

Historical Justice for an Unknown Hero

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He so threatened the very underpinnings of the colonial and slave regime, that José Antonio Aponte came to be seen as the supreme embodiment of evil. Slave-owning Spaniards and *criollos* would say “He is more evil than Aponte” whenever they wanted to imply that someone was undesirably dangerous.

In the twentieth century, the figure of Aponte was practically lost to oblivion. Any much less important fact or event garners more attention in historical references and popular knowledge than the epic that in 1812 jumpstarted a movement whose impact needs to be evaluated, in order to properly see the specific political environment and leanings there were on the island at a crucial moment in American history.

Far from being the subject of a text responsible for “teaching” the nation’s history, much less a documentary, fictional film, theatrical play or television series, José Antonio Aponte is like a ghost enveloped in omission and manipulation’s nebulous fog. All this is quite indicative of the degree to which the racist underpinnings upon which our social relations are built go beyond time and ideol-

ogy. Various generations of historians have graduated from universities without knowing anything at all about this and other events in which black Cubans were featured prominently, yet they are of supreme importance to our future as a nation.

Around mid May, a few days after the commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the execution of José Antonio Aponte and his companions (April 9, 1812), I remained perplexed by the news that a statue celebrating the heroism of the musicians and captain of the British ship *Titanic*, which sank in the north Atlantic more than a century ago, had been installed in the National Aquarium. In the meantime, on that same 9th of April, Cubans flocked to an event celebrating the place where Aponte and his companions had been brutally murdered—just a few blocks from the former home of Cuba’s Spanish governors—which is today one of the busiest corners in Havana. It became painfully aware that the long announced and awaited monument to Aponte remains an unfulfilled promise.

Why not acknowledge Aponte as a Founding Father? Didn’t his movement reflect the desires of landowning *criollos* unhappy

about colonial impositions, and slaveowners who were erroneously in favor of annexation? Didn't they manifest themselves to have evidently racist ideas, even during Cuba's independence struggle? Sixty years before the battle cry at Demajagua, Aponte created a movement whose leadership was horizontal in structure. Free and enslaved blacks and *mestizos*, poor and wealthy, white Cubans participated in it. It was a military organization that could function with territorial autonomy, count on collaborators and information from within the colonial military structure, and have ramifications abroad, primarily in the Caribbean and United States. Its political program promoted separation from Spain and the abolition of slavery, as well as the participation of all Cubans, under conditions of post-colonial equality. This was not an annexationist movement.

At a time when the *criollo* initiators of the American independence movement were still swearing loyalty to Ferdinand VII, when liberator Simón Bolívar was a tried and true slave owner, Aponte was already leading a movement in which all social sectors participated, and which had clearly abolitionist and pro-independence underpinnings.

In the early nineteenth century, José Antonio Aponte was a role model of the achievements of free blacks and *mestizos* in the Spanish colony. At only 54 years of age, Aponte was a relevant, Yoruba, religious leader, well off economically, and seen as an acceptably cultured person for his time. In 1782, Aponte had been part of General Cajigal's expedition, a group that participated in the revolutionary war of North America's thirteen colonies against England.

The plan was to create an uprising among the slaves, take control of some Havana and Matanzas sugar estates, and achieve a surprise



José Antonio Aponte

takeover of the Castillo de Atarés and Cuartel de Dragones, where some of them had already served, and in which they already had some collaborators. They knew the Spanish military installations perfectly well, and came up with a strategy for taking the Cuartel de Artillería by surprise.

While Aponte prepared and trained men committed to the uprising, Juan Barbieri, who went by the pseudonym of Haitian hero Jean François, organized the takeover of the Peña Alta sugarmill (Guanabo); Hilario Herrera worked in the island's eastern province to promote slave uprisings and land takeovers, with help from blacks José Miguel González, Calixto Centelles, Víctor Montealbán, Fermín Robledo and Román Recio, who worked in Camagüey, with Blas Tamayo and others, in Bayamo.

By the end of February, Aponte drafts a call to arms, to bring down tyranny and a copy of it posted on a wall of the Government Palace (Captains General Palace). At this pre-

cise, culminating moment of the conspiracy, and with an extremely tense political context back in Spain and in its colonies, one of the conspirators, perhaps fearful of the movement's magnitude, denounces it.

After the arrest of Cristóbal de Sola, and Pablo and Juan Benito Valdés, Juan Barbieri, Juan Bautista Lersundi and Francisco Javier Pacheco rebelled with slaves from the Peñas Altas sugarmill, on March 15th, 1812. After taking and burning it, their assault on the Trinidad sugarmill, near Peñas Altas, failed, due to the fact that Father Manuel Durán, a Catholic priest who heard the confession of a slave woman from the sugarmill, informed the authorities. On March 16th, Lersundi informs his co-conspirators in Havana of the taking of Peñas Altas and Barbieri's project to take over the Trinidad, Santa Ana and Rosario sugarmills.

Some of the Havana conspirators began to doubt in the uprising's potential for success. Aponte, with his typical confidence and valor, managed to encourage the most doubtful of them, and planned the burning of homes outside the sugarmill's wall, to divert the attention of the Spanish authorities while Salvador Ternero and his men attacked the Dragones barracks, and Chacón and his men, attacked the Castillo de Atarés. A month later, Aponte, Ternero, Chacón and Juan de Dios Mesa were arrested and taken to the Royal Prison. From there, they were taken to the La Cabaña, where Barbieri, Estanislao Aguilar and slaves from the Peñas Altas, Trinidad, El Rosario and Santa Ana sugarmills would join them shortly after, as did the conspirators from Alquízar and San Antonio de los Baños.

At Aponte's home, a very large book's pages were illustrated by a young black man, José Trinidad Núñez, with help from Aponte, himself. The images were representations of

the walls and barracks of Havana; the Morro, Atarés and La Cabaña castles; the roads to Regla and Guanabacoa; and the port's churches, palaces, warehouses and piers.

On April 9th, Aponte, Chacón, Barbieri and Aguilar, all of them free blacks, were hanged without due legal process. With them, Tomás and Joaquín Santa Cruz, both slaves from the Peñas Altas sugarmill, were also executed. Aponte's head was placed on exhibit in an iron cage at the intersection of Belacoaín and Carlos III. The conspirators from Camagüey, Bayamo and Holguín were arrested and hundreds were hanged. Even nine women were condemned to being whipped to death in a public plaza.

Hilario Herrera, "El Inglés," managed to escape to Santiago de Cuba, and took a ship to Santo Domingo, his native land, where that same year he led the Mojena and Mendoza slaves in uprisings.

In Camagüey and Oriente, however, the uprisings continued; the island's black insurrection had begun. Their impact was proven to be felt all the way in Camagüey, and even some of eastern Cuba. The conspiracy's military organization was perfect, and had autonomous regions whose efficiency was seen later, through soon to emerge independent activities. However, the government and some military regiments also had access to secret information.

Aponte's historic and political importance, as a religious and insurrectionist leader, and as an artist, is still being played down two centuries after the epic events of his conspiracy. It will take a radical change in Cuban history's perspective to properly, fully acknowledge and evaluate him for being so ahead of his time. Yet, both before and after 1959, black Cubans have been portrayed as victims and secondary players in a historical future that has always

been manipulated on behalf of promoting a positive image of hegemonic interests.

We should keep fighting so that Aponte, his companions, and all distinguished African descendants in our history can finally achieve the place they deserve as undeniable protagonists in our nation's building. To do this represents a huge challenge because the pride, identity, self-esteem and political and social actions of black Cubans represent an inadmis-

sible danger to those who govern—despite all their just and political rhetoric.

Two centuries after his epic and martyrdom, Cubans who are in tune with and committed to truth and justice reaffirm our determination to ensure that present and future generations not only know, but also take pride in the glorious history and contributions to Cuban history of Aponte and so many other heroes who have been heretofore forgotten.