LA LLORONA IN SOUTHERN ARIZONA

Betty Leddy

A sizable portion of the population of southern Arizona is bilingual. Spanish is the badge of the culture which we inherited from many years of Spanish-Mexican rule—a culture which has been diluted but many relics of which have been carefully preserved. Among the most interesting bits of folklore that are finding their way into English is the legend of the Weeping Woman, the whiteclad, nocturnal figure that weeps—*La Llorona*.

Of the forty-two items which comprise the basis of this paper, ten were taken from the contributions of Miss Doris Seibold of Patagonia, Arizona to the University of Arizona Folklore Archives in 1946. The others were collected in English since the spring of 1946 by friends, one of my students and myself.[1]

This paper is only a report on work in progress and is made chiefly in the hope that other folklorists will be interested in beginning collections in their areas.

The legend of the Weeping Woman in Arizona is continually refreshed by contact with Mexican sources, either social or literary—by visiting back and forth across the border and then among Arizona and California families, by a motion picture or a play. In compiling Spanish and English bibliographies of Mexican materials on La Llorona available in Tucson, we found these forms: novel, story, poem, drama, magazine article and folklore collection.[2]

As a matter of fact, to appreciate the Arizona versions one should know a little about the Mexican background. Undoubtedly there was an early, pre-Conquest body of Aztec lore about feminine spirits, a tradition that obviously could have facilitated the growth of the Llorona legend and that may actually be part of it.[3]

Luis González Obregón writes that the Weeping Woman was first heard in Mexico City about 1550, usually on moonlit nights. She was dressed in white, went through the streets wailing in great anguish, and disappeared into a lake. Among the various explanations offered was the suggestion that she was the infamous Doña Marina, who had repented of her quisling cooperation with Cortés and who, as La Llorona, now wept for her sin.[4]

An interesting account is given by Thomas A. Janvier in *Legends of the City of Mexico.* The Wailing Woman had drowned all her children in the canals of Mexico City. Finally repentant, she began to haunt the streets at night, "weeping and wailing," clad in white. Meeting a watchman or a lonely traveler, she would cry out for her children, then disappear. Those who came into contact with her would lose consciousness or go mad. An officer who coaxed her to cast aside her *rebozo* was rewarded by the sight of a skeleton, and he subsequently left "an icy breath" and fell, unconscious. Later, after reporting the incident, he died. To hear her is frightening; to see, to stop, to speak to her is very dangerous.[5]

The same source recounts the version used by Vicente Riva Palacio. Luisa, a beautiful commoner, was deserted by Don Muño, who had decided to marry within his own class. Enraged, Luisa killed their three children with his old dagger but repented immediately and "rushed wildly through the streets of the City—shrieking in the agony of...her sin."[6]

J. Frank Dobie writes of a woman who drowned her little daughter and was burned for the crime. Her spirit began hunting for the child in the same river, in others (including the Rio Grande), at the seashore, in Mexico City, in other cities, and finally on ranches, and so forth. It is said that she is attracted by death, and that the audience at a hanging can feel her cold breath.[7]

There is considerable variety among the accounts of La Llorona in Arizona. "Some people claim that they have seen a lady dressed in white and she has long, black hair. When they see her she is weeping. They have seen her out in the woods near Patagonia and she has disappeared as suddenly as she appears" (D-38).[8]

Once, a plump young woman carrying a baby in her arms started out from her ranch on the Patagonia-Harshaw Road in search of a stray cat. The cat's cries, which she had been following, turned into those of a woman in pain. The young mother recalled the legend of La Llorona and was terrified. Pursued by "hideous" sounds, she hurried as best she could

to Harshaw, where the sounds stopped. She collapsed and was unable to walk for two weeks (D-47).

Coming north to Tucson, we find La Llorona even in the desert. A man walking home late one night felt her hand on his shoulder (D-14), high-school youngsters heard her screams in the foothills at dusk (D-12), and a young woman was driving across a dry *arroyo* when "the girl friend" — as she called La Llorona — jumped on the running board and rode along for a little way (D-55). A third-grader told her teacher that her aunt, passing a house where a death had just occurred, felt the cold breath and "almost fainted in the street" (D-11). A little girl says her grandfather explains how he accumulated enough money to go into the grocery business, with this story: Coming home along the river late at night, he heard the Llorona crying; the next day near the same spot, he found, frozen to death, "one of the babies," which he wrapped as a mummy and exhibited (D-3).

The first story I heard about La Llorona in Tucson told of a widow whose only son was lost playing near a flooded river. Insane from grief, she seeks to kidnap any small child she sees. Often her fingerprints are found on windows, or screens are torn where she tried to enter homes (D-1). I have been told, with emphatic nods, "She gets 'em often" (D-7).

Possibly, the kidnapping tales are merely an outgrowth of the bogeyman concept. Mothers threaten their children by saying, "Stop crying, or La Llorona will come," for she comes "on the wind when she hears a baby cry" (D-50).

Naughty children will reform if told "La Llorona will get you" (D-33), and exasperated mothers may even threaten to give annoying children to her (D-23).

Ordinarily, however, present-day adults do not expect immediate death from contact with the Weeping Woman; but that part of the legend no doubt was stronger in days gone by, for a sixty-seven-year-old Tucson woman recalls having been told during her childhood that "when people spoke to her (La Llorona) or saw her they died on the spot" (D-31).

The matter of when La Llorona appears is most interesting. In Tucson we read this: "My mother told me about an old well near a house that had been knocked down and every day you could hear her crying about 10" (D-13). A girl in Patagonia reports, "Other people have heard her shrieks every night at a certain hour, and they claim it is the llorona looking for her baby" (D-38). But she is also reported in the same area

as returning "at a certain time every year" (D-42). In one version she returns "twice a year and...(sits) on the banks of the river and...(cries)" (D-46).

In view of the importance of water in early Mexican religion, the marked tendency to connect this legend to water deserves notice. Out of thirty-nine accounts that describe either the original incident or the return, fifteen connect the death with water, two mention her suicide in water, thirteen link her reappearance to water in some form. Sometimes the river is specified, but sometimes the reference is vague, for example: "Now every time there is a big flood or that it is raining the llorona can be heard moaning and crying..." (D-37) and "She...could be seen walking up and down along the banks of the river at night, crying" (D-22). Even the well may be located definitely; for instance, on West Luna Street in Tucson (D-8). One story relates that a man on horseback, crossing a stream in Mexico, turned and saw "*a llorona*" seated behind him; he continued to the next town, where he told his story and died (D-59). A young Phoenican reports that "La Lloronita" appears on the Phoenix-Tucson highway on stormy nights, carrying a cradle, stopping cars, asking "Where is my child?" (D-34). A Tucson youngster told me that once he had wanted permission to watch stalled cars being towed out of a flooded underpass, but an elderly Mexican neighbor told his mother some woman would harm him if he went near the flood. He stayed away (D-15). Reports of La Llorona's reappearance near water are not difficult to understand if one considers the number of times the death she bewails was accomplished in water. Occasionally the place of the drowning is identified fairly closely, as the West Side of Tucson, near Main and Simpson streets (D-23). In addition to the usual floods and rivers, the Patagonia version mentions—and this point is fascinating—the sea! (D-36, D39, D-40, D-42, D-43).

Theologians, quite understandably, consider infanticide to be a serious crime, but even those who view the matter with an entirely nonreligious attitude find that so unnatural a crime provokes the question of motivation. Only thirteen Arizona tales attempt to explain. Four indicate wantonness (D-37, D-41, D-46, D-60) and two indicate shame (D-22, D-23). One child was killed to prevent the father's taking him from the mother. This particular story, as written out by a fifth-grader for her teacher, is interesting enough to be reproduced in full:

> This a story about a lady who had a baby of a noble man and after the boy was big about 1 year old and the man was come to take it away from her Instead of giving to him she kilded him. And he was sword fight with her brother and she passed by a skyscraper crying. She used to appered in Old Mexico [.S]ince they put lights, she hasn't appeared again (D-10).

Three tales suggest the mother was suffering from melancholy following the father's death or desertion and therefore was not responsible for her behavior (D-36, D-39, D-42). One jealous mother killed her own child by mistake (D-40).

There are two examples of negligence, the widow mentioned before (D-1) and Luisa, of whom this is written: "While Luisa was out in the streets someone killed her son. She held herself responsible for his death. She cried '*Mi hijo, mi hijo*'" (D-33). (The italics are mine.)

As in Mexico, while La Llorona is often connected with infanticide, there are also other explanations for her grief. In Nogales it is told that she is a girl whose mother "caused the curse of weeping to be put on...(her). It (the story?) is used to impress the sadness that results from disobeying children" (D-48). Another Nogales report indicates that the "weeping one" is a wife of Cortés "weeping over the grave of Cortés" (D-57). In Patagonia she is also a sailor's widow, who stands nightly atop a hill, gazing seaward; at midnight she comes down and spends the rest of the night seeking him, weeping (D-43).

Besides the reference to Cortés, only two other stories seem to have historical significance: A native woman who worked and lived "in the house of Montezuma" killed her three children and herself. Only the soldier father and "those close to him heard her blood curdling cry. She appeared as a white shadow close to the house where she killed her children and herself" (D-30). The other story is about a native seamstress and a count who precipitated tragedy by abandoning her and bringing a socially acceptable bride to the New World from Spain. The ghosts of the mother and her child appeared to those present at the duel in which the count was killed (D-56).

It is interesting that the old theme of mistaken identity should be attached to La Llorona.

> Some place in Mexico a woman and her baby lived alone in a house with her maid. Her maid also had a baby, and this woman was very jealous of her maid's baby, so she decided that she was to kill him. On the night that she was to kill him, the maid took the baby and put him in the woman's

> baby's bed and put the other one in its place. The woman killed and threw her own baby into the sea. When the woman found this out she jumped into the sea. It is said that when she jumped off the cliff she let out a horrible scream and on certain nights this scream is said to be heard (D-40).[9]

La Llorona is losing, if she hasn't already lost, her power for evil. A few years ago it was a common sight to see her running across the deep back yards that characterized old Tucson (D-20); she appeared at least twice to indicate buried treasure, once to a woodcutter out in the desert (D-21) and once over the pigsty of one of our best families (D-19). A twenty-one-year-old Tucsonan recalls that when he was young he was told that "she appeared as a nun, all in white, she wore a large cross [crucifix] and walked with her hands folded in front of her. People called her *La Llorona Monja*" (D-32).

A most interesting superstition is that La Llorona killed her child in a sewing machine, so any woman who hears the voice of La Llorona in the whirr of the motor must not use the machine any more that day, or her own children will meet the same fate (D-18).

Some specific problems that call for further investigation have already emerged: (1) The possibility of three general types of llorona—the siren, the grieving woman, and the woman who is dangerous to children; (2) the extent of Aztec influence, suggested by such details as the importance of water in the early religion,[10] the drowning of babies as sacrifice to the water gods[11]— the wanton Tlazolteotl,[12] the skeletal Ciuacoatl, who carried a cradle and who wandered through the streets, howling,[13] and the jealous, white painted Ciuateteo, who returned to earth in the moonlight on certain nights and harmed children;[14] and (3) the admittedly slim possibility of European influences contributed by the soldiery—perhaps a legend similar to the fourteenth-century miracle in which Our Lady restores to life in the mother's arms the newborn child she had accidentally drowned and for whose death she was about to be burned;[15] also the song "La Llorona," a recording of which has been reported from Nogales and from Tucson and of which Professor Vicente T. Mendoza wrote me recently is of Andalusian *aspecto* but not related to the legend; (4) the responsibility and occasional punishment of the father; (5) the fact that 50 percent of the tales from the desert country of Patagonia mention the sea; and so on.

NOTES

[1] Credit should be given particularly to Miss Margaret L. Soto, Tucson; Mrs. Earl L. Jackson, Tumacacori National Monument; and Mrs. L. Freeland Byars, Nogales. I should like also to acknowledge my indebtedness to Miss Frances Gillmor and to Dr. Albert W. Bork, both of the University of Arizona faculty, for their generous advice.

[2] The following literary materials concerning the legend of La Llorona have been located in Tucson:

González Obregón, Luis. *Las calles de México.* Tomo I: Leyendas y sucedidos. Segunda edición; México, D.F.: Manuel León Sánchez, 1924. Pp. xxiii, 247. (Folklore collection.)

La Llorona. (A novel in Spanish, which was examined, but was sold by the owner before bibliographic data could be collected; apparently the volume cannot be traced.)

"*La Llorona,*" *Alianza* (Tucson, Arizona), XXXIX (June, 1946), 8, 18. (Magazine article.)

La Llorona: El espectro de la media noche. San Antonio: Editorial Quiroga, 1916. Pp. 96. (Novelette or short story. "Lea usted la novela titulada: *El misterioso tesoro del rey Moctezuma.* Es una continuación de *La Llorona.*")

Marroquí, José M. *La Llorona.* México, D.F.: I. Cumplido, 1887. Pp. 143. (Historical novel.)

Neve, Francisco. "*La Llorona.*" (Unpublished MS of a drama, in the possession of Dr. Albert W. Bork, University of Arizona; ca. 1900-1920.)

Riva Palacio, Vicente, y Juan de Dios Peza. *Tradiciones y leyendas mexicanas.* Edited by Manuel Romero de Terreros and S.L. Millard Rosenberg. New York: T. Nelson and Sons, 1927. Pp xxvi, 172. (Poem.)

[3] For Aztec backgrounds see Thomas A. Janvier, *Legends of the City of Mexico* (New York, 1910); E. Adams Davis, *Of the Night Wind's Telling* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1946); Luis González Obregón, *The Streets of Mexico* (San Francisco, 1937), a translation of the book cited in the preceding note; Lewis Spence, *The Gods of Mexico* (New York, 1923).

[4] González Obregón, *op.cit.*, pp. 13-15.

[5] Janvier, *op.cit.*, pp. 134-138.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 164-165.

[7] J. Frank Dobie, *The Mexico I Like* (Dallas, 1942), pp. 96-99.

[8] Code numbers refer to my manuscript collection of variants.

[9] An interesting comparison may be made with *El Llorón*, described by J. Frank Dobie in *Puro Mexicano* (Austin [Texas Folk-Lore Society Publications, XII], 1935), Pp. 169-173.

[10] Spence, *op.cit.*, pp. 11-33 et passim.

[11] *Ibid*, pp. 246-248.

[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 156-169, especially pp. 165-169.

[13] *Ibid*, pp. 179-183.

[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 353-358.

[15] Eugene Lintilhac, *Histoire générale du Théatre en France* (Paris. [1904?], I, Pp. 202-204.