

About the Black in Cuba: Achievements and ‘Pipe Dreams’

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This paper is a condensed version of a more extensive study about the historical and current reality of the Blacks in Cuba.

The struggle of the Africans and of their descendants in their effort to achieve their rights reflects utmost important aspects from a historical, social and economic point of view. At present some of them are visible (Fernández Robaina, 1990).

From the outset of the slave-holding system of the poorly-named “New World,” and due to the de-acculturation policy imposed by the colonialist’ metropolis, there were manifestations of two different reactions on the part of the Black slaves and the free Blacks.

A) The open rejection and the constant rebelliousness expressed in collective suicides, the uprisings of the dotaciones (chattel slaves), the Cimarronaje or Marronege - formations of slave escapee communities outside of enslavements, and the hiding, individually or collectively, on the mountains and in the woods.¹

B) Covert and total assimilation.

These characteristics stuck out more on a few colonies than in others, by virtue of multiple and complex conditions. For these reasons, cultures carried by the Africans had to adapt to the environmental conditions, both physically and spiritually. From this taking and giving emerged

¹ But Cimarronaje (Spanish) or Marronage (French) can also be defined as actions taken by a group of slaves or an individual one to struggle for their freedom. It was the action to escape to the mountains or the woods.

different forms of practice of their cultures and their religions, that as pointed out by Carnet (1973), motivated a reform of paramount importance in the Yorubás' religious² practices.

During the colonial period and all through the 20th century the Black struggle was encrypted more on social aspects than on indigenous cultural aspects.

Totally or partially assimilated Blacks believed in possible fulfillment of their aspirations to ensure a fairer treatment within the colonial and republican structures through demonstrating that they were at the same intellectual level as Whites, or in other words, that they were carriers of the dominant Eurocentric codes.

However there are many examples that can demonstrate that in spite of that, as some Blacks attained such required levels, they were still marginalized and that in many instances their rights, which theoretically assisted them, were denied. There is no doubt regarding the existence of more examples of the violations of their legal rights which demonstrate otherwise. It was 'pipe dreams,' illusions that not a few of them believed in.

A myth emerged also under the wings of the colony, a belief inherited by the Republic with regard to the whitening of the Black race, as a way to avoid racial conflicts. Fearful of a possible Haitian-style revolution in Cuba, or, as a mode to evolving individually in society, the myth propagated that those with dark complexions did not have the same advantages as those with light complexions, who could pass as Whites. Another 'pipe dream' without any doubt, above all when I concur with what Mustelieff affirmed:

“In a difficult length of time to determine, but that will not be over a century –that if it comes- the Black race will have disappeared from our midst. It will become relegated to the legendary and it will be spoken of as a thing that was of the past and has been extinguished.” Mustelieff, 1912).

The Ten Years War was a decisive factor to deepen thoroughly, on certain social levels, the brotherhood between Whites and Blacks by virtue of the already acquired space that the later ones won at that historical event. The majority participation of Blacks and Mulattos determined the planning of a war by some in the bourgeoisie, landowners, tradespeople, and slaveholders, in order to abolish colonial hurdles that impeded further Creoles' development. It became massive and popular in character, in which majority and popular sectors took part, and fundamentally, the Blacks attained as achievements

2 Religious practices and belief system shared by the Yoruba ethnic group before encountering Islam and Christianity, from regions which are presently known as countries like Nigeria, Benin, and Togo.

their conditions to be freed, as well as the gradual abolition for the remaining slaves. In essence, there were no ‘pipe dreams,’ but for some times, there were many nuances that limited the true achievement.

In Martí’s preaching (Martí Pérez, 1961) to achieve the union of all Cubans, in order to gain Cuba’s independence, amid the highlighted ones are those of his writings directing his efforts towards avoiding the “fear of the Black;” a manipulated idea worked out by both the integrationists and racists in order to break down the much needed unity promoting the idea that a free Cuba would be a second Haiti. It originated the beautiful idea that being Cuban meant more than being White, more than being Black, and more than being Mulatto. And, if to these criteria, we add, the advice given by Antonio Maceo (Portuondo, 19--?) “Ask nothing as a Black, ask everything as a Cuban.” These are two solid reasons we have as to why the goodwill of Cubans, Blacks and Whites, those who honestly believed that the only way to solve the question of the Blacks as a social problem could be accomplished with the triumph of the Redemptive Revolution,³ at the long-awaited Martiana Republic as with all and for the good of all. But soon everyone saw, and more so the Blacks and the Whites in dire need for social claims, that the Republic born on May 20th 1902, whose Constitution proclaimed that all Cubans were equals before the law, was not the Republic they expected, not the Motherland idealized by Martí as with all and for the good of all, but rather a Motherland of the few for the good of a handful of those who have nothing to do with the Blacks, nor with the poorest sector of Whites. That is why it must not be surprising that the demands for social claims were not far behind.

The above could be corroborated by discourses delivered by the most relevant Black figures on June 29th of 1902. At that time among those who stood out were Juan Gualberto Gómez (1854-1933) and Lino Dou (1871-1939).⁴ Many believed in achieving possible Black social equality within that Republic, the same Republic that was the very negation of both Martí’s and Maceo’s ideas. It was therefore a noble determination, but only that, and therefore, a ‘pipe dream’ even to think that the Cuban Independent Color Party (CICP)⁵ could be the solution in order to achieve the much awaited equality and therefore an end to racial discrimination in Cuba.

Similarly, it was also a ‘pipe dream’ that it would be acknowledged, widely and recognizably, what the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (1881-1969) stressed on the importance of the influence

3 It was part of José Martí’s dreams to have an independent Cuba. The war was based on the Martiana’s social thoughts to bring rights, benefits, freedom for all Cubans regardless of creed, race and class. The Redemptive Revolution was the Cuban Independence War of 1895 which objectives were truncated because of the United States’ intervention in 1898.

4 Discourses, *The Cuban Republic*, Havana, Cuba, July 5th and 6th, 1902. See also “Veteran Committees and Societies of Colors.” In *the Black in Cuba*; pp. 37-45. Havana, Cuba: Social Sciences, 1994.

See, for example, the Review of Literature on Afro-Cuban themes for important readings on the Cuban Independent Color Party. Also “Literature Review on Afro-Cuban Cultures.”

of the origin of African cultural and religious values within the Cuban society. He demonstrated fundamentally the great debt Cuba had owed and still owed in having cultural elements of the Conga, Yorubas, Carabelies, and Ararás⁶ ethos embedded in Cuban culture. For too long, Gustavo G. Urrutia's pretension (1881-1958) that assimilated Blacks stop feeling embarrassed by the presence of Afro-Cuban religions was also a 'pipe dream.' For that reason he asserted:

“...we want to say to all of you to continue practicing it, which you have nothing to feel embarrassed about it. And to those “colored ones” who do not even know them, we say to you that neither of you have to feel embarrassed, because they are as cultured and moral institutions as those of your white grandparents. They are only distinct.” (Urrutia, 1935).

In the earlier days of the Revolution, there was no illusion to feel the beautiful social reality of Black Cubans. From 1959, many Blacks could gain access to both jobs and administrative positions in which they had never been seen before, such as in banks. Quite a number of them could now enroll and graduate from high school and from different areas of higher education. As indicated by Moore and Carbonell (1996), there is no doubt that in Cuba the Black had progressed more during the revolutionary period than during the Republic. Back in 1959 and just a year into the Revolution, Fernando Ortiz provided a similar view when asked about the racial question in Cuba. He said:

“In Cuba, where the fading of ill-fated racism is progressing, more than in other peoples of the Americas, this “less developed” can and must give an example. This will be one of the most plausible social reforms that, with firmness and tactfulness, the present revolutionary government can do.” (Ortiz, 1959).

⁶ Africans ethnic groups who were forcibly brought to Cuba from regions presently known as, Nigeria, Angola, Zaire, and the Republic of Congo, from the sixteenth until the nineteenth centuries.

In other words, the quite widespread idea, that in Cuba racial problems had not reached the same peculiarities as in the United States and the South African Republic, it was nevertheless itself a problem.

It was precisely 1959 the year in which the country saw the proliferation of many proposals, responding to a call from Fidel Castro,⁷ pursuing a solution to racial problems in Cuba, even though the problem was not, then, considered a compelling or a major social aggravation. There were, however, other competing problems to be considered with greater urgency such as the eradication of prostitution in Cuba. The racial problem was valued to be resolved given the strong pronouncement of Fidel Castro and the revolutionary measures that trounced lines of discrimination in society, such as, in schools, public parks, the workplace, and particularly, those areas in which Blacks had historically no access. But obviously, that was just to be another ‘pipe dream.’

That effort needs to be understood when in 1985 a further call was made by the First Secretary of Cuba’s Communist Party for support to achieve ethnic, female and youth representations among different administrative levels.⁸ Obviously that was another form to combat against the persistence of involuntary and surviving racial prejudices and practices, sometimes in an underhand manner, without being fully aware of the significance of such prejudices, precisely because it was not always considered as such.

Fifteen years after that call was made and after multiples social phenomenon had occurred around the world, we find ourselves plunged in an open struggle against all kinds of prejudices, in particular, against racial prejudices and racism.

We now dispose of more spaces where we meet, speak, and discuss. Now, more and more of us are understanding and appreciating the tremendous significance of the Revolution for Black people in Cuba. Cuba has been an example and this fact radiates outwards. In the same way, we are more aware that we have to be constantly on guard to confront ongoing racism and the possible increase of racial prejudices as a result of increasing tourism and the opening up to foreign capital.

Objectively a giant qualitative and quantitative leap has occurred, as can be shown through the payroll of seminars, conferences, colloquiums, and symposiums held in the country by different institutions in which themes on Black Cubans and their culture have been presented, themes that have treated the subject from diverse angles, such as the historical, the cultural, the social, the religious, among others.⁹

7 See, for example, Discourses made by Fidel Castro Ruz, “Revolution.” Havana, Cuba, 23 March, 1959: Vol. 1, 24-25.

8 See Fidel Castro Ruz’s discourse. “Revolution.” Havana, Cuba, February, 1986.

9 Among seminars that can be highlighted are those convened by the Fernando Ortiz’s Foundation; workshops by Rómulo Lachataneré-Fernando Ortiz, convened by The House of Africa of Santiago of Cuba. Also, some

But the experience, before and after 1959, shows us that to debate on the Black question is not enough, but we have to take concrete measures, whether short or long term in order to carry out a war against the death of racial prejudices and racism. Such an issue is not a problem to be resolved in two or three generations. Cuba is the most appropriate country to carry out this revolutionary action of great human concern, action already started with the Triumph of the Revolution in 1959, but that needs to be perfected and drilled down. It seems to me that the previously quoted Fernando Ortiz's wise words that Cuba could and should give an example, are true still today. He said:

“Cuba has the obligation to work to eradicate racism in all its manifestations.” (Ortiz, 1959).

I believe that Cuba has already given not just one but many other examples, which are not always taken into account. The Black situation in our country is very distant from the tragic realities in which our Latin-Americans' brothers and sisters live. For me, it was a great lesson to have participated in the 21st Conference of the Latin-America Black Family¹⁰ that took place in Barlovento, Venezuela, in July of 1999. As a Cuban, closely linked with these social problems, it was however stimulating to hear the demands, claims, and denunciations of Black Brazilians, Bolivians, Colombians, Ecuadorians, Dominicans, Hondurans, Nicaraguans, Peruvians, Uruguayans, Venezuelans, among others. Not only had they denounced their social marginalization in which they live, just because they are Black and because of the sub-valorization of their own cultures, but also how difficult it is to get out of such a state faced with the impossibility of having access to high school or college, and in many cases even elementary school. The vast majority of Latin American Black people in greatest need of both levels of instructions cannot afford the prohibitively high costs of high school as well as of college education needed for paving the way toward overcoming social marginalization.

There is no need to highlight the fact that historically those demands and many more were already overcome by Black Cubans, such as access to work, to education, to health care, etc. Our issues are not nearly as critical as those of our brothers and sisters; perhaps our problems are more

workshops organized by the Center of Anthropology of the former Academy of Science of Cuba, and the Caribbean House with its Annual Festival and scientific sessions.

Workshops and Colloquiums on the Cuban Independent Color Party, on its ninetieth anniversary and on the fiftieth anniversary of Gustavo G. Urrutia's death, in 1999; colloquium on Pedro Deschamps Chapeau or the one that took place to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the book *The Black in Cuba* by Arredondo. In addition postgraduate courses on Afro-Cuban bibliography and the history of Black in Cuba all held and sponsored by the National José Martí Library. Also José Luciano Franco's workshop presented by Leda Oquendo, as well as some activities organized by House of Africa in Old Havana, The UNEAC, among other institutions.

¹⁰ For me, personally, this particular conference was of a great experience. It would really merit specific presentation. This event should be more publicized

subtle, since ideological changes are slower than structural changes. For so long we have been subjected to a policy of de-acculturation that we do not always realize we act as a reflexion of this policy. Consequently, a broader space at all levels in the everyday practice is needed such as in our schools and in the mass media. Because both act as forgers-vehicle, of both short-and long term reality by shaping not only our way of thinking but also the way of seeing the world around us by virtue of which they are made to reflect the surrounding reality. Only in this way can we someday begin to struggle for the elimination of racism and discrimination from our minds and from our surroundings.

That is why in 1996, I asked to make a point of the need to intensify that struggle through the opening of spaces to study the cultures and histories of African peoples that have contributed to the formation of Cuba's cultural and national identity, people such as Congos, Yorubás, Carabalíes, and Ararás.¹¹ It is then that the 'pipe dreams,' with which we have lived for so long, may become concrete achievements.

Finally, in Cuba we have made great strides, without a doubt, and we should continue moving forward, yet aware of, and sure that we know what we want, and on alert to avoid whatever setbacks that would impede that achievement.

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¹¹ See Fernández Robaina, "Review of the Literature on Afro-Cuban Studies." In *Themes*, Journal, Havana, Cuba; November/ December, 1996.

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