

THE SECRET OF Santería

Cuba's 'hidden' religion



A Cuban witch doctor taught me the old ways

Eugene Costello, 51, from London

Sitting back in a beautiful red-and-white convertible 1956 Buick Special with cracked cream leather seats and trim, I felt the hot Caribbean sun warm my skin. I was on holiday in Cuba and my driver, Ramón, was giving me an unofficial tour of the beautiful, historic capital, Havana.

'What do you know about Santería?' I asked him curiously. I'd heard a little on my trip about this mysterious, local form of magic and was fascinated to learn more. From what I'd been told, I'd gathered that Santería is a bit like voodoo, a mash-up between ancient African tribal beliefs and a superficial Catholic makeover that is unique to Cuba.

Ramón gave me a conspiratorial look. 'I have a friend who practises it,' he whispered. 'He'll tell you all about it – so long as you buy him a beer!' It seemed like a price worth paying! Ramón made a call on his

mobile and told me the name of a bar in the Old Town where I could find Liober* that afternoon...

Chatty man

Liober turned out to be a friendly chap in his forties with a wife and two children. Sipping his beer, he sat back in his chair.

'So, you want to know about Santería?' he began. 'Well, Santería was, like all religion, heavily suppressed by Cuba's communist government but now it is coming back into the open, along with Catholicism and even things like gay rights, which were non-existent under our former leader Fidel Castro.'

Liober explained that he grew up in a very poor part of Havana, in a solar, a huge building subdivided into rooms and cheap apartments, a little like a Brazilian favela, where everyone is crammed in together, often sharing communal bathrooms, toilets and courtyards.

'Our neighbour, Generosa, was a *santero* - someone who practices Santería - or a *babalawo* as we



Mystical signs: Shells and coconut

call a high priestess,' he said. 'She and her husband would often have parties with violins dedicated to the god Oggun who loves violin music – his Santería name is sometimes San Pedro, San Pablo or San Miguel.'

Strange toys

Liober used to borrow the handbell and the wooden cockerel from Generosa's altar to play with – but his father was afraid and made him return them.

'Generosa would always say, "It's OK, these are the things of Changó – it is a sign that he is watching over your boy."' Liober said. 'It seems I was drawn to Santería from an early age.'

'Who is Changó?' I asked Liober, intensely curious. It turned out Changó was a god! When you first go to a ceremony, Liober explained, the *babalawo* – the high priest who has studied the

religion through the old books – will tell you your own 'road' or 'map'.

'Each person has a different one. They use shells or coconut pieces to look for a sign,' Liober said.

Catholic beliefs

'They'll look up the meaning of the sign in the scrolls. So it might be that you are governed by Changó - the most powerful god, noted for his anger, the ruler of the head. The god will warn you if he thinks something needs your attention – your health, perhaps. And usually this would be followed by a live animal sacrifice.'

Fascinated, I asked Liober to explain the history of Santería. He told me that the Spaniards

Exciting trip: Informative



Temple: Place of worship

in the 16th century refused to allow the slaves they took from West Africa to worship their own gods. The slaves found a way around it by renaming their *orishas*, or gods, with names of Catholic santos, or saints, hence the name Santería.

'So you pray to your *orisha*, or saint,' explained Liober. 'It could be something like, "I really love this girl, please enter her soul and make her love me back."'

Sacrifices

I ask about the animal sacrifices, and Liober chuckled. 'You tourists always want to know about the animal sacrifices! Yes, there would be sacrifices of chicken or goats where the *babalawo* would slit their throat – but this is not unusual in Cuba where we slaughter all our animals ourselves, we don't buy neatly packaged meat from the supermarket. Slitting the throat is the normal method. Tourists

might not like it, but it's a clean and quick death.'

Although most people in Cuba are Catholics, few see any kind of conflict between their religious and spiritual beliefs.

'One *babalawo* I know is a devout Catholic,' Liober said. 'He never misses mass on a Sunday and assists the Father in his duties. And Santería is at least as widespread as Catholicism - anyone who tells

you otherwise is either uninformed or a liar!'

Fidel Castro

There is a rumour that Fidel Castro, who led the 1959 communist revolution in Cuba against a tyrannical government, was a *santero*, mainly due to the fact that during his victory speech, two doves supposedly flew down and one landed on Fidel's shoulder. Doves are associated with Obatalá, who is also known as Virgen de las Mercedes.

'Is there a dark side to Santería?' I asked Liober. I was thinking of the films I'd seen about voodoo – zombies rising from graves, voodoo dolls, terrifying curses, that kind of thing.

Liober thought for a moment. 'Well, some might ask a *babalawo* to cause harm to an enemy



Exploring Havana: Fascinating

– perhaps make a hated boss lose his job or have some sort of accident,' he said eventually. 'It's the same principle as asking for good to happen, you are still praying to the gods and offering a sacrifice. But many *babalawos* will refuse to do it because it doesn't sit well with them.'

'Many say, whatever bad you do to someone else will come back to you ten-fold,' Liober added thoughtfully. 'It's really not a significant part of the religion. And don't forget – it is a religion, not black magic!'

I said goodbye to Liober, leaving him to enjoy his beer in the sunshine, and went to find Ramon and the car.

I'd learnt an awful lot about a fascinating old religion – and, as Cuba moves into the 21st century, Santería finally seems to be coming out of the shadows.

Maybe one day it will be as widespread as Wicca!



Did you know?

Often confused with voodoo, hoodoo is a form of African American folk magic that is unique to the USA. Like Santería, it has its roots in West Africa, but it combines Native American with African traditions, as well as Christianity and traditional European folk magic.

Words: Eugene Costello Photos: SWNS, James Emery and Alamy *name changed