

# Cuba: Cosmic Harmonies in the Havana Slave Descendant

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“If you find two people who live in harmony, at least one of them is good.” Let this ancient but also very current and wise African proverb serve to initiate this incomplete, inconclusive and barely inciting examination of the Havana slave descendant’s distinguishing sense of solidarity, his love of community, connection to his roots and constant nurturing of empathy and respect within his group.<sup>1</sup> These are all qualities that from the beginning immediately would have been seen as traits that best sum up his nature. In the historical context of slavery, they also morally and spiritually represent another of the contributions of African peoples to the modern world.

These qualities are distinctive in as much or even more so, for their very essence and specific reach and, above all, for the way they managed to develop, over centuries, in the midst of the most hostile circumstances. One must never forget that the practice of solidarity or of any simple, brotherly gesture among slaves in Cuba constituted a crime that frequently could and did lead to cruel punishment and death.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to find very many absolutely accurate historical references, facts, and documents to prove the tenacity with which black Cuban slaves found a way to channel their spirit of camaraderie, practicing a sort of externalized cordiality that has forever taken root in the innermost being of the children of Africa



(and they still share their markedly distinctive heritage in Havana). In exchange for nothing, theirs is a carefree, spontaneous affability that they project outwardly to whosoever will accept it, as if it just gives them great pleasure to give of themselves to their friends or to anyone who expresses appreciation and/or consideration for their people. It is not the kind of friendliness that purposefully seeks recognition from its intended recipient, or the sort expressed by someone who at all cost wants to be accepted by the other. It is an inherent, straightforward and uncomplicated virtue in their actual nature: it seems to be something that is proffered because to do otherwise is impossible. It is more or less like reason, which, according to the philosophers, is a

common good that is destined to unite via absolute and lasting ties all those who possess it. Ultimately, it is a natural gift that even the most adverse circumstances were unable to restrict. It was neither limited by geographical confines, nor corrupted by modernity's paraphernalia—because, perhaps, denying something that genuine is the most effective way to prove its existence.

Of course, even when it represents the most scandalous extreme in history, the case of African slavery is not unique. Even when this barbaric reality brought about “societies stripped of their essence, trampled cultures, undermined institutions, stolen lands, assassinated religions, annihilated artistic artifacts, the suppression of extraordinary possibilities...people torn

away from their gods, their land and their customs, from their lives, from life, itself, from dance, from wisdom,”<sup>2</sup> the children of Africa, the only human community who in the face of total annihilation saw relief in mutual solidarity, however limited, and even an alternative for survival, did not change. Notwithstanding, the abovementioned detail is precisely what distinguishes them: more than an alternative for them, fraternal communication, the sharing of support and sympathies, was (and continues being) primordial and an expression of character, above all.

“If it is true that consciousness is a process of transcendence,” as Frantz Fanon alerted us in memorable pages, “we have to see too that this transcendence is haunted by the problems of love and understanding. Man is a *yes* that vibrates to cosmic harmonies. Uprooted, pursued, baffled, doomed to watch the dissolution of the truths that he has worked out for himself one after another, he has to give up projecting onto the world an antinomy that coexists with him.”<sup>3</sup>

If something has been and is still bent on distancing us from that day to which Fanon refers, since the beginning of human civilization, it is precisely the ambition of some men to dominate others, by dividing them and in that way, putting them at odds with terrible greed and crude material interests. Thus, it is precisely in this sense that the transcendency and enormous example of the spiritual solidarity of the Havana descendants of African slavery is confirmed today.

### *Flowers in the garbage heap*

Any minimal foray beyond the outer layer of the history of slavery clearly illus-

trates that just as certain plants can bloom in the midst of filth, thus extracting from it the nourishment they need to be beautiful, the will to share and understand also flourished in the children of Africa, despite (or also as a result of) the most adverse conditions, not unlike certain flowers.

It would be important to recall now some of the circumstances under which they were taken from their world. It is well-known that one of the most common methods the traffickers used to obtain slaves in Africa was to burn villages on all four boundaries, thus grabbing villagers who attempted to escape the flames, frightened and naked, sometimes running around like human torches. Although not the only method used, or the only monstrous one, the evil chaos and confusion this caused aided the traffickers in their task. Equally known, particularly about the earliest times, is that only the youngest and strongest were sent to the coastal slave markets, while the elderly, women and children were mutilated or killed right in the act. There is long recognized and abundant proof of this practice.

In his book *El comercio de esclavos africanos* [Commerce in African Slaves], Thomas Fawell Buxton asserts that during these expeditions more than 20,000 human beings were annihilated in a relatively short time. He also cites the case of an African village, Darkalla, where because traffickers found only old people, women and children, they decided to do away with them by simply throwing them to the flames.<sup>4</sup>

Once captured, the prospective slaves began to endure the ordeal of their transport to the coast: this was in large caravans, leashed together in groups of seven, with ox leather straps around their necks, and the right feet of some shackled to the left foot of others. They also had to collectively sus-

tain the rope that united all the shackles to be able to walk. The death of a captive under these conditions irremediably decided the fate of his (foot) partner because in not being able to drag the cadaver along, to continue progressing with the caravan, he was left behind, seated, with the silent and lifeless weight, with no other option but to await his own death.

In José A. Benítez Cabrera's illustrative *África: biografía del colonialismo* [Africa: Biography of Colonialism], we are not permitted to forget that: "The caravan routes were easily identifiable by the human skeletons strewn throughout the length and breadth of those Dantean trails."<sup>5</sup>

Later, on the coast awaiting transport ships, hunger, smallpox, dysentery and other plagues took their toll among the prisoners, confined in conditions that today pale before the horror of the Nazi concentration camps. It was common for the deteriorated state the captives developed during their long march to the coast to force the traffickers to reject their usefulness. They considered the cost of nourishing them much higher than the price they would get for them; so they did away with them. For the very same reason, captains, who rejected them after they were brought aboard their ships, did the very same thing. Before embarking, they would subject their "cargo" to a new selection process, according to physical state.

Once in the ships' holds, the slaves were piled on each other in such close proximity that they could not shift their original positions but once a day, when they got to go topside, to receive food and water. Any slave whose objective was suicide, by abstaining from eating, would have a spoonful of live coals shoved into his or her mouth. From the voyage's beginning till the end of the

journey, the hold's deck was a sea of blood, vomit, excrement and unbearable pestilence: it looked like a slaughterhouse floor.

Historians today have not yet been able to definitively conclude the exact number of Africans who endured this nightmare. But all their calculations are frightening. Renowned Cuban historian José Luciano Franco, an expert on the subject, believes that "40 million men and women from all over the African continent, primarily its West Coast, participated in the creation of a new form of life and culture in the New World."<sup>6</sup>

The already cited *África: biografía del colonialismo* says the following on the matter: "It has more or less correctly been established that the number of slaves that arrived annually in America was 100,000 in 1750, 120,000 in 1815, 140,000 in 1830 and 150,000 in 1840. If we take as a yearly average the figure of 100,000 between 1600 and 1850, that is, a period of 250 years—when the slave trade was at its peak—we have roughly 25,000,000 Africans brought to America as slaves by the Spanish, Portuguese, French, English, Dutch and German colonizers and merchants. Nevertheless, if we take into account that the incomplete nature of our facts could be a source of error and, on the other hand, that many ship's registry's were duplicated (many were sent from the Antilles to the continent), it might be that 15,000,000 is the total number of slaves brought to the American continent, as W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in his book *The Negro* [El Negro] ... [and if] thirty-five percent of the slaves who left African coasts perished during the crossing, if twenty-five percent died in the coastal concentration camps, if only half of the captives from the interior arrived, and that in order to capture 1,000 Africans they

had to kill a similar number of them, all this means that nearly 150,000,000 had to be captured for 15,000,000 to arrive in the Americas. Furthermore, to enslave 15 million people, kill 135 million human beings, strip from a continent a labor force of 150,000,000 people and then upon that place build a society is not a simple statistical matter but a fantastic genocide.”<sup>7</sup>

However revolting it may be, we should also superficially revisit the subject of the slaves’ treatment once they got to Cuba’s fields. Manuel Moreno Fragonal’s substantial study of Cuban *ingenios* (sugar centrals) states:

The success of the enterprise depended upon the simplicity of the social structure that was created, through its prison-like reality and the lack of communication amongst its members. That is why work ensembles—*dotaciones* (groupings of slaves) were never comprised of blacks of the same tribal or cultural background. It is enough to analyze any one of the hundreds of slave testimonies from Cuban sugar centrals to understand the caution with which these groupings were made, always throwing together Africans from diverse regions of the continent, with different languages or dialects, [and] religious beliefs, and even mutually hostile sentiments towards each other, of course. These hatreds, invented and cultivated by the slaveholders to facilitate the labor divisions necessary for the slave hunt, were exacerbated by masters and foremen, alike. They even created two new opposing categories—*Africans* and *criollos* (Cuban-born blacks). In this way they were able to prevent the formation of a single solidarious group and encourage exclusive, separatist groups that made integration difficult.”<sup>8</sup>

Historian Juan Pérez de la Riva recounts the conditions of their captivity, for his part: “It was only at the beginning of the third decade of the nineteenth century that the construction of giant and sinister masonry barracoons for the locking up of whole sugar central *dotaciones* during resting hours began to be built. It seems that Chateausalins was the first to recommend their construction, in 1831. The Cuban landowners’ *Vademécum* consulting book recommends that they “construct their slave quarters in the shape of a barracoon, with only one door, so that the administrator or foreman could take the key every night. Each room to be built shall have no more than one small door with a small barred window next to it, so that in the evening the slaves cannot communicate with each other.”

This publication, one of the most harmful of the many produced by Cuban slave owners during the “good old times,” was enthusiastically received, as one can see from its subsequent 1831, 1848, 1854, etc., editions. During the day, a barracoon’s doors were kept open and if the slaves cooked their food on wood stoves under its eave, which went the whole length of the structure, their movements, if they were many, became difficult to monitor. They suffocated when they were locked up at night, the promiscuity was horrible, and the difficulties for cooking and food distribution became enormous. There was also evident danger of fire, since the entire building’s support structure was made of wood beams or palm trunks. But even if they weren’t, if the platformed structure caught fire, it was difficult to avoid it getting to the cooking pits the slaves had in their rooms and, from there, to the entire roof.

In a society built upon wealth, greed and human contempt, what might have been the incentives that caused Cuban slave owners to unanimously accept the advice of the good doctor Don Honorato Bertrand de Chateausalins? If a slave vessel could cost up to \$10,000 pesos, the slave yard barracoon that took its place could not have been less than \$20,000 or \$25,000 pesos, particularly with the grand dimensions it was given. Thus, the wealthy landowners must have had very good reasons to so unanimously and quickly decide to incur this great expense. As the mechanization of the sugar centrals increased, and the industrial revolution reached our countryside, *dotaciones* grew on a par with the increasing cost of slaves. They went from a price of 350 to 400 pesos in 1820, to 600 and even 700 pesos for *bozales* (native Africans) in 1850. Since the labor force was becoming increasingly expensive, it was essential to utilize it efficiently. The concentration of all workers in just one place could be considered an ideal way to increase productivity. Seen from this perspective, the barracoon could be a very proficient way of combating absenteeism, as our ineffable Doctor Chateausalins, a University of Havana professor and eminent member of the Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País [Economic Society of Friends of the Country], and others, have said: "after having worked all day," he wrote, "if blacks are not well locked up they will misuse the time they should use for rest, to leave the plantation at night. These nocturnal outings are for... romancing one of the neighbor's black women or (to) look for spirited drinks.... It goes without saying that it is so harmful for blacks to go out like this at night: they do this as quickly as possible, either on horseback or on foot; they return to the plantation all perspired, they

get drunk, they often lie on the damp ground all sweaty and tend to return, one or two days later, sick with symptoms like spasms or pneumonia or any other grave infirmity.... This great inconvenience could be avoided if the barracoon were well guarded and the administrator checked on it from time to time, on no set day."<sup>9</sup>

### *Despite all this, they flourish*

The scene that is (synthetically and quickly) summarized in the paragraphs above not only did not prevent an innate propensity for camaraderie, it did not keep warm and beneficial relationships from flourishing among these unfortunate children of Africa, like flowers in a garbage heap. We might be safe in assuming it stimulated them. Innumerable testimonies, facts and references also prove the meticulous and embarrassing consistency with which the slave owners tried to squash that bloom.

From the very beginning of slavery in the Island's capital, which is this essay's particular focus, none of the barbarous methods employed at the sugar centrals, none of the segregationist barriers that the slave owners and authorities used succeeded in stopping the slaves from providing each other with mutual support. Not even the fact that the seat of the colonial government was located there made any difference in slaves's plans to flee in groups and attempt to establish their own kindred communities.

In 1836, Baron Alexander Von Humboldt stated that "before 1788 there were black *cimarrones* (escaped slaves) in the mountains of Jaruco, where they sometimes created garrisons, where they lived, that they built for the common defense of their small fortifications made of piled up tree trunks."<sup>10</sup>

In his book *Los palenques de los negros cimarrones* [Black Cimarron Palenques], historian José Luciano Franco explains that these *palenque*, escaped slave communities, were basically made up of groups of about 15 to 20 huts or *bohios* that were constructed a prudent distance one from another and hidden within the densest vegetation so that their inhabitants could easily communicate with each other, but not be easily found by the fierce slave tracking dogs, trained as they were, to tear *cimarrones* apart. The *palenques* residents would create a nearby clearing in order to jointly plant and harvest nourishing ground crops. They also send out expeditions to find beef at neighboring farms, but not before organizing a home defense and collective support for their communities, where a set number of people remained to tend to their crops, serve as a rear guard and warn the rest if there was a surprise attack.

As far as the proliferation of this sort of freedom-loving, community-oriented and progressive *palenques*, we actually have figures from the very same historian, who limits himself to the area around Havana and the *cimarrones* who were captured, from a very early date, since there could be no census of the ones who remained free. Franco specifies that “[ever] since the promulgation of the *Reglamento* [Rules] on runaway slaves of December 20th, 1796, till the end of 1815, there had been “14,982 *cimarrones* from the Capital...and another 989 from the country’s interior in the office of captured runaways, for a total of 15,971 *cimarrones*” (Registered as such in the *Archivo Nacional de Cuba* [National Archive of Cuba]: *Real Consulado and Junta de Fomento* [Royal Consulate and Ministry of Public Works], Legajo [Bundle] 141. No. 6913).<sup>11</sup>

The concentration of slaves destined to domestic work and service in the city of Havana made social contacts amongst those victims easier (although only relatively so and despite the slave owners). For obvious reasons, they had more access to communication amongst themselves than those who were isolated away on rural plantations that were very far from each other, inhospitable and had redoubled surveillance systems. Additionally, the number of native-born blacks (slave descendants) was greater in the capital. They, who had presumably experienced some sort of “domestication” process by having been born in Cuba, were preferred for work within the infrastructure by slave owners. The important work they would eventually do to help their African ancestry would soon be revealed.

Cuban historian Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux references a dazzling and illustrative example of these so-called urban runaways, free blacks and mulattoes (artisans, musicians, barbers, vendors or port day laborers), who he credits with having notably inspired slaves who worked as domestic servants (cooks, house slaves, drivers, wet nurses, washer women, seamstresses...) in capital neighborhoods like Belén, Espíritu Santo, Catedral, Santo Ángel or San Juan de Dios to join the freedom struggle. Of course, inspiration was not the only thing they got out of those contacts. Besides urging captive slaves to flee towards a secondary zone, outside the plantations, to neighborhoods that were densely populated by free blacks, Africans of all ethnic groups and many *criollos*, this contact also established a basis for a brotherly collaboration against which the regime’s implacable measures were practically useless.

In his book, *Los cimarrones urbanos* [Urban Cimarrons], Deschamps Chapeaux



explains that one of the most common solidarity practices among the (free) Havana population of African origin was to hide escaped slaves, usually in their own homes. For example, he also points out that the fugitive's "nationality" had no influence whatsoever on whether or not he got this help and explains some of the deftness with which the urban cimarrons made the run-aways' path easier by getting them aptly falsified freedom papers and permits for them to work outside their owners' homes. We should not lose sight of the fact that free blacks and mulattoes as well as *criollo* slaves had an advantage over Africans because many of them knew how to read and write and lacked the (unfortunately revelatory)

tribal striations that tended to distinguish the different ethnic groups on the Island.

It is hardly necessary to say that such acts of camaraderie could and did bring terrible consequences to those who carried out such schemes. In addition, we are once again able to confirm the corrupt actions of the slave owners who, unable to frighten the freemen, attempted to buy them off, taking advantage of their poverty. On the second of May, 1826, the *Diario de La Habana* published the following: "About two months ago, a tall, year old dark-skinned slave called Francisco of about 28 years of age, dressed in cotton work clothes and of Gangá (Congolese) origin, ran away; he has a small scar on his forehead right at the beginning of his nappy head's hairline: this



slave belonged to D. Leandro Zerpa, for whom he worked as a cart driver on the dock for a long time. News has it that he is often seen at a resting place called Retiro, outside the plantation, and is still suspected of being in hiding thanks to a black countryman of his who lives there; anyone who catches him and takes him to 91 Teniente Rey Plaza de Fernando VIIIth Street will be rewarded an ounce of gold: anyone who has knowledge of his whereabouts and conceals this information will be held responsible.” When this newspaper said “anyone who has knowledge of his whereabouts and conceals this information will be punished,” it was not at all kidding. It was simply reminding its readers of what was completely and crudely legislated by the colonial authorities through its horribly called *Bandos de Buen Gobierno* (Good Government Groups). Nevertheless, according to a report dated March 20th, 1835, in the same publication: “The number published between 1829 and 1833 offers a slight idea of the increased percentage of runaway slaves. According, the office of captures of the *Real Junta de Fomento*, the numbers in question, always in agreement with the cited source, indicate that in 1829, 2,514 of those urban runaways were captured (and again, the number of those who avoided capture is not known); in 1830 it was 2,564; in 1832, 2,534; and in 1833, it was 1,876; for a general total of 11,819. To clarify, this calculation shows that an average of hardly a fifth was captured; annually, about 2,563 urban *cimarrones*, that is, about 196 per month, 6 or 7 per day.

Another of the resources to which African descendants often turned to free themselves from slavery was to sign up for the colonial regime’s battalions of light- and dark-skinned blacks. In those battal-

ions, they also found fertile ground for their reciprocally solidarious relationships and their exchange of shared ideas and projects.

It is known that from early in America’s slave system Spain used the children of Africa like cannon fodder, to defend its possessions from pirate and corsair attacks, and from other powers like England. That was the origin of the light- and dark-skinned battalions in Cuba, whose conscripts were given some advantages such as military privileges, pensions or preferential employment in certain jobs, all conditional and of course, always in a way that resulted in them equally suffering the prejudices and privations of the colonial mentality (thanks to its divisive strategies), regardless of whether they were more or less free soldiers or officers. In principle, the actual denomination of “light- and dark-skinned blacks” and the internal division that accompanied it (light-colored skin was hierarchically higher than darker skin) was the classic scheme to prevent confidence and camaraderie among its members. But the colonialists were once again wrong in their calculations, since as Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux aptly describes in his work *Los batallones de pardos y morenos libres* [The Free Dark- and Light-Skinned Battalions], not only new ties of friendship and mutual admiration emerged from and within those groupings of the descendants of the most varied African peoples; plans for a common struggle for liberty, guided by authentic leaders also emerged.

It would suffice to cite the most notorious and remembered (but not the only) example. José Antonio Aponte, a free black carpenter, had been a first lieutenant in the Havana militia of the dark-skinned battalion. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of April in 1812, he was condemned to death by trial, and hanged on the

9<sup>th</sup>. His decapitated head remained on exhibit in an iron cage at the entrance to Havana, on the road to Jesús del Monte. His crime, to have shared in Havana (and way beyond) among the children of Africa, slave and free, the fruit of his natural brotherhood, his pride in and vocation for freedom. All in all, Aponte enjoyed special prestige among the black populace for leading the Shangó Tedom cabildo and being an Oni-Shango within the Lucumí religious order. This takes us directly to another of the aspects of all this (the principal one) that illustrates how the children and descendents of Africa have shared feelings of mutual solidarity, esteem, and reciprocal love and respect as a form of spiritual nourishment, from the very beginning of slavery to the present time. I am speaking about the cabildos, religious and fraternal organizations, of course the undying support and transmitters of their cosmic energies. This is an all-together too complex, careful and detailed topic that has a great deal of historical resonance. Fortunately, it is also among the most touched upon topics with which historians and the most extremely diverse lovers and students of African heritage in America have recently dealt. This frees us (or excuses us) from having to delve much deeper than just the surface, since an extremely detailed treatment of it would exceed the purpose of this article.

### *Cosmic energies*

At this point, it almost goes without saying that none of the oppressive powers that systematically and with impunity attempted for centuries to suffocate the vital force of Africa's children was ever successful in controlling the energy of their spirit. Quite specifically, it is from that energy that

they seem to draw the confidence they have in their own strength. Additionally, that is whence they derive their impetus for shaping the history of civilization.

The more resolutely authentic the expression by means of which a human community channels the palpitations of its soul and through it, decides to face its problems, experiences, and desires, the more perfect the understanding and support it will always find within its members. Such is the case, no doubt.

Fernando Ortiz deduced that there had been black cabildos in Cuba prior to 1573.<sup>12</sup> He even asserts that blacks in Europe were already organized in cabildos before the so-called 'discovery' of the New World. Thus, the early appearance in America of this type of religious-mutualist society in which Africans from one same ethnic group or region got together seems logical. There are currently hundreds if not thousand of pages of essential history that documents the extremely important role these organizations would play in facilitating mutual help and solidarity for their members, as well as in helping them defend the survival of both their African cultural patrimony and their intrinsic character as children of Africa. Some of these pages appear in the book *El negro en la economía habanera del siglo XIX* [Blacks in the Nineteenth-Century Economy of Havana], by Pedro Dechamps Chapeaux, in which he affirms:

Mutual aid, the manumission of their countrymen from their servile condition, and the acquisition of lands or homes in which these people could live made the cabildo something more than just a place to sing and dance as they did in the homeland... From 1691, when the Arará Magino cabildo acquired part of the house located at 172 Compostela Street (in Havana), till

1898, when Spanish domination in Cuba ended, this complete, urban-situated institution represented a socioeconomic value whose importance cannot be estimated. This is because for blacks the cabildos marked the entry point into the Havana economy in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup>

After the formal abolition of slavery, cabildos began to turn into instructional and recreational societies for those who were and continue to be called members of the “colored race” (a term that at the present time sounds incongruent, to say the least). These societies would not only keep facilitating their mission to unite blacks. Their instructional function would also be of primary importance in efforts to elevate the cultural level of its members, as was their full incorporation into the country’s economic and social life. The work of the patriot Juan Gualberto Gómez (the son of a slave woman) as a promoter and head of the Directorio Central de las Sociedades de la Raza de Color, an institution that also lent its support to the Cuban struggle against colonialism, is well known.

The cabildos, in consolidating their bases and developmental conduct, gave a specific shape to the vital energies that have always nourished the spirit of Havana’s African descendants. The general nature of their social institutions and their religious orders, as well as the unifying, illuminating and encouraging character of them both derived completely from the cabildos. With them, Havana’s blacks, mulattoes and mestizos...countered, and today continue to counter Jean Paul Sartre, for whom “no act of kindness could erase the marks of violence, only violence itself could destroy them.”<sup>14</sup>

For over a bit more than a half century, the time between the end of the colonial

system and its violent sequels (a period already free of slavery but during which the slave owning mentality persisted), and the Cuban Revolution of 1959, absolutely most of the victories achieved in Cuba by those of African heritage (and they were not few, nor superficial, nor easy) would take place because of the persistence of their social organizations and/or their political actions. Then came the most wellknown chapter, or at least the most publicized one in all history. In principle, the revolutionary triumph introduced substantial changes in the lives of blacks and mestizos, and essentially all poor Cubans. The Revolution’s sin, or one of them, among the worst, is precisely not having been able to or known how to surpass that beginning (or in not having found the ideal formulas for this). This is an extremely complicated period and is much too vulnerable to the controversies that erupt from historical analyses, probably because of its proximity in time. But if there is one thing that can clearly and currently be seen as an indisputable and direct consequence of the Revolution’s limitations, it is precisely regarding this essay’s topic; that the efforts of African descendants to continue their efficient, peaceful and organized struggle to further their need for social progress are being blocked.

We know that since it first came into power, the revolutionary government decreed an end to all black Cuban social and representative organizations, as well as to the immense majority of black-oriented institutions, unions and other groups. It immediately offered what at that time (a jubilant and perhaps foolish one) seemed plausible and was accepted as such if the Revolution eliminated all kinds of discrimination and class difference; if it was proposing a unity free of reticence and sectari-

anism for all Cubans; if in what followed everything belongs to everyone, with fully equal rights, then it was possible and even advisable to do away with those organizations; particularly if the Revolution proper was going to attentively commit itself, with all of its objectives and projects, and its very distinctive and special daily work.

Romanticism? Political ingenuity? Historical shortsightedness? It could have been some of all these. But there was also something much less excusable and surely no more discreet; the assumption and use of the government's position of power was essentially not very different from colonial absolutism (it is even less so now), nor was its tyrannical nature different from that of earlier political systems. Whatever the Revolution decided was not up for sensible analysis by those implicated in the decisions, nor a response, nor rejection, only applause was permitted.

In the beginning, Cuban blacks and whites from various walks of life not only saw themselves receiving benefits like free education and medical attention in equality, but also living under the same system of imposed ideas and behaviors, with the same difficulties in expressing themselves freely, subject to the same legal decisions and by the same economic and social stagnation, and by the same squelching that befell any individual efforts and/or initiatives. That was the beginning. Yet, sooner rather than later black-white conflicts began to take on certain characteristics. Things were no longer equal, nor distributed in equal parts. Particularly, because no matter how intermingled people were or how parallel the course of their destinies seemed, their origins, the history of blacks and whites had not been equal; neither were the economic and social obstacles that resulted. They did

not even create identical ways with which to face the multiple complexities of their existence. The revolutionary leadership could have foreseen this. Instead, it seems that rather than preventing this, or rectifying the situation as it was happening, as revolutions ought, it decided to 'stick to its guns,' first by trying to make light of the problem, in error, perhaps; then by stubbornly and conveniently denying it, perhaps, intentionally.

So as not to stray too far from the topic of interest here, let us limit ourselves to remembering just one thing: a majority of Cuba's white population (at least formally) practiced Marxist-Leninist atheism for several decades of the revolutionary era that began in 1959. Blacks, even Marxist ones, generally did not ever abandon their spirituality; they did not abandon their Orishas, not even when it was seen quite negatively (a long period of time) and during which time membership to religious orders or groups of any sort was punished. One has only to recall the wording of those endless applications that Cubans had to fill out every time they applied for a particular job, a student scholarship, or to complete the simplest of bureaucratic transactions. Since the stakes were high, one of the unavoidable questions whose answer should be seriously weighed was: "Do you practice any religion?" Black Cubans tended to answer 'no,' of course, but everyone (including government officials) knew all too well what they were forced to keep hidden.

For centuries religions of African origin were squashed, denigrated, and marginalized by the politically and economically empowered. Yet they seemed to adjust relatively easily to the Revolution's blank slate approach and resisted with exemplary stoicism its atheistic torrent. But, other faiths

of European origin, which were for centuries favored by the powerful and the country's legal system did not. Blacks, who had been treated more or less irrationally, like animals by every government before the Revolution, never stopped enriching themselves and enjoying even their independence of spirit via the close ties their social and religious organizations offered them. Yet, it is in the midst of the only political process that promised them real and definitive validation that blacks saw themselves deprived of these essential organizations. Moreover, they found themselves having to make public denials of their faith. I am not making comparisons; there is no room for them. What is important in this issue is not that Habaneros (Cubans) of African descent had a better or worse time of it with the previous systems. What is important is that with the Revolution things were not going the way they were being told they would. And, they had given the Revolution their greatest offering, the institutions responsible for channeling their cosmic harmonies.

It again goes without saying that this *contretemp* was not enough to darken the soul or weaken the brotherly will of these African descendants in Havana. It did little to change a force that was tempered to resist the gravest of shocks without failing, without even becoming diluted with the passage of time or life's many blows; this force always keeps the spiritual energies that move it intact.

Two (of many) clear and provable examples attest to this, the first has to do with one of the most suggestive (and lately, also one of the most controversial) episodes in the whole history of the Cuban Revolution's international relations. This was the intervention of its armed forces in the emancipatory wars of Africa. Black

Cuban participation in these struggles has not yet been amply or seriously studied. It is enough to talk to Cuban blacks personally to understand that a vast majority of our African descendants, with their authentic spirit of solidarity, took part in these wars. They did not, nor do they currently question, the extent to which the presence of our troops in that far away continent truly expressed a transparent demonstration of noble and uninterested brotherhood, the payment of a historical debt (as was and is often officially repeated to the point of suspicion), or if instead they (we) were a spearhead effort for hidden imperialist actions designed in Moscow, as others assure.

For black Cubans (much more than for almost any of the rest of our Cuban troops), the mission in Africa was a personal call to arms, a settlement on an account of honor with their atavistic spirits and, additionally, a basic obligation. Nowadays, that is not an attitude often expressed by all the Cubans who went to gamble away their lives or develop nervous conditions (a common occurrence) fighting against exploitation and apartheid in African lands.

In the equally edifying second example, we have the African descendant from Havana sharing the loving warmth, unselfishness, and willingness to give that typify him amongst his loved ones despite (or perhaps because of) the drastic poverty, desperation, and social isolation he has endured over the past few years, particularly during the collapse of the economy (and moral, ideological and spiritual values) that has affected the country since the 1990s. There is nothing more to say about this.

Generally, black Cubans have less than anyone else and have received less than anyone. But they are also the ones who most happily give and share amongst themselves.

It is often the case that black Cubans have no difficulty with good mutual understanding, with fluid and even intimate exchange with people from different economic and social strata. Famous sports figures and artists, as well as other personalities from this competent minority that includes business people or even political leaders, continue to help the enormous mass of poor and marginalized Cubans with whom they share blood ties in the worst and even best times of the revolutionary utopia. This attitude is prevalent even among those at the top. This is a unique case in Cuba at this time. One hardly finds this with the rest of the citizenry.

Without a doubt, one can be sure that such realities, which are obvious to anyone who wishes to see them with open eyes, are the result of the deep spiritual roots of the African descendants of slaves in Havana; with the teachings and noble leadership of its inveterate social institutions. However, to propose or barely insinuate the need for said institutions to reorganize (with the total independence that was always proper and natural to them) is like mentioning the Devil at a convent at the present time.

This is even more so the case right now, when the old and always recurring arguments concerning the topic of racism have been extremely politicized to the point that talking about racially motivated marginalization or mentioning the setbacks blacks have suffered regarding their desire for social and economic progress has become an attitude the government and communists consider a rejection of the Revolution. In Cuba today, the state's reason and reason seem to be at odds once again. And, it is normal for there to be some who by not immediately confronting the problem, which brings about consequences, silently approve, accept or act as though the state's reason cancels out reason, by politicizing it—by dissolving it and putting it at its service.

Perhaps the time is right for remembering that dignified lesson according to which those who used to and currently change according to the era's dictums forget that their epoch (even with the best of the Revolution) is the result of the efforts of a few who previously did not want to change.

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