

La Llorona - A Hispanic Legend

The Weeping Woman
(La Llorona)

by Joe Hayes

This is a story that the old ones have been telling to children for hundreds of years. It is a sad tale, but it lives strong in the memories of the people, and there are many who swear that it is true.

Long years ago in a humble little village there lived a fine looking girl named Maria. Some say she was the most beautiful girl in the world! And because she was so beautiful, Maria thought she was better than everyone else.

As Maria grew older, her beauty increased. And her pride in her beauty grew too. When she was a young woman, she would not even look at the young men from her village. They weren't good enough for her! "When I marry," Maria would say, "I will marry the most handsome man in the world."

And then one day, into Maria's village rode a man who seemed to be just the one she had been talking about. He was a dashing young ranchero, the son of a wealthy rancher from the southern plains. He could ride like a Comanche! In fact, if he owned a horse, and it grew tame, he would give it away and go rope a wild horse from the plains. He thought it wasn't manly to ride a horse if it wasn't half wild.

He was handsome! And he could play the guitar and sing beautifully. Maria made up her mind—that was, the man for her! She knew just the tricks to win his attention.

If the ranchero spoke when they met on the pathway, she would turn her head away. When he came to her house in the evening to play his guitar and serenade her, she wouldn't even come to the window. She refused all his costly gifts. The young man fell for her tricks. "That haughty girl, Maria, Maria!" he said to himself. "I know I can win her heart. I swear I'll marry that girl."

And so everything turned out as Maria planned. Before long, she and the ranchero became engaged and soon they were married. At first, things were fine. They had two children and they seemed to be a happy family together. But after a few years, the ranchero went back to the wild life of the prairies. He would leave town and be gone for months at a time. And when he returned home, it was only to visit his children. He seemed to care nothing for the beautiful Maria. He even talked of setting Maria aside and marrying a woman of his own wealthy class.

As proud as Maria was, of course she became very angry with the ranchero. She also began to feel anger toward her children, because he paid attention to them, but just ignored her.

One evening, as Maria was strolling with her two children on the shady pathway near the river, the ranchero came by in a carriage. An elegant lady sat on the seat beside him. He stopped and spoke to his children, but he didn't even look at Maria. He whipped the horses on up the street.

When she saw that, a terrible rage filled Maria, and it all turned against her children. And although it is sad to tell, the story says that in her anger Maria seized her two children and threw them into the river! But as they disappeared down the stream, she realized what she had done! She ran down the bank of the river, reaching out her arms to them. But they were long gone.

The next morning, a traveler brought word to the villagers that a beautiful woman lay dead on the bank of the river. That is where they found Maria, and they laid her to rest where she had fallen.

But the first night Maria was in the grave, the villagers heard the sound of crying down by the river. It was not the wind, it was La Llorona crying. "Where are my children?" And they saw a woman walking up and down the bank of the river, dressed in a long white robe, the way they had dressed Maria for burial. On many a dark night they saw her walk the river bank and cry for her children. And so they no longer spoke of her as Maria. They called her La Llorona, the weeping woman. And by that name she is known to this day. Children are warned not to go out in the dark, for, La Llorona might snatch them and never return them.

La Llorona - A Hispanic Legend

Todos me dicen el negro, llorona |
negro pero cariñoso |
Yo soy como el chile verde, llorona
picante pero sabroso. | | |

Ay! de mi, llorona |
llorona de ayer y hoy |
ayer maravilla fui, llorona |
y ahora ni sombra soy | | |

Dicen que no tengo duelo, llorona
porque no me ven llorar |
Hay muertos que no hacen ruido, llorona
y es mas grande su penar |

Ay! de mi, llorona |
llorona de azul celeste |
y aunque la vida me cueste, llorona
no dejare de quererte | | |

Song: **La Llorona** (The Weeping Woman) Traditional
Artist: Joan Baez Album: Gracias a la Vida (1974)
Key: E Phrygian

Remarks: Though sharing many lines and verses, the lyrics tend to diverge among the many versions of this traditional. In most versions the number of song lines by far exceeds those selected by Joan Baez for her own rendition. I guess, however, that she comes close to the song's original meanings and intentions. As I read her selection, the song tells of a girl identifying herself with Llorona, the "weeping woman" of Mexican legends who, long ago, drowned her children because her lover deceived her and whose ghost is still haunting the river banks. The song's protagonist, clearly, has similar reasons for her laments. Probably, just the other day ("ayer era maravilla") her lover has left her for another woman. However, having overcome her tears but still in a mood of selfdestructive anger, she has decided to join Llorona in the river and now is addressing her ghost. Hearing the song lines, one can easily imagine the girl standing at the river bank and looking at the water. Seeing her own image, mirrored there as the legendary Llorona, she is voicing her decision. The song's sad, suicidal character, all in all, contrasts sharply with the album's joyfull title. It is a nice song, though, and beautifully sung by Joan Baez.

Though it may seem so at first sight, the song is not strictly in the key of A Minor as the E Major at the end of the verse feels as its closing *finalis*. In fact we are hearing an example of the Latin American counterpart of the Andalusian Phrygian modal frame, as discussed by Peter Manuel in his article "From Scarlatti to "Guantanamo." Dual tonicity in Spanish and Latin American musics," published in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 55 (2002), 2, 311-336. It differs from the original Andalusian Phrygian modal frame, mainly by its less accentuated and softer tone shifts. Moreover by the typical Latin American insertion of D Minor as an intermediate "subdominant," the song seems to stress the position of A Minor as its foremost key (Manuel, 2002: 325). Following Manuel's analysis, though, we have to treat E Major as the main tonic, with A Minor only acting as a secondary one. The song, furthermore, is clearly based upon the Spanish cadence (Am-G-F-E), the prominent progression of the Andalusian Phrygian modal frame. The F, though, has been traded for its relative minor Dm — thereby softening the transitions between the final chords.

Also note that the tone settings of the song's verse and chorus are opposites. The first part (verse; m1-m8) is firmly build upon the interchange of i-iv and i-V harmonic ostinato's starting from the secondary tonic. Here the girl's voice sounds rather resigned. The second part (chorus; m9-m16) is built upon the Spanish cadence and, with the girl expressing her own decisiveness, contradicts this resignation. This part of the song starts with some urgency in contradicting or qualifying of what is told in the first part; and, with the unwinding of the Spanish cadence it ends up in a calm determination. I've added an English translation. Something of the Spanish lyrics may have been lost in translation, but I think it gets the gist of the original.

1	Am	2	Dm	
	Todos me dicen el		negro, Llorona,	
3	Am	4	E	
	negro pero cariñ-		oso.	
5	Am	6	Dm	
	Todos me dicen el		negro, Llorona,	
7	Am	8	E	
	negro pero cariñ-		oso. Yo	
9	Am	10	G	
	soy como el chile		verde, Llorona, pi-	
11	Dm	12	E	
	cante pero sabr-		oso. Yo	
13	Am	14	G	
	soy como el chile		verde, Llorona, pi-	
15	Dm	16	E	
	cante pero sabr-		oso.	

They all call me black, Llorona,
black, but they think I still care.
They all call me black, Llorona,
black, but they think I still care.
But I am like the green chili, Llorona,
yes, sharp is the flavor I wear.
But I am like the green chili, Llorona,
yes, sharp is the flavor I wear.

My tears they were streaming, Llorona,
from yesterday up till today.
My tears they were streaming, Llorona,
from yesterday up till today.
Yesterday, it all looked wonderfull, Llorona,
now I've turned into a shadow this way.
Yesterday, it all looked wonderfull, Llorona,
now I've turned into a shadow this way.

They say I don't feel the pain, Llorona,
because they don't see me cry.
They say I don't feel the pain, Llorona,
because they don't see me cry.
But even the dead do not cry, Llorona,
though their sorrow is greater than mine.
But even the dead do not cry, Llorona,
though their sorrow is greater than mine.

My tears they were streaming, Llorona,
tear drops in heavenly blue.
My tears they were streaming, Llorona,
tear drops in heavenly blue.
And, though it will cost me my life, Llorona,
I will not forsake my promise to you.
And, though it will cost me my life, Llorona,
I will not forsake my promise to you.