

African and Afro-Diasporic Initiatory Structures and their Interaction with Masonry.

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Form follows function—that has been misunderstood. Form and function should be one, joined in a spiritual union.

—Frank Lloyd Wright (Architect)

Wright used this Axiom in regard to buildings, but the same can be said of human culture. When two cultures with no prior contact or shared influence are seen to have created similar buildings, such as pyramids, social structures and innovations, our instinct is to inquire as to how it could be so, and we are left to conclude whether some divine or mystical force caused these similarities, or if simply, a similarity in need accompanied by a similarity in mental processes simply resulted in similar results.

Either way, when these disparate cultures, hitherto unknown to one-another meet, it is precisely these similarities that aid in the cohesion of the cultures when made to interact.

This paper will highlight how certain West and Central African cultures, and their Diaspora created social and religious structures that at least in-part, contained elements analogous to some key features found in Masonry, and demonstrate various ways those similarities both, made Freemasonry a palatable and even desirable Institution for African and Afro Diasporic peoples, but also, how the structure of Freemasonry possibly aided some of these traditional structures to adapt to the ‘Westernization’ of their environment, providing the opportunity of cultural longevity well into the present era. The Institutional elements I will focus on are as follows:

- Secrecy/privacy
- Initiatory groups and ideas of exclusivity
- Male only institutions
- Higher than average moral expectations
- Legends linking institutions to an exalted past
- Being a “Royal Art”
- The transition from Operative to Speculative

The cultures and their respective socio, cultural and religious institutions mentioned in this paper are:

- Igbo (Nigeria) – (Egwugwu society)
- Yoruba (Nigeria) – (Ogboni Fraternity and the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity)
- Efik/Ekoi (Nigeria) and Abacua (Cuba)- Ejegham / Abacua¹
- Congo and Angola – Kimpasi, Lemba and Nkimba societies and their Diaspora, “Palo” of Cuba

Igbo (Nigeria) – (Egwugwu society)

West African author of Igbo extraction, Chinua Achebe wrote the celebrated book, ‘Things Fall Apart’ which addresses one Igbo groups (south eastern Nigeria. E.g. Onitsha etc) struggle with adapting to Colonialism, Westernization and change in general. It’s protagonist, Okonkwo represents a too rigid adherence to tradition in the face of inevitable change. Okonkwo, though not an old-man, sits on the village’s council of elders, itself an initiatory society consisting of nine men. These nine men deliberate the affairs of their people in secret or better yet, privacy, away from the prying eyes and ears of the uninitiated towns-people. Once a determination has been made, one of the nine men will act as a spokesperson by wearing the ancestral costume of their people. He will go out and make the proclamation, for, the decision of the council is supported by the will of the ancestors. It is very important that even private dissent among them in private is not made know once they have agreed to a message. It is imperative that the members of this council lead upright lives, even when not deliberating as their conduct is a reflection of the council they represent.

I chose this culture and book as the first example only because it is found within an internationally acclaimed work of literature and has been taught in countless schools. The themes of morality, all male initiatory groups, ritualized secrecy should be familiar to any Mason despite the very different circumstances in which these characteristics are found. Obviously, the ‘operative’ nature, to use a Masonic term, of this council of elders (egwugwu society) is governance and not stone-masonry, yet, serves as an apt metaphor for the same. All the following groups will demonstrate more direct interaction with Masonry.

It is very likely that Okonkwo’s name was not chosen randomly by Achebe. Also, among the Igbo people exists what is known as the Okonko society. The Okonko Society consists of only male members. It’s rituals are secret (private). Their duty is to enforce the decisions of communal assembly and act as a court of appeals in disputes. Those seeking membership must be of the most upright character. Like the Egwugwu society, the Okonko also have a masquerade, Ekpe, likely to have contributed to the Abacua society of Cuba. The Okonko

¹ I will only mention the Abacua in passing as a more robust paper on the topic has already been submitted by Brother Alfonso Serrano.

society bears many similarities to the next group to be discussed, the Ogboni, also in Nigeria. In fact, even some Igbo and Yoruba scholars compare them frequently.²

Yoruba (Nigeria) – (Ogboni Fraternity and the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity)

Ogboni of the Yoruba peoples of Nigeria will be the least speculative of the cultures here because, over a hundred years ago, a British Missionary himself observing Ogboni called it an Indigenous form of Freemasonry

*Some of these have already been prominently before us, viz. :
the Oro society, the Egun society, and the Ogboni society.
These have been compared by some writers with European
Freemasonry and its various grades and lodges.*³

There exists among the blacks a secret society, the members of which are very numerous in Yorouba and are called **Ogboni**. This sort of freemasonry seems to have for object the preservation of the ancient traditions, and especially the religious customs of negro pa-

Ogboni as a form of freemasonry⁴

Yorubaland, being a pre-literate society before the arrival of Islam, did develop some methods of non-verbal communication as well as what we may liken unto ‘modes of identification’ within the Ogboni society. Unlike Freemasonry, the verbal identifiers of Ogboni may be words, but are often-times whole phrases. They are always in call and response mode. In older times...the number of pass-phrases a person knew was an indication of how much they had advanced in their learning as additional phrases were given as a reward of diligent study and obedience.

The Ogboni’s temple or meeting hall is called ‘iledi’ meaning the ‘house of the mute’ to emphasize that the secrets and mysteries discussed there are not to be revealed to outsiders. Their traditional regalia is an indigenous cloth called itagbe, which is worn over the

2 Nwosu, Patrick U., Theory and Practice of Secrecy: Focus on Okonko and Ogboni in Africa: Inquiries in African Religion, Lambert Academy Publishing, 2012

3 Farrow, Stephen S., Faith, Fancies and Fetish, or Yoruba Paganism; Athelia Henrietta Press, 1996 (Originally published 1913)

4 Baudin, Noe Fetichism and Fetich Worshippers Benziger Brothers, 1885 (Page 63)

left shoulder of all its members as a sign of their membership. Non-members are forbidden to wear it.

The leaders of an iledi, what we may call officers. Every Iledi has at least three principal officers consisting of the head called *Oluwo*, the Ritual officiant called *Apena*, and leader of women members called *Abiye* (midwife). Unlike the previously mentioned groups, Ogboni admits women into their ranks. There are many more titles/ offices that can be conferred if the Iledi is large enough. The *balogun* is charged with the security and safety.

Need for secrecy.

Ogboni has no relation to any building Craft. Instead, its “Operative” function is Judicial. It serves as a court of appeals when conflict cannot be resolved among parties by local elders or chiefs. Once a case comes before Ogboni, the decision is final and can not be appealed further. Their other major role is that of electing, installing and training kings and chiefs, and in rare cases of tyrannical rule.. to remove them from power.

In Yoruba culture, kingship does not automatically pass from father to son. Instead, and male of the royal family who is of age may be considered for the throne. Therefore, there is always deliberation. As a king or Oba has full power over life and death once installed, the deliberations among Ogboni over who the next king will be is always kept in the most secret confidence among members, lest a king should find out who spoke against their instillation. Secrecy therefore was a literal matter of life and death.

Edan Ogboni

The Edan Ogboni are a male-female pair cast in brass and often linked together by a chain. They are always depicted as elderly, going as far as to depict the female with a beard to ensure that the age is well emphasized. Edan is the Supreme religious symbol of this group. It does not reflect two deities, but one that is at once, neither male or female, nor hermaphroditic and is both male and female. In other words, a perfectly integrated Being. It demonstrates that the wise and the aged aim to eschew the arbitrary distinction of gender (while at the same time, celebrating those distinctions that are not arbitrary. It also reflects the Society’s obligation to champion the well-being of all members of society, not to favor unfairly neither male or female. This symbolism calls attention to much of the symbolism assigned to the dual pillars of the Masonic Lodge, particularly that Edan paradoxically represent a single being, not two just as the pillars are meant to depict attributes within the self.

Emphasis on the number 3

While the number 3 may appear elsewhere in Yoruba culture, nowhere therein does it play such a salient role in the identity of a group as it does among the Ogboni. One Ogboni maxim goes: *two becomes three*. Its surface meaning is meant to allude to the act of procreation but the maxim is meant to be contemplated by its members to arrive at deeper meanings, for example, the understanding that 2 and 3 are one and the same. The Ogboni repeat the use of the number 3 constantly. The initial call to prayer, the “alarm” they make upon entering a temple,

the number of incisions made as part of their initiation, and their symbol which intentionally implies, but does not show, the third side of a triangle.

We find further analysis of the number three in the following Yoruba/ Ogboni maxims:

The three stones of the hearth will not spill the soup (aaro meta kii dobeenu)⁵



The change to a monotheistic and pseudo-Masonic institution.

In the light of European colonialism, rapid cultural change... Many Yoruba struggled with balancing maintaining their cultural identity while at the same time, accepting Christianity, Islam and being a colony of a European power with all its influence.

In 1914, a Christian Pastor T.A.J Ogunbiyi who was also an Apena of the Ogboni society created a Christian version of Ogboni. As the institution itself was still very much respected among the people and it did represent the core values of Yoruba civilization, he did not want to abandon Ogboni altogether. He however needed assistance in restructuring its rituals and praxis

⁵ Buckley, Anthony D; 'Royal Arch, Royal Arch Purple and Raiders of the Lost Ark. Secrecy in Orange and Masonic Ritual. Institute of Irish Studies, Queens University. 2000

and would go on to recruit Adeyemo Alakija, a prominent Mason who would go on to become the Fifth provincial Grand Master of Masons in all of Nigeria (under the GL of Scotland) later in 1950. He was only the Second African to hold the title, and the Mason who installed him Sir Charles William Tachie-Menson, who was then the District Grand Master for Gold Coast (now Ghana). Alakija was a solicitor by Education and a successful newspaper publisher. A man of good standing in the community with a strong Western education.

This new Ogboni Fraternity was originally called Christian Ogboni (Ogboni Onigbagbo) but would go on to change its name to Reformed Ogboni Fraternity when it allowed Muslims to join. To this day, members of the indigenous variant of Ogboni must renounce their membership if they wish to join the Reformed fraternity.

The motto of ROF is: How Good and how pleasant it is for Brethren to dwell in Unity.

Their ritual is said to involve the search for the Ark of the covenant, But I'm unable to confirm.



Kongo and the Kongo of Cuba - Christianity and Masonry

The Kongo of Central West Africa was a kingdom that developed from various migrations starting in the 7th century up until the arrival of the Portugues in the 15th Century. They had even begun to expand, sometimes militarily and were technically an empire. Their economy consisted agriculture, hunting, textiles, ivory, fishing, art and so on. The Kongo maintained extensive trade relations with their neighbors. The Kongo have a deep and varied religious landscape that included the belief in an overarching God called Nsambi, lesser deities and spirits and most notably, ancestor veneration. Many practices were family and clan based. However, there were three, possibly four initiatory schools that transcended any local custom and could be found within and without the official borders of Kongo. These were the Lemba, the Nkimba, the

Kimpassi and possibly the Buelo. In Masonic terms, the Lemba were/is the initiatory order for Commerce and by extension, marriage. Nkimba was the military order so to speak. Initiates were trained to protect their borders and be on call at the commands of the king. And Kimpassi was by all accounts, the priestly Order. Though all three schools based their actions and initiations around gods and ancestral devotion, Kimpassi alone was dedicated solely to spiritual matters.. it had no other ‘operative’ function (to use a Masonic term) as did the other two. These three are analogous to Angel Millar’s three stages of initiation: The Craftsman, the Warrior and the Priest.⁶

In 1483 Diogo Cão, the Portuguese explorer arrived at Kongo. The ruling king at that time was Nzinga a Nkuwu who established relations with the Portuguese and most interestingly for our purpose, almost immediately converted to Christianity, taking the name of Joao. For most of history, it has been recounted that the conversion was entirely voluntary and to this day, it is a fact that has perplexed scholars. Several theories float around why Nzinga a Nkuwu converted so quickly. Whatever the reason was, Christianity became the official religion of the Kongo, and Nzinga, along with the members of the royal family were given tutors in both religion and other Western topics including reading and writing in Latin. To this day, we have a letter written by Nzinga.

One institution that arrived among the nobility of the Kongo as a result of it being a Catholic Monarchy was the Catholic Chivalric military order.. The Military Order of Christ.

was founded in 1319 with the protection of King Denis of Portugal, after the Templars were abolished on 22 March 1312 by the papal bull, Vox in excelso, issued by Pope Clement V.^{[3][4]} King Denis refused to pursue and persecute the former knights as had occurred in most of the other sovereign states under the political influence of the Catholic Church⁷

Kongo being a staunchly Catholic nation up to present does not have much in the way of Masonic history to it, yet, The Military order of Christ in the Kongo has never ceased to exist.

As a Royal institution, it was bestowed upon worthy members of the Kongo nobility. In tandem, the Order of Christ was also used to expand the interests of the Portuguese Crown and the Catholic Church within the African continent as well as in Brazil. And here we have two very obvious means by which Christian Chivalric Orders reached the Americas as early as the late 15th, early 16th Centuries.

The Portugueses would gift non-nobles with honorary membership into the Order in exchange for their service in the colonies. Physically going to Kongo, Angola or Brazil may earn you an honorary squireship into the Order. In other words, the means by which the Order supported the

6 Millar, Angel. The Three Stages of Initiatic Spirituality: Craftsman, Warrior, Magician. United States, Inner Traditions/Bear, 2020.

7 Wikipedia entry – Military Order of Christ, Retrieved 8/11/2023 ;

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_Order_of_Christ#:~:text=The%20Templars%20were%20persecuted%20by,their%20mass%20slaughter%20throughout%20Europe.

crown and the church was no longer based on mounting horses or using a sword to defend the Holy Land, but rather, furthering interests in countries where the Church had not been prior.

But the Order may have also travelled by other means. It is well documented that King Joao I of Kongo and his son, Alfonso I, while earnest Christians, felt betrayed by the Portuguese for not honoring their Christian values and promises made to the Kongo, especially with the illegal traffic of the kingdom's people into slavery. Whether Alfonso I was unwilling or unable to challenge the Portuguese is unknown, but we do know that the official stance of the Kongo crown was to remain allied with Portugal. Alfonso's Brother however, Mpanzu a Nzinga viewed Christianity as the tool which the Portuguese used to take advantage of the Kongo and as such, waged war against Alfonso. This was not a revolt of peasants but led by nobility (and therefore, may have included those who had the Order bestowed on them).

By this time, the Kongo had given rise to many indigenous Christian movements of all flavors; their prophets preaching against Portuguese intervention, many aligning themselves with Mpanzu a Nzinga. History would show however that having the logistical and military support of the Portuguese made Alfonso the dominant power in the region. And while many died in battle or were executed, unfortunately, often-times, the price for treason against the crown was a fate worse than death. Many rebels were sold into slavery (despite Alfonso's fundamental disagreement with his people being enslaved).



The Soba (Chief) is a member of the order in 1965 wearing the mantle of the Order of Christ (Kongo).

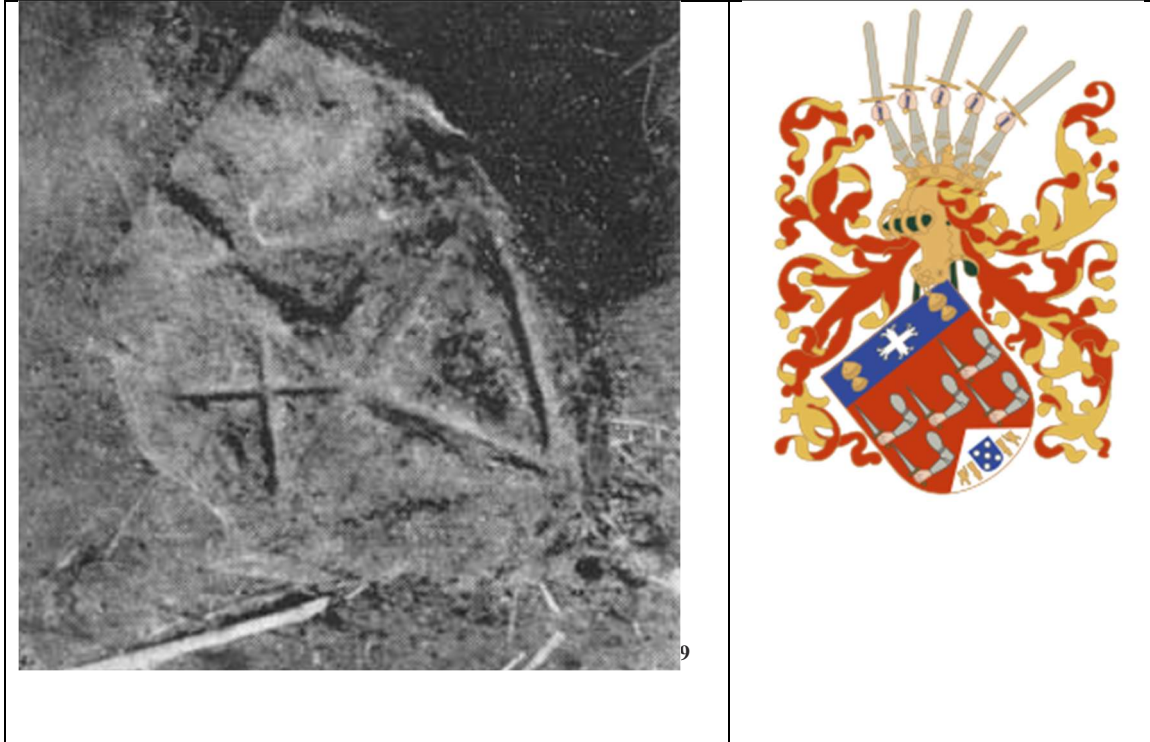


1914 –



They were buried with swords and sabres of honour, local emblems of power and high-prestige objects of European origin. A medallion from the Knights of the Order of Christ that was found in one of these burials suggests that Ngongo Mbata's community included members of the highest ruling elite

⁸ Antiquity: A Review of World Archaeology; Issue 347, Volume 89 October 2015



Cuba

El Supremo Consejo y la Gran Oriente de Cuba y de las Antillas (GOCA) 1862

Vicente Castro, a member of the Grand Orient of Louisiana is recognized by Pike and made the sovereign commander to Cuba for the purpose of Regularizing the Gran Logia de Colon, which was under the auspice and charter of the grand Lodge and Supreme Councils of Charleston, South Carolina. One of the reasons the Grand Lodge of Colon had been deemed irregular was because it had admitted Black and Mulattos, such as Marcos Maceo and his son, and Revolutionary hero, Antonio Maceo, both Members of San Andres Lodge No. 3. Castro would fill this role for no more than a year before establishing his own, competing grand body, the Supreme Council and Oriente of Cuba and the Antillas (GOCA), under the auspice of the Grand Lodge of Louisiana. Vicente Castro was opposed to the elitist and segregationist nature of Regular, North American Freemasonry and instead promoted a more egalitarian French style of the Craft.¹⁰

In the Cuban Revolutionary War against Spain, Antonio Maceo, a man of color was a general and ultimately died in battle. Maceo was also a religious adherent to both the Kongo and

⁹ Ngongo Mbata Tombstone, 17th or 18th century. Stone, dimensions of the engraving: 21 x 15 cm. Photo from G. Schellings, "Oud Kongo: Belangrijke Ontdekking Uit De Eerste Beschaving," St. Gerardusbode: maandschrift der paters Redemptoristen 53, no. 8 (1949):11

¹⁰ García Toledo, Óscar Ignacio; El Papel De La Masonería En La Independencia De Cuba, Thesis. Universidad La Laguna 2019/2020 (Page 12)

Igbo/Ibibio religions of Cuba (Palo and Abacua respectively). Engaging in guerilla warfare, Cuban soldiers were known as Mambi and were a mixture white free man, free black and Criollos and well as enslaved black. This plurality existing within the mountains of Eastern Cuba, Oriente, where Mambi strongholds were, brought together on a quasi-egalitarian field-many different cultures and religious backgrounds. Here, impromptu military Lodges were referred to pejoratively as “logias del Campo” or ‘bush lodges’ and is likely a place where many black men who otherwise would not have had access to Masonry were exposed to it for the first time, and possibly initiated. Soldiers who had been exposed to Masonry, when returning to their homes in Habana and Matanzas were influenced by the experience and began to flavor their traditional practices with Masonic accents. We see this mostly in Kongo and Ibibio practices, the latter being often referred to as an African style of Masonry. Their (Abacua) officer structure, male only policy, even name of meeting place all recall a masonic influence. Though Palo Kongo less so, the influences are undeniable.

During an initiation into the Kongo rites of Cuba, an initiate is blindfolded. His knees, feet and chest are bare. He is escorted in by the equivalent of a conductor. He must knock three times to gain admission. Upon knocking, there is a verbal exchange. The initiate is then received. The initiate undergoes a ritual called the Juramento, or the “oath taking”. And ultimately, the blindfold is removed where he is shown the equivalent of the Great Light by aid of the Lesser light.

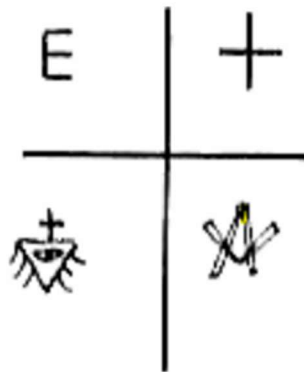
Another well-known touchpoint between Masonry and Kongo initiation is through the actions of Andre Petit. He was considered a codifier of the Kongo practices in Habana, but also imagined an all-inclusive religion in Cuba that would end cultural strife between whites and blacks as well as between blacks of different ethnic groups. In the 1850’s He was instrumental in initiating the first whites into Abacua (to the chagrin of the Abacua leadership), the sons of prominent political figures, some of whom were Freemasons. These would also become some of the initial members of his new religious movement, Santo Cristo del Buen Viaje named after the Church where he was baptized and possibly served as a Tertiary or Almoner.

The initiation ritual of Santo Cristo del Buen Viaje has both more overt Christian and Masonic aspects to it. For example, of all the Kongo Rites, only this one has the initiate recite their Obligation in their lingua franca as opposed to passively hearing it in Congolese.



11

*Abacua initiation, this depiction is similar enough to Kongo initiation for our purposes. Hoodwinked, both knees and chest bear.. before an altar; the initiator presents the GREAT light by aid of the Lesser Light.



12

Emblem used by the Quimbisa Order

Members of Quimbisa also use a cape, red on one side and white on the other, on which side depends on the title of the person; they have a shawl, much like the priests stole, and what appears to be a yellow triangle with an eye in it and a border; the white tunic has red lines on the sleeves, the number depending on rank and knowledge, and finally, wear special sandals.¹³

This quote leads us to a very important belief held by the members of Santo Cristo del Buen Viaje; that they are among the inheritors of the Templar Order. The cape is reminiscent of that worn by those of Christian Military Orders, and the lines or stripes on the sleeves are a clear reference to the modern military practice of displaying rank on one's sleeves.

¹¹ I was unable to find the name of the painter or title of this painting

¹² Cabrera, Lydia. La Regla Kimbisa del Santo Cristo del Buen Viaje. United States, Ediciones Universal, 1986. (originally Published 1977)

¹³ Muzio, María del Carmen. Andrés Quimbisa. Cuba, Ediciones Unión, 2001. (translation mine)

“Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence”¹⁴ and I do not portend to present any solid evidence to this claim. However, either through actual unbroken lineage or through the “spiritual adoption” of the same... we can examine the claims from various angles.

The most likely source of the vestments may be Masonic. As early as 1818/1821¹⁵, we see that both the York and Scottish Rites are established in Habana. It is therefore not unreasonable that an organization established in 1853 and counted Freemasons among its members would have had opportunity to adopt the Chivalric regalia used by the Masonic Organizations.

But what if, even without the regalia, the Kongo descendants of Habana thought themselves to be descendants of the Throne of the King of Kongo and therefore entitled to be considered keepers of the Templar Order? Or more realistically, Order of the Knights of Christ.

While the second half of that statement remains speculative, the first half is well established. By at least the 18th century, and well into the 19th century, Habana is recorded to have had five distinct Cabildos¹⁶ pertaining to the Congo and their descendants. Of these, the Cabildo known as Holy King Melchor and alternately, Cabildo of the Kongo Royalty was said to be the head of all Cabildos. Every Cabildo would choose a new king every four years. And even if the individual chosen as king had been born in Cuba, he would be known as “King of Musundi”.¹⁷ You will recall that the archeological site where funeral evidence of the Order of the Knights of Christ is located in Nsundi. Further, every king of this Cabildo would take the name, Solomon or King Solomon. Worthy of note that this title is likely purely biblically based as it was in use before the formal creation of any Masonic Grand Lodge in Cuba.

I believe I would not be too far into speculative territory to suggest that once the Catholic Kongo traditions met with the Masonic ones.. a common thread allowed the free-flow of customs between the two.. at least among the adherents of the Kongo religious practitioners of Habana.

Not unlike the many quasi-masonic orders to have sprung up during the Golden Age of Fraternalism; the basic structure and goals of Freemasonry served as a template for which many to express their charitable, spiritual, fraternal and sometimes religious goals. The method of analysis here provided could (and has) be extended to the study of Haitian Voodoo¹⁸, North American institutions such as the Underground Railroad¹⁹ and more traditional African and Afro-Diasporic institutions.

¹⁴ Carl Sagan

¹⁵ García Toledo, Óscar Ignacio; *El Papel De La Masonería En La Independencia De Cuba*, Thesis. Universidad La Laguna 2019/2020 (Page 7)

¹⁶ Ethnic mutual aid societies

¹⁷ *The Making of Kongo Identity in the American Diaspora: Case Studies from Brazil and Cuba*
July 13, 2017 | Author: Jessica Johns

¹⁸ Kali, Tony; *Masonic Symbolism in Haitian Voodoo*, 2019 (Medium)

¹⁹ Gomez, Moises; *Freemasonry and the Underground Railroad* (Lecture)



Beginning of a modern Abacua initiation , candidates blindfolded.