

Coming Together 2004

Welcome

Anita Harrell

Greetings. My name is Anita Harrell, and I welcome you on behalf of the Weyanoke Association for Red-Black History & Culture.

3,500 years ago, in what is now Mexico, a civilization arose whose people called themselves the Xi, and who are frequently referred to by others as the Olmec. The culture of the Xi became the foundation for the later civilizations of the Aztec and the Maya.

The Xi honored certain individuals by carving likenesses of their heads in gigantic blocks of stone. These heads are finely detailed and clearly African. Scholars have determined that the Xi spoke and wrote a language descended from that of the Mende people in Mali. But how would the language of Mali have made it to Mexico in the days before airplanes? Well, much more easily than you might think.

The voyage from Mali would have begun inland on the Senegal River, in strong reed ships that carried both sails and oars, so if there's no wind you can row. Not far from where the Senegal enters the Atlantic, there is a powerful current that follows the coast of Africa south. It then meets a faster current that heads west across the ocean.

Any ship riding these currents, if it doesn't sink, will reach the Americas somewhere between northern South America and the Caribbean, whether the people on it want to go there or not. Many modern-day adventurers have made the voyage in boats of various sizes, and it works.

But we don't learn about the Xi in school. If we look with open minds, we may wonder about the unacknowledged African legacy in Native America.

- We may read Columbus' description of Indians with dark skin and frizzy hair.
- We may hear the call and response style of much Native American singing.
- We may listen to a Native American version of a story we know from Africa, or recognize a Native design with an ancient African history.
- Or, we may see a photograph of a Northwest Coast Indian who could pass for a Rastafarian, complete with dreadlocks.

So far as we know, the Xi were the beginning of the Red-Black experience in the Americas. Therefore, today we honor the Xi, and the many Africans after them, who came to the Americas *voluntarily*, were welcomed, and were absorbed into the Native population. As Red-Black artist Francis Yellow put it, "First ... [Africans & Indians] made prayers, and they sang and they danced, and then they made relatives." We are descended from those relatives.

We also honor the 20 or so Africans who came *involuntarily* in 1619, and were settled in the midst of the Weyanoke Indians by the governor of Jamestown. They thereby created at Weyanoke what is believed to be the first African settlement in British North America, in what is now known as Charles City County, Virginia. We use the name Weyanoke in their memory.

1619 also marks the beginning of efforts to drive a wedge between Red & Black peoples, as settlers gradually realized the danger of an alliance between them. Custom and law based on European attitude and precedent were coupled with Indian susceptibility to European diseases, and with the settlers' conviction that they were entitled to whatever they could take by whatever means they could get it.

Fallout from the racism and greed targeting both Red and Black has included, among very many other things,

- the requirement that tribes be officially recognized by the BIA before they are deemed eligible to receive even the pitifully small recompense allowed for the loss of millions of acres of land;
- the closing of reservations where a tribe's membership became what government considered "too Black;"
- and the refusal of some tribes to acknowledge a female member's descendants if their paternal bloodline included African ancestry.

All three are issues we deal with here in Virginia.

Those of us of both Red and Black descent have for most of our lives not been given the opportunity to choose which ancestry to acknowledge. Others with the power to do so have assigned status to us based on what we looked like to them. Or if it suited their purposes better when there was a choice, they would pick the classification with the lower status of the two. That's the origin of the "one drop rule" that says that one drop of African blood is all it takes to make a person Black.

The idea of "blood," as in "African blood," or "Indian blood," has its roots in the concept of "race;" and race has no basis of legitimacy even in science, much less in Red or in Black tradition. Race is an artificial sociological construct, created to support ideas of class, to bolster certain peoples' feelings of superiority, and to rationalize acts of greed and injustice.

What's at issue today is how we, individually and collectively, choose to deal with it. For we do indeed have choices. I see these choices as a continuum similar to that of the grieving process, one of stages through which people pass to reach healing.

- Denial:
"They can't possibly think I'm less 'Indian' than they are when we have the same Indian ancestors. That doesn't make any sense."

- Anger:
“How dare they deny me membership? Who do they think they are? I’m just as entitled to that free education and health care as they are!!”
- Bargaining:
“If you accept my application for membership in the tribe, I won’t tell everybody you’re racist.”
- Depression:
“What’s the use? They won’t accept me, so I’ll just keep calling myself ‘Black’ and not even talk about my Native ancestry.”
- Acceptance:
“I am who I say I am, which is both Red and Black. I will learn as much of our history as I can. I will honor, follow and live the traditions as well as I can, every day, and I will share what I learn with others.”

We hope that today those of you who are both Red and Black will recognize where you are along that scale, and decide what your own choice will be.

Thank you.