

Message from Cuba to African-American intellectuals and artists

• A Yoruba proverb says: "Lies can run for a year; the truth catches them up in one day." Although for a long time U.S. public opinion has attempted to impose, from the most intolerant political circles and the most powerful media, a distorted image of contemporary Cuban society, the reality always, and in one way or another, wins through.

That will happen, we are sure, when the arguments that bring us to refute the fallacious affirmations on our society contained in a document circulated on December 1, in the name of a group of African-American intellectuals and leaders, are made known.

To state that among us there exists an "insensitive disregard" of African Cubans, which restricts "civil liberties for reasons of race," and to demand an end "to the unnecessary and brutal harassment of black citizens in Cuba who are defending their civil rights," would appear to be a delirious lubrication if it was not the case that, behind those fictions, lies the malicious intention of adding respected voices from the African-American community to the anti-Cuba campaign directed at undermining our sovereignty and identity.

If the Cuba of these times were that racist country which they wish to invent, its citizens would not have contributed en masse to the liberation of African peoples. More than 350,000 Cuban volunteers fought alongside their African brothers against colonialism. More than 2,000 combatants from the island died in the lands of that continent. A figure of undisputed international profile, Nelson Mandela, has acknowledged the role of those volunteers in the definitive collapse of the infamous apartheid regime. From Africa, we brought only the remains of our dead.

If the Cuba of today felt that disdain for people of African descent, more than 350,000 young African students would not have been trained in our schools over the last 40 years, nor would 2,800 young people from 30 countries on that continent currently be studying in our universities.

A people inflicted with racism would refuse to collaborate in the training of doctors and other human resources in the health sphere in Medical Faculties founded in Guinea Bissau, Equatorial Guinea, the Gambia and Eritrea; they would turn their back on health assistance programs that have saved thousands of lives in various regions of Latin America and the Caribbean where the presence of the African Diaspora is significant, and would not want to have anything to do with the 20,000-plus Haitians and English-

speaking African Caribbean people whose sight has been restored by surgery offered free of charge in our country.

It is highly probable that the majority of the signatories to the document are unaware of the fact that, in the wake of the devastation of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, dozens of Cuban doctors and paramedics volunteered to attend to the hurricane victims in a humanitarian gesture that failed to find a response from the U.S. authorities.

In another order, perhaps they are also unaware of how, immediately after the popular victory of 1959, the institutional and legal bases of a racist society were dismantled here. The Cuban Revolution found a desperate situation in the majority of the population in 1959. Cubans of African descent, who were among the most afflicted victims of the colonial model prevailing on the island, were immediately benefited by the battle waged by the revolutionary government to eradicate all forms of exclusion, including the savage racism that characterized the Cuba of that time.

Cuban policies against any form of discrimination and in favor of equality have constitutional backing and are laid down in the chapters of the Constitution referring to the political, social and economic foundations of the state and the rights, duties and guarantees of its citizens. Constitutional rights, as well as mechanisms and means to ensure their effectiveness and to reestablish legality in the face of any violation of these, is guaranteed via very precise complementary legislation.

As never before in the history of our country, African Cubans and persons of mixed race have found opportunities and their social and personal realization in the process of transformations undertaken in the last 50 years, based on policies and programs that have propitiated the takeoff of what the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz called the urgent integrative phase of Cuban society.

It is about, as we know, a process that is not exempt from conflicts and contradictions over which both inherited social disadvantages and secularly rooted prejudices gravitate.

Dialoging six years ago in Havana with Cuban and foreign educators, Fidel Castro commented how "even in societies like that of Cuba, which has emerged from a radical social revolution in which the people have attained full and total legal equality and a revolutionary level of education that demolished the subjective component of discrimi-

nation, this still exists in another form. I describe it as objective discrimination, a phenomenon associated with poverty and a historic monopoly of knowledge."

Anyone who observes quotidian life in any place in the country can perceive that tremendous efforts are being made to definitively overcome the factors that condition such a situation, via new programs directed at eliminating every social disadvantage.

African-American intellectuals must know how their Cuban colleagues have approached these issues and are promoting actions from the prominent place that they occupy within the civil society. Some of the programs previously alluded to arose from debates that took place in 1998 during the 4th Congress of the Cuban Union of Writers and Artists (UNEAC), in a frank and open dialogue with the highest state authorities and the then President Fidel Castro.

It should be recalled that the organization grouping the vanguard of the Cuban intellectual and artistic movement had as its founding president a black poet, Nicolás Guillén, one of the most notable Spanish-language poets of the 20th century, an active fighter against racial discrimination and a personal friend of Langston Hughes and Paul Robeson.

A permanent committee to fight, from a cultural perspective, any vestige of discrimination and racial prejudice, has been created in the heart of the UNEAC, an organization that has never turned its back on this problem.

In a racist society it would unthinkable to found and have functioning institutions such as the Africa Casa, the Fernando Ortiz Foundation, the Santiago de Cuba Casa del Caribe, the Casa de las Américas' Caribbean Studies Center and the National Institute of Anthropology which, among others, are engaging in in-depth studies of the African legacy in our culture and interracial relations in our country. Nor would there have been support and widespread recognition for artistic social bodies of the rank of the National Folkloric Ensemble, the Folkloric Ballet of Camagüey, or the Folkloric Ensemble of Oriente. The Museum of the Slave Route, the first of its kind in Latin America and the Caribbean, and one of the principal results of Cuba's commitment to the UNESCO-sponsored program to vindicate the contribution of Africans uprooted by force from their countries of origin to these others where they contributed to the forging of new

identities, would not even exist.

If racial hatred were a predominant tendency in our society, the commemoration of the centenary anniversary of the founding of the Independent Party of Color, on the basis of recovering the historic memory of one stage in the struggles and efforts of the Cuban people for their rights and liberation from all dominations, would be no more than a rhetorical gesture.

Genuine bearers of traditional musical culture greatly appreciated by the American public, such as Los Muñequitos de Matanzas and the Yoruba Andabo and Clave y Guaguancó ensembles would have to work as cheap laborers in the docks, parking lot attendants, shoeshine boys and domestic servants, their exceptional value not having been recognized.

A racist society would not have undertaken to translate and publish hundreds of literary works by dozens of African and African-Caribbean authors. During one of his visits to Cuba, the Nigerian Nobel Prize laureate, Wole Soyinka, stated: "It is hard to find another place in the Western hemisphere where the avidity to know African writers transcends, as I have seen here, the interest of academic institutions."

We Cuban intellectuals and artists are grateful for the solidarity, comprehension and respect shown by many African-American figures toward Cuban realities throughout half a century. We have never asked them to share our political ideas, nor have we conditioned dialogue to any kind of backing or adherence. Out of an elemental sense of ethics, we respect their points of view.

Maybe it would be opportune for the signatories to the statement on which we are commenting to listen without prejudice to those criteria. We are convinced that, on doing so, as the Yoruba saying proclaims, the truth will have its day.

Havana, December 3, 2009

Nancy Morejón, poet and essayist
Miguel Barnet, poet and anthropologist
Omara Portuondo, singer
Esteban Morales, political scientist and essayist

Eduardo Roca (Choco), artist
Heriberto Feraudy, historian and essayist
Rogelio Martínez Furé, Africanist
Graziella Pogolotti, essayist and art critic
Pedro de la Hoz, journalist and essayist
Fernando Martínez Heredia, sociologist and essayist •

HUMAN RIGHTS IN CUBA

A missed shot on the wrong flank

Pedro de la Hoz

• THE December 1 edition of Miami's **El Nuevo Herald** published a full report on an "African-American Statement in Support of Civil Rights in Cuba," which accuses our country of currently being a racist society, drawing on an alleged increase in civil and human rights abuses of Cuban activists with the courage to raise their voices against the island's racist system. It stated that "those isolated and courageous defenders of civil rights have been subjected to unprovoked violence, intimidation on the part of the authorities and imprisonment."

The documents had been hastily circulated a few hours before to procure signatures that would give visibility to something cooked up by Carlos Moore, an individual of Cuban origin who, for years now, has presented himself as a "specialist on racial issues" and has made a living in the United States and Brazil at the cost of manipulating Cuban realities. Prior to its publication, Moore had

managed to con a respectable activist from the African-Brazilian movement, making him believe that legal action taken by the Cuban authorities against one of the beneficiaries of funds from the anti-Cuba policies of various U.S. administrations, was because the subject is black. He kidded other people who received the statement into believing the same story.

Someone of the prestige of the African-American poet and playwright Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) commented on the communiqué as follows: "Moore has been promoting this type of vicious provocations since the 60s... Apparently certain African Americans who signed his petition are unaware of Moore's historical pull."

James Early, another outstanding figure who has traveled to Cuba on many occasions and who works in the Smithsonian Institute, stated that he did not trust Moore's motives for involving himself in the issue of race in Cuba and stressed that "the letter is not in line with what I and other African-American activists found in our recent visit from September 14 to 22, during which we

had frank and open conversations with Cuban citizens and government officials." Early also noted that "Cuban citizens and their political representatives are discussing how to improve their socialist revolution."

So eloquent is the letter in the method it uses to distort racial issues, that one of its signatories addressed the media on Monday, December 7. Makani Themba-Nixon, director of the Praxis Project, asked for his name to be withdrawn from the documents, on the grounds that the accusatory letter against Cuba "is being manipulated to help to detract legitimacy from the important social project that is underway in that nation."

A group of Cuban intellectuals, solely directed by our consciences and in a personal capacity, came together to share our point of view on the issue with African-American colleagues. Because this is about airing, in all seriousness and with arguments, human rights in our country, and about making it known that the statement issued in the United States is a missed shot on the wrong flank. •