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CULTURE-CUBA: Exorcising the Ghosts of the Past

By Dalia Acosta

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HAVANA, Feb 23 2007 (IPS) - The expansion of a debate among a group of intellectuals in Cuba that began as an e-mail discussion at the beginning of the year would seem to demonstrate the need to bury once and for all the cultural restrictions of the past and open up spaces for dialogue, debate and diversity.

"The fear has been shaken off," Cuban writer Arturo Arango, one of the participants in the e-mail exchange, told IPS. "It is clear that that past will not return. Neither we writers and artists, nor the country's institutions, will allow it to."

The e-mail conversation, which has broadened beyond its initial focus, has also transcended borders, incorporating voices from the Cuban diaspora as well as people from other countries.

Regarding the possibility that the most negative aspects of Cuban cultural policy have been completely left behind, Arango said the old policy is still fighting to survive in some limited circles.

In his view, the e-mail debate has attempted to "bring the policy to light, so that more libertarian, emancipating and anti-dogmatic principles expand, perhaps definitively."

"What we are also trying to say is that the Cuban revolution would perish if the old (restrictive) methods return, if it shuns the complexities contributed by art and literature, if it ignores the voices of its thinkers, its artists. That, more than safeguarding our own work, is what this debate is about," said Arango.

The so-called "e-mail crisis" broke out after the appearance on several TV programmes of Luis Pavón Tamayo, Armando Quesada and Jorge Serguera, all of whom were closely involved in designing and enforcing the rigid cultural parameters that negatively affected so many writers and artists in Cuba in the 1970s.

Among the characteristics of that period, which set strong limits on culture and was referred to by essayist Ambrosio Fornet as "the grey quinquennium" ("five grey years"), although it lasted nearly a decade, writer Leonardo Padura lists "the censorship of things that today would look ridiculous" and "the isolation of artists and students for their religious beliefs or sexual preferences."

He also mentions the suspicion that met any action or opinion not based on the most staunch orthodoxy, exacerbated dogmatism, the ease with which people were accused of having "ideological problems", the marginalisation of Cuban artists and the insistence on "Sovietising" art and indoctrinating writers and artists.

Failure to respect the established "parameters" led during those years to the closure of artistic endeavours, like the Guiñol theatre, and to the marginalisation of writers, playwrights and artists. In 1976, the creation of the Ministry of Culture marked the end of the old policy and the start of a new era.

Cuba's "collective memory" is in need of "a revision of the burdens, abuses and excesses of that time, as the only possible way to preserve in the future the spaces for debate, criticism, the expression of opinions, communication and creation that have been achieved today," wrote Padura in Culture and Society, a publication of the Havana office of Inter Press Service (IPS).

According to the author of the 1996 detective novel "Máscaras" (Havana Red), which features an older gay man who suffered the restrictive "parameters" of the past, the consensus on certain principles reached by those involved in the e-mail debate "is a demonstration that space has been gained for reflection, critical views and even indignation."

Besides lashing out against what looked like a vindication of the three former officials involved in enforcing the cultural parameters – Tamayo, Quesada and Serguera – many of those taking part in the e-mail exchange underscored the need to lift the veil of silence on that sad episode in history, and to study its causes and effects and recognise the mistakes made in order to prevent a repeat.

Others, like writer Amir Valle, who is presently living outside of Cuba, or filmmaker Enrique Colina, said symptoms of the past could still be seen in the present: locally made films that have never been aired on television, because of their critical views of aspects of life in Cuba; drafts of books that go unpublished; and little room for people to express opinions that deviate from the government line.

"For me, this was never the 'grey quinquennium'; for me it was always 'the period of the silent scandal'. Generations that have come later have been moulded in this silence," playwright José Milián wrote in an e-mail.

>From 1970 to 1974, Milián stopped writing, and none of his plays were produced on stage until 1979.

Filmmaker Belkis Vega reflected on the need for analysis and how it has been avoided with the arguments that "the time is not right" or "to avoid giving ammunition to the enemy" – a reference to the United States and its hostile Cuba policy.

Although many believe that "to be a revolutionary is to transform, to doubt, to have a critical eye," many issues are postponed "until that 'right' time and moment, which never arrives," in order to maintain unity and avoid giving "ammunition to the enemy," without comprehending that "statism which freezes all debate is a very efficient weapon," said the filmmaker.

The same idea was underlined by Fornet on Jan. 21 in the Casa de las Américas during the first of a series of conferences coordinated by the Criterios cultural centre with the aim of discussing, from different angles, the cultural policy "of the difficult years."

"Pacts of silence tend to be extremely risky, because they create a climate of immobility, a pretence of unanimity that keeps us from gauging the true magnitude of the dangers," said Fornet, a witness to the harsh period in question and one of the first to express, in the last decade, critical reflections on what he dubbed the "grey quinquennium".

Besides Fornet's central conference, the meeting in the Casa de las Américas featured a speech by Cuban Culture Minister Abel Prieto and another by essayist Desiderio Navarro, who has become sort of a coordinator of the e-mail debate from his desk in the Criterios cultural centre.

"In cyberspace, anyone who has access to e-mail can participate. By contrast, in a conference room that seats 450 people, invitations are necessary. But undoubtedly there is more coherence in a conference room, where everyone listens to each other," said Arango on what he interpreted as a leap by the debate from the private to the public spheres.

The central issues touched on by the debate showed up again in the public sphere on Feb. 3 in the presentation of an essay by Navarro on the web site of the Cuban Book Institute. The essay, "The Causes of Things", is a compilation of writings on critical thinking and the banalisation of the media.

The present revision of the past, which some see as unstoppable, also continued in the corridors and presentations at the Feb. 8-18 International Book Fair in Havana.

"I would allow myself to say that this fair is dedicated to all Cuban creators," without excluding anyone, and to overcoming "any restriction that our culture may have shown, endured, and suffered over the years," poet César López, a National Literature Prize-winner, said at the inauguration of the fair.

Among Cuba's outstanding writers, López mentioned Guillermo Cabrera Infante (1929-2005), Reynaldo Arenas (1943-1990), Jesús Díaz (1941-2002) and Heberto Padilla (1932-2000), all of whom died in exile defending positions that were radically opposed to the government of Fidel Castro.

"They have let the genie out of the bottle. And it will not go back in," writer Reynaldo González, 2002 National Literature Prize-winner and one of the participants in the e-mail debate, told IPS.

"Errors are part of the past only if they are rectified. All of this reflects the lack of transparency maintained for 30 years regarding crimes against culture committed by dogmatic, intolerant people and overlooked by some authorities" and the "impunity" that has surrounded them, he added.

González said "opposition to these methods and to the Stalinist ideology that has generated them" has gained strength not only in intellectual circles but also "at decision-making levels." Only "after clearly identifying the causes and combating the effects...can "healing begin," he said.

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