

Nine Days in Havana:  
What Makes and Maintains Solidarity

Sara Markowitz

Cuba: Economic, Environmental and Social Sustainability and Resiliency

Professor Koont; Professor Rose

March 29, 2012

As our group of sixteen students and five professors boarded the small aircraft which would carry us across the warm waters situated between the peninsula of Florida and the enigmatic island of Cuba, my hands began to tremble. I was both anxious and ecstatic, the journey which awaited us on the other side. Upon our arrival in Havana, I was overwhelmed by the tropical air and abundance of Che Guevara's iconic face, which appeared on countless billboards and edifices. We walked out of the Jose Marti airport and boarded our school bus, covered by a mural and very conspicuous amongst the 1950's Chevrolets which populated the highways. Our adventure had begun. While in Cuba, we encountered many different aspects of Cuban culture, but three experiences helped me to grasp the most profound facet of the island: community. Our trip allowed us to observe how religious traditions, the value of education, and sustainable food production have all become significant factors which have contributed to the preservation of the community model.

Before arriving to Cuba, I had been curious about the relationship between religion and the communist ideals of Cuba's government. In my previous study of communism I had learned that the ideal "communist man" described by Fidel Castro rejected religion. This led me to believe that religion would not have an impact on Cuban society. However, in an article entitled "Fidel Castro, Charisma and Santeria: Max Weber Revisited," Nelson Valdes argued that popular religiosity was a main factor which "contributed to the legitimacy of the Cuban revolutionary leadership." (2004: 1) In his article, Valdes acknowledged the impact African culture had on Cuba's society, noting that "popular culture emerged among the black slaves who could not return home." (2004: 4)

In her lecture on Afro-Cuban culture and religion, Lázara Menéndez addressed the effect slave traditions had on Cuba's society. Menéndez began with a brief history on the religion of

Cuban slaves and how that religion gradually blended with the Catholic religious tradition of Spain to create what is now known as Santeria. The African tradition of Santeria came from the Yoruba tribe, the area presently identified as Nigeria. African slaves were forced by their Spanish masters to convert to Christianity and give up their native traditions. While slaves did adopt the Catholic religion, they continued to secretly worship their own deities known as orishas. The orishas are considered to be emissaries of the one African god, in the same way that Catholic saints are seen as the emissaries of the Catholic god. The slaves quickly realized this commonality and used Catholic saints to represent their own orishas. When their Spanish masters thought that the slaves were worshipping a Catholic saint, they were really worshipping one of their own orishas. Menéndez explained that this blend of Santeria and Catholicism led to the strong connection which is still present between these two very different religious traditions.

Menéndez's lecture helped to prepare us for the Afro-Cuban traditions we encountered when we arrived at Calle de Hamel, known in English as Hamel Alley. Hamel alley was one of the first Cuban sites we visited. The colorfully, decorated walls which lined the street displayed beautiful artwork of vibrant paintings and philosophical sayings such as, "El pez no sabe que existe el agua" (The fish doesn't know that the water exists). These striking paintings could have held my attention for the rest of the day, but we were soon introduced to another art form crucial to the Afro-Cuban tradition, dance. In her lecture, Menéndez had explained to our group that Afro-Cuban dances are used in Santeria to depict the stories and legends of the Orishas. These stories, known as Patiki, explain various legends about the Orishas, especially how each particular Orisha came into being.

The Patiki that our group observed showcased four orishas, two male and two female. One female dancer began the enactment of the Patiki; she slowly entered into the circle which

the crowd had created around what would become the dance floor. She moved along with the drum beats and singing of the band which accompanied the dance. As the music quickened, she threw herself onto the ground and then into the crowd. She leapt around from one side of the circle to another and even landed upon the lap of a few lucky crowd members. Soon, a male dancer dressed in green and armed with a machete joined her. The two danced together while interacting with the crowd. Gradually two more dancers joined in the performance, both dressed in bright colors as well. These bright colors signified the different identities and personalities of the orishas, as Menéndez had explained to our group earlier. Unfortunately, our busy itinerary forced us to move onto our next event before the dance had officially ended. The small taste of Afro-Cuban culture we experienced helped me to better understand how African religious traditions had added to the general Cuban community. The Patiki dance was an opportunity for followers of Santería to recall their vibrant history. Despite the sorrowful years of slavery and oppression the Afro-Cuban community had endured, they were able to be together to remember their history and celebrate their traditions in an atmosphere of African roots mixed with Cuban ideals. The strong essence of community in Calle de Hamel gave our group an insider's view of the impact that the Afro-Cuban community has contributed to Cuban society.

Another aspect of Cuba's society which has further culminated community building on the island is not historic, but rather a combination of altruistic values and scientific developments. In his book entitled, *Revolutionary Doctors*, author Steve Brouwer introduces Cuba's extensive health care program as a core element of the atmosphere of solidarity. On our third day in Havana, our group toured what Brouwer considered to be the fulfillment of Che Guevara's dream of providing quality healthcare to every member of society, despite their level of income (or lack thereof). (2011: 11) The Latin American School of Medicine (abbreviated as

ELAM and La Escuela Latinoamericana de Medicina in Spanish) is an impressive place. The university was founded in 1998 by Fidel Castro. The following quotation by Fidel Castro is predominantly displayed upon a wall in the university's reception hall: "Esta sera una batalla de la solidaridad contra el egoismo" (This will be a battle of solidarity against selfishness).

(2011:22) This quotation aptly describes the mission of the university, which promises students a free education with only one request from them in return. Students are expected to pay back ELAM by returning to their home communities to serve "the poor of their native country and dedicate themselves to practicing community health care and preventative medicine." (2011:22) This concept of helping the needy in return for a free education is appealing for many reasons. Castro's implementation of this revolutionary medical system has been able to provide quality health care to every citizen of Cuba.

At ELAM, we were able to meet American students who had chosen to come to the university. Hearing their stories was an incredible experience, especially since the students came from diverse backgrounds. One of the most impressive students was a young woman who had completed her undergraduate degree at Harvard. I was shocked to think that a Harvard graduate would search out such an unusual school to receive a graduate degree. Once I heard her speak about her desire to help members of her community who were in desperate need, her choice of ELAM made perfect sense. Visiting ELAM made me realize that the medical school, as well as its values, has played a monumental role in sustaining the atmosphere of solidarity within the Cuban community.

While I was amazed by the American students of ELAM, I was also astounded by the Cuban medical field's accomplishments. Since many vaccines and pharmaceuticals are created in the United States, they were (and remain) unavailable to Cubans who need desperately need

them. This is just one critical impact that the embargo has inflicted upon the Cuban people. In order to solve this issue, the Cuban government has invested large amounts of money into medical research. By doing so, Cuban medical experts have been able to create generic versions of necessary medicines. Cuban medical experts have also created generic vaccines, as well as a vaccine for Hepatitis B, which is a remarkable accomplishment since a similar vaccine is not available in the United States. The revolutionary Cuban doctors also provide care and education for the poor and needy of other countries, including Venezuela and Haiti. Cuban doctors have been sent all over the world in order to help those in need worldwide. In this way, Cuban medicine has created a stronger sense of solidarity and community at home and all around the world.

The embargo not only affected Cuba's ability to effectively cure its sick population, but jeopardize the nutritional health of the Cuban people as well. Professor Koont explained in his book entitled, *Sustainable Urban Agriculture in Cuba*, that when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1990, Fidel Castro was forced to declare a state of emergency for Cuba. This period, known as the "special period in time of peace," was a true time of crisis for the Cuban people. When the Soviet Union dissolved, "Cuba lost 85% of its export markets." (12: 2011) In order to resolve this crisis, the Cuban government invested in a program of urban agriculture. In a lecture on food security and sovereignty presented to us at the Martin Luther King Center, we learned how Cuba has been able to become almost entirely self-dependent in regards to producing the food supply for its population. Our lecturer explained the term food sovereignty as a country's ability to provide its population with food stuffs produced solely by that country. Cuba has been gradually working towards its goal of becoming completely self-reliant for producing food, but the tropical climate continues to be a significant challenge; grains do not grow well in tropical climates.

Despite this, urban agriculture has been largely successful in Cuba. Presently, Cuba is able to produce sixty percent of its own produce. (Lecture: March 13, 2012)

We spent our fourth day in Havana on the organopónico in Alamar. The organopónico was a beautiful, oasis of green fields and fresh produce in the middle of an urban center. We toured the facilities, which included a laboratory dedicated to the development of beneficial insects. Along our tour, our farming guide showed the most important aspects of the organopónico. He explained how vermiculture (the use of worms and their waste) was employed to create fertilizer without the use of petroleum products. While half of our group left after the tour, those of us who chose to stay on the organopónico were given the chance to plant lettuce and harvest tomatoes. Growing up on a small, family farm, the technique of planting lettuce was not a foreign concept to me. Despite this, I found the communal aspect of the organopónico to be truly inspiring. The workers showed a great deal of patience while we clumsily stepped on the carefully aerated rows and goofed around, taking pictures of our “hard work.” In only two hours, I felt as though I bonded more with our group of students than I had in the previous six weeks of class with them. The organopónico provided a relaxed atmosphere which cultivated learning as well as team-building. This experience with the students in our group helped me to understand how the organopónicos furthered the sense of solidarity in Cuba. Unlike our group of students who would neither benefit from a good crop nor suffer from a poor one, the Cuban citizens who relied on these crops worked together to provide food for themselves, their families, and their communities. This oasis provided an environment where Cuban citizens could help their communities while furthering their own knowledge of agricultural production.

After nine days soaking in the picturesque landscape of Cuba and admiring the core values of community and solidarity, I was not exactly looking forward to traveling back to the

United States; I was not nearly ready for our trip to be over. While each day held new and different experiences for our group, much of our activities seem to highlight the same aspect of Cuban culture: solidarity. Examples of Fidel Castro's dedication to promoting equality and community within the country exist in various facets of the culture. The religious traditions of African slaves were cited as an important basis for Fidel's revolutionary success. The African religion's focus on charisma ("ashe") provided support for Fidel and his movement. Fidel promised equality for all citizens of Cuba, and with his investments in both medical and agricultural research, he has been able to provide exactly what he said he would. Cuba has made significant advances in medicine and agricultural production, which arguably would not exist without the solidarity and resiliency of the Cuban people. This relationship between advances in medicine and agricultural production and the solidarity of the Cuban people appears to be a two-way street. The creations of ELAM and organopónicos have helped the Cubans to maintain their solidarity and strengthen their communities. Cuban equality and solidarity exist alongside each other in their culture, and without these two common facets of Cuban culture, Cuba would not be the success story that it has become today.