

2013

# La Masonería en el mundo – Cuba (3)

Archivo C I E M - Madrid

Documentación - países



## Another look at Freemasonry in Cuba



Cuban Freemasonry is unique in the world for operating openly in a communist nation. What can explain that, given that in most other communist nations Freemasonry has been condemned? For that answer, it is necessary to look at the role that Freemasonry played in the original Cuban Revolution or as some people speculate, the affiliation of the Castro brothers themselves?

Cuba is the only country under the administration of a Marxist government that tolerates throughout its territory an important secret society with an esoteric background: Freemasonry. Today, in the beautiful and economically challenged island of Martí and Maceo, no less than 318 Masonic lodges flourish, openly attended by about 30,000 registered members. Such numbers are high for a country with so small a population as that of Cuba. Various Afro-Cuban religions, Palo Congo, Yoruban Ocha, Abakua, and Haitian Vodú among the population of Haitian descent mostly in Eastern Cuba, religions often mistakenly dubbed "santería" - the Cuban first cousins of Brazilian Candomblé and Umbanda also exist in Cuba, the only other power system capable of competing with esoteric Freemasonry in terms of being reasonably free and unrestricted.



In a Masonic Lodge in Cuba, the rite of the chain of union or force, represented by the crossed hands and arms crossed of the brethren, is symbolic of the evident unity and power of Masonry. The Brotherhood is preparing to play an important role in the future of the country.

Several unsupported stories, amounting to legends are common on the island, both in the media and in popular currency, even among some Masons, to explain this freedom. Some say that Fidel and Raul are Masons, more likely the latter. Others claim that it is the duty of gratitude and that during the Cuban revolution, Fidel Castro had taken refuge in a Masonic lodge, where he found shelter and protection. So he never closed even a single Masonic temple nor persecuted its members. No such stories can be corroborated and since similar stories exist relating to the relative tolerance shown to Afro-Cuban religion, we must remain skeptical until something more than simple assertion can be offered as evidence. The fact is that, today, the Grand Lodge of Cuba - the epicenter of the organization's activities in the country - is entirely regular and recognized by most major Masonic Obediences around the world.



What is an indisputable fact, and which may have more to do with this tolerance, is that the very independence of Cuba was achieved largely thanks to the work of French Freemasons and Cubans. Freemasonry first emerged in Cuba in 1763, from English and Irish military lodges during the brief occupation of the island nation by Britain. When the British left, the French arrived by the thousands fleeing the revolution in Haiti in 1791. The first lodge was actually Cuban Theological Virtue Temple, founded in Havana in 1804 by the Grand Lodge of Louisiana and the famous French-Haitian Freemason Joseph Cerneau, honored throughout Hispanic, Franco-, and Luso-America by mainstream and cosmopolitan or liberal Freemasons alike.



What makes the presence of Freemasonry in Cuba uniquely respected is the role it played during the three decades of struggle for independence from Spanish rule between 1868 and 1895. The three great revolutionary leaders - José Martí, Antonio Maceo and the "father of the nation" Carlos Manuel de Céspedes were all Masons. Historians say today that it was the communist revolutionaries recognized and honored the Masonic affiliation of these three national heroes. But the truth is that little or no effort was made to repress Freemasonry. The vast majority of Cuban presidents, starting with Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, were Masons.

There are other curious features in the behavior of Freemasonry within Cuban society. Very little intervention or limitations have been imposed on Freemasonry. This comfortable state of affairs may be due to the general support Cuban Masonic leaders have demonstrated for the government's policies. Yet, all Cubans are welcome regardless of their politics. A few lodges, outside the Grand Lodge, have begun admitting women to their ranks, which is welcomed generally in a society which formally eschews bias and discrimination of any kind.



After the breakup of the Soviet Union - which was the largest trading partner of Cuba - The Cuban government has further facilitated things for masonry, permitting it to participate in public ceremonies and open new lodges. However, the smooth functioning of all the Masonic lodges is still subject to permission from the authorities, and the publication of books and pamphlets is quite limited for Masonic groups due as much or more to financial limitation as government regulation.

The Grand Lodge of Cuba, popularly known as the Masonic Building, was built around 1955 for the functions of the temple and headquarters of the Masonic bodies of Cuba and came to the University Masonic lodge. It is an imposing building, included among the most significant architectural works in the city of Havana. It lies in the current Avenida Salvador Allende in central Havana. Without forgetting that the Chilean Salvador Allende, friend and ally of the Cuban Revolution, was a committed Mason.

A small lodge in the Sierra Maestra is credited as having hidden Fidel Castro in 1958 after his landing on Cuban shores in the ship named Granma. A building in a remote village in the Sierra Maestra, the door Masonic symbols of the square and compass where it is said that in 1956 hid Fidel Castro who had just landed in the ship Granma.



It was precisely within this old mountain lodge that future Maximum Leader has created the 26th of July Movement that in a few years would sweep away the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista, inspired by the teachings of Jose Marti, the hero of the Cuban father independence movement on the island.

Of course, many stories are told in Havana. That tolerance of Fidel toward Freemasonry is due to his affection by his teacher Mason. That Father Angel, famous landowner, was an affiliate. It is a gesture of respect to his friend Salvador Allende, also a Mason. Even some right-wing theories, of which the Internet has unfortunately more than its share claim that Fidel or at least his brother Raul are initiates. This of course, is also said of them in relation to almost all of the Afro-Cuban religions as well as Haitian Vodú.

Today, on the island, there are officially 318 "regular" lodges frequented by over thirty thousand members. The number increased after the fall of the Berlin Wall.



Officially, the government praises Freemasonry for being associated with the noblest moments of Cuban history. Everyone hopes that in the future, Freemasonry will have an important role in the reconciliation process of the various factions of the country.

Not all lodges are in good condition. Many, especially those far from the capital, lie nearly in ruins. But all masons point to the Grand National Masonic Temple, the eleven storey building crowned by the Square and Compass, located at number 508 Avenida Salvador Allende in Havana as a source of pride.

When it first opened in 1955, was one of the most modern buildings in Cuba. And it remains the best maintained, as witnessed today the small blue leather couches or columns topped by luminous globes. Here's where collective rites occur. It is here, within these walls, with its medals and swords, that the Grand Master and Grand Secretary retain their offices. There is also a museum, a library open to the public and an asylum that houses elderly Masons and administers donations - especially drugs - provided by American and European lodges.

Underground lies the dark "chamber of reflection" on it, along with skeletons and other symbols of vanitas (vanity) human, the aspirant begins to start their learning, "dies" and then is reborn to a new life within the community. A symbolic ritual that, in the country of African diasporic religious traditions, the syncretic traditions that unite African and Christian elements, was enriched with even more macabre passages.



But it may have been precisely this factor that prompted the mix, and subsequently, toleration. The Cuban government has always tolerated the symbols of Afro-Cuban tradition. As happened in 1959 - a week after the flight of Batista - when during a rally, two white doves - symbols of Obatala, and Tiembra Tierra associated in Afro-Cuban traditions with Christ - land on Fidel's shoulders.

Afro-Cuban faith and Freemasonry, in short, both played a role in consensus building in Cuba after the Revolution. The first was useful to gain support from the largely Afro-cuban population of the island who remain poorly represented in the government. The second ensured the sympathy of the Latin American left; the sickle and hammer on one side, and on the other the square and compass.

*Thanks to Paulo Antonio de F. Lobo and João Carlos del Bianco, from Brazil.*