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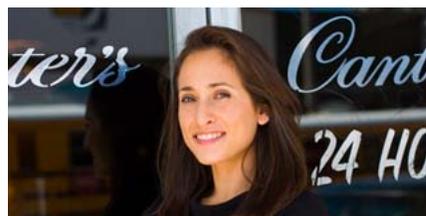
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Santería Night Fever: not for the uninitiated »

2:07 PM PT, December 11, 2009

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Santería devotee Mary Usigli scatters cowrie shells in an attempt to divine the wishes of the spirits.

It was noon on a Saturday. The lidless toilet and dusty tiles of the cluttered employee bathroom at the back of Botánica San Antonio in Altadena were lit by one bare bulb hanging from the ceiling.

The santero, a middle-aged Cuban gentleman named Reynaldo Lopez, gently placed the heavy paper bag containing a squawking chicken in a corner and prepared the scene for a *limpia*, or spirit cleansing, in the Santería tradition.

First, the santero placed an earthenware bowl on the floor. Then he propped a sandstone statuette in the bowl, a figure about a foot tall with eyes, nose, mouth and ears fashioned from pale yellow seashells. He set down some pots of unguents and powders and an aerosol can labeled "Spirit Spray -- Quick Money!"

Next, the santero reached deep into the front pocket of his blue jeans and pulled out more seashells -- cowries, smooth on one side and bisected by tooth-like ridges on the other. At this point, he addressed the recipient of the *limpia*, in this case, the reporter writing this story.

"Tell Elegguá what you want," he commanded.

"Beg your pardon?"

"Tell Elegguá," he repeated. "Tell him what you need."

"Um, I want to be a good writer. I want to be healthy. I want my mother to be happy."

The santero knelt down, shaking the cowrie shells in his hands, and chanted in *Lucumí* -- a mixture of Spanish and Yoruba, a Nigerian dialect. He released the shells in a spray across the floor and examined them closely. Apparently


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satisfied with the instructions he'd received from the spirits, he turned his attention to the softly clucking bag in the corner of the room.

The chicken squawked angrily when the santero pulled it out of the bag, gripping it firmly by the beak and feet, and, still chanting, jabbed it against the reporter's forehead, chest and back.

With eyes instinctively squeezed shut as the bird's huge brown wings flapped in her face, the reporter did as she was told, and turned in circles while the chicken beat its frantic body against her own. The santero subdued the chicken, claws and beak tucked away under his arm, and turned his attention to the statuette of Elegguá, an "orisha" or deity of protection in the Santería religion.

New World religion

Many people have heard of Santería and its sister religion Voodoo, both syncretic faiths born of a fusion of indigenous American beliefs, Catholicism, and the ancient traditions of Africans brought from Nigeria as slaves. But it can be difficult to get unvarnished insider information, since the first rule of Santería seems to be: Don't talk about Santería.

Mary Usigli is that rare devotee of Santería who loves to discuss the religion that has shaped much of her life.

"I've been in it for years and years," said Usigli, who manages the apartment buildings above Winestyles, a neighborhood wine bar in the Mission district of South Pasadena. "It's interesting and different than being a Catholic, although I am still a Catholic, too. My family says I'm crazy, but they don't understand me or Santería."

Usigli, 62, is Mexican American, born in Tijuana and raised in East L.A. A tiny woman with a penchant for brightly colored tracksuits and copper-hued lip gloss, she is all business when she describes her first visit to a botánica.

"I got married when I was 21, and I was having a lot of problems with him," she explained, referring to her first husband. "He used to hit me and that stuff, so I went to a botánica, and they gave me herbs and candles to help me try to control him."

A common feature in Latino communities, botánicas are a combination retail store and pharmacy that sells folk medicine, herbs, amulets and cures for everything from diabetes and arthritis to financial trouble and broken hearts. Botánicas are also associated with santeros, the priests of the Santería religion.

It's difficult to get exact numbers for followers of Santería. Ernesto Pichardo, co-founder of the first incorporated church of Santería in the United States, estimates the worldwide population at 100 million, and that of the U.S. at 5 million, with most of the practitioners residing in cities with strong Cuban populations, such as New York, Miami, Chicago and Los Angeles.

There are between 215 and 252 botánicas in greater Los Angeles, according to listings at yelp.com and the phone book, and even though all of those botanicas might not support Santería, Pichardo estimates the number of local adherents to the religion at "about 300,000."

Donald Cosentino, a professor of folk religions at UCLA's Department of World Arts and Cultures, says the number of people practicing Santería is growing.

"Santería is definitely getting bigger here as a result of increased immigration and increased desperation," Cosentino said. "It's really the biggest alternative health system in the city. I have a santero friend who said it's the emergency ward of last resort for a lot of people."

Cosentino says Santería is hard to measure because it's an "unofficial religion" and is somewhat of a closed society because of societal and legal scrutiny of some of its more unorthodox practices, such as ritualized animal sacrifice.

"People are rightfully afraid of police interference or the Society for the Prevention for Cruelty of Animals," Cosentino said.

Adherents of Santería are often embroiled in lawsuits regarding the legality of their spiritual practices. In 2007, Pichardo sued the city of Coral Gables after a police raid disrupted worship at his Florida-based Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye. It was only last July that José Merced, a santero from the Dallas-Fort Worth area, won the court ruling that allowed him to perform animal sacrifice as part of his religion's rituals.

Not for the uninitiated

It wasn't easy to find a botánica or santero who would share any of the more private practices of the religion, such as a reading or a limpia.

"Santero?" said one of the employees at Million Dollar Farmacia in downtown L.A. "There's no santero here." It was shades of "These are not the droids you're looking for."

"It's the basic problem of anthropology. What are you doing there? What right do you have to this knowledge?" challenged Cosentino. "They're not there for the taking, they're there for the earning."

Limpias cost money, too. A typical cleansing can cost from \$150 to as much as \$500.

"I'm a professional," said Charles Guelperin, a Los Angeles santero of some repute. "If you get a doctor, you pay him for his services. We are not in Africa. We are not in Cuba. I don't do anything for free."

Those interested in Santería need also examine their intentions, as the merely curious are not well-tolerated in this community. While Guelperin said he didn't care if a person was sincere in their quest for knowledge or was merely a thrill-seeker, and that that was a matter for the orishas, he did emphasize the privacy of his religion.

"We don't share this religion with people who are not initiated," said Guelperin, referring to practitioners who have

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committed to the extensive and expensive training required to become a santero, which can cost several thousand dollars. "This is a practical religion of cause and effect. We make sacrifices of ourselves by our commitment, and we make sacrifices of animals, and it's all for the orishas."

Blood ritual

Speaking of uninitiated, it was a shock to see the santero suddenly wringing the blood from the chicken's body, drenching the statue of Elegguá and singing what sounded like lullabies all the while.

After the santero had tucked the chicken's remains back into the bag, he rinsed his hands, and indicated that it was time to continue. There was a thorough application of the spirit spray and nameless unguents and powders to the back, arms, and hair. It was rough, businesslike, and smelled like Pine-Sol mixed with patchouli.

Still a bit jumpy, the thought occurred: When was the deep, spiritual revelation going to happen? It certainly hadn't hit like lightning.

"After," Usigli said matter-of-factly. She handed over a cobbled-together white outfit, since black is forbidden after a cleansing because, according to the santero, it attracts negative energy.

The santero had slipped out sometime during the wardrobe change, off to another appointment in a very busy schedule. Usigli talked more about what happens "after," saying she usually felt very calm after a cleansing but it had to be taken seriously.

"Santería is serious magic," said Daniel Hernandez, whose 2004 article for the Los Angeles Times profiled Guelperin. "If you don't approach it with the proper levels of respect and understanding, it could have adverse affects on your person."

This was not reassuring, considering the anxiety that had attended the ceremony, but Cosentino agreed with this advice.

"All religions are true, or they wouldn't be practiced," Cosentino added. "All of them are efficacious; all of them deliver. I think Santería delivers."

Santería had certainly delivered for Usigli. Although Santería didn't stop her ex-husband from beating her, she credits the religion with helping her to leave him.

"I got a divorce," Usigli said. "It gave me the strength, the self-esteem, to say: This is it."

Usigli says it continues to be a shaping and protecting force in her life, helping her navigate her difficulties in her job as well as personal issues in her relationships.

"It gives you the strength to keep on going," she added. "And it's very, very interesting. The more I get into it, the more I read about it. My thing is why, what for, and how can I do it? That's the way I am."

--Melissa Henderson

Photo of Mary Usigli by Kirk McCoy/Los Angeles Times

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Sadly, what you experienced has nothing to do with Santería, La Regla de Ocha. We don't divine by throwing shells on a carpeted floor, we don't douse you with botanica sprays, dry herbs and promises of spiritual revelations "after" the rituals are over. We serve God, our Ancestors and the Orishas who are the messengers of Olodumare.

In fact, what you experienced was basically someone playing you for publicity for themselves and their own business. There was nothing legitimate about those Santería (Lukumi) practices you described in your article.

I feel bad that you got played, but now you see why legitimate Olorishas (Santeros) who are the holders of our rites and traditions don't want to talk to writers and journalists who are more interested in mixing hype and half-information with a few spatterings of fact they gleaned off a google search.

Peace,
Oshun Nike

Posted by: Oshun Nike | [December 12, 2009 at 02:07 PM](#)

I laughed at the picture and this article. Any competent Santero does not carry "closed" shells (caracoles), LOL This was truly one for the books. I wonder how much this joker actually paid this pair of shysters to mutilate a pollon. :) if you wish to feed rocks, simply add some sunflower seeds to at least pigeons can benefit.

Ok, really.

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