

# ***Cubanidad: Survival of Cuban Cultural Identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***

By Maria Morukian

The history of Cuba is studded with social unrest and the struggle for international recognition and self-control. For the past forty years, the Castro government has fought to survive as a communist regime and to maintain a national sense of defiance, particularly against the United States. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union has forced Cuba to open its doors to more diverse foreign investment and international tourism, thereby introducing the ideals of capitalism and consumerism into a socialist society. Although foreign relations, especially between Cuba and the United States, remain on shaky ground, the Cuban government has taken strides to increase the flow of communication between Cuba and the rest of the world. In the past decade, major changes have taken place to increase tourism and foreign capital in Cuba, yet along with these changes come various concerns regarding the preservation of Cuban culture and the welfare of Cuban society.

Cuba is on the threshold of entering an interconnected global environment, and in order to thrive while maintaining its strong individual identity, it is imperative that new institutions be introduced and existing institutions be developed in order to prepare Cuba for the effects of a consumer society. Despite the Castro government's fear that loosening its absolute control over international exchange could result in the loss of the distinct Cuban culture, the state must submit more power to civil society by allowing citizens to participate in the decision-making processes of the nation and recognizing Cuban citizens as consumers of universal popular culture by granting civil society control over the mass media. These changes can be accomplished without the threat of sacrificing the essence of *Cubanidad*, yet it will take a great deal of compromise and ingenuity on the part of both national and international organizations.

It must be noted that this paper does not argue for the complete decentralization and democratization of the Cuban government. Rather, the paper focuses on researching the history and foundation of the Cuban identity and what measures must be taken to both preserve the Cuban culture and to give Cuban society the flexibility it needs to participate more productively in the international community.

## **The Essence of *Cubanidad***

In order to understand the future of Cuban culture, it is necessary to investigate the ideals of *Cubanidad* and how the national and cultural identities have been cultivated. To begin with, Cubans are extremely proud of their culture and eager to share the different facets of the country's history. The island's mixture of Spanish, African, and indigenous roots and its history of contradiction and struggle have played large roles in forming the national identity that thrives on both assimilation and diversity. Despite Communism's stark imprint on the face of Cuba, the island continues to display its love for the characteristic vibrance and warmth of the Caribbean. As Dr. Pablo Fernandez, Cuba's *poet laureate*, pointed out, Spain may have given Cuba a language, but Africa gave Cuba its soul.<sup>1</sup> The influence of these diverse cultures on the Cuban identity was ignored through the centuries under Spanish rule, as the history books were essentially written from the viewpoint of the Spanish *conquistadors*. Racial and ethnic discrimination greatly altered the representation of the indigenous and African populations and undermined their struggles under the Spanish Crown. Thus, the histories and lifestyles of the "others" survived through vibrant music and dance, and through legends and myths that have been kept alive and handed down through the generations. The Castro Revolution altered the idea of the white intellectual definition of *Cubanidad*, however, helping Cuban identity evolve into the ideology of a nation defined by its solidarity, the *cubania revolucionaria* that we see today.<sup>2</sup>

Cuban culture has historically been laced with the struggle for freedom from oppression and the fight for independence. When the Spanish arrived in the New World, the *conquistadors* immediately began their crusade to overpower the native Cuban people and exploit them in the Spanish Crown's pursuit for riches and land. Over the next four hundred years, the Spanish ruled Cuba with a heavy imperialist hand. In colonial Cuba, there was no imminent need for the Spanish elite to create any sort of hegemonic ideology to maintain cohesion among the masses, since there was no "counter-elite" to challenge the imperialist government.<sup>3</sup> The lower social classes were believed to lack the uniformity and the motivation to discover their own Cuban identity, yet they strived to retain their unique ethnic identities. The Afro-Cuban religious practices of *santeria*, which developed to give an identity to the growing population of blacks and *mulatos* on the island, can still be witnessed today, and are now valued by Cubans of various ethnic backgrounds as a vital part of the national identity, although the presence of racial inequality can still be observed all over the country.

The early development of the term *Cubanidad* can be accredited to José Antonio Saco, a political scientist and philosopher who recognized the importance of defining Cuban nationality in order to protect Cuba from remaining colonized by Spain or being annexed by the United States.<sup>4</sup> Saco defined *Cubanidad* by the common language and tradition shared by the Cuban people in comparison with European nations or the United States.<sup>5</sup> Although Saco's definition of Cuban identity was based wholly on the *criollo* viewpoint, thus omitting the presence of African and indigenous cultural influence, his concept of Cuban nationality emphasized the importance of community and cultural unity, which helped to build the foundation for a distinct Cuban identity. Saco's ideals helped to influence other Cuban *criollo* patriots, and the roots of Cuban identity were finally realized on a mass scale with the *criollo* revolt to abolish slavery in Cuba in the late 1860s, led by Carlos Manuel de Céspedes. Céspedes' liberation of his slaves in 1868 helped provide another layer on the foundation of the national identity and "myth-creation" in Cuba.<sup>6</sup>

José Martí, arguably the greatest contributor to the fundamental ideals of *Cubanidad*, supplanted many of the perspectives that continue to guide Cuban society. Martí introduced the importance of a unified strength that would connect the nation with its people through a common identity, regardless of racial or ethnic difference.<sup>7</sup> Martí also recognized the significance of internationalism and encouraged the conglomeration of Latin American states to unify their strength and fulfill his dream of "*Nuestra América*."<sup>8</sup> Martí's main goals were to instill solidarity among all Cuban people and to create a new popular social class that would balance the power of the elite class.<sup>9</sup>

Although the War of 1898 granted Cuba's independence from Spain, the island now found itself mainly under the thumb of the United States government. The Platt Amendment gave the U.S. government the power to intervene into Cuban affairs whenever it felt that its interests were at risk. The Cuban people to this day will argue vehemently that Cuba did not need the U.S. interference in its war against Spain, and furthermore, that the United States falsely declared itself the liberator of the island: "The United States frustrated our attempt to have a sovereign nation. When Cuba was almost at the point of achieving independence from Spain, the United States intervened."<sup>10</sup> The following years created social division and discontent among the Cubans, especially for the working classes who were not able to partake in the spoils of American tourism and trade. It is not surprising that the Cubans embraced the ideology of the Revolution led by Fidel Castro, which promised to give the island back to the Cuban people. The Castro government spoke of restoring dignity and morality to the Cuban people, and, most importantly, protecting the Cuban culture from U.S. hegemony. The new regime, after its overthrow of the Batista government in 1959, quickly began to demonstrate its resolve to reform Cuba as a socialist nation.

The historic details of the Revolution's accomplishments as well as its basic ideals continue to represent a large part of *Cubanidad*. Today, the legends that represent the historical progress for Cuban independence can be seen throughout the country. The men and women who gave themselves to the cause have been idolized in Cuban history books: Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, Antonio Maceo, José Martí, and then of course, Fidel Castro, Ché Guevara, Camilo Cienfuegos, and the many other revolutionaries who liberated Cuba from the Batista government. The faces and figures of these heroes are plastered all over the island – on highway billboards, in the squares, in schools, and in every souvenir shop, art gallery, and restaurant in every town. Cuban people revel in the words and actions of these heroes who have evolved from being mere humans to becoming demigods.

One of the most prominent examples of the importance of struggle in Cuban identity can be found in the propaganda slogans taken from the leaders whom the country adores. For instance, in the Revolution Square in the middle of Havana, the front of the impressive Ministry of the Interior building is covered by a monolithic steel structure formed into the face of Ché Guevara, with the famous inscription, "*Hasta la Victoria Siempre*" in Ché's handwriting. In the shops and markets that line the streets of Old Havana, T-shirts, coffee mugs, posters, and calendars carry images of the famous revolutionary and his words. These images are more than just symbols of national pride; they are a part of the codes that form the basis of Cuban thought and ideology. The idolatry of Ché Guevara as the fallen hero of the Revolution has survived over the last few decades mainly because his continuous presence in the Cuban culture has provided the people with a sense of solidity through their times of difficulty. The symbol of Ché has become a lasting emblem on which Cubans of all ages rely,<sup>11</sup> as well as a constant reminder of the ideal of "*el nuevo hombre*," the ideal that every Cuban should follow a collectivist lifestyle, working for the good of all.<sup>12</sup>

The history of intense struggle and the collectivist ideology that constitutes Cuban identity demonstrates the potential for controversy and social unrest, especially since Cubans regard the world superpowers, particularly the United States, as a looming enemy waiting to steal their country's prize possession - its independence. At the same time, this strong collective society with its high regard to intellectual thought and intense protection of Cuban culture promises to preserve the ideals of its founding fathers as it gains a foothold in the global community.

## Maintaining Cuban Identity in the Global Community

The primary issue that concerns Cuba today is how to prepare its social structures for the consumer market without sacrificing the basic components of *Cubanidad*. Since a great deal of modern Cuban identity is tied to revolutionary ideology, this is a delicate task to undertake. Although the Cuban identity is fraught with socialist ideals, the Cuban people have grown weary of living in the past. Cubans will continue to take pride in the ideals of Fidel Castro and the past accomplishments of the Revolution. However, the people are eager to create new objectives to improve their quality of life. Hence, Cubans have had to redefine which factors of their socialist structure are expendable and which factors must remain untouched in order to maintain cohesion with their cultural identity.<sup>13</sup>

Although the Special Period through the 1990s introduced a great deal of hardship to Cuban society, today the Cubans are attempting new ways to settle onto firmer economic ground. *Cubanidad* combines a continuing ideology of the battle to survive with the upbeat and optimistic attitude that, with a little hard work, life will improve for everyone.

However, the ideals that have been instilled in the minds of every Cuban since 1959 have had to be re-examined. Some Cuban scholars argue that Marxism-Leninism is an unfinished and flexible philosophy, which leaves an open door that invites redefinition of certain ideas and values, and that the main detail to remember is that socialism provides “greater potential for a just society, which makes it superior to capitalism.”<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, capitalism has begun to introduce itself into the economic system, and along with its vices comes a vast potential to lift the island out of the extreme poverty it has endured since the beginning of the Special Period. Cuba already has made progress in integrating itself into the international community and committing to “a successful adjustment to the world of the 1990s and beyond.”<sup>15</sup> The Castro government, although ostracized by the United States, has managed to make its presence felt in many international organizations, including the United Nations, which in 1999 passed a vote in the General Assembly denouncing the U.S. embargo against the island.<sup>16</sup> Fidel Castro has worked diligently to create a political Cuban presence at almost every international event in the last few years.<sup>17</sup> Cuba has gained global acceptance as a provider of medical aid to suffering countries, and has set an example to many developing nations in providing social services like education, health care, and food distribution. One of the landmark events that brought Cuba into the global limelight was the 1998 visit from Pope John Paul II. The visit marked Castro’s acceptance of coexistence of the Revolution and the Catholic Church in Cuba. The visit also signified the Church’s wish to provide a bridge between “institutions of the state and the autonomous organs of civilian life.”<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, the last decade has produced resurgence in foreign investment and tourism in Cuba. Once the Soviet Union fell and Cuba was plunged into the Special Period, the government began to reassess the importance of tourism for the country’s plummeting economy. In the 1990s, the Cuban Ministry of Tourism launched a development program to revive the tourist industry. The Cuban economy made the move to legalize the US dollar and the Euro, and the government loosened its restrictions on travelers. In fact, a study in 1996 showed that Cuba had encountered the highest growth rate of international visitors in Latin America, as it soared from 25<sup>th</sup> place in 1985 to 12<sup>th</sup> place in 1996.<sup>19</sup> There were over 1.1 million tourists introduced to the island in that year, and the numbers have been steadily growing.<sup>20</sup> The Cuban government has allowed several international hotel chains to open properties in the tourist areas of the island, creating both international popularity for travel to Cuba and increasing employment opportunities for Cuban workers in the industry. The Ministry of Tourism is also working to diversify its tourist market, with plans to introduce golf resorts, marinas, theme parks, and scuba diving in order to increase its stance in the international tourist market.<sup>21</sup>

Yet major concerns arise with the integration of Cuba in the international community, namely the Castro government’s anti-US policy; its fear of “Americanization;” and its intolerance for public criticism. Primarily, there is great concern that the allowance of outside influence, particularly through international media, will open the country once again to the infiltration of United States democratic expansion. Moreover, interventionism in a country’s domestic politics is not necessarily conducive to building strong international relations, especially in the case of Cuba, which has a long history of being swapped between countries like a baseball card, with no regard for its own desire for independence. Castro’s continued popularity is largely a result of his legitimate crusade to defend national sovereignty.<sup>22</sup> The state also fears that introducing the island to the international market and consumerism will not only take away from its total control of Cuban society, but also that it will create a hegemonic “Americanized” popular culture dictated mainly by the desire for material possessions rather than the moral incentives so relevant to the ideals of *solidaridad*.

However, these assumptions do not leave room for the interception of media messages by intermediary structures like the family and the community, both of which are prominent institutions in the Cuban society. The introduction of a globalized “transnational community” would not denigrate the importance of the Cuban community.<sup>23</sup> Incorporation of material incentives does not necessarily lead to a supposed “dog-eat-dog mentality”<sup>24</sup> if the moral incentives that have driven the Cuban society for so many years remain intact. In other words, the Cuban media can be utilized to both encourage participation in the international marketplace and promote the necessity of social responsibility.<sup>25</sup>

The government fears that an increase in cultural exchange may elicit criticism that would “erode the Cuban regime from within.”<sup>26</sup> Journalists, students, and human rights activists, even though they are not government-sponsored, could manipulate the Cuban people and spread dissidence throughout the country. The Cuban government views human rights as not just political but social, focusing on preparing the people and the country to defend themselves against any threats to the island’s sovereignty. The Cuban government’s protection of national human rights is based on condemning any Cuban citizens who are believed to be working for the United States as spies, and the sentences dealt to these dissidents are exceedingly harsh. Any Cubans who “act with foreign powers to subvert the government of Fidel Castro” will be subject to the full force of Cuban law.<sup>27</sup> Even foreign diplomats in Cuba who engage in friendly relations with Cuban dissidents will be chastised by the government, as in the recent case of EU ambassadors who, upon inviting dissidents to embassy events, have been ridiculed by the Cuban Foreign Ministry and have found themselves barred from official Cuban events.<sup>28</sup>

The result is international ridicule of the Castro regime, which has been globally reproached for human rights violations in its harsh judgment of dissidents within Cuba. A large portion of the complaints of the unjust punishment of Cuban dissidents that are reported to organizations such as Amnesty International, Americas Watch, and the Organization of American States come from Cuban-American and Cuban exile organizations,<sup>29</sup> which harms the island’s reputation in the global human rights community. The negative media coverage that has arisen from the government’s punishment of those who criticize Castro has tainted Cuba’s promising image as an international tourist attraction as well as its reputation as a valid participant in the international community.

## **Giving a Voice to Civil Society**

In its efforts to protect the values of *Cubanidad*, the Castro government has made the Cuban ideal of solidarity synonymous with exclusion. Yet the current situation in Cuba demands international contact and participation. In order to counteract Cuba’s major concerns for the negative aspects of global integration, the Cuban government must recognize the voice of civil society. The government already has a high level of civilian participation in social organizations. The strong presence of local organizations such as the CDR (*Comité de Defensa de la Revolución*), reflects the importance for the Cuban people to celebrate their *solidaridad*.<sup>30</sup> Yet such organizations are controlled by the government and, as can be seen from the title, focus mainly on preserving the communist ideals of the Revolution. There is a need for non-government community organizations that focus on building a forum for public debate of social issues. These associations would permit Cuban scholars to participate in issues on the national and international levels, thereby earning Cuba legitimacy in the international community. Such “think tanks” could participate with international NGOs that share their interests of various social concerns and allow the exchange of information between nations. In addition, these civil organizations can take responsibility for addressing the fear of U.S. imperialism descending on the country and bringing socioeconomic inequality and corruption by battling the issues that accompany increased tourism and trade.

The Cuban government’s social system has held public support over the years because the people recognize and appreciate the social benefits the government has provided them at the times when they needed those services. The government must continue to support community organizations and to guarantee the benefits that Cuban society requires to survive, including education, health care, and employment security. However, the new services essential to the survival of Cuban society are modern technology and unlimited access to the international media. The integration of international media and pop culture must be allowed and encouraged, yet with the protection of the national cultural symbols that are so significant to Cuban identity.

Needless to say, the key to finding balance in the social system is through the mass media. The Revolution has utilized media propaganda to define the ideals of socialism to the Cuban people, so it would be natural to do the same to promote new ideals for the changing society while continuing to uphold the principles of *Cubanidad*. In order to simultaneously expose Cuba to the international community and to introduce the rest of the world to the many facets of the Cuban culture, the Cuban government must loosen its restrictions on the mass media. The free flow of information

that will result will provide for more complete international communication and understanding, better access to modern technology in a variety of fields, and a public forum for the Cuban people to communicate within the nation and share their ideas and concerns. Although the Cuban population is well educated and eager to learn more about international affairs, the people lack full access to outside information. Cuba is well respected in the international community for its literacy campaign and its devotion to providing all Cubans with exposure to art and culture. Cuba's literacy rate, at 98%, is the highest in Latin America and one of the highest in the world.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the majority of Cubans have televisions and radios in their homes, and the broadcasting agencies include a wide variety of U.S. movies and TV programs in their daily schedules.

On the other hand, the access to outside media channels is still exceedingly restricted. Since the state controls all printing agencies and book distributors, Cubans have limited access to controversial literature printed abroad. Cuban writers living in the country find it practically impossible to publish any literature that may be considered critical of the Castro government. Likewise, the state-owned radio and television stations do not provide the Cuban people with access to world news and political views as seen from other nations. The government does permit limited Internet and email access, and computers have dial-up networks on computers in the universities, Internet cafes, and some tourist hotels. However, the majority of Cubans do not have access to Internet-enabled computers in the urban areas because the cost is too high, or in rural areas simply because they lack such provisions. Those who are able to gain access are still not guaranteed complete freedom on the Web because the Cuban government carefully regulates the Internet.

Since the government controls practically all channels of media into and out of the island, it can freely utilize the mass media to preach its doctrines to the people. Although the Cuban Constitution guarantees free speech to all its citizens, the state ownership of all mass media channels, including radio, television, and newspapers, ensures that the information distributed to the people of Cuba is carefully limited to news that supports the opinions of the Castro government.<sup>32</sup> The two major newspapers distributed to the country are both produced by the Communist party. Moreover, the government prohibits daily publications from independent groups such as labor unions or other organizations that could possibly initiate "constructive criticism" of government policies.<sup>33</sup>

Instead, it is the duty of the state-owned media to provide the public with the ability to have access to worldwide outlets and to have freedom to discuss and debate both national and international issues. Every educational facility across the island must be provided with up-to-date computer equipment, including Internet access. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of the state to improve objectivity in news coverage and allow journalists and writers to conduct open debates over crucial social issues without fear of punishment. The introduction of civilian-run newspapers and magazines would allow the public exposure to differing viewpoints and an improved variety of information.

In order to achieve balance of control between the state and the people over the information distributed through the country, it is necessary to put regulations into place that allow civilian institutions to monitor the state-run media and participate in the flow of information within Cuba and between Cuba and other nations.

In regards to the preservation of Cuban culture amidst the introduction of the international influence, the state has founded a number of organizations that have gained recognition for their work in exposing and encouraging Cuban national culture. These organizations have the power to help preserve Cuban identity as the country intermingles more with other cultures. Since the early 1960s, the Cuban government has strived to develop highly regarded cultural associations, including The National Recording Institute for Music, the National School of Arts (*Cubanacán*), and the National Institute for Radio and Television, to name a few. The Cuban government also regularly sponsors a variety of national and international cultural festivals, such as the International Festival of Ballet and the Latin American Biennial in the Visual Arts.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to these cultural foundations, it is necessary once again to comment on the immense influence of the family and the community in Cuba. The stories of national heroes are related to children at a young age, and Cuban schools indoctrinate the values of these legends to their students. Cubans of all ages take great pride in the rich history of the island, on the beauty of their land, in the phenomenal music and dance talents that have changed the face of international music, and even on the daily lifestyle led by all Cubans. It is important to reflect that these institutions are crucial in the Cuban culture, and play a significant role in sustaining the norms of solidarity and social responsibility.

## Conclusion

The Cuban people believe strongly that the Revolution will survive, even though it is necessary for it to continue to evolve. Cubans welcome the introduction of more trade and travel between the island and its “imperialist” neighbor to the North, yet many also believe that the United States has a strategy for destroying the Cuban Revolution and the socialist system.<sup>35</sup> Contrary to the general beliefs of the U.S. public, the Cuban people continue to favor their system of governance and to believe in the ideals of the Revolution, even though they anticipate developments that can only come with mixing some factors of capitalism into their socialist structure: “We in Cuba are aware of the need for change...We are inevitably moving towards a mixed economy in terms of the relations of production and we are trying to save the socialist nature of the redistribution of wealth created through this mixed economy.”<sup>36</sup>

The role of civil society in the preservation of *Cubanidad* is paramount. The Castro government’s history of utilizing the mass media to instill the ideals of the Revolution illustrates how effective the media can be in influencing the public. Now, it is necessary for the Cuban government to relax its controls over domestic and transnational media distribution. In order to deal with the concerns that arise along with the integration of a mixed economy, the Cuban government must allow for civilian-run organizations to exercise more power in political and social decision-making processes.

A great deal more research must be done in order to assess how civil society in Cuba can gain more power. The subject calls for an analysis of how power would be distributed, where funding would come from, and who would be called upon to run these organizations, to name just a few of the many issues that must be addressed. It is necessary to point out that the Castro regime is not likely to grant control to civil organizations, as the government too greatly fears the loss of total power. However, as Cuba falls further into economic strife, and the state is forced to turn to foreign investment and aid to boost the Cuban economy, the government will have to address the rising voices of discontent both within and beyond its own country.

As a result of the increase in civil society’s control over the mass media, the state can earn public support both domestically and abroad, and simultaneously conquer the fears that accompany Cuba’s integration into the international community. These organizations must focus not only on serving the needs of their respective communities, but also on continuing to promote Cuban nationalism. National pride in Cuban society is prominent, and the celebration of the individuality of the Cuban culture so greatly valued by the Cuban people will never be erased.

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