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Afro-Cubans in Cuban Society

Photo by Nestor Hernandez
PREFACE
by Félix Masud-Piloto

On September 16-17, 1999, the Center for International Policy, the Cuban Exchange Program of Johns Hopkins University and Havana’s Fundación Fernando Ortiz jointly hosted a conference in Washington, D.C. entitled Afro-Cubans in Cuban Society: Past, Present and Future. In addition to the productive discussions generated by the conference, its most significant achievement was bringing together a group of respected and knowledgeable intellectuals from Cuba and the U.S. for a frank and respectful discussion about race and the role of Afro-Cubans in Cuban society. The conference can be considered a landmark event, since discussions of race have often been considered taboo in both Cuba and the Cuban community in the U.S.

During the final phase of Cuba’s long struggle for independence from Spain (1868 to 1898), Antonio Maceo, the Afro-Cuban general, and José Martí, the movement’s political leader, continued the rebellion begun by their enslaved African brothers and sisters back in the 16th century. (See Dialogando with Fannie Rushing.) Both men believed so strongly in an egalitarian society, that they made it the guiding principle of the Cuban Revolutionary Party. For them, the new Cuban society would be: “a just and open republic, united in territory, in rights, in work and cordiality, constructed with all and for the good of all.” Unfortunately, both Maceo and Martí died during the war, and with their death came the postponement of an egalitarian Cuban society.

When independence finally arrived in 1898, it failed to thoroughly transform Cuban society. Except for the abolition of slavery, the new republic almost kept intact the race-based social stratification of its colonial masters, and although Cuba was spared from the ravages of “legal” or “official” segregation, racism and discrimination against Afro-Cubans were widespread in the new republic. As a result, segregation in social clubs, private schools, housing, and other private institutions was “socially acceptable” from 1898 to 1958.

The Cuban Revolution of 1959 ushered in a new era for race relations. The Revolutionary Government outlawed all forms of racism and discrimination. They enacted legislation for social reforms in the areas of education, health, housing, and employment to benefit all Cubans. These reforms greatly benefited most Afro-Cubans, who reciprocated with enthusiastic support for and strong loyalty to the new regime. The predominantly white leadership also placed Africa at the center of its foreign policy by supporting national liberation movements in the continent and recognizing Africa as the patrimonial heritage of most Cubans. Despite the changes brought on by the Revolution, however, most participants in the Johns Hopkins conference agreed that Cuban society still has a long way to go before claiming a truly egalitarian society. Following are excerpts from their presentations and discussions.

SUMMARY OF A SYMPOSIUM
by Wayne Smith

Afro-Cubans in Cuban Society: Past, Present and Future.
Hosted by: Center for International Policy, The Cuban Exchange Program, John Hopkins University and Havana’s Fundación Fernando Ortiz

Conference participants were in agreement on a number of points:

1. Although Afro-Cubans had made up the bulk of the Liberation Army’s struggle for independence, the more egalitarian society promised by José Martí was not realized. Their efforts to participate fully in the political process were cut short by the massacre of 1912.

2. Although the Cuban Revolution had, after 1959, done much to reduce racial discrimination and bring about a more just society, as of 1999, much remains to be done. Indeed, because of the present economic crisis, racism is on the rise in Cuba and Blacks are disadvantaged in a number of ways.

3. The Cuban government needs to do much more to address the problem. Perhaps the best way to begin would be to openly acknowledge its existence and initiate a national dialogue as to how best to solve it.

4. The Afro-Cuban majority would not accept the return of the white economic elites to rule the country. That option cannot even be on the table.

5. Santería has profound roots in the Afro-Cuban experience. This merits respect and understanding, not rejection and isolation. Dialogue with the Catholic hierarchy would be of great importance as most practitioners of Santería are also baptized Catholics.

The Past: 1866-1959
Like their brothers and sisters in the United States, Blacks were brought to Cuba from Africa as slaves. For almost four centuries, they struggled to survive, to be free and to hold to their cultural and ethnic heritage. Santería and other African-derived religions were key forces. They enabled the Blacks to maintain a certain cultural and social cohesion during the years of slavery despite the deliberate efforts of the slaveowners to scatter families and ethnic groups and to erase their ethnic traditions. In his presentation, Pedro Pablo Rodríguez reminded the audience that especially into the nineteenth century, not all Blacks were slaves. On the contrary, an increasing number were freemen and they strove mightily to raise not only their own station in life but also the possibilities for their race. There were setbacks to be sure, most notably the massacres of Aponte in 1812 and La Escalera in 1844. Over the century, free Blacks helped prepare the way. Perhaps the most important was Antonio Maceo, who played a fundamental role in mobilizing Afro-Cubans against slavery and Spanish colonialism. Emancipation came in 1886 as an outgrowth of the wars of independence. José Martí’s call for a society in which there would be no Blacks or whites but simply Cubans kindled hopes for a truly egalitarian society; Blacks flocked to Maceo’s and Martí’s banners during the last war of independence, 1895-98, and made up the bulk of the Army of Liberation.

After independence, in the 1900s, many of them formed a Colored Independence Party (Partido Independiente de Color) and took other steps to participate in the political process as equals. But tragically, Martí had been killed in the first battle of the war. And as Aline Heig pointed out, his thesis that all were simply Cubans was often used by white leaders who followed him to marginalize the issue of race, or even to suggest that the problem did not exist, and take no measures to address it.

Meanwhile, whites tended to see efforts by Blacks to participate in the political process as unwanted and dangerous. Ominous talk of a coming
Black rebellion. This building white resentment and reaction led to the massacre of 1912, when the Cuban army slaughtered thousands of Blacks, especially in the Oriente province, supposedly to put down a rebellion. It was a traumatic blow. Although there were some advances in the years after 1912, Blacks remained second-class citizens until the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959. Robin Moore traced the evolution of Afro-Cuban music as a reflection of the acceptance (or rejection) of Afro-Cubans by the society around them. During most of the nineteenth century and certainly in the centuries before, i.e., in the heyday of slavery, Afro-Cuban music was virtually banned. Carnivals were wholly segregated until emancipation, and the Afro-Cuban musical groups, the comparsas, were not allowed to participate. With the participation of so many Blacks in the struggle for independence, the turn of the century saw some openings. Blacks were ostensibly accepted as citizens, but at the same time there were calls for the suppression of "atavistic art forms." Technically, comparsas were not banned from the carnival celebrations, but more often than not they were prevented, in one way or another, from participating. Not until the 1940s did the barriers begin truly to come down. From that point forward, comparsas and Afro-Cuban music in general flourished. Given its tremendous popularity today—in Cuba and throughout the world—it is difficult to remember that it was once banned in Cuba. What was once banned is now Cuba's pride and glory. Music fans all over the world can be happy that Afro-Cubans persevered!

The Present: 1959
Until Today

The Cuban Revolution, which triumphed on January 1, 1959, promised to end discrimination and provide equal opportunities for Blacks. Without question, tremendous strides were made.

Blacks were indeed given equal access to education through the postgraduate level. Discrimination in the workplace was greatly reduced. However, as Tato Quiñones pointed out, official policy was one thing, what happened was another. Some managers and officials simply didn't agree that Blacks should be treated equally and their personal prejudices led them to give preference to whites. Nor were Blacks proportionately represented in the government. They still are not. At first this could be explained as a matter of cultural or educational lag. Forty years after the triumph of the revolution, however, that explanation has worn thin.

Still, by the end of the eighties Blacks had made significant gains. An increasing percentage had become professionals, rising to the top in the military and winning great prestige in sports, the arts, music, dance, the cinema, and poetry. Santería, while at first treated as a folkloric expression by the Cuban government, had come to be fully accepted as a religion. The way seemed open for new gains in the years that were to follow. Though underrepresented in the senior organs of the party-state-government triad, Blacks had grounds for optimism that progress could be made there as well.

Certainly, Rigoberto Lopez emphasized, Afro-Cubans always felt that the goals of the revolution were their goals as well: equality and social justice for all.

But economic crises do not usually bring out the best in people and the current Cuban crisis is no exception. The resulting competition for jobs, dollars and status since 1991 has resulted in something of a resurgence of racism and led to increased disparities. For example, because they benefited from the revolution, few Blacks went into exile. Yet, the largest source of hard currency is family remittances from the exiles in the United States. As there are few Blacks among them, very little of that money comes to Afro-Cubans on the island. And today, one's economic status depends largely on access to dollars. In this and in many other ways, Blacks face new disadvantages. Still, as Ana Cairo pointed out, the problems of racism, discrimination and racial inequalities were all inherited by the revolution. It didn't invent them. The revolution hasn't been able to solve them, but it has made a creditable effort. And she agreed with Rigoberto Lopez that Afro-Cubans tend to see the revolution's goals as their own. The most basic was to bring social justice the poor and downtrodden. Whether they were Black or white did not matter. She noted too that the U.S. had not played a helpful role. Racist attitudes in Cuba had been given new strength during the U.S. occupations—1898-1902 and 1906-08. The forty-year-old U.S. embargo had been harmful to Blacks, perhaps more than whites since it did most harm to the more vulnerable elements of Cuban society.

Rigoberto Lopez agreed and noted that one could not understand anything about the past forty years in Cuba without factoring in the all-pervasive U.S. embargo. It had made progress difficult on many fronts. It still does. Further, all agreed that the last thing Afro-Cubans wanted to see was the return of the white elitist exiles thinking they were going to turn the clock back and rule over the island as they had before the revolution. That was totally unacceptable.

Interestingly, panelists representing Afro-Cubans living abroad emphasized their continuing identification with the community still on the island. They still feel themselves to be a part of it and consider the goals and problems of Afro-Cubans on the island to be theirs. They are dedicated to the cause of racial as well as social justice—in the diaspora and back home. In sum, all panelists were in agreement that while progress has been made under the revolution, much more remains to be done. Meanwhile, there are worrisome signs that racism and discrimination may again be on the rise in Cuba, even though officially condemned.

The Role of Santería

Santería, as Lazara Menendez noted, is so deeply woven into Cuban culture as to be a part of Cuban identity, i.e., what it means to be Cuban. One can hardly imagine Cuban music, literature, or even thought patterns without the influence of Santería. Further, it is the most numerous and most powerful religion in Cuba and is growing rapidly. This is not simply because there is an Afro-Cuban majority. On the contrary, many whites as well practice Santería. Santería is a syncretic religion. When the enslaved Blacks were first brought in from Africa, they were forbidden from worshipping their traditional gods. Instead, they had to adopt the Catholic faith. They did, but with an imaginative wrinkle. They simply fused the one with the other. Thus, Chango became Santa Barbara, Eleggua became St. Anthony, St. Lazarus was Babalu Aye, etc. They saw no inherent contradiction between the two belief systems and still do not. Most santeros are baptized Catholics. Santería simply adds another step to their religious beliefs.

As Miguel Barnet pointed out, its importance as a means of communication cannot be exaggerated. In many ways it represents a sociological key to Cuban society.
This is in some ways surprising, given that, as Eugenio Matibag noted, Santería is not really an organized church; rather, it represents a system of beliefs and of individual worship within that system, guided perhaps by a local babalao. But there is no hierarchy—no system as in the Catholic Church of bishops responsible to a cardinal and all responsible to the pope as the head of the church. Despite that, Santería has, over the centuries, been a powerful unifying force.

Natalia Bolivar pointed out that while initially shunned by whites, Santería had come to permeate the whole society. Presidents Mario Menocal, Carlos Prio Socarras and Fulgencio Batista, for example, had all been santeros. It had been Batista, in the forties, who brought down most of the remaining restrictions on the practice of Santería and on the participation of comparsas in carnival—then came the revolution. Given its ideological position with respect to religions, the socialist government had at first been somewhat restrictive toward Santería. But that has now been overcome. The spiritualism of the Cuban people endured and the government now allows the practice of Santería as well as other faiths.

Unfortunately, all panelists noted, that openness toward the practice of Santería is not evident in the Catholic Church. Santeros had looked forward enthusiastically to the Pope’s visit in January, 1998. Most, after all, are baptized Catholics. They had expected his visit to be an expression of brotherhood and that it would mark the beginning of a new spirit of cooperation among all religions. They had been stunned when Cardinal Jaime Ortega, in his televised address to the nation before the visit, had condemned syncretic religions described by him as “simply folkloric rites.” There was no question as to whom he referred. And then, although the pope had received representatives of all other religions on the island, including Dr. José Miller, the president of the small Jewish community (only some 1,500 strong), he had shunned any contact with representatives of the Santería faith. This had been deeply resented by Afro-Cubans in general and most especially by santeros. If they stopped going, there wouldn’t be much church left. Panelists noted that relations with the Protestant churches tend to be good. And they expressed hope for reconciliation with the Catholic hierarchy—once the latter had “reflected further on the issue.”

In the final analysis, panelists agreed, this growing estrangement and resentment between the Catholic Church and Santería is likely to hurt the church more. What the hierarchy of the church doesn’t seem to realize, but the parish priests do, is that 80 percent of the people in the masses on Sunday are santeros. If they stopped going, there wouldn’t be much church left. Panelists noted that relations with the Protestant churches tend to be good. And they expressed hope for reconciliation with the Catholic hierarchy—once the latter had “reflected further on the issue.”

The Future

Gisela Arandia and Graciella Chailloux joined in acknowledging the long way yet to go to attain racial equality. There was no shame in acknowledging this. No other country has succeeded in solving the problem either. Cuba has made a better effort than most, and, both agreed, may now be in position to undertake a more comprehensive solution. The National Assembly, the universities, and other institutions are even now considering new steps. One
measure being considered, for example, is the inclusion of Afro-Cuban studies in the regular curriculum of Cuban primary and secondary schools—a step which would emphasize the important role played by Afro-Cubans in Cuban history and society.

Chailloux concluded that the atmosphere now favors positive change and that Cuba's intellectuals are capable of moving toward definitive solutions. A society without discrimination and in which all can live together harmoniously—a society in which the cultural heritage of all is respected—is attainable. The most important thing is that an honest dialogue begin.

Carlos Moore took strong exception to the optimistic views of the previous two speakers. Cuba is not a multicultural country, he maintained; rather there were two distinct cultures in Cuba—African and Spanish—which have been and still are in conflict with one another. Discrimination and racism of course persist. He did not believe the revolution had made a serious effort to get rid of them and Afro-Cubans clearly remain disadvantaged. Still, there is a growing consciousness among Afro-Cubans of who they are, despite forty years of having the whole issue of race downplayed. They have held to their cultural and ethnic roots. And they are now the majority. Justice must be done. A new, more equitable socio-political model must be developed. Moore believes there are five possible options. The first was to maintain the current status quo, i.e. a white-led communist state. But that would not be acceptable to the majority and would not work for long anyway. The second was a return to the status quo ante, i.e., a white-led capitalist model. That, as earlier speakers had made clear, was totally unacceptable. There was also the possibility of partition, i.e. the island divided between a white and Black Cuba. That had been suggested in the past and could not be discarded as a possible option even now, despite all the difficulties it would create. The fourth option, Moore concluded by saying that he crediting the revolution with bringing about the conditions in which the issue can now be discussed and, hopefully, solved. He agreed with Chailloux and Arandia that the most important thing is that the problem be openly acknowledged and that a national dialogue begin.

Moore's remarks sparked a heated three-hour discussion that made it clear the overwhelming majority rejected partition and most of the other options. By inference, the only one that seemed feasible was condominial rule. They also felt strongly that there were not two altogether distinct, warring cultures that could never be joined; rather, Cuba was developing a distinct identity which was a blend of African, Spanish and various other cultures. It was toward this vision that Cuba should be moving.

CLOSED REMARKS
by Pablo Armando Fernandez

At times, still, I ask myself what is Cuba? What is it to be Cuban? The answer, I believe, is that it is to have participated in a history without parallel in our hemisphere. A history that has forged us into what we are. A history of continued struggle to make of Cuba a fully independent, free and sovereign nation. It is a struggle shared by the sons and daughters of the conquistadores and the colonizers. I think of Flor Crombet and of Quintin Baluster and Basques to wage war against the Spanish crown that was to them the motherland.

It is good that this dialogue among Cubans has begun. It is especially moving that it takes place here, in the United States, where the struggle for respect and justice waged by the sons and daughters of the forced exodus from Africa has been and is so intense.

As I look out over the sea of faces before me, I envision Atlantis, with Cuba as its great altar—an altar, a garden where all the imaginable colors make of the flowers an unforgettable diadem, perennial in its light, in its essence, in its fruits, its seed. Seeing it, my spirit opens and I understand more deeply what it is to be Cuban.