

# Between Heaven and Earth

Víctor Manuel Domínguez  
Writer and journalist  
Havana, Cuba



*Afro-Cuban dances in Santiago de Cuba*

**B**lack characters in Cuban literature of the Revolutionary Period are represented in one of two ways. They are either presented in the context of their magical-religious behavior, or absorbed into a ‘massifying’ ideology that is akin to a thorn in the country’s political culture. What is revealed by the false or partial features with which some Cuban authors imbue their fictional black characters, the caricature of them

with which they sometimes deform blacks into displaying a submissive attitude, or turn them into abominable people, due to their indecision, is the fear these narrators have of them.

Censorship in Cuba has prevented most writers—fairly new ones and even the latest ones—from approaching the subject of race by creating a totally valid black protagonist. The last fifty years of Cuban literature (1959-2009) has seen only one work of fiction that

dealt with the subject from an ethical and social point of view, and a representation of black characters with an inner struggle to find a place somewhere beyond success or failure. In the story *La tierra y el cielo* (1967), by Antonio Benítez Rojo, the world of the Voodoo religion brought by Haitian immigrants and the pragmatism of the Cuban Revolution's utopia are intensely counterpointed.

Pedro Limón (the protagonist) and Aristón (the two faces of one friendship) symbolize "the visible and the invisible, the profane and the sacred, the physical and the spiritual, between heaven and earth".<sup>1</sup> Born in a Haitian community of an imaginary town called Guanamacá, Cuba, and victims of a brutal economic situation and the humiliation they suffer before the Revolution, they join the *guerrilla* in the Sierra Maestra. Aristón, whose idea it was for them to do so, is a faithful believer in the power of Voodoo to help them return unharmed from the war. It is he who led a fearful Pedro to the mountains, where the cycle of their deception would be consummated.

The change of pace and impressions that the war brought caused a distancing between the two friends. This was due to the clash between one's desire to belong to the land and the other's wish to defend their traditions, practice them, and confront the nascent, contradictory limitations that were resulting from the Revolution's anti-spiritual bent.

After returning from the Sierra Maestra, concluding the literacy campaign, and demobilizing after fighting at Playa Girón, Pedro Limón is forced to participate in the firing squad charged with killing his friend, Aristón, who was sentenced to death for in a fit of rage having killed an officer who had insulted him. Henceforth, Pedro's life becomes a living hell. The fact that the very same Revolution that

he had helped build, and to which he considered he owed a debt of gratitude, had made him participate in the execution of his friend, destroyed him. Pedro Limón began to think of his childhood in Guanamacá: "Despite all the poverty, it was a bit of heaven, and I was never happier than during those nights with Leonie, by Tiguá's bonfire, under the prairie trees, listening to his stories about the old country, and about one-armed Mackandal."<sup>2</sup> Aristón, his childhood friend who took him to the Sierra, had chosen the Voodoo heaven through which Mackandal traveled as a butterfly or bird. But by wanting to be a 'new man' for the Revolution, he had chosen the earth instead. Yet, even "more than an evil spirit from a horror movie, Pedro Limón the zombie is a passive, faceless, manipulated pariah who has lost his free will and identity, and sold his soul. He was first controlled by Aristón, and later transformed by the ideology of dialectical materialism, and zombified into a Haitian Marxist-Leninist acolyte."<sup>3</sup>

In all its depth, this story, in which Carpentier's magical realism fuses and develops within a context of growing materialism, reflects the futility of a mythical value that is powerless against the weapons of those in power, who impose their reality before a firing squad.

**Notes:**

1- Skłodowska, Elzbieta. *Cuba: Un siglo de literatura (1902-2002)*. Madrid: Editorial Colibrí, 2004.

2- *Ibid.*

3- *Ibid.*, 307.