



International Conference

# Cuba & Africa

Engagements, Circulations and  
Racial Representations

23 – 24 May 2016

The Institute for Humanities in Africa (HUMA),  
University of Cape Town, Republic of South Africa

In September 2012, the fourth meeting of ‘African Solidarity with Cuba’ took place at the African Union, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. For two days, representatives of 27 African countries engaged in discussions with a Cuban delegation to cries of ‘Viva Fidel!’ and ‘Cuba estamos contigo!’ Delegates discussed shared struggles, the sanctions against Cuba, the fate of the ‘Cuban Five’ held in the United States and the joint development of Cuba and African countries. What did this show of solidarity reflect? Was it Cuban internationalism with a taste of anachronism? Pan-Africanism nourished in the matrix of Marxism? Developmentalism supported by policies of collaboration? Renewed South-South solidarity? (Adams 1981, Adi 2014, Falk 1987, Gleijeses 1996). To address these questions, we have to go back over the histories, representations and practices that accompanied, transformed or influenced the relations between Cuba and Africa. The objective of this first meeting is to measure the scale of the many-sided engagements between Cuba and many African countries.

## 1. The contours of a ‘Cuban pan-Africanism’

Our national historiographies, no less pressing in independent Africa, and our approaches by “cultural areas” might well have impeded considering the scale of Cuban engagement in Africa after 1959. The different areas of this multi-dimensional cooperation are to be considered together. Military engagement, as in the exceptional case of Angola, where tens of thousands of Cuban soldiers served during the 1970s and 1980s, and dramatically, even definitively, altered the balance of forces in southern Africa, from Luanda to Pretoria (Gleijeses 2002, 2013). Medical cooperation was implemented in many parts of the continent during particular crises or, more regularly, to train local doctors. Education was promoted through technical, administrative and university training of large numbers of young people and professionals, either at home or, often, in Havana. In the realm of culture, starting with music from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, theatre and dance companies founded at the outset of the Revolution in Cuba (Hagedorn 2011) and after independence in West Africa (Djebbari 2012), largely contributed to the process of nation-building. In the religious domain, Cuba made a comeback as representative of Yoruba traditions within an ambivalent relation with Nigeria (Argyriadis and Capone 2004, 2011, Gobin

2014). What is at stake is not so much ‘accounting’ of these developments as it is about furnishing, through multiple case studies, a first transnational and continental landscape of what we could call a ‘Cuban pan-Africanism’.

## **2. Mobilities and circulations**

The Cuban experience should be questioned from Africa, and not simply from Cuba. This other perspective ties scales and spaces, and endeavours to trace the circulation of ideas, people and goods between Cuba and various sites and periods in Africa. A particular attention is given to influences, traces, and memories of Cuba in Africa, as well as to memories of Africa in Cuba. Archives, actors and memories are located in Havana or Santiago, as well as in Porto Novo, Luanda, Zanzibar, Addis Ababa, etc. The histories of individuals, of exchanges, and of transfers offer a social thickness to the transnational or Atlantic framework of interventions in the military, medical, educational and cultural fields. Thus there are Cubans participating in military operations in Africa, or Africans prizing their Cuban experience once they return home. The relations between Cuba and Africa have also left a material heritage, in the form of buildings, monuments – such as the Ethio-Cuba Friendship Square in Addis Ababa, military cemeteries, iconography (notably in the posters produced by OSPAAAL), literature and scientific knowledge. These trajectories and heritages allow the mapping of the mobilities and circulations peculiar to the African-Cuban relationship.

## **3. The making of a post-racial world**

“Apartheid, in reality, was universal, and it lasted many centuries.”<sup>1</sup> Explicit on more than one occasion, the words of the Cuban authorities, like those of Fidel Castro before the South African Parliament in 1998, designated racism as one, if not the primary, of their enemies. This discourse on race is rooted first of all in the social reality of revolutionary Cuba (de la Fuente 2001), in the tensions that arose there (Moore 2008, Rodriguez 2004, Nunez Gonzales 2011), and then in the struggle with the United States (Moore 1989). It assumes a particular sharpness when we consider the representations preceding or giving birth to the relations between Cuba and Africa. The entanglement of racialism and non-racialism, a peculiarity of Revolutionary Cuba, with its successes and its failures, represents an ethic and a categorical imperative that has nourished, and was nourished by Cuban engagement in Africa. The task today is to evaluate the ideological cost of these discourses, and to identify the uses and the stakes of ‘race’ in the relations between Cuba and Africa. Interrogating the mobilities, the relations and the work of ‘race’ between Cuba and Africa brings up to date an Atlantic history *par excellence*, both strong in its local presence and relevant in its global implications.

We invite historians, anthropologists, political scientists, jurists and sociologists to submit proposals for interventions presenting empirical data, and offering new perspectives on the historical and contemporary dynamics linking Cuba and Africa.

<sup>1</sup> Hedelberto López, Blanch, *Cuba Pequeño gigante contra el Apartheid*, Casa Editora Abril, Havana, 2008: 30.

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## **Calendar**

Panels and papers proposals can be sent until **December 31, 2015** at this address: [\*\*giulia.bonacci@ird.fr\*\*](mailto:giulia.bonacci@ird.fr)

Proposals have to include a short bio-bibliography of the author or of each panel member, the institutional affiliation, detailed contact, a 300 words summary in one or ideally all working languages of the conference (French, English, Spanish).

The Scientific Committee will evaluate the proposals and will inform authors of acceptance by **January 31, 2016**. Articles should be sent for **April 1, 2016**.

## **Scientific Committee**

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