

Cuban Artist has Hair Competition to Bolster Black Pride

By **Andrea Rodriguez**
Associated Press

HAVANA (AP) — A young Afro-Cuban performance artist transformed a Havana cultural center into the stage of a Black hairstyle competition this weekend in a rare public commentary on racial beauty standards in Cuba, where prejudice remains widespread and largely undiscussed.

this year’s international art fair. Few works touch on discrimination against Black and mixed-race Cubans, which remains commonplace more than a half-century after the island’s socialist revolution promised to eliminate racism.

Susana Delahante, an internationally known 30-year-old Havana artist, invited black and mixed-race women to compete

locked.

After a two-hour competition in which 70 women competed Saturday evening, the audience of about 300 people voted by applause, handing the natural-hair prize to 72-year-old Felicia Solano, whose white outfit dramatically set off her halo of white hair, and the braids award to Marbelys Gonzalez, 15, with a cascade of tight braids decorated



Contestants display their hairdo on stage during an Afro hair contest in Havana, Saturday, June 13, 2015. Susana Delahante, an internationally known 30-year-old Havana artist, invited black and mixed-race women to compete in three hair categories, natural, braided and dreadlocked.

Sociologists say black Cubans’ reluctance to identify themselves as such is a powerful indication of lingering prejudice

Politics, particularly de-

tente with the U.S., is a common subject matter at

in three hair categories — natural, braided and dread-

ed in brightly colored beads. There were no entries in the

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dreadlocks category.

Delahante and participants in the competition described it as a way of rebuilding pride among Afro-Cuban women in a society where kinky hair and black skin often are seen as less beautiful than straight locks and pale complexions.

“This is a first step in reclaiming this type of hair,” said competitor Ania de Armas, a 22-year-old art history graduate who competed in the natural hair category.

Contemporary Cubans are descended mostly from Spanish colonists and their West African slaves, and Cubans categorize themselves as black, white or mixed-race. Sixty-four percent of Cubans identified themselves as white in the country’s last census in 2012, 26.6 percent as mixed-race and 9.3 percent as black — figures that wildly undercount the number of Cubans identified as black by themselves and others in their daily lives. Sociologists say black Cubans’ reluctance to identify themselves as such is a powerful indication of lingering prejudice.

“I wanted to do something that legitimized my hair, this undervalued type of hair,” said Delahante, who wears her hair in a tight Afro style. “This competition is about something that has merit and needs to be rewarded.”

The socialist revolution brought large numbers of black Cubans into the middle and upper ranks of government, academia and professional fields but the Afro-Cuban population still generally has worse housing, transportation and food than whites. The Cubans who fled the island after the revolution were heavily from the white elite class, and so their hundreds of millions of dollars of remittances sent back to relatives on the island each year tend to go to white Cubans.

Behind closed doors and even in public, white Cu-

bans have been known to talk disparagingly about black Cubans in ways that have become socially unacceptable in many other countries, describing them as criminals and forbidding their children from dating Afro-Cuban schoolmates.

Black Cubans also have been the losers in President Raul Castro’s economic reforms, in which Cubans with capital from overseas have been able to open profitable businesses serving increasing numbers of international tourists. Black Cubans are notably absent even on the lower rungs of those new private businesses, such as in service jobs like wait staff positions that bring in big tips from foreign customers.

People of predominantly Afro-Cuban descent also are underrepresented on Cuban television and in much of the contemporary music world, making many black Cubans feel they have to straighten their hair to be considered beautiful.

Roberto Zurbano, a cultural critic and essayist at the Casa de las Americas, a Havana cultural center, said the mostly white leaders of Cuba’s revolution had failed to realize the deeply rooted nature of Cuban racism and implemented race-blind policies instead of programs like affirmative action specifically designed to help black Cubans move into positions of greater influence.

Naomi Santana, a 25-year-old librarian, said she was at the competition in order to bring herself closer to Afro-Cuban culture.

“I used to have straight hair,” said Santana, who now styles her hair in a large Afro. “This is a social recognition that’s been missing for a long time.”

Michael Weissenstein contributed to this report.