

Witchcraft attracts thousands to Mexican city

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edgeable and the voyeuristic. The conference begins at midnight with re-enactments of a "Black Mass" with symbols of devils, bats and owls in rings of fires.

"It's pure commerce. The real witches of Catemaco are the most humble people," says one sorcerer, who wanted to be identified only as Jorge. "The mind is very strong, and black magic can work by mere suggestion."

At 29, Jorge has the "gift," but like others, he doesn't advertise and only practices white magic. He makes his living as a tour guide in a blue motor boat that glides along the crater lake, created by an extinct volcano.

The ambiance in Catemaco, with a population of about 40,000, permeates with mystical allure. A fog flows from the mountains and rises from the lake, where fishermen's nets brim with the day's catch.

Catemaco, which means land of volcanic rocks, gleams with marshes, inlets and jungles packed with cranes, egrets, pelicans, macaws, toucans, parrots, monkeys and crocodiles.

It's hard to imagine malice thrives in everyday rituals believed to go back thousands of years before Christ, when the mother culture of Meso American Indians, the Olmecs, ruled.

"Everyone here believes in witchcraft, more than in medicine," says teacher Sandra Teresa Acosta, 31. "My father was a pediatrician, and parents would bring their children to him when they were almost dead, after they had been to every witch doctor."

Catemaco is divided between good and bad witches who live in separate parts of town. Some call evil witches "charlatans" who worship only one God: money.

Many sorcerers cast both good and evil spells. But they don't come cheap. A simple cleansing can cost \$50 and increase into the hundreds, depending on the "cure."

Tito Gueixpal Seba, 59, is the most famous "witch," as he calls himself. He says he has "the leap of the tiger," and the "black power" within him.

He works from home, in a small room stacked with herbal potions, plants, candles, saint sculptures, images of Lucifer and taxidermic animals.

Like others, he practices a syncretism of religion common throughout Latin America, where African slaves or indigenous people hid their own saints behind their Catholic conqueror's deities, eventually practicing a mixture of all.

In Catemaco, 260 miles east of Mexico City, it's easy to see how religions blended. The Veracruz port was where Hernán Cortés led his first expedition from Spain in 1519. African slaves were brought to work in shipyards and fields, and later Cubans arrived.

"I believe in God. I counteract injuries a person has, with the blessing of God," he says.

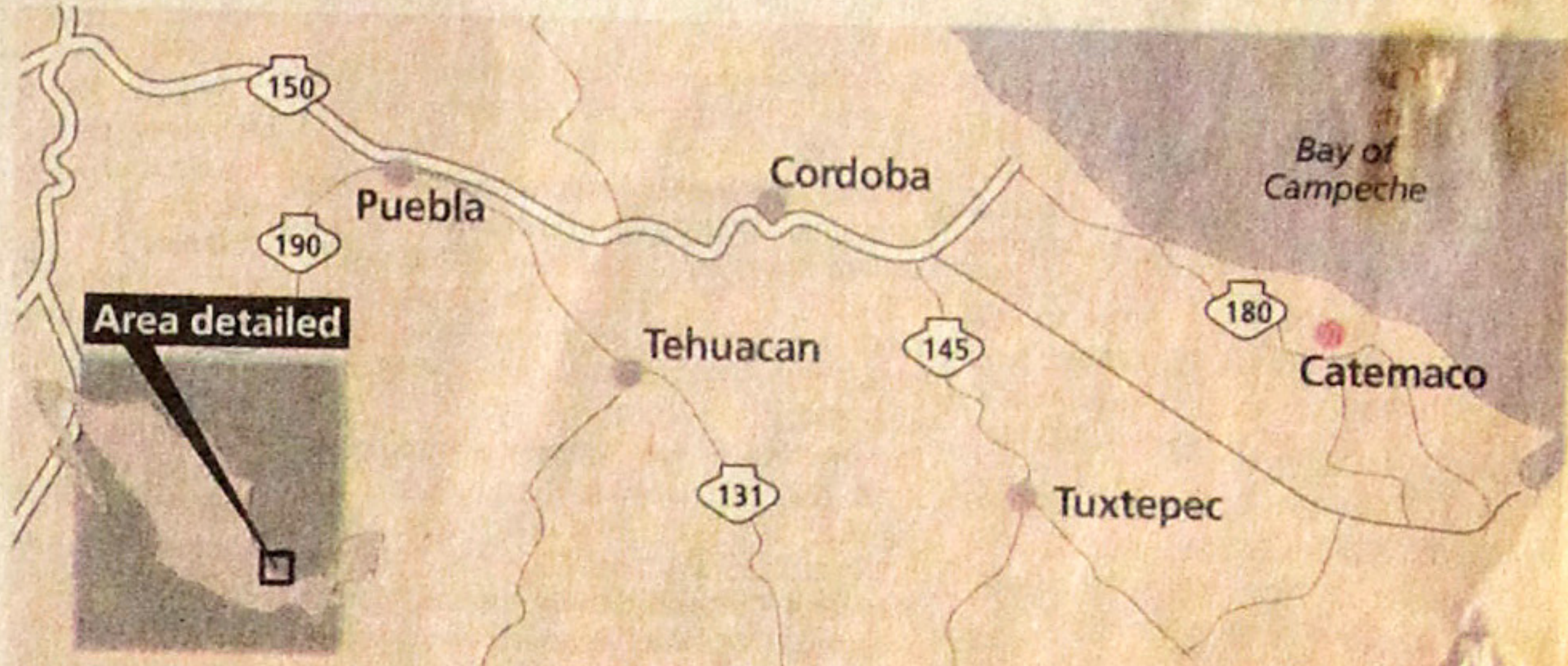
At 6 a.m., he sits behind a desk covered with money, crosses, photographs



PHOTOS BY JANET SCHWARTZ/SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

ABOVE: A statue of the many-handed Hindu God Shiva sits on the desk of Pablo Fonseca Cruz in his healing 'clinic,' as he shows and sells handmade amulets.

LEFT: Silvia Ochoa Marin applies a healing clay mask to boat tour guide Jorge.



EXPRESS-NEWS GRAPHIC

of "patients," including famous personalities, and articles about himself. His face is shrouded in clouds of incense.

Enrique López, 27, enters the room. He wants white magic, because he has "no luck in work, in love, in anything."

Gueixpal burns incense, lights potions, shakes plant leaves and recites a typical incantation that begins: "Through the mountains, rivers and waters, I want this person to be cured and be protected night and day."

López pays about \$100 for the 20-

minute cleansing.

Gueixpal is doing well. Dozens outside wait to see him. He is laden with gold necklaces, bracelets and rings sparkling like sunshine seeping through a dark basement.

He casts evil spells several ways. He holds up a blue cloth doll. On the face, seven pins are stuck to a photograph of a woman.

Asked if anyone can ask for and receive black magic, many "witches" say yes — even if they suspect the customer is lying, as in my wife/husband is cheating on me. A "witch" may get

such vibes, but like any business, they do what the customer asks.

What if a man asks that his wife suffer an illness, an accident or even death because he claims she cheats on him? And what if the man doesn't love her anymore?

Pablo Fonseca Cruz, 31, is also a witch, a talent he says he inherited from generations of relatives.

"I have the *don* (the gift) to attract magnetic energy," says Fonseca, who began studying herbs at 15.

"Yes, I do black magic. I use nails, pins, depending on what they want me to do," he says. "No, I don't feel bad about it. That's what I am paid to do."

Many here say the real witchcraft is

a festival celebrating corn.

As Friday ends, the city's inhabitants pay homage to the life-giving maize. In the Nanciyaga ecological reserve, white-clad women representing virgins dance and sing, tossing corn and lighting fires.

Food made from corn is served in the dark Nanciyaga jungle, named after the first-born prince of an Olmec king.

"This is for real. It represents our culture, that man is made of corn," says Martha Baeza, 21. "It's not for tourists, who come only to be deceived by black magic."

express@netmex.com

Five free minutes never reveal the truths of psychic hot lines

Phone soothsayers failed to predict industry's black eye

By JERRY SCHWARTZ
ASSOCIATED PRESS

To Shlomit Galperin, the future looked bleak. And she wasn't even a psychic — yet.

She was cleaning houses around St. Petersburg, Fla., to support her two kids, and there wasn't a lot of money in it. So when she saw the ad in the Thrifty Nickel — work at home, earn good money, flexible hours — she made the call.

"You will be a psychic," she recalls the woman telling her.

"What?" she replied.

Clearly, Galperin is no clairvoyant. If she was, she would have already known that for the next four years, she was fated to be one of hundreds of stay-at-home psychics who answered calls on behalf of Miss Cleo, the exuberant soothsayer with the Jamaican accent.

She quit last May, before lawsuits — filed first by the attorney general of Missouri and eventually by eight other states and the Federal Trade Commission — took a heavy toll on the company's reputation and profits. They charged the company Miss Cleo represents, Access Resource Services of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., with all sorts of sins, including lying about Miss Cleo's qualifications as a seer.

But it would be a mistake to focus too much on Miss Cleo. The story here is a business in which just about everybody has been accused of sleazy behavior — Access, its contractors, even the people who call for readings.

And don't forget the psychics. "I'm not too proud of what I did," says Galperin.

She recalls how the recruiter sat down with her and two others



SCOTT MARTIN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Shlomit Galperin pauses at her son's desk at home in St. Petersburg, Fla., where she took calls as a proxy psychic for four years while working for the Psychic Readers Network.

reclusive Access owner Steven Feder in a taped message to his psychics.

Moynihan likens it to the World Wrestling Federation, another form of entertainment that is not embraced by all. Customers "budget it into their entertainment dollar; they'll call two or three times a month for a reading or chat," he says.

Kathy Fisher isn't buying it. "Believe me, these folks weren't calling to be entertained," says the Washington state woman who worked as a phone psychic for two days in 1996. She quit after taking two calls.

Outrageous, says May Chao, head of the New York State Consumer Protection Board: "Consumers with very real problems reach out to these so-called psychics, looking for help with money, children, their love lives and careers."

But Edward Popper, dean of Girard School of Business and International Commerce at Merrimack College in North Andover, Mass., says there's the question as to how much government can or should do to protect people who think they can learn the future by calling a 900 number.

"Do you have to protect people from their own stupidity?" asks Popper, a former staffer at the FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection.

Prosecutors have not spent much time worrying about whether Access psychics — or any psychics — are legit. Instead, they are focusing on other issues: ■ Does Access violate "do not call" laws to drum up business? No, attorney Moynihan says.

But Access does call a lot, with recorded messages that promise "amazing" free readings.

■ Is Miss Cleo a Jamaican shaman, as she claims?

"They haven't even attempted to substantiate that," says Bob Buchner, an assistant attorney general in Florida. His office pro-



MISS CLEO

duced a birth certificate for a Youree Dell Harris, born at Los Angeles County Hospital. Her parents were from Texas and California.

Miss Cleo could not be reached for comment, and her lawyer, William Cone, did not return a reporter's calls.

Peter Stolz, Access' president, has told the Los Angeles Times that the company is phasing out Miss Cleo as its spokeswoman and replacing her with more generic psychics.

■ Do the psychics resort to chicanery to run up callers' phone bills?

According to Buchner, Access executives will "close their eyes to what their so-called psychics have to do to keep these people on the line." Moynihan denies it. He has issued edicts prohibiting psychics from putting callers on hold, or from reading scripts intended to prolong the calls.

Still, there are complaints. Sandra Dominick, a 36-year-old art teacher in Jamestown, N.Y., goes to a psychic every couple of years. When she saw Miss Cleo's commercials, she thought, "It's free. What the hey!" and she gave the 800 number a call.

Normally, the operator explains what is about to happen, and gives you a 900 number. Dial that number, and a recorded preamble explains more. And then the live psychic comes on the line; after a few minutes, there is a beep, and the meter starts running.

Neither the operator nor the psychic is employed by Access directly. The operator works for West TeleServices, of Omaha, Neb. And the psychic works for an independent contractor, known as a "bookstore," that manages a stable of seers.

The way Dominick tells it,

when she called last November she was told that it was a busy night, and that if she agreed to stay on hold, she would be granted an extra 15 free minutes. Over the next hour, she was repeatedly told to wait, and was assured she would not be charged.

Then a tape came on. She had been on the line for the maximum 60 minutes. Click.

She called back and was assured she would receive the reading she deserved, including 18 minutes free. They chatted on; at no time, she says, did she hear a tone signaling that she was about to be charged.

In December, she got the bill: \$489, for 98 minutes.

Moynihan, says the taped preamble advises callers to press star-911 if put on hold — the call is disconnected, and the psychic reported to management.

Putting callers on hold "has never been an OK method. That's one of the things you can be fired for," says Michael Arnone, owner of Bassador Co., a bookstore in Portland, Ore. The use of scripts is also a firing offense.

But all of this is beside the point, says Moynihan. "The ultimate arbiter here is the caller, right?" he asks. He says if callers are dissatisfied with the call, the simple solution is to hang up.

Another option is to contact the long distance carrier — in Dominick's case, AT&T — which processes the bill. AT&T said it would remove the charge.

AT&T does this a lot, which is one of the reasons it is getting out of the business of billing for 900 numbers. The telephone company — and Access — have lost millions of dollars as a result of these "chargebacks," often prompted when callers flat-out deny they called.

"This is a multimillion-dollar business," says Buchner. "It could be thousands (of errors). It could be hundreds of thousands, even."