

Can Afro-Cuban culture survive after Castro?

By Karen Juanita Carrillo
Special to Sentinel-Voice

NEW YORK (NNPA) - The latest rumor from Cuba is that the nation's leader, Fidel Castro, may have Parkinson's disease. It's only one of many tales about Castro's health, his wealth and his governing abilities.

It's a CIA assessment that Castro personally refuted by delivering one of his customary five-hour-long speeches to a group of Havana University students.

Castro has long been the subject of near-death rumors, despite the general health he enjoys at 79-years-old. The reports usually originate in Florida's exiled Cuban-American community, where many have never forgiven the Cuban leader for taking power on the island during the 1959 revolution.

Cuba's president traditionally dismisses the various rumors of stroke, brain hemorrhage, hypertension and other illnesses as the vengeful wishes of enemies who would love to see him dead. Still, the inevitable reality of Fidel Castro's true passing is bound to lead to drastic changes on the island nation. And the most striking changes will affect the lives of Afro-Cubans.

"Black Cubans continue to lag behind White Cubans," notes the journalist and activist, Willie Mack Thompson. "President Castro has spoken to this... but this is especially frightening in an anticipated leadership transition.

"My concern is that if Black Cubans enter into this transition with less resources and income — less status — they will not be able to compete and will thus be relegated to their pre-Revolutionary status. It will be a class struggle based on status."

Castro's 1959 revolution took Cuba out from under the control of monied interests strongly allied to the U.S.

government. Between the large agro-businesses and Mafia-controlled casinos, hotels and prostitution rings throughout the island, Black and White Cubans had bitterly complained of being treated as if they lived on a large offshore U.S. plantation. Castro's revolution nationalized island businesses, which led to the end of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States and a now 43-year-old U.S. economic embargo against the island.

Cuba's survival has been buttressed by the education, employment and social inclusion of its large Black population. But the fact that Blacks are not central to the political structure in Cuba may prohibit Afro-Cubans from playing a central role in controlling the island post-Castro.

"The Black population there realizes that they have made gains since the revolution," notes local Harlem activist Elombe Brath. "They understand that it's to their advantage to maintain the revolution." Race-based discrimination was so fine-tuned in Cuba prior to Castro that even the nation's former president, General Fulgencio Batista, was denied admission to exclusive clubs because he was considered a mulatto, pointed out Brath, who hosts the show "Afrikaleidoscope" on WBAI-FM.

"There has always been a relative silence among Cubans about race and racial inequality," said George Priestley, who directs the Latin American Area Studies department at CUNY's Queens College. "And given the fact that so much has been done to erase the racial problems the island had, and that so much was done to address the issues of structural inequality, racial identification was for a while not encouraged. And a Black identifi-

cation was particularly not encouraged."

The popularity of reggaeton, hip-hop and floetry among Afro-Cuban youth may spark a higher degree of ethnic awareness, Priestley added. And that ethnic awareness — or Black pride — should spur stronger political responsibility.

But in the meantime, the political awareness of Afro-Cubans remains exclusively tied to the Revolution. "And Fidel is the one sustaining the revolution: the reason Cuba is so strong is because of Fidel," said a prominent U.S.-based Afro-Latino journalist who preferred not to be named.

"After Fidel, the Cubans in Miami will simply pounce on the island," this journalist contends. "They have connections in Cuba; they have their people in place in Cuba already. When they take over they're going to be opening up the political arena to the U.S. again.

"The problem is going to be with Black Cubans who are not used to taking orders and won't stand for it. The White Cubans in Miami are still racists. They're making preparations for their return, but their plans don't include concerns about Black people."

The majority of Miami-based Cubans are right-wing and anti-Castro, called "gusanos" (worms) or "vendepatria" (traitors) by Castro supporters. There are left-wing Castro-supporting Cubans also living abroad, but they are not as frequently heard from in the media, because they are generally labeled communists. Cuba has also been branded communist since the Castro-led revolution, but supporters see Castro's efforts as continuing the island's push for independence.

Cuba has ostensibly been "independent" since Dec. 10, 1898, following decades of fighting between the nation's

independence army, the Cuba Libre, and Spain. By 1898, the war was between Spain and the United States, but Cubans had declared their independence as early as Oct. 10, 1868. At that time, they'd also called for the island to end its enslavement of Black people, but emancipation from slavery was not made law until Oct. 7, 1886. Afro-Cubans took the lead in the fight to end Spain's dominance on the island, and for three decades they formed the majority of soldiers in Cuba Libre's ranks. After its independence from Spain, Cubans felt they had to continue their fight to gain independence from the United States. Castro has always termed his revolution a further battle in the struggle for Cuba's independence.

"Fidel is a mortal being and as a mortal being he will die one day," notes the Afro-Cuban journalist, author, and broadcaster Pedro Perez-Sarduy. "But Cubans know

that Cuba has been transformed into a revolutionary nation over these past decades. And Cuba will remain a revolutionary nation for many years to come — with or without Fidel!

"I think these kinds of worries, so often repeated in recent years — mostly by people of goodwill, who don't live in Cuba — is in many ways similar to the wishes of those who don't want the best for Cuba after Fidel dies," Perez-Sarduy adds. "Obviously, it would be shameful for most of Cuba if the revolution does not survive the death of its principal creator. But he is not the only defender of the revolutionary ideals that began in 1868 and re-emerged on July 26, 1953 during the attack on the Moncada barracks in Santiago de Cuba. Cuba will survive with or without Fidel!"

Karen Juanita Carrillo writes for the Amsterdam News.

Your Horoscope Says... Dec. 29-Jan.4

ARIES

Use your gift for gab to pull others into a project that excites you. Be tactful and clever in describing yourself as leader of the pack. It's not your romantic life that needs your help. Listen to a friend and give advice on their love affair. You'll help to clear their fog.

Soul Affirmation: Time is on my side as I wait for the time to be right.
Lucky Numbers: 3, 42, 55

TAURUS

You sometimes like to race off and do things without thinking. Don't try that this week. Those details you hate have to be taken care of or else they'll come back to haunt you. Don't search for excitement. Rocking steady is better this week in love affairs.

Soul Affirmation: I make clear to myself what I want and I get it from others.
Lucky Numbers: 5, 40, 51

GEMINI

Your clever way with words could open up an adventure for you unlike any you've had recently. Move forward. Enjoy. Don't let your mind get crowded with too much useless information. Love is simpler than you think.

Soul Affirmation: By loving my freedom, I help others to be free.
Lucky Numbers: 12, 31, 52

CANCER

Play it a little close to the vest this week. This is a good time for learning. Sober thoughts are best. Take care of some serious things. Friends and associates will respect you for communicating honestly about important issues.

Soul Affirmation: I get by giving. This is the way of the world.
Lucky Numbers: 34, 49, 50

LEO

Okay, so you like to gossip. Go ahead! Dish a little dirt. Spin a couple of tall tales about someone not so close to you to someone close to you. It strengthens the bond of trust. Now, don't go back and tell the person you gossiped about what was said.

Soul Affirmation: This week I let my childlike heart come out to play.
Lucky Numbers: 17, 40, 41

VIRGO

Feel deeply for the sorrow of a loved one. You're needed to give more understanding than you might in other circumstances. Change is coming into your life. Handle it in the expert manner that you usually handle change.

Soul Affirmation: I keep the mother-presence vivid in my imagination this week.
Lucky Numbers: 5, 31, 39

LIBRA

This week let your nurturing spirit shine through. Your tremendous adaptability will make it possible for you to show kindness even where it is not deserved. Know that your kindness is appreciated.

Soul Affirmation: I give love power over everything I do.
Lucky Numbers: 19, 27, 32

SCORPIO

Spend a quiet week. Usually you like to talk, and it seems you were put on Earth to speak your mind, but practice something counter to your usual nature. Even if you know someone is speaking against you, try not to respond. This is excellent training.

Soul Affirmation: I find pleasure in the flow of life and luck.
Lucky Numbers: 17, 24, 41

SAGITTARIUS

The package you've been waiting for is likely to arrive this week. It should

assure you that you are loved. Your sense of purpose can be an inspiration to those who work with you. Love is the reward for a job well done.

Soul Affirmation: My life is enlightened by the company I keep.
Lucky Numbers: 25, 28, 39

CAPRICORN

It is amazing how a witty, mobile person like you can button down when you have to. This week is one of those weeks when duty calls. The best way to get it done is to think about it with only half your mind. Let the other half roam around to more exciting places.

Soul Affirmation: I find joy in the pleasures that flow my way.
Lucky Numbers: 18, 35, 46

AQUARIUS

Talk to yourself: "Hey good looking." Feels good, doesn't it? Feels true? A combination of factors make it easy for you to love yourself this week, even more than you usually do. Being a twin sign, let one twin talk to the other. "You really feel great, huh?" "Sure do."

Soul Affirmation: I find the peaceful vibrations inside myself.
Lucky Numbers: 36, 38, 49

PISCES

Smooth talk will take you anywhere you want to go this week. Your ability to communicate has always been good, but not as good as it is this week. If you want someone to do something for you, this week is a good week to try to convince him or her. Your words will hit the target.

Soul Affirmation: I accept the answers that instinct brings me.
Lucky Numbers: 39, 46, 51

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parable to the nascent years of the United States. Oh, really? What if a "coalition of the willing" had come to this country during the Revolutionary War to liberate enslaved Black people from the tyranny under which they suffered? Too bad there was no coalition back then — with cowboy George W. leading the charge.

Instead, George W. is leading the charge to build a New Iraq but has little time for and will not allocate adequate resources to build a New Orleans. Hey George, be sure to close the door to the bank vault behind you when you and the guys finally get as much money as you can carry. Okay?

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