

A Visit To A Bolivian Medicine Woman - Gadling

by Laurel Miller on Apr 30, 2013

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yatiri

I'd never heard of a shaman until my first class on my first day of college. I'd signed up for "Magic, Witchcraft, & Religion" as an elective on a whim. It turned out to be one of my favorite undergrad classes and has been highly inspirational to my work as a travel writer.

The instructor was a short, plump woman of a certain age. She'd lived on a Hopi reservation while working on her doctoral thesis. She looked so exotic, always bedecked with ropes of beads, silver and turquoise necklaces and rings, and dangly earrings. She wore colorful indigenous skirts and told incredible stories, some of them involving the words "peyote" and "[ayuhuasca](#)." She'd traveled all over the world. I wanted to be her.

So, it's no surprise that I developed a fascination for indigenous cultures. Perhaps one of the reasons I find them so absorbing is because I don't subscribe to any religion myself, so I find the concepts of animism, polytheism and shamanism particularly interesting. I'm spiritually bankrupt myself, although I studied holistic massage in the '90s (big mistake), and through that developed a respect for certain alternative modalities of medicine.

But fortune-telling? Soul cleansing? Killing endangered species and then ingesting their body parts in foul-tasting teas? Um, no thank you. I find this stuff interesting, but I don't believe in it, nor do I endorse anything that involves sacrificial offerings in the name of fortune, fertility or romance.

I once had my palm read on a press trip in [Hong Kong](#). The fortune-teller, a wizened old man, examined my hand (at the time cracked and callused from my part-time jobs as a farmers market vendor and waitress), and asked my translator, "Why no marry? If no marry by 40, never marry. Health good, feet not so good." Still single at 44, that asshole may well have sealed my fate, but on the other hand, my feet are in good shape.



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Still, despite my non-existent belief system, I was determined to visit a shaman while in [Ecuador](#) four years ago, simply because I was curious about the process, as well as what he'd have to say about my psyche. Unfortunately, my session proved impossible to organize on short notice, so when I went to [Bolivia](#) last month, I set about finding a contact pre-trip who could hook me up with a reliable medicine man or woman.

Throughout South America, there are variations on the type of people who perform services that, to our Western minds, are mystical, if not demonic. Depending upon the country or indigenous culture, this person might be male or female, and they can variously be considered a medicine... person, shaman, or witch. The most important fact is that rarely are these people practicing what we would consider the occult.

The function of most South American "medicine men/women" and their ilk is to provide spiritual guidance or assist with medical or emotional problems. Whether this involves medicinal herbs, potions, casting spells or purifying rituals is besides the point. For many people, particularly those

from indigenous cultures, regular visits to these specialists is a way of life.

Amongst the Aymara people of Bolivia, such a person is referred to as a *yatiri*, and they may be male or female. While plenty of *yatiris* can be found in La Paz's [Mercado de Hecheria](#), or witch's market, I discovered that the real-deal *yatiris* (i.e. ones that don't cater to tourists) are located up in El Alto, a separate city that's sprung up in the hills above La Paz. This mostly indigenous community is a sprawling cacophony of markets, ramshackle houses, shops, traffic snarls and street vendors, but it's also an excellent representation of daily life for urban Aymaras.

It was here that my fixer/translator, a British woman who's been living in Bolivia for 22 years and works as the office manager of a mountain biking company, found Dona Vicentá. A practicing *yatiri* for 10 years (she says she felt a calling), her services are requested across the continent, including by some prominent government officials.



la paz

Dña. Vicentá agreed to see me thanks to a personal reference from a Bolivian friend of my fixer. She doesn't usually take on gringos as clients, but for whatever reason she agreed to see me, as well as allow me to document my session. I was given a price range for a fortune telling and soul-cleansing session (the price depended upon just how much scrubbing my soul was in need of, so I steeled myself for the full fare, which was about \$60).

My fixer and I took a cab up to El Alto, and there we met Dña. Vicentá in front of a community building. She was an adorable, sweet-natured Aymara woman with remarkably youthful skin, dressed in full *cholita* (highlands woman) attire. We walked to her "office" along a busy street. We came upon a row of squat, corrugated buildings, most of which had small fires burning in metal pans in front of each doorway. I learned that these were the workplaces of other *yatiris*. This area is popular with them, because of its prime location overlooking La Paz (*above*).

Location is, as they say, everything, and for *yatiris*, the double-whammy of having the soaring peaks of Huayna Potosi to the left, and Illimani to the right has significant cultural and spiritual meaning. It's also where La Paz's radio towers are located. This, explained Dña. Vicentá without a trace of irony, makes for excellent communication with spirits and helps her to better receive feedback on her clients. For the record, I believe she was utterly sincere, and for the sake of journalistic and personal integrity, I'd promised myself I'd submit to this adventure with a completely open mind.

My session began with Dña. Vicentá asking me a few general questions, but nothing personally revealing. She asked me for a 10 *boliviano* note, which she added to a pile of [coca leaves](#) on a table. She then began picking up handfuls of the coca leaves, and divined their meaning based upon the way they fell. This lasted approximately 15 minutes.

I'm not going to tell you what she said, because it's personal, but I can say that she was eerily accurate. Not just good-at-reading-people accurate – she literally nailed certain things that only a long-term therapist, if I had one, or my closest friends could possibly know. It didn't freak me out so much as astound me, and after that, I began to pay closer attention.

Unfortunately, this is the part where my fixer and I learned that a visit to a *yatiri* is a two-part process (at the very least). Dña. Vicentá told me she had a client with a serious family matter waiting outside, and asked

when I could return for my soul cleansing. Apparently, the process requires the *yatiri* to seek guidance from higher powers, in order that he or she might procure and prepare the correct offerings. In order for me to have a certain “blockage” removed that was prohibiting me from achieving certain things, Dña. Vicentá would need time to prepare (much of this was lost in translation, but I do know that a dried llama fetus was required).



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We explained to her that I was flying out of [La Paz](#) at 6 a.m. the following morning, and had no plans to return to Bolivia anytime soon. I actually felt a little distraught. Dña. Vicentá mulled things over and decided to perform a sort of mini-cleanse in order to help me in the interim, but only with the understanding that I would return to Bolivia for the full deal at some point (this I promised, as I do get to South America about once a year).

After about 15 minutes, Dña. Vicentá was ready for my ceremony. A small, incense-fueled fire was burning in front of the office. I was told to kneel on a blanket overlooking the city. She requested my wallet, so that my money would be blessed. She then used a smudge stick to purify me (*above*), chanting in Spanish and Aymara the entire time. It took about five minutes and when it was over, I felt strangely relieved – like I’d acquired some karmic insurance to tide me over. I thanked her profusely and we exchanged traditional cheek kisses in farewell.

So, now I’m back home and I have to say, it seems some of Dña. Vicentá’s predictions appear to be coming true. Of course, this may well have happened without her, and I prefer to continue to believe we make our own luck, or lack thereof, most of the time. As for the long-term outcome of certain things she told me, that remains to be seen. I do know I’ve given a lot of thought to a few things she pointed out about my nature (which, for the record, she deemed as fundamentally good), and I’m working on trying to change a few detrimental habits.

Do I now believe in witchcraft, shamans and spirits? No. But I’m willing to accept that perhaps there are certain people out there who are blessed with a type of insight that goes beyond what the human mind can readily comprehend. Or maybe Dña. Vicentá has just read some of my writing.

[Photo credits: Laurel Miller/Jill Benton]