

# Of the cream, the chocolate and the café latte

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**T**he Totí is a very common bird in Cuba. It is “of small size and very black color”, according to the description provided by Don Fernando Ortiz in the *Nuevo Catauro de Cubanismos*, Havana, 1974. The wise Ortiz also pointed out that “the black man offensively and without a doubt is called a Totí because of his blackness like the bird.”

Ortiz explains that this little bird “caused so much damage by eating grains... and even eating the sugar... that in the old times, it was common to place a slave at the sugar mills for the purpose of scaring away the voracious and daring Totí birds.” There is an old saying, which is true, that “the Totí is to blame” when something happens. Also, the Totí is a clear allusion to “the black man” who always ends up getting the short end of the stick. He always pays the price of the blame for being the Totí.

Upon scrutinizing the explanation contained in the *Nuevo Catauro de Cubanismos*, we see that the one who took care of the grains and sugar was a slave, who had to look after what he was missing. Could it be that the slave stole what the Totí could not take and, in the presence the foreman and master, blamed the Totí, a bird known for stealing? This is very possible because such deception was necessary to survive slave life.

Recently, I heard a young white man tell a story of how he got out of getting a ticket. He

said that behind him there were two young black men on a bike carrying something in a box. The box drew the attention of the officer, who made them stop. He, of course, searched them and asked each for their identification. The officer found that the box was empty. The young men were only transporting air in the box. On the other hand, the storyteller was transporting a forbidden load!

You can't judge a book by its cover. But, the dark skin and about twenty years have configured the image the police have about blacks as one of delinquent tendency.

A mixed, professional woman, sympathetic to the beliefs of the Island's government, angrily expressed to me that her adolescent son was placed under arrest because he did not have his identification card! The police arrested him at his front door and took him to the police station. Clearly, the mother was justified in her anger when she went to pick him up. She complained at the police station where they had taken him. After demanding the apologies they were entitled to, she returned home with her son. Episodes such as this are not uncommon in Cuba.

The majority of those who compose the economically destitute segment of Cuba are the black and mixed populations. A low percentage of these populations are employed in the tourism sector or in key leadership posi-

tions. On the other hand, because they have access to only a few positions in the labor sectors this causes them to choose informal routes to solve their economic problems. The larger percentages of those who live in the marginal neighborhoods are black and mixed people.

The possibilities of receiving help from abroad, through wire transfers, are also low for blacks and mixed habitants. Generally, emigration to the United States (U.S.) has been and is proportionally greater for whites or individuals whose degree of dark skin allows them to be considered white. As a result, wire transfers sent from the U.S., where the greatest number of wire transfers comes from, benefit whites in much greater proportions than blacks. However, informal routes to address the habitants' economic problems have not been absent. A large number of black and mixed women have immigrated to other countries thanks to marriages or intimate relationships with men of European origin.

For some black and mixed women in Cuba, the image of the black man has been belittled in relation to a stable future. Given this circumstance, the increase of interracial relationships is not strange.

A friend, whom I admire for the grace with which he decorates the intelligence of his expositions, synthesized the situation in two concise sentences: "the whites of the Vedado, a Havana neighborhood, do not accept the human genome" and "Western Union is a cosmic word for the majority of blacks in Cuba because they do not receive wire transfers."

On behalf of the Cuban government, the only concrete response to the racial situation on the Island is that "since 1959, the laws have established racial equality and condemned racial discrimination". Even a figure as important as Raul Castro, Cuban Vice-President, has expressed critical points of view that reflect a closer view of reality and the need

to find immediate solutions, especially in the case of black and mixed women.

Having survived the whitening of the population of the Island that lashed at the conscience and the dreams of the Cuban rulers since 1902, the last statistics published in Cuba show that in a population of almost 12 million people<sup>1</sup>, 66% are whites, 12% are blacks and 21.9% are mixed (mulattos). This is quite opposite to what the statistics were at the beginning of the 19th century, when blacks were approximately 46% of the population.

Between 1880 and 1930, the white immigration to Cuba was voluntary and consciously favored. One million Spanish people immigrated to the Island during that period of time, in addition to the other thousands who represented other different nationalities. Nowadays, the censuses reflect an individual's registered skin color. According to information provided by experts, census workers conduct visual appraisals and are the ones who indicate an individual's racial group. In some cases, this is based on the appeal to his/her subjectivity and "sight."

The Cuban population definitely has a tendency towards cross-breeding. Changes in the racial composition of the Island should be taken into account in the development of future social and political scenes. Why not? Any project that does not include the interests and hopes of these individuals—the new Cubans of the 21st century—will move away from contributing decisive solutions in the future.

#### NOTE

1- According to facts provided by the 1981 Census of Population and Housing. (Editor's Note)

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