

# Is Cuban National Identity Weakening?

## Are There Cultural Identities?

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The phenomenon of cultural identity definitely has been impacting social debate in Cuba, and should be associated with national identity as seen through its symbols and attributes. The unquestioned assumption is that Cuban national identity is strong, but I'm not so sure of the accuracy of this viewpoint. Even so, the identities that remain are getting stronger. Is there a relationship between a weakening of national identity and a strengthening of the other? Can the latter continue fortifying themselves, even as the former continue to decline? Does this weakening have anything to do with the very origin of some of those symbols and attributes? Can this problem be blamed on the last fifty years of political policy?

There can be multiple reasons for this decline and fortification of identities. When seen all together, the result is quite surprising. Let us observe this process through the nation's symbols and national attributes, taking symbols to be representations that attempt to give meaning to an historical event or process, so that when we see a specific symbol, we under-

stand immediately the meaning and message meant by it. Thus, with no effort at all, the symbol embodies what it represents and communicates something to those who identify with it, which explains, in some way, why symbols are sacred. An attribute is similar, but less powerful, and is modeled after the most relevant characteristics of the landscape, or a specific cultural event or phenomenon. The element taken from these is natural to them, and is then inscribed with certain characteristics. For the sake of distinction, let us assume that an attribute does not reflect a purposeful motivation for its assignation of meaning, whereas a symbol does.

### *What is going on with Cuba's national symbols and attributes?*

According to Article 3 of the Republic's Constitution: "The national symbols are those which, for over one hundred years, have presided over Cuban struggles for independence, the rights of the people, and social

progress: the flag of the lone star; the anthem of Bayamo; the coat of arms of the Royal Palm.” Other national symbols assumed and made official by the State are the Trogon as its state bird, the Butterfly Jasmine as its national flower, and the Royal Palm as its state tree. In examining the origin of each of these symbols, I wonder if it is somehow related to the fact that a large percentage of the population does not identify with its nationality. If the *Larousse Spanish Dictionary’s* definition of ‘attribute’ is ‘an inherent characteristic,’ ‘an object closely associated with or belonging to a specific person, thing, or office,’ and ‘a word ascribing a quality to something or someone,’ I ask myself of the abovementioned attributes “are they the ones that really evoke or represent our homeland?”

Let us begin with the Trogon [*tocororo*] (*Priotetus Temnurus*), a bird from the *Trogonidae* family. One of a kind, it is endemic, so as an attribute that characterizes the Cuban landscape, it is chosen as a beautiful and noble representation of our island’s natural surroundings. It is also meant to allude to the island’s inhabitants, as a way to territorially identify them. Its value in this role rests as much on its ubiquitous presence (they seem to have been abundant), as its natural identification with the landscape, and its peaceful coexistence with the rest of nature—a sort of non-violent or unforced cohabitation. This explains why it is our national bird.

Yet, there are no more Trogons in our midst. It is said to inhabit some mountainous regions, but has not been seen, which is a necessary condition for identity. It serves us only as an imagining, but no longer as an attribute of our landscape. It is hard to find in our forests and does not seem to thrive in captivity. This very real absence of our national attribute is in itself symbolic, and not coincidental. It reflects the growing rootlessness of many

Cubans, and their disconnectedness with our physical landscape and cultural ecology. The extinction of the Trogon illustrates symbolically a natural and ecological fracturing at the agricultural level. It serves to symbolize our own alienation and fracturing, amongst ourselves, and with our landscape and homeland.

This weakens our national identity at a most basic level—as an identification with and sense of belonging to the land we inhabit. Seen from this perspective, Cubans inhabit an abstract territory with which they find no physical identification through one of its natural attributes. This growing rootlessness is mildly connected to the disappearance of a national bird that represents us. There is not even one national holiday that unites all Cubans to celebrate this national bird—as is the case in other local cultures, or in the national traditions of other countries.

If this is the case with the Trogon, what is the situation with the national anthem? It is one of our strongest symbols, but its origin was that of a local anthem, and not a symbol of the whole nation. It emerged prior to the political existence of Cuba, in Bayamo, a place identified as the birthplace of Cuban nationality. This explains its weight as a symbol, because its origin was motivated by and constructed upon a local tradition that spread over a nation that was also being constructed. Together with our flag, it evokes a sense of unity that joins all Cubans through memory—one of foundational underpinnings of any nation.

Yet, if the anthem connects us through the past, there are also two ways in which it has been hurting our identity in the present and into the future. First, it is local in origin and highlights a regional preeminence that affects internal relations amongst communities and regions, which has been happening for quite some time now. Yes, Bayamo was the birthplace



*Trogon. National Bird*

of our struggle for freedom, but it is also a place characterized by regionalist tensions so common on the island today. Its problems with the nearby city of Manzanillo are well known, and stem from the artificial creation of the Granma province. The second limitation rests on the fact that our anthem is a battle cry; it doesn't evoke our eventual cultural community, which is also important for a nation's underpinnings. Is permanent war our destiny?

This second limitation is ever growing in its impact. Given the accelerated rate at which Cubans are losing their sense of community, the anthem fails to inspire the passion needed to keep dangerous sentiments from turning into a threat of war. I work in the field of education and can document the minimal passion, detachment, and even ridicule with which the national anthem is sung in our schools. If as a

marker of a strong national identity our national anthem cannot muster passionate feelings towards the nation in which we live, then where do we find the strong connection with our greater identity, the national identity that unites us all? In times of crisis, unity is often fomented through singing, the anthem, and poetry. Yet, what happens when the national crisis is not the threat of war?

The problem is that our national identity is getting weaker and the hymn that calls us to war cannot instill new life in it. So, what do we do with a local hymn that at present—and through all our many crises—reminds us only of our past? Many young people do not seek their national identity in a strong, heartfelt version of the Bayamo anthem. Isn't it time to create a hymn to peace, as an anthem to forge a better common destiny for us?



*Royal Palm. National Tree*

The Royal Palm represents yet another of the weaknesses in our national identity. Mambí soldiers proclaimed the Royal Palm (*Roystonea Regia O.F. Cook*) as our national tree—due to its firmness and majesty, its erectness and great stature, and its abundant presence all over the island. Yet, this beautiful tree is not endemic to Cuba, but instead to Florida. According to the *Diccionario provincial casi razonado de voces y frases*, by Esteban Pichardo, the definition of ‘palm’ states that no other tree is as apt to be targeted by lightning, or as likely to be torn out by hurricane force winds, because of its weak and superficial roots. We are faced with a motivated symbol that is held up solely because of a cursory observation of its characteristics.

It was selected at a very special moment—at the height of war. Yet, in its selection, two essential things were overlooked. First, its ‘foreignness.’ While it may easily grow all over the island, it is not native to it. It is seen as easily transplanted, but is also extremely fragile. Nothing that grows quickly can have deep roots, and its fragility is secondary. What is revealed in all this is that there was a need to quickly construct the symbols of identity, and a tendency to act abruptly in selecting the symbol without closely examining it. In this particular instance, its selection was completely contrary to what it was intended to represent—the palm is strong in appearance only—and is harmful to Cuban identity because of this

identity's most essential characteristic—resistance.

If we go beyond its selection—a respectable one not so much for what it symbolizes, but for those whose intention it was to create the symbol in the first place—what is noteworthy is the way in which we determine

identities that sooner or later do not manage to symbolize and characterize Cubans. How many Cubans acknowledge or see themselves in a Royal Palm? Yet another issue is how our identities are shaped by elements that do not identify us, due to their origin. What this means is that these motivated identities and



*Butterfly Jasmine. National Flower*



*Cuban Flag*

non-exclusive identities need a lot of support from other, more rooted elements. If not, these 'borrowed' elements become weakened, as does the greater identity. The Royal Palm is not as regal as its name may imply, and also generates a series of questions about our foundations, as seen through our symbols. The Butterfly Jasmine (*Hedichium Coronarium Koenig*) is also not endemic to Cuba, but rather to Asia. It is another attributed symbol that was superficially selected and shares the same fate as the Trogon. It shares with the Royal Palm its condition as a 'foreigner': it reflects that Cuban identity is created in a constant state of flux with the outside world, and is not an endogenous and singular identity. Notwithstanding, leaving aside its origin, what is important about its motivated attributes is that they are consciously assumed, and demand special care and cultivation. Put differently, symbolic attributes require more care and attention when they are not endemic than when they are, for the simple reason they are not produced naturally.

If the Butterfly Jasmine disappears in Cuba, then it disappears as a symbol, too. Can a strong national identity allow the extinction of its essential, symbolic attributes? Doesn't this mean that not caring for our symbolic identity suggests the weakness of its roots, and cultural loss? Another question is whether or not the selection of weak, identifying attributes that are difficult to preserve, reveals a somewhat precarious national identity.

It would seem not. The official adoration of our flag would seem to indicate that our national identity is strong. Together with the anthem, the Cuban flag sends a message of cohesion via lofty symbols that make us forget all the differences, and evoke for us that past community in which we all recognize each other. The flag retains a certain sacred quality, because it is used in solemn acts of State, military ceremonies, as a covering for soldiers fallen in combat, or on difficult missions associated with the State. All this seems to point to the fact that the first and foremost of national

symbols is respected and recognized as strongly representing many events, and as a symbol of a community with a common destiny and identity among the flags of other nations. It is certainly true that the flag is all that, and it is the only one of all our important symbols that not only recalls for us our past, but also evokes that as a community, we have a common destiny.

There is no other symbol in Cuba that fulfills this need; except that of José Martí, an emblematic figure who along with the national anthem and flag are today the only political symbols that allow us to speak of a national community we all assume. Even so, the national flag is the most significant, because its significance is not debatable. Yet, it is the one symbol most associated with Cuba's open identity, so much so, that as a symbol, it was at the middle of the greatest conflict Cuba has faced—between independence and annexation. The survival of this ideological conflict today is irrelevant, but the flag continues to be employed, and it symbolizes the struggle between an open and closed identity. The flag itself was created from elements found on the Texas flag, and created by annexationist Narciso López, who was not even Cuban. The basis of its design can be ascribed to Miguel Teurbe Tolón, a native-born Cuban of French origin from Matanzas. The symbolic value of this most important of symbols—in terms of an open identity—is even greater when we consider that another flag—the one designed by founding father Carlos Manuel de Céspedes—was rejected.

Our flag symbolizes that our identity grows stronger if we remain faithful to its origins, that is, when the identity it symbolizes remains an open one. Our identity, though, as we have seen with other attributes, is defined by our open communication with the rest of the world, and there is weakness behind that hardy appearance. If our national identity is weaken-

ing due to the dissolution and fragility of most of our national symbols, and because of the way in which some of them are 'lived' and 'felt,' then it, too, is dissolving behind the external sacredness of the flag. It is inevitable. Identity is not a sum of symbols: they, themselves, completely express it, or they don't express it all.

The importance of this cannot be diminished or ignored. Of all our symbols, the flag is the only one that represents some degree of national sacredness, because it is the only one that also represents the will to exist as an independent state: it is revolutionary in nature and represents a liberating goal, a democratizing intention, and a nation-building project. It is an authentic symbol of the Cuban nation because it joins the idea of democracy and the nation-building project. The anthem is also freedom loving in nature, but it does not evoke a whole, comprehensive project because it is only a call to arms. The emblem of the Royal Palm offers an identity, but it is not democratizing. When used as emblems, coats of arms only serve to recall the aristocratic nature of States, and warring conditions, for which reason they are studied in heraldry.

The supreme sacredness of the flag is clearly found in the Law of National Symbols and their Legislation (Law No. 42-1983 and Decree No. 143 – 1988, respectively). There are 25 articles concerning the national flag, only six about the Bayamo anthem, and only five about the Royal Palm coat of arms. This detailed protection and legislation regarding the use of the flag says volumes about how it is seen, and its national symbolic weight.

Naturally, though, given the materials from which they are made, and their actual crafting, all flags are easily transported, something that should require even more legislation. No one would walk around with a coat of arms; very few would risk changing in any way the singing and playing of the anthem. We may



*National Coat of Arms*

be a musical people, but there are more citizens than there are singers or composers, and this does not change the fact that the flag is the most important of national symbols—which seems to be the case in all countries. Yet, despite this, it is the only symbol of national identity—the most important of them—that has been contaminated and distorted, despite the laws that expressly prohibit this. Over the past ten years, at least, followers of the Cuban regime have used a version of the Cuban flag with the image of Ernesto Guevara de la Serna—actually a foreigner—emblazoned on it—at many a public act, all over the world. Groups of young people, mainly in Europe and Latin America, raise this version of our national symbol with incredible verve and energy, as if it were a commercial advertisement for a highly valued revolutionary product—the image of Ernesto Guevara—ignoring the fact that the flag is the symbol of a nation, and not an ideology. I am not aware of any other country but Cuba that allows this. No self-respecting country tolerates such a dis-

tortion of the way its symbols originally looked, because identity rests in that origin. Yet, this global trend is so accepted and promoted, that another highly recognizable product, the Pastors for Peace, contaminate our flag in their own, U.S. way—writing on it their own messages, forgetting that it is the flag of Cuba, and not the Cuban government’s flag. The worst thing of all is that every time it transmits in the media its enthusiastic supporters brandishing just these kinds of flags, the government is promoting the flags’ distortion, and in doing so violates its own laws.

Article 20 of the Law Regarding National Symbols states: “The flag of the lone star may be raised with streamers and ribbons, but these *cannot be tied to the flag nor be placed above it*” (author’s italics). Article 24 goes on to say that “no stamp, writing, painting is permitted on the flag, nor can any object or figure of any sort be put on it. The flag also cannot serve as a backdrop for superimposing or apparently superimposing designs of any sort.” Thus, the law is clear on all this.

Leaving any sense of solemnity aside, an obviously growing sense of the loss and weakening of our national identity is a reality. The indifferently accepted distortion of the Cuban flag already reveals an absence of the essence of those greatest contributors to our identity as a community of shared memory and destiny. Beyond the extinction of the Trogon and Butterfly Jasmine, beneath the fragility of the Royal Palm, indifferent to the anthem’s drums of war, and far from the medieval heraldry—all of which are undaunted by the distortion of our greatest insignia—our national identity is crumbling. Nearly 4 million Cubans have left the island, or are working on leaving Cuba.

This crumbling of our symbolic identity matches up exactly with this national exodus, and is not coincidental either. This is very clearly reflected at a political level, in José Martí’s



replacement as a public icon and image by Ernesto Guevara. Martí is a timeless, somewhat romantic and poetic hero. Guevara is a tough, permanent hero, and is better sold than Martí. Are Cubans losing their identity? No. The problem is that our open identity is limited by its lack of precision. This and its historic fragility may be the reason we so easily replace certain political identities with others. That is a risk all, open cultures take, which is why they need firmer pillars, and reasons to identify with them that are motivated and assumable by the people. If someone proposed replacing the Trogan and Butterfly Jasmine as national symbols, there would be little social or cultural resistance right now. No doubt the proposed replacements would be a lion or horse. The dissolution of Havana as a cultural and symbolic entity is another example of this weakness and the displacement of identities that have historically characterized us, which does not happen anywhere else as easily as it does in Cuba.

Countries with strong national identities could never have survived the eclectic nature, superimposition, and displacement of one set of emblems for another, particularly when there is no relation between them. This natural and inevitable openness, when accompanied by fragility, leads to the reinforcement of other specific identities. This openness in our own national identity cannot be evaded. An attempt to close it has brought about consequences difficult to reverse. Yet, it still needs other positive elements to be able to achieve stability and cohesion.

In the meantime, we Cubans revert to more specific identities. The attention they have been garnering has brought about a cul-

tural renaissance—religious, sexual, selected, cultural and racial identities that fill a spiritual, mental, ritual, attitudinal and temporal void that in the past was entirely and visibly dominated by our symbolic national identity. These two identities do not coexist well, but instead displace each other. The stronger they get, the more they undermine commitment to the nation. This is a rich cultural process, because it recovers the plurality of our open minds, but it weakens the greater identity within the nation's space. Specific identities, too, become weaker in the long run, because they require more space, and national identity symbols that offer fluidity and a minimum of pluralistic community.

I think that an avoidance and rebirth of diversity and cultural plurality may indicate Cuba is ceasing to exist—as a symbolic identity. The country's physical borders and the fact it is an island functions like self-containing barriers. Its political system uses this to manipulate an image that can only be attributable to it being an island. This helps it keep the national fiction behind the fiction of its national identifying symbols.

The national identity symbols that gave us our origin need to be instilled with positive content, so we can find an identity better than war, and flexibly stronger than our plural culture. In the absence of real dangers, our national identity needs a content that can be stronger in pluralist societies. This next nation of firmer, more visible and more stable features—one that takes up the national flag as its center—is the business of all Cuban citizens.