Freemasonry, Secret Societies and Civil Society in Cuban Independence

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In the 19th century, amid the intense conflict with the Spanish metropolis, several Masonic lodges and non-Masonic secret societies came to light in Cuba, many of which reproduced some elements of organizational structures and forms of the lodges. The social relations established in these secret societies also resulted in collaboration with other Masons in several regions, on educational and civic projects. Studies by E. Torres Cuevas on Masonry in Cuba have provided a better understanding of the history of the lodges, but the system of social relations based on secret societies in Cuba has not yet been sufficiently studied by modern historiography. Small and middle plantationist Cuban bourgeoisie gradually became aware of their role in the process of shaping a civil society committed to independence, which involved fomenting culture, rights for slaves, and education in the Cuban nation.

During the second quarter of the century, an informal network of communication and social action was established around Masonic lodges and operated parallel to them; this network allowed members of the creole national bourgeoisie to challenge the colonial power and carry out social and cultural transformations of great significance by working jointly. Social effervescence of this informal communication network was sparked by the events of the Spanish Liberal Triennium. On Saturday April 15, 1820, the news of the triumph of liberal constitutionalist movement in Spain, led by Rafael del Riego, reached Cuba. Captain General of the Island, Juan Manuel Cajigal, was forced to swear by 1812 Constitution. In a few days several Masonic lodges and non-Masonic secret societies came to light; the latter imitated the structures and organizational forms of the first. Secret societies integrated by Spaniards remained faithful to the principles of Spanish liberalism. (Communards, Amillers, Carbonari). The Spaniards in Cuba had appropriated the name of the Italian Carbonari movement, but not its ideals. Creoles found that the American York Lodge model better matched their anti-colonial, independence-related interests, and their position in the process of national identity formation. They grouped in lodges and societies named Cadena Triangular, Soles y Rayos de Bolivar, and Caballeros Racionales. By the number of lodges and societies, as well as its large membership, it is logical that many of them came running from the previous years (Cfr Torres Cuevas 43-45). To the present day, there is no consensus on whether the lodges of the early nineteenth century were regular or irregular, because their archives were destroyed to protect its members, and, for most of these lodges there are no records of granted Letters Patent.

One of the most powerful symbols of Cuban independence ideals, as well as the greatest poet of Hispanic Romanticism, is José María Heredia. As an icon for a generation of Latin American poets and writers, he is also considered the primogenitor of a long line of Cuban poets- martyrs. Because of his participation in the independence conspiracy whose origin laid in Los Soles y Rayos de Bolivar Lodge, he was forced to go into exile. First he took refuge in the United States and a few months later he went to Mexico. Los Soles y Rayos de Bolivar had the stated aim of establishing the Republic of Cubanacan. Initiated members swore on a sword or dagger to die for
independence. Each of them was a “lightning” that became “Sun” when he managed to recruit seven new members. The oath on the sword or dagger might have a double symbolic meaning. Interpreted from the possible Carbonarian influence on the French Rite Cuban Lodges, it could be understood as hatred towards all monarchies. From a more traditional interpretation, the name also refers to the flaming sword that among Masons symbolized the creation through the luminous verb, and the purification of initiates by the tests they had undergone. (Vide Hutin)

While in his brief exile in United States, Heredia wrote one of his best-known poems, the "Hymn of the exile" (173). In this text we find key elements of the great romantic poems: glorification of country with religious terms, nostalgia for the beloved motherland, the need for poetry and literature as instruments against the oppressive tyranny. “¿Qué tenéis? Ni aun sepulcro seguro/ En el suelo infelice cubano./¿Nuestra sangre no sirve al tirano/ Para abono del suelo español?.” The first two verses are significant because of its similarity with the image from Italian poet Ugo Foscolo in “Dei Sepolcri”. There is no peace for those who rest in a land oppressed by tyrants.

Shortly after his arrival in the Mexican exile, the Cuban poet worked as editor for the literary and political journal El Iris until June, 1826 (Sola 225). This newspaper kept the same style and ideological manifesto as El Zurriago. The editor of El Zurriago, Felix Mejia, was a member of the secret society Confederacion de Caballeros Comuneros, but at the end of his life he embraced the Carbonarian movement. It is highly significant how the Spanish secret societies served as a model for the secret societies in Latin America, precisely in the latter struggle against Spanish colonial rule. El Iris had been founded by two Italian Carbonari: Claudio Linati and Fiorenzo Galli, who were the editors of the newspaper. Along with other Italians, they had taken up residence in Mexico after the failures of the liberal revolutions in Italy and Spain in the years 1821 -1823 (223). Linati, an active Carbonari, closely linked to Heredia in ideology, had fought against Spanish realism. (224)

An intellectual who is considered foundational in Cuban philosophy and political thought is José de la Luz y Caballero. Caballero, who greatly admired Mazzini and mentioned him in a well-known short aphorism, used the example of Mazzini to refute the idea that the independence of the country could be achieved by peaceful means. Luz y Caballero, teacher of young students, praised and recommended the revolutionary action, just like the Italian patriot.

After Los Soles y Rayos de Bolívar, several similar conspiracies occurred. In Camaguey, a conspiracy known as “Cadena Electrica” took place. This conspiracy had grown among members of secret society Cadena Triangular. In the city, Miguel Vidaurre, a Peruvian judge, was presiding the Real Audiencia, (regional legal entity of the Crown of Spain). Vidaurre, who later became vice president of Peru, was a renowned intellectual, author of several important legal texts where he had already made explicit his commitment to the independence of Cuba and Latin America. The conspiracy “Cadena Electrica” was closely related to the Promotion Board for the Cuban Liberty, a society founded in Mexico in 1825 (Dávila del Valle). The Aguila Negra Grand Lodge, founded in Mexico in 1823, with later branches in La Habana, Santiago de Cuba, Trinidad and Camaguey, united all these conspiratorial organizations (The statutes of this Grand Lodge were the basis of the statutes drawn up during the revolutionary landing attempt by Francisco Aguero Velazco in 1826, who had belonged to the carbonarian Natural Lodge in Camaguey). Manuel Vidaurre, with
Antonio Miralla, Fernandez de la Madrid, and other Masons residing in Camaguey, went into exile in Philadelphia when their involvement in the conspiratorial activities of secret societies were revealed.

Felix Mejía, the Spanish carbonari, editor of El Zurriago, along with other liberals, managed to flee Spain on a US ship with help from the Communards organization and the international Carbonarian movement. Mejía and his companions arrived in Philadelphia in 1824. There, the Spanish intellectual published a Carbonarian-inspired liberal anti-church brochure: Encyclical of Pope Leo XII. In aid of the tyrant of Spain Fernando VII. With a dissertation in the opposite direction, in 1826. This critical contestation, along with legal principles written by Manuel Vidaurre, would serve as a model for some Cuban revolutionary documents drafted in Philadelphia in those years. With the money collected among all American liberals in Baltimore and Philadelphia, most of the journalists decided to go to Mexico, but Mejía stayed in the United States. He came in contact with his Carbonari comrades and with liberals and Hispanic conspirators, especially with those from Central America and Cuba. It was in Philadelphia where he probably met Gaspar Betancourt Cisneros, a Cuban patriot born in Camaguey who had immigrated to America in 1822. In 1838, Mejia immigrated to Cuba, where he became acquainted with the poet and old liberal journalist Ignacio Valdes Machuca. (Vide Romera Valero)

Gaspar Betancourt Cisneros, also known as El Lugareño, an outstanding Cuban freemason who lived in the first half of the 19th century, devoted his life to fighting for a Cuba free from Spanish rule. He is known primarily for his literary and journalistic writing, abundant with humor and social criticism. However, his most important work is the organization of a complex system of social relations (a secrecy-based communication network). Until today there is no document to establish with certainty when the Cuban joined Freemasonry. If he was initiated into a Cuban lodge, this was done in a ceremony from which there is no record, and in open defiance of the Spanish colonial power. The scholars argue that another possibility is that his initiation may have taken place during his first exile in the United States. Cisneros Betancourt writing was also highlighted by the use of irony as a form of subversion in the development of a discourse of “progress” to the Cuban nation. El Lugareño is considered to be an individual synthesis of the evolution of political and social thought from the island until the first war of independence. He sustained early libertarian concerns, later he stated the need for dialogue with the reformists from 1835 to 1845. He was also a champion of annexation as an ideological concept from the late 40s to the early years of the next decade, and then he released more explicit expressions favoring the idea that Cuban independence should not be linked to foreign nations. His efforts were relevant not only to Cuban politics before 1868, but also, to necessary domestic, economic and educational reforms.

As part of this system of relations which also involved other Cuban, American and Latin American freemasons, Betancourt Cisneros encouraged patriotic and civic education, participated in the so-called Cuban Philosophical Controversy over education, and created in his home country an alternative method for young people without access to education. He also developed institutions and opportunities for those lacking education. He provided most of the funding for these projects and schools with no religious affiliation, and created a program to accelerate economic and social progress in his home region.
Cisneros Betancourt was a student and a great friend of Jose de la Luz y Caballero, whom were both united by their love for Cuba and the ideals of independence. Between them there was extensive correspondence in which the major conflicts about identity and national independence were debated. Following the educational aphorisms by Luz y Caballero, Cisneros Betancourt wrote genre scenes with a scathing criticism against the lack of education among the destitute people, and even more on inequality in education for girls and women. Using his own private resources, he contributed to the opening of some school at his hometown, and in the small coastal town of Nuevitas. In these schools, El Lugareño proposed a plan of liberal studies, which had its basis in the teaching of science and practical classes, as well as language teaching and Universal Modern History courses.

In 1850, a Masonic lodge named “Camaguey” was founded by men who formed the Liberation Society of Puerto Príncipe, following a proposal from Cisneros Betancourt. Seven prominent men joined the twelve founders, all of them closely bounded to the independence movement. They agreed to require all candidates, prior to initiation, the following oath: “As a free citizen, I promise you my personal services, whether these I were required, to work for the Cuban independence, taking the nation out of the darkness in which it is as a colony, and raising Cuba to the rank of a free, sovereign and independent country, and if in order to achieve this were necessary the sacrifice of my life, I’ll sacrifice myself”. These are the ethical foundations of July 4, 1851, when the first Declaration of Independence of Cuba was signed in San Francisco del Jucaral. That first day waved the national flag designed by Masons Narciso Lopez and Miguel Teurbe Tolon, escorted by exclusively Cuban troops, under the direction of Joaquín de Agüero.

As mentioned above, El Lugareño had also been linked in his youth with revolutionary expedition led by Francisco Agüero, which had forged through the close ties of its participants with the Mexican secret societies, and he had participated in more than one revolutionary attempt. During his second American exile, Betancourt Cisneros and his fellows Cuban Masonic brothers exiles founded the “Orden de la estrella solitaria” in New Orleans, and the “Joven América” y “Joven Cuba” revolutionary movements, with a Carbonari inspired plan, following the “Giovine Italia” and “Giovine Europa”, projects by Giuseppe Mazzini.

From exile, Betancourt Cisneros had been the main ideological guidance in shaping Joaquín de Agüero’s revolutionary ideas. Together they wrote the 1851 Cuban manifesto of independence. The ethical foundations of July 4th, 1851, of course, had much in common with American independence. All of these movements were developed during and after the initiation of conspiracy led by Narciso López in 1851. (Dávila del Valle). With Mazzini happens the same that with many Cuban patriots and intellectuals: their membership in Masonic Lodges, in organic sense, and through a regular initiation ritual has not been ever proved. The prestigious historian José Antonio Ferrer Benemelí even said that Mazzini was never a Mason although many continue to say he was. (Comba 3). The same debate is still around regarding Cuban patriots.

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Betancourt Cisneros had excellent relations with Antonio Meucci, businessman, intellectual and Italian inventor who lived in Cuba from 1835-1850. Through Meucci, Betancourt Cisneros met Giuseppe Garibaldi, and somehow had to do with Garibaldi’s visit to Havana in 1850. This visit, which is still controversial today, was an attempt to explore the actual conditions to develop an independence movement in Cuba, as Garibaldi had done in other countries. Meucci had lived in Havana for fifteen years, and invited Garibaldi to visit Havana to organize a liberating expedition from a port in the eastern US. From the United States, Meucci maintained not only trade relations but also political links with John Anderson, -an American landowner in Santiago de Cuba, tobacco producer, who funded part of the Garibaldi’s activities. Garibaldi generously praised Havana as one of the greatest cities in the world in a letter written to El Lugareño, where he mentions his friendship with Narciso López and Cirilo Villaverde. Antonio Meucci, for several years, contributed with mony, sent guns and recruited volunteers for the war in Cuba, during his Havana days and when he returned to New York. (Chao 41)

Betancourt Cisneros and a group of Latin American patriots, during their stays in Philadelphia, facilitated discussion on various integration projects and attempts to build the Cuban national identity. There he received and helped train many young people who fled the island due to political persecution. Through this network Betancourt Cisneros collaborated with the organization of independence projects such as the already mentioned “Cadena Triangular” conspiracy, Narciso Lopez’s expeditions and the Joaquin de Agüero’s uprising. Many of these political projects were born in secret societies that reproduced linkages at Masonic lodges.

Joaquin de Agüero´s Masonic name was Franklin, his obvious tribute to Benjamin Franklin. Significantly, many Camagueyan patriarchs sent their children to study in Philadelphia, where the most important Cuban Masons and independence leaders settled. After Joaquín de Agüero left Cuba, in June 1843, persecuted for his pro-abolitionist and liberal ideas, he lived at least three months in the city. (Cento 86)

Agüero was executed by the Spanish troops on the 12th of August in 1851, in Sabana de Mendez, where now there is a memorial monument honoring his legacy. Subjected to fierce persecution, the Lodge goods and documents were confiscated, the files were destroyed, and the surviving members, under surveillance, appeared to disperse. Fifteen years later, on December 7, 1866, after the funeral of Gaspar Betancourt Cisneros, his Masonic brothers regrouped and, in early 1867, they founded the Tínima Lodge, whose members had an important role in the armed struggle for independence. Of the hundred men who participated in the armed uprising in the summer of 1868 in Camaguey, 84 were members of the Tínima lodge.

After the failure of this attempt to free Cuba from the Spain rule, many Cuban decided to explore the possibility of an annexationist project from the United States, including Betancourt Cisneros. Later, he moved to Florence, Italy, where he lived from 1856 till 1859; there, his only son was born. With his political and social action, Gaspar Betancourt Cisneros was a cornerstone of freemasonry in Cuba, and also of the relationships between the lodges and secret societies. He helped strengthen relations between Cuban civil society of the 19th century, and the secret societies in United States and the Caribbean.
In the fictionalized biography of Meucci, by Basilio Catania, we can read a recreation of Meucci’s actions in connection with the visit of Garibaldi:

“Antonio” he said, lowering his voice, “do you actually think that the Governor was not informed about the money you sent to Garibaldi?... And how do you think he took it?... Don’t you know that in all the former Spanish colonies of America Garibaldi is considered to be the patron saint of independence fighters and that Cuban exiles are doing their best to get him to organize the invasion and liberation of Cuba from Spanish dominion?” He grew quiet and thoughtful. Then, after a moment’s hesitation, he suddenly decided to speak out: “Take a look at this” he said, pulling out of his pocket a folded piece of paper signed El Lugareño. He pointed to a sentence written in italics “Un valiente sabe siempre encontrar un arma” (A brave man can always find a weapon). “This” he said, handing the piece of paper over to Antonio, “is a clandestine manifesto that is circulating in Cuba and this is a sentence pronounced by Garibaldi, which Gaspar Betancourt, known as El Lugareño, is using from New York to encourage Cuban independence supporters to rise up against Spain. Do you understand me now?” (Catania 272).

The bonds that fiction makes are those that historiography and academic essays can not. But, as a form of literature, it is a powerful ideology and weapon. A history that deepens into the relationship between masonry and secrets societies in Cuba, in the course of the formation of the national identity, that has yet to be written. Likewise, the most important topics of research are focused in the social participation of the Cuban masons and their contribution to the national identity and the ideals of freedom and democracy.
Bibliografía


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