

1912: Anatomy of a Silence

Roberto Castell
Writer and journalist
Batabanó, Mayabeque, Cuba

The documentary

The projection of this documentary film had an impact on those in the room. One heard sharp words uttered against President José Miguel Gómez and José Martí's son. The *guaguancó's* lyrics were moving, a reminder of Carabalí blacks' contribution to the cause of Cuban independence. After nearly two hours, it is over. The credits allow the tension in the room to decrease. There is consensus about what has been defined as opprobious silence. I disagree: I say it was a prudent silence. If I am to use the thirty or so spectators as an example, what I heard was the murmuring of people quick to tear up, to become emotional, which places great limits on one's ability to be objective. Almost no one considers something essential: a balanced point of view. The documentary has gone beyond a cold, hard, deep, reasonable analysis devoid of sentimentalism.

The social context

A synthesis of the context of 1912 Cuba would have provided perspective for the viewing public. Slavery had been abolished only 25 years earlier, and most black Cubans still lacked the values and norms of a so-called 'free' society. As a social group, the majority of white Cubans are far from being condescending, understanding, flexible, indulgent. Whether *criollos* or Spaniards, they are ignorant rural folks

convinced of the fact that they are enshrined in hegemonic culture, the only one associated with progress. It is to this paradigmatic culture, with its gravitas, that it is assumed that all other cultures will willingly assimilate.

In 1912, civilization was taken to be defined by and reflected in the most advanced social and scientific thought. Any historical vestige that might impede in society's socio-economic improvement was uncritically stigmatized. A half century would have to go by before a cultural revolution dignified anything situated outside the West, and more than seven decades for non-Western culture to be seen as an example of true possibilities, so long as it was essentially Westernized.

The vast mass of illiterate, white Cubans enjoys advantages over the mass of illiterate blacks. In an overwhelmingly agricultural country, owning land was a guarantee of social responsibility, and the mass of white *criollos* had it—to a greater or lesser degree—since colonial times. Recently emancipated, black *criollos* must resign themselves to laboring as agricultural workers at the very same sugarmills at which they had earlier served as slaves. Thus, their degree of social responsibility with regard to social stability is quite inferior, by comparison.

To own land, no matter how meager, produces a set of social values, such as a culture of sacrifice, a willingness to endure austerity and desire to make money, unthinkable for someone

who has no property at all. It has always been the case that having land has meant work, work and more work. Even today, an eight-hour day is unthinkable for a farmer. There are no Sundays, no vacations, no retirements, or even painted fingernails for women. A farmer's job starts at dawn, when he gets up to milk the cows, and goes on till evening, when he beds down the animals for the night. Farmers' wives—and their children—who start working on the farm at a very young age, must also endure the hot sun, a sacrifice that today's defenders of children's rights could easily denounce.

White farmers who had been hardened and brutalized by the harshness of their work, could look only disdainfully upon agricultural laborers, who after a day's work gave themselves up to pleasures like gambling, rumba and alcohol.

Even though in 1912 Europe was becoming less and less Christian, as a result of influence from nineteenth-century revolutions, the majority of white Cubans, who had their own style of Catholicism, embraced Catholic morality—in both its positive and negative aspects—and to an extreme. On the positive side, there was the effort to control instincts and keep desires at bay. Naturally, this moral code was violated in the at home-on the street dichotomy, which is the negative aspect. There was one moral code for within the home and society, and another, quite different one for outside the home and in the brothel. Hypocritical? Yes. But it was 1912.

For white *criollos*, the tribal cultures or chieftanships of African origin, as well as the promiscuity that characterized slave barracons, in and of themselves constituted an assault on the decency and good customs upheld by inherited social appearances. White *criollos* had no other point of reference. The socioeconomic conventions of the time prohibited blacks from being able to raise their standard of living and educate themselves. The kind

of progress for which decades later the State would create a plan, one that would liberalize minorities and promote tolerance, was in its infancy. The kind of progress that would increase productivity to levels never before achieved, and allow farmers to send their children to school to become educated, was barely discernable on the horizon. The white man in 1912 is illiterate, rough, intransigent and moralizing.

The political context

In Europe, the power behind worldwide progress, nationalist fervor, is at its all-time high. Decreasing religiosity and doubt in the notion of a universal God, cause reason to be abandoned in favor of experimentation with absolute liberty. The sharpest minds begin to debate, to develop theories of racial supremacy. Thirty years later, this would unleash the worse violence ever.

It is 1912. Five years must pass before the triumph of Bolshevism brings about an era in which political parties will exploit the frustration of workers and rural people, who when irritated, will rally against the aristocracy and bourgeoisie. It would be decades, after the earliest triumph of fascism, and later national-socialism, when the worst sort of politicians in one party would exacerbate racial passions and exhort the masses to carry out the worst crimes imaginable against different ethnic groups.

On the national scene, the inauguration of the republic wreaks havoc on traditional concepts of father or motherland. Rural areas, which have been destroyed by war, need hard currency and a market. This is no time for patriotic pride. Masses cannot reason on empty stomachs; an empty belly turns the masses into mobs. The emerging republic urgently needs a health system, an educational system; cities need to clean up and assume the new century's code of urban existence. Cuba is not in a position to attain the resources it needs on its own. She is

now free, and must accept the consequences. No one is legally obligated to offer Cuba help, and Cuba knows this. One does not ask for assistance at gunpoint. She can negotiate with some of the players that might offer help and foreign aid, but being independent makes her responsible for that freedom, and maturity should allow her to accept that she is not in a position to demand everything she wants. Maturity should allow her to realize that she must give up something if she is to preserve the whole. Politicians should be committedly prudent.

The nature of the problem

When the 325th Constantine year saw the prohibition of gladiator games, the measure had little effect. The humanist ethic proposed by the new, official, imperialist religion collided with the basic instincts of a mass little accustomed to the limiting effects of reason. Empirically, Constantine knew that there could no dialogue come out of the little practiced reason employed by the classic, Roman Colliseum's mob. He knew that laws were only the first step. Laws were only the earliest evidence of mankind's concerted effort to progress. Thus, it would take force to allow laws to actually work.

Laws in the nascent Cuban republic held that all races are equal, but this did not mean that racial prejudice was eradicated. Whites and blacks had fought together for independence; together they had overcome the first obstacle—Spanish domination—and established the nation. The nation came into being with a constitution that endorsed racial equality. Yet, obstacles to full integration came into view.

Blacks and whites came from very different cultures. The religion of whites stemmed from a millennial, hierarchical, and monarchic moral authority with very clear dogma. It obliged people to behave properly by constantly moderating their basic instincts. This author-

ity, founded upon a pact between faith and reason, was efficient because it tolerated and even encouraged a certain degree of superstition among the ignorant masses, in order not to lose them entirely.

The religion of blacks, on the other hand, exacerbated sensual instincts. African priests did not obey a god that demanded proper behavior. Instead, they worshiped a group of gods who operated capriciously. It was possible to negotiate even life and the future of other human beings with them, via offerings. This appalled the white men of 1912, whether they were superstitious or not. Each priest was free not only to interpret the messages of spirits and deities, but also to manipulate said messages to their own financial or personal advantage, regardless of whether the deity or he behaved properly or not. It is safe to assume that Independent Party of Color (PIC) militants believed that blacks should be considered over whites regarding social careers, for the simple reason that their disadvantage was so obvious. To resolve this overwhelmingly social problem, PIC members despaired and ended up turning to politics, in a vain attempt to use force to resolve this problem, ignoring the fact that no human law can control anyone's conscience.

For all the other citizens, reason sustained that the rules of the game should be fair. Much later, history would pass judgment on this notion, since anywhere social classes or ethnic groups organized politically and triumphed, the cure was far worse than the disease.

Martín Morúa

Martín Morúa was ahead of his time. Unlike his black brothers, who had cut their teeth on and been hardened by the hinterland, Morúa Delgado was a far-seeing intellectual. He understood and valued the absolute need there was for social equality within political parties.

As a novelist, he knew and appreciated the imperfect nature of human beings. Morúa understood the tenuous nature of the coexistence of these two, extremely culturally different ethnic groups. They had only just begun to come together in the new nation, a total blend that had not yet occurred. It could not occur in such a short time. Morúa could see just how dangerous for national stability and peace among the citizenry it would be one of the two racial groups organized politically, not according to political leanings, but rather to cultural heritage. He knew this ninety years before the clash of Muslim and Christian civilizations of today.

The PIC did promote some positive notions, which was great, but the concern was how long it would be before its members were carried away by human passions that could blind reason; how long would it be before black Cubans became violent with the white, landowning family that had earlier enslaved them, to settle the score. How long would it be before white Cubans became violent against a race it viewed as suspicious, given its loose customs?

Conclusion

A hundred years later, Morúa Delgado's actions are still misunderstood. He is barely mentioned in history; there are few opinions concerning his legacy. It is still a thorny issue. The phrase "little war" is slowly being replaced by "massacre," in reference to what took place during the summer of 1912. Yet, the use of "massacre" does not take into account that the word implies the killing of defenseless people, and not armed people, which the PIC activists were, even if only with machetes. For the Cuban as well as the foreign landowner, the tenant farmer as well as the lot owner, the rising up of hundreds or thousands of black men armed with any sort of weapon wreaked a kind of ter-

ror that no party platform could mitigate—regardless of its progressive nature.

Let us set aside the well-meaning pamphlet and accept the reality of hundreds or thousands of rebels. They have no support from any foreign country, nor the support of any wealthy Cuban. How does Evarist Estenoz think he is going to finance this uprising? How will he feed and provide for hundreds of men? Farmers and landowners see the answer quite clearly: by the sweat of their own brows, by force or not. How could an isolated farmer or landowner deny the demands of two or three hundred rebels coming through their property? How did four or five generals-now-politicians plan to control the basest instincts of an irregular troop organized according to race, and not ideals, which is what was highlighted in the documentary?

Once does not need to wait for an intellectual treatise five years later for an answer. Fear was not the result of propaganda. It was enough to be white and live in isolated conditions, in the hinterland, to realize how frightening it was to know that there were hundreds of hungry, rebellious blacks in the zone—not because they were black, but because they started an uprising and considered themselves to be a victimized race. This made them see the other race, the whites, as the victimizers, a notion filled with great, negative, psycho-social connotations.

Given this context, hardly anyone dared to opine as to whether or not the Morúa amendment unleashed the terrible events, or whether it was Estenoz's irresponsible behavior, in exhorting his rural, black brothers, who clearly lacked any advantage (since they did not have a regular army) to bring their nation to the brink of civil war. A hundred years later, the debate is still at a stalemate, stuck in a quagmire that blames the victimizers, and thus abandons any possibility of integrating them.