

Afro-Cubans: Society and Politics

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Cuba's African descendants played a decisive role in nation's history and politics. Their visibility was due essentially to the prominence of certain black and mulatto military leaders intimately involved with the independence cause. Among them were Antonio Maceo, José Maceo, Flor Crombet and Guillermo (Guillermón) Moncada. They achieved status as national heroes. Generals Jesús Rabí, Agustín Cebreco, Quintín Banderas, Juan Eligio Ducasse, Prudencia Martínez, Pedro Díaz, and others, also were acknowledged for their contributions to making Cuba free. All were symbolic of Afro-Cuban participation in the independence war and potentially represented examples of leaders with whom to resist those who would minimize the role of blacks in the building of the nation.

The social and political importance of these black veterans was guaranteed at endless banquets held in their honor, the interest of emerging political parties in attracting them,

and the creation of social and political clubs named for them. Their social and political activities were amply covered in the press. For example, in 1900, there was a "friendly banquet" given in Santiago de Cuba in honor of General Rabí. "All" the cities' civil, religious, and legal authorities, and representatives of various corporations, newspapers and "most of the city's valiant citizens" attended. Quintín Bandera offers another example of visibility, prestige and leadership. He carried out work very important to the history of Cuba, as the organizer and president, in 1899, of the Cuban National Party in Oriente, and later of the Cuban National League. Banquets and parties were also held in his honor.¹

The contribution of Afro-Cubans could not be ignored; it was obvious at patriotic events like the Republic's inauguration, on May 20th, 1902. On that day, a group of soldiers from the Liberating Army, described by the press as a "Cuban force," most of them with

“bronzed” faces, marched through the streets of Havana under the leadership of General Pedro Díaz, commander of the Sixth Army regiment and a personal friend of Antonio Maceo’s. Black generals were also present at other public acts, like the commemoration of the start of the Ten Years War (1868-1878).

Black Cuban patriots earned a place in Cuba’s social and political life. Rabi’s illness and death were closely followed by the national press, and made front-page news. The funeral procession for black patriot Rafael Serra y Montalvo was led by the President of the Republic himself. Even when white leaders participated, in order to attract black votes, they also were publicly acknowledging the role played by Afro-Cubans in the formation of the Cuban nation.

Numerous black patriots who lacked military credentials but contributed to the independence cause also held leadership positions and garnered visibility. Juan Gualberto Gómez was one of the most prominent among them. Born the son of slaves, he became a close collaborator of Martí’s and became the island’s most notable black leader during the 1890s. He headed the Central Directory of Black Societies and began to publish the newspaper *La Igualdad*. The importance of the Directory in the struggle for independence and against racism is well known. It involved about a hundred societies in 1893, and started a successful campaign for the acknowledgment of black Cubans’ civil rights and legal equality. Another of its contributions was to provide a space in which Afro-Cuban activists could acquire organizing and political skills, both of which would later allow them to play an active role in republican times.

The life of Manuel Delgado is a clear example of this. In 1892, the Society of Light, a black club in Yaguajay, named him their del-

egate to the Directory. As a delegate, he later joined the Liberating Army and achieved the rank of commander. After independence, he served as lieutenant in the Rural Guard, was a member of the Las Villas provincial assembly, and was a representative in the National Congress. He later became a member of President Gerardo Machado’s cabinet, first as Secretary of Agriculture, later as Secretary of the Interior.

Another black public figure involved in the Directory and newspaper *La Igualdad* before participating in the war was journalist and writer Lino D’Ou. While in the war, he reached the rank of colonel in José Maceo’s top brass; afterwards, he was a representative for the Conservative Party in Oriente province, in 1908. D’Ou remained a distinguished political and intellectual figure till his death, in 1939.

Others who distinguished themselves include Laudelino García, Juan Travieso, and Ramón Canals. García was a captain in the Liberating Army at the war’s close, and ended up joining the Las Villas provincial assembly. Travieso was a representative, and later became known as the “patriarch” of his native town, Bejucal (near Havana). Canals was a business owner, went into exile during the war, and served as a town councilor for Havana (1908-10 and 1912-16).

The independence war’s black heroes were also quite visible and prestigious after the war. Antonio Maceo was the most venerated, mentioned and disputed symbol of Cuban racial brotherhood among them. His death in combat is commemorated every year with massive processions to his tomb. These invariably included politicians and representatives of black clubs and societies. Congress held special sessions in his memory; parks were built, monuments were raised, and streets were named in

honor of this mulatto general. In 1930, in his effort to draw black votes, President Machado declared the date of his fall in combat a national holiday.

The popularity and prestige of black Cuban heroes and veterans were indicative of an inevitable reality. Even those who despised blacks had to acknowledge them and face the fact of their participation in the emerging political order. There was no argument about it: blacks had to and must be considered at each phase of the island's reconstruction. Furthermore, one cannot even talk about this without mentioning the Independent Group of Color, established on August 7th, 1908, which then became the Independent Party of Color (PIC), whose membership included black Cubans such as Evaristo Estenoz (its President), and Agapito Rodríguez and Pantaleón Valdez (both Vice-Presidents), Gregorio Surin (Secretary), and Julián Valdez (Vice-Secretary), all of whom made marks on Cuba's political history.

The PIC was formed to respond to the needs created by a desire to further develop the progress and civilization of blacks, an aspiration the political parties in which they had been active were not yet able to fulfill. Yet, they were misunderstood, and another of the period's intellectual and black, political figures, Senator Martín Morúa Delgado, disappointed of the idea of organizing a political party to achieve this end—despite the fact he acknowledged there was a need there was to improve the black race's social, economic and moral situation.

The largest of the Antilles had witnessed the ascent of a large number of black Cubans in politics, which is how they earned more participatory space—little by little. After the revolution of 1933, other black politicians became involved in public life and led

social movements. After the 1959 revolution, the outlook for Afro-Cubans became dismal. Their presence in the government's highest positions and in the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) was negligible. Any changes in the leadership's racial composition were painfully slow.

According to the 1986 census, blacks and mulattoes represented only 9% of the Central Committee in 1965, 7% in 1975, and 12% in 1980. Their proportion as leaders was no different at the provincial level: 8% in 1974. These numbers have not changed much, even now, despite the mistaken and unwise policies the majority white, governing elite has implemented, e.g., establishing quotas at different levels of government. They have not considered that the race problem should be seen and dealt with differently, by raising awareness. How can all that tradition and history of active, black involvement in Cuba's social and political life be obviated?

If at this time in Cuba's history there are few or no blacks in positions of real power, it is because the governing elite is not interested in it being so. The few who have reached this inner circle are 'virtual' figures incapable of expounding on the race problem for fear of losing their privileges and perks.

Juan Almeida Bosque, Esteban Lazo, and Pedro Sáez, to name a few, are among the few who have had any real pull at the top. The naming of Raúl González Lovaina, a black-skinned Cuban, to lead one of the country's three armies is a response to criticisms launched by agents of change both in and outside Cuba.

The future of black Cubans depends on them seeking democracy as an inevitable and thoroughly examined option, as well as in public spaces, which will offer the best way for blacks to attain their rights. The challenges

are many, but so is our determination strong. The current political situation in Cuba has created a new imperative. Since dark-skinned Cubans constitute a majority of the population, have no place at the table of official power, and are socially and economically marginalized, we must continue to discuss and debate race relations and how opportunities are denied us. Let me just remind you of Alejandro de la Fuente's words (he is a professor at the University of Pittsburgh, in the U.S.): "Let's be honest. If identifying people according to their *race*, if talking about blacks, whites and mulattoes is a sin against humanity, then we Cubans should be excommunicated *en masse*. Yet, is it really sinful to talk about a topic so central to the formation and representation of Cubanness? Or, on the contrary, should we reserve excommunication for those who are bent on institutionalizing the silence that surrounds this and other topics?"²

Notes:

- 1- Major General José Quintino "Quintín" Banderera Betancourt (1834-1906) fought in Cuba's three independence wars. In postcolonial, republican Cuba he fought with the liberals against "moderate" President Tomás Estrada Palma's reelection efforts. When the Rural Guard dispersed his forces, he sought refuge at the El Garro farm, where he died on August 22nd, 1906, by Captain Ignacio Delgado's party. They killed him with a single shot, rather than use the machete on him. He was a Tata Inkisi (a Bantú priest), and ministered to the Liberating Army. (Editor's note)
- 2- De la Fuente, Alejandro. *Una Nación para todos. Raza, desigualdad y política en Cuba*. Madrid: Colibrí, 2000.