

International Day for the Abolition of Slavery: Learning from Angerona, Cuba

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The Cafetal Angerona, located at about 5 kilometers from the current town of Artemisa a city with about 80 thousand people, the capital of the newly formed Artemisa Province of Cuba prior part of the Pinar del Rio province, was declared a National Monument in June 1989. Little could be done, however, to bring the monument back to its previous splendor without financial resources. Cuban volunteers did what they could without funding and cleaned the area of vegetation that was blocking access and accelerating the deterioration of the site.

In Angerona, the site of a coffee plantation, history and archaeological field work are coming together to hopefully help us understand a little bit better life under slavery dehumanizing conditions and giving life to the drowned voices of slaves. Looking into slave trade, slavery and the lives of slaves can be a challenging experience for all of us, and one that forces us to reflect and question racial prejudices and privileges. Furthermore, slavery is not over as it continues to besiege the world; thus field work in Angerona can have a role in enriching our reflections on slavery and on encouraging us to challenge it and work towards stopping it wherever we find it in the world today. .

Peculiarities of Angerona

Angerona may have differed from other plantations as it may have offered slaves a marginally better existence than anywhere else in Cuba. For example, in Angerona slaves may have benefitted from working under better conditions, in covered areas protected from the weather, the afternoon tropical Sun or very strong rains; slaves may have benefitted from not working at night and being better rested. Angerona may have included an infirmary; slaves may have lived in units with kitchens and with their family members rather than in barracks divided by gender. Such concepts are part of the Cuban folklore regarding Angerona but they need to be proven by research. In 2018 a team of archaeologists from St Mary's University, in Nova Scotia, is planning to explore such questions under the supervision of Aaron Taylor.

And yet, regardless of whether, or how far, Angerona departed from the typical model of plantations Angerona was still a plantation. And, the plantation economy target was the exploitation of slaves, and, slaves suffered the most cruel, barbaric and dehumanizing system known to us. There was physical violence against slaves in Angerona and slaves were locked in their quarters behind walls and a gate and watched from the Watchtower at all times to prevent them from escaping. The mud floors of the slaves' quarters were covered with limestone, Taylor shared in a presentation about his field work in Angerona

this past November 28th, to prevent slaves from eating mud, a method slaves used in attempting escape slavery by killing themselves. We can only guess about their desperation and anguish.

Angerona came into existence in 1822, the work and idea of Cornelio Souchay Escher, a German, of French Huguenot, background who bought the land on which it would be build (530 hectares) in 1813 for, arguably, for 14 thousand pesos. Souchay arrived in Cuba from Germany in 1806 and at the age of 22. He was born in October 21st, 1784. Souchay stayed in Havana from 1806 until 1822 when he moved to Angerona with her lover, a black woman born in Haiti, Ursula Lambert. Cornelio had met Ursula in Havana and they have done business together. Ursula, 6 years her junior, had been born in 1790 in Haiti, the free daughter of slave parents. She and her parents arrived with her parents' owners in Cuba in one of the last migration waves the result of people fleeing the war of liberation which was raging in Haiti since Ursula's birth. They settled in Guantánamo, Eastern Cuba.

The historical context

A number of relevant episodes were taking place in the world at this time. For example, from 1770 the British colonies of North America had been fighting for their independence from Britain, which was recognized in 1783 by the Treaty of Paris. In Haiti, the "Societe des Amis des Noirs" (The Society Friend of Blacks) was established in 1878 following the steps of Wilberforce, the British abolitionist. In 1789 the French people stormed the Bastille, liberating the incarcerated and launching the French Revolution, focused on bringing the monarchy down to create a republican government but also in the rights of men with the proclamation of the declaration of the Human Rights of Man and the Citizen.

Haiti, a French colony, located close to Cuba, a colony of Spain, both with plantation economies exploiting slaves. In the case of Haiti, 20 thousand white men dominated and controlled more than 400 thousand slaves. The power of the King was being challenged in France and threatened to be replaced by a republican system and, naturally, at the colonies the colonial power and structure was bound to be challenged. In fact, Haiti becomes the second colony fighting for its independence, after the United States (1776) but Haiti also becomes the center of a rebellion of black slaves. When in 1791 the Slave Rebellion starts in Haiti Toussaint Louverture was 50 years old, a slave born of African parents working at the Breda plantation; he had learned to read thanks to the teachings of an older slave. Initially the Rebellion of the Slaves takes the side of the King knowing that only the King could warrant their freedom but soon this will change and the rebellion will side with the Republic. Louverture, a self taught naturalist, had enrolled in the army of the King as a doctor and only after ensuring the safety of his master and his family who he put in a ship for Baltimore and to whom he regularly sent means for survival. An interesting point because it shows that the dehumanizing treatment slaves received did not cause them all to forget their humanity; in fact, most black generals involved in the Rebellion of the Slaves ensured the safety of their masters and their families. Soon Louverture and his generals realize that the king is not planning to comply with his promise and they stopped supporting the monarchy, thus, in 1794 Louverture and his army join the forces of the Republic wearing the tricolor rosette. (2)

Cuban colonials become increasingly concerned when Haitians started to immigrate to their island, some with their slaves with a focus on establishing and working there. Haitians immigrants fleeing the Rebellion of the Slaves made Cuban colonials increasingly concerned

about the Rebellion expanding to Cuba and the propaganda the Haitian slave owners spread in Cuba contributed to this because they wanted the Cubans to believe that Louverture had plans for attacking Cuba to liberate the slaves there too. The details are complex and Louverture is taken prisoner in 1802 under Napoleon directive, a directive Napoleon himself regretted later in writing. Louverture is sent to Fort de Joux where he dies of hunger in April 1803 but the fight for Haiti's independence continues and Haitian independence is granted in January 1804 after the island was burned to the ground by the rebels, who set fire to everything in their efforts to be free. (2)

A lovestory: the daughter of slaves, the slave owner



When, in 2014, Berta Serafina Martínez Páez completed her biography of Ursula Lambert, the Cuban movie "Roble de Aroma/The Scent of Oak" (2005) had already portrayed Ursula as a sophisticated and attractive black young woman with a taste for music and a flair for organizing and very much in love with Cornelio Souchay, the owner of Angerona. But, a film has limitations in terms of what can and cannot share with an audience regarding the complexities of interpersonal relations between slaves and their owners. Berta had, as a writer, more time and space to reflect and consider complexities and pay more attention to detail. Berta had collected an impressive number of documents about Ursula and Berta herself is a woman of color. She explains during an interview that she reflected much on the complexities of life in the Angerona coffee plantation and investigated the life of Cornelio Souchay almost as much as Ursula's life. When Berta published Ursula's biography and presented it at the Havana Book Fair in 2015 she had already visited with living descendants of Souchay in Germany, her hope was to write a biography on him as well.

Angerona functioned as a coffee plantation between the years 1822 and 1837, she argues, that year Cornelio Souchay dies and at this point, or few years later, the plantation passed to the hands of Andre Souchay, Cornelio's nephew. Soon after that the coffee plantation is unable to function for a number of reasons, one of them, she believes, had to do with both Cornelio Souchay and Ursula Lambert been extremely good managers who paid much attention to detail, while Andre was not. The plantation suffered their absence. At its height, Angerona had 450 slaves who took care of 750 thousand coffee plants; by 1837 the number of slaves was less than half, close to 200. Ursula moved to Havana after Souchay died and continued to work and live there until 1860. She died at the age of 70 a rich woman with a fortune of her own making and 20 slaves to her name.

The main challenges Berta faced in writing the biography had to do with her own feelings about slavery, the brutality of slave work and the plantation system but also the questions arising in connection with the intimate relationship between Lambert, a black woman daughter of slaves, and Souchay, a slave owner. Berta was challenged too by the reality of Ursula Lambert owning slaves herself until her death. To complete her work, she explains, she had to be able to *“put things in its place, reclaiming their lives with their virtues and challenges,”* she had to understand them as imperfect human beings and find value in the work they did in bringing to life the most productive and sumptuous coffee plantation of Cuba (*“towering over more than 130 existing ones in San Marcos and Cayajabos at the time of cafetal splendor”*). (1)

Berta is passionate about the history of Artemisa, her community. She learned about Angerona in 1959 but could not start her research until 1982. Her knowledge of the plantation economy and of the history of the area helped her. Berta is dismayed in finding that Cubans may not be as interested as she is in history or in Angerona. Her book is an attempt to share knowledge, to inform and engage others with her passion. Her research, detailed and demanding, was recognized because of its quality by the Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad de La Habana who published her book. The book she wrote is available outside of Cuba and it can be found in a number of American libraries on loan (the New York Public Library or the Columbia University Library of New York).

Beyond Angerona

Then dealing with a subject like slavery we cannot escape asking difficult questions. Facing challenges of the past can help us deal with questions and challenges of the present connected to oppression, exploitation, abuse, discrimination, racism, classism, as well as with views accepting, and even admiring, power and money and of those who hold it without paying due attention as to how it is obtained, held and maintained and at what costs. Most of us and most of the times we live unexamined lives, there is either little time to reflect on them or very little incentive in society for us to do so. There is also strong bias benefitting the rich and powerful and many prejudices against the poor, the weak and the vulnerable. We rarely examine how power is achieved or how money is accumulated, or if they are achieved and accumulated in ethical ways or in oppressing, exploiting and abusing others. We rarely consider whether the powerful, rich people at the top of our societies deserve our admiration or should be questioned and condemned for abusive actions against others, and for holding a relentless unlimited ambition.

Angerona is the setting where 450 slaves worked, without rights, to enrich a couple who lived luxurious lives and had much power over the lives of their slaves. This couple exhibited a love for music and refinement, and hopes for creating an orchestra of slaves to show the slaves capacity for growth and refinement. This does not change, however, the reality of slave work, the treatment of slaves as not-human, the fact that they were supervised from a watchtower and locked behind a gate every night. Even if research were to prove that Angerona was less oppressive than other plantations, a lesser evil, it was evil nevertheless. A few concessions to slaves can provide slave owners some moral relief while they still receive most of the economic benefits of their exploitative enterprise. Still, slavery, slave trade and the existence of slaves is a criminal enterprise that colonizers learned to live with to ensure and maintain their privileges. They ignored the costs to their own humanity, and to the humanity of their own children raised in that form of hell on earth that turned them into corrupted devils pretending to be better than they were. But, often, exploiters forget, or oversee, how exploitation corrupts them more than it corrupts the exploited.

When looking into what shape slavery may have taken in Angerona we are looking into more than the past because slavery exists today. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) there are more than 40 million people victims of modern slavery worldwide. The term, “modern slavery” includes practices such as forced labour, debt bondage, forced marriage and human trafficking. These are situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception or abuse of power. In addition to the 40 million adults victims of slavery there are 150 million children subjected to child labour, almost 1 in 10 children around the world. Of the 40.3 million adults forced into slavery, about 24.9 million are in forced labour while the remaining 15.4 million are in forced marriage. Of the 24.9 million in forced labour, 16 million are exploited in the private sector (domestics, construction and agricultural workers), 4 million are in forced labour imposed by state authorities, and 4.8 million are in forced sexual exploitation.

Women and girls are disproportionately affected by forced labour, accounting for about 99% of the victims in commercial sex industry and for about 58% of the victims in other sectors. There are 5.4 victims of slavery for every 1000 people in the world. The United Nations has proclaimed December 2 as the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery. This year the 50 for Freedom Campaign aims to persuade at least 50 countries to ratify the Forced Labour Protocol by 2018. (3)

There was much outrage when CNN made public a video where Africans were sold in a public auction in Libya. People protested and questions were asked to the Libyan government that had to admit their lack of control over the country and recognize the challenges Libya faces since western powers attack and dismantled Gaddafi’s government. Slavery today is cheap and disposable. In 1850 an average slave in the American South cost the equivalent of 40 thousand dollars in today’s money, but, today, and worldwide, the cost of a slave is on average 90 dollars. Modern slaves are not considered investments worth maintaining so they are disposable and easily killed. At the tape CNN showed from an auction in Libya a slave is shown to be sold at 300 dollars. (4)

Thus, when the team of archaeology students and professors from St Mary University visits Angerona this summer of 2018, and, as part of their field research pose the question of whether at the coffee plantation the slave quarters were barracks, separating slaves by gender, or a village, favouring family units, we will be waiting for the answer. We will be waiting not because of what it tells us about the past but because of what it can tell us about ourselves as people, our present and future, and the future of our humanity which makes us who we are. We will be eager to pose new questions to understand, and bring to life, the silenced voices of the slaves of Angerona for what they can contribute to our understanding of the cruel, dehumanizing system human created and labeled “plantation economy”, and imposed in our continent and in our world by the relentless love of money and profit of some of us.

Notes

1. Interview by Teresa de Jesùs Torres Espinosa en Habana Cultural, on “Ursula Lambert: la singular haitiana del Angerona” book author Berta Serafina Martínez Pàez, February 16, 2015.

<http://habanacultural.ohc.cu/?p=15656>

2. Josè Luciano Franco (2010) “Historia de la Revolucion de Haiti. La batalla por el dominio del Caribe y el Golfo de Mexico.” Alba bicentenario, Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, Instituto Cubano del Libro.

3. United Nations, 50 For Freedom Campaign, December 2, 2018.
<http://www.un.org/en/events/slaveryabolitionday/>

4. Slavery Today, <https://www.freetheslaves.net/about-slavery/slavery-today/>

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