

A Common Memory

At the first gathering of the newly created National Congress of Black American Indians, organizers and attendees came to unite and celebrate individuals of both African and Native American ancestry – a subject often fraught with complicated questions of race, identity and citizenship.

Although Native Americans and African-Americans have crossed paths, intermarried and formed alliances since pre-colonial times, often uniting in their common fight against slavery and dispossession, their shared history has been slow to be unearthed and brought into the light.



The formation and the first meeting of the NCBAI sought to remove the taboo of mixed ancestry and bring together those who could trace their ancestry to both communities.

The gathering received endorsement and letters of support from Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley, D.C. mayor Vincent Gray and Prince George County Executive Rushern L. Baker III.

“This has been a conversation that has been avoided and pushed aside, and folks who have wanted to have this conversation have been marginalised, subjugated, separated, downtrodden, stepped on,” said Jay Gola Waya Sunoyi, one of the founders of the national Congress. “But still we are here.”

Sunoyi, a member of Echota Cherokee tribe of Alabama, said that black Native Americans historically concealed one part of their ancestry to avoid the trouble that would inevitably come along with being a part of both marginalised groups. Sunoyi said he himself did not know that he was descended from enslaved black Americans until after his grandmother, a Taino Indian from

Puerto Rico, passed away and old family letters were recovered. For others, it was easier to integrate into black communities and avoid claiming their native American identity.

25 “In the history of this Western Hemisphere, because of the price of Native American people’s heads, our people hid in other folk’s identities just to survive,” he said. “But if you don’t accept all of you, you are lying to yourselves.” Some attendees have done extensive research into their genealogy to find their Native roots, while others were more reliant on oral histories and anecdotal evidence. The lore of Native American ancestors runs deep in many African-American families, 30 although geneticists have found the numbers of black Native Americans to be relatively small. When activist and scholar and Louis Gates looked into the subject, he found that only 5 percent of African-American people carry more than 2 percent Native American ancestry.

Still, David, Rich, 62, said he thought “more people had claim to it than they know.” Rich, who was not a member of any tribe himself, said he was drawn to the gathering to pay respects to his 35 grandmother, who he said was a Cherokee Indian.

Marlene Parker, 47, recently discovered through family records that she had ancestors who were part of the Meherrin tribe of North Carolina, said she felt liberated to be in an environment where our heritage was celebrated. Although she had grown up identifying as an African-American in the black community, Parker said she wanted to know more about our Native roots.

40 “For such a long time, it was outsiders who defined who we were, depending on what we looked like,” she said. “This is about finding the truth.”

Naureen Khan, *Black American Indians to honour their mixed ancestry*, america.aljazeera.com, 2014

Picture: Diana Fletcher b.1838, a Black Seminole who was adopted into the Kiowa tribe (Wikipedia).