

Haiti : the capital of the Diaspora?



Photo from the Documentary “Nou Pito Mouri Kampe- We Rather Die Standing”, by Kevin Pena

The Emancipation Support Committee presents an ongoing public discussion in honor of Kwame Ture, son of the soil, who was a leader of the African American civil rights movement of the 1960's. The series was launched on June 11th, with Mukasa Dada (Brother Willie Ricks) who worked with Brother Kwame Ture during that period and is a Civil Rights Leader in his own right. Ricks is considered by many, as a hero who transcends time. He uses excellent oratory skills to reconstruct historical events and bring them alive for his audience.

The second event in the Lecture Series was a film and discussion which was held at the Simon Bolivar Auditorium of the Venezuelan Embassy, in Port of Spain on Thursday June 18th. The lecture and film created a space charged with concern for the continuing crisis of Haiti. The film and discussions contributed to an understanding of the Haitian revolution and the continuing trauma experienced by Haiti's population. Sister Andaiye, the guest speaker engaged the audience as the lead discussant on the film, produced by Kevin Pena entitled “Nou Pito Mouri Kampe – We rather Die Standing”, a documentary on the campaign to exterminate democracy in Haiti. Andaiye is a researcher, poet and regional activist who has worked tirelessly, first as co founder with Dr. Walter Rodney and Brother Eusi Kwayana of the Working People's Alliance of Guyana and then of Red Thread and

currently as a member of the Global Women's Strike. She is committed to bringing low-income Guyanese women of African, Indian and Indigenous descent together to struggle for improvement in their living conditions. Andaiye contributes to building capacities of women and men to contest the inequalities that oppress grass roots people, wherever they exist. Her work has made her a regional symbol of leadership, commitment and social activism.

The film highlighted the contentious nature of Haitian politics and the brutal response by the United Nations Stabilizing Mission (MINUSTAH), which was described as an occupying force. The United Nations operations began in 2004 as a response to the protest of the people against the forced exile of President Jean Bertrand Aristide. A depiction of the catastrophic consequences of the clash between the MINUSTAH, the Haitian police and the people of Cite Soleil is brought to light. Additionally, a window was opened that allowed the audience to view Cite Soleil, one of the largest over populated slums in the western hemisphere, located in Port- au- Prince Haiti. It depicted life in the slums which got rougher after the ousting of President Jean- Bertrand Aristide. The documentary showed thousands of the inhabitants of Cite Soleil who remained devoted to President Aristide and his Lavalas Movement and their involvement in peaceful demonstrations which were often interrupted by gun shots piercing the crowds of unarmed civilians, resulting in hundreds of Haitians being killed and injured. Despite the armed forces opposing the human rights of the civilians, the film suggests that their spirits are not weary but standing firm, as they pursue the cause of the return of Aristide, freedom of political prisoners, an end to the killing of the innocents and respect for the Haitian Constitution.

As lead discussant following the film, Andaiye noted that Haiti was the first independent nation in Latin America and the first independent African nation in the world. However today Haiti has paid financially, for its freedom and continues to experience an economic depression as a result of the monetary extortion which started in 1825 as restitution to the French. Andaiye argued that the return of such funds would significantly boost the crippled economy, thus enabling the government of Haiti to finance several projects which would increase the standard of living. An example was the reforestation of Haiti. She spoke of her first hand knowledge of the brutality which the occupation of Haiti has brought citing the disappearance of her colleague Pierre Louvinsky. In concluding, Andaiye made a call to the listeners to carry on the conversations about Haiti in our individual spaces, mobilizing towards a united regional and global effort of repaying the social debt which we all owe to Haiti, since January 1st 1804.

Members of the audience expressed the view that they could see a similarity between the horrors of occupation in Haiti with the violence and occupation in Laventille. Some also suggested that we remember both Haiti and Laventille as we commemorate the struggles for emancipation. A member of the audience recommended to Sister Andaiye that one of the best ways we could probably help Haiti, would be to "make Haiti the capital of the Diaspora". That way we could keep the eyes of the world on Haiti.

Andaiye responded that ... "my attraction to the idea is that it is heavy with symbolism and the symbolic embrace of African people in the Caribbean, Latin America and in the United States of an abiding connection to Haiti and an ongoing debt to the Haitian people which we have never acknowledged or begun to repay"

Khafra Kambon, Chairman of the Emancipation Support Committee in thanking people for their participation, elaborated on the comment by saying "we owe Haiti much for being a symbol of liberty which taught the Caribbean region its first lesson of freedom as a result of relentless resistance, and by attaining freedom gained after a successful slave rebellion."

The committed gathering expressed the view that discussions between the audience and the panelists was informative and intriguing. The lecture series is scheduled to continue every Thursday with topics of conversation that are relevant and refreshing. For more information about the Kwame Ture Memorial Lecture Series, contact the Secretariat of the Emancipation Support Committee at 628-5008 or www.panafricanfestival.org.