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# U.S. African American Denomomations in Cuba

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*Jualynne E. Dodson*

## U.S. AFRICAN AMERICAN DENOMINATIONS IN CUBA

**C**URRENTLY, THERE ARE TWO Protestant traditions in Cuba whose organizational homes are lodged in the African American Christian community of the United States. The Mt. Sinai Holy Church and the Progressive National Baptist Convention are two predominately African American U.S. denominations with congregations located on the island. The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church also had Cuban churches and was the first “Black Church”<sup>1</sup> to organize there.

The relationship between U.S. Protestants of African ancestry and AfroCubans is an unspoken, and relatively unknown, international alliance. Isolated from dialogue with Cubans, most contemporary U.S. generations know nothing about links between the two diaspora communities and specifically links by way of Protestantism. Some tend to assume Cubans are White as well as Catholic — or since the 1959 Revolution “atheist.” Not only are Cubans largely a brown-skinned people, there are Cuban Protestants—albeit a numerical minority; and at least two African American denominations of the U.S. have had an alliance with their southern kin for fifty years or more.

In this consideration of relations among and between peoples of African ancestry I want to reclaim some historical details concerning the presence of U.S. African American denominations in Cuba. As small as they may be, these morsels of history are significant because they demonstrate the U.S. Black community’s international concern for racial injustice. Equally, the historical reclamation of the relationship reminds us that religion and religious affairs are significant arenas of social and political activity and they must not be omitted from the discourse on social behaviors of Africans in the American diaspora.

In November of 1916, Frances (or Francis)<sup>2</sup> A. Pearson of Calle Santa Tomas #60 Alto in Santiago de Cuba sent a letter to Rev. J. W. Rankin of the AME Church. The letter included a request for pastors to assist “Spanish speaking people.” Several things are still unclear about Pearson’s correspondence; a) was it from a woman or a man, b) how had Pearson come to Cuba, and c) for what reason was Pearson in Santiago? Unanswered questions notwithstanding, the ability to send such a letter was based on the existence of the AME Church as a well established and recognized Christian Church committed to improving social and political conditions of African people.

The AME Church began in 1797 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania when a small group of free Blacks acted upon their desire for self-determination in religious affairs. The group was protesting White racism in worship but they were simultaneously expressing the contradiction between their understanding and preferential practice of

Christianity and the way it was understood and practiced by Whites. Every African American person in St. George Methodist Church walked out of that November Sunday service in 1797; and, they never returned. After meeting for a while as a mutual aid society, some protesters formed and legally incorporated the Bethel African Methodist Church of Philadelphia. In 1816, this congregation was the nucleus for organizing an independent denomination: the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

By 1885, the AME Church was the largest denomination of African Americans in the world with a membership of 403,550; it created 3,394 local church buildings in most every state of the U.S.; and had sent missionaries to Haiti, San Domingo, and Canada.<sup>3</sup> Its correspondence and missionary contact with Cuba was as early as 1893; and ministerial connections there were maintained from the Church's base in San Domingo.<sup>4</sup> In 1896, the denomination's legislative body, the General Conference, unanimously passed a resolution expressing approval of the Cuban struggle for independence from Spain. The governing body also appealed to the U.S. Congress to recognize the island's freedom fighters.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, men from the AME Church were soldiers with the U.S. occupying forces that landed in Cuba in 1898, and at least two were military chaplains. In April of 1898 Rev. H.C.C. Ashwood was officially appointed AME Superintendent for Cuba and his headquarters appear to have been in Santiago.

These Methodists' activities in Cuba were the first by an African American denomination and Pearson's 1916 invitational letter to AME ministers was not a new idea for the Church. However, there are no signs that the 1899-1902 U.S. military and economic occupation of Cuba provided any support to the African American denomination.<sup>6</sup> There is also no evidence to suggest that the AME Church participated with U.S. Protestants' geographic partitioning of their Cuban work. Entry of African Methodism, therefore, must be included as part of the U.S. imperialist expansion into Cuba although AME entry and presence differed from that of White denominations at that time.

Pearson's September 1916 letter was followed in November with a second one reporting that the Cuban "Spanish speaking people" would be most receptive to the message and goals of African Methodism and, to solicit support for a personal visit by Pearson to the United States. Perhaps Pearson received no immediate response to his correspondence, but, by September of 1920, there was a "quarterly report" to the AME Missionary Department from a minister, Rev. R.A. Cevestus Duggan, assigned to congregations in the Caribbean.

The Rev. Duggan identified four centers of Cuban work with "Preston, Nipe Baiha, and Oriente de Cuba as the more important. Mr. Henry Ramsay was listed as Circuit Steward and George Taite and T. E. O'Riley as local preachers. By November of 1920, Rev. Duggan submitted a more detailed report in which he acknowledged that he had come from Jamaica to Santiago on July 31, 1920, that the Catholic Bishop greatly opposed African Methodism in Cuba and that he, Duggan, was holding "outdoor meetings" in the towns of Banes, Jacajo, San Jerinero and Preston. He also expressed a desire to work with the "United Fruit Company" in Jacajo and Preston, since that company owned all property that could be used for meetings. Such a possibility was not promising, however, given the company's racism and its alliance with equally racist U.S. denominations.<sup>7</sup>

*U.S. African American Denominations*

35

By December of 1920, Rev. Thomas H. Spencer, a new missionary, submitted his quarterly activities report from Boquerou of Guantanamo Bay, Oriente Province. He had held meetings in a church building located close to the U.S. naval base constructed twelve years before. Rev. Spencer had taken over the building and reported thirty AME pupils. By 1938 geographic focus of African Methodism in Cuba had shifted to Havana and was under the management of Mr. John Deaveaux who had relocated to the island. Working through Cuban "logias," Deaveaux communicated praises about the innumerable opportunities for the Church. Bishop Reverdy Ransom, a well known radical among U.S. religious and political communities, had received Deaveaux's correspondence and was preparing to officially incorporate Cuban congregations and ministers into the African American denomination.<sup>8</sup>

A full Episcopal delegation visited Cuba in 1939. An entourage of fifteen persons visited Havana, Pinar del Rio, Matanzas, Santa Clara, Camaguey and Santiago de Cuba. Over and above Cuban members reported from previous AME activities, this visit identified some four hundred and fifty persons prepared to unite with African Methodism. In 1941, as work of most Protestant Churches was organized into the Ecumenical Council, the AME Church was a charter member of that body. Unfortunately, internal politics prevented Bishop Ransom from admitting the Cuban congregations into full organizational membership in 1940, and no future Bishop seemed prepared to acknowledge the work as more than missionary efforts.

Simultaneous with the 1940s accomplishments of African Methodists' activities in Cuba, the Mt. Sinai United Holy Church of America was making initial contacts in the nation. Mt. Sinai was organized as an independent denomination in 1924, in Philadelphia by Rev. Ida B. Robinson, an African American woman. Rev. Robinson formed the new Church in response to her vision and Divine Call to secure an organizational home where women preachers would be welcomed and encouraged. In a friendly separation, Rev. Robinson left the parent United Holy Church and became Mt. Sinai's first bishop.<sup>9</sup>

On April 15, 1949, Elder Willie Taylor of Mt. Sinai Church came to Banes to organize a congregation among the Jamaican community. He had been among the U.S. soldiers who volunteered and served in Cuba with the 1898 9th and 10th Calvary. These African American troops who had fought at Las Guasima, El Caney, and San Juan Hill, were familiar with conditions in Cuba.<sup>10</sup> Taylor's 1949 organizing for the Mt. Sinai Church was successful, particularly among women; and Jamaican membership in the Banes congregation continued to grow throughout the 1950s.<sup>11</sup>

The successful Revolution of 1959 brought forth a series of dramatic changes for all Cubans. Many religious organizations had an uneasy association with early expressions of the revolutionary government; and, Protestant bodies were no different. For its first two decades, the government made few distinctions between Catholic Christian organizations, which often openly opposed social changes including the new government, and Protestant Christian denominations. Some Protestants also did not support the government, few if any denominations publicly opposed Cuba's social transformations.

Protestants, like other religious, suffered discrimination imposed upon those believed to actively support counter-revolutionary activities against the Cuban government. However, by the mid-1970's, the government began acknowledging an error in its singular evaluation of all Christians as "counter-revolutionary." Cuban Protestants, more so than Catholics, began to identify areas of commonality between the social consequences of their religious goals and realities of their new society. The reflections and reassessments by both groups unlocked a new, less conflictual relationship between Protestant bodies and the Cuban government.

Neither financial, ministerial, nor moral support to Cuban congregations from the U.S. headquarters of the AME Church continued after the 1959 Revolution. By 1967, African Methodists acknowledged that they no longer had a presence in the country. The Mt. Sinai Holy Church, on the other hand, sustained the dwindling numbers in its congregations through heroic efforts of Pastor Felicia Oakley. By the late 1970's, Cuban governmental leaders were actively studying the role of Christianity as motivator of social change in Latin America. They were also interested in the Civil Rights struggle in the U.S. as one grounded solidly in African Americans' liberating interpretation of Christianity. The theology and political activities of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. were a specific focal point of their studies.

Familiarity with struggles of African Americans in the U.S., particularly those of the Protestant communities, led to Cuba's introduction to a third African American denomination—the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC), whose initial contact with Cuban Baptists was through an ecumenical organization, the Black Theology Project. Several individuals associated with the Project were also members of PNBC congregations. In 1983 the Coordinacion Obrero Estudiantil Bautista de Cuba (COEBAC) extended an invitation to the Black Theology Project, by way of Rev. Gayraud Wilmore, to participate in a Jornada Teológica de Martin Luther King, Jr. In April of 1984, the Project was able to send a delegation of seventeen clergy and lay persons to Havana. Significantly, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, then a candidate for U.S. President, also traveled to Cuba and with the group, facilitated the historic event of President Fidel Castro attending worship services with Cuban Christians and the Black Theology Project. Because of these ecumenical activities as well as their involvement in their congregations' commitment to the social justice theology of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the ordination of women, several Cuban Baptist leaders were expelled from their home denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention. In response to their expulsion some Cuban congregations organized La Fraternidad Iglesias Bautistas de Cuba and eventually joined Convention, the Progressive National Baptist Convention, which was organized around Rev. King's philosophy.

In August 1990, PNBC sponsored two Cuban delegates from La Fraternidad to attend their annual meeting in Louisville, Kentucky. In November of the same year, a visiting team from PNBC visited congregations in Cuba and negotiated details of the churches' peer membership.<sup>12</sup> The relationship was made official at the 1991 meeting of PNBC when six delegates were supported to travel to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The Convention continues to sustain its relationship with La Fraternidad and indications are that PNBC will maintain this support.

Given that Cuban religious alliances with U.S. African Americans are rarely discussed, I have chosen to highlight some historical details of this relationship between a numerical minority within both the Cuban Christian and U.S. Protestant traditions. Demythologizing the presumed absence of contact between Cubans and U.S. African Americans reveals a religious alliance with deeper theological, philosophical, and political implications that often go unexplored. Indeed, no proper assessment of the history and evolution of Cuban society can be made without considering religious affairs.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In the field of U.S. sociology, the “Black Church” is referred to as an institution because the pattern of organized, Christian behaviors within African American communities traditionally has satisfied the social needs of most community members.
- <sup>2</sup> The handwriting of the archival record is unclear as to whether the spelling of this name is with an “e,” denoting a female, or with an “i,” thereby identifying a male. F. A. Pearson to J. W. Rankin, November 1916, AME Missionary Department, Folder Correspondence ‘P,’ Box 1, Archives of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.
- <sup>3</sup> L. L. Berry, *A Century of Missions of the African Methodist Episcopal Church 1840-1940* (New York: Gutenberg Printing Co., 1942), 43-46. Benjamin Arnett, *The Budget of 1904*. (Philadelphia: Rev. E. W. Lampton and Rev. J. H. Collet, 1904), 173-74.
- <sup>4</sup> The correspondence was from Rev. Durmer in the city of Santiago who wanted the Church to organize throughout the island nation. Letter from Dr. Durmer, 1893, AME Missionary Collection, New York, Schomburg Center, Box 1. See also L. L. Berry, *ibid.*, 79, and Charles S. Smith, *A History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church Volume 2* (Philadelphia: Book Concern of the AME Church, 1992), 186.
- <sup>5</sup> Smith, *ibid.*, 201.
- <sup>6</sup> For discussion of churches receiving support from U.S. business see: Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 798-99, 848-51, and 877-80; Robert E. May, *The Southern Dream of A Caribbean Empire* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973).
- <sup>7</sup> Missionary’s Letter to the Secretary of Missions, October 7, 1920, AME Missionary Department, Folder Correspondence, Box 1, New York, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.
- <sup>8</sup> J. Deveaux to R. Ransom, September 19, 1938, AME Missionary Department, *ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> Harold Dean Trulear, “Reshaping Black Pastoral Theology: The Vision of Bishop Ida B. Robinson,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 46 (Summer-Fall, 1989): 20-21.
- <sup>10</sup> William Seraile, *Voice of Dissent* (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1991), 45-47, 130-34. Peter M. Bergman and Mort N. Bergman, *The Chronological History of the Negro In America* (New York: Mentor Book, 1969), 321.
- <sup>11</sup> Interviews with Mrs. Nugent, original member of Mt. Sinai Church of Banes and Rev. Felicia Oakley, current pastor of the congregation. Interviews were conducted in Havana, January 1990 and in January 1992 in Banes.
- <sup>12</sup> The “peer” status means that Cuban congregations are not missionary members of the denomination as is the case with most other Baptist congregations and organizations whose parent Church is in the U.S. See Jualynne Dodson, “Report To Annual Meeting of the Progressive National Baptist Convention,” unpublished report, August 1991; *ibid.*, August, 1992.