

# A Conversation with a Babalawo

*An interview with Lázaro Cuesta Valdés, organizer  
of the Letter of the Year Commission*

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Lázaro Cuesta Valdés is devoted to honoring his gods and his faith. His house is an Ifá temple; there, he honors the orishas. There, his godchildren and others seek him out for help and advice. Enslaved Africans brought the Ifá cult to Cuba from the western part of that continent, during the tragic period of the slave trade. Now, Cuesta Valdés gives a press conference every January to reveal to Cuba and the world the Letter of the Year's predictions.<sup>1</sup>

Our interviewee is the organizer of the Letter of the Year Commission. There are other babalawo associations that offer predictions in Cuba, but most believers follow the organizing commission's Letter. It is also the oldest.

**Lucas Garve (LG):** How many years ago did you get initiated as a babalawo?

**Lázaro Cuesta Valdés (LCV):** I was initiated twenty-five years ago.

**LG:** For you and your way of conceptualizing the world, what importance does Ifá culture have in Cuban culture and for Cubans?

**LCV:** Well, I'd say that Ifá's written works are the medicine that cures all ills, and not only those of the Cuban people. It already has a place in world culture and has acquired such a level of renown that Ifá predictions, his advice, and his guidance are followed all over. Ifá is no longer found only among the poorest people in our population; it is also found among the wealthiest. Highly educated people, scientists, researchers, ethnologists and writers take great interest in Ifá's predictions, because of the importance they have had, due to their proven nature before international opinion.

**LG:** Lázaro, you are a member of the Letter of the Year Organizing Commission and one of its principal spokespersons. What does this Commission do? What is its objective in gathering so many Ifá priests from Cuba and the world?

**LCV:** The Letter of the Year Organizing Commission came about in 1986, with the intention of uniting the greatest possible number of babalawos around the issue of the Ifá predictions, in the hopes of increasing our capacity, and

improving our ability to find solutions to problems. I am a founder of the Commission and the only one of them to still be active in it. Some have died, others have left the country and still others have changed their positions. Furthermore, I have been organizing the activity for twenty-one years.

**LG:** What is the extent of the Ifá religion's influence in the world? To what point are Cuban babalawos recognized as its god-fathers and 'heads' of their temple-houses?

**LCV:** Let me explain. From the beginning of the slave trade, Cuba was the most idyllic place to gather the largest number of slaves; they were later separated or taken to different parts of the continent. Thus, Cuba is the place where the greatest number of work traditions, religious concepts, types of Yoruba practices, what we call Regla de Ocha, Regla de Palo Mayombe, and the Secret Regla Abakuá gathered. So, these practices took root here, and they grew and multiplied. In and after 1959, Cuban immigrants took away with them their religious traditions, which became well known in the outside world, something that had not happened before. Currently, there are descendants of Cuban babalawos all over the world.

**LG:** So, does that mean that these babalawos can create their own temple-houses, have godchildren, have an independent family—and that they all belong to the same branch?

**LCV:** Our religion is like a family. Sometimes a grandfather sets up his own home and has sons, and then the sons become independent and start their own families. But they cannot deny that their grandfather is their grandfather. That is how priests of Cuban origin who are spreading all over the world can have other

kinds of work, other positions, etc., but not be able to deny their roots. That root is in our country.

**LG:** Regarding the prices that are charged when someone gets initiated, is that called a "derecho" [a "right"]? Can you explain for us what this whole process entails exactly?

**LCV:** The word "derecho" refers to everything having to do with any kind of ceremony that takes place. Any ceremony incurs expenses such as for animals, food, transportation and many other things that might be needed for it (who cooks, who distributes things, who manages things, and who works directly with the ceremony, for example). To my knowledge, there is no officially established price. Each priest is free to set his own price according to the level of organization involved. There are those who are fair. There are also those who are extremely abusive in this regard, and others who are extremely ridiculous. When there are no set controls over this, it is possible for the people who are going to go through with a ceremony to get economically trounced. Yet, sometimes the "derechos" that are charged are so low that everything is done improperly. The initiates receive minimal attention and the quality of the ceremonies is not always adequate. As in everything, I believe there should be a balance that only the person who presides at the activity can control. To my knowledge, there is no set rate of fees for any type of ceremony.

**LG:** As far as religion is concerned, what can you tell us about family, about respect, from a secular perspective and within the religious family?

**LCV:** I would say what I've already said. We are called to care for our families within the home, where there should be respect and consideration on the part of the

youngest members toward the eldest. Respect with regard to conduct, attitude, projection, and that is the duty of all, from the youngest to the oldest. Consequently, the sign that is ruling over us this year calls us to recover the values that have been lost, that is, respect for family, respect for our neighbors in the social sphere in which we live and share; respect for one's co-workers, and respect for other people's ideas because respect is the keystone to the building of communities and peoples, spanning from personal homes to the country itself. This year's sign is calling us to rescue all these elements that are necessary for ensuring a better future.

**LG:** Lázaro, does the yearly Letter govern how a babalawo initiation ceremony should be? Or, does the personal desire of the person who is paying for it? Or, is it something else (for example, friendliness or liking, personal affinity, etc.)?

**LCV:** That should be analyzed in two different steps: one for the past, and one for today. How it was in the past is what I am most familiar with, people would come to this ceremonial process via direct guidance from Ifá, either through his Mano de Orula (Orula's Hand) or maybe in an Itá (Orisha's reading) at his *santo* ceremony (an early initiation). There he would receive a recommendation about his need to take this step, to be able to carry on in life in a position from which he might be able to solve his problems and help others to solve theirs too. Nowadays, it often doesn't work that way. Many people have made a lot of money. They get to the point where in order to get some benefit they find someone and initiate him or her irrespective of whether or not that person is qualified, even if his or her attitude and moral conduct are not the best. An Ifá priest should set an example in his

temple-home; an example for society, an example for the country, an example for anywhere he is located. All priests, from any religion, are undoubtedly mirrors in which many people who go to their temples in search of guidance and advice look at themselves.

**LG:** Have you traveled to Africa, to Nigeria or any of the other places where Yoruba culture has its origins?

**LCV:** I have not traveled to Africa, or to Nigeria, or anywhere. Everything I know I acquired orally and through writing, from the elders who guided me, prepared me and organized me. I have them to thank for my being able to practice all these years, trying to do things as well as possible.

#### **Notes:**

1- *La Letra del Año* [Letter of the Year] is obtained as a result of a consultation the Ifá babalawo priests make within the context of the group of religious practices known as Regla de Ocha-Ifá, of African origin. Believers, particularly initiates, should observe the predictions, recommendations and warnings contained within the Letter of the Year.