

Matanzas, 1844: **Slave Conspiracy or Slave Owner Manipulation?**

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Slave rebellions had been developing in the Cuban countryside since the first years of slavery. The first rebellion recorded in Cuba's history took place in 1533, in Jobabo, in the eastern region. Subsequent rebellions occurred in colonial history, most notably in 1538, 1616 and especially from 1677 to 1801 in El Cobre, Santiago de Cuba. During this struggle, however, slaves who worked in the Cobre mines were granted freedom by the Spanish crown. In addition, rebellions of great importance occurred in the southeastern part of Havana in 1726 and in Havana and Port au Prince (Camagüey) in 1798. The Havana countryside also witnessed upheavals in 1802.

Until these rebellions, it appeared that the disturbances had more of a circumstantial character. However, between

1790 and 1820, the slave uprisings lost this character primarily as a result of the development of a plantation economy (based on the forced arms of the Africans) and emancipation ideas that reflected the international abolition movement. In that manner, the slave rebellions turned into true conspiracies, such as the rebellions that occurred in 1795 in Bayamo and the Havana countryside in 1802. Other known conspiracies included those of Ramon de la Luz, Francisco Bassave and Joaquin Infante in 1810 and the "Aponte's Conspiracy" which occurred and was repressed in 1812¹. Additionally, other important uprisings took place in the Matanzas fields in 1825, and on different plantations in the interiors of Havana and Guantanamo between 1830 and 1837. Further, in 1839, a conspiracy by harbor workers which was strongly marked by

religious factors was dismantled. It was evident that the character of the uprisings became more organized and structured each time.

In the first years of the 1840's, the rebellions had an explosive character, agitating different ranches throughout the

Macuriges and Lagunillas, Matanzas. The capital city also experienced a revolt by 50 lucumi slaves.

In the international arena, British politics tended to the abolition of slave trade and slave emancipation. Activities conducted by D. Turnbull, the



Slaves of Sugar Plantation, Cuba, 1866.

entire Island. This was particularly evident in the Matanzas region where a greater concentration of slaves lived and exploitation was most cruel due to the large development of sugar plantations. In 1840, the insurrectional movement made its presence in several plantations in Trinidad and Cienfuegos; in 1841, in

British consul, uplifted the slaves' spirits². The long work days, tough lifestyles and mistreatment were the real basis or root for the idea of slave emancipation.

During the first trimester of 1843, hundreds of slaves revolted against their masters. The revolts began in the Alcancia sugar mill in Cardenas, but soon spread to

work crews at the La Luisa, La Trinidad, Las Nieves and La Aurora sugar mills, including those of the Moscu coffee plantations and the Ranchuelo corral. The slaves that were building the Cardenas and Jucaro railroads were also added to the upheaval.

Companies of soldiers were sent to fight against the revolts. In fact, the Cardenas port received a contingent of 5,000 soldiers who arrived in the Pizarro steamboat. A good number of protesters perished at the hands of the soldiers, although some found shelter in the southern coast marshlands and the Habana-Matanzas Hills elevations.

Barely eight months later, when the situation appeared to be under control, slaves of the Triunvirato sugar mills in Matanzas began a new revolt. The slaves of the Acana sugar mill joined the revolt and together they invaded the La Concepcion, San Miguel, San Lorenzo and San Rafael sugar mills. Witnesses of the invasions reported that the rebels shouted "Death, fire and freedom!" When the rebels moved toward the town of Santa Ana, they were beaten by 300 soldiers from the Lanceros del Rey regiment.

In the end, 50 dead bodies were left over the field and 200 slaves were made prisoners. Frequently, slave bodies were found hung from trees in the forests. Nevertheless, order was reestablished in just one week, although serenity and peace proved to be vulnerable. During the following months, Esteban Santa Cruz de Oviedo, a landowner and proprietor of a Trinidad sugar mill in Sabanilla, Matanzas, told authorities that Polonia, one of his slaves, reportedly knew and told him of a planned slave revolt during the Christmas holiday in 1844. The revolt

involved slaves from the Trinidad, La Rosa, Santo Domingo, Jesus Maria, La Majagua and La Trinidad sugar mills.

Polonia received freedom papers and 500 pesos in 1845 for reporting the planned revolt. The information she provided gave slave owners justification to initiate the cruelest and most savage repression ever taken in the history of the Island³ against slaves and freed African descendants.

The authorities and landowners feared the strength rebellions had acquired on plantations and the abolitionist ideals. This gave them certainty that a project existed to bring about a black republic like the one in Haiti, protected by the British. Given this, the declaration of a slave from the territory where there was a large concentration of slaves was a perfect fit.

If this project of conspiracy was proven, the plantations could be scoured in search of the most rebellious slaves and they could halt the advances of the "free dark-skinned and black men" that were rising due to their own efforts in the stratified colonial society. But, overall, the scouring efforts were about attacking the abolitionist ideals with force. It was abolition, as an international liberating movement, together with slave honor, that was the center of attention of the Spanish colonialism on the Island.

Investigations by the authorities began feverishly under O'Donnell's (Spanish General Captain in Cuba) orders and the sentencing and executions were not delayed. More than 10 accused slaves were executed in front of other slaves and many others were condemned to different sentences. But, that was not enough. O'Donnell, who embodied the collective paranoia of the plantation dominion was



Cuba. 1861

sure of the existence of a conspiracy induced by the British, and therefore, ordered that the investigation be strengthened. This was how Francisco Hernández and Esteban Santa Cruz de Oviedo were commissioned as Colonels of the Matanzas militia. The second was a landowner who, not surprisingly owned the slave who denounced a conspiracy involving 4,000 slaves and free African descendants that lived in the same quarters as she did. Soon, panic forced numerous proprietors to request that they be added to the investigations conducted by the authorities.

The method employed by the military to combat conspiracies consisted of tying suspected slaves to staircases and whipping them until they confessed or died. The plot of slaves under these circumstances was called the “Staircase Conspiracy.” In reality, however, if a conspiracy actually did exist it had no name. Instead, the bloody repression did have a staircase as a site of torture⁴. Fulgencio Salas, brigadier of the military commission, justified the bloody actions by declaring: “When it comes to the safety of the coun-

try and of a crime of the State, any method is legal and allowed...”⁵.

Although an undetermined number of tortured slaves died without revealing any knowledge or participation in a general plot, confessions soon poured in. All slaves were suspects and the higher the number tormented grew, the higher the admissions grew. If women, who were tortured by the inquisition courts in medieval times, confessed that they cohabitated with Lucifer in order to halt the torment they were subjected to, what was expected of the slaves who submitted to punishment?

In Cardenas, after the initial incidents, one of the first slaves interrogated was the “mulatto Segui,” who declared: “Gentlemen, I am arrested and before this court to declare the entire content of this conspiracy and, if I do not declare, I will be punished until I am proved to be understood and involved in it... But, to somewhat free myself of the sentence I deserve, I am going to denounce all of the free blacks and mulattos that comprise this atrocious conspiracy...”⁶ And, so it was that Segui regarded D. Turnbull, the

British consul, as the “President” of the movement; Placido, the poet whom resided in Matanzas, as “our President”; Ceballos, as the captain of the dark-skinned in La Havana; and Pomariega, as a mason “of great opinion” in Trinidad.

Segui’s declarations, structure, and details formed a cliché equally repeated by many others who were tortured. Reports worthy of attention included that the slaves had been offered freedom “and that they would own all of the riches and properties of their masters, and would marry the white women who they were not ordered to murder unless they—the women—were old and ugly.” More than the content of an abolitionist plan of conspiracy; the slaves’ declarations reflected the nightmare of a proprietor in a heated summer night. In this declaration, it is also important to point out that Segui testified: “...any black man whose confession you take, at the beginning or at the end, will confess the same...”⁷

The two greatest centers of the staircase repression were the cities of Matanzas and Cardenas. In Matanzas, the torture staircases were mounted at the Estancia de Soto plantation. When a prisoner arrived, if he did not immediately declare that he was guilty and accused others, he was tied and whipped. If he survived, he was transported to an infirmary that was built for such a purpose in one of the houses in the city. Those who died were said to have perished from diarrhea.

In Cardenas, the prisoners arrived in trains or wagons to one of the railroad offices. From there, they would be transported to the Carrera warehouse. Survivors of the tortures were taken to the railroad infirmary. Those that died were thrown in the Cardenas bay.

It was asserted that about 4,000 people were involved in the hearings carried out by the Military Commission of Matanzas. However, Robert Paquette⁸, based on Vidal Morales, affirmed that the number was 3,066. According to information gathered by this author, 96 of these were white, 783 slaves and 2187 were “free colored” people. Also, it has been stated that 78 of the people involved in the cause were sentenced to death, 600 were sentenced to jail, and some 400 were expelled from the Island. Ramiro Guerra, a Cuban historian, stated that approximately 300 black men died during the interrogations. However, this information is based on partial and unreliable sources.

The source of information is one of the most important issues that should be taken into account when using statistical data provided by the Military Commission and the authorities. Since it is very difficult to reconstruct the exact number of slaves who died, the official numbers are unreliable. Currently, estimated numbers of slave deaths do not take into account the anonymous slaves that perished during the tortures, especially since many were said to have died of diarrhea. Also, it is also doubtful that those who were thrown into the Cardenas Bay were included as part of some registry.

If the revolt began with the slaves from the countryside and until now there is no irrefutable proof that the whites, dark-skinned and free blacks with abolitionist ideas were materially linked to the events, why were 71.09% of the sentenced free men “of color” and only 10% of the condemned slaves from the plantations? Why, if the slaves were supposed to be the armed branch of the revolt? The truth is that it was the explosive reaction of slaves from

the countryside that put the abolition process in motion and the statement of a slave that facilitated its linkage. But, the main victims were the “free dark-skinned and blacks,” who they could only accuse of a conspiracy theory, for the revolt was dismantled before it occurred.⁹

Ninety-six whites were investigated or judged by the authorities together with slaves, dark-skinned and free blacks. Among them were outstanding figures such as Domingo del Monte and José de la Luz y Caballero, illustrious Cuban thinkers. Both men defended themselves of the accusations from different angles because there was definitely nothing farther from their beliefs than a revolt.

The case of Felix Tanco Bosmeniel was different. He was of Colombian origin and began living in Cuba in 1810 at 14 years old. During the years of repression, he was a postal administrator in Matanzas. Also, he maintained close contact with the Cuban intellectuals as editorial chief of the *La Aurora de Matanzas* newspaper, and secretary of the patriotic delegation of the Friends of the Country Society. Felix Tanco was an abolitionist whom publicly recognized, from the cultural point of view, the values and contributions of Africans on the Island. Perhaps of all the whites involved in the hearings, he had developed the most abolitionist and anti-slavery creed. For years, Felix Tanco had been identified by the authorities as a dangerous intellectual because he publicly voiced his feelings against the slave trade and slavery. When the first uprisings occurred in Cardenas, he wrote a letter to Domingo del Monte in which he stated: “The events of Bemba and Cardenas have again ignited the fire in my heart against the infamous oppressors... the whites con-

quered, but let the wicked keep in mind that when one man binds another man’s foot to a chain and makes him his slave, he also binds himself...”¹⁰

It is certain that the investigations, on occasions, demonstrated some links to conspiracy between slaves and “free dark-skinned and blacks.”¹¹, but the existence of a general plan directed by the latter was never proven. If the plan of the authorities and slave owners was only to halt the continuous uprisings of slaves in the Matanzas region, the repression that was unchained and its brutal ways were more than enough to keep the rebellions from taking shape, those that since then were never able to reach the levels they had in 1844.

Nonetheless, the colonial authorities manipulated the movement to involve their political enemies, who were the whites and descendants of free Africans and carriers of emancipation ideas. Additionally, they took the opportunity to demolish the battalions of the free dark-skinned and blacks that had already become a compelling force and with them the small and growing “black bourgeois.” This one, as Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux stated, practically disappeared with the conspiracy.¹² The black man had slowly and gradually climbed up Cuban society. Perhaps, a small bourgeois of African ancestry was born with the important role that the Loyal Dark-skinned and Black Battalions held at the nation’s councils (Cabildos de Nacion) and in their mutual help and liberation.

The authorities established battalions in the 17th century because they answered the defensive needs of the Spanish crown in America. The battalions existed in Havana, Matanzas, Trinidad, Sancti Spiritus, Santa

Clara, San Juan de los Remedios, Puerto Príncipe, Bayamo, Baracoa, and Santiago de Cuba. Members of the battalions fulfilled their duty in Florida, Louisiana, and Mexico. They acquired prestige and some capital which they invested in properties such as houses, farms, land, and even slaves. Moreover, they financed businesses such as tailors, funerals and public transportation.

The most noted figures of the Loyal Dark-skinned and Black Battalions were linked to the intellectual movement of the free dark-skinned and blacks. Poets, writers, journalists, sculptors, musicians, educators, nurses, and dentists of light African ancestry, appeared in the press or were linked with members of the battalions through family, economic, or simply cultural ties.

No slave rebellion was being dismantled on June 28, 1844, when Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (Plácido)¹³, a mulatto poet, was led to the firing squad accompanied by Santiago Pimienta, a landowner; Andrés José Dodge, a dentist; Jorge López, a painter; José Miguel Román, a music teacher; and Pedro Torre, a musician. The progress that had been acquired by the African descendants was based on their own merit and was being interrupted.

With the embargo of the riches that belonged to those who were sentenced and having many of them exiled, the slave owning aristocracy and the colonial administration were not eradicating the danger of the torch of freedom in the plantations. They did not constitute the armed force that would break their backs; they were actually taking apart a new and vigorous sector that posed an economic, political and cultural threat.

As a result of these events, the writer, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's novel, entitled *Sap*, was censored. This occurred not because it was considered to be a project in support of emancipation, but, because it focused on a relationship between a man of black ancestry and a white woman.

When Félix Tanco was thrown into one of the Morro Castle dungeons, a conspiracy's armed branch was not being dismantled but, rather, the abolitionist ideal¹⁴. As once stated by Tanco, it was the abolitionist ideas they were attacking and the new culture that was generated by the union of blacks and whites. When besides this, they eliminated their source of income by making an embargo on their riches, the authorities and the landowners considered their future to be guaranteed. This, however, misfired:

For the Cubans, abolition, as an ideal of human justice, formed an inseparable part of their struggle of independence from the Spanish colony. That is why, as José Martí would write in the *New York Herald*, on May 2, 1895, "...when the desire for liberty matured in the revolution of 1868, that nation of true men redeemed black slavery in their first action as a nation..."¹⁵.

NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Some “free mulattos” were involved in the conspiracy of independence seekers of 1823, denominated “Suns and Rays of Bolívar”.
2. See Sarracino, R. (1989). *Inglaterra, sus dos caras en la lucha cubana por la abolición*, Editorial Ciencias Sociales, La Habana.
3. The national historiographies always referenced this accusation, but it was not until the year 2001 in which two Cuban researchers came across the documents that proved such a secret, however, it does not mean that the information provided by the slave woman was entirely true. To that respect, see Barcia Zequeira, María del C. y M. Barcia Paz (2001): *La Conspiración de la Escalera: el precio de una traición*. En *Catauro, Revista Cubana de Antropología*. Fundación Fernando Ortiz, La Habana. pp. 199-204
4. Due to this it would be more appropriate to speak of the slave rebellions of '44 and of the “staircase repression.” (Represión de La Escalera)
5. Guerra y Sánchez, R. (1964). *Manual de Historia de Cuba*. p. 437 (*Económica, Social y Política*), Editorial Nacional de Cuba, La Habana.
6. Hellberg, C. (1957). *Historia estadística de Cárdenas*. Comité Pro-calles de Acción Cívica Ciudadana, Cárdenas. p. 44
7. These statements were made by the historian Charles Hellberg, based on the original documents of the process.
8. See Paquette, R. (1988). *Sugar is made with blood, The Conspiracy of La Escalera and the Conflict between Empires over Slavery in Cuba*. Wesleyan University Press, Connecticut.
9. See García, Gloria (2003). *Conspiraciones y revueltas. La actividad política de los negros en Cuba (1790-1845)*, Editorial Oriente, Santiago de Cuba. p. 131
10. Academia de la Historia de Cuba (1957). *Centón epistolario de Domingo del Monte*, Imprenta El Siglo XX, La Habana, t.7. p. 17
11. In that respect the texts of Robert Paquette, Rodolfo Sarracino & Gloria García can be consulted.
12. See Deschamps Chapeaux, P. (1971): *El negro en la economía habanera del siglo XIX*. Editorial UNEAC, La Habana. p. 15
13. Plácido was born in Havana on March 18, 1809. Outstanding artisan and poet, he had collaborated with the *La Aurora de Matanzas* newspaper. He had been detained on various occasions before for supposed conspiracy activities. When the repression was initiated, he detained again on January 30, 1844, and soon after was sentenced to death, executed from his back.
14. A valuation of the F. Tanco's contributions to the Cuban culture and to abolition are found in *Félix Tanco in the Cuban literature setting of the XIX century*. G. La Rosa (1985). *Revista de Literatura Cubana*. La Habana, N. 7. pp. 34-59
15. José Martí (1953). *Obras Completas*, Editorial LEX, La Habana, V. II. p. 266