# Traditional Sociocultural
## References and Interracial Relations in Today's Cuba*

Leonardo Calvo Cárdenas
Historian and political scientist
National Vice Coordinator, *Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration* (CIR)
*ISLAS* representative in Cuba
Havana, Cuba

For centuries in Cuba, certain thought and referential patterns have taken shape as a result of certain socioeconomic and cultural underpinnings. These patterns situate Cuba's African descendants in perspectives and dimensions that are generally rigid and very difficult to change. This is expressed in what we might call the Cuban socio-historic paradox: while blacks and *mestizos* have gained a role and participation in political, economic, social and cultural processes, the perspective of them has remained beyond ideological alignments or situations that could guide and help determine corrections to their socio-racial position.

Today, with its very complex socioeconomic conditions, those patterns and references function as substantial obstacles in a very necessary process of reevaluating and streamlining social relations, in an effort to attenuate the disadvantages and dysfunctionality from which Cuban society still suffers.

Contemporary Cuba is both host to and a reason for growing disquiet and debate about its social realities, particularly those having to do with its interracial relations, and beginning, above all, with the undeniable disadvantages and inequalities that African descendants still endure in sociopolitical circumstances that structurally reduce and predetermine their options for finding a place in society.

For a long time, particularly from abroad, Cuba has been seen as a place of racial harmony and social equality. It is only when observers get close to Cuba's reality, with a critical, objective and unprejudiced eye, that they see the deep fissures and inequalities that at this stage of the game still exist, a situation that not even the Cuban government, which is never self-reflexive, dares to deny.

Too often, Cuban analysts succumb to the temptation of comparing Cuba's social reality with that of other countries, including the United States, losing sight of a series of historical and socioeconomic specificities that make Cuba a very particular, unique case in a hemispheric context.

Like all Iberian colonies, Cuba was a colony with a population, but the lack of a con-

siderable proportion of natives and the economic development that promoted first coffee and then sugar production, caused Africans and the descendants to have a very important and great demographic, economic, and later, social impact.

The large-scale importation of slave labor to ensure sugar production in the first global exporter of this sweet substance created a situation in which at some times in the nineteenth century there were more blacks than whites. As in no other place, a great number of Africans, freed descendants and freemen physically shaped cities and towns, and became socially and economically important. The areas in which they were involved included everything from the economics of the arts, to religion, and even the organization of urban spaces. The intense miscegenation that has characterized Cuba's demographic evolution, the fact that slaves had a legal and material possibility to buy their freedom, or that of their children, the penchant for commerce and plantations of Spaniards and Creoles, the broad possibilities for development and prosperity offered by Cuba's skyrocketing economic development, talent and hard work for which Africans and their descendants were known—despite their disadvantages and difficult social situation—brought about the existence of a very visible group of Cuban blacks and *mestizos* by the early nineteenth century. They were possessed of appreciable position, economic power and a vast culture.

This important, large group of craftsmen, businessmen, musicians, artists, schoolteachers and even European educated professionals represented an emerging group of African descendants were without precedent in our hemisphere. Upon the publication of a very interesting compilation about the historical and social impact of Cuban, African

descendant women, many readers were surprised at discovering there had been black, Cuban landowners and slave owners, or how Africans and their descendants presented and sometimes won lawsuits at colonial courts.

Throughout colonial history, units like the *Batallones de Pardos y Morenos* [black and mulatto military units]—in which many African descendants achieved superior ranks and even participated in distinguished campaigns such as the Haitian independence struggle and that of the Thirteen Colonies—, the *cabildos de nación* [brotherhoods organized by national origin], religious brotherhoods, fraternal and recreational organizations were important parts of the civic and social development of Africans and their descendants.

Slaves often demonstrated their rejection and rebelliousness against their inhumane exploitation. A number of important uprisings, and the creation of escaped slave communities—known as *palenques*—in intricate areas, became the nation's first free territories.

Naturally, this enormous social development had to find political expression. Members of the abovementioned battalions valiantly faced the English invasion of Havana, in 1762. A certain Captain Aponte distinguished himself in spectacular fashion in his struggle against the English occupation, which lasted almost a year. Half a century later, when the grand, Cuban landowners preferred to continue their submission to Spain, and started a campaign promoting "fear of blacks" to reaffirm their conservative interests, and when well known heroes from the continent remained in slavery's chains, a grandson of Captain Aponte, José Antonio, an artist and religious leader, led an internationally known movement peopled by whites, freed blacks and slaves, to abolish slavery, end colonial rule and promote egalitarian coexis-

tence for all of the inhabitants of a postcolonial Cuba.

African descendants participated on a grand scale in the three wars for independence (1868-78, 1879 and 1895-98). The vast majority of combatants and a number of the most valiant officers, who with their heroism and sacrifice earned the highest ranks in the Liberating Army, wrote pages of glory during three decades of difficult battles. And these were the wars that made the aforementioned socio-historical paradoxes noticeable.

In the midst of this nation building exercise, this scene of epic proportions further clarifies society's performative structures. What resulted from the contradiction between the accumulated role of African descendants in this struggle and the rigidity of Cuba's social norms was the creation of the Independent Party of Color (PIC-1908-1912) by a considerable number of veterans of the independence wars. This was their response to exclusion, disdain and injustices. The PIC was the only party of its kind in the entire continent.

The PIC is well known for having been a black and white political organization that very early on proposed a very progressive program connected to the needs and desires of the majority of Cubans at that time—without distinction. Twenty-two years prior to the Constitution of 1940, and forty-one years prior to the program presented by Fidel Castro in his *History Will Absolve Me*, the Independents of Color put forth solutions for the most difficult of social problems.

The narrative of subalterns, despite the fact it is extremely rich in examples of the crucial involvement, contribution and definition of African descendants in the shaping and development of the Cuban nation, and its wealth and culture, has not managed to be-come integrated into the master narrative that analytically conceptualizes and contrasts the options, possibilities, achievements or failures of the nation-building project. It is such because the descendants of Spaniards, Catholic landowners who governed Cuba from Spain from their supremacist and hegemonic positions managed to enshrine their interests in the power structure, and epistemologically coincide with the nation's limiting rhetoric.

Their intellectual mindset has been set forth as the only one possible, and becomes crystalized in the hegemonic rhetoric about the real, conceivable and legitimate. The tension of the rhetoric should come as no surprise. As it flowers, it also makes more evident the failure of the nation-building project, given the emergence of the excluded, marginalized, of people made invisible and subaltern. The recurring attempt to reaffirm the image, imaginary, real powers and spaces in which social and economic realization take place vividly clash with a reality that no longer allows itself to be trapped in a rhetoric of what is possible that is constructed from above and those with the power of culture and who have power over culture. We are not now facing a simple political crisis, or a crisis of politics, but rather a crisis concerning the cultural limits of the Cuban national project.

"Fear of blacks" is still an irrefutable reality. Yet, the *criollo* supremacists do not fear any possible violence of African descendants. Racism today flourishes like an urgent need to reorganize and correct—via disdain—the necessary subject and make him inferior, as though he were a danger capable of also showing enough ability to raise himself over the obstacles and challenges the story of his life has imposed on him.

This disdain has become a profound cultural referent: a systematized pattern of behavior and extended social mindset for *criollo* hegemony—a way to make African descendants inferior.

This exclusionary hegemony advances surely when it manages to convince many of the inferiority of those who are discriminated. But, when it manages to convince those who are discriminated of their own inferiority, its success is completely guaranteed. Unfortunately, this is the same way a vast majority of African descendants see ourselves, in the very same way we have been represented by this colonial mentality, which explains why we ourselves have not tried to stop being who and what we are in some way or another, instead of decolonizing our minds and spirits, and being proud of our qualities, struggles and contributions to the culture and history of the nation.

For almost two centuries, these historical and socioeconomic particularities that characterize us have caused us to live with a false illusion of whitening. That is, from our condition as marginalized and excluded people, we believed that by taking on the behavior, education and culture of "whites," we could change our status and socially advance. Ever since the establishment of our first republican, imagined nation (1869), we have lived with a false illusion of equality that is totally disconnected from the inequalities and injustices that have historically defined our coexistence.

Always stuck in zones of exclusion, Cuba's African descendants were victims of the cruelest violence, despite the fact they created the wealth, independence and culture of Cuba's history at its most important moments— with their sweat, blood and talent. In 1844,

many of these black and *mestizo* Cubans, even cultured and wealthy ones, were executed due to the supposed Escalera Conspiracy. In 1912, thousands of PIC members and many innocent citizens were massacred by former brothers in arms, who in the name of a republican government eliminated the "black danger" at its root, which became a solid and promising political trajectory.

In 1953, then revolutionary leader Fidel Castro carried out a sort of moral genocide when he failed to list in his defense-text-turned-political-program the race problem among the traumas and challenges Cuban society faced after almost fifty years of republican existence.

The assumption was that the revolution's triumph (1959) would sweep away all the disadvantages and inequities that had accumulated over time. Nevertheless, without abandoning its justice seeking and egalitarian rhetoric, the high leadership systematically and meticulously devoted itself to reinforcing the patterns of inferiority and disdain that were already part of the basic mindset and culture, in order to sweep clean the spaces and civic achievements gained with a great deal of effort. For years, the Cuban authorities disdained, demonized and persecuted cultural and religious manifestations of African origin. The Cuban government has constructed two orthodox cathedrals in a predominantly black area, but prohibited devotees of Afro-Cuban religions from consecrating temples of their own.

To assume that racism had been eliminated—an absurd and perverse notion, given the fact that racism is an innate attitude in human beings— and suppressing debate about it—as well as important, African descendant thinkers, leaders and artists—in the name of national and revolutionary unity, caused

a deep wound in the soul and body of this inchoate nation. It is a nation that, given its profound crisis, is today being shaken by fissures and dysfunction that represent enormous trauma and dangers for a future that will entail complex transformations.

As usual, Cuba's African descendants continue being the first when there's hard work to be done or to die in wars, but we are always relegated and excluded when it is time to occupy society's and the cultural imaginary's promising spaces. Anyone with some measure of power or authority knows that he or she can commit a racist injustice and not be questioned or punished. The Penal Code contains some vague verbiage preventing crimes against equality, but even prosecutors ignore this.

It is damaging to see how we African descendants are still seen as victims, guilty, suspect or beneficiaries of hegemonic paternalism—despite the fact those governing have acknowledged the gravity of the problem. We are not even counted as who we are in government statistics. There are more of us on the street than there are in the official census. Upon going out into the streets, each Cuban African descendant knows that he may be the object of hazing or arbitrariness at the hands of the police, as well as represent an immense majority in the already excessive prison population.

At the present time, the abysmal increase in poverty, which is unfortunately associated with a definitive color, and the territorialization and sectorialization of disadvantages, coexist and gain strength with the persistence of these patterns. This makes it difficult and painful to be black in Cuba. Society's dollarization meant the definite structuring of disadvantage. Today, very few Cuban blacks have access to the dollarized economy's fiscal enclaves or the financial or material resources that would allow them to venture forth into the independent, non-governmental economy.

From the heights of their power, the high leadership has not clearly realized that when a white Cuban loses his job due to the structural changes the general crisis has generated, as response to a failed model, he might be able to rely on help from a family member functioning within a dollarized economy abroad or offering specialized services to some foreign country. These possibilities become greatly reduced for an African descendant.

Even though official propaganda does not register it, U.N. representatives in Havana don't see it and press correspondents don't dare report it. What, you ask? The black map of poverty and despair that spreads and deepens all over Cuba.

It is so shameful that our children and youth continue completing all levels of education, even universities, without learning about the long and beautiful history of glories, heroism, talent and effort with which Africans and their descendants have contributing to forging our nation's wealth and culture. It is harmful to see how African descendants are less than invisible in commercial and corporate images, and how television—under total State control—projects a degraded and humiliating view of this essential sector of our society.

It is very clear that the Cuban authorities believe that fulfilling their responsibility and showing their citizens the history and truth that have for so long been hidden would mean dramatically turning official rhetoric's deeply ingrained, referential perspectives, which are also rooted in our social mentality, on their head. Acknowledging and disseminating the true history of Cuba's African descendants

would prevent those in power from continuing to tell us that it was the revolution that made us persons.

After a half century of revolution, Cuba is still a stratified society of castes, where no matter how educated, talented, selfless, famous and even wealthy African descendants are, they will never be perceived and treated as first class citizens.

Said reality imposes on independent intellectuals and civil activists an unavoidable responsibility to engage in academic and social debate about this far-reaching issue. It has been initiated with excellence and vigor in multiple spaces in civil society, and is connecting everyday Cubans with their real history, one free of purposeful omissions and distortions. This is the only path to reaffirming the models of identity, pride and self-esteem that should be the solid base upon which to create a coexistence filled with equality, integration, respect for diversity and everyone's values, without distinction.

Unfortunately, those official (government) intellectuals, academics and artists who for years have shown interest in the issue of race, and revealed their chimeras and experiences, have not been able to get at the bottom and essence of the structural and ideological reason why Cuba today is so behind in its incorporation of the principles and mechanisms that are propelling the global crusade for the rescue of African descendant values and affirmation of their rights—and this despite the role they played in history.

At this point, any attempt to exempt those who have been in power and defined our country's destiny for the last 54 years from their historic responsibility for the enormous trauma and shortcomings present in our interracial relations would reveal an incredible lack of courage and political ethics and, above all, a deviation from the right path to consequently facing one of the most serious problems in Cuba in its immediate future.

I am tireless in my desire to express that becoming aware and sensitive to the depth and reach of this problem means a very high degree of commitment and responsibility, because a nation divided can become a nation fractured; a nation fractured can become a nation incomplete; and a nation the is incomplete for too long can become a nation impossible.

If we do not opt for extending this very necessary debate with the courage and honesty it requires, outside official spaces and elite coteries, and taking it to its natural realm for ventilation, i.e., the ghetto, communities, the classroom, screens and stages, in order to begin to definitively change the perception we have of ourselves, our descendants will not only suffer; they will also protest to and criticize us.

Delaying a necessary attempt to solving this accumulated fissure is like continuing to postpone the completion of our inchoate, nation-building project. Without the integration of African descendant, there is no Cuban nation.