

'GOING BACK HOME': SLAVE SUICIDE IN NINETEENTH CENTURY CUBA*

“REGERESANDO AL HOGAR”: EL SUICIDIO ENTRE LOS ESCLAVOS EN CUBA EN EL SIGLO XIX*

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RESUMEN

La cuestión de los suicidios de esclavos africanos en Cuba estuvo presente de manera continua en las mentes de los traficantes de esclavos, plantadores y autoridades coloniales. Durante la primera mitad del siglo XIX, las discusiones acerca de las razones existentes tras de estas acciones alcanzaron a todos los sectores de la sociedad insular, incluyendo a las principales autoridades. En este artículo, los suicidios de esclavos africanos se discuten tanto como acciones cotidianas de resistencia, como una preocupación social para aquellos interesados en la continuación de la esclavitud en la isla.

Palabras clave: esclavitud, Cuba, suicidio

ABSTRACT

The issue of African slave suicides in Cuba was an always present one in the minds of slave traders, planters, and the colonial authorities. During the first half of the nineteenth century, discussions among the reasons behind this behavior included basically all sectors of the island's society, including the main authorities. In this article, slave suicides are discussed both as a day-to-day action of resistance undertaken by the slaves, and as a social concern for those who had invested interests in the continuation of slavery in the island.

Keywords: slavery, Cuba, suicide

In mid-1795 Francisco de Arango y Parreño, the man who had frantically led the western part of Cuba into a sugar plantation territory, made two interventions before the City Council of Havana.¹ He talked to his fellow countrymen about the need of increasing the number of African slaves in the island. He warned them about the chances of success of the rising British Abolitionism and about the possible collapse of the commercial fortune of the Antilles. Albeit Arango had shown his ideas to the world a few years earlier, this time he was particularly dramatic in his attempt to convince everybody –including the King– of the advantages of importing large numbers of slaves to toil the numerous emerging plantations that were rapidly spreading east of Havana at the time.² By 1803 Arango and his group had obtained such a degree of success that a new company to bring slaves from Africa to Cuba was created by the merchants and planters of the city.³ This fact propitiated an unprecedented level of slave imports during the next 50 to 60 years.⁴

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1 Archivo Nacional de Cuba (hereafter ANC): Real Consulado y Junta de Fomento. Book 161. City Council meetings of 8 July and 1 Aug 1795.

2 Three years earlier Arango wrote his most famous piece of work precisely with the aim to obtain a Royal Order allowing the introduction of large numbers of African slaves into the island. Francisco de Arango y Parreño, "Discurso sobre la agricultura de la Habana y medios de fomentarla", in ARANGO, F. (1936): *De la factoría a la colonia*. Secretaría de Educación, Havana.

3 Landowners and Merchants of Havana to the King Charles IV. Havana, 12 January 1803. ANC: Asuntos Políticos. 106/9.

4 According to the data compiled and published by Eltis *et al.*, between 1801 and 1860 a staggering 484.977 slaves were carried out to Cuba from African ports. See *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*. www.slavevoyages.org

Eventually, African slaves and their descendants overtook the white population of the island in a few years. By 1817 they were already a majority.⁵ In an article appeared some years later in Jamaica's *The Morning Journal* published in Kingston, these imports were at the center of discussion. The anonymous author of this article was keen to stress that Cuban planters had 'added year after year, and by weekly and monthly importations, to the number of their slaves, without ever dreaming that they were creating a numerical superiority for the blacks'.⁶ The overwhelmingly large African population was a constant concern for Cuban authorities and whites in general. As the same author stressed in the Jamaican newspaper, by 1840 'the planters of that island [Cuba] have had evidence of a most convincing kind that slaves appreciate the value of liberty'.⁷ Not only several revolts and the recurrent establishment of maroon communities were affecting their minds, pockets and security. A wide range of diverse disguised forms of resistance constituted their daily crux. Among these forms of resistance there was one particularly difficult to understand: *suicide*. Slave suicides were a continuous problem that proved to be very complex and hard to control.

For Colonial authorities and slave owners the loss of any slave was always an economic setback. As it is shown in the following pages, they were keen to deal with the problems relating to the way of dying of their slaves. In particular their determination to take their own lives constituted a serious concern for authorities and owners. For slaves, notably for those born in Africa, to commit suicide was a form of going back home. In other words, suicides were often a form of resistance that affected both the paternalist image of the Spanish Catholic system and the economic prosperity of plantation owners. Neither the Church nor the planters did ever really understand the after-life beliefs of some of their African slaves. Not very far from truth, one of them, Italian planter José Leopoldo Yarini wrote in 1839 about this circumstance that death caused the Africans 'no horror at all'.⁸

This article examines a number of issues related to suicides among slaves in nineteenth-century Cuba that have only been sporadically studied be-

5 See GARRIDO, F. (1867): "La esclavitud en Cuba". In *La España contemporánea*. S. Manero, Barcelona, vol.2, pp.1019-1032.

6 *The Morning Journal*. Kingston, 31 May 1842. Vol. I, 2.

7 *Ibid.*

8 José Leopoldo Yarini, [untitled]. Archivo del Museo Carlos J. Finlay (Hereafter AMCJF). Havana [unprocessed document].

fore.⁹ What reasons led African slaves to commit suicide? Were they intrinsically related to their lives as slaves, or were they embedded in cultural practices and religious beliefs acquired from their early years in Africa? To what extent were slave suicides a problem for the Cuban authorities at the time? Can we trust the sources produced by them, which addressed this social and economic problem? What measures were discussed and taken to deal with these occurrences? To answer these questions, the obvious place to look at first is the African slaves homelands and what sort of social, political and religious role the act of taken one's life had there.

To commit suicide in West and Central Africa was not a rare event.¹⁰ In fact, very much in the Stoic fashion, suicide was a way out for the humiliated, the disgraced and for those with incurable illnesses. In one of the most relevant episodes in the history of Oyo, the Oba Asamu killed himself after being asked to do it by a crowd, approximately in 1796. Before committing suicide Asamu went to the outskirts of the town and from there he cursed its future inhabitants. Then he returned to his palace, and in a way that is reminiscence of the suicide of Cato in ancient Rome, he refused to listen to the advice of his servants who urged him to fight, sent his relatives away, and then took his own life.¹¹

9 Any scholar who investigates slave suicides in mid-nineteenth-century Cuba will be faced with the dilemma of having a large amount of criminal records that refer to specific cases and a near-total absence of reliable statistics on the actual extent of this phenomenon among both slave and free populations. In this situation, historians have been forced to work with what they have at their disposal, or in Louis A. Perez's words, with statistics "mostly in fragmentary form". PEREZ, L.A. (2007): *To Die in Cuba: Slave and Society*. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, esp. chapter 1. See also POUMIER, M. (1986): "El suicidio en Cuba en los años 1840". *Anuario de Estudios Americanos*, n° 43, pp. 69-86.

10 However, some scholars argue that suicide was an unlikely event among the inhabitants of the Niger Delta. See GOMEZ, M. (1998): *Exchanging our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, p. 117. For cases of suicides in nineteenth century Nigeria see PEEL, J.D.Y. (2000): *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*. Indiana UP, Bloomington.

11 See ADEYEMI, M.C. (1914): *Iwe Itan Oyo-Ile Ati Oyo Isisiyi Ago-D'Oyo (A History of Old and New Oyo)*, chapter 2. This text has been entirely reproduced in FALOLA, T. & DOORTMONT, M.R. (1989): "Iwe Itan Oyo: A Traditional Yoruba History and its Author". *The Journal of African History*, vol.30/2, pp.301-329. Suicide, at least as a death penalty, was a common practice throughout the history of Oyo. The Oyo Mesi, a sort of Supreme Council of State, had the right to condemn any deficient or inept Oba to commit suicide. See CROWDER, M. (1962): *The Story of Nigeria*. Faber and Faber, London, particularly its first chapter.

Before and during the Middle Passage suicides seem to have been a recurrent difficulty as well. Just before boarding the ships on the coast, the already enslaved men and women self-destroyed in a wide range of manners. Alongside with escapes, suicides were the main reason of concern for slave traders while loading the ships. If captured, slaves could try again and again, resorting to other violent means of resistance such as self-mutilation or the assassination of crewmembers and land-based merchants.¹² The fears of facing events like these were so somber that some contemporary writers, such as the Frenchman Jacques Savary, urged slave vessels' captains to take a rapid departure after stacking their ships. For Savary, once the 'cargo' was on board and ready to depart, captains should sail right away. He saw the character of the Africans and the love they felt for their land as the principal causes for this necessary rush:

"The reasons for this is that the slaves have such a great love for their land that they despair to see that they are leaving it forever, and they die from sadness. I have heard merchants who participated in this commerce affirm that more Negroes die before leaving port than during the voyage. Some throw themselves into the sea and others knock their heads against the ship; some hold their breath until they suffocate and others starve themselves".¹³

And indeed Savary was sadly right; several of these cases were recorded during the centuries of transatlantic slave trade. A document found by historian Stuart Schwartz in the National Library of Lisbon describes one of these events. In 1812, captain Felipe Nery wrote how while the vessel under his command was entering in the river Zaire in West Central Africa, three of the slaves he was carrying out threw 'themselves into the sea' after being whipped.¹⁴

12 See STEIN, R.L. (1979): *The French Slave Trade in the Eighteenth Century: An Old Regime Business*. The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, pp. 73-95; and LAW, R. (1991): *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550-1750: The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on an African Society*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.

13 SAVARY, J. (1697): *Le parfait négociant*. Jacques Lyons, Lyon, p. 206.

14 Felipe Nery to Antônio Estes de Acosta. Pernambuco, 6 August 1812. In SCHWARTZ, S. (1985): *Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society: Bahia 1550-1835*. Cambridge UP, Cambridge, p. 370.

Testimonies like these are not uncommon. There are multiple reports about the general fear existing among African men and women that their white captors would devour their flesh or suck their blood after being shipped away. These anxieties led many of them to commit suicide.¹⁵ An extraordinary case occurred in 1737 illustrates the extent of these assumptions. Just after docking in the island of St. Christopher, over one hundred of the African slaves carried by the *Prince of Orange* jumped into the sea in what was a singular case of a collective attempt to commit suicide. The motive for this sudden determination was a joke made by a local slave who told them that they should get ready, because their eyes would be put out and eaten by their white masters.¹⁶ Beliefs in 'white cannibalism' and 'white vampirism' were not rare and appeared time and again throughout the entire history of the Atlantic slave trade. According to Moreau de Saint-Méry, recently arrived slaves were often afraid of their masters, especially after watching them drinking red wine, for they genuinely believed that they were drinking blood.¹⁷

15 Albeit there are not references about suicide practices among African Islamised slaves, we might assume that the rates should have been low. The Maliki Sharia law –adopted in West Africa since the 12th Century forbids suicide. The Koran itself has some dispositions regulating this behaviour. See *Quran*, sura 2, verse 195: “do not with your own hands cast yourselves into destruction”; and sura 4, verse 29: “Do not kill yourselves. God is merciful to you, but he that does that through wickedness and injustice shall be burned in fire”. I thank Robin Law, John Thornton and J.D.Y. Peel for their insightful comments and recommendations regarding this issue.

16 POPE-HENNESSY, J. (1967): *Sins of the Fathers*. Weidenfeld and Nicholson, New York, pp. 105-106. The best discussion about the belief in 'white cannibalism' amongst Africans is PIERSEN, W.D. (1977): “White Cannibals, Black Martyrs: Fear, Depressions, and Religious Faith as Causes of Suicide among New Slaves”. *The Journal of Negro History*, 62:2, pp. 147-159.

17 Red wine was unknown for many African slaves carried to the New World. See DE SAINT-MÉRY, M. (1958): *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue*. Société de l'Histoire des Colonies Françaises et Librairie Larose, Paris, vol. I, p. 39; and LE PAGE DU PRATZ, A.S. (1975): *The History of Louisiana*. Louisiana State UP, Baton Rouge, pp. 357-358. Both Moreau de Saint-Méry and Le Page du Pratz, are cited by PIERSEN: “White Cannibals”, pp. 149-150. These findings are reaffirmed by some scholars who have studied how for Africans often interpreted European demands for slaves as acts of vampirism or cannibalism. See MILLER, J.C. (1988): *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade*. The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, pp. 4-5. For a more recent approach, this time about the colonial period of the history of Africa see WHITE, L. (2000): *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

The punishments given to those who attempted to take their own lives varied from cutting their arms and legs off, to filling their mouths with boiling lead. At other times the bodies of those who succeeded were easily visible along the coastlines mauled by the sharks, not far from the European castles. However and in spite of all the slave traders' endeavors, suicides never stopped.¹⁸

According to the logbook of the ship *Hannibal*, kept between 1693 and 1694, the 'Negroes' who starved to death or who willfully drowned themselves, did so in the belief that once dead, they would 'return home to their own country and friends again'.¹⁹ Mutilation of the suicides' bodies was also based on the conviction that physical integrity was necessary to undertake the return journey. According to the same document, slave traders used to cut the suicides' arms and legs off 'to terrify the rest, for they believe if they lose a member, they cannot return home again'.²⁰

Once at sea the situation did not tend to improve. Rather, the problems increased as a result of the isolation and the poor living conditions onboard the vessels. Some slave ships were loaded with almost unbelievable amounts of human beings in relation to their size. The day-to-day routine onboard also contributed to aggravate the problems. Punishments and compulsory dancing and singing, epidemics and other more common diseases, and an inadequate diet certainly made the living conditions of the slaves almost intolerable.

Spanish doctor Francisco Barrera y Domingo, who had a solid knowledge of the situation, wrote in 1798 about the behavior of the slaves during the Middle Passage. Not surprisingly, their different forms of self-destruction during the journey appeared more than once in his text. Referring to some specific African nations, "Viví, Carabalí, Minas", he pointed out that "When they can't throw themselves into the sea, they get sad until they die".

18 See SHERIDAN, R.B. (1981): "The Guinea Surgeons on the Middle Passage: The Provision of Medical Services in the British Slave Trade". *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 14:4, pp. 601-625; STECKEL, R.H. and JENSEN, R.A. (1986): "New Evidence on the Causes of Slave and Crew Mortality in the Atlantic Slave Trade". *The Journal of Economic History*, 46:1, pp. 57-77; and DONNAN, E. (1969): *Documents Illustrative of the Slave Trade to America*. Octagon Books, New York, vol. 1, pp. 401-407.

19 DONNAN: *Documents*, vol. 1, pp. 401-407.

20 *Ibid.*

He also mentioned that sometimes it was possible to ease their pain by telling them lies about their immediate future. However, he also warned that should they realize the truth, they would wait for the right moment to jump into the sea, “because they believe that by doing this, they free themselves from the Europeans, and that they go back to their lands”.²¹

Authorities and planters in the New World believed that the imported Africans were absolutely convinced that by killing themselves they would return to their homes and families in Africa. Discussions about this topic were regular in official documents as well as in all kind of correspondence almost from the very beginnings of the transatlantic trade in human beings. Slave suicides were also a tremendous problem in places like the Antebellum South, the Caribbean and Brazil, especially after the turn of the nineteenth century.²²

Although not all slave suicides were aimed at resisting slavery, slave owners and colonial authorities in Cuba –in accordance with the precepts of the Catholic Church– always considered them as pernicious and immoral acts. No doubt, slave suicides were an economic problem as well as a humanitarian issue. Throughout the nineteenth century the acquisition of new slaves faced legal obstacles due to the restrictions imposed by Britain to the Spanish slave trade following the treaties of 1817 and 1835.²³

21 BARRERA Y DOMINGO, F. (1953): *Reflexiones histórico físico naturales médico quirúrgicas. Prácticos y especulativos entretenimientos acerca de la vida, usos, costumbres, alimentos, vestidos, color y enfermedades a que propenden los negros de África, venidos a las Américas*. C.R., Havana, pp. 68-74. In the logbook of the English ship *James* (1675-1676) two suicides were recorded while the ship was “at sea”. Both slaves –a woman and a man– were bought in Wyembah. She died after many days of “not eat or take anything”; he “leaped over the board (sic) and drowned himself”. See DONNAN: *Documents*, vol. I, pp. 401-407.

22 For instance, Moreau de Saint-Méry, strongly recommended a *grande surveillance* with the Igbo, since they were often ready to kill themselves in the creed that this was an effective way to return to their homeland. DE SAINT-MÉRY: *Description topographique*, vol. I, p. 51; Also Herskovits commented how in both Haiti and South Carolina slaves from the Igbo and Calabar regions –Niger Delta– were regarded as suicidal. HERSKOVITS, M. (1941): *The Myth of the Negro Past*. Harper Brothers, New York, pp. 36-37. Michael Gomez has also found some interesting testimonies given by African slaves from the Antebellum South, referring to the so-called myth of the “flying Africans”. GOMEZ: *Exchanging our Country Marks*, pp. 116-119.

23 Spain and Great Britain signed two treaties to abolish the transatlantic slave trade. Both were virtually ignored by Spanish and Cuban slave merchants. See MURRAY: *Odious Commerce*, pp. 72-113, and PAQUETTE, R.L. (1990): *Sugar is Made with Blood. The Conspiracy of La Escalera and the Conflict between Empires over Slavery in Cuba*. Wesleyan UP, Middletown, pp. 135, 139 and 144-147.

In Cuba, the understanding of the African slaves' cosmologies, and consequently their reasons for committing suicide, was quite poor, at least until well into the nineteenth century. The members of the Cuban plantocracy were often aware of the ideas of the French Enlightenment. They visited and sometimes studied in Europe and the United States. They often knew more than one language, and in many cases were foreigners or had foreign ascendance. The writings of Rousseau, Montesquieu, Voltaire and many other European philosophers were discussed and commented in public and even in some newspapers since the late decades of the eighteenth century. This phenomenon was particularly relevant among the civil authorities and intellectual leaders of the planter and merchant groups; those same groups committed to the expansion of the slave trade to the island after the collapse of Saint Domingue's. Additionally, they had a few other concerns such as the plausible possibility of having to confront slave movements capable to bring to an end all their wealth and prosperity. Saint Domingue was too close to be ignored. Planters and authorities strengthened their methods of control and domination throughout the period, being aware that free colored and slaves were receiving news from the slave revolution that had, paradoxically, became the source of their fortunes and fears.

However, their Catholic-based approach to the suicide issue did not differ at all from those of the rest of the inhabitants of the island. Centuries of a rigid and mystic faith were not to be easily ignored. Consequently, the understanding of key philosophical topics –in this case the suicide– remained deeply biased by the dogmatic texts of the millenarian Roman Catholic Church in its notably outrageous Spanish version.

The Catholic approach to the act of self-destruction was –and still is– surprisingly simple. Any suicide, regardless of its cause, was seen as an evil act, carried out against the will of God. As we will see later, regardless of their social origin, suicides had no right to repose in holy ground and it was assumed that their souls would endlessly burn in hell. The inhabitants of the Catholic island of Cuba, slaves included, were raised and educated within the rigid frame offered by this dogma, knowing that the act of suicide would place their souls beyond salvation and divine forgiveness. The situation, however, proved to be far more complicated when the authorities and slaveholders tried to impose their religious rules upon the masses of African slaves living in their numerous plantations.

Influenced by the official position of the Church, authorities and planters dealt with slave suicides in their own, peculiar ways. Several issues associated with these events constituted matters of concern and debate during this period. Among these critical problems were the social, religious and economic consequences of the slave suicides. In front of their eyes the nature of

the problem was probably bigger than what we can imagine today. Suicides were against the law of both God and men, they were intrinsically “pernicious”, and were above all a daily threat to their pockets. Consequently, they did their best to stop their occurrence all around the island, resorting to medieval-like alternative measures.

No doubt, the belief in an afterlife influenced the conceptualization of the act of self-destruction for both the slaves and the owners. The latter acted in consequence emphasizing their repressive measures to dissuade their African slaves to follow their suicidal companions. Havana’s Royal Physician José Antonio Bernal, a well-educated man, mentioned this topic in a letter to the Military Commission when three of his slaves executed the overseer of his sugar plantation. After demanding the highest punishment for the murderers, he begged:

“We certainly know that the slaves from the African coast persuade themselves in their ignorance that death at the gallows opens the way to their homeland, releasing them from slavery. That is why we frequently see them committing suicide by using that way under the hopes offered by their imagination. Therefore, this punishment is inefficient if we want to teach the others a lesson (...) they must be executed by the back as usual, then hanged and their heads cut off so that they can be exhibited where it is convenient”.²⁴

Individuals from the most diverse origins and social statuses concurred with Bernal’s opinion time and again during the period. For example, in 1790 authorities and slave owners from Havana wrote to the king, Charles IV, to complain about the recently sanctioned Black Code of 1789.²⁵ In this letter they accused their slaves of being uncivilized and intrinsically evil.

24 José Antonio Bernal to Captain General Vives. Havana, 11 August 1831. ANC: Miscelánea de Expedientes. 635/B.

25 The Carolinian Black Code was issued for the entire Spanish Empire on the 31 May 1789 under the influence of the Italian Minister Grimaldi, from whom the document received its popular name (Code of Grimaldi). See LABRA, R.M. (1879): *Los códigos negros: estudio de legislación comparada*. Aurelio J. Alaria, Madrid; and BARCIA, M. (2008): *Seeds of Insurrection: Domination and Resistance on Cuban Plantations, 1808-1848*. Louisiana State UP, Baton Rouge, pp. 89-96.

Not fortuitously, their "Pythagorean beliefs"²⁶ in reincarnation played a fundamental role in the arguments they presented, since they constituted the philosophical basis for the suicides occurring among them:

"They are barbarous, daring, ungrateful to the benefits (...) the good treatment drives them insolent; their temperament is hard and rude; several of them never forget the error of the Pythagorean transmigration they learnt since their early childhood. That is why they show little fear of committing homicide in themselves".²⁷

Forty-one years after this letter, while judging the rebel slaves from the coffee plantation *San José*, the experienced public prosecutor Francisco Seidel called for the death penalty for the three Lucumí leaders, Simón, Andrés and Rafael. Up to this point there was nothing unusual since the execution of slaves was a common event in nineteenth-century Cuban cities and countryside. However, like Bernal, Seidel specified that the prisoners should be shot in their backs, "instead of hanging them as it is ruled, since as it has been demonstrated that this kind of execution does not scare these people as the first one".²⁸ Here, in a clear reminder of the measures taken by the slave traders on the African coast before embarking, Seidel suggested mutilating and publicly exhibiting the head and right hand of Simón Lucumí, the principal rebel.²⁹

A last testimony, given by a plantation overseer twelve years later confirms how deep the beliefs on the African idea of reincarnation after suicide were among the Cuban population. Vicente Pérez, overseer of the coffee plantation *La Juanita*, located a few miles west of Havana, testified before a public prosecutor soon after Miguel Lucumí, one of the Africans under his supervision hanged himself from a güira tree. Shocked by the event,

26 The term 'Pythagorean beliefs' appeared repeatedly in the Cuban documents between 1788 and 1844. These 'Pythagorean beliefs' based on the Greek philosopher's ideas about the transmigration of souls was absolutely not a Cuban patrimony. Moreau de Saint-Méry used the same words while analysing the suicides among the Igbo slaves in Saint-Domingue. See DE SAINT-MÉRY: *Description*, vol. I, p. 51.

27 Havana's merchants and planters to the King Charles IV. ANC: Real Consulado y Junta de Fomento. 150/7456.

28 Conclusion of Public Prosecutor Francisco Seidel. Havana, 8 Sept. 1831. ANC: Miscelánea de Expedientes. 440/C.

29 *Ibid.*

Pérez said that Miguel had always been an outstanding worker and that as a result he had never been forced to flog him. Asked about the cause of Miguel's death he stated "...that they [the slaves] believe that when they die they go to their land", and that this was his only reason for committing suicide.³⁰

It is truly amazing how a medical doctor, the members of the city council of Havana, a public prosecutor, and a simple overseer gave such similar interpretations despite the fact of an existing gap of more than fifty years between the first and the last ones. These statements are the best proof of the wide belief in reincarnation existing among African slaves in nineteenth-century Cuba. They also offer an excellent point of departure to examine this attitude among slave owners and authorities.³¹ As it will be shown later, authorities and planters debated whether suicides among their slaves were provoked by religious, social or medical reasons. It was clear for them that when the slaves killed themselves they were trying to escape their slave condition. The unfair social system was the cause and the suicides, aimed to escaping from it, were merely their ultimate consequence.

West African and West Central African beliefs were extremely outrageous for the white Catholic elites in charge of the government of the island and its plantations. Even for some exceptionally educated people, such as the Italian doctor and planter José Leopoldo Yarini, it was difficult to understand this belief in a mythical return to Africa.³² While fighting against the

30 Deposition of Vicente Pérez. Cafetal La Juanita, Mariel, December 1843. Archivo Histórico Provincial de Pinar del Río (Hereafter AHPPR): Instituciones Judiciales Coloniales. 1507/7754.

31 On 17 November 1844 José Cruz, a free black born in Africa and condemned to death during La Escalera, hanged himself in prison creating huge doubts among the authorities dealing with his sentence. So confused was the prosecutor, that he kept Cruz's body unburied until he received instructions about whether should he proceed to cut off his head or not. Cruz had, in fact, frustrated the whole ritual of demystification arranged by the Colonial Courts. Since he had not died shot by a firing squad, prosecutor Gala was not sure whether to behead him would be useful at all. Gala was sure that concerning the rest of the African slaves, Cruz already had successfully gone back to his land. Finally the body was buried without any mutilation. Apolinar de la Gala to Fulgencio Salas. Matanzas, 17 Nov. 1844. ANC: Miscelánea de Expedientes. 38/1.

32 José Leopoldo Yarini was an Italian doctor and planter arrived in Cuba in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. In the late 1820s he bought a sugar mill in the district of Guamacaro, not far from Matanzas. During the cholera epidemic of 1833, Yarini had to face the death of many of his slaves and employees and even of one of his sons. Some years later he recalled that time in a sort of memories that have been recently discovered in the archive of the Museo Finlay in Havana by historian Adrián López Denis. Yarini died in 1839.

most terrible *cholera* epidemic of the nineteenth century, Yarini took notes that he later wrote down in a sort of memoirs of the epidemic. After the death of one of his African slaves he observed how the other slaves prepared their companion for the long journey back home. At first he did not understand anything at all of what was going on. He did not understand what the purpose of the colorful cock feathers, the rum, the tobacco and the club they were burying alongside his body were.³³ Nevertheless, after asking many of his slaves without getting an answer, one of them, a Carabalí as the deceased, gave him a clue about the whole funerary ritual he had just observed. The feathers, he said, were needed so that he could arrive at the time the cocks sing just before dawn and hence to be able to awake up his relatives and friends so they would welcome him again. The tobacco and the rum were provisions for the journey, and the club was necessary to beat the dogs in case they would fail to recognize him. However, the most interesting thing his slave told him was that this kind of ceremony was held only for those who had died far away from their homes.³⁴

What he said next was an exceptionally interesting narrative of the slave's understanding on the matter:

"Then a new epoch of life begins, and he enjoys again the peace and domestic union together with his gods. This same individual who was explaining to me these African mysteries experienced a sweet satisfaction while talking about them. I clearly noticed the happiness in his face, while his eyes sparkled of pure complacency while he mentioned that he would be born again and that he would enjoy again his former freedom".³⁵

Indeed, the theme of the journey back to Africa was also supported by material evidence. Clothes and provisions played an important role for those Africans who decided to take their own lives. In 1847, Claudio Martínez de Pinillos, count of Villanueva, was forced to examine the rea-

33 In a similar way and referring to a slave funeral in Jamaica, Olaudah Equiano wrote that "each different nation of Africa meet and dance after the manner of their own country. They still retain most of their native customs; they bury their dead, and put victuals, pipes, and tobacco, and other things, in the grave with the corpse, in the same manner as in Africa". Cited by CHAMBERS, D.B. (1997): "My own nation: Igbo Exiles in the Diaspora". *Slavery & Abolition*, 18:1, p. 72.

34 Yarini, [untitled]. AMCJF. Havana [unprocessed document].

35 *Ibid.*

sons for the increasing suicide figures among the African slaves. Relying on his own experience as a planter –he owned two important sugar mills west of Havana– he commented that slaves used to hang themselves from trees or in their huts and that:

“When they do that [killing themselves] they wear all their clothes, put in their hats the food that they did not eat, and sometimes even bring their animals to the place where they will die, in order to return well provided to their native countries, where they imagine their bodies and souls go”.³⁶

Several cases seem to confirm the Count’s opinion in this respect. For instance, on March 1825, Joaquín, slave of the ranch *Los Acostas* in Guane, committed suicide by hanging. In this case the authorities remarked that Joaquín was dressed

“With brand new trousers and new shirt, and wearing pig leather shoes; he had a handkerchief wrapped around his head, and in one of the pockets of his trousers he had a small bag with stuff to make fire; he also had a machete, a knife and a hat made of palm leaves; everything was on the floor”.³⁷

In another case, in June 1844, Dionisio Lucumí decided to hang himself from a Guava tree. As in the previous case, he chose to wear his best clothes and not surprisingly, inside the hat he was wearing the authorities found tobacco.³⁸ Unfortunately, often the descriptions of the clothes and items are very poor, or they do not appear at all. Just to cite an example, while referring to the suicide of Paulino Lucumí in June 1846, the official report barely mentioned that he was wearing only his day-to-day clothes and that these were already well used.³⁹

36 Claudio Martínez de Pinillos, Count of Villanueva to Captain General Leopoldo O’Donnell. Havana, 30 June 1847. ANC: Asuntos Políticos. 141/12.

37 AHPPR: Instituciones Judiciales Coloniales. 1618/7953.

38 AHPPR: Instituciones Judiciales Coloniales. 1507/7757.

39 AHPPR: Instituciones Judiciales Coloniales. 1507/7761.

Suicides raised other significant issues with respect to the ethnic groups most prone to self-destructing and their specific religious beliefs; the means to carry out the decision; and for the authorities and planters the tremendous problems of what to do with the bodies of the suicides. The ethnic question was a permanent quiz for authorities and planters. We have seen how in 1798 Barrera y Domingo considered Carabalí, Vivís and Minas as the groups most predisposed to committing suicide. From the 1820s onward, however, Lucumí slaves attracted all the attention of authorities, planters and of the public in general.⁴⁰ Again the count of Villanueva, relying on his own experience as a planter saw the ethnic origin of the slaves as a key issue to stop the suicides:

“By the acquired experience in the government of the slaves in my holdings, I have confirmed the idea that among the different African nations or tribes to which the imported slaves belong, there are some which easily develop despair, uneasiness, mental disorders and the other ordinary causes of suicides. Those who belong to other tribes rarely kill themselves”.⁴¹

Although the Count did not refer to any particular African group, he was well aware of the preponderance of the suicides among Lucumí and Carabalí slaves. Already in the mid-1820s Lucumí slaves were the dominant force in most of the slave uprisings of the time; a direct result of enslaving wars that were taking place simultaneously in Yorubaland, Hausaland and other neighboring states. Expectedly then, most of the recorded acts of collective suicide were also led by them. One can only vaguely imagine these groups of men and women who were already defeated running to find trees where to end their lives with the conviction of the mythical return to their homelands.

40 Although the ethnic denominations used in Cuba were highly arbitrary, plantation records and other documents refer to a majority of Congo, Carabalí, Mandinga and Bambara slaves until the beginnings of the nineteenth century. After the second decade of the century, Congo slaves remained as the largest group in the island, while Lucumís coming from the then-falling Empire of Oyo in Nigeria began the second largest group in the western part of the island. By the mid-1850s Lucumís were already a majority, with Carabalís, Congos and Gangás in second, third and fourth places respectively. See MORENO FRAGINALS, M. (1978): *El ingenio: Complejo económico social cubano del azúcar*. Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, Havana, vol. II, pp. 8-10.

41 Villanueva to O'Donnell. Havana, 30 June 1847. ANC: Asuntos Políticos. 141/12.

The revolt that took place at the coffee plantation *Tentativa* on January 1827 was the first important Lucumí-led movement that concluded with a collective suicide. Two days after crushing the uprising, colonel Joaquín de Miranda y Madariaga reported that up to 18 slaves, most of them Lucumís, had been found hanging from the trees in a nearby forest.⁴² There is no account of a collective suicide among slaves before the events of the *Tentativa*. Coincidentally, this was the first Lucumí-led insurrection to take place in the Cuban countryside. In the following years, every registered collective suicide among African slaves shared similar features. The great uprisings of Guanajay in 1833 and Bemba and Cimarrones in 1843 are only three of the best-known examples.⁴³ These armed movements, especially the last two, were still fresh in the Count's memory when he wrote the lines quoted above.⁴⁴ The best proof of his awareness of these events was his letter to Captain General of the island, general Leopoldo O'Donnell, where he recalled how the scary atmosphere of the years 1843 and 1844 had led to the occurrence of a large number of suicides among the 'people of color', including African slaves.⁴⁵ Collective suicides were therefore almost certainly one of the most significant consequences of the increase of imports of

42 Joaquín de Miranda y Madariaga to Captain General Francisco Dionisio Vives. Coffee plantation Reunión, 9 Jan. 1827. ANC: Real Consulado y Junta de Fomento. 150/7436. For a discussion on slave revolts on coffee plantations, as opposed to sugar plantations, see BARCIA, M. (2012): *The Great African Slave Revolt of 1825: Cuba and the Fight for Freedom in Matanzas*. Louisiana State UP, Baton Rouge; and VAN NORMAN, W.C. (2013): *Shade Grown Slavery: The Lives of Slaves on Coffee Plantations in Cuba*. Vanderbilt UP, Nashville.

43 In 1833 a cholera epidemic broke in the western side of the island. Francisco Santiago Aguirre, owner of the coffee plantation *Salvador* stopped the work and put all the slaves together in isolation in order to protect them of the disease. This, in turn, led to one of the biggest slave rebellions ever happened in Cuba. 330 slaves out of 375 –most of them Lucumís– began a tumultuous revolt that provoked irreversible damages in the neighbouring plantations and in the town of Banes.

44 In March 1843 more than 600 Lucumí slaves put fire to the buildings of some plantations, damaged the railroad between Júcaro and Matanzas and killed at least five whites before being defeated by the Spanish army. This slave rebellion was arguably the biggest ever-occurred in Cuba. A few months later, in November more than 300 slaves of the sugar plantations Acana and Triunvirato rose and killed all the whites they found in both plantations. After some hours of combat against the soldiers sent by the governor of Matanzas the rebels were defeated in the lands of the ingenio San Rafael. Fifty-four were killed in the battle, while sixty-seven were captured.

45 Joaquín de Miranda y Madariaga to Captain General Francisco Dionisio Vives. Coffee plantation Reunión, 9 Jan. 1827. ANC: Real Consulado y Junta de Fomento. 150/7436.

Lucumí slaves after the wars that engulfed Yorubaland, Hausaland, and their neighboring territories began in the years of the nineteenth-century.

The ethnic theory has only one transparent weak point, namely, that the time of adaptation of the newcomers also determined to a remarkable extent the rates of suicides. The Count of Villanueva noted the importance of this aspect while discussing the causes of the frequent slave suicides, and planters were usually aware that it was necessary to give better treatment to the recently arrived Africans. In many cases *bozales*, as they were called, were given the easiest tasks in the plantations and it was a common practice not to force them to work very hard during the first months, due to two main causes: rebellions and suicides. Nevertheless, sometimes these rules were broken with dreadful consequences.

On July 1835 the overseer of the sugar mill *La Magdalena* made a number of mistakes that led to a genuine disaster. First, he decided to send the 14 Lucumí slaves that had arrived on the plantation only three days before to the fields. Predictably, they decided to ignore his orders, but nonetheless were forced to do their task. The next morning two of them appeared hanging from a tree and again the rest refused to do any work 'preferring to die instead'. The overseer, pushing the limits once again, sent them to the fields under the crack of the whip. Not content with this he decided to line them up in front of the bodies of the dead slaves. The testimony of Domingo Lucumí, one of the remaining slaves, is the best description of what happened next:

"We found many whites, who separating the twelve of us who were left, lined us up in front of our dead companions. Seeing this, I told the remaining slaves that since our friends had died we should die too, and therefore we attacked the whites with our machetes".⁴⁶

Domingo and two of the 'many whites' he mentioned were seriously wounded. Ildefonso Lucumí threw himself in the river, while another African was found hanging from an avocado tree two days later. The last fatal casualty was Serapio Lucumí, who died a couple of months later, presumably as a result of the wounds he received during the battle that ensued and the subsequent punishments he received.

Frustration and rage led the slaves to fight against the white men who were trying to punish them and to take their own lives. However, the fact

46 Testimony of Domingo Lucumí. Santa Ana Jurisdiction, July 1835. ANC: Miscelánea de Expedientes. 232/Z.

that the estate overseer ignored the African slaves' time of 'adaptation', was the ultimate cause behind this collective act of resistance that involved both a rebellion and various suicides.

A second element that tormented authorities and planters whenever they discussed slave suicides was the ways in these were carried out. The means were regarded as the key to understand their unusual behavior. The opinion of the count of Villanueva in 1847 was that they invariably hanged themselves, while five decades before Barrera y Domingo had reported that drowning in wells and rivers was the most frequent way. Nevertheless, several cases seem to contradict their opinions. Throughout the period there were frequent cases of self-slaughtering and self-stabbing. Sometimes slaves chose to set themselves on fire, and on occasion they chose to jump into boiling sugar pans.⁴⁷

For instance, jumping from cliffs was not strange at all for runaway slaves. The most renowned slave hunters of the period left accounts of this practice. After dispersing the maroon slaves of a *palenque* in the mountains of Pinar del Río, José Pérez Sánchez commented about the number of slaves who had jumped from a cliff without thinking twice about it. A quick search at the bottom of the cliff later revealed the body of a woman and blood-stains from other runaway slaves.⁴⁸ One year later, Pérez Sánchez again referred to these events when he wrote to the Real Consulado that "it is likely that many of them [the maroons] have killed themselves jumping from the large rocks and cliffs".⁴⁹

In some cases, after failed suicide attempts, slave tried again to achieve their goal. These were the cases of Trinidad, a slave on the sugar mill *Jesús*

47 In February 1843 the slave Vidal Ausas jumped into the steam grinding machine of the sugar mill El Gato, owned by the Marquis of Campo Florido and situated nearby the town of Güines, south of Havana. According to the Lieutenant José María Payá the reasons for the suicide of this Hausa slave were not clear. José María Payá to Captain-General. Catalina, 12 February 1843. ANC: Miscelánea de Expedientes. 4282/X; also Moreno Friginals dedicated some lines to comment about this type of suicide. See MORENO FRAGINALS: *El ingenio*, vol. II, chapters 1 and 2.

48 Journal of José Pérez Sánchez. Jan. 1829. ANC: Real Consulado y Junta de Fomento. 150/7447.

49 José Pérez Sánchez to the Prior and Consuls of Havana. El Rubí, 31 Dec. 1830. ANC: Real Consulado y Junta de Fomento. 150/7456.

María,⁵⁰ and Julián, a slave on the sugar mill *La Cuchara*,⁵¹ both with a history of repeated attempts of escaping and attempting suicide. The resolution to escape from the slave life was sometimes taken to extremes, as in the case of the *bozal* Nicolás, slave of Antonio Vidal in Cayajabos, west of Havana. On May 1822, Nicolás saw how his bid to escape was frustrated and decided to slash his throat with a machete instead. Although the white workers of the plantation somehow managed to subdue him, he escaped again and this time he managed to cut off his penis. Nicolás did not die, his condition was extremely critical for months, and presumably he was never again forced to go to the fields.⁵²

Last but not least there was the intricate issue of how to dispose of the bodies of slaves who had killed themselves. The bodies of the suicidal slaves were frequently mutilated and sometimes incinerated.⁵³ Villanueva briefly mentioned that in order to persuade the slaves to stop their inclination to take their own lives some plantation overseers had resorted to the combustion of the bodies of those who had committed suicide. However, he recognized that not even this method had given very good results.⁵⁴ Moreover, those who had taken their own lives were always excluded from the holy Catholic cemeteries. In Havana during the first half of the nineteenth century those who had committed suicide were buried in the necropolis destined to foreign Protestants –alled cemetery of the Americans or the Englishmen–, where curiously also a large number of African slaves were buried.⁵⁵

Suicides among African slaves were then seen as a direct consequence of two very specific facts, namely their supposed 'barbarism' and their lack

50 José Ramos to Governor of Matanzas. Sabanilla del Encomendador, 22 Feb. 1832. Archivo Histórico Provincial de Matanzas: GP. 7/11.

51 Trial against Nicolás Pentón due to the death of one slave and the suicide of another. El Algodonal, Banao, 1839. ANC: Miscelánea de Expedientes. 532/A.

52 Report of Public Prosecutor Manuel Martínez Serrano. Cayajabos, 1 Oct. 1823. ANC: Miscelánea de Expedientes. 2433/G. Martínez Serrano recommended his owner to treat him with humanity due to his current state, both physical and mental.

53 One of the few-recorded cases of body incineration took place just after the 1825 rebellion of Guamacaro was ended when Alejandro Carabalí, from the coffee plantation *La Hermita* was found hanging from a tree. Without hesitation and as a form of setting an example Lieutenant Andrés Máximo Oliver ordered to burn his body immediately. Official communication by Lieutenant Andrés Máximo Oliver. Guamacaro, 27 June 1825. ANC: Comisión Militar. 1/3.

54 Villanueva to O'Donnell. Havana, 30 June 1847. ANC: Asuntos Políticos. 141/12.

55 See BARCIA, M. (2001): "El Cementerio de los Protestantes de la Habana". *Boletín del Gabinete de Arqueología*, vol. 1:1, pp. 78-83.

of religious education. According to various testimonies the vast majority of the white people considered suicides a consequence of this 'barbarism'. In 1838 the lawyer in charge of defending the rebel slaves of the coffee plantation *Clarita*, a lieutenant of the Galician Regiment, declared:

"My defendants were not men able to reason; their ignorance is so great that most of the time they cannot understand half of what they hear; they have the appearance of men and the rest is pure irrationality".⁵⁶

Throughout the nineteenth century slave counselors frequently used the reasoning of this Spanish Lieutenant. Beyond any doubt, elements of racism permeated the discourse of Spanish officers and of the white population in general. However, the 'barbaric' character of the Africans was also a very effective argument to defend the slaves. Very often, their lack of understanding of the Spanish language and laws, and even their physical appearance were portrayed as evidence of their innocence.

When it came to the "slave issue", Cuban authorities and planters, many of them literate people with a solid knowledge of the works of the Enlightenment, did not hesitate to defend their rights to keep the slave system they had built, basing their right on 'humanitarian' and civilizational reasons. At the beginning of the nineteenth century most of the Cuban people were convinced that by bringing the Africans to the Americas they were transforming them into Christian civilized persons, in contrast with their original African 'barbaric' origins.

The slave trade became a synonymous with progress and civilization in the discourse of Cuban intellectuals, merchants and planters. The behavior shown by the recently arrived slaves, and mainly their violent acts of resistance, were broadly used as a way to reaffirm the need to help them to become 'human beings'. To 'civilize' and Christianize them became the chief reasons to keep the slave trade alive. Newspapers and official documents supported this position throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Not surprisingly, among the most abominable transgressions of the 'barbaric Africans' were their frequent suicides, often used as a powerful weapon to demonstrate their uncivilized character.

⁵⁶ Inform of the Defender Lieutenant Juan Gregorio Reyes. Havana, 1838. ANC: Miscelánea de Expedientes. 1044/Ak.

In 1821, Cuban priest Juan Bernardo O'Gavan went to Madrid as one of the island's deputies to the recently re-installed Spanish Constitutional Assembly. His mission was to request the impossible: to restore the transatlantic slave trade, legally abolished by the Treaty of 1817 signed between Spain and Britain. O'Gavan began the second paragraph of his official statement announcing that his aim was not to make 'an apology for slavery', nevertheless, what followed was the closest imaginable thing to it.

Showing off all his intellectual capabilities, O'Gavan mentioned a series of climatic, geographic, epidemiological and economic factors that contributed to the improvement of the Africans' lives once they were moved out to the New World. He called the peoples of Central Africa 'idle and useless' and stressed their misery, disorders and stupidity.⁵⁷ To give an end to his arguments about the differences between the barbarous Africa and the civilized Americas, and somehow contradicting himself, he offered an idyllic and unbelievable excuse for the slavery in the plantations:

"The black man lives surrounded by his family, with his wife and children, and in his house, nearby his fields. He has the freedom to go fishing and hunting; and when he is hard working and has some talent, he enjoys some comfort and even a certain degree of luxury. When he falls sick he is treated with great care; when he is old, far from the problems of his own subsistence and his family's, he is treated with generosity. When he gains the necessary money for his rescue, he becomes a freeman in disposition of all his faculties. Our special laws highly favor the good treatment and the freedom of the blacks, and open for them all the opportune roads. To conclude, these men, who would be indomitable wild beasts in Africa, learn and practice among us the precepts of the religion of peace, love and sweetness, and become part of the great evangelic society".⁵⁸

In his shameless speech this Roman Catholic priest, one of the most influential figures in Cuba at that time, ignored what he knew was happening

57 O'GAVAN, J.B. (1821): *Observaciones sobre la suerte de los negros del Africa, considerados en su propia patria, y trasplantados á las Antillas españolas: y reclamación contra el tratado celebrado con los ingleses el año de 1817*. Imprenta del Universal, Madrid, pp. 4-5.

58 *Ibid.* p. 9.

just a few miles away from his quarters in Havana.⁵⁹ He deliberately ignored the massacre that had followed the uncovering of the Conspiracy of Aponte only a few years earlier in 1812. He calculatedly overlooked the hundreds of ships loaded with new victims that were arriving every year on Cuban shores from Africa; and what it is more grievous, by defending the slave system in such a blatant way, he voluntarily abandoned the thousands of souls that under his priest's eyes were suffering daily whip and shackle in his "beloved island".

The count of Villanueva, in contrast, when asked by the Bishop of Havana and the Captain General about what he thought were the motives for the frequent suicides among the African slaves did not hesitate to answer that:

"More than the fanaticism and more than the innate characteristics of the African slaves, their state of servitude should be considered as the main reason for their suicides. No matter how easy this state may be, and even if their destiny may look better than the scarcity and uncertainty of the European laborers, the freedom of the laborers still is and will always be preferable".⁶⁰

Very likely, many planters and members of the island's ruling elites privately shared the Count's opinion. However, they were unable to express their concerns in a time when only the almost limitless power of Villanueva allowed him to speak out freely.⁶¹

59 Juan Bernardo O'Gavan was born in 1783 in Santiago de Cuba, the second city of the island. In the late 1790s O'Gavan went to Havana to start his sacerdotal studies. During his storming life, he was twice elected as a deputy to the Spanish Courts, took the care of the Bishopric of Havana for some years and enjoyed a great influence among the governors and colonial officials in the island.

60 Villanueva to O'Donnell. Havana, 30 June 1847. ANC: Asuntos Políticos. 141/12.

61 The best proof of this situation were the answers given by the group of planters who were asked by Captain-General Valdés about the improvements that could be done regarding the situation of the slaves in the plantations. Villanueva was the most influential Cuban born character in nineteenth century history, maybe with the sole exception of Francisco de Arango y Parreño. Villanueva was the man who represented the Council of Havana in Spain during the Napoleonic invasion of the Peninsula. Later on, he was named Treasurer of the island for some years until he became *Intendente de Hacienda*, a position who allowed him to manage virtually alone the Cuban treasure during more than twenty-five years. Never again a Cuban born functionary had similar authority on the Cuban political and economic scenario until the establishment of the Republic in 1902.

Religious instruction was continuously considered as the main measure that could be implemented to stop slave suicides. Very few among authorities and planters doubted that the failure to Christianize their African slaves had played a significant role in the increasing number of slave suicides. The Marquis of Arcos, a well-known and rich slave owner, wrote in 1842 that the fulfillment of the religious precepts was the only way to stop the excesses of the African slaves;⁶² and the count of Fernandina went even further by stating the abandonment of religious instruction among slaves was regretful. Ironically, he also lamented the fact that slaves were considered by their owners to be animals without the right to the afterlife.⁶³

These discussions and concerns became so intense that captain general O'Donnell, to the request of the Bishop of Havana, ordered an investigation with the intention of uncovering the causes behind the high suicide rates existing among the African inhabitants of the island. For this task he appointed the versatile and experienced public prosecutor and lawyer Ignacio González Olivares, who carried out a thorough examination of the figures of slave suicides between April 1839 and November 1846.

González Olivares not only looked at the slaves but also at the rest of the Cuban population with the aim of comparing the figures. 1.337 suicides took place during this period, and 1.171 of them (87,4 percent) were committed by slaves. For González Olivares the frequent floggings and the lack of religious instruction were the two principal causes behind their occurrence. Echoing his contemporaries he stated that slaves preferred to die rather than to work because "or they have no idea of the next life, or they have it wrong, obscured by idolatry".⁶⁴

Soon after reading González Olivares's report, the Count of Villanueva challenged these findings and clearly and explicitly dismissed changes to the religious education of the African slaves as the main method to stop suicides among them:

62 The Marquis of Arcos to Captain General Jerónimo Valdés. Havana, 19 May 1842. ANC: Gobierno Superior Civil. 941/33186.

63 The Count of Fernandina to the Captain General Jerónimo Valdés. Havana, 12 March 1842. ANC: Gobierno Superior Civil. 940 / 33158.

64 Prosecutor Ignacio González Olivares to Captain General O'Donnell. Havana, 6 Dec. 1845. ANC: Asuntos Políticos. 141/12.

“Religious education is not and cannot be a fast work; and we should not suppose that those who have decided to kill themselves will desist from their intention by other means than by a extreme vigilance (...) good treatment, rational working schedules, the welcoming they receive from the old slaves and above all the constant care of the employees in the holdings are the principal means to put the African slaves away from the idea of committing suicide”.⁶⁵

Never before these lines were written had someone in Cuba been able to apprehend the phenomenon of the self-destruction among African slaves. His own experience as a planter and his life-service to the Spanish Crown as a public servant had given the Count a solid background that allowed him to tackle the issue in a serious way. Even the bloodthirsty captain general O’Donnell was forced to recognize that the Count’s analysis was correct.

Nevertheless, after 1847 suicides among African slaves continued to be a serious problem for slave owners and authorities. The result of this exchange of letters among the Captain General, the Bishop of Havana, the count of Villanueva and prosecutor González Olivares ended in an official decree aimed at improving religious instruction among the slaves. Nothing was ordered to ease the harsh work on the cane fields or to limit the quality and quantity of the punishments already administered across the island.

Villanueva’s insightful critique was worth nothing, since the well-cemented religious attitude prevailed once again. All the knowledge acquired by the illustrious members of the government and the planter elites, all the readings of Rousseau, Voltaire, and Montesquieu were useless when it came to easing the lives of their slaves. They preferred to ignore the meaning of the belief among the Africans in what they called ‘Pythagorean transmigration’, assuming that it was a religious and “barbaric” mistake that needed to be corrected by religious means. They decided to disregard the oppressive nature of slavery practiced on the island, even though they knew very well that this was –as Villanueva rightly put it– the main reason for the frequent suicides among their African slaves.

It is apparent that our understanding of slave suicide as a form of resistance among African slaves in Cuba is limited by various reasons. Chiefly among them is the fact that because those who took their own lives were not able to tell their story, all those who tried to make sense of their actions, from fellow slaves, slave owners and authorities until historians today,

65 Villanueva to O’Donnell. Havana, 30 June 1847. ANC: Asuntos Políticos. 141/12.

had been forced to speculate to a certain degree. Additionally, although in Cuba slaves testimonies were accepted in criminal courts, their voice was still translated and written down by the authorities, often blurring the real meanings of their words and actions. From the surviving testimonies and accounts, however, it is clear that quite often these African men and women used suicide as a form of resistance insofar they constituted a form of escape back to their homelands, and a way of physically removing their bodies from the urban and rural environments where they were forced to toil day-to-day. In both instances, there was a distinguishable intention to resist by undermining the fabric of the institution of slavery.

During the first half of the nineteenth century different reasons provoked an escalation in the rates of suicides among the slave population of Cuban plantations to what Perez has called "epidemic proportions".⁶⁶ Factors such as the ethnic origin of the slaves, their time of adaptation, their cultural and social backgrounds, and the living conditions in their places of destination determined to a large extent the frequency of these acts. No doubt, whether aimed at resisting slavery or not, slave suicides were a constant matter of concern for Cuban authorities and slave owners. Every new suicide committed in the island represented an economic loss as well as a signal to the outside world that Cuban slavery was not the 'human' system they were trying to portray.

Recent studies have discussed slave suicides in different regions of the Americas. Only few, however, have addressed this issue as its main subject.⁶⁷ This serious lack of studies on the topic has been one of the principal reasons for dedicating some pages to the ultimate form of resistance practiced by the African slaves in the New World. This form of resistance that was heavily inspired by cultural and religious elements and that was badly understood by authorities and general population at the time. Hopefully this article will serve to shed light upon this extremely interesting and sad aspect of the slave resistance in the Americas.

66 PÉREZ: *To Die in Cuba*, p. 41.

67 See PÉREZ: *To Die in Cuba*.