

# The Heritage Continues

## Lesson #20: CUENTOS (Stories)

### TIME

50 minutes

### MATERIALS FROM TRUNK

Video - *Cuentos (Stories)*

### OTHER MATERIALS

TV and VCR

### TEACHER PREPARATIONS

Decide if the story will be shown on video or if a person will tell it. Preview the video if unfamiliar with the story. If the story will be read, practice reading it aloud.

### OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- 1) become familiar with one Mexican folk story
- 2) compare a Mexican folk story with stories from their own culture
- 3) assess the value of this format in preserving a culture

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Storytelling is a very important part of the Mexican culture. All cultural groups have folk tales and beliefs that provide insight into the character and lifestyle of the people within the culture. The stories are handed down from family to family through the years. Many of the sayings and tales may be made up, others may be true, and still others may have elements of both.

Traditional behavior is passed on from parent to child, worker to worker, and neighbor to neighbor. Knowledge is taught by word of mouth or by example. Folk stories are traditional in that they are part of an unbroken thread that can be traced back through time. However, no set time period is necessary for a particular behavior to become part of our folklore. Instead, the behavior needs to have existed long enough to enable variations in the behavior to develop. Once something is a tradition it no longer exists in a standardized form. Instead local variants can be found. Examples of folk stories include the Grimms fairy tales, which were adult stories collected by the Grimm brothers, and urban folk tales such as the cat that got blown up in the microwave.

Before there was a written language, there was storytelling. Stories were not told simply as entertainment but as a way of teaching lessons, explaining why things are the way they are, and passing on the history of a culture. They tell about a culture because they reflect the morals and values of the traditions and lessons they teach. Every good story offers

something to learn, even if it's just that it's good to laugh and be entertained.

Storytelling is an art. Every storyteller tells their stories in ways that make them feel most comfortable. No two storytellers tell the same story the same way. Most use a lot of expression. They tell the story using words and body movement. It's fun watching them as they move around while telling their stories. Many storytellers also use props such as hats, animals, other people, or musical instruments to add to their stories.

From: Westridge Young Writers Workshop. *Kids Explore America's Hispanic Heritage*. Santa Fe: John Muir Publications, 1992.

**For more information on La Llorona**

Antonia Quintana Pigno. "Along the Creek Behind St. Catherine's: Hispanic Folklore of Emporia, Kansas." *Kansas Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (1992): 87-95.

## VOCABULARY

- Cortés = The Spanish explorer credited with conquering the Mexican Indians.
- Cuentos = Spanish word for story.
- La Llorona = The Crying Woman, a folk story from Mexico told by many Mexican Americans throughout the United States.
- Maya = An Indian group that once lived in present-day Mexico.
- Montezuma = Ruler of the Aztecs at the time of the arrival of the Spanish explorers.
- Reincarnation = The rebirth of a person in a different body or form.

## ACTIVITIES

- 1) Begin by introducing the concept of what folk tales and folk stories are and why they are important within cultures.  
*Folk tales, stories, and beliefs are found in all cultures. They provide insight into the character and lifestyle of the people within the culture. Storytelling is also a way of teaching about the past and preserving history and culture without a written language. There are many reasons to tell stories including teaching moral values, passing along a culture's history, explaining why something is the way it is, or just for fun.*
- 2) Show the class the story of La Llorona (la yo-ro-na) on the video *Cuentos (Stories)* or read them this story. A copy of the La Llorona is located at the end of this lesson. La Llorona means "the crying one" in English. (La Llorona is the first story on the tape. Stop the tape at the end of the story.)
- 3) Discuss the story with the class. Use the following questions to direct the discussion. Remember that interpreting stories is very subjective so as many answers are possible as there are people in the audience.

What was the story about?

*The story is about a woman who killed her son. He became*

*reincarnated so his soul did not go to heaven. When his mother died she could not get into heaven because his soul was not there. Because of this she is constantly looking for her son and at times killing other children in an attempt to get into heaven.*

Does the story tell us anything about Mexico and the people that live there?

**This story gives insight into parts of Mexico's history: the Spanish "conquest" of Mexico, the attempts by the Spanish to convert the native Indians to Catholicism, the fact that there was a complex society of people in Mexico before the arrival of the Spanish, and aspects of religious beliefs such as reincarnation.**

- 4) The story of La Llorona has probably always been part of the culture of Mexican American communities in Kansas. Read the following quotes to the class and see if they give the class more insight into this story and what it means to people within Mexican American communities.

The following quote is from a group of oral history interviews done in Emporia, Kansas. It is translated from "Along the Creek Behind St. Catherine's" cited in the historical background section of this lesson.

**But it's nothing...more than the fantasy that the same Spaniards create to keep the Mexicans inside their house so that they don't leave. They (the Spaniards) make an imitator in white cloth, and to increase the fright the imitator rises very high, very high, very high. By raising a threatening stick above, it produces the effect of the crying woman very great.**

What does this person think of the story of La Llorona?

*The person feels La Llorona was just a story made up by the Spanish to keep the native people of Mexico, the Indians, in their houses at night.*

Helen Delsey grew up in Topeka near the Santa Fe railroad yards. During an oral history interview she was asked if she was familiar with the story of La Llorona. Her reply was:

**From [the] Santa Fe [yards], you heard the 7:30, the 4:00, and the noon whistle. At 9:00 at night, a whistle blew. All the children would run home because it was time to be in bed. My parents would say, "You get home when the whistle blows or La Llorona will get you." Everyone ran home because they were scared of La Llorona. La Llorona was a lady looking for her child who had been stabbed, drowned, or killed. I don't remember too much. I read and read and I knew this could not be true, but it was a way to make you do what your parents wanted you to do. La Llorona is a spirit; she's everywhere at the same time. And I thought, how could she be everywhere?**

What does Helen Delsey think the purpose of the story is?

***To make children mind their parents or behave.***

Ask the class if they can think of a similar type of story or belief in their culture.

***The "bogey man."***

- 4) Ask the class if hearing this story changed anyone's views about Mexico?

***Perhaps to someone who had never visited Mexico this story might make the people of that country more "real." Its similarity to our "bogey man" might make the Mexican culture seem less different.***

- 5) Ask the class if they can think of folk stories or sayings that are found in our culture. If so, what are they and why are they important enough to pass down?

***Pecos Bill, "bogey-man", "ghost stories", etc. If March comes in like a lion, it goes out like a lamb. Find a four leaf clover and you'll have good luck. Drink nine swallows of water without taking a breath to get rid of hiccups. Cold hands mean a warm heart.***

***They explain something in history or the environment, reflect some aspect of or belief in our society, are a form of entertainment, etc.***

### **EXTENDED ACTIVITIES**

- 1) Have the class familiarize themselves with a Mexican folk story by creating a play or skit about it, drawing the story in cartoon form, or creating a diorama depicting an event in the story.
- 2) Have the students write down a story they are familiar with, create one, or tell one to the class.
- 3) Explore the role storytelling plays in explaining the world in which a society lives. Stories dealing with the Aztec and Mayan views of their world include *The Fifth and Final Sun: An Ancient Aztec Myth of the Sun's Origin* by C. Shana Greger, *How Music Came to the World: An Ancient Mexican Myth* by Hal Ober, *The Legend of Food Mountain* by Harriet Rohmer, and *The Hungry Woman: Myths and Legends of the Aztecs* by John Bierhorst.
- 4) Have the students research La Llorona. Some questions they might want to research are: How many different versions can they find? Are they different? If so, how? How do people feel about this story? What are the origins of this story?
- 5) Read the story of the China Poblana found on worksheet #28. Have them discuss this story, why it was important enough to be passed down through generations, what it tells them about Mexico, etc. Information about this story and the national costume of Mexico, the China Poblana, can be found on the video Cuentos (Stories) at counter #70.

- 6) Have the class listen to the story of "Martina and Senor Perez" at counter #37 on the video *Cuentos (Stories)*. Discuss this story.

## LA LLORONA

It is very late one night in Mexico City. A man walks alone in the deserted streets, and it is very quiet. His footsteps echo against the tall buildings, and the emptiness of the streets makes the man very lonely. All of a sudden the silence of the night is pierced by a terrible shriek, followed by a long, mournful wail. The man doesn't know which way to run because the sounds seem to come from everywhere.

From out of nowhere, a pale woman dressed in white appears. Her hair is long and black, and it flies around her face when the wind blows. The man stands frozen in his tracks. Is it a ghost? The woman seems to float instead of walk. Her feet do not even touch the ground.

"Oh, my little ones," the beautiful woman cries. The woman is so lovely that the man decides to follow her through the deserted streets of the city. She leads him to the edge of a lake, where she glides over the water. Since the man cannot let her go, he wades into the lake, hurrying after the beautiful white figure. The water comes up to his knees, his waist, his neck -- still he follows. Soon he disappears beneath the water.

On a different night, another man finds himself alone in a city in Mexico. He decides to walk beside the lake, where he also hears the woman's wails and cries. Suddenly he sees the woman in white, but this man is younger and bolder. He does not remain silent. "How lovely you are!" he says. "Who are you? Are you real or a ghost? Are you La Llorona, the Weeping One?"

At first, the woman does not speak. She hovers over the water and finally she says, "Look into the water, and tell me what you see." When the young man looks into the dark waters of the lake, he says, "It is blood . . . A great pool of blood."

La Llorona answers with a moan, and as the man looks up, she is gone.

Who is La Llorona? No one knows for sure, but many people believe she is the ghost of a woman whose children were kidnapped or killed. Her grief is so great that it did not die with her. She still roams the earth looking for her lost children.

So if you visit Mexico City, and you hear shrieks and wails, or you see something white, do not follow. Do not look for La Llorona. However, on some silent night when the moon is full, don't be surprised if you find her.

From *Spanish is Spoken Here*, a resource and activity guide for Hispanic Heritage Month 1991 for Topeka Public Schools.