



# Oaxaca Times

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Free

## Matlaciuhua



La Matlaciuhua I by Maximinio Javier

Many phenomena, which cannot be logically explained, have been generally attributed to the supernatural. These occurrences are kept alive and passed down from generation to generation and are often taken to be true.

One such legend is that of Matlaciuhua, a devil who took the form of a woman when she appeared to wanderers and travelers late at night. She would cast her spells over them, castrate them, and leave them dead in some dark, isolated gully.

In the far-away village of Matlaciuhua, where this story takes place, no one doubts the truth of the following events. Chema León, a young man, pale and emaciated, roamed the streets of Matlaciuhua wrapped in a blanket as if shrouded by a piercing cold. He wandered down the winding streets repeating his tales of

grief after his encounter with La Matlaciuhua.

He was barely the shadow of the young man, the sort of indigenous Don Juan he once was. He had the looks and the manners that swayed the hearts and wills of the young ladies. Among the shadows of the coffee plantations he would rob them of their honor. Never would the young Chema have imagined the deplorable condition to which his daring would be reduced.

In those times the political bosses ran everything. Chema León was bailiff at Town Hall.

It happened one night on the day after the Feast of the Assumption. That day, the mayor of Talea received an

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### Finding the real Oaxaca



The city of Oaxaca

Psst, mister, the vendor hissed from a doorstep on Andador Turístico. He waved a handful of tree-bark placemats.

"Cabrón," he muttered as I walked by shaking my head.

I know, I told myself, if I don't buy stuff from every vendor I see, I'm not doing my job in Oaxaca. That's what I'm here for, to open my wallet and let the bills fly out

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### MOVIE Theaters

On page 11

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# Matlaciuhua

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... message from Villa Alta. This message had to be sent to the town leaders in San Juan Yaée. Chema León called to deliver it.

Wearing his *jorongo*, he headed into the hills. Having had to wait for Town Hall's response, and having spent time with his friends, and then having to go to the town fair, things took much longer than he had expected. It was nearly eleven at night when Chema León, bathed in the blue light of the moon, started along that lonely road

back.

He walked briskly as he entered the outskirts of town. Out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of a silhouette. It was a woman seated on a rock by the wayside. She was dressed in a long white robe, her hair cascading down her back. She turned to catch Chema León's inquisitive glance as he passed.

The messenger was intrigued.

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# Matlaciuhua

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Who could it be at this hour of the night? He stopped, unsure what to do. He was deciding whether to approach her or to keep walking when she turned to him and burst out laughing.

"Ha, ha, ha. You don't remember me?"

"What?" he answered. "Is it you, *Petrona*? What are you doing here?"

"I went to get firewood for my godfather whom I have been helping at home. Do you want to join me?"

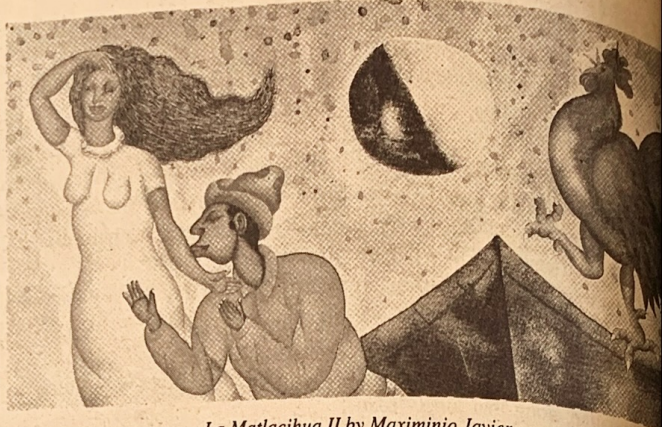
"Firewood? In the middle of the night?"

"In the middle of the night. . . ! What have you been doing, or haven't you realized that it is almost morning?"

Morning? *Chema León* was confused. "Could those three jugs of tepache I drank at the fair have gone to my head?" he wondered. The shrill crow of a rooster from a nearby house seemed to confirm his worst suspicions. Yet, he was convinced it could be no later than midnight. The rooster's crow sounded nothing like the joyous song of daybreak. It was sinister, resounding like a knife plunged into the depth of silence.

*Chema León* succumbed to *Petrona's* insinuations with the sinful thoughts of an opportunity he had long desired. He began to follow her until he had wandered deep into the forest. In the far recess of a dense thicket surrounded by ominous and foreboding cliffs, *Petrona*—whom he had been unable to reach despite having followed her there to quench his lustful desire—suddenly revealed her cunning disguise to show him the satanic beauty of her true form, releasing a demonic cackle and slightly lifting her skirt to show him her wrinkled turkey feet.

He was paralyzed with fear. He wanted to run, but his legs failed him. He wanted to cry for help, but all he could manage was a grunt from the back of his throat. "Jesus, save me..." He could barely force out the words, and the stuttered beginning of an old psalm. "Th...th...the Loooord is my...my str...str... strength..."



*La Matlaciuhua II* by Maximinio Javier

He was choked with fear and could no longer go on. The evil woman laughed in his face. She taunted him for his inability to pray.

"Forgot your Bible?" she said laughing. "Look, I remember my psalms better than you. 'The Lord is my strength and my salvation. It is right to give him praise.'" Her cackle echoed through the gloomy silence. *Chema* was terrorized and fell unconscious.

The demonic presence stayed with

him until the first light of dawn chased it away.

A few hours later two women walked into the bushes gathering herbs for tea. They discovered *Chema's* body and reported it to the authorities. He was brought back to town where he spent the rest of his days recounting horrible tales about his night with *La Matlaciuhua*.

Written by José María Bradomir  
Translated by Susan Briante. Taken from the book *Myth and Magic*. Palo Alto, CA.

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# Finding the real Oaxaca

■ Continued from Page 1

fly out into the thousands of insistent hands of crafters, food sellers and beggars.

Because if I don't, tourist dependent Oaxaca will shrivel into a terminal ghost town.

Another party to the tourist business, a laundromat near the Zocalo, took more than money. They took a cap and shirt, I discovered while inspecting my clothes a day later. And they had no idea where my missing clothes were when I went back to ask.

Meanwhile, an unknown piece of unwashed food plus numerous hot chiles were mincing my intestines, sending me through a horror series of bathrooms lacking toilet paper, paper towels and hand soap.

These were my first impressions of Oaxaca.

Fortunately they lasted only two days, the first of 30 that I would spend here as an I.C.C. Spanish student and cultural voyeur.

What changed my impressions were people. A Mexican family from Colonia Jalatlaco rented me a welcoming room with complementary breakfasts and informative conversation.

From them I learned the Oaxaca Valley bus routes (buses to Mitla leave from the Mercado de Abastos and stop along the Periferico east of town) and the locations of two restaurants favored by Mexicans: a taco joint called El Tizón Sur, on Calle Aldama, and a sandwich shop on Calle Armenta y Lopez called Mi Cafe.

They also showed me how to work the public markets: quickly, relying on vendors you learn to trust and ignoring the masses of other sellers. As if I were being tested, they sent me to the Mercado de Abastos. My challenge there was not to get lost among the hundreds of booths offering clothes, shoes, pirated cassettes, pipe joints,



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plastic washpans and fried grasshoppers.

Two university-level tourism majors dedicated their evenings and weekends to showing me Oaxaca's lesser known attractions and to interpreting aspects of Mexico not always apparent to Americans.

Without them I wouldn't have seen the Oaxaca's urban splendor and suburban sprawl from the Cerro del Fortin hilltop (due east of downtown) or visited the city's two most scenic natural escapes: Ciudad de las Canteras, a series of cliffs, lakes and ornamental forests built along the abandoned quarries east of downtown, and El Tequio, a flat deciduous forest, cactus garden and sport complex near the airport. City buses go directly to both places.

The students also explained the federal government's latest shenan-

gans. They called the August 1995 presidential election a scam, even though the ballot counting was watched by foreign observers. Also, they say the Oaxaca state government deliberately sponsors concerts in the Zocalo to distract attention from anti-government activism. In August a group of Zapatista supporters occupied a plaza next to the central cathedral to air videos of Subcomandante Marcos and announce a town hall-type rally in Mexico City.

Language school also bonded me with other Americans, who I may never have met in hectic and often impersonal places like the San Francisco Bay Area.

Drawn together as compatriots in an environment where we suddenly comprised an ethnic minority, we would exchange Mexico survival tips, share news from the United States and go together on bus trips, taco-eating frenzies and late-night mezcal binges. Several of us became regulars at La Farola, a friendly and high-energy (yet safe) bar on Calle 20 de Noviembre. Just beware of the mushroom pushers.

From other Americans I learned the location of a reliable laundromat and the medicinal secrets to preventing or curing stomach problems. Together we also discovered a number of courteous, upbeat vendors from whom we were happy to buy crafts, clothes or food — thus doing our part to help the Oaxacan economy.

By Ralph Jennings/San Jose, California  
August 1995



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