

Reflections on Afro-Cubans

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Dr Fidel Castro's speech at the Riverside Church on 8 September 2000 provided the leader of the Cuban revolution with the opportunity once more publicly to take an official stand on the question of race in revolutionary Cuba. He spoke about the current social conditions of the people of African descent living in that country.

I have been observing official Cuban policies and positions with regards to blacks in that country for over 30 years. I say that Dr Castro again took a stand because this was not the first time: he has done so on several occasions, including the Third Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba in 1985, in which I personally participated as an official guest. There he openly admitted that racial discrimination still existed in his country and that measures needed to be taken against it. Unfortunately, his speech was not published in the final report. This is contrary to the practice of other Congresses before and after this one, where the reports were published in booklet form. I do not know what conclusion should be drawn from this omission. This type of carelessness could strengthen the position of some critics, who say that the leader of the revolution is occasionally censored by certain retrograde elements who serve him as advisors.

Marginality

In September 2000, the President of Cuba again raised the topic of racial discrimination and marginalization, admitting that the revolutionary process is not a perfect model that has solved all problems of inequality and injustice. In itself this was a victory for Fidel Castro over those tendencies surrounding him that seem to wish to silence the dialogue on this issue. His words were as follows:

I am not claiming that our country is a perfect model of equality and justice. We believed at the beginning that when we established the fullest equality before the law and complete intolerance for any demonstration of sexual discrimination in the case of women, or racial discrimination in the case of *ethnic minorities*, these phenomena would vanish from our society. It was some time before we discovered that marginality and racial discrimination with it are not something that one gets rid of with a law or even with ten laws, and we have not managed to eliminate them completely in 40 years ...

When the Cuban President speaks of *ethnic minorities*, he is referring to people of African

descent and perhaps to the remnants of the indigenous Tainos, the Chinese, Japanese, Jews, Arabs, etc. On the other hand, there must be a so-called *ethnic majority*, presumably the descendants of the Iberian Spanish immigrants.

There is much to be said concerning this categorization in terms of numbers, and the use of the terms “majority” and “minority”. The very first question that should be raised is: by what criteria can one determine that the Iberian Spanish element, in racial terms otherwise classified as “whites”, are in the majority in Cuba? Vague concepts like this create tensions before any discussion gets underway and obstruct a positive evolution of the assessment and definition of official policies on existing ethnicities in Cuba. Emphatically, I want to say that the official circles responsible for setting out the guidelines on social and political practice in Cuba need to take this matter very seriously and reflect on this matter of the percentages. This is especially true of commonly employed classifications such as “whites”, “mulattos”, and “blacks”.

Some official documents consider “mulattos” to be “white”. Other documents sometimes define Chinese as “white”, though on other occasions they are defined as “black”. One can find still other sources, such as the Ministry of External Affairs, that include blacks and mulattos on the same side of the list, resulting in a figure of 63% for the sector of African descent, an estimate one also finds in American sources, both governmental and scholarly.

Statistics that are sometimes officially cited, for example that the population is 70% white, 19% black, and 11% mulattos, are clearly inadequate. These very likely come from the 1980–1981 census, in which people were asked to identify themselves in ethnic terms, and are disregarded by most scholars of Cuba. Such percentages necessarily lead to partial policies followed by inequality in proportional social relations as a result. Consequently, the directors of major policy-making bodies need to accommodate themselves to these patterns of visions and should adopt a critical and self-critical attitude when considering the position, participation, and mobility of people of African descent in Cuban society.

Dr Fidel Castro goes on to say:

There has never been nor will there ever be a case where the law is applied according to ethnic criteria. However, we did discover that the descendents of those slaves who had lived in the slave quarters were the poorest and continued to live, after the supposed abolition of slavery, in the poorest housing. There are marginal neighborhoods; there are hundreds of thousand of people who live in marginal neighborhoods, and not only blacks and people of mixed race, but whites as well. There are marginal whites, too, and all this we inherited from the previous social system

Certainly, blacks and whites co-exist in marginal neighborhoods under difficult material conditions such as deficient housing, limited urban infrastructure, and unreliable transportation. President Castro has made a bold statement and has exposed the matter with openness and frankness. It is clear that people of African descent still face marginalization in housing conditions in the traditional urban quarters of the capital, Havana – in areas such as Jesus María, Belén, Colón, Canal, Los Sitios, Pueblo Nuevo, Cayo Hueso, San Leopoldo, Pogolotti, Romerio, to mention just a few – or in others across Cuba such as La Marina in

Matanzas, La Loma del Chivo in Guantánamo, or Los Hoyos and La Maya in Santiago de Cuba.

Cultural Marginality

But housing is just one part of the story. At present the most burning question remains *cultural marginality* as a consequence of the supremacy of the Iberian-Hispanic values and norms in education, culture, economics and politics. At the Pedagógica 99 Congress that took place in Havana in February 1999, Dr Castro stated:

We thought that to decree absolute equality and civil rights would have been sufficient to wipe out these traces. However, today we still observe that the poorest sectors are still those descendants of slaves. Before the triumph of the revolution, there existed on the island a culture of poverty and wealth, where the middle class was fundamentally white and were better prepared and had better material conditions. People with a better educational level influenced their children because they taught them, they supervised their homework, and they made demands of them. In the same way, poverty was transmitted [from one generation to the next]. For all that everyone was made equal under the law, for all that assistance was rendered, the best grades came from those families headed by professionals. This does not mean there were no advances in these years, but that, despite the equality in opportunities for all, it is difficult to carry out a revolution because it implies a change in society.

President Castro is indicating that the results of students of African descent are less favourable than those of students of Iberian-Hispanic origin. In several discussions with professionals on this topic, in which I asked why students of African descent obtained such results, I was told that “*será porque los negros son más brutos*” (“maybe because the blacks are more stupid”). I sincerely believe that expressions of this type are a consequence of a lack of awareness in those who have expressed them. A broader look at the Caribbean area shows us that extensive studies sponsored by UNESCO have been carried out to address the typically “Eurocentric” character of the content, aims and objective of the educational system in various countries. The same situation has been looked at in anglophone, francophone, and germanophone countries, where language differences and a focus on European cultural values and norms have caused serious lags in the education of youths of African descent, with consequent high dropout rates.

To tackle this problem we must admit to ourselves that Eurocentrism exists in education in Cuba, and define policies directed at acknowledging the multiculturalism of the society as a whole. Efforts ought to be made to meet the student of African descent from within his or her own life experience. This applies to both intramural and extramural education programmes, and also to adult education.

Socioeconomic marginalization has to do with the fact that people of African descent do not participate fully in all economic sectors, especially in the recent reorganization of the economic system which has created new job opportunities in the privileged “dollar market”. When speaking of the dollar market, I am referring to the hotel sector and the commercial

sector, which depend on foreign currency for their operation, and all other work sites that legally handle foreign currencies. These will deliver some economic interest to the worker who is active in that sector and who thus will either directly or indirectly have access to revenues in foreign currencies. Naturally, this situation is creating social tensions and disgust among broad sections of the Cuban population, but especially among those of African descent, as they feel excluded. It is also the visual part of the problem with which foreigners and friends of Cuba from abroad are confronted when they visit the country and notice that the representation of blacks in hotels and business corporations is extraordinarily low. This is the case even in provinces like Santiago de Cuba and Guantánamo, where the African portion of the population is larger than in any of the other provinces. I will illustrate this with one example out of many.

In the summer of 2000, I had the pleasure of leading a Carnival Group from the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe to Santiago de Cuba's Carnival. The major criticism of the Caribbean and North American visitors, who were lodged at Hotel Santiago, was that the only Cuban worker of sub-Saharan African descent that they had seen that day in the lobby of the hotel was a uniformed young woman sweeping the floor. The group asked question after question and I as the host had the difficult task of answering them!

Another concern for many is the fact that it is plain to see that people of Iberian-Hispanic descent have greater access to the now free dollar market, which gives them a remarkably privileged position. This is partly explained by taking into account the fact that they receive financial support from relatives abroad.

As far as financial support on an organizational level goes, it is worthwhile mentioning that those organizations and institutions that clearly represent aspects of the culture of the Iberian-Hispanic segment of the Cuban society, for example, the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, can easily count on donations from Spain. On the other hand, organizations of people of African descent, such as the Ballet Folklorico Nacional, are facing dire financial circumstances owing to lack of resources.

As we continue our discussion of cultural marginality it is necessary to point out that the constant struggle between Europe and the Africa that we find in all societies that have had plantation economies is also manifest in Cuban society. The method used to find a solution to this conflict has been the assimilation of the African component to the values and norms of the European component. This has meant that manifestations of African culture have either had to make way for new concepts or have come to be considered folkloric. This has been the case with African religions, the rumba manifestation, and the Son rhythm complex in popular dance music.

Religious rites of Yoruba, Bantu, Calabar and Arará origin have survived all adversity and are now openly performed. The Eurocentrism of official cultural policies meant that manifestations of African religions were regarded as "exotic", therefore folkloric, and so we witness these manifestations being used for tourist consumption in bars and nightclubs. Naturally, this is offensive to the religious sentiments of the people of African descent, who do not express their opinion, but nevertheless observe and reflect. This is a typical African way of responding to such social manifestations.

As the rumba complex, comprised of the genres yambu, Columbia and the guaguanco, is

lived out in popular quarters by dancers and musicians predominantly of African descent, it has constantly been threatened with extinction. It was not to the taste of the elite before the revolution or of certain sectors after the triumph of the revolution. At the same time, Theatre Rumba, which was already well developed before the revolution, continues to exist as entertainment in nightclubs, theaters, and tourist resorts. Whatever criteria there could be to justify the disappearance of popular rumba, nevertheless people of African descent have experienced another “no” to one of their authentic cultural manifestations.

The problem of cultural marginality is complex. For example, how can one explain why the Son rhythm complex was neglected or almost destroyed by measures taken early on by the revolution? The Cuban Son is one of the highest expressions of African rhythms fused with Hispanic melodies. What explanation could be given as to why the African sound and timbres had to disappear in the newly created musical styles, such as nueva trova, to accommodate Iberian-Hispanic tastes? How is it that certain music producers on radio stations, all of them of Iberian Spanish descent, could have gone so far in downgrading the musical styles of Arsenio Rodriguez, Chappottin, and Estrellas de Chocolate as being “musica de negros” (“suena muy negro” [“it sounds very black”]) and therefore to be eliminated from the air? The Son rhythm complex originated in the 19th century and comprises the genres changüí, nengón, guiriba, guajira, guaracha, danzón, danzónete, mambo, son montuno, charanga, and the cha-cha-cha. Its roots are in the War of Independence against Spain, one of the greatest slave revolts in the Western hemisphere.

Buena Vista Social Club and the international success of Son represent a triumph of African flavour with a sound and timbre that most authentically represents Cuba’s cultural identity. It is also an important warning to all those forces inside Cuba that once intended to falsify history by destroying the African component of the national cultural heritage of Cuba.

The Self-awareness of Blacks in Cuba

How do blacks in Cuba react to manifestations of Eurocentricity that hold back their culture? Cuba’s history is rich in the experiences of slave and maroon revolts in the Colonial period, of which Aponte’s uprising in 1810 was one of the more significant.

In the 20th century the rebellion of 1912, in which the leaders of the Partido Independiente de Color and 6000 other blacks were slaughtered, should never be forgotten. It had a determining effect on black self-esteem and on black–white relations.

Upon all these pages of struggle written by blacks in Cuba, the questions arise of whether Cubans of African descent are conscious of their African origin, and of how they see their society. This has been a question that many visiting friends have posed over and over again to black Cubans. They received astonishing responses, sometimes much to their annoyance.

Many individuals still agree with Jose Martí’s statement that “more than black and more than white, we are Cubans”. This statement intelligently bypasses the nationality question and leaves the Africans in Cuban society without an answer to 500 years of severe psychosocial problems caused by European colonialism. Today, a black Cuban can still tell you that he or she is neither black nor African. A black Cuban can easily say, “nuestros antepasados, los españoles”, [“our ancestors the Spaniards”]. Frequently a Cuban man or woman of African descent will think that it is logical and better to marry a white person in order to “adelantar la

raza" ["advance the race"]. Often, a black person will address another as "negro", which anywhere else in the Caribbean, the United States, or Europe would immediately cause serious conflict. Naturally, the praise of European somatic features above African ones is still common among blacks in Cuba. Women straighten or process their hair and often blacks call each other or think of themselves as "feo", ugly. Cuba's borders have been closed to the influences of the Black Power movement and the entire Black Awareness Movement which was so active in the sixties. This is why it should come as no surprise to many observers to learn that while the problem of self-hatred and internalization of European values and norms by people of African descent has found a solution in other countries of the region, in revolutionary Cuba this problem has yet to be solved on a significant scale.

We need to be optimistic for there is a growing interest among Cubans of African descent in cultural matters connected with Africa and the African diaspora. The African survivals in Cuba are among the strongest in the hemisphere and have been taken up by the younger generation, though not always with the rigor that their elders might wish for. A significant number of youth are admirers of Bob Marley, the Rastafarians, and the reggae movement. Over the past two to three years, hip hop and rap music exchanges have been promoted between the USA and Cuba. The Minister of Culture, Abel Prieto, even declared that rap was part of the national patrimony, making evident what was already a major movement among Cuban youths.

Plastic artists are successful in promoting black consciousness but face resistance from certain sectors who even try to dismiss them by nicknaming them "black fundamentalists". Their experience is of great interest as their exhibitions, like the *Queloides* exhibition in Havana in 1999, turn into group dialogues on race. One of their observations has to do with the difficulties of getting whites to discuss these issues and overcome their state of denial. As long as the discussion centred on white racism, no headway was made, but when a discussion of racism and self-hatred on the black side was engaged, then the situation became more fluid.

Ongoing Dialogue between Fidel Castro, Caribbeans, and Americans

President Fidel Castro Ruz has on numerous occasions successfully circumvented his own advisers and dealt directly with the problems of race and the status of Cubans of African descent when addressing foreigners, including Americans. Nevertheless, more attention needs to be given to this matter and more talks need to be held concerning the racial situation; such talks should be based on a cultural perspective of the whole of present-day Cuban society.

We need to take into account important historical factors such as the fact that Cuba was the second-last country in the Americas to abolish the system of enslavement of Africans in 1886. After Cuba became independent in 1898, the neocolonial era, introduced and supported by segregationist ruling cliques in the United States, saw several moments of racial tension and upheavals like the 1912 massacre which cost the lives of over 6000 Cubans of African descent. Around this time, the neocolonial Cuban governments, backed by transnational corporations such as the United Fruit Company and others, decided to import thousands of immigrants from the Caribbean islands as a further step against Cubans of African descent. These workers came in from Haiti, Jamaica, Tortola, Saint Thomas, Saint Croix, Saint John,

Jos Van Dyke, Anguilla, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Antigua, Dominica, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Saint Lucia, Grenada, Saint Martin, Curaçao, Bonaire and Aruba. This process was initiated in around 1910 and lasted up to the early fifties. These immigrant workers were subjected to living in subhuman conditions worse than those in the days of slavery.

While listening to Dr Castro's September speech, it became clear to me that many friends and visitors from the United States have been talking with the leader of the Cuban revolution about the situation of blacks, people of colour or simply Cubans of African descent. We know that prestigious organizations of African Americans such as TransAfrica and the Grass Roots Malcolm X Movement, along with representatives of the Black Caucus in Congress, have met with the leader on several occasions, and that the topic of race has appeared on the agenda. As indicated above, I personally have had the pleasure of leading a significant number of visitors from the Caribbean and the United States to Cuba; these visitors were amazed at what they observed in terms of race relations. We have spent many hours discussing the race situation in revolutionary Cuba on many occasions, in Havana, Santiago de Cuba, Guantánamo, Cienfuegos, Camaguey, Las Tunas, Sancti Spiritus, and Matanzas. The topic is of great interest to a wide range of friends of Cuba. Up to now there has been little official approach or answer to the question of race or of the social status of Cubans of African descent from a cultural perspective. So far, the official position has mostly been a denial of racism in Cuba and the insistence that there are no blacks or Africans in Cuba, but that "we are all Cubans". This position in itself has created more harm, and has contributed to raising the suspicions of analysts, scholars, and friends of the Cuban revolution from other countries with a great deal of experience in this matter, such as Jamaica, Haiti, Guadeloupe, Antigua and the United States itself, among others.

The policies of generalization aiming at unifying the society against outside political aggression, mainly the United States, have had serious consequences for the non-Iberian-Hispanic sectors of the population. This was possible since, from a cultural perspective, these policies were Eurocentric and Iberian-Hispanic in nature. I will give two examples to illustrate this statement. The first one is of an association of descendants of residents of the Canary Islands which is active in the province of Villa Clara. It so happened that in the summer of 1998, I was covering a yearly Caribbean Trade Fair in the eastern Cuban province of Santiago de Cuba. In a conversation with the leaders of a delegation representing the cultural heritage of the Canary Islands, these personalities asked to participate in my "Section on the Cultural Identity of the Caribbean", which is aired every Sunday on Radio Progreso. The reasons why they asked this were, firstly, according to them, they are considered as Spaniards in a crude way, and moreover their specific case as Canarians was neglected or subordinated in order to fit into the nation's general cultural plan. Indeed, the history of the Canary Islands is different from that of Spain, which colonized this archipelago off the northwestern coast of Africa.

The second example occurred on a working visit to Caimanera in Guantánamo, when a high-ranking cultural officer explained to me the harm that the imposed generalized unifying policies caused to residents of Portuguese origin, among others, who live in this once very active neighborhood. Many were ruthlessly considered to be Cuban and had to suppress or neglect their origin, in this case Portugal.

The official position, which over-emphasized “Cuban” citizenship, has estranged the “white” immigrants as well as “black” ones, as in the case of Haitian, Jamaican and other Caribbean and African nations.

In his September speech at Riverside Church, Dr Fidel Castro engaged in an open dialogue with the friends of Cuba who were concerned about these matters. This was a cordial gesture to those who had repeatedly expressed their sincere concern about racial matters in revolutionary Cuba. The wellbeing of the masses living in revolutionary Cuba is and should be a matter of concern to forces both inside and outside of Cuba. All doors should be opened for honest, frank, and sincere dialogue among those who want to promote peace, equality and social progress.

Yet I still would want to emphasize that this positive process of dialogue should be continued, only more rigorously. By this I mean that visitors, observers, and friends from abroad, on the one hand, and the leadership of the Cuban revolution on the other hand, ought to address this question with ever-increasing depth of vision. None of us should be too soft on our own history. There is no need for embarrassment, since we are not responsible for having created the problems that have been in evidence ever since the colonialists sowed their seeds on our lands and pastures.

With this knowledge of the historical processes that preceded and determined the revolutionary processes that started on 1 January 1959, it is right to insist that urgent attention should be paid to these matters, especially by the leader of the revolution. This cannot be the prerogative of any other sector of Cuban society without guidance similar to that which he has given on the changes in the economic realm to counteract the crisis that resulted from the US blockade and the disappearance of the entire European socialist bloc. The changes in the socio-economic profile of Cuba since 1990 have brought about the emergence of a new social group that has taken occupation of strategic positions in economic and political life. These descendants of Iberian-Hispanics are over-represented in the socio-economic, cultural and political profile of day-to-day life in contemporary Cuba.

Diligent attention to solving this problem is required before the result of the above changes lingers on too much and certain negative speculations about the future of Cuba become more evident. The future of Cuba has to be determined and tailored now, in the lifetime of Dr Fidel Castro, the sole uniting figure who has the confidence of the masses, in particular of the people of African descent in Cuba.

This process of change is urgently needed to safeguard the revolution in the long run. The economic blockade could be lifted and money could start to pour into the island again by the millions. There is no doubt about that, but the concern among the “wretched of the earth” is: will the conditions of quasi-slavery as they existed prior to 1959 ever be re-established in Cuba?

Dr Fidel Castro Ruz asks us to be hopeful when he concludes his speech by saying:

I told you that our country is on its way to a new era. I hope someday to be able to speak to you of the things we are doing today and how we are going to continue to do them. We do not have the money to build housing for all the people who live in what we could call marginal conditions. But we have lots

of other ideas which will not wait until the end of time and which our united and justice-loving people will implement to get rid of even the tiniest vestiges of marginality and discrimination. I have faith that we will succeed because that is the endeavour today of the leaders of our youth, our students and our people. I shall not say more, I am simply saying that we are aware that there is still marginality in our country. But there is a will to eradicate it with the proper methods for this task to bring more unity and equality to our society. On behalf of my Homeland, I promise to keep you informed about the progress of our efforts.

The dialogue on this matter must continue both inside and outside of Cuba. Other Caribbean countries, such as Curaçao in the Netherlands Antilles, also once had plantation economies, dating back to the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Consequently, the number of people of African descent in these countries is significantly high. Talks on matters related to the history and social position of the people of African descent have encountered severe resistance from certain sectors in those societies which are intimately loyal to colonial and retrograde ideologies on both a cultural and political-economic level.

In this light, we should refer to the visit of Fidel Castro to Barbados in August 1998, at the invitation of Dr Owen Arthur, the Prime Minister. This visit coincided with the celebrations commemorating the abolition of slavery in the British territories. On this occasion, Barbadian officials, together with the Seraphine Cultural Center, called for an extension of the Pan-African movement and called on Fidel Castro to include Cuba in this movement. The call is appropriate as it takes into account the fact that Cuba is the home of a significant number of Africans of the diaspora.

Conclusion

We need to be hopeful and wait for the “other ideas” that the leadership of the revolution would want to put forward in the near future, with regards to the improvement of the material and non-material living conditions of the people in Cuba who are descended from Bantu, Yoruba, Benin, Calabar, Igbo, Mandinka, Wolof or Abyssinian peoples and other peoples of Mother Africa.

The history of these sons and daughters of the rich continent of Africa is the obverse of the history of the Eurocentric sectors of Cuban, and therefore Caribbean, society. History has blessed us with the shining example of Antonio Maceo y Grajales, who, in 1878, in his “Protest of Baragua” made clear to General Arsenio Martínez Campos, who represented Spanish rule and the Eurocentric sectors of Cuban society, that there would be **no independence without the total abolition of the system of enslavement of Africans**

The history of liberation in our continent has shown us that some elements among us have been and still are prepared to break some contact with colonial Spain, France, Britain, the Netherlands, Portugal, Denmark, Sweden, and Germany in particular, and colonial Europe in general, but not all contact, especially not cultural ties! And that is precisely why our nations, even though independent or semi-independent, have to persisting in reflecting on and talking about our situation along with Cuba so that we can find a way of dealing with the globalized world together.