

The Rebellion of the Independents of Color: Things that Need Clarification

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A while back, I read in an old colonial-era newspaper, the *Diario de la Marina*, the following ad: “Will exchange young black girl for sewing machine.” This type of advertisement was not uncommon in a slavist society. We all know that slaves were animals or things, which is why slavery goes beyond just being racist. Human history contains slaves of all skin colors, and slavers, too, have had different skin pigmentation. Perhaps José Martí’s definition of ‘slavery’ says it all: “the world’s great shame.”

In Cuba, that great shame officially ended in October 1886. The Republic came into being 16 years later, and shortly after that, the *Agrupación Independiente de Color* [Independents of Color Group] was created. It quickly became a political party and participated in the 1908 elections without success. The following year, the Senate approves a Constitutional Amendment presented by Martín Morúa Delgado. It prohibited the existence of parties organized according to race.

Morúa Delgado was a brilliant black man who was linked to Antonio Maceo during the War of Independence. Maceo, a mulatto considered to be the greatest general in Cuban history—who was baptized the Bronze Titan—is seen as one of the most respected and admired national heroes. In Cuba, Morúa Delgado eventually became Chair of the Sen-

ate and Secretary (Minister) of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce under General President José Miguel Gómez. José Manuel Carbonell, Chair of the National Academy of Arts and Letters, called Morúa Delgado a “Cuban lover of liberty and progress for his country.”

Another distinguished mulatto, Juan Gualberto Gómez, a notable journalist quite tied to José Martí, the Apostle of Independence, voted in favor of the Morúa Amendment. The following was written about Juan Gualberto Gómez: “He was passionate, utopian, sentimental; his imagination was filled with ideas about the solitary star, and its anxieties and sufferings. No one has been or ever will be able to strip it from his imagination, nor the ungratefulness and lack of knowledge of his compatriots.”

There are two interesting points about these two men: no one has ever qualified them as ‘blacks’—not for any reason—which is unusual for a country with no lack of highly adept, irreverent people. This says a great deal about the stature they achieved.

In any event, the Independents of Color, led by Evarist Estenoz, a veteran of the War of Independence, started an armed rebellion in the eastern zone of Cuba, in 1912. We are assured that more than three thousand blacks, many of them massacred, died in that ephem-



Founders of the Independent Party of Color

eral rebellion. President José Miguel Gómez unceremoniously squashed them. Ironically enough, many blacks fought on behalf of Gómez in the so-called War of August (1906), which erupted in protest against President Tomás Estrada Palma's reelection intentions, which prompted a second U.S. intervention.

It would always be unfair and risky to come to definite conclusions about an incredibly unfortunate chapter of our nation's history that happened so long ago. Not without having felt their frustrations, shared their desires, felt the despair they did during that painful period.

The Platt Amendment, which was added as an appendix to the Cuban Constitution of 1901, in its Article III, established: "The Government of Cuba consents that the United States may exercise the right to intervene for the preservation of Cuban independence, the maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty, and for discharging the obligations with respect to Cuba imposed by the Treaty of Paris on the United States, now to be assumed and undertaken by the Government of Cuba."

The Republic had recently come into being, and we must assume that the politicians

and capitalist investors, both foreign and domestic, did not want a third U.S. intervention, because it would ruin all their plans. We also have no reason to doubt that their uneasiness about another intervention was not due entirely to totally civic reasons.

If only for this reason, the uprising had little or no chance of succeeding, and this without considering whether or not those in power might have been amused by the fact that members of a race that had been enslaved only 25 years earlier now wanted to forcefully impose their valid or invalid, fair or unjust point of view.

I am in no way in favor of branding individuals for any reason. I don't even agree with putting the term "Afro" before any description of Cuban blacks or mulattoes, particularly in Cuba, where the original inhabitants appear to have left no descendants and, where because it is an island, many generations of its population's ancestors are from other parts of the globe. Nevertheless, I do agree with those who believe that there are still many things that need clarification regarding the Independents of Color's armed rebellion, a century later.