



Argentina Mysteries

While visiting Argentina for the 2005 *Primera Conferencia Iberoamericana Sobre Pensamiento Crítico* ("First Latin American Conference on Critical Thinking") in Buenos Aires, I was also able to take a look at some local mysteries with which I already had some familiarity. These included a haunted cemetery, miracles of popular saints, and tales of animal mutilation by the dreaded chupacabras. Here is a brief look at each in turn.

Haunted Cemetery

It is a memorable sight: "a city within a city," as one writer describes it (Winter 2001). Actually, it is a city of the dead, a necropolis consisting of narrow alleys lined with ornate crypts and mausoleums. Given its roster of burials of the rich and powerful, it is said that "For the living and dead alike, Recoleta is Buenos Aires's most prestigious address" and "one of the world's grandest graveyards" (Bernhardson 2004, 72). (See figure 1.)

I visited the memorable *Cementerio de la Recoleta* on September 14, in part to view the crypt of Eva Perón. (The late actress-turned-controversial-first-lady is discussed in the next section of this arti-



Figure 1. Recoleta Cemetery in Buenos Aires is a grand city of the dead. (Photo by Joe Nickell)

cle.) An Internet search had turned up a cautionary remark: "Everybody will tell you the stories about this interesting place, but don't believe all of them; ghosts don't walk there at night" (Fodors 2004). Sure enough, two days after my visit, a local guide told me just such a tale about the cemetery.

As the story goes, one night a man met a woman in the neighborhood, and the pair went to the cemetery for a tryst. She borrowed a jacket from him but then suddenly ran away. He followed, searching for her. Eventually, he found his jacket at a crypt bearing a picture of a young woman who was entombed there. It was the same young lady!

The guide who related the tale, Paola Luski (2005), told me she was dubious of it. She said one reason to question the story was the general absence of pictures of the deceased at the tombs of Recoleta.

More important, the tale seems especially doubtful because of its obvious similarity to the widespread "Vanishing Hitchhiker" urban legend (albeit without that story's automobile). Shared narrative elements (or *motifs* as folklorists say) include the meeting of the pair, their linking up, the young lady's disappearance, and the cemetery as

the final destination and scene of revelation. The jacket (like the coat, sweater, etc., present in some versions of the proliferating hitchhiker tale) is clearly

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intended to provide verisimilitude (a sense of truthfulness) to the story, and it represents an unmistakable link with the famous roadside-phantom narrative.

Thus, the Recoleta tale is simply another variant of the ubiquitous legend which has antecedents as far back as 1876. As American folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand (1981, 21) points out, multiple versions of a tale provide “good evidence against credibility.”

Popular Saints

Until quite recently, Roman Catholicism was the official religion of Argentina, and it still dominates the daily lives of its people. In addition to their formal faith, however, Argentinians often seek help from a number of popular, unofficial saints. They represent a spreading folk Catholicism that often diverges from orthodoxy and even includes spiritualist practices.

Like official saints, the popular variety are often believed to work miracles. For instance, there is “the Robin Hood of Corrientes,” the gaucho, Antonio Gil. An army deserter in the 1850s, Gil was hanged on an *espinillo* tree but before dying he supposedly warned the commanding sergeant that his son would become deathly ill and could only recover by means of the sergeant praying for Gil’s soul. Upon the boy’s recovery, his repentant father carved an *espinillo* cross which he placed at Gil’s death site. Today, as many as 100,000 pilgrims visit the site on the anniversary of his death and credit Gaucho Gil with miracles and life-transforming experiences (Bernhardson 2004, 186, 273, 606).

Even more popular than Gil is legendary Maria Antonia Deolinda Correa, known as the Difunta (meaning “Defunct” as the deceased are called in the countryside). A pious legend tells how she followed her husband, a conscript during the civil wars of the nineteenth century, and died in the desert of thirst. However, when her body was discovered by passing muleteers, her infant son was found alive, “miraculously” feeding at her lifeless breast.

Adding to the implausibility of an infant surviving on milk from a corpse is the limited evidence that the Difunta even existed. Nevertheless, the legend

was so resonant among the local folk that they transformed the waterless site into a shrine. Today it is visited by pilgrims who stand in line to visit a chamber which holds an effigy of the prostrate Difunta with her infant at her breast (Bernhardson 2004, 273–274).

There are many other popular saints including the faith healer Madre María Salomé. Sardonicly, novelist Tomás Eloy Martínez has called his fellow Argentines “cadaver cultists” for being so devoted to the dead (Bernhardson 2004, 606–607). Not all of the unofficial saints, however, are widely believed to work miracles, and perhaps the most famous—or infamous—of all has had her status slip.

Alternately reviled and beloved as “Evita,” Maria Eva Duarte Perón (1919–1952) was the controversial first lady of Argentina from the election of her husband Juan Perón in 1946 until her death from cancer in 1952. A former film actress, she lent her charisma and ambition to the popular causes of assisting the poor, of improving education, and helping to achieve woman’s suffrage. Nevertheless, Perón’s increasingly demagogic methods cost him the support of the Catholic Church, and his wife’s death diminished his appeal among workers. He was ousted by the military in 1955.

In her last speech, she had stated, “I will be with my people, dead or alive.” Perón helped the mythologizing process by having her body mummified and placed on display while a monument was being prepared. A popular movement sought to have the Church make her a saint. Her followers installed altars to “Santa Evita” in their homes, and over 100,000 requests for her canonization flooded the Vatican, many crediting her with the requisite miracles (McInnis 2001; Fouché 2002; Evita 2005; Mosca 2005).

Instead, after Perón was deposed in 1955, the Church conspired with the new regime to spirit away her body. It was buried in Milan, Italy, by the sisters of the Society of St. Paul. There, under the false name Maria Maggi, it reposed for fourteen years. Meanwhile the anti-Peronists attempted to efface her memory, tearing down statues of her and

burning copies of her autobiography, *The Sense of My Life*.

In April 1971, however, the Argentine president ordered what has been called “the world’s most beautiful corpse” returned to Perón, who was living with his third wife, Isabel, in Madrid (Which Coffin 1978). According to journalist Wayne Bernhardson (2004, 73), Perón’s “bizarre spiritualist adviser” José López Rega—known as “The Witch”—“used the opportunity to try to transfer Evita’s essence into Isabelita’s body.” (After Perón’s brief return to power in 1973 and his death the following year, Isabel succeeded him but was soon deposed by the military.)

I visited several related sites, including the Museo Evita, where the controversial First Lady is honored. It appears that claims of miracles have largely abated. However, one writer concludes (Morrison 2005):

Though efforts to have her made into a saint have been turned down by the Vatican, Evita still holds near to saint status in Argentina. Slogans proclaiming *Evita Vive!* (Evita Lives!) can be seen everywhere even today in a new century. At her family crypt in the Recoleta Cemetery in Buenos Aires, supporters and pilgrims still leave flowers, and a continual guard is kept to prevent vandalism.

Questions remain: Were none of the miracles by Santa Evita authentic? Were they rejected for lack of merit, or dismissed out of hand for political reasons? How does the Church reject her but canonize Mexico’s Juan Diego? (He is the legendary—possibly fictitious—figure on whose cloak the Virgin Mary “miraculously” imprinted her image, but which is, in fact, painted [Nickell 2002].) Are *any* miracle claims credible, officially sanctioned or not?

El Chupacabra

The face of the Argentine *pampas* (plains) was altered in the sixteenth century by the arrival of feral livestock that displaced the native rhea (American ostrich) and guanaco (ancestor of the llama and alpaca). The Spaniards brought such domestic animals as horses, cattle, sheep, pigs, and poultry (Bernhardson 2004, 633).

In recent years, the “animal mutilation” hype that burgeoned in the mid-1970s in the United States struck Argentina. Like its northern counterpart, the South American version of the phenomenon was often attributed to extraterrestrials, especially the blood-thirsty *El Chupacabra* (“goat sucker”). That creature was described by the Cox News Service (April 1996) as “part space alien, part vampire, and part reptile, with long sharp claws, bulging eyes, and a Dracula-like taste for sucking blood from neck bites.”

The chupacabra is traceable to Puerto Rico, where it “spawned something near hysteria”; then the myth spread to Mexico and still later to Florida—all via the Spanish-language media. Its further migration is no surprise. Involving major livestock areas, the reported mutilations sparked conspiracy theories by UFOlogists, journalists, and local workers. Typical of the reports I collected was “Chupacabras Attack Ranches in Argentina” (Trainor 2000).

Actually, however, animal mutilation claims have consistently been countered with prosaic explanations. For example, a rash of cattle mutilations in the western United States during the 1970s was carefully investigated and attributed to the work of predators and scavengers (Frazier 1980; Nickell 1995, 115). And when the chupacabra scare reached Mexico in April 1996, a scientific team staked out farmyards where the goatsucker had reportedly struck. Wild dogs were caught each time (Nickell 2004, 29).

As I would discover, Argentina was no exception. I was able to spend a day at a horse ranch in the pampas north of Buenos Aires. In addition to having an open-pit barbecue lunch, going horseback riding, and experiencing other entertainments, I was able to talk with the head gaucho who told me (with my guide translating) that the chupacabra claims were nonsense and that there were certainly no such mutilations of horses at this ranch or any credible attacks on cattle or other livestock nearby (Romero 2005). One of the five brothers who owns the ranch was similarly dismissive of the idea that chupacabras were on the loose (Rossiter 2005).



Figure 2. A “mutilated” ram. (Photo by Argentine journalist Gabriel Alcalde.)

At the conference, I met journalist Gabriel Alcalde of Santa Rosa who generously shared his knowledge of the local phenomenon. He related that almost 100 cases of animal mutilation were reported in La Pampa and Buenos Aires provinces between May and August 2002. (See figure 2.) However, he noted that research conducted by the National Service for Food and Agriculture (SENASA), with the Veterinary College of National University of the Center of the Province of Buenos Aires (as well as other universities in the area where mutilated livestock were found), had found mundane explanations. In a report SENASA concluded:

The deaths can be attributed to natural causes. Under direct and close observation it could be ascertained that the injuries to the tissues and organs were caused by predators. Histological studies done on the carcasses showed conclusively that no special tools had been used to produce the cuts, e.g., cauterizing scalpels.

The conclusion was that the animals’ deaths were due to natural causes, such as alimentary deficiencies, and that the mutilations were subsequently caused by predators, including field mice. The report stated that “in all the cases under review there were traces of bird, carrion (fox), and rodent (mice) feces on the

carcasses and near the dead animals.”

And so the chupacabras were vanquished, although Gabriel Alcalde pointed out that many Argentines denied the scientific evidence and “continued to believe the spellbinding stories concocted by the media.” He told me that he felt the real mutilation was that which had been done to critical thinking.

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