

# Misleading Moves

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The island's nomenclature-making machine has been set into motion. Little by little, blacks are being taken out of the cupboard (only those necessary) to offer a vision of racial pluralism to fit the characteristics of a population that is approximately 60% black and mestizo.

While the steps are still timid and limited, they'll likely become more visible in order to create an expectation for greater integration of dark-skinned Cubans into areas where their presence continued to be controlled by chance, or they were simply victims of perpetual omission.

It seems to be a tactic that seeks, above all, to displace or derail currents of opinion that have been forming outside the government's sphere, in which can be found not absolute but more objective conclusions about the problem.

The network of offices under the government's umbrella lacks the necessary independence to deal with the problem freely, without red tape. One cannot forget the mitigating mechanisms that are disconnected to open repression, but are no less efficient in establishing unwritten laws that control the limits of any project's analysis or procedures.

The arm-twisting that is inflicted upon the most daring studies and proposals is often camouflaged with awards, permission to travel abroad, access to better jobs, book publication, and other maneuvers that are

included in a tacit agreement between both parties.

It is very difficult to officially find work in any project, particularly if its topic has implications that go beyond just culture, because they can bring about impactful government decisions to attenuate or dilute their racially conflictive potential.

The persistent effort to channel the black Cuban population's dissatisfaction through silence, and the use and abuse of folklore, is a strategy that has managed to generate only a vicious circle that produces new kinds of marginality and decline in this sector of the population. It is condemned to remain in the rearguard of almost every sphere of social, economic and political life.

There are black intellectuals intertwined in the official-like fabric of cultural institutions that have written excellent essays and works. But the list of these is too brief. A regime that has a vast arsenal of ways to correct attitudes that stray too far off the mark sets off one's survival instincts. Those voices one hears from within civil society that propose to analyze the causes and consequences of racial prejudice in Cuba, and don't silence themselves due to possible reprisals by the political police, have become a moral reserve that is fueling a different dynamic free of orthodoxy and superficiality. All they want is an atmosphere in which they can have coherent, inclusive and profound discussions about

a need for Cuban reality to be reformulated and balanced, in order to be able to construct the sanest democracy possible when the already too prolonged mandate of the Communist Party is over.

A currently sporadic media offensive whose tone is increasing challenges the activism of several groups that remain unfiliated with the State. It is pigeonholing said activism under the category of counter-revolution and officially calling for a study of these subjects, in order to rob power and prominence from those who have decided to take the bull by the horns, at the possible expense of having to face a horrible fate and personal danger.

The position assumed by those who in one way or another have become official spokespersons for the government's rhetoric denotes worry and fear that their decisions and attitudes, which are limited to obeying whatever the cultural and political elites have decided, remain in evidence against them. The essence of these decisions is rooted in communicating beyond a doubt that the government is indeed concerned about the race problem, something quite far from the truth. A cursory look at how black Cubans live, taking into account the racial composition of the Cuban people, reveals just how concerned officialdom really is about their quality of life. This becomes obvious if one takes into account the racial composition of the Cuban people and then realizes how many dark-skinned families live in dives, sees exactly who is employed in the emerging economy, and who makes up most of the prison population. In every case, blacks and mestizos overwhelmingly represent the most negative figures.

There are other sectors in which the marginalization is obvious. Nevertheless, I offer only a few examples, just to illustrate the disparity between official rhetoric, which

goes on about equality and social harmony, and the bitter existence of tens of thousands of black Cubans caught up in an interminable, generational cycle of misery, violence, and exclusion.

Blacks in Cuba continue to inhabit the periphery. They must negotiate a labyrinth with hundreds of corners and turns in it to escape these marginal spaces. Success often comes in the form of de facto rules that function like potholes in the dark. The end brings a tumble and return to their original place: oblivion, neglect, and an environment dominated by alcohol, drugs, promiscuity, suicide, and crime.

### *Vignette: Beyond the Drum*

Many black Cubans feel driven to find refuge in religious practices of African origin, and in socially unacceptable behaviors, as a way to respond to the constant disdain that persistent, hegemonic patterns that reaffirm mechanisms of exclusion and marginalization inflict upon them. This makes progress, recognition, and social inclusion within the system considerably difficult.

In looking at the socio-political restructuring that was put into effect in 1959 and is still in force, it would not be too ridiculous to see in this a plan that favors these sorts of attitudes. The objective was for black families to rely on unenlightened codes and self-isolation to





distance them from modern cultural and social spaces.

Secondly, the exotic nature of the wide array of ceremonies, attire, dances, and liturgical and spiritual rituals brought by slaves from Africa has been used to sell “products” to first-world citizens at exorbitantly high prices. I must point out that the rights and earnings from this lucrative industry end up, of course, in the coffers of a State that has given ample evidence of its disdain for and ignorance regarding the enormously rich African contribution to Cuban nationality and culture.

It is not difficult to find whole families of African descendants locked up in a world in which the only topic of conversation is the aforementioned subject. It has served as an avenue for earning self-respect in an unfavorable environment, but also represents a fatal confluence of elements disposed to deepening ignorance and fanaticism. This cannot do any good—except subjectively—for practitioners whose way of life is almost at the dawn of civilization.

Thousands of people every day turn to spiritual consults; others initiate themselves into the popular rites of deities of African origin, like Yemayá, Ochún, Changó, and Obbatalá. Large sums of money are invested in these conversions; many are the goals of those who choose to fully immerse themselves in those mysteries, which range from being cured of a chronic illness or seeking prosperity, to trying to hurry the arrangement of plans to travel abroad, or putting a bad spell on an enemy, to being absolved at a trial.

The problem is that one does not always get what one wants. It is all a world of speculation, coincidences, and luck. There are those who have invested a fortune and gotten no good result in return. In the end, they are still in hovels, die tragically, and end up in one of Cuba’s more than 200 prisons and workcamps instead of leaving for Europe.

It does not take much to figure out what results from a formula in which blacks fulfill two roles that actually dovetail with the power elite’s preferences: submitting to and obtaining healthy dividends from these ancestral practices. Blacks will need to redouble their efforts to break these stereo-

types and cultivate their intellect if they are to become free. The more they progress, the greater their defense will be against any attempted manipulation and belief purporting there is no racism in Cuba.

Race-based discrimination in the twenty-first century is not the same as the kind there was in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, Cuba is not South Africa. We need to use other ways of seeking recognition, so that those who don't believe in us can abandon their complacent thinking, and the racists can be publicly exposed, names and all.

Personally, I have nothing against the sound of a drum. That heritage is responsible for enriching jazz, mambo, son, and other universally famous rhythms. The drum is part of our national identity, of Cubanness. But we must not forget that spaces are often defined according to a multidimensional perspective, one that can stimulate the creation and survival of a way of thinking open to renewal, and closed to stagnation and mediocrity.

There should be no contradiction whatsoever between a devotion to centuries and legitimate cultural traditions and subsequent progress and social participation. We must correct our popular imaginary's fixed image of blacks as some kind of fulltime rumba dancers or, at their worst, as picturesque figures given to discordant hedonism who are efficient only in tasks that require intense physical effort.

These ideas highlight the purported intellectual inferiority of people with some measure of African ancestry, when compared to whites. There is an attempt to generalize this dubious, unprovable scientific concept. I don't deny there are particularities that distinguish a distant descendant from Kenya or Ethiopia, from someone else whose genealogical tree is rooted in Scandinavia or Saxony. Yet, it is absurd and malicious to try to fix patterns after centuries of assimilation. There is a big difference between blacks living in huts, in the depths of a jungle, and those born in Jamaican, Barbadian or Cuban urban centers.

It is common for negative behavioral standards to be associated with African descendants without any consideration for the usually adverse conditions in which they have had to develop during their childhood and adolescence. Blacks in Cuba have created their own spaces for survival. A hostile environment hidden behind rich foliage has forced their hand. Music and sports are their preferred hiding places. Beyond that, they count for nothing, with rare exceptions. That is why we must add other sounds that can communicate messages of maturity and integrity to the referential sound of the drum. We must raise our consciousness. If we do not, we will never be able to undo the trappings of a bad reputation, the grudges against us, and the perception of blacks as second- or third-class people.