

CUBA

The Pursuit of Freedom

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CHAPTER XCI

Black Cuba

In the 1950s the Negro or mulatto population was described as being under one-third of the total; an accurate figure is hard to give, since in 1953 the identification of this or that individual by the curious and misleading euphemism 'coloured' was left to the innumerators, whereas in previous censuses account was taken of the declarations made by the persons concerned. Presumably, therefore, the identification was inaccurate. At least one other published estimate suggested that as many as half of the total were 'Negroid' and another 20% really mulatto,¹ an estimate with which many intelligent observers would agree. These included Fernando Ortiz, the Afro-Cuban folklorist.²

OFFICIAL FIGURES FOR BLACK CUBA 1899-1953

		% of total population
1899	505,443	32·1
1907	608,967	29·7
1919	784,811	27·2
1931	1,179,106	27·2
1943	1,225,271	25·6
1953	{ 725,311 Negro 843,105 mulatto } 1,568,416 Total	27·2

However misleading the official figures may be, in comparison with whites there was a drop in the black or mulatto population between 1931 and 1943, due partly to the repatriation of over half the Jamaican or other West Indian labourers who had come to Cuba in the good times of the past,³ partly to the effects of the depression which hit the poorest Cubans hardest (and probably more of these were black than white). The drop in the early years of the Republic was due to the Spanish immigration. The decline in that immigration, as well as the general recovery of prosperity after the Second World War, accounts

¹ MacGaffey and Barnett, 28. See also Goldenberg, 131.

² In conversation with the author, July 1966.

³ 56%. Census of 1943, 741.

for the rise of the black or mulatto percentage between 1943 and 1953. On the other hand the official figures, which must represent something of the truth, suggest that the 'white' population increased four times, the black or mulatto population three times.

Again according to the official figures, the Negro population dropped from 15% of the total in 1899 to 10% in 1943, and rose again to 12% in 1953, whereas the mulatto population fell from 17% in 1899 to 14.1% in 1953.⁴ These changes can scarcely be accurate, given the alterations in methods of examination, but they are all that exist. There was obviously intermarriage between black and white, but more usually between white men and black girls. The voluptuous mulatto remained a symbol for sexual desirability; but marriage between white girls and black or mulatto men was relatively rare. The social area where the races mixed most freely was that of prostitution, habitual criminality, drug trafficking, gambling and superstition.⁵ The mixture of Chinese and *mulata* produced offspring of very special beauty.

At the beginning of the century, about twenty municipalities of Cuba had formally a black or mulatto majority of the population, and these remained apparently the most non-white areas. There was little change in fact in the general geographical distribution of the Negroes during the early history of the Republic. This immobility of the black population is one of the many aspects of the matter where Cuba contrasted with the U.S.: the U.S. Negro had little part in the great expansion to the west in the nineteenth century, but moved much in the twentieth.

On paper, even Oriente formally had a majority of white people. Havana province had a total of 350,000 Negro or mulatto people in 1953, or a fifth of the total number; three-fifths⁶ of the black population as a whole were considered 'urban' – slightly more, that is, than the national percentage.⁷ The birth rate appears to have been higher among whites than coloured. But mulattoes, in Cuba as elsewhere, sought to pass themselves off as 'white' once they got to the towns, and often succeeded, particularly if they became well off.

It is impossible to resolve exactly how (and if so to what extent) the black or mulatto population suffered economically in comparison with whites. In some districts with a theoretically mostly Negro population, the majority in all school ages did not go to school. But in the Oriente towns of Caney and Guantánamo, both of which had a black or mulatto majority, most of those aged ten to fourteen went to school, and

⁴ See Census of 1953, 49. Negro population rose from 235,000 to 725,000; mulatto from 270,000 to 840,000.

⁵ Ortiz, *Negros Esclavos*, 11.

⁶ 943,983.

⁷ 'White' figures were 2,365,759 (57.5%) to 1,878,197.

in Santiago a majority of those aged five to fourteen. Proximity to a city, more than race matters, determined this. There was little formal difference between predominantly Negro towns in Oriente and nearby mainly 'white' communities; while Santiago, a predominantly black city, resembled Camagüey, predominantly 'white', in the level of school attendance.⁸ The only district even in Oriente which seems to have had an illiterate majority was Niquero, in the south-west, which was mainly white.⁹ This was because many workers there were recently arrived sugar workers. Black and white illiteracy seems to have been much the same. In the late 1930s a quarter of students were black or mulatto – doubtless an underestimate.¹⁰

On paper, half the Cuban black or mixed population lived in Oriente,¹¹ the poorest province. They had not always done so, but then Oriente had not always been the province with the largest population, and it was natural that, in the early years of the century, the opening up of Oriente should attract a great immigration of labour. By the 1950s, however, the vast majority of Cubans were where they were because they had been born and brought up there.¹² Anyone, black or white, living in Oriente, had, again on paper, a less good chance of a good life than anyone living in Havana (schools, doctors, hospitals and so on being far less provided for), only 5,000 people out of the total population¹³ having had any higher education. For educational and economic reasons alone it was not surprising to find black people poorly represented among the prestigious middle-class professions.¹⁴ Even there, however, the situation had changed greatly since the beginning of the century. In 1943 there were 560 black or mulatto lawyers – a large number in comparison with the three or four in 1899–1907; 424 doctors were black or mulatto, a fifth of the total in the country, compared with 10 out of 1,000 in 1899–1907. There were also 3,500 teachers, compared with about 16,000 white teachers, though the black ones were more regular attenders than the whites. Negroes were well represented among musicians, painters and others involved in the arts. In 1943 workers on the average received less if black than if white: 46% of black workers got under \$30 a month compared to 37% of white, while 43% of white got between \$30 and \$60 compared to 41.4% of black. There might be little in that but 6% of white workers got over \$100 and only 2½% of black.

⁸ See Census of 1953, 117–18.

⁹ Though the sugar mill workers at Niquero from the manager down were all black or mulatto (evidence of Julio Lobo).

¹⁰ *Problems of the New Cuba*, 32.

¹¹ 732,696 out of 1,568,416.

¹² See above, p. 1118.

¹³ 1,797,606.

¹⁴ We have to make do with 1943 statistics in these matters.

In some professions, the black or mulatto population was well established. As in the early part of the century, they dominated laundering, sewing, shoemaking, woodcutting, and tailoring. They were on a level with whites among barbers, bakers, carpenters, coopers, and blacksmiths. They held their own, in terms of their percentage of the population, among tobacco workers. They also represented a majority of the servant population, partly out of tradition, partly because those with servants liked to imitate the North American deep South. In unskilled work, the black or mulatto population did more than its fair share – 26% – of mining, building and industrial activities,¹⁵ but had slightly less than its percentage in agriculture.¹⁶ It would be correct to assume, no doubt, that as in 1900, racial distinction in the country was still the superficial visible symbol of a distinction which in reality was based on the ownership of property.¹⁷

The Constitution of 1940 barred all race discrimination. This worked reasonably well. The situation was described by Castro in a press conference on 23 January 1959 when he said, in reply to a North American journalist, that ‘the colour question’ in Cuba did not exist in the same way as it did in the U.S.; there was some racial discrimination in Cuba but far less; the revolution would help to eliminate these remaining prejudices; on this topic, Castro added delphically, ‘Our thoughts are the thoughts of Martí.’¹⁸ This was Castro’s first comment of any sort on the question of race, though, later on, the Cuban revolution would emphasize race questions harshly. Castro might also have gone on to say that, in so far as it did exist, racial discrimination was chiefly a middle-class phenomenon. The Cuban middle class was always rather

¹⁵ In 1943, the professional breakdown* of black or mulatto to white persons had been:

	<i>Black or mulatto</i>	<i>White</i>
Agriculture, cattle, fishing	23·0	77·0
Mining	33·0	67·0
Construction	44·2	55·8
Manufactures and mechanical industries	35·9	64·1
Transport and communications	22·9	77·1
Commerce	15·9	84·1
Banks and finance	9·2	90·8
Domestic and personal services	46·9	53·1
Recreation and other services	39·7	60·3
Professional services	14·5	85·5
Government	19·3	80·7
Various services	28·0	72·0
Industrial and commerce unclassified	26·5	73·5
<i>Average</i>	25·9	74·1

*Corrected from Census of 1943, 786

¹⁶ The Agricultural Census of 1946 did not make any allusion to the question of colour, so we know nothing about the size of farms in this period.

¹⁷ Williams, *Race Relations in Caribbean Society*, qu. above, p.431

¹⁸ *Revolución*, 23 January 1959. Martí’s views were expressed in the Manifesto of Montecristi.

conscious of North American habits. Such racial discrimination as there was appears to have been imitative of North America rather than to have sprung from anything special to Cuban circumstances. In the smarter hotels of Havana, frequented by the American business community,¹⁹ racial prejudice was yet another example of the way that some Cubans were always exiles, even in Havana. There was a half racial, half class colour bar in those streets where the upper class walked in the evenings. In the tobacco industry Negroes were cigar-makers and strippers but not sorters or trimmers.²⁰ Segregation was most remarked in Camagüey, least so in Oriente. No doubt there was segregation in certain enterprises, and a committee for rights of Negroes had been set up in 1934. There were also clubs for mulattoes and Negroes alone, in addition to the religious groups.²¹ Relations between Negroes and mulattoes were ambivalent: one proverb ran: ‘One Negro may hurt another; a mulatto will do worse.’ Fights between black and white on racial grounds were rare, though some seem to have occurred from time to time; for instance in Trinidad in 1934.²² That racial prejudice in old Cuba was not overwhelming is suggested by the fact that Castro never mentioned the matter in any of his speeches or programmes before the revolution. To read *History will absolve me* would suggest that Castro was addressing a racially homogeneous nation.

This silence on Castro’s part was in fact denounced by militant Cuban Negroes. Some years later, a Cuban Negro Communist of Chinese views, Carlos Moore, criticized Castro as an upholder of white Castilian upper-class ways, and claimed that Castro’s alleged improvement in racial harmony was a fraud.²³ The question is more complicated. (One Negro commented in the mid-1960s, ‘Before the Revolution the only time I remembered I was black was when I had a bath; now I am reminded of it every day’.²⁴) In general, since the mysterious and unsuccessful ‘Negro revolution’ of 1912, Negroes had not played a prominent part in public life. One or two minor politicians had been mulatto, such as Vasconcelos (a minister under both Prío and Batista and Castro’s earliest political sponsor) but none had been as prominent, in the second era of Cuba’s history as a Republic, as Morúa Delgado or Juan Gualberto Gómez had been in the first. In Grau’s time there were five black or mulatto senators out of fifty, twelve representatives out of 127.

¹⁹ See above, p. 1101

²⁰ *Problems of the New Cuba* (1935), 32.

²¹ Discussed below.

²² Grant Watson dispatch, 12 January 1934. This was apparently a consequence of Negroes pushing their way into that section of Central Park, Trinidad, habitually reserved to whites.

²³ *Présence Africaine*, November 1965.

²⁴ Evidence of a Bayamès. On the other hand, Víctor Franco among others reports a comment, ‘I wasn’t a man before. I was a nigger.’ (Víctor Franco, *The Morning After*, 63.) The author has met Cuban Negroes who have said or implied both.

Two prominent generals of Prío's day, Hernández Nardo and Querejeta, were Negroes. Locally, black or mulatto politicians were often successful: for instance, Justo Salas, a Negro, became mayor of Santiago in the 1940s with votes from the (white) *bourgeois* district against black votes for his white opponent. Negroes also rose to important positions in the trade union movement, particularly among the Communist trade unionists: Lázaro Peña, about to reappear on the political scene, Aracelio Iglesias, the dockers' leader murdered in 1948, and Jesús Menéndez, murdered in 1947, were the outstanding ones. The chief exception was Batista, apparently a mulatto with Chinese blood. He was the Cuban politician who appealed most to the black population, precisely because he was a man from outside conventional politics, outside conventions, and because his lower-class origins, his apparent sympathy with the masses, made him popular. Batista supported and contributed to the *santería* and *ñáñigo* rites, whose initiates regarded him as almost one of themselves, particularly in the city of Trinidad.²⁵ Indeed, Batista paid 'out of his own money' for a big reunion in the summer of 1958 for all the prominent *Santeros* (priests) of Guanabacoa, at which many cocks and goats were sacrificed to appease the 'demons of war'.

Batista's army and police were full of Negroes and mulattoes. Yañes Pelletier, the officer who arrested Castro in 1953 after Moncada, was black. In 1943 (the latest year for which even doubtful statistics are available), just under one-third of the army was allegedly black or mulatto, just over what seems to have been the national proportion.²⁶ In contrast, most active radicals or progressives were middle-class whites. About a dozen of Castro's followers at Moncada were black or mulatto,²⁷ but this was an exceptional event in Cuban revolutionary history. Batista's soldiers openly said that it was a disgrace to follow a white such as Castro against a *mestizo* such as Batista. When Captain Yañes came on Castro hiding asleep in a *bohío*, it will be recalled that the soldier who found them cried: '*Son blancos!*' 'They are white!' Some Negroes even owed their lives at that time to the fact that they were black.²⁸ It is not clear how many of the rebel army in the Sierra were black but a majority certainly were not, and Almeida, a mulatto, was the only officer of importance who was. The black population as such never rallied to Castro before 1959. He appeared just another middle-class white radical, with nothing to say to them.

The alienation of the black community from the revolutionaries and

²⁵ I am indebted for this comment to Sr Cabrera Infante.

²⁶ 4,039 Negroes or mulattoes to 14,637 white. There were 947 police of African origin to 5,492 hispanic.

²⁷ See analysis in appendix XI.

²⁸ Cf. Merle, *Moncada*, 264, 268. There seem to have been about a dozen Negroes or mulattoes at Moncada.

conventional politics had really lasted throughout the Republic. Perhaps they were less without means to rise to higher goals, as Lowry Nelson says, than without aspirations to do so. Like all the Caribbean Africans, the Cuban Negroes were still coping, not always satisfactorily, with the heritage of the forced migration of their ancestors, and of slavery itself. This heritage had meant above all the destruction of the family, the substitution (in some cases) for many generations of the Master for the Father, except in his strictly biological function.²⁹ The Cuban Negroes were still in some respects demanding real emancipation. Their task of adjustment may have been made easier by the fact that African ceremonies and religions sometimes blended effectively with Catholic festivals,³⁰ though the task of self-articulation may have been more difficult than in the English West Indies, where the white population was insignificant. It was certainly different. Since race is so much a problem of noticeable physical attributes, the predominantly sallow-skinned Spaniards, with their strong draughts of Moorish and Jewish blood, probably blended more easily, at least with mulattoes, than did the pink or beige Anglo-Saxons, Celts, Germans and Slavs who constitute the majority in the U.S.³¹ There was no Cuban society for the advancement of coloured people, though in the 1930s some Negro Communists had argued for an autonomous Negro state in Oriente.

Cuban Negroes were not, however, living in a private world of their own. Their world extended outwards to embrace, if not politics, at least painting and music. If a country is measured by its arts, Cuba was over half Negro. African rhythms, echoes of ceremonies forgotten or practised still in secrecy, dominated Cuban popular music and poetry. The dances, for which the Cubans were as famous internationally as their cigars or sugar, were mostly African: the conga, rumba, mambo and finally the pachanga, were all direct popularizations of religious dances. They were not, however, entirely African and in fact their blend of African and Spanish, with some North American and French influences, was their distinctive contribution. Much Cuban music derived from the 'love affair of African drums and Spanish guitar', as Fernando Ortiz put it, echoing the carnival dances of Negroes at Catholic festivals before they were banned. By 1958 the old white Spanish dances, such as the *habanera* or *bolero*, had almost vanished. The best Cuban musicians, such as Brindis de Salas or José María Jiménez, were black. Nicolás Guillén,³² the best Cuban poet, himself a mulatto, tried to catch in his poetry the

²⁹ I am indebted to Dr Sherlock for this point.

³⁰ See above, p. 517, for further discussion.

³¹ Even pure Castilians are of course darker than Anglo-Saxons.

³² Born 1904 in Camagüey, published *Motivos de Son* (1930), *Séngoro Cosongo* (1931), *West Indies Ltd* (1934), etc.

rhythm of the songs of Cuba as his master, García Lorca, did in Spain. Wilfredo Lam, half Chinese, half Negro,³³ in his jungle paintings, was partly an intellectual explorer but partly a mediator between a West already modishly searching for new dreams among primitive things and the African and West Indian worlds of green shadow and magic. The same sort of work was done in sculpture by Teodoro Ramos Blanco. Of course there were very few good Cuban artists who were untouched. The best Cuban novelist, probably the best novelist in South America, Carpentier, used *negrismo* in his *Ecue Yamba-O*, and his marvellous novel *The Kingdom of this World* is a brilliant evocation of Negro feelings during the Haitian revolution³⁴. Guillén believed that in Cuba a real mulatto culture (which he named *negri-blanca*) was already, uniquely, in existence.

Artists in Cuba itself were in fact specifically mediators between black and white. So too were the folklorists, among whom Fernando Ortiz, the inspiration of Afro-Cuban studies for half a century and grand prosecutor of sugar monoculture, was the acknowledged master. His books too were an exploration: they awoke middle-class white Cubans to the beliefs, habits and myths of the African Cubans, weakening their fear and ignorance. It was hard to distinguish Afro-Cuban religion from lower-class Catholicism. Upper-class Catholics still referred to Afro-Cuban activities as witchcraft (*brujería*) – the word used by the Afro-Cuban population itself for bogus behaviour at rites. Other more timid writers described the development of Cuban Negroes as ‘evolutionary disaster’, or as inferior because their languages had no grammar.

The Africans introduced words as well as dances. A little Yoruba or Efik from Nigeria, some Fon from Dahomey, could be heard in Cuba, but the use of African languages was on the whole confined to religions, and, like the Sephardic Jews who lived so long in Arab countries, the Cuban Africans otherwise spoke the language of their adopted country, with different dialects.

The nature of Afro-Cuban religions appears to have become more closely identified than ever with Roman Catholicism since the Negro revolution of 1912. Catholicism was regarded by Africans increasingly as a Spanish version of the African *Santería*, the cult of *orishas*, dead great men. The black or mulatto middle class had become assimilated by white Spanish society except on the occasions of participation in

³³ Born 1902 in Sagua la Grande, son of Yam Lam and Serafina Castilla; educated at the Academia de S. Alejandro, Havana, and Spain; first exhibition Madrid, 1927; Paris, 1939; New York, 1942. Lived most of his life in Paris.

³⁴ Alejo Carpentier, born 1904, editor of *Carteles*, 1924–8, imprisoned by Machado; in Paris, 1933–9, and in Venezuela, 1945–59. He was the son of a French architect who went to Cuba in 1902.

Abakuá or *santería*, which therefore became more of a contrast with ordinary life. Changó, god of war, and St Barbara remained an uneasy identification, living in a ceiba tree of the acacia family (the only tree never uprooted by hurricanes), dressed alternately as man and woman; St Peter was still Elegua, destiny in a more malevolent dress, and also known as *El Dueño de los Caminos*, Master of the Paths. Destiny or Orumila, St Francis, was believed to have 200–300 *santeros* (*babalaós*) in Havana alone – part-time, of course – ministering to his needs: white cocks and palm nuts at regular intervals and in special combinations. Madonnas as ever appeared sometimes with tribal marks. God himself, or Olofi, son of the Earth, a shadowy Holy Ghost rather than a Lord of Hosts, played little part. White people continued to go to these celebrations: senators, politicians and mayors would often make obeisance to these curious deities: ‘*Yo no creo pero lo repito*’ (‘I do not believe but I repeat the ritual’) was a frequent explanation. One Cuban at least out of four had gone at one time or another to some such fiesta.³⁵

There was much interchange between the different Africans, including the Cubans, Haitians and Jamaicans who had come for work in the 1920s or before and also in the 1940s. Some Yorubas, however, feared the Haitians’ Voodoo. Haitians were thought to order Zombies to chase chosen victims ‘at all hours, with a burning candle’:³⁶ Voodoo had of course a nineteenth-century basis in Cuba as well. The *ñáñigos* were the most secretive of these groups: membership guaranteed a place in the next world only if kept secret. (They had been banned for a time after 1902 but Menocal allowed them to come back as part of an electoral deal.) *Ñáñigos* were feared by the whites: white nannies would explain to the children of the rich that, if they were bad, *ñáñigos* would come looking for little white boys.

The black population in Cuba therefore lived still partly in a mysterious dream world, hispanized or North Americanized to some extent, which whites could visit but never really incorporate into their own affluence or poverty. This went ill, inevitably, in a country where materialism had utterly displaced religion. The Communist party, despite its important following among Negroes, criticized the African cults as non-productive and anti-social, but without effect: it was true, however, that the African religions were fundamentally conservative and immobile, if vital: innovations in ceremony were rare except that it seems that during the twentieth century the stones upon which the cocks were sacrificed in Yoruba cults came to have greater and greater significance. These stones, hidden behind a curtain in the lower part of

³⁵ Catholic Action survey, 1958, qu. B. Macoin, *Latin America, the 11th Hour*, New York, 1962, 69.

³⁶ MacGaffey and Barnett, 209.

the altar, were supposed to have all sorts of magical powers once they had been baptized in blood. On the other hand, it is clear that this was not a wholly modern development since the most powerful stones, which were supposed to be able to walk, grow and bear children, were said to have been brought from Africa by the slaves.³⁷

³⁷ See W. R. Bansom, 'The Focus of Cuban *Santería*', *South Western Journal of Anthropology*, VI, Spring 1950, quoted R. F. Smith, *Background to Revolution*, New York, 1966.