

The Mute Says What the Blind Man Sees

José Hugo Fernández
Writer and journalist
Havana, Cuba

At the end of last year, the Supreme Abakua Council of Cuba had to refute a rumor that evil, racist tongues began to spread throughout the streets of Havana¹, which like a real snowball, grew as it rolled. It is not necessary to go into details; the incident became well known. In a nutshell, what was being said was that a white man had been stabbed by a large group of Abakuas.

What was worse yet was that the rumor was supported by a video that was broadly distributed by cell phone; in it, a man presumably being stabbed. "The word on the street is that this person was massacred at an Abakua religious activity, that he was denied admittance, sought revenge by spreading his urine and feces, which in turn provoked the stabbing by members of the religious group." This is what Tato Quiñones, an activist member of the *Cofradía de la Negritud* [Brotherhood of Blackness] explained back then.

Yet, neither the official denial nor confirmation of the incident was enough to put a stop to a tendency that is quite old in Cuba (from the earliest years of slavery) but is gaining new vigor with a new energy. It is as if it were not only stored in memory, but also something intrinsically genetic in Cubans. Anytime there is an assault that results in theft, a crime or some other horrible incident, the first question that is automatically asked is about the skin color of those who are

implicated. If they are Afro-descendants, the event is immediately connected to their common religious beliefs and practices.

Even in the twenty-first century, after more than a half a century under a government that presents itself as an enemy of racial discrimination, and whose ascendancy and control over thought and all cultural expression has been absolute, it is disheartening that racist aberrations persist, and that they are very different from those that existed during Spanish colonial times.

As with a metaphoric Mud Snake, the ancient specter of prejudice and fear regarding the Yoruba pantheon's gods is firmly ensconced in the present. It is a malicious idea that interminably survives time. Even a few months ago, the topics most sought after by Cuban racists were about rapist, thieving, lazy, violent blacks. Most recently, in addition to the repressive black policemen, it has been about a black Yoruba priest who has come to ride the wave of public fear and loathing.

Curiously, though, for lack of a better expression, is that this attitudinal scourge is resurging at a time when diverse religions are being expressed freely in Cuba. This has never been the case, at least not during the lengthy rule of a government that calls itself socialist. After decades of the most absurd official criticism and prohibitions, Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, and many other religious

traditions—even those of African origin—finally reopened their places of worship and freely proselytize among our people. What's more, it seems that everyone approves.

This is a novelty we applaud and that has caused many citizens to reformulate hateful behaviors that the revolution tried to perpetuate as the result of the idiosyncratic nature of Cubans' identity. In fact, in great measure, it has managed to fill a spiritual void that was created by what was called the end of the revolutionary utopia. Faith in a future of social redemption and economic stability, which was the classic carrot on a stick, always just one little step away but never reachable, has been replaced, in short shrift, by faith in the gods. At least they do not promise what they can't give, beyond consolation, luck or resignation.

It is no secret to anyone that in this new context religious beliefs of African origin occupy a large place in this society. The reasons are many, but just three would suffice to better understand:

1) The ostensible demographic growth and concomitant influence of the Afro-descendant population in Cuba, which might be in the majority today;

2) The intrinsic attraction of African-origin religions, not only because its spiritual motivations are closely tied to matters of people's everyday lives, but also because of the way believers and deities interrelate: with familiar language and customs, camaraderie, none of the sacrosanct distancing that tends to exist between believers and deities in other religions;

3) The increased attention and space the government has been giving (perhaps unwittingly) to Afro-Cuban folklore, by offering it as a tourist attraction, for economic purposes much more than for cultural ones.

It is paradoxical (and equally suspicious) that just when there is this increased visibility that many of our old phobias against African-origin religious rites and organization also experience a resurgence—but only against African-origin religions. It is impossible to understand how while hundreds of thousands of Cubans calmly and confidently offer up their souls to other religions (none of which is free of historical blame, shameful prohibitions, or reductionist dogmas in the context of civilization's progress), only those Cubans who are devotees of Santería and other forms of religious expression, mostly blacks and *mestizos*, are still stigmatized by prejudice. More so, they are as blatantly defamed as they were long ago in Spanish colonial times.

At last, members of other religious organizations that earlier suffered official repression (with the indifferent approval of countless citizens) had camouflage and obscurity as an option, this while they waited for circumstances to change. They could also change faiths, as many did, although it was hardly noticed, but blacks and *mestizos* could not camouflage their color, much less change it. What is more frightening yet is that what is behind this new outbreak of racism against these religions and their followers has less to do with any spiritual objections, or fear of competition by other religions, but much more to do with what is always at the core of this attitude: fear of blacks, of the attraction and power of their cultural manifestations and, in sum, of the influence it has over Cubans today, regardless.

One of the first rumors that spread concerning the few dozen Havana residents who poisoned themselves by drinking methane alcohol assured that the drama took place at a Santería feast. Since the majority of those affected were black or *mestizo*, racist specu-

lation was rampant. I do not know if any of the people were poisoned consumed the methane alcohol at a Santería feast. It is also not relevant. What is essential here is that the majority were Afro-descendants, all of them residents of marginalized neighborhoods; all of them marked by a tragic identity, regardless of where the incident happened. This was escape from failure, socioeconomic entrapment and the lack of opportunities through alcohol.

This coincidence was much less accidental than the accident itself. It took place in the La Lisa neighborhood, but it could have been any other Havana neighborhood, since almost all of them are marginalized to one degree or another. There is no doubt that those affected by this will continue to be mostly blacks and *mestizos*, even if it happens in some other province of Cuba.

The color black has always stood out in the context of despondency and despair that afflicts the poor in Cuba today. It is the most cruelly effective lesson to come out of this event, and is the easiest to prove. Yet, for some reason (a mysterious one, let's say), instead of resolving or improving the situation, many, too many Havana residents have opted to look at this dramatic turn of events through a lens of racist rumors and assumptions, the very same ones that have served (from colonial times till now) to fuel among the underdogs historical divisions those on top have known expertly how to use to weaken us.

In the meanwhile, on the other hand, timid and opportunistic intellectuals (among them some who say they defend the rights and claims of blacks and *mestizos* from their 'official' positions, and from their position as Afro-descendants, too) ignore the real evidence, and all lack at least the common sense to accept that those who poisoned themselves with

methanol in La Lisa and in other marginal, Havana neighborhoods belie and deny in the most tragic of manners all the crap they write in the educated pamphlets, and everything they say at conferences and meetings destined to uphold the myth of a profoundly liberating revolution that set the base upon which all Cubans would have the same opportunity to progress in life.

“El mudo dice lo que mira el ciego” [The mute says what the blind man sees]. This popular saying is extremely rooted in the attitude of those who are more or less racist and are conscious of that fact that they prefer to entertain today's pernicious rumors instead of think with their heads. In the case of supposedly anti-racist, friendly, government officials—to coin a phrase—Cubans blacks and *mestizos* do not need enemies.

Note:

1- Visit the following link for a clarification from the Supreme Abakuá Council of Cuba: <http://observatoriocriticodesdecuba.wordpress.com/2012/10/02/nota-aclaratoria-del-consejo-supremo-abacua-de-cuba/>.