

# Tensions in Future Afro-Cuban Thought?

## Useful notes for analyzing an old and current problem

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The responsibility to define the trajectory of Afro-Cuban thinking about and by those of us who are interested in the subject can no longer be put off.

This thinking's development and even its existence have languished in ignorance and/or denial for decades. Its de facto illegalization forced it to go underground and reveal itself beyond its confines ('confines' refers to the island's boundaries).

With time, a tendency to deal with issues of Afro-Cubanness as a part of something called "folklore" (a questionable misnomer) was established.

It would become fashionable to talk and write about Santería or Regla de Ocha-Ifá, and Afro-Cuban religions, in general.

Even now, there persists a negative intentionality in just how honestly the complex problems of Cuba's Afro-descendants are

dealt with, particularly regarding the institutionalized expressions of racism they have to endure. This is fundamental issue that the government has attempted to discuss behind closed doors, a space that excludes any but the most 'impartial' (uncritical) analyses. Given this situation's unsustainability, these actions are only truly meant to please international organizations.

This practice made it difficult for some to develop profound thinking about Afro-Cubanness, particularly many of the people who remained on the island; it also made it nearly impossible for others—particularly younger generations—to think about it succinctly.

In the long run, as in any natural process, ideas about Afro-Cubanness developed by people who are intellectually and/or physically gagged have emerged and become organized. On occasion, some have even been articulated.

Those who tend to articulate these ideas from a subject position still tend to be intellectuals, artists or political activists.

However, articulation among these subjects is marked by more than five decades of pressure, repression, lack of confidence, and politically stimulated apathy and maliciousness. Even so, even this does not always manage to restrict, silence, disable, dehumanize or limit the actions of these subjects.

To Dr. Esteban Morales we owe the first known attempt to define the trajectory of thought about Afro-Cubanness—something very urgent and necessary. Despite the grave importance of this enterprise, his book is rigid and lacking; it presents a distorted and distorting perspective, which is always dangerous, particularly in the case so complex and with such a multilayered a reality.

Professor Morales's mapping of this trajectory reveals a simplicity often found in "analytic" outlines produced by "organic" intellectuals seemingly accustomed to subsisting in the confined parameters of the Cold War. His reductionist classifications and concepts are filled with anxieties; the work itself is anxiety producing. Following a 'cops-n-robbers' film approach, this outline is filled with binary oppositions: "good" and "bad," "revolutionaries" and "counterrevolutionaries," "patriots" and "enemy agents."

This outline's underpinnings reveal a rhetoric that is simultaneously aimed at "allies," to please them, and warn the "enemies," "enemies" whose natural existence is not what's important. It doesn't matter, though, because they are presented as important. This presupposes that the "enemy" has been surreptitiously constructed, or will be, even if it must be invented. This has been the case quite often among Cubans.

Among other things, foundational rhetoric of outlines such as this creates enemies and annihilates friends—or doesn't make any, at least. It is a rhetoric anchored to the whims of those who monopolize and intend to hold on to power indefinitely. Likewise, it is not an intellectual or political position that affords an opportunity to dialogue and seek consensus. For the same reason, it is not a foundation upon which to support one's self to advance the search for and elaboration of an urgent, new, social pact, one that needs to be negotiated by all parties.

Finally, it is a "listen-and-take-orders" rhetoric, nothing more. One must examine its habitually threatening form and tone. According to its precepts, those of us who do not have any alternative but to be quiet and reserved must obey and fulfill its mandates. That is the oppressively paternalistic idea present in the often expressed sentiment expressed by seniors, "those who want the very best" for the youngest and also know how to achieve it." In other words, impose it.

The violence expressed in this and other more or less similar rhetoric reflects an urgent need to deconstruct the violent and schematic, political culture that has been shaping us into a nation—one reason to encourage and promote Afro-Cuban thought and thinking about it.

Despite timid attempts, this encouragement has been going on at many levels and has used many resources, from the most intellectual to the most practical, which depends on one's sense of reality. Myriad voices express themselves this way, from a wide array of positions.

That diversity is what gives and makes this phenomenon important. At the very least, each voice and position has its *raison d'être*; each and every one of them has a right to ex-

ist. It's quite another thing if they earn legitimacy or not, in accordance with their sense of reality. What no one has is the right to create a monopoly via a truth that, like all truths, is multifaceted; the degree to which it is accepted is also always varied and can be mediated.

It is easier to assume heterogeneity when intellectually considering Afro-Cubanness, and though about it, in general, when we ignore any (false) notion of politically feared and demanded and/or naively accepted "unanimity."

This is a "unanimity" that has enforced silence and hypocrisy, and has not considered conversation or opposition. This "unanimity" is always ready to be adulated, not criticized, unless the maximum leader published it in his newspapers. Yet, he would never initiate a true process "to rectify the errors."

An acknowledgment of a diversity of thought and positions among Afro-Cuban intellectuals and the topics that directly concern them due to their ethno-racial or other kind of group membership, and even of their right to not think or act along these lines, is important. Important, too, is an acknowledgment of the diversity of thinking and positions on Afro-Cubanness. All this is a necessary part of the dynamics of inevitable and urgent, endogenous and exogenous transformations for Cuba.

Concomitantly, recognition of this heterogeneity is part of the dynamics of change for the entire, Afro-descendant population. This is true no matter how timid the heterogeneity, or how manipulated it is by those in power, those who try to severely limit it. The national and transnational transformations that go with the macro- and micro-level dynamic of changes that are taking place now also imply a change in mentalities. This can be seen in cultural products called "border" phenomena, as well as in the cultural, political,

economic and social products of transnationalization. These last ones both traverse and are traversed by the aforementioned concepts.

To deny this reality is not going to save us from having to live through it. Limitedly, we are already experiencing this reality. Given this scenario, what is most important for the parties involved in the movement is to 'recognize' the diversity; the same could be said about the development of Afro-Cubanness and thought about it. Because it is beneficial to these parties, it will also be good for the nation-under-construction that we are.

In this atmosphere, in which a multiplicity of voices and positions is acknowledged, it will be important to get beyond the moment when our (exiled, emigrated and/or banished) Afro-Diaspora is denied, regardless its politics.

Acknowledging the need to continue to hear from exponents of the African Diaspora about the race problem is just as important. Their pronouncements on the subject and desire to deal with it and to share their thoughts with their countrymen and women on the island are responsible for Cuba's leaders acknowledgment of the problem.

A realistic attempt to define the trajectory of Afro-Cuban thought about Afro-Cubanness should not include or allow any purposeful omissions. Neither should it permit ideological, ethno-racial, geographic or generational ones, as has been the case till now.

An ample bibliography on the Afro problem, in general, has been produced outside of Cuba. It is time for us in Cuba to have access to it without having to violate laws to do so, or having this print information taken away from us when we bring it into Cuba from abroad or when it has been mailed to us.

Works by people like the Castellanos brothers, Lydia Cabrera, Carlos Moore and

Juan F. Benemelis, and of so many other who have persistently dealt with the subject while in exile or after having been banished should be available and promoted in the country of their birth, a homeland they have never rejected or denied. The journal *ISLAS*, which focuses on issues of Afro-Cubanness, should not have to circulate in Cuba on a semi-clandestine basis. Cuba is precisely where its content is of greatest interest, and where it could most powerfully contribute.

The intellectual production of those of us in Cuba who deal with the subject should be known throughout Cuba—its place of origin—independently of whether people like what it says. Recent workshops on Afro-Cubanness and anti-black discrimination among Cubans deserve to be greatly promoted. People from all over should attend them, so that they can have an open and honest conversation.

The Cuban people has as much right to freely express themselves, have access to the media, the governmental José Antonio Aponte Commission and the officious *Cofradía de la Negritud* as do the oppositionist members of the Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration, the Afro-Cuban Foundation and the Juan Gualberto Gómez Movement for Racial Integration.

In a civil society that is battling to become independent, we must be psychological-

ly prepared to accept the legitimacy of every new group (organized around any social issue or interest) that crops up. Instead of eliminating them, they should be encouraged and helped to function; this would be of benefit for our weakened social fabric.

The removal of institutionalized Afro-Cubans for expressing their ideas publicly and with clarity should cause us shame and provoke us to reject the action, even if we don't agree with what was said. The accusation of those who express themselves on the subject of "wanting their fifteen minutes of fame" should be rejected by all of us.

Unfortunately, this is not what happens.

The time to articulate an agenda to discuss problems affecting Afro-descendants in Cuba—something that should be of interest to the entire nation—has come. It is now.

Yet, this cannot happen so long as the tensions, marginalization and exclusion are continued (purposefully or not). It cannot happen so long as we insist on creating "enemies," even amongst ourselves. Neither can it happen so long as narcissism and a selfish interest reign (receiving personal benefits in order to assuage the traumatic effects of institutionalized, discriminatory practices of all sorts), or if motives or solely ethno-racial.