The African Presence in the Caribbean: Some Considerations

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Introduction

The history of the Cuban people is tinged with maroon rebellions, uprisings, and resistance against foreign interference. It is the history of the struggle of nascent peoples that found in their own misfortune and marginality the necessary strength to become nations. In what can be considered a difficult and labyrinthine history, the relationship between popular culture and politics cannot be separated. Rather sententiously, Patrick Jones says in reference to the people of this part of the world that history was preserved through popular culture while discontent was expressed through politics (1978, p. 74).

When talking about the African ethnos, its presence, permanence, and importance in Cuban culture, Fernando Ortiz (1973) defined it through the culinary analogy of the *ajiaco*: a tasty chili sauce. This analogy can also be extended to the Caribbean identity. Through this reference, I attempt to appraise this ingredient in its own right: as the pinch that defines the dish and determines the seasoning, making it a unique meal out of other similar dishes. Such is the case of the American and Caribbean 'meal,' where all our people share a common past that begins with aboriginal presence, proceeds through the period of European colonization, and is characterized by the wailing, pain, and blood triggered on our coasts by the Transatlantic trade. This central fact of ethnic multiplicity that underlies our social ethnos cannot be avoided when carrying out studies on the countries in this area, given that we are the result of a series of cultural mixtures. From the very beginning, our people were not uniform, whether you are talking about the ethnic composition of those that came from Europe to the New World in Colón's caravels to 'discover' and later on to colonize us, those who ravaged Africa through

slave capture, or the large human groups held captive in factories awaiting transportation to uncertain destinations determined by the Transatlantic trade.

Dissimilar nationalities and extremely varied cultures converged, confronted each other, and fused over several centuries. We descended from this interbreeding, heirs of those that arrived and those that were already here, thus forming a synthesis of a new, powerful culture *sui generis* through what Fernando Ortiz referred to as a transcultural process (1978, p. 74).[1] The Africans were present since the very moment of the conquest, because, as Isaac Barreal affirms, "With the first Spaniards arrived the first blacks" (Barreal 1966, p. 20), and when the Indigenous genocide created the necessity for an alternative source of manpower, they brought thousands of Africans in successive waves through the terrible business of the slave trade.

I will not delve into a full-fledged discussion of the slave trade or what it meant for Africa. Rather, I will briefly discuss the fundamental aspects of this people, and how they integrated into their new habitat, becoming part of our culture and an important element in defining the historical subject this side of the Atlantic.

The first thing to consider is that these men and women came to the New World with nothing apart from their memories and traditions. However, even that was not complete, because for the most part, only the youngest and strongest ones were actually shipped away and this set of people did not yet have ample knowledge of their tradition and culture. This can be explained by the fact that many African societies have a stratified socio-cultural set-up that is based on initiation. This means the individual is granted knowledge to certain cultural norms mainly in accordance with their age. With more years comes more knowledge and more experiences. Accordingly, as strong and apt for work as they were, many of the Africans taken to the Americas had different levels of knowledge about their cultures. That is why they fused memories and knowledge in the magnificent act of reconstructing and safeguarding cultures.

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[1] Fernando Ortiz, 1881 – 1969. A pioneer in studying the African presence in Cuban culture and society. His theory of the transcultural developed in his work *Contrapunteo Cubano del Tabaco y el Azúcar* (Ortiz 2002) supposes that, when two cultures are in contact during a long period of time, a new culture will emerge as a result of their interaction. This new culture, on account of having elements from its progenitors, has new elements that result from fusion and exchanges of cultural norms and practices.

In *Les religions africaines au Brésil*: *Contribution à une sociologie des interpénétrations de civilisation*, Roger Bastide aims to explain the theory of memories. According to Bastide, at a certain point in time, because of the diverse ethnicities that comprised the group, its different members combined their memories and their life experiences to create a solid basis upon which they could found a new conception of the world. This led to the creation of a new culture, which included reconstructed myths, rites, cultural ceremonies, music, literature, etc. (Bastide, 1960/1998).

It will be relevant now to discuss the concept of memory as the reservoir of the group and the role it plays in this complex framework. In an attempt to conceptualize, we can say that the word "remembering" is used in reference to a concrete fact. For example, "I remember the beautiful wooden coffee grinder which my grandmother used in grinding freshly roasted coffee." Memory, on the other hand, would extend much further, not only to involve the beautiful coffee grinder, but all the circumstances surrounding it, as well as the connotations that the act of 'grinding coffee' had for my grandmother and her relatives. It can be concluded that memory is, or might be considered, as 'the universe,' that is to say, an archive where a community keeps all of the relevant facts of its history, be they private histories, family histories, daily realities, or experiences pertaining to the community at large. From this premise, it becomes easy to understand how the process of cultural resistance by the so-called subaltern cultures survive and continue to flourish in the face of 'official cultures' in contemporary times.

If we abide by the preceding postulations, we could take as a point of departure Victor Hugo Quintanilla Coro's definition of memory:

> […] as a set of fortuitous and circumstantial knowledge and practices, the product of processes that are subject to constant change of scenes and fields of meaning.
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> Memory, in this sense, constitutes a form of continuous re-definition of all those moral values, beliefs and daily practices that safeguard cultures and communities […] against degradation to which they would be condemned was memory to be limited only to a repetition of traditions or to the preservation of rituals in the face of oblivion (Quintanilla Coro 2004, p. 1).

It is a fact that even today, inherited behavioral norms are repeated and reproduced in the collective unconscious, fixed in an indelible way by memory and converted into a resource for the symbolic matrix and the social ethos of the people.

Secondly, in societies that were not mostly based on writing culture or who preferred oral transmission even when they had a writing culture, knowledge was passed on from one person to another and from one generation to another through the spoken word and was preserved in the memory of those who never renounced their cultural values.

Thirdly, from the very beginning of their long sojourn in the slave ships, the enslaved persons began to tease together the compound framework of memories, fusing elements and cultures with the sole aim of holding onto their African roots. As such, the majority of the African deer, to quote an obvious and precise example from folktales, were replaced as kids, rams, oxen in the Caribbean version. Wild beasts were converted into wild dogs. Accordingly, in the tales of Anansi, whose opponent is the Tiger, the original connotations were lost, giving way to new meanings in the Americas. In the tales about the Spider, there is no real connection between the character of 'Tiger' and the actual African big cat. The *baobab* becomes a *ceiba* and so on. As can be inferred from the above, this system of substitutions and transformations leaves the inner essence of the element in question intact, making it acquire the necessary connotations in order to survive in a completely different cultural environment. Faced with a different social and environmental reality, they began to take whatever was familiar, common or at least known to them to reconstruct the legacy for future generations.

Fourthly, however, there was no unique approach of integration into the nascent national culture. The Creole, a term referring to someone 'born in these lands,' was an individual who, from the onset, felt entitled to occupy the land, being its product. That was not the case with the African. The latter was characterized by a spirit of rebelliousness and a sense of belonging to a distant ancestral Africa underlined by the sentence: "I am not from here, they brought me here." This "They brought me here," this feeling of a land where their presence was not desired despite the fact that their bodies were being utilized, is what kept alive the desire of returning to the continent and the sense of 'belonging' to it. Such sentiments were so deep-rooted that right up to the early 20th century, there existed movements advocating for the return to Africa. Even today, there are still groups claiming their African origin. "They brought me here" is the basis of such a strong cultural resistance that it permeated all levels of society, becoming an important ingredient in our national existence. However, even though the African *ethnos* constituted an integral part of the national culture, the same cannot be said of the African *people*.

Even when we talk about how much we owe to their culture or about the role and integration of their culture in ours, the social treatment of the Black people leaves much to be desired. Prejudices persist and, in some places, openly discriminatory practices are directed against descendants of the African people who are, at this point, undoubtedly citizens of the Caribbean.

We need to define the framework of our reflections with regard to the theme of orality as a basis for an analysis of the American society. Considering Cuba as part of that universe, cultural analogies can be seen as a result of the same historical subject, allowing us to talk about it and, by so doing, understand a part of our history that is not in the books, but in the memory of people. In accordance with this approach, we take as starting points the following concepts: Context, oral literature, and the meaning of the term Caribbean, since these are the central elements in our discussion. Context is the space where the complex process of the surging of the Caribbean crystalized, including its own oral literature that flourishes across the spectrum of traditional popular culture. Above all, context is where history and cultural exchanges between our people took shape, and through the interlacing of its symbolic matrix, it allows us to talk of the Caribbean 'self' and of a common historical subject. The study of orality is generally accepted as an undeniable source of knowledge regarding the history of the Caribbean people. Following this past that is transmitted from generation to generation, leaving perceptible traces in each of them, makes it possible to penetrate deep into the past of humanity[2] itself.

In its general linguistic meaning, *context* is the relation between structures of language and social structures given that utterance acquires meaning in the situation in which it is realized, depending on the personal experiences of the recipient of the message or the linguistic and communicative competence of the participants in the dialogue. We can assume that – linguistically speaking – *context* is a way of organizing which specific properties are determined by the intention behind the communication, the communicated meaning, and the (possible) interpretation made by the recipient. This is due to the fact that the context assumes the laws that govern reality, individualizes meaning, deriving

[2] On the question of orality and its role in history, see the works of David Gonzalez, Paul Thompson, Jan Vansina, and others.

the particular from the general in the message, and highlighting explicit or implicit markers that make communication easier.

In all this, orality is both the general background, as well as the reservoir of the most pertinent aspects of the people's memory and oral literature. This presupposes a specific use of language structures within the framework of a determined social stratum, where decoded messages are exchanged amongst people that are conversant with the same codes. This is independent of the fact that not everyone belongs to a particular social stratum. Orality can establish links between social strata as long as speakers pertaining to the same or different communities share common linkages and connections in their past and present.

The way I use the term *context* in this paper intends to go beyond the linguistic meaning. I take this latitude following the criteria set down by Tatiana Slama-Cazacu, which state that the sign has various nuclei of significance and that only the context delineates meaning. That way we can use the term *context* to express the conception of the universe, *place*, and most importantly, a *space* of convergence of an intercultural encounter that radically changed the conception of 'the world' at a given time in history. There were different ways in which this encounter made an impact. Either way, it left profound effects both on the 'discovered' and their 'discoverers,' giving rise to new concepts, such as 'the colony,' which influenced the geopolitics of the epoch. This legitimizing concept of domination and foreign interference emerges in the Caribbean and America at the very moment the Spaniards arrive. With regard to the term "colonial period" and its semantic connotations, Alejo Carpentier writes that:

> The notion of the colonial period was born with the discovery of America. It is common knowledge that before coming to America, the Spaniards […] the Portuguese had been to the confines of Asia […] but never thought of establishing colonies per se. They created some warehouses for commercial exchange […] negotiated, traded. There were some few cases where they settled with their families, but not enough to qualify them as colonies. On the contrary, Spain did enter America with that notion. And the first great colonizer that enters America after the discovery is the firstborn son of Christopher Columbus […] who founded a small renaissance court in St. Domingo. (Carpentier 1981, p. 23)

The colony was a melting pot of cultures. Most importantly, however, it was the place where a specific group, from a position of power, sought to forcefully impose 'themselves' (their habits or way of life) on another

group. This led to a split into two highly distinct groups of people that would, in time, become designated along 'social ranks.' On the one hand, the colonizers turned into the dominating class, that is, the absolute owners of all rights; on the other hand, the colonized turned into the dominated class, the ones that lack absolute rights. However, they developed a culture that preserved the most precious elements of their 'social being' and later influenced their worldview. They further succeeded in converting this culture into a homogenous culture that ended up assuming the status of national culture in these lands. This is the sociocultural context that will provide the spatiotemporal framework for our reflections.

Obvious examples of how this complex process of cultural resistance and transculturation was accomplished can be found in several manifestations of our culture. In music, for example, even more important than the re-creation of the wooden instruments using metal, was the maintenance of the playing style and the rhythm, so that the sonorous image of African music could be transferred over to the new instruments while retaining the sound of 'ancestral' Africa.

From a religious dimension, given that evangelization was used as the main pretext for the slave trade, Africans used the imagery of Catholicism to keep their own gods intact, making good use of the outward traits of Catholic saints to be able to worship their black gods behind the church altar.

The notions of good and evil in African philosophy fitted well into the paradigm of Heaven and Hell, while what had on the African continent been songs of work now turned into religious songs.

The personification of natural forces became the different *orishas*: all the Catholic hagiographies were connected to the stories of African saints. We have already seen a similar case within oral literature, in the animal tales, where the big cat ended up being converted into the dog *Jivaro*, while the antelopes and impalas were gradually turned into kids and rams. Nothing got lost; on the contrary, the culture was enriched. Through a generous and fertile process of integration and collaboration, a new national and cultural identity was formed that was completely Caribbean.

In all of the examples discussed above, orality was the vehicle of transmission and memory served as the archive of the aforementioned traditions. A major part of the social and hierarchic structure, the internal organization of the Town Council, its dances, songs, etc., were passed on from one generation to another through verbal testimonies such as

in the case of the *Regla Ocha* or *Santería*, the Conga or Palo Monte. Popular religions of African origin preserved their legacy (transmitted by slaves) in the same way. In both cases, orality fulfilled the two fundamental premises in relation to society: preserving the social structure across time and fulfilling the social-environmental adaptation of memory and culture. The process of cultural resistance of Africans in the New World registered success the very moment these men and women, without any weapons other than their memory, established a socio-cultural context in their new environment in which they had been resettled against their will. In that way, oral testimony managed to fulfil a social function: it enabled the preservation of values necessary for the formation of the identity of the peoples of Cuba, fulfilling its function both at the level of the entire group as well as the subgroups, the true custodians of tradition. To understand its function and significance, both in relation to society and as a mere formality, two fundamental aspects must be considered in the analysis: The adaptation of this society to its environment and the preservation of the social structure across time.

Every society has a different contextual notion and the new universe: the Caribbean forced the several ethnic groups that converged in that space to claim, abandon, and reformulate this contextual notion according to the assimilation of linguistic and social structures. Darcy Ribeiro discusses the concept of new people, which implicitly takes a notion of the characterization of these identities in which oral literature also became something new because it harmoniously combined and recast all the constituent elements of the nationalities that converged in the territories. In that way, it incorporated European, African, and autochthonous elements and at least in some Caribbean (and even Asiatic) islands.

Therefore, when talking about Caribbean language, we do not have to refer to the term's limited geographical meaning of territorial space, but to its cultural meaning based on the conceptual frame suggested by René Depestre:

> […] the planet's crossroad 'where' history has created a particularly complex nexus of civilizations where the baroque, the picaresque, the magical, the epic and the marvellous penetrate and undercut each other […] in the political, social, religious and cultural fields. Nevertheless, five centuries of existence offer the necessary perspective for the understanding and identification of a historically constituted family […] The Caribbean […] has been defined for a long time not for its peculiar realities but rather by reference to Europe, Africa and the rest of America. Nowadays it is possible to study, to interpret and to understand the internal system of the inherent

> values of our societies from within. On the global stage, the Caribbean is present with its singular problematic, its music, arts and letters, its crises of identity and the dynamics of its efforts of mutation (1981, p. 16).

Thus, it is not surprising that such a heterogeneous situation was the focal point of a process of cultural resistance, unique in the history of humanity, which made it possible to talk today, at the dawn of the third millennium, about traces, remnants, and costumes. But most importantly, it enabled a discussion about an authentically Caribbean culture that looks a lot like its forebears but has even more of its own authentic self. We have to consider the fact that, at first, this process was not in any way simultaneous in time and space. The colonization of the Caribbean was gradual and involved many different European powers, each leaving its mark on the territory. On the other hand, there was a pre-existing society in the conquered territories on which the newcomers with their corresponding cultures imposed themselves. As Manuel Moreno Fraginals affirms, the culture that took shape in the Caribbean was initially based on African values and patterns, elaborated or transmuted in a complex process of cultural resistance (as discussed above) and then further developed as part of an enduring class struggle. In that struggle, the dominated faced the repressive system of the colonizers who resorted to de-acculturation as a weapon given that they pre-fixed religious models, behavioural rules, dietary habits, housing, and sex regimes for the subdued ethnic groups.

These were the historical and social conditions that underlined, defined, and configured the rise of the Caribbean as a region. Of course, there were many forms of resistance by the slaves against the terrible process of de-acculturation to which they were subjected. From the imperative *not to forget* who they were, where they came from, their tales and traditions, etc., they resisted from within their own culture the impact of the others on them and recreated their African way of life.

When the resistance flourished creatively and the deep anguish of the slave condition fed into the great African dynamism, this produced results, not only in the religious sphere but also with regard to music, dance, language, literature and arts, family and social life, the culinary, and costumes, and general expressions of their wisdom, vivacity, and optimism. All these had an irreversible impact on the mestizo identity of Latin America (Picotti 1998).

With regard to language, there still exist traces of African languages that are subjected to in-depth studies today due to their important lexical contributions to the constitution of American Spanish as well as other Creole languages spoken in the rest of the Caribbean. It is necessary to start by mentioning the emphasis African cultures place on the word, considered something sacred. In addition to the rich and substantial lexicons that we inherited from the African languages, is added the 'mode' of usage. It is effectively the treatment of the word in the African manner that made possible the emergence of mixed languages like the Creole and Papiamento, thus preserving and reconstructing the Garifuna language or the black Caribe. To the extent that if the essence of a language is considered to be the grammatical structure and not the vocabulary, it will be necessary to consider recent neo-African and non-indo-Germanic languages (ibid).

Manuel Zapata Olivella offers interesting reflections as a starting point for a global analysis of the evolution, permanence, and transculturation of language in America, stating that:

> […] Irrespective of whether the colonized ever set out willfully to recreate new idioms or dialects, their sentiments and interpretations inflected in the imposed language a new substratum that in the successive and continuous processes of acculturation and endo-culturation constitutes the most important contribution of Africa.
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> Equally, in the case of Latin America [and the Caribbean], we must underscore the fact that African influence was produced largely in the spoken language given that Africans were systematically deprived of formal learning of the oppressor's language so as to maintain them in a state of illiteracy. The result of this double linguistic repression has been the enrichment of the oral tradition in the communities of African origin. Due to the overcrowded nature of their living spaces and marginalization to which they were subjected, their expressivity could flourish freely without the oppressor's intervention. (Olivella 1988, p. 49)

With this premise that places us fully in a new context of an identity constituted by multiple roots which overlap in an objective reality with an absolutely unequal correlation of forces and power, we can understand the development of Caribbean languages and consequently decipher, from the linguistic point of view, how they originated.

"Kuntu"[3] is the reigning category of African philosophy that presided over the complex process of transculturation which characterized the arrival of these thousands of men and women in the Caribbean. But during that process, as we indicated at the beginning of this paper, African people were not included. Due to their exclusion, the nation that was being formed could afford to incorporate elements of their culture while keeping at bay the bearers of that culture, considered as they were as mere merchandise. They were denied access to culture in a wider sense of the term and were kept in a condition of servitude and inferiority. As a social group, they continued to be relegated and denied access to possibilities of education and integration into the Creole society that was taking shape.

We have to face the fact that slavery did not simply end with the juridical decree that abolished it. Just like the status of servitude, other evils followed four centuries of actual slavery and left racial prejudices intact. The racial antagonism which had hitherto paved the way for discrimination persists even today, in one form or the other. It is against the refusal to recognize black contributions and roles in the constitution of the cultural identity and the historical subject of our culture that scientists and researchers of the calibre of Fernando Ortiz have fought ceaselessly. The refusal to accept the African factor is common to all American and Caribbean mestizo societies. Even today, there are instances where black presence is denied in spite of detailed studies of the cultures and ethnic characteristics of their citizens and unimpeachable proofs of their impact in our material culture.

An urgent and terrible problem faced by people of America today in varying degrees is that of denying the African presence as a subject and a component of American history. This is a legacy left by four centuries of slavery and slave trade which even the 20th century with all its scientific advances and great ideological changes has not been able to erase. A good example of this deplorable reality is the more than 40-year old Cuban Revolution which, despite having created a new generation of open-minded citizens and built a society in which (at least from state perspective) people have full access to education and culture, we can still find personal attitudes that, time after time, blatantly portray vestiges of racial prejudice. It is ironic that even with all the opportunities that a

[3] The African philosophy establishes four main categories: Muntu, man; Kuntu, way; Kintu, animals; bintu for things, about this, see: J. Jhans el Muntu

radical process like the Cuban Revolution has yielded, the country still faces similar racial issues as in the pseudo-republican epoch when there was little access to education and culture.

It is true that the clarion call from Yara and Cespedes' heroic gesture that granted liberty to the slaves marked a new dawn for Cuba. People began to respect each other, and there was no more the question of the color bar which gave way to equality based on human blood. Participants in the war efforts took up positions in former palenques – the free towns for escaped slaves – and military life converted each and every one into soldiers such that at the turn of the 19th century one could say to the other, "You were born here and as for me, they brought me here: but blood, pain, and war made us one."

The cultures of America, of which Cuba is no exception, are permeated by this ingredient. Notice that I use the term mestizo in this paper not with regard to its racial dimension, but rather to its connotation of mixture and melting pot where knowledge and idioms of many peoples have fused: those that were here, those that came here by their own volition to forge a different world, as well as those that were brought here against their will, chained and made inferior by their captors who tried desperately to rid them of their human condition of being substantial ingredients in this dish, the ajiaco of Cuban culture.

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