

The african in Cuba

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Legacy

The slave trade and African slavery not only constituted universal tragedies that involved three continents but also were decisive for the formation of contemporary American societies. They resulted in an intense process of biological and cultural interactions, as well as of ethnic and racial fusion. Today's American cultures bear the visible stamp of this forced encounter between Native Americans, Europeans and Africans. The African participation in that process, and the intensity with which its legacy can be observed, have not been the same everywhere. They have varied according to historical, economic, social and demographic factors that, to be fully understood, require a specific study for each region or country.

Four centuries of Slave Trade.

African slavery in Cuba began in the first years of colonization and persisted for almost four centuries. During that time it bled the African continent of people and at the same time violently incorporated them as slaves in the new societies that developed in America. Slaves of practically all regions of Sub-Saharan Africa were brought to Cuba, which explains the great variety of ethnic groups that participated in the mutual acculturation (or trans-culturation) process that shaped Cuba's people and culture. Among those coming to Cuba, several peoples were especially important. Those from the region between the northern part of the Congo River and the southern part of Angola spoke a Bantu language and were known in Cuba as Congos. The Yoruba came from the southeastern region of the present Republic of Nigeria (and with



Tobacco farm

demographic enclaves in Benin and Togo), and were called Lucumi. The Ibo, Ibibio and Ekoi of southeastern Nigeria were known as Carabalí, and the Ewe-Fon coming from old Dahomey (today's Republic of Benin) were called Arara.

At first, few Africans arrived in Cuba because the Island's economy had relatively little need for their labor. The role of Cuba, and especially of Havana, remained primarily that of a transit point for Spanish ships on their trans-Atlantic voyages as well as part of the defense system for the rest of the Spanish empire. The Island's only alternative economic activity was cattle herding, which required only a small work force. Throughout that time relatively few slaves were brought to the Island.

The economic contribution: sugar and coffee.

The volume of slave imports varied, according to economic needs. A large increase occurred as Cuba's sugar economy began to blossom toward the end of the eighteenth century and reached its peak in the nineteenth century.

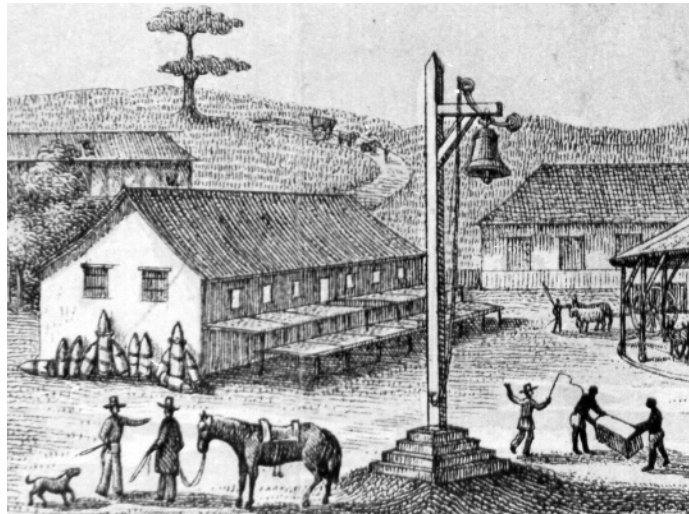
In 1820, a treaty abolishing the slave trade was signed between Spain and England, making commerce in slaves illegal. This development occurred during the full flowering of Cuba's plantation slave economy, with its insatiable demand for labor. As a result, the importation of slaves continued, now as part of a lucrative contraband commerce that deposited slaves in concealed coastal zones away from the urban centers.

Today we can still see evidence of the magnitude of Cuba's sugar mills and coffee plantations, which were the primary recipients of African slaves and were the sites of Africa's most important contribution to Cuba's economic development as well as to world-wide commerce. But African contributions were not limited to sugar. They also

affected tobacco ⁽¹⁾ and mining, as well as the construction of communication routes, fortifications and great mansions in the cities, examples of which can be seen even today.

How many slaves?

It is difficult to calculate the number of Africans brought to Cuba. Imports persisted at least until 1873, when the last known illegal arrival was documented. The most accepted number is 1,300, 000, a number which by itself speaks forcefully of their



Traditional sugar mill



R"Angerona" coffee plantation. Ruins of the main house. Havana.

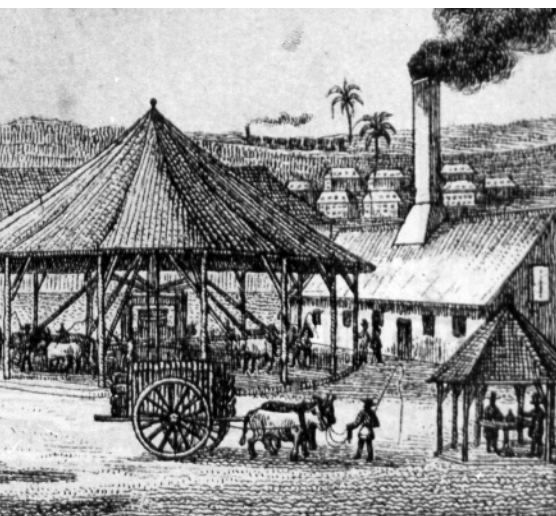
economic, social, biological and cultural impact.

In the period between the censuses of 1774-1775 and 1862, the Island grew by more than a million inhabitants. One of the main reasons for this dizzying population increase was the massive introduction of African labor. According to the 1792 census, when the sugar period of Cuban history was just beginning, slaves already constituted 31.06 % of the total inhabitants of the Island, and were even higher in the main sugar plantation districts of the western part of the Island. This increase would continue,

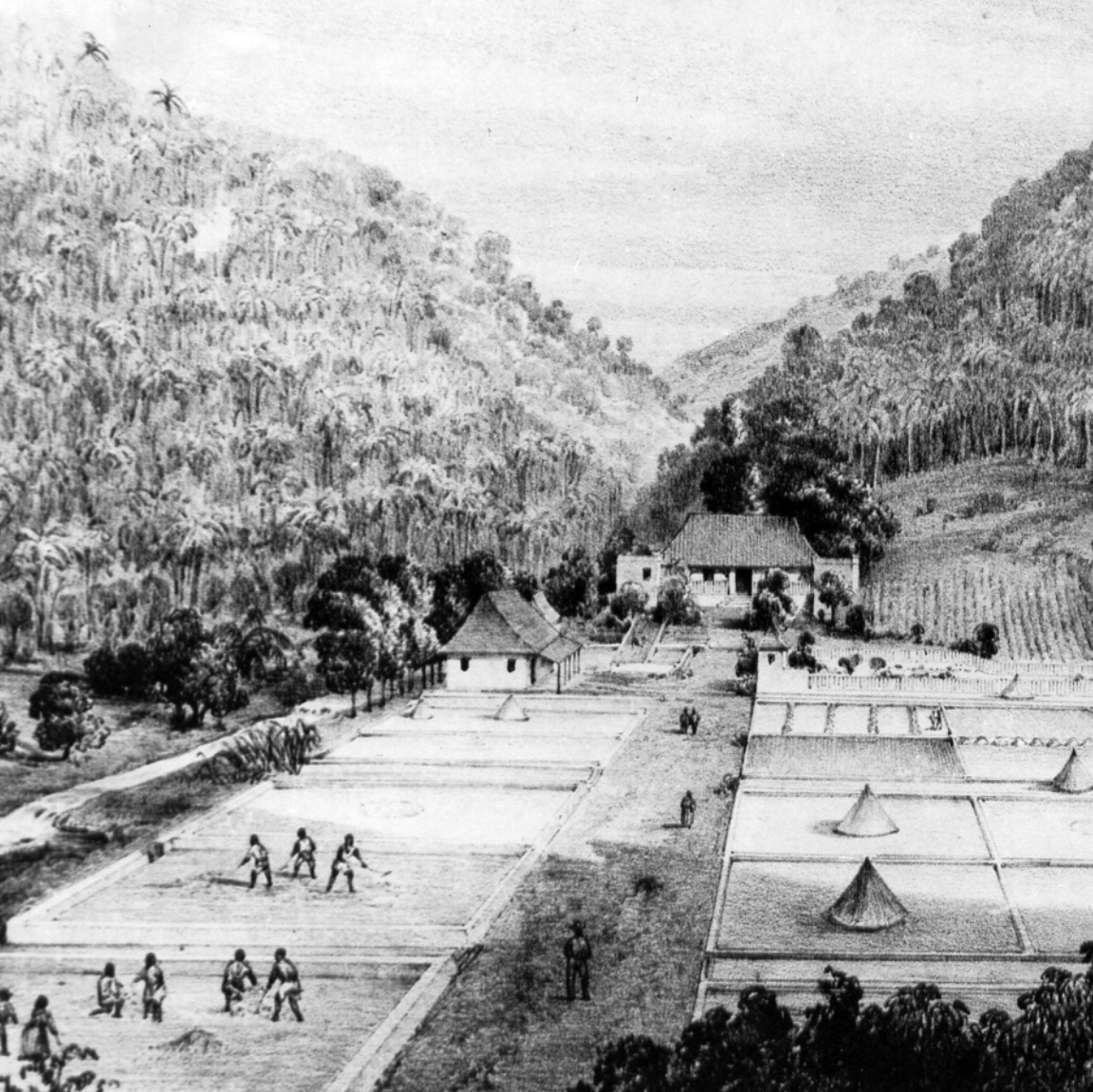
with variations of each stage, until the mid-nineteenth century, when slaves came to represent 40.73 % of the Island's population, and free "people of color" (black and racially mixed) made up another 15.1 %. This was the time of the great sugar mills, where several hundred slaves were housed in large dormitories (barracones).

The life of the slave: punishments and tortures

The insatiable thirst for wealth that caused the introduction of Africans to Cuba also shaped their life experiences—long periods of exhausting work,⁽²⁾ confinement to large dormitories, and drastic punishments inflicted for small infractions. The most common punishment was flogging, commonly known as bocabajo (face-down). "Some times the slaves were put in stocks, at other times they were tied by their extremities. But the most frequent method was the utilization of two or more slaves to hold the offender while punishment was



"Taoro" sugar mill tower, Havana



La Ermita” coffee plantation, Pinar del Río.

administered.”⁽³⁾ Punishment included imprisonment ⁽⁴⁾ in unsanitary jails; the stocks (cepo) ⁽⁵⁾ where the slave was kept for several days; the grillete (shackles) ⁽⁶⁾ and the collar⁽⁷⁾.

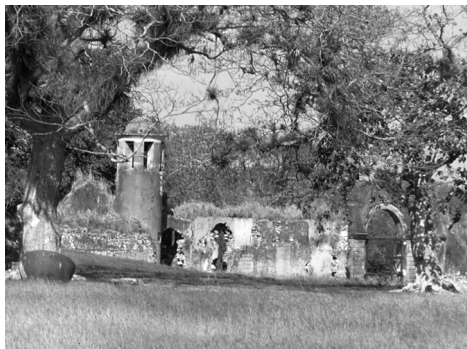
Revolts

Slaves’ resistance to the extreme work regime and severe punishments began from the time of their introduction to the Island. Resistance was expressed in a variety of ways. Passive resistance included work slowdowns, avoidance of tasks, breaking

tools, and the like. More active resistance included abortion and suicide, which freed slaves of their burdens and deprived the owner of a valuable economic possession. Even more active resistance included running away (cimarronaje), the establishment of runaway communities (palenques) and, ultimately, outright physical revolts.

Maroons and apalencados

Maroons were fugitives who escaped alone or in groups and who often traveled surreptitiously from one place to another, often remaining close to the plantation from



*Ruinas del barracón de esclavos.
Cafetal "Angerona" La Habana.*

which they frequently obtained their daily sustenance. Palenques constituted a relatively stable community of fugitive slaves. These often were located in difficult and inaccessible terrain in order to avoid the constant attacks of ranchers and their specially trained search dogs. In Cuba more than one hundred palenques have been documented. Similarly, evidence of a number of small refugee groups has been found in the Sierra de los Organos, the Sierra del Rosario, in the Province of Pinar del Rio, and in the Alturas of Habana-Matanzas.

Newspaper accounts tell of the resistance offered by runaways (*apalencados*) and of the retaliation taken against them by ranchers when they were re-captured. Such is the case of a leader of runaways in the palenque known as "the Drum", in the present Province of Havana. He battled the ranchers so tenaciously that his companions had time to escape. He was there alone when the attackers chopped off his hands with a machete. In palenques a subsistence economy based primarily on the production of food stuffs sometimes developed next to the farms that served them as shelters. Not infrequently palenques developed commercial bonds with these nearby properties. In 1848, in Las Cuchillas del Toa, located in the easternmost part of Cuba, a gang of ranchers assaulted and occupied the palenque "Todos tenemos" ("All We Have"). According to the documents, this palenque had 59 "houses" and 35 bohios (mud huts), which served as barns. The palenque had 200 bags of rice, 25 arrobas of dried meat, seven corrals, fourteen pigs, and a church with an altar. The fields held bananas, malangas, sweet potatoes, yucca, ñame, cane, ginger, vegetables and fruit trees.⁽⁸⁾

The revolts

Slave revolts date to the very beginning of the slavery system in Cuba. Revolts managed to shake the foundations of the slavery

regime, peaking in the 1840s with the development of abolitionists ideas. In 1844 the so-called “Conspiracy of the Ladders” justified a bloody repression that massacred not only slaves but also free blacks and mulattoes. Some who were accused as harboring abolitionist ideas emigrated in fear of retaliation. Slaves were tied to ladders and forced to confess by whipping. From this comes the name of the conspiracy. Thousands were tortured to death. Fernando Ortiz argues that slave associations (cabildos) and plantation drums played important roles in the organization and spread of the preparations of this conspiracy. Drums were frequently used for communication among slaves.

Expressions of rebellion and of the fight for freedom by the population of African origin in Cuba achieved an especially important significance in the second half of the nineteenth century during Cuba’s struggle for independence from Spain.

The cultural contribution

During the long period of slavery, Africans not only were stripped of their economic, social and cultural roots, but upon arriving at the Island they were dispersed among various plantations and

towns. When studying the slave registers of the time, it is not difficult to find examples of African ethnic diversity. African ethnic groups spoke different languages and brought with them a strikingly differentiated spiritual world. Perhaps their most common element was skin color, which became a basic source of identification, but which created a serious obstacle to relations among African ethnic groups as well as between African and Hispanic groups.

Their very condition as slaves, deprived of the most elementary rights, constituted a limitation that had inescapable consequences. The policy and practice of slavery strove to deprive them of their cultural patrimony, imposing on them institutions, customs, religion and language that had no connection with their previous experiences. In spite of that, enslavers could not destroy important expressions of Africans’ traditional culture, nor could they prevent aspects of African culture from modifying Hispanic culture. These all became fused and gradually gave rise to a phenomenon that later would be expressed in cubanía, (“Cubanness”).

The Afro-Hispanic interaction took place in several ways. It was not limited to the minimal, often violent contacts of the



“Buena Vista” coffee plantation. Restored main house Pinar del Rio.

plantation, where the dominant element was that of the overseer's whip. It also included domestic servitude, in the countryside as well as in the city—especially in the city—where the conditions of life and work were less violent and where a close and intense system of relations and contacts could emerge. One must also emphasize the role of free blacks and free mulattoes, that from the time of first contact began to increase, slowly but continuously, by virtue of the Royal edict of 1526 that gave slaves the right to seek freedom by means of a process known as “coartacion,” a process by which a slave could force a master to declare his market value, and then raise that sum (often by working extra jobs or by using his family and/or friends) to be purchased and set free. Some of these free blacks began to constitute a small bourgeoisie, until the drastic reaction following the already-mentioned “Conspiracy of the Ladders”.

Black mother. White child

The function carried out by the black woman had much to do with the process of mutual acculturation (transculturation). As a domestic slave, she was in charge of the day-to-day workings of the household of the owner — cooking, washing, cleaning, and even nursing the master's children. “She would take charge of them, care for them, rock them to sleep, feed them, play with them, stimulate their imagination by telling them their first stories...”⁽⁹⁾ How many remnants of African ancestral culture would come to form part of this infant during his or her socialization? Simultaneously there occurred biological interactions—obvious from the very earliest times—and which resulted in the high degree of racial mixture so evident today in the Cuban population.

Racism. Unfortunate legacy

In spite of this, everything that manifested African origins or African contribu-

tions to the Cuban nation and Cuban culture were devalued by the codes of “whiteness” in the dominant culture, a process that continued beyond the slavery period and survives today. It is embodied in one of the most nefarious and ignominious legacies of African slavery: racism. Its various expressions have continued reproducing themselves according to the historical conditions of each period. The fight against it constitutes one of the most important challenges for the Cuban society of the twenty first century.

NOTES and BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Marrero, L (1984): Cuba Economy and Society. Editorial Playor, Madrid, Vol 11
2. Conditions of work on sugar plantations were particularly harsh. During the harvest, the work day could last 19 hours. Neither young children nor women nor the elderly were excluded from exhausting labor. (Ortiz, 1987:195-198).
3. Ortiz, F (1987): Los Negros Esclavos, (Social Science Publishers), Havana 1987.
4. Section of the barracoon (slave dormitory) with large, unsanitary jails. Frequently the stocks added to the misery.
5. It consisted of a large, heavy plank with holes, in which the feet, the hands or the head of the slave were shackled.
6. Iron hoop that was put in the ankle of the slaves by means of rivets, making it very difficult for the slave to free himself. There was also a double shackle in which a heavy chain held simple iron hoops or hoops with small bars attached to the leg-gings. In order to walk, the prisoner had to gather it up, tie it to the waist or to take it in the left hand (Ortiz, 1987:236).
7. A very degrading instrument, consisting of an iron hoop that was placed on the victim's neck, locked with a key or rivets. From this hoop protruded two horn-like pieces, also made of iron, with bells on the end. (Ortiz, 1987:237).
8. This information was provided by Gabino la Rosa. Also see his book, Los cimarrones de Cuba (Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, La Habana, 1988); Los Palenques del Oriente de Cuba: Resistencia y Acoso (Editorial Academia, La Habana, 1991).
9. Entralgo, E. (1953): La liberacion etnica cubana. Universidad de la habana, La Habana, 1953.