

Cuba speaks from its depths

The real consequences of identity

There is a Yoruba proverb that says: "A lie can last a whole year, the truth catches up to it one day." That is how on December 3, 2009, eight Cuban intellectuals began their response to a declaration made by 59 African-American leaders from the United States criticizing the persistence of racism in Cuba.

Proverbs always rely on the deeply embedded value that their simple words enshrine. Even if they come to us from a distant land and time, proverbs can reflect the universality of ideas. We can and should extrapolate concepts and teachings from the cultures of others in order to organize our own coexistence in the here and now.

This is unavoidable for the Yoruba people, that is, if the historical, social, and political identity of nations is to have any relationship whatsoever with the deeper elements of their culture. In considering Cuba, the island is home to a diversity whose roots go from Jerusalem to Ibo, from Galicia to Barcelona, from the Caribbean to Syria, and from the Congo to Canton.

With this as a given, and if we really are all those things, we are now in a better place in Cuba than we were fifty years ago, an era with a distinctly anti-cultural agenda that declared that today, fifty years later, we would all be like the Che. If, as the Yoruba say, the truth can

really catch up to a lie one day, something Christians and those who promote an ethical, civic attitude also believe, then the truth we share through our rich diversity has caught up to the lie that just one person told us, a lie that blinded us from clearly seeing how racism hid behind the total spell of his words.

Notwithstanding, the history of words is crystal clear and involves less sacredness: facts always find the words they need when they want to appear as "the Truth." In principle, all they need is a minimal guarantee that they will be repeated in a constant and uninterrupted fashion, so they can be appreciated for all their lofty aims.

With the passage of time, this is how other facts that were never repeated, because they lacked the same guarantees, didn't manage to find their way towards absolute certainty. Thus, that which is perceived as being true has an enormous advantage over what is believed to be false. It is terribly difficult for the latter to attain the position of the former. Established truths leave little room in this world for truths yet to be established. They hurriedly fly about, protected in every sort of way, through schools, cultural ministries and alienating communications technologies, and end up with the thought police and those in charge of rapid intimidation. This is how myths come into being the almost, absolute triumph of hegemony's words.

Hegemony's words attain what for philosophers is only a dream; they become "the

Truth.” The rest is a lie: a lie that paradoxically now comes back as a moral philosophy enshrined in a Yoruba proverb. Does this mean the return of the Yoruba, Christian, Muslim, or Confucian moral philosophy, so it can give Cuban civic identity a diverse and identifying form? Would this mean that history could finally be told from the perspective of those truths yet to be established dialoguing with those that are established?

The value of repressed words

There are serious racial problems in paradise. At least they don't involve hate. The myth of Cuba as an unfinished project to put an end to racism has been shattered by the visibility attained by repressed words, those that never managed to become established truths because they were not protected. The fact that those very same words became known when African Americans pronounced them is very important, but also reveals a southern defeat. Others—Cubans, Afro-Caribbeans, Afro-Brazilians, and Africans—have said those very same words without the same effect. And now, those yet to be established truths are criticized and attacked not by an evocatively powerful Marxist phrase, but by the knowledge in the essence of a Yoruba proverb.

But, where were the Yoruba when the durable myth of the New Man was defined? We, the undersigned, endorse the value of those other words that have been historically silenced by the sugarcoated myth. It was this myth, and not Yoruba wisdom, that led us Cubans to our African wars.

The memory of those who died there should be forever preserved. But they did not go there as Cubans fighting racism. Racism cannot be fought by means of a far off war unleashed between same race men, but rather through a homegrown, cultural and political

project. We saw our children, friends, brothers and neighbors die in distant lands during the 70s and 80s, at precisely the same time that racism was re-infecting our entire social project's marrow. Why the insertion of blacks into governing positions and the establishment of quotas in the second half of the eighties? Why is the absence of black generals leading mostly black Cuban troops in the fight to “liberate” their black brothers in Africa so glaring?

The participation of Cubans in Africa reveals the same historical and cultural pattern found in Cuba's regular wars for independence, with some historical exceptions: blacks go to combat and whites get total control. Any historical revision of Cuban history should begin with a mature critique of its cultural patterns. It might be true that those patterns helped liberate Nelson Mandela's South Africa but, more precisely, they impede in our reading and understanding of Nelson Mandela's thoughts.

War, education and health are all part of the same project. All nations can appreciate that their citizens are literate, educated and healed. From Africa to Latin America, Cuba has contributed to this essential work towards the development of societies. But this project had and has nothing to do with the global fight against racism. What educational tools could the Cuba government have employed, or use now, to contribute to this struggle, when they don't exist to fight racism in Cuba? Unlike technical knowledge, the struggle against racism activates a knowledge and set of cultural practices that should be incorporated. The solidarity needed for this cannot follow even the Cuban government's tradition with regard to issues as sensitive as health: more focus on outside Cuba, less inside Cuba. Above all, in a situation such as this, the educators must be educated, as Karl Marx recommended.

It is not a coincidence that many African and indigenous origin Latin American stu-

dents (except the politically correct ones) complained and complain about racism in Cuba. While they may enjoy great health, because discrimination is not guided along racial but national lines in this case, it is always strangers first, Cubans later. This is a sort of discrimination that reflects another sort of racism tied to the historical precariousness of the concept of nation in Cuba.

The institutional sublimation of racism

This precariousness resides precisely in the structural reproduction of racism. 1959 saw the deconstruction of the legal and institutional bases of this scourge. But other, more resistant ones were enacted and then reproduced. Saying there is racism in Cuba but it is not institutionalized is a complete contradiction of terms. Racism is an institution in and of itself. All -isms imply the existence of a social and political structure at their roots. Capitalism, socialism, machismo, Nazism, feminism all rely on a structure so they can function and legitimate themselves.

The way in which each one of them achieves this depends greatly on circumstance. What is undeniable is that they all directly or indirectly, openly or subtly function. The assumed scientific distinction between racism and racial prejudice, a distinction that could not hold up to the least bit of analysis, does not account for the fact that racial prejudices are just another form of institutionalized racism that function within a specific context. Were it not so, how could one explain that said prejudices—the bad conscience of a racist conscience—have endured as long as recognized racism has? Racial prejudices are just an appendix in what is the whole body of racism. We would do well to recall that a human being can very well die of appendicitis.

An insistence upon the fact that there is no institutionalized racism in Cuba is an attempt to make people believe that there is no true racism in Cuba like the kind that took legal shape in South Africa, the United States, Nazi Germany, or Bosnia. These emboldened, self-recognized forms of racism actually facilitated direct battle against them. Yet, thinking this way is like establishing a direct correspondence between institution and law, and institutionalized racism is precisely not recognizable because of its legal exceptionalism. Precisely because it exists as a cultural institution, racism (in most of the world and throughout history) has not required legislation but might sometimes need laws to legally mask itself, to make its work easier, basically in countries and cultures like Cuba's, in which laws have been respected but not upheld for centuries. Machismo and homophobia have not needed laws in Cuba to discriminate against women, homosexuals and lesbians, respectively. No one can deny that we are facing very robust cultural institutions. Racism in Cuba is institutionalized because it expresses a way of thinking within the context of an ideology of bad conscience and increasingly subtle cultural practices on television (which transmits and possibly defines a hierarchy for our rich diversity); in education; in everyday humor; in the foundations for teaching history and culture; in sociological criteria; the establishment of possible topics and limits for discussion; the discussion of threats to national security and the definition of the possible nation-building project; the mantra of the New Man; the political use of cultural symbols; the invisibility and filtration of black and *mestizo* participation in our cultural image; the structure and content of our historical pantheon; the moral use of the freedom 'bestowed' upon blacks and *mestizos*

by those with hegemonic power; and, the perpetual state of psychological denial that refuses to acknowledge its own mentality.

This is an ideology that ends up doubly legitimating itself: first, in a penal code that punishes “pre-criminal” attitudes and dispositions, something that is possible in Cuba only because of a “cultural” prejudice that identifies blacks with criminality, and that also punishes mechanisms for social survival and, second, in a constitution that establishes criteria regarding cultural superiority as foundational for the shaping of the State’s political will.

In fact, if not for institutionalized racism, Articles 72, 73.1, and 73.2 of the Penal Code (currently Law 62/87), which legally and subtly institutionalize the thinking of Cuban criminal anthropology, would be beyond comprehension. Not even Article 5 of the Constitution, itself, which establishes Marxist views (which are among many viewpoints) as superior to all other cultural understandings that constitute the brick and mortar of our nationality. Why are Marx or Lenin superior to Olofi, or Jesus, or Buddha, Confucius, or Mohammed?

To deny that civic order, which in turn leads to authentic political order, is born of an ethical world that has been nurtured by diverse and corresponding religions, worldviews, and moral universes is what leads to a profoundly cultural attitude that allows a clearly ideological party, one which represents only a million citizens, to establish a hierarchically superior position vis-à-vis other moral and civic beliefs. Despite the fact that more than six million Cubans hold these beliefs, the State deprives them of articulating their own vision of political order. The President of Bolivia, Evo Morales, could say a great deal about this. If a minority governs Cuba, this is possible only because of the cultural legitimation of a superiority that is accepted or assumed by the

majority for the sake of the common good. That is racism.

Similar constitutional atrophies, which are culturally illegitimate vis-à-vis Cuban nationality, are viable only because they rest on the pillars of institutionalized racism. This reveals more about cultural difference and differing worldviews, any direct or indirect discriminatory intentions, than differences in ethnic origin or in skin color. Of course, that explains why the use of a toponymic (*palestinos*=Palestineans) as a discriminatory classification of Cubans born in the eastern part of the island clearly expresses the essentially cultural nature of racism. It also demonstrates the emergence of new racisms in our country.

Why not assume that Yoruba proverbs are a reflection of a Yoruba idea that could offer us a way to consider our rich diversity and conceive our civic and political space in Cuba? Why was the State finally able to open up many orthodox cathedrals in Cuba for the limited number of followers of that religion (they must number about 0.01% of the population) and it prevented the establishment of temples for the Yoruba religion and other faiths for the large but indeterminate number of Cuban men and women of all races and colors?

Precisely, the convenient use of the cultural richness of ‘others’ is an old rule of Cuban racism. The Yoruba and other Cuban cultural groups should be able to contribute to more than just an appropriate phrase and an anthropological veneer for foreigners.

Racism as the precariousness of the nation-building project

That anthropological veneer has been part of and continues contributing to the identity of our racisms, in colonial times, in the republic, and in the revolution. Watered down versions of folklore, music, art, sports,

and religiosity are the places where our blacks and *mestizos* have been destined to be confined—since the very beginning, when they were in slavequarters—till today—in music and art schools, in sports, and in the Caribbean image we project to the North. Naturally, the colony, republic, and revolution have all recognized the existence of their portion of “ill-ustrated” blacks and *mestizos*. This has been in order to share some of the power and ideas with them in exchange for their assimilation, and their denial of all the logical consequences of diversity in what we might call the historical whitening process of Cuban miscegenation. This allowed racism to end up excluding itself from that project. It has been denied by many of its victims...right up to our own times.

That explains why certain realities have endured without cultural interruption for so long, from the colonial period to the revolutionary era. These realities include it being impossible for blacks and *mestizos* to legitimate themselves as economic subjects; the difficulty they have in recreating their civic spaces without being accused of being racists; the persistent poverty found at the economy's margins and cities, and in the quality of their representation; the existence of a perpetual cycle of marginality and prison; the disdain to which they have always been subjected by officers of the law; the inability to achieve the civil legitimacy of an already multiracial religiosity; a sense of outsidership with regard to national debate; a mindset of indebtedness to whatever those in power have done for them; a damaged self-esteem and reverse racism as a dangerous defense mechanism.

In light of this reality, which has lasted 400 + 50 years, blacks, *mestizos*, and whites alike have raised their voices and put forth projects. From this point forward, this debate begins to take place in the best of all places,

the plaza (public space), for the purpose of overcoming the fissures and other things caused by racism. The public plaza is serving as the space in which ideas and projects are being shared. This debate's protracted progress led more than 286 organizations to give each other evidence of their imagined, critical and practical ideas for successfully cornering racism despite its assumed identity and basic redoubts—culture and power—and clear proof of other basic progress that has been made in the realm of culture, without which there would no *Muñequitos de Matanzas* or *Folklore de Camagüey* [both Afro-inspired music groups].

Till 1959. From that year forward, civil society and debate were abolished, and blacks and *mestizos* began to be objects of emancipation and subjects of folklore...and sports. That is how the racism that was reproduced remained silently virulent and hidden behind the social illusion of a society of “equals” before the law, and as regarded access to opportunity and the redistribution of wealth. All of this was belied by the realities of Centro Habana, El Cotorro and San Pedrito, neighborhoods in Havana and Santiago de Cuba; within Combinado del Este, Valle Grande or Boniato, all prisons stained *by color*; and, by any one of the numerous police stations that try to lock up (control) the city's *disorder*.

Trapped in their social and cultural ghettos, most blacks and *mestizos* face one more difficulty. To gain access to the political sphere demands they have previously undergone a definitive process in order to be part of the current political project—the cultural education of the emancipated. This is an impossible goal, which explains why there are so few emancipated people of color within the spectrum of the power elite.

After 1959, any and all attempts to reestablish the debate about racism has clashed

with the racist norms of our inherited cultural model, one that is reproduced by our revolutionary process as well: the historical supposition that a racial debate only serves to divide the nation. What nation? Precisely the one that needs to participate in this debate. Since 1959, there has been a vicious circle that punishes, surpresses, and condemns to posterity any approach that might be employed to have a creative discussion of Cuba's problem, making it not only an issue of national security (of which there is ample current evidence) but also a hopefully escapable abyss, in a redefinition of Cuba's nation-building project. Many are the people and initiatives that have been trying, since around 1959, to take this debate to the inner circles of the State's power structure—unsuccessfully.

The exile of Juan René Betancourt, the *parametración* [imposing of strict guidelines] on Walterio Carbonell, and his non rehabilitation in public, the Satanization of Carlos Moore, the silencing of multiple voices, among them union supporters who found it necessary to leave the country; and, the *El Puente* literary group, the debates at the José Luciano Franco department, the open discussions at *La Madriguera's* cultural space in the nineties, on the one hand; and, on the other, the *Pablo Milanés Foundation* (also in the nineties); threats to establish a black theatre, the reflexive spaces of the *Yoruba Society* of 2005-2006, the Unión exchanges that took place at the Rubén Martínez Villena Hall at the UNEAC; courses at the National Library or at the Casa África, the supervised meetings at the office of the journal *Temas* and the *Color Cubano* project, among myriad, less known projects, have all fallen or been quarantined, like bothersome domino tiles that the so-called Cuban revolution cannot or does not want to play.

It lacks the intellectual, political, and anthropological tools of the complex sort of thinking it needs to lay on the table a problem that requires a true and factual accounting of the state of things as they currently are. This explains why those attempted, smaller debates, conducted by people who for the most part were honest, who unfortunately have been ostracized, run parallel to an economic restructuring of racism, the daily mistreatment the police inflicts on those it racially profiles as dangerous, and the efforts to silence independent voices and projects everywhere whose purpose it is to discuss race—among other facts in a long list of offenses.

Without a debate, any possible solutions to the race problem suffer the stagnancy and possible erosion of cultural time. They become a probability that is everywhere refuted by the certain reproduction of human scourges that are not the object of a constant, open debate by the citizenry. In its essence, the struggle against racism does not require one to go back to the nitty gritty. It is much more about a particular focus, opening up, and self-acknowledgement.

The undersigned consider there are two clear points. A denouncement of the racism that exists in Cuba should not be understood as an attack on actual persons. That would be entirely irresponsible. Additionally, it would constitute a high-level, intellectual defeat to try to define a problem with culture as a problem with one person. This kind of methodological singularization would personalize an issue that is more in the realm of ideas than that of legacies. It would result in an outright failure. The question for us is not: "Why is it still this way?" Instead, it is: "Could it be another way?" The answer is 'no.'

We believe this not because of the persistence of racism in Cuba, or because throughout the world it is a cultural issue, a symptom of a

crisis of global dimensions and of a nation-building project found all around the world—from South Africa, to Bolivia, and even in the United States—anywhere that human diversity is forced to coexist in one and the same political territory.

In our particular case, to mention one of many, the paradigm of emancipation is dead. Emancipation is a freedom that is bestowed by the victors, according to their own interests and acquired needs. It entails new chains that exist by means of a connected series of political, social, and cultural fictions that, if and when they're detected, result in humiliating accusations of ingratitude against those who show the slightest concern or dissatisfaction. This reveals the old contract that is still implicit in the internal colonization they bring, even while this process is cloaked by a sense of progressivism: I free you and you owe me eternal gratitude. What about freedom? Well, if one thinks about it, freedom is only truly possible through self-emancipation.

No people, women, minority, or discriminated, or marginalized persons truly enjoy freedom if they themselves have not defined and achieved it. This is the basic message: self-emancipation is the only way to put an end to racism and the protracted process of cultural and psychological decolonization. If the so-called Cuban revolution allowed specifically women, youth, and workers to organize it was because at a political level they were traditional actors who were easily assumed into the old emancipatory paradigm.

Allowing blacks and *mestizos* to organize in the civil arena, even if manipulated, would mean legitimating actors with a sense of their own cultural roots and specific impact on civic and political life, as is the case today throughout all of Latin America, with

indigenous peoples, and with blacks in Brazil and the United States. This would call into question the model of Cuba as a *criollo* nation that has been intact since the nineteenth century. In this sense, the denouncement made by Afro-Brazilians, Afro-Caribbeans, and African-Americans is something more than a gesture of social and racial solidarity in light of some of the State's negligence. It constitutes a realization, via the media, of the crisis that has taken hold in a nation whose form took shape in the Cuban nineteenth century, which explains why the government refuses to have a thorough discussion of the subject of race. This is not only because it does not seriously admit the existence of any of the country's structural problems, but also because it will absolutely not tolerate any questioning of the founding principles of the cultural model of which it is part. This is a government that opts for the surest way to weaken nations: hiding and transferring its most difficult dilemmas.

This is the way for so many reasons any approach to the race problem demands responsibility. The undersigned believe that a post-racial focus and the integration of our social, cultural, and political goals (something better than just miscegenation) are essential for confronting the problem of racism. The Cuban citizenry must become empowered; we must have the profound debate we have been proposing—a debate that includes all Cubans, and not divided camps. The cultural actions we promote must be realized and have a respectful and inclusive exchange among all the players in the country's daily social, cultural, and political life; we must have the support of all citizens and a social map that is open to representing us all as equals in our diversity. This is an approach that can and should be shared by Yoruba peo-

ple and Christians, atheists and existentialists, by Congo and Carabalí people, Marxists, post-Moderns, whites, blacks and *mestizos*, all of them essentially Cuban, so we

can have a nation-building project that reflects our identities—all of them, without exception.

Havana, December 29th, 2009

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