Pens as Swords

Criticisms of practices of African origin in 19th century Cuban culture

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In his transcendental work *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (1940), Fernando Ortiz defines the concept of "transculturation" as opposed to acculturation.[1] His friend, the anthropologist of Polish origin Bronislaw Malinowski, argued in his introduction to the work that the latter term had to be changed, being saddled as it was by heavy moral significance. It presumed a process of disindividualization of the subject (whether he be immigrant or of an ethnicity other than European), under the pretext that Western culture is superior to any other. According to Malinowski, "The immigrant has to "acculturate"; just as so must the natives, pagans and infidels, barbarians or savages who 'benefit' from being subjected to our Great Western Culture".[2]

Writing while the Nazis were using the concept of race as a weapon in the midst of World War II, Fernando Ortiz defines Cuban society as a "stew" of cultures to which each ingredient contributes different flavors and characteristics. Even though Ortiz, the ethnographer, does detail in his book the social and historic conditions that brought Cuba to what it was then, he does not care that much about the process that brought about this mix as he cared about the final product. In the following pages, I propose to highlight how the Creole literary and political elite of the XIX Century saw this process and tried to influence it, by repeatedly attempting to separate from the components of its culture what it considered alien. That is, how it relied upon Catholic values, morality and European culture in its attempt to control and design social relations, always believing that the institutions it had inherited from its European ancestors were superior and had to serve as a model to the other ethnicities.

Doing so comported a united effort, at all levels of society: from the political and legal institutions, to the media, the Church and the arts. It involved lawyers, priests, writers and the police, who, under the pretext of purifying the country from exogenous elements, categorized and criticized all they deemed to reflect savagery, barbarism and irrationality inside Cuban society. In literature, this work befell traditionalist and satirical writers, who, through fun making, parody and satire degraded the feelings of those who did not share their ideas, poked fun at them and

predicated a furious didacticism whose purpose was that of culturally "whitening" the country.

No one is better suited to demonstrate this than Luis Victoriano Betancourt (1843-1885). In his articles on the customs of the times, Betancourt dealt with a series of "social problems" that included the participation and cultural practices of blacks in the Cuban society of his day. Betancourt was concerned especially by three issues: first, that young Cubans wasted so much time dancing when they could be doing so many other things; second, that young men learned outrageous movements in houses of ill repute so as to later teach them to young ladies while dancing, "mudding thus the waters they would later drink from"; and finally that this type of dancing was, as it were, "African dancing, with accompanying clarinets and cornets".[3]

Betancourt was bothered by this heretofore unknown mixture of African and European elements in music, and was determined to affect it so as to avoid a societal corruption of values. In his article criticizing dancing, Betancourt adds that in homes where young mixed breed women were employed as maids, they were the ones that taught their masters the outrageous movements that they would later use in dancing. In a dialogue taking place at a party, likely of Betancourt's invention, he has two young men chatting:

"I defer to your opinion: dance and may the world go to pieces! And do not think that someone taught me. I was born dancing."

"Well, I learned from the mulatto girls at home, who, as you well know, sure are dancers. Heck! I should say they have taught me five hundred-thousand ways to dance."

"It is well known that you have benefited from the teachings of those mulatto girls."

"You flatter me". [4]

I should clarify that those who liken themselves with pride to the young mulatto girls are sons of the upper classes, the masters, those who directly or indirectly take advantage of the slaves' labor. To imitate, to learn from and be like their servants was equivalent then, to lowering themselves to the same condition and class. Thus, dancing was the most promiscuous equalizer, leveling a society otherwise rigidly compartmentalized among masters and slaves that was constantly trying to reimpose its limits. An indignant Betancourt puts the matter to an end with the following phrase: "The ancient Romans asked for bread and circus; the sons of Spain ask for bread and bulls; we ask for bread and *danzón*."[5]

Betancourt was not alone in ascribing to this thesis. Eduardo Ezponda, in his poem "*The Cuban Dance*" also called attention to the fact that Cuban dancing, with its mix of European and African elements, was an incentive to "africanize" the country, a corrupting element of society and a drug for its inhabitants. This is what Ezponda wrote:

Like Ethiopians to the beating of the drums
On Sunday they suspend all of their chores
Forgetting thus their misery and concerns,

"Los Negros Curros" [Black Cuban Curros]. Víctor Patricio de Landaluze.

They dance content while singing of their loves.
With the children of Gambia and Niger
The ones that now belabor under us
Africa her music has brought us
Making of this dancing great pleasure.
Dancing that now causes much distress
As it diverts our morals from their way
Our feelings and energy dead lay
As human dignity and virtues do degress.
Of one song, monotonous, inert,
Is Cuban dance in this the harmony,
Of a fun loving people the only poetry,
The opium it enjoys no more alert.[6]

Beyond pointing out the pernicious influence of this "African" dancing upon Creole culture, Betancourt criticizes the "Mangrove" vocabulary that was becoming more and more popular among the youth of the island. In the same chronicle on dancing, he invites the reader to listen in once more upon a conversation among the youth. He writes, "Let's listen to their empty thoughts and Mangrove slang".[7]

According to Esteban Pichardo, around the XIX Century, the Mangrove was an area along the Havana coast, close to the bay and outside of the city walls. It included the Jesús María neighborhood. Within it resided, in extremely poor conditions, blacks known as *curros*. According to Pichardo, the *curro* embodied a person characterized "by his dress fashion and way of talking".[8] So, in his work about dancing, Betancourt condemns the fact that young people, at parties, should speak in a language akin to these blacks' and that, by so doing, "africanized" society. Words he puts in the mouths of these youngsters include *"regustado", "caidita", "parada", "riñón soté", "malatoba", "veterana", "muy riquísimo", "sofocaditas" and "el cerbeceo"*. These were all words not included in the dictionary, grammatically incorrect phrases or slang typical of this group. Pichardo, for example, believed that the term "*sofocar*" was a corruption of the word "*sufocar*" (to suffocate). Young people used it to indicate that girls were rendered breathless by the dancing.[9]

Naturally, between the voluptuous music and all the empty talking, Cuban youth was not moving forward, but rather heading backwards. It was becoming dangerously homogenized: not in the way described by Ortiz, rather against the wishes of a cultural and political elite that saw in this process a violent cultural act to the detriment of European bred culture. Consequently, African religion with its "amoral" practices and vocabulary were

things that needed to be fought against, so as to prevent their evil from expanding. It is not strange then that the language of these defenders of traditional mores would be warrior-like, of those who want to do away with evil at all costs. It was imperative to do as the revolutionaries had done, except this time they would wield the pen rather than the sword.

Luis Victoriano Betancourt was, in fact, the most prestigious literary figure to rise-up with the pro-independence Creoles in the war of 1868. He stayed at their side until the end of the conflict, in 1878. While underground, as the lawyer by profession that he was, he held important posts, such as that of President of the Court Martial, for instance, as well as those of representative, secretary and president of the House of Representatives of the Republic in Arms. Emilio Roig de Leuchsenreing (1889-1964), in his study on the traditional literature of Havana during the XVIII and XIX Centuries, used this martial metaphor and affirmed that these writers were all "worthy of applause and gratitude for their courageous collaboration that by their deeds they lent to the strife for political liberty and the moral regeneration of their people".[10]

But what kind of "moral regeneration" are we speaking about? For Roig de Leuchsenreing, the first historian of Havana, the task undertaken by these chroniclers had been as important as that of those who had fought for independence "with the force of arms".[11] He doesn't pause to reflect, however, that many of these criticisms were directed at blacks, whose cultural practices had as much a right to exist as those of the whites, and that these criticisms were done from the socio-hegemonic political stance of the colonialists, compelled to maintain traditions and reproduce parameters established by their ancestors. In the end, none of these social commentators who so criticized the Afro-Cuban dances and religion achieved their goal. For this reason, today Cuba enjoys one of the richest religious and cultural patrimonies the world over. They didn't understand that it was impossible to stop cultural development and place obstacles along its way and that on the contrary, it responds to what is appropriate for society at a given moment: regardless of what a particular ethnic group would like to prescribe, exclude or legitimize through its reflective and institutional practices.

Betancourt, however, finds it ever more urgent to confront his readers with a contorted image of their sons. Show them how, by imitating the gestures, the practices, the vocabulary and the dress of blacks, they contributed to exalting the latters' ways while denigrating their own. This is why Betancourt criticizes two white youth who are planning to dress up as "black *curros*" for the following ball. The passage reads as follow:

"Of black *curro*, man; that's the most decent. It's going to cost me more than a pretty penny without counting the golden shoe clasps. But I'm gonna have a wild time; I have already learned some steps nobody else knows. Do you remember last year at the Petacas' girls house, the one that went:

I am Patoco da black man
In the good times'n da bad
I got good beat in da head
I jump, dance and play all I can?

"I am also going as a black *curro*, I am going to learn the steps of María Liboria, the black woman, and I am going to dance the rumba that is lots of fun. Is there a better dance than that, man?".[12]

Once again Betancourt refers to the black *curros* as "decent" while intending the reader to view them otherwise, and has the young men about to have a "wild time" playing with the double entendre. They were going to have a great time but as savages. Once again the concept of "reverse" imitation is what concerned the author because it upended the traditional mores of Havana society. Consequently, in addition to the "Mangrove language" he italicizes throughout his work so as to make it easier for the reader to recognize it, Betancourt adds these kinds of scenes that illustrate, as a story, that which he is trying to explain. They are fictional scenes that clarify, like parables, the disintegration of the values of his day, and compel the reader (civil servant or family head) to act quickly and decisively.

Beyond criticizing the dance and slang of African origin, Betancourt pauses to talk about the non-Catholic religious practices of those who cured the "evil eye" and who called themselves "medicine men". This city author highlights how, in the countryside, the peasants were superstitious and ignorant; hence he has another of his fictional characters state, "around here there are more than ten individuals, both black and white, who cure the 'evil eye' and call themselves witch-doctors".[13] Even the deacon of the village church, he says, claimed that an old black woman had foreseen his evil eye and had cured him of it by tracing a cross with ashes over his navel, giving him a "concoction of blessed palm fronds following a special prayer to Saint Luis Beltrán".[14]

It's impossible not to notice this kind of negative opinion of medicine men, the police harassments, the church sermons against superstitions and the work of the State and its law enforcement against religious groups and organizations of mutual aid of African descent as were the *ñáñigos*. So much so that in 1866, right about the time Betancourt's chronicles were being published, Antonio Bachiller y Morales, one of the most important intellectuals of the colonial age, publishes his first essay to "witch-doctors" with the objective of fixing in the mind of the citizens of Havana an inveterate fear of blacks.[15]

According to Havana police inspector José Trujillo y Monagas who in 1882 published the voluminous *Los criminales de Cuba,* (Criminals of Cuba) arrests of *ñáñigos* were carried out periodically throughout the island. In 1872, he says, Ricardo Aguabella was sentenced to a 30 days prison term for having been caught with others "singing and dancing in the *ñáñigo* style,"[16] thus indicating that the educated classes of Havana also shared in these concerns and criticized their activities in magazines.

In the following decade, Bachiller y Morales would publish two more articles related to the religious beliefs of blacks in

Cuba, the United States and Haiti, in two New York based magazines: *El Mundo Nuevo* (The New World) and *América Ilustrada* (Illustrated America). The first of these articles is titled *Los cabildos, los ñañigos -los obis, y los sectarios del 'voudismo'* (The sects, the *ñañigos*, the zombies and the voodoo practitioners); and the second *El profeta Bobo* (A prophet named Bobo). Furthermore, when, in 1881 *Tipos y costumbres de la isla de Cuba* (Types and mores of the island of Cuba) is published with illustrations by Victor Landaluze, the book includes another article written by Enrique Fernández de Carillo titled *El ñáñigo,* and another one by Bachiller touching upon the same subject. According to Carrillo "Over the last few years whites are also admitted [in its organization],"[17] which causes him to ask: "How, by what means are whites admitted in the world of the *ñáñigos*? …love of the things of the flesh is the tie that binds them, a disorderly appetite is the yoke that pulls them… *Ñáñigo* witchcraft seeks the degradation of a superior race, so as to exalt the inferior ones… The *ñáñigo* is apolitical. It aspires at a meshing of the Caucasian race with the African race, but by absorption of the former by the latter".[18] Meanwhile, in the same book, in an article titled *Ogaño y Antaño,* (Today and long ago) Bachiller y Morales gave this answer to a query by an interlocutor from Havana: "The *ñáñigos* today… Do you think we have moved forward? –Not exactly forward except in that the media unanimously condemn them".[19]

All this indicates that, instead of highlighting the value of this mutual aid society, created precisely out of the conditions of social inequities in which Cuban blacks lived in the XIX Century, these critics preferred to see how it regressed the country, corrupted its institutions, was a danger to the "civilization" of a superior race and caused, with its mixings, the disintegration of colonial hierarchies.

In his book chockfull of police raids, José Trujillo y Monagas, provides a detailed description of the *ñáñigos*, "their history, their practices, their language", all demonstrating, he claimed, that they represented a "crude superstition" and "a very rudimentary and retrograde step on the ladder of civilization".[20] Moreover, one of the main reasons given by the newspaper *La Correspondencia de Cuba* to demonize them was that they reproduced "African regions … in the bosom of the cultured society in which they now lived".[21] They were also accused of admitting among them all sort of marginalized subjects: thieves, jail fugitives, bums and bandits. In addition, according to Monagas, among arrested *ñañigos* there were army officers and municipal fire fighters, suggesting that their ranks included white people.

Just as with the dances and the Mangrove slang, the crux of the matter had nothing to do with *ñañigos* actually killing those who didn't play their "game", but that they represented a step backward from the perspective of a sector of society that saw itself as "civilized" and looked upon any racial or cultural blending with horror. Logically, the fear of these chroniclers pertains to the virtual loss of their

power, the Creole culture as they knew it. It was a matter of arm wrestling the others to adapting to them, leaving their barbaric, violent and savage ways and adopting the values of the "great Western civilization" referred to by Malinowski.

To summarize and in conclusion, Cuban traditionalists write with the objective of pointing out and doing away with the "evil" customs and the exogenous elements that contaminate the city. Some of them are clearly of the Afro-Cuban culture: dances, slangs and the religion of the *ñáñig*os. Adoption of any of these cultural traits by the white community reflected setbacks and breakdowns, leaving no other option than to confront this evil quickly and extirpate it from its roots.

Betancourt, as his father before him, does precisely so. He trades his rifle for the pen and with it tries to end social practices he sees as repugnant. He pokes fun at those who don't think alike and lifts his voice with the certainty and satisfaction of one who is doing something for the good of his country. His critique must be read as a form of eugenics, as a way of re-designing the city from the ground up, molding a type of subject according to his ideology: white, Catholic and heterosexual. Anything outside this triad was dispensable.

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