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John O. West

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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

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SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Paper entitled, "Hispanic Folklore" and article from the Journal of American Folklore entitled, "Cultural Confusion on the Playground."

Hispanic Folklore

by John O. West

The University of Texas at El Paso

Hispanic folklore--or, if you prefer, Spanish-American folklore--may be said to have begun soon after Columbus made it to the New World. The Spanish Conquistadores or explorers who followed Columbus over four centuries ago were the first Europeans to leave their mark on the area where today Spanish is still commonly spoken. But there were other people here before them--the many different tribes of people we call Indians. They came from afar too, anthropologists tell us, crossing from Siberia to Alaska and working their way south. And it was the mingling and interaction of these two cultures that produced something both old and new--Hispanic folklore. Then, when another set of outsiders--English-speaking explorers and settlers from the eastern and southern United States--came in, another element of culture entered the mixture. Still, the Spanish-Indian (or Mexican) culture continues to be dominant in the Spanish Southwest, ranging from the mouth of the Mississippi westward to California, but also lingering in cultural islands throughout the United States. Small or large groups of Spanish-speaking people in New York, Saint Louis, and other metropolitan areas continue, in a reduced way, the beliefs and customs of Hispanic America. But in the Southwest--Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and California--the large percentage of people of Mexican origin maintain what might be called a purer strain of the old ways.

I am not saying, of course, that Spanish-American folk and folklore are entirely different from the so-called Anglo culture around them. In fact, one of the most interesting things about folklore to me is that it

teaches how basically alike we all are, no matter our differences in language or religion or skin color. All cultures, after all, have proverbs and wise sayings, home remedies, stories that account for many of our customs--and often there are exact parallels in several cultures. For example, "perro que ladra no muerde" sounds strange, perhaps, but it is exactly the same as the English saying "a barking dog never bites." Other proverbs in Spanish perserve the same idea in only slightly different form. For example, to be "entre la espada y la pared" (between the sword and the wall) is very similar to "between the devil and the deep blue sea" or "between a rock and a hard place"--while from classical antiquity comes the saying about being between Scylla and Charybdis--that is, between a rock and a whirlpool that caused the destruction of many Greek and Roman ships.

Still, in spite of the many universal themes and forms of folklore, there are those things that are especially characteristic of a single culture or folk group. And it is in these areas that we'll explore Hispanic folklore.

Language is perhaps as good as any place to start. Many words that we use in English come from Indian or Spsnish sources--chocolate, lariat, hoosegow, corral, rodeo, adios--to name only a few in use pretty generally throughout the English-speaking United States. But where English and Spanish are about equally common, as in the Southwest, many words cross the language border in both directions. Mexicans eat hot kekis for breakfast, drive the family peecup, and use many English words in their daily conversations. Anglos do the same--often with hilarious results. For example, there's the story of the fellow from Texas who took his sketchy Spanish on a trip to Mexico City. He enjoyed himself so much that he almost missed the plane home.

He ran through the airport hollering out "Escusado! Escusado!"--thinking he was saying "Excuse me." But escusado means bathroom. Folks did get out of his way! And there are similar stories about the Hispano who gets tangled up in English.

Of course much of Hispanic folklore loses its punch in translation. A dicho or proverb often depends, as it does in English, on rhyme and rhythm--qualities that are lost in translation. And Mexican folk songs likewise depend, for full enjoyment, on a knowledge of Spanish. Even so, in much of the Southwest groups of Anglos, young and old alike, enjoy singing Mexican folk songs that many know by heart but few can translate. Two songs from the Mexican Revolution come to mind. One is about Adelita, the ideal girlfriend of the Mexican revolutionary. She marched or rode horseback with him, cooked his frijoles and tortillas, and even used a rifle beside him in battle--and if she ever ran off with another man, the song goes, he would follow her, by sea in a warship, or by land on a troop train:

Si Adelita se fuera con otro
La seguiria por tierra y por mar--
Si por mar en un buque de guerra,
Si por tierra en un tren militar.

And movie-goers everywhere have some familiarity with another, "La Cucaracha"--the cockroach, who can't travel because he hasn't any marijuana to smoke:

La Cucaracha, La Cucaracha,
Ya no puede caminar,
Porque no tiene, porque le falta
Marijuana que fumar!

Within the Hispanic culture, of course, there are thousands of folk songs that are truly foreign to the Anglo, but they are precious property of the Latin culture. Along the Texas border where racial discrimination often still lingers, a corrido or ballad about a valiant Mexican, Gregorio Cortez, is still sung--much as Anglos might sing of the outlaw hero Jesse James who didn't let bank and railroad bosses run his life! A bilingual Texas folklorist, Américo Paredes, has told the story of Gregorio Cortez in a fascinating book called "With His Pistol in His Hand." It's worth reading.

Another hero to members of the Latin culture is Pancho Villa, the muledriver and bandit who became a general in the Mexican Revolution. There are songs about him, but he is more often the subject of stories--stories that brag on his valor and wisdom. One story told of Villa recalls the wisdom of Haroun al Raschid of the Arabian Nights: Pancho Villa was a kind man. He was also very cruel at times. He was, above all, a smart (or crafty) man. Once Villa had been betrayed by one of two "federalists." One of the men was Villa's enemy, but Villa was not sure which. Villa took two glasses of coffee and offered them to the two men. Then he told them, "Look men, I know which of you is guilty and one of these glasses contains poison. Drink the coffee. If you are innocent, you will live." One of the men drank the coffee but the other became very nervous. He began to look everywhere, seeking the opportunity to escape. Suddenly, he threw the glass from him and began to run. Villa was ready. When he saw him start to run, he shot him. Other stories tell of how Villa escaped the troops of the American general, "Blackjack" Pershing, who pursued him into Mexico in 1917. He escaped, some stories say, by turning himself into a zorro--a fox--and laughing at the Americans. And many

tales tell of Pancho Villa's treasures hidden here and there in northern Mexico-- complete with ghosts to guard them.

But Pancho Villa wasn't the only one with buried treasure. J. Frank Dobie has written two books--Coronado's Children and Apache Gold and Yaqui Silver--about lost mines and buried treasure. One story, that of the Lost Padre Mine on Mt. Franklin near El Paso, Texas, is well known in the Southwest. It seems that in colonial days when Indian unrest was at its highest, some Spanish priests hid an enormous fortune in the shaft of a silver mine--gold, silver, church crosses and candlesticks of gold--before fleeing from the Indians. The entrance to the mine, they say, can be seen at dawn on Easter Sunday from the tower of the old mission in Juarez, across the border. But no one has ever found the treasure, perhaps because of the ghost of an Indian chief, Cheetwah, who continues to stand guard over it. You can even see the outline of his face on one of the peaks of the mountain.

And there's the story Patricia tells of her grandmother, who bought a huge old house for a very low price--she didn't know why it was so cheap, but she soon found out! The house took up a whole block, and the kitchen was separate from the rest, with a huge fireplace for kettles, cooking and all. And every night about 10:30 they heard funny noises. They were puzzled until they found out it was the ghost of a nice little Spanish priest who came out of the fireplace and walked around the kitchen saying his rosary. "My grandmother wasn't scared," Patricia says, "but she asked a live priest what she should do. He said to tear down the kitchen--and in the bottom of the fireplace the workmen found a big kettle of Spanish doubloons! And the little priest stopped hanging around after that."

Not all Mexican ghosts or revenants are guarding money. For example, there's the story of Maria: Jose was very sad. His wife María had just been buried, and now he was alone. "Poor Jose, you are very silent. Can I help you?" said Donaciana. Jose looked up and saw his neighbor. She had brought him some food and flowers, and she began looking after him regularly. Soon, Jose fell in love with the kind Donaciana and married her. One hot night Jose slept outside in the moonlight. Donaciana had gone to visit her sister in a neighboring village, leaving Jose alone. All at once he began to shiver. Something cold was pressing his feet. He was almost paralyzed with fright. María's ghost stood at the foot of his cot. It was her hands that were pressing his feet. With a yell, he ran into the house and barred the door. After a sleepless night, Jose went to the village priest with his story. "My son, do not be afraid. María was a good woman. She means you no harm. When she comes again, ask her what it is that she wants from you." Jose thanked him and returned to his home. That night Jose slept outside again. When he felt cold hands grip his feet he said, "María, what do you wish of me?" "Jose, I am glad that you are happy, but I cannot rest in peace. I owe the grocer, Xavier, seis pesos, and I cannot rest in peace until you pay the debt. Give him the money, Jose, and let me rest peacefully." In the morning, Xavier's first visitor was Jose. He paid the six pesos and was never again troubled by María's ghost.

The supernatural is very real in the Spanish Southwest. In fact, it seems to make sense that if God has his angels, then the Devil has his workers helping him out--and there are many stories to prove it. There are a couple of things we need to remember about the Devil and the Southwest--

he has a foot like a rooster (pata de gallo, they call it), and he often punishes those who disobey God or their parents, punishes them right here on earth. A story that shows both these details is that of the girl who disobeyed her mother. Juanita told me this one: Once there was a girl who lived near my grandmother. I didn't know her, but my aunt did. She was very pretty and all the men liked her and tried to date her. She didn't help at home. Her mother worked very hard in El Paso so that the girl could have nice things and go to school. The girl wanted to go to a cantina and dance one night. The mother was very tired and asked the girl to stay home and take care of her little brother. The girl wouldn't. She went to the cantina and danced with all the men.

Finally a stranger came in. He was very good-looking and walked with a slight limp. He passed all the other girls by and danced only with this girl. He seemed very rich and the girl was very interested in him. While they were dancing, someone tore his trouser leg and everyone could see the rooster foot. "Mira, pata de gallo!" someone screamed, and the lights went out. When the lights came on, the girl was half in and half out of the door and she had been scratched to death. As the people picked her up to carry her away, they heard a loud laugh and a cock crow. It had been the devil! The story of the girl at the dance is an obedience legend, told to warn girls of what can happen if they are disobedient. A similar story, that of La Llorona, the weeping woman, is popular all over the Southwest, in literally dozens of variants. A student of mine told me this one: "Late one night my uncle and one of his friends were coming home late from the cantina. They always took too much tequila, you know, and so it was pretty late. All at once they saw this lady, about a block away, walking toward the

canal. She really had a good figure. Well, you know how guys are when they've had too much tequila--they get interested in the ladies. So they hurried to catch up, and they even called to her, but she didn't wait. She walked on down by the canal. Finally they were just a few yards away, and they called to her to wait. Slowly she turned around--and she didn't have any face! She lifted up her hands towards them, and she had shiny claws, like tin! And she was coming toward them, like she was going to get them, you know? Well, they turned and ran, with the woman right behind them, 'til they got to a bright street light, where she disappeared. My uncle never went to the cantina after that--he didn't want to meet La Llorona again." A more common version of the tale explains why the Weeping Woman cries and wanders through the night: Luisa was a beautiful but poor maiden who attracted the attention of a rich young man of high social standing. He knew his family would never approve of his marriage to Luisa, but he could not give her up. So he furnished her a casita, a love nest, as is the custom. They were very happy, and in time came one, two, three children. His friends came to visit them in the casita, and she was respected.

Then, the family interfered. They introduced him to a beautiful young lady of good family, and insisted that he marry her. Finally he gave in, and went to tell Luisa. He assured her of his love, and promised her that he would still come to see her--but she flew into a rage and drove him out. At the wedding Luisa hid in the back of the cathedral, weeping. After the ceremony she went home, crazy with grief, and stabbed the three children to death. Then she threw them into the river, and jumped in after. But the Good Lord would not let her rest. Her spirit was sent back to find

the children, and she still wanders along the river, crying and looking for her children. Night after night she walks and cries--and there are those who say that if she finds a child out in the night, she will take the child with her, and he'll never be seen again.

In the dark of night, if one has been told often of La Llorona since early childhood, shapes and sounds bring back memories, and goose bumps go up one's neck. La Llorona wants to get even with those who are happy; this is why men--the cause of her trouble--often are driven mad by the sight of her in the night. What does La Llorona look like? Stories vary, but generally she looks beautiful--even enticing men closer--until one can see either the face of a horse, or a blank, empty one. She dresses in long flowing robes--either white or black--and her long, shiny fingernails are like knives by starlight. Some years ago, people in one of the local barrios--neighborhoods--kept hearing La Llorona cry about eight at night, every night. They began to group together for comfort and protection--and whoever was making the sounds of La Llorona robbed the houses people had left in fear. Such is the power of the tales of La Llorona. Among other things, the story of La Llorona serves as an obedience legend, helping to bring youngsters in off the streets at night, or warning young girls against love affairs that might end in tragedy. And, as in the case of the uncle who drank too much tequila, she sometimes serves to bring people back to the straight and narrow.

This belief in the supernatural is closely related to beliefs about the nature of illness, and the use of spiritual healers. Juan Diego--that's the Latin equivalent of John Smith--relies on San Lorenzo (Saint Lawrence) to help him in many ways. For example, Juan Diego and his wife often call on

San Lorenzo for special help in cases of illness, a childless marriage, or any problem they may face. They made a manda or promise of a certain gift or act in return for the saint's favor. The manda may involve a pilgrimage on hands and knees for a certain distance to the saint's shrine, a gift of money, or even a simple act of public acknowledgement of his help. San Lorenzo often has a special corner in a Mexican church, and his shrine is literally covered with notes of gratitude, pictures of the babies brought into the world through his help, milagros, silver arms and legs (about an inch long) memorializing the recovery of afflicted limbs. Of course, if the saint does not come across with the requested benefit, a disappointed devotee may punish him by standing his statue on its head.

But if the blessing is received and the manda is not paid, Juan Diego knows that he will be punished by fire--his wife may spill hot grease on him, or any sort of "accident" may cause him to be burned. Perhaps he cannot afford to pay the promised manda--or maybe he's not always prompt at paying his bills--but he accepts calmly the certainty that San Lorenzo will collect, one way or another. Apparently the use of fire for punishing the debtor comes naturally to San Lorenzo: He was himself martyred by being burned to death on a red hot gridiron. Juan Diego uses amulets--Christian and folk--to ward off sickness or evil. He believes fervently in mal ojo--the evil eye--and often has to call in a folk practitioner or curandero to diagnose and cure the afflicted one.

Mal ojo is a sort of curse, often imposed without intent. For example, praising a child without touching him with your hand may send him into a listless condition that yields to no usual remedy. Finally the curandero is called in. With appropriate ceremony the "doctor" breaks an egg into

a saucer, often with crosses made of broomstraws on opposite sides. After a few hours the egg is examined, and if an eye has formed on it, the diagnosis is clear: mal ojo. Inquiry follows: Who has praised the child? Who might be envious? Who holds a grudge against the family? Then another ceremony follows. A certain stone is placed in the fire and heated, then examined: on it (they say) appears the face of the person who has caused the illness. The source of the ailment is thus identified by the curandero, and help is on the way. If the person who caused the mal ojo is innocent of evil intent, the procedure is simpler, but even the most envious person will yield to the threat of retaliatory action by the curandero. Then the curandero arranges a ritual whereby the victim receives three mouthfuls of water from the mouth of the person who caused the illness. Proper incantations, accompanied often by the sign of the cross, complete the cure.

There are also brujas or witches in Juan Diego's background. The bruja can work love charms, break up romances, and generally raise havoc for the victims of her art--and there have been cases where the bruja has taken payment from both sides in a neighborhood quarrel or in the pursuit of a desired lover. Brujas often serve as curanderas, especially where black magic has caused an illness.

Not all folk medicine in the Spanish Southwest involves spirits or faith healing, of course. Just as in any culture, Southwestern Mexicans use what is available for their cures, and often these materials are desert plants or things that grow near at hand. The juice of the pita cactus, heated and dripped into an aching ear, takes away the pain. The "hairs of the corn"--corn silks--steeped in hot water made a tea that is very good for kidney ailments. And no Latin household could do without a patch

of mint--yerba buena--to make tea for an upset stomach.

The foods served in the typical Mexican household are another distinctive feature of the Hispanic culture. These hot, spicy foods have found their way--often in poor imitations--onto the tables and restaurant counters of people far from the Spanish Southwest. The basis for Mexican food is corn--Indian maiz or maize--a product of the New World. Dry corn, soaked in lime water, swells and softens; these grains of corn, essentially like Southern hominy, are boiled and eaten as pozole. Or the grains can be ground up into a corn meal called masa and made into tamales--both hot chili-flavored meat-filled tamales and sweet ones resembling fruit cake. Masa can be patted by hand into thin pancakes called tortillas which can be formed into tacos or enchiladas with meat or cheese stuffing. And of course there are also the red beans called frijoles and dozens of kinds of green and red chili. Mexicans enjoy these basic Indian foods, and many Anglos lucky enough to live in the Southwest acquire a strong taste for real Mexican food; others have to depend on the canned varieties. But real frijoles, cooked in a traditional clay pot, with a folded tortilla to serve as a spoon to scoop 'em up with--that's about the best food you can hook a lip over!

Another Indian aspect of Hispanic culture is in adobe architecture. Adobe--sun-dried bricks made of earth and straw--have, of course, been around for many centuries. The Old Testament tells us of the children of Israel making bricks of earth for their Egyptian masters, sometimes having to supply their own straw, which helps to hold the bricks together. The early pyramids of Egypt were made of such adobe blocks and then faced with stone. And the Moors brought this building concept with them when they conquered

Spain. The Spanish Conquistadores, when they reached the area to be known as New Mexico, found that the American natives already knew about building earthen houses. The people living on the upper Rio Grande had huge apartment-like structures that the Spanish called pueblos--as they named the people who lived in them. But the Pueblos didn't use the rectangular brick idea; they would set grass afire, then work mud into balls on top of the ashes, the ash acting like a kind of cement, and then use the huge balls to build with after they dried with mud mortar. When the two techniques--Old World and New--were put together, a new kind of architecture resulted. The Spanish friars built churches with adobe bricks, using Indian labor, and even the Indian apartment idea caught on. Today in the Spanish Southwest the coolest houses in Summer and the warmest in Winter are made of adobe, plastered inside and out. Many of them are actually a hundred or more years old!

In almost every culture there are numbskull or noodle tales--stories involving stupid people who do stupid things, but sometimes they come out on top anyway. In Hispanic folklore there are several such numbskulls with cycles of tales. Juan Tonto--Foolish John--is one such.

One day Pablo is taking his siesta under a tree when Juan Tonto comes by holding something in his hand. "What you got there?" says Pablo. "I got a honnysuckle." "What you gone to do weeth it?" "I'm going down the road to get me some honny." "Juan Tonto, you don't get honny from a honnysuckle--you get honny from a bee!" But Juan goes on down the road and comes back with a bucket of honey. Pablo doesn't understand this! The next day Pablo is taking his siesta again and along comes Juan Tonto with something in his hand. "What you got there, Juan?" says Pablo. "I got

a botter cup." "What you gone to do weeth it?" "I'm gone down the road to get me some botter." "Juan Tonto, you don't get botter from a botter cup--you get botter from a cow!" But Juan goes on down the road and pretty soon he comes back with a pound of butter. Pablo doesn't understand this! The next day Pablo is taking his siesta and along comes Juan Tonto with something in his hand. "What you got there today, Juan?" says Pablo. "I got a horse fly." "Wait I get my hat and I go with you!"

Another dumbo is Don Cacahuate--Mr. Peanut. He and his wife are out of money, food, and everything else. As they are sitting around, Don Cacahuate says, "Wife, get me a cup of coffee." "With what?" she asks. "Why, with sugar and cream! You know how I like it!" Another day, Don Cacahuate and his wife decide to go hitchhiking on the train. He tells her how to catch the freight train when it comes along, and she succeeds--but he misses his hold, and tells her to get off. When the next train comes along, Don Cacahuate goes first, but all he gets is a hand hold, and his feet are dragging. "Why are you dragging your feet, my husband?" says his wife. "I'm stopping the train so you can get on."

Don Cacahuate has some of the earmarks of the trickster, but Pedro de Urdemales, who is found as far back as the great Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes, is a better example of the type. He may even be influenced in some stories by the Indian trickster Coyote. In one story Pedro is wandering through the country, out of money, and he figures a way to get some. Coming to a huge herd of pigs, he cuts off their tails and sticks the cut ends into a muddy bog. When a man comes along, Pedro pretends to cry, and explains that the bog is swallowing up his entire herd of hogs and he will be penniless. The man offers Pedro a thousand dollars, planning to pull the pigs out and

make a lot of money on Pedro's stupidity. But when Pedro gets the money and leaves, the man finds out who the stupid one really is! Pedro also plays tricks like those associated with the story of Jack and the devil in the Southern mountains. Pedro meets a giant one day, and fears for his life. When the giant isn't looking, Pedro throws his sandal in the air. When it falls to earth, Pedro explains that three days before, he had thrown a man into the air, and this sandal was the first he's seen of him since. Pedro and the giant agree to a set of tests: In the first, Pedro secretly hollows a hole out in a tree and replaces the bark. With one blow he drives his fist through the tree--and the giant admits defeat. In the second test they are to see who can throw a rock farther, but Pedro has a dove up his sleeve; when he throws the dove, pretending it is a rock, it flies out of sight. The next day the two are to wrestle--but Pedro shows up late, scratched up, with torn clothes. "Where have you been?" asks the giant. "I've been wrestling a man bigger than you," says Pedro, "but I threw him into the air and he hasn't come back down yet." The giant gives up and leaves the country.

The majority of people in the Hispanic culture are Roman Catholic, but their Christmas customs are interesting variations not common everywhere. For example, there is the posada--a semi-dramatic custom in which people representing Mary and Joseph go from house to house asking in vain for shelter. Finally one family invites them in and a banquet is shared by all concerned. Also at Christmas time luminarias, candles set in sacks half-filled with sand, are lighted; some say they are to guide the Holy Family. Another folk custom still practiced in many areas is the presentation of a folk drama recalling los pastores--the shepherds--to whom the angels announced the birth of Christ. Children have their parties, with games and sweets and

gifts all round, like in many cultures. But the piñata is distinctive: a candy-filled clay jar, decorated with gay crepe paper, is swung overhead by a rope, while blindfolded children take turns trying to break it. Much fun is present, as the person holding the rope pulls the piñata up out of reach and the wild, determined swings of the stick only fan the air. Finally one child--usually one of the smallest--is allowed to break the piñata and the candies spill out for the children to gather up.

This sampling of the folklore of the Spanish Southwest is only a tiny taste of the rich variety to be found in this Spanish-Indian-Anglo mixture of cultures--unique in many ways, yet suggesting the strong similarities to be found in all people throughout the world.