



Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2004, glbtq, inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

The Republic of Cuba is an archipelago situated at the mouth of the Gulf of Mexico and is made up of the island of Cuba, the Isle of Youth (formerly known as the Isle of Pines), and approximately 4,195 islands, islets, and cays (shoals). The long narrow land mass is 42,827 square miles and has a population of eleven million. Politically and administratively, Cuba is divided into fourteen provinces and the Isle of Youth, which is a special municipality.

Cuba is ethnically extremely diverse, the result of the historical and cultural mixture of Africans, Spaniards, and Asians, among others. The original indigenous inhabitants are virtually non-existent.

The most important sectors of the economy are sugar and its derivatives, tobacco, nickel, and tourism, the latter now producing more income than the other three combined.

Cuba does not have a glbtq movement. Although homosexuals in many different parts of the world have organized politically and the echoes of Stonewall can be noticed far and wide, the socio-political and cultural impact of these developments is virtually nil in Cuba. Activism has not developed on the island; however, there have been some attempts to consolidate a "community."

Unlike other countries in Latin America, such as Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, that have many activist groups, Cuban political activism is only in the process of developing. Among the many causes that have limited the creation of a movement in Cuba have been the lack of a convincing, unifying project and political leadership.

The Colonial Period

The influence of the Inquisition was not as pervasive in Cuba as it was in other regions of the Americas, although there were denunciations of people considered to be sodomites. In the seventeenth century, the Captain General of the island wrote to the Spanish king to report that he had sentenced twenty effeminate men to death by burning and to ask his Majesty for advice about what to do with this type of person. According to one historian, this is the only known execution of this kind.

Historical sources indicate that a small island in Havana Bay that is currently named Cayo Cruz (Shoal of the Cross) was known as Cayo Puto (Shoal of the Faggot) or Isla de las Mujeres (Isle of Women). During colonial times, prostitutes and homosexuals were sent there, and many documents allude to the existence of this islet. It is possible that after the government built Havana's Royal Prison and Asylum it was no longer necessary to use the small island for this purpose.

On April 10, 1791, an article appeared in the newspaper *Papel Periódico de La Havana* entitled "A critical letter about the man-woman." This essay was one of the first documents expressing incipient nationalist sentiment, albeit through the desire to regulate the social customs and sexual practices of Cuban society. The letter was also possibly the first document to refer to effeminate men as the counterpoint to masculine men, who were exalted as appropriate representations of the nation. The author viewed Cuba within the framework of the Hispanicized Havana elite, with women and homosexuals excluded from this notion of the nation.

Nineteenth-century Cuba

During the nineteenth century, men who engaged in same-sex sexual relations were generically termed sodomites and pederasts. These people probably did not share a homosexual identity or engage exclusively in sexual activities with members of the same sex. Court cases record the punishment of men who engaged in carnal "acts against nature." Observers were interested in documenting the "pathological" person whose "indiscreet" behavior was impossible to hide.

The concept of homosexuality as a scientific category developed in association with the classification of sexual behavior at the end of the nineteenth century. In Cuba, however, sodomy was not thought of as a sexual variant; rather, it was considered an ambiguous and strange possibility. In general, Cubans did not use the descriptive categories of homosexual and lesbian.

In the late nineteenth century, and after independence from Spain and the establishment of a republic in the early twentieth century, an incipient community developed in Havana. Sources indicate that social networks based on homoerotic desire emerged in the capital, but not in other parts of the island. Homosexual interactions also overlapped with prostitution, and the center of this community's social life was concentrated in the area of the city known as Old Havana.

Homosexuality in the Context of the Cuban Revolution

In the process of building a new society in the aftermath of the 1959 Cuban Revolution, one of the model figures presented, promoted, and theorized by Ché Guevara was the idea of the "New Man." Homosexuals were excluded from this idealized masculine revolutionary being.

Following a Stalinist conception of socialism, the revolutionary government also formed UNAPs, or Military Units to Aid Production. Many homosexuals were forced to work in these units to "correct" their "anti-social" behavior. Moreover, the Declaration of the First Congress of Education and Culture that was held in 1971 explicitly rejected homosexuality and excluded homosexuals from social and cultural activities.

Government policies created a climate that made homoerotic sociability difficult, but despite the hostility toward them, gay men and lesbians struggled to find creative ways to meet, build informal social networks, and express their sexuality, albeit discreetly.

Although reforms in the penal code in the 1970s eliminated references to homosexuality as a criminal offense, this act has not been sufficient to establish respect and equality for Cuban gay men and lesbians. Among those Cubans who have emigrated from the island, including many in the Marielita exodus of 1980, have been many gay men and lesbians who were denied social space within the country. Others have been enticed by economic possibilities abroad.

To date, the only Cuban homosexual organization that has formed on the island is ONE, Organización Nacional de Entendidos, or National Organization of Gay People. It operated entirely underground between 1996 and 2001, and then disbanded. Founded by Adolfo del Pino, ONE developed out of the need for homosexuals in general, and writers in particular, to have a social space where they could exchange ideas. The group published *Hola Gente* (Hi Folks), a magazine that was printed on a computer three times a year, with one or two copies of each edition circulating among its readers.

Contemporary Cuba

In contemporary Cuba, one cannot speak of a gay community. One can, however, speak of a homoerotic environment for meeting and socializing in Havana that is constantly moving and reshaping itself. Ironically, the most frequented location is an area of the city known as Vedado, which is where a similar social life thrived during the colonial period and the first half of the twentieth century.

In the 1990s, a more liberal attitude on the part of the state tolerated overt manifestations of homosexual socializing. During these years, gay men and lesbians could meet openly in bars and discos that featured drag shows. However, at the end of the decade the government cracked down on such places, driving drag shows to underground meeting places.

In 2003, the Minister of Domestic Commerce issued Resolution Number 2, which redefined nocturnal recreation sites and turned many of the city's most popular discos into vegetarian restaurants. Under the pretext of controlling illicit drug use, many spaces occupied by homosexuals have been eliminated. Weekend socializing has been reduced to congregating in front of the Yara movie theater under the eyes of the police and participating in semi-secret parties in out-of-the-way places.

Within the homoerotic world, Cuban transvestites suffer the most social discrimination. Although there is no law that prohibits cross-dressing, transvestites are constantly harassed by authorities on the street and are not allowed to work in state-run enterprises. Several years ago, the National Center for Sex Education issued letters for people diagnosed as transsexuals that, to a certain extent, protected some transvestites. However, people began to copy and forge these letters, and soon thereafter the police ignored their validity.

Humanistic ethics are embedded in the ideals of the Cuban Revolution, and the country's Constitution prohibits discrimination based on ethnicity, sex, and age. These values should logically extend to gay men, lesbians, and transgendered people to protect them from discrimination by public institutions and within the family. Unfortunately, they do not.

Bibliography

Bejel, Emilio. *Gay Cuban Nation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Lumsden, Ian. *Machos, Maricones, and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality*. Philadelphia, Penn.: Temple University Press, 1996.

Quiroga, José. *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America*. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

Sierra Madero, Abel. *La nación sexuado*. La Habana: Editorial Ciencias Sociales, 2001.

Young, Allen. *Gays under the Cuban Revolution*. San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1981.

About the Author

Abel Sierra Madera holds degrees in history and Latin American studies from the University of Havana. A member of the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists, he is author of *La nación sexuada. Relaciones de género y sexo en el siglo XIX en Cuba* [The Sexualized Nation: Gendered and Sexual Relations in Nineteenth-Century Cuba].