

The Role of the Internet in the Endurance of “La Llorona” as a Liminal Archetypal Monster in Modern Latin American Society

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Abstract

Monsters are liminal beings that not only portray fears, proscriptions and collective norms, they are also embedded with special qualities that scare and, at the same time, captivate people’s inquisitiveness. Monstrosities are present in practically all cultures; they remain alive, being passed from one generation to another, often altering their characteristics over time. Modernity and science have not ended people’s belief in paranormal beings; to the contrary, they are still vivid and fresh, with contemporary societies updating and incorporating them into daily life. This paper analyses one of the most well-known legends of Mexico and Latin America, the ghost of “La Llorona” (the weeping woman). The legend of La Llorona can be traced to pre-Hispanic cultures in Mexico, however, the presence of a phantasmagoric figure chasing strangers in rural and urban places has spread across the continent, from Mexico and Central America, to Latino communities in the United States of America. The study of this liminal creature aims to provide a deep sense of her characteristics – through spaces, qualities and meanings; and to furthermore understand how contemporary societies have adopted and modernised this figure, including through the internet. The paper analyses different versions of the legend shared across online platforms and are analysed using Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s (1996) theoretical tool described in his work *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*, which demonstrates La Llorona’s liminal qualities.

Keywords: social media, La Llorona legend; liminality; paranormal; Latin America; folklore; gender studies.

Introduction

The term “liminality” refers to a threshold in-between two stages or worlds (Van Gennep, 1909). It refers to a border area inhabited by subjects, that, under certain circumstances – negative or positive – are considered special by a community and temporarily in a phase in between two situations (Thomassen, 2009). Liminal people, thus, possess an ambiguous nature, moving between two zones, they belong neither here nor there. This is the reason why liminality is associated with the rites of transition by which one person changes her/his social role into another (Turner, Abrahams, & Harris, 1995).

Liminality doesn't just apply to living people, but can be also used to understand the position of supernatural creatures of specific cultures: their qualities, rituals, spaces and meanings. Paranormal beings: vampires, ghosts, monsters and other horrors are liminal creatures that live segregated for an undetermined time in the border between the "normal" life and the "underworld". They are associated with forbidden and special places like graveyards, crossroads, rainforests, rivers or doorsteps and items that have been endowed with unusual powers, such as mirrors or rings (Beville, 2009; Garner, 2015; Wisker, 2007). Monstrosities are destined to endure ghettoised without hope for redemption (Oswald, 2010). Yet, at the same time, they access extraordinary qualities far beyond human possibilities. The liminality of monsters not only enables the possibility of moving between territories, but they are also opened to endless potentiality (Nuzum, 2009).

This paper analyses a prominent paranormal figure in the Latin American context, the ghost of La Llorona (the weeping woman), which has remained in the collective imaginary for centuries, always surpassing borders and in constant evolution. This paper will focus on understanding how new information technologies, such as media and mobile devices, have given renewed dynamism to this traditional myth. La Llorona, besides her rural and local origins, now travels internet networks, always in constant transformation. People using the internet not only have access to several versions of the myth through different media, but, thanks to digital interactions between users, are changing the original layout of the legend, giving novel re-significations to this liminal monster. The purpose of this article is to examine the qualities, social roles and spaces associated with La Llorona, as well as to analyse how modern Latin American societies – via new information and communication technologies – have adopted, modernised and incorporated this legend to configure their own anxieties, ambiguities and fears. The article thus aims to explore the role the internet has had in the reception and reconfiguration of this traditional myth. Fieldwork consists of (and exists in) the compendium of different versions of the legend shared through the internet in Spanish, and reader's commentaries regarding the various versions of the myth.

The analysis of data, the versions of the myth and the commentaries will follow the work of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "The seven theses about monster culture" (Cohen, 1996). This author outlines the qualities of monsters under seven different theses: i) monsters are embodiments of a certain cultural moment, they give life to fears, desires and anxieties, ii) monsters always come back, but at the same time they change a little, adopting novel cultural aspects, latest clothes and representing new concerns, iii) monsters challenge classifications, taxonomies and organisations, and due to their ontological liminality, appear in moments of crisis as a third expression that problematizes the clash of extremes, iv) monsters are social representations of the dissimilar, they portray corporeal and psychological aspects that condemn them to stay aside from the norm, as liminal beings they do not belong to a specific place in the community, v) monsters represent borders of the possible, they serve as warnings that keep people away from the limits, they are examples of what happens when a social norm is broken, and what it means to be acceptable within a community, vi) liminal beings like monstrosities not only scare, but also capture people's curiosity due to their association with forbidden practices and desires, simultaneously repulsive and attractive; and finally, vii) monstrosities exist in the margins of discourse and geography but they always return to us. They ask us to reconsider

and evaluate our cultural ideas about race, gender and sexuality, but above all, they call into question why we have created them.

An old romance always opens to novel sceneries

The origins of La Llorona may be rooted in several pre-Hispanic religious beliefs of Mexico, particularly in Aztec and Mayan traditions in which women who died whilst giving birth were considered divine (Rodríguez Tapia & Verduzco Argüelles, 2009). It is possible to find several reports of this tale (Mathews, 2005). One of the most extended versions of the legend situated the origin of La Llorona in the colonial era in Mexico, between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, approximately when the Americas were under the rule of the Spanish Empire. There was an indigenous woman so beautiful that men were easily enchanted by her splendour. This characteristic, however, is not banal, but an essential quality of this liminal monster, her beauty was a weapon which she used to chase, attract and kill her "prey" by drowning or driving them mad on desolate moors, usually near a lake or a river. This young lady fell in love with a prominent Spaniard, a gentleman with whom she had two or three children (depending on the version of the legend). When the woman asked the noble Spaniard to formalise the relationship he refused and instead married a noble Spaniard dame. In her despair, the indigenous woman became insane and in her frenzied search for revenge she ended up drowning her own children in a river. Afterwards, realising the horror of her actions, she committed suicide. Some years later, people began hearing the screams of a woman repeatedly shouting, "*¡Ay mis hijos!*" (Oh, my children!), a ghostly voice searching for her offspring along the banks of the river. The legend says that now in her ghost form, she will remain searching forever, until she finds their bodies. Witnesses affirm that when you hear her yell at a distance, she is near you; but when the scream is strong, it indicates she is far from you.

The figure of La Llorona has served to address many cultural questions related to religion, gender, sexuality, class, migration and identity, among others (Perez, 2008). In pop culture, she has been depicted in several horror movies and television series in Mexico and the United States of America (Ibarra, 2014; Subero, 2016). She has also been the source of works of literature and folk music. One remarkable feature regarding La Llorona is her ability to spread from countryside to cities, as well as internationally. In the beginning, La Llorona limited her appearances to rivers, lakes, and creeks, or spaces related with water as reminiscent of the original place where she committed her crime; but with the passing of centuries, her territory has expanded to the streets and railroad tracks of urban spaces. Similarly, for centuries La Llorona passed from one generation to another orally; however, with the arrival of the internet she has become global, traveling across social media platforms, always in constant regeneration. In fact, in the 21st century, new communication technologies have updated this ghostly history, providing novel possibilities to the classic tale. It is possible to observe diverse versions of the legend on the internet, many of them with multimedia elements such as videos, recordings and graphics. There are even representations of La Llorona as a meme used to criticise economic and political decisions in Mexico. In cyberspace, people can source many versions of the legend in Spanish and English on Facebook, or observe videos on YouTube which show recordings of this ghost in México and South America.

Virtualising ancient fears and anxieties: The case of La Llorona

The appearance of La Llorona on the internet calls for closer investigation. This section of the paper focuses on the analysis of some versions of the legend shared across diverse online platforms that allow readers to make comments. All stories were published in Spanish on electronic sites that target users from Mexico, Guatemala, Costa Rica and El Salvador and in communities of Latin American migrants in the United States of America, spaces in which the presence of the legend is strong (See Table 1).

Table 1. Versions of the legend of La Llorona shared on the internet (source: own research).

Web address	Country	Headline	Name
https://www.helloforos.com/t/la-leyenda-de-la-llorona/208139/6	The United States of America	The Legend of La Llorona	La Llorona
http://cipotes.net/cipotes/modules/newbb/viewtopic.php?viewmode=flat&type=&topic_id=2999&forum=11	El Salvador	The Xtabay woman	The Xtabay
https://historiasdeterror.website/leyenda-de-la-llorona-caso-real-verdadera/	Mexico	The legend of La Llorona. A real case	La Llorona
http://www.cancunforos.com/leyendas-mayas-la-xtabay/	Mexico/Yucatan	Mayan Legends. The Xtabay	The Xtabay
http://foros.eluniversal.com.mx/w_detalle.html?tdi=122&rtid=12415	Mexico	Tell us your version of the Llorona Legend	La Llorona
http://www.mis-suenos.org/suenos/178056-que-significa-sonar-con-la-llorona	Spain	What does it mean to dream with La Llorona?	La Llorona
https://www.facebook.com/notes/hotel-casa-santo-domingo/la-leyenda-de-la-siguanaba/10150398195535569/	Guatemala	The legend of The Siguanaba	The Siguanaba
http://www.viajeporguatemala.com/guatemala/cultura/leyendas/siguanaba.html	Guatemala	Legends of Guatemala - The Siguanaba	The Siguanaba.
http://www.taringa.net/posts/paranormal/10100871/Leyenda-Costarricense-La-Cegua.html	Costa Rica	Costa Rican - Legend. The Cegua	The Cegua/Segua.
http://aminoapps.com/page/creepypastasamino/7384051/la-segua-de-costa-rica-mi-pais	Costa Rica.	The Segua of Costa Rica.	The Cegua/Segua.

However, it is also possible to observe in some user's commentaries that accounts of the existence of La Llorona also appear in South American countries like Chile. In the next sections the data collected in these virtual spaces will be analysed using Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's theoretical tool described in his work *Monster culture (seven theses)* (1996).

Thesis I: La Llorona as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment

The figure of La Llorona as a representation of a very conservative moral patron, notwithstanding some variations, has remained essentially the same for centuries, preserving a core script: a woman who broke a community rule and is sentenced to be ghettoised from the group. Segregated from the society she wanders chasing, seducing and killing men (see Table 2).

But as Table 2 indicates, some countries and cities (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala and Yucatan, México) have preserved native elements of the legend, such as the name for the monster: Xtabay, Cegua, Siguanaba. Virtually in all of Mexico it she known as La Llorona, but in the State of Yucatan, in the south of the country, people know her by the name of "Xtabay" (Báez-Jorge, 1990), while in Costa Rica she is recognised as "La Cegua", and in El Salvador and Guatemala as La "Siguanaba".

These variations could indicate a form of cultural resistance against the uniformity of a more global version of the tale. For example, in the general history of La Llorona, the woman was punished because she killed her children, in the case of Xtabay, Cegua and Siguanaba, their crimes are related with corrupt social behaviour in the community, such as displaying a licentious conduct or gossiping. In local versions of La Llorona, like in Yucatan or Guatemala, there is a strong association of the ghost with the Ceiba trees. This is not an incidental element but an important signal of the endurance of the legend, because these trees under Mayan tradition represent life and perpetuity. This is the reason why people avoid travelling at night near Ceibas, they do not want to have an inconvenient meeting with this 'particular lady'.

Diverse factors like cultural exchange, globalisation, migration and the spread of information technologies have helped La Llorona to expand her 'hunting area' from rivers and rainforest to streets, and from the Mexican countryside up to the city of Chicago (Walraven, 1991). This legend travelled along with peasants that left fields and moved to the big cities looking for new opportunities in factories, it was carried to the United States of America by Mexican migrants that have preserved the story with other cultural assets like food and music (Jones, 1988). La Llorona is present in the imagination of people on both sides of the Mexico–United States border (Carbonell, 1999; Doyle, 1996). But besides this territorial dispersion, her way of 'hunting' has remained invariable: she appears to incautious people, generally men, and seduces them through her beauty. Sometimes, depending on the version, when the men approach her, her attractiveness vanishes, and she exposes herself as a dreadful woman, and occasionally she has a horse face. Those who witness her die or lose their sanity. In other versions, on the contrary, men are attracted to rivers or became insane, or they die by falling from a high peak after she disappears.

Table 2. Liminal aspects of La Llorona in Latin American countries¹ (source: own research).

Liminal Place	Liminal quality	Communal meaning	Sin	Name and country	Consequence
Near rivers or lakes, streets, and railroad tracks	Beautiful woman that seduces men	A form to punish men that practice immoral sexual conduct (cheaters, adulterers)	She murders her children	La Llorona (ubiquitous)	People drowned or died by falling from a peak, they lost conscience, got injured, and became insane
She lives inside the Ceiba trees in the rainforest	Beautiful body, but with a horse or skull face. She steals men's souls	A form to punish men that practice immoral conduct (cheaters, alcoholics)	Antisocial behaviour	Xtabay (Yucatan, Mexico)	People drowned or died by falling from a peak, they lost conscience, got injured, and became insane
Rural ambient (rainforest, rivers)	Beautiful body, but with a horse face	A form to punish men that practice immoral sexual conduct (cheaters, alcoholics)	Antisocial behaviour	La Cegua (Costa Rica)	People drowned or died by falling from a peak, they lost conscience, got injured, and became insane
Rural ambient (rainforest, rivers)	Beautiful body, but with a horse face	A form to punish men that practice immoral sexual conduct (cheaters, alcoholics)	Lascivious behaviour, cheats on her husband	La Siguanaba (Guatemala, El Salvador)	People drowned or died by falling in a peak, they lost conscience, got injured, and became insane

The story of La Llorona has been associated with other urban legends that refer to the presence of women along the borders of highways like "the vanishing hitchhiker" in the United States or "La chica de la curva" (The girl of the highway curve) in Spain (Gomez-Ferri, 2011). These ghostly females appear to drivers (most of the reported sightings are from male drivers), and as with the case of La Llorona, ask for a free ride. Her apparition could be evil or noble – depending on the version of the story – sometimes she just vanishes, but if the driver mistreats

¹ Table 2 describes the liminal qualities of La Llorona. The contents of Table 2 were derived from analysis of the diverse legends found on the internet. This information only intends to give a brief overview of some liminal qualities of this monster, but as happens with all other liminal creatures, La Llorona is a figure that is in constant change and evolution not only in written form but also orally. There are always variations and new elements that are added to the story to update and incorporate the myth into novel contexts.

her, or tries to abuse her, she can cause an accident or kill him (Bennett, 1998). In the following commentary posted on the internet it is possible to observe how the legend of La Llorona has spread across the Latin American region, embracing other contexts:

“Yo no vivo en México, soy de Chile, y mi madre la ha escuchado en diferentes ocasiones, no dice ¡Ay mis hijos! Solo es un llanto” [I do not live in Mexico, I am from Chile, and my mother has heard her on different occasions. She does not yell, “Oh my children”! The sound is just a scream.]²

Thesis II: La Llorona always comes back

Despite its remote rural origins, the myth of La Llorona has endured and persisted across the centuries. Now in the 21st century, new information technologies have provided her with novel possibilities: travelling from one platform to another, mutating from a meme into a video and so on. She has been invested by the connected society with the gift of omnipresence. The digitalisation of legends provides to traditional monsters a double liminality. They are firstly liminal because they are creatures that move between the borders of the dead and the living, or normal and paranormal life. In entering cyberspace, these monsters obtain a second liminal nature because they now live between the ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ worlds, hovering in-between two spaces, the geographic and the virtual. Both states are interconnected and coexist at the same time, any relation stands on both sides so deeply, that it is almost impossible to assert a border in between these spaces (Kapferer, 2004; Madge & O’Connor, 2005). In other words, virtual-reality is not a segregated sphere of liminal monsters, but is a complementary element that provides them with additional potential. This fact is notable when understanding the role of new information technologies to spread traditional monstrosities from a restricted geography to the World Wide Web. Cyberspace is a space that encourages liminal beings’ endurance in modern societies. The different versions of the legend are a good testimony of this change from local to global spheres (see Table 1).

Thesis III: La Llorona challenges classifications, taxonomies and organisations

Liminal creatures escape taxonomies because they were created by fear, anxieties and other moral aspects that tend to mutate and change from one epoch into another. Our modern societies must deal with the fact that most of our daily lives occur in virtual spaces accessed through computers, mobile devices, smart TVs, video games consoles, and others. Monsters have moved from libraries and festivals into cyberspace. In the realm of the virtual reality, they are under constant change from one format into another, from a creepy past to a ‘meme’ and to an online game (Heath, Bell, & Sternberg, 2001). And in some cases, they travel across the virtual border to ‘the real world’ to hunt communities. This was the case of the “Slender Man” that appeared in the form of a videogame on the internet in 2009, and became real in May 31, 2014, in Waukesha, Wisconsin, where two teenagers almost killed their schoolmate to honour the Slender Man (Chess & Newsom, 2014). The account of Slender Man is remarkable

² See: <https://historiasdeterror.website/leyenda-de-la-llorona-caso-real-verdadera/>

because even though this figure is based on urban legends like “The Hook Man” or movies like “Candyman”, he was re-signified in online environments. Slender Man is no longer a monster that lurks on highways or is confined to linger in the Cabrini-Green neighbourhood like the Candyman, he travels across the internet changing his shape from a videogame into a ‘meme’ and so on. Liminal monsters in the 21st century have become virtual and ‘viral’ and travel all over the online world, and sometimes they materialise, crossing the borders in between the possible and the unexpected.

Thesis IV: La Llorona as a representation of the dissimilar

What is possible to observe when analysing La Llorona under Cohen’s theses IV and V is that there are two ways of adopting the myth in Latin America and in Latin American communities in the United States of America. The first is a fresh view that has envisaged the legend as a form of women’s liberation. Under this interpretation, the dissimilar attributes of the monster stand against the traditional patriarchal model (Carbonell, 1999; Morales, 2010). This is the case in Chicana feminist literature in which there is a substantial change in how the figure of La Llorona is analysed and how she associated with women’s rights (Mercado-López, 2016). It is a shift from an archetypal model based in betrayal, to one founded in resistance. In this analysis, feminist authors do not follow the conventional version rooted in the colonial era, but they take inspiration in traditions that pointed to the origin of the legend in the pre-Hispanic cult of the goddess *Cihuacóatl* or *Coatlicue*, a strong divinity in Aztec civilization. Connecting the figure of La Llorona with this deity provides this liminal monster with a novel conception grounded on wisdom and protection, far beyond the image of La Llorona as a ‘Femme Fatale’ associated with murder and voluptuous lust. Here, La Llorona is a model of resistance and courage against the actual harsh situation of many women in Latin American. However, besides this vision of opposition and defiance, the figure of La Llorona mainly remains interpreted as a traditional form of social and moral control, not only for women, but also for men. Both genders are compelled to follow strict norms of behaviour and to adopt patrons (in various forms of imagery) of what it means to be a good and bad man/woman in a community.

Thesis V: La Llorona at the border in between the possible and uncertainty

Traditionally, Latin America has been a region where human rights, especially women’s rights, are rarely respected (The Economist, 2013). Unfortunately, despite the incorporation of women into universities and in the labour market, and the recent activism in social media against ‘machismo’³ and for women’s rights, gender inequality still exists. This situation is critical in all countries in the region, but particularly in countries like El Salvador and Guatemala where the level of femicide is extremely high (The Economist, 2016). Despite some important advances, machismo and discrimination towards women remain firmly rooted, as portrayed

³ The concept of machismo (macho, male) refers to the statement that men are superior to women, and, that they deserve special privileges simply for being males.

with the legend of La Llorona in Latin American social tradition (ORMUS, 2011). La Llorona epitomises an archetypical figure that has endured for centuries, shaping the social role of women from the colonial era up to the age of the internet (Florez, 2009). It is possible to find a version of this legend under different names in many Latin American countries (see Tables 1 and 2), where elements of the legend can be interpreted as validations of customary discrimination towards women. She is a warning for all women who want to break the norms of the patriarchal system (Manrique, 2014). She represents a type of woman who does not follow the established role of being a mother or display 'decent' conduct. This conservative assumption of La Llorona is attested to in the next commentary on Facebook made by a woman:

"Es escalofriante la historia, pero es como un castigo para las mujeres que hacen las cosas mal" [It is a horrifying history, but is like a punishment for those women who have a bad behaviour.]⁴

Latin American women through the 'Llorona model' became liminal characters susceptible to being segregated and isolated if they do not follow the ideal designated to their gender. La Llorona serves as a moral tale regarding the need to respect convention. The women who do not want to conform to the duties of motherhood will have the same destiny as La Llorona – there is no exception, even if conception was the product of a rape, as in the times of the civil war in El Salvador (1980-1992) during the last century, or in the guerrilla warfare in Colombia (since 1964 up until present day). Women, under this moral code, must uphold their responsibility of being a mother, or be segregated from the community, in many cases, without reestablishment – like La Llorona remaining indeterminate and living in the borderlands as pariahs. This role of La Llorona as a custodian that guarantees the duties of a mother with her newborn can be seen in the next testimony:

"Mi sobrino nació el 24 de marzo. Cuando a mi hermana la dieron de alta se quedó con mi tía a la semana mi mamá... La primera noche alrededor de la 1:30 y 2:00 am, frente a mi casa pasa un río chico más o menos a esa hora se empezó a escuchar un lamento en la ventana del cuarto del bebe y se empezó a alejar" [My nephew was born on March 24th. When my sister received the medical release, she stayed for a week with my mom... The first night, in between 1:30 and 2:00 am, in front of my house there is a creek, at that time she began hearing a lament outside the window of the baby's room, but then it began weakening.]⁵

Thesis VI: La Llorona between repulsion and attraction

Besides differences between digital versions of the myth (see Table 2), nonetheless all versions agree that her liminal power resides in her beauty and her arts of seduction. Men are her main target, particularly those whose conduct is disapproved of by the community (such as those who cheat, commit adultery, or are alcoholics). In this case, the appearance of La Llorona stands as a type of lesson, a warning to those who intend to engage in dishonest sexual conduct. La Llorona scares men because her appearance is a warning of imminent

⁴ See: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/hotel-casa-santo-domingo/la-leyenda-de-la-siquanaba>

⁵ See: <https://historiasdeterror.website/leyenda-de-la-llorona-caso-real-verdadera/>

danger – men could die or go mad – but at the same time, her beauty portrays licentious pleasures that are forbidden by communal norms (see Table 2). This ambivalence is well described in the following user's commentary:

“Si tú la veías te quedabas como hipnotizado y muchos caían con sus encantos, pero para librarte de ella no tenías que mirarla a los ojos, pero muchos por curiosidad la veían y después la seguían y ésta los perdía en la selva y al día siguiente aparecían muertos”[If you look at her, you were like hypnotised, and many fell under her charms, but to elude her you do not have to look at her eyes, but many men gazed her by curiosity, and then they followed her, and she lost them in the forest; the next day they appeared without life.]⁶

Thesis VII: Conclusion. Why did we create the myth of La Llorona?

Due to their inner ontological liminality, monsters appear in times of crisis, in the transition of two historic phases (Cohen, 1996). A typical example, is the case of the "*Chupacabra*" (literally "goat-suckers"), a kind of vampire that is considered in urban legend to be an alien that terrified rural communities on both sides of the Mexican-United States border, sucking blood from herds. The legend of *Chupacabra* emerged in Puerto Rico in 1995, but it quickly spread to Mexico and the United States. In Mexico, this liminal figure was a symbol of fears and collective hysteria caused by the huge economic crisis and uncertainty experiences in the country at the time (Bandy, 2000). In the case of La Llorona, this legend surged between the end of the Aztec empire and the beginning of the Spaniard domination. This was a time of tremendous religious, social and economic change and the birth of a new mixed culture emerging from the pre-Hispanic and European clash.

Some monsters not only reflect the anxieties of the moment, but their liminal qualities also serve the irruption of a new social order, and corresponding new social rules. Such is the case regarding La Llorona, whose spectre reinforced novel moral patrons, based on the Catholic religion, in the incipient Novo-Hispanic society. Under these new parameters, the correct conduct for men is to be faithful to the sacrament of marriage and for women to honour the figure of motherhood. Those who broke their duties would be punished: For females, the penalty is to be segregated from the community and considered a Llorona; for males, the consequence is death. For modern Latin American societies, La Llorona is a reminder of the survival of traditional social models that have resisted the passing of time and the arrival of incredible scientific advances. They are firmly rooted in between the clash of individual desires and social repression. Liminal creatures like La Llorona help us to understand not only how modern societies have adopted and modernised these monsters, but to realise the role that these legends play in retaining traditional moral patterns in modern societies.

⁶ See: <http://www.cancunforos.com/leyendas-mayas-la-xtabay/>

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