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Speaking up for results...

By Charlot Lucien

Courtesy Boston Haitian Reporter

This History, these histories, have yet to be discovered,
But it's us to up to make it happen...

De l'Egalité des Races Humaines"/The Equality of Human Races, a scholarly thesis written by Haitian anthropologist Anténor Firmin in 1885 to refute the admitted line of thinking of the inferiority of certain races in the 19th century, is coming to light in Boston, translated in English. The circumstances that led to the inception of this project are interesting and may or should inspire even more productive initiatives.

On Saturday, February 24, at Artisan's World Art Gallery in Cambridge, Professor Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban of the University of Rhode Island, presented on Haitian anthropologist Anténor Firmin's book, *De l'Egalité des Races Humaines (Anthropologie positive)* (Paris, Librairie Cotillon, 1885), a powerful refutation of the work of prominent 19th century French anthropologist Arthur de Gobineau, who had argued the "natural" inferiority of the black race in the *The Inequality of Human Races*. Fluehr-Lobban, a specialist in African and Arab studies, made an eloquent presentation based on her introduction of the book translated from French to English by Haitian author Asselin Charles and released in 2000 by University of Illinois Press.

Many in the room learned a great deal about Firmin: he may have been the first anthropologist of African descent; he revealed himself a forward thinker by broadening the horizon of anthropology decades in advance to incorporate other human and social sciences such as linguistic, geography, archeology and ethnology; he advocated Pan africanism and Pan Americanism; his work with Frederick Douglass, then American ambassador in Haiti, prevented the US from seizing the island of La Tortue from the Haitian government in 1891. (Douglass fell in disgrace in US governmental circles who suggested that he had been soft on a Negro nation).

But beyond these achievements that may boost the moral to those alarmed at the amount of negative media coverage that Haiti is getting due to the deteriorating political situation, a more interesting question comes to mind. How this book came to be translated and printed is the simple but fascinating anecdote that deserves to be shared.

Professor Fluehr-Lobban recounted it during a quick chat:

"I was teaching this course at the University of Rhode Island and I was covering Arthur de Gobineau's *The Inequality of the Human Race*, when this student, in typical Haitian student who knows something that you don't know, shook his head on the side, looked at me and asked? "Do you know of the rebuttal of Gobineau's work by Anthénor Firmin?" Well, I did not know Anthénor Firmin."

So Jacques Georges proudly went on to explain that Anth  nor Firmin was this Haitian author who had methodically refuted Gobineau's assertions. Intrigued, Fluehr-Lobban started to research Ant  nor Firmin, and was astonished to find out that his ideas may have preceded by five decades, more recent integrative approaches of anthropology. However in 1885, the submission of his elaborate volume (662 pages) to the *Soci  t   d'Anthropologie de Paris* where he held a membership, was politely received, filed, and never mentioned according to Fluehr-Lobban.

It is becoming more and more obvious to Haitian natives living abroad that whatever they thought they knew about Haitian history is only the tip of the iceberg. Haitian history and some of its most interesting histories have yet to be "discovered". Because of the structure and the sources of the education provided to Haitian students, most Haitians grow up learning about their history from books written in French... or by French authors. Most of these books will always carry serious shortcomings: they are more likely to reflect a side of the story and they can rarely give a full account of all events related to Haiti, as some of them took place in the US and the Caribbean neighborhoods.

For all kind or reasons -linguistics, financial, political- Haitian historians have rarely had access to American, Spanish or British accounts of some of the events of their past. In addition, even armed with the necessary linguistic skills, it is unlikely that some of these accounts, data or materials would be readily accessible. They would more likely be buried in archives or footnotes, since the focus is not necessarily on the "other" nation.

It is not widely known for example by many Haitian historians, or by Haitian students for that matter, that aside from sending volunteers to the US to fight British forces in 1776, and later to Simon Bolivar in 1815 to support his liberation crusade in South America, Haiti also sent ammunitions and volunteers in 1816 to help the Mexican fight for independence, to Greece's in 1821 to fight Turkish occupiers, and in 1830 to Belgian revolutionaries. Some would be blown away by the extent of the literature published on Haiti's independence precursor Toussaint Louverture in the Southern states, where he achieved a strange distinction: abolitionists claimed him for his fight for black freedom, and slave owners for the strict agricultural policies implemented to sustain the economic development of the island. (*Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America*, Alfred Hunt, Louisiana State University Press, 1988)

It is only little by little that these facts are coming to light, as the Jacques Georges raise their hands, key dates such as the Bicentennial of Haiti's independence elicit more research and committed friends of Haiti show the kind of persistence that bring results. It took Fluehr-Lobban's investigative work -she reached out to the *Soci  t   d'Anthropologie de Paris* to access their archives of the 1880s- and the patience of Asselin Charles to bring to light Firmin's work, first through the translation released, then through a conference held in Rhode Island in June of 2001.

Ultimately, it is up to all, regular folks, students, and leaders finding themselves in certain situations, to raise their voices, or their hands to ask: "Did you know that...", and engage

the audience. The sharing, when not obnoxious, is healthy, and may bring results such as further research that will tell us, and the world, a little bit more about ourselves and contribute to balance Hollywood-style and sensationalism-bent media reports.

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The recently inaugurated *Artisan's World*, specializing in Haitian art, provided materials for this article. *Artisan's World* is located on Hampshire St, #139, Cambridge.
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