

By V. Corzen

██████████, President of The Gentlemen's Alliance in Nigeria, addressed a large group of African-American gay men. ██████████, who describes himself as a lawyer and profeminist activist, talked about his organization's work in Nigeria and their need to link with African-Americans residing in the U.S. During his talk ██████████ stressed the misperceptions that Africans on the continent and African-Americans in the U.S. have about each other. He attributed this to the lack of information exchanged between the two groups. ██████████ stated that his organization works to combat this problem by meeting with African-Americans and dialoguing with them. Through the dialogue he finds out about their communities, and they dispel many of the myths that are prevalent about African society.

In his speech ██████████ rattled off many facts about Africa that the average American did not know. The continent has 54 sovereign nations, 5 major languages (English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Arabic) and many other languages. They do not have wild game (zebras, lions, tigers) walking in the streets, and the majority of the people do not live in the bush. Nigeria, ██████████'s country, is one of the largest in Africa with over 100 million people comprised of over 300 ethnic groups and languages.

Cultural exchange was not the only theme of ██████████'s talk. He addressed the differences between the gay community here in the U.S. and in Nigeria. According to ██████████, in Africa everyone is assumed to be at least bisexual. In Nigeria, gay men describe themselves as men loving men. This is to be more inclusive and address the many variations of sexuality. Sexuality is blended into lifestyles and not as rigid as it is in the States. ██████████ mentioned that oftentimes many gay men in Nigeria are married and have their wives and male lovers living in the same house. However he did not mention a similar situation for lesbians.

When defining the parameters of the gay community ██████████ stated, "There have been lesbians & gays in Africa since the beginning of creation. There are members of our community 90 years old." In conversations with ██████████ it was discovered

that many of these men, who are about 90 years of age, have never met gay men outside of their communities. Many of them have never left their communities, a phenomenon common to several communities in New York. The reaction of these gay elders to outsiders who come to their community is one of surprise that there are other men loving men out-

## Gay Life and Activism in Nigeria

side of their communities. They felt it was something unique unto themselves.

Lesbianism was addressed for a short time at this event. ██████████ reported that the lesbian community has been in existence for a long time. He mentioned stories about lesbians who would go through a ceremony that would preclude them from marriage to a man. He also talked about female-to-female marriages that were fully accepted by the communities the women lived in, and that for lesbians sleeping with the same sex is seen as empowering.

Children in gay families were also covered. Methods such as artificial insemination were not mentioned. However ██████████ inferred that many women marry men to get pregnant and see women on the side. ██████████ stated that it is the norm in Africa to get marry for children, who are seen as an investment in the future.

In households where the woman lives with her husband and his male lover, she is especially glad the lover is a male because there is no other

woman competing with her to have children. There are more resources for the children to split.

Transvestites are also a respected part of African society. According to ██████████, they are seen as biologically male but spiritually female. They are not threatened. ██████████ stated that their businesses in the marketplace do considerably better than the businesses owned by women.

Finally ██████████ addressed the work of his organization, Gentlemen's Alliance. Started in 1989, this gay organization has three zones which are lead by 3 people, 30 states, and is still growing. The main focus of its work is to instill political consciousness among gays, raise the issue of AIDS, fight sodomy laws, and keep in contact with other organizations.

When addressing the topic of AIDS and HIV in Africa, ██████████ said there was a lot of work that needed to be done. Complacency is a major problem in Nigerian society. Nigerians commonly believe that AIDS was brought to Africa by western tourists and that they have a block against it by being Black. Many Nigerians believe they will die of something and that AIDS is just one of the many diseases they can die from. AIDS/HIV propaganda also fueled homophobic feelings about gays by linking homosexuality with AIDS/HIV. Homosexuality is also linked with western imperialist culture, based in a promiscuous libertarian lifestyle. Since AIDS is so closely associated with the western society it is not taken seriously by Nigerians. The propaganda ignores that in Nigeria AIDS is spread primarily by heterosexuals.

Another problem with AIDS/HIV propaganda, stated ██████████, was that graphics show people in the last stages of the disease. This makes healthy looking people think they do not have it.

The Gentlemen's Alliance is working against these myths through public education through the media. After a minor fight with their local newspapers they were able to start publishing a series of articles about the Nigerian gay community. They are also working on a safer sex campaign targeted to the gay community. If you would like additional information on the group, contact them at: PO Box 52686, Falomo, Lagos, NIGERIA. ■

By Mariana Romo-Carmona,  
Lidell Jackson and  
Curtis Harris

As we approach the 500th anniversary of one of the events that radically changed the history of the American continents, as well as the economic structure of European colonialism, we, as lesbian and gay/two spirited People of Color can make an important statement about what this date means to us. We can use this focus to develop a clear analysis of our political unity and why it is important for us to struggle in solidarity with each other.

Each of us needs to ask some questions about the meaning of this quincentenary, a period of 500 years, and then discuss why we need to have our own perspective, as People of Color and lesbians and gay men. The coming year will be saturated with governmental celebrations, mass media spectacles, including books, movies, tv programs, educational initiatives, presidential decrees, all attempting to capitalize on Columbus' accidental arrival in the Antilles, in the small island of Guanahani, later San Salvador.

Consider that in October of 1991, three replicas of the three ships of Columbus' first expedition, were sent from Spain to cross the Atlantic in a joint U.S./Spanish effort, partly underwritten by Texaco. The ships will tour not only Central America, but North America, stopping at key points such as Boston and New York Harbor to be met by an international array of tall ships and human dignitaries, for an entire year. Two major Hollywood studios will release movies based on Columbus next year, to be echoed by countless TV documentaries, tributes, literary supplements, etc. You name it, it can happen.

With all this investment and commitment to make 1992 a global party to celebrate the benefits of Columbus' invasion 500 years ago, **any voice raised in protest of the one-sidedness of these events will be seen as a censor, a spoil sport, a radical.** There are already many radical voices united in providing the world with a different vision.

The attached articles are only a few. We are three community activists who see ourselves as gay/lesbian/Two Spirited People of Color, who asked ourselves how 1992 relates to us, and we attempted to

# activists respond to the



# QUINCENTENNIAL

lesbian/gay/bisexual/two spirit in 1992

answer. We want to share these thoughts with you, and hope that we can plan some local and regional events commemorating these 500 years of survival and resistance.

### Mariana Romo-Carmona

**"I am not only myself.** I am my blood, my spirit, my land. My responsibility as a Latina lesbian, a Chilean immigrant, a Mestiza living in the U.S., is not only to myself, but to those who survived and resisted, and knowing it or not, they gave me a future. This is my testimony...

I have grown up proud yet inferior. Physical poverty hadn't mattered, but historical inferiority could undermine my spirit. I'd learned in our own history books that our poor countries in Latin America had no resources. That we were not only poor but backward. That we were lucky that our oil, copper, nickel, nitrates, silver, gold, emeralds, fish, flowers, wool, art, literature, music, fruit, clean skies for observatories, open country for military bases, coca leaves, rain forests, chicle, rubber, pastures, and waterways were useful to our mighty friend in the North, so that we could rise out of underdevelopment.

It was almost twenty years after emigrating that I learned the following:

*Between 1545 and 1558 the silver mines of Potosí, were discovered in Bolivia. Immense quantities of silver were diverted en route to the Philippines, China, and Spain, and therefore do not figure in the official calculations of the times. From 1503 to 1660, the port of Seville in Spain saw the arrival of 185 thousand kilograms of gold from the Americas, and 16 million kilograms of silver. The silver transported to Spain in a little more than a century and a half, exceeded three times the total of the European reserves...*

This is just the beginning of my understanding of my heritage. I am the product of rape and pillage, of robbery and treason, of slavery and genocide. Yet the first thing I learned about Columbus' arrival in our continents was that it was beneficial, and that without that historical incident, we Latinos and Latinas would not exist.

Today, I recognize the importance of my solidarity with the struggles of all Native peoples and all People of Color. In the Americas, Native people are still marginalized, while the mestizos, the product of the mixing of African, Native, and European, are in a constant battle of allegiance that attempts to make us forget two parts of our origins and make us remember only one-- the

European.

In 500 years, we have lost our Native languages, indeed our Native names. In some countries, African names and customs are still strong and continue to influence our culture, everybody's culture. We Latinos and Latinas, while we exoticize our roots, the basis of our music, medicine, and spirituality; still answer to the names given by the conqueror. This is the time to step back and examine what has been the cost of our survival. We are a new people, it's true, but our older brothers and sisters still inhabit these continents. The Mapuche, Aymará, Quechua, Araucano of the Southern cone of America still maintain their languages and their sovereignty. It is time to step back and accept leadership from all our people, beginning with those who have been the most silenced and have the most to say...

Because of this almost forgotten heritage, it is important for me to give the observance of these 500 years a new meaning. The imperialism of the last half-millennium has suppressed any and all forms of protest and alternative expression of life, love, and sexuality. In whatever form, we as lesbians and gay men of color have a connection with all social protest that clamors for freedom of expression.

Our identity as political activists may be different from that of 500 years ago, but let us not be arrogant. We may not have the last word on how life should be lived, and we certainly have a lot to say about how it shouldn't, beginning with our struggle against racism, sexism, and homophobia."

#### Lidell Jackson

As I see it, the histories of the Indigenous people of this land, before Columbus, seems drastically different from that occurred after his arrival. A culture that was filled with a history of great pride, strength, trust, spirituality and connection with nature, became the cultures which were systematically devastated by violence, enslavement, mistrust, and genocide. This has become for me a human rights issue, as well as an issue of violence against women and People of Color.

As an African American, my people's history, in this country and internationally has been similarly devastated. As dominant cultures have grown out of persecuting, our cultures have grown out of oppression. And the reality of my people's history has created in me a need for



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progressive activism, as it has served to constantly remind me of the importance of addressing issues of oppression, racism and discrimination wherever they may exist...

What relevance does this issue have for me as a gay man? At first this was the most difficult question to answer. But my experience here in New York with We Wah & Bar Chee Ampe has been essential to my understanding of the issue. As lesbians and gay men, our sexual orientation is perhaps the most important aspect of our being. As such, it is equally important for us to remember that the history of indigenous people has embraced and honored this same sexual orientation. The existence of "two spirited people"—individuals in touch with both the feminine and masculine sides of their being—has historically been regarded by many Native cultures with great esteem and reverence. It is important that we recognize, and support, this history.

And again, as dominant cultures have grown out of persecution, our cultures have grown out of oppression. The Stonewall Rebellion of June 1969 has by now certainly developed into over 20 years of a dynamic Lesbian and Gay Movement, that is clearly growing stronger and shows no sign of abating. As we constantly combat the growing oppression and discrimination we face as lesbians and gay men, declaring our civil rights as human beings, we must ally ourselves with other peoples and cultures who are engaged in similar human rights struggles. All this has led me to realize the importance of supporting and advocating the efforts to address "500 Years of Survival and Resistance".

#### Curtis Harris

After 500 years of occupation, Native people have decided to celebrate our existence... We have chosen to exam-

ine where we are now, what we want for the future, and what has happened to us during the occupation.

Occupation is used to describe a state when people other than your own have moved in, instituted other forms of government and basically ignored your existence—other than the odd mascot at any given weekend sporting event. This has happened to Native people... After 500 years maybe most people thought we forgot, let me remind everyone that the state of Israel was created after not existing for over a thousand years, that the first inhabitants of Southern Africa are now gradually being included in a transformation of their land and government, and finally, the Baltics were recently recognized after only 40 years of independence in their entire history—no, we have not forgotten...

The most forgotten, even among most Native people, is the respect of the "Two Spirits." In most communities, Two Spirited people lived and worked for the survival of the community as was expected; in many they held honored positions of medicine and mediation. There was never a mass persecution of Two Spirited people; since the Creator created all, how could human kind consider sexuality an evil?...

What I'm talking about is the Iroquois Confederacy and its system of government which offered each community member a voice in decision making, and actually based leadership decisions on the recommendations of elder women-- "clan mothers." Can you imagine the Lesbian and Gay community choosing leadership on the recommendation of older lesbians? This is just one example of functioning government by the people and for the people.

What should inspire us to get involved? By the fact that we identify with any of the above, then we know what oppression is, we know what it is like to be left out, to be ignored in decision making. Being lesbian, gay or Two Spirited can make us stronger as well as better at seeing the injustices of this society. By joining the celebrations or by supporting the efforts of the 1992 coalition, we are making sure that human rights will be addressed for lesbians, gay men and Two Spirited people as well.

If we can sit at the circle in making the decisions which affect the next seven generations, then maybe Indigenous people and lesbian and gay men of all the sacred colors will not face the oppression that so often is part of our lives now." ■