

Cuba Overview

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Environment

Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean. It is located 150 kilometres south of the tip of the US state of Florida and east of the Yucatán Peninsula. On the east, Cuba is separated by the Windward Passage from Hispaniola, the island shared by Haiti and Dominican Republic.

The total land area is 114,524 sq km, which includes the Isla de la Juventud (formerly called Isle of Pines) and other small adjacent islands.

Peoples

Main languages: Spanish

Main religions: Christianity (Roman Catholic, Protestant), syncretic African religions

The majority of the population of Cuba is 51% mulatto (mixed white and black), 37% white, 11% black and 1% Chinese (CIA, 2001). However, according to the Official 2002 Cuba Census, 65% of the population is white, 10% black and 25% mulatto. Although there are no distinct indigenous communities still in existence, some mixed but recognizably indigenous Ciboney-Taino-Arawak-descended populations are still considered to have survived in parts of rural Cuba. Furthermore the indigenous element is still in evidence, interwoven as part of the overall population's cultural and genetic heritage. There is no expatriate immigrant population.

More than 75 per cent of the population is classified as urban. The revolutionary government, installed in 1959, has generally destroyed the rigid social stratification inherited from Spanish colonial rule.

During Spanish colonial rule (and later under US influence) Cuba was a major sugar-producing territory. During the 18th century this necessitated the steady importation of Africans in chains to provide forced labour, thereby creating an enduring set of colour, caste and class relationships and contributing to the present profile of the national population.

Chinese

Besides the large number of Cubans of African descent, there is a small but visible Chinese minority. Chinese began migrating to Cuba in 1847 as indentured labourers to work on the sugar plantations. Over

several decades hundreds of thousands arrived to replace and/or work alongside enslaved Africans. At the end of their contracts some Chinese immigrants settled permanently in Cuba. In addition, in the late 1800s some 5,000 Chinese immigrated from the US to avoid the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act.

Generations of Chinese-Cubans married into the larger Spanish, mulatto and Afro-Cuban populations. Today almost all Chinese-Cubans have African, Spanish, and Chinese ancestry. Many have Spanish surnames. The majority of Chinese left after the revolution. However, as part of a cultural rescue and tourism promotion, Cuban Chinese have been provided with small businesses, like beauty parlours, mechanical shops, restaurants, and small groceries to help them recreate a scenic Barrio Chino (Chinatown).

History

Pre-Colombian

The original inhabitants of Cuba were the indigenous Ciboney and other Arawak speaking groups. As a result of the island's location at the entrances to the Gulf of Mexico, as well as the Yucatán Channel, it was used by the early Taino Arawak (4000 BCE) in their original migrations from Belize and the Yucatán and across the windward passage to Hispaniola.(Ay-iti) That neighbouring island subsequently became the regional centre of Taino-Arawak culture and religion and sent colonists back to eastern Cuba. The name Cuba, is derived from its original indigenous name, Cubanascnan.

Early colonial

Columbus first landed on Cuba in 1492 but Spanish colonization of the island did not begin until 1511,with the establishment of settlements at Baracoa, Santiago de Cuba (1514) and Havana in 1515. Cuba served as a staging area for the successful Spanish colonizing expeditions to Mexico and Florida.

Although the first enslaved Africans were taken to Cuba in 1513, initial Spanish gold mining depended primarily on savage extortion of forced labour from the indigenous Taino-Arawak population. The Taino-Arawak mostly died in captivity, or engaged in resistance and disappeared into the remote mountains creating a labour shortage. This necessitated the importation of captured West Africans to provide the needed labour, with the first large group of enslaved Africans to work underground entering the mines in 1520.

The first recorded uprising of enslaved Africans in Cuba took place in 1533 at the Jobabo mines. Uprisings were frequent with the participants escaping into the mountains and linking with indigenous groups to forming maroon settlements called Palenques, from which they mounted raids on Spanish settlements. One of these maroon raids, conducted jointly with pirates in 1538, destroyed part of Havana.

Gold trade

Given its location on the Windward Passage that links the North Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, Cuba became a key part of the most important trade route in the New World. After the mid-1500s, gold, silver and emeralds from Spanish mining centres in Bolivia, Peru and Mexico were trans-shipped to Havana, Cuba, and then on to Spain.

As the capital of Cuba, Havana became a very important city. Havana held a monopoly on local as well as international trade, which reduced local interest in producing sugar in the surrounding countryside,

and the need for forced labour on plantations. Enslaved Africans in Havana worked primarily at the ports, in construction (ships, housing), domestic service and also as artisans, merchants, small shopkeepers, and even as itinerant street vendors.

Cuba prospered as a trading hub and became the prime target of pirates, smugglers and rival European navies, during the 16th and 17th centuries. Despite trade regulations laid down by the Spanish crown colonists conducted brisk contraband trade with neighbouring colonies and privateers, thereby making it easy for the English to capture and occupy Havana in 1762-1763.

The British, who by then had a monopoly on slave trading, met the pent-up local demand for slave labour. During the year they controlled Havana, the British imported 10,000 Africans for sale in less than 10 months, mostly to work in the sugar factories (ingenios). After this the Spanish government liberalized its Cuban policy and encouraged greater agricultural development, commercial expansion, and increased colonization.

The remaining restrictions on trade were officially eliminated with the Royal Decree of Graces of 1815, which encouraged Spaniards and later non-Spanish Europeans to settle and populate Cuba and Puerto Rico. Between 1774 and 1817 the population of Cuba increased from about 161,000 to more than 550,000, some of these being colonial refugees from the Haitian revolution.

The decree especially encouraged slave labour to revive agriculture and to attract the new settlers. Consequently large numbers of enslaved Africans continued arriving in Cuba after the late 1700s. This led to a significant rise in sugar production. Cuba became the world's largest sugar producer, with a highly structured class and caste-conscious plantation society, in which cruelty towards dark-skinned Africans was routine practice.

This situation also led to increased African resistance to slavery and a high rate of escape to maroon Palenques. There were a series of slave uprisings in the island that would eventually become interwoven into the struggle for Cuban independence.

During the 1830s, in the effort to hang on to its few remaining colonies, Spanish rule became increasingly repressive. This provoked a widespread movement among the colonists for independence. Revolts and conspiracies against the Spanish regime, like those of 1834 and 1838, dominated Cuban political life throughout the remainder of the century.

By 1843 enslaved Africans constituted nearly half the Cuban population. With slavery already abolished elsewhere in the region, pro-slavery forces in both the United States and Cuba made periodic calls for the US to annex, buy or invade the island to help safeguard the profitable slave societies of both countries. Offers by the US government to purchase the island were repeatedly rejected by Spain.

In 1868 revolutionaries under the leadership of Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, a wealthy landowner with pro-abolitionist sentiments, proclaimed Cuban independence. He raised an army composed mostly of freed slaves and fought against Spanish rule.

The ensuing Ten Years' War became a costly struggle to both Spain and Cuba and also had an impact on its Caribbean neighbours. (See Dominican Republic) The guerilla war raged mostly in the eastern provinces and took nearly 200,000 lives. It was terminated in 1878 by a truce granting many important concessions to the rebels, especially the abolition of slavery.

Slavery was finally abolished in Cuba in 1886, more than half a century after its elimination in the

British Empire. Importation of cheap labour from China was ended by 1871 and the equal civil status of blacks and whites proclaimed in 1893.

US guidance

Despite the 1878 truce, the Spanish failed to institute the promised reforms, resulting in a resumption of revolutionary activities under the leadership of Jose Martí. The US seized the chance to intervene on the side of the rebels, precipitating the Spanish-American War. In April 1898, Spain relinquished sovereignty over Cuba, and the US established a military government in Cuba, setting up a new constitution in 1901.

As in all the previous battles, Afro-Cubans also played a prominent role in this War of Independence (1895-8), which finally ended Spanish colonial rule. However while the constitution of 1901 guaranteed formal equality for all Cubans, at the same time 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.

Furthermore Cubans still had not gained full and true independence. A few material benefits did accompany US occupation, but as in the nearby Dominican Republic it mainly allowed US corporate interests to gain control of the island's resources, especially the sugar-industry which had long been connected to slavery, low wages and poor working conditions.

Popular dissatisfaction led to series insurrections that continued until the end of WW1. Mounting economic difficulties, caused by complete US domination of Cuban economy especially finance, agriculture, and industry, also marked the period following World War I. Unrest and frequent regime changes continued, but no real reforms occurred until Fulgencio Batista Zaldívar won the presidential contest of 1940 and served a term in office.

Revolution

Fluctuations in world sugar prices and a continuing inflationary spiral kept the political situation unstable in the postwar era.

In March 1952 the former president Batista seized power with army support, reintroduced reforms and in July 1953 crushed an uprising in Oriente Province led by a young lawyer named Fidel Castro, who went into exile.

Undaunted, Castro-led insurgents tried again in December 1956 and were once more defeated. Then in the tradition of the abolitionist Maroon Palenques, the group escaped to the mountains to plan and formed the 26th of July Movement. They used maroon-style hit and run guerrilla tactics to challenge the government, and mobilized considerable popular support. In March 1958, Castro called for a general revolt. On 1 January 1959, the revolutionary militia entered Havana, forcing Batista to resign and flee the country.

Revolutionary Cuba

The reformist tendencies of the highly populist new Cuban regime alarmed US companies on the island. The agrarian reform laws and decrees prohibiting the operation of plantations controlled by non-Cubans mainly affected US sugar interests; So too did the initial revolutionary efforts to de-emphasize sugar production in favour of food crops.

The line was crossed when the Castro government expropriated an estimated US\$1 billion in US-owned properties in 1960. The US imposed a trade embargo and broke off diplomatic relations. Furthermore, covert attempts to dislodge the Castro regime failed on April 17 1961, when the group of over 1,200 US-supported anti-Castro exiles who landed at the Bay of Pigs in southern Cuba were either killed or captured.

US-Cuban relations grew still worse in the autumn of 1962, with the discovery of Soviet-supplied missile installations in Cuba, which caused a naval blockade.

In 1965 the Cuban government agreed to permit Cuban nationals to emigrate to the United States. Large numbers of European-descended Cubans took the opportunity. By April 1973, when the airlift formally ended, more than 260,000 mostly white Cubans had left, many to settle in South Florida.

In 1980, when Castro temporarily lifted exit restrictions again, another 125,000 people left for the United States. With the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s, Soviet-bloc aid and trade ended. As the effects of this change filtered down through the population, greater numbers of Cubans attempted to leave the country for economic reasons.

In February 1996, Cuban jet fighters shot down two civilian planes piloted by Miami-based exiles which the government said had violated Cuban airspace. Following this incident, US President Bill Clinton in March 1996 made permanent the economic embargo, which previously had been renewed each year. Canada, Mexico, and the European Union complained about the US law, arguing that it contravened World Trade Organization rules.

Governance

Cuba is governed under a 1976 constitution that defines the country as a socialist state. All power belongs to the working people and the Communist Party is the country's sole political party.

The central legislature of Cuba is the National Assembly of People's Power, whose 510 members are elected to five-year terms by universal voting. The Council of State includes a president, who is the country's head of state.

Judicial power is exercised by the People's Supreme Court and courts of justice at provincial or regional levels. When required, revolutionary tribunals are convened to deal with crimes against the state.

Sugar and sugar products make up about 75 per cent of annual Cuban exports. Tobacco, nickel and copper ores, foodstuffs, and petroleum products are other important export commodities. A second crop of commercial importance is tobacco, a large part of which is manufactured into the internationally popular Havana cigars.

The collapse of Eastern bloc communism in 1989 signalled the end of Cuba's preferential trading relationship with the Soviet Union and led to a severe economic crisis. As one of the last centrally planned economies in the world, Cuba began to introduce market reforms while attempting to preserve its existing political system.

Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

The 1959 revolution outlawed all forms of formal discrimination and institutional racism and its wide-reaching economic and social reforms clearly benefited the majority of Afro-Cubans who were the

lowest on the social scale. 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. Reports of discrimination against Afro-Cubans, particularly in the Cuban tourist industry, continue to mount, although in the absence of a thriving civil society this issue remains unexplored on the island.

In 1993 President Fidel Castro signed a decree allowing some free enterprise in more than 100 trades and services. In its zeal to protect the revolution Cuban officials have said that dissidents, Cuban intellectuals and self-employed workers, were being manipulated by Cuba's foreign enemies to undermine the authority of the Communist Party. Castro vowed to step up the government's efforts to silence opposition groups and enforce compliance with the party's economic and ideological beliefs.

Since most Afro Cubans are involved in the informal sector and hence self employed this hard line communist policy placed their activities particularly at risk since any interaction with a foreigner like a tourist could be interpreted as potentially leaving the way open for foreign manipulation.

Participation in other small-scale economic activities by Afro-Cubans is also limited. For example artesan fishing is not allowed as a result of the risk of escape by boat and also because at the local level fishing is undertaken by registered independent operators banded into cooperatives.

Although there were many black police officers and army enlisted personnel, racial discrimination often occurred. Blacks complained of frequent and disproportionate stops for identity checks. In Cuba as in other plantation societies like Brazil, Peru, Venezuela Colombia and elsewhere, where colonial era relationship patterns continue to influence current life, anti-racism activists are joined by popular musicians, particularly rappers, who also denounce racism particularly in their art. This is reflection of the greater radicalisation of consciousness around the racial question that is now taking place among a great majority of Afro- Cuban intellectuals and artists working at home and abroad.