

In support of an investigation of the racial problem in Cuba

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It's not uncommon to hear a "compliment" in Cuba having great racial undertones, which expresses that a black person behaves like a white one. But even sadder and more shameful than the actual "compliment" is to find that those "complimented" are calmly accepting, and sometimes pleased with the degrading compliment. I'm convinced that there is no offense meant by those who say it, or by those who receive the "compliment" the great majority of times. Such a situation, which unfortunately is so often repeated, probably reflects an underlying culture. In this culture, white and black people very naturally assume that the ideal and perfect thing to do is to be or behave like "white people," besides identifying the projections and behavior of black people as socially incorrect or reprehensible.

The essence, depth and scope of problems related to racial diversity in Cuba have led to permanent restlessness in the political, social and intellectual spheres of all times. Currently, the issue becomes unique and com-

plex while there is no polarization or a generalized ethno-racial disagreement that leads to immediate social chaos; nor is there a legal or judicial structure in place for racial discrimination. However, the problem is evidently real, and its satisfactory solution will have a determining influence in the future destiny of the nation.

A few years ago, a small group of us Cuban intellectuals arrived at a bold, but convincing conclusion. Until the black segment of the Cuban population (which is so important demographically and culturally speaking), is and feels fully integrated in all spheres, levels and structures that define the Cuban values, rights and powers; until a natural and balanced racial parity is seen in Cuban symbolic images and real status, we will not be able to talk about a complete nation in the most basic meaning of the phrase.

The racial problem in Cuba, its complex character and sui generis, has profound historical and cultural roots. It has been worsened by the inconsequential attitude of those



who have been in power, independent of their political beliefs and affiliations. This has also been worsened by the routine displacement or inconsequentiality of black Cubans as a social group; by their lack of motivation to strive for the inclusion of their identity and dignity as recognized, first and foremost, by themselves. It has been worsened by the black man's inability to get away from that negative and ongoing inferiority complex that leads them to behave "like whites"; to project the counter-productive "reverse racism"; or to see themselves as defenseless and devoted people who "benefited from the revolution."

A graphic example of this way of thinking is the fact that the black people who dare to publicly oppose the Cuban government are very often refuted, first and foremost because it is black people doing so. As if the modern revolutionary evangelists "liberated" us black people to forever be devoted to them, and that our souls may go to heaven for having been so.

In order to transcend colonialism or feudalism in any place, the bourgeois (in this case

meaning the white people) are willing to risk their patrimony and their lives, conscious of the fact that their land, values and power as a social class will be recognized within the resulting structural transformation. That social class conviction, along with traditions, development, cultural baggage, ownership and interests, internal relations and viability, determines their great capacity of social reintegration and social, political and economic recycling. This is possible for them even when they have suffered the attacks or consequences of economic, political, or natural catastrophes. The perception of property and status ownership is a determining factor in the search by any means of lands and privileges. However, for black people since slavery, Cuba symbolized exploitation and separation from their land. Property ownership was the origin of their suffering, besides becoming accustomed to legal and jurisdictional areas (the basis of property) being the foundation of the exclusion and repression they suffered.

The natural, innate and sustained instinct of black people and their descendants is to escape from, outwit, and alienate themselves from those canon laws and structures which they identified as oppressing, repressing, and ignorant of their own values and customs. This is manifested through their focus on religious syncretism. It is also manifested through that sort of "neocimarronaje" (neowildness) topped with their marginalization and "ghetto" mentality with which they assume their inclusion into society, once broken the slavery chains.

Beyond that which is cryptically reflected in laws, the black person is rejected, isolated and excluded by those who have real power. These people are direct and legitimate heirs of those who snatched the black man from his land and converted him into slave and inferior, the greatest recipient of the compassion and



charity of the “chosen” ones. Once slavery and colonization are overcome, blacks are Cubans and citizens or in the precise moment, revolutionary partners, but always inferior and excludable.

Within the revolution they are receptors and debtors of the gifts of the leaders, who are also white heirs of those who colonized and enslaved the black man. The traditional practice of seeing the black man as a useful subject of political or military mobilization is reproduced within the revolution, but it has always excluded him from social, political and institutional practice. This is worsened by the known fact that the revolution shuts down the only two ways of finding a solution to the issue: the common ground found in the civic areas within the Republic, and public debate about the subject. The eradication of discrimination came from the highest level of government and by “principle and political will.” The issue is no longer discussed unless it is to recall how bad it was in the past and how good it is now. Independent institutions are no longer necessary because now we’re all equal and having such institutions can have a racist connotation.

The Spanish evangelized and civilized us with their God and their clothing. We should have been wholly grateful. The revolution “emancipated” us with its corporate equality

and there’s nothing else to say about the subject. Whether it was done on purpose or naively, the revolutionary leadership lost sight of the importance of the psychological and sociological foundations of social evolution or personal projection.

It is a fact that the Cuban military has, proportionally, more generals of Asian background than black. There is an inexplicable tendency of tourism guides to assure their clients that 80% of the population of the Island is composed of white people. The ecclesiastic Catholic hierarchy (which is also an ethnic and social heir of the colonialist slave owners), demonstrates an attitude when it excludes the representatives of religions of African origin from the ecumenical and protocol driven encounters with Pope John Paul II. All of these examples constitute an unequivocal, unacceptable, manifestation of the place reserved to the black segment of Cuban society by those who wield the real power.

This tradition of indifference and rejection to what is established, structured and official, began to establish segmentation and short social reach of black people and their descendants in Cuba. This is different than immigrants from many parts of the world who, having arrived on the Island under more or less the same conditions, demonstrated the ability to achieve integration and economic and cultural success.

A clear process of racial mixture in Cuban society has been produced in recent decades. This process is manifested in phenomena such as: the increased access of black people to professional, academic and cultural development opportunities; in the visible increase in racially mixed couples (it’s not difficult to find people who are presumed to be white with conditions such as sickle cell anemia, a hematological pathology genetically reserved for black people); in the considerably

increased number of white people who practice religions mainly practiced by black people and vice-versa, or in the increased involvement of white people in crimes traditionally attributed to black people.

However, this reality is not reflected in the economic and political structures, nor in the Cuban media and areas of cultural diffusion. Although there are many black people professionally and scientifically qualified, the administrative positions and the jobs that provide greater and more direct access to wellbeing and prosperity are reserved for white people for the most part. In fact, it's a burden when foreign visitors comment that they are

which operate to prevent those who have reached an adequate level of education from reaching the employment or title that their talent and effort would merit.

The poverty of black people in some areas has often been justified with the argument that "they succeed more in the cultural and sports arenas," but the fact is that we haven't had better luck in those areas either. The Cuban Union of Writers and Artist (UNEAC) as well as the National Institute of Sports, Physical Education and Recreation (INDER) have waited for decades to witness the ascent of a non-white person in their highest positions. One must wonder, after the pass-



sure there are as many white people as black people in Cuban streets, but there are only white people in the offices and in protocol oriented positions. The problem in Cuba is not that the segregated black people lack access to professional knowledge and preparation; it's that there are certain mechanisms in place

ing of the historical UNEAC president, Nicolas Guillen, what prevents the renowned composer, Jose Loyola, from being the president of the organization? He has been an example of political fidelity to the regime in addition to being the craftsman of the entity's functioning. Or why has the Cuban govern-

ment preferred to have second hand political representatives who have absolutely no knowledge or experience in sports as presidents of the organization which rules sports, instead of having renowned icons such as Alberto Juantorena, two-time Olympic champion and world record setter during his most productive years; or Roberto León Richard, world class gymnast, awarded with the Olympic order of sports achievement, with a Bachelor degree in

unheard clamour of the black actors and dancers which is sometimes deaf and sometimes desperate due to the inherited lack of opportunities and recognition. The issue worsens as long as those cultural spheres are totally controlled and directed by the State; the entity most responsible for guaranteeing and reflecting the equilibrium and equality which it so often celebrates.

In the '90s, just as it occurred in other



Physical Culture and Psychology. For many years he was the direct collaborator of the Chief of State.

The same thing happens with the media, which is very important in the reflection of reality as well as in the promotion of human and cultural values. It is very far from expressing the diversity and ethno-racial integration of the Cuban nation. A renowned person has commented on the subject, saying that television used to be in black and white and that now it's only white. I do not intend to extend myself to this level with well known and palpable examples of deficiencies, gaps and omissions that television, movie theatres and the National Cuban Ballet have suffered for decades. I'll only remember the unending and

spheres, the economic condition of black Cubans also became complicated. All the elements which the "survival of the revolution" depended on (thanks to the new socio-economic reorganization), conditioned personal survival, wellbeing, or prosperity¹. These elements were once again taken from black people. Once again, the historical changes (this time the history of the liberating revolution), excluded and alienated black people. Once again, crime and prostitution became the "saving grace" of the rough years kindly named: "Special Period During Time of Peace."

In my opinion, the solution to the racial problem in Cuba is very difficult because I don't believe the practice of methodologies used with black people in the United States,

such as affirmative action (designed to provide opportunities and give preference to minorities which have historically been alienated from society's nerve, structures and institutions), is an appropriate solution. Other examples are sectors which, although broad in numbers, have been reduced in importance or segregated almost to the point of constituting separate nations in the marking of a territory or State (i.e., Native American towns in America and Kurdish in the Near East).

I believe it is necessary and possible for images, symbols and structures within Cuba to reflect in a natural, balanced and consistent manner, that richness in diversity and racial mixture that forms the Cuban nation. It's necessary and possible for black Cubans to have a proper and authentic voice, aside from the possibility of not only making their potential count in every corner of our social structure, but also the capabilities that their talents and efforts have granted them. That "Cuban Yoruba Association," helps very little in accomplishing that. It is directed, with no discretion at all, from the office of Religious Issues of the Communist Party Central Committee, or that absurd public and corporative "Abakua Bureau."

Until now, Cuban authorities have only created additional obstacles by basing themselves on counterproductive omissions and manipulations. Since they do not appear to have the capability of doing anything better, the main contribution that they can offer to the solution of the problem (which constitutes in no small terms, a threat of social fracture possibly greater than we can even calculate) is to recognize that it exists, and to support the initiation of an extensive and profound debate. The debate must be one in which, without prejudice and conditions, we can define what deficiencies and advances existed in the past; what steps forward and steps back

are currently present; and above all, what can we do to build that future of positive diversity and harmonious coexistence that the children of this land desire and deserve. If the Cuban rulers had the personal and political courage of recognizing that the formula of "everything before bad, everything now perfect" is fatal and unsustainable, we would be taking the first step toward the completion and salvation of the nation.

Another element of great significance is the responsibility of black and mixed professionals and intellectuals who are always preoccupied and hurt by the conditions, manifestations and impacts of the racial problems in Cuba. They should decide to let go of their concerns regarding small family circles, and nurture debate and solutions that will determine the future destiny of their descendents with their judgments and projections.

More than twenty years ago my dear African History professor insisted that there was no possible solution in South Africa. She rejected the ability of human beings to reduce their prejudices and miseries in favor of values and interests of greater transcendence and reach. We will never stop thanking South Africans, black and white, for that invaluable lesson: it's so important to recognize that the "other" exists; deserves respect; and has a right to be heard even before being loved. There is no doubt that Cuba is a plural and racially mixed nation. The day in which we are also a model of integration, equilibrium and justice depends on all of us.

NOTE

1- Namely, property (comfortable homes, automobiles or farmlands), access to dollar based economics or the money sent from families who live out of the country (only about 4% of Cuban exiles are black).