The "African being" in the Canary Islands: a prospective analysis of the concept of Tricontinentality

José Otero

Universidad de La Laguna

2017

1. Introduction

Are the Canary Islands considered part of Africa? Instead of answering directly this question, my intervention today - which is a summary of my PhD dissertation- will go over the different responses to that question by local intellectual elites since the conquer and colonization of the Canary Islands. There are certain connections between Africa and the archipelago and I would like to present them from three different perspectives: 1) Understanding the indigenous inhabitant of the Canary Islands as an "African being". 2) Reconstructing the significance of the Canary Islands in the Atlantic slave trade and its effects on some local artists in the first decades of the twentieth century. 3) Restructuring the interpretation of some Africanity in the cultural and political fields shortly before the end of Franco's dictatorial regime.

2. The guanches and Africa: the repetition of denial

The Canary Islands were inhabited by indigenous who came from North Africa in different immigrant waves –at the earliest– around the IX century B.C. (Farrujía, 2017). The conquest of the Islands by the Crown of Castile was a complex phenomenon and took place during the entire XV century. Knowledge of indigenous cultures has undoubtedly been the main theme of any historical and anthropological reflection made from the archipelago and even today, the circumstances around the guanches provokes discussions and lack of consensus across the social spectrum, not just among academic disciplines but in popular culture too. (Farrujía, 2009: 84)

On this point I will follow Fernando Estévez' "Indigenismo, Raza y Evolución" (2016) which demonstrates the African memory of the guanches as a constant denial in the local anthropology. We have reliable descriptions of the archipelago since Classical Antiquity, nevertheless, according to Estevez, the history of the Canaries as a scientific discipline starts in the XVIII century with José de Viera y Clavijo. Viera (a priest who has been compared with Bartolomé

de Las Casas) (Estévez, 2016: 121) concludes his research with two main thoughts:

1) The Spanish Conquest of the Canaries was an "unavoidable evil" responsible for the complete annihilation of the indigenous population. 2) The guanches represented a honourable culture in harmony with nature itself. Viera's work adopts the philosophical French Enlightenment tradition applying Rousseau's "positive" concepts of state of nature. On one hand, he defends the nobility of the guanches but on the other hand he justifies –certainly not without grief– the Spanish domination as part of the inexorable civilization process. Viera brings us to the end of the indigenous culture certifying its genocide or ethnocide (Estévez, 2016: 122).

From the beginning of the XIX century, a second wave of anthropological thinking will be responsible of a new understanding of the Canarian indigenous. Denying Viera's conclusions but assuming the nobility of the guanches, Sabin Berthelot –a French botanist and ethnologist who lived for many years in the Canaries– will trace some idiosyncratic configurations and racial elements from the former culture transferred to the contemporary citizens. A little later, Chil y Naranjo –a Canarian doctor who studied in Paris– picked up the thread reinforcing this raciologist conception with osteological researches of Darwinist character and working on the foundation of Museo Canario, perhaps –and even today– the most influential institution.

Berthelot and Chil y Naranjo introduce and establish the notion of the guanche as an unfinished political issue as both were strongly influenced by a positivist approach to science reflected in the middle of the romanticist paradigm. The concepts of origin and authenticity related to the ideas of nation and race will configure the new geostrategic agenda after the loss of the Spanish Empire in 1898. In that framework it was necessary to base the European membership of the guanches on the vigorous denial of their real African origin: for that matter Chil y Naranjo linked the recent discovery of the "French" Cro-Magnon man to the skeletal remains of the guanches in order to justify the whiteness of African Berbers and –subsequently– of the Canarian

population. But, as we know today, the Berbers came from Africa. (Farrujía, 2009: 75)

3. The slave's heritage in the Canary Islands

The Atlantic slave trade was significant in the Canary Islands although it cannot be compared with the magnitude of the phenomenon in other African countries, like Cape Verde, Senegal or Angola. (Lobo, 1982: 30) Whether for agriculture or other labours, the presence of black and Berber slaves in the Canaries was important, even in the cities. This African heritage is thus added to the indigenous cultural legacy and it would further mingle with the different populations coming from the peninsula to constitute a new mixed race society. (Hernández, 2006: 28)

The Escuela Luján Pérez was founded in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria in light of a short but significant economic growth at the beginning of the XX century, having as its main objective the education of artists and artisans within the framework of modernity and bourgeois cosmopolitanism. Due to the First World War and the Crash of 1929 –among other factors– this aesthetic prospective would be soon replaced by a new one, not so complacent about a positive self- representation but concerning the unknown, poor, rugged and tropical countryside of the Islands. (Castro Borrego, 2008: 116) This group of artists would be later called the "indigenous Canarian school". From this moment, the neglect and denial African heritage will be vindicated but not without controversy if we analyze the effects of the so- called "discovery" of African art by the Parisian avant-garde in the Canarian artists. However, the idea of a Self- Other or a particularly "own otherness" linked with Africa comes to light for the first time in the archipelago. This operation will take place in a framework of disenchantment with a regionalist Eurocentric project and will be silenced as soon as Franco's dictatorship held the central Government in Spain.

4. The Other or the Same?

The decade of the sixties started with a strong and fast economic development that transformed the Canary Islands. Two main factors influenced this change: 1)The impact of mass tourism as an economic and social model. 2) The political decadence at the end of Franco's dictatorship. However, this important shift from a historical and structural poverty to the beginning of a welfare state democracy did not occur without trouble.

The relation of Franco's regime with Africa during its last years –and even later– influenced and unintentionally raised public awareness on decolonization in the archipelago, particularly concerning Western Sahara. Separatist local forces –which had operated underground for some years before– will take advantage of this global context to make a public proclamation of the Canary Island's independence. The international diplomatic achievements of Antonio Cubillo's MPAIAC (Movement for the Independence and self-determination of the Canaries Archipelago) as well as the use of violence in the Islands and Spanish peninsula are worth mentioning in order to understand the difficulties and contradictions in this turning from a repressive political culture to an attempt of state linked to the African postcolonial agenda. (Utrera, 1996: 199)

In the field of contemporary art El Hierro manifesto from 1976 brought a lot of artists, intellectuals, writers, cultural workers and students together around a new African sensitivity, even when most of them rejected the independence cause. This manifesto vindicates aesthetically and politically the heritage of the Canarian indigenous as well as it regains the history of a poor and slave archipelago that the indigenous Canarian school had sketched out at the turning point of modernity.

El Hierro Manifesto is perhaps the last decade's most controversial proclamation in the local culture although its prospective did not have further repercussions as soon as the Statute of Autonomy of the Canary Islands and democracy in Spain set the "African question" aside until the immigration crisis at the beginning of the new century.

5. Conclusions

We state two facts that justify some Canarian Africanity in the field of the history of ideas. Each one will have its own development. However, most of the time they are presented to us undivided in this never-ending construction that we call identity. (Mignolo, 2009: 10) On one hand, we have the indigenous as an important inclusion in the modern Canarian population's character. On the other hand, we also argue that the presence of the black and Berber slaves contributes to sustain an African memory of the Islands. (Farrujía, 2009: 77)

The question about the role to be played in the Islands concerning Africa represents the people's will, needs and acceptance (or rejection) of the idea of an own Africanity. This consciousness is modified in different sociocultural and political episodes as an expression of a common life. Although it is true that some aspects of a Canarian Africanity cannot avoid a Eurocentric perspective completely, it is also true that the Archipelago's particular history -with a specific colonial past in the context of the Atlantic slave trade- legitimizes some kind of African recognition that overlooks, in terms of Enrique Dussel's concepts, the Other as the Same (1994: 35).

6. Bibliography

CABRERA, Antonio (1988): *Las Islas Canarias en el Mundo Clásico*. Madrid. Gobierno de Canarias.

CASTRO BORREGO, Fernando (2008): "La Vanguardia en Canarias: La Escuela Luján Pérez" en Fernando Castro Borrego y Jonathan Allen *Historia cultural del arte en Canarias VII: La modernidad y las vanguardias canarias (1900- 1939)* Santa Cruz de Tenerife. Gobierno de Canarias. Pp. 115- 163

DUSSEL, Enrique (1994): *El Encubrimiento del Otro: Hacia el origen del 'mito de la Modernidad'* La Paz. Bolivia. Plural.

ESTÉVEZ, Fernando (2016): *Indigenismo, Raza y Evolución. El pensamiento antropológico canario (1750- 1900)* Santa Cruz de Tenerife. Ediciones Idea.

ESTÉVEZ, Fernando (2008): “África fetiche. Ex- primitivos, cultura caníbal, y poscolonialismo en las imágenes europeas del ‘Otro’ africano” in “África: ecos espirituales y rastros artísticos” Casa África.

FARRUJÍA, José (2009): “Canarias y el norte de África desde una perspectiva historiográfica y arqueológica” *Tabona*. Nº18. Pp. 63-90.

FARRUJÍA, José (2017): “Entrevista a José Farrujía, investigador del pasado indígena canario” In *Revista Pellagofio*. (http://pellagofio.es/portada/jose-farrujia-investigador-del-pasado-indigena-canario/) Consultado el 11/05/2017

HERNÁNDEZ, Manuel (2006): “La esclavitud en Canarias en los siglos XVII y XVIII y su emigración a América” in Ofelia M. González Izquierdo (coord.) *Esclavos: Documentos para la Historia de Canarias VII.* Archivo Histórico Provincial de Santa Cruz de Tenerife. Gobierno de Canarias. Pp. 27-39.

LOBO, Manuel (1982): *La esclavitud en las Canarias Orientales en el s.XVI (negros, moros y moriscos)* Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. Ediciones del Cabildo de Gran Canaria.

MIGNOLO, Walter (2009): “Desobediencia Epistémica (II) Pensamiento Independiente y Libertad Decolonial” *Otros Logos. Revista de Estudios Críticos.* Nº 1. Pp. 8-42.

MILLARES, Sergio *et al* [dir.] (2011) *Historia Contemporánea de Canarias*. Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. La Caja de Canarias.

TODOROV, Tzvetan (2008) *La vida en común. Ensayo de antropología general.* Madrid. Taurus.

UTRERA, Federico (1996). *Canarias, Secreto de Estado*. Madrid. Mateos López Editores.