

Rebirth of Slavery in the Twenty-First Century

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One can currently discern reminiscent glimpses of the indignant slavery to which our ancestors were subjected for more than three hundred years. Competent organizations must be vigilant about this, so they can initiate a socio-cultural project and combat any manifestation of injurious racism, as well as counter the disintegration of different ethnic groups, and respect the 2005 OIT [International Labour Organization] declaration about the nature of the nineteenth-century slave trade.

The seven major ethnic groups that were forcefully brought to Cuba, known popularly as the *Seven African Powers* (people of Congo, Carabalí, Gangá, Mandinga, Arará, Mina and Lucumí extraction), were not able to escape the pain of disassociation, racial and cultural discrimination. The disintegration of these groups in Cuba is palpable, as are the contradictions that exist among the abovementioned congregations and many believers of almost all the Afro-Cuban religions. We must understand that the problems “blacks” have amongst themselves, which are frequently discussed among “white” circles, are not the result of genetics or race, but rather of a behavioral

model imposed on them for more than two centuries. In the latest edition of *Malcolm X Speaks* (2008), the author writes “The experience I often have is that when you meet blacks who talk about non-violence, they do not act non-violently amongst themselves, they don’t love each other or forgive each other. Generally, what they mean when they say they’re non-violent is that they are so with other people. They are non-violent with their enemies.”

We can lay the blame for this contradiction on Spanish colonialism. Let us consider just a few of the historical realities that had the most influence on shaping the behavior and formation of many black people, particularly those who were and are still followers of African-origin beliefs. According to Israel Moliner Castañeda, in his book *Los cabildos en Matanzas* [The Cabildos of Matanzas] (2002, “the consent of the authorities for the integration and functioning of African cabildos fundamentally sought to keep the black and *mestizo* population controlled and segregated.”

Permission or authorization for any public activity was necessary, as was presenting a record of everything that was done and

happened. Only people with a direct ethnic connection to the organization were allowed to become affiliates. Not even the children of parents brought from Africa were allowed to join, if they were born in Cuba, because they were considered *criollos*. Historian Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux, explains that this allowed the dominant class to avoid black unification and uprisings, in the event that the entire labor force from a region's plantations or haciendas belonged to one, single, ethnic group. Captain General Luis de las Casas included the following four articles in the Edict of Good Governance and Policing for Havana, in 1792, to regulate these national cabildos:

Article 8: Blacks from Guinea will not be allowed to build altars to their saints, for dances, as is their native custom in their cabildo houses. Any violation will be noted immediately by the authorities. Should such violation continue, the same will be charged with a fine of 8 ducats, or more. In addition, all other blacks will be removed from their homes, have everything associated with their altars dismantled—their images and statues, furniture, and other belongings—and given to the local parish priest, or priest's assistant, to determine their fate as he sees fit.

Article 9: The authorities will also inform the leaders of these cabildos that under no circumstances should they themselves take or allow anyone else to take the cadavers of black people to their cabildos for the purpose of holding dances and mourning rites, as is their native custom, and that if they ignore this warning, they will be committing an act of maximum public disorder, upon which the authorities will visit the bereaved, executor, or other interested party and order him or them to immediately take the cadaver to an mortuary.

Article 36: Cabildos are allowed to hold dances on feast days only from 10AM-12PM,

and then again from 3PM-8PM, at which time all activities must cease, everyone must go home, and there must be no further activity for any reason whatsoever. The first violation of this ordinance will cause the cabildo leaders to incur a fine of 6 ducats (the monies will be used for public works), and a fine of 10 ducats for the second offense, in addition to 10 days in prison, and a loss of their leadership position among those of his ethnic group that conferred it upon them.

Article 38: Under no circumstances will blacks grouped by ethnicity go about on the streets with flags or other emblems for the purpose of fetching their leaders from their homes, and even less so for the purpose of diversion and drum playing, or any other reason. Any violation of this ordinance will bring about their arrest and eight days of forced labor on public works projects.

This referential evidence facilitates our current ability to discern, question, and denounce to competent authorities any minimal attempt to discredit racial identity and Afro-Cuban traditions. For example, if we continue to allow the current, subtle policy of “whitening everything black,” and do not stop the tendency there is to “cover up everything white,” we will be ensuring that the memory of our Afro-Cuban community and the indignities of slavery will forever be erased.

There are many cultural activities that in some way offend people of African descent in Cuba. The reason for this is because in one way or another they seem to reveal shades of colonial attitudes that are expressed today in the very same racist way. For example, there are numerous whites in national folkloric or Afro-Cuban dance troupes, and their identity is entirely unproblematic. Yet, if a black person tries to join the Liza Alfonso Spanish dance troupe, he or she must use a wig, or have long,

straight hair, like a white person in a flamenco dance. It seems that black people must somehow lose part of their identity to participate in Spanish dance; if not, they are rejected.

Among the comparsa krewes in Cuba, the best known, and most supported and prioritized one is that of the Guaracheros de Regla. It has 9 or 10 whites participants. The leadership and administration of many of these Afro-inspired folkloric groups is in the hands of white people. The justification that is offered for not recruiting more people of color for this group is the meager number of professionally or academically trained black people. There are also allusions made to their antisocial behavior.

There is currently an egregious case taking shape in the Afro-Cuban community. *Quisicubaba*, a “cabildo” in the Los Sitios neighborhood of Havana, has a white leader who has all the freedom of action that was heretofore denied all black cabildo leaders. Many believe that even the name given this congregation represents a lack of respect to the memory of our black ancestors. Israel Moliner has pointed out that *Quisicubaba*, or *Cuabal*, was not a cabildo, but rather a place where slaves would gather to carry out certain rituals away from the eyes of civil and Church authorities. Historian Manuel Pérez Beato’s work on this organization’s documents reveals what happened to free blacks from Havana who were expelled from the *Quisicubaba* house, the first freed black congregation in the city (founded in 1557), for being loud and boisterous.

Havana’s first official historian, Emilio Roig de Leuschesenring, notes that *Quisicubaba* was the place determined by the cabildo (as a sort of city hall) for free blacks, so they could be allowed to “cultivate their land, and they could more or less control them, and impose on them whatever policy necessary, because despite the freedom they had acquired, they did not usually make good use of it, with rare exception.”

Despite our revolutionary government’s efforts to eradicate racism in Cuba, we know that the racist sentiments of many have persisted for many years. Unfortunately, a good number of those racist people are involved in the reestablishment of our social order, and in socio-cultural plans. If what we want is to save our socio-cultural identity, then is it not good when nobly conceived events can provoke a resurgence of old tribal disputes and feelings of rejection. This could be the reason why so many believers think they are witnessing an actual rebirth of slavery in the twenty-first century. On March 25th, 1959, our supreme leader said the following on the subject: “Unfortunately, the problem is that racial discrimination is one of the most difficult and complicated issues the Revolution must face. . . . It may be the most difficult thing of all before us; it may be the greatest of all the injustices with which we have been faced; it is a problem that requires us to put an end to the injustice that racial discrimination is, even if it seems impossible.”