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## EL COLOR DE LA PIEL UN FACTOR DE DISCRIMINACIÓN EN LA EDUCACIÓN CUBANA

### *Skin color a discriminating factor in Cuban education*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Rarely when dealing with the subject of blacks in Cuba or with education is research presented that goes into this aspect in depth. The most usual forms have been the treatment as part of the educational work of the societies, associations of Africans and their descendants, in which Juan Gualberto Gómez played an outstanding role from the end of the 19th century and during the first decades of the 20th century, at the head of the Directorate of the Coloured Race in Cuba.

His deep concern was to provide this human group with a dignified social ladder, with opportunities for progress and employment in representative branches of social life and not only in equally dignified occupations, but which by their nature did not require intellectual preparation because they were eminently physical.

For Juan Gualberto Gómez, culture should be a bastion to be conquered by the coloured race, and from its reach they would be conquering a dignified treatment in

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<sup>2</sup> The thesis La filosofía de la educación en las sociedades de instrucción y recreo en Cuba, was presented by the author in option to the scientific degree of Doctor in Philosophical Sciences, 2008.

correspondence with their capacities and ingenuity, ceasing to be considered savages for having ties with Africa.

It was a surprise for the author, who had previously addressed the subject of social education for Africans and their descendants at an event in the town of Orozco, Bahía Honda, to find a short text by Salvador García Agüero in which she focused her attention on the issue of the presence of blacks in education.

The text belonged to a lecture read on 30 December 1937, eighty-one years ago, presented at the Municipal Palace as part of the series *Habaneros Ilustres*, published in No. 11 of the *Cuadernos de Historia Habanera*, and it is worth this presentation to pay homage to Havana on its 500th birthday. At the same time, we are in this context recognising an inhabitant of the city, a resident of the Jesús María neighbourhood in the municipality of Old Havana, an outstanding figure in Cuban social history.

## **2. THE DIRECTORY OF THE COLOURED RACE. THE WORK OF JUAN GUALBERTO GÓMEZ**

The presence of the *Directorio de la Raza de Color* must be sought at the end of the 19th century, a period which witnessed the implementation of the Law of Associations by the Spanish Metropolis both for the nation and for the Spanish overseas territories. This law of 1877 put into effect the official registration of *cabildos*, *cofradías*, societies, associations, fraternities, brotherhoods, churches, etc., existing on the island of Cuba to legalise their status, rights and obligations, as well as the continuity of their functions.

The period is complex for the coloured race, since the *cabildos*, prayer chapels and societies had to face this process with a natural disadvantage, the language, and on the other hand, the dominion of a legislation and social culture that was "strange" if we take into account the short period between the total cessation of slavery, the changes in the subsistence life of the former slaves, as well as the obligation to participate in a legal process if they wanted to preserve the only real space they had for the practice of their culture of origin.

Added to this objective situation were the legal skirmishes over the obligation to participate under the invocation of a certain Catholic saint, established by the previous legislation as an unavoidable condition for the admission of these black groups to function. This would imply legal battles against the Catholic Church's intentions to appropriate the *cabildo's* property, be it houses, land, furniture, etc., aggravated by the lack of knowledge of the Spanish language, especially among the group of slaves of the nation. Some of the processes of legitimisation of rights during this period were strong, and so preparation for social life became an imperative of the first order.

Juan Gualberto Gómez thus emerged as the representative figure for the change required by the coloured race, because of his biological origins, his opportunity, culture, his sense of national identity and socio-racial identity, called upon him to participate in the intention of providing this ethno-racial group with an educational preparation that

would allow them to move towards better opportunities for work, life and social representation.

For Juan Gualberto Gómez, culture should be a bastion to be conquered by the coloured race, and from its reach, they would be conquering a dignified treatment in correspondence with their capacities and ingenuity, ceasing to be considered savages because they had ties with Africa. With this idea in mind, he worked for the constitution of the Central Directory of the Societies of the coloured race, with domicile in the coachmen's centre of the city of Havana, its creation on the 2nd of June 1887.

The purpose: to respond to the need to unite efforts for the moral and material well-being of this race. In an article by Juan Gualberto Gómez himself, published in *La Igualdad* on 15 June 1892 in Havana, under the title *Lo que es el Directorio* (What the Directory is), in response to questions from different parts of the island about its character and mission, he explains:

“The intellectual effort of the coloured class, since the establishment of the regime in force, has been directed towards the establishment of Societies of Instruction and Recreation which have been created in the main towns and which, being the only collectives organised by the men of our race, are also those which are most legitimately represented by the people.<sup>3</sup>”

The Board of Directors is created to unite the partial efforts of all the Societies of the Coloured Breed. Article 1. Refers is formed by the representation of all the societies of the same race:

- ✓ Coachmen's centre,
- ✓ Cooks' Centre,
- ✓ Bella unión habanera,
- ✓ Friends of Progress,
- ✓ Our Lady of Mercy
- ✓ Purísima Concepción Society
- ✓ Our Lady of Guadalupe
- ✓ Divine Charity,
- ✓ Our Lady of La Cinta
- ✓ Our Lady of Regla,
- ✓ Artisans of Havana,
- ✓ Our Lady of Monserrate,
- ✓ Buen Suceso
- ✓ Detroit, etc.

The domicile of the association, *Directorio de la Raza de Color*, was at No. 6 Aguacate Street since September 20, 1888.

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<sup>3</sup> On page 1, paragraph 2

In its general bases, Chapter 3, article 5<sup>o</sup> declares its main object is to maintain a serious and authorised representation close to the authorities, Charitable Centres, Abolitionists, Economic Society, Higher Education Centres and all those from whom the protection and improvement of the interests of the black race in the different orders of life can be obtained within the strictest legality.

Article 6. Declares that it shall promote, by all lawful means within its reach, the improvement of morals, morality, community aspirations, the propagation of useful knowledge and, in short, all that directly and indirectly may be of benefit to the black race.

Article 7<sup>o</sup> It shall also strive, as a consequence of the fraternal spirit that animates it, to establish an unbreakable basis for the community of interests and aspirations, the closest union with all the centres of Instruction and Recreation, Mutual Aid, Brotherhoods, etc. etc., in order to avoid collisions, antagonisms and all kinds of difficulties that may hinder their progressive progress. (...)

The following articles are essential for education, thus article 8<sup>o</sup> It will request the creation of primary schools for children of both sexes and, failing that, the admission of children of both races to the establishments.

Article 9<sup>o</sup> It will manage the appropriate placement and admission of coloured youths in the University, Provincial Institutes, Professional Schools, Teachers' Training Colleges, etc., etc., either by paying for their education, or by requesting the option of free places, which are or will be granted as a mercy, as well as admission to the Royal House of Charity for underprivileged children.

Article 10<sup>o</sup> Considering the development of Instruction as the only basis of our future prosperity, it will give preference to the creation of as many lay colleges as possible; it will organise conferences on instructive subjects, competitions and functions whose nature will be a constant stimulus for the individuals of our race.

Further on he synthesises, 'As can be seen, the Directory is something like the concentration of the coloured class of Cuba that is carried out with the aim of having a representation that can in all cases manage with the Authorities, Public Powers and Corporations, both official and private, everything that is of interest to the black man in the different spheres of social life. '

Denounces, at every moment events occur which affect the entire coloured class or which, by hurting individuals of its bosom, are of such a generic nature that by rejection they hurt or interest the coloured class in general. (...)

The Directory is a large social group, it seems useless to consider that there is no room for political struggles or religious controversies within it, therefore it calls for the integration and unity of the group to join regardless of political or religious affiliation.

By its nature, the Directory aspires to be the representative of the Coloured Race on the island of Cuba. It gives space to all men of all opinions, it respects the political and general problems of Cuba, as well as those of the coloured race. The agreements are taken by majority vote.

This association was cancelled as a Directory on 21 August 1891, but not the different societies that constituted it, which followed an independent trajectory throughout the 20th century, for example the Societies of Instruction and Recreation, popularly known as Societies of Blacks existing throughout the national geography.

### **3. THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE BEQUEATHED BY SALVADOR GARCÍA AGÜERO IN RELATION TO CUBAN EDUCATION**

In the conference he spoke of Lorenzo Meléndez, a Lieutenant of the Battalion of Granaderos Pardos, born around the middle of the 18th century, mulatto, with a remarkable performance during the defence of Havana, to the point of being ready to have himself killed to defend it against the English invader, an attitude that denotes his sense of belonging to the place of residence and birth.

Meléndez became a teacher by altruistic vocation in union with Mariano Moya, a free brown like him, who with enlightening vision warned that cooperative instruction, understanding and love in the rectification of brutal prejudices in the soul of the dominant race was an important factor for the recovery of the coloured race of their self-esteem, dignity and valuation as human beings.

His school was of high credit, taught reading, writing, accounts, grammar and spelling, and had an enrolment of one hundred and twenty pupils, of whom forty were white and eighty coloured, a high figure for the time and the state of education.

Fray Félix González, a contemporary of Meléndez, describes it very well when he characterizes, " the short stipend given to the teachers could barely reach them for a small house and to live with scarcity and misery, (...), later he adds, only the unhappy and useless could apply himself to be a teacher and leave it when he found an occasion that offered him more profit and comfort, because anyone who applied himself to another exercise of less subjection and task got more fruit from his work. "

The lines written by the friar reveal the plight of the teacher, the dedication required and the personal convictions as the driving force behind the need for this service, so that instead of engaging in a better paid and economically compensated activity, he opted for this one. On the other hand, if we consider Meléndez's previous military life, where the salary opportunities were superior, we can understand why Salvador García Agüero describes his choice as altruistic and holds his work in high esteem, to the point of writing a conference on this teacher who has been forgotten with the passing of time, but who dignifies the sense of service to society that the teaching profession provides with its work.

The pragmatic reflection of the "maker of souls and moral norms", Friar González, and his qualification of "unhappy and useless" for those who privileged the welfare of many to the detriment of their own personal welfare, is interesting and leaves much to be desired in the opposite direction. A hypocritical dichotomy between thought and practice, with respect to what he must have preached in his daily work.

García Agüero provides other data that indicate the concern and interest that this topic generated in him and provides information on:

- During the 16th - 18th centuries, primary education and culture were not an important or sensitive concern in colonial society.
- In 1569 a school was founded by Juan Roger, a Spanish missionary, where Juan B. Segura taught Indian children for a time.
- He dates the fleeting existence of the first school in Havana to 1605.
- He points out that it was in the 18th century, after the English occupation, that the intellectual concern about the need to expand the instructional capacity began and he links to this intention the appearance of the first convent schools, citing as an example the school of the Convent of Belén and the work of Fray González in it.
- He highlights the influence of Don Luis de las Casas, Governor General in 1790 and the impetus given to the creation of the Sociedad Patriótica de la Habana in 1793.
- He highlights Antonio Bachiller y Morales, recognised as the first Cuban bibliographer, as prejudiced and hostile to blacks like the social majority of his time, he repudiated contact between blacks and whites, he also declared himself opposed to the instruction carried out by blacks and browns, in this respect García Agüero quotes: " the most degraded and ignorant race will teach the Caucasian. And, This oddity produced another that the Economic Society sought to destroy, the confusion in the same enclosure, of all colours and castes, thus fostering, from infancy, that element of moral confusion that brings with it the inevitable familiarity of young people of different conditions in slave countries. "

Salvador García Agüero's cultural breadth is exposed when he recognises, in accordance with Hegel, that " the march of ideas is a consequence of the march of things; the march of thought is explained by the march of life. With this quotation he closes his assessment of the position of Antonio Bachiller y Morales.

He notes that in 1809, the first regulations for the Government of Teachers were drawn up, but they were never made firm and were left to the choice of each teacher; they sought to deny blacks all instruction, which must have given rise to great debates that left the matter open.

He explains with a quote from José Antonio Saco, 1797 - 1879, his thinking when he said " the custom of children of both sexes meeting in one room, and the mixing of the white and African races, was abolished. It also prohibited the teaching of free people of

colour, although they were tolerated to exercise it to a limited extent with those of the same race.”.

He was a teacher at the Buenavista school in Havana, and had a great influence on the development of education and Cuban culture in general in the 19th century. For him, (...) public instruction is the firmest foundation on which the happiness of the people rests (...) Let us establish, then, for the poor who cannot afford to pay for their education, the competent number of schools in all the towns and countryside.

This controversial figure in national history was staunchly anti-slavery, but always rejected the humanitarian principles of abolitionism. This position rested on the conviction that blacks, slaves or freedmen, were the main enemy of Cuban nationality, which he confined to white Creoles.

The analysis carried out revealed the sharpness of the issue, the passions aroused, the positions that clashed for and against. He argues with data and examples, such as the case of 13 December 1827, when the Havana City Council denied the free brown Ana del Toro permission to teach First Letters to girls of colour. He also describes the ideas of Félix Varela about the right of all to education and of Juan Gualberto Gómez against the separation of blacks and whites in the classroom.

He provides some statistical data taken from Trelles, to make a simple but valuable comparison of the social situation of blacks in education. However, it has the added value of being sufficiently instructive to appreciate the urgency of education as a societal need and the near parity of disadvantage between the groups compared in the 20th century, the disparity in the 19th century being alarming. Although minimal access to education for both groups.

IN CUBA THEY KNOW HOW TO READ		
YEAR	WHITES	BLACKS
1862	30%	4%
1920	49%	44%

- By 1937 there are 1 170 Black Masters in practice.

He closes with the contributions of the Negro group to education and stresses that the alternative was found in the creation of the Cultural Societies of instruction and recreation, both in the country and in emigration, citing examples of the latter:

- Society “ El Progreso ” in Key West
- Society “ La Verdad ”, Tampa.
- Society “ La Liga ”, New York.

Salvador García Agüero's work with the aim of preparing the conference and arguments on black education in Cuba, places us in the position of appreciating this field

as a crucial scenario of struggle for social equality, so the importance it assumes throughout national history, brings us closer to the dimension of this figure that is among the least studied by the generations of the present and to which, like that of Meléndez in 1937, we must do justice in 2018 and the near future.

But were Meléndez and Moya the only individuals " of colour " engaged in education at this time, have they been the only ones forgotten?

They have not been the only ones I dare to answer, as I place at the disposal of all present and those who may read these pages some names accompanied by details about the work they developed as teachers. I recognise that it is not as detailed as I would have liked, as the search for more information is complex; but at least it opens the way to the hope that more will be done in this direction.

They were outstanding masters in the 19th century:

1. **MATÍAS VELASCO**, son of a slave and priest. He was a man of profound knowledge of the law, which meant that his gatherings were attended by scholars of his time, who listened to him and discussed with respect.
2. **JOSÉ CALZADA**, was an individual who received praise in the press of the time. In 1826 he ran a school in which children of different races learnt.
3. **FRANCISCO PASTOR RODRÍGUEZ**, dentist like his father, founded in 1866 the first Dental Depot in Spanish America, in 1879 the Dental Society of Havana and in 1881 the Dental College " El Progreso."
4. **SECUNDINO ARANGO**, a remarkable cellist in great demand by foreign opera companies, mastered numerous instruments. He was a well-known and famous music teacher. His pupils included:
  - José Silvestre White
  - Francisco de Paula Arango, his son, later an eminent violinist and professor at the Academy of Music in Havana.
5. **JUANA PASTOR**, teacher and poet born in the neighbourhood of Jesús María y José, well versed in arithmetic, geometry, grammar and Latin, died in the practice of her profession. She was a mentor to the most distinguished ladies of her time.
6. **ANTONIO MEDINA**, poet, comediographer, tailor and teacher, lived in Jesús María Street, San Isidro neighbourhood, in Old Havana. He was the teacher of Juan Gualberto Gómez.
7. **LEÓN MONZÓN**, Havana teacher, deported to Spain accused of conspiracy, founded a school in La Coruña.
8. **PILAR BORREGO**, Havana teacher, very concerned about the education of black women, was deported together with León Monzón and with him was co-founder of the school in La Coruña.

#### 4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Salvador García Agüero's work to talk about black teachers and the efforts of this human group to carry out the necessary education that dignifies human beings



and places them in a better position to face life has been commendable. At the same time, it provided us with an opportunity to approach a little-studied figure in our national history.

- The issue of access to education was throughout our history and until 1959, when the Revolution to which we are heirs triumphed, a matter of political struggle for equal social rights, against racial discrimination and for social justice.
- Remembering, researching and socialising the results is, in these times, a way of contributing to the general comprehensive culture of the profession and to the profession's fight against the ideopolitical stigma of social differentiation based on skin colour.

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