
El Kimbo, a leader in the Cuban civil society

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Few days ago, while talking about Cuban civil society and how it has become a profitable business to some fake members, my abakua neighbor El Kimbo, told me he has spent fifteen years working hard to rescue traditions and create opportunities for the neighborhood. He gave me a lecture on the subject, more descriptive than the dictionary itself:

"I am who I am thanks to the people. A Canadian and an American fellow recently asked me in a certain event if there was a school in Cuba to teach how to be a leader and how I had become one. I quickly answered that there were not such schools and well, now I am surprised I am leader. What is to be a leader for you? I asked. Is it someone who is humble and does his best to achieve things? Is it someone who works for the people? I don't know what is to be a leader. Now, you are respected in accordance with the respect you show. I learned it since I was a child in my humble neighborhood".

El Kimbo is member of the coordinator group Proyecto Identidad y Barrio, from La Marina, in Matanzas. His work as a popular leader began with a previous work, along with the Memorial Center Martin Luther King and managed by the community. Raul Dominguez, El Kimbo, tells us his story.

Who was El Kimbo before the project of La Marina?

I prostituted in the streets. I chased foreigners in the park and took them to paladares (private restaurants), private houses. I even served to them as a tourist guide in Matanzas and the police were behind me all the time...

And how you got involved in the project?

I played baseball since I was a child. My neighborhood had a team and they needed a shortstop. I played that position and when I got there, I met Samuel, from the Baptist Church, Laydis and Magaly, who were both popular educators. There was also a group of people from La Marina: Hector Julio, Taimi, Alexis, Juan Carlos, Boris...and

they told me about the project. I first thought, "Why are Church people interested in people like us?", but anyway, we played some baseball.

"They began promoting workshops, debates, and I was invited to a workshop on genre. I did not know what genre was. Afterwards, I attended workshops on family, communication, popular education, and I did not pay much attention to all of that. However, I started to enjoy such activities and attended more and more workshops. Then I was part of a workshop entitled *Mirandonos para el 2000*. I was almost part of the project of La Marina. Then, certain fields of works were defined; namely, family, sports, traditions, the permaculture farming kicked off. I chose traditions. My wife was also there. We managed to carry out a poll to know what people wanted and one of the most requested things was the dance group of Las Imalianas, one of the oldest groups in Matanzas.

The dancing group is once again in the streets. It was been awarded in popular celebrations. Besides, the project rescued the San Juan de Matanzas celebrations, among other traditions in the neighborhood".

What are your earnings with this job?

I earn nothing. This job is not for material ambitions. What you earn is the heart of people. If you are hungry people give you food. Few days ago, I felt ill and around fifty people came by to visit me. That's my real earning. People like Reverend Raul Suarez and his son who have helped me whenever I needed."

So, you are subordinated to the government, or any local or foreign organization...

I work for the people. I respect more my people, my neighborhood than any institution. I traveled to Mexico to an event for leaders where I presented my paper and I was introduced as a Latin American leader. When I returned, I asked Reverend Raul Suarez and Joel: Hey, what's going on? And they said: "You are already a Latin American leader. You have championed the interest of your country and you have done it in your humble neighborhood. And you belong here".

My relation with the neighborhood flows perfectly. My commitment is to the people of La Marina. My neighbors have helped me a lot and you can find here in La Marina physicians, engineers, or policemen.

You traveled abroad once. Why did you come back?

I tell you why: There was a commitment with my neighborhood. I felt I needed to come back with the tools I brought from Mexico. Indeed, I committed myself to pass my twelfth grade. Everybody in the neighborhood thought I would not going to return and they joked about it. And here I am after 45 days abroad...

I am proud to be Cuban. I want to die here. My youth was not easy at all. I had to find a way through life since I was 16. I have a family: a daughter, 24, a son, 13, and a granddaughter of only two years old. I already met capitalism. My dream was to meet capitalism and I fulfilled it. It has nothing to do with Cuba.

There are lots of problems here. But I saw children in the streets there. Those kids were used by adult people for a meal; kids working, not having money to go to the hospital. That's why we must think over the idea of capitalism in Cuba. Capitalism in Cuba will be very, very tough. There is no illiteracy in Cuba. Education is free. I dare to say Cuba is one of the most advanced countries in the educational field. I saw in Mexico get paid 200 USD to kill someone else. You don't see it in Cuba.

Besides the fact of rescuing traditions, what are other impacts the work in La Marina has brought?

Long before I was born people already talk about La Marina. It was a neighborhood where prostitution, illegal business, marihuana, drugs were very common. I am always talking to those who represent us before the state. I ask about the level of alcoholism, drugs, prostitution. Everything is about caring for the human being. You have to be like family for people in need. You should give your heart to them so they give you theirs.

I am proud of La Marina today. Inhabitants have tried to embellish the façade of their home. With the help of the Communist Party and the government we fix the lighting, the seawall...

I have heard you saying Fidel is your father, how is that?

He is. When there are lazy or negligent people, bureaucrats, who do not want to help, I always say "I must talk to my dad. I am just doing what my dad tell me to do. Do you know who my dad is? My father is Fidel". I am a Fidel follower. We are doing a social work for the people. Some people think I am crazy. Crazy people are those who do not work for the people. Those are who are hurting the Revolution.

El Kimbo kept his word with Reverend Raul Suarez and passed the twelfth grade. He also became cultural promoter. Nowadays he is working hard in La Marina trying to help people to transform their own lives. He is the embodiment of the real Cuban civil society even though there are some blind people not wanting to see it.

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