La Llorona in Southern Arizona

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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, or white-clad, nocturnal figure that weeps—La Llorona.

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

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; by a play. In compiling Spanish and English bibliographies of Mexican materials available in Tucson, we found these forms: novel, novella or short story, poem, drama, magazine article, folklore collection.

As a matter of fact, to appreciate the Arizona versions one should know a few key sources.

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:

- 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.)
- Neve, Francisco. “La Llorona.” (Unpublished MS of a drama, in the possession of Dr. Albert W. Bork, University of Arizona; ca. 1900–1920.)
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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 tells us that the Weeping Woman was first heard
in Mexico City about 1550, especially 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 coöper-
tion with Cortés and who, as La Llorona, now wept for her sin.

An interesting account is given by Thomas A. Janvier: 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. He would lose consciousness or go mad. An officer who coaxed
her to cast aside her rebozo was rewarded by the sight of a skeleton; he felt
"an icy breath" and fell, unconscious. Later, having reported the incident, he
died. To hear her is frightening; to see, to stop, to speak to her is very
dangerous.⁴

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."⁵

J. Frank Dobie writes of a woman who drowned her little daughter and
was burned for the crime. Her spirit began hunting 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. She is attracted by death; the
audience at a hanging can feel her cold breath. She sometimes holds "her arms
thus as if she were carrying a little one."

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.)⁶

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).
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.
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 about dusk (D-12); a young woman was driving across a dry arroyo when "the girl friend" jumped on the running board and rode along for a little way (D-55). A nurse heard a noise and saw "something" outside (D-24). 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 her in the street" (D-11). Another 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 her babies," which he wrapped as a mummy and exhibited. (D-3). Quite a different tale comes from two sources: Some years ago, someone—whatever his purposes—masqueraded as La Llorona. Several people along his route fired at the head, which bobbed up and down mockingly. Finally a "wise guy" aimed at the body and wounded him. The discarded costume was found later. (D-53, D-54.)

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 kidnapping is 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 and [an] Old well near a house that had
been knocked down and every day you could hear her crying about 10:00 P.M." (D-13). A girl in Patagonia reports, "Other people have heard shrieks every night at a certain hour, and they claim it is the llorona looking for her baby" (D-28). 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, e.g.: "Every time there is a big flood, in the Sonoita wash, it is said ..." (D-41); 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 Phoenician reports that "La Lloronanita" 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.) La Llorona's reappearance near water is 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, Patagonia mentions—and this point is fascinating—the sea! (D-36, D-39, 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 appered again. (D-10.)

Two other mothers were aroused by the father’s marriage to another (D-29, D-56). 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 Cortez weeping over the grave of Cortes” (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-49).

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 & herself.” (D-50.) 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.)

*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.
There is also the usual assortment of miscellaneous items: 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, since La Llorona killed her child in the sewing machine, any woman who hears in the whirr of the motor the voice of La Llorona 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, the drowning of babies as sacrifice to the water gods—the wanton Tlazolteotl, the skeletal Ciucacoatl, who carried a cradle and who wandered through the streets, howling, and the jealous, white-painted Ciuateteo, who returned to earth in the moonlight on certain nights and harmed children; (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; also the song “La Llorona,” a recording of which has been reported from Nogales and from Tucson and 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 per cent of the tales from the desert country of Patagonia mention the sea; and so on.

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10 Spence, op. cit., pp. 11–33 et passim.
11 Ibid., pp. 246–248.
13 Ibid., pp. 179–183.
14 Ibid., pp. 353–358.