



The Cuban Connection

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Commentary

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Abstract

Below is a quotation from Nicolás Guillén's Prologue to *Sóngoro Cosongo* (translated from the original Spanish). Guillén was a political activist and well known on the island as Cuba's national poet. *Sóngoro Cosongo* is a book of poems protesting racism and the treatment of blacks as second class citizens. "I should say finally that this is mulatto verse. The same elements are present as in the ethnic composition of Cuba, where we are all a little brown. Does that hurt? I don't think so. It needs to be said regardless, lest we forget. The African injection in this land runs deep, and so many capillary currents cross and crisscross our well-watered social hydrography that it would take a miniaturist to unravel the hieroglyph. I therefore think that for us, creole poetry would not be complete without the black. The black, in my opinion, brings solid essence to our cocktail. And the two races that surface so distant one from the other on the island, throw out an underwater hook, like the deep tunnels secretly joining two continents. And, the spirit of Cuba is mulatto, and the definitive color will come one day from the spirit to the skin: 'Cuban color'. "Cuba is an island of illusions".

Keywords: Economic Conditions; Indigenous Peoples; Cultural Anthropologist; Resilience

Introduction

Cubans are survivors. Just as a blacksmith forges metal with extreme heat, the Cuban character has been hammered out over centuries of corrupt Spanish and American rule. Indigenous peoples, black slaves and the lower classes were ruthlessly oppressed by corrupt colonial leaders and shady American interests [1,2]. Since 1959, Cubans have endured 60 + years of worsening economic conditions. During several *periodos especiales* they have had next to nothing in the way of food, water, medicine, electricity or gasoline. They have learned to survive and make do with the barest of essentials. In the process, they have become incredibly resourceful and inventive at handling hardship with great equanimity.

Cubans excel at grit, innovation, overcoming obstacles and finding ingenious workarounds to resolve problems. They never give up. Undoubtedly there are psychological scars from generations of oppression and repression. However, Cubans generally lack the neurotic traits such as anxiety, negativity or self-doubt which are prevalent in America. The conditions of daily life make neuroticism a luxury that the people cannot afford. Moreover, the lived experience of ordinary Cubans is more grueling than any tourist could even imagine.

In jest, Cubans describe themselves as *cucarachas* or cockroaches. They suffer and bear unimaginable indignities that would crush the spirit of less hardy creatures. And

they joke about it. Cubans are amongst the toughest and most resilient (human) forms of life on the planet. Like cockroaches, they have a very tough outer skin. They are able to go without eating for long periods of time. They can endure (almost) anything and survive.

On the economic side, the Cuban financial system is the antithesis of America's Wall Street. There are no mortgages, no stock markets, no mechanisms for saving, investing or earning interest. There is a 700% difference between the official and the black market exchange rate. The Cuban peso is constantly devaluing against the dollar. Doctors and lawyers earn the equivalent of about \$30/month. Yet the longstanding contradictions and distortions of the Cuban Revolution provide grist for Cuba's unique brand of humor.

Surreal vignettes constantly insert themselves into the island's narrative like uninvited guests that liven up a party. Jokes are a way for Cubans to temporarily overcome the onerous aspects of daily life. Wisecracks and laughter enable them to achieve some measure of imaginary control over unremitting suffering.

On the other hand, Cuba's position outside the capitalist orbit shines a light on the blind spots of capitalism. Extended hardship over generations has wrought extraordinary levels of resilience. Resilience does not take root as easily in countries where there is less repression and continuous access to consumer goods and services. Despite the ever-present reality of daily struggle for survival (*la lucha*), the Cuban spirit is irrepressible. To a large extent Cubans have a sense of soul and community that is missing in America.

Indeed the heartfelt spontaneity of the people is what tourists find so charming. Their lively, animated way of being is attributable to a unique kind of soulfulness. The renowned Cuban cultural anthropologist, Fernando Ortiz, coined the term *Cubanidad*: the original quality or character of being Cuban. Ortiz described this as "a condition of the soul" and suggested that Cuban culture has intriguing and ineffable characteristics that no foreigner can comprehend [3]. Perhaps it is this soulfulness that gives another dimension to Cubans' resilience.

Yet despite their vibrancy, something is still missing. Harsh reality has deprived Cubans of the economic attributes of humanity. In his essay about individuation as a development in collective consciousness in the Americas, Murray Stein asks the question: "Can nations and whole cultural communities individuate?" [4]. Stein concludes:

In this endeavor, North America and South America need each other. From the dialectical play between their cultures, there stems a movement toward greater cultural

wholeness for both sides [5]. This may be especially true for Cuba and the USA. The tension between the opposites is stronger between those two countries than anywhere else in the Americas. Stein refers to this phenomenon as "the cultural distinctiveness (*separatio*) and the "the opportunity to integrate foreign and previously unconscious contents (*coniunctio*) [6].

We will not debate the merits of the Cuban Revolution here. As a practical matter, power flows from party affiliation and not from money. Ordinary Cubans have no power or control over what happens. This fact informs their collective, cultural equation. To invert Swiss psychologist, C.G. Jung: Where there is no Power, there is only Eros. Amidst the suffering and repression of their ordinary lives, soulfulness and survival seem to define the Cuban experience. Both are hard-earned qualities that protect from and compensate what is lacking in everyday life. Likely it is Cubans' ever present Eros and indomitable will to survive that feed their resilience.

Cuba's Non-Market Economy

If the Cuban people are hungry, they will throw Castro out.
-Dwight D. Eisenhower, January 1960

Cuba is the "Bongó" alternative to Wall Street. Its anti-market mentality is a rich source of insight into what seems missing in the profit-motive, market-dominated thinking of the US.

Social and economic distortions on the island appear senseless and contradictory. In so far as the traditional avenues of free enterprise are closed, Cubans reinvent themselves in ingenious, non-traditional ways through their vibrant and multi-faceted artistic expression. In a society in which the state controls and dominates every aspect of life some do in fact simply give up. On the other hand, the state does not control peoples' imagination. Entrepreneurship emerges in spite of the most unfavorable conditions. Every day there are remarkable examples of Cuban entrepreneurs' managing to circumvent the incredibly tight restrictions on free enterprise in inventive and/or clandestine ways.

The following is a poignant exchange that took place on the streets of Santiago, in the Western part of Cuba, in 1998. An enterprising seven-year old boy was trying to persuade a Canadian friend to pay a dollar for keeping watch over the rental car while we ate dinner at a private restaurant. My friend was exasperated with the daily barrage of small but insistent con jobs and irritated at having to pay for a service that was so transparently a con job. He asked the boy a question hoping it would shame the boy into giving up and going away. But the boy's response instantly got the better

of my friend. To my mind the answer was cheeky, absurdly creative and yet perfectly reasonable:

Canadian: What do you want to be when you grow up?

Cuban boy: A foreigner.

This exchange illustrates the imaginative and inventive longing of the Cuban soul (particularly the young male) to find outlets for masculine enterprise in order to survive. The boy cleverly finds a way to trick the foreigner and take money from him, while recognizing the reality that economic life is uncommonly better in other countries. There is not much latitude for Hermes the thief in Cuba. The state does not allow a free market, so people invent little larcenies wherever they can in order to survive. A uniquely Cuban style of cynicism mixed with humor is illustrated by a joke that circulated over the Internet amongst the Cuban expat community.

A Cuban in Heaven... Be Careful What You Ask for!

A Cuban who was a very good man in life, upon death, as expected, was sent to Heaven. For many years he enjoyed eternity. One day he asked God: My God, I would like to be permitted to know Hell for one night, just to know what the place is like.

God in his grace, told him: "If that is your wish it shall be so."

Our good man went down to Hell that night. He entered Hell by some steps of the whitest marble. There, by a neon lighted billboard he saw a gate open in the most spectacular manner revealing an Eden surrounded by rivers of rum, whisky, champagne, and packed with the most beautiful women he had ever seen.

They were all naked and calling out to him. He went over and drank and had his way with as many of them as he desired. He made love without end. It was the greatest night of his life. The next morning at dawn, he returned to Heaven.

The following day, in the morning he spoke with God again and asked him if it was possible for him to move to Hell. God in his infinite compassion agreed again.

The man arranged all of his bureaucratic affairs with the official Heavenly census.

The next week he returned to Hell again. He descended the same stairs and the gate opened again. But this time he fell into a gigantic pot full of sulphur.

He sank deeper into the pot while the Devil stuck him with his trident and another demon tried to put a clamp to his you know where. With considerable effort, he managed to grab hold of the edge of the pot. He drew out his head and said to the Devil, who was relaxing on his throne:

"Master of the darkness, what is this? I was here last week

and everything was marvelous."

And the Devil responded: "You, as a Cuban, already you should know that one thing is to be a tourist -- and another is to be a resident."

Perhaps the lusty soulfulness of Cuba, at least as it appears from the outside, is a well-contrived illusion. That seems to be the point of view reflected in the joke. In fact, more and more people are leaving the island now. Cubans are willing to take enormous risks to escape. A Cuban friend, who had spent two years in jail for the offense of reselling avocados, was subject to another long prison sentence. Rather than go to jail again, he built a makeshift raft to escape. He was caught just off the US coast and sent back to Cuba. So he built another raft. The second time he made it safely ashore.

Business is the biggest illusion of all... Bigger than love

Building a life in America is difficult. Yet compared to Cuba, it seems easy. The majority of Cubans who escape to America are doing very well. Yet, many of them still make the annual pilgrimage back to their island in order to reencounter the Cubanidad that is missing in America. Perhaps like the character that goes back to Hell only to find that it is not what he imagined, Cubans flee their country searching for freedom and stability — an economic Heaven on Earth. But when they get there they miss the soulfulness and solidarity that they knew back home. In essence that is the Cuban-American lament. They escaped to America and built a successful life, but still have a longing for the quality of soulfulness that they left behind.

The era of Fidel, the Cuban fairy-tale hero, who ushered in an era free of American domination at the close of the 1950s, is coming to a close. Cubans await a new age, yet nothing dramatic seems likely to happen until the Castro's legacy ends. Even then, nobody can say what will happen for sure. The government still has a firm hand on power. Perhaps it will manage to carry on for another decade...

The Revolution was made to liberate the people from exploitation at the hands of a corrupt regime that colluded with the mafia to make Cuba a den of iniquity and corruption. The Cuban system has repressed masculine enterprise on the island for generations. Nevertheless, enterprising Cubans have found ways to get around the restrictions without landing in prison. The entrepreneurial spirit remains alive and well in Cuba even if that means having to leave the island at any cost.

One day Cuba and America will celebrate a rapprochement. When that happens, it will provide fertile ground for cross-cultural cooperation on both sides of

the Florida Straits. The “underwater hook” that Guillén so poetically describes in the prologue to *Sóngoro Cosongo* implicitly entails even more than racial harmony. That underwater hook is also an unconscious connection between the USA and Cuba. It symbolizes centuries of subjugation, occupation and political and economic blockade but also the opportunity to build and integrate two cultures that are the shadow of one another.

Political polarization is a fact of life today in the USA. Perhaps America can once again find the inner strength to keep its spirits up during the difficult transitional period that lies ahead. Ultimately resilience is the ability to persevere and remain soulful in the face of overwhelming obstacles. In that sense, it harkens back to the original spirit of the American Revolution. Resilience could well be what the US needs to recover its equilibrium. A renewed spirit of cooperation across the Caribbean could signal the coming conjunction that Stein cites as a goal for the Americas.

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