

Black Cubans: A Social Identity

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The 1959 revolution brought about profound changes in all aspects of Cuban social structure and facilitated the access of the poorest sectors of society to educational and labor institutions. This sudden access was primarily meant to achieve a homogenization of the different social classes, so they could participate in the creation of a new society.

This created the possibility for an interracial contact that managed to neutralize common class discrimination and separation. From the very beginning, this declaration of socio-political equality lacked any prior examination or study of the condition of blacks (who, for the most part, belonged to the lowest of classes). This led to the survival and continued practice of prejudices and group behaviors associated with sustained marginalization. None of the traditional avenues of social influence, education, or the mass media, had any direct impact on or brought any “inside knowledge” to this social behavior. No social, cultural or psychosocial variables were ever taken into account.

We would like to digress a moment to highlight something present in published Cuban research that we think our readers might find interesting. It concerns allusions

to, perspectives on, and issues concerning the race problem. While we are not saying we don’t consult these sources, what we want to emphasize is that there is only one, recurrent racial theme, issue or chimera throughout all this work: blackness. The Chinese presence in Cuba is normally studied as a social phenomenon, but blackness is our only real racial marker, our sole and perverse ‘otherness.’

A lack of a black Cuban social history has created a vacuum that continues to limit the rigor and quality of information any researcher might be able to garner. ‘Blacks = Slavery’ is the most common memory children are taught in contemporary primary schools. This is not solely a Cuban problem, as the following excerpt from a resolution approved at the “Racism in the Americas and the Caribbean” symposium of the XLIX International Conference of Americanists in Quito (1997) indicates:

“In particular, we are asking States to adopt immediate measures for creating laws and implementing reforms that allow both the creation of a truly intercultural educational system that respects differences as well as control over the media, especially as pertains to anything

that constitutes a flagrant attack on an individual's dignity, or that of his or her people, as regards their ethnicity, gender, physical abilities, economic status, or cultural group.”

The attacks on black identity that one sees in contemporary societies are not “flagrant.” Could the trivializing of the historic relevance of a social group be considered a flagrant action? Any reader, academic or not, could attempt to answer this question simply by asking him or herself how much we know about the following, in the context of Cuba:

1. The Ladder Conspiracy
2. The Independent Party of Color's uprising.
3. Black participation in our independence struggles.
4. Slave uprisings.
5. The way in which slaves culturally and biologically resisted slavery.
6. Well known black historical figures.
7. Important events carried out by or involving blacks.

We would love to continue along these historical lines, and give away the answers to these questions, but a lack of space and time make it impossible. Instead, we would ask just one more question, the most relevant of all in considering the group with which we are concerned. What possible future is there for a group that is deprived of its history? How do you get across the notion that black Cubans have a psychosocial sense of belonging, a sense of distinctiveness and unity in the context of other racial groups?

Research results on the issue of interracial relations in Cuba in the last few years present a compilation of perspectives that different racial groups (in other words,



whites, blacks, and mestizos) have of themselves and others. The data all agree on that:

1. Blacks are victims of the worse prejudice, and are seen as the most homogeneous and negative group. Blacks are seen that way regardless of the group that is doing the judging; that is, the way other groups see them coincides with the way they see themselves.¹
2. Blacks are more (and not less) likely to attribute positive values and characteristics to all other racial groups.²
3. Significant numbers of people believe that not all groups have the same values, decency, and intelligence. Naturally, blacks are at the bottom of that list (between 10-30%, according to Alvarado, 1996; 1998, and Hernández, 1998).³
4. The displacement of open and active discrimination to spheres where its affective impact can be felt causes social consequences, as in the case of marriage and engagements.⁴
5. Social disadvantages (read ‘discrimination’) must be acknowledged, because

blacks are offered fewer opportunities for development and suffer more exclusion by other groups, despite the improvements promulgated by the Revolution.

We want to take a closer look at blacks as a group, to see, as we said earlier, what variables there are that might impact their image of themselves. On the subject of black Cubans' self image, Alvarado says the following: "The fact that blacks and mestizos have internalized the aesthetic and cultural ideals of whites has led to openly contradictory attitudes that have sometimes affected the degree of self esteem that each group has for itself."⁵ In seeing these data, the most important question to ask is how this self-perception might be changed, how a transformation might be brought about, what might be a more favorable context for blacks to better know themselves and identify as a group. A sense of group is central to this identity, but to what degree is it an attempt to "recover" said identity, as Maritza Montero has asked.⁶ According to Tajfel, the number and diversity of social situations in which an individual will consider as somehow relevant to his or her membership in a group will increase as regards:

1. The clarity of a person's awareness of being a member of a determined group;
2. The degree to which opinions related to that membership are positive or negative.
3. The measure of emotional commitment the person has with his or her self-awareness and others' opinions.

Conversely, there will be social situations that can force a majority of such individuals to behave as an integrated member of a group, no matter how insignificant or

unimportant their initial sense of identification with it.⁷

In interviews we conducted for our degree work, we explored expressions of racial identity in a group of black citizens of Havana. In order to avoid complications with the almost guaranteed, scientific, or popular complexities of racial taxonomy, the informants we chose were people who were phenotypically and psychologically black. In other words, in addition to looking like bonafide blacks to us, they, too, identified the same way. We broke them down into two groups according to their affiliation, or lack thereof, with cultural groups of African origin (Afro-Cuban folkloric musicians or dancers, and practitioners of African-origin religions). Our selection process with regards to this variable took into account their preferences for individual or group identification, with a variety of possible variables. The interviews inquired about different cognitive and affective aspects of group membership, among them the relationship between racial and national identity, feelings regarding group membership, perceptions about distinguishing elements within the group, discrimination and parts of daily life that were perceived as taking place and affecting the group, and the state of the group's historical memory.

The information gathered overwhelmingly demonstrates a propensity for a negative view of the group. The effective concepts inclusion/exclusion were employed to gather data via expressions like "we are" or "they are," respectively, in open-ended questions. This revealed a strong tendency for extreme exclusion, even among those who are not affiliated.

The coupling of affirmations such as "What I like/dislike about being black..."

reveal a pronounced quantitative and qualitative asymmetry regarding the affective ties of the informants. Sociocultural belonging was not only shown to facilitate better group image but to orient criticism not only towards the group's negative attitude and also to the role the social scene played in the legitimation and reaffirmation of the group's status. Those who were not affiliated to a group identity hardly answered the first question, and showed great discomfort regarding physical attributes, particularly hair, which suggests a simpler internalization of the dominant culture's cultural aesthetic.

This seemed significant to us yet, despite this, 62% of our informants said they were proud to be black, which suggests the high level of conflict to which this racial group is subjected, and the mechanisms of reaffirmation and self-defense that are activated to preserve its members' self-image, which is the role of all identities. Something Maritza Montero might say is that conflict has become part of their identity.⁸

Research in Cuba has shown that national identity on the island is solid, and continually and positively reaffirmed by almost all avenues of exchange at the level of the individual and society. According to Tajfel, daily conflict deriving from group membership can increase its subjective importance.⁹ Sixty-eight percent of the people in our study believe that racial identity is as or more important as national identity, which for this group speaks to the psychological hierarchy of the first for the black population of Havana.

The relevance we found of racial identity to national identity in this study does not match results from other investigations, like the one by Daniela Hernández, in 1995. She can speak to multiple factors, regional and historical, and even methodological.

About 94% of our informants perceive the existence of racial discrimination in Cuba: it is seen as an inequality of opportunities versus the formal equality mentioned by 60 percent of those interviewed. More than half of them laid the blame for this situation outside the group, legitimated by some 'Other' (a nearby or more distanced figure in interpersonal relations who wields power in higher social strata). The Affiliated Group (A) showed itself to have more experience with the matter (81.25%); 37.5% of the Non-Affiliated (NA) group did not reveal any such experience, despite the fact it recognized this social phenomenon. This suggests a connection between affiliation and a conscious consideration of the problem, and to the fact that greater attention is given to future consequences from being a member of the group. The NA group perceives discrimination in the interpersonal arena and in couple relationships, which is in keeping with other studies carried out in our country. These differences might indicate in the NA group a personal centralization, and in the A group a greater perception of group. Yet, they also show the conflictive character of their identification with blacks as a group.

Group A has more representation among those active agents, who could initiate changes in the group's status. Although it seems Group A (as well as Group NA) holds the State and black people as more relevant agents of change, both groups contribute new individuals to the struggle for change through new religious participants, via de mass media, and through research. The members of Group NA mentioned none of these spheres of influence; instead, they mentioned education as an active agent of change. Fatalistic attitudes and justifications for the problem of racial discrimination abounded amongst the NA group. Some individuals in

Group A feel that the State needs to want for things to change for anything to happen, but they are also aware of the problem of relying on political and educational institutions to react because, according to them, they are permeated by racial prejudice.

Our results indicated that what should be the area of most concern to us is the lack of historical memory among our subjects. The degree to which the great majority of them know little or nothing about the legacy of blacks, of what they have done in the history of our country, is alarming. Yet, despite the fact this was the tendency amongst all our informants, when asked about this most correct answers came from Group A, which confirms the value of this group's identification with regard to its level or reconciliation and even their incipient social identity.

In our quest for how much or how little knowledge our subjects had about their group's role in the nation's historical events, some of the answers we received revealed total ignorance: a mention of the soap opera *Sol de Batey* and the drama *Pataquín*, or "No. Is there one?" and other more or less relevant answers to the question demonstrates great vagueness. Among those that were less vague, and somewhat correct, we found the following examples:

- * Well...The Independence War: Maceo, Máximo Gómez, Quintín Bandera...I can't think of any other...
- * I don't remember...I really don't remember...Perhaps the war in Angola, although... (then the informant thinks). Maceo's war was one of the most important.
- * The slave rebellion in Haiti, I don't remember the leader's name...When Gilberto Girón attacked Trinidad, I think...

* Many. Maceo's rescue of Sanguily...I know there were many blacks involved, but they were not acknowledged. The '95 war, on February 24th.

* Oh! I know there were many slave uprisings, but I don't remember any. I know they fought with Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, but not as a separate group of blacks.

* When they freed Demajagua. I imagine there must have been some in the independence struggles... Oh! There was also that sugar leader...

Some from Group A contributed to the more correct answers:

* When Bayamó was torched, during the Independence era. Does the answer have to refer to Cuba?

* At the Protest of Baraguá, the Battle Cry of Baire. Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, he started an uprising?

* No. There is nothing in the history of Cuba. In Haiti, I think...Wait, wait. What have we blacks done in Cuba? Does it have to be in Cuba? There is no historical event in Cuba. When Maceo was general, they put Máximo Gómez above him. Gómez was the one who did the thinking...

* They say that when the medical students were going to get shot, some Abakuá black guys tried to save them, because one of them was an Abakuá too. There was an interview about that on television, but the more official version, the moderator's version was that a landowner gave some of his slaves some machetes to free them...

* In the Independence War, they were the ones in front. The whites were behind them. What do you think they freed us for? *This is what freedom is like, gentlemen. Grab a machete and move!*

* Maceo was more than just a man; he was a deed. I admire him greatly... There were also the maroons (escaped slaves). There have always been the blacks in all the wars, Angola, Ethiopia. The hard times are always for blacks, for *niches*...

* The movement of the Independents of Color. One man was killed; another killed himself. About 3,000 were massacred at the beginning of the century. Quintín Bandera was involved in that too.

Some reflections concerning Racial Identity

Although we cannot generalize from this study's results, we decided to create some sort of typology or obvious categories to show tendencies of or departures from this identity.

1) Informants with a highly developed racial identity that did not reveal any issues with being a member of their racial group. This is mostly true for subjects in Group A. Some of the tendencies we saw among this group were that its members included themselves in evaluations concerning the group, and did not think that the existence of other motivational factors obscured their identity in any way.

* I have nothing against whites; I consider myself black. According to the concept of race that has been imposed here, Cuba is a multiracial country... I managed to go to university but there are 300 people in my family and I am the only one. The situation is the same for most blacks in university here. How many of the blacks at university are neither self-aware nor proud? They are rootless. Not all of them behave in the manner they were cultural shaped; they are afraid to of being rejected. How many of them feel like outsiders to the group?

Those humble origins are most affected in this way. The price of arrival for blacks is not easy. Can you believe that in a country like this, where Cuban culture exists thanks to Africa, the authorities allow one to enter a school wearing a crucifix but not an *iddé* (an Olosha or Babalawo religious bracelet)? And, I'm not the only one saying this; many people have, people like Fernando Ortiz. This world is messed up; it is upside-down. (Affiliated)

* I don't have a photo album with a picture of a grandfather in ringlets in it; I don't know, perhaps we had no money for that. Back then blacks first didn't get documented at birth but rather at about 20 years of age. There are no black societies in Cuba. But there are Spanish ones, and Arab ones. I don't know why. I've never thought about it much. As a group, I don't even think we were on José Martí's agenda. He used to say something to the effect that we were more than white, more than black, more than mulatto, but what he didn't say is that we were equal, that I was equal to a white. (Affiliated)

2) Informants whose concept of self is focused on a different social identity. This is the case with people possessing a strong religious, national, or gender identity. We saw a varied spectrum in the relationship of their two identities; it can go from the identities overlapping or superimposing themselves on each other to a total subordination of racial identity.

* It used to be that one couldn't wear religious necklaces to work or university; it was hard to get positions or a place in the Party if one wore them. One could not initiate his or her children, despite the humanitarian, beneficial and curative values of our religion. A father who did this

would get a seven-year prison sentence and lose his religious objects. I had to hide when I initiated my daughter. They would fire you if you got initiated; once this happened, you'd get caught up in vagrancy and vagabonding. This seems like slavery to me, a different sort.... Today, it is others who talk about our culture; they have taken away the voice of those who defended it."(Affiliated)

* They are arrogant, overbearing, even if one has a higher position or level; they like to be on top. Black women are different; not the way I have characterized black men. I've talked about this to other women and have even written about it. They are unbearable, *machistas*, violent; I don't know why. I want nothing more to do with them. (Affiliated)

* In response to the question "At what moment of your life have you felt or thought that being black was important?" "Yes, I have felt this way, but only for a moment... Perhaps more as a Cuban, being abroad, above all, while dancing in Mexico. Blacks are part of Cuban culture and identity."(Affiliated)

3) Informants whose feelings of belonging are based on positive or negative opinions of the group's identity. This identity is considered active and positive when it involves the segment of the group that is seen as having positive values, but not the whole group.

* Blacks have differing characteristics. There are those who have a complex and others who don't; this makes them bad, racist. (Did you write down that I said they had complexes...?) Others are normal, and lead normal lives. They become professionals and can have jobs that make

them feel equal to everyone else.... As a black woman, I've been able to make it. I have not limited myself. I have evolved, just like everyone else. Blacks often place limitations on themselves." (Not Affiliated)

* There are blacks who behave badly, all crazy like. There are also whites with a bad attitude and blacks with good hearts." (Not Affiliated)

* I like being the kind of black person I am. I am totally conscious of my blackness and don't believe there are any obstacles in my life because I am black...Blacks have a great deal to learn. Many blacks don't know they are black...They must be taught from birth on to face forward and not consider their race an obstacle to their full realization. They must be taught to look forward, but bravely."(Affiliated)

4) Other informants whose self-image does not include a racial identification.

* I feel different from other blacks. I am not aggressive, or explosive, or loud. Quite the contrary...I hate those religions. I've always stayed away from them. I don't like them. I don't like to receive anything from a practitioner. I only feel right after I get rid of it. I even have nightmares about this. I am affected by it."(Not Affiliated)

* I am black, but don't take a radical position because I've never had a problem with being black. I belong to the black race, but I've never felt a need to reaffirm this." (Affiliated)

Conclusion

The population sample we studied revealed a negative identity that was not in conflict with national identity and included traits associated with other social groups.

Despite the fact they criticize blacks as a whole, those in the affiliated group focus more of their reflection on those social and historical determinants that cause or result from social marginalization. Unlike those in the unaffiliated group, affiliated blacks held a more positive view of their socio-racial distinctiveness. The unaffiliated offered less positive feedback about group membership. They tended to focus on personal experiences and criteria not related to racial identity. For them, it is obvious that being black means

garnering fewer positive rewards in life. They are also less likely to feel positively about group membership.

Among the segment of the population we studied, group affiliation showed itself to be a catalyst for racial identity; inclusion; or membership in the group had an impact on our subjects' prior self-image. Affiliation is a complex variable; it cannot always reverse what seems to be a tendency towards a negative racial identity.

Notes:

1- Alvarado Ramos, Juan A. "Relaciones Raciales en Cuba. Notas de Investigación." *Temas* 7 (julio-septiembre 1996); Alvarado Ramos, Juan A. "Estereotipos y prejuicios raciales en tres barrios de la Habana." *América Negra* 15 (1998); Pérez Alvarez, María Magdalena. "Los prejuicios raciales: sus mecanismos de reproducción." *Temas* 7 (julio-septiembre 1996).

2- Ibid.

3- Alvarado, Juan A. (1996, 1998). Op Cit.; Hernández, Daniela. "Raza y prejuicio en Santa Clara: un reporte de investigación." *América Negra* 15 (1998).

4- Alvarado, Juan A. (1996, 1998). Op. Cit.; Selier, Yesenia y Penélope Hernández. "Representación Social de la raza negra en jóvenes de Ciudad de la Habana." Term Paper for "Research Methods. School of Psychology, 1997; Hernández, D. Op. Cit.

5- Alvarado, Juan A. (1996). Op Cit., 39.

6- Montero, Maritza. *Ideología, alineación e identidad* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela. Ediciones de la Biblioteca, 1984).

7- Tajfel, Henry. *Grupos y categorías humanos* (Barcelona: Editorial Herder, 1984): 27, 49.

8- Montero, M. Op. Cit.

9- Tajfel, H. Op. Cit., 274.