

# Learning to be Cuban

An Anthropological study of national identity through the use of symbols and collective memory



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Photograph cover<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This picture was taken at the Plaza de la revolucion, by Tessa on the first of february, 2017.

Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

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## Table of contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter 1. Theoretical framework</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>1. Nations, nationalism, identity and national identity (Rixt and Tessa)</b> .....	<b>10</b>
1.1 The nation .....	10
1.2 Identity and national identity .....	12
1.3 Nationalism .....	13
<b>2. Collective memory (Rixt)</b> .....	<b>15</b>
2.1 Defining collective memory .....	15
2.1 The importance of collective memory .....	15
2.3 Problems with collective memory .....	16
<b>3. National symbols (Tessa)</b> .....	<b>17</b>
3.1 National symbol construction .....	17
3.2 The importance of national symbols for the construction of national identity .....	18
<b>Chapter 2. Context</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<b>2.1 Cuba: a brief history of the nation (Tessa)</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<b>2.2 Contemporary Cuba: the current situation (Rixt)</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>Chapter 3. National identity (Rixt and Tessa)</b> .....	<b>26</b>
3.1 National products and holidays .....	26
3.2 The expression of the 'self' .....	28
3.3 The 'other' .....	32
<b>Chapter 4. Collective Memory (Tessa)</b> .....	<b>36</b>
4.1 History of Cuba .....	36
4.2 The role of the government .....	40
4.4 Learning the importance of history .....	42
4.5 History prior to university .....	44
<b>Chapter 5. National symbols (Rixt)</b> .....	<b>46</b>
5.1 Learning the importance of symbols .....	46
5.2 National symbols of Cuba .....	47
5.2 The creation of symbols .....	51
<b>Chapter 6. Conclusion</b> .....	<b>53</b>
<b>Literature</b> .....	<b>58</b>
<b>Appendix A: Research summary</b> .....	<b>61</b>

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20th of June, 2017

For the both of us, it was our first time in Havana, Cuba. Besides it being the first time in Havana, it was also our first fieldwork experience. Everything was new, exciting and intimidating, all at the same time. Cuba has not always been the easiest country to live, but during the three months we have lived in Havana, many people have helped make the city feel like home.

We did a lot of preliminary research and talked to a lot of people who had been there, but still did not fully know what we could expect. The moment we arrived at our guest home in Havana, we were welcomed as a part of the family. Ana and José helped us with everything we needed. They gave us lots of interesting conversations, background information on Cuba and cooked for us every single morning and evening. They fully opened their home to us and introduced us to their family and friends, which gave us the precious feeling of being home away from home.

Our research was mainly performed on university grounds in central Havana. We spent almost every day hanging out with our informants at the university. Thanks to Dr. Dirk Kruijt we were able to get in touch with professor Tania Caram of the University of Havana. She made it possible for us to have access to the university of Havana. She also introduced us to other professors at the university and provided us with interesting lectures on the history of Cuba, its economy and some important national symbols such as Che Guevara and Jose Martí. She helped us with any questions concerning the university and about life in Cuba.

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## Introduction

*When walking through Havana the past is present on nearly every street corner. Near the Malecón, facing the American embassy, in large letters a quote by Fidel Castro 'fatherland or death' appears on a wall. Next to it emerges a monument honouring the victims of the explosion of battleship 'the Maine' in the harbour of Havana in 1898. The Malecón, where the city meets the sea, is the place where groups of people join each other to celebrate the beginning of the weekend. The monuments and quotes referring to the past seem to blend into the scene naturally.*

The Cuban capital breathes history. Not only do classic Chevrolets, Lada's and Cadillac's still roam the streets, houses have hardly changed since the time in which they were built. Every year people are the victim of houses and buildings collapsing. The Internet has only just reached the island, and still in a very limited form. National heroes such as José Martí, Ché Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos illustrate the sides of buildings, just like quotes and slogans like the one described above. Events that happened many years ago still form part of the present in their active remembrance. Just being in the city creates an awareness of these events as if one had been present.

This research has been performed to get a better understanding of how the construction of national identity of students takes place. They are confronted on a daily basis with national history and symbols. Unlike previous generations they have not lived through the period that is being actively remembered by the current government. The revolution of 1959 and its heroes are seen as the most memorable part of Cuba's history to both Cubans and the rest of the world. We chose the capital of Cuba, Havana, as our research site because of the changing situation in the country. Havana has been the site of many important events throughout history and continues to be a place of movement in the country. It is also a place where many different people, with different backgrounds come together, thus making it an interesting site for our research (Sweig 2016). Since the resignation of Fidel Castro multiple reforms have been made in the country by his brother. In the years of the cold war, Cuba was an ally of Soviet Union, and became a Communist nation after the Cuban revolution in the 50s of the past century. This revolution was led by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, two revolutionary fighters whose main goal was to free Cuba from an authoritarian regime led by Fulgencio Batista (Sweig 2016). Since the 50s the

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

relationship between Cuba and the United States has deteriorated because of different political views. This lasted until the year 2014 when former president Barack Obama started to cooperate with Cuba to improve the relationship between the two countries. However, recent events concerning the election of current president Donald Trump, seem to suggest that these developments might soon be reversed.

During our research we have lived in Havana for a period of three months, from the beginning of February until mid-April. The site where we have conducted our research is the central campus of the Universidad de la Habana, which is located in the capital itself. Our research population consisted of students of the Universidad de la Habana aged 18 to 28. As mentioned before, students form a completely new generation that have not lived through the revolutionary years that helped shaped the country's current political, societal and economic situation. They are however a product of this important period. In our research we have studied their conception of national identity as product of the influence of Cuban national symbols and collective memory. It is important to see in what way these historical events had and continue to have an impact on the lives of students, and in what way it forms their national identity. It is of scientific importance to research the effect of history on the concept of national identity of younger generations. This adds to understanding how national identity construction takes place. On a societal level it is important to get an idea if and how history plays a role in the daily lives of university students in Cuba. This leads to our central research question: *'How do shared cultural aspects such as collective memory and nationalistic symbols contribute to the construction of national identity among Cuban students of the Universidad de la Habana, aged 18 to 28?'*. The corresponding sub questions look at the concepts of collective memory, national symbols and their influence on the construction of Cuban national identity among Cuban students. By focussing on how the meaning of national symbols and collective memory have been learned by Cuban students, their role on the process of national identity construction can be studied.

The central concept of this research, national identity, could be seen as a collective phenomenon because national identity has to be formed by multiple people (Smith 1991). It also has to be learned (Kolstø, 2006). Identity, and in this case national identity, is not something you are born with. It is something that has to be taught, in school, by the media, from generation to

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

generation. Smith (1991) sees the concept of national identity as multidimensional, because it includes multiple different concepts, such as language, symbols and collective memory. The last two, national symbols and collective memory, and how they help construct the national identity, were the focus point of this research.

The collective memory is an important memory the majority of members of a nation share (Bell 2004, 69). As Smith (1999) also says: ‘no memory, no identity; no identity, no nation’. These particular memories could have occurred before, during or after the formation of the nation (Takei 1998, 63). National symbols are another contributor to the construction of a national identity. The flag, the anthem and national heroes can all be considered national symbols. As said earlier, national identity is something that has to be learned, it is not something you are born with. National symbols, as well as collective memory help with the construction of a national identity (Smith 1991).

By studying national symbols and collective memory we have used several research methods. Our research methods mainly consisted of conducting informal, unstructured and semi-structured interviews, participant observation, ‘hanging out’ and media analysis. The interviews took place during one-on-one meetings with students. These meetings started out as a language exchange, helping the students practice English while they, in return, helped us improve our Spanish. Our role as researcher was always a topic openly discussed during the first meeting. This way it was assured that if we gathered any data during these meetings it was done with the informed consent of the informants. During the interviews we first used a topic list and later a list of questions to help guide the interviews. The use of these lists was of increasing importance as it became necessary to ask more specific questions over the course of the research. Besides interviews one of the other main research methods was participant observation. This often helped build a relationship of trust with the informant and functions to find meaning behind actions that are being observed (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011). Hanging out is often part of participant observation, by being on the campus for meetings or just being there to observe. This way it forms a good research method where the influence of the researcher on the situation is minimal (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011). We used participant observation in various forms during our research: by on the one hand spending time with students and participating in activities organized by the university, while on the other hand, living in a Cuban family during our stay.



## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

We also had weekly classes at the university and had daily meetings with students. This way we were constantly aware of our surroundings and were able to gather new data. During our ten week research period we continuously used participant observation. Over the course of the research we were able to build up an extensive network of students mainly through participant observation. Through invites and social activities we were introduced to friends and classmates of our informants who often were willing to help us with our research.

The last method that we used was media analysis. In Cuba most mass media such as newspapers, radio and television are regulated by the government. Often historical events are given great attention in these media. An analysis of these forms of media provides us not only an insight into how the past is presented but also helps us to get an idea of which events are seen as important. Before starting with our research we planned to compare the media analysis with an analysis of textbooks used in schools. We reasoned textbooks would tell history from the government's perspective while the media might tell a different story. However, on Cuba all media are controlled by the government. We decided to combine both analyses instead of compare them, to get a full understanding of the official narrative of the nation's history. We think textbooks form an important part of our research because it is important to know what students have learned in the years before university. This will help bring us closer to understanding their perspective on national identity.

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The first consists of a theoretical framework in which the concepts that are connected to our research are explained. We will elaborate on the concept of national identity and its construction. First we will use definitions of scholars as Smith, Gellner and Anderson to explain the concepts of the nation, nationalism and identity. It is necessary to first have a clear definition of these terms which form the basis of the concept of national identity. Next, we will start with defining other concepts that help form national identity. These will include collective memory and national symbols. Bell (2004), Mayer (2005) and Smith (1999) all agree that collective memory is necessary to keep the nation alive. According to them, collective memory is a large contributor to the national identity. Part of this research is based on theories by Geertz (1973) and Kolstø (2006) who argue that national symbols are cultural products whose meaning has to be learned. After the theoretical framework in the second chapter follows the context where a short academic review reflects on the situation

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

of Cuba. A short section discusses the history of Cuba explaining how Cuba has developed through its colonial history as a colony of Spain and the period after the island had obtained its freedom. After the brief historic overview a description of the current political and economic situation on Cuba is given. Following are the empirical chapters which are based on data from the research. First the Cuban national identity and what this exactly entails is discussed in the third chapter. The creation and importance of collective memory is explained in the fourth chapter. The same approach is used for national symbols in the fifth chapter, explaining its creation and importance. After the empirical chapters this thesis ends with a conclusion and a short summary in Spanish.

## Chapter 1. Theoretical framework

### 1. Nations, nationalism, identity and national identity (Rixt and Tessa)

When looking at national identity and nationalism, it is wise to first dissect both terms to the smaller parts that form these two concepts: the nation and identity. The concept of the nation will be discussed, and will be followed by an analysis of the ideas around identity. After this, nationalism will be discussed.

#### 1.1 The nation

In defining what constitutes a nation, Gellner (1983, 16) explains, there are two requirements. First, people belong to the same nation only if they share the same culture. Culture in this context means ‘a system of ideas, signs, associations and ways of behaving and communicating’. The second point Gellner makes is that people are of the same nation when ‘they recognize each other as belonging to the same nation’ (Ibid., 16). Gellner emphasizes that a nation only becomes one when people recognize certain mutual rights, duties and a shared membership. Another aspect is mentioned by Seton-Watson (1977, 1) who also defines a nation as a ‘community of people, whose members are bound together by a sense of solidarity, a common culture, a national consciousness’. So in this sense, a nation is defined as people that share certain aspects of their lives with others. They both recognize each other in sharing the same elements.

Shared aspects are important facets when defining a nation. These aspects could however be defined by ethnic ties or cultural ties. A distinction could be made between two types of nations, the ethno-nation and the civic-nation. Demmers argues: ‘Whereas the civic nation is defined as a group of people with a ‘shared culture’ (2012, 33), open to all who are willing to assimilate into this shared culture, the ethno-nation is open only to those who are defined as sharing the same ethnic ties’. It is important to note that in our research we are looking at a civic nation with a shared culture, since we are not interested in ethnic ties but in cultural and political ties.

According to Anderson (1983, 6) a nation can be defined as an ‘imagined political community’. It is an imagined community because the members of even the smallest nations will not be able to know everyone, but in their minds they are all part of an existing community

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

(Ibid., 6). This is a result of print-capitalism. People started to read the same books, newspapers and later started to watch television or read internet pages but all in different places. One man could not know everyone, but knows that they are reading the same newspaper article, this makes them imagine a community of people. Anderson asserts the nation is limited as well as imagined because even the largest nations have borders, however unclear, there is always another nation on the other side of that border. It is imagined as a community because however unequal a nation may be, there is always believed to be 'a deep horizontal comradeship' (Anderson 1983, 7). Gellner and Seton-Watson might not speak of an imagined community, but they do assert that people recognize each other as belonging to the same nation, through the shared ideas, values and cultural aspects. There is a sense of membership, which is defined by the cultural and political aspects. It is interesting to combine the concepts of imagined communities and a sense of membership defined by certain aspects. On the one hand, as Anderson says, nations are imagined because they are only real in the minds of people. But on the other hand it is also interesting to look at what exactly makes people imagine such communities. As Gellner and Seton-Watson demonstrate by focussing on cultural aspects.

Another important aspect of the nation is the spatial component. Whereas for Seton-Watson and Gellner, the spatial component is not as important, other scholars argue the difference. Smith (1991, 9) sees the nation as 'predominantly spatial or territorial [...] Nations must possess compact, well-defined territories. People and territory must, as it were, belong to each other'. Besides this he does add that nations 'must have a measure of common culture and a civic ideology ... it is a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common enemy and common legal rights and duties for all members' (Ibid., 11-14). The spatial component is an important feature in our research. It is an interesting add-on in the case of Cuba, since it is an island and people cannot just leave it like that. They are bound together through the spatial component.

So to summarize, most authors argue that the most important aspect that makes a nation is that it is a community of people who share certain values and cultures. Other authors add that a nation needs to have well-defined boundaries, with demarcated territories in which the people of a nation reside. We regard it as important for our research to combine these definitions. Cuba is a well-defined territory with specified boundaries, but has shared cultural aspects as well. This

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

is why we have used Smith's definition of the nation as our main definition, since, to us, this is the most complete definition.

In order to understand the 'dynamics of nationalism' one must first understand identity, whether its collective or personal identity (Bell 2004, 64). So first the concepts of identity and national identity will be discussed.

### 1.2 Identity and national identity

Identity itself is a very broad term, which can mean different things to different people. 'Identity is, broadly defined, the answer to the question 'who or what are you?' (Demmers 2012, 19). Identity both implies similarity and difference. It has two components: 'in the one case, the essence of personal self is held to be one's membership of a social category or ethnic/religious group; that is, being like a number of other people. In the other case, it is the most individual sensation of a person's unique sense of self; that is, being utterly unlike anyone or anything else [...] It is about the way individuals relate to and are related to the world in which they live' (Verkuyten 2005, 41-42). Identity can both be used as defining ones belonging to a group, and to distinguish oneself from others within that group. Defining the boundaries of a group is the process of dichotomisation. According to Eriksen (2010) this process entails that an important distinction is being made between the 'ingroup' and the people not belonging to that group, the 'other'. It helps to confirm the ties between members of the 'ingroup' and to strengthen them.

According to Jenkins (2014, 6) 'identity is the human capacity – rooted in language – to know 'who's who' (and hence 'what's what') [...] It is a process – identification – not a 'thing': it is not something that one can have, or not, it is something that one does'. That identity is a process and not something you're born with is argued by Kolstø (2006). In this process, identity is something that is learned. This process of learning identity will be discussed in the paragraph on symbols.

The process of identification can be linked to the nation. Bloom (1990, 79) asserts that when 'there has been a general identification made with the nation, then there is a behavioural tendency among the individuals who made this identification and who make up the mass national public to defend and to enhance the shared national identity'. A political element is added by Smith (1991), who argues that a national identity has some sense of a political

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

community, which has common institutions, rights and duties. It also entails a social space, where people feel like they belong and identify themselves with each other. National identity is seen as 'culture communities' where the members of the communities are bound together through common historical memories, symbols, traditions and myths.

So in the case of national identity, we think it is important to take a step back and look at how identity in general is defined. As was explained earlier, it is important to see the similarity as well as the difference between people. It is important to look at how people define themselves in comparison to others, as well as to how they feel similar to people. We think it is important to look at national identity in the same way. With national identity, the difference is created through the relationship of the self in comparison to the people who are not part of the nation. Whereas similarity is created through different cultural aspects, such as symbols, myths and collective memories.

### 1.3 Nationalism

Analysing the concept of nationalism, it is important to look at the difference between the nation and the state. According to Danforth (1995,14) the difference between the nation and the state is that the nation is a 'culturally homogeneous social group', whereas the state is a 'legal and political organization with the power to require obedience and loyalty from its citizens'. States could contain more than one nation, and nations can exist (separated) in several different states. Therefore we could assess that the spatial component Smith spoke of, is indeed very significant. This can also be applied to nationalism: 'it is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent' (Gellner 1983, 1). There are different reasons for nationalism to express itself. It could be that the boundaries of a state fail to incorporate the whole nation, or it incorporates the whole nation but also strangers, not part of the nation, or it can both fail to incorporate the whole nation but at the same time contain strangers. So as Gellner puts it: 'Nationalism holds that [nations and states] are destined for each other; that either one without the other is incomplete' (Ibid., 16).

Another way of looking at nationalism is as 'a political movement having two characteristics: (1) individual members give their primary loyalty to their own ethnic or national

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

community; this loyalty supersedes their loyalty to other groups [...] and (2) these ethnic or national communities desire their own independent state' (Van Evera 1994, 6). When we combine both ideas of nationalism by Gellner and Van Evera get a broader view of the concept. We can conclude that nationalism is mainly a political principle, where the state and nation should be one unit.

Within nationalism different forms can be distinguished. Anderson (1983, 101) speaks of official nationalism, which is an 'anticipatory strategy adopted by dominant groups which are threatened with marginalization or exclusion from an emerging nationally-imagined community'. The strategy of official nationalism consists of 'compulsory state-controlled primary education, state-organized propaganda, official reviewing of history, militarisation and endless affirmations of the identity of nation'. Besides official nationalism, people themselves create a sense of belonging to a nation through everyday practices. This is called banal nationalism (Eriksen 2010). In contrast to official nationalism, which is a top-down approach, banal nationalism is created and reproduced by people themselves and therefore becomes a bottom-up process.

## 2. Collective memory (Rixt)

National identities are formed through multiple mechanisms, as explained earlier. A few of these mechanisms could be certain narratives as myths, symbols, traditions and historical memories. In this chapter the importance of historical memories, or collective memories, of a nation will be analysed.

### 2.1 Defining collective memory

We agree with different scholars that collective memories can help constitute the construction of national identity. According to Bell (2004, 69) collective memory is ‘a memory that is somehow to be found in and shared between many, perhaps most, of the members of any given national community. It is partly through this ‘memory’, that the nation is constituted’. Takei (1998, 63) adds that ‘collective memories can include events that occurred before the group in question came to share a common identity’. A collective memory is a historical memory that is shared between different people of a group that is an important contribution to construction of a collective and national identity. Takei also asserts that collective memories are not necessarily true in a historical sense, because groups adapt these memories to what they need in that moment. But there are limits to the adaptability of the memories. When certain events are documented it is not credible to change the story.

### 2.1 The importance of collective memory

A collective memory is of great importance in the construction of a national identity. Historical anecdotes or myths are told from one generation onto the next. The significance of collective memory was stressed by Smith (1996, 383). He asserted that: ‘One might almost say: no memory, no identity; no identity, no nation’. A shared memory can constitute to the construction of national identities in different ways: ‘The notion of shared ideas, values and interpretations concerning either real events, or narratives of ancient origins [...] locates the collectivity inside a shared history, a history constantly reaffirmed and reproduced through resonant rituals and symbols’ (Bell 2004, 70). Memories can act as demarcations of the boundaries between the national self and the other. Collective memories are important because ‘memory, almost by definition is integral to cultural identity, and the cultivation of shared memories is essential to the survival and destiny of such collective identities’ (Smith 1999, 10).



## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

Memories are absolutely necessary to keep a nation alive. According to Mayer (2005) these memories of the past must become part of the present narratives to make every generation feel a direct commitment to the events of the formation of their nation. Mayer adds that myths are also a very important ingredient within the concept of collective memory: ‘the story of [the nation’s] creation is replete with quasi-miraculous events whose connection to reality cannot be verified. But the ‘truth’ of national stories of the creation or struggles is irrelevant. All that matters is that members of the nation believe in their authenticity and pass them from one generation to the next’ (Ibid., 6).

### 2.3 Problems with collective memory

Bell (2004, 73), however, speaks of two problems with the concept of national collective memories. Firstly, he claims that there is the believe that ‘Memory is not transferable (as memory) to those who have not experienced the events that an individual recalls, which means that it cannot be passed down from generation to generation’. He uses the example of a slave ship. People can imagine this picture in their heads and it can trigger emotion. But these are not memories since ‘we were not there’ (Ibid., 73). We do not fully agree with this. Even though people have not lived to experience certain events, it does not mean it has no influence on their lives whatsoever. Bell might be right in the fact that it is not an authentic memory because its not experienced, but it does not make it less valuable.

Secondly he says national collective memories are a matter of perspective: ‘different sets of people ‘remember’ different things’ (Ibid., 73). He claims there exists not just one national collective memory and thus not just one national identity. According to Bell we should always look at national collective memories in relation to power and dominance (Ibid., 73). This problem is also an interesting addition to keep in mind while researching collective memory, given that the Cuban state has been a totalitarian state since the 1960s, which had ‘grip on all power and information’ (Gonzalez et al. 2004, xiii). The Cuban collective memory in this case might have been a one sided construction for multiple years. The big outlets of information, media and education, are both highly controlled and regulated by the government. But still, this does not make the collective memory less real or valid, and can nonetheless be a big contributor to the identity of a nation.

## 3. National symbols (Tessa)

One of the most visible ways citizens can show their national identity is through the use of national symbols. These symbols are often shown in various contexts and can be used as a binding factor for a group of people. National symbols are an important aspect in the construction of national identity. Even though national identity construction takes place through many different processes, our research specifically focuses on how national symbols and collective memory help form this national identity. In the next two paragraphs the construction of national symbols and their role in forming national identity is discussed.

### 3.1 National symbol construction

One of the most obvious national symbols is the flag with the colours or patterns of the nation. According to Raymond Firth (1973), the flag represents the sacred character of the nation; used in protest by those who wish to protest or contest something and honoured during moments of pride by those same citizens. The use of a flag as a national symbol has its origins and its function in history. Firth explains how flags were used as a rallying point for soldiers amidst the confusion on the battleground. Over time it lost its pragmatic function and its use turned into a more symbolic one. Eventually the flag was adopted by the nation as a national symbol and a 'focus for sentiment about society' (Firth 1973, 356). Also the way a flag is put on display determines the message it sends (Billig 1995).

There are several approaches to analyse the construction of national symbols. The approach we used for our research is the semantic analysis where each aspect of the symbol is deciphered - the meaning behind the use of a particular instrument when playing the national anthem or the meaning behind every different colour of the flag (Cerulo 1993, 246). In the creation of a national symbol it is important that people identify with the elements used for the symbols.

In the case of Cuba it is interesting to look at the symbolic representations of Che Guevara and José Martí, two historic figures that were seen as leaders of two different Cuban revolutions. Afterwards both were idolized and made into national symbols just like other important figures of the revolution of '59, which Che Guevara formed part of. Cuba forms an interesting example of a nation's construction of powerful symbols to carry out a message to its

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

citizens and the rest of the world. Especially since many national symbols were created after the construction of the nation in its contemporary form.

To conclude, often national symbols are purposely constructed by a nation to help unite its people and to reaffirm the legitimacy of the nation. In the next paragraph will be discussed how symbols come to mean something to people.

### 3.2 The importance of national symbols for the construction of national identity

As discussed before is Smith's explanation (1991, 14) of the nation as 'a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common enemy and common legal rights and duties for all members' important for our research and can be applied to the case of Cuba. The definition of the nation used by Smith helps to explain the process of national identity construction. Belonging to a nation is characterized by having a national identity, one of the many identities a person can have. A man in society can at the same time be a father, husband, lawyer and citizen of a nation. The state incorporates certain symbols as belong to the nation, this helps to create a feeling of unity among the citizens of the nation. 'The nation becomes a 'faith-achievement' group, able to surmount obstacles and hardships' (Smith 1991, 17).

Many national symbols should be seen as cultural products. As Geertz explains 'Culture is public because meaning is. You can't wink [...] without knowing what counts as winking or how, physically, to contract your eyelids.' (Geertz 1973, 12). Brumann (2002, 2) names different definitions for the concept of 'culture'. All definitions name that 'for something to count as culture it has to be shared by some group of people'. For symbols to have the ability to convey a message their meaning has to be shared. National symbols are used to construct a notion of national identity among citizens. This process is necessary as national identity is not something you are born with, but something that is learned (Kolstø 2006).

As mentioned before, national identity is not something you're born with, but it must be learned. People can participate in the construction and reproduction of the meaning and importance of symbols (Kolstø 2006). This can be thought of as carrying the flag during a national ceremony, or singing the national anthem at the beginning of a sports competition. Through this kind of participation national identity is learned (Kolstø 2006). According to

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

Geisler (2005) national symbols can be seen as the starting point for the construction and maintenance of national identity.

Verdery (1993) even argues that the nation itself can be seen as a symbol. As a symbol Verdery states, the nation can legitimize various social actions and movements. The nation as a powerful symbol has the ability to use its features of a sense of shared ethnicity to create a sense of unity among its members and form the concept of national identity (Verdery 1991).

The link between a symbol as belonging to a nation and the emotions that come to be attached to it have to be learned, therefore a symbol is usually considered unfamiliar and even artificial in the beginning (Kolstø 2006). This, however, often changes as the symbol is gradually incorporated in the nation's definition of itself. A characteristic of new states that pass over from the stage of nation-building to the stage of maintaining the nation is that their institutions and symbols are gradually taken for granted as belonging to the nation. The symbols that were not accepted will eventually fade from the collective memory (Kolstø 2006). One process that is important in the construction of national symbols is Pavlov's 'law of association'. This is a psychological phenomenon in which citizens connect state symbols to certain events and situations. Citizens feel a personal connection with events that they associate with feelings of pride, joy and high spirits. If state symbols are effectively connected to those events these feeling 'rub off' on the symbols enhancing their emotional value (Kolstø 2006, 698).

In Cuba where divisions in the population can easily be made on skin colour (De la Fuente 1998) and between adversaries and opponents of the regime it is important to find a common ground upon which to form the national identity, thus creating a feeling of unity. Our research is focused on two different concepts that are often used to form a national identity, namely collective memory and national symbols. Among other things, symbols function to help people identify with their nation (Cerulo 1993). National symbols can become a powerful basis upon which national identity is build.

So to conclude, national symbols can be used to unite and mobilize. They also affirm and protect boundaries of a nation's identity and help to convey messages. They are carefully selected and constructed to convey the right message to the nation's citizens and the rest of the world (Cerulo 1993). To be able to have this effect they have to mean something to people. This meaning has to be learned (Kolstø 2006).

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

We will continue by giving a short context description of our research location. Primarily, the past is discussed, starting with the time when Cuba was under colonial rule by the Spanish. Afterwards follows a short description about the Cuba of today.

## Chapter 2. Context

### 2.1 Cuba: a brief history of the nation (Tessa)

#### *Breaking chains*

At the end of the nineteenth century Cuba was struggling to become free from under colonial rule. As a means of gaining their independence it was necessary to create a new nation.

According to scholar Louis A. Pérez (1999) symbols were one of the things used to give form to the new nation in order to derive legitimacy and claim continuity (Ibid.). Once freed from the colonial rule of the Spaniards, the country ended up facing another threat: America and its ideology of capitalism. This eventually led to the famous Cuban revolution in the year 1959. Many people participated in the revolution with hope that the performative nationalism would be a means of upward mobility. The beginning of the revolution was characterized by the seizing and redistribution of goods and capital. Almost all the social hierarchies in the country were deconstructed and rearranged. (Ibid.).

#### *Moments of transition*

After the revolution a very nationalistic period for Cuba started. The new government emphasized the notion of the *patria* (fatherland) and did everything in its power to further improve the notion of national unity among its citizens. Media, education and collective work were seen as tools to help implement the policies of the new government. The imposed nationalism even went so far that Cubans leaving the country were seen as deserters, abandoning their fatherland. Their citizen rights and properties were taken away and it was made impossible for them to return (Hernandez-Reguant 2009). This lasted until the 1990's when more supple rules were implemented concerning emigration and travel. Also culture was given a central role in the government's new policy. These changes were mainly caused by the deterioration of the position of their socialist allies and the concerning economic situation of the country that made it necessary to allow remittances and look for international support (Ibid.).

‘In the face of a crisis of a political community’ as Hernandez-Reguant (2009, 71) explains ‘cultural nationalist discourses typically operate as an integrative factor, as they tend to polarize the social universe into two mutually exclusive categories: 'the global' (formerly 'the foreign'), and 'the local' (a category that promotes the identification of government and society in

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

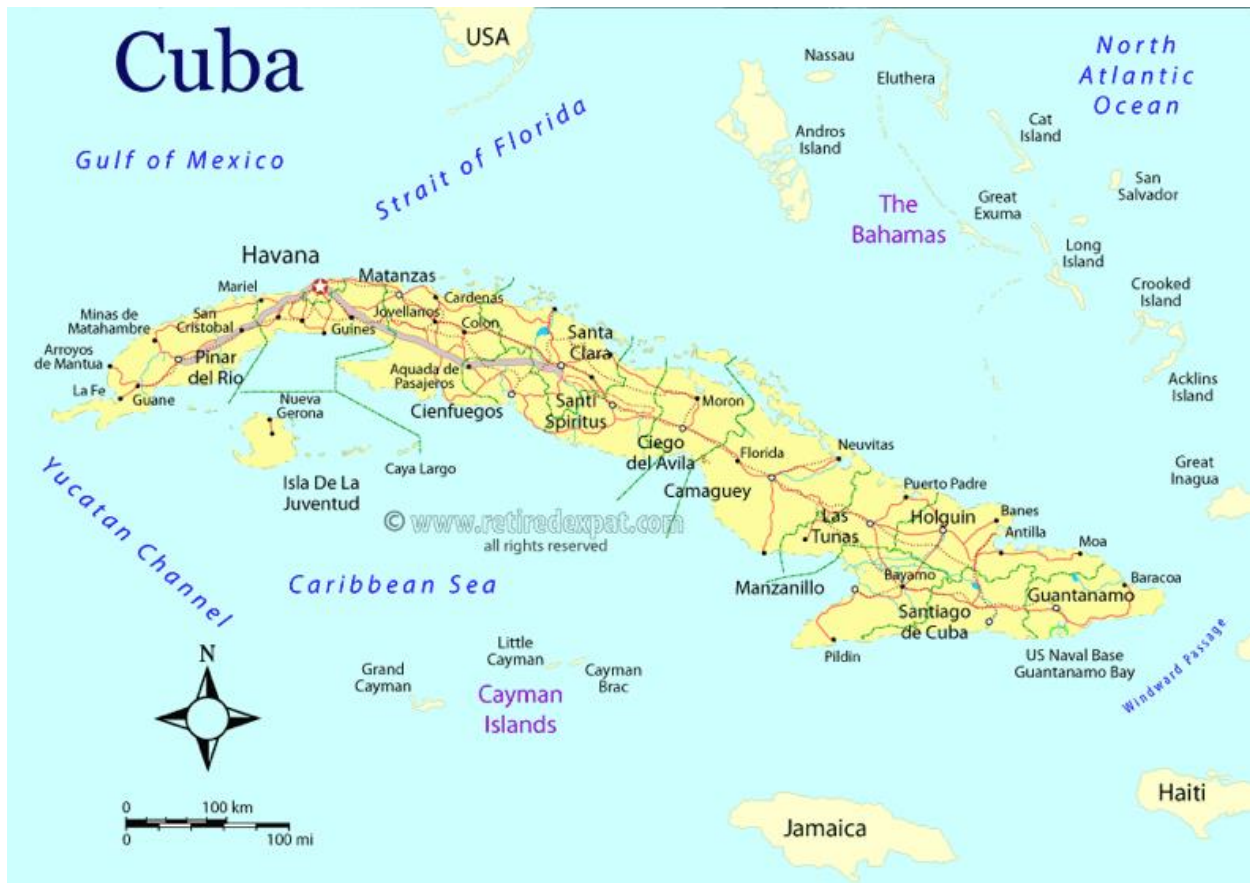
the defense of national particularity).’ In the case of Cuba it was either choosing for the global or the local. The global meant embracing capitalism, which was not an option, especially not during the revolutionary years. The only choice therefore was the local, which meant defending the identity. An emphasis was put on Cuban history and culture to promote feelings of nationalism. This new emphasis was supposed to give new life to the concept of nationalism that was formerly tied to the revolutionary project, which was going through a crisis itself by that time. This formed a starting point from which national Cuban history and culture were promoted by the government as the two pillars upon which the renewed concept of nationalism was built (Ibid.).

### *Making heroes*

One important figure in Cuban history was especially instrumental as a leader of the new ideological course of the nation: José Martí. As of the main figures of the independence war against the Spanish he has helped constitute the independent Cuban nation. In his time he instructed the government with the task both to conserve the cultural patrimony and to defend the country’s cultural identity. He was such an important figure for Cuban national history that after his death he was appointed martyrdom that made him into a national symbol (Font and Quiroz 2006). According to Martí the cultural patrimony partly consisted of intangible things such as manifestations of stories, dances and songs. (Hernandez-Reguant 2009). These things together with other Cuban cultural symbols form important concepts upon which the national identity of Cuba has been constructed during the revolutionary years. As mentioned in the second paragraph, many of the national symbols can be seen as cultural products. The other main concept used to construct the Cuban national identity, is collective memory, which has also been discussed previously.

Following is a short description of the contemporary situation on Cuba, discussing some of the societal reforms that have been made under Raúl Castro. These have had an major effect on today’s society, the site of our research.

## 2.2 Contemporary Cuba: the current situation (Rixt)



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Cuba has counted more than eleven million inhabitants in 2016<sup>3</sup>. The surface area is 109884 square kilometres and the island is situated in the Caribbean sea (UNdata 2016).

The current president and first secretary of the Cuban Communist Party is Raul Castro, Fidel Castro's younger brother. Raul Castro has been in power since 2008. In his inauguration speech he informed the people of Cuba that, even though Fidel Castro was sick, he would still be consulted on all major decisions that needed to be made (Sweig 2016). He did make a number of reforms. Smaller reforms such as the end of the restriction on purchasing cell phones, computers, microwaves and CD players and people were able to buy and use Internet cards in public parks. But also bigger reforms, for example he has redistributed government owned land to

<sup>2</sup> <http://imgarcade.com/1/cuba-map/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2119.html#cu>



## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

corporations and individual farmers. Other reforms include the privatization of certain economic activities. People were allowed to start small businesses and sell their own house or car (Martínez-Fernández 2014). He also reduced the power of the state (Sweig 2016). Raul Castro was even willing to ‘engage the United States in dialogue to improve relations between the two nations’ (Ibid., 267).

The human rights situation in Cuba has somewhat improved the past years. For example, executions are no longer permitted and the number of political prisoners has declined. But repression is still in existence. People are still not allowed to blog independently or be an independent journalist, rap about their views on the way Cuba is governed and the Internet is still too expensive for most people to use (Ibid.).

Since the people of Cuba, and Sweig emphasizes the youth in this argument, have had such low expectations for years, the gradual changes and reforms made by the government have raised expectations that the government have failed to accomplish. People are still dissatisfied with Cuba’s current ‘dual currency’. On the one hand there is the Convertible Peso (CUC), which is more valuable than the normal Cuban Peso (CUP). People in traditional state sectors get paid in CUP, whereas the people that work in foreign and informal sectors get paid in CUC’s. People who get paid in the normal pesos are not able to afford services or products that other people can, which leads to inequality.

The current government is trying to make improvements for the people living on Cuba, but it is not as equal yet as the people want it to be. Sweig (2016) specifically mentions the youth of Cuba who feel they need more change than is actually happening.

By focusing on Cuban students aged 18-28 our research group has a collective memory about the Cuban revolution that is not based on personal experience, but on the way it has been presented throughout their education by their teachers, in textbooks and in different forms of media. The university of Havana is the site where most of our research took place. The university is located in the capital and is the oldest and highest ranking university of Cuba. The university has been functioning since 1728 and is the university where Fidel Castro has studied law. The university counts about 24,000 students and has 18 faculties

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

We have given a theoretical framework, necessary for our research, and the local context of Cuba. We will continue by discussing our empirical data and its connection to the theories already discussed.

## Chapter 3. National identity (Rixt and Tessa)

*Walking through the streets of Havana, on Monday night all the televisions are tuned on to Pánfilo, a comical and somewhat critical Cuban TV-show. The show depicts the daily life and struggles of an older man and his friends in a comical way. With the doors wide open whole families are gathered in front of the television. Children, parents, uncles, aunts and grandparents, three generations together. Everyone seems to enjoy the show. As the streets fill with laughter, erupting from every house, it is clear something recognizable happened. The sound of amusement echoes through the dimly lit streets.*

Pánfilo is an important contribution to Cuban national identity. Almost all people watch the show, and discuss its contents the next day with friends. Anderson's (1983) theory on imagined communities can be linked to this TV-show. While watching the show, they know hundreds of thousands of other people in Cuba are watching the same thing. This enhances the sense of forming part of the imagined community. An imagined community of like-minded Cubans. This chapter will talk about this feeling of belonging and the construction of national identity. This chapter will try to shed light on as to if, and why, Cuban students feel connected to this community and how this national identity is created. We will start off with the observable contributors of the national identity, such as holidays, products and food. After this we will get deeper into the underlying reasons that are creating the feeling of belonging to the Cuban nation.

### 3.1 National products and holidays

There are foods, drinks and products that can be seen as typical for Cuba. Of course these include rum and cigars, which have been Cuba's most famous export products for years. Even though Eduardo remarked that not every Cuban actually smokes *tabaco* and drinks *ron*<sup>4</sup> these are certainly products that many Cubans enjoy frequently. Especially rum is very integrated in society as a favourite drink, with cola, in a cocktail or just pure. A bottle can be bought at almost any bar and usually costs about the same as 3-4 beers. The most popular thing to do when going out is to buy a bottle of rum in a club (you will get some plastic cups with it) and share it with

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<sup>4</sup> Interview Maria and Eduardo, 8th of March

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

friends. On the label of a bottle Havana Club, Cuba's most famous brand of rum internationally, it explains the Cuban tradition of pouring a few drops onto the ground of every newly opened bottle of rum in order to please the ancestral spirits.

Other traditional Cuban products are found in the daily food. A Cuban meal is not complete without rice. Therefore there exist many different ways to prepare the white rice to add some variation. One typical dish is *arroz congri*. Here white rice is cooked with black beans until the only thing that is left of the beans is the shell. The rice absorbs the black colour of the beans. Another name for this is *arroz moro*. Not only rice forms a basic ingredient of a Cuban meal, also meat is seen as a staple food. *Carne de puerco* (pig's meat) or *picadillos* (grounded beef) as well as *pollo* (chicken) are most common, of which pig's meat is the most traditional. Beef has become extremely expensive during the economic crisis and therefore it has become more of a luxury product and is rarely eaten by most Cubans. A common joke is that Cuba has become a second India since cows have become nearly sacred. The situation has a certain truth to it since all cows are regularly counted by the government. On (illegally) killing a cow is a higher sentence than on killing a person. The reason behind this extreme measure is that the milk of the cows is distributed to small children. Killing a cow is therefore seen as robbing children of milk that is necessary for their alimentation. Replacing beef, chicken has become the main substitute meat. It is a lot cheaper than beef and more readily available. During the last twenty years the traditional Cuban diet of eating beef has changed to eating chicken driven by economic necessity. Eating traditional dishes can also form a basis upon which nationalism can be formed. Traditional foods can even become national symbols that can be presented as indicators of Cuban-ness which signify belonging to the same culture. This bottom-up process of banal nationalism enhances the feeling of national belonging (Eriksen 2010, 123).

Traditional dishes sometimes have a strong connection with national holidays such as is the case on the 31th of December. On this final day of the year the whole neighbourhood comes together to eat a piece of grilled pig meat. The pig is rotated on a spit above a barbecue which is placed onto the street. The day after celebrating the new year, the 1<sup>st</sup> of January, is the most important national day. This day the triumph of the revolution is celebrated. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of January of 1959 Fidel and his troops reached Havana where they replaced the government ruled by Batista. Leonardo, a first-year history student at the university, once said this was the most important day of the year for him because 'before the revolution, Cuba was missing something

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

big<sup>5</sup>. Another special day is the 26<sup>th</sup> of July when the attack on the military stronghold *La Moncada* is remembered. This attack led by Fidel and Raúl Castro on the weapon storage in Santiago de Cuba failed, most of the assailants were killed in combat or later executed, but it formed the first attempt to start a revolution by Fidel and his brother. To remember the birth of national hero and poet José Martí, university students walk down the stairs of the university on the night of the 27<sup>th</sup> of January. Each holding a torch while walking towards the place where Martí as a young person had been forced to do hard labour after serving a prison sentence. This is done to pay tribute to his sacrifice and to welcome him into the world remembering his birth night. On several of these national days students have semi-compulsory activities at the university. Often organised by the *Federación Estudiantil Universitaria* (FEU). This highly politicized student organization has strong bonds with the current government. Even though every student becomes a member of the organization by entering into university, this membership can be as passive or active by a student's own choosing. The activities organized by the organization for national days are obligatory to attend, they can even be necessary to gain credits, but are not regarded as very important by students. The compulsory character of these days was often pointed out by students. Other criticism expressed by students is the role of the FEU in the university and its political bonds. Here we can see how nationalism in Cuba is more of a political matter than a sentiment, just like Gellner (1995) pointed out. The celebration of national days has been highly politicized by the FUE. This might explain why many of our informants expressed to feel very little sentiment concerning these days. However, the first of January forms an exception, also because this is an official day off. During this day there are no FUE activities organized at the university. In general Cubans do not ascribe a lot of importance to the celebration or meaning behind national days.

### 3.2 The expression of the 'self'

Fifth-year philosophy students Maria and Eduardo found it difficult to explain what their national identity entails. It is difficult to describe a national identity since it is usually implicitly rather than explicitly present. Another difficulty they mentioned, was that for a long time Cubans have been isolated from the world. There was hardly any 'other' to compare yourself with. They

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<sup>5</sup> Interview Leonardo, 28th of March

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

mentioned the Cuban community in Florida where Cubans seem to make more effort to express their national identity to distinguish themselves from other nationalities.<sup>6</sup>

Cuba's society is based on a socialist system that was implemented in the beginning of the '60's of the last century. The main characteristics of such a system is a fixed salary for all types of jobs, no private sector, a state sponsored distribution of basic alimentary items and free healthcare and education. Some things have slowly started to change in the past thirty years, such as the legalization of people working for *cuenta propia* (private sector). However, the main pillars of Cuban society are still free healthcare and education and a strong feeling of solidarity that exists among Cubans. This feeling of solidarity is said to have declined during the past twenty years. People working in government jobs are still earning a fixed, very basic, salary. Also they still get a small amount of basic alimentary items, such as beans, rice, oil, coffee, and meat, which are distributed through the *libreta de abastecimiento*. This is a monthly coupon that every Cuban citizen receives to buy a limited amount of basic goods at the local *bodega* at prices that are kept low by the government. Just as Kolstø (2006) asserts how symbols that do not have the biggest importance in a society will fade away from their collective memory. This seems to be happening in the case of Cuba. Socialism has been a strong unifier for Cuba, but the fact that Cuba is not growing economically makes the concept of socialism less attractive. The great ideas behind this concept seem to fade away from people's memories. This became clear in an interview with fifth-year economy student Álvaro. One of his favourite things about Cuba was 'the fact that here you can live without having any money and you won't starve' referring to the free education and health care system provided by the socialist system. He is also living in a free student housing complex assigned by the government because his mother cannot provide for him. All positive aspects from the current socialist system. In the same interview, however, he mentioned:

*'Everyone wants to go away to somewhere where they can actually see the fruits of their labour. I would like to go somewhere as well, where they pay me more. I don't want to leave Cuba. I don't have any problems with the country, but I don't like the system that you can't do anything to improve your situation'.<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> Interview Maria and Eduardo, 8th of March

<sup>7</sup> Interview Álvaro, 24th of March

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

The idea of happiness regardless of the circumstances is very Cuban. Even though people are living in very difficult situations being happy and having a positive mind-set seems to be overall present. Leonardo told us that Cubans 'always laugh, and talk very loudly'<sup>8</sup>. Music and dance also contribute to this happiness. Traditional music is *casino* (salsa) and *son*. Both Luna, a fifth-year nursing student, and David, a fifth-year law student, stated about *casino* that 'it is in the blood of Cubans'.<sup>9</sup> From an early age people learn to dance to *casino* or the happy tunes of *rumba*. This is a music style created by former slaves based on the music styles they brought from Africa.

During interviews some students talked about depression among recently graduated students. Talking about their own situation they often compared themselves to Scandinavian countries where suicide rates are among the highest of the world.<sup>10</sup> They stated that depression is not common in Cuba. This was, however, contradictory with our observations. During our three-month research period we heard on two separate occasions of a suicide attempt by a family member of an informant. Most students seem to be most worried about the severe economic crisis that the country has passed through and the way this affects them. For the past two decades the government has started taking measures to allow people to start up their own businesses, mostly concerning tourism. This has helped to take a bit of the pressure of the country's problematic economic and seemingly unchanging political situation. The students often pointed out the economic problems of the country, but did not seem to be very interested in politics. Some were critical about their current government and the influence that the government exercises over the education system. An explanation for their disinterest in politics that we heard several times is that many students feel like they cannot participate or really change the country's political situation anyway. According to Maria and Eduardo it is not a common conversation topic since Cubans rather talk about other things than the multitude of problems in the country. A conversation about politics is bound to end in a heated discussion.<sup>11</sup> We witnessed such a heated discussion one day, when we joined Catalina and her friends one day at the beach. A normal conversation ended in a debate between two people who thought differently about politics. Other times the subject was quickly put aside as people often changed the topic or

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<sup>8</sup> Interview Leonardo, 28th of March

<sup>9</sup> Conversation David 3th of March and interview Luna, 21th of March

<sup>10</sup> see: [http://www.who.int/gho/mental\\_health/suicide\\_rates/en/](http://www.who.int/gho/mental_health/suicide_rates/en/)

<sup>11</sup> Conversation Maria and Eduardo, 1st of March

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

did not really go into depth about it. Another reason Maria and Eduardo mentioned why people rather not talk about politics, is because they feel like they cannot contribute anyway.<sup>12</sup> The fact that the economy is a more readily talked about subject might be because people actually do feel that they can contribute, even if it is just on a small scale. Also students are about to enter the labour market and soon will have to face these problems themselves. After the university most students will start working for the government, at least during their years of mandatory social service. This social service consists of two or three years. Three years for women and two for men who have completed a year of compulsory military service. Each student, after graduation, is appointed a position, generally earning the very basic salary of 20-35 CUC a month (equivalent to 20-35 dollar). Several students including Álvaro, Maria and Eduardo told us stories about recently graduated students that were placed in simple jobs very much below their level of competence.<sup>1314</sup> These jobs have been created by the government by dividing one task into several others to be able to provide work for the whole population. The effect is that many university students end up doing simple jobs that have very little to do with their educational degree. This can lead to depression among recently graduated students. Together with the fact that everyone earns a very basic salary, even highly skilled professionals, is the reason that most students want to leave the country. Despite the many problems that were discussed with students many still felt a certain pride for their country. If the economic circumstances were better most would not want to live anywhere else. As Álvaro explained:

*'We laugh about the problems. I don't know if it is because we live in the Caribbean with a lot of sun, colours and such an abundant wildlife, that this has an influence on the minds and animo of people. [...] Here in Cuba, as people of the Caribbean, the people seem a bit happier, they live more with their family. Here you generally live with you parents, and your grandparents because you don't have any money to go anywhere else. This is why things are this way. I love this about Cuba'.<sup>15</sup>*

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<sup>12</sup> Conversation Maria and Eduardo, 1st of March

<sup>13</sup> Interview Álvaro, 24th of March

<sup>14</sup> Conversation Maria and Eduardo, 6th of March

<sup>15</sup> Interview Álvaro, 24th of March



## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

Cubans often appear positive, making jokes, even about difficult situations. As Ana once jokingly said: 'If Cubans would be dying they would still throw a party with rum and mojito's'.<sup>16</sup> That they are proud people is known around the world and is visible in the overall display of the country's national symbols and history. That most people are living in very difficult situations is something that is noticeable in conversations between people. When asked a simple question like 'how are you doing?' They often start with the phrases 'here everything is difficult', 'it isn't easy' or 'here in the battle'. These phrases refer to the difficulty of life in Cuba and the fact that people feel that they are living in a country during wartime. One way of coping with these difficulties is laughing about it. This is shown by the popularity of the television show *Pánfilo*.

### 3.3 The 'other'

When asked about other countries, students often referred to the United States. Especially to the country's capitalist system with more economic opportunities and its democratic political system. The contrast with other countries mostly concerns the socialist system of Cuba in comparison to other countries where people live in capitalist systems. Also the general idea about the other countries is that health care and education are very expensive and therefore not available to everyone. This is a fear consisting in the minds of many Cubans. According to Eduardo this image is portrayed by the government through national media. By showing mostly negative news about other Latin American countries, it makes Cubans more apprehensive about leaving their country.<sup>17</sup> However, as mentioned above, people do realize that outside Cuba there are opportunities to make more money. Especially people that have completed a higher education often earn quite well in other countries. This realization is the reason that many teachers at the university leave when given the chance to teach at a university in another country.

The Internet has only just reached Cuba. Since two years everyone can access it in public parks. People can buy a card and log in online. Not all the apps function very well, but it is possible to browse websites and use social media such as Facebook. Catalina, a first-year history student, said she uses the Internet to connect with her family that lives in the United States. Before the Internet, keeping in touch was virtually impossible, but now she can even video-call

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<sup>16</sup> Conversation Ana, 5th of March

<sup>17</sup> Conversation Eduardo, 29th of March

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

them and see how they are living. She told us that her aunt video-called her from a mall and that she was very impressed by ‘the way it all looked so clean’<sup>18</sup>. The Internet seems to become a bigger part of the lives of students, even though it is still expensive to use, it does influence them. Maria told us that she has been using the Internet for almost two years now. Before that she had never been able to verify things that she had been taught in school. With the Internet she is able to read critical blogs and news articles from foreign newspapers. This changed her outlook on Cuba significantly. She mentioned that by searching on the Wikipedia about Fidel Castro she came upon things that she did not know before. Only one year ago, for example, she and Eduardo discovered that Fidel Castro was born out of wedlock.<sup>19</sup> This is not something that is taught in history class.

Being Cuban is not something that is as straightforward as it seems. First of all a distinction has to be made between the many different ‘Cuba’s’ that exist. Cuba itself cannot be seen as a country with a heterogeneous identity. There are big differences between the East and the West, or more specifically, between Havana and other provinces. As José, the partner of our host Ana, explained by using a common Cuban joke ‘We are like the Israelis and they are the Palestines’<sup>20</sup>, referring to the period when people from the provinces could not come to Havana, but needed a special permission which stated the reason they were there. Today you still have to get permission to live in Havana as Maria explained.<sup>21</sup> She is from Matanzas, the province that is closest to Havana, but has been living in the capital since she started going to the university there. She explained that in general *habaneros* look down upon people from the provinces. At the same time *habaneros* are not so liked outside Havana for the same reason. It is therefore important to keep in mind this distinction between different provinces and especially between Havana and the rest of Cuba. This could be related to the point Verkuyten (2005) makes: identity is not a thing, but a process. A process of being like a number of people, but at the same time, feeling different from others. Identity is about similarity and difference. This could be said about Cuba which is not a homogenous nation. It would be better to not just talk about Cuba, but to make a distinction between the different Cuba’s that exist on the island. This, however, would

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<sup>18</sup> Conversation Catalina, 2nd of March

<sup>19</sup> Interview Maria and Eduardo, 8th of March

<sup>20</sup> Conversation José, 4th of February

<sup>21</sup> Conversation José, 4th of February

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

make it impossible to make any statements based on the data so we decided not to make this distinction in our research.

This pride to be Cuban, as we observed, has mostly been constructed by the government. Education in Cuba is compulsory. All children have to at least attend primary and secondary school. History classes in primary education mainly discuss the history of Cuba and its position in the world. The children do not learn a lot about other places in the world. The schools teach children with history books that have been unchanged since the 1960s. The history of Cuba is discussed thoroughly. Most students know exact years when asking them about certain historical events, because they were being tested on their country's history in primary and secondary school every few weeks<sup>22</sup>.

News items on domestic affairs are also brought very positively: a new school that has been built for blind children, farmers who have cultivated sugarcane in a new way, a monument that has been built to honour someone. One night while watching the news an item was broadcasted about a train that derailed and in which six people died<sup>23</sup>. This item was abbreviated and followed by a ten minute item on a chicken farm in Camaguey. News on foreign affairs mainly exists of wars in Syria or famines in Sudan. So the government portrays the 'outside world' as a place that is always ten times worse than the situation in Cuba. The same observation could be made for newspapers. Overall they are very positive, and for example in the newspaper *Granma* every page has a quote from a famous Cuban or revolutionary leader. People will not come across bad news about Cuba very often.

All of this could be linked to the concept of learning identity. As Kolstø emphasized that identity is not something you are born with but is a process that has to be learned. In the case of Cuba, children are being taught in school that Cuba is the greatest nation. The news almost never shows the bad sides of Cuba, but does show the bad sides of other places in the world. The state creates a strong dichotomy of 'us' and 'them', where 'us' is almost always a great nation without flaws and 'them' is a dangerous place somewhere else. As Eriksen (1994, 33) also says: 'group memberships and loyalties are confirmed and strengthened through stereotyping and the articulation of conflict or competition'. This demarcation process is called dichotomisation. This

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<sup>22</sup> Conversation Catalina, 8th of March

<sup>23</sup> Observation, 25th of February

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

dichotomisation happens clearly at schools and in the media in Cuba, to create a nation that is proud of what it is.

## Chapter 4. Collective memory (Tessa)

*The stage is decorated as a small café, a wooden bar with a few stools and behind it a banner showing a painted map of Cuba with the text 'Cuba Libre!'. The café is used as a stage where different acts are performed. A group of girls enters the café wearing African dresses. Followed by a girl performing a solo act. She dances to Spanish music moving a small fan in her hand rhythmic to the music. For the last act three boys and girls enter the stage. The boys wear white blouses, a red scarf and a straw hat. The girls are dressed in long white skirts with yellow flowers in their hair. Their dance is announced as a traditional farmers dance of Cuba. The play ends when all actors come onto the stage. Just before they receive their final applause a few actors come forward each shouting a phrase: 'Cuba is free because of Fidel!' 'Cuba is free because of La Moncada!' 'Cuba is free!'*

The play illustrates the importance of history for students. What the dances in this play demonstrate is how Cuba's history has created a country with a very mixed population. Some people have ancestry in Africa and others in Spain. One of the things uniting all these people, is shared history which shapes their national identity. Collectivity can be formed by history, as is argued by Smith (1996, 583) who states that 'Collective cultural identities are based on the shared memories of experiences and activities of successive generations of a group distinguished by one or more shared cultural elements.' This chapter analyzes the role of collective memory in the lives of students and its role in the construction of their national identity.

### 4.1 History of Cuba

The history of Cuba plays a very important role in the education system. In history classes different time periods are discussed. Most emphasis is put on the period starting from the twentieth century until the present, including the Cuban revolution of 1959. The first Cuban revolution is unmistakably connected to one of Cuba's earliest national heroes, José Martí, as he led the fight against the Spanish. Born on the 28th of January 1853, this famous poet and literary figure is one of the most important persons of Cuban history. He is seen as the founding father of Cuba and he is likely the most visible national symbol. His life story fits perfectly in the story of the nation as Martí ultimately gave his life for the nation, the ultimate sacrifice. From when he

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

was young Martí was already willing to make sacrifices for his country. Speaking out against the colonial rule of Spain in Cuba Martí was sentenced to do forced labour when he was only sixteen. Due to the bad conditions of his imprisonment his health suffered greatly during this period. When he was freed Martí was exiled to Spain where he spent several years living and studying. Prevented from going back to Cuba, after graduating he travelled to Mexico, Guatemala and the United States where he lived for several years. During this time he never forgot his homeland and her struggle for independence. In 1895 he returned to Cuba where he rallied troops to fight against the Spanish. He died in the Battle of Dos Ríos on May 19th 1895 (Martínez-Fernández 2014). Cuba's fight for independence continued for several years until the year 1898. Despite officially obtaining independence Cuba was still far from free. The United States, who had intervened to remove the Spanish, saw an opportunity to extend their influence just outside their own borders. The new constitution that was signed included an appendix called the Platt amendment. In this amendment was stated that the United States had the right to intervene on Cuba whenever thought necessary. A right they made use of several times. Also an American military basis was founded on the east side of the island. The military basis was strategically placed in a bay in the region Guantánamo and therefore called Guantánamo Bay (Pérez 1999). José Martí had already warned for the role the United States were to play in Cuba. When living there Martí became aware of the aspiration of America to incorporate Cuba as another state. In 1934 to improve the relations with Cuba American president Franklin D. Roosevelt agreed to end the legality of the amendment, save for the naval basis which still exists today (Pérez 1999).

The revolution of 1959 can be connected to a black and red flag (upper part red, lower black) bearing the text 26 julio or M-26-7 which is visible in many places throughout Havana. The flag is a reference to the 26th of July, the day of the attack on the Moncada barracks in Santiago de Cuba. These barracks were used to store weapons by the government's army led by Cuban president Fulgencio Batista. This attack is seen as the first public act by the early revolutionaries, including Fidel and Raúl Castro. The attack failed and most assailants were killed or arrested. Fidel and his younger brother fled to Mexico to lead the revolutionary movement from there. When they returned they brought with them Che Guevara, whom they had met in Mexico. Together with approximately eighty others they crossed the strait between Mexico and Cuba on a small boat called *Granma*. When they arrived they were attacked by

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

Batista's army. What remained of the group of revolutionaries fled to the mountains of the Sierra Maestra and led a guerilla warfare from there. Eventually they were victorious, replacing Batista's government with their own on the 1st of January 1959 (Martínez-Fernández 2014). This period is now referred to as the revolution of 1959.

History is often taught in function of the role of the United States in relation to Cuba<sup>24</sup>. North America and Cuba have had a troubling relationship for several decades as has been demonstrated above. Even though the relationship has been quite amicable when Cuba was ruled by Batista, as soon as Fidel came into power the relationship quickly deteriorated again. Seeing capitalist neighbour United States as the enemy, Cuba changed quickly under rule of the revolutionaries, eventually imposing a socialist system (Martínez-Fernández 2014). This was during a time when any resemblance to communism was seen as a threat by their powerful neighbour. Therefore, in order to break Cuba, an economic embargo was ensued by the United States shortly after the revolution of '59. To survive, Cuba formed an alliance with the former Soviet Union. They supplied Cuba with the necessary alimentary products. It was not until the fall of the SU in the nineties that Cuba really felt the pressure of the economic blockade. It entered in a deep economic crisis in which there was a shortage of almost all basic products. This period is now referred to as the 'Special Period'. Melissa referred to this period as:

*'the largest crisis that had ever been on Cuba. It was so intense that many people thought we would never recover from this crisis. People committed suicide or fleeing from the country on small boats from the Mariel harbour, not caring if they would die or not'.<sup>25</sup>*

This period is not put on display as much as other periods such as the war for independence against the Spanish, or the revolution of '59, since it reflects many of the problems that people are struggling with nowadays. The students have been born in this Special Period and have only few memories of it, or none at all. However, the Special Period has been a collective experience for all people in Cuba, shaping their national identity, also for those to come. Several people argued that it would be difficult to discuss the Special Period since no one would want to

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<sup>24</sup> Interview Álvaro, 24th of March

<sup>25</sup> Interview Melissa, 23th of February

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

talk about it. It is not something that fits in the image of a proud Cuba. As Renan ([1992] in Eriksen 2010, 111) states: ‘nationhood involves shared memories, but also a great deal of shared forgetting’. Earlier we noted that one particular characteristic of Cuban identity is that people like to make jokes about things, especially about difficult situations. This was recurrent when talking about both the Special Period and the economic situation of Cuba. Melissa wryly noticed when talking about the global economic crisis of 2009:

*‘in Europe they say they are in crisis, but in Cuba we don’t consider ourselves to be in crisis. Before we were doing well and now we’re doing bad. In that way we are in crisis, but overall we’re doing the same. In Europe the crisis means that someone that used to have a car now can’t afford it anymore. They have to live in less luxury. In Cuba we don’t have this, because here almost no one can afford it to have a car. So we don’t notice that the world is in an economic crisis right now’.*<sup>26</sup>

This also helps distinguish Cuba from the rest of the world. As Bell (2004) explained memories act as demarcations of the boundaries between the national self and the other. Therefore comparing their own situation to the rest of the world helps to form a feeling of unity. Cubans often use the word ‘luchar’ when talking about the difficult period that they are living in. This means ‘to fight’ referring to the fact that everyday life has become a struggle. It has another meaning, as it also seems to imply that Cuba is at war. By saying ‘we are in the battle’ they mean that they feel like they are living in a country that is in a state of war, because of all the food rationing and big shortages. The acknowledgement that they are suffering in comparison to the rest of the world, but that they are ‘in it together’ strengthens the feeling of unity among Cubans.

The most important message that the emphasis on history conveys is that Cubans have fought long and hard to be free from imperialist rule and this freedom is something they should be very proud of. Especially by posing the outside world as a threat to Cuba’s independence, a process of dichotomization (Eriksen 2010) takes place which functions to further unify Cubans. Widespread knowledge about the past also creates a common basis among Cubans which help to further unify them. If we look back at Kolstø’s (2006) explanation of Pavlov’s law of association

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<sup>26</sup> Interview Melissa, 23th of February



## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

we can apply this to certain symbols of the revolution. Cuba's history is filled with nearly miraculous events, especially concerning the revolution of 1959. A small rebel army led by Fidel Castro overthrew a whole government backed by superpower the United States. The feeling of pride people feel related to these events rubs off on the symbols that have effectively been linked to that period. Fierce texts, such as the one at the Malécon, and pictures of the revolutionary heroes adorn the city centre to help remember people of a historical moment which made Cuba into a strong and independent nation.

### 4.2 The role of the government

As mentioned before we agree with Bell who states that 'we should always look at national collective memories in relation to power and dominance' (2004, 73). This power and dominance in Cuba is very much in the hands of the government. Eriksen (2010, 109) states that 'standardised mass education can be an extremely powerful machine for the creation of abstract identification. [...] mass education, which entails the spreading of books and other texts which describe and reify history and culture.' The influence of the government in creating a certain narrative of history is visible in the way only certain aspects of history, mostly concerning the war against the Spanish and the revolution of '59, are constantly highlighted. The books that are used for these classes speak of the heroic deeds by these revolutionaries. As Maria said 'since you are a child the books you read say: 'you have to be like Che Guevara, you have to be like Fidel''.<sup>27</sup> These national heroes are used as examples in the education system. Students should aspire to live their lives like the great heroes, especially regarding the sacrifices these heroes made for the nation. A sense of being proud of the nation is encouraged.

### 4.3 The role of the media

Television and newspapers also play a large role in the reproduction of collective memory. Since the 1960's Cuba has been ruled by a totalitarian state. All media are controlled by the government therefore there is no difference between the way collective memory is presented by the media and the government. The media are, in a way, the medium through which the government can express its representation of history. While watching the news on television we noticed that almost daily one of Fidel's famous speeches was broadcasted. Also every now and

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<sup>27</sup> Interview Maria and Eduardo, 20th of February

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

then a short clip appeared summing up historical events with the title ‘crimes committed by the US on Cuba’, showing various dates, the amount of dead, and what had occurred. The news programme itself, broadcasted at 8 o'clock at night, features news items scaling from small scale local news to larger scale news from abroad. Often news items about Cuba concern cultural or agricultural activities whereas global news focuses on insurgencies and natural disasters in other countries. Recurrent themes are items about American president Donald Trump. His presidency is carefully followed in Cuba, especially since it means a lot for their own situation. This news was carefully, often disapprovingly, followed by Ana. She showed us several ‘memes’ about Trump that she and her sister, who lives in Paris, had sent each other. This demonstrates another example of using humour to talk about difficult themes.

News is also published in newspapers. There are three different newspapers in Cuba. The most common one is *Granma*, named after the boat on which Fidel returned to Cuba, and the others are *Rebelde* and *Trabajadores*. They are all relatively compact newspapers, consisting only of approximately six pages each. The news that is published in these papers is similar to the news on television. Almost daily there is an article commemorating, or paying tribute to, Fidel or one of the other revolutionaries. According to Eduardo a characteristic of Cubans is that they feel very important in the world.<sup>28</sup> The government plays a role in keeping this feeling alive. News of Fidel’s death was published in newspapers worldwide. Eduardo explained that in Cuba this news was used to reaffirm this notion of Cuba’s importance in the world. Headlines from news sources around the world reporting on Fidel’s death were shown, while leaving out parts that put the former leader in a bad light. Therefore many Cubans are not aware that in many places Fidel’s death was celebrated instead of mourned. One of Eduardo’s friends would not believe this until he showed her how international newspapers reported on the news of Fidel’s death.<sup>29</sup> Also, he mentioned, if a Cuban matter is discussed in a foreign newspaper this is also thoroughly discussed on the Cuban news. The fact that it only concerns an article in a small local newspaper is not mentioned. Leaving out details like these the news is made bigger than it is. Especially when keeping in mind that Cuba only has three six-page counting newspapers. If an article appears in one of those it is read by the whole country.

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<sup>28</sup> Conversation with Maria and Eduardo, 22th of March

<sup>29</sup> Conversation with Maria and Eduardo, 22th of March

### 4.4 Learning the importance of history

Another important way of reproducing the official narrative, besides the media, is by presenting it in museums. One important example is the *Museo de la Revolución* in Havana. In this museum the time period of the revolution of '59 is displayed. Important persons that fought against Batista's regime are mentioned and several personal objects from these figures are put on display. In the hall leading to the exit there are cartoonish painted representations of Batista and several American presidents such as Ronald Reagan, George Bush Sr. and George Bush Jr.. Each portrait is a mocking representation accompanied by a different quote. Accordingly the quotes are: 'Thank you cretin<sup>30</sup> (!) for helping us make the revolution', 'Thank you cretin for helping us strengthen the revolution', 'Thank you cretin for helping us consolidate the revolution' and last, 'Thank you cretin for helping us to make socialism irrevocable'. Also in other parts of the exhibition strong language is used. When referring to the United States the term 'the aggressor' is used and Batista is replaced by 'the dictator'. About the revolutionaries only good things are written, making them heroes. One of the revolutionaries, Huber Matos, is remarkably absent in the museum. His picture is nowhere to be found on any wall and his name is not mentioned in any of the official history books. Huber Matos was one of the revolutionaries that fought alongside Fidel in the revolution, but shortly fell out favour after speaking out against Fidel's plans to implement socialism. He was arrested and after serving twenty years in prison, exported to the United States. This is consistent with how Melissa explained the presentation of history during her education<sup>31</sup>. Someone is either really good or really bad.

History classes form an important part of the curriculum in university, but the way these classes are taught in university differ greatly from history classes in the lower education system. As expressed by several students, the analysis of historical events and persons goes more into depth in university. For the first time multiple sides of the story are being taken into account. Several students expressed that in university they realised that the history that was taught to them in their lower education had been simplified and presented very one-sided. As Mayer (2005,6) explains: 'the story of [the nation's] creation is replete with quasi-miraculous events whose connection to reality cannot be verified. [...] All that matters is that members of the nation believe in their authenticity and pass them from one generation to the next'. In an interview with

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<sup>30</sup> a stupid person (used as a general term of abuse)

<sup>31</sup> Melissa interview, 23th of February

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

Melissa she mentioned the way national history was presented during her education as very black and white. This part of the interview is shown below:

Interview with Melissa

*What do they teach you in the university about the revolution and the Special Period?*

Since that you're in the first year of lower school they teach you about these things. Now in university it still comes back every year, but it comes back more general. In every form of education it comes back. They don't teach you about the bad things though, they always talk about the good things. They talk about a person that did good things so he was an extremely good person or they talk about a person that did bad things so he was an extremely bad person. They only talk about good and bad.

[...]

*So in the university is the first time that they tell you about things in a different way.*

Yes, they say: 'Now forget this, this and this. We're going to look at things in a different way now'. It's like a clash with the things you already know since you are studying in first, third, fifth year. You're already almost an adult. In university they teach you things from a more realistic point of view. Not everything is just good or bad, not just one or the other, it's more realistic.<sup>32</sup>

The same thing said Eduardo, who stated that 'history evangelizes its heroes'.<sup>33</sup> He meant that only the good aspects are remembered of history's heroes. Creating an image of saint-like figures. Eduardo also mentioned that things he read on the Internet about Cuban history did not always correspond to the things he was taught in school. Or that certain details had been left out.

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<sup>32</sup> Interview Melissa, 23th of February

<sup>33</sup> Interview Eduardo, 8th of March

### 4.5 History prior to university

The fact that history is one of the most important courses is something we quickly noticed when talking to students. They are remarkably aware of their country's past, often being able to name exact dates of important historical events. Just as remarkable is that several events and topics are recurrent in those conversations. The same words and expressions are used to describe these things. For example, when talking about the revolution the term 'triumph' is often used, just like the sentence 'the triumph of the revolution'.

History classes start as early as the first grade of *la primaria* (lower school) and continue throughout *la secundaria* (middle school) up until the end of university. As Bell (2004, 70) stated when arguing that shared memory forms part of the process of constructing national identity: 'The notion of shared ideas, values and interpretations concerning either real events, or narratives of ancient origins [...] locates the collectivity inside a shared history'. Not only do classes about history form an important part of the curriculum of students, they are also confronted daily with images of the country's national heroes that often have a prominent place decorating the school's walls and classrooms. Every grade in school has to contribute to painting a wall of the school with symbols of the revolution. These compulsory activities commemorating historic events and persons form part of the school's curriculum determined by the government. Another similar compulsory activity is a morning ceremony in which children have to sing the national anthem and raise the flag. Several students mentioned that the verse they have grown up with saying during this ceremony was 'Pioneers of the communism, we are going to be like Che', referring to revolutionary hero Che Guevara. Most students explained that the overall presence of pictures of national heroes, has become something normal for them. They do not think about their significance anymore. Saluting the flag, saying a motto and singing the national anthem before class starts has become a morning ritual than does not necessarily has meaning to them.

The government has put a great emphasis on remembering the revolution that helped them get in power. They have done this by constructing their own story of creation and ascribing hero-like qualities to persons that were involved in the revolution. By remembering only the persons that agreed with the current government and omitting others from the official narrative they have tried to create a legitimate basis for their power. As Eriksen (2010, 85) stresses: 'History is not a

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

product of the past but a response to requirements of the present'. The education system has functioned to reproduce a constructed narrative through history classes. By teaching students about their own country they also learn them to be proud of it. Even though they have not lived during the period of the revolution or the years of nation-building before that, history has played such a large role in their education that they can recount and relate to these events like they have lived through them. By stressing the importance of these events the standardised narrative of history forms a collective memory for students. It becomes part of their national identity.

## Chapter 5. National symbols (Rixt)

When walking through Havana, constantly being surrounded by Cuba's national symbols becomes something completely normal. The flag waves outside every big hotel or state building, the national shield could be found on the CUC coin and the faces of national heroes are painted on the sides of buildings and walls. Next to *plaza de la revolución* the huge artworks that show the faces of Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos are hanging on the side of two apartment buildings.

As became clear in the literature, national symbols are created, or come into existence to unify a country, to help create a national identity and to create a proud nation. In Cuba national symbols are depicted everywhere. During our research period we lived with a Cuban family. In their house, Cuban symbols were also to be found. They had a black and white picture of Che Guevara with a colourful background in the entrance hall and a picture of the flag next to it, just like many other houses have in either their living room or entrance hall. This chapter will give a clearer insight in the importance of these national symbols in the daily lives of university students and if it creates unity. It will start by explaining how national symbols are taught to children in schools and in the media, following a further explanation about the most common national symbols of Cuba, and finish with an explanation of the creation of new national symbols in Cuba and the effect on the lives of students.

### 5.1 Learning the importance of symbols

In Cuba, during primary and secondary education, children are thoroughly taught about the history of Cuba and its position in the world. A lot of students were able to recite exact dates when certain things happened in history. Like it has been said in the third chapter, children have to take tests on the national symbols. The obligatory teaching of the symbols, but at the same time also history in schools could be linked to Anderson's official nationalism. The state is constantly reaffirming the national identity by teaching children about these events, symbols and heroes. Maria told me: 'The kids have to make regular tests with questions about the national symbols. So they have to study for the tests and remember the facts the teachers teach you in

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

school about these symbols'.<sup>34</sup> Every single school day, the children gather on the playground of their school, they raise the flag and sing the anthem. Leonardo said the anthem is an important part of celebrating their history: 'it is part of our history. The anthem is from the war against Spain, it illustrates the fight of the *mambises* against the colonial rule from Spain'.<sup>35</sup> All the classrooms in each primary school have a mural with the flag, the shield and the faces of important revolutionaries such as Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and the Cuban five. This implies that children look at these symbols every school day. Geisler (2005) asserts that national symbols 'can be seen as the starting point for the construction and maintenance of national identity'. Primary and secondary schools are trying to construct and maintain a collective national identity, by starting to teach the children about these symbols at a very young age. They grow up thinking these symbols form a natural part of their lives. Kolstø (2006) stresses the importance of the fact that people are not born with a national identity but how this national identity is learned and created through, in this case, national symbols.

Most students, even though they might have forgotten a lot of details about the symbols, always talked about them as if they indeed form a natural part of their lives. When discussing symbols, they never contested any of the ideas. For example, in a conversation with Maria and Eduardo about Fidel Castro, they told us they only just found out the leader was born out of wedlock. In primary and secondary school they only talked about how Fidel studied law and was politically active since his youth. He was always portrayed as an example for all young people.<sup>36</sup> Students have little to no means to think outside the box of what has been taught to them, because all the schoolbooks tell a one-sided story and the internet is still very expensive to access for most Cubans.

### 5.2 National symbols of Cuba

Students explained that in Cuba there are three important national symbols; the flag, the anthem and the shield. Besides that there are a few more 'supporting' national symbols, which are the national tree, the national bird and the national flower. These symbols are supporting because

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<sup>34</sup> Interview Maria, 13th of March

<sup>35</sup> Interview Leonardo, 28th of March

<sup>36</sup> Conversation Maria and Eduardo, 20th of March



## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

these are not the most important symbols but hold a special meaning for Cuba. The meanings behind these symbols could be linked to certain events in history.

### *The flag*

Leonardo told me he knew the exact year the flag came to being, which is 1850. He explained the flag had a few meanings. The three blue stripes signify the three regions: the west, the center and the east of the island. The white stripes signify the purity of the fighters during the war against Spain's occupation. The red triangle signifies the blood of the fighters. In Cuba the flag certainly has a 'focus for sentiment about society' as Firth (1973) asserts, because of Cuba's pugnacious background. In the case of Cuba the state is trying to create and maintain a proud nation that stays actively aware of its turbulent history.

The faculty of history and psychology organized a cultural festival together. This cultural festival was in the form of a theatre play and was held in a big conference hall. The hall was full of students from different faculties. At first I did not notice, because the décor of the play was stuffed with all sorts of attributes like chairs, tables, plants, paintings, which all gave the impression of a living room. But when I looked closer, I found the background of the décor was a huge flag of Cuba. The play was about how people are focusing too much on their telephones and missing the real experience of living. The students that made the play made the observation that this was happening more and more in Cuba and that it should go back to the way it used to be. It had little to do with the flag in the background, until, in the end one reference to the flag was made. All the actors that played entered the stage and said: 'one nation under the great flag of Cuba'.<sup>37</sup>

### *The shield*

The national shield exists of three parts. One part depicts the three blue and two stripes like those on the flag again. One part depicts the national tree, la palma real. The third part is the part the shield is most known for. It depicts a sea out of which pieces of land erupt on both sides. These pieces of land signify Florida and the Yucatan peninsula. The middle of these two patches of land holds a key, which signifies Cuba and its key position between those two pieces of land and the key position it holds in the Caribbean.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Observation, 28th of March

<sup>38</sup> Interview Leonardo, 28th of March

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

Leonardo, just like some of the other students, was able to talk about most of the meanings behind the national symbols. Some details were forgotten, but the gist was clear to all. Cerulo (1993) talked about the semantic analysis of symbols, which means that every aspect of a symbol is being deciphered, such as the meaning behind the colours of the flag, or the lyrics of the national anthem. The students we talked to understood the colours of the flag or the symbols on the shield. But when asking them about it they did not seem to care too much, except for Leonardo, who claimed the symbols did play an important part in his life, because they make him feel proud to be Cuban.

### *The national anthem*

The national anthem seemed to be another story. During *los juegos Caribe*, the sports tournament organized by the university of Havana where all the faculties battle against each other to win first prize, it seemed to be the norm to play the national anthem right before any sports game started. Catalina took me to the gymnastics game because one of her friends participated to represent their faculty. The preparations were somewhat chaotic with loud reggaeton music coming from the speakers and people dancing all around the big stadium just outside the university campus walls. People were testing the field, dancing, doing backflips and somersaults. The people around me in the audience were sitting, standing up, dancing and singing to the music. All of the sudden the music was turned off and people sat down. Trumpets and drums started playing loudly, people stood up and sang the lyrics to the anthem '*La Bayamesa*'. To me it seemed like something they were used to because everybody participated, and nobody warned me about the situation. When it was over the reggaeton was turned back on and people continued dancing to the beats. When I asked Catalina what the anthem signifies, she simply answered, 'it is just a battle song'.<sup>39</sup> Kolstø mentioned that 'people can participate in the construction and reproduction of the meaning and importance of symbols'. Everybody seemed to be able to reproduce the anthem, which they did at the beginning of every game, and they seemed to think it was important, but they did not exactly know the meaning behind it.

### *The national heroes*

Besides the official national symbols, there are the national heroes. The biggest national heroes are José Martí, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Camilo Cienfuegos and the Cuban five. These are all

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<sup>39</sup> Conversation Catalina, 14th of March

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

important figures in either the revolution for independence in the nineteenth century or the socialist revolution in the 1950s. When walking through Havana, seeing the faces of these heroes on sides of buildings or on banners is very normal. Maria even said that the state replaces the banners every month with a new hero or a new quote.<sup>40</sup> On almost all government buildings there is a depiction of Che Guevara, Jose Martí or Fidel Castro. *Teatro Martí*, the capitals theatre, is named after the 'apostle of Cuba'. Near the theatre José Martí's statue looks over *parque central* and part of old Havana. Not only walking through Havana made me realize these heroes are everywhere, even when buying something, portraits of the national heroes appeared. The national currency of Cuba shows the faces of some national heroes. These bills are becoming collector's items for non-Cubans. The bill with Che Guevara's face is sold to tourist for much more than its original worth. Within the university itself, these national heroes play a big role as well. The faculty of history and philosophy is named after José Martí. The entrance hall of the faculty of law presents pictures of Fidel Castro from when he was a student at that same faculty. Pictures of him, young and old, hang throughout all the hallways of the enormous building. In an interview with Maria, she told me that she does not really see these pictures anymore. They are just there, but she no longer actively notices them and stops to think about them.<sup>41</sup>

The symbols are used in many official occasions by the university or the state, such as raising the flag and singing the anthem during big ceremonies. They can also be found in the streets, either put there by the government or hanging in houses of people. In one occasion a student even had the Cuban flag tattooed on his shoulder. However, many students, when asked, said they did not really feel a strong connection with the national symbols. But during observation, most of them participated in singing the anthem, during a play they used the Cuban flag as a background and almost all of them could tell the meaning behind these national symbols.

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<sup>40</sup> Interview Maria, 13th of March

<sup>41</sup> Interview Maria, 13th of March

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

### 5.2 The creation of symbols

Some of these symbols have existed for many decades, even centuries, and are used for official ceremonies. Singing the anthem together creates a feeling of unity, according to Catalina.<sup>42</sup> Verdery (1991) confirms how certain social actions can create a sense of unity among people. The Cuban state makes a great effort to create this feeling of unity by making things like singing the anthem or raising a flag together obligatory during special ceremonies.

Other symbols are relatively newer, such as the national revolutionary heroes from the 1950s. In the case of Cuba, new symbols have been created by the state, for people to become proud of - and stay true to the socialist revolution. Hobsbawn and Ranger (1991) talk about the creation of symbols. Creating symbols is something that is a possibility, just like a new tradition can be invented. Sometimes it is even better to create new symbols to unify a country, according to the authors. Maria brought this point in connection to the creation of a national identity in Cuba: 'It is like they [the post-revolution government] stole the identity of every Cuban. If you would leave Cuba, the things they associate Cubans with are the revolution, communism, Fidel Castro. Right now that is what it means to be Cuban. What is the solution for this? To create a new, own identity.'<sup>43</sup>

These national heroes such as Che Guevara and Fidel Castro are, during special ceremonies, but also as paintings on walls with quotes, brought in relation to the combative nature of the state. The students have not lived to see any revolution, but only heard about stories, they do not feel as connected to these newer symbols.

In today's Cuba, the national symbols that have been created a long time ago do not seem to have a very big impact on students when asking them about it. Most of them answered that the national symbols like the flag or the heroes are not necessarily their heroes. They have been educated about them and know the importance in connection to the nation, but do not feel a personal connection with them. This could be connected to Bell's critique on collective memory. The students have not lived during and experienced the revolutionary years, or the years that came directly afterwards. They do not feel the direct connection with these symbols because they only heard about the importance in school. We have said we do not fully agree with his critique, but in relation to national symbols it is somewhat true that the connection is not as

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<sup>42</sup> Conversation Catalina, 14th of March

<sup>43</sup> Interview Maria and Eduardo, 8th of March

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

strong with students.

Maria told me that because they live in a totalitarian state, students, but also citizens in general, are expected to think about the nation first, and the individual second. This is no longer the case. She says students are mainly interested in music, dance, parties, family and friends. They are not as interested in learning about their nation and the symbols as the government wants them to be. Besides that, they become more and more interested with the outside world, which could be connected to the arrival of Internet<sup>44</sup>.

When going back to the literature, national symbols are mainly used to unify a nation. When talking to students, we found that the symbols do not actively have a great significance in their lives, but subconsciously do play a role in the daily lives of students. They know these symbols exist and are able to make a semantic analysis of these symbols, but they do not always feel an emotional connection to these symbols. Though most students told us they do not find most symbols very important, they participate in the moments they are displayed, such as the anthem or the flag. Students even confirmed that it creates a sense of unity during those moments. The conclusion that could be drawn from this chapter is that symbols do play a role in the daily lives of students. This is, however, a more subconscious role, because the students are not always actively aware that these symbols are being displayed during daily practices. Symbols form a natural part of their daily lives.

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<sup>44</sup> Interview Maria, 13th of March

## Chapter 6. Conclusion

During our research on the national identity of students in Havana we discovered the importance of history in the Cuban education system. This allowed students to name exact dates and events in their country's past. During our research period we spent a significant amount of time on the central campus of the Universidad de la Habana where we witnessed and participated in several student activities. Through these experiences we were allowed to get a look into the lives of students at the university. This campus could be seen as the social space which Smith (1991) talked about when explaining that a social space is where people feel that they belong and identify themselves with each other. The university was an interesting place to conduct our research since the university is a place where a process of identity forming takes place. This is described by Kolstø (2006) who states that national identity forming is a process that is learned, not something you are born with. In this process identity is something that is learned. This led to the central question that we used for our research: 'How do shared cultural aspects such as collective memory and nationalistic symbols contribute to the construction of national identity among Cuban students of the Universidad de la Habana, aged 18 to 28?' In studying the construction of national identity the concepts of collective memory and national symbols had a central place in our research. Both national symbols and collective memory can be seen as the building blocks upon which national identity is constructed. As Smith (1991) said national identity could be seen as 'culture communities' where the members of the communities are bound together through common historical memories, symbols, traditions and myths.

It can be difficult to define a national identity since it is something that can mean different things to different people. However, there were certain aspects of the Cuban national identity that were very clear and observable, such as national holidays and products. Some of those appeared to have great significance to the students. Eating certain foods during festivities, with family and friends, functioned as a binding factor. For example, on the 1st of January, which is an important national day, people come together with the whole neighbourhood to eat a piece of grilled pig. Because of this tradition most students remarked that this was their most important national day. Doing things together can create a sense of belonging as we observed with *Pánfilo*, a comical tv-show. Nearly every Cuban watched the show, and discussed it the day after. These shared activities are connected to Anderson's imagined communities. People are

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

knowingly participating in the same activity, only in different places. This creates a sense of belonging to an imagined community.

Other shared experiences have also been clear contributors to the national identity, but less observable. During conversations with students it became clear that the economic struggle is something everyone has to endure. The economy is a subject students talk about often with their friends. It binds them in a sense that they are consciously talking about it with each other, and comparing themselves to the world outside of Cuba. This creates a sense of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ in a process of dichotomization which Eriksen (2010) mentions. This process of othering creates a national consciousness of feeling like they are all in the same boat. The crisis that people went through in the nineties called the ‘Special Period’ has contributed to this feeling of sharing the same fate. Especially when talking about difficult subjects such as the economy or politics another important aspect of Cuban identity surfaced: humour. Jokes are used to release pressure and make these topics discussable, even though the conversations stay superficial. This also explains the popularity of the television show *Pánfilo* which uses a satirical form of humour to mildly criticize societal problems. These problems are very recognizable for people and this helps to take the pressure of for a moment. Every episode of the programme has to be approved by the government and can therefore only gingerly touch upon these topics or refer to them, but even when walking on eggshells the very implicit humour is something that every Cuban understands. A recurring aspect in this humour is often ‘the other’. Comparing their own situation to the rest of the world, socialism versus capitalism. However, most of our informants expressed their declining faith in the socialist system. They did also express their love for their country. A comparison that we heard several times was with certain western countries where depression is a common problem. However, our own observations argued to differ, they claimed that depression and suicide do not really exist in Cuba. Álvaro mentioned, among others, the sun, colours and the strong influence of family as important factors for the happiness of Cubans. This can also be related to music and dance where cheerful tunes and colourful attires form an impressive music legacy. *Casino*, *son* and *rumba* were named as the most important of all music styles. Dancing is something Cubans have ‘in their blood’.<sup>45</sup> ‘The other’ is also represented in the media. All media are controlled by the state. The news is very one-sided and positive when broadcasting news items on domestic affairs. But when it concerns news about other countries,

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<sup>45</sup> Conversation David 3th of March and interview Luna, 21th of March

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

most of the time it has a negative charge. Up until recently it was virtually impossible to verify this national news. With the Internet becoming more accessible the official narrative can be contested. As Maria mentioned, when she accessed the internet for the first time she realized some things are left out in the news.

As became clear during our fieldwork national symbols and an official narrative of history can be actively promoted by the state to create unity among its people. The education system is an important way for the government to teach young children the importance of the nation. Every morning the children have to sing the anthem while raising the flag. Besides the act of raising the flag, children are thoroughly taught about the Cuban history and national symbols. They have to study many details concerning history and symbols and have to take tests on these subjects. Another important contributor to promote the official narrative of the state are the media.

The two central concepts of our research, national symbols and collective memory, are explained in chapter 4 and 5. In chapter 4 the importance of collective memory is discussed. The collectivity that is aspired by stressing the importance of official history helps build the national identity (Bell, 2004). History plays a big role in the education system in Cuba. As Bell (2004) stresses that memories act to distinguish between the national self and 'the other'. Some parts of this history were visibly incorporated by students who were often remarkably aware of their country's past. Students indicated that the university had brought about a change in their thinking. Even though there are government approved plans for the classes, discussion is allowed. This has provided the students with more in depth views on the topics that they had learned about previously. When everyone learns the same history and can relate to the same things a sense of belonging is created. By putting national symbols and specific historical events on display a success story is created which teaches children to be proud of their nation. To be able to achieve a certain pride for the nation some things are emphasized while others are silently forgotten. As Renan ([1992] in Eriksen 2010, 111) said 'nationhood involves shared memories, but also a great deal of shared forgetting'. Not all stories related to Cuba are successful, but leaving out the negative aspects a nation's history can be created. Some things are rather being forgotten by the government. One of these things is the deep economic crisis called the 'Special Period' after the fall of former ally the Soviet Union. As our informants described it, the aid provided by the Soviet Union suddenly stopped, leaving the country's



## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

economy to experience a freefall. During these years Cubans had to do all sort of things to survive, from eating stray cats to frying the skin of oranges, just to have something to eat. This does not fit in the image of a proud nation and thus is rather forgotten. Collective forgetting is not something that occurs easily, especially not when the events are rather recent, but it takes time. Emphasis is put only on certain time periods while others are silently overlooked. These memories will slowly fade with the passing of each generation.

During our research we noticed the overall presence of national symbols on the streets of Havana, in official buildings and in schools and universities. Chapter 5 discussed the importance of national symbols. As Brumann (2002, 2) stated ‘for something to count as culture it has to be shared by some group of people’. Their significance only plays a role when people know the symbols belonging to their nation and acknowledge their representation. This is similar to Kolstø’s (2006) idea that the meaning of symbols is learned to people through participation. For example, singing the anthem and raising the flag before class which is performed on schools in Cuba. The flag can be seen as one of the most important national symbols. In its creation different values are ascribed to the colours and patterns on the flag. Along with statues and paintings of national heroes José Martí and Che Guevara, its presence was most visible in Havana. When peeking into one of the many houses where people had left the door wide open, their living rooms for everyone to see, busts of José Martí could readily be seen. Also in parks a statue of the poet seemed a certainty rather than an exception. Che Guevara’s presence was visible in the merchandise sold in souvenir shops in the tourist areas. His profile also regularly adorned water tanks, buildings and buses. On several occasions we spotted students proudly wearing t-shirts bearing the profile of Che Guevara. ‘Che’ as he was nicknamed in Cuba, is originally Argentinean but his participation in the revolution and his exemplary role in the time of great changes have made him one of the most important figures in Cuban history. His profile decorates one side of a tall building next to the plaza de la revolución (liberation square) which is one of the first things that people see coming from the airport before entering the city. Next to ‘Che’ the profile of another hero, Camilo Cienfuegos, decorates a similar building. Camilo is another well-known revolutionary and popular throughout Cuba. However, his overall display as a national symbol is mainly limited to Havana, the birthplace of this national hero. As mentioned before, children are taught a great deal about the national symbols in school. Students did seem to remember the stories about these symbols, but they did not ascribe much importance to the

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

national symbols when talking about them. The symbols in the streets and classrooms were simply always there. Only when observing the sports game or the theatre play, we found out the flag was displayed. At the sport games it was waving outside the stadium and during the theatre play it was serving as the background of the stage. The anthem was sung before the sport games started. They all participated without thinking about it, as if it was a normal daily activity.

Together the national symbols and collective memory contribute to the construction of a national identity. Both concepts can be seen as working to constitute the other. Bell (2004) illustrates this by connecting both concepts and locating a collectivity inside a shared history. 'A history constantly reaffirmed and reproduced through resonant rituals and symbols' (Bell 2004, 70). For students learning the importance of history and their country's national symbols have been important processes. In university they were able to adapt this carefully constructed narrative by moulding it into the construction of their own national identity. Both national symbols and history can be seen as building blocks for the national identity. However, when looking at the construction of national identity through the perspective of students they seem to ascribe more importance to the role of history within this process. During our conversations students expressed not to connect any strong sentiments to certain symbols such as the flag and the anthem. In our observations we noticed that these statements were contested by their actions. We had the opportunity to witness an important month-long sports tournament between the different faculties. Repeatedly the anthem and the flag played a central role in the event. When the anthem sounded everyone rose from their seats to join in the singing. The flag was ever present, waving outside the stadium, as well as it was an important feature used as background during some of the plays. In contrast with national symbols history was rendered important by students. They possess an incredible amount of knowledge of their own history. It has played an important part throughout their whole lives. The role of history in the construction of their national identity is therefore more explicit. However, national symbols also play a very important role, only less visible.

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## **Appendix A: Research summary**

### *A.1 Resumen En Español*

Resumen de la tesis escrito por Rixt Kylstra y Tessa van Laarhoven:

Kylstra R. & T. E. van Laarhoven.

2017 ‘Aprender como Ser Cubano: Un Estudio Antropológico de la Identidad Nacional a través del Uso de los Símbolos y la Memoria Colectiva’.

El primero de enero 1959 Fidel Castro y sus tropas entraron la Habana. La revolución del 1959 ha tenido lugar. La historia fue re-escrito por los vencedores en la función de la revolución y sus actores. Esa historia fue asignado un gran papel en el sistema de la educación. Los luchadores más importantes de la revolución se hicieron en símbolos nacionales que adornan paredes y aulas de las escuelas. Los símbolos nacionales y la historia tienen una función importante en construir la identidad nacional como explica Bell, ‘la noción de ideas, valores e interpretaciones compartidas sobre hechos reales o narraciones de orígenes antiguos [...] ubica a la colectividad dentro de una historia compartida, una historia constantemente reafirmada y reproducida a través de rituales y símbolos resonantes’ (2004, 70). La memoria además funciona para distinguir entre sí mismo y personas que no pertenecen al mismo grupo (ibídem).

Los hallazgos en esta tesis son el resultado de un trabajo de campo de diez semanas en La Habana, realizado entre el 2 de febrero y el 13 de abril 2017. El objetivo era investigar la construcción de la identidad cubana a través de los símbolos nacionales y la historia nacional. La pregunta central en la tesis es ‘Cómo contribuyen aspectos culturales como la memoria nacional y los símbolos nacionales a la construcción de la identidad nacional entre estudiantes cubanos de la Universidad de la Habana, de 18 a 28 años?’. La investigación consistió de hacer entrevistas, observar y participar. El mayor parte de la investigación tuvo lugar en el campus universitario de la Universidad de Habana. El campus funciona como espacio social donde personas sienten un sentimiento de pertenencia y donde se identifica con el otro (Smith 1991). Eligiendo el campus como sitio principal para nuestra investigación hemos podido acercarnos a la percepción de los estudiantes.

## Bachelorthesis *Learning to be Cuban*

La tesis empieza con una discusión teórica donde se forman definiciones claras de los términos importantes para esta tesis, como de la nación, el nacionalismo y la identidad nacional. A continuación, se sigue con una explicación sobre la creación de la memoria nacional y los símbolos nacionales. La importancia de la memoria y los símbolos para la construcción de la identidad nacional se explica a lo largo de toda la tesis. Los capítulos cuatro, cinco y seis conectan los términos de la discusión teórica con los datos encontrados. En el cuarto capítulo se dedica a describir la identidad cubana con aspectos como los días nacionales, la música y la comida típica. Otros aspectos culturales como el humor y la alegría también forman una parte importante de la identidad cubana. El humor se demuestra en programas de televisión satíricos como *Pánfilo* en lo que se usa humor para tratar con los problemas sociales. El quinto capítulo se ocupa de los símbolos nacionales. Ellos incluyen la bandera, el escudo, el himno y varios héroes de la revolución. Se puede hacer una distinción en la creación de esos símbolos entre la primera lucha por la independencia y la segunda. La bandera, el escudo y el himno fueron construidos anteriormente a la revolución del 1959 mientras que los otros símbolos son más nuevos. El sexto capítulo se trata de la memoria nacional, incluyendo la historia de la lucha contra los conquistadores españoles y la revolución en 1959. Otros eventos, al igual que personas, que no añadieron a una historia gloriosa sobre la nación fueron omitidos de la historia oficial. La narrativa oficial funciona como modelo para la historia enseñado en las escuelas y la universidad. La creación fue por el actual gobierno y reproducido por los medios de comunicación. La historia forma una parte importante en el sistema de la educación. Desde niño los estudiantes han recibido clases de historia para enseñarles la importancia de conocer la historia de la nación. La historia de una nación funciona para separar entre los que pertenecen a la nación y los que no pertenecen. La identidad nacional de estudiantes ha sido construido por eventos en los que no han estado presente pero que efectivamente, han dado forma a su identidad nacional. Las clases de historia y la prestación visual de los símbolos en los centros de educación han formado parte del proceso de formación de su identidad nacional.