

## CRICKET AND MAYPOLES IN CUBA

For anyone living outside Cuba, the name Guantanamo will automatically bring to mind the brutal, universally-condemned detention centre - an abiding symbol of the Bush era - at the US naval base which, since 1903, has occupied about 45 square miles of Cuban territory and which most people imagine to be the only presence of the contemporary English-speaking world on the island.

However, you only have to leave the base, cross the border and make your way to Serafín Sánchez Street on the eastern outskirts of the Cuban city of Guantánamo to find another link with the English-speaking world whose presence has made and continues to make a significant contribution to the history, as well as to the social and cultural life of Cuba.

The British West Indian Welfare Centre - known to locals as *el Centre* - was founded in 1945 to provide a meeting place for the thousands of workers from the English-speaking islands of the Caribbean (mainly Jamaicans) who had come to Cuba during the early part of the 20th century to work on the sugar and coffee plantations, found mainly in the eastern part of the island. Although these workers had received a good basic education in their own countries and were skilled tradesmen, they could only find work on the island as casual labourers earning minimal wages.



In November 1933, the Cuban government of the time introduced the 50% Law (*La ley del 50%*), according to which companies and landowners were obliged to employ 50% Cuban nationals in their work force. As a result, many of the English-speaking immigrant labourers who found themselves unemployed gravitated to the city of Guantánamo in south-eastern Cuba to seek work at the US naval base which was only too happy to employ English speakers.

The Centre still occupies the building where it was inaugurated, in the presence of the British Vice-Consul for Oriente Province. Adorning the walls of the large hall, which serves as office, functions room and archive, are large flags representing all the islands in the



English-speaking Caribbean, together with the Cuban flag and the Union Jack. Also on the walls are a cricket calendar, the words of the Jamaican national anthem and photos of famous Jamaican and Cuban politicians. There is a bookcase containing the Centre's archives as

well as information about the English-speaking Caribbean community. In one corner stands a portable maypole. Behind the building is a large patio, also used for meetings and other events.

*El Centre* has always occupied a special place in the life of the community it serves. All the officers on the Board are volunteers and have full-time jobs elsewhere. As the Culture Secretary, Onil Bientz Conte - a graphic designer in his 30s and 4<sup>th</sup> generation descendent of immigrants from Jamaica - explained: "Before the 1959 Revolution, Cuba was a profoundly racist society in which all people of African descent, whether Cuban nationals or immigrant workers, faced racial abuse, discrimination and exploitation in all areas of their lives. They had no political representation and a large percentage of the black community lived in poverty, often extreme poverty, finding themselves marginalised from mainstream Cuban society. This Centre served as a place where they could find support and reaffirm their identity and traditions in a hostile social environment."

Until the Revolution, the centre also ran its own full-time primary school where children wore a uniform and the teaching medium was English. It was run by the grandmother of the current Secretary of the Centre, Sonia Jackson Ming, a retired civil servant, and which Sonia herself attended. "When I was a child, I always spoke English at home. My family was very proud of their origins," explained Sonia, born in Cuba of a Jamaican father and whose mother was born in Cuba of Jamaican parents. At the onset of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 when she was aged 12, she transferred to a Spanish-speaking secondary school. "It was a shock at first, but I quickly found myself using Spanish quite



naturally," she said. English continues to figure prominently in her family: her brother and niece are both English teachers.

As was to be expected, many of the English-speaking workers settled down and married Cubans. Sonia continued: "The handing down of the English language from one



generation to another depended very much on which parent spoke English. The children of English-speaking mothers tended to converse easily in the language. Those with only an English-speaking father tended not to, their father being out at work for much of the time. If the children lived with their English-speaking grandmother, they had no option but to use English as their mother tongue."

The 1959 Revolution brought many important changes to the lives of Afro-Cubans, summarised in the poem *Tengo* ('I have') by the famous Afro-Cuban poet, Nicolás Guillén. Social divisions narrowed and society became more integrated as free education and health care for all Cubans, social benefits, workers' rights and land reforms were introduced. The standard of living of the poorest Cubans improved significantly. At the same time racial discrimination was outlawed. As the social climate changed, so Afro-Cubans felt there was less need for centres like the Welfare Centre in Serafín Sánchez Street and the membership declined as the younger members moved away, leaving only the founding members. The school disbanded as the pupils joined state schools.

This decline continued until the Special Period, which started in the early 1990s, when Cubans suffered the effects of a severe economic crisis brought on by the collapse of the USSR and socialist Eastern Europe, together with the introduction in the US of the Torricelli (Cuban Democracy) and the Helms-Burton acts in 1992 and 1996, both of which legislated for a stringent tightening of the US blockade, in existence since 1961. They affected other countries' ability to trade with the island, at the precise time when Cuba needed to expand its markets. Once again, finding themselves in need of support at a time of hardship and stress, Afro-Cuban descendents of English speaking immigrants returned to the Centre and the membership started to grow again.

Today, the Centre has 176 members, covering the full age range (the average age being around 40) with a new generation keen to discover their ancestral roots and to keep alive their cultural heritage.

Officers are chosen in elections which take place every two years and members pay 1 peso (just over 1p) a month membership - cheap even by Cuban standards.- and 2 pesos annually for health and welfare services offered by the community. As Onil explained, "This centre has two fundamental objectives: to give community support to those in need and to serve as a cultural centre. Members visit the sick and help is given to those who may need it, such as pensioners who need special food because of a medical condition. When a member dies, there is support for the family and the centre provides a wreath for the funeral.

The strong commitment of the Centre to the welfare of its members is also reflected by its future plans, envisaged by its perceptive, and tirelessly hard-working director, Jorge Derrick Henry – an English teacher in his 50s who works at a medical school in Guantánamo and whose ancestors came from Jamaica and Antigua. "My dream is to open a day centre for the elderly here with social activities, exercise classes and a volunteer nurse or doctor in attendance in the morning, followed by lunch and more activities – all for a nominal charge," he explained, adding that meals should cost less than a peso.. Initially the day centre would be available only to members of the BWIWC, but eventually Jorge would like to offer the facility to the local community in general. He took me out to the patio, indicating



a bare patch of ground at the back that had a few bricks and rubble strewn around. "If we can get funding, the kitchen will be here with the roofing spanning the area from the toilets to the outer wall. In front of the cooking area we'll build a long counter for serving the food," he added. He went on to explain that, although there were very cheap dining centres provided by the state across the

island for the elderly and the *círculos de abuelos* – groups that organise outings and exercise for the same age group - there were few places that combined the two kinds of facility.

Equally impressive is the range of cultural activities run by the Centre. Educational activities include talks on a variety of subjects, ranging from engineering and health issues to literature and history. There are workshops on the Anglo-Caribbean presence in Guantánamo, offered in conjunction with the local authority, and English classes which are open to everyone living in the locality. Inevitably the Centre runs family history workshops for members wishing to trace family roots, in most cases in Jamaica. A religious service is held each year on Easter Sunday, mainly for the older members, and there is also a yearly memorial service for members who have passed away.



However, much of the centre's cultural life focuses on the young although, of course, all age groups enjoy the activities on offer. Because, as Onil says, "It is the young people who will keep the interest in our culture alive in the future."

The Centre has its own cricket team - one of seven on the island - which takes part in yearly national tournaments and who are the current national champions. The team has also played in Jamaica and is keen to plan more fixtures abroad.



There are groups which perform traditional and modern styles of music and dance, such as Calypso, Soca, Reggae, Mento and Ska and there is a monthly *peña de reggae* (a group of reggae enthusiasts). A maypole dance also forms part of the dance group's repertoire. One group, called Rainbow - all amateurs with full-time jobs - performs in multi-cultural festivals, both locally and nationally, where groups from the different communities that make up the Cuban population, such as those with ancestors from Haiti, China, the Middle East, Nigeria, the Congo and the English-speaking islands of the Caribbean, as well as from different regions of Spain and the Canary Islands, come together to enjoy each other's music, dance and food.

Most popular are the celebrations held at the Centre with food, drink and dancing to celebrate Mother's Day, Father's Day, St. Valentine's Day, Children's Day, Xmas and any other occasion that can serve as an excuse for a party.

Needless to say, the Centre has attracted interest from many quarters. Links are still maintained with the British government, which makes small donations from time to time, as well as with governments, academics and researchers from other English-speaking islands in the Caribbean and beyond. Notwithstanding the diversity of origins among members and visitors, the Centre sees itself above all as being part of what it is to be Cuban - one of a number of widely differing cultures, all of which have contributed to enrich the island's historical legacy and social and cultural identity – a process known in Cuba as *transculturación*, which continues to be strongly promoted and developed by the Cuban socialist government.

As I leave Jorge reaffirms the Centre's position: "Our historical and cultural links with the UK and the English-speaking world do not mean that we don't see ourselves first and foremost as Cubans and supporters of the Revolution. Many visitors here think we are a chink in Cuba's armour which will enable them to report back negatively about our country's socialist system. They are mistaken. We value the opportunities and freedoms that the Revolution has made available to us and which are not enjoyed by many communities on the other islands of the Caribbean. We do not wish to see regime change in Cuba."

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