

# Message from Cuba to African-American Intellectuals and Artists

A Yoruba proverb states: "The lie may run for a year, the truth will catch up with it one day." Although the most intolerant political circles and the most powerful mass media have tried to impose a distorted image of contemporary Cuban society on American public opinion for a long time, one way or another, in the end, a path to reality opens up.

We are sure that's the way it will happen when the arguments refuting those deceitful statements about our society contained in a document circulated on December 1st in the name of a group of African-American intellectuals and leaders are considered.

To say that among us there is a "callous disregard" for black Cubans, that they are denied "civil liberties on the basis of race," and to insist that "the unwarranted and brutal harassment of black citizens in Cuba who are defending their civil rights cease" would seem delirious speculation but for what lays behind those fictions: the malicious intent of adding respectable voices from the Afro-American community to the anti-Cuban campaign that attempts to undermine our sovereignty and identity.

If the Cuba of these times was that racist nation they wanted to invent, its citizens would not have contributed massively to the liberation of the African people. More than 350,000 Cuban volunteers fought alongside their brothers of Africa against Colonialism. More than 2,000 fighters from the Island fell in the lands of that Continent.

A personality of undisputed worldwide relevance, Nelson Mandela, has recognized the role of those volunteers in the definitive defeat of the infamous Apartheid regime.

From Africa we brought back only the remains of our dead. Cuba has over there in that continent no property, no bank, no mines, no oil wells.

If the Cuba of today were to feel such disrespect for Blacks, more than 35,000 African youth would not have been trained in our schools over the past 40 years, nor would 2,600 young people from some 30 African nations be studying right now in our universities.

A people sick with racism would refuse to collaborate in the training of medical doctors and other human resources in health care at the Schools of Medical Sciences founded in Guinea Bissau, Equatorial Guinea, Gambia, and Eritrea. They would have turned their back on the health assistance programs that have saved thousands of lives in Latin America and the Caribbean, where the African Diaspora is significant, and they would have not provided services to the more than 20,000 Haitians and English speaking Afro-Caribbeans who have recovered their eyesight through surgical operations performed in our country, free of charge.

It is very probable that the majority of those who signed the document aren't aware that when the City of New Orleans was devastated by Hurricane Katrina, dozens of Cuban

medical doctors and paramedics volunteered to provide help to storm victims in a humanitarian gesture that received no response from the American authorities.

Perhaps they also ignore how, from the earliest days following the popular victory of 1959, the institutional and legal bases that sustained a racist society were dismantled.

The Cuban Revolution found in 1959 a critical situation within the majority of the population. Cubans of African descent, who were among the victims that suffered most from the neo-colonial model that existed here, immediately benefited from the battle carried out by the Revolution which put an end to all forms of exclusion, including the fierce racism that characterized Cuba during those years.

Cuba's policy against any form of discrimination and in favor of equality has Constitutional backing, found explicitly in the chapters of the Cuban Constitution that refer to the essential political, social and economic foundations of the State, and about the rights, obligations, and guarantees of its citizens. These constitutional rights, as well as the mechanisms and means to uphold them and restore legality after any violation, are guaranteed by means of very precise complementary legislation.

As never before in the history of our nation, black and *mestizo* Cubans have found opportunities for social and personal development in transformative processes that have been ongoing for the past half a century. These opportunities are conveyed through policies and programs that made possible the initiation of what Cuban Anthropologist Don Fernando Ortiz called the non-deferrable integration phase of Cuban society.

This is a process, we know, that is not exempt from conflicts and contradictions in which inherited social disadvantages and

deeply-rooted prejudices play an important role.

Six years ago, Fidel Castro, in a dialog that took place in Havana with Cuban and foreign teachers, commented how "even in societies like Cuba, that arose from a radical social revolution where the people had reached full and total legal equality and a level of revolutionary education that threw down the subjective component of discrimination, it still exists in another form." He described it as objective discrimination, a phenomenon associated with poverty and a historical monopoly on knowledge.

Whoever observes daily life anywhere in the country will be able to see how a sustained effort is underway to bring an end to the factors that provide the conditions for that situation through new programs oriented towards eliminating any social disadvantage.

African-American intellectuals must know how their Cuban colleagues have dealt with these topics and promote actions from the prominent position they hold in civil society.

Some of the programs we have referenced came into being as a result of the debates that took place in 1998 during the VI Congress of the Cuban Association of Writers and Artists (UNEAC), in an open and sincere dialog with the State's highest authorities and then-President Fidel Castro.

It should be remembered that UNEAC, which brings together the vanguard of Cuba's intellectual and artistic movement, had as its President and founder, a black poet, Nicolas Guillen, one of the most important poets in the Spanish language during the 20th century, an active fighter against racial discrimination, and a personal friend of Langston Hughes and Paul Robeson.

Within UNEAC, an organization that never turned its back on these problems, a permanent Committee has been created to fight

against any remains of discrimination and racial prejudices from a cultural perspective.

In a racist country it would be inconceivable to found and operate institutions like the House of Africa, the Fernando Ortiz Foundation, the House of the Caribbean in Santiago de Cuba, the Center of Caribbean Studies of the House of the Americas, and the National Institute of Anthropology, which, among others, conducts in-depth research into the African legacy in our culture and the interracial relations in our country.

Likewise, artistic organizations and entities such as the Conjunto Folclórico Nacional, the Ballet Folclórico de Camagüey, or the Conjunto Folclórico de Oriente would not have received support and the most widespread social recognition.

The Museum of the Slave Route would not have existed. The first of its kind in Latin America and the Caribbean, the Museum is one of the first results of Cuba's commitment to the UNESCO-sponsored program to vindicate the contribution made by Africans forcibly removed from their lands of origin and brought to elsewhere where they helped forge new identities.

If racial hatred was a predominant trend in our society, the celebration of the 100th Anniversary of the founding of the Partido Independiente de Color would have been nothing but a rhetorical gesture. The celebration was based on recovering the historical memory of that stage of struggle and of the aspirations of the Cuban people for their rights and liberation from all forms of domination.

Genuine bearers of traditional music culture much appreciated by the American public like Los Muñequitos de Matanzas, Yoruba Andabo, and Clave y Guaguancó would be working as parking lot attendants, shoe shiners, and domestic laborers were their extraordinary values not recognized.

A racist society would not have committed itself so deeply to translating and publishing hundreds of literary works by African and Afro-Caribbean authors. On one of his visits to Cuba, the Nigerian Nobel Prize Laureate Wole Soyinka declared: "It is difficult to find any other place in the Western Hemisphere where the eagerness to learn about African writers attracts the interest of academic institutions, as I have seen here."

Cuban artists and intellectuals are thankful for the solidarity, the comprehension and the respect many Afro-American personalities have shown towards the Cuban reality during the last half century. We have never asked them to share our political ideas, nor have we put conditions on the dialog based on any type of support or backing. From a most basic sense of ethics, we respect their points of view.

Perhaps it would be opportune for those who signed the declaration we are commenting on to listen, without prejudice, to these criteria. We are sure that by doing so, as the Yoruba saying proclaims: "truth will have its day."

Havana, December 3, 2009

Nancy Morejón, Poet and Essayist

Miguel Barnet, Poet and Anthropologist

Esteban Morales, Political Scientist and Essayist

Eduardo Roca (Choco), Artist

Heriberto Feraudy, Historian and Essayist

Rogelio Martínez Furé, Africanist

Pedro de la Hoz, Journalist and Essayist

Fernando Martínez Heredia, Sociologist y Essayist

Omara Portuondo, Artist