

2012: A Year of Transition Towards the True Cuban Nation?

María I. Faguaga Iglesias
Historian and anthropologist
Havana, Cuba

Juan F. Benemelis
African Studies historian and essayist
Cuban. Residing in the United States

First Part

The International Year for African Descendants is about to conclude, and perhaps we were really drawn to it because it is no small feat that African descendants finally got the recognition they really deserve from international organizations. For the first time ever, they finally approved a call to devote a ten-year period to shedding important light on the historic frustrations, needs, demands, and claims of African descendants—something that long ago should have already resulted in the legal and real rights that have been held back since the creation of the republic, regardless whose government. Even the most evolved of our constitutions from those times became dead laws—not worth the paper they were printed on. The approval of this decade-long, unprecedented focus means devoting time and space to this issue, and giving voice to African descendants internationally and transnationally.

Except for in Cuba, where little has been done, governments and civic groups throughout Indo-Afro-Hispanic-America have spent months designing, articulating, adjusting, and executing far-reaching policies aimed at the African descendant population. Their underlying priority is to prepare people for an already unavoidable reconfiguration of their societies. If these were consciously and coherently planned, the actions that would bring about these changes would address the creation of coherent societies whose sociopolitical, economic and cultural workings actually reflected the truly multiethnic and multiracial nations they are—which is what they have always been since their forced, colonial origins, and are destined to be now and in the future.

The process of adjustment that is currently taking place in Indo-Afro-Hispanic-America is so legitimate and natural that it will continue regardless of the obstacles or interruptions. This is because there is no time to wait. The process will go on with or with-

out acknowledgment from continental leaders, whether or not many white, *criollo* Latin American and Caribbean people who control all power like it or not. Their monopoly has existed since the independence period and has always been connected to the context of colonial-era Spain and other European cities.

Up till the present moment, these nations have functioned by means of unequal substitutions forced on our population by impositions and oppression, resulting in dichotomous pairs involving necessary subjection, marginalization, and exclusion. With this formula, those in power have forcefully invisibilized the largest factions of the population: native, African and African descendant populations. The same formula is used to force these subaltern groups into internalizing alienation as a form of escape or resistance, as a life-long practice. Thus, the continental nations have not been the truly integrated nations we are destined to be—given our population.

From colonial and independence times till now, these fundamental power relations have imposed upon us an alienating nation-building project. In each and every one of our countries, from Simón Bolívar to the most diverse totalitarian, authoritarian or openly dictatorial governments—from the Castro Ruz brothers to Nicaraguan Daniel Ortega to Ecuadorean Rafael Correa—what all these rulers have taken our freedoms to mean has reproduced the exclusion and subjection of non-whites and assimilated *mestizos*. From this position of power, what has been sought is spurious whitening, a humiliating and cynical whitening, as well as a Western European and Europeanizing tradition—both of which do not match our plural ethnogenesis.

With this as a foundation, what has been imposed on the continent are bourgeois or “revolutionary” (some proclaimed, or pro-

claiming themselves to be “nationalistic”) nation-building projects that have developed even more reactionary and fundamentalist attitudes, due to our historical evolution and accelerated processes of biological and cultural miscegenation. This fundamentalism is of the sort we often criticize in the Arab world, without stopping to consider its multiple and everyday expression in our own hemisphere.

Without distinction, all these projects have left submerged, invisibilized, denied and frustrated the most authentic of nation-building projects—those that are inclusive—because inclusion was not among the interests or goals of the more hierarchical, marginalizing and exclusionary ones. The idea of inclusion did not reconcile with the bourgeois or revolutionary elitism with which the white-*criollo* aristocracy has gotten its power, and forced the largest part of the population to rethink their resulting position as the enslaved producers of wealth for this aristocracy’s enjoyment.

By resisting, or as Afro-Ecuadorean Adolfo Albán Achinte¹ put it, by re-existing and re-elaborating “life under adverse conditions while trying to overcome them so they find a dignified place in society,” the majorities would remain outside that fleeting and quickly changing, American, republican modernism.¹

We majorities have been left out, forced into subalterity, and almost always manipulated by adverse forces. An example of this tension can be seen in the struggle between old, traditionalist and foreign, Christian theologues versus currently popular, restrictively interpreting, American, Liberation Theology, a point of view in which native populations and African descendants, women, and other subjected and/or discarded social groups could not find their own space, except through the prism of European Marxism, which reduces

everything to social class (to the exclusion of any other criterion).

This latest stage of Liberation Theology, at least in Indo-Afro-Hispanic-America, would initiate a process of reconsideration and reformulation around the 1990s, particularly when celebrations and counter-celebrations of the Columbus Quincentennial, and the encounter or clash of American and European civilizations were being planned.

Second Part

This is the motley landscape of nationalities in Indo-Afro-Hispanic-America, a place that cannot ignore the Caribbean and its imperial frontiers. We are both products and inheritors of this territorial space and its imaginaries, both of which were historically constructed. Even the most superficial, historical revision of the creation of the nation-building project imposed on us is domineering and exclusionary. This revisionism irremediably constructs us as *non-persons* first and as *others* second in that political and intellectual project. This status is invariably associated with African descendancy. A revision of what we have been given as our Cuban national history is woven from past to present with a sustaining and conducting thread that has firmly kept power in the hands of the white-*criollo* elite. This elite was earlier bourgeois, and is today Castroist, the latter lasting more than five decades. This Castroism threatens to structurally and ideologically survive beyond the Castro brothers themselves, despite the enormous gap between it and the cosmovision of large numbers of people on the island, and despite the deep dissonance between them.

A nation, according to Benedict Anderson's very apt definition, is an imagined community

that expresses its nationhood verbally and through metalanguage. According to Homi Bhabha's pertinent, analytical perspective, the existence of a nation presupposes the duplicity of a dual construction: one found in the everyday narrative of those who actually live there, and the imposed, rhetorical one set forth by those who talk about and construct master narratives.

In considering the duplicity of the nation-building project, we find that in the Cuban case *unity*, interpreted politically as subordination and subjection, leads us to the same empty signifier at which Castroism arrives in its use of Martí's philosophy when mobilizing a demagogic rhetoric that is plagued by stereotypes. This has been the case with all previous, republican governments, too. With few changes, Cuba's governments have employed the very same assumed and false truths, internally and externally, using Afro-Cuban motifs for their picturesque, political window dressing. With little difference owing to historical periods or differing governments, male and female priests of Afro religions in Cuba have been restricted and manipulated within this framework, in parallel with their censure, discrediting, and stigmatizing. With minimal contextual variation, what we find is that:

- civil rights are claimed to be a gift: having them requires gratitude. Our government leaders implicitly expect no one in society who is enjoying them to make claims and demands.
- assimilated culture is derived from Iberian culture; folklore from Africa.
- the defining essence that was intellectually decreed was Iberian, while Africanness is expressly seen as secondary and barren.

- political independence and the abolition of slavery are both falsely presented as gifts stemming from the sacrifice of white *criollos*.

These four elements exclude the extensive and ongoing history of African and Afro-Cuban rebelliousness, their early political awareness and awakened feelings of national identity, both expressed in deeds that are historically confirmable and little mentioned, even in historiography. These are fundamentally structuring components of an imagined nation mediated by omissions, falsehoods, and a distortion of important facts. This all omits the primacy of African descendants in the creation of our national identity and nationality. In turn, this is the imagined nation that is reproduced to support the dogma containing the aforementioned falsehoods.

That national project, with its content and discriminating character, has been imposed by force. It is evidence of the atrophied power relations that persist, are unchanged, or reveal minimal variation. They have been around since the period of Spanish colonization, but are masked by bourgeois or *revolutionary* trappings. Consequently, the legitimate nation has not been able to crystalize. It has been stifled by the dilatory forces of its forging and achievement.

The national project imposed originally by a conspiracy of foreign forces (Iberian and U.S. American), and shielded by them, represented the will of the island's white, *criollo* elite, which after a prolonged period of independence wars revealed its ambition for power, disdain and contempt towards Afro-Cubans, and an obstinate persistence in wanting to relegate black/mulatto Cubans.

After the creation of the bourgeois republic, among the most noticeable examples of the depth of their exclusion, and the eth-

no-racial discrimination of that imposed and false national project, are:

- the way General Quintín Bandera was treated and, ultimately, assassinated.

- the destruction of the most radical and integrative forces of thought and action among all Cubans, and especially among Afro-Cubans. We must understand that those who were organized in the Independent Party of Color, who followed the model of the culturally and racially integrated nation promoted by Antonio Maceo, proposed the first truly, inclusive and egalitarian, republican project.

Third Part

From the past and until the present, an imagined, national, racial and culturally hierarchizing, authoritarian and totalitarian, ahistorical, fundamentalist and purist, national design has been reproduced in the political context of most visible, intellectual and even artistic narratives. Official and pro-government intellectuals, academe, most known and recognizable history—expressions racially, culturally and ideologically in tune with that imagined national project—have found grounding and justification, and manipulated their explanations any time there has been a crisis. They have acted like cogs in a framework that is delaying the construction of the true Cuban nation. This is how they sometimes have managed and perpetuated their age-old, colonialist power in neocolonial trappings, and other times a really colonial one, or both, somehow connected.

If knowledge is power, then it has been systematically denied Afro-Cubans via its omission and manipulation. On occasion, even repression has been used. The Manichean presentation of the Independents of Color as “naïve” anti-patriotic, pro-imperialistic,

“bourgeois” blacks hungry for importance and positions of power, as a divisive element, and as violent promoters of a possible U.S. military intervention, is no coincidence. This last event, their “armed protest,” was and is still known as a “race war,” on its hundredth anniversary.

All this indicates that those who monopolize power, their henchmen, and even their ideologues, know that the illegitimacy of their project, which is energetically defended by the white *criollos* it represents, and of which it purports to be part without really being one, would be unsustainable if a large part of the island’s population managed to achieve the power of knowledge. We should recall that General-President Raúl Castro, Fidel Castro’s younger brother, publicly declared that he perceived himself as a “Galician born in Cuba.” This is why they hide, deny and distort for us Cubans—no matter what our color or culture, —our national history, particularly if we are black Cubans.

1868, 1895, 1901, 1902, 1930, 1959, and since then, with these long and extenuating decades of Castroism, have been a constant repetition of exclusionary confrontation *versus* integration. Consequently, each one of those moments has received the intellectual support it needed to be successful. Speculation and statements have behaved similarly, their only purpose being to immobilize us in a “Cuba for Cubans” that included and marginalized us for the benefit of others, and also placed certain nationals—black men and women—in asymmetrical conditions.

Those “Cubans” who would award themselves the unrestricted right to enjoy and govern were “white,” mostly misogynistic, homophobic, Christian men (this last criterion being replaced by atheist and atheizing one during the decades between

1960-1980). This Christian (and particularly Catholic) condition would come back in later years, and be conveniently used by the power elite, once again with help from the *revolutionary* intelligentsia. The requirement of being heterosexual has been reconsidered, either due to the regime’s unconditional nature, or as a simulation. The same is true of homophobia. Much less so about being a man or woman.

A Castroist, political power alliance was created with high-ups from the Board of the Cuban Council of Churches, with the Catholic nunciature first, and the hierarchy of Cuba’s Catholic bishops next. Because of their exclusionary, anti-black, and anti-national cosmopolitanism, visits from Pope John Paul II (January 21-25, 1998) and Fascist-like, inquisitorial Ratzinger, now in his role as Pope Benedict XVI, have had the same sort of impact. There have been an attempt to strengthen the concept of a *white* Cuba. The descriptor ‘white’ is increasingly relevant, but also equally strong and exclusionary in this imaginary. It matters not so much what it is, but rather what people think and feel it is—machista, misogynous, Christian-centric, and anti-black.

Both visits benefited the false Cuba that exists in the narratives of those of us who experience her daily, but in the real Cuba existing in the narratives of those who monopolize her, and have power, and make visible their impact. Both benefited the Cuba whose structure was designed to keep subalterity from achieving more space than was given, so that invisibilization, self-distortion, and exclusion are still imposed. Both served a Cuba that projects a prolongation of those circumstances. They are the result of and can be attributed to a Cuba in which citizenship is not a right, but a privilege given by the system, with imposed restrictions, instead.

This is the Cuba in which stereotypes of “the good black” are repeated, as they have been since formal colonial times, and still exist in our *de facto*, colonial condition. In its Christian interpretation, this “good black” “forgives” and “turns the other cheek,” a take that is strikingly similar to that of the Castro regime. In other words, ours is a society that privileges blacks who ally themselves with those in power, and favors blacks when they act against their own people, against themselves collectively and as individual subjects—always in a subordinated position. All this to receive some benefit. Yet, “good blacks” are never acknowledged, nor are they esteemed or respected, because that would imply treating them like equals. Subjection is not meant to project high position and consideration, but rather dishonor and demoralization. This is a Cuba that does not see individually or collectively, black subjects as Afro-Cuban, or as having a corresponding, militant self-awareness of their environment and important actions.

Nevertheless, traitors, cowards, and alienated individuals have always existed and still exist, in all social groups. Concomitantly, there have existed and still are the most socially active, legitimate representatives of socially excluded groups, too. These subjects and active forces are so often subjected to extremely denigrating campaigns meant to distort their public image, or invisibilize them. These campaigns employ methods that try to erase us from a scene filled with the expression of the multivarious dynamics of many civic and political forces in Cuba.

Fourth Part

The Castro brothers’ miracle of making “things black” transparent, or invisible, except for revealing them in what is artistically

convenient for their economy, is in keeping with the white-*criollo*, nation-building project:

- It has whitened Antonio Maceo and falsified what he was actually like.
- It has hidden from us José Antonio Aponte.
- It has mocked, discredited and stigmatized the Independents of Color.
- It has disappeared the Afro-Feminist movement.
- It has gone and changed Juan Gualberto Gómez, one of most prescient thinkers and finest journalists, into a second-rate mulatto at the service of the white José Martí, the latter of whom receives all the honors accorded a pro-independence and revolutionary thinker and organizer.

Most directly, it has:

- hidden from us a movement meant to acknowledge diverse Afro-Cubanness by means of folklorizing *negrismo á la José Zacarias Tallet*.
- denied us an African diaspora through a combination of the Castro brothers’ authoritarian, totalitarian, and purist fits and anti-black racism.
- tried to (pseudo)scientifically recreate our *Cuban nation-ethos* and reimpose an habilitated version of miscegenation theory as a false solution to evident, restructured racism, and its racially-based, concomitant, inequalities and inequities.

This ideological positioning contributed to the reproduction of the concept of the “chastened black,” a position with which a white-*criollo*, pro-independence person like President José Miguel Gómez, who lynched black Cubans, is celebrated in our current, *revolutionary* historiography as a “patriot” and defender of sovereignty. He is not seen as a traitor to the legitimate nation we should be and have yet to be. He was the kind of ‘traitor’

that a hundred years ago would have considered us brothers under the same flag.

The historically and still offered image of the “chastened black” was that of a prototype that would render impossible for Afro-Cubans any pretension of economic and social, upward mobility, or desire to become politically involved. The stereotype emerged from the exemplary massacre that put an end to the so-called La Escalera Conspiracy (1844). The result was the creation of an urgently “frustrated black,” and the intellectual construction of the “folklorized black,” who is quasi-objectivized, and whose useful images those in power use even today.

This is why the greatest danger the Cuban nation faces is not and never has been outside the island. Instead, it can be found inside its ever increasingly porous and fragile borders. The forces that have undermined and delayed her evolution are within and not without her. In the past, the greatest danger was the practical limitation of her national character by its identification only with its Iberian roots; then came the folklorization of her *negritude*. This last reality is misinterpreted by renowned scholars of race even today. Many of them equate *negritude* with ‘black’ or ‘blackness,’ when what is really at hand is black people with a very clear concept of who they are, are very proud of belonging to their ethno-racial group and its contributions, and are quite conscious of the fact that theirs is a forced subalterity.

Today, the greatest danger facing the Cuban nation is an obstinate persistence in remaining anchored to a now out-of-date, white-*criollo* and anti-black nation-building project that excludes any other, different cosmopolitanism. This danger puts the nation face-to-face with an essential challenge: moving from a hierarchical fragmentation that has

been enjoyed and sustained by some, to a truly integrated state. To do otherwise will lead to the nation’s disintegration. At this time, the greatest challenge to any national project established by those in power, or by a group seeking it, will be the balanced inclusion of all its citizens. In other words, the greatest challenge is not to redesign exclusionary or hierarchizing models. The true challenge rests in enabling, restructuring and recalibrating its entire citizenry’s potential force, with an egalitarian collaboration and participation that doesn’t disdain any of its groups. This multifaceted force displays all our corresponding possible positions, and what we perceive to be the ethical and moral costs for us as individuals and collectively, ethno-racial and national subjects. Each one of these positions corresponds to and highlights our own imaginings, our potential sponsorship, demands and procedures, and their concomitant commitment and militancy regarding our tactics and strategies. This scene reveals, among other things, two extreme tendencies being played out in a game of light and shadows:

- the visibility offered by the adulterating representativity of the recent incorporation of people—30% black/mulatto, mostly women and young people—to the reigning Central Committee that was imposed by the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) on the nation to direct it, and the celebration of an internally and externally inclusive, international workshop on Afro descendance with permission from the United Nations (UN) that was publicized by the nation’s mass media;
- the government forcibly obfuscating the efforts of African descendant groups who are fighting the exclusionary, national project. Events like the First Assembly for Black Civil Rights (2012), the first Race and Identity Forum (2010), and its second iteration (2011),

have been hampered by the prestigious voices of intellectuals from the African Diaspora that have been encouraged by the Castro Ruz brothers. The efforts of these civil rights groups remain relatively unknown, despite their commendable and legitimate efforts to participate as citizens, and desire to promote and be part of the empowerment and reempowerment of Cuban citizens of African descent.

Thanks to the *revolutionary* invisibilization of much of an authentic, Afro-Cuban militancy, both past and present, the symbol of national, African descendant representation and representativity is sometimes usurped. Other times it is used by an unauthentic group that has been corrupted by the long-term effects of concepts such as “chastened blacks,” “frustrated blacks,” and “folklorized blacks.” This often leads to complete tragedy.

This is the image that is most seen around the world, an image of an African descendant disconnected from his own people, who has no self-awareness, or hides his identity because he is alienated, a faker and/or a distorter. These are people who usually employ and give credence to a rhetoric that other, white-*criollos* dictate to them, or that they themselves make up to please them. This is a rhetoric often aimed at naïve and gullible, international audiences that do not know there are gaps and complexities in our national, island reality, or the specifics about the lives of the country’s African descendants. Nevertheless, the fact that important, misguided members of this population, and sometimes even dazzled members of the international audience, purposefully believe this false idea concerning the homogeneity of black Cubans—when no human group is homogeneous—is noteworthy, as is the notion that their way of thinking, their philosophy about all this, is uniform, too.

Yet, the representativity of the most radical, Afro-Cuban militancy, its positions and intellectual production (both in and outside Cuba), is normally kept from the international scene. It is silenced and ignored. This is how the essential symbology of representation is hidden, and the validity of its semiotic explanations of our social forces is rejected. Are they active, or are they passive in terms of their power and authority, in their more or less watched transitions? Semiotics is losing its ability to explain to us a society engaged in power games, games that are expressed in its simulated and imposed representations and omissions.

Despite the discomfort of some in accepting this, this explains why Cubans today must urgently revisit, reread, reanalyze, and unravel our own history. We must do this without fear of scrutinizing the particular complexities of this history and its national, regional, continental, and international ramifications. To this purpose, we should always have a transnational perspective, and try to seek symbols and spaces, while attempting to reinterpret symbols within their spaces. We must devote ourselves to digging deeply in the histories and intentions of those who created them, as well as into their supporters, defenders, and detractors.

We will continue to construct our truly postcolonial, historical, sociological, and political analyses within this complicated morass of narratives, always crossing limits and revisiting always shifting boundaries. We civic activists, members of the Afro-Cuban intelligentsia and others devoted to this topic, are on the road to reconstruction, sometimes tripping, and encountering huge obstacles. Our plan is to make progress and confide in the creation of our own critical *corpus*, always looking at ourselves and outward—to

the world—with both our subaltern and excluded gaze, and our gaze as civic activists and African, ethno-racial militants. We will not capitulate to those in power or pity ourselves: we will be sensitive to the integrity of a historically injured people, but without sentiment.

It is on this road that we will construct the legitimate Cuban nation, from the ground up. This is the nation that those in power, with their colonial practices, try to keep asphyxiating. For this prolonged situation of more than fifty years to end happily will be the responsibility of all the nation's groups who because of their ethno-genesis make it up and support it. We must use all our strength, and force ourselves to do this, regardless of our skin color or political leanings. If the nation is to be legitimate, it must truly embody the notion “with all, and for the good of all.” If not, the end result will simply and tragically be to cease existing, particularly at this time of widespread and rapid, post-nationality in which so many prefer to be foreigners, and even try to and believe they have shorn their essence.

In this sense, the year 2012 marks the commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of the greatest real and subjective lynching suffered by black Cubans. It is a historic and determining moment for us. The Castroist political elite and leaders of excluded, black

Cuban, civic groups could begin their most important battle ever. Will there be another lynching of African descendants and Afro-Cubans? The only thing we can be sure of right now is our amazing and, perhaps, induced propensity to self-destruct. All we can do right now is wait and see what happens. The repression that was unleashed against the participants of the second Race and Nation Forum is not a good sign. The tributary statue of anti-black José Miguel Gómez is still standing on a very centrally located, capital city avenue; the media still presents black women mostly as prostitutes and vulgar; black men as criminals and assassins. And members of the repressive forces that should be establishing order are (mis)educated into seeing each African descendant as a potentially, highly, dangerous person.

Note:

1- He was interviewed in 2006 by Colombian broadcaster and journalist Camila Gómez Cotta. In: Gómez Cotta, Camila. “Memoria ancestral e identidad, elementos para entender la agencia-otra afroesmeraldeña” [Ancestral Memory and Identity: Elements for Understanding Agency—Another Afro-Esmeraldean]. *Del Caribe* 53 (2009): 85.