hooker (the rector) denoted that there is a “*long journey to go.*” Nevertheless, she indicated that the commission needs to “*hold on strongly to the policies that the University Council have approved in favor of the Afro-descendant people.*” The policy that the rector referred to was approved in July of 2015; and known as the “***Política de Posicionamiento de URACCAN ante el Decenio de los y las Afrodescendientes***” or “*Positioning Policy of URACCAN toward the Decade of Afro-*

*descendants*". From the rector's perspective, the commission is responsible to determine how to implement that policy. The rector words highlighted the fact that the policy has been approved by the maximum authorities. Therefore, they have assumed a compromise with the Afro-descendant people independently of how Mestizos may think and feel about it. This reaffirms that the Afro Commission has the university authorities "full support."

The Positioning Policy of URACCAN toward the Decade of Afro-descendants includes three components: The Political Platform of Afro-Descendant Women, to specialize the URACCAN Bluefields into a Black Studies campus and accompaniment to the Central American Black Organization (ONECA). The policy stated three objectives to attain by establishing a Black studies campus. First, to transform and strengthen URACCAN as an intercultural university that promotes the consolidation of the Autonomy process through the development of the Afro-descendant identity, its cultural revitalization and respect for its Human and Autonomic Rights. Secondly, to provide scientific, technical, cultural and spiritual knowledge to students of different ethnic groups in Nicaragua and around the world with a deep understanding of the history, culture, and systems of political, social and economic organization of Afro-descendant peoples of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua and the African Diaspora; and third, to form human resources with knowledge and skills to contribute to the consolidation of the Autonomous process and to a regional, national and international economic development.

The policy also establishes a series of activities in correspondence with the five functions of the university. These define the way the university authorities visualized the establishment of the Bluefields campus to be specialized in Black studies.

**1. Learning community**

- 1.1 Establishment of the African and African diaspora lecture.
- 1.2 Strengthen the curricular processes with the inclusion of content related to the Black diaspora from an intercultural and gender perspective.
- 1.3 Establishment of a library with focus on Black studies bibliography.

1.4 Establishment of a leadership school specialized in Black studies for young boys and girls of African descent.

## **2. Creation and recreation of knowledge and practices**

2.1 Train Black faculty members in research from a Black studies perspective, and in the systematization of traditional practices in the Black communities.

2.2 Development of a research agenda for the Afro-descendant people.

2.3 Publication and dissemination of research studies.

## **3. Social Accompaniment and Community Incidence**

3.1 Accompaniment to ONECA, Regional Secretary of Women, Network of Black Women and the Diaspora, communal and territorial governments. etc.

3.2 Mediate for the exercise of the Afro-descendant rights, and black women rights within an autonomic system.

3.3 Inclusion of content about mother earth, development and good living from the afro-descendant perspective in a formative and analytical process.

3.4 Publication and dissemination of the results of experiences highlighting Black people good practices. As for example, the celebration of the Black heritage month.

## **4. Intercultural Management and Communication for Institutional Development**

4.1 Development of a plan to raise awareness about Afro-descendant people from an intercultural gender perspective

4.2 Promote the establishment of agreements and joint initiatives with local, regional, national and external actors, in defense of the rights of Afro-descendant people.

4.3 Promote the inclusion of men, women, and young people in political spaces.

4.4 Establish a technological system of information with data related to Afro-descendant people.

## 5. National and International Cooperation, Solidarity and Complementarity

5.1 Efficient management of the external funding for the development of the Afro Commission plan.

5.2 Establishment of alliances and articulation agreements with Black organizations and universities. As for example, University of Texas, Gettysburg, The University of San Carlos in Guatemala, and promote academic exchange between black scholars (URACCAN 2015).

In an interview, Grace Kelly expressed that from her perspective, in order to materialize the idea of the Black studies campus, the following step is to establish a center or institute specialized in Black studies to lead the path into converting this site into a Black studies campus. Members of the Afro commission agreed with this suggestion and expressed that the Afro Commission is limited in various ways. Therefore, an institute with a staff that could focus only on leading the way into converting this campus to be specialized in Black studies seems like *“the right thing to do.”*

In conversation with Edmund T. Gordon, who is the founder and Chair of the African and African Diasporas Studies Department at the University of Texas at Austin, and who has worked closely with the Afro Commission, expressed that converting this campus to be specialized in Black studies is appropriate and necessary. As an interdisciplinary scholar he suggests that *“Black studies in Bluefields have to be both theory and content implemented throughout the campus. This means the need of a strong core curriculum, as for example all students should receive a course on Introduction to Black studies, and two or three other courses that deal with concrete aspects of the Black experience: Black culture, Black political philosophy and Black history on the Coast in order to be able to graduate. As for example, they need to take at least the introduction to Black studies which gives a preamble to ways of thinking about Blackness in relationship to other areas, and then two or three other courses that are part of a core curriculum. So then, every student has taken three or four courses that are design around understanding and knowing about Blackness in the Americas (North America, the Caribbean, Central America,*

*South America), And Africa. In addition to that, faculty members should be required to center blackness in their courses regardless of the subject that is been taught. As for example, in a course of communication and literature of Spanish language, teachers can integrate reading and text that recount the Black experience. So, there is a way in which blackness becomes part of the course material. In addition to that, there is the need of a leading institute for Black Studies on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua or do research of interest to people of African descent. So, you have a core curriculum, the inclusion of content in Black studies into all other subjects' areas, and a research component that focus on blackness, Black people and people of African descent. This work also needs a strong wide-ranging bibliography of what has been written in Colombia, Brazil, the Caribbean and the United States.”*

The idea of establishing a Black studies campus in Bluefields generates enthusiasm among members of the commission and black community in general. They consider that it is about time to prioritize Black studies as a tool to understand the current situation of Black people on the Coast. The Afro Commission is looking forward to working hand in hand with the authorities in order to establish concrete actions that would ensure the creation of the Black studies campus.

## **XI. Conclusion**

The establishment of the Afro Commission responds to the need to address and strengthen the work of the university towards the Black community in the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua. Members of the Afro Commission considered that the work developed so far is valuable and self-satisfying. From their perspective, the declaration of August as the month of Black Heritage in the Southern Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua is their greatest achievement with a positive impact at a local, regional and national level. Nevertheless, the greatest goal still to attain is the establishment of the Black studies campus. The Afro Commission has also confronted several challenges that for the most are yet to be solved. At an institutional level, the interracial conflicts and confusion around the meaning of a Black studies campus create a work climate of tensions and suspicions. Mestizos are fearful of “*Black taking ova the recinto.*” In regards to finances, although for the

last three years the University Council has assigned an annual budget to cover the expenses of the various activities, 90% have been used to finance the Black Heritage month, therefore there is the need to increase the budget mainly through funds obtained from international sponsors and donors. At an external level, working amid two Creole communal Boards has been the most difficult situation.

Seven years of hard but valuable work have been a learning experience for each member of the Afro Commission. To have embarked on a journey in which blackness, Black people, and Black issues are the main focus of attention was something completely new and innovating. Stressful and frustrating moments shape the way members of the commission understand their assigned place in the university, which has also functioned as a *“wake up call”* towards adopting an assertive positioning in regards to racial discrimination and the injustices they confront in the institution. In spite of it all, one true fact remains: The Afro Commission has initiated the pathway towards converting URACCAN Bluefields into a Black studies campus.



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### XIII. Annex.

Annex No 1. The following table shows the list of personnel who are or have been members of the Commission.

No	Name	Position in the university
1.	Joseph Downs	Administrator
2.	Narda Wilson	Coordinator of Humanidades
3.	Dayanna Forbes*	Faculty member
4.	Wendy Joseph	Institutional Planning
5.	Paul Budier*	IMTRADEC Intern-student
6.	Ivania Garth	Nurse at IMTRADEC
7.	Grace Kelly	Coordinator of IMTRADEC and the Afro Commission
8.	James Henriquez*	Faculty member
9.	Eva Hodgson	PhD. Student in Black Studies at UT-Texas
10.	Sasha Castillo*	Specialist in Gender at CEIMM
11.	Trina Clair	Assistant at IPILC
12.	Barbara Grandison*	Specialist in Gender at CEIMM
13.	Diala Lopez	Current Vice-rector
14.	Marsha Cuadra	Faculty member
15.	Marjorie Humphries*	Nurse at IMTRADEC
16.	Diana Aristomene	Faculty member
17.	Shirley Walton	University Accreditation
18.	Lilliam Thomas	Project Specialist.
19.	Dawn Dixon	Project Specialist
20.	Courtney Baez*	Vice rector Assistant
21.	Lesbia Cayasso	Administrative staff
22.	Charles Kelly	Responsible of sports.
23.	Bridgette Desouza*	Responsible of culture
24.	Yeliceth Hodgson	Lab Specialist.
25.	Angela Brooks*	Responsible of culture
26.	Janell Gordon*	Administrative Staff
27.	Linda Carlson*	Library assistant
28.	Darlene Morales*	Faculty member
29.	Hellen Hodgson*	Radio and Communication staff
30.	Leyla Heberth*	Assistant at IPILC
31.	Berjanelle Budier Kelly*	Alumni
32.	Malcolm Gonzalez*	Alumni
33.	Lidia Hodgson *	Alumni

\* No longer working or studying at URACCAN

**Author MSc. Eva Hodgson, PhD. Student in Black Studies at UT-Texas**

**Co-authors:-**

**MSp. Ivania Garth, Assistant Coordinator of IMTRADEC-URACCAN**

**MSp. Wendy Joseph Coordinator of URACCAN´S Institutional Planning Department**

**MAPC. Grace Kelly, Coordinator of IMTRADEC and the Afro Commission- URACCAN**