

Cuba - Afro-Cubans

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Profile

Since 1989 and the so-called 'special period in peacetime', statistics and analysis concerning social trends in Cuba have been almost unavailable. This compounds a more long-standing problem of information concerning race relations and minorities in the island. An objective assessment of the situation of Afro-Cubans remains problematic due to scant records and a paucity of systematic studies both pre- and post-revolution.

Estimates of the percentage of people of African descent in the Cuban population vary enormously, ranging from 33.9 per cent to 62 per cent. This is partly a question of self-perception, as census figures are based on how Cubans define themselves.

As in many Latin American and Caribbean countries, there is also a large 'mulatto' or ethnically mixed population, and colour, class and social status are closely interlinked. Few Cubans are either 'pure' white or black. Definitions of 'colour' are as much the result of social criteria as of somatic classification. Afro-Cubans are most prevalent in the eastern part of the island and in districts of Havana.

Taking all of this into consideration, the fact that there has been a significant exodus of 'white' Cubans from the island means that Afro-Cubans have now come to represent a larger proportion of the overall population and are now thought to constitute closer to 70 per cent of the total.

Historical context

Early colonial

The first enslaved Africans were taken to Cuba in 1513. Many of these first Africans were forced to work in the mines of Cuba as replacements for the rapidly disappearing enslaved indigenous Taino-Arawak labourers. The first large groups of Africans to work underground entered from 1520 onwards. As in nearby Hispaniola maroonage started from the very earliest period.

The first recorded uprising of enslaved Africans in Cuba took place in 1533 at the Jobabo mines. There were frequent uprisings thereafter with the participants escaping into the mountains and linking with indigenous Taino groups to form independent African maroon settlements called Palenques. From these enclaves they mounted raids on Spanish settlements.

Mining activities came to an end with the discovery of large supplies of precious metals in nearby Mexico and in South America, however Cuba remained important for other reasons.

Due to its location on the Windward Passage linking the North Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, Cuba became part of the most important trade route in the New World. Gold, silver and emeralds from Spanish mining centres in Bolivia, Peru; and Mexico was transshipped to Havana, Cuba, for the final leg of the journey to Spain.

As the capital of Cuba, Havana became a major transshipment point, which reduced local interest in producing sugar in the surrounding countryside. There were therefore no plantations consequently the enslaved African population was used in Havana for very urban occupations. These included loading and unloading the ships and working in associated urban activities such as construction (shipbuilders, carpenters, stonemasons,) as well as domestics, merchants, small shopkeepers, and even itinerant street vendors. This would later form the basis for the urban Afro-Cuba population.

Havana also held a monopoly on local trade, having been decreed the only port that could ship goods to Spain. Havana's prosperity made it an attractive prize for pirates and rival colonial powers throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. But slave imports were limited.

Major African arrival

Large numbers of Africans began arriving in Cuba in the late 1700s only after the British took the prospering Havana from Spain during the '7 Years War' and occupied both the city and port from 1762-3. The British brought 10,000 Africans into Cuba in less than 10 months mostly to work in the sugar factories (ingenios) of the outlying areas.

After reverting to Spanish rule in 1763 trade was once more restricted but the Spanish government was forced in 1789 to open up Havana as Cuba's exclusive port for the buying and selling of enslaved Africans.

African resistance continued growing and in 1796 militia groups were organized to hunt down renegade slaves and destroy the Palenques, which had continued to serve as bases for attacks on the plantations.

The remaining trade restrictions were officially eliminated with the Royal Decree of Graces of 1815 from the Spanish Crown. This order encouraged Spaniards and later Europeans of non-Spanish origin to settle and populate the colonies of Cuba and Puerto Rico. Since it encouraged the use of slave labour to revive agriculture and attract the new settlers a new planter class began immigrating from other countries of Europe seeking slave labour in large numbers.

Consequently large numbers of Africans continued arriving in Cuba causing the enslaved African population to grow from about 10-25 per cent in the 18th Century to more than 40 per cent by 1840. Cuba became the world's largest sugar producer and Havana became the largest market for enslaved Africans in the Caribbean by 1839, importing around 10,000 slaves a year.

Cuba was transformed into a highly structured plantation society with all the attendant class and caste relationships with cruelty towards Africans being routine practice.

The continuing increase in Cuban slavery in the 19th century provoked powerful resistance, which in turn fuelled European reprisals. As a result uprisings continued across Cuba throughout the 1830s.

Between 1810 and 1870 Cuba acquired about 600,000 slaves and although Britain prohibited the Transatlantic Slave Trade, Africans continued to be sold into slavery in Havana's markets until the last slave ship arrived in 1867.

Cuba was also the last Caribbean territory to abolish slavery, in 1886. It is in this context that the continued slave resistance is intricately interwoven into the struggle for Cuban independence and would later continued to inspire and contribute to the Cuban revolution.

As in all the previous battles Afro-Cubans also played a prominent role in the War of Independence (1895-8) led by Jose Marti, which finally ended Spanish colonial rule. However while the constitution of 1901 guaranteed formal equality for all Cubans, those in control pursued a policy of *blanqueamiento* (whitening) whereby 400,000 new Spanish immigrants were invited to enter Cuba between 1902 and 1919, making it the most Spanish of Latin American countries.

Post revolution

By 1959 the Cuban revolution had outlawed all forms of formal discrimination and institutional racism. Its wide-reaching economic and social reforms clearly benefited the majority of Afro-Cubans who were the lowest on the social scale. Access to housing, education and health services improved dramatically, as did the representation of black people among a wider range of professions. Afro-Cuban women have been particular beneficiaries of the revolution's progressive social legislation, gaining much-improved employment opportunities.

Yet, however radical the assault on institutional racism, little was achieved in eliminating racial discrimination. Attempts by intellectuals to raise the issue of racism in revolutionary Cuba were harshly dealt with in the 1960s, and the government insisted that it had eliminated racial discrimination.

On various occasions, Fidel Castro explicitly condemned racism and affirmed his government's commitment to equality. However, critics of official policy allege that educational policy and official culture remained strongly Euro-centric. Afro-Cubans have not, for example, been widely represented in the higher echelons of the ruling Communist Party nor in the upper levels of the civil service or state industries. And, with few exceptions, Afro-Cuban women have not yet reached the highest professional strata.

Current issues

Marginalization

Given the role of Havana in Cuba's colonial history as a major trading centre there is also a long standing Afro-Cuban presence in that city going back to colonial that included artisans, merchants, small shopkeepers, and even itinerant street vendors.

Consequently the African presence in Cuba does not only have an exclusive rural dimension but is also strongly urban. As a result the discrimination that is manifested at all levels of the state (including the highest) is also reflected in the place Afro-Cubans hold in the structure of contemporary urban life.

Despite efforts by the authorities to weave Afro-Cubans more closely into the overall fabric of post revolutionary Cuba and to promote and preserve African cultural expressions the marginalization of Afro-Cubans has continued especially in the urban areas where it is manifested in various forms.

The limited statistics available, suggest that Afro Cubans live in the most neglected parts of the urban areas, especially in Havana. Of Cuba's large prison population of 100,000, approximately 70 per cent are estimated to be Afro Cubans They have also been economically marginalized and in keeping with the colonial tradition of itinerant trading they have had to create their own income generating opportunities. This is particularly in the informal sector and in the 'underground' economy that surrounds the tourist industry.

Market reforms

The move towards free-market reforms and tourism-led growth has not provided opportunity for Afro-Cubans at the most advantageous personal levels. Furthermore the nature of the growth of this sector might have further disadvantaged them.

European-oriented tourism boom has tended to benefit wealthier Cubans who own property and vehicles, while the enclave nature of Cuban tourism means that Afro-Cubans – like most other Cubans who are not directly involved in the formal tourism service sector – are limited from interacting with foreigners. This means they are often prevented from entering hotels or

going to certain beaches and tend to be restricted to working on the fringes of the tourist industry providing sex services and other forms of itinerant 'hustling'.

In part this has been a direct result of the increased marketing of Afro-Cuban culture as an exotic commodity for the Euro-oriented tourism industry. Afro-Cubans have therefore been doubly disadvantaged. Not only are they now blamed for participating in these activities but instead of promoting more contemplative socio-cultural aspects of the Afro-Cuban reality the trend away from the exotic is now being replaced by policies that sell Cuba primarily as an Iberian influenced destination for tourists from Spain, Italy, and South America; further alienating Afro-Cubans from participation. This growing hegemony of Spanish culture has also included direct subsidies from Spain.

There are other areas of the economy that have produced a greater social divide. The large numbers of white Cubans abroad are able to send remittances back from the US and Spain thereby placing their relatives in a better economic position.

Commerce

The arrival of foreign businesses in search of joint ventures has not improved conditions for Afro-Cubans in other parts of the formal economy. Since 'white' Cubans largely dominate the emerging capitalist sector, historical prejudices ensure that Afro-Cubans are not sought out to be included in startup entrepreneurial ventures either as managers or workers. As a result, Afro-Cubans receive little of the hard currency now essential for buying basic consumer items that are needed for everyday survival and a decent quality of life.

Some visitors have been known to decry the questionable quality of service that pertains in the tourism and restaurant sector where customers are sometimes taken for granted because of job security in Cuba's planned economy. In contrast Afro-Cubans have had to become very involved in 'hustling' in the informal sector. Nonetheless although they have readily taken to commercial activities the entrepreneurial talents of Afro-Cubans have remained underdeveloped due to the limitations of Cuba's planned economy. It could therefore be said that as far as the economic sector is concerned the revolution has failed to live up to its promise to help Afro Cubans realize their fullest potential.

Ironically, a pattern has emerged making the place of Afro Cubans in their society not much different from other former plantation colonies; especially those that have continued to develop capital-intensive free markets. Apart from the rise of some Afro-Cuban professionals in medicine and biotechnology, the other main areas in which the revolution has truly allowed a large number of Afro-Cubans to excel have been in sport and the performing arts.

Afro-Cubans are disproportionately represented in Cuba's teams at worldwide sporting events such as ball games and regional and global athletic competitions as well as in helping to define and internationally project Cuba's national cultural profile.

Given its genesis as a plantation society it could be said that the legacy of enslavement and racism remains deeply embedded in the caste and class determined social structure regardless of the economic model Cuba has chosen to follow.