

COMMENTARY *By* DR. DHANPAUL NARINE

Why Black History Month?

February means Black History Month. It is the time when teachers dust those books from the previous year and brush up on their knowledge of Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King. It would also be good if the unsung heroes are mentioned, particularly the women. Do we need Black History? Should we set aside a month for the study of it? Do Blacks have a history anyway?

In order to answer such questions the life and times of Amos Beman is pertinent. The young Beman had his heart set on attending Wesleyan but in 1832 the college was not admitting Blacks. The Board of Trustees passed a resolution on October 10, 1832 saying that, 'none but white male persons shall be admitted as students of this institution.'

Beman was tutored three times a week in the living room of abolitionist Samuel P. Dole, as private tutoring was common at the time. Beman grew up and became an influential pastor. In 1843, Noah Webster who is famous for his thesaurus asked Beman for his views on Black History. After a discussion, Webster concluded that Blacks do not have a history and worse yet 'there can be none.'

Colonialism has left its mark on the black psyche, by white washing history, and depicting black civilization as one that was confined to the jungle. But this is not true. Africa had a complex and rich civilization long before its contact with Europe. According to one view, 'the mis-education upon the Black psyche is designed to corrupt African-Americans' sense of racial unity and cohesion, mold the character of self-hatred, and engender self-doubt and distrust among their groups.'

The violence of the colonial encounter and psychological damage is described well by Franz Fanon, Steve Biko, Walter Rodney, Homi Bhabha, and others. They discussed how those that have suffered from the

sentence of history have given us the most enduring lessons for living and thinking. This 'sentence' has included subjugation, a feeling of embarrassment, erosion of self-worth and displacement of the diaspora, among others.

Colonialism reduced many economies to a state of dependency, created internal divisions, a Eurocentric status quo and glorified the hunter. Haiti was once known as the Pearl of the Antilles. Its sugar and profits filled the coffers of France and the boulevards gleamed in the summer. Haiti fought for its independence and became the first free black republic, a feat that is attributed to the ingenuity of Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian people. But France had other strategies to try and chain the Haitian spirit. It demanded reparations for its loss to slave owners in the sum of 150 million francs. It took Haiti 122 years to repay the debt with massive interest.

In 2010, President Nicolas Sarkozy visited Haiti for five hours and said that colonization had created many 'wounds' but he did not offer reparations as was expected. Haitians thought that President Francois Hollande would make redress during his visit in 2015 but he also failed to offer reparations. He declared a memorial open and said that the 'fight for human dignity is not over.' Mr. Hollande told Haitians that he was only in their country to repay a 'moral debt.' The Haiti example alone is worthy of a study of Black his-

tory and how the forces of colonization operated to deprive people of their self-esteem.

Sarkozy visited Senegal in 2007. He wanted to outline a blueprint for African development. His speech in Senegal has continued to anger many people. Sarkozy said that Africa had turned its back on progress. According to him, 'The tragedy of Africa is that the African has never really entered into history. They have never really launched themselves into the future. The African peasant, who for thousands of years lived according



Dr. Carter Woodson

to the seasons, whose ideal life was to be in harmony with nature, only knew the eternal renewal of time, marked by the endless repetition of the same gestures and the same words. In this imaginary world, where everything starts over and over again, there is room neither for human endeavor, nor for the idea of progress. The traditional African never launched himself into the future.'

Predictably, Sarkozy's speech struck discordant notes in Africa, and elsewhere. How could he say that blacks were without a history? This was Noah Webster in the twenty-first century!

Achille Mbembe of Cameroon is a professor at Witwatersrand University in South Africa. He said that Sarkozy

was like a master speaking to his slave; a white chief with a bad memory! The French rapper Roce is also eloquent about the evils of exclusion and hypocrisy when he spoke about the fracture of the cities and 'the bitter taste of history that hurts the head.'

Black history is rich, inquisitive and complex. The ancient Kingdoms of Africa highlight the important contributions that Africans have made to civilization and culture. Its language, architecture and humanity have the potential to unite peoples of all persuasions. The marvelous



Crispus Attucks

inventions that Blacks have made can be seen all around us and they need to be taught and highlighted.

School districts will do well to include in their curriculum some portion of history to remind students that 'everyday is history day.' The internet and social media make it possible for us to learn about different cultures and their contributions to the grand mosaic. Black history needs to be taught on a daily basis in schools because many children are unaware of their history and heritage. They can reel off from memory the latest songs, movies, and brand of sneakers but cannot say who Crispus Attucks was or who started Black History Month.

Crispus Attucks was Black and was one of the

most important persons in American history. He was the first to die in the American Revolution when he defended Americans against the British. His name is emblazoned as a hero in the Boston Massacre. The person that started Black History Month is Carter G. Woodson. He was the second Black American to earn a doctorate in history from Harvard, after W.E.B Dubois. Woodson wanted people to learn about the greatness of Black culture and he launched in 1926 what was then Negro History Week. This grew into Black History Month



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study Black History. In his documentary 'More than a Month' Tilghman suggested that a petition should be signed to end Black History Month. This attracted mixed responses; some persons felt that there was not enough of it while others saw Black History as part of the bigger picture that is America. When Tilghman visited Lexington, in Virginia, he was told by the Sons of the Confederate Veterans that, 'America has been dumbed down in history which is one of the reasons why we are celebrating Confederate History Month.' But this begs the question: if there is a celebration of Confederate History why not celebrate Black History? How can one be understood without the other?

The school's curriculum needs to be restructured so that more time is allocated to learn about the achievements of Blacks. It is argued that since knowledge is at the fingertips of students why only learn about Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King, Frederick Douglass, and a few others? But if one learns about a Black hero it will be a good starting point into the world of Black achievements.

Do we need a Black History Month? Despite the criticisms, there is good reason to devote a month to study Black History. There is nothing to prevent an enquiring mind to delve further into the subject. If twenty-eight days can lead to this, the month would have served a useful purpose.

and it was officially recognized as such by President Gerald Ford in 1976.

Do we need a month to celebrate Black History? There is a growing feeling that relegating it to a month is an insult to Blacks. The actor Morgan Freeman has argued that there is no need for a month to celebrate Black History. 'It's ridiculous,' Freeman says. 'Are you going to relegate my history to a month? Which month is white history month? Which month is Jewish history month? I don't want a black history month. Black history is American history. How do we get rid of racism? We have to stop talking about it.'

Freeman's views resonated with Shukree Tilghman who wanted to find out whether a month was indeed necessary to