

Black Women and the Cuban Nation: Historical and Imaginary Memory

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We must deepen our recovery of a memory that has been hidden from black women by a historiography that was written by the white elite, and includes very little about black social actions and the African descendants who brought them about. It is more crucial yet to make them publicly known.

The role of black women in the formation of the nation has traditionally been disdained and obscured throughout Republican historiography, and is still unknown by the majority of the population. Yet, archival information gathered by Cuban scholars as important as Dr. María del Carmen Barcia Zequiera reveal some of what has been forgotten: “The number of black freemen who owned tenement yards in the sixteenth- and seventeenth centuries is noteworthy. A prime example of this is an October 1585 sale made by Susan Velásquez, a black freewoman from Havana, who sold to María Rodríguez, another freewoman, a Zape African resident of Havana, a neighboring tenement yard that on one side bordered with the homes and tenement yard of Cecilia Velásquez, another black freewoman.”¹

In any book on Cuban history, the space dedicated to black and *mestizos* is essentially employed decoration or filling regarding pointed actions carried out by whites. Even the actions of white women are told, in the context of the arts, teaching and training, and domestic life.

Written or visual testimonies from the period reveal white women in public spaces, in the context of their attendance at the theater and dances, and participation in carriage rides driven—of course—by a black or *mestizo* coachman. Their social role is entirely tied to that of men: “their fathers’ daughters, husbands’ wives, children’s mothers,” but it is clear that Havana served as a privileged scene in which the economic and also social prosperity of African descendant women was also shown off.²

African descendant women in black councils [cabildos]

A principal, defining characteristic of *cabildos* [councils] is women’s participation in them. This reflects the position they occupied and the extent of their influence on kinship and trust societies. Women were queens, matrons or integral members of these black *cabildos*, a space they used wisely to make decisions and reveal agreement, through the acceptance and acknowledgment of all their members. Their most important function was to protect and take care of all the *cabildo*’s belongings. They were also responsible for naming supervisors and passing on traditions such as spiritual and cultural strengthening, which includes resistance culture for times of extreme social pressures.

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century documents at the Cuban National Archive prove the existence of about 110 *cabildos* divided by ethnicity, e.g., *carabali* [from Calabar], *congo* [Kongo], *lucumi* [Yoruba], *gangá* [from Sierra Leone], *arará* [descended from the Fon, Ewe and Popo], *mina* [from Cameroon] and *mandinga* [descended from the Mali Empire]. The existence of 159 queens and matrons is documented. These were women who were economically independent and able to plan their own futures. They achieved personal and real property ownership.

The *cabildos* offered these women a social space and the possibility of gathering, establishing ties, establishing themselves, creating different kinds of networks, promoting culture, sharing and developing their interests—material and spiritual, and opening paths outwards to public spaces.

They also had a place in education. For example, in the seventeenth century, ex-slaves Matías and Eugenio Velazco had a school in the Jesús María and Los Sitios neighborhoods; black man Juan de la Cruz had one on St. Nicolás Street. All of these were tied to *cabildos*. In 1877, Ruperto León, from the Purísima Concepción *cabildo gangá* requested permission from the Spanish authorities to instruct Africans and their descendants at their schools.

Black women in Catholic cofradías

The first, two, black and *mestizo cofradías* we know of were Nuestra Señora de los Remedios (1598) and Espíritu Santo, which were created by free blacks at the shrine and later, at a church by the same name. Just like *cabildos*, *cofradías* were social and meeting places, and spaces in which black and *mestizo* women could establish trust networks. They did not primarily carry out functions in them, like they did at the *cabildos*, but two women who served on the board of the *pardos* and *morenos* section of the

Congregación de Sufragantes de las Benditas Almas del Purgatorio section. Ninety percent of its members were women; some eventually came to be as important as Juliana Reyes de Barbosa, María Isidora Bernabeu, Úrsula Lambert and Águeda Beltrán.

It is interesting that some *cofradías* were interested in educating their children, so one of the obligations was to start schools. Thus, the San Agustín *cofradía* opened a coeducational school that did not distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate children. This is important because black and *mestiza* women had illegitimate children, given their social position within slave society.

Black women and instruction

Juana Pastor had a school for black children, and some white children in the Jesús María neighborhood. Noteworthy is the fact that the Sociedad Económica gave awards to black teachers Lorenzo Menéndez and Mariano Moya, both lieutenants in the *Pardos* and *Morenos Batallion*. Education was one of the few, possible occupations for black and *mestiza* women, given the growing needs of this social group's poor infrastructure in cities.

Free, black and *mestiza* women who worked in childcare—whether white, black or *mestizos*—both in and outside the home, undertook the role of primary school educators. Despite the fact *criollo* intellectuals used their influence to press for the closing of these schools, said black and free women used the fact that there were just a few of these schools to keep them open to black, *mestizo*, and even poor white children for several years. The city had no money with which to replace them. Thus, black and *mestiza* women set upon teaching played a mediating role in so important a public space open in Havana.

Another defensive strategy was to create “friends’ schools,” which were founded by women

who allowed neighbor's children into their homes to teach them to read, write and their catechism. In 1848, there were nine of these schools in Santiago de Cuba, all led by black and *mestiza* women like Ramona López, María Nicolasa, María Feliciana Portuondo and Antonia Núñez.

In 1879, María Eduviges Lasagra founded the La Caridad del Cobre mutual aid society. It was run entirely by black and *mestiza* women. It was possible for men to be considered members, but not to hold leadership positions. This unique factor reflects the advanced, emancipatory thinking of the African descendant women, when one compares it to the backwardness of white women in Cuba's nineteenth-century society.

Free black women: freed black women

According to Levi Marrero, freed black women were indispensable to the local, Havana economy, and participated in it more than men in their same situation. They were able to use their capacities and develop strategies that allowed them to gain and keep a place in public spaces.

In 1559, precisely when Havana was being threatened by French corsairs, the governing, Havana *cabildo* had to request assistance from freed black women to watch the Morro Castle* because they "enjoyed total freedom and even had their own homes."

Ex-slave women showed that they were able to overcome the patriarchal and slave society in which they lived by taking advantage of the chinks present in colonial legislation and inserting themselves in the urban service economy. They became owners of small farming properties in the country. In 1887, Belén Álvarez, a freed black woman born in Africa (of course, she was a slave who bought her own freedom) bequeathed 10 homes, an eight-room tenement yard, refined furniture and 6,500 pesos in her account at the Banco Español. She employed two

whites as caretakers in her homes and rooms, so they could manage them and collect rents.

Black women in court lawsuits

The judicial battles of black and *mestiza* slave women in the nineteenth century reveals a different view from the one that persists even today about their attitude, actions and social role. Census figures confirm that "matrifocal" families were the norm among slave families, as well as in those of freed blacks and *mestizas*. This explains why the position of black women was so special, and that black slave women whose children were fathered by their owners could present themselves before the Síndico del Ayuntamiento [City Administration] in order to recover their children. These cases were generally decided in their favor, as happened with Juana González, a free (ex-slave) *mulata* who emancipated her daughter María Quirina; Encarnación de Cárdenas, a free black woman arranged for the purchase of her mother, and when her owner refused, went to the Síndico; Dionisia de los Reyes, who presented a lawsuit at the Síndico because of difficulties she had in buying her little sister; and María Candelaria Gavilán and Isabel Falí, who asked the Síndico to protect their children from the abuse of their owners.

These examples prove that to the extent that the era's conditions permitted, black and *mestizo* women, whether free or slave, made ample use of the law for their own benefit. They even managed to challenge the municipal authorities and in some instances obtained favorable decisions. This shows the autonomy of decisions and sense of female subjectivity they had amidst a society totally dominated by white men. This degree of freedom also reveals the high-level, strategic capacity they had for creating opportunities for themselves in a very complex colonial society.

Claims of inheritances and suits for the adjudication of properties attest to how these

women formally constructed their families' economic bases. More than a necessity, it was a question of appropriating a social identity based on a rigorous sense of self-sufficiency as free women, which by comparison did not exist among white women, even the wealthiest of them.

African descendant women and modernity

The participation of black and *mestiza* women in the wars for independence was extremely important, despite the fact official history offers only a few figures. The presence of women in patriotic clubs at the end of the nineteenth century in Cuba and in exile has been ignored. At least three had black women heading them: Mercedes Varona, Mariana Grajales de Maceo and the Rius Rivera sisters.

Nineteenth-century Havana suffered a pounding from modernity, and the role of black and *mestiza* women was very important in the changes that were occurring, in the way they managed to negotiate their space in city life. They were laundresses, midwives, teachers, vendors, wet nurses, caretakers for small children, servants and lovers, which allowed them to mediate between groups with power and subalterns. These practices guaranteed a tense and fruitful dialogue between social groups in Havana's social fabric.

The freedom of assembly and the press conferred by colonial authorities created a space for the rhetoric of black and *mestizo* women in the press. This rhetoric became even more effective in the twentieth century's early decades. Black and *mestizo* publications came on the scene in the forty years between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Among them was the *Minerva* magazine (which didn't last too long but was incredibly relevant for women as a way to defend rights and the need for education), which encouraged the acknowledgment, emancipation and social ascension of African descendants.

Women such as Úrsula Coimbra de Valverde, Salie Derosme, América Font, Pastora Ramos, Lucrecia González, María de Los Ángeles Storini, África Céspedes, Catalina Medina, Natividad González, Etelvina Zayas, Cristina Ayala, María Cleofás, Lanita K., Felipa Basilio, María Duabanc, and Francisca Turín y Laura Clarens distinguished themselves in this manner.

At the same time, white women sustained a rhetoric that exalted family values and poetry. African descendant Lucrecia González Consuegra (1848-1929), who wrote for *Minerva*, *El Álbum de las Damas de Las Villas*, *Albores*, *Ibis*, *Soñada* and *Diana* is markedly different. She directed and edited the literary periodical *La Armonía* in her own home city, Sancti Spiritus, with Juan Rafael Valdés, founder of the Juan Rafael Valdés Instruction and Recreation Society (1882). He sought to contribute to the advancement and development of blacks and *mestizos*. González Consuegra declared herself in favor of equality between the sexes, and saw to all the troubles and difficulties of black and *mestizo* women, and their need for education. She had a working relationship with José Martí and Juan Gualberto Gómez, and was involved with the Cuban Revolutionary Party.

Black and mestiza women in the twentieth century

In the twentieth century, some of the names that stand out are those of Carmen Piedra, Consuelo Serra, Inocencia Silveira, Catalina Pozo Gato, Arabella Oña, Calixta María Hernández, and Teresa Ramos, women who wrote about women's emancipation and advocated for the rights of black and *mestiza* women to have better working conditions, salaries, and an acknowledged social position. The feminist movement developed mightily and it was women who promoted laws for divorce, parental custody, and voting rights.

Black and *mestiza* women actively participated in three national women's conferences, where they were 20% of the forum. Eudisia Lara and Inocencia Valdés stood out at those events. The topic of the 1939 conference was black and *mestiza* workers.

Similarly, black and *mestiza* women contributed with their sporadic publications in defense of voting rights, equal pay for equal work, and against discrimination, through the Independent Party of Color's publication, *Previsión*, in the "Ideals of a Race" section of the *Diario de la Marina*, and *La Lucha* and *La Discusión*.

Black and mestizo women and religious syncretism

Black and *mestizo* women—slave or ex-slave—protected and passed down their religious beliefs and myths, and overcame all of life's negative circumstances. The value of the spiritual guidance contained within their testimonies continues to grow as an answer to a life of submission under slavery.

In seeing them as bearers of cultural resistance against another, dominant culture imposed by the slave-owning masters, one can see how they managed to make their spiritual work become strategies for dealing with a new and tragic reality. Their success can be appreciated in the degree to which they readjusted their original spiritual models without them losing their essence.

Cabildos served as a source for religious conservation and a basis for the transmission of religious, ethical and moral values, of a different cosmogonic perspective. Their mission was commendable not only because of the non-material patrimony they preserved and passed one, but also because they stamped our nationality with particular traits.

Inés Flores (Cabildo of Nuestra Señora del Rosario y las Ánimas), Ña Caridad (Ca-

bildo Changó Teddún), María Josefa Cárdenas (Cabildo of Los Congos Reales), and others like Timotea (Latuán) Albear (of whom it is known she passed on a greater part of the Osa and Ifá narratives in Cuba, and taught Octavio Samá (Obadimeji), and in their union brought together the Yoruba religious groups under one liturgical body—Regla de Ocha)—were extremely relevant and important. Other santeras—Ña Rosalía, Ña Matilde Zayas, Má Monserrate González (who taught Fermina Gómez, the women who first brought Olokun to Cuba), Arabia Oviedo, Ña Belén González, Rosa Rodríguez, Ña Margarita Armenteros, Panchita Herrera, María Towá, Josefa Herrera, Aurora Lamar, Susana Cantero, etc.—left their indelible mark on our non-material patrimony.

In recent years, certain studies of gender and about black and *mestiza* women carried out by institutional researchers have managed to expose a small part of a reality that till now has been unknown or ignored in general education. Despite everything, the history of the social development of black and *mestiza* women and their contribution to the formation of Cuban nationality and Cuba's spiritual and cultural values is very far from completed.

Notes:

1-Barcia Zequeira, María del Carmen. Los ilustres apellidos. La Habana: Ediciones Boloña, 2009: 41.

2-Ibidem, 92.

* **Editor's Note:** The author seems to be referring to the slope or hill (morro) at the entrance to Havana harbor, which was used as a lookout since 1538. The castle was fully conceived by engineer Juan Bautista Antonelli around 1565.