

Societies of Color and Social Agency in Güira de Melena, 1899–1960

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When I enter currency-charging stores in Güira de Melena, where I was born and almost all its inhabitants know each other, I can tell that dark-skinned people are hounded, watched, nearly harassed by employees, as if we were terrible criminals. When I perceive the disdainful and disrespectful way in which consecrated Catholics from my area see the humblest of the faithful, I am more thoroughly convinced of how little we have progressed with regard to dignity and human values as a basis upon which to shape our social relationships.

Observations such as these, and the truly palpable inequalities that bother so many of us, motivated me to inquire into the social and institutional presence of African descendants in Güira de Melena during the republican era. I am aware of the fact my hometown has a long and still active tradition of racist conservatism and inconsequence.

Those who told me their stories, shared with me details of the recreational-cultural organization that Güira's black and *mestizo* population founded in 1899. They called it "The Society of Color"; I prefer to call it the African descendant society. The structure that would serve as headquarters and wit-

ness to a very important and unforgettable tradition for the town's blacks—regardless their age, profession and level of education—was built early in the Republican era (post-1902). It was called "The Freedom Center" till 1924, and as a refuge and recreational space for countless blacks citizens in Güira de Melena.

Lorenzo Carrera Varo, Alberto Álvarez, Francisco Valle, Elio Carreras and Antonio Díaz were this Center's presidents. Díaz is acknowledged as the one person who most contributed to the society. Admission cost 5 cents and one could purchase an membership ID for 50 cents a month. With this, members not only got into the Center, but also any colored society in neighboring towns.

A variety of activities took place at the Center, especially recreational ones like dance matinees, the town's Patron Saint feast (May 19), to which inhabitants of other towns were invited, bachelors' parties, dance parties with themes like the Guayabera, Elegance, Flowers, and others. *Comparsas* from other provinces and famous music groups also participated, e.g., those of Arsenio Rodríguez, Chapotín, Arcaño y sus Maravillas, Melodías del 40, etc.

The most popular activity was the contest to crown the Beauty Queen, a fundraising effort for which colored cards were sold (the colors corresponded to one, particular contestant). Whoever sold the most was declared the winner.

The town had its own band—with both black and white musicians—ever since the early 1900s. By 1940, music classes and rehearsals were led by Professor Salazar, who is well remembered. He was a renowned member of the society, and held these events at the Center's headquarters. This band performed for the townspeople every Sunday, in the town park, and also provided music for funerals, if families so desired.

By the early 1950s, the society created a “betrothed couples *comparsa*,” which surprised and anguished some white residents, because it was in no way vulgar, and lasted a number of years. It was particularly known for the refinement and beauty of the costumes—bridal gowns and groom suits—and, above all, for its elegant dances. I had the honor of interviewing some of its now very old veterans, who recalled that after strolling through the town's main streets, the *comparsa* would go the city gate to the tune of the wedding march, dance a first waltz, and then a *danzón* and other traditional dances.

Antonio Maceo would be honored every December 7th with recitals and historical, theatrical sketches depicting his life, and that of other historical figures. “Verbenas” were celebrated for end-of-year celebrations, in the town's park. Just one orchestra would play, but rope was used to divide the park into two parts so that whites could use one side, and blacks the other. Yet, despite this differentiation, citizens all agree that they recall no time when the festivities were interrupted by any type of fight or conflict.

“The Freedom Center” had lots of members: most were black townspeople, or blacks from neighboring locations. Among these members, one could find anyone from a professor, musician or doctor; a cigar maker, peasant or plumber; a housewife, seamstress or student.

Board members from this black society were permitted to attend the white society's festivities at the “Círculo Familiar.” I located a 1952 directory, in which I was able to find people who are today remembered with admiration and respect by their contemporaries: Antonio Díaz (President), Armando Castañeda (Secretary), Guillo Noriega (Treasurer), and Juan Martínez (Spokesperson), etc.

After the Revolution's triumph (1959), it was agreed that there should be “integration,” so the Freedom Center closed. Dances for everyone were held at the Círculo Familiar, the ropes that divided the park at New Year's disappeared, and no more activities honoring Maceo were organized. Everything changed.

I was able to collect many opinions and get a sense for the feelings of the few witnesses who still exist from that time period. I also got to appreciate the value of their memories. Their eyes really twinkle when they talk about the great time that they had at their society; how they danced and played dominoes, and were able to avoid problems or arguments. They felt as though they were active agents in their own history, and masters of their own space.

There were three, main, recreational centers in Güira: the *Centro Español* (which today is known as the *Casa de la Cultura*), the *Círculo Familiar* (which is today the social club of the CIMEX corporation), and the Freedom Center, which is an abandoned, used building today, although its side patio is used by the National Institute for Sports and Recreation (INDER).

No one remembers exactly when the Revolution took all this away from them. All they so know is that when integration and unity came on the scene, they lost everything else. The dividing rope was removed from the park, but then social misconduct became the norm. This destroyed tranquility and harmony. Today, this social misconduct is so terrifying and commonplace that it is actually risky to just try to safely entertain one's self. The Freedom Center's headquarters were taken, in 1961, by the 180th Battalion of the National Revolutionary Militia, after the Bay of Pigs invasion. My informants told me that this was the last noteworthy event at the Center, because it has ceased being a place for recreation and cultural growth for Güira's, Republican-era blacks and mestizos. The great edifice that took in this organization as a place for fraternity, brotherhood, healthy recreation, and cultural development is today the victim of abandonment, deterioration and mindless oblivion.

This example of African descendant civic and sociocultural activity in Güira de Melena is one more chapter in the long struggle of the Republican era, a struggle carried out by a particular societal group in order to transform everything we have contributed to the building of the Cuban nation into real gains and consecrated spaces. Today, this presence and that memory are lost to forgetfulness, to oblivion. The testimonies of our ancestors' struggles and victories are not even collected or presented by the media and cultural institutions, nor even by the local, municipal museum. Thus, current and future generations cannot learn about or acknowledge the fact that we were real social agents and achieved progress prior to 1959. This exclusionary omission makes us historically invisible, which has not helped us cease being permanent victims of disdain and suspicion.