

David L. Biller

JOURNALIST



Mystic Catemaco

Published by National Geographic en Español, January 2011

Jorge Romero and his brother used to enter the dense jungle of the Los Tuxtlas sierra to hunt tepezcuintle, brocket deer, and other wild animals. One day, some 20 years ago, they crossed paths with a jaguar for the first time in their lives. His brother leveled his .22 and shot. The bullet clipped the jaguar's eye, and it bolted off. They tracked it to the mouth of a cave and ventured in. There it was, growling fiercely at the rear of the cave and moving towards them to exact revenge. They opened fire. They sold the pelt for a small sum, enough "for some sodas," Romero told me as we walked along a path through the deforested mountain.

The last official jaguar register in the Los Tuxtlas reserve by Mexico's national protected areas commission (CONANP) was seven years ago; witches, on the other hand, have reproduced exponentially. The region is now known as a national and international center of black and white magic whose cultural capital is the city of Catemaco, which sits on the shores of a lake with the same name in Veracruz state.

Deforestation in the area has contributed to the mystical atmosphere. In the shadow of the Santa Martha volcano, where Romero lives, vegetation was reduced by three-fourths between 1967 and 1990 as cattle pasture was carved from jungle. Toward the end of the late-1990s, the Tuxtlas jungle had been reduced by half, and witchcraft became another relatively honest way to make a living.

The Olmecs had ventured to the Los Tuxtlas' volcanic heights to retrieve the giant boulders they sculpted into colossal heads as well as statues of the Jaguar God, a divine protector who they believed ruled over the mountains. The Spanish later introduced cattle and established sugar plantations, both of which were tended by African slaves. In that way, the Catholic concept of the devil, black magic and prehispanic rituals clashed. It had been normal to recur to local remedies, but there were no cures for the European diseases that decimated the indigenous population.

As she does every year, María del Carmen Ixtepan visits her nephew, a healer, on the first Friday of March. It is the day the powers of the Tuxtlas

David L. Biller

JOURNALIST



witches are supposedly at their height, tied to the onset of Spring when the natural world is charged with energy. María comes for a contra: a concoction of sherry, St. John's wort and two pinches of tree bark ground to a fine powder by seven 15-year-old virgin girls. "What jaguar can there be now if cars can come in on roads? I tell you, all of that is lost. The monkeys, all of that, it's gone," she said.

The healer told me that 30 years ago Catemaco was still a sleepy town where one could "breathe pure air that gave you life." But the modern history of Catemaco is divided into the time before and after the rise to fame of the witch Gonzalo Aguirre. More than agrarian changes, more than colonization, more than anything, it was Aguirre who put Catemaco on the proverbial map.

Aguirre, a jack of all trades, was fascinated by the chief witch of Catemaco and spent several years by his side as an apprentice. When the master passed, lines began forming outside Aguirre's office, called "*El Brinco del León*". Below walls decorated with dried animals, people gave themselves over to the intense gaze of his coffee-colored eyes that, several former clients told me, possessed the power to impose.

Aguirre sometimes sent his clients to doctors or prescribed patent medicine, as long as he was the one to administer it. One of Aguirre's sons, Oscar, recounted the story of a Catemaco doctor who brought his sick daughter to Aguirre. When Aguirre gave her pills, the doctor told him that he had already tried the same prescription. "Give it to her," Aguirre responded, "because I'm the one giving her these ones." She made a full recovery.

In Catemaco, his legacy persists in the form of witchcraft tourism, particularly on the first Friday of March. This year Catemaco sponsored a three-day witchcraft conference with speakers and a "black mass". People from all over Mexico, and even the world, attended the conference.

The lines that once distinguished witchcraft, religion and medicine have grown fuzzy, at best. Local witches, for example, employ Catholic iconography and incantations in their rituals. And outside Catemaco's basilica, women sell bouquets of basil to parishioners who offer them to the patron

David L. Biller

JOURNALIST



saint, La Virgen del Carmen, then cleanse themselves and their children in the same way as the witches.

Traditional medicine is the affordable alternative to expensive hospital fees. There are specialists of every stripe: those who exclusively treat snake bites, tell fortunes, use massage, set bones, or suck pulses to cure fright. Much as the church spread its Word, though, the message of modern medicine has reached even the recesses of the mountains. Witchcraft is the first recourse rather than the alternative for ever fewer people.

Mysticism flows deep in Los Tuxtlas, especially in the remote sierra where brooks are born from springs. But it also trickles down to the city, where some residents still talk of *nahuales*: witches who can transform into animals. To a greater extent, they believe in *chaneques* – forest spirits that usually appear near streams and lakes in the form of small, nude children. *Chaneques* are today viewed as mischievous, playful dwarves who lure children into the woods.

The Olmecs and the indigenous groups who succeeded them believed *chaneques* served the Jaguar God in controlling communal access to natural resources, and could punish someone with a spell who, for example, took more than needed, left an animal wounded, or hunted a pregnant female. They were a cultural construction, a social myth that ensured the sustainability of the society-nature relationship, anthropologist Elena Lazos and ethnologist Luisa Paré write in their book "Miradas Indígenas sobre una naturaleza entristecida." [Indigenous Looks at a Saddened Nature].

Lazos and Paré cited the belief of some indigenous people in the region that the removal in the 1960s of the 1,200 kilogram Jaguar God statue from its perch atop the San Martín Pajapan volcano suddenly left the mountain under human control. Without the Olmec figure to serve as the bridge between man and nature and regulate resources, wildlife disappeared and water levels dropped.

But water levels are not just falling on the slopes of San Martín Pajapan. The stark deforestation has caused erosion and the sedimentation of river beds throughout the Los Tuxtlas region. In the past decade, there have been days

David L. Biller

JOURNALIST



at a time in Catemaco - a city that sits beside an enormous lake – when no water flows from its taps.

Illegal hunting is also a persistent threat. Before the first Friday of March, a vendor at Catemaco's market sold a man a natural alternative to Viagra - the dried penis of a coati - and to a lovelorn woman a mixture of sherry wine with seven hummingbird hearts. In preparation for the big day he had ordered 100 more hummingbirds from the mountain to be made into amulets.

Bush meat also has its demand. Clandestine hunters shoot peccaries, tepezcuintles, armadillos and other animals, then hop on a local bus and bring the catch to their urban clientele.

Rosamond Coates is the director of National University's 644 hectare reserve, which is located within CONANP's protected area and being encroached upon by four communities. She says people in Los Tuxtlas tend not to care about conservation issues, except in indigenous enclaves such as those near the Santa Marta volcano where the practical role of *chaneques* has not been distorted. Most do not miss the darkness of the jungle, and hope their children will never know it.

"Maybe we can turn to a witch to save the jungle. We haven't tried that yet," Coates joked to a colleague.

"All of this was given to me by God," a healer, Don Hilario, says as he walks me through his garden. "The largest pharmacy in the world is called nature."

He received almost all of his knowledge of medicinal plants from healers in Oaxaca state who could not even read. Hilario is the type of healer who Larry Lawson would have preferred to meet when he came to Catemaco for the first Friday of March. Lawson is a body-focused holistic healer and physical therapist from Washington who, with his flowing grey beard and hair, could have been a wizard from the middle ages. He came to Catemaco in search of healers who could share their knowledge and, furthermore, identify a remedy for the rash-like condition he developed on his hand in tropical India. He believes that ties to indigenous practices in the United States have been too severely broken, and all that remain are tattered scraps.

David L. Biller

JOURNALIST



"As brutal as the Spaniards were, they were just lazy enough to let some of the indigenous people survive. So there's definitely the possibility of intact ancient wisdom available," Lawson told me.

Instead of connecting with someone like Hilario, though, Lawson was herded along the tourist track onto the back of a moped and delivered to the home of a construction worker who supposedly knew about medicinal plants. The herbs he bought never did anything for his hand.

Over the years, tourists drawn by Gonzalo Aguirre's legacy made witchcraft an attractive vehicle for social mobility, and urban witches proliferated. Even the witches admit it: charlatans now abound. A common sentiment among Catemaco's residents is that real witches are neither rich nor charge steep fees, but rather offer their services in exchange for whatever one can spare.

On the first Friday of March, a young couple, pregnant with their first child, and both of their mothers went to a 74-year old healer. She cleansed the husband with two eggs while mumbling Catholic orations, then distributed plastic cups of *contra*. She charged them only the cost of the eggs. By contrast, one witch who tests concoctions on himself to see what results they produce, told me he recommends people receive a cleansing from him at least once a month, for a total 3,600 pesos per year. Many, but not all, would also balk at his 12,000-peso charge to cleanse a business.

People have noticed that Catemaco's witches apparently set their own arbitrary prices. In 2009, according to some witches, members of the Zeta drug cartel began demanding payment. Those unwilling or unable to cough up the money (in some cases up to 10,000 pesos monthly) were kidnapped, beaten, or simply relieved of their possessions. Some witches fled the city. Others remained without paying, and have had to keep their heads low.

"Instead of coming to see me, someone who really has the knowledge, someone who can help, people go to see the other, the charlatan. To that narco-witch," one healer, who claims to utilize more than 400 plants, told me. "That is the problem that we are living with in Catemaco right now."

David L. Biller

JOURNALIST



The hour approached midnight on Thursday, March 4, and the townsfolk of Catemaco and tourists stood before a stage next to Lake Catemaco's shore. Fireworks went off, and everyone ambled merrily along a lakeside path to a plot of land that was empty save for several burning torches. The chief witch of Catemaco, dressed all in black with a matching cape, kneeled within the circumscribed six-pointed star marked on the ground in preparation for the ceremony. Only some of the onlookers were solemn; others cracked jokes or talked on their cell phones.

The chief witch slit the necks of two black chickens with his machete and, clutching them by the legs as their wings flapped with fury, sprinkled their blood upon the ground. The spectators filtered into the circle and formed a line to receive rapid cleansings. After giving thanks to the four winds, God, Mother Earth, and the spirits present, the spectacle came to a close. A TV crew rushed into the circle for an interview with the chief witch.

That same weekend there was a more chilling black mass held within the Devil's Cave, and that witch did not stop at chickens. *El Gato Negro*, a witch from the city Santiago Tuxtla, performed the ceremony to "remove the enemies from the path" of two Mexico City politicians, each of whom paid 18,000 pesos.

After sacrificing three chickens, *El Gato Negro* pressed the flat side of his moon-silver blade to a black cat's mouth; it lapped at the crimson edge. Then an apprentice held down the cat's legs, and *El Gato Negro* began sawing through the back of its neck with his dull blade. Its tail flicked about wildly and its screams, terrifyingly humanlike, resounded against the cave walls. Mouth agape, tongue curling out, and a gurgle of blood in his throat, the cat alternated between heavy panting and whimpering cries. After five full minutes, it fell silent. *El Gato Negro*, sweaty from the exertion, chopped through the last scrap of fur and flesh, and placed the severed head atop a jar filled with blood and the politicians' photographs. The cat's green eyes were filled with tears.

Gonzalo Aguirre's former clients commemorate the first Friday of March in an altogether different way, by congregating at *El Brinco de León* to offer up an annual toast to the late, great witch. *El Brinco de León* is now run by Rafael,

David L. Biller

JOURNALIST



Gonzalo's son. Sitting behind a desk in his purple examination room, his unbuttoned white guayabera could be mistaken for a doctor's jacket were it not for its buttons made of gold. Rafael observes his clients intently, and lets their speech and behavior guide his response. When he first asked his father how to treat people, he was told, "The people will teach you."

Although he is a trained physician, he feels he can accomplish more as a healer. He rarely writes prescriptions and will gladly send a patient to the hospital if need be; however, he believes modern medicine is too far removed from humanity - too sterile, in other words - for its own good. In fact he says it does a disservice to people's health - physical and otherwise - by discarding the cultural beliefs in the power of witchcraft and herbalism that can be used as tools, and does so without providing equally powerful alternatives.

He actively cultivates such belief among clients and has no qualms about using the power of suggestion and therapeutic persuasion to unlock the curative power of their minds. A doctor's end goal, he says, should always be to cure, and the most natural treatment of all is often a placebo.

"If you come to me and I have to trick you to cure you, I'm going to trick you. I'm going to save you" he explained.

"The magic is the place," Caco Rodríguez, the owner of the Nanciyaga eco-tourism resort on the shore of Lake Catemaco, told me. "You feel something. It changes you right away."

Caco misses the days when short-wave radio was his only contact whatsoever with the world outside the jungle. He walked near the Santa Marta volcano and saw tapirs and even jaguars, all extinct nowadays. He swam and fished in the rivers and brooks that are now drying up.

Nanciyaga is an homage to that memory of pristine jungle. Well-heeled tourists find solid footing on the cobblestone trails that bring them from their cabañas to spa treatments, podiums display reproductions of prehispanic artifacts, and a few fiberglass trees stand as testament to the filming of the movie *Medicine Man*. The small park is a refuge, but is in reality just the notion of the jungle. To glimpse the magic for which Caco is nostalgic, you

David L. Biller

JOURNALIST



have to follow the Cuetzalapan River from Lake Catemaco up toward the Santa Marta volcano. There is a waterfall that empties into a pool with water green as jade, and surrounded on all sides by a soaring wall of trees and vines. But this, too, is an oasis amid cattle pastures.

Following the valley farther until the end of the road, one reaches Miguel Hidalgo at the limit of the Catemaco municipality. When a teenager took me on a hike through nearby jungle, he showed me - among many other things - that the leaves of a certain plant leave a foul odor on your hands, that armadillos move from one burrow to another, and that a jungle frog's sleeping spots can be found in such and such a way. He told me with the same certainty that there is a spot nearby where you can hear *chaneques* at least twice a day.

Jorge Romero and his brother still live in Miguel Hidalgo, but their outlook has shifted since they killed that jaguar two decades ago. Their streams started to dry up and, in 2005, they founded an association to reforest the village. Recently, Romero coordinated the planting of 75,000 trees farther up the mountain at an eco-tourism and animal reproduction project called *La Otra Opción* [The Other Option]. The land he reforested is the very same one he was paid to deforest years ago. "He got screwed for deforesting," the project's owner, Arturo Knopfmacher, said of Romero. "God punished him!"

In the heights of the sierra, where clouds drift dreamlike among the mountains and people fully believe in *chaneques*, the idea seems dimly plausible. Perhaps *chaneques*, in service to the Jaguar God, did mete out this punishment to Romero for years of disrespecting nature. I asked him as we walked along the path if he thinks he is being made to pay his debt to nature. "Maybe that's what it's called. That, yes, we're paying that. But that's something only God knows."

As with witchcraft, these are things unseeable and unknowable. With the Los Tuxtlas jungle dwindling, it is worth remembering that mere belief in the mystical can have the power to work wonders.

But not always.